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*Ménage Everlasting*

The  
American  
Heroes  
Collection

Florida

SUNSET  
HEARTS



# SUNSET HEARTS

*The American Heroes Collection*  
*Florida*

**Macy Largo**

MENAGE EVERLASTING



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# SUNSET HEARTS

MACY LARGO

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## Chapter One

Daphne hated going out on boats with a passion usually only reserved for terrorism, child molesters, bad hair days, and beets. How she ever let Paulie talk her onto the freaking thing confused the hell out of her. At least she hadn't needed the skills she learned in the intro scuba class he made her take. He planned on them going out with a dive charter before this last-minute change in plans.

*This was worse. Definitely worse.*

At least a half-day diving trip would have ended with her unwinding in the safety of a luxury hotel suite overlooking Duval Street. Not kneeling over the toilet in their cabin's head on this luxury yacht. Yes, it was a nice boat, she'd give it that.

It was still a boat. A boat that refused to hold still for even a few minutes so she could quit feeling sick. She squeezed her eyes shut as another wave of nausea overtook her. It felt like all she'd done on this trip from Key West was puke.

They'd been having a damn good time in Key West. Then he had to drag her out on this boat. She didn't know their intended destination, some stupidity about a business deal.

She didn't want to know what *that* meant.

Once she felt somewhat steady again, she rinsed her mouth and stared into the mirror. She should have listened to her best friend, Deanna, and run far and fast from the charming, handsome Paulie

Scorsini. No, she let him talk her into quitting her job and moving in with him two months ago after dating for nearly a year. Most of her stuff still sat in storage in a unit near Orlando, where she'd been living before moving to Paulie's condo in Daytona Beach. All she took with her was what few clothes he liked, then he bought her new ones. He hated all her garage sale furniture but she couldn't bear to get rid of it. She hadn't had time to get things like family pictures and stuff moved either.

Now, all she had of her own was a wardrobe that would do any hooker proud, and the convincing ability to act like a dumb blonde in nearly any circumstance.

*Christ.*

She had a damn good idea what Paulie's "business" might be, especially after overhearing him talk with his father four days earlier, right before Scorsini senior got popped by the Feds and taken into custody. Well, hearing Paulie's father yell at him would be more accurate. If she'd known the Scorsini family's business was organized crime, she would have turned tail and run fast and far.

Then again, hadn't she suspected? The flashy cars and money that seemed to materialize out of thin air were dead giveaways she'd willfully chosen to ignore. If Paulie wanted her to have something, he handed her cash and told her to go buy it. Then the issue of the goons who hung around, euphemistically called "associates," yet who never did anything more strenuous than look menacing and hold doors open.

But after years of doing without, struggling for every dime, sleepless nights studying to land an academic scholarship and then working while earning her English degree, she'd almost felt like she'd stepped into a fairy tale. Paulie was handsome, ten years older than her and good in bed. He wanted to take care of her. She wouldn't claim she loved him, but she'd been willing to overlook that little factoid in lieu of waking up every morning not worrying about how much she had to make in tips that day at the bar to pay FP&L to keep the lights on.

When the boat took another roll, so did her stomach. She held on to the sink and prayed neither went belly-up. The seas had roughened. From what she'd overheard before stumbling below deck to the cabin, they'd meet another boat somewhere out here. Wherever "out here" was. They'd flown into Key West two days ago, then this surprise jaunt.

She ran a hand through her blonde locks. She needed to dye her hair when they got back. Paulie wanted her platinum blonde, and her dark roots now showed. She hated being a blonde, hated growing her hair nearly down to her waist, but Paulie wanted it that way.

And Paulie Scorsini always got what he wanted.

Or else.

She crawled back into her bunk in the large master bow cabin she shared with Paulie and tried not to listen to the men laughing and talking on the deck. The sixty-foot cruiser, called the Lucky Break, belonged to Paulie's father. It was nearly ten o'clock. She wished they'd find a marina so she could get off the damn thing and quit feeling nauseous. She wanted to sleep in a real bed that didn't move under her.

She turned off the reading light and closed her eyes. She thought about opening the large overhead vent port for some fresh air, but decided to stick with the A/C.

Just as she'd nearly managed to get to sleep, she heard footsteps descend the cabin stairs, down the corridor, and approach her cabin. She kept her eyes closed at the sound of the door opening. She sensed Paulie's presence, and a whiff of his expensive cologne confirmed it.

She played possum. The last thing she wanted to do was have sex and ralph all over him.

A moment later, the door closed. She heard him talking to someone.

"She's asleep. Call them and tell them it's time. Let's meet up with them and get this done."

That piqued her interest. *Get what done?*

The engines slowed their monotonous throb as the captain, a Scorsini family friend, shifted the boat into neutral. She heard the sound of another boat approaching and sat up to look out a side porthole. A boat smaller than theirs drew close, illuminated by the light of the full moon, which had temporarily appeared from behind the clouds. The smaller boat, running without lights, left a glowing wake behind as it angled toward the Lucky Break.

The other boat, an open fisherman maybe twenty-five feet long, pulled alongside. She heard male voices and watched through the port as Paulie climbed across to the other boat.

In the distance, she spotted lights. They couldn't be too far offshore then.

When she heard angry tones, she focused on the boat again and...

*Holy shit!*

Paulie had a gun pressed to another man's head. Blue-tinged moonlight glinted off of it. The man had his hands up and hysterically babbled something.

Suddenly, an orange blast and a sharp report split the quiet darkness as Paulie fired.

He stood there and watched as two of his guys rolled the other man's body overboard after efficiently wrapping it with chains and an anchor.

Caught between shock and a scream, she clamped her hand to her mouth and ducked. They couldn't see her watching behind the tinted glass.

*Ohmigod!*

Daphne heard the sound of footsteps in the main cabin again. She threw herself back onto the bunk, in her previous position, and feigned sleep.

Her heart raced as the cabin door opened. She fought the urge not to gag when she smelled something she suspected was gunpowder on Paulie's hand as he reached out and stroked her cheek.

"Daph?"

*And the Oscar goes to...* “Are we at the dock yet?” she mumbled as she rolled over to look at him.

In the dim light spilling in from the main cabin, she made out his cold, businesslike expression. Had she really thought him handsome? “No, babe. We’re not. How are you feeling? Any better?”

“Sick. I dreamed we’d docked.”

He smiled, his cold mask dissolving. Despite his handsome features, she did her best not to scream over the memory of what she’d seen. She suddenly realized her nausea had completely disappeared.

*Oh, good. Witnessing a mob hit cures seasickness. Handy thing to know.*

“We’ll be heading down to St. Pete and dock there. We’ll spend a week at the Don CeSar. I appreciate you being a good sport about this trip.”

She forced a smile. “Sorry I don’t have sea legs.”

He leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Go back to sleep.”

Once he left, she took a deep breath and prayed like hell he’d bought her performance. She raced over to the cabin door and listened as she heard the men talking. She caught the tail end of Paulie’s comment to one of his guys.

“...storm front coming through tomorrow morning. We’ll do her then and claim she fell overboard. Don’t want her body anywhere near his. I hate to, but I can’t risk it. Pop’ll kill *me* if I don’t, told me I was a dumbass for bringing her to that other meeting...” She lost the sound of his voice as he left the main cabin.

She closed her eyes and fought her tears even as her heart pounded.

*Fuck!*

No fucking way she would die like this. *Fucking bastard!*

In the darkness, she felt her way over to her suitcase, dug out her bathing suit, and pulled it on with trembling hands. As she heard the sound of the other boat pulling away, she rummaged through one of

the storage lockers under the bunk where she remembered seeing...*Ah!*

She pulled out a scuba mask and snorkel. Most likely there for show, they looked like they'd never been used.

She dumped the bottles of shampoo and conditioner out of the gallon-sized zipper top baggie she kept in her overnight bag. Into that baggie went her wallet, a T-shirt, a pair of underwear, and a pair of shorts all folded painfully tight, and a grand in cash she found in Paulie's suitcase.

*Fuck him.*

Her cell phone was dead, so she didn't bother with it. She took her keys to the storage unit, stuck her purse and the clothes she'd been wearing back inside her suitcase, and zipped everything up.

*How the fuck do I get out of the cabin without them seeing me?*

After squeezing all the air out of the baggie, she sealed it and stuck it and her cheap flip flops into the nylon fanny pack she'd bought in Key West. At least she wouldn't be stuck with just a wet bathing suit to wear. She could hit a discount store and buy some clothes with the cash she had. She lived broke most of her life, she damn sure could make do with this for a few days until she could get to her bank.

With the fanny pack securely zipped and fastened around her waist and her heart running an Indy race in her chest, she looked up and spotted a large overhead ventilation port. It was big enough for her to squeeze through.

Running on fear-spiked adrenaline, she stood on the bunk for a minute and carefully listened. The engines throttled up again to full speed as she felt the boat powerfully surge forward in the water.

No sound of footsteps on the deck overhead.

She slowly lifted the hatch a few inches and looked around. The moon had disappeared again, the night thick and dark. Not spotting anyone, she raised her head enough to look up at the fly bridge.

The captain sat in his chair, but he had his back to the bow. He

looked like he was talking to someone. Moving quickly, she pulled herself out of the hatch and pushed it closed, then yanked the mask strap over her head and down around her neck. She slipped under the front bow railing, holding on and hanging over the side, her feet slipping against the slick hull as warm sea spray pelted her.

*Seemed like a good idea a few minutes ago.*

Hoping they didn't spot her, and that the boat wouldn't run her over, she took several huge gasps of air and pushed off the bow as hard as she could with her legs.

She dove deep, kicking hard and praying as she felt the boat pass overhead. With the sound distorted by the water, she listened for any indication they'd seen her.

The boat continued on without hesitation.

When she knew she couldn't hold her breath any longer, she broke the surface and gasped for air. Turning, she spotted the Lucky Break in the distance, continuing on without her.

She pulled the mask up over her face and into position, cleared it and the snorkel like she'd learned in the introductory scuba class, and looked around. She located the lights on land again and headed that way.

No fins to help her, she tightened the strap on her fanny pack and started swimming. The Gulf water felt warm, at least. She'd lettered three years in a row on her high school swim team, even if she hadn't done much of it lately.

Still, it would be a long fucking night.

## Chapter Two

When Alan Walker heard the sound of the key in his front lock a little after eight-thirty that evening, he didn't rise from the couch.

*He's right on time.*

"Please tell me you cancelled your charter tomorrow," Jerald grumbled as he walked into the living room. He'd already showered and changed out of his uniform into a T-shirt and shorts. He pulled his gun from his holster belt, removed the magazine and chambered bullet, and put his belt on the table. He took the gun into the bedroom, where he planned to lock it in the gun safe in the closet.

Besides his toothbrush and deodorant, the gun safe was the only thing that Jerald had moved into Alan's house. They'd been together a little over two years, and Alan still hadn't convinced Jerald to move in with him, despite his best efforts.

"Hello to you, too," he called out after him. "And, no, I didn't cancel my charter. Why the heck would I do that?"

Jerald returned a moment later without the gun. He arched an eyebrow at his lover. "Because it's supposed to blow twenty knots or more, six to eight-foot seas, and Ruskin has posted a small craft advisory, that's why."

If Jerald Carter had any beliefs in a higher power, they would be firmly focused on the National Weather Service's regional office in Ruskin. Alan grinned the boyish smile he knew could charm the pants off even over-protective, grouchy Florida Marine Patrol officer Major Jerald Carter. "Jer, it's not going to be that bad." He started flipping channels.

Jerald reached over, snatched the remote out of his hands, and

tossed it onto the couch. “Can’t you please humor me for once?”

“*You’re* going to be out in it tomorrow.”

“I’m *paid* to be out in it.”

“Yeah? Well, so am I.” They’d had this argument countless times before. Alan knew it would end the same way.

“The *state* pays me to be out in it, hell-ooo. Me, Marine Patrol. You, fishing guide.”

“Relax. It’s a morning charter. They want to cast, not go deep sea fishing. I’m taking the flats boat, not the big one. I’ll stay close and take them out for trout and snook in the sawgrass flats and inlets around Aripeka. Come on, it’s a September full moon tide. Perfect for hooking into snook and they can keep the legal ones.”

“What if I pull you over and ask to see their fishing licenses and snook stamp endorsements?” he growled. “Maybe do a full safety inspection. Take an hour or more to check your equipment and permits and captain’s license? Make sure you’re legal.”

“If you’re talking about checking my equipment, you’d better be talking about the equipment between my legs, dude.” Alan sat up, grabbed Jerald’s T-shirt, and dragged him down to the couch. “Otherwise, I’ll tell them to ignore you, that you’re just my worrywart boyfriend showing his ass and his badge to get me back on dry land because the water’s a little choppy. You ready to pay my mortgage on my boats if I can’t work?”

Jerald’s rugged jaw set in a firm clench. Alan loved the way the older man looked when he got angry. His blue eyes, creased at the edges by years squinting against the sun, his deep tan, his short brown hair sun-bleached almost a reddish blond...

His protective temper.

“Maybe I should cuff you to the bed and call Todd at the marina and tell him you’re out sick.”

“I’ll take the cuffs, you know I love that game. But you try to mess with my charters, you’ll have to figure out a way to keep me cuffed because once I get loose I will kick your ass.”

Stalemate.

As Alan suspected he would, Jerald backed down. He sat next to him on the couch and draped his arm around Alan's shoulders. Jerald, only eight years older than his own thirty-four, sometimes positively acted like his damn father.

Not that he minded too much.

"Please don't go out far."

Alan knew he'd won at that point. He leaned in and kissed him. "I promise. I'll be careful, you know I will. If it's too bad, or if they wimp out, we'll come in."

"You call me as soon as you're at the dock."

"I will." He glanced at the time. "It's almost nine. You staying?"

"If you want me to."

Alan reached for the remote and shut off the TV. "Yep. You know I want you to." He stood and grabbed Jerald's hand. "Since when have I ever *not* wanted you to? You got someplace better to be?"

"Not really."

"Gee, thanks."

Jerald's face broke into a wide smile as he rose from the couch. Alan stood six inches shorter than Jerald's six-four. Jerald pulled Alan to him. "You know I'm just messing with you," Jerald rumbled. Then he slanted his mouth over Alan's and kissed him, hard, his evening stubble scratchy against Alan's cheek.

Alan reached down and grabbed the front of Jerald's shorts. His lover's hard cock strained against the cotton fabric. "Yeah, and I'm ready to mess with you, too." Gently tugging on the taller man's bulge, Alan led him to the bedroom where they both quickly stripped and fell into bed.

Alan ended up on the bottom, his wrists pinned over his head. "Maybe I *should* cuff you," Jerald threatened.

"Then you'd have to stay here with me."

"There are worse things." Alan tried to kiss him, but Jerald lifted his head out of the way, teasing him. "Sometimes I think you enjoy

those games a little too much.”

“As long as it’s you and not the real thing, I’m fine. I’m always up for a game of Marine Patrol poking the Poacher.”

Jerald groaned, then laughed. “You’re too fucking much.” He stared down at Alan. “Maybe I should shove my cock in your mouth to shut you up.”

Alan opened wide, sending Jerald into another laughing jag. He lay on the bed next to Alan. “Get down there, then.”

Alan grinned as he sat up. “Does this qualify as police harassment?”

Jerald’s tone sounded light. “Shut the hell up and suck my cock, goddammit.”

“Such a sweet talker you are tonight.” Alan bent over the other man’s member, which had grown to its full length. With a glance up at Jerald’s hungry expression, he swiped his tongue over the swollen head. “Like that?”

Jerald groaned. “Don’t tease me.”

Alan’s own cock throbbed, desperate for release. Alan knew what his lover wanted. He kept his eyes trained on Jerald’s face as he wrapped his lips around his cock. Jerald’s gaze burned as he watched.

Jerald always loved to watch. And he always wanted Alan to look at him, to never close his eyes while they made love.

Alan slowly engulfed Jerald’s cock with his mouth, teasing it with his tongue, using one hand to stroke the base of his shaft, the other to palm his sac and gently play with him.

Jerald moaned. He folded one arm behind his head, supporting him so he could watch Alan going down on him. With his other, he reached down and fisted his hand in Alan’s shaggy hair.

Working his tongue around the head, Alan teased his lover, his tongue caressing the outline of every throbbing vein as he deep-throated him. When Jerald’s hips started thrusting in time with his mouth, Alan knew he was close. After a few long, sweet minutes, his cock hardened even more, growing slick against his tongue.

He pressed a finger against Jerald's rim, not breaching it, but the sensation sent him over. Alan swallowed as his lover's tangy, hot seed filled his mouth.

As Jerald's cock softened, Alan eased up, finally releasing him.

Jerald's eyes had dropped closed, his chest still heaving. "Good?" Alan asked.

Jerald nodded.

He licked a trail from Jerald's cock to his chin before he kissed him. "Roll over," Alan said, his voice deep and husky. "My turn."

Without opening his eyes Jerald did, arching his back so his firm ass stuck in the air.

Alan's cock throbbed at the sight. He reached over to the bedside table and grabbed the lube. They'd done away with the condoms after six months and getting tested. Neither of them were interested in sleeping with anyone else anyway.

Alan worked lube into the other man's tight rim, teasing him, wondering if he could get Jerald hard a second time. After a few minutes of playing, Alan couldn't stand to wait any longer. He lubed himself and pressed forward, moaning as he felt his cock tightly fisted inside Jerald's ass.

"Fuck, yeah," he whispered once seated all the way in.

"Do it," Jerald growled. "Fuck me hard."

If he was asking for it hard, experience told Alan seconds would be had shortly. Alan grinned and grabbed Jerald's hips. "You got it." He fucked him, hard and fast, the sound of skin slapping skin filling the air. Jerald moaned as he flexed his ass and hips against Alan's onslaught.

"Harder, goddammit."

"Ooh, someone wants to play tonight." His balls bounced against Jerald's ass at the bottom of every stroke. It wasn't long before he felt them tighten and tense, his climax close. He pounded into his lover, fingers digging into his hips until the final stroke took him over and he buried himself deep, his come flooding inside the other man.

Out of breath, he propped himself up with one arm.

Jerald bumped his hips against him. “Get on your back. I want to fuck you.”

Smiling even as he still panted from his effort, Alan pulled out. He stepped into the bathroom to clean up, then returned to bed.

Jerald sat up on his knees, the bottle in his hand, his own cock already hard again and slick with lube. Alan lay on his back, knowing what Jerald wanted. He hooked his hands behind his knees and drew them up to his chest. “Like that?”

Jerald nodded, his large fingers probing and lubing him.

Alan kept his eyes on Jerald’s, never wavering from his lover. Jerald seated himself, slowly stroking his stiff shaft inside Alan. “How do you make me so fucking horny?”

“I know what you like and I’m not afraid to give it to you.”

Jerald leaned forward, pressing Alan’s thighs further into his chest. He hungrily kissed him. “I could fuck you all night long.”

“Who’s complaining?”

In the dim light spilling through the bathroom doorway, Jerald’s blue eyes looked dark, like the midnight sky. “I guess if I lived here it would give me more time to fuck you, wouldn’t it?”

Alan’s heart skipped, his hope blooming. “You could have it whenever you wanted, tough guy. When have I ever told you no?”

Jerald braced his hands on the headboard and took another hard stroke. “I could walk in from work and tell you to drop your shorts and bend you over the kitchen table.”

Alan reached up and brushed his fingers over Jerald’s nipples. “Every night, anytime you want it. But who says I’d be wearing clothes? I’d run around naked if you wanted.”

Jerald laughed. “You probably would, wouldn’t you?”

“You better believe it, if it means you living here. You could wake up to me sucking your cock every morning.”

“Or me sucking yours.”

“Oh, fuck yeah!”

Jerald sat up and grabbed Alan's thighs for leverage. He took long, slow strokes out, followed by hard, fast deep thrusts in. "Maybe I could try it temporarily. See if you still want me after a few months."

"I'll always want you. Now shut the hell up and pound my ass the way you know you want to."

Jerald grinned. He liked it hard and fast. The entire bed shook with the force of his thrusts. It didn't take long for his climax to build. "Oh, fuck yeah! I'm coming!" he cried out as it washed over him. A few minutes later they lay tangled together in a sweaty heap on the bed.

Alan wrapped his arms around Jerald. "I love you."

Jerald kissed him. "Love you, too." He finally moved, slowly, and stepped into the bathroom to clean up. When he returned they curled together in bed, Jerald's arms around Alan. He brushed his fingers down Alan's arm. "I've got Thursday and Friday off. I can bring a load of stuff over."

"I don't have any charters on Thursday. I can help." If he had his way, he'd back a truck up to Jerald's freaking shit hole trailer and completely empty it before burning it to the ground.

"Okay. Then we'll start on Thursday."

Alan felt a Cheshire cat grin crease his face. He decided to test the waters. "What do you feel like doing tomorrow evening?"

Jerald shrugged. "Hadn't thought about it."

"Tom Kelly invited us over. He's having a barbecue tomorrow night. Invited a bunch of people."

Jerald's face darkened as he looked away. "Go if you want."

"I wasn't asking your permission. It's an invitation extended to both of us."

Jerald let go of him and rolled over, facing away from Alan. "I've got things I can do. You go have fun."

Alan tried to drop it and couldn't. After stewing for five minutes, he sat up. "Are you fucking ashamed of me or something?"

“What the fuck? Where’s that coming from?”

“Well, answer the question. Are you?”

“Christ, no! I told you I’ll give living here a shot. What more do you want?”

“Is it because I’m a guide? Or because I’m a guy? Be honest.”

Jerald rolled onto his back. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded quiet, unlike his normal rumble. “All right. I’ll go to the barbecue with you. Happy?”

“No. I want an answer.”

“I haven’t been out as long as you, okay? There’s still a lot of people who don’t know. I’m *not* ashamed of you. I’m just...still learning and getting used to this. Okay? Kate fucked me over hard, you know that. It took me a long time to get to the point where I knew another shoe wouldn’t hit the floor with you.”

That was some of the deepest emotional honesty Jerald had ever copped to in their two-plus years together. Despite being an eloquent man, Jerald rarely expressed his emotions like that. He usually kept them carefully hidden behind a solid fortress.

Huge breakthrough for the tough guy.

Alan propped himself up on one elbow. “If you want,” he quietly offered, “we can go tomorrow night in separate cars. I’ll behave myself. Hands off. Just friends.”

It wasn’t what Alan wanted, but after Jerald agreed to try living together, and then opening up like that, Alan wanted to give ground to reciprocate. If nothing else during their relationship, Alan had learned the fastest way to draw Jerald out was to always back down when Jerald gave ground rather than trying to bully him into something. Jerald always followed him and gave ground of his own when he did that, because then he didn’t feel pressured.

“We don’t have to go in separate cars. I do want to go with you.” He took a deep breath and slowly let it out before looking at Alan. “How can you be so patient with me? I know I’m a pain in the ass.”

Alan kissed him. “You’re *my* pain in the ass, that’s why.” Alan

knew he was the only one who ever got to see Jerald vulnerable like this.

“I love you,” Jerald whispered.

Alan smiled. “I love you too, tough guy. When you going to let me totally move you out of that shit hole trailer and in with me?” After Jerald’s divorce, Kate had gotten the house and nearly everything in it. Fortunately, Jerald only had to pay her a year of alimony. Financially, he was still recovering from the debacle. Jerald had rented the cheap place south of Bayport from a friend of his. Alan owned his house, which he’d inherited from his parents. Built only seven years earlier, they’d paid it off with the sale of other property they’d owned, taking advantage of the real estate boom before the market tanked.

“Give me a little more time for that, okay? Let’s see how a trial arrangement goes. I’ll keep the trailer for now, keep my other crap there, my books and stuff. I’ll start bringing my work truck home here. Deal?”

“I’d like to wake up next to you every day.”

“You’re going to get sick of me. You just wait and see. I’ll drive you nuts.”

“That’s a short trip, buddy. One I’m happy to take with you behind the wheel.”

“I’m set in my ways and a pain in the ass to live with.”

Alan smirked. “So? You give great head. I’m willing to overlook other imperfections.”

Jerald laughed. “I’m still waiting for you to come to your senses and get rid of me.”

Alan sat up and grabbed Jerald’s chin. “Listen to me. I’m *not* going anywhere. If you want to run away, go ahead. Get it through your head I’m always going to be right here waiting for you to come back.”

Sometimes Alan wondered if Jerald would ever fully overcome his fear of their relationship. Alan knew Jerald didn’t fear him so

much as he couldn't let go of past heartaches and betrayals. Alan didn't know a lot about Jerald's past because the man didn't want to talk about it. Alan knew only that Jerald's parents had died violently, and he spent most of his childhood frequently shuffled between distant relatives and foster homes. It was also one of the reasons he'd gone into law enforcement.

"I know," Jerald softly said. "I know you are."

Jerald kissed him goodnight. Alan closed his eyes, content and happy to know he'd moved one step closer to having Jerald Carter living with him full time.

\* \* \* \*

After a few minutes, Jerald heard Alan's breathing slow and deepen, indicating he'd fallen asleep. He studied the other man as he lay in his arms. How *did* Alan put up with him? He must be in love. Alan was the "what you see is what you get" kind of guy, laid back and easy going. And then him. Barely out of the closet. In fact, standing in the closet doorway with one hand on the doorknob, ready to yank it shut and lock himself inside at the slightest hint of trouble.

As much as he hated Kate, she did him a favor by screwing around on him the way she had. She made it impossible for him not to embrace his anger, at least for a little while. Then a month after the divorce was final, Alan invited him to go fishing in the Keys for three days. Jerald took the time off and they drove down there towing Alan's flats boat.

They'd known each other professionally for a few years before that. He'd chatted with Alan at the dock nearly every day, even had lunch together countless times. Jerald had been out on his boat as a passenger a few times too, when Alan had room, to fill in a paying charter group. He knew Alan always brought in legal catch. Checking his coolers was just a formality to make it look like he didn't play favorites among the guides. Alan Walker always played by the rules.

He'd never found anyone with a bad word to say about Alan. Even the people who didn't care for him didn't speak badly of him, other than snide comments behind Alan's back about his sexual preferences.

Jerald had known Alan was gay from third party chatter, but nothing in the man's demeanor ever screamed "flaming queer." If he hadn't heard it from more than one source, he never would have believed the gossip. Alan just didn't show up on his radar one way or another.

Until the Keys trip.

All the way down I-75, across Alligator Alley, and down the Florida Turnpike to U.S. 1, Alan let him talk. And talk.

And talk.

He knew Alan never spread rumors, never gossiped. Jerald felt fucking lonely and angry and needed to vent to someone. Anyone. He had no close friends and no family. The friends he thought he had were Kate's, not his. From the way they avoided him after the divorce, even though she had cheated on him, he knew she'd gotten custody of them as well.

By the time they reached the resort in Marathon that first night, Jerald had done more talking to Alan than he had to anyone else. Ever.

Alan sat there and listened.

They went bonefishing the next morning. Jerald still talked. Alan quietly listened as he poled the boat across the flats while Jerald cast when and how Alan told him to. Jerald started drinking beer before lunch, loosening up even more.

Still, Alan listened.

By the time they returned to the dock a little before sunset that evening, he saw Alan in a new light. Maybe because of his own beer buzz, or Alan's shaggy blond hair made even more yellow by the sun. Maybe it was those huge brown eyes, "doe eye," his momma would have called them. Or the way his tanned and slimly athletic body

looked in his baggy guide shirt and shorts, or the way he gracefully moved, like a cat. Even in a pitching boat, Alan never seemed to lose his balance.

After ordering a pizza for dinner and downing a few more beers, Jerald vaguely remembered staggering into Alan's bedroom in their rented condo and falling onto his bed.

"I'm sick of women, and I'm fucking sick of being alone!" he screamed.

Then, for the first time in his adult life, he cried. He remembered curling up against Alan and sobbing like a fucking baby while Alan held him and softly murmured comforting words.

When he awoke the next morning, hung over as hell, he still lay in Alan's bed. Fully dressed. Alan, also dressed, lay propped on one elbow and stared down at him with those big brown eyes. For the first time, Jerald noticed Alan's long, blond eyelashes, almost like a girl's.

Jerald sat up too quickly, then realized his mistake as his hangover headache pounded a bongo rhythm inside his skull. He lay back down with a groan.

"What happened?" Jerald croaked, the nasty morning after taste of beer coating his mouth with a thick, disgusting slime.

"You got stinking drunk, stumbled in here, said you're sick of women and sick of being alone, and cried in my arms. Then you passed out." He looked vaguely amused. "And has anyone ever told you that you snore like a freaking chainsaw when you sleep on your back?"

For some reason Alan's final remark, delivered in that exact tone of voice, with those brown eyes staring at him, hit just the right combination of notes inside Jerald. He laughed, then moaned as his head pounded, then laughed again.

Alan smiled. "Glad to see you're feeling better."

"I'm sorry, man. I'm a sloppy drunk. Normally I don't drink a lot for this very reason."

"Gee, ya think? Besides, what are you sorry for?"

“For last night.” He groaned as he rubbed his face with his hands. “You must think I’m a fucking douche.”

Alan shrugged. “There’s a couple of reasons I brought you down here, Jer. For one, you’ve been acting like you’re about to rip someone’s head off. All the guides in the area are talking about taking up a collection to buy you a hooker or a hit man, whichever would do the most good. You’ve been acting pretty shitty for the past few months. We all understand why, believe me. It just didn’t make it any easier for us to deal with you on our end.”

Alan sat up. “For another, we’ve always had a good rapport, and I think you’re going through a rough time and need a friend. Add to that the fact that I like you. I’m not saying I’m going to put moves on you and freak you out and fuck up a good friendship, but I hoped maybe you’d loosen up a little. What happens on this trip stays on this trip, whether it’s you baring your soul or your ass or maybe both. I figured you needed a chance to cut loose without worrying what anyone else would say. Whether you simply want a friendly ear to talk to, or actually want to do something, that’s up to you.”

Jerald laid there and blinked, stunned, as he stared at the younger man.

After a few moments, Alan spoke again. “I’ve watched you for a few years now. I don’t know if you’re straight or gay or bi or curious. I don’t care. I do know I’ve noticed you checking out asses a few times, whether you were aware of it or not.”

Jerald felt a deep heat fill his face, but he didn’t speak.

Alan continued. “Like I said, I’m not going to put moves on you. I especially won’t take advantage of someone who’s drunk. However, be advised the next time you show up in my bed, please do it sober, and definitely do it naked, because after sleeping next to you all night I’ve got a fucking hard-on right now that would cut glass. Unless you’re a cock tease. If that’s the case, you should have warned me so I could go whack off.”

Jerald harshly laughed. “Do you ever think about what you say

before you say it?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t stop me from saying it. You’ve known me long enough to know I’m a no bullshit, no drama kind of guy. If you’d like to dig a little deeper and explore some options, feel free to make a pass at me. Normally I’m not this forward with someone like you who’s never been with a guy before.”

“Who said I’ve never been with a guy before?”

Alan arched an eyebrow at him.

“Okay, so no, I haven’t.”

Alan stretched, then pulled his shirt off as he stood. Alan had a nice, tight body. Naturally muscled and tanned from being outside all the time. “Now that I know you’re not going to puke in your sleep and choke on it and leave me with an embarrassing situation to deal with, having a dead officer of the law in my bed, I’m going to go take a shower and take care of this woody.” He stopped at the bedroom door and turned to Jerald. “I’ll leave the bathroom door open if you feel like having your back scrubbed. Or your front. No strings attached. If you want, we can pretend it never happened. It’s up to you.”

On that note, he walked into the bathroom.

Jerald lay there, stunned, his heart now pounding even harder than his headache.

His own cock had hardened, throbbing at the thought of taking a shower with Alan.

*What the fuck?*

He sat up again, carefully this time. Yeah, okay, so Alan had nailed him mentally in a few ways he’d never wanted to admit before.

Jerald couldn’t feel the floor under his feet as he walked into the bathroom. Alan had already started the shower and stood, naked, brushing his teeth at the sink. He had a nice, tight, firm ass a few shades lighter than the rest of his body. Alan obviously didn’t sunbathe in the buff. Jerald could reach out and...

Alan caught Jerald’s gaze in the mirror and held it until he finished brushing his teeth and turned around.

“Shower’s big enough for two, man.” Alan stepped in and pulled the shower curtain closed.

Jerald’s head still throbbed, but he also brushed his teeth to get rid of the nasty, stale morning after beer taste.

Then he stripped and stepped into the shower.

Those huge, brown eyes. Alan turned to him and pushed him so Jerald’s back pressed against the cool tile wall. When Alan dropped to his knees, he palmed Jerald’s sac with one hand. With the other, he slowly pumped Jerald’s now-throbbing cock before putting it in his mouth.

Fascinated to watch his cock disappearing between the other man’s lips, he couldn’t look away. Alan’s eyes closed.

“No,” he hoarsely said. “Look at me. I want to see you’re with me.”

Alan looked up, their gazes locked as his tongue and lips worked at his stiff shaft. Jerald wound his fingers through the other man’s wet hair as he thrust his hips in time with Alan’s movements.

He felt connected to him. Something he’d never felt with his ex. Or anyone else.

*Ever.*

Jerald had always felt Kate was somewhere else when making love to her. She wanted the lights off and never did it in the daytime. He barely remembered what she looked like naked. He could count on both hands the number of times she went down on him during their marriage. Usually only once a year, on their anniversary. She made it seem like she did him some big fucking favor for even considering it.

Because of his hangover, he wasn’t sure if he’d make it, but his balls tightened as his orgasm spiraled from somewhere deep inside him.

“I’m coming,” he gasped.

Alan never looked away. He took him deeper into his mouth as he reached behind Jerald and grabbed his ass. As he felt the explosion rip through his balls, he let out a loud moan while he watched Alan

watching him come, watched Alan's throat work as he swallowed.

After a moment Alan rocked back on his heels. "Better?"

"Holy fuck."

"Is that a good holy fuck, or a *what the fuck did I just do* holy fuck?"

"Both."

Alan arched an eyebrow at him. "Should I take care of myself, or would you like to help?"

Coherent thought slowly returned to his brain. Jerald heard himself say, "I'd like to help."

Alan didn't look away as he stood and pressed close. He grabbed Jerald's hand and put it on his cock. "How about I go easy on you and you let me do the heavy work?" Then he leaned in and kissed Jerald as he wrapped his own hand around Jerald's, holding it on his shaft.

Alan thrust his hips, fucking Jerald's hand. After a few minutes Jerald regained enough of his senses to help. As Jerald took control, Alan released his hand and held on to Jerald's shoulders for balance. Jerald used both hands, one on Alan's cock, the other on his balls.

"Look at me," Jerald grunted. "I want to see your face when you come."

Alan tipped his head back. Jerald studied him, wanting that feeling back, that connection of a moment ago.

To feel connected to another human being in a way he never had before.

Alan was there, with him.

It took his breath away.

He watched as Alan's lips parted, his skin flushed. Then his thrusts quickened, more jerky. "I'm almost there."

Jerald squeezed harder as Alan cried out, his hot juices coating Jerald's hands.

Alan rested his head against his chest as Jerald enveloped him in his arms and held him for several long, silent minutes. He didn't miss how good Alan felt in his arms.

“What now?” Jerald croaked, still not sure how he’d gotten to this point, and yet knowing he could never go back.

He didn’t want to go back. He didn’t want to lose that connection with Alan.

Alan laughed as he looked up. “Whatever you want, man. I told you, what happens here stays here.” His gaze flicked over Jerald’s face, studying him. “Unless you want to do something when we get home. Then I’m happy to oblige you there, too. I’m not going anywhere.”

He wanted to kiss Alan again. He wanted to taste him, feel his stubbly cheek coarse against his own, run his fingers over the sandpaper texture on his face. He slanted his lips over Alan’s and kissed, nipping, biting, deep and hungry.

He didn’t want to lose him and didn’t know how to hold on to him.

He just knew he had to for his own sanity.

They never made it back out on the boat the rest of the trip. After their shower, they returned to Alan’s bed. Alan grabbed a towel, a bottle of lube, and a box of condoms. Then he spent nearly half an hour playing with Jerald, teasing him and slowly loosening his virgin ass with his fingers, playfully torturing him before he finally rolled a condom onto himself.

“You ready?” Alan asked.

Jerald didn’t trust his voice. He nodded.

He felt Alan press his thick cockhead against his puckered rim. Then Alan smiled down at him. “I’ll be honest. I hope I’m the only guy who ever gets to do this to you.” He pressed forward, breaching his ass, slowly seating himself inside Jerald until his thighs lay against his.

Jerald, on his back with his knees to his chest, stared up into Alan’s big brown eyes.

“You okay?” Alan asked.

Jerald nodded. He felt a hell of a lot better than okay.

He'd never imagined this side of Alan, taking charge, his quiet confidence and security.

"I'm going to fuck you, then you can fuck me, okay?"

Jerald nodded, lost in Alan's gaze.

The corners of Alan's mouth curled into a sexy, playful smile. "I have a feeling you'll normally want to be on top. I don't mind bottoming, as long as you let me have a turn on top every once in a while."

"Do you always talk this much during sex?"

Alan grabbed Jerald's thighs and took a deeper stroke that hit a sweet spot inside him and nearly sent him over the top. "Only when I don't have a nice, hard cock in my mouth to suck."

Jerald's heart raced as he watched Alan's climax build. "I don't want to share you," he blurted out.

Alan stopped, his smile broadening. "Well, buddy, you're in luck. I've been stuck in a dry spell the past six months, and I tend to enjoy the monogamous lifestyle."

"What about the rubbers and lube you brought?"

He shrugged and took another long, slow stroke. "Be prepared, that's my motto. You complaining?"

"No."

Jerald held onto Alan's arms as he fucked him, felt Alan's muscles tense as he drew closer to his release. Alan's lower lip caught under his front teeth as his whole body trembled. He thrust harder, faster, then let out a loud cry as he came.

Almost too fast he pulled out, leaving Jerald feeling empty. He tried to keep him there. "Where are you going?"

Alan leaned in and kissed him. "Condom. Don't worry, I'll be right back."

A moment later, he was.

One thing Jerald quickly learned, Alan always did what he said he would.

Alan rolled over in his sleep, throwing an arm around Jerald and bringing his thoughts back to the present. For over two years now, Alan had shown nothing but patience with him. The worst he thought would be when any of his fellow Marine Patrol officers found out about him and Alan. Only one guy, a jerk named Mark Jackson, tried to bust his chops about it.

“What’s up with you and that guide, Walker?” Jackson said to him late one Sunday afternoon while they stood on the dock waiting to check more boats. Alan’s boat had appeared in the marina basin, prompting the jerk’s comment. “You two fuck buddies or something?” From the man’s tone of voice, Jerald knew Jackson thought he was being funny, busting his balls.

Thankful for his mirrored sunglasses, which hid the anger in his eyes, he slowly turned on Jackson. “Alan’s my boyfriend,” he softly said. “You got a fucking problem with that?” His heart raced. This was four months into their relationship, and the first time he’d openly confessed it to anyone he worked with.

Admittedly, he enjoyed the priceless look of shock on the other officer’s face. “Um, no. No problem. Sorry, man, I didn’t know. I was just kidding around.”

“Shut the fuck up before you dig yourself a deeper hole and I kick your ass into it.”

He did.

Alan even good-naturedly put up with him checking his catch more than the other guides, in his early attempts to prove he wasn’t showing him any favoritism.

He closed his eyes as he lay in bed, Alan asleep next to him. Alan always calmed him, just by his very nature. Jerald never felt stressed when with him. Alan always knew when to stay quiet and let him unwind in his own way from an overwhelming day.

He always had the right words to say to Jerald, knew when to offer him a backrub or a blowjob, when to make him laugh, when to lend an ear.

For the first time in his life, he felt like he had someone who had absolutely no intention of letting him go. Who wanted to be with him and wasn't there simply because of some perceived obligation.

Family.

Jerald settled in and, with the sound of Alan's slow and steady breathing to lull him, tried to sleep.

## Chapter Three

Daphne didn't know exactly what time she hit the water or how long she'd been in, but it seemed like the lights on the shoreline didn't get any closer. On top of that, the seas started to build. She felt the waves pick her up and carry her, sometimes swamping her. She had to be careful not to swallow sea water through the snorkel.

*I'm in the middle of a freaking ocean, and I'm thirsty.*

She didn't dare drink, knowing what it would do to her body if she did.

Fear hadn't set in, yet. She wouldn't let it. If she died—something not on her daily to-do list—it wouldn't be because of Paulie Scorsini.

What she'd do when she got back to dry land was another matter entirely. Nothing but her say so against everyone on both boats that they'd killed a guy. She couldn't even begin to tell authorities the victim's name or where to look for his body.

Several times she had to flip over on her back and float for a while to rest. Staring up into the cloudy night sky, she hoped to find the strength to go on. No one would come identify her body if she washed up somewhere.

She had no one.

For that reason alone, she damn sure wouldn't let the fuckhead win by dying out here.

At some point before dawn, she felt the winds start to kick up. As grey light crept into the eastern sky, she thought she saw land but couldn't be sure. Despite the warm water, she felt herself shivering from hypothermia. When she caught a wave just right and it carried her on the crest, she spotted the dark shapes of land, maybe a mile or

two away. Dropped into a trough, she started laughing, then screamed when her feet hit something. Only when it happened again and she put her legs down did she realize the water was just a little deeper than she was tall. Something broke loose inside her. She scrambled, frantic, half-swimming and half-running through the water to get closer to land.

Unfortunately, the waves made her job difficult. As dawn broke with a grey and overcast sky, the waves threw her onto a rocky oyster bar. Despite her feet getting cut, she stood up, the water at chest level. She laughed almost maniacally as she took several long, deep breaths and shivered in the wind. Land had grown closer. She didn't see any houses, just what looked like wilderness, but it was land.

Then another large wave overtopped the oyster bar, pushing her off toward the coastline.

Her hope renewed, she swam her ass off.

After a while, as the waves picked up even more, and with her feet and legs cut to hell and back by the oyster beds, she gave up trying to fight her way to shore. The current and wind seemed to be carrying her in that direction, so she let them do the work for her. She felt exhausted, thirsty, cold, and all out of fight. She flipped onto her back to float and let the waves carry her toward the sawgrass flats becoming visible in the morning light.

\* \* \* \*

The alarm went off at four the next morning. Alan rolled over and blindly slapped at it without opening his eyes.

He felt Jerald sit up next to him. "Want to go back to sleep? I'll wake you before I leave, let you sleep in a little."

Alan rolled over and peeled back an eyelid. "No, I'm getting up."

"Another drawback if I live here, you know. My crazy hours."

"No crazier than mine, chickenshit. Getting up with you means I have time for an extra cup of coffee in the morning and someone to

scrub my back in the shower,” Alan joked.

“What time tonight?”

Alan had to think for a moment, sleep still fogging his brain. “What time tonight what?”

“Tom Kelly’s barbecue.” Jerald walked into the bathroom without bothering to shut the door. “You still want to go, right?” he called back.

Alan’s heart raced in a good way, now wide awake. “Yeah. If you do.” He tried to make it sound casual.

“Yeah, but only if you go make me some coffee.”

Alan smiled as he jumped out of bed to do it. He heard the shower start. *Finally, some progress.* He’d forced himself not to push Jerald. Last night’s confrontation was a fluke, his frustration overwhelming him.

Only it had paid off.

He waited until enough coffee gurgled into the pot to pour Jerald a mug, black. He carried the mug into the bathroom, where he climbed into the shower with him.

Jerald’s blue eyes looked worried. “You won’t cancel your charter? I can’t talk you into not going out?”

“I’ll be safe.”

“If I’m living here, I’ll be nagging you about bad weather.”

“That’s never stopped you before.”

Jerald scrubbed Alan’s back for him, then rinsed off. “I’ll shave at home.” He kissed Alan. “I want a call from you as soon as you’re back at the dock, understand?” He poked Alan in the chest.

Alan smiled as he shot him a salute. “Yes sir, Major Carter.”

“Smart ass.” Jerald ducked into the bedroom to throw on his T-shirt and shorts.

He kept his uniforms and FMP truck at his trailer. He’d never parked his work vehicle overnight at Alan’s house.

Alan was drying off when Jerald returned, dressed and ready to go, his holstered gun in his hand. He pulled Alan to him and kissed

him. "Call me, or I will go totally batshit on you."

Alan nodded, loving the familiar routine. Any time the winds kicked up, so did Jerald's protective streak.

He wouldn't have it any other way. "I promise I will."

One last kiss, and then he left.

Naked, Alan walked into the kitchen to pour his own coffee. Two important battles won. He had a promise from Jerald to give living together a shot, and going someplace together as a *couple*.

He turned on the TV and listened to the early news and weather as he sipped his coffee. Going places together was never an issue. They shopped together, ate out, went to movies, but always with an invisible barrier between them when away from the safety of Alan's house. No one who didn't know them would ever suspect they were *together*. It wasn't a secret, but Jerald didn't want it openly in-your-face advertised. Alan respected that. Recently, Jerald had loosened up somewhat, but they'd never been to someone's house together as a couple. Usually they arrived in separate cars, even though most of the people who knew them knew their relationship status.

One of those silent things no one talked about because they honestly couldn't care less.

All Alan had left was to convince one Jerald Dennis Carter of that fact.

His heart light, Alan dressed and loaded his gear in his truck for the short drive to the marina in Aripeka. He had nearly two hours before the charter would show up, but he wanted to be ready. He needed ice and bait and could get all that handled.

Other guides were arriving at the marina, preparing for their own charters. Alan was chatting with a friend of his when his cell phone rang. Ten minutes later, as daylight broke, he found himself without a charter. The entire party had food poisoning. Could they go out tomorrow, on Wednesday? Lucky for them, he didn't have a charter and agreed.

The wind hadn't kicked up too bad, yet. The last thing he wanted

to do today was boat maintenance or sit at home doing paperwork. The radar showed the main frontal boundary still hours offshore. Conditions would deteriorate early in the afternoon, but he had enough time to go hit the backcountry for a while like he'd originally planned. Maybe hook into some snook himself.

One of the other guides called out to him as he headed for his boat. "Where's your charter, Al?"

"They postponed until tomorrow. I'm going to go out for a while, be back before lunch." He stared preparations to leave. Jerald's FMP boat still bobbed in its usual slip on the other end of the marina. At least Jerald would be happy he wouldn't be out long.

He was about to cast off when Jerald's FMP truck pulled into the marina parking lot. Alan cranked his engine and let it idle as he waited for Jerald to take his time walking down the dock. Still a little too dark to wear his trademark mirrored sunglasses, he carried them clipped to his shirt pocket. He wore uniform shorts today, not long pants. The charcoal material accentuated his firm, powerful thighs and tight ass. Not that he could see Jerald's ass from that angle, but he had plenty of memories of staring at it and knew exactly what it looked like.

He could, however, see the familiar bulge between his lover's legs, the bulge he spent a lot of up close and personal time with.

*Damn, he looks hot.*

Jerald glared down at Alan from the dock. "Where's your charter?"

"Bad shrimp scampi last night. They're going out tomorrow instead."

Jerald squatted down so he wouldn't have to yell over the noise of the engine. "Where the hell are *you* going then?" he grumbled.

"Chill out. I'm not even going as far as the head marker. Tide's coming in. I'm going to stay close to the flats, hit the back country, piddle around Indian Bay for a while. Maybe run up as far as Bayport into the river. No open water, I swear."

Jerald's radio squawked. He listened for a moment, then turned it down. "Be careful, please?"

"I promise."

Jerald glanced around, apparently didn't spot anyone paying attention to them. He crooked a finger at Alan, who stepped to the side of the boat. When he did, Jerald leaned in and kissed him. On the lips.

Stunned, Alan broke into a grin as Jerald stood up and slipped his sunglasses on. His lips curled in a playful smirk. "See you tonight, *Captain*." He turned and walked down the dock, leaving a stupefied Alan in his wake.

That was the first time, ever, Jerald had done something like that in public. Especially considering they were in "home territory," so to speak.

Laughing, Alan cast off his lines and slowly pulled his boat out of the slip. He motored out of the marina at idle speed, then turned north toward Hernando Beach. A few natural channels deep enough for his boat to navigate, especially at high tide, wound from the woods and wetlands into the sawgrass flats. He could try his luck in the canals and sheltered coves.

Not too many small boats out on a day like this, grey and breezy, choppy. He thought he spotted a bright splash of color a hundred or so yards in the distance, in some shallows at the edge of the sawgrass flats.

*Probably a loose crab buoy.*

He motored into a relatively calm inlet and almost immediately hooked several small snook, which he released. An hour later, his phone buzzed.

He took a quick glance at it before answering. Jerald's private cell. "I'm in a little place nearly as calm as a lake," Alan immediately said. "I'm fine."

"When are you coming in?" Jerald growled. "I've got to run down south to Hudson and take a look around. A crabber reported

someone's tampering with his traps."

"Hang on to your balls, buddy. It's rough out there. And you gave *me* shit about being out in open water?"

"Yeah, bite me. I'll be back in a couple of hours. *Your* ass better be at the marina before me."

Alan laughed. "Stay safe. Love you."

Jerald didn't hesitate to reply. "Love you, too."

Alan put his phone back in the console. Okay, so it wouldn't hurt to go back in to humor him. Especially considering what he looked forward to that evening. Not just a barbecue, but attending a barbecue with his *boyfriend*. Add to that the fact that Jerald had agreed to try living together.

Jerald Carter wasn't a difficult man to get along with, as long as you practiced the fine art of compromise and didn't mind his normally stony facade.

Jerald could sometimes make Mt. Rushmore look talkative.

He cranked the engine before pulling anchor. When he emerged from the sawgrass flats, he spotted that same strange blob of color.

Curiosity got the better of him. *What the hell, why not look?* He checked the depth finder and raised the engine as high as he could to protect the skeg and prop. As he neared, he couldn't get any closer than twenty yards away because the bottom grew too shallow.

That's when he realized the bright splash of pink wasn't a loose crab buoy, but a one-piece swimsuit on a woman's body.

*Oh, fuck.*

He hit the mark on his GPS to save the coordinates, threw the anchor, then prepared to call in his find to Jerald. That's when the woman raised her head before exhaustedly collapsing again.

He ripped off his shirt, kicked off his shoes, and vaulted over the side into the knee-deep water. She looked beat to hell, scratched and cut, but alive.

"Ma'am?"

She lifted her head again as he slogged toward her. Then she

started crying. "Oh, thank God!"

Caked in muck and mud, her long, blonde hair was matted to her head. Her hazel eyes looked bloodshot and terrified. Her pink bathing suit was also cut in a few places, and he noticed the scuba mask hanging around her neck.

*And a fanny pack around her waist?*

He picked her up and carried her to the boat as she tightly clung to his neck and cried against his shoulder. Under different circumstances he guessed she was probably pretty.

"How the hell did you get out here, lady?"

"I need to get to shore. Please take me in. I'll pay you."

"You're not paying me anything." He hefted her, hoisted her up on the gunwale before wading around the back to use the swim step to climb in. "How'd you get out here?"

"It's a long story."

"I need to call the Coast Guard and report you found. Someone must be looking for you."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, no! Please, you can't tell anyone you found me!"

Every last one of his bullshit alarms rang. "Why?"

She shook her head. He had to grab her arm and haul her back into the boat when she tried to dive off the side as she hysterically screamed, "No! I won't go back! He'll kill me!"

"All right, Jesus, calm down!" He held her until she stopped thrashing. Holy crap, her skin felt ice cold. "You promise not to jump out, I promise I'll hear your story and won't call the Coasties. Deal?"

She nodded, shivering despite the warm morning.

He grabbed a couple of towels out of the dry storage locker and wrapped them around her. "Now tell me what happened?"

"Do you have a bottle of water?"

He got her one and she drained it in several long, thirsty gulps. She finished half of a second bottle before she stopped. "I didn't fall overboard. I jumped. Last night."

He blinked in surprise. “Why the hell would you do that?”

She looked him in the eye. “Have you ever heard of the Scorsini family?”

“Sounds familiar.”

She shivered and pulled the towels tighter around her. “The father’s on trial in federal court in Tampa right now for racketeering and murder.”

“Oh.” He realized what she meant. “Oooh. *That* Scorsini family.”

“Family with a capital F.”

He rubbed his forehead, wondering what the hell he’d just gotten himself into. “Let’s back up and start with your name. I’m Alan Walker.”

“Daphne Peres.” She told him what happened as he dried off and pulled his shirt back on. When she finished, he had to admit he believed her, even though he suspected she left out more than a few details. Regardless, no one was crazy enough to do what she did without a damn good reason.

“You can’t tell anyone you found me,” she begged. “I need to get away.”

“Daphne, you’re going to have to talk to someone.” When the panicked expression filled her face again, he held up a hand. “Take a second to look at yourself. You need to get checked out, you have to see a doctor. You’ll be lucky if you can even walk.” He knelt in front of her and picked up one of her feet, his touch gentle as he examined the sole. Her skin had turned white and wrinkled from being in the water all night, but ugly slices full of mud marred the bottoms of her feet.

“You’ve got a bunch of nasty cuts on your feet. Some of them look pretty deep. I can call an ambulance for you when we get to shore.”

She frantically shook her head. “No, please!”

“Can I at least call someone for you? Anyone?”

She shivered and looked away. “I don’t have anyone,” she quietly

said.

“No one?”

She shook her head.

Jerald would kill him for not calling him into this, but he had to help her. “Listen, my boyfriend is a marine patrol officer. We’ll talk to him and he can help you.” He pointed at her feet. “You can barely walk. I’ll get you cleaned up, and then we’ll call him.”

“You can’t tell anyone you’ve found me.” She started crying again. “Please, he’ll report it and they’ll find me!”

Alan had to follow his instincts. Whatever her deal, no doubt she felt terrified. “I’ve got an idea. I’ll take you home with me, but I can’t take you into the marina. You going to behave and not try to run away?”

She tried to stand, crying out as she apparently realized he was right.

He shook his head. “You can’t walk like this. Let me help you.”

“Okay,” she said.

\* \* \* \*

Alan Walker was a cutie. A freaking angel on Earth. Saved her life, and he’s gay. Why not? If he wasn’t gay, he’d probably be happily married to a supermodel and have a house full of kids.

*Figures. My fucking dumb luck.*

She didn’t speak as they motored south. She shivered as she held the towels around her and tried to warm up. So she left out the part of her story about witnessing a murder, tweaked the events to make it sound like Paulie was really an abusive asshole.

Minor freaking detail. If she told Alan about the murder, she was a dead woman. Not to mention this poor guy’s life would also be in danger. At least this way, if she disappeared for a while without mentioning the murder, Paulie might not think she saw anything. He’d probably assume she died. He wouldn’t be reporting her lost

overboard, that's for sure. She didn't know how she'd get away from this guy, but no freaking way would she let anyone keep her from running.

Once she could walk, of course.

He turned the boat down a private canal and pulled alongside a dock. "If I take you into the marina, they'll know something's up. I know the guy who lives here. He's at work right now. The marina is one canal down. I'll go dock and come back and get you in my truck. It'll take me about fifteen minutes. You wait right here and don't move, okay?"

She nodded, trying not to start crying again. He had the sweetest brown eyes. "Thank you, Alan. I really appreciate this."

He offered her a smile. "It's okay."

By the time he returned for her, she'd tried to walk and didn't make it more than a few steps before she had to sit down again. Her idea had been to disappear so she didn't have to involve him any more than he already was, but not being able to walk put a kink in that admittedly ill-conceived plan.

He picked her up and carried her around the front of the house to his truck and sat her in the passenger seat.

"I thought I told you not to move," he chastised when he climbed behind the wheel.

"I wanted to see if I could walk."

"No, you wanted to take off and run away. Now do you understand what I was trying to tell you? How far do you think you'd get looking like that? Jesus, you look like an extra in a shipwreck movie."

She stuck her tongue out at him. He laughed, shaking his head as he shifted the truck into drive. "You're too much, Daphne. You're worse than my youngest sister."

He only lived a few minutes away. He pointed out the marina when they passed. "That's where I keep my two boats."

She noticed the FMP truck parked in the lot. "Is that your

boyfriend's truck?"

"Yeah." She didn't miss the slightly wistful tone in his voice.

"You've got it bad for him, don't you?"

He reddened a little. "Is it that obvious?"

"Guy in love. No mistaking the sound of that."

His house in south Aripeka wasn't a mansion, but nicer than middle class. He picked her up and carried her inside, where he set her on the bathroom counter so he could check her feet.

She caught a glance of herself in the mirror. "Holy crap, I am a mess. No wonder you wanted to call an ambulance." Now that she'd warmed up a little, knew she wasn't going to die, and had drank another two bottles of water, the worst of her injuries appeared to be her feet and her peace of mind.

"I'll start the shower and help you get in. When you're done, I'm taking you to a walk-in clinic so they can look at those cuts."

When she started to protest again he held up a hand. "Listen to me. You can give them a fake name, tell them you're my sister or something. Tell them you fell overboard and lost your purse and ID. I'll pay for it."

"I can pay." She unhooked the fanny pack and removed the baggie and her flip-flops. Her clothes, wallet, keys and the cash were all dry. At least something had gone right. "I took it from him when I left. I hope it's not counterfeit. Wouldn't that be ironic, to survive Paulie Scorsini, and then get busted for passing fake money?" She laughed, then started sobbing. "I'm sorry. I'm just so scared."

He held her, letting her cry against his shoulder. "Hey, you're lucky you're alive."

"I don't know how long I'll stay that way once he finds me."

"You're welcomed to stay here as long as you need. I've got plenty of room."

"I can't impose on you like that." Not that she had any other options. She damn sure couldn't go back to Daytona Beach.

He squeezed her hands one last time before turning to start the

shower for her. Such a sweet guy. His boyfriend was one lucky son of a gun.

He brought her shampoo and conditioner and a comb for her hair. He offered her a steadying hand while she dropped the towels and stepped into the shower. After pulling the shower curtain closed, she carefully slipped her suit off and handed it out to him.

Trashed by her journey to shore, several long rips split the fabric torn from snagging on the rocks. "Want me to just toss this?" he asked.

"Please."

"I'll stand outside the door if you need me."

"You might as well stay in here. I'm not modest." Screw it, he was gay. Her feet hurt like hell, especially with the fresh water now aggravating the cuts in her soles. Standing felt like agony since she'd warmed up and feeling had returned to her extremities. She also realized she had scrapes up and down her legs when the water stung those, too.

She tried to work the worst of the snarls out of her hair. It was hopelessly tangled and matted, even after she washed the mud and assorted grass and other crap out of it. "I hate to bother you, but can you help me with this?" She turned around and pulled the shower curtain open enough so he could reach her hair.

She handed the comb to him. He drenched her hair with conditioner and carefully pulled at the ends with the comb. After fifteen minutes, he sighed. "Honey, I'm sorry, but it's bad."

"I hate it long anyway. Can you cut it for me?"

"Let me get some scissors." He returned a moment later. "How short?"

"As short as you need to."

He touched a place on her back a few inches below her shoulders. "Here?"

"Sure."

She felt him carefully slide the blade along her back, snipping,

then combing and snipping some more until a few minutes later he made one final long cut, in a straight line, across her back. "That's it."

"Thank you." She finished showering, turning the water even hotter while he cleaned the hair up off the floor. It felt weird having shorter hair.

It felt good.

"I'll be right outside when you finish," he said, then she heard the door shut.

She found he'd left fluffy towels out for her, as well as a thick bathrobe and a clean pair of socks. She limped over to the counter, dried off, dressed, and pulled the robe on over her T-shirt and shorts. She still felt a little chilly.

"All safe?" he asked through the door.

"Yeah." He opened the bathroom door.

When he saw how much pain walking caused her, he carried her out to the kitchen, where he'd fixed her some soup. "You need something in you after that night." She ate as he sat across the table from her. "You can talk to me, you know," he said.

She nodded but didn't reply. She had a feeling he didn't totally buy her story, but she wasn't about to admit the truth.

She tried not to think about the man she witnessed being murdered. That might make her yak the soup.

Alan must have realized she wasn't going to talk. "Once you finish that, I'll take you to the walk-in clinic."

"Thank you."

"It's okay. I imagine you're going to sleep the rest of the day and a good chunk of tomorrow. Listen, I have to take a charter out tomorrow, but if you promise not to try to run away, I'll leave you here by yourself."

She might be stubborn, but not stupid. Paulie couldn't trace her here. Not this quickly. "I'll stay. Are you sure it's not an imposition?"

When he smiled, her heart thumped in reply. Shaggy blond hair, those big brown eyes, sweet, gentle voice, and a hunky bod. What

wasn't there to like? He was adorable, gay or not. "It's no imposition," he assured her.

\* \* \* \*

The doctor bought her story about falling overboard hook, line, and sinker. She wore one of Alan's baseball caps with her hair shoved under it. He gave her a tetanus shot, rinsed her wounded feet out with antiseptic, and stitched two of the wounds with dissolvable sutures. After putting her on a preventative round of antibiotics and admonishing her to stay off her feet for the next several days, the doctor declared Alan's "cousin," Jenny Walker, otherwise okay.

Alan stopped at a drugstore to fill her prescription. He got her a wheelchair they provided for customers and she held a hand basket in her lap while he pushed her through the store so she could get other things she needed. She bought some cheap tourist T-shirts and beach shorts, underwear too, giving her more than just one set of clothes.

On their way back to Alan's, she remembered hair dye. "Dammit. I should have gotten that, too."

He laughed. "You just survived a night in the Gulf, you're sliced up like you lost a round with a set of Ginsu knives, and you're worried about your roots?"

"No. I hate being a blonde. The only reason I dyed my hair was for..." She thought about it. "He is my ex now, isn't he? Not that I probably could have left any other way." That led to more nervous laughter, which soon turned into crying. "Jesus, I'm losing my mind."

He parked in front of his house. "No, you're exhausted. I bet you sleep the rest of the freaking day." He carried her inside to the guest room, got her situated, then rolled in an office chair. "Use this, stay off your feet so they can heal like the doctor said. I already checked and it'll make it through the bathroom door."

Her eyelids felt like two anchors had been tied to them. "Your boyfriend is a lucky guy, Alan."

He smiled, but it looked a little sad. “Yell for me if you need me, kiddo.”

She crashed into sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Alan closed the bedroom door. With a little time to himself to think, he needed a shower. The holes in her tale about why she jumped overboard sounded big enough to fly a jumbo jet through. With three younger sisters, he knew better than to push Daphne for more answers. She would open up to him and tell him the full truth when she felt safe enough to do it.

Until then, he’d have to wait her out.

Now the problem would be wrangling Jerald so he waited her out, too. He would want to go all cop on her ass and try to force the story from her.

Something had terrified her, without a doubt. A person doesn’t get rescued from the Gulf just to try to jump out of a boat again. Not unless they have something to hide.

Or fear.

After his shower, he sat at the kitchen table. She’d left her wallet laying there. He picked it up and looked through it. Daphne Peres. Daytona Beach address. Her driver’s license had been issued a month earlier, before her renewal date. Just moved, maybe? Twenty-three years old. She’d had her birthday that past July eighteenth. She also had a Social Security card, and a recently expired student ID for the University of Central Florida in Orlando. Well, that ruled out her being an illegal alien, most likely.

He looked up at the sound of Jerald’s truck in the drive. He’d lost track of time. It was after six already...

*The barbecue. Dammit.*

Jerald walked in, a pleased look on his face and dressed in a nice button-up short-sleeved casual shirt and khaki shorts.

*Yum!*

*And...it would go to waste.*

When Jerald walked in, he frowned at the look on Alan's face. "What's wrong?"

"You need to sit down. I've got a whopper for you."

"Is this about why you didn't call me like I asked? That's not like you. Only reason I didn't chew you out is I had to deal with a BUI and saw your boat was at the marina when I got back."

"Just sit down."

Alan watched Jerald's professional mask immediately slip into place. "I guess this means we're missing the barbecue?"

"Yeah."

Jerald pulled out a chair and sat. Alan related the day's events and handed him Daphne's license.

Jerald didn't speak until Alan finished. He stared at her license. "This doesn't make sense."

"You can't go all Perry Mason on her."

"Perry Mason wasn't a cop. He was an attorney."

"You know what I mean, Jer."

"Why didn't you call me when you found her?"

"Because she totally flipped out when I mentioned the Coasties. I did tell her you're FMP and could help her. She's scared for her life."

He let out a long, sad-sounding sigh. "Did you call them and tell them we won't be there tonight?"

"Not yet."

"Okay. Do it. Blame it on me, if you want. Say I had paperwork or something. I'll be back in a few." He picked up her wallet and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. I've got to run her license. My work truck with my laptop is there."

"You can't report this! I told her I wouldn't."

"I need to find out if she's got any outstanding warrants, or if

there are any missing person reports.”

“Jer, please, I promised her.”

“I have to do this. If I get nothing back on her, I won’t call in a report.”

Alan made the call to their friends and apologized for their absence. Then he nervously waited until Jerald returned thirty minutes later. Jerald laid her wallet on the table. “She’s clean. No record, no outstanding warrants. One traffic warning citation a year ago for a headlight out. The new license was an address change from Orlando. No car currently registered in her name, but she’s got insurance through one Paul Scorsini, Jr., of Daytona Beach.” He arched an eyebrow at Alan. “You do know who they are, don’t you? This could be a major fucking deal. You realize that, right?”

“Yeah. I realize that.”

“She needs to go.”

Alan sat up. “I’m not making her leave!”

“She’s not a stray cat. She’s a mobster’s girlfriend, for chrissake.”

“She’s a mobster’s *ex*-girlfriend.”

“Oh, yeah, like *that* doesn’t complicate things!” Jerald stood and jabbed his finger at Alan. “First thing tomorrow morning, you put her on a freaking Greyhound to anywhere and don’t stick around to find out where. That way you won’t end up in the line of fire.”

“No.”

Jerald’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, no?”

“N. O. Spelled just like that.”

“You’re going to risk yourself over someone you don’t know?”

“Jer, talk to her tomorrow. Please? If you’d just seen her when I found her—”

“I’ve seen desperate gratitude before. It comes as an unfortunate part of my job’s territory. It doesn’t mean I bring every person who expresses it home with me.”

Alan studied his face. “You’re jealous.”

Jerald’s eyebrows arched. “What?”

“Yeah. You’re jealous that I brought her home.”

“What the fuck? No, I’m not. I’m worried about your safety.”

“She’s not going to hurt me. She can barely stand, much less walk.”

“No, but the Scorsini family, they find out she’s here, they *will* hurt you. Haven’t you been paying attention to the news? The father’s up for a whole law dictionary full of charges, including the RICO act. They’re not throwing the book at him, they’re chucking the whole goddamned Library of Congress in his general direction to hopefully make something stick. The guy’s so slippery he makes Gotti look like Velcro instead of Teflon.”

Alan stood and rounded the table. He put his arms around Jerald. “That’s sweet that you’re worried about me. You’ll keep me safe, tough guy.”

Jerald finally returned his embrace, hugging him tightly. “Man, you finally drag me kicking and screaming out of the closet and you’re putting yourself into the line of fire like this? I don’t like it.”

“We need to help her.”

Jerald remained quiet for a long time. “The only reason,” he finally said, “that I’m not filing an incident report on this right now is because it’s you. There’s no missing boater or missing person report on anyone remotely matching her description. I don’t have any proof to suspect she’s tied up in something illegal. My honest opinion is she’s either running a major scam, or there’s a hell of a lot more to her story and she’s scared shitless to say so. Either way, it’ll show up soon enough. Please, promise me you’ll be careful and not get suckered into something you have no business being involved in.”

“I promise.” Alan kissed him. “Let me make you dinner and take you to bed to make up for our missed barbecue.”

“No, I’d better go.” He tried to pull away but Alan wouldn’t let him.

“Why?”

Jerald’s face reddened in embarrassment. “It’s not like we can do

anything,” he mumbled.

“Okay, dude, seriously? For one thing, she’s out like a light. She’s so exhausted we could probably have sex *in* bed with her and she wouldn’t wake up. For another, and frankly the most important point, it’s my house and you’re my boyfriend and she knows I have a boyfriend.”

Jerald kissed him, but still extricated himself from Alan’s arms. “I’m sorry. I’m just not comfortable with someone else here. I didn’t have a big family like you did.”

What he didn’t say, Alan easily guessed. Jerald wasn’t comfortable boinking with someone on the other side of the wall, able to hear them. Even in a hotel he sometimes tended to freeze up a little.

Alan sighed and leaned in for one last kiss. “One of these days, I’m nailing that goddamned closet door shut so you can’t retreat anymore.”

“Sorry,” Jerald mumbled. “I’ll stop by tomorrow to talk to her.”

“I’ve got that charter.”

He nodded. “I’ll come by after you’re back. Give me a call when you get in.”

With that, Jerald left. Alan’s appetite left with the man. He plopped himself onto the couch to watch TV. He had sworn he would never get involved with someone like his father, who had a job that put them in danger or who was a workaholic and let his job take priority over their private time. And look what he did, fell ass over ankles for a cop just like his old man. A wildlife officer, sure, but marine patrol officers were still cops. In some ways, Jerald’s job was even worse than a land cop’s job. An investigation or rescue could take him out onto the Gulf in treacherous weather no person in their right mind would brave.

He’d also sworn, after a relationship ended badly a few years ago, that if he got seriously involved with a guy again, it wouldn’t be with a guy who wasn’t totally open and comfortable being out.

Strike two.

Still, Jerald was different than anyone he'd ever met, man or woman. The last woman Alan had dated had screwed him over. Not as badly as Jerald's ex screwed him. Thank god he hadn't been dumb enough to marry the woman. But she'd stolen his identity and nearly put him in the hole financially. Fortunately, he'd caught on to her early enough to prevent serious long-term damage.

In the long run, it didn't matter if Jerald was gun-shy. Alan knew he'd wait as long as it took to totally coax Jerald into being fully comfortable with the public aspects of their relationship. Maybe Jerald came off as a stone-faced, stiff and personality-challenged cop to most everyone else, but Alan knew the truth. He had seen the man's softer side.

He was the only one who'd seen it. Once Alan realized it, he knew he didn't want anyone else in his life.

## Chapter Four

Alan woke up at his normal time the next morning, a little before five, hating the feel of the wide swath of empty bed beside him. He preferred it when Jerald spent the night, even if all they did was sleep.

Waking up alone did not suit him well anymore. Not when Major Jerald Carter filled the other half of his king-sized bed so perfectly. He almost walked out of the bedroom naked when he remembered his house guest. He slipped on a pair of shorts.

Alan stood in the kitchen, waiting on the coffee to brew, when he heard the guest room door open. After an extremely long moment, the bathroom door shut. He went to look and sure enough, the office chair still sat by her bed.

He grabbed it and stood waiting with it outside the bathroom door. When she emerged, she flinched, startled to see him standing there.

He pointed at the chair.

Rolling her eyes and smiling, she sat. "Thank you, Dad."

"I'm not old enough to be your dad. Big brother, maybe. You want to go back to bed, or would you like coffee and something to eat?"

Her stomach growled at the mention of food.

Alan laughed. "I think that answers that question." He pushed her into the kitchen and over to the table. "You want cream and sugar?"

"Please."

Daphne watched while Alan poured her coffee. Shirtless, his jersey knit shorts clung to his ass in a tantalizing way.

*Gay with a boyfriend. Totally off limits. Gay with a boyfriend...*

He turned from the counter with a mug in his hand. He brought it, a sugar bowl, a spoon, and a gallon of milk to the table. "There you go."

"Why are you helping me? I mean, I really appreciate it, but I can leave," she quietly said.

His expression grew serious, the playful look gone. "Listen," he quietly said as he sat next to her, "do you honestly *have* anywhere else to go? Any family? Friends? Anyone?"

He reached out and gently turned her face to his, his fingers firm on her chin. She felt lost in his big brown eyes. "No," she whispered.

She felt like a pitiful loser having to admit that. She had no family. When her best friend, Deanna, put two and two together and realized who Paulie was, she begged Daphne to leave him. When she wouldn't, Deanna distanced herself.

"Then why not stay here with me, at least for a while? Unless that asshole is a psychic, he has no way of finding you here."

She didn't have an adequate comeback that wouldn't force her to tell the truth. "Can I pay you rent or something?"

"Not right now. When you can get around again, you can do chores, help me with my paperwork, stuff like that."

"I won't stay long, I promise."

He leaned in and kissed her forehead. "I hope you don't mean that."

He stood to make them breakfast, leaving her wondering what he meant.

\* \* \* \*

Alan thought about Daphne while he took his shower. After breakfast, he'd helped her to the living room couch and made her comfortable there. She could watch TV all day on the couch, chill out and not have as far to go to the kitchen. She broke down crying again, and even though he knew it would put him at a rush for time, he sat

with her, holding her, soothing her until she calmed herself.

Why *was* he helping her?

What man in his right mind, straight or gay, could resist helping a pretty damsel so obviously in distress? He didn't get a scam vibe from her. He felt a literally scared to death vibe.

He thought about his youngest little sister, Laurie. His mom and dad had adopted her when she was twelve.

*Okay, color me psychoanalyzed.* Laurie had worn the same desperate, terrified look on her face when she first came to live with them at the age of six. He was fourteen then. They'd had several foster children, boys and girls, cycle in and out of their home over the years. The caseworker, Mrs. Calgary, had knocked on their door at ten that night with Laurie in her arms, the little girl desperately clutching the woman, refusing to let go.

Alan's father had been a deputy in the small north Florida town Alan grew up in. A shortage of emergency foster homes in their area prompted his parents to sign up for the program. Laurie's father had gotten very drunk one late May evening and beaten her mother to death before her eyes. She managed to lock herself in the bathroom of their small trailer and climb out the window to escape to a neighbor's house. She had no other family.

Mrs. Calgary tried to hand her over to Alan's mom and dad, but the little girl screamed, terrified to let go.

Alan had walked around behind Mrs. Calgary and smiled at the little girl without reaching for her. Then he talked to her for a couple of minutes, offered her a Twinkie and showed her one of his other sister's stuffed animals. To her, he must have seemed a strangely safe version of an adult. Older than her but not threatening. She finally let him take her from Mrs. Calgary, but she clung to him, terrified to let go, holding on as tightly and desperately as she had to Mrs. Calgary. He carried her up to his parents' bedroom where he and his mom stayed with her all night while his dad slept in Alan's room. Laurie tightly clung to Alan, even in sleep.

His mom looked at him in the dim light, a sad smile on her face. “You’ve always had that special touch, Alan,” she’d whispered. “You’re a gentle soul. You’re always good with the kids. Don’t ever lose that.”

Over the next days and weeks, Laurie shadowed Alan, even waiting for him outside the bathroom, wanting to sleep in his room with him, not even wanting anything to do with his other two younger sisters. She insisted Alan stay with her when she talked to the caseworker and the counselors. Fortunately, by the time school started that fall, she had bonded to his parents and other siblings and wasn’t terrified to go to school.

To this day she still felt closer to him than anyone else in his family.

Daphne wore the same look when he found her out there in the sawgrass flats. Those same terrified hazel eyes. That same fear.

She’d looked death in the face, literally, and believed with all her heart and soul she’d die next.

He’d never told Jerald about the circumstances of Laurie’s adoption. They didn’t talk about it in their family. It wasn’t a secret, but Laurie had no desire to revisit that dark time in her life. It had taken her years to stop having nightmares. Alan couldn’t begin to count how many times he’d awoken to find Laurie had crawled into bed with him in the middle of the night when she had yet another night terror.

Alan knew no matter what, no way could he ever turn his back on Daphne if she would let him help. Standing by and doing nothing was absolutely not an option.

\* \* \* \*

Alan found her dozing when he returned to the kitchen after his shower, but she awoke at the sound of him getting ready. He wrote his cell and the neighbor’s numbers on a notepad and brought it and the

house phone to the living room, where he laid them on the coffee table so she could reach them.

“Lucky thing I haven’t canceled the land line yet. I thought about doing it last month. That’s my cell number. Call me if you need me. If you get my voice mail, leave a message in case I didn’t hear it go off. If there’s an emergency, call my next door neighbor, Sharon. She’s usually home during the day and she’s got a key to get in. I already talked to her last night.”

He watched Daphne’s eyes haze over in fear. “Who did you tell her I was?”

“My cousin from out of town.” He smiled and gently chucked her under the chin. “I have a freaking huge family. Eight aunts and uncles, with literally dozens of cousins. Trust me, no one will ask questions or suspect anything unusual.” He watched as she marginally relaxed, but he could almost taste her fear. “I’ve got a morning charter. I’ll be back by one at the latest. Can I bring you anything?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you.”

He sat on the coffee table and gentled his voice. “Will you please talk to Jerald this afternoon? For me? I promise he won’t bite.” He smiled. “Unless, of course, you like being bitten. But if that’s the case, sweetie, I would be more than happy to help you out there.” He winked.

She laughed. Finally, he’d pulled a non-fearful emotion out of her. “Okay. If you think I should talk to him.”

“I think you should.” He couldn’t help it. He leaned in and kissed her forehead. She looked so lost, so terrified. “I’ll see you later. I’ll lock the door, but you can unlock it from the inside. Do not leave this house, and stay off those feet.”

She nodded. When he left, he locked the door behind him. A moment later his truck started and she heard him pull out.

He was so sweet. So cute. A little flirty, but probably just trying to make her feel better, hello, *gay with a boyfriend*. It’d worked, though. He’d totally put her at ease.

*Paulie's goons would...*

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut and willed away that memory. She couldn't live with herself if Alan got hurt because he helped her. He'd taken her under his wing without pushing her for the truth.

Then again, if she did tell him the truth he might make her leave. She certainly wouldn't blame him for that, either.

As far as she was concerned, the truth could stay at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico with that poor bastard Paulie killed.

\* \* \* \*

When Alan returned from his charter at noon, Jerald stood waiting for him on the dock at Alan's slip. Alan tossed him the mooring lines. Jerald caught them and wound them around the dock cleats.

"Have a good morning?" Jerald asked.

One of the tourists, a fat middle-aged man with a loud Boston accent, launched into an excited recollection of the morning. Alan caught Jerald's eye and winked.

Jerald winked back.

He gave their catch a cursory glance and waited until Alan had finished helping them unload their gear. Once they left, Alan grabbed a hose from the dock and started washing down the deck. "Oh. My. Gawd," he said, imitating the man's Boston accent. "They tawked my freakin' ears awf," Alan said.

Jerald smirked, amused. "That'll make you appreciate me even more."

"Dude, you have nooo clue. Your stonewall act is a relief compared to that. I had no idea how lucky I am."

Alan finished cleaning up, secured his boat, and followed Jerald up the dock. He pulled into his driveway first, Jerald following in his official truck. They found Daphne lying on the couch, dozing, the TV turned to a cable news channel. Alan walked over and sat on the coffee table. When he reached out and touched her shoulder, she

jumped, screaming, before she recognized Alan.

“Oh, god, I’m sorry,” she said. “I guess I dozed off again.”

“That’s okay. Daphne, this is Jerald Carter.”

Alan watched as the fear from her startling wake-up never fully left her face. Jerald put on a smile warm enough to melt an iceberg as he knelt down next to the couch so he didn’t tower over her.

“Nice to meet you, Daphne,” he said.

She nodded. “Same here.” Alan didn’t miss the way she pressed back into the couch, trying to put as much distance between herself and Jerald as possible.

*Laurie all over again.*

“Would you mind if I talked with you for a few minutes?” Jerald asked her. “Alan told me the basics.”

“Okay.” Her voice dropped nearly to a whisper.

Jerald went through the events that led her to jumping overboard, basically the same story she’d told Alan. When Jerald suggested she file charges against Scorsini, she flat-out refused.

It still didn’t make sense to Alan. She said she worried Scorsini would beat her up, referenced a fight earlier that day, but still nothing he could put his finger on that would cause the reaction he’d witnessed.

She nervously twisted her hands in her lap, constantly glancing at him as she talked with Jerald.

Finally, he couldn’t stand it anymore. Jerald’s questions had become repetitive as his tone hardened in frustration. Alan reached out and patted her hands, squeezed them to calm her. “That’s okay, you did good. You want lunch?”

“Yes, please.”

He stood and pulled Jerald to his feet and led him to the kitchen, behind the divider where she couldn’t see them.

“Enough, Jer,” he whispered. “She’s done.”

He frowned. “I’m not even getting started. Her story doesn’t add up.”

“She’s said all she’s going to say. Don’t harass her. You said she doesn’t have a record.”

“I said her license came back clean in whatever name she used to obtain it. I need prints to be sure.”

“You are not running her fucking prints! She hasn’t done anything except fight to save her life.”

Jerald leaned against the counter, arms crossed, his expression dark. Alan knew that look. Jerald felt far from happy. “This doesn’t add up.”

“Has she broken any laws?”

“Not that I know of, but—”

“Then you leave her the hell alone.”

\* \* \* \*

Jerald stared at Alan, studying him. He’d never seen this reaction in Alan, the blatant challenge in his expression, daring Jerald to argue with him.

“What’s going on with you?” he asked, struggling to keep his voice calm. “Why are you adopting her like this?”

Alan turned to the fridge. “She needs help. We can help her.”

“What’s this ‘we’ stuff? *You* volunteered to help her.” He sensed that was the absolute wrong damn thing to say from the sudden, tense set of Alan’s body.

“Fine. *I’ll* help her then. Happy? Sorry I fucking bothered you.”

Jerald put a hand out to still Alan’s agitated movements. “No, I’m not happy. You fish her out of the Gulf and she tells you her boyfriend is a fucking mobster who beat the crap out of her, and you’re just going to move her in with you?” *Without even asking me first.*

Alan shrugged his hand off his arm. “I’m not moving her in. I’m giving her a place to stay. She doesn’t have anyone she can turn to.” He dropped his voice again as he realized their volume had crept up

the scale. "You staying for lunch or not?"

"No."

"Fine. Are you coming back for dinner?"

Jerald knew that could lead to nothing but a fight under the present circumstances. "I don't know." He headed for the door.

"What about tomorrow?"

"What about it?"

"We're still moving your stuff, aren't we?"

*Holy crap.* He'd forgotten. He turned. "That should probably wait for now, don't you think?" He hated the hurt look that flashed in Alan's eyes, but he couldn't bring himself to cross the room and go back to him, to wrap his arms around him and hold him, not with Alan now standing in the opening to the kitchen where *she* could see them if he did.

Alan's jaw tightened. Jerald hated the way the other man's voice now sounded hurt and quiet. "Okay. Fine. See you around the marina, then," Alan said. He turned to get something else out of the fridge.

Jerald walked out, forcing himself not to slam the door behind him. All the way back to the marina he ripped himself a new one.

*Could have handled that a lot fucking better.*

He wasn't good at this kind of stuff. Especially not with Alan. Normally, their relationship cruised along without him having to deal with hurt feelings or arguments. They never argued. They rarely disagreed. Perfectly matched as far as temperament, no friction or tension usually existed between them. Except for the pleasant sexual kind, of course. Alan was his calm, his rock, his eye in the storm, and this alien emotional territory made him uncomfortable. Everything had been going fine until Alan found *her*. They'd been happy, and now it had gone to shit.

*And it's all her fault.*

## Chapter Five

From the tense hunch in Jerald's shoulders, Daphne was surprised he didn't slam the door as he left. "Is everything okay?" she nervously asked Alan. *Duh*, she'd just witnessed a fight over something.

She had a feeling that something was her. She didn't have to be a psychic to see that hot and hunkalicious Joe Friday, Fish Cop, couldn't be less thrilled about her presence if he tried.

Not that she blamed him. If their positions were reversed, she wouldn't want some mobster's ex-girlfriend moving in with her boyfriend either. At least he didn't have to worry about them sleeping together in a wild monkey-sex kind of way.

*Le sigh.*

"He had to get back to the marina."

She eased herself off the sofa and into the office chair. Carefully, she rolled over to the kitchen table. "Dirty Harry doesn't like me, huh?"

He smirked. "I wouldn't say that."

"That's because you're a nice guy. You don't have to spare my feelings. I'm sorry I've caused you problems with him."

He made them both sandwiches and dished out potato salad before he sat down at the table with her. "He's protective."

"If you were my boyfriend, I'd be protective too. Territorial even. He's a lucky guy."

Alan laughed. "You're good for my ego, girl."

After lunch she returned to her bedroom to lie down and take a nap. Her feet throbbed if she kept them down too long. He helped her prop them up on extra pillows.

“Did you take your medicine?” he asked.

She smiled. “Yes.”

“You don’t mind I’m overprotective, do you? I’m big brother to three younger sisters. Old habits die hard.”

“I don’t mind. It’s nice having someone taking care of me.”

“You ever have that?”

She felt heat fill her face. “No,” she quietly admitted. “Not for a long time.”

Daphne tried to sleep after he closed the bedroom door and left her alone. Only a moron could miss the blatant emotions in Jerald Carter’s face when he looked at Alan. That man felt head over heels in love with Alan.

He also didn’t like the fact that Alan had taken her in.

Maybe if she tried super hard to be nice to him, he might friendly up a little. Alan was right, she couldn’t leave yet. She damn sure didn’t need Major Carter poking around and asking her more questions. She also didn’t want to cause Alan any problems with him.

\* \* \* \*

Jerald slammed his fist against the steering wheel before he started his truck and pulled out of the marina a little after five that afternoon.

*Goddammit.*

He’d felt like shit all afternoon, probably pissed off half the guides at the marina in the process, and wanted to beat the living daylights out of something.

He had to apologize to Alan. He would also have to sit back and let this situation run its course on Alan’s time, not his. Legally, there wasn’t anything else he could do, unless he wanted to file a report and piss Alan off and drive him away in the process. Alan’s protective big brother streak had gone into steroidal overdrive. Any attempts on his part to make Alan see reason would only cause more problems. Alan

would take her side, not see the sense in his arguments.

He went home, showered, changed, and picked up his personal truck. He took a detour by Wal-Mart before heading back to Aripeka. He couldn't show up at Alan's empty-handed. He needed to bring an "I'm sorry" gift.

Jerald happily noted that Alan looked pleasantly surprised when he walked in his front door a little after seven. Despite that, Alan still didn't cross the kitchen to kiss him hello.

"Hey," Alan simply said.

Jerald nodded and set the plastic bag on the table. "Hey." He glanced over and noticed Daphne struggling to get off the couch and into the office chair. He dove for her, catching her as she lost her balance when the chair skittered out from under her.

She blushed. "Thank you," she softly said as he helped her into the chair.

He wondered if she ever raised her voice. She sounded so timid that it led credence to her domestic abuse story. "No problem."

"I'll leave you guys alone." She started scooching her way across the living room floor, using her toes to move the chair.

Jerald reached out and grabbed the back of the chair. "That's okay. Don't worry about it. You don't have to leave."

She warily eyed him. "I don't mind giving you two privacy. I'll go eat in my room."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Alan watched their interaction.

"Don't be silly," Jerald insisted as he pushed her across the living room to the kitchen table. "I'm off duty. I promise, no interrogations or bright lights. I even left my rubber hose at home."

She actually laughed, despite blushing again. Even her laugh sounded quiet.

"Don't let him fool you," Alan joked. "He keeps a spare rubber hose in his pants."

She laughed again, sounding a little more relaxed. Jerald bit his tongue not to reply, but his heart raced at the playful smile on Alan's

face.

He'd been forgiven.

When Jerald stepped behind Daphne's chair, Alan silently mouthed, "*Thank you,*" to him.

Jerald felt heat fill his face. He nodded before taking a seat at the table.

"You're staying for dinner, right?" Alan asked him. "I made plenty."

"Yeah, thanks."

Alan was in the process of breading cube steaks. He rinsed the flour from his hands and opened the plastic bag. He arched an eyebrow at Jerald as he held up the spool. "Fishing line?"

"You said you needed some," he mumbled. "I figured I'd pick it up for you."

Alan winked at him again. "Thank you. That's very thoughtful. I appreciate it."

\* \* \* \*

Alan desperately struggled not to laugh as he turned his back on them and set the spool of fishing line on the counter, out of his way. *Fishing line!*

So it wasn't flowers or a card. In Jerald Carter's world, it meant a lot more than some mushy, sentimental mumbo-jumbo. Alan had mentioned a few days ago that he needed to add a spool of fishing line to his next shopping list, but he'd forgotten to do it.

Jerald might appear to be a stonewalled hardass to those who didn't know him, but inside hid a sweet, lovable marshmallow.

Translated, fishing line was Major Carter-ese for "I'm sorry I acted like an asshole."

That and the fact that he'd tried to make nice with Daphne.

While Alan cooked dinner, his back turned to them, Jerald talked with Daphne. Alan sensed her starting to loosen up around Jerald,

which would be good for both of them. She had no family, no friends who could take her in. He didn't know her whole story, but he would get it out of her eventually.

She wasn't going anywhere if he had anything to say about it. He didn't want to lose Jerald, but the other man would have to get used to having her around for the foreseeable future.

\* \* \* \*

During dinner, Alan's cell rang. He left the room to take it, then returned a moment later. "Would you mind if I took a charter tomorrow morning?" he asked Jerald.

"Why would I mind?"

He nodded toward Daphne, who sat with her back to him.

Jerald realized what he meant—babysitting. "I'll be around in the morning." He had been hoping to start moving in. Who was he kidding? He didn't have much. He could have been totally moved in by lunch if he got his butt in gear early enough and with both of them packing his stuff.

That wouldn't happen now, though. Not with her around. He just hoped she didn't stay very long.

"Thanks." Alan put the phone back to his ear. "Yeah, meet me at the marina at seven sharp. Great! See you there." He gave Jerald a peck on the cheek as he sat at the table again. "Thank you."

"Yeah, no problem."

Jerald took care of the dishes while Alan helped her take a bath and get settled in bed. If Jerald could pick a descriptor to label Alan, girlie would be at the bottom of the list, but caretaker would be at the top. Jerald hoped Alan didn't get in too deep with this girl. Not that he worried about him romantically, but attracting any kind of attention from the Scorsini family was not a good idea.

Hopefully she'd tip her hand soon enough. Then Jerald could use that to force Alan to see reason.

When Alan returned to the kitchen, he wrapped his arms around Jerald's waist and kissed the back of his neck. "You are the best. You know that?"

"Why?"

"Why, my ass. Do I have to embarrass you and say it?"

He finished rinsing the last plate and dried his hands. "Please, don't."

"So we can move you in tomorrow afternoon after my charter?"

Jerald took a deep breath. "We need to hold off on that."

Alan studied him. "You're not pulling some passive aggressive bullshit and holding that over my head so I'll get rid of her, are you?"

*Yes.* "No! Jesus, I just..." He tried to think of a way to get through this without starting another fight. "It took me what, two years of you working on me to get me to agree to move in. I'm not like you. I can't just jump right in with open arms like you can. Maybe after I get to know her better I'll feel more comfortable. I need time to get used to having a stranger around."

Alan crossed his arms in front of him. "So this means I'm not getting laid in the foreseeable future."

"You know, you *can* come over to my place and spend the night."

"And spend an hour hunting for my clothes in the morning after the rats have carted them away? I think not."

"It was one raccoon, and I told you, it's gone. My trailer's not that bad."

"It's not that good, either."

It was already after eight. Normally they would have tumbled into bed by now and been halfway to getting laid or going to sleep. He didn't want to piss Alan off, but he didn't want to sit on the couch and end up with a worse case of blue balls than he already had.

Jerald leaned against the counter. "I'll come by in the morning and stay with her," he said. "Maybe you and I can go out for dinner or something tomorrow night."

"I wouldn't feel right leaving her here alone."

*Of course you wouldn't.* He pushed away from the counter and headed for the door. "I'll see you in the morning, then."

Alan caught his arm. "So this is how it's going to be between us from now on?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, bullshit you don't. You're pissed because I won't toss her out on her ass. The doctor told her she should stay off her feet as much as possible for a few days until the worst of her cuts heal. You don't expect me to kick her out unable to walk, do you?"

Jerald knew he shouldn't say it. Still, he couldn't stop himself. "I expect you won't kick her out at all. It's your house. I don't have any say about what you do in it."

Alan let go of him as if he'd been scalded, shock on his face. "That's not fair."

"I don't want to fight with you about this, about her. Let's not do this, okay? I'll see you tomorrow." He leaned in to kiss him, but Alan leaned away.

Jerald found he was getting pretty good at not slamming doors even when he really, *really* wanted to. He stalked out of Alan's house and managed to not squeal the tires when he pulled out. He stewed all the way home. An hour later, he lay in bed, watching TV, when his cell rang. He felt tempted not to answer, but it wasn't worth exacerbating the situation.

"Hello."

"I'm sorry," Alan said. "Please have a little patience."

He had to say it. "I'm trying to have patience, but when every bone in my body screams there's something wrong, it's hard for me to sit by and watch the man I love being pulled into something that's none of his business. I'm a cop. My job isn't just about fish and game, you know. It's not only my instincts, but my training telling me this girl is bad juju."

Alan fell silent for so long Jerald had to look to make sure the call didn't drop. "That's sweet that you feel that way. I'm sorry you're

worried. I do appreciate your concern, but I am a big boy. My dad was a cop too, remember? I promise, if I feel this is too much, I'll turn the situation over to you and defer to your judgment. Does that make you feel better?"

"A little. I won't really feel better until life gets back to normal."

"Any chance of talking you back over here tonight?"

"You need to get to sleep. You've got to be up early for your charter."

They said goodnight and Jerald turned off the TV. He lay there another hour, stewing, before finally dropping off to sleep.

## Chapter Six

*I will be nice to her*, Jerald mentally chanted through his shower the next morning. Instead of being able to sleep late on his day off, or getting up early to do something pleasingly productive like moving in with Alan, he was getting ready to go to his boyfriend's house and babysit a mobster's runaway girlfriend.

*Terrific.*

Not on his daily to-do list, that's for sure.

He arrived just as Alan was preparing to leave. Alan kissed him, long and deeply.

"I *really* appreciate this. I don't like leaving her alone if I don't have to."

"Yeah, well, maybe you can come home with me later and show me exactly how much you appreciate this."

"Why can't you stay here and let me show you how much?"

Jerald stepped away. "You know why," he grumbled.

"She could care less what we do. She's grateful to have a roof over her head."

"I care, okay?" This had already started out badly. "She still asleep?"

"Yeah. I'll be back after noon."

"Be safe."

"I will." Alan kissed him one last time.

Jerald set about making himself breakfast before sitting on the couch to eat and watch the morning news. She emerged a little before seven.

*At least she's not some lazy thing that sleeps all day.*

He watched her slowly hobble from her room and down the hall toward the bathroom. “Why aren’t you using the chair?” he called out.

Startled, she turned, which made her lose her balance. She grabbed for the wall as he bolted off the couch, managing to reach her before she fell. He wrapped a supporting arm around her waist. “Jesus, if you hurt yourself, he’ll fucking kill me.”

“I’m sorry.” She sounded close to tears.

“Hey, I’m sorry I scared you.” He did feel badly about that. “Let me help you.”

“I’m okay.” He wished she’d use something other than that shitting-bricks-scared tone of voice.

“No, you’re *not* okay.” Clearly, she wasn’t. Her face looked pinched with pain. “Let me help you into the bathroom.”

She finally nodded. She leaned on him for support while he helped her make it into the bathroom. When she emerged a few minutes later, he waited next to the bathroom door with the office chair.

“Sit.”

“It’s okay.”

“Sit, or I carry you.” No way in hell would he give Alan something to get angry about.

She finally sat. He pushed her into the kitchen, to the table. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“Cereal is fine.”

“No, I’ll cook you something.” Maybe when Alan heard he’d cooked for her he’d get laid later. “Eggs?”

“Thank you.”

He hated making small talk, wasn’t good at it, but would do it anyway to make Alan happy. Try to be nice to her. *Proves how much I’m in love.* “Scrambled?”

“That’s fine.”

Jesus, she sounded like a timid mouse. It pissed him off someone had done something to make her act like that. She shouldn’t have to

live in fear. "Tell me a little about yourself."

"There's not much to tell."

When she didn't continue, he fought the urge to sigh in frustration. "Are you originally from Florida?"

"Born here. I grew up mostly in Orlando."

He waited, trying to figure out something else to ask her, when she looked at the small stack of magazines he'd left on the table. "What's this?" she said, pointing.

"Sudoku magazines. I'm sort of addicted to them."

"What is that?"

"What is what?" He plated her eggs and brought them and a mug of coffee over, along with the milk and sugar.

"Sudoku. I don't know what it is."

He laughed as he sat across the table from her. "You must be from another planet." He pulled a magazine from the stack and showed her. "They're number puzzles. Nine-by-nine grid, divided into nine boxes of nine. You have to fill in the missing numbers, one through nine, based on what they give you." He showed her.

"That looks complicated."

"Not really. Once you get the hang of it, you can blast through the easy ones. There are tricks to solving the more complex ones. I love these things." He smiled. "It's Alan's fault. I couldn't shut my brain off at night after a really bad incident at work. After a few nights of insomnia, he handed me a book of them and told me to go do some. Helped me focus and quiet my mind."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Better than crossword puzzles, because you don't need any reference books to look stuff up. And better than the find-a-word puzzles, which I used to do, because even with those you're thinking about words. This is all numbers."

"I could use something like that."

She looked haunted, vulnerable. Like she'd witnessed things best left undisturbed in her memory. "You should try these then." He

teased another magazine out of the pile and brought her a mechanical pencil from Alan's desk. "Here. I've got plenty of them."

He showed her how to do them. "Once you get the hang of it, it becomes automatic."

"Does it really help you not think about things?"

Maybe if he shared a little she might reciprocate.

"A lot of people think what I do is pretty simple because I'm marine patrol. It's not. I'm a cop, just like any deputy. The difference is, my beat is spent on a boat or in a truck, and my crime scene might be at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico, or it might be in the middle of the Withlacoochee State Forest."

He took a deep breath. "Year before last, fourth of July weekend, a couple of families went out on the water. Everyone goes out on the big holidays, whether they belong there or not. These people did not belong there. They'd been drinking.

"One of the guys gets the bright idea to race down the channel and challenges the other guy. Problem is, one of the boats strayed too far outside the channel, hit bottom, and slung a six year-old boy out of the boat. Kid didn't have a life jacket on, either." He swallowed back bile at the memory. "The other boat ran him over, didn't see him and couldn't have stopped in time anyway. Two hundred horsepower outboard with a stainless steel prop. Like a damn meat grinder. You ever see pictures of manatees with prop wounds?"

She nodded.

"Think what would happen if a prop did that to a forty-pound kid's belly and chest."

She paled and reached for his hand. "I'm sorry."

"I arrived on scene first. I'd been out near the head marker. Nothing could be done for the poor kid. When I could finally sleep, I had nightmares like you couldn't believe. Couldn't close my freaking eyes without seeing him. I don't do sleeping pills. That's when Alan told me to try these. I started doing an hour of them before I went to bed and it worked like magic. I still had nightmares, but at least I

could zone out before I tried to go to sleep. My mind worked on something else.”

He sat back and let out a deep breath. “The worst day I’ve ever had on the job. I hope to God I never have another one like it before I retire.”

“How long have you been in?”

“Too damn long, it feels like some days. Over twenty years. It was still called marine patrol when I joined after college. Now we’re under Fish and Wildlife. Everyone still calls us marine patrol though, even though that’s only part of what we do.”

After she finished eating, he helped her to the couch. Then he cleaned up the kitchen and washed the dishes before he returned to the living room and settled in the recliner Alan had purchased a few months earlier. Super comfortable, and more than one evening he’d fallen asleep in it to have Alan wake him up and drag him to the bedroom to spend the night. He suspected Alan bought it specially for him, yet another enticement to try to keep him there with him.

“You don’t have to stay here with me if you have other things to do,” she said. “I’ll be okay.”

“It’s my day off. I don’t mind.” He started working on a Sudoku puzzle.

“Earning boyfriend brownie points?”

He looked up at her soft comment, then spotted her playful smile. He laughed. “Yeah, maybe you could say that.”

“I’m sorry I’ve caused problems between you two.”

Okay, that made him feel guilty. “You didn’t cause a problem.” *I will not interrogate her. I will not interrogate her.* “If you want the honest truth, I’m a very private person. In my line of work, I like to end the day and settle in and decompress. Alan has a calming personality and I don’t socialize very well. I don’t want you to feel bad about being here, seriously.”

“Thank you. I promise as soon as I can I’ll be out of here and out of your way.”

*Aw, shit. "I don't want to run you off. That's not what I meant." That is what I meant, but Jesus Christ I don't want Alan to think I actually said that!*

"No, I know. I understand. Besides, I have to get moving and find a job and a new place to live anyway." She fell quiet and sat there working a Sudoku puzzle. The TV seemed to annoy her. "Is there anything special you want to watch?" she asked a few minutes later.

He shook his head. "Not really. I usually listen to a cable music channel if Alan's not home. I don't watch much TV."

"Oh, how does that work?"

He picked up the remote and showed her how to activate the channel guide. "There, those channels."

"Do you care what I put it on?"

"Please, no rap or gospel music. Or kids stuff."

She smiled. "I guess that means classical is out too, huh?"

"Channel eight-forty."

She laughed as she changed the channel. "He'll be happy we have something in common," she teased as she set the remote on the coffee table. As the peaceful sounds of Mozart filled the living room, Jerald felt some of his tension melt away. He liked many different kinds of music. When driving or on a boat, or trying to work around the house, he liked upbeat contemporary stuff, or rock and roll.

When he needed to decompress, he turned to his "aural Novocain," as Alan had dubbed it. "You like classical?" he asked.

"My mom taught piano. She used to play in her spare time. She especially loved Chopin and Brahms."

*Ah, a little of her mysterious past revealed.* "Do you play?"

"No. I was never any good. I enjoy listening to it though."

Now she had his interest. "Tell me a little more about yourself."

"Like what?"

"Did you go to school?"

"I have an English degree, if that's what you mean."

"What about your family?"

Her face clouded. "I don't have any."

"None?"

She shook her head.

"What happened to your parents?"

She took a deep breath. "My mom and dad died in a car wreck. I was ten and sitting in the backseat. Guy fell asleep at the wheel and hit us head-on. Not drunk, just exhausted. I lived with my mom's aunt through high school. She died when I was seventeen. I stayed with my best friend's parents until after I graduated, then I lived on my own in college."

"What did you do for a living before you met Scorsini?"

"I graduated this past spring. I waited tables and tended bar. I tried to find a job as a teacher, but with all the budget cuts and hiring freezes, I didn't have any luck."

"That's how you met Scorsini?"

"Unfortunately." She studied the puzzle magazine in her lap. "He finally talked me into moving in with him. I wish I'd never done it," she softly said.

From the look on her face, he sensed she'd had all she could tolerate on that subject for a while. He left her alone as they sat there working their puzzles.

Something else they had in common, he realized.

They were both orphans.

\* \* \* \*

Alan called from the marina a little after twelve. By the time he returned home, Jerald had lunch waiting on the table. He'd also made sure Daphne took her medicine.

Alan leaned in and kissed Jerald, worry on his face. "Everything okay?"

"I played nice."

"Not a single rubber hose in sight," Daphne joked from where she

sat at the table.

They had a good lunch, then while Alan went to take a shower and clean up, Jerald started gathering his things.

Daphne tried to return the Sudoku magazine to him. “No, you keep it,” he insisted. “I have a lot of them. I’ll bring you some more, if you want.”

She offered him a hesitant smile. “Thank you.”

He decided to test the waters. “Is it helping you keep your mind off your troubles?”

She shrugged. “I don’t think anything but a lobotomy could do that, but it is distracting me.”

\* \* \* \*

Jerald returned later for dinner and brought a pizza and large salad. While Daphne acted a little more relaxed around him, she offered no new information on her situation. After they finished eating, she went to take a shower before going to bed.

Alan leaned in and deeply kissed him. “Spending the night?”

Jerald’s dick throbbed. A deep kiss, hell, even a sultry look from Alan could make him hard. “Not tonight, I’m sorry.”

Jerald didn’t have to be psychic to read the disappointment on Alan’s face. “Why not?”

They’d had a good dinner and Jerald didn’t want to start another fight. “I’m really tired.”

Alan crossed his arms. “Explain why my bed isn’t just as good or better for sleeping in than that shitty trailer?”

“Just give me some time with this, please?”

Alan looked like he wanted to argue the point, then let out a long, sad sounding breath. “Fine,” he quietly said. “What are you doing tomorrow?”

Jerald hated that tone of voice. He knew it meant Alan wasn’t happy about him leaving, but he wouldn’t fight him on it either.

*Fuck.* “Sleep late. Then I need to mow, the grass is nearly up to my knees in some places.”

Alan turned back to the sink and started wiping down the counter. “Okay. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Love you.”

Alan nodded, but didn’t turn. “Love you, too. Be careful driving home.”

Jerald didn’t want to leave things like that, but wasn’t sure how to fix them and damn sure didn’t want to prod Alan about it and start a fight with him. Jerald drove home kicking himself all the way. Why *not* spend the night? Turn around and go back and be able to sleep in together tomorrow morning, enjoy relaxing with him on a rare morning they both didn’t have to get up earlier than hell.

He couldn’t bring himself to do it. And as he lay in bed and tried to sleep, he wondered if he was strong enough to stand by Alan in this relationship, be the kind of partner Alan deserved. Someone not terrified of their relationship.

Someone proud to admit that man was his partner.

He rolled onto his side and tried to sleep.

## Chapter Seven

Jerald gave up trying to sleep a little after six the next morning. He'd tossed and turned all night and kicked himself in the ass for not staying at Alan's. He couldn't get Alan's sad, quiet voice out of his head.

He hated hurting him like that.

Alan deserved better. He deserved a boyfriend who could man up and not be afraid. He wanted to be that man, he'd just have to figure out how the hell to do it.

He spent all morning working at home, ran errands, went shopping, and played catch-up on chores he'd put off. He needed to do laundry, then decided to bite the bullet and took it over to Alan's.

He found Alan and Daphne sitting and talking on the back deck. Shirtless, Alan looked like he'd been doing yard work of his own. When he saw Jerald he smiled and stepped inside the house to talk with him.

"Glad to see you." He kissed Jerald. "Missed you last night."

Jerald studied his feet. "Missed you, too." He prepared for an onslaught of *see, I told you so's*, but none came.

Instead, with a knowing smile, Alan tipped his head toward the full laundry basket. "Washer's empty. Help yourself."

"Thanks."

"You staying for dinner?"

Jerald forced his gaze to Alan's face. "Yeah."

Alan nodded. "Okay." He stepped outside again without asking if Jerald would spend the night.

Jerald didn't know if that made him feel better or worse.

He spent the afternoon helping Alan, feeling more nervous as the day lengthened. Alan still hadn't pressed the issue about spending the night.

Jerald helped Alan fix dinner. Daphne had volunteered to help, but both men ordered her back to the couch. Alan didn't want her to hurt herself, and her feet still obviously bothered her.

Jerald wanted nothing to impede her healing. The faster she could get out of there, the better.

"Would you please go out with me tomorrow night?" Jerald asked Alan. He hated that he sounded like he was begging, but dammit, he wanted time alone with him.

Alan glanced at the living room, where Daphne sat on the couch and worked a Sudoku puzzle. She'd really gotten into doing them.

"I don't know. I don't feel right leaving her alone."

"I *can* hear you, you know," she said. She looked up and smiled. "Please, go have fun. I'll be okay by myself. I really would rather not go out anywhere. Besides, I don't have any clothes to go out in."

Alan looked torn. Jerald pounced on the opportunity. "Please? You and me. She said it's okay."

Alan looked from her to him and back again. "You're sure you don't mind being home alone?"

"Not at all. Seriously. I'll sit here and watch TV and do puzzles. I'm not much of a socializer anyway."

"All right."

*Yes!* Jerald would have jumped up and down, but that would have looked undignified. "Tomorrow night, once I'm off duty, we're going out. You and me." He stepped forward, forcing Alan behind the kitchen wall. Jerald leaned in and growled in his ear, "Maybe after, we can have some fun if she's asleep when we get back."

Alan slipped his arms around Jerald's waist and pulled him closer. Jerald felt Alan's hard cock through his shorts. "Who gives a shit if she's asleep?" he whispered. "I need a good, hard fucking, buddy. You haven't given me one in several days."

Jerald was getting to the point maybe he could overlook someone else in the house. “We’ll see.”

Alan planted a kiss on his lips before turning him loose.

After dinner, Daphne retired early, leaving the men alone in the living room. Alan sat next to Jerald on the couch and snuggled close.

Before he knew it, he had Alan in his arms, kissing him.

Alan’s hand trailed down Jerald’s torso, until he slipped it between his legs and squeezed, making him moan.

“Come to the bedroom with me,” Alan whispered. “I have something I want to show you.”

“What?” Jerald gasped.

Alan stood and dropped his shorts, leaving him standing naked in the middle of the living room. “Me.” He picked up his shorts and quickly walked down the hall without a look back.

Jerald’s mouth dropped open. Finally, once he made his brain start working again, he followed.

*Why the fuck not.*

Alan waited on the bed, stretched out and naked. When Jerald walked through the bedroom door, Alan crooked a finger at him. “Come here, tough guy,” he quietly beckoned.

Jerald shut the door behind him and stripped. No, he couldn’t turn his back on Alan tonight. No fucking way in hell.

He crawled onto the bed. “You still in the mood for a good, hard fucking?”

Alan’s eyes lit up. “Oh, man, when am I ever *not* in the mood for you?” He reached over to the bedside table, where he grabbed the bottle of lube before handing it to Jerald. Without prompting, he flipped over onto his hands and knees.

Firm thighs dusted with golden hair tapered into the slightly pale, deliciously tight ass now presented to him. Jerald bent down and swirled his tongue around the indentation behind Alan’s right knee.

Alan moaned as Jerald teased him, tickling the spot that could drive him nearly crazy with need. Alan’s hips bucked against thin air.

“Dude, please,” he hoarsely whispered. “Don’t leave me hanging.”

Jerald smiled as he sat up. He reached between Alan’s legs and palmed his sac. His balls already felt tight and firm, drawn up, begging to be handled. He reached further and gripped Alan’s cock. A drop of pre-come had already formed at the slit. Jerald rubbed it all over the head as Alan shifted his hips against his hand.

Without letting go of Alan’s cock, Jerald leaned in and kissed his right ass cheek before biting down, hard enough he knew the impression of his teeth would remain until at least the next day.

Alan moaned into his pillow as his cock twitched in Jerald’s hand.

With his free hand, Jerald stroked Alan’s back. “You like that?”

Alan moaned in response, well past the point of coherent speech. Jerald continued biting and nipping Alan until the man begged to be fucked. Jerald slicked himself with lube, drizzled some down the crack of Alan’s ass, and pushed his finger into the other man’s rim.

“Right there? Is this what you want?”

“Jesus Christ, you goddamn tease, stick your cock in my ass and fuck me!”

Jerald laughed. “All righty then.” He pulled out his finger, replaced it with his throbbing cock, and thrust home hard and deep.

Alan slammed his hips backward, meeting him stroke for stroke. “Goddammit, yes!”

With his large hands clamped around Alan’s hips, Jerald fucked him hard and fast, enjoying the sound of Alan’s loud moans. When Alan reached between his legs and fisted his own cock with his hand, Jerald knew he was close.

He tried to hold back, wanting Alan to finish first. That proved difficult considering how good it felt having Alan’s tight ass muscles deliciously engulfing his cock. He slowed his thrusts a little, while increasing the force, their flesh loudly slapping together at the bottom of every stroke.

Then Alan threw back his head. “Oh, fuck yes!”

Jerald took that as his cue. Feeling his lover’s muscles spasming

around him, he pumped his cock into him until his own climax felt like it would split his cock in two before it finally exploded. He collapsed on top of Alan, both of them breathing heavy. He laced his fingers through Alan's and kissed the back of his neck.

"You okay?"

Alan laughed and squeezed Jerald's hand. "I'm sooo fucking okay. That was fantastic."

"Why didn't you wait?"

Alan turned his head so he could look at Jerald. "For one, you had me too fucking horny to wait. Not to mention what you did to me felt too damn good. For another, I didn't mind doing it so we could cut down on the noise a little, end things sooner."

Jerald felt heat rush to his face. *Holy fuck*, they had been loud. Now with his cock finally happy to have received some action, he realized unless Daphne was asleep or comatose, there was no way in hell she couldn't have heard them.

He rolled off Alan and went to clean up before returning to the bed with a washcloth for Alan. With a little more time to ponder the situation, he realized he couldn't face her right away. Damn sure didn't want to look across the breakfast table to see a knowing smile. Even a smile as cute as hers, when you could coax a smile out of her.

Alan frowned. "Uh oh. What's that look for?"

"I'd better go," he mumbled as he reached for his clothes.

Alan touched his hand. "Why?"

"Give me some time with this, please?"

Maybe Alan was just happy to have won this battle. He kissed Jerald before smoothing his hair back. "Maybe you'll feel more comfortable staying tomorrow night." A playful smile crossed his features. "Or maybe I'll fuck you cross-eyed and you'll fall asleep after and then it won't matter."

Jerald let his forehead rest against Alan's for a moment. "Thank you for understanding."

Alan kissed him one more time. "Please be careful driving home."

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Don’t forget I’ve got two charters tomorrow.” Jerald dressed and left after one last kiss.

Alan lay there in bed for a few minutes. He hadn’t counted on Jerald going through with anything tonight.

*Progress.* Give and take. Begging him to spend the night would have pushed Jerald into an argument. Maybe by tomorrow night he’d have himself talked into staying.

\* \* \* \*

From her room just on the other side of the wall from the master bedroom, Daphne listened to the men as they made love. Part of her envied them, how good they sounded together. Part of her wanted to join them. Then a few minutes after the noises ended, she heard the front door open and shut, followed by the sound of a car starting and leaving.

She couldn’t sleep. *Why would Jerald leave?* It was only nine o’clock.

She decided to get a glass of water and a snack. Alan must have heard her because a few minutes later he walked out to the kitchen.

“I’m sorry. Did I wake you?” she asked.

He smiled. “No. I couldn’t sleep.”

“Neither could I.”

“Want to watch a movie with me? I’ll make popcorn.”

She couldn’t refuse that offer.

They snuggled on the couch together. She loved the way he smelled, between his cologne and clothes detergent and even a hint of musky after-sex scent she didn’t want to contemplate, because the thought of what he’d been doing a little earlier made her horny.

“Why did Jerald leave?” she asked as a distraction more than anything.

He obviously didn't want to answer at first. "He decided to put off moving in for a while. He's got to work tomorrow."

"Sorry."

"Crap, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"No, that's okay. It's the truth." She glanced at Alan. "He's not comfortable with me here, is he?"

He snuggled her tighter. "He's coming around."

She bit her tongue to keep the bad pun in her mouth. "I should be able to leave in a few days."

"Let's not talk about that tonight." He pointed at the TV. "I want to enjoy this. I got laid, I've got a cute girl to cuddle with, and life's good."

She laughed and nearly choked on her popcorn. "I wasn't going to say anything about that."

"What, cuddling with a cute girl?"

She laughed again. "The getting laid part."

"Nothing to be ashamed of. Why, it didn't bother you, did it?"

"You want the truth?"

"Yes."

She looked into his eyes. "It sounded like you two had a lot of fun. I wish I could have watched."

He grinned and nuzzled her nose. "Well, sugar, maybe we can arrange that one day."

He had to be joking, teasing her, but the thought dampened her panties as she settled in without further comment to watch the movie.

Later, after she went to bed, she lay there and played the sounds of the men's sex over in her mind, recalled the feel of Alan's warm body on the couch.

She rolled onto her stomach, plunged her fingers between her legs and imagined not one but two hunky guys making love to her. A deliciously naughty fantasy. Thinking that, it didn't take long before she moaned into her pillow as her own orgasm flooded through her. As she drifted to sleep, she thought maybe staying with Alan, for a while at least, wouldn't be such a bad idea after all.

## Chapter Eight

Jerald arrived at the marina at his usual time on Saturday morning. He wished he'd spent the night at Alan's. He'd barely slept and felt like a grouchy bear.

*Goddammit.*

Yes, Daphne seemed sweet and nice. Still, something did not set right with him. She'd practically wrapped Alan around her finger in just a few days. Nothing he said about her even slightly negative would go over well. Alan felt bound and determined to take care of her, regardless of the circumstances.

As much as it aggravated Jerald, it also warmed him. Alan, a truly nice guy and a kind-hearted man, would go out of his way to help others.

And he was *his* boyfriend.

Now if they could only get some time to themselves now that he'd managed to wrap his mind around that little factoid, life would be just skippy. At least they'd go out tonight. Alone.

*Please let her be asleep when we get home.* Thank god Alan had been relatively patient with him. Of course, the irony didn't escape him that if Alan was a girl he would have no hesitation whatsoever about making love to him with someone else in the house.

*One of these days, I need to let go of my fear.* Thinking it didn't make it any easier to do it.

He loaded his gear into the boat. After cranking the engines, he cast off and headed down the channel. A nice Saturday, every weekend warrior would be out. At least he'd remembered to bring an extra citation pad.

He suspected he'd need it.

A short time after noon, he had pulled over an old wreck of a boat and was going through a safety inspection when he heard the VHF radio go off. "Hey, Major Carter, marine patrol. You out here? It's Bob Diego."

The boat's owner had all his required equipment, and the vessel appeared seaworthy despite looking like it was held together with duct tape and fiberglass patches. He cut them loose and grabbed the radio mic. "This is Major Carter. What's up, Bob?"

"Do you have my cell number on you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Call me. Right now."

Bob Diego was one of the local shrimpers Jerald regularly dealt with professionally since he worked out of the Aripeka marina. If Bob couldn't say something over the radio, it must be bad. A moment later, Jerald called him on the cell.

"I'm about five miles southwest of Hernando Beach. I've brought up a body."

*So much for my dinner plans tonight.* "Dead human body?"

"Um, yeah. No question about it."

"What's the coordinates?" He wrote them down, then called it in to base on his police radio. He would beat the sheriff's office and Coast Guard out there.

With relatively calm seas, he made good time. It took him twenty minutes to reach the location. Bob had gone out in his pleasure boat with his family. He'd been teaching his two sons how to dive on a shallow rock ledge in less than thirty feet of water when they stumbled upon the man's body.

Bob had brought the body up, laid it on his dive platform, and covered it with a beach towel. His two sons, fourteen and twelve, looked freaked. Bob's wife looked sick to her stomach.

The man had been wrapped in a light chain hooked to a fifteen-pound fluke anchor. Jerald was surprised it hadn't floated with an

anchor as light as that. The anchor must have hooked into the bottom or on the rocks. From the condition of the body, he looked like he'd been down there a couple of days, at least. Jerald would have to wait on the ME to discern the cause of death. The man's left arm was gone below the elbow. Jerald didn't know if the missing portion of the man's head had anything to do with how he died, or was simply the result of feasting marine life.

He didn't have any ID on him, just the remains of his clothes, tan slacks and a white pullover knit shirt.

Jerald called Alan to warn him he didn't know when he'd be back due to a homicide investigation and put off their dinner date. He didn't finish with his paperwork until nearly seven that evening, followed by his normal duties: refueling the boat, filing his other reports and citations, and everything else he had to do in the normal course of a day. He went straight home and climbed into the shower, glad to rinse the sticky salt residue from his skin and the hint of decomposition he hadn't been able to shake.

He wished it was Alan's shower and that Alan was there with him.

Yeah, he had it bad. No doubt about it. Having admitted it to himself, owning it, now he couldn't wait until they lived together full time.

But that couldn't happen until *she* left. He still couldn't bring himself to spend the night with her there, even though he really wanted to. He damn sure didn't feel comfortable living with a practical stranger. Maybe Alan's large family made it easier for him to adapt, but he hadn't had that luxury growing up.

Nearly eight o'clock, Alan would still be awake.

Did he or didn't he? Man, he needed him.

A few minutes later, he hopped in his truck and drove to Alan's. He saw light from the TV flickering against the front blinds and knew Alan was still up.

*Thank god.*

He let himself in with his key. Unfortunately, Alan wasn't the

only one still up. Daphne sat cuddled next to him on the couch while they watched a horror movie.

At his arrival, she stood. "I'll see you guys in the morning," she said before slowly limping to her bedroom and closing the door.

Alan shot him a disgusted look before he shut off the TV. "Hey. Didn't expect to see you tonight."

Jerald put a hand on Alan's chest before he could lean in to kiss him. "What was that look for?"

"What look?"

"The look you just gave me."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I spent all evening trying to draw her out of her shell and—"

"Okay, fine. Sorry I bothered you." He turned on his heel and stormed out the front door, slamming it behind him.

Alan raced after him. "No! Jesus, Jer, stop. That's not what I meant!"

Jerald wrenched his truck door open and got in, slamming it, too. "Look, I'm sorry, but I'm not very good company right now. I had to deal with what looks like a fucking mob hit that Bob Diego and his kids found this afternoon. They discovered a body while diving. I'm tired, I've had a suck day, I'm pissed I had to call off our date, and I should have just stayed home tonight. Go take care of her." He started the truck and ignored Alan's hurt look as he pulled out of the driveway and drove home.

When his personal cell phone went off, he sent the call straight to voice mail and shut it off. Dispatch could call him on his work cell if they needed him, or on his radio.

No, certainly not the mature way to handle things, but the last thing he needed was more stress on top of an already stressful day. All he'd wanted was to...

*Christ.* He'd just wanted to be with Alan, to relax and decompress. Now he felt more tense than ever.

He lay in bed and stared at his ceiling fan. It had never worked

since he'd lived there and hung at a weird angle from the ceiling, casting odd shadows across the opposite wall from the high windows where light from the security lamp outside forced its way through the cheap-ass blinds.

*Fuck.*

Now he had to apologize to Alan the next morning for acting like an asshole.

Things were going well for them, everything smooth sailing, until that girl came along. Was it fucking selfish of him to want to have his boyfriend all to himself without worrying if someone in the next room could hear them screwing each other's brains out?

He rolled onto his side and tried to sleep. Even doing Sudoku puzzles wouldn't help him tonight. He didn't sleep well here anymore. He only slept well with Alan, the other man's body stretched out alongside his.

*Fuck.*

\* \* \* \*

Alan watched Jerald's taillights disappear down the darkened street. "Shit." He walked inside and even though he suspected Jerald wouldn't answer, he called his cell anyway.

Straight to voicemail after the third ring. He didn't leave a message and tried again. This time it went straight to voice mail without ringing.

He'd shut his phone off.

*Leave him alone until morning, or go after him?*

Daphne appeared in the hallway. "Alan? Is everything okay?"

He sat at the kitchen table. "It's all right. He had a really bad day, that's all. They found a man's body out in the Gulf."

Did she suddenly turn white?

"A body?"

"Yeah. Said it looked like a mob hit—" She bolted down the

hallway for her bathroom, where she started vomiting.

He raced after her. In the bathroom he knelt beside her, held her hair back. “What is it? Are you okay?”

Far from okay, she seemed near hysterics, sobbing as she sicked up the remains of her dinner. After ten minutes she shakily climbed to her feet, then rinsed her mouth in the sink.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “I need to leave. Tomorrow. I’ll catch a bus somewhere. Anywhere. I’ll call a cab to take me to the bus station.”

“Whoa. Did I just step into a *Twilight Zone* episode and someone forgot to tell me? First him acting weird, now you. What the hell is wrong?”

She shook her head as tears brimmed in her eyes. “I have to go. I can’t stay here. I’m sorry. I’ll leave in the morning.”

He tried to get her to talk to him, but she refused to explain, then locked herself in her bedroom. He tried calling Jerald’s phone one more time before he went to bed. He didn’t want to resort to calling Jerald’s work phone, so he’d have to wait until morning.

After making a couple of calls to rearrange his charters, he set his alarm for four in the morning and went to bed. Whatever he did, he was not letting her leave until he found out the truth.

\* \* \* \*

Jerald finally rolled out of bed at four after a mostly sleepless night. He shouldn’t have left like that. He shouldn’t have shut off his cell. Now Alan probably felt pissed off as well as hurt.

*Rightfully so.*

He showered, dressed in his uniform, and drove his work truck to Alan’s. He wouldn’t have much time to talk to him before they both had to head to the marina. As he expected, the light was on in the kitchen.

He let himself in the back door. Alan sat at the table with a cup of coffee. From the look on Alan's face, Jerald sensed something horribly wrong.

He hoped he hadn't totally fucked up things between them.

"We need to talk," Alan softly said.

"I'll start. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone off on you like that last night. That was totally out of line on my part."

"About Daph," he said, still speaking softly.

"What?"

Alan glanced down the hallway. "After you left last night, she came back out. When I told her what you said about the body you recovered, that you said it looked like a mob hit, she freaked."

Jerald sat but didn't interrupt him.

"She not only freaked, she went into hysterics and puked her guts up and is insisting she's leaving today on the first Greyhound to anywhere."

"What?" That news should have made him happy, but the circumstances surrounding it didn't.

"Yeah. How long you think that body was in the water?"

"ME said probably a few days at least."

"Like since maybe sometime late Monday?"

Jerald stared into Alan's big brown eyes, comprehension dawning.

Alan scooted a chart Jerald hadn't noticed before in front of him. A small, red dot marked the shoreline just north of Aripeka. "That's where I found her. When I first saw her I thought she was dead, so I hit the marker on my GPS. I pulled it up and double-checked the coordinates. Where did Bob find the body?"

Jerald glanced at the lat/long coordinates on the chart and pointed. "About there. They were diving that small rock ledge you like to fish for grunts."

Alan's eyes met his. "That's not very far. Not if she's swimming for shore. She had the current and wind with her, pushing her toward shore. The front blew in from the west and I checked currents for that

night. She's a very strong swimmer, said she swam in high school. It's plausible."

Jerald stared. Alan was right. "Fuck."

Alan continued. "You know as well as I do that no woman in her right mind jumps out of a perfectly safe boat in the middle of the night in the Gulf of Mexico unless she's seriously freaked, or unless whatever's on that boat is scarier and worth risking her life to leave. Getting beat up is bad, but it usually isn't higher on the freak-out-ometer than risking the Gulf alone at night."

"You think Scorsini whacked the guy we found and she witnessed it?"

Alan nodded. "I've already changed my charters for today. I've got another captain taking them out."

Jerald sat back in his chair and scrubbed his face as he contemplated the ramifications.

Alan leaned in, his eyes never leaving Jerald's. "I know you think she's got me wrapped around her fingers. I can't change your perception there. I'm not a pushover or a moron. I've known all along there's more to her story, but me bugging her to tell us wouldn't make her open up any faster. I needed to let her learn to trust me."

"I've got to talk to her."

"I know you do. That's why I'm taking the day off. Let's hope she opens up now that she knows us a little better."

\* \* \* \*

Daphne finally woke a little after six, feeling horrible and terrified. She hated to leave, but knew that was her only option. When she walked into the kitchen and saw both men sitting at the table, she froze. "I'll be out of here in an hour," she softly said.

Before she could turn and retreat, Alan jumped from his chair and raced to her side. He caught her hand. "No, hon," he said in a gentle tone. "You're going to come sit and talk to us." When she sat she

spotted the chart on the table. Alan wouldn't let go of her hand and laced his fingers through hers.

Jerald wore his uniform. *He must be on duty*, she thought. He sat on the other side of the table, his expression one of concern, but not anger. He pointed to the chart. "Here's where Alan found you." He pointed to another spot. "This is where the man's body was found yesterday."

She struggled not to throw up. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Daphne, please," Alan pleaded. "Tell us what really happened."

She shook her head. "I already told you what happened."

Jerald's eyes met hers. Where Alan was cute, Jerald looked handsome, rugged, a mountain of a man, if she had to recycle a cliché. "Daphne, I can't help you—we can't help you—if you don't tell us the truth."

She wanted to. Never before in her life had she so badly wanted to just curl up and cry in their arms and let them take care of this. She knew if she did that, told them, they would be in danger. Paulie would never let her get away if she testified. They'd been too nice to her for her to drag them into this.

"Please, just let me go pack."

Alan's stern tone surprised her. "No. Now, either you tell us the truth, or he will take you in and they'll question you, and they won't let you leave until they have the truth. I would rather not put you through that."

She looked at Alan, startled by his firm voice. She read the concern in his face, but also knew he wouldn't back down. Not this time.

"I mean it, guys, seriously, I told you." Tears bubbled just below the surface, her terror threatening to take over again.

\* \* \* \*

From across the table, Jerald closely watched her. If this was a fraction of how she acted when Alan found her, he could understand exactly why Alan had latched onto her. Fear didn't begin to describe it. She looked absolutely terrified and near hysterics. He stood, rounded the table, and knelt next to her. He took both of her hands in his while Alan stood and moved behind her, his hands rubbing her shoulders, trying to soothe her.

Jerald gentled his voice. "Daphne, this isn't like the movies. This is real life. You can't keep quiet and pray Scorsini goes away or forgets about you just because you don't say anything. If you don't tell the truth, there won't be a damn thing anyone can do to protect you. Or at the very least they'll charge you with either obstruction or with complicity for not turning him in. If you tell the truth, we can help you. We can protect you."

"I can't!"

Jerald forced his voice to stay calm. "Honey, you have to tell me what you know. Do you know who that man is and how he got there?"

Tears spilled down her cheeks. Her hands had gone cold and they trembled in his. "Please don't make me tell you." She broke down sobbing. "Please don't make me!"

Alan started to reach for her, but Jerald picked her up and carried her to the sofa. He sat, keeping his arms wrapped around her as she cried.

"Shh. You have to tell me," he whispered into her hair. "I can't help you if you don't tell me."

She tightly clung to him, as if she was in the Gulf, drowning in the stormy waters. "I heard him say he was going to kill me next!" she cried.

Alan crowded close, his arms around both of them. "Tell him, baby. I promise you, we won't let you go through this alone."

Her voice hitched. "Paulie shot him...he didn't know I saw...thought I was asleep...heard him tell...other guy they...would

kill me later...his dad's orders."

Jerald tucked her head under his chin and rocked her. "Shh, it's okay. We won't let him hurt you. You're safe, but you have to tell me everything."

She finally did, crying and sniffing and sobbing her way through it until she lay in a crumpled heap on the couch, both men holding her as she blankly stared at the dark TV. "He's going to kill me," she whispered. "He will. I know it. No matter where I go, he'll find me. I don't have anywhere to go."

"He will *not* hurt you," Jerald promised. "We'll keep you safe. You're going to stay here with us and once he's behind bars for good, then we'll figure out what's next. But you are not going anywhere until after the trial, at least." He realized what he'd said and looked at Alan.

His lover wore a sad smile. "*Thank you,*" he mouthed.

Jerald nodded.

Alan tapped him on the arm to get his attention. "*See, I told you so,*" he mouthed.

Jerald rolled his eyes. "*Bite me,*" he mouthed back.

Alan grinned, then winked. "*Tonight?*"

\* \* \* \*

Jerald made a couple of phone calls. They got Daphne dressed, giving her one of Alan's button-up shirts to wear over a pair of her shorts. With her sandwiched between the men in Jerald's official truck, Jerald drove them to the sheriff's department. When they arrived, two detectives waited to interview her and Alan. Jerald stayed with her at her request, then they interviewed Alan alone. They even showed her an autopsy photo of the man, and a picture of his clothes.

"Is this the man you saw murdered, Ms. Peres?" one of the detectives asked.

She nodded as she swallowed back her bile. "Yes. I'm pretty sure.

And that's what he was wearing."

Two hours later, they gathered all three together to talk. "We'll coordinate with the federal prosecutor's office in Tampa about this," the lead detective said. "We can't risk jeopardizing their case against the Scorsinis. Where can we get in touch with you, Ms. Peres?"

Jerald spoke up. "She's currently without a permanent address. You can reach her through me. I'll take responsibility for her."

One of the detectives arched an eyebrow, but he noted the report. "Why is that, Major?"

"Right now, we're the only friends she's got. We're damn sure not sending her away so Scorsini's goons can hunt her down."

"The reports will stay sealed for now. Her identity is safe."

"Not for long," she sullenly groused.

"We can talk to the feds about putting you into protective custody, Ms. Peres."

She anxiously shook her head. "No, I don't want to. I want to stay right where I am."

They left the sheriff's office and headed for Aripeka. On the way, Jerald detoured and pulled into a drugstore parking lot. He reached behind the seat and rummaged through a bag for a notepad and pen. "Daph, write down what Alan needs to buy for you to do your hair."

"What?"

He pointed. "Your hair color. You need to dye your hair. Scorsini's guys, if they come after you, will be looking for a blond with long hair."

"I can go in and get it."

He shook his head. "I don't want you on surveillance video. I'm not taking any chances."

She jotted down the information and Alan went in for it. After, Jerald drove them back to Alan's, where he checked his watch. "I need to go patrol. I'll be back later."

Alan and Daphne got out of the truck. Alan walked around to the driver's door and stuck his head through the window. He kissed Jerald

goodbye. "Dinner?" Alan asked.

He nodded. "Yeah, if you don't mind."

"Duh."

Jerald smiled and waved before pulling out of the driveway.

Alan unlocked the front door and escorted her inside. "How long will it take to do your hair?"

"About thirty minutes. Then I take a shower to rinse it out."

"Go get it done, kiddo." She carried her supplies into the bathroom while he took care of paperwork before he made them some lunch.

When she emerged, her hair damp, he stared, stunned.

"Well?" she asked, her voice sounding nervous.

Alan thought she looked gorgeous. The blonde color had not suited her at all, her darker eyebrows betraying her unnatural color even more than her dark roots.

"It's you. It looks really good on you. Promise me you won't go back to being a blonde?"

She smiled, maybe the first open smile he'd ever seen from her. "I promise. I hated it anyway. I only did it because Paulie told me to. Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"I want to cut it shorter. Can you come do it for me?" It still hung below her shoulders.

"Of course."

He followed her to her bathroom. After combing it straight down her back, he took the scissors. "How short you want it?"

"You know that hard bone at the base of my neck?"

He reached out, felt, and found it. "Yeah."

"To there. Then it's still long enough to pull it back into a ponytail."

He carefully cut, doing his best to keep it even. When he finished, another three inches of her hair lay on the floor.

She smiled as she checked it in the mirror and ran her hands

through it. "Perfect! Thank you."

He left to put the final touches on lunch while she finished her hair. He heard the hair dryer run for a few minutes. When she walked into the kitchen, his jaw dropped.

She'd done a little more trimming, creating long layers on the sides. "It's not perfect," she nervously said, "but it's how I used to always wear it before I met Paulie. I should get to a stylist at some point, let them even it out for me."

"It's gorgeous. I wouldn't recognize you."

She sat at the table. "Let's hope no one else does, either."

Jerald almost didn't. When he walked in a little before seven and saw her standing at the kitchen counter, he stopped and did a double-take. "Daph?"

She nervously smiled. "Yep."

Alan laughed at Jerald's reaction. "I know. Huge difference, right?" Jerald nodded.

She'd been cute before. Now she looked beautiful, enhanced by her natural shyness. She obviously had no clue how pretty she looked.

"Good difference," Jerald agreed. She blushed again. He stepped forward. "Is that your original color?"

"This is darker than normal, but that's okay. My roots won't show while they grow in. Once it gets long enough, I'll dye it a color close to my own. I had him get a really dark brown, almost black, to hide the blond. I wasn't sure how light it would turn out. My normal color is a light reddish brown."

\* \* \* \*

After dinner she returned to her bedroom to watch TV, leaving the men alone. Alan wrapped his arms around Jerald. "What would you like to do now?"

Jerald didn't want to move from that spot but knew they still had things to do. "You need to come home with me."

Alan rolled his eyes and let go of Jerald. “We are *not* having this argument again.”

Jerald smirked. “Well, we are if you want to help me move some of my stuff tonight. I can’t drive two vehicles. And if you help me pack my clothes, it’ll go faster.”

A wide grin slowly spread across Alan’s face. “You mean it?”

“Yeah, I mean it. But it’s late. If you want to start this project and want me sleeping here tonight, you have to help me. I want to get my clothes and uniforms moved over. I’ll get the other stuff later.”

Alan kissed him, crushing Jerald’s lips with his. “Let me go tell her we’ll be back soon.”

“Well, hurry up. I’ll wait for you in the truck.”

He walked outside while Alan scurried down the hall. Yeah, he had it bad for Alan. He supposed he’d better learn how to deal with this sooner rather than later. He couldn’t let Alan watch out for her alone. Alan hated guns, despite growing up a cop’s son. Alan only tolerated him bringing his work sidearm into the house because it meant he’d spend the night.

*Someone around here has to be armed if we’re hiding a mobster’s ex-girlfriend.*

He’d have to work on her about the protective custody issue. Maybe he could gently talk her into it. That would be the safest option for all of them, especially her. If he tried to force the issue, it would only piss Alan off.

And admittedly, if he spent more time around her, that meant more time to talk her into protective custody. Although now that he knew she wasn’t a scam artist, his attitude toward her had changed for the better.

Alan burst out the front door with a beaming smile on his face. He jumped into Jerald’s truck. “Let’s go!”

Shaking his head and laughing, Jerald started the truck and pulled out.

## Chapter Nine

Daphne awoke early on Sunday before Jerald and Alan left for the marina. She wouldn't be tap dancing any time soon, but her feet felt a lot better and she didn't need the rolling chair anymore.

"Can I make you lunch or something to take with you?" she asked.

Alan gave her one of his mouth-watering smiles. "Thanks, sweetie, but that's okay. Already done."

"What about tonight? Can I cook dinner? I feel sort of useless. I'd like to do something to earn my keep."

The men exchanged a glance. "Sure, if you feel up to it," Alan said. "Feel free to raid the freezer. There's lots of stuff in there."

"What time do you think you'll be home?"

"Should be around six. We'll call if it'll be later."

Once they left and she had the place to herself, she ate a little breakfast, made another pot of coffee, and turned on the music.

She dusted the house first, even though it didn't really need it. She vacuumed the floors, mopped, cleaned the bathrooms, and did laundry.

That took her as far as noon.

Jerald stopped by a little after one to check on her and found she'd alphabetized Alan's extensive DVD collection.

He smiled. "You a little bored?"

"I just want to be useful."

He tipped his head. "Follow me." The night before, he and Alan had dumped all his clothes into the third bedroom, which doubled as Alan's office. "If you want, you can hang my stuff. Alan cleared out a

couple of drawers and some closet space for me in his—our bedroom.” He looked like he almost blushed a little. “If you want to, that is.”

“No problem.” Actually, it relieved her. That he asked for her help for something like this meant he’d accepted her to a certain extent.

He smiled. A genuine smile, not a “cop trying to put her at ease” smile. “Thanks, sweetie.”

“Do you want something to eat?”

“No, I’m okay. Just wanted to check on you.”

“Did Alan ask you to, or is it more boyfriend brownie points?”

He grinned. “You are a ballbuster, aren’t you?”

“I have my moments.”

Alone once again, she started on her new project. Alan’s taste in clothes ran to casual, casual, fishing guide boat wear, and...more casual. With a few pairs of jeans, and exactly one suit that could be worn to a wedding or a funeral.

More surprising was Jerald’s wardrobe. He owned several expensive, tailored suits, dress slacks and shirts, clothes an executive would wear.

*Another surprising layer to Major Carter.*

When the men returned home that evening, she had beef stew, a huge salad, and biscuits waiting for them. They ate first, then she refused their help cleaning up. “Nope, go take a shower or whatever. This is my job.”

Alan leaned in and kissed her cheek. “You’re the best, sweetie.”

The men disappeared to their bedroom. Then she heard the shower in the master bathroom start a few minutes later, followed by what she suspected were noises of them having a little fun.

She smiled. Okay, so living with a couple of horny hunks with drool-worthy bods wasn’t a bad thing. Just her bad luck they were gay, meaning totally off-limits. Maybe she couldn’t join them, but they could feed her own nighttime fantasies.

*Le sigh.*

\* \* \* \*

She quickly found the men's days off varied. Jerald had the next Wednesday off, but Alan had two charters that day.

Alan didn't pout when he found that out late Monday, but he looked close to it. "Guess that means I can't help you get moved."

"I'll help," Daphne volunteered. Her feet didn't bother her anymore. Alan had run her to the store that afternoon so she could get sneakers and a few other items, like bras and socks, to fill in her skimpy wardrobe selection. "I don't mind."

The men exchanged a look. "Okay," Alan said. "If you're sure?"

"It's the least I can do." There were far worse ways to spend the day than with a hunky, well-armed officer of the law.

Well-armed being a key point in her mind.

On Wednesday, Daphne rode with Jerald to his trailer. From the outside it didn't look as bad as Alan had made it sound. The landscaping was practically non-existent, just plain Bahia grass and one lonely cabbage palm near the driveway, but the yard had been recently mowed.

The travel trailer admittedly looked ancient and ugly, but nothing to make Jerald eligible for the white trash club.

The interior was a different matter.

"Oh." She looked around, almost afraid to walk too far inside.

He noticed her expression and laughed. "Yeah, it's bad. It's clean, though. No bugs."

"Alan mentioned a rat."

"Raccoon. That was weeks ago. I trapped it and got rid of it." He pointed to a place in the floor near an A/C vent. It had been recently patched with plywood. "He came in through there one night." He tossed his keys on the counter. "It's over thirty years old and the roof used to leak. That's why I got the rent so cheap. I reroofed the damn thing one weekend and started ripping out the bad carpet and paneling

and stuff. I know it's not pretty, but it's a place to keep myself reasonably dry. I could afford it. Then after Alan and I got together, I spent most nights there anyway."

She walked forward and felt one portion of the bare plywood floor give under her feet in a springy, unsettling sort of way. "And you resisted moving in with Alan...*why*?"

He shrugged. "I'm a moron. Shoot me."

He laughed when she held up one hand and cocked her thumb and index finger at him. "What goes first?" she asked.

He led the way to a tiny back bedroom, which had been crammed full of boxes. "All this stuff, for starters. Leave the heavy boxes. I'll carry them. I don't want you hurting yourself."

One box at the top of the pile closest to the door was marked "Ernie." The top flaps lay open. "What's this?" She reached in and lifted out an old, pristine hardcover copy of *To Have and Have Not*.

"Those are my Hemingway books."

"Ernest Hemingway?"

"Yes. Some of those are rare copies."

She carefully replaced the book. "I wouldn't have made you to be a Hemingway kind of guy."

He smirked. The expression looked cute on him. "Why's that?"

She realized how stupid and condescending her observation sounded. "Sorry. I guess considering I'm an English major who lived as a mobster's bimbo for a while, I don't have much room to talk."

"So what did you think a fish and game cop would like? Willie Nelson, *Guns and Ammo*, and pay-per-view porn?"

Heat filled her face. He really was a lot more complex than she gave him credit for. "No. I don't know what I thought. I'm sorry. You're just..."

"Complicated? Deep? Complex?" he offered with an amused smile.

"And so modest, too."

He laughed, but it sounded warm and inviting, playfully teasing.

“Honey, there’s a lot more to me than meets the eye. Most people don’t assume I’ve got a boyfriend, either.” He shifted the heavy box of books out of her way. “That gives us another thing in common.”

“What, that people don’t assume I’ve got a boyfriend?”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “No. That we’re both a lot different than we appear on the surface.”

\* \* \* \*

They made three trips from the trailer to Alan’s. One more would do it, but on the return trip to the trailer, Jerald brought a box of cleaning supplies and Alan’s shop vac.

“Just because it’s a piece of shit trailer,” he said in response to her questioning look, “doesn’t mean I want to leave it dirty.”

They moved out the last of his things. Once the trailer was empty and they’d gone through all the closets and cabinets to make sure they’d retrieved everything, she helped him clean the place as best they could. After one final look around, Jerald declared it good enough.

“Better than when I moved in, that’s for sure.” He pulled a key from his pocket, removed another from his key ring, and left them both on the counter. “Don, the guy who owns it, is going to stop by later today to get them. He said to leave it unlocked. Not like anyone’s going to trash the place between now and then,” Jerald quipped.

After unloading the last batch of boxes into the house, Jerald hugged her. “Thank you for your help. I really appreciate it.”

“I didn’t do much.”

“Yes, you did. Plus you kept me company.” He appeared a little uncomfortable. “Look, I know I came off a little hostile those first couple of days. I’m sorry about that. I really did enjoy spending time with you today.”

“I enjoyed it, too. I’m sorry I’ve uprooted your lives like this.”

He shrugged. “Well, at least Alan’s happy. I was only going to move in a little of my stuff last week. You kind of threw a wrench in my time line. In a good way,” he quickly added.

“You guys are lucky you’ve got each other.” She mentally kicked herself after saying it.

She couldn’t interpret the look he gave her. He pulled her into his arms and hugged her again. “Hey, you’ve got us. I know it sucks being alone. Been there, done that. Seriously, it’s okay.”

That finished her. She broke down sobbing. “Please don’t make me go into protective custody! You guys are all I’ve got and I’m so scared!” She hated she couldn’t control herself, that she’d let her emotions bubble over like that.

He guided her over to the couch where he sat, pulled her into his lap, and rocked her. “You’re not going anywhere,” he quietly assured her. “I told them I’m taking care of you and I meant it. I won’t make you go, I promise.”

“I’m so sorry...”

“Shh.” He did make her feel safe. The fact that he wasn’t being protective just to try to get into her pants at the same time only intensified to her emotions. “You’ll be okay.”

\* \* \* \*

Jerald sat there and held her. He felt horrible for her. No, he wouldn’t make her go into protective custody even though every instinct in his body told him that was exactly where she should be. He didn’t have to be a mind reader to feel her crushing loneliness, compounded by fear. He remembered being alone. He remembered mind-numbing fear. Having lived through it as a kid, it wasn’t something easily forgotten.

He closed his eyes as he held her, her face tucked against his shoulder. Alan had done the thing no one else in his life had ever managed, to help him quiet the memories, the voices, the sounds of

gunfire in the night and his mother screaming his father's name before another shot rang out and she went silent forever. Drug dealers going after the wrong house. Later, the cops discovered the assholes had transposed the numbers in the address of their intended victims. He'd been six and hid under his bed until the cops responding to the neighbor's 911 call found him, crying, twenty minutes later.

Alan had let him be who he was without trying to pry or pick him apart from the inside out to find out what made him tick. Alan accepted him at face value.

Alan settled him, calmed him.

In many ways, Daphne had a similar effect on him, now that he was getting to know her better. If he'd met someone like her after he'd divorced Kate, he never would have gotten together with Alan.

He rested his chin on the top of her head, gently rubbing it back and forth in her soft hair. "You can talk to me, you know. Don't let stuff build up inside you. I promise I don't wear my cop hat all the time. I'll take it off anytime you need me to. Just ask."

At that she let out a snurfly-sounding laugh and sat up. She wiped her eyes. "Thank you," she said, her quiet voice back.

He touched her chin. "Daph, I've been through a lot myself. I'm not some heartless hard-ass. I don't want you going through your life always looking over your shoulder."

She leaned in and hugged him one last time. "Alan's a lucky guy to have you."

"I'm the lucky one, sweetie. Believe me."

\* \* \* \*

The lawyer looked up as guards led Paulie into the interview room. He wore an orange prisoner jumpsuit, wrist and ankle shackles, and an angry expression the lawyer didn't have to be psychic to interpret.

Once the guards got him seated at the table and securely locked to

it, they left the room.

Paulie leaned in close and dropped his voice. "What the fuck, Tom? What the hell am I doing in here?"

"Daphne Peres. She ring a bell?"

He frowned. "Yeah, but..." He sat back. "Yeah, why?"

"The body they fished out of the Gulf on Saturday, Torvetti? She saw you kill him."

"That's fucking impossible! Besides, she's dead."

"I didn't hear you say that."

"You fucking well did. She disappeared off my boat."

"She didn't disappear off the face of the planet, apparently. The Feds have a sworn affidavit testifying to what she saw."

Paulie's jaw dropped. "She's alive?"

"Oh, yes. And singing her sweet lungs out. She didn't fortuitously fall off your boat, asshole. She jumped and swam to shore."

"Son of a bitch. Where the fuck is she?"

"In hiding. More telling will be why you didn't report her missing if you had nothing to hide."

Paulie hesitated. He'd never dreamed she would have made it to shore alive. "We stopped at a dock for fuel, didn't know she wasn't on the boat when we left the dock. She'd been asleep in the cabin I thought. We thought she must have gotten off while we were there. My guys'll vouch for me."

"And you never went back to look for her? Never called the cops or the Coast Guard to report her missing?"

"She took her wallet. And a grand, cash, of my fucking money. Goddamned cunt." He had happily overlooked that little fact when he thought she was dead. It had been worth it to him to have her out of the way and not be the one to pop her.

"It doesn't matter what fucking excuse you use. By the way, come up with something a hell of a lot better than that. She's alive and well and going to be the government's star witness against you for this case. Now that Torvetti's been identified, the FBI is crawling all over

his home and offices like a swarm of fire ants on a candy bar. Your father, needless to say, is beside himself at this point.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. He goes down because of this, you’ll wish you’d been the one to jump off that boat and swim to shore and disappear.”

Paulie winced. He’d really liked Daphne. He’d never thought he’d have to get rid of her like that, but when his father ruled, that was final.

“Can I talk to any of my guys?”

“I can pass a message for you. But any visitors you get that aren’t doctors, clergy or attorneys, will be video recorded and possibly used as evidence against you. So outside of this fucking room, you keep your mouth shut. Understand?”

“Yeah. I understand. Tell Tony to send Ira Weinstein to see me.”

“He a doctor?”

“Not a medical one.”

“He a rabbi?”

“No, but consider him a spiritual advisor.”

“Since when are you Jewish?”

“I had a sudden conversion.”

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Paulie was seated in the interview room again, this time with Dr. Ira Weinstein, an old friend and business associate of his father. Paying for Ira’s Costa Rican psychology degree three decades ago had cost Paulie’s father some bucks, but the wily old man had said it was money well-spent for use in emergencies like this.

“Well, Paulie, you’ve got your dick in a pickle this time, haven’t you? What can I do for you?”

“Ira, you old shylock, I’m calling one in.”

He nodded. “Go ahead.”

“You got any paper on you?”

The man handed him a business card and a pen. Paulie scribbled something on it, then handed it back to Ira. "Give that to Tony for me."

Ira didn't even glance at it as he tucked it into his wallet. "That's all?"

"That's all."

Ira leaned in and dropped his voice. "Your father called me in yesterday."

"He's pissed?"

"You should be so lucky. He wants this dealt with expediently and as neatly as possible. No collateral damage whatsoever to raise more questions."

"Just get Tony that card and it will be."

"You realize we never should have left New York. I told your old man it was silly to set up shop in the south. New people, new ways, whole new network and infrastructure. Between the Trafficantes and Gambinos, they brought too much attention to everything when they got popped in Tampa a few years back. This state's full of Columbians now anyway, drugs, coyotes, and the gambling's controlled by the Indians. It's not a stable business environment for what's safer and traditionally profitable. Too many gangs moving in for a cut. Then those 9/11 fucktards trained in Venice, it got Homeland Security involved and now they have a huge presence here. Trying to move shit in and out of this state is more trouble than it's worth. They don't have trade unions down here like they do up north. What, we're supposed to make a living on teachers unions? Firemen? Wait staff? Migrant workers? Those poor bastards can barely support themselves as it is. There's nothing down here anymore to really make money, unless you open a goddamned theme park and stick a rodent on the sign. Can't even make money on real estate in this market."

"No arguments from me."

"We get you guys out of this mess, then we all go back north."

We've got too many lucrative legal and grey-area enterprises we can focus on. We don't need this shit. Me and your old man, we're not young any more. Agreed?"

"Agreed. Thanks for coming."

"What? You think I'm going to not come when you ask? I was at your christening, Paulie. Your father is one of my oldest and dearest friends. You're like a son to me. We've all managed to stay out of jail this long, somehow, and I don't plan on tarnishing that record at my age."

When Ira left, the guards returned Paulie to his cell. He was in solitary confinement for his "protection," according to prosecutors. Fuck that, they wanted to try to control who he contacted and knew in the general population he would be able to get messages out to his crew.

Paulie settled onto his crappy bunk and stared at the ceiling. Tony would arrange things. He was trustworthy, capable.

*Sorry, Daph. Nothing personal, it's just business. If you'd kept your mouth shut, I never would have known you were still alive and even if I had, I would have let you go.*

## Chapter Ten

Daphne helped Alan prepare dinner. He'd just gotten off the phone with Jerald, who was now on his way home from the marina. In the three weeks she'd lived with the men, the three of them had quickly settled into a comfortable routine. Daphne was more than happy to take over the bulk of the household chores, as well as help Alan with his paperwork, in exchange for her room and board.

She refused to leave the house alone. She'd noticed that when Jerald went somewhere with her, he always carried a concealed handgun.

She felt safe. So much so that she sometimes went a day at a time without thinking about Paulie Scorsini.

It wasn't unusual for the three of them to cuddle up together on the couch to watch movies or TV in the evening. She figured they simply viewed her as a younger sister, but she soaked up what affection they offered. They would never be hers, but in her mind, alone in bed, she could pretend.

Several times she awoke screaming from nightmares. One such dream caused Jerald to burst into her room, naked and with his gun drawn, with Alan, also naked, on his heels.

Once Jerald ascertained she wasn't being attacked, he'd invited her back to their bed. She'd accepted, only because she'd been too terrified to sleep and knew the men would worry about her.

Unfortunately, they donned shorts before climbing into bed with her, but not before she'd managed to notice they were both well-hung.

*Le sigh. Fucking dumb luck anyway.*

"Why do you call him that," she asked Alan after he'd hung up

the phone.

“Hmm? What?”

“Tough guy. Why is that your nickname for him?”

Alan smiled. “You’ve see him. He’s not a total hard ass when it’s just the two of us alone. I’m special. I get to see the softer side of Major Carter.” He sighed. “He’s a tough nut. I let him be who he is. He shows me he loves me in the ways that count. I don’t have to worry about him playing games or running around on me. If he says he’s working late, that’s where he is. If he says he’s going to be somewhere, that’s where he is.”

“He showed me his Hemingway collection. I wouldn’t have taken him for a classic literature kind of guy.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty neat. Not my style, but hey, it’s just all part of the ‘Jerald Carter mystique.’” He teasingly used finger quotes around the phrase. “I gave up trying to get mushy sentiment out of him a long time ago. It doesn’t matter. What I really need is a stable, dependable partner who loves me, and that’s what I’ve got. I won’t force him to change who he is. I accept him the way he is, the same way he accepts me.”

“Unlike some men in the world.” She ran a hand through her hair. She definitely preferred it shorter. The men seemed to think it looked good on her.

Alan didn’t miss the gesture. “Any man stupid enough to think you look better as a blonde doesn’t deserve to have you on his arm in the first place, sugar. Why screw with perfection?”

Alan left to answer his cell phone. She already noticed a difference in her relationship with the men. Alan had no problem discussing intimate matters with or around her in a matter-of-fact way. She understood all too clearly why Jerald referred to him as a “WYSIWYG” kind of guy: What You See Is What You Get. She even had a running joke now between her and Alan, where he’d ask her for a judge’s score of the men’s night before, based on the noises she’d heard from their bedroom.

They never did that in front of Jerald, knowing it would make him uncomfortable. Daphne didn't mind because it was part of Alan's playful, fun-loving nature. And as much as Jerald sometimes felt a need to play down their relationship in public, Alan had an even greater need to have a person he could talk to and be totally open about it.

Jerald acted more reserved when it came to his emotions, but as he'd relaxed around her, she saw the deeper side to him. She could discuss books and music with Jerald in a way that bored poor Alan to tears. Despite his tough exterior, Jerald Carter definitely was a Renaissance Man.

\* \* \* \*

Two nights later, Alan was home alone with Daphne. Jerald had to lend a hand on a poaching stake-out over in Brooksville and wouldn't be home until late the next morning. Alan sat cuddled on the couch with Daphne while they watched a TV special on Yellowstone National Park. He loved cuddling with her and felt glad Jerald also enjoyed her company. No jealousy to worry about.

"I've always wanted to go to Yellowstone," Alan said. "I've heard a lot about it, but I've never been."

"I've heard it's beautiful."

"You know what's stupid? I've been to Georgia and the Carolinas, but that's as far as I've ever been. I've never been out west before. Spent all my life living and working here in this state. I'd love to go fly fishing out there, exploring."

"Has Jerald been there?"

"Yeah, a few times. Years ago."

"You two should go."

He hugged her. "You could come too, you know."

"No, that would be private vacation time for you two. I'd stay here and hold down the couch. Make sure no one steals the

newspapers out of the front yard.”

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. “You’re so cute, you know that?” The problem was he *did* think she was cute. Cuter every day. More than once he’d caught himself thinking about her in ways that made him hard. Not to mention she’d crossed his mind more than once while he made love with Jerald.

Having her in their bed would be no sacrifice.

Except no way she’d ever go for it. Jerald probably wouldn’t either.

He nuzzled his chin against the top of her head. “I wouldn’t feel right leaving you alone like that.”

“Three’s a crowd, Alan.”

“No babe, I believe three’s a ménage.”

She snorted, laughing as she tipped her face up to his. “You’re looking for trouble, teasing a poor single girl, aren’t you?”

He smiled. “Trouble is my middle name.” *And you’re a handful of trouble I wouldn’t mind having in the middle of my bed*, he wistfully thought.

\* \* \* \*

Alan had taken a charter deep sea fishing for grouper on his larger boat that day, thirty miles offshore and not due to return home until late that evening. They needed groceries, and Jerald asked Daphne go to with him. After a little gentle prodding, he finally got her to agree.

“I want to make a quick side trip before we hit the store,” Jerald said after they climbed in the truck.

“What?”

“I want your opinion.” They drove a few minutes north, turning down a dirt road that ran through a thicket of scrub oak and cabbage palms. The rutted shell track opened into a large, empty plot of land. “Besides my clothes and books and stuff, this is the only thing I kept from my divorce,” he said as he turned the truck around so the front

pointed back down the road. He opened his door and climbed out. Daphne followed.

He dropped the tailgate and sat, watching the western sky. Past the expanse of sawgrass flats, the Gulf darkly glistened as the sun began its evening descent.

Daphne sat next to him in the truck bed. She loved time alone with Jerald as much as she did with Alan. Now that she'd gotten to know him better, it was nice having his steady presence around. Not as talkative as Alan, he provided a different kind of comfort.

The property was a little over an acre. She barely spotted a light in the distance, to the north, through the trees. Otherwise, there were no signs of nearby neighbors and it sounded totally quiet except for the breeze rustling palm fronds, and crickets and frogs sounding off.

"I've owned this for years. My uncle left it to me. My bitch ex almost made me sell it, but I'm glad I didn't." He stared at the Gulf. "I've always wanted to build a house here, but she didn't want to live here. She wanted to live away from the water, scared of storms and shit. Said it was too buggy, too hot, too whatever." He looked at her. "I thought I'd ask Alan if he'd want to go halves with me on it, build a house. For us. I pay the taxes on it every year and almost sold it after the divorce, could have made a fortune on it. But something told me to hold on to it."

She smiled. Like this, with his defenses and stern, professional façade down, Jerald was so cute, so sweet. "Good thing you did."

"So what do you think? Will he like it?" Jerald sounded nervous, uncertain. A tone of voice she definitely wasn't used to hearing from him.

She leaned against him, hoping he wouldn't move away. Alan would immediately cuddle with her, sling an arm around her shoulders and pull her closer. Sometimes Jerald acted more reserved. "This is a beautiful spot, Jer. I think he's going to love it."

She ignored the small pang, the voice of reality chiming in that there really wasn't a place for her here long-term with them.

The Gulf slowly absorbed the sun. The sky ebbed and flowed with colors, blue melding into pale yellows and oranges that transformed into fiery pastels counterpointed by deep purples and grays above the clouds. Straggling lines of leftover clouds from the late afternoon sea breeze front dotted the sky.

Daphne smiled and pointed. “Those look like little series of hearts,” she said. “Like a whole line of puffy, cotton candy hearts.”

He slipped his arm around her shoulder. “Sunset hearts.”

Her heart raced as she snuggled closer. Why torture herself like this? The men had each other. There was no place in their life for her except as friend and maybe adopted little sister. They felt protective of her, wanted to keep her safe.

With her head resting on his shoulder, they sat like that for another fifteen minutes until the sky darkened to purple with the impending night. As the light faded, they got back in the truck and headed toward the main highway.

Before they reached the store, he spoke again, surprising her. “I love him, Daph,” he said. “I never felt this way about my freaking ex-wife, the way I feel about him. I don’t just mean the sex, either. He’s my best friend.” He almost looked embarrassed. “I never used to believe that soul mate bullshit, but being with him, even if it’s just eating dinner or out fishing, I feel calm, like it’s where I’m supposed to be. Does that sound stupid?”

She sighed. “No. It sounds like you’re in love.” *And Alan is a very lucky man.*

\* \* \* \*

Jerald pushed the cart through the store while she checked items off the list. He studied her while she walked. She wore an aged air, more an attitude than her actual appearance. He would have guessed her to be much older. Not from lines on her face, but the cautious mask, the hesitation in her smile. The soft volume of her voice even

after opening up to them and trusting them.

He wouldn't admit it to Alan, but he enjoyed his time alone with her. Not that he didn't love Alan any less, but he enjoyed having her personality, a balance to Alan's playfulness, to ground him.

"You need to buy some clothes, kiddo. You realize that, right?"

She blushed. Dammit, he loved that. She looked so cute. "I've got boxes of them at my storage unit. I never got around to moving them to Daytona. I'm scared to go there now. Fortunately I paid the rent a year in advance, cash. Paulie gave it to me when we moved. Most of the clothes I had Paulie hated anyway. He wanted me to dress 'sexy.' Which is another word for slutty."

The more he learned about Paulie Scorsini, the more he hated him. "How do you normally dress?"

She snorted, amused. "You won't be impressed. Shorts, jeans, and T-shirts, usually. I don't mind dressing up to go out, but he liked to see me dressed up all the time."

Jerald detoured them out of the grocery section and to the women's clothing section. "Why don't you get some stuff?"

She shook her head. "I'm okay. I can't afford to spend money on clothes anyway right now."

"I'm buying. You've got four pairs of dime-store shorts and you're using our shirts. Not that we mind, babe, but you won't break me if you let me buy you a few pairs of jeans and something a little better than what you've got."

It took him another few minutes of prodding to get her to do it. She tried on a couple of things, and when he saw the sizes, he grabbed more in different colors and tossed them into the cart. "Get yourself some more undies and stuff, too. And you need something other than flip-flops and sneakers."

She bought inexpensive multi-packs of underwear. He'd hoped for something lacy and silky he could imagine on her body, but she opted for plain cotton briefs. In the shoe department, she picked up a pair of sandals on sale for five dollars.

“You are a cheap date, kiddo,” he teased. “You know that?”

She blushed. “I told you, I normally don’t dress up. Paulie would spend more on one outfit for me than I would make in an entire month before. I just don’t like to shop for clothes.”

He laughed. “A woman who doesn’t like to shop for clothes? Honey, I think I love you,” he teased.

After they returned from the store and unpacked the groceries, she carried her new clothes into her bedroom to put them away. Alan returned while Jerald still worked preparing dinner. He kissed Jerald. “How are you?”

Jerald smiled. “Your question is really, how is Daphne? The answer, she’s fine. I took her shopping. Go get a shower, you smell like bait.”

Alan laughed. He swatted Jerald on the ass as he walked past him down the hall, to their bedroom.

*Their* bedroom.

Jerald let that sink in. Okay, so getting used to having her around the house had been easier than he’d anticipated. Once he knew the truth about her and could trust her, he found it easy to open up to her. To want to take care of her and protect her.

He tried to cut off that line of thinking. It could only take him bad places. He loved Alan, was *in* love with Alan, and didn’t want anyone else as his life partner or lover.

He wouldn’t deny watching Daphne walk down the hall, the way her hips curved and swayed under her shorts, could stiffen his dick.

After dinner, the men hugged her goodnight and retired to their bedroom.

“So what’s going on, tough guy?” Alan asked as he snuggled against Jerald’s side.

“What are you talking about?”

“That look. Like you’ve got mental constipation. There’s something on your mind. Might as well spill it.”

“Is it that obvious?”

Alan rolled onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow. "Yeah, pretty much."

Living together had gone better than Jerald had expected. Yeah, the men had crazy hours and sometimes their days off didn't mesh, but being able to sleep in the same bed together nearly every night had made Jerald realize this was exactly what he wanted and needed.

He told Alan about the property. Alan quietly listened, without interrupting, until Jerald finished. "Well?" he nervously asked.

Alan smiled as he let one hand follow the thin trail of dark hair that ran from Jerald's navel down to the soft nest between his legs. "You're asking me if I would mind building a house together with you. *Our* house."

Jerald nodded.

A slow grin played across Alan's face. "You gonna carry me across the threshold when we move in?"

"It might not look very graceful. Might have to sling you over my shoulder."

"Good enough for me." He kissed Jerald. "I'm in. I can't think of anything better than to do that together."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Jerald wanted to make love to him right then and there, yet he could see how tired Alan was from his long day. "Why don't we cuddle up tonight, and I'll take a rain check on the hot celebratory sex?"

"Who says you can't read minds, tough guy?" Alan once again curled up close to Jerald's side. Within minutes, he'd fallen asleep.

Jerald lay there and listened to him breathe. His mind swirled. *Their* house.

Daphne's face flashed before him. Would she still be with them? As he closed his eyes and tried to drift to sleep, he realized he wouldn't mind her moving in with them permanently.

Not in the slightest.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, before the alarm went off, Jerald awoke from a pleasant dream of Alan deep-throating his cock to find that Alan was, in fact, deep-throating his cock. He wrapped his fingers in Alan's hair and rocked his hips in time with Alan's movements.

"Oh...yeah!"

Alan's lips and tongue worked at his shaft while his hand played with his sac. Considering he usually woke up with a morning woody anyway, it didn't take Alan long to bring him to climax.

Jerald didn't move as he felt his pulse slow. He lay there stroking Alan's hair when the alarm went off. He reached over and slapped the snooze button.

Alan lifted his head. "Time for a quickie?"

"For you, anytime." He sat up and shut off the alarm. While his hand hovered over the bedside table, he grabbed the bottle of lube and handed it to Alan. Alan moved out of the way as Jerald rolled onto his knees.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of Alan's hands stroking his back, his thighs, his ass. Alan's gentle hands. A little rough from salt water and hard work, but pleasantly so. He felt the mattress dip as Alan nudged into position between his legs. Then the feeling of cool lube, followed by Alan's hot, hard cock pressing against his rim.

He closed his eyes and relaxed, enjoying the feeling of his lover inside him, joined together. A few years ago he never would have admitted he could love this.

Alan's balls brushed against his ass as he sank his cock completely inside him. Then his warm hands stroked his back.

"Jesus, you feel so good," Alan softly moaned.

Jerald flexed his hips. "Then show me how good."

Alan's fingers tightened around Jerald's hips. Jerald let Alan set the pace, joining him, rocking his hips. "Isn't waking up like this

worth living together?” Alan asked.

Jerald grunted his approval, now distracted by his own cock wanting seconds. He reached between his legs and stroked his meat. Eyes closed, he dropped his head to his pillow. “Harder,” he grunted.

Alan laughed. “Aw, you just love my cock so much you can’t get enough of it, can you?” Alan picked up the pace and force of his thrusts.

“Fuck me!”

“I am. Have patience. I don’t want to finish first and leave you hanging. Pound that sweet cock for me.”

Lost in the sensations of the cock in his ass and how good it felt fisting his own cock, he let out a loud moan as he climaxed.

Alan slapped his ass as his own thrusts increased. “That’s what I wanted to hear.” With that he let go, burying his dick inside Jerald with a last hard stroke. They fell to the bed, Alan on top.

“Holy fuck,” Alan gasped.

“That a good ‘holy fuck’?”

Alan chuckled as he caught his breath. “You know it was, buddy.” He kissed the back of Jerald’s neck before carefully untangling himself. “I’ll go get the coffee started if you want to get the shower going.”

After a quick stop by the bathroom, Alan pulled on a robe and padded out to the kitchen. While he was setting up the coffee pot, he heard Daphne’s bedroom door open. Dressed in one of Jerald’s old T-shirts, which hung almost to her knees, she walked into the kitchen as she yawned.

“Morning, sweetie,” he said, smiling as he kissed her forehead.

“Eight-point-five. Although the Russian judge gave you a six for waking me up so early.” She bumped her hip into his.

He snickered. “Sorry. I was too tired last night.”

She took the coffee scoop from him. “I’ll bring it in when it’s ready. You go get in the shower with him. You’re going to be late.”

He planted a kiss on the nape of her neck as he passed her.

“Thanks, honey. You’re the greatest.”

She watched him walk down the hall.

*Le sigh.*

The men had actually grown quite comfortable with her presence. Jerald had started leaving the bedroom door open in the morning when they were getting ready for work, although he still didn’t discuss their sex life.

For her part, she didn’t care if they caught sight of her naked.

Hell, she secretly hoped maybe they’d want to take advantage of more than just her housekeeping abilities.

Once the coffee finished brewing, she poured Jerald’s, black, and fixed Alan’s with a little milk and sugar. She carried the mugs into their bedroom. The bathroom door stood open a few inches, enough she could see them in the shower through the shower curtain.

*Damn, they were cute.* “Guys?”

“It’s safe, sugar,” Alan called. “Bring it in.”

She pushed the door open with her foot and set the mugs on the counter. “Need any help scrubbing your backs?” she joked. *Or your fronts?*

Alan stuck his head out and waggled his damn cute eyebrows at her. “Why? You volunteering?”

“Hell, yeah. Any time.”

She heard Jerald’s rumbling laugh join Alan’s as she left the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

\* \* \* \*

Alan grinned at Jerald and planted a long, lingering kiss on his lips. “She’s really fitting in, isn’t she?”

Jerald stepped under the spray to rinse off. “You were right and I was wrong. Happy?”

“That’s not what I meant.” He pressed his body against Jerald’s. “I’ve seen you checking out her ass.”

Jerald's face reddened. Before he could stammer an answer, Alan grinned. "Hey, it's okay. Hell, *I'm* checking out her ass. She's got a cute one."

Jerald studied him. "You're not mad?"

"Not if you're not."

Jerald kissed him, hard. "Well, your cock was buried in *my* ass this morning, so I suppose I have no reason to be jealous."

"None at all, buddy. None at all."

But as Jerald finished his shower and stepped out, Alan had an idea.

Maybe even one that would earn him a perfect ten from that pesky Russian judge.

\* \* \* \*

Over the next couple of weeks, Alan took any and all opportunities to mention Daphne during his lovemaking with Jerald. Usually with explosively hot results. He knew Jerald only saw this as a scorching hot fantasy addition to their sex life, but Alan used it to lay the groundwork.

He also pushed Daphne together with Jerald any chance he got. Unfortunately, even though he saw how well they got along together, and how comfortable she was with him, no prime opportunities arose to take things to the next level. As Halloween approached and Daphne felt like a permanent part of their lives, he noticed how Jerald watched her, how she watched him.

As he walked through the grocery store buying items for dinner the next evening, his mind drifted back to the Keys trip, the first time he made love to Jerald. Maybe that was the answer, a little liquid courage for all of them. He had planned a little cook-out for the three of them the next evening anyway, celebrating that both he and Jerald had the next two days off together.

With a smile, Alan added several six-packs of Jerald's favorite beer to the shopping cart before he headed off in search of condoms.

## Chapter Eleven

Daphne opened the cooler and grabbed two bottles of beer. Jerald reached for them, opened them both, and handed one back.

He clinked his bottle against hers. “Cheers,” he said.  
“Cheers.”

They both lifted their bottles and drank. Alan knew Jerald couldn’t deny that knowing her secrets, he stood one hundred percent behind Alan in making sure she stayed safe, and stayed with them. It’d only been six weeks, but Alan couldn’t imagine life without her.

Alan grilled their steaks while Jerald and Daphne sat on the swing and made teasing catcalls that grew more risqué with each beer they consumed. At one point she leaned over and in a not-so-quiet stage whisper asked, “Is his ass really as cute as I think it is?”

Jerald nodded. “Cuter. Hey, Alan, show her your ass.”

Alan glanced over his shoulder at them, smiled, then mooned them.

Both of them hooted their approval.

He pulled his shorts up and added a little ass wiggle for show, laughing under his breath. They were really in the tank.

Then again, that would work to his advantage.

Why shouldn’t they have fun with her? Alan hadn’t been with a woman in years, but that was mostly because he hadn’t met one that made him want to give up guys again. He’d never sworn them off completely as a species.

He would have no problems having fun with Daphne.

His cock stiffened as he glanced at Jerald and Daphne sitting together on the swing. What it would feel like to have her squirming

between them. Even better, to bury his cock inside her while Jerald fucked him silly.

He had to grab the deck railing at that thought as his cock throbbed, rock hard inside his shorts. He even had to adjust himself as he felt his shorts uncomfortably bunch around his balls.

*Jesus.*

Okay, that fantasy he *had* to try.

Why couldn't the three of them live together? She was like part of the family now anyway.

And he loved her.

He watched them together. He loved both of them. Could Jerald feel the same way? Would Jerald decide he wanted to be with a woman again and choose her over him?

The benefits of the possible arrangement far outweighed the risk. If he couldn't trust in Jerald's love, he had no business being with him in the first place.

He removed the food from the grill and set it on the picnic table as he steeled himself to carry out his plan.

All through dinner, Alan made sure they stayed just tipsy enough to go along with his scheme. He didn't want either one of them falling down drunk, just sporting a really good beer buzz.

He didn't drink anything but water and iced tea, and neither of them were sober enough to notice.

After dinner, he put in the DVD and they settled on the couch with Jerald in the center. He draped one arm around Alan's shoulders, his other around hers. Alan kept up a running commentary, getting more risqué with each one-liner he cracked. At one point, Jerald leaned over and kissed him, using full tongue, drawing a low moan from Alan.

"You don't hush, I'm going to have to find a way to shut you up," Jerald warned.

"Oh, yeah? How you plan to do that, tough guy?"

“Gonna shove my cock in there, that’s how.” Alan knew he never would have dropped a comment like that in front of Daphne if he wasn’t in the tank.

*Bingo!* “Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Won’t be able to talk if you’re too busy sucking on it.”

Daphne giggled on Jerald’s other side. “Ooh, how do I get some of that action?”

Alan jumped on the opportunity. “He loves having his cock sucked. Makes his eyes roll back in his head. He said I’m the best head he’s ever got, even better than any woman he was ever with.” Alan slid his hand between Jerald’s legs and squeezed his cock through his shorts. It had already grown rock hard.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” Daphne protested. “How do you know I’m not better than you?”

*Challenge issued, gauntlet thrown.* “Well, why don’t we let him decide?”

Confusion painted Jerald’s face. “Whoa, what?”

Alan leaned in and kissed him as he squeezed his cock again. “You just sit there and enjoy this.” He dropped to his knees on the floor in front of Jerald, who now looked shocked. “Come here, Daph. Put your mouth where your mouth is.”

She giggled as she eagerly helped Alan yank Jerald’s shorts down and off him. Jerald was obviously still too confused to protest, his beer buzz and horny cock totally in control.

Alan felt his own cock screaming for release as he wrapped his fingers around Jerald’s shaft. “I say ladies first.”

Daphne nudged in and when Alan felt her hand wrap around Jerald’s cock, Alan let go.

Jerald’s eyes widened in shock. Alan didn’t break contact with his lover’s gaze as he knelt next to Daphne and held her hair out of the way. She worked his cock with her lips and mouth, taking his large member almost all the way to the hilt.

*Damn, the girl can go deep.*

He looked at Jerald as he whispered in Daphne's ear, "You want to feel that beautiful cock buried in your sweet pussy tonight, baby?"

She moaned around Jerald's cock, making Jerald moan in reply. One of Jerald's hands cupped the back of her head, his hips now rocking in time with her movements as he thrust.

"Don't make him come too fast. Let him enjoy it. We can probably get two or three out of him tonight if we work together. I want to feel your mouth on my cock, too. I also want a chance to fuck you good, baby."

She moaned again, louder. He slipped his other hand inside the front of her shorts. She spread her knees a little wider as his fingers plunged between her legs and found her wet.

"Jesus, sweetheart, look at how wet your pussy is. You're really horny, aren't you?"

Her moans had turned to desperate whimpers as he finger fucked her for a minute.

Alan wished he could take a picture of Jerald's stunned, wide eyes. Alan withdrew his hand and stuck the two fingers in his mouth.

Jerald licked his lips as Alan slowly sucked her juices off his fingers. "How is she doing?" Alan asked him.

He nodded, speechless.

Alan stood and knelt next to him on the couch. Jerald's gaze never left him, following Alan as he kissed him. "I want to watch you fuck her," Alan softly said. "I want to watch you spread her legs and sink that gorgeous cock of yours inside her and pound her until she's screaming your name."

Jerald moaned.

Alan leaned closer, his forehead touching Jerald's. "I bet you want to watch me fuck her too, don't you?"

Jerald nodded.

"It's been a long time since I've gone down on a girl. Think you can talk me through it?"

Jerald grabbed his head and crushed his lips against Alan's, his

whole body shaking as a long, loud groan escaped him.

Alan heard Daphne happily moan, then she suddenly bobbed her head up and down on Jerald's cock.

*There he blows...*

A moment later, she still knelt before him, her cheek resting against Jerald's thigh, his hand gently stroking her hair. His eyes had dropped closed, but he still held Alan tightly against him, Alan's face pressed against his neck.

"Holy fuck," Jerald whispered.

"Was that a good 'holy fuck'?"

"Yeah." Jerald opened his eyes. Alan spotted the worry there, but he leaned in and kissed Jerald hard, Alan's tongue plunging and dueling with Jerald's until he knew he had Jerald's full attention again.

"Let's take our girl to bed and show her a good time, why don't we?" Alan suggested

Jerald nodded.

Alan stood and caught Daphne's hand. He pulled her to her feet and kissed her. Kissing her felt so different. He had to hold back, be gentle, savor her. Jerald still sat there on the couch, in shock.

He grabbed Jerald's hand and hauled him to his feet. "Come on, tough guy. My turn to play. We've got a very horny girl here who needs our services."

Alan led them to the master bedroom. He pushed Daphne into Jerald's arms after pulling her shirt up and off over her head. "Keep her busy for a second, buddy."

Jerald kissed her. She melted into his arms as Alan reached around her. He unfastened her shorts and pushed them and her underwear down her legs. He dropped his own shorts after skimming his shirt off. Then he pressed his body along hers, his stiff cock nestled in the seam of her ass.

Maybe this is how they'd take her, him behind, Jerald on the bed in front of her, his slightly larger cock buried inside her pussy while

he got to sample her sweet backside.

She started grinding her hips against them as he nipped his way across her shoulders. “You keep doing that, baby,” he whispered, “and you’re going to get all the horny cock you can handle tonight.”

Both she and Jerald moaned.

Alan pulled her from his lover’s arms and turned her around so he could kiss her. “Get on the bed.” She did.

He looked at Jerald. The other man stared at her in stunned disbelief. His cock had hardened again, but he still wore his shirt. “You gonna wear that all night, or you taking it off?”

Jerald realized what he meant. He pulled it off and dropped it to the floor.

The men crawled onto the bed. Alan kissed her tummy, running his tongue around her navel, teasing her. She squirmed, trying to coax him between her legs.

He chuckled. “What’s the matter, baby?”

Her hazel eyes looked dark, filled with passion. “Please,” she whimpered.

“Spread your legs,” Jerald hoarsely said, taking Alan by surprise.

She did.

Jerald sat behind her, leaning against the headboard and supporting Daphne. Alan knelt between her legs. He wanted to watch Jerald’s hands as they caressed her, brushing over her skin until he cupped her breasts and played with her nipples, his thumbs rubbing them into hard peaks.

She threw her head back against Jerald’s shoulder and begged for more.

Jerald looked down her body until his eyes met Alan’s. “*Look at me,*” Jerald silently mouthed.

Alan smiled as he lowered his mouth to her mound and traced her sex with his tongue. He never looked away from Jerald’s intense blue gaze.

Daphne’s skin flushed. “Yes!” she gasped.

Alan felt like his cock would explode from the friction of it rubbing against the bed as he teased her with his mouth and tongue, the sound of her pleased whimpers, and the smoldering passion in his lover's eyes as he watched him go down on her.

"Don't let her come," Jerald hoarsely said again, sounding like he could barely speak.

She tried to protest, but Jerald kissed her. "No, baby. I want to feel you come with my cock in you."

Alan sat up and kissed him. He reached over to the bedside table where he grabbed a condom from the drawer. Jerald's eyes followed his hand. He arched an eyebrow at Alan.

"Be prepared," Alan said.

Jerald smirked, then kissed him again. "Put it on me," he said.

Alan patted her on the hip to move her, then he leaned over and sucked Jerald's cock into his mouth.

"Oh, fuck yeah," Jerald said. He tangled his fingers in Alan's hair and thrust a few times before Alan sat up and rolled the condom on him.

Daphne tried to squirm against Alan, wanting him to take her again and finish what he started. He grabbed her waist and nudged her until she straddled Jerald's cock, her back against Jerald's chest. Jerald still sat up against the headboard. Alan pushed down on her hips, encouraging her to impale herself on him.

"Fuck him good, because then it's my turn," Alan said.

Her head lolled back against Jerald's chest, tucked under his chin as she rolled her hips.

Jerald's eyes bored into Alan's. Then he laced his fingers through Alan's and they both held her there between them. Alan leaned over her and kissed him. "How's she feel, buddy?"

"So good."

Alan slipped his hands free and backed down the bed, his gaze still locked on Jerald's blue eyes. Jerald slid his hands down between her legs. "Spread your legs wider, baby," he encouraged, nuzzling her

ear as he stared at Alan.

She did, now squirming on his cock, whining, wanting release.

“Calm down, we’ll take care of you,” Alan teased.

Jerald’s fingers parted the soft, short downy hair between her legs and opened her wide and vulnerable to Alan.

“Use your tongue on her again,” Jerald hoarsely ordered.

Alan smiled before doing it, a long, slow stroke from where Jerald’s cock disappeared inside her, up past her clit, and back again. He took time at the bottom of his journey to swirl his tongue over Jerald’s balls.

Jerald sucked in a sharp breath. “Fuck!” he whispered.

Their girl seemed to be in a frenzy. “Please make me come!” she begged.

Alan placed his hands over Jerald’s. Using his lips and tongue, he flicked and tormented her clit as she bounced on Jerald’s cock and tried to gain enough traction against Alan’s tongue to push her over.

Jerald’s mouth parted, his tongue flicking out and licking his lips before he swallowed hard. “I want to feel her squeezing my cock.”

Daphne lifted an arm and hooked it around Jerald’s neck. He kissed her before his gaze returned to Alan.

Her whole body trembled. Then she cried out, her back arching as she came.

“That’s it, baby,” Jerald coaxed. “Give it to us.” He grabbed her hips and thrust up into her. Alan reached between Jerald’s legs and played with his sac as he rose up on his knees and kissed the man.

“Fuck her good,” Alan said. “Give her that sweet cock.”

“God, yes!” Jerald’s thrusts shook the bed as he bounced her on his shaft. With a final grunt, he buried his cock inside her as his eyes dropped closed.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. Alan leaned in, kissed both of them, then patted her on the hip. “Sorry, baby. You’ve gotta move.”

She rolled off Jerald, but snuggled against him as he stroked her

hair. Alan smiled. "I'll take care of that for you." He pulled the condom off his softening cock and disposed of it. When he returned to bed, he knelt over Daphne and kissed her. "Did you save a little energy for me?"

She smiled. "Oh, yeah."

Jerald stretched out on the bed next to them and rolled onto his side. He leaned in and latched onto one of her nipples, nipping her and making her squirm. Alan kissed her, his cock screaming at him to fuck her.

She looked beautiful, her skin flushed, a fine sheen of sweat covering her body. "Do you want me to fuck you too, baby?"

She nodded, her bottom lip caught under her teeth.

Jerald reached over to the table and retrieved another condom. "I'm going to love watching him with you."

After Alan rolled on the condom, he lifted her legs to his shoulders. "I want to take you deep, sweetheart," he said. "Gonna fuck you slow and deep until you're begging me for it."

Jerald kissed her. His hand trailed between her legs and caught Alan's cock before he slipped it inside her. He gave it a gentle squeeze before lining it up so Alan could plunge deep inside her.

She closed her eyes. "Yes!"

Alan looked at Jerald, kept his eyes on his lover, knew he wanted his full attention. She felt so good in a different way from when he fucked Jerald.

"You're the first girl he's fucked in a long time, baby," Jerald growled in her ear as he played with her clit.

She moaned, squirming as his hand stroked her.

His eyes never left Alan's. "You're our girl, no one else's. You got that?"

"Yes!"

Alan smiled as a slow, sultry grin curled Jerald's sexy lips. "We'll take good care of you, sweetie."

Her eyes opened as she looked at Jerald, then Alan. "I love you

guys,” she whispered.

Both men froze, then looked at her. Jerald kissed her. “We love you too, sweetheart.”

Alan kissed her. “We’ll always love you.” He stroked his cock into her, taking his time, savoring the feel of her muscles gripping him.

Jerald continued to play with her clit. “Let’s get one more out of you, baby. I want him to feel how good you are.”

Alan thrust harder, deeper, feeling his release curling inside him as his balls tightened. “I’m close,” he said.

Jerald rolled her swollen nub between his fingers while he nuzzled her ear with his lips. “Don’t leave us hanging. Give it to us.”

She whimpered. Alan felt her trying to thrust in time with him. She held onto his arms, her fingers tightening around his wrists. “Harder.”

He smiled. “Anything for you, darlin’.” He took long, deep, hard strokes as Jerald captured her lips.

Then he felt it, the magical, sweet sensation of her pussy clamping down on his cock as she let out a keening cry.

“That’s it!” Alan let his own climax wash over him, his eyes catching Jerald’s blue gaze. He didn’t want to move, wanted to curl up there with them. He carefully lowered her legs and kissed her, then felt Jerald tap him on the ass.

“Condom.”

“Shit.” Alan carefully withdrew, but before he could get out of bed, Jerald slipped a hand between his legs.

“I’ll get it.”

Alan laughed as Jerald smirked. “Least I can do is repay the favor.” Jerald kissed him before leaving the bed to dispose of the condom.

Daphne rolled into his arms, snuggling her head against his chest. He kissed the top of her head. “You okay, baby?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Sleepy.”

He felt pretty damn sleepy himself.

Jerald returned and they curled up with her between them.

The two men stared at each other over the top of her head for a long moment before they both broke into wide grins. She was already asleep as they kissed before settling in for the night.

\* \* \* \*

At first, Daphne didn't understand why she felt so freaking sore when she awoke the next morning.

Until she realized she still lay sandwiched between the men in their bed and the previous night's events returned in a rush.

Heat raced to her face. *Holy fuck was I drunk!*

Trying to slow her panicked pulse, she lay there staring at the dark ceiling, praying they wouldn't be upset. Hell yes she'd enjoyed it, but at the time, between the beer buzz and how horny they'd made her, she hadn't bothered writing, much less cashing, a reality check.

One of the men, Alan, she knew from the faint scent of his cologne, shifted position in his sleep, his hand settling over her left breast.

*No chance of escape.*

Not that she wanted to escape, but Jesus, what would happen once they woke up?

She loved them. Yes, it was out. Not just because they'd taken her in and helped her. She loved Alan's playful, sometimes borderline silly nature, and she loved Jerald's deceptively rocky façade, which he'd allowed her to penetrate and see the sensitive man hidden inside.

Jerald rolled toward her, his hand sliding across her belly, then lower, between her legs. "You awake, sweetie?" he rumbled.

"Yes," she squeaked.

One intense blue eye popped open. "What's wrong?"

She swallowed hard. "Um...nothing?"

"Was that an answer or a question?" Alan snarked from her other

side.

Okay, so they were both awake.

Jerald lifted his head and kissed her. “If the nervous tone is because you’re worried how we’re going to react, don’t worry. We still love and respect you.”

She caught the playful curl to his lips.

“Do you still love us?” Alan asked.

She turned her head to look at him. His big brown eyes had filled with worry of his own.

She nodded.

His face exploded into a beaming grin. “That’s a hell of a way to wake us up, sugar, by scaring the crap out of us like that.”

“You guys are really okay with this?” she nervously asked. *Oh please, oh please, oh please!*

Jerald kissed her again, taking her breath away. She even welcomed his morning-after beer breath as his tongue gently asked for access. He took long, languid minutes exploring her. “Yes,” he finally said. “We’re really okay with this.”

Alan nuzzled the side of her neck. “So, how’d we do?”

“Even the Russian judge gave you a perfect ten.”

He pumped his arm in the air. “Yes!”

They both laughed at Jerald’s puzzled expression.

\* \* \* \*

After coffee, breakfast, and a shower, they tumbled into bed again and spent the morning making love. When an afternoon thunderstorm broke, they lay in bed together, watching fat raindrops bounce off the deck as thunder rumbled.

“What happens now?” Daphne asked, almost afraid of their answer.

Alan gently stroked her arm. “What do you mean?”

She closed her eyes. “What happens in the future?”

Jerald nuzzled her neck, behind her ear. “We get you safely through the trial and then we enjoy spending the rest of our lives together.”

“And build our house,” Alan added.

Her heart raced. “Your house?”

“*Our* house,” Alan repeated for emphasis. He grabbed her hand and kissed it. “All three of us. In fact, I’ve got an appointment next week with a contractor.”

She turned to look at Jerald. His normally hard face broke into a beaming smile. “Believe it, sweetie. All three of us.” Then his smile faded. “You do want to stay with us, right?”

Daphne threw her arms around him. “Just try to get rid of me!”

Jerald rolled over on top of her and kissed her. “Quit scaring me like that.” He nuzzled her nose with his. “Gonna give me a complex.”

She rolled her hips against his, enjoying the feel of his cock stiffening against her. “How many times can you get it up in one day?”

Alan kissed her. “When he’s exceptionally horny, as many times as required. And I do believe that right now, he’s exceptionally horny.”

“Amen.”

Daphne moaned in disappointment when Jerald sat up. “Where are you going?”

“Nowhere, babe.” He pushed her legs wider apart and knelt between them. “Just right here.”

She closed her eyes as his tongue caressed her, sending more tremors through her. Damn, he was good. He took his time teasing and tasting, not letting her get close enough to the edge to make it. Alan propped himself up on one elbow and enjoyed taunting her with promises of all the dirty things he wanted to do to her, or watch Jerald do with her.

When they’d worked her body into a frenzy, she couldn’t take it anymore. She pried her body loose from Jerald’s tenacious grip and

rolled on top of Alan before working her way down his body to his cock. “Fuck me, Jer,” she muttered, her voice husky, before she engulfed Alan’s cock in her mouth.

\* \* \* \*

Jerald thought that was the sexiest thing he’d ever heard in his life. She didn’t need to ask him twice. He quickly rolled a condom on and plunged deep inside her, sinking his shaft all the way to the root, tightly sheathed inside her. He stroked her back and looked at Alan. Heavy lids barely concealed his passion-glazed eyes.

Jerald reached around her and found her clit, began stroking it in time with his thrusts. Alan’s hands cupped the back of her head as he wrapped her hair around his fingers and thrust his hips in time with her motions.

Like that, the men settled into a slow, sexy rhythm with her body flowing between them, joining them as her passion climbed.

Jerald felt her muscles quivering around him, tightening as her pussy prepared to squeeze him again. When she let out a long, loud moan and felt her body clamp down on his cock, he released her clit and grabbed her hips.

“Come for me, Al,” he grunted, his eyes never leaving his lover’s face.

Alan’s gaze locked with his as his hips thrust harder, faster while Daphne used her hand in time with her lips to stroke his cock.

Jerald recognized the look, the way Alan’s lips parted as his eyes dropped closed and he threw his head back. The moan had barely reached his ears before his own orgasm raced through him.

He didn’t want to move, hated pulling out and leaving her, but when he returned from the bathroom he enjoyed the sight of her cuddled in his lover’s arms.

He slipped back into bed on her other side. She rolled into his arms and kissed his chest. “I need a nap,” she mumbled. “You wore

me out.”

Alan spooned against her back and his hand sought out Jerald’s. With their fingers laced together, they drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Twelve

For the first time in her life, Daphne gave thanks she was a homebody. Despite the men assuring her they didn't mind if she used their vehicles, she refused to leave the house alone. Even venturing outside the front door when the men were gone nearly gave her a panic attack. She was happiest when safely snuggled between the men every night, even if all they did was fall asleep.

The impending trial, still several months away by the prosecutor's guess, didn't weigh heavily on her mind while she stayed safe in her cocoon. Although one stormy Saturday morning she allowed Alan to talk her into going to a local indoor flea market with him after he had to cancel a charter.

Poor Jerald still had to work. She felt a little guilty about them enjoying themselves while he would be out in that sloppy weather, but he assured her he wanted them to go and have fun.

Alan never released her hand as he kept her close by his side while they perused the aisles of eclectic offerings. Then, in a large booth selling plants and small fountains, she stopped.

"Oh, that's pretty!" The manatee fountain, small enough to fit on a tabletop, made a happy, burbling sound as water trickled from the top down the sea cow's natural curves to a small shell-shaped pool at the bottom.

Alan looked at the price tag. "You want it?"

She sighed. "No, that's okay."

"Honey, it's not expensive. I'll buy it for you if you want."

She shook her head. Despite the fact that the men assured her they didn't think of her as a freeloader, she hated that they spent money on

her for food and clothes and all she could contribute was chores. She'd always earned her keep, even as a teenager she'd had part-time jobs while in school to earn money. "No. I can't afford it."

"Daph, I *can* afford it—"

"Alan, seriously. It's okay." He looked a little upset that she wouldn't let him spoil her, but she felt better about refusing. She hooked her arm through his and led him away from the booth. "I don't need it."

"I know you don't *need* it, but I wish you'd let us do stuff for you."

"You saved my life." She looked up into his eyes. "You gave me a home and love. I'd say you've done more than your fair share." She rose on her toes and kissed him. "This is all I need, you and Jerald."

\* \* \* \*

The week before Thanksgiving, Alan was fully booked with charters. The only day he did block out was Thanksgiving, to spend with the two of them. That Monday, Jerald had the day off and he stayed in bed while she got up to make Alan lunch and send him on his way. Then she climbed back under the covers with Jerald and snuggled close.

He sleepily smiled and slung his arm around her, pulling her tightly to him. "Kept the bed warm for you."

"Good. I like it like that." While she could honestly say she didn't prefer spending more time with one man or the other, she treasured her alone time with Jerald. Sometimes he would open up to her, let her peek behind his stone wall.

His hand lightly stroked her arm, from elbow to shoulder and back again. "Can we talk about something?"

*Uh oh.* "Sure." She tried to steel herself for the worst. Her biggest fear was that one or both men would grow tired of their unusual arrangement and she'd lose them.

He kissed the back of her neck. "I know I've told you a little about me. And you know Alan's from a pretty big family."

"Yeah?"

She felt him tense, as if afraid to speak his next words. His voice sounded unusually soft and quiet. "I guess I should have brought this up sooner, but is it going to bother you that I really don't want to have kids?"

She laughed with explosive relief. Turning in his arms, she nuzzled her head under his chin. "Is that all? Holy crap, you scared me. I thought you were about to dump me."

He let out a relieved sigh of his own. "So that's a good answer, right?"

"You want the honest truth? I've never really thought about kids. I was too busy trying to take care of myself. I don't hate them, but if had to choose between you and Alan or having kids, you and Alan would win hands down every time."

He kissed her forehead. "Okay. That's good. He always sort of wanted them, but when we got together, you know..." He shrugged, then looked down into her eyes. "I mean if you and Alan really wanted them, then I'd go along with it."

"No, tough guy, we won't put you through dirty diaper detail." She smiled and stroked his cheek. "Is that what had you so worried? Wondering about that?"

He nodded. Then he kissed her, hard and passionately. She'd quickly learned she didn't need him to talk about feelings when he could show her through his actions.

He rolled over on top of her, then worked his way down her body with his lips, his morning stubble scratchy against her skin. When he settled between her legs, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of his hot tongue flicking at her clit. Despite Alan's joke early on that he thought he might be out of practice with women, both men had proven beyond any doubt they were more than capable of pleasuring her nearly out of her mind.

After he'd brought her to a shattering orgasm, he put on a condom and easily slipped inside her wet sex. She wrapped her legs around him, enjoyed staring up into his eyes as he fucked her, hard and fast, sometimes with his hand tightly fisting her hair and other times as slow and tenderly gentle as any fairytale prince.

One day, she'd find a doctor and get on the Pill and they could do away with the condoms. Until then, she'd gladly put up with the slight annoyance just to feel their hard cocks inside her.

"You know what I'd love to do one day, baby?" he growled as he slowed his strokes and nibbled on her neck.

"What?"

"I'd love to have you sitting on my cock and feel Alan slowly slide his dick inside your ass, both of us together."

Her nails dug into his shoulder as her pussy clenched around him. "Yeah?" One of her favorite fantasies, but one she hadn't mustered enough courage to vocalize to the men yet.

"Yeah." He nipped her shoulder hard enough to leave a mark behind, making her shiver. "To have both of us taking you at the same time, fucking you together, that would be so amazingly sexy."

Her clit throbbed as he fucked her, his body rubbing her perfectly, driving her close to another climax. "I'd like to try that," she whispered.

He froze, making her whimper as the delicious friction against her clit ceased. "Really?"

She nodded, trying to rock her hips against him. "Really."

A long, slow smile spread across his face as he picked up the pace again. "Oh, fuck, baby that would be awesome."

So was the rubbing pressure against her clit, and when he realized how close she was, he maintained his movements until she arched her back and dug her nails into him again when she came.

He sat up and started fucking her, hard and fast, soon adding his climax to hers. He breathed a small sigh when he had to withdraw, but before he could sit up she rolled him over and grabbed his cock, then

slid the condom off him.

“I’ll do it.” She kissed him before leaving their bed.

He watched her sweet, rounded ass as she disappeared through the bathroom door. Holy fuck, he had it bad for her.

\* \* \* \*

Jerald had Thanksgiving Day off. That morning, the three of them, the men wearing boxers and Daphne dressed in nothing but one of Alan’s shirts, started preparing their meal and put the turkey in the oven.

Once finished, Alan grabbed her and sat her on the counter. He stepped between her legs, pushing them further apart. “I think I want to try a special sausage stuffing this morning.”

Jerald and Daphne both groaned, then laughed at his horrible pun. But when he knelt and licked her pussy, she grabbed his head and ground her hips against his face. After a few minutes of that, she begged them to make her come.

Alan picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. When Jerald lay down on the bed, Daphne straddled him and rolled a condom onto him. Alan grabbed another condom and the bottle of lube. He gently pushed her down onto Jerald’s chest.

“Just lay there and enjoy yourself, sweetie,” he said.

Jerald wrapped her hair around his hand and kissed her, deeply, his tongue sweeping over her teeth and possessing hers.

Alan lubed his finger and gently worked it into her tight ring. “Oh, damn, sugar, you’re gonna feel so fucking tight!”

She wiggled her hips against Jerald, enjoying the feeling of fullness and how her clit throbbed as it rubbed against the coarse nest of hair between his legs.

After a few minutes of torment, he added more lube and another finger. She moaned, rocking her hips so much Alan had to lay the flat of his free hand on her back to hold her in place. “Steady, baby.

You're wiggling so much I can't see what I'm doing," he teased.

Daphne closed her eyes and enjoyed every sensation. When he worked up to three fingers, she felt a slight burn that soon gave way to pleasure again as her muscles grew used to the intrusion. Once he felt she was ready, he donned a condom and replaced his fingers with the head of his cock.

"Ready?"

"Please fuck me!"

"Easy," Jerald rumbled. He wrapped his arms around her to hold her still while Alan slowly pushed the head of his cock through. After a moment, he continued, until he was buried to the hilt inside her.

"Fuck, man that's good!" Alan muttered as he held her hips.

Daphne whined and squirmed, her need reaching a fevered pitch. She tried to rock her body against the men but Jerald firmly held her in place. "Relax," he firmly ordered. "Just hold still for a minute. You'll make us blow before you get a chance to enjoy it."

She didn't want to hold still. It was the absolute last thing she wanted to do. What she wanted to do was fuck them hard and fast, ride their cocks and feel them pounding inside her. Her nipples rubbed against Jerald's chest, his hair brushing against them and driving her need as their cocks stretched and filled her pussy and ass.

The men settled into a slow, sensual rhythm, see-sawing their cocks into her as she held on to Jerald's solid body. She climbed toward her release, felt it winding tighter inside her as she settled into their arms and let them set the pace.

"Look at me, babe," Jerald hoarsely muttered.

She lifted her head, her gaze locked with his. She loved his blue eyes.

"Come for us," he urged. "Let's feel you squeezing us."

Alan's hands slipped up her back and around her sides to cup her breasts. When his fingers started playing with her nipples, it triggered her release. She felt like she shattered from the inside out. She cried out as her eyes dropped closed, her body no longer under her control

as her muscles relinquished everything she had to her climax.

Jerald's hand cupped the back of her head as his hips thrust against her from below. "That's it, baby," he said. "Come on, Alan, I'm close."

"Don't wait on me," he said. He grabbed her hips again and thrust, hard and deep as she went limp in Jerald's arms. A moment later she heard them both moaning, felt their cocks throbbing inside her as they came.

Then the inevitable. Alan quickly withdrew first and left the bed. She hated this part, longed for the day they could do away with the rubbers and she could go to sleep impaled by both of them.

Jerald gently rolled her onto her side and kissed her as he withdrew. "Stay right there," he teased.

She nodded without opening her eyes. A moment later she felt Alan return to bed and he swabbed her down with a warm wash cloth, then dried her off with a towel before sliding back into bed beside her, spooned against her back.

He wrapped his arms around her as she snuggled close. "You okay, sweetie?" he asked.

"Mmm hmm."

Jerald returned to bed and cuddled in front of her, his head resting against her breasts, one arm draped around the other two. "When's the turkey coming out?"

Alan snorted, amused. "A lot sooner than you did."

Daphne giggled and gently elbowed him. "That was bad."

Jerald let out an exaggerated, put-upon sigh. "See what I have to deal with, sweetie? This is why I need you. He picks on me."

She giggled again as she tangled her fingers in his hair. "I'll protect you from the big, bad fishing guide, tough guy." They rarely got to see this side of Jerald, even when in bed together. The gentle, playful man hiding behind the well-fortified stone walls.

"I'll hold you to it," he mumbled, already drifting to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

To say Alan went nuts with his Christmas plans would be an understatement. Wanting Daphne's first Christmas with them to be perfect, he totally decorated the house, inside and out. When Jerald arrived home from work one evening to find the living room looking like a scene right out of Santa's workshop, he rolled his eyes.

"Holy fuck," he muttered under his breath as he set his lunch bag on the counter.

Daphne giggled and slipped her arms around his waist as he kissed her hello. "Watch out. He's in full-out decorating mode."

"So I see. Last year he tried to talk me into putting lights up on my trailer."

"I shouldn't have told him it's been a lot of years since I had a tree or any Christmas decorations," she joked.

He snorted, amused. "Well, there was your first mistake," he teased.

Alan walked into the kitchen, a maroon and gold leopard print Santa hat jauntily perched on his head. "What was her first mistake?"

"What the hell is that on your head?"

He fingered the large poufy pom-pom on the end. "You like it? I thought I'd be a snazzy Santa this year."

Jerald rolled his eyes, making Daphne laugh again. "Wait'll you see what he bought you," she said.

"I don't want to know."

"Oh, yes you do! Wait right there!" He rushed out of the kitchen.

"Do I want to know?" Jerald grumbled before kissing her.

"You'll look so cute."

"I don't do cute."

"Don't hurt his feelings."

Jerald sighed.

Alan returned and held up the pair of boxer shorts. Red velour with a black elastic waistband and a belt buckle printed on the front,

the leg holes trimmed with white fake fur.

Jerald frowned. "What the hell are those?"

Alan broadly smiled. "I got a pair for me, too!"

"Oh, *hell* no."

Alan's smile faltered. "Please? For me?"

Daphne still had her arms around him and poked him, hard, in the ribs where Alan couldn't see her do it. "Please?" she said, winking at him.

He rolled his eyes and sighed again. "All right, fine. But I'm not wearing them right now. It's still two weeks until Christmas. I have my pride."

\* \* \* \*

Feeling guilty she couldn't afford any gifts, she made the men promise not to buy her anything. Jerald understood and agreed, even though from his reaction he'd obviously wanted to get her something. Alan appeared hurt by her insistence.

"We'll give you money, sweetie," he said. "Seriously. We want to spoil you rotten!"

She climbed into his lap, where he sat on the sofa, and draped her arms around his neck. "You already spoil me rotten," she gently assured him. "Do you know what Paulie gave me last year for Christmas?"

Alan frowned and shook his head.

"He gave me a diamond necklace. He took great pains to tell me how much it cost. And he took great pains to tell everyone else how much it cost, too, when he took me places and people commented on it. By the third week I had it, I was sick of hearing about it."

"What happened to it?"

"I left it at the condo when we left for the trip. I didn't want to risk losing the damn thing. He gave me lots of expensive jewelry and gifts. But do you know the one thing he never gave me?"

He shook his head.

Daphne leaned in and kissed him, long and slow, sweetly, sensuously. When she lifted her lips from his, she looked deep into his big, brown eyes. She whispered, “He never made me feel the way you two make me feel. Loved. Cherished. Safe. That’s all I want this Christmas.” She snuggled against his chest as they stared at the tree. Jerald was due home any minute and the smell of the roast she’d made for dinner filled the air.

“We just want to spoil you,” he softly repeated.

“You have, and you do. Tell you what. Next Christmas, our first Christmas in our new house, we can go all-out nuts. Okay? But this is the first Christmas I’ve had in a long time where I won’t be alone or feel like I’m basically alone. To me, that’s the best gift I could ever hope for.”

He nuzzled the top of her head. “All right.”

\* \* \* \*

Christmas Eve, the three of them cuddled together on the couch to watch movies and drink eggnog. Alan wore his Santa hat and boxers.

Jerald begrudgingly wore his boxers, too.

“Ooh, I like this,” Daphne said as her fingers snaked through the fly opening in the front of Jerald’s shorts. “Easy access.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “Keep going. Don’t let me stop you.”

“See?” Alan practically crowed. “Now aren’t you glad I got these?”

Jerald rolled his eyes, but Daphne didn’t miss his playful smirk. She’d quickly grown used to Jerald’s tough guy exterior now that she knew the sweet, passionate man hiding behind the thick walls. She rolled off the couch and knelt between Jerald’s knees. He spread his legs, allowing her better access.

She tugged his elastic waistband down until she could reach his

now stiff cock. When she slipped it between her lips, he threw his head back and worked his hips in time with her movements.

Alan leaned in and kissed him. "Jesus, I love watching her go down on you," he hoarsely said.

She reached over and grabbed Alan's crotch through his boxers and found him ready for action. He didn't need any further encouragement. He climbed off the couch and disappeared down the hall, returning a moment later. Without making her move, Alan lifted her T-shirt and pulled her panties down.

"Are you wet for me, baby?" he asked as he pressed two fingers between her legs.

Of course she was, she felt her thighs slick with her juices already, just from what she'd been doing to Jerald.

Jerald wrapped her hair around his hands and lifted his head to watch Alan don a condom and slide his cock inside her pussy. "Holy fuck," Jerald grunted. "Damn, that's hot."

For her part, Daphne had lost herself in the sensation of having them both together like that, enjoyed belonging to them at the same time, connected as one sexually charged being. Alan pumped his cock into her, his hands holding her hips in place. In this position, he could take her deep and hard and stroke pleasurable places inside her his cock normally didn't reach.

She used one hand to palm Jerald's sac, feeling the contrast of coarse hair and soft, warm skin, stroking the base of his cock with her other as her lips and tongue worked on the head. Each time he rewarded her with another taste of his salty pre-come she fought the urge to moan and wildly suck him hard and fast. She didn't want the moment to end.

Daphne rested her cheek against his rock hard thigh as she sucked him deep into her mouth. From his reaction, she knew he was close.

Alan sensed it too. He slowed his thrusts and reached around her to finger her clit. "Come on, baby. Don't tease me."

As close as she already was, it didn't take but a few strokes from

his hand to bring her over. Her eyes dropped closed as she deep-throated Jerald, triggering his climax. Ropes of hot, tangy come shot down her throat as Alan picked up the pace of his thrusts to catch up with them. He pulled out almost immediately, leaning over to kiss her back before he disappeared to the bathroom again.

Jerald pulled her up to the couch with him, cuddled against his side as he stroked her hair and kissed her.

She could easily lose herself in his eyes. It amazed her how one moment he could emotionally seem as hard as stone, then the next like this, open and vulnerable to her.

“I love you so much, baby,” he whispered as he wrapped a strand of hair around his finger. “Merry Christmas.”

She reached up and stroked his cheek. “Merry Christmas, tough guy.”

Alan returned from the bathroom and cuddled on their other side. “Maybe next year I’ll tie a bunch of mistletoe to my cock. Get me a little more action.”

The other two looked at him and burst out laughing. “You don’t need to resort to that to get my lips on your cock,” she teased.

He leaned back and pulled his Santa hat down over his eyes. He wore a smug look. “I don’t know.”

“You just got laid, you greedy bastard,” Jerald teased. “What more do you want?”

“Been a while since I’ve been in the middle.”

Daphne caught Jerald’s gaze. She didn’t miss how he rolled his eyes. He prompted her to stand up, then he hooked an arm around Alan and dragged him down into his lap. “Since when did you become a high maintenance kind of man?” Jerald playfully growled as he leaned in and kissed him.

Alan wrapped his arms around Jerald’s neck and kissed him back. “I am not high maintenance,” he argued once Jerald lifted his head. “I’m just really enjoying having you around like this.” He pulled his hat away from his eyes. “I’m wondering what I’d have to do to talk

you into retiring.”

Daphne had settled on Alan’s other side, his legs draped across her lap as he lay across Jerald. She watched Jerald’s face transform from playful to guarded.

“We don’t need to talk about that right now,” he grunted as he released Alan and leaned back against the couch.

Alan started to argue, but Daphne reached out and patted his thigh, derailing him. “Why don’t we head for bed? We’ve got to get up early to cook that bird in the morning.”

Jerald headed for the bedroom while Daphne helped Alan turn off the lights and gather their eggnog cups. She touched his arm and whispered, “Give the tough guy a break. One battle at a time. Let’s get through my trial and then work on him about retirement.”

Alan smiled. “You’ve been paying attention.”

She kissed him. “You’re a good teacher.”

\* \* \* \*

She awoke first the next morning. When she tried to slip out of bed from where she was snuggled between the two men, Alan grabbed her and hauled her back to him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he mumbled.

“To start the coffee. And then the turkey.”

“Who you calling turkey?” Jerald grumbled as he rolled over. He draped an arm around her, effectively pinning her between them.

“Merry Christmas, guys. Now let me make the coffee.”

They wouldn’t let her go and stilled her movements by taking turns kissing her. Eventually she quit fighting them and didn’t notice that when Jerald wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him, Alan climbed out of bed. She did notice his return a few minutes later, when he held out his hands to her.

“Come on.”

“What?” She had just really started getting into the idea of staying

in bed.

He took her hands in his. “Come on. I want to show you something.” He’d also put his Santa hat on.

She couldn’t miss his playful look. “What’d you do?”

“Come on. Close your eyes.”

She pulled on a bathrobe and let the two men lead her to the living room.

Alan stepped behind her and rested his hands on her hips. “Okay,” he whispered in her ear. “Open them.”

The space under the tree was filled with presents.

Stunned, she stared as her eyes filled with tears. “I thought we agreed—”

“Now, don’t do panicking,” Jerald teased. He sat in front of the tree. “We didn’t spend any money. Well, except on wrapping paper.”

Alan sat by the tree and pulled her into his lap as Jerald handed her a large box. “Here. Open this one first. This one’s from me.”

She couldn’t help but notice how light the box was. Still shocked, and feeling guilty she hadn’t bought them anything, she unwrapped it. Inside, she found a small piece of colorful scrapbook paper, with Jerald’s neat handwriting.

“Coupon for a one-hour foot rub,” she read.

The corners of Alan’s eyes crinkled in amusement. “Okay, so he spent money on that paper, too.”

She laughed and leaned forward to hug him. “Thank you.”

Now realizing what they’d done, she was able to throw herself into the festivities. Every present was for her, and they ranged from “coupons” to computer print-outs of things the guys would have liked to have bought her, like jewelry and clothes.

Jerald handed her the last one, smaller than the rest. “This one’s from me and Alan.”

Inside lay a small, heart-shaped piece of paper. On it, they’d printed one word: *Us*.

Alan nibbled the side of her neck. “We’re yours forever, sweetie,”

he said.

Her vision blurred again as tears filled her eyes. Jerald leaned in and kissed her. “Forever,” he softly echoed.

“I love you guys,” she whispered. “I love you so much.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Ira came to visit Paulie two weeks after Christmas. “Give me good news.”

“She’s not in protective custody, as far as we can ascertain. Tony said one of his contacts came through. Her license was run the day after she jumped ship by an FWC officer. He usually works out of a marina in Aripeka.”

“Fuckin’ game warden?”

Ira shrugged. “No official report on her being located, but they did a little digging. Get this, the FWC officer’s a faggot. His boyfriend is a fishing guide. Our contact’s working on that angle now.”

“You think this guide found her, picked her up?”

“Makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“I want this problem to disappear.”

“Don’t worry,” Ira assured him. “They’re working on it.”

“Try not to whack the fucking fish cop while they’re at it. Last thing I need is a dead cop rap added to the list.”

“Your father said absolutely no collateral damage, Paulie. That’s the final word.”

\* \* \* \*

It was warm even for late January in Florida. Alan and Daphne had a few honey-do items to check off the list, including pressure washing the outside of the house. He wanted to paint it in preparation for their eventual move, but this step had to be completed first.

She’d spent many hours with Alan at the contractor’s office, going

over the plans for the new house. The men urged her to pick things like the cabinets, paint, and flooring. Every step closer to breaking ground hammered home to her how much they loved and wanted her.

*Their* house. Always including her in that phrase. The men never let her forget it.

She rode with him to the equipment rental place where they picked up the pressure washer. She still felt nervous leaving the house, but as time wore on with no sign of Paulie Scorsini's goons catching up with her, she could relax a little.

Jerald had to work today but would most likely come home for lunch because he'd had to work late into the night on a poaching investigation. The property survey for the new house had been completed and the contractor was in the process of securing the needed permits.

They had several other errands to run too, and by the time they returned to the house, Jerald was pulling in behind them before they even got out of Alan's truck.

\* \* \* \*

Across the street, hidden in a stand of trees, a man silently swore. He'd been given specific instructions. No collateral damage. Just the girl. Especially not the cop. Considering who footed the bill for this job, he didn't dare screw up.

He settled in to await a better opportunity.

\* \* \* \*

Jerald was slow to push back from the table after lunch. "Jesus I'm freaking tired."

"You can't call in? Take the rest of the day off?" Alan asked. "You look wiped out." He stepped behind Jerald and rubbed his shoulders.

“No, I don’t have anyone to cover me.” He scrubbed his face with his hands. “Just three more hours and I can call it an early day. They’ve got someone coming in a little early for us.”

“Want me to make you some coffee?” Daphne offered. “It’ll only take a minute.”

“Thanks, sweetie, but I’ll be okay. I need to get moving.” He kissed Alan, then her, before heading for his truck.

\* \* \* \*

Across the street in his wooded hiding spot, the man watched the cop get into his truck and leave. A few minutes later, the other man and the woman also walked out the front door.

*Crap.* She didn’t look like the picture he had. At least not from where he sat. The picture he had was of a platinum blonde. He’d have to get closer.

He watched as she helped the man unload a pressure washer from the back of the truck and lug it around the side of the house. Well, at least it would help cover any noise.

Stepping out of his hiding place, he looked around. He knew no one was home in the three houses closest to this one, the nearest one almost a hundred yards away. The quiet side street ended three blocks up at the woods, meaning very little traffic.

He’d done his homework.

He heard the pressure washer start up on the back side of the house and took that as his cue to quickly cross the street and work his way through the yard, the gun in his hand held close by his thigh.

\* \* \* \*

Jerald pulled into the marina parking lot and unsuccessfully suppressed another yawn. *Fuck. Three more goddamn hours.* Maybe he could just sit here and do paperwork. It was a Tuesday, only three

empty trailers in the parking lot, most of the regular boats tied up in their slips.

He stared at Alan's two boats, safely tied up. He'd love to be snuggled up in bed with Alan and Daphne, catching up on his sleep.

With a weary sigh, he opened his truck door and climbed out. Maybe it was time to consider retiring. Past vested in the state pension plan, he was getting too old for this shit. He reached for his waterproof duffle bag when Corporal Steve Charon pulled into the marina parking lot.

*Oh, good, another delay.*

Steve waved and walked over to him. "Jesus, Jer, you look wiped out."

"That's what Alan said."

"I heard about the bust last night. I figured I'd come in early and see if you wanted to go home."

Jerald let out a huge sigh of relief. "Man, that would be freaking awesome. At this rate I'm liable to fall asleep behind the wheel. Sucks getting old."

Steve smiled. "Beats the alternative."

"Well, that's true." He tossed his bag into the truck. He hadn't written any citations yet that morning, so nothing to process. "It was really quiet today, nothing happening. Tell them I'll file my reports in the morning."

"No problem."

Jerald climbed into the truck and headed home, then groaned. *The pressure washer.* He rolled his eyes. Hell, he'd be willing to pay an extra day's rental charges if it meant Alan would keep the damn thing shut off.

He rounded the turn to get home and immediately spotted the tell-tale spray blowing over the roof from the back of the house. *Damn, he got it set up fast.*

As he pulled into their driveway, he thought he caught a glimpse of a man disappearing around the far corner of the house. Instinctively

on alert, he jumped from the truck and thumbed his holster open, his hand on the butt of his nine millimeter.

This was wrong. He knew without a doubt it wasn't Alan, and from the way the guy moved, he was up to no good, sneaking around.

When he reached the corner of the house, he heard the shot even over the sound of the pressure washer. Breaking into a run, Daphne's screams reached him as he spotted the man preparing to shoot again.

That's when he instinctively drew his own weapon and fired.

\* \* \* \*

Alan watched as Daphne tried to stand upwind of the spray, but the light, confused breeze blew it everywhere.

He laughed at her. "Come down here and stand behind me," he said. "Seriously. I'll even show you how it's done."

She grinned. "You just want to get your hands on me."

"Guilty as charged. You know I can't keep my hands off you, babe. Come here."

She walked across the deck to him. He put the pressure washer wand in her hands and wrapped his arms around her. "Like this." He ground his hips into her backside as he led her in a sexy little dance while they pressure washed the wall.

She laughed. "You keep this up, the house won't get done."

"Ah, babe, but you sure will." He nibbled on her neck, making her laugh.

She was getting the hang of it and he stepping back so she could do it on her own when he caught movement at the corner of the house. By the time he realized the man had a gun, he knew it was too late.

Screaming her name, he dove in front of her, knocking her down as he felt pain explode through his gut.

\* \* \* \*

Jerald's pulse raced so fast he couldn't tell one beat from the next. He kicked the guy's gun away and checked his pulse, even though that was unnecessary. Half the fucker's head was gone.

He screamed into his radio for them to send deputies and an ambulance as he followed the sound of Daphne's screams. At least she was alive.

He rounded the corner and knew he was still screaming into his radio when he dropped to his knees beside them. Alan's eyes were closed, and Daphne—Holy Christ! She was covered in blood!

She looked at him. As her screams turned to sobs he realized the blood was Alan's.

"Are you okay?" he yelled, shaking her shoulders.

She'd pressed a hand to Alan's wound, trying to staunch the bleeding. "He threw himself in front of me! I never saw the guy!"

Alan's eyes fluttered open and Jerald breathed a sigh of relief as he grabbed his hand. "The ambulance is on the way, buddy, hang on."

"Jer, do me a favor," he muttered.

He fought his tears. "What?"

"Go shut that fucking power washer off, please?"

Jerald's hands shook as he fumbled and found the power switch. As silence descended, Jerald heard the scream of approaching sirens.

"You get the fucker?" Alan asked.

"Yeah, I got him."

"Good." His eyes closed.

Daphne sobbed, screaming his name. Jerald checked his pulse, he was still alive, still breathing.

When he heard the sirens reach their driveway, he screamed for them and had to fight to pull Daphne away from Alan as the EMTs ran to them. He held her as she struggled in his arms, trying to get back to Alan.

Still numb from shock, all he could do was hold her and watch them work on Alan. As more deputies arrived and the EMTs prepared to take Alan, he waved one of them over and forced Daphne to go

with them. “She’s not hurt, but she needs to go with him. She’s his girlfriend.”

Daphne was too out of it to realize what he’d said and let the EMT lead her around the house to the ambulance.

They loaded Alan on a gurney and Jerald realized his knees wouldn’t support him when he tried to stand. He knelt there, hands on the ground, struggling not to cry, not to scream.

One of the deputies made it over to him. “What happened?”

Jerald couldn’t answer him. He shook his head, then threw up.

The deputy called for help and two of them hauled Jerald to his feet and got him seated at the picnic table on the deck. With shaky hands, he managed to unholster his weapon and lay it on the table as he told them what happened and why he suspected the gunman was there.

“So you live here, and Alan Walker is your boyfriend?”

He was too heartsick and worried to think about pretenses. “It’s the three of us. Me and Alan and Daphne.”

Thirty minutes later, his supervisor showed up right behind the Medical Examiner’s van, delaying his departure to the hospital even longer until he went through everything again. He knew he’d be put on administrative leave until the investigation wound up, and that was fine with him. All he wanted to do was get to Alan.

*Please let him live.*

When they finally told him he could leave, he ran inside, grabbed clean clothes for Daphne, and locked up before driving to the hospital. They already had a deputy there with Daphne, keeping her in a private conference room near the ER.

When he walked in, she started crying and hugged him desperately, sobbing as she fell into his arms. “He’s in surgery,” she choked out. “They can’t tell us anything yet.”

He guided her over to a small sofa and pulled her into his lap. She wore a patient’s gown over her shorts and they’d gotten the blood scrubbed off her.

His stomach rolled at the memory of how she looked holding Alan and covered in his blood.

“I brought clothes for you, babe,” he managed. “Why don’t we get you changed.”

The deputy stepped outside while he helped her change. Then when Jerald realized how much she was shivering, most likely still in shock, he asked for a couple of blankets and sat with her wrapped in them and laying on his lap.

Her eyes had glazed over and he wondered if they’d given her any kind of sedatives. “He jumped in front of me,” she whispered. “He saved me.”

He tightened his grip on her. “He’s going to be okay.”

“You got the guy?”

“Yeah, I got him.” She started crying again, and he was about to send the deputy out for a doctor when she finally fell asleep in his arms.

When a nurse knocked on the door an hour later, she noticed Daphne asleep. “Mr. Walker’s family?”

Jerald nodded.

“He’s doing well, the doctor is about to close him up. He’ll be in to talk to you when he’s finished.”

Jerald wanted to cry and forced them back. “He’s going to be okay?”

“The doctor will come talk to you, but so far, he’s doing well, he’s stable, and his vital signs are good.”

When the nurse left he took a minute to regain his composure and dry his own tears before he kissed Daphne’s forehead. “Babe, wake up.”

She startled awake, but he held her, keeping her from falling out of his lap. “He’s going to be out of surgery soon. He’s doing well.”

Her eyes immediately welled up again as she started sobbing. “This is all my fault,” she moaned. “He got shot because of me.”

“Shh. Hush. Just rest. Try to go back to sleep.” He stroked her

shoulders and tried to calm her.

When the doctor came in another long hour later, Jerald couldn't read his expression. "The bullet missed his spine, and it went out the other side. It did some damage, but he came through surgery fine and I believe we repaired all his injuries. Right now, all we can do is wait and see, make sure there isn't any internal bleeding or infection."

"He's going to live?" Jerald asked.

The doctor smiled. "Barring any complications, yes, he should make a full recovery. I'm going to keep him in the ICU tonight, though. If he does fine and there's no sign of infection, we'll move him to a room tomorrow."

"Can we see him?" Jerald asked.

"Go on up to the ICU. They'll let you visit for a few minutes, but he's sedated. He won't be awake until morning, most likely."

Daphne nearly collapsed in the ICU when they stepped into Alan's cubicle. He was off the ventilator, but unconscious, pale, and frail looking.

Jerald wanted to crawl into the bed with him and hold him and cry himself to sleep, but knew he couldn't. He maintained his stony façade for Daphne, pretending to be strong for her. He felt barely able to pull it together to keep her upright and get her home. Even with a deputy standing watch over Alan throughout the night, and another assigned to stay with them that night at the house, Jerald knew the only reason he'd be able to sleep was sheer exhaustion. When the federal prosecutors wanted to question them, he told them they'd have to wait until the next morning.

Daphne didn't speak, let him lead her inside the house and to the shower where he held her under the spray. She clung to him, her eyes wide and vacant.

It wasn't until he had her tightly wrapped in his arms in their bed that she spoke. "He's going to hate me," she whispered.

"What?" He forced her to roll over. "What the hell are you talking about?"

“He got shot because of me. He’s going to hate me.”

“Babe, you didn’t shoot him. He’s not going to hate you.” He hadn’t even had time to contemplate the fact that he’d shot someone, although the fact it was a man who’d shot his lover took away whatever feelings of guilt he might have over it.

She didn’t argue with him. A few minutes later, he realized she’d fallen asleep.

He kissed the top of her head and closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Jerald awoke before Daphne the next morning and called the hospital. Alan had done well, actually woke up at one point, was resting comfortably now and they expected he’d be moved into a room in a few hours.

He took a mug of coffee in to her and woke her. Her eyes looked red and puffy. “He’s doing well this morning. Let’s get cleaned up and go see him, okay?”

She didn’t speak, just nodded.

He let out a sigh and brushed her hair away from her face. While less exhausted than the night before, he knew he had to keep his emotions reined in around her, couldn’t let her see him get upset. She needed his strength. “Let’s eat a little something and get a wake-up shower.”

Within an hour they were driving to the hospital with the deputy guarding them following closely behind. Federal prosecutors awaited them and wouldn’t be denied their interview. Jerald sat with Daphne in a conference room, holding her hand while she recounted the events. She listened while he told his side of the story.

“Did you identify the guy?” Jerald asked when he finished.

“Yeah. He’s one of Scorsini’s guys from New York. We’re backtracking now.”

After a few more minutes, they finally let Jerald and Daphne go to the ICU. Alan opened his eyes and weakly smiled when he heard them enter his cubicle.

“Hey,” he mumbled.

Jerald struggled and somehow held back his tears. He leaned over and kissed Alan. “Hey.”

Alan looked at Daphne and offered her a weak smile. “Come here and kiss me.”

Jerald knew she struggled to maintain what little composure she could muster. She leaned in and kissed him. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for, babe.” He squeezed her hand.

They could only visit for a few minutes in the ICU, but they soon moved him to a private room where a deputy stood guard outside. Once Alan was settled, Daphne and Jerald took up positions on either side of his bed. Alan soon drifted to sleep again.

Jerald stared across the bed at Daphne. Her gaze never wavered from Alan’s face.

What about the next time? What if he didn’t come home in time?

He excused himself to the bathroom and stood there, his body trembling as he held onto the sink and tried to calm himself.

What if Alan hadn’t seen the guy? What if he hadn’t thrown himself in front of her?

She might have died.

Alan could have died.

Jerald wouldn’t let himself think about how time seemed to slow down when he drew and shot, how a chunk of the guy’s head had exploded in a spray of blood and brain matter.

When he knew he could maintain his composure, he returned to the room. Daphne had laid her head on the bed next to Alan’s shoulder and stared up at him like a lost puppy. It broke his heart. It wasn’t her fault he’d been shot. If anyone was to blame other than

Paulie Scorsini, it was him for not protecting them.

He looked up an hour later when one of the prosecutors entered the room and motioned for him to step outside. He introduced Jerald to another man. “Major Carter, this is Special Agent Ben Williams, with the U.S. Marshals office.”

Jerald waited for them to get to the point, and Williams didn’t dick around. “We need to discuss protective custody for Ms. Peres.”

His heart tightened. He’d promised her. “Look, can we wait a day or two on this? She’s not doing well right now.”

Williams didn’t look happy about it. “I want to talk to her about this sooner rather than later. We need her testimony to put Paulie Scorsini away permanently. We do that, we can flip several others high up in the organization, but unless he’s convicted, they won’t testify. You can’t keep them safe all the time. If we don’t have her in protective custody, it’s only a matter of time before they try again. Next time, you might not be there to save them.”

He returned to Alan’s bedside with Williams’ words ringing in his ears.

Daphne must have noticed his expression. “Jer, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he lied. “I’m fine. They just had a few more questions for me.”

Alan’s doctor made rounds and assured them he was doing well.

All Jerald wanted to do was curl up next to Alan and bawl like a fucking baby.

After another hour, he couldn’t take it. He couldn’t be strong, he couldn’t get Williams’ words out of his brain, and he hated that he couldn’t do anything other than sit there and stare at Alan.

He kissed Alan, who’d fallen asleep again, then Daphne. “I’ll be back in a little bit. I need to go talk to some people.”

She caught his arm before he could step away, and her eyes finally met his. “I love you,” she whispered.

He took a deep breath and leaned again and kissed her one more time. "I love you too, baby." He stroked her cheek. "More than I can ever tell you."

## Chapter Fourteen

Jerald returned home. His gut clenched, tight, threatening to squeeze the coffee and bagel he'd forced down that morning back out through his gullet.

Alan would live, but it'd been close. If he hadn't shown up when he did, hadn't shot the gunman, no telling what would have happened.

They both could have died.

He was done trying to follow his heart instead of procedure. He loved Alan, and he loved Daphne, but both of them were in danger as long as she stayed with them. Until the trial ended and Scorsini sat in prison, she needed to be kept safe. He could not protect her, no matter how much he wished he could, despite what he'd promised. It didn't matter she'd only been with them for four months, he loved her almost as much as he loved Alan.

He damn sure wouldn't let her die.

After considering it for a few minutes, he made up his mind and refused to look back. He found a couple of duffel bags in the hall closet and went to her room. He packed all her clothes, used another bag for her stuff from the bathroom. Scanning the house, he tried to find everything that belonged to her and packed it. There wasn't much. Finally, with it all loaded in his truck, he called Special Agent Williams and arranged to meet him.

Back at the hospital, Daphne remained at Alan's bedside while a uniformed deputy watched over both of them. She looked up when Jerald walked in. This wouldn't be easy. He risked not only her hating him, but Alan too.

He had to take the risk for both their sakes. He was their lover, but

he was also a cop. Their safety had to come first.

“Did you find out anything else about the guy that shot him?” she softly asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing.” She clung to Alan’s hand, her eyes red and puffy from crying.

He hated seeing Alan looking so vulnerable, his normally tan skin pale and grey. Alan slowly opened his eyes at the sound of Jerald’s voice. Jerald had to shove his own tears back again.

“Hey, tough guy,” Alan softly said.

Jerald forced a smile as he leaned in and kissed his forehead. “Hey, buddy. How you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been gutshot.” He weakly smiled, his brown eyes full of pain.

“Yeah? You look like it, too. Must have been one hell of a party.”

“Yeah. Sure seems like it.”

“That’ll teach you to try to tackle home improvement chores without me. I need to borrow Daph for a few minutes, okay?”

He nodded.

Jerald patted her shoulder. “Come on, kiddo. I’ll buy you a coffee.”

She glanced at him, but leaned in and kissed Alan. “Love you. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Love you, too, baby doll.”

Jerald steeled himself. She would hate him. Alan might hate him too, but it was the only option. Once she calmed down and saw reason, she would hopefully understand and forgive him. When the trial ended, they could be together again without the risk of death hanging over their heads.

Not a perfect solution, but better than risking their lives. He wouldn’t get any sleep or even be able to work and focus on his job if she wasn’t in witness protection. He’d been stupid, never should have agreed to her living with Alan, should have forced her into protective custody at the start.

Then again, they never would have fallen in love with her if they'd done that.

She waited until they were in the corridor, after he draped his arm around her shoulders, to quiz him. "What's going on?"

"We need to talk, sweetie." He led her into a conference room down the hall. They still had it to themselves, but wouldn't for long. He pulled her to him for a long, strong hug. Probably the last he'd ever get from her for a long, long time.

If ever.

"I love you so much," he mumbled in her hair. "I love both of you. I thought you were both dead when I saw that guy, and then I thought for sure Alan was when I ran around the corner. I can't risk losing you guys again like that."

She held on tightly. "I love you, too. You know I do. You're not losing us. Either of us. They said he'll be okay and we can take him home hopefully in a week or two at the most."

He took a deep breath. "I can't risk Scorsini trying again. This was too fucking close."

"What are you saying?" She looked up into his face, trying to understand.

"You have to go into protective custody," he quietly said.

She stared at him, stunned, before she shook her head. "I told you I don't want to. I want to stay with you."

He stroked her cheek. "Baby, I can't watch you twenty-four seven. You are going into protective custody. You have to. It's the only way I can guarantee your safety."

She stepped back, her face paling. "I won't go. I won't leave you guys. You promised! You said you wouldn't make me go!"

"You don't have a choice. The federal marshals are waiting outside. You're going with them."

She stood there, silently stunned, studying him. "You can't be serious."

"I am. I already went home and packed your stuff. You need to

stay safe. They need your testimony to put this guy behind bars. Until he's locked away for good, you can't ever live without having to look over your shoulder. Any of us." He stepped over to the door and opened it, motioned the two men and one woman in. They closed the door behind them and stood there.

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I thought you loved me!"

The pain in her voice ripped a hole in his heart. "I do, baby. I love you so much it hurts to do this, but I have to *because* I love you. I have a responsibility to keep you safe. That's why I have to do what's right for you."

"You can't just send me off like this! How can you say you love me and do this to me?"

One of the men spoke up. "Ms. Peres, I'm Special Agent Williams. We have a material witness warrant from a federal judge allowing us to take you into protective custody. You need to come with us."

"Jer, don't let them do this, please. Don't let them take me!"

He couldn't look her in the eye, at the tears spilling down her cheeks. His gaze dropped to the floor. "You have to testify or he goes free. This isn't a book or a movie where I can magically protect you and off the bad guy. I need to know you're safe. I love you too much to risk your life again."

She stood there, staring at him, until the female marshal stepped forward. "Ms. Peres, please—"

"No!" She jerked her arm out of the woman's hand. "No! I won't go! You can't make me!" she screamed.

"Daph, please don't fight them," Jerald softly said. "Baby, please don't make a scene. Alan doesn't need to hear that."

She sobbed. "I can't even say good-bye to him?"

"Please go. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

She stared at him, unmistakable disbelief on her face. "How can you just stand there staring at the damn floor? Can't you even look me in the eye? If you really loved me, you wouldn't be doing this! You

promised me! You and Alan, you're all I've got!"

He forced his gaze to hers. "I do love you," he whispered. "And believe me, this is the hardest fucking thing I've ever had to do in my life. If you think this is easy for me, then you don't know me very well." He pushed past the marshals and out the door. Behind him, he heard them talking to her, trying to calm her as she sobbed before the door closed and blocked the sound.

He stepped into the bathroom across the hall and locked himself in. A few minutes later, he heard them open the conference room door. He heard her still crying.

They led her down the hall in the opposite direction of Alan's room, down a back stairwell. They would most likely take her out a back door to a waiting vehicle. He'd already handed all her things over to Special Agent Williams, who promised they'd keep her safe.

He wouldn't let himself cry. Not now.

He washed his face and pulled himself together before returning to Alan's room. Alan lay sleeping, his pain killers zonking him out again. Jerald sat in her chair next to his bed. It still felt a little warm from where she'd been sitting in it.

Yes, he was a chickenshit. He admitted it and felt glad Alan still slept, sparing him from having to tell him.

It would break Alan's heart, but not any more than his own.

He hated betraying her like that. He didn't have a choice. Not when it came to keeping them both safe. They attacked Alan trying to get to her. She could have been shot too, if he hadn't shown up when he did.

If that pissed her off and she was too upset to see the truth, he could do anything to change her mind. Hopefully when she calmed down she would see he was right.

A nurse came in to check Alan's vital signs. "Major Carter, I'm sorry, but visiting hours are over."

He nodded. "I'm going." He stood, then leaned in and kissed Alan's forehead. "I'll see you in the morning, buddy," he whispered.

“I love you.”

Alan never stirred.

The emptiness of home painfully seared his soul. At least he could curl up in their bed with his arms wrapped around his lovers’ pillows. With his face buried in them, inhaling Alan and Daphne’s scents, Jerald broke down and sobbed.

\* \* \* \*

Daphne felt numb. She stared out the window of the armored SUV as the landscape passed outside. She didn’t know where they were going.

She didn’t care.

She didn’t care about anything anymore. He’d sent her away. How could he tell her he loved her, and in the same fucking breath send her packing? They were all she had.

They were her family.

What about all their plans?

*He promised.*

She felt something brush her hand. The female agent, Lammond, pressed several tissues into Daphne’s palm.

Yes, she was still crying. Would she ever stop crying? She didn’t have a home, didn’t have her men.

Didn’t have anyone anymore. For all his talk, Jerald Carter was as full of bullshit as anyone else. She thought she’d seen a softer side of him, but the truth was, his heart of stone was the real man. Everything else was just an act.

They finally pulled up in front of a small motel. She didn’t say anything or ask questions when one of the male agents opened her door and offered her a hand out.

She stepped out without taking it.

She followed them into a suite. Two beds in the bedroom, a sleeper sofa in the living room. One of the men brought in her stuff

for her.

Daphne walked to the bathroom, locked herself in, and cried.

\* \* \* \*

Alan stared out the window from where he lay in his hospital bed. He hadn't said much since Jerald broke the news to him three days earlier, the morning after Daphne left.

Jerald didn't lie to him. He couldn't. It wouldn't do any good. He owed him the truth.

He didn't know how angry Alan felt, how much had sunk in through the haze of painkillers they kept him on.

Jerald wore civilian clothes and pulled the chair next to Alan's bed. "I was thinking," Jerald said, "about what you said a few weeks ago. About me retiring and us working together. I've got over twenty years in. I'm vested in the pension plan. Not a lot, at my age, but I could go get my captain's license and do that, too."

Alan didn't answer. He made no indication he'd even heard Jerald.

Jerald waited a minute and tried again. "I can help you out until you're better. Then I can go to Sea School and get my license."

Nothing.

Desperation set in. He knew it'd been a huge risk, but he couldn't lose both of them at the same time. Not like this. "Please," he softly begged. "Talk to me."

Alan didn't look at him. "What do you want me to say, Jer?"

"Please don't be mad at me!"

"I'm not mad at you."

He hated feeling like this, and yet he knew he couldn't lose this man. "I had to keep her safe. Do you want her to get killed?"

"You did the right thing." Alan's voice still bore the same soft, flat intonation.

He grabbed Alan's hand. "I can't lose you," he whispered. "I love

you.”

Alan finally looked at Jerald. He studied him for a long time with those big, brown eyes. “I love you too,” he said. “It’s just going to take a while for me to heal, that’s all.”

Jerald knew he didn’t mean his stomach.

“I’m sorry. I love her too, you know. I couldn’t protect you. How the hell can I protect her if I couldn’t even keep you safe?”

He’d sworn he wouldn’t do it, wouldn’t cry in front of him. But he did. He dropped his head to the bed and cried. “Jesus, Alan, I thought both of you’d been shot when I saw the blood on her. She was screaming, and I thought you were dead. I’ll never get the sound of her screaming out of my fucking brain!”

He felt Alan’s hand on the back of his head, tangling in his hair, stroking his scalp. “It’s okay,” he said. This time a little emotion crept into his voice. “I’m not going anywhere, tough guy.”

He raised his head and met Alan’s gaze. “It’s not like she won’t come back. Once the trial’s over, we’ll bring her home. I swear we will. Then it’ll be the three of us forever.”

Alan nodded. “Yeah.” He stared at Jerald for a while. “I need more out of you. I need you to blow up that fucking wall you keep around your emotions. I don’t mean I want you to go all girly on me, but I need to not have to sit there and wonder what you’re thinking all the time. I can’t get through this and try to fight you over that at the same time.”

Jerald nodded. “Whatever you want.”

Alan laid his palm against Jerald’s cheek. Jerald covered Alan’s hand with his. “How long do you think the trial will last?” Alan asked.

“I don’t know. Depends on whether or not Scorsini cops to a deal.”

“Worst case.”

“Could be six months or longer.”

At that, Alan’s eyes dimmed. “Okay.”

\* \* \* \*

Scorsini's lawyer must have had a serious come-to-Jesus talk with his client, because Jerald and Alan weren't harassed. At least, not threatened with violence.

On the other hand, the defense dragged Daphne's reputation through the mud at every possible opportunity. The defense tried to portray her to the press first as a whorish gold-digger, then as a worthless tramp latching onto fame and fortune at the expense of the taxpaying public and his client.

The men could do nothing but sit back and try to ignore the ugly lies the defense team spread about her. Jerald ached for her, missed her like crazy, but couldn't talk about her.

Alan mentioned her from time to time. When Jerald first brought him home from the hospital, Alan paused in the living room doorway and silently stared before continuing on in silence to the master bedroom.

Jerald knew what he thought. It didn't feel the same without her.

Two months after the shooting, Alan was back behind the wheel running charters.

Jerald turned in his badge and his retirement benefit paperwork.

While taking his Sea School classes, Jerald also took over doing Alan's paperwork for him for the business, and all the housework, freeing him up to spend time on his charters. Alan didn't talk or smile as much as he used to. His spontaneous, playful spark wasn't there like before. Jerald found himself trying to carry on one-sided conversations with him until Alan's sad smile told him without words that he was only humoring Jerald by listening in the first place.

He also knew the sadness in Alan's soul was the same plaguing his.

Daphne's absence felt like the throbbing from a phantom limb. Nothing you did eased the pain.

He also didn't tell Alan about the letters. He'd written her every week, starting that first week, to explain, to keep her posted on Alan's recovery.

To apologize and tell her they loved her and missed her and looked forward to being with her again once the trial was over.

After the third month, when he drove to the U.S. Marshal's office in Tampa to deliver the latest one to Special Agent Williams, who was in charge of the case, Williams had closed the office door behind Jerald and gently told him she wasn't reading them and that she requested he please stop sending them.

With his face burning, he handed the last one to the agent anyway. "Then do whatever you want with that one," he mumbled before blindly feeling for the door, hurrying to get out of the building and into his truck before he started crying.

He could understand her being pissed at him, fine, okay. But to take it out on Alan?

Didn't she care how he was doing?

How could she *not* worry about Alan?

He didn't expect the crushing sensation that hit him, ripping his breath from him. At first he thought maybe it was a heart attack until he started crying, sobbing, his head on his arms on the steering wheel, screaming his rage and pain until his throat hurt and his voice had gone hoarse and scratchy.

Once he calmed down, he could breathe again. The pain in his chest eased after several minutes.

*Okay. Fine. She couldn't understand this was for her own good? Whatever.*

No way in hell would he allow Alan to be hurt if he could help it. Not even by her.

He started the truck and headed for home.

\* \* \* \*

Daphne stared at the TV. She didn't really know what was on. Didn't care. It simply provided noise to help her drown out her thoughts.

At shift change, they brought her dinner and her weekly supply of Sudoku magazines. She was getting good at them. They allowed her to keep her mind off everything else. To totally focus and not let her thoughts wander.

In the plastic grocery bag with the Sudoku magazines lay a white envelope with her name printed on the front in familiar writing.

Williams shrugged. "I told him yesterday when he came by to stop bringing them. He told me to do whatever I wanted with that one. I figured I might as well give it to you."

She nodded and returned to the bedroom. She rarely spoke to the agents. Not because she wanted to be rude, but because speaking meant thinking, which usually led to crying.

She hated crying.

She stared at the envelope for a long time before opening her dresser drawer and laying it, unopened, on the stack of unopened envelopes already there. Each with her name neatly printed in Jerald's block handwriting on the front. She couldn't bear to read them, yet as angry and hurt as she still felt, she couldn't bear to throw them away, either.

Not like he'd thrown her away. And God knew she'd tried, countless times, even going so far as to toss them into the garbage but she'd immediately retrieved them.

It hurt less to hang onto them. One day she'd be strong enough to get rid of them.

She'd always known Jerald's first loyalty was to Alan, but she'd never thought he would turn on her like this. Not after what they'd all shared together. Not after he'd told her he loved her.

Not after he'd promised.

The logical part of her brain tried to whisper that Jerald thought he was doing the right thing. That part of her mind always tried to defend

him. Tried to tell her not to be mad at him. Tried to talk her into opening the letters and reading them.

It couldn't shout down the part of her heart that hurt like hell and cried over being tossed out without discussion.

Abandoned.

Lied to.

She'd never forget how cold he acted, staring at the floor, sending her away without a second thought.

He could have at least talked with her about it, worked out a way she could have seen or talked to them. Something. Anything. Couldn't he?

Not...this.

And always in Jerald's neat and tidy handwriting. Never Alan's. Didn't Alan even care? Maybe being shot had scared him enough to go along with Jerald's plan. Or maybe he was mad at her for getting him shot in the first place.

Not that she could blame him.

She knew Alan was okay because she'd asked the agents to keep her posted on his progress. She knew he'd been discharged from the hospital after two weeks and had made a full recovery.

She didn't keep track of time, other than Fridays. She tried to finish her current crop of Sudoku magazines to coincide with a Friday so she didn't run out. They moved her frequently. She never asked where they were going.

She didn't care. She could have been in Tampa or Miami or even the other side of the country for all she knew.

It didn't matter to her.

She sometimes met with the prosecutors several times a week at the motel while they prepared the case. Then there would be a stretch of a month or more when she didn't see anyone but the marshals watching her. She suspected Special Agent Williams worried about her because she didn't fight, didn't bristle against the confinement, never asked to go anywhere. Never asked for anything other than her

Sudoku magazines and basic necessities like toiletries. She ate whatever they brought her without complaint.

Five months after she'd been taken into custody, Special Agent Williams asked to speak with her alone for a few minutes one morning when he came to check on her.

He did most of the talking.

“Would you like me to bring in a counselor to talk with you? A chaplain? Anyone?”

“No, thank you,” she softly replied.

He stared at her. “Ms. Peres, I have to say I'm worried about you.”

She didn't respond.

He forged on. “Most people go stir crazy by the end of the first week. You haven't even asked for a special meal. Can't we get you something to make this easier on you? Do anything for you? I mean, we can't take you to Disney, but do you want books or movies or anything?”

She thought for a moment, then softly said, “If you want, you could get me one of those little hand-held Sudoku games. I saw them at Wal-Mart once. They're pretty cheap. Then you wouldn't have to keep buying me the Sudoku magazines.”

He laughed. “I could get you a Wii by the end of the day if you asked for it. I can get you a laptop, but I can't let you have email access.”

She stood to return to the bedroom. They always got hotel rooms with a separate bedroom suite so she could sleep while someone stood guard outside. “No, thank you,” she softly said. “The only thing I ever really wanted, Paulie took it from me. My family's gone. No one can give me that back.” She closed the bedroom door behind her, lay down on the bed, and cried.

She cried for the love she'd had with the men. Her home, however brief, she'd had. Her shattered dreams.

She buried her head under the pillow and sobbed as she tried to

forget being safely snuggled between her two men, feeling loved and safe and secure.

Remembered how Alan had saved her that first morning when she escaped from Paulie's boat.

Remembered the possessive, hungry fire in Jerald's eyes the first night they all made love.

Then the pain as she remembered Jerald's stony façade when he handed her over.

These memories and a thousand others swamped her. She sobbed until she cried herself to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Williams returned with a middle-aged man who wore a suit and U.S. Marshal ID badge.

"Ms. Peres," Williams said, "this is Dr. Kennings. He's our staff psychologist working out of our field office. He asked if he could spend a little time with you."

She hated the condescending tone in Williams' voice even though she knew he didn't mean to come off sounding that way. He talked to her like you might talk to a child who'd climbed up on something dangerous, coaxing them down while trying not to alarm them.

Williams left them alone. She answered some of Kennings' questions at first, then shut down. His questions came too close to making her think. Finally, she'd had enough. "Dr. Kennings," she quietly said, "I appreciate your concern. I just want this trial over so I can figure out what to do with my life. I have no home. All I own in is a storage unit in Orlando and here in this room. This is my life."

"Well, we could put you permanently into the witness protection program when this is over. Give you a new start somewhere. Has anyone mentioned that to you?"

She hadn't considered that. "Anywhere?"

"Within reason." He smiled. "They won't send you to Hawaii or

the Cayman Islands, but we could certainly give you a few choices. Get you a new identity and a job and a place to live.”

*A new start.*

“Could they send me to Wyoming?”

“I don’t see why not.”

He remained silent while she thought about it. “What do I have to do?”

\* \* \* \*

Alan and Jerald couldn’t be in the courtroom because they were witnesses. They sat in the heavily guarded witness room, longing for a glimpse of Daphne, but they didn’t spot her. After their testimony, the federal prosecutor came in to talk with them at recess. “You can go home. If we need you to come back, we’ll call.”

Jerald’s desperation mounted. “Can’t we see Daphne? Please?”

“She’s not here today. She won’t be testifying until next week.”

“Oh.”

Alan tried to talk to Jerald on the way home, but he slumped in the passenger seat and stewed while Alan drove. They watched cable coverage of her testifying. Jerald taped it and watched it over and over again, way into the night, even though they never showed her face to protect her identity. All they could do was hear her voice.

She sounded so quiet.

Sad.

It killed him he couldn’t see her. He wanted to reach through the screen and hold her.

The TV went dark. Alan stood there with the remote. “Come to bed, tough guy. This isn’t doing you any good.”

The next Tuesday, Jerald’s cell rang from a number he didn’t recognize. Alan was out on a charter.

“It’s Special Agent Williams. Ms. Peres’ last day of testimony is tomorrow.”

“Then we can come get her?”

He didn't reply at first. “She's entering the witness protection program.”

He felt the breath socked out of him. “What?”

“A few months ago, she requested to be put into the witness protection program after the trial. Between you and me, there's something seriously wrong with her. Emotionally. I raised three daughters. If I didn't know any better, Mr. Carter, I'd say her heart's been broken.”

Jerald realized he was squeezing his phone. He relaxed his grip before he broke it. “We won't be able to see her again?”

Another pause. “I will meet you and Mr. Walker and escort you back to a secure witness room so you can have a few minutes with her. You won't be able to be alone, I'll have an armed agent with her. It's against protocol, and I damn sure wouldn't do it for anyone else, but maybe if you can talk to her it will help her and you both.” He told him when and where to meet him, and when Williams hung up, Jerald tried to get the nasty feeling out of his stomach.

She wasn't coming back.

Ever.

\* \* \* \*

When Alan returned home a little after six, he immediately asked what was wrong. Jerald broke down crying and told him.

Alan held him. “It's okay. I'll cancel tomorrow's charter and we'll go. Maybe we can talk her into changing her mind.”

“I'm sorry. This is all my fault. If I hadn't forced her into protective custody, she wouldn't be mad at me. She wouldn't be leaving us.”

“You did what you had to do to keep her safe.” He rocked Jerald in his arms. Since they'd lost her, Alan had witnessed the change in his lover. Gone was the sure and steady rock. Every day, Jerald's pain

and guilt radiated from him, never improving. As much as Alan loved and missed her, he had to focus on Jerald and trying to get him to forgive himself.

“Maybe if I leave, maybe she’d come back to you,” Jerald quietly said.

Alan angrily held him at arm’s length. “You think I’m fucking letting you go anywhere, think again. I love you. I loved you before we met her, and I love you now. No matter what. You quit that shit right now.”

The next morning, they drove to the federal courthouse in Tampa and met Williams. He led them through security and into a witness room where an armed marshal stood guard. “This is all the privacy I can give you,” he said, nodding to the guard. “You can have ten minutes with her. If she decides she doesn’t want to go into the program after all, she can go home with you, if she wants. It’s up to her.”

“Thank you,” Alan said.

Jerald nervously paced. Alan knew he was probably practicing a thousand different lines in his head that he wanted to say.

All Alan wanted was to tell her he loved her.

An hour later, they heard the door open and a bailiff led her in. She looked up, obviously startled to see them.

The bailiff stepped out and closed the door as she silently stood there and stared at them.

Alan didn’t know what to say, it turned out.

Jerald beat him to it. “Hi, honey.” Alan hated the forced joviality in the other man’s voice, that he tried so hard when the stiff set of her body language told Alan all he needed to hear.

She was leaving. In her mind, she’d already gone, only her body still stood there. Her heart was a million uncrossable miles from them.

“Sweetie,” Jerald said, “we love you so much. We’ve missed you, and I’m so sorry. Please, don’t leave us! Come home with us!”

She stared at them, not speaking.

Alan couldn't take it anymore. He stepped over to Jerald's side and put his hand on his shoulder. "Stop," he softly said. "She's going. She won't change her mind. She won't stay." He couldn't hold back his anger. "We've spent the last seven months missing you like fucking crazy. Then Williams tells us you signed the paperwork to go into witness protection months ago. If our love isn't enough to keep you here, the least you could have done was have the balls to send us a message so we could move on with our lives instead of keeping us hanging and waiting for you like this."

Daphne gasped, shocked by Alan's anger as much as by his words. "I—"

He cut her off. "No. We love you, and we'd do anything for you including giving you up so you wouldn't get killed. Then we have to find out from the fucking marshals that you're leaving after we spent all these months counting the time until you could come home? Thanks a lot. Nice to know we don't mean anything to you. Were we just a convenient place to hide and you mercy fucked us out of guilt? Was that all we were?"

The fury in his usually sweet brown eyes, the ones she'd dreamed about for so many months, crumpled her heart. "I do love you," she whispered.

Jerald's composure snapped. He sank to his knees as Alan kept a steadying arm around him. "Please," the large man sobbed, "if you hate me so much, I'll leave if it means you'll stay with him at least."

She couldn't process this. This couldn't be Jerald, the cold, emotionless man she'd demonized as well as loved and missed for all these months. Or her sweet, gentle Alan. She watched as Alan knelt and protectively wrapped his arms around Jerald and held him while the larger man cried.

"If this is what you wanted to see," Alan angrily said, "then I hope it lived up to your expectations. I knew this was a bad idea. I never should have let him come today. But maybe now he can let you go. I hoped you'd come back, but honestly? I had a bad feeling a few

months ago when we never heard anything from you that you wouldn't want to come back. I just wish you'd said something before now to spare him this. Did you want revenge for him sending you into protective custody?"

She stepped forward, reaching for them, her men. They still wanted her!

Alan pointed at her. "Not another fucking step. Just get the hell out of here and have a good life. You've hurt him enough. I hope you know you're taking our hearts with you. I hope it was worth it to you." He wrapped his arms around Jerald as the man sobbed even harder.

The marshal, who'd quietly watched from the corner, stepped over to her. "Come on, Ms. Peres," he softly said. "Let's go."

She didn't want to go. She wanted to stay, to cry in their arms. They still wanted her? They *loved* her?

"No, can't I just talk to them—"

"Goddammit, would you get her the fuck out of here!" Alan shouted.

The marshal hustled her out the door and down a hallway. A group of marshals surrounded her, escorting her quickly down a series of corridors. Before she knew it, she was in another SUV, one of a series of black, armored vehicles they drove her around in. She couldn't see through her tears.

She couldn't feel anything past the memory of watching Jerald sink to his knees, crying, and Alan's angry voice as he ordered her out.

The female marshal, Agent Smith today, touched her arm. "I brought your purse, Ms. Hemingway."

"Thank you."

She held it in her lap. Inside, her wallet with her new ID, her paperwork. As of this day, she was no longer Daphne Peres, but Jenny Hemingway.

It also held the stack of unopened letters she couldn't bear to read

or throw away. There had been no more after the last.

Then again, she had asked Jerald to stop writing, hadn't she?

A few minutes later, they pulled up to the general aviation gate at Tampa International where the agents hustled her onto a small private jet.

Smith was explaining they'd emptied her storage unit. Her things had already been moved to her new home. It would take nearly a full day to get her to Wyoming, because they would route her throughout the country in a series of almost random moves designed to throw anyone off the trail. They'd packed all her things from the motel and loaded them on the plane.

Daphne nodded, but she didn't really hear the agent's words. All she could hear in her mind was Alan's angry voice and Jerald's tortured sobs.

Her men.

They'd thought she was coming home. Instead, she was walking away from them.

\* \* \* \*

They were in the air for an hour before Daphne opened her purse with trembling hands and removed the letters. She stared at the stack of envelopes for a long time before she opened the first one. She realized she'd have to open them all and put them in order. Jerald had handwritten each letter, several pages each, not typed on the computer. He'd dated each one.

After opening all thirteen of them, she started at the first one.

*Hey, Sweetie...*

She held her hand over her mouth to muffle her sobs.

*I'm sorry. I am so sorry. When you quit being angry at me, you'll understand this is for your own good. And we're going to sit here and wait for you and miss you. When we get you home, I promise you we're going to take off a couple of weeks and go anywhere you want*

*to celebrate. We'll take you anywhere in the world. We can go to Yellowstone, if you want.*

*I can't stand the thought of them hurting you. I love you too much to risk that...*

The words blurred as she cried.

*...and almost losing him nearly killed me. The thought of them hurting you too, I can't handle it. If I thought they'd take Alan, I'd send him into protective custody with you to keep him safe, too...*

She sobbed as she read and re-read the first letter several times. Agent Smith walked over to check on her, brought her a box of tissues, and left her alone again.

She carefully folded the first letter after she finished it, dug a pen out of her purse, and wrote the letter's date on the envelope. Then she tucked the letter back inside and read the second.

It took her thirty minutes of crying and re-reading to get through it.

*...and the doctors say he's going to be fine, babe. I'll take good care of him until you come home to kick our asses, I promise I will. I hope you're okay. I hope you're not still mad at me. Williams said they can pass messages to us from you, it just can't go directly through the mail. So I'll keep sending these to you. Hell, I'll write you every day and drive them to Tampa if you tell me to, just say the word...*

She finished it and put it back in its envelope after she wrote the date on the outside.

*He asked about you again. I brought him home yesterday. I don't know what to tell him. Please, Daph, don't be angry at him. He didn't know I was doing this until after the fact. If you want to ignore me, okay, I understand, but please write to him, okay? It'd really make him feel better to hear from you. We love you so much, and it's so damned lonely around here without you...*

Had she really thought Jerald Carter was an insensitive rock wall? A statue? Incapable of emotion?

His letters, had she read them before, would have moved her to tears then.

Would have made her forgive him.

*I'm a fucking idiot. I don't deserve to live.*

She rested her head against the seat in front of her. It was just her and five agents riding as passengers on the small jet. And now...it was too late to turn back. Daphne Peres no longer existed. Months after jumping from Paulie's boat, Daphne Peres had finally drowned in an ocean of paperwork, resurrected with a fake name and a fake history and a fake life.

All that remained of Daphne were the memories of the love she'd left behind and the pain she'd carry with her for the rest of her life.

## Chapter Fifteen

Alan worked his ass off all week to coax a single smile out of Jerald. He didn't think he would manage it, but finally, he did.

Not all the changes in Jerald since the shooting had been bad. Where before he would be leery of public displays of affection, now the large man wasn't ashamed to grab Alan's hand or even slip his arm around his waist or shoulders while they walked somewhere. Wanting contact with him, as if afraid to let him go.

Afraid to lose him.

Alan wouldn't talk about her. Didn't want Jerald thinking about her if he could help it. Easier said than done. But as the weeks wore on, until a month after that final showdown in the courthouse, he saw signs of life returning to Jerald Carter's heart.

He acted even quieter now than ever before. Spent a lot of time reading or just staring out at Alan's backyard.

The new house was ready for move-in. Alan didn't tell Jerald he'd used the cabinets and flooring and paint she'd picked. Despite his heartache, they were the perfect accents for the house. He'd envisioned them all during construction and why should he let the fact that she picked them stop him? What, to spite a woman they'd never see again?

Then again, part of him had hoped she'd come home, that they could surprise her with the house.

They made the move over the course of a week, leaving them enough time to paint the old house the weekend before the new tenants moved in. The rent would more than cover the expenses for that house, and over half of their monthly mortgage on the new one.

Their first night in the new house, Alan cooked Jerald a nice dinner. He lit candles in their bedroom and gave him a long, sensual massage. Then Alan stretched out next to him, propped on one arm. "Home sweet home," he said with a smile.

That coaxed a smile out of Jerald. "Home sweet home."

"Our home. Our first house together." He rolled on top of Jerald and kissed him. "Yours and mine."

Jerald's hands settled on his ass. "Ours." Jerald's eyes seemed to study his face. "Thank you for being patient with me all these years."

"Hasn't been that long. You make it sound like we've been together decades."

"You know what I mean. For taking so long to..."

"Come out?"

He smiled. "Yeah."

"I know a good thing when I see it, buddy. No way in hell I was letting you get away once I knew you were interested."

"Maybe we can take a vacation fairly soon," Jerald suggested. "I think we need it."

*Jerald wanting to take a vacation?*

"Why don't we go to Yellowstone?" Jerald continued. "I know you've been wanting to go."

"Maybe we can do that next spring. It's going to be damn cold there now. Let's go take a cruise or something for Christmas. Go party. See the Caribbean."

"Okay, I like that idea." They'd mixed their finances, getting a joint account and credit cards. They'd even done paperwork giving each other medical power of attorney and other authority. They'd made their wills.

Jerald touched Alan's hair. "Go ahead and call tomorrow and book us a cruise. If you don't book now, they might all be full."

"Okay." Alan relaxed, happy Jerald wanted to go. It meant a distraction, fun, relaxation.

It meant not sitting at home thinking about the last Christmas,

when Daph was with them, or her absence during what should have been a joyous holiday celebration in their new home.

He damn sure didn't feel like putting up a Christmas tree this year.

\* \* \* \*

Daphne read and re-read the letters countless times. She photocopied them and read the copies because she cried so much she worried she'd ruin the originals. Every night, her ritual was to start with the first and read through them all.

She cried every time.

She bought a prepaid cell phone and had it activated with a Tampa area code, but hadn't worked up the nerve to call. It was against the rules the U.S. Marshals had given her to contact Alan and Jerald without going through the marshals to do it.

After being in her new home for two months, she finally tried Alan's home number.

Her heart sank when the automated tone sounded, followed by the recorded message, "The number you are trying to reach is no longer in service..."

*They must have finally ditched the land line.*

She couldn't remember their cell numbers.

She looked up Alan's charter reservation number online, which would ring to his cell. When she called, one of the Aripeka marina shop clerks answered.

"Is Alan Walker there?" Daphne asked.

"We're taking his bookings for him."

"Do you have his cell number? I need to reach him."

"We're not allowed to give that out. We can pass along a message for you."

"Oh. Thanks. Never mind."

She'd fucked up. They'd never stopped loving her, and she'd been too damn angry and immature to see the truth at the time.

It felt like she'd spent the last year crying or in a freaking daze. Time to take action.

She awoke the next morning to a snowstorm. She stared, in awe at the strange sight. She'd never seen real snow before, and it was her first in her new hometown of Cody, Wyoming. Small town, yes, but a nice place. Friendly people.

Fortunately she didn't have to drive very far to the travel agency where she worked. "I know I haven't been here long, but can I put in for some unpaid time off at Christmas?"

Her boss, Barbara Thomas, laughed. "Honey, we close down from Christmas to New Year's every year. Knock yourself out, but I usually pay everyone for that time."

"Even though I haven't been here that long?"

The woman's nephew was a U.S. Marshal who had helped Daphne find the job. "It's okay, Jenny. You work hard, you're good with the customers. I don't mind."

She sometimes had trouble answering to her new name even though she'd picked it. "Thank you."

That's how the day after Christmas she found herself eagerly flying into Tampa International Airport. She knew it was against the rules, but she'd worried if she told her agent handler about it he'd forbid the trip. It'd been four long, achy months since that showdown in the courthouse. All she knew was she'd been miserable and would come out of the program if it meant she could be with her men.

If they would take her back.

She didn't care about her life anymore. What good was it without her men? She just hoped they still wanted her.

She rented a car and drove north, her stomach bound in knots. She pulled into the driveway a little before sunset and hesitated when she saw all the cars in the yard but didn't recognize any of them. Someone was apparently having a party.

Nervously, she walked up to the front door and knocked. The woman who answered didn't look familiar either.

“Can I help you?”

Her heart sank. “I’m sorry. I’m looking for someone who used to live here. I’m sorry I interrupted your evening.”

Fighting her tears, she turned to go.

“Are you looking for Mr. Walker or Mr. Carter?” the woman called out.

She stopped and turned. “Both, actually. I’m an...old friend of theirs.”

“They live at their new house now. We’re renting from them.”

Hope flared again. “In north Aripeka?”

“Yes. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes, thank you!”

She turned to sprint to the car when the woman’s words stopped her in her tracks. “But they won’t be back from their cruise until the seventh of January. If you want to leave a message, I’ll be happy to give it to them. We’re getting their mail for them.”

\* \* \* \*

*No, no message.*

She sat in the airport bar and stirred her drink. She’d gotten a room at the Tampa International Marriott after changing her flight to the first one she could get back the next morning. What a sucky way to spend the holidays. Although, from the way it appeared, she knew she should get used to spending them alone. A far cry from waking up last Christmas in their bed and in their arms, celebrating together as a family.

She blinked back another wave of tears at that thought. She felt even more alone now than she had before she met them. She’d had a taste of life, of love, of belonging, and it was gone.

The men, obviously, had moved on without her.

She didn’t blame them.

She’d turned in the rental car already. Despite knowing it would

rip her to shreds, she drove by the new house before returning to the airport.

It looked just like the plans.

The men's trucks sat parked in the driveway, but Jerald's work truck wasn't. She wondered where he'd left it, then she realized it wasn't her business anymore.

That thought brought another prickle of tears to her eyes.

She recognized the manatee water fountain on the deck, the one she'd seen at the flea market that day and didn't get, even though Alan wanted to buy it for her.

She wondered when they'd bought it.

If they'd bought it in anticipation of her coming home.

She'd sat on their back deck and watched the sun set over the Gulf. Remembered the day she'd sat in the back of Jerald's truck with him and talked.

Their sunset hearts. She didn't get sunsets like this in Wyoming. The Absaroka mountain range swallowed the sun west of town.

*Looks like the sun has finally set for good.*

\* \* \* \*

Alan stopped by to pick up their mail the morning after they returned from their cruise. Lisa handed him the small box full of it. "Did that woman ever get hold of you?"

"What woman?"

"She stopped by here looking for you the day after Christmas."

"Did she leave her name?"

"No."

"What'd she look like?"

"Young, kind of reddish brown hair, not red. Not long, not even to her shoulders. Hazel eyes. Shorter than you. Looked really sad when I told her you guys were gone. She said she was a friend of yours."

Alan felt his heart seize in his chest. "Do me a favor."

“Sure.”

“Never mention her to Jerald. Please. Forget you ever saw her.”

Before she could ask questions he didn't want to answer, he stiffly walked to his truck. He pulled out of their driveway but stopped by the marina before he returned home. A valid excuse to kill time.

A way to get his emotions under control.

He quickly rummaged through the box of mail, looking for anything from her. He'd never let Jerald see it. Jerald had a great time on the cruise, had finally started coming out of his shell, acting like his old self in some ways. In the good ways.

He wouldn't let Daphne pop in for a minute and ruin it for him.

For both of them.

\* \* \* \*

Special Agent Ben Williams hung up the phone and scrubbed his face with his hands. Before him on his desk, a report from the Cody field office. Jenny Hemingway had safely returned to Wyoming.

What troubled him was where'd she'd gone. He received monthly reports on her, knew she kept to herself, didn't date, didn't socialize. That she'd broke the rules and traveled to Florida only confirmed what he'd long suspected, that her mental state hadn't improved from her time in protective custody.

She had no idea her little holiday jaunt had been closely monitored. While technically a closed case, because of her high value in the Scorsini trial, and because of Paulie's pending appeals, he kept close tabs on her in case her future testimony was needed.

He made a few phone calls, then told his administrative assistant he needed to run out to meet with a witness and drove to Aripeka.

After finding no one at home, he drove to the marina and found Jerald Carter at work on an outboard engine. Alan Walker was nowhere to be seen.

*Good.*

Carter looked up at his approach. “What do you want?”

Williams sat on the dock. “Just stopping by to see how you and Mr. Walker are doing.”

Carter’s expression turned gruff. “Fine.” He went back to changing the spark plugs in the outboard.

He cleared his throat. This was totally against protocol, but what the hell. “Retired life treating you kindly?”

Carter nodded. “It’s okay.”

“Getting to travel?”

He shrugged, still not looking up at him. “We took a cruise. Thinking about going out west later this year.”

*Ah, perfect.* “Really? Where?”

“Alan’s never been to Yellowstone.”

*Fuck me, there is a God.* “Hey, listen, one of my buddies, his aunt runs a travel agency in Cody that handles trips out there. He just sent me some pics from one of his trips, I think I have the info.” He pulled out his BlackBerry and pretended to scroll through it when, in reality, he’d saved the info to his memo file. He scribbled the travel agency’s info on the back of one of his business cards and handed it to Carter, who reluctantly took it.

“Thanks, but I usually use a local place here in town.”

“Yeah, well, maybe they can book you some backcountry fishing through that place. Been seriously thinking about going myself.”

Carter jammed the card in his pocket. “You didn’t come here just to share travel tips. Quit blowing smoke up my ass.”

He couldn’t reveal the truth. It would be a breach of the rules big enough to get him tossed out and jeopardize his own pension, not to mention risking her life. All he could do was give the three of them a gentle nudge in the right direction and hope they found each other. “I feel guilty, okay?” Well, that *was* the truth.

“Why?”

“I should have counseled her to talk to you guys before she made her decision.”

Carter returned his attention to the outboard. “Yeah? Well, if my letters to her weren’t enough to convince her how we felt, how would talking have helped other than to end it faster?” He threw the socket wrench onto the deck. “Look, you come out here and start hashing this shit over, what the fuck? If you don’t have something better to do, then I would appreciate you go harass someone else. We’ve moved on, we’re over her, and we’d rather not talk about her, okay?”

Williams nodded. “Yeah. Sorry.” He stood to go, then Carter’s soft voice stopped him.

“Is she okay?”

He turned. Carter stared at the deck, his fists clenched. “She’s existing,” he gently said. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say she’s okay.”

\* \* \* \*

Jerald stared at Williams’ back as he walked down the dock. He didn’t need this shit today. He’d had a good few days, hadn’t thought about her...much. Alan had seemed so happy following the cruise.

He jammed his hands into his pockets and felt the business card. Well, okay, maybe the local travel agency could book through them. He did want to take Alan fly fishing. He pulled the card out and stared at it.

*Couldn’t hurt, right?*

## Chapter Sixteen

Despite Barbara Thomas' attempts to hook her up with one of her many nephews, Jenny, as she'd finally started thinking of herself, kept to herself. She had no desire to meet anyone romantically.

No man would ever live up to the two she'd stupidly thrown away.

Living alone sucked. How had she done it before she'd met Paulie? Oh yeah, she'd been in school, too busy and perpetually exhausted to notice that when she fell into bed at night there wasn't anyone waiting to hold her.

She lay in bed most nights and tried not to think about how huge it felt, despite only being a double. She slept huddled on the far left side, pillows piled against her back and the covers tightly swaddled around her. If she closed her eyes and thought hard, she could conjure the memory of Alan's cologne and Jerald's scent.

But when she did that, it usually meant more tears.

She hated to cook for only herself. Her pantry lay pitifully barren, like her heart and dreams. She ate cereal most days for breakfast and dinner, and would get a sub sandwich from a little shop next door to the travel agency on the days she worked there. Sometimes she made her own lunch, but that also brought back memories of taking care of Jerald and Alan, making lunch for them.

It wasn't worth the heartache. Cheerios didn't make her cry. They were also supposed to help lower her cholesterol.

*Bonus.*

The other bonus being she lost fifteen pounds. Clothes that used to feel tight on her now felt comfortably loose.

*Another bonus. I don't have to go clothes shopping, except for warm stuff to keep from freezing to death.*

The majority of the travel agency's business related to Yellowstone, the Grand Tetons and surrounding environs, usually booking incoming trips to the area, not outgoing ones by local residents. As winter set in, Jenny went on snowmobile tours into and around the park on her days off, falling in love with the extreme beauty and vastness of the place.

She would imagine talking with Alan, describing it to him in full, vivid detail, or pretend he and Jerald were with her and seeing it as she did. As winter gave way to spring, she spent even more time there, whenever she could, until she secured a part-time job working there two days a week. It meant she didn't have any free time, between working five days a week at the travel agency and then at Yellowstone, but it was worth it.

It kept her busy.

It kept her too exhausted to lay awake at night thinking about Alan and Jerald and how they were doing. Wondering if they missed her the way she missed them. Or if they'd simply gone on with their lives without another thought to the pain in the ass needy chick they'd rescued, who'd broken their hearts and gotten Alan shot.

She wondered if Alan still felt angry at her.

She returned from a lunch break one day at the travel agency to find a new stack of fishing guide reservation forms on her desk for her to input into their system. As she started working on them, one caught her eye and nearly stopped her heart.

J. D. Carter and Alan Walker, for two weeks, both in Yellowstone and the Tetons, sightseeing and then several days of fly fishing with an outfitter company that booked through their agency.

Her boss walked over. "What's wrong, Jenny? You look like you saw a ghost."

"Nothing." She put the form down and piled others on top of it. "I thought I recognized a name, but it was just a funny coincidence.

Someone I used to know.” She forced a smile. “I’ll get these plugged in for you.”

Before she left, she entered their contact numbers and itinerary information into her phone. They would be arriving in six weeks. She stopped by her boss’ desk on her way out. “Would it be okay if I took a few days off?”

She pulled out the calendar. “When you want them?”

Jenny flipped through and pointed. “There. A Wednesday and Thursday. I need a couple of days off in the worst way.” At least with two jobs she would have no problem paying her bills, even after she lost the government stipend she still deposited every month.

“Sure.” She wrote it in. “Have fun. What will you do?”

“I plan to go to Yellowstone and play tourist instead of guide.”  
*And maybe fix the worst mistake I’ve ever made.*

\* \* \* \*

Alan read the exhaustion in Jerald’s eyes. “You want to stay here and nap?” They’d flown out of Tampa the day before into Spokane, spent the night there, then drove to Yellowstone.

“Yeah, I need to rest. I didn’t sleep well last night. You go ahead and explore.”

Alan leaned in and kissed him. “I’m going to go find some coffee and see when Old Faithful’s going to erupt.”

“Okay.”

He walked across the compound from where the cabins were located to the main lodge. The cabins weren’t as nice as the Old Faithful Inn, but he’d heard about them and liked the more rustic feel of them. Jerald had been happy to oblige him when making their reservations.

He bought a cup of coffee from a snack counter inside the lodge and looked around for a few minutes. Huge timbers, rustic Old West feel to it. As beautiful as he’d imagined.

A huge wooden sign set up like a clock in the lobby showed Old Faithful would go off in fifteen minutes. *That must explain the crowd gathered outside.*

He walked down the path to join them on the boardwalk. The benches were filled, so he stood behind them, waiting as the geyser decided to make up its mind and erupt. He glanced around, tourists from every walk of life and more than a few nations.

He caught sight of a woman standing alone at the edge of the crowd and watching him. She wore a baseball cap pulled down over her face and dark sunglasses, the afternoon sun casting a shadow that concealed her features. When he looked again, the crowd had shifted and he didn't see her.

He turned back to the geyser. *I will not think of her! I won't ruin my fucking vacation thinking about that woman.*

God knew he'd wasted enough time on her.

Now he couldn't shake the feeling he was under surveillance. The last minute geyser crowd swelled as people hurried over to watch. Then it erupted, taking everyone's attention as steam and water shot into the air with a gurgling blast.

*I wish Daph were here.*

He blinked away tears and tried to summon his anger again. Only his anger and taking care of Jerald got him through the past almost year and a half.

Without her.

As the crowd thinned, drifting away along the boardwalk, he sat when a section of bench opened up. He needed to get his head on straight before he returned to the cabin to Jerald. Needed to get her out of his heart for good. He hoped this trip would do the trick. Just him and Jerald and the great outdoors with no fucking reminders of Daphne Peres every time he turned around.

He was buried deep in thought when he realized someone had sat on the bench next to him. He looked.

The same woman. Her dark green baseball cap bore a National

Park Service emblem. When she turned to look at him, his heart wanted to explode.

He tried to stand but she reached out and grabbed his wrist. "Please, don't go."

He wanted to scream, to rage, to yell.

He sat.

His brain shut down as he tried to cope with her presence. "What do you want?" he hoarsely asked. "Why can't you leave us alone? He's finally happy again."

She took off the sunglasses and he hated that he had to fight the urge to take her into his arms and hold her and love her tears away.

"I'm sorry, Alan. I never read his letters. Not until after I was on the plane when I left the courthouse that day." Her voice didn't even sound right, even more quiet and sad than when he first met her, if that was possible. Like she never laughed anymore.

Joyless.

"I hadn't read them. I felt so angry and hurt and abandoned, the way he turned me over to the marshals. It felt like he'd lied to me. But I couldn't throw them away either. Then on the plane out here that afternoon, I finally read them. I never knew how he felt until then. I didn't understand. I was too angry."

"What letters? What are you talking about?"

She opened her purse and handed him a sheaf of papers. "Didn't he tell you?"

Alan took them with numb fingers and thumbed through them, scanning them, photocopies of letters in Jerald's handwriting. "No."

"I didn't have my head on straight. I admit it. I felt abandoned and hurt. I thought he was mad at me for you getting shot, picking you over me. I couldn't see the truth at the time. I refused to read the letters then. I wish like hell I had."

She twisted her hands in her lap as she started crying again. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I told the marshals to tell him to stop sending them, and he did. So I figured that meant he really was done

with me. I never stopped loving and missing you guys. Until I read the letters, I thought he had.”

“You came by after Christmas? While we were gone?”

“I couldn’t take it anymore. I had to see you guys. I’d hoped...” She sniffled and wiped her eyes. “The new house is beautiful. I drove by before I returned to Tampa that night. I was going to stay the whole week if you’d have me. When the woman at the old house told me you guys were gone, I couldn’t bear to stay. I didn’t have a reason to stay.”

He couldn’t focus on her and the letters at the same time, so he read. Jerald’s words, his love and pain pouring off the page. He’d known the tough guy had loved her and ached for her, but this was a side he hadn’t openly seen of his lover until just recently.

“You could have said something that day in the courthouse.”

“I tried. You ordered me out. When I saw how angry you were I...” She took a deep breath. “I didn’t want to hurt him when I saw him like that. I never wanted to hurt either of you. You made it pretty obvious you wanted me to leave.”

His shock somewhat waning, he finally addressed the obvious. “How did you know we were here?”

“I work over in town, at the travel agency your trip was booked through. I saw the paperwork come through and knew I couldn’t waste the chance to see you. I also work here a couple of days a week in the park.”

She watched him as he read the letters. She couldn’t bear to reach out to him, afraid he’d rebuff her. He looked good, his hair a little shorter and less shaggy than it had been. He must have gotten up way early that morning, because she spotted the faint shade of stubble already shadowing his cheek.

She remembered how it used to feel nuzzling against him after he came in from a day on the water. Rough sandpaper skin that tasted sweetly salty.

That thought nearly took her nerve away. She slowly inhaled, trying to fill her lungs with piney Yellowstone air to clear her head and get hold of her emotions, but she caught a whiff of his cologne, too.

He'd made no attempt to touch her, to hold her.

He really had moved on.

At least now she had her answer.

When she stood, he never looked up from the papers in his hand, made no move to stop her. She felt what little hope existed in her heart rip loose and die.

"I'm so sorry, Alan," she whispered, struggling not to cry. "I love you, and I love him. I'm never going to stop loving either of you. There hasn't been a single day I haven't missed you. Once I got my head on straight and realized he did the right thing, it was too late for me to come back and make it right. If you want to tell him that for me, please do."

She choked back a sob. "I promise I'll leave you alone. I won't contact you guys again. I don't want to hurt you anymore. I never wanted to hurt you, I just wanted to love you." She laid an envelope on the bench next to him, the letter she'd written them in case they wouldn't talk to her at all.

She quickly headed for the parking lot. Her hands trembled so badly she almost couldn't fit the key into her truck's ignition. She didn't dare look back.

\* \* \* \*

Too stunned to stand, much less follow her, Alan sat there and read the letters Jerald had written. Then he looked at the envelope she'd left. Nothing written on the outside.

He finally opened it. In her handwriting, it wasn't very long.

*I'm so sorry. Jerald, I do know, now, that you did the right thing. I'm so sorry I didn't see it before. I was too upset and hurt to see the*

*truth. I was stupid, yes. I know apologies don't change the fact that I was a moron for not trusting you and your judgment. I should have known how much you loved me and how much that decision hurt you as much as it did me. I thought you were mad at me. I didn't read the letters you wrote me until after that day in the courthouse. I never threw them away but I couldn't bring myself to read them before then.*

*I didn't know how you felt, that you still loved me and wanted me. I thought you were getting rid of me for good.*

*I was already a new person by then, thanks to the government. I was already in the program.*

*I would give it all up to have you both back. I would do anything to be with you again. I've never stopped loving either of you and I'm so sorry I didn't trust you enough to understand why you did what you did. I thought you were choosing Alan over me, not that you were trying to protect me.*

*I wish you both nothing but happiness and love. I don't regret loving both of you, but I know I will never again find the kind of joy in my life that I had when I was with the two of you. The peace I felt. I just wish I hadn't fucked everything up with us. I wish I'd refused to go with the marshals in the courthouse that day and stayed and listened to you guys and talked to you and told you how I felt. I wish I'd read the letters when you first sent them to me so I knew.*

*I understand now why Alan acted so angry that day, and rightfully so. I know it looked bad. I didn't know you expected me to come home once the trial was over or I never would have asked to join the program. I threw away all that time we could have had together and nothing can ever bring it back and I'm so sorry.*

*I've hurt you guys so much, and if it's just a fraction of the pain I feel for causing it, then I know there is no way I can ever make up for it. And you both deserve so much better than that.*

*I'll always love you. Both of you.*

*D.*

As the shadows lengthened in the valley, people were once again gathering for the next eruption. How long had he sat there? At least ninety minutes, by his best guess. He realized he'd been crying. He stood and looked around and didn't see her anywhere.

What had she said? She worked over in town. But Jerald had booked their trip through a local agency in New Port Richey, not here.

*Fuck!*

He didn't know what town she meant, and Jerald had the reservation information.

He ran back to their cabin and rummaged through Jerald's bag until he found the paperwork and the agency's name and number. He tried to call them, but realized not only did he not have a cell signal, but that it was nearly eight o'clock in the evening in Florida.

Jerald heard him and woke up. "What's wrong?"

How did he tell him? He'd been so angry that day in the courthouse, he remembered holding Jerald and ordering her out of the room. She'd been trying to talk and he didn't want to hear anything she had to say. Especially nothing that would hurt Jerald more.

He sat on the bed and handed Jerald the note she'd left him.

It took him a moment, between his exhaustion and confusion, to realize what it meant. "Where did you get this?" Jerald hoarsely asked.

"She found me over at Old Faithful."

"And you didn't come get me? Where the hell is she?"

Alan shook his head. "I don't know."

Jerald stood, his voice rising. "She was *here*, and you let her fucking *leave*?"

He nodded.

"We've got to find her! Where does she live?"

"I don't know."

"Did she change her appearance?"

Her hair had been tucked under the ball cap. He couldn't have sworn to the color or the length. He shook his head. "I don't know."

“Please tell me she told you her new name!”

Alan shook his head. “I was in shock.” He looked up at Jerald and showed him the letters. “Why didn’t you tell me you wrote her?”

“Because I didn’t want you to get upset that she never answered. I figured she was done with us. I blamed myself for it, that she was mad at me for sending her away.”

Alan started laughing. He laughed so hard he fell back onto the bed and his whole body shook. A moment later, Jerald realized Alan was sobbing.

He sat next to Alan and tried to soothe him. “Jesus, I fucked up!” Alan screamed. “She tried to talk to us that day and I ran her out! I was so fucking mad, and I told her to go! If I’d just let her talk, she’d be with us now.”

“We’ve got to find her.”

“How? The agency in Florida is closed for the night.”

“And I didn’t bring the info for the local agency with me. I can’t remember who or where it was. Dammit!” Jerald grabbed the itinerary from Alan and scanned it. “The fishing guide. He’ll know which local agency booked him.”

“No cell phone reception.”

“We’ll find a damn phone. It’s Yellowstone, not outer Mongolia.” He pulled on clothes. “Come on, let’s go.”

They found a pay phone in the main lodge and made calls. The guide, when they finally reached him two hours later, didn’t know either, because he worked for an outfitter company who took his bookings for him.

They were closed until the next morning.

At least it was narrowed down to one town—Cody, to the east.

Neither man could sleep. They were supposed to spend the next three days sightseeing on their own. Around three a.m. they gave up, got in their rental car, and drove to Cody. They sat in an all-night restaurant drinking coffee until six in the morning, when they left the restaurant and parked outside the outfitter’s office. They waited by the

door when a young woman unlocked it at six-thirty.

The girl told them the office manager didn't come in until eight. The office manager was the one with access to the bookkeeping system. All she did was take care of new bookings, calls for the guides, last minute snafus, those kinds of problems. She couldn't access what company had booked a guide after the initial booking was made, only the customer and guide itinerary information.

The men sat and anxiously waited for the office manager to arrive.

The older woman suspiciously eyed them after they told her what they wanted. "Why do you want to know that?"

Alan and Jerald both tried to speak, their words tumbling over each other, until finally the woman held up her hands. "So you're trying to find a girl who works for one of the travel agencies here in town?"

"Yes!" both men said.

"Let me see your paperwork."

Jerald handed it over. She scanned it before walking to her desk. She sat down at her computer and a moment later, she wrote down the information and handed it to Jerald. "There's the agency, their address, and their phone number."

"Are they here in town?"

"Three blocks over that way." She pointed.

The men ran for the door. Five minutes later, they stood in front of a scowling older woman who listened as Jerald told her they were looking for one of her employees.

Three other women worked in the office, none of them Daphne.

"No offense, gentlemen, but I don't give out my employees' personal information to two men who barge into my office."

Jerald showed his official ID. "I'm retired, but you can call Florida and they'll confirm who I am."

She pursed her lips. "We don't have anyone here by the name of Daphne anyway. You must have the wrong agency."

Desperate, Jerald scanned the office again. One other desk, one

the office manager hadn't been sitting at, stood vacant. The nameplate read Jenny Hemingway.

That couldn't be a coincidence. "Jenny Hemingway. Where is she? Can we talk to her?"

"She's on vacation. And no, you may not. A moment ago you were looking for a girl named Daphne."

"This is really important—"

"Leave now, before I call the police."

Alan grabbed a business card from the counter and scribbled their cell numbers on the back of it. "We're not getting reception in Yellowstone, but please, give this to Jenny and have her call us. Tell her to leave a voice mail. Please tell her yes, we do want to talk to her. She'll know who we are and what it's about."

The woman reluctantly took the card. "All right."

The men left, Jerald driving. "Back to Yellowstone?" Alan asked.

"Fuck no." He stopped at a nearby real estate agency, got a free map of town, and returned to the car a moment later.

"Where are we going?"

"City hall. I want to see if there are any tax records in her name on file. That'll give us an address."

"You're a fucking genius."

Jerald grinned. "No, I was a fucking cop."

\* \* \* \*

She tried to sleep and couldn't. She needed to get out and do something. Anything. Outside of Yellowstone, to avoid running into the men. She packed a lunch and at daybreak drove east toward the Big Horn Mountains. She'd wanted to explore Shell Falls, had heard enough about it.

*Might as well go do it.*

Ironically, she didn't fear going anywhere alone. There was almost a relief in her anonymity. If she disappeared forever, only the

U.S. Marshals and maybe her boss would miss her.

There wasn't anyone else left.

*So this is what it feels like to really be alone.*

All she could do now was to try to release the men in her heart. To let them go once and for all. They'd moved on, rightly so. She wished she could have seen Jerald one more time, though.

She tried to enjoy the day even though clouds rolled into the mountains surrounding the park, and a chilly mist that threatened to turn to drizzle dampened the trail around the falls. She'd packed a rain poncho and jacket, quickly learning the weather here wasn't at all like Florida. She always went out prepared for anything.

Shell Falls was beautiful, definitely worth the drive. The scenery through the mountains was breathtaking in a different way than Yellowstone's rugged serenity.

She thought she might return home after lunch, but then she remembered a paperback in her truck that she hadn't finished yet.

Peaceful, calm, and with a sheltered bench where she could sit and read and stay dry, she decided to stay.

\* \* \* \*

Jerald tried the obvious first, but found no phone number listed for Jenny Hemingway in Cody, Wyoming.

Alan watched, his stomach tight with tension, as Jerald scrolled through the computer records in the property appraiser's office. A moment later, his face erupted in a triumphant grin as he jotted information down. "Let's go."

Twenty minutes later they pulled into a driveway in front of a tiny house on a small, shaded lot. The neighborhood wasn't the best, but not a slum, either.

"Jesus, that place is a freaking shoebox," Alan said. "Can't be more than eight hundred square feet, if that."

"A single woman, in a small town like this, they're not going to

put her into some huge ranch house. She's lucky she's not in a trailer." They raced up the front walk and rang the doorbell.

Nothing.

They knocked and waited, then knocked again.

They circled the house and saw no signs of life.

"How do we even know this is her place?" Alan asked as they returned to the car. "We don't know for sure she really is Jenny Hemingway."

Jerald looked at his phone, which had picked up service again upon their arrival in Cody. He scrolled through his files and found a picture he'd snapped of her and Alan, a picture he hadn't looked at in months but couldn't bear to delete. With Alan following, he left the car, walked to a neighbor's house, and knocked on the front door.

An older man answered. He eyed them suspiciously. "Can I help you?"

Jerald smiled. "We're looking for our cousin, Jenny Hemingway." He held up the phone, displaying the picture. "We thought she said she lived next door, this is the address she gave us. We were supposed to meet up with her today, but she's not home and not answering her cell."

The man's face relaxed as he looked at the picture, then at Alan's friendly, smiling, hopeful face. "Looks like she's coloring her hair now, huh?" He grinned. "My wife started dying hers the first time she spotted a grey hair. I don't have the heart to tell her everyone knows it's not her real hair color."

Jerald forced himself to stay friendly and not beg the guy for information. "Yeah, she said we might not recognize her at first. We haven't seen her in over a year, well before she moved out here. Do you know where she went or when she'll be back? We came all the way from Florida. She promised to take us around the area, show us around Yellowstone since she works there part-time."

"She loves that job. Don't know how she finds the energy. Not a day off, she's either at that travel agency or leaving here before dawn

to drive over to the park. Probably costs her more money in gas to work there than she makes. Sorry, boys, can't help you. You're welcome to wait here if you want."

"That's all right, we appreciate it, though. We'll just sit in our car and wait and keep trying her phone. Maybe we got our wires crossed about the time."

"Maybe she hit the grocery store or something. I know she said she was taking a couple days off, but I don't remember her mentioning you boys. Maybe she told my wife though."

"We'll keep trying her cell phone. Thanks."

They returned to their rental and sat there for a moment. Jerald felt his whole body tremble. "It's her," he said before he looked at Alan. "We gonna get her back and take her home, or are we going to risk losing her again? I need to know what you want to do."

"I want her back," he softly said. "I want her home."

Jerald nodded and started the car. "Okay, then we're on the same page." They ran through a discount store, got bottled water, snacks, and magazines to read. There was a small park across the street, so they parked where they could see her driveway and waited.

And waited.

They took a break to get a late lunch around four. By six, Alan wondered if this was such a good idea. He was about to suggest they give up and return to Yellowstone when they spotted a small pick-up truck slowing as it approached her house. It pulled into the driveway and parked. When the woman got out, both men launched themselves from their car and sprinted across the street, screaming her name.

## Chapter Seventeen

*Home again.* She hoped she hadn't ruined the men's vacation. She wondered if Alan would even tell Jerald he'd seen her, or if he'd remain silent and hold it in.

She wouldn't blame him for not saying anything. She wished she'd never seen the paperwork, should have left well enough alone. Now the guys were probably upset.

*I can't do anything right.*

She'd stopped by the grocery store on her way home, picked up a gallon of milk and other things she needed. Trying to juggle it all at once to avoid a second trip, she fumbled with her keys as she made her way up the walk.

"Daphne!"

She turned, startled, as two men ran across the street in the deepening gloom. At first fear set in. Had Paulie sent men to find her anyway, even this many months later?

Then she recognized them.

The gallon of milk slipped from her hands. The plastic jug exploded when it hit the walk, showering her shoes and jeans. The men splashed through the puddle and threw their arms around her.

They were both babbling so fast, talking over each other, that she couldn't understand them. Her own shock compounded the matter. As they all sank to the milk-covered sidewalk, she realized they were telling her they loved her, begging her to come home.

At some point between crying, laughing, and telling them how sorry she was and that she loved them, Alan found her purse and keys and brought the rest of the groceries in. Jerald scooped her into his

arms and carried her through the front door.

She heard Alan dump everything onto the kitchen counter, then he joined them on the tiny sofa.

Jerald kissed her, ran his hands through her hair. “Jesus, baby, I’m so fucking sorry—”

“I’m sorry,” she interrupted. “I should have read the letters, shouldn’t have gone.”

“We’re all sorry,” Alan interjected. “Now let’s all shut up and make up.”

She laughed and pulled him to her. He kissed her, a hungry, possessive need in him she never remembered feeling before. Like the men’s positions had been reversed and now Alan was the strength of the two.

Jerald got up from the couch. “There’s the bedroom.”

Alan stood and pulled her into his arms. “I hope you realize you aren’t getting away from us again.”

“I don’t want to get away.”

“Good.” He picked her up and carried her in. The men quickly stripped themselves and her and she wanted to cry again, only this time with happiness as they stretched out on either side of her in a bed that had suddenly gone from too big to extremely crowded with their arrival.

*Thank god!*

Jerald kissed her as Alan laced his fingers through hers. “You won’t get away again, baby,” Alan whispered in her ear, making her pleasantly shiver. He kissed the spot behind her ear that always melted her. “Never again.”

Jerald lifted his head and stared into her eyes. “Forever,” he whispered, his voice husky. “You’re ours.”

Alan kissed his way down her neck, along her collarbone to the hollow at the base of her throat. His tongue, sweet and scorching, drew a long moan from her, muffled by Jerald’s mouth over hers.

She tangled her fingers in Jerald’s hair as his tongue swept across

hers. Alan wrapped his lips around her right nipple and lightly bit down, making her squirm. Then his fingers slipped between her legs. Her back arched as she tried to press her hips closer to his hand, wanting, needing him.

Jerald lifted his head and stared into her eyes. "I've missed you so much. I never thought I'd see you again."

She didn't want to cry again, but at least now they were happy tears. "Me too."

Alan kissed her even as he slowly thrust his fingers inside her. "I can't wait to get you home."

"What'll we do with this place?" she finally managed to ask.

"We can sell it, rent it, or keep it as a vacation home."

"I want to show you Yellowstone," she said. "I want to be the one to show you around the park."

He traced her lips with his. "We have plenty of time for that, babe. All I care about right now is making love to you."

Jerald groaned. "I didn't get any rubbers."

"That's okay," she breathlessly said after she pried her lips from Alan's again. "I'm on the Pill."

Both men sat up. "What?" they asked, looking identically territorial.

Startled by their reaction, she finally laughed. "Don't worry. You two were the last to lay your hands and any other body parts on me. I started getting bad migraines every month because of the altitude. My doctor put me on the Pill to help." She laughed again when they practically deflated in their relief. "You don't honestly think any one man could ever live up to you two, do you?"

"I hope not," Alan said. She traced her fingers along his stomach, over the pale scar twisting near his navel. He captured her hand and lifted it to his mouth, where he brushed his lips over her fingers. "We need to put some weight back on you. You look pale and skinny, like you haven't been eating."

"I haven't had any appetite. Sucks cooking for one."

Jerald rolled her into his arms and nuzzled the base of her throat. “We’ll keep you well-fed, sweetie.”

She tangled her fingers in his hair. “When you’re not on patrol, huh?”

He lifted his head. “I’m retired. Got my captain’s license. Alan and I work together now.”

“Retired?” Life had passed her by. Hell, it’d been over a year since she’d left them, what did she expect?

He nodded. “Yeah, baby. Retired. Well, as retired as I can be, working with the slave driver here.” He kissed her again, taking her breath away. “I have a feeling I’m going to take some more time off when we get home though.”

“Both of us,” Alan echoed.

“You’ll be lucky if we let you out of bed for a week,” Jerald teased.

She hadn’t missed the sex so much as she’d missed the men. Well, okay, yes, she had missed the sex too, but more important, her family.

She started crying again as he pulled her into his arms. “What is it?” Jerald asked, worried. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m so sorry I got mad at you and didn’t read the letters! I was stupid.”

He gently rubbed her back. “Hey, it’s over. It’s old news. It doesn’t matter anymore. You’re coming home with us and that’s all there is to it.” They laid her back on the bed and took turns kissing and caressing her.

Alan worked his way down her tummy to between her legs, kissing her the entire way. “You’re so beautiful. I’m glad you found me.”

“Sneaky woman,” Jerald teased. He cupped one of her breasts. His fingers teased her nipple into a hard, taut peak. “Damn, you feel good!”

Alan kissed the inside of her thigh. “I hope you weren’t planning on getting any sleep tonight, sweetie.” He swept his tongue up her

flesh to the juncture between her thighs. With his palms flat against her legs, he gently pushed her thighs wider apart. "Open up for me, baby. I've got a lot of lost time to make up for."

Jerald switched to her other breast and played with her nipple. "Times two."

She squirmed under their hands. As if they hadn't spent a single night apart, her body responded to their touch. Heat rushed from her core to her clit. She felt herself grow slick as Alan nuzzled the inside of her other thigh, teasing her, refusing to be rushed. Jerald captured her mouth with his lips, possessively exploring, tasting, teasing. Alan drew slow, seductive circles over her flesh with his tongue as he inched closer to her sex.

"You want it, baby?" Alan asked her.

Jerald lifted his mouth from hers. "Yes!" she gasped.

Jerald cradled her in his arms as Alan breathed warm air across her clit. Then with the lightest of touches, Alan licked her clit, lightly dragging his tongue up one side and down the other as she shivered under his touch.

"I love watching him go down on you, baby," Jerald murmured in her ear. "It's so fucking sexy watching your face."

She looked up into his blue eyes. He caressed her cheek, his finger stroking her lips. She opened her mouth and flicked out her tongue, licked his finger. When he pushed his finger into her mouth she eagerly sucked it, working it over as if a smaller version of his cock.

She heard his sharp intake of breath. "Fuck, that's sexy."

She would have responded except Alan's tongue plunged into her pussy and sent her into a frenzy. She moaned with disappointment when he withdrew, until he replaced his tongue with his finger. Stroking it in and out of her, he returned his attention to her clit and swirled his tongue around it.

Jerald withdrew his hand and cradled her chin in his palm. "Look at me, baby. Don't close your eyes."

How could she have forgotten this? Feeling like she was

connected to them while making love, like their very souls had joined, not just their bodies.

Safe in Jerald's arms, with Alan eagerly at work on her clit, she let go of her guilt and regret. There was nothing but the feel of their flesh against theirs, the warmth of their bodies enveloping her, the musky scent of her own passion slowly washing over them.

"Come for us, baby," Jerald coaxed. "Don't hold back."

Alan added a second finger, slowly stroking, turning his hand until his fingers found that exceptionally sweet spot inside her. He pressed up at the same time he sucked on her clit.

Whether it was because she felt so emotional, or because she hadn't had an orgasm since the last time she made love to her men, she exploded, sobbing as her muscles gripped his hand, her nerve endings overloaded with white hot pulsations. Once he'd sensed she'd had enough, Alan raised his head.

"How was that?"

Her eyes had dropped closed. She nodded.

Alan raised himself up on his arms and knelt between her legs. His stiff cock brushed against her thighs. "Be prepared for the fucking of your life, sweetheart." He leaned in and kissed her, hard. She tasted herself on him. When he sat up he grabbed his cock and rubbed it up and down along her folds before pressing forward, deeply. "Oh, baby!"

When he'd fully buried himself inside her, he lowered his body on top of hers, his head resting between her breasts. "Jesus, you feel so good!" he whispered. "I could fuck you all night long." Every slow stroke of his cock made her pussy clench again.

"Don't take all night," Jerald grouched. "I'm dying here."

"You're not dying," Alan teased. "You're just tired of me."

"Not tired of you. Tired of *waiting* on you, maybe."

She giggled as Alan pulled her legs around his waist. "Patience, Jer." He withdrew almost all the way before sinking his full length inside her again and holding still. Leaning in, he kissed her, then

Jerald. With his eyes locked on Jerald's, he took a long, slow stroke. "I don't want to rush."

"You got any lube, sweetie?" Jerald asked.

She laughed. "No, sorry. Haven't needed any."

Jerald untangled himself and bolted out to the kitchen. He returned a moment later with a bottle of olive oil. "Jesus Christ, kiddo. What the hell have you been eating?"

"Why?" Alan asked.

"She's got practically nothing in her fridge or pantry. No wonder she's so freaking skinny." He knelt on the bed. "Roll her over, Alan."

Without pulling out, he did, sliding his arms down her hips, cradling her ass. Jerald rubbed oil over his cock and nudged into position. "I can't wait to feel you."

Daphne nuzzled her head against Alan's chest, his heartbeat thrumming in her ear. Jerald massaged her ass cheeks, then moved Alan's hands down. "Hold her for me."

She relaxed as Alan's fingers splayed across her ass to spread her open for Jerald. Then Jerald drizzled oil down the seam of her ass. His fingers rubbed her rim, preparing her. Then his hard cock pressed for entrance.

"Let me in, baby," he said.

Her soul felt lighter as he slid inside her, filling and stretching her. She rocked her hips against the men and felt the familiar erotic burn quickly give way to pleasure. With both of them inside her, they hit places neither one alone could touch.

*Damn, they feel good!* Jerald's hands gripped her hips as Alan brushed his fingers up her spine, their hands scorching hot against her flesh in contrast to the cool temperature of the room. Her clit, already sensitive from Alan's earlier ministrations, comfortably rubbed against him.

"You like that, baby?" Jerald asked.

She wiggled her hips in reply. "Oh, you have no idea."

The sensation of them filling, stretching, fucking her answered all

her prayers. Her men.

They still wanted her. Still loved her.

She pushed up with her arms to gain leverage. Rocking her hips against them, they let her set the rhythm as she found that perfect, sweet position where her clit and G-spot both received attention.

Jerald kissed the back of her neck. "That's it. Take what you need, sweetie."

Alan reached up and cupped the back of her neck. His sweet brown eyes looked nearly black in the dim light. "Fuck us, baby."

She tried to keep her eyes open, but then Jerald reached around her and started rolling her nipples between his fingers. The immediate contraction of her muscles around their cocks triggered her climax. She came unhinged, a cry bursting from her as the men started moving above and beneath her, fucking her, taking over and catching up to join her.

She heard Alan's moan first, felt his cock throbbing inside her, followed by Jerald a moment later. Panting, she collapsed onto Alan and lay there as he stroked her back and shoulders.

Jerald held himself up on his arms, kissing her back and feathering his lips down her spine.

Maybe tonight she would actually sleep all night without waking up or having bad dreams.

"You okay, baby?" Jerald softly asked, nervous worry tingeing his tone.

"Oh, sweetie, I am sooo okay now."

He carefully pulled out and walked into the bathroom to clean up. He brought a warm, wet washcloth back, then cleaned her up before returning to snuggle with them.

She didn't move from where she lay sprawled across Alan, his arms enfolding her, his softening cock still embedded inside her. Jerald rolled onto his side and draped an arm over her back. She felt him playing with her hair.

"Is this your natural color, babe?"

“Yeah.” She wasn’t with them long enough for it to totally grow out. She’d kept dying it dark before the trial, the marshals telling her it would be better to wait until after to change it, to make it harder for her to be recognized.

“It’s beautiful,” Jerald said. “I love it.”

“Please don’t ever change it,” Alan echoed.

“What happens now?” she softly asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Jerald grinned. “Oh, no you don’t. Don’t you dare go thinking we’re letting you out of our sight.” He nuzzled his nose against hers. “You’re stuck with us for life, babe. Seriously.” Then a dark look clouded his face. “Do you have a government contact here in town?”

“Yeah. I only have to talk to them once a year, or if I’m going out of town for a while I have to give them a heads-up so they know I’m gone.”

“We have to make that call first thing in the morning. Tell them Jenny Hemingway’s getting a change of address.”

Alan rolled onto his side, placing her in Jerald’s arms. “I’ll be right back.” He kissed her, then left the room for the bathroom. The tiny house only had one bedroom and one bathroom, but at times it had felt way too large.

Especially during the long nights.

She tightly snuggled against Jerald as his arms enveloped her. “This feels so good.”

He kissed the back of her neck. “You can say that again.”

She heard the sound of the toilet flushing, then a moment later Alan’s aggravated voice from what sounded like the kitchen. “What the hell?”

“What?” she called out.

He appeared in the bedroom door. In his hands, two boxes of Cheerios. “Okay, seriously? What the hell is up with the cereal?”

She felt herself blush in the dim room. “I told you I don’t cook very much.”

“But Cheerios? All the time?”

“Not all the time,” she mumbled.

He rolled his eyes and disappeared again. She heard him moving around in the kitchen, opening the fridge and cabinets. She suspected he was putting away her groceries.

“Uh, oh,” Jerald murmured in her ear. “You’re in trouble now, kiddo.”

She giggled, another wave of relief nearly overwhelming her. Laughing felt good. *Damn* good. She’d done very little of it since she’d left them.

Alan returned a moment later. “Seriously,” he said as he climbed into bed, “I’m cooking you a real meal in the morning.”

Her stomach loudly growled, making both men laugh.

“Well, I hadn’t had dinner yet,” she grouched. “Someone sort of took me by surprise.”

Alan kissed her, then got back out of bed. “Where’s the keys, Jer?”

“Why?”

“Because I refuse to let her go hungry, and she’s damn sure not eating cereal for every meal anymore. I’m going to run to the store. It was only a couple of blocks away. Besides, you and I need dinner too.”

Alan dressed, got the keys, and leaned in to kiss them both. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

Jerald tightly hugged her. “Don’t worry, she’s not leaving this bed.”

Alan laughed. “Don’t wear her out. You’ll scare her away.”

Alone with Jerald again, she rolled over to face him. Alan had turned the bedside lamp on when he got dressed and left it on. In the yellow light of the dim bulb, she saw the deep lines around Jerald’s eyes that hadn’t been there that last afternoon in the hospital.

“Thank you for tracking me down. When I left Old Faithful I thought I’d never see you two again.”

“I was a cop, baby. You think I’m not tracking you down, think again. You’re my life, you and him.”

“Thank you for forcing me into protective custody.”

He arched an eyebrow at her, but didn’t say anything.

“If I’d read your letters, if I hadn’t been so pigheaded, I would have understood sooner. You did the right thing to keep me safe. To protect Alan. If you hadn’t shown up when you did...” She swallowed back her tears. How many nights had she lain in bed after nightmares of Alan’s shooting woke her up in a cold sweat? “I never would have forgiven myself if he died because of me.”

Jerald gently brushed the hair out of her face. “Old news. Ancient history. He’s fine, the Scorsini family network is either in jail, facing charges, or in witness protection, and you’re back where you belong.”

He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her, gently, slowly, seductively exploring. She didn’t think either one of them could be ready again so soon, but she felt him stiffen against her leg even as sensual tingles deep inside her betrayed her own reaction.

He rolled her onto her back, his stiff cock easily sliding inside her. “I want to make love to you all night long, baby.”

Her hands settled on his waist, her legs hooked around his, holding her to him. “At least this is one night I won’t mind not being able to sleep,” she said.

It felt so easy rolling her hips against his in that familiar way, the slow, steady rhythm he always set at first, the little extra push at the bottom of every stroke, bumping her clit in a teasing way, never enough to quite get her all the way over.

He stopped and sat up, wiggling a hand between them. “Show me what you’ve got, baby,” he said, a playful smile on his face.

With his thick member filling her and his thumb strumming her over-sensitive nub, it didn’t take her long to give him what he wanted. As she pulsed around him, he grinned. “That’s my good girl.” He grabbed her hips and fucked her, hard and fast, the entire bed shaking with each pounding stroke until his climax took him and he cried out

her name before collapsing on top of her.

“So good,” he whispered against her neck. “So, so good, baby.”

They were dozing, arms and legs tangled together, the sheets pulled up to their waists, when Alan returned from the store thirty minutes later.

He grinned from the bedroom doorway. “My turn next, right?”

She laughed. “I think I need food first.”

“That, my dear, is coming right up.” He returned to the kitchen.

She tried to slip out of bed, but Jerald snagged an arm around her waist and dragged her back. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Bathroom. Then I was going to help Alan in the kitchen.”

He cracked open one eye. “I suppose I can let you do that.” His mouth curled in a teasing smile.

Laughing felt so good! She leaned over and kissed him. “I promise I won’t leave without you two.”

“Okay.” He let her go. She went and cleaned up, pulled on her bathrobe, then padded out to the kitchen. Already she felt that pleasant, familiar ache in her thighs and other muscles. She’d be sore in a good way the next morning.

And oh, how she’d missed that feeling.

On her way through the living room she adjusted the thermostat to warm the place up a little. Alan stood at the kitchen counter, chopping something to toss into butter melting in a skillet, which already sat on the lit stove.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her face against his back. He still used the same laundry detergent, the familiar scent warming her soul. “What’s for dinner?”

“Chicken stir fry. How long has it been since you actually cooked anything?”

She felt herself blush again. “I don’t use the stove. Never have. I don’t know how to cook on a gas stove. It scares me.”

He turned, shock on his face. “Seriously?”

“I grew up in Florida. We didn’t have gas appliances. When I

moved in here they had to show me how to take care of the water heater in case the pilot light went out.”

“Okay, so how do you cook?”

“I don’t. Well, if I can nuke it, I do. I don’t use that stove. I’ve got an electric skillet I use for stuff like that, and I’ve used my grill a couple of times. And a slow cooker. But I don’t cook on the stove. Don’t bake, either. I usually don’t cook at all.”

He rolled his eyes. “Well, we’ll get you home where you belong. No gas stove there.” He kissed the top of her head before turning back to the counter.

Jerald walked into the kitchen, naked, and slipped his arms around her waist, pinning her between them.

Alan laughed as he glanced over his shoulder. “You do realize it’s hard to cook with both of you standing there like that holding on to me?”

“I’m just making sure she’s not going anywhere.” He tugged on the neckline of her robe, exposing the nape of her neck. He kissed her, gently nipping and making her shiver.

Ten minutes later, Alan had dinner ready for them. Alan held her chair for her as she sat at the tiny dinette.

As the men took their seats, she laughed.

“What now, sweetie? What’s so funny?” Jerald asked. He was still naked, had waited for dinner with his arms around her, reluctant to let her go.

“I’ve never had guests. Not really. Just you guys, the neighbor lady next door, and the U.S. Marshal in charge of my case. You’re the first people besides me who’ve eaten here.”

“Well two cherries popped, then,” Alan snarked. “Your stove and your table.”

Jerald volunteered for clean-up duty while Alan carried her back to the bedroom. “Okay, you have a full tummy. I expect your undivided attention.”

She giggled as he dropped her onto the bed. He stood beside the

bed and stared at her as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt. He dropped it to the floor and kicked off his shoes before unfastening his jeans. Then he knelt over her and untied her robe's sash.

"Are you starting to remember how I couldn't keep my hands off you?" he asked, his voice low and throaty.

"It's coming back to me."

He kissed a trail from her lips to her navel and up again before he rolled onto his back. His cock had grown rigid during his oral explorations. "Come here," he softly said, patting his thigh.

She sat up, then dropped the robe and swung a leg over him before settling on top of him. She slowly impaled herself on his cock, sighing with contentment as she felt him bottom out inside her.

He stroked her thighs. "Beautiful, baby. Absolutely beautiful." He cupped his hands and played with her breasts for a few minutes, lightly rubbing her nipples with his thumbs until they stood tautly peaked. Then he dropped his hands to her mound. He slipped his fingers between them, found her clit and started rubbing it. "I want one more, baby. I want to feel your sweet pussy squeezing me."

She didn't know if she had it in her, as tired as she felt, but she'd damn sure try. Then she heard Jerald walk in. He knelt behind her and played with her nipples again.

Secure in his arms, she relaxed against him as Alan's talented fingers wrung one more orgasm out of her. When he felt her coming, he grabbed her hips and fucked her, hard and fast, bouncing her against Jerald. Finally spent, he pulled her down to him and held her as she felt his pulse slow and return to normal.

Jerald didn't move. "Great. You wore her out. What the hell am I supposed to do with this?" he said, pointing at his cock. It had decided it wanted another round.

She sat up and seductively grinned. "I'll gladly take care of that for you." She went down on him as he swept her hair away from her face and held it at the back of her neck for her.

He moaned. "Oh, Jesus!"

Taking her time, she swirled her tongue around the head, flicking it over the slit, tasting his pre-come. He was already damn close, just from watching the two of them together.

She reached between his legs and found his sac, palmed the soft, heavy flesh in her hand.

He moaned again, his cock twitching in her mouth.

She thought he might last longer, but he didn't, taking only a few minutes before he filled her mouth. She swallowed, going deep and licking and sucking him as his fingers tightened in her hair before finally going lax. She sat up and kissed him.

"Good?"

He nodded, then dropped to the bed between her and Alan.

"Hey, tough guy," Alan said, poking him. "No fair hogging her."

Jerald grabbed her and moved her so she lay between them. "Better?" Jerald asked.

Alan cuddled close. "Much."

It was a tight squeeze, and one she definitely didn't mind. "Good thing I am on the Pill," she mumbled. "You two would have me pregnant by morning at this rate."

Jerald yawned. "Actually, I know I said all night, but I think I need a nap."

"Me too," Alan sleepily agreed.

Daphne giggled. "Did I wear you out already?"

"Yep," they echoed.

Snuggled like that, they all fell asleep.

## Chapter Eighteen

She awoke before dawn the next morning with a man between her legs, his tongue eagerly lapping at her clit. Without opening her eyes, in case it was a dream and not reality, she reached between her legs and ran her hands through his hair.

*Jerald.*

That meant the man she was snuggled against...

Alan kissed her. "Good morning, babe."

A sleepy smile creased her face. "Good morning." She patted Jerald's head. "Good morning to you, too."

He mumbled something in reply that could have been "good morning." The rumbling vibration across her clit only served to make her moan.

After a few more minutes of this, with his fingers also skillfully stroking her, she felt her climax build.

"That's it," Alan coaxed. "I bet you're totally wet for him, aren't you?"

She knew she was. She felt it. Not that either man had ever had a problem getting her wet in the past. Just the thought of what they could do to her would make her wet.

That was the thought she needed to push her over the edge. As she came, she cried out. Alan kissed her, fucking her mouth with his tongue the way Jerald fucked her with his fingers and mouth. When she finally lay limp on the bed, Jerald lifted his head.

"Are you awake yet?"

She laughed. "Get up here and fuck me, tough guy."

He needed no further encouragement. He grabbed her ankles and

lifted them to his shoulders as he plunged deep inside her. Alan sat up and moved until he knelt behind Jerald and grabbed his ass. “Maybe I should fuck you like this, while you’re fucking her—”

“Oh, hell yes!” Jerald cried out, but as he fell still, she realized he’d already come.

She giggled. “I think you missed your chance there, Alan.”

“Jesus Christ, that’s not fair!” Jerald gasped as he recovered. “I barely had a chance with her.”

“Figures you’d cheat me out of it.” Alan slapped Jerald’s ass. “Move. My turn.”

Jerald rolled to his side and kissed her as Alan took his place. “You tired of us yet, baby?” Jerald asked.

“Not in the least. Give me twenty or thirty years, then ask me again.”

“Oh, a lot longer than that,” Alan said. “Dammit, you feel so good!”

She looked at Jerald. His eyes seemed to burn right through her. “How did you get to be the lucky one to go first this morning?”

“I woke up before Mr. Lazy,” he teased.

She held on to Alan. “Well, that means you don’t have to hurry,” she joked.

He moaned against her neck, his thrusts becoming harder, faster.

Jerald reached over and stroked his ass. “Yeah, he does. He promised to cook you breakfast.” His hand dropped lower, and she knew from Alan’s reaction that Jerald had grabbed his balls.

She ran her tongue around his ear. “Come for me, baby,” she whispered. “Fuck me good.”

Between Jerald’s hand and her voice in his ear, Alan couldn’t hold back. He sank his cock into her one last time before falling still on top of her.

Jerald stretched out next to them again. “You’re too easy,” he teased. “Should make it a challenge next time.”

“Fuck you,” Alan mumbled, his lips still pressed against her neck.

Jerald laughed. "You aren't fucking anyone until after breakfast at the very least. We also need to talk to her U.S. Marshal handler."

"Talk about a buzz kill," she groaned.

\* \* \* \*

They all managed to squeeze into her shower. Alan finished first to get breakfast started. By the time she emerged with Jerald, he had it ready for them.

She'd missed this too, being together with them at meals, talking about the day ahead or what happened, spending time together not just in bed but out of it.

Jerald held her hand after breakfast while she called the marshal and told him she needed to see him. When he showed up an hour later and she broke the news to him, he protested before the men spoke up.

The U.S. Marshall caseworker looked decidedly unhappy. He paced Daphne's tiny living room while Alan and Jerald flanked her on the couch and held her hands.

"I can't believe you're willing to risk your life like this."

"I'm not changing my name back. I'm staying Jenny Hemingway. Very few people knew me back then anyway. I rarely left the house before the trial."

"Nobody will get close to her," Jerald growled. "I'll guarantee it."

"You're the one who put her in protective custody in the first place, Major. Why are you now willing to risk her life?"

"I'm not a major anymore, I'm retired. Besides, Paulie Scorsini was killed in prison two months ago. Or did you forget to tell her that little factoid?"

She looked at the caseworker. "What? Is that true?"

"Well, yes, but what difference does that make?"

"Because," Jerald said, "you know as well as I do that the Scorsinis are worried about the dozen or so other federal indictments coming down the pike for the few people still not under indictment

yet. The old man's dying, Paulie's dead, their whole organization is in turmoil and being cannibalized by other families. Their own people are turning rat faster than they can whack them, and the least of their concerns right now is Daphne. Jenny," he corrected himself. He looked at her and brushed the hair away from her cheek with his free hand. "Sorry, honey. That will take some getting used to. You'll always be Daphne to me."

"Me too," Alan echoed.

After an hour, the caseworker gave up trying to change her mind. He left in a huff with dire warnings to her to think about this long and hard. She knew she didn't need to do any more thinking because all she had done over the past long, lonely months was think about what a horrible mistake she'd made.

She packed herself a weekend bag and, sitting in the passenger seat while Alan rode in back, they drove out of town, headed to Yellowstone. They would stay at the cabin for another night before driving up to Mammoth and staying there.

"Oh, wait! I need to do something."

"What?" Jerald asked.

"We need to stop by the travel agency."

Alan reached over the seat and gently grabbed her chin. "You're coming home with us when we leave," he firmly said. "And that's final."

She grinned. "Of course I am, silly. I need to quit and clean out my desk."

Jerald laughed as he swung the car around. "Then by all means, let's get that handled right now."

Barbara Thomas didn't look happy. She suspiciously eyed the two men while Daphne cleared out her desk. Before she left, Barbara pulled her into the back room. "Are you okay? I can call the cops for you."

She laughed and hugged the other woman. "I can honestly say this is the best I've felt in over eighteen months. They're my guys. I know

it's weird, but I love 'em like crazy and they love me. There isn't a damn thing on this planet that's going to keep me away from them now that I've finally got them back."

"I do have to admit you look happy. I don't think I've ever seen you smile like this before." Barbara handed over her final paycheck. "Well, good luck. If things don't work out, you're always welcomed here."

"Thank you, but I have a feeling those two guys aren't about to let me go again. Believe me, that's the way I want it."

She kept one hand on Jerald's thigh while they returned to Yellowstone through the east entrance. She showed her employee pass at the gate and they waved them through. "I am going to hate quitting here," she admitted. "It's beautiful. You should see it in winter when it's covered in snow. They groom the roads for snowmobiles."

"I could care less about the park," Alan said. "I've got the only sight I want to see sitting right here with us. You're so beautiful. You look so good."

Jerald lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it without taking his eyes off the road. "Talk about a sight for sore eyes, baby."

They stopped at Fishing Bridge for lunch before continuing on to Old Faithful. In the cabin, Jerald fell onto the bed, pulling Daphne on top of him. "Now I'm thinking screw the vacation, let's go rent a truck and get your stuff and drive home."

Alan knelt on the bed behind her, straddling Jerald's legs. "Not a bad idea."

"No. You don't have to worry about me leaving. I'm not going anywhere and I don't want to ruin your vacation. I promise I won't leave your sight, except to go to the bathroom. Deal?"

Jerald grinned, the expression lifting years from his face. She'd never seen him looking so happy and carefree, even when they were together before. "Deal, baby."

Alan wrapped his arms around her waist. He slipped his hands

under her shirt and skimmed his hands up her tummy. “What’s this still doing on?” He nibbled on the side of her neck. She pulled it over her head and tossed it to the floor.

“Better?”

“No.” He released the hook on her bra and slid it down and off her shoulders. It joined her shirt on the floor. “*That’s* better.”

She melted against him as his lips and tongue worked back and forth across her shoulders. Jerald’s hands cupped her breasts, sending delicious sparks through her body as he teased her nipples into hard peaks.

It didn’t take them long to get out of the rest of their clothes and return to their previous positions.

“Hey, Jer,” Alan said.

He didn’t take his eyes off Daphne. “What?”

He nibbled the back of Daphne’s neck. “Best. Vacation. Ever.” He punctuated each word with a kiss.

Jerald laughed. “No argument there.”

She rubbed her body against Jerald’s, sliding her slick cleft along his stiff cock, rubbing her clit against him before she finally impaled herself on his thick length.

She felt Alan’s stiff cock rubbing against her ass. “You have something besides olive oil?” she joked.

Alan laughed. He reached for something, then she felt cool lube against her flesh. “I surely do, babe.”

She stopped her movements as he seated himself inside her. She wasn’t sure if she’d make it this time around as sore as her muscles felt, but she was more than willing to try.

She lay on top of Jerald and enjoyed kissing him, loved the slightly scratchy feel of his hair against her sensitive nipples, the rough stubble of his beard against her cheek. Neither man had shaved that morning.

Even better, she could stay right where she was as long as she wanted without worrying about condoms.

Alan's movements slowed, then stopped as he lowered himself over her, his chest against her back. "Holy fuck, I'm going to blow already."

She wiggled her hips against him. "What's stopping you?"

He nipped the back of her neck. "I want it to last, you damn tease."

"I'm not going anywhere."

He sat up. "Good point." He grabbed her hips, and sure enough, within a few strokes he orgasmed. He collapsed on top of her again. "Holy fuck, that's sooo good."

"Get off her, you're squishing me," Jerald complained from below.

Alan chuckled, but rolled off her and climbed out of the bed.

While he stepped into the bathroom, Jerald rolled her onto her back, his cock still stiff inside her. "Mine," he growled as he nipped her lips and started thrusting.

She wrapped her legs around him. "Always, tough guy." His lazy smile warmed her heart. "Come for me."

He shook his head. "I want you to come first."

"Later. I want you right now."

His intense gaze never left hers until his climax hit. Then his eyes dropped closed as he collapsed on top of her with a happy moan. She held him trapped against her chest and threaded her fingers through his hair. "I love you."

He kissed her tummy. "I love you, too, baby. I'm never letting you go."

\* \* \* \*

They had a great time in Yellowstone. The men happily paid the last-minute fee increase to add her to their fishing plans and enjoyed spending time with her touring the park. When it came time to think about returning to Florida, Jerald was able to secure her tickets on

their flight.

It was decided they'd make another trip out from Florida in two weeks to pack what she wanted from the house, but they could afford to keep it ready as a vacation home. They drove her back to Cody so she could pack clothes. She happily packed things she'd had in storage for months like tank tops and shorts, clothes she never thought she'd use again.

Clothes that held good memories that no longer caused her pain to contemplate.

She was going home.

\* \* \* \*

By unanimous agreement, they'd decided she would remain Jenny Hemingway. She'd met very few people when she'd lived with them before, and the few that she had knew the story because of Alan getting shot. They could also be trusted to keep their secret about who she really was.

The mugginess hit her right away when they stepped out of the terminal at Tampa.

God, she'd missed that.

She closed her eyes and inhaled. Despite exhaust fumes from taxis and shuttle buses, they were close enough to Tampa Bay that she caught the faint scent of salt water.

The men had left Alan's truck in long-term parking. She happily watched familiar sights pass outside the windows. She never thought she'd enjoy seeing palm trees again. They didn't reach Aripeka until a little before sunset, and at first she thought it was odd Jerald passed the house until she remembered that wasn't her home anymore.

*Home.* She felt a pleasant thrill run through her. Their home.

*Her* home.

Jerald picked her up before she could climb the stairs. "No, you don't. I've got you."

He carried her up the stairs while Alan followed with a mischievous grin on his face. “You can’t escape us now, sweetie,” Alan teased.

At the top of the stairs, Alan stepped around Jerald and unlocked the front door. Jerald carried her inside. “Home sweet home,” Jerald said as he carefully set her on her feet in the foyer. “Right where you belong.”

The house appeared as gorgeous on the inside as it did outside. As she looked around, tears filled her eyes. She turned to Alan. “You still used everything I picked out?”

He pulled her into his arms. “Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful!” She threw her arms around him. “Absolutely perfect.”

Jerald sandwiched her between them, hugging both of them. “It’s even better with you here to look at, baby.”

She’d dreamed of this moment but never in her life thought it would come true, of having them back forever.

Of coming home.

The men brought up her luggage and she started unpacking. Alan cleared some space in the dresser and closet. Jerald watched as she started putting her toiletries up in their bathroom. When she put her packet of birth control pills in the medicine cabinet, he reached out and touched her hand.

She met his intense gaze. “You can throw those away, if you want to,” he softly said.

Her throat dried. “I thought you didn’t want kids.”

He pulled her into his arms. “If you want kids, I want kids. If you don’t, that’s okay too. I want you. I want what you want. Nothing else matters.”

She looked at the package of pills in her hand. “I’ve got three more months on this prescription, then I need to get it refilled.” Her eyes returned to his. “Why don’t we wait until then? That way if you change your mind—”

“I won’t change my mind.” He kissed her. “Not about you, not about that.”

“What if Alan doesn’t want kids?”

“You know he does. He always has. He was willing to give that up before we met you. How bad can kids be?” he teased.

She laughed, resting her head against his firm chest. “Can’t be any worse than the two of *you* at your worst. At least we’d have three of us instead of two to wrangle them.”

“What can’t be any worse than what?” Alan asked as he brought one of their overnight bags into the bathroom.

“Kids,” Jerald answered simply.

He froze. “Kids?”

Jerald pulled him into their embrace. “Kids. You know, a mini me. Or a mini you.”

“Or a mini me,” she quipped.

“You mean it?” Alan asked, the blatant hope in his voice unmistakable.

“Yeah,” Jerald softly said. “I mean it.”

Alan kissed him hard, then her. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

As exhausted as they felt, they sat on the porch swing to relax for a few minutes, Daphne between them, and stared out at the Gulf. Little clouds dotted the horizon, just as they had the evening she sat in the back of the truck with Jerald. She nuzzled her head against Jerald’s shoulder.

“Look.”

He smiled, then kissed the top of her head. “Our sunset hearts. They’re welcoming you home.”

“We can watch them every night,” Alan said as he stroked her arm. The sky turned purple as the sun finally sank below the horizon. “Sunsets every night, followed by happy finish sunrises.”

Jerald and Daphne burst out laughing. Alan shrugged. “Well, I’m not as eloquent as you two. So shoot me.”

“I’d rather fuck you than shoot you,” Jerald quipped.

“Me too,” she said with a snicker.

Alan stood and stripped off his shirt. “Fine. Then come molest me.” He walked through the sliding glass doors leading to their master bedroom.

Jerald smiled at her and waggled his eyebrows. “I can’t turn down an invitation that good.”

“Neither can I.”

“Then let’s not keep him waiting.” He stood and hauled her to her feet. Before he released her, he placed one last, deep kiss on her lips. “I’ve spent so many nights watching the sun go down and thinking about that evening we sat here in the truck,” he admitted. He glanced over her shoulder at the darkening horizon. “I couldn’t help it. It left me feeling sad, but I thought maybe you were watching it too, somewhere. Maybe you were seeing what I was seeing, and maybe it was a way to be with you.”

“No more sad sunset hearts,” she swore. “Never again.”

“Get your asses in here and fuck me!” Alan yelled from the bedroom.

Jerald smiled. “I think he’s serious.”

“Then let’s go.”

She squealed with laughter as he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder, then carried her to their bedroom.

# THE END

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Macy Largo loves hunky men, happily ever afters, and hazelnut coffee. Get between her and any of those three things, and you risk your life. Her real-life hunky hubby inspires many of her fictional fantasies, which she's more than happy to share with readers. You can visit her website at <http://www.macylargo.com>



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