

PERFECT  
UNYIELDING BOOK THREE  
RAGE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**NASHODA ROSE**

Copyright © 2016 by Nashoda Rose

2005

*Catalina (Alina)*

“THEY DON’T LIKE civilians around, especially journalists. Don’t take it personally,” Jaz whispered as we followed the lieutenant who had said no more than three words to us since we arrived on base. Two of which were ‘no photographs’.

He’d taken us directly to base commander, General Maunder, who reiterated the no photos rule, and that we, under no circumstance, were allowed to walk around base unsupervised. He also told us we’d leave for the orphanage at 0600. Then he ordered the lieutenant to take us to meet Corporal O’Neill.

The strict formality did nothing to help my nerves that had caused a perpetual churning of my stomach. I was in a war-torn country on a military base where I was obviously not welcome and would be traveling across perilous roads to an orphanage where I’d spend the next month.

Yeah, I was nervous as hell.

Jaz nudged my elbow and slowed. “It’ll be fine.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know.” But I didn’t know. Jaz did because he’d been doing this for twenty or more years. I’d never been out of Colombia.

We passed row after row of enormous canvas tents when finally the lieutenant stopped abruptly at a clearing where six shirtless, muscled military guys jostled one another for a ball.

“O’Neill will be free in a minute. Wait here, please,” the lieutenant ordered, then spun on his heel and walked to a guy who stood watching the game. He said something to him, nodded in our direction, and then disappeared into a nearby tent.

“Get your camera, but discreetly,” Jaz said. “I can do a sideline story.”

“The commander told us no photos.”

“You want to be good at this, you need to take risks and get the shots no one else does.”

Jaz had reported all over the world in dangerous environments, whether it was from natural

disaster or war. I was like a shiny new car who had never been driven off the lot and gotten her tires dirty. But the lot hadn't exactly been safe and I'd been exposed to the elements. Those elements being a Colombian drug lord named Carlos Moreno.

I was here to escape the unwanted attention of Carlos and the only reason I obtained this position was because my brother worked for the magazine, and the photographer broke his leg the week before they were supposed to leave.

"I'm here at an army base in Afghanistan. That's enough risk and I really don't want one of these guys angry at me." Besides, I wasn't here to take photographs of hot military guys playing football or as they'd call it soccer. Still, I couldn't help but look at the guy who currently had control of the ball.

He grinned as he volleyed it back and forth between his feet while making his way toward the makeshift goal. The grin was a little mischievous, a little cute and a lot cocky. His deep blue eyes were filled with amusement and I heard his raspy chuckle when one guy slid into the dirt attempting to kick the ball away from him, but Blue Eyes saw him coming and heeled the ball backward at the last second.

My eyes trailed over his hard chest to the tattoo down his left side, then to his flexed abdomen. Definitely an eight-pack and even though I couldn't see his thighs because he wore cargo pants, it was obvious they were muscled, too.

But he wasn't the only one. All the guys playing were in incredible shape.

"Deck, you bastard," Blue Eyes barked, as a guy who I assumed was Deck elbowed him in the ribs and stole the ball. He then dodged a seriously built guy who attempted to block him. "Gate. Fuck. Take him out."

I smiled when Blue Eyes' grin was replaced by a fierce scowl as he ran after Deck who was close to the goal with no one on him.

Obviously, this guy was competitive and didn't like to lose because any playfulness had turned to resolve as he darted left to avoid a guy trying to block him from reaching Deck.

"Riot!" a guy yelled. His back was covered in a tattoo of a bird, like a hawk or something.

Riot. The call sign suited Blue Eyes as he undeniably appeared like he'd be fun, but also dangerous with that aggressive determination.

Deck hitched his leg back to kick the ball into goal at the same time as Riot reached him. He body checked Deck to the left, then kicked the ball hard out of the path of the goal.

Out of the path meant toward the sidelines—where we were standing.

It happened in slow motion and my reaction time was non-existent as the ball flew through the air right at me.

"Ah, fuck," Riot shouted just before the ball hit me in the forehead.

I staggered back from the impact and Jaz grabbed my arm at the same time as I put my hand to my head.

"Holy shit, you okay, Alina?" Jaz asked.

The loud smack vibrated in my head and there was a burning throb in the middle of my forehead. Hard, air-filled plastic hitting the skull hurt, but it was more shocking than anything.

"Ah, yeah. Fine."

"Shit. Sorry. Didn't see you there, ma'am." It was Riot and he stood in front of me, sweat dripping down his chest and his eyes no longer twinkling, but genuinely concerned. "You okay? Do you need to sit down?"

I stared at him, a little dazed, but I was uncertain if it was from the ball hitting me in the head or from the hot guy standing inches away from me. I went with a combo.

I breathed in and his scent wafted into me. It was all man, no cologne, just a natural earthy smell with a hint of mint, as if he'd just used one of those breath strips.

And he was tall. Like really tall and I was five foot five so I wasn't tiny, but he still towered over me. With his broad shoulders and bulging arms, I felt like a pixie standing next to him.

"Ah, yeah... umm, no, I mean, I don't need to sit. I'm good," I finally sputtered. I didn't normally sputter, but my nerves had already been sparking and now they were out-of-control fireworks.

I froze, eyes widening when Riot's fingers gently caressed the spot where the ball hit me. It was so soft I barely felt it. Except I did and goose bumps rose and my belly flipped.

"It's red, but I don't think it will bruise," Riot said, his gaze drifting from my forehead to land on my lips then slowly back to meet my eyes. "Corporal O'Neill." He held out his hand and I took it, noticing how it completely engulfed mine. His palms were rough and his handshake firm. Not painful, but with purpose.

"Yo, O'Neill!"

He turned and I looked past him to see the guy Deck across the yard with his gear in hand and his shirt back on. "Bird landed. See you back in the world," Deck called. "One month."

Riot, or rather Corporal O'Neill, did a fist pump in the air.

Deck jogged off with the seriously scary built guy they called Gate.

O'Neill's attention shifted to Jaz who had yet to say anything and I knew why when I looked at him. He was grinning ear to ear as his gaze moved from O'Neill to me and back again.

"Jaz Klein." He offered his hand and they shook. "Journalist for the *Miami Messenger Magazine*. The girl you smacked with your ball is Alina, my brilliant photographer. I'm writing a story—"

"On the orphanage," O'Neill finished and his eyes shot back to me, but there was a scowl now and it was a little scary because his square jaw clenched and his lips pursed.

"Yeah," Jaz said. "Are you one of the guys giving us a ride?"

He didn't answer him; instead, his intense eyes were on me and I shifted uncomfortably. "The magazine sends *you* to an unstable country to take photos? Not fuckin' smart. And I don't have time to babysit civilians."

Jaz cleared his throat. "I understand your concern, Corporal O'Neill, but the public wants to read more than just about the war over here. And I plan to give it to them." I hadn't realized I was holding my breath until O'Neill's eyes moved from me to Jaz. "I've been to hundreds of *unstable* places and am very aware of the risk."

O'Neill paused while looking him up and down. Jaz was in his forties, appropriately dressed, wearing black cargo pants with a snug, long-sleeved shirt, black combat boots and his head was buzz cut like the military guys, so he fit in.

O'Neill had about an inch of dirty-blond hair and two days scruff that gave him a rugged look.

"Yeah. Maybe." O'Neill's attention shifted back to me again and I stiffened. "But I wasn't referring to you."

Whoa. What? I looked down at myself. I had on dark green fitted pants with laced boots and a white blouse that I thought was appropriate considering the unbearably dry heat.

"I'll speak to my staff sergeant and advise him that you're both to be airlifted out of here at the first opportunity. The story on the orphanage needs to be told, but not now. PR was crazy allowing this. Come back in a few years when shit settles. Or when you find another *brilliant* photographer." Then he added, "One that's out of high school."

Oh, my God. Did he just say that? He could only be a couple of years older than me.

I was too shocked to say anything and Jaz was having a coughing fit with his hand over his mouth, so I knew damn well the guy was laughing. *Laughing.*

“Jaz.” I kicked his ankle and he cleared his throat and said, “Umm... yeah, listen, don’t worry about her. She can handle herself.”

“It’s my call and I say she can’t.” Corporal O’Neill’s eyes lingered on mine for a second then he nodded. “Ma’am. Sir.” Then he walked away.

What the hell just happened? He was going to tell his sergeant to send us home? Could he do that? This story was not only my escape from Carlos Moreno, but my catapult into my dream job as a photographer.

And there was no way this guy was ruining my chances. I wasn’t being sent home with my tail between my legs.

I ran after him.

“Alina!” Jaz called out to me, but I ignored him.

I caught up to O’Neill who had managed to cover a large amount of ground with his long, lean legs and snagged his arm. “Wait,” I said, my fingers curling around his forearm. But they didn’t even come close to encompassing the span.

He stopped, his gaze landing on my hand and I saw a flash of heat flare in the depths before they darkened and there was that fierce scowl again that sent my heart racing. I suddenly wondered if I should’ve just let Jaz deal with this. But it was me he had an issue with.

I released his arm. “I need this job. It’s really important.”

He replied, “You won’t need it if you’re dead.”

“We’re going to an orphanage.”

“That we have to drive to. You know about roadside bombs, right? Suicide bombers? You do know what’s going on in this country?” God, he was being an ass. “You hear about the stories of reporters being held for ransom or even worse, terrorists torturing them for months before videoing their head being blown off? They’re all true. This isn’t a place for a young girl who probably hasn’t witnessed death, let alone heard a gun go off. Go home. Finish school and take photos of families with their dog.” He turned and started walking away again.

Jesus. What right did he have telling me how to live my life? I was good at what I did and I wanted to take photographs that told a story. “I know how to handle a gun and I’ve seen men die,” I blurted.

He stopped, broad back stiffening and then swung around and headed for me. *Shit.* I backed up a couple steps because he was really intimidating with that severe scowl and overly confident swagger.

I swallowed. “My father taught me to shoot when I was ten.”

He snorted. “A squirt gun doesn’t count.”

“Funny.” What a dick.

He leaned in closer. So close that his warm breath swept across my face. “Do I make you nervous? Because you sure as hell look it. Pulse throbbing in the curve of your neck, quick inhales, fingers curled in the sides of your pants and your teeth chewing on that plush bottom lip. How nervous do you think you’ll be if the Taliban gets a hold of you?”

I hastily released my lip and his eyes flicked to my mouth.

Bastard. But he read me perfectly. I was nervous. He made me nervous and I’d grown up around dangerous, powerful men, my father being one of them. He flew cocaine from Colombia to Miami for Carlos Moreno ever since I could remember.

I'd never personally met Carlos until three years ago, when I was sixteen. I'd been with my mother and father in the market when a Jeep slowed beside us. It was Carlos and his right-hand man, Diego. My father told me to go home, but Carlos already had his eyes on me and asked for an introduction.

The man was old enough to be my father and yet he stared at me with the corners of his lips curved up and his gaze lingering on my breasts. There was a gleam in his eyes that made my stomach lurch and my pulse race with fear.

My father was so nervous he stumbled over his words and kept looking from me to Carlos, his face pale. It was my mother who moved in front of me to block Carlos's view of me, but it was too late. I had his unwanted attention.

But he never did anything about it for three years, then one night Carlos's man, Diego, showed up unannounced at the house and he and my father had a huge argument. It was then my father contacted my brother, Juan, who lived in the States.

Last time I'd seen my brother, I was ten years old. He'd bought me my first camera, his goodbye present. He'd told me once he was settled and had enough money I would live with him in the United States. I soon realized why he left when he did—to escape Carlos Moreno's grasp.

I straightened my shoulders as I faced off with Corporal O'Neill. "Then make sure the Taliban doesn't get ahold of me," I retorted. "And you can't disobey orders." I really wasn't sure about all the rules, but I was pretty sure he couldn't just refuse for the simple fact that he thought I was too young and obviously disliked me.

He grunted, shaking his head. Crossing his arms, a hint of a smile emerged. "I wasn't ordered. I volunteered. Now I'm unvolunteering."

"That's not even a word."

He produced a full-on smirk. "Sure it is. We're in my world now and I'm sure I have lots of words you're not old enough to understand."