



*Forgiven*

EMBER DANTE

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**FORGIVEN**

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# EMBER DANTE



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*When you forgive, you in no way change the past—but you sure do  
change the future.*

— *Bernard Meltzer*

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## LETTER TO THE READER

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Dear Reader,

I am beyond excited to write in the world Corinne Michaels created with the Salvation Society. The story that follows features characters created solely for this world, along with a few characters you already know and love.

I hope you enjoy spending time with the cocky Navy aviator and the quirky but lovable veterinarian. Alek and Shannon were unexpected, but I fell in love with them while they were falling in love with each other.

Ember  
XOXO

P.S. While I did a fair amount of research about the Navy, I'm sure I have made a few mistakes here and there regarding procedures and other details. The mistakes are my own, and I hope you can forgive the artistic license I've taken in telling Alek's side of the story.



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# CHAPTER ONE

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## Alek

The cloudless blue sky was in direct contrast to the choppy ocean surface.

I was on the third day of a two-week training cruise in the middle of the North Atlantic, practicing landing on a pitching carrier deck. Thirty-foot swells made the deck move violently forward and aft. No doubt other pilots and off-duty crew were below decks watching and betting whether I could nail it on my first try or if I'd have to take a spot in the bolter pattern.

It shouldn't even be a question, really. I'd managed textbook landings on both of my previous runs. Why wouldn't I be able to manage it again? I'd be lying if I said these training ops weren't stressful, but flying was in my blood—and I was damn good at it.

Yeah. I was a cocky bastard. Hell, you'd be hard-pressed to find a Navy aviator who wasn't.

The disembodied voice of the carrier's tower spilled from my headset, barely louder than the noise from the jet's engines and the wind outside.

"One-zero-four, Marshal one-seven-zero, two-seven, angels twelve. Expected approach time three-seven. Approach button fifteen."

"One-zero-four, Marshal one-seven-zero, two-seven, angels twelve, time three-seven, button fifteen," I repeated.

"One-zero-four, read-back correct. Squawk seven-one-five-zero."

I answered automatically, "Seven-one-five-zero."

"One-zero-four, Freedom approach, final bearing three-four-two."

“One-zero-four,” I responded.

I drew in a deep breath and let it out, pushing thoughts of everything but the current task from my mind.

“One-zero-four, approaching glide path. Begin descent. Three miles, right of course, going right of course. Left five.”

My gaze flicked to my instruments and back to the postage-stamp-sized carrier in the distance. “Needle’s showing down and left.”

“One-zero-four, concur. Fly mode two.”

The carrier gradually grew larger in my field of vision. My senses sharpened, vision narrowing on my target—the pitching deck. Any miscalculation on my part or that of the landing crew could result in disaster. Funny thing, I knew it was a dangerous job when I joined the Navy, but I’d never regretted my decision to become a pilot. It sure as hell beat being chained to a desk in a stuffy office designing the very planes I was paid to fly.

“One-zero-four, slightly above glide path, coming down left of course, correcting slowly.”

I followed the Paddles crew’s instructions, correcting as needed until my landing gear hit the flight deck. There was a familiar jolt when the jet’s hook caught the arresting cable, but the jet didn’t stop—it continued forward and lurched over the end of the carrier.

My heart stopped, then pounded in my chest. *The cable snapped.*

I pulled back on the stick, thinking I could turn it into a bolter, but I wasn’t quick enough. The jet shot over the edge of the carrier, falling nose-first toward the ocean’s surface sixty feet below.

Without thinking, I reached down and pulled the ejection handle, taking care to hold my elbows close to my body, away from the sides of the cockpit. Seat restraints took care of my legs.

Ejecting from a jet was anything but pleasant. It felt like my body was being stretched and compressed simultaneously. Everything hurt. It was the first time I’d ever ejected, and it sucked. It wasn’t an experience I wanted to repeat.

I must have blacked out because my next memory was being fished out of the drink by the rescue helo and a swimmer. Two corpsmen were waiting with a gurney to take me to the hospital

deck. My head was splitting, and I felt like I'd been hit by a Mack truck.

The ship's medical officer leaned over me and used a penlight to check my eyes. I fought the urge to squint. "Commander Pierce? Can you hear me?"

*Yeah, I can hear. My head hurts, but I'm not fucking deaf.* "Yes."

"I'm Lieutenant Fincher. Can you tell me what day it is?"

*Geez.* "Friday, June twelfth."

"Right."

I struggled to sit, and that's when I realized something was wrong with my arm. "What happened?"

"You don't remember, commander?"

*No, I don't fucking remember. If I did, I wouldn't be asking.* "No ... I can't..."

"The cable broke. You had to eject."

*Right. That sounded right.*

I tried to lift my left hand, and pain lanced through my shoulder and chest. I dipped my chin as my right hand explored the injured area.

"Can you stand? We need to remove your flight suit."

"Yeah." I nodded and immediately regretted it. My head was heavy and felt like it could pop off my neck at any moment. "I think so."

Fincher stood on one side and a nurse, Murphy according to the name patch on the right side of her chest, stood on the other side to steady me. I unzipped the suit and, without thought, began to slide it over my shoulders. The simple movement sent another wave of pain through my arm and chest, prompting a low growl that rumbled in my throat. I was fairly certain my shoulder was dislocated.

"You better let us help you with that," Murphy said.

There was no such thing as modesty in the military. They stripped me down to my skivvies, stuck me in a scratchy hospital gown, and instructed me to lie on my back so they could take a few x-rays. I wasn't surprised to learn that in addition to the shoulder, my left clavicle, ulna, and radius were broken.

I ground my teeth as they set my shoulder. The joint throbbed, blending with the pain radiating from the collarbone and forearm.

“Any allergies?” Fincher asked.

“No.”

He shifted his attention to Murphy, who busied herself inserting an IV in my good hand. “Push point-one morphine to take the edge off the pain.”

“Yes, lieutenant.”

A few moments later, the pain subsided, and my body relaxed, and I suddenly didn’t care that I was being poked and prodded.

“Lucky for you, the breaks are pretty clean.” His explanation came while he and Murphy set my arm and wrapped it in a cast. “You’ll still need to see an orthopedist when you get back to the mainland. They may choose to put in plates to help speed healing.”

I expected as much. There was no reason for me to remain at sea when I clearly wouldn’t be able to fly. “When?”

“I’m sorry?” Fincher asked.

I sensed my words were somewhat slurred. My tongue was thick and didn’t want to move correctly. “When am I shipping home?”

“In a day or two, at the most. You most likely have a concussion, and I’d like to keep an eye on you for a bit before we fly you out of here.”

“Do I have to stay here, or can I go suffer in my own bunk?”

He chuckled. “I need you to stay here for a few hours, and then we’ll let you go to your stateroom. How’s your pain?”

“Tolerable.” I scrubbed my good hand over my face. “But I feel like I’m going to be sick.”

Fincher’s reflexes were on point as he grabbed a plastic basin just before I spewed all over him. “That’s probably the concussion. We’ll give you something to help with the nausea. Lie back and try to get some rest.”

Murphy murmured something about the medication that didn’t make sense to my fuzzy brain, and I didn’t have the energy to comment or ask her to clarify. Additional pain meds must have been involved because as soon as I closed my eyes against the bright lights above me, I was out.

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The smell of citrus hit me the moment I opened the door. I shook my head and stepped inside, knowing it meant my mother had sent a housekeeper to spruce up the place before I got home. I pushed the door closed and pulled out my cell phone. A quick swipe of my thumb brought up Mom's number.

"Alek," Mom gushed. "When did you get in?"

I chuckled. "Just now. You know, you don't have to keep sending Maggie over here to clean my house."

"Oh, stop. You shouldn't have to worry about cleaning when you come home from a deployment."

"It was just a training op, Mom."

"Whatever," she huffed. "You've been away, and you're injured. You need to concentrate on getting well, not cleaning."

"I seriously doubt a few dust bunnies would impede my recovery."

"Well..." Her voice took on a whiny edge.

"But I appreciate it, thank you."

Her tone brightened. "You're welcome."

I made my way into the kitchen. As I had suspected, she also stocked the fridge. "Groceries, too?"

"You have to eat, don't you?"

I knew better than to argue. At least she included a twelve-pack of my favorite beer. "Yeah. Thanks for that."

"Listen, sweetheart. We're having our annual July fourth celebration at the country house, and I'd really love for you to be there."

My body deflated. "I don't know, Mom. I'm not really in the mood for a big party."

"I'd love to see you. So would Owen. It would mean so much for you to be there."

Right. My stepfather, the senator, was in the middle of a re-election campaign. I wasn't surprised by my mother's full-court press to have me at their holiday party. A decorated Navy aviator was a good thing to have on hand. It made a favorable impression with supporters.

"I want you to promise me something."

"What, sweetie?"

“If I visit, I don’t want anyone to make a big deal out of it. I’m officially on leave and won’t be wearing my uniform, and I don’t want to be paraded around in front of Owen’s guests so he can get more donors. I just want to be there as your son and Owen’s stepson.”

“You are my son, baby.”

“Mom, you’re not hearing what I’m saying.”

“I hear you fine,” she snapped, her tone sharp and controlled. “We would never use you to further Owen’s career.”

I lifted my hand to massage my brow and was quickly reminded of the pain in my left shoulder and arm. “I’m sorry. I know you wouldn’t intentionally use me like that. I’m just out of sorts, I guess.”

“Will you come?”

I could be an ass and tell her no, but the truth was that I kind of wanted to see my mom. Recent events had given me a new appreciation for family ties. “Yeah. I’ll be there.”

“Oh, honey. Thank you. I can’t wait to see you.”

I hoped I wouldn’t regret going, but the gratitude in Mom’s voice relieved some of my trepidation. “Me too.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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## Shannon

“Dr. McKenzie? I think there’s something wrong with Leonidas.”

Leonidas was a brown Chausie with feline leukemia. He was well into his third year with the disease, which was longer than we’d expected him to survive. His owners brought him in the day before because he’d lost more weight and would no longer eat.

I rinsed the soap from my hands and faced our veterinary assistant. “What’s going on, Molly? He seemed to be perking up when I checked on him this morning.”

“He’s extremely lethargic. I could barely get him to respond when I changed out his water just now, and he still hasn’t eaten anything.”

I stepped around her on the way to the kennels. “Let’s take a look.”

Sure enough, Leonidas was stretched out on his side, eyes slit. His breathing was labored, and he was panting. I rushed over and pulled him from the kennel to cradle him in my arms, careful not to dislodge the IV taped to his front leg. Molly and I shared a brief look. Tears glistened in her eyes, and I knew mine were probably the same.

“Call the Brewsters and ask them to come in immediately. I don’t think our boy has much time left. I’ll do what I can to make him comfortable while we wait for them to get here. Oh, and let Denise know that I need Dr. Charles to take over. I don’t want to leave Leo.”

Molly nodded and rushed into my office to use the phone. She came back a few minutes later. “They’re on their way.”

Twenty minutes later, Denise brought Leo's family back. We discussed his latest lab results and prognosis. I never wanted to give up on an animal, but in Leo's case, I knew it was time for the Brewsters to make a decision. Breaking that news to a pet's family was never easy, regardless of how many times I'd had to do it—even when the family knew it was imminent.

After a tearful conversation, Molly and I administered the medication to euthanize Leonidas. The Brewsters stroked and cooed to him during the procedure.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," I murmured, giving Leo one last stroke along his flank. My other hand swiped away the few tears that spilled onto my cheeks. "I know this is difficult, but we can have him cremated for you. Or"—I took a deep breath—"you can take him home if you'd prefer to bury him."

Mr. Brewster rested a hand on his wife's shoulder and squeezed. "Cremation is fine, thank you."

I shifted my attention to Molly. "Would you help them with the paperwork, please?"

Molly nodded and led them from the exam room. Physically and emotionally spent, I released a long exhale and moved on autopilot as I cleaned the room and prepared the cat to be picked up later in the day. I wasn't ready to see any other patients, so I retreated to my office and allowed myself to feel all the emotions I had held in check while I was with Leonidas and the Brewsters. The tears fell as I cradled my head in my hands.

During times like this, I often wondered why I decided to become a vet in the first place. But I knew why. Even as difficult and painful as it could be, I loved animals. I loved being the one to care for them when they were sick, and most of the time, I was able to send them home healthy and whole.

The screen of my cell phone lit up, displaying the name of my best friend, Holden Carlisle. I wasn't particularly in the mood for conversation, but he always managed to make me feel better whenever I was down. I wiped the tears from my eyes, swiped a tissue under my nose, and answered the phone.

"Hey, you." My voice was thick and nasally, making it obvious I'd been crying.

“What’s wrong, Shannon?”

Sniffling, I shook my head even though he couldn’t see it. “Bad day. I just lost a patient.”

Sympathy filled his voice. “Oh, I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, but thank you. The offer helps.”

“You’re welcome. Look, I don’t want to seem insensitive, but the reason I called is ... what are you doing tomorrow night?”

“Oh. Um, I don’t know. Why?”

“There’s a benefit gala at The Mellon. Dad got double-booked, and can’t go, so he asked me to attend in his place. It would be great if you’d go with me as my plus one.”

“I thought you were dating someone. What was her name? Amber? Wouldn’t she like to go with you?”

He didn’t answer right away, and I had a hunch Amber was no longer in the picture. “Yeah. About that...”

“Holden,” I groaned. “What happened this time? Did she vote the wrong way in the last election?” I was only partially kidding. He’d broken up with girls for that very reason in the past.

“Har, har,” he huffed. “It just didn’t feel right, and it wasn’t fair to her. No point prolonging the inevitable.”

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out. You’re such a great guy, and you deserve to be happy. I wish I knew some hot single ladies I could set you up with.” I giggled, knowing full well Holden would never go for that.

“That’s not gonna happen,” he drawled. “But seriously. About tomorrow. Please? Go with me?”

I clapped a hand over my eyes and groaned. It wasn’t the first time I’d been his date to a hoity-toity event, but they were so not my thing. I’d much rather spend the evening curled up on the sofa with a good book, a cup of tea, and my cat. “What time is this fabulous event?”

“Seven.” There was a hint of triumph in his voice. “That gives you plenty of time to get here, and you can crash at my place. Just like old times.”

A low growl rumbled in my throat. He was my best friend, and there was no way I could turn him down. “Fine. But Sunday, you’re

taking me to brunch at that French bistro on the Wharf.”

“Deal.”

He must have been desperate. That was the only reason he would have agreed so readily to my demand. He wasn't fond of bistro food—he considered it far too dainty for his taste—and he never enjoyed going to the Wharf.

“I work until noon tomorrow. How 'bout I meet you at your place around four-thirty-ish? I'll get ready there.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He was positively giddy. Hmph. Holden was giddy. Never thought I'd make that comparison. “Thanks, Shan. I owe you one.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I chuckled. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Not if I see you first.”

The smile I heard in his voice made me laugh. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

I may not have been all that interested in attending a fancy event, but Holden's call had the necessary effect. I was no longer focused on morose thoughts about my patient.

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Saturday night passed in a blur of faces and handshakes as Holden worked the room like a seasoned pro. Then again, I suppose he was. He had become quite the politician during the eight years his father had served as senator of Virginia. I hadn't realized how much he'd changed until I watched him in action. He was no longer the shy, awkward boy I grew up with. Now he possessed a poise and confidence that made him difficult to resist. It was like the question of which came first—had Holden's new maturity come before Owen placed him in such a prominent place in his campaign or because of it?

“In case I haven't already mentioned it, I really appreciate you being here with me,” murmured Holden as he steered me toward the bar.

“You're welcome, though I'm not sure what use I've been. You seem to do fine on your own.”

His smile was crooked. “You keep me from looking too desperate.”

I poked his shoulder playfully. “Whatever.”

He rested a hand on my lower back and leaned into me. His mouth was next to my ear as he spoke, and I could have sworn I heard him sniff my hair. *Okay, that’s just a tad creepy.* “Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?”

I had debated between two dresses: a more traditional black dress and the one I finally opted for, a delicious confection with layers of grey tulle flowing from an illusion bodice embroidered with silver sequins. The style combined the appearance of a strapless gown with the security of not having to worry about the top slipping out of place. It suited my quirky personality to a tee.

I backed away, putting more distance between us. “Thank you.”

Uncomfortable with the sudden attention, my gaze drifted around the room as we took our place in the short line before landing on a trio of two men and a woman engrossed in conversation a short distance from us. I took advantage of the opportunity to change the subject and turned to Holden, inclining my head slightly in their direction as I spoke. “Who’s that? The gentleman facing us looks familiar.”

Holden smiled softly and followed my gaze. “That’s Jeremy Mitchell, the CFO of Chase Waterford Special Projects. The woman standing beside him is their Chairman and CEO. We need to speak to them next.”

My brow arched in disbelief. “You’re going to solicit campaign contributions from one of the largest defense contractors in the world?”

“Sure. Why not? Dad’s on several committees in Washington, including appropriations. I’d say he’s in a great place to serve their needs whenever the country’s current defense contracts come up for renewal.”

I couldn’t explain it, but simply being there made me feel dirty. “It just seems unethical, to say the least. Definitely a conflict of interest.”

His expression and tone took on a decidedly patronizing air. “Shannon, I don’t expect you to understand, but a large part of the political game is scratching each other’s backs to get what you need.

Dad wants to get reelected. I want to help him do that.” His lip curled in distaste. “Of course, it would be better if Alek were here. Defense contractors love chatting up decorated servicemen, the ones who actually use their products.”

The distaste in his voice didn’t surprise me. Holden’s relationship with his older stepbrother was contentious at best, and not because of Alek. I loved Holden dearly, but he had a serious case of penis envy when it came to Alek. Alek was everything Holden always wanted to be but could never achieve.

I bristled. “I’m not an idiot, you know. I may not be as wired into the political scene as you, but I do understand a simple *quid pro quo*.” My skirt rustled as we moved closer to the bar. “And using Alek to further your political aspirations would be obscene.”

“Mine? I’m not the one running for office.”

I arched a brow. Owen may have been the one running for office, but I knew that deep down, Holden hoped that one day he could throw his hat into the ring as well. I also knew that Owen loved Alek as his own son and would never use or abuse their relationship. “Really? It’s hard to tell, by the way you’re acting.”

Holden ordered our drinks—two fingers of scotch for himself and a glass of champagne for me. Glasses in hand, he maneuvered me to the side and spoke in a low voice. “What’s with the attitude? You knew we were coming here to try and raise money for Dad’s campaign. This is how it’s done.”

My eyes narrowed. “Thanks for mansplaining things to me. I wouldn’t have been able to figure it out otherwise.”

“Shan—”

I jerked away from his hold and downed my glass of bubbly. It burned my throat, choking me and making my eyes water. A waiter approached, and I deposited my empty flute on his tray. I was tempted to grab another glass but decided against it. “I think I’d like to leave now, and I’d appreciate it if you’d call the car around so I can go back to your place and change. I’ll drive back to Newport News tonight.”

“No. Don’t go,” he sighed. “It’s late. Stay, and leave in the morning. We’re supposed to do brunch, remember? That was the deal.”

“Why? So you can continue to tell me how stupid I am?”

He growled and led me to the edge of the room. “That is not what I said.”

I crossed my arms. “You certainly implied it.”

“I did not,” he grumbled and shoved a hand through his hair, ruffling the perfectly gelled strands. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I know you’re not stupid. You’re one of the smartest people I know.”

I didn’t respond. Holden had never been intentionally mean or nasty during our life-long friendship. I wanted to believe it was the stress of the campaign making him act nuts, but that still wasn’t an acceptable excuse. In fact, there was no excuse. “Holden—”

He stared at me with wounded puppy dog eyes. “Please? Don’t go. I just need five minutes.”

My fists rested on my hips, and I inclined my head toward the Chase Waterford trio. “To go talk to them?”

“I only want to introduce myself and extend Dad’s apologies for not being here. That’s it. Then we can leave.” He drew an ‘x’ over his heart. “Promise.”

Holden was only doing his job, regardless of how distasteful I found it. I shouldn’t punish him for it. My lips twisted into a pout as I snagged another glass of champagne from a passing server. “Fine. I’ll come with you.”

He grinned and led me to his intended targets. True to his word, he kept it brief and promised to set up a meeting with Owen. He wrapped it up about the time I finished my drink.

We arrived at his penthouse about twenty minutes later, and I wasted no time shucking my party clothes in favor of buttery soft yoga pants and a tank top. Holden had done the same and looked much more relaxed in a ratty old tee and a pair of basketball shorts. That was the Holden I remembered.

He held up two DVD cases as I walked into the living room. “*Evil Dead* or *Re-Animator*?”

I laughed. “Hmm. That’s a tough one. *Evil Dead*. You know me, I love Bruce Campbell.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. It’s been a while since I’ve watched that one.”

Holden got the movie started while I continued into the kitchen to grab snacks. In typical bachelor fashion, Holden didn't have much food in the place, but I managed to scare up some popcorn and beer. There was plenty of that. I chuckled to myself about his priorities—alcohol yes, food no.

The opening credits began to roll, and we settled on the sofa, the bowl of popcorn between us. My earlier aggravation faded as we enjoyed the movie, and the easy camaraderie we'd always shared returned. Soon we were pelting each other with popcorn, just like we did when we were kids. One movie turned into two, and then Holden broke out his old water pistols. We chased each other through the spacious apartment, laughing and yelling like a couple of banshees. It was the most fun I'd had in ages.

Then everything changed.

I skidded around a corner and landed flat on my back, realizing too late we'd been careless with our aim. The black marble flooring in the hallway and foyer was riddled with small puddles of water that were all but invisible.

I let out a yelp of surprise as a shock wave of pain radiated from my tailbone. Holden dashed toward me, his face a mask of concern.

"Be care—"

Before I could finish my warning, he lost his footing, lurched forward, and narrowly missed landing on top of me. We stared at each other, dumbfounded by our mishap, and then burst into laughter.

"Maybe this was a bad idea," Holden chortled.

"You think?" I snickered, then rolled to my side. "Ouch. My butt hurts."

Holden's laughter died as he rose into a crouch. "Did you hit your head?"

"No." I sat and gave myself a quick once-over to check for lumps. There would probably be a couple bruises from where I hit the hard surface. "I just injured my pride."

He stood and held out his hand. "Here. I'll help you up."

I accepted his offer and allowed him to pull me to my feet. My free hand rubbed across my aching backside. "That's gonna leave a mark."



Holden maintained his hold and lifted his other hand to cup my jaw. “Sure you’re okay? Do I need to call a doctor?”

“It’s fine.” I shook my head. “I’m fine.”

I tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t release me. He just continued to stare, his gaze filled with concern and something else I didn’t recognize. Or maybe I didn’t want to recognize it. He still held my hand, his thumb tracing loose circles across my knuckles. His other hand feathered through my hair as he stepped closer. A general feeling of unease settled in my gut, reminding me of when I suspected him of sniffing my hair. My heartbeat echoed in my ears, and I thought I was going to be sick.

“Holden, what are you doing?”

He lowered his head and pressed his lips to mine. Stunned, I stood frozen, unable to fully process the fact that my best friend was kissing me. I regained my senses when he licked the seam of my mouth, seeking entrance.

“Stop.” I pushed against him, forcing him back with both hands planted firmly on his chest. “No, Holden.”

“Shan.” He released a ragged breath that smelled of beer laced with scotch and stroked his nose against mine. “Please...”

“I don’t—” I folded my hands around his wrists and eased his hands off me as I continued to back away. “No. I’m sorry, Holden.”

He sighed in defeat and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Sorry. I, uh, don’t know what that was about. I think I probably had too much to drink.”

*Right.*

I turned toward the guest room. “I’m going to bed now, and I think it’s best if I pass on brunch in the morning. I’d like to get home at a decent hour.”

It was a bullshit excuse. It was only a two-hour drive home, but I needed to get away from Holden as quickly as possible. I would have left right then if it hadn’t been so late.

“Shan—” He folded a hand around the back of his neck and met my gaze. “I’m sorry.”

I pursed my lips and nodded. There was nothing I could say to make him feel better, especially when I wasn’t sure how I felt about him trying to kiss me.

I left him in the hall, staring after me as I locked myself in the bedroom, wondering what the hell I was supposed to do now.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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## Alek

Captain Baxter stared at me expectantly, though neither of us had spoken. Having never been to counseling or any type of psychotherapy before, I raised my brows in question. I had no idea how it was supposed to work or even what to say. It was a necessary evil, in my opinion, a requirement to get back into the air, and that was the only thing keeping my ass planted in the chair.

“The time will pass a lot faster if you talk to me,” he said. His dark brown eyes, appearing almost black under the harsh fluorescent lights, twinkled with amusement.

I shrugged, then immediately regretted it as a stab of pain lanced through my shoulder. “I know I have to be here, but I’m fine. As soon as this”—I dipped my chin toward my injured arm—“heals, I’ll be good to go. Isn’t there something you can do to speed up this part of the process?”

Baxter smiled and leaned back in his chair. His long brown fingers drummed the edge of his desk, but the relaxed posture did nothing to dispel the tension between us. We were equal in size, but Baxter exuded a ‘don’t fuck with me’ attitude that intimidated even me. I had been trained never to show weakness, and while I could admit that to myself, I damn sure wouldn’t let him know.

“Why don’t we talk about the accident?”

I fought the eye roll that desperately wanted to make itself known. “It’s all in the report.”

“I know. I’ve read it.” He nodded and leaned to one side, resting his chin on his fist. “I’m interested in hearing about it in your own

words, Commander.”

His tone of voice hadn't changed, but the use of my rank rather than my name was his way of telling me I'd better say something. I shifted in my chair and released a ragged breath. “We were running training ops, takeoffs, and landings on a rough sea. The swells were, oh, I guess thirty feet. The flight deck was pitching wildly.”

“And how did you feel about that?”

Christ. “That's the job, and we have to stay sharp. We don't have the luxury of always landing on solid ground like those Air Force pu—er, wimps.”

“Right you are, Pierce. Right you are.” Baxter chuckled and straightened, leaning forward to rest both forearms on the desk. “I guess what I meant was, were you particularly nervous or not at your best that day?”

“No. Well, I mean, if you're not at least a little nervous, you'll wind up getting yourself killed, but no, I didn't feel anything out of the ordinary. Nor was I off my game. I nailed my landing the first time, pure textbook. The cable broke, and I had to ditch. I couldn't save it. Now, here we are.”

“That's a succinct explanation of that day's events. Of course, you left out the fact that you as well as several members of the deck crew, were injured.”

I couldn't contain my sarcasm. “I'm sorry, I thought that was implied in the part about having to ditch and the fact I'm in a cast and wearing a sling.”

Baxter's expression hardened, making him look even more imposing. He'd be diplomatic about it, but he was about to deliver an ass chewing. “I'm going to say this one time, Pierce, so listen up. You and your squadron are one of the Navy's most valuable assets. It's not overselling it to say your mission record is the best in the fleet, and it's my job to ensure you continue that trend by treating any psychological injuries you've sustained. The Navy surgeon on board at the time of your accident recommended a minimum forty-five-day convalescent leave. Based on your documented injuries, I'm inclined to agree with him. So, if your intention is a full reinstatement to combat flight, then drop the attitude and do the work. Heal. Do the PT as instructed, and come prepared to put in the effort during our

weekly sessions. That's the only way we're going to put you back into a sixty-seven-million-dollar jet."

Admittedly, his monologue wasn't what I expected. It even contained a compliment or two. I was at a loss. "Thank you, sir. I will."

"What do you say we try this again?"

I took a breath and let it out slowly. "No, I wasn't overly nervous that day. I'd never ejected before, and it hurt like a bitch. I think I passed out, but I remember being fished out of the drink by a swimmer and the rescue helo."

"How's your head?"

"I still have a few headaches. Vision seems fine, at least until the headache intensifies."

Baxter picked up his pen and made a few notes. "What does medical have to say about that?"

"Rest. Hydrate. We modified my diet a bit, and they gave me some meds to help with the pain."

More scribbling. "And how often do you think about what happened?"

My lips twisted into a wry smile. "Every time I try to use my left arm."

His gaze lifted, and he arched a brow. "How are you sleeping? Any nightmares?"

"Some," I mumbled, blinking slowly.

"How often?"

"Couple times a week, I guess." I had a choice. I could force Baxter to drag it out of me, or I could elaborate and do the work, as he'd suggested. "It's always pretty much the same. The landing gear hits the deck, then the hook catches the cable. There's a lurch when it breaks, and I'm not fast enough to save it."

Reliving it made my throat tighten. My chest heaved as I gasped for air.

"Pierce?"

I shook my head. "I felt a pop. My shoulder must have hit the canopy when I ejected. Then there's nothing but black. When I wake up, the sheets are soaked, and I can taste the seawater." My good hand curves around my throat. "I'm choking on it."

“Then you don’t remember much about the actual ejection.” Baxter said it as a statement rather than a question. He lifted his gaze from his notepad. “You know what happened, but you don’t consciously remember everything do you?”

“No. I suppose I don’t.”

He nodded. “That’s most likely the concussion. Give it some time.”

I lifted a hand in question. “Are we done? I think I’ve hit my limit on sharing today. Not to be disrespectful, sir.”

Baxter cracked a smile that spread into a grin. “Yeah, Pierce. We’re finished for today. I’ll see you same time next week.”

I nodded and stood, saluting when I straightened. “Sir.”

He returned my salute. “Get the hell out of here and get some rest.”

“Yes, sir.”

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It was a ten-minute drive from base to my house. Five minutes after that, I shucked my service uniform. It was the first time it had ever felt claustrophobic. I was sure that Baxter would make an astute psychological observation about that.

I laughed at the irony as I popped the top off a bottle of IPA, grateful that Mom had seen fit to include my favorite beer in her grocery order when she stocked the place for me. A knock at the door interrupted my channel surfing and forced me from my comfortable spot on the sofa.

They knocked two more times before I made it to the door. I pulled it open and laughed. “No fucking way. Ben Pryce. What the hell are you doing here?”

Ben grinned and held up a twelve-pack of the same IPA I was drinking. “Heard you were back. Thought I’d stop by and see if you were up to having company.”

I smiled and backed up, giving him room to enter. “Damn good to see you.”

He stepped inside and made his way to the kitchen. I followed him, sipping my beer as I watched him struggle to place the twelve-pack in the overstuffed fridge.

“Since when does a confirmed bachelor such as yourself have this much food in the house? Shouldn’t there only be some leftover pizza and a few half-empty condiment bottles? Maybe some spoiled Chinese takeout?”

Laughter roared out of me. “That’s exactly what was in it three weeks ago.” I tipped my bottle toward the fridge. “That’s my mother’s doing. She’s under the impression I can’t take care of myself.”

Ben gave me a sideways glance and smirked. “Awww. She wuvs her baby.”

“Man,” I sighed with a ghost of a chuckle. “I do not need this shit today.”

He stood, his own beer in hand, and met my gaze. “Sorry, dude. It’s been a while, and I’m just busting your balls.”

I held out my bottle, and Ben clinked his against it. “It’s all good.”

We settled at the small dining table, taking chairs opposite each other. Silence settled between us as we sipped our drinks. It was several minutes before either of us spoke.

Finally, it was Ben who broke the silence. “I heard about the crash.”

I set my bottle on the table and pushed it away. “Fucking ridiculous, isn’t it? I mean, of all the shit that could have happened.” I snorted. “It doesn’t even make a cool story.”

Ben shook his head. “It never is, man. The shit plays out the way it’s supposed to, and we’re left with fucked-up reminders when it’s all over.” He took a drag off his beer and motioned to his leg. “Case in point.”

“Now I feel like shit, sitting here whining like a little bitch.”

“Not a problem.” He shrugged. “Have they given you any idea about what they’re gonna do?”

“Nah. Right now, I’m on CONLEAVE and mandatory counseling. The shrink claims he wants to get me back in the air, but I suspect he’s telling me what he thinks I want to hear.”

He grinned. “Doctors are good at that, yeah?”



“Yeah.” I shook off my morose thoughts and answered his smile with one of my own. “Let’s talk about something more pleasant. How are Gretchen and the kids?”

“They’re great, man.” He lifted his bottle for another sip. “I’ve never been happier. You need to come for dinner one night. I’ll check with Gretchen about a date now that you’re home.”

The corners of my mouth twitched. “Never thought I’d see the day...”

He scowled. “What?”

“Mr. Family Man.” I tilted the neck of the bottle toward him. “It looks good on you.”

“Now it’s your turn.”

“Uh, no thanks.”

Ben arched a brow. “Really? Whatever happened to that one chick—what was her name? Felicity? Fiona? I can’t remember.”

I laughed. “Holy shit, dude. That was ages ago.”

“Okay. So, it didn’t work out with her. Is there anyone else?”

“No.” I picked up my bottle and took a long swallow.

“No one in particular, or just no?”

“Just...no. I’m not that guy.”

“You’re still a stubborn ass, I see.”

“I think it’s great that things have worked out for you, Ben. I do. You deserve it.” I drained my beer and stood. “It’s just not in the cards for me.”

“I felt the same way until Gretchen came back into my life. Now I don’t know how I ever lived without her.”

I walked to the fridge and grabbed two more beers, hoping it would derail Ben’s lecture. I’d heard it before.

It didn’t work. He just kept talking. “Dude. You’re doing that thing.”

“What thing?” I asked with a smirk as I handed him another beer.

“Ignoring me, you ass. Which is rude.” He accepted the bottle and took a swig. “Do you remember all those times you told me to get my head out of my ass after Charity split?”

“Yeah.” I slumped in my chair.

“No matter how much it stung at the time, I knew you were just looking out for me. Now I’m trying to do the same for you.”

I shook my head. “I’m fine.”

“I thought the same damn thing.” He leaned forward, earnestness in his posture and voice. “And you know what? I’m glad I finally took your advice because I’m the happiest I’ve ever been. I’d hate for you to miss a chance at what I’ve found for myself just because you’re too fucking stubborn to try.”

With that, he took one last draw off his beer and stood. He clapped me on the shoulder as he walked past me. “Think about what I said.”

I turned my head and watched him walk to the front door. “Thanks, Dad.”

His laughter was cut off by the sound of the door closing behind him. The smug bastard had a point—not that I’d tell him that.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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## Shannon

The clinic was swamped with patients as if everyone had picked the same day to get their pets examined, vaccinated, or boarded for the weekend. I didn't slow down until almost three o'clock.

Famished and ready for the day to be over, I made my way to the front to hand off the most recent chart to Denise and catch my breath for a few minutes before my next patient. A huge bouquet of Shasta daisies and delphiniums in a silvered glass vase adorned with a matching blue ribbon sat on the cabinet behind Denise's desk. The ribbon's tail bore a small cream envelope with the clinic's address printed neatly across its crisp surface.

Denise's lips split into a wide grin. "Bout time you found your way up here. Those are for you."

I frowned. "For me?"

"Mm-hmm. They were delivered about an hour ago. I haven't had a chance to tell you."

"Who are they from?"

She shrugged. "Dunno. Guess you better read the card."

My lips twisted into a wry smile as I slipped the card from the envelope.

### *I miss you—Holden*

I rolled my eyes and stuffed the card in my pants pocket before accepting the next patient's chart. Holden and I hadn't spoken since

the night of the gala, and it irked me that his note said he missed me, but not that he was sorry for what happened. There had been several times I wanted to call, if only to clear the air between us, but I couldn't make myself go through with it, and I fought the urge to apologize, even though I didn't do anything wrong. But that was how it had always been with Holden—I was the one to keep the peace between us, regardless of the situation.

There was one other thing that unsettled me about the flowers.

Maybe I was reading too much into them, but all plants and flowers have meanings. Daisies meant innocence, loyal love, and romance. Delphiniums represented ardent attachment. As much as I adored Holden, those were not sentiments I wanted from him.

I'd been told many times that I didn't have a poker face, and it must have been true because Denise was studying me like I was some sort of science experiment.

"What?" I asked.

"They're from your man, aren't they?"

"What man? I don't have a man."

"Play coy all you want. You know who I'm talking about."

I shook my head and greeted Mrs. Walker and Winston, her five-year-old pug. She was the last patient in the waiting room, which meant my reprieve would be short-lived. I'd take it.

Thirty minutes later, Denise carried the flowers into my office. "You forgot your flowers," she teased.

"I think they'd look better in the waiting area."

"Nope." She smirked, setting the vase on the corner of my desk before propping her hip against the edge. "Are you going to tell me about it?"

"Tell you about what?"

Her honey brown eyes sparkled as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Your hang-up about the flowers and whoever sent them."

"The flowers are from Holden, as I'm sure you guessed." As my closest female friend, I'd told her all about him, of course. At least I'd told her about our friendship. "We had a bit of a disagreement last week. I guess this is his way of making up for that."

"That's sweet of him."

“I’m not so sure.” I took a deep breath, preparing for the inevitable surprised reaction. “He hasn’t bothered to actually apologize for his behavior.”

Denise shrugged. “Maybe he thinks you owe him an apology.”

“I’m not the one who acted inappropriately,” I snapped. A moment later, I realized I was out of line. I couldn’t be mad at Denise when she didn’t have all the facts. “I’m sorry for that. It’s just”—I exhaled harshly, ruffling my bangs—“he’s always been like a brother to me. I love him dearly, but we’re just friends. He’s making it pretty dang obvious he wants to be more than that, and I’m not sure I can continue to be around him.”

“Are you sure that’s it? Maybe you’re afraid to open yourself up to the possibility of a real relationship with him.”

My head swiveled in denial. “Going down that road would ruin everything we have. Then I really would be alone.”

She moved closer and rested a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Why do you think that? You can’t let fear hold you back. Besides, you’re far too young to be such a pessimist.”

I gave her a sad smile. “I’m a realist, and I suck at relationships.”

“Oh, please. Two failed relationships don’t mean others will end badly. You need to get that idea out of your head.”

“It doesn’t look promising when I’ve only been in two relationships, and they both failed.” I tossed my hands in the air. “I’m the common denominator, which doesn’t bode well for the future.”

“Listen to you. It doesn’t *bode well* for the future.” She giggled. “You know something, honey, the only problem you’ve got is the one between your ears that’s telling you there’s a problem. You need to get out and live.”

“You make it sound so easy.” It was a struggle to keep the sarcasm out of my voice, and I wasn’t one-hundred percent successful.

“Why shouldn’t it be?” she asked with a shrug. “You’re young, bright, successful, and beautiful. Any man would be lucky to have you.”

I suppressed another eye roll. She meant well, but our conversation was slowly turning into a self-help lecture. “Denise, I

know you're just trying to help, but I think I'm better off concentrating on my job."

I continued to mutter under my breath, "Animals are much easier to deal with than people."

She surprised me with a robust laugh. "I can't argue with that. Then again, most people don't bite, scratch, or pee on you when you make 'em mad."

I arched a brow. "You sure about that?"

Denise chuckled and patted my arm. "Touché. I'm going back to my desk, so I can start closing out everything for the day. Think about what I said."

I bit my tongue and nodded in agreement as she closed the door behind her. My gaze landed on Holden's flowers, and I grudgingly admitted that Denise's lecture had merit. I wasn't attracted to Holden, but was she right about jumping back into the dating pool?

*Was I ready for that?*

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## Alek

I rolled to a stop in front of my mother and stepfather's country home, shaking my head in amusement at the flurry of activity. Vans and trucks littered the driveway and most of the street in front of the house as florists, caterers, and rental companies carried their wares around the house to the back lawn. Mom never did anything half-assed, especially where holidays were concerned.

Regretting my decision to show up, I slid from the truck and weaved through the crowded yard. Things were just as crazy inside the house, and in the middle of it all was my mother, Camila Pierce Carlisle. The woman was a force of nature, regardless of her petite stature.

"Alek," she exclaimed, rushing toward me with her arms spread wide. "Oh, honey. I'm so happy you're here."

I bent and returned her hug with my good arm. "Everything looks great, Mom."

"You're sweet." She kissed me on the cheek and backed away, appraising me with a gaze that traveled from my head to my feet and back again. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine."

She stood with arms akimbo and stared up at me. The defiant stance reflected the bravado in her light brown eyes. Both were a stark contrast to her elegant attire and sleek hairstyle. "Alek Daniel Pierce."

*Great. My full name.* "Aww, Mom. Don't do that. I said I'm fine, and I meant it. It's just going to take some time for my arm to heal." I

forced a smile. “Then I’ll be good as new.”

“Are you sure, baby?” Her face crumpled in concern as she reached up to trace the hairline at my temple.

“Yeah, Mom.”

“It’s not like you’d tell me any different.” Mom rolled her eyes at my perceived stubbornness and then grinned and clapped her hands together. She’d always been able to change her moods on a dime. “Now, I need a huge favor.”

I arched a brow. “What favor?”

“Would you take Cookie to the vet?” She bit down on her lower lip like she expected me to lose my shit or something. “She’s been throwing up quite a bit recently, and I just want to have her checked out to make sure she’s okay.”

I groaned. The dog was a useless ball of white fluff and hated me. Then again, the feeling was mutual. It was one of those small, yappy dogs about the size of a football. “Mom...”

“I know you don’t like her, and I’d go myself if I could. I can’t spare any of the house staff, either.” She huffed and gestured at our surroundings. “As you can see, we’re a little busy with preparations for the party tomorrow.”

“It looks like you’re expecting a bigger crowd than in the past.”

“Yes. Holden wants to use it as a partial fundraiser for Owen’s campaign, so we expanded the guest list accordingly.”

That sounded exactly like something Holden would do—commandeer a family event to make himself look important. I didn’t have anything against the guy per se, but my younger stepbrother had exhibited symptoms of a massive inferiority complex throughout Mom and Owen’s eighteen-year marriage.

But that wasn’t his only problem.

He was also pompous and condescending. I’d lost count of all the green Navy flyboys who were just like him, most of whom washed-out their first week out of flight school. Fortunately, Holden’s attitude wasn’t likely to get himself or someone else injured or killed. Fewer donors or votes, perhaps, but nothing I would consider fatal.

“Sounds like Holden’s calling the shots now. Doesn’t Owen have a campaign manager?”

Mom laughed. “Yes, well, you know Holden. He’s been such a great asset to his father, but it’s never enough. He tries so hard to make a name for himself.”

“Hmm. You’d think Holden’s the one with political aspirations,” I mumbled.

“I know it seems that way, but I think he’s pushing Owen toward a presidential run someday.” She made a clucking noise and shook her head. “Good lord, I hope Owen never decides to make that call. Being married to a senator is hard enough.”

I gave her shoulder a light squeeze. “Big difference from the way things used to be, huh?”

Her eyes misted as she patted my hand. There was no doubt she loved Owen, but any reference to my father—no matter how vague—always evoked that response. I couldn’t deny my own melancholy about the subject. “Change is inevitable, baby.”

“I know.” I gave her one more squeeze and released her. “So, Cookie.”

She brightened, flashing a smile that chased the clouds from her eyes. “You’ll do it?”

“Yeah, I’ll take her.”

“That’s not going to hurt your collarbone, is it?”

“She hasn’t suddenly transformed into a Great Dane or Rottweiler, has she?”

“Oh, you.” She giggled. “I’ll go get her and put her in the carrier for you.”

She bustled off and returned a few minutes later with a bag about the size of a generous purse. It was hot pink quilted fabric with zebra print end panels and straps. I also noticed the dog’s name embroidered on the side, accompanied by a few well-placed rhinestones.

*Fuck my life.*

“Here we go. Sassy Miss Cookie is ready to go see Dr. McKenzie.” The bag shifted when I accepted it, and a noise that sounded like a cross between a bark and growl came out of it. “It’s okay, sweet girl,” she crooned. “Alek is going to take good care of you for Momma.”

I coughed lightly, clearing my throat. I was ready to get the fiasco underway. "Which vet do you use?"

"Hightower Animal Hospital, over on Warwick."

At least I didn't have to drive very far. "All right. I'll be back as quick as I can."

I turned and left, tossing a wave over my shoulder as she called after me to be careful.

*Home sweet home.*

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## CHAPTER SIX

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## Shannon

“Who’s next, Denise?” I asked, handing over the previous patient’s chart.

Life had resumed its usual ebb and flow, and fortunately, there hadn’t been any more flower deliveries from Holden. I was also relieved that Denise hadn’t attempted to revisit our conversation about my dating life.

She smiled and handed me a different folder. “Cookie is in room three.”

I laughed. It still cracked me up when we talked about our patients as if they were people and could drive themselves to the clinic. “And what’s wrong with Cookie today?”

“When Mrs. Carlisle called earlier, she said the dog has been throwing up but doesn’t know why.”

I looked up from the dog’s chart and arched a brow. “What do you mean when she called? Isn’t she here with her dog?”

“Someone else brought Cookie.” Denise waggled her brows. “A very hot someone. Smoldering, in fact.”

So much for her lack of meddling. An unladylike snort ripped out of me, prompting me to clap a hand over my mouth. I composed myself and straightened my scrub top. “You’re so bad. He probably works for her.”

“Right.” She giggled.

“What? You think she wouldn’t hire a cute guy to run miscellaneous errands?”

“I wouldn’t call that man”—she nodded toward the exam room —“cute. He is the very definition of tall, dark, and handsome.”

“Either way, it doesn’t matter.” I lifted my chin haughtily and turned on my heel. “I’m more concerned about Cookie.”

She called out as I walked away from her, “We’ll talk again after you see him.”

Her laughter tinkled after me as I opened the door and stepped into the exam room. The familiar pink and zebra carrier sat on the stainless table with the dog still inside. She began to yip when she saw me.

Her minder leaned against the wall with his attention directed to the phone in his right hand. Aviator sunglasses hung over the collar of his snug black T-shirt, and a white plaster cast adorned his left arm, wrapping his hand and reaching to his elbow. The shirt skimmed his torso, straining around his broad shoulders and muscled biceps, and fell smoothly at his narrow hips to just cover his belt. His faded denim jeans fit equally well but weren’t quite as tight. Best I could tell, he had great quads and a nice butt.

He looked up as I cleared my throat and pushed the door closed behind me. “Hi there. I’m Dr. McKenzie.”

He nodded and slid the phone into his back pocket. “Nice to meet you.”

Denise was right. He was gorgeous—and almost a foot taller than me. His dark brown hair was cropped close in a traditional Ivy League style, and along with his straight brows, square jaw, and sculpted lips, he could have been a model.

My smile faltered a bit when we made eye contact. There was something familiar about him, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. I opened my mouth to speak, but was struck dumb by his eyes. In my opinion, they were his best feature—steel grey orbs with darker rims around the iris. His stare was penetrating and enough to make me confess to damn near anything.

Apparently, he decided to take pity on my befuddled state. “Mom said she called about the dog.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. Of course,” I stammered as I unzipped the carrier and removed the squirming ball of fuzz. “Wait. Did you say your mom?”

He smiled, revealing pearly white, perfectly straight teeth. “Yeah. It’s my mom’s dog.”

Okay. His smile was pretty great, too.

“Camila is your mom?” I held Cookie close and scratched her ear. “You’re Alek?”

“I am.” His smile grew wider, and he laughed. “And yes, she is.”

“I’m sorry. I thought maybe you worked for her.”

He shrugged. “I guess I do today.”

I set the dog on the table and started the exam, moving my hands over her and feeling for anything out of the norm. “You probably don’t remember me.”

“We’ve met before?”

I chuckled and checked Cookie’s ears, eyes, and teeth before donning my stethoscope to listen to her heart. “I think maybe once or twice, though in your defense, it has been a long time.”

He stepped forward and leaned against the table, reaching out to absently stroke the dog’s head. “Are you going to clue me in, or do I have to guess?”

My focus returned to the dog as I scolded myself for opening my big mouth. Alek had always been larger than life, and someone Camila talked—no, bragged about often. Her son, the Navy aviator. It was silly, but over time I had developed a slight crush on him.

Not that I’d admit that to him or anyone else, for that matter. Especially Denise. Hell, I could barely admit it to myself.

I forced myself to meet his gaze. “I’m Shannon, Holden’s best friend. We, uh, we grew up together, and he’s like a brother to me. Our families have been friends forever, since before his dad married Camila. Your mom.” Heat clawed its way over my face, and the more I rambled, the worse it got. It didn’t help that he stared at me with a dumbfounded expression plastered across his face, his mouth slightly agape as if to speak, even though my incessant chatter prevented it. “I’m going to stop talking now and grab one of our assistants so we can draw some blood.”

He pointed to the dog. “Blood? Is everything okay?”

“I can’t find anything obviously wrong with her, so I want to run some tests just to be safe. At the very least, it will give us a good baseline since it’s been a while. I’ll be right back.”



Again, with the rambling. I gave him a weak smile and darted out of the room, crashing smack into Denise. She must have been eavesdropping.

“Is everything all right in there?” she asked, her eyes filled with glee. “You sure act like you’re in a hurry.”

“Everything’s fine. I was just about to grab Molly or Derek to draw some blood.”

“Your face is red,” she teased. “I told you he was a looker.”

“That’s not—” I bit back the rest of my retort and took several slow, deep breaths. There was no reason to lose my cool. So what if Alek Pierce was in one of our exam rooms? Who cared if he also just happened to be one of the hottest men I’d ever met?

Yeah. That was so not working.

“He brought in his mother’s dog, and I’m just doing my job.” I huffed and gathered the supplies I’d need for the blood draw. “Please do yours and send somebody in to assist me.”

Denise arched her brow. “Do you want Derek or Molly?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I muttered, then thought better of it. “Wait. On second thought, send Derek.”

Denise chuckled and headed toward the back room. “That’s what I thought you’d say. No competition that way.”

“Oh, hush,” I grumbled, refusing to acknowledge I’d had the same thought.

Alek was scratching Cookie’s ears when I walked back into the room. He tried to act like he didn’t care about the dog, but based on the simple act of affection I wondered how true that was. I’d already made a big enough fool of myself, so I opted not to give him a hard time about it.

“What happened to your arm?”

“Just an accident.” He shook his head. “I’d rather not talk about it if that’s okay.”

My cheeks burned. “No problem.”

Derek chose that moment to join us, sparing me from further embarrassment. Alek moved out of the way, giving us plenty of room to work. It only took about five minutes, and then I was packing Cookie back into her carrier.

“We’re all done.” I grabbed a dog treat and fed it to Cookie. “You’re such a good girl. Yes, you are, baby.”

Alek snickered at my sing-song tone of voice. “Do you talk to all of your patients that way?”

I gave Cookie one more scratch on the head and zipped up the bag. “Only the ones who behave themselves.” I handed the carrier to Alek. “Cookie appears to be completely healthy, but the test results should be back in a few days. We’ll give Camila a call as soon as we know something.”

His brows knit. “You couldn’t find anything wrong?”

I shook my head. “It’s possible she ate something that disagreed with her, or maybe she ingested too much hair.”

“A dog with a hairball?”

“She’s got a lot of hair, in case you haven’t noticed. Cats aren’t the only animals that lick themselves.” Another wave of heat caressed my cheeks. “I’m sorry. That was rude of me.”

He laughed. “Not at all. I thought it was funny, actually.”

“Well, I still apologize. Please tell Camila I said hello, and we’ll call as soon as we get those test results.”

Mortified, I spun on my heel and strode away before he could respond, leaving him in Denise’s capable hands. I had to struggle to keep from going back and apologizing again for being such a socially inept moron. I made it to my office and closed the door before collapsing into the chair behind my desk.

My cell rang before I had the chance to contemplate my unexpected meeting with Alek. Holden’s smiling face filled the screen, and I hesitated briefly before swiping my thumb across the glossy surface. It had been two weeks since that dreadful night at Holden’s—when he tried to kiss me. I took a deep breath and summoned as much excitement as I could muster. “Hey, you.”

“Hey. Did I catch you at a bad time?” he asked. His voice was warm and friendly but it was laced with an undercurrent of trepidation.

“Nope. I just finished with a patient.” I didn’t elaborate, though I wasn’t sure why. For some reason, I didn’t want him to know about Camila’s dog or the small detail that his stepbrother Alek had brought her in. “How’ve you been?”

“Good. Things have been ramping up.”

Gah. Stiff, stilted conversation. And, of course, Holden moved into his comfort zone of discussing politics.

There was a long pause before he spoke again. “Say, Dad and I are coming in tonight, and we’re having a big July Fourth blowout tomorrow at the country house. I’d really like for you to be there.”

The knot in my chest loosened. “Oh, wow. Is it the usual crowd, family and friends?”

He chuckled. “Actually, bigger. We increased the guest list to include some real power hitters, hoping to get a few more donors on board the campaign.”

I wondered if those so-called power hitters included the defense contractors we met at the fundraiser. “Wow. Well, I don’t know. I have to work until noon tomorrow.”

“That’s not a problem.” I detected a slight tremor in his voice. “The party doesn’t start until four. You can come any time before that. I’ll make sure Camila has your room ready, and you can stay over.”

There was a giant, nameless elephant inhabiting the void between us, one neither of us would acknowledge. It made me question whether I should go. But then again, Alek would probably be there, and I certainly wouldn’t mind seeing him again under more casual circumstances. My heart raced at the prospect. I inhaled deeply and attempted to maintain a calm tone. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Aw, c’mon. Stay over. Then we can concentrate on having fun.”

He said that as if we’d be hanging out together the entire time, instead of him using the event as a networking opportunity. I could say no, but we hadn’t exactly parted on good terms the last time we saw each other. The hurt and aggravation lingered, but I missed him. “Okay. Yes, I’ll be there. Probably around mid-afternoon.”

“Great. Can’t wait to see you.”

There was a click, and he was gone. I checked the phone’s screen to verify the connection was severed. I sighed and shook my head, marveling at his ability to pretend everything was perfectly normal between us. Part of me wanted to put it behind us, but another knew we needed to discuss it if only to clear the air.

I was already second-guessing my decision to go to the party, but I couldn't shake the feeling I needed to be there.

I just didn't understand why.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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## Alek

Most of the vendors were gone by the time I returned with the dog. I found Mom on the back patio, supervising the setup and table placement in the backyard. Twenty ten-seat tables dotted the expansive backyard. Dread settled in my stomach like a stone as I fully grasped exactly how large the party would be.

*Fucking Holden.*

I released a long exhale and freed the dog from her carrier. Cookie yipped and ran toward the patio. Mom spun around and dropped into a crouch, ready to catch the speeding ball of fur. "There's my girl. Yes, she is," she cooed. She held the dog close, oblivious to the white fur sticking to her otherwise pristine clothing. "How'd it go?"

I shrugged. "They're going to run some tests and call you in a few days with the results."

Mom nodded and cuddled the dog closer, giggling as Cookie licked her neck and face. "What did you think of her?"

"Huh?"

"Shannon. What did you think of her?"

"Shannon?" I shook my head and frowned, momentarily confused as to whom Mom was asking me about. "Oh. You mean the vet? I don't know. She seemed all right like she knows her stuff. Why?"

Mom's smile widened. "I know she's good at her job, honey."

I arched a brow, suspecting I already knew where the conversation was headed. "Then why were you asking?"

"Don't you think she's cute?"

*Yep. Called it.* “Mom. Stop.”

She fluttered her eyelashes. “Whatever do you mean?”

“You pull this every time I visit. There’s always some new girl you want me to meet.” I flicked my hand toward her. “Just put that out of your head. I don’t need any help in that department, thank you very much.”

“Oh, so you’re seeing someone, then?” she asked, her face the picture of innocence.

She knew damn well how I felt about relationships and why I wasn’t interested in anything long-term. “Drop it, okay? Please?”

She huffed and ushered me inside the house, closing the door behind us. The dog squirmed in her arms as she lowered it to the floor. As soon as its paws hit the ground, it was off, darting toward the kitchen—and no doubt its food bowl. “Baby, I just don’t want you to end up alone. That worries me. And you’re not getting any younger.” She huffed and muttered the rest under her breath. “Neither am I, for that matter.”

Oh, geez. “Really? Now you’re gonna give me the grandkid speech?” I laughed. “I’m sure Holden will be more than happy to marry a beautiful, power-hungry socialite and pop out a few rug rats for you and Owen to spoil. You’ll have grandchildren. They just won’t be from me.”

Mom’s expression hardened. Her eyes narrowed and her lips pressed into a slash, to the point I could no longer see her berry-colored lipstick. “Don’t take that tone with me. I’m still your mother, and you’ll just have to forgive me for wanting you to be happy. You won’t be able to fly combat forever, and then what? What happens when it’s time to retire?”

I tried to cross my arms and was quickly reminded of why I couldn’t as a jolt of pain shot through my shoulder. The cast didn’t help, either. I settled for propping my hands on my hips. “Are you worried about my financial future now? I can assure you I’ll be fine.”

“No. I’m worried about you waking up one day and realizing your life is an empty shell of what it could be if you hadn’t been so damned hard-headed.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, and her tone softened. “I just don’t want you to have any regrets.”

I stepped closer and drew her into a hug. "I'm fine, Mom. There's no need to worry. You'll just give yourself grey hair."

She chuckled and patted me on the back before releasing me. "I already have some, thanks to my husband and his over-zealous son."

I gave her a crooked smile. "See? There's no need to add more on my account."

"Fine. I'll drop it." She gifted me with a mischievous smile and winked. "For now."

I knew as soon as she said it that neither the conversation nor her desire for me to settle down were finished. Once Camila Carlisle got an idea in her head, nothing could dissuade her from pursuing it.

*God, help me.*



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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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## Shannon

Saturday afternoon, I worked until noon and then made the spontaneous decision to go shopping. I had several dresses that were appropriate for the event, but I felt like splurging on something new. It took two hours and three stores before I found what I wanted. It was the perfect dress, both retro and cool. An ivory confection with a fitted bodice and A-line skirt that fell to the knees—a traditional garden party design—with a chiffon overlay embroidered with delicate green vines and pink cabbage roses.

I got a good look at my hands as I stowed my purchase in the car. The manicure I'd gotten only two weeks ago was a mess. Some nails were chipped or broken, and many were missing color altogether. That was one of the hazards of working with animals day in and day out and the very reason I rarely treated myself to a manicure.

Realizing I couldn't go to the Carlisle's garden party with crappy-looking nails, I trotted to the nail salon next door to the boutique where I'd bought the dress. It took the technician almost an hour, but I left with trimmed, shiny pink nails that matched the flowers on my new dress.

My unplanned excursion left me enough time for a shower to wash off the antiseptic smell of the clinic and to pack an overnight bag. I hadn't decided if I would be staying, but there was no harm in being prepared.

I kept the rest of my look simple by pulling my hair into a loose half up-half down style, and added a pair of pearl earrings and pink

wedge sandals. Looking the part of an affluent member of society was easy. Being comfortable and enjoying that lifestyle was another matter altogether. I had never managed the latter, and some days it amazed me that Holden and I had become such great friends. He was built to run with the rich and famous jet-set crowd. I was not.

It was almost four-thirty when I arrived at Owen and Camila's country home. The English Tudor sat before me, its perfectly landscaped grounds stretching to the James River in the back. A valet station sat at the driveway's entrance, telling me the party was much larger than I had anticipated. Anxiety rippled through me as I handed over my keys, and I briefly entertained the notion of leaving. I could call Holden later with an excuse, and I knew he would believe pretty much anything I told him, but that wasn't me.

The overnight bag stayed in the trunk as I crossed the cobble stone pathway to the backyard. Light classical music filled the air, played by a string quartet set up on the trellised patio. The sprawling backyard was dotted with round tables decked out in white linen tablecloths and festive red, white, and blue centerpieces. A massive pontoon boat festooned with flags and balloons in holiday colors sat moored to the wooden pier that stretched sixty feet from the shore. Clearly, Holden had convinced his parents to go all out based on the ostentatious display of wealth before me.

I helped myself to a glass of champagne, convinced I needed to find the hosts, say a quick hello, and make a speedy exit. It would be a waste of the money I'd spent preparing for the party, but I couldn't deny the discomfort I felt being there. Maybe it was because of the way Holden and I had parted the last time I saw him or the simple fact I didn't like crowds.

Standing at the edge of the party, I sipped my champagne as I tried to spot Holden or Camila.

"Are you lost?"

Startled, I turned toward the man I hadn't noticed walk up to me. He was smartly dressed in a season-appropriate, blue seersucker suit with a pink and navy striped tie. A pink checked pocket square adorned his left chest. Flecks of grey peppered his close-cropped light auburn hair, but his beard was the direct opposite. He wore an

open, friendly expression that wasn't reflected in his narrow blue eyes.

I hadn't a clue as to his identity, but his presence increased my unease. "Not really."

"I don't know your name, but I'm sure it's as beautiful as you are." He extended his hand. "Tom Haskell. I'm Virginia's *other* senator."

Etiquette dictated I shake his hand. I would never do anything to embarrass the Carlisle family. "Shannon McKenzie. Nice to meet you."

His smile was wolfish as he held my hand a moment longer than necessary. When he released me, he allowed his fingers to slide up to my elbow in a slow caress. The unwelcome touch made me shiver. "Are you here with someone?"

"Actually—"

"There you are." Alek appeared at my side and bent to press a kiss to my temple. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

Another shiver rippled through me, but this time it was fueled by excitement. I smiled and played along with the ruse. "Sorry. I guess I got sidetracked."

The senator adjusted the knot of his tie and extended his hand toward Alek. "You must be Camila's son, right? Tom Haskell."

Alek shook his hand. "Alek Pierce. Yes, that's correct."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for your service." Tom pumped their hands once more before releasing Alek. "If you'll both excuse me. I see someone I need to speak to."

Senator Haskell hurried away and started a conversation with the first person he encountered.

I laid a hand over my mouth and snickered as my gaze drifted upward to meet Alek's. "Thank you for that. He was beginning to creep me out."

"I noticed." He nodded toward the other side of the patio. "I was just over there and watched him approach. You went a little stiff, and I decided I needed to run him off."

"Well, again, I appreciate it. Normally I'm more aware of my surroundings, but I was busy looking for Holden or your mom."

He pointed toward the center of the lawn. "Holden's most likely down there in the middle of everything. I'm not sure where Mom

went.”

“It’s fine. I can wait. I really don’t want to wade through all those people.”

“I don’t blame you,” he muttered. I hadn’t noticed the beer bottle in his hand until he lifted it to his lips. “You look pretty, by the way.”

Heat filled my cheeks. “Thank you.”

“I almost didn’t recognize you without the scrubs.” He smiled, and it lit up his entire face, including his eyes. “I’m actually surprised to see you here.”

I nodded. “Holden called me late yesterday and invited me. I wasn’t going to come, but...”

Alek arched a brow. “But what?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head, pushing my childish notions aside, and took a sip of champagne.

“Clearly, something changed your mind.”

Of course, Alek would be one of those guys who wouldn’t let something go unnoticed. I opened my mouth to respond and was once again cut off by someone I didn’t see approaching.

“You came.” Holden stepped forward and folded me into a quick hug. “I was worried you’d change your mind.”

I gave him a tight smile. “I told you I’d be here.”

Holden grinned, and it made him look boyish, reminding me of the guy I’d grown up with. “Come with me. I want you to meet a few people.”

“Well...” I stammered, gesturing toward Alek, leaving the words unspoken. It was obvious we’d been talking when Holden joined us.

Ignoring me, Holden whisked me away from Alek, through the crowd, and finally onto the dance floor. He took my empty glass and deposited it on the nearest table before pulling me into his arms to dance.

I didn’t want to make a scene, so I didn’t fight him, but I wasn’t going to let him completely off the hook. “That was rude of you, Holden.”

“What?”

“What you just did. You totally ignored Alek. He and I were in the middle of a conversation, and you acted like he wasn’t even there. That is rude.”

“I’m trying to protect you from him.” He dipped his chin and sighed. “You don’t know him like I do. Alek is a dog. A man whore. He’s only after one thing.”

I stopped short and pulled away. The other people dancing continued to sway around us. “That means he couldn’t possibly have any reason to talk to me unless he’s trying to get me into bed? Is that what you’re implying?”

“I’m not being mean. I’m just stating facts. Alek has never had a serious relationship with anyone. Ever.”

“Who said anything about a relationship? This is a party. We were talking.” I propped my hands on my hips. “I’ll have you know, one of your politician buddies came on to me—he was very creepy about it, I might add—and Alek helped me.”

“That was just him trying to mark his territory.”

“And you just ignored the part about the skeezy politico. Thanks.”

I spun on my heel and stalked off the dance floor. My first impulse was to leave, but another part of me wanted to stay. Holden’s words haunted me, but I couldn’t believe there was an ulterior motive behind Alek’s actions. I wasn’t the best at reading people, but I didn’t get a cagey vibe from Alek. He didn’t seem like that kind of guy to me.

Holden caught up to me and grabbed my arm, spinning me around. “Shannon, please don’t go. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t understand you sometimes. Alek is your stepbrother. What is it about him that makes you act nuts like this?” I knew the answer to that, of course, but wanted Holden to admit it—to me and to himself.

He guided me to the side of the house, out of view of the other guests, before answering. His words came out in a breathless rush. “I’m sorry for being a jerk. I’m under a lot of stress right now, and you and I don’t get to talk or see each other as often as I’d like. I guess I got a little jealous because I asked you to come, and you were talking to Alek. I’m also sorry about”—he took a deep breath and let it out—“the night of the fundraiser. I had too much to drink, and it seemed like a good idea at the time. You’re my best friend, and I don’t want to screw that up. I don’t want to lose you.”

Everything he said was perfect, and his expression certainly matched the sincerity in his words. Forgiving him wasn't even a question. Of course, I would. But that didn't mean I couldn't make him sweat a bit first.

He stood before me, the picture of contrition, in his bespoke tan linen suit, a red and blue triple striped tie, and matching red pocket square. He was the picture of a successful and idealistic attorney, the champion of right over wrong.

But it was the sad, dark brown puppy-dog eyes that slayed me.  
Dammit.

"You're not going to lose me. You've always had my back, and I have yours, too. Just promise me you'll be nicer to Alek. I don't think he's such a bad guy."

Holden smirked, but that soon morphed into the genuine smile I'd always known. "I promise I'll try."

I gave him a dubious look. "Hmph."

"How 'bout I get you another glass of champagne, and we have some real fun?"

I smiled in return. That was the Holden I knew. "Okay."

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## CHAPTER NINE

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## Alek

*“Bailout! Bailout!”*

*There was a BOOM followed by a jolt, and then I was sailing through the air. I was strapped to my seat, yet somehow my body was stretched and compressed simultaneously. I ached all over.*

*Water was all around me, and I sucked some of it down as I fought to stay afloat. I didn’t know how long I waited before the helo hovered above me and a rescue swimmer hauled me from the drink. They grabbed me and attempted to wrestle me from the water, but I slipped from their grasp. My legs became entangled in the lines of the chute, and I slowly sank beneath the water...*

I sat upright, gasping for air, the taste of seawater heavy on my tongue. My hands scrubbed through my hair and over my face. The sheets were soaking wet. Pain in my shoulder reminded me that at least part of the dream was true.

Scratch that. It wasn’t a dream. It was a fucking nightmare, the same one I’d had almost every night since the crash.

The clock on my phone mocked me with the time—two a.m. Resigned that I wouldn’t be going back to sleep anytime soon, I pulled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt before heading toward the kitchen to get a snack or something to drink to help me relax.

Wind whipped outside, blowing tree limbs against the roof. Leaves danced in the moonlight, casting shadows through the windows along the back of the house. The house creaked and groaned with the weather outside but was otherwise silent.

I stepped into the kitchen and stopped abruptly when I realized I wasn't alone. Shannon filled the electric kettle and turned it on. I coughed lightly and announced myself. "Hey."

She spun around and rested a hand on her chest. "Wow. Hey."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

Shannon chuckled, but it was filled with tension. "I heard a noise, but I thought it was the wind or something. I didn't expect to see you standing there."

"I'll try to make more noise next time."

"Be sure that you do. I'd hate to throw something at you." She reached into the cabinet and retrieved two mugs. "I couldn't sleep, so I'm making some herbal tea. Would you like some?"

I shrugged and slid onto a barstool. "Sure. I guess."

She busied herself with tea bags while the water boiled. "I take it you couldn't sleep, either?"

I usually didn't spill my guts, but something about Shannon made me want to talk to her. It still wasn't easy, however. "I, uh, had a dream that woke me."

"Honey?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?"

She held up a bottle of honey. "Would you like honey in your tea?"

"Please." Maybe it would make the tea a bit more palatable.

Shannon handed me a steaming mug of peppermint tea and slid onto a stool opposite me. "Do you want to talk about your dream?"

"When I came to the clinic, you asked about my arm." I blew across the hot liquid and took a tentative sip. "A few weeks ago, I crashed during a training exercise."

Her eyes rounded, and her mouth gaped. "Oh, my gosh. What happened?"

I gave her a quick synopsis of the events leading up to and including ejecting from the jet. "Now I have to see a shrink once a week until they decide I'm fit for combat."

She sipped her own tea. "How long will that take?"

"As long as it takes. They'll probably put me on desk duty when my leave ends. I won't be deployed to a carrier right away, even after my flight status is restored."

She frowned. "That must be tough. What about the cast? When does it come off?"

"Hopefully, in a few more weeks." I drank more of the tea. It wasn't too bad. "What's your story? Why are you down here drinking tea at two in the morning?"

"Do you really want to hear about it?"

I took another sip. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

Her tongue slicked across her bottom lip as she placed her mug on the island. "Holden." She sighed. "He's been acting strange, and the way he behaved toward you today..."

My finger hooked the mug's handle and twisted it back and forth. "I learned to ignore him a long time ago."

"Well, it was rude, and he acted like he didn't even care that the skeezy senator hit on me." She rolled her eyes. "Sometimes, he can be such a jerk."

*No kidding.* "Well, I doubt he's going to change."

We sat in silence for a few minutes, each of us sipping our tea. I never thought I would be drinking herbal tea in the middle of the night, especially with the woman my mother intended to be my next date.

"You mentioned that you and Holden grew up together."

Shannon cradled the cup in her hands and nodded. "My parents were good friends with Owen and Faye. I guess they'd known each other forever. After my parents died, my grandparents took over, but Holden's family more or less adopted me. I spent every summer with them and just about every weekend. We've been through a lot together. Holden's like the brother I never had." Her face crumpled into a frown with her last comment as if the thought were distasteful.

I chuckled. "Isn't that good? You two are tight, right? Best friends and all?"

"Yes. No." She hid her face with one hand. "I don't know. He's changed so much since his mother died, and it's only gotten worse since his dad was elected senator. I suppose it started well before then. I know he cares about your mom, but sometimes I think he still hasn't accepted his mother's death." Her eyes rounded. "Oh, I'm sorry. That was insensitive of me."

"Why?"

“Well ... because of your dad.”

I shrugged, though I appreciated her consideration. “Eh, that’s ancient history.”

She arched a brow. “Is it really?”

Good question. The answer was complicated because my father’s death still shadowed every aspect of my life. He was the reason I joined the Navy and why I kept my personal life loose and casual.

“That’s—”

A door shut, and footsteps echoed on the stairs. Shannon jumped off her stool and placed her mug in the sink. “I’m going back to bed. I really enjoyed hanging out with you.”

I frowned, puzzled by her sudden shift in mood and departure. “Yeah. Me too.”

She flashed a quick smile and took off, darting out of the kitchen through the door to the dining room. A few moments later, Holden stepped through the door at the opposite side of the room. He stopped abruptly when he saw me, shook his head, and continued to the refrigerator. I finished my tea as I watched him peruse the contents before finally grabbing a bottle of San Pellegrino. He leaned against the counter and twisted off the top.

“What are you drinking?” he asked.

“Peppermint tea.” I smirked at his confused expression. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“I thought I heard voices. Who was with you?”

I couldn’t explain it, but I didn’t want to tell him about Shannon, so I lied. “Mom.”

He nodded and drank some water. “I’m glad you’re here. I wanted to thank you for what you did for Shannon at the party.”

I could have played dumb, but there was no point. I was sure it cost Holden a large piece of his pride to even mention it. “It’s no big deal. The dude was a creeper, and I could tell she was uncomfortable.”

“I appreciate it nonetheless.” He lifted the bottle for another sip. “You know, she doesn’t have any family. Just us. I try to look out for her, and it pleased me that you did the same when I couldn’t.”

Could he have been any stiffer? Jesus. I slid from my stool, rinsed my cup and Shannon's, and added them to the dishwasher. When I finished, I dried my hands on the tea towel Mom left folded beside the sink and turned to face Holden.

"Shannon seems like a nice girl." I refolded the towel and returned it to the counter. "I'm going back to bed. Have a good night."

Holden nodded in acknowledgment but didn't speak. I turned on my heel and left him in the kitchen with his bottle of fancy mineral water.

Sleep was slow to come, but I finally drifted off around five o'clock. Sunday was going to suck.

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# CHAPTER TEN

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## Shannon

Sundays always began with brunch.

My earliest memories were happy weekends with the Carlisle family. When my parents were alive, we met every Sunday for brunch, followed by afternoon sailing. I missed those days. Life seemed so much simpler then.

Owen's brother Hank was the only family member to stay after the holiday bash. Laughter echoed around the table as he rambled on about his students. Hank taught anthropology at Georgetown and always had entertaining stories to tell. Even Holden was having a good time, and I wondered if maybe I had misjudged his attitude. Perhaps stress really was the reason he'd been acting like a jerk.

But then he had to go and erase all doubt.

"Let's go sailing," Holden said, abruptly changing gears.

Hank grinned and clapped his hands together. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

The sound of a ringing phone interrupted the conversation, prompting Owen to push away from the table. "Excuse me. I need to get that."

We watched him stroll toward his office, and then Holden resumed recruiting participants for his impromptu boat outing.

"Is everyone else game?" His head swiveled, looking at each of us in turn, stopping when his gaze landed on Alek. His upper lip curled into a sneer. "You're welcome to join us, of course. If you're up for it."

Without breaking eye contact with Holden, Alek polished off his orange juice. His jaw tensed, and he looked as if he wanted to reach across the table and knock Holden's ass out of his chair. "I'm not really in the mood. Thanks anyway."

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Camila asked, resting a hand on Alek's arm.

"I'm fine. Just a little tired, I guess."

Holden tilted his head toward Alek. "I suppose the tea didn't help, then?"

"What tea?" Camila asked. "I didn't know you drank tea."

Alek turned to his mom. "It's not a big deal. I couldn't sleep, so I came down and had some tea."

"I thought you had tea together?" Holden frowned. "That is what you said, right?"

Alek gave Holden a tight smile but didn't comment. I wanted to jump in and admit that I was the one in the kitchen but stopped myself. Clearly, Alek was covering for me after I'd set the tone and bailed when we realized someone else was stirring in the house. I couldn't explain it, but I knew it was important that Holden not find Alek and me together that late at night.

Holden squeezed my shoulder, pulling me from my thoughts. "How 'bout you? Are you up for it?"

"I think I'll pass," I said, forcing a smile. "I should get home."

"Come on. It's still early."

I shook my head. "I have a lot to do to get ready for the week."

It wasn't a lie. It also wasn't the complete truth. The antagonism he displayed toward Alek was getting old, and the thought of being stuck on a boat listening to him while he trash-talked his stepbrother wasn't appealing in the least. I also wasn't keen on the inevitable boasts about his political accomplishments.

His lips pursed, about as close to a pout as he'd get. His voice was almost a whine. "But it's been forever since we've had a chance to really hang out."

As if that would happen on a boat. "I really can't."

Alek chuckled. "She said no, Holden. No means no."

A deep red flush clawed up Holden's neck and over his face. He whipped his head toward Alek and opened his mouth, no doubt to



unleash another rude and pointed barb, when Owen strode back into the room.

“I’m afraid our sailing adventure will have to wait.” He slipped on a sports coat as his gaze shifted between Holden and Alek, taking in their tense posture. He gave a slight shake of his head and sighed. “Holden, if you’re finished being an ass, we have work to do. That was Leland. There’s been a mix-up with next month’s rally, and we need to meet him and his staff in Richmond. I told him we’d leave immediately and get there as quick as we can.”

Holden sprung to his feet, everything else forgotten except the immediate disaster with Owen’s campaign. “I’ll get my things and meet you at the car.”

“I’m sorry to run off like this,” Owen said, kissing Camila on the cheek.

She patted his hand. “It’s fine. I’ll close the house and head back to Alexandria.”

Owen turned his attention to Alek and extended his hand. “Great to see you again, son. Don’t be a stranger.”

Alek accepted his hand and shook it. “I won’t.”

Owen nodded to us all and walked away.

Without a second glance our way, Holden rushed down the stairs to meet his father in the foyer. The sound of their voices was silenced when the door clicked shut behind them.

Alek helped with the post-brunch cleanup before retreating to his room to pack. That’s where I found him, stuffing his freshly laundered clothes into a duffel bag. He’d only been there two nights, but Camila had made sure his laundry was done before he left for his home in Virginia Beach. Her mothering made me smile.

The door stood open, revealing a room decorated in navy and cream, with a dark wood floor and furniture—the perfect masculine bedroom. A few photo frames were scattered across the top of the dresser, but I couldn’t make out any details from my place in the doorway.

I rapped two knuckles against the wooden frame. “Hey.”

He stuffed a shirt into the bag and turned. “Hey. Is everything okay?”

“I—” I shifted from foot to foot and wrung my hands together. “Would you like to go get coffee?”

It was the clumsiest invitation possible, and I fully expected him to decline. I mean, I’d just asked him on a date, which was sort of ridiculous. I fidgeted as I waited for him to answer, part of me wishing I could crawl into a hole and hide.

Alek took pity on me and smiled. “Coffee?”

“I was hoping we could finish our conversation from last night. I feel bad for running away and leaving like that. It was stupid of me.”

“I get it. It’s best Holden didn’t walk in and find us alone.” He lifted his brows. “Can you imagine? His head would have exploded.”

The image took root in my mind as an unladylike snort ripped out of me, and I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle the sound.

Chuckling, Alek zipped his duffel and turned back to face me. “Let’s go have coffee.”

“Really?” my voice squeaked.

“Yeah. Why not?”

“Cool.” A thrill ran through me, and I tried to keep my voice neutral and even. “I’ll drive.”

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## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

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## Alek

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I gaped at the yellow MINI Cooper and shook my head. “There’s no way I can fit in that thing.”

Shannon’s bottom lip stuck out in a pout. “Sure you can. I’ll put the top down.”

Dubious, I approached the vehicle as if it were a poisonous snake, grateful that at least it was a coupe, so the doors were larger than that of the four-door version. That would make getting in and out of the car a little easier, at any rate. “We could take my truck.”

“I said I was driving.”

I shrugged. “You can drive my truck.”

Her lips curled into a mischievous smile. “Aw, come on. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

*In the middle of the North Atlantic, apparently.* “Fine.”

Her smile widened into a grin as she cranked the car’s engine and lowered the convertible top. I hesitantly slid into the passenger seat and adjusted it as far back as it would go. It would have been easier to remove the damn thing and sit in the back.

She turned her head and burst into a fit of giggles. “I guess I’ll have to wait to talk to you until we reach our destination.”

“Funny,” I muttered. Even with the top down, my muscular, six-three frame barely fit. Not only that, but the seats were narrow and jammed my thighs together, making my nuts feel like they were about to lose circulation. “I don’t think MINI had tall people in mind when they designed their cars.”

“You can always pretend I’m your chauffeur.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to take my truck?” I asked again.

“Nope.” She shifted into gear and pulled out of the driveway, heading toward town.

I pointed at a Starbucks as we drove past, desperate to get the hell out of my confinement. “Why don’t we just stop there?”

“You’ll like this other place better.” She leaned close to the steering wheel, her hands at the ten and two position, with a look of intense concentration on her face. “Are you allergic to cats?”

“No,” I drawled, confused by the random change of subject. “What does that have to do with coffee?”

“You’ll see.”

She parked in front of a nondescript red brick building on Warwick, not far from her vet clinic. The sign over the door read: **Cattoccino.**

I had a bad feeling about our outing. “They have cats in there, don’t they?”

Shannon cut the engine and twisted in her seat. “Yes, but the kitties are in a separate room, not in the food area of the café.”

“I’ve never heard of any place like this.”

She grinned. “I guess you have now. Want to go check it out?”

Not really, but Shannon was kind of cute about the whole thing. And I needed a break from the cramped quarters of her little clown car. “Sure. Why not?”

Her face lit up as she climbed from the vehicle. I managed to pry myself out of the seat and followed her inside. The rich aroma of roasted coffee assailed my senses the moment I stepped into the café. Wooden accents and a dark floor set the tone and complemented the plush furnishings grouped in intimate arrangements throughout the space. I may not have been thrilled at the prospect of a cat café, but I had to admit the place was nice.

Shannon stared at me expectantly while I surveyed our surroundings. “What do you think?”

“Not bad.” My gaze shifted to hers. “How’s the coffee?”

“Let’s find out, shall we?” She swept her arm in a wide arc and bowed at the waist. “After you.”

The chick was a comedian. It made me wonder how the hell she and Holden had become such good friends because I’d never known

that dude to have a sense of humor of any kind. Then again, there was a saying about opposites attracting or some shit.

We stepped up to the counter, and a statuesque beauty with ebony skin—who looked like she belonged on a runway or red carpet rather than working in a coffee shop—greeted us. A smile lit up her face and filled her dark brown eyes. “Dr. McKenzie! It’s been a while since you’ve been in.”

I arched a brow. “Come here often?”

Shannon answered with a smile of her own. “I donate vet services.”

Based on what little I knew about her, that revelation didn’t surprise me. “That’s really nice of you.”

She shrugged, bright pink tinting her cheeks. “It’s not that big a deal.”

The woman behind the counter beamed. “But it is. Our kitties have the best care, thanks to Dr. McKenzie.” She waved her hand. “Anything you want, it’s on the house.”

“That’s not necessary,” I said.

Shannon echoed my answer with a shake of her head. “He’s right, Maricela.”

Maricela ignored our protests and turned toward me. “You look like a straight espresso or Americano man. Am I right?”

“Yeah.” I grinned. “Large Americano, please.”

She nodded and shifted her gaze to Shannon. “Your usual? Large white mocha with a peppermint shot?”

Shannon’s blush intensified, and she cut me a look from the corner of her eye as if I’d make fun of her order. “Please.”

“Anything to snack on?” Maricela asked.

“No, thank you,” I said, slipping a twenty into the donation jar.

Maricela nodded and turned to make our drinks.

Shannon leaned close and spoke in a lowered voice. “That was mighty kind of you, supporting the cats.”

I shrugged, feeling heat flood my own face.

“Wow. The tough Navy guy has a soft spot for felines. Who would’ve guessed?”

“You must really enjoy busting my ba—” I tilted my head and covered my mouth to hide a cough. “Sorry.”

She rested a hand against my bicep and let it slide down to cup my elbow. My gaze followed the movement before snapping back to hers. It was such a simple thing, but an undeniable electricity crackled between us. Neither of us moved for several moments. We simply stood rooted in place with our gazes locked.

“Here we go,” said Maricela in a slight sing-song voice. “One Americano and a peppermint white mocha.”

Maricela’s voice broke whatever spell bound us, prompting Shannon to drop her hand like she’d been burned. I could relate. The echo of her touch warmed my skin. We stepped apart, each of us searching for something—anything—else to look at. Shannon moved closer to the counter and retrieved both drinks, glancing up at me only long enough to ensure I had a firm grip on my cup.

She returned her attention to Maricela. “Is it okay to go in the kitty room?”

Maricela smiled. If she noticed our sudden awkwardness, she was kind enough not to acknowledge it. “Of course.”

Coffees in hand, we made our way to the “catio” area and settled in a quiet corner. Floating shelves of varying lengths lined one wall, overlapping each other in a stair-step pattern, and an open wooden framework hung from the ceiling in the center of the room, like a chandelier. Another platform hung slightly lower, stretching toward the wall holding the shelves.

A few cats lounged on chairs or in quiet corners while others played with the handful of patrons present. An orange tabby was laying on the platform above us, its head hanging slightly over the edge. Its body was still, save the occasional curl of a paw as it watched us. I’d never been inclined to have a cat—or any pet, for that matter—but I found the short-haired ginger intriguing.

As if sensing my interest, he sat on his perch and stared down at us. His gaze bore into mine, and I had to admit I was a bit intimidated. It was weird.

“He’s not going to jump on us, is he?” I asked, pointing toward our stalker.

Shannon tilted her head back and laughed. “That’s Boris. He’s just sizing you up, trying to see if he can get a rise out of you.”

I arched a brow. “You say that as if he thinks like a human.”

She shook her head. “Oh no. Cats are much smarter than we are.”

“I’ve never seen a cat fly a jet,” I mumbled, taking a sip of coffee.

“A cat would never have a need to do so.” She shrugged. “But that doesn’t mean they aren’t smart enough to do it.”

As soon as the words were out, a scarlet bloom filled her cheeks. She directed her gaze to a kitten climbing a rope-covered pole on the opposite side of the room and sipped her drink. I set my coffee on the table between us and reclined in my chair. The temptation to tease her about her comments was great, but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything.

In the end, I opted to focus on her obvious comfort zone.

“What’s the deal with this place? Where did all these cats come from?”

Her posture relaxed with her exhale as her gaze slid back to mine. “You’ve heard of pet therapy, right?”

She continued at my nod, “Many health facilities utilize animals to help patients cope with their health problems. There have been studies that show contact with animals helps lower stress levels and blood pressure and elevate mood. The owners wanted a place where people could hang out and forget their cares for a little while. They also know that statistically there are a lot of unwanted and forgotten animals—specifically cats.” She gestured around the room. “All of these cats come from the animal shelter. Most of them are adoptable, but a few of them are permanent residents.”

The thing that always freaked me out about cats was their ability to just appear. Apparently, Boris saw fit to demonstrate by jumping on the ottoman in front of Shannon’s chair.

“Jesus. Where the hell did he come from?” I asked, unnerved that my situational awareness was off its game. Outsmarted by a damn cat.

Shannon smiled. “Told you he likes to see if he can get a rise out of you.”

“I guess so.” I leaned forward to get a closer look at the ginger furball. “What’s your story, little dude?”

Boris sat, wrapping his tail around his feet and haunches, never breaking eye contact with me. I wondered how long I’d have to stare



at him before one of us blinked. Then I wondered which of us would blink first.

“I think he likes you,” she murmured, reaching over to stroke the cat’s head and down his back. “Boris is five. He was abandoned when his family moved. A neighbor took him to the shelter.”

“That sucks. That he was abandoned, that is. I guess it’s good the neighbor turned him in.”

“Yes, it is. At least he’s safe and cared for.” She tilted her head toward me, and her lips curled into a smile. “He’s adoptable.”

“No.”

Her brows lifted. “What?”

“I don’t need a pet.”

She managed to look offended. “Why not?”

“Well, I’m hardly ever home. That wouldn’t exactly be fair to an animal, would it?”

Her expression fell as she continued to pet Boris. “Bummer.”

I chuckled. “What about you? Do you have any pets? Why don’t you adopt him?”

A look of determination and dreamy wistfulness covered her face. The slight shimmer of tears filled her eyes. “I’d live on a farm and adopt all the homeless babies if I could.”

She didn’t answer the question, and as much as I wanted to fault her passionate idealism, I couldn’t. Hell, I admired it.

I think that was the moment I started to fall for Shannon McKenzie.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## Alek

“How were things with your family last weekend?”

Captain Baxter’s gaze softened in anticipation of my answer as I reclined in my seat. I’d managed to dance around the subject each time he broached it during my last two visits, but I knew I couldn’t hide forever. Though, I wasn’t clear on what that had to do with the crash and getting me combat-ready.

“Fine.”

He arched a brow in silent question. The expression, combined with his already imposing stature, had the ability to make one feel like an errant child. I shifted in my seat and propped my good elbow on the arm of the chair.

“I arrived Friday afternoon, and my mother asked me to take her dog to the vet.”

When it was clear I wasn’t going to elaborate, Captain Baxter chuckled and relaxed into his own chair. “You know, Pierce, you’re a tough nut to crack. Why is it so difficult to talk about your family?”

I shrugged. “There’s not much to say.”

“Oh, I think there’s a lot to say.” His chair swiveled side-to-side briefly before returning to face me. “What was wrong with the dog?”

“Nothing as it turned out, but Mom adores the little fluff ball and was worried about it.”

“What kind of dog is it?”

I fought the impulse to roll my eyes and gestured with both hands, estimating the size of the animal. “It’s about yay big with long

white fur. One of those small, yappy dogs about the size of a football.”

Baxter laughed again. “Ah, yes. My grandmother was fond of those breeds as well. So that was it? You showed up, and your mother immediately asked you to take her dog to the vet?”

“Well, no. She asked about me first—you know, typical motherly BS.”

“Like having your house cleaned and refrigerator stocked before you came home?”

I shifted in my chair, suddenly uncomfortable. I hooked a finger in my collar and pulled. *Was it getting warmer?* “Yeah. Something like that.”

“And how did you feel about that? Being asked to run an errand like that for her?”

“I’m not sure what bearing that has on anything. How is talking about my mother’s dog going to get me back in the air?”

“I’m just curious. You seemed a little irritated when you mentioned it.”

“It’s not my idea of a good time, but Mom rarely asks for my help.”

“Do you feel she guilted you into it?”

“Not really.” My right hand wrapped around the back of my neck, worrying at the growing tension before falling back into my lap. “She’s my mom. I feel I should help her out whenever I can since I’m hardly ever around.”

Baxter smiled but didn’t respond. It was one of his tricks. He did it often, knowing it wouldn’t take long before I filled the silence with some seemingly innocuous tidbit of information. Then he’d pounce. He was like that orange cat in the café, studying me. Looking for a weakness.

That thought unnerved me, and I blurted the first thing that came to mind. “The dog was just a ruse. All she really wanted was to try and set me up with the vet.”

As soon as the words were out, I cringed, knowing the captain would be all over it. I wasn’t wrong.

“Is that something your mother does often?”

“More often than she should, yeah.”

He turned thoughtful and scribbled something on his notepad. "How often should she do that?"

I scowled. "Never, in my opinion. I don't need help finding dates. Which is the same thing I told her. She never listens."

"Tell me about the vet."

His comment caught me off guard, and I shook my head. "What?"

"Tell me about the vet. Surely there was a reason your mother thought she'd be a good match."

"My mother is a busybody who wants grandchildren."

Baxter's expression tightened as if he were fighting back laughter. "So her taste isn't very discerning, is what you're saying? Surely not, being married to a prominent senator."

A low growl echoed in my throat as I cursed myself for ever mentioning it. Damn required psych visits. "No. My mother has great taste. Shannon—the vet—is a family friend. She's my stepbrother's best friend. Supposedly we'd met before, but I didn't remember her." I took a breath and released it. "She's, uh ... she's pretty."

The corners of his mouth curled upward. "Do you think your mother would try to match you with someone you would find to be less than desirable?"

"What?" My brows drew together. "What are you talking about?"

"You sounded surprised that Shannon was pretty. As if you expected her to be anything but that."

"Uh, no. At the risk of sounding like a misogynist, I didn't expect the vet to be a woman. Don't ask me why. I just, for whatever reason, expected a man. I didn't realize my mother's intentions until after I returned with the dog."

"What made you realize it? Did she tell you?"

Jesus. We were talking in circles, and I couldn't for the life of me figure out why he chose to follow this line of questioning. "Not in so many words, but she asked me what I thought about Shannon. When I commented on her abilities as a vet, Mom told me she already knew that. From there, I deduced Mom was trying to set me up. That's when she went into her spiel about grandkids and how she doesn't want me to end up alone."

Baxter nodded and scribbled a few more lines on his pad. "Why does she think you'll be alone?"

This time I did roll my eyes. Not at the captain, but because of my mother's crazy beliefs. "Because she knows I don't do relationships. I mean, I date occasionally, but my life isn't conducive to anything long-term."

Light glinted off his wedding ring as he drummed his fingers on the desk, mocking me for what I'd just said. "Is that because you don't want that life, or do you believe being in the Navy and having a successful, long-term relationship are mutually exclusive? It must be one or the other?"

"I don't believe it would be right to expect someone to wait for me when I could be deployed for months at a time. Not to mention the inherent danger of my job. The possibility of being killed in combat and leaving a family behind? I couldn't, in good conscience, ask any woman to live that way."

"That's very noble of you, Pierce." He nodded and then clucked his tongue. I'd come to recognize that as his tell, right before he called bullshit on something I'd said. "So, it's specifically flying jets, and not the Navy itself, that makes you feel that way. Is that what you're saying? In other words, if you had any other job in the Navy, you'd be open to your mother's wishes for your future?"

"What? I'm not sure what you're asking."

Baxter arched a brow in disbelief and switched his tack. "Your father was a SEAL, correct?"

A wave of heat rushed through me, making my pulse pound in my ears. I felt like I was about to be sick. It was a familiar feeling whenever my father was mentioned. "That's right."

"And he was killed in combat when you were only eight years old, isn't that right? Leaving your mother a widow?"

"Yeah," I snapped, my response coming out harsher than intended. "What's your point?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he scribbled more notes on his pad. The friction of his pen scratching against the paper set my teeth on edge. I was moments from jumping out of my chair and bailing on the rest of our session time.

Baxter finally lifted his gaze to mine and reclined in his chair. "Did you know that when we experience a life-changing event—trauma—"

when we're young, it shapes our beliefs as we mature? Those types of events can have long-lasting effects on our lives."

"I don't want to talk about that. My dad. He's off-limits."

A sharp stab of pain shot through my broken arm, and it took a moment to register why. My hand was clenched so tightly that the cast material had begun to cut into my skin. I forced myself to relax and wiggled my fingers, attempting to loosen the muscles in my hand and wrist.

"I'm sure that had to have been very difficult for you at such a young age."

I ground my teeth together. "I said I don't want to talk about him."

"Alek, your personal life and whether you choose to have a family is your business. The Navy doesn't care. What it does care about is how that choice affects your ability to do your job. The one you were trained to do."

"My personal life has never affected my job. You said yourself during my first visit that my squadron is the best in the fleet. Clearly, it wouldn't be if I brought my personal drama to work."

"Yes, that's true. But we've just hit on a subject for which you have many unresolved feelings. Don't you think it's time you dealt with them?"

"I'm fine. The reason I'm upset is that my father is irrelevant to my current situation."

"I don't believe that. You might, but I think the crash has brought all of that back to the surface. I think it also reminded you of your own mortality, which then made you think of your father's death. I think it's also why you try to keep yourself so closed off from everyone else."

I wanted to argue, but how could I? The crash confirmed that I had made the right decision to avoid commitment and keep my personal life casual.

Baxter's deep, steady voice broke into my thoughts. "I want you to do something for me before next week. Homework, if you will." He moved forward, leaning his forearms on the desk, and clasped his hands. "I want you to write a letter to your father, telling him all of your feelings about his death and how that's affected your life since."

"I don't see what that's going to do for me," I scoffed.

“It’s just a means to get it out of your head.” He shook his head. “I don’t intend to read it, so you can say whatever you feel you need to. However, I want you to take this seriously and write it. We’re going to talk about it next session.”

I snorted. “It feels like I’ve just been given an essay assignment for English class.”

“I suppose it does.”

He laughed and stood, extending his hand. I offered mine in return, and we shook. I opened my mouth and immediately slammed it closed again, knowing I wanted to say something but unsure as to what it would be. In the end, I kept it simple.

“Thank you, Captain.”

“I’ll see you next week, Pierce.”

I gave a swift nod and spun on my heel, donning my hat as soon as I was out of his office. The afternoon heat was oppressive as I covered the short distance to my truck, allowing my mind to examine the past hour.

One thought kept circulating more than any others: why had I allowed my father’s death to dictate so much of my life?

*What was I going to do about it?*



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## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

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## Shannon

I stepped into the muggy afternoon and choked on the thick July air as I locked the back door of the clinic. Everybody cleared out quickly after our last patient on Saturday, leaving me to be the last one in the building.

My cell vibrated in my hand, alerting me to a text. The sight of Holden's name on the notification sent a stab of disappointment rocketing through me. Who did I expect it to be? No one texted me except Holden and the crew at work.

I hadn't heard from Holden since July Fourth, which made his text seem a bit out of the blue. My initial assumption was he needed a plus one for another event, and I was in no hurry to confirm that. I dropped my phone into my bag and rounded the corner of the building on the way to my car. My steps faltered, almost sending me sprawling, when I noticed the person parked beside me, resting against the fender of his truck.

"Careful, slick," Alek said, stepping forward to catch me if needed.

"What are you doing here?"

He smiled, and it lit up his entire countenance. "Hello to you, too."

My cheeks flamed, and I clapped a hand over my face. "That was rude, wasn't it?"

"Somewhat." He laughed. "But then again, you weren't expecting me to be here."

"No, I wasn't." I hitched the strap of my purse higher on my shoulder and smoothed a hand over my hair. "But why are you

here?”

Alek dipped his chin and looked embarrassed. “I thought you might like to grab lunch.”

My heart did a strange skip-beat, and I sucked in a breath. “You drove an hour to take me to lunch?”

“I did.” He nodded and wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. “I would have called first, but I don’t have your number.”

Another little thrill ran through me as I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth. “I suppose we should remedy that.”

“Indeed.”

We gazed at each other, not speaking, each of us waiting for some imaginary sign or cue to tell us what to do next. Unable to take the silence any longer, I cleared my throat and plunged ahead. “What’s for lunch?”

He grinned. “Anything you want.”

Oh, man. He had no freaking idea. I screwed up my face while I considered our options and how I was dressed. “Have you ever eaten at The Avenue over on Arthur Boulevard?”

“No, but I’m game. Is that where you want to go?”

“Sure.” I rocked from foot to foot and gestured at my car. “Do you want to follow me?”

“I figured it was my turn to drive.”

“Fair enough.” I laughed. “I’m finished here for the day, and I only live a few miles from here. Would you mind following me home first so I can drop off my car? I mean, if that’s not too much trouble.”

“No problem.” Sweeping his arm to the side, he bent slightly, mimicking my actions before our trip to the cat café the previous Sunday. “Lead the way.”

“Try and keep up,” I teased, giggling as I jumped in my car, cranked the engine, and took off out of the parking lot.

I may have gotten the jump on him, but it didn’t take him long to catch up. He turned into my driveway less than two minutes after me. It was a bold move on my part, playing that kind of game with him when we barely knew each other. I had no idea if he would be amused or angry.

The garage door rumbled closed behind me as I crossed the short drive to his truck. He slid from the driver’s seat and met me in

front of the vehicle. I pulled both lips between my teeth, biting back the smile threatening to reveal itself over my impulsive prank. Alek's face was a stern mask, telegraphing his displeasure. I had to admit, the man was rather intimidating. I hoped I hadn't made a huge mistake.

I drew closer, stopping about two feet away from him. "Hi?"

His eyes narrowed and a muscle ticked in his jaw. Our gazes locked, and the longer we stared at each other, the more nervous I became. Seconds turned into minutes, and I was almost ready to cry 'uncle' when his lips parted in a crooked smile.

"You're funny."

"I am?"

"Yeah." He stepped around me and opened the passenger door, urging me to climb into the truck. "Come on. Let's go eat."

I briefly considered asking him to wait so I could change out of my scrubs but then decided it really didn't matter. It wasn't like this was a real date, right?

Or was it?

He backed out of the driveway and headed back the way we had come. We lapsed into silence during the brief, ten-minute drive to the restaurant. My cell vibrated, signaling yet another text. I slipped it from my bag, and the notification confirmed what I already knew.

### ***Holden: Where are you??***

"Is everything all right?" Alek glanced my way as he parked and cut the engine.

"Yeah," I muttered, shaking my head at Holden's manufactured urgency. I dropped the phone back into my purse and smiled.

Alek nodded and let it go, even though I could tell he suspected it was from Holden. He walked around the truck and opened my door, then led me to the entrance with a hand resting on the small of my back. His hand was large and warm, sending a shiver up my spine regardless of the day's high temperature.

We opted to sit in the bar and grabbed a high table in a quiet corner. A server greeted us and rattled off the day's specials, leaving menus and promising to return soon with our drinks.

“This is a nice place.”

“It is. Sometimes we come here on Fridays after work.” I shifted my gaze away from Alek and studied the casual elegance of our surroundings. Cool granite topped the wooden bar and all the tables. Black chairs and accents complemented the neutral palette of creams and browns. The overhead lighting was soft, augmented by pendant lights over the bar and wall sconces hung by every table. The overall effect was warm and inviting. “Their onion rings are amazing. So are the crab cakes. Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever had anything here that wasn’t good.”

Ugh. I dropped my chin and pretended to study the menu as if I hadn’t already memorized the darn thing.

Alek chuckled and lowered his gaze to his own menu. He was kind enough not to comment on my word vomit.

The server returned with our drinks, a local IPA for Alek and a Blue Moon for me. “Can I get you started with anything, or are you ready to order?”

“We might need a bit more time, but how about we try some of your onion rings?” Alek’s gaze slid to mine. “I hear they’re really good.”

“Great choice. I’ll get those started and give you a few more minutes with the menu.”

I pulled the orange slice off the rim of the glass and squeezed it into the golden liquid before dropping the mangled piece of fruit into the glass. I took a healthy sip. What was wrong with me? I’d been on dates before—not that this was a date—but there was something about Alek that knocked me off-kilter.

Yeah. The fact that he was gorgeous. And larger than life. And a freaking hero. And from what little I’d learned about him so far, a great guy.

“What looks good to you?” he asked, his gaze on me, not his menu.

*You.* Heat clawed up my throat. “Oh, uh ... I think I’m doing, um, getting the crab cake sandwich. With fries.”

*Kill me now. Please.*

My phone began to ring, sparing me further embarrassment but also irritating me. I removed it from my bag and declined the call. I

fired off a quick text before setting the device to silent and putting it away.

***Shannon: Can't talk. Will call later.***

Alek gestured to my phone. "You sure everything's okay? Do you need to take that?"

"No." I took another sip of my drink. The spiced beer rolled over my tongue, momentarily distracting me. "It's just Holden."

"Figured as much."

My brow wrinkled in confusion. "What makes you say that?"

"Just a guess, judging by the number of notifications you've received in the past few minutes." He shrugged. "He hates it when he doesn't get his way."

I couldn't argue with that. "It's just—" I forced another sip of beer and returned the glass to the table. The tip of my index finger traced the curve of the glass, leaving a blank spot in the condensation collected on its surface. "Things have been weird lately."

"Weird how?"

"A few weeks ago, he asked me to be his plus one for a fundraiser in Alexandria, and we got into a sort of tiff while we were there."

Alek arched a brow. "A tiff?"

I rolled my eyes. "You know, a spat? An argument?"

"Yes, I know what a tiff is."

My eyes narrowed. "Were you making fun of me?"

He wagged his brows. "What if I was?"

I pursed my lips and scowled. "That's not very nice."

Alek winked. "Finish your story. Please."

"So anyway, he wanted to squeeze this big defense contractor for a donation, and I told him I thought that was a conflict of interest."

"Oh, I bet he loved that," Alek crowed.

I tried to hold back my own laughter but was unsuccessful. We were both still chuckling heartily when the server brought our onion rings. The rings were just as I remembered, crispy and golden deliciousness.

“Damn. These are good.” Alek mumbled as he bit into one of the rings.

“Told ya.” I folded a ring in half and dredged it in ketchup before popping it into my mouth.

“What happened after you and Holden argued?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “We just got over it and moved on. But later that night, he ... kissed me. He tried to blame it on the alcohol earlier in the evening, but I think that’s a lie.”

Alek shifted in his seat and dropped the uneaten portion of onion ring on his plate. He wiped his hands on the napkin before taking a long drink of beer.

Sensing his unease, I plunged ahead, not giving him a chance to say anything. Truthfully, I was afraid of what he thought and that he would be disgusted by what I had disclosed. “Things between us have been off ever since. I don’t feel that way about him, and I can’t —”

Alek lifted his hand and waved me off. “It’s cool. You don’t have to justify yourself, or anything, to me.”

“Well, I don’t want you to think that there’s anything other than friendship between Holden and me or that I’ve led him on in any way. Not that I think you and I, uh, I mean ... I don’t expect...”

I released a breath. Damn. I was rambling again. There was something about being around Alek that made me feel like a bumbling teenager.

He reached across the table and rested his hand on my arm. “Hey. Relax. We’re just hanging out. Let’s concentrate on having a good time. Does that work for you?”

“That sounds perfect.”

And it did. Right then and there, I decided to do something I’d never done before.

Go with the flow.

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## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

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## Alek

Lunch with Shannon had been an impulsive decision, made in response to Baxter's badgering about the past. He was like a bloodhound and had the uncanny ability to sniff out things that were better left alone. I wasn't sure what I intended to accomplish by spending time with Shannon, considering she was the opposite of the type of woman I typically dated.

*Hell. Was it a date? And could I rightfully call my typical behavior 'dating'?*

I was so out of my depth.

One thing I knew for certain, her quirks were endearing, like the way she rambled when she got nervous. It was an odd sensation, but I felt like I could breathe whenever I was around her. Whatever the hell that meant.

I also understood that Holden was going to be an issue. He had texted no less than three times during lunch and called once. Could there ever be anything between us while Holden was in the picture? Sure, Shannon claimed she didn't have any romantic feelings for him, but they were friends. He would always be a part of her life. Not that I would deny her a friend. I would never do that. But I knew Holden would never accept Shannon and me ever being more than friends. Hell ... he might not even accept that.

There was an unmistakable twinge of envy when she acknowledged Holden was the one who called. I'd never been jealous before in my life.

*So why now? And what the hell did that mean?*

That line of thinking made me uneasy, prompting more questions than I cared to answer. Captain Baxter would have a field day. It also made me second-guess my original plan to extend our afternoon. I could take Shannon home and drive my ass back to Virginia Beach. No harm, no foul. She'd never know the difference.

But I couldn't do it. It was one more thing I didn't understand.

"Are you in a hurry to get home?"

"Oh, um ... no, I guess not." She fidgeted in her seat as she fastened her seat belt. "Why?"

"I thought we might take a little side trip if you're feeling adventurous." I shrugged. "Do you trust me?"

It was probably asking a lot, considering we didn't know each other all that well, but it was only fair considering she dragged me to that damn cat café the previous weekend.

Bright pink filled her cheeks as her lips parted in a wide smile. "I do. Yes."

Liking her answer a bit more than I should, I pulled out of the parking lot and turned toward our destination—without telling her where we were going.

Twenty minutes later, I turned off the highway into a lightly wooded area. Shannon released an excited squeal when the building came into view. "The Living Museum? Oh my gosh! I haven't been here in years."

I found a parking spot near the entrance and cut the engine, unable to contain the smile that spread across my face. "I thought you might enjoy this."

Part botanical garden, part zoo, and part art museum with a planetarium thrown in for good measure, the Living Museum exhibited over 250 species of animals and plants found in Virginia, many of which were endangered or threatened. It had always been one of my favorite places.

We approached the entrance side by side until we reached the door, where I ushered her in ahead of me. I pulled our tickets out of my back pocket and handed them over at the admission window.

Shannon gaped at me. "You already had tickets?"

I mumbled an affirmative response and scratched my brow with my thumbnail.

She rested a hand on my shoulder. "That's so sweet. Thank you."

"So, uh, where would you like to start?"

"The animals, of course."

I nodded. "Of course."

She looped her arm through mine, and we set off, making our way through the exhibits. My body buzzed with the unexpected contact, and I couldn't remember a single time any woman's touch had affected me that way. It was fucking with my head.

We made it halfway through the interior exhibits when Shannon released me. A slight crease marred the space between her brows. "What made you think of coming here today?"

I frowned. "Huh?"

"Well, most men wouldn't think to bring a date to a museum." Her cheeks flamed, and she clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, crap. I didn't mean that. I mean, well ... shoot."

Hell, I couldn't argue with her. After all, hadn't I driven to Newport News with the intention of taking Shannon to lunch? And hadn't I bought tickets to the museum online before I left Virginia Beach? If that wasn't a date, what else could it be called?

Yep. I was so screwed.

I never considered myself a coward, but at that moment, I decided to avoid the dating angle and just answer her original question.

"I used to come here with Mom and Dad." I widened my stance and tucked my thumbs into my front pockets. "They'd bring me here before he deployed. We'd spend the entire afternoon just checking out all the exhibits. Dad's favorites were the red foxes and the dinosaur trail."

"How old were you when he died?"

"Eight." I sighed. "This was a happy place for us. After"—I sucked in a breath—"he died, Mom and I would come every year on his birthday. When she married Owen, they set up an endowment in Dad's name to help with animal care and whatever else the museum may need to operate."

"Wow. I didn't know that. Holden never told me."

I wasn't surprised. "I'm not sure he knows. It's not a big deal."

“It’s a very big deal. That’s a beautiful way to honor your father.” She paused as if she wasn’t sure she should continue. “He was a SEAL, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, what’s your story?”

I laughed. “What do you mean?”

“What made you decide to become a pilot? Why didn’t you go through SEAL training?”

My hand ruffled through the back of my hair. “I would’ve thought you already heard this story from my mother.”

She frowned. “No. She just brags about how awesome you are at your job.”

Now that didn’t surprise me. “I never intended to join the military. I planned to go into aeronautical engineering. A few months into my first job, I decided I’d rather fly planes than design them.” I shrugged. “So, here I am.”

“Well, according to Camila, I’d say you found your calling.”

I pointed to the cast on my left arm. “This would suggest otherwise.”

Shannon shook her head. “I bet if you checked the statistics, you’d find that if you fly long enough, accidents are bound to happen.”

My lips twisted into a wry smile. “Now you’re just trying to make me feel better, aren’t you?”

She grinned. “Is it working?”

I returned her smile. “Yeah. I think it might be.”

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The ringing of my cell phone woke me. I squinted against the bright sunlight filling the bedroom as I grabbed the device and swiped my finger across the answer button. I didn’t bother checking the caller ID.

“Hey.”

“Alek?”

My brain registered the familiar voice of my best friend, Ben. "What's up?"

"Are you busy today?"

"Hmm. Let me think." I paused, scrubbing a hand over my face. "Nope. But come to think of it, I haven't been busy any day."

Ben chuckled. "Well, you must've been busy yesterday because you never returned my calls."

"What are you talking about?" I pulled the phone away from my ear and checked the call log. Sure enough, there were three calls from Ben. "Sorry, man. I didn't realize you'd called."

"Who was she?"

My sleep-addled brain didn't grasp his meaning right away. Then, it did. "Ha, ha. I was running a few errands yesterday. I guess I wasn't paying attention to my phone."

"So, you're saying a woman wasn't involved?"

"Yeah. That's what I'm saying."

It was a lie, of course. Well, about a woman being involved, anyway. I really hadn't realized I'd received any calls. I'd put my phone on silent before I met up with Shannon.

"Whatever you say. The reason I called yesterday was to invite you over. We're having a cookout this afternoon and would love for you to join us."

I arched a brow, even though he couldn't see it. "Did Gretchen tell you to call? Or, should I say, did she tell you how to phrase the invite?"

"No. I'm inviting you because I want you to be there."

"Okay." I laughed. "Just asking because I've never known you to say things like, 'would love for you to join us.'"

I stretched and caught sight of blue ink on my white cast.

*Shannon's number.*

"Fuck you, Rooster."

I laughed harder. He pulled out the call sign. Man, I loved getting under Ben's skin. "What time?"

"Three, if you can make it."

"Yeah, I'll be there. Appreciate the invitation."

"You bet. All the guys from Cole will be there. I thought it might be good to get reacquainted." He paused, letting a beat or two of

silence fill the line. “You know ... just in case.”

A ripple of unease slithered down my spine. “You mean in case the Navy won’t reinstate my flight status.”

“I’m just saying ... yeah. You never know. It might be a good idea to keep your options open. We can always use good pilots at Cole.”

I bristled at the implication that my Navy career may be over. “Yeah. I’ll see you at three.”

We disconnected, and I dropped my cell on the bedside table. I couldn’t fathom not flying combat. I knew it was a possibility, but I hadn’t given up on life getting back to normal after my leave was over and I passed my psych evaluation.

*If* I passed my psych evaluation. Baxter held the fate of my career in his hands, and I couldn’t get a good read on the guy. Given the way he liked to push me during our sessions, I could easily see him deciding there was some bullshit reason to keep me out of a jet. Maybe Ben’s idea of hanging out with the guys he worked with wasn’t so crazy after all.

I lifted my arm and inspected the blue scrawl on my cast. There was no name, just a number with the rough outline of a cat scribbled beside it. We’d exchanged numbers the day before, but for some reason, Shannon also wanted to sign my cast.

Was that even still a thing? Who did that anymore?

Shannon, of course. Quirky, endearing Shannon would sign someone’s cast.

I rolled out of bed and quickly donned some running clothes. I needed a distraction other than playing multiple rounds of *Call of Duty*. Running was the only real exercise I was allowed, other than my twice-weekly physical therapy visits. I couldn’t wait for that part of my life to resume when the cast would come off and I could get back to the gym. Sitting around on my ass playing video games all day wasn’t doing me any good.

Later that afternoon, I stood in Ben’s backyard with a cold beer in my hand, shooting the shit with the guys from Cole Security Forces. Mark, Liam, and Quinn accepted me without hesitation, simply because of Ben. We’d hung out a few times in the past, but not often since I was still on active duty and hardly ever home. The only member of their group not present was the company’s owner,

Jackson Cole. I'd met him once before at Ben and Gretchen's wedding.

I wasn't prepared to accept the possible end of my military career, but I couldn't deny that working with them might be a cool gig after all. If I had to separate from the Navy, that is.

Quinn gestured at my cast. "How long until that comes off?"

"Twelve days. I hope." I released a ragged exhale. "I'm ready to get my arm back."

"Do you know when you'll be back in the air?" asked Liam.

"No." I took another sip of my beer. "It all depends on my psych eval. I'm not sure how many hoops I'll have to jump through—even though the shrink claims he wants to get me reinstated."

Mark gestured at my cast. "Looks like that hasn't slowed things down with the ladies."

"Huh?" My gaze followed his and landed on the damn cat Shannon drew. "Oh. That. Yeah, a friend thought it would be funny."

"You mean a chick," he said. "Only a chick would think to do that. Who signs a cast nowadays? Chicks. That's who."

Everyone laughed, including me. I had a feeling Mark wouldn't have been as assertive about that if his wife, Charlie, had been standing next to him. "Affirmative. She's my stepbrother's best friend."

Ben waggled his brows. "What's she doing signing your cast?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "She's a family friend?"

"That sounds like avoidance to me," chuckled Liam. "And why her phone number and not her name? That seems rather curious."

"You guys are looking for shit that's not there." Those were the words coming out of my mouth, but did I truly believe it? I'd questioned her motivations myself.

"There you go, avoiding the question," Ben said.

"Because there's nothing to say. She's a family friend, and she's quirky. I'm sure she thought it would be funny. She has a strange sense of humor."

Knowing Shannon, she wrote her number on my cast so I wouldn't forget to call her. That realization didn't give me any comfort. If that was indeed her intention, it was working because all I could think about was calling her as soon as I got home.

The others exchanged a look that clearly said they didn't believe my bullshit explanation. The truth was, I didn't really believe it myself.



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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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## Shannon

My cell phone rang as I pulled the last load of laundry from the dryer and dumped it on my bed. A small thrill ran through me when I saw Alek's name on the screen. I took two deep breaths before answering.

"Well, hello there. How are you?"

"Hey. I'm good." He paused for several seconds. "What's going on? Are you busy?"

"Not really. Just folding some laundry." I laughed.

"Should I let you go?"

I sat on the bed cross-legged. "No. What's up?"

"Nothing. I've just been looking at my cast and had the urge to call you."

I giggled. "Sorry. I guess that was rather silly of me, wasn't it?"

"Considering I'd already put your number in my phone ... maybe. Yes."

It had been a silly thing to do. Maybe I just wanted to make sure he didn't forget about me. I decided to ignore the subject. "How was your day?"

"Fine." He laughed. "My friend Ben had a cookout today. I hung out over there for a while this afternoon."

"That sounds like fun."

"It was, I guess. Ben and all his friends are married, so it was kind of weird to be the only single guy there. Not that it was that big of a deal." He sighed, realizing he'd begun rambling, just like I did whenever I got nervous. It made me giggle. "Whatever. It was cool to

hang out with them. Better than sitting home alone, playing video games.”

“Is that what you normally do?” I teased.

“Pretty much, yep. I go to physical therapy twice a week, and the shrink once a week, but otherwise, I sit and play video games all day. It gets a little old.”

“It’s a shame you’re not here. You could help me with my laundry.”

He laughed. “I’ll pass.”

“Don’t be mean. I’d help you.”

“Really?” he asked, incredulous. “You’d do my laundry for me?”

“Yeah. I would.”

“Well, aren’t you sweet?”

“I think I am.” I chuckled. “What are your new friends like?”

“They’re not new friends. I’ve known them for a while, but we don’t see each other very often because I’m typically deployed.” He paused, and the sound of him swallowing carried over the line. “But they’re a great bunch of guys. All SEALs.”

“You Navy types all stick together, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Listen, I want to thank you again for yesterday. It was great to hang out. Lunch and the museum ... it was probably the most fun I’ve had in a while.”

“You’re welcome.” Silence fell between us. It seemed that neither of us knew exactly what to say. “Have you talked to Holden?”

Ah. I guess I should have expected that question. Was it bad that I continued to dodge his calls and texts? “No. I haven’t been in the mood. I’m concerned he just wants me to go to another fundraiser with him, and I’m not up for that.”

“Are you worried about what he’ll think if he finds out we were together yesterday?”

Yes.

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Because of what you told me about him and the fact you didn’t want him to catch us together that night at Mom’s.”

“Okay. Yes. Maybe.” I sighed. “I just don’t want to deal with it. You know how he gets.”

“Yes, I do. That’s why I’m asking.” A low, frustrated growl echoed over the line. “What are we doing here? I’m not sure I know. I don’t even know why I called, other than just to hear your voice.”

My heart galloped in my chest. Alek’s admission stirred something akin to hope deep inside me. I tried to tell myself he was just being nice, but if that were the case, why say anything about wanting to talk to me?

“That’s sweet of you to say.”

“Not sure about that. I’m just being honest.”

“Well, to answer your question, I don’t know what we’re doing either. In fact, I didn’t know we were doing anything at all. I mean ... I didn’t mean”—I gulped around the lump lodged in my throat and plunged ahead—“I had a great time yesterday, and I really do enjoy talking to you. I’m glad you called, even if you don’t appreciate my artwork on your cast.”

“I never said I didn’t appreciate it.”

“Did your friends see it? Did they give you a hard time about it?”

He laughed, a rich, robust sound. “Oh hell, yeah. They gave me a lot of shit about it. So, thank you for that.”

“Sorry.” I chuckled.

“Are you?”

The visual of Alek’s friends giving him a hard time about me signing his cast triggered a ripple of laughter that soon caused him to join me. “Nope. Not even a little.”

“I figured as much. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

We broke out into more laughter, and I knew that whatever was happening between Alek and me was something I wanted more of.

Only time would tell if it was strictly friendship ... or more.

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## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

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## Alek

I arrived a few minutes early for my appointment with Captain Baxter. His door stood open halfway, revealing him at his desk, typing what were most likely session notes into his laptop. I rapped lightly on the door with one knuckle.

Baxter shifted his gaze to the doorway and peered at me over the top of his reading glasses. "Pierce. Come in."

I pushed the door closed and strolled forward to take my usual seat in front of his desk. Baxter ignored me and continued typing for several minutes. When he was finished, he pushed his chair backward and turned to face me fully.

"You look well today, Pierce. Is that an act or reality?"

My hands fidgeted with my hat, bouncing it on my knees. "No, I feel good. PT is going well, and I only have another week in this cast."

He nodded. "That's great. Glad to hear it. Did you write that letter I assigned you last week?"

I groaned. "Not exactly. I started it, but it turned into a list of questions I wish I could ask him rather than a letter."

Baxter shrugged and reclined in his chair. "That's fine. Want to tell me what you came up with?"

No, I really didn't. As much as I'd balked at the assignment, I found the act of writing down those questions helped quiet some of the demons inside me. Maybe this psychiatry shit had some merit after all.

“I mainly want to know why he didn’t get out when he had the chance. Or at least become an instructor. He could have. He’d been in thirteen years when he died. I don’t understand why he had to go back on that last tour.”

Baxter arched a brow. “Don’t you?”

I hated whenever he responded with a question. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “You just passed your eleventh anniversary, isn’t that correct?”

“Yes. Is there a point in there somewhere?”

“You’re questioning your father’s commitment to the SEALs and his country when you’ve made that same commitment yourself.”

“It’s not the same. The Navy requires pilots to serve eight years, basically ten, considering training.”

His smile widened. “That’s right. They do. Which means you opted to extend your contract by thirty-six months after your initial eight years and once again right before the crash. There’s a handsome signing bonus for that, yes?”

The truth behind his words hit with the force of a freight train. Yet, I still couldn’t give in to his reasoning that easily. “It’s not about the money. Besides, I don’t have a family waiting for me to come home.”

“That’s true. You don’t.” His chair rocked lightly as his fingers drummed on the edge of the desk. “And what do you think is the reason for that?”

“I think we’ve already covered this, haven’t we?”

“We have.” He nodded. “But I think it’s important to revisit that. As I said last time, I believe you’ve got some unresolved feelings about your father.”

I sighed. “This is ridiculous. I don’t believe in this stuff.”

“Pierce, I’m not asking you to believe in anything. I’m merely asking you to consider a correlation between your anger about your father not leaving the Navy and thereby being killed in action and your own length of service. You deliberately avoid meaningful human connection and thereby avoid finding a life partner because of your father’s death. By your own admission, you seek women amenable to casual relationships. You go out of your way to remain alone

simply because you don't want to inflict the same hurt you suffered as a child on someone else."

Fuck. It was hard to argue with that logic. I opened my mouth to do just that, even knowing the words would be hollow, but that wasn't what came out. "I've started seeing someone."

*Where the fuck did that come from?*

Baxter raised his brows, his eyes wide in shock. "You have? This is news."

"Yes. No." I sighed. "I don't know."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk, his hands clasped under his chin. "Tell me about her."

Warmth flowed through me as I thought about Shannon. How had I become so enamored with her in such a short time? And what was that supposed to mean?

I'd already dug myself into the hole with Baxter, so I may as well put myself out of my misery and answer his questions. "It's Shannon, the vet in Newport News who treats my mother's dog. I mentioned her a couple weeks ago."

"Ah. That's right. So, how did that come about? When you mentioned her, you were adamantly opposed to pursuing anything because of your mother's interference."

"I don't know." I ran my right hand through my hair and scratched the back of my head. "We'd spent some time talking that weekend, and"—I dropped my hand to the arm of the chair—"I drove over last Saturday, and we had lunch."

"You drove an hour to Newport News to take Shannon out to lunch?"

I released an exasperated sigh. "You know, when you say it like that—"

"But that is a fact, yes? You drove from Virginia Beach to Newport News for the sole purpose of taking Shannon to lunch. Correct?"

Why was it so difficult to just open up to the guy and tell him what was floating around inside my head? "Affirmative. Then, afterward, we spent most of the afternoon at the Living Museum."

"So, it was a date, then?"

That was the real question, wasn't it? "I'm not sure I originally thought about it that way, but once I was there, with her ... yeah. I



guess it was.”

Baxter’s mouth twitched, but he quickly schooled his expression and bit back his smile. “And in the week since? How are things between you?”

I sucked in a breath and released it. “We talk every night, usually for at least an hour or two.”

“What do you talk about?”

“Everything. Anything.” I shrugged. “Nothing. A few nights ago, we watched a movie.”

He arched a brow. “While you were on the phone?”

I laughed. “Yeah. I called, and we just both happened to be watching the same thing.”

“Which movie did you watch?”

“What difference does that make?” I asked, frowning.

“It doesn’t. I’m just curious.”

“*Kill Bill*.” I shifted in my chair and fidgeted with my cast, plucking at the band running between my thumb and index finger. “*Volume Two*.”

“And you remained on the phone the entire time?” he asked, jotting down a few notes.

My lips twisted into a smirk. “I think I just said that.”

He nodded but didn’t comment on my sarcasm. “What do you anticipate getting out of this relationship?”

“Getting out of it?” I suspected where he was going with that question, but I decided to play dumb.

“You mentioned previously that Shannon is your stepbrother’s best friend. Do you perceive that being an issue, should things with her progress beyond these early days?”

So, I was wrong. That wasn’t what I expected at all. “Truthfully, I’ve thought about that. I’m sure Holden would have an aneurysm over it. There’s already a lot of animosity between us. On his part, that is. I don’t wish ill against him. And before you ask, no, I’m not associating with her to hurt him.”

“Associating is a rather impersonal word, don’t you think?”

Christ. These shrinks. “Fine. I didn’t mean it that way. Yes. I like her, probably more than I should. I remember thinking last weekend during our ... date ... that I feel like I can breathe around her.”

“And what does that mean to you?”

“Most women only see the pilot. They have this romanticized ideal of what that means, thanks to movies like *Top Gun*. They don’t care about the person, just the perceived image. But Shannon... she’s the total opposite of that. I can just be myself with her. She’s—”

Baxter cocked his head to the side, waiting for me to finish my thought.

“She’s real. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“You know, Pierce, I do believe this is the most open and honest you’ve been with me since we began our sessions.”

I chuckled. “I’m sure you’d just drag it out of me if I wasn’t.”

A robust belly laugh burst from his lips. “That I would. I had considered giving you another homework assignment today, but I don’t think I will. Something tells me you’ll do just fine on your own until we meet next week.”

“Yes, sir.” I stood and tucked my hat under my arm. “Thank you.”

He stood as well and propped his fingers on the desk’s surface. “Keep doing what you’ve been doing, and we’ll see what happens when that cast comes off next week.”

I gave him a quick salute before spinning on my heel and strolling out of his office. The heat hit me as soon as I stepped from the building, but it didn’t seem nearly as oppressive as it had when I’d arrived.

Maybe there was something to my psych sessions after all.

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The day’s psych session kept repeating in my head, making me question my beliefs and the way I’d lived my life up to that point. It had always made sense to keep people—namely, women—at arm’s length. Captain Baxter hit that nail on the head when he observed that I did it to prevent hurting anyone the way I’d been hurt.

He made me see it with fresh eyes. I was eight when my father died. Why had I allowed something that happened almost thirty years ago to maintain such a tight hold on my life?

My thoughts drifted to the cookout at Ben's the previous weekend. All of my friends were married. Watching their kids chase each other around the yard—being kids—had sparked something inside me. I wouldn't say that I suddenly wanted a family, but it made me want *something more*. Maybe I was foolish for even considering it, but a part of me wanted to see if it was truly possible to do what I do and have what most people considered a 'normal' life.

Maybe that's what pushed me to pick up the phone and call Shannon.

She answered on the third ring, sounding somewhat breathless but still pleased that I called. "Hey."

"Hi. Did I call at a bad time?"

"Huh? Oh, no. I made a quick stop at the store after work and just walked through the door."

"I can call back," I said, hoping she wouldn't take me up on my offer.

"Don't be silly," she scoffed. "I can multi-task. So, what's up?"

"Nothing. I just called"—*man up, for fuck's sake*—"are you busy tomorrow?"

"Busy? Well, I work until noon." She paused. "But you know that."

"I meant, tomorrow night. Do you have any plans tomorrow night?" I held my breath as I waited for her answer, hoping she wouldn't turn me down.

"Well, I was going to wash my hair tomorrow night," she teased. "But no, I don't have any plans."

A rough chuckle rasped out of me. "You're funny."

Shannon giggled. "You might have said that to me before."

"Yeah. It's still true."

Her giggle turned into laughter, a light, carefree sound that made me feel things that belonged in a romance novel. Not that I'd ever read one, but I was aware of the genre.

"Why do you ask?"

I drew a deep breath and hoped I didn't sound like a bumbling teenager on his first date. "One of the pubs on the beach has a local music festival that starts tomorrow afternoon. I think they've scheduled four or five bands to play. My buddy Ben told me about it, and it sounds like it should be fun. I thought you might like to go."

Shit. I was rambling, sort of the way Shannon did whenever she was nervous. “Anyway. Just thought I’d ask. I know it’s not dinner and a movie, but I really would like to see you again.”

“Ahem,” she gasped. “What kind of music?”

“I think they’re all rock cover bands, mainly classic rock to alternative. Some grunge.”

“Whew. That’s a relief. I was afraid you’d tell me it was country. That’d be a deal-breaker.”

“See? Funny.” My heartbeat slowed from a full gallop to a trot. “It will probably run late, so I thought—if you wanted—you could stay in my guest room. That way, you wouldn’t have to drive home at one or two in the morning.” She didn’t say anything right away, and I immediately thought of what she’d told me about the last time she’d stayed at Holden’s. “Or I can get a hotel room for you if that would make you more comfortable. It’s fine either way. Whichever you prefer.”

“I’m not going to ask you to pay for a hotel room.” She paused again, and I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. “I can get my own room.”

And just like that, the air was sucked from my lungs, like losing cabin pressure. What the hell had I expected? Of course, she would feel safer staying at a hotel than with me. Why wouldn’t she? Sure, we’d spent hours on the phone getting to know each other, but we hadn’t spent that much time together.

I tried to school my voice to restrain the sudden wave of disappointment, but I wasn’t sure I was all that successful. “Cool. I can text you a few recommendations of the nicer places to stay.”

“Alek. I’m kidding.” She chuckled, and it morphed into something resembling a cackle. “Oh, man. You make it too easy. The guest room is fine.”

My brain caught up, and I joined her laughter. “Okay. That wasn’t all that funny.”

“Oh, sure it was.” She snorted, and her amusement devolved into staccato hiccups. “Crap. This sucks.”

“That’s what you get for being a snot,” I teased.

“What time”—*hic*— “does it st—”—*hic*— “start?”

“Are you okay? Do you need a drink of water or something?”

“No”—*hic*— “they’ll go—”—*hic*— “away in a mi—”—*hic, hic*— “minute.”

“The music is supposed to start at five, but Ben and I were talking about getting there earlier, around two-thirty or three.”

Her hiccups lessened, but her voice radiated tension. “Your friend is going, too?”

“Yeah, and his wife. As well as our other friends, the guys that Ben works with—and their wives.”

“Um...”

“I guess I should’ve mentioned that at the beginning of the conversation, but it’s not a big deal. It’s all super casual, and we’re just going to hang out at the beach with some friends. They’re cool. I think you’ll like them.” I forced myself to pause and take a deep breath. “But I’ll understand if you decide now that you’d rather not come.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just—”

“Just what?”

“It’s silly,” she murmured, more to herself than me. “Is that going to be weird with your friends? I mean, if we just show up together? Are they expecting you to bring a date?” She exhaled harshly, and I could imagine the bright red flush covering her face. “Sorry. I’m being a weirdo.”

I exhaled and shoved a hand through my hair. “No, you’re not. It’s not a big deal. Yes, they will probably give me some shit about it, but that’s just what we do to each other. If I know Ben, he will probably try to warn you off me.” I chuckled. “You know, kind of like Holden did.”

“Good grief.” She laughed. “I would hope your friends are at least nicer about it than Holden was.”

“Actually, yeah, they will be. Believe me, they’d love nothing more than to tease me about having a girlfriend.”

Shit. Had I really said that? I must have lost my mind.

Shannon released a nervous titter but didn’t say anything.

“Look, I’m new at this, so what do you say we just see what happens?”

“Okay.” She released another exhale that sounded more relieved than anxious. “I can do that.”

Our agreement not to define our nebulous relationship should have put me at ease. After all, wasn't I accustomed to loose, casual acquaintances with women? Yeah, but I was beginning to realize that wasn't what I wanted. Not with her. Shannon was different. Maybe it was my inner caveman, but I was overcome with the urge to claim her and make her mine. I'd have to proceed with caution, or we could both get hurt.

And hurting Shannon was the last thing I wanted to do.

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## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

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## Shannon

Nervous anticipation filled me as I loaded my car for the short drive to Virginia Beach. Alek and I had agreed not to define anything yet, but after we'd hung up, I realized that was exactly what I hoped we would do.

Ugh. I was such a spaz when it came to men, and if anything, I should tell Alek to run as far away from me as fast as possible. Based on my losing track record, we were on borrowed time, and soon everything would come crashing down.

But until that happened, I was going to enjoy every minute of our time together.

See? I was a total spaz.

I made another sweep through the house to check if I'd missed anything I might need when Holden's name flashed across the screen of my cell phone. Not who I wanted to deal with at the present time, but I'd been dodging his calls for a while and felt obligated to answer.

Forcing a smile that I hoped he would hear in my voice, I swiped my thumb across the answer button. "Hey, you."

"Finally. Where have you been?" The heavy tone of demand laced his voice, and frankly, it made me angry. "I've been trying to reach you, but my calls always roll to voice mail."

"I've been busy." My smile remained as I locked the house and slid into my car. A quick flick of my wrist and the engine purred to life. A moment later, the Bluetooth connected, picking up the call. I rolled



my eyes, irritated at myself for feeling obligated to apologize. “Sorry if I’ve been neglecting you.”

“Are you in the car?” he asked, ignoring my apology.

“Uh, yeah. I’m just headed over to the cat café. A few of the kitties need their booster shots.”

“That’s so great. I love that you donate your time there.”

I grimaced at how easily I could lie to my best friend, and he believed me. “Thanks.”

I navigated through traffic and took the entrance ramp for the highway south to Virginia Beach. A sudden flash of guilt flared in my chest, but at the same time, I knew Holden would have a conniption over me going to see Alek.

I also doubted he would accept any type of relationship between us. At that moment, however, I didn’t care. I’d lie as long as I needed to until I knew where things were headed. Then Alek and I could make the decision to tell Holden—together.

“I haven’t seen you since the July Fourth party at Dad’s, and I wanted to see when we could get together again.”

Another thing that annoyed me about Holden was his refusal to acknowledge the river house in Newport was as much Camila’s as it was Owen’s. It was just another way to keep Alek at arm’s length.

“Well, that might be tough. You’re tied up with the campaign in Alexandria. I live in Newport. It makes getting together a little difficult.”

His voice dropped an octave, increasing the severity of his tone. “What if I came to visit? There’s no rule that says I have to stay in Alexandria all the time. And”—he drew in a measured breath—“I could really use a plus one at another event next weekend in Richmond.”

*I knew it.*

“Holden, I love you, but I can’t go to any more of those events with you. I just can’t. That’s not me, and I’m still weirded out by the way things went the last time.”

He groaned. “Aw, come on. I explained that. That will never happen again.”

I maneuvered the car easily through traffic as I attempted to corral my thoughts into a coherent order that would make sense to

Holden. He never took “no” for an answer. In fact, I’m not sure the word was in his vocabulary. I suppose that’s what made him so good at his job.

“That doesn’t matter, Holden. Alcohol or not, you clearly have feelings that I don’t share. You are my best friend, and I love you. Truly. But if that night taught me nothing else, it showed me that you and I are on different pages regarding our friendship. Hell, we aren’t even in the same book.”

“Are you seeing someone? Is that why you’ve been ignoring me?”

That flare of guilt pulsed through me again, but anger at the way he dismissed my feelings followed close behind. “That’s really none of your business.”

“Then I guess that’s a yes,” he grumbled, a hard edge in his voice.

“No, that’s a non-committal answer because it’s truly none of your business. You’re just mad that I won’t go to your stupid gala, or fundraiser, or whatever with you. I have always gone along with whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted it because you’re my best friend. But you know what? I can’t think of a single time you’ve ever done that for me. You wouldn’t even acknowledge that the creepy senator hit on me on July Fourth.”

“Christ, are we on this again?”

A sudden rush of heat flooded my body. I couldn’t recall ever being that angry with him. “You know what? I’m done. I can’t talk to you anymore because I find you frustrating and disagreeable. I’ll call you when I’m ready to finish this conversation.”

“Shan—”

I didn’t give him the chance to finish his comment or beg me to reconsider. I hit the ‘end’ button and disconnected the call.

We’d known each other forever, but at that moment, I wondered if Holden had ever really been my friend.

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I turned onto Alek's street, double-checking the address before parking at the curb. The home was a modest ranch-style in red brick with white trim and black shutters. A white storm door partially concealed the turquoise front door—the only pop of color on the structure's façade, other than the US flag affixed to the front of the compact front porch.

A wave of *déjà vu* swept through me as I slid from the car and grabbed my overnight bag from the back seat. A few short weeks ago, I had a tremendous amount of trepidation about staying the night at the Carlisle house, yet I was about to spend the night with Holden's stepbrother. Talk about irony.

The only difference was that this time the feeling was borne from hope for the unknown rather than dread.

I strolled up the walk and climbed the porch steps, taking another deep breath before extending a hand to ring the doorbell. The two minutes I waited felt like an eternity before the inner door swung open.

Alek beamed at me as he pushed the storm door toward me. He was dressed in grey board shorts and a plain white T-shirt. Both garments skimmed his form, highlighting the shape and strength of his muscles. I sucked in a breath and forced my gaze back to his.

"Hey, Shannon." He backed away and beckoned me inside, taking my bag as he closed the door behind me. "How was the drive?"

"Great. Traffic wasn't bad at all. I was surprised." I clamped my mouth shut, cutting off the possibility of yet another incoherent ramble.

He inclined his head toward the interior. "C'mon. I'll give you the nickel tour."

I chuckled and followed him. The decor was light and airy, with a beachy vibe—definitely not what I expected considering the exterior design. I briefly wondered if Camila had influenced him in any way as he led me through the house.

"And this is the guest room." He ushered me through the door and placed my bag on the foot of the antique iron bed.

The room was decorated in a tropical motif. Prints of jellyfish adorned one wall, and the comforter depicted lush foliage and bright

pink flamingos. Lightweight cotton curtains in a coordinating shade of green covered the window. I chuckled, unable to contain my laughter.

“What?” Alek asked, his brows drawn together.

“Flamingos?”

He shook his head. “Mom’s idea. She redecorated during one of my last deployments. She wanted to *surprise* me.”

A loud, rumbling belly laugh exploded out of me. I couldn’t help it. “How did I know you were going to say that?”

Alek arched a brow. “Really? It’s bad enough Ben gives me shit about it, and now you’re going to bust my balls, too?”

I struggled to rein in my reaction. “I’m sorry. I promise I’m not trying to hurt your balls.”

“You’re not?”

Heat filled my cheeks. “No. Are you mad?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I was just giving you a hard time.”

I growled and swatted his arm. “Jerk.”

His smile widened. “Do you need to change or anything before we go?”

“Nope.” I had anticipated he’d be ready to leave when I arrived, so I changed before leaving the house. “I’m ready to go whenever you are.”

“Just take your ID. You won’t need anything else.”

“Are you sure?”

He sighed and cocked his head to one side. “Considering this is a date, the gentleman”—he gestured to himself—“pays for everything.”

“Well ... yeah ... but—”

“No. I invited you to stay, so you’re my guest. I’ve got you.”

Oh, man. Did he ever. He had no idea how true that statement was. It made our time together dangerous.

I was so screwed.

A shudder ran down my spine as I drew a breath and attempted my best southern belle accent. “I do apologize. I didn’t mean to impugn your honor, sir.”

Alek’s shoulders shook with laughter. “That was the worst southern accent I’ve ever heard.”

“I was born in Virginia,” I complained. “That counts as southern.”

“Okay. But the accent you just attempted was, I’m assuming, from Georgia.” He arched a brow. “Scarlett O’Hara, right?”

“Maybe.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “I think you need to practice that a bit more.”

I crossed my arms and huffed in fake annoyance. In truth, I was anything but annoyed. I was secretly pleased that Alek and I were developing the type of relationship where we could kid around and tease each other. I remembered my grandparents being like that. It was something I’d always wanted and hoped to have someday. “Whatever.”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “Well, if you’re ready, we should probably get going. Don’t want to keep Ben waiting.”

I shrugged and followed Alek to his truck. “Tell me about your friends. What are they like?”

He glanced at me from the corner of his eye as he backed out of the driveway. “Well, Ben is my best friend, but the other guys are cool. We typically hang out when I’m home.”

“What about their wives?” I chewed on a thumbnail.

Alek reached across the console and rested his hand on my arm. My heart skipped a beat at the contact. Part of me wished he’d taken my hand in his. “Would you rather not go? I’ll call Ben and tell him we can’t make it, and then we’ll go do something else.”

My gut clenched. The offer, though sweet and considerate, made me feel needy. “No. I’m being stupid.”

“You’re not stupid.” He tightened his grip. “I get that it can be a bit nerve-wracking to meet new people.”

“I’m just—”

We stopped at a red light, and he tilted his head toward me. “What?”

“I’m better with animals.”

His hand stroked my forearm before giving it a slight squeeze. “You are exceptional with animals, but in my opinion, you’re damn good with people too. You’ll be fine.”

Was it silly that I had the sudden urge to pat myself on the back?

Unsure of how to respond, I simply shrugged and turned my head to gaze out the window. Alek’s hand remained on my arm until we

reached our destination. I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy the prolonged contact.

We parked in a lot down the street from the pub and strolled the short distance hand-in-hand. A small part of me dared to hope, yet again, that whatever was growing between us wouldn't crash and burn.

Alek guided me toward the bar. We stopped in front of a muscular man standing beside a willowy blonde who could have been a model. Alek clapped his free hand on the man's shoulder. They were the same height, but the other guy was thicker and bulkier.

"I see you started without us. Asshole."

The man turned, muscles tensed for a fight, but relaxed and smiled when he saw Alek. "You're late. Dick."

They grinned and clasped hands before leaning in for the obligatory "man hug." Alek backed away and rested an arm across my shoulders. "Shannon, this is Ben. Or Hulk, whichever you prefer."

Ben extended a hand. He arched a brow and glanced at Alek before turning his gaze toward me. "Nice to meet you. I was beginning to think Alek made you up."

"Nope. I'm real." I chuckled nervously. "What does Hulk mean? Other than being a Marvel superhero."

"That's my call sign." Ben laughed and gestured to his wife. "This is my wife, Gretchen, aka Jilted."

I nodded and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you. Were you ... are you ... in the military, too?"

"No." She pushed Ben out of the way and moved beside me. "But they typically give you a call sign when you join this crazy crew. Don't take these guys too seriously. They do enough of that already."

I briefly wondered if they'd give me a call sign and how long it would be before they did. That was if I became a part of their group.

Alek gave Gretchen a hard look before turning toward me. "What would you like to drink?"

"Blue Moon if they have it. Otherwise, I guess a Miller Lite."

He nodded and stepped to the bar with Ben to order drinks. Gretchen tugged on my elbow, pulling me to the side while we waited.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look a little freaked out,” she said, the ghost of a smile on her lips. “Like you’re feeling a bit overwhelmed, maybe?”

I nodded as my shoulders sagged in silent acknowledgment. And I thought I’d gotten better at hiding my reactions. “Yeah.”

She glanced behind me, confirming the guys were still occupied. “How long have you two been seeing each other?”

I shrugged. “Not long. I guess, officially, this is our second date?” It came out as a question, even though I intended it as a statement of fact.

“Truth be told, I was surprised when they concocted the plan to hang out tonight.” Gretchen laughed. “Doubly so when Ben told me Alek was bringing a date. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve seen Alek with a woman since I’ve known him.”

“Yeah, I guess you could say I was warned about him. Not that he’s been anything but great with me.” I tilted my head for a quick glance over my shoulder. “I asked him if my being here would be weird for him.”

“I know he’s told Ben a little, and apparently, you’ve gotten under Alek’s skin. But you know how guys are. They can be rather obtuse.”

Her words conjured an image of Alek and Ben gossiping over a round or two of beers, making me snicker. There was something about Gretchen that put me at ease. I knew intuitively that she and I could become great friends in time. There weren’t many people I could say that about.

Alek and Ben returned and handed us our drinks. Alek rested an arm across my shoulders and nudged me playfully. “What’s so funny?”

Gretchen and I shared a look. “Nothing,” we said simultaneously.

“Hmm...” Alek arched a brow.

“Dude, don’t even ask,” Ben warned.

I shifted my gaze toward the stage, hoping I could redirect the conversation. “Looks like the first band is about ready to start.”

Ben checked his phone and slid it back into his pocket. “That was Liam. They’re on their way. Should be here in about fifteen minutes.”

My stomach twisted as I took a quick sip of beer. The abrasive liquid rolled over my tongue. If only it would wash away my ridiculous

and unspoken fears.

“You okay?” Alek asked, leaning close to whisper in my ear.

“Mm-hmm.” I forced a smile. “Fine.”

“Why don’t we go find a good spot on the beach?” Gretchen suggested, gently pulling Ben’s arm as she moved in that direction. “The other guys can spring for a few buckets of beer to keep the party rolling.”

Ben’s lips twisted into a smirk. “I love the way you think, babe.”



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## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

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## Alek

I had officially lost my mind.

That thought ran through my mind on a constant loop, berating me for thinking it was a good idea to introduce Shannon to the guys. It was too soon. Things were too new between us, and there I was, subjecting her to the idiots I considered friends. Who was I kidding? They were more than friends. They were brothers. Especially Ben.

That knowledge didn't make things any easier on Shannon. I could tell she was on edge from the moment we arrived. Gretchen was amazing, as usual, deflecting Shannon's attention to try and put her at ease. I knew the other ladies would do the same, but that fact didn't do much to decrease my guilt at dropping her into an unfamiliar situation.

Which probably meant I was no better than Holden. And that pissed me off.

I caught myself watching Shannon closely, looking for signs she was ready to bail, but none materialized. Then I wondered if I had imagined her discomfort. Maybe my situational awareness wasn't as good as I had thought.

"Where's your head?" asked Mark, making me jump.

Yeah. Situational awareness was definitely off.

"Huh? Right here. Where else would it be?"

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Well, you've been laughing and nodding at all the appropriate times, but your eyes haven't left Shannon since we got here. Is there something you haven't told us?"

Liam shook his head and reached for another beer from the bucket between us. "Here it comes."

"I'm just keeping an eye on her. You know, to make sure she's comfortable. I dropped her into this situation with very little warning. Most people would find a bunch of ex-SEALs intimidating."

"Call this a baptism by fire. If she can deal with us, she's a keeper," joked Quinn.

"Man..." I sighed, shaking my head.

Mark stepped beside me and draped an arm across my shoulders. "It's okay to like a chick, Alek. You know that, right?"

I shoved off his arm and took a step back. "What the hell, dude?"

"What Mark is clumsily trying to say," murmured Ben, lifting his drink to his lips. "Is that we've all been there, and the fall doesn't hurt nearly as bad as you'd think."

"I do not need this shit from you, of all people." His words rang true and reinforced everything I'd already been thinking. I just didn't need to hear it from my best friend and our buddies.

"Then why did you bring her here if you weren't at least a little serious?" asked Liam. "You had to know we were gonna give you shit about her."

Fuck if that didn't summarize the entire situation in under two minutes. It must have been all those required psych visits because I suddenly wanted to come clean to my friends.

"Okay. I'm only going to say this once." My gaze bounced to each of my friends in turn, eyes narrowed to indicate I was serious. "Yeah. Shannon's different from all the other chicks I've been out with, and I would appreciate it if you lot wouldn't run her off. I don't know what the hell we're doing, but I'd like her to stick around long enough to find out. Get it?"

Quinn and Liam held up their hands in defeat as Mark snickered and downed the last of his beer.

Ben grinned and tilted his bottle toward me. "I accept."

I scowled. "Accept what?"

"Your invitation to be your best man. I accept."

I coughed, choking on a mouthful of beer while the other guys crowed with mirth. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

He clamped a hand on my good shoulder and squeezed. "You and I both know where this is headed. I'm just trying to alleviate some of your stress."

"You're full of shit."

The others gawked at us, barely holding their laughter in check. "This is going to be fun to watch," said Mark.

Quinn crowed. "I say we take bets on how long it will take Alek to pop the question."

"You fuckers are out of your minds," I growled.

Liam smirked. "I'll put a hundred on Alek proposing before this time next year."

"That's making it too easy," complained Quinn. "You're giving him too much time."

"Nah," said Liam, grinning. "It'll be a few months before he decides he's all in. Then he'll freak and try to talk himself out of it. It'll take time for him to realize he can't live without her."

"You're full of shit," I grumbled.

"Then put your money where your mouth is," dared Mark. "Let's see what you're made of."

Ben nudged me with his elbow. "You know you brought this on yourself, right?"

"Fine." I turned toward Liam. "You're saying this time next year, right?"

"Let's be generous and say by the end of August next year. You'll ask her by then, if not before. I guarantee it."

I glanced at Mark and Quinn. "Is that what you think, too?"

They shared a look and turned back to me. "Yeah. We're in. A hundred bucks says you'll propose by the end of next August."

"What about you?" I asked Ben.

He shook his head. "I'm sitting this one out."

"Man, don't be a pussy," goaded Quinn. "You're in this, too, you know."

"Nope. I'm not going there." Ben took another sip of beer and chuckled. "You knuckleheads don't know what you've just started. I'm gonna sit back and laugh my ass off when this shit blows up in your faces."

“Okay. Ben’s out.” I shrugged and extended my hand. “But you three are good to go, right? Shake on it?”

Liam bit down on his bottom lip and narrowed his eyes, his gaze shifting from me to Ben and back again. “Something’s not right.”

“No. Ben’s just smart enough to know you guys are gonna lose.”

Mark stepped forward and grabbed my hand. “I’m in.”

“Me, too,” said Quinn, taking my hand next.

Liam shook his head as if he knew it was a bad idea but extended his hand next. “Fine. Let’s do this.”

I chuckled and exchanged a glance with Ben. “It’s like taking candy from a baby.”

I didn’t care about the stupid bet. That was just to make the guys shut up. What I cared about was how much of what they said was true and where the shit with Shannon was going.

Time would tell.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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## Shannon

Alek and I left after the last band finished. Both of us were drained from being in the heat most of the afternoon and evening. I had picked up a bit of the conversation between Alek and his friends, and I knew they had given him grief over my being there—but it didn't seem mean-spirited.

We arrived home shortly after one o'clock, tired but edgy from the leftover adrenaline.

"It looked like you made some new friends tonight," Alek said as he pulled into the garage and killed the engine.

I beamed. "Oh, yeah. They were all great. And really welcoming. We talked about trying to have a girls' night in a couple weeks if they can all line up babysitters again."

Alek chuckled. "I'm surprised Charlie didn't suggest putting Mark in charge of that."

"She did, but then she changed her mind and said it would be better if Liam *took point on that mission.*" I chuckled at her choice of words.

Laughter erupted from Alek's mouth as the garage door rumbled closed. He opened the door leading into the kitchen and gestured for me to go first. "She's right about that. Mark's a great guy, but he's just a giant kid himself. It wouldn't take long for the kids to take over if Mark was in charge."

I slipped off my shoes before stepping inside the house. A thin layer of sand still clung to my legs, and I felt sticky all over. "Ugh. I'm in desperate need of a shower."

“Yeah, me too.” He pushed the door closed behind us. “What did you think about the bands?”

“I loved them all, but I think the Hollow Stripes were my favorite. They kind of reminded me of Pearl Jam. At least, the singer did. His voice.”

He cocked his head to one side, a thoughtful look on his face. “Huh. I can see that. I’ve only heard them play one other time but didn’t notice.”

We stood in his living room about a foot away from each other, as if neither of us knew what to say next. It was odd that we were so unsure after we’d been chattering away all evening, cutting up and having fun with his friends. I guess they were my friends now, too.

Finally, I couldn’t take it any longer and broke the silence. I jabbed a thumb over my shoulder. “I’m gonna go grab that shower now.”

Alek nodded, a slow rocking of his head. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but instead, he allowed his eyes to drift closed as if trying to convince himself to remain silent. “Yeah, okay.”

Unease tugged at my spine, making me wonder if the evening had ultimately been a mistake, even though we’d both had a great time together. Resigned that I may have imagined all of that, I turned toward my room, already planning my departure the next morning. It needed to be as graceful as possible. I couldn’t handle more awkwardness.

As I turned to go, a sudden yank pulled me back. Alek’s right hand folded around my upper arm, gripping firmly but not causing any pain. I stopped in front of him, only inches away. Our gazes locked in a moment that felt like an eternity before his mouth was on mine, his lips crushing, bruising my own. My lips parted, granting him entrance. He tasted of summer and the malty sweetness of beer. There was nothing slow or delicate about his kiss. He took what he wanted, and at that moment, I knew he wanted me.

My breath came out in ragged gasps as he backed away, breaking our kiss. “Holy cow.”

It was lame but the best I could manage.



“Guess I should have asked first,” he joked, pressing a sweet kiss to my lips. “But I’ve been wanting to do that for a while.”

I arched a brow and swiped my tongue along my lower lip, savoring the part of him that lingered. “What took you so long?”

That was all the prompting he needed because he dipped his head and took my mouth again. I shivered as his hands stroked the length of my spine, the hard plaster of his cast pressing into my back. He pulled away and nibbled down the side of my neck, raking his whiskers across my skin. A shudder rippled through me, followed by an ill-timed giggle.

“What’s funny?” he mumbled against my lips.

“Your stubble tickled.”

“Sorry.” He drew his nose along my jaw, his breath warm on the side of my face and against my ear. “Not sorry.”

I turned my head and kissed the corner of his mouth. “Didn’t think so.”

Alek pulled away, maintaining his embrace but putting a little space between us. “Should I have asked first?”

My brows drew together. “About kissing me or tickling my neck?”

He lifted one shoulder. “Either.”

I pulled my lower lip between my teeth. “Maybe. But I won’t hold it against you.”

He sighed. “Well, since I’m already in trouble, I suppose it wouldn’t matter if I did it again, would it?”

Oh, it mattered, all right. Everything that had transpired between us mattered. “If you must,” I teased.

Alek moved slowly, drawing his lips across my forehead, over my temple, down my cheek, along my jaw, and finally, my lips. His touch was tender, a whisper of contact. It was unexpected but not surprising. Regardless of the warnings I’d received, I suspected there was another side to him. I’d gotten a glimpse of it at the cat café and again during our trip to the Living Museum. He wasn’t as cold and unfeeling as he tried to appear.

When we finally broke apart, he rested his forehead against mine. His eyes were closed, and his breath was deep and even. He backed away slowly, releasing me and folding a hand around the

back of his neck. “I should let you get that shower. I’m going to grab one myself and head to bed.”

*Well, that was unexpected.* “Yeah. Okay.”

I turned to go, then stopped. My mouth opened to ask about the sudden shift between us, but I thought better of it and retreated to my room with a shake of my head, confused by the entire encounter. He’d changed from hot to cold in a nanosecond. I didn’t understand men, which was probably why my other relationships failed.

The shower was exactly what I needed, cleansing the sand from my body—I had sand in places one should never have sand—and pushing all the negative thoughts from my mind. Instead, I focused on the evening, how much fun I’d had, and my newly forged friendships.

And Alek’s kiss. Yeah. No way I could forget that, not that I would ever want to.

When I exited the bathroom, Alek’s bedroom door was closed. A thin bead of light seeped underneath, leading me to believe he was still awake. I was tempted to interrupt him and ask him exactly what the hell had happened after our kiss. I’d never been that woman, the one to push boundaries. But damn, I considered it.

I returned to my room and folded down the bed covers, telling myself to crawl between the sheets and go to sleep. After all, it had been a busy day, and I should have been exhausted. Instead, I was wired with anticipation of what could be.

*What would happen if I knocked on Alek’s door?*

There was only one way to find out. Guess I was going to push some boundaries after all—mine as well as his.

I stepped in front of the mirror to check my appearance and fluff my hair. Lingerie had never really been my thing, so the pajamas I wore were a simple T-shirt and shorts combo, white with tiny pink roses. Not very sexy from a man’s perspective, I suppose, but who knew what Alek would find sexy?

I wiped my palms on the hem of my shirt and reached for the doorknob, my fingers trembling as I pulled the door open. The strip of light still shone under Alek’s door.

I took a deep breath. Now or never.

Three steps and I stood in front of his bedroom door with my hand poised to knock. My heart hammered in my chest. The pulse in my neck throbbed. I didn't have a clue what I was doing, but I knew what I wanted. I was about to find out if Alek wanted the same thing.

I tapped lightly on the wooden surface, causing the door to shift in its frame and make more noise than intended. There was a soft creak, then muffled footsteps toward the door. Before I could convince myself it was a bad idea, the door swung open.

"Hey," Alek said. "Everything okay?"

My gaze traveled over the chiseled god standing in the doorway. He wore only a pair of black boxer briefs and his dog tags. Taught, sun-kissed skin covered his broad shoulders and toned chest. Hard planes of muscle defined his form, narrowing to a defined stomach and slim hips. A thin line of dark hair descended from his navel and disappeared beneath the waistband of his underwear. I couldn't stop myself from licking my lips.

A ghost of a smirk played over his lips when our gazes met once more.

"Yeah. Uh, I, uh, well," I stammered, unsure of how to go about seducing the Adonis in front of me. "I just wanted to ask you..."

He arched a brow. He propped his forearm on the edge of the door and rested the other hand on his hip. "Ask me what?"

I couldn't explain what came over me. I'd never done anything like it before, but I didn't think. I just acted.

I lunged forward and kissed him, throwing my arms around his neck. The sudden movement caught him off guard, and he stumbled backward a few steps, folding his arms around me to help maintain his balance. My actions may have surprised him, but he didn't hesitate to kiss me back.

At first.

"Shannon," he murmured, backing away. "Think about what you're doing."

"I am. I have." My cheeks flamed, but I didn't look away. My gaze stayed locked on his. "Tell me that you don't want me—or this—and I'll go back to my room and go to sleep."

His fingers threaded through my hair and lowered his mouth to mine. "I have a feeling neither of us is going to get any sleep tonight,

babe.” He spun me around and walked me backward until the back of my knees touched the bed. “Are you sure about this? Last chance to back out.”

I grasped the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head. When I lowered my arms, the thin piece of cotton floated to the floor. I arched a brow. “Does that answer work for you?”

He raked his teeth across his lower lip as he reached for me. “Affirmative.” His gaze traveled over me, drinking me in. I was self-conscious at first and started to cover myself. “Don’t. You’re beautiful. Perfect.”

I couldn’t deny a tiny swell of pride that a man like Alek would use those words to describe me.

His fingers traced the curve of my shoulder, followed by his lips as he kissed the light sprinkling of freckles there. He palmed my breast before lowering his head and taking me into his mouth. The tip of his tongue flicked my nipple, sending a jolt of electricity to my core. I shuddered and almost stopped him. It had been too long since I’d been with anyone, and the sensations were almost too much. I hadn’t realized how numb, how desensitized I’d become until Alek touched me.

“Are you okay?” he murmured, moving to my other breast.

“Mm-hmm.” Even though it was somewhat overwhelming, it felt too damn good for him to stop.

Lifting his head, he chuckled and gently pushed me onto the bed. I reclined on my elbows, admiring the sight of him as he also visually feasted on me. The hunger in his gaze was raw, blatant, and I drank it in, committing the moment to memory.

He bent at the waist and stripped off my shorts and panties in one quick motion. I released a nervous giggle when I remembered the tiny pink and red hearts covering the white cotton bikinis. His hands rested just above my knees. “Did that tickle?”

I lifted my head. “Nope. All good.”

If he hadn’t seen them, I damn sure wasn’t going to draw his attention to them. Not when there were other, more important tasks at hand.

His lips twisted into a smirk as he lowered his head and laced tender kisses up one leg, his hands following and paying special

attention to the soft skin around my ankle and behind my knee. Gooseflesh rose after every caress, sending gentle tremors ricocheting through my body.

My fingers curled into the comforter as I fought the urge to push his head downward when he reached my hip while carefully avoiding the very place I needed him most. His lips and fingers teased, promising release as he worked his way down the other leg. When he reached my ankle, he curved his hands under my thighs—muttering an almost inaudible curse about his cast—and jerked me to the edge of the bed.

Trembling with need, I parted my legs shamelessly, giving him unfettered access. Alek moved slowly, sliding his nose along the soft flesh of my inner thigh, his breath releasing in hot puffs of air against my skin.

My body jerked the moment his tongue touched my aching core. "Oh!"

"Is that all right?" Alek murmured before circling my clit with the tip of his tongue.

"Yes," I panted. "God, yes."

He dipped his chin and focused on his task, alternating pressure with each stroke of his tongue. He slid a finger inside me, causing my hips to buck. I ground against him, riding his tongue, wanting more. *Needing* more.

"Alek," I cried, fisting his hair, holding him close. "Harder. Don't stop."

Another finger joined the first as he fucked me hard, giving me what I craved. I exploded around him, still gripping his hair, his name bursting from my lips with a shout. My body went limp, sinking into the bed with each ragged breath.

Alek leaned over me, the cool metal of his dog tags giving me a chill as he peppered my stomach and chest with soft kisses. "That was fucking amazing."

I snorted. "You're telling me."

Supporting himself on one elbow, he hovered above me and brushed the hair from my face with his other hand. "You're beautiful, Shannon. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise."

Heat filled my cheeks as I reached for him with shaky arms and tugged at the waistband of his boxers. I was too bare, too exposed for such compliments. "Your turn."

He shook his head and captured my hands with his left. "Next time, babe. Right now, I need to be inside you. I don't think I can wait any longer."

My legs folded around his hips and drew him closer. "Sounds good to me."

He gently moved my legs and straightened, taking a step or two back. "Hang on a sec."

I lifted onto my elbows and watched as he lowered his boxers and kicked them aside. My tongue darted out to wet my upper lip. "Oh my."

He gave me a cocky smile as he ripped open a condom and rolled it down his impressive length. Honestly, I was sort of relieved he didn't want to take me up on my offer to return the favor. I wasn't all that experienced with blow jobs and didn't know how I would manage it.

Fully sheathed, he took his place between my legs and resumed our previous position. I dug my heels into Alek's backside and pulled him closer. This time he didn't stop me. Without preamble, he bent slightly at the knees and sunk into me.

"Oh, God," I moaned.

His answering groan rumbled in his chest as he set a slow and steady cadence. Shockwaves of pleasure rippled through me, and I knew it wasn't simply because he felt so damn good. As much as I had tried to guard my heart, somewhere along the way, I had fallen for Alek Pierce.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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## Alek

I rolled to the right and into a warm body. My eyes squinted open against the glare and focused on Shannon's delicate features. She lay on her stomach, her face turned toward me. Her warm brown hair was a mass of unruly curls, no doubt the result of our vigorous lovemaking the night before. I brushed a few errant strands from her face, noticing again the smattering of freckles dusting the tops of her cheeks and bridge of her nose. Her lips were parted, forming a perfect pink bow, allowing soft snoring sounds to escape.

Overcome with desire, I moved closer, intending to pull her to me so I could spoon behind her. She jolted slightly and clamped her mouth shut as I slid my arm around her waist as a prompt to roll onto her side. She grumbled at first but straightened herself and turned her head so she could adjust her position. I was surprised she didn't wake.

Her body molded itself to mine, and I had to slip a hand between us to adjust my cock. I may have been glib about asking permission last night, but this morning was a different matter altogether. Regardless of how badly I wanted to slide my dick inside her warmth, I wouldn't—no, *couldn't* do it while she was still asleep.

Like most surprises, Shannon arrived in my life when I least expected it. We may have met years before, but I never knew her. Hell, I hadn't even remembered her. But being with her now was the best thing that could have happened to me. And now that I'd had her in my bed, there was no way I could go back to the way things were. I'd already known that Shannon was different from all the other



women I'd ever been with, but I hadn't realized exactly how different she was. She wasn't—could never be—a casual relationship. Shannon was the type of woman a man longed to meet. The type he should choose as a wife.

That was a sobering fucking thought.

I was immediately reminded of that stupid bet with the guys and how they thought I would propose to Shannon by the same time next year. Oh, it had all been in good fun while we were hanging out and drinking, but suddenly, the thought wasn't that stupid or ridiculous.

But I wasn't ready for that. No way I could be that guy.

*Could I?*

Trying not to wake her, I released Shannon and slowly inched my way backward until I could slip from the bed. I hurried to the bathroom and splashed some cold water on my face. The bad thing about July in Virginia was that the cold tap water was never all that cold. Regardless, it did the trick, allowing me to fully wake up so I could talk some sense into myself. What could I really offer her? I was still in the Navy and probably would be until I hit retirement age. What kind of life could we possibly have?

It reminded me of everything Captain Baxter had said, how the two options weren't mutually exclusive and that it was possible to have a military career and a family. I wasn't so sure about that. It hadn't worked out so well for my parents, had it?

Everything in my life had spun out of control since the crash. Was getting involved with Shannon a bad idea? Or was it the right thing?

My uncertainty convinced me that I needed some time to get my head straight. Damn shame I had to wait until Friday for my next psych visit. I was sure Baxter would have some sage advice about the entire situation.

I splashed more cold water over my face and ran my hand around the back of my neck before grabbing the nearest towel as I contemplated the best way to ask Shannon to leave.

And once again, the similarities to Holden stung like a bitch.

When I returned to the bedroom, she was sitting up, her folded arms resting on her bent knees. The sheet was draped over her legs and rested loosely at her waist, revealing her torso. If not for her long hair, I would have been granted an amazing view of her slender

form. An artist would have been able to properly capture the scene and the way the morning light graced her beauty. Seeing her there, in my bed, knocked the breath from my lungs. It was like she'd always been there. Like she belonged there.

My gut clenched, and once again I was reminded of Quinn's stupid wager.

Shannon smiled, and it was breathtaking. "Morning."

"Hey." I leaned against the bathroom doorway. "Sleep okay?"

Her smile faltered a bit, her lips quivering. "Yeah. How 'bout you?"

I stayed in place and struggled to cross my arms in front of my chest. I looked forward to the day I could get rid of the fucking cast. "I think so."

"Is everything all right?" Her brows drew together, creating a tiny 'v' in the space between. "You look like something's bugging you."

"No, all good." My right hand wrapped around the back of my neck as I forced a smile. "I, uh ... I remembered that I promised to help Ben with some shit today."

She arched a brow. "Really? You didn't say anything about that last night. Neither did Ben."

Fuck. I hated lying. "Yeah, well, I just remembered."

"Okay." She dragged out the word to multiple syllables. "What are you trying to say?"

I started to cross my arms again, got frustrated, and finally settled my hands on my hips. "We won't be able to do breakfast. Or brunch. Lunch. Whatever."

She nodded. "Are you asking me to leave?"

"Yeah." I shrugged. "I guess."

All the happiness drained from her face, leaving behind a mask of rejection that quickly morphed into indifference. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she chewed on her bottom lip as her head bobbed in contemplation. I was being a dick, and I knew it. I wanted to tell her I was full of shit and that I didn't have plans, but if she stayed, I knew I'd never want her to leave. That couldn't happen yet. I had my own shit to sort out before anything like that could happen.

That rationalization didn't make me feel like any less of a dick, however.

She jumped out of bed, pulling the sheet with her and wrapping it around her body. A body I was now intimately familiar with after all the hours I'd spent worshipping it the night before. "Fine."

Shannon hustled past me, bumping into me as she walked by. She didn't even glance my way.

"Shan—"

She didn't reply. She stormed into the guest room and slammed the door. A few minutes later, she emerged with her overnight bag in tow. Her hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun, revealing graceful shoulders exposed by the pale blue sundress she wore. The dress hit just above her knees, providing a great view of her shapely calves.

Shannon was beautiful, yes. Hell, I'd gone out with a lot of beautiful women. But unlike all the others before her, she was equally beautiful on the inside. And I had most likely just fucked any serious chance I'd had with her.

"Shannon, wait."

She stopped, her bag in one hand, purse draped over the opposite shoulder. Determination was etched across her face. "Why? I don't want to hold you up. You have plans, right?"

"Just ... wait. One second."

"Alek." She dropped her chin and took several deep breaths. "I haven't asked for or expected anything from you. I haven't pressured you in any way. At least, I don't think I have. So, I don't know what's happening right now. I thought..."

I reached for her, but she pulled away. "Shan, let me explain."

"Explain?" Her brows lifted, and her eyes rounded in surprise. "Hmm. Let me see. You invited me here, and I thought we had a great time yesterday at the beach. Then we came back, and ... well, okay. I initiated things, but I thought we had moved forward. Last night, you even said you wanted to see where this was going." She sighed. "What changed since then? What's happened?"

"I don't—"

"You know what? No. I can't go through this again." She hitched the strap of her purse higher on her shoulder. "You've been throwing out all kinds of mixed signals since we connected on the Fourth. And that's fine. I get it. You don't want anything serious. Whatever. But

don't act like I'm different and then pull this crap. I've been down this road before, and I won't do it again. Figure out what the hell you want and let me know."

"Would you just listen for one fucking minute?"

"Listen to what? You haven't said anything except ask me to leave because you supposedly have plans with Ben today."

That was fair. "Things have been fucked up lately, and I know I'm being—"

She arched a brow. "A dick?"

"Yeah."

"Alek, I care about you. I do. But I refuse to play games. Either this—" she wagged a finger between us, "is something, or it isn't. I'm not going to be another notch, or whatever you call all the other women in your past. I'm not going to nurse another broken heart. I won't."

"I'm not trying to break your heart."

"No?" She made it to the front door and stopped with her hand on the knob. "Gretchen told me last night that she and Ben are taking the kids to see her parents today."

With that, she walked out of my house.

Hopefully, she hadn't just walked out of my life.

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"How's the arm, Pierce?"

I glanced down at the shriveled appendage and grimaced. "It looks and feels like an albino raisin, sir."

Baxter laughed and rocked backward in his chair. "I suppose it does. What about the shoulder?"

"Much better." I lifted my left arm and rolled it in a small circle. "PT has been a great help with that, though my range of motion isn't what it should be. Yet."

He nodded in understanding. "That will come in time."

"That's what the doctors say," I grumbled.

"You don't believe them?"

"No, I do. Why wouldn't I?"

He chewed on his lower lip before answering. "Why don't you tell me about the past week. How have things been going?"

My mood darkened. "Fine."

"Just 'fine'? How are things with Shannon?"

"We haven't talked much this week."

"Why is that?"

I dropped my gaze and focused on an imaginary speck of lint on my trousers. "I guess we've both been busy."

"You're still on leave. How busy have you been?"

My eyes narrowed. "Maybe she's been busy."

He nodded knowingly. "Okay."

I arched a brow. "You don't believe me?"

"Is there a reason I shouldn't?"

"You just seem a little dubious."

"Maybe that's because I think you're full of shit."

My eyes rounded. "Wow. Uh, okay. Didn't expect that."

"I've told you before that things will go easier if you simply talk to me."

I released a rough exhale and met his gaze. I'd already told the man more than I'd ever told anyone, and he knew as much about me as my best friend, and still, I had a difficult time opening up to him, even after all the weeks I'd been coming to see him. My shoulders sagged in defeat. "I invited her to the beach last weekend."

His eyes widened. "You invited her here?"

"Yeah. I offered her my guest room or a hotel room."

Baxter leaned forward slightly. "Which did she choose?"

"After giving me a hard time about it, she decided to stay in my guest room."

He nodded knowingly. It was something he did whenever he thought he had me figured out. "So, your new girlfriend drove to the beach to stay the night with you?"

"Yeah." I paused, then rushed an explanation. "But she's not my girlfriend."

"Ah." Another nod. "So, the woman you've been spending hours on the phone with every day, gone out of your way to spend time with, and invited to your home, isn't your girlfriend?"

And once again, he managed to summarize all the ways I've acted like a major dick. "Okay. I guess she is. But she may not be anymore. I really pissed her off."

He reached forward, grabbed his pen, and scribbled a few notes. I wanted to stand up so I could see what he was writing. Then again, maybe I really didn't want to know. "And how did you piss her off?"

I could sugar coat it, but there was no point. "I asked her to leave the next morning."

"How did that go? Were you having coffee and you just casually threw that out, or what exactly?"

I understood why he asked questions, and why he chose the specific ones he came up with. It wasn't because he was nosy, though he could have been that. It was because he was trying to get me to see the truth for myself.

And I hated that.

"Okay. We slept together."

Baxter returned my gaze, nonplussed. "And?"

"That's it? That's your reaction to that comment?"

"Pierce, you seem to be under the impression that I haven't figured you out." He leaned forward and rested his forearms on the desk. "For the past few weeks, you've been talking about how the relationship with Shannon has progressed. The things you've told me indicate it's become more than just a casual friendship. It stands to reason the next logical step was sex."

I lowered my head and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Why won't you just spit it out? Just say what's obviously on your mind."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Why won't you?"

Yeah. I hated that, too.

"I woke up thinking that things were as they should be. With Shannon and me, that is."

"You could see yourself being happy with her?"

"Yes."

"Then what happened?"

"I blew it. I lied and told her I had plans and needed her to leave."

He nodded. "I see. How did she take it?"

I snorted. "How do you think?"

Baxter didn't respond. He just sat there like the fucking Sphinx.

“She was pissed off. As she was leaving, she called me on the lie and told me not to talk to her until I figured out my shit.”

“Have you talked to her since?”

“A little.” I shrugged. “Well, we’ve texted a few times about mundane shit like the weather.”

“No hour-long phone conversations, then.”

“No.”

“How does that make you feel?”

I answered without hesitation. “Like a dick.”

He nodded. That was his sign for me to continue, and he wouldn’t say anything else until I did.

“I miss her.”

This time he cracked a smile. “And what do you intend to do about that?”

That was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it?

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

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## Shannon

In the week since Alek asked me to leave, we'd only shared a handful of text messages—and no meaningful conversation—and I was no closer to knowing where we stood. The tension between us was thick, even through such an impersonal mode of contact. I thought we had reached an important turning point in our relationship. How could I have been so wrong?

To make matters worse, Holden called multiple times throughout the week, no doubt trying to push his way back into my good graces. Every call was the same as the previous one, and each time we had the same argument: why was I dodging his calls, was I seeing someone, and who was it? The unfortunate by-product of those brief conversations was the dark mood I carried to work each day, which resulted in my curt responses to Dr. Charles and the rest of the staff.

I could only blame myself, though I tried my damndest to blame Alek. But how could I? I'd heard the stories, and I couldn't say I hadn't been warned. But I didn't believe it. Or maybe I just didn't want to. Besides, I was the one with a dismal track record when it came to relationships.

Finally, at the end of a very long week, I went home with my tail tucked between my legs, prepared for another sad, quiet evening. I stopped on the way home for a bottle of red, hoping the rare indulgence would soothe my frayed nerves and shattered spirit.

My mood lifted a little when my beloved pet and best friend, my black cat named Ebony, greeted me with her standard, demanding meow. I bent and scratched her behind the ears and down her back,

enjoying the suppleness of her silky coat. I gave her one last scratch just above the base of her tail and trailed my fingers down the length of the twitching appendage. “I hear you. What would madam like for dinner this evening?”

“Merrooww.”

“Then, I’ll see what I can do.”

I chuckled to myself as I walked the short distance to my bedroom to change out of my scrubs. Talking to my pet as if she were a person had to be a sign I was losing my mind. I treated her as more of a roommate than a pet.

It seemed like I was well on my way to the lonely life of a spinster, for sure. Talk about depressing.

After I had changed, I returned to the kitchen so I could feed Ebony and pour a well-deserved glass of Pinot Noir. With the cat fed and glass in hand, I retired to the living room and started searching Netflix for something to watch that wouldn’t make me feel worse about myself and my life. A knock on the door interrupted my search, and a flare of hope burst in my chest that maybe Alek had opted to make a surprise visit.

I set my glass on the side table and hurried to the door, stopping only long enough for a quick glance in the mirror hanging in the entry to check my appearance. I pinched my cheeks to give myself some color, fluffed my unruly mane, and opened the door.

“Happy Friday,” exclaimed Denise, holding up a bag of takeout from The Royal Pagoda, the best Chinese restaurant in town.

Disappointment squeezed my heart but quickly subsided at my friend’s thoughtfulness. I couldn’t fight my growing smile. “Wow. This is a surprise. Come on in.”

She grinned and stepped past me. “Given the hellacious week we’ve had—”

“You mean the week I’ve had and the way I’ve behaved,” I corrected her, brow arched.

“Well, yes, but regardless, it’s still been a bad week. I thought you could use some cheering up in the form of chicken with broccoli, egg rolls, and hot and sour soup.”

My stomach rumbled. I hadn’t even thought about dinner for myself yet. “That sounds amazing.”

I tipped my head toward the kitchen, indicating for her to follow me, and pulled out plates and silverware. Ebony glanced our way and immediately turned back to her dinner.

Denise ran a hand down Ebony's back for a quick scratch. "Hey there, pretty girl."

Ebony's ear twitched in response, but she otherwise didn't react.

"Would you like a glass of wine? Or, I have sparkling water, soda, or just plain water."

"Girl. Have you ever known me to turn down wine?"

I laughed and pulled another wine glass from the cabinet. "You've got a point."

She accepted the glass and took a sip, watching me as I unloaded the takeout bag. "So, do you want to tell me what's had your dander up this week?"

My shoulders sagged. "Can't we just forget it and move on?"

"Um, no." She took another sip before placing her glass on the counter. She gently moved me aside and began opening the containers. "You've been on cloud nine for weeks, then suddenly you show up Monday grumpier than a dog that ran through a briar patch. Something happened."

I sighed and dished some chicken onto my plate. "It's stupid, mainly because I should have seen it coming."

Denise rolled her eyes and helped herself to an egg roll. "Don't start that 'I suck at relationships' garbage."

"Well, I do." I shrugged, grabbing an egg roll, and opening the soup. "There's really no point in discussing it."

We loaded up our plates and carried them, along with two bowls of soup, into the living room. I plopped onto the sofa and dug in. Denise watched my every move as if she expected me to break into a million pieces. Little did she know, I'd already done that in the first few days following Alek's rejection.

She continued to stare as she ate until finally, I couldn't take it any longer. "What?"

Denise didn't answer. She simply spooned more soup into her mouth and waited for me to open up. I wasn't as close to her as I was to Holden, but she was the best female friend I had, and I'd

confided in her many times in the past. I couldn't explain why I found it so difficult to do so now.

"Ugh," I groaned, setting my bowl on the side table and picking up my wine. After a fortifying sip, I took a deep breath and let it out. "Fine. Last weekend, Alek invited me to the beach, and we met up with some of his friends for a music festival at one of the pubs there. We had a blast. Up until that point, we'd only gone out a couple of times and talked on the phone just about every night. I thought we were building something."

Enthralled, Denise set down her own bowl and leaned forward. "Then what happened?"

"When we got back to his place ... he kissed me." I narrowed my eyes to discourage her commentary. "Yes. God, yes. The man can kiss."

"Don't leave me hanging." Denise was practically salivating. "And?"

"Things got a little awkward, and we said goodnight. I took a shower and got ready for bed but decided to put myself out there to see what happened."

Denise's plate joined her bowl on the table, and she cradled her wine in both hands. "Continue."

Heat settled in my cheeks. "It was the absolute best sex I've ever had in my life. I know, that's not saying much since I've only had two partners, but ... wow."

"I would think that would put you in an amazing mood, rather than turn you into Cruella De Vil's twin."

"Ha, ha." I drained my glass and went to the kitchen for a refill. I returned with the bottle, wishing I'd had the foresight to buy two. "Sorry I haven't had the sunniest disposition this week."

"What's the rest of the story?"

"The next morning, he got totally weird on me and asked me to leave. He gave me some lame reason that he had made plans with his best friend."

Denise shrugged. "Maybe he had."

"No. Ben's wife told me the night before what their plans were, and they didn't include Alek." I rolled my wine glass between my palms. "Alek lied. So, I told him to call me when he figured out his

crap. We've only texted a couple times this week, just boring, mundane stuff. No conversation about what happened. On top of all that, Holden keeps badgering me about whether I'm dating anyone. It's getting quite annoying, and every time he calls, we argue, and I hang up on him. I don't know what to do about either of them."

"What's put the bug up Holden's ass?"

That was Denise. She always cut right to the chase.

"I told you before. He's acting like he wants more than friendship, but I don't. Things have been weird between us ever since that fundraiser in June and only got worse after July Fourth."

"Do you think Alek is the reason for that?"

"No," I answered without hesitation, then thought better of it. "Well, not as far as Holden is concerned. He has no idea Alek and I have been seeing each other. He would have a fit if he knew."

"What about you?"

"I think that, yes, it's possible Alek is part of the reason I'm not as open with Holden as I used to be. I love Holden but as a friend. I think—no, I know I'm falling in love with Alek, and that scares the hell out of me."

"It sounds like Alek isn't the only one who needs to sort out a few things."

She was right. I just wasn't sure where to begin.

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Denise's visit left me without any clear direction on what I should do. I wanted desperately to talk to Alek, but I didn't feel like I should make the first move. After all, I'd given him an ultimatum, and if he chose not to respond, I had my answer. I couldn't be the type of woman to chase after a man who clearly didn't want me.

I curled up on the sofa with a cup of peppermint tea and *Ebony* on my lap. It was probably a good thing I'd only bought one bottle of wine; otherwise, I would have likely gotten soused trying to drown my troubles and ended up drunk texting Alek. I resumed my search for something to watch and landed on a dopey romantic comedy. Yeah. That should cheer me right up.

My hand idly stroked Ebony, eliciting a loud, rhythmic purr that sent vibrations through my legs. Her front paws opened and closed in a slow, delicate fisting motion as she kneaded the pillow wedged at my side. It was our normal evening routine and usually soothed whatever bothered me. But not that night.

The screen of my cell lit with an incoming call, and I groaned, expecting it to be yet another attempt from Holden to beg my forgiveness. I reached for the device, surprised to see Alek's name displayed across the glossy surface. My fingers trembled as I swiped a thumb across the screen.

"Hello?" I hoped he didn't notice the slight quiver in my voice.

"Hey."

I lifted both brows. Somehow, I had expected more than that. "Hey."

"What are you doing?"

So, we were back to making uncomfortable small talk. "Not much. Watching television, trying to unwind from a busy week. You?"

"I just got back from Ben's a little while ago. He and Gretchen said to tell you hello."

This was going nowhere fast. "Well, thanks for that."

His next words came out in a rush as if he expected me to hang up before he could continue our conversation. "My cast came off today."

"That's great. How does it feel?"

He chuckled. "I like that my arm doesn't sweat and itch all the time now, and it feels like it can breathe again. I told my shrink it looks like an albino raisin."

An unexpected laugh ripped out of me. "That's pretty funny. And, I'm sure fairly accurate."

"Yeah." Silence lengthened between us, punctuated only by our breathing. I wanted to prompt him to say something—anything—but forced myself to wait patiently for him to continue. Surely he'd called for a reason other than to chat about mindless topics.

"I think we should talk. Can I see you this weekend?"

There it was. The official brush-off. "I'm not sure that's necessary."

"It is. I want to talk in person. It's important."

“Alek, I’ve told you, I’ve been down this road before, so just say whatever it is you want to say, and we’ll call it good.”

Confusion filled his voice. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve called to tell me you want to end things, right? That doesn’t require an in-person visit.”

“No. That’s not at all why I called.”

The pain that had pierced my heart began to fade as relief took its place. Maybe I’d overreacted. Again. “So why did you call?”

“Well, I’d like to apologize for being so distant and stand-offish this week. I’ve been trying to do what you asked and *sort out my shit* as you so eloquently put it.”

The emphasis he placed on my prior request injected a little levity into the conversation and made me feel mildly better. “And?”

“I’ve never been in this position before, so I’m probably not doing this right.” He released a ragged breath that echoed through the phone. “Which is why I’d like to see you if you’ll allow it. I want to talk about this face-to-face.”

I stroked Ebony a few times before picking at an invisible speck of lint on my black yoga pants. “What did you have in mind?”

“I’d like to take you on a proper date tomorrow night. That is if you don’t already have plans.”

My heart thumped wildly, trying to leap from my chest in pure joy. “Well, I haven’t really thought about it.”

“I thought I could come up and stay at Mom and Owen’s place on the river. Dinner and a movie, maybe? I remember you said there was a new Mediterranean restaurant you wanted to try.”

I sucked in a quick breath. He’d listened. I also couldn’t help the smirk that twisted my lips. “The Olive Branch?”

Humor laced his voice. “That’s the one. I thought it would be appropriate. I miss you, and I want to see you. There are some things we need to talk about, and I’m not trying to blow you off.”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

“So, is that a yes?”

“Yes.” I drew a hand down Ebony’s side, curling my fingers through the soft fur of her stomach. “What time?”

“You tell me. What works for you?”

I bit down on my lower lip to prevent blurting out an answer. “Pick me up at six-thirty?”

“Perfect. I’ll make the reservation.”

The pounding of my heart started anew and lodged in my throat.

“Great. I’ll see you then.”

“I’m looking forward to it, babe.”

*Babe.*

We said goodnight and disconnected. There was no way to know what the future held, but that one word restored my hope that everything would be all right.



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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

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## Alek

My palms were sweating.

It was ridiculous. I was a thirty-eight-year-old decorated Navy aviator nervous about a fucking date as if I were a teenage virgin about to bust his nut for the first time. There had to be a deep, psychological meaning in there somewhere, but I'd be damned if I knew what it was.

Maybe my attitude had been a little glibber than I'd thought when I invited Shannon to dinner, or maybe it was the restaurant's dress code that had my feathers ruffled. I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken a date to a restaurant that required a tie. For that matter, I couldn't remember the last time I'd worn a tie when I wasn't in my dress uniform.

Oh, wait. The last time I'd worn a tie was at Ben and Gretchen's wedding. Yeah. It had been a while.

I arrived at Shannon's place a few minutes early and took the extra time to get my shit together. I'd been less nervous in dogfights than I was to see her again.

That's when it hit me. This date meant something, and I realized I really did want things to work between us. I didn't know when it happened, but at some point during the psych sessions with Captain Baxter, his advice had begun to sink in. Maybe it really was possible to do what I do and have a real life.

I slid from the truck and strode purposefully to the door. I rubbed my hands together and over my hips to dry my palms before I rang

the bell. A few moments later, the door swept open, and my jaw hit the floor.

Did I mention Shannon was beautiful? Well, she's a fucking knockout.

My gaze raked over her from head to toe, taking in her elegant but somewhat messy knot of hair tied at her nape, the matching pearl earrings and necklace—I had to force my thoughts away from my x-rated fantasies about another type of pearl necklace—and the short, sleeveless, black dress that showcased her petite figure. All she needed was a tiara and a pair of black cat frame sunglasses, and she would have been a perfect doppelgänger for Audrey Hepburn circa *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Except for her shoes. They were simple black heels, but the way they elevated her calves and enhanced her legs screamed *fuck me*.

I took a deep breath and pushed all those thoughts from my mind as well. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." Her fingers toyed with her necklace as she subjected me to her own perusal. Unless I was imagining it, she even licked her lips. "You look very handsome."

I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "I've missed you."

She leaned away and met my gaze. "Me, too."

I needed to get her in the truck before I dragged her inside and yanked her out of that dress. Except for the shoes. The shoes would need to stay on. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, and I don't mind admitting that I'm starving. I didn't have time for lunch today."

I held out my elbow, and she looped her arm through mine as she pulled the door shut behind us. "Busy day?"

She nodded. "I think everyone in town decided to come in on the same day."

I helped her into the truck and gave her another peck on the cheek before closing the door. She seemed as nervous as I was, so I added a wink for good measure.

She was quiet as I slid into the driver's side and started the engine. The silence was pregnant with anticipation, sort of like the

calm before a storm. She didn't speak until I pulled away from the curb and headed toward our destination.

"When are we going to talk about what happened last Sunday?"

I tilted my head and glanced at her from the corner of my eye. "Are you in a hurry?"

"Not particularly, but I've been driving myself crazy trying not to rehearse and choreograph it in my head. I do want to know where we stand and what you're thinking."

I relaxed into my seat, resting my right arm on the center console with my left poised loosely at the top of the steering wheel. Two heartbeats passed before I answered. "I was a dick last week. I know that. This is going to sound lame, but"—I let out a breath and scrubbed a hand over my face and along my jaw—"I was afraid."

She frowned. "Afraid?"

"I told you before, I've never really done the dating thing. I woke up that day, and everything felt ... right. Too damn right. And I freaked out. The only thing I could think of was needing time to figure out what I wanted and how I felt about you. About us."

She gaped at me. I knew that was a lot to absorb, and it sure as hell wasn't an easy thing for me to admit. "Have you come to any conclusions?"

We stopped at a red light, and I reached over and took her hand in mine. My fingers traced small circles across her palm. "Yeah. I can't promise I won't fuck up again, but I'm all in. I want to see where this goes. We'll work out the logistics, but I want to make it work."

The light changed, and I pressed the accelerator. It was another two blocks to the restaurant, and it took that long for her to respond. "What"—she paused, took a breath, and let it out—"what about Holden? He's been relentless this week, and he's convinced I'm seeing someone. We've had several arguments about it, and I know it will be a battle when he finds out. Are you sure you want to get into that mess? It's going to be a lot of drama." She shifted in her seat as she mumbled, "Not sure I'm worth all the fuss."

I turned into the parking lot. The place was packed, and I was forced to park behind the building. "Hey." I cut the engine and squeezed her hand. "You are worth it and more. We'll deal with Holden together whenever you're ready."

She rested her free hand on top of mine. "I can't say when that will be. He's still my best friend, even though he's frustrating me right now. I don't want to hurt him."

"We'll figure it out. Deal?"

She smiled. "Deal."

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

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## Shannon

It wasn't like me to hold a grudge, but the sting of Alek's attempt to push me away lingered. I wanted to believe his words, that he was ready to make a real go of things, but my heart was wary of being hurt again.

Throughout dinner, the easy camaraderie Alek and I had shared since we met returned during dinner and as we lingered over dessert. It was as if the past week hadn't occurred, and we hadn't missed our usual evening phone calls. I dared to hope that all was right between us once again.

We left the restaurant hand in hand and strolled the short distance to Alek's truck. He reached to open the door for me and stopped. "I thought about a movie, but we can do whatever you want."

I closed the gap between us and smoothed his tie as I lifted my gaze to his. My lashes fluttered in what I hoped was a seductively coquettish way. Truthfully, I could have looked like a deranged caricature of myself. Either way, I took a deep breath, unsure if I was about to make a decision I'd ultimately regret.

It was a risk I was willing to take.

"We could just go back to my place and watch something. And you could meet Ebony."

"Oh. Right, your cat."

"I think you'll like her."

He arched a brow. "But the question is, will she like me? Or is she going to get territorial over you and attack me?"

I laughed. "Oh, she'll make you think that, but no. She's a sweet kitty."

Alek stroked my cheek with the backs of his fingers, drawing them down along my jaw. He kissed the tip of my nose before tilting my chin to place a sweet kiss on my lips. "Ok. I'm game with whatever you want, babe."

My lips curled into a smirk. "You may regret telling me that."

He winked and helped me into the truck. "Not a chance."

The door closed, and I watched as Alek rounded the front of the vehicle and slid into the driver's seat. "What if I ask you to watch a romantic comedy or some other chick flick?"

He flicked his wrist, and the engine roared to life. "I'm sure I can handle anything you throw my way."

I laughed, relieved that our easy banter had returned. Maybe things really would be all right. "Should I take that as a challenge?"

Alek backed out of the parking spot and eased toward the exit. The corners of his mouth twitched. "Are you suggesting we turn that into a bet?"

I shrugged. "Why not? You bet on silly things with Ben and the guys all the time."

He chuckled and shook his head. "I think my friends may have been a bad influence on you."

I twisted in my seat and leaned on the console. "Afraid you'll lose?"

"Nope." He threaded our fingers together. "How much?"

"Well, it's just for fun." I squeezed his hand. "How about a dollar?"

Alek stopped at a red light and gave me a quizzical look. "One dollar? Seriously?"

"Sure. One dollar says I can come up with a movie that will make you regret giving me free rein."

He lifted our joined hands and brushed a kiss against my knuckles. "You're on."

The rest of our short drive passed in companionable silence as I ran through a mental inventory of possible movies we could watch. I didn't really care about winning the bet. It was just a game, a silly way to distract myself from any potentially negative thoughts about our relationship.



It was a sad fact that old habits die hard, and even sadder that I still worried about it.

When Alek turned onto my street, I asked him to park behind the house. I'd inherited the spacious Cape Cod style home from my grandparents. Unfortunately, it came with several nosy neighbors, most of whom felt compelled to take over where my grandparents left off. While I appreciated that a few of them had looked after my grandparents while I was in college, and they genuinely seemed to care about me as well, I had a difficult time with their busybody tendencies.

The last thing I wanted was to give them even more fodder for their speculations regarding my love life—or lack thereof. It was bad enough that they meddled whenever Holden visited.

“Worried someone will see you have company?” Alek asked.

“No.” I quickly explained about the prying eyes on my otherwise idyllic street. “I just don't want to deal with all the invasive questions.” I shook my head and sighed. “I'm sure that sounds stupid. After all, I'm an adult. It shouldn't matter what anyone else thinks.”

“No, I get it. I don't like anyone getting into my business, either.”

I flashed a grateful smile. “Thanks for that.”

He shifted into park and killed the engine. “My pleasure.”

The word rolled off his tongue like melted chocolate, smooth and luscious and thick with innuendo. It wasn't overstating it to say I was no longer interested in watching a movie. Secretly, I hoped we wouldn't be watching any television at all. What I really wanted was to lock ourselves in my bedroom and get properly reacquainted.

I giggled at the thought but didn't hide my amusement as well as I'd hoped.

Alek gave a sideways glance and pursed his lips. “What's so funny?”

My teeth raked across my lower lip. “Nothing.”

“Hmm.”

I squirmed in my seat and cleared my throat with a soft cough. “Do, uh ... I mean, are you ready to go inside?”

*Geez. Somebody put me out of my misery.*

Alek lifted his hands. “It'll be difficult to watch a movie out here.”

My eyelids fell shut as heat flooded my body. “Right.”

I hopped out of the truck without waiting for Alek to open my door. My fingers trembled, fumbling with the key as I unlocked the back door and led him inside. The door closed behind him with a dull thud that echoed through the house. Ebony didn't greet me with her imperious demand for food and the obligatory brush of her body against my legs. I shouldn't have been surprised. Life with a cat was anything but predictable.

"Do you mind if I go change?" I asked, turning to face Alek.

"Go right ahead." He arched a brow. "Would you like some help?"

I laughed and jabbed a finger in his side. "I think I can manage. Make yourself at home, and I'll be back in a few minutes."

He smiled and ambled toward the living room. Ebony was coiled on my bed, her sleek black body forming an impossibly still lump on the comforter. She remained asleep as I stroked a hand down her flank, though her ear flicked to acknowledge my presence. Typical.

I slipped out of my dress and quickly donned a pair of yoga pants and a loose T-shirt. I almost felt guilty changing into something more comfortable while Alek couldn't do the same, but I had no desire to hang out and watch a movie in my favorite little black dress.

When I returned to the living room, I found Alek reclined on the sofa, his sleeves rolled to his elbows, and his tie folded neatly on the coffee table. And he was watching baseball.

"Seriously? I leave you alone for five minutes, and you start watching baseball?" I teased, not really caring that he was watching the game. I just wanted to keep the mood light and maintain our easy, carefree banter.

His face was the picture of innocence. "You did tell me to make myself at home."

"Hmph." I sauntered toward him, not sure exactly what I was going to do when I reached him. A proper hostess would offer her guest something to drink, but I wanted to mess with Alek a bit more. I plopped onto the sofa and snatched the remote. "Sports time is over. We're watching a movie, remember?"

He brushed a lock of hair behind my ear as I browsed the streaming app for something to watch. I looked for the silliest, sappiest romance I could find. Something that would surely drive Alek crazy enough to make him cry *uncle*. The only problem was

that he seemed more interested in picking at me than which movie I selected.

“How’s this?” I asked as I tried to concentrate on the hokey chick flick—a totally corny high school, young adult romantic comedy—and not Alek’s fingers playing with my hair.

“Fine with me.”

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye and noticed he wasn’t even looking at the television. His gaze was riveted on me.

“What?” I turned my head, and my lips curved into a wobbly smile.

He shrugged. “Just admiring the view.”

I released a nervous titter that morphed into a full-blown belly laugh. “Stop.”

His fingers traced the shell of my ear before grasping the lobe between this thumb and forefinger. The spot tingled as every ounce of my attention focused on his touch. What had I been thinking about? I couldn’t remember. The game I started was going to be more difficult than I thought, and I began to regret it.

“Stop what?” he asked. His voice dropped an octave. Or had it always been that deep, and I was only noticing it now because my desire for him was slowly chipping away at any remaining reservations I had.

I took a deep breath and tossed the remote aside, not caring where it landed. “Honestly, I don’t really care about watching a movie.”

“No?”

“Nope,” I said with a shake of my head.

“Shannon, baby, I don’t want us to only be about sex.”

“Neither do I.” I straddled his lap and draped my arms over his shoulders. “But right this minute, I don’t give a shit.”

“I’m trying to be the good guy, babe.”

“I appreciate that. But right now, I want you to be the not-so-good guy.”

He stood, supporting me as I wrapped my legs around his waist. “Then tell me where I need to go.”

“Down the hall and to the right.”

Alek kissed me then, and it was slow and sensuous. I never thought I'd use the word 'swoon,' but yeah, he made me swoon. He carried me to the bedroom and lowered me to my feet. A shiver ran down my spine. It was as if we'd never touched, never made love before. Every sensation was new as he lowered his mouth to my neck, my shoulder, my collarbone. His touch was electric, everywhere his skin met mine. His breath was hot against my body, serving only to stoke my desire for him.

"Alek, don't tease."

His lips brushed the curve of my shoulder. "Oh, I'm not teasing, baby."

"Then why are we still dressed?"

He chuckled and lowered his hands to the hem of my shirt. "What part of 'I didn't want this to only be about sex' did you not understand?"

I nuzzled his throat. "Oh, I understood all of it. I just don't happen to agree right this moment."

"Is this make-up sex, then?"

I shrugged. "If you want to call it that."

He nipped at my neck and pulled the shirt over my head, revealing the lacy black bra that matched my thong—a decadent splurge I'd made after agreeing to our date. "Damn, you're beautiful. I am one lucky bastard."

I tried to infuse my voice with more bravado than I felt. "Why are we still talking?"

His only answer was a crooked smile before he tossed me on the bed, upsetting the cat and sending her scurrying from the room. I released a nervous laugh and had a momentary doubt about jumping back into sex, but my concerns evaporated the moment Alek trailed his lips over my skin, marking me as his.

Alek thought he was the lucky one.

Truth be told, I was pretty damn lucky myself.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

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## Shannon

Sunlight seeped around the curtains, casting a soft glow throughout the room. I turned to my right and propped my head on my hand. Alek lay on his back, one hand on his chest, the opposite arm by his side. His head was turned toward me, his features relaxed and smooth in repose. I took advantage of the quiet moment to appreciate his masculine beauty. How had I managed to be here with him, now? I had to fight the urge to pinch myself.

Alek inhaled deeply, a stuttering breath clogged with the remnants of sleep. The corners of his mouth twitched before he opened one eye. "Are you watching me sleep?" he asked, his voice raspy.

"Oh ... um..." My cheeks flamed, and I ducked my chin. "No. I was just thinking how amazed I am that you're still here."

He rolled onto his side, facing me. "Where else would I be?"

I lifted one shoulder. "I don't know. I suppose I expected you to come to your senses and leave before I woke."

"Shan..." He cleared his throat and beckoned me closer. "Come here."

"What?"

He reached for me and pulled me to him. My gaze dipped toward the motion, taking in the pale skin and angry red scar on his forearm. I hadn't paid attention the night before. Then again, he'd been wearing long sleeves, and I wasn't exactly concerned about the condition of his post-cast arm when the shirt came off.

“Roll over.” Part demand, part request, he prompted me to comply with a hand on my hip and a gentle tug. I flipped away from him and allowed him to wrap his arm around my waist. He pulled me into a spooning position and kissed the back of my head. “I don’t know what those assholes did to make you believe you aren’t worthy, but you are.”

I was grateful my back was to him so he couldn’t see the unshed tears stinging my eyes. “No, it’s not that...”

But it was. It was sad that two men—the only serious relationships I’d ever had—had managed to teach me that I was unworthy of anyone’s time and love to the point that I had decided it was easier to live without love than to open myself up to heartbreak again.

“It’s not?” His arm tightened around me as he brushed his lips across my shoulder.

“Okay. Say you’re right.” I tilted my chin to glance at him from the corner of my eye. “That should explain why I’m more than a little nervous about you. About us.”

“I do understand.” He nestled his chin in the hollow of my shoulder. “Look. I’m not good at this either. I told you that. But I want to be with you however, whenever. I want this to work.”

A sudden rush of butterflies swarmed inside me, daring me to hope things could work out. I wanted them to—badly.

I twisted in his arms and cuddled against him, pressing my lips to the hollow at the base of his throat. His scent filled my nostrils, a combination of his cologne—lush greens and cedar with a hint of musk and touch of vanilla—and his natural scent. “I want that, too,” I murmured into his skin.

His lips bowed into a warm smile as he maneuvered me onto my back and nudged my legs apart with one knee. He extended a hand and fished a condom from the nightstand. As soon as he rolled it on, my arms and legs automatically encircled him as he guided himself inside me. We moved together in that slow, unhurried pace that suggested we had all the time in the world. But the languid tempo didn’t last long, and soon we were pawing at each other in a frenzy of need that ended in a glorious fall into bliss.

It was the perfect Sunday morning.

Alek rolled onto his back, taking me with him, so I was draped across his chest. His fingers moved idly down my spine, tracing patterns on my skin. "What do you want to do today?"

I lifted one shoulder and scooted up his body, so my head rested on his pillow. "I don't care. Anything. Nothing." I hooked a finger in the stainless-steel chain holding his dog tags and straightened it over his chest. "We could stay here all day."

He rested a hand over mine and squeezed. "What if we get hungry?"

I smirked. "There's always delivery."

"We'd still have to get up to answer the door, goofy." He laughed. "Hey, I'm not opposed to keeping you in bed all day, but I'm just saying, at some point, we're gonna have to get up."

I rolled my eyes and tried to act offended. "Fine."

"Don't pout." He lowered his mouth and kissed my forehead. "I didn't say we had to get out of bed right this minute."

"No, you didn't." I lifted myself to lie fully on top of him, so our bodies touched from chest to knees. "Let's stay here a while longer."

"You stay there very long, and we won't be going anywhere for a while," he teased, threading his fingers through my hair to push it away from my face.

"Dammit." I giggled and kissed him, enjoying the scrape of stubble on my face.

He deepened our kiss, framing my face in his large hands. Even though we'd just made love, my body began to tingle with awareness. I could become addicted to that feeling.

My happiness was short-lived however, when the chime of the doorbell intruded on our peaceful morning.

"Just ignore it," Alek said.

That was easier said than done, with the chime repeating in harried intervals, followed by the loud bangs of what had to be someone's fist striking the wooden surface.

"Crap." I groaned and wiggled away from him, sliding out of his embrace and slipping on the shirt he wore the night before. "I'll be right back."

"You know," he began, mimicking the position I'd been in while watching him sleep, "you look fucking amazing in my shirt."



I stopped in the bedroom doorway and adopted a sexy pose, one hand in my hair, elbow raised, and the other hand on my hip, one leg bent. My eyelashes fluttered in the most coquettish way I could manage. "Why, thank you."

Of course, his shirt was long enough to be a dress, reaching to my knees. I lifted the collar to my nose, breathing in the same cologne lingering on his skin as I walked to the door. Whatever joy I'd felt evaporated as soon as I opened the door.

"Don't you answer your phone anymore?" Holden demanded, forcing his way inside.

I pushed against him, trying to move him back outside. "Really? I didn't say you could come in."

"Since when does that matter?" He flipped his sunglasses on top of his head. His eyes narrowed. "What are you wearing?"

"What difference does it make? I already told you it's none of your business. None. And don't try to distract me from how rude it is that you just showed up at ten on a Sunday morning without calling first."

He balled both fists and propped them on his hips. "I did. I've been calling you all morning. I had to come in to pick up some papers Dad forgot and thought I'd see if you wanted to grab some breakfast. But you wouldn't answer."

I squeezed my eyes shut and pursed my lips. There wasn't going to be an easy way to get rid of him. "Well, I'm sorry. I guess I was sound asleep and didn't hear the phone."

It wasn't a complete lie. I really didn't hear my phone ring. I just fudged about being asleep.

He shifted his posture, moving his arms from his sides to cross in front of his chest. A mask of disbelief settled over his features. "Right. Are you going to tell me who he is?"

I scowled. "What are you talking about?"

He tipped his head toward my attire. "I recognize a man's dress shirt when I see one."

"I think you should probably go, and I'll call you later. Now's really not a good time."

He smirked. "Right. Because your new fuck buddy is here, and you don't want me to know who it is."

My jaw tightened to the point I thought I might crack a few teeth. "Is that attitude really necessary? I don't think I deserve that."

"Argh," he growled. "C'mon, Shan. I haven't seen you in ages, and all I want is to take you out for breakfast or brunch, and you're the one giving me attitude."

A sudden flash of anger coursed through me. I suppose I never wanted to see it, but it became increasingly clear that Holden had a habit of gaslighting me. And that was about to come to an end.

"You show up here unannounced and demand I change my schedule to suit you? I suppose that's my fault since that's what I've always done to appease you. Well, no more. I love you, but I have a life, too." I marched to the door and jerked it open. "Now, if you don't mind, please go, and I'll call you later."

"No."

"What do you mean, 'no'? I wasn't giving you a choice. I need you to leave. Now. I'm busy, and I have plans."

"You've been dodging my calls and texts for weeks, and when we have talked, it's like pulling teeth to get you to open up. You say you want me to respect you? I think I deserve the same thing."

He may have been partly right, but I was angry enough not to care. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to respond.

I heard footsteps behind me about the same time Holden's eyes grew wide in shock. Alek took his place beside me, wearing only his dress slacks.

"Is there a problem?" Alek asked.

For the first time since I'd met him, Holden was speechless. If it hadn't been such a serious moment, I would have laughed.

Holden's gaze bounced between Alek and me, mouth gaping. Time slowed to a crawl as I waited for the inevitable explosion. Once Holden's mouth caught up to his brain, he pointed to Alek and spoke through clenched teeth. "He's the reason you've been ignoring me? Seriously? After I've told you what a player he is?"

"Just stop, Holden," I warned.

"Holden, she asked you to leave. This really isn't the time to get into this when you're obviously upset and might say something you don't really mean and can't take back."

Holden snorted and shook his head. He refused to acknowledge Alek's comment and focused his angry, hate-filled gaze on me. "I expected more from you, Shannon. You go behind my back and fuck my stepbrother? What makes you think he's any different from those other guys?"

"It's none of your business. Why don't you get that?"

"I'm trying to save you from another broken heart," he grumbled, his voice laced with exasperation. "I'm protecting you, just like I've always done."

Alek stepped closer, putting himself between Holden and me. "That's enough. I think Shannon can take care of herself and make up her own mind."

I appreciated Alek's support, but they were talking about me as if I weren't standing in the same room. I folded my hand around Alek's forearm and gently pushed him aside. "Thank you."

He understood my unspoken request and took a place behind me, arms crossed in front of his chest. He cast an imposing figure, one I wouldn't want to mess with if I were in Holden's position.

"Holden, I appreciate that you care enough to look out for me, but I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"Right," he scoffed. "Why do you think I ran off those other guys? Because I knew you wouldn't—couldn't—do what needed to be done."

A shiver ran down my spine. Surely I had misheard him. "What did you just say?"

He paled but quickly regained his composure. Holden stepped forward and rested his hands on my shoulders. I knew where he put his hands because I watched him do it, but I couldn't feel their weight on my body. I was completely numb. There was no way he just admitted to sabotaging my relationships. No way.

"Those guys were bad news, but you couldn't see it. I was protecting you. I've always looked out for you. I love you. I've always loved you. No one could love you as much as I do."

"Please say you didn't do that to me. Please tell me you're just being mean right now."

There was a shift in his demeanor, the set of his jaw. I guess he decided he didn't have anything to lose at that point. "You didn't

know what they were really like. They were just using you.”

“And what would you call what you’ve done? You were my friend. I trusted you, and you betrayed that trust.”

“Shannon, those bozos couldn’t make you happy. Not like I can.”

Alek knocked Holden’s arms away and grabbed the back of his shirt in one fist, pushing him toward the door. “I think we’ve heard just about enough. I’ve always known you were a jealous ass, but this is fucked-up.”

“Take your hand off me,” Holden demanded, shrugging out of Alek’s grasp. “You’re no better than those other guys. You’ll take what you want, and then what? What happens when you’re deployed again? What then?”

Alek faltered and then adopted a stoic expression that belied the muscle ticking in his jaw. “How is that any of your business?”

“You expect her to just sit around, waiting on you to come home? What kind of life is that? What if you die, and you leave her alone? What if you knock her up? What then?” Holden laughed without humor. “But I guess that’s no big deal. Like father, like son, right?”

Alek lunged, his right fist connecting with Holden’s jaw. “Shut your fucking mouth. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Holden rubbed his aching jaw, dragging his fingers across the new split in his lip. Blood oozed from the cut and coated the tips of his fingers. “Guess the truth hurts.”

“It’s time for you to leave now.” Alek grabbed Holden’s arm and dragged him toward the door. “I think you’ve done enough damage for one day.”

Holden made a parting shot as Alek shoved him outside. “Maybe you should examine your own actions before it’s too late.”

Alek slammed the door and returned to my side. He gathered me in his arms and kissed the top of my head. “I’m sorry, babe.”

I relaxed into him, slowly at first, then all at once as I folded my arms around his waist. “It’s me, isn’t it? I’m the one who’s messed up.”

“Hey, now. No. That’s not true. All of that was about Holden’s issues, not you.”

I sniffled, and a few tears splashed onto my cheeks. My hand curled into a fist and swiped blindly at the wetness rolling down my

face. "I think I need to be alone right now if you don't mind."

"I'm—" Alek began to voice his protest but stopped short. "Are you sure that's what you want? For me to leave?"

I nodded and wiped at my tears again, pulling away to free myself from his embrace. "Yes. I'm sorry. I just need some time to think."

"Okay. Whatever you want, baby." He retreated to the bedroom and came back a few minutes later, dressed except for the shirt I still wore. He didn't ask for it. He dropped a kiss on my temple and ran a hand down the length of my spine before moving toward the door. "I'm just a phone call away, okay?"

I nodded and forced a smile. "Okay."

We stared at each other another moment or two before he gave me a sad smile and walked out the door. The door had barely closed before I fell apart and crumpled to the floor, bewildered as to how the day had turned to shit in such a short period of time.

I rolled onto my side in a loose fetal position, no longer able to fight the myriad emotions ricocheting through me, and I cried.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

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## Alek

Life has a funny way of bringing things full circle.

I began my required psych visits filled with dread, partly because I didn't know what to expect but also because I didn't believe in the process. Truthfully, I didn't know anything about it.

Over the past four weeks, I'd slowly grown to accept and then even look forward to speaking with Captain Baxter. However, that familiar feeling of dread returned as I arrived for what I hoped would be my last required visit.

"Captain?" I knocked lightly, rapping on the door frame with the knuckle of my index finger.

"Pierce." Baxter glanced up from the open folder lying on his desk and removed his reading glasses. "Come in."

Nodding, I removed my cap and took my usual seat. "How are you today, sir?"

Baxter tossed his glasses onto the desk and reclined in his chair. "Trying to turn the tables on me today?"

I laughed. "No, sir. Just trying to make conversation."

He clasped his hands and rested them on his abdomen. "Tell me about your week. How are things with Shannon?"

"I don't know."

His eyes rounded, and he leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desk. "You don't know?"

This was why I dreaded our meeting. "I think I've fu— er, screwed up."

He shifted in his chair and studied me closely. “Why do you say that?”

*Because it was true. In more ways than one.* “Last week, you asked me what I planned to do after making an ass out of myself with her.”

“I remember. What happened?”

“We talked things out, and everything was great. We were in a good place.”

He arched a brow but didn’t speak, expecting me to continue.

“Then the next morning, Holden showed up, and everything went to shit. He said some things...” I exhaled roughly and relayed the things Holden had admitted about his past with Shannon and some of the things he said to me. “It made me realize that I was wrong to think everything would work out.”

“You’re talking about your father again, correct?”

I shrugged. “I just think she’d be happier with someone else. In the long run.”

“Bullshit.”

I was taken aback, though I should have expected his reaction. He’d been calling me out on my shit since our visits began. “You always ask me to tell you how I feel about this shit, and when I do, you don’t believe me? What kind of counseling is that?”

“Pierce, you’ve made a surprising amount of progress since you first walked through my door. I say surprising because this is only our fifth session. You’ve shown a remarkable willingness to open up and adapt to this potential relationship with Shannon. But, and you know what I’m about to say, you still need to deal with your feelings about your father and his untimely death.”

I shook my head. “She deserves someone who will be with her every day. Someone she can come home to at night, not someone she has to worry about who’s deployed halfway around the world for months at a time. Someone who may not come home at all.”

He pursed his lips and reclined in his chair, resting an elbow on the armrest and his chin on his hand. “Shouldn’t she be allowed to make that decision for herself?”

“What?”



“Shouldn’t Shannon be allowed to decide how she wants her life to be and who she wants to be with? Are you any better than Holden by choosing for her?”

*Mother fucker.*

“It may not matter. I called to check on her a couple of times, but otherwise, we haven’t spoken since Sunday. She said she needed some time. I’ve been trying to give her that. I’ve just become more convinced that we need to end it now.”

“It sounds like she’s understandably upset about Holden’s revelation. It’s not easy to learn that someone you trusted so completely could betray you like that.”

“Yeah.”

“You know, Pierce, I had intended for this to be our last required session. Your convalescent leave officially ends today. I’ve already recommended that your flight status be restored.”

For the first time since I walked in, I began to feel a small glimmer of hope. “Wait. What?”

He gave me a tight smile. “You’ll be on desk duty for a couple of weeks while the bureaucratic red tape gets sorted and you get final medical clearance, but yes. I see no reason to keep you grounded.”

I exhaled pure relief. “Thank you, sir.”

“But—”

I knew it. There was no way it could be that simple.

“I’d like to continue our meetings until you receive your new orders.”

“You just said—”

“I said you’ve made remarkable progress, and I believe you’re fit to return to combat flight. However, I also believe you have some deeper issues to work through on a personal level.”

“And if I say no?”

He shrugged. “I won’t require it, but I feel it would be beneficial. I’m also going to suggest that you talk to your mother and get her perspective on your father’s death.”

“Why would I do that?” I lifted my hands. “Reopen all those old wounds? For what? She’s happy now. It seems like that would be cruel.”

“Have you ever talked to her about it? Have you ever asked her how she felt, how she dealt with her grief? How she managed to move on?”

“No.”

Baxter leaned forward and lowered his voice. His face was a mask of sincerity. “Right now, I’m speaking to you as your doctor and a friend, not a captain in the Navy. Even if you choose to break things off with Shannon, I think you would find great benefit from having a meaningful conversation with your mother. You may be surprised. In the end, what have you got to lose?”

*Yeah. What did I have to lose?*

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

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## Shannon

My world was spinning out of control and taking my mind with it. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I was so out of sorts I took a week off so I wouldn't risk any potential harm to my patients.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken any time off. I just wished it had been for a more enjoyable reason.

It was exactly the kind of situation I needed to discuss with my best friend.

But I couldn't.

Because he was the person responsible for my present state of mind.

The calls began almost as soon as Alek threw Holden out on his ass. I declined them, of course. I had nothing to say, and I wasn't ready to listen to his lame excuses and apologies.

Denise tried to be what I needed, but she relied on tough love when what I really wanted was to be distracted and maybe even coddled a little bit. That wouldn't happen with Denise. I didn't feel right reaching out to Gretchen or the other ladies since I didn't know them all that well. If Alek and I couldn't get past this newest hurdle, I likely never would.

Then I thought of the one person who might understand and who would have insight into both Holden and Alek.

I called Camila, prepared to make the drive to Alexandria to see her. Luck was on my side, however, and I learned she was in Newport News, overseeing some work being done at their country home on the James River.

A work truck with the name Bingham Tile painted on the side was parked in the circular drive when I arrived, and just behind it, a landscaper's truck and trailer. I parked on the street and made my way to the front door. It was unlocked, so I rang the bell once and let myself in.

Cookie yipped from somewhere inside, and I could only assume Camila had put her in her kennel to keep her out of harm's way while the workers were in the house.

"Camila?" I called, walking through the living area and into the kitchen. She wasn't in either location, so I retraced my steps, intending to check upstairs, when the patio door opened with a whoosh and let in a gust of warm air.

Camila stepped inside and beamed at me as she closed the door. "Shannon, honey. It's so good to see you."

We walked toward each other and hugged. I held on as if my life depended on it, and maybe to some extent, it did. "You, too."

She patted me on the back, comforting me as I dissolved into tears. "There, there. What's wrong, sweetheart?"

I loosened my grip and backed away. My shoulders shook with each stuttering breath as I tried to regain my composure. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to just burst into tears and cry all over you."

"Don't you worry about that." She took my hand and led me into the kitchen. "Come in here, and I'll make you some tea. You can tell me all about it. I'm going to assume this has something to do with that ornery stepson of mine."

I released a giggle that sounded more like a snort and soon became a frustrating round of hiccups. Damn. "What" —*hic*— "what makes you say that?"

She arched a brow and shook her head as she busied herself making tea. "I'm not blind. I've known for a while that Holden is sweet on you. It was just a matter of time before he tried to push that agenda."

"You're" —*hic, hic*— "good."

"I know." She smiled. "There's more to it, though, isn't there?"

"Ye" —*hic*— "yes."

Camila placed a steaming mug of peppermint tea in front of me. The aroma took me back to the night Alek and I shared a cup in this

same room. I fought back a fresh round of tears and blew on the surface before taking a sip. She waited patiently while we both sipped our tea.

When I felt like the hiccups were gone, I took a deep breath and laid it all out for her. I told her everything, starting with the night of the fundraiser in Alexandria and leading up to the previous Sunday when Holden confessed how he had betrayed me.

When I finished my story, Camila patted my hand. "I think we may need something a little stronger than tea after all that."

For the first time in over a week, I laughed. "Yeah, maybe."

I thought she was kidding, but she wasn't. She produced a bottle of brandy from the pantry and two snifters. "Drink this. It'll help."

I took a sip and set the glass on the island. "I don't know what to do. I'm so angry with Holden. But I'm also angry with myself. How could I not have known he was capable of something like that?"

"Don't dwell on that, baby. It's hard for us to see the bad in people we love."

"I don't think I'll ever be able to trust him again."

"Oh, I don't doubt that." She cradled her glass in her palm and swirled the topaz-colored liquid inside. "What about Alek? Have you talked to him recently?"

"Not really. I mean, he called a couple times after all that happened, but I haven't heard from him in several days. I wasn't exactly friendly the last time we spoke."

"Well, I'm sure you're not the only one trying to make sense of Holden's bull."

I snorted. "We knew Holden would react badly whenever he found out about Alek and me. We talked about it. I guess I thought we would have been a little farther down the road before we had to worry about it. I never wanted to hurt Holden. I just want to be happy." Fresh tears stung my eyes, threatening to spill. I blinked them away. "Am I not allowed to be happy?"

Camila set her glass beside mine and clutched my shoulders. "Of course you are. Everyone deserves to be happy."

"Then why does this crap happen to me? I swear, I'm beginning to think I'm cursed."

“Oh, pfft. You are not cursed.” She pulled me into a brief hug. “Learning that Holden was the reason for your past misfortunes should’ve told you that.”

“It just seems like I can’t catch a break.”

“I know, baby. I know.” She gave me a squeeze and released me. “You didn’t answer my question about Alek.”

“What can I do? He was convinced that we wouldn’t work out, then he changed his mind. After Holden’s little outburst, I’m sure he’s right back where he started.”

“How do you feel about him?”

I didn’t hesitate. “I’m in love with him.”

“That’s what I thought.” She smiled and leaned closer, dropping her voice to a whisper. “My son is hard-headed, and sometimes he refuses to see what’s right in front of him. He takes after his father. All I can tell you is that if you want him, you have to fight for him. Just don’t make it too easy on him.”

I didn’t know exactly how to fight for Alek—for us—but after Camila’s pep talk, I knew I wouldn’t give up without a fight.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

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## Alek

Third day of admin duty, and I was already going insane. I'd never been content to work at a desk, which was the very reason I'd ultimately decided to join the Navy. Everything in life truly did move in circles.

After I got home that evening, I tried to lose myself in a round of *Call of Duty*, but I couldn't concentrate long enough to keep my character alive. Captain Baxter's last advice about talking to my mother kept repeating in my head, on a constant loop. Would it really make any difference? Could it?

I grabbed my cell and dialed Mom's number. My thumb hovered over the send button as my ongoing internal debate raged. Disgusted with myself for being so indecisive—when I typically was not—I jabbed the button and held the phone to my ear.

Mom answered on the fourth ring. "Alek, honey. What's wrong?"

"What makes you think there's anything wrong?"

"Would it have been better if I'd said I was surprised? You usually don't call me just to chat."

*That made me feel like shit.* "Sorry. Everything's fine." I sighed. "No, it's not. That's a lie."

"Did you call because you want to talk about it?"

I felt like I was in Baxter's office all over again, desperate to get my troubles off my chest while simultaneously dreading opening up to someone.

"I'm not sure where to start."

"Start wherever you want. It doesn't have to be at the beginning."

I really should call Mom more often. Just hearing her voice settled some of my uneasiness. I took a deep breath and released it. “Did Dad ever talk about leaving the Navy?”

“Yes. We talked about it often during those last few years before he died.”

“Then why didn’t he?”

“Because I wouldn’t let him.”

The air left my lungs in a rush. “What? Why would you do that? Didn’t you want him to be home with us?”

“Of course I did. But baby, your father was a SEAL through and through. I knew that when I met him. Yes, I could have asked him to give it up, and at one point, he even talked about teaching at Coronado. But that wouldn’t have made him happy.” She paused, and I could hear the tears clogging her voice. “And I wanted him to be happy.”

“But what about you? How did you deal with that? You still miss him, right?”

“I miss him every day. But, whenever you lose someone you love, you have to find a way to go on. Loss is a part of life, Alek. I don’t regret a second that I spent with Daniel, and if I had a chance to do it over again, I would make the same choices.”

“I don’t know if I could ask someone to wait for me like that, knowing I may not come back.”

“By *someone* do you mean Shannon?”

“How—” I shook my head. “Have you talked to her?”

“She came to see me Saturday, and we had a nice visit. Yes.”

“And?” I tried to prepare myself for the motherly advice I knew she was dying to give. Though, wasn’t that why I called in the first place?

“Well, first, Holden is an asshole. I don’t remember exactly when he lost that sweetness he had when he was younger, but it’s gone. Half the time, I don’t even recognize him. Neither does Owen.”

I laughed. “Yeah, the kid has definitely got some issues. What else did you two talk about?”

“Why don’t you stop beating around the bush and ask me whatever it is you want to ask me?”

And there it was. That hurricane personality wrapped in a petite package. *My mother.* “What am I supposed to do, Mom? What should I do?”

“Honey, I can’t tell you what to do.” I groaned, but she kept talking as if I hadn’t made a sound. “You’re just going to have to decide how you feel.”

“You’re impossible. You know that, right?”

She chuckled, apparently taking pity on me. “What does your heart tell you?”

Finally, an easy question. “I care about her, and I know I want to be with her.” The next bit was hard to admit. “I just don’t know how.”

“Do you love her?”

“I think so.”

“Honey, you better be sure. But if you do, then go for it. It won’t be easy. Love never is.”

“What if I screw it up?”

“Then you apologize and make it up to her.” She paused, letting that sink in. “What have you got to lose?”

What, indeed?

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT**

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## Shannon

I followed my last patient out of the exam room and handed their chart to Denise. “I’ll trade. Who’s next?”

She picked up a thin folder without looking at it. “New patient in room three.”

I frowned and checked the time. New patient visits typically took more time, and they were cutting it close by coming in thirty minutes before we closed.

Not that I would turn anyone away.

I flipped open the folder and glanced over the information. The breath caught in my throat when I read the owner’s name.

*Alek Pierce*

“What?” I stared at Denise’s neat printing as if I expected it to spontaneously morph into something else. My gaze shifted to Denise, and I caught the satisfied smirk she wore.

“Are you gonna stand there gawking at me, or move your ass and go see your man? And don’t tell me you don’t have a man.”

I choked on a laugh and ran off, bursting with happiness. My hands were shaking as I opened the door. We hadn’t spoken in almost two weeks—my fault for asking for time—and I tried to prepare myself for the worst.

Alek stood beside the exam table, stroking a ginger tabby I recognized as Boris from Cattoccino, the cat café we’d visited a few weeks ago. My heart swelled at the implication that Alek had decided to give him a forever home.

“Hi.” As soon as the word left my mouth, I cringed. Ugh. “What, uh, I mean...”

He answered with a lopsided smile. “Nice to see you, too.”

I tossed the folder beside the small sink as I rounded the table and lunged, forcing him to wrap his free arm around me. My arms flew around his neck. “I missed you.” I briefly thought about Camila’s advice to make Alek work for it but screw it. I was done playing games. “I’m sorry I shut you out after that mess with Holden.”

His hand stroked the length of my spine before drawing me closer for a brief squeeze. “It wasn’t just you. I should have called more often, even though you said you needed time. Truth is, I needed time as well.”

I backed away to meet his gaze and lowered my arms to his waist. I wasn’t ready to break contact. “For what?”

“To realize Holden was full of shit. That I was full of shit. I’ve been using my father as an excuse.” He folded a hand around the back of his neck. “I don’t know. To keep me from living, I guess? That’s what Mom thinks, anyway.”

I giggled and cupped a hand over my mouth. “Did she really say that?”

His tongue slicked across his lower lip. “In so many words, yeah.”

“That sounds like Camila.”

“Meow.”

We both glanced at Boris, who sat patiently on the table, waiting for our attention to return to him.

“I can’t believe you adopted him.”

“I decided it was time to grow some roots.”

My gaze snapped back to his. “Roots?” I swallowed hard, choking on the possibilities that presented. “What do you mean?”

“I know I don’t have the best track record, and it seems as though every time we decide to make a go of it, something happens.”

I arched a brow. “I wouldn’t put all the blame on you.”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. The point is, I’m tired of hanging onto the past. I want to move forward with you.” A light shade of pink tinged his cheeks. “If you’ll have me. And Boris, of course.”

I pulled my lower lip between my teeth and bit down. “Of course.”

Alek brushed a stray lock away from my face and tucked it behind my ear. His fingers traced the shell of my ear before threading through the back of my hair. He lowered his mouth to mine and pressed a sweet kiss to my lips. We lingered there, but he didn't take the kiss any deeper. I was disappointed at first, but considering where we were, it was for the best.

"I was afraid." I drew in a breath and confessed my deepest fear. "You would have already deployed and I wouldn't see you again. Or at least for a while."

Alek shook his head. "I'm stuck on a desk for at least a few more weeks. Then I'll most likely be assigned to personnel or cargo transport. It will be a while before I'm sent back to a carrier."

I released Alek and carefully slipped Boris back into his carrier. There was no need to examine him. I'd already given him his shots a few weeks ago. After he was safely contained, I turned back to Alek. "I know this will make me sound like a wet blanket, but how do we do this?"

He sighed. "We have some things to figure out. Since I'm stationed in Virginia Beach, I'm pretty well stuck. Luckily, it's only an hour away, which means it's not completely out of the realm of possibility to make it work."

"That's an awful lot of driving, though. Even if it's only on the weekends."

"We'll figure it out."

He sounded so confident. I wish I felt the same. Bottom line, I didn't want to spend that much time apart, especially when he would ultimately be deployed and be gone for months. I told myself my next suggestion came from a place of practicality rather than being needy. "I'm pretty sure Virginia Beach has veterinary clinics."

The lopsided smile reappeared, along with a dimple in his left cheek. Damn, I was a sucker for dimples. "I didn't want to ask, but would you consider a move?"

*He had no idea.* "I'd consider the right move."

His eyes narrowed as he pressed my back against the wall and caged me between his arms. "Is this a negotiation?"

"Well, I can't make things too easy."

“I love you, Shannon. Easy or difficult, it doesn’t matter. I just want you. We’ll figure out the rest.”

I sucked in a breath. “I love you, too.”

He lowered his mouth and kissed me, only this time it wasn’t sweet or innocent. It was full of the promise of what was to come. And for the first time in my life, I was hopeful about what the future would bring.

And I couldn’t wait to get there.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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## Alek

*The things we do for love.*

That thought repeated in my head as I parked in front of Holden's apartment building and took the short elevator ride to the twentieth floor. I hadn't given much thought to what I'd say once we met face to face, but I knew the outcome I wanted.

Bottom line, Shannon missed Holden, and she wouldn't—*couldn't* be truly happy until things were right between them. Regardless of my personal feelings on the matter, and for him, I wanted what was best for her.

Yeah. Love was a bitch.

The door swung open and whatever smile had been plastered on Holden's face fell when our gazes met. I could only assume it was intended for an expected guest. "Oh. What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you."

He rolled his eyes. "I can't imagine what we could possibly need to say to each other."

I shook my head in disbelief. "I'm not here for me. I'm here to talk about Shannon."

Holden dropped his chin and took several deep breaths before making eye contact once more. "What about her?"

"Do you really want to talk about this in the hall, in full view of your neighbors?"

For a moment, I thought he was going to slam the door in my face, but his shoulders drooped, and then he backed up a few steps to open the door wider. "Come on in."

I kept telling myself I was doing this for Shannon. Personally, I didn't give a shit if we ever saw Holden again. I stepped into his apartment as he pushed the door closed. "I'll make this quick. What you did to her, fucking up her relationships, was a dick move. Regardless, she still cares about you. She misses you, even though she's still pissed off about that shit."

Holden crossed his arms in front of his chest. "She can call me and tell me that herself if it's that important to her."

"No." I shook my head. "You don't get it. I'm here to tell you that if you want to save your friendship, you need to get off your ass and do whatever it takes to fix things between you. In all honesty, I don't give a shit either way. But it matters to her, which means it matters to me. She still loves you, even though you ripped out her heart."

"Well, she ripped out mine as well."

"Give me a fucking break," I scoffed. "You've been playing her from day one, just to get what you want. That's all you've ever cared about. Your wants, your needs. Right now, I'm asking you to think about what she needs. As badly as I hate to admit it, she needs you."

Indecision flickered over his face, which was quickly replaced by arrogance. His default attitude. "I don't know why. She has you now."

"See? This is why everyone thinks you're an asshole." I gestured toward him, palms up. "I don't know what I've ever done to you, and frankly, I don't care. Shannon and I are together. That's not going to change. That being said, I don't want to deprive her of one of the most important relationships in her life. She loves you. She needs you. If you ever gave a shit about her, you need to swallow your fucking pride and try to make things right."

Slowly shaking his head, Holden chuckled and folded a hand around the back of his neck. "Did she send you here to deliver that little speech?"

"No," I answered immediately. "She doesn't know I'm here. This was my idea. Because I know making things right with you will make her happy. Even if she isn't ready yet."

He gave another shake of his head and met my gaze. Vulnerability filled his eyes. I couldn't remember ever seeing that in

him before. "I never wanted to hurt her. I thought I was doing the right thing and that I was looking out for her."

"I'm sure you did."

That vulnerability became desperation. "Do you love her?"

"Yeah, I do." I took a deep breath. Holden and I had never been close. Hell, we'd barely acknowledged we were stepbrothers. "Look, things with Shannon just sort of happened. I'm sorry if that hurt you. Just so you know, I didn't pursue her to spite you."

"I get it." Holden nodded as if agreeing with some pre-determined course of action. "I'm not ready to talk about this yet, but I promise I'll call her soon. I'm having a really hard time picturing my life without her in it."

I stepped forward and extended my hand. "I doubt you and I will ever be close, but I'd like it if we could at least be civil and get along, for her sake."

Holden pursed his lips, his face compressing, as he shook my hand. "Fine. I think I can manage that."

I wasn't sure how long our uneasy truce would last, but I wouldn't be the one to break it. I loved Shannon enough to at least try to make it work.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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## Shannon

### ***One year later...***

I woke to a feather-light caress across my bare shoulder and down my arm. A protest rumbled in my throat as I swatted at the sensation.

“C’mon, Doolittle. Time to get up,” Alek murmured, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

I smiled at the affectionate use of the call sign I’d been given after I moved in with Alek. That was almost nine months ago. Ben came up with it after I got a job at Perfect Paws animal rescue, and I loved it. All of the ladies in the Cole Security group had a call sign, and the fact they gave me one meant I was part of the club—even though Alek was still on active duty and didn’t work for Cole.

I finally felt like I belonged, which was something I’d missed since my grandparents died. The Carlisles may have taken me under their wing, but I always felt like an outsider, regardless of the close relationship I used to have with Holden.

“It’s too early,” I grumbled and rolled away from him.

“It’s almost eleven. Hell, the day’s half over.”

“Hmph.”

He nudged my shoulder. “Do you really want to sleep the entire day away? Let’s go do something fun.”

“I can think of something fun we can do, and we won’t even need to leave the house.”

Alek stood and pulled the covers off me. “Up and at ‘em. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

I shivered at the loss of warmth and rolled toward him, unabashed in my nakedness. Of course, he was fully dressed and ready to go. “What surprise?”

He didn’t respond right away. Instead, he allowed his gaze to drift over my body, taking in every curve, every hollow. His hungry gaze snapped back to mine. “Well, if I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise. Would it?”

I grudgingly climbed out of bed and stretched. My hands went to his shoulders as I reached up to kiss him lightly on the lips. “This better be one heck of a surprise to warrant leaving the house when you’ve only been home a few days.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I think you’ll like it.”

“Hmph.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me into his arms, lifting me so we were pressed chest to chest. My arms automatically looped around his neck as he lowered his mouth to mine. We’d been together a year, but every kiss felt like the first one, filled with that intoxicating mixture of excitement and anticipation. A kiss from Alek was enough to get me to do damn near anything, and I knew I’d ever get enough.

“Please?” he asked.

“Fine.” I pursed my lips. “What should I wear?”

He shrugged. “Whatever you want.”

Since he clearly wasn’t going to give me any hints, I took my cue from his attire: a navy polo, dark jeans, and dark brown boat shoes. Based on that, I assumed I could rule out a nature hike or otherwise strenuous outdoor activity.

“Give me twenty minutes.” I stepped toward the bathroom called over my shoulder. “Maybe thirty.”

“Okay.” He chuckled and left the room.

I opted for a short red and white polka dot wrap dress with a flirty ruffled hem paired with royal blue ballet flats and pulled my hair into a messy low ponytail. It would have to do, and hopefully, I wouldn’t be too over or underdressed for whatever Alek had in mind.

Twenty-seven minutes later, I stepped into the living room and found Alek engrossed in *Call of Duty*. He whistled and tossed his game controller aside. “You look beautiful, babe.”

I smiled and gave him a shallow curtsy. “Will this do for the day’s excursion?”

He stood and ambled over to me. “It’s perfect.”

“I still don’t see why all the secrecy is necessary,” I mumbled.

He gave me a sly grin and ushered me out the door and into his truck. “You will.”

My suspicions were raised when we entered the highway headed toward Newport News. “Um, why are we going to Newport?”

Alek arched a brow. “Are you going to trust me, or just keep asking questions the entire way?”

“You could just tell me, and then I’ll stop asking questions.”

He laughed. “Woman, you’re killing me.”

An hour later, we parked just down the block from Cattoccino.

I couldn’t deny my excitement over visiting a place I loved, but it was a little confusing, to say the least. “Why are we here?”

Alek turned toward me, a faint smile on his lips. “I wanted to bring you here for the anniversary of our first visit, but that couldn’t happen since I was deployed.”

If I hadn’t already been in love with the man, that would have clinched it. I leaned across the console and threw my arms around him. “Thank you. That’s so sweet.”

“I don’t know how true that is, but I’m glad you’re happy about it.” He gave me a squeeze and released me. “How about we go inside and see if they have any new cats?”

I arched a brow. “Are we going to leave with another one? Ebony and Boris might enjoy having another friend to play with.”

He slid from his seat and faced me before shutting his door. “No.”

I made a face as he walked around the vehicle and opened my door. I swung my legs toward him and slid from my seat. “Don’t you want three cats?”

“I never thought I’d see myself with one cat, let alone the two we have. I really don’t think I could handle a third.” He closed the door and threaded his fingers through mine. “Ebony and Boris cause enough trouble on their own. They don’t need any help.”

I snickered as we walked the short distance to the cafe. He was right about our two cats being a handful, but it was fun to tease him about adding another pet to the mix.



We approached the counter, and Maricela greeted us after serving another customer. “Dr. McKenzie! It’s been too long.” Her gaze shifted to Alek. “It’s good to see you again, as well. The usual today? White peppermint mocha and an Americano?”

“Good memory,” Alek said. He nudged me. “Babe?”

“Perfect. Yes, please.”

I wandered off a few steps to peek into the cat area and see if there were any new kitties I hadn’t met. Alek joined me, a drink in each hand. He held mine out to me. “Ready to go check things out?”

I nodded and tried to contain my excitement so I wouldn’t burst into a dead run. I’d missed the cafe since I left Newport, and unfortunately, I’d had little time to make regular visits.

Alek led me to a pair of plush love seats in a quiet corner. A black and white tuxedo cat lounged at the end of one, leaving just enough room for me to sit beside it. Its ear twitched as I sat but otherwise didn’t acknowledge my presence. Typical cat. I gently scratched the top of its head and trailed my hand down its back and across its flank. The cat stretched, flexed its front paws, and began to purr.

“Don’t get any ideas, babe.”

I glanced at Alek and adopted a fake pout. “I’m just petting him. But isn’t he cute?”

“Mm-hmm.” He rolled his eyes and turned his attention to a petite calico that wandered over. She brushed up against his leg before attacking the leather ties on his shoes. “Hey. Stop that.”

He pushed her off his foot and tried to distract her with a toy. I giggled at the sight of Alek flicking a teaser wand with a bright blue bird and purple feathers on the end of a black cord.

“I think she likes you.”

He slid off his loveseat and sank onto his knees as he flipped the wand back and forth, making the speeding ball of fur chase it. “Not gonna happen.”

“That’s what you said about Boris.”

The calico landed on the stuffed bird, flipped onto her side, and clawed at the toy with both back feet before launching into the air. She ran a few feet away, spun around, and dropped into a crouch to stalk her prey. Alek flicked his wrist, making the bird dance. The cat commando crawled closer, then leaped onto the toy, capturing it in

her mouth. Her momentum jerked the toy out of Alek's grasp as she continued across the room, taking her treasure with her.

My attention had been divided between the tuxedo at my side and watching Alek play with the calico kitten. When the kitten ran off, I focused on the cat beside me, who had just discovered the tie at my waist. "No, sir. You don't need that."

"Check this out, babe." I glanced up at the request. Alek was on one knee at my feet with a small black velvet box in his hand. The corners of his mouth twitched and slowly spread into a nervous smile as he held it up in offering.

My heart pounded, and I suddenly didn't care that the rambunctious tuxedo kitty batted at the tie on my dress. "Oh my gosh."

"Open it."

I swallowed around the growing lump in my throat and accepted the box with trembling fingers. A gasp whistled between my lips as I flipped open the lid. Nestled inside was a delicate platinum band that supported a perfect emerald cut diamond flanked on each side by a marquis and round diamond. "It's beautiful."

"I love you, Shannon. There's no way I could love anyone more, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you." His smile faltered, then returned. "What do you say? Will you marry me?"

My gaze dropped to the ring. It was beautiful, but I would have loved him just as much if he'd presented me with a ring straight out of a gumball machine. He stared at me, anxiously waiting for my answer, but I didn't have to think about it. I just spoke from my heart. "Yes."

"Ah," he sighed in relief. He framed my face with both hands and kissed me. A hush fell over the room as the other patrons stopped to watch us. A sheepish expression blanketed his face as he plucked the ring from the box and slid it onto my finger. We stood together, still cocooned in our own bubble but aware we were the center of attention. I smiled and tossed up a weak wave. Alek laced our fingers together and grinned. "She said yes!"

The room erupted in applause as complete strangers stepped forward to congratulate us. My cheeks burned, and while I wasn't

comfortable being in the spotlight, the small cat café was the perfect place for Alek's proposal.

He squeezed my hand. "Are you ready to get out of here?"

"God, yes," I said, relieved at the thought of escaping our newfound audience.

When we were back in his truck, I lifted my left hand and tilted my head toward Alek. "Does this mean you win the bet?"

His brows furrowed. "What bet?"

I rolled my eyes. "About when the guys thought you'd propose."

His eyes rounded. "You knew about that? That was just them being idiots."

"Of course, I knew." I laughed. "Gretchen told me about it a while ago and how Ben didn't participate because he knew you'd put it off just to prove them all wrong."

"Well," he chuckled. "He was right, but I would have lost had I been here in July."

I frowned. "Gretchen said the bet was you'd propose within a year."

"The deadline was August thirty-first."

"And today is September fifth." My lips curved into a slow smile. "So, how much do you win?"

He shrugged. "If I hold them to it, three hundred."

Another laugh burst out of me. "You're so bad."

He wagged his brows as he started the engine. "You know that's what you love about me."

I leaned across the console and kissed him on the cheek. "Oh, that's just one of many things I love about you."

Alek lifted my hand to his lips and brushed a kiss across my knuckles. "It keeps life interesting, babe."

"That it does."

He was right. Life with Alek would never be dull.

And I was looking forward to every minute of it.

THE END

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## BONUS EPILOGUE

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When I got the opportunity to write *Forgiven*, I had the idea of *Top Gun* meets *New Girl*. I wondered what would happen if a jaded Navy aviator met a quirky, somewhat socially awkward younger woman. The answer was the book you just finished reading.

After I finished, I wasn't quite ready to let Alek and Shannon go, so I wrote a quick peek into the future. If you'd like to see how they're doing after the events of *Forgiven*, you can download the bonus scene here: <https://BookHip.com/MXMFNFT>

I hope you enjoyed reading their story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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It seems as though this is always the most difficult part of the book to write, mainly because there are so many people involved in making a nebulous story idea into reality.

To Mr. Dante, thank you for your continued support and encouragement while I chase my dream.

To Jennifer Hall, Brittany Franks, Mazie Jones, and Sara Magee, thank you for all the time and hard work you invested as I brought Alek and Shannon to life. There aren't enough words to explain what each of you mean to me.

To Corinne Michaels, thank you for allowing me to be a part of The Salvation Society. I hope I have done you and your characters justice.

Finally, to my readers. Thank you for taking a chance on me and reading the stories I create. Without you, there would be no reason to bring my characters to life.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Ember Dante is an artist and the author of the recent release, *Damaged*. She holds a degree in graphic arts and photography and taught web design at the junior college level for over ten years.

She currently lives in East Texas, home of pine trees, roses, and pollen. Lots of pollen. Her sense of sarcasm and Texas-sized imagination were introduced in her debut novel *Exposure*. When she isn't busy herding cats, she can be found engrossed in a good book or indulging her Netflix addiction.

You can stalk her online at [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram @emberdanteauthor](#).

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