



Wicked Obsession (The Paladin League #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Blue-Blooded Woman

As an ambassador's daughter, Langley Canfield has lived all over the world, but she's never fit in—not abroad and not at home. She thought she found a man who loved her, but when it becomes obvious that she's the only one with deep feelings, Langley breaks up with him and heads across the country for a friend's wedding.

Blue-Collar Guy

Special Forces Sergeant Ryder Pienkowski knew that he'd never be able to hold on to Langley Canfield, that she was completely out of his league, but it still stuns him when she ends things between them. He's trying to get her out of his head when her father arrives and tells Ryder there's a death threat directed at her. Without hesitation, Ryder hops on a plane and flies out to protect Langley. She might not want him anymore, but he's not letting anyone hurt her.

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Langley Canfield hated confrontation. Sometimes, though, there was no choice.

Leaning back in the car's seat, she stared at the sleeping city through the windshield. It was a ridiculous time of the morning, but she was catching the first flight out of Tampa International, and Ryder had to report early.

Thinking of him had her turning her head, taking in his profile. The dashboard offered meager light, but she had his face memorized—the strong square jaw, full lips, high cheekbones, sleepy hazel eyes, and longer-than-regulation, tousled dark hair. Her lips curved. Ryder Pienkowski was half Italian, half Polish, and all gorgeous. She wished she could add all hers to the list, but honesty prevented it .

Her gaze drifted forward again. They needed to talk. Seriously talk. She loved him, and after more than a year together, she was seeing forever. Langley wasn't certain Ryder shared that vision. Her hands tightened around the strap of her purse.

“You okay?” Ryder asked, voice husky.

She swallowed a sigh. Damn it, he was too observant. She'd hoped that between the dark and the early hour that she'd be able to work things through in her head before broaching the topic. She should have known better. While Ryder wasn't a morning person, ten years in the army had honed his observational skills to a sharp edge, and sleepy or not, it shouldn't have surprised her that he'd notice even the smallest detail.

Shifting in her seat to see him better, Langley said, “Yes, just thinking.”

“About what?”

After a split-second hesitation, she said, “Sarah’s wedding.”

It wasn’t a lie. Sarah’s wedding was what had started her questioning Ryder’s commitment to their relationship.

“What about it?” Ryder glanced over briefly.

“Something feels off,” she offered slowly, “and I didn’t like her fiancé when we talked on the phone. He seemed...slick. I didn’t trust him and I was uncomfortable the entire conversation.”

“He might not be good on the phone. Some people aren’t.”

Logical, but this was about feelings. “Sarah and I are like sisters and have been since we roomed together in college. We text each other at least a few times a week, call each other frequently, and she never once mentioned Mitch Armstrong. When she was going out with this Brett guy, she talked about him constantly.”

“So? Maybe she didn’t bring up Armstrong because he was too important to her to chatter about.” The light went green and Ryder’s focus returned to the road.

“Right. She’s been dating this man for two years and never once referenced him, even in passing?” Langley shook her head. “They’re engaged for heaven’s sake. It was Mitch who asked me to be her bridesmaid, and what was the reason? Because she didn’t want me to have to spend money on a dress and fly across the country to San Diego. Please.”

Ryder took another quick glance at her. “That does seem strange. She has to know that you don’t have a job to worry about, and that you have enough money to stand up to a thousand weddings.”

Langley looked at him squarely now, but his face was inscrutable. “I wanted to fly out last week. She wouldn’t let me. I had to argue with her to let me come out four days early. Sarah wanted me to arrive the day before the wedding. Nothing about this feels right, and I think it has something to do with her creepastic fiancé.”

“Talk to her when you get there. You’ll get a better idea what’s going on if you can see her face.”

With a nod, she said, “I intend to.”

Silence settled in the car again and while Ryder looked relaxed, Langley’s tension increased. Talking about Sarah hiding Mitch’s existence reminded her of Ryder and his behavior.

After more than a year, he’d never invited her anywhere that risked them running into anyone they knew. Like he was embarrassed to be seen with her. Would he keep her a secret if he loved her? Wouldn’t he want her to meet his friends?

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she said, “You know, you could still attend the wedding with me. You’d only need to take a day of leave if you flew out on Friday.”

He shook his head.

“I have enough frequent flyer miles that you wouldn’t have to buy a ticket.”

“Sorry, can’t do it.”

Langley felt her lungs constrict, forcing the oxygen from her body.

That could be the truth. She knew Ryder well enough to realize his Special Forces team had a mission coming up. Something about him always seemed more honed

when he was close to leaving for an assignment. “Okay.” Langley feigned easiness and stayed quiet for a moment before asking, “My parents are having a Labor Day barbecue, and I’d like you to go with me.”

“No, thanks,” Ryder said, and his voice was neutral.

A huge weight settled on her chest. “There’s a gala to raise money for the Paladin League, I’d love to have you as my escort.”

“Can’t make it.”

“You don’t know when it is.” Langley froze and locked down her emotions. She wouldn’t create a scene. Even if it was becoming abundantly clear that while she was good enough to sleep with, he didn’t want anything deeper than that.

“I don’t think so, Langley.”

There was a note in his voice that suggested Ryder didn’t want to hear one more invitation. Well, she had her answer, right? He didn’t want to spend time with her family or friends, and he’d already demonstrated that he didn’t want her to spend time with his friends either. Who kept someone they loved cut off from his life? But someone who was nothing except a female body? Yes, that woman might be kept isolated.

Don’t make waves, don’t make waves. But sometimes there was no other choice. She loved Ryder, but she couldn’t let him keep using her. The sign for the airport had never been more welcome.

“I think,” Langley said slowly, struggling to keep her voice level and unconcerned, “that we should stop seeing each other.”

“What?” The word was sharp as a knife and his head jerked her direction, his gaze boring into her until someone honked at them and he looked back at the road, returning the car to its lane.

“We both knew our relationship wasn’t forever.” At least Langley knew it now. “It’s been fun, but it’s time to move on.” She gestured to her right. “Delta’s over there.”

With no regard for traffic, Ryder cut over to the curb and braked hard. “You’re dumping me?”

She opened her car door. “Please pop the trunk so I can get my bags.” Her voice was tighter than she wanted, but Langley was fighting to hide her devastation.

Without waiting, she walked to the rear of the car. She retrieved her carry-on, but they both reached for the handle of her suitcase. The warmth of his callused hand over hers nearly dropped her to her knees. You’re an ambassador’s daughter, she reminded herself. You don’t make scenes. She pasted a smile on her face. “I have it, thank you,” she said as politely as she’d greet the prime minister of Australia.

Ignoring her, he lifted it out and put it on the ground, pulling up the telescopic handle for her. “We can talk about this when you get home.”

Langley shook her head. She had to get away from him before she fell apart—she wouldn’t let him see her cry. “There’s nothing left to say. Stay safe, Ryder, and have a good life.” Without another word, she turned and walked into the airport.

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Ryder let loose with a series of jabs against the heavy bag. His boxing gloves made a satisfying thwack as leather met leather, but the bag didn't move, not with his buddy, Finn "Stone Man" Rowland holding it in place. Ignoring the sweat running down his face, Ryder took a few more jabs, hoping that something, anything would make him forget Langley.

He didn't have to close his eyes to see her—the glossy brown hair that fell past her shoulders, the full lips that tipped up at the corners, and those eyes. They were brown—sometimes light, sometimes dark depending on what she wore—but it was the spark he saw when he stared deeply into them that made his chest ache. He tightened his jaw and jabbed at the bag harder, trying to drive the memories away. Running hadn't done it. Weightlifting hadn't either. He didn't know what the fuck to try next if some boxing didn't do the trick.

Three days. Three days since she'd ended things, and it felt like an eternity already.

The breakup had been a shock. He'd always known he wouldn't be able to keep her, that one day Langley would walk away from him. Ryder thought he'd been prepared, that he'd hear her words and calmly say goodbye, but Tuesday had shown him how wrong he was. He'd been about as far from cool as he could get, but damn it, somehow, when he wasn't looking, she'd woven herself into every millimeter of his life.

Changing to uppercuts, he went at the bag harder, grunting at the impact his hands took despite the padded gloves. Langley. All those conversations they'd had late at night, lying side by side in bed. Sometimes they were silly, sometimes they were serious, and sometimes they'd been mundane. No matter what the topic, he'd always

enjoyed those moments with her.

Ryder's lips curved as he thought about her accent. Not American, not British, not French, not anything he could pin down. She maintained it was mostly Kiwi from her time living in New Zealand, but she didn't sound like any of the NZSAS guys he'd met. Whatever the accent was, it had always been uniquely hers.

Something else he'd miss.

Scowling as he realized he'd been doing nothing except think of Langley, Ryder tried to wipe the sweat from his brow with his forearm. It didn't do much. August in Tampa was too fucking humid for the gym's air conditioner to keep up with.

He needed a mission. Too bad the dumb fucks up the chain of command had put the one his team had been training for on hold. Indefinitely. Ryder gave the bag another flurry of jabs. Damn them. Jorge Torres might be headquartered out of Puerto Jardin in South America, but he was an international arms dealer, and he could have been involved in the sale of US military weapons to terrorists. The weapons that had been used to kill four men from the Third Special Forces Group in Niger.

That news about his mission being postponed had come down yesterday, and then today—to make his life more fun—Captain Nguyen had told the team he didn't want to see any of them near this place for the weekend and dismissed them at 1500. Technically, this workout in the team's gym violated his order, which was why he and Rowland were the only ones here.

The weekend. Two days with nothing to do except think about Langley. Her smile, her laugh, the way she kissed him, the little sound she made when she took him into her body—

“Ski?”

He could see her brown eyes go unfocused as he moved—

“Ski?”

The way her breath would catch when—

“Pienkowski! You okay, man?”

Ryder shook his head and brought his thoughts back to the now. “Yeah, why?”

Stony released the bag and stepped to the side. “Because you were standing there, looking blank.”

“I was thinking about something. Hold the bag—I want to get in a few more rounds.”

“No.” Rowland crossed his arms across his chest. “You’ve been at this since the captain dismissed us. Let’s call it a night and find some food. Mako texted that everyone’s headed over to Big Joe’s for ribs.”

“You go ahead.” Ryder looked around until he spotted the small, red bag hanging from its platform. “I’ll use the timing bag.”

Instead of moving, his teammate stood there and stared at him, his face expressionless. That was how he’d earned the nickname Stone Man, Stony for short.

Rowland could be fucking annoying. He was chameleon-like—he could conceal his emotions completely, shut down whenever he wanted, and he could morph into any role in an instant. Which was why he was brilliant when the team went undercover. His dark blond hair was already shoulder-length for their delayed mission where he was supposed to play the part of a mercenary and gunrunner. Ryder was a supporting player. Not that he wanted to do what Stony did. Hanging out with the scum of the

earth and lying to them convincingly? His acting wasn't that good.

"Go eat barbecue," Ryder said.

"I will, but first let's talk about what the fuck is wrong with you."

Ryder opened his mouth and then shut it without saying anything. It took too much energy to lie, and maybe he did want to talk about it. Stony was quiet, but he saw a lot, and he had his head screwed on straight. "Langley broke things off when I took her to the airport."

Rowland didn't react. "What happened?"

Grabbing the Velcro on his left boxing glove with his right glove, Ryder pulled it open. "Damned if I know." He kept his voice flat and tried to sound careless, as if the breakup hadn't shredded his insides. "One minute she's inviting me to all this shit, including parties at her parents' house, and the next minute she's telling me we're finished."

He couldn't read Stony's expression. "What? "

"I didn't realize I was friends with a fucking moron."

Ryder was too surprised to be offended. "What does that mean?"

Instead of answering directly, Rowland said, "Tonight, most of the team will be at Big Joe's with their wives and girlfriends. Let's say Langley wasn't in San Diego. Let's say she was in town and hadn't ended things. Would you have brought her to dinner or would you have shown up alone, had a quick bite, and then taken off to spend time with her somewhere else?"

“She wouldn’t have been comfortable.”

“How do you know? Have you ever invited her to any of our team gatherings and had her tell you that? Or is it that you’re more comfortable keeping her away from us?” Stony shook his head, forestalling what Ryder had been about to say. “Would you have asked her to join us at Big Joe’s if she were here?”

Pivoting without a word, Ryder went and stowed his boxing gloves.

“Half the team doesn’t realize you’re involved with someone. That’s why their wives keep trying to set you up,” Rowland called from across the room.

“It isn’t half the team,” Ryder disagreed.

“Close enough. Lurch is bringing Hannah tonight. He’s been going out with her for six weeks. How long have you been dating Langley?”

Stony damn well knew Ryder had been seeing Langley for more than a year. “That isn’t why she called it quits. Langley doesn’t realize that our team is big on get-togethers.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve run into you guys around Tampa three times, and she sure as hell noticed the way you cut the conversation short and hustled her away from me. Griff and Mako said you did the same thing with them. The surprising thing isn’t that she had enough. What surprises me is how long she put up with it. That woman is no pushover.”

True, his hellcat wasn’t a doormat—princesses usually weren’t—but he had a hard time believing that she’d ended things over a few invitations. Rowland was smart, but he didn’t know everything. Before Ryder could figure out how to respond, his phone went off and he retrieved it to check messages.

Report to General Richard Wolfe's office.

Looking up from the text, he asked Stony, "You didn't get a message?"

Rowland unclipped the phone from his belt and looked. He shook his head.

This wasn't about the assignment to Puerto Jardin being back on then. The entire team would have had their phones blow up at the same time if that was the case. Ryder frowned. He'd kept his mouth shut when the mission had been postponed, so there was no fucking way this was a reprimand. "Tell me that there are two generals named Richard Wolfe assigned here."

Stony crossed the room and read the message upside down. "You know there aren't. I wonder what you did to get called to the SOCOM commander's office."

Special Operations Command, and the general in charge of Special Forces for every branch of the military. Great.

"At least it doesn't say ASAP," Rowland said, as if that were a consolation. "Take a shower and get dressed. I'll grab a vehicle and drive you over."

Although he walked as silently as he could, his footsteps sounded loud on the gray tile of SOCOM headquarters. The portraits along Commander's Corridor seemed to be condemning him for the noise—Special Forces should have a soft step. Ryder was dragging his feet, though, in no hurry to reach General Wolfe's office. Getting called in couldn't be good.

Stony had been no help on the drive over. When Ryder had asked him if he thought Ambassador Canfield had enough juice to get him drummed out of Special Forces, Rowland had said the man had the kick to get Ryder imprisoned in Leavenworth. With friends like that... But Stony was sitting out front, waiting for him, instead of

eating ribs at Big Joe's, so there was that.

Special Operations Command was quieter than he expected—even at 1730 on a Friday evening—but he didn't blame anyone for wanting to get their weekend started if they could. Hell, if Langley hadn't dumped him, he'd be eager to get the fuck out of Dodge, too.

Before he was ready, Ryder found himself standing in front of General Wolfe's office. Taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders and entered the antechamber. He scanned automatically before closing it behind him, but he couldn't conceal his surprise. It was empty, the general's aide nowhere to be seen. That was wrong, and he didn't care if it was Friday. He hesitated, torn between waiting to see if the aide showed up and knocking.

Do you really want to keep a general waiting? Especially one who's that high up your chain of command? He didn't have to think about that hard.

He lightly tapped on the General Wolfe's door, and when he received permission to enter, stepped inside. Ryder was coming to attention before he saw who sat behind the desk. This was worse than he'd expected. Langley's father. Fucking hell. "Ambassador Canfield. Sir."

"At ease, Ryder. I'm not in the military."

No, but he might as well be. The ambassador looked as intimidating as any four-star general, and the mahogany desk with the flags behind it—the United States flag as well as flags from each branch of the military—simply enhanced the power he exuded. "Yes, ambassador. Sorry, sir."

"Call me James," he said. "I'm no longer an ambassador."

Call him James?

Hadn't Langley told him she'd ended things?

Maybe he was friendly now because Langley could finally find someone worthy of her, and the ambassador didn't have to worry about Ryder being in the way anymore. But if he wasn't pissed off about the break up, why had the man traveled to Tampa? It was a three-and-a-half-hour drive from his home in Palm Beach and even flying would be inconvenient. Her father had to know Langley was attending her friend's wedding in San Diego, so that meant he'd come here to see Ryder.

Ryder studied the older man, trying to read Ambassador Canfield's mind, but his expression remained congenial and gave nothing away .

The ambassador hadn't changed since Ryder had first met him in Puerto Jardin. James Canfield was tall and trim and wore a dark, tailored suit that probably cost more than Ryder had spent on his car. His hair was nearly black, much darker than Langley's, and liberally laced with gray. There were wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and lips—Ryder's mom had always called those laugh lines—and he had more wrinkles across his forehead. Ryder called those what-the-fuck lines, but he was pretty sure the man wouldn't find that funny.

The ambassador's eyes were the same chocolate brown as Langley's, and the stab of pain was sharp and unexpected. In the next instant, the ache disappeared, replaced by unease. Something in Canfield's gaze made his pulse speed up.

Before Ryder could ask what was going on, the ambassador stood, fastened a button at the waist of his suit coat, and moved to the front of the desk. "I'm sorry to have you summoned without explanation, but Richie was kind enough to loan me his office and the fewer people who know I'm here, the better."

“Richie?”

“Sorry. General Wolfe.”

Ryder stiffened. His girlfriend’s—ex-girlfriend’s—father called the commander of the entire US Special Forces ‘Richie’. Oh, yeah, Ryder’d be filling sandbags as a private in some long-forgotten military outpost from now until retirement. “Why don’t you want anyone to know you’re here, sir?”

The ambassador leaned a hip against the edge of the desk and looked down for a moment. When he raised his gaze again, Ryder’s unease morphed into fear. Something was seriously wrong.

“I need your help. This morning I received a letter with a death threat directed at Langley.”

The words hit Ryder like a physical blow.

“I contacted the FBI immediately, and they’re confident it isn’t credible. They’re investigating and will track down the author, of course, but they’re not sending anyone to watch over her.” The ambassador frowned. “I’m certain they’re right, and she’s not in any danger, however, if they’re wrong—”

“If they’re wrong,” Ryder interrupted, unable to keep the savageness from his voice, “Langley is unprotected and vulnerable.”

“Yes.” Canfield nodded, concern visibly etched on his face now. “If I doubted the bureau’s judgment, I’d have hired a team of bodyguards based in California and had them in place by now. My wife wants me to hire them regardless.” He looked squarely at Ryder. “Langley hates bodyguards. ”

Fuck that. Ryder managed not to say it out loud. “Send them anyway.”

The ambassador glanced down at his manicured fingernails and back up again. “Langley,” he said slowly, as if measuring every word, “has had bodyguards most of her life. When she was thirteen, one attempted to molest her.”

Ryder growled, the sound low in his throat. Some bastard had tried to rape Langley? Why the hell hadn’t she told him?

For a moment, the two men shared a glance—one of understanding—and the ambassador continued, “She managed to scream, and he was stopped quickly, but despite years of therapy, they make her extremely anxious. I don’t want to put her through that when I’m 95% certain the FBI is correct.”

“You want me to go to San Diego and keep her safe.”

“Yes.”

“You do know that Special Forces isn’t allowed to operate on US soil, right?”

Ambassador Canfield’s lips curved slightly. “I’m aware of that, but if you took leave and flew out there as Langley’s boyfriend, then it’s not a mission.”

“And if I happened to bring some buddies with me who were also on leave...” Ryder let his voice trail off.

“Exactly. There won’t be trouble getting time off approved. General Wolfe is aware of the situation and will ensure you and a few of your friends will be able to stay with my daughter for as long as needed.”

Ryder frowned. “Have you talked to Langley, sir?”

“She texted her mom and me when she arrived in San Diego, but nothing since then.”

“I meant have you told her about the letter, but I’ll take your response as a no.”

Now the ambassador’s smile was genuine, if a bit rueful. “I thought you knew her better than that. This is a case of it being better to ask for forgiveness than permission.”

He wasn’t able to smile, but Ryder managed a nod. “She believes she can take care of herself.”

“I made certain she had training, but she doesn’t have the experience to handle this if the threat turns out to be genuine.”

Ryder had trained her, too, but some rudimentary skills didn’t give her the expertise to deal with this—especially not if the attack came from an experienced adversary. At this point, he had to assume the person was highly trained. To do anything else would put Langley at risk. “What about logistics?”

“I have a private plane waiting at the airport, fueled and ready to take off for San Diego the instant you give the word.” Ambassador Canfield reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out a thick envelope. He held it out, but Ryder shook his head.

“I’m not taking money to protect Langley.”

“You can return whatever you don’t use, but I want you to have cash to cover any contingency that might arise while you’re guarding her. There’s also a credit card in your name with no limit. It will take a while for anyone to track charges on it. I won’t have her safety compromised by you making a charge on your own credit card.”

Reluctantly, Ryder took the envelope, opened it to see what he was dealing with, and

blew out a long whistle. “Holy fuck.” Realizing what he’d said, he cleared his throat and apologized, “Sorry, sir.”

The ambassador waved it off. “Outfit yourself with whatever you need—you can save the receipts if it makes you feel better, but I want my daughter protected at any cost.”

Ryder nodded, but his brain was busy making lists of what he wanted to bring. The private jet meant no security checks and no need to worry about carrying pistols or other assorted firepower. He knew who he was bringing with him. Rowland was a no-brainer and he was sure Griff and Mako would agree to come along, too .

“Ryder,” the ambassador interrupted his thoughts. “Keep Langley safe.”

“I will, sir, no matter what it takes.” She might not want him anymore, but for damn sure, he wouldn’t allow anyone to hurt her.

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Langley rested her palm over her stomach, trying to still the roiling. If she didn't speak up soon, she'd be forced to object to the wedding during the ceremony.

Never make a scene. Never make anyone feel uncomfortable or awkward. Keep your thoughts to yourself.

When one member of the family was in diplomatic service, the entire family had roles to play. The wrong facial expression could cause an international incident, and it wouldn't have mattered that she was a child. Why hadn't she done the smart thing and confronted Sarah days ago? As soon as she'd met Mitch, Langley had known Sarah was marrying a man she didn't love. Instead, she'd wasted time trying to subtly encourage her friend to share what was happening. That had been an abject failure. Nervously, she pushed at the pins holding up her hair and tried to find the right words to introduce the topic.

She regretted not saying something immediately. She regretted cancelling her trip to visit Sarah in April because Ryder had just returned from a months-long mission and she'd wanted to spend time with him. If she'd realized then that he didn't love her, Langley would have come to San Diego, and perhaps she could have stopped the wedding before plans had gotten underway. She took a step toward Sarah and immediately added another regret to her list—wearing five-inch stiletto heels. Her feet already hurt.

The bride's room at the Wedding Knot was cramped, the furniture worn, and the carpet threadbare in places. The unfortunate thing was that it looked nicer than the actual facility did. If Sarah had been marrying someone Langley liked, she would have offered to pay for a better location, but Mitch had been worse in person than

over the phone, and within minutes of meeting him, her instincts had set off the red-alert klaxon.

Enough, Langley! She had to stop delaying. The wedding was scheduled to begin in twenty minutes, and if she dithered much longer, she would be forced to make a public spectacle. Her friend gazed into the mirror, but Langley didn't think she was looking at herself .

“Sarah.”

No response. “Sarah?”

As Langley watched Sarah's reflection in the mirror, she saw something in her friend's eyes that frightened her. “Sarah!”

“I'm sorry. I was woolgathering.” Her friend smiled, but it looked forced.

Woolgathering? Not a chance. “Sarah, for God's sake, what's going on?” When her friend did nothing but stare back at her, Langley took a deep breath and forged on. “Something is really wrong here. You tense every time Mitch comes near you. You haven't invited a single guest. You didn't even invite me .” Leaning forward, she took the fabric of the wedding dress between her fingers. “This isn't your mother's wedding gown, and you've had your heart set on wearing that since I've known you. What's going on? Don't tell me nothing. I know you. Everything about this wedding is wrong.”

The panic and pain that flashed across her friend's face made Langley feel horrible about pushing, but it also told her she was right to do it. Sarah couldn't marry Mitch. “I'm your friend, you can tell me anything.”

“I can't.” The words sounded raw, Sarah's voice almost a croak.

Shaking her head at how slow she'd been to figure it out, Langley asked, "Is Mitch forcing you to go through with this because of something Sean did?" Another epiphany struck. "Is he using drugs again?"

Sarah didn't answer, but she didn't need to. When her friend had made bad decisions for herself in the past it had always been because of her brother. "You can't keep sacrificing yourself for Sean, Sarah. You've put him first since your parents died. He's what? Twenty, now? Twenty-one? Either way, he's an adult. It's time for him to take responsibility for his own actions and accept the consequences for whatever he did."

"I know, but this time it's different."

Before Langley had a chance to rebut that, the door burst open and crashed into the wall. She jumped, teetered precariously on her heels before regaining her balance, and stared at the man who'd entered. He was gaunt, almost emaciated, his blond hair was thinning, and—Langley tensed—the expression in his eyes seemed crazed.

"Can I help you?" Sarah said, sounding amazingly calm.

"You're Sarah? Mitch's bride?" The questions were hurried.

"Mitch? You must have the wrong wedding facility."

He pulled out a large gun. "Right." He snorted. "Then why are there so many of his fucking SEAL mates down below? "

Langley's gaze sharpened, and she pushed aside her fear. Think first, feel later—when it was safe. They wouldn't be able to get past him, not when he stood squarely in front of the door, and if the crash hadn't brought someone running to see what had happened, she doubted anyone would hear a scream. The Wedding Knot

might be rundown, but it was solidly built, and the chapel and guests were on the other side of the building, as far away from the bride's room as they could be.

"What's this about?" Sarah asked. The barrel of the gun pointed directly at her and Langley's breath caught in her throat.

"This is about Mitch refusing to pay me what he owes me. This is about me, using you, to make sure I get my half of the cut." He looked at her, eyes wide, fevered. "And her, too. Hell, two broads is better than one."

She'd known Mitch was bad news. Known it, damn it.

"I want you to head toward the door. Slowly. Out in the hall, go right, toward the back stairs." The wild-eyed man moved closer. "I'm a fucking good shot. If you try to run, you'll be dead before you take your second step."

As Sarah tried to negotiate with him, Langley silently cursed. Rule number one—never, ever, under any circumstance, leave the primary location with a bad guy. The secondary location was always worse for the victim. The advice was to run in a zigzag, that the odds of a shooter hitting something vital were small.

Only she couldn't run.

Not only did her raspberry-colored shoes sport skyscraper heels, but her dress was mermaid cut with a court train. It had never occurred to her when she'd bought the gown that she might get kidnapped for the second time in her life, especially when most of the wedding guests were US Navy SEALs.

It didn't take a genius to guess that the gunman didn't want to leave any witnesses behind and that was why he was taking her along with Sarah. She was extraneous, an unneeded complication. How long would he allow her to live after they left the

wedding facility?

“Get real, lady,” the man said, ending the conversation. “We’re going down the back stairs to the car I have stashed below. Your bridesmaid is going to drive, while you and I ride in the backseat with my buddy Mr. Sig Sauer here.” He waved the gun enough to make his point. “After we’re holed up, all nice and friendly, I’ll call your husband-to-be, tell him the wedding’s been postponed. If he wants you back, he’ll bring me my half of the cut. Now move.”

Sarah reached out and clutched her hand and Langley returned the squeeze, trying to offer her reassurance, but they were in deep trouble. Mitch wasn’t going to pay any ransom—there wasn’t a doubt in her mind on that. Her father would cover whatever the amount was, but Langley wasn’t certain she should mention it.

“Leave it.” The man shoved Sarah forward when she tried to grab her purse, and Langley frowned. Her hope had been that someone would ping the GPS on their phones and locate them that way, but they were going to be forced to leave those behind.

“Move faster,” he ordered her sharply.

“Sir.” Langley took a deep breath and played up the Kiwi in her accent, hoping he’d mistake it for British. Many Americans unconsciously respected someone who spoke in an Oxford English voice. “I’m afraid my shoes make hurrying difficult.” Reaching for the fabric below her knees, she raised her skirt to her ankles, letting him see her incredibly stupid stiletto heels.

“Take ‘em off.”

“Then I’ll move slowly because a great deal of my skirt will drag on the floor and wrap around my feet.” Langley wasn’t lying. The hem brushed the carpet already and

the court train was a potential nightmare without her shoes.

He swore at her. “Move as fast as you can.”

She did as ordered, because he had the gun pointed at Sarah. If there was a chance any of the SEALs would spot them, she might have dawdled, but their room was over the kitchen and Langley didn’t believe that would happen. It was too early for anyone to check on the bride.

Obstacle two was maneuvering the stairs. Langley’s thoughts echoed the gunman’s muttered curses—she was every bit as aggravated by her attire as he was. Hanging onto the railing with one hand and as much of her train as she could with the other, she carefully made her way down. She knew he’d become angrier when they reached his car, and she wasn’t wrong.

“What the fuck is the problem now?”

“My dress is tight to my knees. It’s not easy to enter a car in a garment like this.” It was why she’d changed clothes in the bride’s room. If he’d burst in an hour earlier, she’d have been wearing jeans and running shoes.

“You better figure it out fast, lady.”

Sit and swing. Langley half fell onto the seat, almost slid out, but grabbed the steering wheel in time to prevent that. She rocked, giving herself momentum to swing her legs into the Impala, then pulled her train in before it became stuck in the door. As he got in the back with Sarah, she took a second to adjust the seat. Her hands visibly shook. Langley clenched them and released a quiet breath as she worked to regain control. Feel later .

With her nerves steadier, she tried to hike up her skirt to make it easier to move her

feet between the accelerator and brake, but the satin didn't have any give and she only managed about an inch before she ran out of ease. This was going to be a challenge.

"Drive," he ordered, and in the rearview mirror, she saw the gun pressed into Sarah's side, positioned in a way that would make it nearly impossible for someone in another vehicle to spot the weapon and contact the police.

For an instant, she met her friend's gaze and tried to make her own reassuring. Tough to do when she wasn't certain herself that they'd get out of this alive. Then, not willing to risk the kidnapper's wrath, she put her foot on the brake and pushed the button for the keyless start. The engine roared to life.

"Don't do anything stupid. I got the gun trained on your friend. I'll fucking kill you both if I have to. Won't bother me none."

Langley didn't doubt it. "Which way do I go?" she asked as she neared the exit.

"Turn right and don't try nothing funny. Do the speed limit, use your turn signal, and follow the traffic laws."

With a nod, Langley flipped on the blinkers and turned onto the road. Keeping her gaze moving, she searched for a police car. If she could only find a cop, she'd come up with a way to catch his attention without risking Sarah.

"Head toward Pomerado," the kidnapper ordered.

She hesitated. "Um, sir?"

"Wait, don't tell me. You don't know where to go."

“I’m only visiting,” she said, trying to sound as foreign as possible. Langley’s heart pounded faster and she squeezed the steering wheel.

“Shit, you’re fucking worthless.”

He spouted off a series of instructions, and despite her anxiety, she made sure she listened. Being useless was a good way to get killed, and she’d already proven herself to be a liability. Langley recited the directions back to him, and when the guy grunted, she released a quiet sigh.

Driving was difficult, her nerves were screaming, and there wasn’t a cop in sight. Honestly, where were the police when she needed them?

They were near Sarah’s house, she recognized the area. If she turned left there—

The traffic light went yellow, and she barely caught the brake with the toe of her pump, but her heel became trapped in the train. She wouldn’t be able to reach the accelerator if she didn’t get it loose, and Langley didn’t want to think about the kidnapper’s reaction to people honking at them because the light was green while they remained stopped.

Shifting her leg, she tried to free herself from the chignon. Her toe slipped off the brake.

The car moved into the intersection.

Her eyes went wide and her heart leapt to her throat and lodged there. The kidnapper started yelling at her. Threatening her, threatening Sarah.

With a hard yank, she got her shoe free and stopped the car inches away from the oncoming traffic.

A sob welled up, but she swallowed it. Ambassadors' daughters don't cry in front of others—especially their kidnappers. "I'm sorry." She had to fight to prevent her voice from trembling. God knew the only reason he couldn't see her hands shake was because of the death grip she had on the steering wheel. "I'm sorry."

"You did that on purpose," he accused.

"I didn't. I swear. It's the shoes. My foot slipped."

"You're thinking I won't kill your friend here. You're thinking if I do that, I ain't got any leverage, but you know, I can hurt her without killing her. One more fucking mistake and I will hurt her bad, got it?"

"I have it. I'll be careful. I promise." Oh, God. A sob escaped as a soft hiccup.

You can do this. You've performed under pressure many times in the past. Not this particular kind of pressure, but nonetheless high-stakes situations. Lock down the emotions. Act now, feel later.

The light went green, and she concentrated on moving her foot smoothly from brake to accelerator. Despite her internal pep talk, Langley continued to shake as he guided her into an area that appeared remote. She hadn't realized there was a part of San Diego that was this undeveloped. They continued driving.

"See that pole up there on the left?" he barked from the backseat after what seemed like forever.

"Yes."

"Right past it, there's an entrance. Turn in there."

Langley leaned forward, trying to spot anything that resembled a road or driveway, but nothing leapt out at her. She couldn't miss it. She couldn't risk angering the man another time. She couldn't put Sarah in jeopardy. Her pulse throbbed wildly against her throat, and she swore she could feel the rush of blood in her veins.

There was nobody behind them, and she slowed the car further. She barely saw it in time. To call that overgrown track an entrance was pushing it.

The unpaved drive was rutted, and they bumped along it. Langley tried to avoid as many of the holes as she could, afraid the man might accidentally squeeze the trigger on one of the bounces, but it was hard to do when the path was littered with them.

She was about to take a chance and ask him how far he wanted her to drive when they came around a curve and she spotted a house. That was their destination, she was certain. Langley kept the car moving slowly.

As they got closer, the tears welled again, and she blinked them away impatiently. The structure was single-story, large patches of shingles were missing from the roof, revealing the wood below, and the porch leaned slightly to the right. Overgrown bushes and tall grass obscured much of the front, but she could see that some of the siding had gaps—perfect entry for mice, rats, and insects of various kinds.

Boards covered the windows, but they appeared almost as old as the house, charcoal in color from years of weathering and dirt. It looked like something straight out of a horror movie, the site where the teenagers went to party and ended up dying at the hands of a psycho killer.

Langley looked around again, but there were no other signs of civilization.

The experts were right. The secondary location was always worse.

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Ryder scowled. Fucking SoCal traffic. Didn't these damn people have homes or jobs or somewhere else they could be other than the roads? Okay, so he'd been aggravated before they'd left Florida and his mood had only soured since landing in California. Over ninety minutes ago, his gut had started churning, and he'd known Langley was in trouble. She needed him and where was he? Stuck behind some shitting cement truck.

Mako stopped when a traffic light turned yellow, and Ryder shifted impatiently in his seat. His teammates had refused to let him behind the wheel of the Explorer they'd rented, and Mako drove more like an old woman than his namesake, the fastest shark in the ocean. "For fuck's sake, yellow doesn't mean stop," he muttered. More loudly he asked, "How is it that we can deploy a twelve-man team halfway around the world faster than the four of us can reach the other side of the United States?"

"Because when we head to the Middle East or South America," Rowland said with annoying calm from the backseat, "we have the logistical support of the US Army behind us."

They were hours later than he'd planned. Hours. He thought they'd land in San Diego late Friday night. Instead, it was Saturday, according to the dashboard clock it was closing in on 1130, and he hadn't reached Langley yet. Everything had taken a thousand times longer than he'd expected. Hell, there'd been a delay just rounding up the other three members of his team because damn Griff had picked up some woman at Big Joe's and disappeared.

"Relax, Ski," Mako said. "We're almost there."

Ryder caught the sidelong look Bryce gave him as he accelerated through the intersection. He needed to take it down a few notches because if they walked into a hot situation with his emotions out of control, he'd jeopardize Langley and his teammates. They were here as a favor to him, he realized that, and he owed them. "Sorry," he apologized gruffly. "I'm worried about Langley."

"We know," Griff said. He was seated behind Mako. "We got your back. We're the four musketeers, remember?"

"Thanks," Ryder said and took another deep breath.

They turned onto a less-busy street and Ryder straightened. They must be getting close now. He studied the neighborhood. The houses looked as if they'd been built in the 1970s, and while the lawns were cut and everything was neatly trimmed, most had big trees and lots of shrubs. The bushes would be good cover if they needed it, but they could also conceal a threat. From the beginning, his plan had been to get Langley out of here quickly, but now he moved up that timeframe to ASAP.

It only took a few more minutes for Mako to pull to a stop at the curb. "That's it," he said. "The blue one a few doors up."

Ryder studied the home. It was small, one story with a white picket fence and a large tree in the tiny yard. More bushes, and the neighbor on the right had a privacy fence—additional concealment. There were no vehicles parked in front, and the home appeared quiet. Too quiet. 11:27 on the SUV's clock. The churning in his gut became more insistent. "Stony, you come with me to the door. Griff, Mako, watch our flank."

He opened the vehicle's door and was greeted by low humidity and mild temperatures. Nothing like Tampa in August. The leather jacket he wore over his jeans and T-shirt was unnecessary, but it hid the pistol holstered at his shoulder. Odds were the feds were right and he wouldn't need it, but fuck that. He wasn't taking any

chances with Langley's life.

When they reached the front porch, he rang the bell. He could hear it echo in the house, but there was no other sound from inside. Rowland stood behind him, facing the street, and Griff and Mako were positioned at the foot of the stairs, one on either side, keeping watch. Ryder rang the bell again with the same results. He tried knocking, but no one stirred.

"What time's the wedding?" Stony asked.

"I don't know."

"Langley didn't tell you?"

"No, and the ambassador didn't know when or where it was taking place." Which was damn inconvenient. Ryder knocked again, louder this time. He hoped the women were ignoring him.

Their intelligence sergeant, Ford Pruitt, had researched for them while they'd been outfitting themselves. He'd discovered pictures of Sarah Gillespie and Mitch Armstrong, although the picture of Armstrong had been at a distance, and he'd verified Sarah's address. But Pruitt had been unable to come up with the wedding location or time, which meant that intel was unfindable. No one was better at scooping up data than that guy.

Stony became more alert, but he didn't say anything, so Ryder didn't worry about it. He rang the bell again and followed it up with a knock. He didn't want to admit the house was empty, but while Langley might not want to talk to him, her friend, Sarah, would have answered the door to tell him to go to hell, if nothing else.

Now what? Camp out here till Langley returned? Even if his instincts were misfiring

and she was fine, he didn't want to sit around doing nothing. The problem was that there had to be at least a thousand places to get married in San Diego alone.

"We have company," Rowland reported quietly. A pause, then, "Two men, one armed."

Ryder turned immediately.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" the man on the passenger side of the Jeep Renegade called out as he closed the door and stepped onto the curb. The driver joined him.

Ryder moved to the rail, assessing the situation in a glance. The passenger wore running clothes and was drenched in sweat, but the other was dressed up—black slacks that looked freshly pressed, dress shoes, and a crisp white shirt underneath a conservative blazer. It didn't take skill to know who was carrying .

Both men were tall, over six feet, muscular, with brown hair and a vibe that suggested Special Forces. Or ex-Special Forces. The FBI didn't know where the threat had come from, and if a foreign government was behind it, high-end contractors were a possibility. Of course, the groom was a Navy SEAL, and the most likely scenario was that these guys were his friends.

Despite the suit being the one with the weapon, it was the runner who seemed the most dangerous at the moment, and Ryder focused his attention on him. "Who are you?"

"I'm the guy who belongs here. You aren't."

There was only one person Ryder thought might make that claim. "You're Sarah's fiancé?" he asked, voice flat.

“What do you want?” the runner asked.

His eyes narrowed. He didn’t like the fact that the dude hadn’t answered him.

“Ski,” Rowland said softly, “the odds are they know when and where the wedding is, information we don’t have. It won’t hurt to give some info.”

Yeah, his buddy was right. “We’re looking for Langley Canfield. Her father sent us.” He paused briefly, then asked, “You with HQ1?”

“ST7,” the runner offered slowly, but in the next instant, he was moving urgently toward the door. “Fill me in,” he ordered as soon as he reached the porch.

Fuck that. “Where’s Langley?”

“She’s missing. So is Sarah. Now tell me what the fuck’s going on.”

Ryder felt panic shoot through him. The FBI had been wrong, the threat was legit, and while they’d been wasting time trying to get out of Tampa, the author of the letter had grabbed her. His gut had been on the money—Langley was in trouble. In the next instant, he thrust down his emotions and battle calm descended. He wouldn’t be able to help her if gave in to his fears. “You’re the fiancé?” he asked again, determined to get an answer this time.

“That’s right.”

Something felt off. “Name?” He took a closer look at the runner, compared him to the inadequate image Pruitt had found. It could be the same man.

“Mitch Armstrong,” he said immediately.

“Aren’t your clothes a little casual for a wedding, even by California standards?”
Ryder asked, tone carefully bland to hide his suspicions.

“He was working off pre-wedding jitters,” the suit said.

Plausible, but Ryder couldn’t trust the guy. Langley read people with uncanny accuracy and she hadn’t liked Armstrong. He’d go with her instincts until proven different. “What do you mean she’s missing?”

“They were at the wedding center, checking out the bridal suite. Nobody’s seen them since.”

“When?” The word emerged more tightly than he’d intended, but fear threatened to overwhelm him again. If anything happened to Langley...

“An hour and a half ago,” Armstrong said. “Your names?” It was more of a demand than a question.

Ryder didn’t want to share that information. Names meant, with the right contacts, they could be checked out, and he couldn’t afford that until he knew this guy wasn’t a danger. He looked over at Stony. His buddy shook his head almost imperceptibly, telling Ryder they were on the same page.

Without another word, the runner pivoted and headed back to the Jeep.

Ryder hurried down the stairs, Rowland right behind him, and beelined for the Explorer. Mako knocked him aside before he could get behind the wheel and Ryder rounded the hood, headed for the passenger seat. Closing the SUV’s door, he pulled the seatbelt down and said, “When they take off, stick on their ass. Don’t drive like a pussy this time.”

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The Wedding Knot event center was a dump—it was more like the Wedding Not—and Ryder couldn't imagine anyone Langley knew getting married here. Grime covered the building, and the parking lot was a disaster. The dust being kicked up over the Explorer was proof of that. They parked next to the Jeep, and as he was taking in more detail, Armstrong checked out a red Nissan.

“They’re gonna pop the trunk,” Griff reported. “Am I the only one who thinks that’s an interesting assumption?”

“Not if there’s a threat we don’t know about,” Rowland offered.

“That would explain the dude’s intensity at the house,” Mako said.

Ryder climbed out of the Explorer and headed over to the sedan. He scanned the vehicle and the trunk, but he didn’t see anything helpful. “Your fiancée’s car?” Without waiting for an answer, he glanced over at the two-story building. “They disappeared from in there?”

“Apparently,” Armstrong said.

Fuck yeah, Rowland had read it right. The man was too wound up for the bride to have taken off of her own volition, not even if she was hiding from him. It only made sense if there was a threat against Sarah—and because Langley was with the woman—that meant she was facing an additional risk, one Ryder knew shit-all about. And since nobody was volunteering any intel, he was trying to put together puzzle pieces in the dark. He had to force his jaw to relax.

His teammates had followed him out of the SUV and taken positions to watch his back. He rejoined them and filled them in, using the team's shorthand. Neither Armstrong nor the suit needed to know what he was sharing. Still in their coded language, he added an order to put a tracker on the Jeep. Something was up and Ryder wanted any edge he could get.

Rowland nodded, but before Ryder could say anything else, Jonah Griffin whistled low enough that no one else would hear. "You're right, this Sarah lady definitely didn't run out on her wedding. Dude is amped." He inclined his head slightly to indicate Sarah's fiancé stalking across the parking lot to the building.

"So is Ski," Mako pointed out and Ryder shot him a look.

"Yeah," Griff agreed, "but our dude is hiding it better."

"He is now," Mako corrected.

Muttering a curse, Ryder strode toward the Wedding Knot, leaving his teammates behind. Honest to God, he was closer to them than he was to his own brothers, but occasionally they annoyed the shit out of him. Besides, he didn't have time for this. He was sticking close to Armstrong until he knew what was going on. It didn't surprise him when Stony caught up and fell into step beside him.

"They're only trying to lighten things up. You're tight."

"I know that." Ryder didn't have the fucking patience for it. After he had Langley safely stashed away they could joke around, but not now.

Maybe Rowland picked up on his tension because he said, "We don't know what the fuck is going on here, remember that."

“Yeah, but when was the last time you assumed a missing bride was in the trunk of a car?” No response. “Don’t bullshit me, Stone Man. The stakes are too high.”

They reached the entrance to the building. He pulled open the door and stepped into chaos. It looked like the Navy SEALs were about to have their own civil war—the two they’d met against about a dozen others.

Before anyone threw a punch, a man with black hair and dark eyes stepped in and icily, efficiently took control. The ranking officer had clearly not been invited to the wedding, not when he wore faded jeans, a gray T-shirt, and work boots, but he had the respect of everyone in the room.

The presence of this many guests suggested a couple things. Number one, the ceremony wasn’t scheduled for this evening. No one showed up that many hours before a wedding. Which led to point two—the man who’d claimed he was Mitch Armstrong had been lying. No way was the groom wearing running clothes when it was clearly a morning service, but who the fuck was the guy and what was his connection to the bride’s disappearance?

Ryder and Rowland stayed near the entrance to the chapel, their backs against the wall, and watched. He hated waiting—fucking loathed it—but the only other option was to drive around San Diego aimlessly, and that would waste more time. Especially when they didn’t have the full picture of what the hell was happening. He could be patient if it meant getting to Langley sooner rather than later.

“We got hold of Mitch,” the suit said, face and voice cold.

Ryder shared a glance with Stony, but it only confirmed what he’d guessed—the runner wasn’t the groom.

The suit guy continued, “Looks like he’s ass deep in some heavy shit. He owes

money. Sarah and her bridesmaid were taken to expedite payment.”

“Mitch has no intention of paying the ransom,” the runner said. “Hell, he’s probably in the wind by now.”

Rowland’s hand landed on his shoulder, stopping Ryder before he could do more than take a single step forward. Yeah. They’d get more info by not barging into the middle of this. At least not yet. When he nodded, Stony released him.

Tempers flared again, and the ranking officer said, “Stand down.” His voice was hard and brooked no disobedience. “Fill me in,” he ordered.

The details Ryder heard the runner report had nothing to do with Langley, or where the women might be, and everything to do with what an asshole Armstrong was. His hellcat had the best instincts he’d ever seen when it came to sizing up people fast. She’d nailed the groom’s sleaziness after one short phone call.

Ryder jerked his full attention back to the conversation when he heard the officer in jeans ask, “Taggart, did he say who this associate was or what they were into?”

“No. Sounds like the business associate is asking for half a mil.” Taggart—AKA the runner—thrust a hand through his hair. “Hell, Mitch’s accomplice may not even be behind the girl’s disappearance. Mitch never said he’d actually talked to the guy. And we ran into a protective detail while checking out Sarah’s house. The team leader isn’t saying much, but he did drop the news that Langley—the bridesmaid’s father—assigned them because someone threatened her.”

He’d admitted nothing about a threat, but Ryder wasn’t surprised Taggart had figured it out. It didn’t matter anyway. What did matter was that Langley and her friend were missing, and he was aware now that their purses and cell phones had been left behind. He didn’t know about Sarah, but Langley was obsessively detail-oriented. There was

no way in hell she'd forgotten her bag, and she wouldn't have allowed her friend to leave hers behind either.

Rowland nudged him back to the conversation as the officer asked, "You called Rio in?"

The suit nodded. "He's in route. "

Who the fuck was Rio?

"We've already lost an hour." The officer turned to the wedding guests. "Canvass the neighborhood. Someone must have seen something. Check with shops, cafés, banks—any place that might have video of the surrounding area." He turned back to Taggart. "Rio will bring his own people in, but at least we'll have some of the legwork done for them."

As the men began to leave, Ryder's position as bystander ended. The officer raised his voice and asked, "You the security detail Lieutenant Taggart mentioned?"

The liar was a lieutenant? Ryder shot Taggart an irritated glare as he walked past him, then turned to the officer running the show, and held out his hand. "Ryder Pienkowski." He didn't have to glance over to know that Stony had hung with him. He gestured toward his teammate with his chin. "Finn Rowland."

The man shook both of their hands. "Devlin Russo, and you've met Brett Taggart and Lucas Trammel."

Or as Ryder thought of them, the runner and the suit. In the next instant, something else Langley had said on the way to the airport popped into his brain. When Sarah was dating this Brett guy, she talked about him constantly. Had to be the same man. Looked like the bride's ex was carrying a serious torch for her.

Russo's gaze turned assessing and Ryder put Langley out of his mind. The inquisition was coming and he needed to be sharp. "Where you out of?" the man asked.

And here we go, Ryder thought. He glanced over at Stony, but his face was perfectly expressionless. "MacDill," Ryder said.

Those dark eyes studied them and only years in a covert ops unit gave him the experience it took to hold steady under the regard. "You with MARCENT?" Russo asked at last, wanting to know if they were marines.

Ryder glanced over at Rowland, and without so much as a flick of his eyes, he knew his buddy was warning him to tread carefully. Like he didn't fucking know that. Shit. He ran a hand over his hair and down his neck before letting it drop to his side. They hadn't reached the classified part yet. "Army Special Forces," he said slowly.

"No shit," Taggart said, face and voice neutral. "Green Beret? Is it true you boys kill with sticky notes?"

Russo shot the lieutenant a look hard enough to shut the man up and then focused on him again. Great. "Far as I know Army Special Forces aren't stationed out of MacDill. They're out of Elgin," he said with a frown .

Ryder shrugged. It wasn't as if he could reveal that his team had been moved to MacDill Air Force Base to focus entirely on covert ops missions in South America or that the majority of their assignments were in Puerto Jardin. He waited for the next question, the one he couldn't answer, but Russo surprised him.

"Who's your C.O.?"

"Captain Nguyen," Ryder said.

The man gave them another once over, and Ryder doubted that his gaze missed a thing. He almost blew out a long breath when Russo relaxed slightly. “How’d you get stuck with a baby-sitting detail?” he asked.

“Langley is the daughter of Ambassador Canfield.” Ryder was as careful now as he’d been when he’d talked about his team being at MacDill. “The ambassador recently received some threats against his family. Since we’re on leave, he asked us to sit on her until the threats were assessed.”

“Why you and not the feds?” Trammel asked.

Ryder shrugged. “We had dealings with the family last year. Apparently, Ms. Canfield is allergic to bodyguards. Her father thought she might be more comfortable with men she knew and trusted.”

Recognition flashed across Russo’s face. “You’re part of the team that rescued her from the rebels in Puerto Jardin, aren’t you?”

The sound of footsteps stopped the conversation cold. He eased back—enough to be out of the spotlight, but not enough to miss any details. Ryder could feel Stony staring at him, and reluctantly he looked over. “What’s so fucking funny?” he growled quietly.

“Ms. Canfield? You’ve never addressed her that politely in your life, not from the moment you grabbed her out of that shack in the rainforest.”

The newcomer reached the front of the chapel and Ryder settled for glaring at his teammate, but he cut that short when the guy asked, “Either woman show up?”

It was Trammel who answered. “No. Their purses and cell phones are in the bridal suite. Sarah’s car is in the parking lot. No sign of the two women anywhere.”

The man scowled, his attention moving to Russo. “I saw a bunch of your boys out canvassing the neighborhood. I hope to hell you’re not planning on launching your own investigation into this situation.”

Cop? Fed? As Trammel filled the guy in on what they knew, Ryder guessed cop. The FBI was more buttoned up than this man, Rio.

The dude looked frustrated when the briefing finished. “Let me get this straight,” Rio said. “We have two missing girls. Two separate threats. And no clue whether they’re actually missing, or whether the bride got cold feet and fled in someone else’s car. Hell, you don’t even know for sure if the girls were taken. They could have left with someone they knew.”

No fucking way.

“Without their purses or cell phones? Without letting anyone know what they were doing?” Taggart beat him to the punch, but Ryder nodded his agreement and moved next to the lieutenant to present a united front to the cop.

Two of the men who’d been sent out to gather intel were hurrying back, and his stomach cartwheeled. Ryder knew they didn’t have good news.

“Sir,” one of them said, his gaze locking on Russo. “The coffee shop next door has video of the two women being forced into a car at gunpoint.”

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When Ryder left Tampa, he'd been concerned about the threat against Langley, but trusted the FBI's call that it was bullshit. He wished now that they'd boarded the private jet immediately and bought supplies in San Diego. While it was true that it would be harder here because it was unfamiliar territory, at least he'd know she was safe while they shopped. Hell, he wished he'd agreed to come to the damn wedding with her to begin with.

He looked up from the maps spread across the hood of the Explorer and eyed the western horizon. They'd spent hours driving around. Now the sun was low in the sky, and finding the kidnapper's car became exponentially more difficult in the dark .

Not that it was easy in the daylight.

They knew it was a white Chevy Impala. They knew it had triggered a red-light camera at Pomerado and Willow Creek at around 1000, damn close to Sarah's house. They knew Langley had been the driver. And they knew the car had been headed away from the freeway. That was all they had.

From the moment the cop, Rio, had called at 1400 to tell them the information on the vehicle, they'd been searching. San Diego was a big city, though, and there were thousands of white cars and ten times more places to hide one. If the kidnapper was a local, he could have parked in his garage and no one would ever see it.

One more hour of good daylight. Shit.

Ryder looked back down at the satellite map. Subdivision after subdivision—most with garages. His gaze moved to the street map. They'd created a grid over it,

searched in sections, but had nothing to show for it. Not a fucking damn thing.

He took a deep breath. They'd had to stop for gas, and since the station was next to a fast food restaurant, Mako had walked over to grab some dinner for them. That made sense. It also made sense for the three of them to pull over to the side of the parking lot after filling up and lay out their maps where they could get the big picture while they waited for Bryce to return. Ryder suspected this whole search was a waste of time.

Okay, he knew it was a waste of time, but there was nothing else to do, and if he had to sit around and wait and imagine the things that could have happened to Langley by now, he'd lose his mind.

Ignoring the conversation between Griff and Stony, Ryder pulled out his phone and checked the app for the tracking device they'd attached to Trammel's Jeep Renegade. It hadn't moved in hours and an earlier ride by had shown it parked and empty. It was a damn pain.

Rio had made it clear when he'd phoned that they were only acting as extra eyes for the police department—the SEALs too—but Ryder knew damn well that if Taggart located the vehicle, he would try a rescue no matter how illegal it was, and his buddy Trammel would be right beside him. Ryder wanted his team there to make sure Langley got out alive, too. While they'd been at the chapel, it had been Sarah, Sarah, Sarah with Langley as an afterthought. Fuck that. His hellcat was every bit as important as the other woman.

But the reality was that she might already be dead. If the guy was the person who'd threatened her, the whole purpose was to kill her. If it was the threat to her friend, Langley was a complication the man didn't want or need. Ryder pushed the idea away. He couldn't think like that and function. But it was hard to stop.

“Ski, you listening?” Griff asked.

“No, what did you say?”

Rowland tapped the satellite map, bringing his attention to an area northeast of where they’d searched so far. “Griff suggested that this would be a good place to go to ground.”

“There’s a whole lot of space there,” Griff said, “and if you were a kidnapper worried that a neighbor might see an alert and report you to the police, you wouldn’t hide in a subdivision. Garage or no garage, it’s a risk.”

“You think we should search there next?”

“Why not?” Griff shrugged. “It’s as good a place as any.”

Yeah, it was as good a place as any. They were assuming the asshole wasn’t in Mexico, drinking beer at a bar in Tijuana. They were assuming that if he was after Sarah, he was waiting for a cash payoff and not a wire transfer. They were assuming that if it was the guy who’d threatened Langley, he hadn’t simply killed both women and dumped their bodies somewhere. Fuck. He had to stop thinking like this, but he knew what could happen. He’d seen too much not to know.

“Don’t count her out, Ski,” Rowland said. “Langley’s tough. That scar you have should remind you of that every day. ”

Before he realized what he was doing, he raised his hand and brushed his temple.

“You underestimated her,” Stony reminded him. “Kept bitching about having to put our mission on hold to rescue some damn princess.”

Griff nodded. “She hadn’t even fucked up. She’d been inside the US Embassy when the Puerto Jardinese insurgents grabbed her.”

“Where the hell is Bryce with the food? We need to get back on the road,” Ryder said.

“You were the one who fucked up,” Griff continued, undeterred.

“He’s right,” Rowland agreed. “You never should have let her know you thought she was some spoiled heiress. She played on that until she had an opportunity to use your assumptions against you.”

“You can’t blame her for not believing you were Special Forces.” Griff folded his arms over his chest.

“For fuck’s sake, I don’t blame her.” Ryder thrust both hands through his hair. “I looked worse than I do right now. I know that.” And he had acted more like a mercenary than a soldier from the time he’d pulled her out of the window of the shack. He’d been disrespectful, sarcastic, impatient, and provocative. Langley had told him later that she believed he’d stolen her from the rebels to ransom her to her father. “Can we get back to business now?”

“All you had to do was rescue her while we kept the insurgents busy and then join up with the rest of the team at the rendezvous point. Simple assignment.” Griff rocked back on his heels, amusement in his posture if not on his face.

“Simple,” Rowland agreed, “if your rescued hostage doesn’t escape and elude you for nearly an hour.”

“Some friends you are.” Ryder scowled at the pair of them, but he gave Stony a few extra seconds. Griffin was abrasive most of the time, but Rowland was the quiet one.

Usually, anyway.

“We are your friends, fuckwit,” Griff said genially.

Stony nodded. “You’re thinking the worst, maybe you believe she’s dead and we should be looking for bodies, not the car. We’re reminding you that Langley is tough, smart, and knows how to handle herself. Our money’s on her.”

Voice tight, Ryder said, “Puerto Jardin was a one-off. Langley is a lady, not some Amazonian warrior.”

“Dude, you call her hellcat.” Griff gave him a what-the-fuck look.

“That started as a joke.” Mostly because when he’d referred to her as princess in the rainforest, she’d turned icy on him and he’d wanted her cooperative.

“You’d think that rock she hit him with would have knocked some sense into his head,” Griff said with mock sadness.

“Some people learn slower than others.” Stony’s face was bland. “He’s clinging to his princess fantasy and ignoring the fact that she’s a fighter.”

Ryder closed his eyes for a moment, dug deep for control, and said, “Even if you’re right, the odds are against her.”

“Fuck the odds,” Griff said with a growl and poked him in the chest. “This team protects its women, and we consider Langley one of ours. We’re finding her and she’ll be alive, got it?”

“I want to believe that.” God, did he ever, but the more time that passed, the worse her chances became. He looked back to the west. “Night will be here soon.”

“Then let’s get ready to roll. Mako’s coming with dinner and we can eat while we search,” Rowland said calmly.

He glanced over in time to see Bryce cross the drive-thru lane and cut between two overgrown bushes that separated the restaurant from the gas station. It wasn’t until he grew closer that he realized Mako looked angry .

“What happened?” Ryder demanded as soon as his teammate reached him.

“They ran out of fries. I didn’t wait for them to make a new batch, not when I’d stood in line for-fucking-ever. I got onion rings.” Mako glanced down at the maps. “Are we looking for the car or standing around?”

“The car,” Ryder said immediately.

Rowland clapped him on the shoulder, gathered up the maps, and opened the door to the SUV. “That’s right. We have to save the kidnapper before Langley hurts him too badly.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:51 am

Most people went their entire lives without being abducted, but not her. Here she was on her second time as a hostage in fourteen months. Impatiently, Langley shifted in the dirty, sagging, mildewed armchair and wound up with a spring poking her in the butt. With a grimace, she wriggled to the side until she was away from the metal coil.

She had no idea what time it was, only that it was beginning to get dark. That was what she'd been waiting for as she'd made her plans.

Langley looked around again, making sure she hadn't missed a single detail. The room was a disaster. Sheets of cabbage-rose wallpaper limply drooped to the floor, chunks of plaster had come off the walls, spreading dust and debris across the uneven floor. A dead rat lay in the corner, half decayed, and curtains, grayed by years of filth and frayed along the edges, hung limply over the sole window. She'd been lucky. The plywood over the windows in this bedroom had been nailed to the inside and not the outside.

It didn't smell good. Not only was there the stench of decaying animals, there was also a musty, closed-up odor that she couldn't get used to and the dust was so thick, Langley felt as if she could taste it. She hadn't quite been able to acclimate to the scents or the filth.

She continued her visual sweep of the room. A few stray cockroaches clung to the walls, making her shudder. Shards of glass and slivers of porcelain rose up amid the dirt and rubble like tiny daggers. The pieces were too small to be wielded as weapons, and it would be too difficult to hold one long enough to saw through the zip tie binding her wrists. The only other piece of furniture besides her chair was the frame of a standing mirror—the source of the broken glass. The left side of the

support had been smashed to splinters, but she planned to use the other wooden mounting.

From the time she'd been put in this bedroom, she'd been plotting her escape. After running through dozens of scenarios, she'd finally settled on the option most likely to succeed. It had been tempting to implement it immediately, but a daylight attempt would fail utterly. Her shoes and the dress prevented quick movement and she'd simply be recaptured.

The dark, though, offered opportunities. It offered concealment.

Judging by the amount of sun creeping through the openings in the plywood, she guessed it was evening. Not much longer and she could go. Find help.

She moved her wrists against the zip tie binding them together and hissed as her abraded skin protested. The kidnapper had forced Sarah to secure Langley's wrists and ankles and her friend had tried to leave her slack, but he'd double-checked her work and tightened them. Langley had barely had time to flex her muscles a small amount. It had given her enough space to ensure her extremities wouldn't go numb, but not enough to work herself out of her restraints. She'd tried to wiggle free for hours with no luck.

It was hard to believe that this morning her biggest concern had been how to stop her best friend from marrying Mr. Incredibly Wrong. Now she had to worry about keeping Sarah—and herself—alive. What terrified her most was that she had no idea what was happening to her friend. The house might be a wreck, but it had been built in the day when walls were thick and blocked sound .

The kidnapper hadn't tried to disguise himself and that had to mean he wasn't letting them walk out of here alive—even if by some miracle Sarah's horrible fiancé paid the ransom. Langley frowned. When she'd been taken hostage in Puerto Jardin, the rebels

had worn balaclavas over their faces to conceal their identities and they'd had less worry of being arrested than this man did.

Langley had too much training to believe that rescue was coming. Her father had paid experts to make sure she had a thorough education and Ryder had added to that training. Including showing her how to free herself from multiple forms of restraint and making certain she practiced regularly. She'd complained about it, because even using duct tape to protect her wrists, it hurt, but she was grateful for every rehearsal. Now that it mattered, she had confidence she'd succeed.

For hours, she'd played the role of cowed hostage. She'd been meek and subservient whenever the kidnapper had made an appearance. People underestimated her most of the time and she wasn't above using it when she needed an advantage. Ryder had done it in Puerto Jardin, too, and if she could escape from a Green Beret, the wild-eyed man didn't stand a chance.

The bravado fell flat. There was a big difference between when she'd escaped in South America and today. Ryder had been sent to get her to safety and had been protecting her from harm. The kidnapper would have no compunctions about hurting or killing her.

So, no mistakes on her escape tonight. She had to do it clean.

Yelling from the other room made her stiffen. She couldn't make out the words, but in order for her to hear him through these walls, he had to be shouting at top volume. That meant the kidnapper was furious and that didn't bode well for Sarah or for her either. While part of her longed to confront the guy and take him out with some martial arts moves, she had no delusions that she could defeat an armed man, no matter how much training she had. Especially not in a bridesmaid dress and stilettos.

No, she had to play it smart. Her plan was simple—go out the window, make it down

the rutted track of a driveway in her ridiculous footwear, reach the road, and flag down a motorist to call the police.

The possibilities for failure were rife. She battled down the fear and breathed until her hands steadied. Think first, act second, feel later.

She'd been stuck in this chair since she'd been here, and she needed to do more reconnaissance before it became darker. Langley glanced at her wrists and frowned. To break free, she was going to have to tighten the damn zip tie, but first, she needed to stand.

Easier said than done. By the time she managed to get to her feet, her butt felt like a pin cushion from the many times she'd landed on the chair spring. She'd no doubt fall back into the chair a final time from the force of breaking the plastic, but she'd deal with it. She paused, waited to see if her movements had caught the attention of the kidnapper, but the door to the bedroom remained shut. "Move, Langley," she told herself softly.

Lifting her wrists, she grabbed the end of the zip tie between her teeth and pulled it as hard as she could. She gasped as the plastic bit into her raw skin, but she kept going. The tighter it was, the easier to break free and she didn't want to have to do this twice, not when she hurt so much already.

"Here goes nothing," she whispered. She brought her arms over her head, took a deep breath, and gritted her teeth. Then, with as much strength as she could muster, brought her arms down and back, driving her elbows toward her shoulder blades.

Madre de Dios!

She clenched her teeth harder, holding back a scream as the plastic sliced into her tender wrists. In the next instant, the zip tie's lock gave way, and she swallowed a

whimper as she hit the chair with enough force to drive the spring hard into her bottom. Tears welled and Langley silently cursed in each of the languages she spoke until the pain subsided enough for her to function again.

Taking a deep breath, she listened intently for signs that the kidnapper had heard something, but it remained quiet. So far so good.

Langley had left most of her hair down for the wedding, but she'd pulled the sides back in a loose, curly fish-tail braid. She reached up, found a hairpin, and used it to shim the two zip tie locks around her ankles. With her hands free, it was easy to depress the locking bar and tug the end loose. At least that had been painless.

She struggled back to her feet, the dress and shoes hampering her every move. Mermaid style. Why the hell had she chosen a mermaid cut? But she knew why. The dress was beautiful, and she'd fallen in love with the raspberry color. Plus, it made her look sexy, and she'd wanted Ryder to see her in it.

Shaking off the thought, she headed to the window. The chiffon court train trailed on the floor, continually getting stuck on the scattered rubbish. It had to go, and maybe she could hack away at the dress, too, at least enough to free part of her legs. She searched the floor until she found a shard of mirror that looked strong enough to do the job.

Bending down to get it without falling took some maneuvering and she carefully grasped the glass. Langley whacked away at the train and found it incredibly difficult to make any progress. She wasted too much precious daylight before she got it off and decided not to bother with an attempt to cut at the satin.

As she straightened, she let the shard slip from her fingers and sighed. If she wanted to reconnoiter the area outside the window, she couldn't afford to dawdle much longer.

Despite ridding herself of the train, Langley still had to mince her way across the debris-laden floor, the stilettos making her balance precarious. The shoes were Ryder's fault, she decided. At five-foot-nine, she never bought five-inch heels, but Ryder was six-three so she could wear them and be shorter than he was. She'd have chosen a different dress and more reasonable shoes if she'd known he wouldn't come to the wedding. It might be easier to walk if she could take them off, but Langley didn't want to risk getting glass in her feet. And yes, the bugs and dead rat didn't make it sound like a splendid idea either.

Things had been simpler the first time she'd been held captive. For one, she'd been dressed more sensibly, and for another, she hadn't had to deal with restraints. Of course, with a platoon of rebels guarding her, she couldn't escape. It had taken a team of Green Berets to rescue her.

Langley's lips quirked briefly in a ghost of a smile. Ryder Pienkowski had appeared scarier than the guerrilla fighters who'd imprisoned her, and while he'd told her he was US Army Special Forces, she hadn't believed him. He'd looked like a mercenary.

And she had to stop thinking about Ryder.

Finally, she reached the window and studied it. The plywood was as deteriorated as everything else in this house. Prying it off with the wood support shouldn't be too hard, the problem would be the noise.

A second potential issue was the height of the sill. It was abnormally high and leveraging herself up with this dress would be a struggle. She could do it—Ryder had regularly upped her workout routine to challenging levels—but how much time would it cost her? Langley shrugged. There was nothing she could do about it.

As she moved the curtains aside, dust and dirt rained down on her and Langley closed

her eyes to protect them. She tried to muffle her cough, but it sounded loud. She froze, waiting to hear the kidnapper enter, but the door stayed shut. When the cloud of particles settled, she leaned forward and tried to see outside by peering through a hole in the plywood.

Years of dirt made the panes opaque, spider webs were everywhere, and she could hardly see anything in the miniscule space available.

Shuffling as far forward as she could get, Langley used her back and shoulders to keep the drapes out of her way, and with two fingers, she poked at the wood. On her fifth stab, she broke through and created a hole big enough to get a good view. The sound had been soft as the wood had given way.

It was darker than she'd expected, making it difficult to see much, but it didn't look too overgrown around the window. Stepping back, she studied the plywood, looking for the best place to pry at it, the location that would pop the wood from the window the quickest.

No matter what, she had to save Sarah.

Sarah was the only real friend she'd ever had. Langley's father had been reassigned to a different embassy regularly. She'd lived all over the world: Taiwan, Luxembourg, Belize, Panama, and New Zealand to name a few. She spoke fluent Spanish, French, German, Luxembourgish, and Mandarin and was passable in a half dozen other languages. It had been a great experience, but it wasn't easy to build friendships.

In a lot of ways, the US was more foreign to her than Europe or Central America, but her dad and mom had insisted she attend college back in the States, and no amount of arguing had changed their minds. She'd been out of her element when Sarah had befriended her. She owed her best friend a lot.

There! If she leveraged the wood there, she should be able to break it free with one good shot.

She needed to hurry. The room was dimmer than it had been a few moments ago, and once it was fully dark, escaping would be more difficult. Time to get her makeshift crowbar, get out of here, and get help.

Langley inched her way cautiously through the debris field to the mirror, cursing her shoes the entire way. “Never again. Even if my next boyfriend is a basketball player,” she had to pause a moment. The thought of being with someone other than Ryder made her feel queasy. “Even if he’s a basketball player,” she forced herself to repeat, “I will not wear skyscraper heels again.”

By the time she returned to the window with the tapered wood bar, it was pretty much dark. Before long, it would be impossible to see anything.

Wedging the stick of wood under the plywood, she applied her full power to her lever. For an instant, nothing happened, and then, after a screech of protest, the wood gave way with a loud crack. Damn, damn, damn, damn!

She dropped the wood and pushed at the window, adrenaline giving her muscles a boost of strength that sent the sash upward in a rush. Langley didn’t hesitate. Ignoring the dead bugs and rubbish beneath her palms, she vaulted herself up and swung her legs outside. As she lowered herself to the ground, she heard the sharp report of a gunshot.

Immediately, there were two crashes, almost simultaneous.

Langley grabbed the sill harder as her ankle began to twist, saving herself from a sprain. As soon as both feet were flat on the ground, she looked around hurriedly for anything she could use as a weapon.

Something that looked like a stairway spindle was off to the side, and as quickly as she dared, she crouched to pick it up. Pieces of wood crumbled off where she held it, but there wasn't time to find something stronger. Langley ran for the front of the house. It was risky in these shoes, but she had to make sure Sarah was safe.

The police. Please be the police. But as she neared the front, there were no emergency lights, no squad cars, no SWAT team. The rescue was up to her, then, because there was zero time to find help. Sarah could be shot, bleeding. She couldn't wait .

With as much speed she could manage, Langley raced for the main door. It appeared as if someone had kicked it in, but she didn't hesitate.

Before she reached the steps to the porch, arms wrapped around her, stopping her in her tracks. The wood fell from her grasp, breaking apart as it hit the ground. Damn it, she couldn't afford to be recaptured.

Langley wouldn't let the kidnapper kill her friend, and she'd fight the son of a bitch with her last breath if that's what it took to save Sarah.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:51 am

Ryder leaned back in the bucket seat of the Explorer and grimaced. Dread sat heavy on his chest. He'd created a mantra to try to keep himself from diving too deeply into pessimism and it had been running on an almost infinite loop through his head since they'd left the service station. Langley is strong, smart, and alive. It wasn't helping. The sun was pretty much gone and they had shit. Any minute now, one of his buddies would suggest they call it for the day and start again tomorrow, but damn it, he didn't want to leave her with the kidnapper overnight.

If she was still breathing.

He tried the mantra again.

Before he finished the first repetition, an alert popped on his phone, lighting up the SUV, and Ryder grabbed it from the cup holder next to his thigh. There was a single app he'd allowed to give notifications—the one keeping tabs on the tracking device they'd attached to the Jeep. He had to clear his throat before he could speak. “Trammel's moving.”

“Guide me to him,” Mako said.

Voice quiet, Ryder gave directions. The SEALs had found the kidnapper—he'd stake his career on it. The knowledge allowed him to find his battle calm, the thing that had been eluding him from the moment he'd discovered Langley was missing. He was going to get her back and it would be tonight. He refused to believe anything else.

They'd nearly reached the Jeep when the tracker went stationary again. “It stopped,” Ryder reported. “We need to ease in slow.”

“Copy that,” Bryce said.

The area was almost desolate, something Ryder hadn’t expected close to a major city in SoCal, and dark enough that they nearly missed the Jeep. It was empty, pulled completely off the road on the right-hand side. Mako parked behind it, then killed the lights and the engine.

As they scrambled out of the SUV, Bryce popped the hatch. They quickly donned their vests and comm gear. “We could use a few night vision devices,” Ryder complained quietly as he checked his weapon. It was his fault they didn’t have any. He hadn’t wanted to spend the ambassador’s money on something he was sure they wouldn’t use.

“We’ll get by without them,” Rowland said. “Let’s find where they went in.”

Nodding agreement, Ryder said, “Mako, Griff, take the left side. Stony and I will check over here.”

It didn’t take long before Griff signaled. The track was overgrown, but the vegetation showed signs of being recently crushed by tires. “Want to bet there’s a white Chevy Impala at the end of this path?” Griff asked.

“Not taking that wager,” Rowland said, tapping on his phone. “Google Earth shows a house that direction. I’m estimating less than a mile.”

Taking a look at year-old imagery didn’t give Ryder up-to-the-minute intel, but it did allow them to make plans. “Stony, you take the east side of the house. Mako, you have the west. Griff and I will take the front.”

“What about the back?” Bryce asked.

“That’ll depend on how many SEALs there are and what they’re doing. Let’s roll.”

Without NVDs, they couldn’t make out much of the landscape. It wasn’t night, but it was dark enough to hide detail. The drive was rutted, pockmarked with holes that could turn an ankle, and vegetation to hide them. It forced them into a measured lope and Ryder struggled to keep his pace steady. He wanted to reach Langley now, but racing down the track and coming up on the backs of another Special Forces team that didn’t know they were there was a good way to get shot.

It seemed like they’d been moving forever, and if signs of the weeds and tall grasses being tamped down weren’t obvious despite the encroaching darkness, he might have questioned if they’d lost the trail.

They reached a curve, and Mako and Stony split off to come in on the sides of the house. He and Griff gave them thirty seconds then continued moving toward the front.

They were forced to slow down, to move stealthily as the house came into view. The structure was falling apart, and in spite of the lack of good light and the tall grasses growing around the building, he could see gaps in the siding, patches missing from the roof. It was dark, not a single light. No electricity was a given in an abandoned house, but wouldn’t the kidnapper have a lantern or two burning? Maybe this wasn’t the right place.

Griff’s hand signal caught his attention. The Impala they’d spent the afternoon looking for was parked to their right, mostly hidden by a thicket of brush. He nodded.

He thought he saw motion near the porch. The kidnapper or a SEAL?

Using what cover there was, he and Griff eased their way closer to the house. A figure made his way up the stairs. This time Ryder gave the signal to his teammate.

Something in the way he moved made Ryder think it was Taggart.

What—

The sharp report of a gunshot sliced through the night. Griffin locked his hand around Ryder's biceps, stopping him before he could do more than take a step forward. At the same instant, the SEAL kicked in the door. Another crack of breaking wood came from the rear of the structure.

Taggart entered the house and Ryder tried to shake off his buddy. He tightened his grip.

"We can't go in," Griff said, voice less than a whisper. "It's too risky."

Shit, he knew that. The danger wasn't only to his team, but to the hostages as well. Friendly fucking fire. It pissed him off to be on the outside, to be forced to wait. What if Langley had been the one to take the bullet? Damn it.

Rowland's voice came across his earpiece. "Langley escaped through a window."

His eyes closed. She was alive.

"She's headed your way, Ski."

"Copy that." He couldn't do anything about the thickness of his voice.

Seconds later, she came into view. For a moment, he drank in the sight of her. She was running a little awkwardly, but she was in a full-length dress. There were no signs of a major injury, and he was able to take a deep breath.

In the next instant, he realized Langley was headed for the front door, a makeshift

club in her hand. Shit, she wasn't escaping—she was on a fucking rescue mission.

Silently, he chased after her, stopping her headlong dash by wrapping his arms around her from behind. She reacted instantly, nothing princess-like in her fierce response, and he tightened his hold before she could drive her elbow into his tactical vest. It would hurt her more than it hurt him. Whispering hotly, he said, "Damn it, it's me. Ryder. Stop fighting."

She sagged against him, but in the next instant, he felt her muscles firm and she pivoted in his arms. "You scared the hell out of me." Her voice was as soft as his.

They were face to face, and he took a second to drink in the sight of her. He couldn't make out much, not when it was essentially dark, but he could see the spark in her eyes. Damn, she could be a handful. Ryder grinned—he couldn't help it.

Langley tried to twist free, but he'd expected that and tightened his hold. At least she had the good sense to not yell—not that he'd ever heard her raise her voice before, but there was always a first time. "Let me go," she hissed barely loud enough for him to hear. "Sarah's in that house, and there was a gunshot. I have to save her."

"Relax. There are some Navy SEALs in there right now trying to get her out, and I guarantee they don't want your help. Come on, we need to get you out of here."

She shook her head. "I want to make sure Sarah is okay."

Fuck, she was stubborn. She'd argue with him the entire night if he let her. Ryder bent, put his shoulder into her stomach, and hoisted her into a fireman's carry. Griff came up as he turned to haul her down the drive. "Tell Taggart I have her," he ordered quietly, and without waiting for a response, he started jogging toward the road.

Langley was feeling slightly sick from bouncing on his shoulder, and she nearly lost her balance when Ryder set her back on her feet. She had to grab his forearms to keep from falling .

“What is it? Where are you hurt?” he demanded.

Hurt? She’d gotten a head rush from the rapid change in position, but— Oh . She realized why he’d asked. “I’m fine. It’s these shoes.” Hanging onto him, she raised a foot, letting him see the five-inch heel. Or try to see anyway. It was fairly dark.

“It’s a miracle you can walk in those things. How the hell were you running?”

Waving away the question, Langley posed one of her own. “Are there really SEALs rescuing Sarah?”

“Yes, I promise. Griff’s there, too. He can take care of a gunshot wound if he needs to.”

She felt the blood run out of her face and turned to look toward the house. Griff was a medic for a Special Forces team. He no doubt had experience with bullet wounds.

“If you try to head back to that house,” Ryder said, voice low and dangerous, “I will throw you over my shoulder again and keep you there until I know everything is finished.”

“I’m not planning to return to the house.” With the rough terrain and her heels, she’d never make it anyway.

“Bullshit.”

Ryder didn’t say anything else, and while he was looking at her, his attention was

elsewhere. Something caught her eye, and leaning forward, Langley spotted the earpiece he wore. Someone was probably speaking with him.

While he was occupied, she took in her surroundings the best she could. He'd crossed the road from the driveway and deposited her on the turf side of an Explorer. Another SUV was parked in front of them.

She felt wired, and if she was wearing more comfortable footwear, she'd be pacing to work off some of her nervous energy.

As soon as his focus returned to her, she asked, "To whom were you speaking?" She lightly tapped her ear with two fingers to cue him in on why she'd asked. "Did he say how Sarah was?"

"That was Bryce and no, he didn't mention Sarah. The only one who might know something is Griff, since he stayed behind to let them know I have you."

She nodded. "Okay, but shouldn't Jonah have contacted you to tell us the SEALs have Sarah safe by now?"

"You realize you're the only person who can get away with calling Griff by his first name?"

Langley frowned. "Answer my question."

"You've been spoiled by knowing Army Special Forces." Ryder's voice said he was teasing her. "These are Navy guys. Give them more time to get the job done. "

Although he was trying to lighten her mood, Langley couldn't smile. "Not funny. Not when Sarah might have been shot."

“Relax. Adrenaline is skewing your perception of time.”

Perhaps it was, but the house was nearly a mile from the road—she’d watched the odometer as she’d driven the route earlier that day—and Ryder had run that distance with her over his shoulder. “If I were to guess that about eight minutes had passed since you began jogging down the drive, how far off would I be?”

His shrug looked uncomfortable, but Langley couldn’t see Ryder’s face clearly enough to read him. “You’re close,” he admitted.

“Wouldn’t you expect this situation to be resolved in a matter of minutes?”

“There might be a standoff,” Ryder suggested, but he lacked conviction.

Langley took a step toward the road. That was as far as she’d planned to go, but he must have assumed she was heading for the house. He grabbed her wrist. The hiss escaped before she could stop it.

Ryder held onto her hand with one of his and with the other, pulled a penlight from his vest. He shone it on her arm. “Holy shit,” he breathed as he looked up to glare at her. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me you were hurt? ”

She stiffened and pulled her hand free of his. “Don’t use that word with me, Ryder Pienkowski. I did what I needed to do. I’m not hurt, only scraped up a little.”

“Damn it, how many fu—” he stopped short, then resumed “—freaking times did I make you practice breaking those flex cuffs?”

“I know. I thought I could wiggle free. You taught me how to do that, too.”

He opened his mouth, shut it, and took a deep, audible breath. Then, with careful

precision, Ryder turned off the penlight, placed it in his vest, and in a move she hadn't expected, hugged her tightly. She felt his lips moving against her hair as he said, "I thought I'd lost you, hellcat. You took about twenty years off my life today."

Until he'd put his arms around her, Langley hadn't realized she'd needed him to hold her like this. She wound her arms around his waist and accepted the comfort his touch gave her. "It hasn't been my favorite day either."

But Ryder had come to San Diego. He'd come to rescue her. That had to mean he loved her, right?

The five-hour flight, getting his friends together to join him, finding her. None of it would have been quick or easy, but he'd done it for her. Warmth spread from her chest and fanned out through her body .

Before she was ready, Ryder stepped back. She started to protest, but he drew his weapon and moved in front of her, the Explorer between them and where he pointed his gun. She became confused when he lowered it until Nevada Bryce appeared on the other side of the road. He must have talked to Ryder over the earpiece.

Nevada grinned when he spotted her. "Hi, Langley. It's good to see you alive and kicking."

"Thank you. Do you know anything about Sarah?"

"Sorry, ma'am," he said, shaking his head. His attention shifted to Ryder. "I'm going to retrieve our hardware from the Jeep. No point giving the SEALs our electronics."

Langley was puzzling through that when Nevada walked over to the car parked in front of the Explorer, reached in the wheel well, and pulled out something. She didn't know what it was and didn't ask because Finn Rowland appeared.

His lips curved—the biggest smile she’d ever seen from him—and said, “I told Ski you were one tough woman, but even I didn’t expect to arrive as you were escaping. What took you so long to get loose?”

She knew he was teasing her, but she was unable to joke in return. “I had to wait for dark,” she said truthfully .

Finn turned to Ryder. “Shouldn’t Langley be in the SUV?”

“Yes,” he said. “Do you want to help her get in?”

“I’m not getting in the car until I know how Sarah is.” She scowled at both men and shifted her weight until it was distributed more evenly.

“It’s okay,” Finn said. “Stand down. No one is going to wrestle you into the vehicle.”

Langley couldn’t tell whether he was teasing this time, but before she could ask, Jonah Griffin arrived. As if that was what everyone was waiting for, the men started to move. Nevada opened the driver’s door and got behind the wheel. Finn climbed in the back and Ryder looked at her and opened the other rear door. He gestured for her to get in, but she ignored the invitation.

“Jonah,” she said the instant she could speak to him without shouting, “is Sarah okay? Was she shot? Did you have to treat her?”

“Sarah’s fine,” he said. “When I left, she had tingling in her legs from being cut loose from her restraints, but that’s apparently the worst of it.”

“Apparently?” she asked, ignoring Ryder’s second gesture ordering her to get in the car.

“I didn’t see her myself, just talked to one of the SEALs.” Jonah opened the front door. “He’s the one who gave me the status report.”

When he got in the vehicle and closed the door, Langley had two choices—stand out here and holler through the window, or climb in the back and quiz him while they drove away. And they were leaving, because Nevada had started the engine. She wanted to see for herself that Sarah was okay, but it dawned on her that the guys were in a hurry because the police would be coming soon and Special Forces wasn’t supposed to take action in the US. They’d meet up with Sarah and the SEALs later. Right?

She eyed the running board of the Explorer and looked down at her skirt. This wasn’t happening. “Ryder, I can’t raise my leg high enough to get in, not in this gown.”

His lips twitched, but he didn’t say anything, simply swung her into his arms and put her on the seat. She glanced behind her and saw that the back was loaded with gear. Lots of it. In the next instant, Ryder nudged her over with his hip, settled beside her, and closed the door.

“Let’s roll, Mako,” he said.

As they pulled away, Langley did some calculation. She and Sarah had been kidnapped at 9:45 this morning. It was unlikely anyone had noticed until after ten, when the ceremony had been scheduled to start. How long until the guests had realized it wasn’t merely Sarah having cold feet?

No doubt it had taken a while, but even if they had known immediately and called the police, it was a five-hour flight to San Diego without any layovers. The very earliest Ryder could have arrived would have been 3 p.m. if he had a private jet fueled and a pilot on standby. Commercial? Not a chance, not with security. A realization dawned—travel time to the airport. No, 3 p.m. was impossible, and 4 p.m. would be

optimistic.

According to the dashboard clock, it wasn't 8:30 yet. Technically, it was conceivable for the men to get here and find her, but her instincts said no.

The timing simply didn't work.

Langley ran through the timeline in her head again, but came up with the same answer. Then she factored in a second problem—how had Ryder heard about her kidnapping?

The police would have contacted her mom and dad, not her ex-boyfriend, and her father would have hired someone located in San Diego to find her. He'd know time was of the essence—she could be killed before the Green Berets were able to reach California.

So why were Ryder and his three closest friends here with enough gear to invade a small country?

It wasn't because he knew she'd been taken hostage and he loved her too much to stay in Florida, waiting for the police or someone her father had hired to find her. That was a disappointing realization—she choked up thinking about it—but Langley was done lying to herself about Ryder. She played through every scenario she could come up with, but only one made sense.

“When did my dad receive the threat, and how serious is it?”

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Langley shimmied her upper body, trying to buy herself another inch of space. She felt stuffed between Ryder and Finn because both had broad shoulders and they were wearing tactical vests. Immediately, Finn shifted, trying to give her more room, but of course, Ryder didn't move. She jabbed him with her elbow, but he didn't relinquish so much as a millimeter. She wished she could lean into him and let him comfort her. It saddened her that she couldn't, but she pushed that aside.

No one had responded to her question. "My dad didn't know I was kidnapped when you left Tampa, did he? In fact, you didn't know either until you couldn't find me, right?" More silence. "How am I doing so far? "

It remained quiet until Finn said, "Damn good."

Ryder shot a glare at him that didn't seem to faze the other man. "For God's sake," he muttered.

"It's not like it's a fucking secret," Griff chimed in from the front seat.

"Don't drop the f-bomb in front of Langley," Ryder said with a growl to his voice. "She doesn't like it."

"I don't like it directed at me. I'm fine when it's directed at you."

Nevada chuckled, Jonah turned in his seat and grinned at her, and even Finn's lips curved. Only Ryder was unamused.

"Someone start talking."

Ryder shifted, allowing him to look at her face—for all the good that did him in the weak glow from the freeway lights. “Your father received a letter yesterday, threatening you. The FBI didn’t believe it held water, but he asked me to come out to San Diego and protect you until the feds find who wrote it. This kidnapper wasn’t the person who made the threat against you, if I’m reading your questions right?”

Langley nodded. “The man wanted Sarah. I was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“You know this for a fact?”

“When he burst into the bride’s room at the wedding center, he said he was taking Sarah hostage because her fiancé owed him money. She was his leverage and he took me as well because ‘two broads is better than one.’” Langley deepened her voice, trying to mimic the kidnapper as she repeated what he’d said.

“There was only one man?”

“I never saw anyone else.”

After a moment of quiet, Finn said, “It makes sense he was after Sarah, considering what we heard at the wedding center.”

“Yeah,” Ryder said slowly, dragging out the word. “The only reason anyone thought it might have something to do with the ambassador is because we showed up.”

Langley tuned the men out as they discussed what she’d told them. When she’d let her parents know she’d arrived in California, she should have mentioned that she’d broken up with Ryder. It could take a couple of days for the FBI to clear the threat, and until that happened, she’d have to spend time with the man who’d ripped out her heart.

The letter itself didn't concern her. It wasn't the first her family had received, and she felt confident that this one would end up being nothing more than someone blowing off steam over some imagined injustice, just as the others had been.

Her dad and mom did take threats seriously, though, and if they hadn't sent her ex-lover and his buddies, they would have hired bodyguards for her. A frisson of unease traveled down her spine, an instinctive response she couldn't control. She'd rather deal with Ryder. Langley trusted him completely. But what about his friends? What did she know about them?

She'd met them in Puerto Jardin. Ryder had caught up with her within an hour of when she'd knocked him out, and he'd told her again that he was US Army Special Forces, that he was taking her to meet up with some of his team. From there, they'd ensure she reached her parents in Rio Blanco. This time, she'd been more inclined to believe him. A mercenary wouldn't have been as calm about being blindsided with a rock as Ryder had been when he'd found her.

He'd been as good as his word, and when they'd reached the rendezvous point, five of his teammates had been there, including these three men. Langley had spent hours with them hiking through the rainforest, but she didn't feel as if she knew any of them. They'd been professional in South America, intent on their mission to get her back to the capital city, and none of them had talked much during that trek.

She'd started dating Ryder shortly after the team returned to Tampa, but he'd done his best to ensure she never socialized with his friends. They'd run into them a handful of times while they'd been out, but he'd always ended the conversations quickly.

So what did she know?

Finn Rowland was enigmatic. His dark blond hair was nearly shoulder-length and

that confirmed her suspicion of an upcoming mission. He wore a mask that hid his thoughts and feelings, and his ability to conceal his emotions had earned him the nickname Stone Man. Maybe if she knew him better, she'd be able to read him, but maybe not. Ryder was closer to Finn than any of the other guys, though, and that counted for a lot.

Nevada Bryce was driving. His nickname was Mako, and he'd claimed he'd earned it because he was silent, deadly, and the enemy never saw him coming. According to Ryder, he'd gotten the moniker because he'd eat anything. By conventional standards, he was the most handsome of the three men, with a strong jaw and light blond hair that was nearly as long as Finn's. The only other thing she knew about him was that Nevada was from Las Vegas, which said a lot about how successfully Ryder had shut her out of his life.

Jonah Griffin rode shotgun. He went by Griff or JT, but allowed her to use his first name. He was from Boston, though he didn't have an accent. Langley would wager they'd trained it out of him in Special Forces, though she couldn't know for certain. He had nearly-black hair that went past the collar of his shirt and blue eyes. Griff also tended to be rude and abrasive. He was the team medic and had been the one to stitch up the gash she'd left near Ryder's temple.

Langley wracked her brain, but she couldn't think of another fact about any of the men. That meant she had to trust them solely because Ryder trusted them. She wanted a more concrete reason than that.

She slumped back in her seat, hit a male shoulder on either side, and shimmied again to get space. Adrenaline was supposed to leave a person exhausted when it stopped flowing, but she remained wired. With the threat against her, the men weren't going to allow her to go for a run, but there was a chance she could talk them into taking her to a gym. A quiet gym without a lot of people for them to worry about. She needed to burn off this energy or she wouldn't sleep.

Langley straightened, earning a sigh from Ryder when he had to shift his shoulders again. She ignored that. “This isn’t the way to Sarah’s house.”

“We’re not going to her house,” Ryder said.

Her body stiffened. “Are we meeting Sarah and the SEALs at another location?”

“No.”

Turning her head, she scowled at him. She hated it when he gave her one-word responses with zero explanation. “Why not?”

More silence.

Ambassadors’ daughters did not make scenes . “Is it because you don’t want to put Sarah at risk?”

Before he could reply, Ryder’s phone vibrated in his pocket—she could feel it against her side. Reaching across his body with his right hand, he pulled it out, looked at the caller ID, and muttered a curse. It vibrated again, and he hovered a thumb over the decline button before tapping accept. “Yeah?”

Because he held the phone to his right ear, Langley couldn’t overhear the other side of the conversation, but Ryder wasn’t happy, she could feel it in the tension of his body where it pressed into hers. “We’re on our way to a safe house out of town right now.”

Who was he talking to? And they were leaving town? Why?

The call remained cryptic until he growled, “I know it’s a fucking felony, but we’re not taking her to the police station. You want to interview Langley, you come to us.”

Langley perked up. “Tell the police officer to bring my purse and the bag I left at the Wedding Knot. And if he goes to Sarah’s place first, to bring my suitcase and carry-on bag. Everything is packed. ”

Ryder grimaced, but asked, “Did you hear her? Yeah.” He looked down at her. “He’ll do what he can.” His gaze shifted back to the road in front of them. “I don’t know. You have a safe house in San Diego we can hole up in until you can interview her?”

Safe house? He’d said that twice and Langley couldn’t help but wonder if the threat was more serious than she believed. Wouldn’t it make more sense to simply go to a hotel and then board the plane back to Florida after she told the police what she knew about the kidnapping?

“What’s Russo’s number?”

That question had Finn pulling out his phone and as Ryder repeated it, his friend entered it into his contacts list.

“Got it,” Ryder said after Finn nodded. “Yeah, I’ll call you back when I know where we’re going.” After ending the call, he brought up the keypad. “Shoot me the number, Stony.”

This conversation was brief, but Langley heard enough to know the address where they were going to spend the night and that the house belonged to someone named Mac who wasn’t living there any longer. Nevada exited the freeway, crossed the bridge, and headed back the way they’d come.

Langley tuned out the return call Ryder made to the police officer. A house meant she’d be able to have a shower. She was covered in dust and dirt and cobwebs—and whatever else she’d picked up while held hostage. And removing these shoes? That would be heavenly. She could soak her feet, wash her hair, take off her makeup, and

perhaps there'd be antibiotic cream to put on her wrists.

Ryder put the phone away and said, "Rio—that's the detective—will be over tonight to talk to you."

"Tonight?" She kept her tone level, but it took effort. There went any chance of convincing Ryder to take her to the gym and it meant she'd have to delay her shower as well.

"I tried to convince him to come in the morning instead, but he was insistent." Ryder took her hand, interlacing his fingers with hers. "The kidnapper died."

Her grip tightened around his, an involuntary gesture she couldn't stop. "What happened?"

Ryder shook his head. "I don't know. The cop wouldn't tell me and I was with you, remember?"

The urge to say something sarcastic was strong, but Langley subdued it. Adrenaline was looking for an outlet and she wasn't going to allow it to start an argument. Leaning back in the seat, she stared straight ahead. She should pull her hand free, but couldn't make herself do it. Ryder's palm was warm against hers and she needed his touch too much to deprive herself of it. That was weak. Only for a few minutes, she promised herself.

The first time he'd held her hand had been in Puerto Jardin and there'd been nothing romantic or comforting about it. Ryder had admitted that he wanted to make sure she didn't hit him and run off again. Even so, there'd been something about the feeling of palm against palm that had left her breathless and looking at him as a man.

That tingling feeling that developed had been why she'd given him her mobile

number when he'd asked. It had been why she'd said yes a couple of weeks later when he'd called and asked her out.

He'd arrived in the lobby of her condo with his hair cut shorter than regulation. Her lips curved. It had been cute—he'd wanted to impress upon her that he was a soldier and not a mercenary. And after dinner that night, as they'd walked back to his car, their hands had brushed, and it had been natural for their fingers to link. Just as they were now.

Tears began to build and Langley impatiently blinked them away. She'd cried over him enough already, and yet, Langley was afraid she'd never be able to shed enough tears to wash him from her heart.

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Ryder locked the door behind the cops and released a long, silent sigh. They were free to leave town, although Rio had been skeptical about their story. Who could blame him? If the SEALs hadn't gone in first, if Langley hadn't gotten herself out of the house, they'd be answering a lot more questions than they'd faced tonight. What had him pissed off, though, was the man had been an asshole with Langley. For fuck's sake, she'd been a damn victim and instead of treating her gently, he'd been flat, cold, and as suspicious of her as he was with Ryder and his team.

The team deserved it. His hellcat hadn't.

He turned, almost walked into the couch, and grimaced. Mac's house was small—two bedrooms, two baths, around 1100 square feet. Or less. It felt smaller than that because of the oversized, brown-leather sectional, the bar-height dining table on one side of the living room, and the fact that the home had been built before open concept had become the norm. On the plus side, it was set back from the street and the house itself was secure.

The subdivision was another story. It butted up against some foothills that offered too much concealment for Ryder's peace of mind and the front of the house faced those hills. He didn't care that they were a good distance away; it made him uneasy. It was one night, he reminded himself. They were out of here first thing in the morning.

It sank in slowly that his buddies were standing, staring at him, arms crossed over their chests. "What?"

"You better check on Langley," Griff said.

Ryder's heart began to beat faster. "Why? Are her injuries worse than you told me?"

Griff shook his head, but it was Rowland who answered. "The shower hasn't come on and she excused herself before Rio started questioning us."

"Maybe she fell asleep."

"Maybe," Mako said, "but she showed signs of someone who isn't going to wind down for a long time after that adrenaline spike."

"She was damn insistent about showering right away," Griff added .

That was true. She'd asked him to bring her bags into the master bedroom, and when the detective had finished asking her about what had happened, she'd hobbled off to clean up. Ryder hesitated. Langley had been full-on ambassador's daughter while dealing with Rio—that had been brought on by his attitude—but it signaled she had her self-command back. The woman who'd held onto his hand in the SUV was likely gone and the woman who'd broken up with him there in her place. She wasn't going to want him to check on her.

"Ski," Stony said, "if you don't go and make sure she's okay, we will."

None of them knew her well enough to read her. They'd never figure out whether or not she was all right. "I'm going."

He made no effort to quiet the sound of his footsteps on the hardwood floor as he walked down the hall to the bedroom. After the day she'd had, the last thing Ryder wanted to do was startle her. When he reached the door, he tapped lightly. "Langley, is everything okay?"

"Fine."

“Are you dressed?”

“I’m fine.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.” Her lack of response had him slowly opening the door. She sat at the foot of the bed, wearing her bridesmaid dress, and her face was pinched. The expression immediately smoothed away, but he only needed that split second to know something was wrong. Ryder went into the room and closed the door behind him. “Wanna lie again and tell me you’re fine?”

Her chin came up, but she remained silent.

For a moment, he did nothing but stare at her. Langley appeared pathetic, but even coated in dirt with cobwebs in her hair, he thought she looked beautiful and regal. “Are your wrists bothering you?”

“No, they’re fine, thank you.”

She’d said fine again, but this time he didn’t think she was lying. “Is the problem with the dress? You sat down, and now you can’t stand up?” He was guessing.

“That’s a problem, yes.” The New Zealand was strong in her accent right now.

Ryder ran a hand over the back of his neck. She’d said a problem, but not the problem. What other—? The shoes. Those fucking idiotic shoes. “It’s your feet.”

“I’m not used to wearing heels this high,” Langley admitted. She pulled up the bottom of her skirt to display the shoes.

“Why do you still have them on?”

Her smile was anything but amused. “I’m afraid of how badly it will hurt once I remove them. I’m frightened that when I flex my feet, I’ll have charley horses in both calves. Ryder,” she said softly, raising her gaze to his, “I ran in them. The balls of my feet, my toes...” She trailed off with a shrug.

“You didn’t break anything, did you?” He came deeper into the room and crouched in front of her.

“I don’t believe so, no. I’ve been wearing them, though, for more than twelve hours. I was sitting for most of that time, but I’m not certain that means much.”

“Yeah, not with your foot arched like that.” Ryder studied the architecture of the shoe and shook his head. He nearly asked her why the hell she’d worn those fucking things, but she’d go polite on him if he said something like that, and it didn’t matter. “If I guessed your lower back and hips were hurting, too, would I be wrong?”

“My knees as well, but those are aches more than pain.”

Which was Langley-speak for she was in agony because of her feet and calves. “I could try rubbing your legs and see if that loosens up the muscles for you. Okay?”

“Yes.”

To say her calf was tight would be understating it. The muscle was damn-near seized. His fingers got caught in the back of the skirt and Ryder had to push the fabric out of his way. Langley didn’t make a sound as he massaged her, but her eyes were closed and she clutched the blankets hard enough to turn her knuckles white. “Am I hurting you?”

“I think it’s helping. Please continue.”

Ryder did, but he didn't like causing her pain. To keep her mind off it, he started talking. "Sometimes, Langley, you amaze me. I watch what you accomplish and think, wow, how'd she do that? Like escaping from that house tonight. Other times, I watch you and get pissed off over the chances you take. Like trying to go back into that house to rescue your friend." He felt her stiffen. "I know. You thought there was no one else there to do it. I understand, but that doesn't mean I don't get frustrated."

"Would you leave a friend of yours behind?" Her voice was tight, but Ryder chalked that up to the pain she was in.

"That's different."

"No, it's not."

"It is," he insisted, "because I wouldn't have gone off half-cocked and rushed inside without a plan. That's exactly what you were doing. You didn't think about tactics. You didn't think about stealth. And even though your only weapon was a piece of rotted wood, you were going to charge inside, damn the consequences." Ryder looked up and met her gaze. "You know what would have happened if the kidnapper hadn't been dead, if we weren't there, if the SEALs weren't there?"

Her lips tightened, but she didn't respond.

"What would have happened is the kidnapper would have shot you as soon as you went in the door. You'd be dead and your friend would be in the same situation that she was in already. Damn it, you need to think before you act."

"I do think."

"Not tonight you didn't." Ryder struggled to keep his tone neutral because if he became accusatory or angry, she might not listen. "I know adrenaline can make

people feel superhuman, but I'm asking you to temper your impulses with some careful, clear-headed thought before you take action."

"I heard the gunshot as I went out the window. What if Sarah had taken the bullet?"

"So the smart thing was for you to get shot too?"

Langley hissed in a sharp breath as he rubbed a particularly tight part of her calf. When she had her voice back, she said, "Stop twisting what I say."

"I'm not twisting anything. I'm pointing out what the probable outcome would have been." He worked on her shin. "Of course, you had no way of knowing the gun went off because your friend was enacting her own harebrained scheme. I hope to hell Taggart is chewing her out for trying to disarm the kidnapper."

"The detective said she made her move while the man was asleep."

Ryder shook his head. "While her ankles were bound. No wonder the two of you are such good friends. How does your calf feel?"

The question caught her off guard and it took her a moment to switch gears. "Much better."

"I'm going to try taking off the shoe. Brace yourself."

She nodded. "I'm ready."

Moving slowly, he eased the shoe from her foot and scowled when he got a good look. There was blood covering her toes and bruising underneath two of her toenails, turning them black. She was barefoot, but socks wouldn't have made a difference. How the fucking hell had she continued to function without complaint? "Holy shit,

hellcat.”

“That bad?”

“It could be worse.” He started to massage her foot. “After you shower, we’ll have to see about an ice pack.” Langley made a hiccupping sound, but he was pretty sure she’d tried to swallow a sob. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know.” Her voice was definitely thick. “Keep going.”

He did, and when he’d finished with her left, he moved to the right calf and foot. They weren’t any better, and this was one instance when he was glad Langley had tight control of herself. Ryder didn’t see any bruising on the ball of her foot, but her reaction every time he massaged there made it plain that it caused her a lot of pain. When he had her muscles back to a more normal level of tension, he asked, “Do you want to try standing?”

“No.” Her smile was lopsided. “I suppose I should, though. I’ll need help.”

Straightening, he took both of her hands in his and said, “Let me know when you’re ready.”

Her fingers clutched at his briefly, and then with a nod, she said, “Pull.” Her face went pale. “Mère de Dieu,” she whispered as she gained her feet.

Langley’s knees started to buckle, and Ryder wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly. “I got you, hellcat. Hang on to me as long as you need.”

“I hate being weak.” Her hands clutched at his waist.

“You’re not weak, you’re human, and you put your body through a lot of abuse

today.” And she continued to push herself. It was hard to reconcile this tenacity with the formal gown and her aristocratic accent.

It took a while before Langley eased her hold on him and said, “I think I have this now. Let’s see if I can stand on my own.”

Cautiously, Ryder released her and moved away, but he stayed close. She wavered and then balanced herself. One step, though, and she wobbled again. “I’m okay,” she said, when he made a move to catch her. “It’s the mermaid cut of this raspberry nightmare.”

“And the six inches of skirt wrapped around your feet,” Ryder said as he took in the full scope of the issues the dress caused her.

“Get me out of this absurd thing, will you please?”

The request showed exactly how much Langley trusted him not to be an asshole. It humbled Ryder, especially now that he knew what had happened with one of her bodyguards in the past. “Sure,” he said, his own voice a little rough. He moved to her back, but all he saw was dress. “Where the hell is the damn zipper?”

As she looked at him over her shoulder, she managed a ghost of a smile. “It’s hidden under the chiffon. Dig around toward the top. You’ll find the pull.”

He located it, but he had to keep shifting more and more fabric to keep the zipper moving south. “I thought the bride was supposed to have the complicated dress,” he said as he finished opening the back. Langley didn’t respond, but pushed it down, trying to get it off. Ryder helped her until there was a crimson—make that raspberry—puddle on the floor. Lifting her free, he put her back on her feet and watched to make sure she remained steady.

When she did, Ryder faced a new issue. Langley hadn't been the only one who'd dealt with fear and adrenaline tonight, and seeing her in nothing except a pair of panties reminded him of a very primal way to prove they were both alive. Clenching his hands into fists, he took a giant step backward and reminded himself that he'd seen her in less many times.

He'd also made love with her many times and knew how damn good it would be with her. She trusts you, dumbass. "I'm going to check if there's any ice to put on your feet for after you shower," he said. "If you need help, holler."

Ryder barely waited for her nod before he escaped from the room.

Langley sat on the end of the bed and fiddled with the sock beside her. The blinds were partially open, and the early morning sunlight gave her a clear look at her surroundings. The bedroom was small, the large bed taking up nearly the entire width, and it had pale sage walls. From what she'd seen of the house, the man had lived here alone because it was a very masculine space with a lot of oversized furniture. It was also immaculate, something she appreciated more than ever after her time as a hostage in the cockroach cottage.

Her stomach growled. She was starving, but there wasn't any food in the house. She'd been promised breakfast on the road, and if she wanted to eat soon, she had to move. Her bags were in the Explorer, the men were ready to go, the only thing she needed to do was slip on a pair of socks and her tennis shoes.

But the idea of putting anything on her feet was abhorrent. She gazed down at them.

They looked horrible and felt worse—no wonder Ryder had said holy shit. She could hardly walk, a fact she was attempting to hide, but she suspected it would become obvious when she tried to make it to the vehicle. Her balance wasn't helped by the lack of sleep, either. She'd been wired the entire night, and even if she had been tired,

the throbbing in her feet would have kept her awake.

If she asked, she knew Ryder would carry her barefoot to the car, but she was determined to make it under her own steam. Besides, she'd be sandwiched between two big men in the back seat again, and while they'd try to be careful, it would be too easy to get her feet stepped on. No, she had to put on shoes.

And she would. In a minute.

The detective had assured her that Sarah was fine, but Langley wished she could see that for herself. Ryder was hellbent on protecting her, though, and he wouldn't take her anywhere someone might expect to find her. That meant her friend's house was out of the question.

Langley frowned. Mitch was out there. Somewhere. He might be dangerous. The kidnapper had said enough that surely the police were investigating him, he must realize that. But a man like that didn't disappear quietly and her friend was the perfect target.

Her sigh was nearly silent. There was nothing she could do about it, not right now, and according to the cop, Brett Taggart was with Sarah. The man was a SEAL and Langley trusted that he'd look after her friend despite their breakup—the same way she had faith that Ryder would defend her despite their own split.

Thinking of Ryder reminded her she needed to get moving. Grabbing her sock, she pulled it wide and eased it over her toes. The whimper escaped before she could swallow it. Her low-cut running socks were normally comfortable, but the spandex made it cling, and that hurt. A lot. Reluctantly, she drew it over her heel and released it. She swallowed a gasp as the top of her sock hit the blisters her stilettos had left behind.

She eyed the tennis shoe distastefully. These were her most comfortable pair—she'd run 5Ks in this style—but damn, she hated the thought of putting them on.

Langley heard the front door open, and if she didn't get moving, Ryder would be here to check on her. Then she'd have to put on her shoes with an audience. As she did with the sock, she pulled the upper part of the shoe as wide as she could and tied the laces as loosely as she dared. She tested it out from her sitting position. Her heel slipped a bit, but they wouldn't come off or make walking more difficult than it already was.

Wiping away a stray, unwanted tear, she put on the other sock and shoe, but stayed where she was. Damn, she didn't want to put weight on her feet.

There was a light tap on the door, and before she could say anything, it opened. Ryder leaned his shoulder against the jamb and studied her for a moment. She wasn't sure what he saw, but his expression became concerned. "Are you okay?"

Uncertain she could pull off a full smile, Langley curved her lips instead. "Fine." He didn't look convinced. Sobering, she admitted, "Look, we both know my feet and legs hurt and that I haven't slept in twenty-four hours, but my injuries are minor, and the detective assured me that Sarah was well. Considering what could have happened yesterday, I am fine."

After a moment, he nodded. "I'll help you up."

Langley hesitated when he reached her and held out his hand. When he was taking care of her, it was too easy to forget why she'd ended things. Too easy to lie to herself and pretend she meant something to him. Ryder would be this solicitous with any ex-girlfriend—it was the way he was made. As long as she kept that in the front of her mind and didn't let herself fall into fantasy, she'd be fine.

She took his hand and let him pull her to her feet. There was nothing she could do to hide the grimace, but she released his hand immediately.

Ryder patiently walked with her as she headed toward the front door. She was slow and extremely unsteady, which was no doubt why he was frowning as he stayed by her side. When they reached the front door, he held it open for her. She eyed the steps. There were only two short ones to reach the walkway, then it was flat the rest of the way to the curb where the Explorer was parked. She could do this.

As she teetered, Langley grabbed the railing, but she made it down the stairs. It was smooth sailing from here, she told herself .

Picking up her pace, she kept her eyes glued to the open back door of the SUV. Or as she thought of it, the goal. Once she reached there, she could get the weight off her feet. She might be able to prop them up on the center console of the front seat. She simply needed to reach the car.

Her shuffling gait annoyed her, and she was moving with the steadiness and grace of someone on a three-day bender, but it was the best she could do, and she was almost there.

Ryder hovered, and she tried not to be annoyed. She could fall at any moment—her balance was that precarious—but she hated to be viewed as delicate. “You’re doing great, hellcat. You’re nearly halfway.”

Halfway? That was it? Damn.

Watching her shoes, Langley forced herself to continue putting one foot in front of the other, and when she felt wobbly, she held her arms out like a tightrope walker. Perhaps she was swaying like a sapling in the wind, but she hadn’t needed Ryder to catch her. She felt great satisfaction when the house’s walkway met the neighborhood

sidewalk. Now she truly was almost to the SUV.

She raised her gaze, but that was a mistake.

The sidewalk wasn't completely level and the toe of her tennis shoe caught a raised section of concrete. She couldn't maintain her balance .

As she started to fall, a sharp report echoed through the tree-lined street.

Ryder's arms wrapped around her before she hit the ground, but instead of helping her stand, he dragged her to the car and threw her in the backseat.

He piled in after her, pushed her head down, and covered her body with his. "Drive."

Mako took off, wheels squealing.

That had been a gunshot. Someone had shot at her.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:51 am

Ryder pulled down the sedan's visor because even with sunglasses on, the glare from the evening sun was bad. It would be dark by the time they reached the safe house the ambassador had arranged and that didn't make him happy. If the cop hadn't derailed their plans last night, they'd have arrived in Tahoe around dawn, and maybe no one would have shot at Langley. The sniper changed everything, and to get her to their hideaway as covertly as possible, they'd needed to handle a few things before leaving San Diego. Like buying two used cars.

They'd gone the private seller route for a number of reasons, including the fact that cash would be expected, not looked at suspiciously, and in California, the license plates stayed with the vehicle. Stony had done the talking, spinning some convincing stories for the owners. Ryder had done the vehicle inspections, and he was grateful his dad had insisted on giving him and his brothers an extensive education on auto mechanics. He'd used that knowledge today. It had taken four vehicles to find the pair that he thought would get them the five hundred odd miles they needed to travel.

They had ten days to register the cars, but that wouldn't be an issue. This whole thing would be over long before that. Ryder clenched his hands around the steering wheel and then relaxed them. "You're a damn good liar," he commented, looking in the rearview mirror at Stony. His buddy was jotting something on a notepad, and Ryder noticed Langley had finally dozed off, her head on the back of the seat. It had taken a hell of a long time for exhaustion to win out over adrenaline and he'd been worried about her.

"Damn good actor," Stony corrected quietly.

Ryder turned his focus back to his surroundings. They were more than 400 miles out

of San Diego and in the middle of fucking nowhere. There were mountains in the distance on either side of the freeway, but the rest of the landscape was arid, and the only vegetation appeared to be sagebrush. He didn't know if they were technically in the desert or not, but it sure looked like one to him. There was only one other vehicle visible—the car with Griff and Mako trailing behind them. He liked that they had the road to themselves, but the drive was growing tedious and they wouldn't stop again until they reached the house.

Stony had driven most of the way—they'd switched when they'd gotten fuel—and he sat in the backseat with Langley where Ryder had been previously. Now that he'd finally been allowed behind the wheel, he wanted to be a passenger, but it wasn't fair to his buddy for Ryder not to take a turn.

“The shooter must have followed the cop,” Ryder said, returning to the thing that bothered him most—how the sniper had found them in San Diego. “He probably didn't bother to check if anyone was tailing him.”

“It's the most likely scenario,” Stony answered. “The odds against having the GPS on her phone pinged in the short period of time between Rio's arrival and when we put it in the privacy case are staggering.”

And they'd sent Mako out to find a twenty-four-hour shipping location to get her phone away from them. It must have been halfway to her condo in Florida when the shot had come this morning. “There's no way anyone could have put a tracker on the Explorer. The only time the four of us left the SUV unattended was when we went in to rescue Langley.”

“The odds are against that, too,” Stony said, sounding distracted.

And this morning, in case they'd had a tail, they'd ridden around town for a while before buying the cars. No point letting the shooter know what they were driving.

They'd returned the Explorer to a remote location for the rental car company and then headed east to make doubly certain they weren't being followed. About seventy-five miles out, in another place in the middle of nowhere, they'd made the turn north.

"She was damn fucking lucky today," Ryder said quietly. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about this morning for more than a few minutes at a time. "If she hadn't tripped..." His heart raced, just remembering how close he'd come to losing her forever.

"It's a good thing you weren't carrying her."

Ryder swallowed hard. He almost had. He'd been impatient with how slowly she'd been moving and concerned about how much pain she'd been in. The only thing that had stopped him was that he knew Langley didn't like any kind of public display that would call attention to her. He hadn't wanted to face the icy politeness she would have directed his way if he'd embarrassed her in front of his teammates.

They hit a rough stretch of road that jostled them around and Ryder firmed his grip on the steering wheel to keep the car between the lines. When they reached smooth pavement again, his curiosity got the better of him and he asked, "What are you writing?"

"I've been making sketches and doing some calculations, trying to figure out that shot this morning," Stony said.

"You reach any conclusions?"

"Yeah, and you're not going to like it."

Ryder's shoulders tensed. "There hasn't been one fucking thing I've liked since we arrived in California. Hit me with it."

There was a pause, then Stony said, “If the shooter was positioned where I think he was, we’re looking at a distance of almost 1800 meters. That means heavy duty training, I’d guess in the military.”

Before he could speak, Ryder had to unclench his jaw. “Are you sure?” he asked and looked in the rearview mirror. Langley’s head was resting on Rowland’s shoulder, and his arm was around her. Ryder’s muscles went rigid again.

“I’m as sure as I can be without physically measuring the distance, and like I said, if I’m right about his position. It’s not like we stopped to look for the shell casing.”

“Son of a bitch,” Ryder muttered. He took it as a given that Stony was correct about where their assassin had been shooting from. Or at least close enough. “This means whoever made the threat hired it out.”

“It looks that way, and if they could afford to hire a sniper of that caliber, I’d bet they paid enough to get a full team.” Stony sounded unperturbed, and Ryder wished he could be that calm.

“Fuck.” This made protecting Langley much more difficult.

“We could call Andy Harper when we get to Tahoe. He’d know the names of snipers who were good enough to take a shot like that—hell, he could have trained them—and since he’s working for Bent Tree now, he might know who was willing to sell their services to the highest bidder.”

“Maybe tomorrow morning,” Ryder allowed, but he didn’t want to call Harp if there was another choice. It had been disillusioning to have his mentor quit the team last year and go to work for Bent Tree. Theoretically, they were a security company, but that outfit was a bunch of mercenaries as far as Ryder was concerned. “The man doesn’t have to be US military, though. Soldiers for hire could be from any country.”

“There aren’t that many snipers worldwide who would try from that distance and Harp might have heard of them anyway. It’s a small club.”

Ryder briefly took a hand from the wheel to run it across the back of his neck. “You’re assuming he’s not over in the Middle East, earning big bucks from the US government for security.” He couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“Yeah, I know,” Stony said, tone every bit as dry as Ryder’s had been. “It was only an idea.” He changed the subject. “You talked to the ambassador. Was he confident that no one could trace this safe house to his family? It does belong to a friend of his.”

Ryder glanced in the rearview mirror and scowled. If anything, Langley was closer to Stony than she’d been the last time he’d checked.

“Ski?”

Shaking his head, he said, “The ambassador said that nobody in his family had been there in nearly twenty years and that there was no reason anyone would think of it in connection to him or Langley. He also mentioned that he has other friends with property around Lake Tahoe. We should be okay.”

“I hope so. We vetted the place and its plans when we believed this was nothing more than a couple of days of babysitting. Things are different now. A team of pros means that the FBI needs to find the person who made the threat and get them to ID who they hired. They might need to find the men on the team. This is going to add to the length of time we’ll need to keep her under wraps.”

“I know.” He said that between gritted teeth, but Stony was making no attempt to put any space between him and Langley. “The house has state-of-the-art security and sits on some major acreage. We won’t have to deal with traffic or neighbors.”

“Don’t forget the tunnels. That’s a potential problem despite the sensors, cameras, and the barricade bars on the doors.”

“Those tunnels are also an escape route if the worst happens. Do you want to go over the other choices again?” Ryder couldn’t prevent the irritation in his voice, but for fuck’s sake, they’d had this discussion once already, and the four of them had agreed it was the best option. But yeah, Stony was right—they’d made this decision before they’d known the threat was real. The reasons they’d chosen this place to begin with, though, continued to hold true and the other locations they’d considered had had much larger security holes.

And this house had a second set of tunnels, a system his team knew nothing about because they weren’t on the blueprints, and the ambassador had sworn him to secrecy. That was his ace in the hole. His way to get Langley out quickly and quietly if the need arose .

“No. I just didn’t want you to lose sight of the issues we’re facing. You seem distracted.”

He tried to hold back the words, but they escaped anyway. “Langley’s snuggled up against you for fuck’s sake.” At least he managed to keep his tone modulated so he wouldn’t wake her up.

Amusement was evident in Stony’s voice when he said, “Do you want me to tip her the other direction so her head’s against the window?”

As if on cue, they hit a bump, rocking the sedan. “No,” Ryder said, “but you don’t have to enjoy it so much.”

“I’m enjoying your reaction,” Stony corrected.

Ryder's scowl deepened. He glared at his buddy for a moment in the rearview mirror.

"Ski, I'm not going after your woman and you know it. Why are you getting so territorial?"

"You have your arm around her." The words came out harsher than Ryder intended.

There was a long pause—Ryder suspected Stony was trying to get his laughter under control—before his friend said, "You might as well get used to it. Tampa isn't New York or Los Angeles, and at some point you're going to run into her when she's out on a date with another guy. Hell, if we stay at MacDill, someday you'll run into her with her husband and children."

Ryder wasn't stupid. He knew Stony had said that deliberately to play him. The damn thing was that it worked anyway. A growl escaped before he could stop it.

"If you don't like the idea of her with someone else, dude, then you better get your shit together."

"When I want your opinion," Ryder said coldly, "I'll fucking ask for it."

Ryder couldn't get the image out of his head—Langley with a couple of brown-haired, brown-eyed boys calling her mommy. Or fuck, he could come face-to-face with her while she was pregnant. The idea of her carrying another man's child made bile rise in his throat.

Stony didn't leave it alone. "When you find your person, you hang on to her as long as she'll let you, but you've done everything you can to push her away. You do realize you'll compare every other woman you ever meet to Langley, right?"

Ryder scowled, determined to stop letting him push his buttons. "She'd never want

me for the long term.” The words escaped involuntarily.

“You don’t think dating for more than a year proves you’re wrong about that?” Rowland asked.

This time, Ryder kept his mouth shut, sorry he’d said as much as he had.

“You can’t be worried that she’ll cheat on you. If she has a problem, it’s being too loyal. You saw that yesterday when she was willing to risk her life to save her friend. She’s also strong and independent enough to take care of herself while you’re out in the field.”

“I know that.” She might be a princess, but she was a self-sufficient one.

“Then what the hell is your problem?”

Stony was usually pretty smart; Ryder couldn’t believe he needed to spell it out for him. “My dad is an auto mechanic. Her father was a US ambassador. My mom is a school lunch lady. Her mother throws parties.”

“Her mom did a hell of a lot more than throw parties . Because her father was in foreign service, her mother basically was too, although she wasn’t on payroll. Even Langley was affected by his career choice.”

Ryder nodded his head. “The death threat. The kidnapping in Puerto Jardin.”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Stony said. “Imagine growing up the way she did—moving from country to country every year or two, bodyguards in most, if not all, of those locations, always having to be careful of what she said and what she did. How much time did she spend in the states as a kid?”

He stayed quiet, considering what Rowland had said. He'd never really thought about it before, but his buddy was right—it had impacted Langley's behavior. She tended to hang back, to observe for a while before she relaxed. Getting the lay of the land—that thought had crossed his mind more than once when they'd been out together. She pulled away from any kind of public display and he'd learned not to sling an arm around her shoulders as they walked. He'd simply never equated her restraint with the way she'd been raised.

“Foreign service might look glamorous from the outside,” Rowland continued, “but it's a lot of hard work for the entire family.”

“You might be right, but it's not blue-collar work.”

“That's your problem, Ski, not hers.” Stony's voice was soft. “After having a nearly six-hour conversation with her in the car today, it's obvious she's not a snob.”

Ryder's lips quirked. Stony was generally quiet, and Langley tended to be reserved with people she didn't know, but she'd been bored, and since he'd refused to let her play on his phone, she'd started talking with Rowland.

Ryder sobered. “No, she's not a snob, but her friends are a different story.”

“How the fuck would you know? You've never met any of her friends.”

Stony had said that at regular volume and Ryder checked the rearview mirror, making sure they hadn't woken Langley. She didn't stir. “Keep your voice down.”

“If you met the people she enjoys spending time with, I bet you'd find they're as genuine and down-to-earth as she is.” Rowland was much quieter now. “I don't think she'd have the patience to hang out with anyone who wasn't.”

“The fundraisers she holds for the Paladin League—”

His buddy cut him off. “That’s her job . I mean her real friends.”

“She’s a volunteer. She doesn’t have a job.”

Ryder looked in the rearview mirror in time to see Rowland shaking his head. “You have some strange misconceptions. She might not be paid, but fundraising is a job. A thankless one, when people like you underestimate how much time she must put into it.” There was a pause, then, “What does the Paladin League do?”

“They’re a nonprofit that grants funds for archaeological digs around the world.”

“She’s interested in archaeology? I wish I’d known that before she fell asleep.”

He kept his mouth shut. Ryder assumed she had an interest, but he’d always changed the subject when she’d talked about the organization because it reminded him that she didn’t have a real job and didn’t need one. It embarrassed him now to realize he’d minimized something that was important enough to Langley that she’d volunteered to help.

What had his friend said on Friday in the gym? Something like it was a miracle that Langley had put up with his shit as long as she had?

Yeah, maybe he needed to think about that.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:51 am

Ryder leaned his hip against the bathroom doorjamb, brought the towel to his face to wipe away the excess shaving cream, and stared at Langley. The morning sunlight bathed her face in its brilliance, but she didn't stir. She hadn't woken when he'd carried her from the car, gotten her ready for bed, or tucked her in.

Sleeping beside her last night had felt right. He wanted their relationship back the way it had been before he'd driven her to the airport. The idea of never holding her, never laughing with her again made it hard to breathe. Yeah, he needed to do something. He wouldn't be able to keep her forever, he understood that. Sooner or later, she'd figure out she could do much better than an Army sergeant and it would be completely over .

Ultimately, it didn't matter if he had another month with her or another year. He couldn't give her up and he knew she wasn't finished with him for good. Not yet. Ryder guessed he had until the threat was over to win her back. If he didn't and they returned home, he would lose her forever.

Lowering the towel to his side, he tried to come up with a plan, but it was hard to see anything beyond how beautiful Langley was and Ryder shifted his gaze. The mountains brushed the bluest of skies and sat on the greenest grass he'd ever seen. It was a stunning view, unimpeded by any curtains or shades.

Ryder frowned. The owners had all the privacy they needed since they owned a shit-ton of acreage and they probably hadn't wanted to block the scenery, but it made him uncomfortable. He wanted to cover every window in the house, but the sheer magnitude of the task had stopped him. They were everywhere, and most of them were mammoth, including the set in the living room that filled two full stories. Hell,

he doubted there were enough blankets or sheets in the house to cover every damn window.

This enormous mansion was a vacation home owned by friends of the ambassador. Vacation home. He looked back at the bed, a wooden four-poster that he estimated cost more than he earned in a year. The room had a carved marble fireplace, a dresser with the wood in some kind of mosaic inlay that looked expensive, and there was a private stone balcony.

Win Langley back? What the fuck was he thinking?

Turning, he returned to the bathroom and tossed his towel in the hamper. Dual vanities, a private john, a walk-in shower with tiles that were imported from God knew where, and oh, yeah, the sauna. The guest suite had its own sauna.

“Shit,” muttered, and grabbing a shirt from the pack he’d left on the floor, he drew it over his head. He checked his pistol and secured his holster over his shirt. A noise came from the bedroom and Ryder hurried to check on Langley. She’d shifted position but remained deeply asleep.

He didn’t blame her—she’d had a hell of a couple days. After a brief deliberation, he decided to find some breakfast. Langley might sleep for a while longer, and she’d be fine alone for an hour or so. But he hesitated before reaching for the knob. What was he forgetting?

She shifted again, and with a grimace, he quietly opened the door and stepped out, shutting it softly behind him. The room opened out onto gleaming hardwood floors and a wrought iron balustrade that overlooked the formal living room below.

He was out of his league. Totally and completely. The chandelier was bigger than any he’d seen before, a marble fireplace soared two full stories, and he could tell the

grand piano was of the highest quality from up here. His fingers tingled with the need to touch the keys, but he bunched his hands into fists and headed to the stairs, resolutely continuing forward.

The rest of the house wasn't any less lavish, and by the time he reached the dining room, he was in a foul mood. The next door led to a butler's pantry that was bigger than his parents' family room and the door after that finally brought him into the kitchen. Stony glanced up from the stove, took one look at him, and pointed. "The coffee is over there."

The kitchen was as daunting as the rest of the house. Cherry cabinets, some kind of countertop that didn't look like any stone he'd ever seen before, and two islands. Both had sinks, one had three leather-backed stools and two small chandeliers over it. The breakfast table sat eight and was tucked in an oversized bay window that overlooked the lake.

Grimacing, he went to the coffee maker and poured himself a generous cup. Stony was already settled at the table with an omelet and his own mug of coffee. "You got more of that?" Ryder asked, gesturing to the plate.

"Ingredients are in the fridge. "

After taking a gulp of liquid nirvana, Ryder went in search of food. There was no way he was cooking anything, but he found some instant oatmeal in the walk-in pantry, poured a couple of packets in a bowl, and nuked it. Grabbing a few paper towels to keep from burning his hands, he put his breakfast on the table, topped off his coffee, and then sat across from Rowland. Stirring the oatmeal, he asked, "Where are Griff and Mako?"

"Griff has outdoor patrol duty this shift and Mako's monitoring the electronic security."

“And you?”

“Just came out of the control room. I’m going to grab a couple hours of sleep after breakfast and then take my turn on patrol.” Rowland lowered his fork. “I better fill you in on what happened this morning.”

Ryder felt his stomach drop to his shoes. “What?”

“We had a security camera go down.”

“Shit.” Ryder lost his appetite.

“Mako and Griff checked it out. They didn’t find footprints, and with the broken twigs and the way the camera was askew, their best guess was an animal was responsible. There are bears in the area and mule deer.”

“With the amount of rainfall Tahoe gets in August, the ground would be dry enough that someone who walks softly wouldn’t leave prints.”

“Yeah, I know, and if we’re dealing with a high-caliber team, they’d have at least a few people who could do that. I also don’t like which camera lost signal.” Rowland went back to his breakfast. “It was the primary, overlooking the drive. If I wanted to get close to the house undetected, that’s the camera I’d take down.”

Pushing his oatmeal away, Ryder asked, “Is it working now?”

Stony nodded. “Griff fixed it and realigned it. We’re good, but it was down too long before we were able to get someone over there.” There was a brief pause, then, “Where’s Langley?”

“She’s still sleeping,” he said tersely.

Expression bland, Rowland said, “That’s not a surprise. She stayed awake for nearly thirty-six hours.”

“I’m not faulting her,” Ryder snapped.

The other man shrugged and continued eating his breakfast.

The silence lasted until Ryder realized he shouldn’t have growled at his friend. “Sorry,” he muttered. “The camera and this mansion have me in a shitty mood.”

Stony finished his final bite of eggs and washed it down with coffee before he said, “It’s not Langley’s fault that she was born into money. ”

Ryder grimaced and wished he’d kept his mouth shut on the ride up here. Rowland saw enough on his own without being given more intel to work with. “I never said it was,” he replied, careful to keep his tone neutral.

“Really? That’s not what it sounded like yesterday.”

Instead of snarling, he took a swig of coffee and worked on his control. He wasn’t getting into this discussion again. “Did you check on the tunnels? How is the security?”

After a brief hesitation, Rowland said, “The barricade bars are solid steel, but those passages make me twitchy.” He changed the subject. “I called Harper this morning.”

They’d sort of agreed on that last night, but Ryder grimaced anyway. “What did he say? Any names come to mind?”

“I couldn’t get hold of him. When I tried his cell phone, I reached a stranger. The person I talked to had gotten the number about six weeks ago.” Stony stood and

walked to the sink. As he rinsed his plate, he said, “I called Bent Tree next and asked them to pass along a message to contact me. Harper was unavailable, per the person I spoke with.”

“Probably in the Middle East,” he muttered. He understood why Harp had gone to work for them, but Ryder fucking hated Bent Tree and everything it represented.

“Or some other hot spot,” Rowland agreed, loading his plate and utensils in the dishwasher. “That means we’ll have to wait for the FBI to do their investigation. The only good thing about that shot yesterday was it lit a fire under the feds.”

He grunted. The shot had lit the fire, but the ambassador had stoked it to inferno level. He’d been quietly livid when Ryder had spoken with him, and he wouldn’t be surprised if Canfield had shredded the agents.

“There’s another issue.”

“Fuck.” Ryder pushed his bowl away, grabbed his coffee, and took a gulp before he said, “What now?”

“The kitchen is fully stocked with fresh food—eggs, meats, cheeses, produce—you name it, we have it.”

“How—” Ryder stopped short, his brain engaging an instant after his mouth. “Shit, that means the owners called to ask someone to provision the house for us. We have to assume that every employee knows we’re here.”

“And they would have been asked to stay away until further notice.”

“Why the hell wouldn’t the ambassador tell his friend to keep his mouth shut?” Canfield knew better than this, damn it.

With a shrug, Rowland said, “Maybe because he set this up for us before the threat was proven to be legit. Maybe he did tell the owner to be discreet, and the man trusts his household staff enough to disregard the request. Who knows?”

“Yeah,” Ryder said and pushed his mug next to the oatmeal bowl. His stomach was roiling now. “The whys don’t matter, what does matter is that we can’t count on our presence here remaining secret. It only takes one guy making a casual comment in front of the wrong person for the whole thing to go to hell.”

Rowland’s expression remained smooth and his tone was neutral when he said, “The odds are that it won’t cause any trouble.”

“Fuck the odds,” Ryder said fiercely. “This is Langley’s life we’re talking about here.”

“You want to pack up and take off?”

Did he? With the new info would it be smarter to leave? What if the camera had been set up to get them to run? They were at greater risk on the road, and a hotel offered a whole slew of issues, including the fact that they’d be surrounded by unknowns.

“No, we’ll stay. For now. If something else happens, though, we’re out of here.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:51 am

Langley woke slowly, luxuriating in the warmth of the blankets before stretching and opening her eyes. Her contentment disappeared in a heartbeat and she jerked upright, looking around the bedroom, trying to figure out where she was. The furniture, the decor, none of it seemed familiar.

The view of the lake and mountains through the windows brought back yesterday's conversation in a rush. They were at Uncle Bill and Aunt Kate's cabin. Her breath escaped in a whoosh , and as the adrenaline receded, her brain dropped out of fight or flight and back into logical thought. The last thing she remembered clearly was stopping for gas in some small town and Finn getting in the back with her while Ryder had a go at driving .

She took another look around the guest suite and saw a few things she'd missed earlier. For one, her suitcase and carry-on bag were sitting in front of the dresser, perfectly aligned. That precision made her lips curve. Ryder normally would have simply dropped the bags, but he knew what a stickler she was for order.

Second, she was dressed only in her panties and one of Ryder's T-shirts. There was no question who'd done that. She frowned, but he'd been taking care of her, and there was no point in becoming angry over it. And she had asked him to help her out of the bridesmaid dress on Saturday night, so he had every reason to assume she wouldn't have an issue with him putting her to bed on Sunday night, either.

Shaking her head, she picked up on important detail number three—someone had shared the other half of the bed last night. Again, she didn't need to guess who that had been or why. After that shot, Ryder would be sticking to her side pretty closely. The surprise wasn't that he'd slept beside her, the shock was that he wasn't hovering

right now.

She tossed back the covers and stood. Immediately, Langley winced. Her feet hurt. Not as badly as they had when they'd left San Diego, but enough so she'd be moving gingerly today. That reminded her of her wrists and she checked them. They remained red, but not as brilliant a shade as they'd been and there was no sign of infection.

Her stomach rumbled, ending her contemplation of her injuries. She hadn't been able to eat when they'd picked up food on their drive north—stress always killed her appetite—but she was starving now. Time to get dressed.

Showered and wearing jeans, her running shoes, and a three-quarter-sleeve, ivory T-shirt with navy stripes, she exited the guest suite and her sense of unfamiliarity continued. Clearly, Aunt Kate and Uncle Bill had redecorated the house completely since her last visit. Either that or her grade-school-age memories of the cabin weren't accurate. With a shrug, she headed for the stairs. As long as she could find the kitchen and some food, it didn't matter.

Langley located it on the first try. Ryder was there, hunkered over his coffee, and damn if his brooding expression didn't make him look even sexier than usual. He'd shaved. Ignoring the way her heart skipped a beat, she headed for the coffee maker and poured a mug.

One sip had her coughing, and Ryder jumped to his feet, striding across the kitchen to where she stood. "Who made this sludge?" she asked, voice hoarse, when she managed to swallow the worst tasting coffee she'd ever had .

The tension left Ryder's shoulders. "I'd guess Griff. He's the only one who makes it strong enough to melt your spoon."

She grabbed the carafe handle. “I hope it doesn’t corrode the pipes.” She went to the sink, poured the toxic waste down the drain, opened the coffee maker, and ditched the grounds before setting it up to brew a fresh pot. She pressed the button and turned, surprised by how near Ryder was. He must have edged closer while her attention was diverted. Langley shifted, getting more distance between them. “What’s for breakfast?”

“If I’m cooking, microwave oatmeal.”

“It’s morning then?” At Ryder’s nod, Langley asked, “Monday?”

“Monday,” he confirmed. “You slept about fifteen hours. You’re limping. How are your feet?”

“Better—sore but better—thanks.”

“Wrists?” Ryder asked, taking her hand and lifting her arm so he could get a closer look. “Definitely not as bad as I thought they’d be when I saw them Saturday night.”

He continued to hold her hand and Langley had to convince herself to extricate it. “I think I’ll pass on the instant oatmeal, tempting though it might be, and see what else is available.”

The refrigerator was full of fresh ingredients that she’d have to do something with if she wanted to eat. She closed the fridge and checked out the pantry. Langley paused inside the doorway and admired the layout. There was a center island, a row of shelves and drawers on her left, and a long counter on her right with several small appliances visible against the backsplash only because the pull-up cabinet doors hadn’t been closed. A wine refrigerator with a glass front was tucked next to a sink and a mini fridge was beside that.

Lost in admiration, it took her a moment to realize the pantry was fully stocked as well. When she spotted syrup and bread, an idea occurred to her. Perhaps she'd try French toast. She grabbed the bottle and a loaf and turned.

Ryder blocked the doorway.

"Excuse me," she said.

Of course, he didn't move. Langley sighed. "Will you please stand aside? I'd like to eat."

"Langley, let's talk."

From the tone of his voice, she knew it would be personal, and not about the threat against her. This wasn't a conversation she wanted to have, not today. After everything that had happened, she felt vulnerable. "I'm not discussing anything in the pantry," Langley said, keeping her tone pleasant with effort.

"If I let you out of here, I'll end up chasing you around the house, trying to talk with you." Ryder shook his head.

He moved closer and Langley brought the bread up, using the loaf like a shield. If he touched her, she'd melt into him and she didn't want to be that weak. "That's close enough," she warned him.

Ryder stopped, frowned briefly, and said absolutely nothing.

Langley waited. She wanted to prod him, but if she did that, she'd tip her hand about how difficult it was for her to stand this close without reaching out to touch him. There was no chance she'd let him have that information. She waited some more.

About the time she was beginning to wonder if Ryder was simply going to stare at her the entire morning, he said, "I'm sorry."

She expected him to say more, but he didn't. "Sorry for what?"

"Everything."

That definitely was a blanket apology. "Everything? You mean you're sorry someone has threatened me? Sorry someone kidnapped me? Sorry someone shot at me? Sorry we need to hide out?"

"None of that."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Okay, yeah, I'm sorry about those things, but I'm not apologizing for them because I'm not responsible for any of that." Ryder ran his hand over the back of his neck before meeting her eyes and saying with careful deliberation. "I'm sorry about the times I changed the subject when you talked about the Paladin League. I didn't listen, but I should have because it's important to you. I promise not to do that again."

Langley didn't say anything, certain that he hadn't finished speaking.

"Well?" Ryder prompted.

"Well, what?"

"Did you want to tell me something about the Paladin League?"

"At the moment, no. It's not at the forefront of my mind. If that's it...?" She let her voice trail off, hopeful he'd take the hint and move aside, but he didn't. "There's

more then?”

“You’re not making it easy for me.”

A retort was on the tip of her tongue, but Langley swallowed the words. “So sorry,” she said instead, careful to keep the sarcasm from her voice. Ryder smiled sheepishly and she suspected that he knew her well enough that he hadn’t needed her tone to tip him off.

“I’m sorry I hurt you, Langley. I never meant to do that.”

Uncertain how to respond, she shrugged.

Ryder shook his head. “Say something. Tell me to go to hell if you want, but don’t be polite with me. I fu—freaking hate it when you go distant.”

“What am I supposed to say? That it’s okay that you hurt me? That it’s okay you considered me some kind of convenient sex partner and nothing deeper? Well, guess what? I can’t absolve you. I can’t say no worries, it was fun.” Langley stopped and reined in her emotions. She was close to crying and she wouldn’t allow him to see her in tears.

“Convenient?” Ryder sounded as shocked as he looked. “Hellcat, I’ve never thought of you as a convenience.” He took a step forward but stopped when she backed up. Grimacing, he continued. “You got under my skin, wormed your way into my head. Shit, you messed me up in so many ways, I can’t name them. All I can think about is you, and when I’m not with you, I feel it physically. Here.” He briefly touched a hand over the center of his chest.

Taking a deep breath, one she hoped was unobtrusive, Langley said, “How am I supposed to believe that? You only allow me to get so close, and then you

deliberately put distance between us.”

He reached out, removed the bread and syrup bottle from her grasp, and placed them on the counter. “Langley,” Ryder took both her hands in his. She wanted to pull loose, but that would be too telling. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t because you meant too little, it was because you scared the shit out of me, and I was hoping that some space would help. It didn’t. You still scare the shit out of me, but I can live with that as long as you’re with me.”

Langley tried to sort through everything he said. Her brain was spinning, and she was trying to separate what he meant from what she wanted to hear. “Why the change of heart?”

Ryder frowned. “Because I didn’t realize what I was doing to you until you broke up with me. Because arriving in California and discovering you’d been kidnapped woke me the hell up. Because someone shot at you and would have killed you if you hadn’t tripped.”

Langley could see torment in his eyes as he spoke of the sniper. That raw emotion was why she let him tug her against his body and wrap his arms around her. It was why she hugged him in return.

“Give me another chance. I promise I’ll do better.”

Part of her wanted to hold on to her pride, to tell him no, but doing that would hurt her every bit as much as it hurt him, and it wouldn’t fill the emptiness she’d carried in her heart since she’d walked away from him at the airport. She loved him, and as long as Ryder was willing to meet her halfway, she wasn’t going to push him away. Leaning back in his embrace, she rested her forearms against his chest. Langley needed to see his eyes. Reassured, she nodded. “Okay, let’s try again.”

Ryder smiled and drew her closer against his body. “Thank you.”

Sliding her arms up his chest and around his neck, Langley melted into him the way she’d wanted from the instant she’d seen him this morning. “I love it when you shave.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she drawled, mimicking his casualness. “You’re too good looking to hide that handsome face.”

A hint of red appeared on his cheekbones, and instead of replying, he lowered his mouth. His lips brushed over hers, asking rather than taking. Easing back a few inches, Ryder said, “Damn, Langley, I need you.”

Without warning, he lifted her and turned. He placed her on the island counter and moved between her thighs. Langley broke the kiss. “Here? What about your team?”

“I’ll take care of it.” He walked to the pantry door, shut it, and turned the lock on the doorknob. “There,” he said, returning to her and settling back between her legs. “Nobody will walk in on us now. ”

“A child could pick that lock.”

“Nobody’s going to interrupt us,” he repeated firmly.

Her murmur of agreement was lost beneath his mouth.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:51 am

Langley ran her hands across Ryder's shoulders before winding her arms around his neck. For a moment, she stopped and savored his warmth. After the ride to the airport, she thought she'd never enjoy this closeness with him again. Maybe he believed the same thing because there was a pause, a moment when they did nothing except stare at each other, before he lowered his head to hers.

His lips brushed hers, his restraint even more pronounced than it had been earlier. Langley was torn between frustration and anticipation. Part of her wanted the screaming orgasm his self-command would give her, but another part of her wanted him as out of control as she felt.

They'd been lovers for a year—she knew what he liked and where to touch him—she could use that to provoke him. Langley opened her mouth under his, trying to encourage Ryder to deepen the kiss. Instead, he moved to tease her lower lip, nipping it before pulling it into his mouth. She shivered, her body tightening with desire. Yes, she knew him and what he enjoyed, but he knew her every bit as well.

Not quite ready to go along with him yet, she trailed her fingers over his nape, teasing his skin with her nails. His shudder made her lips curve beneath his. He always loved a light touch there.

"I'm not"—he kissed her chin—"that easy to distract."

"I know." And Langley wasn't certain that she wanted to dissuade him anyway. It wasn't only the way he'd make her come, it was the message behind the slow, teasing pace. They weren't having sex, they were making love and sealing their commitment to each other.

He kissed his way up her jawline to her ear, bit her lobe gently before soothing it with his tongue. Her fingers clutched at him briefly and she tilted her head, giving him free access. This time he made her breath catch as he trailed his mouth slowly down to the base of her throat, nipping and teasing as he went.

Langley shivered, but found her voice. She trailed her fingers over his nape again. “Do you know what I’m thinking?”

“Hurry the hell up?” he guessed and tugged her shirt from the waist of her jeans. His hands slid over the bare skin of her back until he reached the clasp of her bra. Ryder traced a line directly below it with the callused tip of his finger, but made no move to open it.

Her words were thick when she said, “Your guess is close enough.”

Raising her arms, she pulled her shirt off, letting it drop to the floor before she reached for the hook on her bra. She had a sudden flash of his friends trying to open the door, but shook it off. Ryder had promised her they wouldn’t be interrupted and he wouldn’t lie. Without any more hesitation, she undid the clasp and let the bra fall to her lap.

Instead of the result she was hoping for, Ryder stepped back and stared. The heat in his eyes reassured her and his hand shook slightly as he ran his knuckle slowly across her right nipple. It tightened, pulling taut at the attention. “Sometimes,” he said, voice choked, “I forget how beautiful you are and then something reminds me. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being willing to give me a second chance, for wanting me, for a million other things.” He lowered his arm and got rid of the shoulder holster, carefully placing the gun on the counter behind him. Then Ryder tugged off his shirt, dropping it on top of

hers, and opened his jeans. “Let me show you how much you mean to me.”

As if she were the one dawdling. Instead of saying that, Langley held out her arms and he moved between her thighs again. She squeezed her leg muscles, pulling him closer as need surged. It wasn't enough, nothing would be enough until he was deep inside her. Ryder clearly didn't feel the urgency, though, content to trace her collarbone.

Langley growled low in her throat. “Get me naked.”

His breath came out in a whoosh , and from the look on his face, he wanted to chuckle, but didn't have enough air. “Yes, ma'am,” he croaked.

It took both of them to shimmy her jeans down and off. Her panties went with them. Langley rocked into Ryder, letting him know how ready for him she was. Grabbing her hips, he held her in place and she muttered a curse. “Damn it, I don't need foreplay, I need to come.”

He nodded, face serious, and went to his knees. Before she could ask what he was doing, she felt his mouth on the inside of her thigh and figured it out.

He licked, nipped, kissed his way up the inside her leg until her body trembled with anticipation. She remembered the first time he'd gone down on her, the way he'd taken his time to learn exactly what she liked. She remembered how he'd honed that skill until he could make her come in minutes.

Sometimes it didn't take that long.

And when she felt his fingers open her, when his tongue found her sweet spot, the strength left her muscles and she lay back on the island.

As his mouth teased her, Langley arched and relaxed, unable to stop the motion. It didn't faze Ryder—he moved with her, sucking lightly on her nub. She was close, tensing for release, when he stopped what he was doing. Her groan was half protest, half disappointment.

Nipping her other thigh, he worked his mouth down the opposite leg to her knee. If she could have moved, Langley would have pulled Ryder back where she wanted him. She couldn't form words, and damn him, he knew exactly what he was doing to her. Revenge—she was definitely getting him back for his. Not right now, not today, but sometime.

Her lips managed to curve even as he startled a gasp from her. His tongue moved inside her, his thumb making circles over the center of her pleasure. She arched hard, waiting, waiting— And again, he shifted away before her orgasm could come crashing over her .

“You. Are so. Going to pay. For this,” she managed between gasps, moans, and whimpers.

“I’m counting on it,” he muttered against her thigh. She could feel his smile.

Slowly, his fingers penetrated her as his mouth closed over her. He flicked where her pleasure was centered with the tip of his tongue and she undulated until he got the hint. His fingers moved in and out with a short, staccato rhythm, but he kept his attention focused on her center. This time, as the wave began, he didn't pull away. Her body bowed as pleasure crested and then it rolled over her. She arched higher, riding the tsunami until it broke.

Langley had no idea how much time passed before she became aware of her surroundings again. Since she was still breathing hard, she guessed not too long, but she was boneless, her whole body warm and languid.

She heard Ryder moving, but she couldn't open her eyes.

Something cool and wet landed on her left breast, covering the nipple. Langley's eyes went wide in a hurry. "What are you doing?"

She lifted her head in time to see Ryder drizzle syrup over her other breast before he said, "Relax." He extended the trail of maple over her sternum, diaphragm, and swirled a spiral over her abdomen. Langley tensed as his fingers separated the folds of her sex and sucked in a sharp breath as the cool sweetness touched her heated core.

In a nanosecond, she was back dancing on the knife point. She arched, offering him her breasts, but instead, he squeezed the syrup bottle until another big drop landed on her nub. The syrup began to run between her thighs, but Ryder was there, catching it with his tongue.

That quickly, that easily, he had her riled up and ready.

He cleaned the sticky sweetness from her sex before moving up to her abdomen. She felt empty, needy, and Langley tried to grind against him. The weight of his body kept her in place as he followed the trail to her belly button.

"You're going the wrong way," she protested, but he ignored her.

When he reached her breasts, Langley understood his plan. His lips teased her nipple as his tongue lapped up the syrup and his cock pressed tightly against her sex.

She arched into him, trying to bring Ryder home. He rocked against her, but didn't slide inside. "Not done yet," he told her when she protested and pursued the syrup across her chest to her left breast.

"You're killing me."

“At least you came once.” He sounded absurdly pleased with himself .

“Whose fault is that?”

Ryder raised his head until their eyes met and she saw his grin. “All mine, and don’t you forget it.”

“Arrogant,” she accused, but lost her train of thought as he licked the side of her breast. “I want to play, too.”

“Next time.”

Before she could argue, his mouth closed around the crest and she forgot about everything except what he did to her, not only physically, but emotionally as well. She could feel the tension pulling tight inside her, and this orgasm was going to be at least as strong as the first one. Perhaps stronger, because it would be with him.

“Ry,” she protested as his cock slid up and down her sex without penetrating her. “Stop teasing.” She meant it to be an order, but it came out like a plea.

His forearms kept him propped over her and she could see the determination in his eyes, the sweat on his brow. This wasn’t easy for him, but he persisted anyway.

“Why?” It came out like a wail.

“I want this to be special.”

“It’s already special.” She clutched at his shoulders. “Whenever we’re together, it’s special.”

He went motionless, stared at her as if trying to discern the truth of her words. Then

his lips curved. “For me too, hellcat. You’re special.”

As he kissed her, Langley could taste herself and the sweetness of maple. Ryder began to straighten, and she hung on to his shoulders, letting him pull her into a sitting position. After an infinitesimal hesitation, he positioned himself and began to slowly enter her. The restraint cost him, she knew that, but he was determined, and while it frustrated her, it tantalized, too.

Langley gasped as he filled her at last. Her inner muscles tightened involuntarily, but when Ryder groaned, she did it again deliberately.

His thrust was quick and shallow, but immediately he froze, struggling to regain control. The motion was the first sign that his rigid command was starting to crack. She wanted it broken, gone, wanted to experience the raw emotion without Ryder feeling as if he had to be restrained in order to prove something to her.

Langley flexed around him a third time.

“Damn it,” he muttered, “I wanted—”

“Yes, some other time. Right now, show me you want me.”

“I always want you.” His mouth covered hers and Langley wrapped her legs around Ryder, drawing him closer.

His first few thrusts were careful, as if he were making sure she was ready for him despite the intense orgasm he’d given her earlier. But that was Ryder. He was considerate, he always made certain that she was sharing in the pleasure, and she had to swallow hard to dislodge the lump in her throat. With a shaking hand, she threaded her fingers through the hair right above his left temple and whispered against his ear, “Be wild for me.”

“Don’t want to hurt you.” Each word came out roughly, as if he’d lose command if he didn’t keep a tight rein on every part of himself, including his voice.

Something close to a growl escaped. “You won’t hurt me. I’m not a butterfly, I’m a woman. Your woman. Claim me.” And deliberately, Langley clenched around him, doing her best to break his control.

A tic began at the side of his jaw and Ryder stopped moving. She began to squeeze him rhythmically. Her gaze stayed on his face, watching, reading his reactions. He closed his eyes, gripped the counter on either side of her hips, but he stayed inside her. Oh, yes, he liked what she was doing.

“Ryder, I need you. Take me.”

His eyes opened and there was fire there, barely banked. “Langley—“

“Hard, fast, no hiding the need.” And she clenched around him one last time.

The fire became a conflagration, jumping past the break before he could strengthen his defenses. “I warned you.” He eased out of her, took hold of her hips, and pulled her firmly into him as he surged forward.

Langley gasped, torn between surprise and a surge of lust. This is what she needed—for him to share the breathless urgency. She clung to his shoulders, moving to meet every thrust of his cock.

If her skin wasn’t damp enough to stick to the counter, his next stroke might have moved her backward. “Yes, like this.” The last word came out like a hiss as skin met skin. Her eyelids closed halfway as she lost herself in the pleasure. Lost herself in pleasuring the man she loved.

She touched, caressed, sometimes dug her fingers into his back, his shoulders when arousal spiked. “Ry, Ry, Ry,” she chanted, unable to form any other word.

“Yeah. Come for me, hellcat.”

Almost there . She couldn’t manage to say it.

It didn’t matter. Ryder knew her. He’d know she was close.

The guttural sound he made told her he was close to coming too. As he ground against her, he pinched her nipple, startling her eyes into opening. The sweat running down his face, the gritted teeth, the inferno burning in his eyes.... Yes .

Langley arched as ecstasy bore down on her and Ryder shifted, moving with her.

His groan was loud, long, and his orgasm set off hers. She clutched at him, needing him to keep her anchored in this world. When the bliss finally began to lessen, she went boneless, falling against Ryder, trusting him to keep her safe.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:51 am

Ryder was scared to open his eyes, afraid he'd see condemnation in Langley's face or worse yet, fear. She'd wanted him to lose his self-command, and she'd gotten her wish, but she deserved better. There was a soft catch in her breathing and he tensed. What if he'd given her pain instead of pleasure? That got his eyes open. Fast.

Her head was against his shoulder, her dark hair hiding her face. There was a tremor in his hand as he smoothed it back, trying to see if she was okay. "Did I hurt you?"

She made a sound that could mean anything.

"Langley?"

"Fine." She bit his shoulder where it met his neck, then licked the spot .

"You're fine?" he asked, needing to be positive.

"Um-hum."

Finally, he allowed himself to relax, and Ryder resumed stroking her hair, needing to touch her, needing to show her that he was capable of gentleness. Langley might not be a real princess, but she had grown up surrounded by wealth, she'd met kings and prime ministers, and she deserved better than a rough ride on the pantry island.

That thought finished off what was left of his erection and he eased back. And immediately lost his balance. Langley had to hang on to him to keep him steady. Damn, he'd forgotten he'd only pushed his jeans and briefs down to his thighs. He tugged everything up and zipped, but didn't bother with the button at his waist.

Langley sat naked on the counter, body relaxed, and he gently pushed her hair out of the way to see her expression. Satiated. Contented. Smug. And then she grinned at him. “We must do that again.” He didn’t know what she saw on his face, but she laughed. “I didn’t mean right this instant.” Leaning forward, she gave him a loud, smacking kiss and sat back before he could overcome his shock.

Her playfulness eased the weight on his chest and he gave her a slower, more thorough kiss before stepping away. “Hang on,” Ryder said as she made a move to get off the counter. “Let me get something to clean you up.”

He went to the sink, looked around, and grabbed a ribbon of paper towels, folding them and dampening them before returning to Langley.

“Paper towels?” Her tone was teasing. “I don’t rate a dish cloth?”

“Hellcat,” Ryder said as he took care of her, “it was either this or a pot scrubber.”

She made a face at him, but remained quiet, her hands resting on his bare shoulders. When he finished, he used his free hand to tip her chin up until their eyes met. With reverence, he kissed her slowly, putting all the gratitude, all the awe he felt into the gesture. And as he lifted his head, Langley sighed softly. One side of his mouth quirked up.

Wrinkling her nose at him, Langley said, “Help me down.”

Taking her by the waist, Ryder put her on the floor, holding on until she was steady. Her wince worried him, but nothing except time would make her feet stop hurting. “Okay now?”

“Yes.” She stepped into her panties and pulled her shirt on before gathering up her bra, jeans, and shoes. “Will you make me a sandwich or something, please? I’m

starving. I'm going to finish cleaning up in the bathroom next door. You didn't catch every bit of the syrup."

"I got the places that mattered," he pointed out, voice thick as he remembered where he'd taken his time.

She laughed and pressed her lips to his chin. "Will you make me food?"

Ryder nodded and was rewarded with a smile. She didn't linger, though, going to the door, unlocking it, and checking both directions before scurrying into the bath. He opened the cabinet under the sink, found some cleaning spray, and wiped down the counter. With the signs of their lovemaking gone, he returned the bottle under the sink and washed his hands, using paper towels to dry them. He tossed the wad in the trash, jerked on his shirt, put the holster back on, grabbed the loaf of bread, and returned to the kitchen.

He made her sandwich with care, making sure he folded the slices of corned beef so they covered every millimeter of the bread. Okay, it was stupid, but Ryder wanted it to be perfect. Wanted it to be an apology he wasn't sure he'd be able to adequately verbalize. What did he say? Sorry I fucked you instead of making love? He wasn't sorry, not exactly. He'd loved every second of it. Using the butter knife, he measured the width of the bread and tried to cut the sandwich into exact halves. Langley noticed things like that.

After putting her plate on the table with a tumbler of ice water, he placed the creamer and some sugar out in case she wanted coffee. No Langley. His stomach gave a low rumble, and he remembered that he'd only eaten a partial bowl of microwave oatmeal, not nearly enough to fill him up. He made a sandwich for himself, too.

And she wasn't out of the bathroom yet. Maybe she was in there crying, not wanting him to know he'd hurt her. "Shit," he muttered, and squaring his shoulders, he went

to the door and knocked softly. “Langley? Are you okay?”

Her response was muffled.

The doorknob turned when he tried it and he pushed the door open. She was completely dressed except for her shoes. Again, he asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, sorry.” She shrugged. Leaning down, she slipped on her running shoes and tied them. “Is the food ready?”

“Yes. Are you sure you’re okay?” Ryder held out a hand, gesturing toward where she sat on the closed toilet lid. “You’ve been in here a long time.”

Langley reached up, took his hand, and waited for him to pull her upright. “Sorry,” she apologized again. “I’m so hungry, I’m shaking and that caused me to spill water on the floor. After I cleaned that up, I needed to sit down. My legs might not show the wounds from wearing those heels on Saturday, but I feel it in my calves and thighs. ”

Remembering how tight the muscles in her legs had been, Ryder grimaced. He should have factored that in. “How bad? If you needed to run, could you?”

“Am I going to need to do that?”

“I hope not, but can I assume you answering my question with a question means no, you can’t run?”

She walked out of the bathroom, not hobbling, but definitely not moving fast. He hovered, sticking close in case she had any problems. When she sat at the table, he breathed easier. “Are you going to answer the question now?”

“I’m fine.” Langley held up a hand before he could point out that wasn’t what he’d asked. “Can I run? Yes, if I absolutely had to. Do I want to do it? No, I’d prefer to skip that particular bit of exercise for the next few days.” As she picked up her sandwich, she asked, “Do you think I’ll need to run?”

“I hope not.” He went to the coffee maker. “Did you want coffee?” Ryder asked, glancing over his shoulder.

“Yes, please.”

He brought her cup to the table, then went back to the pot to pour his own, but before he could grab the handle, the door at the end of the hall opened. Ryder moved, putting himself between Langley and whoever had entered. It was Griff.

“What are you doing here?” Ryder asked tersely.

“Grabbing some coffee before I relieve Bryce in the comm room.” Griff glowered at him, then smoothed out his expression and stepped to the side to see around him. “Good morning, Langley,” he said a lot more pleasantly. “How are you feeling today?”

“Good morning, Jonah,” Langley said with a smile. “I’m doing well. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, it’s only a shift change.” He crossed the room and poured himself a mug. “Did you make the coffee, ma’am?”

Since Langley had a mouthful of food, Ryder answered, “She did. If it’s too weak for you, there’s some instant coffee in the pantry.”

“Ski, I have standards. I’ll have two cups to get the caffeine.” He chugged down the

mug and then poured a second one. “See? Problem solved without resorting to instant.” Griff headed toward the hallway, but stopped near Ryder to ask, “Some reason you decided not to carry your phone?”

“Shit, I knew I forgot something.” Ryder made a move to go get it, then hesitated, not wanting to leave Langley.

Griff said, “Don’t worry. I’ll hang with Langley until you get back. ”

“Mako is going to be pissed.”

“He’ll get over it.”

Ryder headed for the staircase. He stopped inside the guest room and couldn’t prevent the smile. She’d made the bed. After everything she’d been through, with feet and legs that hurt like a son of a bitch, his OCD little hellcat had taken the time to make the bed. The grin remained on his face as he retrieved his phone from the top of the nightstand. When he got back to the kitchen, the plate in front of his chair was empty, nothing on it except a few crumbs.

“You took my sandwich,” he accused Griff.

He shook his head. “Nope.” Pointing at Langley, he said, “She did.”

Langley swallowed the bite she was chewing. “Jonah, you ratted me out!”

Ryder smiled. He couldn’t help it. Langley rarely said things like ratted me out.

Griff smiled, too, and said, “Sorry, ma’am. Now that I’ve been vindicated of sandwich theft, I’m going to take my turn in the control room. Later.”

“I’m sorry I ate your food,” Langley apologized with a sheepish smile as Griff disappeared.

“Liar,” he said and returned her smile. “Eat slower; you don’t want to throw up.”

“Are there any chips around here?” But she did slow down .

“Don’t you mean carrot sticks? I thought you didn’t eat crap like chips.”

“Carrots aren’t going to cut it. I haven’t eaten since the morning of the wedding.”

Ryder’s good humor slipped away. He hadn’t thought about her eating nothing since Saturday. No, instead he’d hoisted her on the counter and—

Turning abruptly, he stalked into the pantry. Damn it, he should have put her needs before his own.

He didn’t see any chips, but he did spot a coffee cake that looked calorie-laden. He grabbed the box and returned to the kitchen.

Langley’s eyes lit up. “Ooh!”

Her obvious excitement made him grin despite himself. Putting the entire box down in front of her, he said, “I’ll get you a fork, knife, and a plate. Or should I just get you a fork so you can eat it out of the box?”

“I only need a fork, thanks.” She gave him a sweet smile that sucked the air from his lungs. “And another cup of coffee. Please?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ignoring the face she made over the ma'am , he gave her the fork she'd asked for, grabbed her mug, and refilled it. While Langley attacked the coffee cake, he cleared the plates and made himself another sandwich before dropping into the seat across from her. She was about a quarter of the way through the cake, but she'd slowed down considerably. There might be a piece left for him yet.

When she glanced up at him, he took a big bite of sandwich to hide his laughter. Only Langley could send him through so many emotions in such a short period.

About the time he finished his sandwich, Langley groaned and pushed the box to the center of the table. "Why'd you let me eat half a coffee cake?" She reached for her mug and sipped.

Ryder arched his brows. "Hellcat, it might have taken my entire team to come between you and your food and there would have been casualties during the mission. A wise man knows which battles to fight and which to walk away from."

"Smart aleck," she muttered, but she sounded amused, not angry.

He picked up her abandoned fork and pulled the coffee cake to his side of the table. "I'm glad you left me some. I like the cheese kind the best."

Langley nodded. "This one has a lot of filling, too." She reached over the edge of the box. "As fresh as it was, it must have been baked locally." She broke off a hunk of cake.

"Are you still hungry?" Ryder asked as she brought the piece to her mouth.

"No, I can't eat another bite." Langley stopped short and stared with surprise at the chunk of cake she held. "Well, hell." Her cheeks went red, but she ate it anyway.

Their eyes met. She used a hand to smother a giggle, but he didn't bother to hide his amusement and she quickly gave up to chuckle with him. She'd always been able to make him laugh, and better than that, she'd always been able to laugh at herself. A lot of people couldn't do that. "Damn, I missed this. Laughing with you," he explained at her quizzical look.

"It's been less than a week since you drove me to the airport."

"It seemed a lot longer." Almost a week that he thought everything was over between them, that he'd never share moments like this with her again. Ryder paused, taking extra time to savor the experience, and reached out to cover her hand with his. "I'm glad we can go back to the way things were with us before I drove you to the airport."

Langley froze. "When you say back the way things were before , do you mean exactly as they were before Tuesday morning, no changes whatsoever?"

Cautiously, he said, "I did promise I'd listen when you talk about things that are important to you like the Paladin League or whatever, but it was good between us. Why would we want to make any changes? "

She pulled her hand out from under his and straightened. "When you said I scared you because I meant too much, I made a few assumptions. My mistake."

Without another word, Langley stood and brought her mug to the sink.

Ryder jerked to his feet, the chair sliding backward with a shriek that made him grateful the floor was marble and not hardwood. She didn't so much as glance over despite the noise. "For fu—" He stopped short . "What the hell?"

Langley rinsed her cup and put it in the dishwasher before she spoke. "It's apparent that you and I want different things. I think it's better that we end our relationship,

but I do hope we can remain on friendly terms.”

“Friends?” She was dumping him—again—and she wanted to be friends?

Instead of replying, she headed for the exit and Ryder moved, blocking her. “I hate it when you go polite and walk away. If you’re pissed off, shout at me, tell me to go to hell. Something.”

“So sorry to disappoint you, but I do not shout. Excuse me.” She tried to go around him, but he shifted, stopping her.

“You don’t communicate either.”

Langley stiffened. “I believe I communicated quite clearly. What part of ‘I think we should end our relationship’ was puzzling? ”

Ryder clenched his jaw so hard he felt a muscle begin jumping in his cheek. There wasn’t the slightest note of sarcasm in her voice, but the quizzical politeness was worse. At least sarcasm indicated emotion. “That part was crystal clear, but I have no idea how you feel.”

She didn’t react and that infuriated him. He knew everyone wasn’t like his family, that other people didn’t yell to show they cared or that the relationship meant something, but this cold politeness? Ryder didn’t get it.

He did finally understand one thing, though—he loved her. He was so fucking in love with Langley Canfield that he couldn’t see straight, and he had no idea if her feelings for him ran as deep. Ryder didn’t want it to be over between them, but he didn’t know if he should fight for her or if there was anything to fight for.

“Everything is always fine with you,” he accused, voice low, “and I’m left trying to

figure out what the hell that means. Like Saturday night. How hard would it have been to tell me your feet were the problem? Instead, you made me guess why you were sitting at the end of that damn bed in your bridesmaid dress. I don't understand you, Langley. Little things, big things—you don't share any of it unless I push.”

Her mask didn't slip.

Well, that was an answer, wasn't it? Looking away momentarily, he ran a hand over the back of his neck and took a deep breath before meeting her gaze again. “I think you're right. We do want different things. I want someone who doesn't shut me out every time I turn around, and you're not that person. I don't want to be friends, but we can get along until the threat against you is over.”

Ryder stood aside and watched Langley walk away.

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Langley felt shattered. A part of her had gone deep inside, locking itself away where the pain wasn't as intense. Another part seemed to be outside herself, detached. Observing. The great room was no escape, not when Ryder had followed her. She felt trapped and there was no way to request one of his friends act as her immediate bodyguard instead, not without tipping her hand on how deeply he'd devastated her.

She stared out the windows at the lake, trying to soothe her pain with the beauty of nature, but it didn't work. A boat passed near the end of the dock and she wished she was on it, motoring away from here faster than was allowed this close to shore. Langley dropped her gaze.

A copy of *The Canterbury Tales* was open on her lap, but the words blurred and she couldn't read. It didn't help that Ryder paced the room. Every now and then he'd pause to glance down at his phone before resuming his path. If he was as wounded by this breakup as she felt, he showed no sign of it.

You're a fool, observer Langley pointed out. What other word describes a woman who's so stupidly in love with a man that she looks for any excuse to believe he feels the same? He said I never thought of you as a convenience and you heard I love you. Such an idiot.

She was an idiot, a pathetic idiot.

There was nothing to keep her mind occupied. Reading wasn't working, the cabin had no televisions, and while there was a theater on the lower level as well as an arcade and a bowling alley, nothing held any appeal. Or at least those things had been there the last time she'd come to the cabin. She had no idea how extensively the

house had been remodeled since her previous visit.

Ryder stopped stalking around the room to check his phone again. She didn't know what he was looking at, only that Finn had appeared, the two men had conversed briefly, and Ryder's fascination with his mobile had commenced at that time.

Why couldn't he love her? What was wrong with her ?

Perhaps she was too different. She'd grown up like few others had, and she had more in common with the children of ambassadors from other countries than she shared with people who'd been raised in the United States. Until college, she could count the time she'd spent in her own country in months.

Langley didn't regret her childhood. How could she? Her parents had literally given her the world, and without being pushy, had encouraged her to embrace the different cultures to which she'd been exposed. She'd done things, visited places, and lived in countries most people only dreamed of.

There was a cost, however. She didn't fit in. She'd never fit in—not abroad and not at home—but she'd managed to surround herself with friends who liked her for who she was. There weren't many with whom Langley could truly be herself and perhaps that was why breaking up with Ryder hurt so badly. She hadn't only lost the man she loved, but she'd lost one of her best friends as well.

Blinking rapidly, Langley cursed silently for allowing her thoughts to run along this path. She wouldn't cry in front of him. Ambassadors' children didn't cry in front of anyone.

She'd spent her entire life being the perfect daughter. Some diplomats' kids rebelled, but she was close to her mom and dad and she wanted them to be proud of her. She'd wanted to be an asset to her dad's career and to the United States. No one, not even

her parents, knew how stressful the perfectionism was for her, that the meticulous attention to detail had cost her sleepless nights, or the way her brain would spin as she judged her actions against standards no human could reach. Stretch goals, sarcastic Langley pointed out.

Perfection was unattainable, she knew that, but that didn't mean she stopped trying, did it? She wanted to excel at everything she did. And when she failed to meet her standards, she chose not to point that out to anyone. No one flagged their failings.

Little things, big things—you don't share any of it.

Why did it all fall on her shoulders?

Ryder wanted her to communicate, but had he ever done the same? He'd left her guessing about everything, and despite dating for a more than a year, she had no idea what he felt for her.

Yes, part of the problem was hers, she could admit that, but she'd only accept half the responsibility.

The other half belonged to Ryder.

Ryder couldn't settle long enough to sit. He'd really fucked up this time. Langley had forgiven him so easily that he'd figured he could have her back on his terms. He should have read the danger signs when she'd asked point blank what he'd meant about back the way things were before . He should have said he meant dating when he'd spoken, but that he wanted more than what they'd had previously. He should have said practically anything except what had come out of his mouth.

And then he'd made things worse.

Yeah, what he'd said was true and she did need to stop shutting him out, but there were better ways to bring it up. Instead of thinking first, he'd lashed out. He'd attacked. If he'd waited until he was calmer, until he could raise the topic in a way that wouldn't immediately make her close up, they might have been able to talk it over. Instead, Langley sat rigidly in a chair facing the lake, ignoring him completely.

Shit, he could be a dumb fuck.

The windows made him uneasy. At least she'd listened to him when he'd told her to sit as far away from them as she could get, but she'd gone hyper-polite. Definitely not a good sign. Ryder wished like hell that she'd yell at him, throw things, something. Anything.

His family shouted when they got mad. They were close-knit, always had each other's backs, but that didn't mean disagreements didn't arise. Thanks to his mom, he could curse creatively in Italian—those were the only words she knew in that language. His father didn't speak any Polish, but he could holler in English just fine. And his two brothers, fuck, when the three of them were growing up, there'd been at least one wrestling match every week because someone had pissed another brother off. As the youngest, he'd usually gotten the worst of it.

Yet Langley never raised her voice.

He tried to picture her having Thanksgiving with his family and winced. Everything was loud, it didn't matter if anyone was angry or not, and there was shouting between the grown up table and the kids' table throughout the meal. Then there was the extended family, the way everyone talked louder and louder to be the center of the conversation. Ryder stopped, stared out the windows at the lake. She'd run the other direction and wonder what the fuck he'd gotten her into. The princess and the peasant.

Langley was champagne, he was beer. Langley had graduated from Berkeley with honors, he'd dropped out of college after his first year. Langley owned a penthouse condo on Bayshore Boulevard, he lived on the air force base. Ryder could list a thousand other differences, proof that she was out of his league.

And yeah, the money was his hang-up, he could admit that. Langley honest-to-God seemed content to go out for pizza and a movie. He was the one who felt like he should be able to put her on a private jet and whisk her to New York for dinner.

Maybe he'd be worthy of her if he hadn't dropped out of college. How many times growing up had he heard: You gotta get a degree. You don't got nothing without that paper. His brothers had listened and now one was a vice president of engineering, quality, and some other bullshit at a Fortune 500 company and his oldest brother was bucking for partner in the law firm he worked at.

Ryder could go back to school. Except he didn't want to do that and he wasn't sure it would make a difference to Langley anyway. She'd never said a word about his education. His issue. Fuck. It would be easier to deal with if she was the one who had the problem.

It didn't matter. He was going to fight for her and if it took him outside his comfort zone, so be it. She might not forgive him again. She might not want to let him in. It could be that this breakup was the end. Ryder shook his head. His family might not have prepared him to deal with Langley and how she handled conflict, but they had taught him something valuable. Don't give up on love.

A pair of kayaks neared the dock and Ryder stiffened, hand going to his weapon. The mansion was set back from the lake, but not far enough for his peace of mind and he hated that boaters regularly neared the beach. It had to be driving his buddies crazy even with the sensors along the shoreline and on the dock.

The kayakers continued past and Ryder lowered his arm. Resuming his route around the great room, he glanced over at her. She continued to read that book she'd pulled from one of the two bookcases and she seemed engrossed in it. Or she was feigning interest to avoid having to interact with him. Knowing her, it could go either way.

As he passed the grand piano, he lightly ran a hand along the side. In other circumstances, he would have sat down and played. When else would he ever have the opportunity to try out a brand that started at half a mil for a basic, built-by-hand model and went higher for custom-made instruments like this one? It might be worth close to a million dollars. But things weren't different and Ryder couldn't indulge himself.

He pulled out his phone instead, standing where he was until he ran through each of the security cameras. Everything remained quiet inside and out .

There was no reason for the hair on his nape to prickle. None whatsoever.

But Ryder couldn't shake the tingling feeling. His sixth sense was usually dead-on and right now, it was whispering warnings. He ran through the cameras again, going slower this time, studying each view, but the house and grounds continued to check out okay. He closed the app.

His instincts must be wrong. There was no way they could have been followed here. They'd split up for the drive and Mako and Griff had watched their rear. The cars couldn't have been tagged with any kind of tracking device since they'd bought them after the shot and hadn't left them unguarded for so much as a minute. Langley's phone wasn't the culprit either. It was in Florida by now, and the team's phones were secure. He was jumping at shadows.

Only his gut wasn't buying it. And it wasn't completely impossible that they'd been tracked. Nothing was ever impossible.

Returning to the window, he scanned as far as he could see. Nothing. Instead of feeling relieved, Ryder tensed further. Fuck logic. His instincts had saved his ass too many times to name and he wasn't discounting them with his woman's life on the line. "Langley, we're moving. Now."

She didn't argue or question, merely put the book aside and stood. Sometimes her calmness worked to his advantage.

"We're going up to the guest room so you can get your stuff together. We're leaving here."

"What about your team?" she asked.

Ryder gestured toward the stairs, not speaking until she started walking toward them. "I'll contact them when you're packed. I know they can deploy in a hurry. I'm not sure how long you're going to take."

She didn't grimace. She didn't limp. She moved quickly, but he saw how gingerly she walked, and Ryder was reminded to factor that into the contingency plans forming in his mind. There wasn't much he could change, though, if things went to shit. He knew Langley would suck it up and deal with the pain without a whisper of complaint, but he didn't want her hurting.

As soon as they entered the bedroom, she headed into the attached bath. The crawling sensation on the back of his neck increased. He reached for his phone, but it pinged before he unhooked it from his belt. The text was short and it turned his blood to ice. Primary ext. cam 3 down 2x. The 2x told him it was the same camera that had been out of commission this morning. Once could have been an animal, twice told him it wasn't.

"Langley," he called as he closed messaging and opened the security app. "Forget

your shit. We're going without it. The sniper's here."

He quickly ran through the cameras, but stopped and went backward. The tunnel entrance in the wine cellar was wide open, the barricade bar resting next to the door.

Someone had taken that bar down from the inside. Someone he trusted.

One of his friends had sold them out.

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A picture was worth a thousand words and Ryder needed Langley to understand the situation. When she reached his side, he showed her the live feed from the security camera on the tunnel door in the wine cellar.

“The barricade bar is down.”

“I know.” He stowed the phone and moved quickly, gathering a few things they’d need.

“It can only be removed from the inside.”

“I know.” He slung a backpack over his shoulder and stopped in front of her. “From here on out, trust no one—only me.”

Her gaze jerked up to his and he saw in her eyes that she understood exactly what he was telling her. “Who?”

“Don’t know.” Ryder took Langley’s hand and tugged her to the bedroom door. He released her and listened carefully before cautiously inching it open. The escape tunnel system the ambassador had told him about was separate from the tunnels the assassination squad had used to gain access to the house and it was their ticket to safety. He hoped. “Stick close,” he whispered, and after reaching for his pistol, stepped into the hallway.

He fucking hated that the corridor was open to the great room below, and Ryder gestured to Langley to hug the wall. If someone walked through and looked up, they were finished.

The nearest entry point to the escape tunnels was in the master bedroom and they were going to be exposed for about thirty to forty seconds until they reached the enclosed section of the hall. That was going to be a long half minute. From there, they'd have another thirty seconds or so until they made it to their destination. Fuck, he wished there was a closer entrance.

He didn't know who the hell the ambassador's friend was or what he did that necessitated a hidden escape route, but they were damn lucky it was there and twice as lucky that Canfield had made him promise not to share its existence with his team.

A floorboard creaked under Langley's foot and Ryder froze. Waited.

She was practically plastered to his side and he could feel her tension. Ryder wished he could smile and reassure her that everything was going to be fine, but he couldn't do that. Because an unknown member of his team was a traitor, and the two of them were on their own against a sniper of epic skill and probably a team of mercenaries. His hellcat might not be some normal civilian, but she wasn't Wonder Woman either.

After a few seconds, he resumed moving, confident that no one had been around to hear the sound. Reaching the enclosed hallway was a small relief. He eyed the door at the end of the corridor. Halfway there.

Langley breathed a soft sigh when they arrived at the master bedroom, but he knew better. Ryder exercised as much caution to enter the room as he'd done when they'd gone into the corridor. Silently, he closed the door behind them.

In milliseconds, he saw that bedroom was enormous with lofted ceilings and a view of the lake and mountains that was amazing. He headed straight for the closet.

He'd only been given a few minutes to study the schematics for the emergency tunnels and Ryder had focused on the entrances and how to open the hidden

doorways. Finding their way around once they were inside would involve a lot of trial and error, but he'd worry about that when he needed to .

The closet was as big as some people's homes and filled with clothes. A wardrobe for each residence? At least the fabric could hide them if anyone came in here and only did a cursory search. Closing the door, Ryder went to the back right hand side. "Grab some jackets for us while I get the door to the tunnels open. It'll drop to the 40s or 50s overnight."

"You know about the escape tunnels?"

Ryder paused, turned to look at her. " You know about the them?"

"Sure. I played in them with Charlotte and Louisa when we were kids."

"Who the fuck are Charlotte and Louisa?" he demanded, voice soft.

She frowned at him, but didn't mention his language. "Uncle Bill and Aunt Kate's daughters. If we need jackets, does that mean we're camping out?"

Ryder shook his head. "Only if we have no other choice. My plan is to get one of the cars and drive away."

If the vehicles hadn't been disabled.

And since they'd left them parked outside in front of the garage, they no doubt had been tampered with, but he didn't share that with Langley. Moving clothes aside, he worked his way to the closet wall. She'd played in the damn tunnels as a kid. That didn't bode well for them being as secret as the ambassador had told him they were and that fucking damn well sucked.

The ornate gizmo he needed to press was hidden amid scores of other carvings. Every inch of the wood from knee-height to crown molding held something—a bird, a flower, a leaf—and it was repeated. Fourth row from the top, fifteenth flower in. Or was it fifth row?

Nothing.

He pressed the flower one row below as Langley came up beside him. “It’s fourth row from the bottom,” she told him softly. “The entire family needed to get out, if the need arose, and children can’t reach that high.”

She leaned past him and pressed a flower. Nothing happened for her either.

A sound reached his ears. It was barely a whisper, but his hand tightened around the pistol. They needed to hurry. He studied the wall near where Langley had pressed. There, in the row above her flower, was a lily that seemed out of alignment by a fraction. This time when he touched it, the wall slid silently open.

Grabbing Langley’s hand, Ryder pulled her into the tunnel. The control to manipulate the door was obvious on this side and he hurriedly rearranged the hangers before using it. The panel seemed to shut painfully, slowly.

The sound of the closet door opening came as the entrance closed with a barely-audible thud. The darkness was absolute.

Langley leaned into his side as they listened to someone search the closet. He should put her away from him, but he couldn’t make himself do it. What Ryder wanted to do was wrap his arm around her, to give her whatever comfort he could, but he remained ready, his attention focused on where they’d entered. He held the pistol in his right hand and the other held hers firmly.

It didn't take long before he heard someone say, "Clear."

Ryder didn't move, and his hand tightened around Langley's when she began to stir. He didn't know if the man was talking into a headset or if he had a partner with him, and it didn't matter. They were waiting before they did anything that might make noise.

When he felt comfortable that the search for them really had moved on, Ryder released Langley and reached for his phone. The light from the screen seemed bright after the dark, but it wasn't enough illumination. He turned on the flashlight and moved the light around, trying to get a better idea of the tunnels.

Cobwebs were thick between the wood of the ceiling and the dark wooden walls, particularly in the corners. He felt Langley shudder but ignored it. Spiders were the least of their worries. The floors were also wood and about fifteen feet away there was a set of spiral stairs that he thought would take them to ground level. Everything was covered in a thick coating of dust and that was a good sign. It meant that the household staff didn't come in here to clean.

It meant the tunnels might actually be secret.

Gesturing with the light, Ryder indicated she should take the stairs. Langley didn't move. He repeated the motion, more insistently this time.

She turned to scowl up at him and then using her thighs to hold one of the jackets, she donned the other, a raincoat, and pulled the hood over her head. With the other jacket draped over her arm again, she moved carefully toward the stairway.

After about four steps down, she stopped.

"Why aren't you moving?" He kept his voice quiet, but he was pretty sure Langley

would pick up on the fact he was getting pissed at her.

“Because I can’t see where I’m going and the spiral of the staircase is tight. Aren’t we in enough trouble without my falling?”

Yeah. It was dark and she was out of the pool of light his phone’s flashlight was emitting. Still, he was irritated. “I’ll give you the phone so you can have the light. Be careful with it.”

“I’m going to ignore your tone,” she said.

Ryder’s jaw clenched at how painfully polite she sounded and handed her his mobile. She thrust the leather jacket at him. Scowling, he shrugged it on, repositioned his pack and said, “Move.”

Hanging on to his phone with one hand and the bannister with the other, Langley slowly descended. Impatience made him tense, and he struggled to keep his mouth shut. The staircase was steep, the spiral was tight, and her legs were in rough shape, but damn it, he wanted to tell her to hurry the fuck up.

About six million years later, they reached the ground floor. She stayed at the foot of the stairs, and with his voice soft and carefully neutral, Ryder said, “Can you please take another step forward so I can reach the floor too?”

She did, but quickly jumped backward, slamming into his chest.

“What? What’s wrong?” He didn’t see any threat.

“Mouse,” she whispered.

“For fuck’s sake, Langley, it’s more afraid of you than you are of it.”

“It startled me. I apologize for reacting to the unanticipated motion.” She enunciated each word with perfect diction.

He pulled the strap of the pack higher on his shoulder and grimaced. Sometimes he forgot that normal people responded strongly to unexpected stimulus, but he didn’t apologize. “Let me have the phone.”

Taking it from her, he held it aloft, using the light to check out where they were. To their right, there was another set of stairs going to what he guessed was the basement and the dust and cobwebs were every bit as thick there as they were on the set they’d previously used. Straight ahead were a set of hallways shaped in a giant T. They stood at the foot of the letter.

Ryder narrowed his eyes, trying to orient himself. Between not being able to study the plans for the emergency tunnels for very long and the spinning on the spiral staircase, he needed a moment to get his bearings.

When he thought he knew how to head toward the garage, he said, “Go straight ahead, and when you hit the wall, turn left.” He passed the mobile back to her.

“I hope your phone is charged.”

“It is,” Ryder said, not bothering to mention that the battery was more powerful than anything available to the public.

He guided them through a series of turns until he thought they were getting near the garage. If his memory was right, there was an exit from the tunnel to a workshop tucked at the back of the vehicle stalls. He’d leave her inside the passageway and check out the cars. On the off chance one of them was running, Ryder would get her and they’d head out. The odds weren’t in their favor, but he knew a hell of a lot about engines, so it was a possibility he’d be able to fix whatever had been done.

They remained silent except for his occasional directions, meanwhile he ran scenarios on what might happen when he checked on the cars. The mansion was large, but he didn't know how many mercenaries there were. He hoped that the entire squad was occupied searching the house, but what would he do if someone was guarding the vehicles?

Finally, they reached the exit out of the tunnels to the garage. He took his mobile from her hand and ran the light over the wall until he found the mechanism to open it. "Okay," he whispered, "I'm going out to the cars. You stay here until I come back. Don't move no matter what, understood?"

"Understood."

Giving the phone back to Langley, he used the lever to slowly open the panel into the garage. The sunlight was bright and he gave his eyes a few seconds to adjust. Putting his pack down in the hall, he slipped out of the tunnel and pulled the door almost completely shut behind him.

He stayed low, remaining behind cover as much as possible until he reached the first car. Keeping it between him and the house, he scanned. No signs of life.

Carefully, quietly, he opened the passenger door, the side of the vehicle farthest from the house, and leaned over to pop the hood. It made a soft snick as it released. Ryder didn't need to lift it all the way to realize they weren't driving out of here. Not unless he could find a working battery to replace the one that had been removed. He carefully lowered the hood, but didn't close it, too aware of how loud that would be. The gap was barely noticeable.

The second car had the same problem. Fuck . Yeah, well, he'd guessed they weren't going to be able to get away that easily.

Ryder ducked and froze as motion caught his eye. As he watched, an armed man passed by the front of the house before disappearing around the side. He recognized him.

The depth of the betrayal slammed into him.

Andy Harper. The man he'd considered his mentor.

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Ryder forced aside the sick feeling and waited. He needed to make sure the area was clear before he moved. But son of a bitch. Harper had met Langley—he'd been with them on the rescue in Puerto Jardin—and he damn well knew she was Ryder's woman. Shit, he'd been the one who'd encouraged Ryder to ask her out to begin with, and he'd known things had become serious before he'd left the team. The bastard had hired out to kill her anyway. Motherfucker.

Anger wasn't helpful and Ryder pushed that away, too. There'd be time later, after this was finished, to be pissed off. Right now, he needed control, he needed clear-headed thinking.

It was hard. This was another betrayal, one that managed to cut deeper than he'd expected. Harper not only knew how important Langley was to him, he'd also been willing to risk Ryder's life to take out his target when he'd fired on her in San Diego. Ryder had been standing next to Langley, close enough that if a breeze had moved the bullet a small amount, it could have hit him. Harp wasn't arrogant enough to discount Mother Nature, so he simply hadn't cared if Ryder was the one to go down.

Harper had been his role model when he'd first joined the team. He'd looked up to the man, admired him, learned from him.

This made protecting her more difficult. Harper knew him, understood how his mind worked, what tactics he was likely to deploy, when he would zig instead of zag. Hell, he'd taught Ryder some of those tactics. He didn't have as much knowledge about his adversary. The man had been reticent about himself.

Had Harper always had been this callous, this uncaring?

When he realized his jaw hurt from how tightly he'd gritted his teeth, Ryder shook his head and worked to lock down his emotions. Who Harper was didn't fucking matter. There was only one person who was important right now and she was waiting for him.

It had been quiet long enough, time to move. Staying low, he crept back into the garage and the escape tunnels. He needed to forget about friendships, forget about treachery, and think about nothing except keeping Langley alive. The odds were stacked against them and getting worse by the minute.

Langley whirled when he entered, hands coming up before she identified him and relaxed. As the door to the tunnel closed, she held the phone's flashlight up to get a good look at his face. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She read him too well. "Car batteries are missing," he said, voice low.

"What else? And don't tell me nothing."

Yeah, he hadn't thought that he'd be able to get away with a partial answer. "I saw our sniper. He's someone I know."

She stared at him. Langley was in shadow since she held the light, but he didn't need to see her to recognize that the synapses in her brain were firing. He'd never met anyone who was as good as she was at taking scant facts, piecing them together, and coming up with the correct answer. She did it this time too. "Andy Harper? Your former teammate."

"Yeah," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize Bent Tree hired their operatives out as hitmen."

“Me either.” It was hard to believe they’d risk those lucrative government contracts for this. Was Harper freelancing? Somehow that idea was worse than his former teammate being assigned the job. “It doesn’t matter now. Let’s move.”

Langley moved, but as she walked, she asked quietly, “With the cars disabled, am I to assume we’re headed through the tunnels and into the woods surrounding the cabin?”

Cabin? She called this place a cabin? Ryder grimaced. “You got it. I don’t suppose you know how to get to the exit, do you?”

“No, when we played here, we were never allowed to go that far. You don’t have that information?”

“Your father only let me review the schematics for a couple minutes. It’s okay. I’ll figure it out.” He might make a few mistakes, but he’d get them out of here. Eventually.

He fucking hoped that the mercenaries didn’t know about the secret passages because the last thing he wanted to do was go around a corner and run into one of them. The damn thing was that even if the escape system was a secret now, the longer they stayed in here, the greater the risk of discovery. Harper didn’t give up and sooner or later he’d question if there were more than one set of tunnels. He’d start testing the walls, and once he got in, there’d be nowhere for them to hide.

The tunnels were a maze and they wound their way around and through the house. It had been a bitch to keep the turns they’d taken straight in his head as they’d made their way to the garage, but if he remembered correctly, once they got far enough away from the house, it should be a straight shot to the forest. If he could guide them to that point.

They reached a section where there was enough room for them to walk side-by-side

and Ryder took Langley's free hand. He needed to hold her, needed to reassure himself that she was alive. Her fingers squeezed his, taking comfort and giving it as well.

Voice gentle, Langley asked, "Does knowing it's Andy help narrow down which of your teammates is assisting him?"

After a moment's consideration, he said, "I don't think so. Harper mentored everyone on the team in some way or another and everyone liked and trusted him."

There were many times that Griff stayed up late into the night talking shit with Harper. Mako had spent time hanging out with Harp and his family. Stony had considered the man to be the father he'd never had. Any of the three of them could be helping him. The million-dollar question was which one?

And could there be more than one?

Griff and Mako were best friends. Would they work together against him? In the next instant, Ryder discarded that idea. Special Forces weren't disloyal. One traitor was a surprise. Two would be almost impossible. Right?

But the last time he'd seen Harper, he'd been feeling members of the team out, trying to see who'd be interested in working for Bent Tree. A memory stabbed into Ryder's brain. Rowland wasn't going to re-up, he'd already said he was done when this enlistment was finished. Had he chosen to join Harper's band of mercenaries?

Stony had always been quiet, inscrutable, and he kept his thoughts to himself. Was he the one working with Harper?

"Ryder."

“What?”

“One member of your team is a traitor. That means the other two men are completely on their own against the squad of mercenaries because they can’t trust anyone, not even each other, and they must realize that we won’t trust them either.”

He grunted. Yeah, he’d thought of that, and there wasn’t anything he could do about it, not while he was protecting Langley. It didn’t surprise him that she’d figured out Harper hadn’t come here alone. “They’re Special Forces. They’ll take care of themselves.”

“He was a Green Beret, too. He knows how they were trained.”

“I’m aware of that,” he said more harshly than he intended. Ryder took a deep breath and gave her hand a gentle squeeze of apology. “Sorry. I know you’re worried about my friends, but there’s nothing we can do.”

“Yes, but if something happens to one of the guys on our side, you’re going to blame yourself when this is over.”

Ryder shook his head. First, Langley had tried to rescue her friend from a kidnapper and now she wanted to save his buddies—the ones not betraying them—from mercenaries. She didn’t seem to understand that the mission was to protect her.

“I’ll deal with it later if I have to.” He had another concern. “How are your legs holding up?”

“About as well as I expected,” Langley said.

“Which is probably about fifty percent worse than what you admitted to when I asked you about them earlier today.”

Her shrug pretty much confirmed what he'd guessed—she'd underplayed the amount of pain she was in. And he was dragging her into the woods. Great.

As they grew closer to the house, the hall narrowed, and he was forced to let go of Langley's hand. This time he was more worried about what was in front of them than behind them, so he took his phone and led the way. When they reached the hallway that formed a T near where they'd started, Ryder paused. They could continue straight ahead or take that second spiral stairway he'd spotted earlier.

The wine cellar and the tunnel the mercenaries had used was on the lower level. The escape system had to run underground, too. At least partially.

He opted for the stairs, descending at a slower pace than he normally would have, worried that Langley would try to keep up with him if he didn't. The lower level was more of the same—dust and spider webs. At first there was only one choice of direction, but that changed quickly.

Ryder struggled to keep himself oriented as the hallways twisted, turned, and intersected with other corridors. Maze was too mild a word. Labyrinth fit better. But the passage changed from wood to stone and that added to his confidence that they were on the right track.

Until they hit a blank wall.

There was nowhere to go, and they'd need to turn around and try another passageway. "Fuck," he muttered.

"There could be a trigger to open a doorway," Langley suggested.

"There's nothing obvious, and it should be, since there's no reason to hide it on this side."

“It’s worth looking before we backtrack, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Reluctantly, he released Langley and moved a few steps over to get a better look at the entirety of the stone wall. If there was a release mechanism, the only way to hide it would be with rough, textured rock.

There were several patches that looked promising, but Ryder chose to start with the least obvious choice—a spot about a foot off the ground. It would have to be somewhere everyone could reach it, like it had been in the closet. Crouching, he used his fingers and the phone’s flashlight to examine the stone.

As he searched, Langley moved closer, leaning over him. He could swear he felt the heat of her body and it distracted him momentarily. Taking a deep breath, he refocused his attention on the job at hand.

It was so small, he nearly missed it.

Ryder ran his fingers over it a second time before tripping the mechanism. The doorway that appeared was small, so short he had to duck to walk through it. This hallway was clean and that made him frown. Everything had been filthy up until now. There was also a lighting system lining the walls on either side. It was turned off, but it strummed a warning against his senses. He left the secret door opened a crack, just in case.

If he was correct, turning left would take them back to the house. “Don’t say a word,” he ordered, voice barely a breath of sound. Reclaiming her hand, he headed to his right, moving as stealthily as possible.

After a few moments, they hit a fork in the corridor. He turned right again.

Ryder stopped short when he spotted a staircase complete with railings on either side.

This one wasn't spiral, but a straight, normal set of stairs. He didn't like this. They couldn't be back at the house, but this didn't look like an exit to the woods either.

There was only one thing to do. "Wait here," he whispered against her hood where it covered her ear.

Freeing his hand, he leaned the pack against the wall next to her and crept up the stairs as silently as possible. He heard voices before he reached the door which was standing ajar. He arrived mid-sentence.

"—office is a waste of time," an unknown man complained. "It's a big house—they're hiding somewhere."

"Yeah," unknown man number two agreed, "but Harp's calling the shots, and he thinks there are more tunnels. He wants schematics."

"We haven't found jack shit."

"Then we finish the job and tell him there's nothing here."

Office. Fuck. They were in the tunnel that connected the mansion to two outbuildings—the office and the pool house. That meant they'd left the secret passage and wound up in the passageway the mercenaries had used to gain access to the house.

Not wanting to tip them off, Ryder slowly, carefully backed away from the door and went back down the stairs. Langley straightened from the wall she leaned against. "Wha—"

He moved quickly then, putting his hand over her mouth, stopping the word short. It was too late, though, he knew it. Her voice had carried upstairs.

Grabbing her hand, he started to run.

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Langley didn't ask any questions—she ran. Ryder had told her to stay quiet, but she'd had to ask what he'd seen.

She heard footsteps coming down the stairway behind her and adrenaline went into hyperdrive. They weren't trying to be quiet, but what was the point? She and Ryder were sitting ducks if they didn't reach the secret passage in time. This tunnel was long and smooth with no crevices or hiding places to conceal them. Once they passed the split for the pool house, the tunnel was completely straight. Shooting them would be like target practice.

Her heart raced as if she'd sprinted a mile. She started to look over her shoulder to see how close the men were, but Ryder tugged her hand, moving her along. When would the mercenaries turn on the lights? The darkness was their only concealment and it was meager. A flick of the switch...

They reached the apex of the fork where the tunnel split into two branches. Instead of heading straight, Ryder took a sharp right, leading them down the passage to the pool house.

Langley opened her mouth to ask why they weren't heading back to the escape tunnels, but shut it again without speaking. Not only wasn't it a good time to ask questions, but she knew why. There was no way for them to outrun the mercenaries and they'd never make it to the secret passages in time. The tunnel they were in now didn't provide any more concealment, but it was better than being caught in the main corridor.

At least the pool house offered a chance of hiding. It included a gym with a complete

set of equipment which would help shield them, and better yet, there were two additional exits.

She gave up worrying about where they were headed—she'd trust Ryder—and focused on running. Her feet and legs hurt, and she was aware of every step. Adrenaline couldn't block the pain but she firmed her jaw. She wouldn't slow them down no matter what it took.

Grimacing, Langley thought she heard the footfalls gaining on them and her heart lunged from her chest to her throat before dropping back to where it belonged. She ignored her pain and ran faster. It wasn't her imagination, not when Ryder had picked up his pace as well, pulling her along with him.

They reached the staircase up to the pool house. By the time they arrived at the top, Langley's legs shook and she panted as if she didn't run regularly.

The door was closed, costing them precious seconds as Ryder pushed it open.

In the darkness, the pool area appeared eerie, the lights glowing under the water the only illumination. The tables, chairs, and chaise lounges presented obstacles, forcing them to cut left and right. It put more burden on the muscles of her legs and she had to swallow her gasps of pain.

"Here!" The shout sounded loud in the quiet of the pool house, and she fought off a wave of dizziness as adrenaline and fear exploded inside her.

Ryder swung her in front of him, putting himself between her and the guys chasing them. Shielding her with his body. She swallowed a sob. He wasn't wearing his tactical gear, he didn't even have the backpack any longer. There was only a leather jacket that wouldn't protect him from anything .

Langley tensed, expecting a shot to ring out, but the men didn't fire their weapons.

She headed for the gym. The back exit was somewhere in that vicinity, although she couldn't remember where, not exactly.

They had to get out of here before reinforcements arrived. It wasn't a matter of if they brought in more men, it was when. Her breathing sounded loud and she tried to slow her respiration, not wanting to give away their location.

At the last instant, she spotted the sunken hot tub and swerved to avoid it. Her muscles screamed in protest at the abrupt motion and Langley struggled not to cry.

Where was the door to the fitness center?

She had to find it. Ryder had already put himself between her and the bad guys—she didn't want him to have to fight it out, the two of them trapped in the open because she couldn't find the damn door.

There!

Langley fumbled with the handle, nerves making her clumsy. For an instant, she feared it was locked, then it turned beneath her hand. She pulled with her full strength, but the door fought her. Then it released with a suddenness that knocked her off balance. Ryder caught her, an arm going around her waist to keep her on her feet.

At least the pool area had been faintly illuminated, but the darkness in the gym was absolute. She didn't see the elliptical quickly enough and banged into it. This time she couldn't stop a gasp—the hard, sudden impact gave her no chance to fight it off.

Sound carried in the building.

A man's voice drifted from the pool area to the fitness center. "We found them. Pool house." A pause. "Do we still need to take her alive?" Another pause. "Yeah, fuck. Got it."

Alive? Why did that sound worse than being killed immediately? Instinctively, she glanced at Ryder, but it was too dark to see his face clearly.

If the mercenaries didn't catch her, it wouldn't matter what their plans were for her. They needed to escape and she needed to focus on what was important—they'd called in reinforcements. In minutes, they'd have more than two men to worry about.

She had to remember where the exit was.

The stair stepping machine loomed large, and she hoped its shadow would hide them for a few seconds. Long enough for her memory to return. The door outside had to be somewhere in the back. Langley headed that direction, Ryder right behind her.

He was trusting her to get them out of here. She couldn't let him down .

Her eyes had become accustomed to the dim lighting and she spotted something ahead and toward the right that looked promising. Before she could lead them that direction, Ryder took her hand and tugged her down behind the shoulder press machine. To her left, she saw two men enter from the pool area, the brighter room behind them making their silhouettes obvious.

Afraid to so much as blink, Langley looked at Ryder. His face gave her no hint as to his thoughts, but he kept his gun trained on the men as they entered the gym.

Her breathing seemed impossibly loud and her blood was pounding through her veins. Langley worked on controlling her emotions. She was an ambassador's daughter. She'd kept her self-command in many challenging situations. Nothing this

dangerous, but damn it, she could do it.

Think now, feel later.

Indistinct murmuring reached her ears. Langley held her breath and strained to hear what was being said. This time, she couldn't make out the words.

Ryder never took his eyes from the men.

Some of her tension eased as the mercenaries turned the opposite direction. It would only buy them a few moments, but maybe it would be enough to get—

The control panel for the gym's lights were over there. Did they know that? Were they headed that direction to light up the place? Langley lightly touched Ryder on the shoulder and pointed to the ceiling. He looked confused and she pantomimed pulling a cord and used her fingers to indicate rays of light. She saw realization dawn.

Pointing off behind them, she tried to indicate there was an exit. She wasn't sure he understood her message completely, but while the mercenaries were out of view, Ryder gestured for her to stay low and go that way.

Ignoring the pain in her thighs, calves, and feet, Langley ran in her crouched position to what she thought was a hallway.

There was a brief hum, and then the lights came on. They were dim at first, the kind of bulbs that needed to warm up before they were at full strength. It wouldn't take long. Were the mercenaries heading this direction?

The lights helped in one way. She saw clearly now that it was a corridor ahead. They made it there without being spotted, but the bulbs were shining brightly now.

There were five doors and she had no idea if any of them led outside or not. She searched her memory, trying to come up with where they went, but damn, she'd been seven years old the last time she'd been here.

Something flashed in her brain .

Locker rooms—one for men, one for women—and a bathroom. That left two doors, but she'd never used the rear exit. To reach the cabin, she'd always gone out the front.

Ryder inclined his head, signaling her to move. He remained between her and the gym, continuing to use his body to protect her. She had to pick a door and she wasn't sure she'd get a second chance to get it right.

She heard a new voice speak, then another. The reinforcements had arrived. Her eyes went wide and her attempt at calm went down in flames. Time to make her best guess.

Lunging down the hallway, she opted for door number four.

It was dark and she froze. They weren't outside. Ryder nudged her deeper into the room, closing the door behind them. Now it was pitch and she whispered, "Phone?"

He turned the flashlight on, holding it up and moving it in a semi-circle. There were shelves, buckets, and a couple of barrels containing who knew what. It was storage. She'd led them into a room with pool supplies.

Her breath rasped as fear morphed into terror. Before she could clutch at Ryder, the flashlight picked up another door at the back of the room and settled there. That had to be the door out of here. Had to be. She inclined her head toward the exit before she ran to it. There was a barrel full of pool lane dividers blocking the way and she

grabbed hold of it, rolling it to the side.

After handing her the phone, Ryder pulled one of the metal shelving units in front of the door to the gym, the screech loud enough to drown out a rock concert, and then rolled a couple of barrels in front of that. He was looking around, perhaps searching for something else to use as a barricade, but Langley had goose bumps on her arms. They couldn't stay any longer, she knew it.

"Ryder," she whispered fiercely, "let's get out of here."

Using his shoulder, he nudged her behind him and took a moment to check out the door. Langley almost bounced with impatience, with her body's need to run, but she battled back the urge to push past him.

When he decided the coast was clear, he slipped the deadbolt and eased the door open a crack. Sunlight blinded her after the darkness of the storage room. Ryder waited a moment and then pulled it open farther. Taking her hand again, he stepped outside.

They were on the side of the building, with nothing except manicured lawn in front of them. Nowhere to hide if they needed it. They were completely exposed. Completely .

Her fingers tightened around Ryder's. This was scarier than the building, than the tunnel.

He jerked his head to the left, indicating they should head for the rear of the pool house. She nodded. They'd nearly reached the corner when a man wearing tactical gear swung around from the back side, weapon up and aimed directly at them. Langley couldn't prevent her gasp.

It was Finn Rowland.

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For an instant, Langley could only stare in stunned bewilderment. While she'd known that any of the three men accompanying them could be the conspirator, she'd never expected it to be Finn. He was Ryder's best friend.

Before she could do more than process what was in front of her, Finn slowly, carefully holstered his gun. As he raised his hands over his head, he said, voice low, "It isn't me, Ski."

The two men stared at each other. Langley held her breath until Ryder relaxed, lowering his gun a fraction.

"Who?" Ryder asked.

Finn shook his head. "I don't know. Did you see Andy Harper is leading this merry band of mercenaries? "

"Yeah." Ryder's voice was devoid of emotion and Langley realized he was still assessing Finn, not completely sold on his innocence. Her legs started shaking and she locked her knees, trying to remain steady. She couldn't falter, not now.

It can't be Finn.

Ryder said, "Harp recruited you for Bent Tree."

"He tried."

"Succeeded. You're leaving the army."

“Tried,” Finn stressed the word. “My getting out has nothing to do with Harper or money, and I’m for damn sure not hiring on at Bent Tree.”

There was something in Finn’s voice that sounded infinitely weary to Langley and she believed him, but she remained quiet. She couldn’t help the nervous glance behind where they stood. It hadn’t been long—less than a minute—but damn, her anxiety was climbing the longer they remained in one place. Ryder didn’t move.

“Ski, not to rush you, but Harp came with at least three men. We don’t have time for this.”

Ryder shook his head. “There are more in the pool house. You gonna call them?”

One side of Finn’s mouth quirked up. “No, I’m here to save your ass. You can thank me later.”

The scraping, squealing sound traveled from inside the building and Langley knew the men were pushing open the door to the storage room, forcing the shelving unit across the tile floor. “We’re out of time,” Langley interjected.

“I’ve got your back,” Finn said. “That is if you trust me enough to let me hold my 9 mil.”

Although Langley couldn’t see anything on Ryder’s face, she could almost feel him taking an instant to debate what to do. “Cover us,” Ryder said. “We’re heading for the forest. Make sure you watch your own back.”

Immediately, Finn reached for his gun and Langley knew a moment of terror, but he didn’t point it at her or Ryder. “I always do,” he said. The squeal from the pool house became louder, the shelf sliding further. “Move!”

“Run, Langley,” Ryder ordered, pointing to his right. “Don’t slow down, don’t look back.”

She didn’t wait for him to stop speaking. Langley ran before he finished saying her name.

The yard around the house and outbuildings was carefully maintained, but ahead there was tall grass. It didn’t matter that it was scrubby and little more than knee high. What did matter was it offered some concealment—more than the nothing she had right now. Beyond that was the forest. It seemed impossibly far away and she focused on the grass. Just reach the grass.

Her lungs burned, her legs seemed heavy, and Langley knew she needed to pace herself. She tried to pretend it was one of the 5K races in which she’d run, but her brain couldn’t make her body slow down.

Where was Ryder?

Langley wanted to turn, wanted to check on him, but he’d told her not to look back. She concentrated on running, on putting one foot in front of the other. Her thighs were screaming, her calves were cramping, she was gasping for air, and her feet—

A loud crack stopped her heart. Gunshot! That was a gunshot. But he’d told her to keep going, so Langley ran on.

Almost to the grass. She was almost to the grass.

More shots cut through the air and Langley dove into the tall grass like a running back diving for the end zone. As soon as she hit the ground, she rolled to her hands and knees, crawling forward as fast as she could.

A weight pinned her to the ground. Ryder.

“You’re okay?” she asked. She couldn’t see him, not flat on her belly with his body over hers.

“Fine. Stony and the mercs are exchanging fire.”

Her breath rasped and she felt like she was suffocating. “I can’t breathe with you on top of me,” Langley said.

Ryder shifted his body and she filled her lungs with air. As her oxygen problem became less severe, she became aware of the trembling in the muscles of her legs, and the toes on both feet had gone numb. This wasn’t good. “How long do we stay here?” she asked, but her question was broken by panting.

“I’d like to stay until you don’t sound as if you’re dying, but we can’t spare that much time.” Ryder seemed distracted, but Langley didn’t look.

She heard another shot, but this one was at a farther distance. Her inhalation sounded serrated, more stuttered gasp than a breath.

“We need to go while Stony has them occupied. Think you can move?” he asked.

“Yes,” Langley lied. It didn’t matter how fatigued her legs were, her life—and Ryder’s, too—depended on her running, so she’d run. She pushed herself to her hands and knees, braced herself, and stood. It was sheer willpower that kept her on her feet.

“Head for the trees,” Ryder ordered from beside her.

Langley fixed her gaze on the tree line and forced herself into a jog. More gunfire,

closer to their position, encouraged her to pick up her pace. She waited for another surge of adrenaline to help propel her forward, but it didn't come. She might have burned out that resource over the past few days. She'd have to count on stubbornness.

Clenching her jaw, Langley ran. She kept her eyes glued to the trees. All she had to do was reach the trees. It wasn't that far. Just reach the trees.

Her foot hit a depression in the earth and she gasped and flailed her arms. She couldn't fall. An instant later, her balance was back, but she paid a price—her left calf went into a full charley horse.

Biting her lip hard to stifle the whimper, Langley limped-ran as fast as she could. The pain was intense, but better a muscle cramp than dead.

She almost sobbed with relief when she arrived at the trees, but she kept going. Weaving her way through the trunks, Langley worked her way deeper into the grove. She wanted to rest. She wanted to rub her calf, but Ryder hadn't said she could stop, and he was the expert. A stitch developed in her side and she was breathing like a chugging locomotive, but she was on her feet.

"Whoa." Ryder took her hand, slowing her down to a jog.

"We're safe?"

"Not yet. How's the ankle?"

"Ankle?" Langley was confused.

"I saw you twist it when you nearly fell."

Shaking her head, Langley said, "Charley horse." It came out with breathlessly. "It's

okay. I'll live."

Ryder made a sound that was close to a growl. "I know you'll fucking live; I'll make sure of that. And yeah, I know, don't swear at you. I need to know the condition your legs are in. It colors the decisions I make."

Ambassadors' daughters didn't break into tears, but she hurt badly enough that it was tempting to forget her training. Instead, she wrapped it around her like a shield to maintain control. "They're a bit sore, thank you for asking, but I've played field hockey with worse injuries than this."

He scowled at her briefly, she caught it in her peripheral vision, but didn't dare take her eyes off where she was going. Sweat dripped down her face, and impatiently, Langley wiped a hand over her brow. It was in the 70s and she was running in jeans and a raincoat. At least the hood had fallen off her head when she'd dived into the grass and the breeze in her hair helped. Some.

After a moment of silence, Ryder said, "I hate that lady-of-the-manor tone you take with me. If you're pissed off, then say so."

"I'm not angry." Then she remembered him telling her she didn't communicate and admitted, "I don't have enough energy for anger. It's taking everything I have to move." Langley wasn't mad, but *mare de Déu* she wished she could latch on to that emotion and use it to fuel herself.

"I was afraid of that," he muttered. "Why don't you walk a while? We're far enough away now that it'll be okay. "

She didn't wait for him to tell her twice. Communication . He'd asked how her legs were, said he needed to know, and she'd repeated what she'd done Saturday night when he'd caught her sitting in her bridesmaid dress. It was hard for her to admit

weakness, but was she going to let that get them killed?

When she thought she could speak without having to pant between words, Langley said, “My legs and feet aren’t in good shape. My toes are numb, both calves are on the verge of charley horses, and my thigh muscles are shrieking. To make it more fun, my hips ache and my right knee feels swollen behind the kneecap. I might have twisted it when I hit that depression in the grass.”

Ryder looked at her sharply, and while his expression remained neutral, she knew she’d surprised him. “How much farther can you run?”

“As far as I have to.” She shook her head, forestalling whatever he’d been about to say. “No, I’m not being polite or whatever you call it. Our lives are on the line. I will run until they shoot me.”

He grunted and she didn’t know how to read that.

Langley continued to wheeze for air and it embarrassed her. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m having this much trouble. I run regularly. You know that.”

“It’s the altitude. Tampa and San Diego are basically at sea level and Tahoe is higher than Denver.”

She should have thought of that, but Langley had always been more attracted to the beach than to the mountains. “Why didn’t you warn me?”

“I wasn’t sure it would be a problem. Women usually acclimate better than men.”

They were climbing. Langley felt it in the back of her thighs and it was the last thing she needed. At least the charley horse had eased enough that she wasn’t in agony. She leaned forward, seeking some relief from the incline. “You’re doing better than I

am.”

“My training’s been more intense than yours.”

Understatement. They walked a few minutes more, but she could feel Ryder revving up again, although he showed no outward sign. He was picking up on something she couldn’t identify.

“Ready to run?” he asked.

Langley wasn’t surprised by the question. “Of course,” she said, lying without compunction. She had to run, so she would run, end of story.

It took less than two minutes before she was huffing and puffing as if she’d never worked out a day in her life. There was more sporadic gunfire and it was closer than she’d expected. Langley waited for fear, waited for adrenaline, but she couldn’t feel anything except exhaustion.

Her brain did manage to piece a few facts together. The mercenaries were hunting them, and it was unlikely that they could outdistance a squad of men indefinitely since she was slowing Ryder down. He could walk without creating a trail, but that was a skill set she didn’t have. She was leaving a track right to their location.

Ryder would know this—he probably knew more that he wasn’t sharing—and that meant he had to have a plan for these contingencies. Langley wanted to ask what it was, but it required her entire focus to put one foot in front of the other. Forming questions was beyond her.

Sweat streamed into her eyes, making them burn, but she couldn’t lift her arm high enough to wipe it away. Just run. Just run. Run.

It seemed as if it was becoming brighter. Langley started to raise her head, stumbled, and returned her gaze to her feet. But when the sun hit her fully in the face, she slowed, and after blinking away the sweat, looked around.

While she was busy running, they'd left the forest and now there was only scattered trees. A shiver went through her.

They were completely exposed to anyone with a weapon.

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Ryder glanced over to check on Langley and realized he couldn't push her much further. The dazed expression on her face told him she was beyond exhausted and she was breathing hard. Sweat had plastered her hair in spots on her forehead and cheeks and she visibly shook. The streaks of dirt and grime across her face added to her pitiful appearance, but he'd never seen her look more beautiful.

She'd done better than he'd expected, but not as well as he'd hoped. Ryder had never believed they'd be able to outrun a team of mercenaries, but he had wanted to get more distance. Didn't matter. They were in the area he'd been headed for.

"Come on, Langley. We need to find a defensible position."

"We're going back into the woods?" She sounded as confused as she looked.

Between the altitude and exhaustion, she wasn't firing on all cylinders. "No, this section might be sparse on trees, but there are pockets of large boulders. We're looking for one of them." Ryder kept his voice gentle. "I need you to hang in with me another five, ten minutes. Can you help me out here?"

He wasn't surprised to see her nod and square her shoulders. That was his hellcat. Ryder took her hand and tugged her in the direction he wanted to go.

Still think the toughness she showed in Puerto Jardin was a one-off, dumb fuck?

They were climbing, and if he could feel it in his legs, it had to be excruciating for Langley. The going was rough, too, with scrubby bushes and patches of scree making walking challenging. Speed wasn't an option, not with the shape she was in, and it

made Ryder antsy. He wanted her to be safe. Needed her to be safe.

A shot echoed, followed quickly by two more.

Langley skidded on the loose rock and Ryder moved quickly, releasing her hand and sliding his arm around her waist. For an instant, he caught her full weight, then she regained her balance and he relaxed his hold .

Up ahead, he saw a fall of boulders. Getting Langley settled somewhere quickly would be a positive, but as they grew closer, he scratched the spot off the list. The rocks were in a pile and didn't have enough space in between them for a human body. He wanted protection on as many sides as possible and this would only give them the front.

She didn't question him, not with so much as a glance, and that wasn't Langley. She always wanted to know what, where, when, why, and how. Yeah, he definitely needed to get her settled somewhere soon.

The satellite images he'd studied on the flight from Tampa had shown there were more than a dozen options on this side of the property. They needed to find the right one.

Ryder continued past a small outcropping of rocks that put a sharp drop at their backs and a low ridge of stones on two sides. It gave them zero escape opportunities. Not that they'd likely be able to leave once the shooting started, but he liked options.

More gunfire. Stony wasn't going to be able to keep the mercs occupied indefinitely. Fuck, probably some of them had already broken off to find them. There was no way to move Langley faster than she was going and he couldn't risk swinging her over his shoulder. As they walked, he repeatedly checked behind them.

The third collection of rocks was the worst and he didn't pause.

More gunfire—these shots were in the distance. It had to be either Griff or Mako trying to help. The question was which one was on their side?

A team of mercenaries and a traitor versus him, two allies, and an exhausted hellcat who might have mountain sickness. The odds were against them, but fuck that. If he had any say in this, Langley was walking away alive at the end.

Outcropping number four loomed ahead and Ryder hoped this one provided decent cover because he couldn't chance dragging her around the mountain much longer.

Substantially better, he decided as they approached. The boulders were huge—the smallest had to be around eight feet—and they were in an oval with enough space in the center to hold a few people safely. Ricochets might be an issue, but they'd have to deal.

As they reached it, Ryder took stock. The front had a large gap, slightly off center, with short bushes in front of it that extended to the sides. The rear of the oval also had a broad opening, although it wasn't as large as the front. It was barren back there and he didn't like it as an escape option—too easy to be picked off, especially if someone climbed the nearby slope.

The problem was the amount of cover available for the mercs on the two sides. It wasn't a forest, but there were a lot more trees here than there'd been for a while and bushes everywhere. Including right up to the left side of the stones. He'd been hoping for a bulwark in a more desolate area.

Another volley of gunfire echoed too fucking close for comfort. That ended the debate. This was the spot. It would have to be good enough.

“Come on, hellcat, let’s get you off your feet,” he said quietly and guided her into the center of the boulders. He helped Langley to the ground next to a rock on the side that was the most protected.

Take her alive. The words replayed in his brain and Ryder scowled. They hadn’t been worried about her being alive in San Diego. What had changed?

Her breathing began to calm, but Ryder’s concern for Langley didn’t lessen. The shortness of breath could have been because of exertion at altitude or it could be a symptom of mountain sickness. If it was the latter, she’d be dealing with dizziness, nausea, and fatigue, and that would impact their options.

Langley’s eyes opened. “What now?” she asked softly. Too softly.

“Now we hold this position.”

“We’re going to hold it? You and me?”

“I was thinking Stony and me, but if it comes down to it, do you feel like you can shoot?” He wasn’t worried about her ability, not when he dragged her regularly to the gun range to keep her skills honed, but about how sick she felt.

Her brow wrinkled as she considered his question. “Yes, I think—” She stopped short. “Wait a second. You only have one gun. You mean, if you’re incapacitated, can I take your weapon and defend myself, right?”

He shrugged. He’d have to be dead to stop protecting her.

She stared at him without blinking for a long moment. “I’ll do what I need to do,” she said and the determination in her voice told him everything he needed to know. Shit, no matter how often he tried to put her in the princess box, the label didn’t fit.

Langley Canfield really was one hundred percent hellcat.

Crouching beside her, Ryder asked, “Do you have my phone?”

Without a word, she reached into the pocket of her jacket and handed it to him.

For an instant, he debated. Did he call the police? Would the locals be able to handle a team of mercenaries comprised of ex-Special Forces soldiers? Did he have a choice? They were outnumbered and outgunned and needed every bit of help they could get. He thumbed his phone on and realized the point was moot. The signal was being jammed. There was a chance he could get a text out, but—

A sound had him sliding the phone away and moving to the entrance of their rock fortress. He aimed his pistol the direction the noise had come from.

He heard a low whistle—one long, two short—and Ryder’s finger eased slightly off the trigger. A figure emerged from the trees. Stony.

Rowland was armed like some parody of a Hollywood action hero with guns and ammo slung over his chest and shoulders. Unless his eyes were playing tricks on him, it looked as if Stony had acquired a couple of extra tactical vests and helmets, too. His buddy always thought of the details.

Stopping a short distance away, Rowland called quietly, “Okay to approach?”

“Yeah,” Ryder said and lowered his weapon so it wasn’t aimed directly at his heart.

When he reached the enclosure, Stony handed him the vests and Ryder gave one to Langley. “Put that on,” he ordered her. Turning back to Rowland, he said, “Give me a report.”

“I counted seven mercs, including Harp. Two are down, but that leaves us with half a dozen if you factor in our traitor.”

Ryder glanced quickly at Langley, but she didn't seem to realize that two down meant Rowland had killed those men. “Unless the other person shooting took some of them out.” He kept his voice low as he shrugged on a vest and fastened it.

Stony divested himself of the ammo he was wearing. “I didn't see them go down, so I'm considering them active.” He thrust a helmet at him. “Give this to Langley. It's mine.”

He handed the helmet to her and donned the other, the one with the mercs' comm gear. Rowland was wearing another of the enemy helmets. “They broadcasting?”

“They were. I think they figured out I was listening in.”

Which meant they'd gone radio silent. “How far behind you are they?”

“I laid a false trail. It won't fool them for long, but it should buy us a few extra minutes. Here,” he handed Ryder one of the assault rifles he'd brought in. “They're carrying SCARs and I saw some AK-74s.”

“I didn't expect anything else.” Ryder turned to look at Langley again. She'd put on her own vest. It was big on her, but better than nothing.

“No kidding. This is the tip of the iceberg. They are seriously outfitted, dude.” Stony pulled out a smaller automatic rifle. “Can she shoot?”

“Yes, she can,” Langley interrupted.

There was some life in her voice and Ryder was damn glad to hear it. He took the

weapon Rowland handed him and let out a silent whistle. Holy fucking shit. “How’d they get their hands on this?” he asked aloud, but it was a rhetorical question.

“Better give her a high-level course on how to fire that,” Stony said.

“I can shoot.” Langley enunciated each word carefully and that told Ryder she wasn’t happy with Rowland.

“I wasn’t denigrating your skills, ma’am,” Stony said with as much neutrality as Langley had used. “This is an Israeli weapon, new enough that it hasn’t been out in the wild for long. It doesn’t have much kick, so it should be a good one for you.”

Ryder handed Rowland his phone. “I think they’re jamming us. Want to see if you can get a text out to the ambassador? He’s in my contact list.”

Bringing the rifle over to Langley, Ryder ran over what she needed to know to use it. He finished by saying, “Rowland is right about there being very little recoil. A six-year-old child could fire it. ”

Langley frowned, but instead of commenting, she lifted her chin toward Rowland. “Why’s he texting my dad?”

Well, he’d wanted Langley back to normal and that meant questions. Ryder sighed, but his voice was thick from relief as he said, “We can’t call the police because they’re jamming our phones, but we need help. It’s better if your dad smooths the way anyhow. The cops are not going to be thrilled with the situation and that doesn’t mean only the mercs. We’re technically on leave, but—”

“But Special Forces can’t operate in the US. I know. Mercenaries, a sniper, a small Special Forces team, an ambassador’s daughter, a traitor, and at least two dead bodies. I’m not sure even my dad can explain this chaos to the police and gloss it

over.”

So Langley had picked up on the fact that Rowland had killed a couple of men. “He’s a diplomat, but as long as the ambassador gets us some backup, we’ll deal with the rest.” Unable to stop himself, Ryder reached out and smoothed the hair back from her face. Damn, she was special. Nothing could happen to her. He wouldn’t fucking let it.

“Can a text get past a jammer?”

Considering what Harp and company were armed with, Ryder wasn’t sure they’d be successful in getting any messages out, but they had to try. “It depends what they’re using.”

“Obviously not the top-of-the-line jamming equipment,” Rowland said. “Message delivered and SOS received.”

Ryder closed his eyes for an instant. Now they needed to hold out until the cavalry arrived. “I’ll take the side with the bushes, you take the other one,” he ordered. “Hellcat, can you watch the front?”

“You’re trusting me to handle that?”

“Do I trust you? Yes. Do I want you to be an active part of this mission? Hell, no.” He didn’t want Langley handling anything. Ryder wanted her tucked away safely in some shielded spot while he and Rowland took care of everything, but there was only two of them and they had to keep an eye on the rear in case someone managed to sneak past their flank undetected. Or found another way to reach the rear that hadn’t been obvious in his quick scan. The mercenaries probably wouldn’t try a frontal assault. It would be too risky.

“You better ask her the big question, Ski,” Rowland said quietly. “We need to know

before things heat up.”

“Fuck,” Ryder muttered without inflection. Stony was right. Keeping his expression blank, he asked, “Could you shoot a man if you had to? Can you shoot to kill?”

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Ryder watched a number of expressions cross Langley's face, but he was only able to label a few of them—surprise, consternation, deliberation, and finally resolve. He knew what she was going to say before her shoulders went back and conviction settled on her features.

“Yes, I can shoot to kill. I'll do whatever you need me to do.”

Everything he saw as he looked at her supported her words. Ryder had a flash of their time in Puerto Jardin, the way she'd gone for his temple with that rock. She could have killed him with that blow and she'd known that. And swung anyway. Maybe she could do this.

But battle was a completely different ball game. She had the determination now, but when the men actually showed their faces, could she squeeze off a few rounds?

What would they do if she couldn't?

She looked up at him, her normally shiny brown hair snarled, her face grimy but resolute, and he finally got it. Really got it. This woman was nobody's princess. Her money didn't fucking matter. Only she mattered, and if she didn't care that he couldn't jet her off to the south of France on a whim, then why was he hung up on it? Langley Canfield was his person, and he loved her enough to fight for forever with her.

He couldn't tell her that, not now, so instead he studied the terrain in front of them, trying to view it from Langley's perspective. Too much cover, but it might help. If she couldn't see them clearly, she could fire at the bastards without freezing up.

“Ski,” Stony said, “get her ready. The clock’s ticking, dude.”

Going down on his belly near the entrance, Ryder shifted around until he found a small gap in the bushes that would allow her to see out but keep her behind as much rock as possible. It was a riskier location than he wanted for her.

Ryder turned to look at Langley. “See where I’m at? When I get up, you try it.”

She nodded and he pushed to his feet, watching her lay almost exactly where he’d been .

“There’s a gap in the bushes. You got it?” he asked. “It’s small, but it’ll allow you to monitor the approach.”

“Found it,” she reported.

Stony had gotten into position on the side Ryder had assigned him, but he hesitated. “Call out what you see. How many men, what they’re doing, things like that. We’ll do the same.” And they’d have to avoid using a lot of their normal shorthand because Langley wouldn’t understand it. “If you get overwhelmed or need help, say that, too. Don’t make me have to keep an eye on you.”

“I’ll let you know if I need assistance. I promise.”

“Good.” He lingered although he believed her. She’d actually filled him in on the condition of her legs earlier, communicating with him honestly, and he trusted her to be telling him the truth now.

He couldn’t make himself move and Ryder knew he had to watch the other flank. Langley looked up at him and smiled. Not an I-got-this smile, it was a you-got-this smile. As if he were the novice.

His lips twitched, but he suppressed the grin. She'd nearly made him laugh before a firefight. Damn, he loved this woman.

Crossing to his side, Ryder settled on his stomach and lined himself up on one of the cracks between stones. The next gap over was blocked by the bushes and this location gave the best angle on that approach. One of the fuckers might try breaching the oval that way. He couldn't see the complete area, though, and that worried him, but they weren't getting in here. They weren't taking Langley.

With his heightened senses, the light buzz of a phone on vibrate sounded incredibly loud. Stony had Ryder's mobile—it had to be his phone—and waited for his buddy to read the text message, half holding his breath.

"Backup is twenty minutes out," Rowland reported quietly.

Well, shit. It was about what he'd expected given the location of the vacation home, the size of the property, and their position deep into the acreage, but he'd been hoping for a shorter timeframe. At least they had one huge advantage—the bastards wanted Langley alive. That meant they weren't going to be tossing a grenade in here or using a rocket launcher.

"Motion," she said softly. "See one, no two."

"Distance?" he asked.

"At the thicker trees."

He grunted. That put them more than thirty yards out. "When they poke their heads out, aim and fire. Don't shoot off a million rounds. One or two is enough."

With the amount of ammo Stony had brought, they'd be okay for a while, but there

was no sense wasting bullets and spraying fire everywhere was amateur hour anyway. Ryder continued to scan the landscape. The mercs needed to get around their flanks and he and Rowland needed to stop them because they were vulnerable at the rear.

It remained silent. She wasn't shooting. Had she locked up?

On the heels of that worry, Langley fired.

He'd told her to do it, but Ryder almost came out of his skin. He struggled with the adrenaline spike, fought to hang on to battle calm, but damn it, this was his woman. He wanted to be in front of her, protecting her, not listening to her shoot at those motherfuckers.

Stay in position, dumb fuck. That's the best way to protect Langley.

They returned fire. Instinct warred with training. Training won. Barely. But shit, hearing Langley engage with the enemy while he waited nearly destroyed him.

The exchange lasted long enough to pull his nerves taut. Why the hell were they focusing on her?

They didn't know it was her, he realized in the next instant.

Harper might have been with them in Puerto Jardin, but until the day he left the teams, he'd believed Langley was a nearly helpless princess—just as Ryder had. The bastards thought they had either him or Stony occupied. Two shooters. Four unaccounted for.

“Diversion,” he said quietly.

Rowland squeezed off a couple of rounds. “Figured that out.”

Twenty minutes. Twenty minutes was a fucking eternity in a firefight.

Motion caught his attention and Ryder finally found his mind centered on something other than worrying about his woman. He fired slightly ahead of where he'd seen the movement.

At least the terrain gave them one benefit—the bushes, tall grasses, and weeds were damn fucking hard to keep stationary and this mercenary band was unlikely to be made up of only former United States Special Forces. Bent Tree hired from countries around the world and a lot of them didn't train their people as well as the US did.

Another bush swayed in a way that wasn't natural an instant before a couple of shots were directed his way.

He returned fire. But as he was shooting, it dawned on him that Langley had been quiet for a while. Damn it. Squeezing off a few more rounds to buy himself some time, Ryder took a second to glance over and make sure she was all right .

Ryder didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until it shuddered out. She was okay. He could only see a part of her face, but her expression was completely composed, not a hint of stress or fear. Holy hell she was magnificent.

A bullet hit the boulder near his shoulder, sending a fragment of rock flying.

Cursing again, Ryder returned his attention to his own assignment. Get your head in the game, dumb fuck. But how did he find the zone when his hellcat was at risk? How did he stop worrying about her and only pay attention to the enemy? How—?

His thoughts cut off abruptly as a mercenary appeared through the gap to his right. Spinning into position, Ryder fired. And fired.

The asshole fell backward, at least one round catching him below his vest.

“Gonna check on him,” he told Stony. Ryder had to make sure the fucker wouldn’t surprise them again.

Creeping out of the crack between the boulders, Ryder found the merc right where he’d gone down. He stripped him of his weapons before checking for a pulse. Thready and weak. He checked the wounds next. Because of his angle of fire, several rounds had gone under the vest and up toward the chest. There was a shit-ton of blood.

Ryder was grabbing magazines from the vest— never pass up ammo—when the man made a gurgling gasp. He checked his pulse again, but there wasn’t one.

“Down,” he reported when he returned inside the circle of boulders.

“Five left,” Stony said.

Getting back in position, Ryder put the extra weapon beside him and worked harder to block Langley from his mind. He’d known from the get-go that the bushes on this side of the boulders were a potential hole in their protection. He’d known he had to keep careful watch and he’d fucked up. If he hadn’t immediately spotted the merc...

He stopped his body mid-tremor. No time for thinking about this. Later. When he had time for nightmares.

Gunfire from behind the enemy position reached his ears. Too early for the cops, so it had to be either Griff or Mako. Which one? Which one was fighting with them? He fucking hated that if either man approached their position, he’d have to treat him as an enemy, but there was nothing else they could do.

He caught motion and fired at the spot immediately. He heard Rowland and Langley shooting, too. A bullet kicked up dirt about three feet to his right .

If it had been on his left, it would have been damn near Langley.

Focus, dumb fuck. Focus.

Just about the time he had his mind back on task, he heard a man curse in what sounded like an eastern European language. Czech, maybe.

“I think I hit someone,” Langley called out softly.

“I don’t think you hurt him too badly,” Ryder said. He fired another round where he thought he saw someone skulking. “He wouldn’t be swearing if it was serious.”

“I know.” She sounded disappointed.

Before he could figure out how to respond, a bullet hit rock and ricocheted. The fragments narrowly missed him. Shit. More shots were coming inside their enclosure.

“Fucking hell,” Ryder cursed as another bullet created a puff of dust.

“Someone took the slope,” Stony said. He had the angle on the hillside above Ryder. “Can’t find him.”

More shots bounced around.

Ryder couldn’t see the slope from his position. “Langley, do you see anything glinting on the hillside above me?”

Rowland fired randomly toward the general direction of the shots .

“No, I don’t—wait! Eleven o’clock. About a quarter of the way up.”

“Got it.” Stony sprayed the spot with bullets.

The merc opened a barrage on their oval. Ryder had his head down, gaze locked on the approach to the rocks to make sure another mercenary wasn’t trying to use the shooting as a diversion.

“Need help,” Langley said, so quietly he barely heard it. Before he could shift to check on her, he had a merc on his side. Ryder fired.

The report from his weapon was still echoing when Stony’s words stopped his heart. “Langley’s hit.”

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Ryder couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't function. Not Langley. The thought unlocked his muscles and he scrambled across the distance to her side. Rowland had beaten him there and had his T-shirt off, using it to apply pressure to the wound. Thigh. Fuck, there was blood. Too much blood.

"Artery?" he asked, barely able to choke the word out.

"Don't think so. Blood's the wrong color, and there's not enough of it."

Taking a deep breath, he plastered a reassuring expression on his face and turned to Langley. Her pallor scared the shit out of him. "How're you doing, hellcat?"

She tried a smile, it was lopsided and didn't look convincing. "I've been better, thanks." The smile faded. "It burns."

"Yeah," he agreed, unable to find more words. Instead, he ran the backs of his fingers lightly across her cheek. He couldn't lose her. He couldn't fucking lose her. Ryder shifted his attention back to Rowland, but what he saw didn't reassure him. "You got a tourniquet?" he asked quietly.

"At the house," Stony said. "Check your vest. See what the mercs are carrying."

He quickly ran through every pocket of the vest. "Nothing medical," he reported. If only he hadn't left his damn pack behind in the tunnels. Ryder's gut clenched. Hemorrhage was the leading cause of death on the battlefield. That truth froze him again, and he had to fight the haze filling his head.

“The cops should be here soon,” Ryder said. “They’ll have a life flight helicopter and we have an open area directly behind us.” He was talking out loud, trying to reassure himself, but Rowland didn’t know that.

“Civilians aren’t landing while there’s shooting going on.”

“Fuck.” And who knew how long the police would need to lock down the scene? It might take longer than Langley had. The Golden Hour. That’s what Griff called it. The window when a person’s odds of survival were the best provided they got to a hospital and a doctor.

“Ski, we’re not on a time out. You better fucking watch or they’ll walk right in here.”

Stony was right, but damn it to hell, he didn’t want to leave Langley. Reluctantly, he focused his attention on their perimeter. “Right now,” he muttered thickly, “I wish to hell you were Griff.”

“Right now,” Stony said without looking up, “I wish to hell I had Griff’s gear and those magical clotting supplies he carries.”

Gunfire echoed, telling him that one of his buddies was out there, helping them. He also noticed one other thing. “There’s no more fire coming from the slope,” Ryder said as he patrolled. The bastard could have picked them off easily if he remained up there.

“Almost certain I hit him. I think that barrage of bullets we took was reflex as he went down.”

“Define almost certain,” Ryder ordered.

“I’m putting it at ninety percent I got a kill shot.”

He grunted. That left four—three bastards and the fucking traitor. Ryder caught motion out of the corner of his eye and fired at it. At least one merc was trying to gain the slope. He would have seen how successful his teammate had been at shooting inside their defensive position from that location. There was no way to stop them from going high, not indefinitely, and once they realized Ryder was the only one keeping their position secure, they'd be totally fucked.

He glanced back at Langley, but her eyes were closed, her lips pressed tightly together. The golden hour. Every minute counted. Every second.

No way was he standing around, waiting for the police to arrive and secure the scene. Langley didn't have that kind of time. The men coming weren't LAPD or NYPD or from some other major city. How much training did the locals have for a situation like this?

But Ryder did have the training—and he had an ally out there.

Four against two. He liked those odds.

Decision made, Ryder loaded up with magazines. It was unlikely he'd need as much ammo as he was taking, but he wasn't going to be caught short. Getting out without drawing fire wouldn't be hard. He could slip out of the boulders the same way that merc had nearly entered earlier. The bushes should conceal him long enough to get him clear unnoticed.

Crouching beside Langley, he reached out and squeezed her hand. "Keep fighting, hellcat. Help's coming." She returned his squeeze, choking him up until he shook it off.

Quietly, so only Stony could hear, Ryder said, "Take care of her. I'm going to make sure a helicopter will land."

Rowland glanced up briefly, nodded, and said, “Good hunting.”

Ryder took a last look at Langley. Her eyes remained closed, but her brow was furrowed and her frown was fierce. She was fighting. His mission now was to get her the help she needed. ASAP.

He squeezed through the gap, and staying low, crept past the body of the merc he’d dropped earlier. He paused when he reached the edge of the thicket and took a deep breath. It had been eluding him, but he needed to find his battle calm, and to do that, he’d have to push his hellcat out of his mind. Not easy.

He visualized a helicopter landing, paramedics stabilizing Langley. That would only happen if he got his shit together. Another deep breath and he found the zone.

Shooting in the distance helped him pinpoint at least one of the bastards. He knew another was trying to climb the slope. That gave him a second location. Merc number two posed the most immediate threat to Langley, so that was who he’d take down first.

Using the surrounding cover, Ryder made it to the place where he’d seen the bastard. There were a few drops of blood on a rock embedded in the dirt. Injured. Good, that gave Ryder an advantage.

The drops were few and far between, but the dude wasn’t being particularly careful and wasn’t hard to follow. Any idiot could read sign, the trick was interpreting it and using it to form a picture to anticipate what the guy might do next. To Ryder, it appeared as if the bastard was going wide. That would allow him to climb the hillside out of range from the boulders, and then move across to shoot into the stones. Like hell.

Ryder picked up his pace. He wanted to catch the man low and not waste time

chasing him up the incline.

It only took a few minutes before he lost cover. There were no bushes or stones, not for yards. In the distance, he saw another large grouping of boulders.

Taking a long look around, he decided the area was clear. He could take his chances in the open. He studied the boulders in the distance. Could the asshole be hiding there, waiting to pick him off?

Did the fucker know Ryder had left the protective circle? He moved silently, not wanting to alert the guy if he was nearby.

It didn't take long to realize that the merc had the same idea about cover because his blood trail led directly to the stones. Ryder paused, listened, and then peered around the last boulder.

The bullet clipped the rock next to his head.

Ryder ducked back behind the stone. Another inch...

He'd found his man, but somehow Ryder had tipped off his presence. Swinging out around the boulder, he squeezed off some rounds a few feet past where he'd seen the man. Logic said he'd be working his way to come around the other side of the rocks and that's where Ryder shot.

He'd assumed right.

A bullet caught the merc's shoulder, spun him partway around. Ryder fired a few more times until the guy fell.

Cautiously, he approached, but the man stayed down. When he reached him, Ryder

didn't bother to check for a pulse. The bastard wasn't getting up again, not with half his head missing.

Three enemy remaining.

Returning to the cover of the boulders, Ryder listened, trying to pick up more gunfire. Nothing. He wished to fuck his weapon had a suppressor, but all he could do was hope that Harper and the other two believed it was their own man firing at the stones. He needed the element of surprise.

The quiet lingered. Had his ally gone down?

Ryder decided to head back from where he'd heard the gunshots earlier. He could track the sons of bitches from there.

He was nearly to that point when more gunfire sounded. Relief threatened to destroy his calm, but Ryder fought until it receded. His friend remained healthy enough to shoot and he was keeping those fuckers busy so Stony could tend to Langley without interruption.

As he grew closer to the location, he nearly fell over a mercenary, his body hidden by the thick collection of bushes Ryder was wending his way through. The man stared unseeing into the sky. To be safe, he checked for a pulse, but didn't find one. He hadn't expected to. That meant there were only two left.

Harper and the traitor. The most dangerous of the adversaries. He hoped to hell he could tell the difference between friend and foe before taking a bullet.

As he silently edged his way closer to the shooting, Ryder considered things. His hellcat hadn't cried out when she'd been hit. That made it unlikely the bastards were aware of what had happened. Without that knowledge, Harp would assume that

Ryder and Stony would stay close to Langley.

And if she'd remained uninjured, he would have been right.

If he were Harper, he'd work with the traitor to remove Ryder's ally from the situation. Then, with no outside interference, one of the men would go high to get an angle to take out Ryder and Stony. The other would wait till it was clear, then go in the circle to grab Langley.

That meant he could generally predict where Harper and the traitor were without hearing another shot.

If Harper was playing it as Ryder thought he would. That was a fucking big if.

Running through a few more scenarios, Ryder decided the original strategy was the most likely. Harper was a big proponent of keeping it simple, and every other plan would be much more complicated, time consuming, and have a greater chance of failure.

Scenario one was the best choice.

Ryder shifted his angle slightly. He wanted Harper. No matter which of his two friends had sold him out, Harp was the man in charge.

He slowed further as he grew close to where he expected to find the bastards.

Luck was on his side—he came up behind the man. An instant later, Ryder recognized Harper. "Drop your weapon," he ordered.

Harper froze. He didn't release the SCAR, but he did raise his hands—and the weapon—over his head before turning slowly to face Ryder. There was nothing

except contempt on his face. “The smart move would have been to take me out while you had your chance, but you’re such a fucking boy scout.

Ryder ignored the bullshit. “I’m not telling you again. Drop your weapon.”

“And if I don’t, what are you going to do?”

“Shoot you.”

“You don’t have the balls to fire at me, Pienkowski.”

A menacing voice came from his ten o’clock. “Drop it.”

The first thing Ryder saw was the weapon aimed his direction. The second was the man holding it.

Griff.

He’d miscalculated the positions of the two men, and he was going to die because of it.

In the next instant, Griff fired. The bullets went past him.

Motion caught Ryder’s eye. Harper was bringing down his SCAR in a hurry. There wasn’t time to worry about Griff firing again.

Ryder squeezed off a few rounds, taking Harp down before he could get his weapon in position. He wanted to check on Harper, make sure he wasn’t faking it, but Griff was armed and standing there.

“Stay the fuck down,” Griff growled. “I don’t want to shoot you again. ”

It finally penetrated that Griff was looking past him, that the shots earlier had gone off to his side. Ryder turned and things became clearer.

Mako was on the ground, bleeding. He'd always walked softer than anyone else on the team and Ryder hadn't known he was back there. Griff hadn't been trying to kill him—Griff had saved his life...and he'd had to shoot his best friend to do it. Fuck.

"I'm going to check on Harper," he told his buddy. "You can handle Mako?"

"Yeah, I got this."

Ryder nodded, and weapon ready, approached the older man.

Harper hadn't put the plates in his vest, that was apparent from the blood covering his chest. He kicked the SCAR out of reach and then bent down to check for a pulse. There was nothing. Maybe he'd feel something later for the man he used to think of as his mentor, but right now there was only relief.

He dug through the man's pockets, found the cell phone jammer, and turned it off. Ryder hoped that Stony was checking the phone, watching for a signal to call for a medivac.

He headed over to where Mako lay. As he neared, he heard Griff ask, "Why, you motherfucker? Why did you betray us?"

Griff had his pack open and was trying to stop the bleeding, but Ryder could tell Bryce wasn't going to make it. He had no doubt Griff knew it too, but he needed to try to save the friend he'd shot.

"Had no choice," Mako said, voice thready. "Harp blackmailed me."

“Blackmailed you how?” Ryder asked.

Mako’s lips curved slightly, but there was no humor there, only self-reproach. His eyes drifted shut. “He knew. I slept with a spy. Didn’t realize till too late. Told her too much. Got an army copter shot down. Men died.”

Ryder blew out a long breath. Mako had committed treason—an offense that would get him the death penalty—and he’d been saving his own ass by helping to kill Langley.

The sound of a chopper had Ryder looking up. It was landing in back of the boulders where he’d left Langley. Life Flight was on the scene and his hellcat had medical help. She wasn’t out of the woods yet, he knew that, but her situation had improved dramatically.

He refocused on Bryce. “Who’s after Langley and why?”

“Don’t know. Sorry, Ski.” Mako’s voice was so weak, Ryder almost didn’t hear the apology. “Sorry, Griff.”

Bryce’s body went slack and Griff worked more frantically. “Don’t you die. Don’t you fucking die, asshole.”

As his teammate fought to save his friend, Ryder remembered when they’d been in San Diego, when Bryce had returned from the fast food restaurant and looked pissed. When called on it, he’d said they’d run out of fries. That must have been when Harper had contacted him. No one became furious over onion rings. If Ryder hadn’t been so fucking focused on finding that white Impala, he might have questioned that story more closely, and he could have figured out earlier Mako was a traitor, and Langley wouldn’t have been hurt.

When Griff went still, Ryder knew Mako had died and that his buddy had accepted there was no chance to revive him. The helicopter took off again and he watched it until it was out of sight. Don't stop fighting, hellcat.

"You gonna be okay, dude?" he asked Griff quietly after a moment.

Before he could answer, a voice ordered, "FBI. Drop your weapons. Hands up."

Ryder did as ordered. The cavalry had arrived, and he was about to get arrested.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:52 am

Langley shifted in the hospital bed and grimaced. Her leg hurt, but she was lucky and she knew it. The shrapnel from the ricochet had passed through her thigh cleanly and without hitting anything vital on its journey. This morning, she'd even managed to convince the doctor to dial back on the painkillers.

She thought about turning on the television but decided against it. This was the first time she'd had more than a few minutes alone since she'd arrived at the hospital yesterday. There'd been nurses in and out constantly, technicians, the doctor, the police and FBI questioning her, and her mom had arrived last night and absolutely refused to leave her side. Langley had finally talked her into getting something to eat, but she wouldn't be gone long, so she better enjoy the quiet while she had it.

As if on cue, the door opened, and Langley swallowed a sigh. Now what?

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Ryder. She'd known he was okay, but it was a relief to see that for herself. He was wearing the same clothes he'd had on yesterday and there was a day's worth of stubble on his face. He looked tired, but determined. His gaze raked her from head to foot and she was certain he hadn't missed a thing.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here earlier," he said quietly, "but the police and the FBI were in no hurry to release us, not with eight dead bodies in the forest. I came straight to the hospital."

"They decided against officially arresting you?" Langley asked. It was a little over twenty-four hours since she'd been wheeled from the helicopter into the ER.

Ryder nodded his head and approached the bed. "I have a new appreciation for the

diplomatic corps after watching your father at work.”

“Where is Dad?”

“He spotted your mother and decided to join her for dinner.” He reached her side and covered her hand with his. “The ambassador told me what the doctor said about your condition, but I want to know how’re you feeling, hellcat?”

“I’m fine, thank you. ”

“No, you’re not. You were honest with me yesterday. Don’t backslide now.”

Langley frowned. “I dislike—” She realized the words were heated and cut herself off. After taking a deep breath, she said evenly, “I’ve been better, you can see that, but it could have been much worse.”

“No,” he gently squeezed her hand. “Don’t do that. If you don’t like something I do, tell me. It’s okay not to be polite with me, damn it.”

The battle between a lifetime of training and the fact that the pain had left her cranky didn’t last long. “I hate it when you press me. If I tell you I’m fine, then leave it alone.” She froze, appalled not only at what she’d said, but her tone of voice as well.

Ryder leaned over her so he could meet her gaze head on. “If I don’t press, you’ll think you can get by with your polite lies. I fuck—freaking hate that shit. You can be honest with me. You can be yourself with me, don’t you get that? You’re not going to start a war if you tell me to go to hell when I piss you off.”

“Telling you I’m fine isn’t some polite lie—it’s because I don’t like being weak.”

“You don’t always need to be strong.”

“Yes, I do. When you’re weak, you’re a potential victim.” She shut her mouth, but not quickly enough. Damn it, he’d have questions now .

The expression on Ryder’s face made her tense. “Fuck. The bodyguard.”

How did he know about that? She started to ask, but Langley realized she was too tired for this. She sank back against the pillows and took a deep breath. “I don’t have the energy for this conversation.”

For an instant, he appeared startled, and then chagrin took its place. Ryder scowled and studied her again. “Let me get the nurse. You look like you’re hurting.”

Langley grabbed his hand before he could reach across her for the call button. “Oh, no you don’t,” she scolded. “It took me too long to convince the doctor to ease up on the painkillers. You’re not walking in here and undoing the work I did.”

“You want to be in pain?”

“It’s discomfort, not pain.” Strong discomfort. “And I want a clear head.”

Scowling, he dropped down in the chair next to the bed. “Because you always have to be in control of yourself.”

It was tempting to mention that wasn’t true, that she had no self-command when they made love, but decided that was a direction she didn’t want to go. “Something you should understand completely, since you’re exactly the same way.” Instead of pursuing that topic, Langley changed the subject. “Where’s Finn?”

If anything, Ryder’s frown deepened. “He and Griff headed back to the estate to get a shower and catch some sleep. They’ll be by to see you in the morning.”

For a moment, she remained quiet. “So it was Mako then.” She couldn’t use his first name any longer, not when he’d betrayed her, betrayed Ryder.

“Yeah.” There was no emotion on his face and he had the nerve to tell her she always had to be in control. Before she could do some pushing of her own, Ryder added. “Griff shot him before Mako could shoot me and then tried to save him. He didn’t make it.”

Langley processed that. “It’s going to be difficult for Jonah to deal with killing his best friend. How’s he doing?”

Ryder shrugged. “He isn’t saying much right now, but the feds kept the three of us separated most of the past twenty-four hours, so I don’t really know where his head’s at.” For an instant, he seemed far away, then he blinked and refocused on her. “You heard the FBI arrested the person who hired the hit squad, right?”

“Dad called Mom this morning and she passed along the news, but she didn’t get any details. Do you know why someone wanted me dead? Is it a person Dad knows?”

“Your father didn’t have much time to talk to her considering that he was trying to keep our asses out of jail right then.” One side of Ryder’s mouth quirked up briefly, but the amusement didn’t last long. “And no, it wasn’t anyone your family knows. It turns out that while your father was ambassador to Puerto Jardin, some college kid was arrested for trying to smuggle artifacts out of the country. He was tried, convicted, and thrown in prison.”

She considered that. “It’s been suspected for a while that the Puerto Jardinese government is financing their civil war by systematically selling their own antiquities on the shadow market. Perhaps they didn’t like anyone encroaching on their territory.”

“Maybe,” he said, “but the kid died in custody and his mother blamed your father for not playing the get-out-of-jail-free card.”

She huffed out a sharp breath. “As if he could. Puerto Jardin isn’t known for their leniency.”

“I know,” Ryder said. “From what the feds shared, the kid was guilty as hell, too. It appears he traveled there solely to be a mule for the artifacts.”

“The country isn’t exactly a vacation destination,” Langley said dryly. It hadn’t been even before the civil war started. Not with the drug cartels and the arms dealing and the poverty that encouraged looting of historic sites.

“The bottom line is that his mother decided that since she lost a child, the ambassador should lose his child as well. You. It took her a while to finance this gig and even longer to figure out how to hire it out, but here we are.”

“Here we are,” Langley echoed and shifted against the pillows. “One wounded, eight dead.”

“Revenge is ugly,” Ryder said. “And she planned to make it uglier. When Harper missed you with that bullet in San Diego, the mother decided she wanted to torture you herself before having you killed. She thought it would make her feel better.” He shook his head.

Quiet settled between them, but Langley didn’t have enough energy to consider what kind of woman would torture an innocent person out of revenge. Perhaps she didn’t want to think about it.

They stayed silent, but she didn’t feel like making small talk to ease the awkwardness. It shouldn’t be like this between them. Sitting without speaking should

be companionable. As the silence lengthened, it became more uncomfortable and she wished her mom would return and smooth things out. If he had more to say, why didn't he say it ?

Belatedly, she realized she hadn't shown her appreciation. Could that be why he wasn't heading back to the cabin to catch his own shower? "Thank you," she said, and it was genuine despite her wanting him to go. "I appreciate everything you did to keep me safe."

"I don't need a thank you," Ryder growled. There was no hiding his irritation.

Clearly that wasn't why he'd remained. Another thought occurred to her—he might be lingering because he didn't want to leave her alone. "Mom will return in a few minutes. You don't have to stay."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

Langley couldn't quite read his tone, but it angered her anyway. "If that was my aim, I'd feign exhaustion," she said with a touch of crispness in her voice that she'd been unable to squelch. "I'm merely assuring you that there's no need to waste time here."

"Being with you isn't a waste of time." That came out loudly and full of annoyance. Under his breath, he muttered, "For fuck's sake." Ryder closed his eyes briefly, as if gathering himself, and then looked her dead in the eyes. "I'm sorry."

"That I got shot? That wasn't your fault."

He scowled at her. "No, I'm sorry I hurt you. Again."

Langley turned her head forward, but she could see Ryder in her peripheral vision. She couldn't do this, not another time. "I forgive you," she said, keeping her words

calm with effort. “And I’m sorry my communication skills are lacking. That doesn’t mean we’re going to resume dating. Our relationship is finished.”

“That’s pretty much what I guessed you were going to say, but hear me out anyway, okay?”

It was tempting to say no, but what was she going to do if he insisted? Gather up her IV and outrun him? Langley steeled herself, determined that she wouldn’t react to whatever he said. She might be pathetically in love with him, but she wasn’t so eager that she’d embrace whatever scraps he tossed her way. Not a second time.

When she had herself locked down tight, she gestured for him to go ahead, but she kept her gaze fastened on the wall in front of the bed. From the corner of her eye, she saw him frown, but he didn’t insist she look at him.

“This isn’t how I expected things to go.”

“So sorry,” she apologized with utmost politeness and absolutely no sincerity.

“Okay, I’ll take what I can get. I know I deserve worse than this.” She caught his rueful grin. “I’m sort of lucky you’re not very mobile right now or I know I wouldn’t get this much of your attention. ”

Instead of responding, Langley clamped down on her emotions harder.

“Yeah, so here goes. There’s nothing and no one in my life more important than you. I don’t want to lose you, Langley.”

She waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. If he hadn’t fooled her the other day, she might have gotten misty eyed and assumed this was an avowal of his love for her. But the last time she’d jumped to conclusions, she’d discovered that Ryder wanted

the status quo and nothing more. She wasn't making that mistake twice.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, what?"

"Don't you want to say something?"

After a couple of seconds of consideration, Langley said, "I can't think of anything, no."

"Yeah, okay."

He went quiet. Langley wished she had turned the television on earlier when she'd thought of it. The only thing more awkward than this screaming silence was staring at a wall while it dragged on.

At last, Ryder said, "I grew up differently than you did."

Langley bit her lip to stop herself from interrupting. Almost everyone had grown up differently than she had, but his voice was rough, as if he were forcing the words out, and if she spoke, he might not continue .

"Until I joined the Army, the only other country I'd ever visited was Canada, and I didn't speak any language except English. You speak, what? Half a dozen languages and you've lived in more countries than I can keep track of." Ryder's sentences were choppy, almost serrated. "My dad is an auto mechanic, and no matter how hard he scrubs, there's always at least a little grease under his fingernails. Your father gets manicures. Blue collar versus blue-blood. The soldier who dropped out of college and the heiress who graduated magna cum laude . We come from two different worlds, and I'm not sure they're even in the same universe."

Langley turned her gaze from the wall to Ryder and glared at him. “I’ve never judged anyone by how much money they have in the bank or who their family is, but it doesn’t appear as if you can say the same.”

“I wasn’t judging you, I was judging myself.” Ryder dropped his head, ran a hand over the back of his neck, then looked up again. “Here’s the thing. My dad harped on me and my brothers as far back as I can remember to go to college, that we’d never be anything without that piece of paper. I know I disappointed him when I joined the Army, but I didn’t realize how much I internalized what he said until after I met you and wished like hell I had some kind of degree. ”

She attempted to see the totality of what he was trying to say, not only the small insights he’d actually shared, but she couldn’t manage it, not today. “If this was an issue for you, why did you ask me out?”

Ryder smiled, but Langley read chagrin in the expression. “Because I couldn’t stop thinking about you after we were back in Tampa. I figured we could have some good times and then we’d both move on.”

Fisting her hands was a reflex, but it didn’t help her tamp down her anger. She didn’t try to modulate her tone. “Good times?”

This smile was more genuine. “That plan didn’t last long. I got in over my head with you pretty quick and I didn’t want to move on, but I was sure you wouldn’t feel the same way. That sooner or later you’d realize I wasn’t good enough for you and you’d end it. So I did things I thought would limit the damage when you dumped me.”

“Like making sure I didn’t get to know your friends. And refusing to meet mine.”

He nodded. “I tried to keep our lives as separate as possible. It was a stupid plan and it didn’t work worth shit. Losing you hurt like hell on fire and it didn’t matter that

you hadn't hung out with my friends." Ryder's hand covered hers, his fingers curling around hers. He cleared his throat, but his voice was thick when he said, "I love you, Langley. I've been in love with you for a while and was too stupid to see it."

Her mouth opened and closed a couple of times before it occurred to her that she had no idea what to say. She could tell Ryder she loved him, too, but the things he had problems with weren't going to disappear. "And what about my background? That won't change, and I don't intend to pretend my trust fund doesn't exist. If you begin to resent the money or my education, any relationship between us is doomed."

"Do you believe that I love you?"

She didn't have to consider it long. Ryder wouldn't say it if it weren't true, and Langley had been confident about his feelings for her until she'd thought about his reluctance to include her in his life. That had raised doubts. "Yes, I believe that."

Ryder nodded. "Do you love me?"

"That's beside the point."

"No, it isn't. How we feel is the whole point. Do you love me?"

The badgering was annoying, especially when he was ignoring her concerns, and she huffed out a long breath before snapping. "Of course, I love you. Only an idiot wouldn't know that I've been in love with you for months." More months than she was going to admit.

His smile was slow, sweet, and so smugly satisfied that she scowled at him. Ryder's hand stroked hers, soothing the sharp edges of her irritation.

"You have no reason to believe this, not given how I've treated you, but your money,

the differences in our families, upbringings, and educations aren't going to be issues between us. I promise you that."

"You might feel that way right now when the memory of my being wounded is fresh in your brain, but what about five years from now? What about when I spend money on something you think is frivolous or too expensive? What if I want to take you to Europe on a vacation and stay at a luxury hotel? I don't want to worry about you becoming angry every time I shop."

"What about you? Can you handle my being gone for months at a time and not being able to tell you anything about where I was or what kind of mission the team was on?"

"I grew up the daughter of a diplomat. I'm used to secrecy, to not knowing what's happening. Would I rather you were home and not out on dangerous missions? Of course, but I knew you were Special Forces when I started dating you and I wouldn't ask you to give that up."

"Then we're set."

"Oh, no, we're not." Her temper frayed at his complete disregard for her concerns. She tried to rein it in, but then decided not to bother. He wanted her to tell him to go to hell when she was angry with him, well, she was beyond angry. "I've addressed what you were worried about, but you've completely ignored my concerns. Why do you think you can brush aside my fears as if they're nothing?"

"I haven't brushed anything aside."

"Bullshit." He looked shocked. "Yes, I said bullshit. Basically, what you said to me was don't worry your pretty little head over it, and that is complete and utter rubbish. I have more cause for my misgivings than you do for yours. I've already dealt

admirably with you going on missions and telling me nothing. The same can't be said about your reactions."

His hand tightened over hers. "Yeah, okay, you're right. Maybe it's because there's nothing I can say to prove my change of heart. You think that I'll forget the moment of clarity I had when I understood how unimportant the differences between us are, but you don't grasp how hard the realization hit me."

She opened her mouth, but Ryder shook his head.

"Let me finish. I asked myself what if you had grown up in another blue-collar family, had worked your way through college, and gotten a high-powered job where you earned the kind of income your trust fund gives you? Would it be a problem for me? The answer was no. That doesn't mean we won't ever argue about money, but I won't resent the fact that you have it or that you'll spend it. Yeah, I will balk when you want me to accept you paying our way on expensive vacations or buying me shit because I don't want you to ever believe that I'm taking advantage of you. I don't want your damn money, I want you. I love you."

"I know you don't want my money." That had never been in question.

Ryder took a deep breath and eased back on his intensity. "When I think about my future, I see you with me. I see us married, going through life as a team, laughing, arguing, making up, making love, making babies. I want everything with you, Langley. Only you, forever you."

Tears welled and her heart filled her chest, but Langley couldn't quite make the leap into the abyss.

"I know," he said quietly. "This is my fault. Let me ask you this—if I hadn't messed up on the drive to the airport, if I'd agreed to one of your invitations would you have

these doubts?”

Would she? “Probably not.”

With a nod, Ryder said, “It was one mistake.”

“At the cabin—”

“I made two mistakes,” he corrected and grinned ruefully. “I won’t make a third. I promise that I love you with all that I am. Take a chance on me. Take a chance on us .”

Langley paused. She could play it safe, turn him down, and spend the rest of her days regretting it or she could take the risk. Her parents had raised her to embrace life, to go for broke when she felt strongly, and she loved Ryder. There was nothing she wanted more than the future he’d described. She took a leap of faith.

“Oh, you’ll make a third mistake and a fourth and more, but I’ll make mistakes, too. We’re both human. We’ll argue, we’ll work things out, and we’ll go forward. I love you, Ryder.”

“Thank God.” He looked and sounded relieved. “Does this mean you’re going to marry me?”

“I haven’t been asked.”

He grinned again, joy radiating from his face. “If that’s what it takes to get you forever, I can do that.” Ryder dropped to one knee next to her hospital bed. “I love you, hellcat. Will you marry me?”

Returning his smile, Langley laced her fingers with his and simply said, “Yes.”

Six Months Later

Ryder touched the back of his wedding ring with his thumb and lightly stroked it. The weight felt foreign, but it had been a matter of hours since Langley had slipped it on his finger. They'd gotten married outdoors at sunset, and although it was dark now, the ambassador's Palm Beach estate, especially the exterior, was lit up like Times Square. And filled with about the same amount of people.

In a minute or two, he'd have to go back to mingling, but Ryder needed a break. He thought he was well-hidden in the shadows of an outdoor pavilion, but Griff found him anyway .

"There are too many people," his buddy grouched.

"I know." Ryder estimated there were eight hundred guests. Coming home from a mission and immediately being surrounded by this enormous crowd made him edgy, and he'd needed to keep his focus on Langley to make it through the ceremony.

"How long do you think we can hide?"

Ryder shrugged. "You can get away with it longer than I can."

"True, but—"

Stony arrived and gave Griff a hard stare. "Teammates are supposed to have each other's backs, asshole."

“I am looking out for you, dude. You have a hot blonde who wants you for a no-strings-attached fuck. I didn’t want to get in the way.”

Rowland clearly didn’t buy the innocent act. “You know I’m not interested in her.”

“No, you’re interested in throwing your career away on some chick you met in Puerto Jardin.” Griff had a whole lot of Boston in his voice when he said that.

Ryder shifted, trying to determine if he needed to play peacemaker, but Stony went chill. “I made the decision to leave the Army before I ever saw her. ”

“It was a damn stupid decision and now you’re making another one.”

“Griff has a point,” Ryder interjected. “You’re going to turn up on the doorstep of a woman who didn’t tell you where she lives and believes you’re a gunrunner. That’s not the smartest idea you’ve ever had.”

“She’ll call the cops,” Griff added.

“No, she’ll shoot me herself.” Rowland’s lips curved.

“For fuck’s—”

“Ryder,” his mother called as she approached and they went silent. When she reached his side, she said, “You need to cut in.”

He turned his attention to the dance floor. If he’d been asked, Ryder would have wagered that the orchestra hired for the reception wouldn’t know a polka, but they were playing Roll Out the Barrel and it wasn’t only his family out there hopping around. “Cut in on who, Ma?” he asked.

“Your father’s dancing with Langley. She’s going to overdo it.”

Ryder searched until he spotted his bride. She'd gotten rid of the veil between the ceremony and the reception, but he found her as soon as the dancers parted. "Dad's going half speed. She'll be fine."

His mother made a noise that was a cross between a snort and a huff. "You were away. You have no idea what Langley went through in physical therapy to be able to walk without a limp. Your dad is going to push her too hard."

He'd been out of the country for five months and had only returned nine days ago. Before his team had left, his parents had met Langley and been concerned Ryder was making a mistake. He'd come home to discover his mom and dad now considered his hellcat one of the family and his mother was more protective of her than she was of him, her youngest son.

"Ma," Ryder said patiently, "Dad hovers over Langley worse than you do. He won't do anything to hurt her." But he kept his eyes on her, making sure he didn't see any sign of pain until the song ended.

His three great aunts—he and his brothers had always called them the gargoyles—waved at Langley and his dad escorted her over to them. "See? You worried for nothing."

That earned him "the look" and Ryder immediately straightened, almost coming to attention. "You need to stop hiding and talk to people," she admonished. "I raised you to be polite." His mom walked away, but the rigidity of her back told him she'd return breathing fire if he didn't get his ass out there and mingle.

"You guys coming?" he asked Griff and Stony.

"No." Rowland shook his head .

"Hell, no," Griff said at the same time.

Ryder was halfway to the dance floor when three of his Polish uncles hollered a song request at the orchestra. “ In Heaven There is No Beer! ” Immediately, his Italian relatives countered with their own demand, trying to outshout the other uncles. “ Tarantella! Tarantella! ”

Fucking hell, he’d known his family couldn’t stay on their best behavior the entire night. The yelling escalated as more relatives got involved. Before Ryder could figure out how to minimize the scene they were causing, his grandmothers came to the rescue. Nonna and Busia asked for a big band era song, and after a quelling look at their children, danced to Moonlight Serenade . Watching the two eighty-somethings dancing together made him smile. Thank God for the matriarchs.

The reprieve wouldn’t last forever, though, and Ryder switched course toward the bar. He needed fortification before the next incident. He was nearly to his goal when he noticed Brett Taggart was in line. It was tempting to change direction, but he forced himself to join the lieutenant. “Taggart,” he said, trying not to grit his teeth.

“Pienkowski.” The man didn’t sound any more enthusiastic than Ryder had.

As they stood, ignoring each other, Ryder realized their relationship couldn’t continue to be antagonistic. With a grimace, he said, “Lieutenant, I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I hope we can put that behind us and find common ground.”

“Why?” The suspicion wasn’t veiled.

“Because our wives are best friends, and if our animosity causes a wedge between Langley and Sarah, there’ll be hell to pay.” Ryder’s lips quirked. “I’d prefer not to face my wife’s wrath.”

“You’re afraid of your wife?”

“Hell, yeah. Aren’t you afraid of yours?”

Arching an eyebrow, Taggart drawled, “Never.”

Ryder didn’t bother to call him on the blatant lie. “Truce?” He held out his hand.

“Truce,” he agreed and they shook hands.

When they both had a bottle of beer, Taggart asked, “You like this bullshit, Pienkowski?” He gestured out toward the throng.

“Call me Ski. No, I hate the bullshit, but I want Langley, and it’s part of the deal, lieutenant.”

Taggart grunted. “It’s Tag. Did you know the commander over all of Special Operations is here?”

Ryder scowled. “Yeah. General Wolfe and my father-in-law are friends from way back.”

“Fuck.”

“I know. ”

Sarah joined them then, her red hair a bright contrast against the dark purple of her dress. “Brett, would you get me a glass of white wine, please?”

The look she shared with her husband made Ryder tense and brace himself.

Sure enough, as soon as Taggart was out of earshot, she rounded on Ryder. “You hurt Langley.”

“Six months ago,” he said, but she ignored him.

“You made her cry. Langs never cries. She might have forgiven you because she loves you, but I’m not that easy to win over, and I’m keeping my eyes on you. If you hurt her like that again, you’ll be dealing with me. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He kept it at that because she wouldn’t believe any assurances he gave her.

“About her getting shot—”

“I’ll do a better job protecting her in the future,” Ryder interrupted.

“Good,” Sarah said with a sharp nod. “Make sure you do.”

Langley’s arrival saved him from more scolding. As her arm went around his waist, she said, “Your great aunts are the sweetest things!”

“The gargoyles? Sweet?”

She frowned at him. “They’ve done incredible things in their lives. The next time I go to Cleveland, they’re going to show me pictures from some of their adventures.”

Taggart returned with Sarah’s wine and Langley looked up at him expectantly. “What would you like, hellcat?” Ryder asked.

“Manhattan, please.”

“Be right back.” And he kissed her forehead because her accent was too fucking sexy—okay, she was too fucking sexy—and went to get her drink.

Smiling, Langley ignored the throbbing in her leg. She might have overdone it the tiniest little bit, but she only intended to get married once and she planned to enjoy herself. “The amethyst color looks fabulous on you, Sarah,” Langley said.

“And the slit in the skirt is high enough that I can run if I need to.” Sarah raised both eyebrows.

Langley’s smile broadened to a grin. “That’s why I bought an A-line dress without a train and chose one-inch kitten heels.” Her wedding gown was beautiful with a sleeveless, illusion bodice, but it wouldn’t have been her first choice if she hadn’t been kidnapped six months ago. “But we shouldn’t need to run tonight. Brett’s here,” she turned her smile on him momentarily, “we have a plethora of Army Special Forces present, and Dad hired security.”

“And some of the guests brought their own bodyguards.” Brett’s voice was dry.

With a shrug, Langley said, “The royal family doesn’t go anywhere without their own security, and foreign heads of state get secret service protection while they’re in the US. We have several prime ministers and presidents in attendance.”

His face remained expressionless, but Langley had learned to read that special kind of neutral that operatives donned.

“What can I say? My parents know people.”

An elderly Taiwanese couple came up to her to say good night. Sarah and Brett excused themselves and Langley thanked the couple in Mandarin for flying out for her wedding, chatting with them briefly before they departed. She had about thirty seconds alone before Ryder returned and handed her the drink.

Smiling her thanks, she took a sip.

“Is it too early for us to get out of here?” he asked, sliding an arm around her waist.

“Much too early,” Langley said.

“That’s what I thought. I love you, hellcat, but today has been overwhelming.”

Her heart clenched in her chest before it resumed beating. “The wedding?”

“Marrying you was the highlight of my life.” Ryder gently squeezed her waist. “This crowd of people, though...” He shook his head. “You know I’m edgy for a while when I get home, and I haven’t been back long enough to completely settle in. This crowd is hard.”

After another sip, she leaned into Ryder’s side, letting him take some of her weight. “I’m sorry.”

Ryder pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Do you think we can sneak off for a few minutes alone?”

An ambassador’s daughter didn’t sneak away when there were duties to perform. “Let’s do it.”

Without another word, Ryder took her glass and put it down on a table before clasping her hand and leading her away from the guests. She’d expected to have to hurry to keep up with him, but his pace matched hers and it told her that he was aware of exactly how much her leg hurt her tonight. They were stopped several times along the way, but at last they reached a secluded part of the grounds. The sound of voices, of music seemed distant here.

Ryder wrapped her in an embrace and said, “Alone at last.”

Langley rested her hands on his shoulders. “We might have five minutes.”

“I’ll take what I can get.” He kissed her slow and sweet. “I needed that.”

“Mmm,” she hummed. “Me, too.”

“How long do we have to hang around? ”

It was hard to speak while Ryder stroked her back, but she managed to say, “Midnight.”

“Is your leg going to hold up that long?”

“Of course.” Langley paused. She didn’t have to pretend with him. “It’ll help, though, if you stay close at hand so I can lean on you from time to time. It’s throbbing.”

“I’ll stick like glue.” Ryder pressed his lips to her temple. “And if anyone tries to dance with you, I’ll act possessive and glare.”

“That should do it.” Even with his hair cut short as it was today, Ryder could appear seriously frightening when he wanted. “When we get to St. Lucia, we won’t have to go anywhere or do anything unless we feel like it.”

“Another reason to look forward to the honeymoon.”

Langley leaned back far enough to see the amusement on his face, and it hit her how much she’d missed him while he’d been away. “I’m glad you’re safely home,” she said.

His expression became more somber. “So am I. I love you, Langley.”

“I know. I love you, too.”

Ryder kissed her again, this time with so much feeling, she could do nothing except cling to him.

“Ew! Gross!”

“Yeah, gross!”

They separated and Langley saw two of Ryder’s nephews standing there. The little one had his hands over his eyes, but his fingers were far enough apart that he could peek.

Before she or Ryder could ask what they were doing here, the older boy said, “Everyone’s looking for you.”

“Someone wants to give you toast,” the younger piped up, lowering his arms.

Langley shared a glance with Ryder. “Okay,” he said, “we’ll be right there.”

That was all the boys needed. They took off running, the younger of the two shouting, “Grandma, we found ‘em.”

“That wasn’t five minutes,” Ryder complained softly. His arm went around her waist as they walked back to the hub of the reception.

“It’s difficult for the bride and groom to slip away at their wedding.”

“Yeah.” They walked in silence for a bit before Ryder said, “After we return from St. Lucia, the team’s having a get together, a send-off for Stony. Think you’ll be up to it?”

It was the first time he’d invited her to hang out with his friends. Initially, she’d been dealing with her injury and then Ryder had been off on assignment. To her embarrassment, her throat tightened as emotion swamped her. This felt as monumental to her as their wedding—maybe more so in some ways .

“Of course,” Langley said, voice slightly thick. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

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