



YELLOWSTONE
GUARDING ERIS



REINA TORRES

GUARDING ERIS

BROTHERHOOD PROTECTORS WORLD

TEAM WOLF

BOOK THREE



REINA TORRES



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[Colorado Conspiracy \(#5\)](#)

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[Montana D-Force \(#3\)](#)

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BROTHERHOOD PROTECTORS WORLD

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Guarding Hannah - Delilah Devlin

Guarding Eris - Reina Torres

Guarding Payton - Jen Talty

Guarding Leah - Regan Black

Brotherhood Protectors Colorado World

Athena Project

Beck's Six - Desiree Holt

Victoria's Six - Delilah Devlin

Cygnys's Six - Reina Torres

Fay's Six - Jen Talty

Melody's Six - Regan Black

Team Trojan

Defending Sophie - Desiree Holt

Defending Evangeline - Delilah Devlin

Defending Casey - Reina Torres

Defending Sparrow - Jen Talty

Defending Avery - Regan Black

GUARDING ERIS

TEAM WOLF BOOK 3

Reina Torres

CHAPTER 1



FOUR MONTHS AGO...

THE BUFFALO BAR and Grill wasn't exactly where he wanted to end up that night, but he'd fucked around until most of everything was closed so, there he was pushing open the door and bracing himself for whatever he'd find.

The place was just bright enough that he wouldn't stumble into anyone or trip over an unfortunate foot, but it was also dark enough that he could probably manage to get a drink and a bite to eat and make his way out without really being noticed.

This would work.

The man at the bar looked up when Alex stepped up and offered a friendly smile. "Welcome to the Buffalo Bar, I'm Ron."

Alex put his hands on the polished bar top. "Nice to meet you, Ron."

Ron's smile didn't falter when he didn't offer his name and Alex gave the other man points for leaving it at that.

"What can I get you?"

Alex drew in a breath through his closed teeth and looked around. He didn't have any trouble seeing in the dimly lit interior. He'd always had great night vision, so bars weren't a problem.

People were.

And as he stood there, the front doors opened up and half a dozen people walked in.

Turning back to Ron, Alex had to ask. “Is it gonna be crowded tonight?”

Ron shrugged. “Small town so we get the ones that come in like clockwork, but we also get the ones who decide to stop in for whatever reason.”

A couple came to a stop beside him at the bar and the woman set her fancy camera down on the bar top.

Grimacing at the implications of her camera, he looked up at Ron and saw the knowing look that the man gave to the pair.

Tourists.

Yeah... maybe not.

“Can I get food here at the bar?”

Ron slid another look at the tourist couple standing beside him before he turned back. “Sure, but maybe you’d rather get a table? Or a booth?”

The man on Alex’s left set down a couple of bills and stepped away from the bar.

That’s when Alex saw her.

The woman at the end of the bar.

Her body language was easy to read.

I’M ALONE. I like it this way.

HE SHOULD LISTEN to that language.

He really should.

But standing there, looking at the woman, he knew a few things outright.

She was beautiful.

She was a loner.

And she was packing.

That's why he was going to stay.

He wasn't afraid of her. Nor did he think she was there to cause trouble.

If anything, he had a feeling she could handle anything that came her way.

She hadn't just caught his attention,

She'd captured his attention and curiosity, and-

"Hey, mister."

Alex turned to look at Ron. "Hmm?"

"Now," he exhaled, "I'm not gonna tell you what you should do."

"But?" Alex couldn't help but smile at the older man's attempt at tact.

Ron blew out a breath and slowly shook his head. "Around these parts they tell you to keep a healthy distance away from the wildlife."

The other man's words were apt, although Alex doubted that the barman would have said anything like that to the woman's face. Likely he'd end up hobbling afterward or tending bar with one hand.

Alex smiled at the older man. "I've come face to face with my share of wildlife. I know how to take care of myself."

Ron's eyebrows raised, not in surprise, but more of a 'we'll see' look. "Well, before you sit, maybe you ought to have a drink." Ron turned his back and when he came back around, he had a glass in one hand and a bottle of Roughstock Whiskey. He poured Alex a healthy splash of the liquor and set it down.

When Alex started to reach for his wallet, Ron shook his head. "Consider this one on the house."

Alex tipped his head to the side. "Well, thanks."

When the glass touched his bottom lip, Ron's smile became a grin. "It might be your last."

The whiskey burned all the way down to his stomach, but at least he didn't choke on it.

Ron's look said he might have been hoping that Alex would have. At least it would have been a good story.

Instead, it gave Alex a little clarity.

Yeah, going to sit down beside the woman at the end of the bar might leave him with a few scars on his skin and under it, but hey, he'd already lived through what felt like a lifetime in the military, deployed with his team from Ft. Drum.

He'd lived dangerously before.

He wasn't averse to taking a chance with life and limb.

There was something about her.

Before he started to move, Ron pressed another glass into his hand. "Here. You might need that."

Alex gave him a pointed look. "Thanks, I think."

Ron gave him a mock salute. "Carry on, soldier."

Yeah, Alex hadn't said a word about being in the service, and he liked to keep his hair close cropped just because he liked it like that, but he'd been told that it didn't take much more than a look to peg him as being in the service.

It didn't make sense to him. He thought he looked like pretty much everyone else in the room. A man. Wearing jeans. A flannel long sleeved shirt. Boots and-

"Where are you from?"

He stopped just shy of the empty barstool beside her. "Sacramento."

She nodded and hummed a little.

"Do you have another question for me?"

She shook her head. "Nope." She took a drink from her glass.

Not a sip.

A drink.

It was his turn to, “Hmm.”

She was still for a moment before she turned on the bar stool and faced him. “How much of a glutton for punishment are you?”

Heaven help him, he perked up at that.

She gave him a searching look and then her lips curved up into a little smile. “You’re not like the others.”

“Others?”

Yeah, he didn’t know what to do with that.

“There are three types of men that walk up to me in a bar.”

Oh, this, he had to hear.

“One. Drunk tourists. Two. Drunk locals.”

Silence fell between them, and he leaned his elbow on the bar waiting for her to continue. “And three?”

“You.” She looked at him with a coy look in her eyes, a look that made his skin hot under his collar. “You’re the third type. And I don’t know what to make of you. You’re not drunk.”

“No.” He shook his head.

“And while I know you don’t live around here, you’re still not drunk.”

“Why would men approach you drunk?”

She laughed and the sound seemed to surprise her enough that she lifted a hand toward her mouth but lowered it again.

“Well, most men around these parts call me prickly, so they’d only come up to me pretty sloshed.”

Okay. Glad to know that men in West Yellowstone didn’t have much in the way of balls.

“And tourists? If they come up, they’re likely drunk and someone’s dared them to come and talk to me.”

“A dare, huh?” He smiled. “They have eyes, don’t they?”

She picked up her drink and touched the edge of the glass to her lower lip.

While he watched, she let the liquor slide over her lip and into her mouth.

Alex had to keep himself still. He wrapped his fingers around his glass and held it tightly against his palm.

When she finished the drink and moved the glass away, she licked at her lips, and he sat himself down on the stool beside her.

She didn’t comment on the movement, nor did she warn him away, so he took it as a small victory.

Besides, it was more comfortable to sit down and give his dick some room in his jeans. It also kept her from seeing how fucking hard he was just from watching her take a drink from her glass.

“What are you drinking?”

He almost missed the question, but he’d caught her look at his glass and figured it out. “Uh,” it took him a moment to remember what Ron had said. “Whiskey,” He smiled at remembering that much. “Roughstock,” he added, pleased with that recall.

That earned him a smile. “Nice.”

Nice?

Okay.

He’d take nice.

“You’re not a regular here.”

He shook his head. “Just visiting for a week or so. I used to come here summers while I was growing up.”

Her eyebrows rose but he couldn’t tell if it was surprise or curiosity.

“My grandfather had a place along the river.”

She leaned closer, setting her elbow on the bar top. “Really? That sounds amazing.”

He had to smile at that. “Yeah, it was. Those were the best. You from around here?”

She seemed a little taken aback by the question, but she didn’t shy away from answering it. “Nope. I grew up in Arizona down about Many Farms. I’ve lived here almost a year but I’m not sure this is the place for me.”

Alex felt a pang of sadness at her words, although he wasn’t sure why. “Why not?”

Again, she paused as if she hadn’t expected a question directed at her.

“I’m not all that sure it feels like home.”

He heard something empty in her words, but it was something he felt too. He just hadn’t put a name to it until she’d answered him.

He’d been unsettled for the better part of a year, anxious. The leave of absence his unit had been given from Iraq was the reason he’d found time to come to Yellowstone.

It wouldn’t be long before his time in the military was up. He knew he wasn’t going to reup when his time ran out.

He just didn’t know where he’d end up.

Home.

That’s what he’d been looking for when he’d hopped on a train and a bus to get here. He just didn’t know what he was looking for. How he would know when he found it.

“What’s does home feel like?”

Her brow furrowed at his question and a few wrinkles pinched at the bridge of her nose. “I’m not quite sure. I’m just not sure it’s here.”

He nodded.

He wasn’t going to argue. Why should he? He didn’t know what it felt like either.

“What about you,” she asked, and he found himself leaning in to hear her better with the building crowd in the bar. “You must have some great memories about this place to come and visit. Maybe I’m just not seeing it through the right lens.”

Smiling, he nodded. “The first time I came out here as a kid I hated it. No TV. Not even a decent radio station.” He shook his head and laughed. “Then again, I was a kid. Cartoons were my life. Looking back on it now, it wasn’t the tortuous experience I thought it was. Spartan, maybe, but my grandfather was a real man of the land.

“We fished and ate the fish. He always tried to start a garden, but never quite got the hang of it. He traded fish with a couple of families that had decent gardens closer to town. I’m just... looking back it was better than I thought it was. What I saw as suffering away from the world...”

“Was actually much better than what you thought the world was?”

He smiled and she followed suit.

It felt good.

It felt damn good.

“Yeah,” he nodded and lifted a hand to his head. It was a gesture that he’d never outgrown. Although, back when he was younger, he had a full head of glossy hair. Now he just cut it close all the time because of the military. All he felt against his palm were the spiky ends of his recent touch-up.

Realizing that he might look a little silly, not that he normally cared, he dropped his hand down and set it on the rail of the bar.

“Funny how time and perspective can change things.”

She nodded, but there was a faraway look in her eyes.

And while she probably didn’t notice how intently he was staring at her. He took advantage of the moment to admire her face.

She was tanned, a warm tone that said she was at home out of doors. Her dark hair looked like ebony in the interior of the

bar and his hand itched to touch it.

He bet it would feel thick and glossy in his hand.

Yeah, sitting down was a damn good idea.

If he hadn't, she'd get an eyeful if she looked his way. He hadn't been with a woman for what seemed like forever, but he didn't miss it all that much.

Just a few moments with this woman and he wanted to feel her body under his... over his... any way he could have her.

Fuck.

He fucking needed to get inside of her.

And it wasn't just because of the way her eyelashes cast shadows against her high cheekbones when she lowered her eyes.

It wasn't just the way her lips looked like sin, perfectly curved and full.

It was all of that and the way her body drew him closer. The pensive way she held herself on the barstool and the elegant curve of her back as she turned her head to look at him.

When she lifted her eyes to look at his face, he was suddenly short of breath, his chest tight and fighting for air.

"Maybe you could show me."

Her words put his thoughts into overdrive, but he knew that's not what she was talking about.

"Show you?"

Her smile dimmed a little. "No, never mind. Sorry." She lifted her hand and made a vague gesture with it. "It was a stupid thought."

Her hand dropped down on to the old bar top and put a smile on her face. A smile that wasn't all that happy.

"No, really." He reached out a hand and set it down just shy of hers.

He wanted to touch her.

It was crazy, but that's what he wanted to do.

He wanted to reassure her that he'd meant his words and it had been a long time since he'd wanted to connect with someone else outside of the men in his unit.

Alex just didn't want to fuck it up and he had a feeling he was dangerously close to crossing that 'line.'

"Look," he swallowed his nerves down and turned his hand over in what he hoped was a gesture she wouldn't see as aggressive or over the top, "I'm not joking with you or making light either. I know I'm just some guy who walked up to you in a bar..."

They both gave a few involuntary chuckles at that, and her smile brightened again. "That sounds like the start of a bad joke."

He nodded thoughtfully.

It did.

It really did.

He lifted his hand and held it out to her. "I'm Alex. Alex Ridgely. Nice to meet you."

He stood there, with his hand held out. Hopefully she wouldn't leave him standing there like an idiot.

"Alex," she said his name and nodded slowly. "Alexander? Or Alex?"

He fixed his eyes on hers. "Alex."

She nodded and reached out her hand, taking his in a firm shake. "Eris. Eris Lange."

"Eris," his eyes narrowed as he said her name, "I like it. It's-

"Silly," she scoffed, her shoulders rising in a reflexive shrug.

"Unique," he countered and slowly withdrew his hand from her. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

His question threw her off balance. "What's tomorrow?"

“Tomorrow,” he gestured back at her barstool, and she sat back comfortably, “I’m taking you to see where my grandpa had this cabin on Duck Creek.”

He sat down a moment later and watched as her thoughts played across her features.

She wasn’t a woman who did things lightly.

He had a feeling that Eris Lange was a woman who put a lot of thought into everything she did.

And he was hoping that she’d decide to spend some time with him the next day.

Maybe a day or two after that if he could postpone his flight back to Fort Drum.

He held his glass lightly with his fingers touching the edge of the glass.

Alex hoped to hell that he didn’t look as anxious as he felt.

Eris Lange was a force of nature. Gravity, pulling him in.

And the last thing he wanted was to pull away.

CHAPTER 2



THE RIDE OUT to Duck Creek had been a relaxed one and Eris had to admit it wasn't all that hard to have Alex in her Jeep. Normally she drove alone and enjoyed it, but from the moment she picked him up at the motel on the edge of West Yellowstone, they'd fallen into easy conversation.

The fact that he'd mentioned fishing as part of the day's activities had really been the cherry on top of the handsome sundae in her passenger seat.

Most guys, and yes, there had been a few, who'd asked her out after she moved to West Yellowstone either thought she was joking about going fishing or found it a rather 'manly' thing to do.

Like a woman couldn't fish or ride or hunt as good as any man or enjoy it as much.

Those troubling thoughts had fallen by the wayside easily enough, and he didn't gripe about her music. He even sang under his breath on a few of the older country songs that had popped up in her playlist.

She loved the warm bass tone of his voice and held back her own urge to sing along to the songs just to hear his voice.

That alone had kept her attention until they'd pulled onto the private road that led down to the creek.

Eris had slowed her Jeep almost to a crawl as they descended the gentle slope toward the river. She'd never seen such a view.

“Wow. This is where you spent your summers?”

Alex’s laughter wasn’t teasing, but she could hear the smile in his tone. “Yeah. Just down there, where those trees are planted.”

She was at a crawl and pulled over to the side of the road where he was pointing at the foliage through the windshield. Putting the Jeep in park she sat back and sighed. “Where was the house?”

When he didn’t immediately reply she hesitated, thinking she might have accidentally opened an old wound.

Lifting her chin a little she turned to look at him. “Alex?”

His gaze was still at the same place it had been a few seconds ago, but the look on his face said that he was probably in the past.

What was it about this man that had her breath catching in her throat and her body acting like it had a mind of its own?

No, that wasn’t true.

Her body didn’t have a mind of its own, but maybe it had a magnet.

And Alex Ridgely was all iron.

Muscles for days.

She normally didn’t care what a guy wore around her, but he wore his t-shirt and cargo shorts like he knew how it would show off the muscles and veins in his arms. She’d barely had a glimpse of his calves but what she’d seen had her swallowing hard to get the knot out of her throat.

Alex was built like the marble statue of a god.

But he was warm instead of cool like a statue.

His head turned at about the same moment that her addled brain realized that she’d put her hand on his arm, her palm against his warm flesh.

“Oh, ah... Sorry.”

She took it away and dropped it back onto the console between them and she saw his head turn to look her in the eye.

Not a coward, nor wanting to appear to be one, she lifted her chin and met his gaze.

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No,” she saw a muscle tick in his jaw, “you should, if that’s what you wanted to do, Eris.”

The whole world seemed to grind to a halt as she heard the slight hiss of the s at the end of her name.

Unbidden came the fantasy of his voice in her ear, as he held her against him, her back against his chest.

“Eris...”

“It’s not like I do that all the time,” she mentally shook herself for speaking at all. “In fact I’m not big on touching anyone. I just... I guess I thought I said something that made you sad... or upset. And I wanted to know if that’s what happened and ugh,” she tipped her head back until the back of her head hit the headrest on the seat, “I should stop talking now before I sound too much like... like...”

The day was sunny, but there were enough clouds above their heads to keep things relatively cool to the touch. However, the heat she felt on the back of her hand wasn’t just any heat.

It was Alex.

She didn’t even have to lift her head to know what had happened.

She could feel it.

Him.

His hand on top of hers.

Again, her mind was clouded with ideas of what it would be like to have him pressed against her, his heat warming her skin.

Eris had a feeling that if they stayed in the Jeep she just might climb over the center console and straddle his lap. The tingling sensation that she'd felt the night before at the bar hadn't really gone away.

Apparently, it had just been dormant.

Having him touch her.

Having him near and in a relatively private place made her heart race with the possibilities.

She wasn't someone who had a lot of casual sex.

Okay, not a lot was actually never. Not casually.

She'd been with a total of two men in her life and both times they'd gone out for a month or two before she'd even wanted to try to extend their relationship into a sexual one.

But somehow Alex made her want to be a little bolder than she'd been before.

He made her body hum with some kind of unfamiliar need.

The voice inside of her head sounded a little panicked when it blurted out a warning in her ear. *Get out of the car, dummy.*

"Wow. That really is a great view." Eris pulled her hand from under Alex's and while she gave him a quick side-long glance, he didn't seem all that upset about her sudden movement. "We should go down to the water and see what conditions are like today."

Before she finished speaking, she was out of the Jeep and needlessly moving her hands over her hair as if it needed a check.

The plain ponytail she usually wore when she wasn't on duty at the corrections center, was pretty well behaved.

She didn't have any curls or waves in her hair. It was pretty much boring and straight no matter how long it was or even if there was a lick of humidity in the air.

Still, it was something to do with her hands, so she didn't feel like a complete idiot.

Alex walked around the front of the Jeep and extended his arm toward her.

Instinct wanted her to move closer, take the hand he was offering, but the voice in her head gasped in mortification.

Girlie things just weren't her bag.

But the way her body leaned in toward him and wanted his touch was likely to take that poor voice and drive her over the edge.

Alex curled his fingers, beckoning her to follow him and started walking through the scrub brush at the edge of the property. "Come on. You wanted to see the view on the river, right?"

"Yeah." Her smile was easy, and she quickened her steps to walk by his side.

The brush wasn't that thick, and she could almost see the ghost of a path through the brush.

"Was that a path?"

Alex stopped and turned to look in the direction she was pointing in. He smiled and the honest expression hit her in the gut. He was gorgeous. Rugged.

And the realizations weren't doing anything to slow the deep attraction building for the man she just met.

"Yeah."

His answer caught her attention. She felt her cheeks heat and she wondered if he could guess where her thoughts had gone in that moment.

"The cabin was right about there." He pointed at the center of the open space. "It was just big enough for a couple of people and a couple of dogs without everyone climbing on top of each other."

She joined him in laughing at his words, knowing that he probably wasn't expecting 'that' image to pop up in her head.

Without waiting for him to say anything else she caught up to him on the old, faded path and they easily picked their way

to the banks of Duck Creek.

The whole world seemed to quiet a little as she took in their surroundings. They were, for all intents and purposes, alone at that moment. The water moving along just a couple of feet from where they were standing.

Even in her well-worn boots, her toes wiggled, wanting to feel the cool water on her toes.

“It’s a little low at the moment.” His voice drew her attention to his face, and she studied his profile, enjoying the view especially with the background of Yellowstone’s majestic beauty all in one. “We’ll be able to fish, but I’m not sure we’ll get to catch anything with where the water level is.”

The look he turned in her direction was a little hesitant, as if he wasn’t sure if that was a deal breaker.

Smiling she leaned in and gave him a nudge with her shoulder. “My granddad always said that it’s called fishing, not catching. I’m just happy to enjoy the time outdoors if you do.”

The look he turned on her was stunning.

He wasn’t smiling but his eyes fixed on her and made her feel like the world around them was suddenly gone, disappeared.

“Yeah.” his voice was deeper than it had been, a little gruff. “I want the time with you.”

Maybe it was the sun on her skin or the late night they’d had at the bar, but she was suddenly feeling a little off kilter.

Like the walls she normally held tightly around her had shifted, crumbling a bit.

And damn, she even felt a little more feminine.

It had been a while since that had happened.

Being around Alex was just that... unnerving.

That didn’t stop her from smiling.

It just added to the strangeness of the moment.

“Okay then,” she stood a little taller and just might have put her shoulders back a bit too... improve her posture, “should we go back to the Jeep and grab your pole? Oh, shit. I meant grab the poles.”

She almost cringed at the words after they came out of her mouth.

Eris wasn't normally someone who bandied about with double *entendres* like the guys did at the detention center where she worked. Encouraging that felt wrong to her, but just normal conversation with Alex seemed to give words extra meaning.

And that was why her life, in a word, sucked.

He was visiting.

Coming to Yellowstone to relive childhood memories before going back to the military and back to his deployment.

He wasn't sticking around.

Which was probably a good thing given how much he'd already turned her world sideways, and they'd known each other less than twenty-four hours.

“Eris?”

Oh god.

She'd zoned out on him. Hadn't she?

“Sorry,” she shook her head and didn't have to try to smile, she was already embarrassed enough that a smile wasn't even voluntary, “I was a little lost in thought.”

His smile looked sinful, although that was probably just her imagination.

“Oh, I thought you were thinking about *my pole*.”

Before her mind could wrap itself around his loaded words, she saw something in the river and her training kicked in.

“What are they doing?”

She didn't wait for an answer, it was more rhetorical than anything else.

Eris ran a little way up the creek and stared at the canoe coming toward them. "Sir? Sir!"

The man only sent her a quick side-ways glare, but he didn't call back to her.

She felt Alex at her shoulder.

"Sir, the creek isn't deep enough right now." She pointed toward the area behind them, where they'd just been looking into the water.

The man didn't get what she was saying. He dug his oar into the water and pulled with a grunt. The little boy in front of him held a toy oar that didn't even touch the water when he made a similar pull on the side of the canoe.

If it hadn't been dangerous, Eris would have thought it was cute.

Well maybe not cute, since neither of them was wearing a safety vest.

"Sir." Eris stepped up to the edge of the creek bed and stretched out an arm, waving to get his attention. "Sir, please, move over to the side and stop."

The man swung his head around to stare at her, his eyes blazing with frustration. "I'm spending time with my son."

"I see that, sir, but it gets pretty shallow up ahead and I'm not sure the bottom of that canoe--"

As she spoke some part of the bottom of the canoe hit and bumped over a hard surface, probably a rock.

"We just need to get over this." The man shoved the oar into the water and grunted.

The canoe lurched forward, and Alex stepped forward, putting his boot in the water.

Eris grabbed his arm to hold him back.

The bow of the canoe swung and nearly clipped him.

Instead of arguing with her, Alex covered her hand with his and gave her hand a squeeze.

Together they moved along with the canoe as the man forced it over rocks.

The sudden movements rocked the canoe and pitched them side to side. His son's white-knuckled grasp on the oar was about the same shade as his face.

“Sir, stop. You're not going to be able to handle this.”

The man turned his head to flash a look at her. His eyes were sharp, and his brow was pushed down over his eyes. “Leave us alone. You're not in charge here.”

She wanted to roll her eyes at his sharp and condescending tone, but she had other worries.

“Look!” He scoffed as he pointed his oar ahead. “The water's flowing really good up there.”

Alex's hand tightened around hers and broke away as they walked quickly downstream to get ahead of the canoe.

The river was moving well ahead but that's just because it was spilling into a faster moving part of the river. The man and his son weren't going to have to worry about rocks anymore, but with the way they were pitching back and forth, they'd likely flip before they righted themselves and regained control.

She had a feeling that Alex wasn't going to be content to follow alongside the canoe and she understood the feeling, but she'd had some experience with the new 'brand' of tourists that were coming into Yellowstone, and they certainly weren't what Alex would remember from his time in the area.

Help wasn't something they wanted unless it was on their terms.

Alex splashed into the water and took a few steps forward.

Eris saw him stop at the edge of the rocks that were easily visible. The man's thrashing movements with his oar had stirred up the bottom of the creek and muddied the water.

It wasn't safe to go any further under normal conditions, but with the erratic movements of the canoe, even that was too far.

“Just a few more-”

“Daddy, stop!”

“-bumps and-”

“Alex! Watch out!”

Eris watched the situation unfold as if it was in slow motion.

One herculean push of an oar and the bow of the canoe pitched upward at an odd angle, tipping the father and son backward.

If she hadn't seen it, she wouldn't have believed it, but the canoe suddenly looked like it was standing up in the water on its back end.

It splashed into the water upside down making both father and son disappear.

“Fuck.”

Eris wasn't sure if she'd said the word or if it was Alex, but she was already bending over to yank at her bootlaces.

She'd tied them loosely when she'd put them on which was a good decision. She had one boot off and the other pulling free when she saw the little boy's head pop up out of the water.

He was pulled swiftly away by the current which was free of all of the rocky intrusions. She was already on the run when she heard Alex's voice.

“I'll get the dad.”

She didn't nod or reply, she dove in, keeping the dive shallow. Once she came up, she was just a few feet shy of the boy.

He wasn't trying to swim, and she wondered if he had any skill in the area. It wasn't a judgement, but the way the child

was flapping his arms in the water she was sure she was going to have a fight on her hands.

As she cut through the water, she hoped that Alex was having better luck with the father behind her.

“Give me your hand!”

The child was spun around in the water and when he saw her, his eyes flashed wide. “Where’s my dad?”

“My friend is getting your dad. Give me your hand.”

She pushed forward in the water and reached out to the boy.

He moved sideways, his hand slapping at her arm.

“Go ‘way!”

“I can help you, give me your hand.”

She moved closer and he slapped at her but only hit the water, splashing it into her face.

The water didn’t hurt but it was a little disorienting.

“I said go ‘way!” The child was almost screaming and when she managed to get a hand on his shoulder he ducked under the water and away from her.

Damn it.

She ducked under the surface of the water and felt like she was going to be pulled further under. It was irrational, but she couldn’t ignore the feeling.

Reaching out blindly she got her hand around something.

Arm or leg, she didn’t know.

The hold didn’t last long.

Whatever she was holding was torn from her grasp and something, probably one of his feet, connected with her jaw.

Panic gave the kid some serious strength, but she couldn’t give up.

She popped up, her head above water and quickly swam down stream of the boy.

He breached from the water his head looking back upstream. “Daddy!”

That’s when she pushed closer, reached her arm down over his shoulder and managed to hook her finger in a belt loop on the boy’s shorts.

Turning so she was almost on her back she started moving toward the side of the creek.

Eris caught sight of Alex and the boy’s father on the bank. Both of them were pissed. Alex’s shirt was torn, but they were both alive and on dry land.

She couldn’t have asked for a better... well, she could have, but she had a feeling neither the boy trying to elbow her in her ribs, nor his father would have been at all willing to help keep themselves out of the water.

Nature or nurture didn’t really matter when in situations like this. People were people.

Sadly, some just couldn’t see beyond their own myopic views.

The boy landed a good sharp jab just under her ribs on her right side and air pushed out of her lungs a moment before she took in some water.

“Eris!”

She heard Alex’s voice and the deep bass tone calmed her, easing the tension that had her strung tight.

“Keep coming! I’m coming out to get you.”

It was okay.

It was going to be okay.

Right as her foot hit the ground, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

She eased her hold on the boy and he lurched away, almost pushing her under water.

Alex’s hold on her shoulder was rock solid and he helped her to her feet.

By the time she was upright, the father and son were already walking back along the creek. The boy was sobbing, his father disturbing the peace with his grouchy demeanor and half-grumbled, half-shouted complaints.

Turning back to Alex, she stopped short. “Wow, did you fight a bear or something?”

Alex dropped his gaze to the shirt he had been wearing but was currently hanging from his shoulders. “No, a bear would probably be more grateful than that jerk.”

Before she could stop herself, she reached out and tried to right the torn shirt on his body. It brought her hand into contact with too much skin and swallowing hard, she looked into his eyes. “I’m not going to complain about the view, but maybe we should get back to the car.”

He tilted his head and gave her a curious look. “Do you want to head back into town?”

That brought her up short. “Leave? No! I was... I have some towels in the back of the Jeep. I thought we could dry off and clear a space for a fire. Warm up?”

Her gaze was so fixed on his that she didn’t see his hand move.

She felt it though.

His hand over hers, her knuckles curled against his chest, his torn, wet shirt grasped in her hand. “I’m all for getting you warm. A fire works.”

Eris grinned at him, feeling something inside cracking wide open. “For now.”

CHAPTER 3



BY THE TIME the sky was filled with violet, pink, and blue hues, they'd managed to dry off and catch a few pickerel stirred up by the canoe. As Alex minded the pan over the fire, he tried to look his fill of Eris, hoping she wouldn't think he was being a creep staring at her.

She looked good by the fire.

Shaking his head, Alex knew it was an understatement.

Eris Lange looked good in any light.

Wrapped up in a light blanket to keep her warm from the chilly night, she looked comfortable and relaxed.

Peaceful.

He liked that look on her.

He liked her in his space and while he hadn't talked about it, he was starting to really consider moving to West Yellowstone when he got out of the Army. The rumblings in the service said that the military would be pulling out of the Middle East in short order, and he found himself approaching a new crossroads in his life.

The other men in his unit were younger than him by a few years.

How many, he couldn't... or wouldn't number. It wasn't vanity.

Not in the general sense.

He just didn't want to think about the way his hide had been marked up by the years of his service. He was still in his prime, but he was on the far end of it, unlike the others.

The others were younger. Outside of the military, they'd likely have more years to live than he would, but that didn't mean he wanted anything less than anyone else.

As the fire crackled under the pan, he couldn't help but think about his summers with his grandpa, doing pretty much the same thing that he was doing right at that moment. Sitting under the expansive sky and enjoying his life.

"Mmm, that smells delicious."

He shrugged, but he couldn't hide his smile. "It's almost ready. I hope you're hungry."

Her laugh was a tangible thing that he felt all over.

"Oh, I'm hungry. After taking that unexpected swim, I've shed enough calories today."

He gave her a side-long look. "You don't need to worry about calories."

The look she gave him was a lifted brow. "I never stop worrying. I have a utility belt I need to fit around my hips." She treated the statement like some kind of admission, shrinking a little after she said it. He didn't want her to do that. Not around him.

He decided to wade into the conversation instead.

"Law enforcement?"

She tilted her head to the side. "It could be construction. Why did you go to law right away?"

He shrugged and reached for a plate.

Eris put one of the plates in his hand and he spoke as he put a fried fish on the plate.

"You had a gun in a belly band at the bar. The way you wore it said it wasn't the first time you'd worn it out. Your ease with it and then your utility belt comment made it almost

a sure thing, unless you were Bat Girl and then I would not be completely off base, but I'd also be living in a fantasy.”

She was blushing. Or at least that's what he thought. Her cheeks had darkened and her eyes were sparkling bright.

“I always liked Bat Girl from the original show. Barbara Gordon was all kinds of bad ass. She was smart, straightforward and super sexy.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “When did you manage to see those?” Alex handed her the plate he'd just finished and took an empty one from her, waiting for an answer.

She shrugged. “My grandparents, I think. Grandma liked those shows but grandpa was a true fan. He'd point to Barbara and say that she was the real hero of the show. I guess I wanted to be like Bat Girl for that reason alone, but it's also because...”

“She was a beautiful bad ass.”

Eris' smile made his chest feel too tight. He'd known her for about twenty-four hours, but he felt like they got each other in ways that no one else did.

It was a silly thought, since he knew next to nothing about her, but the feeling was still there.

And if she kept smiling at him like that, he was tempted to put the food aside and kiss her senseless.

Another stupid thought, but that one felt even more real.

So real that he swore he could already feel her on his lips.

“So, what kind of LEO are you?”

Her smile twisted a little, the light in her eyes dimmed too. “Detention Center Guard.”

The change in her demeanor made him feel bad about asking the question. He sat back, folding his legs in front of him so he could put his plate down in his lap. “You don't like it?”

Eris laid her fork down on her plate and her lips pursed for a moment before she spoke. “The job is great. I like the people

I work with. The people in holding, most of them are okay. There's always the tough guys too. I guess I don't like being cooped up inside all the time."

She looked up into the sky and he looked too, for a moment, before he lowered his gaze to her face, not wanting to waste the opportunity.

"I guess I like this view a little too much." Smiling she turned and saw him looking at her. She didn't look away but the color in her cheeks deepened and her breathing quickened a little.

Alex smiled, knowing that she was affected by him too.

Did he want to try anything long distance? No.

But likely she didn't want to either.

That didn't stop him from wanting her.

For wanting these moments not to end.

"What about you?" she asked. "I bet you get your fair share of outdoors."

He almost choked on the bite he had in his mouth.

She grimaced and muttered an apology.

Alex waved it off. "Yeah. Sometimes more than that. Still, there's not a lot of opportunity to just look up and stare at the stars or doze off. Out in the field, even at the base, you've got to be aware."

Eris nodded. "I've heard people talking about having your head on a swivel."

"Oh yeah?" He noticed she didn't say men, but damn it, he didn't like the thought. *Stupid much?* His thoughts liked to mess with him. "Who do you hear that from?"

"The Park Rangers that I know." She leaned a little closer and smiled. "It's not the same as what you have to worry about, but around here, you have to keep your eyes on the whole world so you don't have a bear or a wolf... or a dozen other things sneaking up behind you."

Nodding, he smiled at her words. “Sounds like they do have to watch out.” He loaded up another fork. “You sound like you’re a fan of the outdoors. Why don’t you get a job with the Park Service? I bet you’d be great at it.”

She hesitated before she said anything but she didn’t look upset at the idea.

“Yeah,” she hesitated, “I dunno. I just started working here a couple of years ago and I hope I can advance up the ladder, maybe a more permanent job than the detention center. Somewhere I feel like I can make a difference. Where I am, I just make sure people are held safely as they wait for transit to other facilities.”

He nodded. “I’ve been in the service for a while and it’s coming up to another deadline to re-up in a little over a year.”

She looked at him and furrowed her brow. “You sound like you might not stay in.”

“Well, it’s a consideration. I’m not as young as I used to be and sometimes the other men in my unit like to joke about me being the ‘dad’ or ‘pops.’”

“Really?” Eris set her plate down on the crate that she’d turned over to use as a table and then moved a little closer to him. “I don’t see it.”

He felt something catch in his throat when she leaned in, her gaze fixed on his face.

“It’s just their joke about me. I don’t mind.”

“Well, it’s dumb,” she pouted a little and he wanted to reach out and smooth his thumb over her full lip just to see how she’d react. “Or is it like one of those boys club things where you’re all assholes to each other just for fun?”

He chuckled at that. “I don’t know about the asshole part, but we do rib each other from time to time. I think I’m just a little sensitive about it because I do feel my aches and pains a little more than the others do. And yes, because of my age.”

Alex lifted his hand before he realized he was doing it and touched the hair at his temples.

“It’s not like I can hide the gray.”

“That’s not gray, that’s silver.” Eris touched her fingers to the same place, and it felt like flames against his skin. Good flames, burning him just the right way. “Silver is hot.”

“You have a thing for older guys?”

“It’s not about the age,” she replied, “or the color. It’s about the man, Alex. And you,” her fingers trailed down the side of his face, coming within an inch of the lobe of his ear, “wear it well.”

He ground his back teeth together, holding in his hunger.

The rest of his dinner sat on his plate, all but forgotten, but still between them.

“Eris...”

Her eyes were half-lidded and she was close enough that he could feel her breath on the edge of his ear.

If she was meaning to turn him on, she was doing a damn good job. Not that it took her doing anything for him to want her, but her proximity and her touch was pushing him toward the edge.

“Tell me, Alex,” her eyes met his again, “do you have one of those military nicknames that I hear so much about?”

He swallowed, not because he was nervous, but because he was afraid that he might groan out loud if he didn’t. The air in his lungs was already screaming for release. “Yeah.”

Her smile was almost playful when she took the plate from his hand and set it on the crate beside hers. “You going to tell me? Or do I have to guess?”

For a moment he thought about being polite and asking her if this was what she wanted. If he could touch her like he wanted to.

But those words froze in his chest when she got up on her knees beside him and reached for the elastic holding her hair up in a ponytail.

She pulled it loose, but before she raked her hands through it, he did it for her.

He pushed his fingers through her sun-dried hair and felt the strands slide through his fingers.

When his hand reached the back of her head, he cradled her in his palm and unfolded his legs so he could get up on his knees in front of her.

She looked a little stunned, her eyes meeting his as her lips parted gently. “Alex?”

“Tell me you want this, Eris.” His voice scratched in his throat. “Or tell me you don’t. I’m okay with that, but I feel like we’re both on the same page. Like we both want each other.”

She nodded, and when she spoke her voice was softer than before. “I want you, Alex.”

It made her sound sad and he didn’t want that.

“You don’t have to say it if you don’t mean it.” He shook his head with a single resolute motion. “I’m not here to pressure you, Eris. I just feel like... like-”

“I meant it, Alex. From last night when you walked up to me like I wasn’t trying to be left alone. It’s crazy easy to talk to you when I usually get by with one or two word answers for most people. I’ve never... done this with anyone else.”

“This?” His voice deepened a little more. “Sex?”

Her smile made his heart pound in his chest.

“No, I’ve... uh, done that before, but this first date thing? Nope. Not that I keep track, but I feel like... I feel like...”

Her cheeks were dark in color, affected by the light from the fire he’d made before cooking the fish that they’d caught earlier in the day.

“I feel like I know you.” Her expression was a little sheepish. “And I want to know more.”

“Me too.”

He leaned in to kiss her, but she stopped him just shy of her lips.

“Your name, Alex. What do the others call you?”

He huffed out a laugh and then a sigh. “It’s pretty straightforward. Ridge.”

“Ridge?” A thoughtful look settled on her face. “Because of Ridgely?”

What could he say to that but the truth. “Yeah. It’s just-”

He stopped talking.

Hell, he stopped breathing when Eris shifted, and he felt her hands on him.

One hand on his chest, splayed over his heart which was going a mile a minute, and the other which couldn’t quite cover the entire length of his cock.

He’d already been hard, but having her hand against him, he felt like he might just be able to break free of his jeans with just the pressure straining the zipper.

“Ridge,” she breathed, “works for me.”

He kissed her.

No, that seems too simple for what happened between them.

He covered her mouth with his and swallowed her soft gasp of surprise.

Alex could have used his hand in her hair to hold her still while he explored her mouth with his tongue, but Eris didn’t need him to do that.

She gave as good as she got, and he found that their two tongues delving into each other was hotter than if she’d given in to his kiss.

Her hand on his chest worked its way down to meet the other at his waistband and together they had his button fly open in seconds.

It was hard for him to admit it, but he liked what was happening between them more than he should. He'd always been with women who liked him to take charge. It never ended well because it was one thing to take charge and another to do all of the work, but at first it always seemed good.

But Eris was blowing his mind.

She kissed him back like she really needed to taste him on her tongue and then she nearly tumbled him to the ground when she pushed his pants down to his hips and nudged him onto his back.

Still clothed, Eris straddled his thighs and her hair fell forward, shadowing her face from him.

She laid her palms on his abdomen, he could feel her heat through their connection.

“Bet you weren’t expecting that,” she gave him a wink.

“No.” He shook his head but had a hard time taking in another breath.

“Then I bet this is going to shock you a little bit more.”

Her hand wrapped around the base of his cock and she leaned down, her eyes locked on his.

She opened her lips just a moment before he felt her tongue and the sensation crawled up his spine like lightning. When she leaned in, taking more and more of him into her mouth, he was only able to groan deep in his throat. No words would form.

And when he felt her breath on the tender skin just above his sex, he felt his breath leave his body.

She took him deep into her mouth, her tongue caressing his shaft with eager strokes.

It was quickly becoming impossible to think, let alone move.

So, he turned the tables on her, moving his hands down to her shoulders to pull her away.

Her hair was wild around her face and in his mind flashed a memory of his hands tugging on her wavy hair, holding her close.

Smiling with some measure of smug satisfaction, Alex brought her up, and kicking off his shorts, he had the freedom of movement to bring her closer and lay her on the blanket they'd laid near the fire just a little while ago.

He reached for the waist band of her pants and she smiled. As he worked the first button free, she pulled the hem of the tank free and then off, laying it down behind her.

When she lifted her hips for him, he tugged her shorts down to her hips and saw the plain cotton bikini style panties against her tanned skin and he felt like he might burst.

"It's not fancy," she started to apologize when he leaned down and took the edge of it in his teeth.

She was left staring at him when he sat back up and tugged her panties down with the waistband of her shorts.

"Lift."

With a slightly raised brow she braced her arms and lifted her butt off the blanket. He didn't spend much time pulling them down her legs, but she helped at the end, kicking one leg free. Once he'd kicked them off, they ended up somewhere nearby.

When he looked up at her, he was mesmerized.

Eris Lange looked like a dream.

He was seated at her feet, with her gorgeous legs between them. Her hips gilded by the firelight called for his hands on them and he couldn't wait to touch her. Couldn't wait to get his mouth on her, much like she'd done to him. And her breasts...

As he sat there, she opened the clasp nestled between her breasts and shrugged the garment off of her shoulders. Like her panties, it was made of plain white cotton, but that added to the appeal.

She didn't need bows and lace to look like sin.

All she had to do was breathe.

And for a long moment he sat there wondering if she might still be around when he finished his time in the military.

“I want to know,” she spoke softly, “what you’re thinking about.”

She braced her arms on the blanket and he could only stare.

“You.” It was the truth and he felt it deep down inside. “I came here to remember one of the best times in my life; I never expected to find you.”

He saw that his words had some kind of effect on her, but he didn’t know what it was.

Alex had never really invested himself in the thoughts of the women he’d had sex with. It was the mutual satisfaction he kept his focus on.

It just wasn’t the same with Eris.

He wasn’t the same.

She rolled onto her elbow and treated him to a devastatingly gorgeous view of her ass. Full, rounded, he wanted to get his hands on it as well as his mouth, but as he crawled toward her, she turned back, setting his wallet aside and holding the pair of condoms she pulled free between her fingers. “Two?”

He reached out and plucked them from her fingers, tossing one on the edge of the blanket and opening the other with his fingers.

Alex looked over at a cabin across the creek and set back in a cove of trees. “You worried someone might see?”

She laid down on the blanket, her hair spread on the dark fabric, and her hand reaching for him. “I’m worried you’re going to decide not to put that thing on and come here.”

He shook his head. “No way.” He lowered the condom and slipped it over the head of his cock. “Not a chance in hell.”

Once he had it on, he had to tighten his hand around the base of it, he was on the edge and he felt like he might burst before he really got started. And that, he'd never live down.

Not with her.

Not with the way she made him feel.

Once he had himself somewhat under control, he reached for her.

CHAPTER 4



ERIS LAY ON HER BACK, staring up at the stars. The fire had burned down and was barely glowing on the far side of the blanket. The endless night above their heads gave her a moment of distraction but it didn't take long for her thoughts to drift back to the man sleeping beside her.

Alex.

It was crazy, really.

She barely knew the man, but that hadn't stopped her from agreeing to spend time with him and letting him inside of her body.

She could count on a few scant fingers the men she'd had sex with over the years, but none had pulled at her heart.

Alex shouldn't have either.

He was passing through.

Coming back to West Yellowstone to steep himself in old memories. He'd be gone in the morning.

Eris lifted her hand and placed it over her heart, hating the way her heartrate had increased with the thought of him going.

She wasn't a woman who longed for love. She liked doing a job. Being useful.

She didn't need a man or a family to feel complete.

She wore that belief like body armor, eager to disavow any man who thought he could turn her into a domestic drudge.

And yet, there was something different here.

Something different with this man.

It made her heart skip a beat.

It also made her stomach twist in her middle.

Beside her, Alex shifted in his sleep and let out a soft exhale.

That was all it took for her to become aroused again.

It wouldn't be the first time.

No, they'd stripped bare beside the fire and she'd barely spared a thought that someone might be able to see them. Her eyes had been fixed on the naked beauty of his body. The scars that he bore didn't bother her. They actually gave him a rugged look that made her even more attracted to him, but her fingers hadn't explored the raised and scarred flesh until they'd both had their fun.

Laying on top of him, she'd asked him about each scar before she'd touched and kissed them in turn. It had felt more intimate than any other interaction she'd had with a man.

That scared her, but she ignored the feelings, unwilling to waste another minute.

They'd fallen asleep beside the fire, too exhausted to move apart.

The wind blew through the trees and she wrapped her arms around herself.

Eris could have tugged on the blanket that only covered half of her body, but she wasn't sure she wanted Alex awake again.

It wasn't that she didn't want to have him inside her again, but the more time they had around each other awake, there was more of a chance that they'd talk about tomorrow.

Or beyond tomorrow.

And she knew that there wouldn't be a beyond.

She certainly had no interest in trying anything long distance and Alex was heading back to the Middle East with his unit.

This weekend.

This night was all they had.

So far it had been amazing.

The last time, she'd been on top, seated like she would be on a horse, her eyes were fixed on the starry heavens. All the while he'd thrust up into her body, and his hands were on her breasts, her hips, and yes, thank heavens, between her legs.

It had been incredible.

Almost cosmic with the stars overhead and Alex beneath her.

Laying there on the blanket staring up at the stars again, Eris felt her body heating up with desire.

The ache she felt between her legs increased as she felt heat kindling there again.

“You’re ‘wake.”

She turned toward his voice and saw him looking at her, his eyes half-hidden with the darkness overhead. “So are you.”

His smile was lazy, his eyes sharpening with every passing second. “I reached for you and you weren’t there.”

The timbre of his voice vibrated through her and before she realized she was doing it, she reached out and took his hand.

“You’re cold.”

She half-shrugged, still staring up at the night sky. “I didn’t want to wake you to take back half of the covers.”

“There are other ways to keep warm.”

Just hearing his voice was enough to heat her up.

Feeling his arms wrap around her and his muscled body pressed up against her side, Eris felt no need to pull away or ask him to stop.

He brought the blanket along with him and covered them both. They may have ended up further from the fire, but she wasn't cold.

Alex's hands easily moved the blanket out of the way as his hand moved from her hip down between her legs. She turned toward him, needing more contact.

She parted her legs and gave him room to fill her with his fingers.

"You're so damn wet."

Eris grinned at the gruff tone of his voice as she reached for him under the blanket. "And you're so damn hard, Alex."

He moved so that he was partly hovering over her, his eyes glittering in the darkness blending into the star-studded canopy overhead.

"Don't make me wait, Alex. We don't have much time."

His whole body tensed for a moment before his fingers pulled free.

"Then you choose." He pushed the blanket aside. "Top or bottom. Lady's choice."

"I don't want to think all that much, Alex. I want to feel."

"And the stars," he leaned in and pressed a kiss to her neck, "do you want to see them dance again?"

She shifted on the blanket, her body aching even more from his question and the image it brought up in her mind.

"Can we have both?"

Eris regretted the question, almost immediately.

As short as their time was, she didn't want to demand anything beyond what he could offer. She would soon be disappointed enough when he left. She didn't want to have that empty feeling start so soon.

When he moved again, she realized she shouldn't have doubted Alex.

He pressed up against her back, his hand grasping the sensitive and tender flesh on the inside of her thigh, opening her to the point where her foot lifted up and over his legs.

She looked down and watched as his long, dark fingers swept through her curls and her wet folds until his fingertips had found her clit, stroking it gently before he lifted his hand. He flattened his palm against the soft flesh below her bellybutton and pressed down enough to cant her hips back toward him.

As she breathed shallowly, he slipped inside of her from behind.

Eris lifted her arm, wrapping it up and around his neck, to scratch her fingers through his short cropped hair and against his scalp.

He loved that, she could tell. Her nails, as short as they were, scratching against his skin, made his body tense. She could hear his breathing deepen, feel the reflexive thrust of his hips when she dug her nails in at the nape of his neck.

“The stars,” she breathed as he thrust inside of her, “the stars...”

Alex closed his mouth over the pulse at her throat, his tongue making her gasp aloud. “You’ll see them after I leave.”

He started moving in earnest then, almost as if he was determined to make some kind of indelible impression on her.

She was caught up in the moment, her lips parting on a silent sigh as his hands roamed over her body, stirring up more passion that she’d ever felt before.

Eris wanted to tell him that he didn’t have to try so hard to get her to remember him.

She doubted that would ever be a problem.

As he thrust into her, over and over, she held him close with both her hand and her body, clasping him tightly inside of her as they rose higher and higher in the night sky, driven by their physical needs and something she couldn’t... wouldn’t name.

Eris felt herself rising, lifting over the edge of reason, and tumbling down into the darkness of the night surrounding them.

She wasn't afraid of the fall.

Didn't need to reach out and grasp for anything to stop it.

She felt Alex's body behind her and his arms around her.

She'd never admit it out loud, but she wondered if she would be happy to rest like this for days and days.

Could she?

Could she be enough?

Those thoughts drifted off as she drifted to sleep in his arms, his talented hands tucking the blanket around them as the stars sparkled on over their heads.



THE MORNING ARRIVED before he was ready for it. He'd barely slept at all since the early hour wakeup when she'd welcomed his touch a third time.

He knew that she didn't think this was a thing between them.

He wasn't sure either, but that didn't stop the instinct he had to move closer to her and hold her against him once again.

Something in the water moved and flitted along in the creek.

He enjoyed the sound and smiled, rolling onto his back.

The darkness of night was lifting almost as if the sky was stretching itself awake at the same time he was.

Beside him, Eris sighed and rolled toward him. Her hair was mussed, but it looked good on her.

Doubtless everything would.

She was beautiful in anything.

Although he might just prefer her naked like she'd spent most of the night.

It wasn't a stretch. Eris Lange filled out her clothes beautifully, but naked? She made his chest tighten and his heart pound.

Gazing at him through half-lidded eyes?

Fuck. He was hard again.

He'd been so long without sex that he couldn't believe how many times he'd become aroused.

For her. Maybe that was the difference.

She made him aroused, by breathing.

"You look ridiculously awake."

He smiled at the grumbling tone of her voice.

The deeper tone sounded sexy to him.

"I don't usually sleep in. It's a military thing."

She shifted and lifted an arm over her head. "I think maybe it's just a *you* thing," she sighed. "You smile a lot."

He heard her exasperated tone and smiled in response.

"See?" The hand above her head lowered to nudge him in the shoulder. "You're smiling again."

And he was.

He just didn't think that she wanted to hear that she was the reason.

Shaking her head, she braced her elbows under her and looked around in the lightening darkness. "We didn't throw our clothes in the fire, did we?"

"No, but we didn't put them back on after the second time."

The look she swung in his direction was heated, but not in anger.

"I'd go for another one if we didn't have to worry about people coming around." She dropped her head back and took

another look at the stars still visible in the sky overhead. “I’ve warned a few people about indecent exposure, but I’ve never been in the situation myself.”

“Oh?” Just the idea of it sounded good to him. Not the trouble part, but seeing her again, naked? He could go for that. “Is that the most fun you’ve had on the job?”

Alex thought he saw her blush.

“It wasn’t really part of the job for me. I’m in law enforcement, but I work at the detention center. I’m not in the field as the others are.”

“You’re working with the prisoners?”

She turned to look at him and he wondered what thought crossed her mind when she heard the question.

“They aren’t prisoners when I see them. The detention center only takes in those who are being detained or arrested. We handle intake but no one we have has been convicted or sentenced to jail time.”

Alex hissed in a breath when she sat up and reached over for something at the edge of their blankets. He couldn’t help the way he physically reacted to the bare expanse of her back. He was grateful for the blanket covering his lap. “You get the drunks?”

She nodded and he watched her turn her top right side out. “Drunks. And we get a lot of those. We do get a fair amount of hunters. Poachers, really. They’re the ones who get on my nerves. They’re some of the worst when they come in.”

“Do they get rough?”

She hesitated and his hands fisted in the blanket covering them.

When she answered, she didn’t look up at him right away.

“Most, no. The ones that are, are both probably drunk and hunting without a license or trespassing. At that point, it comes down to just having a plain disregard for the law. At that point, they don’t care who they hurt. They certainly don’t care if they offend anyone.

“And putting hands on public servants isn’t a problem for them either, but I can handle myself.”

He smiled and she answered him with a smile of her own.

“I bet you can.” He reached out and rubbed his hand up and down her bare arm. “I know how strong you are.”

“We know I can take you down to the ground.”

Fuck. She knew just what to say to make his blood heat up in his veins.

“If I could stay, I’d go for a few rounds in the gym with you.” And the bedroom, he added in his thoughts.

She nodded. “You’re still going right?”

He agreed, nodding his head, but he also wondered if she was eager for him to confirm that he was leaving... and soon.

“I’ve got to catch a flight tonight and get back to base.”

She pulled her shirt on over her head. “So, I guess we should get you back to town then.”

It was almost like a wall had come up between them on her end.

“Yeah, eventually, but we don’t have to rush.”

Eris darted a glance in his direction. “You don’t sound so eager to go.”

Again, he wasn’t sure in what way she meant it, but he wasn’t about to ask.

“I like my job. The guys that I work with are the best. It’ll be good to get back, back to work.”

“I agree.” She said the words, but the tone of her voice said she wasn’t all that sure. “No.” She gave her head a definitive shake. “I like the people I work with at the center. The police and rangers are great. Some of the people who come in aren’t there because they’re bad people. Everyone makes mistakes.”

He smiled at her strident defense.

“Why aren’t you a ranger?” He looked around at the land surrounding them. “You care about the land and the animals here, right?”

She drew back, a startled look on her face, but she didn’t push back at his words. “Of course I do. It’s the best part of Yellowstone.”

A wry smile touched his lips. “Not the people?”

Her reflexive expression spoke volumes, but her words confirmed it. “More than *most* people.”

“So, if you like the land and the animals more than most people,” he gave her a wink that made her cheeks darken, “maybe you should consider a change.”

She drew back again. “I’m just settling into the job I have, Alex. I’m not sure you have any idea what that means.”

He offered a bit of a shrug.

“I joined the service later in life. Before that, I was a mechanic. Those skills helped me in the military. Our unit has more than our share of experience flying helicopters. Learning how to keep them up and running was easy enough with my experience. I’m not saying that you should give up your work. I don’t know enough about you or what you do to make that kind of suggestion. All I can tell you is what my grandfather offered me in the way of advice.”

He saw resistance warring with curiosity on her face before he continued.

“It was back when he started to add a room onto the back of the cabin. Some of the newer residents thought he was crazy. They’d catch up to him at the store or the diner and tell him the old place didn’t just need a coat of paint, it needed to be razed to the ground.”

“Was it that bad?” Eris’ eyes were fixed on him, concern easy to read in their depths.

He shook his head, his mouth turning to a thoughtful momentary pout. “He didn’t think so. He thought too many people wanted to spend their money. He knew that the bones

of the house were good.” Turning around, he looked over the land behind him. Narrowing his eyes, he could almost see the cabin the way it used to look when he’d last seen it. “He didn’t want to erase what was there, just make it better.”

He felt her hand on his arm and turned to look at her.

Again, he could see the care in her eyes, feel the warmth of her touch in more than just a physical way.

“I think it could be the same for you.”

Eris startled, drawing her hand back and settling it in her lap. “What are you talking about?”

“You.” He reached out his hand to touch her in the same way she’d touched him, but she looked at his hand as if it might bite her and he lowered it back to his knee. “You have a job and I bet you’re great at it, but I think you’d probably enjoy a job with the Park Rangers. It would suit you more. Give you a chance to be more involved in nature. That’s what you want right?”

She tilted her head in one direction and then the other as if his words settled on her and she wasn’t quite sure if she liked the feel of them.

He was sure he could tell when she’d made a decision and it wasn’t the one he hoped.

Her shoulders tensed and her lips pursed, making her expression a little sad.

Before she could voice it, he took a chance, thinking this might be the only lasting influence he might have on her.

“It wouldn’t be a complete change. You wouldn’t have to start over. I don’t know exactly how it would work, but I bet if you asked you’d find that the change wouldn’t be all that hard. But in the long run-”

“Why are you pushing this?”

He saw her brow furrowed in consternation. “Me? I don’t think I’m pushing.”

She blew out a sigh. “Well, you might not think it, but it feels like you’re pushing. I just don’t know why.” Eris shook her head and reached for her pants, turning her face away from him.

“You don’t?” Alex wanted to reach out his hand and trail his fingers across her skin. “I can tell you if you want to know. It’s not a secret.”

She sat back, her pants held in her hand. “I don’t know, to be honest. I’m a little afraid of what you’re going to say.”

“It’s nothing to be afraid of, Eris.” He leaned in and reached out his hand. He traced his thumb across the rise of her cheekbone. “The last thing I’d do is hurt you.”

For a moment, just a moment, he thought she’d lean into his touch, but she held herself back.

He almost admired her resolve, but he wished that she wanted his touch as much as he wanted to give it to her.

“I trust you.” It sounded like the admission took quite a bit from her. “I have since the moment I met you, Alex. It’s crazy, for me at least, but it’s true.” She paused, taking in a breath and letting it out again. “But, why, Alex? Why is this a thing?”

“Why do I want to help you?”

She started to shake her head and then nodded. “I guess that’s the question. It’s not like we’re... it’s not like-”

“Whatever we are or aren’t, I want to help you.”

He touched his hand to her shoulder and then let it drift down her arm until his hand cupped her elbow in what he hoped was a reassuring touch.

“I don’t know where I’ll end up after my deployment ends,” the breath he took into his lungs was hot, stifling, “but I want to believe that you’re going to make a move and put yourself in a better place than you are now.”

He watched her swallow and her lips part in a hesitant motion.

When she finally spoke, he swore he heard the effort it took for her to speak and it hit him square in the chest.

“You sound like you’re not... you make it sound like you’re not-”

She sucked in a breath and dropped her eyes to the blanket. With stilted movements she pushed her pants under the blanket and started pulling them on.

“Eris?”

“We should get going. I know you have to check out at ten.”

And just like that, the wall snapped up between them.

Any attempt he made after that...

Well, it bounced right off of that wall and he felt the impact somewhere deep in his chest.

When she drove away from the motel less than an hour later, he was left there, standing by the curb.

Watching her go.

Hoping that what he’d told her had helped and not hurt.

Because that’s the last thing he wanted to do.

No, the last thing was leaving her behind.

CHAPTER 5



IT HAD BEEN LESS than a week since Alex left West Yellowstone to go back to his unit in the military and everything for Eris felt... off.

Always someone to get up on time, a few minutes before her alarm, she was leaning on her alarm and the snooze button.

Her thoughts while she was at her apartment would drift off and wonder about a man who was likely thousands of miles away.

It wasn't like her.

Not. At. All.

And she wanted it to stop.

Needed it to stop.

She'd never been the kind of woman to moon over things, but it seemed that in the space of a few days she'd changed.

And she wasn't sure if the change was a good one, but that didn't stop the change from happening. It left her feeling like there was something that she needed to do.

She just had to figure out what it was.

The best part of her day was working.

Life at Yellowstone's Temporary Detention Center wasn't somewhere she could daydream or even let her mind wander. She kept herself busy.

When she wasn't working the desk and checking in new detainees, she had a whole list of things to keep herself busy, but she also had some down time to do a little investigating of her own. It was amazing what you could find on social media. People made and posted all kinds of pictures and information. They loved to make videos bragging about things.

Some of them were even illegal.

And it was those posts that she'd been sending into the Park Rangers when the information put their crimes within park boundaries.

So far there hadn't been any posts for the day that needed her attention beyond the possibly criminally stupid news stories and video of a tourist who had decided that the bison standing along side the road wanted to be in his selfie.

She was sure she'd hear about it later from one of the rangers.

The front door to the Detention Center buzzed and clicked, telling her that they had incoming. Eris got up from her chair at the reception desk and managed not to roll her eyes when Park Ranger Evan Haskins walked in with Caleb Pruitt and his brother Hal.

"Morning, Evan. How are things?"

The ranger shook his head. "It would have been a great morning if these two hadn't taken a shot at an elk."

Hal scoffed at his words. "Shows how much you know, Ranger Ass-licker. We was shootin' at the coyote!"

Eris held back her words, but even with her lips pressed together, her thoughts must have been plain to see on her face.

Evan's shoulders shook with laughter. "Well, thanks for that confession, Hal." He darted a look at the camera in the corner before meeting Eris' wide eyes.

Caleb had seen the subtle look and took his turn to laugh. "Well, unless you got one of them deaf folks who can read our lips, it don't matter what you can see."

Seeing that Evan was on the verge of a good old fashioned gut laugh, Eris explained. “First, you don’t have to be deaf to read lips,”

She saw Caleb shrug at her words.

“But we don’t need to worry about that, because that camera has a damn good microphone too. It’s called ‘VIDEO RECORDING.’”

Caleb’s brow furrowed leaving him a deep rut between his brows. “You ain’t got permission to record us! It’s against our damn first amonite rights.”

She looked at Evan. She already knew the answer to the question that she was posing to him, but she just wanted to get through Caleb’s granite like skull. “You Miranda’d them, right?”

Hal looked interested. “Who’s she?”

Evan’s eyes were tearing up but managed to keep his voice relatively even when he spoke. “Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law.”

Wide-eyed, Hal whirled on Evan. “We ain’t in no court of law!”

Eris reached across the desk and grabbed Hal’s arm. “I’m sure your brother can explain it to you later. But,” she sighed and wondered when idiots like this would learn their lessons, “you’ve been in here enough that you should know.”

As she walked Hal toward the empty holding cell, he pulled on his arm. “Lemme go, you uppity bitch!”

She gripped him a little tighter as she opened the cell door. She’d had a detainee in the past who’d popped her in the face with his elbow. It had taken over a week for the bruise to die down, but she’d felt twinges of pain almost a month later.

When she tried to move him into the cell, he glared at her.

“You don’t have to dig your nails into my arm!”

She lifted her free hand and showed him that all her nails were trimmed close. There weren’t any nails to dig into his

arm. “Step on in, Hal.”

As he moved past, she gave Evan a glance. “Transport to the jail will be here in an hour or so. Good timing.”

Evan winked at her behind Caleb’s back.

Caleb was a good head taller than his brother, but he was only a few inches taller than her.

She heard the wet suction sound and turned her head. Caleb’s spit landed on her temple, and she felt it on the shell of her ear.

Evan gave the man a good shove, making him stumble into the cell.

Opening one eye, Eris closed the cell door and locked it before heading back to her desk.

Following her for a moment, Evan jogged on ahead and opened one of the drawers. He pulled out the wet wipes and opened the lid. He’d already pulled two out when Eris reached for it.

She methodically wiped her face while keeping a stoic look on her face.

“Asshole,” Evan grouched and handed her another wipe which she used on her ear, “he’s going to catch additional charges on that.”

“I don’t think he cares how many charges he gets, for him it’s like a badge of honor or something like that.”

“Well, he is something.” Evan scoffed at the idea. “You want to let him know I went out after him and his brother because of you?”

“I hope you’re joking about that.” She threw the last wipe into the trash can. “The last thing we want them to know is that we’re tracking their social media.”

“You’ve got a sharp mind, Eris.”

“Well, I just want to do what I can to protect the park and those two dweebs back there are habitual offenders and damn

proud of it. I had a feeling that they couldn't help but incriminate themselves.”

When she'd checked the local posts during her shift the day before, their post had popped right up.

Caleb had posted a picture with his brother that had a GPS tag on it. Their post?

GOING TO SHOOT US SOME GAME

Given that the GPS put them within the border of the National Park, she'd immediately contacted Ranger Headquarters. The brothers liked to spend a few days in the park at a time, with or without permission.

Evan leaned his elbow against the counter, leaving him almost eye to eye with her. “Oscar Knightly is retiring in a few months.”

“Oh? Huh. That's a shame. He's like Old Man Time around the park.”

Nodding, Evan continued. “So, they're looking to hire some new blood.”

That got her interest.

“Yeah?”

“Yep.” Evan gave her another wink. “I mention this because when I asked him if he knew you, he smiled and said you'd be a perfect choice to hire on as a ranger.”

Her face went numb.

Her hands went cold.

“Don't fuck with me, Evan.”

“You know I'd be perfectly happy to fuck you, Eris. Fuck with you? Hell no. You'd kick my ass.”

She nodded. She didn't like what he'd said at first. She'd already turned him down more than once.

“Considering I don't get involved with people I work with, yeah, I'd kick your ass. But, I'd kill to get the job.”

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a card.

Printed on it was Oscar Knightly's contact information.

"He said to give him a call and you guys can talk. I think if he gave you the thumbs up, you'd be a shoe in for the job."

She was so busy staring at the card, she didn't notice that Evan was leaving until she heard the automatic doors slide open.

She raised her hand to wave goodbye, and he gave her another wink as he disappeared out of sight.

"Hey!"

Eris schooled her features and turned to look at Caleb in his cell. "Yes?"

He had one hand wrapped around one of the bars and his face pushed as far as it could go between. "Since you said we got some time before the transport gets here, how about you suck on these." His second hand appeared and grabbed a hold of his crotch.

She hoped that her face didn't heat from his comments. The last thing she wanted was for him to think he was getting to her.

A drunk from the other side of the holding area slurred his response, making hers unnecessary.

"Even if she wanted some shriveled berries in her mouth," he groused, "I doubt she'd pick you."

Looking down at the card in her hand, Eris decided that she'd call the retiring ranger on her next break.

She needed to get out of this building and into the park.

CHAPTER 6



SIX MONTHS LATER...

MOVING to West Yellowstone had seemed to be a good thing... at first.

For Alex Ridgely it had been easy as far as the move was considered. He had little in the way of things that needed to be packed up. A few boxes of books, some clothes, and his personal collection of firearms and sporting equipment. He traveled light as far as items were concerned.

His emotional baggage, well, that was another case.

Hearing that his team would have jobs in West Yellowstone had been strangely fortuitous, or at least he'd thought it would be, until he got there.

And found that Eris wasn't at her old apartment.

Asking the people who were there didn't get him far.

It did get him a few narrow-eyed, suspicious looks, but no information.

Before he could do much more than that, they were busy working.

And like some of the team that had started up at the local office before they arrived, his friend Gabe had fallen headfirst in love and was ridiculously happy.

Alex wasn't the kind of guy to be jealous of his friends for much but seeing the way Harper and Gabe just clicked

together reminded him of the short time he'd had with Eris.

He just had to find her first. West Yellowstone was suddenly a lot larger than he remembered and finding one woman might just be a little more difficult than he thought.

Alex found his way into the mess at the lodge and gave a little wave to Cookie who always seemed to be at the stove or the cutting board.

Even though he wasn't serving thousands aboard a warship, he worked with the same efficiency which had gotten him through years of service.

Cookie turned back to the stove and used a large spoon to stir what was in the enormous stew pot. "You look like shit, son."

The plainly stated opinion didn't shock Alex in the least. Even with the short time that he'd been staying at the lodge he'd learned that John's employees treated him like family. And his family had always been outspoken.

"Thanks, Cookie. Nice to be back after a long day."

The older man gave him a little look over his shoulder and huffed. "If you're gonna stay here and talk, you better come on over here or you'll give me a crick in my neck."

With a soft chuckle, Alex made his way around one of the long prep tables and came to a stop a couple feet shy of the stove. "This better?"

Cookie slid him a look out of the corner of his eye and took a hesitant sniff. "Glad you cleaned yourself up after the fishing trip."

"I wasn't raised in a barn."

The corner of Cookie's mouth turned up in a grin. "Well you work in one now."

Alex nodded his head. The Brotherhood Protectors had renovated the old and unused barn at the lodge and turned it into their headquarters. It was hard to believe if you just looked at the barn from the outside. It looked like any country barn, well kept and painted a bright and cheery color. Inside it

was contemporary in design and filled with current high-tech equipment, enough to monitor and direct a number of operations at the same time.

“Fair enough,” Alex met the older man’s eyes with a solid look. “Still, even if it was just my military training,” he explained, “I know enough not to tromp dirt and grass through your spotless kitchen. I wouldn’t want to get in a fight with you.”

“Hmph.” Cookie lifted his chin and arched an eyebrow at him. “That’s because you know you’d be no match for a Navy man.”

Alex knew it was said in good humor, but after years of rivalry between branches of the military had taught him a number of potent zingers to lob back in a verbal battle like this. Instead of repeating any of the patent phrases that were perched on his tongue, he gave the man a shrug. “I dunno about that, Cookie, but I’m a man who values a good meal, so I’ll just keep mostly quiet.”

The older man thought through his answer and nodded in appreciation.

“Smart. Even if you’re an Army man.”

“Uh... thanks?”

Cookie withdrew the spoon from the pot and tapped the long wooden neck on the lip before setting it on a nearby stand. “It’s the best you’ll get from me for now.”

“Okay then,” Alex turned to the coffee urn set on a table along the far wall, “would I put myself in danger if I poured myself a cup of coffee?”

“Go ahead, Ridge.”

The familiar use of his team name made him smile.

Cookie might be gruff, but he’d all but shown him that he’d been accepted as far as the mess went at the lodge.

And really, that was fine with him. He liked to eat on the regular.

The door at the end of the table swung open and John Jacobs, the owner and operator of the lodge walked in with a smile for them both. “How are things, Cookie?”

“Going. Dinner will be ready on time.”

John shrugged and picked up a mug to pour himself coffee from the urn, turning for a moment to look at Alex. “How did the day go out on the river?”

Alex felt a smile touch his lips as he looked at the other man. “Good. Really good. At least half of the guests caught some fish in the creek.”

Cookie gave him a look. “Where’d you put the fish?”

John glanced between them both and Alex saw more than a hint of humor in the other man’s eyes.

“The men cooked them over a fire out at my grandfather’s property. Don’t worry, they’ll still be hungry when it’s time for dinner.”

Cookie sniffed. “As long as you didn’t poison them, I don’t mind either way.”

John almost choked on his coffee.

Alex shook his head. “I’ve been cooking over an open fire most of my life. But don’t worry. It was an easy prep. The men let me prepare the fish for the pan and while they recounted their outdoor prowess, I cooked the fish with some butter and herbs. There wasn’t anything left when they were done besides their ear-to-ear grins.”

Lowering his cup, John gave him a satisfied smile. “It’s good to have a man join the group who has more than a passing knowledge of the area.”

Alex paused with his coffee cup almost up to his lips. “Not the whole area. I know the land up there at the creek because of the summers I spent with my grandfather. Anything outside of that area and I’d likely need a map and compass, or a decent GPS like anyone else who didn’t grow up here.”

John and Cookie shared a look before John spoke. “Fair enough.” John set his coffee cup down on the table and gave

Alex a curious side-eyed stare. “Is that why you’ve been asking around about Eris Lange?”

Alex felt the coffee in his mouth suddenly lose its flavor. He swallowed it down with some effort.

“No.”

The simple reply had Cookie and John exchanging not-so-subtle looks.

“Alex?”

He heard John’s tone and knew that the man wasn’t been harsh or judgmental.

It didn’t make the invasive questioning any easier.

“I’m sorry to ask this, but... why are you looking for her?”

Uncomfortable with the inquisitive looks on the other men’s faces. Alex kept his face as bland as he could. “It’s personal.”

Again, the other men shared a look.

Before they could ask another question, Alex started to walk toward the sink to empty his cup.

The door at the far side of the room opened up again and Alex felt the mood in the room shift. It lifted the tension in the room and changed it to something like anticipation.

Feeling a moment of unease, Alex turned around and watched the group that entered the room.

John’s son, Stone and his wife, Kyla were the first through the door, followed by another of Stone’s team, Bubba Yates came in followed by two women. The first, he recognized as Chelsea Youngblood.

As he started forward, Stone made the introductions and Alex was only half listening since he knew that she worked with wolves in the area and was heavily involved in their preservation. He’d done quite a bit of reading on the wildlife in the area as they’d traveled to Yellowstone as a team.

It was going to be a pleasure to work with Chelsea if the opportunity presented itself.

Bubba clapped a hand down on Alex's shoulder. "You should also meet someone else that'll be working with Chelsea and your team from time to time around Yellowstone. Ridge, meet Park Ranger Eris Lange."

The next few moments felt almost comical in a way. His hand held out, he stared at the woman he hadn't been able to get out of his mind for months. "Ranger?"

She stared back at him with her eyes wider than he remembered, her cheeks flushing with color. "Ridge?"

He took her hand and felt like his heart might beat its way out of his chest.

She looked... fantastic.

And confused.

But then again, so was he.

He was only vaguely aware that he held her hand in his grasp, but their hands weren't moving. "When did you change jobs?"

She dropped her chin a little, but he could still see her beautiful face. "Almost right after you left. Another ranger was retiring, and they were looking to hire someone, and I was lucky enough to get the job."

Chelsea scoffed a little. "They were lucky to get you." Chelsea addressed the room. "Eris is the lead on identifying and arresting poachers in the area. She's got this almost supernatural way of sniffing them out."

Alex felt Eris' arm shake from her laughter and when she met his eyes and gave her hand a little tug. He let it go and lowered his hand to his side, but he couldn't take his gaze off of her.

Eris addressed the group in a soft, almost whisper-like tone. "I'm sure they'll figure it out soon enough, but you'd be surprised what people put out on social media."

Bubba was the first to speak and Alex wished he'd been the one to ask-

“Like Facebook?”

Nodding, Eris's hands disappeared behind her back. “It's actually something I started doing a few months ago when I was working for the Detention Center. It's not exactly a busy place once we have the detainees in their cells and we're waiting for transport. I'd log onto social media and focus searches on posts made that were tagged to the Yellowstone area. People posting about climbing over barriers. A couple taking engagement photos after carving their names into trees. More than one tourist thinking bison are big furry dogs. And yes, poachers. Two men took a photo with a mountain lion they'd shot and killed.

“By the time we tracked them down they'd broken half a dozen laws and generated enough evidence against themselves that there really isn't a legal defense they could make.”

John sighed and shook his head. “Unless terminal stupidity is a defense.”

Eris' smile brightened the room around her. “Not from what the prosecutor tells me. I just got the news that I've been assigned to help Chelsea if she needs me. Many of the social media posts have also included GPS coordinates so I think it should make it easier to track them than just wandering around the park looking for people out of place.”

Stone nodded. “It's a good plan. The fact that people like oversharing on social media should make it easier to track people down.”

Bubba cleared his throat. “It's still dangerous.”

Alex saw Bubba put an arm around Chelsea's shoulders and tucked her against his side.

“You know I'm available to go out with you whenever you need me.”

Chelsea pressed a kiss to his cheek. “You and the team have your own jobs to do. Besides,” she gestured at Eris, “she's not just pretty, she kicks ass.”

Alex couldn't hold back the memory of the time that Eris tackled him down to the blanket in the tall grass near the creek. He knew, by the tone in her muscles and the effortless way she knew just how to tumble him down onto the blanket that she'd had her share of training in fighting.

The conversation lulled right at that moment, and Alex was about to ask Eris if he could have a minute or two when her cell phone rang.

With a little wince and shrug of her shoulders, she stepped back from the group and made her way across the room.

Alex saw the curious looks of the others settle on his face, but he wasn't ready to answer questions that he wasn't sure he had an answer for.

So he kept his gaze on Eris as she answered the call. "Lange. Mmm. Mmmhmm. Yeah. I'm in West Yellowstone. Yeah. The Lodge. Okay. I can meet you- Oh. You're going to come here?"

Eris looked at John and Stone as she shielded the lower part of her phone. "Sorry, Mister Jacobs and... Mister Jacobs-"

"Stone is fine," the younger of the two gestured for her to continue.

"Stone. I need to talk to the prosecutor of one of the cases. He wants to meet me here to talk about the case. I can go out to the parking lot and sit in his car-"

Alex spoke up before he could think better of it. "Sounds a little cramped. Uncomfortable."

It certainly made him feel uncomfortable.

The group went quiet for a moment and Alex knew he'd stuck his foot in it.

Where exactly, he didn't know.

The look on Chelsea's face said she did, but she didn't say a thing in response.

John did. "There's a bunch of seating areas in the main room. You're more than welcome to meet out there."

Cookie entered the fray a moment later. “Might be too loud out there or folks might be tempted to listen in.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder to a corner of the room. “Got some chairs over there and a table. Maybe Ridge will help you set up. Hell, I bet he’d even pour coffee for the two of you.”

Heads turned in his direction and even though he’d already been more than willing to help out, he felt like he had to verbalize his answer to satisfy the others.

“Yeah, sure.”

The look Eris turned in his direction told him she wasn’t exactly thrilled with the idea.

Just his luck.

Lifting her hand away from the phone, Eris spoke to the prosecutor. “We’ve got a place here where we can talk in private. Oh? That’s what you wanted? Great. I’ll meet you out front in- okay. Ten minutes.”

When she ended the call, she smiled at the Jacobs men. “Thanks for your understanding. I can’t imagine that you’d want us to sit in the main room and attract attention. This is supposed to be a place to vacation and relax, not some kind of law enforcement hideout.”

Alex saw Stone and Bubba share a look with their women, but Eris didn’t see it. For some reason she had her eyes on him.

He just wasn’t sure it was a good look or even a good reason that she was singling him out.

“Alex? I was wondering if I could talk to you outside before I have to meet with the-”

“Sure. Absolutely.” He didn’t wait for her to say ‘prosecutor’ because he didn’t want to hear it.

It made no logical sense that he hadn’t wanted her to say the word, but logic had kind of flown out the window when he’d met Eris.

Now, she wanted to talk to him, and he was almost dreading it.

He'd wanted to talk to her privately.

He just wanted to be sure that what she wanted to say to him was a good thing.

There was a tension at the corners of her lush mouth and a worried look in her eyes.

What he wanted to say to her... what he wanted to ask, wasn't something that could fit into ten minutes, and it certainly wasn't what he wanted the others to hear.

Not yet.

Or not at all if what Eris wanted to talk about was anything like the look she had in her eyes.

He wasn't ready to lose her before they'd really begun something.

Still, Alex knew he couldn't put off this conversation.

He needed to find out where she'd moved and how to keep in touch, even if it was just a friendly thing.

After so long not wanting anything with anyone, he felt like he'd somehow cursed himself.

He just had to figure out a way to hold onto something that wasn't really his in the first place.

Alex gestured toward the door. "After you."

Nodding, Eris started toward the door and Alex followed her, feeling everyone's eyes trained on the back of his neck like a laser sight.

It wasn't until the heavy front door of the lodge swung closed behind them that Alex felt like he could draw a new breath into his lungs and Eris, she turned back to look at him grabbed him by the upper arms and looking him over from head to toe before she spun him around to face the door.

Alex had no way of knowing what she was doing, but he assumed it was what she'd done to his front.

When she loosened her hands on him, he turned around and was shocked to see just a hint of tears in her eyes when

she met his curious gaze.

“You’re alive.”

He dropped his chin down in a nod.

“And you’re living here in West Yellowstone.”

“At the lodge for now.”

His answer lifted her chin and her gaze fixed on his unerringly.

“Well, I’m glad. Relieved really.”

Alex smiled. He was relieved to see her alive and in one piece too.

“I just need you to know that what we did... before...” She drew in a full breath before she spoke again. “It’s not going to happen again.”

CHAPTER 7



OKAY, so she hadn't planned to say what she did.

Then again, she hadn't planned to say anything, because she hadn't expected to hear about Alex after so many months. So she hadn't planned to see him again. At all.

Walking into the kitchen at the lodge was a new thing.

Coming face to face with Alex with no warning?

That had thrown her off center and her kneejerk reaction had been to slam the door shut between them, in a figurative manner.

The fresh air of the porch had been a boon. It helped her clear her head and as Alex looked at her, she tried to put her thoughts into order.

"It's been months since we've seen each other."

He nodded. "I went to your apartment."

Her brows pushed together as she thought over his words. "I didn't see you."

"Well," his expression lightened a little, "you moved."

Of course.

"Yeah, sorry. I did move about a month ago. Something opened up closer to the park and it... How long have you been in town?"

"About a month? We moved in and kind of hit the ground running."

She nodded. She had heard about a new security group stepping in with a recent problem regarding the wolves within the park boundaries.

As the newest hire, she wasn't let into all the 'water-cooler' conversations. The dirt wasn't something she got to hear about because everyone was still getting used to having her within their ranks.

"So, you've been living here at the lodge?"

He drew in a breath before he answered and damn, just the movement of his chest expanding to allow the air in was enough to make her skin heat with arousal.

Eris had touched that chest.

She'd kissed it.

And her tongue-

"I'm staying here until I figure out something a little more permanent."

At first, she'd only caught the end of his answer, but a quick trick of her mind figured out the first part of his answer.

"Oh," she managed, "okay."

"I would've called, but-"

"Yeah. Yeah." Of course he would have, but it wasn't like they exchanged numbers. Something she'd put a stop to if she remembered correctly.

And she knew she did.

"So, should I ask where you're living now?"

Eris saw the look in his eyes. She thought it was hope, but if she was being honest with herself and she regrettably was, she wanted it to be.

And then she didn't want it to be, as well.

No one ever said she wasn't complicated.

Not that she ever asked.

"Maybe it's best if you don't."

She saw the way her answer hit him.

It set him back a bit.

And she felt it too.

She wasn't ready for this conversation, and she was making a mess of it.

If only she hadn't asked to speak to him privately. Then maybe she could have had some time.

"Look-"

She heard a car driving up to the front of the lodge and turned her head to see it was the prosecutor. Had she wasted away her time or had he just driven that fast?

Eris turned back to look at Alex, hoping that she could salvage this somehow. "I don't know how to say what I'm feeling because I honestly don't have a clue. I'd just gotten used to the idea that I'd never see you again and as shit as that was, it was an end, you know?"

He started to speak and damnit, she cut him off, blathering again.

"And I guess we're going to be working together if you're with the Brotherhood." She thought she saw a little shock in his expression. "Chelsea explained some of it to me. So, if we're working together then that's going to be it, right? I've turned down a few of the rangers because I'm not about to mix business with... whatever they're asking for. It's got to be the same with us, right?"

She wondered if she sounded as stupid as she felt, but the last thing she was going to do would be to ask Alex.

And his expression?

He wasn't happy.

Well, join the club, hot stuff.

"Eris! There you are."

She shook her head a little, wishing that this whole meet-up hadn't happened at all.

She'd taken her own shock at the situation and turned the whole thing into a dumpster fire.

Just great.

Turning on her heel, Eris' hands went to her hips just above her utility belt.

She schooled her features into what she hoped was a businesslike expression. "Sir. You made good time."

The man that stepped up to her looked a little overdressed for the lodge. His dark grey pinstriped suit was classic, but with both of its buttons securely fastened she couldn't help but think that he looked a little stuffy.

Granted, he was the head of his office, but still.

"You don't have to be so official with me, Eris. I'm just glad we have a chance to speak one on one about this case. I know a lot of people think that I should turn his case over to someone under me, but I want everyone to know that I consider poaching a serious infraction and as such, I think lending my considerable skill and experience will drive that idea home."

She couldn't help but feel like he was purposefully excluding Alex who was standing right there in front of him.

And while she'd just gone through a whole lot of stupid to tell Alex that they needed to keep a distance between them, she wasn't able to ignore him.

"Mister Callas, this is Alex Ridgely. And Alex, this is--"

While she was introducing the two men, Alex seemed to keep his focus on her and while she felt a little shiver at the intensity of his gaze, she was just as aware of the change in the other man's posture.

If she didn't know any better, it could have seemed like they were both staking a claim of some sort.

The prosecutor cleared his throat and stepped forward with his hand held out.

The way he'd moved, it put him a step in front of her and closed much of the distance between him and Alex.

Eris almost expected Alex to step back to give the other man room, but he didn't.

Instead, he grasped the prosecutor's hand and gave it a single hard shake before letting it go.

The prosecutor stopped just short of wiping his hand off on his pants leg. "Mark Callas, lead prosecutor for the greater Yellowstone area. I'm taking a personal interest with," he paused, and Eris looked up at him only to find his eyes fixed on her face, "Eris' case."

Her face went hot, but it wasn't in pleasure.

She'd thought better of the man from their first meeting, but the way he was staring at her and the way his voice had changed inflection, she felt like she'd missed something in her earlier evaluation of his character.

Now, she was feeling more than a little uncomfortable at the energy around her.

It wasn't just the sudden influx of testosterone between the two men, she didn't like being proven wrong when it came to someone's character. She could only hope that this was some kind of mistake on Mark's part.

Maybe he just had a thing about... a thing about...

She huffed in her head at herself.

She couldn't think of anything else that he might mean by the prosecutor's overt claim.

After a single face to face meeting, he really was acting like a jerk.

And Alex?

Well, she couldn't help but go a little soft on him.

The man had put his mouth and hands all over her body under the stars.

If there had been a woman acting like this about Alex in front of her, she would have felt a little protective over him.

The thought shook her.

Almost as much as the sudden memory of the last time they'd seen each other.

It really wasn't the right time for that to pop into her head. Thank goodness for the sports bra she was wearing under her uniform. It was the same style she used at the gym when she worked out. It kept her from jiggling uncomfortably, and it kept her nipples from making distinct peaks visible to anyone looking in her direction.

So, even though Mark Callas was closer than she liked most people to get, he wouldn't see much more than her unexplainable flush of color across her cheeks.

"Well," she had to swallow to get her voice to come out enough to be audible, "now that you two have met each other, I guess we should go to the kitchen and talk about the case." She tilted her head toward her shoulder so she could look up at Mark and put some distance between them. "I'll show you where it is inside."

Before she could move, she felt something touch her back. Not just anywhere on her back, but it felt like Mark's thumb brushed against her back above her belt and she hoped she was wrong, but it felt like his little finger touched just above the curve of her butt.

Eris stepped back and almost stifled the nervous laugh that fell from her lips. "Here. I'll get the door."

She hated that she'd laughed the way she did. It was hard enough to be taken seriously as a woman in her profession. A laugh and a step back like that could easily be seen as a weakness. She didn't dare look at Alex.

Eris didn't want him to see how uneasy she felt.

Taking the door handle in hand, she opened it and stepped far to the side of the open doorway.

She spared a quick look at Mark's face and his smile hadn't faded or tightened.

He looked like he was happy for some reason, and she knew she was in for a tough meeting.

What was it with some men?

As soon as Mark walked past her, she started to follow him, letting go of the door.

Eris stepped through the open doorway quickly, expecting the door to swing closed quickly behind her, but when it didn't, she looked back over her shoulder.

Alex was holding the door open and ugh, with his hand on the edge of the door it made it all too easy to see the corded muscles in his forearms.

Forearms that she'd-

“Eris?”

Her chin dropped a little and let out a breath before she looked back at Mark.

“Are we going to have our meeting?”

In her head it felt like he'd added a word in just by this tone. ‘Are we going to have our *little* meeting?’

She wondered if he'd grown up with a Stepford family and expected a woman to walk around in an apron smelling like vanilla and cinnamon or something silly like that.

Not that she minded anyone who wanted to bake for their family, but she had a feeling that Mark was the kind of man who'd prefer a woman to stay at home and greet him at the door with a good stiff drink when he came home.

So his touchy-feely nature that he'd only begun moments ago would be completely misdirected if he was looking for something more than work.

And Eris knew that she wasn't interested in him at all.

No, the man at her back, was the only one who'd ever left a lasting impression on her, was still caught up in her thoughts.

How she was going to keep him at arm's length, she had no idea, but she'd figure something out.

She'd just started her job with the Park Rangers and strangely enough, it was Alex's urging that had pushed her to change.

Later, she decided, much later, she'd let him know that he'd been right.

Send him a gift card or something to say thanks.

Squaring her shoulders, she picked up her speed and walked Mark to the kitchens. A table and chairs had been set up for them and before she reached the simple set up, Cookie brought over two cups and a pot of coffee.

Mark pulled his chair out and sat down.

Cookie put the cups down and gave a little missish grunt. "Here," he shook his head, "let me get your chair."

Eris almost grinned at how affronted the older man was, but she easily pulled out her own chair and sat down with a smile. "Got it. Thanks, though."

Cookie poured her a steaming cup of coffee. "You want something to add to that?"

She cupped her hands around the mug and shook her head. "No thanks, I'm fine. Thanks, Cookie."

The older man gave her a hint of a smile and poured coffee into Mark's mug. It wasn't as efficient as the pour he'd done for her. Some of the coffee even sloshed over one side and then the other of the cup.

Cookie turned his back to the table and got a couple steps away before Mark turned his chair in that direction. The legs scraped against the floor and Mark called out. "Hey."

Cookie made an about face with a bland look on his features.

Mark made a circular gesture with his hand. "Cream and sugar?"

Eris swore she saw a glint of humor in the cook's eyes before he spoke.

“Didn’t ask you.”

As Cookie went back to the stove, Eris put her focus on Mark. “What can I help you with?”

Grudgingly he turned back to the table. “I wanted to talk to you about just *how* you focused on the Pruitt brothers.”

She wanted to laugh and tell him that the Pruitts had put the focus on themselves, but Mark’s tone didn’t make it seem like he was in a joking mood.

“It’s all in my report. When I sent the information into the Park Rangers, I put all of that in so that there wouldn’t be any questions about the tip that lead them to arrest the brothers.”

Mark smiled then, but it wasn’t the kind of smile that warmed a heart, it was the kind of smile that you’d give a child when you might pat them on the head. A placating gesture.

“Well, that’s part of the problem. How am I supposed to argue, with a straight face, that the evidence came from a social media website?”

Eris wanted to tell him what her grandmother had always told her in moments like that.

‘The answer is usually in the question.’

“Well, it is the source and saying anything else would be a lie. If called to testify I wouldn’t perjure myself.”

“Whoa! Whoa there, sweetheart.”

A heavy clang of metal turned both their heads toward the stoves where Cookie stood with a wide-eyed stare of warning at Mark.

The prosecutor looked back at him and lifted his hands to the side. “Careful you don’t hurt yourself, old man.”

Cookie returned his haughty look with one of his own. “You best be respectful while you’re in my kitchen. That’s Ranger Lange sitting before you.”

Eris felt her stomach twist inside of her. She wasn't used to people taking up for her. She was the one who would stand up for herself if it was going to happen.

She'd met Cookie when she'd moved to her new apartment. Her duplex.

He'd been at the café next door and seen her drop a box full of books.

Cookie helped her pick them up and they'd found that they had similar taste in adventure classics. Since then, they'd had coffee together a few times and they'd lent each other books, which had taken quite a bit of effort and trust for both of them.

This was the first time that she'd come to the lodge and seen Cookie at work, but the pointed look he was giving the prosecutor was one she'd seen directed at others.

Eris was extremely happy that she wasn't on the receiving end.

Mark didn't look all that thrilled to have it turned on him. In fact, he was almost wiggling in his chair as Cookie glared at him.

The prosecutor lifted a hand in a contrite gesture and put on a smile that he'd likely had practice fixing on his face. "Now, I didn't mean any harm. I wasn't trying to be rude."

Cookie sighed and shook his head. "I suggest you try harder, son, or I won't have you in my kitchen."

Mark's grin almost doubled as if he saw a little wiggle room around Cookie's warning. "Well, the lodge—"

"Won't have you eating at the lodge either." Cookie gave him a matter-of-fact nod. "And if you think going to John will change things, think again. He may be my boss, but I reserve the right to refuse service."

"Now," Mark's soft chuckle didn't sound very genuine, "that's not very hospitable, is it?"

"Now," he mimicked Mark's tone, "you may find some way around my wishes." Cookie's expression held a look of

dark humor in it. “Just remember that I’m the one who controls what goes into the food ‘round here.”

Mark got up and pushed his chair back. “Do you mean to tell me you’d... spit in my food?”

“Spit? Hardly.” Cookie looked downright affronted. “But a scotch bonnet chili or two might make your next meal one to remember.”

As Cookie’s words sunk in, he walked away, laughing to himself.

Eris had to hold back her own laughter. She didn’t like the tone or attitude that Mark Callas had taken with Cookie. It was one thing to speak down to her, she expected that from quite a few people, but she would have gladly put the prosecutor in place if he’d decided to pick on Cookie.

She wouldn’t let people speak to her friends like that.

She didn’t have many as it was.

Mark turned his gaze to the coffee cup and glared at it as if he was worried that Cookie had put something in it, even though both of their cups had been poured from the same pot.

“Look, Eris-”

She felt her back teeth grind together as he tried to lift his tone to get her agreement.

“I’m not sure how this will all play out in court. I have to be honest-”

Somehow, she wasn’t all that sure that he was trying all that hard.

“I’m going to offer them plea deals because I’m just not sure if the judge is going to take your evidence seriously.”

She wanted to tell Mark she wasn’t taking him very seriously either.

“What’s next, hmm? TikTok? Are you going to turn in videos of them dancing?”

Eris held in her feelings, almost.

When Mark pushed open the kitchen door, she called out to him. “The posts are evidence, Mister Callas. It’s good evidence too. We’re trying to do everything we can to protect the wildlife in Yellowstone and I’d like to think that you’re doing the same thing.”

Maybe he heard the sharp pang in her tone, or maybe he saw the disappointment on her face.

Either way, he gave her a patronizing look that she’d seen too many times in her life.

“Well, when you’re a big girl with big girl evidence, then we’ll be on the same side. Until then, you’ve got some growing up to do, young lady.”

Even after the door shut, she stood there staring at it.

Eris heard the soft treads of footsteps walking up behind her and wasn’t at all surprised when Cookie set a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“That man is a complete and utter asshole.”

She turned her head to look at Cookie and saw him give her a big toothy grin. “I completely agree, Cookie. One big, fat, asshole.”

He gestured at the table. “You hungry? I could make you up something.”

“Hungry, yes.” Sighing, she shook her head. “But I should try to catch up with Chelsea and see if she wants to go over any of her plans. That’s why I came here today, to talk to her. I wasn’t planning on being told that the work I did to get me into the rangers was stupid, little girl stuff.”

“Who said that?”

Eris wanted to swear.

Or kick fate’s ass.

It certainly wasn’t on her side.

“Chaos.” The word ground out between clenched teeth.

“What?”

She lifted her head as Alex walked over to them from the open doorway.

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “The asshole in the over-priced suit walked out of here looking like you kicked him in the balls.”

Eris couldn't help but smile at Alex's take on the interaction. “Well, not me so much as Cookie.”

Alex turned an open, admiring look to the older man. “What did you do?”

“Well,” Cookie gestured at the full cup of coffee near the empty chair, “I may or may not have threatened to set his tongue on fire the next time he comes in to eat if he didn't give Eris the respect she's due.”

Eris wasn't prepared for the broad grin on Alex's face.

“I've thought you were a stand-up man since I met you, Cookie. But now,” he gave the man a wink, “I think you might just be my new hero. Even if you were in the Navy.”

Cookie gave Alex a single fingered salute and waved him off. “I need to get back to cooking. Eris was looking for Chelsea. Maybe you can show her where the others went off to?”

With that, he turned his back and walked toward the stoves and the meal he was preparing.

Alex looked at her and she couldn't help but feel the heat of his gaze on her face.

He wasn't aroused or at least that's not what she saw in his expression.

What she thought she saw was admiration.

And damn, if that wasn't just as good.

He gestured toward the door. “You want me to take you to the barn? I think that's where the others went.”

The barn?

Well, it was West Yellowstone.

With all of the outdoor activities available in the area, a business like the lodge was bound to have a barn and stables for horses. “Yeah. Sure. I’d love to see the barn.”

There was a moment where something shifted in his gaze. It wasn’t mean like Mark’s had been. There was an element of humor in his eyes, but it wasn’t like he was laughing at her. “Then let’s go. I think you’ll like it when you see it.”

“Oooohkay.” She shrugged and started walking along beside him toward the door. She stopped short a moment later, turning back to clear the table.

Cookie called out from across the kitchen. “Leave it. I’ll grab it later.”

She lifted a hand and gave him a little wave of thanks. “Thanks, Cookie. Next time, coffee’s on me.”

He gave her a big grin. “I’ll hold you to that.”

As they continued to walk, Alex turned to look at her with a curious grin. “What... or who was that you were talking about when I came in?”

She drew back a little, confused. “Mark?”

He shook his head and before she could reach out and open the door, Alex beat her to it. “You said something about chaos.”

“That’s me.” It was her turn to laugh, her shoulders shaking as they walked into the man lobby of the lodge. “Eris, in Greek mythology is the goddess of chaos. Fitting isn’t it?”

He stopped for a moment, and she had to turn back to look at him.

Alex shook his head. “I don’t know about that, but you certainly shook up my life in a good way.”

What could she say to that?

Nothing.

So, when he started walking again, she fell into step beside him.

CHAPTER 8



ALEX FELT like he was back in time in middle school, walking beside Mary Ellen Baker. She was his crush back then, but as pretty as she was on the outside, she had no trouble ripping apart what little self confidence he'd had back then.

Eris was different.

She wasn't just pretty. She was so beautiful it made him ache.

And on the inside, she had a character that amazed him.

It hadn't taken long to see that she was someone who stood up for others. Someone dedicated to making the lives of others better.

And the National Park Service uniform she was wearing?

She wore it well.

The no-nonsense shirt and slacks combination, combined with flat-brimmed hat she held in her hand looked good on her. Even though the uniform was cut in a way that was meant to look like all the others in the service, it did nothing to hide the curve of her hips or the feminine curve of her breasts under the button-down shirt.

Yes, he'd looked.

He just hadn't stared.

Yet.

They were halfway across the yard when Eris turned her head and gave him a look, with an inquisitive brow raised in

his direction. “So... we’re not going to talk?”

He brought his head up and fixed his gaze on the barn for a moment. “Talk? Sure.” He chanced another look in her direction and found her watching him. “I just wasn’t sure what was safe to talk about.”

The words weren’t meant to scold or hurt, but she seemed to turn away from them, nonetheless.

“Eris-”

“I probably shouldn’t have said that. Not the way I did.”

What a rollercoaster.

When she’d started speaking, he had hope. Then she seemed to do a U turn and run right over his feelings again.

“Alex-”

She put a hand on his arm and they both stopped moving.

“I’m sorry, seeing you was a shock today.”

He wanted to take her hand in his, but he was fairly certain she’d yank it away from him and he wasn’t ready for that.

He’d never be ready for that. “Coming here was a rushed decision. One moment we were leaving the military and the next we were here in West Yellowstone.”

She was taking in his words as they came.

Eris was listening to him and that was the most he could hope for at the moment.

“I did go to your apartment to look for you.”

“And no one said anything?” Even though she questioned him, he could hear the hesitation in her voice.

“Well, they had no idea who I was, so I understood why they were so reticent to give me an answer beyond the ‘No one here by that name.’”

A smile rippled across her mouth, and he wanted to chase the movement with his lips. “I didn’t know many of the others, but I can see why they’d be a little closed-lipped.”

“Random guy shows up asking for a single woman? Yeah, they probably would’ve called the police and had me chased off if I’d pushed the issue.”

Her smile deepened and Alex had to work to keep his hands to himself. He wanted to pull her close like he’d done before.

“Is it really because of work?”

Her fingers lifted off of his arm and almost kicked himself for jumping into the conversation like that.

“Alex, it’s... complicated.”

He heard the plea in her voice, but he also believed he saw a different look in her eyes.

“Tell me.” He began and tried to figure out if she would let him touch her... anywhere. “I’d like to know.”

She pressed her lips together and the hesitation made him worry. He worried that he’d misread her expression. After all, much of the time that they’d spent together had been at night.

And this ‘business first’ Eris was someone he hadn’t been introduced to yet.

“I’m new to the Park Service.” Her tone was straightforward. Plain. “I got the chance at the job because another ranger retired after spending most of his adult life working as a Ranger. To say that I have big shoes to fill isn’t just a phrase. The kind of respect that people had for him was monumental. Going from the detention center to a job as a ranger was already a bit leap.

“Yellowstone isn’t just the oldest of the National Parks but probably the largest. Over two million acres of land and there’s less than three hundred and fifty of us. It was one thing to get hired, but pretty much everyone I meet in the service gives me the same look. They’re waiting to see if I fit in.

“They’re waiting to see if I trip over my own feet and fall flat on my face into a steaming pile of it. And being a woman doesn’t make it any easier. Those that treat me like they should pat my head for just putting on the uniform drive me to the

brink, but then there are those that think the job should have gone to someone better suited for it and by that, they mean someone who has to stand up to pee.”

Something shifted in her expression. Something that wasn't upset or anger.

He saw something softer touch her face and he wanted to touch it too.

“Seeing you again was a surprise, Alex, but it was a good one. I'm just not ready to understand what that means.” Her eyes searched his face, and he knew before she said anything what she must have seen. It was probably a mirror of her own expression. “You went to see me at my old apartment. What did you think was going to happen if I'd been there?”

His thoughts raced through his head.

Thoughts of what he would have said, which was a whole lot of ‘who knows.’ Because while he'd gone to see her it was always an instinct instead of any kind of plan. He would've shot from the hip on that.

Really, his first instinct and what he'd continued to circle back to was pulling her into his arms and kissing her until he ran out of air.

That very thought must have been plainly written across his features because she was blushing and shaking her head. “Besides that.”

He reached out a hand toward her, but she didn't look like she was in a mind to take it. “I don't really know, Eris. I didn't have anything planned beyond finding you. I know that moving here wasn't what either of us expected, but I don't think it's a bad thing.”

She didn't immediately respond, but she also didn't tell him he was wrong, so he held onto that hope.

“Seeing you walk into the same room...”

He hadn't smiled so much in a long time and was happy to see that a soft smile curled the corners of her mouth too.

“It felt like a gift.” Alex shook his head. “I know that probably sounds kind of corny, but it’s how it felt to me. I’ve spent a lot of years just being me, alone outside of work and when I’m home, but the short time I got to spend with you the last time I was here?”

He didn’t mean to do it.

It certainly wasn’t something he planned.

He lifted his hand and covered hers, holding it against his forearm.

Alex could see that she was shocked at what he’d done.

Well, so was he.

“I feel like I got to get a taste of what life could be like if I took a chance.”

Maybe his hand was shaking, or maybe it was hers.

Either way, their hands trembled slightly against his forearm.

It didn’t feel like weakness on either of their parts.

It felt like tenderness.

Or hope.

“And,” she swallowed, and his eyes followed the strangely seductive movement of her throat, “what if I’m not ready to take that chance?”

The air he had in his lungs was suddenly trapped there.

What if she wasn’t?

Hell, he didn’t even know if he was ready to either. Did he?

Instinct, it turned out, was getting its ass kicked by difficult questions.

Questions, he wasn’t sure he had good answers for.

“We... we barely knew each other before you left.”

He couldn’t blame her for saying it. He’d thought the same thing at one point.

He wanted her to stop talking about it.

He thought he did, but he could hear how hard this was for her in the tightened tone of her voice and if his chest got any tighter, he was worried he'd embarrass himself by having to double over just to breathe.

He'd certainly made a mess of things.

Now, he just had to figure out a way to stop it from getting worse.

“Ridge!”

He turned to look in the direction of the barn and saw Bubba coming across the grass with Chelsea almost on his heels.

Eris took her hand from his arm and his hand fell from hers. They'd been touching just a moment ago and now it felt like a chasm had opened up between them.

Before he could greet Bubba in turn, Chelsea rushed up beside him and put her hand on Eris' shoulder. “We need to head to Yellowstone.”

Eris' expression was all business. “What happened?”

“Some hikers found blood on the grass. And fur.”

Bubba's hand settled on Chelsea's hip, and he stepped close enough that if she wanted to lean on him, she could have without any real effort.

“Any reports of injured hikers?”

Chelsea shook her head. “They think they saw a wounded animal in the distance. A wolf.”

He wanted to reach out and touch Eris.

Instinct? Absolutely.

She'd paled as if the blood had drained from her face.

He knew as much as anyone what a wounded animal could do if it came across hikers. An injured animal was all teeth and survival instinct.

He could sympathize with them. He'd had moments like that in the past.

Eris looked at Chelsea with confusion on her features. "No one called me."

Chelsea nodded. "They called me thinking you were still with the prosecutor discussing the case."

A muscle tightened in Eris' jaw. "No, he's long gone. Come on," she gave Chelsea a determined nod. "We can take my vehicle. Do you have the coordinates?"

Chelsea lifted her GPS and gave her a little nod. "All plugged in and ready to go."

Eris moved past him with Chelsea at her side.

Before he realized what he was doing, Alex was keeping step behind her with Bubba at his side.

The other Brotherhood Protector gave him a grim nod.

It didn't take much more than that for them to communicate that they were going along, to protect their women.

WHEN THEY REACHED the turn off for the park entrance, Alex stayed quiet in the back seat beside Bubba. Neither of them was exactly happy with where they were sitting.

It had nothing to do with the women driving or wanting to sit up front.

It was pure protective instinct.

Alex wanted to put himself between Eris and any danger that could arise, but he knew that this was her job.

Hell, it was her vehicle.

And the weapon case he saw in the back of her Tahoe was hers as well.

He and Bubba had their share of weapons on them. Alex felt a little more at ease knowing he had three pistols on him and a knife... or two.

There hadn't been time to head into the barn for more, but Alex knew that time was of the essence if there was a wounded animal on park grounds.

As they exited the paved road and rocked onto a dirt access road, Bubba leaned forward and put a reassuring hand on Chelsea's shoulder, giving her a gentle squeeze.

Chelsea covered Bubba's hand with her own and squeezed his hand in response.

Alex looked into the rearview mirror and saw Eris' gaze focused on the road ahead.

If he leaned forward to put his hand on her shoulder, he wondered what the reaction would be.

The question faded away as they broke through a line of trees and saw a trio of hikers standing across a clearing. Two of the hikers were waving their arms over their heads. The third had their back to the others and their eyes on the trees beyond.

"Smart," Alex gestured at the group across the way, "one of them watching the woods. The last thing they need is a surprise coming at them from the woods."

Eris put the large vehicle in park and lifted her gaze to meet his in the mirror. "Smart."

Alex stepped out of the Tahoe and went around back and opened it before Eris got there.

Chelsea's voice carried to them from the front of the vehicle.

"Glad we're dealing with folks who have sense. After we had to deal with a bunch of nervous nellys just a little while ago, I'd rather deal with these folks."

Eris pulled out the gun case in the back of the Tahoe, sliding it toward the edge of the trunk. With a quick twist of the lock, she opened it up and took out a long-range rifle which she slung around her shoulders and laid against her back.

Alex knew he was staring at her.

It wasn't anything bad.

No. Seeing Eris handle the long gun with such ease was more than a little arousing.

She must have seen something in his expression as she reached up to close the back of the vehicle. "I hope we won't need it, but if there is a wounded animal, I'll need to put it out of its misery."

He could see how uneasy she was.

"You going to be okay?"

His words seemed to hit a nerve and she lifted her chin to meet his eyes.

"I'll do what needs to be done, Alex. It doesn't mean I like it. I certainly won't hesitate to do the right thing."

He nodded. "I know. I just don't want you to be upset."

Her expression softened for a moment, and she nodded. "Something out there is bleeding, hurt. I'm already upset. What's going to help is getting to them to help. You don't have to go with me."

She was off, walking at a fast clip.

Running would make it difficult to see what was happening around her. To see what was in the shade under the trees.

Eris moved with purpose. Alex just hoped it wasn't going to end badly for anyone.

Especially her.

Halfway to the hikers she looked back over her shoulder, and he saw her eyes widen when she caught sight of him. It wasn't surprise.

She almost looked reassured.

He was glad she wasn't going to argue.

Alex knew he couldn't just wait at the car for her.

He had to be where she was and Bubba? He was right there alongside Chelsea.

This.

Alex felt his heart lurch against his ribs as it pounded in his chest.

This is what he wanted in life.

She was what he wanted.

One of the hikers jogged out to meet them. “Over here. We saw some blood on the trail and... and it looks like it’s quite a bit of it.”

With her rifle across her back, Eris followed the man to the edge of the clearing.

She made a quick look over her shoulder at him before she knelt down on one knee to investigate the blood on the trail.

The hiker wasn’t kidding.

There was a good amount of blood present as if the injured party had laid down for a short period of time before moving.

Eris scanned the area around her. “You said there was fur? I don’t see any here.”

The hiker nodded and gestured off into the trees. “There’s a fairly decent trail of blood in that direction. I saw some fur caught in some tree bark about thirty yards that way. I don’t know how it got there.”

Alex saw Eris’ expression before she spoke. He wasn’t sure if she was pleased with the news or not. Her eyes weren’t directed at him.

“While I’m thankful for the information, in the future, it’s probably best for you to stay out in the open instead of following what might be a wounded and dangerous animal into the woods.”

The hiker shrugged. “We’re all pretty familiar with the area. I doubt we were in any real danger.”

Eris’ eyes closed for a moment, but she didn’t ruminate over her thoughts. She got up to her feet and swept the small group of hikers with her gaze. “Until we know what’s going

on around here, the three of you need to stay with us. And please don't-

The same hiker jumped in to finish her comment. "Wander off? We won't. Lead the way, Ranger."

Eris didn't react directly to the man's comment. She just turned and moved off, fixing her attention on the trail of blood and the surrounding area.

Bubba raised a brow and met Alex's eyes.

They hadn't worked together much at all, but there didn't need to be much of a rapport for one man to tell another that they were dealing with a man who thought he was the shit.

He was, Alex mused, *the* shit.

He'd do a favor for Eris and keep his eyes on the man. Alex got the impression that the man wanted to make a good impression. It didn't matter if he was trying to impress Eris or just impress the group in general.

Someone showboating like that could easily get someone hurt.

Alex was going to make sure that the man didn't have a chance to cause any trouble.

He knew he didn't have to help. Eris would probably be just fine if he decided to stay out of it entirely.

Still, he was going to help because he wanted to.

Wanted to keep her safe.

Later, he'd like another chance to convince her that even though they were basically working together, they could still make a relationship work.

Every moment they spent together gave him more and more reasons to not only respect Eris for her work and her skill, but it gave him more insight into her heart.

And he liked everything he saw.

He could only hope that he'd grow on her too.

CHAPTER 9



ERIS HAD a horrible feeling as soon as she'd seen the blood and fur.

By the time they'd tracked the blood into the woods for more than a half mile, she knew that when they found the animal, it was either going to be dead or dying.

In her heart, she hoped that she wouldn't have to be the one to put it out of its misery.

It wasn't that she wasn't willing to do what was necessary, she just didn't want it suffering any longer than it already had.

Chelsea was at her elbow, both of them scanning the grass and dirt underfoot.

"Wolf, a small one."

Eris nodded and kept her voice low. "You need to be prepared."

She heard Chelsea swallow before she spoke. "I just don't want it to suffer."

Aware of the weight of the rifle on her back, Eris let out a breath. "I'll do whatever I can."

The sound of an animal in distress had Eris holding up her hand to stop the rest of the group behind her.

Easing the strap away from her shoulder, Eris shifted the rifle until she had it safely in her hands, the end of the barrel pointed before her.

She wasn't going to shoot until she made damn sure that was the only option, but she'd seen what a scared animal could do when it was cornered. She'd lived most of her life in what many would call 'the wilderness' and she wasn't about to put the others in danger by not being prepared.

"Eris?"

She heard Alex's voice, but she didn't turn back to look at him.

Nor did she think he expected her to.

"Be careful."

She felt the corner of her mouth tug into a smile, but that's all the attention she could give his words at the moment.

The blood that they'd been tracking had been drops, falling from the animal.

Likely the wolf had been running on adrenaline. Taking full advantage of its flight instinct.

As she slowly rounded the trunk of the nearest tree her stomach turned.

The grass was painted with blood.

The first sight she caught of the animal was its hind legs.

Stretched out in the shadows, the wolf's body didn't make a move as Eris side-stepped into the opening between the trees.

The wound on the flank of the animal was large enough that she could see into its body. And each breath pushed more blood out onto its fur.

"What did they shoot you with, sweetheart?"

The injured wolf lifted its head but it didn't bare its teeth.

Instead, it whined and dropped its head back down as if it was too heavy to keep aloft.

"Eris?"

Chelsea's voice was as pained as it was soft.

Chelsea didn't have to see the animal to know that it was in pain.

Neither did Eris, but she was the one looking into its eyes.

"I'm sorry, girl." Eris lifted the rifle and tucked it into her shoulder, fixing the sight on the end of the barrel square on its target. The people who shot the wolf probably wanted it to suffer.

She wasn't one of those people.

Well, if she caught the assholes responsible, she might be up to causing them a little pain, but this female wolf, likely just shy of the first season where she might have conceived and given birth to cubs, needed her mercy.

"Where you're going, there's no more pain."

The rifle pushed back against her shoulder as the sharp report echoed through the trees.

It wasn't until the wolf's body sagged peacefully against the forest floor that she shifted the rifle back into its original position at her back.

Eris approached the wolf and before she crouched down beside it, she pulled a pair of gloves from her pants pocket.

It was hard to maneuver into a position where she could do much more than a cursory investigation. The blood on the grass was a mess, but she knew that there wouldn't be any evidence at the scene. The wolf had been shot somewhere else.

All that was left to do where they were was to pack the animal out and clean up. The area wasn't all that popular with hikers, but blood would draw all kinds of scavengers to the scene, and they didn't need to make it any more dangerous for tourists and outdoor enthusiasts than it already was.

"Eris?"

She heard the sorrow in Chelsea's voice. Eris felt it too, but she'd let herself express it later.

Chelsea stepped up beside her and Eris pointed toward the open wound in the animal's side.

“We’ll have to see if anyone heard shots. Whatever they used had to be a large caliber. This kind of damage...”

“Bastards.”

Eris swore she could feel Alex behind her.

They weren’t physically touching, but it felt like he was surrounding her with warmth.

Support on an emotional level that made her catch her breath.

She must be crazy thinking that was true.

Maybe it was just the unusual heat of the Indian Summer they were experiencing.

The name always made her cringe, but that’s what the meteorologists had been reporting for the last few days.

The snow had disappeared, and the heat had come back, tricking her body into some kind of crazy feeling, right?

She couldn’t actually feel Alex behind her.

“Do you want me to do anything while you call it in?”

“I’ll call it in and get some backup from other rangers.” She turned to look at him and he stepped back so she didn’t bump against him. “Chelsea’s probably going to insist that she stays here with the wolf, and I can’t leave it either. And Bubba,” she looked over Alex’s shoulder at the other man. His gaze was fixed firmly on Chelsea and the area that surrounded her.

He would be just as determined to make sure that scavengers or the people who had injured the animal didn’t come looking for it.

“Could you take the hikers back to the Tahoe? I’ll have some of the rangers take them to a station to make a report.”

Eris saw the hesitation in Alex’s body. The way his hands fisted at his sides and the strong line of his jaw tightened, she knew his instinct was to say no.

She also knew that she didn’t want him to go.

Call herself needy or stupid, but she wanted to lean into him and feel his arms around her.

Putting the wolf down had felt like she'd caused a similar wound to her own soul.

Shaking her head, she looked up at Alex and saw the concern in his eyes.

“I'll take the hikers back. Don't worry about that. Just make sure you keep yourself safe.”

Her gut instinct was to take offense at his words, but in the next instant she knew that he hadn't meant anything by it.

She was just so used to people expecting her not to live up to her responsibilities.

Men who thought that she was less because of two X chromosomes in her DNA.

But Alex... She couldn't believe that of him.

She'd hardly spent any time with him, but he'd never undercut her in that way.

Eris didn't think he had it in him.

He turned and started back toward the hikers who were hovering nearby. They didn't have their phones out and for that, Eris was grateful and expressed her thanks.

The three headed off with Alex and she called into the head office for the Park Rangers and explained their situation. The office responded back a few minutes later, explaining that Evan Haskins was the closest to her location and he'd be there within twenty minutes at the most.

Bubba looked at her, his eyes narrowed slightly. “You know this Evan guy?”

She wanted to explain that with the dozen officers assigned to their area that she knew pretty much everyone who would conceivably be assigned to help, but she knew why he was asking.

Bubba was in love with Chelsea and Eris' new 'partner' was in love with Bubba. The question he was asking made

total sense. He wanted to know who was going to come to the scene.

“He’s the one who helped me get the job with the rangers. Evan’s a good ranger and he’ll be a help while we clear the scene.”

“Okay. Good to know.”

Bubba cast a look behind him back the way they’d come. “Anyone going to go back that way and look for casings? Other evidence?”

Eris didn’t take exception to his questions. He was just covering the bases just like she would do.

He knew how much the death of this wolf was going to mean to Chelsea.

“I’m going to search the area myself once we get someone to transport the body out of here. I’m going to do everything I can to bring these assholes to justice.” She looked back at the wolf and shook her head. “This is exactly the kind of thing I wanted to stop when I joined the service.”

He nodded his head and gave her a grim smile. “You and Chelsea. Both of you are driven, probably to a fault.”

Chelsea turned to look at him. “What?”

The look of love in Bubba’s eyes made Eris feel like she was a rather inconvenient third wheel in that moment. “Nothing’s going to stop either of you from doing what you set out to do. I don’t know if I should congratulate Ridge or offer my condolences.”

Eris tried to pretend she didn’t hear what Bubba had said, but it had become the elephant in the room. She picked her way across the grass and around the back of the deceased animal.

With gentle hands she pushed against the flank of the wolf and saw that there was an open wound on the other side as well. The holes were different sizes, but she didn’t think that it was a through and through wound. The placement looked off for something like that.

She'd have to wait until they had the necropsy, but she had a feeling they were going to find that the wolf had been shot at least twice.

Maybe even with two calibers of ammunition.

She heard Chelsea sigh and Eris lifted her head. "Something wrong?"

Chelsea gave Bubba a glare, but her lips were curved in a slight smile. "I know he's just trying to distract me with what he probably sees as gossip, but I told him not to pick on you and Ridge."

"Ridge."

Eris felt the bridge of her nose furrow in confusion. "Alex?"

Chelsea shrugged a little as she adjusted the fit of the glove on her right hand. "The guys call him Ridge, just like they call Benjamin, Bubba."

"I guess it makes sense." Eris stood and moved away from the wolf needing some air. "It's a simpler name. Single syllable. Something quick to call him if you need his attention."

Still mulling over the senseless death of the wolf, she found a tree near the edge of the clearing and leaned her shoulder against it.

When she'd heard about the wounded wolf she'd left straight from the lodge with Chelsea.

While she'd known Chelsea for just a few weeks, she knew that where she went Bubba went with her unless he was off on some kind of protection job.

"Hey."

Eris turned to look at Chelsea and tried to muster up a smile. "Hey."

"Don't let what Benjamin said about Alex get to you."

"Hmm?" Eris shook her head. "What did he say?"

Chelsea's cheeks reddened a little. "Nothing really."

Even as the words reached her ears, Eris could tell that Chelsea wasn't going to leave it at that.

"Okay, so he thinks that you and Alex are going to be a thing."

Eris let out a breath.

She wasn't sure she wanted to say anything to Chelsea.

From what she had learned from her short time working with Chelsea, it seemed like the Brotherhood was quite literally a brotherhood.

If they didn't already know that she and Alex had-

"Oh wow," Chelsea bit into her bottom lip for a moment, "really?"

"Really?" Eris felt like she was missing something. "What really?"

"Oh, nothing." The smile on Chelsea's face was brighter than it had been just moments ago. "I think I needed that."

"Needed-"

"Something to smile about."

Across the way, Eris saw Evan Haskins walking toward them flanked by two men. She walked out to meet them and was proud to have Chelsea walking at her side.

As they closed the distance, Eris looked over at her partner and nodded. "Thanks."

"For what? Backing you up? You're my partner. Who's that with Evan?"

Eris felt her cheeks warming with a smile. "Well, I don't exactly know, but they don't look happy."

"That," Chelsea sighed, "is an understatement."

Evan made the introductions. "Sal Anderson and Ed Halverson. Gentlemen, this is Ranger Eris Lange and Chelsea Youngblood, she works with-

One of the men cut him off. “We’re well aware of who these ladies are.”

Eris bristled at the comment, but she hoped it didn’t show.

“We’re part of a corporation that bought up a large chunk of land near the park.”

Eris heard the words, but it didn’t make much of an impression on her. For them to say their land was *near the park* was like saying the grass they had on their land was green in the spring. They could be talking about anything.

Sal or Ed spoke next. She couldn’t tell the two apart. They were both wearing what looked to be the BEST SELLERS from the North Face catalog and looked almost identical to each other.

“We’re looking to build a large outdoor entertainment complex. Hotels. Stores. Restaurants. What can you tell us about this... shooting we heard about?”

“Shooting?” Eris looked at Evan to see what his expression could tell her.

He looked uncomfortable and his feet shifted in the grass as he avoided her eyes.

Eris looked at the men and did her best to give them as mild of an expression as she could. “There was a report of a wounded animal. We tracked it and when we realized that it couldn’t be saved, I put it down.”

She felt her breath burning in her chest, struggling to keep her emotions in check.

“We still have to complete an investigation to determine how the shooting happened.”

The two men looked at each other and nodded before they turned back. “Good.”

Again, she had no idea which man belonged to what name.

The other spoke as if they were trading comments back and forth. “News like this can’t be good publicity. We’ve done our research and tourists would pay top dollar to come and see

wild animals prowling around.” His grin was too toothy to be taken seriously. “We’re going to make a mint and then some, but you’ll need to,” he made a vague circular gesture with his hand, “wrap up your investigation quickly, hmm? You know-”

“Yes,” the other businessman took his turn to speak, “we want to see prompt action on a matter as serious as this is.”

Eris cringed inside. These men didn’t care about the animals. They didn’t care about the park. They cared about bad publicity. They didn’t want to have bad news associated with the park, well good luck.

With the length and breadth of the park, there were millions of ways for people to be hurt or killed on the grounds. Besides the public’s crazy obsession with the wild animals in the park, it was the features of the park that seemed the most benign that could kill with ease.

“Miss Lange? Are you listening to us?”

She lifted her chin, just a little, and she schooled her features into an expression that she’d seen staring back at her from faces like these men who had no real understanding of what they were saying, but thought they held all the power in the world.

Eris had no misconceptions that she could wield any kind of power like that, but she had to try and get her point across to these men.

“I’m listening, gentlemen, but while I’m going to do everything in my power to find out who committed this crime, you should understand that I’m not doing it for either of you, or your planned entertainment complex. It’s because I became a ranger to do just that, protect the animals and the people in the parks.”

She looked from one man to the other and back again. She avoided looking at Evan because she had a feeling that he was probably about to faint because of how she’d spoken to these ‘big wigs.’

The two men gave each other odd looks that said that neither of them were happy with what she said, but when they

turned back to look at her, they were smiling.

She cringed inwardly at the display.

“Well,” Sal or Ed spoke, “we’ll leave this problem in your capable hands.”

Eris swore she heard the words ‘for now’ in his tone.

She wanted to laugh it off, but she had the feeling she’d just stepped into the deep end of a big pool of shit. At least she was a passable swimmer, right?

Evan waved at the gentlemen’s backs as they crossed back to the other side of the clearing. When they were a good halfway across, he turned to her and stared. “What the hell was that?”

“That would be my question for you, Evan! Why would you bring those men out here? ‘We’ll leave this problem in your capable hands’? They didn’t believe a word of that.”

“Those men didn’t mean their smiles.” Chelsea shook her head. “I don’t like them.”

Eris smiled and felt some of the tension in her shoulders fall away. “I knew I’d like you.” She didn’t leave things there. She looked Evan straight in the eye and told him. “I’ve got a shooting to investigate. I need you to get the body transported to the lab for a necropsy.”

Evan looked back at her with a hard look in his eyes. “And while I’m doing that, what are you going to do?”

The words felt like they’d turned to dust in her mouth and the weight of the world seemed to fall hard onto her shoulders.

“I’m going to find out where this all started.”

CHAPTER 10



WHEN ALEX MADE it back to the park, he thought he was prepared for what he'd find. Bubba had called him ahead of time and told him what was going on.

But what he found gutted him.

Eris stood beside Bubba and Chelsea, but she looked like she was thousands of miles away, staring across the clearing.

Bubba put his arm around Chelsea's shoulders and steered her to the vehicle that was waiting for them beside the road. "Stone and the others dropped off a car for us. You think you could take Eris back to her place?"

Maybe he'd hesitated.

Or maybe Bubba had already planned what he was going to say, adding, "You can bring her over to the lodge, but Cookie says she'll probably feel better at her place. He'll be happy to send food over whenever she wants."

Alex opened his mouth to speak.

"He says Eris has his cell number in her phone."

Nodding, Alex smiled at the other man. "I'll make sure she knows."

Bubba turned to look back at Eris, but it was Chelsea who reached out and touched his arm.

"We didn't find any evidence. She's taking it hard. I know she's upset, but there's something else going on, Alex. I don't... she won't tell me."

He nodded. "I'll talk to her."

Bubba gave him a nod and tucked Chelsea in against his side so he could place a kiss on the top of her head. "Sometimes, it's better to listen."

Chelsea shifted against him and gave him a hug.

"Got it," Alex smiled at the two. "You two go on and get some rest. I've got Eris."

Chelsea's smile made his own deepen. "Not yet, but... I have faith in you two."

They were gone a moment later, climbing into the vehicle that Bubba's team had left for them.

Alex was left watching Eris and trying to decipher her thoughts.

She was still miles away even though she was almost in reach.

"Eris?"

It took her a long moment to turn her head toward him and when she did, just the look nearly knocked him over.

"If you want," her tone was flat, "I'll drop you off wherever you want to go. You don't have to babysit me."

He opened his mouth to argue, and she cut him off.

"I may look like I'm checked out, but I could hear enough of what they told you. My bad mood isn't something you have to deal with."

"I get the feeling, that no matter what I say, you're going to argue with me." He hadn't meant to leave an edge in his voice, but there it was. "What happened?"

"I suck." She laughed and he hated the harsh sound of it. "I suck at my job. I should have stayed at the detention facility. Hard to mess up things when all I'm doing is inputting data or wrestling a drunk hunter to the ground when he feels like copping a feel."

Unsure of what to say, Alex reached out a hand and she looked at it like he'd just tried to hand her a snake.

“I thought I could make a difference you know. I joined the rangers and hit the ground running. Turns out I'm hitting a wall.

“The prosecutor today? He just wanted to let me know that the poachers I ... he's offering them a sweetheart deal because he thinks my evidence is stupid. And the shooting today?

“I can't find any damn evidence. No casings. No nothing. That wolf must have run like the wind after it was shot or something. Or maybe it was aliens? That would make more sense at this point. They ripped it open and dropped it down here to die.”

Alex wasn't sure it was a good idea to talk at the moment, but he didn't know what else to do.

“Just because you didn't find something today doesn't mean that you won't find the answers tomorrow or the day after that.”

Eris closed her eyes and let out a breath. “What if I don't have very many more tomorrows. I get the feeling there's quite a few folks wondering if they gave the wrong person the job.”

“Are you doubting it?”

Her eyelids fluttered open, and she stared back at him. “Deep down inside? No. But I'm well aware that when it comes down to it, my job doesn't depend on what or how I feel.

“There are hurdles that I'll need to get over and I have short legs.”

“If you need a boost up and over those hurdles, you've got people who want to help.” He tried to smile and lighten the mood, but he was sure he was messing up somehow.

She gave him half a smile. “I bet you didn't think you'd have to pick my mood up off the ground when you got up this morning.”

“No,” he shook his head. “This morning I didn’t know where you were. I was going to have to ask Stone if I could do a little snooping on our computer system to find you.”

Eris moved closer, but even if she hadn’t, Alex felt like he was miles closer to her than where they’d been just a few moments ago.

“The offer is still open you know.”

The softer, huskier sound of her voice was doing things to him that he doubted she’d done on purpose.

“What offer was that?”

She chuckled and it almost sounded like she meant it wholeheartedly. “To drop you off at the lodge so you can escape my bad mood.”

“Do you want to be alone tonight?”

The look she gave him was conflicted.

Alex didn’t want to let her go now that he knew she was still in West Yellowstone, but he also didn’t want to overstay his welcome in her life.

“Here,” he pulled his phone out of his jeans pocket and unlocked the screen, “add your contact information in. Whatever you want me to know.”

He left it to her and watched while she thought through the open-ended question. It took her a few seconds before she’d made the decision and entered her information in.

She handed it back and before he could send her a text so she could have his cell number, she pulled her phone from her pants pocket and unlocked the screen with a hesitant smile.

Handing it over, she made him the same offer. “Whatever you want me to know.”

The things he wanted her to know could take days... years.

But he wasn’t going to push his luck, no matter how much he wanted to push.

He wanted time with her.

Wanted dinner.

Wanted to sleep beside her.

Bury himself inside her until he memorized the feel of her heat gripping him tight, but he wasn't so eager for it that he'd push too much.

He had time.

The rest of his life.

He could only hope that she was a part of it.



ERIS WENT BACK to her apartment that night because she needed to think. She didn't let Alex come with her because he was part of the problem.

It wasn't anything she could blame him for.

He'd been perfectly... well, perfect.

She hadn't expected him to come back to Yellowstone and seeing him in the lodge had knocked her off her game.

The following meeting with the prosecutor had gotten under her skin like a splinter.

No, like a papercut.

It burned inside of her.

The world had to move on from investigations that were perfectly fine just a few years ago. Social Media was a thing that wasn't going away. It was only becoming more involved and more invasive.

People posted things that exposed them in ways that they probably didn't even think about, which is why she'd taken to looking for things online.

A lot of folks didn't even consider the audience for their posts. The posts she'd seen for the Pruitts had been marked public. And public meant anyone could see it. So it was fair game.

If Mister Callas didn't see the point of it, well, that wasn't going to change that it was still a valid form of investigation. And as a ranger, she could now be a part of the questioning once they found poachers.

That would make a difference. She could gather more information.

Yes, more evidence.

That would help get justice against poachers.

It would make the animals within the park safer.

Kicking back on her sofa, she had the television off and her cell phone on the coffee table playing a random mix of songs on her iTunes.

She was nearly dozing off to some ballads from the sixties when her phone alert went off for a text message.

Eris hesitated for a minute and then reached her arm out to grab the phone off the coffee table.

CHELSEA: Hey! Just checking in.

GRINNING AT THE MESSAGE, Eris responded.

ERIS: Still alive. Thanks. You?

CHELSEA: I was thinking you were going to spend some time with Ridge

ERIS: No comment

ERIS SIGHED, but she definitely had a smile on her face.

CHELSEA: Don't get me wrong. I see the point of being cautious. But I don't think dinner would be a horrible sacrifice.

ERIS: No one said anything about dinner. I just needed to think.

CHELSEA: You were so upset earlier. I was hoping he could do something to make you smile.

CHELSEA: There is something between you two, right?

BLOWING OUT A BREATH, Eris wondered if she should say anything.

It was strange. Neither she nor Chelsea were all that 'girly.' They both tended to spend a lot of time out in the wilds. It was part of their jobs, but even then, Eris felt like Chelsea understood the way she felt about a lot of things.

Especially when it came to Yellowstone and the wild animals there.

And while Eris was still learning about the animals, she'd been teaching Chelsea some things about the trees, plants, and rock formations in the park.

In a way it was like they both were putting together two different puzzles and finding that their puzzles fit together in a way they hadn't expected.

When snow had started falling a few weeks before, Eris had grumbled about it, knowing that it would curtail the amount of time she'd spend outdoors. Snow across the roads would mean that they'd have added issues with patrolling the park in wheeled vehicles and have to shift to snowmobiles and other weather compatible conveyances.

But the return of heat to the park and the cessation of snow for a few weeks, things were looking up for a few more days to track down the people responsible for the shooting of the wolf.

Eris' phone beeped and she looked down.

CHELSEA: You're either ignoring me. Or you were thinking about today.

ERIS: Yes.

CHELSEA: That's not a real answer

ERIS: It's AN answer.

CHELSEA: Fine.

CHELSEA: Well, no. NOT fine, but okay for now.

CHELSEA: Just tell me you're feeling better.

CHELSEA: Answer truthfully please.

IT WAS AN EASY ANSWER.

ERIS: I do feel better.

ERIS: I'm glad we're working together

SHE WASN'T sure if she felt like she should say more, but she was already so far outside her comfort zone she might as well take a leap off the ledge again, right?

ERIS: I've never had a friend like you.

CHELSEA: Same. Now about RIDGE

ERIS: Goodnight, Nosey

CHELSEA: Night, Partner

ROLLING HER EYES, Eris put the phone back down on the coffee table and groaned when she realized that she'd put the phone just out of her reach and hadn't hit PLAY again on iTunes.

She had to make the decision if she wanted to wiggle over and stretch out her arm to turn it on, or just leave it there and maybe drop off to sleep.

THE PHONE, or rather someone with oddly perfect timing, lit up with a text alert.

Tucking an arm under her body, Eris sat up and reached for the phone. When she held it in her hand, she saw the alert was from Alex.

Shaking her head, Eris opened the app and read his message.

ALEX: Did you get something to eat?

ERIS: Popcorn

THE THREE LITTLE dots moving across the screen made her regret her answer. Well, almost regret her answer.

Alex seemed like a guy who was a little too tightly wound.

Still, she argued with herself, it probably wasn't nice to push his buttons.

Lifting up her phone, she typed out another answer.

ERIS: Coconut Curry Chicken – I was just thinking about making some popcorn later, but I'm too much of a slug to get off the couch

ALEX: Good. I was about to raid Cookie's kitchen and bring you something to eat.

SHE HISSED and shook her head

ERIS: Bad idea. He'd figure it out later and lock you in the Brig.

ERIS SWORE she could almost see a smile on Alex's face.

ALEX: He'd be okay once he found out it was for you.

ERIS: Maybe...

ERIS: But you would have been guilty of invading his kitchen. Not good.

ALEX: Here I was thinking you were warming up something in the microwave.

ERIS: I was. It's a good frozen meal company. Warm, delicious, and I don't have to follow a recipe.

SHE DIDN'T SEE any dots pop up on the screen and she blew out a breath.

Dropping back against the couch cushions she tilted her head back to look at the stucco ceiling above her head.

Was it wrong that she was wishing she was beside the creek with Alex, staring up at the stars?

Instead, she was sitting there, alone in her apartment and wondering if she should have given in earlier to have him come back to her apartment.

She certainly wasn't going to go back to the lodge with him.

Too much of a chance to run into his team and she wasn't sure she was ready to meet them.

Not that the idea of it scared her, but she didn't know if he'd told them anything about her.

A quick turn of her head said that it was almost ten and she should get some sleep if she wanted to be fresh and alert in the morning.

HA!

Maybe Alex had nodded off himself.

Her shoulder shook with laughter. She didn't believe that.

Not at all.

Her phone rang and she lifted it up to her ear wondering when Chelsea would drop the subject.

“I told you I’m not going to talk about Ridge. Or Alex. Whatever you want to call him.”

“Eris?”

She could hear the confusion in Alex’s voice.

And she could feel the heat of her shame in her face.

“Oh damn it. Shoot me now.”

His laughter was almost infectious. “Don’t think so.”

“Is this your way of saying you like me?” Eris cringed at the question. What the hell was she doing? This wasn’t like her at all.

“Sure, I like you.”

The unseen band around her heart loosened at his words.

“But really, think of all the paperwork I’d have to fill out.”

She groaned out loud at his words.

“Ha ha. Very funny, Alex.”

“And really, I think Stone might have a fit. And then there’s my team leader, Gabe. He’d kick my ass. Oh, let’s not forget Chelsea.”

Eris turned slightly on the couch and laid her cheek on the top of the couch cushion. “Don’t you mean Bubba?”

“Bubba I can handle,” he sighed, “Chelsea would probably slap me silly.”

“Naw,” Eris shook with silent laughter, “she’d knee you in the groin and drop you to the floor.”

Alex hissed and she was sad she couldn’t see his expression.

“I could see that. You two are well matched.”

“Yeah?” Eris knew he could hear the hopeful tone in her voice. “She’s pretty badass. I’m learning a lot from her.”

“I bet,” he agreed, “but I bet you’ve got some things to show her too. Together, you’re a huge help to the wolf population in Yellowstone.”

The mention of wolves turned her thoughts to a darker place.

“Stop that.”

She swallowed and blinked back tears from her eyes. “How did you know?”

Eris thought she heard the rustle of fabric through the connection on the phone. Then she heard a sigh on the other end.

“I think I know how you think.”

“Alex-”

“There you go, wanting to argue with me.”

“Well, I’m told I’m an argumentative person,” she tried to chide him right back.

“I don’t think so.”

She closed her eyes and imagined that he was sitting beside her on the couch, looking right back at her. “Well, maybe you don’t know me as well as you think so.”

He made a non-committal sound in his throat. Eris wished that he was there so she could see how he looked. She wanted to see the look in his eyes.

“I think,” his tone was lower than usual, deeper, and softer too, “I wish I was there talking to you.”

She drew back a little, wondering at how close he was to her own thoughts.

“I’d like to reach over and tuck your hair behind your ear.”

Ohhh... his voice did wonders for her.

“You want me to do that for you, sweetheart?”

Sweetheart?

She almost smiled at the endearment. And she felt an argument on her tongue, but she didn't have the heart to make it.

Sweetheart.

She liked the sound of that.

“Eris?”

“Hmm?” She was drowsy and warm listening to him.

“I don't think you've fixed your hair.”

Blowing out her breath, she reached up her free hand just so she could tell him that her hair was fine.

That was when her fingertips came in contact with a long tendril of her hair.

It was big enough that it would probably tickle her cheek if she left it where it was.

She could tuck it behind her ear like he said, but-

“I think I like it down like this.”

He laughed. “Even I can hear that lie. But you're being stubborn. I get that.”

Eris pressed her lips together wanting to argue with him, but she couldn't.

Wouldn't.

“Maybe I'm leaving it where it is on purpose.”

That got a good laugh from him. “Right. And just what reason do you have for leaving it down like that?”

“Maybe...”

Joking with him... maybe she was even flirting with him... felt so damn easy it was scary.

She also had a feeling that sooner, rather than later, she was going to end up saying something stupid, so she'd better retreat to flirt another day.

“Maybe,” she repeated, gathering her thoughts, “I'm leaving it down, so you'll have to fix it when I see you next.”

Goodnight-”

“When do I get to see you again?”

She smiled. He certainly wasn't wasting any time. “I have some work to do in the morning.”

“You're not on schedule tomorrow.”

Before she could ask him how he knew, he answered.

“I spoke to Chelsea and Bubba at the lodge tonight.”

That's right. Her partner for the foreseeable future. She nodded even though he couldn't see her. “I'd like to check in on the necropsy and look for some leads, but tomorrow night?”

“We have a barbeque at the lodge tomorrow night. Come and eat. And then if you want to leave to... talk we can.”

“Barbeque? You really know how to go for my sweet spots, huh?”

Both sides of the call went silent, and Eris was well aware that her words could be taken in different ways.

And she realized a moment later both ways definitely applied to Alex.

“I'll see you at the lodge tomorrow, Alex. Text me the details, okay?”

“Okay. See you then, Eris.”

Goodness, she loved how he said her name.

“I'll see you then, Alex.” She moved the phone away from her ear, but that didn't stop herself from speaking again. Something she didn't consciously say. “Sweet dreams.”

Her shoulders sagged and wondered if she could move her fingers fast enough to end the call before things got really uncomfortable.

He spoke before she could juggle the phone and hit the red button.

“They will be, of you.”

That's when she dropped the phone into her lap and smiled like she'd never smiled before.

She was in over her head.

And she liked it.

CHAPTER 11



THE BARBEQUE WAS JUST STARTING up when Eris got to the lodge, and it didn't take long for her to find Chelsea in the sea of guests. All she had to do was look for Bubba. There were quite a few large, hot men mingling among the guests, but they were still easy to find.

Chelsea pulled her over to the coolers to get a drink. With a look of friendly concern, she asked Eris. "Water? Soda? Or do we need something stronger?"

Eris felt some of the tension bleed from her, loosening her shoulders. "Please tell me there's a ginger ale in there."

Her friend hissed in sympathy as she dug through the cooler. "What did you find out this morning?"

It wasn't that Eris didn't want to talk about the information she'd learned, but there were quite a few lodge guests around.

Chelsea came up from the third cooler with a triumphant smile. "Got one!"

Eris took the green can with a smile. She really did need something to soothe her stomach if she wanted to eat later.

She hadn't viewed many animal necropsies, but she didn't think she'd ever get used to the sight of an animal dissected in that manner. Eris had a feeling the glassy look in the wolf's eyes were going to haunt her for a few days at least, if not longer.

"Hey," Chelsea's hand at her elbow forced a smile on Eris' lips, "let's go sit down by the volleyball net. We can watch the

grudge match.”

Eris moved along with Chelsea. “Grudge match?”

Chelsea laughed a little. “It’s hardly anything that big, but you wouldn’t know it based on the guys. Look,” Chelsea sat down in one of the Adirondack chairs that were open near the volleyball net and pointed out the men on the left side of the net. “Bubba’s back there getting ready to serve. Get ‘em, babe!”

Bubba gave her a wink and served the ball over the net.

As Eris sat down, she set her can down on her thigh for a minute as Chelsea pointed the others out.

“There’s Alex in the back end of the court, not that I need to point him out to you.”

No, she didn’t. Her eyes had found him easily on the court, but she’d welcome any reason to give him a once over. His shorts hugged the taut curve of his ass nicely as he bent over to bump the ball off of his forearms.

“That’s Justice Kane getting under the ball to set it, a...and there! That’s Edge, Nathaniel Edgerton, for us civilians, going to spike it over the net.”

A black German Shepherd dog watched the whole exchange on the opposite end of the court.

Eris motioned toward the dog. “That’s Pierce, right? Nathaniel’s dog?”

Chelsea nodded. “Yes! Have you met the guys on Alex’s team yet?”

Eris shrugged a little. “Not really. Alex told me about them when we met a few months ago. And I admit, I’m big on furry things.”

“Oh?”

Biting into her bottom lip, Eris rolled her eyes at herself. “Yeah, that didn’t come out the way I meant it...”

“Okay, okay. Kyla and I are going to have to tease you about that later.”

“Oh, joy.” Eris was laughing at herself more than anything else.

She listened and followed along as Chelsea pointed out Wade Fielding and then the team leader Gabe Walker.

“I don’t know if I’m going to remember all of that. Just tell me there’s no test later on.”

Chelsea turned to look at her with an inscrutable expression and Eris popped open her soda can and groaned a little.

“Let me guess. I don’t get to eat until I remember their names, right?”

“Not on our end.”

Eris turned as another woman pulled up a chair on the other side of her.

Chelsea laughed out loud. “That’s Harper. She’s with Gabe.”

Managing a nervous smile, Eris introduced herself. “Eris. Eris Lange. I’m a... I’m Alex’s friend.”

Neither woman called her out, but she could see the look that Harper exchanged with Chelsea around her.

“He’s kind of a quiet guy.” Harper’s smile was easy. “I’m glad he has a... friend in town.”

Almost as if he’d heard his name, Alex jogged over when a couple of the guys were shit talking each other through the net.

“Hey.” He stopped in front of her and looked at the ginger ale in her hand. “You, okay?”

Eris nodded. “I’m getting there.” She lifted the can. “I needed something to settle my stomach after going to the lab today. I’ll be better in time for the food.”

Alex looked over to the side of the grassy area. “It’ll be ready on time as long as people leave Cookie alone.”

The ladies turned to look toward the grill and smokers which were all emitting the most delicious smells. Eris turned back first. “Who’s been bugging, Cookie? Whose ass do I need to kick.”

Alex leaned in closer and gave her a broad smile. “No one with any sense of self-preservation. I bet Cookie could take care of himself, even if he was a squid.”

“Careful,” Eris narrowed her eyes at him as if she was warning him, “I might just like him more than you.”

There was something in his eyes that made her burn. “I might just have to test that theory.”

She heard the word *later* even though he didn’t voice it.

And damn, she might actually be okay with that.

After their conversation the night before she’d been thinking about... him.

Seeing him at the lodge was probably the only reason she didn’t lose her mind earlier at the lab.

“Hey, Ridge!”

Alex’s shoulder shook with silent laughter. “That’s Gabe.”

Eris nodded. “Your team leader.”

He nodded and Harper leaned forward in her chair. “Gabe, give the man a moment!”

“Hey, Ridge! We have a game to finish before we eat!”

The German Shepherd seemed to perk up and gave a loud WOOF.

Eris bit into her bottom lip and laughed. “I’m guessing that was Nate.”

“The one and the same.”

“Come on, old man!”

Harper sat back in her chair. “That’s Justice.”

Alex shrugged it off and moved back. “Remind me why I’m playing right now?”

Laughing, Harper answered back. “Because Gabe said you have to.”

Eris could only shrug as Chelsea added in. “Because you want to impress the girl.”

Alex nodded at Chelsea and made his way to his place after they’d shifted positions for the next point.

Sitting back in the chair, Eris lifted the can to her lips and took a sip, watching as Alex stepped in to set the ball up for a spike by a teammate.

It gave her the opportunity to watch Alex at her leisure. She’d enjoy the game, even though she wouldn’t mind playing along with him. That could all be done later.

“Oh!” Eris hissed as Alex dove for the ball, keeping it from hitting the ground so that Justice could tap it over to the other side.

Chelsea and Harper kept a running commentary going. By the time the guys called it quits she’d been able to watch the two teams and get to know a little about their teamwork and camaraderie. Stone, Bubba, Carter, Dax... they were all amazing to watch. They’d been together for a good long time and acted like friends as well as teammates. And Alex’s team had much the same dynamic with a few foibles here and there as if they were having some growing pains after ending their careers with the military.

She sympathized.

Goodness, she felt like they were handling the change much better than she was and she hadn’t relocated halfway around the globe to do it.

“Hey.”

Eris turned her head toward Harper, but she didn’t turn her eyes away from Alex until the last moment. “Hmm?”

Harper was gorgeous. The fact struck Eris hard and fast. She managed a halfway decent smile for the other woman suddenly realizing that since Harper was with Gabe, Alex’s

team leader, she probably had a lot to do with whether Alex's team reacted well to having her around.

Just that thought sent Eris reeling.

Wasn't she the one who'd told Alex that 'they' weren't happening?

"Wow, you've got it bad."

Stunned and confused, Eris focused on Harper's expression and saw that the other woman was smiling.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Yep, stunning conversationalist, right?

Harper leaned in and gave her a conspiratory smile. "I'm not trying to make you feel uncomfortable. I'm still trying to figure out what it's like to be with Gabe."

Eris lifted her free hand to her face and rubbed her fingers over her forehead. "What? Is it written on me or something?"

Leaning back in her chair, Harper laughed lightly. "It's all over your face and the way you look at Alex when you don't think other people are looking."

Grimacing, Eris wanted to say that the first time they'd been together didn't have anyone else around.

But then she'd have to admit she'd all but crawled into bed with him on their first 'date.' Okay, there hadn't been a bed but-

A metal clatter sounded, and everything seemed to stop at that moment.

"Get cleaned up and come and get some food!"

Eris leaned her elbow on the arm of the chair and turned toward the grills and smokers. Cookie was standing there looking as proud as a man could, his hand holding the metal rod that he'd used to ring the triangle to get all of their attention.

Laughing beside her, Harper bumped shoulders with Eris before she got out of her chair. "Don't feel bad about it. Alex

is a great guy. He helped a lot when Gabe was helping me, and things looked really dark. When you get some time, we should get together and I'll tell you about it."

Harper stopped as she walked around in front of Eris' chair.

"Or you don't have to hear about it. Whatever you want. Just know that I'm here if you want to talk. It's kind of breathtaking, really."

Eris got up and searched Harper's expression. "What do you mean?"

Harper leaned in until their cheeks were almost touching. "Being in love with men like we are. Just having them hold you." She shook her head as if she couldn't believe what she was saying even though her voice was filled with wonder. "There's nothing like it, is there?"

Eris didn't know what to say. She was left standing there, feeling like a fish out of water, with her lips parted as Harper stepped into Gabe's arms as he came to her side.

Gabe gave her a smile before walking Harper off toward the sinks set up along the back of the building. Eris thought she heard him talking about how hungry he was but based on the pretty color of blush that crept up into Harper's cheeks, Gabe wasn't just talking about the food that she could smell.

"Hey."

Eris turned and tried to school her expression into her usual laissez faire mask that she showed to everyone on a daily basis. She should have known it was impossible.

While she was still trying to process what Chelsea and Harper had said to her, her mind was miles behind her heart.

The heart which was pounding double time in her chest.

She was desperately trying to maintain a distance between herself and Alex, but the way he looked at her reminded her too much of Gabe's expression as he walked with Harper.

"Is this what it's like?"

Eris had no idea how those words spilled out, but it was too late to take them back.

“What what’s like?”

Her instinct was to take a step back, but Alex reached out and took hold of her shoulders with his hands.

God, those hands.

She hadn’t been able to forget what those hands felt like on her skin.

On her hips.

His fingers combing through her hair.

“Wh-”

“Hey.” Alex’s brows furrowed as he maneuvered her back into her chair. He got down on one knee in front of her and touched his fingers under her chin, lifting her face up so he could look into her eyes. “Are you feeling okay?”

She heard the tender concern in his voice, and it made her ache in return.

“You want me to get you another ginger ale?”

Eris looked back at him and wanted to shake her head, but all she could do was look at him.

Look at him and wonder if it really was just that easy.

He used his free hand and touched the backs of his fingers against her cheek and then her forehead. “You don’t feel overheated.”

Oh, but she felt like it inside.

The fire had started the night before when they’d spoken on the phone and she’d felt that same, incredible spark of desire flare up inside of her.

Even with the horrible morning that she’d had to suffer through, she knew that she’d have time with him after it was over.

And sitting there, between two other women who had found themselves in love with men like Alex, it felt so easy.

It felt like she belonged.

All of that felt so perfectly strange, she really didn't know how to act. What to do. What to say.

“Okay, okay. What’s going on over here?”

Before she could sit up to speak to Cookie, he was kneeling down beside her. “I’m... I’m fine.”

He raised a pointed brow and gave her a look that called her a liar. “Right. If you were fine, you’d have yourself a hearty helping of my food piled on a plate.”

“See?” Alex hadn’t moved from his place, crouched before her. He did turn his hand so that he could cup her cheek in his palm. “I’m worried about you.”

“Really-” Eris felt stupid. She was a perfectly capable woman who’d been knocked on her ass by a realization that she was still fighting... and wasn’t at all ready to share with the world. “Who would have known how hard it was to watch a bunch of hot guys play volleyball.”

“Tsk.” Cookie gave her a hard look tempered with a crook of a smile at one corner of his mouth. “It wasn’t like they were shirtless like those men in Top Gun. I think you’ve been working yourself too hard.”

Eris wanted to get up, but she felt like she’d end up knocking Alex on his butt and she wasn’t ready for that kind of fun yet. “Look, I’ve just got a lot on my mind.”

Cookie turned to Alex and she swore that they came to some sort of agreement without her hearing a word.

The cook gave Alex a hard nod. “Yep, you make sure she gets some rest and I’ll save you both food.”

Eris wanted to scream, almost. Instead, she realized that she was just fighting the inevitable. Alex and Cookie were going to insist and honestly, she needed some time to think.

It wasn’t every day in her life that she figured out that she just might be in love for the first time in her life. And she knew it wasn’t something she was just going to blurt out.

She was already rocked by the revelation.

Maybe getting some quiet time wasn't a horrible thing to do.

"See?" Cookie gave her a fatherly nod and a smile. "You go with Alex and Alex," he crooked an eyebrow up at Alex, "you better keep yourself respectful. She's a quality woman. And no," he cleared his throat, "means no."

With that pronouncement made, Cookie walked off toward the spread that he'd set up for the guests of the lodge.

Alex took her hand and helped her up to her feet.

Part of her wanted to argue and say she could stand on her own, but she recognized it for what it was, her need to assert that she could handle it.

When she was on her feet and meeting Alex's intent gaze with her own, she smiled at him and tilted her head toward the back door of the lodge. "Want to show me where you're living?"

His expression changed and what Eris saw was a man who was as rocked as she was. It was a heady thing for her, thinking that she had that kind of effect on him.

Alex was a man who'd been places that she would never go. He'd done amazing things that she couldn't even imagine. Had skills that she'd probably only seen in movies.

And he was interested in her.

Her.

Eris could only smile as he took her hand and walked her toward the doors.

CHAPTER 12



EXHAUSTION. Bone deep.

Alex has seen it over and over, and he'd experienced it, so he could see it plainly on Eris' beautiful face.

When they got to his room, he was under no misconceptions. He reached to pull back the blankets so she could crawl into bed, but she just climbed on and laid down with her hands pillowed under her cheek.

It didn't look comfortable at all, but before he circled around the bed to the bathroom, her eyes were closed, and her body relaxed in sleep.

Shaking his head he wondered what the biologist at the lab had said about the wolf's wounds. Eris was still probably processing the information in her head. She liked mulling things over just like he did. It was something that they shared.

And he wasn't someone who felt like he had to fill a silence, and neither was she.

In fact, it was those quiet moments when they were together that filled many of his memories.

Laying on a blanket, under the stars, her warm skin against his.

Those were the moments that he kept going back to when he felt alone.

When he needed a connection to someone else.

Alex walked into his bathroom and pulled the door almost closed. He turned on the light but hoped that it wouldn't bother her or stir her awake.

It wasn't normally how he did things. Alone, he'd leave the bathroom door open.

With Eris in the room, he didn't want to shut her out. He wanted to feel connected to her.

Having the door partly open gave him that.

Alex didn't take long showers. It was a habit he'd developed in the military. The last thing you wanted to do was be the one who ran down the hot water, so everyone was damn good at getting clean, fast. It was kind of like that sign at video stores.

Be Kind. Rewind.

Get in. Get clean. Get out.

Not being an ass went a long way to getting along with your team.

The water was hot, and he was grateful for the burn on his skin. The soap that the lodge provided was good, but it was also a little fruity smelling, so he kept using his scentless soap. Being out in the woods as much as they were, it was good not to smell like a snack.

It didn't take him long to dry off with his towel, but it was while he was scrubbing the excess water from his short-cropped hair that he realized he'd forgotten to bring clean clothes in the bathroom with him.

That was something else he didn't have to worry about being all alone in his room.

He paused at the door, his bath towel in his hands, and decided to wrap it around his hips, tucking in the end at his waist to keep it in place.

Alex left the light on in the bathroom and slipped out into the room. The dresser was just a few feet away and he pulled out a pair of his boxer briefs and an undershirt before opening another drawer to pull out the rest of his clothes.

Once he'd laid them out on the top of the dresser, he grabbed up his boxer briefs and stepped into them, pulling them to his knees before the towel and the briefs tangled.

With an inward huff, he pulled the end of the towel out from where it was tucked on his waist and the towel fell as he pulled the waistband up and into place.

A soft sigh reached his ears from the bed.

"You didn't have to rush that."

Alex turned around and looked at Eris, laid out on his bed.

Yeah, he didn't need another picture in his head to get him hard. He had plenty of those. Real and imagined.

He didn't even try to hide the erection that was stretching the front of his boxer briefs. He liked the feel of it. The friction.

Just like he loved the look in her eyes.

Even sleepy, Eris looked at him like she was hungry.

It took him a moment to remember that they were due back in the field behind the lodge for dinner.

Picking up his undershirt from the dresser, he pulled it on over his head and tugged it down into place.

Eris grumbled a little and curled up into a ball on top of the blankets. "I was kind of hoping you'd leave that off."

Alex didn't even think about it.

Lifting his arms up, he reached over his shoulder and pulled the undershirt off and laid it across the top of the dresser. "I guess I don't need it outside, it's still hotter than it was the other week."

She nodded and sighed. "Indian Summer," she murmured under her breath. "The name sucks, but they haven't come up with an alternative."

He shook his head and reached for his shirt. "Not yet. But things are changing all the time."

Eris nodded. “Glad they’re changing things to get rid of words like squaw. It’s cringeworthy in so many ways.”

Pulling the long-sleeved Henley over his head, Alex pushed his arms through the sleeves as he moved closer to the bed. “Just because things have carried a name for years, doesn’t make it okay. I like that people aren’t just thinking about changing it. I’m glad they’re changing it.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and laid his hand on the blanket, his palm up and open.

His heart pounded hard against his ribs when she reached out her hand and laid her fingers against his palm.

She wasn’t holding his hand, but she was touching him.

Her fingertips moving gently against his skin.

In a way, it felt more intimate than if she’d just covered his hand with hers.

And any intimacy from Eris?

He’d take it gladly and do what he could to earn more.

“I’m hoping we can change how people feel about the animals too.” Her voice was soft, almost a whisper. “The wolf from yesterday? They found Glaser rounds inside of her. Or,” she tensed, her knees drawing up against her belly, “what was left of what they found said they were Glaser rounds.”

Alex’s back teeth ground against each other.

Glaser rounds had their purpose. Sky Marshals could use them because they fractured into tiny pieces so they wouldn’t pass through walls, or the fuselage of a plane. But with the shot inside, and their shells fracturing into pieces, once it was inside a body it would do a lot of damage.

Eris’ eyes met his and he could see the pain in her gaze. “They didn’t want to poach the animal for its fur or to stuff it like a trophy. I think they just wanted to cause pain. They made that wolf suffer. And a wolf in pain could have been more of a danger to others. I just...”

She squeezed her eyes shut and all but buried her face into the blankets on his bed.

Alex knew he wasn't going to argue with her.

He wasn't going to try to tell her what she already knew that she helped to end its suffering.

That wasn't going to make her feel any better.

In a way, Eris was suffering in the same primitive way that other living things like wolves did. Curling into a tiny ball as if that would keep her safe from what was happening around and to her.

She turned her back to him and he swore he could feel her pain.

Alex stretched out beside her, spooning up behind her body.

She wasn't shorter than him by much, but her curves pressed against his harder planes made him ache all over.

There was nothing as wonderful as touching Eris, but there was also nothing as painful as feeling her suffering.

He didn't think it was a conscious thing, how she pushed back and cuddled against him. The way she shifted so that his arm could find its way under her, and he could wrap his arms around her body.

It was a magical moment when she relaxed her neck for a moment so that he could nuzzle against the elegant column of her throat and feel her shiver as his breath fanned across her neck.

"We're not giving up," he spoke against her skin and felt her body melt into his.

"It's not your job." She sighed and leaned into his warmth even as she used her words to put some distance between them. "You don't have to say that. You've got your own job to do."

"Whether or not it's my job," he brushed his lips against the length of her shoulder, "I'm going to help you, Eris. Not

because I have to, but because I want to.”

She didn't give into him. He wasn't expecting that.

Instead, she covered his hands on her belly with her own and sighed. “I'm glad you want to help, Alex. It... it feels good to have you with me.”

If he hadn't already been prone, he would have been knocked on his ass, and not in a comical way. He knew how hard it was for her to let people in. How hard it was for her to not just accept help, but welcome it.

He hugged her a little closer and held back a groan when she wiggled a little against his erection. It felt good to have her with him too.



IT WAS like waking up from a dream.

A good one, this time.

Eris had managed to open her eyes and search the room for a clock.

It was an LED clock on the nightstand beside the bed.

Before she could wrap her mind around her situation, she felt a warm hand slide under her shirt to her belly.

“You ready to go back outside?”

Alex's voice was a slightly sleepy, sexy growl of sound and even as her stomach clenched in response, she hesitated, wondering if they should stay in.

“If you think Cookie's not going to come up here and pound on that door, you're fooling yourself.”

Eris shook with silent laughter. Alex was right.

If she stayed up in his room knowing that Cookie was holding plates for them, she wouldn't be surprised if the cook came and knock on the door.

“I am hungry,” she admitted to him.

Her stomach punctuated her statement with a loud, distinct growl of its own.

Alex's hand against her belly gave her a gentle pat. "Then we're going to go eat. I really would like for you to get to know the others."

She thought she heard what he didn't say after that, that he was hoping she'd become a part of their group.

A few days before she would have laughed outright.

But today, after talking to Chelsea and Harper, and doing a little soul searching of her own, she had to admit that Alex might get what he was hoping for.

First, food.

Eris got up and slipped from the bed, watching as Alex got up and reached for his jeans. The rather pronounced erection he'd had earlier wasn't as hard, but it wasn't gone either. He must have seen where her eyes had gone, because he cleared his throat and smiled when she guided her gaze to his face. "We can revisit that later," he explained, "unless you're still thinking of staying away from me."

"I know, I know," she shook her head, "that was a knee-jerk thing, okay? But I'm still not all that sure how this can work. I mean, if we're working together. I've made it a policy-"

"A personal one?"

"Well, it's not encouraged among the rangers," she shrugged. "It's not a hard and fast rule as some couples have married and worked in the same park, but that's not saying it's easy and there are always pitfalls and difficulties."

He didn't argue. "We had our rules in the military too," he explained, "but that doesn't mean I'm going to let this end before we've really started. I'm going to find a way to make this work as long as you're willing."

Her stomach made another little noise and they both chuckled at the interruption. "I'm willing to talk about this *after* we eat."

Alex finished lacing up his boots and they were off.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for them to find a place to sit and dig into their plates. Sure, the guys from Alex's team shared some raised eyebrows and knowing looks, but Eris didn't care.

They'd already had sex even though it wasn't in his room and really, it wasn't like she was a virgin or a particularly young woman. She knew what she wanted and in this case who she wanted.

Some slightly cheeky looks from his team?

She could handle that.

It was fun to put her feet up and share a low-key meal with the others and feel like she could kind of get to know them without a lot of in depth questioning since the guys thought they knew much more than they did.

Eris liked having the upper hand and given Alex's easy smiles she felt like he was having a good time himself.

Before they were done with their meals, a number of the guys said their goodnights and drifted off to do other activities with their free time and their circle around the firepit expanded again when Stone Jacobs, John Jacobs' son sat down with his fiancé Kyla. Bubba and Chelsea joined them as well. Having Harper and Gabe there too felt good. Like four normal couples, Eris thought, even though she knew that she and Alex weren't anywhere near official.

Yet.

Eris demurred from telling the others about what the biologist had said given the social nature of the event, but with Chelsea's encouragement, she told them what she'd explained to Alex in his room.

Alex looked between Gabe and Stone as he reached his hand out and settled it on her knee. "I'm going to help her dig into this some more. I don't have any assignments yet. Can you take me off rotation until Eris can get this maniac behind bars?"

She didn't know what to say to that.

He wasn't being subtle. He'd just put it out there and pretty much laid a claim to her with his hand.

In the past, a man who'd tried to do something like that would have found himself pinched by her short-cropped nails, or his hand knocked off of her leg.

But Alex wasn't any of those men and somehow, she was different too.

And having him stake some sort of physical claim to her?

Damn, it felt good.

Eris turned to look at him, straight in the eye and there was something in the way he lifted his chin as if he expected her to take issue with it.

Her smile seemed to take him by surprise almost as much as when she set her fork down on her plate and covered his hand with her own.

They were locked in on each other, so much so that she almost missed what Stone had to say.

"I don't have a problem taking you off of the rotation, Alex, but you don't need to."

Eris turned to look at Stone, both the son of the lodge's owner and the head of the Brotherhood Protectors in West Yellowstone. He gave her a pointed nod before he turned back to Alex, and then Gabe.

Gabe gave his own nod of agreement. "It fits into what we're doing here. We can assign you to the task, especially because this whole problem involves one of our own." Gabe gave Chelsea a smile and turned back to Eris. "I guess, I should say two of our own."

She felt Alex's hand give her leg a gentle squeeze and that helped keep her quiet. A quick look at Alex and his slightly cryptic smile said that he knew that her instinct had been to argue back and say that she wasn't a part of the group.

But given the look in his eyes and the feeling in her chest and all over her body, she knew that fighting it was futile.

“Two of who?”

Eris turned to see John Jacobs, the owner of the lodge, stepping up to the edge of the group.

Stone gestured for his father to join them, but he waved it off. “Thanks, son, but I’m just making my way around the yard checking in on everyone. But I was also hoping you folks would welcome Santi at the fire. He just got here a little while ago and I think,” he craned his neck to look across the fire at Eris and Alex, “you two are the only other ones still eating.”

Gabe got to his feet with Harper right behind him. “Santi! Good to see you again.”

Eris was a little stunned.

Living in West Yellowstone, she’d heard about Santi Vincent. You kind of had to be a hermit to not know about him.

Which was saying a lot because people didn’t usually see him. He was, as much of a hermit as she alluded to just a moment before in her thoughts. And because of that he was kind of a legendary creature, much like Big Foot or the Jersey Devil, but holy cow, he was gorgeous.

Tall, topping at least six feet, with a head full of salt and pepper curls, Santi was a billionaire several times over, but he didn’t live an ostentatious lifestyle. As he stepped closer to the fire, with a plate piled high with Cookie’s cooking, he made quite an impression with his understated look.

As he followed around the circle greeting anyone new to him, with Gabe’s introductions, Eris could see that Santi was a product of his own company. From his light jacket to his extremely well-cut slacks, they were all Outré Brand. He wore it well which wasn’t always the case when someone wore their own brand, but Outré Activewear wasn’t an ostentatious brand. It was excellent quality at a decent price point. She actually had a few items from the company that she wore when she went hiking on her own and not as a part of her job.

Still a little star struck, she'd almost missed her own introduction to the man.

“Eris, is it?”

She managed to pull herself together and nod. “It’s not a normal name, it means-”

“Chaos. Or rather, the Goddess of Chaos.” Santi sat down on the other side of Gabe and Harper and set his plate down in his lap after he folded his legs in front of him.

It was hard to imagine a man worth as much as he was just sitting down and digging into some barbeque, but there he was and looking pretty comfortable doing it.

Beside her, Alex leaned forward. “How did you know?”

Santi shrugged. “I’ve always been interested in Greek Mythology since I was in school. I guess I never stopped reading it.”

Harper turned and looked at her with a big grin. “That’s a great name.”

Eris grimaced in return. “Unless it’s one of the times my name proves itself. Other than that, it’s pretty interesting to see how many times people call me Erin, thinking it’s just misspelled, but I don’t mind.”

“Well,” Harper hedged, “if your life does prove a little chaotic, Santi’s the man to know around West Yellowstone.”

“Uh, babe?” Gabe gave Harper a slightly pained look. “What about me?”

Eris knew she must have looked confused at the strange back and forth, Harper took pity on her and explained what happened when she met Gabe.

She sat there, entranced as Harper explained the crazy adventure that they’d been on and yes, how Santi had helped save them both in the end.

“See?” Harper reached out her arm and nudged Gabe with her elbow. “You’re both my heroes.”

Gabe raised a brow in her direction and Harper laughed, leaning in to give Gabe a resounding kiss on his lips. “There,” Alex’s team leader grumbled deep in his chest, “that’s better.”

The conversation continued from there, but Eris got the impression that Santi wasn’t all that comfortable in their circle. It wasn’t that they were excluding him or that he shrank back from joining in the conversation, it was the way he looked at all of them in turn.

It felt like he took note that he was the single man in the group. Even though Alex hadn’t done or said anything overt to say that they were together, Santi seemed to notice all of the little gestures between the couples.

And while he didn’t react enough for anyone to really notice, Eris felt like there was a story there that she didn’t know, and she certainly wasn’t going to ask.

After they’d all finished their plates and thoroughly enjoyed both their meals and their conversations, the fire burned down, and they all got up to leave. As Gabe and Stone carefully put out the fire to make sure there wasn’t a chance that it might flare up again, everyone else gathered up anything that needed to be secured in trashcans built to keep the wild animals out and the refuse in. Harper and Kyla were speaking to each other, and Eris reached out for a piece of trash at the same time that Santi did.

Surprised, they both lost hold of the napkin and Alex leaned in to pick it up. “Got it.”

Santi seemed to hear the deep grumble in Alex’s voice and held up his hands in surrender. “So do I.”

Eris felt a blush creep up into her cheeks and Alex’s face reddened a little. “Sorry about that.”

Santi shook his head. “Don’t be. You two are good together.”

“Uh thanks, but nothing’s really set in stone.”

Alex dropped his chin and gave her look. “It will be. And I don’t think I’m alone in that, am I?”

Eris held back her laughter. She could see that Alex was struggling a little. She didn't blame him. She was still struggling with what was happening between them. Reaching out her hand, she slipped it around his arm and leaned into his side. "You're right, but I'm not about to have this conversation in front of Mister Vincent here."

"Santi, please."

His tone was easy and humble, but she thought she saw a little sadness in his eyes, and it wasn't about her.

"Can... can I help?"

"No." Taken aback he shook his head. "No. Not at all. It's a long story and I think the party is over."

Eris recognized the feeling. She had those moments herself. Turning to look up at Alex, she saw the understanding in his eyes.

Alex met Santi's eyes and softened his own expression. "Sorry, I didn't mean to sound like an ass."

Eris squeezed his arm and leaned against his shoulder to ease his worry.

Santi shook his head in reaction as well. "Please don't apologize to me, I know what it's like to love someone like that."

She felt her heart pound at his words, but she couldn't quite lift her gaze to Alex's face. Is that how he felt?

The other man's expression looked almost haunted as he sighed. "You two should come over to Lone Wolf Aviation when you have some time." He addressed Alex for a moment. "I know you're good with helos. You should bring Eris with you, and we'll see if you feel comfortable with either of the two I have at my hangar. They're available for the Brotherhood to use when you need them. I'm happy to get you checked out on either or both of the helicopters I keep there. And then maybe," he looked off into the darkness for a moment as if he was staring back in time, "maybe..."

At that, Santi walked away into the darkness and Alex turned her toward him.

He pulled his arm free from her grasp and settled his hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" She gave him a wry grin. "For the little caveman moment?"

He nodded. "I didn't mean... Okay, I meant it, but it... I messed up. Eris, I-"

She reached up and touched her fingertip to his lips. "Let's make sure everything is picked up and then... we'll go up to your room... and *talk*."

"*Talk*." He repeated with the same lift that she'd held in her tone.

She nodded. "*Talk*."

CHAPTER 13



ALEX WASN'T sure it was a good idea for Eris to come back to his room. It wasn't that he didn't want her there. He felt... off.

Unbalanced.

He was sure he hadn't left the best impression on Santi Vincent, but even worse, he was worried that Eris wasn't happy with what he'd done.

With how he acted.

Still, she came upstairs with him and didn't run for the hills when he unlocked his door and held it open for her.

She stepped inside and made room for him to come in after and close the door.

Once he heard it click closed, he looked at her. "Are you sure you want to stay?"

Eris looked at him, with narrowed eyes as if she was trying to look inside him. "What's going on? Are you still," she stepped closer and took hold of his chin, turning his head one way and then the other, "still worried about what happened down by the fire?"

What could he say but the truth?

"Yes, of course. I still can't believe you're not."

She let go of his chin and dropped her own toward her chest. Taking in a breath, she finally looked up at him. "What bothered you so much? Can you tell me that?"

"About what I did? That's easy, I-

“No,” she folded her arms across her chest, “what were you upset about with Santi? Or was it me?”

His thoughts rushed through his head, and he huffed out a breath. “I don’t know. Both? He was focused on you, and you were on him, and I felt like a damn third wheel and it’s not like you owe me anything and he certainly wouldn’t care that we...”

His feelings, his jealousy, ate at him.

“No, that’s not fair to either of you,” he explained and shook his head, angry at himself. “He was just being nice and you... you were being you. And I feel like I can’t be the only one who sees how amazing you are. Sees how beautiful you are. Dedicated. Smart. And you could do so much better than a guy living in a lodge who hasn’t proved he’s got his life settled. How the hell am I supposed to compete with a man like Santi Vincent who’s a fucking millionaire?”

He felt his indrawn breath burning in his throat and his face hot from something akin to shame.

Alex couldn’t... wouldn’t blame Eris if she turned her back and walked out on him after the way he’d acted and the words he’d said.

She moved toward the door, and he felt his shoulders sag and his heart kick against his ribs.

He wanted to dart ahead of her and hold the door closed, but he forced himself to stay in place. If she wanted to leave, he was going to let her.

At that point he wouldn’t blame her for never wanting to see him again.

After all, he’d gone from wanting to have a relationship with her to acting like a jealous ass.

It was probably better for her to put some space between them because he knew-

“I don’t deserve you.”

He almost missed it.

While his words were falling from his lips, she had set the lock in the door.

She turned back to look at him, her eyes shining with emotion he didn't want to name.

Or rather, he couldn't.

“Why do you think you need to deserve me, Alex?”

Her voice was so achingly beautiful, but the way her hands felt as she set them against his chest made his heart swell in his chest.

“I don't think I do. I *know* I need to.”

He covered her hands with his own and felt the heat of her skin against his.

“I don't want you to regret being with me, I'm not like the other guys in my team, I'm older than they are. More set in my ways. More of a loner-”

She stopped him then, pulling her hands out from under his.

Before he could barely realize what she was doing, she reached up and took his face in her hands. “If you're a loner, Alex. So am I.”

Eris stepped back and he went with her until her back connected with the door.

“I've done a good job keeping other people out for a long time. I knew people. I went to work. I did a good job, but everyone was always at arm's length. Even in a bar, people left me alone until they were too drunk to read the signs to stay away. You didn't see the signs-”

“I did,” he admitted softly, “but I ignored them to talk to you.”

Her intent look softened with his words. “And I'm glad you did. Because, Alex Ridgely, you changed me. You cracked open a hole in that wall I had around me and damn it, it felt good. I just didn't trust how good it felt.

“You were leaving. So in my head, it was okay. Letting you in didn’t mean I had to change completely. It just meant I could have you and then I could let you go because I didn’t have a choice.”

He set his hands on her hips and got a solid grip on her as he stepped in closer until their thighs were pressed against each other. “And then I came back.”

Her smile was almost bashful, but her eyes were shining. “And I had some serious reservations about that. That gap you made in that wall I’d built around me hadn’t closed up. It had just gotten bigger, and I wasn’t ready to see it.”

“I didn’t really give you time.” A muscle ticked in his jaw and his fingers dug into her hips. “All that time away, I only wanted you more.”

He watched as she sank her teeth into her full bottom lip, the movement making him hunger for her even more. Alex remembered how those lips felt against his skin and he couldn’t escape the need to feel them again.

“Well, I might not have shown it when I saw you again,” her tongue swept over her lips and he found himself painfully hard, “but I hadn’t been able to get you out of my head either.”

Before he could register what was happening, Eris smoothed her hands down his chest and tugged on the button at the waist of his jeans.

He thought he was already hard, but when she pulled on the fly of his jeans and the zipper opened on a hiss, he felt his dick swell.

Alex reached for her hands to hold them still, but all of his training fell by the wayside as Eris slipped her hand past the waistband of his boxer briefs and gripped him tightly.

It was a moment of pain but only because he felt himself throbbing in her hand.

Eris looked up at him as her hand sank down his length until he felt her hand reach the base of his cock. He felt her knuckles against his belly, the strange scratch of his coarse hair against her fingers. With a pout of those gorgeous lips, she

drew her hand up his shaft and when her finger bumped up against the tip, he almost came from that alone.

“Shit,” he groaned, “you better stop.”

“Stop?” He saw her lips curve into a smile that was all anticipation. “Why would I do that?”

And then she almost drove him to his knees.

Eris released him and splayed her palm against his hip. She turned him around until he had his back against the door instead of her.

Before his brain could come to grips with what she’d done, she hooked her fingers into the waistband of his pants and boxers and tugged them down.

The pressure and sudden release of his cock made him swear.

It turned into a blue streak of curse words when she tugged his clothes down to his knees as she reached hers.

Alex looked down as she leaned her cheek against the hard length of his shaft, nuzzling his erection as her hands worked their way up his thighs.

It was almost impossible to keep his eyes open as the sensations of her fingertips and palms brushed against the hairs on his legs. The delicious friction of her tongue against his arousal, coupled with her hand stretching around his shaft, almost buckled his knees.

His eyes shut as her nose bumped against the flared head of his cock, but they flew open as she closed her lips around its head.

“You’re... you’re going to kill me like this.”

Eris leaned back and his cock popped free from her lips. “Would you rather I stop?”

He shook his head, unable to speak for a long moment.

He drew in a breath and let it out in one long, hard exhale. “I’d rather you let me inside you.”

Before she spoke, he took her hands in his, prying her fingers away from his dick.

He lifted them up to his mouth, kissing one palm and then the other. "I'll never get enough of you."

Alex let her go for one moment and bent over to push his pants and briefs off.



ERIS TOOK advantage of the moment and bent over to give one cheek a sharp spank.

A moment later, she realized what she'd done.

She didn't have a chance to move away.

No, Alex wrapped his arm around the back of her thighs and stood.

She was bent over his shoulder, staring at his amazing ass.

As he turned and walked her toward his bed she reached down and gave his cheek a rub.

"Poor baby," she laughed, "did that sting?"

She was falling a moment later, bouncing onto the blankets of his bed.

It didn't escape her that hours before they'd laid together on that very bed, his aim to comfort her. Now, she watched him reach up and over his head to pull of the Henley shirt he'd had on at the BBQ and as he did, she worked furiously at the buttons on her blouse.

She gave up a few second later and reached for the hem, tugging it over her head so she could throw it to the side.

Alex crawled up onto the bed after her, his hands opening the waist of her shorts and tugging them down over her hips, thighs, and off her feet.

When she reached for the hem of her camisole top, he closed his own hands over hers.

“Let me. Let me do it, please.”

How could she tell him no?

After all, he'd said the magic word.

Instead of taking over at her hem, Alex reached up and drew the thin elastic straps down over her shoulders, only stopping when the clingy fabric slipped beneath her breasts.

With her arms at her sides, barely held in place by the elastic, she knew she could free her arms, but the look on Alex's face told her not to.

The hunger in his eyes and the tick of a muscle in his jaw made her feel like a... like a femme fatale. He was entranced by what he saw and damn it, she liked the feeling of power. He knelt between her legs, his knees moving in and pushing her thighs apart.

Looming over her, he put a hand on her shoulder and leaned her back until she was only held up by her elbows. The position tightened the fabric, lifting her breasts so that they were full and pushed closer together.

He murmured something under his breath and Eris opened her mouth to ask him what he said, but when he closed his mouth over the tip of one breast all conscious thought fled.

His tongue, coupled with his lips was decadent.

When he added his other hand, his fingers putting the most amazing pressure on her already swollen nipple, she panted out her breath.

A slight nip of pain tossed her head back and she swore she could feel him smiling even though she couldn't see him.

Alex Ridgely did things to her breasts with his mouth that she'd never even considered possible.

All of that and she was already aching between her legs and the tight bud of her clit seemed to throb in anticipation.

“Oh god,” she moaned as his tongue circled her nipple, “I swear, once you're inside me I'm not going to last very long. I-”

He moved his mouth from one breast to the other and the friction his fingers found on her already slick nipple had a surprising effect.

Eris clung to him.

Her fingers biting into his shoulder and the back of his neck as her orgasm hit her like a freight train.

Never in her life had she come from just the stimulation of her breasts, her nipples.

As the sensations rocked through her body, she wasn't sure if she was swearing or praying.

Either way she had no control.

She heard the soft slide of a nearby drawer open and closed and then the whisper of something tearing.

“Yes, yes...” she couldn't seem to let him go, only holding him tighter with her hands, “I need you.”

Somehow, when he touched her hip with one hand, she found the strength to lift her hips from the blankets and with a searching nudge of his cock against her folds, Eris lifted a leg and hooked it over his.

One shuddering breath later, he slid home inside her.

When he was fully seated, she managed to open her eyes to look up into his. “Alex?”

She heard how shaky her own voice was and couldn't help but smile at the whole situation.

“Yeah?” He grinned down at her, his smile one of complete masculine satisfaction. “What do you need, baby?”

“I need you to fuck me, Alex. And don't you dare stop until both of us can't move another muscle.”

He slid out of her and then slammed home, rotating his hips, just a little.

Her eyes were wide open, her body felt like it was humming with energy.

Alex's lips curved into what might have been a devilish grin, she didn't seem to have the ability to think that much.

“Challenge accepted.”

And in the dark of night, Alex Ridgely came through.

CHAPTER 14



ERIS FIT RIGHT into his team. Alex didn't just think that, he'd seen the evidence.

She was driven and dedicated which meant that quite a bit of the time they spent together was working.

She'd called and visited every ammunition distributor and gun supply shop for miles around, some of them hours away.

No one who had been linked to the park or the town of West Yellowstone were on their customer lists. The lack of evidence along that vein of her investigation didn't dampen her spirits. They just seemed to hone her determination to find the people responsible for the wolf's unnecessarily painful death.

Much of her investigation for the last few days had been on her own time. She'd had a rather tense conversation with a few of the rangers that were higher up the food chain, which for a new ranger was pretty much everyone above her.

And the night before, he'd seen it for himself when Evan Haskins, came to the lodge to see Eris.

SHE'D BEEN EXHAUSTED, bent over the plate of food that Cookie had pushed in front of her, but instead of diving into the dinner, which was her normal reaction to anything Cookie made, Eris just pushed her food around.

Alex had gone to get a couple of beers and when he'd returned, he found Evan at the table, bracing his hands on the

smooth wooden tabletop as he spoke to Eris.

Even though he'd only known her for a short time, Alex was good at reading people from a distance. He'd done that more times than he wanted to acknowledge.

Eris wasn't afraid of Evan, but even though Alex knew how fierce she could be, Eris looked like she was shrinking away from man she'd described as a good friend, a great ranger.

Alex slowed his steps for a moment, watching the interaction. It wasn't that he was afraid of Evan physically hurting her, he was more interested in reading the other man's attitude toward her.

And in the end, as he was nearly to the table, he heard Evan's pointed plea.

"You've got to drop this. You can't just keep going when you've been told to stop."

"Hello, Evan."

The other man's head snapped up and he had the decency to look a little hesitant at Alex's greeting. "Alex."

Alex put the open beer down beside Eris' plate, but he didn't sit down beside her.

He stood across the table from the other ranger. "What's going on?"

Evan shot a look at Eris, but Alex noticed that she didn't look up to see it. With a frustrated exhale of his breath, Evan gave him an answer. "Just work stuff."

Alex kept his gaze fixed on the other man and Evan shifted his balance slightly. To his credit he leaned forward and not away. At least he had some kind of courage inside of him.

Still, Evan broke and added, "Maybe you can talk some sense into her, man. Did she tell you that she's been told to let go of this poaching thing?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Eris' shoulders sag.

Alex had had a feeling that she was having trouble at work. The fact that she'd been investigating on her off hours had given him an inkling, but it didn't change that he was more than willing to help her. Even if the Brotherhood hadn't assigned him to help her with the search, he would have done it anyway.

He believed in her search, and he believed in her.

Alex fucking loved this woman.

He just hadn't told her, yet.

He wasn't sure she was ready to hear it and truthfully, he was worried that he'd sound a little silly saying it so soon.

It just didn't stop him from feeling it.

And Evan, well, the other man was dangerously close to feeling the keen edge of Alex's need to protect her from pain.

Alex could see that Evan was still waiting for him to respond, looking at the top of Eris' head to his own face, expecting Alex to agree.

Yeah, right.

"She's got plenty of sense, Evan. And she knows what she's doing."

"No, no..." Evan shook his head and set his hands on the utility belt he was wearing. Whether or not it was an instinctive action, it did emphasize the fact that he had a gun and a taser as well.

Alex set his beer down on the table to have his hands free.

"She's got to understand. You can't just tell the bosses to fuck off."

"I'm following their instructions." The scrape of Eris' chair sounded like the needle pulled off of a record. "I'm not using my time on shift to investigate."

Her chin lifted and Alex could see the strong line of her shoulders.

Evan seemed to lose some of the starch in his uniform, his shoulders hunching over. “I feel like this is my fault, Eris.”

A muscle in Alex’s jaw clenched. Somehow, Evan’s use of her name felt too personal for his liking.

“I made this big deal about you taking initiative and now I feel like it’s gone to your head.”

“I’m doing what I need to do, Evan. I know this might not seem worthwhile to you, but it is to me. You knew that wildlife meant a lot to me even before I joined the rangers. This is my dream job. Educating people about the wilds and the creatures who live there. The creatures who have every right to live within the park. You talk about the bosses like they’re on the opposite side of a line. I think they just don’t see what I see.

Alex saw Eris draw herself up taller, squaring her shoulders like she was ready to fight.

He was damn proud of her, and her spine made of steel.

“And as long as I do it on my time, I don’t see what they can really argue about.”

“Don’t you get it?” Evan’s face looked like it had been redrawn in harsh, slanted lines. “This isn’t how it works. You’ve put a target on your back.”

“Then I’ll deal with it, Evan, I’ll-”

“Stop!” He reached out and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Don’t you get it-”

As Alex moved, Eris pushed Evan back, knocking his hands away from her.

Eris backed into him and reached back. Alex put his hand in hers and she laced their fingers together. “I think you need to leave, Evan. Now.”

She didn’t wait for a reaction. Looking up and over her shoulder, she gave Alex a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Let’s take the food up to your room, ‘kay?”

“Sure.” He lifted his free hand and brushed the backs of his knuckles against her cheek, glad to see that her eyes were clear even though they looked like rage was flaring up inside of her. “Let’s go.”

As he reached past her to grab her plate, she put her hand on his shoulder and he stilled.

Eris leaned in and nipped the tender curve of his earlobe. “Play your cards right and I’ll let you-”

Alex turned his head and captured her lips in a fierce kiss. When he pulled away, he saw the laughter in her eyes.

“You didn’t even wait for me to tell you what it is.”

Alex licked his lips and tasted her again, making him harden in his jeans. “I was afraid that I might end up throwing you over my shoulder and run out of here like a caveman.”

Her eyebrows raised as she gave him a flirty look. “That might work. You pulling my hair and-”

He turned and started for the doorway, her plate in one hand and their joined hands in his other side.

Her laughter followed them out of the room.



THE NEXT MORNING, Eris was up early, and Alex brought her breakfast in bed. He’d survived Cookie’s pointed look and the threat of the pointed end of his fillet knife by swearing that he was being a gentleman. Neither of them seemed to believe it, but Alex left with a full tray and a smile.

As much stress as she was suffering with her work and her added investigation, he made it a point to pamper her as much as he could.

Even then, Eris shocked him in so many good ways, including the way she looked at him when she thought he wasn’t looking.

As they stepped out onto the front porch of the lodge, she'd tugged on his waistband, turning him around as she backed into the corner. Even in her uniform with parts of her utility belt squished between them, Eris rose on the toes of her boots to press a hot kiss to his lips.

They hadn't had the time for sex that morning and his dick was still at half mast before the kiss, full and thick as her lips broke away from his.

The haze of arousal lasted for less than a few seconds when her hands dropped down to his forearms and her expression soured. "What are they doing here?"

Alex's instincts kicked in and the hands he had on her hips pulled her tight against his front, ready to put his body between hers and any possible danger.

The men that walked past them as if they weren't worth the time it took to notice them, were well dressed. A little too formally for the town. Hell, for the season. With the heat, the men were sweating in the time it took them to reach the front doors of the lodge.

"You know those men?"

Alex searched her eyes for the answer, hoping she wouldn't hold back.

He should have known better.

"I met them while you were taking the hikers away from the wolf that day in the park. Evan brought them over to meet me. Their names were... Anderson and... -son, umm... Halverson. They're buying up some land near town for some kind of entertainment complex."

Alex nodded and heard Eris' phone chime with her alarm.

He enjoyed the quick peck she gave him before she pulled away and walked toward the parking area.

She waved at him over her shoulder and then swaggered away.

Well, he called it swagger, but it was just her normal way of walking. The subtle sway of her hips only served to remind

him of how those hips felt under his hands when they were alone.

“Fuck me...” Alex shook his head as she got into her vehicle. He was well and soundly fucked when it came to Eris Lange. He had no idea that a quick trip to West Yellowstone for some R & R would end up with him falling head over heels in love with a sassy park ranger. “I’m one lucky bastard.”

The laugh he heard from the doorway turned his head.

Gabe was standing just inside the doorway. “I think we’re both lucky.”

Alex shrugged. “We haven’t really made it official yet.”

“Official how?” Gabe narrowed his eyes. “She’s here most nights or you’re at her place. How much more official- Oh. You haven’t wised up and said the words yet.”

Alex scoffed at Gabe’s words, but he had to admit that the man was right. “No. Not yet. She’s got a lot going on right now and I want to find the right moment.”

Gabe stepped forward and clapped his hand down on Alex’s shoulder. “The right moment is whenever you decide to say it. If you’re going to wait for a ‘perfect’ moment-”

“Okay!” Alex shook his head. “Look at you, giving the old man relationship advice.”

Alex hadn’t really meant anything by the self-directed jibe, but Gabe sobered a little.

“You’re not worried about that, are you?” He shook his head. “Eris isn’t that much younger than you.”

He wasn’t going to say exactly how old Eris was, that wasn’t for him to do. If Eris wanted Gabe or the others to know she would tell them, but she was likely the same age as Harper.

How he felt for her wasn’t a matter of numbers and she hadn’t told him that she worried about his age either.

What mattered the most to him was how she made him feel.

And while she made him feel invincible, he also felt fear that she might be taken away.

“Hey, what’s going on over there?”

Alex tuned back into the world around him and saw that Gabe’s attention was fixed near the far side of the main room. Standing before the bank of windows along the back wall was John Jacobs, the owner of the lodge and Stone’s father.

The two men that had entered earlier were speaking to him. Actually, they looked like they were placating him. It was an odd situation. “I don’t know, exactly, but I’d like to find out.”

Alex stepped back inside and felt Gabe fall into step beside him.

“You’re not going to have all the fun yourself, hmm?”

Lifting his chin toward the door at the back of the room, Alex pointed out that they weren’t the only men curious about the conversation.

Stone stepped up beside his father. Alex and Gabe paused nearby, watching carefully. They kept their focus on the four men and their intense conversation. They were close enough to step in if they were needed but they didn’t want to interfere unless John or Stone looked like they wanted them involved.

But John had everything handled in a few minutes.

It wasn’t the best of circumstances. That was easy enough to tell.

John was a man who was kind and hospitable in a number of stressful situations, but the men he was talking to didn’t even get a handshake or a smile as they walked away.

Alex and Gabe followed their exit with open curiosity, watching them until they were long gone from their view.

When they heard John clear his throat, they both turned.

“Don’t worry, boys, those men won’t be coming back here.”

Gabe folded his arms across his chest. “What happened?”

John's smile was almost real when he filled them in on their conversation. "Those *gentlemen*," he put a sour tone on the word, "they made me a ridiculously handsome offer to buy the lodge."

Alex almost swore when John named the price. He hadn't heard that kind of number outside of a spy thriller.

John sighed. "They told me all about this—"

...entertainment complex...

"Entertainment complex that they want to build, and they want to purchase my land to do it."

"Sorry, sir," Alex was struggling to put the pieces together, "why this land. The lodge is already developed. A complex would likely need to start with an empty space, or it would add to the cost."

John nodded. "That's what I thought, but I told them I wasn't going to let this place go." He turned and put a hand on Stone's shoulder. "I don't want to sell, son. I like having you and the others here. This is where I wanted to spend the rest of my years. Even a mountain of money wouldn't make me move. So I told them they were barking up the wrong tree."

Gabe chuckled. "It didn't look like they took it well."

"No," John shook his head, "they didn't, and I had a feeling that they were going to try and strongarm me verbally, but that's when Stone walked up. The men took one look at him, and I could tell they realized that they might be in trouble."

Stone's stoic look became one of dark humor. "That's when my father introduced me as his son who was in Special Forces."

Gabe's laughter was almost a snort of sound. "That'll teach them."

Something was still bothering Alex. "Sir? Did they talk about any other land that they were buying?"

John's expression turned thoughtful, and his lips pursed into a crooked line. The tension released when he started to

speak. “I think they mentioned something, but honestly, I wasn’t paying much attention. Their offer was a no from me before they even began to explain. But,” his gaze drifted off for a moment before he snapped back into focus on Alex’s face, “come to think about it, they mentioned that the land they were planning on buying had some legal trouble attached to it. That’s probably why they decided to approach me.”

Stone put his arm over his father’s shoulders. “They don’t know how stubborn you can be.”

John laughed and pretended to elbow his son. “Well, if they try to come back later, they’ll find out.”

“And they’ll have us to help drive the point home.” Gabe nodded and turned toward Alex. “You worried about something?”

Alex struggled to put a smile on his face. “I’m always worried about something. It’s one of the reasons you call me ‘old man.’”

John gave Gabe a pointed look before he turned to look at Alex. “You’re in good company, son.”

Alex nodded at John and let the tension in his shoulders ease for a moment, he’d put his mind to work on the problem again when he was alone. “The best company, sir.”

John sighed. “Call me John before I feel even older than I am.”

“Yes, s- John.”

The four men ventured off into the kitchens to fill their cups with industrial strength coffee and start their days.

CHAPTER 15



IT WAS JUST a few days later that Eris felt like she'd hit a wall. Hit it like Wile E. Coyote hits a painted tunnel on a mountain side. Full speed. And with all the conviction in the world.

And it fucking hurt.

Then again, the day had started out on a high note, so she could, in her own defense say that the world kind of sucker punched her.

A phone call from the prosecutor's office came before she left her apartment that morning. It caught her right as she pulled open the door. She closed the door, leaving it unlocked and picked up the phone wondering if it was her landlord. Mister Rodger only called on her landline. He was the only one that did since it came with the apartment, Eris picked up the call.

"Hello?"

"Hello." There was a momentary pause. It was long enough to realize that the man on the line wasn't her landlord. "Ranger Lange?"

Okay, that was weird, but weirder things had happened in her life.

"Yes. This is Ranger Lange."

"This is- -from the Prosecutor's office."

Pressing the phone closer to her ear, Eris felt her forehead furrow between her brows. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear your name-"

“That’s not important Ranger Lange. What’s important for you to know is that the judge hearing the case for the Pruitts has decided to go forward with their trial.”

To say she was stunned was a vast understatement.

“Ranger?”

“I- I’m sorry. I thought Mister Callas said that he wasn’t eager to take this to court. I think I was under the impression that he might plead them out or drop the case based on my... based on the investigation.”

It still hurt to remember that rather harsh and pointed conversation.

No, Eris didn’t believe that she was perfect, far from it.

She was dedicated and excited to make a difference, but the prosecutor had acted like he didn’t care about the case as a whole. Especially the way that she’d aided in the arrest for poaching an animal on Park Property.

Eris heard the person on the line and realized that they were still talking.

“And so, we’ll have to speak to you about your testimony for the upcoming trial. What does your schedule look like today and the next few days?”

To say a thrill passed through her was an understatement.

Eris had all but written off the case and now it was looking like she was getting a chance to help her community and help the wildlife in the park.

“Uh, today... I’m working at the park, well actually, I’m working at the park every day this week. I’m sure if I tell my supervisor that you need me to talk to-”

“No... no. You don’t need to get special permission. In fact, with the rocky start to this trial, it’s probably better to just keep this low key, you know?”

Low key.

She was still getting looks from other rangers as if she’d pooped on their lawn, but the important thing was getting the

case to court and later, when the case was over, she'd get a chance to prove herself to the others.

“Ranger Lange, are you-”

“Sure. Yes. Low key, I get it. I understand.” And she did. She just didn't like it.

“You know,” she swore she could here him smile, “I might actually be in West Yellowstone later today. Do you know your assignment?”

That, she could answer.

“Sure, but unless you're familiar with the park you might not know where to find me.”

The man on the other end chuckled a little. “I know I'm a man, but I can follow directions.”

Unwilling to get on the bad side of another prosecutor, Eris pulled her cell phone out of her purse and opened the app that she used to keep track of which area of the thirty-five hundred square miles she was assigned to on any given day.

She took a photo of the screen and asked the prosecutor for his email.

“Well, I'm calling you on an office line, Ranger. How about an approximate GPS location.”

Wow, old school.

“Sure.” She read off the GPS location at the center of her assigned area. “I'll be around there. Do you need my cell phone number to call when you're close?”

“No, that's... actually, yes. That would be a huge help, thanks.”

Eris took a moment to see the keypad in her head and then rattled off her phone number as she imagined dialing it. “Sorry, it took me a moment to see the number. I hardly ever call my own phone.”

There was a silent moment before the prosecutor spoke again.

“Well, okay. I’ll see if I can arrange to come up and speak to you today.”

“If you can’t,” Eris drew in a breath to steady herself, eager to develop a good relationship with the prosecutor’s office as she intended to continue her work as long as she was allowed, “I’ll be happy to meet you at your convenience.”

“That might work out better for both of us,” the man explained. “Still, I’d like to take care of this today, if I can. Thank you for your help, Ranger Lange.”

“No problem, Mister-”

The phone call ended, and Eris’ phone chimed to remind her that she should already be on the road.

“Shit.”

Putting the phone back in the cradle, she made her way out of the door.

She wouldn’t have time to meet Cookie for a coffee, instead she headed straight to the park to start her day. She might start a few minutes late, but she had no problem staying until her full time was done. Eris did love working at the park and with wildlife.

AS SOON AS she drove into the park, she received a call to a remote road and the report of tourists who were getting too close to a herd of bison.

Eris’ heart kicked against her ribs as the dispatcher ended the call with, “there are kids.”

Tapping her GPS to find the fastest route toward the road, she put her foot on the gas.

It was one thing for adults to be stupid. But taking their kids into danger?

For a moment, well... more than a moment, Eris considered kicking some adult ass when she arrived, but she had a horrible feeling that she wasn’t going to be the one delivering the hurt.

Eris didn't need a lot of prompting to figure out where the trouble was.

There was a damn tour bus and a half-dozen cars stopped in the road.

The field beside the road was barely visible through the trees, but Eris knew she'd figure out exactly what was going on after she got out of her vehicle.

She'd already put her windows down in hopes of hearing things before she could see them, and hear, she did.

Calls of warning, in rising levels of volume reached her ears as she parked her car and bailed out with the engine still running as fast as her heartbeat.

Before she even broke through the tree line, she heard horrifying screams.

The tourists in the field were almost outnumbered the bison in the herd and every single one of them couldn't hope to run as fast as a bison.

Forty miles an hour outran anything on two feet.

And the man who was spinning around the head of a bison like a baton in the hand of the head majorette of her marching band had found that out the hard way.

The sound of blood rushing through her ears blocked out the frantic cries and screams from the people in the field, but it only took her a moment to assess the situation and begin managing the crowd.

That meant moving everyone away from the frantic bison who had turned a human man into a rag doll.

Children clung to their parents and many people stood stock still screaming at the scene before her.

There was no way that Eris could approach the bison at the moment. She had a duty to get the others to safety first.

If she was to shoot the bison, it would likely take off running *with* the man hooked onto its horn. It might even trample the people standing in the field screaming.

She got to the side of a man first, a young child holding his hands.

Eris picked up the child, ignoring her terrified screams and pushed her into the man's chest. "Go!" She yelled and shook his shoulder. "Get back to your car!"

He moved and as she hoped, he started a chain reaction, pushing into a couple who were standing with their mouths open, and phones held up to record.

She reached an older couple and got in front of them, waving her hands.

The man startled first, and she gave them the same order she gave to the first man. "Go!"

He grabbed a hold of the woman beside him and almost jerked her off her feet as he started moving toward the road.

The screams were receding. Not because they were stopping but their cries were headed away from her.

The field cleared quickly. Faster than she'd hoped. Apparently, once she'd shaken the first few pieces loose, the rest of them seemed to fall back.

The last two that were still standing there in the field were likely with the man.

The woman was ashen, her mouth open and seemingly frozen like the tragedy mask in theaters.

She wasn't screaming, at least not out loud.

The little girl at her side was sobbing into the woman's leg.

The bison was starting to slow down.

Whether she was tiring or just finished with her attack, there was no way of knowing.

"Ma'am?"

The woman stared right through her. Eris had to grab her by the shoulders and give her a hard shake to get her to focus.

"Ma'am! I need you to move!"

She lifted a hand toward the horror behind Eris. “But Chris-”

Another shake. “Ma’am. I need you to take your daughter to safety. I’ll... I’ll handle Chris.”

The woman was still stuck in place.

Before Eris could figure out how to reach through her terror, her little girl did it first.

“Mom! Mom! Help!”

The woman snapped out of her stupor and picked up her little girl. The child clung to her like a monkey and Eris was glad to see them running for the road.

Letting out a breath she turned back toward the bison and was happy to see that it hadn’t advanced toward her.

Still, she was well within the safety zone of twenty-five yards away. If something happened to her, it was not only going to hurt, she’d likely get tossed like a weight at a Highlands Celebration. And not a man in a kilt within sight.

The massive male bison had to be nearing fifteen hundred pounds or more. Larger bison were in the field, but they were likely older and not as interested in roughing up the invaders.

If the male turned on her, it might be the kind of video no one wanted to star in.

A snuff film without the sex.

As she edged forward, she hoped that Alex wouldn’t see the video on Facebook or some other streaming service. The last thing she needed was to look like a complete idiot right before she died.

The bison leaned his head down and the man hanging from his horn wasn’t moving.

A barely stifled cry from the tree line had Eris tensing and hoping that the sound would stop.

And it did.

Small miracles, really.

The bison dug a hoof into the grass beneath him. Grass that had been covered in snow just a few weeks ago. Maybe the winter would be a good thing, she wondered. It would close some of the roads and give the rangers a break from tourists who just couldn't seem to be bothered with the warnings and instructions.

Eris kept her mind active because she was afraid.

Scared almost shitless by how close she was to the immense creature.

Never had she ventured this close on her own or with another ranger.

They knew to keep away.

Stay. Away.

All she could do was keep her eyes on the lone bison. The rest of the herd had moved away, meandering toward the far side of the meadow.

She could only hope that the bison was done with whatever he was doing with the man.

Sending a message?

Letting go of a little anger?

She had no idea.

All she could do was watch and wait.

And then the danger was over.

The massive head of the bison tipped forward and the man slid unceremoniously off the horn and down onto the ground.

Eris was aware behind her that someone was shouting.

Maybe more than one.

She had a feeling it was the woman.

It seemed like she'd found her voice again.

Still, Eris wouldn't move any closer until she was sure that the bison was headed away.

Jumping the gun might mean that the burly beast would turn around and stomp all over the man. Biding her time, no matter how horrible it sounded, was for the man's benefit.

And then it was her time to step in.

The bison was moving away with the others in his herd and that's when she moved forward, dropping to her knees besides the man who was sprawled in the trampled grass.

He wasn't conscious and maybe that was for the best.

A quick assessment told her what she needed to know, and she called in for emergency services. Well, a step above that, literally.

Dispatch asked for her location and this time she sent her GPS coordinates.

Calling in an ambulance wasn't going to be enough. This poor man was going to need an airlift.

Dispatch called back saying that Lone Wolf Air was bringing in their medivac helicopter and for a moment, Eris felt relief. She'd met Santi Vincent at the barbeque and felt comforted that she knew who was headed in her direction. Once dispatch had confirmed that the EMTs were at the hangar and they already had equipment aboard, she could focus back on the man before her.



ALEX ARRIVED at the Lone Wolf hangar and saw the flurry of movement outside. He didn't get in the way, but he got close enough to hear the EMTs as they were calling out to each other as they put a couple of bags onto the medivac helicopter.

Santi jogged out from the office and saw Alex standing off to the side. He held up his hand and shook his head. "Sorry, man. I'm just about to take off, can we do this later?"

"No problem."

Part of Alex wanted to offer to go along, but he understood Santi's hesitation.

They'd made a plan for the two of them to check Alex out on Santi's helicopters, but Alex could understand that when it was an emergency situation that the other man would want to focus on the matter at hand.

The EMTs were in, and Alex stepped forward to close the door and backed out to a safe distance and watched as Santi expertly lifted off and started in the direction of Yellowstone.

Reaching into his back pocket, Alex pulled out his phone and unlocked it.

For a moment, he considered calling Eris to see what she was doing, but she was at work, and he didn't want to bother her when he was going to see her for a late dinner.

Until then, he'd head back into town and go over the plans he'd unearthed in his grandfather's trunk.



CALEB and his brother Hal were sitting out on the porch of their home, staring into the woods. Hal spit into the dirt at his feet. "This ain't my fault."

"Well it ain't my fault either."

"You're the one who said we should live it up since we were gonna sell the land."

Caleb shook his head. "We both thought it was going to be a hoot. Don't blame it on me."

Hal ran the tip of his tongue over his teeth. "We were all set to get the money. They can't change their minds, can they?"

"I think they can, but maybe..." Caleb dropped his face into his hands and rubbed his fingertips against his temples. "Maybe..."

Hal slapped his upper arm. "Out with it, Caleb!"

Turning to stare at his brother, Caleb's lip curled up to bare his teeth. "If you'll shut up, I could get a word in sideways."

Hunching his shoulders down, Hal crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm waiting."

Caleb shook his head, pursing his lips together to keep himself from shouting at his brother.

"It's 'cause we got caught," he explained to Hal. "The men said that they could still buy our property, but we've got that thing in court comin' up. And that's the problem."

Hal nodded, but after a minute or so, Caleb wondered if Hal had nodded off to sleep.

Just when he was going to poke Hal in the shoulder, his brother lifted his head and turned to smile at him. "I got it. I know how to get us that money, Caleb."

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Caleb gestured for his brother to speak.

"That woman. That ranger lady." Hal's mouth slanted up at the corner and he had that look on his face when he got the urge to hunt. "She's the reason we're in this mess. If we get rid of her, we get rid of our problem."

Caleb let the words sink in and when he'd let the thought bounce around a little in his head, he had to admit that Hal had a point. "The judge said that it was her evidence that got us caught in the first place. If she doesn't get up on the stand, we ain't got a problem."

Hal popped his brother in the ribs with his elbow. "Well, maybe we ought to go and have a talk with the bitch."

CHAPTER 16



IT WASN'T until dinner rolled around that Alex wondered what was going on. Even when Eris was late finishing work, she'd call.

At first, he'd just kept his phone close and left it on the table during the meeting that the Brotherhood called in the barn. It was a mix of team members from Stone's group and Gabe's as a few of the men were out on assignment.

The meeting hadn't taken long, and he'd managed to keep his attention on what was being said, but it wasn't easy.

His eyes continued to drift to his phone. Even if it was silent, he could still see when she called.

If she'd called.

As they walked out the door of the barn, Gabe reached his side. "You, okay?"

Alex's first instinct was to say. Sure. Fine.

Instead, he stopped and turned to his team leader. "Eris is late. She was supposed to be here after work, but so far there's no word." As he stood beside Gabe, Alex unlocked his phone again and opened up the tracking app looking for her phone. There was no signal.

Gabe turned them around and headed back into the barn. The computers were still up, as they always were.

As Alex watched, Gabe made a few keystrokes into the nearest desktop and a grid map appeared.

“You think you can get her signal with our computers?”

“Not if you can’t. But Stone and I tagged her park vehicle.”

Alex nodded. “Because she works with Chelsea?”

Gabe tapped Alex’s chest with the back of his hand. “Because Eris is with you, man. She’s one of us now.” He leaned over the desk and pointed at the red light within the confines of Yellowstone National Park. “That look familiar to you?”

Narrowing his eyes at the screen, Alex recognized the map. “That’s the field where we parked to track down that injured wolf.”

Alex focused on the signal, his mind working a mile a minute.

“Why would she be there?” His heart kicked against his ribs. “Why wasn’t her phone signal coming through?”

Pushing his hand into his jeans, Alex closed his fingers around his keys. “I’m going to go look for her.”

He hadn’t made it more than a step before he felt Gabe’s hand on his shoulder.

“*We’re* going to look for her.”

Alex drew in a breath and nodded. He’d always been a part of a team during his time in the military, but after leaving the service, he hadn’t really considered what that would mean for their team. Even though they’d moved to the same town, he hadn’t really figured out how that was going to change... or if it would.

Feeling Gabe’s reassuring strength, Alex managed a smile. “Thanks.”

Gabe fell in beside him as they left the barn and jogged over toward the parking lot.

Alex had the doors unlocked before they got to the vehicle, and they were both in and on the road in moments.

He could see Gabe take out his phone and send a message.

Alex's phone buzzed in his pocket, and he turned his head to look at Gabe for a moment.

Gabe nodded. "Sent a message to the Brotherhood here in West Yellowstone. They'll be on alert so if we need them... they'll be there."

Alex focused on the road ahead.

He was nervous and he might admit that he was afraid as well, but that just meant he'd be that much more focused on the road. He'd get to the field and hope that it was just a case of her running her phone battery down and her work vehicle breaking down.

Yeah, that was too easy.

Fuck.



ERIS CAME AWAKE SLOWLY.

And wished that she was asleep again.

The ache at the base of her skull sucked balls.

A moment later when she tried to push her hands against the ground beneath her so she could get up, she realized what was worse than just a pain in her head.

Her hands were tied behind her back.

She sagged back down against the ground, turning her senses to the world around her.

Opening and closing her eyes over and over again, she found that she could still see, but it was dark. Ridiculously dark.

The grass against her cheek was matted, flattened, and she could feel a few tiny pebbles pressed into her skin.

At any other time it would be annoying, but at the moment, it kept her alert.

The swell of pain at the back of her head told her that she'd been struck.

The thin pinch of pain around her wrists made her think of cuffs at first, but a quick tug told her that it wasn't cuffs. Most likely zip ties.

She twisted her wrists and felt it bite deeper. Yeah. Zip ties.

The pain in her head subsided a little and the rushing sound of blood in her ears took its place.

Eris couldn't imagine how she'd gotten stuck in this situation and her memory was foggy.

She had to focus on where she was and how she'd get out of the situation. Then she'd figure out the rest.

Closing her eyes, Eris listened intently to the world around her. It was difficult with the panicked pulse of sound in her ears, but slowly, she calmed herself down as much as she could and listened. Her hearing expanding further and further into the world around her. Then she heard it.

The first man-made sound that made her both shiver with anger and feel the unmistakable ache of dread.

“What are we gonna do, Caleb?”

Hal's words were slurred. His volume more of a stage whisper than a real one.

“Shut up and let me think.”

Caleb's voice was sharper. Maybe he wasn't drunk, or not as drunk as his brother.

Eris wasn't sure if that meant it would be easier to deal with them both if they were drunk or if it would be better to try to reason with Caleb.

Neither man sounded like they were happy with the situation.

“You said we'd just talk to her. Get her to agree not to testify about us.”

“Testify, idiot.”

“Naw, testify sounds like them hymns in church when grandma took us.”

Caleb swore under his breath. “It’s the same kind of testify, asshole. That’s what she’s gonna do against us in court. And yeah, we were supposed to just talk to her, but you got yourself fucking drunk and stupid.”

Eris shook her head to clear it and ended up squeezing her eyes shut to hold off the pain.

It didn’t quite work.

“I got nervous. You know when I get nervous, I need a drink.”

“Three.”

“Three drinks,” Hal grumbled.

“Three bottles,” Caleb shot back, “and then you wouldn’t get out of her way when she was trying to leave.”

Hearing that, her memories drifted up to the surface.

She’d gone back to the scene where they’d tracked the injured wolf. Why? Because she was like a hound dog with a scent in her nose. Without a specific assignment, she’d gone back to see if there was any trouble in the area. She’d waved to a few hikers, answered the question of a vehicle that stopped to ask for directions and recommendations, including a great place to go rock hunting outside the park for a little girl who wanted to find some crystals to take home.

All of that had been a breath of fresh air for her and a way to bolster her emotions, until-

She heard the wheels behind her, the truck coming to rest behind her vehicle.

Eris turned around and put a smile on her face. “Hal, Caleb, how are you?”

She’d turned toward Hal first because he stumbled as he got out of the truck.

She'd taken a couple of steps toward him to help, but when she'd gotten close enough to reach out and touch him, she also smelled the bracing scent of alcohol. "Hal? You, okay?"

When her fingers touched his sleeve, he'd waved his arm at her.

The move had been lumbering in a way, giving her another clue that he was drunk instead of just a little too far in his cups.

Eris had stepped back and looked at Caleb. "You ought to take him home and let him sleep it off." She didn't think her tone had been harsh or anything of that kind. She'd been worried about the other man. Drunk hunters... There was nothing good about that.

And she'd kept her attention on the older brother, the man who seemed to have a better grip on reality.

That had been her worst mistake.

"Don't look at him! He ain't the boss of me."

Hal's arm had made contact with her shoulder. It felt like he'd taken a swing at her, but she couldn't be sure. His hand had gone past her shoulder, but his forearm had clipped it and she rocked back on her boots.

"Okay," she shook her head and held up her hands in front of her, "that's enough of that."

Caleb moved closer. "Look, Hal's being a fool, but we need to talk to you."

She'd taken a step backward, but the two were closing the distance, their larger strides making it easier for them. "Hey, we can talk," she stepped back but the back of her thigh clipped the back end of the bumper on her own vehicle, "but you guys need to give me some space, okay?"

To her relief, Caleb had stopped, and she relaxed a little.

It was when she turned to look at Hal that her stomach had clenched.

Hal wasn't where she could see him.

Eris turned back to Caleb, her eyes widening and her heart pounding forcefully in her chest. “Caleb, what’s going on?”

Caleb wasn’t the angry man she’d seen in the detention facility. He was a man who looked nervous, and worried. “We’ve been trying to sell the land our dad left us, and we had an offer from these men who want to build something, but the bank won’t give them the money because we’re in trouble with the law.”

Eris shook her head but stopped a moment later when she realized what he was saying. “Because the judge doesn’t want to let the case go? I have no control over that, Caleb.”

“No?” He took a step closer, his hands fisting at his side. “I think you do. That man, Callas? He said that your evidence was shit. He said a lot of things, but the judge didn’t agree. And that judge isn’t gonna let go and we need the money.”

She had no idea. “I’m sorry, Caleb, but-”

“Sorry? You’re sorry?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry that you’re having trouble, but you and Hal... you guys knew the law and you didn’t just break it, you filmed and photographed evidence of it.” She turned her head, looking for Hal. “Maybe I can offer an option to the judge, volunteering opportunities.”

“You can fuck your volunteering opportunities.”

Eris heard the voice behind her and realized that she’d stepped far enough away from her vehicle that she didn’t have the bulk of it at her back.

She started to turn to look at Hal, but he reached a big, meaty hand toward her and she turned back toward Caleb.

A moment later, a blinding pain radiated through the back of her head.

On the way down to the ground, she’d barely managed to get her hands under her to break the fall, but she felt the burning scratch of pebbles from the road against her cheek.

There was a moment after she’d hit the ground that she’d let out a breath, thinking that she’d just get up and it was a

mistake.

An accident.

That feeling was knocked out of her when something slammed into the back of her skull a second time.

And she was out.

Fuck all.

She groaned before she could stop herself and the talking she heard stopped.

“She’s waking up.”

Hal?

Or Caleb?

She couldn’t really tell with the echoing waves of pain in her head.

“We need to decide what to do, man. We can’t just keep her here at camp.” Hal. Definitely him.

Caleb’s voice was thick as if he’d had a few drinks as well.

“We’re far enough away that people won’t find us, and this part of the park is choked with trees. No one comes back here. No trails. No tourist spots.”

Hal’s laughter sent a chill through her. “The only thing we’d have to worry about is when we dragged her ass in here. Bitch is too heavy for either one of us to carry.”

“Well, if you hadn’t knocked her ass out, we could have made her walk.”

Eris felt her chin tremble and hot tears fill her eyes.

She had to hold back the whimper of fear that rushed into her throat.

And then she slammed the door shut on that fear.

Fear was real, but it sucked.

If she wanted to get away, she’d have to hold her shit together and put her mind to work.



THE AREA WAS ABANDONED.

What was barely active on a normal day only seemed aching empty when they arrived.

Alex parked about fifty feet down the road from the pull off area and left the headlights on.

He and Gabe looked at the road ahead of them. Nothing stood out. No one burned their tires. No one swerved. It was perfectly normal.

They made their way to Eris' vehicle, carefully making sure that there wasn't any kind of clues that they were disturbing.

The vehicle was parked as if the stop was planned and accomplished in a normal way. No one had forced her off the road.

That gave him a moment of hope that maybe she'd just fallen asleep in her vehicle.

That hope was dashed moments later when he looked into the windows of the vehicle and saw it was empty.

Letting out a pent-up breath, Alex felt Gabe's hand on his shoulder.

"We'll find her, Ridge."

Alex nodded, his jaw tight with tension. "I know, because I'm not stopping until I find her. Let's check around the car before we go any further."

Alex moved around in one direction and Gabe in the other. It was when Alex bent over, looking under the carriage of the vehicle that he saw it.

"I found her phone!"

He heard Gabe's approaching steps, but Alex was already under the car, reaching under it. It was tucked behind the

wheel. Likely, whoever took her hadn't seen it fall or couldn't see it in the shadows when they'd taken her.

When he got to his feet, Gabe shined his cellphone light onto the phone along with Alex. Together, they saw the problem. While they didn't know how it had happened, the screen was smashed. "Had to be someone heavy," Gabe surmised.

Alex tilted the phone screen into Gabe's light. "Looks like the arch of heel. Some kind of heavy-duty boot."

Gabe nodded. "Looks like." He lifted his chin toward Alex's car. "Let's go back to the lodge, we'll see what we can do to get the information off of her phone and find out what happened leading up to..."

Alex saw the hesitation in the other man's expression.

"We'll figure it out," he told Gabe. "We'll get her information and find her. And if they're lucky, we might just put them in the ground and save them a lot of pain."

Gabe didn't seem to react to his words and Alex knew that his team leader understood all too well what it was like to have the woman you love taken away.

As they jumped up into Alex's car, Gabe was already on the phone telling the local police where they'd found her car and that they'd have a member of the Brotherhood Protectors meet them at the car before it was towed in as part of the investigation.

If the police thought that they wouldn't be involved, they had another thing coming.

Nothing was going to stop them from finding Eris.

Alex just had to trust that they'd find her alive.

CHAPTER 17



IT WAS one thing to play possum when you were just biding your time.

It was quite another when you had to go to the bathroom.

Eris swore, long and hard, in her head.

While it was satisfying for a moment, it didn't make her feel any better.

How was she going to manage it?

“Hey.”

Hal sounded close.

Too close.

That's what happens when your head hurts and you can't focus.

“You still out?”

She would have loved to be snarky at him. How was she supposed to answer if she was out cold?

Then she felt something nudge her in the back, right around her ribs and kidneys.

And that's when she groaned.

Peeing had never been so damn problematic.

“So you are awake.”

Sighing, she rolled onto her back and looked at Hal Pruitt.
“Yeah.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. Curiosity taking over. “What’ve you been doing all this time?”

She bit the inside of her cheek when more words wanted to fly out of her mouth. She decided on something simple. “Trying not to pee.”

Hal laughed out loud. “Hey, did you hear that, Caleb? She’s got to pee.”

Caleb stepped closer, standing above her. “Yeah? You’ve taken your own sweet time waking up.”

What was it about her that wanted to bite back and ask him what he’d expected her to do?

“I half expected you to make a fuss and scream when you woke.” Caleb looked suspicious. “Why didn’t you?”

Hold it together.

“Well, I doubt we’re anywhere I could be heard.”

When Caleb didn’t react, she thought she had her answer, but it was Hal’s shit eating grin that told her she was right. There was no ignoring his superior attitude.

“And if I’d screamed for help,” she looked straight at Caleb, not wanting anything to do with Hal, “what would you have done?”

Hal’s chuckle was to be expected, but it was the steely determination in Caleb’s eyes that gave her chills. “I would have made you quiet again.”

Yeah. That’s what she didn’t want to hear.

“There’s your answer,” she sighed, “but now that I know what you’d do if I tried to scream, that’s the last thing I want to do. But,” she gave Caleb a pointed look, “I still need to pee.”

He shrugged. “What do you think I’m going to do about it?”

She rolled away from them and wiggled her fingers.

That hurt.

“You could take this off so I could go to the bathroom.”

She rolled back and looked up at the brothers.

Hal was looking at Caleb, but he didn't even bother looking at Hal.

“I don't think so.” He tilted his head and shrugged. “We still have to talk about what we're going to do to you.”

To you.

Bile crawled up on the back of her tongue.

“I think we could talk,” she didn't want to let them know that she'd heard their conversation. “I don't know what this might be about but as far as I see, all we have right now is time. But before we talk, I need to pee. Please.”

They both looked at each other and for a moment she wanted to scream.

Being unconscious might be better than hoping she didn't pee her pants.

“Caleb, please.”

Disgusted, that was the look on his face.

“Go ahead.” He gave Hal a look. “Let her pee.”

Hal's smile faded. “What?”

Caleb put his hands up. “Let her go to the bathroom.”

The bridge of Hal's nose crinkled up. “We ain't got no TP.”

Before either man could say anything, she spoke. “I'll make do. Please, I really do need to go.”

Hal swore under his breath. It sounded like there were a few creative phrases in there, but she really didn't care. Even as hard as he gripped her arm and lifted her up onto her feet, she almost cried in relief.

Caleb walked off into the darkness and Eris hoped that there wasn't a problem.

Hal took her to the edge of the tiny campsite that they'd created. He shoved her toward the line of trees and lifted his chin. "Go."

She turned her back to him and wiggled her fingers again as her legs tingled. She'd been down for so long she was having trouble with some pins and needles.

"What? You think I'm going to let you out of those ties? You're fuckin' nuts."

"Well if I don't have my hands, I'm going to end up peeing through my-"

"Oh shut up." He grabbed her arm, and she heard the metallic snap of a knife a moment before her wrists were suddenly free. "There. You happy now?"

Eris grabbed at her wrists in turn, ignoring Hal's huff.

"Sorry," she explained, "I don't think I can feel all of my fingers."

He glared at her. "Hurry up."

She reached for her pants and that movement drove home the realization that they'd taken her belt and all of the stuff she could use to protect herself. Yeah, she knew it was gone, but it was just another level of fresh hell to have it confirmed.

She popped open the button at her waist and gave Hal a look.

No, she didn't expect him to turn his back.

They weren't camping together for fun.

Hal and his brother had kidnapped her.

So she didn't bother getting upset about the lack of privacy.

She turned so she was facing Hal and managed to shimmy her pants and panties down and managed to do her business.



“SWEDE?”

Alex stood beside Gabe at the computer and waited for the Brotherhood’s tech wizard in Montana to work his magic.

It wasn’t easy, but the last thing Alex wanted to do was piss off the fates. He needed them to get Eris back.

She was named after the Goddess of chaos, but Alex had a feeling that was going to work in their favor. As he watched, the cable they’d fit into Eris’ phone was managing to draw out information from its smashed body and given the racing lines of code on the monitor paired with the phone, it was reading something.

The voice that came across the speaker was calm, at least it seemed calm.

And while Alex wanted to scream, he held himself together.

There had been numerous times in his life when he’d faked the calm to keep his focus. He was doing the same now.

Swede, whose name was Axel Svenson, the computer guru for the Brotherhood Protectors, and a SEAL. They’d called him in to help with mining information from Eris’ phone. They watched through the video link as Alyssa, Swede’s wife, set a new cup of coffee down beside him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks, Allie.”

She lifted her hand and touched the top of his head in a gesture that made Alex ache a little.

He wanted that.

He wanted Eris back.

“Good luck, guys. I’m pulling for you, Ridge.”

“Thanks, Alyssa.”

Her smile was hopeful, and her eyes were full of sympathy. All of the Brotherhood apparently had their stories of danger and reward, so Alex took strength from that as well.

Swede sat back in his chair with a satisfied smile.

“The information in the phone is mostly intact. It looks like there’s some damage to the internal memory, but I can work around most of that.”

A map pulled up on the screen and Alex was faced with the same GPS view they’d seen before they left the lodge.

“Okay, this was the last place she was when her phone was damaged, and I can trace where she was before that and-”

He stopped and leaned in toward the screen and read something. Before they could ask what it was, another screen popped up on the monitor.

A news story about a man and a bison run in that ended with an airlift scrolled through the window, ending with a short video taken from the view of someone standing along a road.

As they watched the video, Alex saw Eris move in and assess the man laying still in the field as the herd of bison drifted away.

“Shit.”

“Yeah,” Swede nodded. “She was on site for that and there’s more video online that’s coming in from several different sites. Nothing identifying Eris at the moment, but I’m guessing they’ll have her name by morning.”

“Do you think this might be why Eris was taken?”

Swede’s mouth pulled up at one end as he shook his head. “I don’t see why. All she did was help out an injured man. From what I can see, all of the coverage about the unnamed female ranger is positive. Many crediting her with saving all the bystanders and getting quick assistance from a medevac life-flight.”

“Santi-” Alex turned to Gabe. “I was at Lone Wolf earlier and he was leaving to do a pickup. It was probably this event.”

Gabe nodded and pulled out his phone. “I’ll talk to Santi and see if he saw anything that might help.” He walked away, leaving Alex talking to Swede.

“Any other reports in that area of the park?”

Swede adjusted himself in his chair and Alex could see his fingers flying across the keyboard and his eyes taking in what was likely massive amounts of information. “No... nothing big today. That man was lucky that the bison’s horns didn’t gore him, but he got tossed around like a rag doll. I really don’t see that anyone had anything negative to say about Eris except for people griping about tourists. Tourons. Huh. Tourist. Moron.” Swede nodded. “I can see why they say that.”

Alex let out a breath, struggling to center himself.

“What about-”

“What about-”

They both spoke at the same time, but Swede deferred to Alex. “Go ahead.”

“What about other cell phones? Anything else in the area where we... where we lost her?”

Swede’s hands were moving before Alex finished his questions.

Alex felt a frisson of hope as Swede’s eyes moved back and forth across the screen.

He wasn’t sharing what he was looking at, but Alex was fine with that as long as he found something-

ANYTHING.

“Hey, it looks like another phone was located near her vehicle for a few minutes. Does,” as he was asking the question, Swede’s fingers were moving like lightning, “Caleb Pruitt sound familiar?”

“Yeah. She’s been worrying about a case with the Pruitt brothers. Apparently, the prosecutor wasn’t a big fan of her investigative techniques.”

As he was saying the words, he felt like Swede was reading about the case on his end.

Swede smiled. “Huh. She used their posts on social media to help nail them for poaching. I still don’t get why people

post their crimes and- Huh. There's something here about a pending sale for the Pruitt land that they inherited." Swede went quiet as he read more on the screen. "Looks like they were about to sell to a corporation who want to build... who want to build an-"

"Outdoor entertainment complex?"

Swede's expression sobered. "Yeah. You know what I'm talking about."

Alex nodded and felt his stomach twist and turn in his gut. "What happened to the sale? The court case?"

Nodding, Swede sighed. "Looks like the current legal trouble that the Pruitts are in gave the bank some pause. I'm guessing that they were told about the trouble but why would they take it out on Eris?"

"From what I heard from her, neither one has much in the way of intelligence. They've got mountains of arrogance, but that's about it."

Swede sat up in his chair and looked at Alex through the screen. "You think they're trying to eliminate her to fix things? That doesn't make much sense."

"They don't make much sense on a normal day, Swede."

Gabe was standing beside him again and Alex looked at his teammate.

"You heard that?"

Gabe nodded and pointed at the phone he had on his palm. "So did Santi. He's ready if you need a lift."

"Swede?" Alex leaned toward the screen. "Do you have their current-"

"On the screen."

The map had an overlay that showed him the physical look of the area.

Alex spoke first. "They'll hear us coming. It's too remote of an area. Too many fucking trees."

Gabe leaned in and pointed a little southwest of the beacon. “There. Get in, get her and then we’ll pick you up in that clearing.”

Alex looked at his friend and team leader. “Thanks, man.”

Gabe shook his head. “No need for thanks. You always have my back.”

“Always.”

Alex turned back to the image and used his finger to trace out the route. “It’s good that they’re far in and away from the road. They won’t hear me coming in if I take it easy. I’ll hike in from there and get to Eris.”

Swede was typing again. “I’ve linked you both for this. Do you want to call in anyone else?”

It was late and calling everyone together would take time.

Gabe clapped him on the shoulder. “We’ve got this, Ridge.”

“And the element of surprise.” Alex smiled, but he was well aware that his smile was a bloodthirsty one. “We’ll get her back.”

Swede lifted a hand in farewell. “I’ll monitor and if you need any further assistance, let me know.”

Alex nodded. “Thanks, man.”



MILES AWAY, in the woods that Alex had been viewing via satellite overlay, Eris was trying to ignore the ache in her middle.

After her brief bathroom break, the Pruitts had discovered that the zip tie they’d used on her was their only one. Apparently, kidnapping her hadn’t really been their plan. That wasn’t quite as comforting as she’d wanted it to be.

Searching through their packs, they’d found some rope.

Rough-hewn, it was itchy and was quickly giving her a rash on her wrists.

Life, in a word, sucked.

As she sat there near a rocky formation, she tried to keep her mind awake. It wasn't easy with the rush of adrenaline draining out of her body, but now that she was awake, she didn't want to fall asleep. Held captive by two men was scary enough, but apparently Hal's pack held more alcohol than survival essentials. He'd been at it for a while, so long that Caleb had found a place to sit and sulk once his brother was drunk.

But Hal?

Hal wasn't getting sleepy. He was getting angry.

"Why did you tell on us?"

She swallowed and tried to keep quiet, but Hal repeated the question.

"Why did you tell?"

Eris knew she'd have to answer.

So she did.

"You broke the law, Hal. And you guys posted it publicly. When I saw it, I had to tell."

She didn't know what she expected him to say back, if he said anything at all. She hoped he'd just tip the bottle up to his lips and drink himself to sleep.

That wasn't going to happen though.

Hal wiped at this mouth with the back of his hand. "You know... I thought you were pretty once."

Okay. Like she cared.

He set the bottle down and with just the light of the moon to illuminate that part of the camp, all she could see was that he was moving closer.

It wasn't until she felt his hand on her knee that she realized what he was doing.

“If you want to use that mouth to tattle on us, *Ranger*.” His fingers clamped down around her knee and his breath blew across her face, rank with alcohol. “I’ll put that mouth to use.”

CHAPTER 18



THE ROPE ON ERIS' wrists stretched her shoulders back, making her worry that she might suffer some real damage, but when Hal pulled open his belt, her concerns changed a little.

A torqued shoulder? She could handle that.

What he was planning?

Fuck no.

He flicked open the button and smiled as he finished the last of the whiskey in his bottle.

Tossing that into the darkness, he yanked down the zipper at the front of his jeans and reached a hand into his boxers.

Eris knew she had one chance to stop him because of how she was bound, and she had to get him closer to do it.

So she let her face show fear.

It wasn't hard.

She was afraid.

She was more afraid that she'd miss, and he'd get the upper hand, but that thought ended abruptly when Hal's dick appeared in his hand.

It wasn't much to look at in the meager amount of moonlight that made it through the canopy of trees above their heads.

It probably wasn't much to look at in any situation, but that wasn't the point.

Stroking it in his hand, he moved closer and got down on his knees.

He spared a quick glance toward his sleeping brother.

Laughing low in his chest, he gave her a self-satisfied smile. "Let's have a little fun and then we can discuss how we're going to handle all of this."

"Don't." The breath she pulled into her lungs felt like fire. This was her nightmare coming to life. "I won't testify. I'll tell them I was wrong."

His nose wrinkled with disgust. "Of course you won't. Now you know we mean business." His hand gave his dick a tug and he grunted in response. "Now, let's celebrate. You and me, yeah?"

She shook her head as he reached his free hand for her boot and tried to pull it away from the other one. "No, please."

God, why wasn't he stopping?

His mouth flattened into an angry line, and she realized that he'd made the decision to have her even though she'd told him she didn't want it. At that point, she wasn't all that worried about hurting him right back.

"Come 'ere, girl. Let me have some fun."

He was already on his knees and dropped a hand down by her hip as he reached for her zipper.

Eris tried to scoot back. It was a movement she couldn't stop. Her body just didn't want him to touch her, but she also needed him focused on her... above her waist.

"Don't play hard to- Fuck!"

She'd nailed him square in the breadbasket. It wasn't hard to draw up her knees. It lifted his chest up and gave her a good view of the target, the crooked, dangling dick that he'd wanted inside of her.

"Fuck! You bitch!"

She didn't get up or try to run. She knew she couldn't outdistance Caleb and he was suddenly awake and pissed off.

“What the fuck is going on?”

Eris managed to move over and put her back to a bunch of rocks that had shielded them from the wind.

Caleb was dividing his attention between her and his brother, Hal, who was tucked up into a ball, gasping for breath.

“Hal, what happened?”

“She,” he gasped and pointed a hand at her, “she kicked me in the balls!”

Caleb turned to look at her and she struggled to look cowed and meek.

In reality, she wanted to look up and smile, lift her chin and give him a sneer. Instead she hunched her shoulders forward and tried to look contrite.

It was excruciating.

“I wasn’t going to let him rape me, Caleb.”

“You bitch! You wanted my dick.” Hal’s eyes were wide and watering as he glared at her.

Caleb shook his head and gave her a hard look. “You keep your... boots to yourself. And you,” he turned to glare at his brother, “if she’d wanted your dick, she wouldn’t have kicked it. Stuff it in your pants and zip up. We need to figure out what we’re doing.”

Hal opened his mouth to argue but Caleb cut him off.

“Not you, Hal. You’re not going to talk. The ranger and I are going to discuss this and you, if you know what’s good for you, will shut up and stay out of this.”

Eris watched Hal follow his brother’s instructions, but she didn’t for one minute think that was the end of it. She’d humiliated Hal. He might not be all that bright, but he was plenty angry.

And that’s all a body needed to get ornery.

A wounded pride.



ALEX STEERED the Mercedes 2550e Hybrid and admired its handling almost as much as he was grateful that Santi Vincent had loaned it to him.

Driving his own vehicle would have made it all too easy for someone hiding to hear him coming. As it was, the 2550e was so damn quiet, he felt like he could get much closer than he'd planned initially. He knew that the time he'd saved driving through the dark and lonely streets had almost been halved by the power and handling of the vehicle.

Taking another indrawn breath, he looked over at the GPS and saw that he was near to the stopping place he'd planned.

He hoped, as he pulled over to the side of the road, that the car wasn't going to be damaged, but in the long run it didn't matter. As long as he got Eris back safely, he'd work for the rest of his life if he needed to, to repay the man for his generosity.

Not that Santi seemed to care a single bit when he'd handed the keys over.

As he turned the car off, there was barely a difference in the noise it had been making just moments before. It really was damn near silent.

Picking up his phone, he dropped it into his back pocket and gave a quick look at the matching beacon on his watch.

The gun he picked up off of the passenger seat slid into the shoulder holster he'd strapped on earlier and with that, he was quietly moving down the road toward the location where he hoped to find Eris.

If she wasn't there, he'd find the Pruitt brothers and he'd get the information, no matter what it took.

Those fuckers were going to pay for taking her. He'd make sure of it.



FROM WHERE SHE sat against the rocks, Eris let Caleb do most of the talking.

She responded from time to time when he was getting anxious, but it was all just the same thing over and over.

“We just wanted to talk.”

“We’ll never do it again.”

“The poaching and the kidnapping.”

“No, we didn’t mean to hurt you.

“We just needed the money.”

She’d talk when she had to, but it was only because it gave her the opportunity to cover the muffled sound of what she was doing behind her back.

The rock formation hadn’t been one that was familiar to her, but the rock shape was. As a child she’d been a rockhound. She’d picked up rocks at the lake. On the trail. Now, she knew about Leave No Trace, but back when she was a kid, no one had said anything about her constantly picking up rocks and taking them home. They just rolled their eyes and thought she’d grow out of it.

And college? She’d taken a geology course a few steps higher than what they ‘lovingly’ called ‘Rocks for Jocks.’ So she knew that the rock formation behind her had a decent amount of small obsidian pockets.

Thankfully, she was able to break off some of the rock pieces and use it to chip away until she felt an edge.

Obsidian was something she’d loved learning about in school. The tribes in the area would use it for cutting points, like scraping the hides of bison or arrow points. She was already feeling the rough scratch of the rope against her wrists as she worked on freeing herself. She knew if she worried about worsening the abrasions, she might never get free, so she focused on the sharp edge of the rock and cutting the rope.

“So,” Caleb looked at her with a mixture of frustration and worry in his gaze, “how are we going to work through this?”

“I think it’s going to come to an end soon,” she told him, her voice a little louder than she would normally speak, “so it’s kind of up to you.”

He narrowed his gaze at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I have friends,” she explained, and she felt her heart tighten in her chest, “and a boyfriend who are already looking for me.”

For a moment, she thought he’d argue with her, but she lifted her chin at him and squared her shoulders as much as she could. It hurt like crazy at both her shoulders and her wrists, but she needed to show him that she believed what she said.

“I was going to meet Alex for dinner, and I didn’t call him to cancel, and I don’t even know what you’ve done with my phone. So I’m sure he’s already found my vehicle and started a search.”

She saw Caleb’s breathing kick up, his shoulders rising and falling faster. Eris knew she had his attention.

“He’s not going to just wait around for me to show up. So, I think you have very little time before Alex and the rest of his team show up.”

Hal decided to weigh in on the conversation. “Team? Does he bowl? Play darts? What the fuck are you listening to her for?”

“His team are men from his unit in the army. Special Forces. Hard as hell. And I don’t think either of you,” she gave them both a hard, pointed look, “are any match for them. So what you have to decide is how long you think you’re going to hold me before you have to give up and let me go.”

Hal reached over to his knapsack and stuck his hand inside.

“Really, Hal?” She was so tired of him. “What have you done so far that’s been a good decision?”

A moment later, Eris knew she’d gone a step too far.

Hal yanked his hand free, and she saw the familiar shape of her service pistol in his hand.

“Don’t.” She felt her breath seize in her chest, but as soon as it stopped, it started again, and she used her heightened fear to saw at the ropes around her wrists.

She had more cover because Caleb was now arguing with Hal.

“Hal, don’t be an ass!”

“Don’t you yell at me, Caleb. I’ve got this figured out. There’s plenty of land around here. We kill her like we did them animals. Only this time we don’t take the carcass with us. We dig out the bullet, we leave her here. Come morning, plenty of critters will have had their taste. They won’t be able to tell how she died.”

“No. That’s not going to happen.”

Eris was instantly torn between relief and worry the moment she heard Alex’s voice.

Alex had stepped out of the closest copse of trees, his gun leveled at the back of Hal’s head.

“Caleb?” Eris met Alex’s eyes for a moment to let him know she’d seen him. “Tell Hal to put the gun down.”

She swore she could see the wheels turning in Caleb’s head, but she also saw the panic.

“Hal?” Caleb’s voice shook a little. “I think you should put it down.”

“There’s still time,” she tried to reassure them, “nothing you’ve done can’t be excused for some reason or another, but if that gun goes off, Hal. I don’t think we can help.”

Caleb’s expression was one of entreaty and Eris saw the weight on his shoulders. I can’t be easy to have a man like Hal

as a younger brother. He just wanted to do what he wanted to do and Caleb, he didn't have much control.

Hal grumbled under his breath. "We ain't gonna get that money, are we, Caleb?"

Caleb looked at her and she understood why. Just a few minutes before they were talking about how to bring this to an end. Sure, she was doing her best job of bullshiting him. She wanted them to pay for what they'd done, but that's not something you say to a couple of guys who kidnapped you where one was drunk and had an itch for sex with a woman tied up with rope.

"We ain't, are we, Caleb?"

Hal's voice was almost childish, but it was also petulant.

The man was unraveling.

"We can talk about this, Hal." She'd said the words and she'd tried to mean them, but maybe she hadn't done it well.

Maybe he'd heard the truth in her voice. She was exhausted and bone weary.

Whatever the reason, Hal turned toward her, lifting the pistol toward her head.

Eris knew she lacked Alex's military training, but she was also seated on the ground, legs like jelly because she'd been sitting too long. The chance that she'd escape a bullet from her own gun wasn't likely.

She turned her head to look at Alex and felt the full weight of an apology fill her eyes. She'd been planning to tell him that she loved him, but that probably wasn't going to happen here. She wasn't going to distract him and maybe cause him to lose his life as well.

There really was only one chance that she had, but she had to get her wrists free, and-



ALEX WISHED he could go numb inside.

Training had given him the ability to focus on the mission and exclude everything else around him. It was another reason some of his team had told him that they saw him as a cold bastard sometimes.

But not this moment.

Not after he'd heard Eris trying her darndest to negotiate with Caleb and she had been getting close. He'd heard Caleb's voice quality change.

He didn't have to see him to know that her arguments were making sense.

And then he'd heard Hal. Drunk. Angry. And dangerous.

Alex heard the unmistakable sound of a hammer clicking into place.

The gun was going to be on Eris.

He had to do what he needed to to turn that gun somewhere else.

He saw Eris against the rocks, her arms behind her. How she was bound, he didn't know, but she was basically a sitting duck sitting down the way she was.

"We can talk about this, Hal."

God, he loved that woman. She was strong. She was full of courage. He needed her more than he could understand.

Then it happened. Hal turned, his arm moved, and he had Eris dead to rights in the gun sight. He didn't even have to be a good shot, he just had to hold his arm steady and pull the trigger.

Alex settled himself and put pressure on the trigger.

Before he could fire, the world exploded in motion.

Eris' arms came into sight, and she threw herself toward the grass.

Caleb, the larger of the two brothers wrapped his arms around his brother like a bear and that's when Alex heard the

gunshot.



SHE HEARD the sharp report of her gun and waited for the pain, but it didn't come.

Eris saw Caleb jerk and that's when she realized what had happened.

He'd moved in front of her and taken the bullet that his brother had meant for her.

Alex was suddenly in the clear as Hal fell forward onto Caleb, a raw scream leaving the younger brother's throat.

Pushing herself up onto her hands and knees she almost fell face first into the ground when her legs didn't hold her up.

"Damn it!"

She tried again and felt a hand hook under her arm and lift her almost onto her feet.

"Let's go!"

She didn't argue. She didn't question.

Eris forced her legs to move one and then the other.

Alex managed to slide his arm around her waist to bolster her as they moved, but she knew she was holding him back, slowing him down.

"Go," she spat under her breath, "I can run."

"Don't bullshit me, woman. I'd never leave you behind."

A shot passed between them. Eris felt like it might have gone through the loose lengths of her hair, it was that close.

Beside her, Alex turned his head and lifted his arm to fire, but because he still had his arm around her, it limited his movement.

Eris felt him get hit before she heard the gun fire and Alex stumbled forward a step. "Shit!"

“You made me shoot my brother!”

They were moving through the trees, so Alex kept them moving back and forth and she didn't try to direct their movement. Two people pulling in different directions wasn't going to help.

“Alex,” she wanted him to stop and take care of Hal, but he kept them moving.

“Keep going,” he growled under his breath, “we have to get to the field.”

She kept going, finding more strength as they dodged through the trees.

Both of them were likely keeping count of the shots as the bark of a tree near her head exploded, then a wuff of sound was heard behind them, likely Hal falling down as he ran. Alex pulled her behind the tree and lifted his chin toward a field they could see through the trees. “That's our pickup spot.”

“And Hal?”

Round seven barreled through the bark of the tree and Eris felt the impact as it hit Alex. He pulled her in the direction away from the shot. “I was trying not to kill him.”

Eris put her hand out and Alex put his gun in her hand.

The grip was a little bigger than she was used to, but Eris crouched down and leaned out from behind the tree.

She saw the glare from the gun aimed at her and she shot.

“Aw, fuck!”

Before Hal hit the ground, she wrapped her arm around Alex's back and they started forward again. “He's still got bullets,” she turned her head slightly in Alex's direction, “but he's going to have to shoot from where he landed. He's not going any further than that.”

“Let's go then.”

As soon as they cleared the tree line Eris heard the approaching THUMP THUMP of a helicopter and she looked

up into the night sky. The helicopter didn't have any search lights on, but she saw the blinking beacon on Alex's watch and knew that they were piloting from the GPS locator while not showing their location in the air.

As they got closer, she watched as Alex moved his arm in a signal that she didn't recognize, but it didn't matter. The people aboard the helicopter understood and it descended into the field.

The side door panel slid open and with the modicum of light inside she still thought she could identify the man inside waving them forward before he shouldered a rifle and had it pointed at the trees behind them.

"Thank god," she exhaled as they got close enough to see the interior of the helicopter, "my legs are about to fall off."

Alex turned and lifted her up, almost all the way into the helicopter.

She ground her teeth together to keep herself from scolding him.

Eris had no idea where he was shot, but it couldn't help him to heft her butt inside.

Instead, she used her position inside to turn and reach for him after she set his handgun down on a seat. "Come 'ere."

Alex gave her a grimace as she all but dragged him inside after her.

"Everyone in?"

Eris turned to see Santi Vincent in the pilot's chair and nodded. "Yeah. We're in."

She didn't get up into the seat, instead she sat down on the hard floor of the helicopter and pulled Alex in against her chest. "Where are you hurt?"

The helicopter rocked just a little as they lifted off and rose quickly up above the trees.

He didn't answer her so much as he grabbed her arms and wrapped them around him.

“Alex,” she gave him a rough hug, “tell me.”

“I’ll live,” he chuckled and leaned a little to the side so he could look up at her. “We have you back. That’s all that matters.”

“Well,” she leaned in and put her cheek against his, “that’s nice, but I want to know where you were shot so I can bandage you.”

“You got shot?” Gabe set his rifle down and shook his head. “Shit, Ridge. Are you losing your edge?”

Alex shook his head, and she felt the rough scratch of his five o’clock shadow against her skin. He hugged her closer and pressed a kiss to her sleeve. “I’ve got her back.”

Those few words slayed her and she broke down crying into the side of his neck.

CHAPTER 19



ALEX GRINNED as Santi drew Eris away from him with the lure of coffee.

Ever since they'd returned to the hangar at Lone Wolf, she'd hovered over him as more of a nursemaid than a lover. Part of him didn't want to argue, but the first time that the medic had revealed the wound in the upper back of his shoulder, she'd paled and almost passed out.

He let the medic clean and suture the wound, thankful that the shot had been shallow and taken a nice trough of skin out of his shoulder. A little bit of rest and time to heal and he'd be good to go. He had plans that needed a good, strong shoulder. He just had to get some private time with Eris to talk about it.

The police showed up as the medic was finishing up the stitches and Alex gave them enough of a report that they were comfortable in waiting until the morning for Eris to give her accounting. Part of their reasoning for waiting was probably because Santi wouldn't let them in his office in the hangar. That door remained closed and locked and well, he was respected well enough in West Yellowstone that the police just gave a wave and walked away.

Gabe laughed but tried to hide the sound.

"I'm pretty sure he'd bar the door even if the whole police force came out."

Alex nodded and waited for the medic to wrap up the wound. "I haven't heard his story yet." He watched as Gabe's expression sobered. "Do you know?"

The medic quietly excused himself and when he was out of earshot, Gabe still hesitated. “It’s not my story to tell, man. If you want to know, he’ll probably tell you, but...”

“I get it,” Alex turned his head to look at the hangar door. “I get it.”

Gabe got up from the table he’d been sitting on. “You want me to wait around and drive you guys somewhere?” Before Alex could answer, Gabe gestured over by the gate. “One of the guys dropped off your car and another brought back Santi’s Mercedes. So I can stick around or-”

“I’ll be fine. *We’ll* be fine, Gabe. Thanks.”

Gabe waved off the gratitude. “Just treat her right, man. She’s had a shit day.”



ERIS WARMED her hands on the coffee cup, but she didn’t actually drink any. She wanted to fall asleep as soon as they settled on where they were going that night.

She had a lot to say to Alex, but she really didn’t want to do it when she was this exhausted. She had a feeling she’d break down into tears again and that was the last thing she wanted to do.

Santi sat down on the other end of his desk and looked down into his coffee cup. When he looked up at her with a soft smile, she felt her heart turn over in her chest.

“I should thank you again.”

“No. That’s not necessary. I was happy to help.”

“At least let me know how much the gas was.” Boy did that sound dumb, but she didn’t know what else to say to him. “I bet that helicopter sucks gas like a Hoover.”

Eris didn’t know what she expected from Santi, but she certainly didn’t expect him to laugh.

It wasn’t a gut laugh or even a chuckle.

She heard a soft, almost cough-like sound.

“That’s one way to think about it,” he added on, “but it’s not a problem. I can afford the gas. It’s one of the reasons why I’m happy to let the Brotherhood use my machines as long as I clear them all first.”

“I can understand. You want to make sure they can handle the power, right?”

He shrugged in response, but then he spoke softly, and clarified what he meant. “Anyone in the pilot seat has a responsibility. The helicopters provide a service, but one in the hands of someone who can’t handle it is a bigger danger for the people they’re transporting and the people in the area.”

She heard something in his voice, but she wasn’t sure if she should ask about it.

“You just pulled my bacon out of the pan, but I get the feeling you do that a lot.” She set the coffee cup down and hitched her hip up so she could look at him. “You’re like this archangel swooping in to save the day. I know I’m probably stepping over a line here, but I get the feeling that with all the good you do, you don’t feel like it’s enough.”

That seemed to take him aback.

“It isn’t.” With a sharp exhale, he gave her a look that made her feel like she could see right into his soul. “It won’t ever be.”

Eris had no idea what to say to him. She knew whatever she could come up with wouldn’t comfort him.

She could feel the pain as if it was radiating from his chest into hers.

Santi pointed to a picture on the wall.

If she’d asked an artist to create some kind of Nordic Queen of beauty for the ages, that’s what they’d done.

“That was Elin. We came here for a vacation after I asked her to marry me. It was winter and we were going to do every kind of adventure that the park offered. The last day of our trip I wanted to go out and do one more cross-country ski trail.

Elin wanted to stay behind in our rental, but I wanted her with me.

“Snow mobiles were out, and they were going too fast to see us when Elin stopped to adjust her skis. The impact threw Elin backward and into a tree. They called for assistance, but they took too long to get to us. Roads were covered in snow and ice in different places and by the time EMTs were able to reach us on their own snowmobiles, Elin was gone.”

“And if there had been a helicopter,” Eris’ voice was almost a whisper, “she might have lived.”

Santi didn’t answer her, but she didn’t need one.

His pain, his regret was written across his face.

“I’m sorry you lost her.”

He nodded, but his eyes didn’t meet hers. “I found a purpose though. And I stayed.”

Eris got up from the edge of the desk and she moved closer, putting her hand on his where it laid flat on his desk. “I know you helped save my life tonight. And Alex’s too. Thank you, Santi.”

He demurred from her thanks, but she thought it had some sort of effect on his loss. She hoped it did.

“If you ever need anything, Santi. Just call. I owe you so much.”

Santi drew his hand away and picked up his coffee.

She knew he wasn’t trying to hurt her feelings. He was just feeling a lot of emotions so close to the surface. She’d felt like that when they were in the helicopter heading back to his hangar.

Everything inside of her had felt like it was going to burst through her skin screaming or crying. Maybe both.

“I mean it, Santi. If you want to talk or just sit in silence and stare at the wall, I’ll be there.”

He looked up at that and shook his head. “You’ve got someone who needs you. Someone who loves you. Enjoy that,

Eris. You don't need to be with me while I wallow."

Okay.

It didn't make her feel any better.

She took a few steps away and turned back to see him looking at the picture on the wall.

"I'd say you won't be wallowing forever, but what do I know."

His shoulders shook with silent laughter, and she felt the mood in the room lighten a little.

"Maybe," he sighed and took a sip of his coffee which had to be cool by then, "maybe I won't, but my heart died with Elin years ago. I don't think there's a way to resurrect it."

Eris looked at the picture and saw the beauty in the other woman's smile. "Maybe not," she smiled even though he couldn't see it, "but I think she'd want you to be happy again. A woman with that smile," she smiled looking at the photo, "she'd want that for you, Santi. I know she would."

She left him drinking his coffee and found the main hangar building empty of people.

Except for Alex.

He was sitting on a bench by the doors, looking at her.

Alex held out his hand to her and she leaned to the side to take a good look at him. "Is that your good arm?"

He laughed and held out both arms, but she saw the slight flinch when his left arm lifted up to the same level as the other one. "I'm good."

"You're a bad liar," she scolded him, "but I still love you."

Eris stepped in between his thighs and watched as his eyes fixed on her face.

"I mean that, you know."

She lifted her hands and traced her fingertips across the handsome planes of his face.

"I was going to tell you tonight, even before those two-

Alex was up on his feet, his mouth covering hers before she could finish and she leaned into him, only too happy to ignore the words that were coming next.

Eris wrapped her arms around his chest, careful to keep her hands far, far away from his wound.

Just the sight of it had brought up the horrifying reality that she could have lost him before she could tell him how she felt.



IT WAS CRAZY, he reasoned. With all of the crazy things that had happened in just a day, he could have lost Eris forever.

And yet, here she was, holding him like she never wanted to let go.

Telling him that she loved him.

Shit!

“I love you and all that amazing chaos you bring into my life.”

He touched his hands to her face, feeling the warmth of her skin against his.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” She took his hands in hers and tugged his hands down to her waist.

Alex felt his own skin grow hot, itching to be touched by her. “I don’t care if I hurt,” he lowered his voice and leaned in toward her ear, “I just want to love you.”

He felt her shiver and smiled. She knew what he was talking about.

And damn it, he was hard enough that the tight constriction of his jeans hurt more than his shoulder.

“Where are we spending the night?”

He knew he’d confused or shocked her.

“Hmm?”

His fingers dug into her hips, and he looked her in the eye. “Everything else is taken care of. Hal’s in jail. Caleb’s probably in the hospital by now.

“One of the Brotherhood picked up your vehicle and took it back to the Park Ranger office. Your boss said you have the rest of the week off and I’m planning on keeping you in bed for most of it. I just need to know if you’re coming back to the lodge with me or are we going to your place?”

He saw Eris’ eyes soften at his question. Why? He didn’t know, but damn it, he was going to find out. He just wanted to get her home safely and prove to her how much he needed her.

“Let’s go.” She stepped over to his ‘good’ side and let him wrap an arm around her.

The keys to his vehicle were in the ignition and Eris drove them back to the lodge.



ERIS HAD FORGOTTEN about the pain in her wrists until she took off her uniform shirt in the bathroom so she could take a shower. Looking at the painful abrasions, the dull ache became a throbbing, painful mess.

The water was on in the shower, but she really couldn’t think of how she was going to bathe when it hurt to move her wrists.

The bathroom door pushed open, and Alex stepped in. “Hey. I’ve got some clothes you can wear,” he laid them over the towel bar and stopped short, looking down at her wrists. “What the fuck happened to your wrists?”

Eris opened her mouth to answer, but Alex didn’t even wait to hear it.

His jaw tightened up and he growled under his voice. “I’m going to fucking kill them.”

“Alex, don’t-”

“Do you see your wrists?” His eyes were glaring at her.

And that's when Eris did something she didn't expect.

She started to laugh.

Out loud.

Gut laugh.

Alex didn't see the humor. "What are you laughing about?"

She held up her hands in surrender and that didn't make him happier at all.

He lifted his hands and folded their fingers together. "Have you lost your damn mind?"

Eris shook her head. "I think I found it. Or at least my heart. Yeah, my wrists hurt like shit, but I'm alive and you're alive and honestly, Alex?"

She moved closer to him and leaned her hips closer to him until she felt the hard length of his cock against her belly.

"I want to feel alive. I want you to make me feel that way."

She rubbed against him.

"Do that for me, Alex, hmm? Make me remember what it's like to be so alive it hurts."

He stripped them both down and stepped into the shower with her, using a towel and her favorite body wash to clean her body.

It was almost as frustrating as it was invigorating. She wanted to feel his hand between her legs or lingering on her breasts, but he didn't.

Drying her off was going to drive her mad and apparently, he knew it because when they were done with their shower, Alex put her in front of the sink and opened up the medicine cabinet for some salve. He gently smoothed it over the rough patches of skin on her wrists and when he was done, he had her brace her hands on the sides of the sink.

Before she knew exactly what he was up to, he disappeared behind her.

“Oh.”

Eris felt his breath on her skin, felt his hands on her cheeks and then felt them caress the outsides of her thighs.

When his hands splayed on the inside of her thighs and traveled up, she widened her stance and bent over the sink.

Before she could wrap her mind around what was about to happen, Alex had his mouth on her.

Staring in the mirror, Eris saw color rising in her cheeks.

“Oh wow.”

His tongue slipped into her folds and curled inside of her.

She felt her knees lock and her eyelids fluttered closed.

Alex’s hands pushed her thighs wider, and she couldn’t believe how deep his tongue seemed to get inside of her.

She’d always heard about a woman being eaten out, but damn, the way that Alex had his mouth on her and his tongue in her, she finally got what all of the fuss was about.

“Alex, oh... more-”

She hadn’t even gotten the word out of her lips, and she was shaking, her body eagerly pushing back against his mouth as she came.

And even as she was coming down from that unexpected high, he didn’t really stop, his tongue continued to coax more from her body.

“God,” she groaned aloud, “I feel it in my spine.”

“Really?”

His teeth bit into the curve of her ass and she leaned further against the sink, desperately hoping that it would hold because she had a feeling that she knew what was coming next.

“Eris?”

Her eyes flickered open, and she saw Alex standing behind her.

Her eyes moved to the bandaged part of his shoulder and felt her arousal wane as she remembered what they'd gone through.

“Look at me, Eris. Look me in the eye.”

She did, because how could she ignore the deep entreaty in his voice, the solid grip of his hands on her hips.

She'd never felt more connected to another person as she did to him, and it wasn't just the sex.

Eris felt like Alex could see deeper inside her soul than she could see in herself.

She met his eyes in the mirror and it felt like she could see inside of him too.

He paused and she saw a bit of worry in his features. “I need to get a condom from the other room. I need-”

Eris bit her lip and pushed back against him. “I need you inside me, now.”

She saw him hesitate.

“Baby, you know I love you, but-”

Her eyes narrowed, focusing on him in the mirror so he could see how much she meant what she said. “I want you and me, Alex. Do you want to come inside me? It's what I want. If you want to wait, okay, go get it, but don't do it for my sake.”

She saw him hesitate before he answered, but she also saw the bare need in his eyes.

“I want you, Eris. You know I do, but you know what could happen if we do this.”

She rolled her eyes and then met his gaze again with an open challenge. “Give me all of you, Alex. Everything that you are. I don't want to wait for the rest of our lives to start.”

He didn't say a word, but he didn't need to.

She felt his hands caress her back, slide over her hips, and when he anchored his hands on her waist, she barely had a heartbeat to think before he was inside of her.

It burned for just a moment as her body welcomed him home. The rush of heat deep inside her coated him all over again and it wasn't more than a breath before he was pushing inside of her over and over.

She barely kept a hold of the sink as she leaned forward, canting her hips to take him deeper inside of her. Every so often, her nipples would brush the cold porcelain of the sink sending chills through her body and the further forward she went, the more she felt.

And when Eris felt him swelling inside of her, she braced her legs apart and urged him on with her moans.

Alex must have felt her body tense against the cold as her knees threatened to buckle.

He snaked one hand around and slipped his fingers through her curls to find her clit. Just a few forceful strokes of that tender bundle of nerves and she let go.

Eris felt him release inside of her and it felt so damn good.

His heat joined hers and a few more thrusts had them leaning heavily against the sink.

She felt his lips brush against her cheek before she spoke.

“Can you imagine if we'd broken this sink?”

“Yes, I can.” He turned his head even more and nipped at her earlobe. “I'd be damn proud of it too. But right now,” his fingers slid against her clit one more time before he brought his hand back to her hip, “I'm taking you to bed and finding a few more positions that won't hurt your wrists.”

He turned her around and she hated the emptiness she felt without him inside of her.

Eris looked up into his eyes and loved the heat she found there. “I barely feel my wrists, Alex.” She reached out her hand and wrapped her fingers around him. “I can feel that, though. Take me to bed.”

He pulled back the blankets for them and helped her get settled before he cuddled up behind her, his hand reaching for her breast. “You know, I like having you this close.”

“Hmm?” She arched back and she felt him hardening against her. “I like it too.”

Alex placed a kiss on her bare shoulder and another along the side of her neck. “It’s so much easier guarding you if you’re never out of my sight.”

Eris sighed and wiggled back further against him, needing all the contact she could get. “I love the way you think.”

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ABOUT REINA TORRES

When she was a little girl, Reina Torres read every book she could get her hands on and if she didn't have one available to read, she'd get out her pencils and paper and write down stories to pass the time. Waiting for her mom to finish working, she'd duck into the ladies' breakroom and use the typewriter. She felt like Jessica Fletcher, happily tap, tap, tapping away for as long as she could.

Now her 'typewriter' doesn't clack the same way and there's not even paper to pull out of it with a flourish and a nod of satisfaction, but she has the joy of sharing her characters and books with people all around the world!

Reina hopes you'll enjoy reading her books, because she's going to keep writing as long as the characters keep feeling chatty!

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ABOUT ELLE JAMES

ELLE JAMES also writing as MYLA JACKSON is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* Bestselling author of books including cowboys, intrigues and paranormal adventures that keep her readers on the edges of their seats. When she's not at her computer, she's traveling, snow skiing, boating, or riding her ATV, dreaming up new stories. Learn more about Elle James at www.ellejames.com

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