

# The Getaway

## By Scribblesinink

Jake shut the door to the conference room behind him, the click loud in the heavy silence. He could no longer bear the weight of eyes on him: the shell-shocked expressions on the hostages' faces, or the expectant looks of his men silently pleading for him to fix things.

He couldn't fix it. Not this time; he was flat out of ideas. And he couldn't come up with new ones. Not with the sound of gunfire still echoing in his ears, or the image of Michael, lying bloody and limp on the cracked pavement outside the bank, burned onto his brain.

He flopped down in a chair at the head of the table. He longed to lie down on the table's glossy surface and get some shut-eye; he was so fucking tired he couldn't even think any more. They'd been so close to making it. So damned close.... Close enough that he'd already tasted their freedom. Only to have everything go FUBAR in the most spectacular way, forcing them to fall back to the goddamn bank again, and losing Stan and Derzie while they were at it.

And then Mike had died....

Perhaps, Jake decided, he could simply fall asleep—and when he woke up, Anna would be sleeping beside him, and he'd discover the last couple years had been nothing but a very bad dream....

Yeah, that'd be nice.

He grimaced, letting out a disgusted snort and scrubbing a hand through his hair, and sat up straighter. No. He wasn't going out like that. He'd vowed this would end with him and his men free-or-dead, and people had sacrificed their lives trying to get them out; he owed it to those guys to keep that vow: freedom, or death.

His gaze fell on Mike's AK, discarded on the table. Mike's body had probably been collected by now, sent over to some city morgue for processing before they shipped it off to his mother. There'd be no military funeral for Mikey, no honor guard to mark his passing. And that? That wasn't right.

Mike should never have been here in the first place.

Jake got to his feet and picked up the AK. Propping it, butt down, up against a chair, he got his coat and hung it from the muzzle, a mute memorial for another

man lost on his watch. His hand shook uncontrollably as he said a silent prayer for Mike's soul. But at least, for Mikey, it was over. He'd gone home: no more pain, or blood, or killing for that kid.

Turning back to his seat at the head of the table, Jake pulled out his phone. Time for the end game; he had one last card he could play. But he hesitated to make the call: Cali might've crossed the line first, when he brought Luke into this mess, but did that give Jake the right to do the same? Yet what other options did he have left?

Pressing his lips together in determination, Jake flipped open the phone to call Deke and give the order. Fingers hovering over the keypad, still unwilling to take this final step, he glanced up again, once more considering his temporary monument for Michael. The heavy coat hung around the gun formlessly. Perhaps, if they'd had—.

Abruptly, a memory surfaced. Jake shot up straight, heart thudding against his ribs. How could he have been so damned stupid? Everything he needed was right here, in the bank: the duffel in the back hallway, its contents dismissed as having no further purpose; a willing hostage; and plenty of ways of creating a diversion. Sure, it'd be dangerous, far riskier even than anything they'd attempted so far, but it also relied almost entirely on deception, and was likely not something Horst Cali expected him to do at all. For once, the element of surprise might work for Jake instead of against.

It was worth a shot.

It'd be an all or nothing end game, of course. But then again, weren't they all? They'd found themselves in plenty similar situations in Baghdad and Fallujah, and so far lived to tell the tale. If they could do it over there, they might pull it off here as well.

And even if they didn't, if they failed at this last ditch attempt for freedom, Jake could die in the sure knowledge that the last shred of his honor had remained intact. That might not seem much to most people—not when Jake had tried to rob a bank—yet it was everything to him.

He'd put the phone back in his pocket, ready to start plotting the details of their exit strategy, when noises filtering through the heavy wood door from the bank's main room distracted him: frightened shrieks from the women; men's voices raised in anger. He realized the racket had been going on for a while, his subconscious filtering it out while his mind was occupied with other matters. What the hell was going on out there? Couldn't he leave matters to his squad for five minutes, even?

Rubbing his face wearily, resenting that he needed to interfere, Jake clambered

to his feet. He'd have to deal with this latest crisis, whatever it was, before he could even think about calling Cali and setting his new plan in motion.

oOo

"You killed him." Albert dropped to his knees next to his dead brother's body, his voice quiet, though still seemingly loud in the heavy silence that had fallen over the bank.

A collective gasp gripped the room at his words. The hostages gaped first at Albert, cradling Henry's body in his arms, and then at Jake. He couldn't have begun to name the mix of emotions in their expressions, but he suspected they were a mirror of his own: horror warring for precedence with fear, grief....

"I'm sorry, Albert," he muttered, backing away from the Roman brothers. "I'm sorry. Forgive me." He swallowed, hard. What had happened was entirely his fault; he was their sergeant, and he shouldn't have lost his temper like that. But when he'd stepped back into the bank's main room, and taken in the scene, his last shred of self-control had snapped. All he'd wanted to do was to lash out, to find a release for some of the frustration that had been building with every setback over the last few days.

He shook his head as he watched Albert shed quiet tears. A soldier mourning over a fallen comrade was nothing any of them hadn't seen before; and Henry freaking out was something that shouldn't have come as a surprise to Jake. Rabbit had been a powder keg waiting to blow ever since their return from Fallujah. Deep down, even in the middle of his rage, Jake had known he shouldn't be blaming him; Jake had let him down, and the man had simply gone off the deep end.

Pushing the thought away, Jake straightened, turning his back on the brothers and pulling in a breath. Just another man he'd never should've brought into the bank, another death on his conscience—and not just because he'd killed Henry with his own bare hands....

Outside, the SWAT teams were slowly moving in; he could see their shadows as they tried to sneak up unnoticed. It wouldn't be much longer before they gathered the courage to breach, and bring a violent end to the siege. Once they did, it'd be a bloodbath.

He didn't have much time left.

Giving a little shake to bring himself back to the present, Jake sought out Marshall, wanting to give Albert a little more time to mourn his brother. "Cat, waste baskets," he ordered. "Get me however many you can find."

"What?" Marshall shot him a look that said he thought his sergeant had cracked as well.

Jake ignored the question, knowing Marshall had heard him correctly. "And bring that duffel from out back, and collect any materials that'll burn slow and smoky. The smokier, the better."

Marshall's eyes narrowed. "You got a plan?"

"Hell, yes, I got a plan." Jake couldn't help giving him a little smirk. "I'm gettin' us outta here."

Marshall grinned back, before he trotted off to do as Jake had ordered. Jake turned back to look at Albert, crouched on the floor next to Henry's lifeless body. "Albie?" There was no response, and Jake repeated, a little more firmly, "Albert." At last the other man looked up, tears staining his face. "Talk to me for sec?"

A little reluctantly, Albert gently laid his brother's body back down and pushed himself to his feet. He adjusted the weapon slung across his back, and followed Jake to a far corner where Jake knew the hostages wouldn't be able to overhear. "We're gettin' out of here," Jake told him in a low voice. "You, me, and Cat. Alright?"

Albert nodded, but Jake noticed the uncertainty in the gesture, and the way Albert cast a glance over Jake's shoulder at his dead brother.

"Are we good?" Jake asked. "Can I count on you?"

After a second, Albert pulled his gaze back to meet Jake's. "Yes, Sarge."

Jake grabbed his shoulder, giving him a slight shake. "Good to hear that. Now, go help Cat set things up. He'll tell you what to do."

After Albert had gone off, Wolf swiveled to survey the hostages. They were still huddled together in a tight pack, stealing furtive peeks at him, at once anxiously curious and trying not to be too obvious about it. He caught Chloe's gaze: the only person in the bank right now who wasn't afraid to look him in the eye.

He jerked his head in her direction. *Come here.*

As he'd known she would, she picked up the silent request immediately. She detached herself from the group, her heels clacking against the stone floor as she approached. "You're planning something, aren't you?" she asked softly, her blue eyes flicking across his features.

"Yeah." He should tell her to get the hell out, should send her back to her life.... Drawing a heavy breath, he plunged onward. "And I'm gonna need your help."

He didn't want to ask her this; what he had planned was dangerous. But she'd offered once already, and his entire plan would fall apart without her help. "We're gonna make a break for it," he explained. "Soon. I want you to come." He hated the way her face lit up at his words—he'd meant it when he told her she couldn't want this. But that was then, and this was now, and it couldn't be helped; he'd just have to deal with the consequences later.

After he'd explained to Chloe what he wanted her to do, he started rounding up the remaining hostages. He spread them throughout the bank, locking them in various rooms: the manager's office, the upstairs conference rooms, the vault. He was determined to create as much confusion and doubt as possible; the longer it took the cops to locate everyone and count all the hostages, the more time would've passed before they realized he and his men weren't among the people they'd rescued. And Jake and the others were gonna need every single second he could buy.

He paused when he reached Ashley Beck. The girl was trembling, darting anxious glances in the direction of Rabbit's body—like she expected Henry to wake up any second, Jake thought. Someone, probably Albert, had covered Henry's face with a towel, but the still figure was a glaringly obvious reminder of how incredibly fucked up their simple plan to rob a bank had gone.

"C'mon," he told Ashley gently, waving for her to go with him. "It's almost over; you'll be home soon." She shot a quick look toward Albert, busy alongside Marshall stuffing waste baskets with torn-up sofa cushions, before she turned to obey.

He stopped her with a hand on her elbow before she'd taken more than two steps. One hostage should be enough for his plan to succeed—but would it be enough to keep Horst Cali and the Pittsburgh PD from going on a no-holds-barred manhunt as soon as they discovered Jake and his men gone?

"Change of plans: you're coming along too." Altering course, he guided her to where Chloe sat waiting. Despite her father's arrest, Ashley Beck was still a high-profile hostage, important enough that the FBI had once tried to ensure her quick release. Jake hoped they'd consider her important enough to proceed with caution as long as they thought her life was in danger.

Ashley opened her mouth, but Jake forestalled her protest and questions with a gesture. "It's not for long," he assured her. "You don't want anyone else to get killed, do you?"

She bit her lip. "No...."

He tried to smile. "So I need you to go just a little bit further. Think you can do that?"

Giving him an uncertain nod, she muttered, "I guess so."

"Good girl." The smile came a little easier now. As Ashley took a seat next to Chloe, he added, "Chloe can fill you in on what we're gonna do." He waited for Chloe to confirm with a nod that, yes, she would, before he turned away. Everything was in place; time to call Cali, and set the rest of the plan in motion.

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Cali approached the bank one cautious pace at a time. When Wolf had called to say he wanted to talk, face to face, it had been entirely unexpected, but it wasn't an unwelcome surprise. Maybe there was hope of resolving this without further bloodshed after all. Because, having seen the look on Wolf's face when his man had been gunned down so unnecessarily, Cali had feared the worst: murder-suicides; a desperate breakout attempt; a score of dead hostages. And then, when Wolf had no longer answered the phone, and Cali had found himself trying to negotiate with a madman.... Cali had no idea what happened to Corporal Roman, nor did he much care; he had to admit, if only to himself, he'd never felt such relief as on hearing Wolf's voice in his ear again. Wolf had sounded weary and exhausted, but seemingly in full control of himself.

His gaze flicking around, trying to find the snipers on the surrounding rooftops, Cali took another few steps. Perhaps Wolf was finally ready to throw in the towel....

No. He suppressed the urge to shake his head in denial. He knew that would be too much to hope for. Wolf wasn't the kind of man to simply give up. *Don't know that order.* The words were still ringing in Cali's ears.

Then, what the hell *did* Wolf want? There wasn't much left Cali could give him, not after everything that had happened in the past three days.

He continued his progress toward the bank, feeling vulnerable and naked without his gun or vest. But if he was to have any chance of talking Wolf into surrendering, he needed to appear as non-threatening as he could. And that meant leaving the paraphernalia of his job in the coffee shop.

He reached the outer doors of the bank. Cracks riddled them, but the bulletproof glass still held firm. Cali couldn't see through the tinted glass, but it appeared the bank was quiet, the lights out. He tested the door and discovered it was unlocked. He slowly pulled it open. Not that he was really expecting to run into any booby traps, but discretion was still the better part of valor.

As he walked into the lobby between the doors, he caught a whiff of acrid smoke drifting out of the bank: something was on fire inside. Cali had to force himself to take it slow. Squinting through the inner doors, he couldn't detect any sound or movement in the gloomy interior. Despite his immediate desire to rush in and find out what was burning, Cali discovered that he was also reluctant to continue, fearful of what he might find.

Steeling himself, he pulled the inner door toward him. Beyond the door, the bank was filled with thick, choking fumes, the smoke so dense that it was impossible to see further than two, maybe three feet. Cali dragged his T-shirt up, covering his nose and mouth, and tried to breathe lightly. He coughed as the first of the acrid smoke hit his lungs.

"Oh my God." Somewhere to his right, invisible in the fog, a woman screamed. "They shot him! Somebody help us!"

The cry spurred Cali into action, and he no longer hesitated. He yelled into his radio: "We gotta breach!" and raced in the woman's direction, trying to spot her in the smoke. He thought he heard sounds—footsteps, people moving, a muffled curse—before he tripped over something. He nearly dropped the radio as he staggered to keep his balance. Glancing back to see what had made him stumble, he was shocked to discover a body, face covered with a bloody towel. He couldn't tell who it was.

"Connie! Now!" he hollered again. Though he didn't know what the hell was going on, there was no doubt left in Cali's mind: the situation had gone way beyond negotiating for a solution. And that meant there was only one course of action left.

As soon as Connie had relayed his order to her teams, pandemonium broke out. SWAT teams swarmed into the building from front and rear. Squad cars raced into the square outside, and yellow-clad firefighters, helmeted and masked, their hoses at the ready, poured from firetrucks. Ambulances, swirling red and blue lights dancing crazily behind the windows of the bank, pulled up, paramedics streaming out. The tension built up over three days of helpless vigilance had found a sudden, frantic release at last, and within moments, the once quiet bank resembled an ant hill that had been poked with a stick.

In the chaos and the smoke, with emergency staff everywhere, nearly tripping over one another in their desire to help, nobody paid much attention to a small SWAT team escorting two hostages out the front door. Nor did anyone notice when the SWAT bundled the hostages into one of the waiting ambulances and climbed in after them.

And by the time order had been restored on the scene, all the hostages in the

building located and accounted for, and two frantic EMTs had shouted into their radios that their rig was missing, it was far too late.

Wolf and his men were gone.

A Pittsburgh PD squad discovered the stolen ambulance an hour later, abandoned under an overpass a few miles from the bank, its driver in the back, hogtied but alive. But the bank robbers were nowhere to be found. Neither were the two missing women.

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An air of anxiety hung palpably over the ambulance as they made their getaway. Jake had clenched his left hand with his right when it threatened to twitch uncontrollably, and Albert was jiggling his foot, bouncing on his toes. Nobody spoke, however, almost as if they were collectively holding their breath. Only the rig's driver, crumpled on the floor at Jake's feet, let out a soft moan as he regained consciousness. Jake strained his ears, expecting sirens to start howling at any moment, and squad cars to race in around them; he knew they wouldn't have much time before the ambulance was reported missing and Cali figured out they weren't among the people he'd found in the bank. But Marshall kept driving them through the busy Pittsburgh streets at a sedate, sure pace, and nobody stopped them.

Ashley coughed into her hand; Jake realized she'd probably inhaled more of the acrid smoke from the smoldering sofa cushions than she should have, and he handed her a bottle of water. She sipped from it gratefully.

"There should be oxygen back there," Marshall suggested over his shoulder.

Jake examined the equipment in the ambulance until he found what he thought looked like an oxygen unit. He gave Ashley the mask attached to the machine and studied the knobs and tubes. After a few moments, he decided this wasn't his area of expertise. Leaning down, he pulled the tape away from the ambulance driver's mouth. "How do you work this thing?"

When the paramedic clenched his lips together mulishly, Albert shifted in his seat and nudged him with a foot. "Hey. Sarge asked you a question. Better answer him, man."

For a long minute, Jake was afraid the medic was going to continue being stubborn and refuse to answer, and he was worried they'd have to resort to stronger measures to get his help. But something in Albert's features must've gotten the message across that not replying would be a really bad idea. In a voice hoarse with suppressed fury, the paramedic told Jake which buttons to press and what valve to turn to get the oxygen running.



A few breaths later, Ashley had stopped coughing, and Jake put the tape back across the paramedic's lips, giving the man's cheek a pat. He straightened up, leaning his back against the ambulance doors, and lifted his head to peer at Chloe, who sat next to Ashley on the gurney. She sensed his gaze, and glanced up at him. "What?"

He grinned. "You're a good actress. Loud—," He rubbed at his ear, still ringing from her scream, "—but good."

She gave him a sheepish look, blushing a little. "You said to make it sound real."

His grin widened, and for the first time since they'd walked into the Three Rivers Trust all those long days ago, he felt like laughing out loud. "That I did."

"Did we make it?" Albert, seated across from Chloe and Ashley on a bench, sounded incredulous. "Did they really buy it? Sarge?"

"Looks that way, doesn't it?" Twisting around a little, Jake snuck a glance out of the tinted rear windows of the ambulance, searching for any sign of pursuit. The streets were crawling with rush hour traffic, but he saw no strobe lights or squad cars.

Albert slapped his palm at his knee in triumph, while Marshall shot Jake a wide grin in the rear view mirror. Chloe beamed at him happily, and even Ashley's features softened a little around the oxygen mask. The only one that didn't look at all pleased was the medic whose rig they'd hijacked. Jake ignored him.

"It's not over yet," he cautioned, warning them against too much celebrating. As soon as Cali realized they were gone, the APB would go out, and an ambulance wasn't exactly the most inconspicuous vehicle they could've stolen. They needed to get rid of it as soon as possible. He hoped Deke had managed to finish the necessary arrangements in time.

As if he could read Jake's thoughts, Marshall asked, "Where to, Sarge?"

Jake squeezed forward past Albert to lean in and tell him to head for the Fort Pitt Bridge. A few turns later, they made it across unhindered. Jake let out a furtive sigh of relief; apparently word of their escape still hadn't gotten out yet, or the bridge would've been blocked.

Once they were across the river and had left the bridge behind, he told Marshall to head north, and to stay off the main roads. It wasn't long before they reached the agreed-on location, where a gray Ford Econoline was waiting for them, right where Deke had told him it'd be. Finally, something was going according to plan—though Jake hardly dared think the thought for fear of jinxing things. Even

so, he couldn't help wonder if maybe, just maybe, they'd managed to beat their snowball's chance in hell of getting out of that bank alive.

Marshall parked the ambulance under the overpass, making sure it couldn't be seen from the air, and they quickly stripped off their SWAT gear. They left the vests and masks for Cali to find, though they kept the shirts and pants that had replaced the bloodied and filthy clothing they'd thrown onto the flames back at the bank. Looking at the pile of SWAT gear, Jake almost wished he could see Cali's face when the good captain figured out how he'd been duped. And though Cali couldn't know it, Jake reckoned he should count himself lucky: if they hadn't had the SWAT gear, their last-ditch attempt to go free would have involved the hostage negotiator in a far more personal capacity. Jake knew he wouldn't have much liked the scheme; and he was damned sure Cali wouldn't either.

"Okay, guys, hurry up. C'mon." He herded the girls out of the ambulance. "C'mon, ladies, you too." They might've made it out of the bank, and even left downtown Pittsburgh behind without being detected, but they were still a long way from being in the clear. "Piggy, don't forget the cash."

At the reminder, Albert ducked back into the ambulance to snatch the satchel filled with money taken from the bank's registers. It wasn't much, certainly not the millions they'd planned to walk away with—but it would go a long way to tiding them over until they crossed the border and could collect the money Abe had wired to Canada.

Jake directed Chloe and Ashley into the back of the Econoline van, and told them to make themselves comfortable on the narrow benches as he joined them. Albert, shucking the money bag over the seat into the rear, settled in upfront in the shotgun seat next to Marshall, keeping his MAC-11 in his lap and ready, though out of sight from anyone glancing at the van. And few seconds later, they were off again, leaving the disgruntled paramedic to wait for his rescue.

It was another step on the road to freedom and, with each such step, Jake started to breathe a little easier. He was slowly beginning to believe they might actually make it.

oOo

"So, Deke's gonna meet us?" Albert shot over his shoulder five minutes later.

"Yeah." Jake had told Marshall to turn left, then right, leading them ever deeper into the warren of streets in the old industrial section of McKees Rocks. As they'd left the hubbub of rush hour traffic behind, the roads grew more empty, and Jake was extra glad they'd managed to ditch the ambulance. "He's got us some new ID's. We'll split up, head for the border in two groups."

"And you'll let us go?" Ashley piped up.

Jake shifted around so he could look at her. "As soon as we're in the clear, you're free to go." He wasn't about to promise anything more specific about when that moment would arrive; his plans had gone wrong too often in the past few days for him to take that risk.

Clearly not fooled, and catching the evasiveness in his answer, Ashley grimaced wryly, but she didn't say anything further. From the corner of his eye, Jake caught a glimpse of Chloe. She was listening silently, and he turned back to stare out the windshield without meeting her gaze. He was afraid Chloe might refuse to leave when he set the girls free, and then what was he going to do? For the first time since Anna had passed away, he'd found someone who saw beyond his scars, both the visible and the invisible ones. But what could he offer her in return? Life on the run? Wanted by the police; chased by the authorities?

It wasn't the kind of life he'd want for her. Wasn't the kind of life he'd want for anyone. If the heist had gone down as it was supposed to.... He shook his head, forcing the thought away. He couldn't change what was in the past.

Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on top of the front seats, concentrating on what he *could* do: get them to the rendez-vous point, where Deke should be waiting with their new papers and a second car. It wasn't far now, and he'd figure out what to do with Chloe if and when the time came.

Five minutes later, they were bouncing along a roughly paved track, bumping from pothole to pothole. The entire area was deserted, and well past its glory days: the surrounding machine shops had long since been abandoned—their windows broken or boarded up—and weeds sprouted everywhere.

"This is far enough." At Jake's words, Marshall let the car coast to a stop and killed the engine.

"I don't see Deke, Sarge." Albert was fingering the stock of his carbine, seemingly unaware he was doing so.

"He's coming." Jake wasn't worried; Deke hadn't let him down yet, and he was convinced the corporal wasn't about to start now. "Go check the area's clear."

oOo

Ashley watched as Albert and Cat climbed from the cab. They walked off quickly, their heads swiveling and hands on their weapons. Once again, as she'd often done inside the bank, Ashley noted how well these guys worked together—operating like a well-oiled machine, she believed the phrase was.

She realized the way they followed Wolf's orders without a word was both a little discomfiting to see, and at the same time strangely reassuring. Especially after Rabbit had gone crazy, and nearly killed everyone.... Ashley gulped; best not think about that.

Wolf slid open the side door and got out. Unsure what was expected of her and Chloe, Ashley stayed in the van, though she dipped her head until she could peer out the side window that was opposite the sliding door, following Cat with her gaze as he slowly circled the van. She'd learned quickly in the bank that doing as she was told when she was told was the best course of action.

Several minutes later, Cat and Albert returned, and Wolf popped his head back in, waving at them to get out of the car too. Exchanging a glance with Chloe, Ashley obeyed. Mere few seconds after she'd set foot on the cracked pavement beside the van, a Jeep rolled from the opposite direction to the one they'd come from. It stopped several yards away from the van and four men, three of them heavily armed, got out. The three armed men hovered near the Jeep, giving her and Chloe knowing looks that made Ashley's skin crawl. The fourth, the bald-headed guy who had been driving, sauntered over to meet Wolf in the space between the two vehicles. Wolf grinned, and Ashley assumed this was the man they were supposed to meet. Wolf's next words confirmed it.

"Hey, Deke, a sight for sore eyes." He greeted the bald guy with a one-armed hug that was returned in kind, but when he pulled away, he dipped his head at the other three men. Some of his good humor had faded and been replaced with caution. "What's this?"

"Them?" Deke jerked a thumb across his shoulder at the others. "Some boys I rolled with on my first tour." He shrugged. "I figured we might need some support. Our forces have been depleted, Sarge."

"Hm." Wolf presses his lips together a moment, and Ashley thought he didn't seem at all happy with the explanation. "Let's just do this." He slung his gun strap over his shoulder. "You got our papers?"

Deke handed Wolf a thick manila envelope. Wolf quickly browsed through its contents, nodded with satisfaction, and stashed the envelope in an inner pocket of his jacket, before he indicated Chloe and Ashley with a hand gesture. "Okay, ladies. Time for us to part ways. Piggy, take them away."

Albert motioned with his gun to indicate the direction he wanted them to go, toward one of the nearby buildings. Ashley exchanged a panicked look with Chloe, heart jumping into her throat. Where was Albert taking them? Why didn't Wolf just let them go?

Turning toward him, she opened her mouth to ask those questions out loud, but it was as if Wolf knew what she was going to say. He offered her a little smile of commiseration. "I can't just let you walk out of here. I need to buy us some more time. Don't worry, we'll call the cops to come find you soon as we're clear."

Albert gave her nudge with his elbow. "Come on, Ashley, let's go."

Giving Wolf one last, questioning look, and finding no lie in his expression, Ashley grabbed Chloe's arm. Reassured that Wolf was actually telling the truth, she figured this was their chance to finally be free, and she was prepared to drag Chloe along by force if needed. Because Ashley wasn't blind and she just *knew* the other woman was going to refuse. But before they could take two steps, Deke spoke again.

"Wait up, Sarge. Change of plans."

The three of them stopped, something about Deke's tone making the small hairs on Ashley's neck want to rise. Albert must've heard it too, since his attention shifted away from her and Chloe to focus on Wolf and Deke instead.

Wolf slowly swiveled around on his heel to face Deke and raised an eyebrow. "Change of plans?" His tone held a note of warning.

"Yeah. A lot of people sacrificed themselves to set you free, and there's a lot at stake here." Deke took a step closer, his voice dropping, growing intense. "Listen, you gotta trust me, here, Sarge. We need—."

"I trust you, man," Wolf interrupted him. "I just don't trust them." He jerked his head at the strangers by the Jeep.

At Wolf's words, the three men stiffened, and Ashley didn't need to be a military expert to spot the rise in tension. The last few days had taught her enough to recognize a dangerous situation when she saw it, and she didn't miss how the men's grips tightened on their guns, or how they moved a few more paces apart, spreading out further. She glanced around, wondering if she should try and make a run for it. She definitely didn't like the way Deke's gaze kept flickering in her direction, or the way Albert was holding his gun: a minute earlier, he'd been at ease and relaxed, but now he was wound as tight as a coiled spring.

"Way I figure," Deke continued, deliberately ignoring the strain that had settled on the group, "we're a couple million short, but I'm sure daddy-dear—" The way he pinpointed Ashley with a look left no doubt who he was talking about, "—can fix that."

"Listen to Sarge, Deke." Albert took a slow step forward, putting himself between Ashley and Chloe, and the group by the Jeep. It made it harder for Ashley to see

what was happening, and she tried to peer around him. "Stop screwing around; you're wasting time."

"No hostages." Wolf shook his head. He sounded tired. "We got the money taken care of, so let's stick to the plan. We're almost home free. Transport. Now. Let's move on." The last few words came out briskly, and Wolf made to turn away, fully expecting his order would be followed.

When Deke spoke again, something dark flitted across Wolf's features. Something that came and went so quickly, Ashley wasn't sure she'd really seen it. But it had seemed... sad? Not wanting to take the time to dwell on it, Ashley concentrated once more on the two men.

"I hate to disappoint you, Sarge," Deke was saying, "but I'm gonna have to disobey that order." He leaned forward a little, balancing on his toes. "I got no life to go back to. This *needs* to work. I need insurance. What's better than having a couple rich chicks as our shield? Marshall, come on, you're comin' with me. Albert?"

Ashley held her breath, again wondering if she should try and run. Right now, everyone seemed focused on Deke and Wolf, with nobody paying attention to her. She didn't know how long that would last.

Cat shook his head. "We roll with Sarge. We follow his lead."

"Deke, I love you like a brother, man," Wolf added. "But I'm not gonna let you take them."

"Well, that ain't for you to say any more, Jake."

Ashley blinked, startled at the use of Wolf's name. She'd never heard his men talk to him with anything but deference. Even Rabbit....

Deke pulled himself up straight and continued, "It ain't your op no more. I'm saying this is the best play, decision final. Go, get her." The final words were aimed at one of his own men.

The last thing Ashley remembered clearly was one of Deke's men starting to walk over to her and Chloe. The rest happened so fast that she was unable to ever reconstruct the exact order of events. Guns whipped up on both sides of the open space between the van and the Jeep, and she never did figure out who fired the first shot before, the very next instant, bullets were flying. The heavy *pop-pop* of the automatic guns echoed deafeningly around the empty buildings and something whistled through her hair, making her cry out in fear, frozen to the spot in shock.

"Fall back!" Wolf shouted. "Fall back!"

Someone grabbed her by the arm, fingers digging painfully in her flesh, and yanked her off her feet. She was thrust roughly into the back of the van, landing in an awkward heap on the bare floor. She skinned her arm on something sharp, and the sudden sting was enough to make her regain some of her senses. "Move, move!" A hand shoved her in the back, and she scrambled further into the van, huddling in on herself in the darkest corner she could find and trying to make herself as small as possible.

oOo

Abruptly, Jake's world had once more exploded in gunfire. Someone screamed, high-pitched, but he wasn't sure if it was Chloe or Ashley. He was too busy spraying bullets to keep the other guys cowed behind their jeep, while backing as fast as he could toward the van. From the corner of his eye, he saw Albert unceremoniously throw Chloe and Ashley into the back before diving in after them. He then rolled and twisted, coming up to fire through the side window opposite the sliding door.

Using the cover fire provided by the other two, Marshall managed to crawl in behind the wheel and start the engine. Jake jumped in after Albert, hanging on to the door frame with one hand, while he continued to hold down the trigger with other, though no longer aiming at anything in particular. "Go! Go!" Marshall stomped down on the gas, and the Ford's tires squealed as he wheeled the van around, exposing Jake crouched in the open door for a brief instant, before the cloud of dust and smoke thrown up by the wheels masked him from Deke's men.

A few eternal seconds later and they were out of reach of the bullets. Jake slid the door shut and fell heavily onto the nearest bench, wiping sweat off his face. His hand came away grimy. *Goddammit.*

"What the fuck just happened?" Albert demanded. He was breathing hard as he settled himself across from Jake. From the front seat, Marshall added a questioning "Sarge?"

Jake leaned his head back against the cool metal of the van's side. He wasn't about to state the obvious. They both knew very well what had just happened, what Deke had done. They simply were having as much trouble as he was believing that their old platoon mate would turn on them.

After a few minutes, when his heart rate had returned to something resembling normal, he pulled himself together. Sitting up, he glanced around, trying to take stock. "Everyone okay?"

He realized that the girls had somehow squeezed themselves in a tight huddle in the furthest corner of the van, lodged between a bench and the rear doors. At his question, Chloe slowly raised her head. Her eyes were gleaming, pupils still dilated with fear, and he could see she was shaking.

"It's okay, now." He kept his voice soft, soothing, as he scooted over and helped her crawl out of the tiny gap. She was still trembling when she sat down across from him, and he reached out to wipe a smudge off her cheek. Reassured that Chloe would be all right, he turned his attention to Ashley.

She still cowered in the narrow space, her knees drawn up to her chest, sobbing into her arms, murmuring something Jake couldn't quite make out over the growl of the engine. He was about to kneel down, see that she was okay, but Albert was faster.

"Hey." Dragging his gun belt over his head, Albert put his gun down on the bench and then pushed past Jake and crouched in front of the girl. "Ashley?"

She glanced up, her cheeks wet and streaked with tears. "It's never gonna end, is it?" She spoke in whisper, but loud enough that Jake could make out the words when he strained to understand them. "Somebody is always gonna be wanting something because of my dad!"

"I'm sorry." Jake hated himself for saying it, for breaking yet another promise, but it couldn't be helped. "I can't let you go yet. Not now. You get that, right?"

The teary-eyed look she gave him was so full of misery that he was half-tempted to throw all common sense to the wind, and let her out of the car right there and then. The look tore at him, worse than the petrified expressions on the hostages' faces had that first afternoon in the bank. Because she was no longer a nameless body to use as leverage; he knew her now. He knew her strengths and weaknesses: knew that she had a sweet tooth, and that she hated the media attention she got just for being her father's daughter....

Ripping his gaze away from her, he steeled himself. He couldn't give in to the guilt. Ashley Beck was still their blue chip, and he wasn't gonna give her up. Not yet. Not now. There were too many uncertainties.

Jake was fairly certain that Deke was dead—he'd seen the corporal go down—but he didn't know what had happened to the others or how much Deke had told them. He also didn't know if anyone had heard the gun fight. The way their luck had been running, police might be storming into the industrial complex right this moment, finding and arresting witnesses. And maybe the Marines vet code would hold, though he was certain Cali would make any survivor offers they'd find hard to resist. So Deke's guys could be singing like canaries, telling Cali everything they knew. And even if Deke had told them nothing, that would



still be a lot.

Either way, he couldn't take the chance.

"Here." Albert was offering Ashley a rather grimy-looking rag that she accepted with a hiccuped sob. She wiped at her cheeks and gave it back. As she did, Albert snatched her wrist and turned her arm. "You're bleeding." He sounded concerned.

Jake sat up straighter. If she'd gotten shot.... He leaned over, examining the cut. It didn't look like a gunshot wound, or even a graze from a bullet. The blood was already clotting, and the wound would soon scab over. He blew out a breath of relief. "It's just a scratch."

Ashley squinted at the cut on her arm with confusion. "I... I don't know how that got there."

Jake figured that maybe she caught her arm on something when Albert thrust the two women back into the van. He hadn't exactly been gentle about it. "Marshall can take a look at it in a little bit," he suggested. Twisting around, he crawled up to the front of the van and saw they were out of the industrial area and back on busier roads. "Go west."

"West?" Marshall shot him a curious glance across his shoulder before turning his attention back to the traffic.

"Yeah. Stick to the back roads. Once we're over the state line, find a quiet spot. We need to regroup."

And he needed time to think about their next move.

oOo

Trying not to make a sound, Chloe struggled to stop shaking and get her breathing under control. She didn't want to draw attention to herself, and if she wasn't careful, she'd start hyperventilating again. She'd done more of that than she cared to remember in the first few days after Roger passed. Her heart was still thudding against her ribs with terror, though—right when she'd thought the worst was over, she'd unexpectedly found herself ducking bullets again.

And those bullets hadn't even come from the police. That would have been expected. But this....

Deke's betrayal had cut Jake deep; she could tell from the way he tried to keep his features in check, his twitching jaw the only outward sign of his inner struggle. It reminded her of their first night in the bank, after the power had been

cut, when he'd taken Bernard away into the back room. Back then, she hadn't been sure how to read the expression, but now, three days later, she thought she did.

Her breathing easing as her heart slowed, she allowed her thoughts to drift away from the fear of what had just happened and what might happen next.

It was amazing, wasn't it? How well she seemed to know this man, who'd literally burst into her life only days ago. She reckoned she should be afraid of him, or furious with him. Or possibly both: he'd robbed a bank at gunpoint and taken her hostage, after all. She'd seen him beat a man to death before her very eyes, for heaven's sake. And yet—.

And yet.

She wasn't sure if anyone else had noticed, but she could still remember the regret in his eyes after he'd shot the FBI agent, the poor woman's blood spattering her own face and dress. And she'd never forget how gently he'd cleaned the blood from her face later, or the soft tone in which he'd apologized. She'd realized right there and then that, no matter what, she was going to be all right; that there was more to Mr. Wolf than met the eye.

The same thing could be said about everyone on Wolf's team, she decided, watching through her lashes while Mr. Pig—Albert, she amended—washed out the cut on Ashley's arm and wrapped it with a bandage from Marshall's first aid kit—and what sort of criminal would think to bring a first aid kit on a bank robbery in the first place?

The girl was still sniffing a little, small hiccups that made her whole body shake, and Chloe's heart went out to her. None of them had had it easy, the last few days, but it had been especially tough for Ashley: her father getting arrested; her pictures plastered all over the TV-news; and her best friend getting shot in front of her.

Angling her body forward, Chloe touched Jake's wrist to get his attention. "Maybe you should let Ashley go?" she suggested quietly. "You have me."

He shook his head sharply. "Not yet."

Chloe was about to argue, then thought better of it. It'd be futile to try and convince Jake she'd make a good enough hostage. Both of them knew better than that: she was a nobody, a widow still grieving, with few friends and no family to care what happened to her. Whereas Ashley was important. Alan Beck was one of the most influential men in Pittsburgh. Even under arrest, he'd still be someone to reckon with, and the way the FBI had tried to negotiate for Ashley's release had left very little to the imagination. No, Ashley Beck provided much

better leverage than she could ever hope to do. And Jake had promised repeatedly he'd let Ashley go when he was ready. He'd kept his word so far; Chloe simply had to trust he would continue to do so.

While Chloe sat thinking about Ashley, Marshall kept the van to a steady pace. The last of the Pittsburgh suburbs fell behind without anyone showing up hot on their trail. Glancing out of the window, Chloe saw they were traveling along country lanes and back roads winding through low hills. Gradually, the farm fields gave way to hilly woods. A few miles further on, Marshall turned the van into an unmarked service road. They bumped along over the rut track, heading into the forest for about half a mile or so until the trees opened up to form a small, grassy clearing. Marshall stopped the van and the engine ticked as it cooled. For a long minute, nobody moved.

Jake gave a shake, as if waking up from a slumber, though his eyes had been open. "Go take some air," he suggested, before sliding open the side door and climbing out wearily. A moment later, Chloe found herself alone with Ashley in the back of the van. She was about to follow the men out, when she realized Ashley hadn't stirred.

"Come on." She reached over and tugged on Ashley's arm. "A little walk will do you good."

oOo

Ashley jumped as Chloe's hand settled on her wrist. She'd been so sunk in misery that she hadn't even noticed they'd stopped. Moving a little stiffly, she got out of the car, her heels sinking deep into the soft ground.

She took a deep breath; the air was cool, and slightly damp, with the faint scent of rot mixed in, but it wasn't unpleasant. She glanced around the clearing. It was dusky beneath the trees; the sun had almost set and gray clouds had moved in overhead. Nearby, Wolf and Cat were poring over maps they'd spread out on the hood of the van. Albert hovered close, his gun once again in his hand, his gaze restlessly darting around as if expecting SWAT-teams to jump out of the surrounding bushes at any second.

Ashley gave a soft, unladylike snort. To be honest, after the last few days, it wouldn't surprise her if they did, either.

She hooked arms with Chloe as they tottered across the clearing. Ashley was glad to be able to stretch her legs a little, even if the combination of her heels and the soft ground made for tricky going. She tried to keep her weight on her toes; the last thing she needed was a twisted ankle.

"Stay in sight," Albert warned them. His voice sounded loud in the forest.

Ashley gave him a wave to let him know they'd heard him, and carried on tiptoeing along in silence. The clearing wasn't very large, and a couple paces later, they'd reached the edge. Scrappy bushes blocked their way. "I need to pee," Ashley admitted to Chloe in a whisper, letting go of the other woman's arm. Pulling a branch aside, she started to push her way carefully through the shrubbery.

"Hey! What did I say?"

Albert was on them in an instant, grabbing Ashley's elbow and dragging her back before she could take another step.

She let out a cry of pain, shaking him off. "I was only gonna—." Tears of anger and frustration burned in her eyes. She was *so sick of everything*: of being the rich kid that everybody was fighting over; of being afraid all the time; of getting bossed and bullied. She felt ugly and filthy in her rumpled, blood-stained clothes, and she hadn't seen a shower in days. She was exhausted and hungry; the cut on her arm stung, and now she really, *really* needed to pee. Was it too much to ask for some peace and privacy? "You don't expect me to go right in front of you, do you?"

Albert flinched as she spat the words at him. The look on his face would've been funny if she hadn't been so furious. But it felt good to be angry. It sure felt a heck of a lot better than being scared out of her mind.

"No, I...", he stammered. He glanced over at Wolf, who'd looked up from the maps when she'd first raised her voice. Wolf gave her a hard stare, before he nodded. Albert turned back to her. "Well, okay. Two minutes."

Two...? Ashley opened her mouth to object: two minutes wasn't nearly enough time for a girl to do her business. An urgent shake of the head from Chloe stopped her. She snapped her mouth shut without another word and stalked into the underbrush, not caring about the way the branches slapped against her bare legs.

Once she was far enough away that she couldn't see the men any more, and she figured they wouldn't be able to see her either, she squatted awkwardly. Maybe she could try and make a run for it. But where would she go? She didn't even know where she was, other than somewhere in a forest across the state line in Ohio. And how far could she get wearing heels, anyway, before they found her? They were trained soldiers, and while she was quite certain there weren't many forests in Iraq, she didn't think she'd be able to outrun them.

"Ashley?" It was Albert, calling her name. Her two minutes were up. She sighed and got up, straightening her skirt and pretending not to see the dried blood

stains on her clothes. She'd better head back, before he decided to come after her.

"Coming," she called back.

With the worst of her anger gone, she realized she'd walked further into the undergrowth than she'd planned, and the vegetation seemed determined to block her way. Twigs and leaves caught her clothes and skin. She tore crossly at the vines until finally, she tumbled out into the clearing and bumped headlong into Albert.

"Easy now." He steadied her with a hand on her arm, grinning a little.

She shook him off again, catching a whiff of dried blood and stale sweat as she pulled away. The urge to lash out, to vent some more of her frustration, was strong. She scrunched up her nose. "You stink." Dimly, she realized it probably wasn't a good idea to rile him up like this, but she couldn't seem to care. To be honest, she was afraid she didn't smell much better herself, but that? *Really* didn't bear thinking about. She suppressed a quiver of disgust.

Albert's reaction, however, was not what she'd expected. Instead of growing angry, he grinned at her. "This?" He gestured down himself. "I've stunk worse. Try doin' reconnaissance in full gear for a week in the Iraqi desert." He chuckled, and she sniffed loudly in response.

Holding her head high, she stalked back to the van. It probably would've made more of an impression if she hadn't had to struggle with her heels catching in the dirt so much, though. She *so* should've gone with the Keds that morning.

oOo

"So, you wanna stay in the States?" Marshall shifted the maps and leaned over to take a closer look at the roads Jake had indicated.

"Yeah." Jake knew they had to stay one step ahead of the cops, and doing something they weren't anticipating was the best way he knew how. "They'll expect us to make for Canada soon as we can." He uttered a wry chuckle. "So we don't."

Albert had joined them again after bringing the girls back into the clearing. "What about the money?" He'd clearly overheard the last few words.

"Money can wait." Jake took the maps and started folding them. "We head west: Montana, Idaho. All the way to Washington, if need be. We stick to the back roads, stay off the radar. We'll cross the border once the heat is off."

A slow grin spread across Albert's face. "Sounds like a plan. What about them?" He indicated the girls with a jerk of his head.

Jake glanced at Chloe and Ashley, hovering nearby, next to the car. Ashley still looked upset, red splotches coloring her cheeks. Chloe seemed resigned to rolling with whatever happened next. He wanted to let them go, he really did but—.

"We'll bring 'em along." He'd probably regret it at some point, but he wasn't quite ready to send Chloe home. Not yet.... He shied away from exploring why, or if he ever would be. She'd kept him sane, these past days, he knew that much.

And as for Ashley.... Her father would still have influence. "Once we're in Canada, we—."

"You bastard!" Ashley snarled, taking one wobbly step toward him. Her outburst startled Jake a little; apparently, he'd spoken louder than he'd thought. "You said you'd let us go! You *promised!*"

"And I will," Jake assured her. He meant it, too; his word was all he had left. "Just not yet."

Ashley glared at him, and opened her mouth to protest some more, but Chloe's hand on her back stopped her. Chloe gave Jake an sharp look, and he found himself shifting his gaze away. Giving himself something to do, he stashed the maps under his arm and made a shooing motion. "Now hush, and get your pretty selves back in the van. Sooner we get on the road, sooner we're in Canada, and sooner you get to go home."

oOo

They kept going for several more hours until they were deep into the Ohio backwoods. Too tired to hold on to her anger, Ashley dozed uneasily, making herself as comfortable as she could be curled up in a corner of the bench. When the car stopped again, she woke with a start. It was pitch-black outside, and the van's headlights had been turned off. She couldn't see even the faintest glimmer of light. Then Cat opened his door, the hinges squeaking unpleasantly, and the interior light came on. Ashley squinted owlshly into the sudden glare, and discovered they'd ended up in another secluded spot in the forest. The trees formed a seemingly unbroken wall of deeper blackness around them.

Crawling awkwardly out of the back of the van, bones creaking, she stumbled a little before she managed to find her balance. She was careful to stay inside the small circle of light that spilled from the van's windows. The air had gone from cool to cold—the temperature had dropped considerably since they'd left the

bank—and she rubbed her bare arms, shivering. Without a word, Wolf offered her a ratty blanket. She accepted it gratefully and she and Chloe huddled under it together, perched on a tree stump.

Albert handed them each a bottle of water. "Dinner's ready."

Dinner, it turned out, consisted of stale Saltines and hard crackers that Albert had discovered in the back of the van, along with the water. Ashley tried not to think about who had left the crackers there, or when. She told herself that Deke had supplied the food, and was hungry enough that she munched down her share quickly, washing it away with large gulps of water.

Still, she mused, it'd be a tough call which was the worst meal she'd ever had: these hard crackers, or the cold, greasy pizza back in the bank. She sipped on the last of her water, watching the men as they ate over near the car.

"Ya know," Albert mumbled around a mouthful of crumbs, "I can't believe I'm sayin' this, but I'd give anything for some MREs."

Cat snorted a laugh, smacking his fellow soldier on the upper arm. "Who the hell are you, and what have you done with Piggy Roman?"

"Seriously." Albert devoured another cracker. "Those Italian cheese things were crap, but the meat loaf weren't so bad."

Cat grimaced. "Albie, you really are a back country hick. The meat loaf was goddamned *awful*." He gave an exaggerated shudder, before gulping down some water. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he added, "No, man, my vote goes to the pasta with veggies."

Albert made a disgusted noise and crumpled the plastic wrapper from the crackers into a ball, before lobbing it into the underbrush. The wrapper unfolded itself quickly and didn't fly far before fluttering to the grass. Albert gave it a dark look. He turned back to Cat. "I swear that's what gave me the runs one time, in Baghdad."

"Freeze-dried pasta with vegetables?" Cat smirked incredulously. "You sure it wasn't something that little Brit reporter cooked up for you? 'Cause she—."

"Guys, guys," Wolf interjected, cutting off whatever Cat had been about to say. "Can it. Please." He gestured at Ashley and Chloe. "We got ladies present."

"Sorry, Sarge."

"Besides—," Wolf pushed away from the van's fender, where he'd been resting one foot, "—any idiot can tell you that the chicken salsa was the best."

Ashley could feel Chloe shake as she laughed quietly. Much to her surprise, she found she was hard-pressed herself not to let her mouth curl up in a smile.

"So, Ashley," Albert scratched his neck with his free hand, "What about you? What's your favorite food?"

She thought about it for a moment. "Italian."

"Aha, pizza girl, eh?" Albert grinned. Ashley didn't bother to correct him. How could she explain to him the weekly lunches with her dad at *Luigi's*, or what those meals had meant to her? What the memory of those lunches meant to her now?

"What about you?" Wolf tilted his water bottle at Chloe. "What do you like?"

"Cuban." Chloe's answer came without hesitation. "There's a small place on Fourth Avenue, where Roger and I always go...." Her voice trailed off, and she stared down at her hands, worrying at a hangnail.

"Alright." Wolf cleared his throat. "Enough talk. Everyone, get some shuteye. Albie, you take first watch."

Ashley glanced at Chloe, curiously, though the other woman refused to meet her gaze. Who was Roger? They'd been split up into separate groups in the bank, and she realized she didn't really know Chloe, certainly not as well as she'd come to know Robby Sabian. Judging by the compassionate look Wolf gave Chloe when the two women passed him on the way back to the van, Ashley figured that he, on the other hand, knew very well who Roger was.

For some reason, the knowledge made her feel more alone than ever.

oOo

They slept in the car that night, as hard and uncomfortable a bed as Ashley'd ever had. The van's metal floor offered no protection against the cold, and the chill air seeped quickly through the filthy blanket. Not even huddling close with Chloe could keep her warm, and she slept fitfully, waking up whenever someone moved, or the watch changed.

By the time the sky beyond the trees had turned gray, Ashley was too exhausted to be mad, or frightened, or upset any longer at not being let go. Clambering clumsily from the van, she yawned and rubbed at her eyes, which stung with fatigue. The moist morning air was cool, making her skin pebble, and the dew-covered grass slapped cold and wet against her ankles. She stumbled into the underbrush to relieve herself, this time without garnering any warnings from the



men.

By the time she was done, Albert was dividing the last of the stale crackers. Ashley shook her head; the mere sight of the dry-as-dust squares made her want to gag. She grabbed a water bottle instead, longing for some hot tea with lemon.

"Hey, come on, you gotta eat something." Albert tried to shove the crackers into her hand.

Ashley shook her head again. "Not hungry." She found the tree stump again and perched on it, drawing her legs up, curling in on herself. Fresh tears burned behind her eyes. She was just so damn tired and she just wanted to go home. Call her dad and have him send someone to pick her up. Or at least tell him she was still alive. He must be sick with worry. But her father was in jail, and there was no way Wolf was going to let her near a phone anyway.

As if he could sense she was thinking about him, the sergeant squatted in front of her, ducking low to catch her eye. "Hey. What's going on? You okay?"

Glancing up, Ashley caught Albert watching them from a distance. He must've told Wolf she refused to eat. She gave Wolf a miserable look. "No," she muttered. "I want to go home." A tear spilled over despite her efforts not to cry, and she brushed it away with the back of her hand.

"I know, I know. And I'm sorry." Wolf offered her one of those intense stares that seemed to indicate he meant it. "But you know I can't let you go yet. I promise, soon as I can, you'll be free." He patted her knee, before he pushed back to his feet. "Now, eat something. You gotta keep your strength up."

Ashley reluctantly accepted the handful of Saltines he offered her, and nibbled on their edges without really tasting them. It was easier to obey Wolf than to continue to refuse.

"Ashley? What's wrong?" Chloe lowered herself next to Ashley on the tree stump, giving her a slight nudge with her hip to tell her to move over a little. Ashley wanted to laugh—did the woman really need to ask what was wrong?—but she didn't have the energy. So she settled for a shake of her head. *Don't wanna talk about it.*

"You know Jake's gonna send you home soon as he can, don't you?"

Ashley lifted her head, shooting a glance sideways. "So, it's Jake, now, is it?" Though her tone was bitter, she spoke without force.

Chloe had the decency to give a slight wince, but she didn't back off. She shrugged one shoulder. "I know. It's insane, isn't it?" She turned her face away

from Ashley, glancing back toward the van, where Wolf was talking to Cat in a low voice. "I know it's crazy, and maybe I'm delusional, but I trust him."

"How can you do that?" Ashley clenched her arms tighter around her knees. "After everything?"

"Especially after everything." Chloe curled her hands around the edges of the tree stump and swung her feet, bumping a heel against the tree's base. "We're still alive, aren't we? And so's everyone else: Bernard, Abe, Rocko...."

"Cass nearly wasn't so lucky." Ashley could still remember the feel of her friend's blood on her hands, hot and sticky. The cracker crumbs she'd forced down turned to stone in her stomach, and she took another sip of water to wash down the bile threatening to rise at the memory. She'd been so scared....

Chloe straightened and took a breath. "That was an accident, and you know it." She twisted around a little until she could meet Ashley's gaze. "They were pretty shook up about that, too."

Ashley picked at a loose thread on her skirt. After a moment, she nodded. "Yeah." She scrubbed vainly at a dried blood spatter on her bare leg. "I just—." A sob lodged in her throat, and she couldn't go on.

"I know." Chloe draped an arm across her shoulders, pulling her close. Ashley hid her face in the other woman's shoulder. "Shh, I know."

They sat like that for a short while, Ashley pulling in deep gulps of air so she wouldn't start crying. Then Albert called, "Ladies! Time to go."

Ashley cleared her throat and rubbed her eyes with her palms, before she slipped from the stump and Chloe walked her back to the van.

"I have an idea," Chloe whispered as they approached the car. "I think I know something that might make you feel better." She locked arms with Ashley and stopped in front of Wolf, who was waiting impatiently by the back door. "Jake?"

If he was surprised by Chloe's use of his first name, he gave no indication, merely cocked his head a little curiously.

"We're gonna need some things."

He lifted a brow. "What sort of things?"

"Fresh clothes, for one." Chloe plucked at her dotted dress, which was decidedly less nice than it had been when Ashley first saw her in the bank. "And other stuff... female things.... You know."

"Hm." Wolf scrutinized them both for a moment. He stepped back, waving them into the van, and Ashley thought he'd refused Chloe's request. But as he followed them in, he ordered, "Guys? Let's find a town."

oOo

They discovered a mall two towns over offering everything they needed: one of those brand-new, modern glass-and-steel monstrosities that looked forbidding from the outside but was undoubtedly all sparkling chrome and gleaming marble inside. A foodmart occupied the first floor at one corner of the complex, the only store with its own entrance. It was fronted by the busiest section of the parking lot, where SUV's swerved around women pushing shopping carts loaded to the rim with groceries. Jake told Albert, who'd taken over driving duties, to slow down a little. He made note as they drove past of the location of various security cameras covering the parking lot, and the rent-a-cops loitering near the various exits, trying to work out angles and avenues of approach.

"So, how are we gonna do this, Sarge?" Marshall stuck his head through to the front in between Jake and Albert.

"We're not." Jake pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "She is."

"What?" Albert whipped his head around so fast that the van swerved and he had to yank at the wheel or they'd have ended up in the ditch. And wouldn't that have been a fitting end to such a fucked-up endeavor?

"Eyes on the road, Albie," Jake chided, grabbing the dash.

"But, Sarge...?" Marshall started.

He didn't need to finish; his confusion was evident in those two words. Jake couldn't blame him. He wasn't really sure it was the right way to go about it, either. And if there was another way, he'd take it in heartbeat. But if it existed, he didn't see it. They were still pretty close to Pittsburgh and the bank siege had likely made the local news in these parts, plastering their photos across everyone's TV screens. If some law-abiding civilian didn't recognize their mugs, he was certain that Pittsburgh PD would've sent out an APB to the various states bordering on Pennsylvania. No, they simply were too conspicuous. He didn't really have a choice: he was gonna have to trust Chloe.

Not to mention, he thought, glancing down at his wrinkled and too-large shirt taken from the SWAT-gear, the way they looked was in itself bound to draw attention they didn't want. It was one reason why he'd so easily agreed when Chloe asked: they did need supplies if they were to have a chance to make it all the way across the country and into Canada without getting caught.

But could he really *trust* her?

They found an unused barn a few miles outside town, at the end of a grassy track. "Get Ashley, and wait inside. Two hours." Jake twisted in his seat until he could meet both Marshall and Albert's concerned gazes. "If we're not back in two hours, you let the girl go, and you evade and escape. Don't stay together and *don't* try to come for me." He didn't have to add that if he weren't back in two hours, he'd likely be dead.

Marshall gave him a curt nod and helped Ashley step out of the car. She followed him meekly enough into the barn, and Jake watched them go with a little frown. The girl worried him. There seemed very little left of the sassy young woman who'd once tricked Albie into losing his gun.

Albert appeared to have the same memory on his mind. He hovered near the van, waiting until Wolf had told Chloe to climb into the passenger seat and shut the door. "Sarge, you shouldn't be doing this. Let me or Marshall take her. If she sells us out—."

"Get inside, Albert." There was nothing Albie could say that Jake hadn't already thought himself. He knew he was putting a lot of faith in Chloe. If he was wrong, if he'd misjudged her, he wasn't gonna let anyone else bear the consequences; if she betrayed them, if things went south, he'd do whatever it took to give Albert and Marshall time to get away.

He turned the van around. A minute later they were bucking back across the track in a cloud of their own dust. In the rear view mirror, Jake saw Albert watching them unhappily. He risked taking his eyes off the track for a second to give Chloe a sideways look. She sat quietly beside him, her hands folded in her lap.

Once they hit the main road and were heading back to town, the road smoothed out and driving didn't take his full attention any longer. "I'm taking a big chance here."

"I know." Chloe's voice was so soft that Jake could barely hear her over the engine. He threw her another look and realized she was studying him intently.

He turned his focus back to the road ahead. "You could go to the cops. Call for help. Something."

"I won't." It came out without hesitation.

They'd reached the mall. Jake hit the blinker and turned into the parking lot, heading for a quiet spot, far away from where he knew the cameras reached. He

killed the engine. "Why?" he asked, shifting in his seat to face her. "Why would you want this? Don't you want to go home? Go back to your life?"

She didn't reply right away. Instead, she gazed down into her lap, her hair falling forward and obscuring her face. Her fingers toyed with the folds of her dress. When she lifted her head, there were tears in her eyes.

"I don't have a home," she whispered. "*Roger* was my home. After he... died...." A tear spilled over and trickled down her cheek. She drew a shuddering breath. "It's just not *fair*! He's gone, and I walked away. But in here—," she planted a fist against her chest, "—in here, I'm as dead as he is. And nobody sees it. Nobody wants to see it. But you do...." Another tear followed the first, streaking through the grime on her face. "With you, I no longer have to pretend to be something I'm not...."

"Hey...." He reached over and swiped her tears with his thumb. She leaned into his touch, something he didn't think she was entirely aware of. Angling toward her, he lightly brushed his lips over hers before pulling back just enough that he could bring her face back into focus. He sought her gaze. "You ready to do this?"

She gave a tremulous nod, chin quivering.

"Then let's do it."

oOo

Marshall kept pacing across the dusty floor. It made Albert nervous. He shot his platoon mate a dirty look that went unnoticed before turning back to his vigil, grimacing to himself. A grimy window next to the barn door offered a clear line of sight down the dirt track, all the way back to the main road. Though it was too soon for Sarge to return, Albert figured it couldn't hurt to keep an eye out. They were wanted men now: fugitives hunted by their own countrymen. That certainly wasn't something he'd taken into consideration when Henry had first talked to him about the plan, but, to be honest? It wasn't that much different from his tour in Iraq: hot action alternating with brain-numbing boredom. Hurry up and wait. Possible danger everywhere. Watch duty. Patrolling the perimeter. Not enough sleep. Bad food. Hard beds....

Still, he reckoned, it was a better deal than fixin' cars for old man Johnson back home. If he never got to see that mean son of a bitch again, it'd be too soon. And maybe, when they got to Canada, he could send some of his cut home to Ma. To help with the rent, and so she could hire someone to fix the roof. She'd like that.

He only wished he could explain to her about Henry.

"Hey, Albie? You think Sarge's alright?" Marshall interrupted his introspection. "She's not gonna sell us out?"

Albert shrugged. "He hasn't been wrong so far." He only hoped Sarge's instincts about women were better than his own. Last time *he'd* trusted a girl, he'd ended up staring down the barrel of his own Mac. He glanced over to the far end of the barn, where Ashley had slid to the floor, her back against the rough wooden wall. She'd drawn her knees up to her chest and folded her arms around them. Her eyes were dull, staring straight ahead without seeming to see anything.

Albert frowned. "Cover for me a minute, 'kay?" He abandoned his post at the window and sauntered across the dirty barn floor. "Hey." He slid down the wall next to Ashley, close enough that he could feel her body heat through the sleeve of his shirt but not close enough to touch.

She gave no indication she'd heard him. Albert pulled the strap of his Mac over his head and laid his gun next to him on the floor. He scrubbed a tired hand across his face. "Look, I'm sorry 'bout this, alright? All of it. I wish—" He stopped, unsure what he wanted. Except for maybe that stupid FBI bitch to have stuck with the program, instead of trying to be some goddamn hero and fuck up Sarge's whole plan.

"Why?" Ashley's voice was so soft that he wasn't certain at first that she'd spoken. "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" He angled forward a little so he could see her face. "Rob a bank?"

She nodded.

"Oh man." He rested his head back against the wall and gazed up at the ceiling beams, collecting his thoughts. "For Sarge. After what they did to him...? He saved our lives, back in Fallujah, and they put him in jail for it. That's just not right. They took everything from him. So, ya know, we thought we'd help him get some back."

She made a noise. "And the money had nothing to do with it?"

He shrugged. "Well, yeah, sure, that too." He drew up his legs and rested his forearms on his knees. "I won't lie about that: I can't wait to get to Canada and get my hands on all that cash."

"What are you gonna do with it?" Ashley plucked idly at her skirt. He tilted his head a little to look at her.

"Dunno. Spend it, I guess. Hey," he turned further, "you know about these things, right? What should I get? Cars? Jewelry?"

She looked back at him. "How much is it?"

"Total? Six mil. But Sarge'll get the biggest cut; he's earned it. And he'll want to send some to Mikey's mother. So—" He tried to do some quick calculations in his head, "—one million?"

"A million isn't gonna last long if you throw it around on stuff like you said." She shrugged. "You should, I don't know, invest it. Go into real estate, like my dad."

He blinked at her, before he grinned slowly. "Maybe I should keep you around as my, whatchamacallit, financial adviser." Instantly, her face clouded, and he mentally kicked himself. He never did know how to talk to people. "Hey, that was a joke. Sorry." He scooted a little closer until he could lightly bump her shoulder with his. "I'll make sure nothing happens to you."

Much to Albert's surprise, she let her head rest against his arm. "If you really want to help me," she muttered, "you could let me go now. I can walk to town and I won't tell anyone where you are. I promise."

"You know I can't do that." Albert reached over with his free hand and tucked a few wayward strands of her hair behind her ear. "Don't worry: you're gonna get home. Sarge said so, and he always keeps his promises."

For a short while, the barn was silent. Marshall went on keeping a lookout through the window, only briefly glancing back at Albert from time to time to give a small shake of his head: *still no sign of Sarge*. Albert thought Ashley'd maybe fallen asleep on his shoulder, when she spoke again. "What was it like, over there?"

"In Iraq?" He ducked his head forward a little until he could scan her face. He wasn't sure if she was setting him up again or not. But Ashley's expression was honestly curious, and truth be told, she appeared too worn down to be trying to double-cross him. He settled back. "A bit like this." He indicated a wide arc with his free hand, trying to include the barn and the last few days in a single gesture. "Adrenaline, fear, blood, people dying. Only a hundred times worse." He paused for a moment. "And the women weren't as pretty."

She made a noise somewhere between a giggle and a snort, and mumbled something he couldn't make out, before snuggling closer. She was shivering and he noticed goosebumps had popped up on her bare legs. "You cold?"

She nodded.

"Okay. Sarge will be back soon with fresh clothes. Hang in there, alright?" He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her tightly against him in an attempt to

offer her some of his body heat. She let him, and gradually her breathing deepened as she fell asleep for real.

Albert didn't dare move for fear of waking her, despite Marshall's eye roll when the other man caught on to his position. "You just keep an eye out for Sarge," Albert groused, keeping his voice low. Marshall shook his head as he turned back to peer out the dirty window again but, thankfully, he didn't say anything.

oOo

"You look great." Standing outside the van, Jake gave Chloe a final once-over to make sure she was as inconspicuous as was possible under the circumstances.

She smoothed the skirt of her dress a little nervously beneath his scrutiny. "Liar." She gave him a tiny smile.

Jake grinned back. He'd meant every word, but he learned a long time ago not to argue about those kind of things with women; they were losing battles, not the sort of fight he engaged in willingly.

"One more thing." He ducked back into the cab and came out with a crumpled baseball cap. "Here." He planted it on her head and pulled the visor down over her eyes. "Keep your head low, so the cameras don't pick you up, okay?"

"Okay." Chloe adjusted the cap a little.

"You have everything?" She'd memorized a list as long as his arm of things they needed and he'd given her a sizable wad of the cash from the duffel. All twenties and fifties, which had been the only kind of bills the Three Rivers' registers had held. It was a good thing, Jake supposed. Not many places these days where you could pay with a hundred dollar bill and not raise eyebrows.

"Yes." She patted her purse, where he knew the money was.

"Don't get it all from one store. Spread it out."

She gave a soft chuckle. "You told me that already. I can do it."

"Okay." She was right; he'd told her several times. But he wasn't used to not being in control and while he trusted her enough to know she wouldn't sell them out, he wasn't entirely sure how good she was at subterfuge. "One hour, alright? Then come back here, even if you aren't done."

Chloe gave a last nod, and he sent her on her way with an encouraging pat in the small of her back. He watched her cross the parking lot and disappear into the sprawling complex of the shopping mall. He scratched his neck. All he could



do now was wait.

He climbed back into the cab of the van and settled into a position that allowed him to survey the area in all directions through the mirrors without being too obvious about it. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. Chloe wouldn't turn on them, but someone might still identify her; he wasn't taking any chances. They were still far too close to Pennsylvania for comfort, and every minute they were exposed was another minute for someone to notice and recognize them.

In the side mirror, he spotted a patrol car with the local sheriff's logo turning into the parking lot. He slid further down in his seat, out of sight, his fingers resting on the safety on his gun. The cop passed by without a second glance at the van, parked close to the nearest entrance to the mall and walked in. Jake let out a breath and sat back up.

He wondered how safe it was for them to keep the van. That deputy just now hadn't looked at it twice, which would indicate there was no warrant out for a gray Ford Econoline. Still, it was probably best to ditch it at the first opportunity, to sever the last tie with Deke. He wished he knew how much the cops had learned....

Catching himself, he huffed a wry laugh at his own expense. When was there ever enough intel? Having to make life-and-death decisions based on incomplete or even faulty information was pretty much par for the course. No different here than it had been over there.

Jake glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes had passed; it would be another forty before Chloe returned, and he shifted to settle himself a little more comfortably in the worn leather.

The rest of the hour crawled by second by second and Jake tried not to fidget. Shoppers came and went; the sheriff's deputy returned to his car and drove off without even a glance in Jake's direction; it started to rain a little, a thin drizzle that stained the asphalt black.

*Hurry up and wait* had always seemed to be the military's motto, and Jake was glad for the years of learning patience. Even so, a burst of relief spread through him when he finally saw Chloe tottering in his direction across the parking lot. She was struggling with armloads of bags and boxes. Darting a last look around for any sign of danger, Jake started the van and drove over to her. They quickly loaded the bags into the back and she crawled into the passenger seat, rubbing her arms.

"You cold?" He reached to turn up the heat, before putting the car in gear. "Got everything?"

"I think so." She blew out a breath and pulled the cap from her head. Her skin was dotted with small droplets of perspiration, and she wiped her face with an arm. "You know, if we could stay in a motel or something tonight, some place with a shower—."

"No." It came out a little harsher than Jake had intended. She meant well. But it was too soon to let down their guard; the cops might be looking at anyone checking into motels in the area. Besides, paying for a room with cash? That'd get them flagged as noteworthy just the same as if they'd be using Ashley's Gold Card.

Maybe, he thought, as they headed back out of town, they could lay a false trail. Send the cops off on a wild goose chase. It'd give them a bit of breathing room. But how to go about it without getting caught?

oOo

"Someone's coming." Though the warning was uttered quietly, Marshall's voice seemed startlingly loud in the deep silence of the barn.

Albert stirred from the half-slumber he'd drifted into—his soldier's nature allowing him to catch z's whenever he could. He snuck a peek at his watch. Nearly two hours had passed since Sarge had taken the woman and left. Close enough to the deadline that it might be Sarge but could just as easily be someone else. The cops, or, Albert grumbled to himself, the barn's owner. With the luck they'd been having, it wouldn't surprise him in the least.

"Who is it?" He disentangled himself from Ashley. She woke when he moved, and blinked sleepily at him. Her cheeks flushed a light pink; apparently she felt a little awkward about having used his shoulder for a pillow, but Albert couldn't say he'd minded at all—even if his arm had gone numb some twenty minutes in. He rolled his shoulder and flexed his fingers to get some of the feeling back.

"Can't tell yet." Marshall leaned forward to peer more intently through the window at a distant speck that was quickly growing bigger. Crossing to stand behind him, Albert didn't have such a good view, though he could see it had started to rain while they waited. His fingers tightened their hold on his Mac without him even realizing it.

"It's the van." Another twenty seconds had passed before Marshall could be sure. "It's Sarge!"

Albert relaxed his grip on his weapon. He swung around. "Hear that? We're still good." Ashley yawned behind her hand in response; Albert chuckled softly in amusement.

A minute or two later, the gray Ford reached the barn. Albert met Sarge outside—one look at his face told Albert everything had gone to plan, another relief—and was quickly put to work distributing their haul, with Chloe instructing him in a soft voice as to which bag belonged to whom.

"Those are yours." She indicated two dark green plastic bags with white lettering. "And..." She peered into another bag, "... yes, this one's Ashley's."

After carrying everything inside, Albert shook the contents out of the bags she'd told him were his. He found a pair of stiff new jeans, two T-shirts and a flannel button-down, as well as a denim jacket. Price tags hung from all of the clothes, but his pocket knife made quick work of those.

"Clean boxers here." Marshall riffled through a handful of flat, square cellophane packets. "Oh, Piggy, these would be yours." He snickered meaningfully and chucked one of the packages in Albert's direction.

Albert snatched it from the air with one hand, took one look, and grimaced. "Haha, very funny." The boxers Marshall had thrown him were dark blue, dotted with pink piglets. Unsure what to make of them, Albert looked back up. Sarge's features twisted as he bit back a grin while Chloe fidgeted anxiously, her expression half-smile and half worried frown.

Peering up at him uncertainly through her lashes, she said, "I saw them and they were—" She broke off, the half-smile faltering. "I didn't mean to—."

Ashley interrupted her before she'd finished. "They're cute." Though she was pale and there were dark smudges under her eyes, she smiled a watery little smile and Albert couldn't hold on to his offense. He hadn't liked seeing her so down; if it brought Ashley out of her funk, he didn't mind being made a little fun of.

"Thanks." He saluted Chloe with the packet and she relaxed visibly, offering him a small nod. Sarge looked pleased.

"What, no cats?" Marshall browsed the rest of the packages, and brandished them mock-angry in Chloe's direction.

"Sorry, no." Chloe gave a shy smile. "No wolves either."

Sarge was shaking his head in dismay, but Albert knew him well enough to know that Chloe's lightening of the mood took a lot of weight off of his shoulders, though he quickly went back to business. "Okay, people, let's hurry up and get out of here, 'kay?"

"There's a sink back there, Sarge." Marshall pointed to the corner where they'd discovered the chipped sink. "Still connected to the main. Water's cold, though."

Marshall was right, Albert decided ten minutes later, once it was his turn for a sponge bath at the old sink. The water that trickled from the tap, the chrome flaking off the rusting metal underneath, was *darned* cold. It encouraged him to make quick work of washing up and scooting into the fresh clothes. They fit surprisingly well. Though she wasn't paying attention to him, he shot Chloe an appreciative glance. Sarge certainly knew how to pick 'em; the girl'd make a good quartermaster. He finished buttoning up the shirt. "Ladies, your turn."

The two women hesitated, exchanging a look and clutching plastic bags to their chests. Albert frowned in confusion.

"Let's give the girls some privacy, alright?" Sarge shooed him out. As Albert and Marshall headed outside, Albert heard him telling the girls as he followed, "Ten minutes."

oOo

It had stopped raining while they were changing into their new clothes, though the clouds still hung low and threatening. A chilly breeze had picked up, blowing in icy air from the north. Jake shivered in his new coat; he'd never been much for cold weather. Maybe, he thought, once they picked up the money, he'd head for Mexico. Have a couple of Coronas while kicking back in the shade of a palm tree, watch the sun go down in the ocean with a pretty strawberry blonde at his side....

With a rueful shake of his head, Jake chased away the happy fantasy. He couldn't afford to dwell on daydreams like that; everything still depended on him keeping his head together. He forced himself to concentrate on the far grimmer reality of their current situation, flipping through the stack of maps until he found the one he was looking for. "Cat, get over here a minute." Not wanting to get the map wet, he made his way round to the back of the van and unfolded it on the floor.

"What's up, Sarge?" Marshall's shadow fell across Jake as he leaned in through the back doors next to Jake. He gave the map a quick glance. "Michigan? I thought we were heading out west?"

"We are." Jake leaned back against the side of the van. "But first, we gotta do something else. I got a plan."

"Another one?" Albert quipped. His insolent smirk quickly vanished under Jake's unsmiling frown, and he muttered an apology.

"I want to throw the cops a bone," Jake explained, once he had their full attention. "Give them a false lead."

"You want to make 'em think we went to Michigan?" Marshall asked.

A gust of wind blew into the back of the van, lifting the map and making it flutter. Jake smoothed it back down on the floor. "Exactly. Problem is, we really gotta go to Michigan for the plan to work."

"So, what's the plan, Sarge?" Albert came to stand between them, looking down at the map.

"We'll have the girl call her father. Even if they haven't released him yet, the cops'll be monitoring his phone. Once they trace the call back to Michigan—"

"—they'll think we're heading toward Detroit." Marshall quickly picked up Jake's strategy. "And the Canadian border." He grinned. "I like it, Sarge."

"Thing is," Jake warned, "we gotta find the right location. Somewhere remote, no traffic cameras, but with a fast escape route out of the area." He leaned over, resting his weight on his spread-out hands while studying the map up close, trying to find a spot that fit.

"Why don't we just let Ashley go?" Albert suggested. "We can drop her off near the state line, and she can tell them we're planning to go to Detroit."

"Right." Marshall snorted. "And she'd lie to the cops for us, why?"

"I'm just sayin'! She wants to go home. She said she wouldn't—."

"Albie, you're a douche." Marshall laughed and poked him. "Ever hear of once bitten, twice shy? Last time she took your gun, remember?"

"That was—." Albert took a deep breath but his eyes flashed as he whirled around to face Marshall. "Look who's talking. You're the medic who got himself knocked out by an old man."

"With a goddamn phone," Marshall protested. "And I wasn't knocked out. Just... groggy."

"Guys, guys!" Jake straightened up from the map. Tension was running high, he understood that, but they couldn't afford this. "Let's stick to the matter at hand, alright? We all got caught with our pants down." When the lights had gone out and he'd found himself at the wrong end of a gun, his men overpowered, he'd thought it was over. He'd been mad, at himself, at his guys.... What a stupid way to go: outwitted by a bunch of civilians. He didn't like to think about it, but it

had been that sense of humiliation more than anger that had made him nearly lose control and kill Rocko. Only the kid's horrified stare had stopped him.

Jake shoved the thoughts to the back of his mind, where they could fester with the rest of the many fuckups he didn't want to think about. He peered intently from Marshall to Albert and back. "What's done's done, no use assigning blame now."

"Yes, Sarge."

"Sorry, Sarge."

"Alright." Crisis averted, he turned back to study the map again. "We can't send Ashley home because A: Marshall's right. She can't be trusted, and she knows too much. And B: we might still need her for leverage."

Albert sighed. "I just don't like it much," he muttered. "She's a good kid."

Jake dragged a hand through his hair. It was still damp from where he'd stuck it under the freezing tap earlier. He didn't like it much either. In fact, if he'd known how it would all play out, he might've thought twice about taking the Beck girl to begin with. His original plan had been to release her—both her and Chloe—after they'd hooked up with Deke, but the corporal's betrayal had put an end to that. Jake reminded himself of what he'd just told his men: what's done's done. Nothing he could do about it now; he'd simply have to make the best out of what he had.

It was, however, one of the reasons why he'd decided to have Ashley make the call herself. If he couldn't release her, at least he could allow her to let her family know she was alive and well. He hoped it might help her cope a little better, too.

"Hey Sarge? Why don't we send Chloe to make the call?" Marshall suggested. "At least we know now that we can trust *her*."

Jake started shaking his head. "No, it's gotta be Ashley."

He wasn't about to share what Chloe had revealed to him: that she didn't think there was anyone she *could* call. That was the other reason he'd picked Ashley for the job. Chloe had no close relatives, and most of her friends had in fact been her husband's friends. According to her, they'd gradually drifted away after his death. The cops would've been hard-pressed to find anyone they *could* monitor for signs of life from Chloe.

"Where do you want to do this?" Marshall had apparently accepted Jake's decision without further questions or objections.

"Here." Jake had found the spot while they talked, and he jabbed a finger at the map, before outlining the rest of his plan to them. It was gonna be tricky, he thought, but doable. Success or failure mostly depended upon how fast the cops would be able to trace the call. Jake believed that if he could keep the conversation short, they should be long gone before Cali or whoever was handling their case now could send in the troops.

o0o

Sarge checked his watch. "Ten minutes are up. Albie, get the girls." He folded the maps and dropped them on the passenger seat. "And make sure the barn's clean."

Albert trotted back to the barn. He'd be glad to get out of here; staying put for too long made him nervous. Especially in a place as open and exposed as this. While the bare fields surrounding the barn offered clear lines of view in all directions, and no enemy could approach them unseen, the visibility was a mixed blessing: it made them stand out just as clearly to anyone passing. All it would take was one curious local, and they'd have the cops descend on them.

He rapped the butt of his gun against the wooden wall and called, "You ready? Sarge says it's time to go."

"We'll be right there." It was Chloe who answered him.

A few seconds later, the barn door swung open. Albert blinked; he barely recognized the girls. Gone were the blood-spattered summer dresses that were far too flimsy for the current weather. Both of the women had put on clean jeans and sneakers, and Ashley was wrapped in a dark gray hoodie with a baseball cap planted on her head.

Albert realized his mouth was hanging open and he snapped it shut, teeth clicking.

"How do I look?" Ashley appeared years younger and more vulnerable hidden in the thick sweater, but he also noticed that some of the sparkle had come back into her eyes and that her cheeks had gained some color.

"You look great." He let out an appreciative little whistle, which made her lips twitch. He grinned back at her happily; he'd whistle at her all day if it banished the beaten puppy look, he decided. Behind him, Marshall started the engine, pulling Albert back to the present. "C'mon. Sarge is waiting."

A short while later, after Albert had made sure they'd left nothing behind to betray they'd ever been there, other than a quickly drying puddle of water on

the floor, they were back on the main road, turning north.

oOo

It was quiet inside the van after they got back on the road. Except for Wolf giving the occasional instruction to Cat to turn left or right, nobody spoke. But the silence didn't weigh near as heavily on Ashley as it had the day before. She shifted on the hard bench, her butt slowly going numb despite the padding provided by using their old clothes stuffed into a plastic bag for a cushion. Despite the discomfort, she had to admit she felt more upbeat than she had for days. And though she didn't know why, she was no longer scared all the time, or feeling like she was trying to hold on to her sanity by her fingertips. Chloe had been right: washing up—even if it had been a hasty sponge bath at a dirty sink in a barn—and putting on some clean clothes had done wonders for her mood. The little nap she'd taken had also cleared away the worst of her exhaustion. Ashley figured she was altogether much better equipped to handle the crazy turn her life had taken.

She sensed someone's eyes on her and glanced up, catching Albert staring at her from the opposite side of the van. Strangely, his blatant scrutiny no longer freaked her out as much as it had before. Back at the bank, she'd suppressed her disgust and played up to his attentions, hoping that—what was the expression?—fraternizing with the enemy would gain her an advantage. However, by the time the advantage had presented itself and she'd gotten hold of his gun, she'd learned his real name and come to see another, more human side to what she'd thought of as simply a violent bankrobber—and then she'd been incapable of pulling the trigger.

And now? She'd peacefully napped on his shoulder.

Ashley heaved a sigh. Why did that not embarrass her the way it should? She figured her change in attitude toward Albert should have worried her, and yet....

She fidgeted again to alleviate the ache in her rear end.

"You okay?" Chloe gave her a concerned look.

"Yeah. Just getting a little car sick," Ashley admitted. She wasn't exactly sure how long they'd been driving, but bouncing along potholed, winding roads in the back of an old van for at least a couple of hours was turning her stomach a little queasy.

"Hang in there a little longer, kiddo." Wolf must have overheard her because he twisted in the front seat and squinted at her over his shoulder. "It's not much further."



Ashley sat up straighter, nausea and back ache forgotten. Not much further to where? Nobody had told her anything of where they were going, and she'd learned it was futile to ask. But now she leaned forward for a better view out the front window. She saw they were driving along the shore of some large lake, passing through small, sleepy summer towns where tourist season hadn't yet begun. It had to be one of the Great Lakes, she decided, but which one? She usually traveled by plane whenever she left Pittsburgh, and her knowledge of the local geography was sketchy at best. She regretted not paying more attention to her surroundings: having no idea where she was made her feel even more powerless, and she resolved to look out for road signs as they passed them. Maybe, she thought, she could get Albert to show her the map at some point.

She didn't have to wait long before she got answers to her questions.

A few minutes later, Wolf pointed, bracing his other hand against the dashboard. "Here!" Cat braked, hit the blinker and turned into an empty graveled parking lot. Through the front window Ashley caught a glimpse of a large sign: *Jack's Bar & Saloon*. Another sign underneath claimed in smaller print *Lake Erie's Oldest & Finest Establishment*.

So, they were on the shores of Lake Erie. But why would Wolf take them to a bar? And a closed bar at that? It made no sense. Ashley flicked a glance at Chloe, but the other woman looked just as puzzled.

After swiveling the van around in a wide circle, tires crunching over the gravel, Marshall stopped with the car's nose pointed back in the direction of the road. Wolf got out, and trotted around the building, disappearing from view for a minute. When he came back, he didn't climb in. Instead, he slid open the side door.

"Ashley. Come with a me a sec."

A little confused, Ashley did as she was told, unconsciously stretching stiff muscles as soon as her feet touched the ground, her spine crackling. She took a deep breath of air that smelled fresh after the stale atmosphere in the car and her stomach instantly settled. Though it wasn't raining, the sky was overcast and a cold wind carried the scent of the lake she could see glimmering through the trees at the far end of the parking lot. Ashley hunched deeper into her sweater, grateful to Chloe for bringing it. It felt like an age had passed since she'd woken up to the first warm day of spring and decided the weather asked for a miniskirt and open-toed heels. In reality, that had been less than a week ago.

"Come on." Wolf took her arm and started to guide her away from the van. "I want you to call your father. On his cell."

"What?" Ashley stopped to stare at him. "Why?" Her heart leaped at the thought

of talking to her dad, but she couldn't help wonder if this was another trick. Although, why should it be? Wolf had done it, right? He'd gotten himself and his guys out of the bank undetected.

"To tell him you're alive and will be home soon. There's a phone 'round back, so let's go." Wolf flapped a hand to urge her to keep moving.

"My father's in jail," Ashley objected, even as she started walking again. *Because of you*, she didn't add, and didn't need to.

Wolf was quiet for a second, though he didn't break his stride. "I know." He spoke softly. "But your dad's still an important man with important friends."

They reached the bar, and Wolf waved for her to walk around it with him.

"Won't the police, I don't know, monitor his phone?" That was how her dad had gotten into trouble in the first place: the police had overheard him talking to Wolf. Much as she might like to talk to her father and let him know she was alive, she didn't want to cause him any further problems.

"Smart girl." Wolf nodded approvingly, giving her a lopsided little grin. "You're right, the cops might have his phone tapped. In fact, I'm counting on it."

Turning around the corner of the bar, Ashley saw an open booth holding an old-fashioned pay phone.

"Look, if the cops monitor your dad's calls, they'll trace this one to Michigan. And hopefully they'll believe we're heading for Canada." Wolf picked up the receiver and held it out to her. "By the time they find this place, we'll be long gone. If they're not listening..." He paused and gave a small shrug. "Either way, you get to let Daddy know you're okay."

He threw a couple of quarters into the phone's pay slot, and again thrust the receiver at her. She took it and dialed her father's number, a sequence she knew by heart. Wolf hovered at her shoulder as she punched the keys, his head close to hers. She suspected it was so he could listen in.

The phone rang once, twice, three times. "It's gonna go to voice mail," Ashley whispered, worried.

But on the next ring, the phone was picked up. "Hello?"

She instantly knew it wasn't her father, and her heart twinged with disappointment. But it was still a familiar voice. "Uncle Jim? It's Ashley."

"Ashley! Where are you? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. We're somewhere in—." Before she could tell him where they were, Wolf clamped a hand over her mouth and shook his head. The message was clear: he didn't want her to tell Jim their location.

"Let's not make it too easy." Wolf's voice was a whisper in her ear, too soft for Jim to pick up. She gave a slight nod and he let go.

"Is my father okay?"

Jim guffawed wryly. "Mad as hell, but he'll be all right. Don't you worry about him." His voice was full of calm reassurance, and Ashley breathed a little easier. Jim had been her father's right-hand man for as long as she could remember. While she'd never wanted to know the details of her father's business dealings, she knew Jim wouldn't abandon him.

Wolf wiggled his hand, held flat, left to right, level with his neck, telling her without words to cut the conversation short.

"I'll be home soon." Ashley's throat clogged up, and she struggled to get the last words out. "Tell Daddy I love him." Wolf reached up to break the connection, before he took the receiver from her and replaced it in its cradle.

"You did good." He brushed a tear from her face.

She hadn't even realized she was crying.

oOo

Less than a minute after Jake and Ashley came jogging back into view, they were on the road again. Marshall was driving fast, straight across the Lower Peninsula. Lake Erie and the route north to the border with Canada fell behind quickly. Chloe watched Jake through her lashes as he slouched opposite her; he'd given the front passenger seat to Ashley, saying, "I don't want you to get sick."

He had his arms crossed in front of his chest and his gaze was distant, thoughtful. Chloe could only guess what was on his mind.

"That was a nice thing to do." She angled her body forward a little so she could keep her voice low and still be heard over the noise of the engine. "Have Ashley call her family."

Jake turned his head and slowly focused on her, before he glanced away again. "Wasn't the purpose."

She smiled. "I know." He'd told her he'd planned to lay a false trail when he'd

first asked if there was anyone she wanted to call. "It was still nice." After all, Ashley was getting dragged halfway across the country against her will, unlike Chloe, who'd followed Jake from the bank of her own choice. Besides, there was nobody left who cared enough to worry about her anyway. Not since her mother had died, and then Roger. Sure, she thought with an inward snort, her and Roger's old friends would frown and mumble over their cocktails that it was a shame what had happened to her, and how had the world become such an unsafe place? And then they'd pour themselves another drink, toast her health, and go on their merry way, living their safe, privileged lives.

But Ashley... Her father cared enough for her that he'd been willing to break the law to see her safe. "Do you think it worked?"

Jake shrugged. "There's no way to tell."

They jostled over a particularly nasty hole in the road, and Chloe planted her feet more firmly on the floor of the van. She leaned further forward, bracing herself with her hands on her knees. "What if it didn't? What if the police find us?"

He stared at her for a long time, his face unreadable in the gloom of the van. Finally, he looked away. "Let's hope you never have to find out."

"Jake...." He whipped his head back around and she flinched at the sudden intensity in his gaze. His expression softened a little.

"I won't go back," he told her in a low voice. "I can't. And Albie? Marshall...?" He gestured vaguely to indicate his men. "Neither will they. They won't catch me alive to put me behind bars, Chloe. Not ever again. If the cops find us...," he paused a moment, "we die."

Chloe swallowed hard and shivered. She wrapped her arms around herself, even though it wasn't really that cold inside the van.

oOo

They drove almost non-stop for the next twenty-four hours, pushing further west with every mile, only interrupting their journey for a handful of bathroom breaks and twice to get more gas. Jake had set up a tight shift schedule for driving and navigating duties between himself and his two men. Meanwhile the girls tried to make themselves comfortable in the back, napping and dozing intermittently. They stuck to the back roads and byways as much as possible. Albert complained that, at this pace, it would take forever to cross the country, a comment which earned him an eye roll from Marshall and a weary rebuke from Jake about traffic cameras and highway patrols.

"I know that." Albie's mulish reply had been followed by a curse as the next sharp curve almost threw him from the bench in the back.

Two days after escaping the Three Rivers Trust, they'd gotten as far as central Iowa, cruising along straight, endless roads that cut through flat, featureless farm fields. At least the bad weather front had moved out and the clouds were breaking open, letting through a watery sun that did its best to raise the temperature.

Around four in the afternoon, they pulled into a sprawling complex at a crossroads that held a gas station, a diner advertising *Breakfast All Day*, a garage and a 7-Eleven. They parked at the far end of the lot, shielded from casual view by a couple of large rigs, and Jake sent Chloe into the supermarket to buy drinks and snacks. Albert used the time to tinker with the van's engine, which had developed a worrisome rattle, while Jake and Marshall pulled out maps and deliberated how best to proceed to Nebraska.

"Psst," Albert hissed from under the hood to get their attention. "Cops."

Jake looked up from the map to see a patrol car turn into the parking lot. It stopped close to the main building and a pair of sheriff's deputies climbed out. One of them, an older guy with a gut that strained his khaki shirt, disappeared in the direction of the men's rest room. The other deputy, who looked to be at least ten years younger than his partner, and a lot fitter, propped himself against the car and unfolded a newspaper. A moment later, he had his nose buried in the classifieds.

Jake puffed out his cheeks. "Let's roll. Chloe?" She'd come back a few minutes earlier with the groceries and was stretching her legs. She turned back at the sound of her name, and he waved her over, giving a dip of his head to indicate the cops. As soon as she saw the patrol car, she headed straight back. He gave her an appreciative nod before he peered around. "Where's Ashley?"

For a long second, nobody said anything.

"Ladies' room." Albert broke the uncomfortable silence at last.

Marshall gaped at him. "*Alone?*"

Albert shrugged. "What was I supposed to do? Go watch her pee? Give the girl a break!"

Jake made a disgusted noise. He didn't blame Albie; he couldn't really expect him to keep the girl under guard twenty-four seven. If anyone was to blame, it was himself: he should've kept track of where she'd gotten to. Well, too late now; he had a situation to deal with.

"Everyone into the damned van," he ordered, keeping his voice low but urgent. "Cat, get ready."

"Sarge, we should go *right now*." Marshall was already behind the wheel, turning the key in the ignition. "Forget about the girl."

Jake ignored him. He couldn't leave Ashley; with those cops right there, that would be as good as walking up to the patrol car himself and surrendering. If they left without her, they'd be sure to have the sheriff's troops on their tail within five minutes.

He waved Chloe back out of the van, hating that he needed to rely on her yet again but not knowing what else to do. "Go get her." From the look on Chloe's face, he realized he'd used the same tone that he used with his men. He gave her a rueful shrug of apology, and made to repeat the order as a request, but she was already scurrying toward the complex and the restrooms.

Before she was halfway across the parking lot, Ashley walked back into view. Jake could tell she'd instantly caught sight of the deputy from the way she froze mid-step. Chloe also faltered, apparently unsure whether she should go on to get Ashley, or turn back. Jake held his breath, knowing there was nothing he could do to influence what happened next. His life, and that of his guys, was in Ashley's hands.

oOo

Ashley stood stock still, her heart pounding in her chest. For a minute, she didn't quite believe her eyes. There was a policeman right *there*, less than twenty feet from her. This was her chance. All she had to do was close the few feet between them, and tell him, "Excuse me, Officer, I'm Ashley Beck. I'm a hostage."

Then why didn't she?

She dragged her gaze away from the cop, who was still scanning his newspaper, oblivious to her inner turmoil. Chloe stood a dozen yards or so behind the patrol car, about halfway between Ashley and the van. Even from that distance, she could see that Chloe's eyes were wide with consternation and her face was pale beneath the bruised look of fatigue. Ashley found she couldn't meet the other woman's panicked gaze.

If she went over to talk to the cop, people would die.

She was sure of that. It hadn't been meant for her ears, but she couldn't help having overheard Wolf's remark to Chloe: *If the cops find us, we die*. She hadn't believed for even a second that it had been an empty vow. For one thing, Wolf

had no reason to lie to Chloe about something like that. And secondly, Ashley had *seen* Wolf bluff. No, it hadn't been a lie: if she announced herself to the deputy, someone would die.

Again, she lifted her gaze to look across the parking lot.

Beyond Chloe, half-hidden behind a U-Haul truck, she could see the gray van. Wolf and Albert were standing next to it, watching her and Chloe. She didn't see Cat anywhere, but the puff of exhaust fumes told her he was probably inside, ready to go. She also knew both Wolf and Albert would have their hands on their weapons, though the guns were out of sight.

Her gaze flicked back to the deputy. He was turning a page in his newspaper, glancing up briefly as he did so. His brows drew down in a small frown as he saw her watching. "Everything okay, Miss?"

She wanted to go home. She so *desperately* wanted to go home.

Ashley realized the deputy's frown was deepening as he waited for her reply. "Miss?"

She couldn't seem to breathe, her entire world narrowing to the strip of asphalt between her, the cop, and the distant van. She felt like she was back in the bank, in that instant when she'd held Albert at gun point and had to make up her mind whether or not she would pull the trigger.

She glanced at Chloe again. If they started shooting, Chloe would be caught in the crossfire.... Chloe actually liked Wolf, seemed to trust him, believed his promises that everything would be all right. Would Wolf really keep his word and let her go home soon?

Would he?

Ashley drew in a shuddering breath. "Yeah, I'm fine." She wasn't sure the cop would believe her, her voice was so scratchy. "Thanks."

She ducked her head and hurried past him, blinking away the tears that burned behind her eyelids. He made no move to stop her.

As soon as she reached Chloe, the other woman linked arms with her and held on tight, almost as if she was afraid Ashley might change her mind. "Thank you," she whispered.

Ashley shook her head, not trusting her voice enough to speak. Somehow, they made it back to the van, and Albert snatched Ashley's arm and bundled her into the back. Cat stepped on the gas before he'd even fully slammed the door shut

behind him.

"Easy," Wolf warned.

A moment later, they were turning out of the parking lot. Wolf ducked his head, peering intently into the side view mirror. A few minutes later, he sat back up, blowing out a breath. "We're clear."

Ashley discovered her hands were shaking uncontrollably. She clenched them into fists.

"Why?" Albert, on the bench next to her, sounded genuinely puzzled. "Why didn't you say something?"

Ashley looked up. His face was a featureless blur through the tears that finally spilled from her eyes. "I—I didn't want you to get killed." A sob lodged in her throat. "I don't want anyone to get killed."

Chloe wrapped an arm around her, hugging her tight. "None of us do, sweetie." She stroked Ashley's hair soothingly. "None of us do."

oOo

The phone in Harvey Rickler 's back pocket buzzed to announce a text message just as he finished loading his tools into his truck. *Crap!* Couldn't they have called someone else? For an instant, he considered ignoring the message. There were less than ten minutes left on his shift; if he took on another job, he'd get home long past the girls' bedtime. Linda wouldn't like it much, and he'd probably be eating his dinner cold as a result.

The phone made its whirring noise again, annoyingly insistent. With a sigh, Harvey fished the device from his pocket. He couldn't very well refuse to take the call; it wasn't like employers were lined up around the block for the likes of him.

At first, he thought the text message had gotten garbled; he couldn't make heads nor tails of it. It certainly wasn't anything like the usual abbreviated street address plus service code. But then a segment of the digits jumped out at him and.... *Holy shit!*

Harvey's mouth went dry. This wasn't a service call: it was a cry for help.

He stared at the message on the small screen again, translating it almost automatically now that he remembered the code he'd last seen almost two years ago when he'd been over *there*... Iraq... *Ten-Thirteen, Pro Patria. Require assistance. Contact this number. Proceed with caution!*



Dammit. Now what was he supposed to do? He knew, of course, what had been happening in Pittsburgh, even if the hostage siege had only been a tiny blip on the local evening news. For old times' sake, he'd been secretly rooting for his former sergeant and platoon mates to make it out, though he couldn't help but wonder what on God's green earth had possessed them to rob a bank in the first place. He sure as hell didn't want to get involved; he had a good life here: a steady job, a loving wife, two beautiful daughters.... He didn't want to risk losing all that.

*You wouldn't have any life at all, if not for those guys,* a voice in the back of his mind reminded him scornfully.

Harvey heaved a breath, already acknowledging defeat. The voice was right: he did owe his life to Sergeant Mendez and the men of the Ten-Thirteen. With another weary sigh, he flipped open his phone. He was on the point of punching in the number listed in the text message, when he remembered the warning. *Proceed with caution.* The cops knew about the Ten-Thirteen, knew everyone involved in the robbery attempt had been a platoon member; they might have his cell tapped. Even if they hadn't, the number he'd dialed was gonna show up on the call sheet at work and it'd be tough to explain. No, he reckoned, better heed Sarge's warning and be careful.

He snapped the phone shut, locked his truck and headed down the street, searching his pockets for quarters. He remembered seeing a pay phone on a corner a block or so down; he could make the call there.

oOo

Once he'd finished coding the text message and sending it, Jake drummed the fingers of his right hand on his knee, clutching the phone with his left. He knew it was too much to hope he'd get an immediate reply—not to mention, actual help—but he couldn't quite bring himself to put the phone away. The original plan—go as far west as possible and then cross into Canada—no longer seemed such a great idea. Running into the deputies and nearly getting caught had spooked him, and he wanted to go to ground for a while.

Changing strategy midway through didn't frighten him, though; he'd never met a plan that lasted past the first engagement. Still, it was hard not to second-guess himself. In most cases, the smart thing to do was to stay on the move: keep the other guy guessing where you were and where you'd be going next. Except in most cases, he hadn't been burdened with hostages along. And that was the thing, wasn't it? He shifted, casting a quick glance over his shoulder, and received the hoped-for reward of a slight smile from Chloe. He turned back without acknowledging her, shifting the phone from his left hand to his right. His palm was slippery.

He still didn't understand why Ashley hadn't warned the deputy. It would've been so easy for her to give them up. But she hadn't. He thought she perhaps wasn't entirely sure herself why she'd kept silent. Maybe it had been shock. Next time, though, they might not be so lucky. But running into the cop had made one thing very clear: if they simply kept going west, they'd be too exposed. Their faces had been plastered all over the networks; even if Ashley didn't give them away, someone might still recognize them. And they might never even know they were compromised until the helicopters came thundering in.

No, he confirmed to himself yet again, they had to go to ground. Hole up somewhere safe. Wait until the manhunt petered out and interest had faded before trying for Canada and freedom. The money could wait.

The phone in his hand rang, its standard ring tone loud in the tense silence of the van. Jake started from his musing. He flipped the phone open. "Yeah?"

"Sarge?"

Jake squeezed his eyes closed a moment in a silent prayer of thanks as he recognized the voice. Though he wasn't sure he deserved it, gratitude for the loyalty of the platoon surged through him nevertheless. "Harv. Good to hear your voice, man."

"I heard about Pittsburgh. They say you kidnapped some girls. Sarge, what the hell—?"

Jake interrupted him. "It's a long story. Too long for now. What I need is your help."

The pause lasted a long time before Harvey came back. "Sarge.... I...."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have dragged you into this, and I wouldn't have, if—." Jake stopped himself. He was starting to get desperate, and beginning to sound like it. Displaying his anxiety probably wasn't the best way to convince Harvey to help.

Fortunately, the other man didn't seem to have picked up on Jake's frantic tone. Instead, Jake heard an audible sigh down the line. "What d'you need, Sarge?"

It had gone fully dark outside, the Iowa fields they were ambling through no longer visible. A few stars shone between the scattered clouds, visible as lighter smudges in the night sky. Jake bit his lip. God, he hoped he wasn't going to regret this. So many men had lost their lives already.... "A place to lay low. Quiet, remote, that nobody knows about. Linda still running that rental deal?"

Another pause. "Yeah. I went up there just last week to get the place ready for summer."

"Can it be traced back to you?" *And us*, Jake didn't need to add.

"If they dig deep enough," Harvey admitted. "But the house is listed in Linda's aunt's name, so it's not immediately obvious."

"Okay, good." Jake pinched the bridge of his nose to try and quell the headache that was building. It wasn't the greatest solution, but it'd have to do. He was running out of options. "Can we use it?"

"Maybe. Gimme an hour to talk to Linda, and I'll know more."

Harvey signed off and Jake shut the phone. Slipping it back into his pocket, he found Albert's gaze on him, before the other man turned his attention back to the dark road. "Harv comin' through?"

Jake shrugged. "He's tryin'." He hoped Harvey would. Because he was fresh out of other ideas.

oOo

Loyalty among the men of the Ten Thirteen went a long way, though: an hour later, Harv called again and told Jake he'd convinced his wife to cancel the first couple of her early-season reservations.

"Is it secure?" Jake asked. The last thing they needed was a party of game fishers to show up unexpectedly.

"You should have three weeks. Told her a buddy of mine from work needed a place to talk things out with his wife." He gave a dry laugh. "Linda's a sucker for romance."

Jake's mouth turned up to a quick half-smile. "Keep an eye on things, just in case, will ya?" He gave Harvey the number of the second prepaid cell phone from the pair Chloe had bought earlier. He was already planning to chuck the first one, the one he was using right now, onto a truck heading the other way at the next gas stop.

"Sure thing, Sarge. And good luck."

oOo

Harvey's directions to the summer home in northern Minnesota that Linda Rickler rented out to tourists for a little extra cash proved clear and easy to

follow. Still, it was past midnight and pitch dark before they arrived. The house sat at the end of a two-mile long private rut track, the turn-off marked by a small, wooden sign that would be easy to miss if you weren't looking for it. The place was as remote as Jake could have wished for: it had no neighboring cabins along the entire length of the track and the nearest town was at least eight miles away.

The place was also a lot bigger than he'd expected. The twin beams of the van's headlights revealed a clapboard two-story country house with a wraparound porch and dormer windows. Tall trees loomed close to it. When Jake turned off the engine and killed the headlights, the abrupt darkness was so deep that someone in the back—he thought it was Chloe—let out an involuntary gasp.

Digging out flashlights, they stiffly tumbled from the car, their eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness. The forest air was cool and damp, with a faint scent of rotting leaves and moss. The woods that ringed the house were dark and quiet, except for normal night sounds: an owl hooting in the distance; the wind whispering through the canopy overhead; small rodents scurrying through the underbrush.

"Wow," Ashley whispered. "It's so... silent." She sounded awed, and a little unnerved.

"Alright." Jake deliberately used a normal tone of voice. "Piggie, you and Cat go set up a perimeter."

"Yes, Sarge."

The two men rooted through the back of the van for a minute to collect what they needed, before they faded into the shadows. Jake indicated to Chloe and Ashley that they should walk ahead of him, up the steps. He followed, lighting their way with the flashlight. The key was where Harv had promised: under a heavy, yellow flowerpot on the porch. Handing the flashlight to Chloe, Jake unlocked the door. The interior of the house felt chilly, as if it hadn't been heated in a while, and the air smelled a little musty.

Despite the slight air of being abandoned, the house still seemed to Jake, after the week they'd had, like a welcoming sanctuary.

Taking the flashlight back from Chloe, he walked into a living room filled with quaint wooden furniture: two arm chairs, a sofa, a coffee table. Off to the right, a large fireplace yawned cold and empty, while a wide doorway led through to the kitchen. Jake flipped a couple of cupboards open and discovered they were stocked with non-perishables: canned soup, noodles, powdered milk, cereal. He smirked to himself: Harv's wife knew how to take care of her guests.

Leaving the kitchen, he continued to explore the rest of the house. At the end of

a narrow hallway, he discovered a bedroom with a bunk bed and an adjoining shower stall. The girls followed him as he headed upstairs, the steps creaking as they climbed them. A couple more doors opened onto the landing: a master bedroom with a king size bed; a storage room—more of a large closet, really—with an ironing board; and, at the end of the hall, furthest from the staircase, a third bedroom that held twin beds.

Jake waved the girls ahead of him into the room. "This'll be yours." He decided he'd take the master bedroom for himself, and Marshall and Albert could share the bunk bed downstairs.

Ashley gave him a look he couldn't quite decipher, before she lowered herself gingerly onto one of the beds, as if she was afraid it might collapse under her weight. She brushed her hand over the comforter, smoothing it. Chloe pulled open a half-hidden door, revealing a small bathroom with a porcelain sink and a shower. She stared at it for a moment before she whirled around to face Jake.

"Please tell me there's hot water?" The hopeful look on her face was almost comic.

"Not yet." The house was powered by a generator, Harv had told him, and he'd need to switch it on. "But there will be, soon." Chloe's eyes sparkled at the prospect of a shower and Ashley let out a small delighted squeak. Jake found it impossible not to grin.

Back downstairs, he found the generator on the porch at the rear of the house; Harv had said he'd refueled the tank for the summer a short while ago, so they should have hot water and light available for a good long while. Certainly longer than Jake planned to stay.

He started the generator and listened to it hum contentedly for a few minutes before he headed back inside. Chloe had switched on a couple of the lamps and was puttering around in the kitchen with pots and pans and cans of soup. She turned as she heard him approach, her eyebrows lifting in a silent plea for his approval.

Jake nodded. "Good idea." It had been a long, long day. His stomach rumbled at the thought of something to eat.

She held up two cans, one in each hand. "Chicken or tomato?"

He didn't really care, so he pointed at one of the cans without giving it much thought, and she put the other back in the cupboard.

"So, what happens next?" She pulled out a drawer and rummaged through its contents; he assumed she was looking for a can opener.

"I don't know." Jake took a seat at the table, watching her work, thinking the domesticity of it was a little surreal. It felt good, though. "We'll probably stay for a while. Hide out until the cops quit looking. Then we'll make for Canada." He shot a glance into the living room, tensing up. "Where's Ashley?"

"Back upstairs." Chloe had found the can opener. "Trying out the shower."

"It'll be a while before the water's hot enough," Jake objected. He wasn't entirely sure yet how the heating system worked: Harvey's instructions on how to get it going hadn't gone into that much detail—they hadn't dared risk a lengthy phone call—and he'd only glanced briefly at the generator's setup.

Chloe gave a small laugh. "I don't think she cares." She was struggling with the can opener, frowning down on her hands as it slipped in her grip. "She'll be soaping up soon as the water's not icy."

"Here, let me." Jake held out his hands and took the soup and the opener from her. As he opened the can, he thought about Chloe's words. For himself, he hadn't much cared about the crude conditions of the few last days. In the bank, they'd had the conference room table to stretch out on, and even the cramped back of the van had been like a five-star hotel in comparison to some of the hellholes he'd slept in. But he had to remember that neither woman was a Marine; they were city girls, used to comforts like heat and running water and electricity. Neither was as well equipped to deal with the hardships of being on the run as he and his men were. And he recalled how upset Anna had been, that one time when a water main had broken further down the street. They'd been without tap water for almost two days and he'd been drafted to help her wash her hair with hot water from a kettle. Secretly, he'd thought it was kinda fun, but the first thing Anna had done when the water came back on was take a long bath. He could only imagine what torment these last few days must've been for Chloe and Ashley.

He handed her back the opened can of soup. "I'm sorry."

Chloe took the soup with a quizzical look. "For what?"

He shrugged a little. "Everything."

Her expression grew thoughtful. "Don't be," she muttered, glancing away. "I'm not. At least not about... everything."

Jake didn't reply right away. To be frank, neither was he. Nothing had gone to plan, and they'd lost some good people, something he'd have to live with for the rest of his life. But not everything had turned out a disaster, either. Still, "Chloe..." He sighed, not sure what to tell her.

She turned her back on him, upending the can over a pan with a little more force than was necessary. Cold soup splattered onto the counter.

"Hey...."

"I want to come with you." The words, an echo of her earlier plea, were spoken so softly he could barely hear them, despite the silence in the kitchen. Somewhere in the walls, the water pipes started clanking as Ashley turned on the shower upstairs. "Please, don't send me back."

Jake got up and walked over to stand behind her. He nudged her to turn around and face him. To his surprise, when he lifted her head with a finger under her chin, he discovered tears glimmered in her eyes. He'd made himself walk away from her once, when the situation had seemed hopeless, and it had been damned hard then. He didn't think he could do it again. Not while there was a chance. But he was horrified by the notion he might end up regretting it. If something happened to Chloe.... They weren't safe yet: they still had to cross the border into Canada, or the cops might be onto Harv and his summer home already. For all he knew, Feds could be racing along the dirt track to the house right then.

Yet he simply couldn't deny her.

"I won't." It was hard to get the words out, his own throat wanting to close up. "Not unless you *want* to go. I promise. Alright?" Chloe gave him a tremulous nod, and he held her gaze for a long minute, desperately wanting to kiss her but not sure he had the right. Then the front door banged open and Albert and Marshall clunked in, breaking the spell. Jake let go of Chloe and stepped away, while she turned back finish heating up the soup.

oOo

With a reluctant sigh, Ashley switched off the shower, a last few slow droplets hitting her bare shoulder. She hadn't wanted get out, not for a long time, but she wasn't sure how much hot water was available, and she didn't want to use it all up before Chloe had a chance to enjoy it too.

Opening the stall door, she reckoned it had been the best shower she'd ever had: a powerful stream of warm water sluicing down her body and washing away all the dirt and grime of the last couple days, real or imagined. She finally felt clean again in a way no sponge bath would ever manage.

She'd discovered some rose-scented shower gel in one of the closets; while it was neither her usual brand nor scent, beggars couldn't be choosers, could they? So she'd lathered up liberally, and now the faint aroma of roses surrounded her.

She drew in a deep breath as she reached for the towel she'd put ready on the nearby rack, realizing with surprise that it was as if some of her distress and worry had washed away along with the filth; she was certain she was gonna get through this now.

Toweling off, she reminded herself she'd survived this far, and one of these days Wolf was gonna let her go. She'd be able to go home, back to Pittsburgh and her family. Her dad would figure a way out of his legal troubles—after all, he'd only done what he'd done to save *her*, his daughter. Who'd blame him for that?—and then they could all go on with their lives. And she could forget the Three Rivers siege had ever happened.

She wrapped the towel around herself and found another for her hair before she padded barefoot back into the room she was going to share with Chloe. The linoleum was a little cold to the touch, and her toes curled involuntarily. Her clothes were on the bed; the new clothes that Chloe had bought. The outfit wasn't exactly the height of fashion, she mused, holding up the gray shirt and sweater for closer scrutiny, but it was warm and comfortable and clean, and that was really all that mattered. She chuckled wryly at herself; she wasn't beyond noting how her priorities had changed.

There was a quick rap on the door. Before she had a chance to answer, it was flung open and Albert crashed in. "Ashley, there's sou—oh."

She whirled around, clutching the sweater tightly to her chest, and glared at him. "You can't just barge in here like that!"

"Sorry." He didn't sound very sorry at all, his gaze flicking down and up, taking in the towels. That should have been revolting, yet somehow it wasn't. Ashley didn't feel threatened, either. In fact—another revelation—she sort of trusted Albert; he'd protected her from his crazy brother, after all. And to be honest, though it had been entirely fake when she'd first flirted with him, he did intrigue her—in that bad-boy-dangerous way that was so completely wrong.

She lowered her arms and put the sweater back on the bed. She didn't want to give him the impression he'd embarrassed her—and besides, she'd held him at gunpoint in her bra. What did she have to be embarrassed about? "Well?" She arched an eyebrow.

If Ashley had expected Albert to beat a hasty retreat, though, she was wrong. His gaze focused on something that seemed to be over her right shoulder and his brow furrowed in concern. "What're those?"

He crossed the room, making a beeline for her. A part of her wanted to back away, yet she stood her ground. He stretched out his hand and lightly poked at her collar bone with a finger. She wrenched her head in an attempt to see what



he meant, even though she already knew. She'd noticed the spots in the mirror over the sink, already fading to green and yellow.

"Bruises."

"Yeah, I can see that." He huffed. "How did you get those? They weren't there before."

She cocked her head, puzzled for a second. How did he...? Oh, yes, of course. This time, she did blush at the memory of stripping in front of him in an attempt to distract him and get hold of his weapon.

She cleared her throat, willing the blush away. "You."

He gave a slight shake of the head, offering her a confused look.

"After you took your gun back." She swallowed hard at the memory; that time, she had been convinced she was going die. "I thought you were gonna choke me." Her voice quivered ever so slightly.

It took a few seconds before he apparently remembered as well, but then he had the good sense to look ashamed. "Sorry." The apology sounded genuinely contrite. "I didn't mean to hurt you." He scrubbed a hand across his face, and she could hear his palm rasp over stubble. "I didn't mean for a lot of shit to happen."

He'd told her something similar after Cass had gotten shot. "I know." And while he'd scared the crap out of her, and hurt her, she couldn't seem to find the energy to be angry.

He traced the bruises again with his fingers, the calloused tips a little rough against her skin, and a shiver ran down her spine. She told herself it was because the room was cold, and she was half-naked. "You know," she reached up to push his hand away, "I never thanked you."

"Thanked me?" He dropped his arm.

"For saving my life. If not for you, your brother—." A tremor of an entirely different nature shuddered through her. She swallowed hard. The gun in her face, the unpleasant, acrid smell it gave off.... She'd never forget the empty look in Rabbit's eyes. She'd known he was gonna pull the trigger. He'd kill her, and he wouldn't even care.... She rubbed her bare arms to chase away invisible goosebumps.

"Oh. That was—." Albert shrugged, not finishing.

"I'm sorry he died," Ashley continued. "I mean, I'm not sorry Wolf killed him, but I am sorry you lost your brother. That must be... tough."

He gave another little shrug and pulled away. "Henry fucked up. He was wrong and Sarge was right, and what can you do?" He paused for a few moments while he paced around the room. "When we got back from Iraq... He was never the same. None of us were. It's like that, you know. Enough bad things happen? It'll change you. And we saw some bad shit over there. Things we did, things we saw? You do what you do to survive, see. Acceptable casualties, collateral damage...." His voice trailed off.

"Have you... talked to anyone?" she asked. "About Iraq?"

"Talk?" Albert barked a laugh without any humor in it. "What good's that gonna do?" He whirled on her, eyes flashing, and she took an involuntary step back. "People don't want to know these things, Ashley. They rather live in their happy bubble and let us soldiers do their dirty work. Who would I talk to, anyway, huh?"

"There are people... Professionals—."

"What, like a shrink?" Albert interrupted, lips curling in disgust. "Yeah, let's do that, let's talk to a shrink. They sent Sarge to see one, and look what happened. They put him in jail, took his pension and his medical so his wife couldn't get the treatment she needed. That's fucked up, man. Really fucked up." He turned his back on her, shoulders hunched.

Ashley remained silent. She didn't know what to say to him. This was the most Albert had said to her since she'd lured him into the vault and he'd opened up to her a little.

He took a deep breath. "Anyway." He seemed to have regained his calm. "Never mind about that. I came to tell you Chloe's got some soup heating downstairs. You know, if you're hungry."

Ashley nodded, glad to be back to safer subjects. "I'll be right down."

He made to leave but stopped in the doorway. "Hey," he half-turned to wink at her across his shoulder. Again his gaze traveled down the length of her, and back up until he met her gaze. "I never did get to see your tattoos." He offered her a small smirk.

For a moment Ashley simply gaped. Then she made a sound. She wasn't quite sure if it was supposed to be a sob or a laugh. Not that it mattered. She picked up a pillow from the bed and flung it in his direction. "Get out, Albert. Just get out."

She heard him snickering all the way to the stairs. Chuckling to herself, she loosened the towel, slipped into fresh underwear and pulled the sweatshirt on over her head.

Yeah, a hot shower did make everything more bearable. She was gonna be all right.

oOo

The house had already grown quiet by the time Jake turned off the last lamp and made his way up to the master bedroom. He thought he probably should've ordered Marshall or Albert on guard duty, but he'd decided to trust in the tripwires and alarms the guys had set on the perimeter and give everyone the chance of a good night's sleep. God knows they could use it. Besides, they were supposed to be here for a while and they wouldn't be able to keep up a regular schedule anyway with just the three of them.

The king-size bed waiting for him was soft and the sheets clean. The faint scent of detergent rose up as he crawled under the covers. With a weary sigh, he let his head sink into the pillow. Despite his exhaustion, though, he quickly discovered he couldn't find sleep. There was too much on his mind, making him toss and turn: thinking over the events of the last few days while trying not to second-guess every decision he'd made; wondering if he'd overlooked some important detail that was gonna cost them their freedom; Deke's betrayal, which had cut him more deeply than he'd thought possible. And then there was the matter of Ashley Beck.... The longer he kept the girl around, the harder it seemed to be to set her free. He hadn't wanted this for her; the idea had been to let her go once they were safe out of the bank. Yet here she was, stuck in the Minnesota woods with a bunch of America's Most Wanted and a woman who confused Jake more than he wanted to admit.

He was still mulling things over, somewhere in that no-man's land between sleep and wakefulness, when a soft noise brought him to full alert again. Sleep instantly forgotten, he reached for the gun he'd put on the bedside table and silently dragged it closer. The door lock clicked and the door swung open slowly.

A figure stood outlined in the doorway. "Chloe?" Jake let go of his weapon and sat up, fumbling for the lamp.

"No, don't." Chloe's voice was a fraction above a whisper. She padded into the room, and quietly shut the door behind her.

"What's wrong?" Jake squinted in the gloom, trying to make out her expression. He couldn't quite see her face in the dim moonlight falling in through the window, but he did catch the little shrug she gave. "Couldn't sleep?"

Another small shrug. "This is stupid."

Jake thought the mutter was aimed more at herself than at him. He smiled and patted the mattress next to him. "Hey, sit. Talk to me." A little concerned, he asked, "Are you having second thoughts?"

Chloe gave another quick twitch of her shoulders, but she settled herself on the edge of the bed. It dipped a little beneath her weight, and Jake scooted back a bit so he didn't roll into her.

"It's okay if you are," he added gently. He still wasn't quite sure what to think of her wanting to go with him to Canada. Part of him still considered it a bad idea: she'd be much better off returning to her safe life in Pittsburgh. Another, less rational part didn't ever want to let her out of his sight again.

"I... don't know," she murmured. "It's all a little..." Her voice faltered, and he finished for her.

"Overwhelming?" He remembered an earlier conversation they'd had.

She made a small noise that he thought was a chuckle. "Yeah."

"Chloe, you're free to leave anytime you like, you know that, right?" He lifted one hand to brush a strand of hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear. His thumb lingered on her cheek, his palm nestled under her jaw. She tilted her head a little, leaning into his touch.

"What about Ashley?"

He shook his head. "You know I can't let her go yet. Chloe, I trust you. I know you won't tell anyone anything. That you won't betray us. I can't trust Ashley to do the same."

She drew a deep breath, nodding in understanding. "I know." She tilted her head a little so her gaze could find his in the little light there was and hold it. "You promise to let her go as soon as it's safe?"

"Yes." He didn't hesitate. "I promise." He took her face in both hands and leaned forward a little so he could brush a light kiss against her lips. They were warm and yielding. He kissed her more firmly and she responded with a little gasp, her lips parting to kiss him back.

They sat like that for a long time, simply kissing, exploring each other's mouths with their tongues. She tasted of toothpaste. Finally, he let go of her face and trailed his hands over her shoulders and down her bare arms until he could take

her hands in his. He could feel her trembling and he pulled back a little, letting his forehead rest against hers.

"You really want this?" He needed to be sure before he took it any further, because *God*, he wanted her with a desperation that was nearly painful. He hadn't been with a woman since Anna got sick, and it had been so long, he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop later. But he knew how much she was still mourning her husband. He sure as hell didn't want to make her do something she wasn't comfortable with, and he also didn't want her to regret it in the morning.

She didn't reply right away, as if she was turning over the question in her head. "Yes." Her voice shook, but her breath was warm on his face as she repeated, "Yes, Jake, I do."

He smiled, caressing a finger over her bottom lip before leaning in to kiss her again. "Wait here." Not really wanting to leave her, he slipped from the bed and padded over to the adjoining bathroom, very aware of her eyes on his naked back. He was suddenly glad she'd insisted he keep the light off. The scars normally didn't bother him, but now he felt weirdly self-conscious about them, even as he reminded himself she'd already seen them.

Fumbling around in the strange, dark bathroom, he stubbed his toe against the tub, biting back a curse. Common sense told him to stop being such an idiot and turn on the light, but the bulb was bright, and he was afraid it would spoil the mood. So he rummaged around by touch more than sight in the closet over the sink until he found the small box he'd seen there earlier. He grabbed it and shook it until a couple of condoms fell out. He put the box back and took the condoms with him, leaving them on the bedside table for later use.

Chloe was looking up at him, a small quizzical furrow creasing her brow. He grinned ruefully and rolled a shoulder. "Courtesy of the house."

She made a noise that sounded like a giggle. "Lucky us."

"Yeah."

With the protective practicalities taken care of, Jake could finally focus his full attention on her. She wore an oversized T-shirt that covered her to about mid-thigh, but the rest of her legs were bare. With her curly blond hair and pale skin, she was so different from Anna, yet she was beautiful in her own right. Especially, he reflected, since she was no longer frightened out of her wits, or grimy from three days of bloodshed.

Guilt stabbed through him at the memories of what he'd put her through. Okay, it hadn't been his fault, at least not entirely, but he was still responsible.

He forced the grim thoughts away; they had no place here. Crouching on the carpet in front her so their eyes were nearly level, he kissed her again, while his hands snuck under her nightshirt and brushed up against her skin. As he moved his hands up, her stomach muscles fluttered under his palms. Jake chuckled and pulled back until he could look at her. "You're ticklish?"

She offered up a sheepish half-smile. "A little."

As he leaned back in to nuzzle her jaw, he realized she was sitting stiffly, her hands resting on the bed on either side of her. "It's okay to touch me," he murmured against her neck. At first, he wasn't even sure she'd heard him, but a few seconds later she moved and put her hands on his shoulders. Her caresses were hesitant and delicate as she trailed her fingers down his back—until she brushed against the edge of the first scar and stopped moving completely. Jake tensed, despite himself.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, her voice a mere breath in his ear.

Although he'd been told the human brain works in such a way that it never fully recalls such truly terrible experiences like the agony of his injuries, Jake remembered clearly there had been times in the hospital he wished the IED had killed him. Even though they'd kept him doped up on morphine, some of the pain had still gotten through his dulled senses, and, shit, it had been *bad*.

Though, to be honest, the latter half of his recovery had almost made the pain worth it: once he was mobile again, they'd sent him home on convalescent leave until he was fully healed. Those months had been some of the best times of his life: having the chance to play some ball with Luke and spend time with Anna, like any normal married couple. In the end, he'd dreaded the moment he'd have to go back to active duty....

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment to banish the flashbacks.

"Not anymore." His voice was little more curt, maybe, than he'd planned, and he dipped his head to suck lightly on her pulse point, a silent apology for his brusqueness. Chloe uttered a little mewl, which made him grin against her throat. An instant later, her hands continued their exploration of his back, fingertips featherlight on his skin.

He pushed his own hands further up under her shirt until he could cup her breasts. They were smaller than Anna's had been, but round and yielding, and when he brushed his thumb over a nipple, it responded and grew into a hard little nub. He dipped his head, sucking through the cloth of her shirt. Chloe let out a soft moan and arched her back, pressing herself closer, and he knew he must be doing something right. But her hands had stilled again and Jake realized

he'd have to do most of the work himself.

Which was okay, really; he didn't mind at all.

He shifted back so he could lift up her shirt and tug it over her head, before he drew her to her feet and pulled her up against him. She came into his embrace willingly enough, and he held her tight for a moment, enjoying the feel of skin against skin. Without heels, she was a fraction shorter than he was; there was no way she could miss his hard-on pressing against her stomach. When she didn't pull away, he experimentally dipped his fingers beneath the waistband of her panties. Kneeling again, he slid them down her legs and nuzzled the junction between her thighs. Inhaling deeply, he relished the mixed scent of soap and woman he found.

She jerked back. "Jake..." He tilted his head up. Her eyes were wide, gleaming in the moonlight that filtered through the window. "I..." She was trembling again, like a skittish animal, and Jake knew that one wrong word, one wrong move would send her bolting from the room. He sucked in his bottom lip, trying to read what was going on inside her head, before climbing back to his feet.

"Shh, it's alright." He dipped his head toward the bed, indicating to her without words that she should lie down. He joined her, nudging her to slide across a little more to make room for him. Using his elbow to prop himself up, he gazed down at her. He held her eyes, looking for answers to silent questions, while he ran a hand along her arm, barely touching her, just trailing his fingertips over her skin—up, down, back up again—until she'd stopped trembling. He shifted a little closer, one hand lightly resting on her thigh. "You okay?"

She swallowed and nodded. "Yes."

Encouraged, he moved his hand again, fingers sliding through her curls and finding her folds. He let his hand rest there, unmoving, while he leaned in to kiss her once more, unsure how to proceed. Fifteen years of marriage had taught him Anna's body in every minute detail, demonstrated all her triggers and tells, yet here, with Chloe, he was lost, without guide or compass. He had no idea what she liked, or didn't like, or in which areas she might be hypersensitive, or how her husband used to treat her.

In a way, it was like learning to read all over again.

"Spread your legs a little?" he suggested. After a second's hesitation, Chloe obeyed, which he figured was a good sign. Yet she'd closed her eyes: he wondered if she were imagining her dead husband, or if she simply couldn't bear to look at him. Had she told him the truth? Did she really want this? Did she even *know* what she wanted?

For a second, he considered putting an end to it and sending her back to her own bed. But no, he couldn't stop. Not like this. Not now. He'd just have to proceed with caution, not unlike patrolling in unknown territory, where snipers and danger might lurk in every nook and around every corner.

"Chloe?"

Her eyes fluttered open again and she slowly focused on his face. He held her gaze for a long minute, trying to read her expression. He found apprehension in it, but no real fear or cause for concern. He quirked an eyebrow, a silent question. Chloe's chin quivered, yet she answered with a quick, wordless nod.

Reassured, Jake continued, letting his hand slide over her while he concentrated on picking up the small signs she gave: the hitch of breath as he slowly slipped a finger inside her, the slight widening of her eyes as a second followed, how her hips tilted to give him better access, and the way her hands bunched up folds of the sheets. She was warm and wet and receptive: while Chloe might not be entirely sure what it was she wanted, her body had no such doubts. Made bolder by her physical response, Jake began to slide in and out, his thumb seeking her small nub and his fingers curling up inside her.

She came quietly, as unobtrusively as she seemed to do everything, stiffening around his hand with a sharp intake of breath. Her eyes were squeezed tight, and Jake thought he might've missed it entirely if he hadn't been paying such close attention. He waited until her breathing evened out again and the muscle spasms stopped before he withdrew his fingers.

"Feel good?" he asked.

She nodded, voiceless.

"You okay?"

Again, a wordless nod. However, her eyes were wide and swimming with tears, and he wasn't sure how to interpret that. "I haven't..." she whispered. She paused and blinked. "Not since...." Again, she didn't finish.

She didn't need to. He reached up to brush a few sweaty strands of hair away from her face. "Shh. I know." She drew in a shuddering breath in response.

They stayed like that for a moment, his fingertips resting lightly on her temple, until Jake became painfully aware of the way his balls were throbbing and his dick was straining against the cotton of his boxers; one way or another, he'd have to do something about it soon. He just wasn't sure what. However, before he could decide how to handle the situation, Chloe pushed herself up, nudging his shoulder with her hand to get him to roll over onto his back. A little



surprised, he allowed her to press him down, until their positions were reversed and she was looming over him. She seemed to have reached a tipping point, because next thing he knew, she'd hooked her fingers into his boxers and was dragging them down, freeing him.

Her fingers lingered for a moment on the shrapnel marks on his left thigh, before she took him in hand. Jake bucked involuntarily, not just a physical response but because he liked the way she'd grown bolder, more assertive. He'd always known there was a spirited woman hiding somewhere behind the shy awkwardness. He'd suspected it since that first night in the bank, when she flat-out asked him if he could've killed old Bernard in cold blood.

Hesitantly, she asked, "Is this alright?"

"A little firmer," he gritted out. He was barely able to draw breath at the sudden feeling of a woman's warm hand on his dick. It had been such a long, long time.... "I won't break.... Yeah... like that."

The mere touch of her fingers curling more tightly around his dick was almost enough to set him off. He knew he wouldn't be able to hold back for long, so he didn't give her much time to experiment.

"Wait," he gasped after a few seconds. He reached over and scrabbled on the nightstand for one of the condoms. Tearing the package with his teeth, he rolled the rubber on and lay back against the pillows. With his hands on her hips, he guided Chloe to straddle him. She sank down and he let out a long, gratified moan, his eyes fluttering closed involuntarily.

Chloe started to move, gyrating slowly and tentatively, but Jake needed more. He reached up to palm her breasts and she arched her back in response, tilting her hips so he could slide in deeper. It still wasn't enough and he was left hanging on the edge, annoyingly close to release yet not quite able to get there.

With a frustrated growl, he grabbed her upper arms and flipped them over, nearly pulling out of her entirely before he could push back in. Chloe uttered a small, startled cry, and Jake froze, afraid he'd hurt her. But then she crossed her ankles behind his back and urged him into motion again.

He cried out as he came, slumping forward, his arms suddenly no longer strong enough to support his weight. He barely managed to roll to the side in time so he wouldn't fall on top of her. Staring up at the ceiling beams, he tried to catch his breath.

He felt like he should feel ashamed; Anna had been dead less than a year, and in all their time together, he'd been unfaithful to her only once. It had been during his first tour, not long after they'd gotten married, and it had sat so

heavily on his conscience that he hadn't been able to look at himself in the mirror for days. He'd never told her; the guilt and shame had been buried somewhere deep in his memories by the time he got home again. Yet he'd never forgotten the utter sense of *wrong*, and he'd never cheated on her again, no matter where they sent him, or how long they were apart.

Chloe stirred beside him, and she felt for his hand. She intertwined her fingers with his, and he offered her a gentle squeeze, not willing to break the spell with words.

Because this? This was different. And instead of shame, he felt... liberated. It was oddly comforting: while there were plenty of things to weigh on his mind, right now none of them mattered. Right now, there was just... Chloe.

After a few more minutes, he'd regained his bearings enough that he let go of her hand and sat up, slipping off the condom and tying it. He took it into the bathroom and dropped it in the trashcan. When he came back to the bed, he saw beads of moisture on Chloe's face glistening in the moonlight.

He frowned, unsure. "Are you crying?"

"No," she lied, sniffing. "Just..." She flapped a hand helplessly before wiping her cheeks.

"Come here." He crawled back onto the bed and pulled her into his arms, spooning himself around her and dragging the blanket over them. She rested her head against his shoulder and he nuzzled her neck, slipping his free hand around her waist. Twisting sleepily, she snuggled closer, her face in the crook of his neck and her fingers splayed over the scars on his chest.

He listened as her breathing deepened, hoping she wouldn't have the need for much longer to burn notes with a name on them. He knew he didn't.

oOo

Chloe floated up to wakefulness from a deep, dreamless sleep. At first she didn't know where she was: dappled sunlight warmed her face and there was a strong arm curled around her. For the briefest of moments she dared believe it was Roger's and that his death and the lonely months after had been a bad dream.

Then the truth crashed in and she remembered: Roger was dead. And the arm....

She turned her head to find Jake's dark eyes resting on her, watching her intently. "Hey, sleepyhead." He smiled.

She blinked and suppressed a yawn, before giving him a hesitant smile in return.

"Any regrets?" His tone was light, but she could hear the anxiety hidden in it.

"No." She answered without thinking, but as soon as the word left her mouth, she knew it for the truth. It was as if last night had jarred something loose within her, and she'd finally let go. At last, she believed she could move on; she'd known it was what Roger would've wanted for her, but it had been so hard.... But last night, for the first time since Roger had died, she'd slept soundly, without horrible nightmares to wake her in a sweat. "No regrets."

Jake smiled back at her, grinning from ear to ear, and Chloe realized how important the answer had been to him. "What about you?" she asked. From what little she'd gleaned of his past so far, he'd loved his wife as much as she'd loved Roger.

He shook his head. "None."

"Good." She put her head back down on his chest and snuggled closer. He stroked her back lightly, seeming to be sunk deep in thoughts of his own, while she listened to the bird song outside. From somewhere deep in the house, muted voices drifted up, too low to make out the words.

Her stomach growled, loud in the silence of the room, and Jake laughed. "Time for breakfast."

Chloe remembered that all of her clothes—those few she now owned—were still in the other room. She slipped back into her T-shirt and panties and tiptoed down the hallway, hoping Ashley was still asleep. She wasn't sure she was quite ready to facing up to Ashley figuring out the truth about her and Jake. It was still too new, too fresh.

However, she wasn't so lucky. Ashley was already up and dressed and brushing her hair when Chloe slipped into the room. She looked up at the sound of the door. "Hey. Where have you—Oh...." She blinked as she took in Chloe's state of undress.

Much to her chagrin, Chloe's cheeks grew hot. She had nothing to be ashamed of, dammit. She was a grown woman, a widow, even. She could do as she pleased.

"Can I ask you something?" Ashley gathered up her hair and tied it back in a pony tail. She gave Chloe a quick look. "How...? I mean, why...?" She didn't finish her question, but Chloe understood what she was asking anyway.

"I don't know." She walked over to her side of the room and gathered up her few clothes before she turned back to face Ashley. "I honestly don't know. I know it's

crazy, and wrong, but.... It feels right. I trust him."

"But he's a criminal!" Ashley objected. "He robbed a bank. They took us hostage."

"I know." Chloe heaved a sigh. She wasn't stupid; she'd been there, too. Yet how could she explain to Ashley something that she didn't understand herself? "It's... like I'm alive again. Ashley, you can't know what it was like after my husband died."

"So you're just gonna give up everything?" Ashley crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Your life? Your home? How can you do that? You'll be on the run all the time. They killed people, Chloe. They arrested my dad for trying to help them. The police aren't just gonna give up."

Chloe flopped down on the edge of the bed, toying with her clothes. "None of that matters." She looked down at her hands. She knew Ashley was right, yet she didn't really care. The thought of going back to her life as it had been frightened her far more than the prospect of life on the run. "I don't have much of a life left, anyway. It all fell apart..." She paused, briefly, before glancing up at Ashley. "And Jake.... I don't expect you to understand but... he sees me...." She shrugged, unable to clarify it any better.

Ashley contemplated her for a few moments, her head cocked. "You're right, I don't get it. But I guess if it makes you happy..." She shrugged, and turned for the door. "I'll be downstairs. Bathroom's all yours, if you want it."

A few minutes after Ashley had left, Chloe stepped under the hot spray of the shower. The warm water felt as good as it had last night, and she tilted her head up to let the spray splash on her face. In her mind, she was going over the conversation with Ashley. She let out a soft groan, remembering how she'd tried to rationalize what she'd done. God, she sounded just like some of those love-struck women on afternoon talk shows. *Maybe she was insane.*

And yet she couldn't help the butterflies fluttering in her stomach when she walked downstairs and Jake appeared from the kitchen to offer her a mug of coffee. Nor could she help feeling a deep and utter sense of relief: she'd escaped from the daily drudgery of trying to go on without Roger in the house they'd shared, which was too big and too empty for a single woman.

She blew on her coffee before taking a cautious sip. If this was madness, she hoped she'd never grow sane again.

oOo

Days drifted by and turned into a week, and then two, in a string of home-

cooked meals, board games, and a lot of lazing about, which Ashley secretly didn't mind very much. Harvey's summer house was warm and comfortable, and the surrounding woods were quiet and peaceful. If Ashley hadn't been missing her friends and family so terribly, and didn't desperately want to go home, she could've almost considered it an unplanned vacation.

On the first morning at the house, Wolf had extracted a promise from her that she wouldn't try to escape, while at the same time vowing he'd let her go as soon as he and his guys left for Canada. Giving her word had given her the freedom to wander around without the constant shadow of a bodyguard. It had been a simple promise to make: the woods were large and thick—and a little scary. It'd be easy to get lost in them, and the closest road was miles away. She was a city girl at heart, she knew, and she wouldn't stand a chance of making it back to civilization if she tried to run.

In the first few days they stayed at the house, the cold front moved out, to be replaced by warm summer air. Enjoying her new-found freedom, Ashley often went down to a pond she'd discovered a couple hundred yards away. She liked to sit on the end of the small wooden pier and dip her toes in the cold water, or simply gaze out across the shimmering surface to the forest on the far side. One day, a little bored and feeling adventurous, she decided to try and hike around the water. It took her more than two hours, which was quite a bit longer than she'd expected; the lake turned out to be much larger than it looked, and the forest denser. By the time she got back, she was hot, sweaty and tired, and hoping the generator had heated up enough water for another shower.

Loud, angry voices echoed through the forest as she approached the house, and she hurried along the last few yards of the narrow trail. As soon as she appeared from the brush, three pairs of eyes swiveled in her direction. She stopped at the edge of the clearing, taken aback a little by the way the three men were staring at her. They hadn't looked at her like that since... well, since the first day in the bank.

"Where've you been?" Cat demanded, before she could ask what was wrong.

His tone instantly put Ashley's back up. "None of your business," she snapped, striding towards the front door. Chloe was nowhere in sight, but heady cooking smells came from the house. They made her mouth water; the hike had left her hungry, too.

"Like hell it ain't," Albert growled.

Wolf didn't speak, but he was watching her with dark, hooded eyes. The intensity of his gaze was unnerving. Ashley threw her hands up in defeat. "Okay, I hiked around the damned lake, if you must know."

Albert's mouth dropped at that, and Wolf relaxed. He seemed amused, in fact. Suddenly it dawned on her. "Oh, come on." She wanted to laugh. "Don't be so stupid. You didn't really believe I ran away, did you? It's like, what, a hundred miles to the next town. Who do you think I am? Superwoman?"

"More like ten," Albert muttered under his breath. Cat uttered a noise that sounded like a suppressed guffaw. Wolf's mouth twitched a little more.

"Besides," she added, folding her arms in front of her, "I promised I wouldn't."

"That you did." Wolf acknowledged her with a small dip of his head. "That's not all, though. These woods can be dangerous. If you twist an ankle or something, and nobody knows where you went...."

"Oh." She deflated a little. She hadn't thought of that.

He reached out and flicked her chin lightly with a finger, smiling, and suddenly Ashley thought she could see what Chloe saw. "I do want to get you back to your dad in one piece, you know. Next time, tell someone?"

Ashley nodded. "Yes. Sorry."

But that had been five days ago, and not much of note had happened since. That would change soon, though, Ashley knew. Two days ago, Cat and Albert had headed out in the van to scout a way to sneak out of the country unnoticed. They'd returned last night at dusk and spent most of the evening cooped up in the kitchen with Wolf, telling him about their discoveries, over a table covered in maps.

She'd be going home soon, she just knew it. Excited by the prospect, she found she couldn't sleep. She had the room to herself. Chloe had moved permanently into the master bedroom the day after they'd arrived. Ashley had to admit, while she didn't fully understand Chloe's reasons, she was grateful for the resulting privacy.

Rolling onto her side, the sheets tangling in her legs, she brushed damp hair from her face. The stuffy, hot air in the room didn't help much with sleep, either: the house, powered by the generator, lacked air conditioning, and though the tall, old trees shaded it from the worst of the sun, it had gradually grown warmer and muggier indoors as the good weather lasted.

She flung herself back onto her stomach, pounding the pillow back into shape. Her nightshirt clung to her. She tossed again, this time ending up on her back, and fanned the thin sheet, hoping to create some cool air. The attempt wasn't very successful; with a frustrated groan, she threw back the covers and sat up, plucking sticky cotton away from her skin. If only she could find a way to cool

off....

A thought struck, and she climbed out of bed and made her way out into the hall. She paused at the top of the stairs, listening, and then tiptoed down the stairs on her bare feet, wincing as the treads creaked occasionally under her weight. A bit to her surprise, nobody appeared to challenge her before she made it to the front door and slipped outside. The cool water of the lake beckoned between the trees, shimmering with starlight. She left the door open a crack so she wouldn't have trouble sneaking back in. Nobody needed to know about her midnight excursion.

The night was dark under the trees, and the waning moon didn't provide much light. Ashley waited out on the porch for a couple of minutes until her night vision improved. Once her eyes had adjusted, she had little trouble navigating the trail down to the narrow strip of beach and the short pier that jutted a half-dozen yards into the lake.

She sat down at the end of the pier, and dangled her bare feet in the water. It was cool and slick, easing her hot feet, and she breathed out a sigh of pleasure. The forest surrounding her was very quiet, the silence broken only by the gentle lapping of the lake at the shore and the soft rustle of the canopy overhead. It was so very different from Pittsburgh. Back home, it never grew quiet; there always was noise, day and night: cars in the streets, boats on the river, airplanes overhead, police and ambulance sirens screeching through the night. She loved Pittsburgh, she really did, loved the bustle and excitement of the big city. But she thought maybe she'd come to love this place a little bit too: the long, slow days; the sweet scents of the forest; the cool lake.

She could be happy here, she thought, leaning back on her hands. Before her, the lake stretched out invitingly: the water smooth, the surface a mirror reflecting back the sliver of moon. She glanced around. There was nobody near; everyone was asleep, back at the house....

Her stomach fluttered with excitement. Feeling a little reckless, she dragged her T-shirt over her head, slipped out of her cotton panties, and dove from the pier. Despite the recent warm, sunny days, the water was cold enough to take her breath away and she came up gasping for air. She quickly grew used to the temperature, however, and began swimming back and forth with long, forceful strokes. Swimming without a bathing suit felt a little strange, but not unpleasant. In fact, she decided after contemplating it for a short while, it felt good, if a bit wicked. She wished she could swim like this more often.

Of course, she chuckled, diving beneath the surface and coming up a few seconds later, her mother would be utterly scandalized if she ever suggested they go skinny-dipping, even in the privacy of their own pool back home.

Despite the rigorous exercise, a chill slowly seeped into her bones. When she began to shiver and her skin started to pimple, she decided it was time to head back to shore. She ducked her head under the water one last time in a sort of farewell to the lake. As she came up, spluttering and wiping water from her eyes, a loud splash broke the stillness of the night. Abruptly remembering she was alone, and naked, she swirled around, trying to determine where the sound had come from. Something slid along her legs, and a small shriek escaped her. Panicked, she kicked at whatever it was with all her might, until a hand grabbed her ankle. An instant later, Albert broke the surface in front of her, grinning.

"Hey, hey, easy." He laughed, fending off her hands and feet when she started to pummel and kick him furiously.

"Dammit, you scared the crap out of me!" How dare he frighten her like that? Adrenaline coursed through her, her heart still pounding and her chill forgotten.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to." He cocked his head to scrutinize her face. "Couldn't sleep? I heard you come down the stairs. Thought I might find you here."

She stilled, treading water, her eyes narrowed. "How long have you been watching?"

"Long enough." He winked at her meaningfully. Her face heated up as the meaning of his words sank in. At the same time, something uncoiled in her lower belly.

Despite the darkness, he caught the blush, or maybe he just saw something in her expression. "Hey, don't be embarrassed. You're a beautiful woman. I like watching you."

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "So I've noticed."

He smirked in response. "You don't mind it very much, do you, Ashley?"

For a long moment, Ashley didn't know what to say. Because, though she didn't quite want to admit it, he was right: his attentions didn't bother her at all—even though she thought they *should*. But to be honest, she acknowledged in the privacy of her own mind, it was kinda flattering, the way the ardent infatuations of the guys at college weren't. Hell, half of *them* were only interested in hooking up with her because of her father's fortune, while the other half didn't care about much beyond getting into her pants.

She laid her head back and let herself float, eyes closed, and listened to the muted noises of the night. In the back of her mind, a small voice reminded her that she should get out of the lake. But the shore seemed far away: her swim had tired her out, and treading water had been quickly sapping the last of her



strength. So she didn't object when Albert pulled her close, but rested her arms on his shoulders for support, letting him carry some of her body weight.

His smirk faded, replaced with something she couldn't quite decipher. The next thing she knew, he was kissing her.

Without thinking, she responded, parting her lips to kiss him back. After that, it all happened so fast, far too fast for her to think things through. He smoothed his hands down her back, producing a shiver down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold water. When he dragged her tight against him, she gasped into his mouth; her nipples, already hard from the icy water, tingled pleurably as they squashed against his broad chest, so incredibly warm compared with the cold water surrounding her. She felt his hardness press against her belly, as he grabbed her hips, his fingers digging into her flesh. He drew his head back a little to meet her gaze; the next moment, he'd raised her up easily, her weight buoyed by the water, and she'd spread her legs, wrapping them around his hips as he pulled her back down onto him, filling her. She hid her face against his throat, feeling the moan that escaped him as much as hearing it, and tightened her arms around his neck, clinging as if for dear life, while he found a quick, steady rhythm. The lake splashed in little waves around them.

"God... Ashley..." He tangled one hand in her hair, wrapping the other arm around her waist to hold her, and she dug her nails into his back as he exploded into her.

A moment later, he rested his forehead against hers, breathing hard while he tried to collect himself. And cold, hard reality crashed down on her.

*Good God, what have I done?*

She pushed herself off of him, the water lapping at her now doubly cold by contrast with his heat. Angry, frustrated tears burned her eyelids before streaming down her cheeks. She shoved at his shoulders. "This is so wrong!"

"Ashley? Hey!" Surprise and concern were evident on his face. "Did I hurt you?"

"I can't... shouldn't..." She nearly choked on the words. "You didn't even use protection!"

"What? Oh." Relieved, he shrugged in apology. "You don't have to worry, I'm—."

"That's not the point, you dumbass!"

He appeared too confused to take offense, instead shooting her a puzzled look as she started to paddle backwards to the beach, glaring at him through her tears.

"Then what is the point?" He swam after her, quickly catching up. "Ashley?"

He reached the shore an instant after she did while she was still trying to yank her T-shirt back down over her head. It got stuck on her wet skin, and she tugged at it angrily. "Stay away from me."

"Ashley, come on." He hoisted himself out of the water. "I didn't mean—." He reached for her, and she slapped his hand away.

"Don't touch me," she hissed. She dashed off through the woods, not noticing how the rough ground cut at her bare feet. Moments later, she was racing up the stairs and into her bedroom, flinging the door shut behind her before falling face-first on the bed.

Muted footfalls approached on the landing a few minutes later, stopping right outside her door. Ashley lifted her head to listen and held her breath, half-praying Albert would go away, half-wishing he wouldn't. She was so confused that she couldn't seem to make up her mind. She should hate him, yet she'd wanted him, and she'd let him—the footsteps started up again, this time slowly retreating back downstairs, and Ashley dropped her head. All the tension of the past month suddenly found a release, along with her frustration and confusion. Heavy sobs racked her, barely muffled by the pillow, until she wasn't sure any more who she was more mad at: Albert, or herself, for wanting him in the first place.

The sun was coloring the clouds pink by the time she finally fell into a restless slumber.

oOo

Jake slipped out from under the covers as soon as the first gray light of day trickled through the curtains. He hadn't slept well: far too many concerns on his mind, his thoughts hemming and hawing yet never coming to a conclusion. Such indecisiveness was a strange and disconcerting experience; usually, he could decide quickly what course of action to take. And once he was committed, he rarely second-guessed himself. It was one reason his men were loyal to him: they knew where they stood. Yet lately everything seemed to have changed. Finding he was losing sleep over something so simple as deciding whether or not it was time to move on was disturbing, to put it mildly.

When he reached the door, he turned briefly to look at the woman who, he knew, was at the root of his indecision. She was still asleep, lying on her back with the sheet drawn up to her chin, one leg crooked at the knee. A slim arm lay across her stomach, exposed to his sight, and her hair was fanned out on the pillow, framing her face. It gave her an angelic appearance that made his heart

swell, despite the doubts nibbling at the edges of his mind.

He closed the door softly, not wanting to wake her, and made his way downstairs. In the kitchen, he started brewing coffee. Marshall and Albert would be up soon; unlike the girls, they had years of sunrise reveille ingrained in every cell of their bodies and sleeping in was a physical impossibility for them too—even if they weren't responsible for everyone's welfare, or didn't have important decisions to make.

Jake huffed a rueful laugh at himself: that was another thing the recruiters never mentioned....

While he waited for the hot water to filter through the coffee grounds, Jake shifted through the maps they'd left open on the table last night. He knew the first question once his men appeared would be, "When are we leaving, Sarge?" So far, he still didn't have an answer.

Was it a good tactic to leave their hideout so soon? Would the trail Marshall and Albert had found really get them into Canada undetected? Or was it better to keep their heads down for a while longer? They seemed to be safe here: despite a couple shopping trips for further essentials—on his instructions, Chloe had gone to a different town and store each time—the authorities hadn't swooped down to arrest them. Along with the groceries, Chloe had brought back the latest newspapers, their only reliable source of intel. The news about the hunt for him and his men or, rather, the authorities' lack of success had quickly gone from the front page to nothing but a small update on page eleven, before it disappeared from the papers altogether, while a worrisome rise in foreclosures, various natural disasters, more bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan, and political scandals in Washington grabbed the press's interest.

No, there was no good reason why they shouldn't stay. According to Harv, they didn't need to worry about Linda's renters until the end of the school semester. And they lacked little in the summer house: they had plenty of food, water and heat, as well as soft beds and clean sheets. Jake had seen plenty of long-term army camps that were far less well supplied. But Marshall kept dropping hints about the money that waited for them. And Albert, for whom patience never had been a strong suit, appeared ready to set out on his own if they didn't move soon.

By the time Chloe finally appeared, Jake had skirted around giving his men a clear answer to their questions so many times that he felt dizzy. His unwillingness to commit wasn't sitting well with Albert and Marshall, either, and the atmosphere in the kitchen was strained. Jake knew he had to make a decision. He owed it to the guys; they'd followed him down a track they hadn't needed to take, out of loyalty.

Yet it meant he'd also have to make a decision about what to do with Chloe. And that was the crux, wasn't it?

He scrubbed a hand through his hair and followed her with his gaze as she crossed the kitchen, heading for the fridge and some milk. God, he so wanted to bring her along, but he wasn't sure he could do that to her. How could he ask her to give up her life for an uncertain and dangerous existence as fugitives? Even with the money—assuming they could manage to get it out of the bank Abe had wired it to without detection—there would be no safe haven for them anywhere, no place on earth where the authorities might not come looking for them some day. It definitely wasn't the kind of life he'd wish for any woman he cared about.

But to give her up...?

Chloe seemed to finally sense the tension that hung heavily in the kitchen. Her hands slowed as she pulled out the carton from the fridge, suddenly uncertain. She cast an anxious glance in Jake's direction.

Albert took that moment to voice a further objection. "Sarge, I don't see why—."

Jake dragged his gaze away from Chloe's and pinned Albert with a scowl fierce enough that the rest of the argument died on the man's lips.

"Not now." Jake didn't want to discuss this in front of Chloe. He tried to think of something to buy him some more time. "Why don't you go check the perimeter?"

"But, Sarge...", Albert tried again.

"Mr. Pig." Jake pulled himself up straighter. "Perimeter check. Thank you."

Something in Jake's tone made Chloe turn away from the counter and give him another, longer look. Albert, too, must have recognized he was in dangerous territory. He shot Marshall a glance, shrugged, and stalked off. A moment later the front door slammed shut behind him with a bang that made the house shake.

The silence in the kitchen lengthened, until Marshall cleared his throat. "You want some eggs?" he asked Chloe. She glanced up from grabbing a box of cereal out of the cupboard.

"No thanks." She offered a smile. "I'm not really hungry."

Jake frowned; girl never ate enough, in his opinion. Marshall hesitated; with the subject of Canada closed for the present and his cooking skills not in demand, he seemed unsure about his next move.

Chloe shook some of the cereal out into a bowl. The rattle of the grains against the earthenware seemed unusually loud in the quiet of the kitchen, and she winced visibly.

Marshall pushed away from the table. "I'll be, um, outside." He shot Jake a last look filled with meaning, which Jake pretended not to see.

Chloe added some of the milk to her cereal and rummaged around in a drawer for a spoon.

"They think it's time to go." Jake swiped the maps together and started refolding them properly. "What do you think?"

Chloe shrugged. "I don't know." She set the bowl down on the newly cleared table and grabbed a chair. "I like it here. But Ashley deserves to go home, and I guess we can't stay here forever."

Jake hmm'ed unhappily, tapping the maps against the table's edge as he mulled over her words.

oOo

An hour later, Chloe had retreated to the sofa in the living room with a second mug of coffee and a book from the stack left behind by previous occupants of the house. She found she couldn't concentrate on the novel, though, and kept darting questioning peeks at Jake. He sat in one of the armchairs, staring at nothing that she could see, his lips pressed tightly together. The only movement was an occasional twitch of his left hand.

Albert, having returned from his perimeter check, slouched in another chair, brooding darkly. In a way, he reminded Chloe of a moping teenager. It would've been funny if she hadn't felt like they were all teetering on the brink of an invisible abyss. The strain she'd first picked up on in the kitchen seemed to be growing worse by the minute, and the tension was making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It felt like the crackling of energy right before a lightning storm, and the air seemed as thick and hard to breathe as if a real storm were approaching. It frightened her; she remembered sensing the same rising mood in the bank a few times, and it had never boded well.

Part of her wanted to escape, to go sit out on the deck, and leave the brooding men to their glum moods. But clouds had moved in earlier, blocking out the sun, and it was too chilly in the shadows of the trees. She mechanically flipped another page of her novel, even though she couldn't remember a word of what she'd read so far.

When Ashley came downstairs a few minutes later, the mood grew even more suffocating. Chloe, raising her head from her book at the sound of footsteps on the stairs, had blinked in shock when she saw the other woman. Ashley looked as if she hadn't slept a wink, despite the fact that it was already mid-morning. Bruises showed under her eyes, and she appeared as morose as in the first two days after they'd escaped the bank.

Albert had also glanced up at the sound of her footfalls, peering up at Ashley uncertainly. She froze as she caught sight of him. For an instant, Chloe thought she was going to bolt straight back up the stairs. Then she visibly squared her shoulders, lifted her chin and finished descending the stairs. She made a beeline for the sofa, and plopped down next to Chloe. Chloe shifted her gaze from Ashley to Albert and—*oh dear*. Her breath caught. But at least this was something she could understand.

Abruptly, she recalled half-waking in the night at the sound of someone clumping across the landing. Sleep-befuddled, she'd dismissed the noises as part of a dream and promptly forgotten all about them. But now she wasn't so sure any longer that what she'd heard hadn't been real.

She shouldn't be so surprised, she decided, when she thought about it. She'd have had to be blind not to notice the attraction between the two: the push-pull-push thing they'd had going on even before Ashley had seduced Albert out of his gun. And from the way they now kept sneaking glances at the other when they thought they were unobserved, it looked as if someone had finally decided to act on the sparking chemistry.

Apparently, it hadn't turned out too well.

Chloe watched them covertly for a minute longer. Ashley was sitting stiff as a rod, pointedly ignoring Albert, who was pretending not to notice—although Chloe was quite sure he caught every tiny shift in Ashley's posture.

"You okay?" Chloe asked softly.

Ashley gave a dismissive little shrug. "I just want to go home."

Chloe unfolded her legs from under her and closed the book. "You know you will, eventually." She had gone over this with Ashley several times already; though she couldn't really blame her for repeatedly bringing up the topic, Chloe was growing a bit tired about having to remind her yet again.

"No." Ashley raised her voice a little. "I mean, I *want* to go home."

Jake gave a start, his gloomy introspection interrupted. His dark gaze focused on Ashley.

"Girl's right, Sarge." Surprisingly, it was Albert who spoke first. He got to his feet and added, a little belligerently, "Why are we still here anyway? We got six million dollars stashed away across the border, and instead of gettin' it, we sit on our asses in this damned forest, twiddling our thumbs. This place doesn't even have friggin' TV!"

Chloe gasped; she'd never heard Albert speak like that to Jake before. The only person she could remember ever doing so had been Albert's brother, Rabbit. And *he* had been crazy.

Jake slowly shifted his gaze from Ashley to Albert. But before he could say anything, the front door burst open and Marshall stomped in. "Sarge, we really should leave today. The radio—" It was only then he seemed to notice the strained mood in the room, or the four sets of eyes that stared back at him. He faltered. "Um...."

Once it became obvious Marshall wasn't going to continue, Jake asked mildly, "What radio?"

"Oh, that. I was in the car." Marshall waved toward the clearing outside where they'd left the van parked. "Listening to the radio."

They were far enough from civilization that most radio signals were faint and filled with static. Except for one Canadian station, which used a transmitter powerful enough that the car's antenna could pick it up even here smack in the middle of the forest. Monitoring the radio news broadcasts had been another way they'd kept track of the latest updates on the search for the 'Three Rivers Three', as the press had dubbed them. Lately, nobody had mentioned them at all, or so Jake had told Chloe.

"I caught the weather forecast." Marshall, having reached safer ground, continued a little more firmly, "Another rain front's gonna move in later today, possibly even tonight." He paused. "Sarge, those forest tracks Albie and me found across the border? Those're gonna be impassable when wet. If we don't leave now, we might be stuck for another week, or however long it takes for those trails to dry out again."

Ashley let out a little groan of dismay. Albert opened his mouth to say something, but obviously thought better of it and snapped his jaw shut without a word. Jake rubbed a hand over his face.

"Sarge?" Marshall prodded quietly.

"Alright." Jake took a deep breath. "Alright." There was a collective exhale of breaths at Jake's decision. Jake glanced at his watch and thought for a moment.

"We leave in one hour. Or we won't reach the border before nightfall." He shifted his gaze to Ashley and smiled. "Hear that, girl? You're going home."

Ashley nodded. Tears glimmered in her eyes, although she was smiling at the same time, and Chloe pulled her into a hug, holding her tight. Across Ashley's shoulder, she discovered Jake was gazing at her intently. He glanced away guiltily as soon as their eyes met, and it told her more than any words could. She grew cold to her core, feeling as if the ground had dropped away from under her feet.

He wasn't going to take her with him.

o0o

Chloe stood on the porch, one hand resting on the railing. She gazed at the play of shadows and light on the ground in the clearing in front of the house, ignoring the bustle going on around her. Marshall was loading bags into the car, while Albert took the opportunity to tweak the engine a bit more.

Perhaps if she ignored it, it wasn't really happening.

She sensed Jake's presence on the deck before she glimpsed him out of the corner of her eye. He walked up to stand beside her, shoulder to shoulder, nearly touching. "Chloe..."

"You're going to send me away, aren't you?" Her words were no louder than a whisper as she voiced her fears before Jake could. She struggled against a throat tight with tears to get them out.

"You know I should." His tone was nearly as low as hers, and he sounded sad.

"No!" She whirled to face him, suddenly furious and unashamed of the tears streaming down her face. "No. I don't know. You *promised*—."

He didn't let her finish. "Chloe, listen to me." Reaching up, he brushed at the moisture on her cheeks. "What kind of a life could I offer you?"

She shook her head, shrugging off his touch. "I don't care. You're not gonna tell me what I should do. Not this time." He tried to reach for her again, but she slapped his hand away. "Look me in the eye, Jake. Look me in the eye and tell me you don't *want* me to come." She took a deep breath, and plunged on. "If you can do that, then I'll go back."

His dark eyes met hers for a second before they flicked on across her face, drinking in her every feature as if he wanted to make sure he'd remember her. He opened his mouth to speak. Closed it again without a word.



Chloe didn't dare move, holding her breath until she grew faint. As she watched, his features twisted. Finally, he dropped his gaze and turned away from her. "You know I can't do that," he murmured. "God may strike me dead, but I can't."

She folded her arms in front of her, heart pounding in her throat but triumph surging through her. "So, it's settled, then?"

He glanced back up at her, his expression both miserable and relieved at once. His mouth quirked wryly. "Yeah. It's settled."

"Good." She brushed past him toward the front door. "I'll go collect my things."

oOo

Shortly after noon, Ashley crawled out of the van a hundred yards from a rest area with a bus stop that offered a regular, once-a-day service from Winnipeg to Minneapolis. The rest area, not far from the Canadian border, also included a diner, a gas station—a sign announced *Last Chance For American Gas*, whatever that meant; Ashley couldn't begin to imagine—and a convenience store which doubled as a ticket office for the bus service.

Chloe climbed out after her and hugged her tight. She was crying by the time Ashley disentangled herself and made Chloe promise to be careful. Chloe nodded and extracted a similar promise from Ashley, before she got back into the van.

Ashley watched her go, brushing at her eyes, tears burning behind her lids. She realized Albert had also gotten out and was standing near the van's side door. He fidgeted when she met his gaze, clearly hesitating over his next move after what had happened the night before. Ashley made up his mind for him; she didn't want to leave without saying goodbye. Not after... everything. She headed over to him and stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek. "Bye, Albert."

He drew back, a frown creasing his forehead, and she gave him an shaky half-smile. "Are we good?" His expression was guardedly hopeful.

She nodded, biting her lip. He wasn't a bad person, and she couldn't blame him for what happened last night. At least not completely. "You wanna know a secret?" she whispered.

He lifted a brow. "What?"

Her lips curved up. "I don't have any tattoos. I lied."

For a second, Albert was shocked into silence. Then he snorted a laugh. "You're

one crazy chick, you know that?"

She grinned back. "Take care of yourself, Albert. You're not such a bad guy."

He gave a rueful shrug. "Don't know about that. But thank you."

"Okay, guys, time to break it up." Wolf offered Ashley a roll of bills. She took it reluctantly, but she was unsure if her credit cards would still work, and she didn't want to get stranded. Judging from the size of the roll, she suspected it was at least enough to buy her a ticket to Pittsburgh twice over and still have money to spare for a burger and a soda.

"I'm trusting you here, kiddo." Wolf folded her fingers around the bills. "Give us some time to make our getaway. There should be a bus around six and you can either wait for it or call your daddy to come pick you up. Whatever you do, the cops will want to talk to you, and I won't ask you to lie for us. Just... give us some time. Can you do that?"

She glanced over Wolf's shoulder at the three people watching her—Albert a pace or two away, Chloe peering out at her from inside, Cat beside the driver's door—and realized she no longer wanted them caught. She nodded. "Yes, I can do that."

She wasn't sure how much she wanted to tell the police, anyway. She was going home, and that was all she'd ever wanted; she didn't care about the rest of it. Struck by a sudden thought, she offered Wolf a knowing little smirk. "Sometimes it helps to be pretty and have a rich dad." He raised an eyebrow quizzically, and she explained, "Paris Hilton pretty much set the norm: we're all vapid airheads. I can play stupid with the best of them."

Wolf laughed out loud, the first time ever she'd heard him do that. "Good girl. And listen, I'm sorry, you know. About gettin' your dad into trouble." She nodded again, her grin fading. She swallowed down fresh tears; she didn't even know what had happened to her father. If he'd been sent to jail, or if Jim and his lawyers had gotten him released, or even if there had been a trial yet.

Wolf squeezed her shoulder one last time before he turned away and joined the others, shooing everyone into the van and sliding the door shut behind him. Ashley kept her gaze on the van as it drove off, unable to look away until its tail lights had faded into the distance. She wiped at the tears that she'd failed to hold back and wondered if she'd ever see any of them again.

Turning away, she stuffed the roll of bills into her pocket and headed for the rest stop. It was over; she was going home at last. Whatever that meant now; she didn't think her life would ever be the same as it was before.

Leaning forward so she could see the reflection in the side view mirror from her seat on the back bench, Chloe watched Ashley's lone figure beside the road growing smaller and smaller. She chewed on a fingernail absently; it was strange not to have the other girl around any longer. They shared a lot of history, after all.

Once she could no longer make out the other woman's form, she pulled in a shuddering breath and sat back, leaning against the cold metal of the van's side. Jake switched over from the other bench to plop down next to her "You okay?"

She gave a tremulous nod, not entirely trusting her voice yet.

He must've misread her, because he hurried on, "Chloe, it's not too late to change your mind." He took her hand and held it between his. "There's still time, you can still go back."

Chloe started shaking her head so forcefully that her hair whipped around her cheeks. "No." She gave him a frightened look.

Jake let go of her hand. "Hey, hey." He twisted further toward her and cupped her face between his hands, tilting up her chin with calloused fingertips until she had no choice but to look back at him. "I just want you to think about this," he added quietly. "If you go back now, with Ashley, you'll be okay with the authorities. You'll be the hostage who was forced to come, just like her. If you don't... If you come with me, they'll consider you an accomplice. And they'll hunt you as much as us. Understand?"

She stared into his eyes, dark and warm. She knew he'd tell Marshall to turn the car round if she gave the word. But she wouldn't. She'd made up her mind a long time ago and, for better or for worse, she'd live with it. She couldn't know what the future might bring—who could, ever?—but she did know what she was leaving behind, and she wasn't sorry to let it go. She couldn't imagine anything might ever make her regret it.

"Yes," she whispered in reply to his question, nodding against his grip. "I understand. It doesn't matter. Not to me. As long—" Her voice caught. "As long as I can be with you, it doesn't matter."

He leaned in to kiss her, then, rocking with the motion of the van.

Marshall shot a warning over his shoulder as he turned the van onto an overgrown forest track: "Sarge, better hang on. It's gonna get bumpy." He'd barely finished speaking before they hit a first pothole, and Chloe was thrown against Jake. She laughed a little self-consciously, and Jake wrapped one arm

around her to hold her tight to him while he braced himself with the other against the van's side.

Chloe clung close, not caring how much she was getting tossed around by the bouncing car. It would be all right. No matter how many twists and turns life might bring, as long as they had each other, they could survive anything.

oOo

Six months later, Ashley had picked up the pieces of her normal life again. That night in the lake had remained without consequences—*thank God*—and she'd gone back to college, working hard over the summer to catch up with the spring semester classes she'd missed. She'd also left her parents' house, finding her father's concern for her welfare and her mother's pampering too smothering. She'd moved into one of the on-campus residences, where she shared a room with a black girl from Georgia. It made her feel almost normal.

Except for a couple of counseling sessions the university had required she undergo, she'd hardly ever spoken of what had happened in spring—although at night, in the privacy of her own mind, she sometimes wondered what had happened to Albert and Chloe and the others. She only knew they hadn't been caught; the media would've been all over it if they had.

In the end, she'd arrived home a full twenty-four hours after Wolf had released her. While she'd desperately wanted to go home, she'd found herself strangely reluctant once she had the chance, and she'd taken the bus all the way back to Pittsburgh rather than calling her father. Not just because she'd made a promise to Wolf to give them as much time as she could but also because she'd simply enjoyed being on her own, with nobody making any demands on her. As Wolf had predicted, as soon as she reached Pittsburgh, everyone had descended upon her. They'd all wanted something: assurances that she was all right; information on Wolf; the exclusive story of her kidnapping.... While it had been impossible to avoid talking to the cops, she'd managed, with her father's help, to dodge the press until they lost interest and moved on to other, fresher stories.

Much to her joy and relief, her father had been released from prison before she made it back home. No district attorney had dared take him to trial for attempting to help Wolf escape; they were too afraid of getting slammed themselves over prosecuting Pittsburgh's richest man for simply doing what any father would've done. But Ashley quickly learned something had changed in Alan Beck, just as it had in her. And although she couldn't live in the same house with him any more, she did manage to reestablish the easy relationship she'd had with him up until a few years ago.

A second chance, indeed. For both of them.

All in all, Ashley decided, maybe that old adage was true: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

This particular evening, sprawled on her bed, she was trying to study. Outside, rain slashed at the windows of the building, and wind howled around the corners, another fall storm blown in from the lakes. Ashley toyed idly with the postcard she was using as a bookmark, finding it hard to concentrate on the textbook. She'd picked the card up, along with a bunch of other mail, over the weekend. It had been delivered at her parents' house the week before.

"Looks like a good place to be right now." Ashley gave a start; more interested in the card and what it meant than in actually studying, she hadn't heard her roommate come in. "All warm and sunny-like."

"Uh-huh." Ashley pondered the picture on the card. It did look like a much nicer place than Pittsburgh was just at this moment: a stark white, sandy beach covered with colorful beach chairs leading down to dark blue sea; light blue sky in the background; green palm trees framing the image. Printed across the sky in fancy red lettering were the words "Wish you were here."

The card was from some small island state in the Pacific; she'd actually had to look it up on Wikipedia.

"Who's it from?" her roommate asked. "A friend? Oh, a *special* friend?" She batted her eyelashes meaningfully.

Ashley scowled and slipped the card back between the pages before closing the book. "Something like that."

She surprised herself a bit with the answer, slipping out before she had a chance to consider it. Though the card wasn't signed, someone had sketched a doodle on the back in the lower left corner. It wasn't a very good doodle. But Ashley knew what it was supposed to be.

The doodle was a pig.

**Disclaimer:** this story is a transformative work based on the Lions Gate Television/Spike TV-series *The Kill Point*. It was written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from it. Please do not redistribute without author attribution .