

Force Of Nature

Beth Ellis

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1

Genevieve inhaled deeply, squaring her shoulders as she approached Chad's table, projecting confidence from every inch of her petite 5' frame. His crude insults wouldn't get to her—not today. She marched up to his table, where he sat surrounded by his equally obnoxious friends.

She stopped just outside Chad's reach, her face hardening into a cold mask as she spoke through gritted teeth. "What do you want for lunch?"

"Are you on the menu, sweet thing?" Chad sneered as his leering gaze raked over her, leaving an icy trail of disgust in its wake.

Refusing to flinch, she straightened her spine despite the urge to recoil. With a swift spin, she turned her back on him. "I'll return when you're ready to order properly."

"Wait... hold on... come back... we're ready," Chad called after her.

Ignoring his pleas, she couldn't help but smile as she

approached her favorite customers. The Navy SEALs stationed in Virginia Beach always lifted her spirits. Her breath caught every time they entered the restaurant; their movements filled that effortless confidence and purpose she admired.

Her gaze drifted over the group, but it landed on Mac as always. Something about him drew her in every time—maybe the rugged way he carried himself or those piercing blue eyes that seemed to see straight through her. He had a magnetic pull she couldn't resist, no matter how hard she tried. She fought the urge to stare... or drool.

They all spoke at once. "Hey, Genevieve. How's it going?" "What's up, Genevieve?" "Our favorite server is back."

"Here's a pitcher of water, iced tea, and a thousand napkins. Now, what'll you have to eat?"

As usual, this boisterous group of military men ordered a ridiculous amount of food while endlessly and mercilessly teasing each other.

"Hey, Mac, you were slow during this morning's run. Stay

up late painting your nails?"

"Naw... your mom took forever to wash my hair."

"I'd like his sister to wash my hair."

"Don't talk about my mother or sister, assholes."

"Hey, everyone shut up so Genevieve can take our orders."

She chuckled at their antics, enjoying their camaraderie. She could stand there forever, but she had other tables to serve.

"Hey, baby. Why aren't you waiting on me?" Chad's voice cut through her all-too-brief reprieve.

Because you're a pig. She stopped beside Chad's table, sidestepping his outstretched hand.

Chad jumped up, knocking over a beer bottle as his hand clamped onto her arm like a vice. "What's wrong, baby?"

"I am NOT your baby!" she snapped. She yanked her arm from his clammy grasp and marched away, her long blond ponytail swinging madly.

“You could be if you played your cards right. You’re just my type.”

What?

She spun around, ready to unleash her fury on him. His type? Not if he were the last man on Earth. Before she could tear into him, Chad’s next move stopped her cold. He grabbed his crotch, his twisted smile oozing arrogance. “And I’ve got what it takes to put a smile on your face.”

A wave of nausea rolled through her, but she swallowed it down, determined to put him in his place—preferably on another planet. She approached him calmly, stopping inches from his face. Squelching her gag reflex, she closed her eyes. “Tell me the color of my eyes, and I’ll consider giving you a chance to make me smile.”

She heard him shuffle and squirm. “Um... uh... they’re... they’re brown?”

“Wrong.” She opened her eyes. “If you’d stop staring at my chest and actually look at my face, you’d know.”

His friends laughed derisively. Chad, red-faced, scowled first at them and then at her. “Stuck up bitch. You got problems.”

She was in deep trouble now. By confronting Chad, she’d publicly punctured his ego—poked the bear, spit into the wind. Her brief flare of bravery? Extinguished. As she walked away, dread coiled tighter in her stomach with every step.

The lunch shift dragged on, each minute feeling like an hour. She gave Chad’s table a wide berth, careful not to make eye contact. But his vulgar comments became louder with each beer he consumed. “With an ass like that, who gives a damn about her eyes?”

Her blood boiled. Who the hell did he think he was? Did he even know what sexual harassment was?

“I sure would like her to service me... I mean, serve me.” Chad grotesquely mimicked a blow job with his hands and mouth.

That’s it! She wouldn’t take any more. A simmering anger ignited, burning away her usual passiveness. She forgot where she was, who she was. “You...may...not...speak to me

like that.” Her voice shook, but her hand was steady as she picked up a glass of beer and dumped it in his lap.

Oh my gosh. What had she done? Bud would fire her.

Chaos erupted.

Chad shot up, hands fisted, face contorted in rage. “Fuck you, bitch.”

Chairs scraped across the floor, beer bottles crashed, and deep voices shouted threats as combat-booted feet pounded toward her.

Chad lunged at her, his fist arcing through the air.

But before it connected, a towering figure in a camouflage uniform intercepted it. In the next split second, he had Chad pinned face down on the beer-soaked floor, his knee grinding into the small of Chad’s back. “You will not speak to her like that again. Understood?” The deadly menace in his voice conveyed the unspoken “or else.”

“Get off me, motherfucker,” Chad gasped. “Fuck, she’s just a waitress.”

“She’s a hard-working woman. Show some respect. Got it?” He twisted Chad’s arm higher, and Chad yelped in pain

“Fine. Whatever. Now get the fuck off me.” Chad stood, his face flushed blood red, and swiped his hand across the front of his soiled shirt with tight, jerky movements. “You’re gonna be sorry for this, Mr. Big, bad Navy SEAL.” His threat dripped with jealous contempt as he stomped to his table, muttering curses, threw down a wad of money, and stormed off.

Genevieve stood frozen, eyes wide, hand over her mouth covering a silent scream.

“You okay, Genevieve?” The SEAL gently touched her shoulder. “Did he hurt you?”

She blinked, dazed, looking around before focusing on the man’s face—her favorite customer, now her hero. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced her addled brain to remember his name. “Mac, right?”

“My name is Michael. Mac’s my Navy nickname.”

She fiddled with her apron, her fingers twisting nervously.

“I am so fired.” Bud would never let this slide.

“Chad had it coming. Bud will understand.”

“I doubt it.” She shook her head, a weary resignation settling over her shoulders as she shuffled away, her gaze sweeping the restaurant. The room buzzed with grins and approving nods while Chad’s friend scowled. Beside an open-mouthed Bud, the other waitress gave her two enthusiastic thumbs up.

Her stomach churned as she swiped her damp palms across her apron. Confronting Chad hadn’t generated pride; instead, it left a greasy knot in her stomach.

2

Michael stood ready for a fight, every muscle taut, his fists clenched so tightly that his knuckles blanched. With each deep breath, the stench of stale beer filled his nostrils as he fought to steady his pulse and rein in his anger. As he scanned the bar for more trouble, his team stood behind him, silent as death.

A hot surge of rage flared in Michael as Chad's insults escalated. His gut twisted as he watched Genevieve's forced calm crack—fear flickering in her eyes, her shoulders hunching, her jaw clenching. Michael had to protect her; there was no other choice. Chad needed to understand that bullying anyone, especially a woman, was unacceptable. Michael recognized Genevieve's vulnerability—he knew that crushing powerlessness all too well. Stand by and do nothing? Not an option.

Genevieve got back to waiting tables, her smile a little shaky, but she held it together. Michael's shoulders slowly relaxed as he watched her regain composure, and the scowl that had hardened his face began to fade.

He and his team set the chairs right and straightened the

tables as they made their way back to their own. The bar buzzed excitedly about the “fight,” but Michael and his men finished lunch in a heavy silence. Tank, his best friend, clapped his back with a heavy hand, and a few teammates grunted their approval, but no one talked about the incident.

But Michael was far from relieved. He’d seen the look Chad gave him on his way out—eyes narrowed, a smug smirk on his face. Michael’s muscles tensed all over again. This wasn’t over—not by a long shot.

On his way out, Michael approached the bar where Bud poured beers. “Sorry about the mess back there.”

“What the hell happened?”

“Chad’s been hassling Genevieve all afternoon. He needed to be taught some manners.”

Bud sighed in resignation. “Not the first fight here and probably won’t be the last. Although fights typically happen on Friday nights, not Wednesday afternoons.”

“Genevieve is worried that you’re gonna fire her.”

“I’ll talk to her. Next time, she’d better report harassment instead of dumping beer on my customers.”

Satisfied that he’d smoothed things over for Genevieve, Michael waited by the bar until he caught her attention and beckoned her over. She stood small before him, shoulders slumped, arms crossed tightly against her stomach as if trying to shrink into herself.

“Are you okay?” Michael asked, concern evident in his voice.

“I can’t lose this job,” she said, her voice tinged with desperation as she bowed her head.

“Bud may give you a harassment refresher, but he won’t fire you.” His reassuring smile went unnoticed as he spoke to the top of her head.

“I hope you’re right,” she muttered, her gaze still fixed on the floor. “I could’ve and should’ve handled that whole situation better.”

Amazed at himself—how much he cared about what

happened to her—he lifted her chin with the tip of his finger and gazed into her watery eyes. “Chad’s an asshole and deserved everything he got.”

“You think so?”

Her hopeful tone filled him with pride. He’d done that. “And now every guy in this bar knows not to mess with you.”

“That’s me, one badass waitress.” Her defiant statement contradicted her trembling lips. She straightened her shoulders, smiled, and wiped away a tear before it could fall.

He scanned her face slowly before speaking again. “My team leaves tomorrow on deployment. We won’t be back in Virginia Beach for a few months, but I’d like to take you to dinner when I get home.”

“You would?”

“I know your eyes are crystal blue, and I’d like to see them in candlelight.”

“You would?”

Seeing the flicker of hope in her eyes, he knew there was no backing out—he was hooked. “Yes, I would.”

“Oh... really?”

He smiled at her flustered confusion. She was part kitten, part lioness, and he wanted her claws digging into his back as she moved beneath him. Surprise flickered through him as he wondered what made her happy, an unusual thought for a man who lived for one-night stands and didn’t do dinners, dates, or relationships. What about her made him think a change might be good?

What an idiot. Genevieve slumped against the steering wheel as her car idled in the driveway, the burning sting of humiliation washing through her. She should’ve said something—anything—but ‘You would?’ She cringed, reliving every awkward response.

By the time she stepped through her front door, she’d already accepted that she might never hear from Michael again. Why did he have to be so perfect? What could someone like him

possibly see in someone like her, a waitress and janitor? He was the kind of man everyone wanted in their lifeboat; she'd be the one they'd throw to the circling sharks.

She spotted her wedding photo on the bookshelves and traced one finger over the image of her beautiful wedding bouquet—a romantic clutch of orange tulips tied with a white ribbon. *Odd. I don't remember those flowers.* Perversely, she clearly recalled the clump of wilted tulips the police handed her with her husband's wallet and car keys. The faint orange tinge clinging hideously to the dying petals was forever seared into her memory.

Her vision blurred as she set the photo back in place, the first tear slipping down her cheek. She shuffled towards her bedroom, her young body heavy with weariness.

Although exhausted, Genevieve tossed in bed, the sheets tangling around her legs as her mind buzzed with thoughts of Michael. Part of her longed for his call, but another feared what it could lead to. She rolled over, pulled the blanket tight around her, and tried to squash her hope, convincing herself it was better if he

didn't call.

Chad's sneering face flashed through her mind as she began to drift off, more threatening than ever. He was a restaurant regular; there was no avoiding him. What would he do the next time they crossed paths? Her pulse sped up, a cold fear settling in. She couldn't shake the feeling that this was only the beginning. How far would he take it?

Would her torment escalate into something worse?

3

One Year later

Genevieve glanced at the clock and sighed. Friday night, the one night she had sworn to herself would be hers. Yet, here she was, tying on her apron for another shift at Buds. She rubbed the exhaustion from her eyes, her entire body aching from a week that seemed to stretch forever. She pasted on a smile she hoped looked genuine but felt paper-thin.

Genevieve wove through the crowd, careful not to trip on the worn, yellowed tile floors. She sidestepped a pair of guys eyeing a group of women at the bar, the women's laughter too loud, too eager. During the week, Buds had the easy, laid-back charm of a family joint—military regulars shared stories, and law enforcement sipped coffee with their meals. But Friday and Saturday nights? Buds turned into a rowdy, booze-filled hookup scene. Men were on the hunt and the women? They were ready to be found.

An hour into her shift, Genevieve found herself in chaos. Her feet ached, her ears rang, and her head throbbed. She regretted

not wearing steel-toed boots for the millionth time as she pushed through the crowd of testosterone-fueled men and overeager women.

As she leaned forward to take a drink order, a customer rudely pushed past her, sending the beer bottles teetering dangerously on her tray. She could only watch in paralyzed horror as the bottles crashed to the floor, shattering on impact and showering nearby customers with dregs of warm, sticky beer.

“Eek!” A woman’s shriek pierced the air. “You stupid waitress. Look what you’ve done to my dress.”

Genevieve’s chest tightened, her voice cracking as she stumbled over her words. “I’m so sorry. I was pushed. I’ll get towels.”

“Towels won’t help. You are so incompetent.”

Each word slapped her, leaving Genevieve’s cheeks burning with humiliation. She scrambled to pick up the glass shards from the wet, grimy floor when a sharp pain cut through her right hand. She stood, confused, blood flowing from a jagged

cut on her hand. Just what she needed on this wretched night.

A man's large hand pressed napkins against the cut, his voice rumbling in her ear. "Here, let me help you. This will help stop the bleeding."

His warm hand steadied her shaking fingers, and his deep, soothing voice sent a wave of calm washing over her. Her breath hitched as she looked up, the words of thanks dying on her lips. *Michael?* Her heartbeat pounded in her ears as she stared at the man who had ghosted her a year ago. Now, he stood before her, his gentle touch a sharp contrast to the harshness of his absence.

"Are you okay?" Michael asked, tenderness in his voice.

The woman, incensed at losing his attention, shrieked, "Michael, I need your help. My dress is ruined."

"Wait, one. This woman's hand is cut." He took Genevieve's uninjured hand and led her to the back of the bar. "Let's find the first aid kit."

Genevieve's thoughts scrambled as she trailed behind him, struggling to believe he wanted to take care of her. He

signaled to Bud, who guided them to the office, unlocked the door, and located the first aid kit. Michael gently cleaned the wound with an antiseptic wipe, efficiently wrapped her hand in gauze, and secured it with surgical tape.

As he cleaned her cut, her eyes watched his face, tracing the angle of his jaw and the curve of his lips. She'd almost forgotten how stunning he was—too stunning, especially after a year apart. The brush of his fingers sent a spark along her skin, leaving her reeling emotionally.

“I bet your hand is throbbing,” he said gently. “Do you want some aspirin?”

She felt no pain. Her focus narrowed to the warmth of his touch and the scent of his skin. She remembered their last time together, after the fight at Bud's. His eyes had locked onto hers, steady and intense, making her feel like the only person in the room. His voice calmed her while everything else spiraled out of control. Her pulse quickened like before—the same shiver down her spine, the same electric current shooting straight to her core. Torn between the hurt of his absence and the pull of desire, she

wondered: Could she trust him again? Could she trust herself?

“Earth to Genevieve. Do you need aspirin?”

“Uh, no. It’s not bad.” She ducked her head, blurting out the question that had nagged at her for twelve long months.

“Where have you been?” *Ghaack*. She sounded inane.

“I was on a year-long deployment.”

A year. Of course. That explained the silence—no calls, no texts—nothing. “You could’ve mentioned it,” she huffed.

He showed good sense by looking apologetic. “Yeah, I should have. Sorry.”

“I’ve got to get back to work. Thanks for taking care of my hand.” Heat crept up her neck as she fiddled with her apron, unable to meet his eyes.

Michael’s hand covered her knee, stopping her. “I looked for you on Wednesday. Bud told me you stayed home for a repairman. I didn’t know you worked Friday nights.”

“I don’t. I’m just doing Bud a favor and filling in tonight.”

He asked Bud about me. Hope fluttered in her belly. His hand on her knee sent sparks of excitement through her, and she had to stop herself from burying her face in his chest.

“Any more problems with Chad?”

Chad? Who was Chad again? Her befuddled brain finally clicked. Chad, the creep who made her shifts at Buds a living nightmare. A shudder rippled through her at the unwanted memory of Chad’s sneer, but she forced her lips into a tight smile, willing her hands to stay steady. “He still comes for lunch, but he’s mostly well-behaved,” she fibbed, trying to sound calm. She didn’t want to talk or even think about Chad right now—not when she was almost in Michael’s arms.

Michael frowned, his eyes searching hers as if trying to discern the truth of her words. Seemingly satisfied, a smile crossed his face. “I’d still like to have that candlelight dinner with you.”

“You would?” The words slipped out before she could catch them. She couldn’t believe she’d said that... again. Her heart raced, and her face flushed.

“Can I have your number?”

“I’m not dating right now,” she whispered, avoiding his gaze as she hurried towards the door. Disconcerted by his attention and her physical reactions, she didn’t trust herself to stay.

Had she missed her chance?

Surprised by her sudden departure, Michael returned to his team's table, surrounded by young women vying for attention. Almost as soon as he sat down, a woman pressed her breasts against his shoulder and whispered in his ear. “Hi. My name is Tiffani. May I join you?”

Her perfume enveloped him in a suffocating cloud, its sharp, overpowering scent wrinkling his nose. “Not tonight, honey.”

“Maybe some other time?”

He almost gagged the cloying sweetness in her voice. “Yeah, sure. Come find me another night.”

Tank, his best friend, with a petite blonde on his lap, commented, “Not like you to turn down an invitation.”

“I’ve got my eye on someone.” His gaze lingered on Genevieve, following the graceful sway of her hips as she moved through the crowd. Even when she wasn’t trying, she had him hooked. He wanted her beside him, under him, over him. He imagined kissing the tender spot below her ear, licking her neck, and sucking on her nipples.

But it wasn’t just lust. An unaccustomed need stirred deep in his chest, pulling him toward her. He wanted her to smile at him, spend time with him—desire him as much as he desired her. But more than that, he wanted her to trust him.

“She’s watching you too,” observed Tank.

“I know. That’s a good sign.”

“She scowls every time a woman gets near you.”

Michael grinned. “That’s an even better sign.”

“I’ve never seen you move so slowly to claim a woman.”

“I don’t intend to claim her. Just take her to dinner and get to know her.”

Michael could feel Tank’s astonishment. What was he doing? He shouldn’t be thinking like this, but here he was, wanting her in every possible way.

“This should be interesting.” Tank’s laughter held equal parts amusement and disbelief.

Michael ignored Tank and continued to watch Genevieve work. Yes, he definitely needed to get to know her. As for a subdued Chad? He didn’t buy it for a second. The slight tremor in her voice said otherwise. Something was off, and he was determined to get to the truth—a truth that felt important, perhaps even vital.

Genevieve limped slowly towards her truck at 2 AM, cradling her bandaged hand against her chest. Michael scooted lower in the driver’s seat of his Jeep, anticipating the moment she found his note tucked under her windshield wiper. He grinned when she

eagerly grabbed the note and clutched it to her chest, and gave himself a mental high-five.

That was the way to attract this skittish woman.

4

Genevieve walked along Chesapeake Bay Beach, each step sinking her feet deeper into the wet sand. Gentle waves lapped against the shore as gulls cried overhead while crabs scurried in and out of their sandy burrows. Genevieve breathed in the salty tang in the air, the serene tranquility a far cry from the crowded, tourist-filled oceanfront. Here, dogs played in the distance, and families relaxed under colorful umbrellas—no excitement, just peace.

Genevieve giggled as waves washed over her feet. She kicked at the water, cold sprays hitting her legs, and gasped in delight. Tilting her head back, she let the warm spring sunshine bathe her face. A bright, spontaneous laugh escaped her lips. Michael still wanted to go out with her. *Her... shark bait.* Last night's note had made that very clear.

She kicked at the water again, her chest tight with both excitement and fear. Was she ready to date? Ready for what might come next? Most importantly, could she risk opening her heart again, knowing what it felt like to lose everything?

As she wrestled with her fears, her gaze drifted down the beach. Up ahead, a lively group enjoyed the warm afternoon. Colorful umbrellas, beach chairs, and coolers dotted the area, and she timed her steps to the rhythm of the music. Laughter and good-natured arguments from a volleyball game grew louder. She couldn't help but stare; she'd always yearned for the camaraderie and shared joy of a close-knit group of friends.

Out of nowhere, the volleyball struck the back of her head, sending her tumbling to the sand. A shadow loomed over her, and a warm hand touched her shoulder as she gasped for breath. A deep voice broke through her daze.

“Are you okay?”

She turned her head and stared straight into Michael's blue eyes.

“Genevieve? It's you.” He stepped closer, surprise evident. “That ball hit you hard. Let me help you up.” He reached out his large hand, gently helping her stand.

“I'm okay. Just startled.” And dumbstruck. The shock of

running into Michael twice in twelve hours was beyond anything she could have imagined.

“Are you dizzy? Just stand there and get your balance back.” He trotted off to retrieve the volleyball.

Oh my gosh. Her gaze trailed down his body as he jogged towards her, her breath catching in her throat as her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. She couldn’t look away from the sun glistening off his broad shoulders and chiseled abs, perfectly showcased by his low-riding board shorts.

Her gaze lingered on the dark curls disappearing beneath his bathing suit, and for a split second, an unbidden, unnerving thought skipped across her brain—*God, I want to touch him.* Heat bloomed between her legs as her fingers itched to snag his waistband, pull him close, and trace that happy trail with her tongue. Heat crept up her neck as her core pulsed. She quickly averted her gaze and focused on the sand, the water, the distant horizon—anywhere but on Michael.

“How’s your hand today?” he asked, his concern evident.

“It hurts less than my head.” She chuckled at her quip.

“I’m sorry about the ball-to-the-head thing. Good thing it was you who got hit in the head... I mean... good to see you again.” He flashed a grin, clearly pleased with himself despite stumbling over his words.

Genevieve planted her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes, giving him a sharp look. look. She decided to let him off the hook. “I understand what you mean,” she said, laughing.

Visibly relieved, he asked in a rush, “Wanna come have a beer with me and my friends?”

“I’d love to, but I have to prepare for dinner with a friend.” She cast a wistful glance toward his friends and silently scolded herself. *Coward*. She longed to grab a beer, hang out with his friends, and spend more time with him, but the thought twisted her stomach into knots. With hardly any experience in social settings, she was sure she’d embarrass herself. She could already imagine stumbling over her words, her mind blank when someone asked her a question. “Maybe next time,” she added, her voice barely above a whisper.

As she turned to go, his warm hand clasped hers, the roughness of his skin sending a delicious tingle up her arm and making her heart race.

“Wait a minute. Let me get your number.” He jogged away to grab his phone from his backpack. When he returned, she dutifully recited her cell number, determinedly locking her wandering eyes on his face. Bright blue eyes and tousled black hair framed his chiseled jaw and luscious lips, reigniting the flutter in her chest.

“I’ll call you to set up our date.” A cocky wink accompanied his promise. Desire tightened her core.

Come on, now’s your chance. Say something clever... say something... anything. “Will it be sooner than a year?” Not brilliant, but it made Michael smile.

“Yes, it’ll be soon. Be sure to put ice on that bump.”

Genevieve walked away, her heart racing. She tried not to look back, but the pull was too strong. When she stole a glance over her shoulder, there he was, still watching her with that intense

gaze.

Had she made a mistake by leaving?

Michael sprawled in a beach chair, ignoring pleas to rejoin the volleyball game.

Tank handed him a beer. “Mac, you gonna let her go?”

Torn between desire and restraint, Michael tightened his grip around the beer can, draining half in one gulp. She was smoking hot. Her tits—he guessed a C cup—swelled above her tank top, and her tight ass barely fit in those tiny shorts. And her mouth. Instant fantasy mode—Genevieve on her knees in front of him, her pink, wet lips wrapped around his cock.

But there was more. He caught the way her eyes widened as she took him in, her lips parted, and her cheeks pinkened. But, where other women would boldly eye-fuck him to signal their readiness for more, a sweet blush colored her cheeks. When was the last time he’d seen a woman blush? Had he ever? His predatory instincts sat up and howled.

But it wasn't just her body that pulled him in. Her soft smile and the quiet in her eyes stirred something deeper, something possessive. Her vulnerability made him want to protect her, to be more than the guy who took her to bed. He'd let her go... for now... but fully intended to chase, capture, and make her his. And if she was having dinner with a boyfriend, that guy's days were numbered.

5

Genevieve popped the last morsel of shrimp into her mouth, savoring the burst of lemon butter. “Mmmm, this might have been one of our best dinners yet.”

“I agree,” Susan said, sipping her wine. “Your cooking is amazing. I could drink that sauce.”

Genevieve smiled, feeling a bit more confident. “Thanks for bringing the shrimp and the wine.”

“My pleasure. Now, we’ve got two things to talk about. First, you promised to tell me about seeing Michael on the beach. Spill.”

Genevieve pressed her fingers to her temples, gathering her thoughts. “I acted like a giddy schoolgirl, completely mesmerized by Michael in that bathing suit. I blushed, stammered, and practically drooled before I hurried away. And don’t get me started on how my legs turned to jelly when he smiled at me.” She wouldn’t dare mention her bewildering urge to trace the grooves of his obliques with her tongue. Embarrassed by how much she wanted him, she locked that fantasy away.

Susan giggled. “I’ve never seen you this way. He must have the body of a Greek god.”

Genevieve sighed, imagining Michael’s strong arms around her. “What is it about muscles that turn me to goo inside?”

Susan leaned back in her chair, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. “We’re hard-wired to be attracted to muscles, you know. It goes back to when we need strong cavemen to fight off saber-tooth tigers.”

Genevieve rested her chin in her hands, her face solemn, her voice thoughtful. “Yeah, but it’s not just that. He’s also kind. He makes me feel safe.”

“Safe?” Susan grinned and waggled her eyebrows playfully above the rim of her wine glass. “He sounds deliciously dangerous. But seriously, G, you deserve to be happy.”

“I’m equally scared and excited.”

“Both normal, healthy responses.” Susan leaned forward. “Are you going out with him?”

“If he calls and I keep my nerve. But...if I do, it feels like

I'm betraying Brian." Guilt settled in her chest like a heavy stone.

"From what you've told me, Brian would want you to be happy."

"You're right." Genevieve sighed deeply, her fingers gripping the napkin in her lap as painful memories washed over her. She bowed her head, her voice thick with grief. "After Brian died, my life became a void. I couldn't feel anything. I was... numb."

She released a long, weary sigh and looked up, her eyes clouded with pain. "And when the numbness faded..." Her voice cracked, and she swallowed hard, "... the loneliness hit. It felt like the world had forgotten I existed."

Susan reached across the table and squeezed Genevieve's hand, offering silent support.

Genevieve blinked away the tears. "You've helped me heal more than you know, Susan. Your friendship brought light back into my life."

Susan smiled warmly, her grip on Genevieve's hand

tightening. “You’ve done the same for me, G. Especially after the mess my ex-boyfriend left.”

Genevieve took a deep breath, her chest feeling lighter than it had for a long time. Maybe she did deserve to move forward. She pushed her sadness aside. “What’s the second topic?”

Susan grinned. “I want you to be my assistant manager at the gym.”

“Me? But I don’t know anything about running a gym.”

“You’re a natural with clients, G, you stay calm under pressure, and you’re a quick learner. I’ll teach you the rest.”

Genevieve’s heart raced as excitement battled with fear, tightening her gut. “Wow, I don’t know what to say.”

“Think about it. I’m at my limit, G. It’s just me, and I need a break and some time off. You’d be perfect.”

Genevieve stared at her, thoughts swirling at the thought of this opportunity. “I’m scared, Susan.”

“You’ll crush it, G. Trust me.”

Susan’s confidence was contagious. “Could it be possible? A career I love...and maybe even a date? Genevieve’s voice filled with hope for a future she never thought possible.

“Are you saying you don’t enjoy cleaning locker rooms?” Susan teased.

Genevieve laughed softly. “You know what I mean. After Brian died, I was terrified I’d lose the house. The job you gave me kept the creditors at bay. I don’t mind working two jobs—I’ve been putting in long, hard days since I was twelve to keep things together.” She shook her head, her voice softening. “But I’m always saving for the next emergency—like when my truck tires dry-rot.”

They cleared the table and headed to the kitchen. The sound of running water filled the quiet as Genevieve rinsed a plate, her thoughts clouded with worry. “I’d better slow down. Every time I let myself hope, it crashes down around me. Happiness never sticks.” She was so tired of being afraid: afraid of being alone, afraid of failing, afraid her future would mirror her past.

“Fuck that thinking, G. I get it, you’ve been through hell. But this time, I know you’re going to make it.” Susan’s words rang out like a battle cry, challenging Genevieve’s doubts.

Dammit. Genevieve clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms. She’d been stuck in survival mode for years, too afraid to hope for anything more. Weel, no more doubting. No more holding back. First, a career, then a date... then maybe a washer and dryer. She snapped back her shoulders and lifted her chin. “I. Am. Going. To. Kill. It.”

“Thatta girl.”

As they washed the dishes, they chattered excitedly, their voices filled with the thrill of endless possibilities.

6

It was 10:30 on a Friday night, and Buds was packed with Frog Hogs—young, beautiful women hunting for a one-night hookup with any SEAL they could find. While other men eagerly scanned the crowd, Michael sat quietly, nursing his beer, fingers absentmindedly tracing the bottle's rim, his gaze unfocused. He barely registered the laughter and flirtations around him—it was Genevieve's face, her soft laugh, that filled his mind.

He guessed she was around 5'2", but at 6'2", nearly every woman seemed short to him. The memory of her toned arms and tanned legs tugged at his self-control, and the thought of her generous curves made his cock twitch.

A young woman's bare stomach blocked his view, followed by the sting of nails raking across his neck. The sharp scent of her perfume wrapped around him like a suffocating fog, turning his beer sour. Her butt plopped in his lap as she introduced herself with a coy smile. "Can I join you? I'm Barbara." Michael quickly grasped her waist, lifted her, and set her back on her feet with ease.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Her voice, a mix of hurt and surprise, clashed with her pout. “I’m lots of fun.”

“Some other time, baby.”

“You sure?”

Michael avoided eye contact and took a swig of his beer. He couldn’t shake Genevieve’s image from his mind—her bright eyes and that shy smile. *I wonder what she’s doing right now. Is she thinking of me? Maybe I should call her.*

Tank smirked as the young woman stomped off. “I’m worried about you, bruh. Second weekend in a row you’re not looking to score. You thinking about marrying that Genevieve chick?”

“Good God, no. I love my freedom and am abso-damn-lutely not looking for a happily-ever-after.”

“But you’re hung up on her.” Tank pretended to be a doctor, adopting a serious tone. “Abstinence can have some pretty bad effects on your health, you know.”

“Don’t worry about my sex life, man. I live to fight and

fuck. Hooyah.”

“Hooyah.” Tank clapped Michael on the back. “Watch yourself, man. Women can be sneaky dangerous. They hook you with their bodies, reel you in with their sweetness, and then—once the real bitch shows up—they suck you dry.”

“Gotta love the sucking part though.” Michael laughed, shaking his head at Tank’s cynicism. But there was something in Tank’s eyes—sadness? Wistfulness? He was sure there was a story there, but he knew better than to ask about Tank’s past.

“So, what makes Genevieve worth giving all this up?” Tank spread his arms wide, gesturing to the lively bar around them.

Michael hesitated. He hadn’t even fully admitted to himself that Genevieve was different—special. And he definitely wasn’t ready to tell Tank,

Tank’s gaze locked onto Michael, waiting for an answer, clearly not letting him off the hook.

“Uh... Genevieve feels... wholesome.” The word tasted

foreign on Michael's tongue, and he cringed as soon as he said it.

Tank exploded into laughter, slamming Michael's back with a thud that could've crumpled a weaker man. "Wholesome? Hell, man, you've gone from wanting 'some hole' to wanting 'whole-some'? You're killing me."

He hadn't meant to say it out loud, but damn, it felt true. Genevieve was real—too real, maybe. And that scared the hell out of him. "She makes these makeup-covered, silicone babes here at Buds seem kinda cheap," Michael mumbled, feeling the need to defend himself.

"That's the kind of woman we like: cheap, easy, and fun. No strings. You're asking for trouble." With that ominous prediction, Tank pushed back from the table. "See you tomorrow morning." Beer in hand, Tank's mountainous form effortlessly threaded through the crowd, leaving gaping women in his wake.

After finishing his beer in one gulp, Michael looked around for the server to pay his check, Tank's words swirling in his mind. Was Tank right? Did he genuinely want to change his

life? He had a good thing going: a job he loved and an endless stream of eager women who threw themselves at him.

But was that all there was to life? Something about Genevieve made him wonder.

7

Genevieve stood tall, hands on her hips, sweat streaming down her face as her breath came in quick bursts. The cool air from the AC brushed against her flushed skin as her muscles buzzed with energy, endorphins flooding her system in a rush of euphoria. Her grin stretched wide, her eyes bright as she bounced on her toes, barely able to stand still. “I did it. I conquered my first functional fitness class.”

Genevieve reached for the disinfectant spray to start cleaning, the thrum of upbeat music still echoing in her ears.

Susan stopped her. “Let’s walk the clients out together,” she suggested. “It’s the perfect chance to give them some personal feedback.”

Genevieve agreed, enjoying chatting with the clients in the warm morning sunshine. Once the last client left the parking lot, she and Susan returned inside. Genevieve whooped and skipped toward the workout room when the door closed behind them. “I’ll be cleaning,” she sang.

Susan crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow, her voice

steady and firm. “No, you won’t.” Susan’s authoritative tone stopped her in her tracks. “We’ll tackle the bookkeeping first and then clean together.”

Genevieve shook her head. “No way. After I tackle the bookkeeping, I’ll do the cleaning solo. You are taking the afternoon off.” Her tone left no room for argument.

Susan relented, a wide grin spreading across her face. “Great idea. Just don’t forget—we’re going out tonight, so leave yourself enough time to look gorgeous.”

Later that afternoon, the relentless sun beat down on Genevieve’s back as she pushed the mower through the sweet-smelling grass. Sweat beaded on her forehead and trickled down her neck, but she smiled at the neat rows she created on her lawn. She looked up to see her next-door neighbor, Ms. Ruth, waving so enthusiastically that she nearly lost her balance. Genevieve quickly dropped the mower handle and rushed over to help.

“Tee hee. I’m okay. I’m okay,” Ms. Ruth chirped. “Hi,

Genevieve.”

“Hi, Ms. Ruth.”

At 93, Ms. Ruth might wobble, but she had the vivacity and giggle of a 25-year-old. Her perfectly coiffed snow-white hair framed a pixie face flush with color—cobalt blue eyeshadow, peach-blushed cheekbones, and cherry-red lips.

“I’ll mow your yard next,” Genevieve offered, continuing Brian’s tradition of mowing Ms. Ruth’s lawn weekly. “How are you, Ms. Ruth?”

Ms. Ruth’s giggle faded, and she frowned, pursing her lips. “I need your advice. A white car was parked outside my house two nights this week: Tuesday and Wednesday... no, Tuesday and Thursday, between 10 and 11.” Her hands fluttered to her chest as her words tumbled out quickly. “It made me nervous. Why would someone sit in their car for over an hour? What should I do?”

Genevieve’s gut tightened as she listened. Her brow furrowed as she scanned the street, thinking it over. “Was it a man or woman?”

“A man, I think. He wore a hat like a baseball player.”

“Hmmm.” Genevieve rubbed her chin. “If he parks there again, call the police.”

“I hate to bug them again. They’ll think I’m a tiresome old woman.”

“Ms. Ruth, the police are here to protect and serve. They would rather you call rather than put yourself in danger.”

“Danger? Danger? Do you think he’s dangerous? Casing my house? Oh my. I’ve got some very nice jewelry. Oh my. I’ve got a shotgun, you know. I just need to remember where I hid the bullets.”

“No guns, Ms. Ruth. No guns.” Genevieve spoke firmly, repeating herself for emphasis. She considered correcting Ms. Ruth but decided against mentioning shotgun shells. Softening her tone, she said, “I’ll check in on you this evening, and I’m just a phone call away.”

“Okay, no guns. I’ll call the police. Now, let me tell you about the Johnsons...”

8

Susan pulled up to Genevieve's house at 9 PM sharp. As they walked to the Uber, Susan's fiery red skater skirt swished against her thighs with every step. Black stilettos emphasized the long lines of her 5'6" frame, giving her a Victoria's Secret model look guaranteed to turn heads.

Susan wolf-whistled playfully at Genevieve, who smoothed down her navy fit-and-flare dress that displayed just the right amount of cleavage. "Try to keep up," Genevieve teased, swinging her hips with playful exaggeration. "Although I doubt that's possible in those gorgeous heels."

Susan strutted with a swagger that made her heels look like an extension of her legs. "I can do anything in these heels... and I mean anything." Her playful wink invited Genevieve to imagine exactly what 'anything' might include.

"I have no doubt." Genevieve laughed as she glanced ruefully at her flats, remembering she'd never mastered walking—let alone dancing—in heels. She nervously adjusted the gold chain around her neck, the weight of her wedding ring a

familiar comfort. “I’ve never been to a fancy nightclub before. Are you sure we won’t look pathetic without dates?”

“Plenty of single girls will be there; no one will notice us. Besides, I refuse to sit at home because I don’t have a boyfriend.”

After giving the Uber driver the club's name, Susan turned to Genevieve. “Your hair looks so pretty down and curled. Your usual ponytail is cute, but this look is sexy.”

“Thanks. No sexy underwear for me tonight, though. I’ve got my girls strapped into a sensible underwire bra.”

“That’s a smart safety measure.” Susan’s eyes crinkled with laughter. “Innocent bystanders could get hurt if those beauties bounced around while you were dancing.”

Noticing the Uber driver’s smirk, Genevieve quickly changed the subject.

As Genevieve stepped into Bottoms Up, she froze, overwhelmed by the crush of sound, light, and movement. Neon lights pulsed with the beat, flashing magenta and yellow across the room. The strobe light flickered intensely, making her blink

and squint. The DJ blasted Top 40 hits, the bass thumping deep in her chest. People packed the small dance floor, moving in time to the pounding music. She glanced at the bar, where patrons crowded three deep, waiting for drinks.

“Come on!” Susan shouted over the noise. “Let’s find a table.”

They quickly found a standing table and ordered drinks from a server in a black halter top and leggings. With the loud music making conversation impossible, Genevieve sipped her drink and looked around at the glamorous crowd. She felt like a stray in a sea of designer labels, sparkling diamonds, and perfect manicures. Her hand unconsciously tugged at the hem of her thrift shop dress, reminding her she didn’t belong there. *What was that saying about lipstick on a pig?* She heaved a deep sigh, feeling utterly out of place and exposed.

Susan finished her drink and grabbed Genevieve’s hand. “Let’s dance.”

Genevieve’s steps faltered as she walked to the dance floor, her mind imagining a hundred pairs of judgmental eyes

fixed on her.

“Come on, girl. Show ‘em what you’ve got,” Susan encouraged.

Genevieve looked around and saw everyone caught up in their own pleasure. What was she worried about? They didn’t know her. She didn’t know them. With each beat, her body loosened, her self-consciousness dissolving as she surrendered to the music. She moved with newfound freedom, her worries melting away. Swaying sinuously to the beat, she threw in molten figure-eight hip swivels and oozy body rolls. Her wide smile was as bright as the strobe lights as she let go.

She was jolted back to reality when a third man tried to grind on her, momentarily shattering her joy. She motioned for him to step back and then stared him down until he moved out of her space. She was in control.

“Frigid bitch.” Muttering, he marched away.

Catching Susan’s eye, they shook their heads and rolled their eyes in unison.

As the man retreated, Chad emerged from the crowd, arms defiantly crossed, legs aggressively spread. His feral grin, all stained teeth and tight lips, pinned her feet to the floor, her heartbeat kicking into overdrive. His gaze dragged over her body, staring far too long and making her skin crawl. Biting her lower lip, Genevieve searched for Susan but found herself alone.

“Hi, baby. Wanna dance?” Chad’s slimy voice slithered into her ear as he moved closer, his breath hot and sour. He reached out, his fingers brushing her bare arm. She recoiled, but he didn’t seem to notice—or care.

Her heart slammed against her ribs as the air grew stifling. She forced herself to look him in the eye, swallowing hard as she clenched her fists. She wasn’t backing down—not tonight. “No, I don’t want to dance with you,” she managed, forcing firmness into her voice, hoping he didn’t hear the hesitation.

Chad’s smirk made her skin crawl, and the stench of his cheap cologne burned her nostrils, making her choke back a gag. “Come on, don’t be like that,” he drawled, leaning closer. “We’re friends, right? Friends have fun.” He pushed further into her

personal space, making it impossible to breathe.

Nausea hit her; his greasy nearness was unbearable. “I was just about to sit down. My feet hurt.” Her voice cracked as she backed up, but Chad stepped with her, keeping her trapped. Desperate, she twisted away, practically fleeing to the table.

Susan joined her with a concerned expression. “What’s up?”

Genevieve exaggeratedly mouthed, ‘Chad.’

Susan’s eyes widened. “Do you want to leave?”

“Absolutely not. I won’t let that little pervert spoil my fun.” Her voice rang with false confidence, her eyes darting nervously around the crowded room. She kept a vigilant watch for the rest of the night.

Shortly after midnight, they tumbled into an Uber, euphorically tired. In the car’s quiet, Susan whispered, “Do you think it was a coincidence Chad was at the same nightclub?”

“I’m sure it was,” Genevieve replied, trying to sound like she meant it. She hoped it was. It had to be. So why did it feel like

there was a rock in her stomach?

“What did he say?”

“He asked me to dance. He didn’t harass me—just creeped me out. I probably overreacted.” Genevieve doubted her words but hoped that saying them aloud would make them true.

9

Michael and his team trudged off the military transport, weighed down by helmets, duffel bags, backpacks, and weapons. Mud clung to their boots, camo paint streaked their faces, and their matted hair stuck to their foreheads—a testament to their time downrange. As they stepped into the air-conditioned locker room, relief washed over them. Cooling down was the only thing on their minds after the 105-degree heat of their hostage rescue.

Michael peeled off his gritty clothes with a deep sigh, the fatigue of the mission pressing down on him. He headed straight for the showers, soaping down every inch of his body twice, desperate to wash away two weeks of dirt, dust, and sand. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he stepped out with a long exhale. “Damn, that felt good.”

Tank grunted an acknowledgment.

Michael grabbed a clean shirt from his bag and shook it, sending a shower of sand cascading to the floor. “Shit, there’s sand in everything. I swear it’s still lodged in my butt crack.”

“And will be for weeks,” Tank grumbled.

After the hour-long mission debrief, Michael meticulously cleaned and stored his weapons and gear before heading home. A quick stop at the grocery store for essentials turned into a tense ordeal. Every shopper seemed a potential threat, and every corner felt like a possible ambush. The squeaky cart wheels, too-bright lights, and saccharine store music jangled his nerves, and he ground his teeth in frustration. Adjusting to the real world took days, and although food shopping had become a necessary ritual to help him feel grounded, his heightened awareness never waned.

As he drove past the fitness studio about a mile from his condo, Michael noticed an unusual number of cars and people filling the parking lot. Curious, he slowed down to take a closer look.

Then he saw her. Genevieve. His pulse quickened, a familiar thrum of excitement rushing through his veins. For two weeks, XXX-rated daydreams about Genevieve had infiltrated his downtime. For hours, he'd imagined the weight of her tits. The color of her nipples. The taste of her skin. Now, here she was, the

woman from his fantasies. There was no way he could drive by without stopping.

As he approached the parking lot, Michael's eyes instinctively scanned the area, a habit ingrained from years of assessing potential threats. Was anything off?

A man lingered in an idling white Toyota at the far edge of the parking lot, his face hidden by a baseball cap. Why the concealment? A warning shot up his spine, urging him to investigate. As he moved towards the car, Genevieve's voice interrupted him.

"Michael."

He quickly memorized the license plate before turning his attention toward her. His breath caught in his throat. *Damn!* She was stunning, a radiant young woman in her prime with glowing skin and glossy hair. And sexy. His mouth went dry, and his knees nearly buckled as she turned—tiny running shorts hugged her mound, and a sweat-soaked T-shirt clung to her amazing breasts. The rawness of his desire took him by surprise.

His eyes followed Genevieve as she chatted with the group around her. She was friendly but not flirty. But when she smiled at the guys, a surge of possessiveness hit him, tightening his gut and clenching his fists. *What the hell is wrong with me?* First, he wanted to pound on her dinner date, and now this. He never staked claims on women—until now. Watching her smile at anyone else made his blood simmer. He forced himself to take a deep breath, trying to shake off the jealousy he hadn't expected.

Genevieve excused herself and aimed her generous smile directly at him. His heart thumped.

"Hi, Michael. What in the world are you doing here? Were you away on another mission?"

"Yeah. Just got back. I was headed home and spotted you."

She flashed a proud smile. "I just finished Susan's class."

"Susan? Class?"

"Susan's my best friend. She owns this gym. I'm her assistant manager."

“Judging by the river of sweat and all the smiles, they loved the workout.”

Her smile brightened.

“Hey, want to grab coffee?” He surprised himself—he’d never asked a woman for coffee.

“Uh, I don’t drink coffee.” She hesitated, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her shorts.

“We could grab water instead,” he suggested.

She raised her water bottle, arching an eyebrow.

“Right.” Guess he had to spell it out. “Why don’t we sit on that bench and catch up?”

Understanding flashed across her face, followed by a sheepish grin. “Okay.”

An hour later, their conversation still flowed effortlessly. Genevieve’s mix of innocence and raw appeal had Michael hooked. One moment, she seemed ready to devour him—pupils

dilated, breath hitching. The next, she looked ready to flee, eyes darting and fingers twisting her shirt. She shifted in her seat, sexual tension pulsing in her throat, foot tapping nervously on the ground. Michael resisted the urge to let desire take over and forced himself to focus on her face, determined to show her the respect she deserved.

“So, I know you work two jobs, don’t have a TV, and love to read,” Michael said. What else do you like to do?”

“I love the outdoors. I crave sunshine. I have no curtains or blinds in my house—just sunlight filling every corner.”

Everything about her drew him in—her work ethic, sunny disposition, and tight body. “I’ve been gone for two weeks and am a little out of touch. It’s Saturday, right? Want to do something tonight?”

“I’d love to, but I already have plans.”

“Of course you do.” Who the fuck with? A guy? If so, he’s a dead man.

“But I’m free tomorrow,” she added quickly.

“Sounds good. I have an idea. Instead of a candlelit dinner, which we’ll save for later, how about a hike in Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge?”

“Terrific idea—so original. Tomorrow, 7 AM, here? ”

“Perfect. I’ll bring the bug spray.”

“Okay.” She took a tentative step forward as if she might hug him, then turned back toward the gym. A pang of disappointment hit him. This had been the longest conversation he’d ever had with a woman, and the anticipation of getting to know her beyond the bedroom was exhilarating—and unfamiliar.

Chasing and capturing her was going to be fun. He grinned as he slid into the Jeep, feeling the excitement building. “Hooyah!” he shouted, already planning his next move.

10

Genevieve burst into the studio, eyes sparkling and cheeks flushed. “Oh my gosh!”

“You talked to him for over an hour,” Susan exclaimed, setting aside her receipts. “Tell me everything.”

With a single breath, Genevieve gushed, “You won’t believe it—he’s a Navy SEAL—tough, intense, and gone a lot. He loves the outdoors, and tomorrow we’re hiking in Back Bay.” She twirled, flopping into a leather chair, as Susan laughed.

Leaning forward, Genevieve pressed her hands to her stomach. “Can I handle this?” she asked, a mix of nerves and excitement swirling in her chest.

Susan sat across from her. “You absolutely can. “It’s easy to see why you’re excited. That man should never be allowed to wear a shirt.” She studied Genevieve intently. “But why are you nervous?”

“Well, first dates are always nerve-wracking, aren’t they? This is my first date since Brian died, and Michael will be only

the second man I've ever been with. What should I do? What do I wear? What's going to happen?"

"One thing at a time." Susan stood, hands on her hips, her voice stern. "First, you're in control. You set the boundaries."

"I want to take it slow, slow, slow." A hike felt right—safe and non-sexual.

"Then you'll make that crystal clear."

Genevieve gnawed on her bottom lip, her mind spinning. "I'm trusting a man I barely know..."

"Isn't that what we all do when we meet someone? You've witnessed his kindness, his protectiveness. You'll be in public, and if anything makes you uncomfortable, call me."

Reassured, Genevieve nodded. "Good points."

Susan began to pace, gleefully ticking off instructions on her fingers. "You will wear casual, loose-fitting clothes, sturdy shoes, and a ponytail. Your makeup is always minimal, so no worries there." She spun with a mischievous grin. "But here's the fun part—you'll wear shiny pink lipstick. The contrast between

your ‘let’s be friends’ outfit and your sexy lips will drive him crazy.”

“You are so bad,” Genevieve teased, laughing. “But it’s a great idea.”

“This ain’t my first rodeo.” Susan laughed, rolling her eyes at the silly cliché. “Just relax, be yourself, and have fun.”

Genevieve’s smile faltered as she slumped in a chair. “And Brian?”

“Michael won’t replace Brian.”

“You’re right.” Genevieve straightened. “I’m not dismissing my love for Brian or our happy years together.”

“That could never happen.”

Genevieve sprang to her feet, feeling lighter. “Thanks, best friend. I’ll try not to overthink this.”

But she would. An ache settled in her chest as she admitted a long-buried truth: she had never felt this raw, burning desire for Brian. Her love for him had been gentle, a warm,

reassuring comfort. But Michael...Michael stirred something deeper—a raw desire that promised mysterious pleasures, both exciting and a little frightening. She tried to push the guilt away, but it clung to her, casting a shadow over tomorrow's date.

Genevieve's heart raced as she pulled up to the studio at 7 AM. Her eyes darted around, eagerly searching for Michael. Her pulse spiked when she spotted him—a white T-shirt clinging to his broad chest and black gym shorts showing off his muscular thighs. As he looked up, adjusting his black wrap sunglasses, his biceps bunched, making her swallow hard. He was all man—pure sex—and she was glad she hadn't canceled.

She swung open the back door to his Jeep and tossed her beach bag beside his black gym bag. He carefully arranged their bags until they were perfectly aligned.

“Is that cooler for us?”

“Yup. Water and fruit.” He grinned, clearly proud of himself.

Genevieve held up a zip-lock bag. “Is there room for these

sandwiches I made?”

“Hell yeah!”

Apparently, the man seriously liked sandwiches.

She added her water bottles and sandwiches to the big, red cooler, arching an eyebrow as he rearranged everything.

“I don’t want the sandwiches to get wet,” he said, a little defensive.

“Makes sense.” She smiled inwardly, charmed by his attention to detail.

“Any chance you brought homemade chocolate chip cookies?”

His flirtatious wink had butterflies fluttering in her gut. “Ha. You wish. Maybe next time.”

His warm hand captured her wrist, bright blue eyes locking on hers. “I like the sound of ‘next time.’”

Heat flooded her cheeks as desire surged through her, her sex contracting with a wave of pleasure. Her legs trembled as she

climbed into the Jeep, feeling like she might combust.

Michael's presence dominated the interior of the Jeep, his large hands engulfing the steering wheel. Her breath hitched as she imagined his strong hands exploring her body—molding her breasts, cupping her bottom, stroking between her legs. Heat coiled low in her belly, and she shifted uncomfortably, mortified at the thought of leaving a wet spot.

They drove in companionable silence, the Jeep's tops and sides removed. She closed her eyes, savoring the warm summer breeze on her skin. She stole glances at him, studying the man beneath the cap. His black hair peeked out, neatly trimmed but not military-tight. His nose and ears were perfectly proportioned, and his lips... oh, those lips were undeniably kissable. Would his kisses be sweet and soft or rough with lots of tongue? Yes, please. She'd take both.

Her gaze trailed over the ridges of his 6-pack abs, then lower, to the heavyweight bulge between his thighs—which was growing. Electric currents shot through her as she swallowed hard and looked up, straight into Michael's eyes.

Busted! He'd caught her staring. What was wrong with her? She had never ogled a man in her life. Her cheeks burned as she pretended to be fascinated by the scrubby roadside brush. At his deep chuckle, she shot him a scowl that could freeze water. That was just wrong. Good manners dictated that he pretend he hadn't caught her looking.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at Back Bay. She practically catapulted herself out of the Jeep, trying to find something—anything—to hide her embarrassment. "I need to go to the bathroom," she blurted, wincing at her clumsy pronouncement. Real smooth, Genevieve.

As she walked away, he chuckled again. She gritted her teeth to suppress a groan, mortified by her awkwardness.

11

Michael spread a refuge map on the hood of his Jeep, his finger tracing the three-mile circuit he'd highlighted in yellow.

Genevieve's eyes widened. "You've really thought this through."

Michael scratched his head, smiling. "I like things perfect. I might have over-planned."

She placed her hand on his forearm. "Today's plan is perfect."

Her praise sent a warm current down his spine, his muscles tightening beneath her hand. *Get a grip; it's just a hand.* He cleared his throat and glanced at the swaying trees. "Today's breeze should pin down the mosquitoes—no need for repellent."

"Good. I don't want to smell like bug spray."

They began at a comfortable pace, arms swinging loosely at their sides. Aware of the difference in their stride lengths, Michael knew that a moderate walk for him was a brisk pace for her. But her steady breathing and big smile showed she savored

every step. July and August would bring unbearable humidity, almost suffocating, but today's breeze was cool and refreshing.

As usual, his vigilant eyes scanned the area for potential threats, a reflex from years of training. There were no threats, just understated beauty. Most people overlooked the wetland, seeing only scrubby trees, brown reed grass, and diminutive native flowers. But up close, the freshwater marsh teemed with life. Beneath the boardwalk, turtles and fish glided through the water, seemingly unaware of human presence.

Satisfied that everything was as it should be, he turned his attention to Genevieve. Her sensible ponytail and sturdy hiking boots? Definitely intentional. She probably thought they made her look 'non-sexy.' But the pink lipstick? That blew the whole idea to hell. He suppressed a chuckle. She didn't realize he would find her sexy no matter what she wore. The scent of her skin, the curve of her cheek, the gloss of her hair—all called to him. He wanted her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist, and those sexy pink lips on his.

Shoving those thoughts aside, he focused on their easy

conversation, covering many topics.

“I don’t know much about your job, Michael. What’s it like being a Navy SEAL?”

“I love it. SEALS aren’t like the rest of the Navy. They’re...different.” He paused, searching for the right words. “We do stuff nobody else can, mostly off the books. No recognition, no praise—just the way we like it.”

Genevieve nodded slowly as if processing his words. “It sounds... intense.”

“It’s more than a job; it’s who I am. The guys on my team? They’re my brothers. I’d die for them, and they’d do the same for me.”

“You sound so passionate and proud. What made you want to become a SEAL?”

“That’s a long story,” he said, a bit more serious.

“I’d love to hear it.”

“Short version? Senior year, I swore I’d live a life of

service. Read about the SEALS, and that was it—I knew that was my path.”

Genevieve stared at him intently. “What made you take that vow?”

Michael hesitated, fixing his gaze on the ground. “My parents...” He trailed off, jaw tightening as familiar feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness resurfaced. Even now, memories of his teenage years unnerved him, so he buried them deep, even from himself. “Let’s just say I didn’t want my life to be like theirs.”

Genevieve’s penetrating gaze pressed for more, but he’d shared enough. As a SEAL, perfection was expected; there was no room for error or weakness. He didn’t talk about his shortcomings—it was time to change the subject.

As they walked, the reed grass gave way to pockets of wild hibiscus, honeysuckle, and pickerel rush, adding color and providing nectar to the buzzing pollinators. Ospreys called to their mates in sharp, piercing cries, and Michael noticed Genevieve tilt her head to listen. The marsh was alive with movement as

hummingbirds darted to and from bright red, tubular flowers. But all he could focus on was her.

Suddenly, a deer bounded across the path, its white tail flashing in alarm. Genevieve's eyes widened, a laugh bursting from her lips.

Michael grinned. "I wonder if they allow deer hunting here," he teased, hoping to get a rise out of her.

"They'd better not." Her reply was sharp, her voice edged with indignation. "This is a refuge; all creatures should be safe."

"You know the deer population is out of control in many parts of North America."

"I don't care." Genevieve's voice softened, her eyes misting slightly. "I loved Bambi when I was a kid. I still keep the copy my mom gave me for my eighth birthday by my bed. The cover's frayed, and the pages are worn, but I cherish it. It's one of the few things I have from her."

Michael's smile was warm. "Got it. No deer hunting."

12

Genevieve walked with a light, carefree step, taking in the sights around her. She laughed as a dragonfly zipped past, sunlight catching its wings, and grinned at a tiny frog hopping through the grass. Michael's knowledge made the walk even better. It wasn't just a walk—it was a shared moment with someone who appreciated nature as much as she did. It felt right.

But the memories of hiking with Brian, her late husband, tugged at her heart. Could she allow herself to embrace this new connection with Michael? Shouldn't she feel guilty for moving on?

“Are you okay, Genevieve?”

Startled, she quickly composed herself, forcing a small smile. Michael didn't miss a thing, and his attentiveness both flattered and unnerved her. She pushed her concerns aside and noticed movement out of the corner of her eye. “Oh, look. A snake,” she shouted, her excitement bubbling over. “Did you see it? It was stunning.”

Pulling out her phone, she scrolled through the images.

“Describe it so I can identify the species.”

“It was a northern black water snake,” he said confidently.

“Really? I need to be sure.” She couldn’t just take his word for it—it had to be verified. She pressed him for details.

Michael meticulously described the snake’s head shape, body markings, and coloration. She compared his words to the pictures on her screen. “You’re right,” she admitted, impressed. “Northern black water snake. Very common, non-poisonous.” She raised an eyebrow. “How do you know so much about the wildlife here?”

“I researched the flora and fauna last night while planning our route. It’s that over-planning thing again.”

“Well, it’s made this hike perfect.” She flashed him a bright smile of approval, and he responded with a goofy grin.

“You like snakes?” His eyebrows lifted, and a note of awe colored his voice. “Most people are terrified of them.”

Her husband had felt the same way. *Brian, if you’re watching, I hope you’re happy I’m enjoying life again.*

“You’re quiet again,” Michael observed.

“It’s a happy quiet.” It was only half-true, but her memories of Brian were too painful to share.

Fifteen minutes later, they stood on a small, weathered deck overlooking the bay, gusty winds whipping up white caps. When their hands brushed, electricity crackled between them. The world faded away—no sights, no sounds—just Michael’s touch.

His gaze locked onto her lips, and nervous anticipation raced through her. He turned his baseball cap backward, gently grasping her arms, his gaze tender and intense. He pulled her close, their bodies almost, but not quite touching.

Genevieve’s heart pounded with mixed feelings. She wanted him—wanted this—but could she handle it? Could she trust herself not to fall too hard or risk losing everything again?

As his head lowered, she lightly pressed her hand to his chest. He stopped instantly, hovering close, his breath warm on her lips.

“Genevieve,” he groaned, sliding his hands down her

arms before gently kissing her forehead. Stepping back, he flipped his baseball cap to the front, and the magic of the moment was gone.

Tears welled up, but she blinked them back, the ache in her chest lingering. His touch sent a jolt through her, but it was how he looked at her that moved her—like she mattered. Like he saw through her doubts. That felt more dangerous than any kiss.

“Did I move too fast?” His voice was raw. “I don’t want to push you, but I want you. Badly.”

Her hesitation must’ve surprised him. He probably expected her to dive in like any other woman her age. She wanted to—God, how she wanted to give into the heat he ignited, to let herself be swept away by the desire coursing through her. But the guilt, the uncertainty held her back.

What if he thought she wasn’t interested? Panic shot through her. How could she explain it wasn’t lack of desire but fear that held her back?

It was time to tell him about Brian.

She gathered her courage, took a deep breath, and began. “I’m a widow. It’s been two years since Brian died in a car crash. A drunk driver hit him.” She lowered her gaze, picking at the wood railing. “My attraction to you makes me feel guilty and disloyal to Brian. I like you, but I need to go slowly.”

She looked up and tried to lighten the mood. “I’m a hot mess.”

13

Well, fuck. That explained her quiet spells and why she was so back and forth all day—pulling him in, then pushing him back. What should he say? ‘Sorry’ felt trite, and ‘Oh shit’ entirely inappropriate.

“Michael?”

He winced the waver in her voice as a wave of empathy washed over him. “Losing your mother and husband? That’s brutal.”

Jaw tight, he focused on the road ahead. He had to end this thing between them. Sooner rather than later. He didn’t do relationships and couldn’t make commitments. That cold, hard truth tasted like ash. He had to step back before her feelings deepened. It was the right thing to do, a matter of honor. He wouldn’t be the one to break this remarkable woman’s heart.

He dragged his hand down his face. But dammit, he didn’t want to stop seeing her. Five minutes ago, he’d been desperate to mount her. The catch of her breath, full-body shiver, and erect nipples tenting her t-shirt had turned his dick to stone.

But it wasn't just her looks. It was her generous smile, unbreakable spirit, and how she made everything feel calmer—a break from his harsh life of weapons and combat. And her laughter? It hit him somewhere deep, somewhere he didn't even know was messed up.

He fidgeted as they drove, one hand gripping the wheel, knuckles white, the other tapping his knee. The tension in his chest grew with each passing mile as he wrestled with the decision—walk away or stay. How could he end this without hurting her? He had to get it right. But he had no break-up experience—he'd never had a long-term girlfriend. He'd been a pariah in high school—the doctor's and lawyer's daughters never gave him a second look.

The jarring silence in the Jeep suddenly registered. Genevieve stared out the window, her hands clenched and white-knuckled in her lap. She hadn't spoken a word.

Back at the studio, neither of them moved. They remained utterly still, staring stonily ahead. With a heavy sigh, he released his stranglehold on the steering wheel, removed his sunglasses and baseball cap, and turned to face her.

“I’m sorry for your loss and get your mixed feelings about dating,” His voice was gentle and sincere. “But I have to be honest. You’re not like the women I usually meet. I admire and respect you and genuinely like you.” He shifted in his seat, forcing the words out. “But I’m not looking for a relationship, not the way my life is. I’m just looking for casual fun with women who know the score—one night only. You’re an amazing woman, but I’m not the right man for you.”

Why did his lifestyle suddenly feel so shallow, so insensitive? Nauseated at the thought of losing her, his gut churned, and bile rose in his throat.

Without a word, she flung open the Jeep’s door with a force that rattled the hinges. Her stiff movements and tight grip on her beach bag made it clear—she was barely holding it together. Then she was gone, speeding out of the parking lot with a screech of tires.

Well, fuck. He slumped against the seat, the ache in his chest dull and heavy. He’d just pushed away the one person who brought joy into his life. But he was sure—ending it now was the

right decision. It had to be. Yet, as her taillights disappeared, the weight of his decision sank deeper.

14

Two hours later, Michael slouched on Tank's worn-out couch.

Tank glanced away from the baseball game and asked, "Guess the date with Genevieve didn't work out?"

Michael jolted upright. "Did you know she's a widow?"

"No way." Tank's eyes widened.

Michael shot to his feet, the cool air in the room doing nothing to calm his heated skin. His boots thudded against the hardwood floor, each step heavy with frustration. "Women: we meet 'em, fuck 'em, and then move on. Always. No conversations, no hikes, no relationships. Shit, I'm pretty sure she's only been with one guy, and I've been with a lot of women."

Tank shouted in approval, "Hooyah!"

Michael stopped pacing, shoulders tight, eyes narrowing at the beer bottle in his hand. He picked at the label with his thumbnail, the shreds falling onto the floor. "I made the right call," he muttered, though the knot in his stomach tightened. "It would've ended eventually. Right? How many SEALs do you

know with long-term girlfriends?”

Tank shrugged. “A few.”

“Yeah, a few. Barely any. Our job’s too unpredictable and dangerous for girlfriends or wives.”

Tank raised an eyebrow at the shredded label on the floor. “Of course, SEALs do what other men can’t every day.”

“Whose side are you on?” Michael kicked out in frustration, scattering the label pieces.

Tank ignored Michael’s inane question. “I gotta ask. Why’d you ask her out in the first place if you didn’t plan on dating her?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you weren’t looking for more, why bother?”

Good question. If Michael couldn’t explain Genevieve’s magnetic pull to himself, how could he explain it to Tank? Stalling, he grabbed another beer from the fridge.

Tank pressed him. “Why assume she’s not up for a few

rolls in the sack? Just because she's a widow doesn't mean she wants forever after."

Michael dropped to the couch, elbows on his knees, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. Well, damn, had he just made a colossal mistake?

"You're not crying over there, are you, sissy-boy?"

"Fuck you."

"There he is."

Genevieve drove straight to Susan's, seeking commiseration and support,

Genevieve paced the room, the soft carpet muffling her sharp steps. Sweat prickled her skin despite the cool breeze from the ceiling fan, her clenched fists trembling with frustration. "Who the hell does Michael think he is?" She stormed back and forth, each word spitting out like venom. "Who made him the damn king of my damn life? Why does he think he has the right to decide what I need and what's best for me?" She stopped with her hands

on her hips and a fierce scowl, her lips pressed into a thin, unforgiving line. “I told him I was a little nervous about dating, and he assumed I wanted a wedding ring and happily ever after. No discussion, just assumptions. Maybe I want a one-night stand but need a little time.” She threw her hands up. “What. The. Fuck.”

Susan was righteously angry for her and too good a friend to point out that it wasn’t a one-night stand if it took several dates to get naked. Instead, she made the all-encompassing derogatory comment, “Men!”

Genevieve stopped abruptly. “I was so keyed up that if he had kissed me, I would’ve inhaled him—stripped off my clothes, spread my legs, and begged him for sex.”

“I’d have been on my knees when he turned his baseball cap backward.” Susan smacked her lips and giggled.

“Damn!” Genevieve’s tone dropped, fierce and bitter. “I left the damn sandwiches in his perfectly packed cooler. I hope the ice melts and soaks them.” Petty revenge, maybe, but still a satisfying thought.

“Or maybe he eats them and gets food poisoning.”

“That’d work, too.” With a sudden shift in mood, Genevieve flopped onto Susan’s lumpy sofa, burying her face in her hands. When she looked up, tears brimmed. “Am I not worth waiting for? Am I not worth the time and effort if we don’t jump right into bed? After all, he’s the one who asked me out.”

Susan handed her a glass of wine. “Remember what you told me when I dumped my ex? ‘If a man isn’t smart enough to see you’re a treasure, he’s not smart enough to be with you. And no woman wants a dumb man hanging around.’”

Genevieve swiped away the angry tears with a watery laugh. “Damn straight.”

After a sip of wine, she slumped deeper into the sofa, her face crumpling. “The sad part? I could’ve liked him. He’s honorable, thoughtful, and...” she rolled her eyes, “interesting.”

“Not to mention panty-wetting sexy.”

Genevieve’s spine snapped straight, eyes flashing with a moment of pride. “Well, it’s his damn loss.”

“That’s the spirit.” Susan raised her glass, clinking it lightly against Genevieve’s, toasting their solidarity.

But the fire in Genevieve’s eyes flickered and dimmed. Her shoulders slumped as her surge of defiance faded, leaving her feeling more disappointed than righteous.

15

Genevieve's excitement grew as she thought about Syd's night—live country music, a packed dance floor, and a beer buzz. She was ready to dance away her blues. Despite not knowing the songs' words or the line dance moves, she rocked the two-step and western swing.

At 9:00, Genevieve swung open her front door, grinning as she greeted her best friend, Susan. Susan's outfit was fire—a hot-pink silk tank top tucked into tight black jeans that highlighted her endless legs. Her sequin-covered black flats were both unique and perfect for dancing all night.

"You're slaying it, Susan. Too bad you're not into cowboy boots," Genevieve teased, extending her leg to show off her tooled navy leather boots.

"I don't get the appeal, but those boots look great on you."

"I don't understand your dislike of cowboy boots, but I love you anyway."

Susan nodded towards Genevieve. "You've got that subtle

sexy thing going with the lace of your bra peeking through your blouse.”

“Since bouncing is outlawed in two-step, I can wear a demi-bra. My girls are safe, not strapped in tight.” Genevieve chuckled.

“Still no word from Michael?” Susan’s tone was cautious as they stepped into the Uber.

“No. I didn’t expect to.” Genevieve scowled as she buckled her seatbelt. “He made his decision about me and for me painfully clear.”

“Tits up, girlfriend. Tonight, you’re going to trample the past under those gorgeous boots.”

A wall of sound punched through Genevieve’s chest as she pushed through the heavy wooden door. Laughing, she rushed forward, eager to dive into the scene—the thump of boots on the wooden dance floor, the swagger of rugged cowboys, and the swinging hips of virile young women. Wide belts and midriff tops emphasized the women’s tiny waists and tight butts, while high-

riding jean shorts revealed the curve of their butt cheeks. The dance floor was a scene of well-organized chaos where line dancers owned the center, and two-steppers moved counter-clockwise along the edge.

Genevieve and Susan claimed a small table next to the dance floor and ordered beers. It was too loud to talk, so Genevieve scanned the bar, amused by the minimal decor—a neon Budweiser sign flanked by two American flags—nothing more. After quickly finishing their beers, they waded into the crowd.

An hour later, cheeks flushed and chest heaving, Genevieve returned to the table, her pulse racing from the dance floor. She had danced several times but only twice with the same partner, squelching any hookup expectations. For whole minutes at a time, she had forgotten about Michael.

Who was she kidding? She'd compared every dance partner to Michael and found them all wanting: too short, too fat, too thin, too insecure. She was pathetic. How long would it take her to purge Michael from her thoughts? He didn't want her; she had to let it go.

Grinning madly, Susan joined her and flopped down on the stool. “Whew. What a workout.”

“I love watching you dance, Susan. Everyone loves to watch you dance.”

“It’s all in the hips... all in the hips.” Susan gave Genevieve a sassy wink.

“Well, you’ve got it going on.” Then, with a casual flip of her hair, Genevieve announced, “Be right back... gotta pee.”

On her way to the bathroom, she noticed a large, rowdy group to her right—unmistakably military men. Her heart skipped a beat. *Oh my god, that’s Michael.* Surprise and excitement surged through her as she locked her gaze on him. Genevieve froze, her heart thrumming in her chest. A girl with too much hair, too much makeup, and too few clothes perched on his lap. One hand was on the girl’s hip, the other wrapped around a beer, and Michael threw his head back in laughter.

When their eyes met, his widened slightly. *Caught!* Why hadn’t she rushed by? Determined to ignore him for the rest of her

life, she clenched her fists at her sides, trying to steady the emotions inside—anger, embarrassment, desire—all colliding. Of all the places in town, Michael had to be here. No smile, no wave, not even a chin lift to acknowledge she existed. She was glad she looked hot; now, she just had to act cool.

Her legs shook. Why did seeing him with that woman hurt so much? She fled to the bathroom, trying to escape the rush of emotions. Inside, she gripped the sink and stared at her reflection. “Pull it together,” she muttered, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. He’d dumped her, but she was over it. Right? After a moment, she stepped out—straight into his chest.

He was waiting for her.

He grasped her shoulders to steady her. “Genevieve, what are you doing here?” His voice was sharp—a mix of surprise and exasperation.

His touch made her pulse quicken, wiping away every rational thought. *Damn!* She couldn’t let him see how much he still affected her. “I’m dancing,” she snapped and stalked back to her table, praying he wouldn’t follow.

“Why the scowl, Genevieve?” Susan asked with concern in her voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Michael is here,” Genevieve snarled, taking a swig of her beer.

“Michael? Here? Where?” Susan’s eyes widened as she looked around, trying to spot him. “We can leave if you want.”

“Hell no.” Genevieve’s voice was defiant. “I won’t let him wreck our night.”

His group was behind her, blocking her view. Where was he? Probably pawing Miss Skanky Pants, who undoubtedly ‘knew the score.’ Bleah. The thought soured her mood even as she continued to dance, her movements automatic.

She glanced around the room, her face composed, pretending she wasn’t searching for him. She didn’t spot him. He was probably huddled in a dark corner, being a man-whore. *Jerk.*

16

After locking eyes with Genevieve, Michael had abruptly pushed the girl off his lap, leaving her sputtering in surprise. Despite Genevieve's cold response—narrowed eyes and pursed lips—he couldn't resist finding a spot at the bar to watch her covertly.

Genevieve had consumed his thoughts all week—her laughing blue eyes, radiant smile, and banging body. Despite his intense desire, he fought the urge to call her, resisted the temptation to drive to her house, and suppressed his longing to be with her.

He watched her dance with three guys. She was good at the two-step, better than her partners. In a simple white blouse tucked into a tight black skirt, she was rocking that good girl slash sex kitten thing that drove him wild. The combination of a short skirt and cowboy boots had him imagining things—hiking her skirt, pushing her panties aside, and taking her from behind. He was sure if he looked closely enough, he'd see her nipples through that thin white fabric.

He took a swig of beer, hoping it'd cool him off, but it

reminded him of her lips. He tried to focus on the music, but all he could see was her swaying hips. Shifting in his seat, he adjusted his jeans, but it didn't help. Relief hit when she shook her head, likely turning down a drink or another dance. Good—she didn't have a date he'd have to deal with, and she wasn't on the prowl. Just seeing her dance partners take her hand twisted his gut. If another guy caught her attention, he knew he'd lose it.

At midnight, Michael watched Susan and Genevieve get ready to leave. Out of nowhere, Chad appeared behind Genevieve in his usual wanna-be-tough-guy pose—arms crossed and legs spread. *Where had he come from? He needed to back off.* When Chad grabbed her arm, Michael's body went to full alert. His fists clenched as he pushed through the crowd, driven by a fierce protectiveness.

Michael planted himself between Chad and Genevieve, who squeaked in surprise. "Let. Her. Go," he ordered Chad.

"You gonna make me?" Chad tried to snarl but failed, sounding more like a schoolyard bully.

"Yes." With one quiet word, Michael conveyed a mortal

threat.

Outmatched in size and fury, Chad wisely backed down and scuttled away, spewing threats.

“Motherfucker,” Michael muttered. His instincts roared—smash Chad’s face in to make sure he never touched Genevieve again. His gaze turned to her. Her tremble ignited an overwhelming urge to pull her close and shield her from everything and everyone. Strung tight from adrenaline, his heart pounded, and his muscles coiled like springs. He needed to calm down and steady his racing pulse. He knew one surefire way to do both—wrap his arms around Genevieve.

“Dance with me,” he demanded.

Her heart skipped a beat as her voice caught in her throat. “Wh... what?”

“Please dance with me.”

“Do you even know how to dance?”

He took her hand without a word, led her to the dance floor, and gathered her in his arms, offering comfort and

protection.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest, accepting his unspoken offer. He held her tight, their bodies swaying to a slow ballad. Every molecule in his body focused on her—her soft skin, sweet scent, and how she moved against him. The soft press of her body made him wish they were alone.

She finally relaxed into him with a soft sigh when he brushed the back of her neck with his fingers. His body, however, remained tense until Tank signaled that Chad had left Syd's.

As his tension eased, he gently kissed the top of her hair. She tightened her arms, showing she was aware of and enjoyed the gentle caress.

17

The world faded away in Michael's arms, leaving only the warmth of his hold. The shift from tough warrior to tender protector caught Genevieve off guard, stirring new desire. His calloused fingers, rough yet gentle, moved across her skin, sending jolts through her. The intoxicating mix of soap, cologne, and his unique scent filled her senses.

Though independent and self-sufficient, she couldn't help but be drawn to his strength and dominance. His effortless handling of Chad impressed her, and her primal, feminine part relished his strong, protective side.

The band started a fast song, but they stayed locked in this embrace. Michael chuckled, his voice vibrating through her. "Try to keep up."

"Game on," she replied with a playful grin as they twirled into spins and dips, moving like they'd done it forever. He was good, really good, and she easily followed his expert lead, even adding a sassy sway of her hips. Susan would be proud. Michael laughed and dipped her so low her hair brushed the ground.

When the song ended, he pulled her into a bear hug.
“We’d better get back to the table and save Susan.”

Though confused, Genevieve didn’t ask for clarification. Hand in hand, they moved through the crowd. At the table, Susan glared at a massive man, her arms crossed, her face etched in anger.

“Genevieve, this is Tank, my best friend.”

“Hi, Tank.” Genevieve hesitated, then turned to Susan.
“Everything okay?”

Susan fumed. “It would be nice if Mr. Touchy-Feely here apologized for scaring me half to death.”

Michael and Genevieve stared at Tank, who remained expressionless and unmoving.

“What happened, Tank?” Michael’s voice was wary.

“She stumbled backward, and I caught her. Shoulda let her ass hit the floor.”

“Oooooo...you.” Susan glared at Tank, sputtering with

anger.

Michael let it go. “Genevieve, let’s get you home,” he said, gripping her hand tighter. He led her to the exit, with Susan and Tank trailing behind.

Once outside, Michael scanned the parking lot like a soldier on guard, keeping Genevieve close. Tank firmly captured Susan’s hand, ignoring her protests, and steered her toward his truck.

When they reached the truck, Michael turned to Genevieve, encircled her waist, and easily lifted her. When her feet hit the floorboard, she glanced over her shoulder and caught him checking out her butt. She’d worked hard for that butt—hundreds and hundreds of squats and lunges.

Unbothered by being caught ogling, he met her gaze and sensually licked his lips. “Wow.”

She tried to mask the involuntary shiver running down her spine. She raised her eyebrows, tilted her head, and smiled knowingly. *Yeah, I know you want that.* This man should come

with a warning label: Lethal to women—date at your own risk.

During the drive, Genevieve recounted the run-in with Chad's at Bottom's Up. Although Michael didn't comment, his profile revealed his angry scowl as he exchanged glances with Tank. At one point, Michael and Tank had a hushed conversation, ending with solemn nods from both. *What was that about?*

Genevieve drifted into thoughts of reuniting with Michael. *Time to stop that nonsense.* Warning herself not to read too much into the evening, she tried to squash her hopes for a future with him. He was just doing his SEAL protection thing. The dancing and hand-holding didn't mean anything or erase his fear of commitment. She squeezed her eyes shut as disappointment washed through her. Nothing had changed.

Michael walked Genevieve to the door when they reached her home, his gaze intense. "I'd like to see you again," he said.

Her heartbeat quickened, and her breath caught in her throat. "What about the 'I'm not the right man for you' speech?"

"Honestly, I don't know." Michael's tone was sober, his

regret clear. “I just know I want to be with you. I’m sorry I said all that.”

With her hands on her hips, she made no effort to hide her irritation. “Are you sorry because you made a choice that was mine to make?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” He took a step closer. “But I’m also sorry I hurt you.”

“I wasn’t hurt, I was angry,” she retorted. “A woman doesn’t like to have decisions made for her.” She softened her words with a small smile.

“Point taken.” He took another step closer. “I’m out of town Monday for a week of training. Are you free tomorrow?”

Her heart beat triple-time. “I can be.”

“Why don’t you plan tomorrow’s date since I planned the hike.”

“Okay. I’ll text you.”

His lips were soft, his breath warm, as he whispered

against her ear. “I want to kiss you goodnight.”

Although her heart slammed against her chest, she calmly nodded her permission.

He placed one hand on the back of her neck and the other low on the small of her back, pulling her close.

Practically purring, she leaned into him, arching like a cat. “I love it when you touch the back of my neck,” she murmured, her voice dropping an octave.

His grip tightened, and hunger flared in his eyes. Lowering his head, his mouth bypassed her lips and attached to her neck, pressing several soft, brief kisses there. Her pulse quickened, her body firing up as his tongue traced her collarbone, leaving a trail of warmth in its wake.

Oh. My. Gosh. Her nipples tightened, her core throbbed, and a small whimper escaped as her insides fired up like she’d touched a live wire. She had never felt this raging, out-of-control desire before. She wanted this man to take her right here, right now, on her front porch in front of Susan, Tank, and all her

neighbors, including Ms. Ruth.

She grabbed his hair, pulled his head down, and attached her lips to his. She wasn't gentle. She attacked his mouth, starved for his kiss.

He was up to the challenge. With a low growl, he took charge. Cradling her face, he sucked gently on her tongue, licking the inside of her mouth. His mouth was hard and demanding, while his hands stayed gentle, overwhelming her senses with their opposing forces. This man knew how to kiss.

The distant hum of a car engine broke through the stillness, but under Michale's tender assault, the rest of the world blurred into the background. He pulled away too soon, leaving her a quivering mass, barely able to stand.

He pressed his cheek against hers, his voice low and guttural. "I want you so badly. My control is stretched thin. Go into the house right now, or I'll fuck you on the foyer floor."

She unlocked the door and stumbled into the house. Before closing it, she whispered, "I think I'd like that one day."

He rubbed his face with both hands. “Fuck, Genevieve.”

Exactly the response she wanted: Michael, frustrated with desire.

As Susan pulled away from the curb, Genevieve noticed Tank’s truck following behind. She was glad they’d see Susan home safely. Grinning to herself, she bit her lip. No way would Susan get the kind of goodbye kiss she had—she and Michael had practically set the porch on fire. Her lips still tingled, and her core throbbed as she locked up the house for the night.

18

Michael and Tank followed Susan home.

“What the hell happened with you and Susan at the club, Tank? Michael asked.

“My touch scared her, and she covered it with anger.” Tank’s eyes widened at the sight of her run-down apartment building. “Damn! Is this where she lives?” Disbelief laced his voice. “She’s too good for this dump.”

Tank jumped out and strode towards Susan’s car, the smell of rotting trash hitting him.

“I don’t need an escort,” Susan snapped, her lips thinning into a straight line as she squared her shoulders. “I walk alone every damn day.”

“Is this place safe?” Tank’s question came off as more judgmental than concerned.

“I’ve never had a problem,” Susan replied defensively.

“I’m walking you anyway.”

Susan slammed her front door in Tank's face as soon as she entered her apartment. The door rattled in its frame, and Tank's jaw tightened as he stared at the chipped paint and flimsy handle.

Back in the truck, Michael chuckled. "If looks could kill, you'd be one dead SEAL."

"She shouldn't live in a place like that," Tank muttered.

"Feeling overprotective? Think she needs to sleep with a big, tough SEAL to keep her safe?"

Tank grunted, changing the subject. "You recognized that white Toyota following us from Syd's?"

"Yeah, I'm sure it's Chad's. Saw it at Susan's gym earlier."

"Sounds like he's stalking her."

"He is." Michael's voice was grim, a knot of worry and anger coiling in his stomach. Had Chad been stalking Genevieve the entire time he'd been away? His fists clenched involuntarily, his knuckles turning white at the thought of Chad near Genevieve. She seemed blissfully unaware of the potential threat."

Tank's deep voice broke through his thoughts. "Gonna see her again?"

"Tomorrow. I'll warn her about Chad."

"Good."

Silence filled the truck as Michael's thoughts wandered. *Damn, that was one smoking hot kiss.* He wanted Genevieve in his bed but knew she wasn't ready. Why was he so determined to win her over? Was it all about the chase? Would he lose interest once he had her? He wasn't sure—pursuing a woman was new for him.

Tank dropped him off with a nod.

Exhausted, Michael collapsed onto his bed. He lay on his back, arms folded behind his head, and closed his eyes, trying to clear his mind. Just as he was slipping into fantasy mode, his phone buzzed. It was Genevieve. His heart thumped.

Genevieve: Let's go sand sailing tomorrow.

Michael: What's that?

Genevieve: You'll see.

Michael: What should I wear? Bring?

Genevieve: Board shorts. Cooler of beer. I like Bud Light
Lime.

Michael: Only board shorts?

Genevieve: Your call. 6 PM.

Michael: Goodnight, Genevieve.

Genevieve: Goodnight, Michael.

19

Genevieve believed Michael had been sand sailing before but didn't know its proper name. It seemed like the perfect second date—no sexual tension and a public setting to keep her in check. Right?

At exactly 6:00, Michael leaned against Genevieve's front door frame, wearing only board shorts and sunglasses—no shirt, shoes, or hat.

Her laughter burst out before she could stop it, and her pulse quickened at seeing him. "I do appreciate a man who can follow directions."

She had packed everything. She paused with her hand on the door, her core tightening as her eyes skimmed over his bare chest. There was no way she could let that hunk of sex into her house. They would never leave.

Michael grabbed the two beach chairs while she picked up her beach bag, which was packed with towels and sandwiches. They hopped into the Jeep and drove to Chesapeake Bay Beach, just a short distance from her house.

He parked and quickly put on a T-shirt, flip-flops, and a baseball cap. Her body melted with a sigh. She could stare at him forever. Why had she thought this evening would be non-sexual? Just the sight of him had her strung tight with nerves.

Together, they carried everything down the short boardwalk to the beach. As they reached the shore, the warm sand shifted beneath their feet. Genevieve closed her eyes, soaking in the breeze—a welcome relief from the day's sticky heat. The waves splashed softly, mixing with the distant calls of seagulls—a calming counterpoint to her nerves.

She pulled herself together. “This evening is perfect for sand sailing.”

“Oh... I get it. Sand sailing is sitting on the beach—one of my favorite activities.”

“To truly experience sand sailing, you have to watch the sun set.” Her tone was solemn, almost like a lecture. “Snacks and drinks might be optional for some, but not for me.”

“I’m on Team Genevieve because I love food and brews

with my beach and babes.”

“Pig,” she accused, her words light and teasing.

“Oink,” Michael returned, his laughter booming.

Their playful banter continued as they laid out the towels, set the chairs side by side, stripped down to their bathing suits, and settled in. Her nervousness melted away.

“Thanks for the beer, Michael.”

“Anything for you.”

His words sent a warm, squishy sensation through her chest. They sat quietly, taking in the calm water and the sky’s blend of red, yellows, and oranges.

“Tell me about your childhood, Genevieve.”

She leaned back in her beach chair, wiggling her toes into the sand. “I was a happy kid. I loved school and playing with my friends.”

“Tell me about your mom.” His gentle voice encouraged her to open up.

Startled, Genevieve froze as memories came rushing back, especially her mother's illness. She swallowed hard, her chest tightening. "She was amazing, so full of life, with a smile that could light up any room." Her voice cracked, and she paused, pressing her fingers into the sand. "Until she got sick. It happened when I was twelve. I took care of her by myself for five long years." Her throat constricted, and a bitter ache filled her chest. "By the end, she was a prisoner in our trailer." *And so was I.*

She hunched over, letting sand slip through her fingers. "I hated that miserable trailer. No matter how much I scrubbed those filthy windows, only a sliver of light ever came through." She rubbed her fingertips together as though she could still see the blood, still feel the pain from the jagged edges of those aluminum screens.

"She died in the middle of my senior year of high school." Arms folded tightly against her stomach, she stared unfocused across the bay.

Michael took her hand, coaxing her to lean against the beach chair. His thumb caressed the top of her hand, back and

forth, and it was so soothing.

“I miss her. She was so kind, and her laugh was infectious. I loved working in the garden with her.”

“Where was your dad?”

“He took off.” Her matter-of-fact tone couldn’t hide her pain.

“Come here.” Michael gently guided Genevieve to his lap and cradled her. He stroked her hair as she rested her head on his chest, crying quietly.

She sighed softly, letting the emotions of her childhood memories fade. For a moment, she just breathed, sinking into his warmth. His hand caressed her back, the steady rhythm soothing her. Her skin tingled where his hands brushed against her, the heat of his body stirring a deep ache. She took his hand and lightly traced his fingers, imagining their touch on other parts of her body.

Collecting herself, she shifted in his lap and ran her palms over the planes of his chest, brushing away traces of her tears. “Ugh, I have soaked your chest.”

“No worries. SEALs perform best in water.” He flashed her a playful grin.

She shifted again.

He inhaled sharply. “Genevieve, if you keep squirming in my lap, stroking my chest, and baring those gorgeous breasts, I won’t be responsible for what happens next.”

“I think it’s already happening. ” She giggled shyly, though her thoughts were anything but innocent. His erection pressed against her, and she wanted to ride that ridge of flesh until their bathing suits disintegrated.

She gasped as he lifted her with effortless strength in one smooth motion. His power! She wanted all that force focused on her, dominating her completely.

He set her on the sand and stepped back, running his hand through his hair. He glanced ruefully at his tented board shorts. “I want to kiss you so badly it hurts. But I won’t want to stop with just a kiss. Damn, woman. You’re hell on my self-control.”

Forget self-control. She’d demand, beg, or even force him

to have sex if needed. What was happening to her?

“Let’s eat the sandwiches before I throw you down in the sand and eat you.”

Yes, please. The erotic image made her cheeks flush as she stepped back, palms playfully facing outwards as if to ward him off. Was she stopping him or herself? Hell, if she knew.

20

Michael knew what Genevieve wanted—her flushed cheeks, parted lips, and quickened breaths said it all. She was ready, and the anticipation was damn near unbearable. Sex with her was going to be fucking hot.

He'd been hyper-aware of her nearly naked body all evening. Her low-slung board shorts framed her waist, and the tiny bikini top barely contained her magnificent breasts. She'd piled her long brown hair on top of her head, leaving her neck exposed—a spot he'd quickly learned drove her wild when kissed.

When she leaned over the beach bag to grab their sandwiches, her bikini top slipped slightly, giving him a teasing glimpse of her dusky brown nipple. His eyes locked onto her chest, captivated by the sway of her heavy breasts, and imagined licking and sucking her nipples until they were swollen and wet. He worried his eyeballs might explode. His cock definitely would. When she caught him adjusting his hard-on, a smug smile of feminine satisfaction spread across her face.

Damn. She knew what she was doing. He didn't care. She

could flex her sexual power over him anytime, anywhere. “I know your game, Genevieve.”

“What are you talking about?” Her voice was coy, and her eyes feigned innocence.

“Be warned... payback is hell.”

“Can’t wait.”

Her carefree laugh warmed his heart, filling his chest with a sweet ache. He grabbed the sandwiches from her hands. “Are these the same? They were damn good last time.”

“I was so mad when I realized I left them in your cooler.”

“I ate all three and loved every bite.” His laugh held no shame.

She harrumphed and gave him a playful scowl. “I hoped they got soggy, and Susan hoped for food poisoning.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Susan and I don't mess around regarding food.”

“What’s in them?”

“Vegetables, hummus, and feta with a drizzle of Italian dressing.

He toasted her with his sandwich. “Bon Appétit.”

They chatted about their lives, enjoying the sandwiches and another beer as they watched the sunset in comfortable silence.

“Why were you ashamed of your parents, Michael?”

He didn’t want her—or anyone—to know about his fucked-up past, but she wasn’t letting it go. What if he lost her respect? Her big, blue, empathetic eyes locked on his, urging him to talk.

“My dad was a janitor, and my mom worked in the cafeteria at my high school. Everyone knew. If I saw my parents at school... I pretended I didn’t.” His hands tightened around the bottle. “Like they didn’t exist.”

“Ouch.”

“They were wonderful parents, and I was a total shit to them.”

“Most teenagers have a skewed view of the world—either fit in or live a miserable existence. I wouldn’t be too hard on yourself. I’m sure your parents understood.”

Her words hit him, leaving him momentarily stunned. She had swiftly and effortlessly absolved him of blame. His gut twisted. Forgiving himself wasn’t that simple, but she offered him a new perspective. Maybe, just maybe, he could open that dark part of his past. His heart told him to go for it. “It felt hopeless, not being able to change who I was—a poor kid whose parents worked menial jobs.” *Unnoticed and unimportant.*

“Maybe... part of why you became a SEAL was to prove something,” she said, her voice thoughtful. “Not just to others, but to yourself—to earn respect for who you are, not where you came from.” She placed her hand over his, the warmth seeping into him. “To be strong enough to protect others, instead of feeling powerless.”

He blinked, momentarily speechless, his grip tightening around hers as her words hit home. Amazed at her insight and warmed by her thoughtfulness, he pulled her to her feet and into

his arms. “You are special,” he whispered, nuzzling her neck.

Genevieve snuggled closer, her body melding into his.

His skin prickled with heat, not just from the setting sun but from the tension that had built between them all evening. “Do you want to come to my apartment and hang out?” Hope colored his voice.

She paused, then shook her head against his chest. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. Part of me wants to go, but you’re still a temptation I’m ready to handle.”

“If I could, I’d dial down my sexiness, but it is what it is.” He laughed as he released her and stepped back.

She rolled her eyes and placed her hand on his forearm. “Thanks for understanding. You’re a good man.”

He kissed her palm. “Don’t tell anyone. Can’t trash my bad boy image.”

Their goodnight kiss on her front porch was almost chaste—soft and gentle, unlike last night’s frantic kiss. He gave her one last soft kiss. “I’ll text you this week when I’m out of

town.”

“I’d like that.”

He strode to his Jeep without looking back. His watch told him it was only 2130, too early to go home, so he called Tank.

“Wanna shoot some pool?”

“Nah, Watchin a game. Come over if you want.”

“Be there shortly.”

Michael let himself into Tank’s apartment, grabbed a beer, and dropped into one of Tank’s two worn recliners.

Tank smirked, his gaze flicking toward Michael as he took a swig of beer. “Guess you’re not getting laid tonight.”

Michael leaned back in the recliner, stretching his legs out. “Not tonight.”

Tank glanced at him sideways, raising an eyebrow. “You gonna see her again?”

Michael shrugged, but the corner of his mouth twitched. “Plan to.”

Tank stared at Michael, a mix of curiosity and skepticism. “Mac, you’re putting a lot of work into one female.”

Michael paused, rolling the beer bottle between his palms. “Yeah, maybe.” He took a deep breath before adding, “She’s fun to hang out with.”

Tank grunted, shifting his attention back to the TV.

Michael stayed at Tank’s for a couple of hours. They talked about work and sports, with easy silences in between.

On the drive home, Michael grappled with his new feelings for Genevieve, his heart racing like no mission ever had. Unable to label them, he knew it wasn’t just a game of chase and conquer anymore—it was something more. He couldn’t promise forever, but he’d treat her with the respect she deserved while they were together.

Damn. Was he really considering a relationship? Facing terrorists never rattled him—his pulse stayed in hostile zones, as the team docs could attest. But the thought of a relationship had his heart racing. He couldn’t plan his way through this. What if he

messed it up? The thought scared him shitless.

He'd planned to bring up Chad, but hearing her talk about her childhood softened him, and he decided to wait. He hoped holding back hadn't been a mistake.

21

Genevieve's heart raced with anticipation. *Michael's home, Michael's home*. The thought echoed in her mind, filling her with excitement.

The enticing smell of garlic and ginger filled the kitchen as she cooked. Her favorite song played, and she couldn't help but dance and hum. She peeled and deveined shrimp, chopped vegetables, and mixed the Chinese sauce.

Their nightly texts had heightened her excitement to a fever pitch, turning her into a bundle of nerves. She looked at her trembling hands. Would she be able to apply her eyeliner in a straight line?

She straightened the kitchen and looked around, satisfied. With dinner prepped, it was time to pull herself together.

On her way to her bedroom, she spotted her wedding photo on the bookshelf. Should she put it away tonight? No. Brian was an essential part of her past—one she wouldn't hide. If Michael couldn't understand and respect that, then he wasn't the man for her.

Her hands shook as she fastened her bra, her breath catching. She slipped on the white sundress, liking how the short skirt swayed with her movements. Was it too dressy? Too sexy? She had agonized over the choice all day. Her thighs tensed as she imagined Michael's fingers brushing against her skin through the open back. She was ready after a quick makeup application—or so she hoped.

She glanced in the mirror and smoothed her dress. She looked good. Her long, blond hair curled softly down her back, with silky tendrils falling in perfect waves around her face. With a slight toss of her head, she imagined Michael's hands tangled in her hair. Would they be rough or gentle? The thought sent a shiver down her spine, and her core throbbed in anticipation.

A knock at the door sent her hand to her fluttering chest. Michael filled the doorway with a six-pack of beer, a bottle of wine, a bouquet of daisies, and a big smile.

She stood before him, trembling with emotions she couldn't control. His thoughtful gifts and warm smile touched her, but his commanding presence stirred a deep desire she hadn't

expected. Feeling like she might shatter, she managed out a strained “Hi” as tears threatened to fall.

Michael took a step towards her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just happy to see you.”

He looked deep into her eyes as he set down the beer, the wine, and the bouquet of daisies. He opened his arms. “Come here, sweetheart.”

She melted into his arms. His scent and warmth enveloped her, filling her with a liquid heat. He kissed her hair, cradled her face, and pressed his lips to her cheeks. His strength and tenderness blended, making her head spin. She parted her lips in response, their tongues meeting in a soft caress while his thumbs traced gentle patterns across her cheekbones.

She brought her lips to his ear and whispered, “Welcome home, Michael.”

22

Michael smiled, soaking in the warmth of Genevieve's greeting.

"You make being home the best part of my day."

Genevieve's smile widened, brightening her face. "You handle the beer and wine, and I'll find a vase for these cheerful flowers."

He playfully twirled her around, admiring her. "You're beautiful. I like those pink toenails."

"Just keeping up with you. You look incredible." Her cheeks flushed, now matching her toenails. "Would you like a drink?"

"We've got two important topics to cover tonight. Do you want to talk first, or should we start with a drink?"

"I'd prefer to talk first. Let's go to the deck." The sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the deck as they settled into their chairs. Genevieve's face tightened as she gripped the arms of her chair, waiting for him to begin.

"First, I want to talk about us. Genevieve, um, I like you,

and, um, I think I could *really* like you.”

Her hands relaxed their death grip on the chair, and her eyes widened in surprise.

“I want us to keep seeing each other. Just the two of us. No one else.” He flexed his finger. “I mean... I’m not seeing anyone else, and I don’t want you to either.” He trailed off. *Damn. Why was he flustered?* He never got like this. But he wanted to get this right. Thankfully, she was quiet, giving him time to think.

He scooted forward and gently traced her knee with his fingertips. “I understand your need to take things slow, and I will honor that. Your pace, your comfort level. I won’t push or seduce you. You’ll have to give me a signal or something to let me know when you’re ready for more... uh... sex stuff. But I’ll wait. *Shit.* He sounded so lame.

He paused, then placed his hands gently over her knees. “What do you think?”

He watched jumbled emotions race across her face—lips parted in surprise, a smile of pure joy, a frown of uncertainty. He

fought the urge to fidget, waiting for her to respond.

She spoke slowly, each word deliberate. “I know you’re sincere and won’t question your certainty. You’re honest and honorable, and I trust you. Thank you for respecting my needs.” She placed her hands on his, her gaze steady and unwavering.

He held his breath and waited for her answer, each second dragging by.

“Yes, yes, YES. I want to keep seeing you, just you.” Her radiant smile crinkled the corners of her eyes.

Relief and happiness flooded through him. He let out a long held breath, his smile mirroring hers.

“I want a relationship with you.” At his panicked look, she chuckled and patted his hand. “Yes, Michael, we’re in a relationship.”

“I’m okay with that,” he managed, clearing his throat with an audible swallow.

She leaned in, her voice turning sultry. “And I’ll make sure you always know exactly what I want and exactly how I want

it.”

Her low, throaty voice went straight to his crotch. “Good to know.”

“So, what is the second serious topic?”

“Whoa. Give me a damn second to adjust to being in my first relationship.”

“Not now. You can do that after we’ve covered the second topic. Start talking.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He admired her confidence—nothing sexier than a strong woman. We need to talk about Chad.”

“Chad? I don’t want to talk about Chad.”

“It’s important. I don’t trust him; there’s something off. He showed up at two different clubs where you were, on different weekends. That’s no coincidence. He’s following you—probably stalking you the whole year I was away.”

“Oh my gosh.” She gasped and pressed her hand against her chest, her voice trembling. “Do you think he knows where I

live? Do you think he's been to my house?"

He hated scaring her, but she needed the truth. "Yes, I suspect he's been here. He drives a white Toyota. Have you noticed one around?"

"How do you know what he drives?" Her voice rose, her eyes filled with disbelief.

"The first time I saw you at the studio, a man waited in a white Toyota. He wore a low hat, hiding his face. Then, a car with the same plates followed us from Syd's."

"You memorized the license plate? Just because he sat in a car?" Her voice climbed to a squeak, her eyes wide.

"I pay attention when my warning sensors fire."

"Wait a minute." She jumped up and began pacing the deck. "My neighbor, Ms. Ruth, saw a white car parked in front of her house on two different nights a couple of weeks ago."

"Definitely stalking you."

"And he hasn't been well-behaved at the restaurant," Sheepishness tinged her confession. "He's always watching me. I

can feel his eyes on me, making my skin crawl. I'm on edge the entire shift, waiting for him to make a move. He hasn't said anything or touched me, but I still feel violated."

Her last words cracked, revealing how deeply Chad's relentless scrutiny tormented her and left her powerless. Her vulnerability fueled Michael's anger more than Chad's stare. "I wish you'd told me sooner," he grumbled, frustration and a hint of reproach clear in his tone.

"Should I be scared? Call the police? Get an alarm? Buy a big dog?" Her questions came quickly, her voice rising with each one.

Michael rose and wrapped her in a firm, reassuring embrace. He gripped her shoulders and locked eyes with her, his expression serious. "The police can't act unless there's an overt threat. Stay aware of your surroundings—people nearby, a slow-moving car. If anything feels off, find shelter immediately. Get inside a building or lock yourself in your car."

, call me. If I'm unavailable, call the police."

“I can do that.” Her hands were cold and clammy against his, her voice wavering despite her attempt to sound calm.

“I’ll have a guy at work check into Chad.”

“Is that...legal?” She searched his face.

“I’ll manage it.” He purposely avoided the legality issue.
“I’ll send his license number to your phone. Memorize it.”

“Okay, I will.” The color drained from her face as she nervously picked at her nails. “I hope I don’t have to deal with him.”

“Me too. Are you okay?”

“I guess. Maybe a little nervous.” Genevieve tried to hide her apprehension with a reassuring smile, but the tremble in her voice gave her away.

She needed a distraction. Michael draped an arm around her shoulders, gently herding her into the house. “Let’s get that drink and kick off this date.”

As they moved inside, the warm air of the house wrapped

around them, a welcome change from the evening chill.

23

Michael pulled a beer from the fridge. “Do you want wine, beer, or something else?”

“I don’t know if I feel like drinking.”

Michael’s heart squeezed at the tremor in her voice, and he was at her side in an instant. “We don’t have to worry about Chad tonight. We have a plan—a good plan. You’ll be safe,” he reassured her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth about Chad earlier. I automatically push any thought of him to the back of my mind.”

Her voice, heavy with self-reproach, made his heart clench with guilt. He’d caused that. Eager to lift the shadow that had fallen over their evening, he gently took her hands, his voice soft and reassuring. “Genevieve, you’ve done nothing wrong. I promise. I understand you don’t want to think about, let alone discuss, Chad. No one wants to dwell on things that upset them or scare them. It’s how we protect ourselves emotionally. But we have a plan for your safety. We can relax and have fun.”

She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against his palm. “You’re right.” She lifted her chin and took a deep breath. “I’ll have bourbon. I’ll make it.”

“Thatta girl.” His praise was warm and encouraging.

He watched her pour a healthy shot of Maker's Mark over ice and add a splash of ginger ale. She took a sip. “Mmm, my favorite drink.”

She pulled a jar from the fridge and struggled to open it. After several frustrating tries, she handed it to him with an exasperated huff. He effortlessly twisted off the lid, and she grumbled, “I loosened it for you.”

“What’s this?” he asked, holding the jar close to his face and examining its contents.

“Homemade pickled green beans and carrots. They’re sweet and sour and have a little kick.”

“Damn! These are good—my new favorite appetizer.” He didn’t miss her small smile of shy pride at his compliment.

He finished his beer, grabbed another, and approached

her. “Let’s toast our relationship.”

“May I propose the first toast?”

“Of course.”

Her lips curved into a mischievous smile. “To clear signals.”

“Hooyah.” Would she send a “ready-for-sex” signal tonight? God, he hoped so. He took her drink and placed it on the counter beside his beer. “I want to make another toast.”

“But you took my drink.”

“I have a different kind of toast—a kiss to seal the deal. Agree?”

“It’s important we do,” she teased, pretending to be serious.

He guided her hands around his neck, splaying his fingers across the smooth warmth of her back. “To us,” he murmured, his lips brushing hers softly—once, twice until she moaned helplessly. Lust surged, but he held back, resisting the urge to let

go. He couldn't lose it—not with her.

Her moans softened, her lips trembling against his as she gasped for breath.

His lips hardened, his tongue licking and sucking her mouth with intensity.

She shuddered in his arms, gasping for air, her body pressing into his. His hands roamed her back, feeling the breathtakingly softness of her skin. Was she this soft everywhere? One hand slid lower, cupping the curve of her bottom, a touch he'd long imagined. He hesitated, waiting, half-expecting her to pull away.

But she didn't. Instead, a small whimper escaped, and she pressed closer, feeding his desire. He slipped his hands under her panties, groaning as his fingers curled into her slick folds. "So hot, so wet," he growled, his voice thick with suppressed lust.

His rock-hard cock pressed against her soft stomach as his fingers explored her wet heat. She rocked against him, pleading for more. Everything felt too good—dangerously good. He needed

to calm the fuck down or risk coming in his shorts.

He reluctantly pulled his fingers from between her thighs, taking a deep breath as his head spun. Her scent was like a drug, intoxicating and addictive. “Fuck. You smell so good,” he rasped. “I want to taste you.”

Her hips moved restlessly, her voice pleading. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

He swallowed hard, fighting the urge to give in. Instead, he held her close and murmured, “Ssh.” Her flushed face and swollen lips made it clear how much she wanted this, wanted him. He could take her right there, but he wouldn’t. He wasn’t going to break his promise not to seduce her. Not yet. He had to earn her trust first.

She shuddered, clutching his shirt, her fingers digging into his waist. “Why’d you stop?” The irritation in her voice revealed her frustration.

He pressed a soft kiss to her temple, breathing heavily. “You wanted to take things slowly.”

“You make me forget why.” She laughed ruefully and blinked rapidly, her eyes unfocused as she glanced around, trying to regain her bearings. “Well... I guess I should, um, I should...”

“Make dinner?”

“Oh yeah. Um, that would make sense.” Her sweet giggle melted his heart.

Michael leaned against the counter, still rock hard, absently rubbing the now familiar ache in his chest. This felt right. He had never enjoyed getting to know a woman or the excitement of extended foreplay. How could he want her so fully—body, heart, and soul?

“Can you cook?” she asked, waving a fork in front of his face, ending his drifting thoughts.

“I want to eat healthy, so I cook. I’m not a pro, but I can follow a recipe and instructions. Tell me how I can help.”

“Everything is almost ready. I need to sauté the shrimp and add the sauce. Why don’t you pour the wine?”

As Michael poured the wine, he congratulated himself on

stopping their earlier sexploration. He didn't want a quick fuck followed by regret or guilt. He wanted her to come to him when she was ready. Damn. Was he becoming comfortable with this relationship stuff? Tank would razz him to death if he knew his thoughts.

They carried their bowls and glasses of wine to her dining room table, where the flowers he brought adorned the center.

“Damn, Genevieve. You can cook. This is delicious.”

“I enjoy cooking, and I love trying new recipes.”

“You should cook for me every day.”

“Not a chance. That's wifey status—I'm barely at girlfriend level.”

“Noted.”

Genevieve rested her head in her hands, elbows on the table. “How did you get the nickname Mac?”

“It's a ‘call sign.’ My team gave it to me,” Mac said, a grin tugging at his lips.

“Are you allowed to tell me why?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s a classic. So, most SEALs have a cheat day, but my body rejects greasy food like poison. One night, the guys tried to ‘educate me’—force-feed me a Big Mac in the back of a car. I fought them off, but the entire car was covered in fries and chocolate shakes by the end. After that, I was forever known as ‘Mac’—and they still stuff my locker with burgers to mess with me.”

Genevieve doubled over in laughter, tears streaming down her face. “That’s hilarious. I bet you still can’t get the smell out.”

Michael felt a warmth in his chest and silently vowed to make her laugh as often as possible. “It haunts me, ” he said, joining her in a booming laugh.

After dinner, while Genevieve cleared the dishes, Michael refilled their wine glasses. As they lingered at the table, their connection deepened. Michael sensed it was time for a deeper conversation. He held her small hand, his thumb gently tracing over her knuckles. “Tell me about Brian,” he said quietly.

24

How was Genevieve supposed to talk about her deceased husband with Michael, who'd had his hand between her legs less than thirty minutes ago? The shift from gentle caresses to sexual heat, then to friendly dinner conversation, was emotionally overwhelming. And the explicit sex talk? It had blindsided her. She wasn't used to that rawness, yet something about it thrilled her, igniting dark desires she hadn't known existed. He'd stopped them just in time. Any longer, and she might have torn off his shirt and sunk her teeth into his chest.

She took a steadying breath, bracing herself to revisit painful memories. "I had known Brian all my life. After my mom became ill, I was essentially confined to the trailer—no sports, no clubs, no football games, no slumber parties, no prom. Brian was my best friend, my only friend."

She paused, a small smile on her lips as she stared into her glass. "One night in our senior year, he kissed me. We were both surprised by the kiss and the feelings behind it, but we were officially a couple after that."

Michael raised an eyebrow. "I doubt Brian was surprised. He was probably in love with you all along. When did you decide to marry?"

She leaned her elbows on the table and rested her head in her hands. "Four months after my mom died, I made a decision." She took a sip of wine. "I had to escape that suffocating trailer with its threadbare carpet, rusted appliances, worn furniture, and chipped dishes. It was a place of hopelessness and despair, once my mom's makeshift hospital room." *And my prison.* She fought to keep the bitterness from creeping into her voice and thoughts. "With my parents gone, there was no reason to stay."

It sounded like she'd married Brian to escape, even to her ears. She hadn't understood the difference between platonic love and romantic love until now.

"We were married for one year, the happiest year of my life." Bittersweet sadness crept into her voice. "Brian was wonderful, and I will always love him." In a whisper, she added, "And always grieve for him."

"Thank you for sharing your story with me. You can talk

about Brian anytime. I respect that he's part of your life and who you are.

Genevieve walked around the table, motioning for Michael to scoot his chair back. She climbed into his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck, and breathed in the subtle scent of his cologne. "My love for Brian doesn't threaten you. You accept him as part of my life."

"I wouldn't be much of a man if I was jealous of him." His arms wrapped around her waist, holding her close. "After everything you've been through, your love for life is incredible. You have every reason to be bitter and angry, but you keep smiling."

She pressed her cheek against his, her heart swelling with memories of Brian and her growing affection for Michael. Then she remembered the kitchen.

"What are you thinking about?"

Suspecting her face had turned beet red, she buried it in his neck. She pushed aside those passionate memories, sat back,

and searched his eyes. “This whole waiting for me to be ready doesn’t seem fair to you.”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry about me. I’m tough. I’m a Navy SEAL. I can take it.”

“But what do you want?”

He tangled his hands in her hair, tilting her head back. “I want everything: your legs around my waist or over my shoulders; you on your back, on your knees, or your hands and knees. I want it all, eventually.”

“Oh, okay.” His words left her breathless—that was all she could manage. The now familiar zing shot from her core to her heart.

“For now, I want your friendship, your laughter, and your company... and, of course, any sex you’re ready for.”

“Fuck, Michael.” She mimicked his tone perfectly—a mix of bemusement, frustration, and lust.

His laugh was the loudest and longest of the night.

She loved how his eyes sparkled when she made him laugh, shedding the grim seriousness of his profession.

Their lingering goodnight kiss was gentle and tender, as if he didn't want to start anything he couldn't finish. *Hah*. She could make it hard for him to resist her. With a mischievous grin, she playfully nibbled on his earlobe.

“Genevieve.” His voice held a clear warning.

She smiled against his neck.

Michael shook his head ruefully, grinning as he walked to his Jeep.

She leaned against the doorjamb and watched him drive away. Warmth filled her chest. He wanted to be with her, respected her boundaries, and understood her needs. He liked her; he really liked her.

She realized she hadn't thought of Brian once while with Michael in the kitchen. The lack of guilt startled her, leaving her confused. Was that good or bad... or normal?

25

“How long has Michael been gone?” Susan asked as they shared lunch in the gym’s office.

“Five long weeks.” Genevieve sighed heavily, her fingers tracing aimless circles on the edge of her plate. “And only one text: ‘Thinking of you.’ The silence is the hardest part. I don’t know when I’ll hear from him again.”

“Only one text?” Susan asked, popping a cashew in her mouth, her eyes narrowing with concern.

“That's not unusual. I researched Navy SEALs online and learned their missions leave them little time for texting.”

Susan sliced a large Honeycrisp apple and divided the slices between them. “Do you worry about his safety?”

Genevieve’s forehead creased. “It’s hard not to. I remind myself that he is highly trained and has his team to protect him.”

“Being a SEAL’s girlfriend is no joke.”

Genevieve gnawed on her thumbnail. “Honestly, I’m more anxious about Chad. I scour every parking lot, constantly

check my rearview mirror, and repeatedly look up and down the street out my front window. My brain never stops worrying.” A shadow seemed to follow her everywhere, her mind unable to quiet the ‘what ifs.’ “What if he shows up at the studio or my home? What if he confronts me on the street?”

“Have you seen him at all?”

“I saw a white car a couple of times—it sent my heart racing—but it was always too far away to catch the model or plate.”

“Hopefully, Michael scared the shit out of him that night at Syd’s.”

Genevieve bowed her head and listlessly pushed her apple slices around her plate with her index finger. This wasn’t easy to admit, but Susan had always been her safe harbor. “I’m staying positive, believing in Michael’s honor and integrity, but I’m worried he’s ghosting me. What if he’s decided I’m too much work, that he doesn’t want a relationship after all?”

Genevieve’s anger flared, replacing her initial sadness.

Spearing an apple slice, she brandished it like a sword. “If he’s changed his mind, he should have the balls to tell me. Is it too hard for the big bad Navy SEAL to give me the courtesy of a face-to-face goodbye? He promised to take care of my heart. Was that just bullshit? Well, fuck him.”

“I think you’re jumping to conclusions,” Susan said in a soothing voice.

Genevieve tossed the uneaten apple slice back on her plate. “I hope so.” She glanced at her plate but couldn’t take another bite, her fingers clenching in her lap.

But she had no experience with happy endings. It was hard to hold on to hope, hard to believe when life had crushed her heart so many times. Her mom’s illness and passing, her dad’s abandonment, and Brian’s death had stolen her optimism.

Too tired to cook, Genevieve stopped by a sandwich shop for dinner. The clink of glasses, clatter of dishes, and low murmur of conversations created a familiar, comforting warmth. Glancing over the dining room, she froze in place, the scene hitting her like a punch—Michael, seated at a high-top table with a young

woman. She took in his rough beard, the beers on the table, and the woman's hand on his arm in one heart-crushing glance.

She blinked, but the image didn't disappear. The air felt thick as she stumbled to the door, her pulse thudding painfully in her ears. Her quaking hands fumbled with the stubborn car door, and tears choked her as she sank into her car, clutching the cold keys. *Michael doesn't want me. He's seeing someone else. Why? What changed?* Her jagged sobs turned to shuddering breaths as she finally managed to start the engine and drive home.

She crawled into bed, fully clothed, and pulled the covers to her neck. Staring into the darkness, she replayed every conversation and relived every touch, every kiss for hours. How had she misread him so completely? He had been so loving and attentive before he left, and she had believed in their relationship with all her heart. He was honest and honorable and had made her feel special.

The following day, Genevieve paced furiously inside Susan's apartment, her footsteps echoing off the walls.

“I will only talk about Michael for ten minutes—set a timer, Susan. I have cried for two days, and I’m sick of being sad, sick of being angry, sick of thinking about that man.”

“If he doesn’t want you, he’s not worth it.”

“Damn right.” She slammed her fist against the counter, each strike driving her point home. “I don’t need a man to complete me, and I don’t want a man who lies to get laid.” Each word reflected her belief in her independence and values.

Susan gently placed her hand on Genevieve’s arm. “I’m sorry. I thought he was one of the good ones.”

Genevieve’s bravado deflated. Resting her hand on top of Susan’s, she admitted softly, “Me too. He made me feel hopeful for a second chance at love.” Disillusioned, her eyes shimmered with pain.

“All of that is still possible, G.”

Genevieve wasn’t so sure. “Okay... enough.” She made a sharp, dismissive chopping motion with her hands. “That’s enough time talking about Mr. No-Balls. Let’s change the subject.

What are we ordering for dinner?"

26

Michael's shoulders slumped as he neared Genevieve's front door. He hesitated, hand hovering, the weight of his decision like a stone in his gut.

She took an agonizingly long time to answer. When she finally opened the door, she stood defiantly in the doorway, arms folded tightly and a deep scowl etched on her face.

Her aggressive stance puzzled him, throwing him off. He spoke tentatively, probing her mood, "May I come in? We need to talk."

"Fine, come in," she said, her voice dripping with hostility. If he weren't so shocked, he'd be impressed by the depth of anger in those three words.

She wordlessly led him onto the deck. The faint creak of the floorboards interrupted the tense silence while the distant hum of a lawn mower buzzed in the background. She down, crossed her legs, and drummed her fingers on the arm of the deck chair.

He winced her tight, closed expression as he rearranged

his chair to face her, the wood scraping loudly in the silence. Clearing his throat, he spoke, his voice rough. “Genevieve, I came to tell you that I, uh, need to end things between us. This ‘thing’ we have doesn’t work for me, and I think we should stop seeing each other. I’m sorry.”

“I’ve got to tell you, the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ excuse is just lame.” Her tone was a snarl, brimming with disdain.

His eyes widened in shock as Genevieve’s cold words hit him. He had expected tears or anger, not sarcastic indifference. He hesitated, unsure of what to say. “Well...I guess I’ll go.” Confusion and defeat tinged his voice. But he couldn’t bring himself to move. He remained anchored to his chair, forearms on his thighs, hands clasped together. He stared at the deck, bracing for her to throw him out.

Genevieve hesitated, her heart and mind locked in a battle. She knew this man—knew his deep-seated commitment to honor and truth. Once her anger had subsided and rational thought became possible, she realized Michael would never intentionally deceive

or hurt her; that's not who he was. There had to be a valid reason for his dinner with that woman.

Searching his face, she saw abject pain in his eyes and sorrow etched on his features. A glimmer of hope flickered. Maybe, just maybe, he didn't want to end things. She paused and then made a bold decision—a reckless, lay-her-heart-on-the-floor-so-he-could-stomp-on-it decision. “I don't believe you.” Her tone was a direct challenge, demanding his honesty.

His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. He inhaled deeply, then blew out a noisy breath, his shoulders slumping and his body deflating. “You're right. That's not the truth. I've been home for ten days. I'm having a hard time.”

Her anger evaporated immediately.

His gaze remained fixed on the deck, his fingers digging into his thighs. “I fucked up,” he muttered, his voice a bitter whisper. “During the training op... I hesitated, made the wrong call.” He swallowed hard. “I let down my team brothers—my brothers—who were counting on me. I should've been sharper, faster. But I wasn't, and it cost us. His voice cracked on the last

word, and his chest heaved with a shaky breath.

“I’ve been struggling,” he admitted, his voice thick with self-reproach. “I can’t get past my mistakes or forgive myself.” He lifted his head, the pain evident in his eyes. “My nightmares are dark, my mood’s raw, and I didn’t want any of this to touch you.”

Her heart ached for him. She wanted to reach for his hands but held back, knowing he wouldn’t want pity. She remained still and silent, letting him say everything he needed to.

He looked deep into her eyes. “I like you, Genevieve... I really like you. I could love you. But this mission reminded me why I don’t do relationships and can’t make commitments. Frequent absences, secret missions, and emotional stress are why long-term relationships seldom last in the Teams. I can’t subject you to that kind of life. You’re too special.”

Genevieve sat in stunned silence, trying to process Michael’s words. She’d expected a curt dismissal or maybe indifference, but not this raw vulnerability. Despite her empathy, she steeled herself, determined to make him face the truth. Her response was direct and unforgiving. “You know you’re not

perfect, right?”

“What?” His voice was a mixture of disbelief and anger.

“I didn’t stutter,” she shot back.

“What the fuck, Genevieve?”

“Don’t swear at me.” She rose, towering over him with a mix of frustration and concern. She fired questions at him like arrows, determined to make her point. “Aren’t training ops for making mistakes? Isn’t that the point? To learn when nobody gets hurt? ”

He scowled at her, his face hardening.

She stood her ground, unfazed by the fire in his eyes. “Your death glare doesn’t scare me, but your need for perfection does. Nobody’s flawless. Everyone makes mistakes, including you. And now, you’ve layered more mistakes on top of the original.”

“I can’t believe I ever thought you were sweet,” he muttered in disbelief.

Narrowing her eyes, she ticked off his transgressions on her fingers. “One: once again, you made a decision that was mine. I, and only I, get to decide how I live my life. Two: instead of sharing your pain with me, you shut me out. Where’s the communication? The trust? What does that say about our relationship?”

He slumped back, forearms on his knees, head bowed. A long silence stretched between them.

It was time for Genevieve to share some truths with him. “I’ve asked myself if I’d marry Brian again, knowing the pain I’d face when he passed.” Her voice was firm and steady. “My answer is always a resounding yes. I’d choose love and loss over a life without love every time.”

She clasped his hands, searching his eyes. Did he understand what she was trying to say? “Michael, nothing is certain. I survived the pain of losing Brian and cherish our memories.”

Michael’s hands gripped hers tightly, his fingers trembling. Despite his attempt to appear strong, she sensed his

turmoil. She wanted to comfort and reassure him but knew that wasn't what he needed. Instead, she squeezed his hands gently, offering silent support.

“Michael, I believe I could love you, too. If it doesn't work out, there will be pain, but I will survive that, too. You must choose 'us' based on your emotions, not mine.”

Come on, Michael. Take a chance.

27

Michael exhaled, finally relaxing as he pulled Genevieve into his lap. “Oh, thank God.” He held her close as if she might disappear. “I missed you,” he murmured as he nuzzled her neck. “I wanted—no need—to share my pain with you. Thanks for fighting for us. I’m all in, all yours.”

“Smart move. I was ready to tie you up to keep you.” Genevieve giggled as she rubbed her cheek against Michael’s chest.

“Even with my stubbornness nearly tearing us apart?”

“I have faith in you, and I believe in us.”

Her forgiveness ignited a sharp, undeniable need in him. He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the kitchen. His lips captured hers, their breaths quickening as the heat between them grew. His tongue teased, slow at first, then deepened with their rising hunger.

And then he attacked.

Their lips collided, tongues tangling in fierce hunger. His

possessive hands roamed her body, kneading her breasts until she arched, moaning her pleasure. Breathless, he broke the kiss and gazed down, his thumbs tracing insistent circles over her nipples until they strained against her T-shirt.

Desire pulsed through him, nearly at its breaking point. Scooping her effortlessly into his arms, he backed her into the wall. Her legs wrapped around his waist as nails raked across his back through the fabric of his shirt. She rode his erection as his hips pumped furiously, both of them lost in the frantic rhythm. And then she surrendered completely, unraveling in his arms, her muscles liquifying.

Still, it wasn't enough. His cock throbbed painfully against his jeans, ready to explode. "I need you. I need to fuck you," he growled, his voice thick with desire. "No more waiting—right here, right now."

"Yes, oh yes," she gasped, her plea a desperate cry for release.

With a swift motion, he pinned her hips to the wall and yanked up her t-shirt.

“Michael, wait.” She unwound her legs, slid down his front, and planted a hand on his chest as if to physically hold him back. A flush of color swept over her cheeks as she caught her breath, pressing against the wall for support.

“I’ve wanted you for so long. I don’t want to wait.” His voice was a low, commanding whisper, demanding her submission.

“I’m not ready,” she cried, her tone a plea for understanding. “I’m sweaty, haven’t shaved, and... am wearing industrial underwear.”

He braced his hands on the wall beside her head, leaned in, and tasted the salt of her skin. “I don’t care. Even if your underarm hair is long enough to braid, I’ll keep my eyes shut when I tear off that underwear. And trust me, you’re only going to get sweatier.”

She stiffened her spine. “I want our first time to be special.”

“It’s gonna be special, off-the-charts, fan-fucking-tastic

special.”

“Michael.” She ducked under his arm, her voice warning him to let it go.

Oh fuck. Was she going to stop them now?

She narrowed her eyes, hands planted firmly on her hips. “You still have to explain that woman in the sandwich shop.”

“What woman?” Still shrouded in a sexual fog, he blinked, trying to shake off his confusion.

“The one touching your arm,” she snapped, grabbing a glass of water.

What in the world was she talking about? When it hit him, he burst into laughter.

“It’s not funny.” She gripped the glass like she might chuck it at him.

“That woman was Tank’s sister. Trust me, you’ve got nothing to worry about.” He swallowed a smile, gingerly taking the water glass from her and setting it safely on the counter. “Tank

was worried about me, so he roped me into dinner with them, that's all."

"I didn't see Tank." Her voice held a note of suspicion that put him on edge.

"Maybe Tank was in the bathroom." As he spoke, a sudden realization hit him. "Shit, did you think I was on a date?" Alarm flooded through him as he grasped the potential misunderstanding.

"Well, duh. You were in a restaurant with a woman, drinking beer."

Michael straightened up, his expression steady and firm. "Genevieve, I'd never see someone else while we were together." His tone was solid, his honesty clear as day.

"I finally figured that out, but when she touched you, I saw red." Her voice wavered as she gripped the counter with both hands.

Her trust moved him, and delighted satisfaction rippled through him. He stood behind her, wrapped his arms around her

waist, and pulled her close. “I’m flattered by your jealousy.”

“I wasn’t jealous, I was ... I was...”

“Jealous? Possessive?” He grinned, enjoying how flustered she was.

She spun and playfully punched him in the stomach.

He quickly concealed his surprise at the strength behind her blow, loving her fiery spirit. His grin broadened. “Did you hurt your hand?”

With a sly look, she ran her hand over her breasts, then cupped her mound.

He couldn’t tear his eyes away, wishing it were his hands—or better yet, his tongue—exploring every inch of her bare skin.

With one finger, she lifted his chin, her smirk and laughing eyes revealing how much she enjoyed tormenting him. “Looks like my hand’s just fine.”

“Cruel... that’s just cruel.” He took a deep breath to shake

off his arousal. “If I can’t have you tonight, I gotta get out of here. Wanna get pizza? We could invite Tank.”

“Great idea. Susan, too?”

“Absolutely.”

“I’ll change quickly. Be right back.”

“Can I watch?” Michael waggled his eyebrows teasingly.

She laughed as she walked down the hallway.

She thinks I’m kidding. “And we’ve got to talk about you wanting to tie me up. I like the sound of that.”

Her laughter floated down the hall, and his lopsided grin creased the corner of his eyes.

28

Later that evening, full of pizza and wine, wrapped in their leggings and hoodies, Genevieve told Susan about her afternoon with Michael.

Susan smiled warmly. “I just knew he was a good guy. I’m so glad things are falling into place for you two.”

“I’m ready to have sex with him.” Genevieve’s bold statement rang loudly in the cramped space of Susan’s living room.

Susan raised an eyebrow. “Well, after he’s kissed you senseless and pinned you to a wall, seems like the next step to me. Go for it.”

“He suggested we go out Saturday night after he gets back. Would you mind swapping our Saturday standing date?”

“No problem. Susan gleefully clapped her hands together as she took charge. “Alright, let’s plan the night.” Cross-legged on the couch, they meticulously plotted Genevieve’s seduction of Michael Poole from the dress to earrings to shoes.

Susan chuckled knowingly. “Trust me, he won’t give a damn what you’re wearing. He’ll just be happy you’re there and willing.”

Genevieve gripped her wine glass tighter as a knot of apprehension twisted in her stomach. She took a steadying breath and plunged ahead, knowing Susan had her back. “I’m nervous about the whole... sex thing. I’ve only been with one man, and that’s all I know. How do I act? What do I do? I know it’s going to be different, but how?”

Susan gently touched Genevieve’s arm. “Tell him what you just told me. Share your feelings and fears before you jump into bed. He’s been understanding up to now, so I’m sure he’ll handle intimacy with the same care.”

A slight boost of confidence and relief coursed through Genevieve. “But how do I control my wild emotions?”

“Out of control is good.” Susan grinned mischievously. “And be seductive.”

Panic returned. “Seductive? I wouldn’t know where to

start.”

“Nothing to worry about. Men are easy. Just touch him or touch yourself.”

“That’s it?” Genevieve asked, skeptical. Could it be that simple?

Susan’s grin widened. “That’s enough for a beginner.”

“I can handle that.” *I hope*. “Thanks for being the wisest best friend ever.”

Susan shook her head with a bitter chuckle. “If I were so smart, I wouldn’t have gotten myself tangled up in the mess I made out of my life.”

“You didn’t make the mess. Bradley did. His dishonesty did, his evilness did.”

Susan shrugged her shoulders. “I do not want to talk about Bradley.”

29

It was time to get ready for Michael. *Sex with Michael!* Her brain buzzed with excitement and nerves as goosebumps rose on her arms.

On her bed lay the seduction outfit she and Susan had planned like four-star generals. She slipped into the smooth, black sheath dress, added diamond earrings, and slid on black strappy three-inch heels. She'd practiced walking in them. Michael was toast.

One final decision: should she wear her necklace with her wedding band tonight? Would taking it off make people think she was no longer committed to Brian? No longer faithful? Wait—what people? Only her feelings mattered, and she'd accepted his death long ago. She'd had no choice.

She'd never had a choice; life had always happened *to* her. But now, she was determined to change that. No more being trampled by fate or choked by circumstance; it was time to seize control of her future. She softly kissed the ring and delicately placed it in her jewelry box. *I will always love you, Brian.*

The doorbell chimed at 7:00, making her heart flutter against her ribs. She gave herself one last look in the mirror and grinned approvingly. Michael didn't stand a chance.

She opened the front door with a big smile.

"Wow," Michael said, twirling his finger and letting out a loud wolf whistle before pulling her close. "You are stunning."

Her heart stuttered, and she swallowed hard. She nodded approvingly at his dark blue blazer, crisp white shirt, and cream slacks, emphasizing his broad chest, trim waist, and long muscular legs. "Still trying to keep up with you. Love your boots," she said with a wink. Once again, she didn't invite him inside to ensure they got to the restaurant.

As he reached for the Jeep's door handle, Susan's voice echoed in her mind: *touch him, touch yourself*. With a bold move, she slipped a finger inside his waistband and tugged him closer. Her other hand fisted in his hair, pulling him down. His wide-eyed reaction fueled her confidence. She bypassed his mouth, pressed a kiss to his throat, and then traced her tongue along his neck.

Every muscle in his body tightened as she continued to tease and taste his skin.

Her lips brushed his collarbone, tasting the heat of his pulse. Determined to provoke more of a reaction, she sank her teeth into his neck and held on with a soft groan.

His entire body shuddered, a deep growl rumbling from his chest. He pulled her body closer, one hand on her butt and the other tangled in her hair.

That was what she wanted. She melted into him.

“Damn, woman, you’re lethal.” He stepped back, gingerly removing her hand from his stomach. “Keep your hands and lips to yourself if you plan on making it to the restaurant.”

Thrilled by her effect on him, she reveled in her newfound confidence. She paused after reapplying her lipstick as they made their way to the restaurant. “I’m not sure if I’m allowed to ask this...”

“Ask me anything. I’ll always answer honestly.”

“How are you coping with that mission? You know, the

one with the mistake?” She winced, wondering if she’d been too direct.

“I’m good,” he answered quickly.

Too quickly. She waited for him to say more, but he stayed silent. ‘I’m good’ was probably his default response to questions about his emotional or mental state. She probed, “Are you sleeping?”

His hands fidgeted on the wheel. “Mostly.”

She sighed inwardly—he was so damn evasive. “Do you want to talk about it?”

His gaze darted towards her. “No need.”

“Hmmm...” She tried another approach. “Do you ever talk to Tank?”

“Talk to Tank?” he scoffed. “Tank doesn’t talk.”

“He might if you needed to.” She’d always found comfort in talking things out with her best friend.

He turned towards her, looking horrified, as if she’d

suggested he drop a baby or wear pink. “If I told Tank I wanted to talk about my feelings, he’d bolt in the other direction.”

She squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Talking to someone who cares can help. I’m here if you ever want to discuss that mission or anything else.”

He pulled his hand back with a scowl. “I can’t discuss missions.”

Exasperated by his stubbornness, she tried to clarify her meaning. “I meant, discuss your feelings about the mission.”

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

Mentally rolling her eyes, she knew letting the topic drop for now was best.

“Thanks for caring.” He retook her hand, squeezing it tightly as if to prove he meant it.

30

Michael was happy. Dinner had been excellent—the food delicious and the conversation stimulating.

Genevieve placed her knife and fork across her plate and took a sip of wine. “So, what are your hobbies? What do you like to do when you’re not in SEAL mode?”

He hesitated, his gaze dropping to his plate as his fingers absently toyed with the tines of his fork. Doubt crept in. What if she thought his answer was lame? Bracing himself, he decided on honesty. “Don’t know if this counts as a hobby, but I like learning.”

She replied immediately. “I think that’s a hobby, a good one.”

Relief washed over him. Eager to share more, he leaned forward. “I like learning about all sorts of stuff, from mechanics to cultural customs to self-improvement.”

“You know, I was thinking about you the other day and...
”

He interrupted her with a broad grin. “You were thinking about me?”

She shot him a playful look of disapproval. “As I was saying, I was thinking about you and wondered if you’d enjoy photography, especially nature shots. You were so knowledgeable on our Back Bay hike.”

He leaned back in his chair, mulling it over. “I’ve never really thought about photography. I could give it a try—sounds like a fun way to learn something new. Good suggestion.”

She beamed at him.

“How about you, Genevieve? You mentioned you like to read. What kind of books do you read?”

“Romance mostly—historical romance.”

“With lots of sex scenes? He smacked his lips and playfully ogled her. “Will you read some of the dirty stuff to me?”

“Hmmm... I might.”

He growled with anticipation. “Oh, yeah.”

“I’m a little warm.”

The coy tone in her voice caught his attention. What was she up to?

She slowly slipped off her jacket, her fingers grazing the soft curves of her breasts, dipping into the deep valley between them. She leaned in close and whispered, “Tonight’s the night.”

“The night for what?” Michael asked, his voice thick with confusion and desire. How could he be this turned on by just the top of her breasts? His heart was about to explode.

“I want to make love with you tonight.”

All his blood rushed to his cock, leaving him barely able to think. “Oh,” he managed, his mind swamped with every fantasy he’d ever had about Genevieve. For once, his brain—sharp even in a firefight—had completely shut down.

“Michael, are you alright? Did you hear me?”

Un-fucking-believable. He forced himself to focus. “Damn, give a guy some warning next time. I’m about to have a stroke.”

She giggled. “That was your warning. We’re having sex tonight. All night. Does that work for you?”

“Hell yes it works for me. I want you so much I can barely breathe. I’ve wanted to fist your beautiful hair and pull you under me all night. I’d drag you out of here right now if I didn’t have an erection that could knock down walls.”

Her eyes flashed. “Well, lose that erection so we can get out of here.”

How in the hell could he do that when all he could think about was fucking Genevieve?

Genevieve gripped the armrest as he drove with laser focus, his fingers white-knuckled on the steering wheel. He sped well over the limit, making conversation almost impossible.

She trailed her fingers along his thigh, reveling in her new sexual confidence. He jolted, his body stiffening. “Genevieve, don’t. Not now.” He gently placed her hand back in her lap. “I’m too wound up—I can’t focus. Behave so we get home safely.”

She jumped out of the Jeep when he parked, forcing him to hustle to catch up.

“In a hurry?” He nestled her butt in his crotch as she fumbled to open the front door.

“I can’t think when you’re doing that.”

In response, he slid his hand up her thigh, tugged her thong aside, and stroked her sex. “You’re already wet for me.” He licked his fingers.

Her keys crashed to the ground. She was going to come before they made it inside.

He picked up her keys, nudged her aside, and opened the door. Capturing her hand, he led her determinedly down the hallway.

Now, she was the one hustling to keep up.

“Which bedroom is yours?” he demanded.

Panting, she pointed to the door on the left. “This one.”

31

Genevieve stood before Michael, nervously twisting with her fingers. In just a few moments, she and Michael would be naked and intimate. She trusted him, but tonight, she felt different—vulnerable. She wasn't afraid of him—he'd never harm her—but he was a dominant, alpha male, and she would be powerless under his touch. Unease tightened her chest. She was about to lay herself bare—body and heart—and that left her feeling exposed, without a way to shield herself.

"I'm nervous, Michael." That was the understatement of the year—she was seriously unglued.

He wrapped her in his arms. "Sssh, sweetheart. I'll be gentle. I'll go slow."

That did not help. "I'm on birth control," she blurted, cringing at her awkwardness.

"Ok... good to know."

"And... I haven't slept with anyone since... since Brian."

Why couldn't she stop divulging information? Not seductive at

all.

Michael searched her face, his eyes thoughtful. “I haven’t been with anyone for over a year—since before my deployment.”

“A year?” Her voice squeaked in disbelief.

“And I always wear a condom. Always. SEALs don’t take risks—physicals every month, no surprises.

“Good, then you won’t have to wear a condom. I don’t like their look, feel, or smell.”

“Go bare? Hell, I’ve never done that.” He choked out the words, his voice rough. “But I’m all in,” he added quickly, as if afraid she’d change her mind.

“Michael, there’s something else.”

Fuck! What else could there possibly be? Michael barely had time to process the whole condom issue.

Genevieve’s voice was a whisper. “I’ve only ever been with... Brian.”

He saw the uncertainty in her eyes and paused to gather his thoughts, choosing his next words carefully. “Genevieve, this is my first time with you, so this will be new for me too. I hope you’ll tell me what you like, what you don’t like, and what you need. As long as we talk to each other, we’ll figure “us” out. And if you want to stop at any time, let me know. I’ll stop immediately.

When her shoulders relaxed, he knew he’d said the right thing. “Now, let’s get you out of that pretty dress.”

32

Genevieve started to remove her jacket, but Andrew gently pushed her hands aside. “Let me.” He took a hanger from the closet and placed it on the bed. Standing behind her, he swept her hair over one shoulder, exposing the graceful curve of her neck. He removed her jacket and unzipped her dress, captivated as she stepped out. He meticulously hung the dress and jacket on the hanger and, without a glance, tossed the hanger into her closet.

Time froze at the sight of her in black lingerie that barely covered her curves. The image burned itself into his mind. What was it about scraps of black lace against bare skin that was so erotic? His lips trailed across her bare shoulders, his voice thick with desire and suppressed need. “You take my breath away,” he murmured between kisses.

“Michael.” Breathlessly, she leaned into him.

Her pliant softness made him pause: her small, soft body—all his. As he held her, everything else disappeared—only her scent, her touch, and her desire for him remained. “Genevieve.” His whispered words held a note of wonder.

His hands roamed her body, lingering at the curve of her waist, caressing the softness of her hips, and gently cupping the firm fulness of her bottom. He nipped at her neck, savoring the taste of her skin as she gasped in pleasure. He couldn't get enough of her. With every touch, every kiss, he felt his control slipping away.

Her full-body shiver drove him wild—she wanted him as much.

He unhooked her bra and turned her to face him. She bit her bottom lip, her hands splayed protectively across her chest, her nerves showing. Once again, he pushed her hands aside. He hooked his index finger into the center of her bra and tugged. Her breasts spilled out lush and full, their dark areola and voluptuous sway calling to his primal instincts. Lust surged, demanding that he mate—mount her, impale her on his cock, and fill her with his cum. But fuck it all, he'd promised to be gentle and slow.

With trembling muscles and clenched fists, he fought to keep his promise. Gently, almost reverently, his lips traced the tops of her breasts, his tongue worshipped every inch of her sensitive

areola, and his thumbs lightly grazed her nipples, causing them to harden in response.

His gaze trailed down over her quivering stomach until it settled on the mound of golden curls between her legs. His cock jumped, demanding immediate release. His dick sure as hell didn't want slow and gentle.

She softly whimpered as he cupped her sex, covering his hand with hers. Her shyness was an aphrodisiac, fueling his desperation to claim her.

He slowly slid her thong down her legs, his gaze fixed on her as if memorizing every inch of her body. When she stepped free, he stayed on one knee, his palm pressing firmly against her bare bottom, urging her closer. Her musk filled the air, making his mouth water.

She gently pushed his head away, her expression filled with hesitation and uncertainty.

He looked up and saw her doubt. "Your scent drives me wild,"

She dropped her hand and squeezed her eyes shut, giving herself to him. Yet, he pulled back, his instincts telling him to be patient. He didn't want to rush or embarrass her—yet.

As shadows filled the room, he switched on the bedside lamp. His gaze traveled up her body with a fierce hunger, his voice a low, dangerous growl as he whispered, “I like to look.”

33

A shiver of anticipation raced down Genevieve's spine. She hugged herself, pressing her arms tightly against her sides. She was in over her head—way beyond her limited experience. *Now would be a great time for my inner sex goddess to stop hiding.* A nervous laugh bubbled up, but she swallowed it back down.

Her eyes snapped open at the thud of his boots hitting the floor. Michael stood before her, built like a god—muscled back, trim waist, and tight butt. She couldn't look away as he turned to face her.

And then she saw it—his cock—thick and long and roped with veins. The head, pulsing with need, was so engorged that it was almost purple. She couldn't help but gasp. *Would it fit?*

“Come here, sweetheart.” His voice was a gentle demand.

She froze, her lips pressed together tightly. Her core clenched and throbbed as her eyes moved between his impressive erection and his chiseled chest.

He moved closer, his muscles rippling with each step.

Looming over her, he asked in a low growl, “What do you want, Genevieve? What do you need?”

Fight or flight? She could do neither. Anxiety tightened her chest, but a thrill shot through her at the thought of his touch. His pull was irresistible. She gathered her courage. “Kiss my breasts, suck my nipples.”

His eyes blazed with raw hunger, his cock jumping with desire. “I can do that.”

His voice held a dark promise, melting away the last shred of hesitation. In one swift motion, he laid her on the bed, her head on the pillow. He propped himself on one elbow beside her, his gaze roaming hungrily over her body.

Embarrassment and arousal warred within her. She clenched the sheets, caught between the urge to cover herself and the desire to reach out. But she couldn’t move, her muscles liquifying as his lips and hands explored every inch of her breasts.

Her surrender shattered Michael’s control. He growled and devoured her breasts with his mouth and tongue. She grabbed

his shoulders and arched her back, moaning long and low. Strung tight as a bow, her core thrummed wildly. She begged for more, pressing her thighs together to put pressure on her clitoris—anything to relieve the searing tension.

His lips crashed onto hers, his tongue ravaging her mouth—tangling, swirling, stroking, exploring every crevice.

She moaned, her body aching as she tangled her fingers in his hair. She broke the kiss with a gasp. “Michael, I want more, I need more. I want you inside me, moving inside me.”

As if waiting for her demand, he mounted her immediately. Supporting his weight on his elbows, he locked eyes with her, desire burning in his gaze. I’ve wanted to fuck you since the moment I saw you.”

Her desire spiked at his raw confession. Heat flared between her thighs, and she felt the slickness of her arousal. She was ready for him. She dug her nails into his muscular shoulders and wrapped her legs around his waist. He wasn’t getting away.

His deep laugh of satisfaction enveloped them. With a

practiced motion, he palmed his cock and guided himself to her entrance.

She stiffened at his touch.

“Relax, sweetheart. You can handle me.”

She raised her hips, inviting him inside.

34

Michael slid into Genevieve slowly, savoring the way her body stretched to fit him. Her warm juices flowed, easing the way as he pushed deeper. He paused, his bare cock throbbing as her pussy clenched around him. *In-fucking-credible*. “You’re so tight, so wet... so perfect,” he murmured.

Genevieve’s nails raked across his shoulders, and her hips rocked erratically—his cue to take control. Her breasts moved with each thrust, the rhythm mesmerizing. Her moans grew louder, a clear sign that she was close, but Michael was determined to push her over the edge first. He growled his command. “Touch your clit.”

“Michael...I’m so close, so close... please..”

Her desperate plea spurred him into action. He moved one hand between their bodies and pressed her sensitive bud against his pounding cock. “Come for me, sweetheart.”

As she reached the peak of her climax, her breathless chant filled the room. “Michael... it feels so good...so good.” When she came, she screamed her pleasure. “Yes, yes, yes.”

His eyes rolled back, and his balls tightened as her pussy rhythmically milked his cock. He was close. With a final surge of frenzied thrusts, he came, waves of euphoria washing over him as his cum spurted into her hot depths. He surrendered to pure ecstasy.

He couldn't think or move—he'd never come so hard. Her final spasms kept him buried deep inside, his mind short-circuited. Then, he heard her crying. "Genevieve, what's wrong?" Panic tinged his voice. Had he hurt her?

She tightened her arms around his shoulders and buried her face in his neck. "I'm...I'm fine, fine." Her waterlogged voice held a note of awe. "More than fine. Wonderful." She swiped a tear from her cheek, giving him a shaky smile. "These are happy tears, I promise."

He'd done that—given her so much pleasure she cried. His chest swelled with pride. "It was fantastic for me too." Michael stroked her cheek, wiping away the tears with his thumb.

"Off the charts, fan-fucking-tastic?" she teased, grinning through tears.

“Abso-damn-lutely.” It was true. *Damn*. Just missionary, and it was the best sex of his life. Was that what love did to sex? *Whoa, hold up*. Love? No way. Not possible. It was their first fuck, for fuck’s sake. He didn’t even know her favorite color. He gave her a loud, smacking kiss, then jumped up, shaking off those uncomfortable thoughts. “I’ll grab a warm washcloth.”

She relaxed as he cleaned between her legs, her shyness gone. He fucking loved her newfound confidence. He rinsed the washcloth and left it on the bathroom counter—for next time.

When he returned to bed, she was almost asleep. *No ‘afterplay’ needed tonight*. He chuckled. As he crawled between the sheets, the scent of sex mixed with the faint freshness of soap clinging to the air.

“No snuggling. Too hot,” she mumbled and then promptly fell asleep.

The quick stab of disappointment surprised Michael. He usually slipped out after sex— no strings, no snuggling—so why this need to keep Genevieve close?

He decided not to overthink it and gathered her in his arms, quickly falling into a dreamless sleep.

35

Michael's lips grazed Genevieve's forehead, eyes, and temples, stirring her from sleep. He nuzzled her neck, his breath warm on her skin. Half asleep, she luxuriated in his tenderness. Then his mouth crashed onto hers, desperate and demanding. Genevieve jolted awake, heat surging through her veins. From deep sleep to fully aroused in under 60 seconds, Genevieve's passion ignited.

He shifted towards the end of the bed, ravenously kissing her breasts and stomach. He placed his hands on the mattress beside her hips and used his shoulders to nudge her legs apart.

Her heart pounded with panic. His head was between her thighs, closer than anyone had been. Was he really going to... oh no, surely not? Frantically, she pressed against his broad shoulders, her voice quivering. "Michael, wait. Brian and I never, I mean, I've never..." She trailed off, unable to voice the truth.

Michael grinned and sat back, his hands resting on her parted thighs. "You're beautiful down there. I want to taste you."

Self-conscious, she covered herself with both hands, her voice strained. "Really? You want to...do that?"

His wicked grin said he was determined to break down her barriers. He leaned closer. “Yes, I want to go down on you.”

Mortification swept through her, and she tried to close her thighs, but his shoulders blocked the way. She scrambled for an excuse. “But I don’t shave or wax or... anything. And I haven’t showered since, you know, last night.”

“I don’t care. Cover yourself in dirt and sweat—I’d still devour you like my last meal.”

“Oh.” Torn between wanting to please him and embarrassment, she threw her forearm over her eyes. Maybe not watching would help.

“Let’s try it, and if you don’t like it, I’ll stop.”

Doubt lingered, but she nodded, unable to refuse him.

He stayed on his knees and spread her labia with his fingers.

Curiosity took over, and her eyes snapped open. She squirmed under his intense stare, heat flooding her face as she recalled last night’s comment, “I like to look.” She tried again to

close her thighs.

He propped her thighs open with his broad shoulders and lowered his chest to the mattress. His tongue was hot as he took a long swipe of her sex. Then another.

Nothing had ever felt so good, so primal, so raw. At that moment, she was entirely at his mercy. She gripped the sheets with white-knuckled fists, teetering on the edge of a thrilling unknown.

He latched onto her clitoris, sucking and licking her to the brink of orgasm. The man knew what he was doing. The overwhelming urge to come escalated into an unbearable need. Her body demanded a release from the intense pressure.

He looked up. “Do you want me to stop?”

She grabbed his hair, her embarrassment gone. “No, Michael, don’t stop. Don’t stop.”

With a deep laugh, he resumed eating her out. He plunged two fingers into her dripping core, thrusting and curling them expertly as he sucked on her swollen clit. The exquisite tension built and built until she shattered into a million pieces, screaming

his name as an orgasm ripped through her.

She let her arms fall limply to her sides as a warm glow spread through every inch of her body—tingling toes, throbbing sex, pounding heart. “Incredible,” she gasped, her voice filled with awe and wonder. “I came so fast, so hard.”

“Happy to please you.” He chuckled and licked her sex one last time. “You taste delicious.” He climbed up her body and claimed her mouth.

“I taste myself.”

His body went rock hard at her shy admission, and with a feral growl, he let his carnal instincts take over. Wild and almost out of control, he pinned her wrists to the mattress with one hand, guided his cock to her soft opening with the other, and thrust inside—no gentleness, no finesse, just wild passion. Fine with her.

He rode her like a wild animal, his balls slapping against her ass. The wet, sucking sound of his thrusts filled the room, mixing with his grunts. His face, hard with intensity, hovered over hers as he drove towards orgasm.

With a sudden burst of confidence, she slipped her fingers inside herself, the movement of his cock stoking her desire. Thrilled by the fury of his excitement and eager to push him over the edge, she cupped his balls. His cock impossibly hardened further. In a frenzy of passion, he buried his face in her neck and let out a primal shout as he released himself inside her. “Fuck, Genevieve, fuck,” he cried out before collapsing on top of her, his chest heaving.

“Well, good morning to you, too,” she teased, a bright smile lighting up her face.

“Nothing better than a hard, fast morning fuck. Not that I’ve ever had one. A downside to ‘fuck and flee.’”

“That’s so poetic.” Playful sarcasm laced her tone.

He laughed and nipped her shoulder. “Tears again this morning, sweetheart?”

“I can’t stop them.” The pleasure from his lovemaking overwhelmed her—she had no choice but to let herself go. It felt too damn good—like floating weightlessly off a cliff then sinking

into a pool of ecstasy.

his gaze locked onto hers. “I get it. I’ve got feelings I never expected—good ones.”

Warmth spread through her chest. He’d been so tender and caring, treating her as someone precious—someone who mattered. And she’d driven him wild—her! It almost felt like a dream.

Michael turned to her with a playful tone. “I could stay in this bed for a week; there’s so much I want to do to you. Hell, a week might not be long enough. But I’ve got PT, physical training, at 0700, and being late is not an option.

“Why do you have PT on a Sunday morning?”

“We leave on a mission tomorrow morning for specialized training.”

“Shoot, I wanted to spend the day wrapped in your arms. I didn’t think you’d leave again so soon. I’m getting a crash course in the life of a SEAL’s girlfriend,” she said with a disappointed pout.

He gave her a quick kiss. “I’m going to take a shower and then head out. I’ve got a change of clothes in the Jeep.” He stopped at the bedroom doorway, looked over his shoulder, and shot her a suggestive wink. “By the way, that thing with your hand—cupping my balls—mind-blowing.”

“Happy to please you,” she said, echoing his quip. Her sex contracted at the memory.

36

Genevieve lay in bed, wrapped in blankets and contentment. Her sexual confidence was off the charts. She could easily tell the difference between last night's lovemaking and this morning's fucking. Both had been perfect. She was drifting back to sleep when Michael stormed into the room.

"We've got a problem, a big problem."

Startled, Genevieve jerked upright, her heart pounding. "What's wrong?"

"That fucker, Chad, was here last night. I'm going to end him." His voice was eerily calm voice despite the lethal threat.

"What? What do you mean Chad was here? How do you know?" Her breath caught at the sight of him—flushed cheeks, tight lips, veins bulging. The room seemed to shrink as his fury filled the air.

"That motherfucker wrote on your car's windows. I can't stay to help clean it up. If this were a normal PT, I'd get approval to miss it. But it's not, and I've got to leave now."

She hid her fear, resolving to handle the situation on her own. “I understand. I’ll take care of it.” “I’ll call as soon as I can.” Frustration sharpened his voice as he barked orders. “Be extra careful today, Genevieve. Lock all the doors. Head on a swivel. Run if you feel threatened.”

Despite her fear, she tried to reassure him. “I will, Michael. I’ll be safe. Go to work now. I’ll be fine.”

He stormed to his Jeep, his face etched with rage. She stood at her door and watched him roar out of the driveway—no kiss or hug or smile goodbye.

She tightened her robe and walked towards her car. Big, ugly, red block letters spelled “whore” on every window. Her heart stuck in her throat. Why would Chad do this? What did he want?

She raced back into the house, quickly changed into shorts and a T-shirt, and threw her hair into a messy bun. She grabbed her phone, Windex, and paper towels, dashed back outside, and snapped photos of the obscene writing. As she scrubbed, her grip strangled the paper towels, her fear shifting to anger. Who the fuck did Chad think he was? How dare he invade her life like this? Her

hands shaking, she grabbed her phone to vent to Susan.

Susan rushed over without hesitation to offer Genevieve support and reassurance. “What the fuck?” Susan muttered as she scrolled through the photos on Genevieve’s phone. “This guy is stalking you. He’s seriously unhinged.”

Genevieve paced the living room, her stomach twisted with anxiety. “What’s his motive?”

“I don’t think he has one, at least not one a rational person could understand. They make chainsaw horror movies about this kind of guy.”

“I know.” Genevieve’s voice quivered with dread as grotesque images from those films flashed through her mind. She bent over, hands on her knees, taking several deep breaths to steady herself.

She and Susan spent almost two hours weighing the pros and cons of Genevieve’s limited options for dealing with Chad. When Susan left, Genevieve locked her door, something she never did during the day. What in the world was she going to do about

Force Of Nature

Beth Ellis

Chad?

37

“You’re not going to do anything about Chad, Genevieve.”

Michael’s voice boomed over the phone. “I. Will. Handle. Him.”

“But how? How can he be stopped? What can you do?”

Hearing the fear in her voice, he softened. “Tank and I will handle Chad. We’re gonna talk to him, just talk. But, when we’re done, he won’t dare come near you. Gotta go. See you later.”

Tank stood nearby. “Sounds like I’m needed.”

“Yup. I’ll explain on the way. First, I need to grab some intel from Geek.”

Geek, the team’s tech specialist, handed Michael a couple of pages on Chad: legal name, address, workplace, and personal history.

“Who is this guy, a terrorist?” Geek asked.

“No, just a fuckin douchebag,” Michael replied. “It’s personal. Thanks, man.”

Michael and Tank sped out of the parking lot, tires

squealing. “Read me the highlights,” Michael demanded.

Tank’s voice turned serious as he skimmed the file. “...troubled childhood, a stint in the military, and, get this, a slew of restraining orders.”

“That sounds about right,” Michael said through gritted teeth.

“He works as a security guard for a gated community at the south end of the beach—the 1800-0600 shift.”

“Perfect. Chad’s apartment should be empty by 1745.”

“Wanna tell me why we’re going to Chad’s apartment?”

Michael described the writing on Genevieve’s car and outlined the plan. “I want to search his place; find anything we can use on that asshole. Then, we’ll make sure he stays away from Genevieve.”

“Sounds like fun.” Tank’s chortle filled the Jeep. “Per usual, I’ve got your back.”

“Hooyah!”

By 1745, they reached Chad's rundown apartment complex—overgrown grass, unkept shrubs, peeling paint. Tank forced the door open with his usual efficiency.

“What did that take you? Twenty seconds?” Michael nodded, impressed but not surprised. Tank was a breaching specialist.

“As easy as opening a pack of gum.”

They cleared each room quickly. The place was filthy—there was more trash than furniture. The stench of stale beer and rotting food stunk up the air and clung to their skin.

“This apartment is a cliché.” Michael snorted, wrinkling his nose. “The EPA should lock down the kitchen and bathroom.”

Tank agreed. “Would gag a maggot.”

Chad's bedroom was the final room to clear. Michael stopped in the doorway, his chest tightened with fear-tinged rage. The sight before him felt like a violation. “Motherfucker,” he snarled.

Tank stopped beside him and followed Michael's line of

sight. His words echoed Michael's thoughts. "That fucker is a dead man."

Photos of Genevieve plastered the far bedroom wall—leaving her studio, going into the grocery store, entering her home.

"Those close-ups mean he's got a telephoto lens. Find that fucking camera." Michael barked as he ripped the photos from the wall along with a good deal of paint.

Tank quickly found the camera and telephoto lens under Chad's bed. "Stupid motherfucker doesn't know how to protect his gear."

"Take everything. What's Chad gonna do? Call the police?"

They returned to the Jeep within eight minutes. Tank gripped the dashboard as Michael peeled out of the parking lot. "Where are we going now?" Tank asked.

"To have a conversation with that little pissant." Michael had a stranglehold on the steering wheel. He wished it was Chad's throat.

Michael's lip curled when they pulled up to the gated community where Chad worked. "This is his security job? That pathetic vinyl-sided guard shack and lame-ass mechanical arm? Is that supposed to keep criminals out?"

Tank snorted. "This is just embarrassing. A class of kindergarteners could breach this community."

As Michael moved to exit the Jeep, Tank grabbed his arm. "American soil. American citizen. Be smart."

Michael nodded. An assault charge could get him kicked off the Teams. Shooting the little fucker wasn't an option.

Chad trotted over, red-faced and puffing for air. He stopped short and whined, "You can't park there. You're in front of the guard house."

"You mean that little toy hut?" Michael's voice was a mocking sneer as he jumped from the Jeep.

"This is private property," Chad blustered.

Michael silenced him with a raised hand, the universal 'shut the fuck up' signal. Jaw rigid, eyes blazing, he spoke in a

low, dangerous tone. “Come near Genevieve again, and I’ll end you.”

“I didn’t...” Sputtering to a stop, Chad paled as Michael stepped closer.

Michael pivoted abruptly and returned to the Jeep without a word. Mission accomplished.

Tank’s lips twisted in a half-smile on their way back to base. “Wish I could see Chad’s face when he notices the camera and photos gone.”

“There’s a manilla envelope in my bag on the back seat. Put those photos in it, would you? Do you think I should tell Genevieve about them?”

“Truth’s always right, bro. She deserves to know.”

“I know you’re right, but those photos will scare her.”

Tank grunted.

“Maybe that’s for the best.” Michael frowned, his voice thoughtful. “Genevieve never spotted Chad, even though he’s

been close enough to get those photos.” His voice hardened. “That little turd. I want to slice his carotid.”

After dropping Tank off at his car, Michael headed to Genevieve’s, each mile bringing him closer to a conversation he dreaded.

38

“Michael... you’re finally here.” Genevieve jumped into his arms, kissing him repeatedly. She wrapped her legs around his waist, burying her face in his neck, absorbing the warmth of his body and the steady beat of his heart. In his arms, her fears about Michael confronting Chad disappeared.

He carried her inside and set her down just past the door. With a firm, passionate kiss, he gripped her hips and pressed against her. “Talk or bed?”

“Bed,” she gasped, her voice thick with desire.

He didn’t need another word, pulling her eagerly down the hall. Eyes locked, they tore off their clothes, leaving them strewn across the floor in their urgency. He lifted her effortlessly, laying her on the bed before climbing on top. His mouth met hers as he entered her with a deep, powerful thrust.

She gasped as his size stretched her to the limit—he was big, and she was not thoroughly wet.

He slowed his thrusts. “Did I hurt you?”

“In the best way possible. But slowing down was... good.” She smiled, stroking his face.

“I couldn’t wait any longer,” he murmured, his voice thick with need. “I needed to be inside you, as close to you as possible.”

He seemed tense—his movements were almost rough, his face set in hard lines. She considered asking if something was wrong but decided against it. Right now, he needed her, and she’d be there to help him shake off whatever weighed on him. Explanations could wait.

His thrusts were unrelenting. “You’re soaked for me now,” he growled with pride. “Your body was made for this, for me.”

“Your cock feels incredible. Fuck me, Michael. Fuck me hard.”

He pounded into her like a man possessed—she could only hold on and joyfully endure his sensual assault.

Their intensity reached its peak. “Touch yourself,” he gasped. “Make yourself come. I can’t hold back.”

She didn't hesitate, pressing two fingers against her clit as he thrust with near-mad intensity. They reached their climax together, collapsing into each other, breathless and intertwined.

She gasped for breath, laughing softly. "I thought simultaneous orgasms were a romance novel myth," she murmured, her voice thick with satisfaction.

"Just wait until I show you what else I can do. I make the impossible happen." Michael wagged his eyebrows, his chuckle rumbling deep in his chest.

Genevieve giggled, rolling her eyes at his boast.

He tenderly brushed damp strands of hair from her face, then suddenly rose and moved between her thighs, forcing them apart as he stared at her sex. "I want to see something."

The man did like to look.

"You should see this, Genevieve. My cum, your juices, together—dripping from you. So damn beautiful. Damn. Makes me want to fuck you all over again."

After lingering a bit longer, he lay beside her and pulled

her into his arms. She scooted back against him, and they lay silently, their breathing slowing together. The steady rhythm calmed them, easing his dark mood and the intensity of their lovemaking.

She'd done it. He demanded, and she met his needs. He dominated, and she matched his strength. Pride filled her—she'd helped her warrior regain his balance.

“I could hold you like this forever,” he murmured.

Forever? A nervous flutter stirred in her stomach. Did he mean it, or was it just something people said? Did she even want forever?

His quick kiss and serious tone interrupted her thoughts. “Unfortunately, we need to discuss Chad-the-Pervert. Let's get dressed so we can talk.”

Her musings stopped immediately.

Michael carried two glasses of water and a manilla envelope to the deck, with Genevieve trailing behind him. “What's in the envelope?” she asked, eyeing it warily like a bomb.

“I’ll explain in a minute.” Avoiding her question, he set the envelope on the arm of his chair,

Genevieve sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap, as tension built.

“Tank and I went to Chad’s apartment to look around.”

His apparent nonchalance didn’t fool her. “Did you break in?” Her tone was more curious than accusatory.

He nodded.

She rubbed her thighs nervously, her voice tinged with trepidation. “Why?”

“To gather intel... information.”

“What’s in the envelope, Michael?” Her voice trembled with urgency.

“Photos of you.”

“What? He took pictures of me? How? Where? I need to see them.”

He handed her the photos. The cool night air stung her

skin as she examined each one. She cried out, anger and fear in her voice. “Chad was everywhere—at work, on my deck, in my home.” She fumbled the photos, scattering them like landmines across the wooden deck. “What does he want? Why is he doing this? How do we stop him?”

Michael quickly gathered the photos and stuffed them back into the envelope. “Chad’s fixated on you. Tank and I warned him to stay away. Hopefully, that’ll scare him off.”

“But what if it’s not?” Genevieve’s voice wavered with worry.

He stood and pulled her into his arms. “You’ve got to be even more careful, even more alert. Chad took many photos of you, and you never saw him. I leave for a mission in four hours and don’t know how long I’ll be gone. You won’t be able to reach me. Go to the police and see what they can do to protect you from this bastard.”

Though terrified, she found herself reassuring him. “Do your job, and trust that I’ll be smart.”

Michael's embrace tightened. "You are important to me, Genevieve."

His words calmed her, if only for a brief moment.

39

A week later, the rich aroma of curry filled Susan's tiny kitchen. Genevieve shifted in her chair, the Prosecco fizzing on her tongue as she listened to Susan.

Susan stabbed a piece of chicken, her voice tight with concern. "Have you seen Chad this week?"

Genevieve frowned. "No, not a glimpse. I've stayed hyper-aware, just like I promised Michael."

"And you haven't gone to the police?"

"No. I don't have enough proof," Genevieve muttered. "Chad's only confronted me twice, both times in public." She swirled her Prosecco. "Anyone could've written on my car windows. And those photos? They're not exactly legal evidence."

Susan's fork hit her plate with a clatter. "It makes me so mad that women have to live like this. We should be able to go about our daily lives without fear of being sexually harassed, stalked, kidnapped, or murdered."

"I wish that were true—it should be true." Bitter

resignation filled Genevieve's voice.

“But I doubt it ever will be.”

Who was banging on her door at 2 AM? She took a deep breath and crept to the front door, her heart pounding and her mind racing with worst-case scenarios. A cool draft slipped under the door, chilling her bare feet. Peeking through the front window, she let out a relieved sigh—it was Michael. She flung the door open and scolded, “You nearly scared me to death.”

Michael grinned. “I missed you too much to wait any longer.”

She forgave him instantly, her heart softening at the sight of him.

He was a mess—dirt streaked his uniform, mud caked his boots, and sand had turned his dark hair silver. Was that camouflage paint hiding his handsome face? It was hard to tell in the dim light.

She jumped into his arms, unleashing a cloud of dust and

sand. “You’re the best-looking thing I’ve seen all week.”

“You feel so good.” He buried his face against her neck.

“I thought about you all the time.”

Michael nipped her neck. “Yeah? And what did you think about when you thought about me?”

“Come inside, and I’ll show you.” Her voice was suggestive as she looped an arm around his waist.

“Oh fuck yeah. But, first, I’ve got to shower; I came over right after we debriefed.”

“Let’s get you clean, so I can get you dirty.”

Michael dropped his clothes onto the bathroom floor and took the world’s quickest shower. A surprising ache filled his chest as he brushed his teeth with a fresh toothbrush Genevieve had bought. How could something as small as a toothbrush make him feel so much?

He walked into the bedroom with just a towel around his

waist, nearly stumbling when he saw Genevieve sprawled naked on the bed. *She wanted him as much as he wanted her.* Her eagerness sent a jolt through him, making his cock swell and his balls tighten. He dropped the towel, revealing his full, ready-to-hit-it hard-on.

Genevieve's sly smile sent a shiver of anticipation up his spine. She ran her hands down his chest, gripped his throbbing cock, and knelt in front of him with a hum. He stood paralyzed. How many times had he imagined her mouth around his dick? A hundred? A thousand?

As if she knew his innermost desires, she held the base of his cock like a vice and circled the head with her tongue, lapping up the drop of pre-cum on the tip. She wrapped her lips around the head and sucked lightly, setting his entire body on fire.

He needed more, wanted her to deep-throat his cock. But instead, she teased, licking the underside from root to tip and focusing on just the head again. Her deliberate, unhurried movements told him she enjoyed this, making his cock swell even more. He fought the urge to dominate, to force her head down.

He'd never be so crude. Would he?

“Genevieve,” he groaned, his voice thick with need,
“Take all of me, please... swallow my cock whole.”

She took as much of him into her mouth as she could handle. When she moved her mouth back up his cock, her hand followed, and she began that magical combination of sucking and stroking every man craves. He moaned loudly as pleasure built.

She kept a steady rhythm, her small, soft hand driving him closer to the edge. When she angled his dick against the roof of her mouth, he thought he might explode right then.

“That feels incredible,” he gasped.

When she cupped him gently and increased her pace, he hurtled toward release. He panted a polite warning, “Genevieve, I’m going to come.”

She removed her mouth and stroked him to the finish. With a deep groan, he came all over her gorgeous tits— her carnal blowjob curling his toes.

When his brain finally re-engaged, he grasped her upper

arms and helped her stand. He crushed her to his chest, his cum smearing over both of them. He bit down on her neck and, barely able to speak, whispered against her skin. “Fan-fucking-tastic. Best blow job ever.”

Her smile was huge. “Watching you come was so hot,” she purred.

He held her at arm’s length, locking eyes with her. “That blow job? Perfect welcome-home present.” His voice softened. “You’re all I need.” Unspoken feelings weighed on him, but he held back. He nipped her shoulder, breaking the tension. “Let’s clean up.”

In the shower, they laughed and teased, playing like children. Between leisurely kisses, they washed each other. He made sure not one drop of semen remained on her breasts, paying particular attention to her areola and nipples, kissing and licking them repeatedly. “Gotta be sure you’re really clean.” His booming laugh bounced off the shower walls.

Throughout his ministrations, she gently peppered kisses on his lips and face. A wondrous warmth surged through his chest

at the feeling of being cherished.

She squealed in delight when he scooped her up in his arms, carried her into the bedroom, and gently laid her down. He slid in behind her, drew her close, and whispered, “You waiting for me, missing me—it made this homecoming perfect. I’ve never had anyone to come home to before.” His voice caught, surprising him.

She turned to face him, resting her cheek against his chest, wrapping an arm around his waist, and tangling her legs with his. As they lay together, the lingering warmth of the shower faded, replaced by cool air brushing over their skin.

Michael pressed his lips to her hair and inhaled her scent—my woman, my Genevieve. Utterly content, he fell into a dreamless sleep.

40

Genevieve woke to the sound of clattering pots and pans and the smell of something savory—Michael was cooking. She stretched lazily and smiled as a warm feeling settled in her chest—he had come straight to her last night.

She hopped out of bed, threw on her robe, brushed her teeth and hair, and headed to the kitchen. Michael was at the stove, his back turned. She slipped her arms around him and rested her head against his muscled warmth.

Michael caught her arms with one hand. “Morning, sweetheart. Hungry?”

“Ravenous.” She pressed a few quick kisses to his back. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Egg and cheese sandwiches on whole wheat toast. Sound good?”

“Perfect. I’ll set the table.”

He served their sandwiches—three for himself and one for her—along with fresh peach slices. She’d have to buy more

groceries.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and kissed her ear as she sat down. “Did I mention how much I missed you while I was away? Did I tell you how much I love coming home to you?”

Her throat tightened, words sticking in her chest, so she nodded and squeezed his arms tighter. His sweetness filled her heart, and she thought she might burst with happiness.

They lingered over breakfast, catching up.

“How did the mission go?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“It was good.”

She let out a breath, her worries evaporating.

Michael speared a piece of toast, his tone sharpening. “Any Chad-the-shitbird sightings?”

“No, thank God. I stayed hyper-aware.”

“Good. Maybe our warning got through.” He chewed

slowly, his gaze never leaving her eyes. “What did the police say?”

She fidgeted as she explained her reasons for not going to them, feeling defensive.

He shook his head slightly and frowned. “At least there would be a report on file.”

“I didn’t think about that.” Heat flushed her cheeks at the faint displeasure in Michael’s voice.

He smiled and took her hand. “No worries. I’ll begin planning your security systems tomorrow while you’re at work. Do you have any free time? I’ve got two days of leave.”

Excitement rang in her voice, “I only have one class today, but Susan or Cindi can cover it. I’m all yours today and have just a few hours of work tomorrow.” Having him all to herself felt like a rare gift.

They chose a scenic drive to Smithfield for a late lunch. Genevieve rolled down the window, the crisp air whipping through her hair. Red and gold leaves blanketed the roadside, ‘wooshing’ as they drove through them. They belted out songs on

the radio with their fingers and hearts intertwined.

During lunch, he asked about her childhood. “Tell me more about your father. Why did he cut out?”

Genevieve’s lip curled at the memory of her dad—a scrawny man with a beer belly, nicotine-stained teeth, and sour breath. “He worked some odd jobs, but mostly, he drank. Said he couldn’t handle seeing mom in pain.”

Michael’s lips tightened. “Sounds like he was feeling sorry for himself.”

Her fingers twisted the napkin in her lap, her voice faltering. “Truth is, he never let anything get in the way of his drinking.”

“That’s bullshit. A father should be there for his family—to love, care, and protect.”

“I can understand how he felt... I guess,” she murmured. “Ovarian cancer is brutal. He told me she’d get better if I kept the trailer clean and read to her. But she didn’t.”

Michael’s voice sharpened. “He put that on you? As if a

stack of books and a clean trailer could cure cancer.”

She looked away, surprised by the anger in his voice. She’d never let herself feel angry at Papa. “It’s in the past,” she said softly, trying to convince herself as much as him.

He shook his head, an angry scowl on his face. “I can’t imagine how tough that would be.”

She fought the buried resentment that threatened to rise. She couldn’t face that now, maybe ever. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Of course. Hey, I’ve got something to show you,” he said, a note of excitement in his voice. He handed her his phone.

Grateful for the change of topic, she took it. “It’s a scorpion,” she squealed, delighted and amazed. “You took this photo? It’s incredible—so detailed. I didn’t know phone cameras could do that.”

“Swipe right.”

“It’s Tank. He looks so fierce.” She slowly took in the photo, her attention wholly absorbed. “His eyes look haunted. I’m

surprised he let you take a photo of him.”

She gasped at the next photo, her eyes widening. “You’ve made a solitary rifle leaning against a wall look terrifying—an ominous premonition of death.

“I’m thinking of buying a real camera.” Pride filled his voice.

Genevieve nodded, delighted at the light in his eyes. She had sparked that joy, and it felt good.

Realization hit her. It turned out that she wanted forever, wanted to build something real with Michael. Her feelings had grown slowly, nurtured by his kindness, intelligence, and humor—everything she’d hoped for. Yes, she could see a future together. Could he want it, too? Was he ready—or even able—to commit?

He was her person; she wanted to be his.

41

They stopped at the grocery store on their way home. An employee struggled with a heavy box of soup cans in one aisle, his left arm straining to keep it balanced while his right hand hurriedly stocked the shelves. As they walked by, the box slipped, sending soup cans clattering to the floor and rolling off in every direction. An annoyed shopper nudged a can aside with her foot and, with a huff, turned her cart around.

Genevieve darted forward, dropped to her knees, and helped the young employee corral the runaway cans.

“Thanks, ma’am. I appreciate your help.”

“Of course. It’s no problem.”

A bittersweet ache settled in Michael’s chest. *She wouldn’t have laughed. She would’ve helped my dad.*

“Michael, why are you staring at me?” Genevieve asked.

“Just a memory.”

Her eyes locked onto his. “Tell me.”

He hesitated, then took a deep breath. “One day in math class, a kid threw up.” He could still taste the sour stench of vomit in that classroom. “Of course, it was my father’s job to clean it up.” Michael swallowed hard, the memory still fresh and painful. “As Dad bent over to mop up the puddle, he slipped and landed hard on his tailbone.”

Genevieve touched his arm, concern clouding her eyes.

His jaw clenched as he remembered his dad’s crumpled face as he struggled to get up with dignity. “The kids laughed, sharp and mean. No one helped him. Not even the teacher.”

Her mouth formed an “O” of sympathy.

“I helped my dad up, then cleaned up the mess.” Michael fell silent, his fists clenching tight enough to make his knuckles ache. His dad’s humiliation, the cold indifference of the teacher and those kids—his outrage still simmered.

“Is that when you vowed to live shame-free? To join the SEALS?” Her voice was soft and full of understanding.

Determination hardened his eyes as he nodded. “Yes.

From that moment, I stopped giving a shit that my father was a janitor or if kids recognized their old, donated clothes on me. I would never feel helpless again—and after Afghanistan, I made it my mission to help those who couldn't help themselves.”

“Afghanistan?”

He closed his eyes, his face tightening into a scowl. “Nothing I want to talk about now.” *Or ever.* He exhaled slowly, his gaze distant, lost in his past. “Afghanistan taught me what real helplessness means.”

Genevieve reached out, her fingers brushing lightly over the back of his hand, warm and steady against his skin. She was there—he didn't have to face his dark memories alone.

Her understanding soothed his blackened soul.

That evening, as he drifted to sleep with Genevieve in his arms, he reflected on their day. He'd felt safe sharing his hardest memory, trusting her understanding. It had been a simple, shared day, like any married couple's. On the edge of sleep, he realized

that thought didn't scare him; it felt right. He curled his arm tighter around her, her warmth steadying him as he sank deeper into the mattress.

42

Genevieve awoke to Michael's mouth on her neck, his hands on her breasts, his erection pressed against her. His skin's warm, salty smell mixed with the clean, crisp scent of the sheets.

"Good morning, Genevieve. How did you sleep?" His voice was morning rough and filled with an earthy sexiness.

She scooted her butt closer to him and smiled. "I don't remember, so it must've been good. Did we spoon all night?"

"I wish." He chuckled ruefully. "When I woke up, you were sprawled over most of the bed."

His beg-hogging accusations didn't bother her in the least. "Well, I'm awake now and like what you're doing."

"Lift your leg and drape it over my thigh."

She eagerly complied, opening her core to his every demand.

He quickly took advantage and plunged his cock into her from behind.

But she was determined to take control, and after a few strokes, she pulled away, pushed him onto his back, and straddled him.

“Hey, I was enjoying that,” he protested, half-irritated, half-aroused.

She smiled, mentally rubbing her hands together. He had no idea what was coming.

She sat back and studied his perfect body. The need to touch him consumed her. Her hands glided over the ridges of his abs, tracing the hard muscle beneath soft skin. His heart raced beneath her fingers. He tried to speak, but she pressed a finger against his lips. “Ssh.”

His eyes widened as a grin spread across his face.

Oh, yeah, he's catching on. This time, I'm in charge. She moved lower and dragged her tongue along one of his sex lines, from pubic hair to hip bone. “Mmmm...I've wanted to do that for a long time.” She ran her tongue along the length of the other one, thrilled by his deep groan. Finally, unable to resist any longer, she

wrapped her mouth and hands around his thick erection and worked his cock with long, steady strokes.

His face tightened, his moans grew louder, and his hips pumped harder.

Releasing him, she crawled up his body, her nails digging into his skin.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop,” he gasped, reaching for her.

She planted both hands on his chest and pushed him into the mattress with a sharp command, “Be still.”

She rewarded his quick compliance with some dirty talk. Her lips on his, she murmured, “I love sucking your cock, tasting myself on you.” She sucked on his lower lip before thrusting her tongue into his mouth.

His deep groan was a mix of excitement and desperate need. He dug his fingers into her hips and greedily sucked on her tongue.

She nipped his bottom lip and sat back on his thighs, grinding her wet sex against him. His body called to her, and she

traced the contours of his bunched shoulders and thick biceps, unable to stop herself. “You are magnificent,” she breathed out.

His turgid cock pulsed. “You’ve gotta fuck me, G. I’ve gotta be inside you.”

Instead of giving in to his demand, she doubled down on her foreplay. She licked the pre-cum from the deeply-colored tip of his cock while gently massaging his balls; she knew exactly how to drive him wild.

His heels dug into the mattress, his hips rocking, silently pleading for her to take him down her throat.

Lost in her own world of pleasure, she mounted him with a deep moan.

He quickly stuffed a pillow under his head and urged her on. “Oh yeah.”

So he likes to watch? Well, she’d give him a show.

As she rocked back and forth, a comfortable rhythm took hold, her movements directly stimulating her clitoris. Her breasts swayed, heavy and voluptuous, drawing Michael’s eyes like a

laser. She squeezed her eyes shut and focused all her attention on the sensation between her legs. Her moans grew louder as her nipples hardened and her clitoris throbbed.

A bold thought flashed through her mind: I want to ride full cowgirl. Surprised by her own daring, she decided to go for it. *Watch out; sex goddess taking charge.*

With him deep inside her, she planted her feet flat on the bed. Slowly, she began raising and lowering her hips in a deliberate rhythm. Pausing high enough so just the tip of his cock remained inside her, she looked down. She couldn't look away from the sight of their joined bodies, his dick slick with her juices.

Her sex pulsing, she braced her hands on his chest and rode him, watching her body take him in and out. She didn't blink.

Suddenly, she stopped abruptly and remained motionless, him deep inside her.

He shut his eyes tightly, moaning his protest.

"Look at me," she demanded.

His eyes snapped open.

He watched her with intense hunger as she fondled her breasts, molding and plumping them with her hands, fingering her nipples until they were swollen and aching. Now, he was the one who didn't blink. And then she licked her swollen nipples.

"Fuck, Genevieve." Grabbing her hips, he took control, slamming her up and down on his erection.

She intended to drive him wild, but her desire surged. After a few strokes, she came, screaming his name as electric sensations streaked through her body. She collapsed on his chest, exhausted. She never wanted to move, content to stay in his arms forever.

But Michael had other ideas. Without warning, he flipped her onto her hands and knees, tilted her ass, and plunged into her, taking her harder than before. The sound of their bodies meeting filled the room. He came hard after four powerful thrusts, stringing together obscenities she'd never heard before. He collapsed on top of her, and they rested, limp and sated.

"Damn, Genevieve. You just made all my fantasies come true."

Her laughter was shaky and breathless, still coming down from the adrenaline. “Some of those were mine too—ones I didn’t even know I had.”

He brushed a wisp of her hair from her face, his expression softening. “You’re incredible,” he said quietly. “Just one look, and I’m done for.”

Genevieve’s breath caught, warmth spreading through her. She pressed her face against his palm, reveling in the tenderness in his eyes.

“You never back down,” he said, his voice low with admiration. “You’re fierce. I love... I love being with you.”

As he spoke, she realized he saw all of her—not just her body, but her strength and spirit. Her heart melted. “I love being with you too.” If only he knew she wanted forever.

43

Michael rapped on the frame of Geek's open office door.

"Come on in." Geek didn't look up from his computer

"Thanks for coming in on a Saturday."

Geek turned to face Michael. "No problem, bruh. I had some intel to review. What's up?"

"I, uh, have a ...friend who needs a security system."

"A friend, huh?" Geek smirked.

"Yeah, a friend." Michael's tone cut off further questions.

They settled on wired alarms for windows and doors, plus motion-sensitive flood lamps at the corners

Michael sighed. "My friend can't afford the high-end stuff like thermal imaging or phone alerts."

"No worries, Mac. I'll get you the best deal."

"Thanks again for coming in, Geek."

Geek gave a chin left as he turned back to his computer,

his fingers flying over the keyboard before Michael reached the door. Michael chuckled to himself—Geek was happiest on his computer.

Lost in thought, Michael walked to his Jeep. He couldn't deny it: he was hooked on Genevieve. He raked a hand through his hair. *I. Love. Her.* The thought slammed into him, and regret immediately followed. He should've told her last night. Why couldn't he just say those three words? He routinely faced danger head-on, so why was this so hard? He climbed in and gripped the steering wheel like he needed the support.

Could she handle the life of a Navy SEAL—the long deployments, the constant fear, never knowing where he was and if he'd come back? Was she ready for that?

The chime from his phone startled him from his thoughts. It was a text from Genevieve: 'I won't be able to make our date tonight.'

What the fuck? They didn't have a date tonight.

He texted her back, "What do you mean?"

Silence. He called her. His ‘spidy’ sense flared when it went straight to voicemail. The line went dead, leaving an eerie silence in his ear. Something was wrong.

He raced to her home—there was no car in the driveway. He searched her house, calling her name—it was deserted. He sped to the gym—her car wasn’t there.

With his heart hammering, each pulse thudding in his ears, he burst into the studio. “Susan, have you seen Genevieve?”

“Not today. What’s wrong?”

“I can’t find her.”

Susan frowned. “Class isn’t for an hour. Maybe she’s running errands.”

As he paced the reception area, a sour taste flooded his mouth. He scrubbed sweaty palms against his pants. “She’s not answering my calls or texts.”

“That’s not like her.” Susan’s voice tightened. “What are you thinking?”

“It’s that motherfucker, Chad,” he said, a deadly certainty in his tone.

Susan’s face went pale, her grip on his arms tightening. “What do you think he’s done?” Her voice shook.

“I don’t know, but I’ll find out.” He bolted out the studio door and yelled orders over his shoulder: “Keep trying to contact her. Call me immediately if you hear from her.”

He was already on the phone with Tank and didn’t hear her reply. “Genevieve’s missing. Meet me at the ready room ASAP.” His voice was desperate.

As Michael sped to the base, dark memories from Afghanistan flashed back—images of a young girl supporting a woman, their faces etched with fear and pain. Blood streaked down the older woman’s legs, while the village women watched, their eyes cold with blame. The scene had burned into him, turning his hatred of helplessness into fierce empathy and a drive to make a difference. Now, the thought of Genevieve—helpless and scared—ignited a protectiveness that consumed him completely. He loved her more than his career, more than his own

life.

What was Chad capable of? If he hurt Genevieve, Michael would kill him with his bare hands. He'd cut off Chad's dick, and stuff it down his throat. A wave of fear hit him, but he shoved it down. Emotions clouded judgement.

His SEAL training kicked in—controlled breaths replaced panic and turned fear into cold logic and lethal intent. His kept his voice even as he directed Tank and Geek, “We need a plan.”

44

Genevieve tried pressing her fingers to her throbbing temples, but even that small movement felt impossible. She would be sick if the room kept spinning. What was wrong with her? Her whole body ached with exhaustion.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to focus. She pried her eyes open, squinting into the dim light, struggling to make sense of her surroundings. Where was she?

She tried to sit up but could only flail, helpless—her hands and feet were bound. Fear and panic rolled through her, cramping her stomach. She thrashed, testing the restraints, but they didn't budge, just biting deeper into her skin. She collapsed, her skin clammy and ice cold with fear.

Questions flooded her mind. Why was she tied up? Had she been kidnapped? "Michael... I need you," she whispered before slipping back into darkness.

When she woke again, her eyes snapped open. The terrifying reality hit her—she was a captive. But where? The room was black, yet the softness beneath her felt like a mattress. Was

she in a bedroom? Tentatively, she used her elbows to push herself up, her pulse loud in her ears. As her eyes adjusted, she made out the faint outline of a bed.

She scooted sideways and perched on the edge with her legs dangling. Her head dropped as a memory flashed through her brain fog—Chad’s crazed eyes, a gun in his hand, forcing her into the passenger seat. She hadn’t dared resist. Why had he taken her?

Helplessness gripped her as tears splashed onto her bound hands. She needed the bathroom. How? Where? Her throat tightened with fresh terror as she curled into a ball, racked by waves of trembling. Sleep eventually dragged her back under, offering the oblivion she needed.

45

By 0500 Sunday morning, Michael was about to lose it. They couldn't find her. Rip and Zeus had scoured Chad's apartment, but Chad wasn't dumb enough to take her there. Geek worked his magic on the computer, quickly generating a list of names and numbers. The team worked through the night, contacting everyone on the list, coffee, and urgency thickening the air in the ready room.

Michael's voice thundered through the room. "What the fuck is it taking so long?" "Twenty hours, and we've got nothing." His anger boiled just beneath the surface, threatening to erupt.

Tank stayed level. "We're moving as fast as we can. Geek's still combing through records for any properties Chad might own."

Michael dragged his hands through his hair, struggling to keep it together. He braced himself against a desk, his throat tight with fear. Where was she? Growing impatient, he began pacing the room. How could they not have one fucking clue where Chad might've taken her?"

Geek burst into the ready room waving a computer printout; his face etched in grim triumph. “I’ve got it.” His urgent tone silenced the room. “Chad’s stepfather has a hunting cabin near the Dismal Swamp, fifty-five minutes out.”

Michael thumped Geek on the back, pulling him into a man-hug. “Hooyah! Let’s go get her.”

Tank caught Michael’s arm. “Slow down, Mac. We need an extraction plan.”

Michael jerked away with a snarl. “It’s just Chad, for fuck’s sake. How much planning do we need to take out that worm?”

“You know better, Mac. We do this right or risk her life.”

Michael threw back his head and let out a war cry. “FUCK!”

Geek took charge. “I’ll pull up the map. You two gear up. Meet back here in thirty.”

Michael scanned the room, his chest tight. His team had shown up—no questions, no hesitation. *My brothers. I couldn’t*

ask for more.

He needed to make it clear. “Listen, the CO can’t know about this. I appreciate your commitment, but only Tank and I go. Despite their protests, Michael held firm. “Just Tank and me.”

They crafted the plan precisely, addressing every possible risk and potential screwup. They tore it apart and refined every detail until Michael and Tank had it memorized.

Then, with his team standing by, Michael waited for the optimal time—the dead of night, when SEALs did their best work. With panic and desperation levels off the charts, he prowled the room until go time at 0100 hours Monday morning.

46

Her head lolled against the bed, each thud echoing in her ears. Someone was shaking her. The room blurred, shapes and shadows merging as she struggled to focus. Who was standing before her?

Chad's face came into view, a cruel smirk twisting his lips. Groggy and disoriented, her questions slurred. "Why are you here?" What time is it? What day?"

"Sunday morning."

The dim light from the open doorway glinted off the scissors in his hand. She scuttled back against the hard wall, its coldness seeping into her skin, her voice catching in her throat. "No...no...don't hurt me."

His malicious laughter made her legs feel like jelly. "I'm cutting the zip ties on your legs so you can walk to the bathroom. Don't try anything—I've got the gun." He lifted his shirt, revealing the gun stuffed into the waistband of his jeans. She sat limply, not resisting as he cut the zip-ties around her ankles. "Follow me," he commanded.

Her legs wobbled, and her brain remained foggy as the room spun around her. Why was she so dizzy? Her mind flashed the syringe he'd used, the realization sinking in—he'd drugged and kidnapped her. Unable to process that information, she shuffled after him down a short hallway, bracing against the wall every few steps, fighting to stay upright.

"Hurry the fuck up." His tone held no mercy, no empathy. He stood by the bathroom doorway and gestured with the gun. "In there."

She brushed past him and stood still, confused. Unable to lower her shorts with her hands tied, she extended her arms, silently pleading for him to cut the zip ties.

"I'll pull your shorts down." His vile leer and menacing voice implied unthinkable things. Helpless, she realized he could do anything he wanted.

Fighting rising panic, she scrabbled backward until she hit the cold, hard toilet. His grip yanked her toward him. But instead of violating her, he sliced through the ties on her wrists. Tears streamed down her face as sobs wrenched from her chest.

“Shut up and pee, or you’ll be pissing in the bed,” he snapped, abruptly closing the bathroom door to give her privacy. She wept as she lowered herself onto the toilet and tried to urinate. Her bladder refused to cooperate, leaving her choked with humiliation. She had to pee now, or she’d wet the bed. She closed her eyes, tightened her abdominal muscles, and pushed. Finally, a thin trickle of urine splashed into the toilet.

Terrified that he might burst through the door, she rushed to pull up her shorts. “I’m ready,” she called out, her voice thin and weak.

The door swung open abruptly. He clamped his hand around her arm, her feet scraping against the rough floor, as he dragged her back down the hallway—back into the nightmare.

He shoved her onto the bed, and she scrambled to sit up immediately, determined to appear as strong as possible. Panic gripped her when she saw the syringe in his hand. “You don’t need to do that. Please, please, I won’t try anything.”

Ignoring her hysterical pleas and weak attempts to push his hands away, he jabbed her in the thigh and tossed the used

syringe onto the bedside table.

“What do you want?” Her voice cracked. “Why are you doing this?”

His breath was sour with the stench of cigarettes as he leaned close, his sneer chilling her to the bone. Your boyfriend took something from me.” His voice dripped with malice. “Now I’ve taken something from him—you.”

Confusion swirled within her. “What? ”

Chad’s eyes narrowed, a cold smile twisting his lips. “He stole my camera—broke into my place, dug through my stuff, and took it.”

“Michael will hunt you down and kill you. You’re no match for him.”

“If you’re talking about Buds, he landed a lucky punch. I was looking the other way. It wasn’t fair, I wasn’t ready.” His voice was petulant and weak

Pathetic. “A true man, a warrior, is always ready, always alert,” she said derisively, her voice sharp and cutting. As soon as

the words left her mouth, she realized belittling him was a mistake. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Chad's gun hand swing towards her face, and then her cheek exploded with pain.

His voice erupted. "Shut your fucking whore mouth. If your boyfriend's so smart, let him try. I'll be ready—just like I was for you." He stomped to the door and turned, his words a menacing promise. "He'll get what he deserves for stealing you, my camera, and my pride. And I'll be the one dishing it out. You'll never see him alive again."

His wild, unsteady eyes darted around the room as if expecting Michael to lurk in the shadows. His tirade left him struggling to breathe—his cheeks flushed an angry crimson, his mouth open, his chest heaving. He looked genuinely unhinged, his face twisted by jealousy and paranoia. He was locked in his fantasy of vengeance, and she had every reason to fear him.

His blow had knocked her over. Defeated and demoralized, she lay there without protest as he reattached zip ties to her wrists and ankles. After he left the room, she wrapped her arms tightly around herself, whimpering softly until a drug-

induced sleep overtook her.

47

Cool, damp air sent a shiver through her as she woke. The dim light of dusk eked through the small window. She'd slept all day. Questions flooded her mind. How long had she been there? She tried to count the hours, but her sluggish brain lost track. Her mouth felt like sandpaper, and her stomach cramped with hunger.

She forced herself to the edge of the bed, scanning the room with one good eye. The other, swollen shut, blurred her vision. Her limbs felt like lead, and her head pounded with each heartbeat. She had to escape. But how? Her stomach churned, and she pressed the heels of her hands into her belly to ease the nausea.

She straightened her spine and threw back her shoulders. She had to find a way out. She needed to be tough, ignore the pain, and push aside the fear. The first step? Find out if she could walk with zip-tied ankles.

Hobbling forward, she managed a few shuffling steps before stumbling. Her bound hands couldn't break her fall. She crashed onto the cold, hard floor, pain shooting through her right shoulder as her breath whooshed out. Her efforts seemed hopeless.

How could she free herself if she couldn't even walk? She was at Chad's mercy, though she doubted he had any.

Just as despair threatened to overwhelm her, she heard Michael's words, 'You are fierce.' They ignited a spark of stubborn determination. Gritting her teeth, she willed herself to her feet, shaky but standing. *I am fierce. I don't back down.* Her voice grew stronger with each step toward the wall. "I AM fierce, and I DON'T back down." She stumbled twice more but forced herself back up, refusing to fail.

Her hands touched something hard—a door. A way out. Hope flickered as she wrapped her trembling fingers around the cold doorknob. Relief washed over her when it turned—unlocked. Hope surged, only to be cruelly snatched away. Despite her desperate tugging, the door refused to open, padlocked from the outside by Chad.

Disappointment crushed her, but she refused to give up. Using the walls for support, she crab-walked around the room. Maybe she could find a weapon. But the closet was empty, the window too high, and nothing was under the bed. Her desperation

grew.

She had to pee, fighting the urge since she'd woken up. She pressed her thighs together, the pressure building until she had no choice—every fiber of her being violently rejecting the thought of peeing through her shorts. Then, an idea struck her—it might keep Chad at arm's length. She squatted, braced her back against the wall, and forced herself to do the unthinkable. Her bladder fought her, but finally, the hot stream seeped through her underwear and ran down her legs—relief warred with disgust and humiliation.

She resumed searching the perimeter, the room's stale, musty odor sticking in her throat. She bumped her shin on the bedside table and reached out to steady herself. Her fingers brushed the cold metal of the syringe, sparking a desperate plan. She slid it under the pillow. Once he cut the zip ties, she'd strike and make a run for it. It could work—it had to.

She sank onto the bed, exhausted, hungry, thirsty, and scared. Would she ever see Susan or Michael again? The thought of Michael pierced her heart. She'd never told Michael she loved

him. As she shivered in her urine-soaked shorts, tears threatened to spill, but her dehydrated body couldn't produce even a single drop.

48

The bedroom door creaked open, sharp as an alarm. Her head snapped up. Backlit by the hallway light, Chad's silhouette filled the doorway. Her limbs shook as a cold, instinctive dread rippled through her.

"Damn, it stinks in here," he sneered, wrinkling his nose.

"Did you piss yourself?"

Her throat clenched shut, words trapped inside. This was it—her chance to escape.

"I brought you food and water. Sit up." His voice, cold and detached, made her stomach knot tighter. He cut the zip-ties on her wrists and dumped a sandwich and a bottle of water into her lap.

Water. She reached for it, her arms heavy, her nerveless fingers fumbling. Chad snatched it back, twisted the cap off, and shoved it at her. Greedily, she took several gulps, the metallic taste relieving her dry mouth. Each bite of the sandwich turned her stomach, but she forced it down—she needed the energy to escape. "Thank you, Chad," she whispered, cringing at how pathetic she

sounded.

He cut the zip ties on her ankles. “Bathroom. Now.”

Hope twisted with fear—her legs and hands were free. She feigned dizziness, stumbling back against the bed as she reached beneath the pillow for the syringe. She hid it behind her back, her heart racing. Her clammy hands clenched the needle as she stumbled down the hallway, each step a struggle against her heavy legs.

He stopped outside the bathroom, blocking her path just like before.

Now! Adrenaline hit her like a jolt. She spun, jabbing the syringe at him with a wild scream. She aimed for his eye but missed, the needle sinking into his cheek instead. Fueled by panic, she shoved past him and stumbled toward the front door, desperate to escape.

Doubled over, Chad let out a raw howl—part pain, part rage—as he ripped the syringe from his cheek. “You bitch!” he roared, charging after her.

Tears blurred her vision as she staggered forward, gasping for air, fighting the drug still dragging at her limbs. *Must reach the front door... just a few more steps.* She glanced back. He was getting closer, his face contorted with fury.

The front door was just inches away. “Nooo,” she screamed, the sound strangled and raw as he slammed her to the ground.

“Got you, you fucking whore.”

“Let me go, let me go.”

Her heart hammered, drowning out the screams in her mind. She fought with everything she had, limbs flailing desperately. The sharp tang of sweat and blood stung her eyes as his weight crushed her, forcing the air from her lungs. His heavy fists pounded her face, each blow bringing her closer to unconsciousness.

He gripped her limp shoulders and shook her like a rag doll, spittle flying as he chanted, “You’re mine, you’re mine.” Chad half dragged, half carried her back to the bedroom, shoving

her onto the bed.

Panic spiked. What would he do next? More pain? Something worse? Drained, she lay still, too weak to fight. She barely felt the sharp sting in her thigh.

He moved away, his voice low and menacing. “I’m leaving and won’t be back. No one will find you; Michael will never know what happened to you.”

His sinister laughter filled the room, dragging her down into nightmares filled with monstrous figures and sharp, blood-stained fangs. Amid the terror, a whisper of warmth flickered. *I love you, Michael...I love you.*

49

Michael and Tank parked their vehicle two miles from the target—a dilapidated hunting cabin deep in the Dismal Swamp. The eerie green glow of their night vision goggles guided them through the dark woods, blending them into the shadows. With every sense heightened, Michael scanned the area as Tank soundlessly breached the front door. They slipped inside without a sound.

Spider webs and animal nests filled the corners, and broken windows let in the swamp's damp chill. The cabin reeked of abandonment—except in the kitchen, where fresh sandwich ingredients on the counter gave Michael a fleeting glimmer of hope.

Michael signaled Tank to start recording. They crept down the hallway, stepping over a crumpled syringe. Michael shoved aside dark thoughts, concentrating on clearing each empty room. Then they reached the last door. It stood ajar, an open padlock discarded on the floor.

Tank drew his K-bar from his boot, and together they peered inside.

Empty.

Michael howled—a sound ripped from deep within. He lunged forward, but Tank’s grip yanked him back. “Wait, Mac. We gotta clear the room and document everything. Might be a crime scene.”

Michael choked down his rage, forcing himself to stay still as Tank swept the room. The stench of urine, sweat, and decay twisted his gut with fear. She’d been here. He knew it. The food, the syringe, the lock, the broken zip ties—they all told the story of her kidnapping. But where was she? Had Chad moved her? Or worse?

“I’m checking the perimeter,” Michael called over his shoulder, heading out the front door. Tank joined him a few minutes later, and they started a grid search, methodically sweeping the area for signs of Chad or Genevieve.

Tank’s urgent voice cut through the darkness. “Here! Behind the shed.”

Michael’s vision darkened at the sight of Genevieve limp

and lifeless on the floor. She was too still, too pale. She had to be alive. He rushed over, heart pounding. His knees buckled in relief as he found a pulse. “She’s alive... barely.”

“Mac, get her inside. I’ll call the police and paramedics.”

Michael cradled her gently, wincing as her head lolled. “You’re safe now, sweetheart. I’ve got you.” Her skin was clammy, the angry red abrasions from the zip ties stark against her pale skin. Then, he saw her face—mottled black and blue, her right eye swollen shut. A raw, guttural scream tore from him, echoing through the swamp like a wounded animal. “Tank, her face. Her beautiful face.” Rage flared, hot, and lethal. “I swear I’ll kill Chad with my bare hands. He’s a dead man.”

As Tank secured the perimeter, Michael held Genevieve, waiting for the sirens.

The paramedic checked her over, wrapped her in a thermal blanket, and started an IV. “She’s dehydrated, with dilated pupils—likely a concussion, maybe drugs,” he said. “Michael, hold this bag of fluids high.”

Grateful to have a task, Michael held the IV bag in one hand and gently stroked her forehead with the other. “I’m here, Genevieve. You’re safe now.” He could breathe again; his heart could beat again—Genevieve was alive and in his arms.

Tank debriefed the police and handed over the video evidence. A policewoman bagged a vial. “Midazolam—a sedative,” she said, “found in the kitchen.”

They loaded Genevieve, still unconscious, onto a stretcher. Michael climbed into the ambulance, daring the paramedics with his death glare. He’d just found her; he wouldn’t lose her again.

The emergency room admitted her immediately, swallowing her into its chaos. Nurses swarmed, and a doctor barked orders as they rushed her gurney toward the ICU.

Susan’s heart sank as she entered the waiting room. Michael sat with his head in his hands and elbows on his knees. She took his hand, her stomach tightening. “Have you heard anything yet?”

Michael's voice cracked, unshed tears constricting his throat. "No."

Together, they held a silent vigil. Machines whirred, people chattered, and the PA system squawked, but Michael was oblivious. Helplessness squeezed his chest, worse than anything from his childhood. He clung to a fragile thread of hope, desperately searching for some semblance of control.

50

Disoriented, Genevieve blinked against the harsh glare. Where was she?

A cool hand wrapped around her wrist, grounding her. “Welcome back to us, Ms. Whitford. I’m Nancy, your nurse. You’re safe in the hospital and making excellent progress.”

Hospital? Genevieve squeezed her eyes shut, seeking relief in the darkness.

“Can you open your eyes for me, Ms. Whitford?” the nurse insisted. “There you go. How do you feel?”

“Pain... my head, my face... my whole body.” Genevieve’s voice was a husky whisper.

“Is your vision clear? Can you focus?”

“The light...too much,” she murmured, squinting against the brightness.

“I’ll dim it for you. Better?”

“Yes, thank you. How long have I been here?”

“Since early this morning. It’s Monday evening now.”

Relief washed over her, easing the hollow in her stomach.
Safe. Not captive. “How did I get here?” Her voice wavered.

“A man, his friend, and a woman who says she’s your best friend brought you in. They’ve been asking for updates all day.”

Genevieve’s heart leaped. “Please, can I see them?”

When Susan squeezed her hands, their emotional dams burst. Tears streamed as they clung to each other, their sobs filling the room. Susan’s voice shook. “I’m so glad you’re safe. I was so scared.”

Genevieve held her tighter, whispering, “Me too.”

“Michael and Tank are here. They rescued you.”

Susan stepped back, and Michael’s face came into view. Genevieve’s breath hitched, her chest tightening with love and relief so intense it nearly hurt.

“Michael, I thought I’d never see you again.”

He clasped her hand and rested his forehead against hers.

His voice cracked with emotions he'd locked down for too long. "Thank God you're safe." Tears slid down his face unchecked; the lock had finally broken.

Her warrior was crying, his tears touching something deep inside. They stayed like that, their cheeks pressed together, their heartbeats finding a quiet rhythm together.

Tank peeked over Michael's shoulder. "Good to see you awake, girl."

Genevieve managed a shaky smile. "It feels good to be awake."

On her second day in the hospital, the police came with their endless questions. Michael's booted footsteps in the hallway made her feel less alone. When he stepped inside, his voice was firm. "That's enough questions for now." His protective presence made her chest ache in the best way.

He pulled up a chair and took her hand. "What do you remember?"

"Bits and pieces." Her voice wavered, the gaps in her

memory making her uneasy.

“The doctor said the drug Chad used can cause amnesia.”

She shivered. “I wish it had erased everything,” she muttered, mostly to herself.

He brushed his thumb over her knuckles, his touch reassuring. “You don’t have to talk about it until you’re ready.”

She hesitated but had to ask. “Did they catch Chad?”

“They got him on the West Virginia border. He’s locked up and not getting out any time soon. You won’t have to worry about him ever again.” Then, his tone lightened as he pulled a book from his backpack and held it up with a grin. “Look what I brought you.”

“*Bambi*—you remembered.” She blinked back fresh tears, touched by his thoughtfulness.

Michael flipped it open and started reading. “He came into the world in the middle of the thicket...” His voice, low and steady, filled the room, wrapping her in comfort and safety.

He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “I love you.”

But Genevieve had already drifted asleep, missing the words he’d been holding onto.

51

The hospital discharged Genevieve Wednesday morning. Her fingers tapped a staccato beat on the armrest of Michael's Jeep as he drove her home. *Why does going home twist my stomach in knots? Shouldn't I be relieved?* The thought of home, once her sanctuary, made her uneasy.

Michael glanced over, his expression gentle but serious. "You've got us, Genevieve. We won't leave you by yourself—especially at night." His hand brushed hers, a quick, comforting gesture.

"Good. I can't handle being alone." Their support kept her grounded.

Her home felt strangely foreign. Genevieve's fingers trailed across the back of the couch and then the dining room table—familiar surfaces that now felt like they belonged to someone else. She paused at the kitchen counter, her chest tightening. *Why does everything feel so... off?*

"Susan, will you wait in my room while I shower?" Genevieve winced at the vulnerability in her voice.

“Of course.”

Hot water pounded against Genevieve’s back, but the cold core inside her refused to melt. She scrubbed her skin raw, desperate to wash away the memories. Would she ever feel clean again?

She couldn’t shake off the chill, even wrapped tightly in a cocoon of blankets on the couch. Would she ever feel warm again? She sipped half-heartedly at the chicken soup. She lay with her head in Michael’s lap and her feet in Susan’s while Tank sprawled in the recliner. The warm murmur of their voices soothed her as she drifted in and out of a light sleep.

Genevieve leaned into Michael’s solid warmth. Tank was gone, but Michael and Susan stayed by her side. “I want to tell you what happened.” That wasn’t entirely true—part of her wanted to keep it locked away—but she hoped sharing might bring some relief.

Michael and Susan listened in silence. Genevieve’s voice cracked as she spoke, her hands twisting in her lap. “I thought—I thought I’d never make it out...”

Susan covered her mouth, her eyes glistening. Michael's grip on Genevieve tightened, his jaw clenching. But they didn't interrupt, letting her words spill out—every painful detail.

But talking didn't help. Reliving it made it feel all too real, and the gaps in her memory were even more terrifying. Drained and stuck in a waking nightmare, she felt relief slipping further away than even.

Susan waited while Genevieve brushed her teeth again, removed her robe and slippers, and slipped under the covers. Then, Susan sat beside her on the bed. "I'll be back first thing in the morning."

Genevieve squeezed her hand. "I love you, Susan."

Susan squeezed back. "Oh, G, I love you too. Try to get some sleep."

In a semi-dream state—not quite awake, not quite asleep—Genevieve heard the low rumble of Michael's voice, the soft click of a door latch, and water splashing in the shower. The mattress sagged when Michael lay on top of the covers and drew

her into his arms.

How did he know? How did he know she craved the comfort of his embrace and the security of his big body but wasn't ready for intimacy? "Thank you, Michael," she whispered.

"Sleep, sweetheart. I've got you. I love you, Genevieve."

His words washed over her, but there was no spark of joy, no rush of pleasure—only numbness. She fell into a desolate sleep, alone in the dark void.

52

The next two weeks passed in a blur for Genevieve. She curled up on the couch each day, wrapped in a blanket, feeling hollow and numb. Nightfall always caught her off guard, leaving her wondering where the day had gone.

Michael continued to sleep on top of the covers. He didn't push for intimacy; she didn't ask him to join her under the blankets.

One night, Michael's expression softened. "Can we talk?"

Her eyes slammed shut, dread knotting her stomach. *Oh no. He's going to ask for more.* She wasn't ready. Not yet.

He touched her hip, his voice gentle but firm. "Look at me, Genevieve."

She opened her eyes, guilt pulling at her. How could she turn away after all he'd done?

"You know I leave for a six-month deployment in two weeks."

What? He wasn't going to talk about sex? Caught off

guard, a nasty kernel of relief formed deep within.

“Before I go, I’ve made sure your place is secure. Deadbolts, motion lights—you’ll be safe here.”

“Thank you, Michael.” Ashamed of her thoughts, she spoke in a meek tone.

He frowned at her weak response. “And no more laundromat trips. A washer and dryer will be delivered tomorrow.”

She jolted upright, pride flickering. “That wasn’t necessary. I mean, thank you, but I can’t afford it.” Her voice faded, her attempt at assertiveness slipping away. She felt caught between wanting independence and feeling too fragile to fight for it.

Michael pulled her into his lap, his body radiating warmth. “The laundromat stresses you out—all those strangers. Getting a washer and dryer was an easy fix. You don’t owe me. I just wanted to help.”

Genevieve lowered her head. “Will I ever get over being kidnapped?”

“You will, but in your own time. You don’t need to force yourself into things before you’re ready.”

She twisted the sheet between her fingers, staying quiet.

“Genevieve, look at me.”

She shook her head, keeping her back to him. She couldn’t handle another conversation—couldn’t handle feeling exposed and weak. She was so tired—tired of feeling fragile, tired of being needy.

He kissed the nape of her neck. “I think you should try talking to a counselor.”

Relive that nightmare? Rip open those wounds? To a stranger? Not a chance.

Faced with her silence, he persisted. “I know it’s hard, but it might help. The Navy makes us big, tough SEALs do it. Just promise you’ll think about it.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it.” She agreed quickly, desperate to end the conversation. She pulled the blankets up to her chin and turned away from him. Why wouldn’t he stop pushing? Hadn’t she

been through enough?

He sighed softly and lay back on top of the covers.

Deep down, she knew her anger wasn't fair—it was just fear talking. But she was too drained to care.

53

The following morning, Susan gently coaxed Genevieve onto her deck. “It’s a beautiful fall day, G. Come outside and enjoy it.”

Genevieve lifted her face towards the warm fall sunshine, feeling a tiny spark of life. “This is nice. I’ve missed being outside.” The words surprised her.

Susan brushed Genevieve’s arm, her touch warm and comforting. “Have you remembered anything more about your kidnapping?”

Genevieve lowered herself into a chair. “I know how I ended up outside.”

“Tell me.”

“My arms and legs were free when I woke up, and the door unlocked.” Genevieve rubbed her forehead and laughed ruefully. “Hah. I guess Chad thought he’d given me enough drugs to kill me. I stumbled outside and made it as far as the shed before the drugs sucked me under again.” She shook her head, her lips tight. “Not brave, not heroic. Just dumb luck.”

“I disagree. You kept fighting.”

Genevieve shook her head—she knew the truth. Suddenly, the sound of men talking pierced the air. *Intruders!* Raw terror stiffened her body.

“It’s just the utility men,” Susan said. “Nothing to worry about.”

Genevieve didn’t hear her; her mind repeated a single thought: *Chad is coming, Chad is coming. I’ve got to hide.* She darted inside, driven by blind panic, to the furthest corner of her bedroom closet. She crouched, whimpering like a cornered animal.

A scream escaped her as the closet door creaked open. “Please, Chad, no more. I’ll be good. I promise. Just don’t hurt me.” She raised her arms instinctively, bracing for the blows she knew were coming.

“Genevieve, it’s me. It’s Susan. You’re home. You’re safe. Chad’s in jail—he can’t hurt you.” Susan repeated her words like a calming mantra until they broke through Genevieve’s panic.

Genevieve collapsed on the closet floor, sobbing from the deepest recesses of her soul.

“Let’s get you out of here, Genevieve.” Susan helped her to her feet and guided her to the bed. “I’ve got you.”

Genevieve let Susan’s gentle touch and soothing reassurances lull her into a fitful sleep.

When Genevieve woke, her bedroom was empty. She sighed, wearily rubbing her forehead. Why couldn’t she get it? She was safe—Chad was in jail. She forced herself out of bed and shuffled to the living room, where Tank lounged in the recliner, waiting.

“Morning. Susan’s at her gym. Michael’s running errands but will be back soon.”

“Okay.” Did she even care? She curled on the sofa and drew the blanket tightly around her.

“Susan left a sandwich for you. I’ll grab it.”

He placed the sandwich and a glass of milk on the coffee

table before her. Her stomach turned. It was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich—Susan didn't know Chad had fed her that.

“You need to eat,” Tank admonished as he returned to the recliner. Then silence. That was as close to parenting as he'd ever gotten.

Minutes passed in silence. Finally, she couldn't stand her grim thoughts any longer.

“Tank, distract me. Tell me about your life. I need something—anything—to take my mind off my mind.”

He hesitated, then spoke about his childhood, sharing a pain they both knew too well. His voice stayed steady, his face unreadable, but she sensed the hurt underneath. Their shared suffering drew her to him. She pushed herself off the couch and sat beside him, wanting to offer some comfort.

Tank stiffened slightly but then wrapped his arms around her when she hugged him. They held each other quietly, forming an unexpected bond.

Her heart tightened at Michael's tires crunching on the

gravel driveway. She quickly kissed Tank on the cheek before returning to the couch.

Tank's smile was gentle. "You're strong. You'll get through this."

She might survive this, but she'd never be the same. Her shoulders slumped. Had life's challenges finally defeated her? Broken her spirit? How could she live or love again if she couldn't even sit outside?

She straightened, her face taut with determination. Michael had to go. He was more than she deserved—brave, steady, always putting others first. How could she keep him trapped in her mess—a broken woman who couldn't give him the love he deserved? She pressed her hands to her stomach, trying to ease the knot of pain. Since he'd never leave on his own—his sense of honor wouldn't let him—she had to push him away.

But she knew she would lose a part of herself when he left.

54

“Michael, we need to talk.”

Michael sat across from Genevieve, their knees almost touching, but the distance between them felt like a chasm. A sense of dread snaked up his spine. Whatever she was about to say, he knew it would hurt.

Genevieve leaned forward, her hands clenched in her lap. “What happened... exposed my weaknesses.” She paused, her eyes lifeless. “I let Chad take me. I didn’t fight back. I just let him lock me away.”

Michael wrapped her hands in his. Her icy fingers startled him as much as her icy tone. “That’s not fair, G. Chad had a gun—he drugged you—you didn’t stand a chance. But you survived. Weak? No way. You’re the strongest woman I know.”

Genevieve pulled her hands back, hiding them under her thighs. Her voice went flat. “I did everything he asked.” Her lips twisted. “I even thanked him for a lousy peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

“You stabbed him with a syringe. You escaped.” Was she even listening? Why couldn’t she see her bravery?

Her face stayed blank, her voice bitter, “I should’ve fought—kicked, bitten, punched. But I didn’t. I just laid there like some helpless damsel in distress.” She wrapped her arms around herself and began to rock.

A wave of dread hit Michael at her self-loathing. He wanted to reach out but held back, fearing she’d recoil from his touch.

Genevieve stopped rocking, lifted her chin, and squared her shoulders. “I never want to feel powerless again. I don’t want to be afraid anymore.” Her nails dug into her palms. “I need to focus on me. I can’t be in a relationship, and I definitely can’t deal with sex.”

Her words hollowed him out. “Genevieve, don’t push me away. You’re hurt—not seeing things clearly. I want to be here for you. I love you.” He was close to begging.

She stayed silent, staring into the distance.

Frustration tightened his chest, and he shot to his feet, clenching his hands at his sides. “I won’t give up on us. I’ll call, text, visit—whatever it takes until you see we belong together.”

Her head whipped around. “Then you’ll be just like Chad.”

Her words hit him like a physical blow. His eyes darted around the room, searching for something to make this nightmare unreal. He felt her pain and dark despair as if it were his own. He wanted to help her fight her way out, but she didn’t want him.

That brutal reality shocked him into action. Fighting back tears, he stormed into the bedroom, shoved his clothes into a duffle bag, and walked to the front door. Turning back, he said softly, “I will always love you, Genevieve.”

Silence.

53

One year later

Genevieve entered the gym and took in the newly remodeled lobby. She waved to the new receptionist and headed to the office she shared with Susan.

Susan looked up from her paperwork and smiled. “Hi. How’d therapy go today?”

Genevieve set her bag down with a relieved smile. “It went well. I only cried once.”

Susan got up and hugged her. “That’s progress. What’s your homework challenge this week?”

Genevieve’s smile faded. “I have to drive to a mall, park my car, walk into the mall, and then—the hardest part—walk back to my car.” Her voice wavered.

“I’d be happy to go with you.”

“No, but thank you.” Susan always supported her. “I need

to do this on my own. My therapist and I have been preparing for weeks. I'm ready." She hoped.

"You've got this," Susan said confidently. "You've overcome so many fears already."

With a playful grin, Genevieve flexed her arms. "I can handle anything."

Susan laughed and cheered. "Yeah, you can. You're unstoppable." She then sat back down and excitedly waved a piece of paper. "Guess what? This is the final bill for the gym renovation."

Genevieve whooped, "We did it. We now co-own this beautiful, modern gym and yoga studio."

A deep male voice rumbled from the reception area, "Where's my wife? I need to see my wife."

Tank's huge body filled their office doorway. Susan scampered towards him, her laughter light and bubbling.

Tank scooped her into his arms. "There you are. I need some lovin', woman," he teased, nuzzling her neck. He had

returned from a two-week training mission a couple of days ago, and he and Susan had just come up for air.

Susan playfully swatted his arm. “Behave. Genevieve is here.”

“She’s got to find her own man.” Tank let Susan wriggle from his grasp, then walked over to Genevieve and gave her a big, friendly hug. “Everyone on the team got home safely,” he whispered. His words carried a private message—Michael was okay.

Longing swept through Genevieve, but she quickly suppressed it. “Hi, Tank. As much as I’d love to stay and watch you two newlyweds make out, I’ve got stuff to do.” Her laughter held a note of sadness as she excused herself.

Later, Genevieve pulled up to her home, the sweet scent of newly mown grass filling the air. A quick scan confirmed it—her grass had been cut. Ms. Ruth’s grass, too. Wait a minute. Was that Michael lounging on Ms. Ruth’s front porch with an iced tea like

he owned the place? What was going on?

She marched over and planted herself at the foot of the steps, hands on hips. She skewered Michael with a sharp look and demanded, “Did you mow my lawn?”

“Yup.” Michael’s reply was casual, as if daring her to object.

With a glare that would terrify Godzilla, she bit out her question. “Why?”

“I like mowing grass.”

His cocky reply irked her, and Ms. Ruth’s giggle didn’t help. “Well, stop it.”

“It’s already done.”

Michael’s self-satisfied smirk had her seeing red. “You... you...”

“A simple thank you will suffice.”

The audacity. She turned smartly and stomped back toward her house, muttering to herself. “I can mow my damn

grass. I'm not helpless. What nerve." Michael's deep laughter floated across the perfectly groomed lawn. The entire neighborhood could probably hear her teeth grinding.

That evening, Genevieve examined her anger. *Thanks, therapy.* Her outrage was a shield, but against what? A lawn mower? Cut grass? Or Michael? Bingo. She didn't want Michael to think she was the same weak, trembling mess she'd been after the kidnapping. She was a new Genevieve, strong and independent. It was a matter of pride—pride in her accomplishments and personal growth.

But there was more to it, and admitting it felt like swallowing dry toast. The sight of him sent her heart into overdrive—tan and fit, with biceps gleaming with sweat. She missed him, wanted him, loved him—only him. But that ship had sailed; she'd made sure of that.

Or had it? Did his gesture with the lawn have a deeper significance? Did he miss her? Or had her pissy responses squelched that, too? With a headache brewing, she shrugged off her questions, waiting to see what happened next.

Two weeks later, Genevieve found Michael in her backyard, shirtless and surrounded by a stack of lumber, numerous bags of topsoil, and a mound of compost. She forced herself to stop gawking at his thick chest and ran towards him, her voice a screech. “What are you doing?”

“Building raised beds,” he replied as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

She forced her gaze away from his beautiful body. “Why?”

“You mentioned you liked gardening with your mom. Since you don’t have a garden, I thought I’d give you one.”

Just like that, there was everything she loved about him—his compassion, thoughtfulness, kindness. She hesitated, then knelt beside him, her heart doing joyful somersaults. “What can I do?”

He pointed at the topsoil with a smile. “Let’s fill these frames.”

The sun was warm on her back, and the rich soil was a familiar comfort. She felt a fragile bond building as they worked side-by-side, mending the rift she'd created.

“Do you want to stay for dinner?” She tried to sound nonchalant but wasn't sure she pulled it off. He probably saw right through her.

“Sorry, can't tonight.” His answer was curt and dismissive.

She worked hard to hide her disappointment. Had she imagined their connection? Had she made up the bond from her wishes and hopes?

When they finished filling the frames, Michael left with a casual wave as if nothing significant had happened between them. From her side of the fence, Ms. Ruth's voice chirped, “He's wooing you.”

Genevieve's heart skipped a beat. Was he? She wasn't so sure. And when Michael stayed silent for the next two weeks, her doubts solidified. There was nothing there.

55

Syd's buzzed with its usual energy as Tank, Susan, and Genevieve settled a table for the evening. For Genevieve, it was her first night out since the kidnapping, and the lively chaos felt oddly comforting—like slipping back to a familiar rhythm.

Tank ordered a round of beers, but Susan couldn't resist the call of the dance floor, joining the line dancing before finishing her first sip. Tank watched her every move, his eyes warm with love and pride.

Genevieve noticed and smiled. "She's something else, isn't she?"

"She is," Tank said with a quiet sigh.

Genevieve rested a hand on his arm. "You're not so bad yourself."

He gave her hand a brief squeeze. Their friendship had grown over the past year, built by self-defense lessons and his marriage to her best friend.

"You don't want to two-step with me, do you, G?" Tank

asked, sounding like he hoped she'd say no.

She stared at him as if he'd just grown another head.

“Wait—you know how to two-step?”

“Yup. Susan taught me,” he said with a touch of pride.

“Let's go for it.” Genevieve hoped he wouldn't crush her feet.

Tank scowled with concentration as he led her around the dance floor. His lips moved as he counted each step, rarely in time with the music. Genevieve bit back a laugh, utterly charmed by selfless effort.

When the song finally ended, so did Tank's ordeal. Genevieve pulled him into a tight hug, her laughter spilling out. “That was so much fun.”

Back at their table, Michael showed up with a young woman girl on his arm—instant drama. Genevieve sighed, her heart sinking. She couldn't catch a break—the universe just had to ruin her night.

Tank draped his arm over Genevieve's shoulders. “What

do you want, Mac?” he asked, his voice hard.

Michael smirked, his voice a slurred taunt. “Ya gonna fight me for Genevieve, Tank?”

Tank withdrew his arm and replied calmly, “No, of course not.”

Susan stepped up beside Tank, slipping her hand into his. Her eyes darted between him and Michael.

“Hey, Susan,” Michael said, swaying on his feet. “What’s up?”

“Hi, Michael,” Susan said, her tone warm but guarded.

“Looks like everyone is having a good time.” Michael glanced around, unfocused, before landing on the woman beside him. His brows lifted like he’d just realized she was there. “Me and... uh, Mindy... we’re having’ a reeeaal good time.”

The girl pouted and swatted Michael’s arm playfully. “It’s Mandy, not Mindy.”

“Whatever,” Michael said rudely. Mandy giggled and

wrapped her arm around his waist. Michael stared pointedly at Genevieve and sneered. “Well, ‘long as it’s just sex, ain’t no one getting hurt, right?”

Michael and Genevieve’s eyes met, locking in a silent battle. She drank in the sight of him—angry, tense, and trying to appear indifferent. But there was something else in his eyes, something deeper—sadness? Longing?

Before Genevieve could say a word, Michael turned on his heel and stormed off, his rigid back and clenched fists shutting her out. The young woman scrambled after him.

56

“Mac’s still pretty raw,” Tank apologized.

Genevieve shot Tank and Susan a sharp glare. “Did you know he’d be here? Was this some kind of setup?”

Tank raised his hands in surrender. “No, of course not. We’d never do that to you.”

Susan shook her head firmly. “Do you want to leave?”

“Hell no. I came here to dance, and I’m going to dance.” Genevieve took a large gulp of beer, its bitterness lingering. “I can’t believe Michael’s with hussy. Her fake boobs look like a bad art project.”

Susan and Tank shared an ‘uh oh’ look but didn’t say a word.

Genevieve took another swig of beer, frustration boiling over. “He’s never liked stupid women. Only a fool would cling to a man who doesn’t even know her name.” She slammed her glass on the table, beer sloshing over the edge. “The Michael I know wouldn’t act like this—he’s better than that.”

Even now, she couldn't shake her belief in him. Memories of his promises flooded her mind. Was that love she'd seen in his eyes? Did he still feel it, too?

Her anger cooled, giving way to a flicker of hope. She made her decision. "I want Michael back," she announced like a battle cry.

"Of course you do." Susan's voice held no surprise.

"And I have a plan," she said, her voice firm. "I'll just tell him."

"Well, I guess that could be a good plan?" Susan's tone carried a hint of doubt.

"It is a solid plan," Genevieve insisted firmly.

Genevieve straightened in her seat, eyes narrowed, chin lifted. "I'm not giving up on Michael." The conviction in her voice silenced the table. "I know he still cares. No more sitting on the sidelines, waiting for him to come to his senses. If he's too blind to see what we have, then I'll remind him. I'll make him see."

Susan blinked, her fork frozen mid-air. The steely resolve

in Genevieve's voice was something she hadn't heard in years—not since before the tragedy that had nearly broken her. “Genevieve...” Susan began softly, a warning laced with concern.

But Genevieve shook her head, cutting her off. “No, Susan. I've spent enough time grieving, enough time second-guessing myself. Life's too short to wait for the perfect moment. If he's too scared to leap, then I'll jump first.”

Andrew leaned back, his lips pressed into a thin line. “This could go really wrong.”

Genevieve raised her hand, cutting him off. “I know what I'm doing. This isn't some naive, reckless decision. I've loved him for years, and that doesn't just go away. He needs me, whether he admits it or not. And if I have to fight for him, so be it.”

Susan reached out, her hand brushing Genevieve's. “Just... be careful,” Susan said gently, worry etched across her face.

Genevieve smiled faintly. “Don't worry. I'm not going in blind.” Her eyes flicked toward his table, where Michael sat,

brooding and distant. “He’s worth it.”

Andrew exhaled sharply, his hand raking through his hair. “Well, hell,” he muttered under his breath. “This should be interesting.”

Genevieve marched toward Michael, who sat like a king among SEALs and women. Her boots scraped the floor as she ground to a halt, hands on her hips, her heartbeat matching the pounding music. Her confidence began to waver as she stood before his cold, indifferent gaze. Just as she considered backing down, he surged to his feet, his eyes burning with fury.

He stopped an inch from her, his imposing figure looming over her, trying to intimidate her with his size. But it wouldn’t work; she was on a mission. Unfazed, she stood her ground.

“Yeah, what do you want?” he snarled.

“I want to dance,” she barked at him like a drill sergeant giving orders.

57

What the fuck? Michael was dumbfounded. Genevieve, the woman who had callously discarded him, now stood before him, demanding a dance. And in front of his team!

She'd kicked him to the curb, shattered his world, and left him in pieces. Yet, here she was, expecting him to come running back like some affection-starved stray.

But deep down, wasn't this what he wanted? Wasn't that why he'd mowed her lawn and built those damn raised beds? Helpless against the pull of his feelings, he could only mutter, "Yes, ma'am," as his heart overruled his pride.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him to the dance floor, her confidence bolstered by the cheers of his rowdy friends.

A slow song played as they stepped onto the dance floor, and memories of their first dance flooded back. Michael opened his arms, letting Genevieve set the distance between them. She closed the gap instantly, wrapping her arms around his waist.

He held her lightly, but she clutched his T-shirt and pulled

him even closer, resting her cheek against his chest. His heart soared. He released a shaky exhale, letting go of the emotions bottled up for so long. Happiness and hope swelled within him—he was with Genevieve again.

He lowered his lips to her ear. “I love you, Genevieve. I’ve missed you so much. I need you in my life.”

Her eyes glistened as she placed a hand over his heart. “I love you too, Michael.”

Genevieve said those words to him for the first time, and they were everything he’d ever dreamed of—home, family, and forever. “You are my person for all time,” he whispered, gently cradling her face and pressing a kiss to her forehead.

She rose onto her tiptoes, seeking his lips. He met her with a whisper-soft kiss—once, twice, then firmly. The sweetness of the moment masked his racing heart and a wild rush of thoughts.

Hand-in-hand, they made their way back to her table. Michael couldn’t bring himself to mention the smudged mascara streaking her cheeks—she looked like a tear-eyes raccoon. When

they reached the table, Susan whisked Genevieve off to the bathroom.

Tank gave Michael a serious look. “Everything okay?”

“Yep, all good.”

Tank offered a crooked smile and a fist bump—his best friend understood.

When Genevieve and Susan returned, Susan playfully challenged Tank. “Come on, big guy, let’s two-step.”

A flicker of fear crossed Tank’s face. “You sure?”

“Absolutely. Susan grabbed his hand and pulled him to the dance floor.

Michael chuckled. “Hilarious. Tank’s afraid of dancing. I’ve seen him stare down a terrorist’s rifle with the same calm as watching TV.”

They watched as Tank and Susan stumbled through the steps, their movements stiff and hilariously offbeat. “They’re absolutely terrible, aren’t they?” Michael said, chuckling good-

naturedly.

Genevieve laughed, too. “Yes, but they’re the best friends anyone could ask for. I wouldn’t have made it without them.”

“Me neither,” he admitted softly.

As their fingers intertwined, an unspoken understanding passed between them—a bond of love beginning to mend their hearts.

“Michael, will you come home with me?”

He saw the hope in her eyes. His response was immediate. “Oh yeah.” There was nowhere else he wanted to be.

Their drive home was quiet, the silence filled with unspoken questions. Michael grew uneasy as they approached her neighborhood. Was she ready for intimacy? What if his touch brought back her fears? How could he make her feel safe?

Every light in her house was on, lighting up the entire block. “I still don’t like the dark,” she confessed shyly. “I keep

every light on all day, every day.”

He nodded his head. “Makes sense.” There was no way she was ready for anything physical. “I’ve got an idea. Let’s sit on the deck and catch up.”

“I’d like that.”

Her relaxed shoulders and soft smile told him he’d come up with the right plan. Tonight was about reconnecting.

58

Michael snuggled a blanket around Genevieve, his hands lingering to ensure the soft fleece covered her entirely. “Warm enough?”

“Mmmm... yes, thank you.” He always knew what she needed to feel safe—time, space, or just a simple touch.

Sitting beside her, he took her hand and entwined their fingers. “Was that a blanket nailed above the door?”

She ducked her head. “I didn’t want anyone peeking inside. Instead of buying curtains, I used blankets.” She pointed towards the front of the house. “There’s another one nailed above my bay window. I got used to them and never bothered with drapes.”

He nodded as if it made perfect sense. She felt secure, knowing she could tell him anything without judgment. Genevieve bit her lower lips to stop the trembling rising inside. Her final fear to conquer was the dark. “I miss the sunlight,” she said softly, her voice filled with longing.

“I bet. I hear you and Susan are now partners in the gym.”

Grateful for the shift, she relaxed. He truly saw her. “We are. I used my savings to buy into the business, and Susan and I transformed it into something amazing—a new weight room, yoga studio, self-defense classes.” Her voice brimmed with pride.

“I’ve got to admit, hearing that Tank taught you self-defense made me a little jealous.”

“I wish it had been you,” she assured him.

Michael’s smile was bittersweet. “At least you learned from the best.”

Genevieve’s voice filled with pride as she recited the SEAL mantra. “Swift, violent, and unexpected.”

“Hooyah!”

“Now it’s your turn, Michael. Tell me about you.”

Genevieve didn’t need to know about the first six months after she’d drop-kicked his heart—the drinking, the fucking. He was determined to prove he didn’t need love, didn’t want love, didn’t

do love. But the thrill of random sex had faded—there was no laughter, heat, no incredible ache in his chest. Sex had become mechanical—just a release—and he could do that with his fist.

His fingers tightened around hers. “I realized I was at a crossroads and needed to rethink my life. I decided to work on my leadership skills. And, for the first time in my life, I started reading.”

Genevieve raised her brows, clearly surprised.

“In school, I only read the Cliff Notes—never an entire book, never one I chose. But this time, it was different. I read about the lives of military and business leaders. I wanted to learn from their experiences, not just be told what to do. Their stories gave me insight and inspiration.

“And the outcome?” Her eyes shone with admiration and respect.

He smiled shyly. “After several missteps, I think I’ve become a better teammate. Still a lot to learn, though.”

“Missteps? As in, you made a mistake? You weren’t

perfect?” Her smile softened her teasing words.

“Far from it, little Miss Smart-ass,” he retorted, sparking laughter between them. “And, I discovered I like reading, which was an unexpected bonus. And photography. I bought a camera and took a million photos.”

“I can’t wait to see your collection.”

“But Tank’s and Susan’s friendship kept me going during that long year without you...” His voice trailed off.

“I caused so much pain.” She shook her head, remorse filling her eyes.

He reached for her hands, forcing out the questions that had haunted him: “Why compare me to Chad? Why push me away?”

She hesitated before meeting his gaze, her honesty matching his. “I needed space, yes. But mostly, I couldn’t bear the thought of trapping you in a sexless relationship, bound to someone so broken.”

“You made a decision that was mine to make?” Tender

sarcasm laced his voice as he repeated her words from so long ago.

“Yes, I guess I did.” She bowed her head.

His laugh was rueful. “Looks like we’ve both grown a little.”

She climbed into his lap and leaned against his shoulder. “I took your advice and went to therapy.” Her whisper was barely audible. “It was tortuous. I thought it would be simple: the therapist would tell me what to do, and, poof, I’d be healed. Boy, was I wrong.”

He kissed the top of her head, giving her a gentle squeeze.

“My mother’s illness, my father’s abandonment, Brian’s death, the kidnapping, and my love for you—they got all knotted up. Therapy forced me to untangle them, one painful memory at a time, even when it felt like walking barefoot over broken glass. But it’s been worth it.”

He kissed her forehead. “I’m proud of you.”

“I’m proud of me, too.”

A little nervous but confident that lovemaking would strengthen their fragile new bond, Michael asked gently, “Ready for bed?”

She twisted in his lap and looped her arms around her neck. She let herself sink into him, feeling his warmth settle her like that light she missed. “Yes, I am,” she replied, confidence ringing.

59

Just outside her bedroom door, Michale paused and gently cupped her face. “You’ll need to give me those sex signals—to let me know what you want and what you don’t.”

What did she want? To be close to him. What didn’t she want? To be apart for another second. Bursting with desire, she wrapped her hands around his neck, pulled his head down, and brushed her lips across his ear. “I want it all—your hands on me, your body against mine. I want to feel every inch of you.”

Michael swallowed, his voice rough. “Copy that. Signals loud and clear.”

“Right here, right now,” she demanded, her breath hitching. She pressed her hips into him. “Don’t hold back. I’m strong, and I want my man.” She rose to her tiptoes and latched onto his lips, her kiss fierce. All thumbs and blind lust, she fumbled with his shirt, desperate to strip away any barrier.

With a booming laugh, he tore off the fabric, revealing his muscular chest—exactly what she’d been craving. Excited, she pressed wet kisses across his chest as he unzipped his jeans and

shoved them down, his arousal springing free.

She dropped to her knees, ready to swallow him whole.

But he had other ideas. With a rough tug, he pulled her to a stand. “Blow me later. I’ll come as soon as you put your mouth around me.”

She giggled as he yanked off one leg of her jeans. With a feral hunger in his eyes, he lifted her and slammed her back against the wall. She wrapped her legs around his waist, his fingers digging into her hips. He snatched her thong aside and entered her in one long, powerful stroke.

He paused, chest heaving. “Tell me you’re okay.”

“Don’t stop. I want you now, hard and fast.”

He gave her exactly what she wanted—rough and fast. When he came, he roared, “Fuck, Genevieve.” Then he added something new: “I love you, Genevieve.”

A rush of calm excitement spread through her, her whole body still trembling. Just as she was about to say it back, Michael grinned, a little sheepish. “Glad you know I’m more than a 10-

stroke guy.”

Genevieve threw back her head and laughed. “I know you’ll take care of my needs.”

“Right now.” Keeping her legs wrapped around his waist, he carried her into the bedroom, his jeans still around his ankles. He dropped her onto the bed, sending her bouncing and laughing. Her breath caught as she absorbed every detail: his stunning blue eyes, sharp jawline, and taut muscles.

He gently cupped her face and kissed her possessively. As he removed her shirt and bra, her breasts spilled free, her dark nipples fully erect. “I’ve got to taste them,” he growled, sucking first one breast and then the other.

She wrapped her hand around his erection, amazed at his stamina. “You’re still hard,” she gasped.

“Your tight, wet nipples keep me rock hard. Lie down, arms above your head, thighs spread.” She eagerly complied, offering herself to him, vulnerable and wanting.

He started an achingly slow assault on her senses.

Feather-light kisses on her temples and eyelids unraveled her. When he sucked on her lower lip, sending shivers through her, she couldn't hold back a moan. When he nuzzled her neck and licked just below her ear, her back arched, and her toes curled into the mattress. Instinctively, she reached out to touch him, but he caught her wrists in an iron grip and pinned them above her head. "No touching."

He yanked her thong down her legs, his eyes dark with lust. "Spread wider."

She squeezed her eyes shut and obeyed, her heart racing in anticipation of him. But instead of his weight pressing down on her, his fingers merely grazed the top of her mound. She quivered, every nerve ending hypersensitive; even the cool breeze from the fan brushing across her skin was unbearable.

He paused.

She whimpered.

"Look at me, Genevieve," he demanded.

Her eyes fluttered open, and his steel blue eyes seemed to

pierce her soul.

“Do you understand that you belong to me?” His solemn declaration echoed through her heart.

“Yes, Michael.”

“That you’re mine forever?”

“Yes, Michael.” Her heart soared.

“Do you understand that I want to share my life with you? Grow old with you? That I want you to have my babies?”

His words were more than questions; they were a vow. A warm thrill moved through her. “Oh yes, Michael,” she breathed through tears.

“Then wrap your arms around me, sweetheart. Hold me close, and never let go.”

Full of hope and promise, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

Then Michael made love to her, their joining powerful and sweet.

As her climax washed over her like a flood of warmth, she felt another release—a freeing of fears: fear of loneliness, fear of the unknown, fear of her past. In their place grew a hopeful anticipation of their shared future. She took his hand and held it close to her heart. As her tears quieted, he kissed her neck and shoulders, whispering sweet words of love and devotion.

“Michael, can we turn off the light?”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind it.”

“I’m sure.

He reached over and flipped the switch, plunging the room into darkness. He pulled her close, his thick arm around her like a safety net. “How about we remove those ugly blankets from the windows tomorrow?”

Surrounded by his strength and love, sunshine flooded her soul. “I’d like that.”

She’d done the hard work of healing, but at that moment, she knew his love was the final piece she’d been missing.

They drifted into a deep, satisfied sleep, holding each

other close.

At 3:00 AM, a ping from her phone woke her up.

Susan: How are you? Everything okay?

Genevieve: smiley face.