



Jeff followed Buck to the SUV and slid into the passenger seat.

“How’s things with Danica?”

Jeff let out a huff. “Like she would tell me. What do you want to know?”

Buck frowned.

“Look, this Haiden thing, I’m not sure what’s going on, but I thought it was all better after the gala. They’re at least talking now.”

“I’m trusting you to handle that for me. If I need to make a change, or if they stop working well together—”

“I don’t think either of them will let it get that far.” Jeff chewed on the inside of his cheek. “I am, however, concerned about the police being detained.”

“Don’t let it get to you. I’ll handle it.”

“Handle what? What do you know?”

Buck shrugged. “Nothing, yet. But I am going to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Jeff nodded as he stared out the window. “I’ve not met Sutton before. You?”

“Nope. Must be a transfer.”

“The fact he didn’t give a reason for them being late, that’s odd.”

“Like I said, I’ll handle it.”

Jeff snickered. Buck was retired military, a Ranger. He wanted things run by the book. Being ‘detained’ wasn’t something that happened or was acceptable. Poor Sutton had no idea what was coming.

The ambulance pulled out in front of them, and Jeff’s jaw clenched.

Those three women had depended on the police to save them. Maybe Sutton deserved whatever Buck was ready to dish out.

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“YOU’RE WORKING WITH US? OFFICIALLY?” Danica jumped from her chair and squeezed Bexley tightly. “I’m so excited!”

“Oh, good grief, Danica. You’re acting like you’re surprised.” Evan smirked, a wonderful reprieve from his usual frown.

“I *am* surprised. It’s not like Buck discusses these things with me. Jeff, maybe, but not me.” Danica worked to ease the nervousness in her voice.

“Well, for right now, I’ll be in charge of media relations while I get back into training.”

“That’s great.” Sergio pulled Bexley to him and gave her a hug too.

Danica nearly burst into laughter as Evan’s face went red. Leave it to him to get jealous of the one man in the group who was married.

“Glad you’re official.” Haiden nodded.

“Well, I’ve been invited to start training. Not sure official is the word. I’ve got a lot to do before I’m up and running at the pace this group carries.”

“You’ll do fine.” Jeff entered and gave her a nod. “I think

those skills you learned as a special operations agent will be useful.”

“You mean if we ever have another person to put into protection?”

Evan huffed and gave Bexley a wink. “That was a onetime thing.”

“I’m flattered.” Bexley sat back down at the island with Evan.

Danica stood, opening the fridge. “I’m hungry. What’s for lunch?”

“It’s barely nine in the morning. You not eat breakfast?”

Frowning at Haiden’s voice from behind her, she shrugged. “I had a granola bar. It was too early for a big meal.” As she turned, she maneuvered around his body and to the walk-in pantry. Peering at the boxes of cereal, she sighed. “What?”

Haiden leaned against the doorway, his arms crossed. “You gonna tell me why you’re upset?”

“Who says I’m upset?”

“I’m not stupid.”

“I would never say you were.”

“Then talk.”

He was so much like Buck, it was infuriating. All her life, her uncle Buck had treated her like the daughter he didn’t have. Which worked, since he was the dad she needed. She was raised with one-word answers or phrases, quick clips of conversation where there wasn’t much to fill in.

“I can handle myself. But lately, you just jump in, take over like you think I can’t cut it.”

“I’m doing my job.”

“Your job is taking over?”

“My job ... is to protect. I oversee. I see what is about to happen before it does.” He leaned forward into her space. “I would never say you can’t cut it. I-I know you can.”

“So, let me do my job.”

His jaw jumped as he turned and walked off.

“Nice conversation?”

Rolling her eyes at Bexley, Danica pushed past and grabbed her purse from the table. “I’m going to get something to eat,” she mumbled.

Walking out to the car, she turned at the sound of footsteps behind her.

Bexley made her way to the passenger side door. “Open it up, let’s go.”

Letting out a sigh, Danica pushed the button to unlock the car and slid in behind the wheel.

“Where’re we going?”

She started the car and backed out of the drive. “I don’t know. Just somewhere else.”

“Coffee?”

She nodded and headed toward their favorite café.

“Why’re you mad at Haiden?”

“He interferes.”

“With what?”

Danica cut her eyes at Bexley. “My job. I don’t see him taking shots for the guys. Last week, he almost pushed me down when we were trying to stop that car from escaping.”

“So, he saved you from getting hit by a car?”

“Bex.”

“Look, I’m not sure what’s going on, but it’s not him interfering. You’re upset because he blew you off.” Bex held up her hands in a hear-me-out gesture. “And you have a right to be.”

Danica continued the drive in silence. Once parked outside the café, she slid from the seat and followed Bexley inside. They placed an order, then maneuvered to a back booth.

“Tell me what’s really bothering you. I know there’s something other than him blowing you off. You wouldn’t let that interfere with your work.”

Danica leaned against the booth’s backrest, gripping her mug with both hands. “I’ve been grasping lately. Trying to find my footing. After the bombing last fall and almost losing you and Haiden, things have been off.”

“You didn’t lose us.” Bexley winked as she took a sip.

“I know, but it was a very trying situation. I’m not used to, I guess I just ...”

“You feel like maybe you owe Haiden for protecting you.”

Danica sat forward. “Haiden shielded my body with his, so I didn’t get covered in glass. He was off duty for two weeks, and he had to have surgery.”

“He did what anyone one of us would do. You just feel like you owe him.”

Danica stared at her friend, and her face heated. It was true.

“Then that whole ignoring you thing—that wasn’t cool.” Bexley made a face. “I should’ve knocked some sense into him. Or asked Evan to do it.”

Danica chuckled. “I guess I haven’t been very understanding. And the whole ignoring me thing, I think it embarrassed him once he found out I stayed with him until he woke up. That’s when he just ... stopped talking to me.”

Sipping her coffee, Danica’s thoughts went to Haiden. His back already held scars. Although she did not know what they were, the doctor had been interested in where they came from.

Now, after shielding her, he had even more scars.

“He’s been trying to talk to me lately. I guess I should talk to him.”

“You mentioned getting in more time at the range. That would be something you could do.”

Danica frowned. “You’re not trying to fix something up, are you?”

Bexley shrugged. “Just trying to help you deal with whatever’s bugging you. You’ve got something else going on besides Haiden?”

Going into the chaos of her past wasn’t something she wanted to explain.

“Dani?”

“I’m good.” She smiled and sat back in the booth. “How about you and Evan?”

Bexley grinned.. “Good, very good. I think he’s got something planned for Valentine’s Day.”

“That’s like, two weeks away.”

Bexley shrugged.

“Humph,” she mumbled. “I could’ve done without that.”

Bexley laughed out loud. “Well, if you have a good conversation with Haiden, maybe you could have something planned for Valentine’s Day too.”

“You know that never works out—work relationships.”

“I don’t know, Dani ...”

It would be great, but chances of a relationship with Haiden dropped after the gala. Maybe God would present someone else, someone who might actually understand what she was going through and the pains of her past.

Her phone dinged.

Hey, Dani. Wanted to see what’s going on.

Frowning at the text from Tony Carlyle, she let out a sigh.

Nothing much. How’re you?

“Is that a friend?”

She cut her eyes to Bexley. “Old friend.”

Shuddering at the memories, she pocketed the phone.