

Disclaimers: None. If you're still reading my stuff at this point, you pretty well know what you're getting into. If you don't have an open mind or if you find something you think needs disclaiming, you are still more than welcome to let me know. It won't change anything, but it may make you feel better. Ugliness will earn you a smack to the back of your head.

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Author's Notes: This is part one of what will likely be a four story arc. And it's what I was working on when Steph asked me to play in the Academy Valentine's Invitational, so it became my Valentine's offering for 2012. Thanks for the invite, Boss!

The Storyteller's Cardinal Rule is in effect... but kind of suspended in this part.

Favors of Fortune - Part One When I Wasn't Looking

By D

Prologue

It's a little bit like déjà vu as I lean against the doorjamb watching her. She's sitting at the bar in jeans and a hoodie - one hand jammed in her pocket as the other caresses a vodka tonic. The hood of her sweatshirt is still covering most of her head, and she's wearing a pair of glasses that help hide the features of her face. She stands out from the crowd, however, just because of her casual dress, and I have to wonder what she did to gain admittance into this exclusive club.

It's only a little bit like déjà vu, though - because twenty-seven years ago, it was me sitting at the bar trying to figure out the meaning of life... my life, anyway. I was lucky that I had someone who cared enough to listen, so now it's time to pay that forward. Now it's my turn to be the mentor, so I push away from the door and make my way towards the bar. It's only the badge I flashed at the door that allows me passage into the inner sanctum - I know I'm not dressed for this swanky place. When I got the call, I didn't hesitate, but came immediately; I wasn't expecting to get pulled from my bed at one-thirty in the morning. Good thing I sleep in sweat pants and a tank top... all I had to do was pull on shoes and grab a jacket before I took off after her.

The bartender looks at me, but doesn't comment on my attire - he's already seen the flash of gold and gotten the nod from the bouncers at the door. Instead, he cocks an eyebrow in question.

"Vodka martini down and dirty, and one more vodka tonic for the lady," seeing her head pop up from the contemplation of the ice in her glass at the first sound of my voice. "But no more," I instruct him firmly. She opens her mouth to argue, but a single look from me snaps her mouth shut quickly enough. She frowns hard, but keeps her attention firmly on her glass.

The silence is uncomfortable while we wait for our drinks, but I'm not going to be the one to break it. She already knows she's in trouble with me for running off alone. I need to see if she's willing to share what had caused her to do so.

I'm down two olives and half a martini when she finally speaks, and only the fact that I'm listening for it enables me to hear her whispered words.

"How did you know when you were in love?"

I'm grateful I don't have anything in my mouth; I'm pretty sure vodka burns a lot more going up than it does going down, and I'm going to need every bit of coherence I've got to answer this question honestly. I clear my throat.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess this is why we're sitting at some ritzy bar at oh-my-God o'clock in the morning?" I don't mention the fact that she came here alone or that one of my people had to follow her and stick around as inconspicuously as possible until I could get here. We'll get to that soon enough and she knows it. Instead, she chuckles at my description of the time and nods her head slowly, as if she's really not quite sure it's the truth.

"I asked my mother that once," I tell her, holding her gaze with my own. "She said if I had to ask, it was already too late." Brown eyes widen and fill with tears before they drop to the remnants of her vodka tonic. I reach out a hand and cover the one closest to me, and she instinctively clasps it tightly. "I don't think that's necessarily true, though."

"You...." She stops and clears her throat, though her eyes remain focused on our joined hands. "You don't?"

I shake my head. "I don't. I think it's a lot more complicated than simply wondering if you're in love."

She shifts our hands until hers rests on top of the back of mine, tilting my fingers until she got a good look at my wedding set. "Will you tell me... about you?" motioning to the rings. I nod.

"I'll share if you will."

She bites her lip and blinks rapidly, forcing back the tears as she inclines her head and stares at the ceiling for several long minutes. Finally she draws a deep breath and nods. "Okay," she agrees huskily. "Maybe you can help me figure this out. But not here... please?"

"Not here," I nod. I slide from the stool and she catches a look at the gun tucked beneath the jacket. Her eyes widen, and I look down before casually closing the jacket. I drop a few bills on the bar and pull her from her seat. My team has a car waiting, and it only takes a minute to return to our hotel.

"Can we go to your room?" she asks. "Part of my... problem is probably still in mine."

"Malcolm?" She nods slowly. "I'll have it seen to. But yeah... we'll go to my room." We enter the elevator and head for our floor. One nice thing about being in charge of this detail - I was able to put us all on the same floor, so security is easier to manage. I pull one of my guys over with a jerk of my head as we emerge from the lift, ushering her into my room as I give him his instructions. Then I follow her in and close the door. It's going to be a long night.

Chapter I

"Would you care for some milk?" I offer as she crosses the room to sit in the semi-comfortable chair. "I have homemade peanut butter cookies if you're hungry."

She looks at me with something akin to shock in her expression. "Where did you get homemade cookies and how did you score a fridge in this place?" slipping her jacket off and hanging it on the back of the chair.

I chuckle. "It's easy when you know the right people, and my daughter sent the cookies. My kids are your age, you know, and she lives here in town. You can sit on the bed if you'd rather - I know that chair isn't particularly comfortable. Take your shoes off and make yourself at home."

She tilts her head as she considers my offer, then smiles as she removes her shoes and pulls back the side of the bed I hadn't been sleeping on. After twenty-seven years together, three years of being a widow isn't enough to break the habit of asking for a king size bed. "No I didn't know. You're not like anyone I've ever met," she comments. "And trust me... that's a good thing. And yes... I would love some milk. Do you have skim, by any chance?"

This time my laughter is full-blown, and she looks bemused by the sound. "I'm sorry," I say when I catch my breath. "Does this really look like a body that worries about milk fat content?" she glances at me, and I can tell she's torn between honesty and politeness. Because while I'm by no means out of shape - I can't afford to be in my line of work - I'm not the skinny spring chicken I once was either. I give her an out. "Believe me - I haven't worried about that in a long time. I can call room service if you'd rather though...."

She shakes her head and accepts a glass of milk, sipping on it gingerly; her eyes widen at the unaccustomed richness of its taste. I set my own on the table so I can remove the accouterments of my job before I crawl into the other side of the bed. She doesn't say anything when I set the ID case down or when I slide the gun off my waistband. When I remove my jacket however....

"Holy crap!!!" I look around trying to figure out what I've missed. "You've got tattoos!!!"

My eyebrows go into my hairline. "Yeah? So do you - what's your point?"

"How did you...?" I cock an eyebrow and she looks chagrined at my response and turns her focus to her hands. "Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. It's just... unexpected, you know. When we see you, you're always so straight-laced and polished. I just never thought...."

I shrug. "No worries... I shouldn't have snapped. I've had them for years, and like yours, mine are pretty personal to me. They remind me of many things." I pick up the box of cookies and offer them to her. "Cookie? They're amazing." She smiles at me briefly and takes one out of the box. She nibbles carefully, then turns shocked eyes in my direction. "I did tell you," I remind her smugly, and offer the box again. She takes a couple more and settles in to enjoy her snack.

"So what do you want to know?" I ask after topping off her glass. It may have been like drinking cream to her, but these cookies were impossible to eat without some serious liquid indulgence. Just in case, I set a half-filled glass of water beside her milk - worse comes to worst, she can add one to the other to make the whole milk more tolerable to her palate. I figured I'd let her ask a few questions

first - if she could relax a little, taking care of whatever was troubling her enough to risk expulsion from the program would be easier for both of us.

"What would you like to share? I mean," setting the milk down so she could talk with her hands. "You probably know everything about all of us - I'm sure there are files you had to read before you took this assignment. But we know nothing about you, except... well, nothing, really. I now know you have tattoos and a daughter. And that you're married."

"Widowed, actually," I reply softly. Even three years isn't enough distance to make it any less painful a reality to have.

"Oh... oh - I'm so sorry," covering her mouth with her hand. "I seem to be screwing up all over the place tonight. Maybe I should just...." swinging her legs over the side of the bed. I grab her arm and tug her lightly back towards me.

"Maybe you should just lean back and take a deep breath. It's all right - you didn't know and it's been three years. I promised to share if you would, remember?" She nods her dark head, and the length of her hair falls down to cover her face. I reach a hand up to tuck it back, and she tilts her head and smiles at me. I return the gesture. "It's all right," I repeat. "I do know all about you, but I don't actually know any of you. What you can read in a printed file rarely tells the whole story about anything or anyone. So how about we figure it out together?"

"So tell me about it," she says as she slides down to lay on the bed, turning on her side and propping her head up on one hand. I clasp my hands together over my belly and loll my head in her direction for a brief moment before letting my eyes focus on the far wall. "How did you know when you were in love?" This time, that question just gives me a melancholy smile, and I let my mind travel back thirty-odd years to another time and place - when life was exciting, and I was young.

*He was dashing in his uniform - a mutual friend had introduced us at her wedding where we were both part of the bridal party. I can't say it was love at first sight, because really... who believes in that?? I can say I was a little smitten with him, but then they do say that a girl marries a man much like her father and Daddy was a career Marine. So I was impressed by the uniform... even if it was Air Corps blue instead of Marine red - and I was going to have to explain that slight breach of protocol to Daddy. Fortunately, *he* would eventually be impressed with the man wearing it.*

"Wait," she interrupts me, dragging my mind back from that first rush of infatuation. I turn my head and arch an eyebrow at her, and she flushes just a little. "Do you have a picture?"

I smile and reach for the Pad that stays on constantly for several reasons. With a couple motions, I expand it to its full size and find the folder I'm looking for, then I hand it over where she can see. "Take your time," I instruct her. "We've got as long as you need." And with that, I rise from the bed and move over to the door. I need to find out what's happening outside my room.

Caleb comes over as soon as he sees me crack the door, and I step outside though I don't close the door behind me. I don't want her to get the wrong idea. Given what I know from her file, trust is something that she's reluctant to give - one reason I'm willing to share with her first.

"What's the word?" I ask briskly. Caleb doesn't take offense - this is a high profile assignment and we're all running under a mountain of stress at this point. We've done well not to crack so far, but we don't waste a lot of time on the niceties either. He grimaces at my question.

"We got Malcolm out of the room as well as the hotel, but he's threatened to go to McMurtry."

"Make sure the rest know - when she left her room, she came directly to mine. Oh, and send someone out to pick up some cold remedy medicine - several different kinds. Make sure they also include some fluid replenishment and some crackers and soup as well."

"We'll take care of everything, Chief," Caleb assures me, and I know I can count on him to take care of the team and the team to take care of the evidence. They will also set a cover to take care of any other possibilities if it becomes necessary to utilize such methods to keep her out of trouble. After all, sickness is a viable excuse to cover a multitude of sins. And the barkeep will swear we were never there by the time all is said and done. I nod and he smiles. "It's little enough to do for someone who has been nothing but nice to us, and Malcolm's an ass."

"A rich, well-connected ass, but I've got enough on him right now to stir some serious shit waves if he decides to push her on this." Caleb nods. He knows what I do, and will do what it takes to make this happen for her. "Let me get back to her. I need to find out what the hell the ass did to drive her to jeopardize everything in the first place. Everything quiet otherwise?"

"Yep. Are we canceling tomorrow's interviews?"

"I hope not, but I'll let you know as soon as I do."

He glances at his watch and nods. "I hope you get some rest, Chief."

I snort. "Me too." I step back into the room and close the door to find her watching me. I cross back to the bed, and she hands me the computer Pad back.

"You have a beautiful family," she comments bashfully and I smile with pride.

"I think so," I agree with a chuckle. "But don't let it get around. You'll ruin my hard ass rep."

She snorts this time and covers her faces in embarrassment. I laugh and she starts laughing as well, and it goes on for a long moment before she takes a deep breath to try and get herself under control. I wait until I'm sure she's good to talk before I cock my eyebrow at her.

"And what were you snorting at, missy? I'll have you know I'm known as a hard ass throughout Operations."

She arches her eyebrow perfectly at me and smirks. "Maybe," she agrees. "But I'd be willing to bet good money you perpetuate a lot of those stories yourself. Because you certainly haven't been a hard ass with me - cookies and milk aren't really a cruel punishment, you know."

"Yes, but it *is* whole milk." She laughs.

I glare at her and she bites her bottom lip, though I silently deliberate if it's because she's unsure of herself or if she's trying to contain more laughter. I huff at her and flop back on the bed, looking up at the ceiling and folding my hands over my belly once more.

"Where was I?" I growl.

"Meeting your husband-to-be for the first time," she responds without a hint of laughter. My eyes soften as I let my mind go back again, even as I try to focus on the task at hand.

He'd invited me for coffee and since I had only just reached majority, I thought it was a very grown-up idea. Besides, I knew Daddy would never stand for any funny business - especially before he had the opportunity to properly vet an Air Corps interloper - and a retired Marine ran the place. It made me question if he chose that as our first date intentionally to make a point to Daddy.

Coffee in the morning became lunch that turned into afternoon tea before we actually left the coffee shop to go somewhere else for dinner.

"Wait," she cuts in again. "You're telling me your first date - which was essentially a blind date with the man who eventually became your husband - lasted *all day*?"

I smirk. "Not just all day," laughing at the expression on her face. It's been a long time since I've allowed myself to remember any of this, much less share it with anyone and I'm glad to discover it's not painful like I expected it to be. Instead, the memories send a warmth through my veins I haven't felt in three years.

"So what happened?" Her voice pulls me from my reverie and I turn my head back to meet her eyes. For the first time since I arrived at the bar, her eyes are twinkling and I understand so much more than I had even five minutes before.

I smile and tilt my head back until I'm looking at the ceiling, recalling that very first date we shared.

We left the coffee shop walking side by side but not touching except as a polite, protective gesture; he was the ultimate gentleman. He opened doors; walked on the outside as we slowly made our way down the street; matched his stride to meet mine and gently guided me through crowded areas.

Dinner was amazing - more for the company and conversation than because of the food, although the food had been pretty spectacular as well. Afterwards we found a quiet spot on the beach and we sat and talked for hours... until the sun began to peek over the horizon.

We fell into silence then, watching as the world slowly woke from its slumber in a wash of beautiful color. Once it was fully daylight, he rose and extended a hand down to me, carefully easing me back to my feet though he didn't attempt to brush the sand off of any part of my anatomy. Instead, he took care of himself and waited patiently until I finished. Then he held out his hand again, giving me the choice to accept the gesture or reject it.

We walked back towards the flight line hand in hand until we reached the cargo plane slated to take him and several others back to their duty stations. He asked for permission to keep in touch and when I granted it, we exchanged personal information. A moment later, he was being summoned to board

the transport. He brushed a light kiss over my cheek and mounted the stairs, turning briefly to wave goodbye before he disappeared from my life.

"He couldn't have disappeared!" she argues. "You get married and have kids - I've seen the pictures!!"

I laugh. I never imagined when the phone rang earlier that I'd be sharing my bed and my story with this brilliant young woman. I can only hope she benefits from the story and that it helps her to trust me enough to be honest... with herself if no one else. She needs a friend, and right now, I'm the best option she's got. And with a little luck, I can guide her to make better choices than she has so far.

I offer her a droll look. "Yes, I'm aware," I inform her. "Pretty sure I was there for all those events. But at the time, he really did disappear from my life and I had no idea when or if I'd see him again."

"So what happened?" and I realize that's going to be her mantra through all this. Not as bad as 'are we there yet?' but pretty damned close. I cut my eyes at her though I never actually turn her way, and still I can see the slight smirk gracing her lips. It makes me smile - it means she's growing more comfortable with me, and that can only be a good thing in my book.

"Impatient much?" I ask, arching an eyebrow at her. "Honestly, you really do remind me of my kids. I should introduce you to them someday. You'd like them."

"Are they like you?" shifting until she's sitting further up on the bed, though not completely upright. Just as well - we can't afford the time to take a nap at the moment. We've got to get things squared away first before someone finds a reason to ask awkward questions. I lean my head thoughtfully so as to regard her while I consider my response.

"In many ways, yes. He was gone so much that I was left to raise them alone mostly. Don't misunderstand - he was a good husband and father, and he spent as much time with us as his job allowed him. But he was career military, and where he went, we followed. And when he was sent off on missions where we couldn't go, we waited... sometimes for months."

"Was it terribly hard? It seems like...." She trails off and bites her lip, considering what she really wants to know. I wait patiently, understanding she will have many questions to ask before we're done. "Was it worth it?" she finally blurts, blushing, but holding her gaze on my face nonetheless.

"Absolutely," I reply without thinking. "I will forever be thankful for every precious minute we had together." I look at her squarely, letting her read the truth for herself.

"Tell me about your children," she asks softly after another moment. "I know you have a daughter and two sons - are the boys twins?"

I smile - my children are my pride and joy, and my sons are the gentlemen their father was. "They are indeed. Ian will graduate from the Air Corps Academy with his wings and Nathaniel will graduate as a Recon Marine from the Naval Academy in the spring."

Her eyes widen slightly, but she's learned to school any more telling of a reaction. "That's... impressive," she murmurs, but I have the distinct feeling she is much more awestruck by the information than she's allowing herself to show. I smile.

"Well, they are pretty impressive boys, in my completely unbiased opinion," eyes twinkling when she cracks a small smile at my words.

"And your daughter?" A small frown furrows her brow. "She looks so familiar, but I can't quite place where I've seen her - or why I would have done so."

"Do you enjoy the ballet?"

"Of course!" her eyes lighting up with enthusiasm. "I've studied since I was a child, but I wasn't allowed to pursue any of the performance arts as a career. Papa said it was an 'unworthy endeavor' for someone of my pos... for me," the last said with more than a hint of bitterness in her tone. She looks at me critically, eyes narrowing as she tries to bridge the seeming gap in our conversation. I watch as her focus goes inward, then wait patiently when her brown eyes snap up to meet mine, studying intently. My smile grows into a bonafide grin when recognition flares in her gaze. "Your daughter is Joy Wellesly?" I nod and she squeals, her enthusiasm making me chuckle in delight. "Oh my gosh - she's like the most famous dancer to take the stage since Anna Pavlova!"

"She's done very well for herself, yes," I reply modestly. Joy may be famous to the rest of the world, but she's still the daughter to whom I gave birth, so her celebrity is of little concern to me except when it comes to her safety. My daughter is the reason I am in this business - and why I am the best at what I do. Nothing motivates a mother better than a threat to her child. And this young woman needs me to be that kind of mom to her now - even if she hasn't realized it yet.

"I envied her, you know," she comments softly, and I tilt my head to study her. "I was always curious to know what it would be like to have been her - to do something she so obviously loved doing... performing every night in front of so many who loved her for the happiness she brought into their lives... however briefly." She looks around the room before allowing her eyes to meet mine again.

"I'll introduce you - you can ask her yourself."

She smiles shyly. "Do you think she might have some more of those cookies?"

I laugh. "I'll make sure she does," laughing harder when she does a little squee dance in her spot on the bed. She leans back into the pillows when she's done, breathing slightly accelerated, but a happy grin on her face. I haven't seen that expression on her before and I decide it suits her. It's a shame I'm going to have to wipe it away to find out what I need to know, but before I can speak, she does, the smile on her face morphing into a more serious expression.

"I think we've gotten a little off-track," she says softly.

"Good thing we're not on a schedule then, isn't it?" I reply as quietly, but my words cause her to visibly relax. "We'll get to everything in time, but I promised to share. And I'm willing to answer any questions you have."

She cocks her head and lets her brow furrow in confusion. "Why?" She holds up her hands to keep me from answering and I wait patiently for her to finish formulating her question. "What do you get out of helping me out? We both know this could wash me from the program if it got out."

"Do you want it to?"

"NO!" she responds so fiercely I'm tempted to see if my hair caught fire. "No," a little more calmly. "This is mine - something I earned on my own merit. Something I want to keep by my own work and effort. But no one does something for nothing. So what's in it for you?"

"Short answer? Someone once did for me what I'm doing for you - it was time for me to pay it forward. Long answer? You'll get that over the course of our talk... as long as you remember our agreement."

"I remember," she says with a sigh, eyes dropping to focus her hands twined in her lap. "It's just..."

I cup my fingers under her chin and wait for her eyes to meet mine. When she finally looks at me, I see the tears she's struggling so desperately not to shed. "Angel," I say quietly. "I'm on your side here - I promise. We'll get through this. Who knows," I offer, giving her a smile, "I may even be able to fix things."

She snorts, but she can't hide the hope in her dark eyes. "Mary, if you can do that, we'll have to change your name to the Miracle Worker."

"Oh, Angel - you have no idea." I say, wagging my eyebrows. That garners me the laughter I was waiting for. We're ready to move ahead.

Chapter II

A hand on my arm makes me stop before I can continue, and I arch my eyebrow in question. She smirks at me and the second brow joins the first on my forehead. This time I get laughter, and though I'm glad to hear it, I'm somewhat confused by the reaction. Usually I get an answer at the very least; I don't think I've ever gotten outright mirth.

After a moment, she calms, waving a hand in front of her face to help cool the flush now covering it. I cock the single brow again, and though she gives me a broad smile, she restrains herself from laughing. A couple deep breaths and she's able to speak.

"I'm sorry," she apologizes, though her expression belies the truth of that statement. Still, I let it slide in the interest of moving things along. "I really am. But you just reminded me of my very best friend - he always had a knack for making me laugh." She sobers and sighs. "Then when I was twelve, he just disappeared from my life completely."

"What happened to him?" I ask, though I already know the truth. I am more curious to hear what she says... whether she knows what really happened or only what the official story says.

"You don't know?" her tone disbelieving.

"I want to know how his disappearance was explained to you," I reply honestly. "You share with me, and I'll share with you, all right?"

"Mama said his papa got a better job and they had to move away. I never understood why he didn't stay in touch with me, though. We were BEST FRIENDS." Her eyes are so sad and I speculate what kind of life she's really had despite the title and position that belong to her. What I know isn't

unpleasant, but that doesn't necessarily mean it was happy either. I know for a fact she was rarely allowed to be a child, and that is yet another reason I am willing to help her now.

She stares at me expectantly, and I clear my throat. "Well," I drawl after a long moment, "his father did get a better position some distance from where you were living at the time. But he was instructed to drop all communication with you upon penalty of... well, if not death, then vast unpleasantness."

"Why?? What did I do that was so wrong that Paul and I couldn't be friends anymore??"

"It wasn't you, Angel. This was all your papa's doing. He wanted to ensure there was nothing to divert you from following the path laid out for you. He felt Paul was a distraction."

"I was TWELVE!!!"

"I know, Angel." My voice is sympathetic, but I am trying to keep any inflection from my tone. There are things she needs to work out on her own, and this is one of them. I am merely a facilitator. If I let my own feelings interfere, things could go south very quickly. And she's worth more than that.

She crosses her arms over her chest and glares at me. I hold her gaze with one full of understanding - no accusation or pity. She frowns as her expression shifts, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth as her eyes drop to her lap again. I remain quiet, knowing she is struggling with something and hoping if I wait, she will share. In a moment she looks at me once more, the confusion plain to read in her face.

"How did you know?" Now I'm the one that's confused and I don't hesitate to make sure she understands this. She smiles the tiniest bit. "How did you know about the nickname? Only one other person has ever called me Angel."

"It wasn't Paul though, was it?" knowing for certainty that I'm right. She shakes her head as she blushes, but she doesn't offer further enlightenment. Thankfully, I already know, and she'll understand that eventually. I smile. "I didn't - when we started this assignment, that was the codename those of us working security on this project gave you."

Her brows shoot up into her hairline in surprise. "We have codenames?"

I smirk. "Of course. What kind of security outfit would we be if we didn't have special designations for each of you? And though we've managed to keep most of the rest of the world unaware of that part of your life, Princess would have been a bit blatant in your case." She agrees with a nod of head, though the anger in her eyes is clear to see.

"You really didn't know? You seem to know practically everything else."

I shrug. "It's my job... as is keeping secrets. It is one reason your background is known only to those who need to know. We extended the same courtesy to all those involved in this project. If it doesn't affect the mission, it stays with my team. But no - we had names for all of you long before you were ever introduced to one another. We've been on this assignment longer than any of you."

This surprises her. Then she looks at me squarely, wanting to see the truth for herself. "So he didn't find out because of you."

"Not at all. I wouldn't do something like that. And frankly, your father has no influence where I am concerned."

She snorts and gives me a look of total disbelief. "If you can manage that, you must be on par with the Holy Father."

This time I laugh, and she smiles, though I can see she is clearly confused by my response. I take a minute to compose myself, then I look at her and grin. "My business is information, Angel, and knowing how to utilize it to protect my clients. Even your father respects that kind of power."

She looks like she wants to ask more, but I hold her gaze and she realizes the futility of her curiosity. Instead, she changes her tack. "So what are some of these codenames?" asked with a beguiling smile.

I chuckle and shake my head. "No way. If I tell you that, you're going to want to spend all night trying to figure out who goes with what name. And we don't have time for that right now."

"Maybe later?" she asks hopefully.

"We'll see. Ask me when we're done here."

"Okay. Can I ask a favor then?" She waits and I nod. "Would you mind calling me by my name... since it's only us here? It's just...." I cover her hands with mine and she stops talking.

"Of course, Arianna." I empathize - far more than she realizes.

She sighs. "Thank you. It's just that having anyone else call me that..." I squeeze her hands and she looks at me, realizing I understand without needing details she's not comfortable sharing yet. "So what happened next? You said he disappeared."

"I did indeed. And he did... at least as far as I was concerned. I knew from having grown up as a military brat that any communication from me had to be static. I would only be able to talk to him directly when he instigated the conversation. Everything else would just be messages sent back and forth between us as time allowed."

"So what happened?" I roll my eyes as her mantra plays for my ears once more, but I can't deny her an answer. She's starting to trust me and I need for that to happen so she's be able to open up to me when it's my turn to ask the questions.

"I was a young adult in college. I went on with my life."

"WHAT?!? How could you?? What about...??"

"Chill, Arianna. My story's not over yet. In fact, it's just beginning."

I went back to school - he went... well, at the time I didn't know where he went. It wasn't until we were married that I understood fully what his job entailed. But even then, I knew black ops meant he would be out of communication for weeks or months at a time, and if I wanted anything with him - even simple friendship - then I was going to have to accept that as part of the price of having him in my life.

I went back to school not expecting to hear from him; the war was still raging and I was confident he was off-planet and out of communication range for however long it would take to complete his mission. So imagine my profound shock when my comm system howled for my attention one morning a few weeks later while I was getting ready for class... when I discovered he was on the other end of the message stream.

"He didn't!" her eyes wide and her smile excited. "He really called you from off-world??"

"He really did," I reply with a chuckle. "Daddy was scandalized, but at the same time, I think that's also when Daddy knew he was the one for me."

"And if he hadn't?" I scowl and lean my head to one side, not entirely clear what she's asking. Before I can ask for her to elucidate, she continues. "If your papa hadn't thought he was the one for you, would you have married him anyway?" She twists her hands together, then looks in my eyes again. "If he had forbidden your union, would you have obeyed him... or followed your heart?"

I blink, but I don't lose her gaze. Though I hadn't expected this yet, I can't let this opportunity go by. "Let me say first that my circumstances and yours are very different, Arianna. I never had the responsibilities or expectations placed on me that you grew up with. That being said," I offer and pause, wanting her to hear what I'm saying to her, "I loved him. Nothing would have stopped me from being with him once I recognized that fact."

She waits a long minute before she speaks again, learning the truth of my words. "So what happened?" she asks with a little grin, knowing she's yanking my chain by continually repeating that question.

I glare, but she just giggles. So I roll my eyes and huff out an impatient breath. "With Daddy?" I say, knowing that's not at all whom she meant. "I think he and Mother started planning my wedding."

She pouts. I suspect she'd stomp her foot if she wasn't sitting in bed. "You're not funny."

"I'm a Marine Corps brat and an Air Corps wife. Did you REALLY expect me to have a sense of humor?"

"It never hurts to hope," she retorts primly, and I just cock an eyebrow at her. She gives me a pleading look and I give in, which garners me a smug smile. Honestly, if I wasn't tired from the lack of sleep and we didn't have to get this settled before it turns into an inquiry, I'd make her wait. As it is, time is on her side right now.

"It's not standard issue - don't get your hopes up," her lips pursing in an effort not to smile. "As for Edward - well, that was something else again. He kinda freaked me out."

"Really?"

I nod. "Really. Think about it. This guy - that I've only met once - calls me in the middle of a war zone from space... just because he wanted to say hello. He missed me."

"I think that's incredibly romantic."

"It was," I agree. "It was also overwhelming." I paused and let my mind wander back to my childhood years. "You have to understand, Arianna - for all of my growing up, Mother and Daddy had sheltered us from many of life's realities outside the confines of the military. We knew what it was like growing up on a military base, but in many ways it's vastly different than living as a civilian. On base, most everyone around you thinks the same way... believes in the same things... even if not to the same degree and fervor. All the boys I knew were just that... boys. And they could be cute and awkward; thoughtful on some occasions and full of themselves on others; loud and obnoxious or polite and well-mannered depending on the scenario. They were still finding themselves and very few were focused beyond graduation. That isn't to say that they weren't preparing for life beyond secondary education, because they were - we all were. But we were still figuring out our place in the world."

"Okay but..."

"Let me finish." I wait for her nod. "College was a whole new world for me. Everyone didn't look the same or dress the same or think the same. It was a taste of freedom I had never known before."

She frowns at me and looks at me hard. "I still don't understand - why did it overwhelm you for Edward to call you? You spent an entire day with him!"

I rub my hands over my eyes, wishing I had skipped the vodka and ordered an energy shot instead. "Arianna, it was one thing to spend the time with Edward when we were both on leave so to speak. There was no real obligation between us and getting to know one another beyond the mutual friend who had introduced us was our choice. And I was home... in familiar territory. I knew people were keeping an eye on things - even when we were sitting on the beach all night." I gave her a droll look. "Daddy was a Marine - do you *really* think there wasn't a military presence everywhere we went that day?"

"Didn't that annoy you?" and I know she's speaking from experience. "To have someone shadowing your every movement?"

I shake my head. "Not really. It wasn't like that, exactly, and it gave me a sense of security - knowing I could go out with this guy and maybe make a friend without worrying about something going wrong." I shrug. "It's how I grew up. It's how I learned to be the best at my business."

She nods. "So you were overwhelmed because...."

"Because I was an eighteen year old kid that was suddenly being courted by a grown man - a man who knew who he was and what he wanted out of life."

She blinked. "Well, when you put it **that** way...."

I give her a half-smile. "Exactly. And it didn't actually surprise me that he called. After all, we had exchanged information specifically to keep in touch. The part that threw me was that he called while he was off world fighting... during some downtime. That was way more serious than I expected and much, *much* faster than I imagined."

"So what happened?" and though there is a small smirk still present, the seriousness of her eyes tells me she's finally invested in the story. I take a deep breath and speak.

"I went a little crazy."

I was a little freaked out by the time we signed off. It wasn't that we had talked for an inordinate amount of time - we didn't. Nor had we discussed... anything really. I mean... don't get me wrong - we did talk. We talked about school and our mutual friend and what little he could discuss with me about his trip after we parted ways at the hanger. But it was nothing of consequence or substance. That is actually what threw me off-balance so badly.

Growing up as a military brat, I knew how things worked when the service people were out on assignment. There was no calling home... except in cases of extreme emergency. And calling from off world?? No... it just wasn't heard of.

It did make me ponder what exactly his job entailed that allowed Edward that kind of access... especially to talk about mundane things like school and the weather. I decided I needed to know more about the world outside the rigidity of military structure.

Daddy was not pleased.

Her eyes widen and I can see the gears turning as she imagines what that could possibly mean. Finally she brings her attention back to the present and looks at me with something akin to awe in her eyes. "You defied your papa?"

"Maybe a little bit, but not the way you're thinking. Not then, anyway."

"What did you do?" The lines on her forehead furrow as she tries to conceive of what I could possibly have done that wasn't defiant, but would still have angered my father. I chuckle.

"I shifted all my classes to online, packed up my laptop and headed out to see the world on my own." I watch her eyes widen again and idly wonder if they are close to simply rolling out of her head. Honestly, I've never met someone like this young woman before - not surprising given her background. Despite her pedigree, or perhaps because of it, she's been far more sheltered than I ever was. And yet there are so many similarities I see in myself. I question if this project - even with all the rules and protocols necessary to its functionality at the moment - is her first real taste of freedom. I will have to go back and do a little more research... and refresh myself on the facts I already have in hand.

"Wait... what?" She grabs my arm and searches my face for... well, what for, I'm not precisely sure. "Are you crazy? How could you just...?"

I cover the hand clenching my arm and pat it lightly, hoping she'll ease her grip a little bit. I'm not sure what exactly set her off, but she's holding on tight enough that she's going to draw blood if she doesn't loosen her grip slightly. "Arianna," I say softly, hoping to calm her down and hold her attention. "It's okay. This happened thirty some years ago, and I obviously lived through it," I offer with a smile. "It wasn't bad. Really," I add at her skeptical look. "I made a number of friends - some of whom I keep in touch with even today. I learned to say 'water' and 'bathroom' in fifteen different languages." I smile. "I have a lot of good memories tied up in that trip."

"So why did it make your papa mad?" her hold loosening enough for the blood to flow back into my hand. "If it was such a good thing, shouldn't he have been supportive of you?"

This time I laugh outright. "You'd think so, right? But hindsight is a wonderful thing, and all he saw when it was happening was that I was running away and running wild." I turn to look at her and she meets my eyes squarely. I study her for a moment and she allows the examination without flinching. "You and I are actually a lot alike. It's one reason I get where you're coming from. I've been where you are, metaphorically speaking - I really do understand."

She returns the scrutiny, and I allow her the same opportunity she gave me. She eventually tilts her head to one side and gives me a genuine smile. "Do you? Do you really think so?"

I smile back at her and nod. "Think that we're a lot alike? Yes... I really do. Maybe not in life experience, but where it counts - yes."

"That could be a good thing, couldn't it? I mean, your story seems to have turned out for the best. Maybe there is hope for me." Before I can ask, she squeezes my arm gently. "So what happened next? Did your papa come after you? Did Edward?"

"Ah, my dear... therein lies a tale in and of itself. But before we get to that, I need a bio break."

She bites her lip and nods. "I could do with one of those myself," trying not to squirm now that it's been brought to her attention. I'm surprised she's made it this long - I know she's had more to drink than I have. I nod towards the en suite.

"Go ahead," I instruct her. "I'll see about getting some more water sent up." She's got the bathroom door closed behind her before I finish speaking. I chuckle to myself and walk to the room door. Caleb should be able to start things rolling.

Chapter III

Caleb is waiting just outside the door when I open it - almost as though he expected me to unlock it at just that moment. I cock my eyebrow and he smirks. We've worked together so long, I shouldn't be surprised to find us so in sync... even at what-the-hell-am-I-thinking o'clock in the morning. He nods towards the cart, and I jerk my head towards the room as I hold the door wider. His smirk becomes an all-out grin and he rolls it inside.

"How's it going, Chief?" handing me an energy shot and loading a few bottles of cold water into my mini-fridge. He grabs a few snacks and adds them to my stash as he waits for my answer.

"Slowly," I reply. "But we're making progress. Any word?"

"Not yet, but I feel confident Malcolm fell asleep before he could contact Fernando. So you have a few hours grace period before the royal shit hits the fan."

"You feel confident. Did you help ensure this confidence, Caleb?"

"Of course, Chief. Never leave to someone else..."

"... the things you can ensure yourself." It is one of our oldest rules and has kept us at the top of our game for many years. "Thank you, my friend," I say sincerely. "Can I ask a favor?" and the look of 'are you kidding me?' makes me smile. "Can you dig a little deeper on Arianna?"

"Arianna?" he repeats. We never use real names - only the monikers we assign at the beginning of a mission. It makes things easier for us on a number of levels.

"She asked. Said only one person calls her Angel."

"You think it's...?"

"Yep." I hear the toilet flush and know she will be returning any minute. "So you'll take care of it?"

"You betcha, Chief. I'll let you know what I find out."

"Thanks, Caleb," I say as I open the door for him to leave, pushing the cart ahead of him. I just get the door closed behind him when she steps out of the bathroom, and I grin at the look of relief she wears. "Better?" I ask.

"Yes, thank you," said with the slightest blush.

"You can speak up if there's something you need," I chide lightly. "This isn't a prison, and despite my sons' belief otherwise when they were growing up, I'm not a jailer."

She snorts. "I'd like to hear *that* story," she admits. "But honestly, I didn't realize it until you mentioned it."

"Okay," I answer after a brief hesitation. "Well, room service sent up more water and some snacks, so help yourself. I'll be right back." And I head into the bathroom. It only takes me a couple minutes before I'm back in the bedroom, but in that time, she's crawled under the blankets and is facing the ceiling. I stare at her, trying to decide if she's asleep when she turns her head and returns my look with a wry expression.

"I don't think I could sleep now if my life depended on it," she offers. "I feel like... it's hard to describe."

"Are you ready to share with me then?" I ask with hesitation and she shakes her head.

"Not yet," biting her lip as though afraid I'll scold her for refusing. I cross to the bed, and take a seat beside her, cupping her face with one hand. I am suddenly struck by the difference in our size. Though I am not a large woman by any means, she is tiny by comparison. I let my thumb brush her cheekbone, wiping at the single tear that has rolled from her eyes. She blinks and lets her eyes meet mine. "Are you angry?"

I smile gently. "Not at all. I promised I would share first. But if you decide you're ready or need to talk, well... it's not like my story is going anywhere. And I will finish... even if you decide it's time to share in the middle of mine, all right?"

Her smile is a little uncertain, but, it is a smile and I smile back. She reaches up a hand to cover the hand on her cheek, clutching it lightly and pulling it from her face to hold in her lap. "Do your kids know how lucky they are to have you for a mom?"

I laugh. "You're getting the benefit of all the things I learned making mistakes with them." I smirk. "But you can ask them for yourself. The boys will be here with Joy and me for the holidays. I'll make sure you get to meet them then."

"If I'm still here then, you mean," she snaps, her tone bitter.

"Pretty sure you will be, Arianna. Have a little faith in yourself... and me. I'm a Miracle Worker, remember?"

"I hope you are, Mary. I really hope you are. So what happened next? Did Edward come after you?"

My eyes unfocus as I let my mind wander back so many years. It's not until she squeezes my hand that I bring my attention back to the present and Arianna who is looking at me with an odd expression on her face. "Sorry," I say, shaking my head to clear it. "I was just remembering." I clench her hand briefly and she releases her hold. I stand and move back to my side of the bed, sitting down and leaning back with a sense of relief. It's been a while since I've had a night quite this late and it's already starting to tell on me. I'm *really* not as young as I used to be.

Without a word, she rises and grabs two bottles of water from the fridge, passing me one and taking another for herself. I nod my thanks even as she cracks hers open and takes a long draught. Then she sits down once more and makes herself comfortable, then turns to face me with an air of expectancy.

"Thank you, Arianna. I wish your parents could appreciate you the way you deserve," seeing her eyes widen in shock. "As for Edward," I continue without missing a beat, "I think he wanted to... come after me, I mean. I think he would have had he not been more than a world away. And whatever influence he had, it didn't extend to bringing him home to chase a skirt, as Daddy would say."

"Your papa was so disrespectful?"

I chuckle. "Not at all. Daddy was as old-fashioned as they come - courteous to a fault; respectful; protective... especially of the women in his life. He was also a Marine with the hard-bitten sensibilities of a career military man. He believed duty came first - feelings took a distant second to that."

"How did your mama react to that sentiment?"

I had to smirk. "He knew better than to say something like that in Mother's presence. He may have been the Marine, but she ruled the roost - steel hand in velvet glove kind of thing."

"She sounds a lot like my mama."

"She probably was. I have found that to be true in many cases where you would expect things to be otherwise. It's how we cope."

"You too then?"

"Me too," I nod. "We love and support the men we stand behind, but we're the ones who hold the homes together. Ask your mama - she'll tell you the same thing."

She shrugs. "Maybe," and I can tell she doesn't really believe it. But that's okay - it's not a priority right now. Nor is it something she can take care of at the moment. "So what makes you think Edward wanted to follow you? Did he tell you so?"

"Oh... not directly, no. But he did call. And he was more than a little upset."

"How **much** more?"

"Let's just say I shut off communications for a while, and when I turned them on again, my device nearly exploded. It was quite flattering... and a little bit terrifying. But by then I had been traveling for a little while and made a number of new friends. And I felt a little more grown up - a little better able to handle the kind of attention he was offering me."

"So what happened next?"

I roll my eyes. We have *GOT* to find another way for her to ask that question - or find a way to keep that query from being made again. A woman can only stand so much, and my kids learned better a long time ago.

When I restarted my communication device, the battery nearly died from the sheer number of messages I received. When they were done downloading, I scanned through them and realized that Edward had called me every single day from the time I had left school. I had to sit down and breathe when the magnitude of what that meant struck me.

Here was a man who was off-world fighting in the thick of the war calling every day to speak to someone he barely knew - someone whom he'd only spent the sum total of one day with. Why?? And how?? Who was he that he had that kind of pull?? And who was I that he'd want to bother??

"Is that when you knew? Is that when you knew you loved him - that he was the one for you?"

I look into her eyes to find hope and excitement swirling in their depths. "You'd think I'd be that smart, wouldn't you?" I ask deprecatingly. "It does seem pretty obvious, doesn't it?" smiling when she nods her head fervently. "Yeah...no - I'm not that smart... or I wasn't then. I listened to the messages he'd left for me, and decided it was gratifying to be paid that kind of attention. So I decided to accept it as my due and see what came of it."

"Why does it sound like that was a really bad idea?"

"Because it was. He was a grown man who knew what he wanted, and I was still a kid playing games. It was destined to end badly."

"But..."

"Shh. I'll tell you."

I returned his messages - oh, not individually. Instead, I sent him a long missive bringing him up-to-date on what had been going on in my life since I'd left college - details about where I'd been and what I'd seen and people I'd met. But nothing personal for him.

I decided to be cute and coy and if I wasn't playing with his feelings, exactly, I wasn't really considerate of them either. I liked the attention he paid me, but I was unwilling to be completely forthcoming with him about what was going on. He was thousands of miles away from me, so what difference could it possibly make?

I had forgotten about Daddy.

"I take it your papa was less than happy with your actions?"

I snort, nearly falling off the bed as laughter took over. *Talk about a master of understatement....* I look at her to find her watching me with an expression of bemused consternation on her face - bemusement because of my reaction and consternation because she doesn't know where it's coming from. I take a deep breath to try and bring myself under control. After a couple minutes, it seems to be working, and I look at her cautiously. I don't want to fall into another fit of giggles. Another deep breath and a sigh and I'm ready to speak.

"I'm sorry, Arianna. I'm not laughing at you, honestly. But if you had ever met my daddy, you'd immediately appreciate just how ironic that statement truly is. There was never any halfway where Daddy was concerned. You were either all in or all out - no pussyfooting, as he liked to say."

"So he was angry?"

"He was furious. Remember, he was already angry at me for leaving - running away, he called it. Then he decided I was stringing Edward along." I look at her with a twinkle in my eye. "You think your papa has connections? You should have been the daughter of a Marine."

"Surely it couldn't have been worse than...."

"Arianna, until you became part of this project, your papa had people all over your planet watching over you. Otherwise, you had an escort wherever you went, but they were always overt in their attention - you were always aware of their presence. So you could plan your actions and rebellions accordingly. Daddy had friends all over the world, and most of them were skilled in the arena of covert surveillance."

"So you didn't know...?"

"I had no idea. At first I thought Edward had gone to Daddy, hoping he would bring me in line. I was more than a little disappointed that he didn't deem it important enough to take care of himself. It didn't take Daddy long to disabuse me of that idea. Edward had only contacted Daddy when he couldn't reach me and I wasn't responding, and then only to ensure I was all right. THAT was when Daddy called in the Marines for help."

"Really?" Her brow furrows in confusion at my words, and I can see the wheels spinning in her mind. "Why then? Why not before? Papa would have never lasted so long."

"Mother," I say succinctly. "Mother asked him to wait - to give me a chance to work out things on my own. I may have been a Daddy's Girl, but Mother was the one who understood me. And since Daddy had three girls, it was Mother who helped him understand that we weren't Marines."

"He wanted you to be a Marine then?" her confusion obvious. I chuckle.

"It probably would have caused him to have a conniption had either of my sisters or I decided to join the Corps. Daddy was a man of old-fashioned values, remember - he felt women were to be cherished and protected... especially those he claimed as his own... until and unless those women proved otherwise to him."

"The doesn't sound old-fashioned - it sounds archaic!!"

"Not really. Frustrating at times, but I married that type of man and raised two more just like them. Of course, they all - including my father - knew better than to treat any woman as less than himself. Mother made sure of that, and we all passed it to our sons. The difference is they know women are capable in every capacity and accept them as such."

"I have so got to meet your boys," she mutters as a touch of a blush stains her cheeks. "But I still don't understand..."

"It would have been easier for Daddy if we had been boys... or Marines. He understood boys and he could order about Marines. Treating us as boys was out of the question and expecting us to respond as Marines would was the wrong tack. So he looked to Mother for guidance on how to deal with us."

"So how long did you have?"

I tilt my head in thought. It really has been a long time since I thought about all this. "Hmm," I mumble softly to myself, "I left college after my first semester."

"What were you studying?" she asks out of the blue and it takes me a moment to refocus my thoughts.

"Theatre and music," I reply after a second's hesitation to reorient myself to her train of thought. I see her brows shoot up towards her hairline, and I grin. "Surprised?"

"Yes," she admits. "A little. How did you end up doing...? I know you mentioned protecting your daughter, but..."

"Patience, Grasshopper," I answer drolly, and she huffs impatiently at me. "I'll tell you, but that doesn't happen for a while yet. Do you really want to know now?"

She sighs dramatically and I wonder what she would have been like if she'd been allowed to pursue the theatre career she could easily have had. She's got a natural flair for it. "I guess not," she says with a hint of martyrdom in her tone. "Go ahead."

I dip my head in the slightest hint of a bow, and she rolls her eyes. I smirk, then return to my story.

I packed up and headed out after first semester finals were over. I told Mother what I was doing and why, but all I told Daddy was that I wanted to see the world for myself. I found out later that it was

three weeks before Edward contacted Daddy to see if I was all right. Daddy gave me another week - then he mobilized the Marines.

It wasn't hard to track me. My comm device was off, but I still had my laptop, and was in touch with my mother and sisters on a regular basis. And Daddy didn't do recon for nothing. After that it was simply a matter of calling the right person in the right place.

He knew the moment I turned my comm device back on and he waited for me to contact Edward. Daddy waited another two months for me to 'come to my senses' as he called it - then he came to see me. Because he knew that Edward wasn't able to call me out on my behavior as long as he was off-world.

"Wait... he broke into your computer and comm device to find out what was going on between you and Edward?"

"Essentially, yes. And I was livid when I found out. Of course, Daddy was never a stupid man. I didn't know a thing until *after* Edward and I were married." I scrunch up my brow in thought. "Come to think of it... neither did Edward."

"Really?"

"Daddy was a Marine. He could keep a secret with the best of them. Even Mother wasn't aware until all was said and done."

"So what happened next?"

Chapter IV

Daddy arrived, full of piss and vinegar, but as I would later discover, he was actually playing it rather cool... for him anyway. He wanted to know what I thought I was doing - wandering around the world alone like some sort of free-spirited hippie. I found that kind of funny, because I hadn't traveled alone for very long before I fell into a group of like-minded individuals - that is to say... kids like me that were trying to find ourselves and our place in the world. And there was nothing hippie-ish about us - we were all working in some capacity or other... paying our way just like everyone else.

Of course he put my back up fairly quickly with his accusations. I was still going to school and maintaining my GPA; the only issue I had in that department was the fact that I needed to return to school at some point to do my practicals. But I had plenty of time to take care of those things. I had only just completed my first year of college.

Still, his attitude and accusations threw me off stride - he had always been supportive of us girls for as long as I could remember, and to have him act otherwise hurt me a lot. So when he brought up Edward, it made me angry. And I was mean.

"Mean to your papa or mean about Edward?" she asks, interrupting my train of thought.

"Both," I say sadly. "Not one of my prouder moments."

"Mine either," she mumbles, her eyes dropping, but I hear and understand her perfectly. I wait, but when she doesn't say anything else, I return to my storytelling.

*Daddy took my anger in stride - after all, I was *his* daughter and he knew very well exactly from whom my temper was derived. I accused Edward of being less than honorable by having Daddy check up on me. Daddy was so quick to tell me the truth about that situation that it was a marvel my hair didn't catch fire. Then I accused Daddy of interfering in business that wasn't really his - truer than I knew at the time, but he had his story ready.*

And in fairness, he really did come to talk. I just had no way of knowing he already knew the truth about everything. I think he knew more than even Edward and I did.

"Did you have a good relationship with your papa?" she asks, drawing me out of my memories once more. I blink slowly and refocus my mind back in the present, then slowly turn and look at her. She's lying on her side facing me, head propped up on her hand. Her face is schooled to neutrality; but the expression in her eyes gets my attention and I question again what we missed in all the research and background checks we've done on the kids in this program. Because this girl has always been brash and outspoken and confident to an almost irritating degree and that's not what I'm seeing reflected back at me. No one is more thorough than my team, so whatever it is that's bothering her, it's buried pretty deep - or is something we couldn't possibly access. She holds my gaze and I smile, glad that the sadness in her eyes fades with that action. I nod.

"I did, actually," I answer. "For all that our personalities were alike - and don't get me wrong... that caused some serious head butting in my youth - Daddy was someone I looked up to and admired for a number of things. Even when our opinions were diverse and we had to agree to disagree, he was someone I not only loved, but respected as well."

"What about him?"

"Excuse me?" cocking my head in question, because I'm not sure what she's asking me.

"You said you loved and respected him," waiting for me to nod - which I do even as my brows twist in confusion. She bobs her head in acceptance. "But what about him? How did he feel about you? Was it mutual - the love and respect? Or were you simply a responsibility he loved in an abstract way? Is that why he was so anxious for you and Edward to be together? So you were no longer his responsibility?" her tone bordering on hateful.

Holy wow! Talk about blindsiding a person! I don't know what I expected, but I can safely say this... attack, almost... wasn't on my list of possibilities. I make a mental note to talk to Caleb again and have him look into her father as well. There is a lot more going on here than simple frustration or rebellion. I comb my hands through my hair and meet her eyes again, but she looks away before I can get a good read on the emotions swirling in the darkness of her expression. I let it go and look at the ceiling; I don't need her to get defensive with me. I chuckle and the sound draws her head back up and turns

her face in my direction. I keep my profile in her vision, though I cut my eyes so I can just see her in my periphery.

"On my wedding day, Daddy and I had a few minutes alone in the vestibule before we walked down the aisle together. I'll never forget his words to me. He said, 'Baby girl, I'm proud of you - of who you are and what you've achieved. I'll admit I was a little worried for a while there, but you came through beautifully. Edward is a very lucky man, and your mama and I like him a lot. But you'll always be my girl and I love you.' He made me cry before we even entered the sanctuary."

I feel the sob at almost the exact moment I hear it and I turn to see anguish on her face. I react like the mom I am and wrap her in an embrace that shelters her as if she were my own. I've held each of my kids like this at different points in their lives - highs and lows - so I am content to let her cry until she's done. Sometimes, it is the most cathartic release of emotions one can experience, and I know for a fact she hasn't been allowed that very often in her young life.

She curls up into me, hanging on for dear life and I realize I need to talk to Caleb. There is no way this girl - this young woman - is going to be able to do any interviews later today. When this is done, she'll need rest. These kinds of emotions are exhausting, and if she's been holding onto them for as long as I suspect, it's no surprise we've seen her all over the place during the selection process... especially as we've gotten closer to the end.

I sigh, then begin humming a tune I sang to each of my children when they needed comfort. I feel her relax into me, and in only a few minutes, she's asleep. I ease her out of my arms and onto the pillow, covering her gently before moving towards the door. I want to talk to Caleb again before she wakes up; we need to make a few contingency plans.

She reaches out in her sleep and from my spot on the bed I glance down over the rims of my glasses to discover that her search for a missing something or someone is actually bringing her back to wakefulness. While I would have been content to let her sleep a little longer, I'm not going to object to her rejoining me in a conscious state sooner rather than later. Despite the brief respite we've acquired by canceling her appearances and interviews today, we are still on a tight schedule - perhaps even moreso as we are likely going to have to provide an explanation for her withdrawal from set plans. Fortunately, the proof is ready... if the questions get asked. I am hoping the talk I had briefly with Caleb will help him head them off at the pass.

She blinks slowly, as if trying to orient herself to where she is and why she is here. "Did you have glasses before?" she asks in a raspy voice when her eyes meet mine. I laugh as I shake my head.

"I didn't need them before," I say as I pull them off. "I can see perfectly fine to talk to you; reading tiny print on a Pad screen is another matter altogether."

"Sorry," she mutters as she discovers how tucked into me she actually is. She cuddled up quite close to me when I returned from my talk with Caleb. Now she releases the arm she's clutching and shifts to lie flat on her back before pushing herself up into a sitting position. She pulls her knees up to her chest and props her head on them, looking at me directly. "Whatcha reading?"

It's the most casual speech I've heard from her, and it catches me by surprise. She is usually so precise in everything she does. I wonder if this means she's growing more comfortable with me or if it's simply her exhaustion talking. A raised eyebrow makes me realize I'm taking too long to answer

and I shake my head. "Sorry... some of us didn't get a power nap," I say with a smile so she knows I'm kidding. "Just some reports. In my job, they're never ending."

She nods, though I can tell she really wants to pursue it. She bites her lip and focuses on the glasses resting in my hand. "So why glasses? Why not surgery? It's not like you need to hide who you are from people."

"Like you do, you mean?" I ask kindly and wait for her to nod. "Actually, sometimes I do need to hide to do my job properly, but in this case it's all about control," I tell her. "I control these," waving the glasses at her. "When I wear them; where I keep them; what they look like. Surgery means letting someone else have control over something I can't afford to lose."

"You think they would mess something up?"

"I'd prefer not to find out - not as long as I have a choice in the matter."

"I can relate. Sometimes it's the little things, you know?"

"It's always the little things," I tell her. I keep my eyes locked on hers and she doesn't flinch, though I can tell it's a struggle for her not to look away from me. I take a deep breath and turn to the nightstand, setting the Pad and my glasses in their place and giving her a chance to relax. When I turn back, she's still watching me. "So do you want to talk about it or should I continue?"

She remains silent for a full minute after my question and I'm tempted to repeat myself... except I know very well she heard me. "Why are you doing this?" her voice a bare whisper.

I stare at her; I know I explained this already. "I told you...."

She holds up a hand and shakes her head. "I know what you said about paying it forward. But what happened? What did someone do for you that you need to pay it forward? And why me? Why this? Why now? Is it because I'm a...?"

I put a finger over her lips and she stops talking immediately. I figure she's probably a little surprised by the touch. I haven't instigated anything so personal but the hug when she started sobbing, and even then she was reaching for me first. "Why is it so important to you to know why I'm doing it?" My query is soft and she looks at me with confusion. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was expecting anger or defensiveness. There's definitely more than a hint of those emotions in her response to me.

"It just is! Now tell me why!" fierce and demanding.

"Would you like me to lead into it or just jump to the middle of my story?" I ask calmly. She glares at me, and it is all I can do to keep from laughing aloud. Seriously, if you're going to try to intimidate someone with a look, you should probably make sure they didn't learn that look first at the feet of a master. I can't keep my lips from twitching, though, and she crosses her arms over her chest defiantly.

"Go on," she growls and this time I do laugh. Really, it's like watching the cub swat at its mother and honestly? Been there, done that... several times. I hold up a hand to stop her before her lips part to retort and take a deep breath.

*Daddy let me rant for a while... at least until I accused Edward of dishonor. He put a stop to that pretty darn quick. By the time he was done explaining to me that *I* was the reason Daddy had come to find me and Edward wasn't, I had calmed considerably. I was still upset with him for involving himself in my life like he was, but he reminded me that he always had been involved in my life and told me that my technically being an adult didn't absolve him of his responsibilities as a father.*

"He sounds like a good man," she says, her fury from before gone now. "I wish I could have met him."

I smile. "You would have liked him. And he would have loved you."

"And your mama?"

This time I snort. "Pretty sure she would have adopted you."

She gazes at me thoughtfully. "I think I might have liked that. So what happened next?"

With my initial anger cool, Daddy decided to talk to me about what really concerned him. He already coveted Edward as a son-in-law and didn't want me to lose him because I was a kid playing games. He knew Edward was just what I needed in my life. He just needed to show me without revealing that he knew I was... playing games, I mean.

"I take it he was successful? I mean... he did get Edward as a son-in-law after all, right?"

I chuckle. "He did. But he wasn't immediately successful. I wasn't ready to be tied down to anyone or anything - not even someone as suited to me as Edward was. Especially not him, if truth be told."

"Why not? Isn't that what most people spend their lives looking for - someone who fits with them?"

I smile. "You think that now because you're an adult - a real adult, I mean. You're done with school; you've been working for a few years; in your mid-twenties. So your mind has turned to thinking about life in a broader sense - about families and children and someone to spend your life with. But be honest, Arianna. At eighteen... even with all the responsibilities that were already part of your life because of your position and heritage... were you *really* thinking about finding your one? Or tying yourself down to even more responsibility?"

She furrows her brow and I can tell she's trying to remember where she was and what she was doing seven or eight years prior. Finally she sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. "I don't remember eighteen," she confesses. "I have been working since I was a child of eight, and I was in training for three years prior to that." Her voice is low and matter-of-fact, but I can tell she's more upset about her lack of memory than she wants to let on. But what troubles me more is her insinuation that she was working at the age of eight. There is nothing in my files that shows anything of the kind and I speculate if perhaps she really is suffering from some sort of malady that causes hallucinations. I

reach a hand over to feel her forehead and she frowns but allows the touch. I cup her cheek, then the back of her neck, but I don't feel a fever. "Mary?"

"Sorry, kiddo," I offer as I remove my hand. "I was wondering if you were feeling all right. I know you have an eidetic memory, so for you to admit to not remembering something...."

She shrugs. "Probably just the exhaustion talking. It's not like I'm much of a night owl if I'm not working. And when I'm working, I'm focused."

"Speaking of," and I watch her eyebrows shoot into her hairline, but she nods her consent for me to continue. "You said you've been working since the age of eight. Now, I know why your best friend left and why your eighth grade science teacher was transferred. I know that your mama talked your dad into letting you go to a regular school as long as you maintained your tutors to keep up with your mind and keep you far ahead of your peers - she wanted you to have friends and experiences like others your age. I know how you snuck out of your room on Friday nights when you were in high school so you could be like all the other kids in your class." Her eyes widen and I grin. "Don't worry; your dad doesn't know about that either, and I for one am not going to enlighten him."

"Thank you," she whispers.

I shrug. "Every kid deserves the right to rebel a little. And you were never in danger."

"You were watching over me even then."

"For a long time, Pri... Arianna," changing my tack when I see her flinch. "I'm sor...."

She holds up her hand and shakes her head. "Don't be. We both know it's true. I've just gotten used to not having to be *her* all the time and Malcolm never fail to...." She breaks off and clears her throat. "Was there something you wanted to ask?"

"Yeah - you said you've been working since the age of eight, but that's not what my records show. I want to know what I missed. I can worry about *how* I missed it later."

"I'll make a deal with you," and though her eyes are twinkling with mischief, I agree. It's nice to see the young woman we all love making an appearance again, no matter how brief. "I'll give you the low down on my work, if in return you tell me about my eighth grade science teacher AND what I was doing at eighteen. It will drive me crazy if you don't."

"Short trip," I quip, laughing aloud when she smacks me across the belly. "All right," I agree. "But you first."

"Fair enough," she sighs, sitting up straighter and taking a drink from her now tepid water bottle. She makes a face, but swallows it anyway, then sets the bottle on the bedside table. She takes a deep breath, then starts talking. "You know I was put in royal training at the age of five," waiting for me to nod. "I hated it," she states flatly. "All the kids my age were playing and I was stuck learning how to sit and how to walk and which fork to use." She chuckles wryly. "I was five - how many forks did I really need?" She shrugs. "Nevertheless, it was part of my training, and I did what was expected of me. It was easier than fighting."

I remain silent, knowing that her talking is only a good thing for me... even if it's not what she needs to be talking about.

"By the age of eight, I had most of it down pretty good and my lessons were only twice a week. Still, I wasn't allowed to play very often - not as often as I wanted to, anyway." She sighs again, and it occurs to me that maybe she does need to talk about this. This has been building for a long, long time. "Science had fascinated me since I started reading and the more I read, the more ideas I had. I made the mistake of writing some of my ideas down where they could be read, and Papa found them. When he realized the implications of what I had written, he immediately cut back on the department lessons and assigned a number of our top scientists to me."

"Excuse me?" I cut in, hoping I misunderstood. "Assigned them to you for what purpose?"

"In the beginning, they were my tutors... my teachers. Eventually, they were my research assistants - for a while, anyway. Until I surpassed their ability to comprehend my work," she says without a hint of humility or bias.

No wonder I had missed this. We thought they were *just* her teachers. I clear my throat. "When did that happen?" She tilts her head in question and I recognize the gesture instantly... especially since she can't follow my train of thought. "When did they stop being your teachers and become your assistants?"

"Oh, I was..." scrunching up her forehead in thought. "Thirteen, I think. But I was scheduled in the lab just like any other scientist was. Papa made it clear he expected results - not immediately, of course, but eventually. So for me, it was work... even if it was unpaid." I'm pretty certain she can see the fury in my eyes, especially when she places a gentle hand on mine. "It's all right, Mary; it was a long time ago."

"Not so long that I won't make mention of it when I see him. Because no matter how long ago it was or wasn't, that is still completely unacceptable. Don't you worry - he'll never know I heard it from you. With everything else I have to present, this will just be another footnote." I cock an eyebrow at her and smirk. "Trust me - Miracle Worker, remember?"

She smiles. "I remember. And I'm even starting to believe it. So it's your turn," squeezing my hand lightly before moving hers to wrap around her legs again. "Tell me."

Chapter V

I remain still and it goes on long enough that she reaches out to me again. "Mary? Hello?? Is anyone in there?" with a hint of playfulness in her voice. It's the light laughter that brings me out of my brown study and I turn to find her gazing at me with a hint of humor and more than a bit of concern. "You all right?" she asks, her eyes searching mine for the truth.

"Yeah... sorry. Something just occurred to me and I was trying to make it fit into some of the questions we encountered when we were preparing your portfolio at the beginning of the project."

"What?" Before I can respond, she continues. "Wait... I have a portfolio?"

I chuckle. "Among other things, yes. Did anyone try to claim your research for themselves?"

"Only once. Papa had him removed from the household so quickly he didn't even have a chance to pack his bags. Someone came in after he was gone and took care of it."

I nod, but I don't comment. She has enough Daddy issues with her papa; I'm not going to add to them by telling her exactly how the man was removed or how permanent that removal was. "So he was the only one?"

"Yes. Being assigned to the Royal Court was considered an honor; no one wanted to lose their place. Especially since Papa could make certain that you never found a job in science again. And really - it wasn't that difficult... as long as you didn't object to taking orders from a child." She rolls her eyes and I smirk in response.

"I can understand that - both sides actually. So," I go on, reaching for the Pad that was on the nightstand. A few swipes and I have the information I need right in front of me, and I slide my glasses on again. "Your eighth grade science teacher. What do you remember about Mrs. Humphries?"

She scrunches her eyes closed in thought and it's all I can do not to laugh. I'm sure she doesn't mean to be cute about it, but she reminds me of Ian when he had to write essays in school - as though making faces would cause him to become smarter or something. It took until he got into the Academy to figure out all it was doing was giving him wrinkles prematurely.

I wait patiently, and in another moment her eyes pop open and she focuses her gaze on me. "Mrs. Humphries was a nice enough woman, I suppose, but she wasn't very bright." She flushes slightly and looks down at the bedspread covering her lap. "I'm sorry - I'm not trying to be rude; she was competent, and most of the kids liked her because she made class fun for them." She sighs and shakes her head. "The only reason I was going to school was to be with kids my own age. It made Mama happy and parts of it I liked well enough. But most of it... especially the classwork..." She shrugs. "It was a waste of time for me, and I'm pretty sure Mrs. Humphries knew I felt that way."

"Would you say she was jealous of you?"

She looks thoughtful before finally shaking her head. "I think she just didn't know how to deal with me. After all, she wasn't teaching me anything I didn't already know. I was just there for the socialization." She frowns. "What does this have to do with why Mrs. Humphries was transferred in the middle of eighth grade year?"

Instead of answering her, I ask another question. "Do you remember the science fair that year?"

She growls impatiently and gives me a look. I simply wait and she huffs before answering. "Of course. But I didn't participate."

"You weren't allowed to do so."

"Excuse me?" Her eyes are wide with surprise and indignation. "I understood what you said, but would you mind repeating it? Or at least explaining it? Because you seem to think you know something that I distinctly don't remember."

"What do you remember... aside from not participating?"

"I remember my project was a reflection of the work we were doing in the lab - on combining the properties nuclear fission and nuclear fusion and how it could safely be utilized in our everyday lives.

At that point it was still in the stage of relatively new theory. I remember doing my presentation for the class - I got an 'A' of course. My theory was sound as has since been proven out, but there wasn't a lot of proof then." She shrugs. "I remember Paul being thrilled about being chosen to participate in the school fair, and I was glad for him. He wanted so badly to be part of the scientific community on our world."

"Of course," I nod. "Scientific research is the most highly regarded profession there. Do you remember what his project was about?"

"Sure - the effect of light and darkness upon mental health."

"And it didn't once occur to you to question why that or any of the other projects were chosen over yours? Arianna, yours was clearly so much more advanced than anything in that exhibition."

"I assumed Mrs. Humphries wanted something that the judges could understand. And my fission/fusion theory was well beyond most people's scope - it still is."

"And yet she gave you an 'A'."

The look she gives me can only be described as a sardonic smirk. "Would you have given me any less... really? Whether you understood the subject not?"

I snort. "No, probably not. But that's not the reason you were excluded. Mrs. Humphries wanted the other kids to have a chance. So she refused to allow your project into the fair. The next week she was transferred to a school outside the capital."

"That seems kind of harsh."

"Nevertheless, it's true."

She looks thoughtful and I deliberate about what she's thinking. Then she speaks. "I'll have to look into that, because she was right. The others did deserve a chance to shine. They didn't have the resources I did and none of them had my brilliance."

"Perhaps, though you were quite upset about it at the time."

She bites her lip and looks up at me before clearing her throat. "So what happened when I was eighteen that I am failing to remember the importance of at the moment?"

I don't push. There's no need for me to embarrass her further, and I think she's starting to understand just how long we've been watching. "Nothing... and everything," I say and she glares, crossing her arms over her chest and waiting for me to continue.

"You dated the captain of the Crunch team though it was never anything serious; you both knew it could never go beyond high school and friendship. You went to your senior formal with a group of kids in your performance group who you finally felt comfortable enough to call friends. It made your mother cry happy tears when she recognized you had finally achieved that level of socialization. A few of your classmates were actually security minders in disguise. You...."

"Wait... WHAT??"

I blink. "You didn't know?"

She shakes her head. "I had no idea." She tilts her head at me. "Are you serious? You're not just making this up, are you?"

"Arianna, what would it gain me to make this up? Would you like to see proof?"

"You have it?" her brows shooting into her forehead.

I nod towards the Pad. "I have it."

I see her hesitate. She wants to trust me, but her curiosity is nearly overwhelming. I can see the struggle, but eventually her maturity wins out. "I believe you," she says quietly. "It's definitely something Papa would do." She gasps in realization. "Did they tell him...?"

"About your escapades?" her head jerking nervously at my words. "No. They figured you needed to blow some steam, and at least they were there to keep an eye out for you."

"Ooookay," she drawls slowly. "I don't think I want to know. So what else?"

I glance at the Pad a moment, then look at her. "What do you remember now?"

"I remember all those things. Dating Kip was a lot of fun - I actually think that helped the most in my socialization. Mama never understood the trial that was for me, but with him I wasn't the Princess and I wasn't some sort of freak genius; I was just Arianna. And it made making friends easier for me. I think about what he might be doing - we fell out of touch after graduation. I was so busy in the lab and he was doing his scientific service." She sighs. "That seems like such a long time ago."

"In some ways it was. And in others, not that long ago at all. Do you remember anything else?"

She sighs. "Yes - I remember my coronation... when my title became an actual responsibility."

"Did it add to your work load?" knowing the answer but curious about what her reaction will be.

"Not really... at least not in the sense you're thinking. It got me out of the lab more often, but Papa insisted. As anxious as he was for me to produce results with my nuclear research, he needed me to assume the reigns of responsibility that fell to me with my coming of age." She giggles and I cock an eyebrow in question. She shakes her head, bringing her laughter under control and giving me a smirk. "That party... I don't think Mama's been able to look at a number of things in the palace the same way since."

"That bad?"

"Well... that eye opening. A lot of tradition and formality went right out the window because that's not how my friends were raised. And I insisted they be invited to attend." She giggles again. "That was probably the most fun the castle had seen in years." She sobers. "Of course it didn't last long." She gives me a look. "The party only lasted a night."

"Aren't you glad you'll always have your memories of it?"

"And lots of blackmail material," she says with an evil grin. "I wasn't allowed to drink to excess - I can't say the same for everyone else."

I laugh. "You're a devious little thing, aren't you?"

"Of course. It makes my life more interesting that way." She tilts her head. "I think those were the stand out events for me that year," she says, rubbing her eyes. "As you said... nothing and everything. But you're right - I wasn't looking for my one. Truth be told, in the back of my mind I was probably hoping that wouldn't happen for a while. I already had so much responsibility and so much pressure on my shoulders...." She trails off and I wait. "I know that I have to produce an heir." She rolls her eyes. "I get that reminder **every* *time** I hear from my mother. I'm just lucky it's not allowed until *after* the marriage ceremony, and as long as I'm on this project...." I laugh again and she gives me a withering look. I bring my laughter under control, but it's hard, and she is huffing impatiently before I manage. "It's not at all funny, you know."

"Oh, but it is. And one day - when you're sitting on the other side of the equation - you'll see the humor." She gives me a disbelieving look and I smirk. "Trust me. I've been on both sides. It's a lot funnier from where I am now than it was when I was where you are."

"Your mama...?"

"... and Daddy," nodding my head. "They were both quite anxious to be grandparents. I seriously considered hiring a hit man at one point. I got it Every. Single. Day. Sometimes twice... if I talked to them separately at different times. And Edward was gone so much, I was left to deal with most of it alone."

"What did you do?"

"Told them flat out that if they didn't stop nagging me about it, there weren't going to be any grandkids except those in their minds."

Her eyebrows shoot into her hairline. "That worked?"

"Like a charm."

She frowns. "Pretty sure that won't work for me. I have an obligation...."

"You have an obligation to yourself first, Arianna."

"I don't think Mama and Papa are concerned with that. It's certainly not their first priority."

"Perhaps," I concede. "But if you don't do what is best for you, you'll never be able to do what is best for anyone else."

She peers at me and I can almost hear the gears turning in her mind. "Experience?" she finally asks.

I shrug. "Something like that."

"Is that why your papa wasn't immediately successful? Because you had an obligation to yourself?"

"Yes. Daddy thought I was being selfish, and I suppose I was in a way... just not the way he thought. I was selfish in that I wanted Edward's attention without the responsibility that came with it. But I wasn't selfish because I wanted some time to figure out who I was. I needed to do that; I needed to know what I had to bring into an adult relationship before I could be successful in one."

"Is that what you told your papa?"

I laugh. "Not in so many words, no. I didn't mention Edward. I was sure that if Daddy knew what I was doing with Edward... keeping him on a string while I did my thing... I would be pushed into something I didn't want and wasn't ready for."

"Your papa would have forced you into marriage?!?"

"No. Daddy was stubborn and impatient, but he was never a stupid man. The result of that kind of action would have been explosive... and irreparable. But he would have made my tenure as a wanderer impossible. And I needed that."

"So what did he do?"

"He became my friend."

After we thrashed out our anger - his at me; mine at Edward - we took a few minutes to regroup. Neither of us wanted to damage a lifelong relationship in the heat of anger and a few misspoken words spoken in haste. So we went and got ice cream.

"Wait... what?"

"Daddy and I went and got ice cream. It was our thing. When we needed to talk, we always went and got ice cream first. It gave us a little peace to collect our thoughts before we started any kind of serious discussion. Made things easier and a lot less volatile."

"Perhaps Papa and I should have tried that."

I tilt my head and frown. "You and your daddy didn't really argue about much."

"We didn't talk about much either. I think I missed out on something very special."

I couldn't disagree. For all the ups and downs Daddy and I suffered through together, the one saving grace was that we could talk things out eventually. It's something I learned to appreciate even more when I had children of my own, and memories I've treasured since he died.

"So what happened next... after ice cream?"

We talked - really talked - about school and life and what I was hoping to find wandering around the world with only a few possessions and a little currency. I made him understand that the trip... the

experience... was for me. Something I needed so I could figure out who I was and who I wanted to become.

Of course, Daddy was less than thrilled. He felt it was a cop out, and I suppose in some ways it was. But he also recognized what I was doing. So he gave me his blessing, and told me to keep in touch. Then he left me to my own devices... and found a couple Marines willing to keep an eye on me.

"He just left? Did you know about the Marines?"

"Not at the time, no. Like a lot of this part of my story, I didn't know of these events until well after they were over. Edward and I didn't find out what Daddy knew or about the Marines that shadowed me until after Joy's birth. And then only because of an off-hand comment Daddy made about learning what it was like to protect a daughter - from herself and others."

"That must have gone over spectacularly."

"Like oil on a fire," I chuckle. "But it was well past by then - nothing we could do to change it and it worked out in our favor, so it was kind of difficult to get too upset about the tactics when the results were fabulously successful."

"So what happened next? It's got to be good, right?" Her excitement is so palpable, I don't think she's even realized she's using that phrase anymore. Because I can't find a hint of teasing - only eagerness to know the next bit of the story.

Before I can respond, a knock sounds on the door, and I hit the monitor that sits by the bed. "Caleb?"

"Sorry to disturb you, Chief. But we've had another issue crop up unexpectedly. Could I see you at the door a moment?"

I look at Arianna and she makes shooing motions at me. "Go on," she urges. "I know you have a job to do that goes far beyond talking to me about love. If you need me to leave, I can go back to my room now... I mean with Malcolm gone and everything. In fact," she continues, sliding towards the edge and sitting up, "maybe I should go anyway. It's late; we can probably finish this conversation later, and..."

I am around the bed pointing my finger at her before she can end her sentence. "Not another word from you, young missy. We have as much time as we need to figure this out, but you've got to stick with me, all right?" waiting for her to nod. "Good. Now get comfortable - take a bio break; get some cold water; whatever. I'll be right back."

I had no idea what awaited me.

Chapter VI

I am aware of the commotion in front of one of the other doors before I set foot into the hallway, and a glance tells me it's coming from Arianna's room. I exit and close the door behind me, not wanting the sound to carry. Caleb steps up beside me as soon as the door is shut and I look at him for a progress report. He sighs.

"We tried to get him to go back to his room, Chief, but he was starting to cause a ruckus. He demanded to speak to you. And we don't want to attract any more unwanted attention, so...."

"Have any of the others been disturbed by this?"

"So far, no. We caught him fairly quickly - he banged on Arianna's door and called her name once before we got to him. He agreed to sit quietly until he could speak to you, but he did demand to speak to you personally." Caleb looks at me and gives me a tired smirk. "Suddenly this is less a security assignment and more like babysitting. Or something from those old entertainment programs - you know, the really unbelievable ones."

I wrack my brain to recall the term he's looking for before I remember my boys comparing them one day just for the sake of argument. "You mean soap operas? Or reality television?" I ask with a smile the memories bring. Caleb shrugs.

"It's all about the same, Chief. Do you want us to wait?" he asks as we reach our target. I shake my head.

"Nah - I got this, Caleb. Thanks," knowing they won't be too far, but will give us a bit of privacy so I can talk to Jacob alone.

Caleb nods and accepts a chair from Martha, setting it down for me and then motioning everyone back to their posts. I take a seat and focus my attention on the young man in front of me. He returns my gaze for a moment, then drops his eyes to the clasped hands in his lap. I wait, like I have all the time in the world. It always worked with my kids, and it doesn't take long for Jacob to cave.

"Where is she?" he asks me quietly, not wanting his voice to carry.

"Where is who, Jacob? There's more than one female involved in this project."

"You know who," a hint of petulance in his tone.

"Jacob, you're breaking a number of rules at the moment, any of which could get you kicked out of the selection process. I don't mind speaking to you and answering your questions... even at three in the morning, but you need to be up front and straightforward with me. And you certainly don't need to take a tone." I pause and wait for him to reluctantly acknowledge my words. "The first rule in my job is to never assume. Now... why are you out in the hallway banging on doors at three a.m.?"

He sighs. He knows I'm right - on any number of levels. He reaches up and scratches his head, shuffling his hair back and forth to put it into some semblance of order. He obviously doesn't realize yet that three a.m. bedhead isn't going to get fixed except with a shower. After another minute, he lets his hand drop and he keeps his eyes fastened on them until he takes a deep breath. Only then does he look up to meet my eyes. Years of practice allow me to maintain my neutral façade, but I wonder what the hell has been going on under my nose and for how long to put that expression of sadness and pain in his eyes.

"Where is Arianna?"

"May I ask why you need to know?"

"Is she all right?" he counters.

"She's a little under the weather at the moment. She's currently staying with me so I can keep an eye on her."

"So she's not with that asshat Malcolm."

"Not at all. She's been with me for the last little while. Why?"

Jacob rubs his hand over his face and I smile at the raspy sound his unshaven skin makes. It reminds me of my boys and how much I miss having them with me. I school my features before Jacob looks up and wait for him to speak. He shrugs.

"I was concerned. Despite everything, she's still my friend, you know? And I know he's been making her uncomfortable lately."

I cross my legs and lean back in my chair. "Can you elaborate?" He hesitates and I stay still. It has taken months, and in some cases years, for these kids to start forming cohesive, caring bonds with one another. It's a necessary and vital part of this project, and not everyone has the same level of commitment or devotion to being a team player. I know that it's important that they have each others' backs and keep each others' secrets, so I'm not going to push. He's going to have to make the decision to trust me or not - I don't have time to convince him otherwise.

Jacob stares at me for a long moment, taking in my measure before he finally gives me a brisk nod. "This stays between you and me - you don't tell your staff and you definitely don't share with Arianna or the rest of the people working on this project."

"Anything you say to me will be held in confidence, Jacob."

He stares at me another minute longer, then nods again. "Good enough," he says. He takes a deep breath, then starts to speak. "When we were at dinner earlier... Let me start over. Malcolm has been causing some discontent within the ranks of project members. It's pretty much guaranteed that Arianna will make the final cut - after all, without her and her work, there wouldn't be any project in the first place, right?" nodding to himself. "Well, Malcolm seems to believe that he will be included on her merit... since they're betrothed and this project is going to take years more to bring to fruition. And he's doing his best to exclude the rest of us from her life." He growls and slaps his clenched fists on his knees, not even wincing at the force he used. "What pisses me off is that she's letting him! Mary, I'm trying to give her the benefit of the doubt - Arianna's been my friend for a long time, but she's making it impossible! If she keeps it up, she's not gonna have any friends left, and having her on the team will make things awkward and uncomfortable for everyone."

I nod my comprehension. I've watched what he's talking about happen in slow, steady increments. But I haven't really been in a position to do anything about it until now. "Okay, I understand what you're saying; I've seen it myself. But what does this have to do with why you were knocking on her door at three a.m.?"

"I'm getting there," he replies quickly, but gives me a small smile so I know he's not snapping. "When we were at dinner earlier, Malcolm completely cut us out of any conversation with her... all of us, not just..." He shrugs, and I speculate that perhaps more people have some inkling of what's happened than I - or they - believe. It could make things much easier or unbearably worse, depending on what they know and what they suspect and how they feel about the entire situation.

"Well, anyway," he continues, "Arianna just gave up trying, and when we got back here, I saw him go into her room. I didn't hear anything for a while, then I heard her door slam. By the time I got to my door and looked out, Arianna was stepping into the lift, and the commotion *that* caused...." He motions around at the various agents now visibly present in the hall. "I was going to follow her, but Caleb told me they had it covered and to go back to bed. Given the look on his face, I decided to follow his instruction.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I checked the clock again it was almost three. I was kind of pissed off at myself - I hadn't intended to wait so long to check on Arianna... to make sure she got back safe and sound from wherever she needed to escape to. I literally ran out the door and across the hall." He shrugs. "You know what happened after that."

"I do indeed."

"Is she really all right, Mary? I know we haven't all been particularly nice to her recently; I'm ashamed to admit it, but it's true. But that doesn't mean we don't still care." He pauses, and I wait. He releases a deep breath and meets my eyes. "I think maybe we care too much. She was a part of us once. And being pushed away...." He shrugs. "It hurts."

I lean forward and pat his hands. "Jealousy takes all forms, Jacob, and portrays itself in many different ways." I hold up a hand to keep him from arguing. I know jealousy - I have been on both sides of that equation as well, and it rarely ends well if it's left to fester. "I promise you she's with me, and I'm doing my best to make sure she's all right."

"He didn't...." the anger growing exponentially in his eyes as the thought plays out unspoken.

"No," I assure him hastily. "He wouldn't have made it out of here alive," I tell him, my own eyes full of dark promise. He shivers in uncontrollable reaction.

"You mean that, don't you? You could actually do that, couldn't you?"

"In a heartbeat... without leaving a trace. However," I continue as I stand and stretch slightly, "it won't be necessary. Malcolm will get what's coming to him soon enough." I reach a hand down and Jacob accepts it with alacrity, allowing me to help him up. He squeezes my hand lightly before releasing his grip and moves back towards his room. I stand rooted to the spot watching him. Only when he reaches his door does he turn to face me, giving me a rakish little playboy grin.

"Thanks, Mary. I'm glad you're on our side, you know? And as far as I'm concerned, Arianna went directly to see you tonight."

"Thank you, Jacob." I smirk at him. "Do me a favor and try not to freak out my security team like that anymore, all right?"

"No promises," he replies with an evil twinkle in his eyes. "Night," he says with a wave before disappearing into his room once more.

I let my shoulders slump in relief and turn to walk back down the hallway. Caleb meets me halfway. "Everything okay, Chief?"

I nod. I know more now than I did even ten minutes ago, and while I had a pretty good idea of what was going on, things are now a lot clearer for me. I give Caleb a tired smile. "Everything's fine, Caleb. His heart was in the right place. His mind wasn't exactly running on all cylinders though."

Caleb snorts. "At three in the morning, *no one's* firing on all cylinders. Besides, I thought this was supposed to be the *quiet* shift." We reach my door and I turn to give him a wry look.

"When was the last time you remember *anything* going like it's supposed to?"

He holds up a finger and opens his mouth, only to snap his jaw shut and frown after a full sixty seconds of silence. I just cock my eyebrow at him and smirk.

"Exactly," I say, and cross the threshold into my room once more.

Arianna has picked up the Pad I intentionally left laying in the bed. She can't access anything but the image file I left open for her, but it seems to have her attention fully engaged. I decide to take a minute to splash some cold water on my face, hoping to revive my sagging alertness. Again, I am reminded of when my kids were younger. There were many nights I spent listening and talking to them as they went through the pains of growing up.

I wipe the moisture from my face, feeling marginally better if not much more awake. *I really am getting old* I think as I hang the towel up. Once upon a time I could have gone all day and all night and all day again with only vast amounts of caffeine to stimulate my senses. Not anymore.

I give myself a wry look and roll my eyes. Then I return to the room to find she hasn't moved an iota, and I question what has her so enamored that she's still not aware of my presence. I climb onto the bed, settling comfortably. When I turn my attention to her, I realize she has shifted to accommodate my movement without ever moving her eyes from the Pad in front of her. I bend towards her and smile as soon as I recognize the picture that seems to be the object of her consideration.

"Tell me?" she asks when I lean back against the headboard once more. Her eyes are sad again, and I can only speculate what's gone on in her mind since I left. I hold out my hand and she places the Pad in it gently, as though loath to disturb the image frozen in time.

"It's a picture of the day he returned from war... the second time."

"Wait... he went to war more than once?"

I smile, though the sadness in my expression causes her eyes to tear. "He went to more than one war. He fought many, many times."

"That's not right!"

"Arianna, he chose that life, and he was exceptional at his job."

She wants to dispute my words. I can see the argument forming in her eyes. I wait, but she surprises me. She takes a deep breath and wills her contention from her demeanor. Another breath and she looks at me again. "Tell me?" she asks again.

I glance back at the image frozen in time and nod. "I need to go back a bit first, though, and pick up the story where I left off. Otherwise, you won't get the full impact of this," motioning at the Pad.

She leans back and crosses her arms over her chest, and gestures with one hand. "So start telling already!" she demands impatiently, and I laugh. It's good to see the unhappiness seeping from those brown eyes, and I turn my attention back to the picture in my hand.

I made sure to stay in touch with everyone - like I had promised Daddy. I talked to my folks at least once a week, and I wrote Edward even more regularly. There was nothing overtly personal in my missives, however; they were more like a journal of what was happening in my life. He reciprocated by doing the same, and in that way, we started learning about one another. It was good for me and we fell into a comfortable groove.

Then Edward came home for the first time.

"How long was that?"

I blink at her as I bring my attention back to the present again. "I'm sorry - how long was what? His visit home?"

She shakes her head. "No. How long were you corresponding before he came home?"

"Oh... hmm - let's see. Daddy came to see me after three months; Edward came home six months after that, so..." I squint in memory, and she remains quiet while I think. "He had two weeks of leave, and he spent them with me traveling around." I look at her. "I'd made sure I didn't have to work those two weeks. I did like him... a lot... he just freaked me out on so many levels. I still don't know if he figured it out on his own or if Daddy clued him in. That was one secret they both took to their graves. But he was my friend those two weeks."

"I don't understand."

I sigh. I was afraid of that, though I had hoped.... "When Edward returned from off-world that first time, he came to where I was just to hang out. He met the friends I had made; shared some of his funnier experiences; played tourist and visited places with us. He never pressured me for time alone; never made me feel an expectation beyond what I felt comfortable giving him. And it was amazing. We were able to get to know one another without pressure."

"And that's when you fell in love?"

"I think I was falling in love the moment we met, but that was when I realized what he recognized from the beginning. We were good together. And when he left, I decided it was time to go home."

"Did you find what you were looking for then?"

"I grew up enough to know that I couldn't continue 'looking for myself'. I had to be who I was - maturity would come with time and experience. I would grow and learn as I went along."

"So what happened next?"

I cut my eyes at her and she giggles, and while I know exhaustion can be credited for some of it, part of it is just her trying to yank my chain. I growl and her laughter grows louder, but she claps a hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. I huff, but I can't stop the smile that crosses my face. I look at the image in my hand and let my mind travel back again.

He had six months Earth side, and though we were on opposite sides of the planet, we continued to stay in touch daily... even if was only to say hi and chat for a few minutes before one of us had to go rushing off to our next task. It was a good time for us. We were still learning about one another, but now we were beyond the surface. We talked politics and science and religion like the rest of the world, but we also discussed our hopes and plans for the future. Where we saw ourselves in ten years; what we'd like to see for our children. Serious things like philosophy and morality and silly things like cooking styles and regional quirks. It was amazing.

Before he was shipped back off-world, he came to see me... to say goodbye.

"Did he kiss you?" she asks, eyes shining.

I grin. "Oh yeah," I drawl. "Something to remember him by, he said. Although by that point, I seriously doubt I could have forgotten him. We promised to stay in touch again, and at least this time I was a little more prepared for the intensity of his attention."

"So now you knew you were in love with him?"

"Not yet," I reply and she snorts at me. "I knew I loved him, and that I would be unhappy if anything happened to him. But in love? I wouldn't be certain of that until he came home again," wagging the Pad in her direction

"Finally!" she grumbles and I laugh.

"Yes... finally," I agree. "The funny thing is, despite everything, I was still caught by surprise when I realized the truth."

She looks at me with disbelief. "Seriously, Mary?"

"Seriously."

"So tell me."

Chapter VII

Before I could resume my story, she puts a hand on my arm. I look at her and she asks, "When did you ask your mama... you know, about being in love?"

"I need to back up a little for that." She nods. "After our two weeks traveling together, I went home and Edward went to his assignment. Mother didn't confront me about him, demanding to know what was going on." I chuckle. "Instead, we talked about what I had seen and done; the people I'd met and the places I'd been. I suppose it was almost a month after I came home before Edward even came up in conversation - real conversation, I mean, and not just a passing mention. And even then, she was pretty subtle about the whole thing."

"How so?"

"She talked about how glad she was that we were staying in touch; asked what he was doing; how he was enjoying being stationed back on Earth for a while. And not all at once, either - little mentions here and there mixed in with our other discussions. And it wasn't like it was completely unexpected. After all, they knew we were in touch and spoke often." I chuckle. "She never made mention of the fact that they knew often meant every single day. And I'm pretty sure she had more than one talk with Daddy about keeping quiet and letting me work out things for myself. I'm really not sure who was more surprised by my question when I did finally ask her about it."

"She didn't expect the question?"

"I'm sure on some level that's true. But more, I don't think she expected me to talk to her about it. I loved Mother, and she became one of my best friends when I finally reached adulthood. But for my whole life, I was Daddy's girl - and with the exception of when I started cycling, I went to him with my questions whenever I could. And not just for the ice cream," I add, getting a smile for my efforts.

"So why did you go to her about this? It seems about the most important question you could possibly ask."

"That's why I went to Mother. I knew how Daddy felt about Edward; he'd told me point blank the day he came to confront me about running away. Oh, not about coveting him for a son-in-law," I say, waving my hand to dispel her confusion. "But I knew Daddy liked and respected Edward like he would one of his own, and that's saying a lot coming from a Marine. If I went to him with this, he'd tell me whatever was necessary to get Edward and me together."

"Your mama wouldn't do that?"

I smirk. "I'm sure she would have if she'd had time to prepare. But she didn't. I just sort of put it out there, and she was left trying to answer it on the fly."

"So what happened?"

"I asked... just like you did. Mother's eyes kind of bugged out of her head, and she swallowed hard a couple times before she cleared her throat and told me what I told you earlier... about it being too late if you had to ask." She nods but doesn't speak. "I nodded and we continued making dinner, which is what we'd been doing when I asked, but after dinner was over, I went out for a while."

"Alone or with friends?"

"Alone. I needed some time to process what Mother had said and to think about what that meant for me. I got on my bike and just rode for a while, and when I got tired, I pulled off at a little out-of-the-way joint. I walked in and went to the bar and ordered a dirty martini - the barkeep didn't even blink. Just poured my drink and took my money."

"You were old enough for alcohol?" eyebrow raised in disbelief.

"I was a Marine's kid. You think I didn't know how to play the system before I was out of high school?"

"Point," she concedes and I smirk.

"Damn straight."

"So how long did you sit there drinking?"

I shake my head. "Two completely different questions."

I only had the one drink all night. But I was there for the better part of three hours. For the first little while, I sat quietly at the bar, sipping on my martini and watching the sports channel that was on. About forty-five minutes and halfway into my drink, this old man sat down next to me. He didn't speak - just motioned the bartender over and in a minute, there was a cold beer sitting in front of him.

I don't know how he signaled the bartender, but as soon as he gave the old man his beer, he went to the other end of the bar and stayed there until I left.

We sat there silently for a little while, watching the game and occasionally drinking, and I figured the old man just wanted to be near the screen to watch the game. It was only when he started to speak that I realized he had chosen that seat so he could talk to me.

"Did that not scare you?"

I look at her funny. "No... why would it? Arianna, I wasn't unarmed. Daddy had taught us all self-defense from the time we were old enough to walk and know left from right. The only way the old man could have hurt me would have been if he'd pulled a gun... or if the whole bar had ganged up on me. But this wasn't that kind of place."

"How could you tell? Had you been in many bars at that point in your life?"

I pause, considering how to explain it. "You know, how when you walk into an interview, you get a feel for the room? How you can tell if the press is going to be hostile or if the interviewer is looking forward to talking to you?"

"Um... no, not really. I just assume they're all hostile and hope I'm wrong."

I cover my eyes with my hand. Given what I know of her history, I should have expected that. I sigh. "Well, when I walk into a room, I get a feel for it. I can tell if people are excited or hostile or ambivalent. It serves me well in my job."

"I can see how it would," she agrees. "So you had a feeling about this bar?"

"And about the old man. And then he started talking and he had my undivided attention."

"You remind me of myself... sixty-odd years ago," he said to me by way of introduction and I turned to find his kindly eyes watching me with understanding and a hint of humor.

"Excuse me?" I was polite - Mother would kick my ass otherwise if she found I was disrespecting my elders... even if I didn't know him. I looked to see if there was someone else he could have been addressing. Surely he wasn't talking to me.

He smiled and I smiled back in reflex because he reminded me of my Grampa. "Don't worry, young lady. You don't know me, but I was talking to you. Because you remind me of myself a long time ago."

I cocked my head. It wouldn't hurt me to listen if he needed to talk and now I was a little curious too. "How so?"

His smile grew a little bit melancholy and his gaze went distant. "Believe it or not, I was once a youngster like you - had my whole life in front of me. I was going to school on a scholarship, involved in sports and clubs and working weekends playing in a band. And then I met this girl, and she knocked me for a loop. I mean really - she blew everything else clean out of my mind. She was all I could think about. I almost lost my scholarship because of her," he said with a glance in my direction and I wondered what this had to do with me. "You think I'm crazy telling you about this, don't you?"

"No sir," I answered without thought.

He held my eyes for another moment, measuring my sincerity. I guessed he found what he was looking for, because he turned his head back towards the game and lifted his beer to his lips. After he swallowed, he spoke again.

"I wasn't really sure how to deal with her - she was so far out of my league - and yet that was part of her charm. I was so taken with her. She was... amazing. And I decided I was going to do whatever it took to make her mine."

"And how did she feel about it?"

The old man snorted. "She wasn't particularly impressed. She thought I was barbaric."

"I'm kinda inclined to agree with her... especially with that attitude." He laughed.

"I am too... now. But then the only thing I could focus on was the fact that I wanted her in my life - no matter what."

"And how did that work out for you?"

"Not at all to begin with. Like I told you, I almost lost my scholarship I was so focused on her. Then I realized that destroying my future wasn't the best way to impress her. And once my focus was back on track, it was a lot easier for me to get to know her."

"Did that help?"

"Immensely," he laughed. "I was a much more interesting person when I wasn't... how did she put it? Oh yeah - when I wasn't acting like a stalker."

I laughed. I could understand where the other girl was coming from, though I was certainly not going to tell the stranger who had introduced her to me. Polite meant I listened; it didn't mean I shared. "What happened?"

"We went through college and we actually became good friends over the course of the four years we were there together. But when graduation came, she left. She had a dream, and she needed to be somewhere else to fulfill it. I wasn't part of it - I couldn't be."

"So you let her go?"

He smiled, the sadness back in his eyes. "I had to. She wasn't mine to hold onto." He picked up his beer and drained it, setting the bottle back on the bar and pushing it away before he turned to look at me again... and waited. He knew he had me hooked.

"What did you do?"

He shrugged. "What I could. I kept in touch; supported her the best I could; I even comforted her through a couple broken hearts when her romances didn't work out the way she wanted."

"That seems like... I dunno - it seems kind of unfair of her to use you like that. Like she was taking advantage of you."

"But was it really taking advantage if I allowed it to happen? Besides, she didn't know how I felt."

"But...."

He waved away my objection. "She had no reason to think I meant what I told her when we first met. Remember, I went out of my way to become friends with her, and to do that, I had to let her think she'd slipped from my romantic radar. So the fact that at that point all she really thought of me as was her staunch best friend was completely my doing. I had to decide if I wanted to risk that friendship for the relationship I really wanted with her."

"What did you do?"

He looked around the bar we were sitting at. "I came to a place like this and drank myself stupid trying to decide if it was infatuation or if it was love."

"You decided you were in love?"

He shook his head and I frowned in frustration. "I decided I loved her, but I wasn't sure if that translated to being in love."

"My mother told me if I had to ask if I was in love it was already too late."

"I don't think that's true. It's very possible to love someone without being in love with them; and the fact that you're questioning means there's a definite possibility and that you're open to it. But only you know if it's something you can build a life on."

"What did you do?"

"Aside from drinking myself stupid?" he joked and I nodded.

"I thought about her; I thought about me; I thought about us together and what she meant to me the way things were. Then I thought about how it would feel if she was no longer part of my life - I couldn't breathe. THAT'S when I knew I was in love. And I realized that if I didn't try, I would lose her anyway and that it was worth the risk to have her finally be mine."

He grew quiet and waited. I swallowed the last of my drink, grimacing at the lukewarm temperature. Then I looked him in the eye and finally spoke. "So what happened?"

"She slapped me."

"Excuse me?"

"She slapped me... on the arm as it happened, but still. Then asked me what had taken me so long - that she'd been waiting for years for me to finally figure it out. We married less than a month later and were together fifty-one years before..." He trailed off, but I didn't need him to finish to know what he meant. The expression on his face was telling enough. "My only regret is the time we missed being together, but I never regretted taking the chance to be with her."

I was curious, but I hesitated to ask. After all, it wasn't really my business. It obviously showed on my face, and he cocked his eyebrow in question, his expression letting me know it was all right to ask. "How long?" He tilted his head and I elaborated. "How long have you missed her?" not wanting to rub salt in what I could see was still an open wound.

He smiled, though there were tears in his eyes now. "Feels like forever," he replied. "But she's been gone from me for almost four years." He dropped some money on the bar and stood, placing a hand on my shoulder as he stepped behind me. "I'm not saying you're in love with your young man or woman - it's not my place to make that call. You're the only one who can decide that. But if you're to the point that you are entertaining the possibility, let an old man give you some advice. There is no greater regret than the chance not taken. And even if he or she breaks your heart, it just means there is something better waiting."

He squeezed my shoulder and made his way out the door, leaving me to my solitude once more. In another few minutes, I took a deep breath and rose from my seat, signaling the bartender for my tab. He shook his head and told me the old man had covered it. I thanked him and walked out the door. It was time for me to go home.

"I didn't say a word to Mother when I got home, and she didn't ask. Although she didn't know where I had gone, she appreciated why I had done so. And she knew that if I needed to and when the time was right, I would talk to her about what I had discovered on my ride."

"Did you?"

"Tell her?" Arianna nodded. "No, not in so many words. But she knew, in the way that mamas seem to know."

"How could you tell?"

"Little comments... actions - things that let me know she comprehended my unspoken indicators. Still, things went on much like they had been before I asked - I attended classes; my sisters went to school or work. Or as it was in the case of one of my sisters, they joined the military. I talked to Edward every day, and the conversations grew longer and more personal as time passed. Then he got his orders for his next off-world assignment, and he came home on leave very briefly to say goodbye."

"Was it romantic?"

"Not at all," I say with laughter in my voice. "We literally had about five minutes alone before his shuttle left, because as I later learned, he shouldn't have been there at all. The stop was a special concession for him. He promised to stay in touch and so did I, but otherwise, there were no promises between us. Then he kissed me and boarded without looking back. He told me later if he'd turned around he would have stayed, and that would have gotten him thrown in the stockade or worse."

"That sounds a little romantic."

"In hindsight, yes - knowing that was the reason he refused to look back. But at the time, it hurt."

"You thought he was dismissing you," she says matter-of-factly.

"I did," I agree. "And it made me a little angry." I look at her. "Have you ever heard the saying, 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'?"

"No, but I understand the implications."

"That was me. Don't get me wrong - I didn't go out and do anything particularly stupid. But I did become more social... going out with groups of friends and spending time hanging out with girls and guys that liked spending time with me - trying to see if what I felt for him was real or just a fluke I could mark down to the attention he had paid me. Mother frowned at me a lot, trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with me. Only the month before I was wondering if I was in love, and now I was acting like it meant nothing. And not having heard from Edward in almost a month.... I knew what kind of pull he had - he'd shown me that at the beginning of our relationship. And now, when it actually meant something to me to hear from him, he was silent."

"Why?"

"He realized he'd made a mistake leaving me the way he had... with things unresolved and me not understanding why. So he'd made a deal with the devil - if he took care of a certain assignment, he could come home for a week to take care of our situation. But to complete his task, he had to be out of communication until it was finished. It was the only way they couldn't track him."

"I take it he was successful."

I grin. "Oh yes. And when he came home...."

"That's when the picture was made?"

"That's when the picture was made. Daddy had Mother bring me to the airfield... said something was coming in special delivery for me. I couldn't imagine what, but I decided to humor them. After all,

just because I was in a pissy mood didn't mean I needed to take it out on the world at large. When Edward stepped off that shuttle, I went virtually dumb and mute - I couldn't move and I couldn't speak. He raced down the ramp before it was fully extended, jumping the last couple feet to the ground before kneeling in front of me. I did move enough to cover my mouth with my hand to keep from screaming. Daddy snapped this picture the moment I said yes."

Chapter VIII

"So he came home and literally swept you off your feet with a grand romantic gesture." I'm not really sure what to make of her tone, but there is a slight smile on her face and a little twinkle in her eyes.

"Kind of. I mean, I had already figured out I was in love with him. It didn't take much for me to let him sweep me off my feet." I give her a smile. "But we still had things to work out and lots of talking to do, and it would take us a little while to iron everything out. But at least we were finally on the same page." She nods but bites her lip and I arch my eyebrow in her direction. "Go ahead and ask." I instruct her. I don't have the first clue what she's thinking, but obviously it's important to her.

"What about his parents?"

I blink. Surely I misunderstood, because that wasn't even on my radar as a subject of conversation since they hadn't come up until now. "I beg pardon?" trying to buy a little time to coalesce my thoughts into some sort of coherence.

The look she gives me should peel the plaster from the walls. "We've talked about your parents. I know that they accepted him in your life immediately." She snorts. "They accepted him before you did." I nod. "What about his parents? You haven't said a word about either of them."

"Not much to say. They didn't like me at all."

"Why?"

I snort. "Pick a reason. I was too young. I was too crass. I was a military brat. I was beneath them socially." I look at her. "Shall I go on?"

She shakes her head. "What did Edward do?"

I smile in memory. "You have to remember that Edward had been on his own for over five years by the time we met - almost seven by the time he proposed. When they explained to him in front of me all the reasons I was unsuitable, he ushered me to his vehicle to wait. Then he told them explicitly how things were going to be, and what it would take for them to be part of our lives again."

"He disowned them?"

"He did. They were never part of our lives from that day. They didn't attend our wedding and never knew their grandchildren. When the kids were old enough to ask about his parents, we told them their father's parents were dead."

"You lied?"

"Technically, yes. But in reality? No. They were dead to us and had been for years at that point."

"And that didn't bother him? Edward, I mean. He didn't miss them in his life?"

I frown, trying to figure out what I'm missing. I bite my lip and search her expression, but her eyes are hidden from me, focused now on the hands she's twisting in her lap. I shift so I can lay the Pad on the table beside me, and I can feel her relax now that my attention has been diverted. "We only spoke of it twice - once right after it happened and the second time after his father passed away. The first time he was full of righteous anger and hatred at their treatment of me. The second time...." I pause and clear my throat. "He was saddened by his father's death, but he told me he'd do it all over again if it meant having what we had together... that it had been worth it."

"Do you think he meant it?"

"I know he did. The fact that my parents welcomed him as a son contributed to that greatly because with them he had a family that loved him despite his parents' actions. I know his parents hurt him by rejecting me because that meant they rejected him as well. But Edward was a strong man, and he had been on his own for a number of years by the time all this happened."

There is silence for a few minutes and I let it linger. She obviously still has something on her mind. Maybe if she can unload whatever is still bothering her, we can get back to the real reason she's here. Finally she looks at me. "If it had been the other way around, could you have done it? If your parents threatened to disown you if you stayed with Edward - because they disapproved of him for whatever reason - could you have walked away from them like he did for you?"

I look at her, covering her hands with mine and squeezing lightly. "Look at me," I command softly. She hesitates for a long minute before raising her chin and allowing her brown eyes to meet mine. "When I first met him, at the age of eighteen, no. I knew nothing of the world or anything in it. And he really did freak me out on a pretty big scale when we first met - he was so intense. But as I got to know him - as I fell in love with the military man and the romantic; the graceful fighter and the clumsy dancer; the man who led men into battle and the man who wrote poetry - as I fell in love with all aspects of him, yes. It would have hurt to hell and gone because we've always been a close-knit family. But I would have left my family behind to be with him. And Arianna," I say softly, letting one hand cup her cheek to wipe away the tears she's permitted to fall from her eyes, "I fell more in love with him every day... even when we fought and yelled with each other. Every trial we suffered through together? It was worth it... because we were together. That was always reason enough Edward said."

She looks away from me then, focusing her eyes on the far wall and her attention even further beyond, and I can feel her willing the tears from her countenance. I know the customs of her planet are similar to what they were on mine a century or two prior, and I can't understand why tears are still considered a sign of weakness for anyone. We've learned that the strong become stronger when allowed to express their joy AND their sorrow instead of being forced to hide parts of themselves for fear of mockery and derision.

I don't want to embarrass her with my scrutiny, however, and I slip from the bed and cross to the refrigerator to grab another bottle of cold water. I have adjusted to drinking it at practically any temperature while on this assignment, but I still appreciate that first feeling of cold sliding down into my belly. I turn to offer her another, but she shakes her head, keeping her eyes focused on the wall as she blinks rapidly. I cock my head, then come to the sudden realization that she's waiting for my permission.

Without pausing, I drop onto the small space beside her, facing her and covering her hands with my own. I don't move, waiting for her to acknowledge me, and after a long moment, she can't help but. Her head turns, but her eyes shift to her lap. I still don't move, nor do I speak. The ball is in her court now. If she's going to share with me, she's going to have to do it on her terms.

"You said you had files on me... on everyone who is being considered for the project?" I nod and her eyes flicker up at the motion before they drop back to her lap. "How much do you know?" I frown, not completely understanding the question. She looks up at me and though there are tears on her lashes and in her eyes, there is nothing in her expression to give away her thoughts.

"About?" I query, trying to get some sort of illumination on what exactly she's looking for. She glares, then realizes I am truly unsure about what specifically she's asking about. She shakes her head and sighs.

"I suppose that was somewhat vague, wasn't it?" giving me a smirk when I arch an eyebrow in her direction. Her mien sobers and her eyes return to her lap as she sighs again. "Let me start over. How long have you been doing this... watching us, I mean?"

I move one of my hands from hers, rubbing across my forehead and eyes before letting it slide down my face. Of all the questions she could have asked, this is one of the most loaded. I go to remove my other hand, by she grabs on tightly enough to draw a wince. I pat her hands, and she looks at me almost involuntarily, and this time her façade isn't nearly as solid. I let my free hand cup her cheek.

"Arianna, I'm not leaving, and I am going to answer your question. I was simply going to move back to my side of the bed so I could lean against the headboard."

Instead of releasing my hands, she simply shifts over towards the middle of the bed far enough that I have room to sit beside her on the edge of her side of the bed. I wonder, but I've been around long enough to know when to take a hint. So I pull my hand from hers and turn so I'm leaning against the headboard, not at all surprised when she leans into me, recovering one hand to hold onto. I let the other wrap around her shoulders even as I consider if her mother has ever done this for her. I feel more than hear her sigh of contentment and decide she probably never did; it makes me angry on Arianna's behalf. Still, there's nothing to be done for it at this point, so I just smile and tip my head down to observe her profile.

"Better?" I ask softly, knowing it is on a number of levels. She nods.

"I miss being held like this. It seems like it's been forever."

My eyebrows jump in surprise. "How long?"

She shrugs. "Mama held me like this when I was little, but once I started training, it seemed to happen less and less. And not at all since..." She stiffens and then forces herself to relax, tilting her head briefly then settling back into a more comfortable position. "So... how long?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"Well, what you originally asked was how long I've been doing this. Then you asked how long I've been watching all of you. Those are two different things - more than that, if I'm completely honest." She

taps the hand she's holding, and I sense her impatience in the motion. I smile just the smallest bit. "I told you I started doing this gig when my daughter's security was threatened," feeling her nod. "She was seven, so close to twenty years I've been in this business."

"Someone threatened your daughter when she was a seven-year-old child??"

"Um hmm." My expression is serene, but I still growl when I think about the fucker that thought he could threaten what was mine. "And it only happened once. We were proactive after that - determining threats before they were ever allowed to blossom beyond the obsession stage. The reason my sons are still at an Academy is because they were part of my team and they were asked to stay and teach for their first term of service. Extending their scholastic careers in such a manner meant they were able to qualify in more than one field of expertise."

"What happened to him?" I glance down at her and cock an eyebrow. "The man who threatened your daughter."

"I found him, and Edward made certain he was never able to threaten another child again." There is a note of finality in my voice and she nods her understanding.

"So you've been taking care of threats for twenty years. How long have you been working on this project?"

"I've been here since before the beginning. I was brought in when it was only in the idea stage."

"But this idea has been around for...."

"Quite a while, yes. It's been talked about since before you started playing with combining nuclear fission and nuclear fusion. But your brilliance in that regard spurred more serious discussion, which led to ideas. That's when I was brought into the project."

"To do what?"

"Our purpose was two-fold. We were to monitor possible candidates as well as to ensure your safety. We looked into your backgrounds; watched your progress; followed your success and failures; monitored your lives as well as your aptitudes. As prospects were dropped from our register, we were able to do more exclusive monitoring and research."

"So you know everything?"

I burst into laughter - I can't help it. She jerks her head back to frown at me, and I take a deep breath to contain the rush of humor. "Sorry," I apologize. "I haven't had a kid ask me if I know everything in a very long time." I hold up a hand before she can protest. "I know you're not really a kid nor is that what you meant, but it struck me funny. Cut me a little slack. It's really, *really* late."

She yawns, causing me to do the same. "Thanks for reminding me," she grumbles at me with a glare.

"Sorry," I return, wiping my eyes. "And no, we don't know *everything*. We didn't tap into comm devices or rooms nor did we wire each of you for sight and sound. We did allow you a modicum of privacy where we could, and we never shared more than was required and then only with those who needed to know. So you do still have some secrets... even from us."

She sighs and I wait. "Do you know...?" She hesitates, and I keep waiting. I'm not going to give this to her - she's got to do it on her own for it to mean anything to her. After another deep breath she speaks again. "Do you know about Eli?"

I blink - it takes me a minute to realize to whom she's referring. I nod. "I know many things. Tell me what you think I need to know," I encourage.

I feel her shudder and she shifts away, sitting up against the headboard beside me, though she retains her hold on my hand. "You know about my growing up," smiling softly when I nod. "You probably know more about it than I do," she adds with a smirk, "given what you've shared with me already. I was put into school at Mama's behest, though I really didn't like it much until towards the end of my scholastic career. My personality made it hard for me to make friends and my position made it nearly impossible." She shrugs. "Still, it made Mama happy, so I kept my own counsel about it, and it wasn't so bad at the last. I mean, I finally had friends and was allowed a certain amount of freedom to participate in school activities with them."

I nod. I know all of this, of course and we've been over most of this already, but if it helps her, then I'm happy to listen to it again... especially if she continues to share details I haven't heard before.

"As soon as school was over, I accepted the crown and my role as heir to the throne - that is when my work began in earnest."

"That's when you were pulled into the project."

She nods. "Yes - even though I was spending less time in the lab, that's when I was pulled into the project... with the caveat that I be allowed to remain at home until it progressed beyond my contribution. I knew everything else depended on my work."

"Did that bother you?"

"What?" She snaps her head around to look directly at me. "No," she replies before I can repeat my question. "I knew I could bring the reality of combining nuclear fission and fusion to fruition - it was just a matter of how long it would take. And I had other responsibilities beyond the project - there was no reason to remove me from them before it was necessary."

"Your choice?"

"My request. As Papa pointed out, this project would take years regardless and there was no guarantee it would happen in my lifetime. There was no reason to put my entire existence into upheaval until we were sure it was a go."

"So once it advanced into the selection process? How has this impacted your other responsibilities?"

"Papa is convinced it is a necessary evil."

"I'm not following."

She snorts. "Yeah... it took me a little while to understand as well." She sighs. "The reason he hasn't protested my participation - has in fact encouraged it - is because of the prestige it brings not only to our household, but to our planet as a whole. We're being recognized as a first-world contributor and that's important to him."

"But not to you."

She shakes her head. "No... not really. I mean don't get me wrong - the recognition was kind of incredible to start with. But I did this - *I* earned this. Not him and not anyone else. And the responsibility for my success or failure lies on my shoulders. And as my work goes, so goes the project to a very great extent."

I nod, because she's absolutely correct. The success of everything lies in her work - she is the foundation everything else is being based from - everything is being tailored to utilize her energy source. She nods as well and resumes her telling.

"So, Papa expects me to be part of this project initially. As far as he's concerned, it's a done deal. For my work and my research to be included, I will be by necessity a part of this from the beginning. And he's thrilled because of the distinction and respect it has garnered us. But he also believes that I will do my time and come home."

My eyebrows shoot into my hairline. "Does he understand what kind of time is involved here?"

"No. And I'm not going to be the one to explain it to him."

"And what of your responsibilities to the realm?"

She cuts her eyes in my direction. "Whose side are you on?"

"No side," I reply, holding up our hands. "I just want to make sure I understand everything clearly."

She squeezes my hand but returns her focus to the far wall. "If I was given my way, the monarchy would be replaced by a democracy. In lieu of that, I'd settle for a regent until such time as my work is complete and I return home. But for now, he and Mama are still in good health and firmly entrenched as ruling monarchs, so the point is moot as far as I'm concerned. Since most of my royal involvement in anything is currently of a ceremonial nature, he is willing to let my royal duties slide to ensure my participation in this project. Therefore I presently have no responsibilities to the realm, as it were."

"Okay. So how does all this tie into Eli and Malcolm and...?" She's turned to look at me with amusement in her eyes and I can't help but smile despite the hand covering my mouth.

"I'm getting there," she chides. "You have to let me tell it, though."

I nod and she removes her hand. I grin evilly at her. "So what happened next?" I ask.

She narrows her eyes at me and huffs. I smirk and she can't contain her grin, though it is brief. Then she starts speaking again.

Chapter IX

"So Papa fully expects me to be part of the original team heading up this project - as far as he's concerned, it's a given. This," motioning around us, "is merely a formality that must be observed for appearances' sake so that everyone is seen to have been given a fair shake to be part of the Alpha

team. Once this is taken care of I, and whatever other members of the team are chosen to join me - including Malcolm - will begin making the concepts we have been developing reality."

"Your father does understand that he has no control over who is chosen, right?"

She cocks an eyebrow. "He likes to think he does. To that end, he betrothed me to Malcolm."

I blink. "Seriously?"

"Do I look like I'm making this up?" Her voice is more than a little harsh and her agitation is clear in the way she's squeezing my fingers sporadically. I make a mental note to get a therapy appointment - I'm going to need it on my hands before we're done here. She releases a breath slowly and relaxes her grip on my hand. "Sorry," she mutters. "Let me start over."

"When I was approached by the Committee, Papa was thrilled," she starts dryly. "Finally, we were getting the recognition he felt we deserved. And it was easy to negotiate the terms I wanted - allowing me to remain home until there were more candidates than just myself to consider. Papa tried to dictate." She gives me a look. "You can imagine how well that went over."

I snort. "Not at all?"

"Not at all. It almost ended my participation before it started."

"Would you have let it?" I interrupt. She angles her head to one side as she considers my query.

"Maybe then," she admits softly. "But it wouldn't have stopped my work. And eventually, I would have sought out a way to utilize it on a bigger scale. That would have brought me back into the Committee's purview. I just wouldn't have been the basis for the rest of the work going into the project - I would have been an alternate."

"I take it your father realized that and gave his blessing instead of continuing to make demands the Committee wouldn't begin to entertain?"

Her smirk is more than a bit angry, and the nod of her head is sharp. "Yes. Instead he asked that other scientists from my planet be considered as well. The Committee agreed and things settled down for a couple years. I continued my work and carried out whatever royal assignments were handed to me. Then the Committee tapped me to begin this process and everything changed."

She clenches my hand again, and it's all I can do to keep from wincing. I give silent thanks for whole milk and the strength of my bones. I reach out with my free hand and loosen her clasp, rubbing my thumb over her hand to persuade her to relax. She looks at me with a myriad of emotions swirling in her dark eyes, and I give her a tender smile. "Tell me."

She nods and closes her eyes, which causes a lone tear to trail down her cheek. She ignores it and takes a deep breath. "You know most of this, but... When work progressed enough on every front, all the scientists were brought here from their home worlds and placed into an environment similar to the one we will be functioning in. The objective was to see how we fit together as individuals and as team members as well as to weed out any potential unworkable ideas. I probably don't need to tell you how *that* went over."

"Tell me from your side. I'm pretty sure you had a different perspective than we did."

"There were a number of candidates that were under the impression that having made it to that point meant they were in. They weren't at all happy to discover this was just another elimination stage."

"Did it cause issues?"

"It could have... probably would have if Eli hadn't stepped into the breach before it blew sky high."

"So what happened?"

There was a lot of discontent as more and more scientists arrived in the relatively small underground bunker. It was easy to see we would be forced to share space - living and working. And most of us were loners... by nature or by necessity. It was going to be awkward, to say the least - downright miserable at worst.

The most disconcerting thing about the entire situation was no one seemed to be in charge. No one was there to greet us - handing out assignments or instructions. Instead, we were left to our own devices... which was a dangerous thing with all the egos in the room.

"Was that deliberate?" her eyebrow cocks in question.

I smirk. "What do you think?"

"So it was. I wondered." She sighs. "It makes sense now, of course, but at the time it was just...."

"I know. But it told us a lot about everyone."

She rolls her eyes. "I'll bet. Besides, as Eli aptly pointed out, we weren't going to be able to rely on outside influences to structure things for us when we got to the final project."

"Tell me," I say again, and she nods.

There was a lot of grumbling - some of it was downright nasty. Malcolm tried to put me in charge... pulling the royalty card, which only put people's back up against me right from the start. Especially since most of the individuals participating were from democracies... not monarchies. They certainly didn't recognize my right to rule anything. And to be honest, I'd lost a lot of my brashness and outspokenness in the intervening years since high school. I had to practice a certain amount of decorum in the course of my royal duties, and lab work tended to drive me towards reclusiveness because so much of my work and research I did alone.

The only thing Malcolm did was to unite all the malcontents against me. And unintentional or not, it was an uncomfortable position for me to be in.

Then from the back of the room, a husky voice spoke up, and Eli was making her way to the front of the room. I was entranced.

"Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why were you entranced?"

She freezes... as though she's never considered the question before. "She was...." The pause is thoughtful and I wait. "She was different - so different from anyone I had ever met."

"In what way?"

Her smile is wistful. "In every way that matters," she replies, her eyes focused on something beyond sight now. "She was confident without being obnoxious. And when she spoke, people naturally listened - even if they argued with her. She still had their attention." She hesitates and I remain silent. "She stood up for me," her voice a mere whisper of sound that I had to strain to hear.

"No one had done that before?"

"Not like that," shaking her head. "She didn't know me - she had no reason to."

"So what happened?"

"All right... listen up. Here's what we're gonna do."

"Who died and put you in charge, bitch?" a big man snarled from one side of the room. "Despite her supposed 'royal pedigree'," motioning towards Arianna, "we're all equals here."

*"No," Eli drawled slowly, staring at him with the slightest smirk on her face. "We're really not. Some of us are actually intelligent outside our work specialties and a few of us even have the sense to get in out of the rain without being told. Obviously you're not one of them. And if she's really some sort of royal," gesturing at Arianna in much the same manner her detractor had, "she's probably got leadership experience. But she didn't volunteer - some other dipshit put her out there. Why are you assuming he knows anything? Or that she *wants* to take responsibility for any of you?" It grew quiet and Eli looked around. "Now as I was saying, here's what we're going to do."*

"Again... who the hell left you in charge?" a woman in the middle of the room asked.

"You think you can do better? Please," Eli offered with a cocked eyebrow, waving her hand for the woman to join her at the front of the room. The woman snarled at Eli, but didn't move. "All right. Then sit down and shut up - all of you. The fact is we aren't going to be able to rely on outside influences to structure things for us when we get to the final project. If we can't work out a way to live together here, we're not going to make it there. I'll bet a place on the Alpha team that this is just another test." There were groans heard throughout the room, but also a majority of heads nodding their agreement.

"Okay, so here's what we're gonna do," Eli repeated for a third time... only this time there was no disparagement. She looked around the room and found a sense of expectancy. She nodded sharply. "We need to decide how we want to split living space first. We can figure out workspace once we're settled. I'd like to suggest that we pair up with people we don't know... especially if you won't be working with them. Part of the purpose to this has got to be getting to know one another," seeing heads in accord even as people started shifting around.

Malcolm headed towards Arianna, but a look quelled his progress and he quickly turned his steps elsewhere. Eli turned to Arianna. "Whaddya say, Angel? You and me?"

Arianna smiled. "I'd like that."

"It really wasn't that difficult," she says softly, her eyes still fastened on a spot on the far wall. "Once we were all on the same page, we realized Eli was probably more right than she knew. And once we had pairs, it was easy to do a raffle to decide who ended up where."

"There wasn't any more grumbling?"

She snorts and I grin. "Not on that account anyway. There was plenty of grumbling, as I'm sure you're aware. But Eli managed to get everyone settled into living quarters pretty easily, all things considered. Dividing up workspace was a different challenge, but surprisingly not difficult. I mean, a lot of it was a given simply due to the various specialties that were present. And Eli was always there to mediate a dispute on the occasion that it was necessary. After she took charge that first day, everyone just looked to her naturally for leadership."

"Even Malcolm?"

Her face hardens and her lip curls in disgust; I wonder why she's still tied to him if she disdains him the way she seems to. She turns to look at me and I thank God for the years I've had to practice my stoic demeanor.

"Malcolm, despite Papa's belief otherwise, has never been particularly bright... especially when it comes to dealing with people he's convinced are his lesser. He was one of the disruptive members of the group - there were a few. Most of them have already been weeded out because their efforts were less than stellar."

She doesn't say it, but I know she is more than a little curious to understand how Malcolm has managed to maintain his status as a peered member of the project. Because she's right - he's not nearly as brilliant as the rest. She probably believes that her father's influence has something to do with it - and she'd be right... just not the way she thinks. However, it's not my place to reveal the truth to her. I will do that to the Committee when the time is right.

"So I take that as a no then?"

Her laughter lacks humor, and her reply is as droll and dry as any I have ever heard. "Take it as a no. He spent much of what little free time we had trying to undermine her authority - authority we had given her willingly and which she had accepted grudgingly because no one else wanted to step up into the leadership role we deemed necessary to be successful."

"So what happened?"

Her head drops and I realize we must be getting close to the crux of the matter.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this. None of this was supposed to happen!"

I cup my fingers under her chin and bring her head up until our eyes meet. There are tears in her eyes again, but I ignore them, searching her face before I whisper. "Tell me."

"You have to understand - this was so far out of my experience...."

"Arianna, you don't have to justify yourself or anything that happened to me. I'm not here to judge, all right? I'm here to listen... and maybe help."

"I don't think you can."

"Let me decide that. Now tell me."

*Things with Eli just fit... in a way they hadn't with anyone in my life before. Even Kip and my friends in high school - it had taken me years and vast amounts of effort to get them to see *me*. Not the Princess or the genius or the obnoxious kid... just me. And suddenly... It was like Eli took one look at me, and she just knew.*

She didn't treat me as a freak or something special - she treated me like everyone else, and that was soooo.... I had never met anyone like her. She never asked if I was royalty or not - she didn't care. To her I was just Arianna; I was just her friend. And that meant more to me than anything... even Papa's approval.

The first couple months were hard... for everyone. There was a lot of adjusting on some pretty steep curves. But for Eli and me, it was like we had always been.

I should have seen it coming, I guess. After all, opposites attract, right? And it was... magical.

She grows silent, and though I know exactly where this is going, I need for her to tell me. She's got to face this head on if we're ever to get to where we need to be. I look at the clock. And we're running out of time.

"What was? What was magical?"

"You have to understand - Eli was everything I wasn't... except brilliant. She was brilliant... is brilliant, actually, just not in the same vein that I am. Her brilliance lies in her ability to see the big picture and make things come together so they fit like they should. I tend to focus on what *I* am doing, tuning out everything around me while she...." Arianna shakes her head. "But it wasn't just her mind that was different - it was everything. And in that regard, it made us impossible from the start."

I cup her cheek, bringing her eyes back to mine. "Arianna, assume I know nothing of what's gone on. Give me the details."

She nods again and bites her lip, willing the tears back. A deep breath then she starts speaking in a whisper and I strain to catch her words.

Eli was brilliant, but she was wild... untamed by the standards I had always known. She came from a place based on matriarchal societies; where people were governed by those they elected to office; where everyone was a warrior by choice and considered it an honor to serve thus. Consumption of flesh is an acceptable practice on her home world and people there are free to choose a mate they feel love for. It's not decided by dowry or suitability or parental wish.

And being with her... being her friend... was a liberating experience for me. She taught me... so much, even in the first few months when we were all trying to adjust to functioning together in this new environment as a society.

Of course, she had to adjust to a non-meat diet, and that was probably my biggest contribution to helping her to adjust to the constraints of the project. After all, I had never eaten meat, so I knew how to make the best of what was available. And it made me happy to be able to provide for her that way - in a way I knew most of the others couldn't. It made me special, and I liked that feeling... especially as it regarded her.

And she was so patient with me about... well, everything. I suppose I really should have seen it coming.

"I didn't realize it was such a big deal. I had never...." She takes a shuddering breath and I wait. "I never considered.... And when she kissed me the first time, I was lost. I knew what it was to feel... really feel and I let myself fall headlong into feeling without stopping to consider the consequences... for anyone."

"What sort of consequences?"

"The kind of consequences that end with me betrothed to a man I can't stand. The kind of consequences that alienate the only person I have ever felt strong emotion for and cause her to not just hate me, but loath my very existence."

I sigh silently. *Finally.* "Tell me the rest. Then we'll see what I can do. Miracle Worker, remember? Have a little faith."

"This is going to take more faith than I've got, Mary."

"We'll start with a little and build from there. Now tell me."

Chapter X

The first few months were furiously busy - Eli and I passed one another coming and going most of the time. If we were in the room at the same time to sleep, it was fortuitous timing more than anything else. Aside from the labs and workstations that had to be established, there were domes to be built

and common areas to set up and stock. It was a madhouse, but once it was decided where each discipline would be housed, it went rather smoothly. Because we knew it was going to take effort from everyone if we wanted to see the project succeed. Not that it was without argument, of course - we still had our few dissenters and all our egos, but mostly it was understood that we all stood a better chance if we stopped competing with one another and worked together.

Eventually, of course, things settled down into a less hectic, more human pace, and we were able to do more than work sixteen to eighteen hours a day. That was such a relief, and that more than anything allowed us to start becoming a family.

We had agreed that a twenty-four hour day was necessary at the beginning to ensure nothing got by us. Eli worked out a schedule that rotated hours on and time off. And since everyone involved was degreed in more than one science, she made it so we worked in more than our own area... allowing us to get to know not only one another, but the sheer magnitude of the intricacies involved in actually bringing things to fruition.

When we finally reached the place where twenty-four hour monitoring in every lab wasn't needed, Eli reworked the schedule. We were allowed an entire day off every couple weeks and it felt like such an indulgence because our hours also got cut - we went from eighteen hour days to ten or twelve hour days. So we suddenly had the luxury of free time and it was wonderful.

Of course, some of that free time was spent 'bonding' as a group - watching movies; playing sports; cooking family style meals together. We even had game nights and card tournaments. It was fun and good for us too. It was relaxing, and that went a long way towards making life smoother.

It was during this time that Eli and I found time to spend together. It wasn't deliberate... not at first. There were just opportunities to do more in our room than sleep and many evenings we found ourselves curled up in our beds just talking to one another. Not about anything important - not what you'd consider important anyway. We tried not to discuss the project or our work - we got enough of that when we were working. Instead, we talked about life and philosophy and music... things that mattered to us. She told me of her home and I shared about mine. I actually watched her gray eyes go completely black with anger more than once on my behalf and that did something to me - put a warm feeling in the pit of my stomach.

We probably did that for a month or two before we were really comfortable with each other. It took us a while, but we were finally friends.

We weren't quite halfway through our yearlong tenure when we decided to add evening walks to our repertoire. Not exercise, mind you - we started our days with that. She was a runner; I preferred yoga. No, our evening walks were just that - walks around the compound. We'd visit the different labs to enjoy the fruits of labor our colleagues had produced - the scent of pine and citrus; the fragrance of flowers; even the food gardens weren't to be missed. And we'd always stop and talk to whoever was about. Those who were working appreciated the chance to bring Eli up-to-date personally, and those that weren't loved the chance to interact with her socially. I was included by default at first and then on my own merit; it meant so much more than I expected.

It was on one of these walks that she first held my hand... guiding me to something she wanted to show me. She simply neglected to release her hold once we reached our destination, and I saw no reason to change the situation. It was on another of these walks that she kissed me for the first time, and it was... it was everything.

I didn't know then how much.

"You know," she says softly, and I strain to hear her words. "You wouldn't think anyone as exceptionally gifted as I am could be so ignorant. But it's the truth - my sole defense rests in the fact that I was still ignorant of a great many things."

"Like what?"

She blinks and looks at me briefly, before dropping her eyes to her lap and shaking her head. "Everything that matters it seems."

"Like what?" I ask again, pushing her for an answer.

She sighs, knowing I'm not going to let this one go. "Like what that kiss really meant. Like not realizing what sex with her would be like. Like not knowing how far Malcolm would go or what my father would do."

"Tell me."

"You need to understand something about the culture I come from," she says, meeting my eyes and waiting for me to nod my agreement. When she gets what she's looking for, she takes a deep breath and glances at her hands before returning to stare me in the eyes. Whatever she has to share is important enough to her that she wants to ensure I absorb the intent of her words. "On my planet, once a person reaches the age of majority and consent, they become sexually active. Interest is indicated by a kiss, and if it is returned and both parties agree, then sex follows as a matter of course. The idea is to gain experience with a multitude of partners before marriage so that you and your mate will have the knowledge and skill to make one another happy during your union. It is believed to make marriage partners more faithful to one another."

My eyes widen, but I refrain from making any comments. She's not looking for commentary and it's not my place to judge anyway. I nod slowly. "Okay. I'm with you so far."

"Right," she says with a sigh. "This behavior generally continues for two to five years - until betrothal is arranged. After that, we are celibate until the wedding night, at which time we pledge ourselves and our fidelity to our new mate."

"And how long does each liaison last... generally speaking?"

"Well, it depends on the people involved of course, but usually there are a few encounters before moving on to new associates. Most never last more than a few weeks; more than a month is considered long-term."

"Uh huh," I drawl slowly, rubbing my forehead in an effort to defeat the headache I can feel forming there. Seriously, who comes up with this stuff?? No wonder I've got a fubar of epic proportions on my hands now.

"I know you don't agree with it," she says softly, and I drop my hand to look at her again. "But until recently, it's worked for us."

"What happened recently to change that?"

"Eli - when I wasn't looking."

"Tell me."

When Eli kissed me, it was wonderful. She had obviously been taught by those with considerable experience on her planet. And I was thrilled to return it enthusiastically. I wanted her to know I thought we would be well-matched in the sexual arena. So imagine my surprise when after a single kiss, she walked us back to our quarters... and said good night.

I was confused. Had I done something wrong? Was I too inexperienced for her? I would have asked, but aside from the embarrassment and humiliation I felt, she had already turned out her light and rolled over to sleep. I was completely unwilling to degrade myself further by waking her to ask.

I would have set it aside as a fluke, except it happened again - every single night for the next two weeks. And every night, I tried to adjust my kiss to convey my desire to have sex with her. Things progressed - our make-out sessions grew quite heated, but they never moved beyond kissing. Finally, though, I grew frustrated and demanded she show me what I was doing wrong. She looked at me like I was crazy.

"Angel, you're not doing anything wrong."

"Then why don't you want to have sex with me, Eli??"

Her brow furrowed and she pursed her lips. "Who says I don't want to have sex with you, Angel?"

I slammed my clenched fists into the sides of my legs. "You do! You have every night for the last two weeks. So I'm obviously still doing something wrong!" glaring at her.

The lines on her forehead relaxed and her lips creased into a smile. "Angel, you're not doing anything wrong. I like kissing you. And I'm looking forward to making love with you as well. I didn't realize we were on a schedule."

I was flabbergasted. So I hadn't done anything wrong and she wanted sex with me as well. The fact that she called it love-making instead of sex was something I put down the differences in our cultures. I had no idea how true that was, but at the time I missed the importance of her words. I was too focused on the fact that sex with her was not only still a possibility, but a likelihood... and in the very near future if I was reading the signs correctly. To say I was excited was an understatement.

I met her eyes and realized that she was waiting for a response, and I frowned as I tried to remember what she'd said that might require one. Her brows furrowed and her lips parted to speak. Then it occurred to me what she was looking for and I clutched at her arm. "OH!" my mouth curling up in a smile, causing hers to follow in reflex. "Sorry - I was so happy to hear you'd like to have sex with me that I almost missed the rest. We're not on a schedule... except our own."

"That's good to know, Angel. Now c'mon... it's late and we've got a long day tomorrow."

"And an early start," I grumbled, making her chuckle.

"And an early start," she agreed.

"It was like that talk took the pressure off both of us and allowed us to move forward without the expectation of sex. I mean... we both knew we wanted it, and we were definitely looking forward to engaging in sexual activity together, but by putting it out there, it was as if it became less of a goal and more of an eventuality that we would get to in our time. We grew closer - which was an anomaly for me, but it was so welcome. Eli touched something within me.... I never knew...." She sighs and looks at me, willing me to understand what she can't seem to articulate.

"You'd never felt like that before?"

"Exactly!" she exclaims, pointing a finger in my direction. It's all I can do not to jerk away from her. "In my culture, feelings don't come until after betrothal or marriage... if they come at all - it keeps things from getting messy, you know?"

"I can see where that could certainly be for the best. But how do you keep from feeling?" She looks at me like she doesn't get what I'm asking and I sigh. She probably doesn't. "When you choose your sexual partners, how do you do so? Aren't there some kind of feelings involved? Like attraction or lust or desire?"

She looks at me like I'm stupid, and I guess by her standards I am. "Of course. But those are superficial feelings - things that can be sated in an encounter or two... something manageable."

"And what you feel for Eli isn't so transitory." I make a statement, and the look it garners me from her should burn me to ash.

"What I *felt* for Eli...."

"NO. You can lie to your daddy and your fiancé and every single person outside of this room if you think it's necessary to do so. But you don't get to lie to yourself or to me." She opens her mouth to make a rebuttal and I shake my head. "NO," I repeat. "Despite what you think, I'm not stupid."

"I never said...."

"You didn't have to," I cut her off. I take a deep breath. Now is not the time for me to lose whatever progress I've made. But before I can speak, she does.

"You're right - oh... not about thinking you're stupid. If I thought you were stupid, I never would have agreed to talk to you about this... even if it meant I went home tomorrow. But you deserve better than me lying to you, and lying to myself...." She shakes her head and gives me a tragic smile. "It hasn't been particularly successful for me."

"It never is," I agree. I wait a moment, but when she doesn't speak further, I prompt her. "So what happened?"

"We became lovers, and it was incredible."

"Tell me."

It was surprising when it finally happened and yet I felt as if I'd finally come home. It was one of our regular evenings - we'd eaten with a group of our friends and had a dance contest afterwards, which was one of the funniest activities we ever held in the bunker. Because let's face it, most of us were far too involved in our work to do more than shuffle our feet occasionally and hope we did it to the beat. Practice makes perfect, however, so we were marginally better than when we started - but it was still highly entertaining to watch any of us try to do complicated dance moves.

It was a night full of laughter, and after we had our turn, Eli and I left to take our evening stroll through the compound. There wasn't really anything notable about it... not really. We went through the gardens, and the scent of the flowers and the hum of bees was heady. She kissed me, and I wrapped myself up in her when I kissed her back. When she pulled away from me, she looked into my eyes for the longest moment, her gray eyes black in the shadows. She traced the skin on my face and gave me a tiny smile, then without a word, she pulled me out of the labs and headed towards our room.

She locked the door behind us when we stepped inside - something she had never done before due to her position in the community. The sound made me smile because I knew what it meant, and I was so ready to share that intimacy with her.

Her touch was slow and tentative at first, but I let her lead the private dance we had started together. She reached places in me I hadn't been aware of before, and when I touched her in return, I did my best to return the tenderness and pleasure she'd shown me. When our first encounter was over, she cried in my arms. And I discovered I was her first. That was so humbling, but it made me cherish the experience even more. It brought us even closer together... which for me was unusual. I didn't remember my first sexual encounter with any sort of fondness, but I felt protective towards her after hers.

And so we became more than sexual partners - we became lovers and it was wonderful... until I was removed from the underground portion of the project at Papa's request. Then everything went to hell in a hand basket.

"Do you know what he told the Committee?" I ask her when the silence goes on for too long. "Do you know how he was able to get you removed from the underground facility without jeopardizing your place in the project?"

She shakes her head. "I never asked. I was ambushed the moment I returned home and by the time things were over, I really didn't care."

I've never seen or heard such defeat in her before and I wonder how her father can believe he's doing what's best for her. What's best should never cause this kind of confusion or unhappiness. "Would you like to know?" I offer.

"Do you? Do you really know?"

I give her a lopsided smile. "I know many things. This is one I really do know."

She gives me a sardonic look. "Let me guess - he claimed it was something necessary to my position as Princess."

I nod my head, not surprised that she figured it out. "He did indeed. He refused to elaborate, and since the Committee doesn't actually have a claim to you until you are chosen as part of the final selection, they had no grounds to dispute his words." She nods but she doesn't speak. "Tell me what happened when you went home."

I managed a bare nod of my head towards the throne when I entered the room. I was still furious that I had been removed from my position - and from her - and I made no effort to hide my upset. I did have presence enough to note that Papa was scowling behind the beaming smile I could see; that Mama was nervous; and that Malcolm was present and wore the smuggest smirk I had ever seen on his face. I stood and waited, not at all happy to be home for whatever reason... especially since I could feel in my guts that I wasn't going to be happy by the end of this.

Papa began to welcome me effusively, and in my anger, I cut him off. "Don't patronize me, Papa. Simply tell me why you summoned me home so I can get back to work."

"And her?" he sneered. "I know what's been going on with you and that animal, Daughter." It was an odd sensation - I could feel the blood drain from my face even as my fury rose. "I could excuse your curiosity about sexual intimacy with someone not of your species - after all, it's not usual in our culture to be placed in such close proximity to someone so different and you're a scientist. Curiosity is part of your genetic make-up. I could even excuse the fact that she's a meat-eater and a warrior if you had adhered to the rules of engagement we utilize during sexual awakening and moved on after sating your curiosity. But despite knowing how things work in our society, you've been with the same individual for three months now. Obviously it is time to betroth you to your marriage partner."

"Papa!"

"NO!!" he roared. "This isn't a vote. You and Malcolm are hereby formally betrothed to one another! He will accompany you everywhere you go from now on. Because of the rules made by the Committee, you cannot be married to one another until you return from this project. Therefore the wedding will take place when you return from your current assignment. Until then, you are betrothed to one another and I expect you to behave thus!"

"Papa!!"

"NO, Arianna! I have spoken. My word is final!"

"We were both sent back to the bunker to continue our work. Malcolm announced the betrothal the moment we re-entered the compound. Eli looked devastated, but she didn't say a word. She simply left the common room. By the time I made it to the room we shared, my things were outside the door and it was locked against my entrance. She hasn't spoken to me since the day before I left for home."

"Is that all?"

"Is that all?" she laughs, though the sound is close to hysterical. "Isn't that enough?"

I take her hands and wait for her eyes to track to mine. "Arianna - Is. That. All?"

She takes a deep breath and shakes her head, but her eyes never leave mine. "I love her. I know I'm in love with her and I'd do anything to fix this. With her and with them."

I nod. This is what I've been waiting to hear. "Go to sleep. It's time for the Miracle Worker to do her magic."

"You can fix this?"

"I can give you a chance. Now go to sleep." She closes her eyes obediently and in mere moments slips into deeper sleep. I look at her enviously for a moment, then ease my hands from hers and standing. I cover her carefully and move towards the door. We've got work to do.

Chapter XI

I open the door and Caleb moves from the end of the hallway where he's been watching from for most of the night. Smoothly, the rest of the security contingent spreads out to keep everything covered while Caleb and I talk.

"Chief?"

I rub my eyes and and sigh. "How's everything out here, Caleb?"

"Quiet, Chief. Except for that little disturbance with Jacob and of course Arianna's little episode, it's been a fairly uneventful night."

I give him a wry look. "Yeah, that was enough commotion to last me for a while. Thanks."

Caleb gives me a sympathetic look. This job has been a logistical nightmare among other things, and this bump in the road is just the pinnacle of my frustration at this point. I rub my burning eyes again and he clears his throat to speak. "How is she, Chief?"

"Physically, she just needs some rest." He glances at his watch and gives me a smirk. "Yeah, yeah - we could all use some rest right about now. Too bad there's no time for it at the moment." I sigh. "Otherwise... well, I've got to work pretty quickly to straighten this out before the Committee makes its final selections."

"Can you make it right?"

"With enough time, I can give them the chance to fix it." I yawn and stretch, smiling when Caleb clenches his jaw against the same thing. "Sorry," I mumble when I finish; he just glares at me... then shrugs.

"S'okay, Chief. I'm not really sure how you're still awake myself."

I snort. "Years of practice being a mom. But I'm going to go get a shower and see if I can wake up a little bit before I have to meet with The Powers That Be."

"You want me to have room service send something up?"

"Rocket fuel," I joke, drawing the grin I expected.

"I'll get right on it, Chief."

I nod. "I should be back out here in fifteen minutes or so."

"I'll make sure the coffee's hot and the biscuits are fresh."

"You're a good man, Caleb."

He laughs and reaches for his comm unit. "Remember that when raise reviews roll around, will ya?"

"Do my best." I push the door open and step back across the threshold. "I'll be back." Then I close the door before Caleb can offer a smart remark. I glance at the bed long enough to notice that Arianna hasn't moved. I move to the closet and grab some clean clothes, then walk into the bathroom and close the door behind me.

I feel better when I step out of the bathroom - at least I'm awake and somewhat reinvigorated, though there's no guarantee how long that will last. Arianna still hasn't moved and I ease the door closed behind me when I exit the room. Caleb is as good as his word, and there is a stocked room service cart waiting for me. I pour myself a cup of coffee and prepare it to my liking, sucking it down as though it's nectar. The team remains in their assigned places and I savor the bit of calm before the storm.

When the first cup is history and the second cup is made, I lean back against the closest wall and let my eyes wander the long corridor. Up and down its length and at the corners of the intersections, my security team stands carefully vigilant. Caleb arches his brow at me and my shoulders drop even as I nod slightly. He wouldn't be asking if something hadn't come up.

"Caleb?"

"Chief, we got word about five minutes ago that Arianna's father intends to be here this morning to lodge a formal complaint against you for removing Malcolm from the premises. He claims you have neither the right nor the jurisdiction to take such action."

The smile I give him makes him flinch instinctively even as he smirks. Caleb recognizes that particular smile and he knows it bodes no good for any number of people and things.

"I welcome him to try."

"You know something more...?"

"I know many things. But mostly I know he doesn't have nearly the leverage that I do, and he's not as powerful as he likes to think he is."

"I'm glad you're on their side."

I cock my head. "I would still like to talk to the other party involved, but I can shut him down without knowing their side. It helps that the Committee is looking for a way to rid itself of Fernando without losing Arianna's knowledge or work in the process."

"You think she would go against him?"

"If it gave her the chance to get rid of Malcolm and reclaim the one she truly wants... in a heartbeat," I confirm. "She's not particularly enamored with a lot of her realities right now and her father is at the heart of her biggest conflict." I release a deep breath. "What time?" Caleb cocks his head in question and I arch my eyebrow in response. "What time is Daddy Dearest expected?"

Caleb looks at his watch. "His shuttle should touch down in three hours. We got word to postpone the interviews by an hour this morning, so the Committee will see him at the beginning of their business day and have allotted an hour for him to make his argument." He gives me a knowing smile. "Are you going to be there?"

I smirk and nod. "Wouldn't miss it." I swallow my last mouthful of coffee, grimacing at the bitter, lukewarm taste. I set the cup back on the cart and grab a danish, knowing I will need the fortification if I'm not going to get any sleep in the near future. And thanks to Arianna's father, I'm pretty sure sleep is going to be nothing but a pipe dream for a while longer as far as I'm concerned.

Caleb looks at me for a long moment, then pours me a glass of milk. I nod my thanks, chugging it like I haven't had sustenance in days. Caleb takes the empty glass from my hand and refills it as I finish chewing and swallowing the remainder of my breakfast. It isn't the first meal we've had on the run, and it won't be the last. In our line of work, it's as common as not. I take the second glass of milk from him and drain it a little slower than the first, but still quickly enough to leave a moustache. Caleb chuckles and offers me a napkin. I stick my tongue out at him, then wipe it away with a smile. Leaving it would certainly not make the impression I need it to make.

"Better?" I ask. He nods.

"Much. How do you feel?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. "Like I'm getting too old for this shit," I reply honestly. "I thought I gave up all-nighters when my kids moved out of the house."

Caleb laughs, not even trying to contain himself. "You might have, Mary... if you hadn't invited another hundred into your life once your kids were out on their own."

I face palm. "What was I thinking?" I mutter. He smirks.

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

I snort. "Not if you'd like to see your bed anytime soon." I look around and sigh. "I'm going to go get my Pad and review a few things before these kids start stirring. Let me know if anything happens I need to be aware of in the meantime."

"You'll be in there?" nodding towards my room.

"Yes. It's not like there's anywhere else much for me to go, and I'm not going to invade her privacy and use her room just because she fell asleep in my bed. It's not like I read out loud or anything."

Caleb grins. "Okay, just... keep the monitor close, will you? I'd rather not disturb her if we need you, and given the way the past few hours have gone, I wouldn't be surprised to hear from at least a few more of these kids like we did from Jacob earlier - concerned about her in spite of themselves. I know they still care."

I feel my gaze sharpen in the blink after his words and he does an admirable job containing his reaction. It's nothing more than a widening of his own, but it's there. I frown. "What have you heard?"

"Little things," he admits. "Things that didn't make much sense on their own - just random bits of information. But with what Jacob said tonight...."

"You heard that, did you?"

"You know I did. I was never out of listening range."

I nod - it's true. No one else would have believed Caleb was able to overhear our conversation, but I knew for a fact his hearing was superior to humans. He was among the best of his kind. "So what else have you heard?"

"There are a few who are angry at her, but most of those that are left are more hurt by her disregard of them than they are angry. The smart ones know that something happened when she went home, and they believe it was done against her will. But since her planet is not welcoming of outsiders as visitors, they really can't imagine what it could be. And since she's never shared much about her home world, there's just a lot of rampant speculation."

"Is any of it close?"

"Surprisingly, yes." He nods his head towards one end of the hall. "Jacob has been particularly insightful about possibilities."

"And the rest?"

"Of those we expect to make the Alpha team with her?" I nod. "Several agree with him; a couple have offered other viable options; a couple want to write her off as a snot; and one...."

"Yes?" I prod when he doesn't continue. He sighs.

"One hasn't said a word - not to offer an opinion or to participate in a discussion. When the subject comes up, she leaves the room. No excuses - she simply walks out. She's actually caused them to stop talking about it when she's around... mostly because the two or three who think Arianna is just being a snot told the rest she didn't need to be hurt anymore and their conversation was doing just that."

My eyebrows fly into my hairline. "When did that happen and why am I just now hearing about it?"

"About a week ago. And because I just now put the pieces together... mostly because of Jacob's actions tonight."

"I'm not following."

"I only got bits of that original conversation - the one where they asked the group to please stop talking about Arianna. But after what Jacob said to you tonight - they still care... even the ones who are angry or discontent with Arianna. They want things to go back to what it was before Malcolm was dropped into the middle of their lives, so to speak - when they were all still a family."

"Even Eli?"

"She verified it?" He glances at the door. "She actually told you?"

"She told me enough."

Caleb shakes his head. "She's hard to get a read on, Chief. Keeps her own counsel and minds her business... plays things real close to the vest, if you know what I mean."

"My father was a Marine, Caleb. I do indeed."

He clears his throat. "I guess you would at that." He looks around the corridor, noting that the agents are beginning to position themselves for the beginning of the day, and glances at his watch again. "I better get moving, Chief. The kids are going to start waking up soon and we need to be ready for anything today."

"I trust your gut, Caleb. I'll have the monitor nearby... just in case."

"Thanks, Chief."

I nod and re-enter my room, not at all surprised to see Arianna hasn't stirred a bit. Aside from being up well beyond normal curfew, that kind of emotional confession tends to be draining. She could very well sleep until tomorrow morning.

I slip off my shoes by the door and padded silently to the bedside table where the Pad still rests. I slip my glasses on my face, then pick the Pad and the monitor up quietly and turn off the small lamp, letting my eyes adjust before I move to the rather uncomfortable chair that sits at an angle to the bed. I sit down carefully, curling my legs up under me and placing the monitor on the nearby table. Then I unlock the encrypted files I'll need later for the meeting in front of the Committee with Arianna's father, and settle down to read.

Some time passes before the monitor crackles to life, and my attention is instantly removed from my files as I wait for Caleb to speak. Instead, he taps out a code he knows I'll understand, and without hesitation, I lock the files on the Pad and shift so my feet are touching the floor.

I curse my own stupidity - while curling up in this chair is the most comfortable way to sit, it is absolutely murder on my old bones when I have to unfold and actually pretend to some semblance of mobility.

I muffle the groan I feel clambering in the back of my throat as I shift forward, entirely conscious of the woman still sleeping in the bed across the room. I pick up the monitor and click back a brief

missive to Caleb, letting him know I got his message and I will be there as quickly as I can restore the circulation to my lower extremities.

I do a few stretches, sighing unconsciously when I feel the blood rushing towards my feet. When the tingling subsides, I slowly stand and shuffle towards the door, knowing the movement will do more to promote blood flow than anything else. I slide into my shoes with a grimace, then realize I left the locked Pad on the table. I walk back the other way, glad that my steps are getting faster even if my brain cells are not. I grab the Pad and head to the door, dropping the 'Do Not Disturb' sign in place before closing the door softly behind me.

I exit, fully expecting to see Caleb waiting for me. What I get is something totally different.

They are lined up like pins behind her, offering her their support while acceding to her authority as their chosen leader. In front of me stand fourteen of the fifteen scientists I expect to be selected as the Alpha team on this project. The fifteenth is still sleeping in the room I have just left. I tuck the Pad under my elbow and lean against the door, casually crossing my ankles. I'm not going to make this confrontational if I can avoid it.

"Where is she?" the blonde standing in front of the rest asks, her gray eyes boring into mine. I don't move my gaze from her but I can see Jacob just barely shake his head in my peripheral vision. Before I can speak, she continues. "She missed breakfast - she's never missed breakfast with us... even when...." She pauses but never drops her scrutiny. "So where is she?"

I jerk my thumb at the door closed securely behind me. "She was unwell last evening. I've been up most of the night making sure she recovers. She simply needs to rest now."

"You're certain?" she asks cautiously.

"I am. I had Malcolm removed for being disruptive," I watch as every one of them sighs in relief, "and brought her to my room where she fell asleep after a bit of care. She should be able to return to the interview process tomorrow as scheduled."

Eli stares at me hard for another long moment, before turning around and facing her teammates. I watch as she meets each set of eyes, waiting for a signal from all of them before turning back to me with a nod. "Thank you, Ms. Wellesly. We were... concerned."

"I can appreciate that. Thank you for coming to me."

"Mary?" This from Jacob and I turn in his direction with an arched brow. "If Arianna is not doing interviews today, does that mean the rest of us have the day off as well?" giving me a cocky smirk that reminds me so much of my Marine son.

"You'd like to think it works that way, wouldn't you, Jacob?" I ask with a smile as I push off the door. "Unfortunately, it doesn't. Each of you still have your interviews to complete, though I've been informed they've been pushed back an hour to accommodate some other business the Committee needs to address. So you've got an extra hour to rest if you'd like. The team will make sure you're up and ready to go at the appropriate time."

"Awesome!" Jacob exclaims and I wonder how he could possibly be from this planet using such antiquated expressions. On the other hand, it does seem to suit him, so I just smile. He looks around at his companions. "Anyone up for a game of *Nuke 'em Duke 'em?*"

The boys almost as a singular entity head towards Jacob's room. By unspoken consent, the girls turn and head in the opposite direction. Only Eli remains separate. Before I can speak, she looks at me - her eyes sad and her smile melancholy.

"Hey Eli!" one of the other girls shouts down the hallway. "You coming?"

She shakes her head and waves them on. "Not now. Maybe later." They nod as a group, as though they'd been expecting that sort of reply from her. Then they continue on their way, disappearing into one of the rooms at the end of the corridor. She waits until she hears the door close behind them, then turns to me.

"Can we talk?"

I nod and follow her down the hall.

Epilogue

Her room, like mine, is pretty standard for a luxury hotel - bed, chairs, table, nice sized closet and a decent bathroom. The only personal property I can see from my place at the door is her Pad that is on the bedside table much like mine had been. Otherwise, you wouldn't know someone was occupying the room unless you opened the closet door.

She shuts the door behind me and motions me further into the room. I feel like an intruder, and if it wasn't for the fact that Arianna was asleep in my room, I would have insisted we meet there instead. These kids deserve whatever privacy can be afforded them, and this to me is an unnecessary invasion... even if she did invite me. She chuckles as she walks around me and drops onto the end of the bed.

"You can come in, you know. I did ask you to be here."

"Right... sorry. It's been a long night."

"Yeah... about that. What's really going on?" I tilt my head in question and she stares at me for a long moment, trying to gauge my honesty. "Is Arianna really sick?"

"Arianna was unwell last evening, but I think we've resolved that issue. A little rest should take care of any lingering problems."

"I don't believe you." She holds up her hands. "Oh... I believe Arianna is still sleeping, and that she's doing so in your room for whatever reason. I even believe that you removed the ass known as Malcolm. But something about this whole story is off, and I want to know the truth."

"Why?"

She blinks at me - gray eyes showing her confusion as blonde eyebrows crease her forehead. "Excuse me?"

"Why do you think something is off? Why do you want to know the truth? From what I have gathered in my observations of you two, you're not friends. You're barely colleagues at this point." Truth as far as it went. But my actual observations and what I know as truth are two completely different things. "So why do you care? Shouldn't it be enough that she's being taken care of and should resume her normal schedule again tomorrow?"

She glares at me, but the sadness in her expression undermines whatever threat she is trying to convey. Finally, she speaks softly - so low I almost miss her words.

"Can I trust you?"

"Eli, I know things about each of you that you probably don't know yourselves - things I haven't shared with anyone and never will. But only you can decide if I'm worthy of your trust or not."

She stares at me again, studying me, and I keep my eyes on hers, allowing her scrutiny. Eventually she nods to herself as though she's reached a decision. "I'll make a deal with you," she says at last in her soft, husky voice. "I'll tell you why, but then you have to level with me. You have to tell me the truth about Arianna."

I can see the clock behind her and realize it's going to be a bit of a race to get this done before I need to go meet with the Committee. But at least I will be going armed with both sides of the story. I nod.

"All right, Princess. You've got yourself a deal." The look of startlement on her face means I've got her attention. This is turning out to be a hell of a night.

END PART ONE

12/11-01/12