

Classified Heat

## Chapter One: “The Wrong File”

CW: Suspense, military setting, light surveillance themes, power imbalance, and spice.

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ELANA

I knew the file wasn't meant for me. That was exactly why I opened it.  
It pinged on my secondary drive—an encrypted packet buried beneath layers of corrupted logistics data. Military routing files were usually dull: coordinates, timestamps, equipment manifests. But this one... this one had no source, no destination, no owner.  
I should have flagged it. Should have reported it.  
Instead, I tapped in the decryption sequence.  
Lines of redacted reports flickered to life on my screen. Test logs. Psychological data. Containment records. A blurred photo of a man restrained in a concrete room. The header read:

**SUBJECT 12: NON-STANDARD INTERROGATION PROTOCOL**  
**STATUS: ASSET NEUTRALIZED**  
**LEAD OFFICERS: REDACTED**

My heart stuttered, then slammed into overdrive. My breath hitched. The office suddenly felt like it was closing in, the walls pressing too close, too tight. My stomach flipped. I swallowed down the burn rising in my throat.  
And then I saw it—  
Scribbled in the margin, faint but unmistakable, was a project code I knew by heart.  
My father's code.  
The one from the classified deployment, he never came back from.  
A sharp, cold spike shot through my chest. My fingers went numb on the keyboard, mouth dry. The buzzing in my ears drowned everything out except one truth:  
This wasn't a coincidence.  
The lights in the office suddenly felt too bright. Too exposed.  
Just flag it. Just report it. Do what you're supposed to do.  
I didn't.  
I saved it to a flash drive, slipped it into my purse, and shut everything down.  
The building was silent as I walked out. Late. Cold. Empty—except for the shadow in the dark SUV across the lot.  
I paused.

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ELANA

The engine wasn't running. No headlights. Just the dense silhouette of a vehicle, too clean, too

quiet.

I stopped mid-step, the keys in my hand clinking softly. Every instinct screamed.

And then the driver's side door opened.

A man stepped out—tall, broad, black gloves flexing as he shut the door. No rush. No words.

Just control.

He moved like he'd done this a thousand times. Quiet. Deliberate.

The kind of man who doesn't need to raise his voice to make you obey.

"Miss Marlowe," he said, even-toned.

I froze.

My pulse roared in my ears as my eyes locked on his. Pale green. Cold as steel.

I didn't recognize him—but he looked at me like he knew everything.

Footsteps behind me.

Too late.

Another man—taller, bulkier, grinning like he wanted someone to run. The kind of smile that said go ahead, make this fun.

I turned slightly, the keys clenched like a weapon between my fingers.

"Who are you?" I asked, breath catching.

The second man cocked his head. "Not yet," he said, voice smooth like ice under a boot.

I backed toward the car I'd never reach. My brain was screaming move, but my legs weren't listening.

Then a third voice. Softer. Almost gentle.

"You triggered a red file," he said.

"They know what you saw."

I turned—slowly.

This one wasn't in uniform. Just black jeans, combat boots, and a tactical backpack slung over one shoulder. Stubble shadowed his jaw. His dark hair curled slightly at the edges.

He looked... tired. Like someone who'd been carrying too many secrets for too long.

His presence didn't scream danger like the others, but it simmered with it.

"If we hadn't come," he continued, "someone else would've."

He let that settle. "Someone worse."

"Who sent you?" I whispered.

"We're your protection detail," he said.

"You're not safe anymore."

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COLE

She turned to Leo like he was the only one who made sense.

Smart.

He doesn't look like a soldier, but Elana sees the truth anyway—he's the one with empathy, the one who might answer questions.

That's fine. She'll learn soon enough that I'm the one who keeps her breathing.

I stepped closer, blocking the parking lot behind her. Rhys flanked the far side. Containment.

She didn't move. Not yet. But she was calculating—scanning exits, watching hands, memorizing faces.

She didn't panic.

She didn't scream.

She registered threat. She assessed.

Definitely not your average civilian.

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ELANA

They boxed me in without ever raising a weapon.

Three men. Three different kinds of danger.

The quiet one with the soft voice.

The smirking predator who looked like he'd break ribs for fun.

And the one standing in front of me now—stone-jawed, unreadable, radiating absolute control.

"What's your name?" I asked the one closest. My voice didn't feel like mine.

He looked down at me like he was deciding if I needed the truth.

Then he said it:

"Captain Cole Bennett. United States Marine Corps."

The words landed like weight. Like chains.

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COLE

I didn't blink. Didn't move.

She needed to know who she was dealing with.

Not for fear—

For clarity.

Because this wasn't going away.

She was in it now.

And I was the only one here who'd make damn sure she didn't get buried because of it.

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ELANA

Fifteen minutes later, I was in the backseat of their black SUV, strapped in between tension and heat.

Cole drove. Hands steady. Jaw locked.

Rhys sat up front, humming something tuneless under his breath, his arm stretched casually along the window—but his eyes tracked everything.

And Leo sat beside me. Quiet. Present. Watching me without looking at me.

I didn't ask questions. I didn't argue.

Because deep down, I knew—

Whatever I found in that file was only the beginning.

And these men?  
They were the end of the world I thought I lived in.

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ELANA

Three hours.  
No answers. No chatter. Just the low growl of the SUV eating up blacktop and my silence, sharp-edged and deliberate.  
I didn't ask questions. Not because I didn't have any—but because I knew they wouldn't tell me. Not yet.  
I watched them in the mirrors. Studied every blink, every breath.  
The one driving—Cole—rigid, intense. The one riding shotgun—Rhys—smiling like a man who liked pain. And Leo... the quiet one. Watching without watching. Calm in a way that felt like restraint.  
By the time the road turned to gravel, I already knew I wasn't here by accident.  
This wasn't a rescue. This was containment.  
The cabin appeared out of nowhere, swallowed by trees and night.  
Remote. Cold. Isolated.  
Exactly the kind of place you bring someone when you want them to vanish.

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COLE

She hadn't said a damn word since we pulled her from that parking lot, but I could feel her watching us. Calculating.  
Not broken.  
Just loading the next round.  
She stepped out of the SUV without hesitation. Boots on gravel, chin up, eyes already scanning her surroundings like a soldier checking for exits.  
That flash drive in her purse had changed everything—for all of us.  
Now she was the variable.  
And I hate variables.

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ELANA

The air bit at my face as I stepped out, but I didn't flinch.  
If this was meant to intimidate me, they were going to have to try harder.  
The porch creaked as we walked up. Rhys punched in a code without looking at me. I didn't need to see it.  
I'd already clocked the pattern. Five digits. The thumb favored the left side of the pad. Fast. Muscle memory.  
Give me time, and I'd figure it out.

The door groaned open. The cabin smelled like cold wood and old secrets.  
Two couches. A stove. A bare-bones kitchen. Three doors down a narrow hallway. No personal items. No warmth. Just utility. This was a place meant to serve a purpose. Not a person.

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LEO

"I'll check the perimeter," I said, grabbing a flashlight off the shelf. Cole nodded. Rhys flopped onto a couch like it was his throne.

Elana stood in the middle of the room, arms crossed, jaw tight. Not afraid.

Focused.

"I'd say make yourself at home, but..."

She shot me a look sharp enough to cut glass.

"Hot water's still working," I added. "Pick a room. Rest. We'll talk in the morning."

Her eyes met mine. No flinch. No softness.

Just assessment.

She gave me a single nod, grabbed her bag, and disappeared down the hall like she already owned the place.

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ELANA

The last room on the left.

Bed. Dresser. Thin quilt. One window.

I locked the door behind me—not because I thought it would stop them. Just because it was mine now. My space.

And I always secure my perimeter.

My bag hit the floor. I didn't collapse. I didn't shake. I sat on the bed, rolled my shoulders, and took inventory.

No cell signal. No power outlets that worked. No weapons—yet.

But I had something better.

Information.

They thought I was the payload.

But I was the detonator.

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ELANA

I didn't waste time. I dropped my bag on the bed and unzipped it, fast and methodically. Inside: a spare pair of jeans, two black T-shirts, socks, a folding knife I wasn't sure I'd get to keep, and the one thing that mattered—

The flash drive.

I pulled it out and tucked it deep into the lining of the canvas bag, then zipped it shut. If they wanted it, they'd have to tear the damn thing apart.

Next: gear check.

I took off my boots, stripped out of my outer layers, and folded them military-neat. Habit.

Everything went into a tight stack on the dresser. Clothes for tomorrow are laid out. No assumptions about how long I'd stay.

I ran my fingers through my hair, grimacing at the tangles.

The adrenaline was wearing off, and with it came the grime of fear, sweat, and the long ride here.

I needed a shower.

Not to relax—hell no. I needed the water to reset. To think. To get back control of my damn skin.

I grabbed a towel and my change of clothes, rolled them under one arm, and cracked open the door.

The hallway was still and dim, the only light bleeding from the front room.

The bathroom was across the hall. Ten paces, tops.

I waited.

Listened.

Nothing.

Then I stepped out—barefoot, in black boyshorts and a tight tank top, towel slung over my shoulder like a challenge.

If one of them saw me like this, so be it.

Let them look.

I wasn't the one who should be afraid.

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ELANA

The hallway was cool against my skin. Quiet, still.

I kept my steps light as I crossed to the bathroom.

The floor creaked once beneath me.

I didn't flinch.

I kept walking.

Hand on the handle. Twist. Push. The door opened with a groan.

A narrow room—just a stand-up shower, a chipped sink, a small fogged mirror. Bare. Functional.

I stepped inside. Reached back to close the door—

Then I felt him.

I turned.

Leo.

He stood just outside the doorway, eyes locked on me. No apology. No excuses.

Just that same unreadable stillness he wore like armor.

"You following me now?" I asked, voice low. Calm.

He didn't smile. Didn't blink.

"I didn't think you should be alone."

My pulse kicked. Not from fear. From something else.  
Heat licked up my spine.  
I raised a brow. "You think I'm not safe in a bathroom?"  
He took one step closer. Into the doorway now. His body filled the frame, all quiet power and coiled restraint.  
"I think you're safer with me close," he said. Voice like smoke—soft, dark, full of things left unsaid.  
My grip tightened on the towel slung over my shoulder.  
"You here to stand guard?"  
"No." His eyes dropped—slowly, deliberately—to the curve of my hip. Then, back up to meet mine.  
"I'm here because I didn't want to walk away."  
The air thickened. Tightened.  
I should've told him to get out.  
Instead, I stepped back. Just once. Enough to leave space for him to follow.  
And he did.

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ELANA

The door clicked shut behind him.  
Soft. Final.  
I didn't move.  
Neither did he.  
The silence between us wasn't empty—it pulsed. Thick with everything we hadn't said.  
Everything we shouldn't want.  
He didn't ask for permission.  
But he didn't assume it, either.  
I dropped the towel from my shoulder, slow and deliberate. My tank followed, peeled up over my ribs, and tossed to the floor.  
I stood there in nothing but my black boyshorts, staring him down.  
"If you're gonna be in here," I said, "you'd better be useful."  
His jaw flexed once. His eyes?  
Hungry. Controlled.  
Then he moved. One step, two, until he was in front of me—his chest rising just slightly faster than before.  
His fingers came to rest on the edge of my waistband.  
He waited.  
I nodded once. That was all he needed.  
The fabric slid down my legs and pooled at my feet. His hand brushed my hip as he straightened, and my skin lit up like a live wire.  
Then he kissed me.  
Not soft.  
Not hesitant.

Like he'd been holding back for hours and finally let go.  
I grabbed his shirt, yanked it up over his head. His hands were already on my skin—gripping my waist, mapping my spine like he needed the contact just to stay grounded.  
The heat between us was sudden, sharp, consuming.

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## LEO

She tasted like adrenaline. Like defiance.  
Like someone who didn't want to be touched—unless it was real.  
And fuck, this was real.  
Her hands slid into my hair as my mouth moved down her throat, over the curve of her shoulder, down the line of her collarbone.  
She arched into me, heat rolling off her like fire beneath her skin.  
She wasn't fragile.  
She was steel wrapped in silk.  
And she let me touch her like I was the only thing keeping her anchored.  
The water came on with a groan from the pipes, steam rising fast as I lifted her into the stall. Her legs wrapped around my waist without hesitation. Her back hit the tile with a soft thud.  
I pressed into her, hard enough to feel her shudder.  
Her breath hitched. My name—just once—barely audible.  
“Leo...”  
Fuck.  
I reached between us, sliding into her with a low groan.  
She gasped—eyes flashing.  
Her hands gripped my shoulders, nails digging into my skin.  
Not because it hurt—  
Because she wanted more.  
I gave it to her.  
Again.  
And again.  
The water beat down on us, but I didn't feel the heat anymore—only her.  
Only the way her body shattered around mine.

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## ELANA

I didn't think. Didn't hesitate.  
I just felt.  
Each thrust was a promise and a threat.  
Each kiss, a warning: this wasn't simple.  
But when I came apart in his arms, head thrown back, breath ripped from my lungs—  
I didn't care.



For the first time since the file, since the shadow in the parking lot—  
I wasn't scared.  
I wasn't hunted.  
I was alive.  
And I'd let a man I barely knew remind me what that felt like.

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ELANA

The water turned cold before either of us moved.  
And even then, it wasn't because we were ready.  
It was because reality came creeping back in—quiet, sharp-edged, and unavoidable.  
Leo turned off the tap without a word.  
Steam clung to our skin as we stood there, close enough to feel the echoes of everything we just did pulsing in the space between us.  
I didn't speak.  
I didn't look at him.  
I stepped out of the stall, grabbed the towel off the hook, and wrapped it tight around my body like armor.  
Behind me, I heard the low drag of the curtain. The soft scrape of his breathing.  
No apology. No regret.  
Just silence.  
I dried off fast, movements sharp, efficient.  
Threw on my tank top, underwear, and the same fatigue pants I came in with.  
The mirror was fogged over, and I didn't wipe it clean.  
I didn't want to see my face.  
He was still behind me, half-dressed, eyes burning into the back of my skull like he was waiting for something.  
I didn't give it to him.  
I opened the door, stepped into the hallway.  
Stopped.  
My fingers tightened around the edge of the towel hanging from my neck.  
I turned, just enough to catch his eyes.  
"What the hell was that?" I asked, voice flat.  
He didn't answer.  
He just watched me, jaw tight, chest still rising like he hadn't caught his breath yet either.  
I held his gaze for three seconds too long, then turned and walked back into my room.  
I shut the door.  
Locked it.  
And leaned against it like it was the only thing keeping me upright.

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LEO

The door clicked shut behind her, and I stood there.  
Soaking wet. Barefoot. Heart still hammering in my chest like I'd just come off a battlefield.  
What the hell was that?  
It wasn't planned.  
It wasn't smart.  
But it hadn't been casual either.  
Not for her.  
And sure as hell not for me.  
I dressed in silence.  
Tugged my shirt over damp skin.  
Ran a hand through my hair.  
And stared at the mirror I couldn't see myself in.  
I didn't regret it.  
That was the problem.  
She was fire in human form—dangerous, driven, full of secrets she didn't even know she was holding.  
And now I'd crossed a line I couldn't uncross.  
I stepped into the hallway.  
Her door was closed.  
Locked.  
I knew it without touching the handle.  
Good.  
She should keep me out.  
Because next time—  
I might not stop.

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ELANA

I waited ten full minutes before I stepped back into the hallway.  
Ten minutes of pacing. Breathing. Trying to scrub the memory of Leo's mouth from my skin and failing spectacularly.  
I looked calm.  
That was the goal.  
Controlled. Flat. Unbothered.  
But the second I walked into the living room, Rhys was already grinning.  
Shit.  
He was sprawled across the far couch like a smug cat, tossing a deck of cards between his hands.  
Cole sat in the armchair, arms crossed, expression unreadable—but I caught the twitch in his jaw.

They knew.  
They definitely knew.

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## RHYS

"Well, good morning, Sunshine," I said without looking up.  
"Or should I say... steamy night?"  
Elana didn't even blink. Ice queen. Damn impressive.  
But Leo, trailing in two steps behind her, looked like he'd taken a bat to the chest.  
"Bathroom acoustics in this place are incredible, by the way," I added.  
"Really carry."  
Cole sighed. Didn't say a word.  
But the corner of his mouth might have moved. Barely.  
"Honestly," I continued, "if I'd known a protection detail came with that kind of show, I'd have called in a red file myself."

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## COLE

"Rhys."  
One word. Sharp. A warning.  
He held up his hands like I'd pulled a gun on him.  
"Hey, don't blame me for having ears. And taste."  
He looked at Leo. "Good form, by the way. Sounded... thorough."  
Leo didn't respond.  
He just dropped onto the nearest couch like gravity was trying to rip him apart.

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## ELANA

I crossed to the opposite side of the room, grabbed a bottle of water from the crate under the counter, and twisted it open with more force than necessary.  
"I hope the two of you got a good laugh," I said coolly.  
Rhys snorted. Cole didn't even blink.  
"I'm just saying," Rhys replied, "some of us have to meditate to regulate stress. Others apparently prefer shower sex."  
I took a long drink and locked eyes with him over the bottle.  
"Must be hard being the funny one when no one laughs."  
"Ouch," he said, clutching his chest. "Wounded. Truly. You're breaking me, Marlowe."

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LEO

I kept my mouth shut.  
Because if I opened it, I didn't trust what would come out.  
Rhys was having the time of his life.  
Cole just sat there like a fucking statue, probably deciding whether I should be benched or shot.  
And Elana?  
She looked unbothered. Cold. Controlled.  
But I saw her hand tighten around the bottle.  
And I knew—she felt it too.  
Whatever that was back in the bathroom...  
It hadn't stayed there.

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COLE

I pulled the worn table in the cabin's center closer and sat down hard.  
No more games.  
"Elana," I said, voice low, measured. "That file you found—it's not just a mistake. It's a message."  
Rhys leaned in, eyes bright with that maddening mix of excitement and dread.  
"We've seen files like this before—ghost ops, off-the-books interrogations, assets that the government wants erased."  
Leo glanced at Elana, then back at the table.  
"We don't know who's behind it yet, but they're watching. And they're ruthless."

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ELANA

I sat opposite them, my fingers curling around the edge of the table like a lifeline.  
"Why me?" I asked. "Why send something like this to my drive? Was it meant to be found?"  
Cole's gaze didn't waver.  
"Because your father's project code was on it.  
Someone wants you to see it—or they want you dead."  
Rhys slammed a fist lightly on the table.  
"Or both."  
Leo's voice cut through the tension.  
"We have to assume every move you make is being tracked. We can't trust anyone outside this cabin."

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COLE

I looked each of them in the eye—especially Elana.

"This isn't just about your father or the file anymore. It's about what you represent. You're part of something bigger now."  
The words hung in the air like smoke.  
Elana's jaw clenched, but her eyes sharpened.

---

ELANA

I swallowed the rising storm in my chest.  
"Then I want to know everything."  
Cole nodded slowly.  
"We'll start with what we know. Then you decide how deep you want to go."  
Rhys cracked his knuckles and smiled that dangerous smile.  
"Welcome to the storm, Marlowe."

---

COLE

I pulled the flash drive from Elana's bag, already knowing what was inside but needing her to hear it straight.  
"We decrypted most of the file before we left. It's a dossier on something called Subject 12—a person who was taken for 'non-standard interrogation protocols.' That means they weren't using normal military or legal procedures. Whatever happened, it wasn't sanctioned."  
Rhys chimed in, eyes dark.  
"The test logs show extensive psychological manipulation—sensory deprivation, forced conditioning, experiments on breaking willpower. The containment records confirm the subject was held in isolation, in a concrete cell, for months."  
Leo leaned forward, voice low but intense.  
"The photo you saw—blurred as it was—was the subject restrained, alone. No ID beyond the code name. But what stands out is the Status: Asset Neutralized. That usually means the subject is dead—or worse, converted into something... else."

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ELANA

I swallowed hard.  
"What... what kind of experiments? And who would authorize that?"  
Cole's jaw tightened.  
"That's the part that's buried. The lead officers are redacted completely. No names, no ranks. This was a black operation, off the books, with no accountability."  
Rhys added grimly,  
"We suspect it's tied to a shadow project your father was involved with before he disappeared. A program to create assets—soldiers or spies—using methods that the military won't admit to."

Leo's gaze locked with mine, serious.

"They call it Project Shattered. It's rumored to push people beyond human limits—but with a cost. Minds broken, lives destroyed."

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COLE

I looked at her, watching the storm cross her face.

"This file was buried to keep it quiet. Someone sent it to you—for a reason. Either to warn you, or to set a trap."

Rhys shook his head.

"And now you're the target. We need to figure out who's pulling the strings—and fast."

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ELANA

I clenched my fists.

"I want in. I want to know everything. No more secrets."

Leo nodded once.

"Then we'll show you. But once you cross this line, there's no going back."

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RHYS

I was about to lay out the next steps when my gut slammed the brakes.

A faint noise—too mechanical, too deliberate—to be just the wind.

"Hold up," I said, eyes narrowing.

The others froze too.

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COLE

"Sounded like... a drone," I said, already reaching for my sidearm.

"Close. Too close."

Leo moved toward the window, scanning the treeline.

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LEO

There.

A tiny silhouette dipping between branches, buzzing low.

"They're sweeping us. Recon drones."

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ELANA

My breath caught.  
The cabin had never felt this small, this exposed.

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RHYS

“Get ready,” I said, voice sharp.  
“If they want us, they’re coming to get us.  
No more hiding.

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COLE

“Positions. Now.”  
The team snapped into motion — weapons up, eyes sharp.

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COLE

The first drone buzzed low, mechanical and menacing. Seconds later, shadowy figures poured from the trees—too many, too fast.  
“Contact front!” I shouted, already firing.

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ELANA

My heart pounded, but my hands were steady.  
Bullets cracked through the cold air. I dropped low, aimed, squeezed the trigger.  
They came at us like wolves, but we were sharper, faster, trained for this chaos.

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LEO

Rhys covered our flank, moving with lethal precision.  
No mercy. No hesitation.  
Every shot counted.

RHYS

Bodies hit the ground.  
Not ours.  
But we weren’t done.

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COLE

The last attacker fell.  
Silence crashed down like a hammer.

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ELANA

We stood there, breathing hard, the cold seeping in through blood and dirt.  
“We bury them,” Cole said quietly.

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LEO

No argument.

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RHYS

We dug.  
Dark soil turned over, muffling the bodies beneath.  
No evidence. No traces.

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COLE

Minutes later, we were moving again.  
“Next stop: the next safehouse. Secure. Hidden. Far from prying eyes.”

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ELANA

I climbed into the vehicle, cold and dirty but alive.  
The flash drive was still safe in my bag.  
Whatever this was, it was far from over.



## Ch. 2 The Thread She Pulled

ELANA

Smoke.

Still in my lungs.

Still on my skin.

We left the Safehouse in pieces—shell casings, boot prints, blood. Someone had burned it before we even saw who lit the match. The firefight came fast. Loud. Messy. Three hours later, the road winds through the backcountry—no cell signal, no satellites. Just the four of us packed into a steel box full of silence and tension.

But it's not quiet.

Not really.

Underneath, it hums—unasked questions, unspoken suspicions. The file I opened by accident—the one that shouldn't exist, but had my name embedded in it. And my father's project code. The same one that went black right before he disappeared.

No one's come for it. No alerts, no pings, no digital breadcrumb trail.

That should've reassured me.

It didn't. Because of the silence like that?

That's not mercy. It's a warning.

Someone out there already knows I have it. And they're not trying to buy it.

They're trying to erase it.

Erase me.

Because what kind of classified military data sits buried—unlabeled, unguarded—until it pings your system like a ghost signal? What kind of file has no sender, no destination... but knows your name?

And your father's.

The SUV jolted hard, dragging me out of the spiral. Leo's thigh brushed mine for half a second, solid and hot through denim and combat fatigues. I didn't move. Neither did he.

Up front, Rhys flipped through a worn paper map like we weren't living in the digital age. A toothpick dangled from his mouth, and somehow, he still looked like he belonged in a war zone. Cole had both hands on the wheel. Unflinching. Jaw set like he'd swallowed a secret and refused to spit it out.

"Half a mile," Cole muttered, eyes scanning the narrow road ahead. Trees pressed close on either side—dense, dark, swallowing us whole.

"Cabin still dark?" Leo asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Only ever used once," Cole said. "Unlisted, off-grid. Power, water, weapons and no windows facing the road."

Rhys chuckled. "So romantic."

"I don't need romantic," I said, staring out the side window. "I just need safety."

No one argued with that.

Leo's body stayed tight—coiled like a detonation cord waiting on a spark. He hadn't touched me since the last bullet cracked past my head two counties back. But he hadn't stopped watching me either.

He studied me like I might shatter.  
But that's what scared him.  
That I wasn't shattering.  
Because women like me?  
When we stop being afraid... we start being dangerous.

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## LEO

She moved like it was instinct when the firefight hit.  
Cover. Return. Reload. No hesitation. No panic.  
Now, in the back seat, she sat still—too still. Just staring out the window like the trees were whispering something the rest of us couldn't hear. But I felt it. I felt her.  
Not just close—aware.  
Elana was reading the room without looking at us.  
Her hands rested on her thighs. Loose. Controlled. She didn't shake. Didn't flinch. Not even once. Meanwhile, mine were clenched hard enough that my fingers ached.  
That's what got under my skin.  
She wasn't lucky to be alive.  
She expected to be.  
At first, I chalked it up to shock. Or maybe pure adrenaline. But this? This was something deeper. That only comes after you've been broken down and rebuilt for something worse.  
The file she found—her name in it, her father's ghost in the code—that wasn't the start of her story.  
That was the revelation.  
I shifted just enough to see her reflection in the side mirror. No flicker. No break. Her eyes didn't blink.  
She'd seen more. Done more.  
Rhys and I both felt it. I didn't have to say it. He glanced at Cole in the front seat. Got the same look I'd seen too many times before. A silent confirmation.  
We were sitting next to someone who wasn't afraid of fire—  
Because she'd already burned in it.

---

## RHYS

She hadn't said ten words since the Safehouse went up in flames. But she didn't need to.  
The silence coming off her wasn't fear.  
It was control.  
And that's the part that scraped against something in my chest.  
She was behind me, but her presence pressed forward, sharp and watchful. Too sharp. Too deliberate.

Most people freak the hell out after a close call. Even some of the best freeze on the second round. Elana? She walked through a storm of bullets like it was protocol. Like she'd done it before.

Hell, maybe she had.

I looked sideways at Cole. That rigid jawline and forward stare told me everything. He felt it too.

I tilted my chin slightly—You seeing this?

His fingers twitched on the wheel. Yeah. I see it.

Whatever Elana was, she wasn't just someone's daughter caught in a crossfire.

Someone trained her.

And she was dangerous.

Which made me wonder:

Were we helping her...

Or walking into her war?

---

## FLASHBACK—ELANA

The drop zone stank of damp pine and motor oil.

I was nineteen. Not old enough to drink, but they gave me an untraceable sidearm and a dossier full of names I wasn't supposed to question.

"Live simulation," they called it.

Right. Tell that to the guy who bled out when I shot him in the thigh to stop him from crawling.

First op. No backup. No prep.

Just an icy voice in my ear:

"Validate your cover or burn with it."

I'd trained—months of tech, weapons, languages, hand-to-hand combat. But nothing prepares you for a target that reaches for a weapon, and you have to decide if you'll pull the trigger first. I did.

Didn't flinch. Didn't second-guess it. But when I dragged his body behind a row of leaking drums and dialed for exfil, that's when my hands started to sweat.

Not from fear.

From clarity.

Because I'd never felt more alive. More awake.

The file said he was running prototypes across the border. It didn't mention the daughter hiding in the trees behind him.

I saw her.

She saw me.

I disappeared into the woods.

And I never forgot that silence between us.

It wasn't guilt. It was understanding.

I went into that op, a name with a clearance.

I came out as a weapon with a conscience.

---

## PRESENT——LEO

The truck rolled to a slow stop, gravel grinding under the tires like dry bones.  
Cole cut the engine. The silence hit hard and heavy with unspoken words. With everything, we weren't asking.  
My eyes were already on Elana.  
She hadn't moved, but her attention was ten steps ahead of us—scanning, calculating.  
Something about the way she held herself now... sharper. Guarded.  
Rhys jumped down first, always first, like the ground owed him something. He scanned the trees, one hand hovering over his sidearm.  
I followed, boots landing in the frost-bit dirt, but my focus didn't leave the truck.  
Didn't leave her.  
Elana moved like she was waiting for a reason not to trust us. I didn't blame her.  
Hell, I wasn't even sure if she should.  
Cole's voice cut through the air. "We clear the inside first, then split the gear. Fifteen-minute sweep."  
"I'll check the perimeter," she said, already in motion.  
"No." Cole's tone held just enough steel to make her pause. "You're with Leo."  
She turned slowly, and I could already feel it—fire under her skin. "Problem?" she asked, calm as ever. That sharp, level kind of calm that usually came right before something exploded.  
"Not if you don't make it one," Cole replied, firm but quieter now. The air thickened between them.  
Rhys didn't move, but I saw the shift. The weight of his gaze locked on Elana like he was watching for tremors before a quake.  
I stepped forward, close enough that my shoulder brushed hers.  
"You okay?" I asked low, just for her.  
She didn't look at me. "You tell me."  
One beat. Two. I didn't answer.  
Because the truth can be complicated.  
Because maybe I wasn't sure.  
She smiled—tight, unreadable—and walked toward the cabin without another word.  
And I followed.  
Of course, I followed.  
Even if I still didn't know if we were walking into safety...  
Or if she was about to burn this place down from the inside.

---

## CABIN INTERIOR — ELANA

The door groaned open under my palm—old hinges whispering secrets to the dark.  
I stepped inside first. Every instinct flared.  
The air was cold, undisturbed. Still carried that scent of sealed time: aged wood, gun oil, damp stone.  
No sign of entry.

No movement.  
But something was different.  
Not wrong.  
Just... waiting.  
My boots ghosted over warped floorboards, the quiet creak swallowed by stillness. Leo and the others followed—fanning in, weapons drawn, eyes carving the space like blades.  
Then I saw it.  
The desk.  
Bare. Except for one thing.  
A page. Folded. Centered. Perfectly square.  
I moved toward it, slow, deliberate.  
Leo caught the shift. “Elana?”  
I didn’t answer. I just reached out and unfolded the paper.  
Black ink. All caps. Handwritten.  
Three words

WE REMEMBER EVERYTHING.

My breath caught—but not from fear.  
Recognition, clean and immediate.  
This wasn’t a threat.  
It was a reminder.  
And it was for me.

---

## LEO

I saw her freeze—just for a second. But it was enough.  
Not fear.  
Familiarity.  
She didn’t flinch, like someone that had been blindsided. She folded—smooth, practiced. Like she’d been expecting it. Dreading it, maybe. But not surprised.  
I stepped closer and looked over her shoulder. “What the hell is that?”  
She didn’t respond. Not right away.  
Behind us, Cole exhaled through his teeth. That low, sharp sound only he made when he knew something was off. “This place was never burned and no one’s been through since the war room went dark.”  
Rhys moved past us, checking corners, eyes scanning. “Then how the hell did that note get here?”  
Elana didn’t look at either of them. She folded the paper back once precisely and slipped it into her jacket as if it belonged there.  
Like it always had.  
And we all saw it.  
For the first time, none of us looked at her like a target or a tag-along.

We looked at her like a detonator.  
She met each of our eyes—one by one—and said it flat, sure:  
“This just changed everything.”  
The door shut behind us with a hollow thud. Dust curled in the fading light from the slatted rafters.  
Stillness stretched too long. Nobody moved.  
Not really.  
Just the shift of stances. A thumb over a rifle grip. A glance held a second too long.  
And that goddamn folded note—now a brand in my mind.  
I broke the silence.  
“You going to tell us what that was?”  
My voice came out quieter than I meant. Too calm.  
Controlled. Too controlled.  
She turned toward me, eyes sharp, unreadable.  
“A message.”  
“Yeah, no shit,” I said, heat finally bleeding in. “For you.”

---

ELANA

I didn’t deny it.  
Because he was right.  
They all were.  
It was for me.  
Had always been.  
The only question now...  
Who else knew it?  
And how far would they go to make sure I remembered everything, too?

---

ELANA

I didn’t respond.  
Not yet.  
Let the silence thicken. Let it choke the air the way it had choked me for years. Let them sit in it—feel it crawl across their skin.  
Cole’s eyes narrowed. “That paper was clean. Fresh. Which means someone’s been here—and it wasn’t us.”  
Rhys stepped forward, a shadow detaching from the wall. “They knew your name. Knew you’d come here. That’s not just a coincidence, Elana.”  
“Never said it was,” I said flatly, my voice a steel blade dragged slowly.  
Leo stepped closer. I felt the shift in the room before he even spoke.

"Then say something," he snapped. "Because right now we're standing in a black site that's supposed to be burned, staring at a ghost note written to you, and I'm wondering how many more things you've failed to mention."

My gaze met his without flinching. "You think I planned this?"

"I think..." His tone dropped quieter. Tighter. "...you're not who you said you were."

A beat.

No one breathed.

Then I shrugged out of my jacket deliberate and slow. Laid it on the table. The folded note fluttered out and landed in front of them like a drawn line.

"Fine," I said, calm but unflinching. "You want the truth?"

Cole's mouth twitched, tightening.

Rhys folded his arms, jaw set.

Leo... didn't look away.

I let them wait. Let it sit.

Let the pieces rearrange on the board.

"I am trained. Not just weapons, not just evasions. Black-level insertion. Deep cover recon. My first sanctioned op happened before I finished college. My father's project wasn't about defense—it was about control. And whatever he disappeared into, someone's trying to make sure I vanish right alongside him."

---

LEO

The words landed like detonations.

One by one.

Measured. Precise. Unforgiving.

Covert recon.

Black-level.

Control.

Not defense.

Not protection.

Control.

My stomach turned, even as my mind reeled—connecting pieces we didn't even know were on the board.

"And us?" Rhys asked coldly. "Collateral?"

She didn't blink.

"Assets," she said. "For now."

My mouth opened to speak.

Nothing came out.

She wasn't apologizing.

She wasn't hiding.

She was done pretending.

Cole muttered, "Jesus Christ."

"I didn't ask for this," Elana said. "But I'm not running from it either."

The silence that followed wasn't awkward. It was strategic.  
We were all doing the math now.  
Trying to decide if she was still on our side...  
Or if we were just pawns caught in the fallout of a war that started long before any of us signed on.  
I took a step back.  
The weight of it—all of it—pressed in.  
Then I turned.  
Shoved the door open so hard it slammed against the outside wall with a crack like a gunshot.  
Didn't say a word.  
Didn't look back.  
Just walked into the treeline, boots crunching fast and hard against gravel. The cold air bit through my jacket. Didn't matter.  
I needed space.  
I needed clarity.  
Because the woman inside that cabin...  
wasn't the one I'd thought I was protecting.

---

ELANA

No one followed him.  
For a second, the room felt colder.  
Like the note had done more than deliver a message.  
It had fractured the room.  
I didn't regret telling them.  
But I felt the shift.  
Felt the moment I stopped being one of them—and became something else entirely.

### **Ch. 3 The Thread She Pulled Cont'd**

ELANA

Cole let the silence stretch.  
His hands were planted on the table, fingers splayed wide like he needed to anchor himself.  
The note lay between us—damning in its simplicity.  
When he finally looked up, his eyes met mine—and they burned.  
“You should've told us the minute you suspected something.”  
His voice cracked against the walls, louder than any bullet at the Safehouse.  
“Do you think we're disposable?” he asked, fury barely leashed.  
“Just another layer of plausible deniability between you and the people cleaning house?”  
“I told you now because you needed to see it first,” I said—even. Controlled. The only way I knew how to survive this.



There was more I could've said—wanted to.  
But survival didn't leave room for comfort. Or confession.  
"Don't patronize me."  
"I'm not."  
"You don't trust us."  
It wasn't a question.  
"No," I said, without hesitation.  
"Because trust doesn't survive fire. Only purpose does."  
He shoved away from the table, pacing now. Hands in his hair, frustration bleeding into every step.  
"Jesus, Elana. People are dead. We've got bodies behind us and a black-coded ghost op breathing down our necks—and now you're telling me this is about your father's legacy?"  
"No," I said, and this time the steel crept in.  
"It's about who they'll burn next if I disappear quietly."  
Cole stopped. Turned.  
"Then why are we here? Why bring us into this?"  
I held his gaze.  
"Because you're the only people left, I don't have a file on."  
That froze him.  
Everything behind his eyes shifted—anger replaced by something slower.  
He didn't speak.  
Didn't have to.

---

## LEO

I heard it all from outside.  
Every word filtered through the thin cabin walls and sank straight into the pit of my stomach.  
I stayed where I was—under the tree line, fists clenched, jaw locked—because walking back in too soon meant saying something I couldn't take back.  
But when I heard her say that—You're the only people left I don't have a file on—I stopped cold.  
That wasn't desperation.  
That was honesty.  
And it hit harder than any confession ever could.  
She was alone in this.  
Had been for longer than we knew.  
That didn't make her safe.  
But it made her real.  
I turned and walked back toward the cabin, steps slow. Measured.  
The door creaked open just in time to catch the next line.

---

ELANA

"I don't need saving," I whispered. "But I won't survive this alone."

Across the room, Rhys exhaled through his nose. He leaned back against the wall, arms folded—not in defense.

In a decision.

"She's not wrong," he said, voice low. Thoughtful.

"We're in this now. Either we help her... or we wait until someone decides we're liabilities too."

Cole rounded on him. "You're siding with her?"

"I'm not siding with anyone." Rhys's gaze found mine—steady. Sharp.

"I just know the sound of war when I hear it coming."

There was a pause.

Not silence.

The wind scratched against the cabin walls.

Floorboards creaked beneath someone's shifting weight.

Just breath.

Just weight.

Then Rhys spoke again—softer. Just for me.

"You don't have to be alone in this, Elana. Not anymore."

My throat tightened.

But I didn't thank him.

Didn't breathe too deep.

Because this—this fragile moment of trust, cracked and war-born—

Was the most breakable thing I owned.

And I'd already watched too many men bleed for less.

I couldn't afford another grave to carry.

---

COLE

I stepped inside as the last words fell between them.

Rhys saw me first. Nodded once—muted solidarity.

Elana didn't look up.

She didn't need to.

Because I saw her—really saw her—for the first time since all this started.

Not as a liability.

Not even as a mystery.

But as a soldier.

And I knew now:

Whatever was coming... she wasn't the only one preparing for war.

---

OUTSIDE THE CABIN — EDGE OF DAWN  
COLE

I stepped out of the cabin door, the cold slapping harder than expected.  
It was still early—sky bruised, light creeping up slow over the tree line.  
I didn't shut the door hard. Didn't want to give them the satisfaction of a dramatic exit.  
Leo had just walked in—silent, all weight and awareness—and I couldn't breathe in that room a second longer.  
Elana.  
Her file. Her father.  
That look on her face when she said we were the only ones she didn't have a file on.  
I paced the edge of the clearing, jaw tight, hands shoved into my jacket like I could trap the anger before it boiled over.  
It didn't feel like betrayal.  
It felt like I'd missed something critical—hell, everything.  
The way she moved.  
The way she didn't flinch.  
I thought I'd been protecting her.  
Now I wasn't sure I hadn't been the one being used.  
I kicked a stone. It skidded into the underbrush.  
The trees whispered back—wind, nothing more—but a cold ripple ran up my spine.  
Not sound.  
Not movement.  
Presence.  
I scanned the woods. Just tangled brush and crooked branches, dawn bleeding pale over frost-bitten ground.  
Twenty feet ahead, maybe less.  
Still—my whole body coiled.  
We weren't alone.  
Not really.  
Whoever was out there wasn't careless. No snapped twigs. No glint of glass.  
But I'd been in enough war zones to know the difference between quiet... and watched.  
I drew in a slow breath, let it settle deep in my chest like a weapon in waiting.  
I wasn't ready to talk.  
Not yet.  
But I was ready for what was next.  
Because someone out here wasn't finished with us.  
And I don't like being hunted.

---

UNKNOWN POV — EDGE OF THE TREE LINE  
SHE

I stayed pressed to the shadow of a cedar, breath low, heartbeat steady.  
The forest had rhythm—wind, earth, silence layered over silence.  
I moved with it.  
Never against.  
Cole Bennett didn't see me.  
Not directly. But he felt me—the way men like him do.  
Soldiers with instincts too sharp to ignore.  
His spine was tight. His eyes swept like blades.  
Not fear. Not yet. But close.  
I stayed still.  
He'd leave. Eventually.  
But not before suspicion took root. That's all I needed.  
Not panic—awareness.  
Through the cabin window, I caught her.  
Elana.  
I hadn't seen her since Vienna.  
Since the breach.  
Since silence swallowed everything after her father vanished.  
She looked different now.  
Not older.  
Sharper.  
Sharp enough to cut both ways.  
I didn't come to kill her.  
Could've. Would've.  
But not now.  
The others inside? If they knew I was out here—unarmed, unmasked—they'd shoot first.  
They should.  
But I needed them alive.  
Especially her.  
If she opened that file...  
If the doors were creaking open again...  
Then, time wasn't running out.  
It was already gone.  
I adjusted the scope hanging from my chest—not to aim.  
Just to watch.  
They weren't ready.  
Not for me.  
Not for what's coming.  
They'd need to choose.  
And when they saw me again, there could be no hesitation.

Leo turned, frustration cracking off him like heat as he marched back toward the cabin.  
Good.

When he disappeared inside, I moved—quick, quiet.

Years of practice making ghosts look clumsy.

No prints. No sound.

My hand slid inside my jacket.

Pulled the object.

Tucked it into the crook beneath the porch beam—small, deliberate.

A silver cufflink.

Worn. Scarred.

Etched with a black wolf's head wreathed in fire.

The last time they saw that insignia, it was on the arm of a man whose body was never recovered.

They'd find it.

They'd feel it.

And they'd remember.