



EXCERPT

What the hell is she doing?"

Sten Jenkins watched from his truck as Izzy, the IT chick, waited on the large wrap-around porch of the ramshackle house. She checked each passerby before venturing to move away from her front door. He didn't need spec ops training to recognize her nervousness—the rigid set of her shoulders, her hands fisted at her side, and the way her head swiveled back and forth. Goth Girl was expecting trouble.

She scanned the street once before her gaze jerked back and then focused on his truck. She retreated under the doorjamb and pulled a Taser from her oversized coat pocket.

A Taser—a bit of overkill, even for the barely gentrified Hillman City in South Seattle.

Sten was in no mood for mysteries this morning. He had his big meeting with Dean, tech security billionaire, to discuss the cyber threats against his company which provided the major portion of security software for military drones.

Sten slowly slid out of the seat of his rig, keeping his voice even and his motions small. Not easy for a six foot, two hundred pound dude. “Hey, Izzy, I’m Sten Jenkins.”

“I know who you are.” Not the usual response he got from women.

He really didn’t have time for this. It was barely eight a.m., and he was already in a Mexican Standoff with a woman he didn’t know. Leaning back on his rig, he crossed his feet.

“Reeves didn’t text you?”

“No.”

She didn’t budge, but at least she put the Taser back in her pocket. There was something vulnerable and forlorn in the fierce way she held her position on the porch.

“Reeves was supposed to text you that he was running late and I’d give you a lift.” He was about to tell her that he lived close except her eyes were narrowed on him like he was a stalker—not the good guy offering a ride to work.

“Reeves had no right to share my address with you.”

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. You can give Reeves shit when you see him.”

Sten gazed down at his watch. “We should head out. I’m meeting with Dean in thirty minutes.”

And the blasted woman didn’t move from the porch as she texted rapidly. “Why would you be joining the meeting with Dean?”

“Do you want a ride or not?” Sten’s mother wouldn’t approve of his less than chivalrous response.

Her phone pinged. She read the text. And then swung her battered backpack over her shoulder. “Okay.”

The woman didn’t trust him? He’d laugh aloud at the idea that she thought a Taser could stop him if she didn’t look so damn alarmed. Sten opened the passenger door but not before he noticed how Izzy looked down the street before climbing into his truck.

When she twisted her head to slide her backpack off, he spotted a major red welt that was still seeping on her right cheek and swelling around her eye that looked fresh—real fresh, like it just happened.

Sten swallowed every profane word he knew from being a Marine and growing up with four older brothers. No wonder she was nervous. God, he hated the violence he had seen against woman and children. “Get in a fight over your latte this morning at Starbucks?”

Her head snapped back. With the height difference of the rig, she was eye-to-eye with him. Close enough to see that her eyes were light green with glints of iridescent blue with extraordinarily thick, long eyelashes. She flinched when he leaned closer to take a better look at her pale skin, dotted with freckles, the deep red welt below her right eye. “Not Starbucks? Violence at your local punk club last night? Do they even exist anymore?” He kept the bullshit going, calming his voice like he did with victims with whom he had too much experience in too many warzones.

“You know—people slamming themselves together, throwing chairs?”

The words were inconsequential—a distraction from the shock and pain. He instinctively knew she wanted no questions or any sympathy. Her shoulders almost touched her ears, and her

white-knuckled grip on her backpack screamed *Don't mess with me or I'll kick you in the balls*. And he wasn't taking any chances since she was in perfect and painful kicking position.

“It's none of your beeswax.”

Now his head snapped back. None of your beeswax? Not fuck off? Who was this woman who looked like Morticia, straight out of the Adams family, with her jet black hair and black clothes and pierced nose, talking like she had just stepped out of a Disney movie—freckles and all.

“Did you call the police?”

“We're going to be late.” She scooted into the rig, but not before Sten got a whiff of a flowery smell and the look of vulnerability before she shuttered her eyes down.

Slamming the door, he scanned the street for a threat. Nothing. He climbed into his rig and did a U-turn.

“You're going the wrong way. Downtown is north.”

“Yeah, I know but I need to make one stop.”

“I thought you were in a rush.”

Her voice was deep and husky for the slight figure she hid under all the heavy black clothes. Yeah, he'd noticed her when she came to his uncle's security company to help them track a rogue DEA agent. And that was the reason why it chafed that she didn't trust him enough to give her a ride or confide who hit her.

“This won't take but a minute.”

Sten drove four blocks and pulled into a parking spot directly in front of the store. This was still a sketchy neighborhood and with Izzy taking a fist to her face, he wasn't taking any chances.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. 7-11?” Izzy blew out an exasperated exhale, lifting the fine wisp of hair that had escaped from her severely pulled back ponytail like dandelion fluff in the wind. “You’re stopping for breakfast?”

Sten ignored the rolled eyes and the disapproving headshake. “Lock the door.” He slammed the door before rushing inside. He could feel the hot hole her bright eyes were burning into his back as he walked into the super bright and super loud store.

Grabbing two bags of frozen peas, he emerged in under two minutes. He tossed the peas on her lap before starting the rig.

“There is a clean t-shirt in my gym bag under the seat if you want to wrap the bags before you put them over your eye. You’re going to have an awesome shiner tomorrow.”

He placed his arm on the seat behind him to pull out of the parking spot, catching the single tear drop down her cheek and the way her pale throat swallowed hard.

“Thank you.”

“No problem. With four older brothers, I’ve had a little bit of experience with black eyes.”

The little smile cost her—her face contorted in a wince.

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