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*Ménage Àmour*

Natalie Acres

Cowboy Boots

AND

*Unfinished Business*

*Unfinished Business*

# **COWBOY BOOTS AND UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

**Natalie Acres**

**MENAGE AMOUR**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.  
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## DEDICATION

To my Southwest Virginia readers who wrote countless times to thank me for using familiar landmarks in my novel, *Cowboy Boots and Untamed Hearts*. Your kind words provided an ongoing source of inspiration. Thank you for your letters and your support. I always enjoy hearing from you.

# **COWBOY BOOTS AND UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

**NATALIE ACRES**

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## **Prologue One**

Wilson Remington wasn't ready to leave, but his sons arrived early and they weren't there without a harrowing purpose.

Remington was a wanted man. His sons and their men surrounded the two dark SUVs as soon as they disembarked. They assumed combative positions.

Their eyes were alert, their jaws set. Those making their cautious approach were prepared to die, but they wouldn't enter the gates of heaven before they first sent a few of their enemies straight through the fires of hell.

Wilson took a deep breath and examined his sons. He'd enjoyed too few opportunities to revel in the pride he felt, and even today there wasn't enough time to convey everything he wanted to say.

He watched each of his boys, studied their faces, and recaptured yesteryear's memories. Remembering their births, their first steps, their youth, and their inevitable training with the Underground Unit, he clutched to those limited images because they were his last.

In the distance, he heard the crushing of leaves crunching under a soldier's boot. Birds scattered, chirping when they departed. No doubt someone waited close enough to see beads of perspiration form on his brow.

Wilson Remington didn't sweat. If the assassin looked close enough, he may have been disappointed.

Wilson realized a light gleamed on the back of his head. He knew the shooter and the person who handed down the orders to kill, and by God, he understood why.

His sons wouldn't grasp the logistics of this particular hit, at least not right away. Instead, they'd remain as they had in the past and prove themselves anything but tolerant while they searched for the hidden objectives behind the reasons. They wouldn't stop looking for his killer, and the shooter behind him was undoubtedly there with one job to do, one task at hand.

Everything was just as it seemed—perfect, timed, even calculated to a fault. Death arrived. It didn't knock on his door with a light peck. Oh no, death came for him the same way he once lived. His last second crept up without a sound and then waited and watched for the perfect opportunity to announce its arrival with a sudden bang.

Sloane, Dusty, Logan, Benson, and Drew realized what was at risk when they came there for him. They'd insisted on transferring him to a safe house by themselves.

What a fucking mistake.

Wilson should've told Sloane to handle his brothers. He possessed the experience and the leadership to pull off anything he might have requested. Hell, Sloane could've sent them all on separate missions. Then again, this was the final goodbye.

Now in the line of fire, he faced his regrets. Could there have been another way? Did he want his sons to watch him die?

He gulped rather than allow himself one final inner debate, filling his lungs with the last intake of fresh air. The scent of death filling his nostrils only burned him with profound recognition.

He was a dead man. He would die in front of his sons.

"Dad?" Dusty greeted him with concern in his voice.

"Back the fuck up, Dusty," Sloane ordered, stepping beside his younger brother and slapping his right arm across Dusty's chest.

Fear etched a patchwork quilt of splotched recognition across his sons' faces in a matter of seconds.

Sloane's eye twitched. Leaves scattered. The trees blew a last sudden wind.

*Yes, son! Yes! Get them out of here!*



Wilson stepped a few inches to the left. The shooter behind him earned a clear shot, and Sloane hurriedly surveyed the area around them, glancing to the right and narrowing his gaze. But it was too late.

The second hand of life struck death. Wilson Remington's time was up.

"Dad!" Sloane screeched.

Armageddon began.

There wasn't a blaze of glory, but the shots heard would forever be remembered by those who fired them in retaliation. In the middle of the Midwestern fields once known as the Remington and Weaver ranches, Wilson Remington lay dying as the familiar sounds of a private war broke out around him.

*Run, boys. Run.*

He was tired of the controversy and the continual conflict. He lived as a warrior, fighting the wars no one else wanted fought. He didn't want his boys to die like he lay there dying. No, no one deserved to die an unknown soldier's death. Maybe this was the final lesson he had left to teach. He wanted his sons to remember how he departed this world so they never found themselves in their own pools of blood.

Sloane rushed toward him. "Dad!"

Wilson met his demise lying in his oldest son's arms. He felt Sloane's strength, but it wasn't enough to save him. His body turned cold. He couldn't see his sons, but he heard the agony, the kind of vocal expressions released by the enemy behind them once they were surrounded, losing a battle they shouldn't have engaged.

Yes, Wilson Remington was proud, but pride didn't save him from dying.

## Prologue Two

### *Nine Months Later*

Sloane Remington sat in a limousine staring at the house where he once lived, a place where the Remington brothers were raised and later trained to join the Midwest division of the Underground Unit, an elite force of operatives called upon for dangerous missions.

Located right outside of Columbia, Missouri, the Remington property adjoined Tom Weaver's former ranch. Together, the Remingtons and Weavers owned over two thousand acres. To ensure their complete privacy, their homes backed up to Rock Bridge Memorial State Park where the hills and low sweeping tree branches served as a barrier hiding them from the rest of the world.

The picturesque ranches would always hold a special place in Sloane's heart. He first met Kelsie Weaver there. Later, they lived there, and they loved there.

Sloane's lips curved in a smile. Kelsie, Tom's daughter, gave him and his brothers a good run for her hand. Ultimately, they convinced Kelsie she couldn't live without them, but she paid a huge price for love. Freedom was expensive when a woman kept moving in order to stay safe.

For now, Kelsie lived in Italy, and most of the time, Sloane made sure at least two Remingtons stayed there with her. She needed them, and her care took five men to oversee. She wasn't exactly an easy woman to love when she was healthy. Now, Kelsie battled for her life, fighting a killer they couldn't see—cancer. Sloane took on the tedious task of overseeing most of her healthcare.

Even though Sloane and his brothers didn't like to leave Kelsie unattended, this sensitive mission made their departure unavoidable. Danger continued to move closer and closer. Sloane made a decision to lure his

enemies back home, to the place he knew like the back of his own hand. When he left for Missouri, he feared he'd given Kelsie his final kiss goodbye.

Sloane narrowed his gaze on the house Tom Weaver built for his family. In love, Tom had shit for luck, much like his own father, much like any agent who affiliated themselves with the Underground Unit. Sometimes Sloane wondered if a curse drifted over those who enlisted. If not a curse, then the darkest cloud drifting across the wide open sky.

He wasn't supposed to be there. None of the Remingtons wanted to leave Kelsie, especially since her cancer continued to spread. If their father hadn't needed them for a full escort to a safe house, then chances would've been real good the Weaver-Remington properties would have remained vacated, especially now when they had other concerns rather than fighting. Only this time, they fought against a vicious South American army and they raised their weapons with a personal vendetta.

If only his father's killer hadn't chosen this spot for revenge. If only his father hadn't been gunned down in front of them, then things might have been different.

Instead, Sloane and his brothers left the woman they loved in Florence, thousands of miles out of their reach. They deserted her when she needed them most, but some things couldn't be passed off to other operatives.

Sloane originally meant to train five agents, men who would have been placed as nothing more than pawns, targets posing as the Remington five. At the last minute, he changed the plan, but the goal remained the same.

The team in place would lure in whoever killed Wilson Remington. Maybe the assassins would come back and try to finish the job if the day to day activities resumed on the two farms.

The original agent line-up called for a team equally as qualified as Sloane and his brothers. Assuming their enemies returned to Missouri, Sloane's team would have been trained and waiting. Then a tip came in and Sloane couldn't place his mock unit. To do so would've been outright murder. Their enemies knew the Remingtons were coming home, and Sloane wasn't satisfied with the men he chose to replace them. Left with only one choice, Sloane and his brothers packed up and returned home.

No one knew the lay of the land better or how to access the hidden tunnels under the Weaver and Remington properties. The Remingtons went

home to Missouri, taking an inside position, posing even as clones of themselves.

They needed to seduce an assassin who wouldn't resurface fast enough for their liking. But one thing about it, when the killer showed his face, Sloane and his brothers would damn sure be ready.

## Chapter One

### *One Month Later*

Veronica Leigh was the kind of woman who turned heads. Her first husband once told her she was a real looker. Her second ball and chain assured her she knew how to work her walk so she strut the kind of stuff guaranteed to make the men who saw her remember her.

She wasn't just a dumb broad in cowboy boots. She was an unknown agent in the Underground Unit. Hired for her brains, Veronica first trained directly under Tom Weaver and Wilson Remington. Later, she became Sloane Remington's protégé. He sent her to work directly under Mark Donovan, one of the original founders of the unit. When she returned from her stint with Donovan, many considered her one of the best in the business. She had, in fact, trained under professionals.

Now, she was on an important mission. Her orders were to take out the man who killed Wilson Remington, along with those who hired him.

If anyone stood in her way and prevented her from completing her task, she reserved a special license to kill. No one affiliated with the Underground Unit wanted survivors. If anyone escaped, her own hide was on the firing line.

She'd draw fast and shoot even faster. In this case, remorse wouldn't visit afterwards. She'd gladly pull the trigger again and again until she sent a message all the way back to Venezuela or wherever the hell the murderous bastards originated.

Veronica couldn't wait to take the kill. Death had a way of leaving a bitter taste in a person's mouth, but murder had a way of making those left behind choke on the stench remaining. After the gun smoke cleared at the Remington house, Sloane and his brothers wanted one thing—revenge. And she planned to help them find all they could stand.

Veronica looked around Tom Weaver's former home. There wasn't anything extraordinary about the structure now. From what she'd been told, Kelsie Weaver hired an interior decorator right after her father's death, but apparently the designer lacked in good taste. Veronica wished the home remained in its original splendor. There was so much she longed to know about the man who hired her as an operative.

Strolling across the tile floor, Veronica studied the pine paneling covering the walls. The scattered pinholes in the wood or the occasional nail reminded her of the family photograph frames once adorning the space. Family, she thought with a sigh. She knew better than to look around for something she never experienced firsthand.

She stared at the blank area again and noted the empty space, a scant representation of what the Remingtons and the Weavers had already lost. With a sudden shiver, she thought of their recent news, too. Another Weaver faced a long battle ahead.

If statistics held true, Kelsie Weaver would lose her fight against cancer. The Remington brothers, practically legends in the Underground Unit, were capable of bringing down empires, the worst of cartels, even the most brutal assassins. But they didn't possess enough strength to take on the likes of cancer. What a crying shame she wouldn't have the opportunity to know Kelsie.

Veronica proceeded down the long, dark hallway and wondered if Tom once kept a picture of her somewhere. He had plenty of Kelsie, but most of them were now stored away in moving containers.

Veronica searched for one of her own photographs, pulling out desk drawers and skimming the tops of boxes strategically placed in the corner of the family room. No, Tom probably didn't keep pictures of his associates regardless of his relationship with them. A photo, when placed in the wrong hands, circulated among dangerous groups. A picture of anyone close often brought untimely deaths for those involved with their particular unit.

She took a deep breath. Sometimes, she wondered if Tom confided in Wilson. Did someone out there know who she was and why she had always been so important to one of the original founders of the Midwestern Underground Unit?

Refusing to delve into the unknown, she passed through the den and headed toward the library. Her fingertips dragged back and forth over the

soft leather burgundy sofa. Before she thought too much about what it might have been like to see Tom sitting in this very room, she deliberately regrouped, focusing on the task for which she was hired.

A month earlier, Veronica moved onto the Weaver property. She anxiously awaited the arrival of her neighbors. Today was the day, and the final hour approached. Veronica felt apprehension as a tickle on the back of her neck reminded her of why.

Whenever she worked with Sloane Remington or his brothers, she had to fight to keep her hands to herself. Would she feel the same with the look-a-likes brought in to replace them? She hoped not.

The last thing she needed to find when her neighbors arrived was another distraction. Still, the agent in her wondered if the men brought in to pose as the Remingtons would bear a strong resemblance to the real men behind the façade. Would they be one-fifth as dangerous as the real Remingtons?

The woman living within hoped for carbon copies. The agent reminded duplicated Remingtons would certainly lead to a whole lot of trouble.

She'd worked closely with Dusty and Sloane on previous missions. The men also trained her in tactical warfare. Sloane was in charge of assigning missions, so they spoke often.

Veronica was in awe of Sloane, and Dusty was just plain tempting. God help her if they sent in body doubles with one inch of their sex appeal.

A rattling sound came from the back porch before she heard, "Hello? Anyone in there?"

Veronica smiled. She was about to meet and greet the lot of the clones. The men served one purpose—to set a trap, bait a few South Americans, and ultimately die if they did a sorry job of protecting their covers and their own asses at the same time.

Waltzing into the kitchen, Veronica put her charm on. She knew precisely how to get the job done.

The door jiggled again. "Hello?"

She unlatched the storm door separating her from the man with his face mashed against the screen. Then she gave it a light push. "Do you always try breaking into homes that don't belong to you?"

Holy shit, she thought. If the man in front of her wasn't Dusty Remington, then he was pretty darn close. She didn't mind settling for second best when a man looked like a Remington.

Confident and cocky as hell, he introduced himself. "I'm Dusty Remington. I'm your neighbor."

She snickered, scooting to the side in order to let him pass. *And I'm Angelina Jolie.*

The man held his tongue to his upper lip and placed her under blatant scrutiny. He started at her boots and worked his way up her denim clad thighs before he abruptly stopped at her breasts. "Is it the name that made you smile or the fact that you weren't expecting a man like me to walk right into your fantasies and make every daydream you've ever had come true?"

Damn. He might as well have been Dusty Remington in the flesh. Veronica had to give Sloane credit. The Dusty look-a-like was right on target.

She had talked to Dusty plenty of times and admittedly enjoyed her field training when Dusty headed up the skills instruction. The look-a-likes weren't supposed to know she'd worked with the Remingtons before, but there was a great familiarity the minute Dusty's clone walked through the door. If Sloane wanted right-on with a man of equal comparison, he must have hired the best plastic surgeons in the world to ensure perfection.

Sloane's instructions rang in her ears. She was supposed to react to the Remington replacements as if they were meeting for the first time, reminding her again and again that he would not send in his brothers for this mission. Maybe he changed his mind.

Easy going and fun to be around, the real Dusty Remington oozed with sex appeal and this one had his bases covered. She checked out his ass. Oh, yeah, this fellow was as close to the real thing as a man gets.

Sometimes, Veronica wondered how Kelsie Weaver put up with Dusty Remington. Then again, she juggled five men. She probably didn't mind giving Dusty a day off here or there.

Dusty's stand-in wasn't half bad. God, she hoped he was single. She might use him for recreational purposes. What she'd give to run her fingers through his thick, curly hair while staring into his hot chocolate eyes.

Veronica moved out of his way and watched him stroll around the country kitchen. "By all means, come on in and make yourself at home. I



love finding a good looking man who would look right nice in one of my backless aprons.”

The agent looked at her like he definitely took her statement as a delicious invitation. “I do believe you’re coming on to me.”

Stopping a man in his tracks was her specialty. “Veronica Leigh.” She extended her hand. “And I’m not one for daydreams and fantasies, sugar. But I have to give you props for confidence and effort.”

He grinned. “If I’m being graded, then I’ll be damned if I won’t try for an A,” he said, looping his arm around her waist and coming up short of smacking his lips against hers.

Dusty moved fast, but she didn’t think he was the type to forget his vows, so undoubtedly, despite similarities, this guy hardly qualified as the real deal. Still, she went with it, reminding herself one final time her guest wasn’t Dusty Remington. She could definitely test him to make sure.

Dusty, like the other Remington men, belonged to one very lucky lady. When the Dusty replacement didn’t back away, she decided on her next play. She needed to see what kind of balls the guy zipped up when he slipped into his tight-fitting Wranglers. She wondered how far he’d take things if she acted like he had a shot.

Veronica’s teeth scraped over his lower lip when he pinned her against the refrigerator. “Do you make a habit out of walking into a woman’s kitchen, introducing yourself, and then teasing her?”

“No,” he said, biting back.

“Ouch,” she whined, giving him another quick nip, too, and giving far better than she’d received.

He pressed his body to hers, quickly picked her up, and carried her through the foyer. “You’re playing with more kindling than I’ll ever need to light your fire, darlin’.”

“You think so?” she challenged.

He kept walking. When he reached the front door, he abruptly released her, reached around her waist, and gave the brass doorknob a hard yank.

“Lesson number one, Miss Leigh, don’t tempt the devil out of the man because from what I hear, he’s always accompanied by several of his brothers.” He grinned at the men staring back at them.

“What the hell?” she exclaimed, blinking.

There, smack dab on the porch, stood the other four. Plastic surgery worked better than perfection if the fellows in front of her provided examples of what a doctor's scalpel performed. Just as handsome as the real men who carried the Remington name, the four operatives—five counting Dusty—made for damn fine substitutes.

Veronica continued her act for about a minute. "Don't tell me. More neighbors?"

The Sloane look-a-like, the most handsome of course, took the lead. Not surprisingly, he was obviously the one in charge. "We're clear," he told the others, walking past her and removing his sunglasses.

"Oh, please, come on in."

The Logan double said, "Oh, we're in, sugar. Can't you feel us yet?"

Followed by the other agents, Sloane stood in front of Dusty. "You just couldn't help yourself, could you?"

"You told us she'd do anything for the job. I wanted to see how far she was willing to go."

Veronica glared at the men who took over her quarters without a second to spare. "For the record, *Dusty*," she drawled, "I never do anything half-ass. Test me and you'll find out how far I'll go for the cause."

"Gentleman, since my cover is obviously blown to hell and back," she began, "I'm Veronica. It's the real name," she added, glancing at the man who nipped and tugged at her lips only minutes earlier. "You gotta a real name, cowboy?"

"I got your cowboy," he said, grabbing the bulge in the front of his pants.

She slapped her mound. "And I got your cowgirl, but we're not here for shits and giggles." She turned around and stared at the amused head haunch, the one who probably had the brains of the bunch, and hopefully she wouldn't have to look for them in his pants.

The one resembling the youngest Remington spoke up. "I'm Drew."

"Nice to meet you." She shook Drew's hand and then faced their leader. "I'm assuming you're Sloane, or at least..." She stopped talking and started staring. Dear God, he even had those haunting midnight blue eyes a shade darker than any she'd ever seen.

The man assuming Sloane's position cleared his throat. "Let's get one thing straight from the beginning. You will use the names we're assigned for this mission. Understand?"

"Yes," she agreed, unsettled because the tone he used with her bordered along condescending.

"I'm Sloane. You've met Dusty and Drew." He pointed toward the other two. "This is Logan and over there's Benson. You don't need to know our real names. It's unimportant. The only thing you need to focus on is the job, and you need to remember we're here working as a team. Understood?"

"Sure, sugar," she drawled. "And since the party is all here, I have one question."

Mischief danced across Dusty's face. "What's that?"

"Do any of you happen to know which room Kelsie Weaver used? I'm feeling rather nostalgic, and since we don't have a lot of options out here, I may want to step into her role in more ways than one, assuming," her gaze darted over to Dusty, "I have at least one volunteer."

\* \* \* \*

"She's going to be a problem," Benson stated flatly when they gathered in one of the underground bunkers later that evening.

"Not if we stick to our plan," Sloane quipped, pulling down the work station concealed in the ceiling.

Logan observed Sloane as he released the lever and the equipment appeared in front of them in orderly condition. "Why didn't you tell her the truth?"

"Hmm," Sloane said, scratching his chin. "That might have worked."

"It's not too late," Benson pointed out.

"The hell it isn't," Sloane bit out, stopping short of pulling up a chair in front of the work station. "We tell no one what we've done here. The only person who knows we decided not to send in replacements is Kelsie and who would she tell?"

"How the hell are we going to keep her hands off of us?" Dusty asked.

"For starters, you can remember you're a committed man," Drew suggested. "If you don't provoke her, she probably won't tie you up and make you call her mistress."

"I didn't come on to her."

Sloane chuckled. "Oh, really? Since when do you carry our female agents around?"

Benson sneered. "Just remember, all five of us promised to love and cherish Kelsie until death...."

A mention of death and the room fell quiet. Logan felt the quick nick against his flesh when the sudden reminder brought back their current reality. Kelsie was dying with cancer and they weren't where they should have been—sitting by her bedside.

Sloane took a seat in front of the computer station. "Anyone talked to Kelsie in the last half hour?"

Drew said, "She's watching old movies and says she's fine."

"I'll bet she is," Logan grumbled. "Without us hovering over her, she's probably giving her nurses hell."

Sloane said, "I hope she does. It'll keep her mind sharp and her senses alive."

"I know what keeps her senses alive," Dusty teased. "I miss my little woman. I think I'll give her a call."

"Why don't you tell her how you had a tongue war with Veronica what's-her-name?" Logan suggested. "I'm sure she'd love to hear all about it."

"Why don't you give the Dusty-bashing a rest," Sloane snapped over his back. Then he wheeled around and faced them. "Listen, I hope none of us place ourselves in a position with Veronica or anyone else that would compromise our relationship with Kelsie. We still have a job to do. Tilting our hand isn't something we can afford with Veronica. She's a very beautiful woman. One of us will have to look at her as more than an agent with a job to do or else she might get suspicious."

"Everyone expects Dusty to flirt, say off-color remarks and whatnot, so Veronica most likely expected the same in any replacement we might send. Keep in mind, if we stuck to the original coordinated details and sent in operatives, they would've followed their own set of personal rules. I think we can all safely do the same."

Benson frowned. "If not, we can always tell Veronica the locals know the 'real' Remingtons are loyal to Kelsie and as the Remington replacements, we're keeping everything as-is for show."

“Hell, Benson,” Dusty said from across the room. “After hearing your spiel, I almost believe I’m a new operative standing in for myself.”

“All right, boys. Let’s get to work.” Sloane dimmed the lights and released a large screen from overhead. “Take a look at our suspects.”

Logan focused on the projected images of the men Sloane believed may have placed the hit on their father. He recognized several, but one man stood out. Immediately, he swung his gaze toward Dusty, who in turn, fiddled with his cell phone opting to text Kelsie, apparently, rather than call her.

Studying how Dusty’s shoulders tensed, Logan realized there wasn’t any room for question. Sure enough, the man in the photographs was precisely who he thought—Gomez Gustavo Esparza.

Sloane stared at Dusty too, providing a quick accounting of assets and briefing them on the Esparza family holdings. He undoubtedly recognized the Venezuelan as someone Dusty never wanted to meet again. Hell, anyone within a hundred miles could’ve seen the fear in Dusty’s eyes.

Dusty wasn’t one to run scared from anything or anyone. Then again, no one ever asked Dusty about the horrifying conditions he endured when Esparza’s guards imprisoned him.

Sloane once claimed he knew all about those days when Dusty was held captive in Caracas. In actuality, no one understood what Dusty suffered, and respecting his need for privacy, they didn’t press for information.

After reading an agent report filed by Riley Donovan, an operative from the southern region, the Remingtons, could only imagine what happened to their brother. What he experienced in South America wasn’t pretty.

Logan noticed the beads of sweat trickling down his brother’s face. Apparently, Dusty still didn’t want to talk about Esparza. He fumbled with his phone, dropping the case once and cursing under his breath, an obvious attempt to play off his anxiety.

Sloane switched back and forth between clips while reading off the numerous crimes the Esparza family committed in Venezuela. Believed to have plenty of protection by the local government in Caracas, whenever the Underground Unit operatives received an assignment there, they prepared for the worst and always faced plenty of opposition upon their arrival.

The Underground Unit often went into the slums of Caracas on a search for American girls sold into the sex trade. Dusty went undercover there and

landed in an unimaginable situation, surviving unthinkable torture but carrying the burden of internal and external scars.

“My money is on Esparza,” Sloane said.

Dusty’s cheeks swelled. Then he blurted out, “Why is your cash on him all of a sudden? We have plenty of suspects.”

Logan shot Sloane a warning stare and hoped to hell he paid attention. Right now wasn’t the time to dig into Dusty’s Venezuelan experience.

Benson answered for Sloane. “When Dad was killed, Esparza was our number one enemy. Many of our operatives, working independently, singlehandedly stopped the sex trade in various areas of Esparza’s drug-infested Caracas territories. Dad—and we all remember how he loved to boast—made sure Esparza knew he was behind the financial catastrophe our operatives caused his cartel.

“Why would he do something so dangerous?” Drew asked.

Logan explained. “Dad loved to win. The war games offered little appeal unless all the players knew who kicked the balls around on the battlefield.”

Dusty sneered. “He fucked around with our lives so he could have a good ego boost. If he were alive today, I’d tell him about it.”

Benson said, “Dad provoked an assassin. We should be in Florence where we belong. Instead, we’re looking for our father’s killer and who knows, maybe he taunted the very men who wanted him dead.”

Sloane pressed a button on a device he held in his palm and pointed to the monitor. “Esparza now has his own weaknesses. The woman at his left is his girlfriend and the small figure behind her is his three-year-old daughter.”

“You can’t be serious,” Drew said. “You’re going to stoop to his level and go after his family?”

“He came after mine,” Sloane said flatly.

“You don’t know for sure,” Drew said.

“Don’t I?” Sloane fired back.

Logan saw the flicker of pain in Dusty’s eyes. Drew addressed Dusty. “You support this?”

“I’m not in charge of this mission. Sloane has our best interest at heart. We’re looking for any angle. If it turns out we’re going after Esparza and the only way to trap him is through his family connections, then yes, I support this.”

“You’d kill a child?”

“Hell no, Drew, and neither would Sloane.”

“I’d make him believe I’d go after her.” Sloane pointed at the woman.

“Keep in mind, Drew, we’re not playing bridge here. It’s like a chess game. We have to make strategic moves and find our opponent’s weakest points.” Sloane brought up another frame and then clicked the button for one more.

The Esparza family stared back at them. The woman in the photograph, Esparza’s woman, was very beautiful. She had silken black hair, high cheek bones, and the darkest eyes Logan had ever seen.

“We know where he keeps the woman and his daughter. We have two operatives outside their compound working as members of the Esparza staff. Veronica stays in touch with Ramon, one of the agents there. He’s told Veronica several times that no one is allowed in or out of the house unless Esparza is inside the home.”

Dusty shifted behind them. “You fellows have fun looking through photographs of the bad guys. I’m calling Kelsie like I meant to do ten minutes ago. I don’t have time for this shit.”

“You better make time, little brother, because if you don’t, when Esparza comes after your ass again, he may want more than a little romp, if you know what I mean. Next time, you can expect a real good thrashing.”

Drew and Benson exchanged quick glances. Logan gripped the back of his chair and slowly lifted his gaze toward Dusty. Oh, yeah, Sloane pushed the wrong button.

Dusty stormed across the room with his fists clenched at his sides. “What do you want to say, huh? You always dance around the Caracas ordeal. Then, whenever you have a chance, you get your digs in and twist the hell out of that knife. Is there something you’re dying to ask me?”

Sloane clicked a button and the overhead light gradually faded. “I don’t know, Dusty. Is there something you want to get off your chest?”

“Yeah,” he replied, drawing his fist back. “This—”

Benson and Logan jumped up and stopped the blow. Although, Logan mused, Dusty owed Sloane a strong right hook.

“We’re not here to fight each other!” Sloane yelled. “For the record, Dusty, I’m not the one who tapped your tight little ass. Why don’t you use

some of your anger and hostility? Why not get even with the man who held you prisoner for nine days?"

"It wasn't for..." Dusty tripped over his words before blurting out, "How the hell did you know it was nine days?"

"There were conflicting reports. I went to Caracas and spoke with the right people. You were held against your will for nine days. Do you want to talk about it now?"

"It's been at least seven years since I stepped foot in Venezuela. I don't want to go back there. I don't want to relive one moment I spent there. Time passes and bodies heal. If you think I need to cleanse my spirit and confess my sins, then you need to know I can see a priest for that. My burdens are mine to carry. The least you can do is respect what I survived rather than make a mockery of it. Are we clear?"

Logan pushed Sloane away from Dusty but kept his hand on Dusty's chest. "I said are we clear?" Dusty yelled, his neck veins bulging.

"Clear as shit."

Dusty backed away from Logan and stormed toward the bunkroom, slamming a door behind him. Maybe he needed a little time alone with his horrors or perhaps with Kelsie if he could get his rage under control and actually call her.

"You had no right," Benson said.

"I have to push his buttons because if I don't and I'm right, we're all in danger."

"Bringing up the past served no purpose," Logan said.

"Oh, yes, it did," Sloane stated flatly. "Dusty needs to prepare for all scenarios. If Esparza is our man and he comes back here, he'll know precisely who he'll find. Don't think he won't send in the very men who tortured Dusty. He'll fly them in here first. Dusty needs to expect the worst, prepare for it, and by God, he needs to get mad, damn mad. Then, he'll be ready to get even."



## **Chapter Two**

Kelsie lifted the receiver from the bedside table. "Hello?"

"Hey, baby."

She clutched the phone. "Dusty? Is that you?" Her heart skipped a few beats. She hadn't spoken to him in a few days. Dusty liked to text more than call, and lately the calls came in less frequently.

Kelsie felt him slipping away. Dusty had his share of demons, and most of the time he ran from them, managing to stay a few steps ahead of them, but lately she thought they'd nipped at his heels. He was different, and even Drew confided they needed to give him space, fearing Dusty carried the weight of something threatening enough to suffocate him.

"Of course it's me. Who were you expecting?"

"Brad Pitt," she teased. "Or that new guy who sings country music, what's his name?"

"Which song?"

"The one about the tractor," she said weakly.

"Jason Aldean?"

"Yeah, him," she teased, covering the phone when she felt like her breathing changed.

"Are you doing him and Brad on the side while we're away?"

"Yep, Urban, too. A girl's gotta stay busy, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Speaking of, how is my girl?"

Her eyes watered then. "Hang on a second, Dusty." She put the phone down and quickly analyzed her current situation. No, she thought, she wasn't going to die today or even tomorrow. Dusty and the rest of her men needed to stay in Missouri and finish what they'd started. She could enjoy the sound of Dusty's voice. It was enough, for now. Later, when they all returned to Florence, she'd seek comfort in their arms.

"Kelsie? Are you there?"

She coughed. "I asked you to hang on a minute."

"Put the nurse on," he demanded.

"What nurse?"

"The one that better be sitting by your bed."

"Why?"

"Because we hired several of them to look after you, remember?"

"I fired them."

"You what?"

"I'm kidding," she said quietly, shifting her weight in an attempt to find another comfortable position that would last about two minutes before her butt burned with the reminder of bed sores.

"I don't think you're funny."

"Cora, the evening nurse, said she didn't eat dinner. I sent her out to rummage around for something we both can eat."

"Can't she cook?"

"Hon, the nurses are here around the clock. Trust me. None of them can prepare an Italian meal quite like the Italians. I've tried choking down one or two of their great family recipes."

"So you feel like eating?"

"Yes," she lied. "I'm actually getting stronger every day. I don't know what it is, but I have more energy than I've had in a long time."

"God, honey, I hope that's true."

Now she felt guilty.

After a short silence, Dusty said, "Tell me about your day."

"No. I'm tired. It's almost midnight here. While I'm waiting on Cora to return, you tell me what's going on there. How did everything look around home?"

"Like always, nothing has changed."

"Then tell me about Columbia. Walk me through the streets. Hold my hand and lead me through the town. I miss it so, you know."

Dusty cleared his throat. "Well, let's see. I ate over at Boone Tavern the other day."

"I bet you went there the second your plane landed," Kelsie said. "Let me guess, you ordered a burger and beer along with a Belgian waffle." Her mouth watered thinking about their waffles. She'd give anything for one bite.

“Yeah, I did. I’m a creature of habit.”

“Is The Field House still open?”

“As far as I know.”

“If I surprised you and came home, you’d take me, wouldn’t you?”

“Honey, if you felt like flying today, I’d pick you up and we’d head there for a night out. Maybe I’d even buy drinks for everyone in your honor.”

“I know you would, Dusty. I wish I could be there. Tell me what else I’m missing.”

“Ah, Kelsie, you know how Columbia is. The town never changes. Everything stays the same here.”

“Except I’m not with you.”

“You’re always with me, baby. Always.”

“Dusty?”

“Huh?”

“What’s she like?”

“Who?”

Her heart raced when he didn’t immediately provide an answer. He understood who, and he realized why she wanted to know. She was going to die, and her biggest worry, a concern she’d voiced to all of them again and again, was that they wouldn’t look for love again once she passed away.

“Dusty, you know who. What’s her name?”

“Veronica,” he said. “I’ve mentioned her before. We’ve trained together. She’s the one I told you I wouldn’t work with on the Switzerland mission, remember?”

“Is she still pretty?”

“What are you doing, baby? Trying to play matchmaker for the men in your life?”

“No,” she said, coughing. “I’m checking out the competition.”

“You don’t have any.”

“I want some. It’ll keep me on my toes.”

Dusty laughed. “You’ve already caught five big lugs who love you. We don’t want you to worry about another woman, Kelsie. There’s no one for us but you.”

Kelsie looked up to find Cora in her doorway with two boxed dinners. “Looks like supper just walked in.”

“Brad or Jason?”

“Funny,” she said. “Cora hopefully brought something with lots of meat.”

“I gotcha some meat, doll.”

“Dusty, please.”

“I do.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“As long as you remember, it’s enough for me.”

She hoped so, but she knew better. The memories they made together didn’t exist as enough for her anymore. The past didn’t provide vivid images to keep her until they returned. In fact, the longer they stayed away, the more she wondered if she’d ever make love to any of them again.

She was weak, tired, and sick. The cancer burned through her body like a serum, coating organs, bones, and cartilage. Her muscles and tissues felt saturated by the disease. Sometimes she wondered if she imagined the cancer spreading or if she truly felt the places in her body as the disease circulated through her bloodstream.

“Kelsie?”

“I’m still here,” she whispered.

“I love you.”

“Then love for me after I’m gone.”

“What do you mean, baby?”

“You’ll figure it out. Goodnight, Dusty. I’ll love you until tomorrow.”

“Baby, you’ll love me into the next day and the day after.”

“Yes, I will,” she promised, hanging up the phone.

“Cora,” she barely managed. “Please get the food out of here. The smell is making me sick.”

Then she fell against the pillows and prayed for sleep. She wanted to find the darkness because then she could search for her dreams.

\* \* \* \*

“How is she?” Benson stood next to the door. The golden light from the other room eased its way through the small opening and cast a quick gleam into Benson’s eyes.

“She didn’t sound good. One of us should be there with her.”

“You wanna go?”

Dusty shook his head. “We both know who should go. As much as I’d like to fly home to her tonight, I’m not the one she needs, and the one she longs for most can’t go.”

“She needs one of us, Dusty. I don’t think she has a preference as to which one is there.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but the truth is Sloane is her rock. He should be there with her, but if he leaves here, I know all hell will break loose.”

Benson sat on the bed across from him. “You’re vulnerable this time, Dusty. You’re the link we need to remove. You go home to Kelsie.”

“What? Are you crazy? I’m the strength behind this operation.”

“Under most circumstances, I’d have to agree. This time, I don’t.”

“Why? Because of what Sloane said?”

“No,” Benson reassured. “Sloane didn’t convince me. You did. If Esparza is responsible for Dad’s death, then he’ll recognize you right off the bat when he comes here.”

“Hell, Esparza knows who we are. He’ll come here looking for me. He’d never believe I’m not with the unit.”

“Then send him on a goose chase. Take the long way home but go home to Kelsie and be there for her when she wakes up in the mornings. Love her throughout the day and do what you can to take every second of her pain away. That’s what we want you to do.”

“Sloane, too?”

“I think so.”

“Did he ask you to send me?”

“No,” Benson stated flatly. “But I’m telling you that our woman is going to die while we’re here, and her nurses won’t see it coming. You can go home to Kelsie and keep us posted on her health. Dusty, I don’t want her to die alone.”

“I don’t...want her...to die!”

And he crumbled. For the first time since the doctor said the words ‘skin cancer,’ he broke down like he had no other choice but to let the tears have him.

Benson pulled him into a tight embrace, holding him as he shook against him.

"I know, Dusty. Believe me, I know. Just cry and let it all out, bro. This is something you've needed for a long time."

A few seconds later, Dusty pushed away from him and wiped his damp cheeks on his sleeve. "God help me, I'm losing my mind."

"Yeah," Benson said. "And I know why. It's not this job or even the need for revenge. Right now, you more than any of the rest of us want to be with Kelsie, and I want you there with her. Will you go? As your brother, I'm asking you to go home and take care of her."

Dusty rubbed his left eye and looked over at the small corner closet. He caught a glimpse of an old flannel shirt Kelsie wore when she cleaned the underground compounds.

He remembered the way she looked in the burgundy and plaid material, the way the garment brushed over her knobby knees. He strolled over to the closet and grabbed the item from its wire hanger.

Burying his face in the flannel, he inhaled, but he couldn't get a whiff of the perfume he imagined she might have worn. He missed that.

What if he never had the good fortune to smell her against his skin again? What if he never had the chance to hold her in his arms while loving her once more? Then again, a few times, he'd had the opportunity. He refused to make love to her, fearing he might hurt her.

Tossing the shirt in the closet, Dusty turned around. "Kelsie once said men never stayed long enough for women to love them. We left her on the other side of the globe so we could protect her, but we were fooling ourselves. If we'd really wanted to keep her safe, we would've stayed behind. All she needs right now is everything she doesn't have—love."

"Kelsie was trained for this," Sloane reminded them when he stepped under the small archway between the control room and the bunkroom.

"Oh, really?" Dusty asked. "And when you were teaching her how to survive as an agent's spouse or our significant other did you prepare her for a long and agonizing death?"

Sloane shook his head. "No one can prepare a person for the death she faces."

"No, but I'll be damned if we didn't force her to face it alone."

\* \* \* \*

“We’ve got movement,” Drew called out over his shoulder as his fingers scooted across the keyboard.

Logan smirked. “It’s probably Veronica bringing over a batch of homemade cookies.”

“I doubt that woman knows how to stir up much more than sweet vanilla pudding,” Sloane said without looking up from their card game.

Drew zoomed in on the Remington front porch and froze. Dusty noticed the way his back stiffened and his expression changed. “Something wrong, Drew?”

“What is it?” Logan asked, leaning over him.

“Nothing,” Drew replied. “I thought I saw something.”

Sloane rose from his chair and walked up behind him. “What did you see?”

“It’s nothing.”

Dusty narrowed his gaze. “How come no one cleaned up that blood bath on the front porch?”

Sloane shrugged. “Think about it. No one has been here. We handled our own affairs in order to keep the locals from snooping around. I locked down the place when we left. Hell, nine months ago, none of us were in any shape to worry about cleaning up the blood spilled. Best I remember, we all left in a hurry.” Sloane hit a few buttons while Dusty watched the monitors.

“What does she want?” Dusty asked.

“Damned if I know,” Sloane said. “She’s a curious little thing.”

“She looks like Kelsie,” Drew commented, bringing in another camera so they covered her from all angles.

“Yeah,” Benson agreed, leaning closer. “She should. Sloane made her cut her hair and style it like Kelsie last wore hers. In the dark, she’s a dead giveaway for our little woman.”

“Like hell she is,” Sloane said, backing away. “We know the difference, and anyone else would, too. I fucked the hell up when I didn’t make her go see that surgeon I lined up.”

Dusty noticed the way Sloane avoided the screens. He flinched when Sloane barked, “Go see what she wants!”

“Who the hell put you in charge?” Logan demanded.

“Think about that one,” Dusty said cautiously, somewhat concerned over Sloane’s quick mood shift.

Logan slapped Benson on the back. "Come on, let's get rid of the only female distraction we have and scare her off so she doesn't come back."

"Sounds like a good idea," Sloane said.

"Why?" Drew asked, still fiddling around with the cameras. "We're working with her, aren't we?"

"The woman is dangerous," Sloane grated out.

Dusty snickered. "Surely to God you don't find her attractive."

"Hell, fuck my life, no."

Dusty said, "Well, I think she's pretty enough, but like the rest of you, I wouldn't dip for joy there."

"I hope not," Sloane said sternly. "I know we're all going through this thing with Kelsie, but I don't want any of us breaking her heart and her spirit just because we can't keep our pants up."

"I'd cut my dick off before I'd hurt her."

Drew laughed and swiveled around in his chair. "Hell, Dusty, without your dick, you won't be able to talk, think, or work. Seeing as that's the only thing you ever seem overly concerned about."

Dusty tossed a sofa cushion in his direction. "Wise guy."

Logan and Benson disappeared, and in a matter of seconds, a fluorescent light shone bright on the Remington porch. Moments later, the front door opened.

"This ought to be good," Sloane said, moving closer to the monitors. "If nothing else, we should bring out the popcorn and at least enjoy the show."



## Chapter Three

Veronica pounded on the wooden door with one hand and shook off the particles of leaves and grass covering her shoulders with the other. She should've driven over, but instead, she strolled across the Weaver lawn, crawled under some brush, climbed a tree, and skipped onto the property like she'd lived next to the Remingtons all her life.

"What can we do for you?" Logan asked when he finally greeted her.

She glanced down at the porch and noticed the dark blotches on the white planks. She didn't need one of the fellows to tell her about those stains. Wilson Remington died there, and no one bothered to clean up the mess. Perhaps Wilson's sons wanted the damning relic so when they returned there they remembered why they searched for retribution.

"I was wondering when we're expecting company. Have you heard anything new from the *real* Sloane?"

"Couldn't you call?" Benson retrieved a cell phone from his shirt pocket. "I thought you programmed our numbers into your phone earlier." He checked the facing on his phone, probably in an attempt to view missed calls.

"I haven't tried. The truth is—"

"What?" Logan cut her off. "The truth is you've been all the way out here in the country for well over three weeks and you're looking for a little company, right?"

She flashed a grin and added a saucy wink, the best one she could manage. "Don't credit your first impression with wowing a gal right out of her pants on day number one."

"If I didn't wow you, sweetheart," Logan continued, "there may be a reason behind it."

“Got a lady waiting for you back home?” she asked, curious because a man who looked like Logan Remington, real or not, made a woman stand back and pay attention.

With plenty of arrogance and standing a little over six feet tall, Logan had a natural curve to his smile and a body any woman appreciated. His short sleeve shirt did nothing to conceal his thick upper arms, and the way the cotton clung to his broad chest made her mouth water. Thank God she could look. Perhaps this Logan didn’t have a Kelsie tucked away somewhere.

“You done?” he asked, while she perused his body.

She copped a smile and wickedly said, “Not yet. I’ll let you know when I am.” Then she moved her gaze up and down his body, working her eyes from side to side, studying the ripples of what she’d accurately guess as one hard man. His bow-shaped mouth curved in a smile he couldn’t hide, regardless of his lame attempt, and his shoulder length hair made him resemble a true rebel.

“Ever heard of sexual harassment?” Benson asked.

“No. In my line of work, the rules don’t apply or perhaps you never received that memo from Sloane. The *real* Sloane, that is.”

“All right,” Benson said. “I’ve had enough of this real and make-believe bullshit. From here forward, get this in your head. We’re the real Remingtons.” He lowered his voice and added, “If you don’t start thinking of us as whom we’re meant to portray, then you’re going to put us all at risk, understand?”

“You’re probably right. I’d hate to have a wet dream about a stand-in for Logan Remington. Especially when, Logan Remington or not, I like what I see.”

“You’re a forward little thing, aren’t ’cha?” Logan asked.

“Not nearly as much as what you’d like for me to be. I see the lust boiling in your eyes. I like it when a man is brewing up something nice and hot for me, job or no job.”

“Humph! You keep your imagination active while we’re out here and those daydreams may just get you killed.”

“You’ll save me if I’m in danger. I have no doubts whatsoever.”

“If you need saving,” Benson said, “then Sloane hired the wrong woman for this job.”

“Maybe he hired the wrong men,” she stated flatly. Her gaze darted between Logan and Benson. They were too familiar with one another, and they sure looked a whole lot like the real Logan and Benson. She’d seen pictures and worked with Sloane and Dusty enough to know that Logan could easily pass for a brother.

This was starting to smell like entrapment. She was almost one hundred percent certain somewhere along the way Sloane changed his mind. Yes, she’d bet dollars to quarters she wasn’t working with a plastic surgeon’s remarkable projects but instead the real Remington brothers.

Who could blame them for wanting to find their father’s killer? She certainly couldn’t. The question irking her was why wouldn’t they tell her the truth?

Now, it was time to call them on it.

“Where’s Sloane this evening? I need to talk to him.”

“He’s out,” Logan drawled.

“Out?”

“Yes,” Benson agreed. “Out. O-U-T.”

“That’s cute,” she said, flipping her hair behind her back. “Thanks for the spelling lesson. Can you tell him I stopped by? I need to talk to him when he returns.”

“Sure,” Logan said. “We’ll get right on that.”

“I thought you said he’s out.”

“He is. But he’ll be back.”

“Can I wait?”

“No,” Benson said. “That won’t be necessary. He’ll be late. Do you want him to come over in the morning or call you when he gets in?”

“I’d appreciate it if he stopped by my place—err, the Weaver’s—later tonight.”

Logan smirked. “I’ll tell him.”

“Great. I’ll look for him.”

She stepped off the porch and walked toward the bushes again. She’d expect him within the hour.

Without a doubt, the Remingtons weren’t using the house where she visited. Oh no, they were buried ten feet under, maybe more, in one of the bunkers the Donovans from back east once told her she’d find in all divisions of the unit.

Walking back to Tom's, she considered the facts. She didn't see movement in the house. The furniture pieces she saw through the windows were covered with long, white sheets. She waited almost ten minutes before anyone answered the door. Benson and Logan looked like they had to run a marathon in order to reach the front porch before she left.

Veronica wasn't stupid. If Sloane Remington brought in body doubles, he wouldn't have told them about the bunkers on the property unless it was necessary. At this early stage in the game, it wasn't. Plus, Tom once told her the Remingtons and Weavers made a pact that no one outside their families could ever know about the location of their bunkers.

Sure, Tom and Wilson were dead and gone. A new generation of Remingtons ran the organization their fathers developed, but as far as she could tell, nothing ever changed with the transfer of leadership. As long as the Remingtons owned those properties, she couldn't imagine the disclosing of family secrets, even to other operatives in the unit. The underground compounds offered the Remingtons safe houses, and on occasion all operatives ran for cover.

She saw movement at the side of the Weaver house and reached behind her back to retrieve her handgun. Someone was trying to sneak in the back door, and by God, if they made it that far, she'd have a surprise waiting for them by the time they found their way inside.

\* \* \* \*

Sloane planned to shake Veronica up enough to where she remembered her place on the team. He didn't need to worry about her sneaking around the house at night. Taking a stroll after dark could have dangerous consequences.

He sliced the screen and slid a credit card down the side of the back door until he felt it give. Jiggling the knob, he was home free when the spring gave. A few seconds later, he eased his way down the dimly lit hallway and turned the corner, heading for the steps.

"Not so fast, buster."

A cold weapon landed firmly against his shoulder, and Veronica kned him in the back, apparently determined to take him to his knees.

“That’s not your smartest move, sugar,” Sloane said, rapidly turning on her and pinning her to the wall.

The full moon peeping through the window captured her expression and showcased her beauty, so much, in fact, he gasped. “What the fuck?” Reaching for the light switch on the foyer wall, he treaded on a dangerously thin sheet of ice when his nerve endings reacted to the woman he held against the panel.

Kelsie, he reminded himself, was not in his arms. Flipping the switch up, he rubbed his left eye and refocused. God help him, how had he mistaken Veronica for Kelsie?

“You could’ve killed me!” she harped.

“You should’ve stayed your ass at home. Most women don’t walk over to their neighbor’s house when the red digits on the bedside clock announce it’s midnight.

“How did you know?”

“That it’s midnight?” he retorted, tossing his arm in the air and pointing to his wristwatch. “Oh, maybe it’s just a lucky guess.”

“I mean about the bedside clock. How did you know there was a digital clock in my room?”

“Oh, dear God, woman, what do you think?”

“I think you’ve been in this house before,” she admitted. “And not for this assignment.”

Sloane rubbed his left eye again but kept his other hand pressed against her abdomen. “Logan said you needed to talk to me. So here I am. Talk.”

“You’re Sloane Remington.”

“Excellent. I’m glad the boys convinced you to believe in what we’re working to achieve here. If anyone pays us a visit, we need our stories straight.”

“No. I mean, you’re the real Sloane Remington.”

“Sugar, you can believe whatever you want, but when these ranches are infiltrated by our enemies, you’d better not care who the hell I am. You’d better be able to do your job.”

She grinned wider, and Sloane knew right then what was on her mind. The whole unit knew he was pussy whipped by Kelsie. She was the love of his life, and nothing or no one would ever change his feelings. But someone would test them and that someone was starting right now.

“You know,” Veronica hummed, working her fingers over the buttons of her blouse. “It can get lonely out here.”

His gaze fell to her heaving chest. The woman evidently found her thrills in working the men around her.

“I’ve been waiting for nearly a month. Setting everything up as Sloane instructed, reading files and finding out what I could about the lives of Wilson Remington and Tom Weaver.” Her fingers worked swiftly, the pearl buttons moved in and out of one slit, in and out of another, until her blouse was open and her eyes hooded.

Sloane licked his bottom lip and stared at the luscious showing of full breasts a lace bra did little to conceal. Hell, he was a man after all. He could look. He didn’t have to touch.

Then again, he reminded himself, he was a man in love with a woman. A dying woman, he thought, closing his eyes. A woman he loved who was fighting for her life.

He had no damn right to look.

“Button up.” He turned away all at once.

She threw her arms over his back and rubbed her chest against him. “Do you want to know what I looked forward to most?”

He chuckled. “I’m sure you were waiting for a man or two to help you out with whatever problems you’ve developed while you’ve been out here.”

“No. I’ve been anticipating the arrival of the man who would stand in for Sloane Remington.”

“You have?” He should commend her for her approach. She knew how to stroke a man’s ego.

“Yes, Sloane,” she purred, kissing his nape and running her hands through his unkempt hair. “I always wanted to know what the real Sloane Remington was like in the bedroom, but he has obligations, responsibilities.” She paused and he tried to think. Hell, his fucking prick was responding to her line of BS, and his brain wasn’t processing fast enough to keep up with her mind games.

Blowing in his ear, she whispered, “I bet he has a cock that can stroke a woman straight into heaven.”

Sloane closed his eyes and thought of Kelsie. God help him, he didn’t want to betray her. Heaven help him, he didn’t want to do something he’d later regret.

“So tell me something, big boy.” She released a throaty cry, wrapping her arms around his waist and reaching for his belt. “How long do you think you can resist me without telling me the truth? Hmmm...I don’t think you’ve got it in you to turn me down. Do you want to know why?” she asked, working to loosen the leather.

“Why?” he played along, rolling his head in an attempt to resist the final fall for her seduction.

“The real Sloane can barely keep his eyes off my ass when he’s working with me. You seem to have the same problem.”

With a quick whip of her wrist, the belt was undone. Sloane slapped his hands over hers and faced her. “You gotta stop this.”

“Or what? Who can you run to when you’re the boss? Huh, Sloane?”

“Regardless of who I am, I’m your superior officer in this operation.”

“We don’t work for anyone when we’re in the field unless you decided to change the rules after your father died.”

“My father—”

“Oops, you’d better watch it, sweet thing,” she warned. “You’re about to give away your secrets.”

“I tell you what, you seem interested in taking this to the next level. How about I just show you what you’re dying to see?” Sloane grabbed her arm and yanked her up the stairs behind him.

As he suspected, she damn sure didn’t resist.

## Chapter Four

“So you got something against fucking in the hallway?”

Sloane turned on the bedroom lights. He yanked open a top drawer in Kelsie’s dresser and retrieved a metal box.

Veronica had seen the container before and wondered what sorts of contents were valuable enough to keep locked in a house the Remingtons seldom visited and not important enough to be kept with them at all times. Had the box been left behind by accident when the Remingtons moved to Italy?

“I’m sure you’ve already seen this. Maybe you’ve even picked the lock?” He glanced up once before he retrieved a silver keychain from his pocket and used a small key to unlock his little treasure.

“I ran across it when I first moved in.”

“With four other bedrooms, you chose Kelsie’s room. Why is that?”

She shrugged. “I guess I get off on thinking about what once went on here.”

“You wanna know?” he asked, his eyes hazing over with what she couldn’t translate as lust now. Instead, she saw plenty of pain. “‘Cause if you do, I’ll tell you.”

She swallowed hard. “You are Sloane. I knew it.”

“Yes, and apparently I underestimated you, Veronica. You’re no man’s fool, but you’re dabbling with something you’ll never be able to handle.”

He retrieved a photograph and shoved it in her direction. “Go on, take it. Look real close.”

She yanked the picture from his hand and saw him visibly jerk.

“Don’t worry. I won’t rip it.”

He sat down on the royal blue ottoman located in the far corner of Kelsie’s bedroom. “That’s our wedding day.”

She snickered. “A little untraditional, don’t you think?”



“Go ahead, laugh. But when you’re done, study those expressions staring back at you. It was the happiest day of my life. My brothers will tell you the same thing.”

Veronica felt a stabbing sensation. “Tom looks proud.”

“Tom and my father were like two kids that day. They were as happy as we were,” Sloane told her. His legs splayed, and his hands dropped in between his legs. “Well, maybe not quite as ecstatic. We had the honeymoon to look forward to, after all.”

“I’ll bet. Kelsie was a lucky woman.”

Sloane looked up, and Veronica saw the agony in his expression. “She is a lucky woman. She’s loved more today than she was in that photograph, and even though she’s dying, any one of us would give our lives to save her.”

She nodded slowly. “I understand.”

“I hope so. We’re here to do a job, Miss Leigh, but when we’re done here, we’re going home to our woman. We’re going to take care of her for as long as the good Lord will let her stay with us.”

“Did you find religion somewhere recently, Sloane?”

“I’ve always had a touch of faith, Veronica. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have survived in this business as long as I have.”

She handed the photograph back to him, and when he started to take the glossy print, she quickly asked, “Would you mind if I kept the picture out while I’m here?”

“Why?”

“I don’t have any recent pictures of your dad and Tom. I’d like it very much if you’d leave that one out, so I can...” she shrugged, “so maybe I can remember what they looked like when they were the happiest.”

Sloane snapped the photograph away from her and stood.

“Okay, I guess not.”

Placing the metal box on the seat he vacated, Sloane walked over to the dresser and propped the picture against the mirror. “Kelsie has other copies. I guess keeping this one out wouldn’t hurt. I know Tom and Dad thought a lot of you.”

Staring back at her reflection in the mirror, he said, “The reason I chose you for the job is because you’re one of the best in the unit. I didn’t choose

you because you're the best woman. I chose you because you're one of the unit's brightest. Tom always said so."

Of course he would. She didn't bother telling Sloane why.

"You have to trust me," she said moving closer. "I can help you pull this off, but we can't have secrets between us."

Sloane turned around as if he expected to ward off another attempt at a sexual conquest. "I don't have to trust anyone, but I'll tell you the truth from here forward."

"If you'd started with a little honesty from the beginning, you could've saved us a lot of trouble and, uh," she looked down, "maybe even saved yourself a little embarrassment."

"If you think an erection bothers me, sugar, then you've underestimated me. I get a hard-on pulling a fucking trigger. Nothing gets me going more than a little revenge."

"I got you going."

"You wanted information. You knew how to get it. I have to commend you for forcing my hand."

"It almost worked with Dusty."

\* \* \* \*

Sloane took a deep breath. Then he allowed himself a true indulgence. He studied the woman, not the operative, in front of him.

Veronica was about Kelsie's age and a tad bit taller. She had auburn curls straight down her back, and they fell in ringlets over her shoulders. A few of the locks touched her brows, and her nose was so small it was easily overlooked. Luscious lips glossed over with a natural shine, and her dimples only further defined the woman's spunk.

He suspected a long time ago that Dusty found an instant connection with Veronica and from the start of the mission planned to keep them apart. A few years ago, he wouldn't have worried, but Dusty had continued to sink into a dark place, hiding behind his humor and making light of everything important, even his feelings for Kelsie.

"Leave Dusty alone, Veronica."

"What? You think your little brother likes me?"

“Show a little respect. Kelsie is dying. None of us are exactly taking her out for a little romantic dinner and dancing just so we can lead her back to the bedroom. She’s sick, practically on her death bed.”

“I am sorry, Sloane.”

“I don’t need your pity. What I need is for you to remember this. We’re men and we all have needs. None of us want to do something we’ll have to live with for the rest of our lives, especially Dusty. Leave him the hell alone or I’ll have to find someone else to come in here and take your place.”

“And you don’t want to do that,” she said.

“No.”

“Do you want me to tell you why?”

“We both know why.”

“I look like her.”

Sloane bowed his head, placing his hands on the doorframe. “You share similar features, but, no, you’re not our Kelsie, and none of us would mistake you for her. We’re just hoping we can fool whoever is out there waiting and watching so when the time comes, you’re the bait our enemies will take.”

“I see.”

“I hope you do,” he stated flatly. After a long pause, he asked, “Out of curiosity, what gave us away?”

She laughed. “Ah, you mean, why did I know I had the real Remington brothers instead of a surgeon’s copies?”

“Yeah.”

“For starters, I worked with you and Dusty, remember? I noticed everything about you, and even though Dusty tipped me off almost from our initial hellos, in the end it was your eyes that gave everything away. A plastic surgeon couldn’t duplicate those eyes, Sloane.”

“I guess not.”

“Your eyes are a peculiar shade, but what you desperately try to conceal behind them—the heartache, the pain, the cold-blooded killer instinct—isn’t something any doctor can instill in a patient.

“Your eyes give you away Sloane Remington. You’re a hardened man but a man with real substance, too. There isn’t a physician in this world who could recreate you.”

Sloane studied her quietly, noting the passion in her voice as she revealed the things she'd noticed about him. Unfortunately, Veronica thought of him as darn near perfect, flaws and all. And if she wasn't careful, he could break her heart.

\* \* \* \*

"What are you still doing here?" Sloane asked Dusty upon entering the bunker.

"I've got a ten o'clock flight," he replied, crossing his ankles and pulling his cap over his eyes.

"Then go to bed. I need that couch."

"Are you staying up all night?" Dusty asked, stretching before he sat.

"No, but I have some thinking to do."

"Then go to the bunks like everyone else. I'm watching the monitors. It's quiet here."

"I said—"

"Every single time we come back here," Dusty interrupted, "you take the lead like you're in charge."

Sloane stared at Dusty.

"Veronica got to you."

"We've worked with her before and she never 'got to me' once."

"Really? Then do you care to tell me what took you so long over there?"

"We had a talk."

"Talk?" Drew asked, entering the control room. "And what did you discuss for over an hour?"

Sloane closed his fist and rubbed Drew's head in passing. "Don't worry about it, kid. I'd let you know if I played in the playpen."

"Shit," Dusty said. "If you play with her, you won't be in a playpen. You'll be stepping into a cougar's den."

Sloane chuckled. "No worries. I've got a little lady back in Italy I can't wait to see."

Drew arched a brow. "You're both attracted to Veronica, aren't you?"

"She's easy on the eyes," Dusty said, realizing Drew would give him a little hell after his confession.

"She may be, but you could show some self-control."

“Ah, hell, little brother.” Dusty grabbed the bulge in his jeans. “This thing hasn’t been out of my pants for nearly a year and a half. I can promise you I’ve got a handle on things here.”

Chuckling, Drew said, “Uh, you’ve got a grip all right. We’ve all heard you in the shower.”

Sloane joined in and laughed, too. Then the room fell quiet. Breaking the silence, Sloane said, “I had to tell her who we are.”

“Shit,” Benson said, entering the room in his flannel pajama pants. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

Logan was coming out of the shower and scrubbed the top of his head with a plain white towel. “Of course he’d tell her. He won’t look into those soft blue eyes and lie to her, will you, Sloane?”

“There you are. I was starting to miss you. I’m glad you’ve had a shower. I want you to go home with Dusty. Check on Kelsie and come on back when you can.”

Logan slapped the damp towel against a nearby office chair, and the impact caused the chair to roll forward. “Are you out of your mind?”

“No. One of Kelsie’s greatest fears was being left alone. Now, we’ve successfully broken the promise we made and left her all by herself when she doesn’t need to face one day without security. Things are under control here. I want you and Dusty to go to Italy and make sure she has everything she needs. If she lost her cancer battle while we’re here waiting to start some kind of war, I don’t think any of us could cope later.”

“Then send Drew,” Logan said.

“You don’t want to see Kelsie?” Drew asked, frowning.

“Of course I do,” Logan said. “I want nothing more than to be with her right now, but, Sloane, you of all people know where your strengths and your weaknesses are. You’re sending your manpower away.”

“Thanks,” Benson interjected, leaning on the desk and crossing his arms. “I appreciate the confidence you have in me, bro.”

Sloane studied Logan and Dusty. Shit, Dusty thought, he had to know Logan spoke the truth. “This is crazy, Sloane. Leaving you with Benson and Drew is like leaving you behind for slaughter.”

“I have confidence in our neighbor.”

“Fucking hell,” Benson said, shaking his head. “You have faith in a woman but little confidence in me and Drew? Are you out of your mind?”

“He fucked her,” Logan said, glaring at Sloane.

“No, I didn’t bang the broad, but I know one hot little babe who would be excited as hell to see your handsome face.”

Dusty shook his head. “I don’t like it.”

“Me, either,” Logan said.

Sloane shrugged. “Go, stay a few days, and come on back. We’re secure here. I don’t want any of us traveling alone right now.”

“And you think Dusty needs an escort?” Logan asked.

“No, darlin’, but you might,” Sloane taunted. “Besides, you’re high maintenance, quick to anger, and far too volatile for the task at hand.”

“You may live to regret those words,” Logan grated out. “I’m exactly what you need here right now, but hell if you want me to go, and Kelsie needs me at home, I’m ready to board the plane. I’ll never turn down the chance to spend some time with the prettiest woman in the world.”

Dusty longed to see Kelsie, too, but he couldn’t shake the uneasiness. He damn sure didn’t like leaving his family behind, especially if they were expecting Gomez Gustavo Esparza.

\* \* \* \*

“What the fuck are you doing?” Veronica drew her fist back to strike, but Logan caught her arms in time, holding her wrists high above her head.

Dusty stared at Veronica and watched for a flicker of fear, but he didn’t see what he expected. The woman must have had bigger knockers than he had balls because if she was scared, she never allowed him to see the terror.

“Shh,” he said, placing his fingertips over her lips. “We have a favor to ask.”

“Great, couldn’t you have called?” She looked up at Logan and added, “I thought you didn’t like surprises.”

“I’m not surprised. I knew we were coming here before we left our place.”

She quickly stared at the clock. “It’s six o’clock in the fucking morning.”

“Yeah, well, if you hadn’t been sneaking around our place after midnight, then you would’ve had plenty of time for your beauty sleep,” Logan teased. “And by the looks of it, you need some.”

She set her jaw. "So you came all the way over here to insult me?"

"No," Dusty said, backing away, nodding toward Logan who then released his grasp. "We need to talk to you."

"Fine," she said, rubbing her arms. "Are we still playing games or did Sloane tell you I know who you are?"

"I always thought you did," Dusty said. "It was in the kiss."

Logan gave him a stern glare and walked over to the dresser. Undoubtedly, he spotted the same picture Dusty saw when he first entered the bedroom.

"Did you say you're leaving?" Veronica asked, tossing pillows behind her back and cocking her head to the side. "I mean if you're going somewhere, don't let me keep you."

"We need to know if we can count on you."

"Are you asking?"

"Damn it. Don't play games," Logan snapped from behind him.

"I'm all in," she said, tilting her head toward the photograph now gripped between Logan's hands. "In case you didn't know, I had a lot of respect for your father, and I loved Tom Weaver like he was my own father."

Logan looked surprised and Dusty asked, "Like your own father? Why is that?"

Dusty watched Veronica nervously smooth her hands across the soft white sheet. "Veronica?"

She lowered her eyes, but then immediately looked up when she said, "No one ever cared about me. Tom took me in and made me feel like I was part of a real family."

"He taught you to kill," Logan quickly reminded her. "Did you grow up with a pack of murderers?"

"He trained me just like the two of you were trained. He saw something in me no one else did."

"I can't imagine what." Dusty looked at her chest and the ample cleavage she showcased even with the sheet tucked under her arms.

"Yeah," Logan snickered. "Me, either. I figure any man who wants to see what you have doesn't have to ask."

"Don't flatter yourself, Logan. I'm not as easy as what you might think."

“We both know that’s not true, don’t we?” Dusty asked, refusing to look away from the soft contour of a full rack.

“Why are you here?”

Dusty stood. “We’re going to bring Kelsie home. We need your help.”

“You can’t bring her here. Are you out of your mind?”

“No,” Logan said. “We’ve discussed all other options and decided we need to make her feel safe. There’s no way she can feel secure when she’s in Italy and we’re in the States.”

“Does Sloane know?”

“He doesn’t,” Logan said. “And you won’t tell him.”

“Kelsie is dying,” Dusty stated flatly. “And she’s not going to die alone if we have something to say about it. As a woman, if you have a heart under those big breasts, surely you can relate to what she must be going through. She’s in an unfamiliar place, waiting for the men she loves but uncertain whether or not we’ll make it out of this mission alive.”

“She must be anxiety-ridden.”

Logan walked over and stood by the bed. “We want to know if there’s anything new going down here before we bring her home. Sloane will count on you. He won’t have any other choice. Drew and Benson aren’t as qualified as you are, and he knows this even if he won’t tell you.”

“Your brothers are trained operatives. I’m sure they can hold their own.”

“You’ve been on twice as many missions as those two have under their belts together,” Dusty pointed out. “If anything happens here, Sloane will tell you first. We need to hear from you when Sloane relays intelligence.”

“Why are you going behind his back?”

“Because he’d never bring Kelsie home,” Logan replied.

“Then maybe you need to think about that before you make her travel halfway around the world.”

“We’ve thought about it. She’ll be happier here,” Dusty said.

“Much,” Logan agreed. “And when she gets here, you’re going to be good to her, got it?”

Veronica looked stunned. “Why would I mistreat a woman who obviously can’t fend for herself?”

“Because,” Logan said. “You already have your eyes on her men. Kelsie is smart. She’ll pick up on any wild ideas you may have.”



Veronica shook her head. “There you go again, giving yourselves far too much credit. I was playing a game and working you until I had the truth. Now that I know who I’m working with, you don’t have the first reason to worry. I’ll behave whether the little woman is here or not.”

“See that you do,” Dusty said, slapping her hip.

Groaning, she said, “I imagine you’ll have a harder time than I will, Dusty.”

## Chapter Five

Dusty might as well have kicked the door down. He flew up the stairs and rounded the hallway headed for Kelsie's room. At the airport, he'd spoken to Kelsie's doctor who informed him she stopped going in for chemotherapy the day they left for the States. Her decision wasn't something she discussed with any of them.

Logan stopped Dusty before he entered her bedroom. "Listen to me. You can't go in there like this."

"The hell I can't."

"No, you can't. Whatever her reasons for stopping her treatment, she came to the decision on her own, and we can't condemn her for the choice she made. If we'd been here, then she might have discussed other options but we weren't here. You can't blame her."

Dusty shook free of Logan's grip. "The hell I can't! She's never made the first decision without consulting one of us first. What gives her the right to do it now?"

"Maybe she's tired of the fight."

"Then I'll put some spirit back in her," he said, nudging the door open with his foot.

"Oh, my God," he whispered when he saw her. "She looks so tiny."

The woman they'd left nearly a month ago was as frail as an old woman lying in a nursing home without adequate nutrition. Dusty and Logan approached the bed quietly. Cora sat nearby reading a book.

Looking up, Cora pointed toward the door, and they backed out of the room with tears in their eyes. Dusty buried his face in the hook of his arm.

Logan placed his hand on his shoulder, but Dusty shrugged him away. He wanted to be left alone. He wanted to carry this pain without anyone to console him, especially a man who had to be going through the same kind of despair.

Cora crept into the hall. "She'll be so glad to see you."

"Dusty talked to Doctor Santiago when we landed. Why did she stop the treatments?"

"She's been in a lot of pain and said the chemotherapy made her sick, weaker than she wanted to feel in her final days."

"You should've called us," Dusty bit out.

"She asked me not to."

Anger ran rampant and Dusty screamed, "Who the hell do you think writes your paychecks?"

"Sloane Remington," she said pointedly.

"Swell," Dusty said. "That money behind the paper belongs to all of us. You owed Sloane, or at least one of us, a phone call."

"Is she eating?" Logan asked.

Dusty blurted out, "Of course she's not eating. Go back in there and look at her! She's a bag of bones!"

Cora remained calm. "She eats when she can. She's been very worried about all of you, and by being here you're helping her more than you know. She's lost a lot of weight, but something to keep in mind, too, is that even though she's weak, Kelsie has good days and bad. Sometimes, I have to drag her out of bed and encourage her to sit outside. Other days, I look up and find her walking down the sidewalk to greet me at the start of my shift."

Dusty sneered and pushed by her, leaving Logan to deal with the old bitty. He rushed for the bed and knelt next to Kelsie, brushing her bangs away from her face.

"Ah, Kelsie, what are you doing to yourself, sweetheart?" He tilted her chin toward him and kissed her softly on the lips. "Baby, wake up."

"Dusty?" A sleepy smile spread her dry, cracked lips.

"Yes, honey. It's me. Logan's here, too. He's out in the hall talking to Cora."

"It's Dusty," she said dreamily before nodding back off to sleep.

"Kelsie?"

"Dusty," she whispered.

"Honey, I want you to sit up for me." He tried to help her, but she responded by slumping against him. He cleared his throat and took a firm approach. "Baby, I want you to sit up right this minute. I've got to get you dressed. We're taking you home."

Her eyes opened all at once. "To Missouri?"

"Yes," he promised, kissing her forehead. "We're taking you back to Missouri."

"Am I dying?"

"No, honey. We're going to make sure you live."

\* \* \* \*

They chartered a plane and waited until they were in Pittsburgh refueling before placing a call to Missouri. While Dusty went inside the airport, Logan sat on the plane with Kelsie, holding her hand and placing cool rags on her forehead. She never complained, but Kelsie didn't like to fly, and her paper thin skin felt clammy and hot to the touch.

Spoon feeding her ice chips, Logan cradled her neck and shoulders while she looked out the small window. "Pittsburgh doesn't look all that welcoming."

"Oh, I don't know. The people here are great. I've worked a few jobs in Pennsylvania."

She giggled. "And your favorite football team is here."

"Nah, just the best looking cheerleaders."

"Stop. You'll make me laugh."

"You think that's funny, huh?" He was glad to see her smile. "It's true. The team sucks, but those gals with the pompoms, well they can play on my field anytime."

"I'll bet," she said weakly. "After taking care of me for a few years, you deserve to look at some healthy gals who still have their curves in the right places."

He held her gaze then and said, "Kelsie, there's not a woman around Pittsburgh or in this world, for that matter, who holds a candle to you."

"Logan," she said, squeezing his hand, "I need to talk to you."

He studied her expression and knew what she wanted to say. They'd have time for all that nonsense later. Right now, he wanted to hold his woman's hand and sit by her side until they landed in Missouri.

"I'm not going for treatment again."

Picking up her boney fingers, he kissed her knuckles and said, "We can talk about this later."

Yeah, he thought, when Sloane could stand behind him and tell her differently. She always listened to Sloane, and he wouldn't give her a choice. Her little ass would fight again once Sloane shook some sense into her.

"No. I want to talk about it now."

"Honey, why don't you want to fight anymore?"

She closed her eyes and said, "I am fighting. I'm just doing this my way now."

"No, you're giving up."

"I'm not. You don't understand. I'm trying to live out my final days with some measure of dignity."

"If you want nobility, you'll follow a regimen most cancer patients have followed before you."

"And then what? Let you all watch me spend the last days of my life crunched over a bucket vomiting every time I have one of those treatments? No thank you. I've been zapped by radiation and chemotherapy until the thought of another hospital sickens me almost as much as the concept of dying and leaving all of you behind."

"Want me to go with you?" he teased.

"Go with me?"

"To the treatments."

"For a minute, I thought you were contemplating something else."

He kissed her hands and bowed his head. "If I could be lying there instead of you, Kelsie, God knows I would."

"I know you would, but I'm glad it's me and not one of you."

Dusty boarded again. "We're all set," he announced. "Veronica will pick us up at the airport."

"Why didn't you call Sloane, Drew, or Benson?" she asked.

Logan and Dusty swapped a quick glance. "Don't you worry your pretty little head about it," Dusty said. "Besides, I thought you wanted to meet Veronica."

"Sure," she said, frowning. "But I'd rather see my men first."

"You stingy little woman you," Logan teased. "Two still not enough for you?"

She sighed. "Logan, believe me, if I could take the two of you right now, I'd be happy with what I have."

Dusty winked. "You let us know when you're ready to go."

Her expression changed, and a look of sorrow instantly washed over her pretty little sunken cheeks. "Cancer has destroyed our relationship, hasn't it?"

"Honey, no," Logan said, framing her face. "Don't ever think our relationship has changed. We love you as much today as we ever have. Isn't that right, Dusty?"

"Absolutely," he said. "This hand here has made a fine replacement for what you used to give me."

"Dusty," Logan muttered.

"It's okay," she said, coughing. "I expect his comments." After a ragged breath, she added, "But not his lies."

"I'm not lying. Wanna watch?"

"Good grief, Dusty," Logan said, backing away and allowing him space to kneel next to Kelsie. If Dusty planned to yank out his pecker, he didn't want to sit too close.

"Don't worry, Logan. I'll save the private show for my woman later. She likes the one on one action, don't you, honey?"

"I'd like any action right now."

"I know, baby," Dusty whispered. "Believe me, I know."

\* \* \* \*

Veronica pulled all sorts of strings. A better man might have been impressed, but she wasn't there to gain brownie points with the Remingtons. She was there to meet a woman who had intrigued her since she first learned about Kelsie Weaver.

The paramedics stood next to the ambulance waiting to transport Kelsie back to the farm. She watched Dusty and Logan step off the plane and waited at a distance while the EMTs carried Kelsie to the awaiting vehicle.

Once she was loaded in the ambulance, she approached Dusty and Logan. "How was your flight?"

"Fine," Dusty said, barely looking her way.

"Would you like to meet her?" Logan asked.

"I can wait until we get her home. I know she's tired."

"I think she'd like to meet you," Dusty stated flatly. "Come on." He extended his right arm forward and pressed his left palm in between her shoulder blades, encouraging her to move toward the vehicle where Kelsie's stretcher had been placed.

Veronica climbed into the back of the ambulance. Once there, she was startled at the way she reacted to the woman's appearance. She looked frail, helpless, and like she might just take the last ride of her life from the airport to the farm.

"I'm Kelsie," she said, reaching for her hand.

Taking her hand in hers, Veronica said, "It's an honor to finally meet you."

"I know. I feel the same way," she said quietly. "Did you drive over?"

"Yes."

"Thank you for arranging all of this. I don't think Dusty and Logan told Sloane I'm coming home yet."

"They wanted to surprise him."

Coughing, Kelsie said, "Oh, he'll be surprised."

"He'll be glad to see you."

When Kelsie studied her a little too intently, Veronica wondered if she suspected something and thought about immediately putting her mind at ease. Instead, Kelsie looked down the length of her body, and before Veronica had the chance to explain anything, she said, "Dusty, I want Veronica to ride with me."

"That's fine," he said, grabbing a hold of her foot and shaking it in a playful manner. Then, he looked at Veronica and said, "Scoot over. Logan can follow us."

"No," Kelsie said. "I want her to ride with me alone."

Dusty's brow furrowed. "Now why would you want to look at her when you could have me pampering you all the way out to the ranch?"

"In case you haven't noticed, I don't have much of an opportunity to talk to other women. I want to get to know the gal who spends the most time with my men, and unless you have something to hide, you won't mind."

Veronica wanted to laugh outright. She had to give Kelsie credit. She knew how to keep her men in check.

When Dusty reluctantly shut the doors, Kelsie said, "I've longed to meet you."

“Same here.”

“Do you know who I am?” Kelsie asked her.

“Why, yes,” she said. “You’re Tom Weaver’s daughter. The lucky woman who landed those two right there.” She pointed toward Logan and Dusty.

“Never mind the men. Do you know who *I* am to you?”

“Yes,” Veronica said. “You’re my sister.”



## Chapter Six

The first few moments between the women proved awkward. Kelsie studied her half-sister and immediately saw strong similarities. She doubted Veronica noticed them. Since cancer, Kelsie had lost forty pounds, and weighing in at a whopping ninety-three pounds didn't exactly make a woman look her best.

"How long have you known about me?" Veronica asked, hurt lacing through her voice.

Kelsie turned the question around. "How long have you known about me?"

"A while."

"Same here," Kelsie said.

Another uncomfortable silence followed, and Kelsie reached out and touched her sister's hair. "I would've asked Dad to let you come and live with us if I'd known about you sooner."

She grinned. Veronica had such a pretty, vibrant smile.

"I don't think Tom wanted us to meet. I understand why now."

"Then maybe you can explain his reasons to me because I don't understand and I never will."

Veronica scooted her bottom across the small bench so she sat parallel to Kelsie. "I doubt either one of us hurt for much growing up, eh?"

"Eh? Spent some time out of the country, huh?"

"Nah," she drawled. "What makes you think such a thing?"

Kelsie giggled. "Dad kept me on the move. How about you?"

"After Mom died, he tried to keep me—how should I say this—sheltered."

"Tell me about it. He hovered over me all of my life and when he didn't, his men did." Kelsie tried to sit.

“Hang on there a minute,” Veronica said in an alarming tone. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I need to move.”

Veronica helped her. “We have a lot of time to catch up. Why don’t you rest until we get you home?”

“I want to know about your mother. My mom died, too. What happened to yours?”

“Mine died in a car accident, and after a team of experts visited the crash site, they determined there wasn’t foul play.”

“Do you believe that?”

“It was twenty years ago. I have no other choice but to believe what Tom told me.”

“You don’t call him Dad?”

“Never did. A father earns his title. He doesn’t breeze in and out of town, leaving a wad of cash on the table and a few gifts here or there. That’s what Tom did.”

“Oh,” Kelsie said. “Sounds somewhat familiar, but Tom—Dad—loved you, I’m sure of it. He took care of his family, Veronica. Surely he took care of you.”

“In many ways, he did. In other ways, in matters of family, he failed tremendously.” She looked away quickly and pointed to the tan SUV following close behind the ambulance. “Those fellows don’t want you out of their sights, huh?”

“Apparently, they don’t mind so much now. They left me in Italy, for crying out loud.”

“Are you bitter?” she asked, sounding surprised.

“No, and I even understood. Had I died while they were here and I was there, I would’ve died at peace, actually. I wanted them to come back and end this thing with the Venezuelans. It’s something they should’ve put to rest a long time ago.”

“So you’re familiar with the various threats against the Underground Unit?”

“I know what they want me to know and that’s about it. Keep in mind they view me as helpless.”

Veronica shook her head. “They love you.”

“I don’t know how they can now.”

“Why?”

Kelsie wasn't sure if she should trust a woman who called her father out by his first name, but at the same time, something told her she was going to form an unbreakable bond with the woman sitting beside her. She went with her gut. “I'm not a wife to them now.”

Veronica looked away again. Kelsie noticed how Veronica immediately found a point of redirected focus whenever she mentioned something disturbing.

Clearing her throat, she took a short breath and said, “I'm surprised one of them didn't mention it.”

“Why would any of them tell me something so personal?”

She frowned. “Apparently, you haven't looked in the mirror lately. You're very beautiful.”

“You're vain, I take it,” Veronica said, smiling.

“Excuse me?”

“On the dresser in your room, there's a photograph of you on your special day. I imagine it was a wedding ceremony of sorts. If you look close enough at the picture and take a closer look at me, you can see the strong resemblance between half-sisters. If I'm beautiful, so are you.”

“I like you.”

“I hope so. I've waited a long time to meet you.”

“Same here,” Kelsie said quietly. “Now, I'm going to sleep the rest of the way.”

“I'll be right here looking over you until you wake up,” Veronica promised.

“Sounds about right,” Kelsie whispered. “That's what we Weavers do. We look out for our family.”

\* \* \* \*

Sloane felt the rage of his inner beast. He glared at Benson and Drew, the messengers. “What do you mean they're on their way back here with Kelsie?”

Benson's hand went out as if to explain a particular point. “Cora, one of Kelsie's—”

"I know who the fuck Cora is, you moron. Explain why Kelsie is coming here!"

"You won't let Benson finish what he was saying. Besides, Dusty and Logan will have to fill us in when they get back. We don't know why they made the decision. Maybe she begged to come home."

Sloane marched through the barn, kicking up sawdust as he walked. "Where the hell is Veronica?"

"Uh," Drew's lips rolled under his teeth, and his gaze darted between Sloane and Benson, "I...uh, well, you're not going to like this."

Sloane seethed. "What won't I like? Please tell me she didn't know about this."

"Assuming she did, she may have been the one to arrange transportation for Kelsie," Benson said. "Especially since she's not here. I haven't bumped into her in the last hour."

"Excellent," Sloane said, punching at the wind. "While our wife is on her way here, we could've been attacked from all sides and none of us would've known what hit us. Do you think Dusty or Logan thought about that?"

"I doubt it," Benson replied honestly. "And, Sloane, if I'd been in their shoes, I probably wouldn't have thought about a mid-afternoon attack, either. In fact, after talking to Cora, I'm not sure I would've thought about our security at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Benson reluctantly said, "They're bringing Kelsie back here to die."

"Is she worse?"

"Apparently so," Benson said. "And the last thing she needs right now is you going the hell off because she wanted to come home."

"This isn't her home anymore. There's nothing left here for us."

"The hell you say," Benson said. "I've come to realize I'm tired of running from one country to the next. Missouri is our home. It's where we all spent the majority of our lives. We allowed our enemies to run us off the very place none of us ever wanted to leave."

"We left because we didn't want to bring down hell on the locals around here. Don't you forget the real reason we didn't stay here, little brother. This is not our home. It's a compound used as a cover-up for the Underground Unit."

Benson shook his head. "Since the livestock arrived, and those fields are filled to the brim with animals again, I disagree."

Sloane pursed his lips. "Don't get too comfortable here, Benson. When this mission ends, we're leaving."

"Don't argue with him," Drew said. "He's like Dad in one way if no other. He's always right."

"What did Cora tell you about Kelsie?" Sloane asked, ignoring Drew.

"The cancer has spread," Benson said softly.

Sloane paced back and forth in front of the barn. His left arm supported his right elbow, and he rested his chin on a closed fist while he walked.

"How bad?" he asked for more information like he might discuss a mission.

Benson shook his head.

"How bad?" Sloane pressed.

"Evidently, the cancer spread to her liver and lungs."

"Damn it!" Sloane screamed. He felt helpless, like the wind had been knocked out of him all at one time.

"Sloane." Drew cautiously approached him. "She should be here with us."

Sloane shook his head. "No, what we need to do is leave this mission and get her someplace safe."

"Think about it," Benson said. "When you consider all the tools and resources we have at our fingertips, there isn't a more secure place than right here at home."

"She doesn't want to die while we're fighting for revenge!" Sloane pointed out.

"She doesn't care," Benson said. "What she doesn't want is to be left alone. Cora said so."

"What the hell does she know about our Kelsie?"

"Probably more than we do at this stage in Kelsie's life," Benson said.

Drew took a deep breath and said, "The truth is, Benson and I never wanted to leave her. We felt like Kelsie should come first. Our enemies can wait. We wasted precious time we could've spent with Kelsie."

"They'll circle this place like vultures once they discover she's here!"

"And who's going to tell them?" Drew asked. "Besides, the only reason Veronica received this assignment was so she could do the same thing

Kelsie can do better—lure in the enemy. Some of the locals, several of Kelsie’s friends, would’ve known something was wrong from the moment they had a conversation with Veronica. She might pass as a double at a distance, but those who knew Kelsie best wouldn’t have bought the impersonation.”

“Sloane,” Benson began. “Whoever we fight, whoever is out there waiting, will show their faces whether Kelsie is here or not. They’ll arrive in due time but on their schedule. I don’t think they’re coming here for a dying woman. Our enemies would take Veronica before they’d take Kelsie.”

“Why the hell do you think someone would go after Veronica with Kelsie here, too?” Sloane asked.

Benson snickered. “Well, in case you haven’t noticed, she could almost pass for the Kelsie we knew five years ago. I have my doubts of whether or not our friends and neighbors would believe Veronica is Kelsie, but I still believe Veronica can pass herself off when it matters most. It’s why you hired her. If Esparza has been watching our family for years, then Veronica is his mark, not Kelsie.”

Sloane felt a sudden stabbing sensation straight through his heart. Was that really his underlying motive? Had he agreed to work with Veronica because he always saw the strong resemblance but couldn’t bring himself to acknowledge the truth? Had he chosen to work with her because she reminded him of a *healthier* Kelsie? No, he thought, how ridiculous would he be to choose an operative because she looked more like Kelsie than he admitted? He’d done worse, he mused, a lot worse.

Benson pointed toward the gate. “They’re here.”

Drew, God love his heart, looked as anxious as he might have on the night of their ceremony. He was still as love sick as a newlywed, and sometimes Sloane wondered if he even grasped the concept that Kelsie was dying.

Waiting for the SUV and ambulance to drive into the barn lot, Sloane felt a sudden tug at his heart strings. “Ah, hell,” he said. “You’re both right. I can’t think of a better place for her than right here.”

Benson smiled and winked. “She’s where she belongs, Sloane.”

Yeah, but if the cancer was eating away at her, she wasn’t the way they’d left her. He quickly prepared himself for the very worst.

## Chapter Seven

Kelsie caught a glimpse of Benson, Drew, and Sloane when they drove by them. Lord have mercy, they still made her feel so alive. Her heart soared from the moment she spotted them standing in front of the barn.

“Sloane looks tense.”

Veronica smiled but didn’t comment. She probably thought Sloane always looked like a man who had a dick up his ass. Most women didn’t warm up to Sloane like she did.

When the ambulance stopped behind the house, Kelsie excitedly tried to sit on her own. Veronica started to help her but backed away as if she realized Kelsie would want to appear healthy enough to manage by herself.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“Don’t mention it.” Veronica crouched over and made her way out of the ambulance when the back doors swung open.

Logan and Dusty rushed toward Sloane as if to warn him. Of course they would. They’d want to tell him, in about three or four breaths, everything Cora had told them—she looked worse, had lost a lot of weight, refused treatment, couldn’t eat, and was barely recognizable.

“Quit feeling sorry for yourself,” she muttered.

Veronica turned around. “Did you say something?”

Before she recited the speech she often gave at her self-indulgent pity parties, Benson and Drew barreled into the back of the ambulance.

“I want you to look at this woman!” Benson exclaimed, grabbing her hands and kissing them.

Drew patted her knee. “How’s my beautiful girl?”

“Good now and getting better all the time,” she promised, eyeing Sloane in the distance.

There was still something about Sloane that made her heart beat a little stronger whenever she saw him. Maybe it was because of the connection

they formed through their Dom-sub relationship, or perhaps it was because he'd been looking out for her all of her adult life.

Benson leaned down and kissed her dry lips. "Hmm, she still tastes like our gal."

"Move," Drew urged, elbowing him in the ribs. "I want to get a better one than that."

She grinned into their kiss when Drew's lips claimed hers. "I've missed you," she whispered.

"I've missed you more," he said, breathless. He didn't try to ease her into a more sensual kiss but instead cupped her neck and gave her light, feather-like kisses until she pushed him away.

"I'm not much to kiss right now," she said. "My mouth is dry."

Benson winked. "I'll run inside and get you a glass of Veronica's sweet iced tea."

"I have sweet iced tea in the refrigerator?" she asked, raising a brow.

"Well, don't you?" Drew asked.

She quickly shook her head and when Sloane passed her, he said, "Veronica here probably doesn't know where the pots and pans are kept."

"I can run over to McDonalds and buy a few gallons of tea if you'd like, Kelsie," she offered.

Shooting Veronica a sideways glance, Sloane climbed in the ambulance and wormed his way over to Kelsie. He brushed by Drew and scooped her in his arms, plucking her from the stretcher.

Carrying her across the short distance, he jumped off the back of the ambulance. "Y'all get her things. I'm taking her to bed."

Veronica frowned. "Is that a good idea?"

Sloane muttered something and kept walking.

"You're what?" Dusty asked while Benson waggled his brows.

Kelsie rested her head on Sloane's shoulder. He walked to the porch with her in his arms without saying one word. The others followed behind them.

"You've missed me," she whispered.

"Yes, Kelsie," he said, strolling across the foyer and up the stairs. "I've missed everything about you. Please God don't hold this against me, but as soon as you're up to it, I'm going to show you how much."



Kelsie's heart hammered against her chest. Sloane still wanted her. He wasn't afraid she'd break or completely turned off because she'd lost so much weight. She heard the hunger in his voice, the raspy edge of control slipping away. He was hungry, as famished as he once liked to keep her, and the only thing that would stop her from loving him was death itself.

From the landing, Kelsie locked gazes with her sister. Veronica called out, "Sloane, I moved my stuff out of Kelsie's room."

"I know," he said hastily. "I came over here looking for our little Miss Sharp Shooter and discovered you'd rearranged everything."

"Be nice," Kelsie pleaded.

"No," he replied. "And just so you know, I'm not playing nice with you, either. You were well enough to travel, and you're well enough for some hard lovin'."

\* \* \* \*

Sloane slammed the door in their faces. When Logan and Dusty first pulled him aside, they told him to do what he had to do to get her back into treatment. He planned to push until he got his way. Kelsie had no right to make such an important decision about her health care without consulting them first.

Sloane placed her on the bed and loosened the buttons on his cuffs. Pushing his sleeves halfway up his arms, he asked, "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes. It was a long trip and I'm a little tired, but overall, I feel good."

"I hope so," he growled, trying his best to keep his libido under control. She may have been sick, but if she was well enough to fly from Italy to the States, she could handle him while he fucked some sense into her. He was going to make her feel alive again. Once she remembered what it felt like to live, then maybe she'd forget about the dying agenda.

"Want a shower or a bath?"

"I need to rest. Would you lie down with me?"

"Shower or bath? And I'm going to do more than lie down with you."

He heard the quick hitch in her breath and ignored her. He walked into the bathroom and turned the water on, watching a jet of it spray from the faucet.

Noticing all the little knickknacks Veronica displayed around the bathroom made Sloane hard. The sweet smell of a woman filled his senses, and he inhaled the scent.

From vanilla and lilac to the rich smell of pineapple and coconut lotions, the whole area was nothing more than entrapment for a man who needed a woman. Not any woman would do, only Kelsie. If all he'd needed was a quick release, maybe he would've considered taking Veronica, but Veronica wasn't Kelsie, and thank God she didn't tempt him into a full betrayal.

He'd kept his vows sacred and now Kelsie was going to keep hers active. He'd make her participate in the full experience of loving him again. Then he'd take her straight to the hospital and check her in for her first treatment.

"Sloane," she called out. "I don't think I can do—"

Assuming his position as her Master, he snapped, "Slave, I don't give a damn if you lie there and don't enjoy it, but I'm going to love you today and I'm going to make you remember what it feels like to be one hundred percent sexy again."

Her skin flushed when he called her his slave. God help him, he never realized how much she enjoyed the lifestyle until he saw the color return to her sunken little cheeks.

"I'm not sexy, Sloane."

"You are to me and to those fellows outside your door. We all love you, Kelsie, every single one of us."

"I can't be with all of you at the same time."

"No, that's probably over," he said. "But you can love us one on one. The days of us all having you at the same time may be over, but just because you're sick doesn't mean you're dead. Do you hear me?"

She nodded quickly, and he snickered when he turned back to the tub. The little thing was already as eager as he was and to think she thought he'd let her come home and retreat to her bed for the duration of her life. Not on his watch. Hell no, not while he still drew air.

\* \* \* \*

"He's going to what?" Veronica asked, blinking.

“He’s making her see things his way,” Dusty explained, pacing the front porch, looking off into the distance like he couldn’t care less to stand guard while his brother fucked his woman.

“You think I don’t know what that means? That’s absurd. She’s too weak for *that* right now.”

“What do you know?” Logan replied, walking over to the stoop. “Just because you rode over here with her doesn’t mean you know what she wants or feels.”

“She’s not strong enough after the flight. If any of you cared about her, then maybe you could let her rest for a few hours before you bring out your little weenies.”

“Did she just refer to my pecker like it was an insignificant member?” Dusty teased, flashing Logan a grin.

“I think she did,” Logan reinforced. “Don’t take it personally. Word gets out. She probably knew someone who knew someone from the good old days. That’s how women work. They cry foul when we spread rumors about how good they are in bed, but when we turn our backs, they blab about size and performance. Veronica here must’ve heard all about where you’re lacking.”

“Damn, Logan,” Veronica said. “You hit below the belt.”

Logan continued, “He can take a few shots there. Poor guy doesn’t have anything worth hitting.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Dusty took it all in stride. “My cock isn’t small, Veronica. Ask Kelsie next time you have one of those private girl talks.”

Veronica directed her gaze toward Logan. “You need to chill out. I’m not here to fuck you, so I don’t care if you’re swinging thirteen inch cocks or under two. I’m not here to make your life with Kelsie complicated, and I’m damn sure not here to cause trouble. You guys need to start thinking of me as one of the fellows and,” she said, slapping Dusty between the shoulders, “the sooner you do that, the better we’ll all work together as a team.”

\* \* \* \*

After Sloane bathed her, he lifted her from the water and carried her to bed. His left arm secured her back and his right draped over her middle. Twirling her nipple in between his thumb and forefinger, he lowered his lips to hers, easing her onto the satin sheets.

She barely felt the mattress under her, but the cool feel of fresh sheets soothed her dry skin. Reaching for him, she attacked his smooth lips. One taste of him only sparked her desire for another satisfying kiss.

“Ah, Kels.” He breathed softly against her neck when his mouth left hers, and he lowered his head, dragging his tongue across her collarbone. “Hell and damnation, I’ve missed you. I’ve missed this.”

Her head pressed against the pillow, and the tears came as he kissed her. He couldn’t find her attractive, not now. She didn’t have breasts to speak of, and her bones jabbed into her flesh with such force she wondered if they’d poke him when he pressed against her.

“Oh, baby, please don’t cry.” Sloane wasn’t one to make tender, sweet love to her. He generally enforced the domination and submission roles in the bedroom. If he intended to love her any other way, then she should be scared, more frightened than ever before. If he took her nice and slow, then she knew the end was near.

Biting back the tears and the pain, she pressed her hand to the back of his head and encouraged him to go ahead and finish what they’d started. She didn’t want him to look at her then. Maybe if he closed his eyes, he could imagine her like she was before.

Sloane wasn’t a greedy lover. He arched his elbow and leaned on the pillow next to her. Looking down on her with nothing but love shining through his eyes, he caressed her cheek.

“I want you, Kelsie,” he said softly. “But more than I want you, I need to be part of you. Let me feel your body surrender to mine.”

It had been over a year since she’d made love to Sloane, and she knew he had needs, the kind of desires they all must have had. Only she wasn’t sure she could take care of five men, not now. But she wanted to love Sloane like she used to love him, wild and free, reckless and strong.

“Sloane, I love you,” she whispered.

“I know you do,” he said in his deep baritone voice, gripping his cock with one hand and rubbing it against her leg until she took over the task.

“That’s my girl,” he said. “You always know what to do. Use my body, baby. Use me to heal you. Let’s make the hurt go away.” His eyes glistened with his lust, and his heart-shaped mouth turned down in a frown. “Let’s make this last forever.”

She reached for him and worked his length in and out of her hand, marveling in the way his skin barely retreated as she pulled and released.

“Ah, yeah, sugar. You know what you’re doing.”

God help her, she used to. Did she still?

Pulling him to her, she nipped at his lips, “Master, I—”

“Today,” he interrupted, “I need to hear you say my name, Kelsie. Forget the way you used to love me and love me the way I need you to love me now.”

“I need you to control me,” she admitted.

He shook his head. “No, right now, we need to make love. You need to feel free to explore my body the way you want me to explore yours. No demands and no expectations. Just love me, hon.”

Her mouth met his, and she clawed at his shoulders, using his strength to gain more of her own. She rolled over him and straddled his stomach. Rubbing her pussy across his belly, she gripped his sides, pressing her knees against his torso.

“Oh, baby, that’s nice,” he said. “So sweet.”

Framing his face, Kelsie kissed him deeply. His lips parted and his tongue darted in and out. He grinned into their kiss when he licked her bottom lip. “That’s my girl. Slide your sweet pussy over my stomach. Let me feel your heat, sugar.”

Her center was wet, and she was drowning in lust for the first time in months. Did she still have the ability to be intimate with a man? She stopped grinding against him, and he pulled her closer, his mouth moving over her ear. “Don’t stop now. Never stop, doll.”

Sloane rolled her nipple back and forth with his thumb. When he pressed down on the little nub, he made her aware of the fullness she’d lost in her breasts.

He didn’t act like he was in any particular hurry to penetrate her, but Kelsie’s robust energy wouldn’t last. She didn’t want to spoil their moment when he needed her to make it into a lasting one.

Sliding her body back and forth once more, she slid toward his chest. His palms went to her sides, and he brought her forward, holding her body over his face.

“Ah, Kelsie, you smell so sweet,” he said, smacking his lips. “Let me taste your sweet cunt, sugar. That’s my girl, spread those legs for me,” he muttered, licking his way through her folds.

A few licks past the first and her legs fell apart. Eager to feel his tongue sink deeper, she let him move her body up and down. Sloane understood how to work her over, and she was thankful he used the knowledge they’d discovered together to make the experience memorable.

Grabbing the headboard behind them, Kelsie felt the freefall begin. “Sloane,” she whispered, closing her legs against his face.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” He stopped suddenly. “You don’t get off that easy after keeping me away for so long.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t,” she responded, breathless. Her senses went into overdrive, and she ground against his chin, hoping to find his lips again, or better still, his tongue.

He held her over him, and she felt like a limp doll. “You may only have one good one in you,” he whispered. “And I have to be there when you take yours.”

His beautiful blue eyes held her prisoner to the loving his body provided. He lifted her up and practically dropped her right over his cock. The tip parted her folds, and she spread open, allowing him plenty of room to penetrate.

“Just relax,” he said. “Do you want me to get lubricant?”

She shook her head and fell over him then, her body opening up to welcome the familiar strokes of a highly sexual man. He bit his bottom lip and watched her as she rode. Staring down at the evidence of penetration, he seemed to need the true visual and didn’t take his eyes off their bodies joining.

“Harder,” she whimpered. “Give me more.”

“Slow and easy,” he breathed, pushing high in her channel and then pulling out so only the tip parted her folds.

“No,” she begged, shaking her head. “I need to come...have to...God bless, Sloane, give me what I need.” Her body slid up and down his cock, riding for the finish without any way of slowing down.

Sloane bit playfully at her nipple. He flattened his tongue over the hard bead until she succumbed to the pleasure.

“Sloane,” she whimpered, riding faster, harder, stronger.

“That’s it. Come for me.”

She worked his cock back and forth as her body became a different limb all at once. Her unkempt hair swayed back and forth over her shoulders, and she realized as she came he watched the whole event without giving up his release to match hers.

“Sloane, come,” she whispered when she’d ridden out the last wave of pleasure.

He grabbed her hips and slowly worked his cock in and out of her pussy. “Ah, baby, you got it, only you. I’m coming,” he moaned, hammering forward but stopping himself a time or two to take it down a notch.

“No!” she exclaimed. “You fuck me like a man fucks a woman!”

Grating back his unimaginable desire, the obvious need to hammer forward deeply embedded in his lust-filled eyes, he growled. “You’d better damn well know I’m all man!”

Smiling, she prepared for the best loving of a lifetime. He rolled over her, tucked her under his body and, yes, screwed her like a man who wants nothing more than the woman under him.

His thighs bunched, his body tensed, and he stroked her without reservations, filling her with his size as his knees dug into the mattress.

“God, yeah,” he muttered, pulling her legs behind his hips. “That’s right baby, stretch for me,” he instructed, pushing himself still higher.

His breathing turned heavy. His long cock vibrated inside her, and he pressed his thumb to her clit when he came, rolling it again and again until her second climax met his first. The headboard banging against the wall sounded like thunder, the scent of sex and masculine flesh in her bed made her feel sexy, loved and wanted.

“Oh, yes, Kelsie,” he whispered against her lips. “That’s my girl. Fuck me out of my mind, sugar.”

She clawed at his shoulders and braced her body against his when he yanked her from the mattress. Cradling her form, he continued to screw her. His hips jerked violently and his large body melded to hers.

When he exploded, he came like a man who hadn't fucked in decades, and the hot spill he released gushed over her labia and down her thighs, staining her with the sticky aftermath of their pleasure. Then he released her, easing her back against the pillow, unable to pull out because she kept her ankles locked behind him.

She kissed his chest. "That's the quietest you've been after the end."

When he didn't say anything, Kelsie looked up and saw the hurt in his eyes. While tears didn't fall, the words he didn't speak were hidden in the depths of his empty stare. He loved her more than he loved himself, and his heart had now shattered beyond repair.

"Who says we're finished here?" he said in a guttural tone, but she saw the terror in his eyes even when she dropped the hold she had on him, allowing her legs to fall to the bed.

He didn't withdraw, and he refused to look away. Undoubtedly, he thought this was their last time. "I love you, Kelsie."

"I love you, too." And she wondered if she loved him enough to let him go. She knew precisely who to ask for help.



## **Chapter Eight**

An hour later a fax came in from overseas. Logan called a meeting. Everyone but Sloane gathered in the Weaver study. Logan relayed a brief summary of what the transmitted documents revealed.

“As we suspected,” Logan began as Sloane strolled in, “we should expect the Esparza cartel.”

Logan moved around the room, passing out photographs and reading material about Gomez Gustavo Esparza and his men. “Nice of you to join us,” he said to Sloane when he handed over the original faxed paperwork.

“I’ll check on Kelsie,” Veronica offered, standing.

“She’s fine,” Sloane bit out. “Sated,” he added, glancing around the room at the other Remingtons. He undoubtedly wanted to taunt his brothers.

“Great,” Dusty moaned, nodding at Veronica. “Go check on her and see if she’s still breathing.”

“Sit down,” Sloane ordered, pointing to the sofa she originally vacated. “We have business here. I can promise you Kelsie is fine. She’s resting.”

“I guess so,” Benson said, smiling. “Will she walk again?”

Veronica wanted to laugh outright. She wondered if these fellows carried on like this when Kelsie was healthier. Poor thing probably had to fuck around the clock to keep the testosterone to a manageable level.

Sloane walked to the center of the room and stood in the oval area of an Oriental rug with a geometric pattern consisting of crosses and stars. “Someone should’ve let me know about this,” he said, smacking the papers against his open palm.

“I wasn’t gonna knock,” Dusty fired back. “I value my life too much.”

“All right, let’s get started on this.” He quickly scanned over the documents. “So we’re expecting company.” He looked at each of his brothers. “Fucking terrific,” he muttered and glanced toward the stairs.

“Didn’t hear you complaining about it thirty minutes ago,” Logan pointed out.

Catching his drift, Veronica tried to hide a smile and buried her nose in the reading material provided. “Me, either,” she finally said, unable to contain the jab she wanted to deliver, too.

Sloane glared at her and the others looked shocked. After a few heated glances were swapped around the room, Sloane continued, “All right. We’ll have to change our plans now that Kelsie is here.”

Shifting in her seat, Veronica paid attention to the new instructions. With Kelsie in Missouri, she couldn’t afford mistakes. The Remingtons would never forgive her if she did something to risk Kelsie’s life. Hell, she’d never forgive herself.

“Here’s what we’re going to do. Benson and Drew, you’ll stay here tonight with Kelsie and Veronica. We need to make Esparza and his men believe we’re as vulnerable as possible.”

“I resent the implication,” Benson said. “We’re as well prepared as you are and we’re just as eager as anyone else. We want the Esparza ordeal over. Drew and I may not have the physical strength you and Logan have or Dusty’s loose screws rolling around in our heads, but we can handle anything you can. Hell, since we’re keeping our pants on, maybe we can even put up a solid fight.”

Sloane frowned. “Maybe, but if Esparza believes the two of you are here by yourselves guarding the women, he could come in close, real fucking close.”

“I don’t like it,” Dusty said, flipping through the papers. “You can’t possibly estimate how many men he’ll send in here. If we go underground,” he slipped and Veronica made a note of it before he quickly continued, “what I mean is if we’re at the house and they’re over here, we can’t get to them fast enough if all hell breaks loose in the middle of the night.”

“He’s right, Sloane,” Logan added his two cents. “You or Dusty must be in here at all times.”

“What about you?” Sloane asked, raising a brow and apparently enjoying the moment.

“You know I’m not as skilled in weaponry as you two,” he paused and tilted his chin in her direction, “Or even her. She trained directly under Tom for crying out loud.”

Her father was the best marksman the Underground Unit ever had from what she'd been told, and if they only knew her level of expertise, they'd quickly figure out she was Tom Weaver's daughter. He wasn't the kind of man who would've given away all of his secrets to anyone outside of family.

Sloane swung his gaze toward her. "All right." He took a deep breath and changed directions. "Dusty, you'll stay here with Benson and Drew. Logan and I will work from the outside."

Veronica liked that idea best, but for some reason, she detected a little apprehension in Sloane's voice, never mind his empty glare. He left a peculiar impression. Didn't he trust Dusty's skills?

Shaking her head, she continued to read over the elusive biography of Gomez Gustavo Esparza.

"Something wrong?" Sloane asked, his neck stretching forward. Sarcasm dripped from his lips. "If you don't like the set up, maybe you should speak up now."

"No, it's nothing," she replied, stammering.

"Nothing? Do you have a problem with Dusty sharing the same roof?"

"That's it," she said, slamming her hand over the paperwork she placed on the small couch pillow next to her. Standing, she decided she had a few things she needed to get off her chest.

"We're not done," Sloane informed.

"Oh, you're damn straight, we're not," she blurted out, walking across the length of the long study. "In fact, this meeting is far from adjourned. Take a seat, Mr. Remington. There are a few things I need to say to you, all of you." Her gaze moved around the room and she began her rant.

"Since I arrived here, I've waited for this mission to start. I'm as hungry as the rest of you, and I assure you I'm thirsty for revenge. But I will not tip-toe around any of you while you try to decide which one of you I'm going to try and seduce."

"Lower your voice," Drew pleaded. "Please."

Logan shot him a cold stare and shook his head. Apparently, the other Remingtons didn't believe in manners.

"For the record," she said, slapping her hands on the back of the sofa. Drew and Benson instantly turned to face her. "I am not here for any of you. I'm here because your father and Tom Weaver were men I respected and

admired. I'm here on a mission and every bit as committed as I would be if you tossed my ass into the middle of Iraq. I don't want to fuck for privileges and have no desire whatsoever to find any of you under my sheets. Now, you have two choices here..." she paused, deliberately trailing off.

"I can't wait to hear about those," Dusty exclaimed.

"Me, either," Sloane moaned, arching a brow.

"You can get your hand off your cocks. Quit worrying about protecting what you're afraid I might take for ransom and work with me like I'm an equal member of this team, or you can send me out of here now."

They looked stunned.

She continued, "And for the record, I've worked on a lot of jobs solo, so if you send me away, you don't have any guarantees I'll leave. I may work by myself from the outside. Then what will we have? Huh?"

Sloane narrowed his gaze, and she saw something crucial in that moment. She finally earned Sloane Remington's respect.

\* \* \* \*

A few hours later, Veronica eased the door open and peeked inside Kelsie's bedroom. She stretched her neck and waited until she saw the rise and fall of her chest before she started to turn away.

"I'm not asleep," she said, opening one eye.

Veronica smiled. "Did I wake you?"

"No," she answered on a giggle. "I've been lying here trying to think if I ever told all of them off as well as you just did, and I swear I can't think of one incident."

Veronica moved closer to the bed. "You heard all that?"

"I eavesdrop a lot," she admitted. "It's the only way I ever know what's really going on when there's danger moving in too close. Remember, they think I'm a fragile flower waiting to wilt until they water me."

"From what the fellows said downstairs, you enjoyed quite a spring shower a few hours ago. Are you okay?"

She laughed. "You didn't come up here to see if Sloane left me alive or not, did you?"

Veronica's hands settled on her hips. "Do you want a lecture, too, young lady?"

“No, I heard enough from you earlier.”

“Good because I’m exhausted now.”

“They’ll zap your spunk,” Kelsie said, sitting up. “If anyone knows how they can deplete a woman’s energy, I do.”

“I don’t know how you manage them.”

“Me, either,” Kelsie said, reaching for the bottled water on the bedside table.

Veronica looked at her sister’s tiny fingers. In so many ways, she wanted to protect her, like a mother would watch over a small child. It was hard to imagine the woman she might have once been.

“I want to ask you a favor,” Kelsie began.

“Okay,” Veronica said reluctantly.

“When I’m gone, I want you to promise me you’ll look after my family.”

“Kelsie, I’ll do what I can. I mean we don’t always go on the same missions. Rarely, in fact, do any of the operatives go off on their assignments with more than one partner.”

“I don’t mean as an operative. I meant as a friend and a lover.”

Veronica felt her pulse change. She took a deep breath and considered what Kelsie asked of her. God help her. She could stare down the wrong end of a rifle, take on the biggest and meanest bad asses in the country, but the dying woman in front of her just asked her something that might require ducking her head and running for her life.

“Veronica, you have to help me.”

Veronica shook her head in adamant refusal. “No, Kelsie, I don’t have to do anything. You may be sick, but you aren’t dead yet. Besides, take a closer look at me. Honey, I’m not exactly domestic and hardly wife material. I have a few failed marriages to prove where I’m lacking. Perhaps you’d like copies from my divorce decree collection.

Kelsie didn’t appear rattled or angry when she received her reply. Instead, she steadied her hands, folded them across her lap, and said, “Sloane won’t survive without your strength. He needs—”

“Sloane needs you!”

Kelsie still didn’t look shaken. Instead, she steered the conversation in another direction. “Did you ever wonder why Dad would protect me, shield

me from the Underground Unit but toss you into their training program and teach you how to fight?”

“Tom did a lot of things I’ll never understand.”

“He knew the Remingtons would protect me. With you, he didn’t have added security. You didn’t live here. They didn’t know you. But by placing you on their team, making sure you trained with them, he all but guaranteed your safety. Wilson and his sons wouldn’t let anything happen to you as long as you were an operative with their unit.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Veronica, I want you to have what I’ve had. A happy and full life.”

“I have a full life. Trust me. I don’t have time for a man.”

“Count again. I have five,” she said. “At eighteen, I decided some people never enjoy a simple life. Feeling sorry for myself one day, I resigned myself to the possibility of never finding true love. But now, here I am at the end of my life and, Veronica,” her voice broke, but she quickly regained her composure, “even though cancer is gnawing away at my body, I’m still the luckiest woman in the world.”

Veronica didn’t know if she’d call it luck. “Your guys love you very much.”

“Yes, they do. You may not believe this, but at one time, I felt so completely alone and convinced myself I didn’t deserve to find love or happiness. I was a product of a career my father chose, and in his line of work, love wasn’t an easy find. Yet, here I am, a woman loved by five men, a woman facing death with peace in her heart and love. Oh, God, Veronica, I love them so much. When those men downstairs decided to love and take care of me, I gained so much more than I ever deserved. I only want the same for you.”

“Uh.” Veronica tried to think of something to say. When she couldn’t, she said, “This is bizarre.”

“Yes, and it’s uncomfortable to talk about, but I’m speaking from the heart. Who will watch over Sloane, Dusty, Drew, Logan, and Benson when I’m gone? I need to know I can count on you.”

“Honey,” she paused when she heard someone behind her. Thank God, she thought, turning. “Listen, I’m going to go,” she said, thumbing the suffocating air around her. “Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course she is,” Benson said, rushing in and landing on the bed right next to her. “Hey, gorgeous.”

“I’ll leave you two alone.”

Benson didn’t look her way, but Kelsie called out, “Will you come back later?”

“Sure.”

“Are you in the room next to me?”

“Right now, I think so. Dusty, Benson, and Drew are staying here with us tonight. I’m sure they’ll want to stay close.”

“Close?” Benson said, so smitten by Kelsie he couldn’t look away. “Drew and I will sleep here tonight.”

“See? You can keep the room next to me then.”

“And listen to the extracurricular activities going on in here? No thank you.”

Benson winked. “She thinks all any of us do is fuck.”

“She would’ve been right a couple of years ago,” Veronica heard her say as she left the room.

Closing the door behind her, she started down the hall and ran into Dusty. “I need to talk to you,” he informed her, taking her by the arm and dragging her into the bedroom next to Kelsie’s room.

“Great approach,” she complained. “Love the foreplay.”

Dusty gritted his teeth. “You tell us to respect you as an equal team player. Then you come on to me like you can’t wait to slip your tongue in my ear.”

“If I wanted my tongue anywhere, Dusty, believe me, I’d find a way to make it happen. I respect my—” Oh Lord, she thought, speaking of that, she almost had a slip of the tongue.

“You respect your what?” Dusty asked, allowing himself the opportunity to body surf. His gaze started at her breasts and worked its way down.

“You should be ashamed,” she scolded, pushing him away.

“I’m not,” he said. “And if you think you’re going to run to Kelsie every time I make your panties wet, then you might want to reconsider. I know we’ve got some kind of chemistry between us, but you need to understand something.”

She cupped her ears. "Go ahead, I'm listening."

"I don't treat you any differently than I treat any other woman in my life."

"Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Well, isn't Kelsie a lucky gal."

"Most women would look at her situation, minus the cancer, and think so."

"I'm not most women."

He grunted and opened the door. "You're telling me."

Placing her hand on his forearm, she said, "Dusty, when are you going to learn to say what's on your mind and quit the song and dance with me?"

He narrowed his gaze and released an outright growl. "You scare me," he confessed.

"I scare you?"

"Yeah, that's it. I've said all I intend to say." With that, he walked out of her room and right into Kelsie's.

When Dusty left her alone, Veronica had time to think about Kelsie's peculiar request. Why would a woman in love ask another woman to take care of her men? What was Kelsie so afraid of? Did she really believe the Remingtons couldn't survive without her? Was there any truth in her assumption?

She'd watched how Sloane hovered over Kelsie, how Drew and Benson practically ran over her to get to Kelsie's stretcher in the ambulance, and she noticed how careful Dusty and Logan had been with her at the airport. She also saw another side to Dusty and Sloane. If anyone would survive the loss of a significant other, they would. Or did she see a front of some sort?

She remembered how Sloane tensed under her touch when she tried to work him for information. She recalled the lust in Dusty's eyes whenever he looked her way. Still, they never crossed the line. They never surrendered to her advances.

She should've been ashamed. What was she thinking in the first place? Kelsie was her sister for crying out loud. She could've tried another way, something else, a better approach for information.

Veronica couldn't help but wonder about them. What kind of future would the Remingtons have after Kelsie? Would they go from one woman's



bed to another looking for the same kind of relationship they once shared with Kelsie, or would they fall apart, sink into their missions, and really never give a damn if they survived them or not?

Veronica strolled over to the window and watched Drew and Sloane. They were unloading a wagon. One of the local farmers must have brought in some supplies.

Glancing up, she noticed another tractor coming through the gates and decided with the dark clouds moving closer, Sloane and Drew might appreciate some extra muscle. Besides, she could use the workout and a little fresh air. Grabbing a sweater from the closet, she shrugged it on, and, a few moments later, skipped over the front steps.

“Where are you going?” Logan asked, exiting the laundry room with a few lightweight jackets tossed over his arm.

“There’s another wagon here. I’ll help unload the hay.”

“Why?”

“Ever heard of work, Logan?”

“Yeah,” he answered smoothly. “I do what I can to avoid as much manual labor as possible. Unless I’m sweating for a woman’s cause, I don’t move my ass.”

“I see,” she muttered, stepping outside. She refused to play the flirtation game. She stopped in her tracks. Was that what this was about? Had the Remingtons asked Kelsie to talk to her about some sort of arrangement after her death? No, she decided. Now, she was grasping.

Kelsie was a dying woman, desperate to have a say in the way her men carried on without her. Yes, that explained everything. The future scared Kelsie. She feared the unknown, and by asking her to take care of her lovers, she kept a hand in what the future held in store for all of them.

Taking a deep breath, Veronica decided she could cope with Kelsie’s request much better now. Her plea made sense even. Maybe she’d tell her what she longed to hear.

By the time she approached the first wagon, Sloane and Drew had most of the hay stacked in the barn. Tilting her chin toward the property fence, she said, “Your other load is coming through the gate.”

Drew quickly turned to check out the delivery. “Did you order more bales?”

Sloane shook his head. “No, but maybe Benson did. I believe that’s old man Ferguson’s tractor. Let me check with him.”

Hopping off the wagon, Sloane landed on both feet and started for the house. Drew looked at her then. “You know something about farming?”

“No,” she answered honestly, “but I don’t mind getting my hands dirty. There’s a storm headed our way, so I might as well help out before the rain sets in. I need the exercise.”

Unlike his brother, Drew didn’t look her up and down as if to check out how badly she needed to bend and stretch. Instead, he went back to tossing hay.

Sloane disappeared, and when he returned, Logan, Benson, and Dusty were right on his heels. “No one ordered another load of hay,” Sloane informed, reaching behind his back in an apparent search for a gun.

At the same time, Drew checked his side and must’ve realized he didn’t have a weapon. Veronica’s gaze darted back to the other men. Drew quickly left the tractor, disappearing into the large red barn located about three feet from the end of the wagon.

Reaching for her boot, Veronica tossed a forty-five toward Drew. “I’ve got your back,” she said, already looking through the trees, scoping out the property in an effort to ensure they weren’t already surrounded.

Moving the rest of the hay suddenly lost its importance. Sloane made his way toward the front of the truck that pulled in the first wagon. Keeping a sharp eye on the entire area and without causing alarm, he said, “Bob, let us get the rest of this tomorrow.”

“Hell, son, I don’t have time to come out here again.”

Sloane glanced at Veronica and then Logan, making his way to the other side of the truck. “We’ll come over to your place and buy another load then. We’ve got a little problem and we need you to go ahead and take the back road out of here.”

The old man narrowed his eyes and in a stern voice, he said, “I knew your father, boy. I’ll tell you right now, I never ran from trouble when he had some of it coming his way, and at my age, I sure as hell don’t plan on running now.”

“Bob,” Logan began, opening the passenger’s door and practically shoving Veronica inside. “Do me a favor and get our little lady out of here.”

The old man with white hair pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. “Kelsie?” he asked, adjusting his earpiece, too. “Is that you?”

Logan patted her leg. “Kelsie, honey, you remember Bob, don’t you?”

She pursed her lips. Damn it to hell, they were getting her out of there when they needed her most. At the moment, perhaps they had no other choice. They wanted to protect their neighbor. The only way to guarantee the man’s safety was to make the old geezer believe he was protecting her. She got that part, but she didn’t have to like the arrangement.

“Damn it, Logan,” she complained, as he grabbed the seatbelt and securely fastened her in place.

Tapping the top of the cab, he called out, “All right, Bob, get our girl out of here.”

“Kelsie,” she whispered when the truck cranked. She pointed toward the house. “She’s upstairs alone.”

“Where’s Drew?”

“Barn,” she grated out.

Fear washed across Logan’s face, and he sprinted for the house.

“Let’s go, Bob,” she said, shooting him a sideways glance. “We’ll follow that back road, like Logan suggested.”

Bob stared up the driveway. “Well, what do you know? There’s old man Fred Ferguson up ahead. You remember that fella, don’t you? Hell, you’ve had these boys away from here so long they hardly recognize local folk anymore. No reason for them to be afraid of Fred.”

She reached for her gun. After seeing the panic spread across Logan’s face and looking into Sloane’s empty eyes right before they pulled away, the least she could do was buy them some time.

“Maybe they thought Ferguson was someone else,” she said, thinking fast enough to try and steer him closer. If the first shots were going to fire, they might as well start at the gate.

“I reckon so,” Bob said. “Let me say hello. Then I’ll drive you back down to the barn.”

“Why don’t you just wave to him? We can circle back around where you two can catch up,” she suggested, suspecting Bob wasn’t easily manipulated.

“Sounds like a fine idea.”

Her hip pocket vibrated, and she didn't have to pull out her cell phone to see who had dialed her number. Sloane most likely hit speed dial when he saw them head for the gates instead of the south end of the property.

With her hand on the butt of her gun, she kept her eyes on the road while Bob smiled to himself and clutched the steering wheel like no other joy was any greater than driving his Ford truck. "Kelsie, you been doing all right, I see. That cancer ain't got you yet?"

Worriedly, she looked in the rearview mirror and tried not to think about Kelsie. "No, sir, not yet. I'm still alive and kicking."

"Well then, I imagine you're going to give our boys a little run for the money then, ain't ya?"

"I beg your pardon?" Her gut issued the warning she had relied on since she was a child. Her stomach rolled with hunger pangs, but she'd devoured a hearty meal that morning. Her stomach felt like it was tied up in knots, and the quick pinching sensation at the back of her neck made her aware of a threat too close for her liking.

"Why don't you pull on over here and let's see what Mr. Ferguson wants," she suggested, pointing to a large pasture area off to the right.

He chuckled. "Well, that'd be right nice now, wouldn't it? Only the fellas in the back of Ferguson's truck might get a little irritated if I don't do what I'm supposed to do."

"What's that?" she asked, easing the gun from her belt and trying to act unaffected by the man's strange behavior.

"Kill you," he replied with unexplainable ease, smiling wider.

Her breathing never changed, and she acted unaffected by his revelation. She was practiced and trained in hostage situations. If the old man beside her thought he had the first chance of gaining the upper hand, he was sorely mistaken.

"Kill me?"

"Yes, ma'am. With you outta the way, the fellas who hired me tell me they can finish the job they started. See, ma'am, the folks around here ain't itching for more of the same kind of warfare Wilson Remington and Tom Weaver brought down on this community. We ain't itching for more strangers coming in from abroad." Copping a wicked smirk, he slammed the truck gearshift in park position and faced her.

“Now, you wanna tell me who you are, or should I let one of Ferguson’s boys do what they can to get the truth out of you?”

“Kelsie—”

“You ain’t Kelsie Weaver. I’ve known little Kelsie since she was a babe, and that dumb bastard who put you in my truck should’ve known even an old feller like me knows the difference between a woman eat up with cancer and one who looks as healthy as you. Now, who the hell are ya?”

She drew her gun. Pointing the firearm at his head, she responded, “The real question here, Bob, is who hired you to betray Tom Weaver’s daughter and Wilson Remington’s sons? And seeing as I’m not a local gal, you’d better start talking. I don’t have the first problem in pumping a few bullets right through your skull.”

## Chapter Nine

“Talk to me,” Sloane said when he answered the phone. Drew rounded the corner and pointed at the parked truck near the gates. The tractor that had stopped midway down the driveway idled maybe two hundred yards from Bob’s Ford.

“Hello?” Sloane heard some static.

“Who is it?” Dusty asked.

“Shh...” he bit out.

Logan rushed toward them. “Kelsie’s gone!”

Sloane’s heart pounded against his chest. “Get those gates closed, Drew!” he yelled while Logan and Dusty took off at an all out sprint.

“Better call them off, now,” he heard Bob say.

“Sloane?” Veronica sounded fine. Her voice didn’t quiver. Her tone remained even.

“What do we have?”

“Lots of trouble in the back of this wagon up here. Get Dusty and Logan back!”

She must’ve seen what Sloane now saw. Guns pointed right at them. The wagon behind Ferguson’s tractor looked like it was loaded down with as much weaponry as hay. The barrels of several assault rifles as well as a few magazines and muzzles were visible from where he stood. Quickly, he turned around. He had nowhere to go for cover except the house or the barn.

“Dusty! Logan! Under!” They were steps from the fencepost. They only had to trigger the lever and they’d drop out of sight, but God help him, he knew they’d press forward.

“Drew! Cover me!”

“I gotcha but there aren’t extra rounds over here,” he yelled. He must’ve been behind the concrete water trough.

“Sloane,” Veronica warned. “Get them back!”

Sloane squinted. "How bad?"

"I don't know," she quickly chanted. "They've already gotten Kelsie out of here. You gotta pull Dusty and Logan now!"

"Where the fuck is Kelsie?"

"Their guys have moved her! God save us all. Get Logan and Dusty back!"

Logan turned around and at the same time Benson sped up the driveway at a high rate of speed.

"Pull back!" Sloane screamed. Dusty turned, too. "Get down!" Sloane yelled, waving his arm.

Drew stepped from behind the trough and jumped into the back of the truck as Benson slowed down long enough to allow him to hop on the tailgate.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Sloane held his breath, waiting for the first shot to fire, realizing his younger brothers had something to prove.

He heard Bob mumble something. Then he heard Veronica's voice. She came across the phone line as level-headed as she might have sounded ordering a cheeseburger. "You have two choices here. You can go ahead and start a battle you may win, but my guess is you were paid a lot of money to betray your neighbors, Bob. Seems a shame you won't ever enjoy it.

"I know you have men already on this property, perhaps even watching the Remingtons, maybe crawling around the barn or even walking around the house. You call that Ferguson fellow off and I'll go with you. They'll let you drive out of here and even though you won't kill them today, you'll leave here with your life."

"No, Veronica. Don't," Sloane said, hurrying for the truck when Benson drove back and picked him up. Sloane searched the fence line before he hopped in beside of Benson.

"They're under," Benson said.

Sloane pressed his fingers to his lips and motioned for Benson to turn the truck around. "Wait here."

All eyes focused on the vehicles at the gate.

"She's got her gun on Bob," Drew informed. "Why doesn't she pull the fucking trigger?"

Sloane thinned his lips and listened. He heard her say, "Get them out of here and I'll go with you."

“What the hell is she doing on her phone?” Drew asked.

“Shut up, Drew,” Sloane snapped, straining to listen. “She’s trying to negotiate with Bob and convince him to have Ferguson move his tractor.”

“And what kind of bargaining chip does she have?” Benson asked.

Sloane held up his finger.

“No, Sloane,” Benson said. “Just because you’re afraid of what may happen to Kelsie, don’t you send her in by herself. Think about who we’re dealing with here.”

Drew said, “If she agrees to get them out of here, she’s going to lose the only sound tracking device we have. They’ll strip that phone from her the second they leave here.”

“Shh,” Sloane said. “Text Dusty and Logan. Tell them to use the tunnels and get to our place now. We need them to head toward town.”

Benson’s fingers started moving swiftly across the facing of his phone. “Ferguson won’t get far driving a tractor.”

“Shh,” Sloane bit out once more, hitting the speaker option on the phone.

He heard Bob’s voice. “You could definitely kill me, young lady. I guess I underestimated you from the beginning. But you need to tell your honeys back there that there are twenty-five men on Fred’s wagon. All of them have their guns pointed toward you right now.”

“There’s no way. He’s bluffing,” Sloane said.

“You wanna die today, old man,” Veronica taunted him.

Benson kept texting. “Dusty said to make sure Veronica does not leave this property. He says they’ll rape her if we’re dealing with Esparza’s cartel.”

A shiver flew down Sloane’s spine. He knew why Dusty was so concerned. God love his heart, he lived through enough hell when the cartel held him. Now, he was worried about Veronica.

“Get out of there,” Sloane ordered. As much as he wanted to send her in, as much as he wanted to give her a shot at saving Kelsie, he also had to protect his agents. “Get the fuck out of there! That’s an order.”

“Kelsie?” she asked. “Is she safe?”

Bob laughed. “Define safe.”



Sloane jerked his head and closed his eyes. After a quick inner debate, he decided he couldn't help Kelsie if he had to worry about saving Veronica, too. "We've got her," Sloane fibbed. "Now get out of there!"

"Liar," she spoke into the phone. "Bob," she drawled. "Get your men on the phone and ask them if they have Kelsie."

"No way, lady. I'm the low man on the totem pole here."

"You aren't telling me anything I don't already know. You professed to know Tom Weaver and Wilson Remington and deliberately put their children in danger. You can't go much lower."

"Wilson and Tom brought all kinds of problems to this community."

"Really? And here I thought they only tried to save the world. Guess they forgot to help out the hometown boys, eh?"

With lots of static suddenly, there seemed to be a struggle and a gun shot was fired. Two men jumped off the back of Ferguson's tractor and quickly rushed the truck, assuming a military-like stance. They eased up to the cab of the truck and jerked the door open.

"What's going on?" Benson said, rolling the window down and waiting for Drew to respond.

"Can't tell."

"Do you have your field glasses or not?" Benson snapped.

"Why hell no," Drew reported. "I didn't know I'd need them while unloading a few bales of hay."

Sloane reached under the seat and pulled out some binoculars. Slapping them against Benson's chest, he yelled, "Ask him if he has bullets for his airsoft gun."

Benson looked at him with disbelief in his eyes. "Do you really have time to be a complete smartass right this minute?"

"We've lost her," Sloane told them, closing his phone.

"What do you mean we've lost her?" Benson asked.

"She handed over her weapon," he explained, pointing up the hill. "They're taking her in."

"We have to stop them," Drew said, leaning in the window. "If we don't, Dusty will never forgive us."

"You two know something I don't?" Sloane asked.

Drew and Benson exchanged a glance and when they didn't say anything, Sloane said, "That's what I thought. Now, we're going to let them

drive out of here. We're outnumbered and we need to regroup. If we follow them now and Veronica does something else profoundly stupid, she could put us all at risk."

\* \* \* \*

Two large burly men shoved Veronica into a ten by ten area where Kelsie had spent the last hour. Disoriented, Veronica looked like she had been badly beaten.

After the men threw a few bottles of water at them, they disappeared, locking the door behind them.

"Oh, God, Veronica," Kelsie cried out. "Are you all right?"

Groaning, she doubled over when she tried to stand. "Kelsie? Is that you? I can't see you."

"What do you mean you can't see me?" she asked frantically.

"They squirted pepper spray in my eyes."

"Pepper spray?"

"Kelsie, yes. The pain won't last much longer, but right now, I just need to lay here. Are you okay?"

"Yes. My hands are bound. I can't get to you."

"Don't worry about it," Veronica said. "What did they throw at us?"

"Looks like bottled water."

"Yeah, that's what it felt like. Where's the closest one to me?"

"Above your right shoulder."

She reached up and grabbed it.

"Pepper spray isn't water soluble."

"I know," Veronica replied. "I'm dying of thirst."

Kelsie watched her rinse her mouth out and then spit like a man might. "That's attractive." Suddenly, horror filled her veins. "Oh, my God. Veronica, did they rape you?"

"Not yet, but they will."

Moaning in agony, Veronica drew her knees to her chest and reached for her boot. "I have another phone. Any idea where we are?"

"We're on the lake, but I'm not sure where. Veronica, one of the men who brought me in said something about Tom Weaver's daughter. When I

said, 'I'm Tom's daughter,' he said, 'Not you but the other one' and chuckled."

Veronica rolled onto her stomach. Placing her palms to the floor, she slowly stood. Kelsie held her breath waiting for her to fall. "Hurry," she said. "Walk a straight line over here and I'll help you,"

With the plastic bottle in one hand and the phone in the other, Veronica made it to the bed in time to toss the phone onto Kelsie's lap and land face forward. At the same moment, the door swung open and a man who didn't need an introduction walked in the room.

Veronica stretched her neck when she heard the footsteps behind her. "Who's here?"

"Quiet, Veronica," Kelsie whispered, afraid to speak until they were asked direct questions.

The man looked like Fidel Castro, and his outer appearance gave his identity away. She'd heard about Gomez Gustavo Esparza for as long as she could remember, more frequently since Wilson Remington had been gunned down at his home.

"Ladies," he began. "I take it your accommodations are comfortable enough for now?"

"Sure thing," Veronica drawled. "Service sucks, though."

Kelsie shot her sister a cold glare, but she knew she didn't see her. Maybe she felt the tension in her legs—since she landed right across them—and realized she needed to shut the fuck up.

"Pepper spray isn't going to kill you, Miss Leigh, and in a matter of minutes, you'll be able to look around and enjoy your company a little more, I imagine. The women trained and prepared by my men in the past often comment about their good looks. After you make their acquaintance, you'll be able to judge for yourself whether or not you think they're easy on the eyes."

Kelsie narrowed her gaze. Esparza walked over to the window and opened the top panel. "I always loved the fresh air. What about you, Miss Leigh? Do you enjoy the outdoors?"

She didn't answer.

"Well?"

She still didn't respond.

"I expect a reply when I ask a direct question."

Kelsie nudged her and she said, "I like the outdoors."

"Then I want you to think long and hard about the potential freedoms you'll forfeit if you decide to stay with us."

"What do you mean?" she grated out, pushing away from the mattress and sitting on the edge of the bed, continuing to blink her eyes regardless of the pain still lingering behind them.

"I'm giving you a choice," he said, amused. "And the decision you make, remember, is entirely up to you and you alone."

He stood on his tip-toes looking outside like he might have spotted something of particular interest. Intimidated by him, Kelsie had a feeling the man in front of her wasn't as bad as she'd heard. Oh no, Gomez Gustavo Esparza was ten times worse.

His dark eyes hovered right above the circles and bags under them, and the way he carried himself made Kelsie a believer in all things she'd heard. He wasn't a man to be reckoned with. He was a force someone needed to destroy.

Esparza continued, "I'm releasing one of you. The other will stay here with me until she is fully trained."

"Trained?"

"Yes," he confirmed, smiling. "Kelsie here is familiar with the BDSM lifestyle from what I understand, but you," he paused, grinning still wider, "would probably be a true pleasure to train for submission, or should I say slavery?"

"What do you want exactly?" Veronica probed.

"I want you to exercise your free will and in doing so, whatever you choose will lead you or the pretty lady beside you to a life where a woman is never given a choice. I want you to make your last decision and choose who goes and who will stay. Understand, the second we take one of you away, we'll begin training the other. By the time the Remingtons arrive to save the one left behind, they'll be too late."

"What do you mean too late?"

He bellowed. "Why surely I don't have to spell everything out for a woman like you, Veronica. You've probably read my files, and Kelsie here—poor little Kelsie Weaver Remington—must realize what I'm talking about. We'll have one of you so spent by the time your boys come in here

that you won't have the energy to lift your head off the pillow, much less recognize your body as your own."

"They'll kill you," Kelsie whispered.

"Be quiet," Veronica retorted.

"They will," she said. Then she addressed the man holding them captive. "Do you know how bad Sloane wants your blood?"

"Kelsie, please!"

"No," Esparza said. "Really, I want to hear this. Please, go on."

Kelsie felt her heart pitter patter somewhere under the bundle of nervous energy. "You'll never get away with this."

"And why not?" he asked. "I beat the Remingtons once. I almost destroyed their Virginia unit back when Sam Kane was alive, and I can beat all of them down again. And I'll start with their women."

"I'm not a Remington," Veronica informed.

"No, but you're a Weaver, and when the Remingtons discover they have another Weaver to save, you're going to lead them straight into a well laid trap because they'll come for you."

"She's not staying behind. I am."

He laughed hysterically and then eyed Veronica. "We both know better, don't we, Ronnie?"

"Veronica," she corrected.

"Ronnie will be your street name so you might as well get used to it. We don't put women into the business with classy names like Veronica. It scares away some of the more violent clients. We like diversification when our customers call on our girls. An appropriate name for a whore is crucial."

Clasping his hands in front of him, he cleared his throat. "Well, ladies, I'll leave you to your private discussion. I'll give you an hour to make up your mind. Then my men will take one of you through the gates of hell while the other one returns home safe and sound."

"Why are you doing this?" Kelsie asked weakly.

"I like to play with those who have played me for a fool in the past." Taking a breath so deep his chest swelled, he went on to say, "Now, ladies, let the games begin."

## Chapter Ten

“Why in the hell would you leave Kelsie alone?” Logan grabbed Dusty by the shirt collar and glared at his brother.

“He’s not to blame,” Sloane said. “I am.”

Logan reluctantly released Dusty and Dusty said, “No, we all are. I could easily blame you, too, Logan, but accusing one another won’t save Kelsie or Veronica.”

“Veronica can take care of herself,” Benson informed.

“Says who?” Dusty asked.

“She’s a trained field operative. You and Sloane seem to have more faith in her than you do in Drew and me. If she’s as good as you think, she’ll get out of there.”

Dusty shook his head. “She won’t leave without Kelsie.”

“And you know this how?” Logan asked.

“She won’t. I saw them together. They’ve formed this odd kind of bond or something. It’s like they’ve known one another all their lives.”

Sloane yanked a fax off the machine. “Esparza has seventy-two of his men here in Missouri. More will come if we don’t agree to his terms.”

“What are his terms?” Benson asked.

“Doesn’t say.” Sloane pointed to the bottom of the page. “But right here, he states one of the women will return home within the hour.”

“What?” Dusty asked.

“That’s all it says.”

Sloane’s cell phone lit up in his pocket and he immediately grabbed it. “Talk to me.”

“Sloane, I don’t have much of a signal and even less battery. We’re at the lake somewhere. Esparza wants me to choose who stays and who goes. I’m sending Kelsie out.”

Of course she would.

“Either go underground or get out of Missouri. This place is swarming with Esparza’s cartel. I don’t have any idea how many of them are here.”

“Any idea where they’re holding you?” he asked, walking as he tried to process everything she relayed, realizing she needed to talk for as long as her battery held up.

The spare phone, the smaller device his operatives carried for back-up was tiny enough to fit into a shoe or even a body cavity. Regardless of where she hid hers, she possessed the ability to make contact but the batteries on the damn things were weak. Their main purpose was for tracking, but if she didn’t keep talking, the device proved useless.

Sloane sat down at a computer and keyed in the code from her cellular device. He watched the scan begin, the way the waves of communication seemed to generate onto the computer monitor.

“Kelsie thinks we’re near water, maybe right on the lake.”

“Tell me about Fred and Bob. How are they involved?”

“They must’ve held some kind of personal vendetta against Tom and your dad.”

“What?”

“That’s all I know.”

“Why is Esparza letting one of you go?”

“Games. He mentioned playing the players who played him for a fool or something like that. This is a game to him.”

“Well then, tell him to get ready. It’s my move.”

“Sloane, Kelsie is weak. Take her straight to the hospital when they bring her back. Do not try to stop them when they drop her. You could get her killed.”

“And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“What kind of trade off are you taking for Kelsie’s safe return home?”

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “And I’ve never been one who liked to wait for surprises.”

“Damn it, Veronica. What aren’t you telling me?”

“I have to go. Are we clear on tracking?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I gotcha.”

When Sloane hung up the phone, he stared at Dusty and nodded. Leaving the room, Dusty marched to the closet located in the foyer and

started pulling guns from the safe at the back. Machine guns and rifles were only part of the weaponry. He also brought out a box of hand grenades and other tools of the trade.

Sloane pressed the print option and looked over the report from the tracking device.

“Logan and Dusty will follow the vehicle back to the compound where Kelsie and Veronica are being held. The tracking wasn’t as efficient as I’d like. They could be anywhere within a five mile radius, and by the time you search boats, vehicles, and homes, they could kill Veronica.

“Drew, I need you to pack up all of the equipment we have here and move it under. Veronica said we need to move underground or—”

Benson held up his hand. “Wait a minute. How did Veronica know about the underground rooms?”

Dusty said, “Maybe she figured it out when we tripped the hidden compartment in the field.”

“I don’t think so,” Sloane said. “Dusty, did you tell her?”

“Hell no. No one knows about those tunnels and rooms except the five of us and Kelsie.”

Logan shook his head. “Don’t look my way. I haven’t even decided whether or not I like her. I sure as hell won’t share family secrets.”

Sloane slapped the papers against his open palm. “Any chance Kelsie told her?”

“No,” Dusty said. “She’s probably so scared right now she doesn’t care about the tunnels.”

Sloane glared out the window and stood there thoughtfully until Logan and Dusty took their weapons and loaded them into one of the farm trucks. Drew and Benson stood on either side of Sloane.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Benson said. “She’s inside.”

“God help her if she is. I’ll wrap my hands around her neck and squeeze the life out of her myself.”

\* \* \* \*

After Esparza left the room and they made contact with Sloane, Kelsie and Veronica faced one another with plenty to say before changed lives, or possibly even death, prevented them from doing so.



Veronica couldn't allow Kelsie to walk out of there and carry guilt in the event something happened to her. "Kelsie—"

"I'm going to die anyway," she hurriedly said. "The cancer has spread, Veronica. I won't live three months. I haven't told them—Sloane, Drew, Logan, Dusty, and Benson—but Cora may have. If not, you can, but I'm not leaving you here."

"Yes," Veronica said softly, "You are."

"No, I'm not. How can I leave you here when we both know what will happen once I'm gone?"

"Honey," Veronica said, taking her sister's hands. "What do you think I've trained for my whole life?"

"You may have been prepped for a lot of things, but I doubt the men who trained you knew how to prepare you for rape."

"They won't hurt me. I'm too ornery. I'll tell them I have bigger balls than they do."

Kelsie shook her head. "I can't leave you. I won't."

"Kelsie, listen to me. I can buy some time. What I need you to do is pay close attention to details when you leave. Everything from sounds to smells to anything they allow you to see. Understand?"

"I'm not going."

"Listen to me!" Veronica said firmly. "I'm counting on you. You wouldn't make it five minutes with these creeps. You're not strong enough for their kind of abuse."

"And how do you know they won't separate us and kill us?"

"I don't," she admitted. "I'm just going on gut instinct here."

"No, you're buying stock in Esparza's empty promises. He's a cold-blooded killer who doesn't care who he hurts as long as his revenge is swift and sweet."

"I've profiled him, Kelsie. I know how he thinks. The man has an incredible ego, and I can tap into that, at least at first. That's why I'm telling you. I'm counting on you to pay attention to everything. Do your best not to provoke the men who drive you back home and make sure you remember everything you can so you can brief Sloane."

"I don't want to leave you here alone," Kelsie cried out, tears drifting down her cheeks. Between sniffles and a broken cough, she made a final plea, "If I go, I want you to promise me something."

"Name it," she said without thinking.

"I still want you to take care of my men after I'm gone."

"Oh, Kelsie honey, I can't promise you something like that when I don't even know what the next hour holds."

"You don't understand. On the outside, they all seem so strong, but down deep, they're just average men who weren't allowed to dream their dreams or even live their own lives because of the careers our fathers chose for them well in advance."

"Your fellows are going to be fine. And you're the only woman who needs to take care of them. You're a survivor. You're going to live a full life and grow old with those stubborn men of yours."

The silence ripped through the room and Kelsie finally sighed, "We both know that's not true. I'm dying, Veronica, and the least you can do is let me die believing you'll take care of my family."

"I think you're talking to the wrong person here. Sloane is my boss. Dusty is second in command and Logan can barely stand to be in the same room with me. Benson and Drew, in case you haven't noticed, won't speak to me unless the topics are business related and you're asking me to take care of them? I'd have to be insane to agree to something like that."

"You seem to have a connection with Dusty and Sloane."

"Honey, we've worked together. Outside of professional interests, there's nothing there."

Kelsie bowed her head and coughed. "Dusty is attracted to you."

"Where on earth did you come up with something so absurd?"

"I've watched him when you're around. He may not have told you how he feels, but when I'm gone, he'll be the first to come for comfort. You'll see. When he does, will you be there for him?"

"Kelsie..."

She raised her head. "Will you take care of him, at least?"

"Dusty doesn't need a woman to take care of him. He only wants to take care of you."

"Someone is here," Kelsie told her, trembling so hard, her bellbottom jeans flared at the hem. "When I get home, I'm talking to Dusty and Sloane. I'll tell them you're my sister. Remember, I told you we take care of our own. You'll see. It will make a difference. They'll come for you and they'll save you."

“I don’t need saving. What I need from you is what I’ve already explained.”

“Same here, and whether you agree now or not, I know in my heart when I’m gone, you’ll take care of everything. Loving the Remington men, all of them, will come natural.”

## Chapter Eleven

“They’re in position,” Drew informed, joining Benson and Sloane in the large den they made into another command center.

Sloane took a deep breath, shoved a clip in the butt of one gun before fiddling with another. Taking a semi-automatic from the desk drawer, he slid it down his boot, placed a cowboy hat on his head, and walked out on the front porch.

Walking up behind him, Benson questioned his authority. “What are you trying to do, give them a good target so if they aim they don’t miss?”

“Go back inside,” Sloane ordered. “The only way I’ll die today is if they aim low or go for straight between the eyes. I have on a vest.”

“Those things work great against bombs, too, I’m told,” Benson said.

“Yeah, well, from what I understand, these guys cherish sex so much, they’ve designed bombs to specifically ensure when a man is blown to pieces, his cock lands in his hand.”

“You’re always such a fucking smartass, Sloane. One of these days when you quit beating off long enough, maybe you’ll realize you take too many chances. Maybe you’ll see it’s time to let go of the past, let the dead rest in peace, and bury the living when they die of natural causes, not waiting for our enemies to send us to early graves.”

“Thanks, Benson. I’ll take what you’ve said into consideration. Now get your ass inside. I’d hate to carry another grudge if one of these bastards shoots to kill and misses me but hits you.”

Benson slapped him on the back. “Check your earpiece.”

“I gotcha,” Drew said, letting him know he heard him loud and clear.

“All right,” Sloane said. “We’re ready.”

Sloane surveyed one side of the property line, searching for any kind of movement. He stood there on the front porch, waiting and wondering. What

was Kelsie going through? Had he ultimately placed her in the line of fire because of the timing he chose to seek revenge against his father's enemies?

Hearing the sound of screeching tires, he placed his hand to his ear and relayed information. "We've got company. Tell Logan and Dusty to stand ready."

A few moments later, a white van pulled right inside the gates. Two men jumped out and a little while later, they yanked Kelsie from the back, guided her up the driveway and left her sitting square in the middle, her eyes covered by a blindfold.

Two minutes tops and they were back on the road with Logan and Dusty in position. They managed to hop into the back of the van when the captors yanked Kelsie from the rear.

"She looks all right," Sloane informed, rushing toward her. Minutes later, Drew and Benson sped right by him. By the time he jogged up the final stretch of the driveway, she sat upright in the truck.

"Thank God you're all right," Sloane released a sigh of relief, pulling her tightly against him and cradling her head. "Did they hurt you?"

"No," she answered softly, pushing him away. "But, Sloane, you have to hurry. We don't have time. Veronica needs you." Her face drew tight with worry. Panic left its mark in her pretty eyes.

"Wait there a minute," Benson said. "We need to get you inside and make sure you're okay, first."

"No," Kelsie pleaded, tugging at Drew's shirt and shaking Sloane's arm at the same time. "You have to listen to me. Esparza said they're going to start training Veronica."

"What do you mean they're going to train her?" Benson prodded.

Sloane could've gagged then. He'd been to Caracas. He'd walked through some of the territories Esparza claimed for his own. He'd actually busted up one of Esparza's little gang bang training parties while working a mission in Venezuela and now, one of his agents would suffer the same fate? No, he thought, not on his watch, and by damn not Veronica. He couldn't stomach it.

"Sloane," she cried out. "You have to go."

"Kelsie, I have no idea where to look, do you?"

"No, but..."

“Logan and Dusty are in the van,” he told her, thumbing the air over his shoulder.

“What?”

“They snuck up from the creek and climbed in when the driver put the van in reverse and the others walked you down the driveway.”

She stared at him in disbelief.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“How could you?” she accused, slapping her hands against his chest. “Why the hell didn’t you go?”

Sloane studied her, trying to read through the outburst. “Honey, Logan and Dusty are trained for this kind of thing, too. They’ll sneak in there before any of Esparza’s crew realizes they’re there.”

“No,” she smacked him across the chest again. “Why would you send Dusty in there?”

“Dusty?” Sloane asked, dumbfounded.

“Yes! Why?”

“We all have to face our demons someday, Kelsie.”

Benson frowned. “I didn’t think it was a good idea, either. You should’ve gone.”

“Yes, well, according to you, I should’ve done a lot of things differently.”

Kelsie moved by them and started walking.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Sloane yelled behind her. “Get back in this truck!”

She kept right on walking, but she stumbled all over the place as she tried to gain momentum and apparently keep her strength.

“I said get your ass back here!” Sloane didn’t have time for a Kelsie tantrum.

“No,” she refused with defiance guiding her very existence. “If you won’t help my sister, then I’ll find someone who can. If I have to walk or even crawl, I’ll find someone in Missouri who will help me save Veronica.”

Sloane stared at her backside. “Wait a minute. Did you say sister?”

\* \* \* \*

There wasn't anything handsome about Gomez Gustavo Esparza, but Veronica decided if fucking him bought her some time, she could make herself. Every minute she spent with Esparza meant one less minute she had to endure sexual torture with various partners, the kind of training Esparza probably couldn't wait to begin.

When he entered the bedroom where she was held, he pulled up the metal chair. "How's your vision?"

"Better," she said, quickly adding, "And thank you for asking."

Chuckling, he leaned back and crossed his arms across his pudgy middle. "Don't try to play me. It won't work. See, I know more about you than even the Remingtons, and from what I can tell, we're hardly what you women in the States call 'a likely match.'"

Veronica tilted her head and crossed her legs. Bouncing her lower leg up and down, she gave him something to think about. "I'm not afraid to die."

Esparza rubbed his double chin. "Maybe not, but you see I don't want death for you. I want to strip away your pride, arrogance, and most importantly, I want to take away your right of choice. Even better, I need to send the Remingtons a message. They can't take what's mine without facing unfathomable consequences."

"And you think they care about what happens to me?"

"I know one Remington who will move hell and high waters to try and stop this. He'll fail and his failure will eat at him night and day because he couldn't protect you."

"I assume you're talking about Dusty?"

"Dusty." He pronounced the name like he savored every syllable.

"Well?"

He made a low groan. "Dusty didn't learn anything from my men when he spent time in Caracas. We tried to break his will, but it was like trying to tame a mountain lion."

Or possibly a Grizzly from what Veronica knew of Dusty's once-notorious temper. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I want you to understand, in case you've heard Dusty's story." His eyes flickered with pure hatred.

"You can't possibly think I know anything about Dusty's time in Venezuela. Wait a minute... you want me to know details. You'd like to tell

me all about the gruesome days of Dusty Remington's moments in Caracas."

His lips thinned, his cheeks swelled, and he shot her a wicked smile, one she hoped she never saw again. "I could care less about sharing Dusty's story. But," he said, holding up his forefinger in the air, "I want you to recognize who you're dealing with before we proceed."

She reminded herself of the man's ego and tried to act engulfed in the conversation. "I'm listening."

"See, Miss Leigh, I happen to know of at least one time you, too, visited Caracas."

She shivered when she heard something outside the window. Oh God, she thought, was Dusty out there? If so, would he hear the truth from Esparza? Did she want him to know that even in his darkest moments, she was there trying her best to watch over him?

Esparza went back to the window. "It's a beautiful day today, isn't it?"

"Not particularly. I like a bright sunny day as opposed to a cloudy one." But she could see where the hazy afternoon appealed more to a man like Esparza. Not that she believed he cared about the weather. He, too, must have heard the leaves scatter when someone approached the house.

"Tell me something. Were you assigned to rescue Dusty in Caracas or simply find him and report back to your commanding officer?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Miss Leigh," he said evenly, "I don't make mistakes. When I mention intelligence, you can bank on its accuracy."

"Someone on your team apparently lied to you. I haven't been to Caracas. I haven't visited South America in several years. I can assure you I'd already heard enough about the Venezuelan experience, and had no desire to go there."

"What a shame," he whispered thoughtfully.

He strolled over to where she sat and yanked her head back so he could stare into her eyes. "I kill people who lie to me, Miss Leigh. Do you want to die today?"

"What's stopping you? If you believe I lied to you, then do it. Snap my neck."

He gritted his teeth, and Veronica stared into his eyes. She saw a man without a soul, a man who barely deserved to be called out as a man. There



wasn't a person behind those dark, empty eyes. Oh no, a monster wore a human's mask.

Esparza wanted to take the kill.

What the hell had she been thinking? Did she push too hard? Her heart raced forward. Why did she seem hell bent on provoking a cold-blooded killer?

She didn't want Dusty, if he was out there somewhere, to overhear Esparza. She never wanted to admit she'd heard some of the torture Dusty endured. She didn't want to be reminded because to hear Esparza's account of those days meant to face her past, the past that made her cold, nearly numb.

Her experiences in Venezuela changed who she was as a person and as an operative. All the training in the world never prepared her for the personal struggles she'd endured after spending time in Caracas.

Sometimes, she could still hear the low moans of the women held captive in Esparza's sex camps. And she never forgot the ear piercing screams she'd heard Dusty release while she tried her best to make her way toward him.

"You think I won't do it," Esparza stated diabolically, holding his fist against her nape with a handful of her hair.

She forced a smile. "You underestimated me again. See, with what I face, I don't give a shit what you do."

As if he was instantly reminded of a better plan, a more perverse means of handling his prisoner, he released her and walked away.

"You're doing this because you're scared of women like me," she announced, changing the subject and rubbing her neck.

"Ha! Is that what you think?"

"Why don't you explain why you're doing this, then? Outside of the obvious. I know you can do whatever you want. No one knows I'm here or how to find me. But why wouldn't you take me for yourself first?"

"Are you offering?"

"Maybe, but remember, you said I don't have the freedom to choose now. Are you willing to exercise your free will and take me? Come on, Gus," she drawled. "I know you want to." She licked her lips and stared at his zipper. "Are you man enough?"

He narrowed his gaze on her chest and right then she thought she'd won, but she still wanted more time. The longer she postponed the dirtiest of deeds, the longer she remained in control of her situation.

"What makes you so sure I'd bed the daughter of Tom Weaver?"

"The excitement," she reported at once, fingering her low-cut blouse. "Like I said, you have the right to choose. Why would a man in your position let his men have what he desires more than anything he's wanted in a long, long time?"

She lowered her eyes and her voice. "I make you feel alive, and you haven't felt this way in years. I see it when you look at me, when you stare at my breasts like a hungry man waiting to enjoy his feast."

His wicked smile turned into an outright evil smirk. He held his tongue against his upper lip. She wondered if he was thinking about her proposition or if he was continuing the game he'd recently sworn to play.

Abruptly, he checked the windows again. He pushed the glass forward and allowed a more even breeze to blow inside the small room. "Sit down."

She sat, noticing the beads of sweat splattered across his forehead.

"Excellent," he commented, pulling a handkerchief from his pant pocket and dabbing his brow.

"I'm here to please," she teased, tilting her head to the side.

"I will break you in the end," he promised. Watching for a reaction, he said, "And you find my threat appealing, maybe even a little arousing?"

He might take her body, maybe even sell her sex out by the hour but, no, he wouldn't break her. She had a strong will and true stubbornness. Plus, she didn't respect men like Esparza, and when she held little respect for someone, they weren't given the power to destroy her. Esparza didn't have the right. Hell, no one did.

"You're turned on, yes?"

"Maybe," she lied. "Do you want to turn me on?"

"Ha! You must take me for a very foolish man."

"No," she cooed, "But I do take you for a very powerful man."

"And you like power."

"I get off on it."

Barely audible, Esparza's growl sounded like his primal instincts made a few decisions for him. Trying to regain his composure, he changed the subject. "I wonder what it must've been like for you growing up."

“Is that why you came in here?”

He arched his brow.

“You want to know about my childhood?”

“When I first heard about Tom Weaver’s willful daughter, I doubted my resources. One man lost his life for providing inaccurate information about Weaver’s oldest daughter. It was inaccurate of course, because the intelligence delivered was about your sister, a delicate little fragile woman all the Remington brothers seemed destined to care for. Kelsie, as you know, is real good at playing dumb, and it landed her the protection of five of the best operatives the Underground Unit has ever known.”

“Then she must not be completely stupid.”

“I didn’t say she’s stupid,” he said slowly, waving his forefinger in the air. “You, on the other hand, are good at playing it smart. You don’t want a man to look at you and see a woman easily controlled. You want him to think from the moment he meets you, he’s met his equal.” He paced. “If someone looks closer, they’d perhaps see your vulnerability. Instead, you keep your distance and,” he shrugged, “apparently couldn’t care less about anything more than mere survival.”

“You know all of my secrets.”

“I have enough to destroy you.”

She doubted that one. “Found me interesting enough to study like a science?”

“I failed anatomy,” he mentioned casually.

“Tsk, tsk, and here I thought you were a pro when it came to handling matters of the body.”

He continued to analyze sisters. “Kelsie is used to doing what she’s told, which is why she left here and you didn’t. In fact, you used her submissive nature against her. When I told you to make the choice, you had little reason to doubt your sister wouldn’t go home like you requested. After all, Kelsie grew up moving around, going from one location to another because someone told her to leave, first your father and later Sloane Remington. On the other hand, you answer to no one. You can guess from that information alone why I hoped you would choose to stay.”

She gave her head a quick toss and winked. “I aim to please.”

“No,” he disagreed, shaking his head profusely. “In fact, you don’t operate under any man’s rules.” His tone changed, and Veronica needed to quickly regroup or at least shut her damn mouth.

“And it’s a disgrace, actually,” he added. “If not a waste of your other talents.”

“Because I don’t do what I’m told?”

Esparza stood in front of her and tilted her chin upward. Moving his head from side to side, he lowered his mouth and sighed, “Such a pretty woman.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, trying to seduce. “I think we’d make a good impression on one another, don’t you?”

Stepping away, he said. “Impression? Is that what casual sex is called these days? Besides, you can’t surprise me, Miss Leigh. I know everything there is to know about you and your sister.”

“Like?”

“Your sister married—what a joke—the Remingtons in her twenties. Sloane Remington dragged her into the BDSM culture because he realized it was the only way he could ever control her. In her father’s line of work, someone had to have a firm hand on Kelsie. The Remingtons practically raised her. And you, ah, but you.” He paused, waggling his finger again. “You raised yourself.”

She didn’t know what any of this had to do with anything else.

“The Remingtons took Kelsie’s innocence. You never had any. Would you like for me to elaborate?”

Suddenly, she felt the sting he must’ve wanted delivered. He knew about her past, knew the way she’d taken one man to bed and then another, looking for comfort, searching for love.

“How long have you known about me?”

He roared with laughter. “Long enough to make you uncomfortable. You see, Wilson Remington and Tom Weaver were enemies of mine from the time I was a boy.”

“What? How is that possible?”

“They killed my father and my grandmother on one of their first missions. The Underground Unit was in Caracas working on recovering a kidnapped woman who had political strings in Russia and the States. They

invaded a safe house for the cartel and everyone there died, including my father and my grandmother.”

She processed the new information.

“What? No apologies? No excuses? No explanation?”

“I never apologize and rarely explain any aspect of this business. My father and Wilson had a job to do. Apparently, your father and grandmother were in that safe house for a reason. Perhaps you didn’t realize why they were there. Perhaps they were innocent bystanders, maybe they weren’t. Either way, this ongoing war between you and the Remingtons will not bring back your relatives.”

His revelation opened up room for further speculation about his mental stability. How long had Esparza harbored hostility? How long had he plotted revenge? Long enough to taste Remington blood, no doubt.

With his fist slamming against the plaster wall, he shouted, “I watched my family die!”

Did he want her to cry a tear? She didn’t have one to shed.

Veronica reminded herself of the ruthless man. Sure, he’d endured heartache like anyone else, and disappointment paid him a visit at an early age. But he was also a notorious killer, one various countries wanted extinguished. “I can’t help what my father or Wilson did in the past.”

“I don’t want your excuses. I only want you to realize the war I have with the Remingtons goes way beyond a simple misunderstanding and while I’d love to take you up on your proposal,” he moved closer and covered her hand with his, pulling her blouse forward enough so he could peer inside her shirt, “I’m going to have to decline your ample offer.”

Now, she was apparently out of time.

## Chapter Twelve

Dusty and Logan waited outside her window. When they heard the door open and close, Dusty realized the stopwatch was set.

“All right, Veronica,” Dusty called out. “The infantry is here, but there’s only so much ground we can cover. If you don’t move your sweet ass, even an air strike won’t be able to save us!”

Leaning out the window, she said, “What the hell took you two so long?”

“Worried ya, did we?” Dusty asked, holding a tight grin. “I’d hate to have something happen to that pretty little ass.”

“My ass isn’t the only body part you’re worried about.”

Dusty said, “Hey, I’m not picky. I can start with the front or the back. Which way do you want to slide, baby?”

Veronica swung one leg over the windowsill.

Dusty gawked at her long, sexy legs. “That works.”

Logan placed two weapons in her hand when she landed on the ground. Then, he said, “If we’re separated for any reason, you’re about two miles from several bait and tackle stores. If you can get to any one of them, Sloane will be able to get to you.”

“You two better not lose me.”

Dusty studied her quickly, starting at her toes and working his way all the way to the top of her head. Then, he touched her cheek. She flinched.

“Who did this to you?”

“It’s nothing,” she assured him, swiping his hand away. “I put up a good fight. You should see the other ten or twelve guys.”

“Veronica, you’re almost black and blue.”

“Yeah, but I’m alive, Dusty, and considering my captors, I consider myself damn lucky.”

“Did they...” Dusty almost choked on his question. “Veronica, they didn’t...” How did he ask her one of the most personal questions a man asked a woman? Did he have the right? Had Esparza’s men compromised her in any way? Had they not only battered and bruised her but also taken her body against her will?

“Why hell no,” Logan said. “How could they? I heard the way she worked Esparza. He probably came in his pants while he was talking to her.”

Dusty’s gaze held hers. “Veronica?”

She patted his face and winked. “I didn’t give this up to anyone yet, Dusty. I’m saving it all for you.”

“God, yeah,” he said, walking behind her. “I hope so.”

Logan shot them a cold stare. “Come on, you two. Let’s get going.”

They started out along the lakeshore, but soon they were climbing up and down hillsides. The three hiked for a good five miles before she finally asked, “Where the hell are we going?”

“What’s wrong, doll?” Logan asked. “Were you expecting limousine service and caviar to enjoy on the trip back home?”

“Knock it off, Logan,” Dusty said, watching her closely. “Are you sick or something?”

“No, but I like to know where my enemies are, and right now, I’m starting to feel like we’re walking toward them rather than away from them.”

Dusty shot her a sideways glance. “Is that a true sixth sense kind of feeling, or are you just being a woman and nagging because you have to work those thigh muscles?”

“What do my thighs have to do with anything right now?”

“Obviously, they don’t have a lot to do with anything whatsoever.”

She stopped walking and seethed for a second. “Dusty Remington, does everything you say have to do with sex?”

Logan placed his hand between her shoulders urging her forward, encouraging her to pick up her pace. “Oh, I guess you didn’t know.”

“What now?”

Dusty shook his head and smiled. “You might as well tell her.”

“Tell me what?”

“Dusty here is the go-to pussy man and, yes, everything he says generally has something to do with sex.”

“Fabulous. That’s probably why we get along so well. See, I’m the go-to dick-chick and, Dusty, don’t you worry about my thighs again. I can promise you I keep them in shape and know how to move them when I find a worthy man between my legs.”

“Shit,” Logan said. “Keep on. One day, you’re going to bite more than you want to chew.”

“I suck and, for the record, I never bite,” she teased.

“Do you swallow, too?” Dusty asked.

“A girl has to keep something private, Dusty. I’ve already told you more than I should.”

“Yeah,” Logan said. “So much for keeping him guessing.”

Logan and Dusty shared a laugh. A few moments later, they heard a car in the distance, and they shoved her down a steep incline, covering her body with theirs.

About five minutes afterwards, she said, “Okay, boys, we can all move now.”

Dusty groaned when he shifted. “I think I broke something.”

“Shit,” she said. “What?”

“Come here and check it out,” he said, pointing toward his cock.

Logan stood. “Don’t fall for it.”

“I won’t.”

“Kelsie does,” Dusty said.

“Do you want me to remind you of why?” Veronica snapped.

Logan raised his brows and shrugged. “Remember, the two women have bonded.”

“Good. Kelsie needs a female companion.”

No, what she needed was a sister, and maybe if they put Esparza to rest, she could finally spend some quality time with Kelsie. She’d like nothing more.

\* \* \* \*

Hiking back to the ranch was grueling. Keeping up with Logan and Dusty brought its own set of challenges.



The men were in incredible shape. While she tried to follow along, a few times they had to wait for her to catch up. They never broke a sweat, and she was ringing wet with perspiration by the time they walked through the front door.

Sloane greeted them in the foyer. "Why didn't you call?"

"We managed to get back," Dusty sneered. "Count your blessings, not your trips missed."

Even in the midst of her exhaustion, hearing Unit Commander Mark Donovan's words of wisdom oozing into the room brought back countless memories. Donovan had taken extra care in her training, and now she knew why. If Kelsie had suspected a sister, then Mark Donovan from the Eastern division and Wilson Remington, who worked with Donovan on a regular basis, always knew Tom Weaver had another daughter. Their interest in her wasn't superficial. They must have genuinely cared about her.

"What are you grinning about?" Dusty asked.

Sloane crossed his arms over his chest. "She should smile. From what I've heard from Kelsie, she barely escaped with her virtue."

"I don't look at this woman and see a pure and sweet, fragile little thing," Dusty bit out.

Barely able to stand the chemistry that continued to build between them, Veronica gripped the handrail and started up the stairs.

"Not so fast, Veronica."

Slowly, she turned around. "Sloane, all I want is a hot bath, a warm bed, and a few hours to close my eyes. Surely, you can let me have a nap before we debrief?"

Sloane shook his head. "You made it this far, and I have to commend you, Agent Leigh. You sure had us fooled."

Dusty and Logan started for the kitchen but stopped in the hallway when they apparently detected the bitterness in Sloane's voice. She easily remembered hearing a similar tone from his father when Wilson Remington headed up interrogations.

Dusty shot her a quick glance before he questioned Sloane. "What's this about?"

"Ask her," Sloane replied, tilting his head in her direction. "It's been in front of me all along and I didn't know. You must've really enjoyed making a mockery out of all of us behind our backs."

“What are you talking about?” she asked, knowingly.

“When were you going to tell us you’re Tom Weaver’s other daughter?”

Dusty’s eyes widened. “She’s what?”

“Yeah, seems now we have two of Tom’s daughters to watch over instead of one. Our enemies will view us as having two weaknesses.”

“Most men wouldn’t view me as a weakness. I’m more of an asset than you’ll ever know, Sloane Remington.”

“Fucking hell,” Logan said, raising his arm and slapping his hand against his side. His eyes remained wide, and he looked like a man who took a real kick to the stomach.

“Go on,” Sloane urged her. “Tell them. I want to hear you tell us all the truth.”

Veronica sat down on the third step and stared back at him. “I’m exhausted. Can we please talk about this another time?”

“I say we talk now.” Dusty provided Sloane with an ally.

She first feared they’d overheard her conversation with Esparza. Now, she realized they didn’t, or if anyone did perhaps only Logan since he had been closest to the window. If they didn’t hear Esparza’s discussion about her father, then Dusty didn’t know she had been in Caracas when he was held against his will.

Benson walked downstairs and patted her on the shoulder. “Kelsie wants to see you.”

“I’d rather talk to Kelsie,” she said leaving them with a smile and springing to her feet with renewed energy.

“I’m sure you would,” Dusty grumbled.

“What’s wrong, Dusty? Are you mad because I kept a little secret from the Underground Unit or because you almost crossed the line with your sister-in-law?”

Sloane looked over at Logan, but he twisted his mouth as if to say he wanted no part of this conversation. “You did what?” Sloane asked Dusty.

“I didn’t,” Dusty balked, eyeing Veronica.

“Okay, Dusty,” she said, starting upstairs. “I’m too tired to argue.”

“You came on to me.”

“Whatever you say,” she chirped, proceeding toward the first landing.

Dusty followed her. “Don’t you turn your back on us. What the hell have you been doing here?”

“What I was trained to do,” she said, wiggling her arm free. “What my father wanted and expected me to do...my fucking job!”

“Deception is in the training manual, is it?”

“I wouldn’t know. Is cheating?”

“I didn’t cheat!”

“You’d better not have,” Sloane threatened. “I’d break your face myself.”

“I imagine you would,” Dusty said. “Then again, you’re the only one here who has had sex in the last fucking sixteen months. Maybe that’s why it’s a little easier for you to avoid friendly flirtations but point an accusing finger at the same time.”

Veronica narrowed her gaze. With a curled lip, she eyed Sloane once more. She might dare him to say anything more to her tonight or to Dusty for that matter. Yes, Sloane was Kelsie’s husband or whatever she called them independently.

Sloane was also the one who obviously handled Kelsie better than anyone else. He was her leading man, and he was also the last man in her bed. Still, he looked at another woman, and she had been the one who had tempted him. When she tested him, she taunted him enough to make him remember what he missed about a vibrant and healthy sexual relationship.

She regretted making her move now. Kelsie’s arrival in Missouri made her aware of a sister’s bond, something she’d never experienced before.

She continued up the stairs. She needed some downtime. Anything they had to say could wait for another day.

“Veronica!” Dusty yelled when she walked toward Kelsie’s room. “We’re not finished here.”

“Oh, yes, we are, Dusty. In case you failed to notice, we never got started.”

\* \* \* \*

“I’m so glad you made it home safely,” Kelsie said when Veronica first entered the room. “I guess they’re a little angry over our secret, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, but I had to tell them.”

"It's okay," she yawned, taking a seat on the bed.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, Kelsie reached for her with childlike arms so thin and fragile she could barely cling to her at all.

Veronica hugged her and then quickly backed away. "I told you not to worry."

"I don't remember," Kelsie said. "Everything is a blur now. I was so scared, Veronica."

"I know you were. But in case I forget to tell you later, in the event something else happens, just remember there's nothing to worry about."

"You know this how?"

"I'm living proof, sis."

"Yes, you are, but my men," she stated proudly, "saved you."

"Yes," she agreed, glancing up at Dusty when he entered. "They did their job."

"Does your face hurt?" Kelsie asked, reaching out to touch her cheek.

"No, it's fine. The bruises serve as a reminder. We won this battle."

"I'm glad you can joke about it. I was so afraid they'd hurt you in other ways."

"They didn't."

"Dusty," Kelsie said, putting him on the spot when he walked close enough for her to touch his hand. "Tell my sister you were doing your job but you love to save beautiful damsels in distress."

Dusty's eyes met Veronica's, and Kelsie looked on like she couldn't have been more satisfied. Her sister had a peculiar way of match-making, if that's what she was trying to do. Veronica still couldn't wrap her mind around the concept.

"So, did you two have," at a loss for words, Kelsie coughed and then finished her statement, "a nice escape?"

"Yes," Veronica quickly provided the only answer Kelsie apparently wanted.

"Hardly," Dusty responded. "She propositioned Esparza."

"You did? Why?"

Veronica sighed and rolled her eyes. "I should've mentioned that first thing. It's exactly as Dusty says, a true proposition."

"He is kind of cute," she teased.

“Oh, definitely,” Veronica agreed. “You made quite the impression on him, too.”

Immediately, Dusty set his jaw. Drew walked in and sat on the end of the bed. “Kelsie makes an impression on every man she meets. Don’t you, sweetheart?” His blue green eyes filled with love. Then he said to Veronica, “When were you going to tell us that you’re practically family?”

“I would’ve told you when the time was right.”

“Why wait for a right time when you can wait until it’s almost too late?” Dusty asked bitterly.

Kelsie studied Dusty for a second. Patting the bed and encouraging him to move closer, she dismissed the others. “Can I have a minute with Dusty?”

Kissing her cheek, Dusty jumped to his feet. “Can it wait until tomorrow? I need to talk to Sloane about security tonight.”

Veronica gently pinched her cheek. “Good to see your color back. Get some rest.”

“I will. You, too,” Kelsie said.

Veronica and Dusty once again exchanged a quick, heated glance and then she walked out. Drew followed her.

Great, she thought, just what she needed. Another Remington giving her a piece of his mind didn’t appeal to her in the least. He must’ve suspected as much and instead of ridiculing her for maintaining her anonymity, he said, “I’m glad you’re all right, Veronica.”

“Thanks, Drew.”

Then, he disappeared downstairs.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Kelsie,” Dusty began. “I know what you’re going to say.”

“No, I don’t think you do.”

“I’m not angry at Veronica,” he began. “I’m disturbed because we can’t work side by side with other operatives if they’re not honest with us. In this particular case, her decision to withhold information—like being Tom Weaver’s illegitimate daughter—proved crucial.”

“Really? So you’re trying to say she wouldn’t have been in a predicament with Esparza if she hadn’t been related to my father?”

“Right.”

“Bullshit, Dusty Remington, and you know it. You’re upset because she didn’t confide in *you*.”

“I don’t care what that woman does.”

“*That woman* is my sister.”

“And I still couldn’t care less what she does.”

“I’m calling bullshit on everything you have to say about her right now, Dusty.”

He winked. “Tell you what, baby, if you’re feeling frisky, then how about you scoot your pretty little ass over and let me tell you a bedtime story.”

“No. If you want to climb in bed with a woman tonight, then I suggest you go and kiss my sister goodnight. We both know that’s what you want to do anyway.”

Dusty shook his head like a cartoon character might. He snapped it so quick to the left and back to the right that his eyes jerked, too. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re attracted to her.”

"I like women and you weren't in the dark about my eclectic tastes when you decided to hop in bed with me. Besides, you're a good one to talk. You're so fickle you have a collection of Remingtons."

"Yes, I do, and I don't make apologies for it. I love all of you the same, and one doesn't take away from the other."

"Thanks, I'm glad you approve." He gave her a quick kiss on the forehead and moved toward the door.

"Not so fast," she snapped. She dropped her voice an octave. "Dusty, when you promised to love and protect me, you didn't promise to forsake all others."

"Honey, I love you. Only you."

"But you didn't promise, Dusty. I wanted to remind you because obviously I never asked you for that commitment when I couldn't do the same. It's not fair for me to have five wonderful men in my life and expect all of you to have as strong of feelings for me as perhaps Sloane does. We all love differently. We touch the lives of those we love in different ways. Dusty, I'm telling you to go to Veronica. She needs you."

"Kelsie, this is crazy. She's your sister for crying out loud." He yanked a soft peach-colored blanket from a nearby closet and draped the coverlet around her, tucking it under her arms.

"I'm not done with you."

"Yes, you are. I'm not discussing Veronica with you." He strolled across the room, but before he left, he said, "Kelsie, you know how much I love you, right?"

"Yes, Dusty, I do. That's why I don't have a problem sharing you with Veronica, especially now."

"You don't have to share me. My heart is with you."

"Mine is with you, but it's also with Sloane, Benson, Drew, and Logan."

"I know."

"There's enough love in this house to go around."

"There's enough love here, all right, but it's all reserved for you," he assured her. Then he walked out of her room and straight into Veronica.

"Were you listening?"

"No."

“Okay,” he said, believing her because she looked like a woman who wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop if she tried. Benson and Logan walked past them, heading for the upstairs recreational room.

“Do you need anything?” Dusty asked softly.

“Outside of a backrub, nope. I got everything covered,” she promised, slipping inside her bedroom. “Goodnight, Dusty.”

“Goodnight.”

He went downstairs and tried to focus on what Sloane wanted Drew to learn about a new security measure on their computers. He’d heard the same information from Logan when they’d hiked home. He didn’t need to go over details again. He practically had a photogenic memory and anything Sloane said now would only be half-ass processed.

Walking back upstairs, he peeked in on Kelsie again and sat with her for a few minutes before her soft breathing almost rocked him to sleep. Kissing her on the cheek, he whispered, “I’ll always love you, Kelsie. Always.”

Then he walked out of her room and slipped into Veronica’s.

\* \* \* \*

Veronica reached for her gun and hit the small fluorescent lamp at the same time. “Good God, you scared me to death. Don’t you believe in knocking?”

His eyes held hers to a challenge. Then, his gaze lowered, settling on her breasts. She’d slipped on the first thing she found and unfortunately, Dusty probably thought she chose the selection for him since he found his way to her room.

The lavender gown dipped low, and the cut of lace outlined the shape of her breasts. The material was so thin that if she stood up he would see her nipples and her pussy.

She lowered her weapon. “Is something wrong with Kelsie?”

“No,” he said, stripping his T-shirt over his head. “Something is wrong with me.”

“I could’ve told you that when I first met you,” she teased.

He knelt down on the bed and as he did, he grabbed her calves and then her hips, flipping her over on her stomach.

“What the hell are you doing?” she asked, wiggling.



With his palm to her lower back, he replied, "I'm giving you what you deserve." Then he raised his hand and gave her a light smack, a playful swat across her backside.

"Like hell you are," she said, kicking once and trying to roll over again.

"Don't get all excited. You wanted a backrub. I'm here to rub."

She felt a tingling sensation on the back of her neck. She didn't need her body to help out with warnings. This wasn't a good idea.

Dusty's hands propelled over her shoulders. The balls of his hands massaged the area below the blades, and his fingers pressed into her flesh, crawling toward her neck.

"God, that feels good," she purred. Now, she couldn't send him away.

"I bet." He maneuvered his hands to her nape and then squeezed and released her shoulders.

"What did you do, take lessons from a massage therapist?"

"When are you going to learn? Honey, I don't need lessons in anything. I'm a trained professional in everything I do."

"Don't tempt me," she said, closing her eyes. God help her, his hands spun pure magic.

He stopped abruptly and straddled her hips. "Are you?"

"Hmm?" she asked dreamily. "Am I what?" Her eyes popped open and she stared at the dim light barely visible under the door.

His palms skimmed across her body, and he kneaded the skin right above her hips. "Do I tempt you?"

God, yes, he was the most enticing man she'd ever encountered in her life, but she didn't want him to betray Kelsie, and most of all, she never wanted to do anything to hurt either of them. "You're all right on a rainy day," she finally admitted.

He stopped again, lowering his lips to her nape. He didn't kiss her but instead whispered against her skin. "I'm better than all right especially during a violent storm, and you should see how I heat up those hot summer nights."

"Damn, my sister must've stroked that ego a whole lot through the years."

He snickered. "Her and a few other ladies I've encountered along the way."

"Bragging?"

He gripped the sides of her waist and ran his hands up and down her sides, stopping before he clutched more than skin and bones. God help her, she'd love for him to try just so she could know what one touch from him felt like. As the guilt consumed her for wishing such a thing, she whispered, "Dusty, I think you need to go."

"Why?"

"You know why."

He kissed her back and smoothed his hands over her gown. "I don't want to leave you, but you're probably right. If I don't go now, I'm going to do something we'll both regret."

"Then you should go," she said, turning to her side so she could study his face.

"I—"

"You what?"

"I want you." He ran his hand through his dark hair. "God help me, I can't sleep for thinking about you. When Bob left here with you, I was so fucking angry. I wanted to kill someone, fight like hell to get you back, and I couldn't breathe. God, Veronica, I couldn't fucking breathe until I saw you again."

She stared into his hooded eyes and, sure enough, saw the heavy weight of lust and guilt, a fine mixture of the pleasure he wanted and the pain having anything to do with another woman would potentially bring. "Dusty, you should leave."

"Give me a minute," he said, moving away from her and looking down at a very visible reason of why he asked for a moment.

"Dusty, it's okay to want something you can't have. The feelings we have, and I admit they're mutual, don't have to destroy us."

Holding his tongue to the corner of his mouth, he confessed, "Kelsie knows I'm attracted to you."

Of course she would. How could she not? Veronica accepted the chemistry she felt with Dusty wasn't something a woman in love would dismiss without further inquiry. Just because Kelsie was sick probably didn't mean she turned the other cheek when one of her men looked like he wanted to stray.

"Do you want to tell me what she said?"

"Not particularly."

“Okay. Do you want me to try and talk to her?”

“It wouldn’t do any good. She’s made up her mind and seems to have a lot of ideas for me and you.”

“Really now, that’s interesting.”

Dusty stood, grabbing his shirt from the end of the bed and doing his best to show off his exceptional abs and toned muscles when he shrugged the shirt on again. “I had ideas of my own.”

“Oh, yeah? I kind of thought so.”

Dusty sat on the bed. With his hands clasped in between his legs, he said, “I don’t know how I’m going to get through this.”

“Dusty, have you ever cheated on Kelsie?”

“Hell, no, I never needed to cheat.”

Veronica watched those long fingers run through his thick hair again. Heaven help her, how she’d love to do the same, but his confession was telling. “Dusty, you don’t want me,” she told him gently. “You have a basic need and Kelsie’s unable to sate those needs right now.”

He shook his head. “No, that’s not it entirely.”

“Yes,” she said. “I think it is. You’re a man who has strong desires, and no one could fault you for looking for comfort, but I’m not sure you want to look here.”

He reached for her hand and held it, rubbing his thumb over the bones of her fingers until the friction alone made her panties as damp as the earlier back massage. There was something far too sexy about hand holding with Dusty, and when she tried to pull away, he tightened the grip.

“I’m not attracted to her anymore,” he said softly. “It’s not because she’s sick. Kelsie always had a stronger connection with the rest of them. She couldn’t fake it. Our chemistry wasn’t strong. The love was there, but the lust never hit the right level of satisfaction for either of us. Sexually, we were never in sync.”

She took a deep breath and stood then, forgetting her gown concealed nothing. “I still think you should leave.”

He gave her another meaningful stare. “God help me, I can’t.”

“Sure you can.” She started for the door. “I’m asking you to go.”

Dusty yanked her back, and she nearly fell across his lap. With his head pressed to her stomach, right under her breasts, he nipped at the material, turning his head to the left and to the right.

Instincts drove her and she wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, holding his head to her body, comforting him, but reminding herself again and again she wanted to comfort, not betray.

“Let’s be friends, Dusty. Let’s keep things simple.”

“I don’t want friendship. I want to lay you down and run my hands all over you. I want my head in between your legs, licking you until you cry out my name. I want to sink my fingers into your soft pussy and watch you rise and fall against my hand, and then I want to ride you, sink my cock balls deep and never leave. God help me, I know you want the same things, too.”

She was too turned on to respond. No one had ever talked to her so provocatively. No one had ever seduced her by such a delicious confession. Dusty pulled her to him, and licking his lips once, he pressed his mouth against hers. At the same time he took the first kiss, the door swung open and Sloane marched inside her dark bedroom.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Sloane called a meeting for the sole purpose of breaking up the little private party in Veronica's bedroom. He waited at the bottom of the stairs for all of his team to meet in the library. When Veronica passed him, he took a deep breath.

She smelled like wild cherries and vanilla. God help him, he knew why Dusty found her attractive and even understood why he found her hard to resist. They had formed a mutual attraction, and unless Dusty had some time alone with Kelsie, he'd most likely continue to look for comfort in Veronica's arms.

Hell, a time or two, he'd considered the same thing. And looking at her now, her battered and bruised face, his instincts kicked in and he wanted to kill the stupid bastards who raised their hands to her.

Dusty skipped down the steps and tried to play off his interrupted moment. "Did you enjoy yourself?" Sloane asked.

Dusty ignored him and walked toward the library. Turning, he noticed how Logan smirked and raised a brow as if he expected Dusty to confirm or deny any potential allegations that something happened between him and another woman. Benson and Drew glared at him like he was possessed by the devil himself.

Sitting across from Veronica, Dusty crossed his right leg over his left, and Sloane noticed the intensity in the eye contact the two of them maintained. He wondered how far they might have taken things if he hadn't walked in when he did.

"It looks like Esparza will strike tomorrow, but the message we received from another team needed some translation, so we have to stand ready tonight."

“Veronica,” Sloane began. “You’re going under with me. You’ll get more rest there and you’ll have plenty of time to think without distractions. You probably could use the time to yourself.”

Dusty frowned. He shot Logan a quick glance, and Logan looked thoroughly amused.

Sloane continued, “Logan and Drew will take the first post inside. Benson will stand first watch on the perimeter around the house. Drew, you and Logan will take a rotation with Benson.

Everyone stared at Dusty when he said, “And I guess you want me to get some beauty sleep?”

“No. I want you to watch over our sleeping beauty. All night long.”

\* \* \* \*

When the meeting adjourned, Veronica said, “Let me grab my jacket. I’ll be right back.”

Taking the stairs three at a time, she strode toward her room angrier than she’d been in a long time. Sloane set up the new assignments because of Dusty’s inability to keep his hands to himself.

Now, all the Remingtons viewed her as just another woman, one they apparently needed to protect, and that pissed her off more than anything else. Grabbing a sweater and a windbreaker from the walk-in closet, she grumbled while she looked on the top shelf for anything else she might need. Then she stomped out of the closet, slammed the door, and glared at herself in the mirror.

“You get what you ask for,” she said to herself.

Only she wasn’t the only one listening. Logan stepped out of the bathroom. “Dusty isn’t in love with Kelsie anymore, and he hasn’t been for a long time. When he says he loves her, he loves her because she’s been part of his life for a very long time. He’s not *in love* with her. I believe he’s falling for you.”

“I can appreciate what you’re trying to do but this isn’t something I feel comfortable talking about with you.”

“He cares for you, Veronica. I hope you won’t play games with him.”

“He’s in a relationship—strange as it may be—with Kelsie. All of you are and you’re off limits to me.”

"I don't have a problem with that, sugar, but you might as well face the truth now because Sloane will tell you to stay the hell away from Dusty. He's going underground with you to give you a real piece of his mind."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I think you should know how Dusty feels about you before Sloane makes you commit to something you don't want to promise."

"You don't know what I want," she snapped, scooting by him. Verbal denial worked at the moment, but she couldn't escape her feelings. She was falling in love with Dusty, and maybe it was time she admitted it to herself, if not to Sloane as well. If he asked, and he might.

"Like I said, Sloane will give you hell. It never hurts to prepare for incoming fire. Maybe when you're walking across the yard looking for the trapdoor leading to the bunker, you'll have time to think about what I've said. Then you can decide how you want to handle my brother."

"I guess with one brother out of the way, you'll have more time with Kelsie, huh?"

He shook his head. "I don't need more time with Kelsie, Veronica."

"Oh?"

"No," he said. "I've had a lifetime of enjoying her live. Now I have to watch her die. You think I find pleasure in that?"

"No," she whispered, bowing her head. "I just meant—"

"I know what you meant," he interrupted. "Kelsie isn't capable of taking care of a man's needs now. Sure, she had her little homecoming with Sloane, but Sloane has always been first in her life. We expect to take a backseat to him. He got a hold of her when she was barely ready to give up her tricycle."

"That's a little exaggerated," Sloane said poking his head inside the large bedroom. "We've gotta roll. Drew is having computer problems up here. We're going to have to hurry down under so we can bring up all the surveillance equipment again."

"I'm ready when you are," she said.

Logan winked. "Veronica, think about what I said."

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, Sloane sat at the computer zooming in and out of various points around the property. After she'd looked around the underground bunker, she sat down behind him. "If something is on your mind, why not tell me about it?"

He squared his shoulders. "You know what's bothering me."

"No, I can't say I've mastered mind-reading."

Sloane struck a few more keys and swiveled around in the chair. "I've been sitting here trying to focus on the job we have to do, and all I can think about is why a woman like you—beautiful, intelligent, and yes, sexy—would feel the need to pursue a taken man."

Wincing, she said, "I'm not pursuing Dusty."

"So he's pursuing you?"

"No, he isn't."

"Then do you mind explaining what I saw a few hours ago?"

"Are you Dusty's keeper?"

"No, but I'm Kelsie's."

"According to Dusty, Kelsie knows Dusty and I share a mutual fondness for one another."

Chuckling, Sloane folded his arms over his chest, "So just how far are you two willing to take this *fondness*?"

"I don't see how any of this is your business."

"It's my business, sugar. Everything surrounding Kelsie concerns me."

She envied Kelsie then. She could see the love in Sloane's eyes and the way he wanted to do everything he could to protect her feelings.

"I don't want to hurt my sister."

"You're the only one who can stop whatever it is that you and Dusty have started."

"I'm not sure that's what Dusty wants."

"Have you asked him what he wants?"

No, she thought. She didn't have to ask. He opened up and told her.

"Have you?"

"Why don't you have this little pow wow with your brother?"

"It won't be necessary because you're going to fix my problem and you're going to do it immediately."

"You want me to stay away from Dusty."

"You have a problem with that?"



“No, but I’m wondering, are you really trying to protect Kelsie or are you jealous?”

“Are *you*?”

“Answer me,” she stated flatly.

Swiveling back to face the computer monitor, he chuckled. “You have no idea.”

“Then why didn’t you send someone else underground with me and stay with Kelsie yourself?”

“Dusty needs time with her. He needs to remember why we all made our vows to love and protect her. You’ll see. Tomorrow you’ll find a very different Dusty.”

She didn’t think so. “I hope so,” she lied.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” she said. “He belongs to Kelsie. I don’t have the right to want him.”

He stopped typing and turned around again. “But you do want him, don’t you?”

“I’m a woman, Sloane. Men don’t always like to hear about a woman’s needs, but I have them. Maybe someday I’ll explain them to you so you’ll be more considerate the next time around.”

Angry, he stood. “What do you mean the next time around?”

“Kelsie is dying. There’s nothing you can do to save her. Now, you can waste your time down here keeping me preoccupied so Dusty can remember the love he shared with Kelsie, or you can go upstairs and take advantage of the time you have left with her. I’m capable of making myself at home down here and guess what? I can even operate a computer, so performing surveillance checks won’t present a problem.”

“You need some rest.”

“So I’ll sleep. I’ll get up every hour and run the checks. I’ve survived weeks at a time taking cat naps. I’ll manage. You need to go back inside and sit by my sister’s bed and cherish the time you have with her.”

His brow furrowed. “You do care about Kelsie.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“She’s my sister.”

“Yes, but you barely know her.”

"It doesn't matter. We're family and she's the only family I have."

Sloane sat thoughtfully for a moment. Then he said, "Why don't you go instead?"

"Dusty's up there," she reminded him.

"Send him down after Kelsie goes to sleep."

"You trust me and Dusty together without you there to run interference?"

He rubbed the pad of his thumb over his lips and then finally grated out. "I guess until this thing is over, I'm going to have to trust you. Besides, Benson and Drew are upstairs, and I've noticed they're not too fond of you."

"I guess they think I'm trying to take Kelsie's place."

"Are you?"

"No. I don't think a woman in her right mind would ever want to take my sister's place."

"She made loving us look easy," he said. "Besides, you might like it."

"I hope that's not an invitation."

"No, but if it ever is? I'll let you know."

## Chapter Fifteen

Kelsie awoke and all she thought about was fulfilling the fantasies she'd just dreamt about. "Drew," she called out in a raspy whisper.

"I'm here," he said, stretching when he stood. He walked away from the ottoman where he'd been seated. "Are you okay?"

"I'm a lucky woman," she told him, appreciating the way he showed off his muscles.

"You are, and what made you decide you're so fortunate?" He knelt next to her and took her hands in his. Glancing at the clock, he said, "It's almost midnight. I thought you would sleep straight through the night."

"I can't sleep."

"Want me to get you something?"

"No," she whispered, motioning for him. "I want you to make love to me."

He gulped. "Kelsie, I don't know."

"I think you do." She pointed at his cock. The quick mention of sex inspired an obvious erection.

"Honey, this thing is hard twenty-four seven. Don't let me make a decision here. I'll have your panties around your ankles before you can utter another word."

"Then prove it." She motioned for Dusty and Logan, too, when they appeared in the doorway. "All of you, please show me."

Dusty cleared his throat. "Kelsie, nothing would make any of us any happier, but the doctor in Switzerland and the one in Italy said those days are over."

Logan eased his way into the room and had already started to undress. His gaze held Kelsie's. "The doctors said to limit double penetration."

"It's been over a year. I followed doctor's orders."

Drew shrugged. "Where's Benson?"

“He has to stay on post,” Logan said tightly, the tension building.

“I’ll ask for his services later,” she teased.

“Kelsie,” Dusty began what sounded like an outright protest. “I don’t like the idea of us taking you at the same time.”

“Then watch,” Drew suggested. “I won’t miss you.”

Logan snickered. “Me, either, but you and I both know if you stay in here someone is going to get a little visit later on tonight.”

Dusty immediately looked at Kelsie. She pretended she didn’t hear a thing.

Shooting Logan a cold glare, Dusty said, “No funny stuff. You both take her slow and easy. No games, no bondage, and no toys.”

Logan returned the stare. “Are you going to stand there barking orders or move out of my way?”

Dusty winked at Kelsie. “I’m not going anywhere yet.”

Raising her gown, she said, “I had the most delicious dream.”

Logan stared at her pussy. “God help me, I forgot how wet you get after those dreams of yours.”

Kelsie used her elbows to brace herself. “I want you to watch, Dusty. If you don’t want to make love to me, watch me. Please.”

“Are you going to put on a show just for me, pretty lady?”

“Yes. I’d like you to come over here and play, but I understand if you don’t find me attractive now.”

“Kelsie, no, that’s not right,” Dusty said, approaching the bed. He caressed her cheek. “I’ll always find you attractive.”

“Will you?” she whispered, a tear in the corner of her right eye.

“Baby, don’t you know how much I still love you? I just think it’s enough to have these two groping you, don’t you?”

She detected the edge in his voice, his tight control shattered but protecting him nonetheless. “My dream included all five of you. Sloane and Benson will have to work, but the more the merrier. Isn’t that what you always said?”

Dusty cupped her neck and kissed her. Drew dragged his finger through her pussy lips, and she moaned into Dusty’s kiss when Drew added another finger.

“Ah, God, Drew,” she cried out allowing the pleasure taking her, turning her head to the side, but reaching up and pulling Dusty over her again.

Dusty nipped at her lips, and she reached for his belt, but he held her wrist away from his body. “Not yet, baby.”

Logan moved next to her. He ran his palm over her breast. Around and around, he used the flat area of his open hand, working her nipples into ripe, little buds.

“Logan,” she whispered, looking down at her body. Her legs jerked, and her nerve endings sent a spark of electric current up and down her spine. She was going to come the second they penetrated her. The dream she had provided lots of delicious foreplay.

“Feels nice, doesn’t it?” Dusty asked. “Real nice?”

“Yes,” she whispered. Her mouth fell open, and her eyes closed. “Oh yes, this is what I need. All of you, making love to me.”

“Drew, there’s lube in the bedside drawer,” Dusty said.

Immediately, she looked at Dusty and smiled. “You’ll join us?”

She saw his answer. The way he looked at her, while lovingly, lacked in lust. Dusty wasn’t able to take her, at least not how she wanted him. The tear she tried to stop slid down her cheek and he swiped it away. “I want you to have special memories, honey. These two can love you the way you deserve to be loved.”

Logan pulled out the drawer in the bedside table, and Drew didn’t give up his spot. Dragging her to the edge of the bed, Drew stood in between her open legs, flipped his hand over, and after taking the lube from Logan, he drenched his fingertips in the fluid. Then, he wiggled his lubricated fingers into her pussy and ass.

Breathless, she rose and fell against Drew’s hand, closing her legs around his arm and rising with the sensation. Her body became a source of pleasure, working for her own as much as theirs.

Dusty’s eyes guided her. She surrendered to the moment, finding pleasure in the way he steered her desire without truly manipulating her lust.

Logan’s smile warmed her in all the right spots as he bit her nipples and smoothed his hand over her stomach. “We’re going to love you until you make us stop.”

“Then love me,” she whispered. “Because my endurance isn’t what it used to be.”

“Do they need to use more lube?” Dusty asked, kissing her again and trying to deliberately avoid her wandering fingers. She wasn’t an idiot. She felt the differences between them in his kiss.

She wasn’t going to force him into something he didn’t want to do but later they’d discuss what was happening between them. Something had driven a wedge between what they once shared. She hoped it wasn’t his guilt, but she imagined he worried she’d feel betrayed or hurt over whatever he’d already begun with Veronica.

Drew’s fingers locked inside her channel, and Logan moved to her cheek. “If you don’t want to play, man, then scoot the hell over,” he told Dusty out of the corner of his mouth, holding her chin and kissing her neck.

\* \* \* \*

Dusty backed away from the bed, but he left her with a smile and a wink. Standing at the door, he looked on, waiting for Logan and Drew to take her. If for no other reason, he wanted to make sure he really didn’t belong there. Maybe if he saw them with her, he’d feel a tug, an uncontrollable urge to join them.

Kelsie’s mouth opened and she sipped the slit topping Logan’s cock. A slurping sound made the entire scene all too familiar and completely erotic. “Perfect, baby,” Logan said. “Absolutely perfect.”

Licking around his sizeable head, she exhaled, “Mmm, so good. You taste like I remembered.” Taking her own sweet time, she only sucked Logan’s penis deeper whenever he looked like he couldn’t stand the test of temptation much longer.

Dusty’s heart slammed against his chest. Kelsie looked too pure, so innocent. Something about her then reminded him of the first time they shared her. It was a long time ago. Nearly seven years had passed and he still remembered the way she made him feel back then.

Was denying her a mistake he’d live to regret? Did he hurt her feelings when he refused her his body? Could he go back and make it up to her or was this his last chance to lay her down and love her?

Dusty's balls pinched him and the throb he felt in his cock damn near drove him back to her bed. But he couldn't make love to her now. Kelsie wasn't well enough for sex, and one partner should have been her limit. Sure, she had good days and bad, but to fuck her when she was so weak seemed wrong, so terribly wrong.

"Logan, please," she whimpered, and Dusty looked up in time to catch her reaching for her clit. "I'm so hot and wet."

Logan grinned. "I've waited for about a year and half to hear those lovely words."

Dusty once wanted to hear them, too, and nothing made him hornier than a woman rolling her little button back and forth, dripping in desire, arching for a man's cock while begging for sex. God bless, he was horny.

Flat against the mattress, Logan reached for her, bringing her thin body over his. Her back pressed against his chest, and he gripped his cock, sliding it up and down her crack before his long shaft slid between her globes.

Drew rubbed his dick across her folds. "Open for me, Kelsie," he ordered.

When she spread her legs more, Logan gripped her hips and Drew plunged forward. A quick intake of air seemed to stop the moment, freeze them all in place. Dusty heard the familiar sounds of one pleasurable performance, and his heart stilled, refusing him another solid beat.

"Don't be easy," she said and they all started to move. "God, please don't take me easy."

Logan kissed her shoulder, and Drew stared into her eyes. If anyone loved her more than Drew, Dusty would love to know who. He held her legs apart and drove into her, her back bowing as his cock moved into her.

"Come for us, baby," Logan said.

His request startled Dusty, but he understood. God help him, he related more than he wanted to admit. They'd all walked around with painful hard-ons, making light of the situation but realizing they were men with needs and by hell, they needed to fuck.

Dusty sensed the arrival of someone else nearby, but he couldn't shift his eyes away from the show. Kelsie locked gazes with him while he stood there watching her find her pleasure and the sight almost broke his heart. There wasn't anything he could do about it. His love for Kelsie hadn't died,

but his feelings had changed. They both accepted the truth even with the profound sense of loss.

Drew's thighs bunched, his knees locked, and he held her legs, gripping them tighter as he fucked her, staring at her like he thought this might be their last sexual tryst.

Dusty sensed it might.

Kelsie's body succumbed to the pleasure, her hips rising and falling with the timed thrusts and the uneven gyration of greedy men finding ecstasy in the approaching end. Her body seemed to easily welcome the weighted cocks impaling her, and the exhilarating feeling of love certainly filled the room.

The buildup continued and the intensity of their orgasms soon released into the air, the vocal expressions damn near intoxicating and entirely indescribable. The sounds of sex almost killed him as Logan and Drew fucked her crazy. But more than anything else, the way they moved around her made him remember the love they all shared for Kelsie.

Yes, Kelsie Weaver Remington was a loved woman, their woman. But still, only one lady had his entire heart now. While he couldn't escape the guilt, he couldn't ignore the growing admiration, if not the building love.

\* \* \* \*

Dusty walked into Veronica's room and sat down on her bed. Running his clammy palm over the length of his face, he closed his eyes and remembered a time he'd tried hopelessly to forget.

Caracas, Venezuela, 2002. He was there on a controlled mission, one where several operatives flew in together only to discover they each received separate orders working in various Esparza territories.

He had the easiest assignment, the one where there were fewer possible outcomes. He should've been the first man out, but instead, he'd fucked up and the damage he'd done to himself was far more than his lucrative annual salary working for the Underground Unit would ever repay.

After he received word Logan's mission was complete, he realized the time he'd lost and panicked. He made costly errors, and those mistakes repaid him with harrowing days as a prisoner in one of Esparza's sex slave camps.



Dusty gripped the comforter under him and held his breath. He still recalled the shame in the abuse he withstood. He remembered the pain and the God-awful stench of repetitive sex with strangers, women he'd never in a million years consider fucking but had to in order to avoid penetration himself.

He once thought he might put the past behind him, but with the suffering Kelsie now endured, battling something she couldn't see, he remembered some of his own feelings of helplessness. Though entirely different, his experience in Venezuela was most disturbing because he couldn't fight a man who refused to show his face. Kelsie wasn't able to draw a gun and shoot down the symptoms of cancer.

He spotted the nightgown Veronica had worn earlier and strolled across the room to retrieve the garment. Picking up the thin material, he brought the silk to his nose and inhaled. God help him, he needed a woman like Veronica, so sexy, so mysterious, but far from innocent.

Dusty wanted the kind of woman who could handle his demons, not a woman who needed to find love and protection in his arms. Gripping her gown, he dropped his arm and allowed the soft lavender negligee to fall from his fingertips.

Eyeing Veronica's gown, he wondered what it might be like to see her wear the garment again. He allowed his mind's eye to capture what he wanted to see. Closing his eyes, he knelt to the floor, picked up the soft silk and clutched it to his chest.

This time, he buried his face in the feel of what could've been Veronica's second skin. Would she feel as soft as he'd imagined? Would she reject him when he finally told her the truth? Would she view him as less than a man?

He hoped not. God, how he hoped not because while he'd never been able to share the consequences of his mistakes in Caracas with anyone else, he knew he had to talk about the time he spent there. For some strange reason, Veronica was the only person he felt he could confide in.

Veronica was strong and capable of hearing his truths. He could open up and tell her everything. Then maybe he could finally find his way back to the man he used to be.

## Chapter Sixteen

Veronica waved to Benson.

“Did Sloane get tired of you already?” Benson asked, a sarcastic nip in his tone.

“Yeah,” she said. “I wore him out.”

“I doubt it,” Benson retorted. “Any change in the original plans?”

“Yes,” she replied, wiping her feet on the welcome mat. “He wants Dusty down under.”

“Imagine,” Benson said, biting back a grin.

Yeah, she mused. Who would have thought?

A few minutes later, she walked through the kitchen searching for Dusty. When she didn’t find him or the others, she was alarmed. Drawing her weapon from her belt, she slowly moved through the house, all eyes and ears. She waited for, and almost expected, an attack.

Had someone made it by Benson and even Sloane’s watchful eyes? Or was her mind playing tricks on her? She hadn’t been able to sleep for longer than fifteen minutes and maybe she was overreacting.

Then she heard low moans coming from Kelsie’s room. Oh, God, she thought, someone had most definitely gotten inside. Already halfway down the upstairs hallway, she peeked around the corner, and there in the middle of Kelsie’s bed, she saw quite possibly the sexiest thing she’d ever seen in her life.

She couldn’t force herself to turn away from the scene, even though she should’ve been ashamed. Logan held Kelsie’s hips while his cock parted her ass cheeks. Drew was under her. His head was back and his face twisted in pleasure, a remarkable sign of an orgasm progressing.

Oh, God, she thought as her hand went to her heart. What kind of woman withstood so much heat, so much erotic pleasure?

Hearing movement behind her, she wheeled around and faced off with Dusty. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he snapped, yanking her down the hall and passing the room she earlier claimed as her own.

"Let me go!"

"Not a fucking chance," he growled, gripping her hand and dragging her into the upstairs control room.

Once there, he shoved her inside, following right behind her and locking the world out in an effort to secure her behind closed doors.

"Dusty," she whispered. "You should be in there with Kelsie, too."

"You go and I'll go."

"Dusty." She breathed, studying his expression. "Don't be ridiculous."

He planted his hands on either side of her head, using his body and the wall to cage her. "I'm going crazy here."

"I can't help you."

His forehead pressed against hers, and he turned his head slightly to the left, nuzzling her when he moved. "The hell you can't," he said. "You're the only one who can."

"That's not right, Dusty. You need to sit down and talk to Kelsie."

"I have to touch you," he said, cupping his left hand at the side of her breast. "Will you let me feel you?"

"Please don't do this, Dusty. Please wait."

"Wait? For what? For Kelsie to die?"

Yes, she thought, for Kelsie to die. As devastating as it seemed, and she didn't want to think about her sister's death, the ugly truth served as a harsh reminder. She never wanted betrayal to afflict her with guilt, a heavier burden than she knew how to carry, regardless of what she felt for Dusty.

"I can't wait to do this," he told her, pressing his mouth against hers. "Or this," he added, licking her lips.

"Dusty...."

"Oh, God, help me, or this." Then, he framed her face and his mouth crashed over hers with passion and heat, a sensual kind of mind blowing kiss he should've reserved for Kelsie, or at least anyone but her.

Stirring the lust already burning hot between them, his thumb skimmed over her erect nipple. Back and forth, he rubbed the pointed bud, taking her excitement to a higher level, using the need he must've known she

possessed to leverage a new position in her life, maybe even her bed. And he was moving mighty damn close to the mattress.

“God help me, Veronica. I gotta have you. I need you more than I need to draw air right now.”

“You long for a woman, Dusty,” she mumbled against his mouth, breaking the kiss. “That’s what this is about. It’s about sex.”

“The hell it is,” he said, tugging her lips between his teeth and sipping on them.

His tongue in her mouth was more potent than any drug, and for a moment, she lost herself in the addiction. Swallowing back the denial, she kissed him, cherishing the mouth that fed her, cradling his head in her hands while nipping and licking, loving the taste of him.

A few rooms down, she heard the banging of the headboard, and in turn, her senses sparked. His must have gone into overdrive. Dusty’s response was to grind against her, dropping one hand to her waist and watching their bodies move together, working out the lust and a deep rooted need to be together.

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she gave him a light push. “Wait,” she said softly. “Wait until we at least have time to think about what we’re doing.”

“I don’t want to stop, and I damn sure don’t want to think,” he said, moving her hand to his cock. “Does this feel like a man who wants to consider other options?”

“No.” She squeezed his length. Hell and damnation, she had to know what he felt like even if the denim prevented her from fully clutching his cock. Tearing her grasp away from him, she said, “You’d find me just as eager if you dipped your fingers in my...” She stopped talking when she saw the desire deeply embedded in his eyes.

He bit playfully at her lips. “Say it. Let me hear you. Tell me how wet you are. Call it what you want to call it, baby, but let me hear you say cunt or pussy. Talk dirty to me. Come on, Veronica, get wild with me, sugar. Oh baby, don’t you know how badly I need you to use me for your pleasure?”

His hands raked over her hips and bottom. He squeezed her ass and then cupped her globes, lifting her to him and positioning his cock right under her. “Feel me, baby. Just feel how hard you make me.”

“Oh God, Dusty. Please don’t do this,” she whispered, taking his face in her palms and kissing him like she’d never kissed or been kissed, loved or experienced love. “I can’t help myself. You have to stop this. Dusty?”

Smiling against her lips, he said, “Hang on a second,” and he worked at his belt, tugging at the leather in an effort to free himself.

Whether she would’ve let him unzip and penetrate her was a question she’d never have to ask because while she groped and fondled Dusty, all hell broke loose outside.

“What the fuck?” Dusty released her, and she quickly retrieved her weapon, rushing for the window.

“Get down,” Dusty ordered, ducking under the windowsill and trying to find the perfect opportunity to peer over the wooden ledge.

By the time the second rounds were fired, they were in position, Dusty at one window while she covered another. But they were too late and unable to help a man drowning in his own pool of blood.

\* \* \* \*

“Benson’s down!” Dusty screamed, running through the hall. “We’ve got to get him inside, now!”

Grabbing some weapons from a closet in the center wall, Veronica sprinted to the top of the stairs, tossing guns at Drew and Logan as they passed her.

“I’ve got Kelsie! Go! Go! Go!”

While the men practically tripped into their pants and then rushed to the yard, she grabbed Kelsie from the bed. Snatching a T-shirt from a nearby chair, she barked orders. “Here, put this on. Stay down.”

“Where’s Sloane?” she asked, frantically.

“Don’t know. I’m sure he’s fine, Kelsie. Please, God, stay down.”

Kelsie squatted behind a dresser, and Veronica looked out over the yard, her weapon pointed toward the glass. “Oh, God,” she gasped, looking on as Dusty and Logan rushed to their brother’s side.

A round of shots came from out of nowhere, and Veronica moved away from the window. “Find cover now!” she yelled over her shoulder when she saw her sister inch closer.

“What’s going on? Is Benson all right?”

Glancing up the hill, Veronica scoured the property for any sign of movement. Grabbing her phone from her hip pocket, she tossed the cell phone in Kelsie's direction. "Hit one and tell Sloane to stay under. He's going to have to trigger whatever traps we have in those woods. Tell him we've got company from all sides. We're surrounded."

"Benson! No!" Dusty's cries shattered her nerves, but she'd already accepted the truth. She'd never seen anyone bleed so much and live. Even two stories above, she could see the devastating horror the Remington brothers faced.

"Veronica?"

"Now, Kelsie. God help us all, just do it."

"Dusty!" Veronica screamed, noting a line of armed men moving from the lower fields toward the backside of the property. "Get the fuck out of there!"

Drew ran for the barn. She saw him leaping over bales of hay and working like an enraged vigilante might. Logan and Dusty tried to shelter Benson's body with their own.

"Get him out of there!" Veronica yelled, aiming at a cluster of bushes.

Shots rang out and she screamed once more, "Get out of there, Dusty! Logan! You have to move now!"

*Kaboom! Bam! Boom! Kabang!*

The loud noise came from the lower field, and Kelsie stood from her crouched position. "What was that?"

Veronica stared in the distance. "They're going for the bunkers," she answered her quickly, unable to believe her eyes when another explosion rippled around them.

The agony of loss surrounded them. Kelsie's face drained of what little color she had when the first of several terrorizing screams filled the air. "What's going on?"

"Get down, I said! Saving grace, please listen to me. I can't help them if I have to worry about you."

"Veronica, I can fire a gun, damn it!"

"The hell you can. You can move your ass to that closet over there and stay there until I come back for you."

She turned around and faced off with a very weak woman. "Who's down?"

"I have no idea," Veronica lied.

"The hell you say! Is it Benson?"

"I can't see a damn thing. Now, please, hurry! Get Sloane on the phone and take this," she pressed a gun in her hand. "If anyone opens that closet door, you blow them to hell and back."

\* \* \* \*

Dusty leaned over Benson's blood soaked body. He was unaware of the warzone they'd entered, uninterested in the shots firing around them. In the distance, he heard Veronica yelling, screaming bloody murder, wanting them to retreat.

"Fucking hell!" Dusty screamed out, cradling his brother's neck. "Dear God, no! Don't take him! Please, God, no!"

Logan fell to the ground on the other side of Benson's body. "How bad?" He gasped when he saw for himself.

It was bad. Sure as all hell, it was bad.

This was how death looked when it came unexpectedly, claiming the young, a man far too young to die, their brother. They might as well have pulled the trigger themselves. They left him without backup. Now, he lay dying in their arms.

Benson strained to raise his neck, spitting blood as he tried to mutter something.

"Shh," Logan said, trying to soothe him. "Don't talk, Benson. We gotcha, kid. We gotcha." Logan's eyes spilled with tears, and he bit his lips until they bled.

Dusty watched his brother struggle for air, fighting to live, afraid—as he might have been—of the death waiting to claim him.

"Benson," Logan shook him. "Benson, don't you die on us, damn it!"

Dusty saw his brother gurgle blood, the last words he'd speak barely audible but, nonetheless, formed.

"Tell Kelsie...I'll be...seeing ...her."

Logan bowed his head, and Dusty grabbed Benson by the collar. "No! No! You don't get to die! Not like this!"

Benson's eyes set, and Logan released him, reluctant to move but at least able to keep his wits. He barked an order, and Dusty shook when he

heard the authoritative tone. "He's gone, Dusty," Logan said, looking over his shoulder. "On your feet, soldier! We're surrounded here. We've got to fucking move!"

"No!" Dusty screamed, shouting out in an ear piercing, toe-curling scream. "No! Fuck no! God, no! You can't go!" He continued screaming, his cries so ridden with agony, every man, woman, and child within a hundred miles would've known what transpired there if they'd stopped and listened.

Clutching his brother to his chest, Dusty rocked him back and forth, recalling too many memories in a short period of time. A flash of smiles, battles fought side by side, and happier days formed so many passing images, too many to sort. And he continued to rock back and forth. "Benson, please." He gasped. "God help us, you can't go. I won't let you go!"

"Dusty, move!" Logan ordered, trying to yank him from the ground but unable to withstand Benson's dead body weight and Dusty's limp form.

Dusty heard him say, "You're going to die out here! Damn it, get the fuck up! Dusty! We need you to snap back right now! Kelsie and Veronica are counting on you!"

Veronica's loud cries in the distance echoed around him. "You have to get out of there!" The anguish in her voice came across clearly when she added, "Move! Now! There's no time!"

Dusty felt like he watched the whole ordeal in slow motion. He saw bodies fall from the trees a few seconds later. Grenades were tossed so rapidly they crossed one another in mid-air. Logan stepped in front of him, taking a wide stance as he used a machine gun and shot off several rounds and then fired a dozen more, like a spray of ammunition would keep their enemies back long enough for Dusty to retreat, get Benson out of harm's way.

Only, Benson didn't need protection. But by God, their enemies would seek plenty.

The battle had begun. The war lay straight ahead.

Dusty rose from the blood spilled, clutching his weapons, securing one in each hand. Releasing a final cry for the brother he'd lost, he stood in front of Benson's body, ready to fight, willing to die. At his feet, his brother marked the spot of the first fallen soldier. He'd be damned if he'd let his enemies have another.



## **Chapter Seventeen**

Approximately three hours later, the fight finally ended. Dusty barreled up the stairs. “Kelsie! Veronica! Answer me!”

Logan followed Drew through the main level of the house. “Kelsie! Veronica!” Logan screamed out, as well. “Where are you?”

“Kelsie’s up here!” Dusty confirmed seconds later.

“Veronica?” Logan continued his search downstairs. His chest tightened as he walked into one empty room and then another. Stopping at the top of the basement stairs, he turned on the light. “Veronica? Are you down there?”

After he didn’t receive a reply, he backed away, starting for another room. A strange sensation, one resembling panic, spun through his body, setting his nerve endings on red alert, and he ran down the rickety plank stairs. Looking under bins and behind boxes, he yelled, “Veronica! Damn it to hell! Answer me!”

He flew up the stairs and stopped short of plowing over another Remington, one who inevitably understood the loss, the catastrophic consequences of leaving one of their own unprotected.

Sloane walked inside but stood in the foyer like a man who didn’t know where to go, which way to turn. The mix of blood and dirt on the front of his shirt matched his dark expression.

“Where’s Veronica?” Dusty asked, stretching his neck over the banister. “Is she down there?”

Sloane shook his head. Dusty held Kelsie in his arms. “Someone come up here. Kelsie said Veronica told her to hide, and she thinks Veronica may still be out there.”

“Sloane,” Kelsie said, visibly shaken. “Where’s Benson?”

Logan noticed how she tried to appear hopeful, but surely she heard the violent, terrorizing screams Dusty released after Benson took his last breath.

The brothers looked at one another and then Logan stared at the blood smeared across Sloane's shirt.

He knew Benson was gone. He most likely gathered him in his arms and clung to him. Maybe he thought he could squeeze some of his life into Benson's lifeless form, or perhaps he needed to hold him one last time, hug him while no one watched.

"Put Kelsie in bed," Sloane choked out, shaking his head once when Dusty's eyes met his. "I'll be right up."

"But Benson?" she persisted. "Damn it! Somebody tell me where he is," she said, fighting against Dusty's grip until he allowed her to stand.

"Damn it! I said put her to bed!" Sloane yelled.

Kelsie gripped the handrail at the top of the stairs and Dusty said, "Kelsie, wait!"

"No!" she cried out, stumbling over her own feet until Dusty barely caught her in time to save her from a spiraling tumble. "Let me go, Dusty Remington!"

"Kelsie," Sloane finally managed in broken syllables, taking a step in her direction and trying his best to level his voice. "I'll be right up, I promise. You're pale and you need to get in bed. I'll find out what I can and tell you what I know in a few minutes." His voice broke and he bowed his head.

"So he's okay, right?"

"Kelsie! Don't ask me anything until I have a moment, please!"

She closed her eyes, and her breaths sounded short and full of congestion. She coughed a few times before falling against Dusty. He picked her up and carried her out of sight.

Rushing into the kitchen, Sloane pulled some binoculars from one of the cabinets and stared toward the hillside, focusing on, if Logan guessed correctly, nothing in particular. "Any idea where she might be?"

"No," Logan said, dabbing at his eyes. Damn it to fucking hell, he wanted to kill someone for what they'd done to his family. "She should have stayed with Kelsie." He felt instant remorse. In his heart of hearts, he realized if Veronica left Kelsie, she did so in order to save one or all of them.

“She might have if she hadn’t seen all hell break loose out there.” Sloane slammed the binoculars to the wayside, gripped the sink, and kicked the fuck out of the cabinet encasing the basin. “What the hell happened!”

Dusty entered swiftly. He was loading a Glock as he walked. “We need to find her.”

“If she’s not here now,” Logan said, “then chances are good she was picked up by Esparza’s men again.”

“Or picked off,” Drew whispered, glaring at the back porch. “Oh, God,” he said, most likely realizing at the same time Logan did what Kelsie would see if she looked out her bedroom window.

Running like a herd of wild animals, Logan, Drew, and Sloane rushed upstairs. There, on the floor, right next to the bedroom window, they saw Kelsie’s collapsed form.

“Kelsie,” Sloane whispered, feeling for a pulse. He nodded and then picked her up and carried her to bed.

Her tiny body curled around his, and she clutched his shirt. “Kelsie are you all right?” He brushed the dangling bangs away from her face.

“No,” she whimpered. “I’ll never be okay again. We’ve lost Benson,” she whispered. “We lost him, didn’t we?”

“Yes,” Sloane said sorrowfully.

“And this isn’t a bad dream?”

“No, honey. Benson’s gone.”

“He’s dead! Don’t you dare say he’s gone like he’ll come back one day! He’s fucking dead!” She buried her face in her hands and sobbed until she sounded completely exhausted.

“Yes,” he confirmed, eyeing Logan. “He is,” he said, refraining from the tears Logan knew had to burn his eyes as violently as his own swelled, waiting to fall.

“No, Sloane, oh, no, please don’t let this be true,” she bawled, clutching to his bicep, clinging to him like a last hope she no longer had.

“Her medicine is in the nightstand. Logan, give her what she needs to sedate her. Drew, you come with me.”

\* \* \* \*

"I don't want to leave Kelsie." Drew followed Sloane into the kitchen. "I can't help you right now. I need to stay here."

Sloane took a ragged breath. "Haven't you been with Kelsie enough for one day?"

Drew swung his gaze toward Dusty, but Dusty refused to look at him. "I've checked outside. There's a blood trail leading into the woods. Get the four-wheelers. Pick up the trails there. I'll check the bunkers."

Sloane shook his head. "She wouldn't know about any of them except the one I showed her. Look in the main safe house first."

Dusty said, "She's Tom's daughter, remember. She knows the lay of this land as well as we do. He would've given her a map of the property and probably made her memorize it in the event of an emergency."

Sloane shrugged. "Maybe, but—"

Dusty held up his hand. "No, I can't even think about it. If Esparza has her now, he'll kill her, but only after he tortures her. You don't understand. She would've fought hard before risking capture again. Veronica is a smart woman, an intelligent operative. She has good instincts. They wouldn't have gotten to her twice."

"Then you need to prepare yourself, Dusty," Sloane said softly. "Chances are good the blood you found out there is hers."

Dusty locked gazes with Sloane and said, "I've lost a brother and a father here. I'm not going to lose anyone else I care about to this place."

"I hear what you're saying, Dusty," Sloane said. "But I also want you to prepare for the worst."

"I've lived through the worst. Now it's time to find Veronica and then—"

"And then what?" Sloane demanded.

"Then we go after our revenge."

\* \* \* \*

Veronica crawled through the hollow tunnel. Her fingernails felt like they might break every time she dug a little harder into the soil beneath her. This must've been one of the tunnels Tom warned her about.

A few of the underground rooms were smaller than the others, which meant she might find limited resources at her disposal once she reached the

hidden bunker. She pushed forward, anyway. The pebbles cut into her flesh until every new place her palm patted left an incision, a bloody reminder of where she'd been.

She had no idea what she'd left behind. No clue who survived or who was unable to make it out of the hell storm alive.

God help her, she'd never seen so much chaos in all of her life. Had her actions with Dusty cost Benson his life?

"No," she said talking herself down, inching forward. She couldn't carry blame here. If she carried a burden, then Dusty, Logan, Drew, and Kelsie would also carry their share and plenty more. They'd all behaved recklessly, and now at least one Remington was dead and Lord only knew what happened to Kelsie.

She shouldn't have left her. Hell's fury, she shouldn't have left her post. Then again, how many men had she stopped cold in their tracks? How many shots did she fire off before she was cornered and had to drop under? She made a difference out there. She may have been unable to save Benson, but she tried to hold fast to the others, make their fight a little less complicated. If the way she fought saved a Remington or Kelsie, then she made the right decision.

Trying to convince herself she had no other choice, she saw a dim light at the end of the space she wiggled through.

*Finally. I'm home free.*

At the end of the hole she crawled out of, there was a drop off and she slid into a cold, somewhat sterile room. Catching her balance before she landed face to the floor, she rolled her shoulders back and glanced around at her accommodations.

She should've collapsed the tunnels. She remembered Tom telling her about the feature, but she was too frightened. What if Dusty and Sloane didn't think to look for her there? Had she told any of them about her familiarity with the Weaver and Remington compounds?

Gaping at the ceiling tiles, she tried to remember how Sloane initiated the drop release for the computer system in the larger bunker. Searching for buttons, levers, or anything to trigger the equipment, she reached into the ceiling tiles. She felt some sort of wire and gave it a deliberate tug. Then she stared at the blank wall in front of her waiting for the small area to transform into a state-of-the-art control center.

“Thank you, Daddy Weaver.” She rushed toward the computer. She hit the power button for the modem and the monitor. She flipped switches on the property detail screens and accessed the surveillance equipment almost immediately.

Narrowing her gaze on the overhead, she saw two four-wheelers fly across the lower fields at a high rate of speed. Zooming in proved difficult, but she finally saw the riders. “Okay,” she whispered. “Sloane and Drew are still among the living.

“Please, God,” she said, aloud. “Let Dusty be okay. Let Kelsie be okay.” She instantly felt remorse. “Okay, Logan. I’ll pray for you, too,” she said, waiting impatiently for all lines of communication to open up. “Please let Logan be okay but help him lose the attitude.”

She accessed the desktop and clicked the Internet icon. “Give me a connection. Come on now. Give me a connection.”

She wasn’t able to gain access to the Internet on her first attempt. After playing around with the settings and changing her Internet properties, she tried again. Bingo! She was in and a few minutes later, she’d sent an email to Sloane and Dusty.

She tapped her nails against the keyboard and waited for a response.

*Affirmative?* She read the reply from Dusty. *Sent from My-Phone.*

It was the prettiest message she’d ever received in her in-box. Dusty was okay. Maybe not okay, but at least he was alive.

She pounded away at the keyboard again. *Can I come out now?*

The new message light shone immediately. *Stay where you are. I’ll be there soon.*

Checking the surveillance monitors again, she saw Sloane and Drew race back for the house. They must’ve gotten a call from Dusty.

Taking a deep breath, she walked in the tiny storage closet and spotted the cases of water in the far corner. Pulling a few bottles from the containers, she paced in front of the computer.

She leaned over the desk and studied a new clip from the farm images. Sloane and Drew hovered over Benson’s body.

Veronica wondered if they’d told Kelsie yet. In her heart of hearts, she believed Kelsie knew when Benson died. She had to suspect devastating loss after Dusty’s blood curling screams.

Several men lost a brother. Kelsie lost a lover. She lost a fellow agent. A man she would've proudly fought beside.

Yes, the world was a colder place without Benson Remington, a much darker place. Staring down at her hands, she noticed the dirt caked under her fingernails. She walked over to the sink and tried to access the water pressure through an old fashioned pump. When nothing happened, she returned to the storage room for more bottles of water.

Dusty was in front of her. "I thought you were dead," he said, stalking toward her. Wrapping her in his arms, he kissed the top of her head and smoothed the hair out of her face. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Dusty, I'm so sorry about Benson."

He quickly shook his head and then took her hand, leading her back to the control room. He sat in front of the computer, and his gaze scanned across the images. "I should've been covering him. He expected me to have his back. I always had Benson's back."

Except when they needed to cover him most, and that knowledge had to sting. No, that truth had the ability to destroy men like the Remington brothers.

"We both should've had his back," she admitted.

"You aren't blaming yourself. I won't let you."

"No, Dusty, I'm not blaming anyone. A man lost his life. You lost your brother. There's no way to go back and undo that, and there's no reason for us to figure out what we didn't do right or what we could've done better. When it's a person's time to go, they go."

Dusty studied her as she spoke. "I need some time alone," he said, biting back tears.

"Okay," she said, looking at the small room off to the left with two futon beds. "Why don't I watch the monitors and you go lie down for a little while. We'll stay here until you're ready to go back up. I don't think Esparza and his men will come back here tonight."

"No," he said. "I don't mean I need time alone by myself. I need time with you. Alone."

"Dusty," she began. "Now, when you're most vulnerable, isn't when you want to make me yours."

"Would you be mine?" His eyes watered and the tears came. He swiped at them, but they returned again and again.

“Oh, Dusty,” she released a sudden cry, throwing her arms around his neck.

He clung to her like she was the only one he’d ever wanted to hold. “Please tell me when this is all over, you’ll consider it. I don’t mean right now. Right now, I don’t want to be alone. I’m not saying I want to make love, but I don’t think I can face my brothers or stay here by myself. I need to stay here with you. Can you do that for me? Can you let me hold you? Please?”

She took his hand and led him into the small bedroom. Closing the door, she retrieved the blanket packets from the rack behind the door and made up one of the futons while Dusty watched.

Then she stretched out against the wall and patted the space beside her. He sat down and slapped his face against his wide open palms. Veronica draped herself over his back. “Dusty, let me help you. Please don’t shut down on me. You’ll feel better if you talk to me.”

Seconds turned into minutes and Veronica rocked his body against hers. She tried to comfort him right out of his terrible pain but realized she faced an impossible task.

“Benson,” he began, clearing his throat, “was the only one who never pushed for information about what happened in South America.”

She stilled against him. Now wasn’t the time for discussing Venezuela, but maybe there’d never be a truly perfect time.

“If you’d talk to any of my brothers, they’d tell you they didn’t ask, didn’t push, but there was always something right after I returned home. I’d get up in the morning, go out to the barn, and one of them would come in and ask me how the day was. If I didn’t give the correct answer, it was because I still carried around whatever happened to me in Caracas.

“Benson never pushed. I really don’t recall him mentioning the first thing about the assignment. He accepted that I didn’t want to talk about South America.”

“Are you ready to talk about Venezuela now?”

With tears in his eyes, Dusty faced her. “Would it break you if I told you the kind of things I barely survived?”

“Of course not.” She brushed his hair back with her fingertips and searched his face, studied his expression. God help her, she was so attracted to Dusty. Whether she had the right to his heart or not, whether he wanted



her to return the compassion or not, she cared for him with everything she had to give. In fact, seeing his pain broke her heart.

“Kelsie asked me about Caracas a few times, but she wasn’t prepared to hear the details, and I’m glad I never told her. She wasn’t strong enough. She’s always been so fragile, so understanding but yet unable to grasp what goes on beyond whatever world we create for her.

“We can move her from one state to another, from one country to another, and she never questions our motives, never wonders about the dangers we’re running from. She just packs up, smiles a lot, and like a kid might, looks forward to another adventure.”

“And you didn’t want to tell her what went on in Venezuela because you didn’t want her to view your missions as dangerous or because you were scared she’d view you as less of a man.”

“I was forced to do things in Venezuela that no man should ever be forced to do!”

“Dusty, I know.”

He froze. “How could you know?”

“Someday, I’ll tell you,” she said.

“No. I need to know now.”

“I was sent in there to watch over you and Logan from a distance.”

“Oh, God,” he gasped, burying his face in his hands.

“No, don’t you dare hide from me.” She pulled his hands away and looked into his beautiful dark eyes. “Dusty, I never saw anything. The few days I was held there, I talked to the girls, and occasionally, I heard your screams. I fought like crazy to get to you, but I didn’t have the physical strength. I was drugged and kept in a cell with some of the other women who initiated your training. Eventually, if one of your father’s men hadn’t gotten me out, I would’ve been brought to you, as well.”

Dusty looked horrified. “Did Dad know?”

She shook her head. “I left everything I knew about you out of my report, claiming to have lost you after the second day of my arrival in Caracas.”

“Thank you,” he said. After an extended pause, he said, “Oh, God, Veronica. What if the Venezuelans made me do some of those awful things to you like I was forced to do to others?”

“You wouldn’t have,” she said. “We would’ve found a way to enjoy it. I’d already decided I was going to tell you who I was.”

“Why did you wait so long to tell me you were there?”

“Because, Dusty, there are missions I’ve been on that I’ll never discuss with you or anyone else. We have operatives out there today suffering the same fates we’ve often faced, and unlike the soldiers fighting for our country, we’ve been paid mighty damn well for the jobs we’re sent in to do. But we’re also paid for our silence, and it wasn’t my place to mention Caracas to you. I wanted you to know I was there with you and a few times did what I could to provide distractions for the guards, but I still couldn’t save you from the hell those men put you through.”

He took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “And you don’t look at me any differently than any other man even though you know what I’ve been through?”

“Are you kidding me? I get butterflies when you’re around.”

“No shit?” Dusty asked, a light barely detectable in his eyes, but the evidence of sadness lingering in his voice.

“I’m telling you the truth.” She placed her palm to his cheek. “You should’ve talked to your brothers about Caracas, Dusty. They’ve all had their close calls and walked into a lot of sticky situations they barely escaped. You could’ve turned to them. They wouldn’t have thought less of you.”

“No, that’s where you’re wrong. I couldn’t tell them for fear of how they’d respond. You see now what happens when operatives are side-tracked and only interested in revenge.

“Sloane would go crazy, Logan would follow pretty close behind, and I worried Benson and Drew wouldn’t look at me the same. They’ve always looked up to me, and I’ve enjoy that, you know? Even as a grown man now, I like being their big brother.”

“I know you do,” she whispered.

Then it hit him. “I *loved* being Benson’s big brother. Oh God, Veronica, he’s gone. Benson’s gone,” he said softly and then he fell against her and cried like a man who’d lost his brother, a man who now faced a world of guilt because he carried a heavy load of blame.

\* \* \* \*

Logan woke them up around three o'clock the next afternoon. "It's Kelsie," he said quietly. "She's asking for you."

Veronica's hand was on Dusty's abdomen and his hand cupped hers. She stared into Logan's dark eyes. "This isn't what it looks like."

Logan frowned. "I hope it's exactly what it looks like. Dusty needed to be here with you, and you comforted him when he needed you the most. I don't think anything else happened and if it did, that's between you and Dusty."

Dusty kissed the top of her head and sat up. "Let's go," he said. "We'll reconstruct the unit here later."

"She didn't collapse the tunnels and you didn't, either," Logan noted. "Why?"

"We thought the threat was over," Dusty said.

"You're not supposed to think," Logan scolded. "We always follow procedure."

Logan stared at Veronica. "She's asking to see you, too. Both of you need to hurry."

Dusty frowned. "This is it, isn't it?"

Logan slowly nodded.

"How in the hell do I say goodbye to her when I can't even think about burying Benson?"

"I don't know," Logan said. "I guess we'll do what we always do. Lean on each other until the pain goes away."

## Chapter Eighteen

Kelsie's skeleton-like form curled around Sloane's hips. He sat near the open window, humming softly like he might have done if he'd held a small child. Drew was seated on the ottoman with his hands dropped between his legs.

When they entered, Sloane jerked. It was as if he had been sitting there all night and perhaps dozing in and out of consciousness. Drew looked up but barely moved.

Veronica noticed the Remington men. The honorable way they joined together in their sorrow said a lot about the heart of their family. Then again, staring at Kelsie now, she saw why. Kelsie was the heart of their family.

Sloane stood up and handed Kelsie off to Dusty. She looked so light, fragile enough to bend and break.

"Kelsie," Dusty whispered in her ear. "I want you to sit up and talk to me. We can't have you giving up on us. Not now, baby. You've been through the good times and the bad, but we need you right now. We can't lose you, too, Kelsie. We just can't."

Her lids were heavy when she looked at him. She turned her head to the side, and then she said, "I need to be with Benson." Her skin appeared light green and hot to the touch.

"That's nonsense." Sloane stalked from one side of the room to the next. He looked out the window and shouted, "Where is that damn doctor?"

Drew ran his hand over his face. "He's not coming, Sloane," Drew said. "Esparza would have bought off our family physicians."

Sloane raced across the room and searched through the desk drawer, hunting for a telephone directory. When he found one, he picked up the phone and started to dial.

"No, Sloane," Kelsie mumbled, gasping for a breath, coughing in between syllables. "No."

Dusty motioned for Sloane to move closer, tilting his head back and chin up.

“I’m tired of fighting...for my life...to save everyone else.”

“Shh,” Logan said, “Kelsie, we’re not ready to give you up, hon.”

“I’m ready,” she quietly told them, struggling to speak. Then, she closed her eyes and whispered her final words, “I’m leaving you in good hands.”

Veronica hadn’t watched all that many people suck in their final breath of life. She imagined many folks who died of natural causes probably went out of this world the same way they came in, when it was least expected. Then again, a lot of people lost their life after violence, too. For that reason alone, she was grateful Kelsie didn’t have to endure any additional suffering, especially with the Esparza cartel lurking nearby.

Still, all of this seemed so unfair. She scanned the room quickly, watching as gazes dropped to the floor and heads bowed. There wasn’t a dry eye in the room when Kelsie passed away and yet there was something more profound lingering there as well, something that went way beyond grief.

Sloane was the most pitiful in his sorrow. He kept his balled fists over his eyes and tears never spilled onto his cheeks. In fact, once when he looked around the room in a daze of confusion, his eyes swelled to an enormous size while the moisture continued to coat them, saturating his pupils so much she wasn’t sure he could even see. His mouth turned down in anguish, his eyes remained still, and he didn’t move.

Drew kept his head down, moving one foot in a clockwise motion and the other in a counterclockwise pattern. He never looked up again while she was in the room.

Logan stared out the window. His shoulders squared and his cheeks flushed. He ran his hand through his thick curls and a couple of times gasped, as if that alone allowed him to continue breathing the same air as Kelsie’s. The tears streamed down his face, and he looked like the most physically tortured of all men. Like his heart must’ve exploded and caused him intense, physical burdens.

Dusty sat on the bed with Kelsie in his arms, staring straight ahead. In the background, Vince Gill’s *Go Rest High on that Mountain* played softly on the radio almost like the angels in heaven called in a special request to help them out in their time of grief.

That's when Veronica wondered about death and why some people lived to be a hundred and others barely made it out of their twenties. Listening to the lyrics, she wanted to ask those who knew Benson best.

Was Benson's work here done? Had he died because he couldn't live without Kelsie and he knew she would soon pass away? If so, then Veronica hoped they'd find one another on the other side.

That day, as she left the Remingtons to grieve alone, she wondered about the kind of things for which there wasn't an answer, but one question rolled through her head over and over again. She questioned death and wondered if Benson hadn't died, would Kelsie have lived longer, fought harder, perhaps even beaten cancer for another few weeks, maybe even a few months?

Was it possible to die of a broken heart? Veronica believed so after watching her sister rebound and then fall deathly ill once more.

Veronica, in many ways, had once envied Kelsie. She never formed the kind of relationships Kelsie easily obtained in her lifetime. Then again, after meeting her sister, Veronica understood why so many people loved her.

Veronica had loved, but she hadn't truly experienced this kind of loss. The closest she'd ever come to heartache was losing Tom, a man who barely knew much more than her date of birth and the dates of her high school and college graduations.

Walking to the barn, she wondered how many times her sister must have taken the same dusty path. She was curious if she ever looked at her surroundings and saw the splendor in the farm's natural beauty. Had she taken her life for granted, or did she try to hold on to the most precious of moments for fear there would always be too few of them to enjoy?

She took a deep breath of cool mountain air. Then, she ran into the barn and cried her heart out. Yes, she believed Kelsie lived and loved in the best of times and in the worst of times, but at the end of time, Kelsie's love didn't conquer all. In her final hours, the love she had for the Remingtons may have ultimately destroyed her because she couldn't imagine her life without them.

\* \* \* \*

“Dusty wanted me to let you know we’re planning funeral arrangements. We’d like to bury Kelsie and Benson here at the ranch unless you object,” Drew said carefully when he joined her hours later.

“I think they would have liked that.”

He sat next to her on the front stoop and after the silence became unbearable, he said, “You would’ve liked Kelsie a lot if you’d known her before she came down with cancer.”

“I liked her regardless of the cancer,” she said. “The disease didn’t change who she was as a person.”

“I know. I just wish you could’ve known her before.”

“Why don’t you tell me about her,” she suggested, propping her elbows on her knees.

Drew smiled faintly. “She looked a lot like you, something none of us noticed in the beginning, but after we dug out a few old family photos, we immediately saw the similarities.”

Maybe that explained why Drew suddenly decided to talk to her. Pushing aside their unspoken earlier differences, she wondered if he knew Sloane hired her to impersonate Kelsie because he thought she might pass as Kelsie at a distance. Then again, she mused, he later said he hired her for her skill sets, too, which was a crowning moment in her career.

“Kelsie didn’t have it easy, Veronica.”

“Life isn’t always what it seems, for any of us.”

“I don’t want you to think that because she grew up here with Tom she had everything she wanted. He did his best to make up for her lost childhood, but never could give her back everything this business forced him to strip from her.”

She thinned her lips and listened.

“What are you going to do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Dusty told Sloane he wants you out of here.”

She stood. “What?”

“Things will get bad. We’ve lost Kelsie and Benson. Dusty doesn’t want to lose you, too. He asked Sloane to reassign you.”

She took her time processing the information. “Where do they think they’re going to send me?”

“I don’t know, but like it or not, you’re under the protective custody of the Remington family now. Sloane and Dusty aren’t going to let you fight this thing with Esparza.”

“What if I don’t give them a choice?”

“You don’t understand. The women Sloane and Dusty care about never have the opportunity to make their own decisions. That’s another reason you should’ve talked to Kelsie more. Maybe then she could’ve told you what to expect.”

“Well, Drew, that’s where I agree with you. Maybe I could’ve asked her to warn all of you, too. Then you would’ve understood more about me as well. I make my own decisions and I’m not leaving, at least not until we’ve fought and won this war with Esparza.



## **Chapter Nineteen**

Three days later, they buried Benson and Kelsie. They chose a spot smack dab in between two of the largest oak trees on the property.

Veronica hadn't spoken to them much since Kelsie died. They needed time to mourn, and she let them do that alone.

She felt the loss of Kelsie the day following her death. She'd walked into her room a few times to check on her only to be reminded of the dark fact. Kelsie wasn't there, and she wasn't coming back.

Dusty took Benson's death the hardest. She'd overheard an argument between Logan and Dusty where Dusty reminded Logan that he should've been covering Benson's ass instead of pushing himself on Kelsie. He then accused Logan and Drew of fucking the last bit of life right out of her. A low hit, even for Dusty.

During the exchange of heated words, Logan accused Dusty of walking out on the tryst so he could pursue her. To add insult to injury, Logan also told Dusty how hurt Kelsie must have felt when Dusty didn't join them.

At some point, she recalled Logan saying something to Dusty about how much Benson always looked up to him, how the bond between brothers—specifically between Dusty and Benson—proved through the years stronger than any other. Dusty's words in retaliation were broken and his sobs were certainly heard.

Through their conversation, she discovered Benson and Dusty had traveled the world together the year before they began their operative training. Soon after their training ended, they began their first missions, taking assignments together as a team under Wilson Remington's insistence. When one of them had to go solo, Dusty pushed for his way and earned his father's vote, something Benson both resented and accepted, understanding Dusty continued to look out for him as his older brother.

The funeral services weren't elaborate. Neighboring locals weren't told about the graveside service, and only the Remingtons and Veronica attended, other than the minister and a few men he brought with him from the funeral home.

The caskets were steel on the outside with matching tan satin and royal blue velvet trim interiors. The mortician performed the task of embalming the bodies on property so the Remingtons didn't have to leave the ranch. They didn't want anyone in the Columbia area to know what they'd lost for fear they would place their friends and neighbors in danger. Anyone who came to the ranch placed themselves at risk of being contacted by Esparza or one of his men.

After the undertaker left the property, Veronica stood by the shallow graves and felt overwhelmed by the loss then. She had desperately wanted to know her sister, and thanks to the decisions her father made, Kelsie and Veronica never had the opportunity to be close, but they could've been. Even with their differences, they could've formed a bond as strong as what the Remington brothers had.

When she walked back to the house, Dusty and Sloane were waiting for her in the foyer. "We need to talk," Sloane said, extending his left arm in an apparent effort to steer her toward the study.

"I'd like to rest," she said. "Everything has been quiet here for the last few days. We should probably expect company tonight."

"You know this how?" Sloane walked ahead of her when she didn't budge.

Dusty's eyes were puffy and dark, the circles shadowing them made him look like he'd aged ten years in a matter of days. He watched her, waiting for an explanation.

Taking a seat on the arm of the massive leather sofa after she reluctantly followed him, she said, "Did you notice the light blue dirt bike parked at the gate?"

"When?" Dusty asked, moving closer.

"I saw it," Sloane said.

"No, you didn't," she said.

He pursed his lips. "I saw the damn thing."

"It was red and I saw a similar one in the back of Bob's truck the day he left here with me."

Dusty swung his gaze toward Sloane. "Did you see it or not?"

Sloane poured a drink, and Dusty eyed the glass in Sloane's hand. Then he met him at the wet bar and poured himself one, too. "Well?" Dusty persisted.

Veronica supplied a reply, "It doesn't matter. All of you would've spotted the bike if circumstances were different."

Wheeling around on his boot, Sloane informed her of his decision. "You're leaving tonight. I know the timing isn't the best, but I need you in Australia. Dusty generally handles our operations there, but I can't afford to send him."

Veronica stood up. "Whether you realize it or not, you can't afford to send me."

"The hell he can't."

"Think about this, Sloane," she said, deliberately ignoring the very man who provoked her reassignment. "You didn't even notice the color of a motorcycle parked right at the gates. Someone was here today and they were so arrogant about approaching us, felt so confident they could stroll right on this land, that they parked their bike at the damn gates! Now, you tell me something. Why did I notice the bike and you didn't?"

"I couldn't tell ya." He lifted the glass to his lips and tossing back the dark liquor.

"I'll tell you why. You're not prepared for what we have coming our way. You're grieving and that's understandable, but I can take up the slack and stand ready when you need me most."

"You think you're prepared for what's coming?" Dusty asked.

"More than you are." She returned her gaze to Sloane. "Or you."

"We just lost the love of our lives and a brother. How the hell do you expect me to notice the color of a damn bike? That should've been your job!"

"Exactly!" she exclaimed. "I pay attention to details, and right now you need me here so that I catch the things you might let slide. Sending me away is a mistake."

Dusty protested. "It's not a—"

"And it might cost all of you your lives!" she added quickly.

Dusty glared daggers straight through her. Sloane poured another drink and gulped it as quickly as his last. She observed his reels turning and knew

she'd made valid points. The elemental danger drew near, and Sloane needed her in place as much as he needed his brothers, maybe even more. They were already grossly outnumbered. Losing someone with her abilities wasn't something he would consider lightly.

Sloane conceded and she knew she'd won before he said, "All right. Have it your way, but one mistake, Veronica—just one—and I'll have you on a plane bound for Brisbane. Do I make myself clear?"

Dusty slammed his glass against the bar and stormed out.

"Are we clear?" Sloane asked again, ignoring his brother's tantrum.

"Yes," she said firmly. "You won't regret your decision."

Sloane looked past her, glaring out the window behind her. "I already do."

When Sloane walked away, she saw why he was so torn. There, in the midst of one hell of a fit, Dusty was chopping wood and slinging logs. His temper finding a release of its own, Veronica wanted to go to him, but she also feared approaching right then. He wasn't just angry and hurt, Dusty Remington was a conflicted man driven by his emotions but overwhelmed by his desires. Those impulses scared her, too.

\* \* \* \*

Gathered around the kitchen table, Sloane rolled a map across the top, smoothing his palms over the blueprints.

"This is an updated map of the property. If you see the letter X, it indicates the safe house spaces that are no longer accessible since the explosions. We can't get in there right now. We lost three constructions and all of the equipment in each. Drew checked out the other bunkers today to make sure they're well stocked with a change of clothes for each team member as well as plenty of food and water.

"If you go under," he began, "You cannot collapse the tunnels. We have to keep those open because we are short on facilities now, not to mention facing an army rather than a few snipers. This means you're at risk if you have to go to the safe rooms. You have to guard the slide entrances and keep your monitors on at all times. You'll have to know what to expect, and even underground you may face aggressive retaliation."

Drew studied the area between the two oak trees. Then he said, Kelsie and Benson are here,” he tapped the map. “Fresh graves may prevent anyone from looking for our main compound. Keep in mind, this is the best stocked unit we have on the place. If you have to drop here, you’ll have more supplies. Five people could live comfortably for at least a year with the dried foods, bottled water, and amenities there.”

“Amenities include running water and full electricity,” Logan clarified. “In other words, Veronica, this bunker is your best option.”

Sloane raised his head and stared at Logan. “She may not have time to go to the beauty parlor for a shampoo and manicure.” Then he addressed her. “Veronica, you have to take what you can get. Don’t try to make it to the main bunker if the best you’ve got is one of the other safe houses. The main thing is to drop out of sight and stay there until we all make contact.”

Dusty passed out new handheld devices. “This cell phone serves as a detonator to set off the bombs in the woods. Hit the blue button once, and you’ll set off five small bombs. Hit it twice, you get double for your trouble. Another feature we added,” he said, turning the handheld electronic face up, “When any of us go under, this light here in the center will light up. The person closest to you will receive the notification.”

“So if I drop out of sight...”

“Technically, you don’t even have to let us know. Whoever is closest to your location will be notified when you’re down.”

She studied the device Dusty gave her and then noticed hers had another option she didn’t see on the other small instruments. She pointed to what looked like a tiny speaker. “What’s this?”

“I have no idea.” Dusty dismissed the question, eying Sloane. “Hmm,” he said, shrugging. “Guess the technicians ran out of time and didn’t add another feature they may have meant to implement.”

She narrowed her gaze on Dusty, and he immediately slid his own gadget into his shirt pocket.

Sloane said, “All right. Drew is underground tonight in the main compound. Dusty, you’re in the house with Veronica and Logan. I’ll take the first shift outside. Dusty and Logan, you’ll take two-hour rotations.”

“What about me?” Veronica asked.

Logan sneered. “What about you?”

“On any other mission, I’d take an outside post time, as well. I’ll stand in like everyone else.”

“Like hell you will,” Dusty said.

Logan looked like he fully agreed with their pending arrangement. “If we don’t see trouble, then you may even get a good night’s sleep,” he said, matching Dusty’s heated gaze. “Or maybe not.”

Sloane perused the refrigerator for a bottle of water. When he rose from his stooped position, he said, “We’ve lost one of Tom Weaver’s daughters. We’re not losing another one. Placing you outside to protect the men won’t happen in this camp, and it damn sure won’t happen while I’m in charge.”

## Chapter Twenty

### *Two Weeks Later*

Veronica strolled into the barn while Dusty and Logan were discussing feed bills. She knew nothing about farming or the expenses involved in running a ranch. From what she gathered, the local feed and seed overcharged them on their farm account. Apparently, mission or not, Dusty didn't want the excessive charges mounting up. Since Benson used to handle their finances, Dusty and Logan appeared at odds over what they were charged and what they should've been billed.

In the cross-ties, a mare stomped her hoof, clearing the sawdust underneath the pressure of a slamming horseshoe. Her head bobbed up and down, allowing her handlers to know she was quite agitated, never mind impatient.

"Are you going for a ride?" she asked when Dusty returned to groom the animal.

"No," he said. "Logan just got back. Damn mare threw him into the fence and about broke his back." He shook his head disgusted. "He'll have more aches and pains than a woman going into labor by the time evening falls."

"Is that right?" She ran her hands over the sleek coat of the rebellious beast. "Does she have a name?"

"Bitch, and the name suits her. She was Kelsie's horse. Sydney Kane sold her to Sloane after her father passed away. Kelsie looked at her once and saw nothing more than a challenge."

"I don't remember seeing her," she said. "She's a beauty."

"Sloane sold her after she chased Kelsie down the field. She had a fit and refused to talk to him for days. She loved this horse. Sloane went down to a neighboring farm and bought her back this morning. She's as contrary

as she was when Kelsie owned her. I don't know why in the hell he wanted to buy this dumb bitch back and add to our problems."

She snickered. "She's not too dumb if she has your undivided attention, now is she?"

Dusty stopped brushing the horse and leaned over her withers. They locked in an unspoken gaze, much hotter than the other times when they'd looked into one another's eyes. This moment was different. This time, there wasn't anything to stop them from gazing a little longer, holding out for a little more than a sideways glance.

"It's been two weeks," she blurted out. "Why do you think we haven't heard from Esparza?"

Dusty frowned, returning to the task of grooming the horse. "Esparza is smart. He's out there, never forget that, but he's biding his time. If he'd sent his men in here right after they slaughtered Benson in cold blood, they would've needed twice the manpower. The anger and adrenaline pumping through our veins made for a dangerous concoction. Sending his crew here would've been like walking them into a gas chamber."

She detected the sadness in Dusty's voice. In an effort to lighten the mood, she said, "Bet I could ride her."

"Ha! She'd throw you just like she tossed Logan's cocky ass. Hell, honey, even Kelsie couldn't ride her back in the day, and trust me, she was excellent on her back."

Logan snickered when he entered the barn. "What a Freudian slip. She was indeed." He walked by Veronica with the same empty stare he'd had since the day Benson died.

"Can I give it a shot?" Veronica asked, pressing.

"No," Sloane said entering the far end of the barn. "I don't want anyone riding her. Logan, you damn near got her killed out there."

"You're worried about her? What about me?"

"I can't help it you can't stay in the saddle," Sloane bit out.

Logan narrowed his gaze. "I don't have a hard time riding a worthy mare, but that one there is pure evil."

"Then don't go near her," Sloane said. "I want her to have a pampered life now that I bought her back. No one rides this horse, understood?"

Dusty and Logan agreed. Veronica asked, "What are you going to do with her when the mission is over? Take her with you?"



Sloane studied the horse and then ran his palm in between her ears. The whole time, the horse bucked her head and nipped at him, like all she wanted was the chance to take a chunk out of his body.

“Yeah, what are you going to do when we leave?” Dusty asked, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“I’m not leaving,” Sloane stated flatly, unhooking the crossties and leading the horse out of the confined area. “Benson and I talked about it once. He had already decided to make this mission his last, pointing out things I hadn’t noticed in a long time. This is home, and there’s not a prettier place around or anywhere else I’d rather be.”

Logan looked away, and his gaze darted around the exterior perimeter of the barn. A few minutes later, he strolled outside.

While Sloane and Dusty discussed Bitch and Sloane’s decision to stay in Missouri, Veronica trailed behind Logan. She noticed how he squared his shoulders when she stood beside him.

“I see why he wants to stay.”

“We had a beautiful place here at one time,” Logan said softly.

“It’s one of the prettiest farms I’ve ever seen.”

“Too many memories here for me.”

“Sloane didn’t say he expected you to stay.”

“You’ll see. He’ll make it impossible for us to leave.” He eyed her then, perused her body, and said, “Even you. He’ll expect you to live right here until he says you can go.”

“By the time this mission is complete, he’ll change his mind.”

“He promised Kelsie he’d take care of you,” Logan said. “We all did.”

“Logan, I don’t need someone to look after me. I’ve been making it on my own for a long, long time. I’m here for you guys as long as you need me, but when we finish Esparza, I’m packing up and heading out on my next mission.”

Logan grunted. “You may think it’s easy to walk away, but you’ll see. You’re the last connection Sloane has to Kelsie. You and this damn ranch.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not. I barely knew my sister. That horse of hers understood her better than I did.”

Logan stared toward the oak trees. “Dusty and I brought Kelsie back here because she didn’t deserve to die alone. We never knew something like this would happen. If she hadn’t been here, then Drew and I wouldn’t have

been in her room when we should've been watching out for Benson. We made so many mistakes," he said, rubbing the ball of his hand in a circular motion in the center of his forehead.

She patted his arm, and he flinched. She lifted her hand but after a second consideration, wrapped her fingertips around his bicep and squeezed. "Logan, I don't think Kelsie would've looked at her life or her death like you did. All of you gave her the best you had to give in her final days. If anything, she probably felt gratitude, happy because you and Dusty did what was best in the end. Never forget, you made her happy. Without you, what did she have?"

"Her life," he replied. "She wasn't strong enough to travel. She didn't need to be here."

"She was strong enough to love you one last time, wasn't she?"

His head snapped. "What are you talking about? Did Dusty say something to you?"

"No."

"Then how did you know?"

She tried not to think about the moment she nearly interrupted, but the images came rushing back like a tidal wave, bringing with them a delicious mix of audible memories as much as the carnal visions. God help her, she'd never seen anything more beautiful or erotic in all of her life.

While he waited for her answer, he watched her through the soft long locks freefalling over his brow. At over six feet tall, he wasn't as tall as Sloane, but he looked a lot like him, only Sloane resembled the epitome of a deadly assassin and Logan made bad boys look pretty.

"You saw us, didn't you?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"You were spying?"

"Not exactly. You left the door open and I happened to walk by."

"And you didn't turn away."

"Would you have looked the other way if you'd been in my shoes?"

"You watched an intimate moment. You should be ashamed of yourself."

She sighed. "Logan, I have a lot to be ashamed of, really. In my line of work, there's remorse at every corner. The damndest thing is, I don't have time to wallow in my mistakes or even think about them."

Logan copped the first smile she'd seen in days. "Maybe not, but depending on what act you caught us in, I'm willing to bet you've thought about what you witnessed more times than you'd ever admit."

She snickered. "You might be right."

He winked. "I know I am. I've been on the outside looking in before, and it's no fun being left out, especially when you have a front row seat to something like a threesome."

Suddenly more aware of her surroundings, she felt the tickle on the back of her neck and her stomach rumbled. "Oh, God," she complained, placing her palm to her stomach.

"Are you hungry? That was some kind of growl."

"No," she bit out, quickly reaching for her gun. "Get inside."

"Huh?"

"I rely on my gut and it's never wrong. Get inside!"

Logan rushed toward the barn and helped her get the doors secured.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dusty asked when he climbed down from the hayloft.

"Veronica here claims there's danger because her stomach growled."

"Have you thought about eating rather than fabricating something in order to get your adrenaline pumping?"

"Damn it, Dusty!" She pointed to the far end of the lower field, staring in disbelief. Trucks approached at a high rate of speed. They appeared to be loaded down with men, soldiers ready to march for Esparza's worthless cause. "We were expecting company, not a party."

"Oh, my God," Dusty said, grabbing his phone from his pocket. "Hurry, take cover!"

He punched a code in his phone and then bellowed into the receiver. "Lock down the house and be ready for the worst rumble of our lives!"

\* \* \* \*

Drew stepped out of the shower and faced the wrong end of a shotgun.

"You must be the youngest," Esparza drawled, eying Drew's protruding member. "I never thought much about a man's personal attributes, but after seeing where you lack, I can see why you're viewed as incompetent. Sloane

is known for having balls of steel. Maybe by the time you came along, there wasn't much left to go around."

Gripping the white cloth he'd used to towel dry his hair, Drew bitterly asked, "What are you trying to do, compare a man's strength by his body parts?"

Esparza's evil grin spread. "No," he said. "It's unnecessary. See, where you're going, you aren't going to need your prick."

"If you plan to kill me, then I'll have something penetrated with this pecker before the end of the day. You may have heard, I have a lovely woman waiting for me on the other side and I ain't afraid to die, Esparza."

"That's good to know," he said. "You and your brother Benson were the weak links in the Remington unit, and from what we've heard, no one is loved more than the kid. I'll enjoy killing you almost as much as I enjoyed watching your brother die."

"How dare you mention my brother's name!" Drew clenched his fist, and Esparza aimed the gun at his head.

"You never stood a chance. From the moment you and your brother Benson arrived here, you were dead men. You were the only Remington who knew Benson had been snooping around Caracas, trying to uncover the hidden secrets even your father and Tom Weaver couldn't find. With Benson appointing himself in charge of interrogating some of my staff, no one wanted his blood more than I did, except for the men who happened to endure his—how should I say this—less than honorable ways of questioning a man."

He took a step back, and with his hips against the bathroom vanity, he pointed his gun lower. "I have to admire you to a certain degree. You, in fact, surprised me. You held yourself together even though your brothers are understandably falling apart. Who would have thought? After all, didn't Kelsie take the first seed from the stalk?"

Drew glared at Esparza. How the hell did this man know so much about their personal lives? How much more did he know about them if he knew he lost his virginity to Kelsie and even realized Sloane and the others often called him 'kid'?

"Benson didn't have to die."

"The hell he didn't!" Esparza screamed. "He wanted to destroy my family, just as your father before him."

“He wanted to understand what motives drove you and Dad to hate one another.”

“Would you like for me to tell you? It really isn’t that big of a secret in my country, and if Benson had asked the right men, he would’ve found his answers. Your father and Tom Weaver took away my father and grandmother. They killed them in cold blood.”

“If they did, they had good reason,” Drew spat.

“The hell they did! I watched my family die, and your family will now pay the price!”

Drew narrowed his gaze. “So you’re going to kill us one by one. Pick us off like you’re on some kind of human hunt.”

“I don’t have to hunt. I always know where each of you are, what you have for breakfast, where you found your pleasure last. For a number of years, I’ve been in the shadows observing. Now, I get to enjoy the fruits of my labor.”

“You’re a sick freak, Esparza.”

“I’ve been called worse, but I’m curious, and since I answered a question or two for you by offering information, maybe you can answer something for me. Why did you and your brothers change your original plan?”

“What plan?” Drew asked, uninterested in sating Esparza’s curiosity.

“A team of operatives trained to come back and stand in for you and your brothers. Then, at the last minute, Sloane changed his mind. Why?”

“Come on, Esparza, you really want me to spell it out for you? We were told we had a mole, and turns out we did, didn’t we? One of your men was actually set to pose as me, right?”

“How’d you know?”

“For the love of God, what are we now, friends?”

Esparza raised his gun. “Not quite. I’ll give your brother credit. Sloane is always one step ahead of everyone else. He may even be smarter than your father, and Wilson Remington was an intelligent man.”

“Intelligence didn’t save him from a bullet to the skull.”

“And it won’t save you. Get dressed. We’re going outside so your brothers can make a choice. Them or you.”

## Chapter Twenty-one

“Esparza is here,” Sloane announced, entering the barn. Logan and Dusty kept pulling weapons from a compartment in the middle of what first appeared as an ordinary horse stall.

Logan handed Veronica another weapon. She tucked it in her boot and then reached for more ammunition. They were so busy packing down, no one noticed the expression on Sloane’s face. No one bothered to look.

He stared at the hole in the middle of the shavings and didn’t move. Logan handed off another couple of weapons and then looked up. “What is it?”

Dusty stilled, a loaded gun falling from his fingertips. “Where’s Drew?” he asked reluctantly, almost as frightened as she was to hear his reply.

Sloane swallowed so hard it looked like his Adam’s apple trapped a golf ball in his throat. “Esparza has him,” he confirmed with a solid rasp, a deadly tone.

“Are you sure?” Veronica said.

He didn’t acknowledge her dumb question. Of course he was sure. The look in his cold eyes brought back recent memories.

“Is he alive?” Logan screeched. “He’s okay, right?”

“Esparza is bringing him outside. He caught him coming out of the shower, and I couldn’t get in the bedroom without going through a few of Esparza’s men.

“He will kill Drew if we make the wrong move. We’ve gotta get out of here and separate. Remember, Esparza likes a show. He wants to kill Drew with an audience. If we so much as show ourselves, Drew’s a dead man.”

“He may be blown to kingdom come if we don’t,” Dusty said.

“No, Dusty, listen to me for once in your life. We have to split up,” Sloane insisted. “And stay out of sight.” Quickly, he grabbed multiple

weapons bags and loaded them with everything he'd need to fight his way out of a combat zone.

"How many? Any idea?" Sloane blurted out.

Veronica gave a quick account of what she'd seen. "Five wagons came in as pretty as you please. All of them were loaded down with those round hay bales. I stood watch while Dusty released the gun shed, and best I can tell maybe fifty, but, Sloane, that doesn't mean there aren't more. Why would they bring in five wagons?"

Logan sneered. "Those wagons will be the first to go in case our company brought us a little surprise."

"You take care of their transportation," Sloane said. "Dusty, you stay with Veronica."

"Like hell!" she exclaimed. "Right now, you don't have time to babysit me. I didn't need tender loving care when I was in Venezuela, and I damn sure don't need an afterschool program now!"

Dusty's eyes held hers for a few quiet seconds. She looked away. There would be time for questions later. They'd have their chance to tell war stories. Shaking off the need to reassure him, she locked and loaded another weapon.

Sloane kicked the lid down on the gun shelter and they walked out of the stall. "Don't go near the house!" he reminded, climbing into the loft and scooting some boards out of his way when he reached the top. He headed for the roof.

Dusty started to follow her out but she stopped him, "You have to let me go. Drew's life depends on us."

Dusty cupped her right cheek. "If you get yourself killed out there, you'll never know what you could've experienced with me."

"I'll keep that in mind. Now go!"

A few minutes later, she crawled under one of the sheds and pointed her weapon toward the side porch. Several seconds passed before Drew and Esparza appeared. Drew looked despondent, almost listless.

She grabbed her satchel and placed the small binoculars on the bridge of her nose. Had he been injured? Was he shot or perhaps even beaten?

No, she thought, but maybe he had given up. Esparza was a vile man, a man known for his horrific tactics, a man who liked killing men with an

audience full of women and children. He had made his way to center stage and loved the attention.

Drew knew he was going to die. Veronica almost believed it, too, but then she thought of Kelsie. Would Kelsie want her giving up on Drew so easily? Absolutely not.

Another inner debate began. Veronica had strong feelings for Dusty, and Dusty was a rebel who would undoubtedly show his face in order to save Drew. If he did, his heroics could cost him his life. And she couldn't let that happen. She had to plot fast and find a way to help save them all.

Raising her wrist to her lips, she spoke into the watch device Sloane had given them when the mission originated. "Do not try to go against this. I've thought of something, and you can use the distraction I cause to gain the upper hand. Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

She immediately heard Dusty in her ear. "No, Veronica! Don't do anything stupid. You can't save Drew right now. You'll get him killed!"

"Stand down, Dusty," Sloane said.

"Sloane, damn it!" Logan screamed. "This is absurd."

Esparza screamed to the wind. "Oh, Remington boys. Where are you, Remington boys? Won't you please come out and play with your little blue-eyed brother?" He pinched Drew's cheeks, and Drew didn't move. He didn't wince under the man's touch or react whatsoever. "He sure is cute, Dusty. Kind of looks like you. I bet my boys will have some fun with his pretty little ass. What do you think?"

"Don't move, Dusty," Sloane said.

Veronica eyed the wagons. She saw a few men she recognized. Bob walked toward the house with Ferguson and two Venezuelans.

"Oh, shit," she whispered.

"Come back?" Dusty said. "Something wrong over there?"

"No," she said. "Stubbed my toe."

"Stubbed your toe?" Logan asked. "What the fuck?"

She couldn't let Dusty know two of the men who'd been involved with his imprisonment now walked on their land. Hell, he'd come out fighting and lose before he had a chance to get started.

Veronica closed her eyes. She had to think. Her position would likely be compromised the second she called out to Esparza.



They'd been trained for this kind of situation, but she wondered if Drew's reaction was a ploy or rather a warning. His demeanor worried her. Had he given up? She wished she knew how much she could count on him now.

She could tell his hair was damp. He had on a pair of Wrangler jeans and nothing else. His breathing didn't appear labored, and his eyes didn't search the fields for backup. Yes, she thought, he's given up. He must've believed Esparza would indeed execute him.

Veronica lowered her face to the ground and placed her weapons at her side. "Gustavo? Is that you?" she called out.

"Ah, is that my Ronnie I hear?"

"Yes!" she cried out, ducking into the dirt again.

"Where are you, darling?" he inquired, keeping the gun flat against Drew's skull. "Talk to me, princess."

"Funny you should mention a princess," she said. "Quite funny, actually. Do you know where *your* little princess is today?"

In her ear, Logan hissed. "This is *not* a good idea."

"Let her go with it," Sloane ordered. "Tread softly, Veronica."

Esparza nudged Drew forward. "Believe me, Ronnie, you don't want to mention my family if you intend on saving the Remingtons. Why don't you come on out here and talk to me face to face. You know, man to woman. Let's chat, lovely."

"I'd love to, actually," she replied. "Only I'm stuck up here in the woods with a piece in my ear waiting for confirmation. See, our people are in place right outside your Caracas compound. Once they have your little beauty in sight and I give them the order, your palatial grounds will go up in flames. With all that gold and silver you keep there, I imagine it will look like the Fourth of July."

He scoffed. "You have no one in Venezuela. The teams Remington sent in always carried the last name."

"Apparently not," she yelled. "I was there. Check with your boys in Caracas. Ask them about a belly dancer they met there a few years back. They'll tell you. I've been on the inside of your compound, Esparza. I've been within four inches of that chubby little bitch you take to bed every night. Go on, call. Confirm. You'll buy me more time."

"You crazy, fucking cunt!" he yelled.

“Ah,” she said. “And here I thought we were starting to form a friendship based on our mutual admiration.”

He shoved Drew to the ground and aimed. “Do you always bluff with your friends’ lives?”

“No, sugar,” she drawled. “I gamble with them. See, I like the fucking rush. If you think Remington means anything to me, you’re mistaken. The only thing I care about is winning, and if I go home after this mission, then I did better than most.”

“Easy,” Sloane said softly. “His gun is cocked, Veronica. Don’t piss him off.”

“I can take the shot now,” Veronica said.

“Hold your fire,” Logan said.

“Kill the son-of-a-bitch,” Dusty encouraged.

“Hold up!” Sloane demanded.

The wave of orders she received made her realize the way this mission had changed the Remingtons. Dusty typically waited for Sloane and Sloane seldom hesitated. Logan had practically been an assassin in Third World countries and he didn’t want her to take her shot?

“Prove to me you have people in my country,” he said.

“I don’t have to convince you, Gustavo. Uh, hang on,” she called out dramatically, careful to stay hidden when she heard someone pass behind her. “All you have to do is pull that fucking trigger and you can piece together your woman when you return to Caracas. She’ll be dead by sunset if you and your men don’t load up and get out of here. Do you like working human puzzles? Hell, she’ll make a complicated jigsaw puzzle look easy, but hey she may not be worth anything to you. If she isn’t, take your best shot. You have one. I have one. An eye for an eye, Esparza, that’s the way it is with people like us.”

“I didn’t come here to leave empty handed,” he shouted.

“Then take me instead,” she said.

“No!” Dusty screamed in her ear.

“Shut up,” she whispered back. “Drew isn’t even responding. He’s in shock or something. I’ve got to get him out of this.”

“What’s your position, Logan?” Sloane asked.

“I’m in the house,” he said. “Second floor, command center.”

“Dusty?”

“Lower fields.”

“Logan, how we coming on the wagons?”

“I can get the grenades there without an effort, but we may want to leave them transportation out of here since they caught us off guard,” Logan said.

“Yeah, they did...again,” Sloane barked.

Veronica peered over her scope, aiming at her target. “What’s it gonna be, Gus? Huh?”

“Are you willing to die for a man you claim you don’t care about?”

“What can I say,” she said. “I like negotiations. Come on, sugar. Let me have this small victory. You let Drew go back inside and I’ll meet you at the tractor. Come on, baby. I’ve got a tighter ass than he does.”

“And a mouth worse than any whore in his sex trade,” Sloane grumbled.

Esparza kicked Drew in the gut and he fell to the ground. “He has ten seconds to get inside or I’ll kill him,” he said. “And you have five minutes to meet me at the wagons or I’ll bring down the kind of hell you and your Remington friends won’t soon forget.”

“Ten!”

“Get up, Drew,” Dusty whispered.

“Nine!”

“Get him, Logan,” Veronica said. “You’re going to have to get him inside!”

“Eight!”

Veronica started to wiggle out of some of her gear, trying to break free of the cover that caught on a nail on the board above her.

“Seven!”

Drew barely bowed his back. He looked like he’d been drugged or he was definitely in shock.

“Six!”

“Logan!” she screamed! “Go!”

“Five!” Esparza taunted, turning around with his arms wide open.

“Take the fucking shot!” Sloane screamed.

“Four!”

He laughed as he approached Drew with his pistol aimed between his eyes.

“Three!”

“Drew!” Logan ran from the house and dodged a spray of bullets as he fell to the ground next to him.

“Two! And look what I get for waiting!”

“I’m here!” she screamed from behind him.

Esparza slowly turned around. “So I see.” With his eyes pinned to hers and his arm extended behind him, he fired anyway, pumping a round of bullets into the vacant ground where Drew and Logan had been less than three seconds earlier.

She swallowed as she stared at the small porch. They made it to the smallest safe house on the place because Esparza made a grave mistake. He picked one hell of a lousy place for a showdown.

Evidently, she did, too.

\* \* \* \*

She saw Esparza’s fury. To his dismay, the bullets ricocheted across the dirt and there wasn’t any sign of where Logan and Drew escaped. Raising his right arm quickly and wielding the gun forward, Esparza had full intentions of killing her.

Shots were fired all around her. She ducked her head, rolled to the ground, made her way back to cover and stared back in disbelief. The most powerful man in all of South America lay dying, inches from where his men shot and killed Benson Remington.

“Talk to me!” Sloane yelled. “Tell me something. You okay, Veronica?”

“I’m...alive,” she said softly, choking back true fear, how she escaped with her life barely conceivable.

Static filled her earpiece and another round of shots filled the air. “Dusty?” she whispered. “Are you there?”

“Hell, yeah, I’m here. Somebody had to cover your renegade ass.”

She breathed a sigh of relief and looked up in time to see a slew of Esparza’s men rushing for the tractors. “They’re escaping!”

“Let them go,” Sloane ordered. “We need them out of here.”

“No!” Dusty protested.

“Dusty, stand down,” Sloane demanded.

“Fuck that, man! There’s no way.”

“Oh, God, Sloane,” she wailed. “He must have spotted the two guys who were in Caracas.”

The static continued. Dusty must’ve been walking, stomping toward the danger, ready to meet retribution with a smile on his face and a gun squeezed tightly in his hand.

Veronica ran back for her guns, quickly throwing her gear over her shoulder.

“Get out of there!” Sloane screamed.

An explosion off to the left, another one off to the right, and the next thing she heard was, “Going somewhere, boys?”

Then another blast of fire power as a continual spray of bullets met men being sent to meet their maker. “Gah!” Somebody moaned as they caught a slug or two. Another one tried to negotiate as he stood, most likely on the wrong end of Dusty’s gun. “I sur—”

“My brother tried that, too, you bastard,” Dusty cried out, walking through the smoke, leaping over dead bodies, and pulling triggers as rapidly as the guns allowed.

Veronica hurriedly ran to the side of the house. Dusty approached more men trying to escape. One tractor pulled away from an outbuilding. The wagon carried men who ducked for cover rather than returned fire.

Dusty pressed forward, pushing through the smoke and flames, kicking a few limbs out of the way as he stomped toward those who didn’t deserve to tread across his soil. Nudging one man and then another, firing unnecessary shots to ensure those who were down, never stood up.

Veronica gasped when she saw the two Venezuelans she recognized from the days when Dusty was held in Caracas. He paused and she held her breath. He couldn’t afford to revisit the past now. He couldn’t hesitate.

His body looked larger as he rushed toward the men now waving their hands and asking him for mercy. He looked like Rambo as his gun waved in front of his body, shooting anything and everything in front of him, leaving a blood bath behind.

“Stand back,” Sloane ordered. “Dusty! This is suicide!”

“No, Sloane. This is outright revenge. Too bad you can’t taste it, too, big brother.” And then another rain of gunfire lit up the field as he continued his battle alone.

By the time Veronica and Sloane reached him, three wagons were blazing. One tractor escaped with what appeared to have ten men squatting on the wagon. Everyone else remaining lay dying or dead. Dusty, however, didn't have a scratch.

## **Chapter Twenty-two**

The next day, Veronica awoke to a morning sun so bright, she thought she might have been living in a dream. The sun seemed to announce deliverance, one she hoped the Remingtons would feel, as well.

After she showered, she walked into the bedroom next to hers and stared at the bed where Kelsie had slept. “We took them down, Kelsie. We got Esparza.”

Drew appeared in the hallway with his luggage. “Where are you going so early this morning?”

“I have a commercial flight to Florence. I’m bringing home Kelsie’s personal effects and then taking some time off.”

“You deserve it.”

“Not really,” he admitted. “Veronica, I want to thank you for saving my life yesterday.”

“I was glad to do it. Everybody has a bad hair day.”

“Mine almost got everyone killed.”

“You’re okay,” she said, squeezing his hand in passing. “That’s all that matters.”

He shook his head. “Tom and Dad never thought I had the right itch for the job. Maybe they were right.”

“Only you know the answer there, Drew. Take your time off and search your heart. Do what you want to do. It’s what Kelsie would want.”

He reached for her. “Come here.”

They embraced. Once he released her, he took her hands in his and said, “Thank you for everything. I hope you’ll be here when I get back.”

She shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“If not, I hope we’ll meet again.”

“Me, too, Drew. Have a safe trip.”

Logan rushed inside and stared up the stairs. "Morning, Wonder Woman," he teased. "Drew, are you ready yet?"

"Yeah, I'm ready. Let me just go say goodbye to Kelsie and Benson."

Logan's eyes met hers, and she continued to make her way toward the kitchen. When she spotted the coffee pot, she sighed. God love their hearts, they left her a full pot. After grabbing a mug, she filled the cup to the brim and inhaled. "Ah, yes. Nothing is better than a hot cup of coffee first thing in the morning."

"From what I hear, you almost didn't get your morning cup," Logan said, walking in behind her.

"I thought you were leaving," she said, sitting down at the kitchen table.

"Drew's outside."

"I want you to know what you did yesterday was stupid."

She crossed her leg and let her foot bounce. "I agree."

"You could've gotten yourself killed."

"You're right. Any one of us could've died out there."

Logan frowned. "You take too many risks."

"I'm not afraid of dying."

"Maybe you should be. There are a few people around who don't want anything to happen to you. Think about someone other than yourself."

If this was Logan making nice, she'd hate to see him in the midst of foreplay. He wasn't all roses and chocolate dipped strawberries, but he still made her smile. He cared. God love his stubborn heart, he genuinely cared.

Dusty and Sloane walked in and Logan walked out, leaving them with a few parting words. "I'll be back in a couple of hours. Maybe the two of you can do something with her."

Dusty smacked his lips. "I'd sure like to try."

After Dusty and Sloane said goodbye to Drew, Dusty came back inside and immediately blurted, "If you aren't afraid of dying, then you need to go into another profession altogether. You risked your life yesterday, but more than anything else, you risked the lives of your team members."

"I'm used to working on solo missions, Dusty. I'm not into contact sports."

She sipped her coffee. He looked on. His full lips rubbed together, glistening with a little moisture. Flirty, dark eyes stared back at her, tempting her to make a first move.



“Are you going to sit there all day and pout, or do you want to go ahead and give me a piece of your mind and get whatever is eating you off your chest?”

At the mention of chest, his gaze drifted to her breasts. He rubbed the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip and then shook his head. Maybe he thought he could shake off the building desire between them.

“Go ahead, Dusty,” she coaxed. “Give me your best shot.”

With the challenge, he stood. “You made a mistake yesterday that could’ve gotten you killed!” he yelled, stomping over to the kitchen window and staring over the lawn.

“So you and everyone else around here have said, but you covered me,” she pointed out. “I knew you would.”

“For a woman who is used to flying without wings, you place your life in the hands of others quite easily.”

“Not others,” she hummed, draping her arm over the back of her chair and smiling. “Just you.”

He arched a brow and then took a deep breath. “I’m not through with you.”

“God, I hope not.”

Sloane returned. He pulled out a chair from under the table and sat down with outstretched legs. The sizeable bulge in his Levis drew her eye, and she quickly looked away, returning her focus to Dusty.

“You act like you’re living in a James Bond movie. You take chances most women would never take. You apparently don’t realize that at the end of this assignment, or any other for that matter, you’re not going to end up at a roulette wheel spinning to win millions in a low-cut black dress, smiling for the cameras, waiting for the curtain call.”

“You never know. I might look good in a little black dress.”

Sloane grunted.

“We don’t play war games here, Veronica!”

She eyed Sloane and his expression was priceless. His lips seemed to shrug and smirk at the same time while his eyes danced with amusement.

“You don’t have anything to say?”

“Dusty does a better job with internal affairs.”

“I see.” She continued sipping her coffee. Moments later, she asked, “What did you do with the bodies?”

“Called the locals.”

“Really?” The Underground Unit seldom involved the local street cops regardless of where their missions took them.

“No. I burned them.”

“You did what?”

“I don’t stutter, sugar.”

“You didn’t burn the damn bodies,” Dusty argued, trying to regain her undivided attention.

“I would have. Only the locals really did help us out with the clean up,” Sloane confessed.

“I see,” she said. “You pulled strings in your hometown?”

“Something like that,” Sloane replied, allowing his gaze to drift over her before he stood up and stalked out.

“What’s up his ass?”

“I don’t know,” Dusty answered dryly. “I guess it’s not every day when one of his operatives tries her hand at negotiation skills while another operative’s head is next to a gun!”

“I can see where that probably unnerved him a bit,” she said, standing. “Well, look, Dusty, I’ve enjoyed our chat. I’ll take everything you’ve said into consideration. But with this mission almost complete, I think I’m going to take a walk and then come back and pack. I’m sure Sloane will send me somewhere soon.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Excuse me?”

“You might as well start a tally for all those trips you’re going to miss. You’re stuck here for a while. Might as well ride into town with me and let me introduce you to some of the locals.”

“Are you asking me out on a date?”

“No,” he said. “I’m trying to trick you into riding into town. Maybe then I can find a shrink and ask him to examine your head. God knows you need someone to help you out and, apparently, I can’t.”

She touched his arm and on a dare, she piped, “I wouldn’t be so sure about that if I were you, Dusty.”

\* \* \* \*

Dusty was harder than a steel rod, and after Veronica's insinuation, he decided today was the day. He was going to take her feisty little ass to bed if it took him all afternoon to get her there.

Starting for the second floor, Dusty discovered Sloane sitting on the bottom step. He had his hands in his hair and his face looked damp.

"Are you okay?"

"Not really," Sloane said. "Are you?"

"I'm fine," he snapped.

"Going upstairs for Veronica?"

"No," he replied. "I need a shower."

"Then you're going for Veronica, aren't you?"

He swallowed hard. "I couldn't save the dying, Sloane, but I can protect the living."

Sloane tilted his head back and stared at Dusty. "You think by screwing her senseless you'll protect her some way? What about falling for her? Will that save her?"

"Do you honestly believe I wanted to fall for her?"

"I don't know. You didn't try to stop it while Kelsie was alive."

"I've never taken Veronica to bed. Ask her. We may have recognized this thing between us, but I never betrayed Kelsie."

"Do you look at Veronica and see Kelsie?" Sloane asked.

"Hell no."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course I'm sure."

Sloane slid across the step moving out of his way. "Then if you're in this for the right reasons, go on," he said. "Maybe if she's in your bed, you'll be able to control her the next time she's in the field."

"I don't think she's going to be controlled," Dusty said.

Sloane had a twinkle in his eye when he stood up. "You'd better find a way to make her submit to you. Domination and submission helped Kelsie. You'll see. Train Veronica as your submissive and she'll make us a better operative."

"I don't want to train her. All I want to do is..." He paused, gulping back the words he didn't need to say, the revelation Sloane shouldn't have to hear.

"You what?" Sloane asked, moving closer. "Are you in love with her?"

“No, of course not.”

“I hope to hell you aren’t, Dusty,” he said, pointing upward. “Because that one there will break your heart.”

## **Chapter Twenty-three**

Dusty stood on the other side of her bedroom door, and she mentally prepared for him. God help her, she knew what kind of man she faced, the kind of warrior she watched kill when the horror of their hostile environment opened up and shone a light on their enemies. Now, she wanted him in her bed?

God help her. Yes, she'd lost her mind. Maybe she should've taken him up on the free ride to the shrink's office.

She kept tossing clothes into her suitcase and waited for him to enter without the invitation. Sure enough, predictable to a fault, he walked in after she refused to answer the door.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah," she said, eying his cock. "Fast."

"What's the hurry?" He shut her door and made a show out of locking it.

"I think you know." She gaped at his tight package. Lord have mercy, she'd love to strip him right out of those denim jeans.

He pointed toward the bed. "Will you sit down? I want to talk to you."

"Dusty, talking isn't on your mind, and we both know it. You walk in here slinging more than cowboy guns and expect me to believe you want to talk? Hell, you're stocking more ammunition in your pants than you ever hid in the barn."

Dusty's hand went to his collar, and he started working the tiny white buttons in and out of the material surrounding them. Eight or ten buttons later, he shrugged out of his light blue shirt and she stared at his abs.

"Then we'll just cut right to the chase," he said, "'cause you're right, Veronica. I'm packing a lot of weight, and I can't wait to use what I have in-between my legs to shoot you straight into heaven."

As corny as his lines were, she had to love a guy with a cute sense of humor. "Is that how you seduce all of your women?"

Dusty let his shirt drag behind him when he walked toward her. Looping his arm around her waist, he explained. "I have a little more in mind than seduction, Veronica. I plan to keep you tempted, aroused, and coming back for more."

Veronica's breath hitched, and by the time he slammed her body against his, she'd already decided. Dusty didn't need to seduce her. He didn't have to give her a choice in the matter because for a very long time, maybe even since the day she'd met Dusty Remington, she'd fantasized about moments like these.

His lips took hers in a sealing kiss. Hard and fast, his mouth came down on hers with a hunger like none other she'd ever known.

Wrapping his arms around her, his hands draped over her ass, and he held her to him, pushing the weight of his erection into the V between her legs. "Don't fight me, Veronica. Please, honey, don't make me stop this time."

"Never." She breathed. "Never again." She kissed him back, opening her mouth to allow his tongue a slick passage, nibbling on the tip until she felt dizzy by the texture, drawing him in for more, feeling the need to sip in the longest kiss he had to give.

Dragging her with him, Dusty backed against the mattress. He fell against it, bringing her down over him. Working at her soft cotton shirt, he discarded it and the bra underneath, latching his lips over her nipple and lapping at the point with long, leisurely strokes.

"Ah, baby, you smell so good." He clasped his hand around the fullness of her breast, puckering as he kissed her nipple, squeezing and releasing, nipping at the side of her breast before sucking her nipple again.

"Dusty." She breathed. "Don't tease me."

"Gorgeous, baby, that's precisely what I plan to do."

Ravaging her body, he slid down her stomach and unzipped her jeans. He didn't help her slide out of them but instead practically ripped them from her hips. Situated on his knees, he propelled his hands over her thighs, and touching her clit through her panties, he watched as her head rolled to the side and she bit down on her forefinger.

"You like that, do you?"

“God, yeah.”

“Then you’ll love this.” He snapped the thin band holding her thong in place. He dipped his head and sipped on her clit, flicking the swollen bud with his tongue until she cried out, moaning his name and fighting to keep her orgasm at bay.

Had there ever been a time when she imagined something so delicious? Had she known all along Dusty would drive her this crazy?

The slurping sounds of a man indulging drove her to open her legs wider, spread them just for him. He made the most sensual sounds as he ate her pussy, lapping at her like he savored a most tantalizing flavor.

Had she feared the way she would respond to him? Was this the reason she’d postponed the inevitable?

Her fingers worked through his thick hair, easing their way around his tight curls. “Oh, Dusty!”

“Sweet,” he whispered, twisting his tongue still higher. His fingers rubbed over her labia, parting her folds, dipping in and out and then retreating, going deeper and twirling higher. She was coming undone. God help her, it had been a long time since she’d truly wanted any man in her bed.

Dusty positioned himself between her thighs like he planned to stay until he was a well fed man. Licking and sucking, he stuck his tongue into her vagina and buried it well past her folds.

“Dusty,” she hummed, bracing herself against her palms. “Don’t stop, Dusty.” She pushed on his head with added pressure.

Veronica tossed her long locks over her shoulders and shivered when they cascaded down her back. His mouth closed around her pussy lips, and she ground against him, rising and falling, humping for the pleasure, burning with a lust she expected to have, longing for the man behind the pleasure as much as the pleasure itself.

Moving away from her, Dusty left her at the crest of her arousal. She eyed his penis after he stepped out of his jeans and away from his shorts. His thick, meaty cock was swollen, hard, and oh so enticing.

He rubbed the tip around her opening when he returned to the bed, draping one leg over her thigh as he pointed, aimed and—then God help her—fucking fired.

Almost as soon as he penetrated her, he came, riding into her walls with a hot spray of come coating her channel. He slid in and out, his liquid moves

heating her nerve endings while he filled her with his size, crying out his pleasure and pumping her full of his hot heat.

Higher and higher, he drove into her, yanking her away from the mattress and pulling her across him in a seated position, allowing her to guide, take the lead. His mouth latched onto her breast, and he continued to fuck her, hard and wild.

“Dusty,” she whispered. “God, yeah, Dusty. Don’t stop.”

“Don’t worry,” he teased, licking her earlobe and whispering his promises. “You’ll have to beg me to stop.”

\* \* \* \*

Her hair fanned around her shoulders, and Dusty caught his breath. Did she have any idea how incredibly beautiful she was? Her full tits bounced, and he caught the right nipple in-between his teeth, running his tongue over her little gem until she cried out, grabbed hold of his shoulders, and rode him faster.

“That’s my gorgeous baby,” he said. “Take me. Take my cock, honey. Make it yours.”

He believed she would. God help him, he thought she’d have her name on the blasted thing by the time she finished with him. And that’s exactly what he wanted because Dusty wasn’t there just to use her body. Oh no, he wanted her heart, her soul, and by damn, he even wanted her to bear his children.

\* \* \* \*

Sloane had known agony before, but things couldn’t have been much worse. The walls were coming down above him and the vocal expressions of sex in progress were heard all over the countryside. His wife and brother were in their nearby graves and the last thing Sloane wanted to do was revisit the recent past. He needed his own distractions.

A lot had happened in a short period of time. He was grieving and feared if he allowed himself to sink into a mourning process, he wouldn’t be able to finish the job they still had left to do.



When he saw Logan's truck top the hill, he couldn't have been more relieved. He'd rather talk to his brother than have a pity party. Besides, why should he have to listen to Dusty and Veronica all by his lonesome?

"What are you doing out here?" Logan slammed the driver's side door and reached into the truck to retrieve his cowboy hat. He swatted the dust off the brim. "Where's everybody at?"

Sloane frowned. "It's just me, you, and Mr. and Mrs. Peter Rabbit upstairs."

Logan snickered. "I doubt Dusty's tapped that. He's tried for weeks."

Sloane shrugged. "She must've gotten tired of the chase. I swear, I thought we'd have to build a new house to stand in this one's place there for a while. All I've done this blessed day is listened to continual fucking."

"Fucked her right, huh?"

"Somebody screwed the lights out of somebody. We should sneak upstairs and make sure they didn't kill each other."

Logan sat on the stoop, too. "She's a sexy woman, brassy as all hell but sexy just the same."

"She's Kelsie's sister."

"Half-sister and they didn't know one another all that well."

Sloane nodded. "You're thinking the same thing, too, aren't you?"

"I don't know yet. I want to get to know her. I know you, though. You've already decided to take on the role of her protector and you're going to lose a few battles with that one if you think you'll control her."

"Then maybe it's just as well Dusty moved in first." His eyes clouded over, and he looked at the tiny crosses marking Kelsie and Benson's graves. "I'm not ready for another Kelsie."

"Good," Logan said. "You won't find another Kelsie in Veronica."

"They're women...sisters," Sloane reminded him. "They're not that different."

"Women come in all shapes and sizes," Logan began. "Most I've met are independent thinkers, and I've rarely met two who were exactly alike."

The noise upstairs drifted from the open window. They glanced up. Dusty moved behind Veronica. Her arms were high above her head, and her palms pressed against the glass, along with breasts no man had the ability to forget.

"Fuck me," Logan said. "I want you to look at those tits."

Sloane stood up and stared, too. Her full breasts pressed against the see-through barrier, and her areolas looked flushed, rosy from the friction or maybe from too much of a man's oral attention.

Dusty bit at her shoulder, and she moved her head to the side, obviously enjoying the loving he gave her. When her face twisted into one of unmistakable pleasure, Sloane felt the rise in his jeans.

"Damn, if I won't get to know her pretty soon after seeing those boobs," Logan said, walking toward the porch.

Sloane stood there and waited, watching, expecting to see her find her release, tempted to go to her and ask her to soothe his pain, as well. Veronica had his balls throbbing, his dick twitching. Fucking hell, he was going to blow watching her screw Dusty.

When her mouth dropped and she started to scream, her eyes opened, too, and she stared into Sloane's eyes, taking her ride, evident when she climbed still higher. They stayed enchanted, locked in a knowing gaze. Veronica tilted her head, placed one palm on the window and wrapped her other arm behind her, clutching Dusty's neck, fingering his hair.

Sloane wanted her. He wanted her hand running through his hair and her tits in his mouth. And by God, he wanted her pussy milking his cock, riding him like a woman on a mission, a secret mission, a loving mission.

But what would Dusty think about sharing another woman? Would he offer to share Veronica if he knew how his body already responded to her? Would he deny Veronica the kind of pleasure they were once able to bring Kelsie?

Dusty fucked her like a wild man and her breasts bounced. Sloane's mouth went dry watching those full mounds sway with Dusty's slower strokes. What he'd give to see them up close. What he'd give to fuck her mouth, those pretty luscious lips shining with his release.

God help him, now he'd lost his mind.

## Chapter Twenty-four

Right before sunset, the local law enforcement agents swarmed their front porch. The sheriff knocked once and Sloane stepped outside.

He saw them when they drove through the gates and told Logan to alert Dusty. There was little point in asking Veronica to join them. Hell, the woman probably couldn't walk or even crawl at this point.

"Sloane," Sheriff Taylor began, extending his hand. "I heard you boys were back in town."

"Nice to see you, Martin," he said. "Did you fellows come out here to say hello or offer assistance?"

Sheriff Taylor rubbed his chin. "You boys have had a little excitement since you arrived back in our neck of the woods." He nodded toward Logan when he joined Sloane on the porch. "Logan," he acknowledged him, extending a hand Logan adamantly refused.

"Uh, anyway," Sheriff Taylor continued. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, especially after Kelsie's death and all, but I'm here to arrest you and your brothers."

"Is that right?" Sloane studied the deputies standing nearby. All three fingered the butts of their guns. Sloane hated to tell them, but if he planned on resisting, there wasn't a damn thing they could do to stop him. Guns or no guns, especially with Logan standing next to him. If he didn't want to go down to the local station, forcing his hand would make for a difficult task.

"You on a suicide mission, Sheriff Taylor?"

"No, Logan. I'm hoping for a little cooperation."

*Think again.*

Sloane glanced over his shoulder and spotted Dusty in his peripheral vision. He backed over to the door and eased it open enough so Dusty could hear him. "If you came here to arrest us, then you waited almost too late. Drew and Dusty left this morning. They flew out of St. Louis if you need to

verify their flight. Of course, if you heard about Kelsie, chances are good the same folks told you about Benson, too.”

“Yes,” he said. “I was real sorry to hear about Benson.”

Sloane arched a brow. “Who told you about Benson and Kelsie, by the way?”

Sheriff Taylor went pale. “I don’t rightly recall.”

Logan’s feet parted, and in the small side window, Sloane saw Dusty back away, realizing no doubt, they had a real and present danger on their hands.

Sloane rubbed the back of his neck. “See, the reason I’m asking, no one came to the funeral. We had a friend from a nearby town come down for the wake, and other than those who sent Benson to an early grave, I can’t imagine who knows about his death.”

“Word is out all over town,” one of the deputies spoke up.

“Is that right?” Logan asked, giving the man a death stare.

“Yes,” another man said. “Seems every time you boys come home, there’s a lot of commotion and the locals tend to get antsy.”

Sloane pulled his sunglasses from his shirt pocket and he didn’t need them for anything more than hiding an unsettled gaze. “I wonder,” Sloane began, shaking the glasses and then situating them on the bridge of his nose, “did the gossip start with Fred Ferguson?”

“Couldn’t say for sure,” Sheriff Taylor said. “This ain’t the big city out here, remember. Gossip circulates quicker than the morning paper.”

“That’s for sure.” Sloane released a dry chuckle.

Sheriff Taylor said, “Sloane, if you don’t mind, I’d appreciate you riding down to the station with us. You and Logan here may be home in time for supper if you cooperate.”

“What are the charges?” Logan asked.

The sheriff shifted his weight from one foot to the next. “Right now, we’re considering a list of them while we continue to gather evidence.”

“But you want to arrest us based on assumptions and expect us to sit in a jail cell until you finish your investigation?” Sloane asked.

“Hell, Sloane,” Sheriff Taylor grumbled. “The whole damn town is scared. We have families sending their kids out of here because you boys decided to drag a bunch of killers in here behind you.”

“What about the killers living among the townsfolk here in Columbia?” Logan asked. “Ever thought about them?”

“I haven’t had a bit of trouble in years. You boys come back and we have more than we can manage.”

“I don’t get that,” Sloane said. “We didn’t see your fire chief or any of the emergency personnel out here when Bob and Fred brought in their wagons loaded down with their friends from Caracas.”

Sloane pushed his glasses up then and carefully studied Sheriff Taylor waiting for him to provide an excuse. When he didn’t, Sloane added, “Where were you then, Martin?”

“I don’t know about any wagons and I ain’t met any fellows from Caracas. Whereabouts is Caracas?”

Logan sneered. “You might consider it right next door by the time these men get through here. Do you really want to put us in your jails while these guys walk down your streets, eat in your restaurants, and shop in your stores?”

“If we have fellows from out of town,” Sheriff Taylor said. “They have as much right to stay here as anyone else.”

“Is that right?” Sloane said. “Maybe you should’ve told Benson that while he was lying in his own blood gurgling out his final goodbyes. I bet he would’ve understood your position and appreciated the hell out of your support.”

“Sloane, I can’t do anything about Benson now, but you boys will probably be better protected in my jail with what could be brewing out there beyond your gates.”

“Is that a threat, Martin?” Logan asked.

The sheriff adjusted the hat on his head. “No, but why don’t you come on down for questioning? Let’s put some of the local gossip to rest. Help me out here, won’t you?”

Sloane’s lips thinned, and he looked toward the oak trees. They’d lost so much already and here was one of their own unwilling to help. Sloane studied the men again, carefully reading expressions, gauging the nervous energy among the rookies. No, on second thought, he mused, they weren’t opposed to offering a helping hand—just unwilling to help *them*.

Sloane swung his gaze over to the deputy with attitude, a young rookie cop with too much of an itch to pull his gun and squeeze his trigger. He

opened the door to the house. "Come back tomorrow when you have legitimate charges pending."

The sheriff drew his weapon and pointed it at Sloane's head. "Don't make me use force."

"How much are they paying you, Martin?" Sloane asked, keeping his back to the men while eyeing Logan. "Are you able to retire on what Fred or Bob promised you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" Sloane challenged, peering to the side. "See, no one knew about Benson's death except those who were here when he died. Your local town mouths couldn't have wagged their tongues unless someone was here and watched my brother lose his life. There wasn't an obituary. Benson's friends weren't notified. Hell, even his ex-girlfriends weren't told about his murder."

"I'm not totally convinced the word is out in town. See, if it had been, we would've seen a whole slew of local folks out here, especially your women. Benson always had a way with the ladies."

Logan's gaze fixated on something right over Sloane's shoulder and he smirked. "That's why you're here, isn't it? You're Blaine Knight, aren't 'cha?"

"What's it to you?"

Logan snickered, agitating the fellow. "Nothing much," he crooned. "Say, by the way, any chance you're still married to Mary Jane Koontz?"

"What's my wife got to do with this?"

Logan's lips turned down and he took a deep breath. "I imagine a lot. See, I'm willing to bet all of you boys were slid a little something under the table, and considering the reputation your wife has, you gotta have something to keep her in line, maybe a little extra side cash."

"Shut your mouth, Remington," Blaine said. "My wife isn't in this."

"No, she's not in this at all. But at one time, she was," Logan said, winking. "Best I remember, she was like good old Bob's young wife. She was in my bed, Benson's bed, and, Sloane, wasn't she in Dusty's, too?"

"That's the way the story goes."

"Yeah, I imagine you've had a time with Mary Jane." Logan stretched and kept both hands on his lower back, tipping the guns stuck in his belt on

the chance he might need them. "Who could blame you? Certainly not me or Sloane. A woman like Mary Jane needs a man who can support her habits."

"No one would blame you, Blaine. Mary Jane is a beautiful woman. Must be hell trying to keep up with her." Sloane helped with the taunting, sarcasm oozing from his lips.

"You have no idea," he informed them, catching a glare from the sheriff and the rest of the deputies.

Regaining his composure, he stood taller. "None of us are taking money under the table."

"Maybe not," Logan said. "But somebody let you know we lost our brother and Kelsie. Now, who could've done something like that, and why would the local beat rub shoulders with those discussing our loss?"

"Makes you wonder," Sloane remarked, taking off his glasses and staring at the sheriff. "Doesn't it?"

"Sloane," the sheriff began, "you and Logan have my word. I'll lock down the jail and have my officers standing guard. I won't leave you there like a sitting duck."

Sloane shrugged. "I don't care either way. With Kelsie gone, nothing is worth living for and there's not a cause I won't die for."

The sheriff lowered his gun and motioned for the other officers to back away. "Sloane, we'll be back. And when we come for a visit, we'll have charges that will stick and probably a list of them. I don't know where you've been keeping yourself all of these years, but if you've got a home someplace, then you best be going there. We're not looking for trouble, you understand."

"I'll look forward to reading your accusations," Sloane said. "And a warrant."

"I'll look forward to delivering them," he promised, abandoning his earlier notion of arresting them on bogus and potential charges.

When they slid behind the wheels of their cars, Sloane glared straight ahead. "Lock down all the gates and reset the grounds security system. No one comes in here unless they're invited and I gotta tell ya," he said, redirecting his focus to the window where he saw an earlier show, "I'm not in the mood for company."

\* \* \* \*

“What did Martin want?” Dusty asked, taking a bite out of a cold bologna sandwich.

“To harass us,” Logan replied, grinning. “Did you have a nice fuck?”

“The best.”

Brothers exchanged knowing smiles, and when Sloane came in, he said, “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

Dusty took another bite, chewed, swallowed, and then rinsed it all down with a glass of milk. “Why was Martin out here?”

“Good thing he didn’t arrive about ten minutes earlier or he would’ve sworn we were running our own sex ring out here,” Sloane stated flatly.

“Who was with him, anyway?” Dusty continued, ignoring any digs pertaining to his romp with Veronica. What he did with the woman he cared about shouldn’t concern them in the slightest.

“Some local fellows,” Sloane said. “Is Veronica sleeping?”

“No,” Dusty said. “Why the hell would Martin get mixed up in this mess?”

Logan shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Sloane said, “Want me to check and see if Veronica is okay?”

Dusty frowned, bracing himself for a good old verbal battle when she walked right in the kitchen and headed straight for the refrigerator. Without looking up, she grabbed a loaf of bread, slapped a piece of bologna on one slice, folded it over, and bit into half a sandwich.

Sloane and Logan stared at her. “What?” she asked around a mouthful of food. “I’m starving.”

“I’ll bet,” Sloane said. “Nothing like a little food for the belly after your body has been fed.”

Logan laughed. “We have other foods outside of sandwich meats.”

“She eats what I eat,” Dusty informed.

Sloane snickered. “I didn’t take you for the submissive type, Veronica. I swear I didn’t.”

She looked at Dusty and then Logan. Swallowing another enormous bite of sandwich, she said, “I don’t know how grabbing a quick bite is a sign of submissiveness, but maybe we all need to get something straight here.”



“Go ahead,” Logan challenged her, crossing his ankles and tucking his hands under his arms. “I can’t wait to hear what’s on your mind. How about you, Sloane?”

“All ears.”

“If I go to bed with Dusty, I go on my terms and not just his. If I fuck him all night long and into the following day, the two of you don’t have any reason to think he’s bringing out the whips and chains. Better still, you shouldn’t jump to conclusions, either.”

Logan’s brow furrowed. “Do I look like I’m leaping toward anything?”

“No, but to set the record straight, I’m not here to take Kelsie’s place. I’m here until this job is over and then, Sloane, you’ll assign me to another one and I’ll go somewhere else. Nothing has changed. Nothing will.”

“The hell it won’t,” Sloane promised, picking her up and tossing her over his shoulder. “Things are moving fast around here, baby. I guess it’s time to make you into a believer.”

## Chapter Twenty-five

Sloane tossed her on the bed. He wasn't easy and by the look in his stone cold eyes, he didn't plan to romance her in any shape, form, or fashion.

She bounced in the center of the mattress and immediately hopped to the other side. "I won't be treated like this!"

"Fine," he said, taking even strides over to the window and tapping the glass. "How about I give you more of the same kind of sexing Dusty gave you? I bet we could drive my brother crazy if he watched something like what I witnessed earlier."

"You shouldn't have looked."

"You wanted me to see."

"The hell I did. I know how much you still love Kelsie. You're grieving and the last thing I want to do is try and make the process more difficult."

"Who said you had to make an effort?" His midnight blue eyes twinkled. Where the red streaks practically divided his pupils earlier, a thin line of pure lust replaced his natural color.

"You realized I was down there and you were smart enough to know I would watch. What man in his right mind looks away from a fucking beautiful woman who is hot for cock and clearly enjoys sex? It took everything I am to keep from storming up the front steps, kicking in the door, and ravaging you the same way you allowed Dusty!"

"You have no right to talk to me like this. Not right now," she said, swaying her hips toward the bathroom door and slamming it.

"I've picked every lock in this house, darlin'. I'd hate to repair one tonight when we have more interesting things we could do to pass the time."

"Like what?" she spat, storming out again. "Fuck until I call you Master, Big Papa, or King Cock?"

“I like that,” he said, grating back a wicked smile. “King Cock might work.”

“The hell it will! I’m not sleeping with you.”

“It doesn’t make a damn to me if you give in today or tomorrow or the day after, but yeah,” he said, rubbing his chin and winking once. “You are fucking me. The foreplay in all of this may be in the longest build-up in history, but one day, I’ll have your pretty little legs spread wide and my cock will bury deep inside that sweet pussy. That’s a solid promise.”

She swallowed. Dear God in heaven, did she feel all of her nerve endings shatter at one time? Something happened when he used that guttural tone. Her defenses shut down, and all she could think about were those delicious insinuations and from there, she developed carnal expectations, even imagined how he might take her.

“What do you want from me?” she asked quietly, doing her dead level best to calm down.

“You really have to ask? Hell, baby, after listening to you and Dusty fuck like honeymooners, you should know.”

“You don’t want me, Sloane. You’re lonely. You’re missing Kelsie.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “You’re exactly what I need. There’s no doubt in my mind.” He locked his upper teeth over his bottom lip and growled. “God, yeah, there’s not a doubt at all. I need to get inside you and stroke away my heartache.”

Veronica’s knees knocked together. Holy shit, she could almost come listening to him talk. He had a way about him. Even though his voice carried an icy pitch and to an extent, sounded diabolical, he had a way of making her want him.

Had he made Kelsie feel this way? She wasn’t going there. Hell no. This thing between her and Sloane had to stay between her and Sloane. But was there room in her bed for a man like Sloane Remington?

She closed her eyes and remembered the day she walked in Kelsie’s room and saw Logan and Drew loving Kelsie. Had there ever been a time in her life when she’d witnessed anything more erotic, more sexual, or even more beautiful?

“What are you doing, baby? Trying to imagine what it might feel like with my cock stuffed inside your hot little pussy, my hands cupping those perfectly round tits?”

“No,” she snapped. “I’m going to go ask Dusty *for permission* to take a walk.”

“I highly doubt that, but go ahead. He’d probably get off on such a tender sweet request. Now, don’t forget to call him Master and lower your eyes when you present yourself.”

“Do what?”

Sloane sneered. “You haven’t a clue what a Dom needs, do you?”

“I’m not a dumb-ass woman in oversized combat boots. I know how to work a man. If I wanted a Dom in my bed, you can bet the dark hairs off your ass he’d be there!”

Sloane swiped at his lips, and she wanted to kiss him, just once. Surely once would sate her for a lifetime because men like Sloane and women like herself didn’t meet in the middle.

His lips glistened and his mouth made him look all the hungrier. “Sugar, that’s where you’re dead wrong. See, first, you have to learn to submit, then the right Dom will show you how to work your body in a manner pleasing to him.”

“Ha! Then that explains everything, doesn’t it? No wonder the egos here are larger than the homes on this property. You honestly think I’d get off on that?”

“Some women do. You’re the one who suggested you could have a Dom in your bed if you wanted one.”

Veronica sucked in a deep breath. Was this where she knelt and begged him to take her because, if so, she was mighty damn close.

She choked back the fear since it crept up along with the excitement, threatening to impair her good sense of judgment. “Like I told you, I’m going to find Dusty.” She held her head high and started out of the room, but she didn’t get far. Sloane twirled her around by the waist and pinned her to the wall.

“Now, you listen to me,” he rasped. “You aren’t going to play games with us, Veronica. Do you understand?”

“Why? What are you going to do? Spank me?”

He rubbed her bottom lip with his middle and forefinger, watching as his fingertips stroked. With a half smile, he said, “I’d like nothing better than to wear your pretty little bottom out with a paddle about as thick and long as my dick.”

“Wonderful,” she said, tossing her head back against the wall. “I guess here is where I tell you I’m wet, drowning in desire, hot for that *humongous* cock since you’ve implied its of enormous proportions. Is that what you want to hear?”

“I just did. And, baby, now you’re going to have to look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t want what I can give you. If you can convince me, then I’ll let you walk out of here. If you can’t, then strip, bend over, and prepare for the ride of your life, sugar. Because I’m going to spank your ass for defying me and then I’m going to fuck the sting away just because I can’t wait to feel your body closing around my dick.”

“Well, it ain’t happening today,” Dusty informed him, walking in the bedroom. Logan stepped in behind him and sat down on her bed like he’d done it a thousand times.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” she barked.

“Sloane, thanks to you, she’s not in a very good mood now,” Logan noted. “Are you losing your touch?”

“She’d make you think so, wouldn’t she?”

Dusty shot Sloane a hard stare and then gripped her hand, brushing her fingertips with his lips.

“Damn,” Logan said. “You that whipped, Dusty?”

Dusty winked and she stood in front of him with her hands and legs apart, her palms turned upward.

Sloane chuckled. “What the hell are you doing?”

She straightened her back and ignored Sloane. “Dusty, I’m presenting myself to you and asking for permission to take a walk.”

Dusty tried to conceal a smile, and Logan laughed outright. “Is that how you taught her to present?”

“Hell no,” Sloane groaned. “She knows every damn thing in case you didn’t know. I suppose that’s a new way of presenting, something I don’t know a lot about, but as long as she submits, who cares, right?”

Dusty grabbed her arm and pulled her against him. Looking down on her, he kissed her lips tenderly. “Baby, I’m not interested in your full submission. If you want to talk about the lifestyle later, I can show you a few things, but I don’t want you to ask for my permission.”

“I know,” she cooed. “I was just deviling Sloane.” Flashing Logan a grin, she added, “I think it worked, too.”

“Next time you pull a stunt like that, I’ll spank you for making a mockery out of something I take very serious.”

Veronica strolled over to the dresser and opened the top drawer. She reached deep inside and retrieved a box. Dusty gasped. “Where did you find that?”

“In the basement,” she replied, setting it on the bed and eyeing the fellows when she opened it.

“What’s in it?” Logan inquired, leaning over on one arm.

“I found Kelsie’s collar and meant to take it to her right after she arrived here but forgot about it.” She held it up and looked at the small little ornaments adorning the loops hanging from the large piece of jewelry. Touching the locks, she said, “Since we’re all here, I have something to ask you.”

Her heart pounded. She tried to steady her nerves. Did she dare? Was she woman enough to make an inquiry because once she made the first one, she couldn’t stop a fast moving train, and Sloane was a fucking locomotive. All he needed was a little steam.

“Are you planning to pursue me? And if you are, will I wear a collar similar to this one? Will I be required to call you each my Master, because that’s where I’d have a problem.”

Apparently mesmerized by the charms in place around the small neck band, Sloane eyed one locket in particular. He fingered the shape, tried to hold its size in between two of his extra-large fingers. Staring at Benson’s monogrammed initials, he said, “You had no right.”

“I have every right! You came in here and talked to me like I’m some common whore. Forget the fact I’m your equal when we’re out there in the field. Now, all of a sudden, you want to fuck me so you have the right to take what you want. Is that what a Dom does? Do they take sex when they need a good fuck and never mind what their submissives want?”

Logan stared at Sloane. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“You started this thing and you’re doing such a fine job. Go ahead. Finish it.”

Sloane said, “Practices within the lifestyle vary from one Dom to the next.”

“Just like it can with submissives,” Logan informed.

“But you want me to submit to you, don’t you, Sloane?”

“I’m hard right now thinking about your *full* submission.”

“And if I give you what you want, then what?”

“Then we see where this goes,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck while the red tint continued to flush his dark complexion.

“No,” she said. “Then you try to make me into an obedient woman. I can’t fit into that role. You’re already pulling rank on me, trying to whisper behind my back about other missions. You’re not going to pull me off of assignments because you suddenly have an overwhelming need to protect me.”

“I will keep you safe.” Sloane made the oath while he watched Dusty from the corner of his eye.

“You don’t have a choice now, Veronica,” Dusty said. “We’re going to watch over you. Like it or not.”

“Well, guess what, Dusty?” She shot Logan a quick glance and saw he was thoroughly amused. “I don’t like it.”

## Chapter Twenty-six

She woke up in the middle of the night with a large hand over her mouth. Her body wiggled and squirmed, but Logan held her to the pillow until she quit fighting him.

“Veronica,” he whispered. “It’s Logan. We’re going under in about five minutes. Grab a few extra things from your closet. Anything you may need. We’re moving now.”

Without asking questions, she gathered her personal effects—her favorite guns, her running shoes, a toiletry bag, and a duffle bag she kept crammed packed with a gal’s favorite luxury items along with several changes of clothes.

Three minutes, tops, and she was leading the way toward the basement, crossing over the plank flooring like she’d been through there a dozen times. “Where are Sloane and Dusty?” she asked, trying to focus on Logan’s face in the moonlight.

“Sloane is under. Dusty is trying to secure the house. He didn’t want you to distract him.”

“Aren’t you the lucky devil tonight?”

“I’m not complaining,” he said, glancing at her breasts. “If I were Dusty, I’d keep you in those sexy pajamas all the time.”

“You think maybe it’s a bit much for Sloane to handle?”

Logan snickered. “I can’t wait to see his face.”

Veronica peered out the small window. “I think we’re clear.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll lead the way. Stay close. We’re about a hundred yards from where we’re going.”

She spotted Dusty making a dash for the bunker ahead of them. “There’s Dusty now,” she said.

“Hmm,” Logan said. “We must’ve wasted a few minutes more than I thought. Let’s move!”



Logan and Veronica left the basement, secured the doors, and ran like hell for the main bunker. Tripping the trap door, they fell through the longest of their tunnels and landed in the elaborate four-room underground compound.

“Daa...hum!” Dusty said. “You know how to give a guy a rise regardless of where he meets up with you.”

“Dusty,” Sloane warned. “Not yet.”

“We need to collapse the tunnels,” Logan said. “Martin won’t buy the fact we left without a trace. Our vehicles are still there. Food is in the refrigerator and it looks like we vanished, just up and disappeared.”

Veronica frowned. “Don’t we need someone up above to dig us out if we collapse the tunnels?”

“It would be a lot easier,” Logan said. “But we can get in touch with Drew and let him know to head back here. Worst case scenario, we can email Brock and Riley Donovan from the Virginia unit. They can get us out if we need them. Our compounds are similar to theirs, but their group is on a mission and we may have to wait a few weeks.”

Veronica’s heart raced forward, striking out one beat and then another. Her pulse quickened and her brow dampened with sweat. She felt weak, a little queasy. “What do you mean by a few weeks? I can’t stay down here that long.”

Sloane said, “Veronica, that’s not up for negotiation. Once I reach Drew, we’re collapsing these tunnels.”

“I don’t know why you’d do it now when you never bothered with the tunnels before.”

“We didn’t have warrants out for our arrests.”

“How can you get arrested? We have carte blanche.”

“Yes,” Logan explained. “But we can be taken in, and even though we can call our people to take care of matters, we’re not protected anywhere outside of our property lines.”

“You mean you could have an accident, an unexplainable death?”

“Yeah, or simply disappear,” Sloane said. “We’ve had operatives disappear without a trace more times than I’d like to think about. We’re not resisting arrest, we’re avoiding it altogether.”

“I like to think of it as self-preservation,” Dusty said, bracketing his arms around her.

“Your heart is pumping,” Dusty said. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“I’m fine. I just need to lie down.”

Sloane and Dusty exchanged a quick glance, and Logan took a seat at the terminal next to Sloane.

Veronica heard Sloane behind her. “If I have to stay down here two weeks with her, she’s fucked around the clock unless she finds something a little more appropriate to wear.”

Logan laughed. “I didn’t see a damn thing wrong with what she had on.”

Dusty’s gaze held hers once he shut the door to the bunkroom. The beds were already made up, and she fell against the bottom bunk, overcome by exhaustion for some unexplainable reason.

“Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“I panicked. I’ve never been underground without a means of escape. I don’t like it. What if we get stuck down here? What if we can’t get out? What if Sloane makes contact with Drew, but he can’t get back here in time to dig us out?”

“Honey,” Dusty said, keeping his voice deliberately level, “you gotta trust us. Tom and Dad thought of everything when they built these underground units. We have the same dry foods the military use, more water than we’ll ever drink. This particular unit has, as you can see, full use of electricity and water. You can even take a hot shower every day while you’re down here.”

“I don’t like confined spaces.”

Dusty said, “You didn’t have a problem with the other units.”

“Yes, because I knew I could leave whenever the job at hand was complete.”

Dusty frowned. “Then let me talk to Sloane. I’ll see you in the morning.”

His lips melded to hers, and she looped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “When you come to bed, come to my bed.”

“Careful, lady. I might keep you bound to that bed. Then what will you do?”

“I said I didn’t like confinement, but I didn’t say anything about your body trapping mine under the sheets. That’s close comfort, and I enjoy a good physical lock-down every now and then.”

“Just once in a while, huh?”

“Okay, several times a day.”

“Now you’re talking.” His lips stole hers once more, and he growled when he moved away. “I’d better talk to Sloane before he hits the demolition button.”

“Okay,” she said, pressing her body to his. “Hurry back.”

\* \* \* \*

“You can’t collapse the tunnels,” Dusty told him.

“Why the hell not?” Sloane asked, watching the monitors and the men invading their properties.

“Veronica doesn’t like to be in tight spaces for a long period of time.”

“Well, what a damn shame. I happen to love them.”

Logan smirked. “Are you really that pussy-whipped already?”

Dusty grinned, too. “Brother, let me tell you, she’s a wildcat in bed. If you knew what I enjoyed, you’d slide under her sheets tonight.”

“Are you offering up the little lady?” Sloane asked, zooming in on the front and back porches of their homes.

“No, but isn’t that what you have in mind?”

Logan slowly ran his hand up and down the side of his face, scratching the rough growth of beard. He seemed almost as anxious as Dusty to hear Sloane’s reply.

“I’m not sure Veronica is what I would consider a sexually compatible partner,” he finally admitted.

“You won’t be good for one another at all if you’re only interested in finding another willing submissive.”

“You don’t think she can be trained?” Logan asked.

“Hell no,” Dusty reported. “I’m not sure I want her to submit after having her wash over me like a sudden summer rain.”

“That good?” Sloane asked, copping a smile.

“That fucking fantastic.”

Sloane stared back at the monitors. “Pull up a chair.”

Dusty grabbed one from the stockroom and sat next to Sloane. Leaning on his elbow, he watched a few of the images. The sheriff and his men walked through the Weaver home, searching for the residents.

Sloane chuckled. "I wish I had some kind of loud intercom system up there. Then, I'd aggravate the daylights out of old Martin."

Logan pointed. "They have company."

Sloane struck a few keys and zoomed in on the front porch. "Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

Bob and Fred slammed their vehicle doors and rushed up to greet Martin. After a few backslaps and handshakes, the men made their way through the home, too.

"We should've left a bomb," Logan said. "Blown the place to kingdom come. We could've left the barns, rebuilt the homes later. It would've solved our problems."

"Speaking of," Dusty said. "You need to call that teenager who used to ride with Kelsie when he was a kid. Ask him to look in on Bitch while we're away. Maybe he can look after the livestock, too."

Logan nodded. "Took care of it already. I've been over here texting him. He said he doesn't talk on the phone. It's not cool."

"Tell him I'll pay him four hundred a week," Sloane said, "but cool employees answer their damn phone."

Logan sent a final message and tossed the phone on the desk. Narrowing his gaze, he held his breath when Bob and Fred entered Veronica's bathroom.

Sloane zoomed in there, too. "If they wanted to prowl, they picked one hell of a place to start," Sloane taunted, slapping Dusty on the back. "Your woman has every delectable scent in the world stocked in that bathroom. Her toys are under the sink, too—wait, there they go—they found her little love bag."

Dusty sneered. "Let them rev up her vibrators all they want. I have the real doll lying right in that room waiting to play with me."

"I bet," Logan said. "Want some company?"

"I don't," Dusty said. "She might."

Sloane said, "I have to ask you something, Dusty."

"Go ahead. I don't have anything but time."

"It's about Kelsie."

The mood changed, and Dusty bowed his head. "I never slept with Veronica while Kelsie was alive."

“We believe you,” Logan said. “But I told him about the night you walked out on our little reunion.”

“You know you hurt her,” Sloane said. “I’m not trying to make you feel guilty. I’m just curious, why? Did you fall out of love with her?”

Dusty pushed away from the desk. Logan and Sloane shifted in their chairs, and their curious eyes left him without an escape.

“I loved Kelsie. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t miss her.”

“We know you loved her,” Logan said.

“But I wasn’t in love with her,” Dusty admitted. “I fell out of love with her a long time ago, maybe even before she got sick.”

Sloane said, “Don’t you think you should’ve let her know?”

“She knew. A woman senses when their connection dies. Kelsie believed I loved her, and God help me, I would still give up my life to let her have a chance at living hers. But you don’t understand, we had a mutual friendship and a loving relationship, but ours was built on sex, a lot of sex. When the sex ended, we didn’t have much, so we rekindled the friendship we had from way back.

“I wanted something deeper, more meaningful, and Kelsie loved me enough to encourage me to go and find it. Besides, I didn’t want to make love to Kelsie unless she had my whole heart, and I couldn’t give her what she needed. The chemistry wasn’t there.”

“Like you have with Veronica?” Sloane asked.

Dusty massaged his neck. “Yeah, like I have with Veronica.”

“You’re saying what you have with her is more meaningful than what you shared with Kelsie?”

“There’s a connection there I can’t explain. I can’t wait to see her when I wake up in the morning, feel like I’m going to die if I don’t kiss her goodnight. I want to protect her, but I’m also grateful she’s able to protect herself. It’s just different, that’s all.”

“Kelsie was the love of your life,” Logan said. “Are you sure you aren’t grieving and using Veronica for sex while you go through the process?”

“I’m one hundred percent certain,” Dusty said. “I love her, guys.”

Sloane’s gaze sliced through him. “What the fuck do you mean you love her?”

“Kelsie was the love of your life, not mine. I adored Kelsie, loved her to pieces, but Veronica, man, you just don’t understand how she makes me feel. I’ve never felt more alive in all of my life.”

“You don’t know her as well as you knew Kelsie,” Logan mentioned while kicking off his shoes.

“I know her better than I knew Kelsie. Veronica and I have trained together. We’ve shared a lot of good times, a lot of funny moments, a few bad ones—like when we brought those POWs home from Saudi—and I have tremendous respect for her.”

“Dusty, you’re grasping.”

“Sloane, I’m telling you, I’m going to marry Veronica. I’m going to make her my wife and ask her, no beg her, to have my children. I want to build a life with her.”

“Then you’d better make sure you’re on the same page. Otherwise, like I told you before, she will break your heart.”

## **Chapter Twenty-seven**

Veronica scooted over when he sat down on the bed. “Hey,” she said. “What about the tunnels?”

“Sloane hasn’t reached Drew yet.”

“Is everything all right?”

“As far as I know,” he said, easing out of his shirt.

She moved her hands up and down his arms, kissing his back and neck while he bobbed his head forward and back. “Ah, baby,” he said. “That feels so nice.”

Reaching behind him, he brought her legs forward. Her knees were pushed against his lower back, and her hands worked over him in a sensual massage.

“Lose the top,” he growled. “Let me feel your breasts at my back.”

A gush of heat warmed her center, and her senses came alive. She slid out of her camisole top and let the material drape over his face. “That better?”

“Much,” he said, turning sideways and looping his arm around her waist. “Come here,” he whispered, latching on to her lips.

She licked her way into their kiss and nearly worshipped his mouth. “Ah, Dusty,” she said.

He bunched her hair at the base of her neck. Moving his body to the left, he laid her down. Braced over her, Dusty kissed her deeper and his mouth worked its magic, spinning over her like warm silk. Her nipples throbbed for his touch, but he didn’t give them immediate attention. Instead, he kissed a path straight down her stomach, hovering over her warm crotch.

His fingers skated across the band, snapping them once to tease and twice to remove. Yanking the thin pajama pants down her legs, he sat back long enough to roll them over her hips and thighs, kissing her ankles and discarding the clothing next to the bed.

“Ah, sweet Veronica,” he said, running his finger through her damp folds. He ran his tongue up and down her calf, making his way higher, but then deliberately shifting to where he had to start at her ankle and trail toward her vagina again.

“You’re so soft,” Dusty said. “So sweet.”

Veronica was losing her mind. She was desperate for a more intimate touch, dying to feel his mouth on her pussy, his tongue on her clit.

“Dusty, lick me.”

“Lick you where, sugar?”

She tried to drag him forward, tugging his arms. Instead, his palms landed over her breasts and he massaged. “Damn, what you do to me.”

He blew a steady stream over her opening. “Feels hot, doesn’t it, baby?”

“I’m on fire,” she confessed, splaying her legs and giving him plenty of room.

“What do you want? More? Tell me, baby. Do you want my cock?”

“Yes,” she said, arching when the steady stream of air enticed her again. Her lust was killing them both. He stared at her pussy. “You’re so fucking wet tonight, aren’t you, darlin’?”

“Hot and wet,” she agreed. “Dusty, don’t tease me. I want you to love me.”

As if she said the magic word, he slid over her and looked deeply into her eyes. “Don’t you know I already do?”

She blinked once. “You mean...” She gasped when he penetrated her, the tip of his cock sliding into her, easing right past her intimate lips.

“I love you,” he said, pumping his cock in between her folds, pushing into her slow and easy. “God, yeah, baby. Work your body for me.”

She swallowed back the tears she wanted to cry. Dusty didn’t want a weak woman. She’d overheard everything when he was talking to Logan and Sloane. She’d even heard him mention the l-word and the m-word. But she never imagined a more perfect time to have him tell her how he felt.

Dusty moved over her like a slow tide, a wave of pleasure building but then crashing before the turbulent motions were upon them, shaking them down and bringing them together for short-lived bliss. He clutched her hands and stretched them high above her head, smothering her nipples with a hungry mouth right before he stole away her lips. Kissing her with a



pattern comparable to the way he fucked her, he stroked, worked even, for her release.

She locked her ankles behind his back and pumped her hips, sitting halfway up until he dragged her away from the bed and fucked her senseless against the wall.

“Dusty!” she screamed as he held onto her bottom. “More, Dusty. God, yeah, give it to me harder!”

His release was near. His balls smacked at her behind and he drove into her. His thighs bunched, and her feet fell to the muscular platform his legs provided.

They were breathing together, but barely. They were fucking like wild animals, but didn’t care. They were loving like crazy, and it was maddening, insanely delicious, and totally intoxicating. And they were definitely falling into the epitome of a most enduring love.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, Logan heard her bare feet pitter patter across the tile floor. She left the door open when she went to the bathroom, and he could see her nude body when she stood outside the shower door, waiting for the water to heat up.

Keeping one eye open and one eye closed, he smirked when he thought of his luck. The hot water took a lot longer to reach the units down under.

Logan didn’t mind her wait. Even though she woke him when she stumbled out of bed, there wasn’t anything prettier than those tits. Like Sloane, he’d had the opportunity to view them from the yard when Dusty made her into an exhibition.

Now, she stood a few feet away while he pretended to sleep and tried desperately to get a handle on his hard-on. She opened the door and stuck her hand under the faucet. Shaking off the water quickly, she must’ve discovered it was still ice cold.

She walked closer and stood in front of the vanity checking out her eyebrows. Women were so strange, Logan mused. What woman would care about her eyebrows at six o’clock in the fucking morning?

He was glad she did. When she strolled back to the shower, the natural sway in those sweet hips helped him reach a decision. He wasn’t going to

take his hand to his cock today. No, Logan was going to have a talk with Dusty and tell him straight-up. Veronica could love, honor, and cherish Dusty all the days of her life, but she was still going to fuck him on special occasions.

Squinting, he eyed those breasts. That stacked rack of hers might lead him astray before he talked to Dusty. Sliding his hands down his pants, he grumbled and rolled over, facing the cushions.

Another few minutes passed, and he heard the sound of the shower door opening and closing. Then, it was safe to peek again. Rolling onto his back, he imagined her riding him, those shapely legs gripping his sides while she bounced over him. She'd provide more than a mouthful with breasts like those, and Logan couldn't wait to kiss her nipples, draw her into his mouth and stroke her sweet pussy.

"God, yeah," he said, wrapping his hand around his cock.

And Dusty walked by in time to save the fucking day. "You going to play with yourself all morning or are you going to join Veronica?"

"Does she know?"

Dusty rubbed his left eye. "That you can have her when I'm around? Yeah," he said. "I told her."

"I just figured you'd want to keep her to yourself."

"I said you can fuck her when I'm around. I didn't say you could have her."

"Same difference," Logan said.

"Not really. I'm asking her to marry me as soon as we can get out of here and I can buy her a ring."

"I'll be all for you, man," he said, easing away from the couch. "But if you don't mind, I'd like to be the first to kiss your future bride."

Dusty disappeared into the storage room to grab a bottle of water, and then stumbled toward the bedroom.

"So you aren't joining us?" Logan asked.

"No. I'm sleeping. Tell her if you don't satisfy her, she can wake me up."

"I wouldn't expect her if I were you," Logan said, walking into the bathroom. Once there, he dropped his boxers and stepped into the shower.

"It took you long enough," she said, her hands running over her breasts when she faced him.

“I didn’t get an invitation.”

“I wouldn’t think a man like you needs one.”

Logan claimed her mouth and kissed her feverishly. His tongue twirled between her lips while he held his cock away from her body.

She reached for the soap and bathed him, scrubbing her hands together before she made the initial contact with his skin. He stood completely still while she provided the ultimate hand-job. His cock throbbed as she worked her fingers forward and back, giving him a sensual squeeze he’d probably never forget.

When she looked down between their bodies, he made the suggestion. “Give me head, Veronica. I love a blow job.”

“And I had you pegged for a guy who couldn’t stand oral sex.”

“Did you?”

Rather than answer, she tugged his dick through a closed fist and dropped to her knees, kissing the tip while the water ran over them. He bent over and touched her breasts, fingering her nipples as she sipped at his tip, acting like a shy little thing.

Logan knew better.

She took him into her mouth, caressing the mushroom crest with her tongue, working over and under the head, licking and sipping, sucking in the whole stalk. Then she reached under his scrotum and tapped his balls.

“Ah, God!” he screamed.

“Like that,” she said, sucking harder. Her fingers never stopped running over his sack, forward and back, around and around.

“I’m going to come,” he said, pressing the top of her head. “I want you to swallow me, baby.”

Faster and faster, his hips moved. “Veronica! Suck it, baby. That’s it, subbie! Ah, yeah, drink me, take me.”

When Logan referred to her as his submissive, she gripped his cock and pulled him tighter between her lips. She dropped her hand to her mound, fingering her clit. Almost immediately, she jerked as he came.

She mumbled against his dick and he fucked her mouth faster and faster, finding his heavy release with a final grunt and shattering force behind him. His cum spiraled toward her throat, ricocheting like bullets from a pistol. The force of his thick heat hit the back of her throat, coating her tonsils and filling her cheeks until some spilled on her chin.

“That’s my pretty, subbie,” he said, stroking her face. “Now, I want you to let me fuck your pretty little ass and while I’m doing it, I want to watch Dusty and Sloane enjoy you too.”

“Logan,” she breathed.

“I need you, Veronica. We all need your strength and you need ours. I want you to let us make all of your fantasies come true. You’ll never watch from the outside again, little subbie, never again.”

## **Chapter Twenty-eight**

When they stepped out of the bathroom, Veronica saw Sloane at the computers, focusing on the monitors like he wasn't aware of them moving across the room behind them.

"Did you enjoy your shower?" he grated out.

"Yes," she said, nervously anticipating his next move.

"I'm glad, Veronica."

"You should've joined us," Logan said.

Slowly, Sloane rose from his seat. Staring into her eyes, he said, "I'm going to do that now."

She felt a sudden chill in the air. Her nipples spiked, pointing forward as if to demand his hot touch, his slow hand.

Sloane took a deep breath and said, "I'm going to teach you everything I know, make you mine as much as you already belong to Dusty." Glancing at Logan, he studied his face as she did now and added, "Who knows, maybe you already belong to Logan, as well."

She glanced over Logan's shoulder and saw Dusty waiting for them in the bedroom. He had a towel around his waist, an approving smile scribbled across his face.

This is what she'd fantasized about. The moment she both feared and highly anticipated.

Sloane reached for her, and Logan pushed her into his arms. "Don't worry, baby," Dusty said when they approached. "We're going to take care of everything."

Logan's wicked smile proved he'd received something they should envy, but he didn't speak of his blow job. Instead when his towel dropped, he was as hard as Sloane, and she could see Sloane's erection protruding through his pajama pants.

Sloane sat her on the bed upright while Dusty placed some extra pillows behind her head and shoulders. She couldn't take her eyes off Sloane. He looked like a man who had forgotten his responsibilities, a man who couldn't care less what happened in the world above them.

All he evidently wanted was the opportunity to fuck her. She could see the lust in his eyes, buried only slightly underneath the pain.

"Sloane." She started to ask him if he saw her when he looked at her. She needed reassurance she wasn't a temporary replacement for her sister.

"Shh, Veronica," he said, framing her face. "Let me take control here."

Dusty snickered. "You'll wish you'd let her take the lead."

Sloane arched a brow as if to challenge her, and she reached for his cock then. Hard and wide, pulling his erection into her hand was like taking a hold of a wild stallion, a man who might explode for days if he ever released his pent-up anxiety.

"Suck it, subbie," Logan told her. "Drop to the floor and show him what you're made of, lover."

Her tongue held at her bottom lip, but when she knelt in front of Sloane, she teased him by nuzzling his tip, licking the slit only once while her fingers adjusted to his size.

Again, just as before, her body had responded to the way *subbie* fell from Logan's lips. She found excitement in the unknown, and her nipples hurt with physical pain waiting for the first touch.

"I smell your arousal now," Sloane said, leaning over and gathering her in his arms. He parted her pussy lips with one finger, yanking the towel away from her body at the same time. "You're so fucking wet."

Changing her stance, she moved against Sloane's hand. She wanted to come but reminded herself, she longed for the grand finale more.

"Holy shit, I forgot about those pretty little nipples." Sloane's hooded eyes scoured down the length of her body, and he fingered her, gripping her shoulder as he pushed his length into her hand.

"Suck my cock, Veronica," Sloane whispered. "Go down on me, sugar. Wrap those sweet lips around the head and let me feel my dick at your throat."

Veronica squatted in front of him again, swiping her tongue across his thick penis and cupping his heavy balls in the palm of her hand. She

mumbled against his shaft and he thrust his heavily veined cock in between her cheeks.

“So good,” he whispered. “That’s right, Veronica. Let me fuck your pretty mouth.”

She ate at his cock now, sucking deep and gripping the meat, lapping at the end and squeezing the skin right above his scrotum. He watched, crooking his head and licking his tantalizing lips.

“God, yeah, Veronica, suck it, baby. Swallow what I give you. Here it comes. Oh hell yeah!” he said, slamming into her then. He tossed his head back and squeezed her shoulders until the pinch from his grip throbbed. His cum skated across her tongue and shot into her throat in one delicious stream.

Even after he was spent, she kept him in her mouth, swallowing his release, tasting his cum. Using her lips, she worked up and over the softer skin and devoured him until his erection regained momentum.

“Look at how sexy she is,” Sloane told Dusty, caressing her cheek. And that’s when she noticed everything about Dusty.

He had his cock in his hand, pumping it nice and easy, taking the grip from the base to the tip. Logan leaned against the wall that more or less served as a headboard, and his legs splayed, offering more than an eyeful.

When Sloane slipped from her jaws, he was solid again, stiff enough to fuck for hours, as she originally suspected.

Logan pulled her over him and lavished her breasts with his kisses. Biting at her nipples and tugging at her fullness. Sliding down her body, Logan held her above his mouth, licking at her folds and finding her hot spot, the little button guaranteed to set her off. Her clit swelled under the stimulating attention.

Sloane stood behind her, and she saw Dusty move, releasing his cock and joining them only after he reached under the pillow and retrieved some flavored lubricant. She could see the red tube, smell the scent of strawberries, and enjoyed the warming effect when he pressed the tip to the crack of her ass.

Logan continued to lick her pussy. “Ah, subbie,” he said, thrusting his tongue into her center. A wave of pleasure washed over her, and she felt the orgasm building, the climax standing by and waiting to consume her.

Then she froze. Sloane's fingers penetrated her, and even if she'd been blindfolded, she would've recognized his hand. His fingers were intrusive, parting her flesh. He held her globes apart, and she felt deliciously exposed.

"Sloane," she whined, trying to escape Logan's mouth while squeezing her ass cheeks together.

"Fuck me. She's not tight, she's damn near sealed," Sloane reported, reaching for more lubricant and running his fingers up and down her bottom.

Logan licked deeper and deeper until she was fighting for her release. He felt like a dream, manipulating her body, sipping at her clit and then tongue-fucking her into a complete frenzy. Sloane's fingers impaled her ass again and she whimpered, accepting the new sensations as an experience she wouldn't dare miss.

"I need to come. Sloane. It hurts...it's a slow burn...hot...too fucking hot."

"Relax." Dusty said against her lips right before he kissed her. And all the while, Logan continued eating her pussy and Sloane's fingers did maddening things to her ass.

Sloane bit her shoulder and then whispered in her ear, "What do you want here," he said, shoving his fingers higher. "What do you long to feel stroking your ass?"

"Oh, Sloane!"

"That's right, baby, you want my dick, don't you, sugar?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "Oh, God yes!"

Dusty and Logan locked gazes when Logan moved away from her pussy. Dusty positioned his cock at her mouth and said, "We're going to seal you up in pure pleasure, sweetheart. You'll love it," he promised.

She quickly nodded. She couldn't speak, only give her consent. She wanted to feel them stroking her, their cocks pounding into her. She needed to come, damn it, and she needed to grab hold of an orgasm now!

Logan's cock slipped inside her folds and Sloane spread her cheeks. She felt the tip of his slick dick at her hole. "What are you waiting for?" she bit out.

Dusty touched her cheek and pumped his cock inside her jaws. Now, she couldn't make demands. Her requests weren't needed, but by hell they were met.



\* \* \* \*

Sloane pushed his dick inside her ass and closed his eyes. It had been so long since he'd loved a woman, since he'd taken her to task and thrust into her like a wild man. Veronica could handle him, he remembered, as he watched her buck back and forth, taking Logan's cock as well as Dusty's.

She was born for this, truly meant to service a man's needs. Maybe that's why Tom put her in fucking combat boots, so few men would notice the sexual creature underneath the camouflage.

His hips bunched and her muscles tightened around him. "You coming for us, baby?"

She rode Logan's dick. Her pretty auburn hair flaming around her face, draping over Dusty's cock until he couldn't see her flushed skin. He wanted to see her, watch her.

Her body closed around him. He held her hair off her shoulders and fucked her right, making sure she felt the ridge of his cock and even the tiny veins swelling for satisfaction.

Logan screamed out his pleasure and Dusty's thrusts changed. The soft sounds of building orgasms changed to hard core fucking until the room filled with moans and groans, carnal growls, and breathless sounds of incredible enjoyment.

Then Sloane felt his balls tighten. Dusty had slipped away and he barely noticed. Logan's mouth had latched onto her breast, but he withdrew to give Sloane more room. Sloane took her hips and plowed into her ass, plunging as deeply as her body allowed, claiming his position, earning his right to stay in her bed.

"Sloane!"

"Touch your clit, baby," Logan said. "That's it, beautiful. Right there."

"Oh, shit, baby. Are you fingering yourself?" Sloane mumbled, unable to see but able to feel the delicate hand working under her body.

She mumbled something and ran her fingers under his scrotum, touching his balls until he couldn't hold back. "Now, Veronica! Stuff those fingers into your pussy, baby."

And she did. God help him, he felt her hand working for her pleasure as he took his final dive and made the moment his.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

### *Three Days Later*

Veronica was starting to think she'd done something wrong. Dusty had made love to her several times every day, but Logan and Sloane hadn't touched her. They hadn't shunned her, but they didn't make a move to take her back to bed.

When she woke up on Saturday morning, she walked into the main control room with every intention of asking them what their deals were. Only she discovered an empty room. Hearing the shower water running, she decided she liked surprises, so without a clue as to whom she'd find bathing, she slipped out of her pajamas, opened the shower door, and stepped inside.

Sloane had a bar of soap in his hand and he instantly dropped it.

"Where are Logan and Dusty?"

"They're out."

"I thought you collapsed the tunnels."

"I didn't want you alarmed, so I left them."

"You didn't collapse them because you didn't want me frightened?"

"That's right. Besides, Dusty made a good point. Drew is the only one on the outside who can get us out of here quickly. If something happened to him, we wouldn't have any guarantees of leaving within a few weeks because the Donovans are out of the country."

He stared at her breasts. "Did you wake up wet, baby?" he asked, gripping her hips.

"Yes," she admitted, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"What are we going to do about it?"

"I guess you're going to have to let me have my way with you."

"That could get dangerous."

"You think so?"

“Yeah,” he said, nipping at her lips and then backing away long enough to put his head under the running water.

She bent down to pick up the soap, and he grabbed her around the waist, his cock right at her ass. “Do you have something against looking me in the eyes when you fuck me?”

“You got something against me tapping this pretty little bottom for you again?”

“No,” she said, wheeling around and daring him to defy what she wanted from him. “But I want you to look at me when you fuck me. I want your eyes on me when you take my body. And by God, I want to know you see me when you’re stroking inside my walls.”

Sloane’s mouth slammed over hers, and he closed his eyes as his tongue worked inside her mouth. His fingers ran over her nipples, twirling them as he kissed her. Lifting her body to him, he secured her legs around his waist and penetrated her at the same time.

Her jaws locked when his cock thrust inside her vagina. “Sloane,” she breathed, clawing at his shoulders. “Please, Sloane, look at me.”

His eyes opened as he thrust, but he didn’t gaze into her eyes. He looked down at the way their bodies connected. Placing a hand against the tile wall, he shoved his hard cock higher into her channel and held her against him, pinned against his hard body and the wall behind her.

“That’s it, baby,” he cooed, looking down. “Milk it for me, sugar.”

Her body welcomed his intrusion. His cock was so large he could damn near destroy something in its path, only she wasn’t looking for destruction. She expected ecstasy.

“Sloane,” she snipped. “Damn it,” she threw her hand against his shoulder, “you fucking look at me!”

He started moving faster and faster, twirling her nipple and pinching the shit out of it until the pleasure and pain mixed in with the incredible sensations of what his cock did to the rest of her body. In and out he stroked, and slowly, ever so carefully, his gaze lifted to hers when he finally kissed her.

Wide eyes connected with hers then, and he pumped slower, caressing her with his body as he moved around her, dropping his lips to her breasts and cradling her to him as he buried himself inside her.

“That’s it,” he said. “Come for me now. Let me have you, sugar.”

He claimed her lips and when his thighs bunched and he pressed the rest of his body against hers, she saw the Sloane Remington not just anyone had the experience of seeing. He cared for her, and he cared deeply. He loved making love to her, but he carried a torch for another, yet he wasn't willing to let this kind of thing get away. Oh, no, she had Sloane right where she wanted him.

The sex was good, too good, and their moment was perfect, too perfect. She owned Sloane as much as she owned Dusty, but Sloane wasn't a man who would let her take his heart. Oh, no, she'd have to steal his love, and she'd do it when he least expected.

\* \* \* \*

Sloane was on the computer running a quick property check when Logan and Dusty returned. "How's everything in the modern world?" Sloane asked.

Veronica looked up long enough to meet Dusty's heated glance. He tilted his head toward the bedroom and she jumped to her feet and immediately followed him.

Logan felt a little uneasy, the discomfort starting in his balls and working its way into his hard cock in less time than he cared to think about. Something about Veronica made him ache all over, and he knew not to question it because he understood the familiar feeling.

He was going to fall in love with her, if he hadn't already. He felt some measure of guilt. Wasn't it too soon to love another? Shouldn't he feel shame for allowing his heart to become attached to the strings he now only wanted Veronica to pull?

"You going, too, or are you going to sit out here and sulk?" Sloane asked.

Logan slapped his back. "Tell me something, did you two talk while we were gone, or did you fuck the morning away like I might have if I'd been left down here instead?"

Sloane chuckled. "What do you think?"

"I think we both need to go in there and make it a party."

“Go ahead,” Sloane encouraged. “I have more work to do. We need to make sure all the security measures are tested effectively before we go back up and resume our day to day lives.”

“I’ll give ’em a minute to miss me.” Logan punched in a code on one of the other keyboards. In a matter of minutes, a full color image of another farm popped up on the screen.

“What’s this?”

“Dusty and I were able to sneak onto Fred Ferguson’s place. This is the area surrounding his horse barn.” He entered a few more codes. “This is his home, and this is his library, completely wired for sound.”

Sloane turned up the volume and leaned back in his chair. “Weren’t you the busy little beavers this morning?”

“We do what we can to please big brother.”

“You ain’t the only one,” he said, thumbing the door behind them.

“She’s a beauty,” Logan said. “A real sweetheart.”

Laughing outright, Sloane said, “Are we talking about the same woman?”

“Why sure. You know we are.”

“Logan, sweet doesn’t even begin to describe Veronica.”

“All right, how about sexy?”

“Damn straight she is.” Sloane folded his arms across his chest and watched the monitors. In a matter of minutes, the carnal expressions of a sexual act in progress filled the room as grunts and groans, yelping, and begging followed words guaranteeing a man he missed some of the best of erotic pleasures.

Logan stared at the door. “Damn.”

Sloane slapped his back. “You had your chance.”

“Want to tell me what’s bothering you?”

“I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Want me to tell you what I think it is?”

“Go ahead,” Sloane said.

“You like her, a lot, but you can’t control her, and that’s where you and I both run into a problem.”

“Dusty doesn’t?”

“Dusty is pussy-whipped. Hell, she could put a collar around his neck and a leash. I swear, he’d wear his leather and chains with a smile.”

“You’re right.”

“You’re sure nothing else is bothering you?” he asked, studying Sloane’s tight expression.

Sloane took a deep breath. Logan and Sloane had an unusual relationship. They were most alike and yet they didn’t confide in one another like most brothers might. They each held their feelings inside and rarely talked about the important things.

“She scares the hell out of me,” Sloane finally admitted.

Logan understood. Damn did he ever.

“She’s like a breath of fresh air one minute, and the next, she’s like an untamed vixen, full of life and fire.”

“And that scares you?”

“I’ve never had a woman excite me more.”

“You mean sex with her is better for you than it was with Kelsie?”

Sloane frowned. “No one will ever take Kelsie’s place.”

“I’m not saying Veronica would, but—”

“Veronica turns me on in a way Kelsie never did.”

“Maybe we never gave her the opportunity,” Logan said. “With Kelsie, we asked her to let us control everything from her life, to her meals, to her orgasms.”

Sloane stared at him. “When you put it like that, we sound like real bastards.”

“No, but our lifestyle worked for Kelsie. She needed us to make her decisions. Veronica doesn’t.”

“You want to know what terrifies me most?”

“Go for it,” Logan said.

“I think if we try to change her to meet our expectations, she’ll lose the very thing that drives me most insane when I touch her.”

“That fire?”

“Damnation, don’t you know it.”

The walls continued to come down behind the closed door, and when Dusty finally appeared in the doorway, he looked like Veronica had used him up pretty good.

Logan shot Sloane a quick glance when Dusty rushed for the storage room. When he returned with several bottles of water, Logan said, “It’s going to take more than water to quench your thirst, little brother.”

With a sly smile, Dusty said, “Veronica can keep me thirsty for a lifetime with a body like that.”

Sloane shrugged. “I guess we better tell Veronica to start shopping for that collar.”

Logan snickered. “Yeah, or else find one to slide around her sweet little neck before she has all of us on a short leash.”

## Chapter Thirty

Sloane slept on the couch. He wanted time to think. Joining Dusty and Logan while they used Veronica's pretty little body for their pleasure wasn't something he needed right then. He needed some space, some distance to think about the feelings he had—the guilt on one hand and pure lust on the other.

He stared at the ceiling and thought of Kelsie. God, he missed her. He missed the sweet look of innocence spreading across her face whenever she looked at him with loving eyes. She had always been willing to submit to his every desire, his every demand.

Kelsie loved the life as his submissive. She was turned on when he called her his little sub or even his slave, and her goal in life was to make him happy.

Veronica wasn't going to please anyone unless she found plenty of pleasure in what she did for the man, or men, in her bed. And maybe, he mused, that wasn't such a bad thing.

After the noise on the other side of the wall subsided, he dared to consider what he might have missed. Veronica had a voluptuous body, great tits, a tight fucking ass, and heaven help him, whipped around a man's cock like a broken wind on a cool fall day.

She was great in bed. No, she was fucking fantastic. One hot piece of ass he wasn't sure he could forget simply because she seemed closed off to the notion of the lifestyle he valued. But he did cherish his position as a Dom, and if Veronica opened herself up to new experiences, she wouldn't oppose them, would she? No, he'd make her enjoy the hell out of them.

He hated to hold a grudge, but something else bothered him, too. Veronica had kept her share of secrets. How could he let her into his life if he didn't know what secrets she'd harbor next?



Running his hand through his hair, he sat up and stared at the monitors blinking in the distance. Maybe he needed to get out of there for a little while, take a walk and check on things up at the house. Yeah, he thought, that's precisely what he'd do. The compound was driving him insane and the need to devour Veronica again was equally as damning.

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Veronica crept around the property with her gun in hand. Damn it to hell! Why hadn't she checked on Sloane? She'd assumed he was sleeping on the couch when she tip-toed into the bathroom, but when she came out with full expectations of joining him, she'd been shocked to discover a pile of blankets but no Sloane.

Ridden with anxiety, she'd searched the monitors and saw him on a few of the frames, creeping around the hallways of the Remington house. Why in the fuck had he gone to the Remingtons instead of back to the Weavers where they'd been staying?

Quickly, she'd left the compound, crawling through the tunnel on her belly until she reached free air again. Then she sprinted toward the Remington house, hoping that whatever threat they faced, she wasn't too late.

Panic drove her and she never thought of the obvious—she should've informed Logan and Dusty before she left the safe house. Now, she didn't have time to go back and wake them. Sloane might need back-up. He could be in pain or danger.

What if Fred and Bob had come back there? What if he faced the sheriff and their deputies and they'd hauled him off? What if by morning, he was in a jail cell or worse, dead?

The crunching of leaves reminded her to take slower steps, and a soft whistle in the distance enticed her to stop. Was it a bird she heard or perhaps a man on another team? A team in place to take down their particular unit?

She picked the lock on the Remington house, disabled the alarm, and eased the back door open. Taking a deep breath, she sighed in relief when she found a deserted mudroom.

Turning her cheek to the left, she thought she heard footsteps. She cupped her ear against the wall and listened. What if someone was out there?

She pushed open the French door leading from the laundry room to the kitchen and walked through a few cobwebs, ducking under one or two in true disgust. She should've cleaned this place up when they were twiddling their thumbs and waiting on another attack. Maybe she would do a little spring cleaning when they moved back to the Weaver house.

She started up the back steps with the gun aimed high in the air. Stopping mid-way, she listened. Did she hear something?

"Sloane?" she whispered.

Nothing sounded out in response. She'd just make her way upstairs, check out the second and third levels, and if she didn't see anything, she'd load up her weapons and hurry back to the bunker and wake up Dusty and Logan.

Creeping away from the top step, she peered in the first bedroom, tried the light switch, discovered it didn't work, and moved on. By the time she made her way to the third bedroom, her heart was in her throat. Someone was in the bathroom. Oh, God, she thought, watching a shadow creep in front of the small window she spotted above the garden tub. Someone was definitely there!

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His hand slapped over her mouth the second she walked in the master bath. He grabbed her gun before she blew off a few important body parts and pinned her against the wall.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

She shivered under his grip. "I thought you needed back-up."

"I was taking a leak!"

Her eyes were wide, fear evident in her expression. "I thought you might need assistance?"

He chuckled. "Unless you wanted to hold it for me, sugar, I've been peeing on my own since I was two or three."

"Funny," she said. "I thought there was trouble. I wanted to help."

Sloane's senses came alive. She smelled like vanilla bean ice cream with a splash of cinnamon, and his cock went from a flaccid, manageable length to a hard rod in a matter of seconds.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, running his fingers through her damp hair.

"I was worried."

His mouth slammed against hers. Hell, he was worried, too. Damn worried. Her lips parted, and she moaned into their kiss, arching against him as he pulled her into his arms, latching them all the way around her.

While he lost himself in her kiss, the little vixen worked his buttons loose, helping him shrug out of his shirt before he had time to realize she wanted him undressed. Ah, yeah, he could get used to a woman who didn't have a problem letting him know she was ready to go.

His shirt was tossed to the floor, and she quickly worked his belt loose and then ripped his zipper all the way down, dropping to her knees and tugging—no gentle touch here—his cock right out of his pants.

Her lips caught the tip and her mouth pulled him right in, sucking his dick into the warmth of her mouth, licking the stalk as she pleased him, tapping his weighted balls, the same ones that pinched the shit out of him earlier.

"God, yeah, Veronica. That's it, baby. Suck this cock for me," he said, holding his length in front of her mouth, urging her forward.

She kissed the tip, and in the moonlight, he saw the glisten moisture attach to the end of his cock forming a thin, transparent connection to her lips. She smacked her lips and moved over him again, bobbing her pretty little head up and down, gripping his legs and staring up with the prettiest bedroom eyes he'd ever seen.

"That's my good little girl," he said, taunting, teasing, hoping if she didn't stop him, he could try his hand at dominating a vixen, taming a seductress.

She stopped sucking and licked again, titillating the end with the tip of her tongue. "What do you want, Sloane?" She swiped the head. "What do you need, sugar?" She dropped over the stalk. "What can I do to get you going?" She ravaged his balls with the gentlest sucking he'd ever experienced, fingering them as much as his ass. He was going to fucking blow!

His butt cheeks squeezed together, preventing her from gaining access to his bottom again. Whatever her hot little finger stirred inside him, he didn't want her stirring it again. Oh, hell no, he didn't want her fingers parting his globes and stroking a place he should've been fingering instead. Her ass, her pussy, belonged to him, and he wanted both. Right now.

"What's wrong, big boy," she said. "Can't you tell little ole me what you want?"

"That's it," he said, lifting her to him and stepping out of the pants balled around his ankles. He walked out of his shoes and carried her body straight down the hall, kicking the door open to the room they once used as a party room.

Placing her down on a pool table, he said, "Don't move. Don't you dare move, or I swear I'll fuck you until morning and then I'll make you wear a vibrator around for the rest of the day."

She bit playfully on her forefinger and acted unaffected, but he saw the lust building in her eyes. God help him, he was harder than hell and going to postpone fucking her until the bitter end.

First, he was going to make her beg. Yes indeed, he was going to make her grovel.

## Chapter Thirty-one

What she thought was a pool table turned into something she never in her wildest dreams imagined. She shivered as Sloane transformed into a sex machine, a man designed for her exquisite pleasure.

He stripped her to bare bones with the most heated stares lapping at her body like a fine-tuned magic touch. His hooded eyes held nothing more than translated lust, and his cock stood proud, the end glistening with sparkles of pre-cum designed to make her mouth water.

Over and over, she licked at her lips, but he seemingly ignored her needs, her desire to taste him. He touched her wrists, examining them for a purpose, she believed, had everything to do with the soft pastel ties he pulled from a wooden box he grabbed from a nearby closet.

“Veronica,” he said with a guttural tone. “We’re going to role-play. I’ll show you the kind of pleasure you’ll have when you submit to me, trusting me to handle this whole experience.”

She cleared her throat and said, “I want to touch you.”

“And you will. When I grant you permission, you’ll touch, but until then, you’re only allowed to feel the pleasure I bring.”

He pulled out wet napkins, and like a surgeon cleaning the tools of his trade, he took the time to wipe down the dusty toys as he removed them from their like-new containers. First, a dildo, then a stone of some sort, a vibrator, and the accompanying batteries in a package never opened. Finally, a blindfold was placed next to her head.

“I’m not—”

“‘Not’ and ‘no’ aren’t in your vocabulary. I’ll grant you a safe word. What would you like it to be?”

“Cock,” she said, flashing a smile.

“‘Cock’ won’t work because I love to hear you talk dirty to me. Pick another one.”

“Love?”

He froze. “Doesn’t work either.”

“How about just plain stop?”

“Fine,” he said. “Your safe word is ‘stop.’ If I do something you find too painful to enjoy or too degrading, if you look at anything I do in such a manner, then tell me to stop.”

She bit her forefinger and eyed his cock.

“Stop,” he said, teasing, and she did. Choosing instead to stare at the cobwebs hanging from the small chandelier over the table, she tried to steady her nerves, forget the bath of desire washing over her pussy.

“All right,” Sloane began, “let me secure your hands and legs.”

He used the long silk ties to secure her arms and then her legs to four of the six posts under the pool table. Stretching her wide, he slapped her bare mound and said, “You will relax!”

“Damn,” she said.

“Say thank you and...call me Master.”

“I’m not—”

“Do it!” he exclaimed, slapping her pussy again.

“Oh, God, that feels so good.” If a swat to her mound sent fireworks through her body, then she’d submit all right, provided one of them would smack her there daily.

“Say thank you, Master.”

“Thank you, *Sloane*.”

He paced back and forth beside the table. Then he stopped abruptly, reaching into his box of tricks again. Pulling out a crop with a visible flogger on the end, he ran it over her pussy. Allowing the end to tap her labia, he flicked his wrist and swatted her mound again.

“Oh, shit, Sloane!”

“What do you say, subbie?”

“Thank you.”

“Damn,” he said, biting back his diminishing self control. “Thank you, Master.”

She grinned and stretched her neck, looking at her outstretched legs and her arms. “Suck my nipples, please, Sloane.”

“Ask *nicer* and I might.”

Her body felt like one wracked muscle, completely overcome by the need to fuck. Her body ached for his touch, and after a few slaps to her pussy, it creamed without further contact.

Sloane walked around the table, dragging the flogger with him. He started at her toes, ran the leather over her ankles, thighs, and pelvic area until he stood directly behind her head. Slowly, he swiped the crop back and forth from one breast to the next until she arched for more.

“Feels nice?”

“Yes,” she said.

“But you want my mouth, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then ask properly.”

She eyed him but didn’t give in. His delicious cock hung at her forehead, only the tip brush against her bangs.

“You’re glutton for punishment, aren’t you, slave?”

“I’m not your slave.”

“But you’re my subbie for the hour, aren’t you?”

“Hour?” Did he say hour? Fuck that!

“Are you my subbie for the hour?” He pumped his long cock in and out of his hand.

“Yes, I’ll be your sub for the hour. Only one hour.”

“Then ask for my cock in your mouth or ask for my mouth on your breasts properly and let’s have some fun.”

She stared at the glistening end of his dick and smacked her lips. She wanted him to suckle her breasts, but she also longed for his thick cock stroking her mouth. She wanted him coming in her cheeks, his spill rushing down her throat.

“Subbie, do you want me to make the choice?” he asked, growling enough to make her crazy.

The crop was used again when he moved to her side. His arm came up and back behind him, and she flinched, frightened he might use incredible force, but by the time he swatted her pussy again, the smack was soft and arousing.

“More,” she said.

“More what?”

“Please?”

“More, Master.”

“More, Sloane.”

“I gotcha some more Sloane,” he grumbled and then leaned over the table. Towering over her pussy, he shoved his hand under her ass and pushed up on her globes. Catching her pussy lips under his suction, he lapped at her labia and sucked on her clit until she felt the heat dripping from her center.

“Oh, Sloane,” she whispered. “Don’t stop.”

And he stopped, smiling as he ran his tongue over the shape of his lips. “Tell me what you want, Veronica.”

“You.”

“No, specifically ask me for what you want.”

Using his bare hand, he swatted her pussy and rubbed his dick over her thigh. Up and down, he slid it close to her heat, so fucking close to penetration.

“I want you.”

Straddling her middle, he reached for the blindfold. “Call me your master and I’ll make your day.”

She shook her head and he said, “All right, you were warned.” He slipped the soft blindfold over her eyes. She saw nothing, felt everything.

The ball of his hand massaged her mound. “You’re ready now, aren’t you subbie?”

“Yes, but my nipples.”

“What about your nipples?” he asked, chuckling. “They’re beautiful, by the way.”

“They burn.”

“Burn how?”

“For your mouth.”

“I’ll drop my head and drive you crazy if you’ll call me your master one time. Just once.”

“You get off on that, don’t you?”

“Damn straight.”

“How about I call you King Cock?”

He laughed. “How about I call you my little pussy cat?”

“Works for me.”

“All right, King Cock it is,” he said. “But only when it’s appropriate.”



He swatted her pussy again and she flinched. “More!” she exclaimed arching.

“More?”

“More, King Cock, more.”

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Sloane heard something behind him and looked up to find a very amused pair.

Logan mouthed, *King Cock*, and Dusty simply shook his head.

His brothers must’ve found them on the monitor. He wondered how long it took them to yank their pants on. He placed his finger over his lips and motioned for them to sit down on the nearby leather sofa.

Logan’s eyes were full of the kind of lust a Dom feels when he watches his submissive train, and poor Dusty looked like he’d already white-washed his denim Wranglers.

“Who’s here?” she asked, raising her neck from the green felt.

“Me and you, doll. Now, about my king cock,” he taunted, eyeing his brothers and shooting them a smile.

“What about it?” she snipped. “I’m tired of this game. I want you to fuck me.”

Dusty leaned forward. His hands dropped between his legs and he observed.

“You do?” he teased. “With my fingers?” he asked, stretching behind his back and patting her pussy. At the same time, he reached around with another hand, too, and smacked her with the crop three times.

“Good God, Sloane, I’m wild for you. I’m so fucking hot I can’t wait for you to rip into me.”

“I know,” he assured her. “I can’t wait to feel that sweet little pussy milking my dick, doll.”

He moved closer until his penis tapped her lips. “Suck it, subbie. Make me come.”

She drew him in with the suction, relying on him to guide his cock in-between her cheeks. “Sloane,” she said, kissing the tip. “I don’t want to play anymore.” Nuzzling his length with her cheek, mouth, and chin, she said, “Please, give me your body.”

Sloane smirked and enjoyed watching Dusty and Logan squirm.

Holding her chin steadfast, he said, “Open, sub. Open and suck.”

“I just said I don’t want to play anymore.” Between each and every word, she sipped at his cock, lapping at him like a hungry little kitten.

“I can see that,” he said. “Want to use your safe word? Say the word and this is all over.”

“Uh...” she swiped at the tip.

“That’s what I thought. Now, take me in-between your cheeks, baby, and blow. Make it yours, subbie. Put a name on it if you have to, but suck like you mean business, sugar.”

Her mouth swelled with his size, and she gave him one hell of an enticing thrill. She licked at his tip, twirling her tongue around the shape of his head, and then lapped at his shape, licking up and down as he thrust closer to her throat.

“Ah yeah, subbie,” he said, now completely unaware of their audience. “That’s my little sub, take my cock, honey. God, yeah, I’m so horny. I’m going to come.”

Then, the little minx defiantly thinned her lips and stopped one hell of a great blow job. “What the fuck?” he barked.

“You don’t come until I do.”

Sloane eyed his brothers. Dusty and Logan shook their heads and acted like the biggest job they’d ever performed in their lives was in controlling their laughter.

“Funny,” he growled. “And just for that, I have something to punish you with.” He climbed off the table and worked quickly, which wasn’t easy with a throbbing hard-on guaranteed to leave him with blue balls if he didn’t get inside her soon. Pushing the batteries into the vibrator, he used his teeth to clip the end off a lube packet and saturated the toy before he moved the tip to her pussy.

The soft hum vibrated against her folds and she arched, trying to find the one thing guaranteed to penetrate sooner than his cock.

He motioned for Logan and Dusty. Dusty smiled when he saw the evidence of her moisture and Logan undressed. Hell, he didn’t blame him. If he were in their shoes, he’d do the same thing.

Pushing the vibrator closer to her pussy, her lips spread, welcoming the invasion. “Yes, subbie, that’s right. Do what comes natural.” And then he shoved the toy inside her walls and stood back to observe.

Her hips flew off the table in about two-and-a-half seconds. She bit down on her lip and released the most sensual cry Sloane remembered hearing. “That’s my girl,” he encouraged. “Feel your orgasm. Take it. Submit to pleasure now, darlin’.”

“What’s it feel like, subbie?” Logan walked to the side of the table and slapped her pussy until she cried out for more. “Like that, do you?”

“Logan?”

“We’re both here,” Dusty grated out.

She smiled then and let the vibrator completely take over her body, rising and falling, her breath not her own to control. Unable to close her legs, she thanked Dusty when he cupped her breasts, kneading them like weighted balloons.

“Ah, Veronica, you have the most beautiful breasts.”

“Well, shit,” she said. “Don’t just play with them. Suck my nipples before they pop.”

“You’re not in any danger of something so vile,” he promised, licking the pointed gem just a little here or there.

“Feels good,” she reported. “Ah, Dusty, I wish I could run my fingers through your hair.”

He stared down at her rosy little nipples and adding some friction to her pretty beads, he clamped the rosy pearls and attached a golden chain between them. Giving her a tug before he moved away, he said, “Now you’re perfect.”

“All right,” she said. “That’s it. This is all I can stand. Take the vibrator out. Ohhhhh,” she cried. “Ah, jeez, here I...come again!”

They stood back, thoroughly engulfed in the show she provided, and watched her lips part, her pussy accept, and the impalement of the vibrator as it danced in and out with her tight muscles controlling how deep or shallow the toy penetrated.

Dipping the cold clay colored stone into the lube, Sloane handed Logan the plug and said, “Now, you’re going to stretch for me so when we take you, you’re ready for the lovin’ we want to give you.”

“Okay,” she said, in a quivering voice.

Sloane lifted her up, using both hands to spread her, and Logan used the tip of the stone to impale her ass.

“Oh, God....I’m coming again!”

“That’s good, subbie. Orgasm. Find your pleasure. Ride it out.”

“Oh! Oh! Take it out!”

Logan tapped the end of the stone. Dusty pulled at the nipple chain and her multiple orgasms were violent, her body shaking all over the place, leaving her in a damp pool of pure bliss.

“That’s good, sugar.” Sloane issued his approval, kissed her mound, and removed the vibrator.

Her bottom closed around the butt plug and he observed. Even though she couldn’t see him, she must’ve known they watched her.

“Aren’t you going to let me have it?”

“It’s stuck,” she announced.

“Stuck?” Sloane asked, amused.

“Yes.”

“You know what I think?” Logan asked. “I think you love the feel of something buried in your ass.”

“Yes,” she readily admitted.

Sloane ran his fingers up and down her side. “Are you ready to fuck, baby?”

“God, yes.”

Dusty lowered his lips to her nipples and kissed them, running his tongue over one hard point and then another. “Sweet baby, these little gems are so tight.” Distracting her by kissing them, he pulled one nipple free of the claw-like contraption and then another.

She yelped when he released her nipples, but Logan quickly lapped at one while he took care of licking the other. “Shh,” Dusty said. “Let us kiss the sting away.”

Her body arched against their mouths, and she moaned in pleasure when Sloane fingered her pussy, lightly touching her folds, tracing the shape of them and then twirling one finger high into her channel.

Dusty pushed the blindfold away from her face. “Hi, you.”

“Hi,” she replied, breathless.

Dusty moved away from the table and undressed where she could see him. Sloane and Logan released the binds holding her to the table, disposing of all the toys in the process.

Approaching her again, Dusty kissed her and said, “We’re going to reward you by taking you nice and slow.”

She smiled. “Sounds like heaven.”

“It is,” he promised. “We’re going to make easy love to you, baby.”

\* \* \* \*

Dusty lied like a mother-fucker.

Her body felt like a soft pretzel loaded down with cream cheese by the time they finished with her, and she wasn’t too happy about it.

While the sex was phenomenal, there wasn’t anything slow and easy about the way Sloane took her. Thank God, at least he didn’t have her ass.

Dusty fucked her ass, and Logan dominated her mouth, which thank goodness, he didn’t waste any time putting to the best of uses. He’d fucked her silly for about a second and a half before he shot off like a rocket, his hot rocks slapping erotically at her chin.

Sloane was a different story. Whatever impression she gave him by taking him up on a little role play, he liked it—a lot. Even after Dusty slid away from her ass, he still hadn’t found his release.

Tugging her toward him, Sloane pushed her breasts up to his lips and took turn about, playing fair with one nipple and then another, lavishing them with a tongue that never tired of the teasing.

Her legs bracketed around his middle, and her arms fell over his back. “Ride my cock, baby. That’s good, sub. Milk this thing.”

She felt her skin blush as he watched her bounce over him, enjoying the way he parted her folds and left room for nothing more than pleasure, silky sweet pleasure.

Sloane’s size filled her. From the length to the width, he was actually a perfect fuck for her body, sealing off the opening as he plunged inside her walls. Her body seemed to pull him deeper and hold him in place. She felt every vein in every stroke as he ripped into her sex, and she held on to the moment because she knew if nothing else, the moments they shared were limited.

She wasn't going to submit to him because she liked Sloane Remington like this, riding him wild, watching that untamed lust unravel. It empowered her, put the balls in her court, and she enjoyed the fuck out of the way he made her feel like this—not like a submissive little honey ready to take his next order. Hell no, she was his submissive—like it or not—when she worked for him in the field, following orders.

Now, he was under her control. Gripping his shoulders, she rotated her hips to accommodate his. Her hair whipped around them. He framed her face and kissed her while she moved over him, keeping her leverage while he pumped closer and closer to his release.

“Come,” she whispered against his lips.

“Ladies go first.”

“No, Sloane,” she said, losing her tight control. “Come!”

She fell away from him, but he caught her lower back while her body danced over him, swaying to one side, jerking to the other. This was what a good long fuck felt like, and by God, she planned to thank him for it later.

When she bent at the waist again, he jerked her to him and stared into her eyes. Biting at her lips, he tried to draw her into a full blown kiss, but his face twisted with the orgasm building. Then the beads of sweat poured over him, and he moved her forward and back, forward and back, until he lay over her pounding away at her pussy and screaming out his infinite pleasure.

## **Chapter Thirty-two**

### *One Week Later*

The trap was set and ready to snap, but no one took the bait. Sloane only had so much patience, and after seven days, his had worn thin.

After the romp at the house, Sloane decided to move everyone back to the Weavers and took to task cleaning up his old homestead after Veronica made the suggestion. Of course, they hadn't gotten a lot accomplished because Veronica kept them all in a constant state of arousal.

Pulling Dusty and Logan to the side one afternoon, he informed them of his decision. Later in the evening, they would watch the monitors over at Ferguson's place, determine when they could catch Bob and Fred, and sneak up on them in the middle of the night.

"Are you going to tell Veronica?" Dusty asked, keeping a stiff upper lip.

"What do you think?"

"I don't like leaving her here alone," Logan said.

"Then set up a camera and surveillance in her room. We'll take one of our handheld monitors and keep an eye on her. After she goes to bed tonight, we'll head over to Fred's place.

"What makes you think we can catch Bob at Fred's in the middle of the night?" Dusty asked.

Logan snickered. "You tell him. Hell, I can't stop laughing every time I think about it."

"Well, you see," Sloane began. "Logan and I went through our collective footage of the Ferguson place and found a very peculiar event in progress."

"What?" Dusty asked, at a loss.

"Seems the old pool house over at Ferguson's houses more than floats and kickboards."

“Do huh?” Dusty asked, shocked.

“Every night between twelve and one, Fred’s old lady sneaks out to the pool house and waits for Bob, who, by the way, is Fred’s old lady’s bitch.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Nope,” Logan said. “Hell, Sloane here was real interested in those tapes. I’m wondering if it’s because sooner or later he knows Veronica is going to make him become her bitch.”

“Like hell,” Sloane said. “I enjoy making her happy, but I like things just fine when she goes out of her way to please me.”

Dusty snickered. “So Bob is going over to Fred’s to play with his wife? Hot damn! This is better than fucking for lunches,” he said, shooting Logan a sweet brotherly smile.

“I don’t know about all that, Dusty. Bob’s young wife used to slap together some mighty fine sandwiches.”

“Yeah, but there on the end she had more meat in the middle than I had between my legs.” Dusty snickered. “Wonder what happened to her anyway?”

Sloane grinned. “Story around Columbia goes Bob caught her at The Comfort Inn with the wife he’s married to now and another fellow. They were ganging up on the old bastard. After Bob ditched the younger one, he married someone a little more his age, but apparently she can’t keep him at home. Fred’s wife makes him feel, and I quote, ‘young again.’”

“Well, what do you say we show him what it feels like to have his little extracurricular activities exposed? I bet he’ll age twenty years by the time we’re done with him.”

“I can’t think of better men to do it than the very two who used to stick the screws to Bob’s ex. Can you, Dusty?”

“What do you say we let them get into the heat of the moment and then bust up their little party before the first ‘oh yeah, right there’ slips from the little missus’s lips.”

Logan’s eyes twinkled. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Hell, I’m hard thinking about it,” Dusty admitted.

\* \* \* \*



Later that evening, Dusty and Logan took the pool house and Sloane went upstairs to retrieve Fred. He wanted him to experience betrayal, kind of like the betrayal he felt when he discovered his neighbors weren't friends and his friends were buddies with his enemies.

"Wake up, Fred," Sloane said, switching the lights on in the house as he walked through. "Wake up, little man," he continued to sing.

He stomped into the bedroom and stared into the eyes of a man who'd gone to bed unprepared. Of course Sloane didn't expect opposition from a mousey type like Fred Ferguson.

Sitting down on the side of the bed, he slapped his cheeks. "Did you sleep well?"

He stared at the vacated spot beside him. "Matilda?" He blinked as he tried to focus on whatever he couldn't see and he reached for his glasses.

Sloane waggled his brows. "I don't think I resemble Matilda much, but hey, around these parts, everybody fucks everyone else. Maybe I have some of Matilda's genes. Never can tell."

Fred glared at Sloane. "What have you done with my wife?"

"Hmm," Sloane said, rubbing his chin. "Can you describe her to me?"

"You know what the hell she looks like, Sloane. Now, go fetch her. I want to see my wife before I negotiate with the likes of you."

Sloane smiled. "That's funny, Fred. Real sweet, too, come to think of it, but I don't have your Matilda."

"Where is she?" he asked firmly.

"Well," Sloane said, still rubbing his chin. "Truth is she is being *held* somewhere."

"Oh, God," he said, rubbing his temple. "Where? Just tell me where and I'll pay you what you want to get her back."

"To get her on her back, did you say?" Sloane taunted.

"No, damn you! I said to get her back!"

"I see," Sloane said. "Funny thing, you don't seem too alarmed to find me in your bedroom tonight. Why is that?"

Fred swallowed hard. "Blasted hell, Sloane. I knew when we didn't get you boys the first time you'd show up here."

"Yeah, well, we did. And we came at a damn good time, too."

"Where is Matilda?"

“She’s busy at the moment, but in a second, you’ll be reunited and just like lovers in the night, you’ll be able to enjoy one last thrashing.”

“You’re going to kill us?” he screeched.

Sloane patted his leg. “No, old man, I’m not going to kill ya. But I’ve got a plan in place, and you may take care of all of my problems.”

Sloane stood, tossed a robe in Fred’s direction, and waited for him to slip the green silk over his matching pajamas. “Fashionable, Fred,” Sloane commented, tilting his head toward the door. “Now walk.”

“Where are we going?”

Sloane patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t you want to find out about Matilda?”

“Yes,” he grated out.

“Keep walking, Fred. Just keep moving. I promised you I’d show you where she’s being held, and I always keep my word. It’s the neighborly thing to do, you know.”

They strolled across the garden and approached the pool. Dusty and Logan stood outside. Logan looked amused and that was enough for Sloane to go ahead with the plan.

“Now, you have to be real quiet when we approach. We don’t want to get Matilda all mixed up in this. It’s not in my nature to see women die at the hands of their foolish men. Sneak up, be very quiet, and ease that door back. Otherwise, the fellow holding her there may get a little nervous and fire off a round of damning bullets.”

Fred stopped outside the pool house. “Is this some kind of trick?”

“Shh,” Sloane said, placing his finger over his lips. “Go on now. I’ll be right over here at the window.”

Fred walked inside. Sloane rushed to the window where Dusty and Logan already had their faces pressed to the glass.

“Holy shit!” Dusty said ducking when Sloane and Logan dashed to the side, as well.

A blaze of gun fire lit up the tiny house soon after Fred entered. Matilda, love her heart, didn’t make it out entirely unscathed. A bullet nicked her skin, and later on, if things went according to Sloane’s plan, she’d face charges for a double homicide.

Lately, Sloane mused, things had certainly been going according to his well executed plans.

\* \* \* \*

“Veronica is up,” Dusty announced when they were driving back to the ranch.

“What’s she doing?” Sloane asked watching the road.

Logan looked in the rearview mirror. “If she’s already been snooping around her room, she’ll know she’s on camera. I couldn’t find a place to hide surveillance on short notice, so I stuck the small cameras on the dresser.”

“She found ’em,” Dusty said, wide-eyed.

Sloane reached over his shoulder for the hand-held device, but Dusty held fast to the small monitor, clinging to it like a man might hold onto his last erection. “Oh no, I’m not missing this show.”

Logan looked up in his mirror again. “What the hell is she doing?”

“Didn’t you put sound on this thing?” Dusty asked, playing with the settings.

“Damn it, give it to me,” Sloane said. “I’ll fix it and—”

Dusty relinquished his toy and Sloane gasped, “Oh, my dear Lord.”

In a few moments, they had the sound fixed and Logan had to pull over on the side of the road to watch, too. The ooohs and ahhs filled the cab of the truck, and Dusty gripped the back of Sloane’s seat in order to keep from snatching the device away from him.

Veronica was on the bed, squarely in front of the camera, and when Sloane zoomed in, he had a wonderful shot of her pretty little pussy. Her finger rolled over her clit and a vibrator hummed beside her as if she wanted them to know she had the toys if they wanted to play.

Her hard nipples protruded perfectly with the clamps around them, and the way her body rose and fell with her own fingers guiding her made the sweat pop on all their brows.

“Look at that body,” Logan said. “Damn, what a cunt.”

“She doesn’t like it when you call it a cunt,” Dusty said.

“Too bad,” Logan said. “That’s one of my favorite words.”

Her hand ran over her stomach, and she moaned, almost excessively. “She knows we’re watching her,” Sloane said, the raspy edge in his voice barely detectable, but there all the same. “I’m going to spank her ass when I

get home. Hell, what if you'd lost the monitor or something went terribly wrong and it fell into the wrong hands?"

"Oh, shit," she cried out. "Feels so good when I can submit to you."

"What the fuck did she say?" Logan asked, stretching his neck and watching the screen once more before pulling back onto the state highway.

"Oh, yeah," she said, pulling another dildo from the mattress and lapping at the end. "Come in my mouth, big boy. Make me scream," she said, sucking the dildo all the way to her throat.

"Holy shit," Dusty said. "If you don't get me home right now, I swear I'm going to unzip right here and take care of a little business."

Sloane sneered. "Don't you dare. I don't want your whiz all over the back of my head."

"Get home," Dusty said, shaking Logan's shoulder. "Now!"

\* \* \* \*

They drove down the driveway at record speed. Dusty and Logan were off like young colts straight out of the gate. They practically ran through the storm door, leaping over a few steps at a time.

Sloane watched them top the stairs and smiled when he heard Veronica's laughter fill the house. She sounded like an angel, one with a few quirks, no doubt, but an angel all the same.

Sloane looked outside and spotted the oak trees. He could see the tiny wooden crosses Drew placed at their graves before he left. He should've heard from Drew by now, but when they last spoke, he asked for some time so he tried to give him the space he needed. Drew was in a bad place, a real bad place. Then again, he might have been, too, if it hadn't been for Veronica.

As much as he wanted to go to her now, he had a lot of thinking to do, a lot of consulting with Benson. Maybe even some apologizing to Kelsie. Either way, he forfeited a night of true bliss to go out by Benson and Kelsie's graves to have a nice long talk with someone.

Strolling across their lawn, he inhaled the fresh air. It was the first time he'd noticed the spring nights with a little less nip and a lot more heat. Maybe change was in the air. He damn well knew it was in the air, he mused, staring up at Veronica's bedroom light.

Dropping to the ground in front of Benson and Kelsie's graves, he pulled at the blades of grass and studied the area where they'd been laid to rest.

"We got 'em, Benson. Bob and Fred turned their guns on each other, and now we've got 'em all." He pictured Kelsie standing over him and smiled. "Ah, Kelsie, I know what you're thinking, they had some help. And, yeah, I had Logan place the guns in that pool house before we stirred a little trouble. What can I say? I had a problem putting a gun to their heads. I still remembered them when they were decent men. I guess the money they were offered by the cartel was enough to buy out their morals."

He sat there for a long time just staring at the space. He wasn't the kind of man to mope, and he rarely cried. Even the day Benson died he somehow kept himself from breaking. Now, with the time drawing near, he had a choice to make, and he wasn't sure he could make a sound decision.

"I may stay here a while longer. Veronica and Dusty will move on and Logan may, too, but I belong here. I hate to leave you. God knows," his voice broke and he said, "I left you both when you needed me most."

He looked down at the ground and said, "Besides, I've bought this horse, and she's kind of a bitch, Kelsie. I think you'd like it if you knew I kept her for you after all. Maybe someday, if you have a ghost or something, you'll come back to this farm and ride her all over the place. If you do, give her hell, hon."

He stood again and stared down toward the pasture. Ironically, the solid black mare with the sleek mane and tail took off across the field at a high rate of speed. Now, he remembered why Tom Weaver loved that damn horse. She was a beauty, a real beauty, much like Tom's daughters.

## Chapter Thirty-three

### *Three Days Later*

Veronica was seated next to the coffee pot when Sloane walked into the kitchen. Her eyes were glassed over with tears and her legs trembled.

“Good morning,” he said, without looking up.

“Is it?” she asked, biting back bitterness.

“I guess so. We’re alive, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, I guess we are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sloane asked.

“Some of us are going to live on but you, not you, Sloane. You can’t bury the dead and let them stay there.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“When were you going to tell me you weren’t leaving?”

“I told you over a month ago I decided to stay.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Because I belong here now.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s because Kelsie’s here.”

Sloane watched the first tear fall. He always hated to see Kelsie cry, and Veronica was very much like her sister when it came to crying those quiet tears.

“Veronica, please don’t cry.”

“I’m mad,” she said, her voice quivering. “I’m damn mad.”

“Honey, you don’t understand. I have more responsibilities than just the Underground Unit.”

“You’re damn right you do!” she exclaimed. “For starters, you have a responsibility to me!”

He blinked. “Wait a minute, did I miss something here?”

“Don’t you dare take an attitude with me, Sloane Remington. I care about you. I fucking love you, and you’re going to send me out of here on a mission that probably doesn’t even exist!”

*Oh, shit.* He bet his father or Tom had told her he was notorious for pulling those kinds of capers on Kelsie. And, yes, he had a perfect one for her, Dusty, and Logan.

He arranged to send them on various cruises on a search for jewelry thieves. The suspects were considered armed and very, very dangerous, only the computer-generated photograph made a few errors when creating the jewelry-thieving couple. One, the woman looked too much like Veronica and two, the man didn’t look like he could harm a fly.

Yeah, he’d arranged the whole thing to get her out of there. He did it to protect her and himself. And he went to extremes because it was time for Dusty and Logan to move on, and he wasn’t sure he could, especially since Drew was coming home to Missouri.

Sloane paced the floor and watched Dusty and Logan load the back of a limousine. “Are you all flying out of Columbia?”

“No,” she snapped. “St. Louis.”

He nodded. “I always loved the city.”

“I won’t be there long enough to do much more than board a plane.”

“Veronica,” Sloane said, moving closer. “I’m here for you. Whenever you need me, all you have to do is pick up the phone and call. I’ll be there, I promise you.”

Veronica buried her face in her hands and said, “Sloane, don’t get me wrong. I do understand. It hasn’t even been six months and I’ve been acting like you should pour everything you have into me. I haven’t been fair, but how can a woman be fair when all she wants to do is hold tight and love you? You tell me how and I’ll do it!”

“Ah, honey,” Sloane said, grabbing her and drawing her close. “Veronica, you are a beautiful woman. You’ve been patient and kind, and the truth is I wouldn’t have made it five minutes without you after Kelsie died.”

“Then don’t separate from me.”

“I can’t leave,” he said.

Dusty and Logan walked in the kitchen and Logan said, “We’re loaded up. We’ll be back in three or four months to check on things here. If you

guys are on a mission or something, leave us a note in the main compound to let us know where you are, okay?”

“Sure thing,” Sloane said, taking her hands in his. “Give us a minute here, all right boys?”

“You got it,” Dusty said, walking away.

When the door slammed behind them, Sloane framed her face and he said, “I want you to go out there with those two men and do your dead level best to make them happy. You hear me?”

She nodded.

“They love you. They by God love you.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But—”

Sloane’s lips covered hers, and she sobbed into the kiss when he stole her mind away with the most loving of kisses he’d ever shared with her. His hands tangled in her hair, and he pulled her still closer until her arms were draped over his back and she was gasping for air.

“I love you,” she whispered. “I know you can’t tell me you love me, too, but I love you just as much as I love them.”

He grinned. “You like this wild cock of mine is what you like.”

Reaching between his legs, she patted his package and said, “Did I not give you enough last night?”

“Veronica,” he mumbled against her lips. “You have a plane to catch.”

Hopping down from the counter, she rubbed against him and said, “Sloane Remington, I’ll go. But I want you to know that you better start looking for me in about three months because after that kiss, I know one thing with one hundred percent certainty. You belong to me now, and I’m a gal who isn’t afraid to claim what’s mine.”

She grabbed her handbag and tossed it over her shoulder. With a little sway to her walk, she strolled toward the limousine and he watched her from the porch before joining them.

The men shook hands, embraced, and said their farewells a few minutes later. Veronica eyed him. “The least you can do is come over here and kiss me goodbye.”

Sloane snickered, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and walked over to the car. She laid a good kiss on him and stroked his cock to boot. God help him, he was going to miss her like crazy, especially since she sure as hell knew her way around his body.



When their kiss broke, she leaned up and nipped at his ear. “When I get back, you might as well have a leash and collar waiting.”

“You think you’ll submit by then, sugar?”

She winked. “Hell no, I’m not the bitch who came running.”

They all shared a hearty laugh. “Yeah, I’d say she’s made her point,” Dusty said.

“She always does,” Sloane agreed, waving goodbye. “She always does!”

\* \* \* \*

Veronica looked out the window as they drove away from the Weaver and Remington ranches. She swiped away a fallen tear and reached for Logan and Dusty’s hands.

Forcing a smile, she said, “We’ll be back in three months, right?”

Logan brought her hand to his lips and said, “You’d better believe it.”

Dusty touched her cheek. “This will always be our home regardless of missions, vacations, or—”

“Fabricated operations?”

Dusty laughed. “Those, too.”

“Hell, I just wanted to get out of town for a few weeks. A cruise or two sounded good to me,” Logan said.

She settled against the leather seat and closed her eyes. She’d come a long way in a short period of time, and in that time frame, she discovered a lot about herself and the men she’d grown to love.

They learned about loss and heartache, winning and losing. They experienced love as much as lust and discovered even the strongest of operatives sometimes face giving up and giving in.

Most of all, they knew who they were, what they meant to one another, and where they’d been. The future they faced together seemed like a piece of cake. Then again, they knew better than to hope for tomorrow. That’s why she made a promise to herself to enjoy her life even more. After all, she wasn’t just living for herself anymore. She had a family and she certainly adored them.

## Epilogue

### *One Month Later*

Sloane finally talked Drew into helping him expand the bunker closest to the house. They'd just started digging when Drew's shovel hit a metal box. "What the hell?"

A clanging noise sounded out around them when Drew tried to move the container again.

"Careful," Sloane said. "Maybe it's something to do with the power running to this bunker."

Drew fell to the ground and squinted. "I don't think so. It looks like a tiny box with some kind of handle. Grab a hoe from the shed."

A few minutes later, Drew used several tools to latch onto the hook-type handle and retrieved an oblong box. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "What's this?"

Sloane squatted next to Drew. "Unless you know the combination, now you get to practice picking locks."

"It's not locked."

After shaking the box free of dirt, he opened the container. "It's a letter," Drew stated flatly. "Addressed to all of us—Kelsie, you, me, Benson, Dusty, and Logan."

Sloane took the letter. "It's from Tom," he said. He shook a few small ants from the page and started reading. "I'll be damned."

"What's it say?"

"Hang on."

He read as fast as he could and then handed the letter over to Drew. "Damn it to hell."

After Drew read it, he said, "So Dad knew about Veronica all along."

"Appears so."

“And Tom wanted us to find out about her? Why didn’t he just tell us who she was from the very beginning?”

“Because that’s how Tom Weaver and Wilson Remington rolled. Don’t you remember how they were in their prime? They had so much arrogance, too much pride, and Tom was literally caught with his pants down. He didn’t want anyone to know he’d cheated on Kelsie’s mother with Veronica’s mom. How would it look to everyone?”

“So he really was ashamed of Veronica?”

“I don’t get that from this letter,” Sloane said. “Here it sounds like he’s proud of the fact that he taught her to stand on her own two feet, fight like a man, and had the joy of training beside her.”

“But he still denied her as his daughter.”

“Dad knew.”

“How does that matter?” Drew asked.

“Dad was one of his few friends. I guess he figured as long as his friends knew the truth, knew who he was and what he stood for, how he cared about his family and took care of his own, to hell with what everyone else thought. To hell with what the world knew.”

“He protected Veronica.”

Sloane nodded. “I think Veronica believes he protected Kelsie, but in the end, he gave her far more than he ever gave Kelsie. Veronica was educated and later trained by his side. I’d say he empowered her. My guess is he saw where he protected Kelsie too much and wanted to do what he could to make sure Veronica didn’t need anyone’s protection.”

“You think in the end, he did more for Veronica than he did for Kelsie?”

“Yeah,” Sloane said. “I think maybe he did. He gave her the tools she needed to thrive in life. I guess I should’ve seen that.”

“Now that you have, what are you going to do about it?”

Sloane grinned. “If I ever have the opportunity, I may just love her.”

Drew handed him his cell phone. “What are you waiting for?”

Sloane took Drew’s phone, searched through his contact list, and found Veronica’s name. Rubbing a closed fist over Drew’s head, his heart raced when he heard her on the other end of the phone.

“Veronica,” he said, choking back his excitement and barely able to withstand blurting out three little words guaranteed to change a man’s life. “I love you and I believe we have some unfinished business, you and I.”

**THE END**

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Natalie Acres is the author of several bestselling titles, including *Cowboy Boots and Untamed Hearts* and the *Cowboy Sex* series. She writes Western ménage romances, and in her spare time reads anything she can find on the historical towns of the Old West. For more information, visit her at [www.myspace.com/natalieacres](http://www.myspace.com/natalieacres).

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