

# Jericho

T.K. Eldridge



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# Dedication

*To Joe Marrs – Thanks for all the years of writing together that prepared me for writing alone.*

*“There is nothin’ glorious about dyin’ in awar. A bunch of starving, freezing boys -killing each other so the rich people can stay rich? Madness...”*- Bill Compton, True Blood s1e2

# Description

He had made the ultimate sacrifice...only he wasn't really dead.

He signed their forms. He accepted their diagnosis. He welcomed the treatment. He changed his name and disappeared.

Now he is treated as less than human. A pet, held in the Facility until he and his team are let loose on a government-sanctioned target.

Except this next target isn't some terrorist or criminal - it's a teenage girl on US soil, along with the woman who stole his heart.

Jericho and his team may be a different kind of soldier, but they still hold to their moral codes and honor. Going against a direct order is not something they would normally consider...

But nothing about this team is normal.

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# Chapter One

**A**drenaline raced through me and left a bitter, metallic taste in my mouth. My grip shifted on the rifle, and I nodded to Hernando. A pace and a half ahead of me, Hernando lifted a gloved hand to signal he was going to go around the corner first. Dust and sweat filled my senses as I clenched the rifle tight, then my breath stopped as I heard a faint gasp from Hernando that seemed to echo over and over again. That one sound, heard just before my whole world went white, then red, and then black. The explosion was silent for me, just a flash of colors as my eyes widened and everything else stopped.

I choked awake on the scream caught in my throat. For a few seconds, I stared at the warm gleam of light on the nightstand where the little lamp burned, my brain slow to register the shift in location. The faint hiss of the intake vent drew my gaze upwards before it shifted to the glow of green numbers on the clock that told me it was still a few hours until dawn. A stretch on the narrow bed eased dream-tensed muscles before I pulled the thick wool blanket up and turned to face the wall. The painted cinder blocks did little to distract my mind from memories brought on by the dream. The beige painted surface soon gave way to the sand and mud wall I last saw nearly five years ago, and the replay of the explosion that ended life as I knew it.



The first things I remembered after the explosion were voices as they talked over me.

“They said that Hernando’s body evaporated from the force of the blast and the only thing that kept this one alive was the corner of the building between him and the IED.” A male voice spoke in the semi-hushed whisper often used in hospitals. I couldn’t place the voice at the time, but later I would know him as Dr. Evans.

“Evaporated? Jeezus. Amazing this guy has as much left of him as he does. Think this batch will work?” The female voice didn’t bother with a whisper. Stephanie Milford, public relations and spin artist for the Facility. The first time I saw her leaning over my bed, all that blond hair and those big blue eyes, I was sure I had died. It didn’t take long to realize the angelic appearance hid a darkness within her that challenged Goebbels. They’d kept me paralyzed and, for the most part, comatose. There were moments of clarity during that time. Harsh, bright shards of painful confusion that didn’t come together until much later.

A shiver, and I tugged the blanket higher. A low growl tickled the back of my throat as I looked at my hands. Ten fingers, a faint dusting of dark hair – they looked like perfectly good hands – but they weren’t my original ones. The scar that had wrapped around the thumb of my left hand, the one where I’d cut it on the old tire swing chain, was gone. An odd twist in my right index finger where I’d broken it playing ball in high school, that one was gone too. They were hands, attached to my body by ligaments and muscles, bone and sinew, but they were not the hands I had been born with. These hands had been grown to replace the hands and forearms that had been blown away in the attack. Same with both legs, my right hip and parts of my face that included both eyes, nose and right ear.

Another shiver and a soft huff of breath as I made yet another mental adjustment. It was still sometimes a lot to get used to, this new body. It also seemed like the price I'd paid for it was getting higher every day.

Dr. Evans had explained it as they had utilized various strains of animal stem cells, made a cocktail with those cells and human stem cells in order to regrow body parts. Organs, limbs, nerves, skin, eyes – stem cells were 'unprogrammed' cells that could become anything. Dr. Thorpe and his research team at the Facility had taken the Rosetta Stone of the medical world and mixed it with cells from wolves, bats, bears, hawks, and others. My new legs made it so I could run faster and move silently. My eyesight was beyond anything a pure human could achieve, along with my hearing and strength. All of these modifications had made me super human. It had also made me a "pet" of the Facility. To them, we weren't super human - we were less than human.

"Get up, Dante," the snide tone of Meyers, one of the lab techs, filtered through the clear wall that fronted the cell. "Sensors show you're awake so you might as well get moving."

I muttered under my breath, "Fuck off, peon," as I slowly sat up and proceeded to annoy the fuck out of the jackass in a lab coat. "And a charming good morning to you too, Assistant Meyers. Breakfast in bed? Aww, you shouldn't have! But...where's my daisy? And daily paper?" A bright, toothy smile as I stretched, then rested my arms on my knees.

A protein bar and a bottle of something the lab created called a 'breakfast blend' sat on a tray that Meyers slammed through the slot in the wall – hard enough to bounce the bottle off the tray into a spin on the floor.

I didn't bother to hide the self-satisfied gleam in my eyes. Meyers was irritated and I took my little victories where I could get them.

"Twenty minutes for food and shower, then morning briefing. Don't be late," Meyers snapped as he turned away and entered his notes on his tablet. He

stopped a few steps down the hall and glanced into the next cell, then muttered and continued on his way.

My jaw clenched as I tracked Meyers' stops and starts down the row of cells. I heard him mumble his disappointment that he couldn't see Kit sleeping. My knuckles cracked as I made a fist. One of these days I was going to beat Meyers' face in for his perversions where my team was concerned. See, Kit was new – and the only female. Kit's cell was next to mine and she never slept on the bed but under it with the sheet draped over the side like a curtain. It blocked the view of anyone outside and gave her the privacy she craved.

I heard her stir after he left, as I ate the bar and downed the bottle's contents. Tasted like sticks, twigs, and sour milk, but my body needed the fuel, so I ate it. The faint click of the electric lock being released told me I was free to head to the communal shower. We were watched all the time. In our cells, in the showers, on the toilet, it didn't matter. The Facility no longer considered us human, so it was deemed acceptable to treat us like lab specimens or rare animals in a zoological experiment. As a result, we'd all developed our own ways of coping.

My thing was a thin braid in my hair that went behind one ear and reached past my shoulder. They'd cut it off twice, but the second time I'd snapped the barber's arm like a twig. They didn't bother to cut it again – at least Dr. Evans knew when to pick his battles. I'd had to sit in The Box for three days as punishment, but I'd been through worse. When the hot spray of the shower hit me, my muscles twitched in memory. The Box meant one supplement a day for nutrition, a slow leak from a garden hose for water, and no clothes while stuck in a concrete box with a hole in the floor that acted as drain and toilet.

Soap slid over skin that still showed a few bruises from the last party the team had attended, but I ignored the ache as I thought about my team. My family. Six individuals that resided in F-block of the Gunston Facility, buried in a forested

state park on land that had once belonged to George Mason back in the days of the Revolutionary War. I knew other buildings held other teams of broken men and women made into something out of science fiction stories. Some, I'd seen. Others, I'd heard since I listened when techs and assistants talked – and forgot that enhanced hearing didn't stop when the lights went out.

Project Phoenix had saved my life, but it had also left me dead. David Carver had died “of injuries suffered when insurgents attacked his unit using an improvised explosive device and small arms fire” or so the report read that my family had been sent. When the doctor in Kandahar listed my injuries, then offered me a chance to get back in the fight and make the insurgents pay for the death of Hernando and the others, payback for destroying my life, I'd grabbed for it with both missing hands and swore I'd never look back.

That had been five years ago. Yet with all that I had gained, I had not bargained on being put in a cage, treated like a lab rat, and only being let out on a very short, GPS-monitored leash. For five years, I have been Jericho Dante. For four of them, I've served as Commander Dante of team Foxtrot. Five men under my command. The team's makeup had changed a few times – usually when someone was killed in action. Most recently, our sniper/recon guy, Aden, had been killed in the mountains of Afghanistan. Kit had been added to the team three days ago, although I'd worked with her before. The guys were going to have a problem with a girl on the team, but having seen her in action, I had zero complaints when she was moved into our compound. The rest of the team would do as they were ordered – and they'd come around when they saw her in action. The intentionally loud shuffle of feet brought me back to the present, and I spoke without turning around. “Morning, Kane.”

The man grunted and then sighed as the hot spray of his own shower hit his skin. Hands flat against the tile wall, Kane bowed his head and let the water run down his back. The two of us bore an uncanny resemblance to each other, but that had

been explained to us as simply a byproduct of the fact that we were both subjects of the same batch of mixed stem cells and DNA. After working a couple of missions, we had even developed a sort of silent speech that the rest of the team jokingly called ‘twin-speak’. No, the lab techs hadn’t caught on to that little bonus, and we both liked it that way just fine.

After five years, I knew Kane wasn’t exactly a morning person, so I just finished up and pulled on my clothes. A jumpsuit in dull army green with “Dante” embroidered on the upper chest. No insignia or logo. Nothing to distinguish it from the uniform of a mechanic or janitor. Underneath that we had plain cotton undergarments, drab green socks and slip on sneakers for shoes. Once dressed, I headed into the commons room and straight for the vending machine. A thumb jabbed the button for coffee and I waited as the paper cup filled, the residuals of the dream still on the edges of my mind.

“S’that for me?” Kane asked as he entered, the cuffs of his uniform tugged up to mid-forearm.

“It could be. I thought you were quitting caffeine?”

“Fuck, no. I thought about it, but decided I wanted to pick my own drug for a change.” Kane reached for the cup as I pulled it free and sniffed it. “You didn’t put any of that flavored crap in it this time, did you?”

“Hazelnut Raspberry Surprise,” I said, then shook my head. “See all of the selections? You can have coffee, tea, or...” I pointed to each selection as I read them off.

A low rumble came from the far doorway as Cutter entered, “...or me.” White teeth flashed in the ebony face and he rubbed a hand over his bald head. “But you’re just too pretty for me, Kane.” A wink, and he took a cold cola from the fridge before he dropped into a chair that sounded a faint plastic complaint at the abuse.

My snort of laughter brought Kane's head around with a snap to glare at me.

"Don't. Start. I never gave any reason for that guy in Belize to think I liked him. It's not my fault he went and got a ring and everything. Damned leather pants – that's what it was. I will never be caught in leather pants in that country again."

Kane took a hearty swallow of the coffee and made a face before he sat in a chair across from Cutter. "And you, my friend, had better watch it. I may well take you up on that offer some time, just to see your reaction."

Cutter choked on his mouthful of cola and laughed low, the sound more threatening than merry. "And you'll find yourself singing soprano," he rumbled. I snickered at the banter and fixed a second cup of coffee before I took my seat at the end of the table. Back against the wall, I could watch both doors and the people in the room. "Now boys," I said, "don't make me stop this car and turn around..." My voice trailed off as Kit ducked into the room. Head bowed, hair still wet from her shower, she went to the coffee machine in silence and jumped when I spoke. "Good morning, Kit."

Wide green eyes stared up at me for a moment before they dropped back to the cup as it filled. "Mornin'," she mumbled and kept her head bowed, the short cut just enough to hide her face.

The WTF looks from Kane and Cutter had me lifting my hand to silence them. "Kit, this is Kane, our demo guy, and Cutter, my second. Gentlemen, this is Kit Carson, our new sniper/recon."

Cutter's expression went neutral while Kane's brows furrowed.

"Our new sniper and recon?" Kane asked.

"Yes," I answered in a tone that brooked no further comment. Kit's shoulders curled in a little more and she cradled the foam cup of coffee in both hands, staying near the vending machines for the moment. "She's one of the best I've worked with. Did the Libya job with me last March."

"But...what about Gideon?" Kane asked, looking Kit over critically.

“Gideon will be fine. We’ll make sure of it.” I replied quietly.

“Kit will be fine.” Cutter murmured. “We’ll make sure of it.”

Kit’s gaze flashed to meet mine, worry and questions in her eyes. I sighed before I answered her. “Gideon has...issues.” That brought a snort of wry amusement from Kane.

“That’s like saying Seattle has rain.” Kane shook his head and drained his coffee, turning to toss the cup into the trash with an overhand dunk shot. “Score!” he hissed, then looked back at Kit. “You having your monthly?”

Kit blinked in surprise. “Um...just finished two days ago.”

“Then you’ve got about five days more to worry. Gideon...got an extra dose of Whatever...and has trouble ...”

“...trouble controlling himself around females when they are most fertile.” I replied, as I finished Kane’s sentence.

“Oh.” Kit said, voice soft. A faint shudder ran through her and she looked over at me. “So, this is one of Their little tests?”

I nodded. “So it would seem. But we can work with it.”

“Not like we’ve got a choice.” Kit replied wryly, then squared her shoulders a little and moved to sit to my left, between myself and Kane, with Cutter across the table. “I’m good at my job. Better’n most. Don’t worry about me not pulling my own weight.”

“You’re here. We’re not worried about that.” Cutter said, as he examined her delicate features. When she turned to look at him, he quirked a brow as the luminescent yellow-green eyes settled on his face. “Hawk?” he asked.

Kit nodded and added. “Owl too.” She, in turn, took in Cutter’s chocolate brown eyes that didn’t seem unusual at all. “You?”

“Owl here. I didn’t need a lot replaced.” Cutter drained the cola and then with as much effort as someone would crumple a piece of paper, he turned the aluminum can into a small ball of colored metal.

“Show off,” Kane teased and looked at Kit. “I wear contacts.” Deep blue eyes met hers then shifted to mine. “He hates the contacts.”

When I looked at her, my eyes glowed a vivid turquoise blue, with cat slit pupils.

“We’re batch brothers,” Kane continued. “We share every...”

Kane’s sentence was cut off by a low, huffed growl from the doorway. Gideon Bond curled one hand around the frame, eyes locked on Kit, nostrils flared. His short, compact frame quivered as his eyes brightened more amber than blue with each breath.

“Bond,” I snapped out a sharp order. “Stand down.”

Gideon’s gaze never left Kit, the hiss of words slid between clenched teeth.

“What. Is. She. Doing. Here?” His chest rose and fell with each set of words, fingers gone white where they gripped the frame. “Get her. Out. Of here!”

Kit didn’t move. Whether it was fear or some instinct come to life, she barely breathed as she watched Gideon.

“Gideon, she can’t leave. You need to get it under control. Now,” I said, voice still sharp but pitched lower than normal as I added, “They are watching.”

Gideon jerked and his eyes closed, then he turned and pressed his forehead to the door frame as he struggled for control. “Be...right back,” he choked out and bolted from the room, back down the hall.

Only then did Kit let out an audible breath as she started to tremble herself. I laid one hand, palm up, on the table near her. Kit stared at it for a long moment, then put one of her small ones into mine and stuttered out a soft “Thanks.” Head bowed, hair over her face once more, she curled in and seemed to shrink into an almost childlike pose of one who sought comfort against my side without a shift from her chair.

It was this odd tableau that greeted Rico when he sauntered in, tousled blond hair in his eyes and hands shoved deep into his uniform’s pockets. “Aww, who brought the dolly to Show and Tell?”



A flash of warning in my eyes was all Rico needed to change his tone. “Hey, sorry. Y’all okay in here?”

“We’re fine. Just a little excitement for the morning. Go check on Gideon,” I said.

“Gideon’s here,” came from behind Rico as Gideon entered once more. The strong smell of mentholated cold rub wafted into the room with him and made everyone grin, even Kit.

Gideon looked over to where Kit watched him and gave her a sheepish shrug.

“Hey, if it works for dead bodies, it should help with this, right?” It also didn’t escape anyone’s notice that he stayed as far from Kit as possible and took few deep breaths.

“Good boys and girl,” the voice came from the speaker overhead. “Please be seated. Briefing starts in five.”

Silence met the voice of Dr. Jeffers as the group took their places around the table, gaze trained on the blank wall between the doors.

A metal panel slid back and the presentation started.

# Chapter Two

Coffee in hand, I leaned back and watched the couple in the corner of the cafe. The two held hands and stared into each other's eyes over lattes gone cold. Myself, Cutter, Kit, and Kane were on a small job where we were to watch a suspected terrorist financier on his visit to DC. So far it had been a weekend of our target enjoying romantic interludes with three different women.

"And you thought you were a ladies' man, Kane," I said.

"I am a ladies' man. This guy is just a man whore," Kane replied as he sipped his coffee. We sat at a table, a laptop open in front of me and a paper in front of Kane. Outside the cafe, Cutter was in the Explorer, wired up so he could listen and chat while he acted as backup. Kit was at the shop next door at a table out front, a halfeaten sandwich and glass of sweet tea near to hand, a tablet held as if she were reading.

"Don't you miss being able to just do this?" Kit asked. "You know, sit in a cafe, have a lazy breakfast and watch people?"

Silence met her question for a few long moments before I replied, "Yeah, I do miss it."

"Freedom isn't part of the deal," Kane said. A bitter laugh and he added, "We fight for freedom, but don't get any. Not exactly what we thought we were

signing up for, is it?”

Cutter spoke up. “I’ve been thinking about that quote from Benjamin Franklin a lot lately. Well, pretty much since we last got back from the sandbox. Yeah, I realize he wasn’t talking about national security, but about taxes and money to defend against Indian attacks, but the words fit. He said ‘Those who give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety,’ and I kinda think we don’t deserve feeling all safe and smug because we let our fear and pain guide us into a choice that puts us right where we are.”

It still caught me by surprise when Cutter would speak so clearly and with such intelligence. Just looking at the guy made you expect grunts and monosyllables.

“That,” I said, still keeping a watch on the couple in the corner, “is not the whole story. You’re right, to a point, but what we were told and what we were sold – and what we got – are not the same. Maybe it’s time...” a crackling sound had all of us reacting in pain, as I hissed. “What the hell?”

Cutter replied, “Looks like the recorder just accidentally fried itself. Shame the home office won’t be getting today’s audio files.”

I glanced out the window and gave a thumbs up to the Explorer before I turned back to the laptop. “Well, then. Now that that is taken care of, as I was saying. Maybe it’s time we made some different choices. If I can figure out a way to get us out of this situation without a violation of honor, are you in?”

There was no hesitation. Each one spoke up, almost in concert, with an “I’m in.” “Roger that. Soon as there’s an opening, we’ll put together a plan.” I closed the laptop and slid it into a messenger bag I hung from a shoulder. We rose, gathered our trash and headed towards the trash can. The target and his current amour had risen from their table. I watched as the man helped the woman with her shawl with a bit more attention than the public venue warranted. I stared at the two, then adjusted my sunglasses before I stepped out onto the sidewalk. “Yer up, Kittycat.”

Kit got to her feet and tucked the tablet in her bag before she walked past me towards the couple. "Aceil! Is that you? Darling!" Kit gushed as she moved towards the man with a bright smile, air kisses offered to each cheek. A green silk sheath dress and gold Louboutins gave Kit the appearance of an exotic model.

Confusion marred the man's face and anger flushed the creamy complexion of his companion.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember?" he flustered.

Kit gave a light, bubbly laugh. "Oh, dahling!" she gushed. "It was just a few weeks ago in Monaco. Don't you remember? The Princess' event?" Kit leaned in and pretended to whisper, but spoke easily loud enough for the woman on his arm to hear. "Oh, the hours we spent in your suite? Magnificent, darling. Simply magnificent."

Aceil al-Harithi's chest puffed out and he wore a smug expression as he patted the hand of the woman who clutched his arm. "Ah, yes, well, I would be memorable. Of course. How grand to see you again, dear woman."

The woman on his arm huffed indignantly, then pulled away as she chided him in rapid Arabic before her hands flew up in the air in disgust and she turned and stormed away.

A dismissive wave of his hand and al-Harithi turned back to Kit. "Well, beauty, shall we catch up over dinner? I have a suite at the Four Seasons." He offered Kit his arm and inclined his head as he waited for her to take it.

"I would be honored, Aceil. And please, call me Jessica. After the time we've shared, we should both be on a first name basis, oui?" Kit's hand slid over the silk of his coat sleeve before she moved along beside him.

"Score," Cutter said.

I just grinned as Kane and I climbed into the Explorer and watched Kit get into the town car parked three spaces ahead. "All she has to do is plant the nano-

tracker in his drink, download his phone and get out without him suspecting. Cutter, you get to go in as the disgruntled boyfriend and pull her out if she can't get away. He might recognize one of us." I said.

The traffic light changed as the two vehicles pulled out, our Explorer two cars back. We followed the couple of blocks to the Four Seasons and pulled over as the town car stopped in front of the hotel. Aceil got out and offered his hand to Kit who curled against him as if she needed the support to make it inside.

"She's really playing it up," Kane noted.

"That's part of the plan," I said. "Al-Harithi is a Yemeni with ties to AQ, and he isn't above skimming a little to make life very comfortable for himself. He's also supposed to be one of the top financiers for terrorist activity out of Yemen and Syria, with some possible assets in Egypt as well."

"That's more than we're usually told," Cutter said, gaze still on the couple as they headed up into the hotel. Once they were inside, he pulled out of the parking spot and drove down into the hotel's garage, making his way up to the top level before we parked.

"Yeah, well, I did a little digging while I was on that laptop. With ISIS working in Syria, his connections have been more in demand, and his empire is growing," I said. I took a moment and stretched before I got out of the vehicle, doing a quick check of my earbud and weapon. "Leave the keys with Kane and head on in, in case Kit needs you."

A nod from Cutter as he pulled a silk scarf around his neck to dress up the black leather trench coat he wore to hide his gun.

"That doesn't make you look any less like a thug," Kane said to Cutter. "Just like one with expensive tastes."

"Bite me," Cutter replied, then tossed the keys to Kane before he headed inside. I just shook my head at the two and leaned against the Explorer as I listened to the chatter in my earbud.

“She’s good,” Kane said, voice low while he kept watch around us.

Listening to Kit flirt and charm al-Harithi amused me.

“Of course, dahling. I’ll be one moment. Just need to freshen up.” Kit’s voice came through the earbud and then the sound of a door closed and water running.

“I’ve got the phone. Copied in three...two...” The sound of a heavy knock on the door vibrated through the transmission. “One moment, dahling!”

The sound of a door as it slammed open and a choked cry. Both Kane and I stiffened and started to move when we heard a laugh. “Aceil! You need to be more patient.” The low rumble of Aceil’s voice could be heard, amusement in the tone, then the door shut again before Kit sighed. “Phone done. Tracker swallowed. Get me the fuck out of here, will ya?” Then the door opened and they heard her laugh brightly. “Now, you have champagne, yes? Where’s mine?” The next thing they heard was the door to the hotel suite being opened and Cutter speaking to Kit. “Wife, you are in for it. Again.”

“Wife?” Aceil’s voice rose as he pushed to his feet, champagne forgotten as he looked between the two. “You are his wife, yet you come here to me?” Anger and disgust could be heard in his voice.

Kit turned to Aceil and drained the expensive champagne in two swallows, then handed the glass to Cutter. “Husband, you did agree that I could have my own friends. Now look what you did.” A dramatic sigh and Kit picked up her purse then blew a kiss to al-Harithi before she sauntered to the door. “Next time, Aceil, I’ll make sure he has his own playmate so we won’t be interrupted, oui?”

Cutter didn’t say a thing, just set the glass down on a decorative table as he followed Kit out of the room. Just before he stepped out, he glared at Aceil as he sputtered, then Cutter pulled the door shut.

Once the door closed behind them, Kit and Cutter hurried to the elevator and down to the garage. The Explorer slowed enough for the two to get in and pulled away before they’d fully taken their seats. Kit laughed so hard she could barely

speak as she pulled off the Louboutins and slid her feet into sneakers. “Oh, my gods, Cutter. The look on his face was priceless.”

“What happened when he came into the bathroom?” I asked as I handed Cutter the tablet.

Kane slid into traffic and slowed to blend in as Kit spoke. “He was being impatient and wanted to share a champagne kiss. That’s how I got the tracker into him,” Kit said. “Almost caught me with his bloody phone though.” She pulled the thumb drive out of her purse and handed it to Cutter before she settled back and buckled in.

While Cutter uploaded the data to the tablet, and thus to the Facility, Kit looked over at me. “What’s this I hear about a new full-team mission for tomorrow?”

“Yeah, briefing at eighteen-hundred after we get back and turn in the gear,” I said. “Stateside, full op with a backup from Potter’s team from Block M. The little bit I’ve heard, it’ll be like the Berlin embassy job from two years ago.”

“No survivors, huh?” Kane sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Hate those. We’ve not done one of those stateside before.” He took his eyes off the road long enough to give me a look, then his gaze was back on the traffic.

*~Doesn’t sound kosher. Time to make our move?~* The thought passed clearly from Kane to me with the other two passengers in the car none the wiser.

*~May well be. Let’s see what the details are before we decide. When we do this, we need to make sure we have a good public story to back it up. Not killing a US. citizen on home turf plays well with the media.~* I sent back, my gaze on the traffic and my attention on our silent conversation.

*~Time to cut the apron strings, brother. We’ve paid our debt, in spades, if you ask me.~*

I nodded slightly to the message Kane sent and sighed. *~And then some. But don’t fool yourself that this will be easy.~*

The two of us shared a solemn look before continuing the trip back to the Facility in silence.



# Chapter Three

Gideon brought the chopper down in the field and we all jumped out before the skids hit the ground. He was back up in the air in seconds to take our ride home out of range of the mission. We got into the trees and checked our gear before we headed down the trail towards our target. The goal was a mansion set in the middle of about thirty acres of forest.

We'd been given just enough information to plan the assault. The main point being that these were human traffickers bringing women from Eastern Europe and selling them along the US Atlantic coast. There were supposed to be anywhere from four to twelve men in the house, waiting on a delivery of women due to arrive in a few days.

The only thing we had to be wary of was the security system and the weapons the house's occupants might have set up. I had brought a jammer that would disable the security grid for a few seconds – long enough for us to get inside. The team could handle armed combatants, particularly when it was a 'no survivors' mission. It was evening and the house was lit up like there was a party going on. We got to the top of the wall that wrapped around the property. I gave the signal, hit the jammer, and we flooded across that lawn like an oil slick on water.

“Got one in the shadows on the upper balcony,” Cutter whispered into our ears. Rico paused and a faint pop sound was heard. “He’s down,” Rico said.

We hit the front and side entrances of the house simultaneously, set the explosives and blew the doors in before those inside could register that they had company. Silenced rounds hit a guard by the back door and one by the side.

“There are kitchen staff here, preparing food. I’m not down with killing innocents,” Cutter said.

Kit spoke up, “I’m good with taking their phones and shoving them out the door.”

“Do it,” I said. I wasn’t down with killing innocents either. What the folks back home didn’t know, wouldn’t kill them. Or us. Rico, Kane, and I had already downed eight in the three front rooms we cleared. There had been lights on upstairs, so I started up the staircase, ready to shoot anything that moved. Kane came with me and turned the knob as I pushed into the room. First few rooms were empty, then we hit one with a sleeping man – and killed him before he stirred. The next room was in the back and when we stepped inside, I lowered my weapon. Two steel cages were inside the room with three women in each cage. A door was open between this room and the next, and Kane went through the door, then lowered his weapon.

I tapped my mic. “Guys? We have victims up on the second floor. Two cages in my room with three each.”

“Three cages in here, with three in one, two in the other two,” Kane said.

“So, thirteen women we weren’t expecting,” Cutter replied. “Great.”

“Can you come up here and open these?” I asked Cutter.

“On my way,” Cutter replied.

Kit came up with him, took one look at the girls and started going room by room, opening doors and drawers. She came back a few minutes later with

sweats and yoga clothes that looked like they might fit the women, and a box of worn pairs of slip-on sneakers. “This stuff might fit.”

“Good job,” I said and looked at the cage Cutter was working on. The doors had electronic locks and Cutter could usually brute strength those things. This time he’d tried something new. A thin metal card was jammed into the lock, with a ribbon cable and keypad attached. He pressed a button and the lock hissed and popped, then clicked open.

I went over to the cage and pulled the door wide. “Do you speak English?” I asked the three women inside.

One nodded and got to her feet. “I do. I am Yelena.”

“Hello, Yelena. My associate here has some clothes and shoes for you and the others. Why don’t you help everyone get dressed and we’ll get you out of here. Sound good?”

Yelena didn’t speak, just dropped to her knees, grabbed my free hand and kissed my glove. I tugged her to her feet. “No, you don’t need to do that. Just help get everyone dressed and we’ll get you out of here.”

She turned and spoke to the other women in what I think was Ukrainian, and they all slowly moved towards the clothing and found what would cover their half-dressed bodies. Kit took them in groups to the bathroom and they got ready a lot faster than I expected. Rico and Kane led the way down the stairs, and Cutter made sure the rest of the upstairs was empty.

Cutter came down a few minutes later with two large duffel bags over his shoulders and a smaller backpack in his hands. He brought the backpack to Yelena and handed it to her. “I think that’s got some of your passports in there, and a few things that will help you when you get out of here.”

Yelena hugged it to her and nodded, clearly terrified by his size and the intimidating appearance he presented.

Kit handed Yelena one of the kitchen staff's cell phones. "This one is unlocked. We'll get you outside the gate, then you dial 911 and tell the police you've escaped on your own in all of the chaos and have no idea what happened. Got it?"

"Right. You were never here, we don't know what happened, we're just glad to be alive," Yelena replied.

"That's right, you understand perfectly," I said and we headed outside, releasing the gate from inside the house.

Once everyone was outside the walls, Kane came jogging up and smiled. "All set."

"Y'know, brother, you enjoy your job way too much sometimes," I told him.

"Gotta find the little pleasures where you can," Kane said.

"Okay, people. Get walking. Down the road towards town. That way," Cutter said, directing the women further from the house.

They were about a hundred yards down the road and we were at the end of the road in the other direction when I looked at Kane. "Wait until we're all in the trees before you hit it. I want to be on that chopper before the police get the first call."

Kane nodded and pulled into the brush while we jogged toward the clearing.

"Fire in the hole," Kane spoke into his mic and then the explosion shook the ground. About ten yards further, we found ourselves in the clearing with Gideon landing in front of us. Kane came out of the trees, climbed in and we lifted off.

"Any trouble finding the clearing?" Kane asked Gideon.

"Ha ha. Very funny," Gideon replied.

As we rose above the treetops, the mansion that we had just left lay below us, a burning pile of rubble that didn't have enough big pieces left to determine what it once had been.

"You're getting really good at that," Cutter said.

“Thank you,” Kane replied, beaming with pride.

“So, Cutter, what’s in the bags?” I asked.

“I’ll show you later,” he replied.

“Understood,” I said. That meant there was stuff in there he was unsure of and didn’t want anyone to be put in a tough spot about reporting it or not. I leaned over and tapped Gideon’s arm. He switched to the private channel for pilot and copilot, so we could talk without being overheard. “I need you to set Cutter and I down on the road to the storage facility. We’ll join up with you all a little later.”

“Got it, boss,” Gideon said. “Oh, and it seems the signals scrambled again.

Home front doesn’t have any recordings of this evening.”

“Good job, Gideon. Thanks for taking care of that. We found thirteen women and released them down the road with one of the kitchen staff’s phones to call for help. Also sent the kitchen staff out the back to the side road. So, no, we didn’t do a full wipe. We don’t kill innocents. That’s not our job.”

“No, sir, that’s not something honorable men do. I’ll make sure the police get to those women sooner rather than later. It’s gonna get chilly tonight.”

“Do that,” I said and leaned back. I was going to have to face the Facility’s staff about tonight, but it was fine. Gideon knew how to scramble our gear so it looked like equipment failure and not purposeful sabotage.

Gideon tapped back into our private channel. “Police picked up all thirteen women about a mile from the burning mansion.”

“Thanks, Gideon,” I said and closed my eyes. Sleep where you can, when you can, as I’d learned in basic. The dream snuck up on me as it always seemed to. Between one breath and the next, I was back in Afghanistan, three months ago. The rifle was tucked under my arm while I scanned the terrain in front of me.

“Gideon, get out front here and tell me what you see.” I watched the edge of the field in the distance where it met the line of mud-brick wall.

Gideon ran forward in a crouch and tucked into the rocks next to me. He peered up over the rocks and scanned the area, then muttered, "Four insurgents, one with a canvas bag over his shoulder and a grenade in his hand. Probably more in the bag, the way it's bulging. Third guy from the left is Jamaal al Fuqra. Rico should be able to take him out from here."

I patted his shoulder and turned to Rico. "Your shot, Rico. Don't fuck it up." I could see some movement in the distance, but to me they were blurs. I could hear the shuffle of their feet and the rattle of the pin ring against the grenade. That's how I knew someone was ahead of us. We'd been tracking this group for two days in hopes of getting a shot at the leader, al Fuqra. I pulled out my scope and watched.

"Don't fuck it up, he says," Rico muttered. "Like to see you take this shot, asshole." And yes, he knew damned well that those of us with enhanced hearing heard every word. Rico settled against the rocks, shifted the rifle, and blinked. Between one blink and another, the lenses in his eyes shifted and brought the target into sharp relief. The shot was almost a let down. The man dropped to the ground like the proverbial puppet with the strings cut.

"Fire in the hole!" I called out and we all dropped and covered our heads, or ears, as the case may be. One of the disadvantages of enhanced hearing is that loud noises could really really hurt. When Jamaal dropped, the guy with the bag of grenades startled and the pin got pulled on the grenade in his hand. The subsequent explosion took out the three remaining jihadis when the bag of grenades blew. There was nothing but a crater where the four men had once stood. "Goddamnitall!" I snapped as I got to my feet. "Now how are we going to prove we got the fucker?" I slung my weapon over my shoulder, gestured to move out, and we headed towards the smoking hole in the ground nearly two miles away.

“DNA?” Kane suggested as he moved up beside me, eyes on the surroundings as we walked towards the crater.

“Oh, sure. You got the swabs and testing gear?” I shook my head. “We’ll just see if we can find a scrap of something that looks like his clothing to bag up and bring back. If they don’t trust our word on it, fuck’em.” The crater was easily ten yards wide. Scraps of bloody cloth and bone were scattered around the edges. I found a swatch of bloody cloth that looked like the head wrap Jamaal had been wearing before Rico shot him. “Here, bag this. The blood is hopefully his and will give them the proof they need. Time to head ho...” My teeth clacked together with the force of Kane’s grip as he pulled me down.

Everyone dropped as the sound of gunfire rattled the leaves where my head had been seconds before.

“Over there,” Aden said as he jerked his head towards a cluster of debris along the side of the field.

“I’ve got him,” Rico said as he lined up his shot and fired.

Aden got up into a crouch off to the side and hurried towards the debris when another round of automatic fire roared from the brush and cut him down.

“Man down!” I yelled. Kane pulled out the launcher and sent a missile into the debris pile. We both heard the scream that suddenly cut off and I didn’t dare look at Rico as I raced towards Aden, med kit in hand. Gideon was already calling in our evac as Cutter and I worked on Aden. The kid was the youngest of us, with the best sense of humor. I saw death in his eyes and knew there was nothing that we were doing that would help, but we had to do something. I held his hand on the chopper ride and felt his fingers go slack when he died. That’s when I always woke up.

Being asleep on a chopper meant I woke up confused. Took me a moment to realize that Aden had been gone a while and we were stateside with no wounded. Not this time. No, Aden was not the first soldier I’d lost under my command, but

he was the first from the Facility. I was the leader and his loss was my fault. I should have been faster in my commands, stopped him and waited. Something. Either way, I really needed to get out of this gig. It was well past time.



# Chapter Four

The dirt trail wound through the grounds and it was a favorite of my team for our endurance training. They called it training, but we all knew how to run with gear and packs on. For us, it was a chance to be outside and talk openly with a lot less chance of being overheard. Kane and Kit were back at F-Block, called in to get some testing done. That wasn't a new thing. We were lab rats, as far as Facility staff were concerned, and ended up giving blood and various body fluid samples on a regular basis. Sometimes it was just sensors and scanners while we ran on a treadmill or lifted weights. Weird shit, but something we'd all grown used to after the first couple of years.

Cutter ran beside me with Rico and Gideon about half a mile ahead. We could faintly hear their chatter as they ran and talked about some TV show they both liked. I dropped to a whisper that I knew Cutter would be able to easily hear, but no one else would pick up on. "You and I have a mission overnight. Starts at sixteen-hundred and goes until about eighteen hundred tomorrow. Suit and tie tonight, jeans casual tomorrow. We're protection for some political person or something. Supposed to get the packet on the way out the door."

"Keeping it pretty hush-hush, aren't they?" Cutter said, his voice a whisper in reply.

“Yeah, and I’m not sure why. I’ve also been left alone by Meyers and the others. It’s weird.”

Cutter looked over at me and then stopped in the middle of the trail. I turned and jogged back to him, with a confused expression on my face. “You’re being played,” Cutter said, his huge hands on his hips.

“What do you mean, I’m being played?” I always felt small next to Cutter and I was six foot three and muscular. He was six foot eight and one of his thighs was nearly the size of my waist. It puts into perspective how I felt when he put his hand on my head, palmed my whole skull, and shook me a little.

“What the fuck, Cutter?” I slapped his arm and backed out of reach.

“Just checking to make sure your brains were still in there. How can you not know? They’re fucking with you by not fucking with you.”

“Try again, I’m missing something,” I said.

“Jericho, your biggest weakness is your team. You’re the ultimate leader. It’s why your team is one of the most-requested and has the highest success rate of any other Facility group. And, before you ask, I know because I hacked their files about eight months ago or more.”

I had so many questions, but Cutter kept talking so I shut up and listened.

“You take ‘no man left behind’ to an extreme, my friend. That’s not usually a bad thing, but when it impacts your ability to be objective with the bigger picture, it can be bad. Seems to me that they’re using your weakness against you. Don’t let them. Remember that we’re all just tools in the arsenal you’ve been given to do your job. Sure, I appreciate that you think of us all as family, and that’s why we’re friends – outside of the job. In the job? We’re tools.”

I heard him. I knew he was right in what he was saying, but it went against everything I’d been taught since I was small. I’d been raised by my mother as my father was active duty military. She was full-blooded Mohegan and he was a mix of English, Irish, and African-American. It’s where I got my looks from.

Permanent dark tan, straight black hair and eyes that used to be brown. Mom taught me that family was more than blood – it was anyone we were sworn to protect or who we claimed as family. This team? They were my family, now that I'd had to give up my other one. I don't know if it was the wolf cells in me or what, but I needed my pack. "You're right, but I don't know if I can go against everything I am. I'll do my best to keep my tendencies from playing into their hands, but I'm gonna need you to help me with that," I finally said to Cutter. "You're my brother, and you're my boss. I'll help you as best I can. Now, let's get a move on before they think we're out here playing grab ass in the bushes or something." Cutter's smile was white against his ebony skin, and I laughed. "When you smile like that, I'm reminded of the Cheshire Cat. White teeth in the shadows."

Cutter snorted, amused. "I am that, a smile in the shadows. Unless you're my target."

Our laughter followed us down the trail as we raced each other back to the Training block.



I didn't see any of the team, other than Cutter, the rest of the day. It was a little unusual, but not enough to worry me. We rested, got our gear together, and signed out one of the SUVs to get on the road. We were to meet our protection targets at a hotel in DC and watch them through an event, then escort them back to the hotel room where their usual team would do the night shift. The next morning, Cutter and I were to escort the targets from the hotel to a breakfast event, then back to their home in Maryland.

“Who are we supposed to be watching, again?” Cutter asked as he drove while I did paperwork.

“I don’t know. We were just given A and B in the Blue Suite,” I said.

“I should’ve got into the files to find out before we left,” Cutter said.

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll make sure whoever they are, they’re alive when we’re done, and then we’ll go back to hell.”

We pulled up to the hotel, let the valet park the SUV and carried our own bags inside. I checked us in and Cutter found a couple of take-out menus before we got to the room. “I want Chinese tonight. Beef and broccoli, house fried rice and three egg rolls. Oh, and get some of that crab rangoon stuff?” I asked Cutter as I headed into the bathroom.

“Will do. I’m going with Indian.”

I heard him on the phone as I got the shower started.

“Be here in twenty minutes or so,” he said, then I heard the TV come on.

I took my time in the shower. Being able to take a long, hot shower and know that no one was watching, was one of my favorite parts of these gigs. There was also a huge tub and I knew that before he slept tonight, Cutter was going to take a long hot bath and read a book. I ended the shower when I heard the food delivery arrive. Wrapped in a hotel bathrobe, I joined Cutter at the table to eat. This was another thing we always did. Good quality take-out that didn’t resemble anything the Facility would feed us. They paid for it and we took full advantage of it.

Within an hour, we were both dressed in black suits, white dress shirts, black ties and black shoes with traction soles. Hey, dress shoes were useless when you had to run. I checked our gear, and we made sure our weapons were ready before we headed out the door.

I hated having to wear the contacts but wearing sunglasses at an evening event would look too obvious. Cutter’s eyes didn’t look too different, but he still wore

contacts just in case someone got too close. We were in the same hotel as our targets, so we made our way to the elevators and up to the private suite. Secret service agents were up our butts before we even got off the elevator. Our credentials calmed them down enough to let us into the suite where we had to clear our way past three more.

“Who the hell are we supposed to be watching?” Cutter asked me, voice barely audible.

I shrugged and looked around. Then I saw her. The most beautiful woman I had ever laid my eyes on. She had hair the color of wildflower honey and eyes a green I had never seen before. Her skin glowed against the green silk of her gown and the matching silk ribbon that held a green and white cameo against her throat. I couldn't look away until Cutter stood in front of me and blocked my view.

“What the hell, Jericho?” he asked, concern etched on his face.

“Sorry, I just saw something amazing,” I said.

“Yeah, I saw the lady in the green gown, and the girl beside her in the blue gown. Vice President Wilson's daughter, Sarah.”

“Woah, is that his wife?” I asked.

“No, that's the girl's governess or something. Peyton Adams.”

“Are they our targets?”

“Yep. We're to keep them safe and keep our eyes on them all night. Are you going to be able to multitask or do I need to cause you pain now and then to keep you on your game?”

I just glared at Cutter, then looked over at Peyton Adams one more time. “I'll be okay. I'm also going to have some damned good dreams tonight.”

Cutter groaned and laughed before he turned and walked towards the pair.

“Good evening. I'm Cutter and this is Jericho. We're your bodyguards for the evening.”

Sarah Wilson was a cute kid who was going to be a gorgeous woman someday. Auburn hair and hazel eyes, freckles across her nose, and the gangling awkwardness of a girl who'd grown a few inches recently and hadn't figured out how to navigate it yet.

"Hi. I'm Sassy and this is Pey. Did you know that Jasin Bailer was going to be performing at the gala tonight? We're even going to get to sit next to the stage and he's going to autograph a few CDs for me. This is going to be epic."

I smiled at the girl, but my gaze went back to Peyton. She blushed when she saw me glance her way and gave Sarah's arm a pat. "Easy, Sassy. Remember, elegance, poise and charm."

"Right, poise and charm," Sarah said, then clapped her hands together and bounced on her toes. "Absolutely epic!"

Cutter chuckled and leaned in to whisper to Sarah. "Remember, the Bailer has girls squealing over him all the time. You want to stand out? Be elegant and calm. He won't ever forget you."

I snorted a soft laugh and looked up at Peyton again. Yeah, tonight was going to be beyond difficult if all I could do was stare at the gorgeous creature in front of me. "He's good with kids. You'll both be fine and have a chance to enjoy the evening."

"As enjoyable as it could be with having to listen to Jasin Bailer's music. I'm not a fan, but that's not a discussion I care to repeat with Sarah," Peyton said.

I was so screwed. Even her voice was alluring. "Honestly? I couldn't name one thing of his. I don't follow pop music much," I said.

"Don't tell Sarah that," Peyton murmured as she moved in front of me to follow Cutter and Sarah. The scent of her flooded me and I knew that no matter how much time or distance passed between us, I'd always be able to find her by scent alone. It was intoxicating and invigorating all at once. I let out a slow breath,

squared my shoulders and moved to follow them. Yep. It was going to be a long-assed night.

I was inordinately grateful that Cutter was so intimidating. Just having him stand behind the chairs the ladies sat in was a huge deterrent. Anyone that ignored his bulk and tried to approach Peyton and Sarah then had to go through me. It surprised me how many people thought Sarah could actually get her father to listen to her about any of their ideas, plans, or prospects. She was, what? Seventeen? By the time the night was over, I would have exchanged the constant politicking for a week in the sandbox in a heartbeat. These vultures were more vicious than any jihadis I'd ever come into contact with.

We escorted Sarah and Peyton back upstairs and I stood in an alcove of the hallway with them while Cutter went in to make sure the Secret Service agents were there and the room was still clear. We wished them both a good evening and told them we'd be by in the morning to escort them to breakfast and left them with the agents.

On the ride down to our floor, Cutter was silent. Once in the room though, he turned to me. "Get her out of your head. She's beautiful, intelligent, and seems to really like you. She doesn't know what we are. Let it go, my friend."

I nodded to his words and went into the bathroom to do my business and brush my teeth so he could have his time in the tub. When I came out, he was in his room, so I went into mine and shut the door. I took some fruit and a cup of tea over to the bedside table, then got undressed. Egyptian cotton sheets and a real mattress were rare treats. Fresh fruit and good tea, an hour or so of mindless television and I was asleep before Cutter got out of the tub. My dreams were all of Peyton.

The next morning we showered and had coffee before we packed up and took our bags out to the SUV in the garage. Check out time would be while we were with the ladies, so this was easier. I made sure to score some chocolate and fruit

to share with the team once we got back. The breakfast event was some scholarship awards thing for five students from Maryland, Virginia, and DC that the Vice President had set up. We escorted Sarah and Peyton to the banquet hall in the hotel, and I believe Peyton looked as gorgeous in black jeans, ankle boots and a green sweater as she did in the silk gown. Sarah wore blue jeans and a Georgetown University sweatshirt with high-top sneakers. Cutter and I were in jeans and sweaters that were bulky enough to hide our weapons. What surprised me most, however, was when the four of us walked into the hall, Vice President Wilson was there in jeans and a Harvard sweatshirt and short hiking boots. Sarah saw her father and squealed, racing over to give him a hug. Peyton smiled as she saw the girl embrace her father, but she stayed well out of VP Wilson's reach. Her body language around him made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I swallowed a growl when he reached for her and she twisted sideways to edge around to put me between her and him. I met his gaze and refused to look away, a tight smile on my face. He hesitated for a fraction of a second before his politician's smile was back in place and his hand was reaching for mine.

I folded my hands in front of myself and inclined my head in greeting. "Sir," I said. "I don't shake hands when I'm working."

"Ah, right. The extra protection team. And you are?" Wilson said.

"Agent Dante and that's Agent Martin," I replied, giving a nod towards Cutter.

"Well, thank you for your service to my ladies," he said. But the way he hesitated over 'service' and the sly smile he shared made me realize he thought I might have done more than just watched over them. In fact, when he added his farewell to Peyton, I knew for sure he assumed I had had sex with her.

"She's worth watching over," Wilson said and nodded to Peyton before he turned to greet another admirer.



I felt Peyton shudder against my back before I reached a hand to my side to touch her hand where it pressed against my sweater. “He’s moved on. I won’t let him touch you,” I said.

“Thank you,” she whispered and took a step back. “He just creeps me out so much. If it wasn’t for Sassy, I would have been long gone. It’s just, since her mother died, I’m really all she’s got. He’s never around and I’ve been with her since she was eight, when her Mom got sick. Samantha was a lovely woman,” Peyton said.

“Were you twelve when you started as her governess?” I asked. “You barely look older than her, to have been doing this for nine years.”

Peyton laughed and I caught my breath. “That’s very kind of you to say, Agent Dante, but I’m probably older than you are.”

“Are you over forty?” I asked.

“No, you’re not forty. Maybe thirty-three?” Peyton said.

“Thirty-eight in a couple of months,” I replied.

“You certainly don’t look it. I’ll be thirty-five in a couple of weeks. Sassy insists on celebrating. Perhaps you could join us? It’s just going to be dinner at my favorite Japanese steak house.”

And here’s where I had a moment of absolute hate for my life situation. “The invitation is really nice of you,” I said. “But I won’t be able to go. Work is pretty crazy.”

Peyton slid a curl of paper into my hand and smiled up at me. “Well, here’s my number. Call me if you get a day off.” Then she blushed and looked down. “I don’t do this, you know. Give my number out to men I have barely met. But you make me feel safe and you don’t look at Sassy as anything other than a wonderful young lady. That’s pretty rare in my world.”

I tucked the paper into my pocket and smiled. “I think that young lady is trying to get your attention.” Sarah was waving at us and Peyton sighed before she

waved back. "Shall we?" I escorted her over to where Sarah and Cutter stood near one of the round tables. As we approached, the girl dropped into a seat next to a woman that looked old enough to be her grandmother. Peyton took the empty seat on Sarah's other side and smiled at her table companions. Cutter and I stepped back and folded our hands in front of us and watched.

The room swirled with people as they took their seats, servers pouring coffee and juice, and Secret Service agents across the hall, closer to the VP's table. I listened to the conversations around the room. Sarah, for all that she was a teenager, had excellent poise and conversational skills. She discussed the sights to be seen in London with her elderly companion on one side and the latest video dropped by some K-pop band with a girl a few seats down. Peyton had trained the girl well. For her part, Peyton was polite and quiet. She shared pleasantries with the woman seated next to her, but her attention stayed on Sarah and those she spoke with and what they discussed. I don't know how I knew it, but Peyton was very aware of where we stood. She never looked back at us, but when the meal was over, she rose from her seat, tapped Sarah's shoulder, and turned right to where we stood.

"We're already packed up and our luggage is with the concierge," Peyton said.

"I'm ready to get outta here," Sarah added and looped her hands around Peyton's arm.

"You should say goodbye to your father, first," Peyton reminded her.

Sarah groaned and pressed her forehead against Peyton's shoulder. "I don't want to get caught up in another discussion about colleges and what I'm gonna be when I grow up."

"Just do a drive by. Give him a kiss on the cheek and tell him you're leaving, then go. Don't give him time to pull you into the conversation," Peyton said.

"I'll be right there with you, so I can help keep it short," Cutter said, and gave Sarah a smile.

“Bear? All you gotta do is look at him and not smile. He’ll shit himself and I’ll get to leave,” Sarah said to Cutter.

“Language, missy,” Peyton chided Sarah who rolled her eyes.

“Let’s do this, Bear,” Sarah said and headed towards her father with Cutter close behind.

“Bear?” I asked.

“Sarah said he reminded her of an over-sized brown teddy she used to have. So now he’s Bear,” Peyton said.

“Yeah, he’s never going to live that one down,” I said as I laughed. “Let’s head for the door.”

Peyton headed towards the door and I moved behind her. It took some serious control to not watch her hips sway and keep my eyes on the potential threats around us, but I managed it. That’s why I saw the man who had stood with Wilson reach out and grab her left breast as she walked towards the door and he was coming into the room. Peyton cried out and flinched away.

I moved and grabbed the hand that had touched her while I asked Peyton to please stay against my back. She did, and I smiled at the pervert in front of me.

“You touched the lady without her permission. Say you’re sorry.”

“Do you know who I am? Get your hands off of me,” the man spluttered and I barely squeezed. Pain flared on his face and he tried to pull away.

“I said, say you’re sorry to the lady.”

“She’s Wilson’s whore. He shares.”

A faint smile curled my lips as I squeezed again and heard a crack. The man screamed as I released him and pulled his now-broken hand to his chest.

“I’ll sue you for everything you’ve got,” he yelled as he stumbled away from me.

Once I saw he was out of range, I turned to Peyton. She was shaking and pale, yet still gave me a soft smile and a ‘thank you’.

“Come on, darlin’. Let’s get you out of here,” I said and kept an arm around her so she was shielded. I stopped a few feet from the door when I heard Sarah call Peyton’s name and turned to see the girl and Cutter moving towards us. Sarah hugged Peyton and the two clung to each other as Cutter and I got them into the elevator.

“I’ll get them into the car, you get the luggage?” I asked Cutter and he nodded, then stepped back to let the elevator doors close.

“That was Senator Hansen,” Sarah said. “Or, as any female that’s spent more than two minutes around him, calls him, Senator Handson.”

“Has he touched you?” I asked Sarah.

“Yep. I have had bruises on my butt where he’s grabbed me. My father just laughs and keeps inviting him over. He thinks I’m overly dramatic and too sensitive.”

“That’s because he thinks I’ve made an impression on you about how evil men are to women,” Peyton said, voice soft.

“That’s because he’s evil to women and didn’t like it when you told him to fuck off,” Sarah said.

“Sarah Samantha Wilson, language,” Peyton hissed.

“Sounds like she’s calling it straight, Ms. Adams,” I said.

Sarah laughed, and Peyton sighed.

The elevator dinged and I held my hand up to keep them in the elevator while I held the doors open and looked out to scan the area. The SUV was one slot away from the elevator, so I could see that it seemed clear. “Ladies, stay right behind me.”

They each put a hand on my shoulder as we moved around the front of the car between the elevator and our SUV. I clicked the key fob and the car unlocked. I had them wait and clicked it again to start it. The engine turned over and I hurried the two ladies into the back seat and locked the doors, then slid into the

driver's seat and pulled out of the spot to stop right in front of the elevator doors. A moment later, Cutter pushed a luggage cart out of the elevator with at least eight pieces of luggage on it. I snorted a laugh and unlocked the back so he could load them in.

"You want to drive, Cutter?" I asked.

"Nope. You got it. But if you don't stop and get us food, I'll eat the dashboard of this car."

"Ooh, please?" Sarah said from the back seat.

"Please, what?" Peyton asked, her attention pulled from the window to Sarah.

"What are you asking for now?"

"Bear wants Jericho to stop for food. Since we're just going home, maybe we could stop at the Shanty and have lunch?" Sarah asked.

"What's the Shanty?" Cutter asked.

"Only the best seafood on the Maryland shore. You guys like seafood?" Sarah asked.

"I think Bear likes anything remotely edible," I teased Cutter.

"Yeah, we like seafood. We don't get it much, so if that's where you want to stop for lunch, we can. If Ms. Adams says it's okay," Cutter replied.

"Yeah, it's okay, if you two don't mind? The food is pretty amazing there," Peyton said.

"Yay," Sarah crowed and did a little dance in the seat that had Cutter chuckling. I was pretty happy she'd said yes, too. A chance to spend more time with Peyton meant my day just got a whole lot better. It was going to suck when I was back at the Facility with just the memory of her, but the more time, the more memories I could store up.

"So, where do you guys live?" Sarah asked.

"Virginia. Near Fort Belvoir," Cutter said.

"Cool. Maybe Peyton and I can come visit sometime," Sarah said.

“Yeah, they don’t allow visitors where we live. It’s all top secret stuff,” Cutter told her.

“But what about your families?” Sarah asked.

My jaw clenched. I hated having to lie to people about this shit.

Peyton must’ve picked up something because she said, “Sarah, they’re military. It’s different. You shouldn’t be asking so many personal questions.”

“I’m sorry,” Sarah murmured, voice low. “I like you two and just wanted to get to know you better.”

“It’s fine, Sarah,” I said. “We don’t like having to be so secretive all the time either, but it’s part of the job. I appreciate that you like us enough to ask the questions. Most people, they see us as tools, not as people. It’s nice that you care.”

Peyton looked into the rear view mirror and met my gaze. Her expression was soft and she mouthed a silent “thank you” before her attention went to the scenery that passed outside the window. I felt like she’d just given me the most precious gift. She’d really seen me, not just looked past me, and she had appreciated what I had tried to do for Sarah. Something so simple, but so rare in my world.

Sarah and Cutter captured most of the conversation the rest of the ride to the seafood shack as they discussed music and books. Sarah was impressively well read for a teenager, and I knew that was Peyton’s doing. Which made me happier to know that Peyton was that well read too. The one thing I enjoyed, even in this environment, were books. I read everything and anything, then shared them with whoever else wanted the escape. I think reading had been the one thing that kept me sane the past few years.

We pulled up to the shack, and it really was a shack. A small shed building with a big window in the side and a bunch of picnic tables scattered around it. We were a little early for lunch, so the crowd was small, and we could park close to

a table and keep an eye on things. Sarah and Cutter went up to order for us while Peyton and I got drinks, utensils, and condiments from the stand to the side. By the time they came back with the food, we had the table set up.

“You’re in for a real treat,” Peyton said. “This place has the best crab cakes and fried platter. They even do a seasoned rice that I would eat by the bucketful if I could.”

I gave her a smile, as I visualized her with a spoon and a bucket of rice, and she rolled her eyes at me. “A whole bucket?” I teased.

“Not really a whole bucket, but it’s that good.”

“I am pretty hungry, so I’m glad you approved the stop.” I sat on the end of the bench with my feet to the side, my attention on the people that came and went. I still jumped when she put her hand on my arm.

“Jericho, thank you for everything today,” Peyton said, voice low. “From what you did with Hansen to how you handled Sarah’s questions in the car. You’re a good man, and I want you to know I really appreciate you.”

My throat tightened and I couldn’t look at her yet. She started to take her hand away and I rested my other hand on top of hers. “You are most welcome,” I finally choked out. “You deserve to be treated well, Peyton Adams.”

“I know this is very forward of me, but if you ever get some free time, please call me. I’d like to see you again.”

Then I turned to look at her and she bit her lower lip. My gaze went from that lip to her eyes, then to Cutter and Sarah as they gathered up the huge order of food. Cutter could hear us, I knew, so I appreciated him taking a little extra time with Sarah.

I looked back down at Peyton and leaned in to lightly brush my lips against her forehead. “Someday, I would like that too,” I said, voice whispered against her skin. “But while I’m on duty, protecting you, it is not a good idea. Just know that if I were free, I’d take you up on that in a heartbeat.”

She leaned in to the kiss, then slid back a bit to put some room between us.

“Someday soon, then,” she whispered.

It felt like a cord had woven between Peyton and I. While we ate, while we cleaned up, while I drove them closer to home, I was attuned to everything about her. When we dropped them off and unloaded the luggage in the foyer, I kept my mood light but I felt the loss of her presence before we’d even left. As we drove away from the huge brick colonial mansion that sat on a small island off the coast, with its own private bridge access, it might as well have been on a separate planet. I had her number, but I didn’t own a phone I could use to call her. I couldn’t text her, message her, stalk her on social media or even keep a photo of her.

Cutter was silent until we’d been on the road for over an hour. “This sucks,” he said.

“It does. We need to get the fuck out of this. I think she’s the one,” I said.

“I think she’s your one, too. Your whole presence changed around her.”

“And she’s not in a safe space, either. Not with Wilson and his pervs trying to get in her pants all the time.”

“You think Wilson would touch Sassy?”

“I wouldn’t think so, but he’s a bastard, so who knows?”

“Yeah, who knows.”

The rest of the ride was mostly quiet. Neither one of us was happy about the whole situation and didn’t see a damned thing we could do to fix it.

It sucked.



# Chapter Five

We dropped off the SUV in the garage and got checked back in by five that evening. As we headed to the commons room, Cutter and I both noticed how quiet it was. Usually, the team was in the commons, hanging out with a game or reading or watching the TV. No one was in there. I grabbed a bottle of juice and one of water, then headed to my cell to stow my bags. I took the fruit and chocolate out as I decided to visit each member and give them the treats. I started with Kit's cell as it was next to mine. I tapped on the door frame.

"Kit, you awake?"

I heard her voice in the shadowed room. "Yeah, I'm awake."

"Can I come in?"

"Just don't turn the light on," Kit said.

"I brought some fruit and chocolate."

"Thanks. Just put it on the table by the door?"

Her voice sounded odd and I set two pears and a bar of her favorite chocolate on the table before I blinked and adjusted my sight. I may not be able to see as far as the hawk-eyed, but I could see really well with minimal light. What I saw stopped me in my tracks. Kit was on top of her bed, not underneath it, and curled on her side. The arm and the side of her face I could see, was bruised looking.

“Kit, what happened?” I whispered and crouched near her.

“I’ll be fine in a couple of days, Jericho. Let it go, okay?”

“Let what go, Kit? You look like you’ve been beaten.”

“I was. It was a test. They put me and one of the guys from B block in a ring, said the first one knocked out would spend a week in the Box. I dropped him. And the next three. Then I was allowed to shower and rest. I’m not in the Box and I don’t have any broken bones, so I’m good.”

My anger flared and the growl that spilled free made her flinch. “Sorry, I’m not upset with you, Kit.”

“Gideon has two broken ribs. Kane broke a thumb and a finger. I don’t know about Rico.”

I opened the bottle of juice and handed it to her. “Take a few sips. Have you eaten anything?”

She couldn’t sit up to drink the juice so I helped her. “No, I hurt too much to eat.”

“I’ll check on the others and then I’ll get food and drinks for all of you. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here to stop this.”

“I don’t think you could have, Jer. They said it was because we let those trafficking girls go free.”

I set the bottle of juice on her bedside table and got to my feet. “Just rest. Did they give you pain pills?”

“No,” Kit said. “And I didn’t ask. But if you want to get me something for the pain and a muscle relaxer, I’d be grateful.”

I left Kit’s room and checked on Gideon and Kane. They were in similar condition. I left them each some fruit and chocolate, then went to Rico’s cell. He lay on his bed, a book in hand and an empty pint of ice cream on his side table.

“Hey, Rico,” I said as I tapped on his door. “Doing okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, why do you ask?” Rico said.

“I ask because the rest of the team that stayed behind, are all beat to shit and suffering. Yet, you’re here with a pint of Ben & Jerry’s and not a bruise on you.” “Huh. Imagine that,” Rico said, his sarcasm made my already strong suspicions into solid proof.

“Yeah, imagine that,” I replied, voice cold. “Imagine this, too. I find you’re behind them all being abused, and you’ll find out how difficult it is to breathe with your head shoved up your ass.”

Rico just laughed and jerked his head at his door. “Get out of my cell, Dante. You lay a hand on me and they’ll make the rest of your short, miserable life even more miserable.”

I left his cell before I snapped his neck, and no, I didn’t leave him fruit or chocolate, either. At least now I had undeniable proof of who the mole in our group had been. It also made me wonder if he’d missed that shot back in Afghanistan on purpose, so Aden would get taken out.

It made me wonder about a lot of things.



Four days had passed and the team healed slowly. Faster than the average human, but still too slow for my liking – or theirs. I’d managed to get food and medical attention for each of them as they needed it. I even got a curtain rod and a blackout curtain for Kit’s bed corner. That way, she could sleep on the mattress on the frame and not on the floor. With her injuries, it was hard for her to get up off the floor and she couldn’t sleep in the open. When the doc said it was a medical necessity for her to have it, she finally got it. It cost me a session with the testing team, but for my family, I’d do anything.

Cutter and I took shifts. We stayed awake and on protection duty for our team. Everyone except Rico. In fact, when he was out of his cell, we moved all of his things to the farthest end away from everyone and put Kane in Rico's old cell. Sure, he bitched about it when he came back and found his stuff dumped in the middle of the darkest, coldest cell in the block, but one look at our faces and he shut up. He was persona non grata and he knew it.

It was my shift to watch and listen, and I had my lights off as I lay in my cot. I had been practicing with my hearing, seeing if I could tell who snored or rolled over, which tech was cursing at the printer, stuff like that. Yeah, I was bored, but it was fun to stretch my abilities and see if I could push them further. It must've been close to midnight when I heard the footsteps of two men.

"Dr. Locke, I am done playing games with you. This is not how I saw this proceeding," Dr. Thorpe said. I knew Dr. Alan Thorpe, but I had only heard of Dr. Locke's existence. I had not yet met him.

"Well, then. Maybe you should have been more specific about how you wanted things to go? Or maybe you should just realize that you had no idea of what you were creating?" That voice had to be Locke's, since I didn't hear any other people in the corridors.

"I created this because of my son. Michael killed himself because he couldn't bear to live without his arm and legs. His hearing, eyesight, and will to live were taken by that IED. I wanted to keep other parents from having to deal with the kind of loss Milly and I have suffered."

"How charming. Heart-warming even. And how blind," Locke said. "You created the perfect killing machines and we had them give up any connection with their families in order to get their new bodies. So, those you supposedly saved so their families wouldn't suffer your loss, have suffered for never having a body to bury."

Thorpe sucked in a breath and I heard his feet shuffle.

“That’s it, Dr. Thorpe. Go ahead and have a heart attack and join the rest of your family in Forest Hills Cemetery.”

The sound of a hand slapping flesh rang out and Locke snarled. “Do that again and I’ll snap your old neck. I think it’s time you retire, Doctor, before you die at your desk.”

“Now you’re threatening me?” Thorpe said.

“No threats, Doc. Just promises. I suggest you get yourself retired before you get yourself dead, Thorpe. The rest of us are done tiptoeing around your archaic rules and morals.” I heard the sound of Locke walking away, then a door opened and closed.

A few moments later, I heard Thorpe speak again. “Jericho, you heard that, yes?” I got to my feet and moved towards the glass wall where the tray holes were. “I did, Dr. Thorpe.”

He walked towards my cell and paused at the corner where he could stand in the shadows. “It’s not safe for them to see us talking. Grab a book and sit on the floor near the corner here and look like you’re reading.”

I grabbed the latest Tigner novel and slid down the wall as I opened the book.

“Okay, Doc.”

“I’m going to retire, but not because of Locke. My health is failing and it’s time. But I wanted to tell someone what was going on.”

“Okay, but Dr. Thorpe, did you really insist that we tell our families we were dead in order to get this treatment?”

“For the first few, we did. We didn’t know how it was going to work or how long it would take. Then Locke and his friends got on the board and made it a mandatory thing just before we were about to release the first survivors back to their families.”

I could hear the anger and frustration in his tone as he spoke. It wasn’t like we got close to those that made us or housed us, not really. There were a few that I

managed to be somewhat cordial with, but mostly it was us and them, in my mind. Dr. Thorpe's words were changing that for me.

"My son, Michael, came back from Iraq so badly damaged, he couldn't stand his existence. He killed himself. It broke my wife's heart, and she died a couple of years later. For me? It made me work harder on finding a way to fix the damage. I'm sorry that it has cost you and the others so very much. I'm going to do what I can to try and help from the outside. I've set some things up on the inside that Locke and his cohorts don't know about, but I'll be able to do a lot more out there, than I can accomplish in here. I will fix this, Jericho, or die trying."

"I'd rather you didn't die, Dr. Thorpe, and I appreciate you talking to me like this."

"Before you go out on your next group mission, a virus will go off in the server farm. Dr. Zahn and his assistant will have to remove the tracking chips. I suggest you take advantage of the situation."

My heart skipped a beat, and I smiled. "That is some of the best news I've heard in a while. Thank you. Oh, and Dr. Thorpe? I'm sorry for your loss and appreciate what you tried to do."

"Thank you for saying that, Jericho. I wish you and yours the best. If all goes well, I hope we can reconnect down the road."

I listened as his footsteps moved away, then I heard a door open and close. I stayed where I was for a while, not reading, just thinking. This was the chance we had waited for, and I knew damned well we were going to run when it happened. I just had to make sure we had somewhere to run to.

The next morning, no one came to bring breakfast, but the cells were unlocked so we could access the showers and the common room. The team slowly trickled in to the commons and got coffee or juice from the vending machine. About an hour later, Meyers came to the door of the commons and set a tray of wrapped breakfast sandwiches and fruit on the table, then left.

Cutter got up and passed out food to everyone, even Rico, while we talked quietly or just ate.

“Okay, team,” I said and got to my feet. “I don’t know what’s going on, but we need to stick to our routine for now. Finish up, and we’ll head to the training block and start working. We’ve got to stay on top of things and we’re at our best when we’re fighting ready. Let’s go.”

Everyone cleaned up their wrappers and cups and headed to the door. There was a passage that led from each cell block to the training facility, and since most of our areas were underground, they left the connections unlocked during the day. None of the teams could go topside or leave the Facility proper without permission. We were watched via our tracking chips whether we were out on a mission, or out running on the Facility’s property. If what Thorpe had said really did happen – then it was our best chance to finally escape. We had lockers in the training facility and some of us used them for things other than our sweats and gear. I had a couple of books in mine that I’d bought while out on missions, and while I knew the idea of personal belongings in this place was stupid, I at least tried to keep them safe. So, yeah, I was surprised to find one of my books on top of my folded clothes and towel. My copy of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone was in plain sight while my collection of Butcher’s Dresden Chronicles remained hidden at the back, under the rest of my stuff. I used my body to block line of sight and flipped through the book. An envelope slid out and I shoved the book deep once more while I gathered up the envelope in the bundle of sweatpants and running shoes. Adept at hiding what I did from the cameras, I managed to get dressed and read the contents of the envelope. A letter from Thorpe that explained that he would be retiring officially today and that before he left he would set in motion the failure of the servers. It would take about a week before the destruction could be noticed and that we’d know it was time

when we heard about the trackers being ‘upgraded’. He also left me a bit more info that I memorized before I flushed the shredded letter.

Once changed, I caught up with Cutter and Kane as they warmed up to lift weights.

“I have an idea of what’s going on. Dr. Thorpe retired and Locke is planning to take over.” Cutter grunted while Kane sighed.

“We’re fucked,” Kane said.

“I don’t think so. Maybe in the short term, but next chance I get, I’ll give you some info. Let the other’s know what’s happening so they don’t worry, please.”

Both men nodded and I moved over to the treadmill to start my circuit. A quick stretch and I was soon at a steady pace, my attention on the room as my team was slowly clued in.

I heard a snort of amusement from the elliptical next to me and I didn’t bother to glance over as I flipped off the machine’s occupant. “I’m not trying to break any records, Z, so let it go.”

“You heard about Thorpe?” Z said.

“Yeah. He said Locke is taking over,” I said.

“And we thought it sucked now. Wait until that prick gets his hands on all of the power. We’ll be dying faster than hummingbirds in a blizzard.”

“You got plans?” I asked.

“Every plan we’ve come up with, fails on the implants.”

My pace stayed steady as I thought about what I knew. “What if I had a way around that?”

Z stopped his movement and turned to look at me. “Don’t you be shitting me, boy. I’m not in any mood to deal with games.”

I glanced his way and then looked back ahead. “I’m not shitting you, Z.”

“How?”



“Thorpe did it. He said it’d take a few weeks but we’d know when they started calling people in to swap out the chips.”

“And they’ll swap the newbies first because they’re the most likely to rabbit,” Z said as he started up once more.

“I hear you and your crew are supposed to join us on this big mission coming up,” I said. “Let’s talk about it more then.”

“Works for me,” Z replied. “I’ll let Affie and Paulo know.”

“Careful. They got to one of mine. We don’t need this blowing up in our faces.”

“Roger that.”

Kit came by and handed me a bottle of water. I chuckled at how she looked with nose plugs in and she shrugged. I used to wear them, but I’d learned how to filter the smells of sweat and dirty socks that filled the gym. Kit was only about three years into dealing with all of this. I watched as Kit gave Z a respectful nod and moved away. Everyone knew that Z, Affie and Paulo were the only survivors of the first batch. They were the senior team and while there were a couple of others that were older in calendar years, these three were all in their late thirties-early forties and had been at the Facility for almost ten years. Over time, they’d managed to bond as a triad and even shared a cell. I wondered if Locke would let that continue or try and break them up. A moment later, I felt oddly psychic as Affie ran into the gym and over to Z.

“They moved our stuff,” Affie said. Her brown hair was cut short and showed a bit of gray, but she was still a fit 5’5” fighter.

“What do you mean, they moved our stuff?” Z asked.

“Your stuff and mine have been moved to two different cells. They’re not letting the three of us stay together.” Affie’s face was pale, and she looked more frightened than angry.

Z’s large hands cupped her face and he kissed her before he spoke. “Aphrodite, I swear that no one here will separate us. We might sleep in separate rooms for a

bit, but you are my heart.”

“Zeus, Apollo is...stressed. We need to go be with him,” Affie said.

Z nodded and took her hand, then stopped near me. “I hope you’re right, Jericho,” he said.

“I hope I am, too.” I told them and watched as they walked away. Huh. Zeus, Aphrodite, and Apollo. Well, the nicknames made more sense now. I just hoped that Thorpe’s plans played out in our favor.

# Chapter Six

*“Today, on the News at Noon, we have Vice President Wilson in a live interview from his compound on Wilson Island off the coast of Maryland.”*

I reached for the remote and turned up the volume. “Yo, front and center,” I called out. Cutter and Kane had been in the hallway while I had paperwork and reports spread out on the table in the commons. While the guys found their seats, I stacked the paperwork and listened to the newscaster. By the time she’d gone through the usual spiel of introductions and pleasantries, the rest of the team had settled around the table, eyes on the screen. Our Watchers knew we watched the broadcast and considered current events something we should be aware of, to “ensure task success in the real world”. Yeah, that was a direct quote. My attention shifted to the camera in the corner of the room, and I smiled before my gaze went back to the television.

*“When it comes to the way science has changed our world, there have been many positive advancements and nearly as many detrimental ones,” Wilson explained to the Barbie copy that sat across the table from him. “Advances in medical science have prolonged life and cured diseases that decimated the*

*population just fifty years ago, yet medical experimentation has stepped into a realm that truly only belongs to God.”*

*“Please explain what you mean, Vice President Wilson?”* the woman asked politely.

I got a sick feeling in my stomach and glanced over at Cutter, then Kane.

Wilson’s buddies had not been happy with us, and now we were going to pay.

*“The government has funded one particular program that, when I am President, I will shut down immediately.”* Wilson’s gaze was on the camera now, and it seemed like he was sharing a secret and a promise with the people who watched him. *“We are not God. We should not be tampering with matters of creation. The purity of the human race was designed by the Lord God, and is inviolate. He created man in his image after separately creating the “beasts in the fields”. By mingling the genetics of man with beasts, man is weakened. Lessened. This turns man from the face of God.”*

A soft gasp from the interviewer and she gave him a wide-eyed look of horror.

*“Are you saying that there have been genetic experiments that have created human/animal mutations?”* One perfectly manicured hand lifted to rest against her collarbone in further expression of her shock, as if she had had no idea of what he was going to discuss in the interview. Stereotypical pearl-clutching at its finest.

Cutter growled softly, curled one fist tight and pointed it at the screen. “C’mere little man, I’ll show you what weak feels like.”

I reached out and rested my hand on top of his fist and eased it back down.

“Later,” I said.

Wilson continued his interview. *“A geneticist, Dr. Alden Thorpe, started experimenting with stem cells and DNA, mixing human and various animal strains. Then he got the government to help fund his pet project. Pet being the operative word here. Men and women who were once human are now mutant*

*creatures that should be put down like stray dogs before they can procreate and contaminate the human race even more.”*

The faint shudder that ran through the woman across from Wilson was artfully picked up by the cameras. *“How disgusting,”* she said.

*“I agree, it is disgusting. When I am elected President of this great country, I will end this program, destroy the experiments, and make sure laws are passed that do not allow further contamination and risk to the purity of the human species.”*

*“Even more reason to support your run for office, Vice President Wilson. With election day fast approaching, it is up to Americans to secure their own future safety and security by voting for you.”*

I picked up the remote and shut off the television, then tossed it back onto the table. My gaze traveled from face to face as I read the various levels of anger and frustration on each one. “Well, if we were still able to vote, I know who would not be getting my vote,” I said, a wry tone of humor in my words.

“So, he plans on just euthanizing us as if we were stray dogs?” Kit said. “What a fucking idiot.”

“It’s these purist God-types that misquote the Bible, twisting it to support their insanity, that make me wish there was another term for them other than Christian. They’re not the kind of Christian I was raised to be, or try to live my life as,” Gideon offered, voice quiet.

“Same thing they did a few years back with the LGBTQ community,” Kane said with a nod to Gideon. “Let’s face it. Most people are sheep. They just want to follow the flock or herd or whatever and be just like everyone else when it comes to big issues.”

Gideon lifted a finger with each example, “And what they did with the racial divide in the sixties and seventies here in the US, and what the Nazi regime did with the Jews, gypsies, and those they determined not Aryan enough.”

“People need someone to hate. Someone to point at as ‘not as good’ as themselves, to make them feel better about their lot in life. If there isn’t something readily available, they’ll create an enemy, like the Nazis did. Dr. Thorpe created their new target, is all,” I said and rolled my shoulders. “Wilson is afraid of us because we don’t play his little games. We make a good target.” Kane got up and fixed two cups of coffee, then offered one to me before he sat back down. “We get the info we need for the next op? I’ll help you work out the plan and get the equipment requisitions done.”

“Thanks, I could use the help,” I said and waved a hand to the room.

“Dismissed, everyone. Keep your head on a swivel and your ears open.”

The team got to their feet and headed off while Kane and I sipped coffee and had a more private conversation.

*~Jericho, I heard that Paulo needed a sedative the other day. What’s going on?~*

*~Locke split up the triad. Put them all in separate rooms. You know Paulo isn’t good alone, so it’s been rough. I spoke to Z the day it happened and he, Affie, and Paulo are coming on this mission.~*

*~Good. If anyone deserves a chance to get out, it’s them. I’ve got ears all over, and the minute I hear that trackers are being swapped, we’ll make our move.~*

*~I’m supposed to go out with Gideon today and buy some supplies for the mission. I’ll drop a letter for you if you want?~*

I reached into the pile of papers and pulled out a sheet folded in half around an envelope with an address and no name and handed it to Kane. “The supplies list is right here,” I said. Kane took it, folded it again, and tucked it into an inside pocket of his jumpsuit. “Not a problem.” *~I didn’t put a name on the envelope in case someone found it. Appreciate you taking care of this for me.~*

*~Not a problem, brother.~* Kane got to his feet and tossed his empty cup as I went back to the paperwork. Best the Watchers didn’t get suspicious of how quiet we were.



“At least it’s on this side of the ocean this time,” Rico muttered as he cradled his rifle in his arm and watched Gideon and Cutter move through the drill course.

“What’s the matter, Ricky? Don’t like trans-Atlantic bed-head?” Kane taunted as he also watched the two.

Behind them, Kit and I talked quietly while we waited our turn. “I’m kind of glad too, honestly,” Kit added, voice low. “Tired of the sand, although this mission seems a little hinky to me.”

“Save the chatter for the trail,” I breathed, barely audible.

They both gave a faint nod. Rico shifted his stance, ready to take on the course as soon as the first two came back and stepped between the timing poles. We’d done this course so many times, it was easy to do, but took some focus to be precise. Once we’d all finished it, we slung our weapons, adjusted packs and took on the trail – a twenty-five mile course that gave us the best chance of not being overheard at all. They tracked us with GPS on the long run, not mics and cameras like they did on the course. We enjoyed the little freedom and took full advantage of it.

I got myself into the center of the pack and started to talk. “To start, there are concerns about this new mission. This is the first one since the Boston assault that has been stateside. I’m not real comfortable with the sheer lack of information we’ve been working with so far.”

“Yeah, like no name for the target, not even a location, just a comment to be ready,” Kane said. “Sounds like a job that no one wants anyone else to know about.”

“How many times have we been told that what we do is for the good of our country?” Cutter asked. “Every single time – except this time.”

I nodded as we rounded a curve, the downward slope of the first hill in front of us. “This time, they’re keeping it all very close to the vest. A floor plan and a timetable, not even a face. And that floor plan is of a big house – the kind of house a rich person lives in.”

“Or someone important to a rich person,” Kit added. “The timetable also sounds like a schedule for a young person who is in school and does sports or something afterwards.”

“I ain’t killin’ no kids,” Cutter growled. “Don’t care whose side they’re on.”

“Didn’t matter much to those rugrats you smoked in Afghanistan,” Rico said as his gaze darted sideways to watch Cutter’s face turn to stone.

“You know damned well that was an accident,” Cutter snapped and started for Rico. “They said the place was cleared.”

“Enough.” I said, my voice sharp. “Rico, I don’t know what your issue is lately, but you can carry my pack the rest of the run and keep your mouth shut, or I’ll shut it for you.”

My pack ended up in Rico’s hands and he started to drop back with the extra weight, eyes narrowed, jaw tight. He was pissed, and I didn’t care. “Whatever the new job is, Cutter and I will find out more tomorrow. We’re supposed to be scouting the area and making an attack plan then.”

The rest of the run was made in silence and Rico came in a good five minutes after the rest of us. He didn’t say a word, but he gave me a clear look of disgust as he dropped both packs in the shed.

“Rico,” I said and he stopped. “I don’t know what they offered you, or what you’re getting from them, but I will not tolerate a traitor. I’ve submitted a request for you to be transferred off my team.”



Rico turned and looked at me, then his gaze dropped. “My mom died two weeks ago. They said they’d let me go to the cemetery if I spied for them.”

“Man, I’m sorry about your mom, but we’re your family now. You can’t fuck your family over and expect to survive in here,” I said.

“I need to pay my respects,” Rico said, voice breaking.

“Where is she buried?” I asked.

“Holy Cross in Lorton, Virginia,” he said.

“I promise that the next time we’re out and have the leeway, I will get you to that cemetery so you can pay your respects. Just, Rico, stop doing what they want. It can get you killed.”

“I know,” Rico said, then looked up at me. I realized how damned young the guy was. Barely twenty-one. “You promise?”

“I promise on our bond as brothers,” I said and he let out a sigh as his shoulders sagged. I stepped close and gave him a quick hug, then whispered in his ear.

“Come see me later. I’ll give you some shit to tell them so they think you’re still playing, but it’ll help us, not them.”

I felt him nod against my shoulder and he muttered back to me. “That’s kind of what I’ve been doing all along. Stupid shit or mixed up stuff. Nothing that would really hurt us.”

I patted his back and nudged him to the door. “Get to the showers. We stink.”

He laughed and flipped me off as we left the shed. I still had my questions, but at least I understood what had been going on with him a little better now.

# Chapter Seven

Cutter and I had two days to scout the area and come up with our plan. We didn't really need two days, but any time out of the Facility was good, so we told them every time it needed at least two days. Now we were in a vacation rental on the Maryland coast about five minutes from the bridge that went to Wilson Island. The two bedroom cottage we were in had a deck that overlooked the water and with it being autumn, there were few warm days left. I scored a burner phone and called Peyton to tell her where I was and see if she'd got my letter. It went to voicemail, so I left a message - "It's me, call me back," and hung up.

Cutter came out onto the porch and handed me a beer. We sat and watched the waves for a bit before he finally spoke.

"You know this mission has something to do with Wilson, don't you?" Cutter said.

"Yeah, but I'm trying to not think about it too much."

"Well, you have to. It's pretty clear that we're supposed to take out Sassy and Peyton. This will destabilize Wilson, or so the Powers That Be think, and will cause him to crash and burn. Me? I think it will propel him into the winning seat

because of the sympathy vote and his raging fury. Kill his daughter and he'll burn it all down."

"We're not killing Sarah or Peyton," I said. "I have a call in to Thorpe. He gave me some coordinates in the letter he left for me and I think they are for a place to hide out."

Cutter pulled out his burner and tapped the map icon. "What are the coordinates?"

I told him the memorized numbers and he pulled them up on a global satellite program, then zoomed in. He turned the phone towards me and I stared at the image of a very large cabin in the middle of trees.

"Back it out some," I said.

He did and smiled at me. "There's nothing within miles of this place. We could be really safe there."

"I'll ask Thorpe about it when he calls me back. Maybe we can hide Peyton and Sarah there."

"That's a good idea," Cutter said. "Have Peyton pack up clothes, photos, stuff like that and put it in totes in a storage locker. I'll go get one somewhere between here and the cabin." He got to his feet, finished his beer, and went inside to get the keys.

"Thanks, Cutter," I said as he headed to the car.

"They're family," Cutter replied as if that answered everything. It did.

I sipped my beer and waited for the phone to ring. It was almost a half hour later when she finally called. "Is it you?" she asked.

"Yes, babe. It's me. J.D. You safe to talk?"

*"Not yet. I'm in the car. Sarah's at a friend's for the night. I'm headed to the gas station near you. Come get me?"*

"C's got the car. I'll come meet you and take care of things."

*"Um, okay. Just be careful. I know I'm being watched and followed."*

“Got it. Then pull the car around to the back of the station and I’ll be there before you are.”

“*See you soon,*” Peyton said and disconnected the call.

I found my tool kit and pulled out a few pieces to tuck into a small bag in my pocket, then locked up the house, pulled my jacket hood over my head, and started running. The station she had talked about was about three miles away, and I was there in less than five minutes. Hey, it takes stealth to not be seen as a blur in someone’s side mirror with the kind of speed I had when I wanted to get somewhere fast. I went into the store, picked out a candy bar and a drink, and got up to the register. My hand was in my pocket and I hit the EMP device before the cameras could get a good look at my face. Everything electronic in the store shut down. Cash register, lights, cameras, coolers, everything. The guy behind the counter started to freak out, so I set my items on the counter and backed away.

“Never mind. I shouldn’t eat that much sugar anyway,” I said as I left. Other customers stayed to argue while I went around back to wait for Peyton.

A few minutes later, she pulled around the building and I gestured to a spot to park, then went over to her. “Release the hood,” I said and she did. I leaned in and disconnected the GPS for the car, then slid underneath to see if there were any other trackers on it. I found one, stuck with a magnet to the undercarriage and pulled it off. I walked around the side of the building and hit the EMP again to fry the little device in my hand, then went back to the car and slid under it to put the now-defunct tracker back on the car. I got in on the passenger’s side, then leaned over to give Peyton a kiss on the cheek.

“All deactivated. Pull out, take a left at the light and go down to the stop sign, then take a right and it’s the last house on the left. You can park in the garage.”

“You’re sure?” Peyton asked, voice shaky.

“Positive. The station is having a bad day. Seems something fried all of their electronics and cameras. Guess you should’ve stopped for gas somewhere else. Luckily, you were far enough away it only messed up the GPS on your car and not the rest of the electronics. The GPS is the most sensitive anyway...” I let my voice trail off and grinned at her.

Peyton gave me a smile in return and pulled out. She followed the directions and I got out to open the garage so she could pull in. Once inside, she shut everything down, got out of the car, and threw herself into my arms. “I’m so beyond glad to see you, Jericho. It’s been a nightmare lately. Something big is going on and I don’t have enough information to figure it all out.”

The garage door was down and locked, and I turned as she wrapped herself around me. I pulled her close, wrapped my arms around her, and breathed in her scent. “Yeah, something is going on and I think I have some of the information. Maybe between the three of us, we can figure this all out.” I led Peyton into the house, then hung up our coats. “You want something to drink? Tea, coffee, beer?”

“You have beer? I’ll have that. I think I need it to help me relax.”

I could think of a few other ways to relax her, but beer was good for now. I opened two bottles and handed her one before I turned on the gas fireplace and patted the sofa beside me. “Come sit and just unwind a bit. You’re safe here.”

“Wait, you said three of us. Who’s with you?”

“Cutter. He went out to take care of a couple of errands. In fact, what would you like for food? He usually picks up something on the way back.”

“I don’t care. I’m good with whatever. Just not too spicy.”

I texted Cutter to bring back enough for three and not spicy. I got a thumbs up in reply and set the phone aside to focus on the beauty next to me. “I won’t lie, Peyton. I’ve thought about having you tucked against me a lot the past few weeks.”

“I’ve thought about this a bit myself,” she said and curled in closer, her head on my shoulder.

I let my arm wrap around her and kissed her temple. “Can you stay tonight or do you have to get back?”

“I can stay. I brought a bag in case it was okay to do so. I need a break from that house, from Wilson and his perv squad.”

“And Sarah’s safe at her friend’s place?”

“Yeah, Katya is an ambassador’s daughter. She’s got her own protection detail, so I know Sarah’s fine there.”

“Good. Want me to put some music on?”

“No, I like the sounds of the waves. It’s calming. Your heartbeat is also soothing.”

Peyton’s beer started to tip and I set mine down before I took hers and set it on the table too. “Just rest, love. I’ll keep watch.” I heard a soft sigh and then the steady breathing as she slid into sleep. I looked down at her face and saw the shadows like bruises under her eyes, the pallor of her cheeks and lips. She was exhausted and it showed. I grabbed a soft pillow and put it on my lap, then eased her down so she’d be more comfortable. I reached for my beer and for the next hour or more, I sat there, thought about a lot of different things, and enjoyed the hell out of having this woman sleeping on me.

Cutter came in and I gestured for him to be quiet. He smiled as he headed into the kitchen with the food.

“Peyton. You want to wake up and have some food?”

A soft sigh and she shifted against me, then gasped and startled awake. If I had not had my hand on her shoulder, she’d have knocked heads with me. “Easy, luv. You’re safe. Cutter just got back with the food. You hungry?”

Once she realized where she was, Peyton relaxed and sat up. Hands scrubbed at her face and pushed her hair back before she gave me a wry smile. “I’m sorry, I

must've been more tired than I thought."

"Do not apologize. You looked exhausted and I was happy to stand guard."

"You two ready for some food? I got Chinese," Cutter called out. I got up and helped her to her feet.

"Bathroom?" she asked and I pointed to the room down the hall.

While she tended to that, I went into the kitchen to talk to Cutter. "She's so exhausted, she looks sick. All she said was that something was going on and then half a beer later, she's snoring in my lap. I disabled the GPS in her car and fried the tracker that had been stuck underneath. We need to speed up the prepping timetable."

"I got the unit and a bunch of tote bins are set up in it. It's about an hour from here, but in the right direction."

"Good job. Let's get some food in her and let her sleep before we talk about all of this."

Cutter grinned at me and pulled out a pair of earbuds. I snorted laughter and shook my head.

"Fine, just don't dance in your sleep," I teased as we got the food and dishes on the table.

"What are you two laughing about?" Peyton asked as she joined us at the kitchen table.

"Cutter likes to listen to music when he goes to sleep, right?" I said and Cutter sighed.

"Here it goes..." he grumbled.

"Well, one night, he sleep walked and was dancing on his bed, sound asleep. I heard the springs squeaking and thought he was having a seizure or something, so I opened the door and saw his hips shaking and arms flailing. I laughed so hard, I woke him up."

Cutter flushed as Peyton giggled. That was still one of the sweetest sounds I'd ever heard.

"Well, Cutter, if you hear the springs squeaking tonight, don't open the door," Peyton said and it was my turn to flush.

Cutter burst out in laughter and pointed at me. "You got him good, Peyton. Good job."

They high-fived and I pulled her close to kiss her cheek. "Sit down and eat, woman. If that's what you've got planned, you're gonna need the fuel."

It was an excellent meal with a lot of laughter and banter. It was something we all needed – a couple of hours of no stress. Peyton and I cleaned up while Cutter got a shower and found a book to take to bed. As the last container was tucked into the fridge, I felt Peyton's arms wrap around my waist, her head against my back. The door shut and I turned in her arms to look down at her face. "I'll sleep on the couch, Peyton. We don't have to do anything."

"No, I'd like to be with you," Peyton said.

"Well, before that happens, we need to have a talk – and I need you to promise to listen. Really listen."

Peyton's brow furrowed and she took my hand and led us to the couch once more. "Okay, talk to me. What's wrong?"

I gave her a tight smile and stepped back. "I'll be right back," I said and went into my room. I took out my contact lenses, then came back into the living room and sat beside her. A slow, deep breath and I turned to look into her eyes.

She met my gaze, and then froze. "Jericho, what's wrong with your eyes?"

"Nothing. These are my actual eyes now. I usually wear sunglasses or contact lenses."

Peyton's gaze shifted from one eye to the other and back again before she sat back hard against the cushions. "Wow. Every time you blink, they shift just a bit and then settle. The color is beautiful. What color were your eyes before?"



Now it was my turn to sit back hard. “Brown. Wait, you’re okay with this?”

“You are no less desirable to me because you’ve been through some shit. I am glad you told me though. It shows what kind of person you really are.

Considerate, caring, loving, understanding – those are all things I’ve seen from you.”

“But Wilson...”

“Wilson is an asshole. He didn’t like that you stood up to his pervert friends and decided to hit back. It probably didn’t help that all Sarah could talk about was how cool you and “Bear” were. When he found out you were modified, he lost his shit. He fired the security specialist that hired you and got his research team to find out more about you guys and the Facility.”

“But how do you know all this?”

“I heard about him firing Ethan and started snooping.”

“Oh, Pey, be careful of that,” I said.

“I know. He’s a real bastard and would think nothing of making me suffer, if he thought it wouldn’t hurt Sarah. But he won’t do something to me that would show himself in a poor light in Sarah’s eyes.”

“Yet, Sarah knows he encourages those grab-ass bastards to come around her and you. She said as much last time we were together.”

“Having jackasses for friends is part of politics. Sarah can let a lot of that slide, but if he actively went after me, she wouldn’t tolerate that.”

“So, uh, Cutter and I were going to wait until tomorrow to discuss this with you, but we’ve got some information that you need to know – and act on.” I took her hands in mine and met her gaze. “My team and part of another were given a mission, that we’re going to actively fail.”

“What do you mean, a mission?”

“We’re a black ops team for the government, under the aegis of the Facility. We have traveled all over the world to rescue and kill. We were given a mission in

the US this time and we will be going out on it – and failing it. The first failed mission we will ever have.”

I felt the shiver run through her before Peyton let out a breath and nodded. “Tell me,” she said.

“Cutter and I are supposed to be doing a stakeout to get a better sense of the security and environment of our targets, but we weren’t told who our targets were. However, we’ve figured it out and started taking steps to derail the mission today. Cutter got a storage unit about an hour away under a false name. He’ll give you directions and the key tomorrow. There are already a bunch of tote bins stacked in the unit. I want you and Sarah to pack up clothes, books, photos, whatever you consider precious and valuable, and make a couple of trips to the storage unit to fill the tote bins. If you do it over two or three trips, say you’re going shopping or something, it won’t be as noticeable as if you loaded up your car with everything in one go.”

Peyton started to shiver and I pulled her in for a hug. “We’re the targets, aren’t we?” she whispered.

“Cutter and I are ninety-nine percent sure that Sarah is the target. You are the secondary target, since you’re always around her. The mission is scheduled for almost two weeks out, when Wilson is in Geneva at the summit. Whoever ordered this mission plans on destabilizing Wilson and making him look like he’s incapable of being President. They don’t want him to burn down their money making Facility.”

“My gods, Jericho. What are we going to do?”

“You’re going to get your stuff to the storage unit without letting anyone know what you’re doing. You’re going to be careful and wait for us to contact you, and then you and Sarah are going to be taken somewhere off grid where you’ll be safe. Then my team and I will make sure no one comes after you two, ever again.”

Peyton curled against me and after a few minutes her shivering abated. I rubbed a hand up and down her back as I stared out the wall of windows at the darkness beyond. “Now that I’ve had a little time to process this, I like your plan, but I need to know a bit more about where we’re going to end up. We need to be wearing appropriate clothes and have our go bags prepared with essentials in case we can’t get to the storage unit.”

I felt a rush of pride at the way her mind worked and kissed the top of her head. “Smart thinking. But we’ll be emptying the storage unit when we take you. They’d just use the GPS on your phones or car to figure out where you stopped or what towers pinged near you to try and figure out where you went. Get a couple of burner phones but don’t turn them on until we’re gone. You’ll have to leave your others behind, so wipe them and be careful of what you text or share. We’re going to the mountains of West Virginia, so cold weather gear.”

“Camping gear, just to be safe. Hiking boots, good socks, jeans, leggings, stuff like that. Got it.”

“You’re going to be fine, Peyton. You and Sarah. My team and I will make sure of it. We all swore oaths, but one thing my team has is a code of honor. We don’t hunt innocents.”

“And I swore to Samantha that I’d keep Sarah safe. Even if that means keeping her safe from her father, too.”

I curled a finger under her chin and tipped her face up towards mine. “I’d like to kiss you now,” I whispered and she smiled at me.

“About freakin’ time,” she said and leaned up to press her lips to mine.

I literally felt my brain stutter and my heart skip beats. I always thought that was romance novel bullshit, but here I was and it happened to me. She tasted of tea and honey, from the drink she’d had at dinner. My tongue flicked at her lips and she parted them so I could taste more of her. I felt her hand press to my chest, then slide under the collar of my shirt. My heart raced and I shifted to pull her

closer when she moved to straddle my lap, her knees against my hips and her arms twined around my neck as we kissed. I knew she could feel the effect she had on me where she straddled me, and I almost lost it when she started to grind her hips. My hands gripped her thighs and I pulled back. "I'd suggest you don't do that or I'm going to be in trouble, real soon."

Peyton gave a low, husky laugh, then leaned in and tugged on my bottom lip with her teeth. "That's the idea," she whispered, then pressed her whole body against me.

My hips bucked up and I groaned, then cupped her butt cheeks with my hands and stood up. She squealed and wrapped her legs around my waist as I carried her to the bedroom, flipped the overhead light on with my elbow, then pushed the door shut with my foot. "You ever want this to stop, just say the word, understood?" I said it, but my body prayed she didn't say stop.

"If I didn't want this, Jericho, I wouldn't have kissed you," Peyton said as she untangled her legs and slid down my front. The cottage bedroom held a queen-sized bed with an old fashioned metal headboard and a simple blue duvet and pillows. The room was painted a light blue with white trim and all of the furnishings were painted white with silver knobs or accents. A chair against one wall held my duffel and a couple of books sat on the nightstand.

Peyton took in the room as she wandered towards the bed, then turned on the small lamp beside it. "Turn off that overhead light, would you?" she asked, then pulled her sweatshirt over her head and tossed it on the floor.

I reached for the switch, then froze as she unfastened her jeans and pulled them down. Socks were added to the pile and she arched a brow at me as she stood there in white lacy underwear and nothing else.

"Well?" she said.

I blinked and shook my head. "Sorry, I was a little...distracted." I flipped the switch off and moved towards her, my own shirt pulled over my head and

dropped on the floor. I started with my jeans, then stopped when I heard her whisper. “Oh, Jericho.”

“What?” I rasped, then looked up at her.

“You’re beautiful,” she whispered.

“Oh, uh, thanks.” I stuttered. Did I keep undressing? One sock off, I glanced down at my torso, at the scars that told the story of my less-than-peaceful lifestyle. I sat on the edge of the bed and let my hands fall between my knees.

“What’s wrong?” Peyton asked, the touch of her hand on my shoulder making my muscles tense.

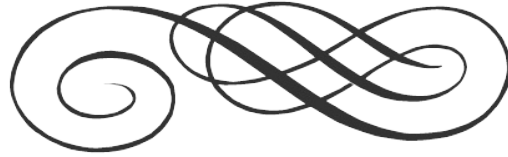
“Why would you want to be with me?” I asked, still focused on the floor.

Some people would’ve brushed it off or made a joke, but not Peyton. She sat beside me and reached for my hand, then held it between both of hers. “Jericho, since I’ve met you, you’ve made me laugh. It’s been a long time since someone did that. You make me feel safe. I haven’t felt safe since Samantha died. You’ve treated Sarah with respect and grace, and since I think of her as my daughter, that is a wonderful gift to me. Jericho, you’ve given me hope for the future, and I didn’t have much of that until we met. You make my heart feel lighter and every time you’re near me, my body tingles. And you wonder why I want to be with you?” She lifted a hand and pressed it to my cheek. I turned to look at her and she smiled. “Jericho, I’m falling in love with the person you are – your heart and intellect and drive. I don’t care what parts you’re made up of on the outside. It’s who you are on the inside that matters to me.”

For the first time ever, I saw myself through someone’s eyes and I liked what I could see. I smiled back at her and leaned in to give her a kiss. “You’re beautiful on the outside, Peyton, but what I’m learning about your inside? That takes my breath away.”

“Good. Now it’s your turn to make me breathless,” Peyton teased and slid away to lie back on the bed. While I did my best to get undressed without falling on

my face, Peyton removed the last of her clothes. When I turned after I tossed the last sock aside, I stumbled onto the bed and landed on a knee beside her. Peyton laughed and reached for me, and we spent the night exploring each other and the bond between us that grew stronger with every passing moment.



The next morning, Peyton and I showered together until Cutter pounded on the door and threatened to eat all of the pancakes if we didn't save him some hot water. I felt lighter and happier than I could ever remember being.

"Thanks for cooking, Cutter," I said.

"Uh huh. I was hungry and I knew you weren't going to get to it before I starved to death," Cutter replied and shot me a grin.

Peyton poured coffee for both of us, then tucked a foot up as she sat at the table to drink it.

"You look thoughtful," I said to her.

"Well, I was thinking. You two are supposed to be scouting out the house and security systems and all that, right?"

"Yeah," Cutter said. "All of that and more."

"Well, how about you ask me what you need to know and I'll fill you in, then I'll go back to the house and get the first load of stuff and you guys can show me where the unit is and help pack?"

I looked from Peyton to Cutter and he shrugged. "As long as we get the intel, we don't have to tell them how we got it," Cutter said.

"Is Wilson home today?" I asked Peyton.

"Nope. He's in California for something and won't be back until the day after tomorrow. Sarah will be back tonight, so I've got some free time to safely do

this.”

It bothered the hell out of me that she had to worry about being safe in the house she lived in, but that was only going to be for a couple more weeks.

“We’re supposed to report back to the Facility tomorrow morning, so we can help. Let’s get some of the questions answered while we eat and then I’ll run some errands and meet you up the road when you’re loaded up. Sound okay?”

“Works for me,” Peyton said. “I’ll just use some trash bags for stuff and say I’m going to donate old things if someone asks.”

Cutter slid plates of fluffy pancakes in front of us to go with the bacon and sausage already on the table. The rest of the meal was spent eating while Cutter went over the questions with Peyton and I filled in gaps as I saw them. Before she left, Cutter made sure Peyton had a code to get into the storage unit in case something happened and we couldn’t connect. The two of us were used to being called back off schedule and wanted Peyton safe and prepared in case that happened.

I kissed her and sent her on her way and watched until I could no longer see her car. When I got inside, Cutter stood by the door with his arms crossed.

“So, boss. How does this change our plans?”

“It doesn’t. We get her and Sarah safe and when we’re able, we go join them.”

“And in the meantime, you’re going to be a basket case.”

“Ha ha. I’ll be worried, yes, but I’ve been more worried with her in the house with Wilson than I will be with her in a cabin in the middle of the woods. He’s more of a predator than any bobcat or bear she might find in the mountains.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Are you going to be okay to help her out without me? I was thinking I should take a drive and go check out the cabin. Well, I had planned on asking you to go check out the cabin and I’d keep doing recon, but last night changed that. I’d rather you had the time you need with her and I’ll take the drive.”

I gave Cutter's arm a pat as I moved further into the house to make sure everything was cleaned up. "That sounds like a good plan. What are you going to use for a vehicle?"

"Well, a rental is out of the question. Too easy to track. I noticed that the house next door was empty and they have a Jeep in the garage. The mail is being forwarded, I found the notice for it in the mailbox. I'll borrow the Jeep and return it with a filled tank and a good wash inside and out. It's an older one with no GPS or computerized crap in it, so it's perfect."

"You just noticed all this?"

"Well, I didn't want to listen to you two this morning, so I went for a run. I decided to check the neighborhood out on the way back. There are five houses on this end of the beach road and only one seems to be occupied full time. All the rest are vacation properties or rentals like this one."

I winced at his words. "I'm sorry, man. I guess I was caught up in the moment." Cutter laughed as he finished getting some laundry started. "Do not apologize for enjoying life. You give to everyone, Jer, and it's nice to see you getting something for a change. Anyway, I'll 'borrow' the Jeep and head out. I've got plenty of cash to cover gas and meals, and I'll be back sometime tonight. Keep the burner in your pocket, I'll text you on that."

I held out a fist and Cutter tapped mine with his before he grabbed his bag and headed for the door. "Cutter, anything seems off, let me know."

"That's why I'm doing this, boss. We can't let the girls go into a bad situation."

The door shut behind him and I stood there and just soaked up the quiet. I was in a building, alone, with no one else around. No one talking or moving or breathing in the same space I currently occupied. That was so rare, it was worth it to take a moment and appreciate it. I heard the Jeep start up and the garage door next door close. I heard Cutter say "All's good, boss." as he drove off. I



went and poured myself another coffee and stepped out onto the porch. I had a gorgeous view, a good cup of coffee, some rare quiet and a lot to think about. By that evening, Peyton and I had done two trips to the storage unit and there wasn't a lot left for her to pack up. Sarah's stuff was all that was really left, and the few things she'd kept to hide the fact that most of her belongings were gone. We were curled up in front of the fireplace after we'd eaten some truly amazing pasta and garlic bread that Peyton had made. Wine was poured and music played softly in the background while we kissed and talked – and waited for Cutter to call or show up.

"I wish he'd call or text or something. I'm starting to worry," I said. "Let me try sending him a text." I pulled out the burner phone and punched in Cutter's number and sent him a message Check in pls.

Peyton leaned against the pillows we'd piled on the floor and sipped her wine.

"Why are you worried? Is Cutter the kind of guy to go rogue?"

"No, he's my second in command. He's the most reliable, dependable guy on the team. I've had issues with nearly every other team member at one point or another, but never Cutter. It's just we don't know what's out there, or what condition the cabin is in. I'm worried he got hurt or something and can't get ahold of me. Some of those areas out there are bad for cell service."

Peyton handed me my glass. "Drink some wine, trust in his skills, and tell me more about this place?"

"Which place?" I asked.

"The cabin," she teased. "You know, where Sarah and I are going to be living while we wait for you to quit your job?"

I wished for a moment it was a job I could just quit, but I understood what she was doing and let out a breath. A swallow of wine and I slid an arm around her.

"Well, one of the docs from the program told me it was set up as a safe house for

us. He didn't want things to go as they have, and he said he made some preparations to help us get out and move on with our lives."

"That was really kind of him," Peyton said.

"And unexpected, to be honest. Which is why Cutter wanted to check it out first. It's not normal for the Facility folks to be, well, nice to us. At all. Ever."

"Is it really that awful?"

"Sometimes. They don't see us as human any longer, so they don't treat us as human. Yes, we signed up to participate, but we didn't sign up to give up our rights as human beings." Peyton was silent as I spoke, but the weight of her tucked against me was a comfort. "He's also supposed to be fixing things so we can leave without being tracked. The only reason Cutter could go get the unit or drive out to the cabin, and the reason I could help you today, is because we've figured out that if we wear a magnetic patch over the spot the tracker is in, we can screw it up. They'll get whacked out readings and just assume it's a tech issue. We go back, they run a scan and the implant is fine, and they just write it off as a glitch. We've done it a few times and never had any backlash from it."

"Where's the patch now?"

"I took it off when we came back, while you were cooking. I'm supposed to be here, so them tracking me as being here is fine."

"What if someone shows up to check on you?"

"They won't. We've been doing missions for almost six years now. They used to check at first, but they don't have the manpower to keep following around all of the assets they have in play."

I felt her relax against me, then the phone chirped and I picked it up. "It's Cutter."

"No signal out there. On the way back. Less than 2hrs out." My turn to relax.

"Yeah, he said no signal out there and he's on his way back. We've got less than two hours."

Peyton made a soft hmm sound and reached for my glass to set it next to hers.  
“Less than two hours. That’s enough time to get into a little trouble.”

I agreed.

By the time Cutter showed up, we were both showered, dressed in sweats and t-shirts and watching a movie.

“Oh, good. You’re dressed,” Cutter teased as he came in. I had listened as he pulled the Jeep in next door, so I knew he was back.

“All wiped down?” I asked and he nodded. He handed me his burner phone.

“Take a look. I’m gonna hit the shower and I’ll talk to you when I’m done.”

He’d taken a lot of photos of the place and the surrounding area. I held the phone so Peyton could see too and we paused the movie as we looked through nearly two hundred photos.

“That’s the little cabin?” Peyton asked, wonder in her tone. I was wondering, too. The place was an alpine mansion and compound all in one. A gated drive, a fenced in property with security cameras, a huge main house with a wall of glass that took in the yard and mountain view. Several outbuildings that ranged from a garden shed to a handful of guest cottages tucked into the trees and landscaping. An in-ground pool gleamed under a greenhouse-type structure and trails led off into the trees with the promise of hiking or running. It looked like a paradise and I was suddenly afraid of how much I wanted us to be there.

“It’s incredible,” Peyton whispered.

“It really is,” I replied and looked up as Cutter came out to join us.

I held up the phone. “Is this for real?”

He nodded. “Every freaking inch of that place is real. The caretaker accepted the pass code and showed me around. The main house has five bedrooms and six bathrooms, a library, a tech center, a movie room with leather recliners in tiers, a kitchen most restaurants would die to have, and the guest cottages are each two bedroom, two bathroom little houses. Little. Like, eleven hundred square feet

each. There is a garage that holds ten vehicles and has five already in place. A van, a pickup, a couple of sedans and a Hummer. There's even an armory."

I just blinked at him. "And it's all ours?"

Cutter nodded. "Held in trust for The Michaelson Group."

"Michael, Doc's son. Well, hell. You said there was no cell signal?"

"Not until I got about halfway down the mountain. The closest store is almost an hour from the compound, but there are enough supplies laid up to keep us through an apocalypse. Frozen, canned, freeze-dried. We'd need to get fresh stuff, but other than that, we're covered."

Peyton interrupted us. "Is this doctor you're talking about a multimillionaire?"

"Yeah, I guess he would be. He's the one that created the stem cell science that made us possible."

"It's helped heal millions around the world without using the animal cells. Just the human ones. Organ donation is no longer necessary when a person can regrow their own healthy organ with a little boost. He's probably a billionaire many times over," Peyton said.

"But at what cost?" I asked, my gaze settled on the flames in the fireplace. "He told me about his son, Michael, who had been in his twenties when he came back from Iraq without legs, missing one arm, his eyesight damaged and his hearing barely functional. He got so depressed he killed himself. Thorpe's wife died from the grief of losing their only child a couple of years later. He's put everything into the science to try and keep other families from losing their loved ones like he did – and it got twisted into the Facility's games."

"So this isn't what he wanted, huh?" Cutter asked.

"No. He wanted to release the first team after the second year. The board of directors and the government refused to let them go. That's when he knew he'd made a mistake and he's been trying to figure out a way to fix it ever since."

Peyton wiped at her cheeks and I noticed the tears there. "Love, what's wrong?"

“Someone wanted to do good and it ended up being twisted into evil. I think Wilson was one of the people behind it. He was on a committee with the Department of Defense and just before he started the campaign to be President, when he ended as VP, he quit all of the extra committees and stuff. He would meet with some military bigwigs once a month on the island, but otherwise, he took a huge step back. I heard something about ‘pets’ in a ‘facility’ a couple of years ago but I never put it together until I started listening to you two. Now I think it all makes sense.”

“And now he’s trying to distance himself even more and take us down at the same time. That interview he did is why we’re supposed to do this upcoming mission,” I said.

Cutter grunted. “Is there more wine? I think I need alcohol to discuss all of this.”

“Three bottles in the fridge,” Peyton answered. “Open two and bring them in? Oh, and...never mind. I’ll show you.” She got to her feet and headed into the kitchen to help Cutter get the wine and some snacks she’d picked up. I heard the oven open and then let the noise fall away as I processed everything we’d learned over the past few weeks.

Enough time had passed that I jumped when Peyton nudged me to get my attention before she handed me a plate of snacks. Hot stuffed mushrooms, little mini quiche, sausage wrapped in pastry dough, bits of cheese, a handful of grapes and some strawberries. “You did all this just now?”

“Well, in the last half hour. Didn’t you notice how long we were gone?”

“No, sorry. I was lost in thought. Trying to sort through everything.”

“He gets like that before a mission, Peyton. It’s a thing,” Cutter said.

“Do you not want the food?” Peyton asked.

I smiled at her and put the plate on the low table beside me. “I want it. It looks delicious and easy to snack on while talking or watching a movie. I’ve not had

stuff like this unless it was at one of those parties where the trays are carried way too fast past the working stiffs for us to get more than a bite or two.”

Peyton settled beside me once more and started nibbling on her own plate of food.

Cutter settled across from us and sighed. “It’s going to be hard going back tomorrow morning, knowing what waits for us in a couple of weeks.”

“I’m just impressed. It’s not at all what I expected. I figured it’d be a one story log cabin with a wood stove and an outhouse. This is living like royalty.”

Cutter lifted his wine glass and looked at the two of us. “Here’s to all of us being able to live like royalty sooner rather than later.”

I tapped mine to his and then to Peyton’s and nodded. “Sooner rather than later.”

“I just hope Sarah is okay with going radio silent on her father. I think she will be, but even for all she’s a teenager and rebels against him, he is her daddy,”

Peyton said.

“Well, that’ll be your job, Pey. Keeping her from blowing it all up for all of us by contacting him. Let her know your life – and ours – depends on her silence,” I said.

“I know, love. I’ll make sure she understands.”

A teenager, a governess, and a pack of half-human soldiers move into a house in the mountains. It sounded like the start of a really bad joke.

Or the beginning of an amazing new life.

# Chapter Eight

Getting my mind off of Peyton and back on the team was tough, but I managed. I got a chance to pull Z, Affie and Paulo into a chat out on the trail a couple of days after we returned so I could fill them in on what was planned. They were all the way in and more than happy to get a fresh start. I didn't tell everyone on my team the plan. Not yet. I felt a little better after I had talked to Rico, but something still kept making me hold back and I knew better than to ignore my gut.

Affie and I were on the outside trail. A cold rain had moved through the night before and parts of the trail were muddy, so we kept our pace closer to normal than we might otherwise. That also made it easier to talk. "You're absolutely positive about this place?" Affie asked.

"I am. Cutter checked it out, showed me pictures. It's a freakin' compound. Beautiful, well stocked."

"I'm afraid to hope," she said, voice soft.

"I know. Part of me is afraid to think about the possibilities too. But Thorpe and I talked a lot and I trust him. As much as I can trust anyone right now, he's got that."

“He was so kind when we came in broken. He cared for us as if we were his children and sobbed when Eros died in spite of the treatment. Then the board of directors had to be put together in order to qualify for some of the government funding and things changed. We didn’t get to work with Thorpe as much and when we did see him, he seemed lost, frustrated, angry. He wanted to let us go after our second year here but the board refused. Said it wasn’t safe for us to be out among so-called normal people.”

We slowed to a walk and moved into the brush to avoid sliding down the slope on the mud-slick trail. I looked over at Affie. Her brown curly hair cut short, but soft around her face. Dark eyes that glinted gold in the light from the lion cells she’d been given. Sepia colored skin that wrapped hard muscles, yet still showed pale scars from battles – wartime and surgical.

“Are you, Z, and Paulo the only ones left from the original batch?”

“Yes. There were five of us that made it through, but we’ve lost two over the years in missions. That’s another reason we want out. The three of us are family. We love each other. It would destroy us if we lost one of us.”

I nodded and reached out to touch her arm. “I promise you, Affie. We’ll find a way to get everyone out of here safely.”

Affie grinned, then swatted my backside. “As long as the three of us get one of those cottages for ourselves, we’re good. Now get your butt in gear. You’re moving too slow.”

I laughed as we picked up the pace, and I told her, “You can have whichever cottage you want. There are enough of them to pick from.”

“I’ll want the one the farthest away from everyone,” Affie said.

“Done,” I replied and sped up to pass her. “Come on, old lady. Keep up.”

“Ooh, boyo, you’re asking for it.”





Gideon was in the garage, going over one of the vehicles, when I approached him. The scent of mentholated rub wafted towards me, and I coughed.

“What the hell, Gideon. You’re bathing in that stuff now?”

“Hey, boss. Well, Kit is due in a couple of days and Amber from the mechanics pool is going through hers now. Amber had been working here when I showed up, so I put it on. I’m used to it now, so forgot to wipe it off.”

I tossed him a clean rag. “Here, before my eyes start watering.”

Gideon wiped it off and shoved the rag into his pocket. It wasn’t quite as strong, but I still kept a few feet between us. “So, is it going to be ready for the mission?” I asked, gesturing to the vehicle.

“Of course. Parts are in and I already started replacing them.”

Gideon wasn’t just doing maintenance; he was making it so the vehicle could be stripped of the GPS tags quickly and cleanly. We’d need a vehicle with no tracking to get away clean, so this one would be it. I’d sent a message to Thorpe after Cutter told me about the garage full of vehicles and asked if one could be left at the storage unit complex for us. He said he’d see that it was done. If he managed that, then we were good. We’d just get the girls to the storage unit, load up that vehicle, and head out. If not, we’d need options.

“When are you headed out for another parts run?” I asked him.

“I could do one today,” Gideon said. “Just tell them one of the parts I got was damaged or not the right one or something.”

“Do that, would you?” I tucked a slip of paper into his pocket. “Check that things are set up, please?” The note had said that I needed him to call T and make sure all was at the site as planned. He’d know that meant to check with Dr.

Thorpe on the vehicle at the storage unit. I didn't want to move until all of the pieces were in place.

Z came in and jerked his head to get my attention. I gave Gideon a pat on the shoulder as I walked by and went over to Z.

"First five newbies were called in to medical to get their trackers swapped. They're being held because there were issues with the new ones not reading properly. Seems like we're off the grid, so to speak, and being given a bit more time due to problems with the new ones," Z said.

"Yes," I cheered in a whisper and fist-bumped Z. "Best news I've had all day. That means that Doc really is coming through for us."

"Yeah, Affie said you agreed to a cottage?"

"Of course, Z. Whatever the three of you want. I'm hoping, honestly, that you'd be willing to help manage things once we get gone. You've got more experience and years than me, and I've seen how you handle people. If we're going to be the safe harbor for our kind, I'll need a lot of help."

"Whatever you need, I'm in. You've given me hope, and that's a rare and precious thing, Jericho."

My tension eased as Zeus agreed to help. I had no idea how we were going to manage all of this, and a lot of those questions couldn't be answered until we were out of here. "I'm thinking once we're out, we need a group to talk about needs, issues, and so on. Kind of a leadership committee for the compound. I'd like you on it and maybe Affie? I guess it depends on how many groups we can get out. Should have a leader from each group in the committee."

"I like how you're thinking, but let's wait and see what we've got to work with once we get there. First things first, Jericho. Mission and rescue."

"Yes, sir. Roger that." I stood there, mind racing, as I watched Z walk away. He was right in that I needed to focus on what was right in front of me, instead of worrying about what came after. Sure, there was some need to prepare, but not to

the degree I had been. It just stressed me out and disrupted my focus. The last thing I needed was to be distracted and screw up something important. We had maybe three days to get everything into motion and while my team was good at working on a deadline, this one had a lot more weight than any other.

I realized that I needed to clear my head, so I stopped at the training hall and changed into sweats before going out to hit the trail. Sometimes the only thing that gave me focus was a long run. With all of the steps we'd taken, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd missed something. Kane often accused me of not trusting in my team enough to let them take some of the weight off, and he had it right. I could delegate, but I still checked after them and I think that's what had helped send Rico over to the other side. I had never actually said I trusted them to do their job. People needed to hear it, and I needed to remember to say it. That wasn't it, though. I let the steps of the mission play out in my head as I ran, then the side step we'd take to reroute the mission into an escape. I could visualize each piece of the plan so clearly, but that tingling feeling in my gut that told me to be wary did not ease up at all. I was on my third lap when it all clicked and I almost stumbled on the trail. Instead, I took a deep breath and poured it on to get back to the Facility and see if I had been correct or not. If I was right, we were going to have to shift the plans.



By 0400, we were all dressed in black wet suits and vests, waterproof bags of gear at our feet. Most of the team had their eyes closed, doing their best to catch a few minutes of sleep as the helicopter lifted out of the Facility airport and headed east to get out over the water before it would turn north. Loki, from L block, flew the bird while Gideon drove the vehicle that we were supposed to

come back in. The original plan was for us to drop into the water behind the island and approach using non-bubbling scuba gear. We were then supposed to take out every breathing body in the house. Knowing what we did, that meant guards, Secret Service agents, Peyton, Sarah, a housekeeper, and a cook. Instead, we had zip ties and gags to subdue the agents and guards, wedges to lock the housekeeper and cook in their rooms if necessary, and bean bag rounds to drop anyone who tried to be a hero.

The goal was to get Peyton and Sarah without interacting with anyone else and spirit them away. Goals were one thing, plans were something else. You always planned for the worst case scenario – that's why we had Loki's mate, Freya with us. She was a doctor and had a kit that might as well have been a portable surgery. She planned to escape with the girls and stay at the cabin. That way, if anyone got injured, we had that covered. Loki would drop us all off and fly back to the Facility. Sure, we could strip the trackers off of a van and steal it, but a helicopter? Nope. Too much risk.

Once we were out over the water, I pulled a burner phone out and sent a text to Peyton. JD: Time to move. We're on our way. I waited impatiently for her reply and didn't take a deep breath until I saw the message pop up on the screen.

PA: Will be in the parking area on the mainland side of the island bridge. Be safe.

Relief washed over me and I flashed the screen to Cutter before I sent a mental message to Kane. ~They'll be in the parking area on the mainland side of the island bridge. We can skip the house altogether.~

~Sounds good.~ Kane replied. ~We'll just swim past the island and come down from the north side. Less chance of being seen based on what you and Cutter have told me.~

~Yeah, the guard house at the bridge is on the south side and there are patrols on the bridge itself so coming in above it is best.~

~Roger that.~ Kane replied, then leaned to whisper to Kit who sat beside him. I turned and filled in Z and he told Affie, who passed it along to Paulo. Yeah, all three of them were on this mission. Paulo had pulled himself together, dealing with their separation better now that he knew it was almost over. His physical systems were fine, but he'd not handled the damage and repairs as well, mentally, as most of the others. It happened sometimes, but Affie and Z handled him just fine so I didn't let it stress me.

Kit leaned over to whisper to Rico and I caught a flash of something on his face but I couldn't tell whether it was relief or frustration. I shifted my position so I could keep him in my peripheral vision. His body language seemed tense.

I leaned forward to speak to Rico just as Loki spoke into our headsets. "Drop zone in three. Doors ready."

We pulled our bags up, checked the clips and ties, and lined up to drop out. We were about a mile out to sea, lights dark as Loki dropped us down and the doors slid open. We went out both sides, the bird lifting fast once the last one of us dropped out. Masks in place, bags pulled to our chests, we sank under the surface and followed each other in a line of faint LED's. When I finally got to where we wanted to surface, I stopped and tapped Cutter behind me. He in turn tapped Kit and so on down the line. When we came up and pulled off our masks, I realized Rico wasn't with us. Fury surged hot and fast in my chest as I kicked myself for not checking on him. Well, fuck. Now we had to really move.

~Kane, Rico's gone. I think he's going to fuck this for us. We need to hustle.~

Kane lifted a fist and we all rushed to the rocky shore. Once past the bushes and on a piece of some trail, we stopped, peeled off the wet suits, and pulled on boots and gear. Wet gear went into the bags and was dumped in the brush.

Kane went down the row and told everyone Rico had rabbited and we needed to pick up the pace. At that, I started down the trail towards Peyton and Sarah, and hopefully nothing else. Peyton ran to me and hugged me tight when we got to

the outer edge of the lot. She and Sarah each had a backpack, and she'd already put her car keys under the front bumper. Freya introduced herself to the girls and the team gathered around. "Okay, Peyton, Sarah, Freya - you guys go with Affie, Z, and Paulo. You know where you're to meet Gideon, so get rolling. Kane, Cutter, Kit and I will take Peyton's car and head south. Don't forget to stop and swap." I gave Peyton a kiss and whispered "I'll be with you soon, love. Stay safe for me."

She kissed me back, whispered "Love you too," before she turned to head into the brush with the rest of them. Z gave me a thumbs up and took up the rear. I watched for a moment, then went to get the keys. I got the car started while everyone got in, then pulled out of the lot.

"What are we going to do about Rico?" Kane asked.

"Fuck Rico. It's why I didn't tell him anything about the cabin or our plans. All he knew was that we were supposed to not kill when we were ordered to kill," I said.

I drove south along the coastal road for about ten minutes until I found a park-n-ride lot. There were only a few cars here this early, so I parked Peyton's car, made sure all our stuff was out and locked the car, the keys tossed over the guardrail into the water. Cutter checked out a couple of the cars before he found one he felt would work. A few nervous minutes and the car was unlocked, started, and we climbed in.

"Good work, Cutter. How about we grab breakfast somewhere while we wait for Gideon to come back for us?" I said.

"Sounds good to me," Kane said as we paused at the exit of the lot.

That's when we heard it. Felt it. The rumble as the earth shook, and the distant sound of explosions. Cutter backed us up so we could see out over the water where the light seemed the brightest. Unfortunately, this was not a sunrise, but the flaming wreckage where the island mansion had once stood.

“So glad we had them meet us away from the house,” Cutter said, voice quiet.

“Rico didn’t know that. This is his doing,” Kane replied.

My phone rang and I answered it. “Dante.”

“Gideon here. On speaker in the car. All are loaded up and we’re headed to the storage to swap out. A couple of us think we heard something. Are you all okay?”

“Yeah, we’re all fine, but it looks like Rico went rogue. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Roger that. I’ll call when they’re on the way and I’m headed back to you. Find somewhere off the main drag to hunker down. I’m still not breathing easy about this. Too many oddities,” Gideon said. Oddities. That was his code word for things had gone sideways somehow, but he was still on track.

“We’re going to find breakfast and a room so we can dump our ride. Stay safe everyone. Dante out.” I hung up and looked at the others. “We’ll grab some food in a couple of places, snacks and drinks and such, then get a motel room where they don’t watch who comes and goes. Keep it to Kane and Kit doing the walk-about. They’re the least attention-grabbing of the four of us.”

“Understood,” Kit said. “As long as there’s coffee...”

“Yes, Kittycat. We know,” Cutter teased and the tension in the car eased a little. Within thirty minutes, the four of us were in a motel room in a town that didn’t even have a traffic light. Cutter went out to lose the car, and we changed into casual clothes before sitting down to eat. I kept a clock ticking away the minutes in my head. They should be almost to the storage unit by this time. They should have everything loaded and swapped by this time. The first group with Peyton and Sarah should be on the road by this time, and so on. I finished my food before Cutter returned and while he ate, I paced, phone in one hand, bottle of juice in the other. When my phone rang, I startled and squeezed my juice bottle, nearly spraying orange juice all over myself. Kane laughed at me as I set the bottle down and wiped my hand before I answered the phone.

“They’re on the road and all is good. I’m on my way back. Where are you?” I gave him the address and he said “I should be there in about an hour and a half. So, what the fuck was that earlier?”

“The mansion blew up. Rico did it, we think. He swam off away from us. He didn’t know any of the plans other than we weren’t going to kill the ones we were told to kill. Seems he had different orders.”

“I told Z not to turn on the news, just in case. I’m glad I did.”

“Why, Gideon?” I asked.

“Sarah was chattering away and said that her father was at home tonight. He had to go to some meeting earlier yesterday and wasn’t supposed to leave for Geneva until later this morning.”

“Oh, fuck,” I breathed. Everyone in the room sat up and looked my way. I shook my head to them and held up a finger to let them know I’d tell them in a bit.

“Who else was there? Anyone you know of?”

“Senator Hansen stayed over as they were going to fly out together. Sarah was saying how happy she was they weren’t going to be there around Handsy. I hope Z listens and doesn’t turn on that radio or they’re going to have a hysterical teenager on their hands.”

“Yeah, Peyton can tell her once she’s at the compound and safe. Thanks, Gideon. Hurry if you can, I’ve got a feeling Rico isn’t done.”

“Understood,” Gideon said and disconnected the call. I turned to the room and sighed. “Vice President Wilson and Senator Hansen were at the mansion when it blew up. They were supposed to fly out to Geneva later this morning. Someone turn on the news on the television so we can see what’s being said?”

Kit rubbed a hand over her face. “Poor Sarah. This is going to fuck with her.”

“Yeah, it will, but she’s got Peyton and us,” Cutter replied.

Kane reached for the remote and turned on the TV to CNN. A line of fire trucks were on the bridge to the island, police cars interspersed, while helicopters flew



overhead to get footage. Yellow tarps lay over five body-sized lumps on the front lawn while the scroll across the bottom of the screen read “Terrorist attack has killed Vice President Wilson, Senator Hansen and several members of Wilson’s household. Any further recovery efforts will have to wait until the fire has cooled. It is believed Wilson’s daughter, Sarah, and her governess, Peyton Adams, were also in the house.”

“Huh,” Cutter said. “That may play in our favor. A lot of times, fires burn too hot to get remains. If they’re presumed dead, no one will be looking for them.”

“Yeah, that could be a good thing. Unless Sarah wants to go to her father’s funeral,” I said.

“Well, that’s not going to be possible, is it? Not if she wants to stay alive. We’ll just have to convince her, because the Facility wanted her dead and they may not have been the only ones,” Kane said.

“We’ve got about an hour before Gideon gets here. I’m going to lie down and close my eyes. I suspect that things back at the Facility are going to be in an uproar, and we need to be on the top of our game,” I said and moved to lie on one side of the queen bed that Kane had claimed.

Everyone was quiet for a bit as they processed the events of the day, the TV left on and low in the background. I must’ve fallen asleep at some point because the next thing I was aware of was Kane as he nudged my shoulder. “Gideon’s here. Let’s go, eh?”

I felt foggy as Kit handed me a cold juice and put my gear bag on the bed next to me. “Packed up the stuff. Gideon is in the bathroom. Let’s go see what kind of crap we’ve got to deal with, huh?”

I gave her a wry smile, downed the juice and got to my feet. Cutter took the bottle out of my hand, stuffed it in the trash bag before he tied it up and carried it out. We always took everything with us. Forensic countermeasures were a thing.

Gideon came out of the bathroom as I headed to the door. “You good to drive, Gid, or do you want someone else to take over?”

“Naw, I’m good,” Gideon said. “How about a coffee stop before we hit the main road?” We all agreed that caffeine would be welcome, so once we all got into the van, he pulled up to a drive-thru and we got cold or hot caffeine as needed.

Once we were on the highway, Cutter spoke up. “Okay, so either Rico was working with others or someone set up the explosives ahead of time. He didn’t have them in his bag on the flight over, and he didn’t have enough time to place them all around the house to cause that kind of damage.”

“Unless it was a missile,” Kit said, voice soft. “All he’d need to do is call in the coordinates or drop a tracker and have the missile aim for it. If I were doing it, I’d have put a bullseye locator on each wall of the house and got out of range before I called it in. Four missiles could have caused that kind of damage and that quickly.”

“That makes sense,” I said and looked over at her. “What made you think of that?”

“We were talking about stuff one time, about a month or so ago. He asked how I’d take out a building if it was supposed to be a total demo. I told him that scenario.”

“Well, if that was what he did, he had assistance, and Loki wasn’t flying anything with missiles, so it wasn’t him. Besides, Loki wouldn’t risk Freya,” Kane said.

“Do you think Rico is alive?” Kit asked.

“Honestly? No. I think he got taken out after he called in the attack. They wouldn’t have wanted him found with the bodies, though, so it’d be once they picked him up,” I said.

“What about us, though? We were all supposed to be in that house when it blew,” Cutter said.

“Well, not Gideon, but yeah, you’re right. So, we come back and say that we lost Rico and went to look for him when it blew up?” Kit asked.

“And we lost Freya, Z, Affie, and Paulo in the explosions,” Kane said.

“If they even ask,” I said after a bit. “I have a bad, deep in my gut feeling, about what we’re going to find when we get back. Head on a swivel, guys. Got it?”

“Yes, sir. Got it,” came from the four others around me and I turned to look out the window. Already one of the missing pieces had snapped into place and I fully expected the rest to drop when we pulled into the Facility. I had a feeling they were not going to let Wilson survive, but I thought they’d drop his plane into the Atlantic or have him shot in Geneva. Guess they wanted to take out everyone, including us. Just before we got back to the Facility, my phone rang and I didn’t recognize the number. “Hello?”

“It’s me,” Peyton said. “Satellite phone that Z found in the armory. We’re here, we’re safe, and this place is amazing. Are you all okay?”

“We’re about to pull into the Facility. Um, Peyton...the mansion is gone. Wilson and Hansen are dead as are a few others. They don’t know the final count yet.” I heard her breath catch, then a faint moan. “Oh, gods. I can’t tell Sarah. Not yet.”

“I wouldn’t. The news is saying you and Sarah were in the house and are presumed dead. This could be a good thing, so they won’t look for you two. Gives you some time to come up with new identities and stuff.”

“I can see that, yeah. Oh, this is rough. I wish you were here to hold me.”

“I wish I was too. Okay, love. Stay put, don’t go outside the walls for any reason. Promise me? And keep Sarah safe. I don’t think this is even close to over yet.”

“I’ll keep her safe. We’ve got stuff to deal with here to make it feel like home for her, and we can focus on that. Love you. See you soon, I hope.”

“Me too. Bye.”

# Chapter Nine

I shut off my burner and tucked it into the pocket of my jeans. As we pulled into the parking area, Gideon slowed. Usually there was a checkpoint, but the gate was open and no one was there. Two vehicles were stopped in the middle of the lot area, doors open and no one in them.

“Everyone, vests and arms,” I said. We all pulled bulletproof vests out of our bags and slid them on, then fastened our gear belts in place. I chambered a round in my .45 and holstered it. Knives were slid into sheaths and light jackets were tugged on over the vests and gear to look a little less obvious.

Gideon had pulled over near the gate and shut it down, keys going into his pocket. “If we need it, we can get out of Dodge faster if I’ve got the keys.”

Good idea,” I said. “Okay, everyone stay close and in the shadows as much as possible.”

We made our way along the side of the lot and down towards the entrance to the residential blocks and the training facility. As we approached, the distant sounds of gunfire and screams became clearer.

“Well, this doesn’t sound good,” Kane quipped and I just gave him a look.

“No kidding. Do we go on or get the hell out of here?” I asked.

“I say we at least see what’s going down before we bail. No man left behind, right? We might be able to help some,” Cutter said.

My gaze went from face to face and I saw each one nod before I smiled. “Good. Let’s go.”

The entrance to the underground buildings yawned about twenty yards ahead of us, the lights flickering and smoke drifting out of the darkness. As we entered, we moved in formation with Cutter at point. He had the best night vision of all of us. Bodies littered the ground as we moved deeper into the corridors. Some of them were white-coats – staff or lab techs. Some were our fellow soldiers. I saw Meyers lying in a puddle of blood, half of his head gone, and I had a moment of remorse for all the times I hassled him.

A grunt of pain and the shuffle of feet had us stop and move into a side room.

Loki sat on a table while Thor wrapped a bandage around his ribs. “Stop complaining. I’ll get you wrapped up and then we’ll get out,” Thor said.

Dahl spun and pointed a broken broomstick at us before he relaxed. “Well, shit. You guys showed up just in time.”

Loki looked over at us. “Any word?”

“All safe and secure,” I said and I watched the worry slide from his face.

“We all need to get out of here. Don’t bother going deeper, there’s nothing left,” Thor said and gave Loki a look. “I’m going to cradle carry you. Keep your arms crossed and your mouth shut.” Then he scooped the man up as if he were a baby and moved to the door. We all turned to follow and headed back up, with Thor and Loki in the middle of our formation.

“You sure there’s no reason to go deeper?” I asked Loki.

“Yeah, self-destruct feature. Some got out and headed into the forest. The rest are dead.”

“Jeezus,” I whispered as we made our way back out. Gideon took off with his super speed and in moments, the van pulled up with the doors open. Loki was

laid out on the back bench with a blanket and Thor sat on the floor beside him as the rest of us loaded up and headed out. We got into the trees and took the dirt side road that led through the forest to another access road.

“Looking for more survivors?” I asked Gideon.

“Yeah, that and this is under tree cover. I hear incoming overhead and don’t want us seen.”

Just as Gideon said that, the ground shook and the van swerved. Gideon hit the brakes and pulled to a stop as repeated explosions shook the ground and the trees around us. Kit hovered with her arms over her head and I slapped my hands to my ears as I stared back the way we’d come. A mushroom cloud of flame and smoke billowed up as the traces of bombs landed over and over where the Facility once stood. As the last bomb fell and the smoke wafted across the countryside, Gideon started us forward once more. Silence filled the van until we were well on our way to West Virginia. I think we were all shell shocked by what had happened and needed to process it all.

I finally shook off the silence and turned to Thor. “Hey, what happened to Loki? Do we need to get supplies or anything?”

“He’s got a graze from a bullet and some cracked or broken ribs. Freya can check him out when we get wherever we’re going. He said we were going to see her before I gave him a pain pill and he fell asleep,” Thor said.

Dahl turned from where he stared out the window and asked me, “So, where are we going?”

“A mountain compound. There’s a main house, cottages, food, supplies, even an armory. It was set up for us and any of us that need a place,” I said.

“Who’s there?” Thor asked.

“Freya, Z, Affie, Paulo, and my ladies.”

Gideon spoke up from behind the wheel and asked what I hadn’t dared yet. “Did any of you see Rico?”

Dahl flinched and shook his head. “No, but we know he’s dead.”

“You guys feel like telling us what the hell happened back there?” Kane asked.

“Sure, but can we get some food and water first?” Thor asked.

“I’ll hit a drive-thru in a bit. I need to stop and pick up something at a storage unit first,” Gideon said.

Kit pulled bottles of water out of her gear back. “Here, this should help for now.”

The guys thanked her and downed the water, still looking out of it. I desperately wanted to know what had happened, but when you see battle-hardened men staring sightless out the window, in shock, you realize that it might be a good thing to just wait.

Loki woke up when Gideon stopped and Cutter got out to open the storage unit. It was a small, closet-sized one and he started taking black canvas bags out and stacking them in the back cargo area of the van. Kane slid out to help and soon it was empty and they were back in their seats as we pulled away.

Kit handed a bottle of water to Thor for Loki. He used Thor’s help to sit up, then blankets were rolled and wedged around him to keep him from rocking too much.

“Thanks, that’s much better. Any food?” Loki asked.

“Next stop,” Gideon said. “Drive-thru food.”

Cutter spoke up then. “It’s still considered breakfast time. Order as much as you want, I’ve got it covered.”

I leaned forward and whispered to him. “How do you have it covered?”

He smiled and glanced back at me before his eyes were once more on the road.

“Remember that trafficking gig?”

“Yeah?”

“They had buyers there. Since they were dead, they didn’t need their money anymore. I gave some of it to the girls to help them get a start in life. I kept the rest for us to start our lives.”

“Well, hell, Cutter. Are all those bags...?”

“No, just about half of them. Trust me, we can afford breakfast. Before we get up the mountain, we’ll find a superstore and get clothes and stuff for everyone too.”

I patted Cutter’s shoulder and leaned back. “Thank you, Cutter.”

We pulled through and ordered enough food for about twenty people. Gideon smiled at the girl as she started to hand him the order and he passed it to Cutter and Kit to set on the floor or hold. He handed her an extra twenty dollars as a tip and drove off before she could say anything. Down the road and behind a hotel, we stopped and passed out the food to everyone. Silent but for the sounds of eating, we finished most of the food and had settled with our drinks when Loki started to speak.

“I landed the helicopter and went through the post-flight checks, as usual. I grabbed my go bag and jumped out through the back instead of the side door. That’s all that saved me. A truck came around the side of the hangar on two wheels and drove into the side of the bird, shoving it a few feet sideways before they both ground to a stop. I had rolled out of the way and scurried behind those huge tool cabinets. Gunfire erupted and I peered around to see someone from the truck shooting at someone in the hangar before the bullets stopped and the guy from the truck lay on the ground. I left my bag where it was, pulled out my handgun and got out of there. I hit the back stairs that headed down into the residential units and saw a squad of black-clad soldiers with semi-autos and helmets that didn’t match anything we’d ever used. They were going room by room and taking out everyone they saw. Didn’t matter if they were staff or soldiers. I went along the back passage and grabbed these two. They had been in the training facility and were on the way back to our cells when it all went sideways. We had to play hide and seek with the elimination squad. Some of



their bullets had started fires, so it got hard to see. I took out a couple of them, but one wasn't as dead as I'd hoped and he winged me."

"That's when I put a bullet in his throat and got our hero into that side room. Luckily it was one of the staff break rooms and had a good first-aid kit. That's when you found us," Thor said.

"I tried to save Sigyn," Dahl said.

Thor reached over and gripped his shoulder. "You did what any of us would've done, Heimdahl. She smiled at you before she left us. Consider that her blessing on you and keep moving forward."

I started to ask but Loki caught my eye and shook his head. I gave him a faint nod, then took a sip of my coffee.

"Would you like to hear about the compound?" Cutter asked them.

"Yeah, tell us about this place," Loki said.

The next hour was spent hearing about our glorious new home before Gideon stopped and Cutter passed out cash to each of us, except Loki. Thor knew Loki's sizes and said he'd get him some things. We also bought some snacks, bottled water, wine, beer, fresh produce, eggs, dairy and so on. By the time we headed on the last bit of the ride, the van was packed full and we had picked up new burner phones. We'd dumped the others along the way at various stops for gas and food with destroyed sim cards. I had put Loki in the front passenger seat as it was more bucket style and cradled his body better than the back bench seats. We didn't want him rolling side to side too much with those ribs and a mountain road was nothing if not curvy. Tucked in tight with blankets and the seat belt, Thor gave him another painkiller as the van climbed higher.

I leaned between the seats to ask Loki a question. "Can you tell me about Rico?"

"He came back in a body bag," Loki said. "I saw him and Simon both laid out in the back of the hanger when I was leaving. Simon had a bullet hole between the eyes and Rico was blood and smoke splattered. He looked burned but I didn't do

more than a quick look and a double check of the zipper tags to verify they were who I thought they were.”

Kit whispered a soft “Rest softly, brother.”

“He must’ve been caught in the explosions at the mansion,” I said and Loki frowned.

“What explosions?” Loki asked.

“The mansion was blown to bits. We think missiles. Vice President Wilson and Senator Hansen were in the house. They think Peyton and Sarah were there too, so even though it’s a cluster fuck, it has a silver lining for us,” I said.

“Who are Peyton and Sarah?” Thor asked.

“Sarah Wilson and her governess, Peyton Adams. Peyton is also my lady. We were sent to kill them tonight, and instead we sent them with the others to the compound.”

“Sarah doesn’t know her father is dead yet. We can’t let her know until Peyton has a chance to explain it all to her, so be careful what you say around her, understood?” Cutter smiled. “She’s a good kid and has a bright future. We need to help her have that future, so watch what you say.”

“Copy that,” Thor and Dahl said, while the rest of us nodded or made some sound of agreement.

It was Kit’s gasp of wonder that had us all looking outside. The stone wall was easily ten feet tall, with the tip of a roof barely visible above it until we drove closer still. The thin glint of light caught my enhanced eyes and I realized there were lasers crosshatched all over the wall.

Cutter pointed to the drive entrance. He slowed even more, then Gideon turned onto pavement and through an arch before he stopped at a gate. He looked at a camera just outside the driver’s window, then lowered the window and pressed a button. A moment’s pause and then the gate started to move and Gideon drove on through. It was better than the pictures. Glass, stone, and wood rose nearly

three stories high above a deck that held seating arrangements and fire pits. As we pulled up, Freya, Peyton, Z, and the others all came out to greet us. As soon as Freya saw that Loki was hurt, she had Thor carrying him into the house. The rest of us were greeted with smiles and hugs before the van was unloaded. Once inside, I stopped and took in the soaring ceiling and the view of the distant mountains before I noticed the stone chimney and fireplace, leather sofas and chairs, the gleam of the kitchen...it was almost too much. I took a deep breath and carried my armload into the kitchen and found a place on the counter for it. That's where I met Hattie, the cook that lived with her husband Edgar in a cottage on the grounds. Edgar organized the groundskeepers and outdoor staff while he handled most of the security. Hattie did all of the cooking and managed the indoor staff of cleaning crew and maintenance.

"Thank you for bringing the fresh stuff. We were going to try and go down the mountain for things in a day or two, but it would've been odd for us to buy so much so soon after our last trip," Hattie said. "Just leave it all here and I'll get it put where it belongs."

I gave her a smile of thanks, and Peyton took my hand. "Come see if you like the rooms I chose for us."

Normally, I would have wanted to do a perimeter check and see how the security was set up – but Freya had been here and that's the first thing she would've handled, so I went with Peyton. She led me up the stairs, to the front of the house. This section had three bedrooms off of a short hallway. One huge one that sat on the front side with some of those floor to ceiling windows, a closet bigger than the cell I'd lived in for the past five years, and a bath with a sunken tub and glass-walled shower. A door led out the other side of the bath into another bedroom that was about half the size of the one we'd just been in. A queen-sized four poster bed sat in the middle of the floor with a gas-log fireplace on one side and a balcony with french doors on the other.

“This is my room. The one we were just in is yours. Everyone agreed you should have that one and I wanted to be close to you. Sarah is across the hall with her own bathroom.”

I looked around the room, then led her back through the bathroom to the main room. A huge bed faced the windows so you could wake up with that view. In the corner, a leather love seat sat before a fireplace with a flat-screen TV over it.

“If you want me to be in this room, you need to be in it with me.” She started to talk and I held up a hand. “You can have your own room and your own space, but I’d rather you stayed with me more often than not.”

Peyton rested a hand on my chest and leaned up to kiss me. “I’d like to spend most of my time with you, but we’re still new at this relationship thing, so having our separate space is important.”

I thought about what she said and had to see the wisdom in that. “You’re still the smartest one in this pairing,” I told her and brushed a kiss against her lips. “I need a shower and sleep. What’s on your plate today?”

“Sarah’s got her assignments for school for the day and I don’t have to check anything until later. Want some help with that shower?”

“That’s not going to lead to sleep,” I warned her as I kicked off my boots and started to peel off clothes as I walked towards the bathroom.

“You go get started, I just heard someone in the hallway,” Peyton said. I got into the bathroom and turned on the shower. I found body wash, shampoo, a shaving kit – everything I would need. Even plush robes hung on the back of each of our doors. The last of my clothes actually landed in the laundry hamper before I stepped into the shower and let the multiple heads massage aching muscles. A few minutes later, Peyton came in and said “Cutter dropped your bags off outside the door. I brought them in and locked the door so we’ve got some privacy.”

“Fantastic. Now, get in here, woman.”

Did you know that when I held Peyton a certain way against the wall of the shower, one of the shower heads hit her in a rather interesting place? Yeah, it made things fun when I could use soap, water, and my body to make her scream in pleasure.

We both slept well after that shower.

# Chapter Ten

Luckily, those huge windows in the bedroom had a push-button darkening feature. I slept all that day and night, not waking up until nearly ten in the morning the next day. A solo shower and a good shave, clean clothes that weren't a uniform, and I felt like a new man. I made my bed and noticed Peyton must've picked up my clothes because they were all in the hamper. I took a moment to appreciate the view before I headed downstairs and followed the scent of toast to the kitchen.

I found Hattie and a man I presumed to be her husband Edgar as they laughed together before he kissed her and turned to leave. I cleared my throat and offered a quiet "Good morning" to them.

"Oh, Edgar, this is Jericho. He's the leader here, according to Doc Alden," Hattie told him.

"I'm not sure who's leading whom at the moment, ma'am, but yes, I'm Jericho."

I held out a hand to Edgar. "A pleasure to meet you. Maybe we can get some time today and you can let me know how we can work with you around here?"

I watched as his shoulders relaxed and a smile curled his lips. He shook my hand and said, "I'd like that, Mr. Jericho, thank you. There's a box of radios charging

in the armory. Since cell service doesn't work up here, we use those and you can just give me a shout out when you're ready."

"It's just Jericho, Edgar, and thanks for charging up the radios. I'll get a couple of my people together and we'll have a sit down and figure out how best we can make your job easier."

Edgar nodded and turned to leave, then leaned back to peer around the corner of the wall at Hattie. "Wife, make sure you feed him well. He's too skinny."

Hattie snapped a dish towel at him to shoo him away and his laughter echoed down the hall. "That man," she grumbled.

"You two look happy together. That can only be a good thing," I said and took a seat on a stool at the kitchen island.

"Coffee?" Hattie asked and I nodded.

"Please, black and a lot of it," I replied.

She filled an oversized mug and set it in front of me, then leaned an elbow on the counter. As I took a sip of the coffee, she started to speak. "Edgar and I have been married thirty-eight years. Four kids, all out in the world and doing well. We met Doc Alden when our youngest, Serena, needed a kidney transplant. He met with us, did some tests and re-grew her a new kidney. She's a doctor herself now, working in Switzerland with child amputees and helping them adjust to regrown limbs."

"Wow, that's impressive. So, that's how you ended up here?" I asked.

"Sort of. We had gone to visit Serena and her family and had dinner with the doctor. This was about five years ago or so. He told us about this place and how he needed someone he trusted to manage it and keep it going until it was needed. We had nothing really holding us down since we'd sold the house and bought an RV to do some travel. We came back to the states, drove the RV up here and parked it on a slab out in the trees, and settled in to our cottage. It was almost too quiet up here until about two months ago when Doc called and said we needed to

get ready for a group of folks to move in. That's when we started stocking up more and bringing in more staff."

I finished the coffee and started to get up, but she waved me back and brought the pot over to fill my cup. "Would you like something to eat? You slept almost a whole day, I bet you're starving. What would you like?"

"Whatever you feel like making. Doesn't have to be breakfast food. As long as it's not a smoothie and a granola bar, I'm happy," I said.

She gave me an odd look but went over to some pots she had on the stove and before I knew it, there was a mountain of food in front of me. Pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, sliced ham, baked beans, fluffy biscuits that dripped melted butter and a pitcher of warm maple syrup for the pancakes.

"Wow," I said as I stared at the plate, then up at Hattie. "Who else is going to eat this?"

She laughed and patted my arm. "Eat up. Edgar's right, you're too skinny."

I started to eat and the food was beyond good. It was incredible. I'd eaten about half of the food when Hattie came back to refill my cup. "You should let me know what all of you folks like to eat. I also need to know birthdays, so I can make a cake or a pie or whatever you prefer for your special day."

My fork stopped on its way to my mouth and I stared at her, then looked down at the plate. The mouthful I had already taken was suddenly impossible to swallow.

I set the fork down and sipped coffee until I got the lump of food to go down.

My throat was tight and my ears hummed, so it took a moment before I heard Hattie ask me if I was okay. Finally, I gave her a nod and spoke, my eyes still on my plate. "That's, um, that'd be really nice of you, ma'am."

"Son, are you okay?" Hattie asked again, voice so soft. She was about five feet tall with a crop of gray curls and warm dark eyes. A round figure with a flowered apron over her clothes, she exuded motherly concern.



“I’m sorry, ma’am. It just caught me by surprise is all. It’s been a very long time since any of us have celebrated a birthday, except for Peyton and Sarah. They didn’t do celebrations where we came from.”

“Well, when is your birthday?” Hattie asked.

“Halloween. October thirty-first,” I said.

“So, next week then. What’s your favorite cake or pie?”

It took me a moment to process. I was almost thirty-nine years old. “Um, I like strawberry cake with strawberry frosting, or blueberry pie.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Hattie said and pointed at my plate. “You’re not finished.”

“This is a lot more food than I’m used to, ma’am. I might need to give it a minute.”

“Well, if you can’t finish, I’ll just wrap it up for later. Can always make biscuit sandwiches out of the meat.”

“I like that idea, thank you,” I said as I slid the plate towards her. The coffee was gone too, so I went to rinse the cup and she plucked it from my hands.

“I appreciate that your Mama raised you well, but don’t do my job for me, son. Now, get out of my kitchen.” I laughed, as her tone was light and playful. “Well, since you were asking, if you ever feel like making lasagna...”

“Lasagna, huh? I’ll see what I can do. Tonight is chicken enchiladas, since Affie and Z got their request in first.”

I groaned and rubbed my stomach. “I’m gonna need to run more laps if I keep eating like this. Thank you, Miss Hattie.” I left the kitchen to the sound of her humming. It was time to explore. I found the library and almost stopped right there. So many books of all genres, classics and new releases. A stack of e-readers sat on one shelf with login info on a sticky note on each one. I’d come back and get one later. The theater room was empty, but the game room had Paulo and Z playing a video game. I left them to it and kept going. I found the

armory but didn't have the code to open it. Another thing to remember to get. Finally, I came to a set of double doors that were partly open and I pushed one to see inside. Cutter and Kane were seated at the table with Affie, Dahl, and Thor. "Hey guys," I said as I stepped inside. A large oval conference table with rolling black leather chairs surrounding it sat in the middle of the room. One wall had monitors and equipment, the other held polished wood file cabinets and shelves. There were no windows in this room as it was in the center of the house. A long buffet-style cabinet held a rack of charging radios and several laptops.

"Welcome to the SCIF," Kane said. A SCIF was a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility - basically a room that was soundproof and set up so all incoming and outgoing electronic traffic was filtered or blocked.

"Okay, now this is cool," I said and headed over to the radios. I picked up one along with a belt case and charger and brought them over to the table. "Edgar told me this was how everyone communicates up here, so I'm taking one. How's everyone doing? What are you all working on?"

"Loki is in the recovery room next to the clinic. He's doing a lot better, but Freya's been busy organizing the medical stuff the way she wants it and hasn't gone to pick out a cottage yet. Peyton's been helping her unpack and sort and all of that. That girl of yours is really something," Thor said.

Well, that answered my next question as to where Peyton had gone. "Yeah, she really is," I agreed.

Affie pointed to the laptop in front of her. "We've picked out our cottage and I'm using the satellite to get on the internet and pick out some stuff for it."

"How are you paying for it?" I asked. "We haven't had time to do accounts or identification or anything."

"There are three Michaelson Group accounts. One is for house supplies, food, repairs, tools, and so on. Another is for all of us to use to get clothes, personal

items, and whatever furnishings or decorations we want for our living spaces,” Affie said.

“The last one,” Cutter said, “Is for us to use if we have to travel.”

“Wow,” I said and leaned back to study them. They were all happy. Every single one of them. Cutter was still cautious, but he seemed more relaxed than I’d ever seen him. “Where’s Sarah?”

“Upstairs in her room. We moved some furniture around for her so she has a nice desk area to do her schoolwork on. If she needs to do research online for anything, one of us has to access it for her and everything she reviews is tracked. She’s not happy about the restrictions, but she understands,” Cutter answered. “I sat with her when Peyton explained about her father being dead and people still wanting to kill them. When Peyton left, Sassy asked me to sit with her and I did. She’ll be okay. That kid is tough.”

“Damn, I had planned on being there for that,” I said.

“It’s fine, Jericho. Sassy and I have an understanding, and it went as well as could be expected. Besides, you needed the sleep. I think I was the only one that didn’t crash for a whole day. Just most of one,” Cutter said with a wry grin.

I looked over at Dahl and he shrugged. “I’m finding a few things for my space.”

“Where did you end up?” I asked.

“Dahl and I didn’t want to stay in the main house here, and we want to be somewhat close to Loki and Freya when they get settled, so we picked a two bedroom cottage in the middle of the row and we’re housemates,” Thor said.

“So, who all is in the house here?” I asked.

“You, Peyton, and Sarah on the east side. Kane and I on the west side. Gideon took the apartment over the garage. Kit picked out a cottage for herself and is there right now. It’s the one across from where Edgar and Hattie live, so pretty close to the main house,” Cutter said.

“Now, the hard question. How is everyone, really?” I asked and tapped my temple. “I know for me it’s an adjustment. I feel like I’m dreaming, and I’m going to wake up and find it all gone. I had a hard time telling Miss Hattie what kind of cake I wanted for my birthday. It’s going to take some time for me to adjust to this place and lifestyle.”

“I had to stop myself from hoarding food to take back to my room,” Cutter said. “There was so much of it and it was delicious, and I kept feeling like it was a rare treat, so I should take some. Hattie must’ve picked up on something because as I got up to leave the table, she handed me a bag with four biscuit sandwiches and two cinnamon rolls.” He shook his head, then looked back at me. “It’s going to take me some time too.”

“I think it’s going to be a process for all of us,” Affie said. “But I’ll share this with you. I did outtake counseling for soldiers when they were headed back stateside after being in combat. I’m happy to talk with anyone who wants to learn coping mechanisms. Freya also did a rotation in psychiatric, so she could be helpful too. Just don’t think you can’t ask for help because we’re all going to need some.”

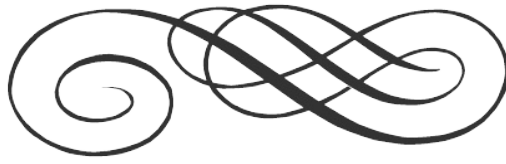
“Thanks, Affie,” I said. “That’s good to know.”

I picked up my radio and got to my feet. “Well, I’ll leave you all to it. Just call for me if you need something.”

Kane got up and went over to the laptops. He unplugged one from the docking station and slid it into a bag, then handed it to me. “Here, take this too.

Everything’s in there that you might need. We all get one.”

“Thanks,” I said and slid the strap over my shoulder. At least it was a backpack style bag and not some clunky briefcase thing. I tucked the radio gear into a side pocket and left the room. I needed to see Peyton.



It took a few wrong turns before I realized the medical area was down a level. Apparently the back of the house dropped down another level so the basement had a wall of windows and a stone patio beyond. The other side of the patio had the glass-walled structure that held the swimming pool. I made my way down the stairs and it opened into a family room type of setup with couches and a wet bar to one side. The three French doors opened out to another stone patio with chairs and a fire pit, this one filled with those glass beads. To my right was an open door that led into a room with several beds separated by curtains. To the left was a surgical suite and a clinic room. It was in there that I found Peyton and Freya. Each had a tablet and small boxes of items in front of them.

“Good morning, ladies,” I said and leaned against the door.

“Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five,” said Peyton and tapped the tablet.

“Good morning, Jericho.” She came over to me and reached up for a kiss. “I’m helping Freya inventory everything and put it where she’ll know to find it.”

“She’s been an incredible help, too,” Freya said.

I slid an arm around Peyton and gave Freya a careful look. “You still look tired, Freya. Don’t forget to take care of yourself too, or you won’t be able to take care of anyone else. How’s Loki doing?”

“I know. I did sleep quite a bit, but it’ll take me a few days to feel fully rested. Loki’s doing fine. He had two cracked ribs, which are giving him more trouble than the wound is, but he should be up and around in a few days,” Freya replied.

“That’s why I’m trying to help out,” Peyton said. “So she can rest more.

Speaking of which, why don’t you go pick out your cottage and I’ll get Jericho

to help me with this. We have the radios now, so I can call you if Loki needs you.”

Freya paused and I could see how much she wanted to go – and how much she wanted to stay. “Freya, go find your home before more folks arrive. I’ll help Peyton. You need to have a place to discharge Loki to, right?”

“Right. Okay, let me call Thor so he can tell me which one he picked. I know he hopes I’ll like one near the one they’re in,” Freya replied.

“Good idea. He was up in the SCIF a few minutes ago,” I told her.

“I’ll just head up there, then. Thanks, Jericho.”

We watched Freya leave and I pulled Peyton in for a much more involved kiss.

“Mm, I could get used to that,” Peyton murmured and I laughed.

“Yeah, me too. Okay, show me what you need me to do.”

The next couple of hours went by fast as we counted all of the things and put them away according to labels Freya had put on cabinets, drawers, and shelves. Peyton paused a couple of times to go check on Loki, but he spent the whole time sleeping.

“I think we’re done,” Peyton said as she took the tablets and set them into the charging bases. “How about some lunch?”

“It’ll be a light lunch for me. I ate way too much at breakfast.”

“Hattie is an amazing cook. I can’t wait to see what she’s got for us,” Peyton replied as she took my hand and we headed upstairs.

Once we got to the main level, we could smell something amazing that only got better as we approached the kitchen.

“Hattie, what smells so heavenly?” Peyton asked.

“Beef stew, a good rustic bread and butter,” Hattie replied as she dished up two more bowls.

Cutter sat at the table near the windows with Gideon and Kit, while Freya and Thor sat at the island. Everyone greeted us as we entered and found seats at the

table with the others. There wasn't a lot of talking at first, just a lot of eating.

After I'd finished my first bowl, I turned to Freya and Thor. "We finished your inventory and got everything put away, Freya. Did you find a cottage?"

"Yes, it's next door to Thor and Dahl's place and I'm so excited," Freya said.

Kit was pulling off bits of bread to eat and smiling as she listened to Freya. "The sites they've found for furnishings and decorations are a lot of fun. I've been enjoying setting up my own place."

"Oh, where's yours?" Freya asked her.

"Just one down from Hattie's. I took the little one bedroom place that's set back with a front garden," Kit said as she nearly bounced in her seat.

I gave Kit a warm smile and said, "It's so good to see you happy, Kit."

"I am, Jericho. I can't wait until we get some papers so I can start taking online college classes. For now, I'm just doing some free ones with a fake name. I also want to get a dog or a cat. Edgar said he'd take me to the rescue shelter next time he goes into town," Kit said.

"Hattie, has Edgar already eaten? I don't want to interrupt his lunch," I asked.

"He's eaten, yes. I think he said he was going to work on putting in more network ports in the SCIF," Hattie replied.

"Great, I'll go find him there," I said, then paused. "Everyone? Listen up a sec. I will have a group meeting with everyone in attendance sometime in the next day or so. In the meantime, rest up and enjoy fixing up your spaces. If you need anything, just ask." I bent to kiss Peyton and headed out to find Edgar.

# Chapter Eleven

I entered the SCIF and found Edgar with his head inside a cabinet, a box of tools next to him. “Edgar,” I said. “You wanted to talk?”

“Yep, just hand me those snips there, with the blue handle, and I’ll finish this up,” he replied.

I found the snips he requested and handed them over. Within seconds, he backed out of the cabinet and gave me a grin. “That should give us enough ports for everyone for conferences,” he said.

“Conferences?”

Edgar opened a cabinet and pulled out two bottles of water, offered me one, then gestured to a chair and sat himself down. I watched him take a few swallows of water while I settled in my seat and waited for him to answer.

“I doubt you’ve had a chance to call Dr. Thorpe yet, correct?” Edgar asked me.

“No, not yet. I plan to before the day is out. Probably after we speak,” I said.

Edgar reached behind him and pulled a spiral-bound book from the shelf, then slid it to me. “This is a guide to all of the systems on the property. I’ve already given a copy to Gideon, Loki, and Affie. They asked how things worked, what happened where, and so on. This answers a lot of that.”



I felt like I was being chided for having slept and gave him a look that probably spoke my thoughts. “I’m not getting on you for it, Jericho. Just letting you know who all has already seen it. Doc Alden said you were the leader, so you need this information. Also, this whole house has soundproof walls. He said a bunch of you have sensitive hearing, so all of the structures on the property are designed with that in mind. This room, in particular, is also a panic room. Behind the shelves over there is another room that I’ll show you in a minute.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” I said, and meant it.

“Each cottage has a panic room under it, and I’ve shown each resident how to find those spaces. Upstairs, there is a shallow closet at the top of the stairs. Behind that is another panic room – fireproof and bomb resistant.”

Only now did I start to fully comprehend what Thorpe had done. “You said something about conferences?” I asked.

“Yes. Since you and a handful of others you select will be on the board of advisors for The Michaelson Group, you will have a need for video conferencing for meetings. It is not wise for Dr. Thorpe to come here now that you’re all settling in. It would target everyone too easily.”

“Ah, I understand now.”

“Well, you understand some of it. There is a conference call between us here and Dr. Thorpe in about an hour. He’ll also have one of the European locations dialed in, too.”

“Wait, what? European locations? How many are there?”

Edgar looked uncomfortable. “I think you’d best wait for him to explain everything.”

“Edgar, please. I hate walking into situations unprepared. Just give me an outline.”

He clearly struggled for a moment and then sighed. “There are several other setups like this one, near where other Facilities had been operating. I’ve also

been told that in the next two to three days, we are to expect more people to show up here. It's why I've been pushing to get everyone up to speed since you folks arrived."

Everything started to make sense. "Got it. Okay, let me see this panic room here and then show me anything and everything you think I should be aware of as the leader of this group. Please."

Edgar's lips twitched and he got to his feet. "Of course. Now, if you pull this figurine on the shelf, the bookcase swings out." He put action to words and the room beyond lit up as the door opened. Bunk beds, lockers, and a shower/toilet area for what seemed like eight to ten people was there. The far wall held a mini kitchen and a large pantry.

"This is where sleeping, bathing, and cooking would happen, but the main conference room would still be used for a place to eat, work, socialize, and so forth."

"Impressive," I said and stepped out. "Seems like Thorpe knew this was going to implode a long while ago."

"Pretty much since he had to turn most of the control of his project over to the Board of Directors and government officials. They weaponized his miracle and threatened him repeatedly over it. This is his response."

A squawk from the radio had us both paused to listen. "Hey guys, it's Freya. Need you to come down to the clinic to get the trackers removed. Loki, Kit, and I are done. Let's do Jericho and Cutter next, then Kane, Z, Gideon, Affie, and Paulo over the next hour. Only takes about ten minutes total to do it, so let's get moving."

I tugged the radio from my belt. "Jericho here. I'll be there shortly. Thanks, Freya."

Edgar nodded to me. "That's important to handle, so go do that. I'll go help Hattie for a few. Come find me when you're done."

“Will do. Thanks, Edgar,” I said and headed down to the clinic. It only took a scan with a hand-held device to locate the chip, a small cut and it was out. A butterfly, some ointment, and a bandage to cover it and it was good. Gideon planned on taking the removed devices and crushing them in a vice then melting them with lead in the mini forge out in the shop.

I went back up to find Edgar and got a cup of coffee to take into the conference room with me. I wanted to go over this book before I talked to Thorpe. It seemed disrespectful to him somehow to not be educated about all that he’d arranged for us. Edgar came in and we got set up for the conference. I watched as six screens on the wall lit up with shadowed figures so that none of us could identify each other. Each screen had a letter beneath it so you could say “A” or “C” and at least identify which person you were speaking to. Dr. Thorpe was the only one that was fully visible and had his name on the screen. The book had explained that since the doctor worked with each of us, we knew him and so anonymity for him was pointless.

“Glad you could make it, everyone,” Dr. Thorpe began. Greetings were subdued and polite from everyone. I remained silent while Edgar did our greeting. For the next hour, I gained insight into something from our nightmares. We here at this location had all assumed our Facility was the only one, because Dr. Thorpe was at our location so often. He lived nearby, so of course he was there more.

However, there were eight other Facilities around the world and the global impact of what was going on finally started to make sense.

Two of those Facilities had been bombed out of existence with no survivors. The other six were like ours – destroyed but with some survivors who managed to escape to the retreats Thorpe had arranged. The understanding that there would be stragglers who would make their way to the locations over the next few weeks put us all in a sober mood. I soon realized just how deep and wide this whole thing went, and how unprepared for all of this I felt. When the conference

was over, I excused myself and found my way outside. The weather was warm so I pulled off my shoes and socks and left them on the steps. I needed to feel my bare feet on the ground.

With no real direction, I ended up out beyond the pool structures and in the forest. I found a boulder in a patch of mottled sunlight and sat down. Feet flat on the ground, hands curled palm up on my thighs, I closed my eyes and counted my breaths. I felt the sun, warm and comforting. I felt the chill of the stone beneath me. My toes curled into the pine needles and the scent released into the air for me to draw deep into my lungs. I heard the squirrels and birds as they moved about me. For a span of time, I became part of the landscape and let the healing power of nature soak into my spirit, into my bones. I remembered my grandfather, Mom's father, teaching me when I was small. He died when I was thirteen and there were times I still missed his wise counsel. One of the main ideas that he'd done his best to pass down to me was that we were all a part of a greater whole. I'd always assumed he only spoke of how life in the forest worked between the trees, plants, and animals that lived within it. Now, I had a much clearer understanding. One man, in an attempt to help others like his son, had created something that saved lives and kept families together, just look at Hattie and Edgar's daughter. It also had become a weapon, just look at myself and the others who had been in the Facilities.

Now that the Facilities were no more, we were a volatile unknown that our governments did not want to worry about. Thorpe had seen the writing on the wall early enough to make sure we would have a place to retreat to. I admired the man's intellect more every day. It seemed to me that we needed to look at this whole situation as an ongoing mission. A process had to be put in place to keep us all secure and give us some semblance of control over our own lives. I stretched, stood, then started a slow walk back to the house. Everyone expected me to step up and be the leader here, but I wasn't going to do it all on my own. I

knew some things, others knew different things, and we'd need all of our input to make this work. It was time to get everyone together and let them know what we were dealing with and get some feedback on how best to proceed.



Once back inside, I put out the call for everyone to come to the conference room. I asked Peyton if she wanted Sarah in on the discussion, and she said she'd rather wait until we came up with a plan. So, Hattie got Sarah to help her with some baking and the rest of us found our places around the table and shut the door.

"Thanks, everyone, for being here. I got some information earlier that I need to share with all of you. Dr. Thorpe and the five other refugee bases around the world joined with us in a video conference."

"Wait," Z said. "Five other bases?"

"Yeah, that's what I said. Except, there were eight Facilities total. Two were decimated with no survivors," I replied.

Murmured concern rippled through the room and I held up a hand. "From what I understand, we're relatively safe here. As long as we don't go making phone calls or getting on this social media stuff, we'll be fine. Also, all of the deliveries that come into the house will be dropped in a storage locker down the mountain and a team will be sent to pick them up to bring back here. The less people that know about us up here, the better."

"I've been working on getting us papers and new identities," Cutter said. "I'll need you all to give me the names you want to go by." Before anyone could speak up, he raised his hand. "Just remember, you cannot go back to your dead name. You can use some of it, if you want. For example, my dead name was

Cole Powers. My new name is going to be Cole Martin – using my real first name and my current last name. Cutter will just be my call sign or nickname or whatever. Got it?”

Everyone nodded as he leaned back in the chair, making it creak. “Get me what you want for a name by end of day tomorrow, please. I’m doing the kits one at a time, but it helps to know what I’ve got to work with.”

“Thanks, Cutter,” I said. “Anyone else?”

Freya raised her hand and I nodded for her to speak. “I’ve got the clinic set up and everyone’s had their chips removed. Dr. Thorpe managed to get copies of everyone’s medical files, including some for folks who aren’t here yet, or that we know are deceased. Peyton’s been great at helping me with everything, but I’d like you all to drop in at some point and let me know if you have anything you’re concerned about or that’s bothering you. Physically or mentally. This isn’t the Facility, so having pain or a worry is okay. Just come talk to me before it turns into a major problem, please.”

“All of the chips were crushed into powdery bits and mixed with melted lead, then buried down the road a ways,” Gideon said. A few folks chuckled and he gave a wry grin. “Hey, I didn’t want any possible chance of anything picking up stuff from those. I may not know their science, but I know how to make it dead.”

Loki leaned forward to see Gideon. “I’m still dealing with the healing ribs, but I’d like to see the equipment we’ve got to work with now that I’m more mobile.”

“Sure, been hoping you’d want to join me in the motor pool. We’ve got quite the selection and it’s more than I can manage or maintain on my own,” Gideon said.

“After our meeting then,” Loki replied and leaned back.

“We’ll need to set up a patrol schedule. While Edgar has shown me how detailed the security is for this place, nothing beats enhanced human resources with a desire to keep their home secure,” I said. “I’ll need everyone except Peyton,

Freya, and until he's cleared medically, Loki, to sign up. Freya, we don't need to risk you getting hurt when you're our medic."

Peyton sighed. "I know, I'm not trained and I don't have super powers like the rest of you. I'd end up tripping over something and setting off all the alarms."

I saw the twitch of her lips and chuckled. "That's probably true, love. It's better you're here to back up Freya if she needs it, and to keep Sarah out of mischief."

"I'll take the first shift. I need to get out of the house and run," Kane said. "In fact, if you want, I'll handle the whole patrol schedule job. Not much around here that needs blowing up, so I'm looking to expand my repertoire."

"Done. If you see anything else you feel good about doing, just speak up," I said.

Kit chewed her lower lip and I quirked a brow at her. "Kit?"

"I'm glad to help with patrols and I'm more than willing to help with anything else that's needed, but I am eager to get my college courses going online and focus on that," Kit said.

Cutter spoke up then. "I've got your paperwork almost done, Kit. Just need the name you want to use."

"Kate Alden," Kit said. "I don't want any ties to my dead name. I hated that name and the family I came from. Dr. Thorpe saved our lives with this place, so I'll use Alden in honor of him and our new family here."

"Got it. I'll have yours done tonight and you can register for classes in the morning," Cutter replied.

Paulo nudged Affie and she blushed, then looked around the table. "Um, I don't mind doing patrols now, but, um..."

"What she's trying to say is she's pregnant," Paulo said.

Freya sat up straight and looked at Affie. "Are you sure?"

Everyone else offered congratulations or smiles. Affie nodded to Freya. "Yeah, there were issues with my birth control back at the Facility, so they removed it and I've been without for about two months. No reason to worry about it, or so

we thought. I'm older, I've been irregular, you know. And then yesterday, while we were working on the cottage, the guys were commenting on how my scent was different. I sat down and thought about the changes in my body I've been ignoring, then used one of those home tests to find out."

"Well, let's get you into the clinic after this meeting and make sure everything is well and get a blood test done," Freya said.

"I don't..." Affie started to say and Z just gave her a look.

"She'll be there after the meeting," Z said.

My mind was reeling. A baby. I hadn't even considered that was going to be a possibility now. My gaze went to Peyton and when I saw she was staring at me, my mouth went dry as dust. I took a swallow of my bottle of water and turned back to the meeting. "Okay, so Affie, you're not on patrol. We've got enough folks capable of doing it without putting you out there."

Paulo spoke up again. "I'm not really in the best head space to do patrols.

However, I saw a pair of greenhouses and some outdoor gardening beds that looked like they would be good for growing fresh produce. I'm really good with that and would like to take that on as my job."

"And that's something I can help with parts of it and not risk anything," Affie added.

I turned to Edgar. "Can you work with them on what's in the greenhouses and what you've got to get them going on that?"

Edgar nodded and turned to Paulo. "Sure thing. We've got some fruit trees already going in the big house that stay there and produce all year round. I'll show you where everything is stored and you can do your thing."

"I'd like to manage the armory," Z said. "I'm good with smithing and repairing weapons or gear, so it suits my skill set."

"Then that's your job," I said, grateful I didn't have to do it.



“Hey, before we go, if everyone knows the names they want, I can just write them down now? When you come down, we’ll take the passport photo and use it for the driver’s licenses too,” Gideon said.

He looked to his left at Kane, then nudged him with his elbow. “You first.”

“I’m gonna stick with Kane, K-A-N-E and use my old middle name as a last name. Phillips. It was my Mom’s father’s name and Grandpa was pretty cool,” Kane said.

Cutter wrote that down and then just wrote down each name as they went around the circle. Freya Marie Sullivan, Logan “Loki” Sullivan, Gideon Williams, Zebediah “Z” Stone, Afira Stone, and Peter Stone.

“And I’ll be using Alexander Eagleson, but like Cutter, you can still call me Jericho,” I said. Alexander, my middle name, named for my mother’s brother who died when she was young, and Eagleson, son of the Eagle for Singing Eagle, my mother’s father. It felt like a good, strong name for a new start.

“Since Sarah and I need new papers, too, I’ll talk to her and see what she wants before we give you ours,” Peyton told Cutter.

“Not a problem,” Cutter replied. “Okay, anything else Alex?” he asked, looking at me.

It took me a moment, but then I grinned. “Nope, we’re done. Dismissed. Anyone thinks of anything we need doing that isn’t being done, let me know. Come to me with ideas, issues, solutions, whatever. Thorpe may have put me in charge, but we’re a family and we all work together. I’m not your boss, I’m just the intermediary between all of us and the board. Got it?”

“Sounds good.”

“You got it.”

“Roger that.”

I heard several variations of those statements as people got up and started for the door. Edgar waited until everyone had left, then he turned to me. “Now I see

why Doc put you in charge. You're a natural. Well done, son. I'm proud to be a part of this."

I couldn't tell you why, but his words felt great to hear. "Thanks, Edgar. I really appreciate you saying that. Feel free to tell me I'm being a moron if you need to."

He laughed and patted my shoulder on his way out the door. "Don't worry, I'm good at that too," he said as he headed down the hall.

I gathered up my notes and took a moment to clean up a couple of scraps of paper and water bottles. I heard a soft shuffle behind me and turned to find Peyton in the doorway, arms wound around herself and a worried look on her face. "What's wrong, love? C'mere," I said and reached out a hand to her. She moved into my arms and wrapped hers around me. Her shaky breath warmed my chest through my shirt, so I stroked her hair and just held her for a moment.

"So much has changed, so fast," Peyton whispered. "It all kind of just hit me and I needed to know you still wanted me here."

I slid my fingers under her chin and tipped her head up so I could look into her eyes. "Peyton, I love you. I'm trying to get things settled around here so we can have a life together. I saw your face when you heard about Affie's pregnancy. I'd love to have a baby with you, don't even question that. But are you ready for that?"

The light in her eyes answered me before her words did. "I was trying to figure out how to ask you if you wanted to spend your life with me. Me and Sarah. I want us to be a family. When she and I spoke earlier, she said we should have the same last name, because we were family. When I asked her who she meant, she said herself, and you and me. That you and I belonged together and she and I did, so you'd just have to adjust."

I laughed and kissed her, then cupped her face and kissed her again. “So, do you like the name Eagleson? Or should we pick something else?”

“I like it. Is there meaning behind it?” Peyton asked.

“Yeah, my grandfather was Soaring Eagle of the Mohegan tribe. He raised me more than my bio dad did, so I wanted to honor him,” I told her.

“Then Peyton and Samantha Eagleson, it is,” Peyton said.

“Samantha? She’s dropping Sarah?”

“Yes, she wants to honor her mom. She’ll still answer to Sassy if we slip up, but Sam is her name now.”

“I’ll let Cut...er...Cole know,” I said and laughed. “I have a feeling it’s going to take a couple of days to get the names sorted out. It’s good, though. New lives, new start, not being stuck with names that were given to us without any input from us.” My smile faded and I huffed a breath. “Like naming your damned pets. That’s all we were.”

“Like you said, love. Fresh start. Come on, Alexander. Shall we go see what Hattie and Sam have been putting together in the kitchen?” And just like that, she’d pulled me right back out of the dark place I had slid into.

“You got it, love,” I said and we went to see what our daughter was up to.

# Chapter Twelve

Sam and Hattie were in the process of cleaning up the kitchen and the scent of something delicious baking filled the air.

“So what did you end up making?” Peyton asked as I took a seat at the island. She grabbed a couple of mugs and filled them with coffee for us before she joined me.

“We made bread and cookies,” Sam replied and glanced at Hattie before she took a plate of still-warm chocolate chip cookies from under a cover and slid them over to us.

I took one and took a bite of the warm, crispy edges and gooey center. “Bread?” I mumbled around a mouthful.

“It’s in the oven. You can have a warm slice if you’re still around when it comes out,” Hattie said.

“So, Samantha,” I said after swallowing the last bit of cookie. She snapped her gaze to mine and I smiled. “Samantha Eagleson. I think it sounds pretty cool, don’t you?”

She put down her cookie, carefully dusted off her hands, then bolted around the side of the island and tackle-hugged me. “You’re cool with it? Really? We can be a family?”

I hugged her back. “Sure thing, kiddo. Just remember, I’ve never been a parent before. There’s a learning curve to this, so we’ll have to be patient with each other, okay?”

“You’ve been a team leader and protected your family for five years or more, Alex,” Peyton said. “You’ll do fine as a parent.”

“Alex? That’s your name now?” Sam asked.

“Alexander Eagleson. I’ll still answer to Jericho, as a call sign or nickname, but my old middle name was Alexander and it was my uncle’s name. I like it and decided to keep that part.”

“What was your old name?” Sam asked.

I shook my head. “Doesn’t matter now. He’s dead. I’m Alexander Eagleson and my family includes Peyton Eagleson and Samantha Eagleson. Cole...Cutter’s new name...will have our packets for us in a couple of days.”

I watched Sarah...Sam’s face shift to sadness for a moment and I pulled her into a hug. “It’s okay to remember, and to grieve for what was. Just be sure to also look forward into the future. You’ve got a bright one, and I’ll help you in any way I can to achieve that.” I felt her nod against my chest, then pull back and reach for a cookie.

“Peyton said that I’m done with my high school studies and can take the exams anytime now to graduate. I heard that Kit is going to college online and I’d like to talk to her about that, if that’s cool?”

Peyton nodded to Sam. “It’s fine with me. Her name is now Kate, and she’s got a cottage next to Hattie and Edgar’s. Just don’t register for anything until you sit down with us, okay?”

“Yes!” Sam did a fist-pump and turned to Hattie. “Could I take a couple of cookies over to her cottage with me?”

Hattie smiled at the girl and handed her a plastic baggie. “Here, put a few in this and go on with you. I’ll save you some bread. Thanks for your help, Samantha.”

Once Sam left, Peyton went to give Hattie a hug. “Thank you for being so good with her. She’s never known a grandmotherly affection as both of hers have been gone since she was tiny. I appreciate you being here for her, so much.”

Hattie blushed and patted Peyton’s back. “It’s fine, hon. She’s a sweet girl and I miss my own. I enjoy having her around as much as she likes being here. No thanks needed.”

“Hattie,” I asked, “Is there a Justice of the Peace in town? One that can be discreet?”

Hattie’s eyes went wide and her smile grew. “Well, there’s one closer than you might think. Edgar is certified. We did that years ago when we first came up here, to help Doc Alden get paperwork processed.”

“Fantastic,” I said and leaned over to kiss Peyton’s cheek. “Save me some warm bread, love. I’ll be back in about ten minutes.” Before either of them could say anything more, I headed out to go find Gideon and see if he’d been able to get what I’d requested.

I found Gideon in the shop set up behind the garage area. The door was open to let fresh air in and I tapped on the frame to get his attention.

“Ah, Jer...Alex. Here to pick up your special order?” Gideon teased, his blond hair pulled back with a bandanna and goggles pushed up.

“If it’s ready, yeah. I ordered the stuff you wanted in payment. It’ll be in the next shipment we pick up from the drop storage,” I replied.

“Sounds good. If the size is off, just have her bring it back to me and I’ll tweak it,” he said as he handed me a small cloth bag.

“Hopefully, it’s perfect. Thanks, man.”

“Good luck, brother,” he replied as I headed out the door.

I returned to find Peyton still in the kitchen with Hattie, so I stopped in the doorway. “Peyton, can you join me outside for a moment?”

Curiosity and suspicion danced across her face before she rose and set her coffee cup aside. “Sure, one moment.” She turned to Hattie and pointed to her cup.

“Please, just leave that there for a few, I’ll be back to refill it.”

“Not a problem, Peyton,” Hattie replied and gave me a wink.

We went out to the deck and down the steps, and I led her over to the start of the path into the woods before I dropped to one knee. “Peyton, would you do me the honor of becoming my partner in all things?”

“I thought we’d already agreed to this?” Peyton asked. “Of course I will.”

“Will you marry me?” I clarified.

Peyton didn’t say anything, she just cupped my face in her hands, then leaned over and kissed me.

I pulled back after a moment and put the small cloth bag into her hand. I didn’t trust myself to open it because my hands shook and I’d end up losing it in the leaf debris on the trail. One of the things that Cutter had taken from the trafficker mansion was a bag of mixed jewelry. One of the rings had been a gold band etched with suns and moons and set with a round emerald surrounded by diamonds. It was sized for a small man’s hand, so I’d asked Gideon if he could make it small enough to fit Peyton.

Peyton slid the ring out and gasped in surprise. “Oh, Alex, it’s beautiful,” she whispered, then held out the ring to me. “You put it on me.”

My hands were still shaking and I almost dropped it. I did manage to slide it halfway down her left hand ring finger before I pulled her close and kissed her.

“You’ve made me beyond happy. Thank you.”

She pushed it the rest of the way on and twined her fingers with mine. We walked down the trail a little ways.

“What do you want for a ceremony? We know Edgar can officiate, and you can order a dress or whatever other stuff you want, but we’ll have to do it here in order for Sam to be part of it,” I said.

“Sam, Hattie, and I can come up with something. You just talk to Edgar and find out if he can still do it all legally with us not showing up in person,” Peyton replied.

I started to answer her when a shrill alarm began to blare across the whole compound. We both turned and raced back to the house.

I went out towards the front and she went inside to check on Sam.

Didn't it figure? I finally propose to the woman of my dreams, and all hell breaks loose. I got out front and found Z, Cutter, and Kane already out there and armed. Kane tossed me an M4A1. I checked it for myself as we started to jog towards the gates. Kane had a device in hand that looked like a slightly larger smartphone and he seemed to be focused on what the readout showed.

“What's that?” I asked him as I got up beside him.

“Tracking location of the alarm sensor that was triggered. Looks like it was at the gate and a bit further down, but all in range of the gate,” Kane replied.

We all picked up speed and once the gate came into view, we slowed and split up. A battered pickup sat outside the gate, the engine off.

One person stood outside the gate, hands lifted up overhead to show they were unarmed. Cutter called Edgar on the radio and the alarm cut off, the silence enough to make my ears ring.

Kane glanced over at me. “You're up, boss.”

I nodded to him and approached, the rifle relaxed in my grip. As I approached, I realized the figure was a woman with very short hair. Behind her, three more figures stood in the back of the truck. “Hello there. Can I help you with something?” I called out.

“Doc Thorpe sent us. Are you Jericho?” she called back.

“I am,” I replied as I got within a couple of feet of her. “What's the word?”

“Fantasia,” she said and I gestured to Kane, hand over my head, to open the gate.



Only those Dr. Thorpe considered safe would have one of the two passwords. He told us we might be getting more, but I was still going to be cautious.

~Come check the truck for explosives, please.~ I sent to Kane as I stepped a pace closer still after the gate was opened.

“Leave the truck there for the moment. One of mine will check it out,” I said.

“Make it quick, if you can. One of mine is in the bed in back, injured,” she replied. “I’m Lana. Kevin, Dino, Sinjin, and Marissa are with me. Dino is in the bed. He took a couple when we were escaping and now he’s got a fever.”

“Understood,” I replied. “This is Kane, he’ll take a look.”

Kane gave her a nod and moved to look over the truck before he gave me a thumbs up.

“Alright, I’ll get in back and ride up with you. We’ve got a med suite and a doctor that can take a look at your man here. We’re also going to ask that you all get your trackers removed before you settle in. Freya can do it fast and relatively painlessly.”

“Not a problem. We brought a few supplies. Marissa is a nurse and has been doing her best with what we’ve got, but-”

Marissa interrupted Lana with, “But one of the bullets is too far in to get out without surgical tools and I think that’s the main problem.”

I got on the radio and transmitted the information to Freya while everyone loaded up. Kane stood by the gate as we drove through, then stayed to watch as the gate closed. Once that was secured, the rest followed up the road to the house. Freya and Peyton came out with a gurney to take care of Dino and I jumped out to help with the transfer. He didn’t look good to my untrained eye and Freya’s sense of urgency confirmed my so-called diagnosis. Once he was on the way to the clinic with Marissa in tow, I asked the other three to join me inside. We got them set up with some clothes, showers, and a meal while the

team downstairs worked on Dino. About three hours went by before Freya came upstairs to fill us in.

Hattie handed her a cup of coffee as Freya sank down onto a stool at the island. “He’s going to be fine. The bullet had been causing the infection. Once I got it out and cleaned out the wound, I stitched him up, got him blood and antibiotics...” Freya took a sip of coffee and sighed. “He’ll be out of it for a couple of days, but he’s going to be fine. Give me a few minutes to have this coffee and I’ll get the rest of your trackers out. Marissa’s already been taken care of. She’s showered and wearing scrubs and staying beside Dino for now.”

“Where are you folks coming from?” I asked as I sipped my own coffee.

“The facility outside of Ogden, Kansas. We’re it. The place was blown sky high, but we were out on a mission. We came back to a crater. A friend of Doc Thorpe’s had been keeping watch for any of us and gave us the information on how to get ahold of the doctor. He told us to come up here, so we did. He said you’d have room for us,” Lana said, and I could see that she was afraid to hope that it was true.

“There’s plenty of room. There are cottages out behind the house, spread out into the forest. They’re really nice. From what I understand, there is a one bedroom left and several two or three bedroom places. Edgar can show you what’s available and how to go about getting whatever you need. We have orders made online delivered to a storage unit down the mountain, then we go pick the stuff up. Keeps our presence up here less public,” I told her. I could see the tension ease in her shoulders and she looked at the others from her group. Kevin looked to be about thirty and reminded me of Cutter, while Sinjin was maybe twenty and the youngest one of us, the modified ones, I’d ever seen.

Lana pointed to Sinjin. “You and Kevin take a two bedroom cottage to share. I’ll take the one bedroom and we’ll need a two bedroom for Dino and Marissa.”

Everyone nodded and Edgar went to a cabinet and took out keys. “Come with me and I’ll show you what we’ve got and you can pick. Each one has a few things to get you through until you can order what you need.”

Lana paused near me as they all headed out and gave me a tight smile. “Thank you. Give me a day or so to get my people settled and I’m happy to step in wherever you need me.”

I patted her shoulder. “Go get settled. We’ll talk later and figure out what everyone’s specialties are and where they want to pitch in.”

Another nod and she stepped out of the room.

Freya let out a soft sigh. “Thanks. I just need a break before I cut anyone else. Dino’s doing okay, but it’s shaky. The infection spread fast and they came a long way. He’s been down for a few days. I didn’t want to lay it out for them like that in case they took it as an accusation.”

“I get it. Give it a couple of hours, then maybe take a kit and go house to house? I’ll want to make sure they have radios and such, too, so one of us can go with you.”

“Sounds good. I’m going to check on my patient and catch a nap,” Freya replied and headed downstairs.

# Chapter Thirteen

Several days went by. Dino had a rough go of it, but he was finally well enough to sit up and eat. Things seemed to be finding a pace of normalcy and the new crew fit in fairly well with the rest of us. My issue was with Sinjin. St. John was his pre-death first name and he had always gone by Sinjin. Once they were out of the Facility, he refused to answer to his team name. He was nineteen, with all of the attitude and yet none of the arrogance. I guess getting blown up knocked a lot of that out of a kid. No, my issues weren't with his work or anything – the issues involved Samantha. The minute Sam had laid eyes on him, the world stopped turning unless he was in her orbit. He seemed just as taken by her. Sam was only a couple of months away from eighteen and Sinjin was only a few away from nineteen, so it wasn't the age difference. It was the experience difference. He'd been to war and she'd grown up in a mansion. None of that seemed to matter to them. Peyton and I decided we had to sit down with them and have a talk. Yeah, I wasn't too convinced I could do this whole parenting about sex thing. The only thing I had going for me was that I'd once been a horny young soldier and I could relate to Sinjin. Peyton? She thinks she can relate to Sam enough to get through to them. The four of us settled in the library and locked the door for privacy.

Two wing chairs faced a matching leather sofa with a low table between. A tray of coffee and soft drinks had been left for us by Hattie, probably to make it seem less like a visit to the commander's office and more like a casual chat. No, it wasn't working for me either. Peyton and I each took a wing chair as the couple had settled on the sofa, Sam holding one of Sinjin's hands in hers. They made a picture, those two. Sam's auburn hair and hazel eyes and Sinjin's blond hair and bright green eyes.

To my surprise, Sinjin spoke first. "Sir, ma'am, if I may. I know you're worried about Sam and I being together. She's not eighteen yet and I'm...different. But I love her and I won't let anything harm her. I'm not doing more than kissing her and I won't until she's over eighteen and tells me she's ready."

Sam blushed crimson and kept her eyes on his face as he spoke. "I knew the moment I saw Samantha that she was the one for me. I know it's crazy, but it's true."

Sam took a breath and looked across the table at us. "I know you're only talking to us because you're worried about me. There's been a lot of changes and chaos, and most people would need time to adjust or process all of this. I've been a politician's kid my whole life and I've had to adjust to things most people never face. This was just another set of circumstances. I'm clear on what I want. I want you two to be my parents, and I want to be with Sinjin. I'm not ready to have sex yet, but I am ready to learn how to be his partner. Will you let us explore this and see where it goes?"

Peyton looked at me and I shrugged. "I'm new at this parent shit, Pey. You know this. But they sound pretty clear headed and focused to me. They're not doing stupid shit and they understand the situation we're in better than some of the adults." I turned to Sinjin. "Son, I'll tell you this once, and only once. You've been through things that Samantha won't understand, and she's had life experiences that you won't understand. But if you're both willing to work

together, then I'm willing to let you try. Just know that if you hurt my daughter, I'll be less than pleased with you."

I watched the young man's Adam's apple bounce as he gulped at my words. It took all of my self control to not snicker right then.

Peyton looked at them both and sighed. "You're both very young. Sam is my daughter and has been for a long time now. I'm here for you both to talk to or whatever, but please – be careful. Be patient. Don't rush into anything, okay?"

They both nodded and Peyton rose to reach for Sam. They stepped around the table to hug as I got up and shook the boy's hand. "We'll leave you two here to talk for a bit. Just remember, we don't need a flood of babies while we're still dealing with threats and danger. Affie's already expecting. Keep your pants on, for all our sakes, okay?"

"Yes, Alex," from Sam and "Yes, Sir," from Sinjin.

I slid an arm around Peyton and we left the library, leaving the double doors wide open behind us. Once we'd made it a few feet away, I started to laugh. "I never thought I'd be the protective Dad type. He actually flinched."

"Behave. They were both more mature than I expected, and I'm grateful they've already thought it through and we didn't have to explain why they needed to wait," Peyton said.

Just then, Edgar hurried down the hall to us. "Alexander, Dr. Thorpe is on the screen for you. It's urgent."

I started to follow, then glanced back at Peyton. She blew me a kiss and waved her hands at me to hurry along. I felt bad rushing away from her when we'd planned on a run together, but urgent was rare, so I focused on that. We got into the conference room and I saw the doctor on the screen.

"Ah, Jer...I mean, Alexander. Thank you for coming to talk with me. I've received intel that you need to know," Thorpe said, then looked past me to Edgar. "Did you find Kane too?"

Edgar nodded. “He’s on the way, Doc. He was on patrol and I got him on the radio. It’ll take him a few minutes, so why don’t you start and we’ll fill him in when he gets here?” “I was informed that Stephanie Milford is doing a news interview with Senator Paul Connell on the evening news. Milford is going to spin the destruction of the Facilities as being the fault of the patients. If they can paint you all as crazed lunatics escaped from the asylum with destruction and terror on your minds, they can get the government and the locals both behind hunting you all down like animals. We can’t let this happen.”

Milford was the spin artist for the Facility. She looked like an angel but had the heart of Goebbels. It was her idea to market us to foreign allies in the early days, so they would see how lethal and effective we were – and want their own creations. That’s how they got Facilities to go global. I remembered seeing her face when I first woke after one of my surgeries and thinking she was so beautiful. The darkness in the space where a soul belonged made her one of the ugliest creatures I’d ever met.

“How do you suggest we counter this?” I asked.

That’s when the doctor looked uncomfortable. “Doc?” I said. “You can say it. Please, no more secrets. I think we’ve shown our support for your ideas and you’ve shown your heart by setting up such an amazing place for us to be. Just say it.”

“Okay. I’ve kept something from you that I learned last week. I wanted to verify it first, and I got the verification this morning. I should have probably said something when I first learned of it, but I didn’t want to drop this on you without proof.” The doctor looked up at me and said, “Kane is your half brother. You share a father.”

Kane chose then to step into the conference room and he looked from me to the doctor. “Excuse me, what?”

“You and Jericho are half brothers. General George Carver is father to both of you.”

I gripped the back of the chair I was standing behind, then glanced over to Kane.

“My pre-death name was David Alexander Carver. What was yours?”

“Adam Phillip Carver,” Kane replied.

“Huh. We never even asked each other what our pre-death names were. It wasn’t worth thinking about when we’d never use them again.” I looked up at the screen. “It’s okay, Doc. I am glad you checked it out and now we know. But I’m not sure why that’s important?”

~At least we now know why we can do this and no one else can.~ Kane sent to me.

I nodded, but kept my eyes on the Doc. “It’s important because the person that both Milford and Senator Connell are calling on to hunt all of you down is General George Carver. If we reveal that two of those he’s supposed to kill are his own sons, it may derail their plan.”

“I don’t want the General finding out my new name, or where we are. I don’t want him in my personal life at all. Suffice it to say that his treatment of my mother was reprehensible,” I said.

Kane looked surprised but shrugged. “He thinks I’m dead. I enlisted as expected and died.” Then he paused and looked over at me. “You’re how old again?”

“I’m five years older than you, Kane,” I replied. “And the last time I saw the General, I was twelve. We moved after that and did our best to stay under the radar.”

“I think we can manage that well enough. He’ll know you’re both his sons and that you’re in an undisclosed location. If he wants to meet, I’ll have Gideon fly you in the chopper to a neutral meeting place. And he’ll want to meet. He’s already hinted that he’d rather have the Facility’s residents under his command than under the ground.”



“Understood, Doc. Okay, so you figure out how we’re going to crash this party and we’ll make sure we’re ready for it. Tonight, right?” I said.

“Yes, it’s the ten o’clock report, so you’ll need to be here, in front of the screens, by twenty-one thirty. Wear the button downs and jackets that I had Edgar pick up for you. Make sure you’re clean-shaven and look like you’re going to a job interview – because you are.” Doc was rambling, which told me just how worried about all of this he really was.

“As long as you’re not asking for ties, we’re good,” Kane said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

It worked.

Doc smiled and gave us a thumbs up. “See you in a few hours. Thank you, gentlemen.” Then the screen went black.

Edgar spoke then. “I have had the jackets steamed and the shirts pressed, as well as slacks that go with the outfits. All of it is up in your rooms. I’ll leave you two to talk.”

And then there were two. My brother and I. I looked at Kane with different eyes, amazed that I had a sibling.

“Are there any other kids in your family?” I finally asked.

“I have a sister. Charlotte. She’s about twenty-eight now. Probably married, but she went to law school. Did her undergrad at Yale and her graduate at Harvard,” Kane said.

“So, I have a half sister, too. Wow.” I turned and leaned my butt against the table between two chairs. “Did you know about us? My Mom and me?”

“No. I had no idea. Did you know about us?” Kane asked.

“Nope. So, he had a whole separate family while he was still with my Mom. That’s crazy. I mean, we thought he was gone a lot because he was active duty. Not because he had a second family somewhere.”

“Wait...” Kane said. “Did he have a marriage license with your Mom?”

“Not that I’ve ever seen. I mean, she took his name and wore a ring. I saw a wedding photo, so they had a wedding. Maybe I can get Cole to dig around and see if he finds one. And no, they never got divorced. That would mean money we didn’t have to fight him and she didn’t even want him to know where we were. He beat her so bad the last time, she was in the hospital for a week.”

“So, he married your Mom first, then had a big church wedding with my Mom... he’s a bigamist. And I’m a bastard,” Kane said.

I had to laugh at that and the laughter grew. He looked at me, all indignant for a moment, then started laughing himself. “Yeah, you’ve always been a bastard. Didn’t know it was true, huh? Did he ever call you that?” I asked.

“He did. A lot. What was his favorite slur for you?” Kane asked.

“Half breed. Which, I am. I’m half Native American,” I said.

“Well, it’s an honor and a pleasure to know you are my brother by blood as well as choice,” Kane said and held out his arm.

I gripped his forearm as he gripped mine and we both grinned. “Sonofabitch. Brothers. The team is going to think this is funny as hell, y’know,” I said.

“Cole is going to prank us. Gideon’s going to roll his eyes, and Kit is going to laugh her ass off,” Kane said.

“Well, let’s go tell them and my ladies, then get some food before we have to prep for tonight,” I replied.



As requested, Kane and I were dressed in suit jackets over button down shirts and dress slacks. Dress loafers for us both that shone with polish. Groomed to within an inch of our lives, we sat in two wing chairs, a curtain hung from the ceiling draped behind us. The table and office chairs had been pulled back so the

more neutral setting could be arranged. A small table sat between us with glasses of water. Nothing about the setting gave any indication of where we were.

Shortly after we sat down, Dr. Thorpe appeared on the top center screen. He told us that he'd contacted the news station and gave them the satellite connection information to reach us. He said he'd be sitting in to listen and yet not be seen on the news report.

About ten minutes before the newscast was about to start, the screen below Dr. Thorpe's came alive. A man wore a headset and mic and spoke to us. "I was told to connect to this feed. Are you the two men who Dr. Thorpe said needed to be in on this interview?"

"Yes, we are," I said.

"And your names?" he asked.

Kane and I had agreed to use our pre-death names, since the whole point was to show our connection to the General.

"Adam Carver," Kane said.

"David Carver," I replied.

The man's eyes went wide and he turned away to speak into his mic. A moment or two passed before he turned back to us. "Are you related to the General?" he finally managed to croak out.

"Yes, we're his sons," I said with a polite smile.

He looked into my eyes and shivered. "We'll be starting in five minutes. Please stay seated during the entire interview. Thank you."

He stepped out of the screen and we saw the stage set in front of us. We must've been on a stand-mounted monitor because it felt like we were standing right at the edge of the circular platform.

"You think he noticed our eyes?" I asked Kane as I tried not to laugh.

"About the time his own went wide and he made the connection. Should make tonight interesting," Kane said.

We looked like any other thirty-something professionals except we both had glowing turquoise blue cat-pupil eyes. Kind of hard to miss in the soft light of our current setting. Yes, that was done on purpose. Dr. Thorpe was a genius in more than just medicine. His ability, along with Edgar's input, to manipulate a setting to our advantage was brilliant. Even our dress shirts enhanced the color of our eyes. Kane's had a faint green hue and mine a blue tint. My jacket was navy while Kane's was a lighter shade of blue. It all served to make our eyes brighter than normal.

I took a sip of water and set the glass back down, then tugged my sleeves into place and folded my hands together over my stomach. Kane tapped a finger against the arm of the chair, but otherwise seemed calm.

*~At least we can talk like this and coordinate our responses.~* I sent to him.

*~Yeah, but if they don't start this circus soon, I'm going to go behind the curtain and do a few push ups. I really am not looking forward to seeing our father's face. Not after everything we now know.~*

*~I get it. I promised if I ever saw him again, I'd kill him for what he put my mother through. Guess I have to revise that promise.~*

*~I just keep telling myself it's for the greater good. If we want to have our lives here, and if you want to be able to marry Peyton and have a family, we have to take care of this sooner rather than later.~*

*~You're right, brother. We're in this together, for all of the rest of our family here. We can do this.~*

A voice came over the monitor's speakers and we looked up to see Ms. Milford, Senator Connell, Margaret Bryant, the interviewer, and General George Carver. All were seated in low-backed upholstered chairs in a semi-circle. A cocktail table held a flower arrangement and mugs of something, probably water. The voice then said "You can hear and see the interview from the beginning, but they

won't hear or see you until you're introduced. Please stay quiet so I can hear my cues," the voice said.

"Understood," I replied and once more fell silent. I took the time to look over the old man. He was an old man, and I wondered what life had been like for him since our deaths. His crew cut hair was white and his face heavily lined. He still looked fit, just a lot older than what I calculated to be his fifty-nine years.

*~He looks ancient.~*

*~I was thinking the same thing. He looks a lot older than fifty-nine.~*

*~I hope...well, no, that's not true. I kinda do hope...he has a heart attack when he sees us.~*

I had to swallow the snort of laughter Kane's statement brought up. I gave him a chiding look and rolled my eyes before looking back at the opening introductions of the evening's entertainment. We listened as they lied about us for a good ten minutes. How we, and the other inmates of the Facilities, had gone rabid and attacked and killed those who had saved our lives. How we stole military grade weapons and blew up the buildings, making sure there were no survivors. They showed images of lab coat wearing bodies, bloodied and maimed on the floors of their labs. Leaving those images seared in the viewer's minds, they went to commercial break.

*~I am somewhat glad we're remote. I'd hate to prove them right by choking the everlovin' shit out of Milford and Connell.~* Kane said.

I agreed and took a slow, cleansing breath. A voice came over the speakers again. "We'll introduce you after we play a clip from Dr. Thorpe."

I glanced up at the monitor where Thorpe still watched us and he held a finger to his lips and smiled knowingly.

*~Oh, hell. I think the shit's about to hit the fan, little brother.~*

*~I think you're correct, big brother.~*

Big brother. That was kinda cool. I liked that a lot. Then the clip started to play and we could see it in a corner of the monitor, while still being able to see the faces of those seated on the stage. In the clip, Dr. Thorpe was seated at a conference table with Connell, Milford, the late Vice President Wilson, Senator Hansen, and a few others we didn't recognize. Thorpe was arguing that we should all be released to our families and lives and paid a salary to continue to work for the Facility if we so desired. Wilson, Connell, and Hansen all ended up shouting down the good doctor and saying that we weren't fully human any longer, so we no longer qualified for the same rights as full humans. I had to uncurl my fingers from the arms of the chair before I broke it. Kane reached over and took my hand in his and we held on while we listened to Thorpe try to fight for us and get shot down every time.

Then the General spoke. "These men and women signed up to serve their countries. For the Americans, they gave their lives in service and knew that being a part of this perverted excuse for a miracle was against the military code." "No, General, that is not true," Milford stated. "The Department of Defense was our biggest financial backer in this and advised on which wounded warriors to accept into the program. This was condoned at the highest levels."

The interviewer, Margaret, spoke up then. "General, we have two of the Facility's warriors coming to us via satellite from an undisclosed location. I think you'll be interested in speaking with these two young men."

As she was speaking, the assistant said "When she finishes speaking, the screen will be two-way live. In three, two..."

"...young men." Her last two words echoed as Kane and I looked out of our monitor into our father's eyes. He didn't recognize us at first, then we watched his face turn gray and his hand shake as he lifted it to his mouth.

"My...boys?" General Carver rasped and then grabbed his left arm. A young man in dress greens came running onto the stage and the camera cut to a

commercial while we watched the soldier slip a pill into the General's mouth. Probably nitroglycerin for his heart. Water to drink, a damp cloth and then makeup came back and added a touch of powder. He assured everyone he'd be fine in a moment and sipped his water, pointedly not looking up at us on the monitor.

"Bad heart, Pops?" Kane said and the General snapped his gaze to the screen.

"You're both dead. We buried your bodies."

"Not quite. You buried parts of us. They regrew those bits and we kept the rest," I said, flippant as usual with the old man. No matter how many years it had been, and we're talking close to twenty-six years since I'd seen him in person, I still reverted to my smart-ass ways.

"Still a smart ass, eh, David?" he said, then looked at Kane. "Adam. My gods." Margaret looked from us to the General. "General, are you well enough to continue?"

"Yes, yes. I'll be fine," he said. He studied us and we could tell when he spotted our eyes and recoiled. He looked physically ill and for a moment, I felt bad for the old man.

"Tonight we have several distinguished guests, but I'd like to introduce two special guests. David and Adam Carver, sons of General George Carver. David and Adam are also two of the survivors of the Facility Massacres," Margaret said.

"Gentlemen, was the story we were told earlier an accurate one?" Margaret asked.

"No, Ma'am," I replied. "The Facility was attacked by a kill squad. I recognized one of the men as a man I'd served with years ago, who had left the military and joined a private military corporation."

"So, he'd become a mercenary, then," Margaret asked.

“They prefer to be called private contractors,” Kane replied. “But you’re not wrong, either.”

“They shot everyone they could find. Inmates, lab workers, maintenance staff, guards, it didn’t matter. A handful of us got out of there, all of us injured, and as we were driving away, a helicopter launched missiles at the buildings and blew them sky high.”

“They tried to hunt us down, but the General is correct in that we were well trained. We evaded capture and got to a safe place to take care of our wounded,” Kane added.

“Prove it,” Milford said, her pretty face looking rather smug.

“I think we have something to prove it with,” Margaret replied.

A moment later, shaky video – probably from a phone – showed the black-clad soldiers going down the corridor in one building, shooting every person they saw. A skip in the video and the person holding the camera was obviously riding in a vehicle that bumped and jostled over the ground as missiles were launched from an Apache helicopter into the buildings in the distance, obliterating them. Milford looked less smug and the Senator leaned over to whisper in her ear. Milford unclipped her mic, rose from her seat, and left the stage. A camera followed her as she went through a door, then the scene panned back to the Senator, the General, and Margaret.

“I’m sorry, Senator, what just happened?” Margaret asked.

“I fired that idiot. She’s been lying to me and I won’t have it,” the Senator replied.

General Carver made a rude noise. “You’re both liars. She was just a prettier mouthpiece. You and your cronies nearly got my sons killed a second time. It wouldn’t surprise me if Wilson and Hansen were killed because of your antics. I’ll be looking into the investigation into your actions and the actions of those behind these Facilities.”



Margaret maintained a calm demeanor, but her eyes glinted with surprise at the General's words. Before Connell could retort, she spoke up. "General, before we went on the air, didn't you say you agreed with Senator Connell's actions and supported them in the hunt for the escaped inmates. In fact, weren't you supposed to head the squad that hunted them down?"

"I was," the General replied. "But now I'm more interested in gathering up the scattered few that survived and protecting them. Soldiers need order and rules, I'll make sure they get what they need."

"Yeah, no thanks, Pops," Kane said. "We're done being soldiers. We would much prefer living a quiet life away from wars and missions."

"We're done," I said and kept my gaze locked on the General.

"I don't think either of you have the freedom to decide that," he replied.

"Actually, we do. We were forced to work within the Facilities rules and boundaries for years past what we'd agreed to. If anything, Senator Connell and the rest of you owe us reparation and back wages," I said. "In fact, I'll have our lawyer contact the Pentagon about just that very thing. A class action lawsuit should settle this all very nicely. Don't you agree, Margaret?"

"Yes, I do think that would settle things," Margaret said.

"But..." the General started to say and Margaret interrupted him and shut him down. "I'm afraid that's all we have for tonight, but for now, I'm Margaret Bryant, and this has been the Evening News."

"Cut!" was shouted across the set and Senator Connell got to his feet, finger wagged in Margaret's face. "I'll have your ass in jail for this! I'll..." the senator raged.

"You'll leave this studio and shut your mouth. You have no legal standing in this situation and I will remind you of the documents you signed before you came on the air tonight. Leave. Now," Margaret said as she got to her feet, one arm out to the side to show the Senator the way to the exit.

The Senator huffed indignantly and stormed off the stage, his mic ripped from his jacket as he moved away. That left the General and Margaret – and us. He shook Margaret's hand, then turned to us and spoke. "I would like to see you, boys. Where can we meet?"

"You can contact Dr. Thorpe and he'll arrange a neutral location. We'll meet, but there are no promises," I said.

"I understand," he replied and turned away. He took a few steps and then turned back to look at us as if he was still not completely convinced we were alive. A faint shake of his head and he left the room.

Margaret then turned to us and smiled. "I appreciate you being here, gentlemen. If you need anything or wish to counter any of the ridiculous claims being spread about you, please let the good doctor know and he'll contact me. We'll figure out a way to correct the narrative. I'm on your side." A polite nod of her head and she gracefully made her way off the stage.

Our monitor went dark and I sighed. "Jeezus, Doc, you sure know how to make a statement," I said.

"You both did well. I..." Doc started to talk to us and then paused, attention on something off to the side. "Well, isn't that a twist?"

"What's a twist?" Kane asked.

"It seems the Senator and Ms. Milford got into their car and just as it cleared the parking structure, it exploded."

I just blinked. "It...wait, what?"

"Seems someone was displeased with their appearance on the show. Or, the result of their appearance on the show. Both of them and the driver are deceased." Doc then looked up at us once more. "Don't worry, the General got on the road safely."

"I wasn't worried," I muttered.

“In any event, Margaret is helping with our PR and she’s wonderful. Her youngest son, Anson, is in the northeast compound, safe and secure. She has a vested interest in making sure things play the way we want,” Dr. Thorpe explained. “You two go relax. I’ll get back to you with the particulars of the meeting with the General in a few days.”

“Thank you, Doc. It’s appreciated. Stay safe yourself,” I said.

Doc nodded and signed off.

I looked over at Kane. “Let’s change and go for a run. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect. Then steaks on the fire pit and beer. Lots and lots of beer.”

“Gawds, we must be related,” I joked as we headed out.

# Chapter Fourteen

**I**t had been a little over three weeks since the TV interview, and Dr. Thorpe and the General were still working out the meeting details. Dino and Marissa were moved into their cottage, and he was getting around well enough to help with patrols and with maintenance projects. Most of the furniture, clothing, and other supplies that folks had ordered to get settled and comfortable had been picked up and distributed.

Today had Cole, Gideon, Logan, and Affie out to get supplies and a load from the storage unit. Affie already needed maternity clothes and she wanted some things for later on when it would be less safe for her to go out. Edgar, Hattie, Peyton, and Sam were also out on a trip to find Peyton's wedding gown. They'd had a few delivered to a bridal shop run by one of Hattie's friends, so Peyton could try them on. I wasn't allowed to go. Something about bad luck seeing the gown before the big day.

You'd think having both of my ladies out of the house would have me relaxing or doing something with the guys. Not quite. I could not find a way to relax, knowing they were out there and at risk. Kane and I couldn't go out in public after having our faces splashed across prime time news. We'd be recognized, someone would tell the wrong person, then we'd all be at risk. It was weird.

Before, at the Facility, we couldn't go out unless it was a mission, and while it chafed, it was just how things were. Now, when everyone else could go out and we could not, it was making me a little crazy. I had settled at my desk in the bedroom suite but left the door open. I didn't like closed doors much after the Facility.

Kane tapped on the door frame and came in. "You, get your swim trunks on. We're going to go play water volleyball."

"I'm busy," I said, feeling cantankerous enough to not want to socialize.

"No, you're not. Let's go or I'll drag you down to the pool as you are."

I sighed and went into the bathroom to change. I came out with my trunks on, a towel over my shoulder and sandals on my feet.

"That's more like it, let's go." We made our way through the house and down to the pool where everyone but Sinjin and Dino were in the water. Those two were probably on patrol, since we had a two-man team system set up.

"About time you got here," Z said and shot the ball at me.

I dropped my towel on a chaise and caught the ball, doing a volleyball serve with my fist back at him. "I was busy," I said as I pulled off my shirt and stepped out of my sandals. I dove into the deep end and swam towards the group at the shallow end of the pool and picked a spot. Kane was on the other team, and the game got started.

There was a lot of laughter and shouting, splashing and shit-talking as we ended up the best two out of three. When the game was over, some got out, some cleaned up the gear and a few just swam lazy laps in the water. It was pretty awesome to have this and know that even in the middle of winter, we could come out here and swim and burn off energy.

The truth was, I was bored. Sure, there were tasks to do and activities to enjoy. Jobs that needed to be handled – but a couple of months into this life and I missed the adrenaline rush. Yeah, I was going to marry Peyton, be a father to

Samantha, be a leader for all of the rest of the team, but what was I leading? A team of maintenance crew? No, we were soldiers. Now, sure, Kit...er, Kate, wanted to do schooling and Affie was going to be a mom, but what about the rest of us? Not all of us want to do gardening forever. My sat phone chirped and I pulled it from the clutter on the table.

“Hello?”

“Jericho, it’s Dr. Thorpe. The meeting has finally been arranged.”

“Great, when is it?” Here I am, thinking it’s going to be in a few days or something.

“In about three hours. I’d suggest you visit the armory and get some of that nanotech armor. Make sure you’re both protected and unarmed. They’ll check for weapons, not for body armor. The helicopter will pick you up in about an hour in the clearing behind the house.” The call disconnected.

“Kane, let’s go,” I called out. “Z, I need to get into the armory.” On the way into the house, I told Z what we needed and he said he’d drop the suits in our rooms. Kane and I hit the showers and within an hour, we were armored and dressed in another version of the slacks, jacket, and button down outfit. Except the shoes weren’t fancy loafers. I’d picked up pairs of ankle boots with thick soles. Soles thick enough to hide a short punch blade. I wasn’t going near the General without a backup weapon.

The helicopter ride took a little over an hour, then we got into a car and drove another half hour. I had no idea where we were, and I didn’t really care. It was some mountainside restaurant that had only two cars outside. Three, if you counted ours. The driver pulled up and we got out, then he moved to a spot further down the lot and pulled out a tablet. Kane and I made our way up the steps. A man in a suit with an ear bud opened the door and gestured for us to come in. The place smelled like Italian food and my stomach growled.

Kane elbowed me. “Told ya you should’ve grabbed a sandwich before we left.”

We made our way around the entry wall where we found the General and Dr. Thorpe seated at a table set for four. Placed around the room were what looked like bodyguards, with no way to tell if they were for the General, the Doc, or just here for the building's security. I was guessing they were Dr. Thorpe's protection. He was the billionaire after all.

Kane and I approached the table and were stopped by two men with scanner wands. They swept us but with the punch knives buried deep in our soles, they only registered as the metal tongues usually in hiking style shoes. Cleared, we were allowed to sit. A waiter came by and offered us wine, as the General's glass was already filled. Kane and I both declined. We liked wine, but this was work. You didn't drink on the job.

"Thank you for coming," the General said.

Dr. Thorpe just gave him a look. "You didn't give us much of a choice, General. At least you agreed to neutral territory and my security team."

"You were the only way I could get access to my sons. Choice was always yours, Doctor."

"Boys, can we stop the petty squabbling and get down to business?" Kane quipped and I had to swallow my laugh.

"General, I haven't been your son in your eyes for more than half my life. I suggest you shut down the attempts at familial affection and tell us the real reason you wanted us here," I said.

The General balled up his napkin from his lap and slapped it onto the table.

"Ungrateful little..."

I just held up my hand in a 'stop' motion and glared at him. "Enough. Why. Did you want. Us here." I bit off the words and kept my glowing blue gaze locked on his face. I was so done playing. A waiter came over with salads and breadsticks. Silence reigned on the real reason we were here until the waiter left with the orders.

“I want to offer you all a job. Missions and action, travel, all of it. All of those things you’ve been missing for the last few months,” the General said.

“Uh, nope,” Kane said.

“We’ve got a good life right now. We’re not interested in going backwards,” I said.

“I’ve got a place...” the General started and the Doc stepped in this time.

“They’ve got a place. Look, General. These men and women have given more than any other soldier in the history of war have ever given. They not only died, they came back and kept on fighting. Let them live the lives they desire, not what you would want for them,” Dr. Thorpe said.

The General leaned back and sipped at his wine. “Let me ask you this, boys. Do you miss the rush?”

I looked at Kane, then back at the General.

~I do miss the rush, but I’m not going back to a Facility lifestyle. Think we can do this on our terms?~

Kane gave me a faint smile. ~I think we can get him to agree to anything we want. Let me run with it a bit?~

I nodded and leaned back to sip at my water. “Let me ask you this, Pops,” Kane replied. “How badly do you want us on your payroll? Enough to do things the way we’re willing to do them?”

General Carver grunted, and Kane continued. “We’re willing to do missions – but we decide which missions we do and how we do them. We do not choose missions that go against our morals or ethics, or against our code of honor. We get paid for each mission, based on the risk factors involved, and any supplies, equipment or medical needs are paid for by you and yours, not the doctor and us.”

The General set down his wine glass. “I’m listening.”



“We get ourselves to and from mission launch locations so our residence location remains anonymous. Not everyone that lives there is going to want to dive back in. Some are starting families. It’s best we protect them by staying hidden,” Kane continued.

~Tell him that if a mission goes sideways, we have the experience to know when to pull out. We don’t get penalized for backing out of a bad situation.~ I sent to Kane.

“If you send us out on a mission and things go sideways, you trust our expertise to know if we have to pull out. You do not penalize us for backing out of a situation gone bad,” Kane said.

“Those are acceptable conditions. I would expect you to come to my site for training,” the General replied.

“No. We’re not going to your site. We’re not going to be under your control. We will work with you, not as your subjects. We are no longer military. This is a private security force and we have the same rights and privileges as any other security employee,” I said.

“Well, you’ll have those rights until the laws pass to qualify you as less than human. Then we’ll reconsider the agreement,” the General said.

At those words from the lips of the man I considered nothing more than my sperm donor, I got to my feet. “Doctor, it has been a pleasure to see you again. Please keep yourself safe. We’re leaving.”

Kane rose with me, glaring at the General. “You almost had it, but you had to get the last word in, as usual. Just keep thinking of us as your dead sons. It’s easier for all of us.”

We turned and started to leave the restaurant, as the General got to his feet. “I forbid you to leave until we’re done,” he yelled at us.

I put a hand on Kane’s arm to stop him and turned to look over my shoulder at the General. “See, that’s your problem. You have no power over us. You haven’t

for a long, long time. Go fuck yourself, Pops. I'm done."

Kane just flipped him a middle finger as we left the restaurant.

As we waited for our driver to pull around for us, one of the security team came down to talk to us. "Dr. Thorpe has asked that you wait at the airstrip for him. He'll be along shortly."

"Tell the doctor we'll give him an hour, and we'd love a to-go bag?" Kane said and I had to laugh.

"Yeah, that food did smell amazing," I said.

The security guy grinned. "Hang on, the to-go bag is already on its way out. You can eat at the airstrip while you wait."

"I love that man," Kane said, referring to the doctor as we got into the car.

Moments later, the bag with our food was delivered to the car and we headed out.

"Thanks for the rides," I said to the driver.

"No problem. Dr. Thorpe pays well and if not for him, I'd not be able to drive anything," the driver said.

"You served?" I asked.

"No, I was mangled in a car accident. Got hit by a drunk driver. Doc got me fixed back up so I could marry my girl. Our first is due next month. I'd do anything for that man."

"I get it," Kane said. "He saved us too. Twice."



We sat on a bench outside the hangar, the helicopter parked in front of us. The food was amazing and we didn't speak while we ate. I think Kane and I were both too wrapped up in our thoughts to really talk much. The last of the tiramisu

was licked from our spoons when Doc's car pulled up. He gestured for us to join him in the limo, so we tossed our garbage and headed inside.

"Thanks for the dinner. That was delicious," Kane said as we sat down.

"I'm sorry things went so poorly with the General, but then again, I'm not," Doc replied.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, I had a feeling that some of you would have a hard time settling down to a life of gardening and college classes. I had already started to put together what you'd need to take on missions. The Michaelson Group now has an offshoot. SH Enterprises."

"SH?" I asked.

Doc grinned. "Yeah, Super Hero Enterprises. Allow me my twist of whimsy, will you? You're all superheroes to me."

Kane snorted laughter and reached out to shake the doctor's hand. "You got it. So, how will this work?"

"Two members from each compound will be on the decision-making team and you can participate or not depending on your preference. There will be a call in two days for the first mission parameters to be discussed. Each region will get missions for their area, but some may require working with other regions."

"Works for me. Kane, you want in on the decision-making?" I asked him.

"Hell no. Get Logan or Cole. They're better at that," Kane said.

"I agree. Since I have a wedding to get ready for, I'll put those two up as the first round crew, if they're game."

"Ah, that's right. The wedding is this weekend, isn't it?" Dr. Thorpe asked.

"Yes, sir. Are you able to attend?" I asked him.

"I might be, but it'll be last minute. I'm just glad Edgar can officiate for you. Enjoy the celebration either way. It's time to find those moments in life that make your heart happy," Doc said.

I shook his hand again before we left. “Thank you, for everything, Dr. Thorpe. Stay safe.”

The helicopter ride home was another quiet one as Kane and I watched the lights pass below us. As we landed, I looked over at him. “Feels like home, doesn’t it?” Kane paused, then nodded. “Yeah, it does. Let’s go make sure everyone’s tucked in.”

I laughed and slung an arm around his neck. “I’m the only one tucking Peyton in.”

Kane laughed too and fake-punched at my side. “Not if I get there first.”

We play-fought and laughed the whole way back to the house. It felt good to have my brother at my side.

# Chapter Fifteen

I wrapped my arms around my bride and swayed with her on the dance floor beneath the trees painted in autumn hues. The tent covered a section of the front lawn, strung with lights and flowers. Peyton was breathtakingly gorgeous in my eyes, her strapless satin gown was elegant and simple. Samantha wore a beautiful russet-hued satin dress that swirled around her knees as she danced with Sinjin. Kane had stood up as my best man and Samantha was the maid of honor for Peyton.

Our honeymoon was an unexpected surprise wedding gift from Dr. Thorpe. He was flying us out on a helicopter to a private airport nearby and then to somewhere warm. We were told to pack jeans, summer clothes and one nice outfit. Peyton was excited and I was just glad to see her so happy. I didn't care where we went as long as it was together.

Cole and Affie had both agreed to keep watch over Sam and make sure she didn't get into mischief. She was a good kid, but you didn't leave a seventeen year old without supervision for a week in the same house her boyfriend lived in. Yes, I trusted them both, but I also remember being a teenager and trust wasn't enough. Hormones were powerful stuff. Anyway, Sam would be okay, everyone else stepped up to take on any other tasks and Peyton and I were going to spend

a week on a private island with a chef, maid service, and no one else around. I couldn't wait.

"You ready to toss that bouquet so we can get out of here, Mrs. Eagleson?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Peyton said and kissed me. We made our way to the table where the delicious cake had been decimated by the crowd to grab her bouquet.

"Everyone, get out on the dance floor. I don't care if you're male, female, married, single – just get out there so we have a crowd to catch the flowers," I said. Much laughter ensued as everyone, even Hattie, got out on the floor.

Peyton put her back to the group and on three, launched the flowers high into the air. A hand reached up and snatched them mid-flight and everyone applauded as Peter handed them to Affie.

"Hey, Edgar," Z called out. "Can you marry triads?"

"I can marry whatever you want," Edgar replied.

"Good to know," Z replied and moved towards Peter and Affie to group hug.

Peyton grabbed my hand and tugged. "Let's go. We need to change before we fly off."

I let her lead me upstairs and helped her get out of the dress. I left my tux on the bed and changed into jeans and a t-shirt while Peyton put on a striped t-shirt dress and sandals. She found her purse and we headed towards the door. Once we got outside, the shower of birdseed nearly blinded us. Laughter, good wishes and bawdy comments chased us toward the helicopter and we waved as we lifted up over the house.

The flight to the island took a couple of hours, so we slept on the plane. It had been a hectic weekend and we were both exhausted. I woke first, about an hour before we were to land. My gaze settled on the gold band on my hand. It looked good there. I'd take it off for missions and training, otherwise I would be wearing this. I never thought I'd have this, not after the IED.

The plane landed and we got on a boat for the run across to the island. Our luggage was loaded up and the crew was friendly as they took us on the last leg of the journey.

“Let’s see what they’ve got for food, and then go for a swim,” Peyton said. “I didn’t eat much at the reception and I’m starved now.”

“Sounds like a plan. Doc says the place has good security so we’ll be uninterrupted. Let’s get settled and changed, then find food and the pool.”

“Enrique is your chef. He is also my brother-in-law. He is making grilled swordfish and herb rice with vegetables for your dinner. I know this, because he said he’d make some for us to eat before we left the island,” a man who’d introduced himself as Jose told us. He was one of the three man crew for the boat.

“That sounds delicious. Thanks for letting us know, Jose,” Peyton replied.

“You will love Curador island. It is very beautiful and very private. Dr. Thorpe doesn’t let many enjoy his special place.”

“Curador, that means healer, doesn’t it?” I asked. My Spanish was passable, but not fantastic.

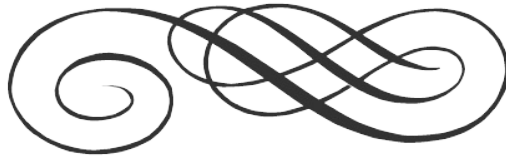
“Aye, the original owner was also a doctor, but he gave the island to Dr. Thorpe when the doctor saved his family,” Jose replied.

The boat pulled up to a dock and Jose got to work. Soon Peyton and I were on a golf cart with our luggage, Jose and Miguel, Jose’s son. The island was truly beautiful, the house a two-story sprawl with most of it one story high, just a section at one end that went to two. Walls of glass took in the views all around and the second floor turned out to be the whole master suite. A massive bath and bedroom suite filled the second floor in a space about the size of a normal person’s whole house. We unpacked and changed, then wandered until we found the kitchen and dining areas. Enrique had set a table for us out near the pool and was happy to serve us there so we could swim and relax after we ate.

“I think I could get used to this,” Peyton said a bit later as she sipped her wine, the meal already devoured.

I got to my feet, pulled off the t-shirt I had on over my swim shorts, and dove into the pool. It didn’t take long for Peyton to join me. It wasn’t too long after that, that both suits were floating in the pool.

“I think I could get used to this,” I told Peyton.



“Check the flight path again. That drone should have been over the island twenty minutes ago. Why are you still not getting information?” the General demanded of the soldier that sat at a console in front of him. “You promised me you could keep an eye on them without anyone knowing. This is unacceptable.”

He’d managed to learn that Thorpe had loaned out his island to David and his new bride. He wanted to see what was really going on there, because he doubted it was just honeymooning. He would do whatever it took to get those sons of his back under his control. Even if it meant something as radical as kidnapping his new daughter-in-law or threatening the lives his sons were building. Some of his people were out trying to find where the so-called compounds were located. No one had been able to find anything yet.

“I’m sorry, General. The drone went down in the ocean. It seems the island has a security system that shoots drones down before they can get within a hundred yards of the island,” the soldier said.

“Then get me a satellite that can see what’s on that island,” he shouted.

“That is not possible, General. None of our satellites pass over that section, by order of the Pentagon.”



The General leaned down and snarled in the soldier's ear. "Then get me someone else's satellites that can see what's going on. Your continued incompetence will get you...replaced. I suggest you fix that."

Leaving the room, the General stepped outside and took a deep breath. The repurposed bunkers did a good job of hiding what they were up to, but it annoyed him that he couldn't have found a more convenient location. High in the mountains on the US-Canada border was not an easy commute to DC. A soldier did what he had to do, to protect his country. Even if he was protecting it from its own. In his mind, those mutants were no longer human and should not be living. He thought the teams that he had sent to remove them would have been more efficient, but they failed. His sons? They were not his boys any longer. They were pets that shared some genetic similarities to the sons he once had. He thought he'd accomplished all of what Wilson had wanted, then Wilson tried to out him as a rogue. Wilson died, Hansen died, and now the rest of these mutants would die. Thorpe? He was too well-known and popular, too in demand, too much of a humanitarian, to be killed without repercussions. He'd live. His pets, however, would not. The General would see to that, one way or the other.

### **The End**

**Want more? Grab The Originals now! <https://books2read.com/Hybrids2-TheOriginals>**

Freedom comes in many forms, all of them illusions.

They'd finally escaped the Facility for a life together that promised security and something like peace. Sorta. Maybe.

The three soldiers didn't have to go to war any longer, but being hybrids meant there were those in the world that hunted them as if they were all animal - not

just some cells.

Now, Affie is pregnant, Zeb and Peter are going to do everything they can to protect her and make the kind of life for themselves they've dreamt of for years. No matter what the General and his secret army want.

# Sample of The Originals

## **C**hapter One

After sharing a narrow cot for nearly eight years, the luxury of a king-sized bed was one Affie truly enjoyed. Particularly now that she took up nearly twice the space she used to, thanks to the active occupants in her belly. Affie also missed being snuggled between Zeb and Peter. Now, she needed to sleep on the outside nearest the bathroom as the little ones woke her with an urgent need to pee several times in the night.

Done with her visit to the bathroom, Affie left the bedroom and made her way out to the living area. The cottage was perfect for the three – soon to be more – of them. The cottage boasted a good sized living room with a gas fireplace, a kitchen big enough for all three of them to cook in, and a dining room that would allow seating for eight if they ever needed that much. Off the kitchen was a short hallway that led to a bathroom and laundry room on one side, the master suite and another bedroom on the other side, and a door at the end that led out to a screen porch and small backyard. The front of the cottage had a nice, deep porch with a set of wicker furniture and a hanging swing.

Pouring herself a glass of juice, that's where Affie went, nightgown and all. The swing had become a way of quieting things when the kicking was too much to sleep through. Since the swing worked so well, they'd ordered a rocking chair. The chair had been delivered to the storage locker down the mountain, with delivery to the cottage scheduled in the next two days. The crib and a few more baby things were also in that shipment and Affie had a feeling they'd arrive in the nick of time.

Zeb woke when Affie got up and listened as she poured her drink and then the click of the door as she went out to the front porch. He got up and pulled on a t-shirt to go with his sleep pants, then went to check on her. He stood in the doorway and watched her in silence. The tousled curls of her afro against her dusky cheek as they moved with the breeze, the contemplative look on her face as she stared out to the commons area, the stroke of her hand over the huge swell of her belly – they all seemed too beautiful for words to the big man.

Affie turned and gave Zeb a smile. "Hello, love. Want to come join us? The sun's just started to rise above the trees."

"I was enjoying this view," Zeb said, "But I'd like to join you, yes." He settled on the swing beside her and tugged her into his chest. "The peanut giving you a rough time?"

Affie sighed as she settled into him and groaned. "Peanut feels more like watermelon, playing handball with a box of rocks. I think I'm carrying a soccer player." She glanced up at Zeb. "I hope the green eyes you and Peter have will win in the genetic pool over the lion gold of mine. But I am betting your dark curls or mine will win over his blonde hair."

Zeb started the swing moving again before he leaned in to whisper in Affie's ear. "I think Peter is making us breakfast. You up for eating?"

Affie nodded, her gaze on the treetops in the distance as the sun slowly rose. "I miss coffee. I appreciate you two having tea with me in the morning, but you can

drink coffee if you like. I know herbal tea doesn't have the wake-up factor."

"No, we'll stick with the tea until you can have coffee again," Peter said as he stepped out on the porch with a glass full of his special smoothie mix. "Here, you need to have this first." Pete's blonde hair stood up in messy spikes where he'd run his hands through it, but his green eyes were clear and bright.

Affie sighed dramatically and reached up for the glass, but she blew Peter a kiss as she took it from him. "Thank you for taking care of us."

"I noticed the acid from the pineapple wasn't sitting well with you, so I switched to mango. It should still be sweet enough to taste good and a lot less acidic," Peter said.

Affie took a sip and sighed. "Oh, this is the best one yet, Peter. Thank you."

Peter's smile was a gift and Affie held it close to her heart as he leaned over to kiss her forehead. "I'm making us biscuit, egg, and bacon sandwiches with bowls of fresh fruit. Tea will be ready soon."

He slipped back inside and Zeb turned to Affie. "I think he's finally feeling a little bit of the happiness."

"I hope so. We've almost lost him too many times. I want him to know his child and feel connected to life again."

"After all we've been through," Zeb said, "We're lucky that we're functioning at all. I never dreamed I'd have this kind of life, Afira, and I have you to thank for it. You're the glue that held us together."

"I can remember plenty of times, Zeb, when you were there to hold me up when I wanted to fall. This is a family because we each do for the others."

"Come eat. I've got a full day today if I want to get all of the transplanting done before our baby comes," Peter called out.

Zeb helped Affie get up off the swing and held the door as she waddled into the house to find a seat at the table.

“What kinds of plants are you working on today, Pete?” Affie asked as they sat down to eat.

“Tomatoes, mostly. Three different kinds of tomatoes, some zucchini, yellow squash, and lettuces. The fruit trees are going to be loaded this year, and I’ve been experimenting with some grafting techniques that might be successful.” Peter was usually quiet, but if you asked him about his plants or the baby, he could talk for hours.

“What are you working on today, Zeb?” Pete finally paused to ask.

“I’ve got two gun repairs and a couple of the vests need stitching. Shouldn’t take me more than a couple of hours today.” Zeb was in charge of the compound’s armory. He kept the weapons and gear in prime condition because they never knew when they’d need it.

As of last count, there were approximately twenty souls that called the compound home. Two of the government facilities that had held them as if they were prisoners had been destroyed a few months back.

The doctor that had helped create all of them by using animal and human stem cells to regrow their damaged body parts was Dr. Alden Thorpe. Thorpe had foreseen the problems and had built protected compounds for them to call home. He used his billions to not only create the compounds, but to also create corporations that allowed them to work without having to compromise their ethics and morals. One of those corporations was a private security firm called SH Enterprises.

Thorpe jokingly called them his super heroes – so he named it Super Heroes Enterprises. Alexander Eagleson, nicknamed Jericho, ran SH Enterprises with his half brother Kane and a few others. Zeb often helped them determine if a job would fit their special skill sets or not.

Of all of the hybrids, Zeb, Affie, and Pete were the oldest surviving members. They were the original test subjects, but the other members of their test group

had not survived. One committed suicide, one died from an unspecified disease, and the third had been killed while on a mission.

A few weeks ago, Jericho and his new bride, Peyton, had returned from an island honeymoon. Within a week of their return, a group of armed men tried to breach the wall of the compound and had resulted in two dead and six wounded – on the attacking side—before they retreated.

The local law enforcement agencies were not informed, but everyone recognized the uniforms of the same assault teams that had taken on the facilities across the globe. None of the compound's residents were injured.

Since then, Gideon, Zeb, and Logan had managed to get a shipment of military-grade drones and were in the process of outfitting them as a part of the regular patrol and protect team. The video and small missile capabilities would be useful if another group decided to show up on their doorstep.

The sound of a truck engine on the one-lane road that ended at their cottage had Zeb and Peter on their feet. Peter helped Affie get down the steps into the panic room under the house while Zeb opened the gun safe and pulled out an M4 rifle, then stood to the side of the door and watched.

Peter got back up the steps and stood near the entrance to the panic room, not locking it down yet.

“What do you see?” he asked Zeb.

“A big rental truck. I can't see who's driving it.”

The truck came to a stop near their porch and Gideon got out and waved. “It's just me, guys.”

“Stand down, it's Gideon,” Zeb said and everyone took a breath.

Peter went back down to help Affie up. “It's just Gideon with a rental truck.”

“Doesn't that idiot know he's supposed to call first?” Affie asked.

“You know Gideon. He probably got excited about driving a new truck and forgot,” Peter said.

Zeb went out on the porch, rifle in hand. “Next time, call first. You had us hustling Affie into the panic room and me pulling out the artillery. We’re all on edge, man. You know this.”

Gideon looked sheepish. “Sorry, Z. I wanted to surprise you guys. I went with Sinjin and got the delivery from down the mountain. We got the crib and stuff you’ve been waiting for.”

“Let me go put this away, and Pete and I will be out to help unload.”

Gideon opened up the back of the panel truck and started to pull boxes out to set on the porch. Zeb returned after putting the rifle away, with Peter behind him.

“All of this is ours?” Peter asked.

“Well, yeah. Some of it is stuff you guys ordered. Some is stuff other people added to the order for you to have as gifts. Everything left in the truck is for here. Sinjin and I got the rest sorted already.”

Boxes and bags were carried in, and Affie had most of it piled on the table so she could open things and then decide where it would go.

“I think they wanted to make sure we didn’t run out of diapers for the first year,” Affie said as she stacked the twentieth package of diapers on the floor.

“Well, it’s not like we can just run down to the corner store and get more if we run out,” Peter said as he brought another box in. “Being up here on the mountain is great for a lot of reasons. Conveniently close to shopping is not one of them.”

“Hey, I think there was a mistake,” Zeb said as he carried in the second box with ‘hardwood safety crib’ on the side. “They sent us two. And two basket beds, two car seats, two high chairs, two feeding chairs...did you hit buy twice or something?”

Affie bit her lower lip and looked at Peter and Zeb. “Um...no? It wasn’t a mistake.”



“I get that you’re worried about something breaking and us needing a replacement, but this is a little extreme, isn’t it?” Zeb said, tone gentle.

“It’s not for replacements,” Peter said, eyes going wide. “Sit down, no, um, lie down. Put your feet up. Do you need water?”

Affie sighed and rolled her eyes. “And this is why I haven’t said anything. I’m pregnant, not dying. And yes, there are two babies, not one. Also, I’m in perfect health and the only thing we need to watch for is that twins often come early.”

“How early is early? Because we’re five weeks out from your due date, unless that’s a lie too,” Zeb said.

Affie shook her head and went to lay a hand on Zeb’s arm. “Don’t be angry, love. We’ve all had more than enough to worry about, and I didn’t want you both freaking out for the last three months. The second baby wasn’t even spotted until the second to last ultrasound. It was hiding behind the first one. They’re fraternal twins.”

“Do you know what the sex is?” Peter asked. “I know, we were going to wait and be surprised, but now there are two. That’s surprise enough.”

“We can guess, but they’re making it hard to be sure, so I’d rather wait. I don’t want to get excited about what we’re having until they’re here. It’s enough to know that everyone is healthy and doing fine. Including me.”

Zeb let out a breath and leaned over to kiss Affie’s forehead. “I wish you’d felt comfortable enough to tell us. This is kind of a big deal.”

“I kept thinking I’d get you to come to the next ultrasound – you know, the one scheduled for tomorrow – and tell you then. But Gideon decided to be helpful and get the delivery early.”

Peter snorted laughter. “He’s probably wondering what the hell we’re doing in here. I’ll go make sure we’ve got it all.” He paused to kiss Affie’s cheek. “Look at you, making sure we each get one.”

Zeb laughed at that and Affie shook her head, chuckling.

Affie knew she'd taken a risk by not telling them it was twins when she found out, but they'd already been driving her crazy with their overprotective behavior and knowing it was twins, it'd get increased by an order of magnitude. But now, Zeb was hurt and questioning her –and things were difficult enough without adding that to the mix.

“I’m sorry, Zeb. You know how hard this has been for me. I’m used to being independent and being the one that takes care of you two. The fussing over me is sweet, but it’s also suffocating.”

“But not telling us there are two babies? That’s not right, Afira. If you’ve been keeping that a secret, what else are you not telling us?” Zeb turned away from her and went outside to help Peter with the last few things.

Affie shook her head and walked out into the back yard to sit on the bench under the trees. She couldn’t be in there right now. The stress of being pregnant so soon after getting here was one thing. Trying to adjust to a way of life that none of them ever expected to see again?

That was a whole different issue. She had experience with counseling soldiers, but not relationship counseling. And not when it was her own relationships. It was time to see if Freya could help. She heard the truck pull away and got herself up and went inside.

The guys were still sorting through things, moving the baby things into the nursery and putting pantry items away. Affie got some clean clothes and went in to take a shower. She’d just walk over to Freya’s place and tap on the door. A walk would do her good anyway.

Showered, dressed, she carried her slip-on sneakers out to the main room. “Peter, could you help me put these on, please? I am going to walk over to Freya’s for a visit.”

“Want me to come with you?” Peter asked as he set the box down, then took her shoes and knelt to help her get them on.

“No, I’ll be fine. It’s only a couple of cottages down the road. Thank you for helping with the shoes,” Affie said, voice soft. “And I’m sorry I kept the secret.” “I’m fine with it. I understand why. Zeb doesn’t, but I’ll talk with him. Be safe, take your radio, and let us know if you need help getting back.”

Affie leaned in to give Peter a soft kiss. “Thank you, my love. I’ll be careful.” She grabbed the radio from the base by the door and headed out.

Cell phones didn’t work up here on the mountain, so they used radios to contact each other. It didn’t allow for much privacy, so dropping by to chat was more common than it might be if they did have cell phones.

She was huffing softly by the time she got to the cottage where Freya and Logan lived. There were three steps up to their porch and it looked like Mt. Everest to her. “Freya, you home?” she called out. The screen door was closed but the inside door was open, so someone was there.

“Who’s call...oh, Affie, are you okay?” Freya opened the screen door, a dish towel in hand.

“I’m physically fine, other than feeling like I’m carrying all of the packs for a battalion on a run. I was wondering if you had some time to talk?”

“Sure, let’s go inside,” Freya said as she headed down the steps to help Affie make it up to the door. Once inside, she led her over to an upholstered chair and pulled the ottoman over. “Get your feet up and I’ll get you some water. I was just cleaning up after breakfast. Logan is already at the main house, working.”

“I had to get out of the house before I started yelling,” Affie said as she took the water and sipped. “I know it’s a mix of hormones and stress, but Zeb accused me of keeping more secrets just because I didn’t tell the guys it was twins.”

“I know why you didn’t want to tell them, but I warned you that it was a rather large secret to keep.”

“Yeah, I knew that. But it’s so bad now that if I take a long shower, they’re knocking on the door to see if I’m okay. If I go to the bathroom with a book and

get to a good part of the story – they’re knocking to see if I need help. I mean, I’ve been a soldier my whole adult life. I’m an independent woman. I can barely take the suffocating ‘help’ I get now.

Telling them it was twins? I’d have an audience for every shower – and not in a sexy, fun way either.”

“Did you explain to them why you kept it a secret?”

“I tried. Zeb just said, ‘What else are you lying about?’ and Peter said he’d try and talk to him. I just can’t with these guys right now. I’m having enough trouble figuring out my life without having to help them figure out theirs.”

“And why do you think you need to help them figure out their lives?” Freya asked, voice soft.

“Because they look to me for everything. I’m not just the babies’ mom, I feel like I’m Zeb and Pete’s mom sometimes, too. And it’s exhausting.”

“Do they ask you for that kind of support? Or do you just do it on your own?”

Affie opened her mouth, then stopped and pondered for a moment. “Y’know, I think I just did it. I saw a need and filled it. I mean, we’ve been a triad for eight years now. It was the fifth mission we did after we were deemed ‘fit’, when Peter broke the first time. We almost lost him then. It was over six months before he was allowed back with us, and Zeb and I just pulled him into our orbit. At first, it was just so they wouldn’t take him again. Zeb is our team leader and I was his second – and then we found comfort with each other. When Peter was released back into the compound, he was like a child who’d been tossed into the deep end of the swimming pool in everything except his military skills. We had to teach him how to shave, brush his teeth, everything. He slept in between Zeb and I, so we could protect him. They’d stripped him down to nothing but a fighting machine that barely remembered how to feed himself. For the longest time, we were like parents to Pete, even though he’s older than I am. It was about three years later that he became a more equal partner.”

“What prompted the change?”

“Zeb got hurt. Nearly died. I’d just had a surgery to try and fix my shoulder because they’d had some issues with the replacement. We were both in need of care and Peter stepped up. I mean, he really stepped up. He fed us until we could feed ourselves. He showed himself to be an equal partner from then on.”

“And you still didn’t feel like you could tell him about the twins?”

“He’s more protective than Zeb. He makes me special smoothies in the morning. He makes herbal teas since I’m not able to have caffeine. He researches supplements and vitamins to make sure my body is getting what it needs. He has to know where I am, all the time. It’s sweet – and it’s suffocating me.”

“And you didn’t tell Zeb, because...?”

“Because he’d physically restrain me if he could. Keep me inside the cottage or in the backyard, not walking around, not going to the greenhouse. He’s worried I’ll touch a plant that will poison the baby or breathe in something that will damage the fetus. He doesn’t want me going to the main house because I usually end up helping with something. I’m pregnant, not disabled. Jeeze.”

“What do you think would help your situation?” Freya asked. “Do you want your own place?”

“Oh, hell no. I love my men. I just need them to let me be me and not just the incubation tank for their spawn. And I need these babies to be born sooner rather than later. I miss running on the trails, doing patrols or going on missions. At least I can still swim. That helps, and it gives my back a chance to relax.”

“What are you going to do once they’re born? I know you said you plan on trying nursing and supplementing with formula if necessary. I also remember you saying that you wanted to hire Marissa to help care for them so you could get back to work at something besides gardening. Have you reconsidered that?”

“I don’t know. My emotions are all over the place lately, so I’m going to save any huge decisions until a couple of months after the babies are here. I need to

remember what it was like when my body belonged only to me before I go doing any drastic changes.”

“That is the wisest thing I’ve heard you say. I’m relieved,” Freya said.

“Would you like to do an ultrasound later today, and have the guys come to see it? We can probably see the sex by now if you all want to know.”

“And nothing looked odd in the amniotic test, right?”

“Everything looked fine. DNA soup is making those babies. We’ll know more once they’re out. Is there a chance they’ll be born hybrids? Yes. But from what I’ve seen in the tests we’ve done so far, they’re both perfectly healthy and developing well.”

“Let me ask them if they want to do this and I’ll get you on the radio? I should hit the bathroom and start my way back before I get a nap attack.”

“How about I drive you back in the cart and I can offer the option so we know and then you can nap before the appointment?”

“That sounds great. But I still need your bathroom first,” Affie said and held out a hand for Freya to help her up out of the chair.

Ten minutes later, they were pulled up outside the cottage where Zeb and Pete sat on the porch, mugs in hand.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Freya said as she got out to help Affie out of the cart. “Affie needs a nap first, but after that, would you like to come to the clinic and see an ultrasound of the babies?”

Zeb still looked a little grumpy, but at Freya’s words, his face lit up. “We could see them?”

“Yes, as they’re now big enough to not let one hide behind the other. That’s why we didn’t know there were two until a couple of months in,” Freya replied.

“I’d like to,” Pete said.

“Me, too,” Zeb said and came down the steps to help Affie climb them. “Are you okay with this? It doesn’t hurt you, does it?” he asked her.

“No, ultrasounds don’t hurt. I just need a nap and then we can go, okay?” Affie said.

“Sounds great. I’ll radio you when she’s up and ready?” Zeb said to Freya.

“I’ll be waiting. Take care, all of you,” Freya replied as she got back in the cart and turned it around to head back to her place.

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# About the Author

TK Eldridge retired from a career in Intelligence for the US Gov't to write. The experiences from then are now being used to feed the muse for romance, mysteries-thrillers, supernatural, paranormal, and urban fantasy stories. When they're not writing, they are enjoying life in the Blue Ridge mountains of western North Carolina. Two dogs, a garden, a craft hobby and a love of Celtic Traditional music keep them from spending too much time at the computer.

You can connect with them on:

Website: <https://tkeldridge.com>

BookBub: <https://www.bookbub.com/profile/t-k-eldridge>

Twitter: [https://twitter.com/eldridge\\_tk](https://twitter.com/eldridge_tk)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/EldridgeEnthusiasts>

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