

DANGEROUS
Beauty

A DANGEROUS BEAUTY NOVEL

J.T. GEISSINGER

DANGEROUS
Beauty

Also by J.T. Geissinger

Slow Burn Series

Burn for You

Melt for You

Ache for You

Bad Habit Series

Sweet As Sin

Make Me Sin

Sin With Me

Hot As Sin

Wicked Games Series

Wicked Beautiful

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Night Prowler Series

Shadow's Edge

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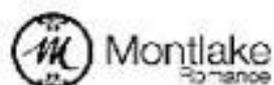
Darkness Bound

Into Darkness

DANGEROUS
Beauty

A DANGEROUS BEAUTY NOVEL

J.T. GEISSINGER



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Published by Montlake Romance, Seattle

www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781542042314

ISBN-10: 1542042313

Cover design by Letitia Hasser

Photography by Reggie Deanching

To Jay.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Women are like roads. The more curves they have, the more dangerous they are.

—*Mae West*

ONE

EVA

Having been followed by men for as long as I can remember, I've developed a sixth sense for it.

A crackle of electricity on the skin. A few pricked hairs on the arms. Animal awareness that brings my surroundings into sudden taut focus, the way a lover's teeth pressed gently against the neck can make the nipples grow hard.

Someone is watching me.

Someone close by.

I don't outwardly acknowledge that fact, though my pulse skyrockets and it becomes impossible to catch a breath. I simply continue browsing through the display of peaches on the wooden stand until I find one perfectly ripe and unblemished, then stash it in the canvas bag slung over my arm, pay the fruit vendor, and continue on my way through the shade-dappled outdoor market.

I force myself not to hurry. Against my hip, the small revolver concealed in the pocket of my full skirt is a cold, reassuring weight.

I knew this day would come. Dimitri never lets me go for long. But this time, I'm not going back.

This time the only way he'll get me back is in a body bag.

Oranges. Mangoes. Loquat and cherimoya, both slightly bruised from their trip over from the mainland, but edible. A few vegetables, then a piece of yellowfin from the fishmonger, and my shopping is finished.

The market is busy, as it always is on a Saturday when the cruise ships dock in the port. Laughing children chase each other over worn cobblestones. Tourists admire overpriced trinkets in a jewelry stall. Swaying in the ocean breeze, hand-dyed scarves hang from a line, as colorful as exotic birds.

I nod hello to a few familiar faces but stop to speak to no one. I have to deal with the tail quickly. My voice would betray my fear, anyway. Turning high and strained whenever I'm afraid, it's the one thing I've never been able to train myself to control.

Fortunately, I don't need my voice to take care of the man following me. All I need are my hands, which are steady, a deserted alleyway, and the weapon hidden in the folds of my skirt.

Like the rest of Mexico, Cozumel suffers from its share of violent crimes. A dead man in an alley will hardly raise an eyebrow.

But he isn't dead yet. My shadow is careful. He keeps an invisible distance as I wind through the maze of fruit stands, flower vendors, and T-shirt stalls, the sun hot on my head and my pulse pounding.

Passing the pickups with truck beds full of watermelons and *pepino amarillo* lined up along the sidewalk outside the market, I quicken my pace. My apartment overlooks the ocean, but I head in the opposite direction, farther into town. My destination is a street notorious for its drug trade, where tourists can buy anything they desire from dead-eyed thugs who'll rob them for their trouble afterward.

Sweating from humidity and adrenaline, I turn a corner, then another, then another. I feel my watcher's steady presence behind me, cold and creeping, like a fog.

A skinny stray dog noses through a pile of trash in the gutter. An old man smoking in the shade of a palm tree squints at me with watery eyes. Pigeons burst into sudden squawking flight from the dirt when I round the next corner, and I start, sucking in a hard breath.

Keep cool. Get it done, then get the bug-out bag and disappear. You've trained for this. You're prepared!

I've never killed a man before, though. I have no illusions that my time spent shooting at trees in the woods will prepare me for the devastation I'll feel after that. And the *blood*—

I curse under my breath and cut off the thought before it can go further. This is no time to get sentimental. Whatever the identity of the man following me, one thing is for certain: he's a mercenary. Dimitri hires only hardened men—ruthless men—and this one will be no exception.

It's him or me. I'll let God decide the degree of my guilt later.

He alone knows my reasons.

I find myself in a narrow alley between two abandoned buildings. The stink of piss and rotting trash sours the air. Flattening myself against the rough brick wall, I drop the canvas bag and draw the gun from my pocket.

Then I wait, holding my breath.

If you want me, come and get me. I've got a surprise for you, friend.

A bead of sweat rolls down my temple. In the stillness of the hot afternoon, my heartbeat sounds like gunfire. I hear the quiet shuffle of feet approaching and raise the pistol.

I nearly shoot the old man in the head.

"Dinero?" he says in a wheezy voice, holding out an arthritic hand.

"My God!" I shout, swaying with horror. "I almost killed you!"

He squints at me again, unconcerned by the gun. *"Dinero?"*

"Go away! *Vete!*" I hiss at him, waving the gun for emphasis.

He sucks his yellowed teeth for a moment, considering me, then wanders off.

I sag against the wall, my hands clammy and my knees shaking, and wait.

And wait.

And wait some more.

When the sun dips lower in the sky and the shadows on the wall above me grow long and slanted, I decide there are only two reasons my stalker hasn't appeared. Either I've lost him—which seems unlikely, because I walked slowly and wasn't evasive—or he was too smart to follow me into an alley. Which means he guessed what I planned to do.

Which means he's still out there somewhere.

I can't risk him following me to where I've hidden my emergency stash of money and new identity papers, nor do I want to risk returning to my apartment on the off chance he doesn't yet know where I live. So, gritting my jaw, I decide on a third option.

If this son of a bitch won't bring the fight to me, I'll bring it to him.

I step out of the alley onto the street.

But it isn't Dimitri's man I encounter.

As I move from the shade of the buildings, it's a drug dealer with gang tattoos from wrist to shoulder who turns to look at me with flat black eyes. He stands across the street with four other men, all of whom stop their conversation and turn to follow his gaze.

The one with the black eyes grins, revealing a mouthful of rotted teeth. "You lost, *chica bonita*?" Radiating menace, he takes a step forward. So do the others.

All the blood drains from my face as my predicament becomes terribly clear.

My revolver holds six bullets.

I can miss only once.

TWO

NAZ

“It’ll be simple,” they said. “Just observe and report,” they said. Your first op, Naz, will be a walk in the park. Get a tan while you’re down there. Drink some beer. Make some easy money by spying on a Russian oligarch’s spoiled runaway wife.

Easy. Sure. Except apparently everyone, including her husband, underestimated this broad to a laughable fucking degree.

Like something out of a Tarantino movie, she strolls out of the shadows of the alley with her chin in the air and a .38 special in her hand. A beautiful woman with crazy pinwheeling eyes, out for blood. I can almost hear the dramatic flamenco guitar in the background.

I shoulda stayed in the celebrity bodyguard business. Babysitting Evalina Ivanova is turning out to be a royal pain in my ass.

“I don’t want any trouble.”

Her voice is surprisingly tremulous for a woman with such a steady grip on her weapon. Such furious, murderous eyes.

Hmm. Maybe she’s not as tough as she’s trying to look.

My new bestie, Diego-the-drug-dealer, is thinking the same thing.

He assesses her with the swift, cagey look of a guy used to staring down the barrel of a gun at least twice before lunch every day. Just a bit of opening banter to establish the pecking order, see who comes out on top. His ugly grin grows wider as he discounts her as a real threat.

He takes another step forward. The scumbag on my left snickers. The one on my right mutters something nasty under his breath.

I sigh. *Here we go.*

“One more step and you’ll be singing falsetto, *amigo*,” says Evalina, lowering her gun slightly so it’s pointed at Diego’s crotch.

“Shut up, you dumb bitch.”

His step doesn’t falter. I imagine he probably gets threats to his family jewels on the regular. Must be on account of all that irrepressible charm.

“I’m serious,” she says, her voice growing higher. “Don’t make me shoot!”

“Are we gonna do this deal or what, man?”

Diego stops in the middle of the street. He looks at me over his shoulder like he can’t decide which one of us he should kill first, her or me.

“No disrespect. But we’re doing business. You can play with your new toy after I get what I came for.” I withdraw a fat wad of cash from the pocket of my shorts and wave it at him like a dare.

Evalina is staring at me like I’m outta my mind. Those big brown eyes, whew. They’re even more stunning up close than through my camera lens. I can see why her husband wants her back so bad.

I wish she’d take her finger off that trigger, though. I have a feeling that if she hears any sudden loud noises, we’re all dead.

“Okay, my man. Business first.” Diego cracks another ugly grin.

For someone with a mouthful of decay, he sure likes to smile.

He shoots a glance to his friend on my left, jerking his chin back toward Evalina like *take care of that*. Then he strolls back toward me while the others make a beeline for her.

Then it all happens fast.

As soon as Diego’s within reach, my fist makes its acquaintance with his nose, which crumbles like a cracker.

Blood sprays everywhere. He bellows and crashes to a knee. His friends wheel around to see what the commotion is. I yank the gun from the waistband of Diego's jeans, kick him in the chest so he topples onto his back, and take aim at the three men standing there gaping at me.

In Spanish I tell them to fuck off or eat lead.

They wisely choose the first option.

They back up slowly with their hands in the air. "You're a dead man," says one of them softly, staring at me with glittering eyes.

"I get that a lot," I say, then kick Diego in the ribs to get him going.

He's groaning and cursing, staggering to his feet and cradling his nose like it's a baby. "You broke my nose, man! My fuckin' *nose!*"

"Boo-hoo. I'll break the rest of your face if you don't move faster. Go join your friends. It's time to say bye-bye."

He sends me a hard, dangerous stare. "I'll remember your face, *gringo*," he promises, backing away.

"You do that, Diego. And I'll remember yours. Won't be hard—it's the ugliest I've seen. Visit a dentist, you fucking degenerate, that shit is disgusting."

He lowers his hands from his face and bares his teeth like an animal. His nose is smashed to a pulp. His black eyes are murderous slits. Blood has stained the top half of his white undershirt red.

Truly, I've seen better-looking roadkill.

Diego and his compatriots retreat to the nearest corner, then they disappear around it at a run.

I pick up my cash from where it fell on the sidewalk and stuff Diego's semiauto into the back of my cargo shorts and pull my shirt over it. Then I glance at Evalina, still standing across the street with her own gun half raised, looking like she's just been electrocuted.

“They’ll be back in a few minutes. This time they’ll all have weapons.”

I let her fill in the blanks, then start off down the street in the opposite direction from where Diego and his friends disappeared.

It kills me not to, but I don’t look back. She can’t think I was there for her. I’m just a dude trying to buy some pot who happens to have some experience handling scumbags, not the guy her husband hired to spy on her. The last thing I want is for her to disappear again, under *my* watch.

Wouldn’t be a great way to start my first gig at my new job.

She catches up to me two blocks later.

“Hey. Hey!”

Flushed and out of breath, she runs up beside me. Glancing down, I’m treated to a spectacular view of tanned cleavage revealed by the neckline of her flowered sundress. Her tits are high and full. Holy shit, her husband is one lucky man.

Stop looking, idiot.

I keep walking. She has to lengthen her stride to keep up.

“What was that back there?”

Oh, just me saving your ass, sweetheart. Let’s not make it a regular thing. “I was trying to score some pot, and you were doing a shitty impression of Annie Oakley. Friendly word of advice—don’t point a gun at a bad guy unless you’re ready to pull the trigger. It generally just pisses ’em off.”

“How do you know that?”

I decide to tell her the truth. I’m crap at lying anyway, but in this case my work history will conveniently explain what just happened. “Used to be a cop.”

“A cop,” she repeats, sliding a doubtful gaze over the tattoos on the inside of my arms that my T-shirt isn’t covering.

“Yup.”

“Used to be? So you weren’t on the job? That wasn’t a sting?”

“Nope.”

“Guess you missed that day in the academy when they taught you not to do drugs, huh?”

“As soon as you’re done criticizing me, smart-ass, you can thank me for saving your life. What the hell were you doing in that alley, anyway?” I take another look at her cleavage. “Oh. Waiting for your pimp?”

She stops dead in her tracks and shouts, “*What?*”

“I’m not judging you, sweetheart,” I say over my shoulder. “Everyone’s gotta make a living. Have a nice life.” I lift my hand, wave, and keep walking.

She catches up to me again after another half block. “I’m not a prostitute!”

“Sure. You just hang out in alleys in the shitty part of town for fun.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I thought someone was following me. I was trying to lose him.”

Christ. That’s why she wandered into this neighborhood? My stealth skills are rusty.

I shrug. “Okay. Whatever. Not my business.”

“Not your business?” She’s incredulous, staring at my profile with heat. “You just made enemies of four drug dealers.”

I shoot her a sour look. “You complaining?”

When she flushes, she looks younger and not quite so sure of herself. “No. Thank you. I appreciate what you did. If you hadn’t been there . . .” She looks away and chews on her lower lip.

I chuckle. “If I hadn’t been there, Diego and his buddies would be full of bullet holes. You woulda been fine.”

In a quiet voice, she says, “Yes to the first part. No to the second. I don’t like violence.”

Something odd in her tone makes me curious. My impression from her dossier was that she is rich, pampered, and spoiled, and has been since birth. How much violence can a woman like her have seen?

“Interesting philosophy for someone who carries a gun.”

“In order to survive, the oppressed must learn the language of their oppressors. And guns are the only language certain men speak.”

Startled by the eloquence of that unexpected statement, I slow my pace and look at her. “Who said that?”

“I did,” she replies, with a look like I’ve insulted her intelligence.

Interesting. Beauty *and* brains. Hope she doesn’t have a sense of humor, too, or I’ll have to hate her husband’s guts. Which would be unfortunate, considering what he’s paying me for this gig.

The sound of car tires squealing makes me glance behind us. An older-model black Caddy with oversize tires and gleaming rims kicks up a plume of dust on the street as it accelerates around the corner. On the passenger side, a guy in sunglasses leans out the window.

I recognize one of Diego’s buddies. He’s got a Kalashnikov semiautomatic rifle in his grip.

It’s pointed at us.

“Shit.”

As the first bullets whiz by our heads, I grab Evalina’s arm and drag her off the sidewalk toward a small white adobe church. The old wooden back doors are locked, so I have to kick them in. They crash open. We run inside the cool gloom, pounding down the aisle toward the altar as the sound of a car screeching to a stop outside echoes through the nave.

In front of the plain altar, Evalina jerks to a stop. She bends a knee, bows her head, and makes the sign of the cross over

her chest.

“Say your prayers later, sweetheart.” I grab her elbow as a spray of bullets pulverizes Jesus hanging from his wooden cross on the wall.

With a yelp of surprise, Evalina leaps to her feet and follows me as I barrel through another door, then another, then finally we’re out on the street again, running through a residential neighborhood. Shouts follow us. We don’t look back.

“Here!” she says, turning down a side street.

She must know where she’s going, because she’s running at full speed, not looking back, her skirt billowing around her legs and her long brown hair flying. I spend a brief second admiring the picture she makes before darting after her.

She makes a series of sharp turns through a maze of yards, follows a thick hedge of scarlet bougainvillea cascading over a wall, then flies through the open back door of a taqueria. We burst into a small kitchen filled with steam.

She shouts an apology to the startled cooks, adding just before she passes through the door to the main dining room that the police are right behind us.

Instantly, two of the cooks slam the door shut, throw the lock, and drag a steel baker’s rack in front of it.

Guess the cops here are as corrupt as their reputation suggests.

The dining room is crowded with tourists and locals chattering and drinking beer. We slow from a run to a walk as we pass through, garnering hardly a glance. Once out on the street again, I recognize where we are. The town square teems with people, and we’re quickly lost in the crowd.

“Nice work,” I tell her as we head in the direction of the outdoor market where I first spotted her. “Remind me to call you the next time I need to make a quick escape.”

“Stop hanging out with drug dealers and you won’t have to.”

She glances at me, brown eyes flashing, and I can't help but smile. "I don't hang out with 'em. I just occasionally make use of their services."

A lie. I hate drugs. But the truth isn't possible.

Her sharp gaze turns assessing. She glances down at my legs, at the slight hitch in my stride. "Pain management?"

It's a convenient excuse, but she's dinged my pride by noticing the limp, so I simply nod and say nothing.

"Have you tried acupuncture?"

I scoff. "Do I look like the kind of guy who'd willingly let some quack stick a bunch of needles in him?"

Her lips turn up. Her gaze meets mine, and her eyes are smiling. "You never know. Appearances can be deceiving. Maybe you're a pot-smoking ex-cop with a needle fetish who also breeds wiener dogs and enjoys the timeless musical stylings of Justin Bieber."

"Oh yeah," I deadpan. "I'm a huge fan of the Biebs."

"Besides, you have tattoos. Isn't that letting someone stick a bunch of needles in you?"

"It's *one* needle. And my tattoo artist would be insulted to hear you compare him to an acupuncturist."

"Oh, excuse me. Your guy is an *artiste*, is that it?"

She's teasing me. We just outran a pack of rabid, gun-toting drug dealers, and she's making jokes.

Who *is* this woman?

Oh yeah—some rich Russian's wife who I'm not supposed to be crushing on.

"Thanks for an interesting morning," I say, slowing next to a fountain surrounded by tourists getting their pictures taken. "But I gotta get going. Be safe, you hear?"

The surprise in her expression is genuine. With that face, she's probably never had a man walk away from her before in her life.

“I will. You too. And thanks again.” She hesitates for a split second. “What’s your name?”

Sunlight glints off her hair, burnishing it to a rich, golden brown. The tips of her long lashes are blonde. Deeply tanned by the sun, her gleaming skin is the color of nutmeg.

“Nasir,” I say, my voice rough. “My friends call me Naz.”

“Then I’ll call you Naz, seeing as how you saved my life. I’m Eva.” She holds out her hand.

We shake, solemnly, as if we’ve made an unspoken pact.

“You take care, Naz. Stay out of trouble.” Her eyes hold mine for a moment past politeness, then she turns and disappears into the crowd.

I stand there until the sun starts to burn the back of my neck, thinking this job is gonna be anything but easy.

I have a terrible feeling that keeping a safe distance from Evalina Ivanova might turn out to be the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

THREE

EVA

I don't feel eyes on me for the rest of the afternoon, but I also don't go back to the apartment or near my bug-out bag, hidden in the belfry of an abandoned church near the docks. I wander the town aimlessly, waiting for darkness to fall and thinking of a handsome man with linebacker shoulders and a slight limp in his gait.

My friends call me Naz, he'd said, his piercing dark gaze full of secrets.

From his skin tone and facial features, I judged him to be Lebanese or Moroccan, though he had no discernible accent. Those tattoos snaking down the insides of his strong arms were definitely Arabic, but his clothing suggested he was an American tourist. If I hadn't seen him take down an armed gang leader with one punch and calmly evade a hail of bullets, I'd have assumed he was just another man on holiday with his family, visiting Cozumel for its famed white beaches and breathtaking dive spots.

Obviously, he's not just another man.

He's a riddle.

I enjoy riddles, which makes me glad I won't ever see him again. The last thing I need in my life at the moment is a complication.

Even if that complication is tall, dark, and handsome and saved my life without breaking a sweat.

I stop at my favorite café on the beach for a beer and fish tacos. From an app on my cell phone, I check the security system at my apartment. Everything is clear. Any movement within a certain radius will trigger the camera, and any breach of the perimeter will trigger an alarm, but no one has tried to break in or gotten too close for comfort.

At least for now.

Pensively watching the waves break and foam on the sand, I wonder if I might've been mistaken earlier. I'd been so sure someone was following me, but I have to admit there is the possibility my paranoia has gotten out of control. The reality is that in the three months I've been on this island, there's been no indication that Dimitri has located me.

I was extremely careful when I left. I covered all my tracks. I meant for this escape to be my final one, and I spared no expense to ensure I was a ghost.

It was reckless that I told Naz my real name. I did it on impulse, without thinking, which isn't like me. But those damn gorgeous dark eyes . . .

No matter. Whoever he is, he'll be gone in days, pulled out with the tide like everyone else. The population of this island is mostly transient, which works well for me. A thousand new faces a week come and go, an ever-changing anonymous crowd one can melt into and hide.

Out of habit, I touch the gun in my pocket, absently thinking that freedom is worth every bit of hypervigilance it's costing me.

Even if it's far lonelier than I imagined it would be.



I spend the next five nights at a cheap motel, watching my place on the security camera, waiting for something to happen. Holding my breath. Dimitri's men are blunt instruments, trained to smash and grab, not patiently lie in wait. So after nearly a week, I'm certain my home hasn't been compromised. If they knew my address, they'd already be there, waiting.

If Dimitri is anything, it's predictable.

Seven years under his thumb taught me that.

Back at the apartment, I can't sleep. I'm jittery and jumpy, wired as if I've had too much caffeine. I pace the floors, restless as a caged animal, ensnared in a web of old memories.

Bad memories.

I decide to go to the local beach shack bar, a place I often visit that's popular with tourists. It's open late and good for people watching. Hopefully it will help distract me from the dust kicked up in my mind by thinking I was being followed and by strangely irrepressible thoughts of the mysterious Nasir.

I haven't been sexually attracted to a man in ages, but something about those eyes . . .

"Cut it out," I mutter to myself as I drag on a pair of faded blue jeans. "You'll never see him again."

Funny how life loves to prove you wrong.

The moment I walk under the thatched roof of Javier's Bar and Grill and look around, I see through the crowd to the beach beyond. His face and half of his body hidden behind a wood column, a man reclines in a white Adirondack beside a firepit in the sand. His bare feet are crossed at the ankles. His arm dangles over the side of the chair. In his hand he holds a glass of amber liquid that looks like whiskey.

From wrist to biceps, a line of tattoos in Arabic snake up the inside of his muscular arm.

I stop, a strange little starburst of excitement fizzing in my belly.

"You can sit anywhere, hon," calls the smiling hostess from a few tables down. "But it's less crowded outside."

Outside it is.

I walk slowly through cheap wood tables, a fine grit of sand beneath my shoes. Jimmy Buffett plays on the jukebox. A group of laughing frat boys down shots of tequila at the bar. When I reach the steps leading to the sand, I pause for a moment, letting the warm salt air play with my hair.

Naz sits in the lounge chair with his eyes closed and a small smile on his face. He's in old jeans, like me, and a simple white T-shirt that showcases every muscle in his stomach. The lines of his big body are completely relaxed, as if he's dreaming of something pleasant.

I wonder if this is what he looks like when he wakes up after a night of lovemaking. I've never seen a man with such a look of satisfaction on his face.

I take the empty lounge chair next to his, shuck off my flip-flops, dig my toes into the sand, and look up at the palm trees swaying gently in the moonlight, their glossy fronds tinged orange from the fire.

"Well, well, if it isn't Annie Oakley." Naz's smile grows deeper, but he doesn't open his eyes. "Shot anyone since I last saw you?"

"No. Break anyone's face since I last saw you?"

He chuckles. It's a deep, sleepy sound, surprisingly sensual, with an edge to it like a purr. "The night's still young. With you around, the odds of a bar fight just went way up."

He cracks open his eyes, turns his head, and looks at me.

I feel that look all the way down to my toes.

"How'd you know it was me?"

He lazily taps his temple. "Spidey senses. I was a cop, remember?"

When I only purse my lips in response, he chuckles again.

"Your perfume. You're the only woman I've ever met who smells like she was born in a patch of night-blooming jasmine."

I lift my brows. "Jasmine is a common ingredient in perfumes."

His gaze holds mine, and his smile never wavers. "Yeah, but it doesn't smell that good on anyone else."

My face flushes. It annoys me, because I'm not a woman prone to that sort of thing. I look away, catch the waitress's eye, and motion for a drink. I have a feeling I'll be needing a strong one.

After I've ordered a rum with lime and no ice and the waitress is gone, I tilt my head back and gaze up at the stars. They sparkle coldly in the sapphire sky, warning me to keep

my distance from the man stretched out beside me. They know I don't have good taste in men.

"I thought you'd be gone by now."

"Nope. Still here."

"Extended vacation?"

Before he answers, he takes a sip from his glass. It seems considered. "More like a hiatus between career transitions."

When he doesn't offer more, I say, "You can't just dangle that out there like that and leave me hanging. We were almost murdered by insane drug dealers together. I deserve a better answer than that."

He presses his lips together, and I can tell he's trying not to laugh. I'm amusing him.

"If you must know, Nosy Nell, I recently left a very high-stress job as personal security for a major celebrity. Now I'm . . . taking some time off to consider my future."

"Personal security? Like a bodyguard?"

"Yup. Like a bodyguard."

I sit up straighter in my chair, intrigued. "Who was the celebrity?"

He groans. "Oh no. Don't tell me you're one of those people who obsesses over the Kardashians and reads *Star* magazine like it's the word of God."

"You're avoiding the question. Spit it out before I squirt lime juice in your eyes."

His shoulders shake with suppressed laughter. I think he enjoys being threatened with citrus fruit.

"Fine. Nico Nyx from the band Bad Habit. Satisfied?"

My eyes grow wide. "Really? Wow. He's *super* famous."

He grouses, "Don't ask me to spill any juicy stories, because I won't."

"You don't have to get defensive, Naz. I wasn't going to ask you to spill any juicy stories. Besides, I can tell you're the

kind of guy who knows how to keep his mouth shut.”

Something sharpens in his gaze. “Yeah? What makes you say that?”

“It’s those secretive eyes,” I say quietly, daring him to contradict me. “I can always tell when a man has seen too much.”

There’s a crackle in the air between us, as sharp as electricity, as dangerous as the edge of a knife. For a moment, I think he won’t answer, but then he does, his voice pitched low and his gaze unwavering.

“Been in the military. Special Ops. Been in law enforcement. Been in personal protection for some high-profile folks. So yeah, I’ve seen a lot. The one thing I’ve learned for sure is that talking about bad shit doesn’t make it any better. Most of the time it’s just salt on old wounds.”

I like that he said that. I like that he didn’t try to make a joke, change the subject, or lie. Especially because I can tell he didn’t want to say it at all, but did because he knew I was looking for something from him. Something like honesty, which maybe between strangers is too much to ask.

“So you’re a protector.”

He blinks, not expecting that response. “Excuse me?”

“All your jobs have been about protecting people. Military. Police. Bodyguard.” When he doesn’t say anything, I add lightly, “Or maybe you just like to play with guns.”

“Look who’s talking, trigger finger,” he shoots back, his easy grin sliding back into place.

He’s more comfortable on less personal ground. I can’t blame him for that. And who am I to be interrogating him, anyway? It’s not like I’m up for a rousing game of Getting-to-Know-You, either. *So, Eva, why are you carrying a concealed weapon? Oh, just in case I have to kill one of my ex-boyfriend’s goons, Naz. Seen any good movies lately?*

Between us, it seems there are a thousand stones better left unturned.

“So what’re you drinking there, cowboy?”

He laughs, and I decide I like that, too.

“Smooth segue. Whiskey neat, ma’am. Simple, like me.”

Simple. Sure. He’s simple like advanced calculus, this one. “I’ve never acquired the talent for drinking whiskey. Or tequila, for that matter. Or gin.” I shudder, remembering one particularly violent hangover after a night of Tanqueray and tonics years ago. My head didn’t clear for days.

“But you like rum.”

“I love rum. Drinking rum makes me feel like Johnny Depp in those pirate movies.”

“Jack Sparrow.”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Ever tried Mount Gay?”

“No. Is it good?”

He looks insulted. “Good? No, it’s not *good*. It’s the best rum in the world. It’s been made in Barbados since 1703 and is the rum of choice for every sailor worth his salt.”

I gaze at him, nonplussed. “You seem to have strong feelings on the subject.”

“I’m gonna order you a Dark and Stormy after you finish what you’ve got.”

“Dark and Stormy? Sounds like my last relationship.”

After a short pause, he says, “Sorry to hear that.”

Great, I’ve made things awkward. Change the subject before you make a fool of yourself. “What’s in this drink besides your world-famous rum? I don’t want anything with an umbrella.”

“An umbrella?” he repeats, horrified. “What kind of man do you think I am?”

The look on his face is priceless. I can’t help myself: I burst out laughing. I laugh so hard I bend over at the waist, clutching my stomach, tears springing to my eyes.

“It wasn’t *that* funny.”

He’s trying to suppress that grin again, looking at me sideways with a sparkle in his eye. I can tell he likes that he made me laugh, and also that he’s conflicted about something. He keeps looking at my mouth, then looking away.

As my laughter dies and I’m wiping my eyes, I say, “You’d tell me if I had spinach in my teeth, right?”

He peers at me, firelight dancing over the angles of his face. “You’re the worst at changing subjects, you know that? No finesse at all. You’d never make it as a talk show host.”

“I don’t know, I think I’d be a good talk show host. I enjoy chatting up strangers, as you can tell. I’d give Marina a run for her money.”

“Never heard of her. Is she on in the States?”

I freeze. My heart starts to pound. I stare down at the drink in my hand, panicked. “Um. I’m not sure. I watch all kinds of random TV shows on satellite.”

I chug the rest of my rum, mentally cursing myself for the mistake. It’s just that I’m so comfortable with him. Something about him makes me let down my guard. But mentioning the name of a popular Soviet television personality is just stupid.

Stupid and dangerous. Especially since I’ve told him my real name.

“Hey.”

Nervously moistening my lips, I glance over at Naz. His face is serious, and his dark eyes are piercing. When he speaks, his voice is low.

“Don’t sweat it. I watch all kinds of random TV shows, too.”

We gaze at each other, and it might be even more dangerous than my slipup from a moment ago. I feel exposed and vulnerable, like my heart is beating outside my chest.

Because he’s not talking about TV shows. He’s talking about secrets—and letting me know in his subtle way that

whatever mine are, they're safe with him.

I'm safe with him.

“Another drink, hon?”

The waitress—thank you, God.

“We need two Dark and Stormies, please,” says Naz, going from serious to smiling in a flash. I'm still recovering, so I don't offer anything but my silence.

“You bet! Anything to eat? Snacks? We make killer popcorn shrimp.”

Naz catches my eye. His smile grows wider. “Killer shrimp? Sounds perfect for us.”

I drop my head into my hands and start to laugh again, this time in disbelief.

“Comin' right up!” The waitress saunters off, leaving us alone again.

“I dunno if you're great for my ego or bad for it,” muses Naz. “Are you laughing *at* me or *with* me? It's a mystery.”

“Oh, *at* you, definitely.” I lift my head and smile at him. “You're nuts.”

He scoffs. “Please. I'm adorable. If you can't appreciate my plethora of remarkable charms, that's on you, sweetheart.” He bats his lashes at me before finishing the last of his whiskey with a flourish.

I'm still smiling when I say, “Plethora? Does my new friend Naz like to show off his vocabulary?”

“Almost as much as I like to show off my muscles. Which would you rather be treated to, a close-up view of my incredible flexed biceps or the definition of *antediluvian*?”

“Better flex, cowboy. I already know the definition of *antediluvian*.”

He looks dubious. “Oh yeah? Prove it.”

“You don't believe me?”

His smile is smug. “You're stalling.”

“Okay, I’ll play your silly game. *Antediluvian* means before the biblical flood.” I toss my hair over my shoulder and smirk at him.

He narrows his eyes at me. “Impecunious.”

I roll my eyes. “Really? We’re going to engage in a vocabulary war?”

“It’s a point of honor that I never fight a battle with an unarmed opponent, so . . .” He folds his arms over his chest, stretches out his long legs, and wriggles his toes, staring at me the whole time with a challenge in his smile.

“Wait. Did you just call me dumb?”

He looks me up and down, head to toe, then purses his lips. “You’re too pretty to be smart.”

I know he’s fucking with me because he’s trying not to laugh again, but this is unacceptable. I’m an educated woman. I speak four languages. I graduated from university at the top of my class.

In other words, it’s on.

“Impecunious.” I spell it for him, just to be bitchy. “Not having enough money to pay for necessities.”

He pretends to be unimpressed, covering a yawn with his hand.

“Okay, big guy. Here’s one for you: puerile.”

His look sours. “Childishly silly. No need to get personal, by the way.”

I beam at him. “Are you going to tell me I’m being intractable? Vituperative? Opprobrious?”

He’s beginning to look alarmed. “Oh Christ. Don’t tell me you’re one of those savants. Are you about to tell me how many hairs I have on my head and what the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow is?”

Without missing a beat, I say, “African or European swallow?”

For the first time since we met, Naz is caught completely off guard. He stares at me with his mouth open and his eyes wide, a genuine look of shock on his face.

“You like Monty Python?”

“Full of surprises, aren’t I?” I send him my most devastating smile and settle back into my chair, enjoying his astonishment.

“Yeah,” he says, sounding disturbed. “You are.”

I don’t know why, but I’ve unsettled him. Maybe he really *does* think all pretty girls are dumb. Then I remember he called me pretty, and that awful flush creeps over my cheeks again. “I’m going to the restroom,” I announce, standing abruptly. “Be right back.”

I walk away before he can say anything. Blowing out a hard breath, I make my way across the sand and through the restaurant toward the restrooms in the back. I have to pass the bar on my way. My stomach sinks when I see two of the tequila-shooting frat boys eyeing me as I approach.

One of them whistles. The other grins and says something under his breath.

I sweep past them without another glance, gritting my teeth and wondering what kind of shitty parents raise boys like that. If I had a son and he acted so disrespectful, I’d knock his head off.

I make sure the door is locked before I use the toilet. Then I wash my hands and dry them, smooth my hair, and emerge from the restroom to find the hallway blocked by two male bodies.

Apparently, the frat boys have decided they want to play.

“Hey, beautiful,” the blond one says, dimples sweetly flashing.

I’m not fooled. Dimitri has a face like a cherub, but he’d slice out your tongue and feed it to his dogs without a second thought.

“Excuse me,” I say, trying to push past.

The blond moves closer, forcing me back toward the bathroom door. His eyes are red, and his breath reeks of tequila. “Where you goin’ in such a hurry? We just wanna talk.”

His friend, a skinny redhead with a sunburn and a goofy smile, says, “Yeah. We just wanna talk.”

He reaches out and squeezes my shoulder.

I freeze.

It’s fury I feel, not fear. These aren’t gang members with guns, but two on one isn’t fair, and I really *hate* bullies.

Staring the redhead dead in the eye, I say quietly, “Get that hand off me or lose it, gingersnap.”

He blinks and laughs a little nervously. “Whoa. Somebody’s crabby. You on the rag or what?”

The blond’s dimples have vanished. His lip has curled to a snarl, and he’s got that look in his eyes that I recognize well. The look of a man about to unleash his temper.

He takes another step closer. I reach around my waist, under my shirt, and close my hand around the butt of my gun. The air goes electric.

Then a calm voice behind the frat boys says, “I’m not missing the party, am I?”

The redhead snatches his hand off me and spins around. The blond jumps to one side as if he’s been electrocuted. Then the big form of Naz materializes from the shadows of the corridor.

He’s got six inches on them both, and probably eighty pounds. He’s smiling, but his eyes are eerie, glinting in the dim light like the flash of knives in a cave.

He looks at the redhead. He looks at the blond. He looks at me.

He growls, “Which one of their necks do you want me to break first?”

FOUR

NAZ

The college pipsqueaks nearly wet themselves. I've never seen a faster retreat, complete with babbled apologies and assurances there'd been a misunderstanding, so sorry, just got lost on the way to the men's room.

The sound of hurried footsteps fades, then it's just Eva and me alone in front of the bathroom door.

She looks angry enough to kill.

"You okay?"

"Yes. Thank you." She inhales a few breaths through flared nostrils, her pulse pounding hard in the side of her throat. "I almost put a hole in the redhead."

"Sounds reasonable. Those freckles of his are extremely offensive."

Her lips twitch with a ghost of a smile. I can tell she's struggling to control her anger. She wasn't afraid of those douchebags. For some strange reason that makes me feel proud.

She's a badass.

A smoking-hot, insanely smart, funny, sweet, and altogether fascinating badass who likes Monty Python, has a heavenly rack, and looks at me with big brown doe eyes that make me forget how to breathe.

And is also married to the Russian billionaire who's expecting a status update first thing in the morning.

Fuck.

I clear my throat and focus. "Drinks came." I jerk my thumb in the direction of the firepit. "You ready for your mind to be blown?"

She looks at me. Really *looks* at me, with warmth and something like awe, as if we're the only two humans in the

universe and we're meeting for the first time. "My mind is already blown, Naz," she says softly, then walks past me without another word, the heady scent of jasmine trailing behind her.

I close my eyes and exhale heavily. *Double fuck.*

After tonight, I can't get close to her again. I need to keep a professional distance.

I spend a moment mentally arguing with myself that it's not my fault she came here tonight. I was just sitting there enjoying my drink and the balmy weather when she wandered in. Unfortunately, my argument is marred by the inconvenient fact that I *knew* she frequented this bar, and I'd been here every night for the past five hoping for a meeting she'd think was mere coincidence.

It's a bad sign that I'm trying to make excuses. It means I'm on the wrong side of my conscience. I know better than to let business get personal.

But this woman. Goddamn. She's a unicorn. The whole enchilada. I didn't think women like her existed outside of the movies.

You've been alone too long, that's all. Get your head straight and get everything but business off your mind.

I drag a hand through my hair, shake my head to clear it, then make my way back to the firepit. I notice with no small satisfaction that all the frat boys have cleared out from the bar.

As I take my seat next to Eva, she's peering suspiciously at the Dark and Stormy the waitress left on the arm of her chair.

"It tastes better than it looks, I promise."

"It's just that it's been sitting here . . . unattended."

She glances up at me, and I instantly understand her meaning. I get a brief, uncomfortable flash of insight into what it must feel like to be a woman forced by experience to be constantly on guard from the other half of the population, who own dicks.

“Let’s order fresh ones.” I dump both drinks in the sand. Eva follows me back inside to the bar. I order another round, and we return to the firepit. I note Eva’s small smile as we settle back into our chairs on the sand.

She takes a sip from her glass, then licks her lips. “Mmm. Ginger?”

“Ginger beer,” I say, nodding.

“Even better.” She takes another sip, then sighs, looking out at the sea.

In profile, she’s so lovely.

Beyond merely pretty, she’s luminous in a natural, unstudied way. Her face is bare and her hair is long and wavy, the ends curling in the humidity, untamed. She wears the simplest of clothes—old jeans and an untucked man’s white dress shirt rolled up at the sleeves over a shell-pink camisole—but she exudes femininity and raw sex appeal.

She doesn’t try to draw attention to her looks in any way, but she draws eyes to her like moths to a flame.

Because beauty will be noticed.

All around us, people are noticing her. Stealing glances. Sending covetous looks. Even some of the women look like they’d like to lick her from head to toe.

How did she think she could hide?

She glances over and catches me staring. “What?”

“I was just thinking how hideous you are,” I say solemnly. “It’s tragic, really. Must be awful, walking around with that face, scaring children. I feel sorry for you. Is there a charity I could contribute to in your name? The Quasimodo Society? The Elephant Man Foundation? I feel moved to help.”

She blinks, the picture of innocence. “That’s so strange! I was just thinking the same thing about you!”

“Excuse me, but I’m extraordinarily handsome. Just ask me.”

She's laughing again, which is becoming one of my favorite things. "You're demented."

"I think you mean dashing."

"More like disfigured. You're frighteningly large. Do you suffer from gigantism?"

A grin spreads slowly across my face. "Only in certain areas, sweetheart." I set my drink on my crotch, send her a meaningful look, then turn my gaze to the stars.

She laughs for a long time, with helpless abandon. I feel the strangest urge to leap to my feet, pound my chest, and let rip a crazy Tarzan yodeling yell.

The waitress arrives with our shrimp. "Here you go, guys." She hands an overflowing plastic basket to Eva. To me she gives two small plates and paper napkins, then she turns her attention back to Eva. "How're you liking your Dark and Stormy, Thelma? Tasty, isn't it?"

Eva freezes for a moment, then forces a smile. "Yes. It's really good. Thanks, Maria."

"Great! Let me know when you're ready for another!" The waitress leaves.

There's a pause in the music as the jukebox inside changes songs. Eva stares at the basket of shrimp in her hands with intense focus, as if she's wishing she could disappear inside it.

"You gonna hog all the food, or can I have some?" I offer one of the plates, but I'm really offering her a chance to let the moment pass. I already knew she went by a different name, but I still can't figure out why she told me her real one.

She turns to look at me, and all the laughter from moments before has vanished from her eyes. The firelight dancing over her face shows how pale she's suddenly become.

"Eva's my middle name—"

"You don't owe me any explanations," I say, holding her gaze. Then I smile. "My real name is actually Wilbur."

"*Wilbur?* No. You're lying."

“Yes, I am.” I sigh dramatically. “It’s Dudley. But don’t tell anyone—I’m embarrassed.” I grab the basket, shake a few fried shrimp out onto a plate, then hand it to her with a couple of napkins. “Get ’em while they’re hot. Nothing worse than cold killer shrimp. Okay, maybe reheated french fries, but not much else.”

There’s a fine tremor in Eva’s hand as she takes the plate from me. I ditch the other plate on the sand and start to eat from the basket with my fingers, settling back into my chair. “Mmm. Delish. I don’t think I’ll let you have any more. You should really be watching your figure. Another few pounds and you’ll be recruited by the circus.”

After a long moment of silence, Eva says quietly, “You’re a very nice man.”

“*Nice?*” I retch. “Christ, stab me in the heart, why don’t you?”

From the corner of my eye, I see her tentative smile.

“I mean, *virile*, I’ll grant you. Charming, obviously. And breath-stealingly sexy goes without saying.”

“Breath stealing? Have you been reading romance novels again?”

Without an ounce of sarcasm, I say, “*Twilight*’s my favorite. Edward’s so *swoony*, don’t you think?”

“Oh sure. All that glittering white skin and an overpowering urge to drink your blood. What’s not to love?”

“And the age difference isn’t creepy *at all*,” I insist, popping another shrimp into my mouth. “So he’s like a hundred and she’s not even old enough to vote? Love conquers everything!”

“Definitely. Just ask Romeo and Juliet.”

“Maybe if Romeo had been a hundred-year-old vampire, things would’ve turned out differently.”

“Yeah, Shakespeare really screwed that up. Too bad he’s dead, or we could send him a strongly worded letter about how dumb he is.”

We grin at each other. I say, “Totally,” and hold out the basket of shrimp.

“I thought I was supposed to be on a diet,” she teases.

“Well, big asses are in fashion right now, so . . .”

She pretends to be offended. “After everything we’ve been through, did you *really* just tell me I have a big ass?”

“Sweetheart, your ass is so huge it should have its own zip code. Eat up.”

She’s trying hard not to laugh as she takes the basket from me, and I have that feeling again, the one where I want to jump up and beat my chest. Making her smile is addictive. It gives me a hard, heady rush, like I’ve snorted cocaine.

I barely remember this feeling. Only once before in my life have I ever—

Get away from her. Now.

Cold like a slap in the face washes over me. This isn’t just stupid, what I’m doing. What I’m feeling, sitting next to her, soaking up her glow.

This is dangerous.

This is wrong.

“Are you okay?”

She’s watching me, taking in the expression on my face with those beautiful eyes, noting the sudden tension in my body. That’s dangerous, too, because it means she’s as attuned to me as I am to her . . . and the last thing either of us needs is for this feeling to be mutual.

“I just remembered I’m late. I have to go.” I stand abruptly, grabbing my shoes from beside the lounge chair and shaking out the sand.

“Go? Now? Where?” Confused, Eva looks around, then up at me, standing over her with my shoes in my hand, getting ready to bolt like a crazy person.

“I have an appointment.” I edge away, avoiding her searching eyes. “I’ll square up our tab on the way out. See you around.”

I turn and walk away before she can utter another word. I pay the tab at the bar, then get out of there as fast as I can.

After two blocks, I turn back.

I find a dark spot between two parked campers down the road from the bar and wait in the shadows until I see her emerge, about twenty minutes later. Then I follow at a distance, watching to make sure she gets back to her apartment safely.

Once she’s inside with the door locked and the curtains drawn, I breathe easier. But there’s still a strange tightness in my chest. Tightness that doesn’t leave, even after she’s turned off all the lights.

Even after the first faint gray wash of dawn creeps over the horizon.

Even after I’m back in my own bed, staring at the ceiling as a new day begins.



“How is our connection? Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” I say, staring into the screen of my laptop. Staring back at me is a man sitting behind an ornate mahogany desk, wearing a \$5,000 black suit. His black silk tie is cinched tight around the collar of his black dress shirt. Though he dresses like a mortician, there’s something boyish and sweet about his face. Fine blond hair and a pair of pouty lips accentuate the innocent effect. He looks like a painting of an angel.

His eyes, though. I’ve always thought there’s something wrong with his eyes. They’re as freezing blue and empty as an Arctic sky.

“Excellent. Proceed.”

I hit a button to upload the photos I’ve snapped of Eva since my last report to Dimitri, one week ago. They flood the screen.

He clicks on each one, wordlessly examines it for several seconds, then goes to the next. When the screen is cleared of images, he smooths a hand down his tie and exhales a controlled breath.

“She has a job.”

From his tone, I can tell he isn't pleased with this development. “Yes. Part time, four days a week.”

Dimitri clicks back to the series of photos that show Eva in a bikini and a life vest leading a group of kids with boogie boards toward the water. “What is she doing?”

“It's a swim-with-dolphins experience for tourists.”

Something ugly flashes in the depths of his cold blue eyes. He says hollowly, “How apropos.”

I don't allow any emotion to cross my face, but I think it's funny, because Eva didn't just run away from Dimitri. She *swam* away. Jumped off their mega yacht in the middle of the night and swam for shore, evading the bodyguards prowling the decks. No one knew she was gone until her husband woke the next morning and found an empty space beside him in bed.

It was miles, that swim, in frigid water. She must've prepared well, not only strengthening her body, but calculating exactly how long she could survive in what temperature before hypothermia set in.

She must've really wanted to leave.

Up to now, I haven't allowed myself to wonder about her reasons. It wasn't my business. It had no bearing on my job. But after spending some time with the force of nature that is this man's runaway wife, I'm gripped by an urgent need to know the details.

I literally have to bite my tongue to stop myself from asking questions. When I taste a metallic tang in the back of my throat, I realize I've drawn blood.

“No matter,” says Dimitri, folding his hands in his lap. “Whatever they're paying won't be enough. She's used to a

life of luxury. This little excursion into the workforce will grow tiresome soon.”

I say nothing, because a response isn't required.

He's insisted from the start that she'd come back to him as soon as she ran out of money. This isn't the first time she's disappeared, but Dimitri's under the impression that if he gives her some rope and doesn't force her to return right away, she'll grow bored with having to do her own laundry and make her own food and take out the trash like the rest of us.

I'm not so sure. She seems awfully content with her simple clothes and her simple life here on this simple island.

I think maybe the other times she disappeared whetted her appetite for freedom.

I think this time she meant to stay disappeared for good.

“What about men?” Dimitri asks abruptly, drumming his fingers on the desktop.

I don't have to ask for clarification of his meaning. “No. No close friends, either. She keeps to herself. The only people she interacts with are at her job or at the market, or waitstaff if she goes out to eat. Her phone records show nothing unusual. Same with her internet use.”

I don't tell him about the interesting tidbit I found in her Google history this morning, because I can't. I'm sure he'd have some uncomfortable questions for me if I disclosed his wife had entered *meaning of the name Nasir* into the search engine.

I still haven't quite recovered from it myself.

“*Otlichno*,” says Dimitri, nodding his head, which I take to mean something along the lines of *good*. Then he pins me with a look of such strange intensity I feel it right through the computer screen from more than six thousand miles away.

“I don't have to tell you that I'm trusting you with my most precious asset, Mr. Mansouri. I appreciate your diligence. I will communicate my satisfaction to Mr. Hughes.”

“Thank you, sir,” I say stiffly. *What kind of man refers to his wife as an “asset”?*

The none-of-your-fucking-business kind, that’s who.

“I’ll expect another report from you at the same time next week, unless anything significant happens in the meantime. And, Mr. Mansouri?”

“Yes, sir?”

Like a cyborg’s, Dimitri’s blue eyes burn with cold fire. “Don’t let her out of your sight.”

He signs off without waiting for my response, because kings don’t need to be polite to the peasants.

I sit there for a moment, staring at the walls of my empty apartment, until finally I pass a hand over my face and mutter, “Shit.”

It perfectly it sums up my mood, the situation, and my opinion of the character of one baby-faced Russian billionaire with dead eyes.

FIVE

EVA

The days blend together.

Island time crawls compared to time anywhere else. Slow mornings give way to long, lazy afternoons that blend seamlessly into sultry tropical nights. Only the hours at work distract me from nagging thoughts of that night weeks ago at Javier's with Naz. How wonderful it was. How easy it was to be in his company. How he saved me from danger—again.

How abruptly he left.

I thought the momentary horror of the waitress speaking my assumed name had blown over, that he was letting it roll as he did with so much else, but suddenly he was on his feet and out the door with awkward apologies, avoiding my eyes.

Who could blame him? The first time he saw me, I was emerging from an alley with a gun. Then the name thing . . . he probably went back to his original opinion that I'm a prostitute.

If he ever changed it in the first place.

I'm unreasonably depressed about the whole situation. We only met twice, but he was the first person I've felt comfortable with since I fled to this island, and the first man I've felt safe with in my life.

I try not to wonder if he's married, but I fail at that, too.

He doesn't wear a ring, but some men don't. He didn't mention a wife, but then again I never asked. I *thought* there was an attraction, but maybe the man is simply an effortless flirt. Maybe our easy connection was nothing more than wishful thinking on my part.

Maybe he hasn't given me a second thought.

Maybe I should get off this bench, because my knees are killing me.

With a sigh, I rise from the wood pew where I've been praying for the better part of an hour, make the sign of the cross over my chest, then raise my gaze to the wall behind the altar.

A simple wood cross hangs between two rustic stained-glass windows ablaze with color in the morning light. There are many churches in this devout country, but the modest ones are my favorites. The small, quiet ones, where no one gets special treatment for the large tithes they give, because everyone is equally poor.

I have to squeeze my eyes shut to block out an image of Father Guryev bowing to Dimitri as we arrived for Sunday services. *Bowing*. All that money he tithed was being laundered, of course, but the priest certainly gave him credit for the effort.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, but Dimitri found a loophole.

He was always finding loopholes. With God and everyone else. There's no law in heaven or on earth that he couldn't find his way around, which was one of the things that made him so dangerous.

Makes, I correct myself. *Present tense*. *He and his temper are still out there, somewhere, no doubt scouring every corner of the planet for me.*

I shudder at the thought, say a final silent prayer for protection, then exit the pew, genuflecting in the aisle. Then I start the short walk from the church to the outdoor market, squinting in the bright light, enjoying the feel of the sun on my shoulders and the sweet scent of plumeria perfuming the air. I don't have to work today and am planning on making ceviche for lunch.

I'm chatting with the fishmonger about the freshness of the tilapia when I spot him.

Across the market, at the fruit vendor I don't shop from because she's too expensive, Naz stands with his back to me.

He's browsing through a display of mangoes, picking one up and examining it before setting it back and picking up another. He's in beige cargo shorts, sandals, and a white T-shirt, and could be anyone.

Except for those broad shoulders. Except for all that thick black hair. Except for the tattoos on the insides of both his arms, sinuous flashes of black ink as he moves.

I'm so surprised to see him I just stand there, staring. Enjoying the view.

His ass is a thing of beauty.

Hard man buns really don't get the recognition they deserve. Michelangelo could've carved Naz's ass, it's so tight and round and—*he's turning!*

Before I can look away, Naz swings around. As if he knew exactly where I was standing, he finds me instantly. His gaze locks onto mine.

In his jaw, a muscle flexes. A crease forms between his dark brows.

He's not happy to see me.

Flustered, I look away and point to the piece of fish I want. I pay for it and grab the paper-wrapped parcel, then head over to the vegetable vendor I like for the ingredients I'll need to finish the ceviche. I hurry through my shopping with my heart beating too fast and my stomach in knots.

Calm down. Deep breaths. Don't look over your shoulder.

I'm digging through my handbag for exact change when a pair of sandaled feet walk up and stop next to mine.

"I see you haven't lost any weight since we last met," says Naz, casually picking up a tomato.

I glance over at him. When I see his dark look has disappeared and he's smiling, I release a slow breath. "The circus called. They're going to make me a star. Eva the Amazing Elephant Girl. They want you, too, by the way. Something about a giant bad-mannered beast? I think they're making you a special cage."

“Giant *charming* beast.” He turns his head to look down at me with a dazzling smile.

My heart does a funny little flip underneath my breastbone. I look away, flustered all over again. “Please. You’ve got about as much charm as a litter box.”

Naz throws back his head and laughs, loud enough to startle the woman behind the vegetable display.

God, he’s good looking. I try not to stare at the strong column of his throat or notice how good his skin looks with that tan, but it’s futile. I give up and drink him in.

This might be the last time I’ll ever see him. Better make sure I remember all the details for later, when I’m alone in bed.

He grins at me, dark eyes sparkling. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“How are you?”

“I’m well, thanks. You?”

He nods. “Doing good.”

“I’m not a prostitute.”

The woman behind the display waiting to help Naz with his order takes the opportunity to remove herself to a different part of her booth.

Naz lifts his brows and considers me for a moment. “Been wanting to set me straight about that, have you?”

“Are you married?”

He starts to laugh again. “God, you’re *terrible* at this. We’re gonna have to teach you the fine art of small talk, sweetheart. This is just sad.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

When he sees the look on my face, he stops laughing. “It’s a no.” His expression changes. “Was that a proposal?”

“Also a no.” I smile at him. “But I’m happy to see I’ve terrified you. I didn’t think it was possible.”

Feeling much better, I go back to browsing through the tomatoes.

“So, *Thelma*,” says Naz, loudly enough for the shopkeeper to hear, “do you recommend the heirlooms or the Romas? I can never decide which are better.” Then, lower, meant only for me: “Awful choice, by the way. You’re as much a Thelma as I am a Dudley.”

Startled, I look up at him.

He winks.

The man *winks* at me.

“Congratulations,” I say when I’ve recovered my wits. “You’re the first person to ever shock me into speechlessness.”

“Cool. Do I get a prize? A blue ribbon? Scratch that, I’d like a statue. Like the kind they give out at the Oscars. Yeah, that’d look great on the mantel above my fireplace. Oh wait. I don’t have a fireplace. So the blue ribbon will work.”

He holds up a yellow heirloom tomato to the shopkeeper. “I need three just like this. Pick ’em out for me, will you please?”

She nods, happy to help. When Naz turns his attention back to me, he finds me gazing at him in deep concentration.

“Whoa. That’s some look. What’s going on in that big fat head of yours, Thelma?” He snaps his fingers. “Wait, lemme guess. You’re thinking about dessert, right? You big girls are always thinking about dessert.” He looks over my head, his gaze sweeping the breadth of the market. “I thought I saw a doughnut stall . . .”

“I meant *kind*, the last time I saw you.”

Naz looks at me, shaking his head. “Christ. This is like verbal whack-a-mole. I never know what’s gonna pop up next.”

“When I said you were nice. I meant to say kind. They’re two different things.”

He stares at me for a long time, his jaw working. Then he draws a deep breath and looks away. “Yeah. I’m a regular

saint.”

His tone is bitter. I’ve said the wrong thing, upset him, but I don’t know how.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, my throat constricting with embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to offend you.” I throw some bills on top of the crate of tomatoes and turn away. I can’t take three steps before the big form of Naz is in front of me, blocking my path.

“Hold on. Don’t run away so fast.”

I stand there miserably, staring at my feet. *Why did I think I could make a friend? He’s right—I’m terrible at this. I make everything awkward.*

“Hey.” He puts a knuckle under my chin and raises my head. When he sees my expression, his eyes soften. “Aw fuck. I’m sorry. Don’t pay any attention to me, I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. You’re a kind, funny, wonderful man, and I’m not used to . . .” I moisten my lips and look away, unable to continue.

Naz says softly, “You forgot handsome.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “Right. Sorry. Breath stealing, wasn’t it?”

“Exactly. For such a troll, you’ve got a really good memory.”

I look at him, and that fluttery feeling under my breastbone comes back. “Like an elephant, you could say.”

He presses his lips together. His eyes are shining. He nods, holding back laughter. “Eva the Elephant Girl strikes again.”

“Shut up, Beastie. Get back in your cage.”

“Your tomatoes, sir!”

We turn to see the woman at the vegetable stand holding out a brown paper bag.

Naz says to me, “Don’t move,” and strolls over to pay her.

Stop staring at his ass, pervert. I squint up into the sun instead.

When he comes back to me, he says, “I had a thought.”

“Really? I’ll alert the media.”

“Smart-ass,” he says, but he’s smiling. With his mouth and his eyes, pretty much with his entire body. He’s so warm. So open. To me, this kind of sweetness in such a big, tough guy is utterly disarming.

A wave of longing comes over me. Longing and desire, both so sharp I can hardly breathe. “Does this thought of yours have anything to do with us spending more time together? Because I think I really like you.”

He slow blinks. It’s comical. Even funnier is watching him trying to regain his composure.

Well, we can’t have that.

Looking him straight in the eye, I say firmly, “Actually I *know* I really like you. I’m very attracted to you. What do you think of me?”

He almost drops his bag of tomatoes. “Jesus Christ,” he says faintly.

“Life is short, Naz, and full of pain. When I die, I don’t want to have any regrets. And not telling you how much I like you would definitely be a regret.”

His breathing changes. His jaw grows tense. He stares at my mouth for a moment, then looks back into my eyes. “You asked me if I was married, but I haven’t asked you.”

That’s a little off-putting. “If I were married, I never would have said those things. Marriage is sacred.”

“So that’s a no?”

Something in his expression tells me he doesn’t believe me. He thinks I’m lying.

That hurts so much I want to kick him in his shin.

“It’s an unequivocal no. I’m not married. I’ve never been married. And if I ever do get married, it will be for life.”

He tilts his head back and gazes down at me through half-lidded eyes.

“Why don’t you believe me?”

“Because you’re too beautiful to be single,” he says, his voice low and rough, his eyes suddenly burning. “Too beautiful, too smart, and too . . . fucking . . . perfect.”

I feel like a cat that’s been stroked down its back. “So you like me, too,” I whisper, gazing up at him with my heart in my throat.

He closes his eyes and deeply inhales, like he’s searching for strength. “I . . . I . . .”

“What, Naz?” I step closer to him, drawn as if magnetized.

He opens his eyes, sees me standing closer, blanches, and steps back. He blurts, “I’m celibate!”

My mouth stays open for a long time. Finally I say, “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Groaning, he squeezes his forehead. “You’re not the only one.”

“Don’t feel embarrassed, please. I respect your choice. I can’t say I’m not disappointed, but I respect it. Is it, um . . .” I hesitate before finding my nerve. “Is it for religious reasons?”

Naz laughs, but in a way that’s not happy. He looks mortified, in fact, and keeps shaking his head, as if in disbelief. “Oh yes. I took a vow of celibacy for religious reasons. And now I’m celibate. I don’t have sex.”

I don’t understand why he sounds so sarcastic. This is all very confusing. But I suppose he didn’t want to tell a stranger the most intimate details of his life?

Yes, that must be it. I got flirtatious with him and almost slobbered all over the poor man in public, forcing him into an unplanned confession, and now he’s feeling embarrassed for both of us.

Leave it to me to be physically attracted to probably the only grown man within a thousand miles who doesn't ever have sex. *By choice.*

Typical. If I didn't have bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all.

I decide to make light of the situation to try to put him at ease. "This is actually a huge relief. Now I won't have to worry about that awkward first kiss. We can be like girlfriends!"

Closing his eyes, Naz whimpers.

My tone turns serious. "Listen. I meant it when I said I respect your choice. I happen to be deeply religious myself. If I didn't have my faith, there's no way I would've survived the absolute hell of the past seven years of my life."

Naz opens his eyes and stares at me. He doesn't blink. It makes me nervous, so I start to babble.

"I promise I won't bring up the subject again, because I can tell you're a private person, but I'd really like us to be friends, if that's possible. I don't have many friends. Any friends, truthfully." I clear my throat, embarrassed by how pathetic that sounds. "It would just be nice to have someone to talk to once in a while."

He's not saying anything. He's only staring at me in this weird, tense silence, his gaze darting all over my face. My confidence starts to falter.

"I mean . . . if you want to."

He's thinking so hard it looks painful. Now I'm the one who's mortified.

"Okay, look, I'm going to give you my phone number." I dig through my handbag for a pen. Then I tear off a small edge of the brown paper from my packet of fish and scribble on it. "If you ever want to hang out, call me. If not, I understand."

He looks at the piece of paper I hold out as if it's a grenade. After a long, horrifying moment where I think he's not going to take it from me, he finally does. He folds it in half and

carefully tucks it into one of the pockets on the side of his cargo shorts.

I turn and walk away before he can see the relief on my face.

I've already humiliated myself enough for one day.

SIX

NAZ

I've been in some rough spots in my life. I've been shot. Stabbed. My car has been rammed at maximum speed by a lunatic intent on killing me. Hell, only last month I was chased down by a gang of drug-dealing maniacs.

But somehow restraining myself from dialing Eva's phone number is right up there with the toughest shit I've ever done.

I tacked the small brown piece of paper she gave me on the wall next to my bed, like prisoners do with pictures of their loved ones on the outside. It's a reminder of what I don't have. What I can never have. What I should forget about.

It would be a helluva lot easier if my *job* wasn't to follow and record her every move.

Day in, day out, watching her walk, watching her work and eat and shop, watching her tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. Watching her body move beneath her clothes. Watching every man around her stop and stare as she walks by.

At this point, prison would be a relief. There'd be bars and guards between us. I wouldn't have to rely on willpower.

Fickle, fading, fuck-all willpower.

And you call yourself a soldier. You're a pissant, boy! You make me wanna puke!

I almost wish Master Sergeant McCall were screaming insults into my face right now. For some reason, all the shit he rained down on my head during basic training really motivated me to try harder. To prove him wrong.

The military knows how to turn boys into men. To weed out the weak. Unfortunately, a little seed of weakness must've remained inside the soil of my soul, because I can't.

Stop.

Thinking.

About.

Her.

With every day that passes, it's only getting worse.

Finally, after three weeks, I break.

“Hello?”

I close my eyes and listen to my heart bang for a few seconds before I'm steady enough to say anything. “Hi, Eva. It's—”

“Naz! You called!”

Fuck. She sounds happy. More than happy—thrilled. This woman has no game. There are no pretenses. Everything she feels and thinks is written on her face and rings in her voice. She doesn't hide anything. She doesn't even *try* to.

That's so appealing to me I wanna drop the phone, climb the thorny plumeria trellis to her second-story beach apartment, smash through the patio door, and crush my mouth to hers.

This is so bad.

“Yeah,” I say gruffly, staring at the floor. I'm sitting on the edge of my bed. It's late afternoon. The sun is slanting through the windows, and the room is stifling hot. At least that's the excuse I'm using for why I'm drenched in sweat.

Eva says softly, “I was hoping you would.”

Hang up. This is impossible. What the hell am I doing? Have I lost my mind?

After a long pause where neither of us speaks, she clears her throat. I remember that's what she does when she's trying to gather her thoughts, and knowing that small, intimate detail of her personality makes my chest ache with the need to know so much more.

To know everything.

HANG UP!

“Because they're showing *Monty Python's Life of Brian* at the Cinépolis on Centro. How crazy is that? Anyway, it made

me think of you. I was hoping we could see it together.”

Oh God. Don't say it. She's gonna say it.

“C'mon. Don't leave me hanging.”

I hear the laughter in her voice and have to relent. “African or European swallow?”

“No, silly. Biggus Dickus!”

I sit there with my mouth open, stunned, until I start to laugh. “You've gotta be fucking kidding me.”

I'd forgotten all about that scene in the movie. A gay, lipping Pontius Pilate reduces his centurion guard to helpless tears of laughter talking about his “special friend” Biggus Dickus from Rome. Or “Wome,” as he pronounces it. It's one of the top ten classic Python skits of all time.

“Hey, you're the one who claimed his genitals were affected with gigantism. By the way, for someone so religious, you sure have a dirty mouth.”

“And you sure like sacrilegious movies for someone so devout.”

“It's not really sacrilegious—it's just satire. Besides, God wants us to laugh.”

“Not sure I agree with you there.”

“It's true! It's why he created wiener dogs and Wine Wednesdays.” Her voice grows dry. “And grown men who wear cargo shorts.”

I laugh until I'm breathless, dizzy with an unidentifiable feeling. Something like happiness, only way more intense. “Cargo shorts are utilitarian! And manly!”

“Oh no. You're sadly mistaken, Dudley. Cargo shorts are one of the worst fashion trends that emerged from the nineties. They're a humiliation for any man over the age of twenty-one.”

“They're like purses are for women! We need pockets for our stuff! They're cool!”

“No one needs that many pockets. And I have absolute, unequivocal proof that they’re not cool. You ready?”

“Yes,” I say, still laughing. “Bring it.”

“James Bond would never wear them.”

I flop onto my back on the bed and grin at the ceiling. “Okay, sweetheart. You got me.”

“Ha!” she shouts, exultant. “I win! Now you *have* to go to the movies with me since I so easily annihilated you with my superior intellect.”

“Whoa! Hold on, Annie Oakley, nobody said nothin’ about ‘superior’ anything, okay? I’m superior in all kinds of ways. It’s like my superpower. Superior Man, at your service. I can leap tall buildings in a single bound. Or at least a one-story apartment building. Okay, maybe a garbage can. I don’t wear blue fucking tights, though—that’s where I draw the line.”

On the other end of the phone, her voice grows quiet. “I’ve missed you, Dudley. I’m really . . . I’m . . .” She takes a deep breath. “Thank you for calling. It’s so great to hear your voice.”

I close my eyes. I imagine she closes hers, but I can’t be sure. For a while we do nothing but listen to each other breathe.

Outside, a dog barks. The lonesome cry of a seagull wheeling over the breaking waves tugs on something in the center of my chest. The place where I keep confined all my deepest, most secret desires.

This moment feels significant, and I’m desperate to understand why.

I hardly know her. We’ve met a mere three times. And yet, somehow, the compass of my heart is slowly turning toward her, readjusting its measure of true north.

Abruptly and far too loud, I say, “We can’t be anything more than friends.”

After a short pause, she says, “Geez, slow down, Romeo. Who said I wanted to be anything more than friends? I don’t

even want to be seen in public with you because of your embarrassing wardrobe. That's why I invited you to a nice dark movie theater."

"Sorry. Fuck. That was . . . it's just that I . . ."

"I know. You're celibate. We've already been over this." Her voice is gently teasing. "I promise I won't do anything seductive."

"Sure. Better wear a burka."

"Was that a compliment?"

Oh shit, I said that out loud. "I meant because you're so ugly. We don't want you getting kicked out of the movie theater for scaring the staff."

She laughs softly. "No, we certainly don't. Are you available tonight? There's a seven o'clock showing."

Don't do it. Back out. It's not too late. Instead of listening to logic, I hear myself say in a thick voice, "Yes. I can't wait."

"Okay, but you're buying the popcorn."

"Why do I have to buy the popcorn? Because I'm the man? That seems kinda sexist for such a modern woman like yourself."

"Not because of your gender. Because of your size. By the looks of you, it's going to take a serious financial investment to make a dent in your appetite, and I just don't have that kind of cash. Meet you in front of the theater, Dudley. Don't be late."

She hangs up, leaving me grinning at the ceiling.

For such a bad decision, I'm ridiculously happy about it.



I've been pacing outside the entrance to the theater for more than twenty minutes when she shows up in a yellow cotton sundress with little white daisies all over it. She looks like hope, sunshine, and everything pure and good in the world.

"Look at you," she says, giving me a smiling once-over as she takes in my tan linen pants and short-sleeved white linen

shirt. “You almost look like a grown-up. No cargo shorts in sight.”

“Burned ’em all. Where’s your burka? You’re making my eyes bleed.”

We grin at each other.

“Have you been here long? I thought I was going to be the early one.”

“Nope,” I lie. “Just walked up before you did. There’s a line, though, if you can believe it.” I nod at the small queue of people waiting to buy tickets.

“It’s okay, I already got our tickets.” She pats her handbag. “I came right after we got off the phone.”

When I cock a brow, a faint blush stains her cheeks, but she doesn’t try to make an excuse. She doesn’t try to pretend she wasn’t so excited to see me she made a special trip hours in advance. She just says primly, “Shut up,” and takes my arm.

As we walk past the ticket line, heads turn to look at her. I feel a jolt of protectiveness and have to take a slow breath to manage it.

She’s not yours. She’ll never be yours. Besides, you’re CELIBATE, remember?

You fucking moron.

I still can’t believe I blurted out that bullshit excuse. But at the time, she had every wire crossed in my brain. I opened my eyes and she was standing so close, gazing up at me with this look—this hungry, hopeful look—I had to say something to backtrack.

Go big or go home, as they say.

Still. I’d like to kick my own ass for it.

Inside at the concession stand, I buy popcorn and sodas from a chubby cashier who gapes at Eva like a starstruck teenager. He stops when I send him a hard stare. Then we make our way into the dim cinema and find seats.

It isn't until we're sitting side by side, contentedly munching on popcorn, that it occurs to me I might not be able to say no if she wants to do this again.

This or something else dangerously date-like.

I almost had myself convinced as I was getting dressed that this would be it. Tonight would be a one-off, and tomorrow I'd get my shit together and tell her I was going back to the States so I wouldn't be tempted to see her again.

But now, sharing an armrest, sharing her space, smelling the sweet, warm scent of her skin, I can't lie to myself.

I'm in serious danger of doing anything she asks me, consequences be damned.

"I can't remember the last time I went to the movies," she says, tossing a handful of popcorn into her mouth. Several kernels miss, tumble down the front of her chest, and get stuck in her cleavage.

"Oops." She brushes at the stuck pieces, trying to dislodge them. Unfortunately, her fingers are covered in melted butter, which smears over her skin. Now I'm staring at the upper curve of her breasts, slick with grease I'd kill a man just for a chance to lick off.

For fuck's sake, God, you're just screwing with me now, aren't you?

Grateful the lights are low so the heat in my face won't be so obvious, I look away and hold out a napkin. "You eat like a five-year-old, Thelma."

She laughs and takes the napkin from me. "Good thing you didn't order the nachos. I'd probably have cheese in my hair by now."

"Can't take you anywhere," I mutter, exercising gigantic strength of will not to look over as she dabs at her cleavage.

Her firm, tanned, buttery cleavage.

Luckily the lights go down and the previews start, so I get a reprieve. Except trying not to sneak glances at her becomes a new sort of torture. Her face lit by the silvery glow of the

screen, she watches the movie with rapt attention, absentmindedly eating, occasionally licking her fingers or sucking on the straw of her drink. She has no idea how sexy these small, unselfconscious movements are to me, no idea that I'm gritting my jaw as she leans closer to whisper something about a funny piece of dialogue, no idea that when she crosses and uncrosses her legs I nearly groan aloud.

By the time the movie is over, I'm wound so tight I could snap.

When we're back outside on the sidewalk, I blow out a hard breath, dragging a hand through my hair and sucking in a lungful of warm night air to clear my nose of her scent and my chest of the raw scrape of desire.

"You okay?" she asks, a furrow between her brows. Before I can come up with some manufactured reply, she provides a convenient one for me. "Oh. Does sitting for too long hurt?"

Her expression full of concern, she looks down at my leg.

I know this isn't pity, she's just being thoughtful, but holy fuck do I hate it anyway. I say gruffly, "Sometimes I get a little stiff."

"You should let me try to massage the kinks out. I have really strong hands."

Sweet. Mother. Mary.

She said it without the tiniest hint of sexual innuendo, but of course my cock takes it as a personal invitation to wake up and take a nice, long look around.

"No, thanks. I'm good."

My tone is too rough. Too dismissive. I can tell by the way her face falls before she looks away, swallowing.

"Okay. So was the movie as good as you remember?"

Shit. I've hurt her feelings. Look at her, trying to let you off the hook for being a dick. I say softly, "Eva."

She glances at me warily, and now I *really* feel bad. I keep my tone gentle and low. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to

come out the way it did. I'm just embarrassed, that's all. I know you were only being nice."

After a moment of examining my expression and apparently finding my apology sincere, she lifts her chin and smiles. "*Nice?*" She makes a retching noise. "Stab me in the heart, why don't you?"

I love how she teases me. I love how she gives it right back to me, throwing my own words back in my face. I love how she wears her heart on her sleeve and doesn't pretend to be tough.

She isn't tough. She's strong, but not tough. She's obviously capable and independent and whip-smart, but she's also vulnerable. Sweet. Soft.

The combination is fucking lethal.

I close my eyes briefly, then jump off the cliff that's right in front of me. "You like ice cream?"

When I open my eyes again, she's beaming at me, as bright as the noonday sun. "Of course I do. Have you seen the size of my ass?"

I offer my arm. "C'mon, then, Thelma. Let's go get you some."

SEVEN

EVA

We stroll down the lamplit street, chatting and laughing, enjoying each other's company and the balmy evening air. Under my hand, his biceps is a big unyielding shape, as hard as a chunk of steel.

I want to squeeze it. I want to sink my teeth into it. I want to bite it and kiss it and nuzzle my nose into all that wonderful firm flesh. It's just so *beefy*.

Instead I let my fingertips rest lightly there and pretend indifference, as if I'm not freakishly obsessing over the quality of a muscle that on other men I'd never given a second thought.

"Oh look!" I point at a woman coming toward us on the opposite side of the street. She's walking a dachshund on a leash. The little fellow is as jaunty as can be, trotting along with his tongue lolling out one side of his mouth. He looks like he's smiling.

"You have a thing for wiener dogs," says Naz, chuckling.

"I do, it's true. They're so adorable. Look at that face! And his chubby little hot dog body!" Then I turn to look up at Naz. "Wait—how do you know?"

He slants me a warm look. "You keep bringing them up."

I frown, trying to remember. "Really?"

"Yes. Once when you were teasing me about my aversion to acupuncturists, and today on the phone. One of your proofs God wants us to laugh. And now you're so excited to see one you're like a kid on Christmas morning."

"Wow. And I thought I was the one with a memory like an elephant." My tone is teasing, but I'm secretly thrilled he remembered those small details about our conversations.

I try not to read anything into it. He was a cop, after all. He's been in the military. He's got a sharper mind than most

people, trained to notice things others don't.

What else has he noticed? What else does he remember? Does he think about me when he's alone, the way I think about him?

Naz suggests, "Should we go pet him?"

"Do you think his owner would let us?"

"Only one way to find out." He steps off the curb, leading me across the street. Smiling, he holds up a hand to the approaching woman. "*Buenas noches.*" He asks her in Spanish if it's okay if we pet her dog.

The woman smiles, stopping in front of us. "*Sí! Él es muy amigable.*"

I kneel down and pet the dog's velvety head. He pants happily, his merry black eyes sparkling. I ask his owner what the dog's name is.

When she replies "Señor Sausage," I lose it. I start to laugh helplessly, which gets the dog so excited he tries to jump up on me, his short legs pawing at my skirt.

"You're such a sweetie," I tell Sir Sausage, scratching behind his ears. "What a good boy. I wish I had a nice boy like you."

We spend a few minutes chatting pleasantly with the woman, until I reluctantly rise. I don't want to be impolite, but I'd happily kneel on the sidewalk to play with my new friend all night.

When Sir Sausage's owner tells Naz he should get his wife a dog, I flush all the way to the roots of my hair.

"I'm not allowed to have pets," I blurt.

The woman looks at Naz.

Naz looks at me.

"I mean at my apartment," I whisper, which of course wasn't what I meant at all.

After a brief awkward silence, the woman bids us a friendly goodbye, then leads Sir Sausage away into the night.

When they're gone, I don't know where to look.

"C'mon, Thelma," says Naz gently, taking my arm. "Don't bust a blood vessel over it."

As he leads me away, I wonder what it would be like to live a life with a man like this. One who allows for secrets and silences. One who doesn't push or bully. One who doesn't equate tenderness with weakness.

One who doesn't punish mistakes with his fists.



At the ice-cream parlor, we order at a long, refrigerated counter, then take seats at a raised bar facing the street. Eating in easy silence, we watch people go by, until Naz carefully sets his spoon into the paper cup with his two scoops of chocolate.

"I'm gonna say something now. After, you don't have to respond. You don't owe me any explanations. It's not my business, and I won't bring it up again. But it's been bothering me."

I take a deep breath. When I look at my hand holding the ice-cream cone, it's trembling. When I finally glance over at Naz, he's looking at me with a strange expression. It's part curiosity, part concern, and something that looks suspiciously like rage.

With quiet intensity, he says, "What did he do to you?"

I drop the ice-cream cone on the counter.

"Shit," I say breathlessly, shaking.

"It's okay. I'll get you another one. I'll be right back. In the meantime . . ."

I glance up at him.

He murmurs, "Just know that you're safe with me. In every sense of the word. Okay?"

The hot sting of tears pricks my eyes. I can't speak, so I only nod, biting the inside of my cheek and inhaling through

my nose, trying hard not to cry.

He turns without another word and heads back to the counter, leaving me an emotional wreck. I prop my elbows on the bar, rest my closed eyes in the heels of my palms, and just breathe. My heart is hammering so hard it's painful.

After a few minutes, Naz returns with a new cone. He hands it to me silently, then cleans the counter of the mess I made. It takes longer than it should, because he's giving me space to get my shit together.

Finally he sits down beside me, picks up his cup, and starts to eat, looking out at the street.

"I hate that it's that obvious," I whisper, staring at my new cone.

"Wouldn't be to anyone else."

He leaves it at that, but I know he means he's seen this before. Probably as a cop. Domestic abuse cases are common in that line of work. Cowering women covered in bruises might have been a regular part of his job.

I moisten my lips and gather my courage. "All right. Since you asked, I'll tell you. But don't feel sorry for me. I don't want your pity. I survived. I'm alive. Not every woman gets as lucky as I did."

From the corner of my eye, I see his jaw clench.

"Everything," I say simply.

Naz turns his head and stares at me.

"He did everything to me. Things you can't imagine. Sadistic things, terrible things, whatever he wanted. Because he could. Because he was powerful and no one would dare try to stop him, but also because he had leverage in the form of my sick mother. He paid for all her care, all her medical bills, all the doctors and medications that kept her out of pain. If I disobeyed him, my mother suffered. A cattle prod was one of his favorite punishment devices for both of us. I won't tell you how he used it."

My voice breaks, and I have to take a moment before speaking again. When I do, my tone is bitter. “A person can endure almost anything if it’s to protect someone they love. Far more than they could ever endure for their own sake.”

Naz gazes at me in open horror.

I can’t bear it, so I look away and eat my ice cream, dancing around nightmarish ghosts resurrected from their graves by this conversation.

Dimitri. My dark overlord. I still can’t believe I finally escaped.

I learned to read his moods like the weather, learned every dark twisted corridor of his mind like a map. I became an expert in navigating around the buried land mines, expert at predicting which responses would earn me a smile or a slap.

Like all victims of the whims of brutal men, I earned a master’s degree in appeasement.

I flattered and smiled and hated myself for it, until I was so full of self-loathing I couldn’t breathe. But defiance wasn’t possible, unless I wanted broken bones. Nor was escape, though I made a few attempts before he started using my mother against me. Punishing her for my transgressions. So I was trapped.

Until my mother died and we were both released from our prisons.

After a while, so quietly I almost don’t catch it, Naz says through gritted teeth, “I’d like to kill him.”

My laugh is humorless. “You and a lot of other people. Unfortunately, cockroaches are notoriously hard to kill.”

I feel his gaze searching my face, but I’m not convinced I won’t start to cry if I look at him, so I keep my eyes focused forward on the street. On all the happy people strolling by not living under someone else’s name.

It must be five minutes before Naz speaks. Once again, he shocks me with his words.

“My wife died of breast cancer.”

Devastated, I look at him. He stares straight ahead out the window as I'd been, watching all the normal people go by.

“One small spot, the doctors said. It sounded so fixable. Nobody dies from one small spot. Surgery, chemo, radiation—it's a year of your life. The hair grows back in. You can look back and say, ‘Look, we beat this awful thing, but it wasn't so bad. We have the rest of our lives ahead of us.’

“Only it turns out you can't say that, because that one small spot that seemed so treatable turns out to be a real sneaky bastard. Before chemo's even finished, there's another spot in the lungs. And another in a lymph node. And another on the spine that fractures the L2 vertebra and turns it to mush, so there's more surgery and more radiation, and then one day the doctor comes in and says that word you've been holding your breath about all along. That word that changes everything. That word that ends your whole world.”

Naz closes his eyes. “Terminal.”

My hand is over my mouth. The room feels too close, too hot. I want to touch his arm, to rest my hand over his, but I don't dare.

He swallows and continues, his voice low. “What I remember most is how terrified I was. The whole time, I was so fucking scared. I'd lie next to her in the dark and listen to her breathe as she slept, and I was so afraid I couldn't move. Because there was nothing I could do. I couldn't fix it. I couldn't stop it. I just had to watch as this person I loved more than anything suffered and wasted away until she was as small and light as a child.”

For the first time since he started speaking, his voice wavers. “I begged God to take me instead, but as you can see, I'm still here.”

“Naz,” I breathe, my eyes stinging. “I'm so, so sorry.”

He exhales heavily and passes a hand over his face. “It was a long time ago. I married very young. But I've been thinking about her a lot since you said marriage was sacred, that day at the market. Because I agree with you. The love I shared with

Sevan was the only pure and holy thing I've ever found in this life."

After a moment of staring at him, I burst into tears.

He groans. "Aw shit. Look what I did."

"It's okay. I'm okay," I blubber, obviously not okay as water streams down my cheeks and people turn to look at me, alarmed.

Naz tugs on my arm. Then I'm falling into him, burying my face in his chest and crying all over his nice linen shirt as he sighs and holds me.

"I guess that was a case of a little too much, too soon, huh?" he murmurs.

"No. It was beautiful. I'm s-sorry I'm such a wimp."

"You're not a wimp."

I lift my head and look at him through watery eyes.

He smiles at me and gently wipes my cheek with a thumb. "You *are* an ugly crier, though. Sheesh. Look at that screwy tomato face. You'll never make it in the movies, sweetheart."

My lower lip quivering, I take the wad of paper napkins he hands me and blot my eyes, sniffing. "I thought you said I'd never make it as a talk show host."

"That either. A career in the entertainment industry is definitely not in the cards for you. Unless you go into radio, where you can hide behind a mike and no one has to see that ugly mug."

I whisper, "You don't think I'm ugly."

All of his gentle teasing vanishes. He gazes at me, at my hair and mouth and wet face, then slowly shakes his head. "No. No, I don't."

His voice is soft and sad. His eyes are sad, too, but I suppose that's what happens when two people tell each other their darkest stories.

I blow out a breath, straighten my shoulders, and attempt a smile. It's weak, but it's there. "This is a *terrible* ice-cream date you've taken me on, Dudley. I'm so traumatized, I might never eat the stuff again."

A glint of humor returns to his eyes. "Good. Because if you gain any more weight, they'll have to remove the roof and bring in a crane to get you out of here, Shamu."

We smile at each other. The moment stretches out. Our smiles fade, but we're still staring at each other, our eyes locked. His lips part, and for a breathless moment I think he's going to lean in and kiss me, but he looks away and exhales.

"Let's get you home," he says, rising.

His voice is even and his eyes have shuttered, but the hand he holds out to me trembles.

EIGHT

NAZ

I walk Eva home. I don't go up the stairs to the door, because those lips of hers are way too much of a temptation. I only wave from the sidewalk and watch as she goes in.

Then I jog all the way back to my own place and get on the phone as soon as I'm inside.

Though it's late, my boss, Connor, picks up on the first ring. "Hey, brother. How's it hangin'?"

"I have a problem."

Without the slightest pause or change of tone, he says, "I've got a solution. Tell me what's up."

"Evalina and Dimitri Ivanov aren't married."

Now there is a pause. I imagine him on the other end of the phone, squinting his dark eyes in that way he has that's intimidating as all hell, even to me. "Two things."

"Shoot."

"Number one, it's none of our fuckin' business what the legal status of their relationship is. The man hired us to do a job, not parse the paperwork."

Shit.

"Number two—how do you know?"

"She told me."

Connor curses. "I was afraid you were gonna say that."

Unable to stand still, I pace back and forth in front of the stove in the kitchen. "You'd prefer a lie?"

His voice rises. "You know I wouldn't!"

"Okay, then. You got the truth."

"You fuckin' this girl?"

Through gritted teeth, I say, "No."

“Because if you are, you’ve fucked me and my entire organization. But mostly yourself.”

The threat in that statement is obvious. I don’t like being threatened, but I’ve brought this on myself. Holding my temper in check, I say evenly, “I’m not fucking her. During my regular surveillance, I saw she was about to be attacked by a group of nasty characters. I stepped in and defused the situation. If I hadn’t, she’d be dead. Or at least gang-raped.”

He chews on that in silence for a moment. “Go on.”

I turn and pace in the other direction. “She doesn’t know about me. Told her I was on vacation between career transitions. But this is a small town. I keep running into her.”

Connor repeats drily, “Running into her.”

“Saw her at the farmers market. By chance. Couldn’t exactly pretend we hadn’t met, considering the circumstances.”

I leave out our meeting at the bar and the ice-cream date, because I don’t want to get myself killed. Connor Hughes is a reasonable man, but he’s also a lethal motherfucker. If he thinks for one second I’ve done anything to compromise the safety of his company or his men, I might as well shoot myself in the head because I’ll never see his bullet coming.

“So you saw her at a farmers market and she tells you in passing conversation that she’s not married. Curious as to how that came up.”

“Well . . . she asked me if I was.”

“So she likes you.”

I close my eyes and remember Eva’s face when she told me she was attracted to me, and have to swallow before I can go on. “Yeah.”

“Not surprised. My wife says you’re hot.”

I blink. Then, carefully: “I don’t think there’s any safe response to that.”

Connor chuckles. “Smart man.”

I exhale a relieved breath, because he's amused. I only met his wife once, on my third and final interview with Metrix Security Services, and I'll never forget her. Tabby was her name. A spectacular redhead covered in tats wearing a skirt so short it was almost a belt and an itty-bitty T-shirt with a picture of Hello Kitty stretched across her boobs. The entire interview consisted of her walking into the room where I was seated, looking at me carefully, then saying, "Tell me the one thing you've done in your life that you're most ashamed of."

I knew it was a test. So I told her the truth, even though the words I spoke I'd never spoken to another soul, not even my wife.

When I finished, her eyes were fierce with unshed tears. She walked out of the room, leaving the door open. She said to Connor, who was waiting outside, "Pay him double whatever salary he's asking."

And that was that.

Apparently she's some kind of genius, with computers and with reading people. Connor—the biggest, baddest badass I've ever met—looks at her like she descended from heaven on a golden chariot, so I'm extremely careful to always be respectful where she's concerned.

Again, wouldn't see that bullet coming.

"Gotta admit, brother, I don't see what your problem actually is. Though I'm not thrilled about the contact, it doesn't sound like your cover is blown, or anything has happened that would compromise the job." His pause is loaded with tension. "Unless I don't have the whole story."

"You don't have the whole story."

He sighs. "Afraid you were gonna say that, too."

"Eva didn't leave Dimitri because she's some bored, scatterbrained socialite who ran off on a whim. She left him because she was being abused."

There's another tense pause before Connor says, "*Eva?*"

Fuck. I realize my mistake too late. “Evalina,” I say, though it’s useless.

Connor’s voice comes over the line as hard as granite. “I’m pullin’ you off the job. Exfil at zero eight hundred—”

“I’m not leaving,” I say loudly.

For a long time, I listen to silence.

“I don’t think you understand the situation, brother,” says Connor, his voice low and controlled. “So let me clarify it for you. The man whose wife you’re surveilling—”

“Girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend.”

“*Shut the fuck up!*” Connor thunders, then continues as before. “The man whose wife you’re surveilling is the son of a longtime client of mine. We’re talkin’ *years*. Not only is he rich, he’s extremely powerful. Connected like a motherfucker. He’s also squeaky clean, but his son isn’t. Do you have any idea what that might mean?”

I close my eyes and exhale hard. “Mafia.”

“Bingo. Give the man a prize. Yes, Mafia. You ever dealt with a Russian mafioso, brother?”

“I saw Viggo Mortensen play one in *Eastern Promises*. That count?”

“This is no time for jokes,” says Connor softly. “These people kill their enemies in ways you can’t imagine, because you’re not a psychopath. Sometimes they kill people if they’re just mildly disappointed in them. I took the job for Dimitri because of my relationship with his father, but also because it required no contact with the mark. It was about as safe as it gets in our line of work. Observe, report, fuck off in a few months when Dimitri gets tired of waiting and sends his men to pick her up.

“But now what I’m getting from this conversation is that not only has contact been made, but you’re feelin’ this girl. Maybe not fuckin’—not yet—but you’re feelin’ her. Hard. Tell me I’m wrong.”

My face is hot. I'm so angry I can hardly breathe. My voice comes out too loud, but I can't help it.

"And what *I'm* getting is that you're telling me you'd deliver an abused woman back into the arms of her abuser because you don't want to piss off that abuser. *You tell me* I'm wrong, Connor."

A click is what I expect to hear. A click and then a dead line, and eventually the wet splat of my brains hitting the wall by the force of a high-caliber bullet exiting my skull when I least expect it. Instead what I hear is a groan.

"Jesus H. Christ on a crutch. I hired Mother fuckin' Teresa."

A wild idea occurs to me. It's a Hail Mary, but I have a hunch it just might work.

"Ask your wife what she thinks we should do. Tell Tabby about this conversation, and get her opinion about how we should proceed. Whatever she decides, I'll do it."

My words are met with an outraged roar so loud I have to yank the phone away from my ear, wincing. Then there comes a string of curses so foul it almost peels the paint from the walls.

Then I get the genius idea to hang up, so I do.

My weekly report is due to Dimitri in the morning, so I'm sure Connor will let me live at least until then.

Ninety percent sure.

Almost exactly one hour later, the phone rings. It's Connor's number on the screen. I answer with a curt "Yep," trying to sound a lot more cool than I feel.

"Hi, Nasir, it's Tabby."

"Oh. Uh. Hi, Tabby. I was expecting Connor."

She replies breezily, "You don't want to talk to him right now. He wants to kill you."

I've been standing at the windows in the living room of my rented beach cottage, but my legs decide for me that it's time

to take a seat. I sink slowly onto the sofa, waiting for her to go on.

“Don’t worry, I talked him out of it.”

It becomes slightly easier to breathe. “That was nice of you.”

“It wasn’t nice, it was strategic. Now you’re in my debt. I’ll call in that marker one day, but for now let’s focus on what’s happening with you.”

“Didn’t Connor tell you what’s happening?”

“Of course he did. I need to hear it from you. In your own words. And, Nasir?”

“Yeah?”

She lowers her voice. “Don’t leave anything out this time. I’ll know if you’re skimping on the truth. And trust me, if you think being on Connor’s shit list is bad, you don’t want to know what being on *my* shit list involves.”

How can a woman a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter than me be so terrifying?

“Roger that.”

She must be satisfied by the tone of my voice, because she says playfully, “Well, go on, then.”

I take a breath, flirt with the idea of leaving out a few of my encounters with Eva, but just as quickly dismiss it. I tell Tabby everything from start to finish. Every meeting, every conversation, every thought that crossed through my head. I treat it like a deposition, because in a way, it is.

After half an hour, I finish talking. There’s a short silence. Then Tabby says cryptically, “I knew you were a good hire.”

“Uh . . . thanks?”

“There are only two problems I see here, but they’re both substantial.”

“The way you say that makes me worried.”

“The first problem is that we don’t know if Evalina is telling you the truth. Not about her marriage—I can easily verify that. About the abuse.”

I say without hesitation, “She’s telling the truth.”

“Which leads me to the second problem,” says Tabby, a smile in her voice.

“What’s that?”

“You.”

I’m silent for a while, but she doesn’t elaborate.

“Sorry, I lost you there.”

“When was the last time you were with a woman, Nasir?”

Heat creeps up my neck. “I’m not having sex with her.”

“I know you’re not. Answer the question.”

“I’d rather not.”

“It wasn’t a request.”

I say gruffly, “You think I’m thinking with my dick, is that it?”

She chuckles. “You’d break your brain trying to figure out what I’m thinking. But no. I know you’re not thinking with your dick, as you so delicately put it. There’s an organ involved here that’s far more loyal and problematic than the one between your legs.”

I stand and start to pace again. I feel like a rat in a cage.

Tabby’s tone turns brisk. “So the situation as it stands is that we must first establish if she’s telling the truth about the abuse. You wouldn’t be the first man to fall for a pretty woman spinning a tale of distress.”

“She’s. Not. *Lying!*”

Tabby sighs. In a tone you’d use when speaking to a favorite but misbehaving toddler, she says, “Dial it down a notch, Prince Valiant. And rein in that white horse of yours while you’re at it. I’m about to tell you something you want to hear, if you’d shut up already.”

I clamp my jaw closed and glare at the floor, waiting.

“If we discover she’s lying, there won’t be anything else to do, because that right there will pull the plug on your feelings for her. You’re not the kind of man who could be in love with a liar.”

My eyes bug out. *In love?*

This conversation has gone completely off the fucking rails, but I’m not about to interrupt her again. I can’t wait to get this circus over with.

“But if we discover she *isn’t* lying about the abuse . . .” Her voice grows deadly soft. “Then the job is off, and Dimitri Ivanov is going to find himself wishing he’d picked on someone his own size.”

There’s something so chilling in her voice I don’t respond for a moment. “What about Eva?”

Tabby’s tone goes from murderous to annoyed in one second flat. “Ugh! Then you ride off into the sunset together on your trusty white steed, dummy! God, do I have to do *all* the heavy lifting around here?”

I grin, suddenly feeling much better. “I’m one thousand percent on board with this plan. What happens now?”

“Your next check-in with Dimitri is tomorrow morning, correct?”

“Yes.”

I hear the smile in her voice. “So check in.”

“What do I tell him?”

“Tell him there’s nothing unusual to report. Send him whatever new pictures you have. Don’t do anything that would raise any suspicions. Let me handle things on this end, and I’ll be back in touch soon.”

“Got it.”

“Good. And, Nasir?”

“Yeah?”

“Do a bug sweep of your place as soon as we get off the line. And fry this burner phone.”

A cold chill runs down my spine. “You think I could be compromised?”

It’s a moment before she answers, and when she does I sense she’s choosing her words carefully. “I have experience with powerful, abusive men. One thing they all have in common is paranoia. There’s a chance we’re not the only ones with eyes on Eva.”

Fuck. I start to panic, thinking of the implications. “If that’s the case, Dimitri would already know I made contact with her. He’d know I’ve been leaving information out of my weekly reports. Why would he let it go on?”

“Why do some boys like to pick the wings off flies?” she asks quietly.

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Think about it. And be careful. We’ll talk soon.”

The line goes dead in my hand.

It isn’t until hours later that I realize the answer to her question.

Because that’s how they have fun.

NINE

EVA

I can't sleep that night.

I lie in bed staring at the ceiling, listening to the rhythm of the waves, until dawn washes the walls pale gray. The whole time, my body is a riot of emotions—fast pulse, tight stomach, sweating palms—but my mind is strangely clear. It contains a solitary thought.

I want Naz.

I want him more than I've wanted anything else ever, with the exception of how desperately I wanted to escape from Dimitri.

Maybe even more than that. Because if somehow I was offered the choice of one night with Naz in exchange for returning to the hell of my old life, I think that's a deal I'd make.

I don't know his last name. I don't know where he lives. I don't even have his phone number—the readout says “Unknown Caller” when he calls. All I know is that when I'm with him, I feel safe and seen in a way I've never been before.

I feel as if he can look right down to the bottom of my soul . . . and he likes what he sees there.

It's an intoxicating feeling. And a complicated one, because I know his life here is a pause between other things. It's not a final destination, like it is for me. In a few days or weeks, he'll be gone.

Then there's the issue of his celibacy.

I'm sure now that he's attracted to me. It's no longer a question. I'm also sure that coming between a man and his religious convictions is something I don't want to do, especially to a man as honorable as Naz. I don't want to be the wedge that drives him apart from his vow. It's wrong. I'd hate myself.

But, oh God, the way he looks at me. The way he looks at my mouth.

I imagine it's the same way Adam looked at the apple in Eve's outstretched hand. So much desire. So much fear.

As every saint and sinner knows, forbidden fruit is always the most tempting.

I'm still lying in bed staring at the ceiling when the phone rings at seven o'clock.

The readout says "Unknown Caller."

I sit up, my heart like a jackhammer, and hit the "Answer" button. "Naz."

"Eva." His voice is thick how it sometimes is. Maybe from sleep. "How'd you know it was me?"

"You're the only one who calls from a blocked number." I laugh, a little dizzy from nerves. "Actually, you're the only one who calls, period."

"Did I wake you?"

"No. I couldn't sleep. I've just been lying here all night. Thinking."

Why did I say that? It sounded so stupid. He'll probably think I'm nuts—

"Me too," he says, his voice dropping low.

You need to breathe now, lungs. You can do this. Here we go. I whisper, "You couldn't sleep, or you were thinking?"

"Both," he replies promptly, then, very faintly: "Fuck."

I close my eyes and listen to him breathe. I'm clutching the phone so tightly I'm surprised it doesn't crumble to dust in my hand. Finally, when I can't hold it in any longer, I say, "I miss you. When can I see you?"

He groans. "Why can't you be coy for once, woman? You're killing me."

"I'm sorry. No, strike that. I'm not sorry at all. Except for the killing you part. I don't want . . . I mean I want . . ." I

exhale a shaky breath. “It got hard to form words all of a sudden.”

“Welcome to my world,” he says, his voice like gravel. “I’ve been struggling with that since the day we met.”

Oh. Oh. What is my heart doing? It feels like it’s trying to break out of my chest.

I’m struck by a sense of urgency so strong it’s almost panic. I stand and walk around the room, trying to shake off all my nervous energy, but I end up walking in circles like a lunatic.

“When are you leaving Cozumel? How much time do we have left? I want to spend as much time with you as possible before you go.”

Another groan, this one fainter.

I stare at my reflection in the small cracked mirror on the wall. My eyes are wild and my color is high. I look like a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. “I promise I’ll wear my burka this time.”

He sounds defeated. “It wouldn’t fucking matter. You could make a nun’s habit look pornographic.” He pauses briefly. “Oh shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I just pictured you in a nun’s habit. I need to go to confession, stat.”

I start to laugh. It seems to break all the tension, because he starts to laugh, too, then changes his tone to the gently teasing one I love the most.

“Okay, Thelma. I *suppose* I can carve out a few minutes of my extremely busy day filled with extremely important Superior Man superhero stuff to spend with a homely woman with a wiener dog fetish. I’ll give you, say, ten o’clock to ten fifteen. Good?”

“Excellent,” I reply, grinning. “As long as that’s a.m. to p.m.”

“Ha. You’d get bored of me after an hour. I’m only tolerable in small doses.”

“I’d never get bored of you. I could spend the rest of my life just staring at your face.”

In the ensuing silence, I realize with a freezing sense of horror what I’ve unthinkingly confessed. What’s worse is the dreamy tone I said the words in. Like a swoony schoolgirl, drunk on her first crush.

What have I done?

After a moment, Naz says evenly, “Don’t freak out.”

I sit on the bed and cover my face with my free hand. “I’m not freaking out.”

“Don’t lie to me, either.”

It’s my turn to groan, only it sounds closer to a whimper.

“I mean, it’s not like I don’t get this *all* the time,” continues Naz, adopting a bored tone. “You wouldn’t believe how tiresome it gets, all these random females throwing themselves at my feet.” Dramatic sigh. “Being spectacularly handsome and charismatic has its downside, let me tell you. I can barely walk out my front door before I’m mobbed. Believe it or not, the blue-haired old ladies are the worst. Only yesterday I got propositioned by a woman who looked exactly like my grandmother!”

“How awful,” I say, smiling and relieved. “Though I hear a blow job from a woman with no teeth can be especially satisfying.”

After a moment of shocked silence, Naz bursts into gales of laughter. “Oh really? Read that in the latest issue of *Geriatric Erotica*, did you?”

“No. It’s what my ex used to say when he threatened to knock out all my teeth.”

His laughter dies and turns into a growled, “That motherfucker!”

It's so intense and filled with hatred I blink, taken aback. Then I'm angry with myself for blurting it out in the first place. I can't seem to find my equilibrium in this conversation.

I prove it by saying, "It's strange that turned me on, right?"

"What, me being angry?"

"No. You being protective."

He inhales deeply, then lets it all out in a gust. "It's how men are supposed to be. Unfortunately, a lot of them don't know the difference between protective and possessive, which is why you have so many assholes in the world."

I close my eyes and sit very still, basking in that statement. And in him, this beautiful man who is single-handedly redefining the word *masculine* for me.

"Naz."

"Yeah?"

"I have a question. I don't want it to make you feel weird, but it probably will."

"Gee, thanks for that confidence-boosting setup. What's the question?"

"This celibacy thing of yours. Does kissing count?"

I hear an odd noise, like a cough, only more strangled.

"I know, I know. One more random female throwing herself at your feet." I pause. "I'm sorry. I promised myself I would respect your choice, but here's the thing. I've spent the entire night thinking about you. When I'm with you, I feel better about myself. I feel happy. I feel, I don't know . . . something like faith? Like you're restoring my faith in humanity one stupid joke and beautiful smile at a time. That's a huge thing for one person to be able to do for another. A precious thing.

"But the other side of all this respect and admiration I feel for you is . . ." I clear my throat. "The horny side." I hear a faint wheeze on the other end of the line, but ignore it. "You're *very* attractive. Someone should make a sculpture of your ass."

"My ass?" he breaks in, sounding astonished.

I ignore that, too. “I’d like to know if I’m allowed to kiss you, because I really want to. If not, please tell me now while we’re on the phone so I can feel like a complete fool in the privacy of my own apartment and not somewhere out in public when you dodge my incoming lips with a look of disgust.”

“Well,” he says after a time, “no one can say you’re not direct.”

I whisper, “It could even be a small kiss. No tongue. I mean, I want tongue, but I don’t want it if you don’t want it.”

“Are you even *real*?” He sounds bewildered. “Did you skip the day in Female 101 where they gave the How to Flirt with Boys lecture?”

“I’ve never been bashful. I find it’s a waste of time.”

“Holy Christmas, no kidding.”

“Do you not like it?”

“Not like it?” he repeats, his voice going rough. “Sweetheart, I fucking *love* it.”

A thrill, high and sweet, runs through my body. I stand, then immediately sit down again because I’m light-headed. “Lord. I feel like I’m having a heart attack.”

“Yeah,” he says drily. “I’m familiar with the feeling.”

“Are you coming over here or what? What are we doing today? And how soon are we doing it?”

He starts to chuckle, and I know he’s shaking his head. “So hopeless. To answer your first question, *no*, I’m not coming over there. Too dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“There’s a bed.” He lets me sit with that and all it implies for a moment, then continues. “As for what we’re doing today . . . how ’bout a nature excursion? I’ve been wanting to check out the Mayan ruins at Tulum.”

“That’s more than two hours away. And we’d have to take a ferry.”

“Guess we’d better get going, then, Thelma. How soon can you be ready?”

“Give me thirty minutes.”

“You’ve got ten. Listen for my horn.”

I pretend to be offended, but I know he’s still thinking about my dangerous bed. “Horn? You’re not even going to show me the courtesy of knocking on my door? I’m just supposed to run out to the street when you come honking?”

“Superior Man doesn’t get out of the car for homely girls, sweetheart. And don’t forget that burka—we don’t want your hideous pasty skin getting burned in the sun.”

He hangs up, leaving me grinning like an idiot as I leap to my feet and head into the bathroom.



When a car horn toots three times ten minutes later, I’m waiting right inside the door. I yank it open, slam it behind me, and fly down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Then I turn around and run back up again because I forgot to lock the door.

By the time I jump into Naz’s black convertible Jeep, I’m all out of breath. I throw myself into the passenger seat, close the car door, and turn to look at him.

After a moment where Naz and I simply stare at one another, I say, “I just shut my skirt in the door, didn’t I?”

“If you’d stop wearing those shapeless potato sacks you like so much, you wouldn’t have this problem.”

“It’s a sundress, not a potato sack.”

His gaze drifts down my chest to my waist, then over my bare legs, exposed above the knee because the stupid dress is caught in the stupid door. He says in a rough voice, “Whatever it is, it makes you look so . . .”

“So what?” I ask breathlessly, my heart leaping.

Naz looks into my eyes and smiles. “*Awful*. God, you’re painful to look at. I should be getting some kind of

reimbursement from the government for this act of charity. A tax credit, at the very least.”

I smile back at him. “Your philanthropy is an inspiration to humanity, sir. May I please kiss you now?”

He props his forearms on the steering wheel, drops his head onto them, and dissolves into helpless laughter.

I drink in the sight of him and try not to openly sigh. He’s wearing a simple black T-shirt and a pair of faded jeans. He hasn’t shaved in a few days, so his jaw is darkened with scruff. He’s tan, muscular, and entirely gorgeous.

I poke him in the shoulder. “Hurry up and finish, I want to kiss you.”

Still laughing, he turns to look at me. “You will never, *ever* make it as a spy.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I’d never *want* to be a spy. I couldn’t lie for a living. What kind of person could do that?”

For some strange reason, that shoots his laughter down like clay birds from the sky. Looking at me somberly, he says, “Sometimes things aren’t so black-and-white.”

I’m a little taken aback by his sudden change in mood, but keep my tone light. “Don’t be silly, of course they are. A person is either a liar or he’s not. You’re ethical or you’re not. There’s no middle ground.”

“There are some circumstances where even the most snowy-white ethics can get murky.”

Now I’m downright shocked. He’s actually serious. “Like when?”

He mutters darkly, “Love and war,” and guns the engine.

We drive. Confused and upset, I stare at his profile for a few moments, then turn to look at the colorful tangle of the streets as they pass by. I don’t know what his sudden strangeness means, what past circumstance lurks behind his tense new demeanor, but whatever it is, he definitely doesn’t want to talk about it.

So I'm shocked once again when he pulls over to the side of the road and stops the car.

Staring at his hands gripped around the steering wheel, he says, "I have to tell you something."

When he doesn't continue, only sits there rigidly with his jaw working and his knuckles white around the wheel, I say gently, "Naz."

He glances at me.

"Whatever questionable things you've done for love or in war, you're not obligated to share with me. How long are you staying in Cozumel?"

He swallows hard before answering. "I honestly don't know."

I'm relieved to hear it, because at least it means not soon. If he had a flight booked out next Tuesday or next month, I know he'd tell me. "For the time we have left, let's just . . . enjoy each other's company, okay? We don't have to share any more of our sad stories. Sometimes it's better to let those ghosts rest."

My voice grows softer. "I know you're a good man. That's all that's important to me."

He stares at me for a long moment, then he drops his head and starts to gently bang it over and over against the center of the steering wheel.

"You know what your problem is?"

Without lifting his head, he rolls it to one side and looks at me.

"You need a kiss." Before he can react, I lean over and give him a peck on his rough cheek. Then I sit back and smile at him. "Okay, all good. You can start driving now."

Slowly, he straightens. He turns to me, leans over, and takes my face in his big hands. Staring deep into my eyes, he murmurs, "You're a fucking angel."

With exquisite gentleness, he touches his mouth to mine.

It's entirely chaste, but I close my eyes anyway. I'm feeling electrocuted, and I don't want him to see them roll back into my head. When I open them again, he's gazing at me with so much tenderness it feels like a knife plunged into my heart.

No man has ever looked at me like this before. Like I'm a treasure. Like I'm a prize.

Like I'm the only thing that matters to him, or ever will.

My breathing ragged, I say, "A 'fucking' angel? Is that some kind of slutty higher order of cherubs?"

He sweeps his thumb over my cheekbone. "You think cracking jokes will get me to kiss you again, don't you?"

"God, I hope so."

He teases, "Shameless hussy," and presses a soft kiss to one corner of my mouth.

When I sigh happily, he presses another soft kiss to the other corner. "Shameless, wanton, homely hussy," he whispers, brushing his lips over mine.

I grab fistfuls of his shirt. I might be panting, I'm not sure. My brain isn't working properly.

Then a car drives by and blares its horn, making me jump. Naz turns and glares at a group of teenage boys waving and hooting at us from the bed of a pickup truck. When he turns back to me, I can tell there will be no more kissing for now.

He's thinking again. Whatever was behind the "love and war" comment, it's a dark presence behind his eyes.

He retreats to his side of the car. Then we're back on the road, the tropical sun beating down on my shoulders.

It does nothing to warm the chill running down my spine.

TEN

NAZ

Dimitri hired me to watch you.

I almost told her. The words were on the tip of my tongue. Then she gave me an out and said I was a good man, and I've never come so close to hating myself.

It's unforgivable, what I'm doing. When the day comes that she finally discovers why I'm on this island—and I have no doubt that day *will* come—she's going to despise me. All the sweetness she shows me will die under the pain of betrayal and be reborn as disgust, and there will be nothing I can do to stop it.

Even worse is that it'll be completely deserved.

I'm earning her future hatred, one minute at a time.

The ferry ride to Tulum is short and uneventful. We disembark in the touristy beach town of Playa del Carmen, where I rent a car.

At the counter, Eva asks, "Why didn't we just ride the bus from the ferry terminal?"

"Superior Man doesn't take public transportation," I reply, earning me a smile.

The real reason is much more practical: I can't evade a tail on a bus.

Since Tabby planted the seed in my head that Dimitri might have other men on the job, I've been obsessing over it. The bug sweep of my place turned up clean, but that doesn't prove anything. On my weekly check-in call with Dimitri this morning, I'd been ready with a cover story to buy some time if he confronted me about having contact with Eva, but he behaved the same as he did in every other conversation. The controlled questions. The strange intensity. The empty eyes.

I've dealt with a lot of bad characters in my time, but something about the man creeps me the fuck out.

“Hey,” says Eva gently, snapping her fingers in my face. “Where are you?”

“Sorry. I’m here.”

Corralling my thoughts, I turn to gaze at her. We’re standing on a bluff overlooking the sparkling blue strip of the sea. Behind us tower the crumbling stone ruins of a Mayan fortress. The sun is glinting in her hair and her eyes are smiling, and I have to fight the abrupt violent urge to take her in my arms and kiss her until she’s weak and breathless.

Until she’s mine.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

I answer without thinking, my voice gruff with desire. “Because you’re beautiful and I want to kiss you.”

Her eyes go wide. Her mouth forms a small *O*. She swallows, then says softly, “So what’re you waiting for, Dudley?”

All around us are people. Tourists, wandering over the grassy knolls, taking selfies with the ruins in the background, exclaiming at the size of the iguanas sunning themselves on the rocks.

Under the circumstances, the first time I take her mouth might be the last time. I want to go slow. I want to savor her. I want to remember every detail.

What I don’t want is an audience.

I take her hand and pull her away from the edge of the cliff. Walking fast, I head toward one of the smaller ruins in the distance where no people are milling around. Her hand tightens around mine, and I know she feels my urgency. We pick up our pace until we’re running through the short grass.

A square ruin looms in front of us, one of the many outbuildings used by the ancient Mayans in this seaside fortress complex. We run through a tall doorway in the front into humid gloom. The building has a high, intact ceiling and a rough stone floor. It’s empty except for creeping green vines

and a few parrots startled by our sudden entrance who fly out in a flash of primary colors, squawking.

Eva slows to a stop behind me and releases my hand.

I turn to look at her. She's framed in the doorway with the light bright behind her and her face in shadow, her hair a golden corona around her head. A band of tightness settles around my chest.

I take a step toward her. She takes a step back. I don't know what she sees on my face, but her eyes are huge and her pulse is throbbing in the side of her neck.

When I take another step and she retreats again, I stop. "Are you afraid of me?"

She laughs shakily. "No."

"Then why are you backing up?"

"I was hoping I'd be at the wall by now. I need it to hold me up. I'm so excited I think I might faint."

The band around my chest grows tighter.

"Stay where you are," I say, holding her gaze. The eye contact feels like a touch, like an electrical current running on a loop between us. It's probably close to ninety degrees, but the skin on my arms raises in gooseflesh. As I take another step toward her, she flexes her hands open and draws a breath.

She says with quiet wonder, "I can feel my heartbeat in my fingertips."

"I know. Me too."

I advance another step. She's an arm's length away. I see it when she begins to tremble.

"This must be what a stroke feels like," she whispers as I reach out and touch her face.

"Probably not this good." I slide my hand into her hair, and she bites her lip.

When I move closer, she raises her hands and flattens them on my chest. I know she can feel how hard my heart is

pounding. Her breathing is as erratic as mine.

“Oh God,” she says faintly. “I really hope this kiss you’re about to give me is as amazing as the pre-kiss. I think my panties just went up in flames.”

“Not a good idea to talk to me about your panties right now, sweetheart,” I murmur, brushing my lips over her jaw. “I’m barely in control as it is.”

I nuzzle my nose into the soft, sweet spot under her earlobe and drag in a breath scented of her skin. She shudders. I cradle her head in my hands as her fingers dig into my chest. I open my mouth over the pulse in her throat and she moans, low and soft, arching into me.

That little moan sets my entire body on fire.

With one hand cupped around the back of her head and the other around her jaw, I tilt her head back and fit my mouth to hers.

Her lips part. Our tongues touching is an electrical shock. She makes a soft, feminine noise in the back of her throat that makes me feel savage, like an animal.

We stand in the gloom and kiss, deep and slow, until the urge to push her against the wall, lift her skirt, and thrust deep inside her is a hot, heady pulse in my veins. She slides her arms up around my shoulders so her breasts press against my chest. I feel her nipples, two hard points in a lush expanse of skin, and groan into her mouth.

My dick is so hard it’s throbbing.

“I want you to kiss me everywhere,” she whispers, breaking away from my mouth but staying in my arms. She’s panting. Her eyes look glazed. “I want you to take off my clothes and kiss me everywhere like that. Promise me you will.”

I huff out a breath that’s part laugh and part groan. “So it measured up to the pre-kiss, huh?”

Blinking slowly, she licks her lips. “Do you brush your teeth with narcotics? I feel drugged.”

I know exactly how she'd be in bed. Pliant and sensual, responsive and open, giving herself completely over to pleasure, and to me. There'd be no coyness, no shy giggles, no shame. She was made to love and be loved with no reservations by a man worthy of her, who in return she'd make feel like a king.

I want that so much my chest aches with it.

And with the knowledge that I'll never have what I want, because a queen would never take a liar for her king.

“Eva.”

Her name on my lips is a broken whisper.

Her body tenses. “Oh. I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to make this awkward.”

When I frown, not understanding what she means, she clarifies. “Your celibacy thing.”

Oh yeah. That. I close my eyes and rest my forehead against hers. There's nothing I can say that won't expose my lie, and—selfish bastard that I am—I want to have her like this for a little while longer.

Before the truth comes out and everything changes for good.

She tucks her head under my chin, lowers her arms from my shoulders and wraps them around my waist, and sighs. “It's okay,” she says, snuggling close. “This is almost as good as another kiss.” Her pause is brief. “Well, not really, but it's still pretty good.”

I press my lips to her hair and squeeze her tight. She fits perfectly against my body, as if she were made for me. Everywhere I'm hard, she's soft. I want to let my hands roam all over her, to map the hills and valleys of her shape. I want to lay her back onto clean sheets and learn all her secrets, all the hidden parts of her. I want to chart every inch of her beauty with my hands.

“Your heart is beating so fast,” she whispers, her ear pressed to my chest.

“Maybe I’m not the one with the narcotic toothpaste.”

She lifts her head and gazes up at me. Her lips are curved and her eyes are shining. For a moment, I lose the ability to breathe.

“So it was good for you, too?”

I comb my fingers through her long hair, memorizing the silken feel of it. The way it pours like water over my hands. “Now you’re just fishing for compliments.”

“Yes. Tell me.”

I chuckle, so charmed by her I feel as if I’m under a spell. She’s cast a spell on me with her sweet smile and her even sweeter mouth, and I’m done for. Like this ancient stone fortress we’re standing in, something old and hard inside me begins to crumble.

Gazing into her eyes, I murmur, “It was perfect, sweetheart. I’ll think of that kiss every day for the rest of my life. On my deathbed I’ll be thinking of it. And of you. How you’re looking at me right now. How beautiful you are, and how lucky I was to have this.”

A small wrinkle appears between her brows. She swallows and starts to blink faster. I’m dismayed for a split second, thinking I’ve said something wrong, until she breathes, “How do you always say exactly the right thing?”

She rises up on her toes and kisses me.

It’s gentle. There’s no tongue. It’s a simple gesture, sweet and pure. But for all that, it still manages to rock me back on my heels, leaving me stunned by its power.

We hear laughter and voices from outside, and break apart as a group of middle-aged American tourists walk in, exclaiming at everything.

“Gawd, it’s gloomy in here!”

“Better than the heat out there!”

“Did you put on your sunscreen, Hal?”

“For the fifth time, Lois, *yes*.”

“Oh, hi!”

One of the women finally notices us. She has wild, frizzed-out blonde curls under a wilted straw hat. She’s wearing a neon-pink T-shirt with a picture of a golden retriever’s face.

“Hello,” I say, taking Eva’s hand and stepping to one side.

The group looks us over as we move toward the door. “Anything good to see in here?” asks the frizzy blonde’s husband, eyeing Eva’s chest. He wears white athletic socks under his sandals and a fanny pack around his paunchy waist.

It pains me to note he’s also wearing cargo shorts.

Eva points to the far corner of the shadowed room. “The carvings on the back wall are amazing.”

“Ooh, *carvings*,” says the frizzy blonde, wandering off. The rest of them dutifully follow.

“Bravo,” I say as we step out into the bright light of day. “They’ll probably be in there arguing about where the carvings are for hours.”

“After that they’ll probably go shopping.” She looks at me, pressing her lips together, her eyes aglow with laughter.

I sigh. “Don’t say it.”

“I have no idea what you mean,” she says innocently, taking my arm.

“I can see my wardrobe failure is going to be an ongoing source of amusement for you.”

After a moment, Eva says quietly, “I hope so.”

She’s talking about the future. Our future. The one that doesn’t exist.

If she hadn’t made that comment about liars in the car, I could almost convince myself she might be able to forgive me when she finds out who and what I really am. What I’ve been doing for the past few months. But the cold, hard reality is that I’ve betrayed her trust. In her mind, there likely won’t be much difference between me and Dimitri.

I'll be lucky if she doesn't pull out that .38 of hers and put a bullet in my head.

“What can I do to snap you out of this funk you're in?”

I glance at Eva to find her frowning at me. She's right: I *am* in a funk. Today is a perfect day, maybe the only one we'll have, and I'm ruining it.

I grin at her and shake off my mood. “Well, you know how I like to watch you eat, Thelma. Why don't we get some grub and you can tell me all about your new act with the circus. I'll even spring for some peanuts. Elephants like peanuts, right?”

She laughs, shaking back her hair. “Okay, Beastie, you're on. Let's go eat. Better keep your paws at a safe distance from my plate, though. Once I get going there's no stopping me.”

We head back to the car, holding hands as we walk. Once or twice I see her frown, looking around, but when I squeeze her hand, she smiles at me and shakes her head.

On the way back to the ferry, we stop at a roadside grill Eva points out. I'm not sold on the idea of eating barbecue chicken roasted on the side of the road, but it turns out to be delicious. We sit and eat at a rickety wood table under a faded green umbrella, talking and laughing, drinking cervezas in the heat and swatting away flies.

It's probably the best meal of my life.

Out of the blue, she says, “I figured Lebanese.” She glances at me, letting her gaze rove over my face. “Maybe Moroccan.”

“Pretty good for an amateur sleuth. I'm impressed.”

She perks up. “I was right? Which one?”

“Both. My mother was Lebanese. Dad was Moroccan.”

She claps, pleased with herself. “You have an exotic face. It's those knife-blade cheekbones. I can picture your ancestors riding glossy black stallions over serpentine sand dunes with scimitars raised over their heads, flashing in the sun.”

I chuckle. “How *Lawrence of Arabia*.”

“You don’t have an accent,” she notes, chewing on a chicken wing.

“I hate to ruin this grand romantic daydream you’ve got going, but I was born in Washington, DC.”

She glances at the tattoos on my left arm. “But you speak Arabic.”

“And Armenian, Turkish, and French. My mother was a language teacher.”

“Hmm. Handsome, funny, *and* multilingual. Be still, my heart.”

I shrug. “It came in handy in the military.” *Uncle Sam loves a recruit who can speak the enemy’s language.*

“What did your father do?”

I almost say *destabilize governments*, but catch myself in time. “He worked for the CIA.” When Eva’s eyebrows fly up, I add mildly, “Desk job.”

Just one more lie to add to the growing pile.

“What about you?” I ask, turning the conversation to safer waters. “Where are you from?”

“Russia. A small town near Saint Petersburg called Kirishi.” Keeping her gaze on her plate, she sets down the chicken wing and wipes her fingers with a paper napkin.

I have to pretend ignorance about her nationality, but I’m eager to hear more details. “Really? You don’t have an accent, either.”

She takes a long pull on her beer, then says quietly, “It wasn’t allowed.”

The hair on the back of my neck prickles. “What d’you mean?”

“I mean my ex beat it out of me. That and anything else he thought was a flaw. Disobedience. Insolence. Any hint of what he deemed laziness or sloppiness. Once he broke my arm when I neglected to make the bed. Of course, he had an accent himself and wasn’t particularly tidy, but that wasn’t the point.

He liked watching me jump through his hoops.” She lifts her eyes and meets my stare with an unflinching one of her own. “He liked it even better when he could punish me for failing.”

I drop the chicken leg I’ve been holding and stare at her.

“That was early on, though.” Her voice is even, almost matter-of-fact, but her face has gone pale. “I adapted quickly. I was a fast learner.” She closes her eyes briefly, exhaling a breath. “Too bad I didn’t learn before I met him that a pretty face can hide a monster.”

I’m at a loss for what to do or say. I’m so angry I want to smash something, but that would be useless.

The last time I felt this impotent was when I was watching my wife die.

I take Eva’s hand across the table and squeeze it. When she blinks up at me, I say, “I fucking *hate* that I can’t make that better for you, but I swear with God as my witness that if anyone—*anyone*—ever hurts you again, or tries to hurt you, or even fucking *thinks* about hurting you, I’ll kill him. And I don’t mean figuratively. I will literally *end his life*, with my bare hands if necessary. Do you understand?”

Her eyes fill with water. After a moment, she says in a shaky voice, “I must be very sick, because I think that’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

She leans across the table and kisses me.

I pull her around the table and into my arms and bury my face in her hair, squeezing her as she wraps her arms around me. I hold her as she takes long, shuddering breaths, curled into me, her face hidden in my chest.

“Thank you, Naz,” she whispers, clinging to me. “Thank you for making me feel safe. You have no idea what a gift it is to be able to trust again.”

Trust.

I officially hate myself.

ELEVEN

EVA

Naz holds me until I stop shaking, then he gently strokes his hand down my back and sighs.

It's a heavy, sad sound. I'm making the poor guy depressed.

I sit up and force a smile. When I look into his dark eyes, I'm dismayed to see them full of pain. "I'm sorry. I keep making things awkward today. Let's talk about something else."

I make a move to go back to my seat, but he tightens his arms around me. "Please don't apologize," he says, his voice cracking. "It makes it so much worse."

I don't know exactly what he means, only that I've upset him. I whisper, "Okay," and press a kiss to his cheek.

He folds me into him again like I'm a child, cradling me, surrounding me with his body and his strength. But there's tension in his muscles now that wasn't there before. There's a new edge to his voice when he asks me if I want another beer.

I tilt my head back so it's resting on his shoulder and look up at him. "No. I want another kiss."

"You can have as many as you want, sweetheart," he murmurs, and lowers his lips to mine.

There's an edge to his mouth, too. Something strange has crept in between us, and it's all because I brought up my past. Dimitri's specter still haunts me, even here, a million miles away from my old life.

I want the strangeness gone. I want the other Naz back, the one who teases me mercilessly and looks at me like I'm a miracle. The one who makes me feel completely, dangerously alive.

I put my mouth close to his ear and say, "If we go back to my apartment and I promise to keep all my clothes on, can we —"

“No.”

It’s rough and unequivocal, and makes blood rush to my cheeks.

He sees my embarrassment. His expression turns anguished, as if I’ve stabbed him in the heart.

“Not because I don’t want to. God, please don’t think that. Because I can’t. I *can’t*, Eva. I couldn’t do that to you.”

Of course not. He’s a man of honor. He’s taken a vow. And he’ll be leaving at some point to go back to his old life, wherever that is.

How stupid of me. How *selfish*. I’m doing the thing I swore I wouldn’t do—wedging myself between him and his convictions. And his future, which doesn’t include me.

I open my mouth to apologize again, but shut it before the words come out. He’s already asked me not to, and I don’t want to make things worse. So I simply nod silently, swallowing around the lump in my throat, and stare at his chest as my eyes fill with water.

“Sweetheart,” he says, taking my face in his hands. “Please don’t look like that. Eva, please. Look at me.”

When I lift my gaze to his, he groans. “Fuck. This is so fucking *fucked*.”

“Please stop cursing at me,” I whisper, starting to shake again.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He gathers me against him and heaves out a breath. I’m shocked to find he’s shaking, too. Against my cheek, his neck feels feverish.

This is my fault. He’s upset because I’m forcing his hand, throwing myself at him, me and all my greedy dysfunctions. I have to make it right.

I peel myself out of his arms, rise, and slowly sink into the chair across the table from him. I inhale a deep, steady breath, flattening my hands on the table. Then I meet his agonized eyes.

“I won’t apologize again, but I *will* make you a promise.” When I pause, he appears to be bracing himself, as if he’s not sure he wants me to go on. After another big breath, I do. “I won’t put you in this position again.”

Gritting his jaw, he closes his eyes.

I don’t think he understands what I’m saying.

“Making you choose, I mean. Forcing you to kiss me. Making you uncomfortable. I promise from now on, I’ll respect you and your vows better than that.”

He grips the edges of the table so hard I think it might crack. Then he shoots to his feet and starts to pace up and down the side of the road, blowing out hard breaths, shaking his hands as if to rid them of crawling ants.

The old Mexican woman at the smoking barbecue pit peers at him through squinted eyes, then sends me a speculative look.

I rise, gather the trash from our lunch, and dump it in the big metal garbage can nearby. I don’t know what else to do, so I get in the Jeep and sit there, waiting for him to gather his thoughts.

After a few minutes, he gets in. Without a word, he starts the car. We drive off. We don’t speak until we pull into the car rental parking lot and he kills the engine. Then, without turning to me, Naz says quietly, “I want you to know I hate myself for this.”

I’m startled by the words, but also by the tone of self-loathing they’re spoken in. “What?”

“When you think of me later, please believe that I . . . I never meant . . .” He swallows hard, staring out the windshield.

“Hey.”

He turns to look at me. I’m taken aback by the depth of emotion in his eyes. I touch his cheek with my hand. “No more of that, Dudley. I know what’s in your heart.”

“Do you?” He stares at me with so much intensity it leaves me breathless.

Something huge is happening between us. I know it, and I don't want to look too closely at it, not yet when it's so near. I'm afraid I'll be blinded. Better to examine it from a safe distance later, after he's long gone.

Though my heart feels like it might be breaking, I keep my voice light when I answer. “Yes. I do. Now, come on, cranky, let's get back to the island so you can get a nap in. Things always look better after a nap.”

He exhales and tilts his head so it's resting in my hand. He briefly closes his eyes. When he opens them again, their usual sparkle is back.

He says, “It's just that spending time with you is so *boring*. You're going to be the least interesting circus act *ever*, Thelma. You'll put the audience to sleep.”

“At least they'll be well rested when they go see you rattling the bars in your shiny new cage, Beastie.”

We smile at each other.

“Okay,” he says, nodding. “Nap it is. I should probably change my diaper while I'm at it.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Ew. Bad visual.”

“You'd prefer I get diaper rash?”

“Get out of the car, you disturbed person.”

“We should probably stop on the way for baby powder and bum wipes, too. I'm fresh out.”

Rolling my eyes at his grin, I exit the car. He does, too, and grabs my hand as we walk into the rental office. He doesn't let go. The entire ferry ride back to the island, he holds on to my hand like it's a life vest and he's a man drowning at sea.

On the ride back to my apartment, he grows quiet again. I feel his mood advancing like thunderclouds, but I'm helpless to do anything about it. By the time we pull up across the street, he looks grim.

“Thank you for a wonderful day.”

He doesn't look over at me. “Yup.”

Ouch. “Um. I'll talk to you later, I guess?”

“Yup.”

Oh, for God's sake. I'm abruptly ticked off at him. “Naz.”

He glances over at me, his gaze wary.

“If you have something to say to me, say it. Because I'm not liking this broody, non-talkative thing one bit.”

He almost smiles. His lips soften, but that wariness stays in his eyes. After a moment of silence, he shakes his head. “Guess I'm just cranky, like you said.”

I glare at him, because I know he's not telling the truth. Something is weighing hard on his mind, and he won't share it with me. Worse, he's letting it ruin what was otherwise a spectacular day.

Worst of all, he's being a jerk.

I mutter, “Fine. Good luck with your diaper change.”

I get out of the car and shut the door behind me. I don't look back as I walk up the stairs to my apartment and unlock the door. I go inside, stand in the middle of the living room, stick my hands into my hair, and let loose a frustrated yell at the ceiling.

Then, feeling a little better, I go take a long, cold shower.

When I get out, I'm in the middle of toweling dry my hair when something makes me stop and cock an ear toward the front door. I stand still in the bathroom for several moments, certain I heard a noise, but it doesn't come again.

It's not the lack of noise that's making my pulse jump, though. It's that old, particular sensation I'm so familiar with from experiencing it twenty-four hours a day for seven years.

I felt it on and off at the ruins in Tulum, too.

Someone's watching me.

My breathing goes ragged. Ripping my bathrobe off the hook where it's hanging on the back of the bathroom door, I quickly put it on and tie the sash around my waist. I grab the .38 from where I left it on the bathroom counter, then creep silently out of the bathroom and into the living room.

The curtains behind the sofa are closed, but one of the windows is cracked. The sea breeze billows the gauzy fabric into folds that gently rise and fall. *Did I leave that window open?*

I turn and look at the front door. My pulse goes haywire.

I can't remember if I locked it when I came inside.

As silently as I can, I move to the corner of the living room, set my back against the wall, and raise my gun. It's hard to hear anything over the crashing of my heartbeat, but I force myself to stand still and wait.

This is only a one-bedroom apartment. If anyone is inside with me, I'll know soon.

When I hear wood creak on the stair landing outside the door, I nearly scream. Instead I slide along the wall with my heart in my throat and peek out the peephole.

A huge surge of relief makes my knees weak.

Standing motionless with his head hanging down, Naz has his arms braced on either side of the frame.

When I pull open the door, he raises his head and looks at me. His expression is wretched.

"I couldn't leave," he says in a raspy voice. "I've been standing here for half an hour, trying to force myself to walk away, and I couldn't." He notices the gun in my hand, and his voice turns hopeless. "If you want to use that on me, you'd be doing us both a favor."

I grab him by his shirt and pull him inside, kicking the door shut behind him. Then I throw my arms around his shoulders and bury my face in his neck.

He wraps his arms around me and inhales deeply against my damp hair. A tremor passes through his chest. He whispers,

“Jasmine,” then exhales in a big gust, as if he’s letting something go that he’s been holding.

We stand like that, unmoving and mute, until our crashing heartbeats return to normal. Then I release him, set the gun on the console table near the sofa, and lock the front door. When I turn back to him, I’m surprised to see him standing mere inches away. He bends and sweeps me into his arms, then turns toward the bedroom.

My heart explodes. “I thought—we weren’t—”

“We’re not,” he says gruffly, striding toward the bed. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t lie down.”

Lie down? The man expects me to lie next to him in bed with nothing on under this bathrobe and not spontaneously combust?

He feels me staring at him in my state of confusion. “You said I needed a nap,” he offers by way of explanation, then gently lowers me down to the bed.

He shucks off his shoes, crawls onto the mattress, turns me onto my side, slides an arm under my head, brings his knees up behind mine, fits me against his body, and exhales in that relieved way again, stirring my hair.

After a moment of shock, I manage, “What are we doing?”

“Badasses like to spoon before a nap, sweetheart.” He presses a soft kiss to the nape of my neck.

“Oh. I wasn’t aware.”

“You okay with this?”

I nestle my head into the crook of his arm, tuck my bare feet between his, and close my eyes. “More than okay.” He presses another kiss to my nape, and I shiver. “But if you keep doing that, it will make things difficult.”

“Things?”

I hear the stifled laughter in his voice, the bastard. He knows exactly the effect he has on me. “Please don’t tease me,” I say quietly. “I’ve never . . .”

He falls still behind me. “You’ve never . . . ?”

I take a small breath for courage. “I’ve never wanted a man the way I want you. I’ve only ever been with . . .” I have to clear my throat before I can go on. My cheeks are flaming. “My ex was the only person I’ve been with . . . you know, like . . . *that*, and it wasn’t good.”

His breathing changes as he processes my words. He tightens his arms around me.

“You were a virgin when you met him?”

I nod, trying to push away ugly memories. “I lived at home with my mother until I was twenty. I was very naive. I went to an all-girls’ Orthodox school. There weren’t any boys around until I went to university, and even then I wasn’t interested. I was too focused on dancing.”

“You’re a dancer?”

“Ballet.”

After a moment of thoughtful silence, he murmurs, “Yeah, I can see that.”

“I was accepted at the Mariinsky Ballet in Saint Petersburg, one of the world’s leading ballet companies. It was an incredible honor. All I ever wanted was to be prima. From the time I started dancing when I was four years old.”

I have to stop speaking because of the rock in my throat.

Naz gently squeezes my shoulder. “What happened?”

I inhale, then let it out in a long, shuddering breath, dreading what I’m about to say.

“Dimitri happened. I danced in a production of *The Firebird*. I was one of the thirteen princesses, a minor role, but Dimitri was in the audience on opening night, and decided . . .” My voice cracks. “He decided he wanted a ballerina for his stable.”

After a long moment, Naz speaks. His voice is even but dangerously low. “Stable.”

I whisper, “Men like him require a variety of toys to play with. I was his favorite, but I was never the only one. He kept me the longest, though. Usually his interest waned after a year or two. I never knew what happened to those other girls. One day they’d just . . . disappear.”

We lie in silence for a while until most of the tremors have left my limbs. I sense Naz’s fury, sense how he’s consciously controlling his breathing and keeping his grip on my arm relaxed, and all of that makes me fall for him a little more.

Finally he says, “I live in New York. Manhattan. You ever been there?”

“No.”

“Would you like to go?”

My heart starts to pound. “Yes.”

He squeezes me so tight it’s hard to catch a breath. His cheek is hot and scratchy against my neck. “Good,” he says gruffly. “Now roll over, sweetheart. I need your eyes.”

I turn in the circle of his arms. He pulls me tight against him as soon as I stop moving. He brushes my hair away from my face and rests his big hand on the side of my head. His gaze full of tenderness, he says, “From now on, you don’t have to be scared of anything. No matter what happens, I’ll always make sure you’re safe. Always. In all ways.”

I start to get choked up. My throat is closing and my eyes are filling with water, but I manage to say, “You can’t promise that.”

“I *am* promising that. Don’t look away. Look at me, Eva.”

I glance back at him, biting the inside of my cheek and trying not to cry.

“I don’t have much to offer you. I’ll never be wealthy. I live in a shitty apartment. I don’t have a pension or real estate investments or even a fucking savings account. But I *can* give you my protection. It’s the only real thing of value I can offer. From now on, I’ll protect you. From any threat. If necessary, with my life. You understand?”

His eyes are tender but there's steel in his voice, and I know without a doubt he means what he says.

Just as I know he's keeping something from me.

I hide my face in his chest so he can't see the tears leak from the corners of my eyes. "To be honest, no. I don't really understand."

He sighs, squeezing me. "Doesn't matter. You will."

We lie together, just breathing, as the sun begins to dip into the horizon and the shadows stretch and slant over the bedroom wall. Naz's body is a warm, heavy weight against mine.

Even a long while later, when his muscles begin to relax and I feel him drifting toward sleep, his arms wound around me don't slacken.

I whisper, "You were wrong, before. You have something priceless to offer. And it's not your protection."

He shifts against me, nuzzling his nose into my hair. "What's that?"

"Yourself."

He makes a soft, inarticulate sound of anguish. Or maybe it's happiness. I can't tell which. Then I don't care which, because his lips find mine and he kisses me with so much passion I feel as if we're igniting the bed. The heat always simmering between us erupts, threatening to consume us both.

He rolls on top of me. My thighs open around his hips. His hands tangle in my hair. His mouth is hot and greedy over mine, and within moments both of us are frantic.

Then his cell phone rings, and he freezes.

From his back pocket, it rings again. Breathing hard, we stare at each other until Naz slowly blinks. Then it's as if he realizes what he's doing. A look of horror comes into his eyes.

When he withdraws from me, it's like a shattering. From one sharp-edged moment to the next, his heat and weight are

gone and I'm lying alone on the bedcovers as he's turning his back and muttering an oath.

He stalks into the kitchen, answering his ringing phone with a curt, "Yeah." He listens a moment, then says in a low voice, "I'm not home. I'll call you back from my place in ten minutes."

I roll facedown, bury my face in my pillow, and stifle a scream.

TWELVE

NAZ

I end the call with Tabby and drag a hand through my hair. Gulping air and shaking, I pace around the kitchen a few times, trying to blow off some steam.

I almost lost control with Eva.

I was so close to taking her, to tearing off that wisp of a robe and doing something unforgivable. Something even more unforgivable than spying on her, lying to her, and pretending to be someone I'm not.

Namely, an honorable man.

If I had any shred of honor left, I would've already told her Dimitri hired me. As soon as she confided in me at the ice-cream shop about the abuse she suffered at his hands, I should've put the brakes on everything and told her the truth.

Instead, I told her the story of how Sevan died. As if sharing my own pain could possibly make us even.

My self-loathing is growing by leaps and bounds.

When I walk back to the bedroom, I stop dead in my tracks at the doorway. I have to grip the frame for support.

Eva's lying facedown on the bed with her fists clenched in the blankets and her hair wild around her shoulders and down her back. Her pale-blue robe is shucked up around her bare legs, draped between her parted thighs, pooled on either side of her hips. In the middle, her bottom is a perfect heart-shaped apple.

Barely covered by a whisper-thin layer of silk.

"Sweetheart." My voice is so hoarse I sound as if I've been gargling with rocks.

She answers with a muffled noise of frustration and kicks one foot against the bed.

It's adorable. Except for the tantalizing way the movement makes her ass jiggle under her robe, which is torture. I bite back a groan. "I have to go—"

"I heard," she growls, lifting her head. "So go."

She drops her face back into the pillow.

Fuck. I take a few careful steps toward the bed, then stand looking down at her, debating whether I have enough self-control to sit on the edge of the mattress.

Better not. You've already proven how much control you don't have. Asshole.

"I'll be back as soon as I—"

"Why?" She flips over and sits up, leveling me with a look. "So you can confuse me even more? So you can tell me beautiful things while obviously hiding other things? So you can make my head spin with how much you want me one minute and how much you don't the next?"

"Don't misunderstand," I say through gritted teeth. "I *always* want you. And being near you like this puts me out on the far fucking *edge* of my restraint."

Then I have to stop talking, because the front of her robe has slithered open and I can no longer breathe.

I close my eyes, but it's too late. The image of her perfect, lush, rose-tipped breasts is branded into my brain forever.

I manage to croak, "Your . . . robe."

I hear a sucked-in breath, then a huff of annoyance. Then a curt, "You can open your eyes now."

When I do, she's holding the front of her robe closed with a fist. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips are pinched, and her head is held at a stiff angle.

She's angry and embarrassed.

She's also so goddamn beautiful it hurts.

"I'll tell you everything," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "Just not yet. There are some things that have to get

squared away. Some preparations that have to be made. But then I'll tell you everything. You have my word."

A shade of anger fades from her posture. For a moment she looks confused. Her voice comes out an octave higher, like it does when she's under stress. "Preparations?"

I grind my back teeth together. She sees my tension and starts to look frightened, so I stop and pull in a deep breath. Keeping my voice steady and quiet as I gaze at her, I say, "I want you to come to New York with me. I want you to stay with me and decide if you like it. If you do, I want you to stay for good."

Her eyes grow wide. Her face pales. From her parted lips comes a faint noise, shock or dismay, perhaps joy, but that could be my wishful thinking.

I've already thrown the dice. Nothing to do now but see how they roll.

"You don't have to answer me now, but that's what I'm—"

"Yes."

It's barely a whisper. If I were standing another few feet away I wouldn't have heard it. But I did hear it, and I can also see the look of adoration in her eyes.

It brings me to my knees.

I sink to the floor next to the bed and pull her into my chest. She comes willingly, wrapping her arms around my shoulders, curving into me with a sigh. When she kisses the side of my neck, my eyes slide shut. I hug her harder.

"You can make your call here," she says. "I'll give you privacy. You don't have to leave."

I wish I could, but Tabby wants me to log in to a secured satellite channel over the computer. "I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise."

"Will you stay the night?"

When I tense, she adds quickly, "You could sleep on the couch. I'll lock my bedroom door."

I growl, “I’d break it down.”

She turns her face to my neck. She whispers, “That would be okay, too.”

I pull back and take her face in my hands. “Listen to me. I want you more than anything. More than I want my next breath. And I pray to God you’ll still want me, too, after it’s all said and done. But it can’t happen until you know everything, and you don’t know everything yet.”

She examines my face in silence for a while, then says carefully, “Now you’re starting to scare me.”

“Just trust me for a little while longer. Please.”

I can see the ambivalence in her eyes. When she stands, I let her go, rising to watch her as she folds her arms across her chest and starts to pace.

After a few moments, she stops and looks at me. “Okay. Here’s the deal. You have twenty-four hours.”

She sounds calm, businesslike, and completely in control. I lift my brows, waiting for the rest.

“We have some kind of crazy connection. I can’t deny that. But I also can’t deny that this cloak-and-dagger routine is strange. It’s unsettling. Considering I have terrible instincts when it comes to men, that’s a major problem. I do trust you, though logically I shouldn’t. I do want to go to New York with you, though that’s about as much in my self-interest as stepping in front of a speeding train. All things considered—especially after what you just said—I should be removing myself from this situation, not jumping in with both feet.”

She looks away for a moment, takes a deep breath, then looks back. Her eyes shine like gems in the light. “But I believe in you.”

A wrecking ball just hit me. A shotgun blast blew a hole clean through my chest.

“I believe you when you say you want to protect me, and I believe your feelings for me are true. If it turns out I’m wrong, so be it, but I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.

But my trust can only go so far. If you can't tell me whatever it is you need to tell me by this time tomorrow night, there's no reason why I should continue to allow myself to fall in love with you."

She stops abruptly, as if she's revealed more than she planned, but the roar of blood in my ears is so loud I probably wouldn't have heard anything else anyway.

I cross the space between us in two long strides and crush my mouth to hers.

She sags against me as I kiss her, hard and deep. I hold her tight, so tight I feel every tremor in her body, so close I feel every ragged intake of breath. She wraps her arms around my neck and gives me what I need for as long as I need it, until I break away from her lips, panting, dizzy with her taste and the scorching heat of my own desire.

"Beastie." Her voice is husky. Her laugh is soft.

If I died at this moment, I'd go a happy, happy man.

"Twenty-four hours," I say, my voice rough. "You have my word. Lock the door behind me and don't open it for anyone. I'll be back."

I kiss her again, then turn and leave before my hormones take over and I can no longer think.

The entire drive back to my place, all I can see is her face when she said she believed in me. All I can remember are her beautiful, trusting eyes.

It breaks my heart to think that by this time tomorrow, that look in her eyes will be gone.



"There's our boy! How are you, Nasir?"

Sitting beside a glowering Connor, Tabby is all smiles. I wish the picture on the computer screen wasn't quite so good, so I couldn't see with such clarity how lethal Connor looks. His eyes, obsidian black, are even darker than mine. At the moment, they're reflecting mayhem back at me.

"Doing good. What's the word?"

“The word,” says Connor darkly, “is that you were right about Evalina and Dimitri. They’re not married.”

I already knew that, but it’s a relief to hear it confirmed, mainly because it means Connor’s probably not going to kill me. I run a hand over my head, impatient to hear the rest. “What about the abuse?”

Tabby and Connor share a look. This time it’s Tabby who speaks. “We have confirmation on that as well.”

“What *kind* of confirmation?” I insist, hearing the snarl in my voice.

Connor opens his mouth, but Tabby lightly rests her hand on his arm, and he closes it again. She says, “Hospital records. The details are immaterial.” Then, after a short pause, “How much did she tell you?”

“She mentioned a broken arm. Said Dimitri liked to use a cattle prod. Apparently he also abused her mother. And she said he had other girls. His ‘stable,’ she called it. Made it sound like a harem.”

“Yes,” says Tabby evenly, but something dark has crept into her voice.

I look at Connor. He says, “You don’t wanna know, brother.”

“Yeah, except I really fucking do.”

“Not gonna help anything.”

I glance at Tabby, whose face remains impassive. Then I look back at Connor. “If someone told you it wasn’t gonna ‘help’ you to know something important about Tabby, what would you say?”

Connor snaps, “I’d tell that stupid motherfucker to say his last prayers, ’cause he was about to meet his maker!”

Tabby looks at the ceiling and sighs.

“Good. Then we understand each other.”

After a moment, Connor mutters, “Well, shit.”

Tabby looks fondly at her husband. “I told you to let me do the talking, honey.”

“Don’t say it like that,” grouses Connor.

“Like what, babe?”

“Like I’m a big dummy who can’t control his mouth.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Tabby winds her arms around Connor’s broad shoulders and kisses him gently on the cheek. “You know I think you’re a genius. And you know I love your mouth.”

He turns and gives her a grudging look. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” She kisses him again. He pretends to pout, which earns him another kiss. Tabby whispers, “I love your mouth and everything you do with it.”

“Hey, people! I’m still here!”

“Sorry, Nasir.” Tabby unwinds her arms from Connor’s neck. He shoots me a glare, but I’m too preoccupied to worry about it.

“I need to know what I’m dealing with,” I say, looking at both of them. “For my sake, but also for Eva’s. She’d tell me everything if I asked her, but I don’t want to have to make her relive whatever ugly shit she’s already gone through. And when the time comes to deal with Dimitri, I need to know exactly what kind of sick fuck I’m putting down.”

Connor leans back in his chair and regards me with narrowed eyes. “You take this woman, you’re starting a war. You know that, right?”

My answer comes with zero hesitation.

“She’s worth it. If you need to cut me loose and disavow all knowledge, I understand. It’s been a privilege to know you both, and I thank you for the opportunity to work together. But Eva’s my priority now. Protecting her is the only thing that matters.”

Tabby clasps her hands to her chest and bounces in her chair, making little noises of glee.

Connor groans and passes his hand over his face. “He’s a fuckin’ romantic,” he mutters.

“Don’t pretend you’re not, jarhead!” says Tabby, and slugs him in the arm.

He sends her a smoldering gaze. I get the feeling he’s about to throw her over his shoulder and take her to bed. *Better wrap this up.*

“Email me whatever you’ve got. I’ll check in again once I’ve reviewed it.”

“Don’t make any moves without talkin’ to me first,” says Connor, looking hungrily at his wife.

The call is disconnected and the screen goes black.

Seconds later, my email pings with an incoming message. I open the files and start to read.

After five minutes, I need to pour myself a whiskey.

When I get to the pictures that accompany the written reports, the whiskey I’ve swallowed almost comes back up.

They were meticulous, the various nurses and doctors who documented Eva’s “accidents.” Medical terminology jumps out at me from the screen like images from a nightmare.

Fracture. Contusion. Hematoma. Splint.

I slap the laptop shut when I get to the section about the burns and spend several long minutes breathing deeply, wishing I could take a scouring pad to my brain.

Then rage sets in. I’m not only gonna take Dimitri down. I’m gonna tear that sick fuck limb from limb.

He doesn’t deserve anything quick or easy.

That decision made, I pour myself another whiskey, grit my teeth, and reopen the files.

An hour later, when I’ve reviewed everything Tabby sent, I call Connor and tell him I need a pickup ASAP.

I promised Eva I’d protect her. Now that I know what kind of a monster I’ve been working for, I have to get her off this

island and out of his reach.

Tonight.

THIRTEEN

EVA

I get out of the robe and dress in jeans and a T-shirt, gulp a glass of water, and try to stay calm. Then I wait.

And wait.

Naz's call comes hours later, just as I'm starting to think that maybe I won't hear from him until the morning. I answer, eager to hear his voice, but I can tell from his tense tone that something's terribly wrong.

"Eva. I need you to listen to me carefully and do exactly as I say."

"That doesn't give me the warm fuzzies. What's happening?"

He draws a slow breath. "Just pack a bag. Only the necessities. I'll tell you on the way."

I sit slowly on the edge of my bed, tightening my grip on the phone as my heart starts to pound. "On the way to where?"

"We're leaving tonight. Now. I'm coming to get you in—"

"Whoa, hold on! *Leaving?*"

His voice is a low growl in his throat. "You said you wanted to come to New York with me, so we're going. Our flight leaves in exactly one hour."

After a moment, I find the presence of mind to say, "You're going to have to do a lot better than that, cowboy. Start talking."

His voice rises. "We don't have time for this—"

"You better *make* time," I interrupt loudly. "Because I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell is going on."

He mutters a curse. I hear heavy footsteps and picture him pacing around a room, dragging a hand through his hair.

“I have to tell you in person,” he finally says. “You need to see my face when I say what I have to say.”

“Again, not getting the warm fuzzies.”

“Yeah, well, it’s gonna get a lot worse before it gets better,” he says darkly. “Just pack your things and I’ll see you in thirty minutes.”

He hangs up.

I stare at the phone in my hand for a long time, queasiness making my guts lurch. *It’s going to get worse before it gets better.* What could that possibly mean?

I’m at a complete loss as to what to do. My mind runs on a hamster wheel, quickly spinning theories and discarding them just as fast.

Is he in trouble with the law? Oh God, maybe it’s drugs? He was buying drugs the first time you met! Maybe he’s not taking time off like he told you—maybe he’s hiding out on this island from the police!

“Why would a criminal hiding from the police promise to protect you?” I say to the empty room, standing because I can’t sit still. “Why would he buy you ice cream and tell you about his dead wife? Why would he refuse to touch you, when it’s something you both want so badly? Why would a criminal act like a complete gentleman, or be so kind, or take a vow of *celibacy*, for God’s sake . . .”

I trail off, staring into space. My mind has presented me with an impossible scenario. An unthinkable scenario, one that—if proven true—is the worst thing I can imagine.

No. No, that can’t be it. That’s ridiculous.

Think about it. He said he didn’t have any money. He said he had nothing to offer you. He said he took a vow of celibacy for religious reasons.

He said you’d make a nun’s habit look pornographic.

Then he said he had to go to confession after he pictured you in one.

What kind of man talks about celibacy, confession, and nuns?

I sit on the sofa and stare blankly at the wall as I try to convince myself it's impossible. I'm still sitting there when Naz's knock comes.

I carefully set my phone on the coffee table, then go and open the door.

Wearing all black, Naz brushes past me into the living room, looking around. Over his shoulder, he says, "Where's your bag?"

I slowly close the door and stare at him.

He turns and sees me standing there silently, watching him with whatever strange look I must have on my face, and briefly closes his eyes. "Fuck."

"Just spit it out," I say. "Whatever it is. Just rip the Band-Aid off and get it over with."

"I can tell you on the way to our flight."

"You can tell me now."

His gaze drops to the small wood table beside the door. The .38 sits where I left it, mere feet from where I stand.

"I'm not going to shoot you, Naz."

He says softly, "You might."

"I promise I won't. Tell me."

"Eva—"

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me everything," I say, loudly enough to make him flinch.

He blows out a hard breath, then starts to pace. "Okay. Just hear me out until the end before you do anything." Another hard breath and he spins on his heel and crosses the floor. "I work for a company called Metrix Security."

"You said you were between jobs."

"Trust me, you won't care so much about that in a sec." He clears his throat, props his hands on his hips, and makes

another turn. “So. This job. It uh, it involves . . . security work.”

“I got that from the name. Get to the point.”

He glances at me, takes a visual inventory of my expression and stance, and curses again. “I’d feel better if you sat on the couch for this.”

“And I’d feel better if you’d stop stalling. It isn’t helping your case.”

“Okay, but just remember you promised you wouldn’t shoot me.”

All the tiny hairs on my body stand on end. I watch him pace with a growing sense of panic, my heart palpitating and my hands starting to shake.

“I was hired to watch someone. That’s why I’m here.”

When a semi-hysterical laugh bursts out of me, Naz looks at me sharply. “What?”

“So you’re not becoming a priest.”

His eyes bulge. “*What?*”

“Wait—you’re watching someone? Like . . . as a bodyguard?”

His expression goes from astonished to guarded. “It’s more like surveillance.”

I’m shaking so badly I want to sit down, but for some reason I think I should remain standing for whatever he’s about to say next. I blow out a tremulous breath. “I can’t say I’m not hurt that you lied to me, but I guess . . . you had to? You have a nondisclosure contract or something? Is this another famous person? And what, they’re leaving tonight, so you have to leave, too?”

He’s starting to look ill. Beneath his tan, his face has gone pale. “No to all that.”

“So what, then?”

He moistens his lips. “Just remember that I said I hated myself for this. Please remember that.”

Something about his expression strikes a chord of terror deep in my heart. My mouth goes dry. I’m rooted to the spot, unable to move even if I wanted to. I whisper, “I don’t think I want to hear this anymore.”

Naz closes his eyes. When he opens them again, they’re anguished. His voice low and rough, he says, “The person I was hired to watch . . . is you.”

My heart stops. I inhale a breath that feels like snow. Cold flashes over me, a chill so freezing I feel it down to the marrow of my bones. When I manage to speak, my voice is eerie and horrible, a dead rasp of a thing, like it’s coming from beyond the grave.

“*Who hired you?*”

“Eva. Eva, please.”

His voice is so faint. His eyes are so pleading. The hand he holds out to me shakes.

And I know.

With the speed of two fingers snapping, I *know*.

I back up so quickly I ram into the door. It rattles in the frame from the force of the blow. I stand there in cold horror with my chest heaving as I stare at the beautiful liar across the room from me, this man I gave my trust to, this mercenary bastard who lied to me with every single breath.

He takes a step toward me, and a sob breaks from my chest.

I scream, “I’ll never go back to him! *Never!*”

When Naz takes another step closer, I lunge for the gun.

FOURTEEN

NAZ

I see her move, and I know what's coming.

This is exactly why I wanted her to sit on the couch. I mean, it's not like I don't *deserve* to get shot, but that she's actually going to do it still stings.

She did promise, after all.

The first slug lands in the drywall three feet above my head. By then I'm already halfway across the room. She manages to get off another shot before I tackle her, but it's wide. It blasts straight through the living room window, shattering the glass and making my ears ring. My nose burns with the stench of gunpowder.

I grab her wrist and knock her arm against the door until she drops the gun. She screams at me, sobbing and thrashing and trying to kick me in the balls.

I wrestle both her arms behind her back, wedge my knee between her thighs, and pin her to the door with the weight of my body. I shout, "Stop, Eva! I'm not taking you back to Dimitri! *Stop!*"

She lets loose a blistering string of Russian words that I have to assume are curses.

"I'm off the job! I'm not taking you to him!"

"You *liar!*" She sobs, red-faced and shaking, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You make me *sick* you disgusting liar get your hands off me I'll kill you I swear to *God* I'll put a bullet through your *brain*—"

"*Be quiet!*" I thunder in her face.

She cuts off with a choked gasp. We stand chest to chest, breathing hard in hostile silence, until I gain control of myself. I speak through gritted teeth.

“I took the job before I knew you. He said you were married, that you ran away. I didn’t know what he’d done to you. I didn’t know anything.”

She’s seething in my arms, straining to get free. Her body is racked with tremors. Her eyes are closed, her nostrils are flared, and I can’t recall the last time I was this close to someone who so desperately wanted to murder me.

If ever.

“I’m taking you off this island,” I say raggedly into her ear. “And we’re going to New York. To a safe place. From there, you can decide where you want to go. Your life is your own, you understand? I’m not working for him anymore. I just. Didn’t. *Know*.”

She hisses like a cornered cat, then tries to bite my ear. I yank my head away before she can sink her teeth into my earlobe.

“Okay,” I growl. “Don’t believe me. But we’re getting you off this fucking island tonight whether you like it or not.”

“I’m not going *anywhere* with you!”

“He knows you’re here, Eva. He’s known all along where you live. He could come at any time!”

She looks at me, and her eyes are fierce with hate and betrayal. “Then let me go. You said my life is my own—prove it. Get your hands off me and let me walk out the door.”

“You can’t get out of Mexico alone.”

“I have a passport—”

“Dimitri knows your assumed name!”

All the color drains from her face. She stares at me as if I’m a monster.

“I didn’t tell him—he already *knew*,” I insist. “He knew everything before Metrix was hired. Whoever you bought your fake papers from worked for him. He traced you here and then hired us to watch you.”

She swallows, blinking back fresh tears. “No. That’s impossible. I was so careful, I . . .”

Some of the fight goes out of her. I become aware of how tightly I’m holding her, and testing to see if she’ll bolt, I loosen my grip on her wrists. I breathe a bit easier when she doesn’t try to move.

“Listen to me. I don’t have to report to him again for a few more days.”

“Report? Oh God.”

“By then, we can be long gone. I’ll get you new identity papers—”

Her laugh is bitter. “Fuck you.”

“—and I’ll make sure you’re safe. I’ll make sure he can never find you again. You have my word.”

She looks up at me. Her lower lip is quivering. “Your *word*? Are you *joking*?”

“No.”

We stare at each other. I want to kiss her so much, but I know it wouldn’t end well. Gazing into her eyes, I say softly, “I meant everything I said to you—”

She groans and turns her face away, so I put my mouth close to her ear and go on. “Every goddamn word. And whether you believe me or not, the truth is that I’m risking my life and the lives of my colleagues by putting you under my protection.”

“I don’t want your protection,” she says, trembling. “I don’t want anything from you except for you to let go of me so I never have to see your face again.”

“Please,” I say, my voice husky. “Please let me get you somewhere safe. Then you can do whatever you want, but first we have to get out of Mexico. Tonight. Right now. Okay?”

Her body goes slack. She starts to cry again, softly, turning away from me, but I take her face in my hand and force her to look at me.

“Sweetheart.”

She bites her lip.

“I’m so sorry.”

She squeezes her eyes shut and shakes her head. “Don’t you dare,” she whispers. When she opens her eyes again, they blaze with fury. “Now *get your hands off me.*”

There’s a crushing pressure in my chest. My heart feels like it’s burning. But I do as she asks and release her, stepping away carefully, watching her face.

She clasps her arms around her body and looks around the room in confusion, as if she doesn’t know where she is.

She’s in shock. Take care of her. I keep my voice as gentle as possible. “Do you have a suitcase?”

She looks toward her bedroom. “Duffel bag. In . . . in the bedroom closet.”

I exhale a relieved breath. She’s gonna let me help her, thank God. “I’m gonna get it out and put some clothes in it. Your toothbrush. Anything else?”

She moistens her lips. She’s still shaking and white, but she seems calmer. “I have . . . I have some cash in a coffee can under the bathroom sink.”

“I’ll get it. Please go sit on the couch.”

She inhales a shuddering breath, then moves stiffly over to the sofa and sits on it, staring blankly at the floor.

I pick up the gun from where she dropped it, shove it into my waistband, and head into the bedroom, keeping an eye on her as I go. I quickly find the black duffel in the closet, grab it, then pull a few pairs of jeans and some dresses off their hangers and throw them in. Going to her small wooden dresser, I yank open the drawers and pull out a handful of T-shirts and panties and dump those in the duffel, too. Eva’s still sitting on the sofa, unmoving, so I stride into the bathroom and lean down to open the cabinet doors under the sink.

I see cleaning products and a few rolls of toilet paper, but I don’t see a coffee can.

I call out, “Did you put the coffee can somewhere else? It’s not under the sink.”

Silence.

I jolt upright and run into the living room.

It’s empty. The front door is open, swinging toward the wall.

“*Shit.*”

I grab the duffel, run out the door, and fly down the stairs and across the street. She’s not that far ahead of me, bolting toward the dark beach, her long hair streaming out behind her like a flag. I throw the duffel into the back of the Jeep and then take off after her, pumping my arms and legs hard, focused on getting to her before she can disappear into the jungle of vegetation between the beach and the main road.

I grab her from behind. She screams and loses her footing in the sand. We both go down in a tangle of arms and legs. She fights me off as fiercely as a wildcat, but I manage to pin her wrists over her head in the sand and straddle her waist so she can’t move.

Chest heaving, she glares up at me. She’s beautiful in the moonlight, even if she is sending me a look that could melt steel.

I holler, “If you don’t let me help you, Dimitri will come for you! Is that what you want?”

“If he comes for me, he’ll kill me,” she hollers back. “And it will be *your* fault, you *spy!*”

She tries to buck me off, but I’m too strong and too heavy. Still wriggling, she lets out a scream of frustration. It’s obvious she’s not going to give up anytime soon or make this easy on me.

“Fine,” I snap. “We’ll do it the hard way.”

In one swift move, I rise, pull her up by her wrists, and throw her over my shoulder.

She kicks and curses, still struggling, but I'm not letting go. Before she can find the gun in my waistband and shoot me in the ass with it, I yank it out and shove it down the front of my jeans. Then I hold on tight as I walk back to the car with my wildly thrashing armful of Russian beauty.

I'm glad the closest house is a quarter mile down the beach, because she's screaming bloody murder. She's also pummeling me on the back so hard I know I'll have bruises.

I start to jog. She lets out a yelp of surprise and grabs my belt for balance, while I grimly smile.

When I reach the Jeep, I set her on her feet next to the passenger door, then hold her while I reach into the glove box.

Then I snap the cuffs around her wrists.

She gapes at the metal encircling her wrists for a horrified moment, then stares at me in disbelief.

I warn, "Be good or I'll have to use a gag, too."

Her eyes flare with outrage. "Try it and your testicles will pay the price."

A shriveling sensation in my groin makes me believe her.

I gently push her into the passenger seat, keeping my head well away from her snapping teeth as I fasten the safety belt around her waist. Then I jog around to the driver's side, slide behind the wheel, lock the doors, and start the engine.

I look over at her. She refuses to meet my eyes, so I say to her profile, "We're gonna take a flight to Cuba, then from there we get on a plane to New York. Once we get to Metrix's headquarters, we'll be debriefed. You can ask all the questions you want. Nothing will be withheld from you about the entire operation. After that . . . you can decide what you wanna do."

She turns her head slowly and gazes at me. The air between us crackles. After a moment, she sets her jaw and looks away.

I gun the engine and we take off, burning rubber. She sits rigidly beside me, staring out the window, her hands clenched into fists. I get the sense she's restraining herself from scratching my eyes out.

That she doesn't try gives me a tiny kernel of hope.

The landing zone where the bird will pick us up is on the other side of town. We drive in silence. I can't help but wonder what she's thinking. What she's feeling. If she'll ever forgive me for this.

I'm distracted with those thoughts when I stop for a red light. A car pulls up beside us, and I glance over.

Then I do a hard double-take.

Inside the older-model black Caddy with all the windows rolled down sit four Hispanic men. Dressed identically in sleeveless white T-shirts, their arms and necks are heavily inked with gang tattoos. They're talking to each other, laughing, paying us no attention.

Until the man in the passenger seat glances over at me. He does a hard double-take, too.

Then his smile—his ugly, rotted smile—dies. His expression turns murderous.

Snarling, Diego-the-drug-dealer draws a gun and points it at my head.

And here I thought things couldn't get worse.

I stomp on the gas pedal. The Jeep lunges forward as the first shot rings out. Horns blare. We narrowly miss being creamed by oncoming traffic as we blow through the intersection, tires squealing. A volley of gunfire follows us, and I shout at Eva to get down.

Clutching the door handle as I careen around a corner, she slumps low in her seat. "I hope he's a better shot than I am," she mutters.

Smart-ass.

We race down the boulevard with the Caddy on our tail. I'm swerving all over the road, trying to avoid the bullets whizzing by on all sides. The bumper gets lit up with a hail of gunfire, then the passenger mirror explodes.

I catch a glimpse of Eva's face and shout, "What the hell are you smiling about, woman?"

"Karma usually doesn't work this fast."

"I can't believe you're actually *enjoying* this!" I swerve hard, barely missing an old man on a bicycle crossing the road. "Those assholes wanna kill us!"

"No, they want to kill *you*. I'm sure it's a common theme with all your acquaintances."

Traffic is stopped ahead of us for another red light, so I drive up on the sidewalk, barely tap the brakes as we come to the intersection, then blast through it when I see it's clear, steering back onto the street. The Jeep's suspension is bumpy under the best of conditions, but coming off a curb directly into a pothole turns it into Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. Eva's head snaps forward, then back, and both of us are slammed against our seats.

Then the back window shatters into a million fractured pieces like a bomb.

I duck a shower of flying glass. "Son of a bitch!"

"Hope you bought good rental insurance for this thing."

I holler, "How are you so calm?"

She gives me a look like I'm being a big sissy. "How are you not, Mr. Ex-Cop-Special-Ops-Man? Or was all that lies, too?"

When I growl in frustration, she says, "If you gave me the gun, I could shoot back."

"You're handcuffed! And you'd shoot me first, anyway! I'm not giving you the goddamn gun!"

"Suit yourself. Watch out for that dog."

I slam on the brakes, jerk the wheel right, then stomp on the gas pedal again, missing Fido by a hair. Behind us, the Caddy is a big black shark lunging in pursuit, its shiny grille flashing in my rearview mirror like metal teeth.

There's no way I'll be able to outrun them. The Jeep is no match for the Caddy's horsepower. So my options are to stop and engage in an outright firefight, or figure out a way to lose them.

I take a hard left at a stop sign, entering a residential neighborhood. We blast down the street at top speed as the Caddy fishtails around the corner behind us. I make three more turns, almost hitting half a dozen parked cars in the process, then find what I'm looking for.

An open garage door.

We come to a screeching stop inside the garage. I kill the engine, jump out of the Jeep, and pull the garage door closed just as the Caddy's headlights swing down the street. Then I stand there in the dark, listening as the car roars by.

When I hear the sound of squealing tires around the next block, I lift the door and jump back into the car. We back out of the garage and head up the street the way we came, using only the fog lights.

When we're out of the neighborhood and back onto the main road, Eva says, "I can't believe that worked."

"Try not to sound so disappointed."

She's silent for the rest of the drive. When we pull off the road and head down a rocky dirt path toward the ocean, she shoots me a look but still doesn't speak. We stop under a stand of king palms, and I kill the engine, then grab her duffel from the back, open her door, and take her arm and help her out.

She looks around at the deserted area, lit only by the light of the moon. We're on an outcropping of land about twenty feet above the beach, separated from the water by a short cliff. Below us waves crash. Above us is nothing but starlit sky.

Off in the distance, the mechanical whir of chopper blades breaks the quiet of the night.

She turns to watch the bird approach, coming in low over the ocean from the mainland. She says with no emotion, "If Dimitri is on that helicopter, I'd rather you shot me."

“He’s not.”

She turns to gaze at me, studying my face with intense scrutiny. “Did you even have a wife?”

“Yes.”

The chopper flies closer. I can’t look anywhere but into her eyes. All the things I want to say are stuck in my throat. My arms ache to wrap around her, but I keep them at my sides.

She turns and watches as the chopper starts to descend. Once its rails have touched ground, she shouts over the noise, “I hope that hurts.”

She jerks her chin toward my left arm, then walks toward the bird, head lowered into the wind.

I look down and see blood coursing down my forearm from a wound in my shoulder, visible through the shredded fabric of my shirt.

FIFTEEN

EVA

I'm not a violent person by nature. I'm the girl who won't kill spiders or trap mice. I save the silverfish who crawl up the bathtub drain and release them outside. I believe all God's creatures have the right to the life he gave them, and I'd only use deadly force for self defense.

But Naz—if that's even his real name—has made me reconsider.

Strapped into the seat across from me, he watches me with those dark eyes as we fly through the night. Toward Cuba, or so he says. Who knows what our real destination is? I wouldn't be at all surprised if we landed on a cargo ship in the middle of the ocean and I was loaded into a container with a hundred other handcuffed girls, headed for sale in a Turkish sex slave market.

The metal cuffs around my wrists chafe, but he's smart not to remove them. I want so badly to wrap my hands around his throat, it's a struggle to keep them clenched in my lap.

The betrayal I feel is overpowering.

He watched me. He *spied* on me. He worked for Dimitri, who knew where I was all along.

The entire time I was developing real feelings for him, Naz was reporting to the monster who raped and beat me for seven years.

No matter what bullshit excuses he's got, there's no coming back from that.

I wish you were dead.

I send him that thought through a look. He receives my transmission and winces, turning away.

I feel a twinge of guilt but smother it. If this helicopter ride doesn't end with me being delivered back into Dimitri's arms, I'll be shocked.

I believe in you, I told him. What a fool. My faith would've been better placed in the tooth fairy.

"María la Gorda in five," says the pilot over the com, nodding back toward Naz.

I look out the windows but see nothing but moonlight glinting off the surface of a black ocean, stretching away in all directions. When I glance back at Naz, he's rolling his left shoulder. The bullet must not have hit bone, because his movement is unimpeded, but he looks like he's losing a lot of blood.

Or maybe that's just wishful thinking.

He catches me looking at him. "If you promise not to claw my eyes out, I'll take the cuffs off now."

"No deal."

A ghost of a smile lifts his lips. "I appreciate the honesty."

"Yes, it's nice when someone tells the truth, isn't it?"

A muscle flexes in his jaw. In a slightly different tone, he says, "I've told you plenty of truths."

"Like I was safe with you?" I say, staring him down. "Give me a break."

"You're safer with me than you've ever been with anyone else."

My laugh is humorless. "That bar is set extremely low."

He leans forward, resting his forearms on his thighs and piercing me with a burning look. "Okay, you wanna get into this? Let's get into it. Ask me why I didn't fuck you when I had the chance."

My cheeks sting as if I've been slapped. "You want a medal for that?"

"I want you to recognize that saying no to you was one of the hardest things I've ever done."

"Saying no to *me*? You make it sound like I was begging for it!"

His voice drops low. His gaze never leaves mine. “Weren’t you?”

I’m breathless with fury. Also humiliation, because of course he’s right. I was begging for it. Pretty much the entire time. If not in words, in actions. And in my fantasies, which he played a starring role in every night.

I cover my face with my hands and groan. Then, realizing the celibacy was another whopper of his, I drop my head back onto the headrest, close my eyes, and start to laugh. It’s a sick laugh, and hopeless, the kind I hope to never make again but suspect I’ll soon become known for.

I stop laughing when I realize how easily he could have taken advantage of me in that way.

And how much worse I’d feel now if he had.

How used.

I open my eyes to find him still staring at me with that burning look. “So why did you say no to me, then?”

His hot gaze softens and becomes unbearably tender. He murmurs, “Sweetheart. You already know.”

Don’t cry. If you cry again in front of this man, you should throw yourself off the next cliff you find.

I break eye contact and stare out the window, blinking and gritting my teeth against the sudden wave of pain. “Maybe it was because you knew Dimitri would kill you if he discovered you’d touched me.”

“I did touch you,” comes the swift, hard reply. “And more.”

God, the kisses. Don’t talk about the kisses. I’ll have to throw up.

“Why don’t you fuck off now, Nasir? I’m not in the mood for more bullshit.”

He leans back in his chair, folding his arms over his broad chest. “And we’re back to Nasir.”

I shoot him an acidic look. “You said only your friends call you Naz. Or wait, was it Dudley? Wilbur? I can’t keep all the

lies straight.”

“You have every right to be angry—”

“You *think*?”

“—but it doesn’t change the facts.”

I force myself to sit still and hold his gaze, though all I want to do is jump up and rip off his head. “If you’re about to try to sell me some baloney about what a superhero you are for not sleeping with me, don’t waste your breath.”

“The facts,” he says more loudly, “about my feelings for you.”

We stare at each other as the chopper begins to descend. Finally I can speak around the rage clawing its way up my throat. “Mention anything about your feelings again, and I’ll make it my personal mission to neuter your lying ass.”

He won’t look away, so I have to.

In moments, we’ve touched down. Naz unhooks his harness, then mine. He says a curt goodbye to the pilot, then exits the helicopter, jumping down onto the grass and pulling my duffel from where he stowed it behind the seat. He throws it onto the grass and turns to extend me his hands.

Ignoring him, I climb out without his assistance and land solidly on my feet.

The chopper lifts off immediately. Naz sighs and picks up my bag.

“Where are we going?” I ask as we trudge through a dark field. He seems to have a destination in mind, though there are no lights or landmarks to guide us, only the stars and the moon.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry and I have to take a piss.”

I say drily, “Thanks for sharing.”

He doesn’t respond. I assume he’s going to relieve himself behind the nearest palm tree, but we keep walking for another

ten minutes or so, then break through a thick line of trees out onto a deserted beach.

To the south is a row of bungalows, lit up like beacons against the dark sky. We head toward them, sand squishing in my shoes. “You said we were going to New York.”

“We’re staying overnight here. We leave at first light.”

Considering the time we left Cozumel and the helicopter ride, “overnight” probably only means a few hours. Still, I’m grateful for the break. I’d rather die than admit it to him, but I’m hungry, too, and hollowed out by too much adrenaline. I need food and sleep.

When I’m rested, I’ll figure out how to escape.

That plan is quickly dashed when he turns to me with a warning look in his eyes. “Don’t bother trying to sneak away. Our room is equipped with a door that locks with a sixteen-digit code, and the windows are bulletproof. And they don’t open.”

I try to keep the disappointment from my voice. “Pretty secure for a beach shack.”

“It’s a safe house. Connor’s got ’em all over the world.”

I have no idea who Connor is, and I’ll be damned if I’ll ask.

We approach the buildings. From the look of things, we’ve arrived at a small resort hotel comprised of individual bungalows. The roofs are made to appear thatched, but on closer inspection, it’s a facade laid over red Spanish tiles. Each bungalow is set well apart from the others, but they’re all painted a bright tropical color, turquoise and orange and emerald green. A long dock strung with lights terminates in half a dozen electric boats bobbing in the water. Rows of pink Adirondack chairs line the shore. A family of chickens darts past us, clucking, and one of the babies stops to peck at seeds in the sand.

Under different circumstances, I’d find the setting quite charming.

At the door of the first bungalow—or the last, depending on which end of the beach you approached from—Naz enters a long code into a small black box on the wall beside the door. He swings the door open and steps aside to let me enter.

“Such a gentleman,” I mutter, ignoring his sour look as I brush past.

I jump when the door slams shut behind us.

Naz enters another code on the keypad inside the room. I turn away, my heart pounding.

Trapped.

The bungalow consists of a bedroom, living room, kitchenette, and bathroom. It’s decorated in island style, with lots of driftwood and shell accents. All the furniture is white. Prints of flowers decorate the walls.

“Here.”

I jump again when I hear Naz’s voice so close behind me. I spin, and there he is, holding out a small silver key. I thrust my wrists at him.

“You want me to do the honors?”

“You put them on. You take them off.”

Heat flickers in his eyes, but his face remains impassive. He lowers his gaze to the handcuffs and unhooks them with a practiced turn of his hand.

When they come off, I rub my wrists, scowling at the red marks the cuffs have left on my skin.

“I’m sorry.”

I glance at him sharply, then huff out a breath. “It’s amazing how you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Make a lie sound like the truth.”

His eyes flash. He stares at me in tense silence for a moment before stalking off toward the bathroom. He tosses the cuffs into the sink, then opens a cupboard below the sink and

rummages around inside. He comes up with handfuls of bandages and medical supplies, which he lines up on the counter.

Then he stands in front of the mirror and pulls off his shirt.

My heart clenches to a fist.

Stripped to the waist, he's magnificent. My eyes burn at the sight of golden skin, rippling muscles, and a line of tattoos that snake from the nape of his neck all the way down the length of his spine. They're the same style of Arabic tattoos he has on the inside of each of his arms.

If he held his arms straight out, the design would form the shape of a cross on his upper body.

He tears open a foil packet, removes what appears to be an antiseptic wipe, and swipes it all over his shoulder, cleaning away the blood. Then he tears open another packet and shakes a pale-colored powder onto his wound. "There will be food in the fridge if you wanna eat." He meets my gaze in the mirror. His voice drops an octave. "Unless you'd prefer to stand there staring at me."

"What do your tattoos say?"

He freezes. I can see I've surprised him. After a moment, he looks at the packet in his hand. He's holding it so tightly his knuckles have turned white.

"It's . . ." He struggles for a second, then goes on, his voice tight. "A message."

Now I'm the one surprised. "A message? For who?"

He lifts his head and our eyes meet again. His are full of darkness. "For what's gonna greet me when I close my eyes for the last time."

Not who, but what.

Goose bumps crawl up my arms.

Naz goes back to tending to his shoulder as if we hadn't spoken, his movements efficient and quick. I'm left with an

unsettling feeling of loss and longing, wishing I could know more.

Wishing even harder that I didn't want to.

I kick off my shoes and head to the fridge. It's stocked with sodas, waters, cold cuts and cheeses, and a platter of fresh fruit wrapped in plastic. I take everything out, arrange it on the small glass table that serves as a dining space, and sit down to eat.

I'm gobbling down a hunk of white cheddar when Naz ambles into the room. He sits on the chair opposite mine and picks up a piece of cured salami. Rolling it like a cigar, he takes a big bite and starts to chew.

He still isn't wearing a shirt, damn him.

"You wanna talk about it?" he says, looking at the other half of the salami.

"If by 'it' you mean our current situation, I'd rather have my eyes put out with acid."

He leans back in his chair, extending his legs out under the table so they're next to mine. "How 'bout if I just talk, then? You willing to listen?"

I glare at him. "A herd of wild horses couldn't drag me away. Oh wait, I'm trapped in a locked room with you—they couldn't get to me in the first place."

He fails to suppress a smile. "Love it when you get sassy with me, sweetheart."

"Love" and "sweetheart" in the same sentence. The colossal nerve of this man. "Call me 'sweetheart' one more time. I dare you."

He passes a hand over his jaw, pretending to rub it, but I can tell he's trying not to let me see him grin.

That makes me so mad I could scream. "I'm glad you find this all so fucking funny, Nasir. Must be a regular day at the office for you, huh? Romancing vulnerable women, taking advantage of their trust, sending them back to the monsters they were running away from?"

His grin vanishes. *Good.*

“I already told you I’m not taking you back to him.”

I say sarcastically, “Forgive me for not believing you, but I’m fresh out of trust at the moment—this incredible man I met turned out to be a giant lying piece of shit.”

He gazes at me steadily. “Incredible?”

I close my eyes, shaking my head in disbelief. “That’s the one thing you picked out of the entire sentence?”

“Yeah, ’cause it’s the one thing that gave me hope.”

I open my eyes and look at him, wishing for laser beams I could shoot out of my head to incinerate him. Slowly, enunciating every word, I say, “There’s no hope. I hate you.”

He examines my face in silence, then says quietly, “Okay. Except you don’t.”

I stand, shoving my chair back so hard it topples over. I grab the plate of fruit and stride into the bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

Then I sit on the floor with my back against the bed and hang my head in my hands, groaning in misery because he’s right.

SIXTEEN

NAZ

The walls are still shaking from the slammed door when I get the call from Connor.

“Yup.”

“You got her?”

“Yup.”

“See you’re in the safe house at María la Gorda. Entry notification came up on my end.”

“Yup.”

He pauses. “Talk to me, brother. Everything good?”

I exhale the heavy breath I’ve been holding and run a hand over my head. “Aside from getting shot on the way out and Eva wanting to kill me, everything’s just hunky-dory.”

He focuses on the fixable problem first. “Where’s the hole and how bad is it?”

“Shoulder. Big gouge, but it’s not serious.”

“You need stitches?”

“No. QuikClot did the trick. Emergency pack here’s pretty good.”

Connor grunts, pleased. As far as gunshot wounds go, mine is about as good as it gets. We’ve both seen enough bullet holes in bodies to know.

“Who’s the shooter?”

“Same asshole drug dealer I saved her from the first time I met her. Ran into him by chance when we were on our way to the LZ.”

“You and your chance run-ins. Any messes we need to clean up?”

By *messes* he means *bodies*. “No. Lost ’em. They fucked up my rental car, though.”

“Good thing it was rented under a fake ID,” he says drily.

“Yeah. Still. I liked it.”

After a long pause, Connor says, “Sounds like you got bigger problems than gettin’ shot.”

“That’s a bit of an understatement.”

“Try flowers. Always works for me.”

I have trouble picturing Connor browsing the aisles of a flower shop almost as much as I have trouble picturing Eva accepting any bouquet I might try to give her. She’d probably tear it apart with her teeth.

“I think short of serving my head to her on a silver platter, I’m fucked.”

“You could always write her a poem. Tabby loves that, too.”

I blink. “If I didn’t already know it was you, I’d think someone dialed the wrong number.”

“What, I can’t write a poem for my woman?”

He sounds angry, which isn’t an emotion I want to incite in a man with twenty-six confirmed kills, who can blow a man’s head off from a mile away.

“Poems are great, but I’m way past that point. When I told her I’d been watching her on Dimitri’s behalf, she tried to shoot me, too. Got two shots off before I took the gun away from her.”

“Well, you know women,” he says, sounding dismissive. “She’s not *really* mad, or she wouldn’t have missed.”

I pause to consider what Connor’s home life must be like, then get on with the business at hand. “The pickup still at zero six hundred hours?”

“Affirmative. We got a setup ready for you on this end, too.”

When I take too long to respond to that, Connor adds darkly, “You don’t think I’m lettin’ you go back to your apartment until this is all said and done, do you?”

“Dimitri,” I say, understanding his meaning. My apartment will be the first place he goes as soon as he finds out what happened to the mission.

“Tabby and I have been talkin’ about next steps. We’ll go over it when you get here. In the meantime, try not to get shot again.”

“Roger that.”

“And, Nasir?”

“Yeah?”

His voice drops. “You were right to call me out on that shit I was talkin’ about Eva. About not gettin’ her away from Dimitri. Blowin’ the job was the right thing to do.”

He disconnects before I can respond.

I check my watch. We’ve got four hours before the pickup. I drop into a chair beside the sofa, set an alarm on my watch, and close my eyes.



“Eva, wake up.”

I gently shake her shoulder. She’s lying on her side in bed, sleeping like the dead. I hate to wake her, but it’s 4:30 a.m., and we need to be on our way.

When she makes a disgruntled sleepy noise but doesn’t open her eyes, I sit on the edge of the bed and brush her hair off her face. I whisper, “Rise and shine, sweetheart.”

“Go ’way,” she mutters, burrowing under the sheets.

“I made you coffee. Black, no sugar, how you like it.”

After a moment, she says, “I don’t want to know how you know that.”

Her voice is scratchy with sleep, but I don’t hear hatred in her tone. I’m seized by the urge to bury my face in her hair

and drag in a deep breath, but I manage to control myself and simply squeeze her shoulder. “I’ll give you a few minutes to clean up.”

Leaving the bedroom door open, I go out to the kitchenette and wait, drinking my own cup of coffee as I listen to the squeak of mattress springs and the bathroom door closing. Water runs. The toilet flushes. By the time I’m finished with my coffee, she’s coming out of the bedroom, rubbing her eyes.

Seeing her like this, in the warm, foggy aftermath of sleep, sends a hot spike of desire like a lightning bolt straight through me.

To wake with her naked in my arms . . .

I hold out a mug. “Here. It’s strong. It’ll help wake you up.”

Barefoot, she shuffles over like an obedient child. Her hair is mussed and her eyes are droopy. She’s so adorable I want to grab her, give her a bear hug, then kiss her everywhere.

She takes the mug from my outstretched arm and sniffs it. Then she takes a careful sip. “Mmm.”

When she sighs in contentment, I feel as if I’ve just won the lottery.

“You sleep okay?”

She blinks drowsily at me. “Sure. It’s not like I was recently in a car chase or got shot at by drug dealers or found out my entire life was a lie or anything. Why wouldn’t I sleep okay?”

Brows arched, she looks at me over the rim of her mug as she takes another swallow of coffee.

I fight a smile. “True. There’s fruit left, if you want.”

She doesn’t answer for a moment. She just drinks more of her coffee. Her voice barely audible, she says, “I can’t go back to him. If you’re taking me back, please . . .” She glances up at me.

My heart stops dead in my chest from that look.

She whispers, “Don’t.”

My voice comes out steady, though my heart has rebooted and taken off like a rocket. “I’m not. I’m taking you to New York, to a safe place. Then I’m gonna find Dimitri and I’m gonna kill him.”

Our eyes are locked. I’m getting juiced like I’ve stuck my finger into an outlet. My entire body is electric.

“Why would you kill your employer, Naz?”

Naz. Jesus Christ. I almost fall over from the relief of hearing her call me that. “Because I know what he did to you,” I say gruffly, holding her gaze. “I didn’t before, but now I do. And he’s gonna pay for everything he did ten times over. I’m not gonna make it quick.”

A furrow forms between her brows. She draws her lower lip between her teeth and bites it. The pulse in her neck starts to flutter.

I suck in a hard breath, forcing myself not to reach for her.

She breaks eye contact and stares down at the mug in her hands, which are now shaking. She clears her throat. “Well. I suppose I’ll just have to wait and see.”

Her voice is brisk and her back is stiff, and tension has settled over her body like armor. A wall has slammed down between us.

She’s not sleepy anymore.

She dumps the rest of her coffee into the sink, then returns to the bedroom. In a moment she emerges, wearing her shoes and a grim expression like she’s heading into battle.

“All right,” she says. “Let’s do this.”

I can tell she’s scared shitless. She really doesn’t know if I’m taking her back to Dimitri or not. That she’s willing to face whatever lies ahead—to look it right in the eye in spite of her fear—makes me so fucking proud of her.

“You little badass,” I say, my voice thick. “You brave little badass. I’ve known soldiers who weren’t half as courageous as you.”

For a moment, she looks like she might cry. Then she steels herself, lifting her chin and squaring her shoulders. “The average woman exhibits more courage before lunch every day than a soldier does his entire career. The bravery of women is what built the entire world. You men just like to take credit for it.”

I nod, because hell, I can admit when someone makes a good point.

Then I grab her duffel and we head out into the soft gray dawn, the future looming dark and uncertain before us.

SEVENTEEN

EVA

The small plane picks us up from an abandoned airfield choked with vegetation. Watching the twin-engine Cessna land, I'm doubtful the pilot will manage not to break off the landing gear on the cracked pavement or get a clump of shrubbery caught in the engines, but he easily pulls it off.

Then we're climbing into the gentle morning fog, headed toward . . .

What?

I don't know. I don't dare hope Naz is telling the truth. Better to be prepared for the worst.

It's how I survived for so long: expect the worst, and you'll never be disappointed.

He sits beside the pilot, taking up most of the space in the cockpit, his head brushing the roof. His long legs are jammed under the instrument panel. His knees are pulled toward his chest. There's room next to me on the bench seat in the back, but he left me the space to myself.

It's a small kindness I'm trying hard not to feel grateful for. I'd hate to feel gratitude toward the man responsible for hand-delivering me back to my tormentor.

The flight is long and uncomfortable. It's hot in the cabin, stuffy and claustrophobic. My nerves are screaming, and I have to pee. When we finally begin to descend, I'm so stressed out I start hyperventilating.

Hearing me pant, Naz reaches back and squeezes my knee. "Almost there. You're doing great."

I don't understand how this man can be so supportive at the same time he's ripping out my heart. He lied to me. He looked me right in the eye and *lied*.

I push his hand off my leg and go back to hyperventilating.

We land at a small private terminal and taxi to a stop. A stretch limo awaits us on the tarmac right outside.

When the pilot kills the engines, terror strikes me with such force I can't move. Naz opens the hatch and reaches for me. I shrink away, drenched in sweat.

"It's okay, sweetheart," he says softly, seeing my distress. "Just take my hand. I'm right here. You're safe. I promise, you're safe."

I promise. Hearing those words leave his mouth gives me the boost of anger I need to get my butt in gear and get moving.

He whisks me out of the plane and into the limo with smooth efficiency, as if he's handled runaway women a million times before. Then I'm crouched against the opposite door, wildly looking around for any kind of weapon I can stow in my jeans.

I grab a corkscrew out of the cup holder next to the empty wine bucket and shove it in my pocket just as Naz gets in and sits down.

The car starts to move. Naz glances over at me. "You look like a cornered wolf."

"Feel like one, too."

Assessing my condition, he decides it's time to give me an itinerary for the next leg of our journey. "It's about an hour drive into Manhattan from here. Metrix's headquarters is in the Meatpacking District, near the Hudson River."

Meatpacking. I form a mental image of cows being led to the slaughter, and shiver, understanding exactly how they feel.

Naz says confidently, "The building is safer than Fort Knox. You'll see. Unless somebody drops a nuke on us, they're not getting in."

I don't mention that Dimitri has an ample supply of weapons perfectly capable of eradicating entire boroughs of New York, because this could all be a game. A strategy. Keep

Eva calm so she doesn't try to escape. Or scream, drawing attention.

Or stab you in the neck with a corkscrew.

"You're gonna meet Connor, Tabby, and the rest of the crew. You'll like 'em. Especially Tabby, I think. That's Connor's wife. You two have a lot in common."

"What, vaginas?"

I expect a smart-aleck comeback, but Naz says, "No. She had a Dimitri, too." He glances over at me. "Only he was her brother."

Had. Was. Past tense.

My heart starts to race. "What happened?"

His gaze stays level with mine, but his voice drops. "Connor took care of it. Just like I'm gonna take care of Dimitri for you."

Dizzy with adrenaline and too many emotions to count, I close my eyes, set my head against the headrest, and exhale a shaky breath. "Can we please stop talking now? I need to concentrate on my impending breakdown."

"Sure."

I hear him inhale deeply, feel his weight shift on the seat next to mine. I also feel his body heat, the warmth that always emanates from his big muscular limbs, and I want so badly to reach for his hand I feel sick.

There's something profoundly wrong with me.

I still want him. I still have feelings for him.

I need help.

We drive. I lose track of time, counting the beats of my heart instead, letting the sound of the road under the wheels lull me. When the car slows to a stop, I snap my lids open and bolt upright.

"Easy," says Naz, looking at my bloodless face. "We're here."

I rub the heel of my palm over the corkscrew in my pocket and swallow a scream.

The driver rolls down his window and speaks into a security box. We've pulled up in front of a solid-steel entry gate flanked by a tall barbed-wire-topped wall. In moments, the gate swings open and we start to move again. Ahead of us is a large parking lot and a three-story redbrick building with all the windows blacked out. We drive toward the building as my terror mounts, and stop in front of the main entrance, a hammered-steel door at least ten feet wide.

Naz opens the limo door and gets out, extending his hand.

When I don't move, he leans down and peers in.

"I can't," I whisper, my voice a raw scrape in my throat. "Don't make me."

He considers that with pursed lips, then straightens. He pulls a sleek black phone from his back pocket and punches in a number.

"Yup," he says when the line is answered. "But, uh, could you guys come out first?" Short pause. "She thinks Dimitri's inside." Another pause. "Yeah, I fucking know, but that's the situation!" He listens for a moment, then says, "Roger that."

He disconnects the call and leans down to peer in at me again. "Connor and Tabby are coming out to say hi."

To say hi?

When the big steel door slides open on silent tracks and I see the man standing there, my terror worsens.

He's in head-to-toe black, including combat boots and a gun strapped to his waist. His hair is black, too, and closely cropped to his skull. His bulging biceps are crossed over his massive chest. His legs are braced apart. He's at least six and a half feet tall and easily 250 pounds. I thought Naz was big, but this guy is a giant.

And he's got a look on his face that could make a serial killer shit his pants.

Then a smiling redhead walks up beside him, stands on her toes to give him a kiss on the cheek, and he visibly melts. He turns to gaze down at her, breaking into a huge, affectionate grin.

He could be smiling because he's in love, or because of her outfit, which is comical.

She looks like a cross between a Japanese Harajuku girl and a goth rocker. Her flaming red hair is in pigtails. Her plaid Catholic schoolgirl skirt is tight and short. Her hot-pink stockings end at midhigh, just above where the black leather lace-up peep-toe boots begin. A chunky chain choker encircles her neck, and one of her arms is tattooed from wrist to shoulder.

Most incongruous of all is her midriff-baring black T-shirt, which sports a picture of a white cartoon cat with a pink bow on its head.

It's obvious that this Tabby person isn't wearing a bra, and her nipples are pierced.

I like her immediately.

She walks over to Naz and says hi. Then she bends down to look in at me. "Is it okay if I come in?"

"Are you carrying any concealed weapons?"

"No."

"Poison?"

"No."

"Chlorophyll, handcuffs, or gags?"

"No. And if you mean chloroform, I don't have that, either."

"Oh. Right. Okay, come in."

Tabby slides onto the long leather bench seat, leaving the door open behind her, and turns to me with a smile. "Hi. I'm Tabby." She sticks out her hand.

"I'm Eva." We shake formally, like leaders of state at a political summit.

“Naz tells us you think Dimitri is here. I can assure you he isn’t.”

She has beautiful clear green eyes, canted up at the outer corners like a cat’s. And her legs are like a dancer’s. If she wasn’t so outrageously dressed, she might be the prettiest woman I’ve ever seen.

But perhaps that’s the point. Not every woman wants to be regarded as “pretty.” Especially if she’s *smart* and pretty, in which case most people are blind to the smarts.

I say, “I like your boots.”

She sticks out a leg, pleased. “Aren’t they cute? I got them on sale at Nieman’s. I can never find platform stiletto boots there, but they were having this crazy shoe sale and I thought, *Oh hell, just go look*. As you can see, I got totally lucky. I bought them in white, too.”

“How do I know Dimitri isn’t inside waiting for me?”

My abrupt segue doesn’t surprise her. She cocks her head and thinks about my question for a moment. “You don’t. Would you feel better if we gave you a gun?”

After I recover from my shock, I say, “Yes.”

“Do you know how to use a Glock semiauto?”

“If it shoots bullets, I know how to use it.”

She smiles again. “I like you already.” She turns and shouts out the open door, “Honey! We need you!”

Connor ambles over, puts his giant paws on his knees, and bends down to look at us.

Tabby says, “Give me your gun.”

Connor looks at her for a beat, then at me, then back at her. He says flatly, “Princess.”

“Hand it over, jarhead, unless you feel like sleeping on the sofa tonight.”

He closes his eyes briefly, shakes his head, then straightens. Then he unclips the blocky black gun from his belt and

reluctantly hands it to Tabby.

She turns to me and launches into a technical description of the gun's working parts and safety features. She sounds like she's reading from the manufacturer's product page. When she's finished, she presents the weapon to me with both hands. "I prefer a .38 revolver myself, but my honey thinks six-shooters are for girls."

Her smile turns sweet. "Or maybe men just need twice as many bullets as we do to get the job done."

I could fall in love with this woman.

"Thank you," I say, taking the Glock from her hands. I blow out a hard breath. "This does make me feel better."

I check the chamber to see if there's a round in it, which there is. Then I check the magazine to see if it's full, which it also is. Then I sit forward and stick the gun into my jeans at the small of my back.

"What I'd like to do is take you inside and show you around, then sit down with you and discuss things after you've rested. We've got rooms you and Naz can have for a few days while we—"

"I'm not staying with him," I interrupt, my voice flat.

Tabby shrugs. "Okay. I just meant that we have space here if you wanted to get your bearings for a bit before we set you up at the safe house."

"Safe house?"

Tabby senses my hesitation and gives me an understanding look. "I know this is shitty. But ultimately the decision whether or not you want us to help you is yours. No one will force you to do anything against your will." Her voice softens. "I'm sure you've had enough of that already."

When I look away, her voice turns practical again. "However, I should tell you that your chances for survival on your own longer than thirty days are approximately twelve percent."

I whip my head around and stare at her, and she shrugs again. “Eleven point nine, but I rounded up. The point is that Dimitri’s resources are vast, and you’re alone. Unless you’re with us, which I hope you will be.”

I’m overcome with a wave of emotion and have to swallow several times before I speak. “He hired Naz to spy on me.”

“Technically, he hired us, and we hired Naz, but yes.”

“How can I trust a word you’re telling me? How do I know that your plan isn’t to hold me here until he comes for me? How do I know any of this is *real*?”

“You listen to your gut,” comes the instant response. “And then you decide. If there’s any other way of navigating the shit show of life, I don’t know of it.”

She regards me with an open, calm expression. I think of Naz saying Tabby had her own Dimitri, and wonder if that was a lie, too.

“What was his name?” I ask quietly, inspecting her face.

“Who?”

“Your abuser.”

Her face pales. Her pupils dilate. A fine tremor passes through her hands before she folds them together in her lap. “Søren. He was my half brother. He was brilliant and beautiful, and he was also a monster. He did many bad things to many people . . . including me.”

Her voice is steady, but I hear the undercurrent of pain and rage. I feel all the old wounds that still haven’t scarred over.

That, more than anything else, I can believe in.

“But you survived,” I say. “And so will I. Let’s go inside.”

I open my door and step out into the bright morning sun. Naz stands with Connor near the entrance of the building.

Watching me.

Waiting.

EIGHTEEN

NAZ

She's coming out. Thank God.

I owe Tabby big-time.

Keeping my expression impassive, I watch as Eva exits the limo and walks around the rear. She waits for Tabby to get out and close the door before following her to where Connor and I are standing. She stays right next to Tabby, keeping close, shooting her worried glances as they approach.

Whatever was said in the car, it looks like Eva trusts her.

Or at least doesn't want to kill her, like she does me.

"Eva, this is my husband, Connor," says Tabby, gesturing toward him.

In his rumbling baritone, Connor says, "Pleasure to meet you, Eva."

She looks him up and down with narrowed eyes.

Tabby waves a hand at Connor. "Don't let the whole macho man vibe fool you. He's a total marshmallow."

Connor glowers. "A *macho* marshmallow, woman."

Tabby blows him a kiss. "A super studly macho marshmallow, honey, yes. That's what I meant."

Connor looks slightly mollified. "Hmpf."

Tabby and Eva share a glance thick with all that secret female stuff women share, then Tabby says, "Okay, boys. In we go. Ladies first."

Connor and I step aside and let the girls walk past us, then we follow them inside. When the steel door closes behind us with a hollow clang, Eva flinches. But she straightens her shoulders and keeps walking. I'm proud of her all over again.

Connor's gun is surely helping her stay calm, but still. I know this is terrifying for her. If it were up to me, I'd take her

into the nearest empty room and hold her until she felt better . . . except I know that would only make her feel worse.

“Chin up, brother,” Connor murmurs, eyeing me walking tensely beside him. “She’s got my gun and she hasn’t shot you yet.”

“Almost wish she would. Might make her feel better.”

He chuckles. “When the time comes, let her bitch you out real good and just sit there and nod. Don’t interrupt. When she’s finished, agree with everything she said and tell her she’s beautiful and you don’t deserve her. *That* will make her feel better.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“Oh, she might still shoot you after. No guarantee there. But she’ll definitely be feeling better when she does.”

I say drily, “Thanks for the sage advice.”

He claps me on the shoulder. “Anytime, brother. Anytime.”

As Tabby leads us deeper into the bowels of Metrix, I try to see it through Eva’s eyes, like someone who’s never been here before. The ceilings are high, the lights are low, and the temperature is cool. The polished concrete floor gives off a subtle, expensive sheen. Black computer towers extend the length of the north wall in blinking, softly humming rows. Hard-jawed men wearing headphones sit at keyboards and stare at the video and TV screens that glow from dozens of cubicles on the east wall. Locked, backlit cases of weaponry are displayed with military precision along the south wall. The overall effect is something out of *Mission Impossible* or *The Bourne Identity*.

We round a few corners and then we’re in Connor’s office, where I was interviewed for the job. Like the man himself, the room is big, intimidating, and upholstered completely in black.

Eva stops just inside the door, taking everything in with a swift, assessing glance. Her posture is still stiff and her expression is still guarded, but she visibly relaxes when she sees the room is empty.

She must've been bracing herself to see Dimitri seated behind Connor's massive black oak desk.

"Would you like to take a seat?"

Addressing Eva, Tabby holds her hand out toward one of the large chairs in front of Connor's desk.

"I'll stand." She retreats a few feet, flattening her back against the wall and staying close to the open door.

Still bracing herself. Watching her go through all this makes my chest ache.

"Nasir, you sit there." Tabby points to a chair in the corner opposite the door, the farthest away from Eva. Then she perches on the end of Connor's desk as he lowers his bulk to the captain's chair behind his desk and leans back in it, lacing his fingers over his stomach.

Then we all simply look at Eva and wait.

She moistens her lips. She takes a breath. Then she says, "How much did Dimitri pay you?"

Still terrible with small talk.

Connor says mildly, "Curious why that matters."

She snaps back with, "I want to know how much money it took to buy Nasir's soul."

When Connor sees me go rigid, he shoots me a warning look. I force myself to relax, sitting back in the chair though all I want to do is stand up and shout.

"Let me set you straight about somethin' so we're all on the same page here," says Connor, focusing his attention back on Eva. "No one in this room except you knew what Dimitri had done to you. Never woulda took the job if we did. He's the son of a longtime client of mine—"

"You know Viktor?" Eva breaks in, surprised.

"Yeah. He's a good dude. No idea how his son went so sideways, but shit happens." He pauses for a moment before saying, "Sounds like you know him, too."

Eva looks at the floor. Her voice is quiet. “We met a few times. He was always kind to me. I don’t think he knew . . .”

“I don’t think he does, either,” says Connor, “but he’s the only reason we took the job for Dimitri. Viktor said his son had a problem he needed help with. Not sure if he even knew what Dimitri wanted, but I made the call. Dimitri tells me his wife ran away again—”

“Wife?” Eva looks up, horrified. “We’re not married!”

Tabby says gently, “We know that now.”

Eva looks at me. I see her put two and two together, and brace myself for the bullet that’s about to rip through my chest.

“Nasir is the one who insisted we blow the job,” says Connor firmly. He can tell she’s about to shoot me, too. “If it wasn’t for him callin’ me up and sayin’ shit was hinky and we had to check it out, you wouldn’t be standing where you are right now.”

“No, I’d still be in Cozumel being spied on by a man I thought I could trust.”

“If you don’t think you can trust him, you’re not as smart as I thought you were,” says Tabby, with just enough of an edge in her voice to shut everyone up.

The women stare at each other. The tension in the room crackles. Finally Eva says grimly, “Put yourself in my shoes. I was held hostage, beaten, and raped for seven years by your client.”

I make a strangled sound of horror, and Eva cuts her freezing gaze to me. Then she cuts me to the bone.

“Yes, raped. Or did you think I was begging for it?”

I rasp, “Sweetheart—”

Connor interrupts with a sharp, “Sew it up, brother.”

Eva turns her gaze back to Tabby. “As I was saying. My life was hell, but I managed—after many attempts—to finally escape. I make a new life for myself. I get a job. I get an

apartment. I can *breathe*. After a few months, the nightmares don't come so often. Things are so much better, but I'm . . .”

She pauses to draw a breath. “I'm lonely. My mother is dead, I can't form friendships because I'm too broken, and I have no hope of ever having a normal relationship with a man. And then *he* shows up. And he's . . . everything that he is. I feel happy. I feel safe. And then I find out it's all a lie, because he's on the devil's payroll.”

She won't look at me. It's probably for the best. If she turned her eyes in my direction, I know I'd jump out of this chair and go straight to her.

After a moment of silence, Tabby says, “Okay, first of all? You're not broken. You're just bent.”

Eva lets out a small, ragged laugh and swipes at her eyes.

“And secondly, put yourself in *Nasir's* shoes.”

When Eva's nostrils flare in anger, Tabby says, “Yeah. Do it. Because here's the thing.” She points at me. “This man is putting his life on the line for you. What do you think Dimitri is going to do when he finds out Nasir went AWOL and took you with him? Do you think he'll simply dust off his hands and let it go?”

Eva grits her jaw and says nothing.

“Neither do I,” says Tabby. “That's point two. Point three is that as soon as you told him about the abuse, Nasir pulled the plug on the whole operation. And judging by what I know of his character, he's also crucifying himself more than you ever could for playing a part in Dimitri's scheme.”

She lets that sink in before continuing. My stomach is tied in so many knots I'm not sure they'll ever unwind.

“So here are the facts. Dimitri told us his spoiled, immature wife ran away—again. He told us he knew where she'd gone and simply wanted us to watch her for a while. He said he was giving her space. He wanted her to get it out of her system, but he had to have peace of mind that she was safe while she was off on her little adventure. He made it sound like he was

devastated that she was gone. So—as a favor to his father—we agreed to put a man on the job.

“I should mention here that this was Nasir’s *first* job with Metrix, so it’s not like he had any expectations that we’d keep him on after running off with our client’s alleged wife. So not only did he risk his life, he also risked his job and even his entire career. Because Connor and I could have easily ruined any possibility Nasir would ever work again with a few simple changes to his criminal record.”

When Eva blinks over at Connor, he says, “You give a man a few convictions for pedophilia, his job prospects are toast.”

I say, “Gee, thanks. Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

Her voice gentler, Tabby says, “I understand where you’re coming from, Eva. I honestly do. All I’m asking is that you look at the big picture here. Take a while to wrap your brain around all the facts before you write Nasir off completely. Because you guys make a super cute couple.”

Eva stares at her, astonished. Tabby shrugs. “He’s totally into you. Like you wouldn’t *believe*.”

Eva turns her astonished gaze to me. I’d like to throttle Tabby for that little gem, but Eva’s expression is distracting me.

“Stay in your seat, brother,” murmurs Connor, catching the look on my face as I stare at Eva.

I curl my hands around the arms of the chair and struggle to keep still.

Eva closes her eyes, drags her hands through her hair, and inhales deeply. She exhales, then drops her arms to her sides. “I think I need a drink.”

Tabby says, “I don’t drink, but the kitchen is stocked for the boys.”

“You don’t drink?” Eva makes a face. “I’m sorry, we can’t be friends.”

After a beat, they smile at each other. I must make some kind of noise, because Connor reminds me, “*Stay.*”

Tabby rises. Without a backward glance, she takes Eva’s arm and leads her from the room, saying, “What’s your poison, girlfriend? No, let me guess—rum.”

“Did Nasir tell you that, too?”

“Nah. I’m just a genius. Tell me, are you familiar with Hello Kitty?”

They round a corner and go out of sight. All the air leaves my chest in a huge noisy rush.

Connor spins in his chair and looks at me. “I think that went pretty well.”

“Tell that to my blood pressure. I’m having some kind of cardiac event.”

“You’ve got five minutes to get your shit together, ’cause we gotta talk shop.”

I stand and walk around the room, too wound up to sit still any longer. “Let’s do it.”

Connor can be still better than any other person I’ve ever met. He watches me pace with only his eyeballs moving, all his muscles relaxed but giving off the sense of aggressive action held in check. It’s a skill I’d love to have, especially right now.

“You thought about what you wanna do about Dimitri?”

I swing around and stare at Connor. “Yeah, I’ve thought about it. I’m gonna take him out.”

Connor looks at the ceiling, as if for divine intervention. “Never woulda guessed.”

“You don’t think I’m gonna let him get away scot-free, do you?”

“Nope.” He levels his gaze at me. “And that’s even *before* you find out all the other bad shit he’s been up to.”

From the top drawer of his desk, he removes a file folder. He slides it over the desk toward me. I pick it up and start to flip through the pages, reading the reports.

Then I sit down.

“Drugs. Weapons. Human trafficking,” says Connor. “Our boy deals in ’em all, and he deals big.”

I look at grainy black-and-white images of Dimitri inspecting crates of rifles in a warehouse, Dimitri standing on a dock inspecting paperwork with three other men, Dimitri inspecting six cowering young girls lined up on a curb outside a nightclub.

“How’d you get these photos?”

“Tabby can hack into any security camera on the planet. Or any satellite orbiting the planet. Or anything else, for that matter.”

When I look at him with raised brows, he smiles. “She hacked the National Security Administration’s mainframe, and they offered her a consulting gig. Now she hacks with a full endorsement from the US government. Uncle Sam loves anyone who can dig dirt that deep.”

“They sure do,” I murmur, thinking of my father.

“The problem we’ve got is twofold, however. Number one, Dimitri’s father. Nothing that happens to Dimitri can get traced back to us. If he knows anything about what his son is messed up in, he’ll assume some bad actors are the cause when his son’s body washes up on a beach. But my gut says he doesn’t, so you need to make it look accidental.”

I say darkly, “There are ways to make a body suffer that don’t leave marks.”

Connor smiles. “Precisely. Problem number two is that Dimitri can’t see you coming. Which means he can’t know anything is wrong with you or Eva or the entire op.”

“Which means I need to get my ass on a plane to Russia before my next scheduled check-in.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s in six days.”

“Okay. So we got a little time.” He drums his fingers on the desktop, his smile growing wider. “I suggest you use it to familiarize yourself with the flowers in season and the proper way to compose a love sonnet.”

I gaze at him. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

He breaks into a grin. “It’s nice not to be the one in the doghouse for a change, brother.”

Though the situation is fucked, I break into a grin, too. “Christ.”

“On a cracker.” He stands. “C’mon, let’s get you some grub, and then I’ll show you where you’ll be sleepin’. You look like you could use a nap. Unrequited love is killer on the adrenals.”

“Why do I get the feeling I’m never gonna hear the end of this?”

Connor laughs. “Cause you’re not, brother. Suck it up.”

I grumble, “Glad you find it so amusing,” and follow him out the door.

NINETEEN

EVA

Tabby takes me on a short tour of the rest of the main level of the building before we get into an elevator. She hits a button marked “Double Take,” and the elevator begins to descend.

“We’re going *down*?” I ask, startled.

“There are four levels below the main one, each more secured than the one above.”

I examine the panel with the buttons. Instead of numbers, each has a name. Level three down is called “Round House.” Two is called “Fast Pace,” and one, the lowest, is called “Cocked Pistol.”

I recognize those names from a world politics course I took at university. I remember being impressed by how uniquely American it seemed that their military code for imminent nuclear war was “Cocked Pistol.” So Wild West, with a throwaway macho nonchalance that spun the possibility of billions of human deaths into a Hollywood action adventure with cowboys squaring off for a shootout on a dusty main street outside a saloon.

“These are DEFCON levels.”

Tabby smiles at me. “Very good. The main floor we were just on is ‘Fade Out,’ the lowest form of readiness, but compared to any ‘normal’ building, it’s extremely secure. The steel gate you came through from the street has two machine guns mounted in the walls on each side. The entire perimeter of the property is wired with explosives and booby traps, so if anyone gets past the gates and barbed wire, they’re in for some fun surprises. The main building above ground is blast resistant, bulletproof, and can operate as a fallout shelter for up to four weeks, but for real emergencies, we can survive on ‘Cocked Pistol’ for up to five years.”

I stare at her. “*Real* emergencies?”

“Armageddon, I suppose,” she says with a laugh and a wave of her hand. “My honey is a stickler for preparedness.”

I can’t decide if that makes me feel better or worse.

The elevator doors open to a bright main space with an open kitchen, dining area, and living room, complete with a huge flat-screen TV hung on the brick wall. Down a corridor at the back are several doors that Tabby says lead to en suite bedrooms.

“Each room locks with a sixteen-digit code if you want to ensure privacy, though no one will bother you down here for the extent of your stay.”

Sixteen digits. Like the safe house in Cuba. “I can’t remember that many numbers in a row.”

“Just pick four and repeat it four times, then. The fridge is stocked and so are the freezer and pantry, but if there’s anything in particular you want to eat, let me know. Computers with secure internet connections are in every room, but be aware all traffic is monitored.” Her smile turns teasing. “Just for fun you should visit every raunchy porn site you can think of. The guys upstairs will go nuts.”

I remember the rows of granite-jawed men staring at computer screens when we walked in. “Porn isn’t really my thing.”

She shrugs. “Mine either, but it’s fun to rile up the ranks every once in a while.”

Connor has his hands full with this one.

Tabby gives me a short tour of the rooms, then says, “So. You’ll have questions you didn’t want to ask in front of the boys.” She gestures to one of the large black leather sofas in the living area. “Should we sit?”

“I think I’m too strung out to sit, thanks.”

“Okay. I’ll get you that rum.”

She walks to the kitchen, gets a glass and a bottle from a cupboard, then pours a measure of amber liquid from the

bottle. She returns to me and hands me the glass, then she sits on the arm of the nearest sofa, crosses her legs, and smiles.

I take a long swig of the rum, relishing the burn. I hate myself for noticing it isn't Mount Gay brand. Then I gather my thoughts and look at her.

“How long was Naz watching me?”

“Eleven weeks.”

I almost drop the glass. It feels as if she just kicked me in the stomach with her stiletto platform boot. I decide standing is overrated, and sink into an overstuffed chair, concentrating on breathing because it has suddenly become difficult. I take another swig of the rum.

“Almost the entire time I was on the island.”

“Yes. Once Dimitri got a hit on your assumed identity on the flight manifest out of Russia, he was able to track all your movements. As soon as you landed in Cozumel, he hired us. From there it was a simple matter for Nasir to locate you.”

When I glance at her, she adds softly, “He's very good at what he does.”

Don't throw up yet. It's probably going to get worse. “He said he had to ‘report’ to Dimitri. What did that involve?”

“They had a standing live chat once a week via Skype. Nasir would tell him what you'd been up to and send him the pictures—”

“*Pictures?*” I sputter, horrified. “He was taking pictures of me, too?”

Tabby's demeanor remains unruffled. “Yes.”

“Doing what?”

“Doing everything.”

When the blood drains from my face, Tabby realizes what I've assumed. “No—he didn't take pictures of you inside your home.” She pauses for a beat, considering me.

“Oh God. What's that look mean?”

“He did have your phone tapped, however. And he installed a keystroke logger on your computer so he could monitor your internet use.”

I swallow, feeling the acid bite of bile rising up the back of my throat. “He had to come inside to do that, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“I had a security system installed within the first few days I was there.”

“Easily defeated by someone with his skills.”

I close my eyes and groan.

I spent thousands on that security system and the laptop. Money I smuggled in airtight plastic baggies inside a waterproof pack when I jumped off Dimitri’s yacht in the middle of the night. Money I’d been hoarding over the course of years. Money that slowed me down considerably as I fought not to succumb to hypothermia as I swam for shore, my muscles cramping and my lungs on fire.

All for nothing.

Tabby sounds sympathetic. “More rum?”

“Yes,” I say, sick. “Please.”

I sit with my head in my hands as Tabby refills my glass. When I can speak again, I say, “I assume you recorded those Skype conversations.”

“We did.”

“I want to see them.”

“Of course.”

The total lack of hesitation in her voice makes me glance up at her. I was expecting a protest.

She says softly, “You’ll get the conversations Nasir had with us, too. Then you’ll have the whole story. And then you can decide if you still want to leave.”

“You seem confident I won’t.”

She thoughtfully screws the cap on the rum, sets the bottle on a side table, then sits on the chair opposite mine and sends me a frank stare.

“I’m confident in the way you look at him, even though you’re angry and hurt. I’m even more confident in the way he looks at you, what he’s said about you, and how completely willing he is to put himself in harm’s way for you.”

My laugh is small and bitter. “Really? You think this story has a happy ending?”

“I think you both want it to. Even if you’d like to make him grovel a little first.”

“More than a little,” I mutter, then finish off the rest of my rum.

Rising, Tabby says, “I’ll send the files to Dropbox. All the computers in the bedrooms down here have the program. Log in from the main screen with the password ‘bitches do better.’”

When I send her a quizzical look, she smiles.

“It’s a long story. If you need to contact me for anything, dial my name from the com board in your room. Your files will be live in about ten minutes.”

She turns to leave, then stops and looks back. “Just so you know, I hated Connor with the burning heat of a thousand suns when we met. Rocky beginnings are par for the course for every great romance.”

I say flatly, “If this turns out to be a great romance, Tabby, I’ll tattoo your name on my ass.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “Awesome! I have an *excellent* tattoo artist. I’ll tell her to get started on the design.” She turns and leaves, pigtails swinging, stilettos click-clacking on the floor.



Though it’s not yet noon, I fortify myself with another rum before exploring the bedrooms. The alcohol gives me a pleasant buzz, allowing the clenched muscles in my shoulders

to relax. From what I've seen and heard so far, Tabby and Connor appear reliable, though I wouldn't bet my life on it.

I know too well how deceiving appearances can be.

But I'm stranded in a strange country with no money, no ID, and nowhere to go if I ran. I'm resourceful enough to get away from here, if that's what I wanted, but for the moment curiosity is getting the better of panic.

I need to see those conversations between Dimitri and Naz.

Besides, I have a loaded gun. Worse comes to worst, I can shoot my way out if they try to block me.

All the bedrooms are identical in size and decor, so I choose the one farthest from the main entrance. I lock myself in with a code, then stand in the middle of the room, warily staring at the ceiling and walls, searching for cameras.

"Oh, screw it," I mutter. "It's not like you haven't been spied on before." I get settled at the small wood desk in the corner of the room, then toggle the mouse to turn the computer on. The screen lights up. I find the Dropbox icon and log in.

Wow. That's a lot of files.

I scroll around until I find the file with the oldest date. When I open it, the screen floods with images, each one opening in its own window. "Dear God," I breathe in horror.

Every picture is of me.

There are hundreds in this file alone.

Furious, I grab a glass paperweight off the table and turn and throw it against the wall.

It smashes into a million shards with a loud, satisfying noise, raining glinting bits of razor-edged glass onto the carpet.

"I wish that was your *face!*" I shout, glaring at the dent in the wall.

When I'm slightly more calm, I sit and continue clicking through files. I find the first recording between Dimitri and Naz, and take a deep breath before opening it.

When Dimitri's face fills the screen, I gasp, recoiling on instinct.

It takes several minutes before my pounding heartbeat slows. I listen to the conversation and watch the back and forth, fighting nausea, trying not to let my gaze linger too long on Dimitri's face.

Those soulless blue eyes. I'd almost blocked the memory.

I force myself to watch it all. When they disconnect, agreeing to speak in one week, I close out of all the open windows and go to the next folder.

When I'm done with that one, I go to the next.

Then the next.

Then the next.

They're always the same. Along with the recorded conversations are hundreds of photos of me walking, shopping, swimming in the ocean, lying on the beach. Over time, I become gradually more and more tan. My hair lightens in the sun. My posture straightens. Rarely, I smile.

I see myself from every conceivable angle. I see myself eat meals at restaurants. I see myself walk down streets. I see myself buy produce and climb the stairs to my apartment and do a million different everyday things.

Always alone.

Then I see myself bloom the way a flower blooms, opening up her petals to the sun. My walk becomes confident. My smile is almost constant. I'm visibly happier. More alive.

This is the same time the pictures become more intimate.

Gone are the distant shots where I'm caught in a crowd. Gone are the panoramas and the blurred angles. My face is almost always the focus, but when it's not, my body takes over the frame. There's a shot of my hand on a piece of fruit, my wrist attractively bent. A shot of my legs as the breeze blows open the slit in my dress. A shot of my arched neck.

As time wears on, the pictures become artistic instead of clinical. They gain a warm, personal feeling. They capture the play of light on my hair, the burnished gleam of my skin, all the little details you'd only see if you looked very close.

They become, in a word, loving.

Viewed on a compacted timeline, the photographer's increasing infatuation with his subject is obvious.

Dimitri saw these photos. Did he see what I'm seeing? And if he did, what does it mean that he didn't react?

My heart is a caged hummingbird inside my chest.

I find Tabby's name under a button on a large panel on the wall and push it. After a crackle of static, her voice comes through the speaker.

"Hi, Eva."

"You said the reason Dimitri gave for not coming to get me even though he knew where I was is that he was giving me space."

"Yes."

"That's a lie. He doesn't believe in the concept."

Tabby pauses before answering. "What's your theory?"

"I don't know, but whatever it was, it was calculated."

"Maybe he thought you'd be more . . ." She delicately clears her throat. "Compliant when you returned if he gave you some time away."

I close my eyes and try to breathe through aching lungs. I whisper, "There was never a more compliant pet than me."

"Oh, honey."

Her exhalation is heavy and her voice is low. She knows precisely what I mean.

"Does he know yet that I'm gone?"

"No, not as far as we can tell. He hasn't contacted us, and there's no indication from his email or web traffic that he suspects anything."

“What about his phone? Have you tapped his phone?”

“He uses burners. Disposable phones.” Her voice turns dry. “These Mafia types do tend to be suspicious.”

“Yes, he’s highly suspicious. And smart, too. Which makes me think he must have noticed the change in Naz’s photos.”

Tabby’s pause seems loud.

“Don’t tell me *you* didn’t notice.”

“I stopped reviewing them after week four. They were always the same, and quite honestly I felt creepy looking at them.”

“That’s because you don’t have a dick. Go back and look at them, especially the most recent ones. I think you’ll see it right away.”

Tabby’s voice turns surprised. “Naz was objectifying you? What, like getting shots down the front of your dress?”

“No. It’s more like . . . God, how do I say this without sounding ridiculous?”

In another instant, Tabby’s got it. “It’s more like worshipping you.”

I feel my face heat. “I have to admit, they’re pretty erotic. I had no idea my elbows were so fascinating.”

“Men,” Tabby mutters, sighing.

“I know. It’s amazing they don’t sit around the house all day playing with their penises.”

“Some of them do.” She sighs again. “All right, I’ll take a look. Is there anything you need?”

I swallow the final ounce of rum in my glass. “More stuff to smash. Send down some crystal vases.”

Tabby chuckles. “Guess Connor should’ve sent Naz down to Cocked Pistol instead of your level.”

My pulse skyrockets. “He’s coming down here?”

“He’s probably already there. Do me a favor and don’t shoot him anywhere lethal, okay? He’s one of my favorite recruits.”

She disconnects the call before I can say, *No guarantees.*

TWENTY

NAZ

The elevator doors open. I step into the room and am instantly filled with disappointment because Eva is nowhere to be seen.

I drop her duffel bag on one of the sofas, then head to the kitchen for a glass of water. I'm leaning against the counter drinking it when I notice the bottle of rum on the coffee table across the room. It's a third empty.

Great. So she's mad, armed, and drunk.

Bad combination.

I'm about to push off the counter and claim a bedroom so I can take a shower when I hear the sound of a door opening down the hall. My heart starts to thump, but I stay where I am, waiting.

Eva emerges from the corridor leading to the bedrooms. She stops when she spots me in the kitchen, then stands there and looks at me.

Her jaw is set. Her eyes are flashing. At least there isn't a gun in her hand.

After a moment of tense silence, she says, "So you weren't really in that alley to buy drugs the day we met."

I slowly shake my head.

"You were following me."

"Yeah."

She closes her eyes and exhales. "I knew I wasn't crazy."

I'm not sure what she means, but I don't want to risk pissing her off even more by speaking, so I force myself to stay silent and wait.

She opens her eyes and blisters me with her look. "Tabby sent me the files."

"Which files?"

“Your reports. All the pictures you sent to Dimitri and your conversations online.”

My heart leaps. “So then you know.”

She arches her brows.

“As soon as you told me you weren’t married, I told Connor. Then I told him what you said about the abuse—”

“I didn’t get that far,” she interrupts, her voice even. “I got too distracted watching your pictures go from vanilla to erotica as time wore on.”

I think of how I felt when I was photographing her, all the times I’d get hard just watching her through my lens. A flush of heat creeps up my neck.

“You liked it, didn’t you?”

“Liked what?”

Her voice drops. “Watching me.”

Fuck. I debate how to answer for a good fifteen seconds before finally admitting the simple truth. “Yes.”

I can’t help how raw it sounds. How filled with need.

She doesn’t seem to know how to respond to my admission. Her cheeks gain a tinge of color, but her expression is guarded. I decide to take a risk and push the conversation farther into dangerous territory.

“I thought about you. All the time. Every day. From the first time we met, I thought of you constantly.”

Her throat works, but she says nothing, so I push even more.

My voice lower, I ask, “Did you think about me?”

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth but still doesn’t reply.

She doesn’t have to. It’s written all over her face. I take a step forward.

“I wanted to tell you. I hated myself. I hated the whole situation.” I move another step closer to her, itching to take her in my arms.

“Naz,” she says firmly, the pulse hammering in the hollow of her throat. “I really don’t want to have to put a bullet in your head. Stay where you are.”

I debate it for half a second, gauging the anger in her eyes, and decide after a moment I’ve pushed as far as I can. Without another word, I turn around and walk out.



Stepping off the elevator on the main level, I head straight back to Connor’s office, nodding at a few guys I pass along the way. Metrix is staffed 24/7 with specialists in everything from computer systems to guerilla warfare. It’s a who’s who of badasses, our leader the baddest of them all.

Perhaps only eclipsed by the badassery of his wife, a woman overly fond of a cartoon cat and ridiculous clothing.

I rap my knuckles on his closed office door. A deep baritone rumbles, “Proceed,” and I go in.

Connor’s behind his massive oak desk, his attention on a file of papers in front of him. He glances up, sees it’s me, then does a double-take, squinting his eyes in assessment at my appearance.

Then he leans back in his chair, grinning.

I say drily, “Mad respect to you, brother, but shut the fuck up.”

He throws back his head and roars with laughter. He tosses the pen in his hand onto the pile of papers, then gestures to the chair across from his desk. “Have a seat, soldier. I hate to see a grown man cry standing up.”

I sit. He proceeds to grin at me like a lunatic.

Chuckling and shaking his head, Connor says, “Got some hankies in my desk if you need one, lover boy.”

“I’m good. Thanks.”

“Yeah, you look good.” He presses his lips together, his black eyes dancing with mirth. “Relaxed.”

I look at the ceiling and sigh.

“Jesus, you look just like my wife right now,” he says, folding his arms over his chest.

I regard him with a look of friendly scorn. “It’s a miracle your wife’s eyes don’t get stuck in the back of her head from rolling them at you so much.”

“Yeah, so *she* says. You’re two fuckin’ peas in a pod.” He waves a hand in the air dismissively. “I know you didn’t come back in here to talk about my wife.”

“No, I came to talk game plan.”

He raises his brows.

“I wanna get this done sooner rather than later. I know we have almost a week before I’m supposed to have next contact with Dimitri, but a lot can happen between now and then.”

“Like what?”

“Like maybe he decides to take an impromptu vacation to Mexico. Who fucking knows.”

Connor nods, listening.

“Tabby made it sound like Dimitri is bulletproof. Probably has a ton of personal security, highly sophisticated systems on his property, cameras, dogs, the works.”

“Oh, he’s got better than that, brother.”

It’s my turn to raise my brows.

“For starters, the man has anti-aircraft missiles on the roof of his palace—”

“*Palace?*”

His tone is droll. “What, you think Mafia kings live in two-bedroom condos in the burbs?”

I mutter, “Fuck.”

“Yeah. So. Anti-aircraft missiles. Highly sensitive motion detectors. Surveillance, cameras, and personnel up the yin-yang. Access control. Perimeter wall security. Underground sensor cables. Microwave intrusion detection—”

“I got it, I got it. Christ.”

“So the question is, what’s the best way to get past all that?”

His gaze is steady, his expression unreadable. But I already know the answer.

“You don’t.”

“Correct.”

Unable to remain sitting because I’m starting to get twitchy, I rise and start to pace, propping my hands on my hips. “So we draw him out. Take away the home-court advantage. Any ideas how?”

When all I hear is silence, I swing around and look at him. He gazes back at me with his head lowered and a look like *catch up* on his face.

My blood runs cold. “No. Hard no. No-fucking-way-in-a-million-years no.”

“You need cheese to set a mousetrap, brother,” he says softly.

“Oh yeah?” I respond, my tone scathing. “You’d use Tabby as cheese?”

His look sours.

“That’s what I thought. Next option.”

He sighs, as if I’m being unreasonable. “Well . . . you could always call him up and tell him the deal.”

“The deal?”

“Yeah. The deal. ‘Hey, bro, I blew the job and took your woman ’cause she was so hot I couldn’t resist. You want a piece of me? Come and get it.’ Like that.”

I stare at him with narrowed eyes, considering it. “That has a certain gunfight-at-the-OK-Corral appeal.”

He grins. “Yeah? You feelin’ it?”

“Why are you excited?”

He shrugs. “Been a while since I had a good tussle. Starin’ at computers only has so much appeal. Need to keep those gears *greased*, if you know what I mean.”

I take another turn around the room, working things over in my head. “It’d ruin the element of surprise, though. And you said his father can’t know it had anything to do with us.”

“True,” says Connor, sounding disappointed.

“So we’re back to square one. Do we know anything about his routines? When he leaves home, where he goes, anything?”

“Nope. But we know someone who does.” When I glance at him, he says, “She’s gonna know better than anyone what the man’s habits are.”

“I don’t wanna bring Eva into it.”

“Don’t you think she’d wanna help ensure the mission’s a success? Not only to get rid of him, but to help you? How d’you think she’d feel if you get your head blown off walkin’ in blind and she coulda given some intel that woulda prevented it?”

I think about it. “Honestly, it would depend on her mood.”

Connor chuckles. “Yeah. Fuckin’ broads. Still.”

“All right. I’ll ask. Might get me shot, but I’ll ask. In the meantime, can Tabby pull up anything else on Dimitri that might be useful?”

“I’ll get her on it, see what else we can dig up.”

A ping from the computer on his desk distracts him from our conversation. He clicks a button, gazes at the screen for a moment, then says, “Eva’s lookin’ at the Dropbox files Tabby sent.” He clicks another button, then turns the screen toward me.

I see the recorded satellite conversation with me, Tabby, and Connor playing on Eva’s screen downstairs. I look tense. I can tell I’d been dragging my hands through my hair.

On the recording, Connor says, “You take this woman, you’re starting a war. You know that, right?”

Then I hear my unhesitating answer.

“She’s worth it. If you need to cut me loose and disavow all knowledge, I understand. It’s been a privilege to know you

both, and I thank you for the opportunity to work together. But Eva's my priority now. Protecting her is the only thing that matters."

She stops and rewinds. She plays it again. She's on the third replay when Connor turns the screen back toward him and clicks off the program.

He smirks. "That right there's gonna earn you some major goodies, brother. Maybe you won't need my hankies after all."

"I'm just glad she's safe. But to keep her safe, I've gotta clean some house."

"We'll regroup later after Tabby has another look-see. Now go back to Eva." His smirk returns. "And good luck."

TWENTY-ONE

NAZ

When I return downstairs, I find Eva pacing in agitation back and forth over the living room floor. I close the door behind me but keep a safe distance, unsure what's going on inside her head.

“You okay?”

In a low, tremulous voice, she says, “I tried to shoot you.”

Oh fuck. She sounds like she regrets it. I try not to get my hopes up that I might be forgiven and keep my tone neutral. “Technically you tried to kill me. It's gratifying that you sound miserable about it, but you missed. No harm, no foul.”

Wringing her hands, she stops midstep and stares at me. “On the drive to Tulum, when you pulled over on the side of the road—you were going to tell me then, weren't you?”

Keeping still and quiet, the way you do when near a frightened feral animal, I slowly nod.

She swallows. Her voice goes high and tight. “And I told you that you weren't obligated to share anything with me and that we should just enjoy each other's company.”

I raise a hand. “I think I know where you're going with this, and let me stop you. You have *zero* responsibility for anything. I could've still told you everything then, but I didn't—”

“Because I said you were a good man. I made you feel *guilty*.”

Her eyes are shining. Her face is pale. She's blinking fast, as if to hold back tears.

I exhale, astonished to realize she's seriously upset.

With *herself*.

I'm flooded with such relief at the change in her attitude that it leaves me breathless. Without stopping to think about what I'm doing, I cross the space between us in a few strides

and pull her into my arms. “Sweetheart.” I whisper it into her ear, squeezing her tight against my body. She trembles against me, hiding her face in my chest. I bury my nose in her hair.

When she tries to pull away, I swing her up into my arms and carry her over to the couch.

“What are you doing?” she asks, her eyes wide.

“I need body contact so I can breathe again.” I take us down to the cushions, her on top, then wrap my arms around her back and wait for her to settle.

She does, gradually, resting her head on my shoulder and flattening a hand over my chest. I stroke my hand down her back, but stop when my fingers touch the butt of the Glock sticking out of the waistband of her jeans.

“It stays right there.”

Her tone conveys that I’ll lose vital body parts if I try to remove it.

“Copy that.” I press a gentle kiss to her forehead, reveling in the feel of her weight on top of me, in the smell of her hair and the warmth of her. In the fact that she’s allowing this at all.

We lie like that, simply breathing, until she exhales a slow, deep breath. She whispers, “I’m still mad at you.”

“I know.”

“But I’m also . . . what you said to Tabby and Connor about protecting me . . . the look in your eyes . . . everything you’re risking for me . . . God, I don’t even know where to start.”

I say promptly, “Start with how happy you are I’m gonna go to Russia in a few days and make the world a better place.”

“I’m afraid to ask what that means.”

“Just had a talk with Connor.”

“And?”

“And . . . we’re putting together the plan.”

I don’t need to explain further. “How can I help?”

I admire how quickly she can change gears. She's got the mind of a strategist, able to switch nimbly from one reality to another, able to quickly adapt to new information.

Or maybe the word is *survivor*.

"You can tell us about Dimitri."

She swallows. "His routines, like that?"

"Exactly like that, yes. Connor tells me his home is basically a fortress, so my best chance of getting to him is when he's away."

She's quiet for a moment, then she looks up at me. "Church."

"He go every week?"

"Yes. Same service, without fail."

"Kinda devout for a scumbag."

"Oh no, it's business. He launders money through it."

That surprises me. "How the fuck do you launder money through a church?"

"Real estate. The church buys property with the funds he tithes, then rents or sells the property and returns the money. After taking their cut, of course."

"Ah."

"He travels everywhere with bodyguards, even there. But he's alone when he goes into the confessional. He has his meetings there, makes the cash drop."

"How convenient."

"He thought I didn't know what he was doing. But you can learn anything if you keep your ears open and your mouth shut long enough. If you're made to keep your mouth shut."

I force myself not to react to the pathos in her words, except for my right hand, which has a mind of its own and curls into a fist.

"Okay, this is really good information. Thank you."

“There’s a lot more I can tell you.”

“We’re gonna meet with Tabby and Connor later. You can tell us everything then.” Something occurs to me. “Unless you’d rather not talk about certain things in front of them.”

“If it starts to feel . . . bad . . . I’ll just tell Tabby. I know she’d understand. I’m comfortable with her.”

“Good,” I murmur. “That’s good to hear, sweetheart.”

She sends me a tentative smile.

“Just promise me you won’t let her take you shopping.”

Her smile grows wider. “I think she looks amazing.”

“Yeah, for a circus performer,” I say drily. “Don’t you feel like she’s about to start juggling chain saws or swallowing flaming swords at any minute?”

“This from the man who thinks cargo shorts are haute couture!”

“You couldn’t wait to work that into another conversation, could you?”

She tilts her head and gazes up at me. *Christ, those long lashes. Those beautiful eyes.*

That mouth.

Heat floods my groin. I concentrate on her eyes instead of her mouth, because I’m sure my hard dick is the last thing she wants to deal with right now.

“A lot of men have tried to kill him. He has a bad habit of staying alive despite everyone’s best attempts.”

“You let me worry about that.”

“He’s well protected. It will be almost impossible to get near him.”

“Again, my problem, not yours.”

“You don’t understand—”

“Hush. We’re not talking about him anymore. We’re talking about us.”

She falls silent for a moment, then tucks her head under my chin. She's thinking, which worries me.

"Talk to me. I need to know what you're feeling right now."

"Confused. Upset. Scared. Angry. Exhausted. Hungry. Thankful. Buzzed." She pauses. "Also I'm astounded that you can talk about murder and feelings in the same breath."

I tease gently, "You'd prefer there were more of a respectable time delay between the two?"

She whispers, "No, I just wish I didn't like it so much." She sniffs my chest, her fingers curling around a handful of my T-shirt.

My dick is now wide awake and ready for business. When Eva shifts her weight on top of me, I bite my tongue so I don't groan aloud.

"You make a good bed."

I answer in a rough voice. "Anytime, sweetheart."

She starts to toy with the edge of my sleeve where it's stretched over my biceps, rubbing her finger along the stitched hem. When her fingertips brush my skin, my dick jumps.

I close my eyes and release a controlled breath.

"Why is your heart hammering, Naz?"

"Because you're crack and I'm an addict."

Her fingers still for a moment. Then she thoughtfully traces a meandering circle around one of my tattoos.

Every nerve ending in my body is awake and on fire, all attention honed on the light slide of her fingertips across the surface of my skin. She follows a vein down to the inside of my arm, lazily stroking it, making it leap under her touch.

Very quietly, she says, "Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes, I thought about you."

Calm down, you fucking idiot. Breathe. "Yeah?"

“Mostly . . . at night. In bed.”

The air goes electric. All my muscles tense. I form a vivid mental picture of Eva touching herself in bed while thinking of me, writhing in the sheets and moaning my name. My dick starts to throb.

I turn my nose to her hair and inhale. I stroke my open palm down her back. I keep my mouth shut and my body unmoving, though every instinct screams for action.

I want to be inside her so badly it’s like a drowning man fighting for air. The ache. The need. The desperation.

“During the day I could usually distract myself, but at night . . . you were all I could think about. I imagined . . .”

When she doesn’t continue, I rasp, “What?”

She answers in the barest whisper. “That my fingers were your tongue.”

A sound breaks from my chest. I exhale in a gust, fighting an almost overpowering urge to flip her onto her back, strip her naked, and thrust my aching cock into her wet heat.

Whatever happens next has to be her doing. Her choice. She has to be in charge of this so she has no regrets.

No matter how much it goes against every roaring cell in my testosterone-jacked body, I have to let her be in control.

She trails her fingertips back up my biceps, slipping her hand under the sleeve of my shirt. I feel the light scratch of her nails against my shoulder and jerk. I try to suppress the tremor that runs through my chest when she smooths her hand down my stomach, but fail. She slips her fingers under the edge of my shirt, then she’s touching my skin, stroking the sensitive spot below my belly button. It pulls another groan out of me.

“All these muscles,” she whispers, spreading her hand over my abs. They contract under her touch, earning me an approving sound. “And so *sensitive*.”

“Trust me, sweetheart, that’s the least sensitive part of my anatomy right now.”

She dips her fingers below the waist of my jeans and runs them back and forth from hip to hip, lightly dragging her nails against my skin, then puts her lips near my ear so her warm breath fans down my neck when she speaks.

“I’ve never seen anything like these sexy cuts, Naz. Not in real life. Did it take you long to get them? Lots of hard hours at the gym?”

There’s a slight emphasis on the word *hard*. Is she playing with me? Punishing me?

Fuck, who cares? As long as she keeps doing it.

I answer through gritted teeth. “Fuck yes. So hard.”

“Mmm. I bet.” She presses the softest of kisses right under my earlobe, laughing softly when I shiver.

“Eva—”

“Be quiet. I’m traumatized and half-drunk, and I have a weapon within easy reach. I’m trying to mentally come to terms with the reality of my situation, what you did for me, and everything that’s happened, and I want to feel you up while I’m doing it. Any objections?”

I blow out a long, ragged breath. “I’ve never been so happy to be used.”

“Good. Because I’ve been wanting to do this for a long time.”

She shifts her weight to one side and works open the top button of my jeans.

I’ve never fainted before, but I think I’m about to.

She undoes all the buttons on my fly, pushes the flaps aside, and gazes at the bulge straining against my white briefs. Then she pushes up my T-shirt so my chest and abdomen are bared.

After a moment of staring at my naked chest, she starts to rub me.

Her hand travels lightly from my chest down my abdomen, then back up again. She runs her palm over my pecs. Her hand

slides down again, disappearing into my jeans, brushing the side of my hard cock to skim my upper thigh.

I release a breath through my teeth and remind myself to take another one.

“You seem tense,” she murmurs. “Spoiler alert: it’s going to get worse.”

She palms my cock and lightly squeezes.

When I moan, she glances up at my face. She’s flushed. Her eyes are a little glazed. She watches my face, stroking her hand down the length of me, then cupping my balls in her palm.

“It’s big,” she whispers.

“It?”

“Him. You.” She slides her hand back up my erection to the crown, circling it with her fingers.

“I’ll fit you just right,” I say gruffly, staring into her eyes.

She squeezes again. My hips flex involuntarily, pushing my cock harder into her hand. My heart is a jackhammer. I’m starting to sweat. I’m dying to kiss her, but I hold myself still against the drum of *more, deeper, now* pounding inside me.

Watching me fight myself, Eva whispers, “You’re being so good.”

“I should get a reward.”

She smiles at how that came out. So rough and needy. So close to undone.

“Maybe you should.” She glances down at her hand and pulls the elastic waistband of my briefs down, exposing the crown of my dick.

Then she slips her hand inside the briefs. Her warm, soft hand surrounds me. She uses her thumb to stroke the throbbing vein on the underside of my shaft, then slides it over the slit in the crown and lightly presses down.

I make fists and bite back another moan, every tendon straining.

“So good,” she croons, and starts to pump her hand slowly up and down the length of my rigid cock.

“Fuck.”

“You like that?”

“You know I do.” I’m panting, heat coiling at the base of my spine and spreading through my pelvis. The whole room feels hot. Hot and supercharged. Pressurized with lust.

“What else would you like, Naz?”

“*Your mouth.*” It bursts out of me like a confession, guilty and raw.

“I’d like yours, too. I’ve never had that before.”

Never had it before? Christ, no, I suppose Dimitri would’ve expected his own needs to be serviced, not hers.

“Oh fuck, please let me put my mouth on you, Eva. Let me kiss you everywhere the way you asked me to in the ruins.”

It’s a desperate rush of words, almost incoherent. I can tell she’s fascinated and turned on by how I’m falling apart in her hands. She licks her lips and grips my cock a little harder, allowing me to start gently thrusting up to match the rhythm of her strokes.

“God, you’re *really* sexy,” she says breathlessly, sounding surprised. “My panties are soaked.”

She squirms against me, and I break.

I sink both hands into her hair, pull her head down, and kiss her, hard.

When she allows it, I relax a little, softening the kiss but also deepening it until our tongues are in a lazy, perfect rhythm, dizzying in its intensity. Her strokes and my thrusts are in perfect rhythm, too. I’m getting close to going over the edge.

“You have to stop or I’ll come,” I rasp against her lips.

Her cheeks flood with color. “I hope this isn’t a complete mood killer, but I have to tell you I’ve never felt this powerful before in my life.”

I groan, shuddering.

She whispers, “You’re so hard.”

“Please,” I beg, my voice thick. “Shoot me or let me come. Even better, sit on my face and we’ll come together.”

Her eyes get round, and her face gets even redder. She pinches her lips like a prim schoolteacher.

That’s when I remember.

She was a virgin when Dimitri took her. He forced himself on her for years. She’s sexually experienced, but not in a good way.

In the ways of real passion, she’s an innocent.

She’s never had a man who adores her, who worships her body and soul, who puts her needs before his own.

She’s never been loved.

“Wait. Sweetheart, stop.” I grab her wrist and struggle to sit up. I rise to an elbow and look at her, trying desperately to catch my breath. My cock is caught between us, suddenly obscene.

Nose to nose, we stare at each other. “This is backward. I should be making *you* feel good.”

Her lashes lower. She says quietly, “You are.”

“Not the right way.” My voice gets rougher. “Not yet.”

I stand and lift her up before she can protest. Then, with her in my arms, I head down the hallway toward the bedrooms.

TWENTY-TWO

EVA

I cling to Naz's shoulders as he strides down the hall, staring wide-eyed at his profile. I'm not sure if my heart is strong enough to take the strain it's under, but I pray it is.

Watching him tell Tabby and Connor in that recorded conversation that I was his priority, that he was willing to throw away his entire life to protect me when he found out the reality of what I'd been through, had such a profound effect on me I sat frozen for minutes, battered by pretty much every emotion a person can have. Finally I leaped to my feet and started to pace, remembering how he'd been so disgusted with himself on the way to Tulum, how he'd pulled over to the side of the road and said he had to tell me something.

How I'd stopped him.

How he'd said he hated himself, and I'd said I knew what was in his heart.

How he refused to sleep with me, even though it was what we both so desperately wanted.

How I tried to kill him.

I tried to kill him! And not half an hour ago I threatened to put a bullet in his head!

Tabby was right: he's been crucifying himself over having to lie to me. In the big-picture scheme of things, at the very core of me, I believe Naz is an honorable man.

And no matter how strange and confusing our situation, I still want him more than I've wanted anything before in my life.

He shoulders through the door to my bedroom, kicks it shut behind him, and heads to the bed. With amazing ease, as if he carries heavy bundles around for his day job, he sets me on my feet and straightens.

Then he pulls the gun out of my pants and puts it on the bedside table. “In case you still wanna shoot me after,” he says gruffly.

“After.” I stare up at him, unable to form more than those two syllables because my mouth has gone as dry as the Sahara.

He pulls off his shirt and drops it to the floor. “After I take care of you,” he says deliberately, his dark eyes blazing. Then he takes us both down to the bed.

He straddles me and braces his arms on either side of my head. He’s big and brawny above me, all heat and muscle and burning eyes, a mountain of a man who could so easily crush me. But his gaze is full of tenderness along with heat, and I know he wouldn’t.

I’m starting to believe Naz would rather suffer anything himself than see me hurt.

“You okay?” he asks, examining my expression.

“If by ‘okay’ you mean on the verge of a nervous breakdown and more excited and terrified than I’ve been in my life, then yes. I’m okay.”

He quirks a corner of his mouth. “You have any idea how much I love that?”

“Me being terrified?”

“You being honest,” he says, his voice husky. “You always saying exactly what you mean. You admitting everything you feel, good and bad, no holds barred. I’ve never known another woman as fearless as you.”

My throat gets tight. I have to blink away the water creeping into the corners of my eyes. “I’m not fearless. I’m afraid of everything. I’m even afraid of you.”

“But you’re still right here with me.”

I blow out a shaky breath and close my eyes. “I won’t let my fear make the decisions.”

With exquisite tenderness, Naz brushes his lips against my temple. He whispers into my ear, “And that—my sweet, brave,

beautiful girl—is the *definition* of courage.”

The urge to burst into tears overtakes me, but I fight it back, gulping breaths and turning my fevered face to Naz’s wrist.

He lowers himself onto me until his body is flush against mine. He balances his weight on his elbows so we’re pressed together, crotch to chest. I open my legs, adjusting my pelvis until he’s snug in the cradle of my thighs, his hardness straining against the seam of my jeans.

He softly kisses a path from my jaw to my collarbone, holding my head in his hands. At the base of my throat, he pauses to dip his tongue into the hollow.

“We both have our shoes on,” I say, trembling. “Is that weird?”

“Stop thinking about clothes,” comes the muffled answer. “I’ll take care of that in a second. Just feel this.”

He licks the vein pulsing in the side of my neck. When I shudder, he adds, “And breathe.”

It becomes impossible to follow his direction when he opens his mouth and lightly sucks on my throat. His teeth scrape over my skin. My nipples instantly harden.

Wanting his mouth somewhere else—*everywhere* else—I inhale sharply and arch against him, digging my fingers into his back.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous,” he says harshly, his lips moving against my skin. “So responsive.” Then he mutters something in a language I don’t recognize, a guttural foreign tongue rough with fricatives that sounds masculine and sexual.

His hand slides under my shirt. His palm is hot and rough against my skin, his calloused fingers hard and soft at the same time, giving me goose bumps, they feel so good. When he reaches my rib cage, I let out a small, incoherent cry.

He freezes.

“I’m okay. I’m just . . . I think I’m a little delirious.”

He raises his head and moves his mouth to mine, capturing my lips in a heated, unhurried kiss. Then he gently slides his hand up under my bra and cups my breast.

“Whoa.” He chuckles softly when I jerk. “Easy.”

“No, not easy,” I say, breathless with desire. “Hard. More. Faster. *Hurry.*”

His lids lower. He considers me with a hard jaw and flared nostrils, his breathing uneven but his body under perfect, immobile control. Then he watches my face as he draws his thumb and forefinger together and pinches my nipple between them.

My mouth opens but no sound comes out. I draw my knee up against his thigh.

He circles my nipple with his thumb, then pinches it again, more firmly this time, sending a shock wave of pleasure through my body.

“What do you want?” he breathes, looking at my mouth.

“Everything. Anything. *You.*”

He pushes up the hem of my shirt, shoves aside my bra, and takes my aching nipple into his mouth.

Heat explodes everywhere through me.

His mouth is hot, wet, and firm, a vortex of pleasure I could easily drown in. He suckles me, his cheeks hollowing, his pelvis flexing into mine. When he lightly scrapes my flesh with his teeth, I groan.

Loudly.

He moves to my other breast and repeats the pinching and sucking routine until I’m a pool of butter on the blankets, shaking and drenched in sweat.

“I think you could come like this,” he murmurs in wonder, flicking his tongue over a rigid nub.

“I’ve never . . . I’ve . . . oh . . .”

He pauses. His voice gentle, he asks, “You’ve never had an orgasm?”

“No. I mean yes, by myself. Not with . . . not during . . .” Embarrassed, I throw an arm over my face.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. Thank you for telling me.” He inhales against my skin, nuzzling my breasts and kneading his fingers into my shoulders. He whispers, “I need to taste you. I want you to come in my mouth. Tell me if you want that.”

I make a garbled noise of assent, helplessly rocking my pelvis against his and digging my fingernails into his muscular back. I suspect my eyes are about to roll up into my head.

Then he’s helping me out of my clothes, taking off my shirt, jeans, and shoes with the same efficiency he does everything. He tosses it all carelessly to the floor. My bra gets tossed aside, too, then he sits back on his heels and simply stares at me.

His scrutiny is intense. His gaze misses nothing. I feel vulnerable and exposed but freakishly turned on by the emotion in his eyes. All that heat and longing.

“So beautiful,” he whispers, trailing his fingers down my bare inner thighs. “Just so beautiful.”

He spreads his hands over my belly, then slowly runs them up my ribs to cup my breasts. He leans down and kisses me softly on the mouth, biting my lower lip a little, licking the sting away with a gentle swipe of his tongue.

I sink my hands into his hair and pull him down for another kiss, a deeper one, full of impatience and need.

He breaks away, softly laughing. “Okay, greedy girl. I hear you.”

He moves down my body and turns his rough cheek to my inner thigh. Balancing on his elbows, he slides his hands under my bottom and squeezes, making a low noise in his throat. Then he opens his mouth and sucks on my flesh, closing his eyes so his dark lashes make a fan over his cheeks.

I can’t look away.

I'm breathing hard, my heart is hammering, and I'm shaking all over, but I can't look away as he sucks and licks the inside of one thigh, then the other, taking his time and obviously enjoying himself, like a cat with a bowl of fresh cream.

When he noses up the middle of my panties and inhales, I think I might scream.

He pulls aside my panties, exposing my flesh to his avid eyes. I've never been looked at like this, so intimately, with deep appreciation but even deeper passion. He looks like he wants to devour me whole.

He whispers, "Bare," then presses a kiss right between my legs.

It's a soft kiss, his lips closed, but it might as well have been a shock from a defibrillator for how I jump, gasping.

He flattens a hand over my belly. It feels like he's giving me support.

I manage to say breathlessly, "I always had to be waxed. He wanted . . ." I swallow, gasping for breath. "I wasn't allowed to have any hair."

After a moment, Naz says, "From now on, you have it however *you* want it. And we're never gonna mention him in bed again."

"Oh God. I'm sorry."

"I'm not angry, sweetheart," he murmurs. "He just doesn't have any place between us."

"No, you're right. I promise I won't—"

My words are cut off by my hard intake of breath because Naz has lowered his head and put his wonderful hot mouth right at the very center of me.

I groan, arching against the bed, my head tilting back into the pillow, my eyes sliding shut. His tongue flicks back and forth over the engorged bud of my clitoris, then he sucks with light pressure until I groan again, writhing against his mouth.

I pant, "Naz. That's. *Amazing.*"

He grunts and sucks harder.

It's dirty and intimate and ferociously hot, far better than even my wildest fantasies. My body is doing things I have no control over. My hips buck and flex. My thighs clench and tremble. My breathing is harsh and loud in the quiet room, and I'm making sounds I've never made before, animal sounds of pleasure.

Then he slides a thick finger slowly inside me.

It feels so fucking good I could die.

I touch his hair and he glances up at me, but keeps his mouth buried in my flesh. When he starts to pump his finger in and out, my shaking fingers tangle deep in his hair. I can tell he likes what he's doing, that he likes the effect it's having on me even more, and that drives me even wilder.

"Please don't stop," I whisper, bucking against his mouth.

As an answer, he slides his other hand from my belly up to my breast and tweaks my nipple.

Moaning, I fall back against the pillow.

Then it becomes only sensation. Rational thought is lost. I fist both hands in his hair and ride his face, completely uncaring how I sound or look, focused only on what I'm feeling. His shoulder muscles flex and bunch under my thighs, and even that is incredibly sexy. There's growing pressure in my core, but also in my chest, as if all my emotions are expanding to fill up the space, straining to break free just as my body is straining toward that white-hot peak Naz is driving me to.

Then, without warning, I'm over the edge.

When the first contraction hits me, I gasp. It's so intense I can't make any sound. Then convulsions rock me, one after the other, hard waves of pleasure that wring helpless cries from my throat.

It goes on and on. I feel as if I'm exploding from the inside out. I hear a long, wavering scream and realize dimly it's coming from me.

It isn't until I feel Naz lowering himself to my chest and crooning, "Shh, sweetheart, hush," into my ear that I realize I'm crying.

I wrap my legs and arms around his body, bury my face in the space between his shoulder and neck, and give myself over to the tears.

He wordlessly holds me tight, letting me cry. My shuddering breath shakes us both, and the bed underneath us. His arms are strong and warm. His heartbeat is an even thud against my breasts. He's heavy on top of me, but the pressure feels like a shield, not a cage.

His embrace is a sanctuary.

For the first time ever, I feel like I'm home.

"I think I forgive you," I sob into his chest.

After a moment, he starts softly laughing. "You know I just made a mental note how to win any future fight we might have, right?"

"Just do that to me regularly and there will be nothing to fight about."

He laughs harder.

"I'm not joking." I pepper ardent kisses all over his neck and jaw. "You're amazing. That was incredible. Please tell me that wasn't just a one-off to get you out of trouble and you'll get lazy and complacent after we've been together awhile and never do that to me again."

"I promise," he says, grinning down at me, his eyes shining so bright. "And also *wow*, you're fantastic for my ego."

I snifle. "Superior Man strikes again."

He dissolves into laughter once more, dropping his head to my neck.

"Naz?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you please kiss me now?"

He lifts his head and gazes at me, his eyes alight. “Of course.” He pauses, sensing there’s something more behind my request. “Any particular reason?”

“I want . . .” I moisten my lips, hesitating. “I want to taste what you tasted.”

His dark eyes flare. “You’re a wet dream, woman,” he growls, then takes my mouth.

The kiss is deeply passionate and lasts a long time. When we finally come up for air, he says, “Well?”

I think for a moment. “I don’t know, it’s like . . . citrusy? Like that tang you get in your cheek when you bite into an orange. But also kinda salty. And you know how French wine has that very specific sort of musty, earthy flavor?”

His body shakes with silent laughter.

“What?” I ask, nonplussed.

“You’re adorable.” He kisses me softly on both cheeks. “Adorable, charming, and completely irresistible.”

“You seem to be resisting just fine,” I grouse.

“What’s that mean?”

“I mean you still have your pants on. *And* your shoes!”

He strokes his thumbs over my cheeks, gazing down at me with his heart in his eyes.

His look leaves me breathless.

“I don’t have a condom,” he says softly. “But even if I did, we should wait to take the next step.”

I stare at him. “*Wait to take the next step?*” I repeat slowly, horrified.

“Not for me. For you. I want it to be special—”

“I want it to be *now*,” I interrupt. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve waited to feel like this? I’ll give you a hint: *forever*.”

He inhales, his gaze contemplative.

“And furthermore,” I say, my temper rising, “we don’t *need* a condom because I’m on the birth control shot. At least I’m assuming your concern is pregnancy and not diseases, but if I’m wrong, I’ll have you know I’m disease free. Are you?”

“Yeah,” comes the instant reply.

“Okay, then. Let’s do this.”

In response to my challenging stare, he dissolves into laughter again, rolling onto his back and taking me with him so I’m splayed across his body like a blanket. He cups my face in his hands.

“We have all the time in the world now,” he murmurs, gazing up into my eyes. Then, in a different tone: “Did you just glance at the gun?”

“I bet I could force you to do me at gunpoint.”

“*Do you?*” He presses his lips together because he’s trying not to laugh again, the bastard.

I sock him in his arm with my fist. It’s like a cotton puff hitting a brick wall. “I want to have sex with you, dammit!”

In a whip-crack movement, he’s got me on my back again with my wrists pinned over my head. “Show-off,” I mutter.

“Listen to me.”

“What?”

Speaking with slow deliberation while staring into my eyes, he says, “If I fuck you, you’re mine. And I’m yours. And that’s it.”

My heart decides it’s time to make like a herd of wild stallions and thunder across an open plain inside my chest. I swallow, thrilled by his intensity.

“The last thing I want is you feeling any kind of regret about getting into this with me too quick, before you’ve even had a chance to decompress. I’m looking at the long-term picture here. Yeah, it would feel amazing, and yeah, it’s what we both want, but what you *need* is a minute to sort this all

out. And what *I* need is to know that when you do finally give yourself to me, you're ready. And it's for good."

After a moment, my voice tremulous, I say, "Oh shit."

His brow crinkles. "What is it?"

"That made sense."

His grin is breathtaking. "What can I say? I'm a genius."

"Can I ask you something, though?"

"Sure. Shoot."

I bite my lip and gaze up at him before speaking. "There's other stuff we can do that's not technically sex, right? Like no-penetration stuff."

His grin vanishes. Slowly, he arches an eyebrow.

I whisper, "Because I really liked what we were doing before, on the sofa. Maybe we could . . . finish that."

His lashes flutter. "Goddamn, woman," he breathes, then takes my mouth in another hard, passionate kiss.

I'll take that as a yes.

TWENTY-THREE

EVA

People who can make you laugh are such an underrated blessing in life. It's not like they're crawling out of the woodwork, either. I can count on one hand the people I've known who could lift my spirits with humor, and of those only one of them is truly funny enough to make me forget—at least for a little while—that I was once a monster's favorite pet.

It could also be his glorious ass and biceps, but I'm feeling sentimental.

Naz looks at me the way an old woman I saw every Sunday at church looked at the cross. Kneeling always in the same pew, her face upturned, her lips moving silently in prayer, she stared at the elaborate gold crucifix on the altar with such reverence her faith poured out of her like light.

She was a true believer, that woman.

I see the same look of ardent devotion in the eyes of the man gently soaping my head.

“You have a shit ton of hair,” he says fondly, lathering my skull with his big hands. He's very good at it, not rough or careless like some men would be. But then, he's probably had experience.

I want to ask him about his wife, but I know it's a source of pain for him, so I smile instead. “Is that a professional opinion from all your years as a beautician, Dudley?”

He drops a kiss to my mouth. “Yup. I can give you a perm when we're done here if you want. Maybe some nice highlights. Rinse.”

I tilt my head back and close my eyes, enjoying the feel of the warm spray coursing over my head.

“Mercy,” he mutters, sliding his hands down my rib cage.

I know he's staring at my body. I don't know why I feel so completely at ease being naked in front of him, but I do.

Another blessing. I'm starting to rack them up.

When I've got all the suds out, Naz pulls me into his arms and kisses me. I don't know if it's the hot water making me dizzy or his mouth, but the room lazily spins around us. Whorls of steam billow against my naked skin.

He slides his hand down my back and squeezes my bottom, fitting me closer against him so his erection is trapped between us, pushing against my belly, slippery with suds.

"Will it always be like this?" I murmur.

He slides his hand up and caresses my breast. "Like what?"

I open my eyes and gaze up at him. "Good like this."

His smile is tender, and so are his eyes. "No," he whispers. "It'll get so much better."

He turns me toward the wall and lowers his mouth to my neck as he takes both my breasts in his hands. I flatten my hands on the wet tiles and rest my forehead there, too, as the temperature of the air seems to jump twenty degrees. When he reaches down between my legs and slips his fingers into my folds, I moan, arching my back.

His erection is hard against my bottom. I reach back and take it in my hand.

He says something in that foreign language again, his voice rough with desire.

Our motions fall in sync. Push, pull, slide, do it all over again, as unhurried as possible. I turn my head and he takes my mouth. His fingers start to move faster between my legs. I respond by increasing the rhythm of the strokes of my hand.

He groans. It echoes against the wet tiles, a thrilling noise of surrender and pleasure, underscored by the sound of my own small, breathless cries as I rock against his hand.

He wraps his arm around my body so I can feel all the straining muscles in his chest. Then he drops his forehead to my shoulder and shudders. "Eva. Eva."

His entire body jerks as he spills himself into my hand. He pinches my clitoris and bites the long muscle of my shoulder, grunting into my skin. The thrusts of his pelvis are short and hard as he rides through his orgasm, staggering toward the end so I have to steady us with my arm braced against the wall.

I feel his heart hammering between my shoulder blades. He's gasping and twitching, completely undone, and I love it all.

"Damn," he rasps, panting. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I wasn't supposed to cross the finish line first."

I chuckle, but the laughter vanishes when he spins me around with his hands on my hips, then sinks to his knees in front of me.

And then—oh then. He takes care of me as only he can.

His mouth is a miracle.

Seeing this beautiful man on his knees, so eager to give me pleasure, is its own kind of pleasure, separate from what his clever tongue is doing. His eyes closed and his face rapturous, he suckles me, steadying me with both hands gripped on my ass.

When I come it's with helpless cries, my fingers twisted in his wet hair, my knees locked so I don't fall over. I call out his name, my head falling back against the tile.

He makes a humming noise that reverberates right through my core. For a moment all the clocks in the world stop ticking. Time spins away and the real world fades out.

Then he's standing and his lips find mine for a long, soulful kiss, filled with the taste of me.

When I'm able to speak again, I say weakly, "I don't think we need to ever get to the penetration part. This other stuff is *epic*."

His chuckle is low and satisfied. "We aim to please, ma'am."

“Well, *good job*. You get a gold star for effort.”

He whispers into my ear, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, sweetheart,” and gently sucks on my earlobe.

My sigh must be profoundly contented because it makes him laugh louder and squeeze me tight. “I need to feed you now. You like pasta? I make a wicked linguini Bolognese.”

“My God,” I murmur in wonder. “I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“My ego is definitely in heaven. Pretty soon we’ll have to duck to be in the same room with it. C’mon, beautiful, let’s get you dried off.”

He herds me gently out of the shower, propping me up because I’m as wobbly as a wet noodle. Then he stands me in the middle of the bathroom floor and towels the water off my skin, blotting my hair and not scrubbing it, as a man in the know would.

“I bet you were an excellent husband.”

He stills for a moment, then wraps the towel around me and makes a knot over my chest with the ends. Then he kisses the tip of my nose. “I was a dumb kid, but I did my best. There are things I coulda done better.”

I touch his cheek and look into his eyes. “She was lucky,” I whisper.

His smile looks sad. “No. I was. Loving her made me a better man.”

“Then I’m glad you loved her. And I’m sure she loved you with all her heart.”

His eyes glimmer with emotion when he takes my face in his hands. “She did,” he murmurs, gazing into my eyes. “And I thought there was no way I’d ever get that lucky again. Most people never find that once in a lifetime, let alone twice.”

There’s a pressure in my chest that wasn’t there a moment ago. My throat closes, and suddenly it’s impossible to breathe.

He gathers me in his arms and holds me, letting his body speak because more words aren't necessary. When I draw a shuddering breath, he pulls away and smiles. "Let's get you fed, Thelma. I know how nutty elephants get when they've gone too long without food."



I find a robe in the closet—black, because apparently it's the house color—and comb out my hair while Naz heads into the kitchen. Fatigue is creeping into my bones. I'm wrung out physically and emotionally, and the thought of what lies ahead weighs heavy on my mind.

I know Naz is smart, strong, and capable, but that's not always a match for the kind of slippery evil he'll soon face.

Dimitri doesn't play by Naz's rules or anyone else's. He plays by his own ruthless set, and he plays to win.

When I emerge from the bedroom, a delicious scent greets me. Garlic and spices, the smell of browning meat.

"They thought of everything, didn't they?" I say, noting Naz has changed into a new set of clothes. The shirt is a size too small, but I'm not complaining. It showcases his sculpted body like a dream.

"Connor's always one step ahead of the game," replies Naz, turning from the stove to smile at me. He's pushing ground meat around in a skillet with a wooden spoon with a white kitchen towel thrown over his shoulder, looking all kinds of domestic.

I'm completely charmed by the sight of him. Big burly men doing things like cooking or holding a baby are one of the most erotic sights in the world. It could be improved only if he were doing it in his underwear.

"So I was your first job with Metrix, huh?"

"Yep. But I wouldn't call you a 'job,' sweetheart." He winks, then turns back to the pan.

I watch as he drains a simmering pot of pasta into a colander in the sink, then puts it all back into the pan and adds

a generous dollop of butter. He's at ease at a stove. I could picture him as a chef.

"Is there anything you *can't* do?"

He chuckles. "Can't hold a tune. Can't drive under the speed limit. Can't for the life of me understand folks who enjoy watching bowling on TV."

"Those aren't faults. Tell me your worst faults so I can knock you off this pedestal I'm starting to put you on."

He turns to me again, grinning. "I don't have any faults. I'm sorry to tell you, but I'm perfect."

I roll my eyes. "Okay, I'll go first. Sometimes in church when I'm supposed to be paying attention to the minister I'll be thinking about something else."

He squints at me, as if he's wondering if I'm for real. "That's not a fault, sweetheart. That's just self-preservation. Sermons can be boring as fuck."

"As fuck," I repeat. "How is that a unit of measurement?"

He lifts a shoulder. "It just is."

"Okay, here's one: I'm messy."

"Yeah. Noticed that. Your apartment looked like a hurricane blew through."

I beam, unreasonably proud he's agreeing because now it means he has to share, too. "I only recently discovered that, though. I wasn't allowed to be anything but perfectly . . ."

I stop myself, biting my lip.

He leans his hip against the stove, tilting his head to examine me. Finally he says softly, "Gonna enjoy that."

"What?"

"Watching you figure out all the stuff *you* like to do."

Heat creeps into my cheeks.

His tone becomes lighter. "I mean, maybe you're really into snake skin collecting—"

“Ew!”

“—or carving things out of butter, or dressing up like Star Wars characters and arguing with people online. Or taxidermy! Oh yeah, I can totally see you with a houseful of stuffed wiener dogs.”

I stare at him. “You are very disturbed.”

He says innocently, “No, seriously, except for the stuffed wiener dogs, those are all my hobbies. You don’t like?”

“I don’t like,” I say, shaking my head and pressing the smile from my lips because I don’t want to encourage him. “I think I’ll take up something normal and boring like knitting, thank you.”

“Knitting isn’t boring, it’s functional. You could make me some awesome scarves and mittens.”

“*Mittens?* I have severely overestimated your masculinity if you’re the kind of man who goes around wearing mittens.”

“You don’t think I could pull it off?” He opens a jar of tomato sauce and pours it into the pan of browned meat, stirring gently to combine it. Then he pulls two plates from a cupboard and scoops some of the buttered linguini onto each.

“I think I’d pay good money to see you in a pair of mittens, Dudley.”

“Pink, if you please.”

“*Pink?*”

“It’s an underrepresented color on the badass spectrum.” He pours some meat sauce onto each mound of linguini, gets two forks from a drawer, then carries the food to the square wood dining table next to the kitchen. “Sit,” he says. “I’ll open a bottle of wine.”

I really have died and gone to heaven. Feeling bedazzled, I drift over to the table and sit down. “This smells incredible.”

“Don’t start without me. My feelings get hurt over things like that.”

I can't tell if he's joking because his back is turned and his tone is even, but I decide to take it at face value and fold my hands in my lap. Then I get the pleasure of watching him select a bottle of wine from a small wood rack on the counter and complete the ritual foil peel and cork removal. Then he's returning with two wine glasses filled with cabernet.

"I really can't believe this is all down here," I say in wonder, touching the crystal stem of the glass he sets in front of me.

"I was impressed when I first saw it all, too." Naz sits across from me, picks up his fork, and smiles, showing off his dazzling white teeth. "Bon appétit."

He digs in and starts to chew on a mouthful of pasta while I stare at him in silence.

"What?" he says, noticing me staring.

"I'm . . . I'm . . ." I close my eyes and inhale, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion.

"It's cognitive dissonance."

I open my eyes and look at him. His expression is nonchalant. He shrugs again, equally nonchalant.

"I have no idea what that means."

"It's what happens when your mind is struggling to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time. On the one hand, you still kinda want to kill me for, well, you know. And on the other, you're totally blown away by how manly, wonderful, and devastatingly sexy I am. And by my mad cooking skills. How's the pasta, by the way?"

"I haven't tried it yet." I watch him wolf down another bite.

"It'll take a while for your brain to decide what's what. It's a perfectly normal kind of psychological stress."

He continues eating. I say, "Hence, the no-penetration thing."

"Exactly. It'll be much easier for you to dump my ass if we haven't bonded sexually than if we have. Not that you're

gonna dump me, because I'm amazing, I'm just saying. If you were to decide you'd like to mosey on off into the sunset with *yourself* after all this is said and done, it'll be an easier transition."

"This is your roundabout way of saying you're incredible in bed without actually saying the words, isn't it?"

His grin is blinding. "Caught me out again."

I take a sip of my wine, keeping my gaze on him as he eats. "There's only one problem with your theory, Einstein."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"I already am bonded to you."

He freezes with his fork halfway to his mouth and looks at me.

I smile and take a bite of the pasta. It's delicious.

His voice rough, he asks, "You're only saying that to get me to have sex with you. Right?"

I give him a *Mona Lisa* smile and sip more of my wine.

After a moment, he shakes his head and chuckles. "I can already tell fucking with me is gonna be one of your favorite hobbies."

"Take out the *with* and that sentence still works."

I laugh out loud when he almost drops his fork. Then he's playfully lunging at me, making growly animal noises in his throat.

By the time we get back to the linguini, it's gone cold.

TWENTY-FOUR

NAZ

I sleep better that night than I have in twenty years.

When I wake, it's with Eva in my arms and a heart so full it could burst. I lie in the darkness and listen to her breathe, and send up a prayer of thanks to whatever force guides the universe.

I let my hands learn the curves of her body. With my nose I memorize every nuance of her smell. I trail my fingertip around the shell of her ear, marveling at its delicate shape, at the baby-fine hair on the nape of her neck, at the small, perfect bumps of her spine, aligned down her back like a cascade of pearls.

Finally she rouses under my attention. She stretches against me, all her muscles tensed and shivering. She relaxes with a sigh, then turns her head and smiles.

“You're here.” Her voice is husky with sleep.

“Always.”

“I thought it might have all been a dream.”

I kiss the sweet spot where her shoulder meets her neck and pull her tighter against me. I've known men who considered it a point of pride that they'd never spoon a woman, considering it mushy or weak, and I have to smile at their stupidity.

Curved around the soft, sweet warmth of this woman is where I want to spend the rest of my life.

“What time is it?”

“Clock says half past eight.”

“Wow. We slept forever.”

“We were tired. You hungry?”

She laughs softly. “I think I'm still full of linguini.”

I stroke my hand over her belly, loving how different it is from mine. How round and supple, made to cradle life. The primal urge to fill her body with more than just my hard cock sends a pang of yearning through my gut.

“You ever think about kids?”

I’m not sure if it’s the question or my gruff tone that makes her freeze.

On a faint, ragged exhalation of breath, she says, “Beastie.”

“Cause I want ’em. Just putting it out there.”

After a moment, she says in a strangled voice, “You have *got* to stop saying this stuff that makes me cry!”

I roll her over and hug her, tucking her head into my chest. Then I hold her tight with my leg thrown over both of hers as she struggles with her breathing.

“Okay. We’ll take up that subject later. I wonder if this is the right time to tell you that you snore.”

“I *don’t* snore,” she says into my chest. Her words are muffled, but I can hear the smile in them, and it makes my heart glad.

“You should hear yourself, Thelma. It’s like a barnyard full of overexcited hogs competing for the last truffle.”

Her shoulders start to shake.

“I notice you conveniently forgot to include that when you were bragging about your faults last night. Any other nasty surprises I’m in for? Foot odor? Flatulence?”

“I bought some charcoal-lined panties to take care of that,” she says, giggling. “Remind me to reorder a box, I’m running low.”

“We’ll put it on auto-deliver. Along with Odor-Eaters for your shoes.”

She raises her head and kisses me on the chin. “Don’t forget the flea powder for your pelt, Beastie. I’ve seen you scratching.”

Nose to nose, we smile at each other. “Good morning.”

“Good morning to you,” she replies. “Are you always this chatty when you wake up?”

“I *am* pretty chatty for a superhero, aren’t I? Hmm. Gotta work on my dark, broody thing. Maybe then you’d take Superior Man more seriously.”

“I’m picturing you leaping garbage cans in a single bound while wearing pink mittens. Pretty sure I’m *never* going to take that seriously.”

“Yeah, I can see how that might be tough.” I kiss her lightly on the mouth and give her another squeeze. “We should get up before my dick starts throwing things around the room.”

“Yes, I noticed he’s a little excited.”

“Just a note for future reference, you should never use the word *little* in a sentence that has anything to do with a man’s penis.”

“Excuse me. I noticed he’s *humongously* excited.”

I grin. “Much better.”

She closes her eyes and shakes her head. “Men are such simple creatures.”

“If by *simple* you mean *fascinating*, then thank you.”

“I didn’t, but you’re welcome anyway.” She flips off the covers and rises, treating me to an incredible view of her naked backside as she strolls toward the bathroom, stretching her arms overhead.

I say another silent prayer of thanks before leaping out of bed and following her.



An hour later, we head upstairs to Connor’s office. We find him there with Tabby, who’s reclining in a chair with her feet up on the edge of his desk, her lips pursed in concentration as her fingers nimbly fly over a Rubik’s Cube.

I don’t visibly react to her outfit, though it’s hard not to laugh out loud. I’ve seen clowns in more conservative getups.

Connor looks up from his desk and grins. “Morning, kids. Sleep well?”

I put my arm around Eva’s shoulder and pull her into my side. “Yep.”

When I smile down at her, her cheeks turn red. She knows what’s behind the big guy’s question.

“Time!” Tabby sets the cube on Connor’s desk. It’s completed, all sides color matched.

Connor consults his watch. “Ninety-two seconds.”

Tabby looks disturbed. “Really? Goddess, I’m getting rusty.”

“That’s *bad*?” says Eva.

“Ugh. Old age.” Tabby waves a hand in the air. “My synapses don’t fire like they used to.”

I snort. “Old age? You’re barely thirty.”

“After twenty-seven, it’s all downhill.” She sends a warm glance to her husband. “It’s a miracle this geezer even remembers his own name.”

Connor glowers. “Ha.”

“Come in, sit.” Tabby swings her long legs off the desk. When we take the chairs opposite Connor’s desk, she gives Eva and me a penetrating once-over, then breaks into a huge smile and bounces up and down in her chair.

I roll my eyes. Connor chuckles. Eva says, “It’s that obvious, huh?”

“You’re exuding a glow that could be seen from outer space,” says Tabby. “And that’s only a slight exaggeration.”

“Better get that burka, sweetheart.” I reach across to squeeze Eva’s hand. “You’re blinding people with your glow.”

Her cheeks turn a shade darker.

Addressing Connor, Tabby turns businesslike. “Well, now that we have confirmation Nasir hasn’t been killed in his sleep,

we can move forward.” As an aside, she says to me, “I’m glad you weren’t killed in your sleep.” She beams at Eva.

Connor sends me a look that I translate as *Fuckin’ broads*.

Shaking my head and grinning, I ask him, “Anything new overnight?”

“Nope. Nada. Which, as you might guess, is extremely good news, brother.”

Eva exhales a slow breath, sagging in her chair.

Noticing her relief, Connor nods at her. “I’m sure I would’ve heard from Dimitri if he knew anything, but there’s still nothing on his email or internet to suggest he’s wise to the situation. And there’s no unusual movement at his home.”

“We’ve got satellite feed,” Tabby explains when Eva’s brow furrows in confusion. “We’re able to see the exterior of the house and the grounds, but unfortunately his security system is a closed circuit operating on its own server. We can’t see inside.”

Eva doesn’t look convinced. “Without access to that or his cell phone, we can’t really be sure what he’s doing, though, can we?”

Connor says, “You think he’d sit tight if he knew you’d left Cozumel?”

Eva thinks for a moment, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. “He can’t hold his temper, and he’d never use subterfuge as a tactic. To him it would be weak to do anything other than let you know what he was about to do.” She pauses. “And exactly how he was going to do it.”

Connor and I share a glance.

“He’s probably got more pressing problems today, anyway,” says Tabby innocently, examining her nails.

“Like what?”

She glances up at me with a Cheshire Cat smirk. “Like trying to figure out where all his money went.”

Eva jerks upright. “What do you mean?”

Connor's serious tone doesn't match his eyes, which are sparkling. "It seems there was a computer glitch at his bank. Funds somehow got wired out to about two dozen different charities. Unfortunately, the transfers got all scrambled so they couldn't be tracked, but a bunch of women's shelters are gonna get a nice big surprise this morning."

Her throat working and her eyes bright, Eva looks back and forth between Tabby and Connor. "Seriously? You can do that?"

"We already did."

We're interrupted by the ringing phone on Connor's desk. He glances at the readout and falls still. When he looks at me, his black eyes have somehow grown even blacker.

"Speak of the devil."

Adrenaline blasts through my body. My heartbeat goes from normal to hyperspeed in two seconds flat. "It's him?"

"Yep."

Eva claps a hand over her mouth and shrinks in her chair. "Oh God."

All the blood has drained from her face, leaving her bone-pale. I grab her hand. It's clammy. "It's gonna be okay. I promise."

"You don't know him," she whispers, shaking.

"Everyone, take it easy," says Connor as the phone continues to ring. "I'm gonna pick up on speaker. Nobody says a word, got it?"

Everyone silently nods. The air in the room crackles with tension.

Connor hits a button on the sleek black phone on his desk. Then, sounding bored, he says, "Mr. Ivanov, how are you?"

Dimitri's cold, smooth voice fills the room. "Not good."

"Oh?" Connor slashes a warning glance at Eva, who just let out a small, terrified noise.

“Yes. I’m having some unexpected problems. That’s why I’m calling.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“I’ll be blunt, since your time is costly. My bank has frozen my accounts. They assure me it’s a computer error, but as of now there seems to be no solution.”

After a moment, Connor prompts, “And?”

“A payment for your services is due.”

Connor looks at me, his brows arched in surprise.

Dimitri continues without waiting for a response. “As your services are expensive, I’ve decided to cancel them.”

In the pause that follows, everyone in the room holds their breath. Eva’s eyes grow wide. She’s holding my hand so hard my bones might snap.

Connor says slowly, “You’d like to cancel the service.”

“Yes. Effective immediately.” He pauses a beat, then goes on with a hint of fatigue coloring his voice. “Quite frankly, Mr. Hughes, the separation from my wife has afforded me some much-needed clarity about our relationship. It wasn’t working for either of us. In light of my recent health problems, I’ve decided that life is too short to chase dead ends.”

Eva has stopped breathing. Her body is so rigid she could be in the grip of rigor mortis.

Sounding as nonchalant as he possibly can, Connor repeats, “Health problems?”

“My diabetes is causing vision loss and neuropathy. I won’t bore you with the details.”

“I see. Sorry to hear it. I’ll call my man off the job immediately.”

“If you’ll send me a final invoice, I’ll arrange to have it paid through a cash transfer.”

“Not necessary,” says Connor. “You were billed in advance, so as of now we’re even.”

“Thank you. And thank you for all your hard work.”

Then they’re saying goodbye, and they hang up.

In shock, we all look at each other.

Connor is the first to speak. “He really have diabetes?”

Eva nods, moistening her lips. “He used to make me give him his insulin shots. If he got a bruise . . .” She trails off into silence. Then she says forcefully, “It can’t be that easy.”

“Sweetheart.” I gently squeeze her hand, and she turns to look at me. “Did he sound like he was telling the truth?”

After a long moment, she says, “Without seeing his face, I can’t be sure.”

“You said he’d never be able to hold his temper, and that he wouldn’t use subterfuge because he’d think it weak.”

She mulls it over, looking troubled. “That’s correct. He’s always been a hammer. There’s nothing subtle about his approach. But he also hired you to watch me all those months, which was out of character. I still don’t understand why he didn’t send his men to pick me up as soon as he knew where I was.”

I try, long and hard, to think of a more delicate way of saying what I want to say, but can’t find it. “Maybe . . .” I take a breath. “He found another favorite.”

Eva blinks.

I drop my voice and lean closer to her. “You said you lasted longer than the other girls, that they would all eventually disappear. Maybe you got away just in time. Maybe you were about to be replaced. Maybe watching you was an interesting game for a while, but then his interest . . . went somewhere else.”

Now she blinks rapidly, a flurry of batting lashes that accompanies a tightening of her fingers around mine. She glances at Tabby, as if for help.

Tabby considers it, her green eyes narrowed. She doesn’t seem to come to a conclusion, because she lifts one shoulder,

saying nothing.

“Here’s what I think,” says Connor into the silence.

We all look at him.

“We’re not gonna know for sure until a) Dimitri does something, or b) Dimitri never does anything. Either way, we need to plan for contingencies, and we need to err on the side of caution. For the next seventy-two hours, we’re on high alert. We’re gonna batten down the hatches and be ready for anything.”

“And after that?” asks Eva.

“Reassess the situation. See if we got anything new.”

She looks shell-shocked. “I can’t believe he’d just let me go like that. After all these years. After everything . . .”

Her eyes cloud. I can tell she’s lost in bad memories. That’s the last place I want her. I stand and gently pull her to her feet.

“We good on Double Take level for now?” I ask Connor, keeping my gaze on Eva’s worried face.

“For now. We’ll do some more recon, see if we spot anything unusual. Eva?”

She glances at Connor.

“I need to talk to your man for a minute. Tabby’ll take you back downstairs, okay?”

She nods and turns to leave, but I grab her and hug her tight. “Don’t worry,” I whisper into her ear. “This is the absolute safest place we can be.”

She sends me a weak smile. I’m reluctant to let her go, but Tabby is already leading her out of the room.

When they’re gone, I sit again. Connor and I stare at each other. “I’m still gonna take him out. That kind of sick fuck shouldn’t be walking the earth.”

“Agreed,” says Connor, nodding slowly. “But this buys us a little more time to plan.”

“You think it’s legit?”

“Guys like him don’t generally pull punches. Can’t see what the upside is from his point of view.”

“Maybe to give us a false sense of complacency? It gets easier for him to grab her?”

“He coulda grabbed her anytime during the last three months. He never even needed to call us in the first place.”

I drag a hand through my hair, stressed but feeling hopeful. “Definitely wasn’t what I was expecting, that’s for sure.”

“Hell, brother,” says Connor, rising. “Maybe we got lucky this time.”

He rounds the desk. Unexpectedly, he gives me a bear hug, clapping me on the back. My shoulder screams. I think I feel a rib crack. Then he pushes me away and grins. “Now get the fuck outta here and go take care of your woman. Glad to see you’re still alive, by the way. Don’t do anything to fuck it up.”

“Copy that,” I say, but I’m already halfway to the door.

TWENTY-FIVE

EVA

Before Tabby drops me off on Double Take, she inspects my face. “I think you’re going to need more than one bottle of rum down here. What else can I get you?”

My laugh is as shaky as my hands. “A crystal ball?”

Looking sympathetic, she squeezes my arm. “You’ve had a rough few days. And before you say it, yes, I am the queen of understatement.”

I try to smile, but my mouth does something funny. I think I might be hyperventilating again.

Dimitri is letting me go.

Can it be real?

“For what it’s worth, he sounded truthful,” says Tabby. “But I don’t know him like you do.”

There’s an expectation in her pause, like she knows I need to talk, which I do.

“I know his ego wouldn’t allow him to let someone else think they had the upper hand. I’ve seen exactly how Dimitri’s particular brand of pathology works. He’s not Machiavellian. He’s the Hulk, smashing anything that makes him angry.”

She says quietly, “So why don’t you believe it?”

Our eyes meet. Our gazes must reflect the same thing back at each other: distrust and darkness, the lingering battle wounds caused by savage men.

My eyes start to water. In a broken voice, I say, “Because he taught me that the good guys never win.”

She opens her arms and gives me the gentlest hug I’ve ever had. “Except sometimes they do,” she whispers. “Just often enough to give us hope, they do.”

We stand there like that, silently giving each other support, until Naz walks in. When we break apart, we're both swiping at our eyes.

"Oh." He stops short, alarmed at how we look. "Uh . . ."

"It's okay, Nasir, you're not in trouble." Tabby gives him a fond peck on the cheek, then walks out, pigtails swinging.

When they meet mine, his gorgeous dark eyes are worried. "Tell me."

I blow out a tremulous breath. "On the one hand, I'm fully expecting Dimitri to come crashing through the door, guns blazing. On the other hand, I'm thinking . . . maybe the nightmare is over."

He takes me in his arms and kisses my forehead. "Your poor brain. That cognitive dissonance stuff is really a bitch, huh?"

I rest my cheek against his chest and take comfort in the strong, steady beat of his heart. "Yes," I whisper. "Like when you put on a pair of cargo shorts and think you look great, until you catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror and your brain has to deal with the horrible reality."

His chuckle is a low rumble against my ear. "Good. A sense of humor will definitely help."

"Help dealing with this situation, or dealing with the inevitable trauma I'll suffer from your future wardrobe choices?"

"Both. I think I know something else that will make you feel better."

Intrigued, I look up at him.

He smiles as if he doesn't have a care in the world. "You need to eat, Thelma. We don't want that giant ass of yours shrinking, now do we?"

He swings me up into his arms and heads toward the kitchen as I laugh breathlessly, caught between tears and joy, wondering if this time the miracle I've prayed so long for is coming true.

Maybe God has finally taken pity on me.



Three days come and go. Naz and I exist in a strange sort of bubble, untouched by the outside world, cocooned and suspended like mosquitoes in amber. In our secure fortress one story below the street, we eat and sleep and shower and talk . . . and talk, for hours at a time. He's led a fascinating life, and I love listening to his stories.

I tell him a few of mine, too, from before I was accepted into the Mariinsky Ballet. Before I was princess number six in *The Firebird* and caught the eye of the soulless blue-eyed demon who'd forever change my life.

I know it's a silly superstition, but I've hated the number six ever since.

He puts on music and asks me to dance for him. I tell him I can't. When he asks why, I admit it was Dimitri's favorite thing, to watch me dance and try to hold back tears as my beaten body would scream in protest through endless grand jetés and soubresauts, through the dreaded relevé in fifth, where I'd have to stand on full pointe and hold my arms over my head for as long as ten minutes without moving.

My bleeding toes were nothing compared to the punishment I'd get if I faltered.

When I tell him that, Naz shuts off the music. He doesn't speak again for a long time.

Once, in the middle of the night, knowing I'm as wide awake as he is, he whispers, "How did you survive?"

I don't answer. How do you tell someone it's surprisingly easy to surrender to horror once you accept there's no way out? Survival is simply the art of suffering gracefully when we're up against forces out of our control.

I lost my fear of dying because I expected it every minute of every day.

Tomorrows only exist in our minds.



On the fourth day, we reconvene in Connor's office. I feel as if Naz and I are survivors of a nuclear blast, emerging from a fallout shelter to mourn the ruins of the world.

"You two look well rested," says Connor, his tone sardonic.

"We are, thanks," says Naz.

"How's that shoulder, brother?"

"Only hurts when I'm breathing."

The men share a smile.

Connor directs us to our chairs, then we all sit and look at each other. "We still got nothin'," says Connor finally. "Dimitri's email is mostly back and forth with his bank. He left the house once, to visit his doctor. Only people in were an electrician and a florist."

God, the flowers. He had them delivered fresh every week. The whole place smelled of Casablanca lilies. Sickly sweet, like a funeral home.

When I grimace at the memory, Naz reaches over and squeezes my arm. "That's great news."

"Thought so too."

A look passes between them that seems to convey some unspoken meaning. I ask, "What?"

Connor leans back and threads his fingers over his stomach. "You feelin' antsy down there?"

"Now that you mention it, yes. There aren't any windows. It feels a bit like a cage."

"Need a change of scenery?"

"Like what?" I glance at Naz, who already seems to know where Connor's going with this. A faint smile hovers around the corners of his mouth.

Naz says, "Like a place of our own."

A thrill passes through me, a little zing of electricity I feel all the way down to my toes.

“It’d be secure,” he reassures me in a soft voice, his eyes shining. “It’s a safe house, close to here, but private.”

Private. We’d be alone. Just the two of us, in our own place, without an army of armed soldiers walking around upstairs.

Like regular people.

Like a regular couple.

When I ask, “Are there windows?” Naz laughs.

“Yes, there are windows. They’re bulletproof, but they’re there.”

“Are you sure it’s safe to leave here?”

Connor shrugs. “*Safe* is a relative term. Can’t predict the future. All I can do is look at what we got. And right now we got a whole lotta nothin’. Up to you if you wanna stay here awhile longer. You’re more than welcome, as you know.”

Biting my thumbnail, I look at Naz. “What do you think?”

“I’m happy wherever you’re happy,” he says gently. “Honestly, you look like you’re freaking out a little, so maybe it isn’t such a good idea.”

I stand and walk around the room, thinking. They stay quiet, letting me chew it over, though I can feel Naz’s attention. He’s focused on me so intently it’s as if there are two lasers following me around the room.

Finally I stop and look at them. “Would it be possible to take a trial run?”

“What d’you mean exactly?” says Connor.

“I’d really like to go to church.”

Connor blinks in surprise, but it’s Naz who answers. “Sure. We can do that.” He turns his gaze to Connor. “Right?”

“You just wanna go out and come back, that right?”

“Yes.”

Connor’s nodding. “Okay. That works.”

“Just playing devil’s advocate here,” says Naz, “but we’ll be unprotected inside the church.”

I say, “I still have Connor’s gun. And I’m sure the two of you have plenty of weapons, too.”

Connor chuckles. “You gonna get into a gunfight in the house of the Lord, Eva?”

“God helps those who help themselves. He’ll understand if I need to protect myself.”

Impressed by my grim survivalist tone, the men look at me, then at each other.

Gathering my courage, I decide it’s time to test my luck.

“We already know Dimitri’s still in Russia. I’ve been trying, but I can’t think of a reason he’d send anyone for me here if he didn’t pick me up in Cozumel. Assuming he even knows I’m here and not there, that is, which he isn’t acting like. So . . . let’s go for it. Take me to church.”



It sounded like such a simple prospect, but apparently military men enjoy overdoing things to the extreme.

Connor and Naz choose a church based on proximity to Metrix headquarters. Luckily, churches are in good supply in Manhattan, and though the chosen one isn’t Russian Orthodox, it will do just fine.

Then a huge map of the surrounding area is projected onto a wall in what Naz calls the “war room.” Naz and Connor mutter to each other in serious tones as they choose a route from Metrix to the church. The process takes about as long as the gestation period of the African bush elephant.

After the route is finalized, the “briefing” begins. Eight large men with crew cuts and guns strapped to their waists clomp into the war room and stand around looking ready to murder things as Connor leads them through the “mission.” Phrases like “center of gravity,” “critical vulnerability,” and “desired endstate” are uttered without a shred of irony.

A confusing discussion about logistics and command signals follows. By this point, my eyes are crossed.

For the finale, bulletproof vests are brought out.

“Isn’t this a tad conspicuous?” I ask Naz, eyeing the black Kevlar vest he’s already slinging over my shoulders.

“Better conspicuous than dead,” he replies, strapping it closed in front.

Thank you very much.

Then I’m escorted to the main entrance of the building in the middle of a phalanx of men. I try not to panic, but all the testosterone bristling in the air makes it impossible. When everyone’s energy is variations on *Shoot! Kill! Die!* it’s hard to maintain a sense of tranquility.

Tabby has, very sensibly, stayed out of sight for the entire operation.

When the huge steel door rolls open, four black SUVs are waiting outside. From my understanding, we’ll be splitting up into groups and leaving in different directions as part of the “diversionary tactics.”

Before I can catch my breath, Naz is loading me into one of the SUVs. The door slams shut behind me with an ominous sound my imagination helpfully decides is akin to the lid sliding closed on a coffin.

“These are armored vehicles,” says Naz. “Ballistic steel and glass will stop almost any caliber of bullet. The tires are shred and puncture resistant with steel rims underneath so the car can escape at speed even if the tires are blasted away. The body’s composed of dual-hardness steel, aluminum, and titanium. The doors alone are armor-plated eight inches thick.”

When I gaze at him, furrowing my brow, he smiles.

“In other words, you’re safe inside. Nothing short of a bomb could put a dent in this sucker.”

“Not even my deadly flatulence?”

His smile grows wider. “Not even that.”

In the rearview mirror, I catch the eye of the guy who slid behind the wheel of the SUV. He's trying not to react to my comment, but I can tell he's wondering just how bad my gas problem is.

We head out in a row through the main gate, while I concentrate on regulating my breathing. Naz sits beside me, holding my hand.

Then we're driving through the streets of Manhattan.

It's a gorgeous day, like something from a travel brochure. The sun shines brightly, illuminating the leaves of the trees to a vivid yellow-green. People are everywhere, walking, biking, pushing strollers along crowded sidewalks, running in and out of shops. I'm overwhelmed by the traffic and the constant blare of horns. Even at midmorning on a weekday, the city is hyperactive.

Island time doesn't exist here. Everything moves at the speed of light.

I glance at Naz. He's got eagle eyes, his narrowed gaze darting all over the place, searching for danger. Through the side mirror, I glimpse Connor's SUV behind us, keeping close. The one ahead of us makes a sudden turn down a side street and disappears.

My heart is banging around in my chest so hard it's painful. I'm high on adrenaline, and with the possibility that this might be the first ride I take as a free woman.

Freedom. What a beautiful word.

If all goes well, maybe someday I'll be driving my own car around Manhattan. Maybe I'll be the one impatiently honking my horn.

I turn to Naz and blurt, "I want to learn to drive."

Without missing a beat, he says, "Maybe later, sweetheart, we're kinda busy right now." He shoots me a quick grin and goes back to scanning the view out the windows.

Suddenly the church looms ahead. Gray spires pierce the cloudless blue dome of the sky. I see rows of stained-glass

windows and the familiar shape of a basilica, and make the sign of the cross over my chest, long habit reducing it to instinct.

When I glance in the rearview mirror, I notice Connor's SUV is gone.

"We're here," says Naz, his voice tight. "Keep frosty."

He can tell I don't know what he means, so he offers an explanation. "Stay on your toes. Be aware of your surroundings. And keep your hand on your gun."

Connor's blocky Glock is shoved uncomfortably down the back of my jeans, jabbing my tailbone. So different from the sleek, rounded lines of my .38, which I recall is in Naz's possession.

I'll ask for it back later. Right now I'm liking the security of knowing Connor's gun is loaded with twice as many bullets.

We pull to a fast stop at the curb in front of the church. Naz leaps out, rounds the car, and opens my door, helping me out quickly. As soon as I'm on my feet, the SUV takes off and Naz and I are trotting up the stone steps toward the big wooden doors of the church.

"Side entrance," he says, guiding me toward a corner of the building. His voice is pitched low. His jaw is like granite. He's in Mega Badass mode, emanating dangerous pheromones so thick I can almost touch them.

Then we push through a set of wooden doors and we're inside.

It's quiet, cool, and beautiful. Light from the stained-glass windows spills glowing lozenges of crimson and gold along the polished marble floor. As soon as I dip my fingers into the brass font on the wall and feel the holy water touch my skin, a profound sense of relief slips over me.

Naz speaks quietly into the black band strapped around his wrist, then listens, nodding. All the men are wired up so they can communicate with each other. He seems pleased by whatever he's hearing, and nods at me to proceed into the nave.

The rubber soles of my shoes are silent on the floor as I walk forward, smelling incense and candle wax, trailing my hand along the smooth wood back of a pew.

At the main aisle, I genuflect toward the altar, then rise and head to the small chapel, where a brass stand of votive candles is nestled against the curved stone wall. I take one of the white taper candles from a tray and lower the wick to one of the votives already burning. When it catches fire, I light one of the unlit votives and say a prayer before blowing the taper out. The smoke rises in a lazy blue whorl toward the ceiling.

“May I?”

I start at the papery voice beside me.

An old woman with a wrinkled, pale face smiles up at me. She’s tiny, swathed in black, holding an antique silver rosary in one gnarled hand. The other she’s holding out for the taper.

I hand it to her wordlessly, stunned by her appearance. Though older, she looks uncannily like the person I just said a prayer for: my dead mother.

She takes the taper from me, nodding her head in thanks, and lights it as I watch. She has a bad tremor in her hand, and I have to fight myself not to help her as she keeps missing the wick on the votive. But she finds the way of it and sighs in relief.

She blows the taper out and we stand in silence, watching the flames dance and play.

After a while, she makes the sign of the cross over her chest. She sighs again, more heavily this time, as if deeply burdened or in pain.

She murmurs, “There’s a price to pay for everything in this world. Nothing is free except the grace of God.”

Then she turns and wanders off, leaving me with a chill of foreboding.

I glance over my shoulder, find Naz in the shadows, and hurry toward him, ready to leave.

“You good?” he asks when I reach him. His weapon is drawn, pointed at the ground.

“Yes. I’m ready to go.”

He murmurs into his wrist device, then takes my arm and guides me out of the church and into the bright light of day. In moments, I’m safely seated in the SUV and we’re speeding back through the city the way we came. The other SUVs swing in behind us from side streets as we pass.

As we drive closer to Metrix, the anxiety I felt at the old woman’s words deepens.

“You’re pale,” notes Naz.

“It’s just something that woman said to me.”

He frowns. “What woman?”

“The old woman standing next to me in the chapel.”

Naz is looking at me strangely, but I’m distracted by the sight of a motorcycle speeding up beside us.

There are two riders, all in black. The one on the back is removing something from his backpack. It’s also black, disc shaped, small enough to fit in his hand. He cocks his arm, as if he’s going to throw it—

“Incoming!” screams our driver, just before I hear the flat *thunk* of something hitting the side of the SUV.

The motorcycle zooms away up an off-ramp. We drive under a tunnel.

Then a pressurized blast of wind hits me and the world turns to fire.

TWENTY-SIX

NAZ

Blinding white light. Heat like a furnace. A punch of pressure and a noise that feels like ice picks stabbed into both ears at once. Then the choking smoke burns my lungs and all my bones feel like they're made of metal. An electrical charge stands all my hair on end.

Eva.

It's the only word my mind can form through the haze of shock. I'm aware that I'm in the air, catapulted and cartwheeling, but there's no pain.

That will come later.

Unless I'm already dead.

TWENTY-SEVEN

EVA

I'm moving, but I'm not moving myself. None of my parts are working. I can't even open my eyes. But still I feel my body passing through space. I wonder briefly if maybe it's my spirit that's moving and not my flesh, that perhaps I'm dead, but that theory is put to rest when searing pain shoots through me at the touch of a hand on my neck.

I don't think death will be quite so painful.

"Ona zhiva," says a male voice.

She's alive.

"K schast'yu dlya nas," says another male voice.

Lucky for us.

The two men proceed to argue about who's at fault for the extent of the damage the bomb caused. There's some quibbling about explosive yields and shock waves, then a consensus is reached that luck was on their side that I was wearing a bulletproof vest.

Apparently the piece of metal shrapnel protruding from the center of the vest was a cause of alarm.

Naz. Oh God, Naz. Where are you?

I struggle to open my eyes, but my lids are made of lead. Then I'm laid on a cold metal surface. When I moan, I'm gently shushed.

"Be still, Evalina. You're going home."

The situation becomes horribly clear.

Terror peels my eyes open. I'm inside a parked cargo van, on my back, looking up into a face I've known for many years. It's one of Dimitri's foot soldiers, the one with the flattened nose and the thick white scar bisecting his left eyebrow. The one called "the Wolf" for his canine ability to sniff people out of hiding, then rip them to shreds.

He smiles at me now, exposing a gold tooth. “I’m glad you had fun on your Mexican vacation, little chicken. I had fun there, too. But the fun’s over. You’ll never be let out of the henhouse again.”

I understand with a bitter snap of clarity that the Wolf was with me on Cozumel.

He followed me there and watched me the entire time, watched as Naz watched me, as we met and started spending time together. It makes perfect sense to me now why Dimitri did nothing when he knew where I’d fled. Why he allowed me to believe I’d escaped. Why he hired Metrix.

Why he said nothing about Naz’s photographs, so obviously the work of a man falling in love.

All the dominoes fall as I stitch the terrible truth together: Dimitri was looking for something to permanently ensure my obedience, something he’d lost when my mother died.

Like I’d told Naz many weeks ago, a person will suffer much more for someone they love than for themselves.

Terror gives way to anger.

Fury detonates inside me, hotter even than the blast that ripped apart the SUV. Looking up into the Wolf’s grinning face, I find the fury gives me strength.

In Russian, I tell him, “I never liked you.”

I jam the barrel of the Glock under his jaw and pull the trigger.

TWENTY-EIGHT

NAZ

I know my ears are still working, at least, because the distinctive sound of a gunshot jolts me out of my stupor. I open my eyes and look around.

I'm lying on the asphalt about thirty yards outside the tunnel, crammed against the low metal barrier in the median separating the lanes. The entrance to the tunnel is partly blocked by the ruins of the SUV, which is on its side, blown to hell and smoking. Cars are piled up behind it in a logjam of traffic that must've come to a screeching halt when the bomb went off. Shattered glass and twisted bits of metal are scattered over the road. People are running through the wreckage, screaming into cell phones. A few are sitting, stunned, off to one side of the street.

Another gunshot rings out.

Then, in the distance, the wail of a siren.

Connor pulls the driver of our SUV from the ruins of the vehicle. He checks for a pulse, but the man isn't moving. He spots me and rises. From his ease of movement, it doesn't appear that he's hurt. He jogs over and kneels down beside me, which is when I realize I can't sit up.

"Eva!" I holler, pointing toward the tunnel.

"Don't move." He flattens his hand over my chest and pushes me back down as I struggle to rise. Then he whips off his belt and cinches it tight around my upper thigh.

I look down to see what he's doing. A large piece of metal juts out of my leg at an odd angle. Blood is rapidly pooling under me, but I still can't feel anything. My ears are ringing. My throat tastes like sawdust. But all I can think is *Eva Eva Eva*. Her name is a sledgehammer in my brain.

I'll never forgive myself if she's hurt.

It was my job to protect her, and I failed.

A movement from the tunnel catches my attention. Connor sees my eyes widen, and he turns to follow my gaze.

Through billowing gray whorls of smoke, a figure staggers out from the darkness.

It's a woman. She's holding a gun. Her golden-brown hair is a tangled mess. A jagged piece of shrapnel protrudes from the center of the bulletproof vest she's wearing. Her eyes are two huge circles of white in the middle of her face, which is covered in blood. She's looking wildly around, searching for something, panicked and feral, weaving on her feet as if drunk.

She spots me and freezes. Then she drops the gun and breaks into a limping run.

"Mother Mary," breathes Connor. He leaps to his feet and bolts to her, catching her as she stumbles, swinging her up into his arms. He strides back to me and sets her on her feet, but she falls to her knees and takes my face in her trembling hands.

"You're alive," she says in a ragged whisper. "Oh God. Oh thank God, you're still alive!"

I want to put my arms around her, but my limbs won't cooperate, so I simply smile up at her instead. "And you're still so hideous and fat. I was hoping some of that huge ass of yours would've been blown off, Thelma, but no luck."

She bursts into body-racking sobs and throws herself onto my chest, which is where she stays as the ambulances arrive and the wail of sirens drowns out the sound of her tears.

TWENTY-NINE

EVA

Naz is in surgery for three hours to remove and repair the damage from the piece of metal embedded in his thigh.

I refuse to speak to the policemen who want to interview me. I refuse the help of the nurses who insist I need to see a doctor. I refuse to do anything other than pace mutely around the cramped waiting room until the surgeon comes out to tell us the operation went well.

“He’s incredibly lucky,” the handsome young doctor tells Tabby, Connor, and me. He’s self-confident and full of disdain, one of those people who talks to you down the end of his nose. “His femoral artery was a hairbreadth away from being severed. If that had happened, he’d have had only a minute or two before he’d have bled out.”

Connor glares at the doctor. “Let’s talk about what *did* happen, not what didn’t. How bad are his injuries?”

The doctor’s arrogance wilts under the heat of Connor’s stare. He shifts his weight from foot to foot, clearing his throat. “His femur wasn’t broken, which is the good news. But he, uh, he sustained a pulmonary contusion and several cracked ribs, so we have him on a ventilator to support his breathing—”

“He’s not breathing?” I say, horrified. “You just said the operation was successful!”

The doctor pauses for a beat before answering. “Blast injuries are complex. Many of the internal organs are affected, though the severity of those injuries may not be evident for some time. We’ve addressed the damage to his leg, but it will take time to see how his lungs react. Swelling and bleeding of the alveoli and blood vessels is common, and . . .” He hesitates, glancing at Connor. “Potentially lethal, I’m afraid.”

I clap both my hands over my mouth and sink into the nearest chair, shaking so hard my knees knock together.

Tabby sits beside me and wraps an arm around my shoulders while Connor continues to grill the doctor.

“When will we know?” he barks, the veins standing out in his neck. “What are you doing for him? Do I need to get a fuckin’ specialist in here to deal with this?”

The doctor’s expression sours. “I *am* the specialist. As for what we’re doing for him, he’s in the ICU for now. He’ll be carefully monitored. Any change to his condition will be immediately addressed. I know it’s not the news you want to hear, but the only thing we can do now is wait and see how his body handles the trauma. He’s young and strong. His chances are good. As soon as we know anything more, you’ll know, too.”

“Can we see him?” I ask, fighting tears.

Examining my face, he says, “Not yet. As soon as he’s stabilized, we’ll let you go in. In the meantime, I suggest you let one of the doctors examine you, miss. By the look of all the blood on your face, you’ve sustained a head wound.”

“It’s not my blood.”

He’s taken aback by that, but apparently decides he doesn’t want to know anything more, because he turns around and leaves without another word.

Connor squats in front of me and Tabby, resting his elbows on his knees. He peers at me with those black eyes of his that seem to miss nothing. He says softly, “You ready to talk?”

I nod, numb with shock.

“Good. Here’s the deal. Got lots of friends on the force. One of ’em said there were two dead men in a cargo van inside the tunnel. No ID on either body. Single gunshot wound to the head on each.”

My whisper sounds harsh in the quiet room. “They were two of Dimitri’s top soldiers. When the police check, they’ll find out the van was rented with cash, under assumed names. There won’t be a record of the men in any US database. And you won’t be charged for the shootings. They’ll be able to trace the bullets to your gun, but you don’t have powder on

your hands. And there are witnesses who saw me come out of the tunnel while you were helping Naz.”

After sharing a glance with Tabby, he stares at me in silence for what feels like a long time. “That wasn’t where I was goin’. What I meant was that was a coordinated attack. They must’ve had Metrix under 24/7 surveillance. Two guys on a bike with the explosives, two more guys ready with a van, who knows how many more guys waiting at wherever they planned to take you. They waited for this opportunity. They were ready. You understand what I’m saying?”

I close my eyes, swallowing down the bile rising in my throat. “You’re saying you can’t protect him here.”

“Correct.”

I already knew that. But what Connor doesn’t know is that he won’t have to protect Naz.

Because I’m going to.

Pretending I have to use the restroom, I excuse myself and go in search of a phone.



Making an international reverse charge call turns out to be a surprisingly simple thing.

“Put Dimitri on,” I say in Russian when the operator patches the call through.

“You have the wrong number,” comes the brusque reply after a moment’s pause.

Ah yes. I’d forgotten the passphrase. “Putin is a pussy.”

This time the reply is instantaneous. “You will hold.”

Then I’m listening to Dimitri’s favorite classical composer, Rachmaninoff, thundering on piano keys from five thousand miles away. Eventually the voice comes back on the line and instructs me to give him the number I’m calling from.

I read the digits printed above the keys on the pay phone, but I know even if they were missing, Dimitri would find a way to trace the call.

Dimitri finds a way to do everything.

I hang up. Within ten seconds, the phone rings. I have to breathe deeply in and out for a few moments before I pick up. My hands are clammy and shaking, and I've broken out in a cold sweat.

"Ya zdes."

"We'll speak in English, Evalina. I'd like to see how much your accent has slipped since you left me."

The smile in his voice gives me chills. I can't speak, but I don't need to because he's already going on. "I understand your friend Nasir wasn't fatally injured. I'm very happy about that. Can you guess why?"

Fighting the sick churn of my stomach, I say, "Leverage."

He laughs, delighted I've finally understood his game. "I've missed that quick mind of yours."

"How did you know it would work?"

"Because I know you. I know your mind, what you think you need, what you think you've been missing. More importantly, I know the effect you have on men. Didn't you ever wonder why you had such a revolving door of bodyguards? It was a certain amusement for me, watching them try to pretend indifference. Watching them slowly fall under your spell. There's only so much time a man can spend fighting his desires before they get the better of him. And your friend Nasir is, after all, only a man."

Superior Man. I swallow a growl of fury.

"Speaking of men, Yuri sends his regards."

Yuri. Oh God. He was Dimitri's house man, in charge of the estate. He ran everything, controlling the household with an iron fist in Dimitri's absence. Much like a prison warden. Unlike Dimitri's soldiers, however, he held no loyalty to anyone but himself. He caught me trying to sneak one of Dimitri's many guns out of the house so I could practice shooting and made me a bargain that he'd keep his mouth shut if I convinced Dimitri to give him a raise.

Yuri got his raise. And thereafter turned a blind eye when I started taking regular strolls in the woods while Dimitri was at work.

I demand, “What have you done to him?”

“Nothing.”

When I don’t respond, he continues, sounding smug.

“I knew all about your little arrangement, of course. Who do you think suggested it? And the money you so carefully siphoned from his petty cash drawer and my safes, did you honestly think it was never missed? Or that your bodyguards would allow you to prance around unattended in the forest? Or that your internet use wasn’t monitored?” He clucks his tongue. “All those survivalist websites you visited. A casual observer would think you were plotting a government coup.”

I close my eyes, feeling sick. All that time I imagined I was successfully plotting my escape, and he knew. I wonder if he knew about all the months I spent compulsively doing laps in the Olympic-size pool until I’d collapse when I got out, my whole body shaking with fatigue, and decide that he did.

He knew everything, all the way back to the beginning.

Defeated, I whisper, “You let me think I was getting away with it.”

His laugh is low and satisfied. “I was making sure to give you just enough rope to hang yourself.”

Leverage. Of course.

Dimitri’s tone changes. It grows huskier, more eager. “Now, tell me what you called to say.” I hear the distinct sound of a zipper being yanked down, then he sighs.

I grit my teeth and lean against the wall, resting my forehead on the cool plaster. “If you hurt Nasir, I’ll kill you.”

It wasn’t what he was expecting. The hint of a snarl roughens his voice. “You’ll pay for that threat, but you know I don’t care about him. He’ll be left alone, as long as you’re a good girl and don’t try to run again. *Now say it.*”

He wants me to beg. I know how much he enjoys that, how aroused it makes him. But everything inside me rebels at the thought. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't.

Fortified by the same fury I felt when I saw the Wolf, I open my eyes and stand up straighter. In a low, even voice, I say, "I'm not the same frightened little lamb you kept in a pen, Dimitri. I've grown fangs since you saw me last. I've got some sharp new claws that draw blood."

He switches back to Russian, roaring, "And *I've* got three men outside NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital waiting for my phone call!"

"There you are," I say grimly.

"Yes," he hisses, seething. "Here I am. You know the limits of my patience, Evalina, and you know you've surpassed them. If you don't get to pier eighty-eight at the docks in time for the vessel *Silver Shadow* bound for Halifax to depart at seven o'clock tonight, Nasir dies."

"No."

Into the shocked silence, I smile. I've endured unspeakable horrors for this moment. I'm going to savor it while it lasts.

Besides, I've got a plan.

"You've waited three months for me. You can wait awhile longer."

He's breathing hard, barely under control. Strange sounds work from his throat. "I know you don't think you can win this game. So what is it I'm waiting for?"

"He's not awake yet. I need time to say goodbye. If you give me that, I'm yours to do with as you please."

He snaps, "You were always mine to do with as I pleased!"

I make my voice purposefully throaty. "Only my body belonged to you. Never my soul."

It was the one thing he wanted from me that he never got. I obeyed in all things, but I surrendered to his sick wishes and

the worst of his depravity with a kernel of defiance in my heart. He knew, and it infuriated him.

What he truly needed from me wasn't submission. Beyond mere control, he craved total domination of body, mind, heart, and will. He wanted to own me past the limits of my flesh or my endurance for pain.

He wanted me to love him like God. To suffer the way a penitent suffers: with gratitude.

As I listen to the sound of his ragged breathing, I know he'll grant me this small favor in return for the thing he longs for most.

"Twenty-four hours," he finally says, nearly panting. "Not a second more. And, Evalina—this is going to cost you."

Not as much as it's going to cost you. "I know."

"Call me when you're ready. You know what happens if you don't." He hangs up.

I rest the receiver back in its cradle, feeling faint and ill, but strengthened by the knowledge that I've saved Naz's life. I was the one who brought him into this mess. It's only fitting that I'm the one who gets him out of it.

I stop in the restroom on the way back to Tabby and Connor and wash the flaked blood off my face. There are dried chunks in my hair I suspect are the Wolf's brains, but the gore doesn't move me.

I'm too focused on how I'm going to get my hands on another gun.

THIRTY

NAZ

I'm aware I'm dreaming, which is something new. I've heard of lucid dreaming before but never experienced it. Must be all the drugs lighting up latent parts of my brain.

So the dream: Eva stands on a dock at the foot of a long wood gangplank that leads up to the deck of a hulking black ship. She's barefoot, wearing a simple white dress. It's cold and blustery, the sky lead-gray above, the wind whipping her hair into wild tangles around her face. I'm on the opposite end of the dock, running toward her as fast as my feet will take me, gripped by a bone-shaking certainty she shouldn't get on that ship.

She stares at me with the oddest combination of determination and sorrow in her eyes before she turns and ascends the gangplank, disappearing beyond the rails.

The gangplank withdraws. Then six black sails unfurl with an ominous crack from the masts, and the ship glides swiftly away into dark, choppy seas.

"Eva!"

"I'm here. Shh, I'm right here."

I lift my lids. A painfully bright white room swims into focus. The first thing I see is a beautiful pair of brown eyes gazing down at me. *Thank God. It's her.* My relief is so profound I start laughing.

Which hurts like a motherfucker.

When my laughter turns to groans of pain, Eva gets frantic. She hollers over her shoulder, "Nurse! Help! We need help in here!"

"I'm okay," I say, my voice disturbingly weak. *What the fuck is that ungodly ringing in my ears? And why am I lying in this bed?*

Oh yeah. Car bomb. Thank fuck for armored vehicles or I'd be pushing up daisies right about now, not staring at the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen.

"Nurse!"

"Thelma. Stop your screeching. My ears hurt."

That makes her quiet down, but she starts fluttering all over like a panicky moth, waving her hands over me and fretting. "What can I get you? What do you need? Are you uncomfortable? Do you need water? Food? Drugs?"

I grab her wrist and pull her closer to me. "You're hyperventilating," I murmur, smiling up at her, my brain fuzzy from anesthesia and relief. "Deep breaths, sweetheart."

She sucks in a few big lungfuls of air, then pauses to think. "It's not working."

"Come here, then." I hold out my arms.

"Honey, you have broken ribs."

Honey. That's officially my new favorite word. "Don't make Superior Man angry, sweetheart. He's liable to throw a hissy fit when he doesn't get his way."

She gazes at me, her eyes so soft and warm. "Okay, then," she whispers. "But tell me if it hurts." She perches on the edge of the mattress next to my hip, bites her lip and furrows her brow in concentration, then ever-so-carefully lowers herself until she's hovering an inch above me, peppering soft kisses all over my face.

"You're patronizing me," I grouse.

"I'm protecting you from being smashed by my extreme weight, Dudley." She kisses me in between words, her lips exquisitely soft.

"Excuse me, but have you already forgotten what a badass I am?"

She stifles a laugh. "My bad, Mr. Badass. Please forgive me."

“Lie down next to me if you won’t get on top. I need to feel you.” I tug on her wrist, pissed off that I don’t have the strength to rise and tackle her down to the bed.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re a terrible patient?”

She sounds stern, but her eyes are smiling and she’s already gingerly climbing up onto the bed. Then she’s carefully snuggling next to me, settling in under my arm with a sigh.

“I don’t know where to put my hands.”

“I’ll give you a *big* hint.”

“Unbelievable. Sixty seconds of consciousness and you’re already horny and bragging about your endowments.”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t like it, Thelma.” I turn my head and inhale the sweet scent of her skin.

“I don’t like it,” she whispers. “I love it. Oh, Naz, I’m so glad you’re . . .” Her swallow is louder than the machine beeping intermittently somewhere above my head. “If you didn’t survive, I would’ve . . .”

“Gotten even fatter. I know. The thought is disturbing.”

I’m trying to lighten the mood because even though I can sense her obvious relief that I’m still alive and kicking, there’s something dark underscoring her words. The memory of her face in the dream gives me chills.

“Connor and Tabby went to get a bite to eat,” she says. “They’ve been here the whole time you’ve been out.”

“Which is how long?”

“Eighteen hours. Well, not counting when you woke up and called the doctor a dick when he removed the ventilator. That’s when we knew you’d be okay.”

I don’t recall that, but I don’t care. Eva has been *eighteen hours* without my protection. A pang of anguish squeezes my chest. I know Connor’s capable, but this is my woman. She’s my responsibility. I’m filled with shame for not being there for her when she needed me most.

“Are you okay?” I ask, feeling panic for the first time. I lift my head and search her figure for any signs of damage, but she puts me at ease.

“Except for some scrapes and bruises, I’m perfectly fine.” Her voice softens. “If your big beastly body hadn’t been directly between me and that bomb, I would’ve been much worse off.”

Fishing for more praise, I say, “It was probably the armored truck.”

“It was *you*. If I’d been sitting on that side of the car, I might be dead. You’re always protecting me, even by accident.”

Her words fill me with pleasure, warm and wonderful like sunshine.

She was right: men are simple creatures.

We’re quiet for a moment, until she says, “Connor thinks he had his men watching us the whole time we were at Metrix.”

Though she didn’t say his name, I’m choked with a sudden burst of anger at the mention of Dimitri. I’ve gotta find out how long I’ll be in the hospital, because he and I have some business to settle.

“Told you not to bring him up when we’re in bed, sweetheart,” I say gruffly.

She slowly exhales. “There are police outside. And more Metrix guys. Connor’s got the whole hospital crawling with security.”

Something in her tone tells me she knows as well as I do that no amount of security will stop a man like Dimitri from worming his way through a crack in the sewer. Along with being notoriously hard to kill, cockroaches are notoriously crafty.

“You let me and Connor worry about that.”

A bosomy middle-aged nurse bustles into the room. She is in pale-pink scrubs with pictures of bunnies all over them and has a cloud of red frizz that’s escaped from her bun haloing

her face. She takes one look at me and Eva on the bed and scowls.

“No. No, no, no. Off the bed, come on, down you go.” She waves her hands at us like she’s shooing away squirrels from a bird feeder. “This isn’t a hotel room, people!”

She’s bossy but sweet. Motherly. I’m inclined to like her, even if she is separating me from Eva, who’s already swinging her legs over the side of the mattress and standing. I notice she’s wearing different clothing from when we went to church. Tabby must’ve brought her something.

I try to convince myself it’s not a bad omen that she’s wearing a white dress like the one in my dream.

Then Connor and Tabby come into the room, along with a doctor who looks like he thinks his shit doesn’t stink. He starts babbling about ventilators and excellent outcomes and the strength of my lungs, which I pay fuck-all attention to because the only thing I can focus on is Eva’s face.

She’s got this really weird expression, sharp and concentrated, like she’s committing the moment to memory. It gives me the willies.

“Cops want a word with you, brother,” says Connor, which immediately shuts the doctor up. “Told ’em to give you till tomorrow.” He shoots a glance at Eva and smiles.

“How long until I’m outta here?” I ask Dr. Self-Important.

“Barring anything unexpected, possibly as soon as two or three days.”

“Make it one,” I say flatly. Even though I feel like shit and everything hurts, which of course I won’t admit, there’s nothing worse than lying around doing nothing. And hospitals are one of the most depressing places on earth.

The doctor says priggishly, “I can’t guarantee that.”

I catch Eva’s eye. She mouths, *Imperious*.

I mouth back, *Supercilious*.

We grin at each other. Suddenly I can't wait for everyone else to get the fuck out of this room.

Eva's thinking the same thing. Adopting an overly concerned tone, she places her hand on my forehead and says, "I think we should let him rest. He looks pale, don't you think, Doctor?"

Dr. Self-Important takes the opportunity to preen, the fucking peacock. He smooths a manicured hand over his glossy blond hair and smiles at Eva.

"I *do*."

When she hears the low growl building in my chest, she gently taps her forefinger against my temple, like *shut up*.

Tabby walks nearer to the bed. Jesus, the getup she's in. It's like she googled "goth computer nerd with a spike heel fetish" for inspiration. There's a little Pippi Longstocking and anime vibe thrown in for good measure. And, of course, the fucking cartoon cat.

Today's iteration is a pair of suspenders holding up a microskirt, both of which are covered in a helter-skelter spray of Hello Kitties on a background of green, like barf.

"You good?" she asks quietly, taking my hand.

"Been better. I'll live."

She smiles at the sardonic tone of my voice. "I know. But you had me worried. And I don't worry, Nasir."

Connor drawls, "You don't hold other men's hands, either, princess."

She ignores him, but smiles. "We're going to need to move you back to Metrix soon. This building is porous."

I nod, understanding. "I'm ready whenever you are."

The doctor looks distinctly underwhelmed by the suggestion that I'm going to move without his permission, but clamps his jaw shut when Connor sends him a look. Then, with a toss of his head, he leaves.

The nurse follows.

Tabby gives me a little peck on the forehead, making me feel like I'm twelve years old. She and Connor say goodbye, and Eva and I are alone again.

"Shut those blinds, woman," I say, gazing steadily at her. "And get your big butt back over here on the bed."

"Your stamina is remarkable, Beastie." She closes the door, then pulls the shades across the window. Then she walks slowly back to me, holding my gaze, a sad little smile curving her lips.

"Don't be sad. It's gonna be okay, I promise." I hold out my hand. She takes it and crawls up on the bed again, careful not to dislodge any of the various needles and tubes I'm stuck with.

Resting her head on my shoulder, she says, "I know it is."

She sounds certain, which makes me feel good. It makes me feel like she still believes in me, even though I'm not 100 percent operational at the moment.

Most of me isn't 100 percent operational, that is. There's a certain body part that has decided anytime we're lying in a bed next to Eva, it's party time.

After a moment, Eva snorts. "Honestly, Beastie. You really *are* an animal."

I glance at the tent in the crotch area of my ugly blue hospital gown. "I think there was something funny in that anesthesia."

"Please. I know you better than that."

There's a hint of laughter in her voice. I turn her face to mine and kiss her gently, letting her feel how much I need her, how glad I am we both made it out of our skirmish with Dimitri alive.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me," she whispers, then hides her face in my neck.

I give her a squeeze with what strength I have in my arms. "God, I know. I'm so amazing I can hardly stand it. You're one lucky girl, Thelma."

She makes a noise that's half laugh and half sob, and I squeeze her tighter.

"I never told you why I chose the alias Thelma, did I?"

I'm about to make a joke, but the melancholia in her voice stops me. "No. Why?"

"Because of that movie, *Thelma and Louise*. Did you see it?"

"Yeah. Great road trip movie about two friends." Then it hits me. "Wasn't Thelma the one married to the abusive husband?"

"Yes. She was also the one who said they should 'keep going' when they got cornered by the police at the Grand Canyon. I loved that so much. Their luck had run out, but instead of surrendering, they just kept going. Right over a cliff, in their '66 Ford Thunderbird. Because death was better than anything they left behind or had ahead of them. Death was the only way they could be free."

When I tilt her face up to mine, I'm shocked to see her eyes filled with water. "Hey. Sweetheart, what is it?"

Her voice comes in a broken whisper as a tear crests her lower lid and slides down her cheek. "I wish I had the right words to tell you all the ways you've saved me. I used to think death meant freedom, but now I know all you really need to be free is someone who believes in you so much you finally believe in yourself."

When I crush my mouth to hers, it hurts in every bone in my body, but I wouldn't trade that pain for anything.

It's the best pain I've ever felt in my life.

We break apart for a moment, breathing hard and staring into each other's eyes. She lifts up to an elbow and flattens her hand over my chest, measuring my heartbeat.

"Always so strong."

"Because it's beating for you."

She closes her eyes, but it's more like a wince of pain. "I'll always remember you said that. And all the other wonderful things you've told me. I'm never going to forget a second, Naz, I swear."

My lungs start to hurt, but I don't think it's from an injury. "Why does that sound like a goodbye?"

When she smiles, the pain in my chest eases a fraction.

"I'm just feeling sentimental because you're wearing this stupid nightgown and I feel really bad for how pathetic you look."

I cock an eyebrow. "Pathetic? Oh really?"

I grasp her wrist and move it farther down my body. "Does that feel pathetic to you?"

Her breath catches in her throat as she wraps her hand around my erection. "No," she whispers, stroking me through the cotton of my hospital gown. "That doesn't feel pathetic at all."

We kiss again, ignoring the uptick in the machine's beeping. My leg and ribs are throbbing, but so is my cock. All the sensation is overwhelming. When Eva pulls slightly away and looks at me, biting her lip, the beeping rises to a crescendo.

In a husky voice, she says, "We're going to need that to stop."

She reaches up and flicks a button. The room goes silent, except for the sound of our breathing and the pulse roaring in my ears.

She rises from the bed, strips off her panties, then straddles me, using the metal bar on the left side of the bed for balance and moving with extreme slowness and care. She lifts her dress around her hips, exposing her bare flesh.

I watch, frozen with lust and disbelief, as she pushes up the hem of my gown, takes my hard cock in her hand again, and starts to rock against it, sliding the crown through her folds.

God. Wet. Hot. Sofuckingamazing.

“Sweetheart.” I gasp, fighting for air. “Are you sure? Now?”

She falls still. “Am I hurting you?”

I flex my hips, testing my range of movement. Pain shoots through my leg and the right side of my chest is on fire, but it’s manageable.

For this, anything is manageable.

I glance up at her, sink my fingers into her hips, and growl, “No.”

“Stay still,” she whispers when I start to move. “Let me.”

I’ve never been so eager to follow directions.

I relax back onto the pillow and draw a deep breath. That sends pain spiking through me, so I decide not to do it again. Then she’s stroking my shaft, getting me slick and herself ready, and the pain dulls under another onslaught of pleasure. She positions my cock at her entrance and looks up at me the moment she lowers herself down.

It takes forever. I feel every inch, gritting my teeth against the loud, animal moan that wants to break from my throat. She feels incredible, a white-hot center of pleasure amid a dull background roar of pain.

I watch as her eyes slide shut and her head falls back. Her lips are slightly parted. She flexes her hips to seat herself fully astride me, and we both release soft moans at the same time.

My skin feels like it’s on fire. All my nerve endings are tingling. I can’t distinguish where the pain stops and the pleasure begins. It’s all a huge swirling ball of feelings, everything crashing over me in gigantic waves.

I slide my hands up the curve of her hips. I squeeze the dip of her waist. I cup the fullness of her breasts through her dress, and feel her shiver.

Deep inside her body, her muscles clench hard around me.

“Fuck,” I whisper hoarsely. “Eva. Look at me.”

Her eyes drift open. We’re suspended like that for an eternity, silent and breathless, just looking at each other, until

my cock twitches and she exhales the faintest of breaths.

We begin to move.

Small, perfect thrusts that are so languid they don't even shake the bed. The stitches in my leg are screaming and I'm probably causing permanent damage to various organs, but I don't care. I've wanted this moment since the first day we met. I'm taking it, broken parts be damned.

A flush spreads over Eva's chest. Watching me, she unbuttons the top snaps on the bodice of her dress, then unhooks the front fastener of her bra. Her breasts spill out into my hands. I pinch both her nipples, and she sucks in a breath.

"Gimme your mouth, sweetheart."

She obeys me instantly, leaning down to kiss me, careful to balance her weight on her hands on the mattress on either side of my head. I let her gently ride me, using me for her own pleasure while giving me incredible pleasure, too, both of us struggling to be quiet as her hips start to flex a little faster.

"You feel so good," she says breathlessly. "God, please tell me I'm not hurting you."

To prove she's not, I thrust up into her. It earns me a beautiful, throaty moan. I suck a hard nipple into my mouth and get another.

A spiral of heat spreads out from my cock, tightening my balls, making sweat prickle all over my skin. I'm grunting into her breast as I suckle her nipple, starting to lose control of my hips, thrusting past the threshold of pain because instinct has taken over.

I want to flip her over and fuck her deep and hard. I want to make her scream my name. I want to feel her claw her fingernails down my back and smile savagely into her hair when she does it, knowing she's mine.

But I also want this, every perfect moment of this. Quiet and intimate and insanely intense. Passionate and beautiful and sweet.

She sucks in a breath through her teeth and stiffens, and I know she's about to come.

"Give it to me," I demand. "Give it all to me, sweetheart. Give everything you've got to your man."

A cry breaks from her lips. She jerks. Then I feel the hard, rhythmic convulsions around my cock, and it's my turn to suck in a breath.

I lose it with a groan and a violent jolt, coming so hard I can't breathe. Or maybe that's the fire in my lungs. Either way, I don't care. I spill myself into her with uncontrollable thrusts, driving up hard into all her perfect heat and softness, losing my mind as I lose the final moments of the man I was before I was completely hers.

I love you, Eva. I love you so goddamn much.

I'd say it, but I can't speak. Not yet. The only thing I'm capable of now is letting this wave of love, pleasure, and pain carry me on its back, tossing me through its currents.

She murmurs something in Russian. I try to remember the sound of it so I can repeat it back to her later and ask her what it means. But then I don't have to remember, because she's saying it in English, over and over in a hushed, reverent whisper, like a prayer.

"Anything for you. Anything for you, Naz. Anything for you."



We drift for a long time in that hazy place between sleep and waking, the place where time and the outside world don't exist. I'm tired in a way I've never been, but also filled with gratitude and a sense of wonder.

This woman is a miracle. My miracle. The reason I wandered alone for so long.

Life leads you right where you're meant to go, if only you let it.

I know she brings me water, slipping a straw between my parched lips. I know she cleans me, because I feel her soft

hands and a cool cloth, the glide of cool air over my heated skin. I know she speaks, but the words are lost to me because I've tumbled back down into a heavy-limbed haze, the aftereffects of surgery and anesthesia, of being nearly ended by a bomb, of making love to a woman when my body wasn't exactly in tip-top shape.

Then I don't know anything for a long time because I slip away completely.

When I blink open my eyes again, bright light is spilling under the closed window shades. The hospital room echoes with emptiness.

I struggle to sit up, searching for her in the antiseptic white space of the room, but I'm alone.

Eva's gone.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Naz. Oh, Naz. You and all your secrets have haunted me for so long.

I knew before I started writing this book that Naz and Eva's story couldn't be told in one neat volume. There is wreckage here that needs to be sorted through. There are oceans of secrets and pain that must be crossed. Nasir (or Barney, as he was known in the Bad Habit series) was always a character I had my eye on, even when he was making small, seemingly innocuous appearances here and there in other books. I've never identified so closely with a male character I've written, nor hated what he had endured and *would* endure, even though I was technically responsible for all of it.

But characters have a way of declaring independence from their creators. That is exactly what Naz did with me, and I love him for it.

I hope he forgives me for what he'll soon go through.

Thank you to my team at Montlake Romance for being so supportive. Maria Gomez, I heart you. Eleni Caminis—even though you're somewhere else now—I heart you, too. Big thanks to the editorial and author-support teams, and my amazing cover designer, and the marketing and sales teams who do such good work.

THANK YOU, MELODY GUY. YOU ARE A GENIUS. (I had to put that in caps because she is a kick-ass dev editor and always makes my books way better than they started out.)

Geissinger's Gang, I love you. You're so much fun! I'm grateful for your support and encouragement.

To my readers, I'm blown away by your continued enthusiasm for these worlds I create. I love to hear from you, and I profoundly appreciate your feedback. I never in a million years expected to have so many wonderful new friends from all over the globe when I began this amazing writing journey nearly a decade ago, but I'm extremely happy that I do.

Thanks to my parents, both bookaholics, who instilled in me a gargantuan love of reading. My life is so much richer simply from that.

Finally, I owe a huge debt of thanks to Jay Geissinger.

I know you'll never read this because reading makes you sleepy, honey, so I can say it with impunity: I'm a better person because of you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



J.T. Geissinger is a bestselling and award-winning author of emotionally charged romance and women's fiction. Ranging from funny, feisty rom-coms to intense, edgy suspense, her novels and novellas have sold more than one million copies and been translated into several languages.

She is the recipient of the Prism Award for Best First Book and the Golden Quill Award for Best Urban Fantasy and is a two-time finalist for the RITA Award from the Romance Writers of America. She has also been a finalist in the Booksellers' Best, National Readers' Choice, and Daphne du Maurier Awards.

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