

A full-page portrait of Delaney Diamond, a Black woman with wavy hair, wearing a black turtleneck. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a scenic view of a coastal town at dusk, with a bay and mountains visible under a purple and orange sky.

FOREVER

AGAIN

DELANEY DIAMOND

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Blurb

To get a second chance at love, two assassins must survive a criminal enterprise determined to wreak havoc in America's Paradise.

Alissa Francis is at home on St. Thomas, USVI when Hossam Jalal—her former lover and biggest mistake—arrives unexpectedly. Then a bomb detonates in the middle of the capital, killing a prominent member of the community, setting the island on edge, and propelling Alissa into action.

Hossam initially came to the island to win back Alissa's affection, but now he joins forces with her to uncover the motive behind the violence. The duo embarks on an investigation that leads them down the twisty path of a local legend and forces them to take the matter of saving the island into their own hands.

Forever Again by Delaney Diamond

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VIRGIN ISLANDS EXPRESSIONS

In addition to these expressions, Virgin Islanders also speak in a way that might seem grammatically incorrect but is an English dialect with its own rules. These are not typos in the dialogue.

Ah – I or of

Ah gone – I'm leaving, goodbye

Bazadee – crazy

Cahn – can't

Copa – short for copacetic

Dem – them, those

Dah way – that way

Deh man – literally “the man,” but can mean man or friend

Donkey years – a long time

Dung – down

Eh-eh – used to express surprise

Geh – get

Gun – going to

Hey gyul – hey girl

Laytah – later

Muddah skunt – curse word, the equivalent of mother fucker

Rass – curse word, the equivalent of ass

Ting – thing

Whah you seyin? – What's going on? How are you?

Wheh – Where

FRENCH TRANSLATIONS

Allons-y! – Let's go!

Enchanté. Vous parlez français? – Delighted (to meet you). Do you speak French?

Merde – shit

Oh là là. Ravi de faire votre connaissance – Oh my. Nice to meet you.

Putain – fuck

Alissa Francis walked behind her client, Imogene Thorn, as they exited the fundraiser at the Egyptian Ballroom of the Fox Theatre in Atlanta.

The black-tie gala had been organized to raise money for the performing arts and consisted of heavy hitters in the local entertainment industry and from out of town.

Ahead of the client was another close protection officer, a bald, solidly built Black man. With Imogene sandwiched between them, Alissa was confident the woman was safe, but that didn't mean danger didn't lurk in the crowd of people lingering on the sidewalk or strolling to their parked cars.

When Imogene stopped to chat with an acquaintance, Alissa stopped too, careful to keep her distance so as not to be intrusive, but close enough to act quickly should the need arise.

She swept the area, body alert and eyes on the well-dressed attendees. She wore a cowl-necked satin dress in desert rose with spaghetti straps. The thigh-high split showed off her toned leg but also allowed for easier movement should she need to run or fire a kick. Around her neck was a long gold necklace with a gold tubular pendant that matched the gold earrings shown off by her pinned-up hair.

They continued walking and stopped on the sidewalk beside the other bodyguard. Imogene's driver should arrive soon to pick them up.

"I'm ready for bed." Imogene stifled a yawn with her hand.

Almost seventy with a head full of gray, she looked regal in a navy dress with a soft blue bodice and ball skirt, her hair pulled back to reveal large diamond earrings.

“This lasted longer than you anticipated, didn’t it?” Alissa remarked.

“Indeed. Because they started late and were very unorganized. I’ll have to speak to Nelson about that tomorrow. I don’t mind lending my support to these events, but nowadays I’m usually in bed by ten, and here it is after eleven, and I’m not home yet.” She shook her head as she rummaged through her purse.

Alissa hid her amusement. In the few weeks she’d worked security for Imogene, she’d grown used to hearing the woman’s complaints about getting to bed on time. She was adamant a good night’s sleep was as important as good nutrition.

At least now they got along. At first, Imogene had not been pleased about having a security detail. Her sons had insisted on it after her soon-to-be ex-husband—Wilson Jennings—threatened to hurt her. Imogene thought this was much ado about nothing, but her sons were concerned about her forty-three-year-old husband carrying out his threats.

He signed a prenuptial agreement when he and Imogene married five years ago. When she learned of his affair, she moved forward with divorce proceedings and confirmed he would get nothing but a small settlement, thereby cutting him off from the lifestyle he’d become accustomed to during their marriage.

No amount of pleading changed her mind, and soon her husband turned nasty. He left dozens of calls on her voicemail. When that didn’t work, he showed up at the office, then the house, and threatened her with bodily harm. After hearing about his surprise visits and listening to the messages, Alissa agreed with the sons. Imogene finally got a restraining order, but they all knew that by itself it was not enough to stop a determined stalker.

The driver pulled the champagne-colored town car up to the sidewalk, and the bodyguard opened the door.

“Have a good night, Alissa, Ms. Thorn,” he said, giving them a salute.

“Good night,” the ladies replied.

They slipped into the back of the limo. Alissa would ride to the client’s estate and make sure she arrived safely inside before leaving to get a good night’s rest. She’d have the entire weekend free since she didn’t have to return to Imogene’s home until Monday morning to escort her to work.

The drive to the estate was held mostly in silence until they were well out of the city and almost to Imogene’s home.

“How much longer will we have to do this?” the older woman asked.

Watching her in the darkness of the vehicle, Alissa understood exactly what she meant. “Are you tired?”

She shrugged. “Not tired, but I do think if Wilson was going to try something, he would have done so already. Don’t you?”

“We can never be too careful, ma’am.”

Imogene sighed. “Well, I think my sons are too careful. I will discuss this with them tomorrow. I’m sure you have more exciting things to do than babysit an old woman whose ex-husband has probably moved on to greener pastures by now.”

A pained expression crossed her face before she turned to look at the passing scenery. Alissa had noted the same pained expression when she spoke about her husband before. Despite moving swiftly to divorce him, it was clear that she had loved him and was deeply wounded by his infidelity.

“Whatever you wish, ma’am,” Alissa said politely. She knew better than to argue.

The car slowed as they neared a stop sign.

Imogene turned to her again. “They think they’re responsible for me. Ever since their father died, which was over twenty years ago, mind you. It’s nice to be cared for, but I’m not a child.”

The driver pulled away from the sign.

“No, you aren’t, but—” Alissa’s eyes widened when she saw a vehicle’s headlights barreling toward them. “Look out!”

The driver swerved to avoid the collision, and the other car T-boned the front of their vehicle, sending the town car skidding and twisting down the road with its tires screeching.

When the car stopped, Alissa shook her head to dispel the dizzying effects of the collision. The driver was hunched over his deployed airbag, and glass shards were scattered across the front seat and into the backseat as well.

She glanced at her charge. “Are you all right, Ms. Thorn?”

“I-I am. I think...” Her voice trembled, and she sounded frail.

Alissa unhooked her seatbelt and then Imogene’s. “I’ll call for help—”

Gunshots blasted through the air and shattered the remaining glass at the driver’s window. Imogene screamed as the chauffeur’s body jerked when the bullets sliced through him. If he wasn’t dead before, he was now.

“Get down!” Alissa threw her body on top of the older woman.

“Wh-what is happening?” Imogene shivered with fear.

Alissa lifted her head slightly to peer out the side window. Backlit by the

headlights of the car, two dark figures approached. One in front, the other behind.

Shit.

At Imogene's insistence, her weapon was in the glove compartment. They didn't allow guns at the event, and Imogene hadn't wanted to have the organizers make an exception for Alissa. Could she dive for the weapon in the glove compartment before the men approached?

The window behind her shattered when a third man slammed his gun into the glass. A gloved hand unlocked the door and yanked it open.

"Get out," he said.

Imogene sank her nails into Alissa's arm. She was shaking more now, cowering under Alissa.

"It's okay, Ms. Thorn. Let's do as they say. I won't let anything happen to you," Alissa whispered. She eased her arm from the woman's clutches and lifted her body off her.

Her breathing jagged and irregular, Imogene slowly sat up in the car.

"Get out. This side," a male voice on Imogene's side said.

Her hands shook so much she couldn't grasp the latch, so Alissa did it for her. She pushed open the door and followed the other woman out of the vehicle.

As soon as her feet hit the pavement, Wilson Jennings stepped in front of the man who had barked the order.

Imogene gasped. "*Wilson?*"

"Hello, my love." He smiled like a jackal.

Tall with dark hair, he was a handsome man, and Alissa could see how Imogene had become smitten by him. Except tonight, his sinister smile on a deserted road in the middle of the night did not bode well.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Renegotiating our divorce."

From the corner of her eye, Alissa saw the man from the other side of the vehicle had rounded the front and approached. With a quick glance, she saw he had a mustache and carried a gun.

"If you kill me, you'll get nothing," Imogene said.

"I don't plan to kill you, love. I do plan to have you reconsider the options."

"This is *not* the way."

"It's the only way because you won't listen to reason. You want to cut me

out completely, after five fucking years? I don't think so."

Imogene glanced at Alissa, as if to ask, *What should I do?*

"This must be one of the new bodyguards I've heard so much about. A woman. Really?" Wilson smirked.

The man to Alissa's right chuckled. "Never send a woman to do a man's job."

All three men laughed, and Alissa clenched her teeth as heat rose up her neck. People tended not to see her as a threat because she was attractive and because of her size. She hated being underestimated.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" Wilson asked.

"Alissa." She stared at him with a neutral expression.

"Well, Alissa, if you're a good girl, I'll let you live after this is all over." From his back pocket, he removed several sheets of paper folded together and extended them to Imogene. "Sign this."

"What is it?" she asked, refusing to take the papers.

"A document I had drawn up, which nullifies the prenuptial agreement."

"I will not sign any such thing," Imogene said in a haughty tone. For someone who'd been attacked in the middle of the night, Alissa was impressed by her sauciness.

Wilson's face tightened. "You will, or I'll have my man put a bullet in the head of your girl bodyguard. Backdate it by one year." He shoved the papers and a pen at her.

Alissa knew right then that he planned to kill them both. By backdating the contract, he secured himself as an heir to her entire fortune.

Imogene took the pen and paper and spread the contract flat on the back of the car. "How will you explain what happened to my driver?" she asked.

"If you're smart, you won't mention a word about this, and it'll all go down as a terrible accident on a deserted road."

"With bullets?"

"Just sign the damn thing!" Wilson snapped.

He kept his gaze on his wife as she readied to sign the paper, and Alissa knew it was now or never.

She clasped the pendant around her neck. She'd chosen this piece as a backup since she couldn't take her weapon into the fundraiser. The jewelry was multi-functional—decorative but also hid a weapon.

She surreptitiously slid her thumb along the back side to release a slim blade inside the tube. Then she yanked it from around her neck and swept her

hand in a swift upward arc, jabbing Mustache in the throat. Before he hit the ground, she snatched his weapon, dropped to one knee, and shot the other man just as he pulled the trigger. The bullet swept past her ear and into the car behind her.

Alissa bolted to her feet and picked up the gun he'd dropped. She pointed both weapons at Wilson, whose mouth was frozen open as he stared at his men on the ground. One groaned and clutched his side, and the other made gurgling noises as he bled out from the neck wound.

"You were saying, *sweetheart*?" she said.

Wilson shifted his gaze to her and shot his hands in the air. "You don't have to kill me."

Alissa smirked. "Oh, I don't plan to kill you. We're going to call the police, and you're going to prison for a very long time. Get on the ground, on your stomach. *Now*."

Wilson quickly lowered to the pavement as she instructed.

Imogene sagged against the car and looked at Alissa with a mix of bewilderment and admiration. "Thank God you were here."

Alissa smiled. "I've heard that before. Call the police while I keep an eye on these three."

"Yes, ma'am." Imogene opened the car, removed her purse, and dialed 911.

As she listened to Imogene give their location, she smiled to herself. Now that her assignment was basically over, it was time for her to take a vacation.

With a small pack on her back carrying water and other supplies, Alissa hiked through the trees in cargo capris, an orange tank top, and a wide straw hat covering her cornrowed hair. She'd only been back on the island of St. Thomas for a few days and was going to one of her favorite spots in a secluded area on the west end, where she could swim in solitude in the calm waters of the Caribbean Sea.

She developed a love for hiking at a young age when her elementary school took students on hiking field trips. She recalled one trip in particular when they went to St. Thomas's sister island of St. John, and she first viewed the sugar plantation ruins and the petroglyphs left behind by the Indians indigenous to the islands.

The hike wasn't easy. The island was known as "Rock City" due to its mountainous landscape, but it was good exercise and one of her favorite ways to enjoy the outdoors. She tramped through water with the sound of crashing waves and the cry of seagulls as a constant serenade. She climbed the rocky cliffs and jumped from boulder to boulder, careful not to slip on their moss-covered surfaces. By the time she arrived at her destination, she had worked up a sweat and was breathing hard, but it was worth it. She felt energized, and the view was spectacular.

Taking a swig of cool water from her thermos, she stood on top of the rocky ground, listening to the waves lap against the land. On the Atlantic side of the island, the ocean was just as beautiful, but the Caribbean side was calmer, with crystal clear water a beautiful blue-green color as far as the eyes could see.

She cast a quick look around to ensure she was truly alone and stripped out of her clothes, leaving on her sports bra and underwear. Walking to the edge of a huge boulder, she looked down into the water, took a deep breath, and jumped in cannonball style.

She hit the water with a happy squeal, and diving deeper, she reached for a puffer fish, which scampered away. She fought against the current to touch the sandy bottom and then turned right side up, kicking her feet to head back to the surface. Taking in a huge lungful of air, she sighed with happiness. The temperate water cooled her heated skin as she swam around and then turned onto her back to bask in the sun's rays.

After her dip, she sat on the rocks in the shade of a bush, ate a sandwich, and drank some water—simply enjoying her time alone and with nature. When she was almost dry, she slipped back into her clothes and started in the direction she had come from.

She briefly thought about Imogene and her estranged husband. Wilson was currently locked up and awaiting trial, and last Alissa talked to her former client, she was in Europe at one of her homes to escape the press about the 'nasty incident,' as she called the attack.

The trek back seemed to take less time, and Alissa arrived at the beach where she'd parked her vehicle, an older model burnt-orange Jeep Wrangler with a soft top. She took the long way home with the top down and cruised down Veterans Drive, a four-lane roadway sandwiched between the capital city of Charlotte Amalie and the promenade known as Waterfront.

A lone man jogged with his dog on a leash, while a few teens skated by and an older couple leisurely rode their bikes. Leaving the downtown area on the way home, she stopped at a roadside stand where an old friend sold fruits and vegetables.

"Good morning, Charles," she said, strolling up and standing behind the woman customer ahead of her.

He looked up. "Hey gyul, whah you seyin?" Charles greeted her in an excited voice.

She smiled, appreciative of the enthusiastic welcome. "Nothing. Just cooling for now."

"When you come back?" He placed fruit in a paper sack and handed them to the customer.

"A few days ago. Miss Lucy pass."

"No, man. For real?"

Sympathy filled his voice, and she nodded. Tears pricked her eyes at the loss of the older woman whom she'd known from the age of six. She'd been a sort of surrogate grandmother since she'd lost both of hers at a young age.

"Ah so sorry. Ah know you was close to her."

"Ah was," Alissa said with great sadness.

"Well, you looking good. Look like you geh some sun today."

"Ah went hiking." Alissa stepped out of the way so the woman could pass by.

"And then came right away to see you boy."

"Of course."

They both laughed, and giving herself over to laughter dulled the pain of loss.

"Give me two ah dem mangoes and dem genip," Alissa said, pointing. Occasionally she'd found genip in Atlanta, but they were dried out and not as tasty.

Charles placed the items in the bag, and she handed over the cash.

"Dis my afternoon snack. Tell Gina Ah say hi. Ah gone."

"I will. Laytah."

She waved at him, climbed into the driver's seat of the Jeep, and cranked the classic reggae sounds of Yellowman through the speakers. She peeled the mango with her teeth and ate the sweet fruit, wiping her chin as delicious juice dribbled down her face. By the time she arrived home, the mango was finished.

She pressed the remote on her keychain, and the wrought-iron gate slowly swung inward from the cement wall which surrounded her property, painted white and bright blue. Rolling through the gate, she parked on the stone driveway in front of her two-story home. The sturdy brick exterior was a lovely rose color and contained three bedrooms and two and a half baths.

Hopping down from the Jeep with her backpack and the fruit, Alissa walked toward the front door and paused. The back of her neck tingled, and she had the sense that she wasn't alone.

Frowning, she scanned the sloped yard, listening closely and checking for the source of her discomfort. She didn't see anything out of the ordinary but couldn't shake the feeling that either she wasn't alone, or someone had been there before she arrived.

Her eyes traveled over the bushes and trees flanking the house on either side. Nothing was visibly amiss. On the alert, she moved slowly toward the

front of the house, and when the oak door came into view, she pulled up short. A man wearing sunglasses sat on the stairs.

Her heart stopped, and she swallowed the sudden tightness in her throat.
Hossam Jalal.

Since she saw him last, his face had haunted her dreams, and his presence evoked mixed feelings—excitement, regret, anger. He removed the sunglasses and tucked them into the pocket of his guayabera shirt. He looked like a man on vacation—relaxed, refreshed.

“Hello.” His low, raspy voice reverberated through her like an echo.

“What are you doing here?” Alissa asked, in a tone as frigid as an icicle.

“You would not speak to me in Paris, and since then you have not accepted any of my calls or returned my messages.” Despite living in France half his life, his accent leaned closer to his native Morocco.

Alissa squared her shoulders. “For the average person, that would be a hint.”

“I am not very good at taking hints.” He smiled, white teeth contrasting against olive-toned skin. The expression softened his features and annoyed her.

“No kidding,” she muttered, eyeing him warily. “It’s been a year.”

“I had some things to take care of first. Then I checked in with one of our mutual friends, who took pity on me and told me you had returned to St. Thomas a few days ago.”

She knew exactly who told him her business. Had to be Hunter since he and Hossam were friends, and she’d give him a piece of her mind the next time they spoke. She would never divulge to either man how many times she’d been tempted to call Hossam and bridge the divide between them.

Six feet tall with his black curly hair adorably too long, he had a wiry build and bore a striking resemblance to the Dutch actor of Tunisian descent, Marwan Kenzari. His unassuming smile and low-key appearance in light-colored linen clothing were nothing but camouflage. Hossam meant “sharp sword” or “cutting blade” or “sword of justice” in some traditions. Very apt, considering he killed for a living. He specialized in making the deaths look like accidents, but he was also a fighting machine, skilled in Muay Thai and Judo.

“You look beautiful,” he said softly.

Her chest tightened at the words, but she knew for a fact that she did *not* look beautiful. She smelled like outside—salt, sea, and air—and was

therefore in desperate need of a shower. Her braided hair probably looked like a frizzy hot mess, and she wore no makeup.

“You wasted a trip. I’m not talking to you.”

“I can be very persuasive.”

She responded by putting one foot in front of the other to move past him, but his fingers curled around her wrist and brought her footsteps to a halt. His touch bled through her skin and into her bones. She gave her arm a sharp twist to free herself, but he held fast and pushed her against the outer wall in the alcove, crowding her with his imposing height.

He was too close now. She could see the irises of his sharp, dark eyes and smell the alluring scent of black currant and bergamot in the cologne he often wore.

“You know I can get out of this hold if I want to.”

“Go ahead and try,” he said with a soft smile. His fingers tightened fractionally, and they had a stare-off.

The challenge hardened her nipples with memories of sparring sessions and playful wrestling. Most men were no match for her, but not someone with Hossam’s skill, whose strength and agility meant he could pin and hold her in place, no matter how hard she fought.

“Let me go, Hossam.” She let the hardness in her voice be a warning.

He sobered. “I cannot do that, *habibti*.”

Alissa stiffened. “Don’t start with that *habibti* nonsense. I’m not your darling or your beloved,” she said, shoving him off her.

As if to dispute her assertion, his gaze ran over her in an overtly possessive way that made her skin tingle and put her on edge.

“I did not come here to fight.”

“Then why are you here?” Alissa demanded.

His eyes softened. “I came for you.”

Damn him. He’d practically disarmed her with four words, but she held firm, straightening her shoulders. She needed to fight these feelings he evoked, but how could she resist the irresistible?

She forced a laugh and shook her head in disbelief.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I can’t trust a word that comes out of your mouth. Besides, our time has passed.”

“I do not believe that.” Thick brows lowered over his eyes.

“You have a lot of nerve, you know that.”

“I came all the way here to talk to you, and I am hard-headed. Did you not say that once?”

She glared at him, and he lifted his hands in a disarming way.

“I understand you did not expect to see me, but I cannot simply leave and act as if... as if we don’t know each other. I am here because of you.”

“You shouldn’t have come.”

“Well, I am here *now*.”

Frustration encroached on his voice as guilt slashed her conscience at her dismissive attitude, but she didn’t have a choice. She had to behave that way or he’d wear her down. She had no willpower when challenged by the force of Hossam’s magnetic pull.

He eased closer, and her shoulders tensed.

“At least hear me out. I understand you do not want to see me because of what you think happened, but we need to talk.”

“You wasted your time coming here. Go back to France.” Alissa unlocked the front door and entered the house. When he opened his mouth to speak, she slammed the door in his face.

She walked briskly away and then paused on the tiled floor in the entryway. Maybe she was being a tiny bit too hard on him. He’d come all this way, allegedly to speak to her.

She gnawed on her bottom lip.

This is a mistake. This is a mistake, her brain warned.

She heaved out a breath of frustration. Turning around, she yanked open the door and stepped back in surprise when she saw Hossam in the same place she left him. A smile lifted the corners of his lips, as if he’d known she’d return.

“You’re not going to give up, are you?”

“No, I am not.”

“Fine, you want to talk? Then you’re going to have to wait for me to shower, wash my hair, and get dressed. Then you’re buying me dinner.”

“I have no problem with that,” he said in a calm voice.

Alissa narrowed her eyes at him. She was definitely making a mistake. “There’s something wrong with me,” she muttered. Then she heaved a sigh. “Come in.”

Alissa's entryway opened into a large living room, where sliding glass doors led onto a deck that ran the full length of the house.

"There's water in the fridge. I'll be back," she said.

Hossam nodded and watched her take the stairs to the second floor. He'd touched her because...well, hell, the impulse had been too difficult to suppress.

He honestly didn't care that she didn't want him there. He'd already achieved one very important goal of the trip, and that was to see her in person and spend time with her.

After she came to Paris last year and helped them take down a major criminal, the starkness of life without her became more real. When she left without giving him a chance, he'd been devastated, and in between jobs he tried to win her back, but to no avail.

There was no one else for him but Alissa, and he vowed to do everything he could to convince her to give him another chance. She was important to him and had been for years as they navigated a long-distance, on-again, off-again relationship between continents.

Hossam strolled over to the sliding glass door. Alissa had placed new patio furniture outside, which included a table, chairs, and an outdoor sofa with an ottoman to take advantage of the incredible view.

She inherited the property from her parents. Because of the violence that took place there, she had stayed away for years and planned to sell it. Eventually, she overcame her aversion and put money into its renovation. There were several fruit trees in the yard. A papaya tree, a mango tree that

provided plenty of shade, and toward the back a tree that grew bunches of tiny, sweet-tasting bananas that locals referred to as figs.

The house overlooked Magens Bay Beach, which was flanked by a hilly terrain covered in lush green foliage. Popular with visitors and islanders, it consistently made travel magazines' lists of the top ten most beautiful beaches in the world.

He'd been to the island several times over the years, the last time during Carnival. He and Alissa watched the parades and ate lots of delicious food and danced all night to hip-swinging music, as if they didn't have a care in the world.

When they weren't participating in the festival's activities, they simply enjoyed their time together. He had vivid memories of being holed up in her house and awakened by the sound of crowing roosters—nature's alarm clock on the island. They sipped coffee and relaxed on the deck before they went for morning walks on the beach. They drove along the mountainous, downright treacherous roads in her Jeep with the top down, the sea breeze blowing their hair as Calypso music poured from the speakers.

Merde.

Hossam ran agitated fingers through his hair. He had really fucked up. They *had* to get beyond this impasse.

He turned away from the window and sauntered over to a bookshelf, which contained souvenirs Alissa had collected from all over the world, as well as photos of her and her family. Her father had been a big man, well over six feet, while her mother had been petite, a couple of inches shorter than Alissa.

He picked up a photo that showed them seated on beach towels, Alissa between them and grinning broadly with her hair in plaits. She looked like a happy kid of about ten years old. Only three years later, her parents would be violently taken from her.

Hossam replaced the photo and went into the kitchen. He removed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and sipped it as he sauntered back to the living room. She'd changed the furnishings in here too, throwing colorful rugs over the white tile floor and adding a beige couch with mustard-yellow and orange pillows.

He sank onto the couch and turned on the television to wait for her to get finished. Over an hour passed before footsteps sounded behind him.

He swiveled his head, and the sight of Alissa dragged the air from his

lungs.

Whenever he saw her, it was like being introduced to a different woman each time. He'd seen her with short hair, her natural kinky Afro, and like this—a straighter style with soft waves that framed her face, kissed her shoulders, and made him want to thread his fingers through her hair.

Nonetheless, she was the same—of average height but filling the room with her presence.

Her skin was the color of burnt sienna, a dark-brown hue that appeared darker at the moment and glowed because she'd probably spent hours soaking up the sun today.

She had a great face, with lush lips that always looked like she'd been kissed—long and hard—a constant invitation that he gladly accepted. She also had high cheekbones and beautiful brown eyes that lit up when she was happy. That was the first thing he thought of when they met in Morocco years ago. That same face could turn fierce in the heat of battle, her eyes taking on a sharp challenge as she moved with speed and agility.

Right now, she waited in silence, as if to give him time to take stock of what he would never have again, but that only made him more resolute that he was *not* leaving St. Thomas without convincing her to give him another chance.

“Are you ready?” she asked, lifting a small purse onto her shoulder.

“Starving.” Hossam stood from the sofa.

“When did you arrive on the island?”

“Today.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Where are you staying?”

“At the Windward Passage Hotel downtown.”

“Good. There's a popular restaurant near there where we can eat.”

She extended her hand for the empty water bottle, and he gave it to her, watching the sway of her beautiful ass in tight-fitting jeans as she went into the kitchen to dispose of it. His body hardened at the memory of how she would throw back her ass when he fucked her from behind.

He swiped a calming hand down his face. He was not here for that. He was trying to win her back. Of course, if she forgave him and they ended up screwing each other's brains out, he would not be disappointed.

Alissa returned to the living room. Along with the jeans, she wore low-heeled sandals and a loose-fitting black top that draped off one shoulder. The sleeveless top showed off her toned arms and the fullness of her breasts—

each one a handful. Despite her athletic build, she had a feminine, curvaceous shape.

“Let’s go,” she said.

They exited the house, and she locked up. “You’re driving.” She tossed him the keys and walked ahead of him.

Hossam hid his smile because it would piss her off. She was going to make him drive and pay for her meal as punishment. Little did she know, he didn’t consider any aspect of their time together a punishment.

They snapped the Jeep’s soft top in place, and Hossam took the wheel, remembering to drive on the left side of the road as he pulled out of the yard.

“The island has really changed since I was here last. They’re doing a lot of work on the Waterfront.”

Alissa, whose gaze was locked on the road outside her window, nodded. “It’s a huge, ongoing project. When they’re finished, we’ll have the most beautiful waterfront in the Caribbean.” Pride filled her voice.

They fell silent for a minute.

“How are your parents enjoying retirement?” she asked.

“My mother is enjoying herself, my father—not very much. He likes to stay busy and complains all the time that there isn’t enough to do. There is some consolation, though.”

“What’s that?”

“After thirty years of working in the government, he is back home in Morocco with my sister and the grandkids, and of course, all his old friends are there. They all keep him busy.”

She let out a little laugh. “I bet.”

Hossam navigated a turn on the narrow road, sending a warning honk to oncoming traffic, as was customary.

“How long are you staying on the island?” Hossam asked.

“I have a couple of weeks of vacation left. How long will you be here?”

His eyes sought hers. “As long as it takes.”

Her eyebrows pulled together in confusion, and then the meaning behind his answer dawned on her.

She laughed, and despite being at his expense, he loved the sound.

“You should probably temper your expectations,” she said.

“That is impossible to do with you. I will always have lofty expectations, and they work. That’s how I got you in the first place.”

“Excuse me? What are you talking about?”

“You were not interested in me when we first met. In fact, you ignored me.”

“Because our countries had sent us to Morocco to *work*, not hook up.”

“Potato, po-tah-to,” he joked.

A joint task force of special operatives from France and the United States organized to take down a terrorist cell hiding in Morocco. Morocco did a good job of mitigating the threat of terrorism inside its borders, but reliable intel had warned of a pending major act of terrorism from outside forces hiding in Marrakech. With the king’s blessing, the government moved forward with a covert operation to stop the catastrophe, partnering with its French and American allies.

Alissa, Hunter, and two other American operatives from a secret U.S. organization named Plan B arrived in Marrakech, hungry for action. At that time, Hossam had been working for the French equivalent of the CIA and brought two men with him. The moment Alissa entered the room, he was smitten. She was the only woman on the team, and he was pretty sure he fell in love with her after seeing her in action.

She eventually gave in to his flirtations, but they kept their hot, intense affair a secret during the entire operation. At the end of the mission, a friendship had formed between Hossam and Hunter, and he’d cemented a relationship with Alissa.

But he screwed up over a year ago. He never told Alissa that his ex came to stay with him for a while, and when Alissa arrived unexpectedly, Amal greeted her at the door and suggested there was something going on between them.

He shot a glance at Alissa, admiring the shape of her lips and the delicate curve of her jaw.

To this day he didn’t know what possessed him to keep Amal’s visit a secret, and he worried that, because of his mistake, he might never win Alissa back.

With a bustling nightlife that included live music venues, bars, and restaurants that served delicious food and drinks for any budget, they had plenty of choices for dinner on the island. Alissa chose a restaurant on the Waterfront within walking distance of Hossam's hotel. She figured once they ate, she'd leave and he could walk back to his room.

They took the stairs up to the open-air restaurant, which was already filled with a good number of guests. The smiling hostess escorted them across the dining room floor, and since the tables looking out at the harbor were all occupied, she seated them near the middle of the room. Alissa spread her napkin across her thighs.

"I'm glad you let me take you out tonight," Hossam murmured.

"This isn't a date. I'm here for the free food," she said tartly.

"I would not be surprised if that was true."

They both knew she had a hearty appetite. Maddeningly, her lips tilted upward, and she dropped her gaze. Darn it, she needed to stay upset at him. She gazed at the menu, trying to decide if she was in a seafood or steak mood. Maybe she should have both.

"Eh-eh. Alissa, is that you?"

She recognized the excited voice before her eyes landed on the older, buxom woman nearby and the two people with her. Senator Teresa Hodge wore frameless glasses and her braided hair in a tight updo. She was a member of the local legislature and had been a friend of her parents from when she was a child.

"Ms. Hodge, hi!" Alissa shot to her feet.

Teresa squeezed her tight in a warm hug, and they rocked from side to side. Then the older woman stepped back and held Alissa's hand while she looked her up and down. "How are you? I didn't know you were back on the island."

"I came back for Miss Lucy's funeral and turned my stay into a short vacation for a couple of weeks."

A frown of empathy settled on Teresa's face, and she squeezed Alissa's hand. "I heard she had passed. I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. I was going to reach out in the next day or two."

Teresa's gaze shifted to Hossam, who had also come to his feet.

"This is my friend, Hossam Jalal. He's visiting from France," Alissa explained.

"France? *Oh là là. Ravi de faire votre connaissance,*" the senator said, extending a hand.

Hossam took her hand. "*Enchanté. Vous parlez français?*"

The senator let out a boisterous laugh. "No, I speak very little French, but I like to practice what little I do speak."

"She's being modest," Alissa said. "She speaks French *and* Spanish fluently."

Teresa waved off the compliment. "I'm getting rusty. Not enough practice. Oh, my goodness, where are my manners? Hossam, this is my daughter, Jasmine, and Senator Ian Lyburd, one of my colleagues in the legislature."

"Nice to meet you," Hossam and Jasmine said simultaneously.

"Jasmine has some news, don't you, baby?" Teresa said, looking like she was about to burst with happiness.

Her daughter blushed. "I'm engaged."

"Engaged?" Alissa repeated.

Jasmine, who wore her natural hair in a short, tapered style, grinned and extended her left hand to show off a dazzling princess-cut diamond ring.

"Jazzy, congratulations!" Alissa pulled Jasmine in for a hug.

At thirty-four, Jasmine was only two years older than Alissa, but she had taken a different path to success in her youth, buckling down and getting high grades in school and eventually going off to college in Maryland on a partial scholarship. A testament to the great job Teresa did as a single mother, struggling to make ends meet.

"It's very nice to meet you," Ian said, shaking both Alissa and Hossam's

hands.

“Nice to meet you too,” Hossam returned.

“So, this is your *friend*?” Jasmine arched an eyebrow, her gaze shifting between Alissa and Hossam.

Alissa laughed uneasily. “We, um—”

“She is and will always be the woman who has my heart,” Hossam said with feeling.

The accented words flowed like poetry from his lips, and Alissa’s foolish heart leapt at the public declaration.

“Wow,” Teresa said.

Jasmine clutched her chest. “Oh my, we need to get together before you go back to the States.”

Alissa cleared her throat and gave her friend a weak smile. “Definitely.”

“I’ll call you,” Jasmine promised.

“We’ll leave you two alone so you can enjoy your dinner. It was nice to meet you, Hossam. Alissa, make sure you come by and see me before you go back to Georgia,” Teresa said.

“I will.”

She and Hossam retook their seats, and she glared at him across the table. “Did you have to do that?”

“I see nothing wrong with telling the truth,” he said, casually lifting the menu to peruse the options.

Fuming, Alissa forced herself to review the entrées. She couldn’t decide if she was angry at him or herself for her reaction to his words.

“How long have you known them?” Hossam asked.

“Since I was a kid,” Alissa said, speaking to the menu as she continued to review the options. “Senator Hodge was a friend of my parents, and after they died, she regularly checked on me to make sure I was okay. She’s been in the legislature for about twenty years and is its current president. Before that, she taught history at the high school. She plans to run for governor in the next election to clean up corruption and strengthen the territory’s standing in the region.

“She’s adamant about the importance of education but is business savvy too. She spearheaded the planning committee that allocated the funds for the improvements on the Waterfront and wants more investments to come to the islands. If she becomes governor, she’ll be the first female governor in the territory, so I’m excited to support her. Jazzy is an attorney and will probably

follow in her mother's footsteps and go into local politics. With a mother like Teresa to guide her, she can't lose."

She ventured a look across the table at Hossam, and her insides quivered when she found his unflinching gaze resting on her.

"What?" she asked.

"I missed the sound of your voice. I hope you'll at least listen to what I have to say."

"I'm starting to think this wasn't a good idea," Alissa muttered.

"I disagree." The right corner of his mouth lifted.

Her stomach lurched when a pang of arousal hit, and Alissa quickly glanced down to focus on the menu's mouth-watering choices. She would not let lust interfere with her thought processes. True enough, she and Hossam burned up the sheets every time they came together, but they hadn't had sex with each other in over a year. Plenty of time for her body to get over him. So why hadn't it?

Why did sitting close to him make her crave his touch the way an alcoholic craved the burn of rum down their throat?

Because sex with him was incomparably good. No, not good—superb, excellent, mind-blowing. She never felt as beautiful or as worshiped as when Hossam was buried inside her, his warm breath on her neck, his strong hands gripping and dragging her into his powerful thrusts.

Stop it. Stop it, she chided herself, reaching with shaky fingers for her water glass and taking a sip to soothe her parched tongue.

By the time the server returned, they were both ready to order. She chose the steak and lobster with mashed potatoes and green beans, and Hossam ordered the stuffed lobster with plantains, rice, and a shrimp cocktail to start. They used to share each other's meals without a second thought, and sadness curled in her chest when she realized no sharing would take place tonight.

"Tell me about Miss Lucy's death," Hossam said, in a low voice.

Alissa's body wilted under the pain. She needed to talk to someone, to share her distress about the loss of an old friend.

"I'm sure you remember me telling you that she used to live next door to us when my parents were alive, and she was like a grandmother to me. She wasn't shy about expressing her disapproval when I 'misbehaved'—her words."

"Like the time you climbed her mango tree without permission," Hossam reminded her with amusement.

“Yes! She never let me live that down, but her scolding came from a good place.”

She laughed at the memory of Miss Lucy rushing out the back door waving a broom and yelling at her to “*Geh dung from deh before you geh hurt.*”

“When my parents died, and I moved to Florida to live with my uncle, we lost touch, but after he—he died and I returned to the island years later, we reconnected. We’ve kept in touch all these years.”

“How did she die?” Hossam asked.

“Peacefully. In her sleep.” For that she was happy. Miss Lucy didn’t suffer.

The waiter arrived with their drinks—a Coke for Hossam and a rum and Coke for Alissa because she needed a stiff drink to get through this dinner.

Hossam sipped his Coke. “When was the last time you spoke to her?”

“A few days before I came here. I had told her that I was planning to visit soon but didn’t know when. Then her son called to tell me she died, and I... I was so angry with myself for not coming sooner.” Alissa clenched her fingers and blinked away tears of frustration and sadness.

Hossam reached across the table and covered her fist with his hand. His touch warmed her heart and shrank the pain to a more manageable level. That was the thing about Hossam—he always, always made her feel better. Right here, right now, it felt as if they were the only people in the restaurant. The only people on the island.

“You’re going to be okay,” he said.

“I know. It’s hard, because...” She shrugged, swallowing the tightness in her throat.

She was tired of death and had experienced enough to last a lifetime. All the people she loved and cared about most always left her.

First her parents at the age of thirteen. Losing them had been a nightmare. Both in the Coast Guard, they’d been executed in their home by criminals smuggling guns and drugs into the territory.

Alissa hid in the bottom of the entertainment center when intruders broke into their home in the middle of dinner. She watched through the door slats as her parents were slaughtered and then the killers went looking for her.

They never found her. One of the men called someone to confirm the job was done, and he placed the phone on speaker so his partner could hear. The person on the other end used a voice changer to alter his voice to a robotic

sound, and she would never forget what he said. “Good riddance to bad rubbish that should not have been here in the first place.”

He had called her parents rubbish. Like they were trash, nothing. Thanks to her testimony, the murderers were eventually apprehended, but for years she had nightmares about hearing those words and seeing her parents’ blood-soaked bodies on the floor.

“Alissa...”

Hossam’s voice brought her back to the present, and she removed her hand from beneath his. “I’m okay,” she said, though the pain of loss remained sharp and searing as if it was brand new.

A year after her parents died, she went to live in Miami with her Uncle Silas, her father’s older brother, and five years later someone murdered him too.

Hossam made her long for stability and a family of her own. Saying goodbye after their meetups became harder as the years progressed. They met when she was twenty-six, and she was thirty-two now. For the first five of those six years, he’d held her heart.

Then he invited his ex into his home and most likely into his bed. Amal certainly suggested as much and rubbed her nose in the fact that she was there with him all the time and Alissa was not. She’d been crushed.

Why had he kept her presence a secret? Had he used his ex to get back at her because, after one night of badgering, she admitted to him that she had other lovers, violating their don’t-ask-don’t-tell agreement? Why ask if he couldn’t handle the truth?

Despite his saying nothing happened between him and Amal, the damage was done. He had lied to her, and she returned to the woman she had been before he dangled the carrot of forever in her face—a woman who was emotionally numb and refused to feel deeply.

As the meal progressed, Alissa and Hossam talked about everything but the reason why he was on the island. Alissa told him about her last job for a wealthy older woman whose husband had tried to force her into voiding their prenuptial agreement. The guy sounded like a nut, but that was not unusual in their line of work. They often saw the worst in people motivated by greed and the thirst for power. He told her about his last job, where he took out the head of a sex trafficking ring in Brazil.

“Did you ever finish the renovations on your apartment?” Alissa asked, right before she placed a couple of green beans into her mouth.

“I did. I had the new kitchen installed last year with brand-new appliances. A chef’s dream, or so I was told by the designer. My private chef enjoys using it, at least.”

“Lucky guy.”

Hossam laughed, took a sip of Coke, and then carefully set the glass on the table. “I took your advice about the lights and installed a new chandelier in the living room. You should come see the changes.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” she said dryly, cutting into her steak.

He missed having her in his home. He could stare at her for hours and had, seated on a chair across from the bed in his Paris apartment, watching as she slept peacefully. Knowing her rest was because she felt safe with him. Trusted him. She’d told him so, in fact.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you Amal was staying with me,” Hossam said quietly.

“Are you?” she asked, as she placed a piece of steak in her mouth with an

air of nonchalance.

“Nothing happened between us.”

Alissa finished chewing. “How do I know that? Because you say so? You had a woman you used to fuck staying at your place—and you were probably still fucking, if we’re being honest.”

“We were *not*. She lost her job and needed a place to stay.”

“Lucky for her, your bed was available.”

Their gazes clashed across the table. He had messed up, but her unwillingness to give him the benefit of the doubt grated.

“What did you want me to do? Send her away?”

“I don’t know, Hossam, you’re a smart man. You could have figured something out!” Alissa snapped.

Her elevated voice caused a few heads to turn, and they both fell silent.

She released a calming breath. “We split up over a year ago. What do you want from me?”

Hossam pushed aside his food and gave her his undivided attention. “Forgiveness.”

“You think you can waltz back into my life, apologize, and everything will go back to normal? That’s not the way things work.”

“You told me you loved me,” he reminded her.

“So did you!” Her eyes darted around the room, and she dropped her voice. “You promised me forever, and then you had your ex staying with you and conveniently didn’t tell me she was with you. Conveniently after I told you about my lovers. Honestly, Hossam, I don’t care what you do. I’m not changing my mind.”

He ground his teeth as anger threatened to overtake him. Anger at himself and anger at Alissa. How could she throw away five years together because he allowed Amal to stay with him for a few weeks?

“I am not some petty child who wanted to hurt you because you hurt my feelings. I am a man. An adult. Maybe you were looking for a way out,” he accused.

She reared back, eyes wide. “Are you serious?” she hissed.

“You heard me. I screwed up and lost your trust, but I have told you over and over that nothing happened between me and Amal. Why can you not forgive me? You were looking for an excuse for us to break up because you wanted to end the relationship.”

“That is *not* true. You know what, we’re not getting anywhere. This is a

wasted conversation. You should get the check.” She tossed her napkin on the table and glared at him.

“You are being unreasonable.”

“And you’re being ridiculously obtuse. What if you came here one day, and I had a man I used to sleep with laying up in my house, and that same man told you about the *great* time he and I have been having?”

“I admit, I would—”

“A whole year passed since I last saw you. You think a phone call and a couple of voicemails are doing something? You haven’t exactly been beating my door down, Hossam, so excuse me if I’m skeptical about your feelings for me. Do us both a favor. Leave me the hell alone and go back to France. What we had is over.”

She hopped up from the chair and stalked toward the exit.

What the hell?

Hossam jumped up too and tossed a wad of bills on the table, enough to cover the cost of the meal and leave a generous tip for the server.

He caught up with Alissa outside. She stood in the parking lot talking to the Hodges and Senator Lyburd. Pedestrians strolled by, including an older couple walking arm in arm.

As Hossam approached, Senator Hodge and her daughter walked toward a red car while Lyburd strolled toward a black SUV, its lights flashing as he popped the locks remotely.

Alissa shot an indifferent glance at Hossam. For a split second, he thought he saw the sheen of tears before they disappeared from her eyes.

“So that’s it? We are done for good?” he asked.

“Yes.” Her answer was quiet but firm.

“I made a mistake.”

“Let it go, Hossam.” Her voice sounded tired.

His chest tightened in dismay. This was it. She was giving him the final brush-off. He raked his fingers through his hair. “No.”

Startled eyes looked into his. “What do you mean no?”

“No, I am not giving up. No, we are not done. No, this relationship is not over.”

Her back went ramrod straight. “You must be mad. Newsflash, both people have to agree to be in a relationship. Thank you for the meal, but if you’ll excuse me, I’m going home.”

He grabbed her wrist. “Alissa—”

She yanked away her hand and glared at him in disbelief. “I *said*—”
Boom!

The night shook as a loud explosion spewed debris into the air. The momentum of the blast knocked Alissa and Hossam to the ground. He landed hard on his knees and flinched when rough asphalt grated the palms of his hands.

Temporarily deafened, he shook his head to mitigate the ringing in his ears. Beside him, Alissa groaned and rolled from her side into a sitting position.

They were both very lucky. Other pedestrians nearby had been knocked to the ground and struggled to their feet, one man covered in blood where glass shards had cut his skin. The older woman Hossam noticed earlier lay on the ground, not moving at all as blood seeped from a cut on her head.

“Agnes!” the man screamed, crawling on his hands and knees to her.

“Are you all right?” Hossam asked.

Alissa nodded.

He staggered to his feet and helped her up too.

Her mouth fell open. “Holy...” Gray smoke billowed toward the stars from a black SUV engulfed in flames.

“*Merde*,” Hossam swore.

Two men from the restaurant ran toward the vehicle with fire extinguishers in their hands. Senator Hodge and her daughter were on the ground, staring at the burning vehicle with their mouths hanging open and their eyes wide.

“Oh my goodness,” Alissa whispered. “That’s Senator Lyburd’s SUV.”



THE POLICE and fire department showed up and put out the fire, and paramedics tended to the injured. The woman who had lain inert on the ground was whisked away in an ambulance with blaring sirens. The explosion damaged the outside of the restaurant, leaving charred wood and burn marks. The people seated near the windows were among the wounded and had been treated by emergency personnel.

Alissa and Hossam stood with the other spectators, and Teresa watched from nearby with a hand over her mouth, while her daughter talked to

someone on the phone.

The police officers questioned everyone present, including Hossam and Alissa. They gave their account, which wasn't much since they didn't know or see anything.

"Neville is here," Alissa said in a low voice.

Hossam followed her line of sight to a tall, dark-skinned man. Despite his casual clothing, he had a commanding presence.

"Who is he?"

"The new police sergeant," she answered.

Something about the way she spoke about him made the back of Hossam's neck prickle. His gaze swung to the man again, and he watched him closely. Short hair, narrow face, and trimmed goatee. He entered the cordoned-off area, and an officer pulled him aside and briefed him on what had occurred.

"I can't believe a bomb went off in the middle of Charlotte Amalie," Alissa said.

"Did the senator have enemies?" Hossam asked.

Alissa shrugged. "I don't know him well. He hasn't been in office as long as Senator Hodge—maybe six years or so? But enemies? I don't know who would do something like this."

Neville went into the restaurant, followed by two uniformed officers.

"We should probably go now," Hossam suggested.

"Good idea." Alissa turned to a female police officer nearby. "Is it okay if we leave?"

"Have you both already given your statement?"

"Yes."

The officer nodded. "You can go."

"Thank you."

Hossam escorted Alissa away from the scene, and they stood for a moment in silence beside her Jeep.

"I—"

"Hossam—"

They spoke at the same time and stopped talking at the same time.

"You go," he said.

Alissa rubbed her palms together. "Thank you for dinner."

"My pleasure." He meant that, despite how the evening had ended. It was always a pleasure to be in her company.

She glanced away so he couldn't read her expression beneath the curtain of hair that fell across her face. "Good night. I hope you enjoy your stay."

"I am sure I will."

When her eyes came back to him, there was a moment's hesitation as she brushed away a strand of hair the sea breeze had blown across her face. The moment lengthened into awkwardness, which he hated. They were not strangers. They knew each other's bodies in intimate detail. He knew what her nipples looked like—like perky chocolate kisses that tightened into rigid peaks when he skated his tongue across them.

He'd seen her scars and remembered where each one was on her body. Some from the adventures of youth, like the one on her foot from when she stepped on a rusty nail as a kid. Others from the tough work she had done over the years, first defending her country, and now protecting wealthy clients.

Hossam stepped away from the vehicle. "Good night, *habibti*."

He didn't care if she no longer wanted to hear the endearment. She was his beloved, his love, and his life wasn't the same without her.

"Good night, Hossam." When she turned away to climb into the Jeep, he almost yanked her into his arms, the need to reach for her was so great.

But he didn't. He stepped farther away from the vehicle and allowed her to drive out of the lot.

He then made the short walk to his hotel, past the commotion and flashing lights. He caught another glimpse of Neville and wondered about the nature of his relationship with Alissa. Were they friends, or had there been more between them?

Once in his room, he stripped out of his clothes and lay on top of the covers on the bed, staring up at the ceiling with his hands behind his head.

No way was he going back to France. At least not right away.

He was a patient man—a skill honed in his line of work. He could spend months studying the worst of society, delving into their background until he found the perfect way to snuff out their life and make the world a better place.

Alissa's dismissal was nothing to him and was easily brushed off by his determined nature. He'd give her space and himself time to come up with a plan.

Before he left the island, they were getting back together.

A lissa stretched and yawned, squinting against the early morning sunlight that poured into her second-story bedroom. When she renovated the house, she turned the entire wall that faced the bay into a bank of windows, and she'd never regretted the decision.

The change gave the house a contemporary design touch and had the more practical purpose of allowing in more light—a vast improvement over the single small window that had been there before.

She rolled out of bed in a white cami and a pair of blue and white boxers—one of several she had stolen from Hossam. She told herself she kept them because they were comfortable, but the truth was they used to make her feel closer to him during the months they were apart, and she hadn't yet weaned herself from their use.

As she padded into the adjoining bathroom, she pursed her lips in disgust. She'd made such a big deal about him not following up for a whole year, yet she held on to these boxers and would never admit she had several which she alternated sleeping in each night.

“You pathetic, gyul,” she said to her reflection.

After her morning ablutions, she went downstairs, poured herself a cup of orange juice, and stepped onto the deck. Mornings were her favorite time, when most of the world was quiet, and only the sound of birds and the occasional car horn in the distance could be heard as people greeted each other or navigated around a narrow bend. It allowed her to think about the coming day, and of course, she had one of the most beautiful views in the world.

Resting her arms on the railing, she gazed at the water and the smaller islands in the distance. She smiled briefly at the sight of a hummingbird rapidly flapping its wings as it sucked nectar from a hibiscus flower, and then her thoughts veered to the events of the night before.

A bomb. A member of the legislature dead. Who would do such a thing—and why?

She went back into the house, sipping her orange juice, and pointed the remote at the television. She had intended to use it only as background noise while she made breakfast but became rooted to the floor when she saw a press conference about to start.

A podium sat in front of the steps of Government House, a white three-story neoclassical building with ornate ironwork on the balconies. Within minutes, Governor Alstead walked out the door, a stocky man with leathery skin that appeared more gray than brown this morning. He descended the stairs looking visibly shaken, his face drawn, probably from lack of sleep.

Two men came to stand on either side of him when he reached the podium. The lieutenant governor on the left, and a Caucasian man dressed in a pale blue seersucker suit on the right.

Immediately, Alissa's eyes narrowed. "What is *he* doing there?" she muttered.

Reverend Jeremiah Gracewood was the head pastor of Harmony Haven Church, a mega congregation in Miami, Florida with a smaller congregation on the island overseen by an assistant pastor. The Miami congregation broadcasted its services internationally and did extensive mission work in the Caribbean. He wore his gray hair with a side part, and despite spending so much time on the island, his skin remained a deathly pale color.

Jeremiah had lived on St. Thomas as a boy with his parents, and ten years ago returned to set up a congregation—a "second home," he called it—for Harmony Haven.

At over seventy years old, he'd been preaching for four decades and claimed to be a healer, staging healing ceremonies and selling so-called holy items that he "blessed" and said could be used to keep away evil spirits, sickness, and disease. As far as she was concerned, he preyed on the vulnerable.

Years ago, he'd been caught in a charity fraud operation. He created fake charities and outreach programs which his congregation and the general public contributed to. Very little of the funds went to help those in need. He pocketed most of the money, and when investigators discovered the fraud, no

charges were brought against Gracewood because he was allegedly unaware. The church, however, paid a massive fine as a result of that transgression.

Then there was the antiquities trafficking. Religious artifacts and cultural treasures had been illegally acquired from countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Once again, the church bought its way out from under that scandal, and Gracewood emerged unscathed—allegedly duped by the dealers he purchased the items from.

In recent years, the pastor purchased Paradise Key, a small, unoccupied cay among the dozens of islands that made up the Virgin Islands. He built a multi-million-dollar compound there which included a square-shaped mansion that looked more like a fortress than a home and was said to be able to withstand sustained hurricane winds of over 150 miles per hour, a private airstrip and helipad, a chapel with Jesus on the cross in front, a warehouse, two guest villas, servants' quarters, a tiki hut near the pool that faced the sea, and other buildings.

There were rules he had to adhere to for the privilege of owning one of the islands. Environmental requirements included an obligation to maintain the island's natural habitat, but as far as Alissa could tell, there was no one overseeing his activities to ensure he followed the required guidelines. Seeing him standing there with the governor, like some kind of leader in the community, made her skin crawl.

Governor Alstead gave a wan smile. "Good morning," he said to the assembled crowd.

They responded in kind, and after a pause, he launched into his speech.

He mentioned the tragedy of the night before, his voice lowering and turning somber as he informed the public that Senator Lyburd had been the only one murdered, but others had been injured. He expressed his outrage that someone—anyone—could have brought this type of violence to our doorstep.

"We have seen an uptick in gun violence in recent years, but this—this is unusual."

In Alissa's lifetime, there had never been a bomb explosion on the island. Bomb threats, yes, but never an actual bomb.

The governor ended with the following words: "The perpetrators will be brought to justice."

Instead of taking questions, he asked Jeremiah to say a prayer for the deceased, the injured, and the island in general. The evangelist walked up to

the podium and looked out at the assembled reporters and guests, and the group waited patiently in silence for him to speak.

“As you know, I love the Virgin Islands,” he started in a southern drawl. “When I was a little boy, my family moved here for several years before we returned stateside. My daddy loved this place and had hoped one day to return permanently, but he never had the opportunity. St. Thomas, in particular, is a second home to me, and it grieves me to see a prominent member of our community—a man who we all know worked hard for improvements in the territory—struck down by a random act of violence.” He shook his head. “We don’t know the hearts of men, but we know who is in charge, don’t we?”

With encouraging murmurs from the group, the cadence of his voice changed.

“We know who holds the future!” he yelled, pointing to the sky.

“Yes, yes.”

“Amen.”

Alissa couldn’t see the people, but she imagined their heads bobbing up and down in agreement. She set her glass on the coffee table and folded her arms across her chest as she watched the charlatan perform.

“Let us not forget who is in charge. Not man, but God. An awesome God. The Good Book tells us, ‘The Lord is slow to anger but *great* in power! The Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished,’ Amen?”

“Amen!”

Jeremiah paused, his eyes scanning the crowd. “We will remain optimistic and trust in our Heavenly Father that the perpetrators of this great evil in our home will be punished. We will pray for those poor souls who were affected by the bomb and pray for the soul of Brother Lyburd. May he rest in eternal peace. Bow with me.”

He bent his head and spent the next few minutes in prayer. When he finished, the conference ended without the governor taking questions, and the three men departed up the stairs into the governor’s mansion.

Alissa watched them go with a queasy, uneasy sensation in her stomach. She turned off the television and tapped her feet on the tile floor.

Something the governor had said stayed with her. There had been an increase in gun violence on the island. What had caused it, and was the bomb an escalation in the violence?

Time to go to the source. Someone she suspected would have answers.

After a quick change into denim shorts and a T-shirt, Alissa smoothed her hair into a ponytail and hopped into her Jeep. She drove into town and parked in a public lot near the police station.

As she walked toward the building, she encountered Senator Hodge coming out, a frown creasing her brow and eyes downcast as if in deep thought. She was so preoccupied she didn't see Alissa.

"Ms. Hodge."

The older woman lifted her gaze in surprise. "Hello, Alissa. How are you?"

"I should be asking you that question."

The senator's shoulders sagged, and she shook her head. "Still shaken. Still in disbelief. My phone has been ringing off the hook all morning from concerned constituents, and the sensational headline in the paper didn't help—*Shocking overnight developments! Is the death of Senator Lyburd a case of chickens coming home to roost?* The tackiest damn headline I've ever seen—pardon my French."

"What does that mean about the chickens coming home to roost?" Alissa asked.

"You haven't been here, but there was an incident a while back where Ian was accused of embezzling funds to pay his taxes. A full investigation was done and no wrongdoing was found, but you know how rumors are. Whether true or not, they caused harm, and his reputation took a hit. I talked to Sgt. Pendergrass to see how the investigation is going, but they don't have any leads yet. It's too soon." Her voice dulled with defeat.

“I’m sure they’re working hard on finding answers.”

“I am too, but that doesn’t mean I’m not worried. We don’t know who killed Ian or why. Was this a personal issue, or are they after political figures? I’m afraid to get into my car. We’re all on edge because we don’t know if this is a one-off or the actions of a madman who plans to kill all fifteen of our senators.”

Her agitation made Alissa more resolved than ever to figure out what was going on.

Teresa forced a smile to her lips. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to burden you with my paranoia.”

“You have every right to be concerned, but hopefully the investigation will turn up answers very soon—before anyone else gets hurt.”

“Amen. What brought you here?”

“I came to speak to Sgt. Pendergrass too.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re an investigator, aren’t you?”

“Something like that. Maybe I can lend a hand.”

“I’m sure they can use all the help they can get. Didn’t you and he...?”

“A long time ago,” Alissa confirmed. “He’s happily married now.”

“Yes, and she’s a lovely woman. We’ll catch up soon, eh?” Teresa patted her arm.

“Definitely.”

They went their separate ways, and Alissa entered the building.

“Good morning,” she said to the male officer standing behind the desk.

“Is Sgt. Pendergrass available? I’d like to speak to him, please.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but I’m an old friend. Tell him Alissa Francis is here to see him.”

“Have a seat.” He indicated several chairs against the wall.

Rather than sit, she shoved her hands in her pockets and paced over to the wall where awards and photos of police officers who’d performed one brave task or another were posted. She didn’t have to wait long before Neville Pendergrass came out, dressed in his uniform blues and a cap. When he saw her, a faint smile touched his lips.

“Hi, Neville.”

“Alissa.” He said the words with a note of longing and finality that made her cheeks burn.

“Mind if we talk in your office?” she asked.

“Come on.” He led the way down the hall.

Neville was one of the men Alissa spent time with when she and Hossam were apart. They would have probably continued in that vein if he hadn't given her an ultimatum—marriage or he was moving on. Marriage was the last thing on her mind—marriage to him, anyway. She had no such qualms about a certain French Arab.

She and Neville split, and he got married a few years ago. They remained friends though only touching base on rare occasions.

In his small office, he pointed to the cushioned wooden chair and then went to sit behind his desk.

Alissa sat down and smiled at him.

Neville removed his cap. "You look good," he remarked, his gaze flicking over her.

"Thank you. Congratulations on the promotion."

He shrugged. "They had to give the position to somebody. Why not me?"

"Don't be falsely humble. You deserve it."

He laughed, sitting back in his chair and watching her with a speculative look in his eye. "How have you been?"

"I've been good. Staying busy with work—you know how it is. How's your dad?"

"He's well. He flew to the States for a minister's conference a while back, and of course, he's still praying for my soul."

Neville grew up in his father's church, a large Baptist congregation on the east end of the island. But after becoming a police officer and seeing the worst of humanity, his beliefs shifted and he became an agnostic. Though he and his father continued to have a relationship, their differing viewpoints caused a rift that had never been completely repaired.

"But hey, I know you're not here for a friendly visit."

Alissa laughed. "Why are you so sure of that?"

He leaned forward on his folded arms. "You keep your distance since I got married. I haven't seen you in donkey years. Now all of a sudden you show up after an explosion on the island. Something is up, so you might as well tell me."

Because of their prior relationship, Neville had an idea of the type of work she did, though not the full extent of her missions. Mostly he knew she worked for the government and had garnered several skills over the years. He did not know she was an assassin and had used those skills to defend the United States against domestic and external threats.

“You know me well. I need information,” Alissa said.

“About what?”

“The explosion that happened last night.”

He shrugged. “We’re at the beginning of the investigation so there isn’t much information available. Right now, all we know is Senator Lyburd was murdered.”

“You know more than that.”

His lips quirked upward. “Why are you interested?”

“I was there, and this is my home. I want to know how something like that could happen.”

“You sound like those statesiders who are always in shock when a murder happens in their upscale neighborhood or small town. We never expected anything like this to happen here,” he said in a falsetto voice.

“Come on, Neville, give me something.”

“I don’t need you poking around my investigation, Alissa.”

“I won’t. I’m curious, that’s all.”

“If I tell you anything, it stays between us.”

“Of course.”

He leaned back again and stroked his goatee as if mulling whether to give her more information. Finally, he heaved a sigh of resignation. “There have been rumors for a while about Lyburd being involved in some shady business. Taking bribes, that kind of thing. He’s been linked to Pastor Gracewood on more than one occasion.” His lip curled up.

He had the same reaction she did to the pastor. “How?”

“For one, Senator Lyburd owed about eighty thousand dollars in back taxes but somehow his debt was paid in full. He was accused of embezzlement, but no one could find any wrongdoing. If you ask me, I think the funds were replaced, but we didn’t dig too deep. That would require forensic accounting and there’s no point in wasting resources investigating a crime when everything seems copacetic. One very interesting thing is the great deal Gracewood received for Paradise Key. The sale and the terms had to be approved through the legislature, and from all accounts, Lyburd was the biggest advocate for allowing the sale to go through. He pushed it—hard.”

Alissa listened with pursed lips. “Hmm, what about Governor Alstead? He had Jeremiah standing with him this morning during the press conference.”

“Right now, all I know is the governor considers him his spiritual

advisor.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I wish I were. The good pastor has wound himself into the political scene very well, at the highest levels. He’s probably privy to information that only our officials should know.”

“You think he had something to do with Senator Lyburd’s death?”

Neville shrugged. “I don’t know anything right now. We started digging, but I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“During the press conference, Governor Alstead mentioned the increase in gun violence on the island. What do you think is causing it?”

He let out a heavy sigh. “Man, it’s getting bad. These guys are smuggling in weapons in all kinds of ways. For instance, they order the parts and accessories, the orders get shipped to the post office boxes, and then they assemble them once they have all the parts.”

“They never register them here at the station like they’re supposed to.”

“Exactly.”

“Where are they getting them from?”

“States with weak gun laws,” Neville answered, with a voice of resignation. “And we’re not the only ones affected. The ATF says the guns that come here from the States also get distributed to other islands like Haiti, Puerto Rico, etc.”

“You think Gracewood has something to do with the gun smuggling?” Alissa asked.

Neville threw up his hands. “I don’t know anything, but he has a private airstrip on his island and a huge warehouse. What could he possibly be storing there? The last time I tried to look into him, I got shut down.”

“By who?” Alissa demanded.

“The commissioner. He said he got a call from the governor and Senator Lyburd. Said we needed to leave our good citizen alone. Look how much good he’s done for the islands.” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “And he made it seem as if I was only going after him because he and my father didn’t get along.”

Reverend Pendergrass had been vocal in the past about the influence he felt Gracewood had on the local government.

Alissa sat in silence for a moment, turning the newfound information around in her head. “If Lyburd was working with Gracewood, why would he have him killed?”

“That’s what I need to find out.”

“I appreciate you sharing this information with me.”

“What do *you* think it means?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Neville leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Hey, I can’t dig into this guy because I have to answer to the higher-ups, but as a private citizen, you could do some poking around yourself and maybe funnel information my way.”

“Will the information flow both ways?” Alissa asked.

“Of course. You help me, I help you.”

She smiled. “Deal.”

With their newfound understanding, she switched gears. “So, how is married life treating you?”

A smile spread on his face. “Margie is pregnant.”

Something rippled through Alissa. Not pain, exactly, but something else. Envy. Sadness. His life was moving on in a way she might never have.

She had dreamed of that kind of life with Hossam.

For a long time, she wasn’t sure she wanted children, but seeing her boss—Cruz—welcome two children in recent years had given her a different perspective. The desire for a family had taken on a life of its own and consumed her thoughts.

She forced a smile to her lips. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Boy or girl?”

“Girl.” He looked at her as if trying to see inside her soul.

“I’m happy for you, Neville.”

He pursed his lips. “Could have been you. Could have been us.” Regret weighed down his voice.

Alissa shook her head. “You know that’s not true. It could have never been us,” she said softly.

He slowly nodded. Their time had passed, and letting go of each other allowed him to find someone who appreciated and loved him in a way she couldn’t.

“Thanks for the information,” Alissa said, pushing up from the chair.

“Don’t be a stranger.”

“I won’t. And I’ll be in touch if I find out anything important.”

“Likewise.”

After dinner, Alissa turned out the lights and trudged up the stairs. It had been a long day. She went to visit friends she hadn't seen in a long time, and she did some digging on Senator Lyburd. He definitely had a sketchy past.

Tomorrow she would look into Jeremiah Gracewood. She knew the basics about his criminal activities but wanted to dig deeper to determine if he was capable of murder.

Alissa climbed into bed and almost immediately fell asleep. She didn't know how long she had been asleep when her eyes flew open. A low noise woke her up. Almost imperceptible, but she'd heard it—something that didn't fit in with the sounds of the night or the house.

Holding her breath, she listened hard and caught the sound again.

Someone was in her house.

Then her door opened, slowly and carefully, one millimeter at a time. With her back to the door, she saw the reflection of shadowy movement in the window directly across from her.

Reaching for the knife wedged between the headboard and the mattress, her fingers tightened around the handle. She moved slowly beneath the bedsheets so her movements wouldn't be visible to the intruder.

He was in the room now, someone dressed in dark colors with a skull cap pulled low on his face. He edged closer to the bed, and she watched him through eyes narrowed to slits—a dark figure tiptoeing across the tile floor.

Then she caught the glint of a knife in his hand. She rolled onto her back, simultaneously firing her knife the short distance into the left side of his

chest. The man collapsed on the ground with a groan.

Another figure appeared in the doorway, and she rolled away from him, off the bed as he fired his weapon multiple times. The bullets tore through the edge of the mattress and shattered the window, barely missing her.

Alissa scooted under the bed and dragged her body to the other side. Her eyes locked on the big man's feet as he eased toward the foot of the bed to circle around and find her. She continued to scoot and escaped to the other side, crouching low.

He caught sight of her. Too late. With a high kick, she knocked the gun from his hand, and it skittered across the floor and forced them into hand-to-hand combat. He swung. She dodged. Her fist collided with his jawbone. He snarled and used his immense strength to slam her into the wall.

He fired off a quick punch. She slid left, and he hit the wall.

“Bitch!”

Alissa shoved the heel of her hand into his nose. The delicate bones cracked, and he howled in pain. While he was stunned, she kicked him in the groin. Then she hooked her foot around his left leg, simultaneously grabbed his chin, and shoved him over her leg to the hard tile. His head hit the floor with a loud crack.

She hopped over his prone body and grabbed the gun from the floor just as he pulled a pistol from his leg holster. Too late again. She fired two shots in quick succession. One grazed his temple, and the other went through his forehead.

Alissa stood over the other man she stabbed and watched him drag his body across the floor toward the weapon he had lost. She kicked the knife under the dresser and put a single bullet into the back of his head.

All of a sudden, she heard footsteps racing up the stairs. She dashed behind the bed again, and seconds later, the sound of a semi-automatic rifle tore through the night. As bullets ripped apart the sheetrock, Alissa crouched behind the bed.

“Come out, bitch!” a loud male voice barked.

She remained in position and modulated her breathing. The gun in her hand was no match for an AR-15. A good agent knew when to stand their ground and fight or get the hell out. The ultimate goal was to survive, which meant she only had one choice. Escape through the broken glass window into the night.

“She probably leave through the window,” one voice said, sounding

uncertain. He had a Jamaican accent.

From her position in front of the broken window, they couldn't see her, but she saw their shadowy forms in the reflection of the other window. The man with the AR-15 was a damn giant. He signaled the Jamaican toward the bathroom, and he nodded.

When she saw him tiptoe away, she popped up from behind the bed and fired two shots at the giant. The bullets hit him center mass, and he fell against the wall with a grunt. The other man came out of the door, and she fired at him, splintering the wood near his face. He ducked back into the bathroom, but she knew he'd be back. He had the advantage. With a quick pivot, she raced toward the window and took a flying leap into the night.

Gunshots sprayed behind her and broke out the other window. She landed one floor down in the grass and rolled to a crouch, broken glass digging into her bare feet. More glass rained down from above, and she ducked to protect her face.

Alissa hopped up as both men appeared above. Darn. The big guy she hit must be wearing a ballistic vest.

She raced toward the blue and white wall and scaled it with a quickness. More shots rang out as she flung her body over the brick barrier between her yard and the bushy landscape, but she landed on her feet on the other side while the wall splintered into projectiles that sprayed the area.

"Shit." She lost the gun when she threw herself over the wall.

No time to look for it in the darkness. Leaning her left hand against the wall, she used her right to finger a piece of glass caught in her heel. She grabbed the edge and yanked it out, grimacing in pain. The back of her neck, arms, and legs stung from the spray of broken glass and fragments of the wall that hit her, but otherwise, she was in good shape.

Using a combination of instinct and light from the moon, she ran through the brush wearing nothing but her cami and Hossam's boxers. She knew this pathway well from hiking down to the beach many times, and there was a boulder coming up she could take cover behind.

Slipping and sliding in the dark, she made better time when her eyes adjusted to the lack of light. She found the boulder and dropped onto her butt behind it to catch her breath.

Who the hell were these guys, and why were they trying to kill her?

She hadn't been sitting long when her ears picked up the sound of voices. The men were coming after her! How did they manage to make such good

time?

Then she saw the lights fluttering through the darkness. Flashlights. She'd have to put distance between them.

She pushed to her feet, but they sprayed the area with bullets, and she dropped behind the boulder again. She knew they hadn't seen her, but they were randomly shooting in the hope of hitting her. She curled into a tight, protective ball with her shoulders coming up to her ears. The trees nearby shuddered under the force of the rounds, leaves and branches fluttering to the ground in pieces.

"Wheh deh fuck she is?" one of the men growled. "She cahn be far. I'll go dah way and you go dah way."

At some point, the sound of gunfire would prompt a neighbor to call the police, but Alissa couldn't afford to wait. She took a chance and peered around the boulder. One man crept away through the trees with an AR-15 in hand, but the other remained close by, his ears cocked to listen.

"Wheh you is? Come out!" he yelled.

Yeah, that would make me come out, she thought.

Carefully and quietly, she picked up a rock and tested its heft in her hand. She heard the man move toward her left side and glanced in that direction. He came into view, sweeping the flashlight ahead of him.

She paid attention to his body language. The hand with the semi-automatic rifle was relaxed, which meant his reflexes would be slower, and the addition of the flashlight meant his response could be awkward.

With his back fully to her, she stood and climbed up on the boulder to give herself momentum for when she landed the blow. She leaped toward him, but he either heard or sensed movement and turned quickly. He caught her in the air, and they toppled to the ground with the flashlight and their weapons falling from their hands.

He overpowered Alissa, and with a quick roll mounted her body with his knees on either side of her waist. Grabbing her neck, he yanked her upper body off the ground and slammed her into the dirt.

The move knocked the wind out of her, and she whimpered, temporarily dazed as stars burst behind her eyelids.

"Got you now, bitch." His fingers tightened around her throat.

Within seconds she could have her trachea crushed or be unconscious from the lack of air. Against a man of this size, there was no point in trying to overpower him. She was no match for his strength, she wasn't in a good

position to knee his groin, and her reach was too short to land a hard punch.

So, she grabbed his pinky finger and yanked hard. Bone cracked, and he yelped in pain. She had to move quickly because if he hit her with the other hand, he could easily shatter the bones in her face with his superior upper body strength.

With his grip loosened, she lifted her torso and followed up with a solid hammer fist to the side of his head, knocking him off her.

She scrambled for the AR-15, rolled onto her back, and sprayed him, destroying his face. As he fell backward into the dirt, something thudded to the ground beside him. The moonlight glinted off a knife he must have pulled from a leg holster.

The other man came running, and she slipped into the darkness behind a tree. When he happened upon his cohort, he gasped.

“Vince! Holy...”

Alissa sprang from her hiding place and aimed the muzzle of the gun at his head. “Drop your weapon.”

He froze and stared at her like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. Then his eyes narrowed, as if he contemplated making a move.

“Drop it or I’ll shoot, and you’ll end up like him.”

His jaw firmed and then his arms went slack.

“*Easy...*” she coached.

Slowly, he lowered the weapon to the dirt.

“Kick it away from you.”

He did as she commanded, though with great reluctance.

He didn’t seem to be wearing a bulletproof vest like his friend. Alissa kept the gun aimed at his chest and remained far enough away that he didn’t have any chance of rushing and overpowering her.

“Good. Now, are there any more of you?”

He lifted his chin in defiance.

She pulled the trigger and bullets kicked up dirt and rocks near his feet. He turned away and covered his face.

“Answer the question,” Alissa said between clenched teeth.

“No,” he replied in a clipped tone.

“Who sent you?”

“Kiss me rass.”

“Who sent you!” she yelled, leveling the gun at his face.

“Me no know.”

“I’m going to give you one more chance to answer. Who. Sent. You?”

“I said me no know. Contact was done anonymously. All I know is, someone want you dead, and we geh the job. You killed the person who coulda answer your questions.” He pointed at the giant on the ground.

“You don’t know anything at all?” Alissa asked.

“That’s what I said.”

His sarcasm grated.

“Then you’re useless. Sucks for you.” She pulled the trigger and shot him in the face.

In the sudden silence, she heard sirens approaching and quickly searched the men’s pockets but came up empty. Neither of them carried identification, but the taller one had a locked phone on his person. A burner.

Two dead bodies here, two in her house, and no answers. She needed answers.

She took the phone and the AR-15—in case the Jamaican lied—and started the climb back to her house.

Flashing lights broke through the darkness. It seemed as if every first responder on the island was at Alissa's house.

After she returned home, she called the police and let dispatch know the gunshots came from her house. Then she changed into cargo shorts and a T-shirt and placed her nightclothes in a plastic bag, which she handed to the police when they arrived.

Uniformed officers had cordoned off the property, and two crime scene investigators were processing the inside of her home. As she watched from the back of the ambulance parked in her driveway, the coroner brought out a man in a body bag.

Neville, who arrived moments before, walked slowly toward her dressed in gray slacks and a rumpled polo shirt he'd likely tossed on when he received the call in the middle of the night.

He stopped at the ambulance and rested his hands on his hips. "I'm starting to think you're bad luck."

She managed a smile. "I was fast asleep minding my own business and was attacked in my home."

"By four men. Who are now dead?" He arched an eyebrow in disbelief.

Alissa shrugged. "I got lucky."

His eyes narrowed. "Why do I feel like I don't know everything about you and the work you do stateside? Nobody is this damn lucky."

"Or unlucky. Care to tell me anything?" She arched an eyebrow.

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

Alissa stood on her bandaged foot. Now the adrenaline was gone, her

right foot throbbed from the glass that had sliced into her heel.

Despite Neville's superior height, she faced him squarely. "This morning I came to your office to find out what's going on and offer my help, and tonight I'm almost killed by four men who broke into my house. That's quite a coincidence."

"You think—" He bit off the words and shook his head, taking a breath to calm down. "I *did not* send assassins to kill you."

"Then why did they come after me?"

"Did you forget where you are? This is St. Thomas, not Atlanta. You know how it is here. Everybody knows everything, and people talk. Your parents were heroes, and although we don't exactly know what you do in Georgia, we know it's something important. After this, tongues will wag more."

What he said was possible but unlikely. She hadn't spoken to anyone else but him about her plans, and her research thus far had consisted of combing online newspaper articles about Senator Lyburd.

"Considering our history, I'm especially insulted," Neville added.

Alissa saw the hurt on his face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have suggested you did this, but maybe there was a leak. Did you tell anyone about our conversation?"

"No."

"Not even the commissioner?"

"He's the last person I'd tell because he would shut down any cooperation between us with a quickness. Remember, he doesn't want anyone messing with our religious savior."

"Trying to kill me is not the way to get me to back off. I'm definitely moving forward now, especially since I need to find out who put out a hit on me."

"We found a black Nissan parked less than half a mile away on the side of the road. It probably belongs to the men who attacked you."

"How do you know it's theirs?"

"The average Thomian don't have no need for the weapons we found in the trunk. At first look, we won't be able to trace the guns, either."

"Why not?" Alissa asked.

Neville pursed his lips in frustration. "The serial numbers were removed. They're ghost guns."

Damn. A dead end.

“We’ll run the plates on the Nissan when I get back to the station and might get a lead there.”

A female officer came toward them and eyed Alissa with admiration before speaking to Neville.

“Sarge, we didn’t find I.D. on any of the men, but I recognize one of them we found in the bedroom. I think he lives in Savan.”

“You have a photo of him you can use?” Neville asked.

The officer nodded.

“First thing in the morning, take the photo and go door to door. Let’s see if we can get a name on at least one of these men, and that could lead us to find out who the others are.”

“Yes, sir.” The officer left them alone.

“One of them had a Jamaican accent. The smaller one I shot on the hill,” Alissa volunteered.

“You sure about that?” Neville asked.

She nodded, and he retrieved a notebook from his pants pocket and wrote down the information.

“What about the others?” he asked.

“By his accent, I’m pretty sure the big guy is from the V.I.,” she replied.

Neville blew air past his lips. “All right. I need to talk to the rest of my people. We good now?”

“Yes, we’re good,” Alissa replied, with a twinge of guilt.

Neville’s face softened. “You gun be all right?”

“I’ll be fine. I have a few bruises and scratches, but I’ll live.”

“You either have nine lives or…” His voice trailed off as he pondered the explanation for how she killed four men who’d shown up in the middle of the night to murder her. “I’ll be in touch.” He tapped the notebook in his palm and walked away.

At the sound of raised voices, Alissa turned her attention to outside the gate. Her eyes landed on Hossam, and overwhelming relief swamped her.

A police officer had a hand pressed to Hossam’s chest to keep him from coming onto the property while they yelled in each other’s faces. Little did the cop know, Hossam was holding back. He could snap the officer’s wrist and flip him onto his back with ease.

“Hey! It’s okay. He’s with me,” Alissa called.

The officer turned to face her.

“He’s with me,” she said again.

The cop dropped his arm, and after a brief glare, Hossam marched past him. Seeing his familiar face in the midst of a chaotic night brought her an unexpected sense of peace.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I couldn’t sleep and turned on the TV. I saw the breaking news and caught a taxi right away.”

Without another word, he pulled her into his arms, and she relaxed into his comforting embrace.

“I’m okay,” she whispered.

“I know you can take care of yourself, but that does not mean I’m not allowed to worry,” he whispered against her temple. He stepped back and cupped her face in his hands.

He placed a gentle, affectionate kiss on her lips. Alissa closed her eyes and exhaled.

Hossam rested his forehead against hers. “I kept thinking about how we parted ways. The angry words.” He lifted his head. “They could have killed you.”

“They didn’t.”

“But they could have. As soon as you’re done here, you’re coming to stay at my hotel.”

“I don’t need to be watched over.”

“This is not a debate, Alissa. Your home is a crime scene. You cannot stay here, at least for a few days, and who are you going to disturb in the middle of the night with a request for a bed? And there is no point in paying for a hotel when you can stay with me.”

He was right. Fighting his very logical argument didn’t make sense.

“Fine, I won’t argue. I’ll stay with you, but only until I get my house back.”

“In the meantime, do you mind explaining what exactly is going on? This is supposed to be America’s Paradise.”

She let out a dry laugh. “It is, but there’s something amiss here.” She lowered her voice. “I decided to look into Lyburd’s death, and apparently someone wanted to permanently stop me from doing that. That’s the only explanation, unless an enemy I don’t know about followed me to the island.”

“That is a possibility but unlikely,” Hossam murmured. “Who did you tell you were looking into the senator’s death?”

She glanced over her shoulder at Neville who was huddled in

conversation with another officer. His eyes met hers for a second, landed on Hossam, and then returned to the officer in front of him.

“The police officer?”

She faced Hossam again. “We discussed sharing information, but I can’t believe he would try to have me killed. We have history.”

His eyebrows lowered into a deep frown. “What kind of history?”

“Hossam.”

“I am asking a question. That is all.”

“He’s married now, but we used to date.”

He shot a glance at Neville. “Before you and I...?”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell,” Alissa reminded him.

His nostrils flared, and he glared at Neville. “If we find out he’s the reason for what happened to you tonight, I will take great pleasure in making him pay for his transgression.”

Alissa lowered her voice. “It’s not him. By the way, I lifted a phone off one of the men who attacked me. It’s locked, but I know someone who could probably open it.” If she went through the police, time would be lost while they applied for a warrant. She could get inside the phone much quicker on her own.

“We could start there,” Hossam said with a slow nod.

“We?”

His lips broke into a smile. “Do you really think I would let you look into this alone now that I know what you are doing? Especially since they—whoever they are—sent men to kill you. We are a team.”

Despite being able to take care of herself—she had after all wiped out a kill team that tried to murder her—having Hossam’s steady presence...well, she liked and appreciated it.

“This doesn’t mean I’m no longer mad at you,” Alissa said to save face.

“Of course. I have to earn your trust.” He sounded amused, and the softening of his features made her heart flutter.

Oh boy, going to stay with him might be a terrible idea. His smile and the amusement in his eyes were already crumbling her defenses.

“Are you finished here?” Hossam asked.

“I think so. I need to double-check with Neville, but I gave my statement to the officers when they first arrived.”

“Then you should put some things in a bag so we can leave.”

“Give me a few minutes.”

Alissa spoke to Neville, and he told an officer to escort her inside the house so she could pack. She pulled together clothes and other items and tossed everything into a duffel bag.

When she exited the house, Hossam was in the same position, waiting by the ambulance with his hands stuffed into his pockets, the T-shirt he wore showing off his ripped arms. The lights flashed across his chiseled features, his lean body still and unmoving as he paid close attention to the emergency personnel as they worked.

She was so glad he came.

When she walked to him, he took her bag and tossed it in the Jeep. Then he climbed into the driver's seat and drove off the property, away from the flashing lights and the buzz of activity around them.

In his hotel room, Hossam placed Alissa's bag on the suitcase rack.

"I appreciate you letting me stay here."

Hossam sat in the chair at the desk, close to the window that opened onto the balcony overlooking the Waterfront. "You can stay as long as you need to. I'm sure it will be a few days before the police release your house."

"At least that long." Alissa rested both hands on her hips and surveyed the room. There was only one bed, a king. She cleared her throat. "Um, if you don't mind, I need to take a shower."

"I don't. Go ahead."

His eyes followed as she took her bag into the bathroom, and within a few minutes, he heard the shower. The last time they shared a shower had been at his apartment in Paris. They soaped each other's skin, and she spent a ridiculous amount of time lathering soap over his throbbing erection. While she worked him over with her hands, he braced his palm above her head, trying hard not to let his knees buckle.

His body hummed with awareness now, imagining her under the warm spray, water running down her naked body and over her dark flesh.

Hossam swore softly. Having her in his room meant waking up with blue balls for sure.

He pushed up from the chair and turned on the television, increasing the volume to drown out the sound of the shower and evict the salacious thoughts from his mind. By the time Alissa came out of the bathroom, he was mostly back to normal and taking cookies from the minibar.

"Whew, I really needed that," she said with relief heavy in her voice.

She wore a simple purple pajama set made up of shorts and a top with spaghetti straps—and no bra. Hossam reluctantly dragged his eyes from her free breasts and the imprint of her nipples under the soft fabric. She had pinned her hair into a ball at the back of her head, which provided a good view of her stunning features.

She smelled like heaven. She preferred handmade soaps, and the scent of one of her favorites—coconut and hibiscus—followed her out of the bathroom and clung to her skin. She owned the same fragrance in a body lotion, and the smell brought back memories of the scent of coconut and hibiscus left in his sheets whenever they had met up over the years.

“Are you hungry? There isn’t much here besides chips, cookies, and chocolate.” Hossam held a few of the options in his open palm.

“I’d just like to go to sleep.”

“As you can see, there is only one bed.”

The comment hung in the air between them for several seconds before he replaced the snacks in the small fridge.

“Yes, I see,” she finally said. “I know we have history, but I want to be clear—I’m not going to sleep with you. Let me rephrase that. I’m not going to have sex with you.”

Hossam walked slowly toward Alissa and noted how her body tensed. “As much as I would love to spread your lovely legs and bury myself inside you”—he heard her sharp intake of breath—“I did not invite you here to have sex. I invited you because you need a place to stay.”

She swallowed. “Okay,” she said throatily.

“Now, if things change and you decide you want to do more than sleep...” He let the suggestion dangle between them as he looked down at her, certain the desire curling in his belly reflected in his eyes.

“*That* won’t happen.”

He shrugged. “I had to try.”

Alissa rolled her eyes but smiled a little, and it was amazing how something so small could create a burst of happiness inside him. He had missed her smile. There was a time when he could make her smile and laugh with ease, and he hoped that could happen again.

“What is the plan for tomorrow?” Hossam asked.

“First, I want to find out who the men were that attacked me in my home. They have to be related to what happened to Senator Lyburd. I can’t think of any other reason. I’ve never had trouble on the island before, and I doubt the

attack was related to a previous job. I questioned one of the men who attacked me to find out who sent him, but he wasn't able to provide much information. All he could tell me was they got paid to take me out."

"And you are certain your friend Neville isn't involved?"

The other man's name burned his tongue. Knowing he had been intimate with Alissa enraged him with jealousy, but he kept the emotion out of his voice.

"I hope he's not involved because that would mean I can't go to him for help. For now, I need to collect whatever information I can on the men who tried to kill me. Neville will probably know something soon, but I can do my part by getting inside that phone."

Hossam glanced at the clock on the nightstand. "We better get some sleep then."

She stared at him. "We're really going to share the bed?"

"Is that a problem? Are you afraid you won't be able to keep your hands off me?" Hossam asked softly.

"It's not me I'm worried about," she said pointedly.

He took her hand and pulled her into a hug. Her body was soft but stiff as he held her. "I want to take care of you, Alissa. That is all."

She immediately relaxed in his arms, and that's what he wanted. He wanted her to be comfortable. Not tense.

She gazed up at him. "Thank you."

She went to the bed and slipped under the covers.

Hossam turned out the lights and climbed in on the other side. He lay there for a long time, staring up at the ceiling and acutely aware of Alissa lying next to him.

In their line of work, forming relationships was hard enough with civilians, never mind they both did similar work. Their obligations meant long stretches away and risking their lives with the possibility of never coming back from a job—their bodies possibly never being found.

Two people with the same career was catastrophic, so they had come together whenever time allowed with the understanding that they didn't really have a future together. But he was now thirty-five years old and a conversation he had with Hunter in Paris had given him food for thought.

"Working a regular job, you at least have a chance at a real relationship. If you ever want to talk options, let me know."

He wanted a real relationship, and he wanted it with Alissa. That was his

last thought before sleep overtook him.



Hossam awoke to Alissa's soft body against him. During the night, they had both shifted to the middle of the bed, as if their subconscious minds had done what their conscious mind could not—bring them together.

Her ass pressed into his hip. His body hardened when his brain computed their new position, and he rolled onto his side and slid an arm across her waist.

“Hossam,” she moaned.

The achingly sweet sound of his name on her tongue hit him in the crotch.

He buried his face in the back of her neck and inhaled the heady scent of her skin. He stroked her thigh, and she moaned again and ground against him.

“Can I make you feel good, *habibti*?” He whispered the question in her ear, his voice hoarse and heavy-laden with need.

“Mmm.”

Hossam couldn't tell if that was a yes or no answer, but she pulled his hand between her thighs, and this time *he* groaned. She spread her legs, and he cupped her sex, squeezing and kneading with slow, deliberate movements until she was gasping and pushing back against his hard dick.

He moved his hand to her breasts, stroking and massaging them while he showered kisses on the side of her neck and shoulder. Her back arched as a cry broke from her lips.

Taking his cue, Hossam pushed his knee between her thighs, and she reached back and squeezed his backside, forcing them into a harder grind.

Arousal stampeded through him. He was dizzy with need and pushed his hand beneath the shorts and under the crotch of her panties to finger her engorged clit.

“Hossam, we said we wouldn't,” Alissa panted, clearly still fighting her desire.

“I never said that. *You* said you wouldn't,” he reminded her.

He rubbed gently at first, then with more vigor as she moaned his name and twisted under the covers. When she cried out, he shoved his hips hard into her ass and simulated sex as she clawed the sheets and trembled through her climax.

The tension finally left her body, and she stopped moaning, and he lifted his drenched fingers from between her thighs. Those few moments reminded him of how much he enjoyed making love to her. She was such a responsive, enthusiastic lover, and he had missed touching her, tasting her, and making her scream.

Alissa rolled onto her back and looked at him with lethargic, contented eyes in the dark. Brushing her fingers down his hair-sprinkled chest, she moved lower toward his hard dick.

Hossam caught her hand—perhaps the hardest thing he'd had to do in a very long time. "I did that because I wanted to. I do not expect anything in return."

She bit her bottom lip, and he saw the uncertainty in her gaze.

"I am not just saying that," he said softly. "You were lying against me, and my hands cannot behave around you."

She desired him but still had doubts about his sincerity. When they made love again, he didn't want her to have regrets.

He kissed her, and she didn't resist, making a noise deep in her chest. The kiss increased in ardor, and he settled between her thighs, hungrily kissing her neck and bare shoulders, moving his lips lower to where her nipples once again puckered against the soft material of her top. The invitation to suck was almost impossible to resist, but somehow he found the strength to roll off her inviting body and onto his back.

Beside him, her heavy breathing matched his own.

"I will behave. For now. However..." Hossam pulled a pillow from under his head and placed it between them. "If you intend to get any sleep tonight, this is necessary."

Alissa leaned up on one elbow and splayed her fingers along his stubbled jaw. She lowered her head and dropped a quick kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Thank you for being patient, and for... making me feel good."

"You do not have to thank me. Making you feel good is always my pleasure."

Jeremiah Gracewood watched the morning news on the living room sofa in shock. How had one little woman killed four armed men?

Incredible.

Was she really simply a bodyguard in Georgia, or something more?

When the update ended, he turned off the television and made the short walk to the floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a breathtaking view in the morning light. At night, all he saw was a black ocean and the faint lights of Charlotte Amalie in the distance, but during the day, he was overwhelmed by the vastness of God's handiwork.

He had spent a small fortune constructing this little spot of paradise on a cliff overlooking the water. Before he purchased the island, it had been uninhabited and overgrown with plant life, but he saw the potential.

At great expense, he cleared the land and erected an estate—a sprawling two-story home built from cement blocks. An Olympic size swimming pool and tiki hut sat on the edge of park-like grounds covered in green grass and adorned with orange and red hibiscus bushes. The landscapers added fruit trees and planted flamboyant trees that were all over St. Thomas, the splendor of their orange-red flowers adding a burst of color to the landscape.

He built paved roads for the golf carts his security used, and the private airstrip and helicopter pad were a must for getting on and off the island with ease. The chapel he needed for private services when he had guests and for his own moments of meditation when he and God spoke to each other. There was also a huge warehouse where he stored the smuggled guns, ammunition, and explosives that he resold as an additional source of income.

He understood why the United States purchased the Virgin Islands from the Danish for their strategic position. Their proximity to the United States meant Jeremiah could import a steady flow of weapons from states with lax gun control laws using cargo planes and small speed boats. He used the island as a jumping-off point for distribution to other parts of the Caribbean where his missionaries had free rein thanks to their humanitarian work. Greasing the palms of local officials was important to make sure they looked the other way.

Jeremiah poured himself a glass of water from the bar, squeezed in the juice of half a lime, and added a single ice cube. As he sipped the water, he gazed fondly at his most recent purchase docked in the water below—a three-level fifty-foot yacht that accommodated twelve guests in six staterooms.

Heaven Sent. The perfect name for his latest gift from God. Over the years, God had seen fit to bless him with good fortune, and that good fortune could very well increase exponentially if all went well with his current plans.

Too bad about Ian, he thought.

The senator let the devil whisper in his ear and grossly overplayed his hand, and actions had consequences. By killing him in such a public way, Jeremiah made sure everyone else on the team thought twice before they tried to double-cross him as Ian did.

People often underestimated him. It had happened all his life, probably because of the Southern accent. They thought he was a dumb hick, but he was, in fact, very wise. Brilliant, even. He knew the Bible backward and forward and had since he was a child growing up in South Carolina at his father's church in Charleston. From those days, he'd become well versed in the Word and his thirst for knowledge culminated in a master's in theology.

The teachings of Harmony Haven Church touched every continent but Antarctica, and his face was broadcast to millions on Sunday—people who craved the teachings of Jesus Christ and wanted to live more fruitful and morally upright lives.

That's where he came in. He was more than a servant of God. He was a vessel to spread the gospel, particularly in the Caribbean. People believed in him and would do anything he said because the Heavenly Father spoke to him and through him.

God had brought him to this point and continued to favor his many works. Ten years ago, He spoke to Jeremiah and told him to return to the islands and purchase this cay. Since then, he'd been nothing but prosperous,

and that prosperity would reach untold levels very soon.

Unfortunately, he needed to figure out what to do about Alissa Francis. The devil had taken hold of her spirit, and she was trying to block his blessings. He couldn't let that happen. With God's help, he would smite her down and stop her evil works.

Not her—or anyone else—would stand in the way of his divine progress.

He gave her an orgasm without intercourse, and now her body craved him. The bastard.

Alissa wondered if Hossam was purposely torturing her.

They both woke up early, and he invited her to exercise with him. He didn't shave, leaving a dusting of stubble on his face, knowing full well she liked the way he looked with an unshaven jawline.

They went running on the Waterfront promenade, and when they finished, they returned to the hotel to lift weights in the gym. On the way out of the gym, he hauled off his sweat-soaked shirt and revealed his magnificence—very little body fat and lean muscle everywhere with a defined chest and midsection chiseled from granite.

“What is on the schedule for today?” he asked, as he unlocked the door to his room.

Behind him, Alissa took in the way the muscles under his skin moved. It was hard to resist reaching out and touching him the way she used to. “First thing, I want to find out what’s on the phone.”

He nodded his agreement. “Breakfast and then we leave?”

“Yes. I’ll let you have the bathroom first.”

Hossam opened his mouth to say something and then seemed to think better of it. “I won’t be long,” he promised.

When the door closed, Alissa sank onto the end of the bed. Being close to him was much, much harder than she’d anticipated. It didn’t help that he was so darn sexy.

They were together but not *together*. It was strange not brushing her teeth

beside him or wrapping her arms around his lean waist from behind to rest her cheek against his back.

She wanted all that but wasn't sure she was ready yet. Last night had softened her toward him, but at the end of the day, she was scared, and she couldn't admit the extent of how scared to Hossam. Not yet, anyway. Fully loving someone meant leaving herself open and vulnerable to pain, and she'd experienced enough to last a lifetime.

One thing she couldn't deny was the warm feeling she experienced from knowing he had come all this way to see her. That counted for something. It counted for a lot. She just needed to be brave enough to accept what he was offering and believe he meant what he said.

"Shake it off, Alissa," she muttered.

When Hossam came out of the bathroom, she went in. After a quick shower, she exited in a pair of knee-length cargo shorts and a white T-shirt with the Virgin Islands flag in the upper right, and a pair of worn but comfortable tennis shoes on her feet. She had pulled her hair into a ponytail and didn't bother with makeup, but the way Hossam ogled her made her feel as if she was decked out in haute couture and a full face of makeup.

"Stop looking at me like that," she said, though she appreciated his attention.

"Only if you stop looking so beautiful."

He had a way of complimenting her that made her blush. With other men, she could take it or leave it. She knew she was attractive and had used her beauty in her work to disarm unsuspecting men. But with Hossam, she was the one disarmed, melting under the heat of his attention at the sincerity in his voice. He didn't just make her feel beautiful. He made her feel as if she was *the* most beautiful woman in the world.

"We should go," she said.

Hossam donned a cap, and they exited the room together.

She took him to the takeout window at a spot near the Waterfront where they ordered breakfast—for her, Johnny cake and cheese with orange juice, and for Hossam Johnny cake and tuna fish with passion fruit juice.

They ate in the car while she drove them out of the capital to the east end of the island to visit her friend, Cyril.

Cyril owned a shop where he repaired phones, tablets, and computers. A native Virgin Islander who converted to Islam, they had met one day when Alissa went to the Islamic center to learn more about the religion so she could

better understand Hossam. The Muslim population on the island was small, made up of Africans, Middle Easterners, and Virgin Islanders, and very welcoming. Though she had no intention of converting, they generously shared their religion and invited her to come back whenever she liked.

She never went back, but she and Cyril struck up a friendship when they ran into each other at the supermarket and had been friends ever since.

They walked into the store, and the moment Cyril saw her, a smile broke out on his face. "Hey, you're alive!" Wearing gold-framed glasses and a white taqiyah, he came from behind the glass counter and gave Alissa a warm hug. "I saw the news."

"I received your message, and I'm sorry I didn't get back to you. It's been crazy."

"I can imagine." He stepped back and looked her up and down. "Well, you look to be in one piece."

She laughed. "I got lucky."

"Yeah, lucky." He smirked and then shot a look over her shoulder at Hossam.

"This is Hossam, a friend of mine. He's visiting from France."

Both men shook hands. "As-salamu alaikum," Hossam said.

"Wa alaikum assalaam," Cyril returned.

"I need your help opening a phone." Alissa removed the burner from one of the pockets of her cargo pants. "Think you can help?"

Cyril turned it over in his hand. "I'll give it a shot. Do I want to know?"

"No, you don't."

A faint smile touched his lips. "How soon do you need it?"

"Can you do it today?" She winced in anticipation of a negative answer.

"Give me an hour, and I'll see what I can do. If I think it'll take longer, I'll let you know."

"You sure?"

"Of course. I might be finished sooner, but I want to give myself time in case I run into a problem."

"We'll be back in an hour."

"I'll be here."

They left the shop, and Alissa drove to Red Hook where a hub of restaurants, bars, and shops was located, as well as a ferry service to neighboring St. John. They bought canned sodas from a convenience store and strolled to the water's edge with them in hand.

“Have you received any word from the sergeant about when they’ll release your house?”

Alissa shook her head. “Not yet, and nothing about the men who broke in, either.” Her phone rang, and she saw Neville’s phone number. “Speak of the devil, this is him calling now. Hello?”

“Hi, Alissa, this is Neville. I have news you might be interested in. We got lucky this morning, and one of my officers who went door to door in Savan learned the names of two of the men. From there, we were able to figure out the other two. All four men are career criminals with long rap sheets—breaking and entering, assault, that kind of thing. Guess where two of them attended church?”

“Harmony Haven.”

“Bingo.”

“A possible link to Jeremiah.” She looked at Hossam, and he frowned as he tried to decipher the conversation from her side.

“One more thing I thought about that I didn’t mention when you were here the other day. Gracewood’s yacht was seen near Hassel Island several times last week. I didn’t think anything about it at the time, but in light of what’s going on, there must be a reason he was there.”

“What do you think it means? There’s not much on Hassel Island,” Alissa said.

Hassel Island was located in the harbor of Charlotte Amalie.

“I have no idea. A while back, he donated a lot of money to the St. Thomas Historical Trust responsible for preserving the history of the island, but that doesn’t explain his sudden need to lurk nearby.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Alissa said slowly, thinking. “Does he ever get off his yacht and go ashore?”

“Not as far as I know. My father mentioned seeing him during one of our rare conversations. He’s seen several of Gracewood’s men go to the island, but not him. He doesn’t know what they’re doing, but he doesn’t trust him. Gracewood being shady as hell is one thing my father and I agree on. He’s called him a false prophet plenty of times, including to his face.”

“Didn’t they have a confrontation once?”

“They did. My father was yelling at the bastard while he smirked at him. Made my father look like an out-of-control lunatic in the middle of the supermarket. Jeremiah is attending a reception at Government House tonight, and I’ll be there too. Maybe I can corner him and casually find out more

about his activity on Hassel Island.”

“Good luck.”

Neville laughed. “I’m sure I’ll need it. What are you up to today?”

Alissa hesitated. Should she mention the phone? She quickly determined that would be a bad idea. She wouldn’t say anything. Not yet anyway since Neville would probably be upset when he found out she’d taken evidence from the scene.

“Nothing much except doing some research into Jeremiah Gracewood. After what you told me, I’m convinced I’m on the right track.”

“An officer is going over to speak to Senator Lyburd’s son later today. If I find out anything of importance, I’ll let you know. By the way, you should be able to get back into your house tomorrow.”

“That’s good news.”

“But Alissa, be careful, eh?”

“I will.”

She hung up and met Hossam’s curious gaze. “Like I said, that was Neville.” She recounted the information he shared with her.

Hossam sipped his soda while she spoke, and when she finished, a frown creased his forehead. “Must there be a reason why Jeremiah Gracewood is hanging out near the other island? Maybe he is interested in seeing how his money is spent.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. There’s another reason for him being there, and we have to figure out what it is. Hopefully, Neville will find out something soon.”

Hossam sipped his soda again, his dark eyes watchful. “You trust him.”

“I told you, he and I have history.”

“How long were you seeing each other?”

Alissa shrugged. “About as long as you and Amal—three years.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “You couldn’t help yourself?”

“I mentioned her for comparison reasons only,” Alissa mumbled, looking away from him.

With Hossam, she became everything she’d sworn she’d never be for a man. She cooked for him, going so far as to buy a tagine so she could prepare his country’s dishes the traditional way. If he mentioned he liked her in a specific color, she bought more clothes in that color, melting inside when he turned his appreciative gaze on her and pulled her into his arms.

He also made her extremely petty, a result of jealousy that gnawed at her

with the thought of him and Amal—or any woman—spending time together. Despite knowing he saw other women when they were apart, she spent years thinking of him as *her* man, and when he told her that he loved her and wanted to be with her only, she believed him. But Amal had forced her to face the unsavory possibility that he had betrayed her not long after words of love dripped from his tempting lips.

“Let’s call a truce,” she said.

“I thought we already had,” Hossam said in a clipped voice.

“Let’s make it official. If you’re going to stay and work with me, we have to get along, and... I think it’s best that neither of us talk about our exes. Okay?” She waited for his answer.

“Okay, but we each get to ask the other one question before the truce goes into place.”

Alissa knew she’d regret this, but said, “Fine. Go ahead.”

“Have you slept with him since you and I split?”

“Considering we were split, it’s really none of your business, but for the record, no. He’s been married for several years now.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. “Okay. Do you have a question for me?”

He had told her he loved her, but she could well see how old feelings could arise and cause Amal and Hossam to slip into each other’s arms when she stayed with him—but had they? Maybe Amal had made a play for him, and he rejected her. Alissa grappled with the need to know and the need for self-preservation.

“You have to answer honestly.”

“I will,” Hossam promised.

“D-did you and Amal have sex at any time when she stayed at your home?”

“No.” His answer came swiftly.

She stared into his eyes to determine if there was any chance he was lying. He’d told her before that nothing happened between him and his ex.

This time, she believed him.

Alissa and Hossam entered Cyril's shop and waited while he finished ringing up a customer. After the man left, they approached.

"Did you get it open?" Alissa asked.

"I know you didn't insult me by asking that. Piece of cake." He handed her the opened phone. "I turned off the code, so you shouldn't have to worry about it locking again."

"Thanks. How much do I owe you?"

He snorted. "You know your money is no good here."

"Come on, Cyril. You're running a business."

"I can do favors for friends every now and again, especially friends who helped me," he said meaningfully. "We good."

"Thank you," she said with deep appreciation.

"Be careful."

"I will."

When they were outside again, Hossam climbed into the passenger seat of the Jeep. "What did you do for him?"

Alissa started scrolling through the phone. "Helped him get rid of a problem he was having. He complained to me that his sister's boyfriend liked knocking her around, but she insisted she didn't want Cyril to get involved. So, I ran up on the guy one night when he was leaving a party."

"You did not hurt him too much, did you?" Hossam asked with amusement.

Alissa shrugged. "Broke a couple of fingers and gave him a black eye. I thought he should know what that felt like. I warned him if he ever put his

hands on her again, I was coming back and the damage would be worse.”

Hossam chuckled. “I take it she has not had a problem since?”

“Last I heard, they broke up, and she’s dating a nice man who doesn’t get off on punching women.” Alissa dropped her gaze to the phone’s screen again.

“Do any of the numbers look familiar?” Hossam asked.

“No, but this is a Miami area code, and that one is local.” She skipped to the text messages. “These texts are from last night.”

Hossam leaned closer, and the pleasing scent of black currant assailed her nostrils.

Local number: Is it done?

Burner: Not yet. She got away.

Local number: How?

Burner: 2 of my men are dead. Going after her. Text when it’s done.

“Based on the timestamp of these texts, this communication must have taken place after I escaped through the window,” Alissa murmured.

There was another message much later.

Local number: What’s going on?

No answer. By then, she’d already killed the last two men.

“Nothing else after that text.” Alissa frowned.

“What about before?” Hossam asked.

She scrolled up, skimmed the conversations, and stopped when she encountered an exchange from a few days ago.

“The latter part of this conversation is interesting,” she said.

Unknown caller: J still looking for Cofresi ting?

Burner: Yea.

Unknown caller: He bazadee deh man. Das not real.

Burner: He believe it.

Unknown caller: LOL

Hossam frowned. “What does this mean: ‘he bazadee deh man?’” he asked, enunciating the words.

Alissa smiled at his effort. “Basically, the texter thinks the person they’re talking about is crazy.”

“Which leads us to the next questions. Who is J, and what is the Cofresi thing he is looking for?”

Alissa bit the corner of her bottom lip. “Chances are, J is Jeremiah.”

“I agree. Then what is a Cofresi? ‘It’s not real,’” Hossam said slowly. He

huffed and stared out the windshield with a frown creasing his forehead. “Call out the numbers, and I will punch them in to see what comes up.” He removed his phone from his pocket.

There were only five numbers, and Alissa called them out, one by one.

“You won’t believe this. The Miami number is registered to Harmony Haven Church in Miami.” Hossam showed her the screen.

“There are no texts between that number and this phone, only calls. Who could this guy have been talking to? What about the local number, the last one?”

Hossam checked. “Nothing. I’ll call the Harmony Church number.”

He dialed but the call went to voicemail. “Hello, this is Harmony Haven Church of Miami. Please listen carefully as our menu options have—”

He hung up. “He could have talked to anyone at that number.”

“Including Jeremiah Gracewood. He flies back and forth between here and Miami all the time,” Alissa said.

“It would still be hard to prove,” Hossam pointed out.

She pursed her lips. “You’re right. The man is as slippery as an eel and there’s no way he’s going to admit he knew about the men who attacked me. He could very well have been the person texting them last night, but you couldn’t find any information for that number?”

“No. It was probably a burner too.”

Alissa tapped the phone in her palm. They had more information, but now they also had more questions.

“Are you going to share this information with your ex?” Hossam took the phone from her and examined the screen, as if the answer to what they should do next was written on its surface.

“You don’t have to call him my ex. His name is Neville.”

“Please answer the question.”

Alissa rolled her eyes. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“He told you that Jeremiah’s yacht has been seen at Hassel Island, correct?”

“That’s what he said.”

“But you have no idea what he is doing out there?”

“Not a clue, which is frustrating. He might not be doing anything. It’s not as if he doesn’t have a right to anchor his boat there. Maybe I’m being extra suspicious because it’s Jeremiah Gracewood, but I don’t trust him. He’s up to something, but I don’t know what.”

“Why don’t we find out what he is up to?” Hossam asked.

“How?”

“We sneak onto his yacht.”

Slowly, Alissa’s lips lifted into a smile. She loved being with someone as adventurous as she was. Hossam was an assassin now, but before that, he had been a trained operative for the Direction Générale De La Sécurité Extérieure or DGSE, the French equivalent of the CIA. With his training and skills, getting on and off Jeremiah’s boat should be a simple operation.

“That’s a crazy, outrageous idea, and I know exactly how we could do it.”

Far from the St. Thomas shore, the water was pitch black at night. As Hossam and Alissa neared Paradise Key, Alissa cut the lights on the walkaround Cyril had generously loaned her.

Hossam didn't know much about boats, but apparently, this type of craft was often used for fishing. It had a small cabin and was designed for speed, should they need it.

"There." He pointed to a spot near the craggy shoreline of the cay, barely visible in the darkness beneath the stars and moonlight.

Alissa decreased their speed and steered the boat toward the area he pointed out. When they were close enough, she cut the engine completely, and he lowered the anchor.

The plan was to swim to shore and then go around to the other side of the island on foot. They stripped down to their wetsuits with knives strapped to their calves. During the day, the waters around the island were warm, but at night the temperature dropped. The thermal insulation in the suits helped them retain body heat in the cooler water.

Alissa had braided her hair into cornrows and secured the plaits at the back with a rubber band. She wore a black and dark gray wetsuit, and he wore all black. She looked damn *good*. She looked good in anything if he were being honest, with an incredible body that managed to be toned yet soft and curvy in all the right places.

She liked to run, and that had been one of the activities they bonded over when they met in Morocco. Morning runs together eventually led to them working out together, which led to them becoming involved in the middle of

a mission. Because of the potential distractions, it wasn't a smart decision, yet it had been the best bad decision he ever made.

He caught her staring at him. "Like what you see?" he asked.

Alissa gave her head a quick shake, as if she'd been in a trance and hadn't realized she'd been staring. "It's all right," she said in a teasing voice.

Hossam chuckled. "I am going to wear you down eventually, and when I do..." His voice lowered with husky promise.

She took a deep breath and averted her eyes. At least he knew she wasn't unaffected. She felt the same as he did but was fighting her emotions.

"Stay focused on the mission, sir," she said, slipping on swim shoes.

He smiled. "Always."

They lowered into the black sea and swam the short distance to shore. Once on the island, Hossam led the way through the brush. On this side of the property, there weren't many lights, so they had to use what little was available to guide them, stumbling along in the near darkness to get to the other side. Their swim shoes kept their feet protected from the rocks, gravel, and other objects that poked at their feet, and the wetsuits kept them protected from the abrasive drag of tree limbs.

According to Alissa, Jeremiah usually docked his yacht at Yacht Haven Grande, a marina located in Charlotte Amalie which accommodated vessels of its size. With a few phone calls, she learned he arrived for the governor's reception on his smaller boat, which meant Heaven Sent remained at Paradise Key.

Jeremiah had built his home on the cliff overlooking the water, and bright lights illuminated the grounds and the yacht below. Stairs built into the side of the cliff took visitors from the dock to the top where they encountered the pool and tiki hut before getting to the house.

As they neared where the yacht was docked, Hossam saw movement above. He came to a sudden stop and stretched his arm back, shoving himself and Alissa against the rock wall. A shadow swept over them from above, and he held his breath as they pressed themselves flat so they wouldn't be seen.

"That man carried an AR-15," Hossam whispered.

"The same kind of weapon they used when they broke into my house," Alissa whispered back.

His stomach burned with the thought of the surprise attack that could have ended her life. Despite knowing she was a skilled warrior, his protective instincts were strong.

“Why would a preacher need that kind of firepower? What is he protecting himself against on this island?” Hossam whispered the question.

“He’s up to no good. Now I wonder if we should have tried to get inside the house...?”

She sounded doubtful, which matched his concern. They had made the decision not to enter the mansion because they needed to do major planning to get into the well-guarded property.

“If we do not find anything on the yacht, we can decide if we want to do that next when we get back to shore.” Although they didn’t know exactly what they were looking for, he was confident he’d know what it was when they found it.

Alissa briefly nodded her agreement.

“Ready?”

She nodded again, and they crept closer. Once close enough to easily swim to the boat, they lowered into the water and dived below the surface, careful to stay out of the beam of light from above.

They swam out to the boat and around to the side facing the open sea where shadows hid their movements. Hossam led the way up the boarding ladder with quick and silent moves. He climbed over the railing and landed lightly on his feet, with Alissa close behind. They both removed their shoes so they wouldn’t squeak and hid them under netting on the deck.

They crept past a dark window, dropping below the line of sight in case someone inside might see them. Slowly, Hossam eased toward the deck, and his nose picked up a woody, tobacco scent. Carefully, he peered around the corner and saw a man with dark hair standing at the railing in a suit. He faced the house on the cliff, casually smoking a cigarette and blowing the smoke into the night.

Hossam didn’t see any other men in the vicinity.

Alissa tapped his arm, her eyes questioning. He held up one finger to indicate he saw one person. Then he signaled for her to wait.

He did a quick assessment of the man, who was about an inch taller and thicker, but Hossam had surprise on his side. With a quick sweep of the cliffside, he didn’t see any guards, but that didn’t mean someone wasn’t watching from one of the many windows overlooking the bluff.

Still, he had to take the chance or they wouldn’t be able to go inside. Staying low, he crept toward the larger man, but when he was within a few feet of him, The Suit turned, and his startled gaze met Hossam’s.

Hossam leaped into action and swept The Suit's feet from under him. He hit the deck with a grunt. As he opened his mouth to yell, Hossam fired a swift, powerful kick, and with a stifled cry, blood sputtered from between the man's lips.

He dropped to the floor and grabbed the man in a Judo neck lock. With his legs wrapped around the man's arms, crushing them against his body, he applied consistent pressure until The Suit's body went limp.

Hossam dragged his bulky frame inside the boat and whistled to alert Alissa that it was safe. She came right away and spun in a circle inside the stately lounge decked out in gold and cream.

"I don't see anything we can use to tie him up," she said.

"Then we better move fast." Hossam stuffed him in a closet and wedged a chair under the doorknob.

From an old online article, they had learned the multi-level craft contained six bedrooms, a grand salon, and a theater room with ten reclining chairs. A grand staircase in the center led to the various levels, including a top deck with a hot tub and bar. They rushed through the boat, carefully opening and closing doors that led to the various rooms.

On one side of the yacht, they heard crew members approaching, talking and laughing. Hossam pulled Alissa into a room to the left and eased the door closed. They waited in silence until the voices receded, and then they slipped out and continued checking doors until they arrived at a locked room at the end of a hallway.

"What do you think is behind here?" Alissa asked in a low voice.

"Whatever it is, Jeremiah wants it protected."

While Alissa played lookout, Hossam inserted his knife between the door and the striker plate. He wiggled until he was able to pry the latch open and push open the door.

An office. They slipped inside and shut the door.

"What we are looking for will probably be in here," Hossam said with confidence. He pulled a penlight from the pocket of his suit, and Alissa did the same.

They rummaged through files on the desk and broke into the locked desk drawers and the file cabinets, but saw nothing suspicious.

"There's nothing here. Mostly financial reports and sermons." Alissa sounded disappointed.

Disappointment crept under Hossam's skin too. "I cannot believe there is

nothing here.” His gaze swept the built-in bookcase and the rest of the furniture.

Surely this couldn’t be it. They might have to go up to the house after all.

“We haven’t been inside the master stateroom. Maybe he’s hiding something in there,” Alissa said.

“Maybe,” Hossam murmured slowly, his eyes going back to the bookcase. Two of the books didn’t quite look right. He walked over and tried to remove them from the shelf, but they wouldn’t budge. Then he pulled them down, like a lever, and the bookcase popped open.

Alissa gasped and came to stand beside him.

There were three shelves with two objects inside. Hossam lifted them both out. They were glass frames that contained very old papers, one of which was an old map.

Alissa peered at it. “That’s an antique map of the Virgin Islands when they were known as the Danish West Indies.”

“There’s a small X right there, on that part of St. Thomas,” Hossam said, directing his light to the mark.

She examined the other document. “This looks like... a letter, maybe?”

“What does it say?” Hossam asked, still studying the map. An idea was beginning to form in his mind.

“It’s in Spanish. I can’t read it—” She gasped and pointed at the end of the letter. “Look at the name. Roberto Cofresi.”

“Cofresi was the name mentioned in the texts,” Hossam said, immediately catching on. “Who is—”

Someone shoved the door open from the outside.

Four men burst into the office, guns drawn. Alyssa took a step back, and she and Hossam threw their hands in the air. The men wore suits and carried weapons—two held AR-15s and two held pistols.

“Take it easy,” Hossam said.

“Who are you, and what are you doing in here?” The Suit, whom Hossam had shoved in the closet, barked the question.

A dark-haired man snorted and answered for them. “Sneaking around the boat and breaking into Pastor Gracewood’s office, Ridge. They’re obviously thieves.” He looked pointedly at the framed papers and penlights in their hands.

“On your knees!” Ridge commanded.

Alissa and Hossam glanced at each other.

Ridge released the safety on his weapon and pointed it at Alissa’s head. Definitely a bad sign.

“Don’t get any ideas. On your knees.” He repeated the command in a terse voice.

Hossam and Alissa reluctantly lowered to the floor. While three of the men kept their weapons trained on them, a third man stepped behind them and took everything from their hands and the knives from their calf holsters.

“This is nice,” he said, examining Alissa’s blade.

“What are you going to do with us?” she asked.

“We’ll let the big man decide. Me, personally, I’d love to put a bullet in *your* head.” Ridge eyed Hossam. “But I’ll wait for instructions from the man in charge.”

Ridge dialed a number and put the call on speaker. The phone on the other end rang several times before going to voicemail. Jeremiah Gracewood's voice asked the caller to leave a message so he could get back to them.

Alissa breathed a silent sigh of relief. That gave her and Hossam time to figure out how to get out of this mess.

"Shit." Ridge hung up.

"Whah we gun do now?" a Black guy asked. By his accent, he was a Virgin Islander.

"Tie them up, then take them below," Ridge answered.

"Or you could let us go," Alissa suggested.

"Sure. We'll do that," the one by the door said, his voice filled with sarcasm.

They all chuckled.

Alissa glanced at Hossam again to see if he wanted to make a move, but with a barely noticeable shake of his head, he indicated now was not the time.

The men secured their hands behind their backs. Alissa had hoped for duct tape or zip ties, the most popular ways to restrain prisoners—both of which were easy enough to get out of. Unfortunately, these guys chose rope, which they tied in tight knots that squeezed her wrists. The restraints would definitely leave a mark when they came off.

They shoved her and Hossam ahead of them out the door, and they walked side by side through the boat. Alissa scoured the interior for an escape option but at the moment couldn't find one. Not with guns pointed at their backs. For now, it was better to see how long they could stay alive.

A male member of the crew came toward them, but he turned his eyes away when the group approached, as if he didn't see two restrained people being led by his boss's security with guns at their backs.

Ridge directed them to take the winding staircase to the lower level. Once downstairs, they walked for a bit and then one of the men stepped in front of Alissa to open a door that led into a mostly empty small room. A curtain covered the porthole, and the only furniture was a small, one-drawer table right below it.

The man stepped aside so Alissa could precede him and then shoved her hard from behind. She stumbled forward. With her hands tied behind her back, her balance was off and she toppled to the floor. She hit her knees going down but twisted onto her right shoulder to avoid smashing her face.

She winced when she hit the hardwood.

Hossam swung to face him. “Hey!” he growled, teeth bared. He charged the man and headbutted him. The security member cried out and clutched his face as blood gushed from his nose.

Ridge swung a fist at Hossam, but he dodged the blow. Behind him, the Black guy slammed the butt of his weapon into the middle of his back. Hossam’s face contorted into a mask of pain, and he crumbled to his knees.

“That’s what you get, you muddah skunt,” the guy seethed.

Ridge followed up with a fist to Hossam’s midsection. Hossam grunted as air expelled from his lungs, and he doubled over in pain.

Leave him alone! Alissa screamed inside her head as she lay on her side. She bit down on the inside of her bottom lip, forcing her face into a neutral expression so they wouldn’t see how much their abuse affected her.

“We’re going to leave you two in here until we find out exactly what to do with you. My hope is, we get to throw you overboard—after we put bullets in your skull.” Ridge chuckled and led the way out of the room.

As soon as Alissa heard the lock turn, she rolled into a sitting position. “Are you okay?” she asked Hossam.

He straightened and grimaced. “I’m fine.” He released a breath.

Alissa pushed onto her knees and then scooted over to Hossam. “What were you thinking?” she hissed, glaring at him.

“He pushed you.”

“I’m fine, in case you didn’t notice,” she snapped.

“I got in a good blow though, did I not?”

She let out a laugh of disbelief. “You’re nuts, you know that? How are your ribs and back?”

He rotated his shoulders. “I’m hurt, but I don’t think anything is broken. They are not as strong as they look.”

On impulse, Alissa kissed his mouth. She’d simply meant for the contact to be a sign of affection and a means of reassurance that he was okay. Yet the minute their lips touched, an explosion of sensation burst through her system. Beneath the compression material of her suit, her nipples hardened, and a quiver of excitement shimmied through her body.

She jerked back, shocked at the visceral reaction to touching him. She immediately wanted more. She’d missed being affectionate with someone—being affectionate with *him*.

Hossam’s hooded eyes settled on her. “I should get hurt more often,” he

whispered.

Alissa cleared her throat. “Don’t you dare.”

“Why did you kiss me? This is not a good time for me to have a hard-on.”

“You’re right, my timing is off, but I couldn’t resist,” Alissa said softly.

“We should try that again when we get out of here.”

“Emphasis on getting out of here.”

She examined the room, and Hossam did the same.

“Maybe there is something in that table we can use to cut the ropes,” Hossam suggested.

Alissa pushed onto her feet and walked to the table. Dropping to her haunches with her back in front of it, she pulled open the drawer. “Empty,” she informed Hossam.

He walked around inside the room. “They put us in the perfect location. There is nothing in here. Turn around, let me take a look at the knots.”

She twisted around.

“I should be able to free you. Give me a minute.”

He turned his back to her and started working on the rope, but after only seconds they heard voices outside.

“They’re back.” Hossam swore under his breath.

The lock jiggled and two of the men—the brunette and the Virgin Islander—returned. The man from the VI carried an AR-15 while the other held a pistol.

“Well, hello. Good to see you two on your feet. Guess what? We now know what to do.” The brunette looked mighty pleased with himself. His clownish expression of joy would be comical if the situation were not so dire.

“What are you going to do with us?” Hossam asked.

“The man in charge doesn’t want blood on his yacht, and I can’t blame him. We’re going to do our version of walking the plank—with a bullet in your backs for good measure. Please, after you. Ladies first.”

With a wide sweep of his hand, the brunette indicated they should exit ahead of him. Beside him, the smirking Black guy infuriated Alissa. She would have loved to smack that look off his face.

She walked out the door and Hossam fell into step beside her. Her mind raced as she wondered what they could do. Climbing the stairs to the upper level triggered a memory.

“Remember Morocco?” She spoke out the side of his mouth.

Hossam frowned in confusion.

“The hotel rooftop.”

His eyes brightened as the incident came back to him and he understood her idea. “I do,” he said under his breath.

They had jumped from the rooftop of a hotel into the pool below—a daring escape that could have ended in disaster if they’d missed the target even by inches. But at that time, their hands hadn’t been tied behind their backs.

“What are you two mumbling about?” the brunette asked.

“I’m... I’m scared. I don’t want to die.” Alissa inserted a healthy dose of fear into her voice and made it tremble. She stopped just inside the entrance to the lounge and turned to face them. “Please. I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” The Virgin Islander asked with a smirk, eyeing her up and down.

It was almost too easy.

“Anything,” Alissa confirmed. “What’s your name?”

He stepped closer with a sly grin. “Frederick. And yours?”

“Althea,” Alissa lied. “You can do whatever you want with him. I don’t care.”

“Althea!” Hossam said in an admonishing voice.

“You heard the lady. Keep going. Time to swim with the fishes.” The brunette looked at Frederick. “You lucky bastard.”

He poked his weapon into Hossam’s back and forced him forward, which was exactly what they’d hoped would happen. The point was to get the men separated.

“*Maintenant!*” Hossam yelled, which meant “now” in French.

As soon as she heard Hossam’s command, Alissa kicked Frederick in the nuts, and when he doubled over, she swung her knee up to his chin and knocked him backward onto the floor. After another swift blow to his head, she kicked away the weapon.

She swung around and saw the brunette on the ground too, groaning. Simply by looking at each other, she and Hossam telepathed that it was time to get the hell out of there.

With Hossam leading the way, they sped through the spacious lounge and in between the luxurious furniture. Two shots cracked in the night. One of the bullets came dangerously close to Alissa’s head and almost hit Hossam.

She used to run track in high school, so Alissa was fast. She caught up to Hossam, and they both raced onto the deck.

“Stop!” the brunette yelled.

They ran straight for the front of the yacht.

Moving in sync, they simultaneously leaped onto the metal railing with one foot and pushed off as multiple rounds blitzed from the barrel of the semi-automatic rifle.

Alissa took a deep breath right before she dropped feet first into the black sea.

On the dark side of the yacht, Alissa rotated onto her back and pulled air into her lungs.

She and Hossam hadn't had time to discuss where to meet once they jumped, but he should be of the same mind and know to meet on this side where the men on the boat would have a hard time seeing them.

Above her, the security guards yelled and cursed at each other, the sound of their footfalls racing across the boat floor.

"You idiots! How did you let them get away?" Ridge bellowed. Then the voices receded.

Alissa stuck close to the curved hull of the boat to avoid being seen, but there was a good chance the men would get in a dinghy and start searching the waters for them.

Where the heck was Hossam? Had he been shot?

Fear gripped her heart as she treaded water, frantically searching the darkness around her for a sign of him. The seconds dragged by, slower than molasses going uphill. He had to have made it. She would never forgive herself if something happened to him because he'd been determined to help her.

Where is he?

As if in answer to her silent question, his dark head broke the surface beside her, and she let out a sigh of immense relief.

"Hossam," she said in a relieved whisper.

He hauled air into his lungs. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine. You?"

“Fine.”

She was relieved and ecstatic that he was alive and well and right beside her, but they were still in danger. “I heard Ridge up top, and he sounds furious. He might—”

The sentence broke off when someone on board the yacht sprayed the water with bullets from an AR-15.

Alissa and Hossam huddled closer to the boat, and she closed her eyes as water sprayed around them from bullets plunging into its dark depths at a high velocity.

The person above was randomly shooting into the water in the hope of catching her and Hossam. Someone on the opposite side was doing the same thing, and the explosive sound filled the night until the clips emptied.

“We should get out of here. *Now*,” Hossam said softly.

They rotated onto their backs and kicked their feet to propel them across the waves, staying in the darkness to avoid the line of light from the house atop the cliff. Though they couldn’t use a typical backstroke because their hands were tied, they made good time swimming on their backs by simply kicking. They headed toward the shore, and once they reached shallow water, they sloshed through on their feet toward the rocky surface of the island.

Both of them dropped to their butts, chests heaving as they caught their breaths after such an arduous exercise.

“We need something to cut these ropes,” Alissa said.

Hossam nodded. They hopped to their feet and searched the area, and he was the first to find a sharp-edged rock that could work.

“Turn around,” he said.

With their backs facing each other, he grated the edge of the rock against the wet binding, back and forth until the rope frayed and Alissa was able to tug it off her hands. She quickly did the same for him.

They both stretched their arms and shoulders to work out the kinks from having their hands tied tightly behind their backs. Then they took off through the brush. If Ridge and the others came looking for them, they might very well find Cyril’s boat on the other side of the island, so they needed to move fast.

They found the boat and swam out to it. Alissa started the engine and kept it at a low speed as they headed back to St. Thomas. After a few minutes, Hossam came to stand beside her in the cabin.

“I think we’re safe. No one is behind us,” he said.

Nonetheless, for the next ten minutes he continued to check over his shoulder to make sure.



HOSSAM EXITED THE BATHROOM, roughly rubbing a towel over his curly hair. “I feel a thousand percent better. Like a new man.”

Alissa had taken a shower before him, changed into cargo shorts and a T-shirt, and blow-dried her hair straight. She watched him from the bed where she sat cross-legged with a laptop on her thighs. He was back to normal, but she couldn’t forget the grip of fear when she thought he had been shot.

“I’ve done a little digging and pulled up information on the man who wrote the letter we found in Gracewood’s office—Roberto Cofresi.”

“What did you find?”

Hossam sat beside her in a pair of linen slacks and a sleeveless shirt that exposed his cut arms. The clean fresh scent of his skin filled her nostrils and temporarily distracted her. Several seconds passed before she could answer the question.

“Back when the Virgin Islands were the Danish West Indies, it was a haven for pirates. The Danish governors took bribes from the pirates to allow them to hide in the islands. Which brings me to Roberto Cofresi. I’m searching through the local library’s archives, and he was a pirate born in Puerto Rico into a noble family. Because of the economy at the time, they didn’t have much money, so he turned to piracy to support his family and avoid being poor. He recruited locally and paid his crews well, and at one time he’s said to have had as many as twenty ships in his fleet. The people of Puerto Rico loved him because when he pilfered and plundered, he shared some of the loot with poor people on the island. He developed a sort of Robin Hood reputation.

“He spent a lot of time between Puerto Rico and St. Thomas. Rumor has it he would have drinks in the Danish bars with the merchants and listen to them brag about their wealth. Then he’d send his men to rob them while they were still in the bars. Here’s where it gets interesting. He was captured in 1825, and he offered to tell the court where he hid his treasure, which included 4000 gold coins, in exchange for his freedom.”

Hossam whistled.

Alissa continued skimming the text on the screen. “The treasure was never found, and according to local legend, it could be hidden in the Virgin Islands.” She looked at Hossam, excitement filling her voice as she continued to talk. “People have searched for Cofresi’s treasure for years, like they have Blackbeard’s and other pirates who frequented the islands. Which leads us to the map and the X we saw on St. Thomas. Here’s the thing—that strip of land is now Hassel Island. Hassel Island was separated from St. Thomas in 1860 by the Danish to increase circulation in the harbor. The island also used to house a leprosarium, though Cofresi died before that happened. Another thing, in the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. government used to test chemical agents on Hassel Island. The combination of forming Hassel Island, the fact that it was a leper colony, and the chemical agent testing, might explain why for a long time no one looked there for his treasure.”

“That could explain why no one looked there before. But now we know there is a good chance that is where the treasure was buried, how did the pastor get his hands on the map and the letter, which probably explained what the map was about?”

Alissa rubbed her temple. “He’s donated a lot of money to the St. Thomas Historical Trust. What if... what if he found out about the treasure through the trust? The historical trust preserves our history and that map could have been found in the archives or donated to the museum. Then it was shared with Gracewood, who took it upon himself to search for the treasure.”

“I think you’re going to find this interesting.” Hossam turned his phone screen to her. “Senator Lyburd was a board member of the trust—specifically, he served as education co-chair and as a past president.”

“That’s it! *That’s* how Gracewood got a copy of the map and the letter. That information could have been handed over to Lyburd, and he handed it over to Gracewood.”

“Because he has the financial means to do the digging.”

“Exactly.”

“But if he finds the treasure, he cannot keep it,” Hossam pointed out.

“He *shouldn’t*. It would be the property of the Virgin Islands, but that man has stolen antiquities from the Middle East. He doesn’t care about right and wrong. When he finds the treasure, he won’t tell anyone, and he’ll keep it for himself.” She shut the laptop. “We’ve got to stop him.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but Neville said his yacht has been moored at Hassel

Island several times in the past week. He's looking for the treasure *now*. I'm sure of it. We have to tell Neville what's going on so he can keep an eye on him or stop him."

Hossam became oddly silent.

"Is something wrong?" Alissa asked.

"I don't think you should tell him." He rose from the bed.

"Why not?"

"You cannot trust him, Alissa. You are letting your past relationship cloud your judgment."

She bristled. "I know him better than you do, and I'm not letting anything cloud my judgment, thank you very much. You're saying that because—" She stopped and got off the bed with the laptop.

"Because what?" Hossam asked sharply.

"I'm not going to argue with you. We agreed we would not go down this road again. The truce is in place."

She placed the computer on the desk, but the tension in the room made the air uncomfortably heavy and thick with unspoken words, regret, and stifled emotions.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked softly, staring down at the desk.

"Excuse me?"

She looked at him. "Why didn't you tell me Amal was staying with you?"

"Because I knew you would act like this."

"That is *not* an answer."

"I do not know any more ways to say I am sorry. If you cannot forgive me..." Hossam shook his head and ran his fingers through his damp hair.

"Maybe you didn't tell me because you intended to sleep with her, but for some reason, you didn't."

"Well, at least you believed me when I said I didn't."

He sounded aggravated, which made her angry. He had no right to be angry. *She* was the one who'd been in the dark and humiliated when that woman opened the door and flaunted her presence in his home.

"You have some damn nerve acting like I'm annoying you because I can't accept you had an ex-lover staying in your apartment. I don't know what you were feeling, Hossam. Maybe you regretted telling me you loved me. Maybe you wanted to hook up with your ex-flame one last time before committing to one woman, and I fucked everything up when I popped in to surprise you." Her voice shook with emotion. "The real issue is, why do you

think it was no big deal? You lied by omission. I know our professions require us to lie and deceive, but we shouldn't lie *to each other*. I've had so many disappointments in my life, I couldn't believe you had disappointed me too. How could you do that? You don't tell someone that you love them and then lay up with your ex!" Tears blurred her eyes.

"*Merde*, Alissa, what do you want me to do? What do you want me to say? How can I fix this? I did nothing wrong. *She lied to you.*"

Emotion crackled in the room.

She rubbed the tears from her eyes. "When I saw her, I was so... scared."

"Scared?"

Alissa hated being vulnerable, but all of a sudden, she needed to tell him what was in her heart. "That I was going to lose you too," she whispered, with trembling lips.

"Lose me... *too*?" Hossam stared at her. "You were not only upset about Amal, were you? You were triggered by previous loss."

Alissa clenched her fingers. "I never want to feel like that again. I couldn't think. It was a nightmare."

"Like when you lost your parents," Hossam said quietly. He whispered something in Arabic and then walked over to her. He took her wrists and pressed his lips to her clenched fists.

"I will not abandon you. I will not leave you alone. Is that not obvious? I came all the way here, without invitation, to convince you to take me back. The reason I stayed away for so long was because I needed to make arrangements to leave France. I spoke to Cruz, and he has agreed to hire me. I will work for The Cordoba Agency, and I did that because I want to be with you. I have done all this for you, Alissa. Because I love you and want to be with you. Forever."

Alissa gazed into his eyes. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you will keep an open mind about us."

She took a tremulous breath. "I'll keep an open mind," she promised in a soft voice.

He moved closer and clasped the back of her neck beneath her hair.

Her pulse went crazy, her belly tightening with sexual need. She had done well over the past year and tried to move on. Then he showed up with his handsome face and sexy smile. Her defenses were in shambles, and now she was questioning why she ever doubted him in the first place.

He knew her better than anyone—knew her secrets and now her greatest

fear. What was the point of fighting against what they both wanted?

“Hossam?”

“Yes.” His gaze flicked to her lips, and they automatically tingled.

“I’m ready. I want to make love—”

She never finished the sentence, because Hossam gathered her into his arms and planted a crushing kiss on her lips.

Hossam's hand closed around her throat, and he pushed her against the wall, their mouths seared together in a demanding kiss. After so long, Alissa almost didn't believe this was happening and wanted to give him as much as he wanted for as long as he demanded.

The kiss was wild. It was passionate. It made her head spin.

She opened her mouth and allowed his tongue inside. The intoxicating taste of him filled her as she stroked her fingers over his hard jaw, and she trembled with desire, diving into his rough kisses—happily succumbing to the way he took control of their lovemaking.

Her fingers tangled into the curls at his nape, and she whimpered in the back of her throat, never wanting him to release her mouth. Hossam made his own sounds—deep and guttural that conveyed his enjoyment—while his other hand roamed freely over her breasts, tweaking and tugging, aggressively massaging. Her nipples swelled and ached, desire licking at her nerve endings and making every part of her hypersensitive.

The hand at her throat didn't move, but Hossam dragged his mouth down the side of her neck and sucked the out-of-control pulse at the base. He scraped his teeth across her sensitive skin until she shivered and sighed with desperate need.

Then his hands were everywhere. Her eyes closed in delight as he removed her shirt and tossed it aside. Her pants and underwear followed right behind, and he then stepped back for a moment to drink in the sight of her naked body. With a crooked smile, he murmured a mixture of French and Arabic and shook his head in disbelief.

Warmed by his obvious admiration, Alissa removed his clothes next. She yanked his shirt over his head and tugged his pants and underwear to his feet until he stood in naked glory before her. His body was beautifully athletic, a machine made of skin and muscle, deep and textured contours and planes. She greedily licked his hair-roughened chest and nipples and dragged her fingers along his tight abs.

They moved to the bed where they tumbled onto the sheets, arms and legs twisting around each other as they each fought to touch and grasp and fondle. Hossam ran a finger down the middle of her chest before he stopped and cupped her breasts. He toyed with them, kneading the nipples and stroking her soft flesh while his teeth nipped at her earlobe.

Alissa reached her hand lower and massaged his hard dick. Stroking him from base to tip, she smiled when he shuddered and hissed. Hooking an arm around his neck, she lifted her lips to lick his salty skin and at the same time ground her pelvis against his hard shaft.

“Alissa,” he breathed, and her core clenched. The way he said her name was a prayer and a groan all wrapped up in one.

Peppering her breasts with kisses, Hossam then seized a nipple into his warm mouth. The flesh puckered against the drag of his tongue and turned into a hard point. He continued to suck with relentless drive until she squirmed and whispered his name in a soft plea.

“Hossam, Hossam,” she moaned, loving the feel of him between her thighs and the way his wicked mouth made her lose her mind.

Strong hands dragged her to him and fit her thighs around his hips. Her breath caught, and her stomach trembled with anticipation. In the dim light of the room, their eyes met. The ache of hunger spread from her pelvis and spring boarded throughout her entire body. Her breathing became shallow, as she watched him take his big dick in hand, intention evident in his dark eyes.

When he entered her, they both shuddered violently, and Alissa released a low mewl of satisfaction. What a fool she had been to fight her attraction to him. Her body needed him on a basic level and was finally getting the fullness it craved. They kissed briefly again, wild and hungry as their joined bodies moved in the sexy dance.

Hossam pumped into her, rough and steady, alternating between long and short strokes. She couldn't speak. All she could manage to do was moan and rotate her hips in time to his thrusts.

As desire unfurled in her belly, he thrust harder and deeper and made her

breasts jiggle. Arching her back, she tilted her hips in an urge to take more. That position was unbearably good and forced her cries of pleasure to grow louder, and her hips moved faster to keep time with him.

“You are so beautiful, *habibti*.”

Hossam muttered more words that were unintelligible but sounded like a mixture of French and Arabic.

“I need you, I need you. Please don’t stop,” Alissa begged.

She didn’t think it was possible, but his stroke accelerated, his hard dick driving into her. She closed her eyes and clung to him with her arms wrapped tight around his strong neck.

“*Hossam*.” She felt him everywhere. In her body, in her heart.

“Take your pleasure,” he growled in her ear. “Take all of it. I want to drown in your cum.”

He transferred a hand to her buttocks and squeezed. Then she fell apart, screaming as wave after wave of ecstasy washed over her. Her arms tightened even more and crushed him to her as the world spun out of control around them.

He continued to pump, and then he too, found release. With a hoarse cry, he pounded her into the mattress as a powerful climax took control of his body. Then, with one final shudder he released a deep breath and relaxed his weight on top of her.

Utterly and completely depleted.



ALISSA AND HOSSAM took a shower together. They soaped each other’s skin, and he stopped every now and again to plant kisses of affection on her bare shoulder or the side of her neck. Alissa also took advantage of their time in the stall. She nibbled his earlobe, and with a naughty smile dropped to her haunches and kissed the tip of his penis.

By the time they stepped out of the shower, they were aroused again, and Hossam wasted no time dropping his towel to the tile. His erection strained against her abdomen as his head dipped to her throat in the next passionate seduction about to commence.

Alissa tossed back her head and gave herself over to the power of his touch. Their lovemaking had been quick and fast the first time because they’d

spent a year apart, but this time their caresses were unhurried.

With his hands gripping the back of her thighs, Hossam lifted her from the floor and walked back to the bed. There, he rolled on top of her, and she accepted his weight, arching her body into his kisses, moaning as he sucked and licked her breasts with gentle passion until she became wet for him again.

He kissed his way down her belly, dropping pockets of heat on her skin wherever his lips touched. When he arrived at her bandaged foot, a growl of anger hummed in his chest.

“I’m fine,” Alissa reassured him, though she appreciated his concern.

Despite knowing she could take care of herself, he had an archaic reaction to her being in danger. She adored the way he wanted to protect her and would enter first into unsafe situations so he could bear the brunt of the danger before she was exposed.

Alissa closed her eyes as he tenderly kissed her soles, her toes, and the sensitive spot behind her knees. Then he pulled her knees apart and smoothed a hand over the wet, quivering flesh between her thighs.

“You have deprived me for a whole year. I must get my fill,” Hossam said in a deeply raspy voice.

She splayed her legs as he lifted her hips toward his mouth. He growled in appreciation and kissed her most intimate flesh, taking his fill with long, sweeping strokes of his tongue. Over and over he brought her to the edge, only to withdraw before that one final push that would plunge her into ecstasy.

Her breathing fractured, her pleas becoming more frequent as she gripped his curls and sank her fingers into his scalp and shoulders, all the while begging for relief. But Hossam was merciless and took his time, forcing her to submit on his terms—as if he punished her for keeping him away for so long.

At last, with one dedicated suck of her clit, her body arched at an acute angle and her legs began to shake as an earth-shattering orgasm took hold of her body. It was so explosive, she writhed under the force of it. Her fingers ran amok, sinking to his scalp and shoulders while her toes curled into the bedsheets.

Hossam entered her again with a possessive thrust and undulated his hips between her spread thighs. His hands moved in a loving caress over her body, his mouth almost affixed to her ear as he whispered words of adoration and

love in a sexy mixture of French and Arabic.

The climax rolled through her hips at a slower pace but was no less intense. She shattered yet again, convulsions making her lock her thighs around him as she rode out the storm. With a soft sob, she buried her face in his neck, clinging to his shoulders as time and time again orgasmic waves flooded her system.

She felt the moment he released and heard the deep-chested groan that indicated he was also fighting through an orgasm. They rode the waves together, bucking hard—pelvis to pelvis, chest to chest.

Finally, they lay beside each other, face to face. Hossam smoothed a hand down her back, his palm soothing as they coasted all the way to her buttocks. His gentle touch was the last thing Alissa felt before she drifted to sleep.

They both slept, but the nap didn't last long. Lying back against the headboard, Hossam cradled Alissa in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder and had an arm thrown across his chest.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so... content. She enjoyed being held by him so much and didn't want to move.

"I was just thinking how you haven't had a chance to enjoy the island this time," she remarked.

"I will, after we take care of Gracewood."

They both fell quiet again, and the tips of his fingers gently stroked up and down her arm.

"Why did you take so long to come to me? I could have moved on and been seriously involved with someone else." Alissa's thumbnail played with a curly hair on his chest.

"That was never a concern."

She lifted her head so she could see his face. "You were so sure of me?"

He shrugged. "There is only one Hossam," he said with an air of arrogance.

Alissa shook her head.

"Am I wrong?" he asked.

"No, you're not," she admitted reluctantly.

"*Et voilà.*" He spread his arms wide.

She returned her head to his shoulder and quietly laughed.

"Also, Hunter kept me updated on your relationships. I knew none of them were serious."

“He doesn’t know everything about me. He didn’t know about you at first.”

“He had his suspicions, but we kept our relationship private, and he chose not to pry. He knew about your dates because you complained about them to him and Raheem. He did not share details, but he let me know when a relationship was not working out.”

“He’s such a traitor,” she grumbled.

His chest shook as he laughed. “He is a good friend.”

Alissa grunted her disagreement.

“If I thought for one minute you were taking another man seriously, I would have abandoned my plans and come right away. I could not risk losing you.”

“You say all the right things,” Alissa whispered.

“Not always. I cannot remember if you or I suggested we have an open relationship, but after some time I regretted that arrangement.”

“Is that why you told me you loved me?”

“I told you that because it was time to let you know, and I could no longer stand the idea of you with other men. Our arrangement had become harder to accept, and I wanted you for myself.”

“I was so jealous of Amal,” Alissa admitted quietly.

“Why?” Hossam sounded shocked.

“Because... because she also lived in Paris, and you were engaged to her once.”

“A long time ago, and I told you that our families made those arrangements for us.”

“But for a while you were going to go through with it. You thought she’d make a good wife.”

“She will, one day, for the right man. Eventually, I realized she was not right for me.”

“Yet you continued to see her.”

“Because she allowed it. I stopped after a while because it was not fair to her. She was not able to move on, the way I did. Then I met you, the right woman, but you lived on a different continent.”

“When I arrived at the apartment and she was there, I was devastated,” Alissa said in a low voice, recalling Amal’s taunting. “I thought you no longer wanted to be with me.”

“Only a madman would let you go.” He gave her a quick squeeze and

kissed her forehead.

She smiled happily.

“Do you remember the time we met in Italy? You called and said you were coming to Europe,” Hossam said.

“Of course I remember.” Alissa sighed. “Three glorious days of doing nothing but sightseeing and eating delicious food. I’m sure I gained ten pounds from all the pasta and gelato, but I didn’t care. I’d been to Rome before, but that was the first time I visited as a tourist and got the chance to really see it.”

She smiled at the memory of them holding hands and behaving like new lovers when in fact they’d known each other a couple of years by then.

“What an amazing structure the Coliseum is,” Hossam said, continuing to let his fingers trail lazily up and down her arm.

“True. Imagine fighting to the death while a crowd of onlookers cheered. I couldn’t handle the stress. Can I tell you something?” Alissa asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“I like experiencing new places and activities with you. Sometimes I purposely held off on visiting a city or trying something new because I’d rather do it with you.”

His hand stilled. “I feel the same way. Everything is better when you are there. Like when we did glass blowing in Stone Mountain, in Georgia.”

She laughed. “Oh, I loved that. It was so much fun.”

“Very different and enjoyable,” he agreed. “But do you know what specific event I remember from our trip to Italy?”

“Do not go there,” Alissa warned.

“When we stumbled upon the karaoke bar and *someone* decided it would be a good idea to get on stage and sing.”

She groaned as she relived the embarrassing night in her head.

“That is when I learned the horrible truth, that the woman I believed to be the most perfect creature Allah has ever created, was not so perfect after all. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that she—*you*—cannot sing.”

“I hate you.”

“Ay, *Dios mío!*” Hossam exclaimed.

Alissa snorted her amusement. “You speak Spanish now?”

“I know many more words, but it is true Spanish is not my strength. If only you had realized singing was not your strength.”

“I really, really hate you.”

“*Ay caramba!*” He slapped his forehead.

She burst out laughing. “*Stop*. That’s enough. Please tell me you deleted that video.”

“It is in a safe place.”

Her eyes widened, and she rose up on one elbow to stare down into his amused face. “You said you were going to delete it.”

“I lied.”

“Hossam! You have to get rid of it.”

While she experienced mild panic, he remained cool, calm, and unperturbed.

“I am afraid I cannot do that. That video is the perfect instrument for blackmail.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever killed anyone for recording me while singing, but I guess there’s always a first time for everything.”

He chuckled and pulled her tighter to his hard body. Even when he was being evil, there was no better place in the world than in his arms.

“The best part is, you have no idea where the video is. It could be in any country in the world, locked in a vault or secure in an underground bunker.”

She didn’t believe for one minute he’d gone to such elaborate lengths to hide the embarrassing video. “It’s probably on your phone.”

“Not the one I have with me on this trip.”

“Then it’s at your apartment.”

“That means you must go to get it.”

“I will, and I’ll sneak in one day when you’re out of the country.”

“Breaking and entering is against the law,” he pointed out in a stern voice.

“So is murder, but that’s never stopped you, has it? I want the video.”

“Maybe I will give it to you, but you have to earn its release.”

“How?” Her skin already grew warm because she knew he would say something sexually out of pocket.

“On your back,” he whispered with a wolfish grin.

Alissa rolled on top of him and straddled his hips. “That is the worst kind of blackmail, Mr. Jalal.”

“I am ashamed of myself, and yet...”

He ran a finger down the middle of her chest, between her heavy breasts. The gentle grazing of his hand made her nipples hard.

“I have not changed my mind. You can start earning points tonight, if you

like.”

“You’re so kind and generous.”

“We Arabs are known for our generosity.”

She leaned close to him. “I was being sarcastic,” she said, though he clearly knew.

She caressed his chest. “You said I could start earning points toward getting the video deleted.”

“Yes,” he answered in a husky voice.

“I think it’s best for me to start right away, don’t you?”

His breath caught, and his eyes darkened. “Absolutely.”

She scooted down and took his hardening penis into her hand. He wasn’t fully erect yet, but her mouth would take care of that shortly.

She fit her lips over the tip and sucked him deeper. He squirmed and tried not to make a sound, but then a harsh moan erupted from him, as if it had been literally torn from his chest.

One hand tangled in her messy hair as she bobbed her head up and down, using powerful sucks and a deep throat technique to drive him wild.

She knew him well and recognized when he was about to come. But instead of giving in to the pleasure, he dragged her up onto his chest and slanted his mouth over hers. Cradling her head in his hands, he kissed her with the deep, devouring movements of a man out of control.

The next moment, he was on top and her face in the pillow. She gasped when he entered her, sliding into her slick channel with ease. His teeth grazed the side of her neck, and pleasure shot straight to her core.

Curling her spine, she threw her ass back and rotated her pelvis to maximize the pleasure for them both. His hands gripped her hips, keeping a steady rhythm until they both climaxed.

Hossam collapsed on top of her and then rolled onto his back and smiled at her. “With a performance like that, I will have to delete that video very soon.”

W *hat a mess. What a fucking mess!*

Jeremiah Gracewood sat in the shade on the lower deck of his yacht, sipping a hibiscus mimosa prepared to his specifications by his staff mixologist. Today he wore a short-sleeved shirt and lightweight slacks to beat the heat.

He had barely slept a wink last night. The men he employed bungled getting rid of the problem couple who had snuck aboard *Heaven Sent*. Contrary to what Frederick said, the woman was not named Althea. By the description the men gave, she was probably the same woman he sent the kill squad after two nights ago.

Alissa Francis. A humongous thorn in his side.

She and her cohort broke into his office and found the hidden compartment behind the bookcase. They had probably already figured out his secret and would become a much bigger problem.

As the afternoon sun dipped low on the horizon, he watched three men digging up the soil on the back side of Hassel Island where they couldn't be seen from St. Thomas, in search of Roberto Cofresi's hidden treasure. This time of day was perfect. The walking tours were over, and they could dig in peace without anyone questioning their activity.

A slow smile crept across his face as he considered the potential windfall coming his way. Gold, jewels, and silver, according to the letter Cofresi wrote to his brother, Ignacio. Much more than the 4000 pieces of gold mentioned in the history books—potentially hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of treasure from one of the most successful pirates this region had ever

seen.

Ignacio had never searched for the treasure because he never received the letter. It was found among the belongings of a local who had bought the contents of a storage unit at auction. He turned the contents over to the historical trust, thinking he was doing the right thing. Imagine being in possession of such history and potential wealth and not having a clue!

Jeremiah chuckled to himself. Thank goodness Ian recognized what he had in his possession and kept the information from the rest of the board members. Too bad he planned to extort a bigger cut of the proceeds through blackmail.

Jeremiah had been furious when he found out, but Ian was no longer a concern, and he would simply take his share.

A female crew member wearing the yacht's uniform of a white shirt and black slacks hustled over with an excited expression on her face. "Sir, Don is back, and it looks like he found something!"

Jeremiah set down his glass and hopped up from the chair. He followed her to the yacht's ladder and peered over the side. Don Kenoa, a Hawaiian adventurer and treasure hunter, climbed aboard in swim trunks and a T-shirt with cut-off sleeves.

"Let me see," Jeremiah said, excited and impatient.

Don landed on the deck and handed over an object. It was heavy, gray, and shaped like a brick. Not at all what he was expecting.

"This is it?" Jeremiah's lip curled upward.

"Yes, but let me show you something. I'll be right back." Don disappeared into the lounge while Jeremiah waited impatiently for him to return.

The treasure hunter came back with a tray of items. He took the brick from Jeremiah and poured a solution from a glass bottle on top of it. Then he used a microfiber cloth to buff the object dry. The tarnished exterior disappeared and revealed the lustrous glow of the metal underneath.

The female crew member gasped. "Wow," she murmured, eyes wide.

Jeremiah shot her a look, making it clear that she had no business standing there. She understood the silent message and scurried away.

Jeremiah held up the silver brick. "Incredible. This isn't the only one, is it? Are there others?"

He certainly hoped so. The past week, they'd encountered several false flags. They found pots and corroded metal utensils, all useless materials.

“We expect to. This is the only one we’ve found so far, but it means we’re finally in the right spot. The treasure won’t be neatly found in a chest like you see on television. Chances are, whatever Cofresi hid the treasure in, it’s badly corroded or destroyed, and then the shifting landscape would cause —”

“Save your explanations. I don’t care about any of that. Continue the search. I’ll get more men out here if I have to, and you’ll have more tools. Whatever you need, I can provide, so we get every single piece of gold and silver buried on this island. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

Unfortunately, there was no *finders keepers* when it came to buried treasure on public land. Most of the island was owned by the Virgin Islands National Park, which in conjunction with the St. Thomas Historical Trust worked to restore the island’s historical sites. The right thing to do would be to notify the authorities about what they’d found. *He* would not be doing that. Not with untold wealth within reach. He had a much better use for the treasure.

“Keep working. I want *everything*,” he stressed.

“Yes, sir.” Don dived over the side of the boat and swam toward the shore to rejoin the other men.

Jeremiah reclaimed his seat and sipped his mimosa. Now that the money was almost within grasp, he should resolve the situation with Alissa Francis. The little troublemaker needed to be put in her place—but how?

Pondering the question as he swirled the red-tinted beverage in his glass, he thought back on how far he’d come in the more than thirty years since he started his own ministry. He already owned several houses around the world and had a garage in Miami filled with luxury vehicles. With these additional funds he could buy more property and expand the church’s work in the U.S. and here in the Caribbean. He could reach more people with the word of God. Save many souls, and buy power and influence from The Bahamas to Trinidad. He would be unstoppable. A god among men.

He was, indeed, a blessed man. The only explanation for him learning about this treasure and then actually finding it was divine intervention.

“Thank you, God.” He kissed the silver and then let out a joyous cackle. He lifted his face toward the heavens. “Thank you!” he hollered.

Still groggy with sleep, Alissa reached for the ringing telephone beside the bed. The call was coming from a number she didn't recognize.

"Hello?" she said, stifling a yawn with her hand.

"This is Pastor Jeremiah Gracewood. We need to talk."

Jolted by his voice, Alissa sat up, and Hossam's arm fell off her waist.

"Why are you calling me?"

"Meet me at Emancipation Garden in one hour."

"Why?"

"You and I need to talk. I'll explain when you get there."

"I'm not coming anywhere until you tell me—"

Dial tone.

Startled, she stared at the phone.

"Who was that?" Hossam asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Jeremiah Gracewood."

He stared at her in shock. "Why did he call you?"

"He wants me to meet him at Emancipation Garden in an hour but didn't say why."

Hossam sat up too. "Are you going?"

"I don't have a choice. I need to find out what he wants, and it's in a public place, so it should be fairly safe."

"I'm coming with you."

"You don't have to."

"But I am. You're stuck with me now," Hossam said in a firm voice.

"That's not so bad," Alissa whispered. She leaned over and kissed him

and groaned.

“We do not have time for this,” Hossam said, rolling her onto her back.

He nuzzled her neck, the bristles on his face gently scraping her skin and making her tingle all over. His hairy legs tickled the inside of her thighs, and the delicious sensation made her groan again.

“We should get up,” she said, smoothing her hands down his back to his tight ass.

“If you continue to do that, the only thing that will be ‘up’ is me,” Hossam warned.

Alissa laughed and pushed him off her, and he rolled onto his back.

“You were right, we don’t have the time,” she said, slipping from the bed.

“That looks good on you,” Hossam said, eyeing the red and black plaid boxers she wore.

Alissa snapped the waistband. “Thank you. That’s why I stole so many from you.”

His soft laughter followed her into her ensuite bathroom.

Yesterday they received a call from the police that Alissa could re-enter her house. She and Hossam spent hours straightening up and cleaning blood off the tile. She trashed the blood-stained rug in her bedroom and replaced it with a new one. The only thing left to do now was install new windows over the boarded-up ones, which she planned to take care of in a few days.

After they finished at her place, they went to a nice dinner, discussed their next plans, and Hossam agreed to accompany her to the police station to tell Neville everything they had learned. Then they stopped by the hotel so Hossam could check out and get his belongings.

Back at her house, they made love in the shadows of her deck. She rested her arms on the handrail while Hossam held her hips and guided his body into hers from behind. The air cooled their heated skin as he plowed her with even strokes until they both climaxed. Rejuvenated, they climbed the stairs to bed and slept until that charlatan called.

They dressed in comfortable clothes and ate eggs, toast, and coffee before leaving the house. Hossam took the wheel for the drive into town.

“What do you think he wants?” Alissa asked.

“No idea. Maybe it is a trap. Maybe he wants to warn us away.”

“I think it’s the latter,” she said.

When they arrived in town, Hossam parked the vehicle and then walked side by side with Alissa into Emancipation Garden, a park built to

commemorate the Danish freeing the slaves in 1848.

In addition to a gazebo used for concerts and government ceremonies, there were well-maintained bushes all around, benches, a plaque, and a bronze bust of a freed slave blowing a conch shell. Perhaps most notable was the replica of the Liberty Bell on one side of the park facing the street. Alissa saw Jeremiah sitting on a bench facing Vendors Plaza nearby, where tourists crowded around booths by local merchants, looking for deals on jewelry, clothing, and souvenirs.

Hossam held back and let her walk over to join Jeremiah on the bench. "I'm here," she said, taking a seat.

"Hello, Miss Francis. It's nice to finally meet you. I feel like I've known you forever although we just met," he drawled.

He wore another seersucker suit, this one tan with a puke-green tie. Beside him was a tan hat with a band in the same ugly green color. He peered around her to where Hossam stood a short distance away, like a guardian angel with a firm jaw and scowl on his face. "Your boyfriend is never far, I see," he said in a dry tone.

"Just tell me what the fuck you want, Gracewood. You called me here for a reason."

He gasped. "Language. Remember you're sitting with a child of God."

"You're about as godly as Beelzebub. *Tell me what you want.*"

"Patience, my dear. Let an old man talk for a little bit, but before we get to that, my friend over there needs to check you for a recording device. Please stand."

Reluctantly, she stood, and a Hispanic man with black hair came over and waved a device over the front and back of her body. "She's clean," he said.

"Thank you, Arturo. You may go now," Jeremiah said.

Alissa sat down and waited, silently fuming as he took in their surroundings. A woman sat on a bench reading, and a couple of kids chased each other on the grass.

"Every time I come to this park and see that statue of the enslaved man blowing in the shell, all I can do is shake my head at the injustices your people have suffered from for so long. But your ancestors are incredible, aren't they? You're a descendant of the ones who were resilient and strong enough to survive the Middle Passage, packed into the bottom of ships like sardines. Then they suffered through the brutality of slavery. When you think about it, the blood of the ones who survived is flowing through your veins.

No wonder you're such a bad bitch." The mask slipped for a split second, and he snarled the last word.

The venom in his voice startled Alissa. She saw nothing but pure evil in his gray eyes.

"Good morning, Pastor." An older woman passed by, holding the hands of two young kids.

"Hello, Miss Aretha, how are you today?"

"Couldn't be better. Feeling blessed. God is good, eh?"

"Yes, he is. All the time."

He waited for her to go out of earshot before he continued.

"I would appreciate it if you would mind your own business and stay out of mine."

"Sorry, that's not possible. This is my home, and anything that happens on St. Thomas is my business," Alissa shot back. No surprise, the whole point of this meeting was to warn her away.

"I know you were on my yacht two nights ago, and you plundered my personal belongings."

"Those were not your personal belongings. More than likely they belong to the historical trust, so how did you get them and what are you doing on Hassel Island? There's only one answer. Looking for treasure, and when you find it, you're going to keep it, even though it's not legally yours."

"Let me guess, you plan to stop me from keeping the treasure—is that it?" Jeremiah asked in an amused voice.

Alissa didn't answer for several seconds, shocked he'd admitted what she'd guessed about the treasure. Was there a bounty of gold on Hassel Island, and if so, how long before he found it?

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"How do you plan to do that?" He crossed one leg over the other. "By explaining about a document that for all intents and purposes doesn't exist? A word of advice, Miss Francis, if you're going to accuse a man like me of a crime, make sure you have proof. I am ordained by God, favored by the King. No weapon formed against me shall prosper, Isaiah 54:17. Good luck getting anyone to believe you, and if they do, good luck getting them to act on it."

He was right. Who would believe her with no proof? He'd been associated with a number of crimes already—antiquities smuggling and charity fraud—none of which had resulted in indictments. Now the murder of

Senator Lyburd, the attempted murder of her, and the stealing of treasure that rightly belonged to the territory could be added to the list because she had no proof.

“Which brings me to the next thing, which is simply a word of advice,” he continued.

He leaned his pale body closer, and she bristled.

“This comes from deep in my heart. Stay away from my home and stay away from my yacht, or I won’t be responsible for my actions.” His eyes darkened with malice.

Alissa locked gazes with him and leaned closer. “You don’t scare me.”

Letting out a loud, maniacal laugh, he shifted away from her. “Oh, good heavens, I wasn’t talking about you! Oh no, no, no. You’ve already proven your ancestral blood flows long and deep in your veins. I’d have to kill you right here, and then everyone would see what I did. No, what I’m referring to is innocent people getting hurt, and I’m sure you wouldn’t want that on your conscience.”

A cloud of fear filled Alissa’s chest.

“You know, it saddens me that so many people have guns nowadays. It’s a terrible idea to let every hothead who wants one, have one.” He cast a glance across the street and waved at two white men beside a big truck.

“What are you up to?” Alissa demanded.

“You’ll see soon enough.”

The men climbed into the vehicle. The driver pulled away, and the one in the passenger seat leaned out the window and fired shots in the air.

Alissa jumped to her feet, watching in horror as islanders, vendors, tourists, everyone—scattered and ran for cover with panicked cries. Hossam took a step forward, body filled with tension.

“Stop it!” Alissa screamed at Jeremiah.

“I’m not doing anything.”

The pastor remained calmly seated, legs crossed over each other, while the truck circled the small park and the man inside continued to let loose rounds in the air. After they had made a complete 360 turn around the park, they took off for Waterfront, toward the west end of the island.

“You crazy son of a bitch!” Alissa grabbed Jeremiah’s collar.

“Please leave my mother out of this. She was a God-fearing woman who never hurt a fly.”

The laughter in his eyes infuriated her more, and she shook with the

restraint needed to keep from hitting him in his smug face. With great effort, she released him and stepped back.

Jeremiah stood and smoothed his wrinkled shirt. “This time no one was hurt, but things could get much worse. As I’m sure you know, the bullets from a semi-automatic rifle cause tremendous damage. Explosives are another issue. They can be planted anywhere—in schools—heaven forbid, churches, government buildings. Imagine the panic that would grip the island if there were widespread violence with no idea who initiated it. What if it spread to St. Croix and St. John? How would that affect tourism? Do you really want that for our beautiful territory? I don’t think so.”

Jeremiah picked up his hat and placed it on his head. “These islands belong to me now, to do with as I choose. Don’t waste your time going to the governor, and don’t be foolish enough to try to take me out. It’s impossible. My property is well guarded, but most importantly, I am protected by the blood of the Lamb. Good day.”

Jeremiah strolled away.

“We can’t let him get away with this.” Alissa paced back and forth in front of Hossam inside Emancipation Garden.

“I know.” He grabbed both of her arms to stop her agitated movements and forced her to face him head-on. “We need to come up with a plan,” he told her.

“I know. I’m just so angry right now. Who does he think he is?”

Some merchants at Vendors Plaza had returned to their booths, but a great number of them had closed up shop and left. Two police cars were parked outside Emancipation Garden with their lights flashing while officers interviewed witnesses.

The driver and the shooter were long gone now, but who knew where they had come from. Alissa didn’t recognize them from the yacht the other night, so they could have been anyone, perhaps brought in from another island specifically to intimidate and then flown out again.

“I’m going to call Cruz,” Alissa spoke with finality.

Cruz Cordoba was the owner of The Cordoba Agency, which she worked for. They met years ago when they both worked for Plan B, a secret government organization that recruited agents who came from damaged homes or had no close family.

Her Uncle Silas in Miami had been involved in all sorts of illegal activities, but she had loved him fiercely. Since neither of her parents had other siblings, he was the only family she had left.

He taught her everything he knew about cars, and she often drove for him when he and his crew robbed a gas station or jewelry store. When she was

almost eighteen, a cohort double-crossed and killed him. She was alone in the world again, but she would not cower and hide this time. She hunted down the culprit and stabbed him multiple times.

She found out later that the guy survived, but she took the police on a two-county chase. Using advanced evasive maneuvers and switching cars, she lost them and was free for ten days before the waitress at a local diner recognized her and called the police. She'd almost been relieved to get caught, but to her surprise instead of going to prison, Plan B came calling and said they could use her skills. In exchange for expunging her record and no jail time, she would work for them and receive training. Otherwise, she faced fifteen years for the attempted murder charge. It was a no-brainer. She accepted the deal and went into service for Plan B.

She became an assassin, trained in the art of Kali knife fighting—a Filipino technique. Most importantly, she became the key to a successful extraction. If the agents could get the principal safely into Alissa's hands, she was able to get them out of harm's way, whether by land, air, or sea.

She'd developed extraordinary skills and done extractions where she drove a boat through choppy waters or flew a helicopter out of a danger zone. She developed nerves of steel and became known as the person to call if an agent wanted to guarantee safe passage.

Up until the organization was disbanded years ago, she worked for them, protecting the U.S. from domestic and foreign threats. Now she worked for The Cordoba Agency, which on occasion could be called upon by the President to perform a mission on behalf of the United States—an unofficial reemergence of the Plan B organization.

She and Hossam sat down on one of the park benches, and she dialed Cruz's number and placed the call on speaker.

"Hola," Cruz greeted her with a friendly voice.

"Cruz, I have a problem here, and I need your help. Hossam Jalal is with me."

"Are you still in the Virgin Islands?" Cruz asked in Spanish-accented English.

"Yes. We ran into a problem." She gave him a succinct version of everything that had occurred and what they knew thus far. "Could you get in touch with Miles and let him know what's going on here on the island? The Virgin Islands belong to the United States, and I'm certain someone in the President's office would like to know their decision to purchase the islands

for strategic reasons is about to be disrupted by a megalomaniac. If he can't get to the President, then someone in the Department of Interior would want to know what's going on. They oversee all U.S. territories. This man is planning to not only steal hidden treasure, but his ultimate goal is to take control of the islands."

If anyone could get a message to the President about the urgency of the situation, it was Miles. He worked in Homeland Security as an off-the-record administrator of the Plan B program and reported to a National Security Advisor in the White House.

"Do you have proof of that?" Cruz asked.

"Nothing concrete, just my word, and I can't go to the authorities here. Jeremiah is entrenched in local politics, trusted because of his government connections and donations to various causes. He's considered a well-respected member of the community, which is ridiculous."

"Keep your phone close. I'll get Miles on the phone and see if he can push this up the chain."

Alissa's body sagged with relief, and Hossam rubbed her back to soothe her agitation. "Thank you, Cruz. This is my home. I want this guy stopped." The islands were called America's Paradise for a reason, and she refused to let this greedy, evil man get away with wreaking havoc in her home.

"And he will be stopped. I'll call you as soon as I know something," Cruz promised.

"Thanks." She hung up and released a breath. "This is all we can do for now," she told Hossam.

"What do you think of his threat to plant bombs and hurt innocent people?" Hossam asked.

"He's a very sick individual, and I believe he would do it. For now, we need to wait for Cruz to get back to us and let us know what Miles said."

Hossam clasped the back of her neck. "We will get him. Don't worry." He kissed her temple.

She relaxed into his side.

Her attachment to the island went deeper than the norm. It was the last place she'd been with her parents, and she lived in their old home. She intended to retire there one day, so seeing someone intend to cause harm to the place she loved so much was devastating.

"Alissa?"

They both looked up and saw Neville standing nearby, his face

expressionless.

“Neville, what’s going on?” Alissa pulled away from Hossam.

“Did you see who shot up the place?”

She stood. “It was Jeremiah Gracewood.”

His eyes narrowed. “How? I was told there were two men in a truck.”

Hossam stood too, and Neville’s eyes followed the movement.

“Neville, this is... um, Hossam. Hossam, this is Sgt. Neville Pendergrass.”

“Nice to meet you,” Neville said.

“Likewise.”

Hossam didn’t extend his hand, and neither did the sergeant, both of them sizing each other up in the tense silence that ensued.

Alissa cleared her throat. “I was going to come talk to you today and let you know what’s been going on.”

She gave him a rundown of what they had been up to, including the burner phone, what she and Hossam had learned from the texts, sneaking onto Gracewood’s yacht, and ending with him demanding she meet him today.

Neville’s eyes were wide by the time she finished. “Do you have a death wish? You could have gotten yourself killed.” He stared at her, aghast.

“I’m absolutely fine, and like I said, I wasn’t alone,” Alissa said in a calm voice.

Neville’s gaze flicked to Hossam before returning to her. “What the hell kind of work do you do in the States that made you think sneaking onto his boat was a good idea? Are you in the FBI or CIA or something?”

She laughed. “Better, but that’s beside the point. We have to stop him, Neville. Have you learned anything new?”

He shook his head. “Nothing that could help you or help us nail Gracewood for Lyburd’s murder. Senator Hodge gave us full rein to question all the members of the legislature, and they all said the same thing, that he didn’t have enemies, which I seriously doubt. Someone hated him enough to blow up his damn car. We searched his office and home and couldn’t find anything to explain why someone wanted him dead. We’ll continue the investigation, of course, but it doesn’t look good. We’re practically at a dead end.”

Hossam spoke up. “Gracewood is too good at what he does. He is not sloppy. He will cover his tracks and cover them well, like he has done for a

long time.”

Neville took a deep breath. “Well, there’s something else that I haven’t mentioned. My office is bugged.”

Alissa gasped. “What?”

“I haven’t reported it yet, but I found the listening device this morning, by accident. I knocked the lamp off my desk, and when I went to pick it up, I saw the device inside the shade. At first, I was confused, and then I realized what it was.”

“You have a mole in the police department,” Hossam surmised.

Neville nodded, his expression grim. “The bug must be how Gracewood found out about you, Alissa. That’s the only thing that makes sense. You and I talked about working together, and he sent someone after you that night.”

Alissa dragged her palm down her face. “I’m not surprised you have a traitor in the police department. I’ve seen this type of thing before.”

“People with money can buy just about anything,” Hossam added.

Neville nodded his agreement. “There could be other bugs. My phone could be bugged. I need to do a sweep of my home, office, and all my electronics.”

“Until then, what are you going to do about the listening device in your office?” Hossam asked.

“I don’t know yet. I think I’m going to notify the higher-ups and let them know what’s going on before I destroy it.”

“Could you hold off? We’re working on something, and we don’t want to tip off the wonderful pastor,” Alissa said.

“What are you working on?” Neville asked.

Alissa glanced at Hossam. “It’s probably best that you don’t know.”

Neville’s face twisted into a rueful expression. “You only trust me so far. I get it. Look, do what you need to do. You have seventy-two hours, and then I’m going to the Commissioner with my concerns. In the meantime, I’ll see if there are listening devices anywhere else so I can be more careful about how and when I speak.”

“We’re going to get him, Neville,” Alissa said.

“We better, because from everything I’ve seen so far, he won’t stop unless he *is* stopped. I’ll be in touch in a few days—unless something else happens, and then you’ll see me sooner.” He dipped his head and walked in the direction of one of the police vehicles.

“I know you don’t trust him,” Alissa said when Neville was out of

earshot. She folded her arms across her chest.

“But you do, and I hope you’re right.”

“I trust him to a point,” she said, glancing over her shoulder to where Neville talked to the other cop.

“I’m thirsty. Let’s get something to drink while we wait for Cruz to call,” Hossam suggested.

They walked over to where a man was parked beside the park with his truck bed full of coconuts. “Two, please,” Hossam said.

Using a machete, the man shaved the ends of the fruit off to a point and then lobbed off a piece to open it up. He handed the first one to Alissa with a straw and then prepared one for Hossam. After Hossam paid, they strolled back to the park and sat down, sipping on the refreshingly chilled beverage.

When Alissa’s phone finally rang, she looked at the screen. “Cruz,” she said, sounding excited. She answered the call and placed it on speaker. “Hey, Cruz.”

“Alissa, I talked to Miles. I wish I had good news for you, but I don’t.”

She wilted with disappointment, and right away Hossam decided if the U.S. government wouldn’t intervene, he would find a way to resolve the issue for her.

“They don’t want to touch Gracewood without proof. He’s not only well-connected in the Caribbean, he’s well-connected here too. He has donated a lot of money to political campaigns and rubs elbows with big names in politics. They need proof of something—any form of wrongdoing that could justify a full investigation.”

“I don’t have any proof,” Alissa said, frustration slipping into her voice.

“What if we got proof?” Hossam interjected.

She frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“The warehouse, on his island. We need to get in there. If he is storing weapons, that is where they will be.”

She slowly nodded. “We could do that. He has security all over the property, but with a good plan we could infiltrate and get into the warehouse, and I’m sure there must be some evidence in his home office.”

“If we take his computers, we can search them later for evidence,” Hossam said.

“I like that idea.” She nodded again, more vigorously this time.

“Do you need some help?” Cruz asked.

“What did you have in mind?”

“A few of us could come down there for a few days and help you get this scumbag.”

Hossam smiled, which was mirrored on Alissa’s face.

“Hell yeah, we could use some help. How soon can you get here?”

Alissa and Hossam waited outside the small airport, leaning against the van they had rented. Finally, he saw Cruz, Hunter, and Raheem step through the door, and Alissa straightened and smiled, resting her hands on her hips. Arriving passengers turned their heads to watch the three men. One woman peeped over her sunglasses with appreciative eyes before her annoyed husband elbowed her in the ribs.

Cruz led the way in a purple T-shirt with *The Cordoba Agency* in gold emblazoned on the front. The six-foot-five Cuban had arms the size of tree trunks and carried two duffel bags in his big hands.

Right behind him was Hossam's friend, Hunter, a mixed-raced man with gray eyes and a large bag thrown over his shoulder. A sharpshooter, he was the best shot at the agency. Next to him was Raheem, brown-skinned and a little taller, the second in command and their VP of technology. He carried a bag and a silver case, and Alissa had expressed hope that he brought along gadgets that could help in their quest to stop Jeremiah once and for all.

"Heard you needed some help down here," Hunter said with a grin.

"It's good to see you guys," Alissa said.

After hugs and handshakes all around, they loaded their luggage into the van, and Hossam took the wheel to drive to Alissa's house.



"MAN, this view. I'm surprised you haven't ditched the agency completely to stay here," Raheem said, arms braced on the wood railing of the deck.

They were all outside. Hossam sat with his feet elevated on the outdoor ottoman. When they arrived at her home, Alissa prepared smoothies for them made from soursop, a sweet and delicious fruit he'd fallen in love with since she introduced him to it. They all drank their smoothies while waiting for dinner to finish.

"My place is small, but you should be comfortable," she said.

Compared to some of the conditions the men had slept in during past missions, her home was perfectly fine. The accommodations included a bed in the guest room, a sleeper sofa, and a sleeping bag.

Cruz gazed out at the bay. "Reminds me of Cuba," he said.

"When are you taking Shanice and the kids there?" Alissa asked, one hand on her hip.

Hossam couldn't stop ogling her lean figure in Army-green, lightweight cargo pants and a white tank top that showed off her toned arms. She wore her hair in its naturally kinky texture today and had tied a green and gold scarf around her head like a headband. With the addition of large earrings, she was the perfect combination of tough and soft.

"One of these days. Sooner rather than later, probably. Shanice recently asked me about going there."

"I'm sure she'll love it. Guys, I'm going to finish dinner, and then we can get down to business." Alissa disappeared inside the house.

While Raheem and Cruz huddled together on one end of the deck, Hunter pulled a patio chair beside Hossam and sat down.

"How are things going?" he asked.

He didn't have to be explicit. Hossam knew he was asking about the situation with Alissa. "Better than expected."

"She didn't give me dirty looks or try to kill me when I arrived, so I figured as much."

Hossam chuckled. "I thought she was going to kill *me* when I arrived, but she has calmed down significantly since then." He traced a line in the condensation on his glass.

"Something's wrong, though. What aren't you telling me?" Hunter asked.

"There is nothing wrong, exactly. I just wonder what will happen when this is all over. Before I came to St. Thomas, I told you that I love Alissa. That's why I wanted to come and see if we had a chance. I want to spend the rest of my life with her, and although I know she loves me too, she... has not said the words," he admitted reluctantly. "She was not happy with me at all

when I arrived, and rightly so. I should have told her Amal was staying with me. It was a huge mistake that I regret.”

Hunter’s eyebrows raised. “Oh.”

Though Hunter had helped him with Alissa and given his blessing, Hossam hadn’t told him everything about their split. He’d only told him that they’d become involved in Morocco and had been seeing each other off and on over the years.

“I thought that was the only reason for her anger, but I learned that was not the real issue.”

“What was the real issue?” Hunter sipped his soursop drink.

“Do you know about her past—how her parents and uncle were killed?”

“Yeah,” Hunter answered in a grave tone.

“She thought she had lost me.”

“Another person she loved,” Hunter surmised.

“Yes.”

His friend whistled. “It triggered her.”

“We talked and are in a much better place now, but she has not confirmed we have a future together.”

“She’s not interested?” Hunter asked.

“The last time we talked, she avoided giving me a commitment.”

He understood that people with abandonment issues worried about letting others get too close for fear of being hurt, but he struggled with her need to keep some distance between them.

His friend winced. “Ouch.”

“Exactly.” Hossam tapped the edge of the glass with his forefinger.

“You said she cooks for you, right?”

“She has.”

Last night she prepared red beans and rice—which she called peas and rice—stewed chicken, and the best damn coleslaw he’d ever tasted.

Hunter leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Being domestic, she doesn’t do that for everybody. She reserves those gestures for close friends and family. I’ve never heard her say, much less seen her cook for a romantic partner.”

This was news to Hossam. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Does she look like the domestic type?”

He laughed. True enough, he’d been pleasantly surprised to learn Alissa liked to cook, but it was something she’d been doing from a young age and

did more often when she moved in with her uncle. She used to cook for him and the crew because his U.S.-born girlfriend didn't know how to make the Caribbean dishes he enjoyed.

His friend sipped more of the tasty smoothie. "You know, she gave me good advice when I wasn't sure about pursuing Sable. One thing she said stood out, and since then, I've never forgotten it."

Sable was Hunter's fiancée. A reformed cat burglar, she now lived in Hopevale with him and had opened an antique shop—a dream she'd had for some time.

"What did she tell you?" Hossam asked.

"She said women want to be chased just as much as men enjoy chasing. If you really believe she loves you, don't give up."

"I don't plan to."

"Good. That's my girl, and I believe the two of you would be great together. Did you tell her about your decision to join the agency?"

"I did."

"Cool. Then I guess we'll see what happens when we're done here."

Hossam nodded his agreement and dropped his feet off the ottoman. "I'm going inside to see if she needs help."

He left the three men outside and went into the house where the aroma coming from the kitchen immediately made his stomach growl.

He sauntered into the kitchen as Alissa removed a large casserole dish filled with fish from the oven. "Do you need some help?"

"No, I've got it." She placed the dish on a trivet on the counter.

Staring at her, he had an image in his head of little girls with the same kinky hair and scarves tied around their heads. Would they pick up her adorable accent, or would they sound more like their American friends? Whatever happened, he wanted a family with Alissa. Boys, girls, boys and girls—didn't matter, as long as they were his and hers. He had cared about Amal, but he loved Alissa to obsession.

Hossam walked over and took her hand, and she looked up at him in surprise. Without a word, he pulled her in for a kiss, planting his lips hard against hers as he embraced her in his arms, smoothing a hand down the curve in her back until he squeezed her firm ass.

When he stepped back, she stared up at him. "What was that for?" she asked in a husky voice.

"I just wanted to do that."

Her eyes softened. “Well, I’m glad you did.”

Minutes later, the men lined up in the kitchen.

Alissa had cooked plenty, and they piled food onto their plates. When they finally sat around the table, Cruz said grace, thanking God for the food and asking Him to bless others not as fortunate.

For several minutes, no one talked as they consumed the flavorful meal. Red snapper in a tasty sauce with onions and peppers rested on Hossam’s plate alongside steamed cabbage and fungi—pronounced foon-jee—a polenta-type food made from cornmeal and okra and formed into a ball.

“Fish and fungi is the unofficial dish of our islands,” Alissa explained. “The tradition of eating them together dates back to when the slaves in the Danish West Indies were allowed six quarts of cornmeal and six salt herring per week.”

“Damn, this is good,” Raheem muttered with his mouth full.

Hums of agreement came from the others, and Alissa smiled with a pleased expression. All Hossam could do was nod his head as he chewed, sopping up the fish gravy with the dumb bread Alissa purchased at a local bakery. The dense bread was a traditional staple and could be made with or without coconut. She had purchased the non-coconut version.

The satisfying meal ended thirty minutes later. The men cleared the dishes, and then they all settled in the living room.

Cruz stood while the others sat and waited for his thoughts. “I have an idea,” he said.

Alissa had known Cruz would devise a good plan. He was a skilled fighter and smart as hell and had executed numerous successful missions over the years. One of the reasons why she hadn't hesitated to work for his agency when he asked.

They planned to hit Jeremiah's compound at night when he least expected it. Cruz and Hunter would focus on the warehouse to find out if it contained a weapons cache, as she suspected. She and Hossam would break into the house to steal Jeremiah's electronics in search of evidence they could provide to the government. Raheem had brought a small, state-of-the-art drone with him. As the eyes in the sky, his job was to make sure they stayed one step ahead of Paradise Key's security.

Alissa and Hossam were in charge of pulling together the items they needed, which included renting a boat since she didn't want to use Cyril's again and risk having it destroyed if Jeremiah somehow got the upper hand. They were limited by the kinds of weapons they could procure because of local laws, but Alissa had found a solution—Neville. Without giving him the full details of their plans, she inquired about securing some weapons, and he offered to meet them in a secluded location to give them what he could.

Alissa drove with the top down to the meet-up. "I can't wait to see that phony prick's entire empire fall apart around his ears."

Hossam gripped the top of the vehicle as she sped around a sharp curve. Accustomed to her driving by now, he barely flinched.

"We could kill him," he suggested.

Alissa laughed. "I'd love to, but I'm not sure that's a good idea. We don't

know everything he's involved in, and he could have his hands in more than gun smuggling, murder, and stealing national treasures. Drug smuggling and sex slavery are very lucrative."

"True," Hossam said, sounding disappointed.

She glanced at him. His curls fluttered in the wind and gave him a boyish, unaffected appearance that she found charming.

"How would you kill him if we did have a chance to do it?"

He smirked. "I have not had the opportunity to study him the way I do other targets, so I would have to improvise on such short notice. If I could get my hands on cyanide, that would be my first choice. It acts fast and is untraceable unless the medical examiner is looking for it. Rat poison is another good choice, readily available and water-soluble. The best part is the symptoms do not appear for a few days, which means the police will have a hard time narrowing down the suspects. Twice I have used eye drops when I didn't have much time."

"Eye drops?" Alissa repeated.

Hossam nodded. "They are very toxic, but the active ingredient—tetrahydrozoline—is detectable by a blood screen. If we do not care whether people know his death is an accident or not, that would be an effective way to kill him."

Alissa slid her gaze over to him, and Hossam lifted an eyebrow in silent inquiry.

"Remind me never to piss you off," she said.

He threw his head back and laughed. Giving her thigh a reassuring squeeze, he said, "*Habibti*, of course, I would never use such methods on you. I prefer to 'kill' you in other ways." His hand slid higher on her thigh before he removed it.

Alissa blushed, thinking about all the ways he'd killed her kitty before the team from the agency arrived. She looked forward to a repeat of that, once they collected the evidence they needed against Jeremiah.

She pulled into a lot overgrown with bushes and weeds where Neville had agreed to meet them. An old boarded-up building stood in the middle of the dusty, broken-down property that hadn't been fixed since a hurricane rolled through, tore off the roof, and knocked out the windows.

She stopped the Jeep and hopped out, and Neville exited his car. Her feet crunched on rocks and gravel as she walked over to him.

"I'm still trying to figure out if what you're doing is a good idea or a

terrible idea,” Neville said.

She figured his dilemma stemmed from his position in law enforcement, but she didn't suffer from the same moral dilemma after years of working in a field that required the blurring of lines to bring the worst in society to justice.

“I can answer that question for you. It's a great idea.”

He snorted his disbelief. “If you say so. Let me show you what I have.”

They walked around to the back of his sedan, and he popped the trunk. Unzipping an old black duffel bag, he revealed a small arsenal of handguns that included Glocks and two AR-15s, as well as a limited amount of ammunition for the weapons. The collection was better than she'd expected.

“Where did you get these?” Alissa lifted out a Glock and hefted its weight in one hand.

“They're all confiscated ghost guns, and you can have them for as long as you need. But, if shit goes left, I don't know nothing about what you and your friends are doing, and *you and them* will be solely responsible for the fallout.”

She'd been deep undercover in enemy territory with the understanding that the government would disavow any knowledge of their actions. His warning didn't faze her.

“Not a problem.” Alissa signaled to Hossam, who exited the Jeep and came to look at the stash.

He whistled. “This is good. Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” Neville said.

Hossam took the weapons back to the Jeep, and Neville closed the trunk of the car. “I hope you know what you're doing.”

“We do,” Alissa assured him.

His gaze flicked to Hossam. “Is he the one?”

“The one for what?” Alissa asked, playing dumb.

“The one you plan to marry.”

She rubbed the back of her neck. “Neville—”

“I know. It's none of my business. I'm married with a child on the way and shouldn't even ask, but...” He shrugged, shaking his head in self-disgust. “You're the one that got away. Maybe I should have been a little more patient. Anyway, be careful. We may not be together, but I don't want anything to happen to you.”

“You be careful too. We don't know everything Jeremiah is up to, and

like you said, you have a wife and baby on the way.”

“I will be.”

They stood awkwardly for a moment, and then Neville hugged her. She embraced him in return, filled with regret. She hated she had any part in allowing him to think they had a chance at forever. She probably wouldn't see him again unless they ran into each other by accident in the future. This hug was their final goodbye.

Neville kissed her on the temple and then released her, taking a deep breath at the same time. “Take care.”

He slipped a pair of sunglasses over his eyes and climbed into his car. He drove past Alissa as she walked back to the Jeep, kicking up a small cloud of dust on his way out of the lot.

Hossam climbed into the passenger side, his expression grim. “You should warn him to keep his hands to himself.”

“We were saying goodbye.”

“He is married. He should keep his *fucking hands* to himself. If you are trying to give me a taste of what you felt when you learned about Amal, you have done an excellent job. *Putain*,” he swore with disgust.

Alissa gripped the steering wheel. “That's not what I'm doing. I don't play games like that. Could we please just concentrate on executing the plan tonight? I want to get this SOB once and for all.”

Hossam looked through her instead of at her. “Fine by me.”

Alissa wanted to say more, but instead of continuing the tense conversation, she started the Jeep and pulled out of the lot.



HOSSAM, Alissa, Cruz, Hunter, and Raheem traveled in a rented speed boat to the island. Deep in thought, no one said a word as they approached, and Alissa cut the engine and steered them into shallow waters.

Raheem remained on the boat, in charge of comms and controlling the drone while the others went to the island. Alissa jumped into the water with a dry bag tied to her waist containing weapons and other supplies. The men also had dry bags tied to their waists and waded through the water, Hossam and Cruz leading the way while Hunter pulled up the rear behind her.

She watched as Hossam started the treacherous climb up the side of the

cliff. Their earlier tension had been forgotten—or at least set aside so they could concentrate on the task at hand. They couldn't afford to be distracted and suffer from easily avoidable mistakes.

His hands and feet gripped the rocky surface above the beach as he climbed, and they maintained the same formation with Cruz following behind him and she and Hunter following behind them. At the top, they stayed low and ran across the grass to the shadows behind the garage, which was separate from the house and where Gracewood parked the golf carts his security used.

“We're in position,” Cruz communicated to Raheem through his earpiece.

“Hold. Two guards on the back side and two in the golf cart are at the far end of the warehouse. Wait a minute, there's a guard coming up on the east wall of the garage,” Raheem warned.

Alissa looked up at the sky and saw the drone silently surveying the area.

As the closest to the corner, Cruz moved into position with his back to the wall. The guard came into view with his weapon held loosely at his side but caught sight of Cruz. Too late though. Cruz grabbed his wrist and swung a meaty fist to the side of his head, knocking him out cold. He dragged the unconscious man into the dark, and he and Hunter used duct tape to cover his mouth and tie him up. Now they had another weapon to add to their stash.

While they worked, Alissa pulled the supplies for a Molotov cocktail from her sack. “Here,” she whispered to Hossam.

They set to work using kerosene and strips of cloth they'd taken from Alissa's home. Since Alissa and Hossam were going into the house, they would be the ones to create the diversion at the tiki hut near that side of the mansion.

“Are you guys ready?” Raheem asked.

The house itself was a sprawling two-story building with lots of windows and multiple entrances, and cameras recorded everything that took place on the property. His job was to temporarily cut the feeds.

Alissa looked at Hossam, and he nodded.

“Ready when you are,” she said to Raheem.

They stood with their makeshift weapons and waited. After several seconds, Raheem's voice came through loud and clear. “Go!”

They took off at a high speed toward the hut and once they came within feet of it, they lit the cloths hanging from the bottles and then hurled them at the thatched roof. It immediately burst into flames, and they raced away

toward the side of the house.

While Hossam covered a window with duct tape, Alissa peered at the hut, engulfed in flames spreading fast. Panicked shouts filled the night, and several of the property's guards came racing toward the structure.

"We need fire extinguishers!" one man yelled.

"Use the water from the pool!" another hollered.

Three more men poured from the inside. There was absolutely no reason for a pastor to have that much security. He was definitely a snake up to no good.

Hossam picked up a rock and smashed the window. The tape dulled the sound of breaking glass and kept the shards from falling inside. He yanked the taped pieces out and tossed them aside.

"We're going in," Hossam said.

That was the signal for Raheem to set up the two communication channels—one for Alissa and Hossam and the other for Hunter and Cruz—so there would be no confusion as he gave instructions in their earpieces while he monitored activity on the property.

Fully loaded Glockes drawn, Alissa and Hossam climbed through the window on the first floor.

Raheem had accessed the plans of the property through the public records, and they knew Jeremiah's office was upstairs. They decided to go there first, but if they couldn't find what they needed, they'd continue their search in the den downstairs.

While Hossam led the way, Alissa climbed the stairs backward, eyes darting to and fro and weapon at the ready in case anyone suddenly appeared. The office was near the end of a hall, and Hossam checked the door.

It opened. She and Hossam looked at each other in surprise.

While Alissa stayed outside and guarded the door, Hossam entered and did a sweep of the office.

"Clear," he whispered.

She slipped in behind him and shut the door.

The huge office contained a giant desk in the center and half a dozen wood cabinets lined up beside each other against one wall.

She and Hossam weren't interested in paper products, though. They were grabbing his electronics.

Using the light that came through the louvered windows from the grounds, they moved fast and unplugged the two laptops they found, and Hossam stuffed the computers into his dry bag which he had kept mostly empty for this very reason.

Then he used his knife to break into one of the desk drawers.

"What are you looking for?" Alissa asked.

"External drives," he answered.

He held up an iPad. "I'm taking this too."

“Hurry,” Alissa said.

The sound of gunfire broke through the night, and she raced over to the window. Shots sounded again, and a group of men raced toward the warehouse.

“I think Cruz and Hunter have been discovered,” she said.

“Guys, get out of there,” Raheem warned. “Shit’s about to go left. Hunter and Cruz confirmed Jeremiah has an arsenal in the warehouse, and they’re under fire at the moment. Security found the broken window, and they’re coming in after you two.”

Alissa turned to Hossam, who remained crouched behind the massive desk. “You heard him. Forget the backups, and let’s go.”

“Wait, one more.”

“Hossam!” she said in a fierce whisper.

He yanked open a bottom drawer and what he saw gave him pause, and he made eye contact with her. He held up two external drives, stuffed them into the bag, and then hopped up from his position. “*Allons-y!*” He flung the sack over his shoulder.

Alissa cracked the door and peered out. Seeing the coast was clear, she slipped out, and they moved quickly but quietly down the hall.

A dark figure came around the corner. Before he could act, Alissa snatched his weapon and used it to backhand him with a blow to the temple. He crashed to the floor. She unsheathed her knife and swept it across his throat, leaving him on the floor as his life’s blood gurgled out of him.

“What’s going on, guys?” Raheem asked.

“We’re in the west wing looking for a way out,” Hossam said.

“Hang on.” Raheem went quiet. “There’s a bedroom on the east side, all the way to the end where it turns into another hallway. Use the window there to get out. I don’t see security on that side of the building.”

They took off in that direction. Hossam veered down a hallway and raced across the landing that connected the east wing to the west wing.

“There!” someone yelled.

The men below fired multiple rounds and sent the wood railing splintering and flying into pieces around Alissa and Hossam. Hossam stopped on the other side. He returned fire and forced the men to dive for cover.

Moving fast, Alissa and Hossam arrived at the bedroom door, but as Alissa was about to open it, someone pulled open the door from the inside.

She and Hossam raised their Glocks at the same time, and the woman

screamed, flinging her hands in the air.

Alissa couldn't believe her eyes. "Ms. Hodge?"

"Alissa, Hossam, what are you doing here?"

"We should be asking you that question," Alissa said.

The senator's face crumbled, and her voice shook with emotion. "Jeremiah invited me to his island to discuss my campaign for governor. He said he wanted to support me. I was shocked of course, but then he wouldn't let me off the island. I don't know what he has planned. Does he want to kill me the way he probably did Ian? I heard the commotion outside and came out to see what was going on."

Alissa stared at her and frowned, but she didn't have time to process the senator's explanation. Men's voices could be heard in the distance getting closer.

"I will distract them. Get her out of here," Hossam said to Alissa. He handed her the bag of electronics and Alissa stepped through the door.

Before Hossam could close it, she grabbed his arm. "Be careful."

He grinned at her. "Always." He caught her chin in his hand, gave her a quick kiss, and then shut the door.

Body tense, she waited in the dark bedroom with Teresa, inches from the doorjamb with her gun ready in the event one of the guards came into the room.

Then she heard, "There!" They had spotted Hossam.

Gunshots were exchanged and then the sound of running feet swept past the room. Alissa counted to ten before she cracked the door and peeped out.

"Raheem, I have Senator Hodge with me. She can't make the second story jump to the ground. What does the north side look like?" she asked.

Several seconds passed while he checked.

"Clear."

"Let's go, Ms. Hodge," she whispered.

She and the senator crept back the way she had come, through the labyrinth of hallways until they arrived at the top of the staircase.

"We're almost there. We'll get you out of here," Alissa said.

She led the way through a side door to the outside and stopped in the shadows. She placed the sack of electronics on the grass.

The senator gripped her arm. "Are we safe now?"

"Close, but I need you to listen to me. There are three other men with me and Hossam. We'll wait here until—"

“There’s movement at the helipad. The helicopter rotors are running!” Raheem yelled. “It’s Gracewood! He’s trying to get away.”

“No freaking way. I’m going after him,” Alissa said.

“What’s going on?” Senator Hodge asked, eyes wide.

“Jeremiah is about to leave, and we can’t let him get away. He could end up anywhere in the world. Get behind those bushes with the bag, and don’t move.”

“I won’t,” Teresa promised.

Alissa swung around and took off running. She saw Jeremiah and Ridge making haste toward the helipad, recognizing the big man from the yacht by his size and the back of his head. Jeremiah’s age worked in her favor because he moved slowly. She kicked up her speed and dashed toward the men.

“Gracewood, stop or I’ll shoot!” she yelled, and came to an abrupt halt, aiming her gun right at them, ready to fire in the event they didn’t stop.

Both men stopped, and Ridge swung toward her with intent, but Alissa shot first and hit his arm holding the gun. He grunted and grimaced, staggered back, and dropped his Beretta.

“Don’t move, or I’ll shoot you again in a lethal place,” Alissa warned.

She might as well have not issued the warning. The obstinate man reached with the other hand for the inside of his jacket, and she pulled the trigger twice. He collapsed on the grass in front of Jeremiah, whose eyes widened in shock. She fired again, shattering the helicopter’s window.

“Get out!” she yelled at the pilot.

He came out slowly with his hands up.

“On the ground!”

“Please don’t kill me,” he begged in a shaky voice, lowering to the grass.

Alissa kept her weapon raised and shifted her attention to the pastor. “It’s over, and everyone is going to know what you’ve been doing. The smuggling operation and trying to steal Roberto Cofresi’s treasure will all get you serious jail time.”

In the background, the gunfight continued as Jeremiah’s security worked to keep control of the island.

“Trying?” Jeremiah scoffed. “Miss Francis, I have already located the treasure, and it’s in a safe place.”

“Then you need to tell me where it is so the rightful authorities can take control. You’re not above the law, Jeremiah. Did you really think you could get away with breaking the law indefinitely?”

“I’ve already gotten away with it for decades,” he bragged.

“All of that ends tonight.”

He laughed. “Do you think it’s over? There’s more going on than meets the eye, Miss Francis. There’s so much you don’t know, so much you don’t understand.”

“You can explain everything from behind bars.”

He smiled a wide, knowing smile filled with condescension. “I’m not going to jail. I’m too important to the territory and the millions of people who listen to my words every Sunday morning. Words of encouragement, words to enlighten and give comfort. *That* is what I offer to people each week.”

Her grip on the weapon tightened as her trigger finger itched. “Cut the crap! You don’t care about anyone but yourself. Your congregation and the millions who listen to you and trust you will finally see you for the liar and con man that you are.”

“You are mistaken. I am no liar or con man, but I have never pretended to be perfect. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Through the blood of Jesus, I am made new.”

“Shut up!” There were few things Alissa hated more than listening to someone use the words of the Bible to fit their twisted narrative.

“Though my sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Jesus has already paid the price for my transgressions. You, Miss Francis, are interfering with the divine will of God.” He jabbed a finger at her, eyes flashing in anger. “You—”

A shot popped in the night air, and Jeremiah’s mouth and eyes expanded to twice their size as a circle of blood bloomed on his chest.

Alissa swung around, ready to fire, and saw Senator Hodge holding a gun. She had a look of horror on her face.

“What did you do?” Alissa demanded, though it was obvious what had happened.

Jeremiah lay on the ground with his eyes open wide and his mouth ajar, as though he desperately wanted to finish his sentence.

“I-I’m so sorry. I thought he was going for a weapon.”

“What in the world made you think that?” Alissa demanded. She marched over and snatched the gun from the other woman.

“What’s going on, Alissa?” Raheem asked in her ear.

“Ms. Hodge shot Jeremiah Gracewood.”

A muttered curse filled her ears.

She rushed over to the evangelist's supine body and checked for a pulse. "Dammit. He's dead."

Alissa stuffed down a scream and shot a glance at the senator, who appeared distraught. "You have no idea what you've done." They might never know where he hid the treasure, and she was certain they'd find additional evidence of wrongdoing in the files on the computer, but not having him alive to question could severely limit the scope of the investigation and subsequent indictments.

"Alissa, Cruz and Hunter are on their way to you," Raheem said.

"Hossam?" Alissa called. She held her breath and waited.

"Here. Two down near the tiki hut, and I have a live one on the ground. I will bring him with me."

Alissa breathed easier. "I have the pilot and Senator Hodge with me."

"I'm bringing the boat around to the dock side," Raheem said.

Hossam arrived first with a guard ahead of him, hands raised. Minutes later, Cruz and Hunter appeared with two more men.

"What's going to happen to them?" the senator asked.

"We're going to leave them here for the police," Hunter answered.

"I need to make a phone call," Cruz added.

While Cruz stepped away to make the call, more than likely waking Miles in the middle of the night, Alissa stood guard as Hossam and Hunter forced the men to sit back-to-back and wrapped their mouths and bodies in duct tape.

When they finished, Hunter sat on the grass and looked around. "What a place."

"You should see the inside. Expensive art, high-end furniture... being a criminal is very lucrative," Hossam added.

"Yes, it is," Alissa agreed.

She cast a glance at Teresa, who stood with her arms wrapped around herself, staring off into the distance. Unease twisting in her gut told her something was wrong.

Cruz came back to the circle. "I talked to Miles. He'll notify his contact at the Department of Interior, and they'll liaise with law enforcement in the territory to get someone over here right away, but he wants us to leave everything as is and get off the island."

"What about the computers?" Alissa asked.

"We take those with us and turn them over to the rep coming from the

States tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. That was fast, and Alissa was pleased.

“Let’s get out of here then,” she said.

They grabbed their supplies and descended to the dock by the stairs built into the side of the cliff. As they sped toward the island of St. Thomas, a Coast Guard boat whizzed by with lights flashing, headed toward Paradise Key.

Hossam lifted Alissa in the air and spun in a circle before dropping her into the water. She let out a happy squeal and laughed.

“I’m gonna get you,” she warned.

He took off, splashing through the water but didn’t put much effort into getting away. She jumped on his back and they tumbled below the waves, laughing and wrestling, which included gratuitous ass grabbing and nipple pinching from Hossam. He couldn’t help himself. Her lime-green bikini made her breasts look amazing and barely covered her fantastic ass.

Breathless and panting with obvious arousal, she slapped away his hand. “Behave. There are kids here,” Alissa said, though her admonishment didn’t quite land because of the excitement in her eyes and the playful smile on her lips.

“They cannot see what I’m doing below the surface of the water,” Hossam said, reaching for her again.

She linked her arms around his neck and hopped up, wrapping her legs around his waist. The move made him groan. His turn to get excited.

“You think this is more appropriate for the children?” Hossam asked.

“I’m sure they’ve seen adults kiss before,” Alissa whispered.

They devoured each other with a deep and sloppy kiss. He no longer saw the kids frolicking in the waves, people sunbathing, or the ones strolling the length of the beach. All that mattered was this woman right here, whose perfect ass he cradled in his hands. She tasted like salt and sunshine, and he rubbed her bottom underwater and groaned.

“This is torture,” he said in a husky tone.

Alissa laughed against his lips and then tugged his bottom lip between her teeth. “That’s what you get for torturing *me*.”

They played some more in the water and swam for a bit before racing up the beach to their umbrella-covered chairs and plopping down.

Hossam sprawled on his back. “That was one of the best workouts I’ve had in a long time.”

Alissa giggled, rubbing her face with a blue and red striped towel before setting it aside. Her hair had curled into tight ringlets that glistened with water droplets, and Hossam reached over and brushed his fingertips through the soft tresses. She smiled at him with pure affection in her eyes, and perhaps love too—though she had yet to say the words.

Yesterday had been an eventful day, with Governor Alstead calling a press conference to update the territory on the criminal activity uncovered within the first two days after the death of Jeremiah Gracewood. In addition to the lieutenant governor, the commissioner and Neville stood with him this time, perhaps as a show of unity since the unfolding events had clearly embarrassed the governor and demonstrated a glaring lack of knowledge about a man he held in high esteem.

The night they left Paradise Key, the St. Thomas Police Department pulled officers from St. Croix, and they all convened on the cay. They arrested the men duct taped on the grass and found enough weapons, ammunition, and explosives in the warehouse to start a war. Weapons they learned were shipped throughout the Caribbean—thanks to the records kept on the computers—which facilitated criminal activities from Jamaica in the west, all the way to Trinidad, in an effort to destabilize the region. Jeremiah then anticipated swooping in and taking over, a far-fetched idea by a man who believed God sanctioned all his actions.

What they hadn’t found was the treasure.

The territory buzzed with news about the scandal, particularly when the FBI and representatives from the U.S. Dept. of the Interior descended on St. Thomas. Hossam and members of The Cordoba Agency were never mentioned in news reports. Neither was Senator Hodge, whose presence on Paradise Key Alissa had questioned as recently as this morning in a conversation with Hossam.

Hungry after spending the morning in the sun and sea, he and Alissa went to her favorite Mediterranean restaurant on the island for a late lunch. As Hossam sat eating from a bowl filled with brown rice, marinated vegetables,

and an extra serving of baba ghanoush, Alissa's phone chimed with a text.

She checked her message and laughed. "Hunter says he may never leave."

"I think we are all feeling that way, but remind him he has a wedding to plan."

Alissa giggled and sent the message. Hearing her laughter and seeing her so relaxed warmed his heart. She looked happy, with her hair pulled back from her face with a bright orange and green scarf that made her sun-kissed skin glow.

A minute later, Hunter responded, and she showed Hossam the phone screen. A shirtless Hunter flashed a peace sign while seated at a seaside bar with what looked like a bushwacker, a frozen cocktail invented on the island of St. Thomas and made with dark rum. The text said, *I'll convince Sable to move with me.*

Hossam and Alissa laughed.

Hunter, Raheem, and Cruz had taken the ferry to explore the smaller island of St. John, and when they returned at the end of the day, they were all going out to a nice dinner.

Alissa dragged a piece of pita bread through his baba ghanoush, and Hossam broke apart one of her spicy falafels and dipped it in garlic sauce. They were back to sharing meals again, a simple habit he had missed.

"Have you thought any more about the situation with Senator Hodge?" Hossam asked.

She speared a Kalamata olive with her fork and placed it in her mouth. "I've tried not to. What if I'm overthinking this?"

"What does your gut say?"

She blew out a breath. "My gut says I'm not, but why would she be involved with a man like Jeremiah Gracewood?"

"I don't know, but maybe we should find out."

Alissa gnawed her bottom lip and looked ill, like someone ready to toss their lunch. She had known this woman since she was a child and wrestled with the possibility that the senator could be dirty.

Hossam shoved aside his bowl. "Let us analyze this for a moment. Why would she be involved?"

"It doesn't make sense. I don't know what she has to gain, but I can't shake the feeling that she killed Jeremiah on purpose. Maybe to cover something up?"

"Is it possible she knew about the treasure?" Hossam asked.

“It’s possible. She and Senator Lyburd seemed close, and it *is* odd that she was on Paradise Key with Jeremiah.”

“Do you think they were involved?”

“In a physical relationship? No, I think their relationship—if there was one—was business only. You know, Jeremiah said something when I stopped him at the helipad, and I haven’t been able to shake the memory.” She frowned, trying to remember the exact words. “He said, ‘There’s more going on than meets the eye.’”

“What does this mean—there is more going on than meets the eye?” Hossam asked.

“It’s an expression that means there are things I don’t know about, but could he have been lying or bluffing?” She searched his face.

“Why would he say that if it was not true?”

She didn’t answer because the answer was obvious. Jeremiah had not been lying.

“If she is not involved, who else could he have been talking about? The governor, perhaps? He was Governor Alstead’s religious advisor, so they had a close relationship.”

“Or the commissioner or both,” Alissa suggested. “They squashed Neville’s investigations into Jeremiah.”

“I suppose we can assume his co-conspirator is not Neville,” Hossam muttered.

“You sound disappointed he wasn’t involved,” Alissa pointed out.

“I have no feelings for the man one way or the other.” Hossam barely kept the irritation out of his voice.

He preferred not to think of Alissa with other men, so he shunned those thoughts for his own sanity. Seeing one of her ex-lovers in the flesh, no matter the fact that they’d been finished for years, made him feel violent. He would rather have a root canal than pay the sergeant an explicit compliment.

“Let’s move on,” Alissa said pointedly. She drank some of her tea. “I need to speak to her, feel her out, but it’s probably best if I go alone.”

He figured she would go this route since she had known the senator for decades. “If you change your mind, let me know, and I will come with you.”

She gave him a grateful smile, but he knew she wouldn’t change her mind.

“Thanks for seeing me,” Alissa said, standing on Teresa’s doorstep.

“Of course, honey, come right in. You know I always have time for you.” Teresa ushered her into the foyer.

Two suitcases and a carry-on bag sat against the wall.

“Are you going somewhere?” Alissa asked.

“Taking a short trip to see family in the States.” Teresa sighed heavily. “After everything that’s happened, I feel exhausted, to tell you the truth, and I need a little break.”

She led the way into the living room, where cream furniture and potted plants invited guests to relax.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Teresa asked.

“No, I’m fine. I wanted to talk a little bit about the events on Paradise Key. It’s been a wild few days.”

Alissa had had no choice but to come here and talk to Teresa. Ever since the senator shot Jeremiah, a feeling of unease followed her around, trailing her like storm clouds about to burst with rain. She hoped her instincts were off this time.

“Absolutely, and we have you and your friends to thank for your bravery and for exposing Jeremiah Gracewood for who he really was. He was the devil, do you hear me? Sneaky and very dangerous.”

“Then why were you on Paradise Key?”

“I told you, he called me there to discuss donating to my campaign, and I guess I wanted to hear him out. But believe you me, if he were still alive, I would not have allowed him to participate so closely in local politics the way

Governor Alstead has. He would not have been *my* religious advisor. That type of behavior and influence is exactly the kind of thing I want to eliminate from the government. The nepotism, favoritism, corruption. Frankly, I'm not sorry he's dead. Good riddance to bad rubbish that should not have been here in the first place."

Alissa's heart took off in her chest, slamming so hard and fast against her ribs she became breathless. "What did you say?"

"I know it's not nice to say, but I'm not sorry he's dead."

Head spinning, Alissa stared at Senator Hodge. "It was you," she whispered.

A frown of confusion descended on her face. "What are you talking about?"

"*You* killed my parents."

Teresa's eyes widened and a burst of incredulous laughter spilled from her lips. "Alissa, that's ridiculous. I loved your parents. We were friends from way back."

"Ohmigod, it was you on the phone, when those murderers slaughtered my parents. 'Good riddance to bad rubbish that should not have been here in the first place.' It's a very specific phrase, and that's what the robotic voice said. The police arrested the people who pulled the trigger, but they never caught the person who sent them. It was *you*. All this time, smiling in my face and pretending to care, pretending you were sympathetic when you're the reason they died. *Whyyyy?*" she wailed, tears springing to her eyes. She couldn't stop shaking. "Why did you take them from me?"

Anger poisoned the air as they both stared at each other. Teresa's surprised look transitioned into a haughty expression lacking remorse.

"They were a problem. They were in the way."

Alissa inhaled sharply as pain swelled in her chest. She could not have been more hurt if the senator had fired a shot straight into the middle of her heart.

"In the way of what, you *fucking bitch!*" she screamed. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

Teresa picked up her purse from a nearby table and removed a silver and black Glock. Then she casually placed the bag on her shoulder and aimed the weapon at Alissa's chest.

"I started a small smuggling operation between our islands and the BVI. A little drugs here and there, nothing major. I was a young, single mother at

the time. Jasmine's good-for-nothing father's support was inconsistent most months, and I had a child to feed. I needed to keep a roof over our heads. It was only supposed to be temporary, but I made so much money it didn't make sense to stop."

"I added Puerto Rico after a while and included guns in the operation. Your parents were going to fuck everything up! I couldn't let that happen, so I took care of the problem and continued my business until I had enough stashed away that I could quit. That money bought this house, paid for Jasmine to go to college in Maryland, and funded my first campaign for office."

"Well, then, I guess that makes it okay," Alissa said.

"I didn't want to kill them, Alissa. I had no choice."

She stared at her in disbelief. Was this woman really trying to justify murdering her parents—taking them from her at the tender age of thirteen?

"I'm going to kill you," she said.

Teresa straightened her arm, keeping the gun pointed at her chest. "No, you're not. You're going to let me walk out of here and catch my flight."

"Now I know for sure you killed Jeremiah on purpose. You never thought he was going for a weapon. You wanted him out of the way."

Teresa shrugged. "He'd served his purpose, and I no longer needed him. My decision wasn't personal, it was business. Not to mention he was greedy. Instead of offering to split Ian's cut with me, he decided to take the whole thing. I couldn't allow that, and I couldn't allow him to implicate me should things go south—which I was certain they would. The man was a narcissist with a god complex." She laughed. "He really thought he could take over the Virgin Islands and use it as his throne to take control of the entire Caribbean. He was a damn idiot—rich, but definitely an idiot."

"Was it you who sent the kill team after me?"

"No. Jeremiah and I both agreed Ian needed to go, and he handled the specifics. I planted a listening device in Sgt. Pendergrass's office so I could stay abreast of the investigation into Ian's death. That's when I learned the two of you would work together. I told Jeremiah and *he* sent the kill team, which did a shoddy job, I might add."

"So now what?" Alissa asked.

"Now, I leave the country on a chartered flight."

"And the treasure?"

"Placed securely on the plane that's waiting for me. I'm sorry, Alissa, I

didn't want to hurt you. You've been hurt enough, but now that you've discovered the truth, I don't have a choice, do I?"

Alissa saw the moment her expression changed. Her face went still and her eyes filled with hostility. Right before she pulled the trigger, Alissa took a flying leap behind the sofa. Teresa fired again. The round cut through the back of the sofa, and she scrambled on her hands and knees out the door, racing down the hall as more shots were fired in quick succession. They tore through the sheetrock and blared with the loud boom of a cannon.

Slipping around a corner, she pressed her back to the wall and listened closely. She was unarmed, but she didn't doubt she could disarm the senator easily enough. Except she didn't hear the older woman coming after her. Instead, she heard the garage door opening. Peering around the corner, she made sure she was alone and then raced toward the front door, which was left wide open in Teresa's haste to escape. The two suitcases remained on the floor, but the carry-on was gone.

"Shit!" Alissa watched Teresa's Cadillac careen toward the opening front gate.

She had to move fast or she'd be trapped on the property behind the iron gates. Hopping in her Jeep, she jammed her foot on the gas and sent her car racing backward to keep from getting closed in. Both sides of the gate moved slowly toward each other, and she squeezed out with barely enough space. The right gate clipped the front of her vehicle, but she got out and swung the car into neutral, took her foot off the gas, and yanked the steering wheel 360 degrees to the right. The tires squealed and the scent of burnt rubber filled the air as the Jeep slid to the left. When the turn hit 180 degrees, she slammed the transmission into drive and accelerated after the Cadillac.

She was not letting this bitch get away. No way, no how.

The older woman didn't have the same driving skills as Alissa, so she quickly caught up with her, both of them honking their horns to warn oncoming traffic as they raced down the hillside. A loud horn blared its warning, and Alissa slowed and eased closer to the edge of the road, scraping tree branches that deposited leaves onto her seats. When the truck passed, she accelerated again and followed close behind Teresa.

She had to make her stop and saw the perfect opportunity when the road widened up ahead. She would use a PIT maneuver to force Teresa into losing control of the car and stop her once and for all, but she'd have to move fast.

As soon as they came upon the widened road, she pulled alongside the

Cadillac and lined up the front bumper of the Jeep to the car's rear tire. Keeping her speed steady, she bumped into the senator's car. The vehicle skidded, spun out of control, and slammed into the guardrail before coming to a stop.

Alissa pulled up behind the car and grabbed her knife from under the seat before she jumped from the Jeep. A plume of smoke lifted toward the blue sky from under the hood of the immobile Cadillac. Alissa ran straight to the driver's side and yanked open the door.

Sitting in front of the deployed airbag, Senator Hodge appeared disoriented and flustered. Alissa cut the seatbelt, grabbed the woman's knot of braids on top of her head, and hauled her from the car to the hard pavement.

Teresa gasped in pain and rolled onto her back. "Alissa, no!" Panic filled her eyes.

Alissa had promised her death, but as she stood over her clutching the handle of her knife, her decision wavered. This woman had been involved in criminal activities for almost thirty years. Murder, smuggling, stealing, and who knows what else. She needed to answer for her crimes.

Could Alissa kill her? She wanted to. She had been trained to kill without remorse, but the situation with Teresa Hodge was bigger than her. There were probably plenty of other people who needed closure.

She leaned down and put the blade to Teresa's throat. The senator whimpered, eyes filled with fear.

Alissa spoke through clenched teeth. "You took my parents from me, and you deserve to die. But I won't kill you, and do you know why? Because you gun march your rass down to the police station and let Neville arrest you. Not only that, but you gun confess to every crime you committed, including killing my parents, your role in killing Senator Lyburd, killing dah scumbag Gracewood, the smuggling, stealing the treasure that belongs to the government—all of it—everything you did over the years. If you do not confess everything, and I find out, I will kill you. I will slit your fucking throat from ear to ear. Even in prison, you are not safe. Do. You. Understand?"

"Yes." Teresa sniffed.

"Good." Alissa punched her in the face.

Teresa cried out, clutched her nose, and started sobbing.

Straightening, Alissa glared down at her in disgust. "Quit your whining

and get up. We going for a ride.”

“Get it!”
“Come on!”
“You got him!”

Alissa and the others screamed at Raheem as he reeled in a huge yellowtail snapper on board the catamaran they had rented for the day.

They had spent the day snorkeling and swimming in the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea. A private chef came with the rental, and she prepared meals and snacks to keep them fueled throughout the excursion.

With cheers all around, Raheem posed with the catch for pictures.

“We’re eating good tonight,” Alissa said with a little dance.

As the sun was going down, a seagull soared over the water, matching the downward trajectory of a seaplane that flew overhead, slowly descending to land in the harbor. The chef presented their last meal, and the energy of the day gave way to a quiet lull with the approach of nightfall. In addition to the snapper, they ate mounds of beans and rice, lobster, fried plantains, and other local delicacies.

Alissa loved sharing the island’s foods with the men and was amused when Raheem said he would try to smuggle his new favorite fruit—the sugar apple—into the U.S.

Hossam stretched his hand along the back of Alissa’s chair. “I’m going to miss the food most of all.”

“Well, I can fix a lot of these dishes for you.” She bit her bottom lip and smiled at him.

“Whoa,” Hunter said.

Alissa stuck her middle finger at him. “Be quiet.”

Raheem laughed. “If you have Alissa cooking, I’ll say you are the man.”

They all chuckled, and Alissa rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Whatever.”

She took their teasing but deep down knew she and Hossam needed to talk. She had promised him that she would keep an open mind, and as the time wound down for her vacation to end, and he would soon have to return to France, they needed to decide if they were going to move forward as a couple or chalk up the past week to their last hurrah and go their separate ways.

Cruz’s phone rang. “This is Miles,” he announced before answering. “Hello?”

“Cruz, how the hell are you?”

“Winding down after a long day. I have you on speaker, by the way.”

Alissa and the men greeted him with a series of hi’s and hello’s.

“All of you sound happy as hell,” Miles grumbled. “Last time I was in the islands I took my daughter and ex-wife—well, my wife at the time—to St. John.”

“You need to come back,” Alissa said.

“One day I plan to, but listen, I called to give you all an update. The President is very pleased with the work you did and is staying abreast of the investigation. Having an egomaniac try to destabilize the region and take control of the islands was something we couldn’t afford to happen. By exposing Jeremiah’s activities, you allowed us to continue protecting our interests, like the Panama Canal, in the region. Right and left, politicians are distancing themselves from Gracewood and his church. Speaking of which, Harmony Haven Church is under investigation to determine how much of his criminal activity was part of the church culture.”

“All they have to do is refer to the previous allegations they never arrested him for,” Alissa said bitterly. “The church was not only a cover, the leadership was complicit in his crimes.”

“They’re working hard to sort through all the data on the computers and in the files in his office, but it’s going to take time. Senator Hodge has been very helpful in that regard. She didn’t know all the ins and outs of Jeremiah’s businesses, but she knows quite a bit about what he did.”

Alissa didn’t comment. She had gone against her nature by not killing Senator Hodge. There were times when she wasn’t sure she’d made the right

decision, but took consolation in how much information the older woman shared about her solo illegal activities and those with Jeremiah Gracewood.

Her greatest concern was for Jasmine. She had called crying on the phone and apologized for all the horrible things her mother had done, as if *she* had done something wrong. Alissa assured her that she did not in any way hold her responsible for the death of her parents or Teresa's other terrible activities, but Jasmine had been inconsolable. Alissa suspected it would take a very long time for her to digest all her mother's bad behavior. She had essentially lost her parent, and that wound did not easily heal.

"What about Roberto Cofresi's treasure?" Alissa asked.

"That is something the Department of the Interior is still deciding on."

Alarmed, Alissa sat up straight. She didn't like that answer. "The money from the treasure would be beneficial to the islands. There are places that still haven't been restored since the last major hurricane and the money would aid in the restoration."

"I'm only the messenger. What happens to the money they receive from the sale of the gold and silver bars and jewelry is above my pay grade."

Fuming, Alissa folded her arms.

Cruz shook his head in disgust. "That's bullshit. They could at least give a portion to the territory. They should think long and hard about how they want to handle Cofresi's legacy."

Hossam chimed in. "Good point, Cruz. It would be a shame if any part of it went missing."

"Or God forbid, the whole thing," Raheem added.

"Are you really threatening the United States government?" Miles asked in a hushed voice as if worried someone overheard.

"We're expressing our concern about the ramifications of bad decision making," Cruz corrected.

Everyone around the table snickered.

Miles sighed heavily and muttered under his breath. "I will convey your *concerns* to the appropriate party to see how best to resolve this issue."

"Smart move." Cruz winked at Alissa.

Grinning, she said, "Thank you, Miles. One day, all your hard work will be rewarded."

"It better be because you lot give me heartburn. I'll be in touch as soon as I know something." He hung up.

"Thanks, guys. I appreciate what you did," Alissa said. These men were

her family, and as long as they were in her life, she'd never have to fight any battle alone.

"You know we got your back. Besides, this is our island home too now," Raheem said.

Hunter nodded his agreement. "I'm officially a Thomian. Yeah, mon. I'm ready to live here, mon."

Alissa let out an exaggerated groan and lifted her eyes toward the heavens. "Please stop."

The others laughed.

"What? I thought that sounded pretty good. I was close." Hunter looked around the table.

"Stick to physical disguises. You are terrible with accents," Hossam informed him.

Then the entire group had another good laugh as their voices drifted across the water in the early dusk.

Alissa walked through her house to the kitchen and poured a glass of water. Cruz, Hunter, and Raheem were flying back to the States tomorrow and had already gone to bed, but she couldn't sleep. She would miss having them around, but they all needed to return to regular life, which included their significant others, and in Cruz's case, his two little ones too.

She finished the water in the dark and then placed the glass in the sink. She stopped at the entertainment center and picked up the latest framed photograph on the shelf. The chef on the catamaran took a picture of them before night fell. She sat between Hossam's legs, wrapped in his arms as she leaned back against him with her white bikini visible beneath the sheer cover-up, pure joy and contentment on her face. Raheem sat beside Hossam, and Hunter crouched in front of them. Cruz stood behind, like the big brother he'd been over the years. She spent a memorable, fun-filled day with them that she would not soon forget.

She went back through the quiet house and climbed the stairs to her bedroom, smiling as she remembered her eight-year-old self, sneaking out of her room at night to watch television downstairs since her parents never allowed her to have one in her room. Then getting caught the next morning when her mother found her curled up on the sofa, fast asleep. She held those memories close to her heart. One day, she would make the same types of memories with her own kids.

She entered the bedroom and was surprised to see Hossam out of bed and standing in front of the newly repaired window, staring out at the dark

landscape. She walked up behind him, slipped both hands around his waist, and pressed her cheek to his bare back. She savored the sensation of their skin-to-skin contact.

“What are you doing up?” she asked, drifting her hands up the firm flesh of his hair-sprinkled chest.

Hossam caught her hands and pulled her around to face him, his face grim and his dark eyes intense. “I need to know,” he said, his voice low and gravelly.

Alissa dipped her gaze.

With his fist under her chin, he gently lifted her eyes to his. “If you don’t know how I feel about you at this point, there is no reason for us to continue. I will leave, and you never have to see me or hear from me again. But know that nothing—*nothing*—matters in my life without you, and I have done all that I can do to convince you that I am sincere. The ball is in your court, Alissa.”

She’d thought long and hard about their relationship. “I believe you, Hossam. I’ve been miserable without you, and I—”

His mouth fastened over hers as he crushed her against him.

The torrid kiss captured her breath and left her dizzy. When he released her lips, the corners of his eyes crinkled in amusement. “I became too excited. Continue.”

Alissa laughed softly, raising up on her toes and winding her arms around his neck. “I was saying that I’ve been miserable without you, and I don’t want to be apart anymore. I want you to move to Georgia so we can have more time together. So we can wake up beside each other every morning.”

He kissed her again, softer this time. Sweeter. “Make love every night.”

“Mhmm, definitely.” She pecked his mouth and flicked her tongue against his lower lip.

Hossam smoothed a hand over her buttocks and brought her tighter against his erection. “Cook together, run together, train together.”

“Everything together.”

He kissed her again but longer. Her nipples hardened and her core throbbed with damp heat as he deepened the kiss and his tongue did delicious things to the inside of her mouth.

He released her to drag his tongue along her jawline and gently suck her skin.

“Hossam?”

“Mmm?” he replied, sounding distracted.

He was barely paying attention, too busy kissing her collarbone and squeezing her butt cheeks, which made concentration difficult for her too because his actions amped up her arousal.

Alissa held his face in her hands and forced eye contact. “I love you,” she whispered.

He stared down into her eyes as if acknowledging how difficult the confession was for her. Indeed, she felt as if she’d opened her chest and laid her heart bare for him to trample over.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she added, hating the way her voice trembled.

“*Habibti*, I would rather cut off my own arm than ever hurt you again. You have no reason to doubt me.”

His voice, his eyes, the very way he gazed down at her, as if he really would rip off his own arm right then and there if she demanded it, convinced her once and for all that she had nothing to fear. She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

They moved at the same time, their lips coming together in a sweet, sensual kiss. Then he lifted her from the floor and took them to the bed where they made slow, passionate love to each other.



ALISSA WOKE RIGHT BEFORE DAWN. Soon the roosters would crow their welcome to the new day.

For some reason, her Uncle Silas came to mind. Like her father, he was built like a machine—tall and muscular with skin a shade lighter than charcoal. She’d never forget the way he welcomed her into his life with open arms when he came to pick her up at Cyril E. King Airport—a lost teenager whose life had been violently disrupted, living with strangers for a year before a social worker located him in Florida, and he insisted that yes, he would take care of his brother’s orphaned daughter. Had the authorities known the type of life he lived, they would have never allowed him to take her.

But he loved her, cared for her, and treated her like his own child. That’s why she had never been able to let go of her anger and thirst for revenge. The state’s case against her uncle’s killer fell apart. Not enough evidence, they

said, which meant she'd never have justice, so she made her own.

Thanks to Plan B, at twenty-six years old, she was a trained killer with advanced skills she didn't have as a teen. She found the bastard who murdered her uncle, and when the time was right, she entered his home late one night and stood over his bed while he slept. Though rage billowed inside her, she gently tapped his shoulder until he woke up. He startled awake, staring up at her with wide, frightened eyes. He knew immediately who she was and that she'd come to finish the job.

He pleaded for his life, and she yelled at him to shut up. She spent the next three minutes explaining how important her uncle had been to her. Then she slit his throat.

The police never showed up to question her about his death. So much time had passed she wasn't even on their radar. She carried on with her life, secure in the knowledge that she had settled the debt she owed Uncle Silas after he had done so much for her.

Would she also avenge her parents' death by taking Senator Hodge's life? She didn't know yet. If she couldn't get rid of the thirst for revenge, she'd have no choice but to quench it. For now, she was satisfied with the closure of knowing that all the perpetrators in her parents' murder had been brought to justice, and the information the senator relayed to the authorities was dismantling decades of corruption and criminal activity.

Alissa rolled over and gazed at Hossam. He was lying on his back, breathing evenly. She didn't want to disrupt his sleep but couldn't help touching him. She ran her fingers through his soft hair and imagined one day having a kid or two with a blend of both their features, personalities, and kickass fighting abilities.

Hossam turned onto his side, eyes open to mere slits as he blessed her with a lazy, bearded smile. "Are you okay, *habibti*?" he asked, his voice raspy in the early morning.

"I'm fine. I love you." The second time was easier.

"I love you too," he whispered, closing his eyes.

He pulled her closer with an arm around her waist, and Alissa settled into the comfort of his warm body. They had a few more days on the island before she had to return to work and he left for Paris. He planned to permanently move to Georgia as soon as possible, and they'd find a place together in Hopevale.

She flung one arm and a leg around his body and nestled closer. The

future looked brighter than it had in a long time. She could hardly wait for what came next.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Parts of the history of the pirate Roberto Cofresi were embellished, but much of what was included in the story was factual. He did in fact spend time on St. Thomas and claimed to have hidden treasure that was never found. He died on the island of Puerto Rico, and there's a statue of him there commemorating his life.

A very special thank you to Virgin Island historian Enrique "Rico" Corneiro for sharing the story with me and offering feedback on how the legend of his hidden treasure could unfold. To learn more about Virgin Islands history, visit his website at www.lulu.com/spotlight/rcorneiro and check out his books titled *The Danish West Indies in Black and White*, *Rescuing Virgins*, *Runaway Virgins*, *Virgin Islands Storytellers*, *The Coal Women of St. Thomas*, *Passports from the Virgin Islands* and *The Legend of Cowfoot Woman & the Soldier Crab*.

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