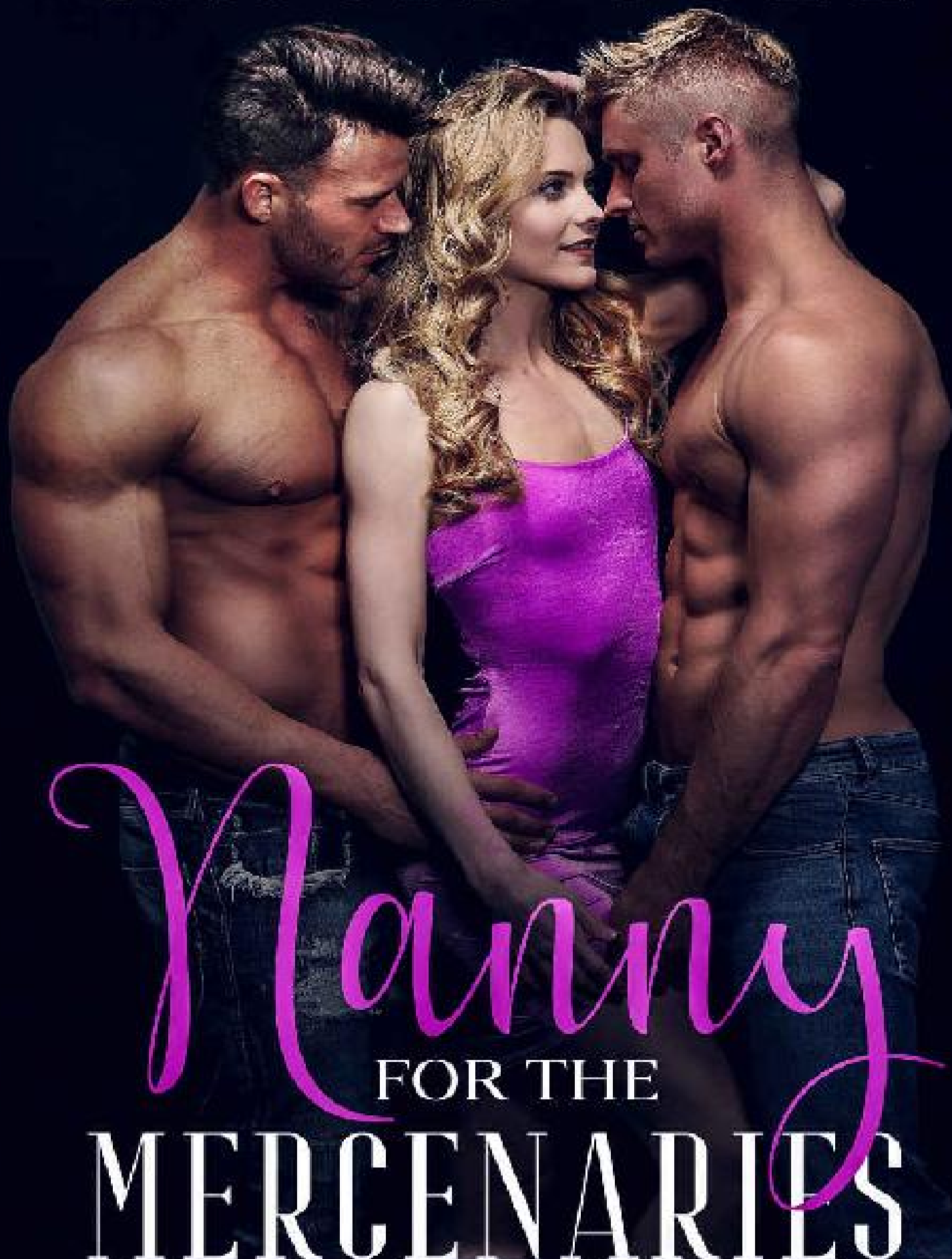


CASSIE COLE



A MILITARY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

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Nanny  
For The  
Mercenaries



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Edited by Gail Gentry

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# 1



## Trish

“Come on, Trish! You can do two more!” Lisa berated me. “Good. There you go, one more... and done!”

I groaned and re-racked the barbell on the bench hooks, then sat up and wiped the sweat beading on my forehead with a towel. While Lisa walked out from behind the bench press to switch places with me, I worked to catch my breath, inhaling the pungent smells you could only find in a gym. I stood up, and Lisa leaned over to wipe off the bench before laying flat to begin her set.

“It feels weird doing heavy weights,” I said. “I don’t want to get, like, big and bulky. I want to be *toned*.”

Lisa unracked the barbell and began benching it like it weighed nothing. “That’s just a myth. You don’t get bulky unless you’re eating a lot of food, too.”

“Have you seen how much pizza I eat on the weekend?” I said while spotting her. “Not to mention my Saturday morning Pringles breakfast.”

She rolled her eyes. “Strength training won’t make you bulky. Trust me. It burns more calories than cardio, too.”

I did trust Lisa. She was my best friend, and she was as fit and lean as a cheetah. Not that I was *unhappy* with my body. At least, no more than usual. But summer was upon us, and I wanted to look extra sexy in my bathing suit.

“Everything going fine at the shelter?” I asked when she took a break between sets.



She grinned up at me. “Better than ever. I mean, as good as things *can* be at a women’s shelter. But no, it’s good. Lots of donations and volunteers. We’re doing great work. What about your job?”

The weights clanged heavily in the rack. “Better than ever,” I replied sarcastically. “Making coffee is extremely fulfilling.”

“I meant your search for a long-term job,” she replied with a glare. “Still no luck?”

I shook my head.

Lisa opened her mouth to say something encouraging—which she always did—but then her eyes cut past me. “Look. Blondie and Brownie are here.”

I twisted to follow her gaze out the window of the YMCA and into the entrance lobby. Two big, muscular guys—who we affectionately called *Brownie* and *Blondie* due to their hair color—were approaching the front desk to scan their membership fobs. They were both wearing dress pants and deep navy polo shirts that hugged their chiseled frames snugly, and they each held camo workout bags slung over their shoulder. They looked like undercover bodyguards, or Secret Service agents who were trying to blend in.

“That’s new,” Lisa said, nodding. There was a little girl with them with long blonde hair running down her back in a braid. She only came up to Brownie’s waist. The girl hugged each of them in turn before running off into the daycare room to play with the other kids. Then the two hunks went into the men’s locker room to change.

“I didn’t know Blondie had a kid,” I said.

“It doesn’t change anything,” Lisa said while laying flat to do another set. “Neither of them wear wedding bands.”

“Maybe they take them off before lifting weights?” I suggested.

Lisa’s voice was strained as she pushed the barbell even faster than before. “I’ve seen them up close before they change. No rings on those fingers, girl. They’re single.

Speaking of which, you still haven't told me which one you want."

"I don't like ogling guys at the gym," I protested.

"Then I'm calling dibs on Blondie. I like a man with an accent." She bit her lip and made a satisfied sound.

"We hate it when men stare at *us* at the gym," I pointed out. "We shouldn't do the same."

"Fine. Ugh. You're such a buzzkill when you're in between jobs, you know that?"

I ignored her and took my turn on the bench to complete my final bench press set. Then we put the weights away and moved to the wall with the squat racks.

"Are you sure my thighs aren't going to get huge?" I asked after my first set of back squats.

"That's not how it works!" she insisted. "It's a whole-body workout. Especially your core."

While Lisa took her turn, Blondie and Brownie strode into the weights area. They had changed into baggy shorts and tank tops: Blondie's was gray, and Brownie's was neon blue and pink. I let my eyes linger on them—specifically the bulging shoulder muscles straining against the tank top straps—before pulling my gaze away. But a few moments later, I sensed them coming closer.

"Hey, Kettlebells," Brownie said to me. "Is this squat rack open?" He jerked his thumb to the setup next to ours. Brownie and I had only interacted once before, when we were both using the kettlebells. A tingle of excitement ran up my spine that he recognized me.

"Oh, it's *open* all right," Lisa whispered under her breath.

I shot her a look and said, "It's all yours. We're sharing this one."

Brownie gave me a big smile that made his entire face light up. He had deep brown eyes to match his hair, intense and kind at the same time, and his hair was thick and luscious. I

had never been so attracted to a man's hair before meeting this guy. I wondered what it would feel like between my fingers.

*Stop it, I told myself. We're all here to workout. Not think dirty thoughts.*

Three eighty?" Blondie said to his buddy in a smooth English accent. I didn't know the individual kinds of English accents, but I did know that his was the sexy kind.

"Three eighty-five," Brownie replied. "Going for a new five-rep max."

It was impossible not to watch the two of them out of the corner of my eye as they gathered the iron plates and slid them onto the bar. When I picked up a thirty-five-pound plate, it took all of my strength and focus. But these guys hefted the forty-fives with one hand like they weighed nothing.

*It's okay to watch a little bit, I told myself.*

"Sorry for getting distracted earlier," Lisa told me while she did her next set of squats. Now that the guys were next to us, she looked like she was doing the squats extra slowly to make her ass stick out as long as possible. "I asked about your job. No long-term prospects?"

"Nothing. Not even a glimmer of hope," I replied. "I've given up on my dream of becoming an au pair in France. I would be happy with a long-term nanny job anywhere in North Carolina. Or South Carolina. Or even Virginia."

"Are you being too picky with your clients?" Lisa asked. She re-racked the weight and hung on the bar. "I know you prefer to take care of just one child at a time..."

I shook my head. "I've loosened all of my preferences. Still no prospects."

"I might be able to get you a temp job at the shelter," Lisa said. "There's a surprising amount of administrative work involved. We usually hire grad students out of UNC Wilmington, but..."

"Thanks, but I'll stick it out," I said. "In the meantime, being a barista isn't so bad."

“That’s not what you said two days ago.”

“Two days ago was an especially bad day,” I replied defensively. “They’re not all like that.” The excuse sounded weak in my ears, and Lisa gave me a pitying look.

We stopped talking and focused on our workouts. Blondie and Brownie chatted about some international crisis in Venezuela. But eventually the subject changed to something that piqued my interest.

“Don’t know what we’re going to do about Kaylee,” Brownie said.

*Kaylee*, I thought with a pang of jealousy. My gym crush had a girlfriend, and that was absolutely unacceptable.

“Kaylee will learn to accept it,” Blondie said in his posh accent.

Brownie shook his head. “You know what happened last year. She says she likes the summer camp, but then she misses us after a few days. If we’re gone for longer, it will be *bad*. She’ll get kicked out in the first week. Then what?”

“We will cross that bridge when we come to it, won’t we?”

*Summer camp*. Kaylee wasn’t his girlfriend—it was the little girl! I stood up a little bit straighter knowing my crush might still be single.

Brownie ducked under the bar and began doing squats. The weight was so heavy that the bar seemed to bend a little bit from the plates. His legs engaged powerfully as he pushed the weight back up into the starting position, sweat glistening on his neck and shoulders as he re-racked the bar and rounded on the other man.

“You always have a hard-on for logistics. But you’re not worrying about *this* problem at all.”

“I have learned to only worry about that which I can control. You do not give her enough credit. She can be quite independent when she needs to be.”

“She needs her fathers,” Brownie insisted, lowering his voice a little bit.

Next to me, Lisa groaned softly. “Damnit.”

“What?” I whispered back.

She leaned close to me so they couldn’t hear. “Fathers, *plural*. They’re gay, Trish. Should’ve known they were too good to be true.”

I shot her a look, but I felt the same pang of disappointment in my chest. It made sense. The two of them were usually seen together, and they were always perfectly groomed. They had a daughter, who had hugged *both* of them before going into the daycare room. And Brownie was wearing a blue and neon pink tank top.

*Life isn’t fair sometimes.*

Lisa and I finished our squats, then started doing what she called a standing military press, which involved pushing the bar up over my head. The two guys grabbed a trapezoid-shaped bar and began doing deadlifts next to us. For the next ten minutes, all of us were quiet as we focused on our workouts.

When they were done, Blondie walked over to the dumbbell rack on the other side of the room. Brownie lingered for a moment.

“See ya next time, Kettlebells,” he said to me with a little wave. “And for what it’s worth, we’re *not* gay. Or at least, I’m not. I can’t speak for Archer back there. I think all Brits are a *little* bit gay. But me? I’m definitely into the fairer sex.”

I felt my cheeks redden. “I didn’t mean for you to hear me...”

“Not a big deal. Just wanted you to know.” His smile remained a moment longer, and his eyes bore into mine with intensity. Then he started to turn away.

“Do you want to get a drink sometime?” I blurted out. “Like, tonight?” Behind me, Lisa started choking up water from her bottle.

Brownie stopped and turned back around, a surprised expression on his chiseled face. He ran a hand through his

chestnut hair, which perfectly fell back into place.

“I... uh, I can’t,” he said.

“Or some other time,” I added hopefully. “It doesn’t have to be tonight.”

This time his smile held a note of sadness. Or perhaps pity. “I can’t. I’m going out of the country for a while.” He nodded, and then added, “Thanks anyway.”

I watched him walk away, my cheeks burning with embarrassment.

## 2



### Jordy

Men didn't get asked out a lot. Even men who looked like me.

Okay, that probably sounded arrogant as hell. I didn't mean it like that. It's just the truth. When I wasn't out on a contract, I exercised every single day. No days off, baby. Keeping my body in top form was literally part of my job. I also happened to think I was good looking. And I had a kick-ass sense of humor, in my totally unbiased opinion. I'd never had a problem with women. When I was in the Army, I was always able to score while the other guys in my unit struck out.

But the fact remained: girls didn't ask *me* out very often. I was always the initiator. That's just how life was. So when Trish, my gym crush who I jokingly called *Kettlebells*, asked me out? It was like getting a thousand high-fives all at once. I grinned so hard that my cheeks hurt.

And then I remembered that I couldn't say yes.

*Three fucking jobs. Why did they have to pop up now?*

"It's just my luck, you know?" I told Archer in the locker room while we changed out of our workout clothes. "Been thinking about this girl for months, fucking *months*, and she asks me out today. Right before we head overseas."

"How unfortunate for you," Archer replied dryly.

"And the worst part is I can't even tell her why." I pulled my tank top off and replaced it with my polo. "She probably thinks I'm bullshitting her. Giving her some lame excuse."

Archer grunted.

“What?” I said. “I’ve known you long enough to tell when you’re thinking something but don’t want to say it. So, spit it out.”

He carefully folded his workout shirt into his bag and then stood up to face me. “You always do this, Jordy.”

“I always do what?”

“Develop a crush on a girl right before we go out on a long contract.”

I barked a laugh. “No I don’t.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the locker. “Mel, right before Prague. Then there was Amy before we flew to Kyoto. Oh, and that saucy little tart you fancied before we spent nine weeks in the Amazon.”

“Eloise.” I smiled in remembrance. “Yeah, she was great. Too bad she had a boyfriend when we got back to the states.” I shook my head. “This isn’t like that. This girl... man, this girl is *different*.”

Yeah, I had a habit of falling for girls hard. What could I say? I may have been a warrior, but I was a lover at heart. Trish didn’t feel like all the other crushes I’d had. We had a real spark between us. Sure, we had only spoken a few times, and shared some flirty glances at the gym, but there was something *there*, damnit. I wanted to explore that, see where it went.

*Not any time soon*, I thought glumly.

“You have to stop,” Archer said flatly. “Harrison and I need you focused on these missions, rather than spending the entire trip pining over a girl half a world away.”

“Pining?” I scoffed. “I’m always professional!”

He raised an eyebrow at me, which for a Brit was the equivalent of laughing in my face.

“Fine, I’ll admit it. I was texting Eloise when we got ambushed outside Manaus. But that doesn’t mean I always do



this. Hell, I didn't even make the move this time. Trish asked *me* out!"

"Indeed she did. And perhaps when we return, you can accept her invitation. But for now..."

I felt my jaw clench. "Don't worry about me. I'll stay focused."

"*Proper* focused," he said, clapping me on the shoulder. "It's going to be a long two months."

We finished changing and picked up Kaylee from the daycare room. She sprinted toward us, slamming into my leg like a child-sized missile. "I missed you, daddy!" she said, clinging to my leg and then switching to Archer's. "I missed *you*, daddy."

Something twisted behind my ribs. We had only been lifting weights for an hour. If she missed us this much, how would she handle us being gone for *months*?

We left the gym and started driving home. I twisted to look at Kaylee in the back seat; she was playing a game on her iPad with her headphones on.

*I won't see her for two months. Maybe three, depending on the jobs.*

"We never finished our conversation," I said to Archer. "What are we going to do about her?"

"STEM camp," Archer replied. "As far as I am concerned, the plan has not changed."

"You know she won't last a week before freaking out."

"We *don't* know that," he said pointedly. "Last year's incident may be a fluke. She's older, now."

"Not old enough." I chewed on my lip and stared out the window at the streets of Wilmington. "What about Trish?"

Archer glanced over at me. "Are you honestly bringing her up again?"

"She mentioned wanting to be an au pair! Isn't that just a fancy name for a nanny?"

“Kaylee doesn’t need a nanny. She needs to be interacting with children her own age, playing games and learning skills.”

“What if it’s a sign?” I suggested.

Archer narrowed his eyes at me. “A sign?”

“We need someone to watch over Kaylee while we’re gone. And the girl we’ve both been eying at the gym happens to mention to her friend that she wants to be someone’s fancy nanny. Doesn’t that feel like a sign to you?”

“I do not believe in making important life decisions based on your interpretation of what is and is not a *sign*,” Archer said emphatically, “and even if I did agree with your assessment—which I do not—I would rather hire someone you *don’t* want to shag.”

“You want to shag her too,” I replied.

Archer rolled his eyes at me. “I fancy the way she looks. That’s not the same thing. And regardless, she asked *you* out. So whatever competition we had, you’re the winner. Congratulations.”

“Daddy,” Kaylee chirped up, “what’s shag mean?”

Archer’s tone changed to one of fatherly love. “It means to be boyfriend and girlfriend with.”

“Eww.”

“That’s right, eww.” Archer gave me a pointed look. “Turn your volume up, dearie.”

I watched Kaylee click the volume button on her iPad and resume playing her game. For all that Archer teased me about developing crushes right before shipping out, it didn’t hold a candle to the emotional toll that our daughter took on me. As cliché as it sounded, Kaylee was my everything. I hated being away from her on missions that lasted a few days. Two *months* was going to be torture. What if she missed us too much?

Or worse: what if she didn’t?

“Sometimes I hate my job,” I said bitterly.

“Sure you do,” Archer said. “You *hate* being your own boss and choosing your own missions. You would much rather be a boot again, taking orders from a fat CO who doesn’t know his arse from his rifle.”

“I don’t miss the Army, either. Both things can be true. I just don’t understand why you scheduled such a long series of contracts...”

Archer sighed. “This is the best thing, logistically. Three huge jobs, back to back to back. We fly to Europe, complete them, and fly home. We would make more in those two months than we would make in two *years*. That means more flexibility to spend time with Kaylee. A short-term inconvenience in exchange for long-term benefits.”

“We’ve never done missions like this before,” I shot back. “At least one of us always stays back to take care of Kaylee.”

“I am quite aware of this fact, Jordy.”

“Daddy?” Kaylee asked, taking her headphones off. “Are you leaving again?”

The knot behind my ribs twisted tighter, but I put on a smile anyway. “We’re not sure yet, Kaylee.”

She considered this with an eight-year-old’s seriousness, and then put her headphones back on. Archer gave me a look. I knew what he was thinking. We needed to tell her the truth soon: that we were going to be gone for two months. But I didn’t want to have that conversation with her. Not yet. I wasn’t ready.

*That’s a problem for future Jordy, I thought while gazing out the window. I’ll let that poor bastard deal with it.*

We picked up some groceries at the store, then headed home. Halfway there, Archer said, “I need a coffee.” He raised his voice. “Dearie? Would you like a hot chocolate?”

Kaylee’s squeal of excitement was answer enough, and Archer pulled off the main road and turned into the Starbucks drive-thru. We placed our order at the window: a hot chocolate for our daughter, a regular coffee for Archer, and a caramel Frappuccino for me.

What? Don't judge me for getting a sugary drink. Bitter black coffee is for bitter, unhappy people.

Archer pulled around to the pick-up window and waited for the order. I don't know what made me look inside. I turned my head, gazed at the barista who was taking Archer's credit card, and then looked behind him, deeper in the Starbucks. And there she was, standing at the main register, blonde hair pulled back in the same unmistakable ponytail that she wore at the gym. It was a totally different context, and she was dressed in a barista uniform rather than gym clothes, but I would have recognized Trish anywhere. An overwhelming sense of understanding came over me.

*This is definitely a sign, I thought. No matter what Archer thinks.*

Before I knew what I was doing, I unbuckled my seatbelt. "I'm gonna hit the head. Back in a minute."

The last thing I heard was Kaylee asking where I was going.

### 3



#### Trish

When was the last time I had asked a guy out? I couldn't even remember. Probably never. I had always been on the receiving end of romantic advances. It was a huge, tremendously-big deal for *me* to be the one to make the first move. Asking a guy out at the gym while we exercised? I never had the guts to do something like that. Yet somehow I had mustered up the courage... and I was promptly rejected. With a really bad excuse, too. Going out of the country for a while? Give me a break.

I didn't know how I finished my workouts without dying of embarrassment. At least Lisa was supportive and comforting.

*I'm never going to ask a guy out ever again.*

I took out my frustrations on the treadmill, cranking the speed way up until I could barely keep up with the belt. The thing that stung the most was that I was in the middle of a particularly long dry spell. It had been six months since I had slept with a guy—wait, no, it was actually *nine* months. That ended up being a one-night stand, and since then I had been plagued by awful first dates and a plethora of Tinder creeps. Dating was hard.

And before that...

*It would be nice to get lucky in at least one area of my life, I thought.*

I was drenched in sweat after finishing my jog on the treadmill. After drying off and changing clothes, I said goodbye to Lisa and drove to work. I didn't mind being a

barista at Starbucks. There were certainly worse jobs out there, and the pay was good. I even had solid benefits and a flexible work schedule.

What made this job suck was that my boss was awful. He was twenty-two years old, was about five-foot-nothing, and he had a huge Napoleon complex about it. His idea of good leadership was ridiculing everyone for the smallest infraction.

Or, in some cases, no infraction at all.

“You’re late,” he said when I walked behind the counter. His voice had a whiny pitch to it that made me wonder if he had ever gone through puberty.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. “Late? I’m five minutes early for my shift.”

“Mark Twain once said that if you’re not ten minutes early, then you’re thirty minutes late,” he quoted sagely.

“That doesn’t make any sense. And I doubt Mark Twain ever really said that.”

“Just hurry up and clock in,” he said. “I need you to clean the grinders.”

I groaned, but didn’t say anything. My boss loved it when people talked back to him because it gave him an opportunity to wield his meager authority. It was best to put your head down and avoid his wrath.

Cleaning out the bean grinders was a slow, tedious process that he always reserved for whoever he disliked the most that week, which for some reason was me. I took everything apart and cleaned them in solution, rinsed them thoroughly, and then put it all back together. When I was done, I pulled out my phone and checked the job listings on my app. I hadn’t checked since this morning, and I felt a sliver of hope.

Nope. There was nothing new. Just the same two short-term nannying jobs I had already applied for, neither of which had responded to me.

“Hey!” my boss snapped. He was suddenly at my side. “What are you doing?”

“I was just checking my phone,” I said. “I finished cleaning the grinders, like you asked.”

“Cell phones are supposed to be stored in the employee lockers,” he said, curling his lip petulantly. “I am going to have to write you up.”

I sighed. “Come on. I only glanced at it for a second. I promise it won’t happen again.”

“Do you *enjoy* being disobedient?” he asked, raising his voice so the other baristas could hear. There was no point in chewing someone out unless it made an example. “Because I get the impression you *intentionally* do a bad job.”

“I... I’m sorry,” I said, swallowing my pride. “You’re right.”

“I don’t care if you’re sorry. I care if you’re productive. This is a business, Patricia, not a charity.”

A few customers were watching. I felt my cheeks redden for the second time today. “I understand.”

“*Do* you understand?” he said, continuing the tirade. “I thought you went to college. I guess having a degree doesn’t make someone smart, huh?”

Anger rose up in me like a fountain, but I didn’t have a chance to say anything to him because a customer did first.

“Hey, relax, man,” said a broad-shouldered man in a polo shirt. “You don’t need to be a dick about it.”

*Brownie?* I blinked at the sight of him on the other side of the register, both hands planted on the counter and giving my boss a warning stare.

“Sir, this has nothing to do with you—” my boss began.

“You’re being an asshole to my friend,” Brownie said. “Which makes it my problem. Are you going to apologize to her, or what?”

My boss scoffed. “Apologize? For reprimanding a bad employee?” He glanced at me. “Patricia, do you know this guy?”

“Um, not really. I’ll be right back.” I left the counter and grabbed Brownie’s arm, pulling him over to a secluded corner. His bicep was as solid as marble, but warm to the touch.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“Your boss kind of sucks,” Brownie said. He was gazing over my shoulder, and he looked like he was ready for a fight.

“You’re getting me in trouble.”

“I don’t want to argue with you, Kettlebells,” he said with a wince, “but it seems like you were already in trouble when I walked in.”

“And you’re making it worse. I need this job.”

His brown eyes settled on mine. “Hey, I wanted to talk to you about that. At the gym, you told your friend you wished you could be an au pair.”

I blinked. “You were eavesdropping?”

“We were lifting weights next to each other for twenty minutes. I couldn’t help but overhear. If you were serious about it, I may have a job to offer you.”

That piqued my interest. “Really? A job? Does this have to do with the little girl you brought to the gym? About how she doesn’t like camp or something?”

Brownie’s eyebrow rose. “Now who’s the eavesdropper?”

I pursed my lips. “Like you said. I couldn’t help but overhear.”

He gave me a sly smile, then said, “Yes. The job would involve taking care of her.”

“Is it something short?” I asked, feeling hope swell within me. “Or more long-term?”

“Definitely long-term,” he replied.

Before I could think about it, I blurted out, “I’ll do it.”

Brownie gave a start. “Wait, really?”

I would have done anything to get out of this job, especially if it meant a job doing what I really wanted: taking care of



children. Having Brownie suddenly show up at my job and offer something to me? It felt like a life preserver had been tossed to me. And I sure as hell wasn't going to watch it float by.

“If it's a long-term nannying job, then I'll do it.”

He hesitated. “I'm glad to hear that and all, but we haven't, you know, told you the details. Are you sure you want the job?”

Struck by a sudden eager impulse, I turned and walked back up to the counter where my boss had been glaring the entire time. He smiled cruelly as I approached; he was probably thinking of how he was going to punish me.

I smiled back at him. “I quit.”

The way his smile disappeared was more satisfying than a dozen orgasms. “What? You can't quit, Patricia. You just started your shift!”

I removed my apron and hat, then tossed them over the counter. “Watch me.”

I turned and walked back to Brownie, who was staring in disbelief. He managed to ooze sexiness even while looking completely surprised.

“To answer your question, yes,” I said. “I'm sure I want the job.”

His smile was full of relief and excitement, and it warmed something deep within my chest. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a card, and handed it to me.

“I'm assuming you're free now. Be at this address in an hour so we can talk about it.”

Brownie gave me a final smile, then walked out of the store. I glanced down at the card, which was printed in eggshell white and with embossed letters:

**Jordan Mackey**  
**Mathos Company**

I frowned. “What the hell is Mathos Company?”

# 4



## Archer

“You did *what?*”

I struggled to keep my voice calm as we drove away from the Starbucks. Kaylee was in the back seat, humming happily while sipping on her hot chocolate. I wished our daughter wasn't with us so I could give Jordy a proper piece of my mind.

“Dearie?” I said over my shoulder. “Are you listening to your headphones?”

She nodded while staring at her iPad.

“Good. Turn the volume up a smidge, would you?”

“Hear me out,” Jordy said. “They can come with us to Europe. Both of them!”

I struggled to keep my voice even as I said, “You want to bring our eight-year-old daughter along with us on a foreign contract?”

“I'm not saying we bring Kaylee on location. I'm just saying they come along with us and stay in the nearest major city. Where our base of operations is. Think about it, Archer. We would get to see them almost every night.”

“Kaylee,” I hissed at him. “We would get to see *Kaylee* every night. Not *them*.”

“Right. That's what I meant. Come on, man. What are the odds she's working at the same Starbucks we happened to stop at? That *has* to be a sign. Right?”

I shook my head in disbelief. Jordy had a habit of falling for women like this. It was the most predictable thing about the man, and it drove Harrison and me crazy. Seeing him do it yet again was incredibly frustrating. Like watching a car crash in slow motion and being unable to stop it.

*Like hell I can't stop it.*

"We can't do this," I said.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Because it's reckless," I replied. "And we shouldn't be making large decisions so impulsively."

"Do you *want* to go months without seeing our daughter?"

"Of course not. But that doesn't mean..."

I trailed off as Jordy reached into the back seat and removed Kaylee's headphones. "Sweetie, do you love your daddies?"

"Of course," she said simply, as if he had asked her if the sky was blue.

"Would you be sad if you couldn't see us for a long time?"

"So sad!" she squealed. "Who would tuck me in at night?"

I glared over at Jordy. "That's a foul thing to do, and you know it."

To his credit, he winced. He did have some shame, even when he was being pushy.

The frustrating thing was that he thought I didn't want it as much as he did. Which, of course, was not true. I desperately wanted to spend every day of my life with Kaylee. My heart ached at the thought of being apart. I had been dreading this trip as much as Jordy. I just didn't flail about looking for half-baked solutions.

But if Kaylee came with us...

I allowed myself to consider it for a moment. Seeing Kaylee every day in Europe. Or if not every day, often enough to make a difference. Tucking her in at night. Reading her a

bedtime story. Being there when she woke up in the morning and gave me the first sleepy hug of the day.

It was tempting. My soul ached for it. Not to mention a woman like Trish being around, the woman we had been eyeing at the gym for months...

“No,” I said.

“She’s coming by the house in an hour,” Jordy replied.

“She most certainly is not,” I said. “We have packing to do. The equipment needs to be shipped out tomorrow so it will be waiting when we arrive. Not to mention all the other logistics I need to see to.”

“Let’s all talk,” Jordy insisted. “Nothing else. Just talk.”

“Harrison does *not* take kindly to outsiders.”

“He’ll like her just fine if it means seeing Kaylee every day.”

I glanced over at him.

“Okay, maybe not,” Jordy admitted. “But he’ll accept it if we both do.”

I gave him another look.

“Okay, he’s as stubborn as a bag of rocks,” Jordy said. “But maybe he’ll like the plan.”

*We’ll see how that goes.*

When we got home, Kaylee immediately ran upstairs to play in her room. Jordy and I found Harrison, the third part of our mercenary team, inside the gun locker in the garage. The bull-sized man had a customized M9A1 taken apart on the table, and was meticulously cleaning every individual component with a wire brush. His messy red beard was covered in grease.

“Jordy’s got something he wants to tell you,” I said as a greeting.

Harrison wordlessly put down the rifle butt and turned his intense green eyes onto Jordy.

“So, uh, I’ve got an idea... but it involves bringing someone new in...”

The last thing I heard was a low growl from Harrison as I walked back into the house. I unloaded the groceries and started prepping dinner. It felt like such a small, mundane thing to do. Going through the daily routines as if we *weren’t* going to be gone for two months.

*It would be easier if Kaylee were with us...*

A small part of my mind began making a case for it. Kaylee would never have to be in danger. For our first mission, she could stay in the city center while we completed our contract with the peace summit. The other two jobs would be more complicated... but it could work.

Would we get along with Trish, though? The three of us were a difficult group to get along with in the best of circumstances. While out fulfilling a contract, our nerves would be frayed and tempers would run high. She would be seeing the worst of us.

*I’m afraid of that, I realized. If Trish gets to know me, I want it to be on my own terms.*

After Jordy emerged from the garage, he pulled out his laptop and did some work at the kitchen table. There was a lot of paperwork and logistics to handle regarding the equipment we were sending ahead of us tomorrow—three different sets of gear for three completely different missions. Not to mention the equipment we would be acquiring in situ. While I continued making dinner, Jordy got up and paced back and forth a lot. He was more nervous than I had seen him in a long time.

When the doorbell rang, he practically jumped up and ran to the door like a nervous teenager waiting for his prom date. I finished stirring the pasta sauce and set the spoon on a towel, then turned to face the open room.

Trish was an attractive woman. That was obvious at the gym. But when she strode into our home, she was wearing a pencil skirt and a blouse like she was applying for an office

job. Rather than being pulled up in a ponytail, her blonde hair hung past her shoulders in waves.

*She cleans up nicely.* I could understand why Jordy liked her. Not least of all because I had been admiring her at the gym too, although I showed considerably more restraint than Jordy. If he wasn't around...

"You look... professional," I said.

Trish gave an awkward smile. "I don't know how to dress for these kinds of interviews! I usually err on the side of too dressy. It's better than sweatpants!"

"I don't know if we've ever officially met? I'm Jordan Mackey, but you can call me Jordy. Or J-Mac."

"Nobody calls him J-Mac," I said.

"I had a boot buddy call me J-Mac for years!"

I made eye contact with Trish. "That's not even close to true."

Jordy gestured. "My wet blanket of a friend is Archibald Caspian, but we call him Archer. Or Archie, if you're feeling frisky."

I reached across the kitchen counter and shook her hand. "Archer is fine. Pleased to meet you, Trish."

"It's nice to actually meet both of you," she said. "And to know what your *real* names are."

"Real names?" I asked. "As opposed to...?"

"Nothing. I didn't mean... Nothing." A blush crept up her fair skin.

Harrison picked that time to come in from the garage. He was a mean sight in a green tank top, and with grease and gun cleaner smeared all over him and his disheveled red beard. He ignored Trish and went right to the sink to wash his hands. Then he grabbed a beer out of the fridge and popped it open with a hiss.

*He's ignoring Trish, I thought. That's a bad sign.*

“The third member of our team is Harrison Gray,” Jordy explained.

Trish flashed a smile. “Let me guess. You go by Harry?”

Harrison’s lip curled in an animal-like snarl. Trish took an unconscious step backward.

“He goes by Harrison,” I said dryly.

“It’s best not to poke the bear,” Jordy added in a whisper.

“Um. Okay. Sorry. Nice to meet you, Harrison.”

Harrison gave her a very long, searching look. Then he turned and stalked away without another word.

“Did I do something wrong?” Trish asked.

“Honestly, that’s the nicest he’s ever treated someone new,” Jordy replied with a nervous laugh. “Now that we all know each other, let’s talk about the job. We need a nanny for Kaylee, our daughter. You will be traveling with us. That way we can see Kaylee while we’re away from home.”

If she thought it was strange that we all called Kaylee *our daughter*, she gave no sign of it. “Where are you traveling?”

I answered before Jordy could: “We cannot disclose that at this time.”

Trish let out a laugh, then clamped her jaw shut. “Oh. You aren’t joking.”

I shook my head. A little bit of the color drained from her face.

“The card said *Mathos Company*. What do you do? Are you, like, involved in oil drilling or something? I tried looking you up, but Google didn’t have any info.”

Jordy and I glanced at each other.

“We are a group of skilled contractors who, on occasion, facilitate the movement or disposal of goods or persons.”

She looked back and forth between us. “What does *that* mean? Are you, like, truckers?”

“No,” I replied. “Not like truckers.”



She let out a soft laugh. “It almost sounds like you’re assassins, or mercenaries.”

I kept my face as blank as possible. Jordy did the same, I was grateful to see.

“Oh.” Trish gulped. “I see.”

“The contract is for two months,” I explained. “Possibly three, depending on how quickly we can complete our objectives.”

Trish gave a start. “Wait a minute. I thought you said this was a long-term job!”

“Well, yeah,” Jordy replied. “Two months is hella long. Especially compared to, like, a weekend babysitting job.”

“But it has the potential to turn into a long-term gig?” she asked pointedly.

“No,” I replied. “Your services will not be required after this trip. Two months, maybe three.”

Trish turned around and paced across the kitchen the way Jordy had earlier. “I quit my job at Starbucks for this. You said it was long-term!”

Jordy looked crestfallen. “I didn’t realize we had different definitions. I wasn’t trying to pull a fast one on you or anything.”

“I need something more permanent,” she said. “Not, like, *permanent* permanent. But long enough to be consistent work. Why would I take this job? After three months, I’ll have to start the job search all over again!”

“We’re sorry to hear that,” I said, gesturing toward the hall. “Let me see you out.”

“Give it a try,” Jordy pleaded, jumping forward to block her path. “Three months is better than nothing, right?”

“If she wants to go, she can go,” I said.

I felt a little saddened by it, I realized. Part of me hoped it would work out and we would get to take Kaylee with us. But deep down, I knew this was for the best. We didn’t want to

push someone into taking a job caring for our daughter. This would only work if they were completely devoted to the job. And all things considered, it would be best if our daughter stayed in America.

I was about to say as much when Kaylee came downstairs.

# 5



## Trish

I couldn't believe how badly I had messed up. The job wasn't long-term. It was only three months, *max*. After that, I would be right back to square one.

And worse... these guys were totally not what I expected. They were *mercenaries*. Guns for hire. Soldiers of fortune. Did they kill people? What about other shady, or even illegal, practices? I had no idea, and I didn't think I wanted to find out.

Could I crawl back to my old job? I doubted my boss would take me back. And if he did, he would first make me grovel. I wondered if my pride could take the public humiliation.

"Daddy! Daddy! I built a plane... who's *that*?"

The little girl—Kaylee—skidded to a stop in the hallway when she saw me. She was wearing a flower-print yellow dress, and her long blonde braid swayed over one shoulder. My heart melted when I saw her. The girl they had at the gym. Their *daughter*.

When I was younger, I hated kids. I was the eldest of three, and my little sisters drove me crazy. It wasn't until I went off to college that I realized how much I loved them, and missed them, and enjoyed helping my mom raise them. Sometimes you needed to be absent from something to realize how important it was to you.

Now I loved kids. Working as a nanny or caretaker was who I was; it filled part of my heart and soul. Seeing Kaylee triggered that love inside of me.

“I’m Trish,” I said, kneeling so that I was at her level.

Without hesitation, Kaylee ran forward and threw herself into my arms. “My daddy is a hugger. So I want to be a hugger, too.”

“That’s good. I like hugs.”

“This is Kaylee, our daughter,” Jordy said.

*Our daughter.* There was that phrasing again. But Jordy said they weren’t gay. Then how exactly did this work? My curiosity was high, but I certainly wasn’t going to ask that in front of Kaylee.

“Do you want to play K’nex with me?” she asked.

“What’s K’nex?”

“I’ll show you!” She grabbed my hand and began pulling me away. Then, seeming to remember herself, she paused and asked, “Is it okay if I play with Trish?”

“Of course you can,” Jordy quickly said. “I bet she would love to see your playroom.”

Kaylee led me out of the kitchen, down a hall, and into the playroom. It was sort of like a sunroom, with an entire wall full of windows and two skylights in the ceiling. There was an adult-sized computer desk in one corner, but everything else was made for a child. Colorful toys were scattered all over the floor.

“I like your hair,” Trish said.

“Thanks! I like yours, too. Especially the braid.”

“My daddy braids my hair for me.”

*I wonder if she means Archer or Jordy?* Probably the latter. Archer seemed too posh for hair braiding.

“Are these K’nex?” I asked, pointing to a plastic tub.

“Yes,” Kaylee said very seriously. “Some of my friends play with Legos. But K’nex are better.”

She sat down on the floor, and I joined her, sitting sideways because of my skirt. The K’nex pieces were made of plastic,

with thin rods that could be attached together with connector pieces.

“What do you want to build?” I asked.

“My daddies fly in planes a lot,” she explained. “I made a plane.” She held up a small triangular object made from three pieces: one connector, and two rods sticking out as wings.

“Wooooow,” I said approvingly. “That’s really good!”

“It can be better,” Kaylee said simply. “Let’s build more planes. You make one, and I’ll make one.”

“I like that plan!”

We grabbed the K’nex pieces from the bin and got to work. Kaylee quietly focused on her work as she began constructing a larger, more complex plane than the one she had shown me. I watched her and tried to make mine somewhat similar, although I gave mine wings that were swept back and aerodynamic rather than straight.

“What do you think about this trip?” I asked after a few minutes of silent work.

She answered without looking up. “What trip?”

“The trip your daddies told me about. The one lasting two or three months.”

Her head shot up. “They’re going away for *three months*?” There was a panicked look in her eyes, and in the blink of an eye she was on the verge of tears.

“No, it’s okay! You’re going with them!” I quickly said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

She visibly relaxed. “Good. I like trips.” She held up her plane. “What do you think?”

“That’s *so good*,” I said, holding up my own plane. “It’s better than mine.”

“Yours is okay,” she said. “Next time, I will show you how to make it better.”

“Okay, good,” I said. “I’m a beginner, so I need help.”

Kaylee nodded. “Let’s go show my daddies!” She jumped up and ran out of the room, and I had to quickly get up and follow.

All three men were standing around the kitchen island, discussing something quietly. Harrison—the big, angry one who had practically *growled* at me earlier—gave me another scolding glare. I tried to ignore it and held up my plane for them to examine.

“That’s a great plane!” Jordy said, bending down to kiss Kaylee on the forehead. “I’m so proud of you. You’re going to be an engineer when you grow up.”

“Is it like the plane for the trip?” Kaylee asked.

Archer blinked. “What do you mean, dearie?”

“The trip.” She pointed back at me. “Trish told me you’re going on a trip for *three months*.”

I immediately knew I had made a mistake. Archer’s eyes widened in surprise, and Jordy’s mouth hung open. I tried not to look in Harrison’s direction, but I heard him exhale unhappily.

“I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to say anything,” I apologized.

“It’s my fault,” Jordy quickly said to his comrades. “I never told Trish it was a secret.”

Archer was totally focused on his daughter. “What do you think about it, dearie? You do not seem upset.”

“Of course not,” she replied. The men seemed to relax, until Kaylee added, “Because Trish told me I’m going on the trip too!”

Every pair of eyes swung toward me again. This time Harrison *did* let out a growl, like a wolf. He had a scar underneath his eye that disappeared down into his disheveled red beard, which only added to the dangerous demeanor. I began considering whether to stand my ground, or run out of the house before they had a chance to kill me.

“So,” Jordy said with an awkward smile. “Can you start next week?”

## 6



### Trish

I could sense that an argument was going to break out the moment I left. It hung in the air, like the scent just before a big storm broke open.

“We’ll contact you with the details,” Jordy said as he led me to the front door. “Thanks for coming. This will be great. Really great.”

“I’m still not sure about all of this,” I said. “I really *was* looking for something long-term. Everything is better that way. And not just for me—for Kaylee, too. It’s not ideal for her to get close to me, spending every day together for three months, and then suddenly I disappear.”

“We’ll see,” Jordy replied. “And for now, we’ll make things right for you. We’ll pay you extra, or give you some sort of bonus. But hey, doing this for a few months beats going back to Starbucks, right?”

“It does,” I admitted. “We’ll see if I still feel that way when all of this is over. Traveling with a child can be tough. Can you really not tell me *where* we’re going?”

Jordy looked like he wanted to tell me, but he shook his head. “Not until you sign some stuff. Archer handles all the documents and paperwork and shit. We’ll hit you up about that in the next few days. Cool?”

He extended his fist, and I bumped it with my own. I had never noticed just how *big* his hands were until now. Jordy’s smile was warm and inviting, and it made me feel like everything was going to turn out for the best.



“Cool,” I replied.

I walked out to my car, but a few seconds later I heard the sound of tiny bare feet slapping against the pavement. Kaylee tackled my leg in a hug.

“I wanted to play K’nex with you more!”

My heart swelled. “We will have a lot of time to play together. I promise.”

When I finally peeled her off my leg, she ran back inside. Jordy was still watching me from the doorway as I drove away. When I was two blocks from their house, I called Lisa.

“Come over tonight for wine. I have a *lot* to tell you.”

I was already starting on my second glass by the time Lisa arrived that night. “Did Brownie change his mind about the date?” she asked. “Did he find your number and ask you out?”

“Not exactly...”

I poured her a glass and explained what had happened. Jordy showing up at work and offering me a job. Going to their house and meeting Kaylee. Lisa reacted by guzzling down her wine and then refilling it herself.

“They’re mercenaries? Like those Blackwater guys my dad is always complaining about on Facebook? The war criminals?”

“Yes. Maybe? I don’t know. I’ve never met a group of mercenaries before!”

“It explains all the muscle. Did they have weapons at their house?”

“I saw Harrison, the third guy, carrying a big equipment box out of the garage. But I don’t know what was in it.”

“Harrison. Mmm, I like that name. Is he as sexy as Blondie and Brownie?”

“He’s actually pretty scary,” I replied. “He’s not ugly, but he’s like a grumpy lion. He stalks around and you don’t know if he’s going to attack you or not.”

“A sexy lion? Mmm. Yes, please. Is he buff?”

“Oh yeah. More than the other two.”

She sat back in her chair and sighed wistfully. “I like the strong, silent type. No talking. Just throw me around in the bedroom, please.”

I snapped my fingers in front of her face. “Lisa. Focus. I have a real problem here. What should I do?”

“It sounds like you already accepted the job.”

“Sort of. Verbally. But I haven’t signed anything yet. Should I do it?”

She gave me a confused look. “Why *wouldn’t* you do it? It’s a job doing what you love.”

“But only for two or three months.”

“And you would be spending more time with Brownie and Blondie!”

“Their names are Jordy and Archer.”

She waved an annoyed hand. “They’ll always be Brownie and Blondie to me. And if I were offered a trip with them, I would do it for *free*.”

“Be serious,” I insisted. “I don’t know if I can do it. Traveling out of the country for so long...”

“Why not? There’s nothing holding you back here.”

“I don’t know. It’s just... a lot? I’ve never been out of the country before, and now I’ll be gone for *months*. And I don’t know where they’re taking me. It’s like learning how to swim by jumping right into the deep end.”

“It will be exciting!” Lisa said. “What if you’re going to Paris?”

“What if I’m going somewhere worse?” I countered. “It could be sub-Saharan Africa for all I know. I don’t know if you’re aware of this, Lisa, but I’m a huge fan of running water. And indoor toilets. And air conditioning. Those are pretty high on my list of needs.”

Lisa rolled her eyes. “Stop imagining the worst possible scenario. They wouldn’t take their eight-year-old daughter somewhere like that. At the very least, you’ll probably be in a city. Oh, or a villa! What if it’s an Italian villa on the beach? Until proven otherwise, that’s what I’m choosing to believe.”

She had a point: they wouldn’t be bringing Kaylee along if it was dangerous. Nor would they send her somewhere without running water. That alleviated most of my fears. But there was a nagging doubt in the back of my head that this would be a mistake...

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Both of our heads swung in the direction of the front door. Lisa put down her wine and clapped her hands excitedly.

“What if it’s Brownie? Go answer it!”

“It’s probably my weekly Amazon delivery,” I said as I got up and went to the door. But when I peeked out the window, there wasn’t an Amazon truck in front of my house. It wasn’t Jordy, either.

I opened the door. “Archer?”

His studious eyes took me in quickly, like a soldier analyzing data and discarding any potential threats. Only then did he nod slightly and ask, “May I come in?” with his posh English accent.

I held the door open so he could enter. As I closed it behind him, I heard Lisa gasp from the kitchen. “It’s you!”

“Archer,” I insisted before she could use his nickname. “His name is *Archer*.”

“You are the woman from the gym,” Archer said. “Pleased to finally make your acquaintance.”

Lisa had that *I’m going to jump your bones* look in her eyes, so I put a hand on Archer’s back and quickly led him into the living room. “Let’s talk in here. *Away* from my friend. Who is going to remain in the kitchen.”

Lisa sighed unhappily, but then returned to her wine.

“Your friend is interesting,” Archer said.

“She’s been crushing on you for a while,” I revealed.

“I did not notice,” he said sarcastically.

“What are you doing here?” My heart sank. “You’re rescinding the offer, aren’t you? Oh God, I don’t want to go back to Starbucks...”

Archer held up a tablet PC that I didn’t notice he had been carrying. “Actually, I have some documents for you to sign.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Jordy said it would take a few days.”

“Jordy is, quite often, incorrect when it comes to timelines.” He sat at the couch and put the tablet up on the coffee table. “I can go over all the terms with you, if you would like.”

I sat next to him on the couch, and he inched closer to show me the documents on the tablet. His scent was unmistakable—like oiled wood mixed with the smell of very old books. It seemed to match his dry personality. And it may have been my imagination, but I thought I could feel the heat coming off his muscles.

Archer explained the contract terms. I would be working for them for a period between sixty and ninety days. The pay was substantial, on the high end of what nannies earned. And there was a *fat* bonus upon completion.

“To make up for the contract being shorter than you desired,” he explained.

Overall, I was happy with all of it. More than happy. If I was going to accept a shorter job, at least I was going to get paid well for it.

“Is that everything?” I asked after I signed it.

One of Archer’s blond eyebrows rose a degree. “We have eleven more documents to sign.”

“Oh.”

Next came a series of waivers involving my personal health and well-being. Then two separate non-disclosure agreements. After that was a document explaining my health insurance

coverage during the period of my contract, and travel insurance.

“What about *life* insurance?” Lisa called from just outside the room.

“Are you seriously eavesdropping from the hallway?” I asked.

There was a long pause. “No.” Then we heard her tip-toeing away.

Archer gave the doorway a wry grin. “Do you have any questions, Trish?”

“I’m concerned about the danger aspect of this,” I admitted. “Is there legitimate danger? Or are these waivers just a cover-your-ass procedure?”

Archer’s grin faded as quickly as it had appeared. “We would never put our daughter in any appreciable amount of danger. That same concern extends to you by default. You have nothing to worry about.”

I sighed with relief. “Okay, good. I thought so, but... You haven’t even told me where we’re going. So my imagination has run wild.”

“We could not tell you before you signed the non-disclosure agreements. Discretion is important. And on that note...” He glanced at the hallway again. “You will not be permitted to disclose your location while we are gone. To anyone.”

“Oh come on!” Lisa moaned from the other room.

“While we complete our contracts, we do not wish for anyone to know the location of Kaylee. I’m sorry, but this is not negotiable.”

“Why not?” I asked. “Would she be in danger if her whereabouts were known?”

Archer studied me for a long moment. It felt like he was seeing *all* of me, even my thoughts. Finally he shook his head, short-cropped blond hair swaying gently.

“Almost certainly not,” he said. “But *almost* is not the same thing as *definitely*. So we are taking all appropriate precautions. Is this a problem?”

“No,” I said, and I realized I meant it. “I won’t tell anyone where we are. Not even my extremely nosy friend.”

“Very well.” He sounded weary, like he had this conversation ten times before breakfast. “Sign this final document agreeing to that, please.”

“Have you done this before?” I asked.

Archer’s passive green eyes blinked slowly. “No.”

“You seem like you’ve done this before. Hiring someone to bring Kaylee along on whatever mission you’re doing.”

“We have not. In fact, I’ll be honest with you: I don’t fancy this plan at all. But Jordy...” He trailed off and shook his head. “Just sign the last document, please.”

*What does Jordy want?* I wondered.

I took the tablet and scrawled my signature with a finger. Archer closed the tablet, put it under an arm, and then stood.

“We are done here. We leave on Saturday. Be at our house at ten in the morning. We have a long flight ahead of us, and we’ll go over more details then.”

“Wait!” I said. “Now that I’ve signed the documents, you can tell me where we’re going. Right?”

Archer glanced over his shoulder, then leaned down close until his lips were an inch from my ear. His breath was warm and tickled my skin as he answered.

“The first contract is in Norway.”

# 7



## Trish

On Saturday, we flew from Wilmington, North Carolina to Dulles International Airport, where we would transfer to the flight to Oslo. During the shorter flight, I sat between Jordy and Kaylee. Archer was directly behind me, and Harrison's huge bulk was crammed into the window seat behind Kaylee.

"So you guys are mercenaries," I said halfway through the flight.

"Yeah..." Jordy replied cautiously.

"You're not like Blackwater or whatever. The guys that do war crimes and stuff. Right?"

He narrowed his brown eyes at me. "You probably should have asked *before* you signed the employment contract and got on an airplane with us."

I felt my chest tighten. "I'm not joking. You aren't really like them. Are you?"

"Sometimes there's collateral damage," he said softly. "Just last week we meant to hit a terrorist cell in Qatar, but ended up destroying a retirement home in Kansas. Big mess. Walkers and oxygen tanks and hard candy scattered everywhere."

By the end I was groaning at him. "That's not even a *little bit* funny."

He grinned and nudged me with his elbow. "We're nothing like Blackwater. We're rarely in active combat zones, and we are very particular about what contracts we take. We do a lot of security details. Training exercises, too. Occasionally we do

something more... *delicate*. But the vast majority of our jobs are safe and boring.”

“And what kind of job are you doing in Oslo?” I asked.

Behind me, Archer cleared his throat pointedly.

Jordy glanced back at him, then lowered his voice. “We’re doing recon and security for some big summit. No idea what the deal is.”

Archer let out an exasperated sigh behind us.

“Wait a minute. The big peace summit?” I asked.

“I guess?”

“That’s a huge deal!” I said. “It was in the magazine I was reading in the terminal. There’s going to be, like, a dozen world leaders there!”

“Cool,” Jordy said. “Guess that’s why they’re paying us so much.”

“I spend a ludicrous amount of time typing up mission briefings,” Archer grumbled, “and he barely even reads them.” Harrison made a grunt that might have been agreement, or might have been disapproval.

I felt a tremendous amount of relief to learn they weren’t bad guys. I had spent the entire past week worrying about exactly that. Jordy and Archer didn’t *seem* like bloodthirsty mercenaries who would kill indiscriminately, but looks could be deceiving. And Harrison definitely had a rough edge to him that oozed calm violence.

“So we won’t be in any danger,” I said, more to myself than to Jordy. “Archer mentioned how you wouldn’t bring Kaylee anywhere dangerous, but it’s nice to know for sure.”

“Not much danger this time. Now, the mission we had in Prague a year or two back, when we were going after Anton Novak...”

Now Archer spoke up: “I believe that is enough sharing for one afternoon. Especially in such a *public* location.”



Jordy grimaced. “Yeah, he’s right. Discretion is important. Get a few beers in us and we’ll tell you the story, though.”

“You’re impossible,” Archer groaned.

*Prague, I thought. I’ll have to remember to ask them about that later.*

Kaylee was very well-behaved during the flight. She played on her iPad for a while, then switched to an eReader. I asked if she had read Harry Potter yet, and she told me she had not. “You’re almost the right age for it. Maybe in another year.”

“Wizards and stuff?” Jordy said. “Didn’t think you’d be the kind of woman to read that.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What kind of woman do you think I am?”

Jordy’s cheeks reddened. “Ah, I don’t know. I shouldn’t judge. Sorry. You can read Harry Potter, sweetie,” he added for Kaylee. “Even though it takes place in a super lame country.”

Behind us, I could feel Archer doing his best not to rise to the bait.

We landed at Dulles and then transferred to a big Boeing 767 for the international flight. I was surprised—and pleased—to see that we had five tickets in Business Class, with individual diagonal pods rather than normal seats.

“I wasn’t expecting this kind of luxury,” I said while accepting a glass of red wine from the flight attendant.

“Expenses are not an issue,” Archer said in the pod in front of mine. “At least, not for the three jobs we have taken.”

“I heard you mention that before. You are doing three different jobs? Not one big one?”

Archer accepted a glass of wine from the attendant. “That is correct.”

“What are the other two?”

Archer’s head rose above the dividing wall of the pods. “We will discuss this at a later time.”

*Fine, don't talk about it in public, I thought.*

Dinner was beef stroganoff with a salad, and New York cheesecake for dessert. Across the aisle from me, Harrison wolfed his food down like he was being timed, then immediately pulled his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap down over his eyes. He was snoring ten seconds later.

The flight attendant came around to fold our pods out into beds. Harrison didn't wake up even when they tapped him on the shoulder. "Years spent sleeping through mortar fire," Jordy told the attendant. "It's best if you don't try to wake him. He doesn't *usually* bite, but..." He shrugged.

The pod bed was surprisingly comfortable, especially after I changed into pajamas in the bathroom. I closed my eyes and fell asleep listening to Jordy reading a bedtime story to Kaylee two pods behind me.

*He's a good dad, I thought as I drifted off. Although I still want to know who the mother is, and why she calls them all daddy.*

We were woken the next morning with gentle nudges from the flight attendants, and then served a breakfast of omelets, fruit, and pastries that were so soft and flaky I could have sworn they had been freshly baked while we flew over the Atlantic. Kaylee let out an excited noise, and I turned and looked out the window.

A wide sea was spread out below us, with a thin, narrow strip of water extending into the distance with deep green land on either side. The map on my TV screen informed me that it was the Skagerrak strait, leading into the Oslofjord. I watched with delight as we followed the fjord north, where it ended at a sprawling city that hugged the edge of the water like foam against a shore. Distant mountains stretched steeply toward the blue morning sky, and I found myself gazing in awe. The sight was unlike anything I had ever seen in the United States.

We landed, went through customs, and then Archer led us into one of the parking garages. A midnight black Range Rover was parked at the end of the garage all by itself. The yellow-haired mercenary—I still thought of him as *Blondie* in

my head—pulled out his phone and tapped on the screen, and the lights flashed twice as the locks disengaged.

“Whose car is this?” I asked.

“It is the car provided for us,” he said simply. “As I said: expenses will not be an issue on any of our missions.”

Archer drove us out of the airport and into the city itself. I pressed my face against the glass and stared like a tourist.

“It’s all so beautiful!”

“First time in Norway?” Jordy asked.

I snorted. “First time anywhere.”

“Anywhere?” Jordy said.

“I’ve never been out of the country.”

“Never?” Archer asked, glancing at me in the rear-view mirror. “Are you taking the piss right now?”

“Am I *what?*”

“*Joking,*” Jordy said. “It’s a pompous British way of asking if you’re joking.”

“Please do not disparage the King’s English in my presence,” Archer said flatly.

“I’m not joking,” I said. “I’ve never been outside of America. The farthest I’ve ever traveled was when my parents took me to South of the Border.”

Archer frowned. “South of the border would be Mexico. Which is, in fact, outside of America.”

“No, I mean *South of the Border*. The tourist trap on I-95. It’s on the border between North and South Carolina.”

“Never been,” Archer replied.

“Good tamales,” Harrison rumbled. “Nasty bathrooms.”

*So he does speak,* I thought, glancing at him over Kaylee’s head. *Maybe he just takes some time to open up.*

Jordy turned and frowned at me. “Wait a minute. If you’ve never been out of the country, why do you have a passport?”

“Oh. Um...” I swallowed hard. “I don’t know. I got it a year ago because I hoped to plan a trip someday. I guess it worked out that I needed it for this, huh?”

“Lucky for us. That would have totally ruined this whole contract. We can get around a lot of border issues, but smuggling an entire person into Europe would have required us to pull a *lot* of strings.”

“Lucky,” I agreed, relieved that they bought my excuse. But then I saw Harrison glancing sideways at me. His dark eyes bore into mine knowingly, but he didn’t voice his skepticism out loud.

Despite being in Scandinavia, Oslo felt exactly how I imagined Paris or Rome: cobblestone streets, lots of pedestrians, and buildings that looked older than anything in Wilmington, North Carolina. Archer drove to the north-east side of the city, up sloping streets and terraced houses, until we pulled up to a four-story condo. The garage door opened, and the Ranger Rover just barely fit inside.

Harrison waited until the garage door was fully closed before opening the back to get our luggage. He handed me my heavy suitcase as if it weighed nothing, then slung Kaylee’s two bags over one shoulder.

“What are those?” I asked, pointing to the olive-colored equipment boxes underneath our suitcases. They were large enough to take up the entire base of the trunk. “We didn’t bring those with us on the plane.”

Harrison gave me a long stare, then began unloading them with delicate care.

*I guess he’s not opening up after all.*

The condo was spacious and airy, with high ceilings and lots of windows allowing in natural light. In the United States, it probably would have cost at least a million dollars. I shuddered to think of how expensive it was in a city like Oslo.

“There is a problem I failed to predict,” Archer said at the top of the stairs. “We have four bedrooms.”

It took me a minute to realize the math. There were four adults... plus Kaylee. She was certainly old enough to have her own room.

“Shoot,” Jordy said under his breath. “We booked the condo months ago. Thought there would only be three of us.”

“I can sleep on the couch!” I quickly offered. “It looks more comfortable than my bed back home, and the bathroom is just down the hall.”

Archer began to nod his head in agreement, but then Jordy said, “Absolutely not. Two of *us* will bunk together. The beds are big, right Archer?”

“One room has a twin. Kaylee can have that. The rest are queens.”

“Perfect,” Jordy said. “Not a problem at all.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” I asked. “I really don’t mind sleeping on the couch.”

Jordy grinned at me. “Archer and I have shared smaller beds before, and in worse conditions. Right, buddy?”

At the top of the stairs, Archer grimaced and then walked away.

The fridge was already stocked with food: fruits, vegetables, organic meat, tofu, and cheese. All of it looked fresh, too.

“Should be enough,” Jordy said approvingly. “The conference is six days, plus a day of prep time.”

“Speaking of prep,” Archer said as he joined us, “I want to get an early look at the site. Verify the maps we were sent are accurate, and walk the perimeter on foot.”

Harrison came up behind him with a duffel bag of equipment in his hand. He nodded in agreement.

“We’ll hold down the fort while you’re gone,” Jordy said, flashing a smile.

*We*, I thought, rolling the word around in my head. *I like the sound of we.*

“Yes we will!” Kaylee agreed, running up and hugging Harrison’s thick leg.

*Oh, right, I thought. I’m not the only other person here.*

“I’ll go check out my room,” I said, hurrying out of the kitchen before they could see me blush.

## 8



### Trish

My bedroom was well-furnished and spotless, like an upscale hotel. I unpacked my suitcase, folding the clothes into the dresser drawers. It gave me a sense of order and stability, even if we were only going to be here roughly a week.

The room had an attached bathroom, so I took the opportunity to wash the travel off me in the shower and then changed into clean clothes. I went downstairs feeling refreshed, but still exhausted from the time change. It was 3:00 p.m. local time, and 9:00 a.m. back home, but thanks to the jet lag I felt ready to put my head on the pillow and go to sleep.

“Don’t do that,” Jordy told me when I went downstairs and said as much to him. “Best way to deal with jet lag is to stick it out. Stay awake until tonight, then go to sleep at a normal time. Trust me, it’ll help.”

“Thanks,” I said, watching him rummage through the fridge. He had changed into khaki pants and an olive-green T-shirt that was molded to his torso like a second skin, revealing every bit of muscle. “What are you up to?”

“Prepping dinner.” He pulled an aluminum tray out of the freezer. “Everything’s pre-made. Just defrost, and throw in the oven for an hour. This one is lasagna.” He sniffed the tray. “*Vegetarian* lasagna, I think. Don’t tell Harrison. He gets grumpy if he doesn’t get enough protein.”

I felt a small hand tug on my shirt. “Trish? Do you want me to show you how to play Minecraft?”

“What’s Minecraft?” I asked.

Jordy chuckled. "Prepare to go down the rabbit hole."

"Minecraft is the *most fun game ever*," Kaylee said, excitement shining in her eyes. "You're going to love it! Let me show you!"

I allowed myself to be ushered over to the dining room table, where her tablet was set up with a keyboard and mouse. I learned that Minecraft was a pixelated game involving digging and chopping down trees and hunting around in caves for certain types of minerals. Kaylee was *very* intense about it, and had strong opinions on the best ways to harvest iron and how to avoid the spiders and skeletons that came out at night.

Jordy appeared in the doorway to the kitchen and dangled two beers in the air. I started to shake my head... then realized it was already six. I had been playing with Kaylee for several hours.

"This is *really* fun, and we've explored deep into that cave," I told her. "But I'm going to take a little break now."

"Okay, go ahead," Kaylee said, eyes already glued to the screen again. "I'll keep exploring."

I accepted a beer from Jordy and joined him in the kitchen. "Told you it was a rabbit hole," he smirked.

"She's *really* into that game," I replied. "Do you guys have limits on screen time?"

He shook his head. "We haven't needed to impose anything yet. She's pretty well-balanced in the summer. She'll play that, or watch YouTube videos about primitive technology, or go and read her books. When school starts up, though, we have to remind her to do her homework."

"Naturally."

He opened the oven, slid an aluminum tray inside, and closed it. A wave of heat drifted out and warmed my face. Jordy took his oven mitts off and then wandered off into the living room, within sight of Kaylee. He sank into the couch, and I picked the chair across from him.

"So," he said. "What's your story?"



“My story?”

“Sure. I don’t really know much about you, even though you’re here taking care of Kaylee. I only just stopped thinking of you as *Kettlebells* in my head.”

“Seems kind of silly to hire me then, doesn’t it?” I said with a small smile.

“You sound like Archer,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Out with it. Tell me more about yourself.”

The question, and the way it was delivered while we shared beers, made it feel like we were on a date. Feeling things out and getting to know each other. The basics.

I shrugged. “What do you want to know?”

“How did you first become a nanny?”

“My siblings,” I said. “I have two little sisters. When I was growing up, I *hated* them. We didn’t get along at all. We were always arguing or fighting. One time, I was sitting on my belly watching TV and Rebecca sat on my back. I told her to stop, and she wouldn’t, so I *bucked*... which launched her right into the TV screen. She had to get four stitches on her forehead!”

Jordy half-smiled. “You’re not making a very good case for being a top-notch nanny.”

I laughed and replied, “I got better! When I went off to college, I realized how much I loved and missed my sisters. I had helped raise them. Soon I was driving home every weekend to visit. And when I graduated, I decided that taking care of kids was what I *really* wanted to do.”

“What did you get your degree in?”

“French Literature.”

“Well it’s not like you could have done much with that degree anyways,” he teased.

I shot him a glare and sipped my beer. “I liked Camus! After that, it took me a while to narrow down what I really wanted. I got a job working in a daycare, but I hated it. Taking care of twenty kids wasn’t fulfilling to me at all. I wanted to give

individual love and care to a smaller number of kids. One family.”

“So you shifted into nannyng.”

“By accident,” I admitted. “I told a friend that I was quitting my job at the daycare, and they asked why... and they happened to know of a family that was looking for a nanny. I interviewed that afternoon and started the very next day. Immediately, I knew it was the right fit for me. Both parents worked together, and their two kids—a boy and a girl—were so sweet. I actually looked forward to going to work every day. I was with them for two years.”

“Why did it end?” Jordy asked.

I sighed. “About six months ago, both parents got tech jobs in San Francisco, working for some new cryptocurrency startup.”

“You didn’t want to go with them?”

“They offered, but I turned them down. I had never been that far from home, and the prospect of suddenly moving across the country terrified me.”

*And I had other things tying me down to Wilmington.*

“And now here you are, nannyng on the other side of the world,” Jordy pointed out.

“*Temporarily,*” I said. “Big difference. And I had no idea where we were going until Archer made me sign the paperwork.”

Jordy took a long pull from his beer. “You haven’t had any nannyng jobs in the past six months?”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Are you implying you guys *didn’t* run a background check on me?”

“That’s all Archer’s specialty,” he replied. “We let him handle the details. So, no other jobs?”

“Nope.”

“I’m surprised you weren’t able to find anything. You seem really good with kids. At least, based on the small sample size

I have so far.”

“Inflation, and the economy,” I said bitterly. “People can’t afford basic childcare services, let alone a private nanny. There *was* one nannying job I almost took a few months ago. But I turned it down.”

“Why?”

“The pay was almost nothing. Literally less than minimum wage, when you took into account how many hours I would be working. I hated to turn it down, because the kids seemed really sweet, but I couldn’t make the numbers work. Six days a week for only three grand a month? That’s not enough for me to live on.”

Jordy barked a laugh. “That’s all they offered? Screw them. They don’t deserve you. And hey, at least it led to you working for us, right?”

“Yes, but this is only a short-term job,” I reminded him.

“Oh. Right.” He gulped the rest of his beer and got up from the couch. When he returned, he had two new beers. I quickly finished my first beer and swapped it for the fresh one.

“Your turn,” I said. “Tell me about mercenary life.”

Jordy shrugged his broad shoulders underneath his tight T-shirt. “Seems pretty self-explanatory.”

“How long have you been doing it?”

“We signed on with the Mathos Company four years ago,” he replied. “Five this October, I guess.”

“I wanted to ask you about that. I tried Googling Mathos Company, but nothing relevant turned up. There wasn’t even a website on the card you gave me. You know it’s not 1995 anymore, right? You have to have a website.”

His brown eyes sparkled with mischief. “That’s by design. Mathos Company is a private military contractor. Emphasis on *private*. The people who need to hire us have their ways. Nobody else needs to know we exist.”

“Where’d the name come from? Is the founder named Bobby Mathos or something?”

“The name comes from some ancient mercenary group that fought for Carthage. Or fought *against* Carthage. I don’t remember. Archer would know.”

“Seems kind of silly to not know the history of the company you work for,” I joked.

“Do you know every historical fact about the daycare place you worked? Or the college you attended?”

I shrugged. “Fair point.”

“It’s a job,” Jordy said. “That’s all.”

I examined the way he sank back into the couch. He looked exhausted when he said it. Like the weight was a lot heavier than I knew.

“How does someone even get into that line of work?” I asked. “Was there a guy at the job fair handing out rifles and grenades?”

“I was in the Army,” he replied. “Enlisted right out of high school. Mom couldn’t afford to send me to college, and even if she could, I wasn’t sure it was right for me. Turns out the Army wasn’t right for me, either. Don’t get me wrong—it made me into the man I am today. I built a lot of good habits in the service, made some long-term friends. But I was going down a path I didn’t like. So I quit.”

“I didn’t even know it was possible to quit the Army early.”

“Technically, it’s not,” he said with a wry smirk. “But I was good buddies with a medical officer who granted me a TERA discharge.”

“TERA?”

“Temporary Early Retirement Authority. Most grunts have to serve twenty years. I got out in ten.”

I chewed that over in my head. “Have you ever... fought in a war? I don’t know how to phrase it.”

“Was I ever in combat, you mean? Some. Less than most. Overall, I was one of the lucky ones. But I didn’t love it. Even when I wasn’t in real danger, it *felt* like I was. It hangs over you every day, even while you’re sleeping. Weeks go by where you’re bored and wondering if anything is ever going to happen, and then suddenly mortar rounds start raining down on the base. Sometimes I miss parts of it. I never felt as *alive* as I did during those years. But...” He shook his head. “I’m glad to be out.”

“It must be nice choosing your own missions now,” I said. “I bet that gives you a sense of control, rather than just doing what people tell you.”

“Oh yeah, it’s much better for sure,” he agreed. “We like choosing our own contracts. They don’t always go the way we expect, though. We had a bad one in Prague a few years back. A close call for all three of us. The guy we were sent to capture, Anton Novak, got away. We haven’t taken on anything moderately dangerous since then.”

There was a faraway look in Jordy’s eyes. I waited for him to reveal more about that mission, but then he sighed heavily.

“Honestly? I’m burned out. It’ll be good to finish these three contracts, because it’ll give me time to relax. Spend more time with Kaylee. And maybe retire from mercenary work altogether.”

“Really? What would you want to do instead?”

He sipped his beer, then grimaced. “Wish I knew.”

“Oh come on. You must have some idea.”

“No freaking clue,” he replied. “I’m not sure I’m even good at anything else.”

“That can’t be true,” I said, pushing a little harder. “Let’s talk it out. What are your interests?”

Jordy crossed one leg over the other and pursed his lips in thought. He was cute when he was concentrating. “I like to cook. And I’m good with car stuff.”

“Then what about becoming a mechanic?”

He grunted. “Nah. I’m good at it, but I don’t actually *like* it. I was kind of pushed into working on cars because my mom drove a beater around town and it always needed fixing. Couldn’t afford to take it to a real mechanic, either. If I didn’t learn how to repair it myself, we probably wouldn’t have survived.”

My heart ached at the thought of a young Jordy barely scraping by with what sounded like a single mother. “What about becoming a chef?”

He chuckled as if it were a joke. “Spoiler alert, Trish: I’m not actually *good* at cooking. I just enjoy doing it. To me, it’s kind of like foreplay before an actual meal. All the aromas and spices and heat... it really sets the mood and makes me want to dig in.” He winked.

I took a long pull from my beer. Was he flirting with me? Or was it just polite banter? When I lowered my beer, Jordy was gazing over at me. There was a question in his eyes, like he was wondering how I had taken the vaguely-sexual comment. I felt strangely comfortable around him, as if we had known each other far longer than a few gym interactions and one international flight...

The front door opened and the two other mercenaries strode inside. Kaylee hopped down from the table and sprinted over to hug them, her blonde braid swaying back and forth.

“Missed you too, dearie,” Archer said to her. Then, to Jordy, he said, “Layout of the conference matches the maps we were given.”

“Great,” Jordy said, avoiding looking in my direction.

Harrison sniffed the air. “Something smells good.”

Jordy popped up from the couch. “Dinner’s in the oven. Should be about ready.”

As I watched him get up and go into the kitchen, I wondered where our conversation may have gone if we hadn’t have been interrupted.

# 9



## Jordy

Archer liked to say that I was a natural flirt. It happened automatically, without me thinking about it. When I was around a beautiful woman, especially one who I may be interested in, I had a way of acting that I didn't even realize.

And Trish? She was very beautiful, *and* I was interested in her.

It was the look she gave me that made me realize I might have crossed a line. Comparing food to sex and then winking at her. She drank her beer and then gazed at me like she was wondering how she felt about all of it.

*She probably thinks it's inappropriate to get involved with me, since she's nannying for Kaylee.* And honestly, she would be right. It was a bad idea, especially at the beginning of our trip. We barely knew each other. If things got weird, then we would have a *lot* of awkwardness until we returned home.

*But if things don't get weird, and she likes me too...*

I shook off the thought as I pulled the tray of food out of the oven. I had promised Archer that I would focus on this mission, and I was going to do that even if it killed me.

We spent the next day meeting with the head of security for the peace conference, discussing the details of the job and potential weak points that could be exploited. The day after that was the beginning of the conference itself. I woke up early because my body was still messed up from the time change.

*And because of the dream I had last night.*

I didn't know where we were—the surroundings were fuzzy, the way things often were in a dream, but Trish was vivid in my mind. Her long eyelashes. That heart-shaped face. Luscious lips begging to be kissed, pursing together as she leaned close...

“Get it together,” I told myself as I got ready in front of the mirror. Most of the security for the peace conference would be wearing suits, but we were dressed in plain clothes to blend in along the exterior perimeter. Jeans and a T-shirt. Plus a jacket to protect against the chilly wind blowing up from the Baltic Sea... and to cover what was on my hip.

“I hate babysitting jobs,” Harrison grumbled as he walked past the room Archer and I were sharing. “I'd rather be shooting something.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” I said as I fastened the belt slide holster on. Norway had pretty strict gun laws, but those were bent by the local government due to the special circumstances of the peace conference. The Glock P80 that slid into the holster was the Norwegian version of the Glock 17, a weapon which I was intimately familiar with. Harrison and Archer would be wearing identical sidearms, along with a long rifle for Archer to use from his vantage point on the roof.

*Hope we don't have to use them,* I thought as I let my jacket fall loosely to my hip, covering the holster easily. *This ought to be just like any other security job. No mess, no fuss.*

The three of us took turns saying goodbye to Kaylee. We each had a different sort of routine: I hugged her and told her I loved her, while Archer made a joke about how she had better not grow another few centimeters while we were gone. Harrison hefted the girl into his arms and swung her around, then squeezed her to his chest so tightly that Kaylee eventually squealed that she was being squished.

My heart ached whenever we left her to go on a mission. But at least she was here in Norway with us, rather than on the other side of the world. And we would see her that evening when we got home.



Trish watched the whole routine from a respectful distance, then drew closer when we were done. “What do you say to someone going on a security mission? Good luck? Break a leg?”

“Either of those work,” I replied.

She hesitated, then came in for a hug. It was comforting and warm, and there wasn’t anything sexual about it, but I still savored the way she felt as I folded her into my embrace. She fit just right, like she belonged, pressed up against my chest. I patted her on the back and resisted the urge to stroke her hair.

*She’s the nanny, I told myself. Not your girlfriend.*

“Good luck!” she repeated with a smile. “Break a leg!”

The peace conference was twenty minutes away, in the heart of Oslo. We met the head of the security team in a neighboring building to the conference itself. At least fifty other members of the security team were milling about and fastening earpieces into place.

“We’ve got the outer perimeter,” Archer said after checking in. He held a map out for us to review. “North end, from this square to this intersection. I’ll be on the roof *here*, which gives me a vantage on these two public squares.”

“Let’s get to it, then,” I said. Harrison let out an unhappy grunt.

Our job was straightforward: to look for anything out of the ordinary. Or to provide an early warning in case someone tried to ram through the conference in a vehicle, although metal barricades were positioned to stop such an attack. Harrison and I patrolled the street, weaving in and out of the flow of pedestrians.

It was as boring as it sounded. We patrolled, and checked in with the head of security, and followed a few individuals who looked suspicious. This went on for an hour. Then another hour. By the time the first day of the conference had ended, nine hours had passed without anything noteworthy happening. I was happy to walk back to our car at the end of

the day without any excitement, but Harrison looked like he wanted to punch a brick wall.

“Boring is the ideal scenario,” Archer reminded him as we drove home. “Any time we get paid and *don’t* have to risk our lives is a victory.”

Harrison stared out the window like a German Shepherd on the way to the vet.

Kaylee was happy to see us when we got home—and I was just as happy to see her. The presence of our daughter was a constant relief; a reminder that this was all worth it.

Harrison found a bottle of vodka and went up to his room, where he closed the door and cranked up what sounded like *Led Zeppelin IV*. Archer opened a bottle of Merlot and casually sipped his drink while reading a book. I grabbed a beer and settled on the couch with Kaylee, who was playing some sort of interactive card game on her tablet.

“How was it?” Trish asked. “Good first day?”

“Not too bad—” I began.

“I’m afraid we cannot discuss it,” Archer interrupted.

“Right, of course,” Trish quickly said. She pulled her hair over one shoulder and began fussing with it nervously. I could tell she was curious about what we had done all day.

*I want to open up to her, I realized. I want to tell her things at the end of the day. To treat her like...*

I shook off the thought and drank my beer faster.

The next day was identical to the first. We drove to the conference, watched a section of the perimeter all day, and then went home to the girls. Trish sat next to me on the couch and talked about growing up in North Carolina, and how amazing it was to get out and see the world. She had taken Kaylee down to the park earlier in the day, and even that little adventure was enough to make her feel like she was living the life of a world traveler.

I struggled to sleep that night. For one thing, Archer’s snoring was so violent that it should have been against the

Geneva Convention to sleep in the same room as him. I was also still wired from the day; even though nothing exciting had happened, my nerves were frayed from staying on alert non-stop. But for another thing, I kept picturing Trish in my head. Sitting on the couch, feet tucked under her and grinning across her drink. The easy way she talked to Kaylee and took care of her. The smile she gave me when I made a joke that nobody else laughed at.

*Archer is right. I have a crush on her.*

Three cups of coffee did little to help me wake up the next day, and I was yawning as I strolled down the Oslo block that we were assigned to watch today. It was due west of the peace conference, with a direct road heading into the secure area where some of the conference members were being dropped off. Once again, Harrison and I were wandering around on foot while Archer covered us from a rooftop.

“Suspicious target at your two o’clock,” Harrison suddenly said in my earpiece.

The hair on my neck went stiff. I kept walking along as if nothing were wrong, but I cut my eyes to my right. “Description?”

“Brunette, green dress,” Harrison replied in a serious tone. “Black heels. No panty lines. Probably concealing a thong.”

I heard Archer groan. “Stop eye-fucking all the diplomat wives.”

Harrison grunted in response.

“She’s not bad,” I said when I saw the woman he was talking about. She was young, probably within a few years from my own age of thirty-three, but carried herself like she was a queen.

“Not bad?” Harrison replied angrily. “You’re fucking blind.”

“Not my type.”

“This girl is *everyone’s* type,” he barked. “You sick or something?”

“He’s pining over our dear nanny,” Archer said.

He probably couldn't see me, but I glared up to the rooftop where he was positioned. "I have been perfectly gentlemanly since we arrived."

"It pains me to admit it, but indeed you have," Archer replied. "Perhaps you are maturing after all."

Harrison barked a laugh at that.

"Thanks," I said dryly, but I was grateful for Archer's acknowledgment. I had tried very hard *not* to flirt with Trish since we arrived. Every interaction with Trish was perfectly platonic. Exactly how a guy should act around the woman nannying his daughter.

But despite outward appearances, there was definitely a deeper connection between us. After Archer and Harrison went to bed, we had been staying up and chatting until late into the night. Trish and I had undeniable chemistry, and keeping things friendly was only accentuating what I felt under the surface. Did she feel the same way, or was it all in my head?

"You see that?" Harrison suddenly chirped in my ear.

"I'm doing my job, not lusting after every woman who walks by," I replied.

But Harrison's voice was deathly serious now. "Rooftop. Seven o'clock. Behind the chimney."

I cut my eyes up to the building in question. "I don't see anything."

"My view is obstructed," Archer said.

Suddenly I saw it: a flash of reflected sun, as bright as a momentary beacon. "There's someone up there. I saw a reflection. Could be binoculars, or..."

I didn't need to say the rest: *or the scope on a rifle.*

I took off across the street at a dead sprint. "Entering the building. Let me know if they move."

"I still don't have line of sight." Archer must have switched frequencies on the radio, because suddenly his tone was

different. “This is Mathos Two. Do we have any other teams on the roofs in our vicinity?”

“Negative, Mathos Two,” came a reply. “Nearest security unit is three blocks from your location.”

“Investigating further, standby for confirmation,” Archer replied.

I was only dimly aware of the conversation as I ran into the building. It was an apartment lobby, with an elevator and stairs to my right. I took the latter rather than waiting for the elevator, sprinting up the stairs two at a time as I climbed toward the roof. The radio chattered in my ear as I ran.

“Moving another unit to the side to corner them. Watch your cross-fire.”

“Mathos Three, climbing to the roof of the neighboring hotel,” Harrison said.

“Should I hold position or get a better angle?” Archer asked.

“Hold position, Mathos Two.”

“I’m on the roof of the neighboring hotel,” Harrison said. “I’ve got eyes on—fuck, he bolted. Must’ve seen me.”

“Is he armed?”

“Unsure.”

“Does the suspect have line of sight down into the conference?”

“From that building, he might.”

A response came in Norwegian instead of English. It sounded like cursing.

I reached the door to the roof. It was locked, but I kicked out with my foot and the frame broke away from the ancient bricks with a cloud of dust. Out into the sunlight I ran, turning to face where I expected the target to be.

The man was sprinting away from me, black jacket fluttering behind him. There was something eerily familiar about him, even from behind. I drew my pistol and shouted an

order to him, but before I could finish the command, he was leaping over the edge of the building, disappearing from sight.

“Suspect jumped off the building,” I said while running to the edge. On a building to my right I saw Harrison. His pistol was in his hands, too.

I reached the edge and gazed down. There was an alley below, and another apartment building adjacent to this one. I expected to see a body on the ground, but there was nothing except a pair of alley cats pawing at a bag of trash.

“It’s at least eighty feet to the ground,” I said. “How...”

“He went through a window on the other side,” Harrison said. “Building two-nine-four, across from the market...”

“Suspect is wearing a black jacket and dress pants,” I said. “Dark hair pulled back in a small ponytail.”

“Can confirm,” Harrison added.

“We have two additional teams closing in on the ground,” someone on the radio said. “Hold positions in case he reappears.”

I balled my hand into a fist and slammed it onto the ledge at the edge of the building. The suspect, whoever he was, had gotten away. I was a few seconds too late.

“You recognize him?” I called over to Harrison.

He holstered his weapon and cocked his head. “No. Why would I?”

“No reason,” I said, even though I had the strangest sense of déjà vu. I looked around and then let out another curse.

“Fuck!”

# 10



## Trish

Nannying for Kaylee was incredibly easy. So much easier than taking care of the two children in my previous job. She ate all her food without complaint, and was old enough to take baths by herself—although I still sat at the edge of the tub and helped wash her hair and dry her off.

Kaylee had a unique personality, too. At eight years old, she was opinionated about the strangest things. She liked butter, but hated margarine. She said that frozen yogurt was just ice cream with fewer friends. And for some reason she was passionate that Brexit was a mistake—an opinion she had undoubtedly inherited from one of her fathers. Archer, probably. I doubted that someone her age had a legitimate understanding of the pros and cons of remaining a member of the European Union.

Overall, she was a joy to take care of. It was satisfying on an emotional level, and professionally as well. It was another reminder that *this* was what I wanted to do with my life, rather than working in retail making coffee for annoying people. It made me want to have a daughter of my own one day—and maybe a boy, too. As long as he wasn't a little terror.

It was also a tremendous opportunity for me to see the world. I was kind of nervous the first day we were here alone, but by the third day I was taking Kaylee on afternoon strolls around Oslo after lunch. We walked almost a mile—over a kilometer, I should say!—to a local market and bought a few touristy gifts for me to take back home. I knew I would need a peace offering for Lisa since I wasn't allowed to tell her

anything about our location and job while we were here. And my little sisters would definitely be upset if I didn't bring them something back from my first international trip.

Since I couldn't tell anyone where I was, I began keeping a journal of everything we did, and all the little quirks about Oslo. Gasoline—which they called *bensin*—was very expensive, but fresh seafood was cheap. Not surprising since it was a coastal city, I supposed. The people were incredibly friendly. Norway was apparently one of the happiest countries on earth, however that sort of thing was measured. And most spoke English. Overall, I stopped feeling like an outsider and immediately felt like I was welcome everywhere I went.

When Kaylee and I returned from the market, we were surprised to find the guys were already home. Kaylee dropped her bag of sweets and ran to hug them all.

I could immediately tell that something was wrong. There was a suspenseful feeling in the air, like we had interrupted something. The guys waited until Kaylee ran upstairs to her room before they resumed speaking.

“All I'm saying is I don't like the rules of engagement,” Harrison said.

“We don't even know who it was,” Archer replied. “It could have been a harmless local who wanted to catch a glimpse of Justin Trudeau. And you want to put three rounds in his back before identifying if there's really a threat?” He scoffed loudly.

“What happened?” I asked.

Harrison whipped his head around to face me. “Nothing that fucking concerns you.”

“Hey!” Jordy snapped. “How about you take a walk?”

Harrison stared daggers at me for a moment longer, then muttered a curse and walked out of the room. The front door slammed hard enough to shake the whole condo.

“Sorry,” I said. “I shouldn't have asked.”

“No, you should not have,” Archer said coldly. “You don't need to be briefed on every single aspect of our contract here,



Trish. You are here to take care of our daughter.”

I folded my hands in front of my lap and meekly said, “Sorry.”

Archer sighed, then turned to Jordy. “Everyone is overreacting to what happened today. Whoever that was, he probably wasn’t a real threat. Just a civilian.”

“A civilian who jumped from the roof into an apartment window on the other side of an eighty-foot drop?” Jordy replied. “I’m with Harrison on this one.”

“We did our job,” Archer insisted. “We identified a threat, then scared them away. We don’t need to dwell on it to any further degree. The head of security thinks we did a good job.”

“Yeah, well, I hold myself to higher standards than whoever is writing us a check,” Jordy muttered. “I’m going to get started on dinner.”

After he was gone, I started to retreat upstairs to check on Kaylee. But Archer grabbed my arm to stop me.

“Forgive me for being harsh, but I am quite serious about what I said,” he told me. His blue eyes were as cold as ice. “You are here to do a job. That job does not require you to know every single piece of information about *our* job. I hope I will not have to tell you this again.”

“I understand,” I said.

Kaylee and I played Minecraft in her room for an hour. She seemed unaware that an argument had taken place downstairs, and was more concerned with harvesting enough gold ore to make a special pickaxe in the game. When it was time to eat, everyone sat down except Harrison.

“Where’s daddy?” Kaylee asked.

“He’s out running some errands,” Jordy said smoothly. “If you eat all your vegetables, you can have some special Norwegian chocolate I brought home for you.”

Kaylee squealed excitedly and forgot all about Harrison’s absence.

The mood was tense after dinner. Archer found a cricket match between Pakistan and Australia on TV, and spent most of the match trying to explain the rules of the game to Kaylee. Jordy watched Netflix on his laptop with his headphones on. I wasn't sure how to navigate the environment after the argument they'd had, so I excused myself up to my room to listen to a podcast.

I was journaling about the day when I heard someone come up the steps. I expected it to be Jordy, but it was Harrison's huge frame that walked past in the hall. He slowed down, then stepped back until he was in the doorway. His presence made me uncomfortable, especially after the way he had snapped at me today, so I pretended like I didn't know he was there and kept scribbling in my notebook.

After a long silence, he said, "I was a dick earlier. Sorry." And then he walked away without waiting for a response. As soon as I heard his door close down the hall, I let out a deep breath that I didn't realize I'd been holding.

*That was weird.* I never would have expected Harrison to apologize to anyone, let alone me.

Kaylee's bedtime routine put me in a better mood. After her bath, Jordy took over and read her a bedtime story. Not sure what else to do, I said goodnight to everyone and went to bed early.

But I quickly found myself unable to sleep. I was tired, but the time difference was still playing havoc with my internal clock. I tossed and turned for two hours before finally crawling out of bed. I had heard that a warm glass of milk helped people sleep, so I went downstairs to try that. I tip-toed across the living room in the dark before motion on the couch made me jump.

"Shit-fuck!" I blurted out.

Jordy sat up on the couch. "Damn, Trish. Didn't know you could curse like a sailor. Good thing Kaylee's not around."

My pulse was pounding in my temple, so I took a deep breath to relax myself. "I'm usually good about censoring

myself. You scared me half to death! What are you doing down here?"

He flicked on the lamp next to the couch. "Was gonna ask you the same thing."

"I'm still jet-lagged. Can't sleep. I was going to get a glass of warm milk."

"Got some sleeping pills, if you need one," he replied.

I started to decline, then stopped myself. "Actually, yeah. I'll take whatever you've got."

He rose from the couch wearing only a pair of tight boxer-briefs that hugged his muscular thighs. He disappeared into the kitchen, then returned with a pill and a glass of water.

"Don't worry, it's not strong," he said. "But it'll help."

"Thanks." I took the pill and gulped it down with the water.

"Huh," he said.

"What?"

He shrugged and returned to the couch. "I guess I'm surprised you took a pill from a stranger without thinking about it."

"You're not a stranger," I said. "And besides, I know I can trust you. Or at least, I feel like I can."

It was too dark to gauge his expression, but I got the distinct feeling that Jordy was blushing. "Yeah, all right," he finally said.

"So, what are you doing on the couch?"

"Archer snores," he replied. "It sounds like someone threw a toolbox into a cement mixer. I'm surprised you can't hear it in your room. Hell, I'm surprised it doesn't wake up all of Scandinavia." He shifted on the cushions. "Unfortunately, this couch isn't nearly as comfortable as I expected."

"Why don't you take one of your sleeping pills?" I suggested.

The shadows of his face twisted into a smile. “Technically, we’re on-call. Can’t risk sleeping through the alert.”

“Oh.” I started to say goodnight, then turned back to him. “Jordy, this is dumb. You should take my bed.”

He shook his head. “I’m good.”

“You’re *not* good. You need your sleep! You have a job to do tomorrow.”

“So do you.”

“My job doesn’t require the same alertness as carrying a gun around and protecting foreign dignitaries.”

Jordy chuckled. “You’ve got me there. But seriously, this couch *sucks*. There’s no way I’m letting you sleep on it.”

I could have let it drop there. I had offered, and argued, and he had politely declined my offer. I could have gone back to bed and allowed my sleeping pill to work its magic.

Instead, I said, “We can share the bed.”

Jordy gave a start. “Huh?”

“It’s plenty large enough for two people. We can even put a pillow barrier between us. Nothing awkward about it. Just two people trying to get some sleep. And I know for a fact that I don’t snore.”

He hesitated. It seemed like he was considering it. My heart began racing all over again—what if he accepted? Could I really share a bed with the man I had been crushing on for months at the gym?

“Tempting, but I’m going to stick it out here,” Jordy finally replied. “Appreciate the offer, though.”

I let out a sigh, and I wasn’t sure if it was one of relief or disappointment. “I’ll leave the door unlocked and half the bed open in case you change your mind. Seriously. I won’t mind.”

“Thanks, Kettlebells,” Jordy said as I went back upstairs.

The pill he had given me worked wonders, and I was asleep within minutes of my head hitting the pillow. But it also gave

me very vivid dreams. I was downstairs on the couch watching television with everyone else. In the blink of an eye, everyone else was gone except Jordy. Another blink and he was sitting next to me on the couch, turned toward me to see the TV screen. He leaned forward and laughed, and clapped me on the thigh. I laughed with him.

And then he was reclining back on the couch while I straddled him. My hair was loose and created a curtain around our faces as we kissed. His lips felt familiar against mine, rather than someone I was kissing for the first time. His tongue forced its way into my mouth, and I accepted it eagerly with a moan.

Without breaking our connection, Jordy sat upright and wrapped his arms around me while I straddled him. Then he was pushing me away, down onto my back so he could cover me with his body. His skin pressed against mine because suddenly we weren't wearing any clothes. I spread my legs wider, accepting him, beckoning him into me. And with the wonderful ease that came from a dream, he slid right inside me, every inch of him until there was nothing left to give.

I grabbed a handful of his hair, the hair that had given him the nickname *Brownie* for so long in my mind. He drove into me with passionate abandon, thrusts of need rather than conscious thought, and within seconds the two of us were crying out as we came together.

I woke up before my alarm went off, groggy and horny. Oh, it had been a while since I had a sex dream like that! I could still remember the way he felt inside me, that wonderful ache of being filled completely by a man. But now, the only ache I felt between my legs was one of dissatisfaction.

It was only when I opened my eyes that I realized I wasn't alone. There was a nipple in front of my face. A *male* nipple. In fact, an entire male body was in my bed, and I was snuggled up against it.

*Not it, I realized. Jordy.*

He was laying on his back. My head was resting in the crook of his arm, the bicep hard and warm. His breath stirred my hair

as he slept. But most notably, my leg was thrown over his body. Over his *crotch*. I could feel his cock underneath my bare thigh, the fabric of his boxer-briefs too thin to conceal the heat coming off its stiff length.

*Oh my God.*

For a long while, I froze there in that same position. I didn't know what to do. I took stock of myself and confirmed that yes, we hadn't had sex. That part was *definitely* a dream. But here he was, in my bed, and I was cuddling against his body.

His gorgeous body.

His chiseled, muscular body.

Against my better judgment, I allowed myself to enjoy it for a few moments. The heat from his bare skin. His scent. The way my head shifted every time his chest rose and fell with his breathing. I was immensely turned-on, and not just from the dream. I knew I was drenched, too. I desperately wanted to make last night's dream a reality.

But could I make the first move? I wasn't good at that. The last time I had made the first move, asking Jordy out at the gym, he had rejected me—although with a legitimate reason, I now knew. Yet I was still paralyzed by indecision.

Before I could make a decision either way, I felt Jordy stir beneath me. He let out a long, satisfied sigh.

Then his entire body tensed.

“Shit,” he whispered to himself. “What the actual fuck?”

“Sorry!” I said, rolling away from him. There was lots of room on my side of the bed.

He jumped up to where he was standing between the bed and the wall. A moment later, he seemed to become aware of the massive hard-on in his boxer-briefs. He grabbed a pillow and covered himself before demanding, “What the hell happened?”

“You came to bed without telling me!”

Jordy sputtered his response: “You—you invited me!”

“I never woke up! The sleeping pill you gave me... I must have totally passed out.”

“It was only melatonin,” he replied. He was very clearly flustered. “Melatonin barely does anything. And I put up a pillow barrier between us to make sure nothing happened by accident.”

I looked at the bed and saw that he was right: one of the long pillows was positioned vertically down the middle of the bed. I had climbed over it in my sleep.

*But will he believe that?*

“Jordy...” I began.

“I have to go get ready,” he said, and fled from the room.

# 11



## Jordy

Everyone had a fight-or-flight response. Mine had been honed to a sharp knife after years of training. I was a warrior, and in most situations, I was going to fight.

But this morning, after waking up with Trish's body curled up against mine like it belonged there, something in my brain just *broke*. I had never trained for that shit. So I did something that was totally out of character for me.

I ran the fuck away.

Down the hall I went and straight into the bathroom that Archer and I shared. Once the door was closed and locked, I started to breathe easier. I didn't know why I felt so embarrassed. It's not like I meant for that to happen, even though I hadn't been able to get Trish out of my head since we got to Oslo. Hell, since before that. Since she worked up the courage to ask me out at the gym.

*It caught me off-guard, I thought. That's all.*

I stripped out of my underwear and got into the shower. But as the hot water ran over my body, it did little to wash away the feel of Trish's body snuggled up against mine. I was half awake when it happened, but I could remember the way she was grinding against my thigh in her sleep, making soft mewling noises. My arm had been draped over her, and my fingertips dragged across her skin. Impossibly-smooth skin. And the way her leg had been resting on my crotch...

Before I knew what I was doing, I was gently touching myself in the shower. I had to; I felt like I would explode



otherwise. Soon that escalated to faster strokes, my cock gripped in my fist tightly while I pictured her body on top of mine again. It usually took me several minutes to get off while watching porn, but now I blew my load within seconds seconds. My gasps and groans echoed off the smooth Norwegian tile.

I felt satisfied as I dried myself off afterward, but it was inadequate. I wanted more.

I wanted *her*.

When I went downstairs, Trish was smearing jam onto two pieces of toast at the table while Archer wolfed down a plate of runny eggs. The two of them were talking about a show on Netflix that I hadn't heard of. Trish glanced up at me, then immediately cut her eyes away while blushing.

*Fuck.*

Guilt rose up inside me like a geyser. She was uncomfortable, now. And ultimately it was my fault. She had been nice enough to offer to share the bed so I could get some much-needed sleep... and then *that* happened. She probably thought I was a creep. Or worse—some sort of predator who had intended for that to happen all along.

After breakfast, we said our goodbyes to Kaylee and prepared to leave. I gave Trish an awkward smile but said nothing more as I walked out the door. I couldn't decide if that was the right way to handle it, or if I should have just broken the ice about what happened.

We made it halfway to the peace conference before Harrison asked, "You two fuck, or what?"

If I'd been drinking something at that moment, I would have sprayed it all over the back of Archer's seat. "What? Huh? What are you even talking about?"

Harrison twisted around to look at me directly. "Dude."

"He heard you sprinting out of Trish's room like a striker with a clear path to the goal," Archer said. "I heard it, too. So did Kaylee, probably. It was loud."

“I don’t like your stupid soccer metaphors,” I grumbled.

“*Football*, you knob. And stop avoiding the topic.”

“Of course we didn’t have sex! Nothing happened. She saw me sleeping on the couch and offered to share her bed. It was totally harmless. I even put up a pillow barrier between us.”

“Then why did you run out of there like—”

“Like whatever dumb English analogy you’re going to use?” Before he could reply with something biting, I went on. “When we woke up, we were... sort of cuddling. By accident.”

Harrison let out a loud scoff and turned away from me.

“You promised this wouldn’t happen,” Archer began scolding. “I was concerned about this *very scenario*, and you assured me in no uncertain terms that you would behave yourself.”

“Nothing happened! And besides, this is your fault for snoring!”

He glared at me through the rear-view mirror. “And it’s your fault we have to share a bed. We would have adequate bedrooms if you had not taken it upon yourself to hire this woman.”

“And now we have Kaylee with us. Which you haven’t complained about.”

That shut him up.

“I’ll share a bed with Trish,” Harrison said.

I turned to him. “Since when do you like Trish?”

He frowned at me. “Who said anything about liking her?”

“Can we all please try to avoid an awkward situation?” Archer said exasperatedly. “We have at least seven more weeks together, maybe longer. Once that’s done, you can play cuddle-time with the nanny all you want.”

“Again, it was an accident,” I said through gritted teeth. “I feel just as weird about the whole thing.” I glanced at

Harrison. "Can I bunk with you tonight?"

"Fuck that," he snarled as we pulled into the peace conference lot. "Keep your ass on the couch."

The morning went on just like any other. Harrison and I patrolled a section of the perimeter while Archer covered us from above. There were a lot more security agents on the roofs today. If the guy from yesterday returned to try something, he would need to find another way into the conference.

It was hard to stay focused for hours and hours every day. I scanned the faces of pedestrians and checked-in with my teammates, but nothing exciting happened. Eventually, around lunch, my mind drifted back to the events of this morning.

Now that enough time had passed, I wanted to text Trish. To break the ice now, rather than wait until we got home and were face-to-face. It was easier to explain things in a text, too. I could get all of my thoughts in order without messing it up. The more I thought about it, the more I compulsively needed to do it.

"I've got to take a piss," I said on the radio.

"No problem," Archer replied. His tone changed as he switched channels. "This is Mathos Two. We need extra coverage in sector nine while one of our boots on the ground takes five."

"Copy, Mathos. Shifting a neighboring unit to add some redundancy."

The Grand Hotel Oslo was one block ahead, and across the street was a McDonald's. I decided the hotel would have nicer bathrooms and headed inside. It was an old building, with a grand staircase that curved up to a second-floor balcony. Dozens of men and women were lingering around in formal attire; it looked like a wedding or something. I decided that a sign labeled "BADEROM" was Norwegian for "bathroom," and after following a hallway, my guess proved correct.

"Nailed it," I muttered to myself as I went inside. I did actually have to take a leak, but I wanted to get the text out of the way first. That ended up being a lot harder than I expected,

though. I typed—and deleted—at least a dozen messages before finally settling on something simple.

**Me:** Hey, are we okay? Is it weird now?

**Kettlebells:** What do you mean? Why wouldn't we be okay?

I gawked at the text. What did she mean, what do I mean? There was no way she was confused about what I was referring to! Or did she want me to come right out and repeat what happened this morning?

My brain immediately assumed the worst scenario: *she wants a documented admission of what happened*. She was going to sue us or something. Well, fuck. I'd messed things up this time, even though nothing *actually* happened and it was all just a misunderstanding.

Before I could continue with my anxiety death-spiral, I heard a sound in one of the bathroom stalls. Not just any sound: a click. Everything else fell away from my concern, because I knew that sound intimately.

It was the sound of someone loading a magazine into a gun.

Slowly, I crouched down. European bathroom stalls didn't have those stupid gaps in the door like American ones, so I couldn't see anything. I stood up without making a sound. Was it someone at the wedding? Or maybe another security guy for the peace conference? No, it couldn't be that. Another security agent wouldn't be loading his sidearm in the fucking bathroom.

I washed my hands in the sink, then left the bathroom. Out in the hall, a bunch of bridesmaids were giggling while looking at a video on someone's phone. It would have been better if they weren't there, but there wasn't anything I could do about it without raising suspicions.

I leaned against the wall and pretended to look at my phone while straining to listen for noises in the bathroom. Two minutes passed. Then a third. The guy was taking a while. Should I radio it in as a suspicious person? I began questioning what I had heard. I was certain of it in the moment, but now I wondered...

The door opened and a man in a chef uniform walked out of the bathroom. He turned right and walked away from me, back toward the lobby. There was a peace conference badge on his hip. Underneath his smock was a bulge that had to be the gun.

I started following him. "Excuse me, sir?" I flashed my own security credentials. "I'd like to ask you—"

The moment he saw my face, he bolted. I was ready for that, and closed the distance within seconds. He was reaching into his smock as I tackled him from behind, which sent the bridesmaids screaming out into the lobby.

When his hand came out of his smock, a gun was in it. A 25mm Tokarev, some unimportant part of my brain noted while my active instincts grabbed his wrist and twisted until I heard something *snap*. He cried out and dropped the gun, which I kicked away before kneeling on his back. From the moment he ran, the whole thing probably took four seconds.

"Transnistria tilhører Russland!" he shouted. It sounded like Norwegian spoken with a thick Russian accent. "Død for NATO!"

I zip-tied his wrists together, ignoring all the shouts and stares from the wedding party. "Command, this is Mathos One. I need assistance in the Grand Oslo Hotel. I got someone."

# 12



## Trish

“Trish?” Lisa said on the phone. She sounded groggy. “What time is it?”

“Crap! I forgot about the time change,” I replied. “Sorry. It’s already the afternoon here. I can call back later if you want...”

I heard my best friend groan. “No, ugh. It’s fine. I’m up now. Is everything okay?”

I paused to glance over at Kaylee. She was playing with a coloring book on the ground, her crayons arrayed around her like debris. “Something happened. With Jordy.”

“Who?”

“Brownie,” I replied. “His real name is Jordy.”

“Brownies?” Kaylee suddenly piped up excitedly. “Are we making brownies?”

*Damnit.* “Maybe later. I don’t know if we have all the ingredients.”

“YAY!” she said, and went back to her coloring.

“Thanks a lot,” I told Lisa while moving over into the kitchen, where I could have a private conversation while still eying the girl. “Now I have to make her brownies.”

“Forget all that!” Lisa said. She sounded wide awake, now. “What about Jordy? What happened?”

I gave her a quick summary of the events in the bedroom, and then the text Jordy had sent me.

“He never replied?” Lisa sighed. “That’s a bad sign.”

I groaned. “That’s what I was afraid of. But I didn’t mean to snuggle up to him!”

“How did he feel?” she asked.

“Wonderful. Big and strong and warm. It only lasted a minute, but while I was cuddled up against him, I felt... I don’t know. Safe.”

“That’s great and all, but it’s not what I meant. I was asking how did he *feel*. You know. Down there. Was it big?”

“Lisa!” I hissed. “I’ve got a real crisis here and you’re focusing on all the wrong things.”

“I don’t understand why your crisis means I don’t get to hear all the juicy details,” she grumbled.

“There are no juicy details to share. Nothing happened.” I paused. “But it was big.”

“I KNEW IT!” she practically shouted.

“Not, like, *obscenely* huge,” I added. “But large. I think. It was tough to tell because he was wearing underwear.”

“What about my guy?” she asked. “Have you gotten to see Blondie in his undies?”

“Lisa...”

“I bet he wears boxers with the Union Jack on them,” she said wistfully. “Or maybe a speedo.”

“If you’re not going to help me, then I’m hanging up.”

“Okay! Fine! Geez, you wake a girl up at the ass-crack of dawn and don’t even let her enjoy some delicious mental imagery.” I heard her microwave beep on the other line. She was probably reheating coffee. “My advice is to play it cool.”

“Did you forget who you’re talking to? I have no idea how to play it cool, Lisa.”

“Pretend like it’s no big deal,” she said. “Act normal. Smile at him.”

“If I smile at him, he’ll think I *meant* to do it!”

Lisa sputtered a laugh. “I said smile at him, not eye-fuck him. You really are bad at this.”

“Yes! That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!”

“It’s only awkward if you make it awkward,” she said. “Honestly, he probably didn’t reply to your text because he’s busy killing people or whatever.”

“He’s not killing people. They’re just security for—” I cut off. “I’m not allowed to say anything. You’re going to get me in trouble.”

“You’re no fun. But I expect to hear all about it when you get back. You *are* eventually coming back to Wilmington, right?”

“Of course I am!” I replied. “I already miss home. Traveling abroad is fun, but it’s just not the same.”

“Do they at least have pizza wherever you are? Actually, don’t say anything. As much as I want to hear about it, I don’t want to get you in trouble. But be safe, okay?”

After hanging up with Lisa, I went back to playing with Kaylee. Play it cool. I didn’t know if I could do that. I was an awkward mess around guys in the best of circumstances, and this was as far from a normal circumstance as possible. I had no idea what was going to happen when the guys got home.

But underneath the embarrassment was another emotion that I was fighting. Desire. The feel of Jordy’s body was permanently imprinted on my brain. When I closed my eyes, I saw him sprawled out underneath me, bronze skin bulging with powerful muscle.

“Do you play any other games besides Minecraft?” I asked Kaylee to distract myself.

That proved to be an hour-long discussion of all the other games she played on her computer. She was passionate about all of them, and launched into long lectures about the best and worst strategies to use in each game. For a while, it did the trick of distracting me from everything going on with her dad.



I really enjoyed nannying for a girl her age. The last gig I'd had, the kids were three and five years old. Compared to them, Kaylee practically took care of herself. And as silly as it was, I enjoyed playing Minecraft with her. My laptop could barely run the game, but I was able to join her in her world and help her build things. It was fascinating seeing her creativity flourish as she built a little castle on a mountain made out of pixelated stone blocks.

The guys didn't get home at their usual time, so I put one of the pre-made meals in the oven. They also weren't home by the time dinner was ready an hour later. I told Kaylee they were probably just busy at work, and that there was no reason to worry, but I felt myself growing anxious about the whole thing. Especially paired with the way Jordy had abruptly stopped texting me earlier.

I read Kaylee a bedtime story about dinosaurs and kissed her goodnight. Then I went downstairs and poured myself a glass of wine. It did little to calm my nerves. Neither did a second glass.

When I heard the garage door open, I practically jumped out of my seat with relief. I forced myself to sit back down and appear relaxed as they walked into the condo.

"Sorry we're late," Archer said. "It was a very eventful day."

"Eventful? That doesn't sound good," I said.

"Only good things," Archer replied. "Lots of paperwork and debriefings."

"Jordy caught a terrorist," Harrison said bluntly.

"What!"

Jordy walked inside with a huge grin on his face. "He's exaggerating."

"That is, quite literally, what happened," Archer said. "We'll let him explain it to you. For now, I need some food, a shower, and my bed, in no particular order."

“I put the leftovers in the oven to stay warm. Kaylee went down about an hour ago, so she’s probably asleep.”

Jordy went upstairs to take a shower while the other two had some food. Harrison ate like a dog who didn’t know when he would be fed again. I was antsy and wanted to interrogate them about what happened today, but I could tell that both of them were too exhausted to talk. And when I did a quick internet search of the peace conference, there wasn’t any information about a terrorist.

They went to bed just as Jordy was coming downstairs. He had changed into gray Vuori sweatpants and a navy V-neck shirt. His hair was still damp and his cheeks were red from the shower.

“Okay, I’ve been a good sport for the past thirty minutes,” I said while handing him a plate of food. “But I’m going to explode if someone doesn’t tell me what happened today!”

He looked at the plate. “You’re Kaylee’s nanny, not our servant. You don’t need to feed me.”

“Stop arguing and tell me what happened! You caught a terrorist?”

His stomach rumbled, and he sat down without any more protests. “I was in the bathroom of a hotel when I heard a guy loading a gun. I waited until he left and apprehended him. Turns out he was some Russian terrorist who has very strong opinions about Transnistria.”

“Where is Transnistria?”

“Fuck if I know,” he said around a mouthful of food. “Somewhere near Moldova I think. Archer would know.” He pointed at me with his fork. “I was texting you when it all happened. That’s why I suddenly stopped responding. You were probably worried.”

“No, I didn’t think anything of it,” I replied. “Sorry for being a distraction today.”

He swallowed his food and gave me a rakish grin. “Are you kidding? I only went in the bathroom because I was texting you. You’re the whole reason I caught the guy!”

I felt my cheeks grow hot. “I wouldn’t go that far. You’re the one who texted me first. Just a lucky coincidence.”

Jordy shrugged and continued eating. I sipped more of my wine. A silence stretched, and the longer it went on, the more tense the air grew.

Finally, he finished his food and put down his fork. He leaned back in the chair and said, “I owe you an apology.”

“What? Why?”

“I crawled into bed late last night while you were asleep. And you were deeply asleep because I gave you a sleep aid. You probably think I’m some predator.”

“It was only melatonin,” I began, but he put up a hand to stop me.

“I want you to feel safe. I want you to trust me. And the other guys, of course. I violated that trust last night. Or, well, I guess it was this morning. Either way, I wanted to let you know it won’t happen again.”

I let out an incredulous laugh. “Jordy, you didn’t do anything wrong. You were just laying there, and I’m the one who crossed the pillow barrier and cuddled up against *you*. Which, by the way, was totally by accident. I didn’t know what I was doing. But if anything, I owe you an apology.”

He chuckled to himself. “I spent all day freaking out about this and thinking you were mad at me.”

“So did I!”

“We’re both really pathetic, aren’t we?” he asked.

“Very pathetic.”

Jordy flashed me another smile, and my heart melted. “How about this. We call it even and pretend it didn’t happen. Deal?” He extended his hand across the table.

“Deal.” His palm was big enough that it enveloped mine completely, and his callouses tickled against my skin.

“I’m exhausted,” he said, rising and stretching. “I don’t know if you were going to stay up later, but I’m going to go

ahead and crash on the couch, if you want to take your wine upstairs.”

“No!” I blurted out. Jordy blinked in surprise. The passion in my voice surprised even myself. “Jordy, we’re both adults. We can share the bed. I’ll put a bigger pillow between us, and I’ll make sure I stay on my half. If you want.”

He furrowed his brow as he considered it. I realized that I desperately, urgently wanted him to agree to it. And not just because I didn’t want my presence to be an inconvenience.

*I want him to sleep next to me.*

“The bed was comfortable,” he grudgingly admitted. “Way more than the couch. As long as you don’t mind, I’m cool sharing.”

“I am!”

“But for the next contract,” he said, “I’m going to make sure we have better sleeping arrangements. So this won’t happen again.”

“Of course,” I said. “This is just temporary.”

# 13



## Trish

A strange mood came over me as I brushed my teeth and got ready for bed. Maybe it was the three glasses of wine I'd had. Or the couple of hours I spent worrying about the guys when they were late coming home. Or maybe it was being on the other side of the world from the only town I had ever known, and not knowing what to do with myself.

*It's none of that, I thought. It's because I'm about to share a bed with Brownie, my gym crush. Again.*

When I went into the room, I found Jordy already in bed. He had moved one of the long body pillows, dividing the bed neatly in half. Although he was under the covers, he was still wearing a shirt.

"Well, goodnight," I said as I crawled into bed and turned out the light.

"Night, Trish," he replied.

For a long while, I stared at the ceiling and listened to Jordy breathe. I was hyper-aware of every noise I made, every small shifting in the bed. Like I would annoy him if I was too loud, like Archer's snoring. I desperately didn't want to be an annoyance to this man, as silly as that sounded.

A few minutes later, I heard him remove his shirt and toss it on the floor. Then he became very still again. I listened for any sound. A water pipe shifted in the wall. I cleared my throat. The comforter went taut as he rolled over.

"It's too quiet in this place," he whispered. "I feel like I can hear my own heartbeat. I miss the sound of the ocean."

“Yes!” I replied. “There’s no background noise here. I was wondering why it was so strange.”

“Better than being in a city center.” His voice was a soft rumble. “A few years back, we stayed in the middle of Prague. Nothing but car horns and pedestrian noise all night. Harrison can sleep through anything, but Archer and I struggled on that mission.” He shook his head. “And then everything went to shit. Closest call we ever had. And the asshole we were there to get, Anton Novak, got away.”

“What happened?”

He stared off. “Ehh. I don’t really feel like talking about it, if that’s all right.”

“Yeah, no, of course.” I glanced over at him in the dark. His face was a dark outline against the window behind him. “Can I ask you something else?”

“Sure. Is it about Kaylee’s mom?”

“No, actually. I was going to ask if you made Harrison apologize to me yesterday.”

He snorted. “Harrison was a dick to you. That pisses me off. I chewed him out afterward. But no, I didn’t make him apologize. He’s about as soft as a bowling ball, but sometimes he does realize when he’s fucked up.”

“That’s good,” I said. “I was surprised when he did it. But I appreciated the gesture, whether you made him do it or not.”

“Nope, that was all him.”

We fell silent for a few moments.

“Can I ask you something else?” I said.

“Hit me.”

“It’s about Kaylee’s mom.”

Jordy chuckled. “I knew you were wondering about that.”

“I wasn’t going to ask, but you brought it up. Where’s her mom? I know she calls all of you daddy, but which one of you is her biological father?”

“None of us, actually.”

I gave a start. “Really?”

“Back in 2014, Harrison and I were stationed just outside Sevastopol. Big port city on the Crimean Peninsula. The US, Great Britain, and Ukraine were holding joint training exercises. Nothing official, most of it under the table to keep from upsetting certain powers in the region. We were in the middle of a training run when Russia decided to invade.”

“Oh no.”

“Mmm hmm. Big time oh no. Invasions are, to put it in technical terms, giant clusterfucks. For the first four hours, nobody knew what was going on. We were attached to a Ukrainian unit that was redeployed to protect the port. It would create an international incident if anyone from NATO were involved in any direct combat against Russian troops, so we had to quickly break off and go our own way once night fell. The city was chaotic as we tried to make our way to our extraction point. The power grid failed. Rockets were landing throughout the city. Whole city blocks just wiped out, nothing but rubble. And we’re passing one of those blocks when we hear a baby crying inside a shop. This thing is screaming its head off. Horrible sound. Made my bones ache. Harrison and I run inside and find it all alone in a basket. Half the shop has collapsed, and the other half looks like it’s about to. So Harrison grabs the baby and carries her the rest of the way to the extraction zone.

“We get there,” he continued, “and it’s an RAF helicopter. British. We’re the last ones on. And the unit commander is this posh asshole who tells us to leave the baby behind.”

I put my hand over my mouth. “Oh my God.”

Jordy gave a wry chuckle. “Harrison did *not* like that. He drew his sidearm and threatened to smoke the commander right there. Big standoff happened, neither of them would back down. Rockets are landing in the city while this is going on, explosions so powerful they made my teeth hurt, even from miles away. Finally, the helicopter pilot turns around and tells his commander that he’s not taking off unless the baby is on

board. The commander relented, and we flew back to a base in Romania.”

“And the baby was Kaylee? What happened after that?”

“The baby was indeed Kaylee,” he said. “And when the helicopter landed, the commander had the MPs—Military Police—take all three of us into custody. Me, Harrison, and the pilot. NATO forces weren’t really supposed to be in Crimea at the time, so Harrison and I were given phony medical discharges. That kept everything under the table. And as part of it, they found a way to create a fake birth certificate for her. I don’t really know all the details of how it works, but I’m her adoptive father on paper. Harrison and I moved back to Wilmington and got a place together, and for a while we just focused on raising Kaylee. Figuring out what to do.”

I giggled. “I bet that was an experience.”

“You have no idea.” He laughed with me. “Harrison’s sister came to visit and helped show us the ropes. After a few months, we got the hang of things. And then one day we got a call from the RAF helicopter pilot who stood up to the commander. A guy named Archibald Caspian. He was discharged for the whole thing, too, and wanted to visit to see the little girl he had tanked his career for. He was only supposed to stay for a day, but he couldn’t leave. He fell in love with that little girl, like Harrison and I had. That’s when he told us about an opportunity with the Mathos Company, working as mercenaries. We signed up that very week, and the rest is history.”

“I’ll be honest,” I said, “when I was wondering about Kaylee’s situation, I never in a million years would have guessed all of *that*. I just assumed one of you was the father, and the mom was out of the picture.”

I couldn’t see him in the darkness, but I could hear the smile in his voice. “Yep, it’s a complicated situation. But eight years later, I’m happier than I ever thought I could be. I wouldn’t change anything for the world. Even though I’m the guy with the name on her birth certificate, Harrison and Archer are her



father just as much as me. None of us more than any other. We're our own weird little mercenary family."

He trailed off, and I thought about how sweet that all was. They were the most unconventional family I'd ever heard of, but it made me so happy that they had found a way to make it work.

"Granted, it's tough to have normal lives," Jordy added. "Having a daughter makes it tough to date. Or at least, *tougher*. Lots of women don't want to get involved with a man who already had a child, to say nothing of the complications of adding two other men into the mix. Archer dated a woman a few years ago who was madly in love with him, but didn't like the idea of him sharing a daughter with us. In the end, Archer chose us over her, but it stung for a while." The bed shifted as he shook his head. "Kaylee keeps us grounded, though. We rarely select dangerous missions because of her. It feels different when we're potentially leaving behind a daughter if anything bad happens. That's tough, because the highest-paying jobs are always the most dangerous ones. That's why we're doing these three jobs back-to-back. To fill our accounts for several years and give us some breathing room to be more selective with missions. Maybe we'll have the flexibility to quit altogether."

He let out a long sigh. "I've talked your ear off. Sorry about that."

"No! Don't apologize. I'm the one who asked. And it's nice knowing your full situation."

A silence fell over us. I glanced over in the darkness; Jordy was just a silhouette, but he was laying on his back with one arm behind his head.

I was already attracted to Jordy. That went without saying. But knowing all of this, how he had risked his life and military career to save a helpless child, who he was now raising... it was too much. The cavewoman part of my brain was screaming at me to pounce on him before someone else did. To roll over in bed and turn last night's dream into a reality.

But I stared at the ceiling and second-guessed myself. It was tough to make the first move. Especially since I had already made the first move at the gym, and was rejected. Granted, I was rejected for a legitimate reason, but it still made it difficult for me to do anything *now*.

“Hey, Trish?” he whispered.

“Jordy.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“It’s only fair, after I asked you about Kaylee,” I replied.

He didn’t say anything for a long while. Another water pipe shifted in the wall. I held my breath and wondered what he would ask.

“Can I kiss you?”

# 14



## Trish

It took a few seconds for his words to register. “Kiss me?”

Jordy twisted to face me. “Yeah. I really want to kiss you. And after everything that happened on the job today... I don’t give a shit about the consequences.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. My body was failing me when I should have been screaming yes, yes I want you to kiss me, you big muscular man! Instead, I bobbed my head yes, and that must have gotten the idea across because Jordy removed the pillow barrier and slid closer to me. I turned onto my side to face him, and our skin connected—toes mingling, arms brushing together.

Jordy crushed his lips against mine with magnetic attraction. Forehead to forehead, nose to nose, we kissed under the warmth of the covers. He slid a hand across my arm, testing the way I felt underneath his fingertips, and eventually wrapping it around the back of my neck to hold me against him. His lips were heady and addictive, sweeter than the finest wine, and soon I was drunk off the taste of Jordy. His mouth churned hungrily against mine in the darkness, a mouth I had been fantasizing about at the gym for months, and was finally claiming for my own.

We were panting as we finally pulled away from each other. Our faces were mere inches apart, and his hazel eyes searched mine. I couldn’t think of what to say, what words were adequate for the moment after our first kiss, and all I could think about was: *I want more of you.*

My eyes must have told him what I wanted, because he pushed me back and slid on top of me and renewed the kiss with a vengeance. My senses were alive as he molded his body against mine, hard and hot and everything I had ever imagined a man to be. As he devoured me with kisses I surged upward with need, spreading my legs and arching my back, desperate to feel the weight of him through my pajama bottoms. His cock was a stiff rod of heat against my belly, impossible to ignore even through the fabric of his underwear, a beacon of sexual desire that was entirely due to *me*.

His tongue forced its way into my mouth, conquering and claiming. I moaned softly, and he responded with a rumble of pleasure from deep within his throat, vibrating from his tongue to mine. My body was on fire with desire, pleasure pinging from him to me with every passionate kiss.

In his arms I felt warm and safe and intimate, on the other side of the world from home.

Jordy tore his lips away from mine and gasped, "I need you, Trish." He held my gaze for the briefest of moments and then pulled my shirt off. He peeled my pajama bottoms away, the cool air on my skin for a brief moment before he covered me again with his warm body. I reached between us to remove his underwear, because I was totally nude and he wasn't, a situation which needed to be remedied as quickly as possible. They were terrible, *oppressive* boxer-briefs that I hated with every ounce of my being. But before I could remove them, he slid lower on the bed, kissing a trail down my neck.

"Ohh," I moaned as he nuzzled at one of my nipples, tongue flicking out against it, sending new pulses of electricity through my body. Then he was sliding even lower, powerful hands exploring me along the way, digging into my skin with need. I felt his hot breath on my sex, which made me shiver and close my legs instinctively, but he pushed his way in between my thighs.

The moment his tongue brushed against my clit, my entire body melted against him. Nerve endings I didn't even know I had fired off in my brain. I had to clench my eyes shut as he

began eating me out with more and more enthusiasm, devouring me like he had been *starving* for me.

For once in my life, I was able to stop thinking about what we were doing and just let it happen. I was safe in his arms, safe and *very* well taken care of. Jordy's tongue slid up and down my soaked entrance, around my clit, and back down again. He wrapped his powerful arms around my thighs as he pressed his face against my pussy, and I thrust my hips into him with every caress of his tongue. And when I felt my climax nearing, rather than slipping away like it often did, it rushed toward me before I knew what was happening. The orgasm dragged me off the cliff and into an abyss of pure ecstasy, my back arching violently and my legs wrapping around Jordy's head, and I bit down on my lip to keep from waking everyone else in the condo.

Jordy kissed his way back up to my neck as I recovered myself. Sweat beaded on my temple and I struggled to catch my breath.

"You... are... really good at that," I managed to say.

He grinned down at me roguishly. "Where I come from, a man always takes care of a lady before it's his turn."

"Speaking of that..." I reached between us and squeezed his cock through his underwear. It pulsed at my touch, and he let out a soft sigh that stirred my hair.

"Trish?" he breathed. "We don't have to."

I gave a start. "Why the hell not? I'm on birth control, if that's what you're worried about."

He furrowed his brow, which accentuated the lines around his hazel eyes. "I really like you, Trish. I don't want to ruin any chances of something between us by doing too much, too fast."

I groaned. "Did you carefully craft that sentence to make me want you even more?"

"I'm serious. I've rushed into stuff before. I want to make sure I don't make that mistake again."

“And *I’m* serious that if I don’t feel you inside me right now,” I replied, “I’m going to scream.”

He grinned. “Hopefully I can make you scream for another reason, then.”

Jordy slipped out of his underwear, then kissed me tenderly. I could taste myself on his lips, especially as he deepened the kiss and molded his body against mine. I reached between us again and found his cock, hot and hard and smooth. I stroked it gently while guiding it between my lips, moving it up and down. Coating it with my juices. Despite what I said about needing him immediately, I was enjoying teasing it out. I could feel the tension in his body on top of mine, the anticipation of feeling me from the inside. As much as I ached for him, that anticipation was turning me on even more.

“I don’t think I can handle much more of this,” he groaned into me.

“Then don’t,” I whispered back. “Do whatever you want with me.” I gazed up at him through my eyelashes. “How do you want me?”

Jordy grinned. “This is how I want you,” he said, rolling me onto my side away from him. I squeaked as he guided his cock into me from behind—I was sopping wet and he slid right in, his thickness pressing tight against my inner walls. I opened my jaw in a silent cry of ecstasy as I savored the way we were finally joined together, two bodies molded into one.

“God,” he groaned into the back of my head. “You feel better than I ever could have imagined.”

Still on my side, I twisted my head around so that I could kiss him. I jammed my tongue into his mouth, and then when his began to swirl against mine I pulled it into my mouth and sucked it between my lips, like I was giving his tongue a miniature blowjob.

He responded by increasing his pace, fucking me harder. Hair from his happy trail tickled my ass as he slid in and out, wet and thick and full.

The angle was intense, but exactly the right amount that I needed. Soon I was arching my back and shoving my ass against him, meeting his stroke halfway.

“Trish.” My name was a prayer and a curse on his lips.

“Yes,” I moaned. “Harder. Fuck me. Just like that. Harder! *Don't stop!*”

He didn't. He pumped faster and faster until his fingers were digging into my hip, and then he cried out with ecstasy and pushed as deep as he could, coming deep inside of me, filling me with his warmth.

I twisted around again and kissed him as he came, the passion in our lips diminishing in time with the throbbing spurts of his cock. We slumped over into the pillows, too spent to move.

I savored the feeling of his dick inside me, slowly deflating while I squeezed it tight. I didn't want him to leave me.

“You intended for this to happen, didn't you?” I asked.

He vibrated with silent laughter that I felt through our conjoined skin. “All I wanted was a good night's sleep in a comfortable bed. I swear.”

We closed our eyes and enjoyed the peaceful, quiet moment for a while.

Normally, I wouldn't *dare* to tease someone in bed. You just never knew how a guy might react. But I felt like I could be myself around Jordy, and the moment called for some lighthearted teasing.

“So,” I said evenly. “Was I just that good, or do you normally only last a few minutes?”

His shocked reaction made me burst out laughing.

“You're not very funny,” he said.

I gave him a challenging look. “Who says I'm joking?”

He grinned mischievously. “Then I guess we'll have to do it again.”

“What are you waiting for?”

I squealed as he dove back on top of me.



# 15



## Trish

It was nice to have a private bathroom attached to my room as I went and cleaned up. Having to make that walk down the hallway would have been *very* awkward if I ran into Harrison or Archer. Granted, they would have no way of knowing what Jordy and I had done. But I still wondered if they would be able to tell.

I exited and Jordy took his turn, giving my ass a playful little squeeze in passing. I tried to grab his chiseled butt right back, but he quickly jumped out of the way and flashed me a victorious smirk before closing the door.

When he came out a minute later, he stopped at the edge of the bed. “What’s this?”

“What?” I asked innocently. He looked magnificent nude, with his V-shaped torso and broad shoulders and tan skin. Not to mention the beautiful cock hanging between his legs, still semi-hard after our fun.

He pointed. “You put the pillow barrier back up.”

“I’ve had my fun, now I’m done with you,” I teased, rolling over. “Please respect my boundaries while I sleep. Goodnight.”

Jordy cursed and crawled into bed, then hurled the body pillow across the room. “You can’t get away that easily,” he said, wrapping an arm over my body and spooning me. He held me tight against his chest, and I leaned back into him and sighed happily.

“I can’t believe we just did that,” I said. “Twice.”

“Me neither,” he rumbled into my ear. “But I’m glad we did.”

“Was it just today’s excitement that made you want to kiss me?”

He snorted. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for a long time.”

“How long?”

“Since I first saw you at the gym,” he admitted. “This was weeks before we ran into each other by the kettlebells. You were doing standing military press with a barbell, and your face was all scrunched up in concentration. Lips pursed together in a pout. I tried not to be all creepy about it, because I know women don’t like being ogled at the gym, but from that point on I couldn’t get you out of my head.”

“Why didn’t you ever ask me out?”

“Like I said: women don’t like being ogled at the gym,” he replied. “I was trying to respect that. And then when *you* asked *me* out...” He let out a groan that was every bit as sexual as a few minutes ago. “Confidence is hot. Men never get asked out. So when it *does* happen, it fucking rocks.”

“I’m glad you think so. It took a lot for me to even ask someone like you out!”

“Someone like me?”

“Uh, duh? A fucking hunk!”

Jordy chuckled. “I’m already in bed, Trish. You don’t need to flatter me.”

I twisted out of his embrace to face him. “Flattery? Now you’re just being obtuse. You’re absolutely *jacked*. Look at you.” I traced a fingernail over his chest. “You’ve got great pecs, and a six-pack. But then you have muscles *here*, between the two. I didn’t know a guy could even *have* muscles there! It took every bit of courage I had to ask you out.”

Jordy’s brown eyes sparkled in the darkness. “Oh yeah? Well, what about you?”

“What about me? I’m average looking, at best.”

His palm slid over the curve of my hip. “There are a lot of good looking women at our gym. There’s that group of CrossFit girls who come in to use the treadmills between their other workouts. And the UNCW volleyball team that lifts weights on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“This is a really weird way to compliment the girl you just had sex with,” I warned.

“What I’m getting at,” he quickly said, “is that there’s a lot of eye candy at the gym. But despite that, my eyes are always drawn to you like a beacon. I can appreciate a good-looking body and then ignore it, but you? It’s a struggle *not* to check you out the whole time I’m lifting weights. If I’m a hunk, you’re a bombshell.”

I was glad that the darkness hid my blush. “Bombshells usually have bigger boobs.”

He barked a laugh. “I love your boobs.” As if he needed to prove it, he cupped one of them, then leaned down to plant a wet kiss on my cleavage. “It’s a perfect handful. Anything more than that is just excessive.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. “I wish fourteen-year-old me could hear you say that. I was so self-conscious about my boobs back then.”

“I bet you were hot back then. I definitely would have been into you.” Jordy’s smile disappeared. “I mean, not that I’m into fourteen-year-olds. That’s gross. I meant if I was a teenager, and you were a teenager...”

I kissed him to shut him up. “You’re cute when you’re awkward.” I rolled back over to let him spoon me again, and he immediately obliged. I liked the way his soft cock pressed against my ass.

“Now we need to figure out what to do,” he whispered.

“I think we should go to sleep. Then wake up and have breakfast.”

“I mean what to do about *us*.”

“Why do we have to do anything?” I asked.

“Well... here’s the thing. Archer was adamant that nothing happen between us while we’re on this trip. So by sleeping together tonight, I kind of broke my promise to him.”

I groaned. “So Archer’s going to be mad at me for wooing you with my feminine charms? Great.”

“Let me assure you: all of his blame will be directed at me. If anything, he’ll assume I wooed *you* with my... what did you call it? Hunkitude?”

“I don’t think that’s a word,” I said with a laugh. “But yes, I called you a hunk. And regarding what to do... I don’t think we can keep it from him. I’m bad at hiding things from people. I get all nervous and sweaty!”

“I was afraid of that.”

“Let’s tell him the truth,” I insisted. “It happened. Both of us wanted it to happen. We’re all adults here. We can keep things professional, no matter what happens.”

“So if I told you I’ve had my fill of you,” he whispered in my ear, “and don’t want to have sex again? You’d be okay, and continue taking care of Kaylee during the rest of our contracts?”

“Of course,” I said. “But that’s not true, right?”

“Definitely not true.”

I snuggled up against him. “Oh thank God. Because I *definitely* want to do it again.”

\*

“You stupid, bloody idiot,” Archer growled.

We were sitting around the kitchen table eating breakfast. Kaylee was still asleep, and it was about time for me to wake her up. Although not until we had finished having this conversation.

“Geez, tell me how you really feel,” Jordy muttered.

“If I tell you how I really feel, I’ll make our daughter cry.” He tossed the rest of his piece of toast onto his plate in disgust. “I had one request. One stipulation for this entire nanny arrangement. And you couldn’t keep that promise.”

“It’s as much my fault as his,” I explained. “Maybe even more so. I’m the one who invited him to share the bed.”

Archer swung his icy blue gaze in my direction. “This isn’t a new thing. Jordy has done this before.”

“What?” I asked. “You’ve slept with Kaylee’s nanny before?”

“No!” Jordy sputtered.

Harrison chuckled while shoveling cereal into his mouth.

“I’ve never done this before!” Jordy protested. “Archer means I develop crushes on women whenever we go out on a contract. But nothing like this has ever happened.”

Archer shook his head. “I should send them back to the states. It’s the safest thing to do. We tried to make this work, and now it’s time to go back to the original plan.”

“We can keep it professional!” I insisted. “My top priority is taking care of Kaylee. I won’t let anything else get in the way of that. You have my word.”

Archer picked up his mug of tea, saw that it was empty, and slammed it back down. “This is a complication. Complications lead to other issues we cannot predict. The safest thing to do is send you and Kaylee home.”

“You’re just mad he macked on your crush first,” Harrison said around a mouthful of cereal.

All three of us turned to look at the bearded man.

“That’s...” Archer said. “You’re completely out of line. And even if that were true—which it’s not—it wouldn’t change the fact that having Kaylee here is a—”

“No,” Harrison interrupted. He drank the rest of the milk straight out of his bowl, then wiped his mouth with a sleeve.

When he locked eyes with Archer, his gaze was as hard as steel. “Kaylee stays.”

The two of them remained in a standoff for several heartbeats. Then Harrison calmly slid back his chair, stood up, and carried his bowl into the kitchen.

*That’s a man who gets what he wants,* I thought while listening to his heavy footsteps. That kind of alpha-male attitude would have been incredibly sexy except that Harrison still felt like an untrained dog who might bite me at any moment.

“Guess it’s settled,” Jordy said with an awkward smile. “Seriously though, I want to echo what Trish already said. We won’t let this change anything about the situation. We’ll try to keep...”

He trailed off as Archer got up and left the table.

“Hey, about what Harrison said,” I began, but then I heard footsteps on the stairs. Kaylee was trudging down while rubbing the sleep out of her eye with a fist.

“Good morning, sweetie!” Jordy said. “We were just about to go get you.”

“I was really tired,” she said.

“It’s the jet lag,” he explained. “Sometimes it takes people a while to get used to being on a new sleep schedule. Let me make you some pancakes to wake you up.”

She brightened. “I want to help! Can I stir the batter?”

Jordy made a face at her. “I don’t know. Stirring the batter is a *really* important job...”

While he watched her, I went upstairs and took a shower. I thought about what Harrison had said. Did Archer have a small crush on me, too? That didn’t seem right. He had always been polite at the gym, but never outwardly friendly, like Jordy.

I returned downstairs and helped Kaylee finish her breakfast. When she was done, I spotted Jordy making a snack by himself in the kitchen.

“Hey, real quick,” I whispered. “Did Harrison mean what he said about Archer? Or was he just making a joke?”

Jordy chuckled. “Sort of, kind of. We both thought of you as our gym crush. We used to joke about which of us you would rather date. Honestly, I thought he had the upper hand, having a fancy accent and all. Until you asked me out.”

“English accents are definitely hot,” I admitted. “My friend Lisa is going to be devastated when she hears about this. She’s been fantasizing about Blondie for months.”

Jordy flinched. “Blondie?”

*Shit.*

“Our nickname for him,” I replied. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

He gave me an evil smirk. “No promises.”

We gathered by the garage door to say goodbye as the men left for the peace conference. Each of them took a moment to say goodbye to Kaylee. Then they disappeared into the garage.

Kaylee immediately ran upstairs to get her laptop so she could play Minecraft. I was wondering what I was going to do with myself when the garage door opened again and Jordy appeared.

“Forget something?” I asked.

He swept me into his arms and gave me a long, passionate kiss. The kind of kiss that usually leads to more than just kissing. I felt lightheaded when he finally let go, and I knew there was a goofy grin on my face.

“If you called Archer Blondie,” Jordy asked, “then what was my nickname?”

“Brownie,” I replied.

“I should have guessed. I like it.” He winked. “Later, Kettlebells.”

# 16



## Archer

I had thick skin. I didn't get embarrassed easily. It came from when I was pudgier than the other boys in school and had to hear their jokes and laughs. I rarely let a comment get to me.

But what Harrison said at breakfast left me flustered. I kept my feelings to myself about most things, and did not appreciate having them carelessly expressed in front of others. Especially in front of Trish, the subject of the comment.

Jordy went back inside, then returned to the garage. He hopped in the passenger seat and said, "Okay, let's go."

"No coffee?" I asked.

Jordy tilted his head like a confused German Shepherd. "Coffee?"

"Your excuse for going back inside. You said you wanted to get a mug of coffee to go. Yet here you are, without coffee."

"He wanted something hot and stiff all right," Harrison said in the back seat.

"Just start driving," Jordy said with a smile.

I pulled out of the garage and began the quick commute to the peace conference.

"Please tell me you didn't do anything in front of our daughter," I finally said.

"Of course not," he replied. "I made sure she was in another room."



“At least you have enough sense for that,” I muttered. “Don’t need Kaylee asking questions about that. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

Jordy rolled his eyes. “It’s not a big deal. We can tell her that daddy has a special lady friend.”

“Who happens to be her nanny,” I added, “which is already a motherly position in her life. It complicates things.”

“I’m agreeing with you! That’s why I made sure she was in another room. Chill out, bro.”

“Archie hasn’t been chill since we got in the car,” Harrison said.

I glanced at him in the rear-view mirror. “Because I don’t appreciate what you said at breakfast.”

“What’d he say at breakfast?” Jordy asked.

“That I had a crush on Trish too. Which is completely untrue.”

Harrison barked a laugh. Jordy gave me a skeptical look.

“It was a *minor* crush,” I said defensively. “I fancied her whenever we saw her at the gym. That’s it. And it doesn’t matter now, since she’s with Jordy.”

“They ain’t married,” Harrison replied. “Just a hookup so far.”

Jordy twisted around. “Hey! It feels like more than a hookup.”

“She don’t belong to you,” Harrison reiterated. “Unless you’re official. And if you aren’t willing to be public around Kaylee, then you aren’t official in my book.”

“I’m certainly not going to make a move on our nanny, not least because she’s now involved with my best mate,” I said. “And I’m sure Trish feels the same way.”

Harrison snorted. “If roles were reversed, and I was bunking with three Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders for a while, I’d have as much fun as I could. That’s all I’m saying.”

I thought about that on the drive into the city. Harrison had a point, but it was still an oversimplification. We weren't cheerleaders. We were mercenaries. Sure, we rarely took dangerous contracts anymore, but we still led a rough life.

*And our second contract will put us in more danger, I thought. And the third...*

The rest of our contract in Oslo was delightfully uneventful. Aside from a few false alarms, we didn't see anything suspicious at the conference. That bored Harrison to death, but it was exactly what I had hoped for.

And at home, Trish and Jordy kept their word. They were totally respectful, and pretended like nothing was going on when they were around Kaylee. Trish seemed completely devoted to her job of nannying our daughter, and Jordy never made any sly innuendo or gave Trish sexy glances or gropes when he thought nobody was looking. And at night, if they did anything, they were quiet enough that the rest of us couldn't hear. Overall, everything felt normal.

But I still found myself put off by the entire situation. For a while, I assumed this was because I was mad at Jordy for breaking his promise. He was very good at finding ways to annoy me, and this time he had really outdone himself. Even if the two of them were behaving themselves, the situation was far from ideal.

Yet after a while, I realized it was more than just annoyance at Jordy letting his dick do his thinking for him. I felt especially upset whenever I glanced at Trish.

*I'm jealous.*

As much as I hated to admit it, Harrison was right. At least, partly so. I was jealous that Jordy had made a move on Trish and I hadn't. I was jealous she asked him out at the gym instead of me. And whenever I admired the curve of Trish's figure in her tight blue jeans, I was jealous that Jordy got to feel the smooth skin underneath.

It went deeper than that, too. Trish took incredible care of our daughter, like she was her own. Every action, every word,

every gesture she made with the girl was motherly and loving. It came natural to her, and it reassured me that Kaylee truly was in good hands.

And of course, it only made me want Trish more. Because any love interest I might ever have wasn't just a potential lover to me—she was a potential mother figure for my daughter. Seeing Trish with Kaylee fulfilled that half of the bargain in my mind. Arguably, the more difficult half. Dating was difficult as a single father, and yet this situation just sort of *worked*.

Except that Jordy had made the first move.

As the days went on, I wondered if things could have been different. If I had been proactive and asked her out at the gym, rather than keep to my plan of waiting until after we returned from our long trip. What would my life look like? Would I be happy? It was further complicated by the fact that Trish was bright and friendly to me every day, every bit as much as she was to Jordy.

*It doesn't matter now, I thought. Whatever chance I had is gone.*

The peace conference ended without much fanfare or excitement. We went through a debriefing with the head of security, signed various documents to end the contract, and then went home to pack everything up. Normally, this routine at the end of a contract would be filled with relief and excitement. But this time we weren't going home; we were flying to the next mission.

We were checking in at the airport when I got a notification on my phone that the wire transfer for our contract had gone through. That lifted my spirits, as it always did.

*A few more jobs like that and maybe we can think about retiring.*

“Istanbul,” Trish said when I handed out the boarding passes. “Not Constantinople?”

“That's nobody's business but the Turks,” I replied, completing the song lyrics.

Jordy frowned at each of us. “What was that about?”

“It’s an old song by They Might Be Giants.”

“They might be what?” he said. “Is that a band name?”

Trish shared a look at me and laughed. “So, what’s in Istanbul?”

“We will discuss it when we get somewhere private,” I replied.

“Ugh. Fine, fine. I get it.” But while we waited at the gate, I saw Trish do a Google search for peace conferences in Istanbul.

We boarded our flight and took our seats in the economy section. “What, no fancy first class pods this time?” Trish asked.

“It’s only a quick trip across Europe,” I replied. “Like flying from Wilmington to Dallas.”

“I’ve become accustomed to a certain amount of luxury,” she replied with a wink.

*Oh, don’t do that, I thought. Don’t make my heart do somersaults.*

I helped Kaylee with her seatbelt and avoided looking in Trish’s direction.

# 17



## Archer

The flight to Istanbul was quick. Kaylee and I spent most of the trip playing hangman on a piece of paper. I was constantly amazed to see how much smarter she had gotten within the last year, especially with spelling and writing. That was probably my favorite part of being a father: watching her grow up. Turning into an actual human with thoughts and intelligence and opinions. I couldn't imagine what she would be like in another year or two, to say nothing of when she became a teenager. I didn't want to think about that at all.

We landed in Istanbul and breezed through security. Our passports had a special clearance in most of the NATO countries that allowed us to travel without many questions, for which I was grateful. Without that, all it would take was one ornery customs agent to ruin an entire contract.

We had another vehicle waiting at the airport. The five of us piled inside and I drove out to the home we were renting in Maslak, a suburb on the northern outskirts of Istanbul itself.

"I couldn't help but notice there weren't crates of *equipment* waiting in the vehicle, like in Oslo," Trish said.

"We don't need any for this mission," I replied.

"Oh, good! That means it's less dangerous, right?"

Jordy and Harrison rumbled with laughter. Trish frowned at them.

"What am I missing?" she asked.

I glanced in the mirror to make sure Kaylee was wearing her headphones before answering. “Istanbul is our base of operations, because we have a fake contract here to use as an alibi. Our contract involves flying from here to... another country. And then assisting in training the local armed forces there on how to use modern NATO weaponry. The equipment we’ll be training them on is already in place.”

“Way to be vague about it,” Trish said. “Where could you go from here? Across the Black Sea into Russia?”

“Absolutely not,” I immediately replied. “We are *not* working with Russia.”

“Kind of the opposite, actually,” Jordy added.

Trish was quiet for a few moments. “So it’s Ukraine, then?”

Neither of us replied. The only sound was Kaylee’s fingers tapping on her iPad.

“Yup,” Harrison finally said.

“Oh,” she said. “That does sound dangerous.”

“Eh, it shouldn’t be too bad,” Jordy said. “I really like these kinds of missions. Helping other people protect themselves. Like being a teacher. It’s fulfilling, you know?”

“As long as you don’t get attacked!” Trish said.

“We will not be anywhere near the front lines,” I explained. “We cannot tell you more than that, but you do not have anything to worry about.”

Our accommodations were at a private residence at the top of a hill overlooking Maslak, with a hint of Istanbul itself visible to the south. There was an electric gate with a keycode to get onto the property. Kaylee went running inside as soon as we had parked.

“It’s so big!” she shouted from one of the distant rooms. “We all have our own bedrooms to sleep in!”

Trish and Jordy shared a private smile.

As before, the fridge and freezer were stocked with enough food to last a full month. Our contract should only last three

weeks, but it was good to be prepared depending on how our contract went.

Tired from the travel, everyone went to bed early. I fell asleep quickly, and when I woke the next morning, I realized I had dreamed about Trish all night. I couldn't remember any specifics, aside from the fact that they weren't sexual dreams, but I was certain she was there in every single one of my dreams.

"Morning!" she said happily when I ran into her in the kitchen.

"Good morning," I replied while searching for the tea cupboard. She had such a bright, genuine smile, that it was impossible not to feel my spirits lifted.

After our morning routine, the three of us prepared to leave for the airfield. "I don't really like helicopters," Trish said while we said our goodbyes. "I've heard horror stories about crashes..."

"Don't worry; Archer is a pro," Jordy said.

"Indeed I am."

"Just text me when you arrive safely?" she insisted. "So I know nothing bad happened?"

"Something bad might happen?" Kaylee said as she came around the corner from her room.

"Of course not, half-pint," Harrison said while sweeping her up into his arms. "We'll be back for dinner." He began smothering her with kisses, and she squealed and laughed and complained that his beard was scratchy.

"Unfortunately, we cannot text once we arrive," I explained. "In fact, I'll be collecting our SIM cards once we arrive at the airfield."

Trish looked deflated. "Okay. I guess I understand." She lowered her voice so Kaylee couldn't hear. "But please be safe?"

"We will."

Jordy gave her a hug, and said, “Oh, by the way. I arranged a surprise for you and Kaylee today. When Mehmet arrives at the gate this morning, let him in. You can trust him.”

“Oh, okay!” Trish gave him another hug. Then, after a short pause, she hugged me, too. Her body was warm and soft and fit perfectly in my arms, so much so that it took an effort to make myself let go. She glanced at Harrison, who stared back at her defiantly, and then gave him a little wave instead.

We drove to the airfield in silence, removed our SIM cards and placed them in a locker, then boarded a Sikorsky S-61R transport helicopter. It was the same model used primarily for search and rescue in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, and hopefully wouldn’t arouse any suspicion. It was also a model in which I had over a thousand flight hours logged.

As we took off and headed north, I sighed happily. It felt good to be piloting a helicopter. The last few missions hadn’t required it, and it was a muscle that I loved to stretch. If we ever *did* get a chance to retire from the mercenary life, I would want to do something that involved flying. I had no idea what, though.

*That is a problem for the future. For now, I need to focus on the present.*

We stopped in Constanta, Romania to refuel before continuing the rest of the way into Ukraine. Crossing over into their airspace brought with it a tingling sense of anxiety. We were now in an active war zone. Granted, we were well behind the front lines where the combat was taking place, but still. It also reminded me of the last time we were in this part of the world, back in 2014 when we had escaped Crimea in a hurry as Russia invaded.

A cluster of Ukrainian officers were waiting at the airfield. After a short introduction, Harrison and Jordy were led off to the rest of the base. I didn’t join them; my job was to be prepared to depart at a moment’s notice, so I returned to the helicopter and settled in.

And then my thoughts immediately returned to Trish. I wished I could text her. Not only to let her know we had



arrived safely, but because I wanted to talk to her.

*There might be a way*, I realized as I examined the on-board equipment.

# 18



## Trish

The guys had been gone for about half an hour when there came a buzz from the intercom by the front door. I pressed the button that looked right and said, “Uh, hello?”

“This is Mehmet,” came a man’s response. “I am at your gate.”

“Oh! Right! Let me buzz you through...”

Mehmet pulled up to the front in a black town car. He was in his fifties or sixties, and wore casual clothes. He gave me a slight bow as we made introductions.

“Mr. Jordan arranged for a private tour of Istanbul for you and Kaylee today,” he said in fluent English tinged with a Turkish accent. His smile was warm and inviting. “It should last approximately three hours.”

I helped Kaylee get dressed and then we got into the back of the town car. As we made the short drive into the city, Mehmet gave us a quick history of Istanbul. From the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire, all the way through the Ottoman Empire, to modern times.

As he parked the car and we got out, I felt very intimidated about being in a new city. Especially one so culturally different than anything I had ever been in! I was keenly aware that I was a sheltered American without any world experience. But after about ten minutes walking through a city square, I felt completely safe. We walked around street markets and popped into shops. Then we made our way to the Hagia Sofia, where Mehmet gave us a private tour of the mosque. Kaylee

thought it was neat that we had to take our shoes off before entering certain parts.

The only exception was when we were walking back through a public square to where our car was parked. The hair on the back of my neck went stiff, and I got the distinct impression I was being watched. I quickly turned around and thought I saw someone staring at me from a distant alleyway. But then I blinked, and after the flow of pedestrians in the square had ebbed, the figure was gone.

*I'm being paranoid, I thought. Who would follow a nanny from North Carolina?*

Mehmet drove us around the city, and then we headed back home. Kaylee asked him lots of questions about the country. Apparently she had been learning about world capitals in school, and she was curious why Ankara was the capital of Turkey rather than Istanbul. Mehmet was patient and friendly and answered her questions better than I possibly could have.

After we said our goodbyes and went inside, I put Kaylee down for a nap. And as I closed her bedroom door, my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was a text from an unknown number.

**UNKNOWN:** We arrived safe and sound. No need to worry.

**Me:** Jordy?

**UNKNOWN:** This is Archer, actually.

**Me:** I thought you weren't supposed to text?

**UNKNOWN:** I found a way to use our vehicle WIFI as a hotspot with a VPN to hide the location. Along those lines, please

don't use any location specifics in the chat, just to be safe.

I settled into the couch and frowned at the screen.

**Me:** This feels like a test to make sure I don't blow your cover. How do I know this is really you?

**Archer:** Here's something only the real me would know: Jordy and I used to refer to you as Kettlebells. And you nicknamed us Blondie and Brownie.

**Me:** UGH, no! I told Jordy not to tell you that!

**Archer:** You should have denied it. Now I'm never going to let you live that down. ;-)

**Archer:** How was your tour of the city?

**Me:** So much fun! I was nervous at first, but Mehmet made me feel comfortable. I had Turkish coffee four hours ago, and I'm still jittery from all the caffeine.

**Archer:** Was Kaylee well behaved?

**Me:** Mostly! She threw a little temper tantrum when I wouldn't let her have any of my coffee.

**Archer:** You should have given her a tiny sip. That would change her mind real quick.

**Me:** And then have a caffeine-reinforced child to watch during the rest of the tour? No thank you!

Archer didn't respond for a while, and I wondered if our conversation was over. He was probably busy, after all. But then he finally responded.

**Archer:** I'm really glad you're here, Trish. When we put our lives in danger, no matter how small, it makes us miss our daughter even more. It's soothing knowing I'm going to get to see her again tonight. I'm sorry if I gave you the impression I didn't want you to come on the trip. I did, I just didn't know if it was the best thing for Kaylee.

**Me:** No apology needed. Jordy does seem awfully headstrong.

**Archer:** That is the truest statement anyone has ever made in history.

**Me:** Okay, seriously though, why are you texting me? Shouldn't you be doing... stuff? Sorry, I almost texted more than I should have.

**Archer:** Good catch. And no, I'm basically sitting on my hands all day. I really ought to bring a book.

**Me:** You can borrow my Kindle if you want. I have all the Twilight books!

**Archer:** Oh God, you read that drivel?

**Me:** Hey! Sometimes a girl just wants to fantasize about a vampire and a werewolf fighting for her love!

**Archer:** I never understood those stories with love triangle drama.

**Me:** You're a guy. I would probably hate them if I were you.

**Archer:** No, I mean I don't understand why there's so much drama about it. If a woman is struggling to choose, then why not date both of them?

**Me:** LOL, if only that was an option.

**Archer:** Why isn't it?

**Me:** Um, because any woman who does that would be called a slut?

**Archer:** Polyamory has become quite a bit more popular in recent years. Society isn't as judgmental as it used to be.

**Me:** Polyamory just feels like an excuse to sleep around. Or only for people who are afraid of commitment. I doubt anyone has actually done it in real life and been successful.

Archer didn't respond after that, which gave me a weird vibe. Like I had touched on a nerve somehow. But I couldn't understand why. Archer didn't seem like the kind of guy who would get easily offended about Twilight, of all things. So I chalked it up to him suddenly getting preoccupied at whatever job they were doing.

The guys got home that night around seven, just as I was getting dinner out of the oven. Kaylee screamed happily and hugged her three dads in the other room. Each of them poked their heads into the kitchen in passing.

"Dinner is ready whenever you guys are," I said.

The guys went upstairs to shower, but not before Jordy darted into the kitchen and gave me a quick kiss before Kaylee could see. Archer was watching from the hallway, and gave a little smile at the sight.

When they came down ten minutes later, Harrison wasn't with them. "He went right to bed," Jordy explained as we sat down at the table.

"He doesn't want dinner?" I asked.

Archer grabbed the serving spoon. "I trust Harrison to decide what order he wants to fulfill his basic needs. Don't worry—he won't starve."

“Daddy says he’s like a bear,” Kaylee happily announced. “Sometimes he needs to hibernate when he’s really tired!”

“It was a long day,” Jordy told me.

We ate while Kaylee explained all the fun we had on our tour of Istanbul. “And you felt safe the whole time?” Archer asked.

I nodded. “Perfectly safe. And not just because Mehmet was with us the entire time. Although there was one moment where I felt like I was being watched. Probably paranoia.”

“If I was a local, I’d watch you too,” Jordy said with a secret little wink over Kaylee’s head.

After dinner, the guys took over playing with Kaylee, so I grabbed my Kindle and curled up on the couch. Archer eyed my eReader and teasingly rolled his eyes. I glared back at him; I wasn’t even reading *Twilight* right now.

A little bit later, Kaylee came over and tugged on my sleeve. “Want to play Dutch Blitz with us?”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I’ll show you! It’s *so much fun*.”

I joined the three of them at the kitchen table, which had been cleaned away to make room for a special deck of cards. Kaylee explained how to play—with the help of her two dads. It was like a combination of Uno and Solitaire, where the objective was to stack cards together to gain points. Except it was done quickly and all at the same time, which made it a little chaotic.

Jordy and Archer played slowly for Kaylee’s benefit, and I mimicked their speed as well. The game was simple and fun, and each round only lasted a few minutes. After a few rounds, I felt my competitive nature kicking in, and I had to remind myself to slow down to give Kaylee a chance.

In one of the later rounds, I grabbed one of my cards—a red six—and quickly placed it on top of a red five in the middle of the table. Archer tried to do the same thing, but was half a second too slow, and slapped his own red six down on top of



mine. We made eye contact and laughed, but his hand lingered on top of mine for a few seconds before he removed it.

*Stop it, I told myself. It doesn't matter if he had a crush on me at the gym. I slept with Jordy. I've made my choice.*

But I couldn't help but remember what Archer had said about the Twilight love triangle, and I wondered if he was trying to hint at something...

# 19



## Trish

We tucked Kaylee into bed and came back downstairs to play a round of Dutch Blitz with just the adults. It was a *lot* more fast-paced with just the three of us, and I soon learned that Archer was very competitive.

“He hates losing,” Jordy whispered to me, although he said it loudly so the Englishman could hear. “Puts him in a terrible mood.”

“My mood is just fine,” Archer replied curtly while shuffling his cards between rounds.

“Hey, speaking of moods,” I said. “When we were texting today, you suddenly cut off. That wasn’t because of anything I said, right?”

Jordy sat up straighter. “You were texting? But you made us hand over our SIM cards!”

“I connected using WIFI and a VPN,” Archer replied.

“You see?” Jordy said to me. “How the rules only apply to us and not him?”

“I do not understand why you are complaining. You and Harrison spent the entire day training Ukrainians. There was no time for texting.”

“We had a few breaks!” Jordy complained.

Archer shook his head and turned to me. “You didn’t upset me. I simply did not want to discuss it by text anymore.”

“Discuss what?” Jordy asked.

“I mentioned that I was reading Twilight, and he said that Bella could have solved all of her problems if she got into a polyamorous relationship with Edward and Jacob.”

Jordy whipped his head around. “You know all the Twilight character names?”

“I do not!” he said defensively.

“He didn’t name them, but he did suggest polyamory as a solution. Which I shot down.”

“Oh.” Jordy grimaced. “He probably got all sensitive because of his family.”

I glanced at Archer. “Your family?”

He finished shuffling his cards and carefully placed the deck on the table, rotating it a millimeter so that it was flush with the grain of wood. “My parents are polyamorous.”

“They’re old school hippies,” Jordy added.

“They’re a perfectly normal, if unconventional, family unit,” Archer replied testily. “They’re all still together, which is more than you can say for *your* parents.”

Jordy put up his palms and said, “See? He’s sensitive about it.”

I thought back to what I had said in my text message. “I didn’t mean to insult your family! Tell me a little more about them?”

“We do not need to discuss it,” Archer replied.

“Aww, come on. Tell me. I want to know. Like I said earlier today, I’ve never known anyone who is *actually* polyamorous. I’m ignorant on the whole concept. How many parents do you have?”

Archer took a long gulp from his glass of water before answering. “Seven.”

I tried, and failed, to hide my shock. “*Seven?*”

Jordy grabbed a nearby notebook and pen and began writing something down.

“I have two biological parents, of course,” Archer explained. “My father, Pierce, and my mum, Cornelia. The two of them have a triad with Camilla.”

“Triad?”

“That means the three of them are all romantically involved with each other. My mum is bisexual.”

“But I thought you said you had *seven* parents.”

Jordy chuckled to himself while scribbling on his paper.

Archer nodded. “That’s sort of the core three. They were all together when I was born. When I was very young, Pierce began dating a bisexual couple: Priscilla and Kate. Those are my two other mums. They’re married to each other.”

“Okay, hold on,” I interrupted. “Those two women are married. And they also date your father Pierce?”

“This is correct.”

“But why are they only involved with Pierce? Why not your mum, Cornelia, too, if she’s bisexual?”

He gave me a funny look. “Because my mum doesn’t fancy them.”

“But Pierce does.”

“Yes.”

Jordy started laughing even harder.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“Just because Cornelia is bisexual, doesn’t mean she automatically would want to be romantically involved with Kate and Priscilla. That’s like assuming you would be interested in Mehmet the tour guide because you are both heterosexual.”

I blinked. “Oh. Good point.”

Harrison came trudging into the room wearing gray sweatpants and a black tank top. He opened the fridge, pulled out the entire chicken casserole from dinner, and began digging into it with the serving spoon.

“Archer’s explaining his family to Trish,” Jordy said.

Harrison roared with laughter and returned to his room with the casserole.

“Anyways, that’s only five of my parents,” Archer went on. “When I was a toddler, Cornelia began a relationship with the bartender at the local pub, Ambrose.”

“Does Ambrose sleep with anyone other than your mom?”

“No. He’s involved with her and nobody else.”

“Okay...” I replied.

“And finally, there’s Hector. He and Camilla have a sexual relationship, but not romantic.”

“Like, friends with benefits?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“If he’s just a hookup, why include him in your family unit at all?”

Archer shrugged. “They’ve been doing it for at least twenty years now. And they are still quite good friends, and everyone else is quite keen on Hector. He’s a savvy Whist player. He’s been spending holidays with us since I can remember.”

“That’s a card game they all play,” Jordy explained.

I shook my head in confusion. “I’m struggling to picture all of this.”

“It helps when you see it drawn out.” Jordy slid his piece of paper over. It was a visual of all seven points connected with lines, like a constellation. There was an hourglass shape, with Pierce in the middle. The left triangle of the hourglass was Priscilla and Kate connected to Pierce, while the right triangle was him connected to Cornelia and Camilla. Another line shot away from Cornelia to a point labeled Ambrose, and a similar one extended away from Camilla to show how Hector fit into the equation.

“Okay, this makes more sense,” I said.

“It looks like a molecule, which is why people in that community call it a *polycule*,” Archer said.

“Why not just say that you have two parents, who are swingers?” I asked.

“Because I don’t have two parents who are swingers,” he said patiently. “Camilla lived in the same house as us growing up. When we moved from London to Stratford when I was four years old, Priscilla and Kate moved in with us. All of them raised me equally. And as I got older, Ambrose and Hector spent more holidays with us, and eventually became family, too. Although both of them feel closer to uncles than direct parents.”

“His situation is what made us comfortable raising Kaylee together,” Jordy chimed in. “After hearing about them—and *meeting* them at Christmas seven years ago!—it didn’t feel so weird for the three of us to raise a daughter.”

“Perhaps I was overly sensitive when you sent your text,” Archer admitted. “Saying that polyamory is just an excuse for people to sleep around. Perhaps that is true of some people. But in my case, I’ve spent the entirety of my life surrounded by love from my parents. All of them. I consider myself lucky because of it.”

I reached across the table and touched his hand. “That’s really wonderful. Anyone would be lucky to have what you have. I’m sorry I was so quick to judge. Is it awkward having to think about all the complex ways your parents have sex?”

“Yes,” he said, deadpan. “It is even more awkward needing to explain it in painstaking detail to someone else.”

I winced. “Yikes, I bet. I don’t even like thinking about *my* parents that way, let alone with a whole bunch of other people who... yeah, I’m going to stop that train of thought right there, because I’m already grossed out.”

Archer adjusted the deck of cards on the table. “Regardless, that’s why I have a hard time taking *Twilight* and other romance novels seriously when a girl is struggling to choose who to be with. There’s an easy solution if you’re willing to

put aside your jealousy! Now, how about one more game of Dutch Blitz? Jordy and I are tied for first...”

We played another game—which Archer won—and then went to bed. Our house here was set up with two separate wings on opposite ends of the living area, and Jordy and I had strategically been given rooms in the same wing, away from everyone else. That meant we didn’t have to be *perfectly* silent, a luxury that we quickly took advantage of.

As soon as we were in his room, Jordy threw me up against the wall and kissed me like there was no tomorrow. I melted against his possessive, demanding touch. He spun me around and kissed the back of my neck while his fingers dove into the front of my pajamas, pressing roughly against my clit. I moaned as he ground against my ass while rubbing me faster. As he tore my pants down and then did the same to his own, I could *feel* how hungry he was for me. Especially the way he guided his cock into me from behind and then filled me with one frenzied thrust, burying himself as far as he could go.

Somehow, I managed to suppress a scream of pleasure as I savored how much he filled me, and more cries of ecstasy as he fucked me up against the wall, his breath hot in my ear, and his rumbling groans practically vibrating out of his throat. He put a hand on my back and bent me over, fucking me rough and fast, driving into me so hard that soon I was gasping and shivering with an intense, toe-curling orgasm that made my knees weak. And as I clamped my inner muscles down around him, I felt his cock explode inside me. He gripped my waist tightly with both hands and let out a noise that was so intense it almost sounded painful.

As I cleaned up and then curled up in bed with him, I thought about how much chemistry we had together. Usually, I felt awkward around a guy after first sleeping with him, before we became comfortable enough to drop our guard and just *be*. Yet Jordy and I clicked in a way that was easy. Natural.

*I wonder if he feels the same thing.*

“I’ve been thinking about that all day,” he whispered while we cuddled.

“Me too,” I replied. “Well, maybe not *all* day. I wasn’t thinking about it while we were touring around Istanbul. But as soon as we got home, I started fantasizing about you.”

“I liked what you said earlier.”

“When?”

“Just now. When we were having sex. You said, *fuck me, my mercenary.*”

“Oh.” I twisted to look up at him. “I... I actually didn’t realize I said that out loud.”

“You said it while you were coming, I think,” Jordy said. “It’s what made *me* come so quickly. That, and the sight of your magnificent ass bouncing against me.”

I grinned and snuggled him tighter. “I’m glad you liked it. Normally I don’t...”

“What?” he asked.

“Normally it takes me a while to get that comfortable with a guy.”

Jordy frowned down at me. “Comfortable enough to do that position? Doggy style?” He sounded incredulous.

“I know! It’s silly. But I usually don’t like to do that unless I’ve been with someone for a while.”

I felt Jordy tense. “Aw, shit. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, or to pressure you into—”

“No, no, no!” I quickly said, sitting up in bed so I could look down at him. “It was great! That’s the point I’m trying to make. Usually it takes me a while to get that comfortable with someone, but with you...”

“It just feels natural?” he finished for me.

“Yes!”

“Like we’ve known each other much longer than a few weeks?”

“Totally!” I replied. “You feel that way too?”



He put an arm behind his head, which made his bicep flex deliciously. “I was afraid to say anything because I didn’t want to spook you. But yeah.”

I brushed my lips against his and then laid back against his chest. “I never expected this when I asked you out at the gym. Flying all over the world, having sex in exotic cities. Norway and Turkey.”

“What did you expect?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Coffee?”

His laughter vibrated up into my chest. “I’ll brew the coffee in the morning.” He stretched. “Speaking of that... I think we should sleep in our own rooms.”

I flinched. “Oh.”

“Just in case Kaylee wakes up before us. Or wakes up in the middle of the night.”

“Right.”

“I don’t want her getting the wrong idea,” he explained. “Archer was right about that. And we did promise to keep this relationship from her, at least for now. I’ve already broken some promises to Archer, so I want to make sure I keep this one. Is that all right?”

“No, yeah, totally!” I said. “I’ll head out...”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me back against him. “Maybe five more minutes of cuddling. I don’t want to let go of you just yet.” His hand slid down my back and gave my rump a healthy smack.

*Relationship*, I thought as I closed my eyes and savored the feel of his body. *I like the sound of that.*

## 20



### Jordy

Training the Ukrainians was fulfilling work, but it was also exhausting. We were up early, flew across the Black Sea, spent all day training, and then flew back. Even though we were totally safe and far away from the front lines of the ongoing war with Russia, there was still the fear that a Russian ship might mistake our helicopter for an enemy combatant and try to swat us out of the air with a missile. I found myself remaining tense during the flights, and didn't relax until we touched down at the airfield outside Istanbul.

But then we came home to Kaylee, and it made it all worth it. Seeing her was a daily reminder of why we were stretching ourselves to the limit. I knew I would march into hell and back if it meant creating a better life for her. And I was happy we didn't have to wait months to see her again, like we would have if we sent her away to summer camp as we had originally planned. Coming home to her soothed my soul in a way I never could have understood before becoming a father.

And then there was Trish...

When Kaylee went to bed, Trish and I had our own fun. It became a nightly routine, but there was nothing *routine* about the way we had sex. We were like horny teenagers that were eager to try every position possible. One night, Trish got on her knees in the bedroom and gave me a fast, eager blowjob. She practically sucked the life out of me, and had me coming within minutes. But she didn't let go—she kept her lips wrapped around my cock and gazed up at me through her eyelashes as I came, drinking in the sight of my pleasure. And

when she had swallowed every drop, she pushed me down onto the bed and rode me like I was her own personal sex toy. To hell with my refractory period; it was so hot that I stayed as hard as steel inside of her, and came again sometime between Trish's second and third orgasm.

The next day, while we were in Ukraine, we got word that there was extra air traffic over our flight pattern home, so we decided to play it safe and spend the night at the Ukrainian base. The local guys loved it, and broke out a case of Odessa vodka to drink. We took shots with them, shared a beef stew that tasted heavily of paprika, and sang Ukrainian marching songs until long after sundown.

We eventually retired to our bunks in the barracks. Harrison was snoring as soon as his head hit the pillow. But on the bunk next to mine, Archer's face was lit up by the glow of his cell phone.

"Doing the Wordle?" I asked.

"Already did it this morning. Got it in three tries."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Keeping up with Trish. Letting her know we're all right."

"You've been texting her a lot," I said.

He shrugged. "She's been sending me photographs of Kaylee." He tossed the phone over to me. The most recent message was a selfie of both Trish and Kaylee in bed, reading a bedtime story. I smiled at the sight of our daughter, but my gaze lingered on Trish. I scrolled up to look for more photos, and saw that there were a *lot* of texts between them. Before I could snoop too much, I tossed the phone back.

"I'm glad you've come around," I said. "To having them with us, I mean."

"It's quite nice," Archer replied, thumbs already a flurry of activity as he texted back. "Trish is a wonderful woman. I can't blame you for fancying her on this trip, rather than waiting until we got home."

I frowned over at him. Archer hated admitting he was wrong, especially in a situation where he could act superior. The sudden softening of his attitude was strange.

*I'm glad he's warming up to her*, I thought as I rolled over in my bunk.

We worked with the troops the next day, then flew home in the early afternoon. Kaylee was overjoyed to see us, and squeezed me extra tight when we walked through the door.

“How much longer is this contract?” Trish asked as we ate an early dinner.

“Getting sick of Turkey?” Harrison asked.

“No, I'm having so much fun here!” Trish replied. “We went into the markets again yesterday and bought some Turkish delight. Did you know it's just gummy candy?”

“I loved it!” Kaylee squealed. “We brought a bunch back to share!”

“We have been here eight days, and it is likely we will remain for another ten,” Archer explained. “Perhaps fifteen. It depends on how quickly they learn the new equipment that is arriving soon.” Archer grimaced. “I am sorry I cannot give you a more concrete timeline.”

“No, it's totally fine!” Trish replied, gesturing with her fork. “I was just curious if you knew. Kaylee and I will keep having fun however long it takes, isn't that right?”

Our daughter's mouth was full, so she bobbed her head in agreement instead.

After dinner, Harrison picked Kaylee up and carried her off to her room to play with the K'nex pieces we had brought with us. Trish, Archer, and I hung out in the living room. There wasn't anything good on TV, so we settled on an episode of *The Sopranos* that was poorly dubbed over into Turkish. Archer came up with a drinking game where we took a drink every time the dubbed voice used an awful Italian-American accent.

By the time the episode ended, we were all extremely buzzed.

“I’m having too much fun to go to bed now,” Trish said. “Do you guys want to play a game?”

“I’m afraid I’m a bit too pissed for Dutch Blitz,” Archer said.

Trish frowned. “Pissed?”

“That’s his cricket-loving ass’s way of saying *drunk*,” I explained.

“Cricket is a gentleman’s game that is superior to anything else human civilization has devised,” Archer said.

“How about another drinking game, then?” Trish suggested. She stretched out her leg across the couch. “Like Truth or Drink?”

“You mean Truth or Dare?” I asked.

“No, Truth or *Drink*,” she insisted. “Either you answer the question, or you take a drink. It gets you drunk quicker. Very popular drinking game when I was at college.”

“I enlisted right after high school,” I reminded her.

“Oh. Right. Well, Army guys have a reputation for being able to drink a lot, right?”

Archer sputtered a laugh. “She is not wrong.”

“I’m already buzzed,” I said. “And Archer is, to use his dumb phrasing, *pissed*.”

Trish flashed a mischievous grin that stirred something inside of me. “Then you’ll both be answering a lot of questions. I’ll go first. When did you lose your virginity?”

Archer cleared his throat. “When I was fifteen, at secondary school. Me and Mary Kane snogged after a football match. Her parents were out for the night, so we went back to her place. Lost my virginity on her couch.”

“Fifteen, impressive. I bet she was pretty,” Trish said.

“She was most certainly *not*,” Archer answered. “I do not want to sound callous, but she had what Jordy has called a *butter face*.”

Trish was frowning, so I explained: “As in, everything is hot... but-her-face.”

“Ahh.”

“Granted, I was a bit of a chonker myself, back then,” Archer clarified. “Before Her Majesty’s Armed Forces tightened me up.”

“Technically,” Trish said, raising a finger, “it’s now *His* Majesty’s Armed Forces.”

Archer winced. “Still haven’t gotten used to the sound of that.”

“I thought nobody likes Charles,” I chimed in. I didn’t have much knowledge on the subject beyond what I sometimes saw online. “Couldn’t they skip Charles and go right to William? Everyone likes him, right?”

“Charles could have abdicated, but he would never do that,” Archer said. “He’s waited his whole damn life for Lizzy to finally give the throne to him.” He sighed. “Diana would have made a lovely Queen Consort. Camilla... I’m prattling on, now. Your turn to answer the question, Jordy.”

“Yeah!” Trish said. “Your turn. When did you lose your virginity?”

I paused dramatically before answering. “Boot camp. There were three women in our unit, and one of them had a thing for me. One day, we snuck back to the barracks during chores and... did the deed. Her name was Vanessa.” I savored the sound of the name on my tongue. Even now, thirteen years later, it made part of my soul tingle.

“Boot camp?” Trish said. “You were a virgin until you were eighteen?”

“Don’t judge,” I said, with a theatrical amount of defensiveness. “I was shy back then.”

“I can’t imagine a shy Jordan Mackey,” Archer muttered.

“Me neither!” Trish added. “So, what happened with Vanessa?”

“Nothing happened. It was just sex. We did it a few times, and then she moved on to the next guy in our unit soon after. She was like a kid in a candy shop among all the guys.” I quickly held up a palm. “Not that I’m shaming her. I can’t blame her at all. If the roles were reversed, I’d be a huge man-slut.”

“I can only imagine,” Trish said. “Being around a bunch of chiseled military guys all the time...”

She trailed off, and her cheeks turned red. For a moment I was confused, and then I realized that Trish was basically in the same situation. Surrounded by me, Archer, and Harrison all the time during this job.

“What about you?” I asked to clear the air.

Trish wagged a finger back and forth. “That’s not how the game works. It’s your turn to ask a question. A *new* one. Repeats aren’t allowed.”

I let out a dramatic sigh. “Fine. Let me think. What’s the most embarrassing moment of your life?”

Her blush deepened, and she hesitated before answering. And not because she was trying to think of an answer. I began wondering if maybe I had touched on a nerve.

“I peed my pants when I was in Kindergarten,” she finally said. “Mrs. Wall’s class. We were practicing cursive, and she wouldn’t let me go to the bathroom when I asked. I held it and held it, and finally jumped up and tried to run out of the room, but by then it was too late...”

“Ouch,” I said. Was that the real story, or was she hiding something even worse?

“Mine’s from secondary school again,” Archer answered. “Accidentally called my teacher *mum*. In front of the whole class. Never lived that down.”

We continued playing the game and laughed at our answers. Archer got creative and asked how much money it would take

for us to jump into a pool of raw sewage—a hundred grand for me, and ten million dollars for Trish. There were questions about least favorite foods, and questions about which celebrity everyone would sleep with.

“Okay, here’s a tougher one,” I said. “What’s your longest relationship?”

“Lexi Parker, eighteen months,” Archer answered. “Dated her when I was in the service. We grew apart.” He shrugged as if it couldn’t be helped.

We turned to Trish. She raised her beer to her lips and began to drink.

“Aww, come on,” I said. “Don’t drink and avoid the question. Tell us about it.”

She lowered the glass and stared into it, as if the contents might give her an escape. “My ex, Daniel.”

“Daniel. Classic douchebag name,” I said.

“Hey! Two of my best mates growing up were named Daniel.”

“I rest my case.” I turned back to Trish. “How long were you two together?”

She pulled her legs up until her knees were almost touching her chin. “We met at UNCW. Dated for two years. It was serious. I thought we were going to eventually get married. Then the family I was nannying for moved across the country, and asked me to come with them. I considered it. That infuriated Daniel. He acted like I was abandoning him, even though I asked him to come with me. He made a big stink about it, how he didn’t want to move away from the East Coast, even though he was a freaking Lyft driver and didn’t have any other reason to stay. So, I turned the nanny job down.”

Trish took a deep breath. “And then, a month later, he broke up with me. Moved to Denver to be with some girl he met online.”

“Fuuuck,” I said.



She grimaced. “That stung. All his talk about me abandoning him was just projection. A lot of the things he said in our relationship ended up being projection, I learned after the fact. That’s actually why I had a passport already. Daniel always said he wanted to travel to Europe with me. Never got a chance. He talked a big game, but there was never any follow-through.”

“Shit,” Archer said. “What an asshole.”

“He’s an *asshole*, too.” I ignored Archer’s glare and tried to pour as much sympathy into my gaze as I looked at Trish. “I’m so sorry. That really sucks.”

She shrugged. “I’m over it now. Or at least, *mostly* over it.”

“Was he a good shag, at least?” Archer asked. “He must have been, if you stayed together that long.”

“That’s the really frustrating part: he wasn’t! He was a total prude. Two years together and he never liked being naked around me. Lights off, under the covers. Very vanilla.” She bit her lip. “Over the course of our relationship, I had maybe four or five real orgasms.”

She glanced at me, and I grinned. She’d already had that many with me in the week we’d been sleeping together. And I was confident she wasn’t faking.

Trish gave herself a little shake. “Okay, enough depressing stuff. Here’s a spicy question. What’s your biggest sex fantasy?”

“Ohh, that’s a good one,” I said. “You first, buddy.”

Archer promptly raised his drink to his lips and took a very long pull.

“Aw, come on!” Trish said. “I just told you about my ex.”

Archer shook his head. “Nope. Not the time for it.”

She leaned toward him. “It must be really kinky if you won’t share.”

“I’m afraid not.” He gestured at me.

I stared at my drink, then decided I had more courage than Archer. “I’ve always wanted to have a threesome.”

Trish nodded appreciatively. “Threesome, nice. Pretty standard. I think every guy has fantasized about being with two women.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Nah, not that kind of threesome. Although that would be hot, too. I mean I’ve always wanted to share a girl with another guy.”

“Oh.” Her blush returned.

“Never had a chance,” I went on. “Should have done it with Vanessa at boot camp. She was into kinky stuff. That was probably my best shot.” I shrugged. “I don’t know what it is about it that turns me on. Me and another guy sharing a girl. Passing her between us. Worshiping her together. It just *does* it for me.”

“I get that,” Trish said. “That’s hot. Too bad you missed your chance.”

Archer downed the rest of his beer and placed it on the coffee table. “Don’t know what the problem is. There’s three of us here.” He grinned. “We can make that fantasy a reality any time you want.”

# 21



## Trish

I was having a lot of fun drinking and getting to know Archer and Jordy. Especially the naughty bits about losing virginity and sexy fantasies. It filled in a lot of the gaps in my understanding about them; especially Jordy, who I had already slept with but still knew so little about. And in spite of some of the more serious answers (like my history with Daniel) the game was lighthearted and carefree.

Until Archer spoke up.

He wasn't drunk, but he was tipsy. Enough to be loose with his words while still meaning them. All three of us looked at each other, not sure what to say.

Finally, Jordy broke the silence. "Hah, that's funny. Turning my sex fantasy into a big joke."

"Aye, sure. Jokes." Archer gave me a wink and then leaned back in his chair.

I wasn't drunk, but I was tipsy enough to think about it. A threesome. I had never considered doing that. It was something that happened in porn or bad movies, not in real life. And the girls that *did* do that got ostracized and called horrible names. I remembered a few specific girls who had rumors flying about them in college. I never wanted other people to think of me like that.

But this wasn't college. There weren't dozens of my peers who would laugh at me and call me a slut if they found out. Here, in a private residence in Turkey, it felt like a safe space

to experiment. With two guys I had gotten to know over the past couple of weeks. Two guys I trusted.

Two guys who liked me.

Two guys who were *really* freaking hot.

Archer was grinning at me, I realized. He had boyish good looks, perfect golden hair, and an intense attractiveness that pulled my eyes to him whenever he walked into a room. And that wasn't even taking into account the sexy English accent that flowed from his lips whenever he spoke. And although we hadn't done anything together, we *had* been texting all week while he was on the job. I felt more connected to him than I had when he was just some guy at the gym we had nicknamed Blondie.

Jordy was looking at me too. His eyes sparkled with curiosity. *Is he actually considering it?* That turned me on even more. If both of them were interested...

I bit my lip. "I don't know."

Jordy put down his beer and slid closer to me on the couch. "I'm not gonna push you into something you're hesitant about. But I *am* going to kiss you, because you're too fucking cute not to."

He leaned in, and I accepted his lips like it was any other kiss. In most ways, it was. But I was keenly aware of Archer watching from the chair to my left. I glanced over, and we locked eyes for a brief instant. A world of passion and possibility passed between us, and then I was diving back into Jordy's embrace with greater enthusiasm.

I felt Archer's gaze like a caress as I made out with Jordy. It turned me on in a new, exciting way that I didn't expect. I never knew I had an exhibitionist streak in me, and the idea of kissing someone—or doing *more* than just kissing—while others watched terrified me. But this was different. This was pushing a lot of my buttons.

Jordy pulled away and breathed, "We don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with."

I grabbed his face with both hands and kissed him more deeply. He accepted my tongue eagerly, letting out a soft moan deep in his throat. Then I broke the kiss.

“But I’m not comfortable doing this here. In case Kaylee walks in. Let’s go back to your room.”

“Yeah, I get what you’re saying.” Jordy rose, and led me away by the hand. We were almost out of the room when I gazed over my shoulder at Archer.

“Are you coming?”

He stood up and ran a hand through his hair. “Not yet, but hopefully soon.”

Jordy barked a laugh. “That was ridiculously cheesy. Even for you.”

Archer scowled. “Well, if you *don’t* want help fulfilling your fantasy...”

“No!” me and Jordy both blurted out at the same time. We glanced at each other, then laughed.

The walk down the hall to our wing of the house felt longer than usual. It was only twenty seconds or so, but that was plenty of time to think about what I was doing. And to chicken out.

*I don’t want to back down, I realized. I want to do this. Or at least give it a try.* It felt liberating to even think about something like this, especially after two years of puritanical eye-rolling from my ex. Walking into the bedroom with Jordy and Archer felt like a rebellion against Daniel and all of the bullshit I put up with. It felt like making up for time I had wasted. I was terrified, and could feel my pulse racing.

But I was more excited than I had ever been in my life, too.

Jordy led me into his bedroom. Archer followed, and locked the door behind us. The last thing I saw was Archer lowering himself into a chair next to the bed, and then Jordy was kissing me even more passionately than before. We fell onto the bed, and I lost myself in the feel of his soft lips and his hard body.

His hand found its way between my legs, and he rubbed me through my pajamas.

“You good over there?” Jordy asked.

We paused to glance at the blond Englishman. “I like watching. It feels like my own personal pornography.”

“Feel free to make any requests,” I said, surprising myself with my forwardness. “I’m good at following directions.”

Archer smirked. “Seems like my mate has been doing all the rubbing. Why don’t you take his cock out and give it a tug?”

I obeyed his request, untying the laces of Jordy’s sweatpants and pulling them down enough to reveal his stiff cock. I dragged my fingernails along the underside of his shaft, which made him suck in his breath. His dick twitched with desire as I teased him, until finally wrapping my fingers around it and stroking him steadily. He let out his breath in a long sigh and then resumed rubbing me through my pajamas. Within minutes, I was squirming beneath his touch.

“You’ve got a beautiful face,” Archer suddenly said. “And a pretty mouth. I think it would look even prettier with a cock in it.”

Eager to obey, I pushed Jordy over and then crouched above him. Heat radiated off his shaft as I drew close, letting him feel my breath on his skin. He groaned as I began licking the underside, from the base all the way to the tip.

“I didn’t say to lick it,” Archer said. “I said I wanted to see a cock in your mouth.”

Being in bed with one man while another gave commands was *insanely* hot. It flipped a switch in my brain that was eager to do as I was told. Without hesitation, I grabbed Jordy’s dick and wrapped my lips around it, pushing down as far as I could go without gagging.

“Well done,” Archer purred from his chair.

As I sucked off Jordy, I could see Archer out of the corner of my eye. He spread his legs in the chair, and gently adjusted

himself. His eyes were wide and hungry. It turned me on even more as I focused on my task with Jordy.

“That’s enough of that,” Archer said. “You want her to ride you, Jordy?”

“I’d fucking *love* that,” he replied.

“Good. Take off those clothes and straddle him, Trish.”

The command was quick and snappy, like I had better do as he said. My loins tingled with excitement as I stripped my pants, then the T-shirt I was wearing. I stood at the edge of the bed, and savored the two pairs of eyes raking over my fully-nude body. I was especially cognizant of Archer’s long sigh as he saw me for the first time. I slowly knelt on the bed, straddling Jordy’s body. And when I was right above him, I reached down and guided his rock-hard cock up between my lips.

“I didn’t say tease him,” Archer said. “I said *ride* him. Do it, now.”

I impaled myself down onto his cock, taking every inch of it in one long stroke. Lightning bolts of pleasure coursed through my body, pleasure that I felt mirrored in Jordy’s groan and gasp. I wanted to savor the feeling, to hold him inside of me and memorize the way he felt, but I was allowing myself to be under Archer’s control, and his instructions were clear.

I began riding Jordy, slowly moving up and down. Knowing that our love was on display, I arched my back and tossed my hair. I leaned down to kiss Jordy, then ran my hands over his chiseled chest as I moved faster.

The alcohol had me buzzed enough to let loose, but I was still fully aware of everything going on. It was the perfect combination.

“Enjoying the show?” I asked Archer.

“Very much so.”

“Then why,” I asked, “aren’t you stroking your own cock?”

Archer unzipped his pants. “An excellent question.”

He pulled his cock out, which was long and thick in his fist. He began jacking himself off slowly. *I'm causing that, I thought. He's turned on because of me, and Jordy. I'm the reason for both of their pleasure.*

I stopped overthinking things and lost myself in the motions. Up and down I rode, taking Jordy's stiff dick while gazing at Archer, who was now stroking himself faster. It was naughty, it was something I would never have done back in Wilmington, and I loved every steamy moment of it.

"Why don't you join in?" Jordy casually mentioned.

I slowed down and looked at Archer again. He wanted to. I could feel it. But he hesitated. "Is the lovely Trish ready for that?"

*Yes, please, I want to be ready,* I thought, begging him with my eyes. *Take what you want, take me.*

But the only thing I could make myself say was, "I don't know."

"Maybe start slow," Jordy said. "Why don't you kiss her on the back of the neck?"

Archer stood and removed his shirt, revealing a tapestry of chiseled muscle. "I thought I was the one giving orders."

"Not ordering," Jordy said while squeezing my waist. "Just suggesting."

Jordy slid both of us down on the bed until his feet were on the floor. Now I was riding him right on the edge. I trembled with anticipation as Archer walked around the bed, agonizingly slow. For a while, he stood behind me without doing anything. I could practically feel his presence behind me, tall and slender and *nude*.

The moment his lips touched my shoulder blade, a ripple of surprise ran through my body. Every one of my muscles tensed as his hands gently gripped my shoulders. Then I relaxed under his touch. I resumed riding Jordy while Archer kissed his way across my back, soft kisses that left cool spots on my bare skin. It felt like a tease. He was here, so close to me, yet was barely doing anything. I leaned back as I gyrated on top of



Jordy, practically *begging* Archer to do more, but he remained tentative with his presence.

I twisted around to look at him. His blond hair was all I could see as he kissed the base of my neck, tongue caressing along the top of my spine. My heart pounded in my chest, so close to what I wanted. And then, when it wasn't enough and I could stand it no longer, I grabbed a handful of that golden hair in my fist and pulled his lips to mine.

Archer was surprised, but he recovered quickly as I forced my tongue into his mouth. A wonderful moan vibrated out of his throat and he gripped the back of my neck, holding me against him as he deepened the kiss himself. Then he was leaning closer, wrapping his arms around me, squeezing a breast in his hand. Our tongues danced together wetly as we surrendered to what we both wanted.

“Fuck, that’s so hot,” Jordy said.

I broke away the kiss to turn to him. “Fulfilling your fantasy nicely?”

“That’s an understatement.” Jordy grabbed a fistful of *my* hair and pulled me down so he could kiss me roughly. His kiss was every bit as sensual as Archer’s, but different in his own unique way, and the contrast between the two ignited a fire of pleasure between my legs. I started riding Jordy harder, chasing that flame of ecstasy that was burning inside me.

Archer leaned against me, pressing his entire chest against my back, bare skin on bare skin. His cock ground against my ass cheek, eagerly awaiting his turn. He growled into my ear with his English accent, “Good, ride him. He likes that. Don’t slow down now, keep going.”

“If she keeps going, I’m going to come,” Jordy gritted out.

Archer’s chest rumbled with laughter against me. “Don’t know how you haven’t already.”

“You’ll know when you try.” Jordy gripped my waist with both hands and pulled his hips away, until his cock slid out of me. “I think it’s about time you had a turn. Don’t you think so, Trish?”

I didn't trust my voice, so I vigorously nodded instead.

Archer nibbled at the back of my ear, then slid a hand down my ass cheek until he found my drenched pussy. He used three fingers to rub my entrance, testing it, savoring it. Then I felt the tip of his cock. New fires of passion burned within me at the mere *thought* of him filling me, taking the place where Jordy had just occupied. Yet he rubbed his crown up and down, teasing it out.

When I couldn't stand it any longer, I pushed my ass back and took half his cock inside of me. Both of us groaned together. His fingers dug into my hips with desire.

"I thought I was the one in charge," he teased.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled into Jordy's chest. "I couldn't wait any longer."

I heard the smile in Archer's voice as he replied, "I think you need to be taught a lesson."

Now he grabbed my hips and *slammed* his cock into me with enough force that I slid forward on Jordy's chest. He pulled me back possessively and drove into me again, this time holding me in place as he pounded me, the skin of my ass smacking against his navel with every stroke.

I let out a cry of ecstasy as he had his way with me, hard and fast after watching for so long. A moment of clarity broke through the sexual act and I realized I was wedged between two beautiful men, Blondie and Brownie, being shared by them in a way I had never imagined. The realization made me cry out with renewed bliss, a sexual freedom I didn't know was possible.

"I'm close," I breathed, reaching between my legs to rub my clit. "Just like that, don't stop..."

But then Archer *did* stop. "I don't think we're ready to let you come just yet. Are we?"

"Don't think so," Jordy agreed. "She hasn't earned it yet."

My groan held a note of frustration. Both of them chuckled.

“Your turn.” Archer pushed me forward until I was straddling his partner again. Jordy guided his cock into me without hesitation. I sighed at the sensation of being filled again, this time keeping my hips stationary while Jordy drove up into me. Archer grabbed my ass with both hands while this happened, and gave my cheek a playful smack that echoed in the room.

*Oh, I liked that,* I realized.

Archer must have picked up on my moans, because he gave my other cheek another smack, a little harder this time. The pain was minor, but it was bright and fresh, and it stirred my loins in a new and erotic way. I felt my orgasm building anew, more desperate this time, like the finishing sprint of a marathon.

Yet just when I was about to come, when my eyes clenched shut and I could feel the heat of it arriving like a sunrise, Jordy abruptly stopped. “There she goes again, right on the edge.”

“I’ll tease her a bit, then.” Archer raised me up off Jordy’s dick and filled me from behind again, this time with just the tip. In and out his head went, the barest amount of him filling me. I tried to push my ass back, to take more of him, but Jordy was holding me firmly in place.

“We’ll let you know when you can come, love,” Archer growled into my ear.

There was something freeing about not being in control. About surrendering to these two men who were sharing me. I let go of that power, and felt the vulnerability of being totally, completely *theirs*.

Archer fucked me for a little while, then Jordy took over. Every time I was right on the edge of release, they stopped and switched, allowing my orgasm to recede a bit. Soon the pressure of it was building inside of me, greater and greater than when I had come the first time with Jordy.

I gave in. I accepted that I was theirs for the pleasing, that I had no control over what happened next. It was freeing. It raised me up to greater heights of pleasure as Archer’s cock

slammed into me from behind. I begged, and whimpered, and moaned as they took turns fucking me between them, having their way with me.

And then, when Jordy took over next, I sensed something within him. The way his breathing hastened and his eyes widened. The way his hands gripped my waist so tightly it almost ached. And then his jaw was hanging open and he moaned, and quickened the pace of his thrusts, and I realized he was about to come.

“Trish,” he gasped, eyes filled with surprise and ecstasy. “Oh, *Trish!*”

I felt him explode inside me as he had done before, and this time the rug wasn't pulled out from under me. My orgasm was a supernova between my legs, a release of tension that had been building for what felt like hours. I arched my back and let out a soundless scream of ecstasy, my vision going white and all sound receding beneath the overpowering maelstrom of pure bliss.

Archer pulled me back enough for Jordy to slide out, then filled me from behind one final time. His thrusts were more urgent now too, driving deep into me with reckless abandon. Jordy was still coming, long ropes of white shooting up against my belly and breasts, and his lips found mine and drank my pleasure. Archer groaned and grabbed my shoulder as he came inside me too, pulses and pulses of it, his cock quivering as I clamped down on him with my inner walls, eager to savor every drop as the three of us drowned together in ecstasy.



### Archer

I didn't think it would actually happen. When I suggested we make Jordy's fantasy a reality, I was *mostly* joking. I never expected him to take me up on it, to say nothing of Trish's opinion on the whole thing.

Yet once we were in the bedroom together with the door closed and locked, everything sort of fell into place. I sat in the chair and gave commands—which, to my surprise, was an immense turn-on for me. Trish obeyed enthusiastically, which gave me more confidence, which made *her* enjoy it even more, a sexual feedback loop that heightened everything we did.

And when I was grabbing Trish from behind and burying my cock into her? Feeling the perfect orbs of her arse bouncing against me as she eagerly took every inch? It was a wonder I didn't arrive sooner. If Jordy and I hadn't taken turns with her, I certainly wouldn't have lasted more than a minute or two.

After, we collapsed together in bed—Jordy on one side, me on the other, and Trish stretched out between us. She was a goddess in the soft light of the bedside lamp, one leg bent at the knee and an arm draped lazily across her breasts. As I snuggled my leg against hers, I felt incredibly close to Trish. Like everything that had happened was more than just sex.

*I'm just basking in the afterglow, I told myself. Anyone would feel this way after the shagging we all shared.*

“So,” Trish said. “Did that fulfill your fantasy?”

“Yep!” Jordy replied. “That was better than anything I ever could have imagined.”

Trish twisted sideways to cuddle up against him, which put a gap between us. “That was very hot for me too.”

“You liked having two beautiful men have their way with you?” Jordy replied. “Shocker.”

“One beautiful man, and Jordy,” I teased.

Trish twisted to look over her shoulder at me. “Speaking of two beautiful men, are you going to stay over there or spoon me? I’m chilly!”

I rolled over and molded myself against her body—my cock against her bare ass, and her back against my chest. It was like the way we had made love, but far more sensual. I buried my face in her hair and breathed deeply. Her scent was every bit as intoxicating as the alcohol that had led to this whole affair.

“I’ve never even imagined doing that,” Trish said.

“You mean, with the two of us?” Jordy asked.

Trish shook her head. “I mean *ever*. With anyone. I grew up in a little suburb outside of Wilmington, and it wasn’t very progressive. The kinds of girls who did that got a reputation.”

“You’ve never even *fantasized* about it?” I asked. “I assumed all women at least thought about it.”

“Not all of us grew up in sex-positive polyamorous families,” she replied. “You might be used to your parents having group sex, but I’m not!”

I groaned. “And just like that, I’m no longer turned out.”

Trish giggled. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Jordy chimed in. “His mom’s pretty hot. So are Priscilla and Kate. I’d be lying if I said I never pictured...”

“That’s quite enough!” I interjected. “Unless you want me to vomit all over the both of you.”

“Regardless, tonight was *very* hot,” Jordy said. “We’re all adults. Three people can have sex without it becoming a big deal.”

“Mmm, just sex,” Trish replied while snuggling closer to him.

As I curled up against her body, I thought about that concept. *Just sex*. Could anyone have sex without it turning into something more? Was it possible to have such an intense sexual connection and *not* develop feelings for the other person? I was already fond of Trish, and I realized I did not want this to be a one-time affair. I wanted to do it again.

*I hope she wants the same thing.*

“We should go back to our own beds,” I said.

Before I could roll away, Trish reached back and grabbed me. “No! Don’t go yet. More cuddles. Five more minutes.”

Jordy grinned on the other side of her. “Don’t make the lady unhappy. Stick around a few.”

I didn’t need much convincing to spoon Trish again. I rested my head in her hair, allowed her scent to fill my nostrils, and then closed my eyes.

*KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.*

My eyes shot open. Was that a dream, or my imagination? I had just dozed off. I checked my watch and flinched. We had been sleeping for two hours. It was the middle of the night.

*KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.* “Daddy?” The door rattled. “Daddy, I had a bad dream...”

Jordy and Trish bolted upright in bed. “What do we do?” she whispered.

“Uh, just a minute, sweetie!” Jordy called.

The doorknob rattled again. “Daddy...”

Jordy scrambled to put some clothes on, but there was no time for me and Trish. I slid out of bed and looked around. Jordy’s bathroom was out in the hall. “The closet,” I whispered, grabbing Trish’s hand and leading her over there.

Rather than a door, there was a dividing curtain on a rod. I pulled it back and winced. There wasn't much room. I squeezed inside, then pulled Trish with me. We slid the curtain closed and held our breath.

Jordy opened the door. "Aww, sweetie. You had a nightmare?"

"Mmm hmm," my daughter murmured. "What are you doing?"

"Uh, what do you mean?" Jordy replied.

"Your light was on."

"I forgot to turn it off."

Trish pushed back against me in the closet. That had the effect of wedging my flaccid penis between her cheeks. I felt myself stiffen.

"Where's Daddy Archie?" Kaylee asked. "And Trish?"

There was a long, pregnant pause. "What do you mean?"

"Daddy Archie wasn't in his room. I went there first. Then I looked for Trish. They're both *gone*."

Despite the precarious situation, my cock was rapidly hardening against Trish's rear. She turned and met my eyes in the darkness, and gave me a, "Are you kidding me?" stare.

"I can't help it!" I breathed, barely loud enough for our ears alone. "If anything, this is your fault for being sexy."

She flashed a grin.

"Let's get you back to bed, sweetie," Jordy said. "I'll stay with you until you fall asleep. I promise."

"But where is daddy? And where did Trish go?"

"Um, they probably went for a walk! Yeah! That's exactly what they did. A walk. Sometimes they can't sleep, too. Just like you."

"Oh," Kaylee said. "Okay."

We listened as they walked out of the room and down the hall. Only then did we exhale and leave the closet.



“That was unfortunate timing,” I said while grabbing my clothes. “Literally caught with our pants down, as they say.”

Trish shimmied into her panties. “I like you with your pants down. I don’t know how you’re going to get them on with *that* obstruction.” Her eyes drifted down to my erection.

“You’re not making it any easier!” I protested.

“Oh? So I’m making it *harder*?”

I glared at her and managed to get my pants on, shoving my stiff dick down one pant leg. By then, Trish had her clothes on.

“Seriously though, this was a lot of fun.” She stepped close enough for her delicious scent to surround me again, and gazed up at me through her long eyelashes. She stood on her tip-toes, brushing her lips across mine. I leaned into her, wishing the kiss could go on for longer, but then she broke away.

“Sweet dreams.” She flashed a final grin and then disappeared through the door.

It took me a long time to collect myself before following.

\*

Despite the excitement that had taken place in Jordy’s bedroom, everyone pretended like things were normal the next morning. I made myself a cuppa while the others drank coffee. We took showers. And then when it was time to leave, we all said goodbye to Kaylee—and, to a lesser extent, Trish.

Jordy found an excuse to stick back so he could have a private moment with our nanny. That made me feel vaguely jealous. I wanted to share a secret kiss with Trish, too. But there was no way to do that without making it awkward.

*Besides, I don’t know how Jordy feels about all this, I thought. He has strong feelings for Trish. Would he get jealous if I tried kissing her goodbye? Is that somehow less strange*

*than having sex with her?* I didn't know how any of this was supposed to work.

We drove to the airfield and boarded our helicopter. We were half way across the Black Sea to our first stop in Constanta, Romania when Harrison spoke up in our headset.

"You guys had fun last night." It was a statement, not a question.

I kept my eyes straight ahead and said, "Sure did. Watched *The Sopranos* and turned it into a drinking game."

Harrison barked a laugh. "Yeah, all right. You want to pretend it didn't happen, I won't stop you."

Now I looked over my shoulder at Jordy, whose eyes were as wide as mine. "What do you mean?"

Harrison snickered again. "I don't give a shit what you two do with the nanny. Go on, get your dicks wet. Do it every night, for all I care. As long as Kaylee is good. Don't fuck up around her again."

"You heard us?" Jordy asked.

"I got up to piss and heard you bringing her back to bed," Harrison replied. "And then I saw Archer sneak back to his bedroom while trying to hide a hard-on the size of Tennessee."

Jordy laughed. "Whelp. You caught us."

An intense wave of shame washed over me. A week ago, I had been criticizing Jordy for his lapse of judgment with Trish. For getting sloppy, and for not being able to keep it in his pants. Now I was on that side of the situation, thinking with my dick and nearly getting seen by Kaylee.

"Like I said, do whatever you want," Harrison reiterated. "Have all the fun you want. Doesn't affect me none who you start dating."

"It's just sex," Jordy quickly said. "I don't know if anything will come of it when we return home to Wilmington. I don't even know if I *want* it to turn into anything. Right now, it's just sex, and that's good enough for me."

“Just sex,” Harrison said, deadpan. “Right.”

I could hear the doubt in his voice. For all of his faults, Harrison had a way of reading people. A way of cutting through all the bullshit and really *seeing* a situation with clear eyes.

*Just sex.* I spent the rest of the flight wondering if he was right.

**Trish**

The next morning, after the guys left for their mission, I floated around the apartment on a cloud. I made Kaylee breakfast, then went for a jog on the treadmill for half an hour while she played on her laptop. I usually hated exercise, but today it felt easy. Everything in the world was easy, and simple, and *wonderful*.

*I had a threesome last night.*

The act itself was amazing. Being shared by two ridiculously hot guys. Two guys who thought I was hot, too. It was scandalous, and sweaty, and so much fun. But there was a level of intimacy with them that made it even more fulfilling than just sex. I *liked* Jordy, and I *liked* Archer. I had spent the first two missions in Norway, and then Turkey, getting to know them better. Both of them were boyfriend material, as Lisa would say.

Crap. Lisa! I had slept with Blondie. She would never forgive me for this. Granted, she didn't have any sort of claim to Archer, but it still felt like I had betrayed her. We were best friends, and best friends were supposed to put chicks before dicks.

*That's a problem for later. For now, I want to revel in last night.*

Kaylee and I spent the day reading one of her picture books, which taught her about all the countries in Europe. "This is Norway, where we were last week," I said, pointing to the nation on the map.

“Where’s Turkey?” she said, giggling at the name. She still thought it was funny that there was a country named after her favorite Thanksgiving food.

“Turkey isn’t on here,” I explained. “Technically, Turkey is part of Asia. Asia Minor, I think. But you can barely see the outline of it *here*, next to Greece.” I pointed to the edge of the map, where the tiniest sliver of Turkey was visible.

Kaylee traced a line between the two countries on opposite ends of the page. “We traveled from *here* all the way to *here*? Wooooow.”

“The trip from America to Norway was even farther! I need to find a globe to show you. That will really put into perspective how far we’ve come.”

“Where are we going next?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Your daddies will tell us when it’s time to go. For now, it’s a surprise!”

“I like surprises. Do you have a mommy?”

The change of subject caught me off guard. “What?”

“Do you have a mommy,” she repeated slowly, as if I was too dumb to understand her.

“I do have a mommy! She lives in North Carolina with my daddy. And I have two younger sisters.”

“I’m glad I’m an only child,” she said, flipping the page in the book. “I have my daddies all to myself. I’m glad I have three daddies, too. That’s better than just a mommy and a daddy.”

My heart melted. “You’re a lucky girl, you know that? Your daddies love you *so much*.”

“Do you love my daddies?”

“Oh. I... I *like* your daddies. Like friends.”

She nodded. “Good. What country is this?”

I breathed a sigh of relief that the questioning was over. “That’s Italy. That’s where pasta and pizza come from. I bet

you like pizza.”

“I *love* pizza!”

My phone buzzed after we had finished the book. It was about the time Archer and I always began texting each day. Kaylee and I were playing Minecraft, so I paused to check my phone.

**Archer:** Touched down safely.

**Me:** Good! Thanks for checking in.

“Trish...” Kaylee whined. “You’re not helping gather wood! We need wood to turn into sticks, so we can make more torches and explore deeper into the caves.”

“Sorry! Collect it without me. I need to take a quick break.”

**Archer:** What are you lovely ladies up to on this fine day?

**Me:** Playing Minecraft.

**Archer:** Hold on. Let me make sure I have this correct. We rented an entire estate with three acres of gardens, and you two are sitting inside playing video games?

**Archer:** And yes, I am quite aware that I sound like a disgruntled old man rather than the lively 32 year old that I am.

**Me:** We went for a walk earlier! I’ve been making Kaylee go with me for at least

half an hour every day.

**Archer:** You don't want to go into the city?

**Me:** We went two days ago. I've already bought all the souvenirs for my family. I'll go back to the market in two days to get more fresh bread.

**Me:** Also, I got a weird vibe the last time we were there. I felt like I was being watched again.

**Archer:** That's unfortunate. Women get stared at quite a lot in this part of the world. I don't want to push you into something you're not comfortable doing.

I started to reply that no, it wasn't that kind of staring. When I was in the market, I felt like I was being watched by someone specific. Someone who was there to spy on me. It had happened twice already, and even though I had no proof of it, I couldn't shake the feeling.

But I didn't want to worry Archer, so I changed subjects.

**Me:** Speaking of pushing me into new situations, I had a LOT of fun last night.

**Archer:** Wow, a LOT of fun? With capital letters?

**Me:** Yes. That's how you know I mean it.

**Archer:** It was exhilarating for me, as well. Jordy and I discussed it when we landed. We would love to do it again. If you are interested, of course. We would absolutely understand if you enjoyed it as a one-time thing and never wanted to do it again. That's how I feel about curry. Everyone back home loves curry. I tried it once, and enjoyed it, but I'm not in a hurry to eat Indian again.

His text was a relief to read. It also made me laugh, because I could sense the uncertainty in his text, going to great lengths to reassure me that it was okay if I didn't want to do it again.

**Me:** First of all, Indian food is amazing. I could eat buttered naan bread three meals a day for the rest of my life, and I'm judging you for not feeling the same way. Secondly, of course I want to do it again! And this time we will be more careful about Kaylee, and not fall asleep immediately after.

**Archer:** Good. I will let Jordy know you feel that way. I know he will be relieved



to hear it.

**Archer:** After all, it's just sex. There doesn't need to be a lot of baggage attached to it.

**Archer:** Just three adults having some adult fun together. And when it stops being fun, we can stop, too.

I read his flurry of texts three times. *It's just sex.* So that's how he thought about it. Granted, that's sort of how I saw it when I agreed to it last night, but things felt different today. Archer wasn't just some guy I was banging, and neither was Jordy. I didn't know *what* we were, and if it would be possible to date them when all of this was over and we went home, but I didn't feel like it was just sex.

*Do they not want something more? And more importantly, do I?* I second and third-guessed myself before finally replying in what I hoped was an aloof tone.

**Me:** Yeah, totally. No baggage. Let's keep doing it as long as we're all having fun. See you tonight!

The conversation left a sour taste in my mouth the rest of the afternoon, but that disappeared as soon as the guys got home that night. They were happy and full of energy, which filled Kaylee with childish excitement. It was tough not to share in their joy. Their arrival held an extra significance, more than just three men going to work in an office. They were putting themselves in danger. Their return home *should* be a celebration every single time.

That night, Jordy and Archer wordlessly led me into my room. We didn't need alcohol to lower our inhibitions this time; all of us were eager with anticipation. Archer started first, laying me on the bed and kissing me deeply. He moved down between my legs and buried himself in my pussy, devouring me until I was arching my back and crying out. Jordy quickly joined us on the bed and knelt next to my face, using his cock to muffle my cries of pleasure as Archer continued going down on me. My second orgasm was quicker and more intense, and I screamed as loud as I could around Jordy's dick.

And then, when I was a puddle of pleasure who could barely move, they took turns fucking me while the other watched. Alternating between them like they did the first night. Except this time, when they were both nearing their climax, they decided to spitroast me (a term I didn't learn until afterward.) Archer straddled my face on the bed and came down my throat at the same time Jordy exploded inside my pussy. It was pure heaven.

The week went by like that. It was a wonderful routine: I said goodbye to the guys in the morning, spent all day with their daughter, we ate dinner together that evening, and when the sun went down we lost ourselves in the mindless drive of our bodies. By the third night, it stopped feeling scandalous. After a full week of sizzling threesomes, I started to wonder why anyone would ever have sex with just one other person.

Harrison knew, I suspected. He smirked at me whenever I said I was going to bed. One night, after Kaylee was already asleep, he said something along the lines of, "I don't want to be your fourth wheel, so I'm going to bed." But he wasn't rude about it, and never made me feel like I was doing something deserving of ridicule. He just gave us the space we needed to have fun.

We had been in Istanbul two weeks, and were beginning the final week there. The four of us had breakfast together, and then it was time to say goodbye to the guys. Kaylee ran down the hall to get her sticker book, because she wanted to give each of her dads a special sticker for good luck. When she was

out of sight, Jordy grabbed me and gave me a very long, very passionate kiss that took my breath away.

“Daddy?”

Both of us flinched and pulled apart like we had been caught doing something we shouldn't have been doing. Which, in a way, we had. Kaylee stood in the living room with a confused look on her face. I stood very still while I tried to think of an excuse.

“Uh, sweetie... I thought you had to get your sticker book,” Jordy said.

Kaylee pointed. “I just remembered. I left it by the couch.” Her frown deepened. “What were you and Trish doing?”

We looked at each other. Both of us were tongue tied, thanks to the *actual* tongue-tying we had just been doing.

“That's how adults say goodbye in some countries,” Archer quickly said. He nodded and looked at everyone else in the room. “Jordy and Trish were saying goodbye before they leave.”

Kaylee scrunched up her face as she considered this. “Do all adults do that? Trish has said goodbye to lots of people in the market, but never kissed them.”

“We only do it with adults we already know,” I said. “Not strangers.”

“Then why don't you kiss my other daddies?”

I shared a look with Jordy. I could tell what he was thinking: *shit. She's got us there.* Archer looked equally uncomfortable, but Harrison was covering his mouth and struggling not to laugh.

“I was just about to.” I approached Archer and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. It was totally innocent, but images from last night flashed in my head when we were kissing in a totally different context. “Goodbye, Archer.”

“Goodbye, Trish,” he replied formally.

Then I turned to Harrison. I didn't want to kiss him, but Kaylee was still standing there patiently, waiting to make sure we were telling the truth. Harrison, the big bear of a man he was, arched a red eyebrow and smirked. He was having a lot of fun with the situation at our expense. I couldn't blame him.

*Might as well get it over with.*

"Have a safe trip," I said. Harrison was standing still. Being so close to him, the scar underneath his eye jumped out even more than usual. I stepped forward and raised my lips to his. Just a quick peck on the lips. No big deal. But as I did, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into an embrace. His breath smelled like peppermint as his lips crushed against mine, a much stronger kiss than I expected.

And despite everything about the man, his rough exterior and standoffish attitude and the beard that tickled my chin, I *liked* it. It didn't feel innocent, or performative for Kaylee's benefit. I closed my eyes and for a few moments it felt like we were alone.

Finally, his arms released me. I stepped back out of instinct. My heart was pounding in my temple, and I breathed hard. Harrison was still smirking at me like the whole thing was a joke.

*It's only because I was already turned on from kissing Archer and Jordy, I told myself. That's all.*

"There you go, dearie," Archer said. "We've all said goodbye now. Can I have my sticker for good luck?"

"Why don't you kiss each other goodbye?" Kaylee suddenly asked. "Your my daddies, and you aren't strangers. So you should kiss, too."

For a split second, a look of fear passed across Harrison's eyes that made me grin. Then Jordy said, "We don't need to say goodbye, because we're going together."

"Oh." Kaylee nodded. "That makes sense. Here are your stickers."

Harrison's relief was obvious as he took a sticker and stuck it to his shirt. Archer and Jordy did the same. Then they

hugged Kaylee goodbye and left.

I licked my lips. They still tasted faintly of peppermint.



### Trish

I thought about the kiss all morning. It was confusing. I didn't like Harrison. I wasn't really attracted to him, either. His beard was too long and unkempt. He barely spoke twenty words to me whenever he was home. And he walked around with an air of danger, like a wolf that was always stalking.

*Maybe that's what I like, I wondered. He's dangerous.*

I shook it off and settled back into our normal routine. Jordy, Archer, and I had sex each night that week in every possible position and combination. I was bent over the bed and fucked while giving the other guy a blowjob. I rode one of them while the other caressed me from behind, taking turns like they did that first night. Once, after I had already come twice, they made me get on my knees and stroke them off until they came all over my chest.

It was the most sex I'd ever had in my life. In past relationships, it was usually just a once-a-week kind of thing. *Maybe* twice in one week. But now I was getting passed between these two men every single night, and I wasn't even close to getting bored of it. I was every bit as turned on by them now as I was when we first started.

Finally, our time in Istanbul came to an end. The guys left one morning for the final day of their contract; they would return that evening, we would spend the night here one last time, and then fly to the next contract—wherever that may be.

Archer insisted that a maid service would clean up after we were gone, but I still spent the day tidying up around the house. Gathering all of Kaylee's toys together, dismantling the

K'nex structures we had built, and generally picking up all the evidence that we had ever stayed there.

Archer sent me his usual text message to let me know they had arrived safely, which coincided with Kaylee's nap today.

**Archer:** Safe and sound.

**Me:** Good! I was afraid something bad might happen on the last day.

**Archer:** Woah. Don't jinx it. We're not done here, yet.

**Me:** Crap. Sorry. Un-jinx! How do I un-jinx it?

**Archer:** I think a sexy photo will suffice.

**Me:** How does that cancel out a jinx?

**Archer:** It doesn't. But it would make me a happy lad.

**Me:** What do I get in return?

There was a long pause between texts. I wondered if Archer was waiting for me to send something. Then he responded—not with words, but with a photo.

A photo of his long, rock-hard penis sticking up through the zipper of his cargo pants. It was large enough to make the hand gripping it look small.

**Me:** OH

**Me:** OH MY

**Archer:** That's what you get in return. Now it's your turn to fulfill your end of the bargain.

**Me:** I don't remember agreeing to any bargain.

**Me:** And I do believe you just sent me an unsolicited dick pic. As an innocent girl from Wilmington, NC, I'm shocked and horrified by this behavior.

**Archer:** I'll let the head of Mathos Company HR know.

**Archer:** Except we don't actually have a Human Resources department. Because we're a mercenary group.

**Archer:** I'm sitting here in the cockpit with nothing to do for six hours. Are you really going to leave me hanging?

I paused to make sure there was only silence coming from Kaylee's room, then I went to my room and closed the door. I stripped off my jeans, then swapped out my current pair of panties for the sexy red lace ones. I pulled them aside, laid my fingers across my bush, and snapped a photo.

**Me:** Here you go. But only because you're such a good boy.



**Me:** [photo]

**Archer:** Did you send it? I'm getting an error message.

**Me:** Yes

**Archer:** It says message failed to download

**Archer:** Ugh, it's probably this bullocks VPN I'm using.

**Me:** Oh no. That's incredibly sad for you.

**Me:** It was a good photo, too.

**Archer:** You are, quite possibly, the most evil woman I have ever met. And I've been to Glasgow.

**Me:** What are you going to do about it?

**Archer:** Hmm. I think Jordy and I will take out my sexual frustrations on you this evening.

**Me:** Yeah?

**Archer:** Yes.

**Me:** Tell me what you're going to do.

**Archer:** Oh, I think you're going to have to wait to find out.

**Me:** Give me a hint?

**Archer:** No.

**Me:** OH, COME ON.

**Me:** I'm dying here.

**Archer:** Oh no. That's incredibly sad for you.

**Archer:** Do you see what I did there? I copied exactly what you said to me earlier. It's not fun when you're on the receiving end, is it?

**Me:** I just remembered that I'm getting my period tonight. At exactly the moment you get home. Sorry.

**Archer:** Got to go. There's a situation.

**Me:** Really? Is everything okay?

I wondered if he was pulling my leg. But an hour passed without him responding, then two. I searched the internet for Ukrainian news, but there were no results that included Americans.

It was an immense relief when I heard the front gate open and their car pull into the driveway late that afternoon. I ran outside and saw that all three of them were in the car. Kaylee followed, just as excited as I was, but for a totally different reason.

"You had me worried," I said when Archer got out of the car. "I thought..." I trailed off as Jordy gingerly slid out of the back seat. He was limping and wincing with pain.

“There was a situation,” Archer repeated.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Jordy winced. “No.”

“We were teaching the guys how to use the new MANPADS,” Harrison said with a laugh. “Rookie named Vlad wasn’t holding it tight enough. Recoil sent the whole MANPAD flying backwards into Jordy. Caught him right in the di—” He cut off when he noticed Kaylee. “Caught him in the beans.”

“BEANS!” Kaylee squealed, tackling Jordy with a hug. The big man let out a groan that was at least two octaves higher than normal.

“Let’s give daddy Jordy some space, dearie,” Archer said, leading their daughter away.

We went inside and I retrieved an ice pack for Jordy. He shoved it down his pants and settled in on the couch. “I’m so sorry!” I told him while the others were in the kitchen. “Does it hurt?”

“I know childbirth is supposed to be bad, but I think this gives it a run for its money.” Jordy winced. “I’m just joking. Not trying to be insensitive. I know childbirth is worse. But right now, it doesn’t feel like it.”

“I know, it’s okay,” I said, gently stroking his hair away from his eyes. “Poor baby. Can I get you anything?”

He gazed up at me helplessly. “Do we have any ice cream left?”

“To eat, or to put on your junk?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“You’ll spoil your dinner,” Archer answered. “We’re going into the city to eat. One last meal before we fly out. Assuming you can walk.”

“I’ll try.” Jordy stood, and groaned. “Haven’t been this hurt since Prague...”

Archer grimaced. “Don’t need to bring that up.”

*Prague*, I wondered. *What happened there? And why are they so secretive about it?*

“I’m sad you’re injured,” I told Jordy. “I was excited about all the fun we were going to have tonight.”

Archer smirked. “His mouth still works.”

“Oh! That’s a good point.” I stroked my chin. “I wonder what you can do with your mouth?”

Jordy winced in pain. “Anything that *excites* me will hurt like hell. And using my mouth on you will definitely excite me.”

“Aww, too bad,” I said.

Jordy pointed back and forth between us. “That doesn’t mean you two can’t have your own fun.”

I blinked. “Really?”

“Sure, if you’re fine dropping down to one-on-one sex,” he replied. “It’s probably boring as hell after the two of us going to town on you each night.”

“Are you sure?” Archer asked.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I assumed you might get jealous,” I offered.

Jordy adjusted the icepack in his pants and sighed. “Not the possessive type. Besides, it’s not like you’re off with some random asshole. It’s Archer.”

“That’s kind of you to say,” the Englishman said.

“I’m not threatened by you at all,” Jordy went on. “I know I’m way better in bed than you. Bigger dick, too.”

“You’re a bigger dick, all right,” Archer replied.

“I don’t know if I would call it bigger,” I chimed in. “It’s *maybe* a few millimeters longer. Hardly worth bragging about.”

“Still counts!” Jordy pumped a fist, then winced as the motion made him ache again.

We drove into the heart of the city to a restaurant that was nestled against the Dardanelles Strait, which was filled with fishing boats all lit up with lanterns as the sun began to set. We were given a table on the second floor, with a window overlooking the street outside, which was full of pedestrians coming and going from the market. Kaylee was very adventurous with the food we shared, and decided that she loved hummus.

As we ate, I kept glancing at Archer. He was smiling and carrying on with the conversation, but something felt off about him. Like he was trying not to look in my direction. Was he feeling awkward about what Jordy said?

Harrison slid back his chair and stood. “Gonna hit the head.” He stalked away.

Archer and Jordy shared a long, knowing look.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Archer said stiffly. “Everything is perfectly fine.”

Jordy, who was sitting next to me, leaned close enough to whisper. “Something spooked Harrison. He’s checking it out now.”

I gazed out the window. Were we in danger? Surely not, or they wouldn’t remain seated here at the table. They would be evacuating us back to the car, the way military guys always did in the movies. I scanned every face that walked by outside. I had a good view from our spot on the second story. Everything seemed normal.

There was motion behind a bread stand, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I suddenly had the distinct impression that someone had been watching me. Watching *us*. Just like the feeling I got when I was in the market.

Harrison suddenly appeared outside. He strolled down the street lazily, like he was killing time. Browsing the goods that the vendors were selling. He disappeared out of view, then returned to our table a few minutes later.

“Well?” Archer asked.

Harrison shrugged. "False alarm."

*Was it? I wondered. Or am I just being paranoid?*

We finished dinner and went home. After Kaylee went to bed, the guys began packing. I retired to my room to do the same.

A knock came on my door some time later. When I opened it, Archer was standing there.

"Come in," I said. A nervous tickle ran up my spine. I wasn't sure why; Archer and I had been sleeping together for over a week. This wasn't new.

*The two of us doing it alone is new. This is the first time Jordy hasn't been here, too.*

Archer leaned against the door and crossed his arms. "So. My texts got you all hot and bothered?"

I nodded. "Especially the photo. I can't believe you sent me a dick pic from a helicopter."

He brushed back his blond hair and grinned. "I have to admit: I've never done that before. Hope you enjoyed it."

"I did! I'm just sad my photo didn't come through."

"Me too." His eyes raked over me. "Perhaps we can remedy that now."

I bit my lip, then sat on the edge of the bed. I remembered what Archer had texted me earlier today: that he was going to take out his sexual frustration on me. That thought made me tremble with anticipation. I loved the way they both used me, and I was excited to see how Archer would open up now that he was by himself.

*Take me,* I told him with my eyes. *I'm yours to use as you see fit.*

Archer kept his distance for a bit. He slowly unbuttoned his dress shirt, then let it slide off his arms. He removed his belt and dropped it to the ground. But before taking off his pants, he finally stepped toward me. I held my breath as he stood

before me. His fingers laced into my hair and he tilted my head up to face him.

His kiss was soft, and wet. It felt like it was the first time, the two of us figuring out how our lips should connect. He pulled my shirt over my head, then lowered himself to my bare breasts. I sighed as he took one nipple between his teeth, nibbling every so slightly. Enough pressure to set my nerves on fire with pleasure, but not enough to hurt.

Then he was kissing me on the lips again, more passionately this time as the two of us scrambled out of our pants. He lowered his body over mine and deepened the kiss, tongue forcing its way into my mouth. Conquering and claiming me. There in the bedroom, just the two of us, I felt like I *had* been claimed by him. I felt like I was his, and he was mine, and that was all that mattered.

He ground his cock into my mound, back and forth, before finally pulling back enough to let it slide lower. I was drenched by this point, and accepted him easily. I wrapped my legs around his body and pulled him in, inch by inch, slowly while we kissed. Because we weren't in a hurry tonight. Jordy wasn't going to take Archer's place and have his way with me. It was just the two of us.

And when he finally filled me completely, buried deep inside of me with every stiff inch, he let out a long moan of contentment and wrapped his arms around me. It was like he wanted as much of his body to touch mine as possible—legs and arms and chest. His weight was heavy on top of mine for a moment, a wonderful manly pressure that made me feel safe.

He stayed inside me forever, unmoving, savoring the moment. And when he finally began fucking me, it was slow and careful. The tiniest gyrating of his hips into mine. *Not fucking*, I thought as his tongue rolled against mine. This was totally different than what we had been doing before now. *This is making love*.

Despite being slow, it was still intense. There was a desperation just beneath the surface, a growing desire that pinged from his lips to mine. It became stronger with every

second, with every bead of sweat that formed on our nude bodies.

We made love like that for seconds, or minutes, or hours; it was tough to tell how long. Then Archer leaned back, raising up and pulling me with him, adjusting himself on the bed. He was in a seated position with me in his lap, my legs still wrapped around him. I kissed him more passionately while grinding against him, and he moved his own hips in time with my gyrating. Then he tore his lips away from mine and held the back of my neck, and stared deeply into my eyes. Somehow, they seemed a deeper shade of blue than usual.

With our arms wrapped together, and gazing longingly into each other's eyes, the two of us made love long into the night.





## Trish

Long after the two of us had climaxed, and long after Archer had given me a final kiss and then retired to his room, I stayed awake in bed thinking about what had happened.

Prior to tonight, everything we did together was sex. Jordy and I had a few nights of passion alone before we started including Archer in the sexy shenanigans, but since then it had been *very* physical. Rough, sweaty, toe-curling threesomes that made me feel naughty every single day. The three of us using each other's bodies to let out some steam. Taking solace in each other after the stress of their mission.

But tonight? It was more than just physical. When Archer gripped me tightly and pressed his forehead against mine while we came together, I felt so much more than just sexual release. I felt close to the man. Intimate in a way that went beyond mindless sex. Tonight, it felt like Archer was giving me part of his soul. It sounded silly, but I couldn't think of a better way to describe it.

And that realization made me feel guilty about Jordy. Where did he and I stand now? We both liked each other when we started fooling around back in Oslo. The inclusion of Archer was for the fulfillment of a sexual fantasy. What would he say if I told him I now had feelings for Archer?

*I have feelings for Archer.* Hearing the thought inside my head made me more certain about it. Which, of course, just left me even more confused than before.

I barely got any sleep that night. Which sucked, because my alarm went off early the next morning so we could make it to

our flight. I guzzled two cups of *extremely* strong Turkish coffee and then spent the drive practically bouncing up and down in my seat.

“Time for the big reveal,” Archer said when we got to the airport. He whipped out a bundle of printed tickets from his pocket and handed them out with dramatic flair. And he grinned at me for a heartbeat longer than normal when my hand touched his.

I looked at the airport code on the ticket. “GYD. Haydar Aliyev International Airport?”

“Baku,” Jordy said. He didn’t need to keep an ice pack on his junk anymore, but he still walked gingerly while holding Kaylee’s hand through the airport. “Capital city of Azerbaijan.”

“Shithole country,” Harrison grumbled.

“We’ll explain everything when we arrive,” Archer told me with a long look.

Once we were boarded on the plane, I paid for the in-flight Wi-Fi so I could research the country. Azerbaijan was a former Soviet nation located just east of Turkey, and on the northern border with Iran. It was an oil-rich country, and the capital city, Baku, was nestled against the Caspian Sea.

I shook my head with wonder. Baltic Sea, then Black Sea, and now Caspian Sea. I’d visited a lot of bodies of water that I had previously only read about. *And in alphabetical order, too*, I thought with a chuckle. Next would be the Danube River, or the Gulf of something.

The flight was under three hours, but it felt more ominous than the previous ones. We were continuing eastward, which was even farther from home than before. Norway and Turkey were countries that I knew about, but Azerbaijan was totally foreign to me. Was it really a *shithole* like Harrison described? How would they treat women there? I found myself gazing out the window and dreading the final stretch of my time away from home.

Yet when we landed and drove into the city, my worries melted away. Baku may have been located in Central Asia, but it felt very similar to Oslo or Istanbul. The buildings were old and made of slate-gray stone. There was a bustling modern city center with skyscrapers. Archer pointed out three buildings covered in blue glass that were called the *Flame Towers*.

This time we were staying at a hotel downtown, just one block from the water. The lobby was old but richly built, with white marble floors and vaulted, painted ceilings. The bellhop led us to the top floor, which was where our penthouse suite was located. I gasped as we walked inside; it was an enormous open room with wall-to-wall glass giving us a sprawling view of the Caspian Sea. *This is bigger than my house back in Wilmington. And it's just the living room.*

Harrison immediately approached a suitcase that was nestled between the couch and the wall. It was brown Italian leather, finely made. I started to open my mouth to ask if it belonged to whoever stayed here before us, but then he unzipped it and reached inside. His hand came out holding a pistol, which he quickly opened and checked with expert movements.

"It's all here," he said. "Nothing high caliber."

"Because those are meant to be used as a last resort only," Archer lectured. "If you have to use it, then it means our mission is properly fucked."

Harrison grunted, zipped up the bag, and carried it away.

There was a chess board on a pedestal table in the hallway, with pieces made of frosted glass. I picked up the King's pawn, feeling the weight of it, and then impulsively moved it forward two spaces. It had been a long time since I last played a game. Maybe I would teach Kaylee how to play, if she didn't already know.

"There's no kitchen," Jordy said. He was walking around the suite, waving a small electronic device over the walls. Checking for listening devices, I assumed. "But there's a mini-fridge, and someone left a bunch of grocery bags on the table by the bar."

Archer dropped his bag on the floor and nodded. “I had the concierge pick up some staples for us. Bread, butter, peanut butter, cheese, milk. We can use those for lunches. The rest of the meals will be delivered from the hotel restaurant downstairs.”

“I love room service!” Kaylee squealed.

“When have you had room service?” I asked.

“We stayed at a hotel in Valley once. I got ice cream delivered!”

“*Raleigh*, not Valley,” Archer said. He turned to me. “Whenever you order the meals, have them drop them off outside the door. Never let them inside. If you have to, tell them you’re paranoid about COVID.”

“Understood.”

Harrison returned to retrieve his duffel bag, but he didn’t carry it away. He fished something out of it and went into the bathroom in the hall. He left the door open, and I heard water running from the faucet.

“Dearie? Why don’t you run along and get settled in your room while the adults discuss things,” Archer said.

Kaylee needed no other persuasion, and went sprinting off. Archer waited for the door to close, then retrieved a manila folder from his laptop bag. He placed the folder on the coffee table and opened it, revealing a black-and-white headshot of a man with a thin beard and a bald head.

“This is Aldi Kadyrovic. He’s the unofficial leader of the Chechen Republic within Russia. While the official head of Chechnya sits behind a desk signing paperwork, Kadyrovic goes out and does all the dirty work.”

“Fucking animal,” Harrison growled from the bathroom, where the water was still running. What was he doing in there? Washing his hands?

“Kadyrovic reports directly to Vladimir Putin. He sends press gangs through Chechen towns, forcing men to enlist to fight in the war in Ukraine. When men don’t want to go, he

tortures them. Their families, too. Sometimes he tortures them even when they agree. He gets off on it, the sadistic asshole. In Moscow, he's got a reputation. They call him Putin's Rabid Dog. Kadyrovic is, without a doubt, an evil man."

Jordy nodded. "I read the full report. You don't need to convince me."

"We should only be here a week," Archer went on, mostly for my benefit. "It will take a few days to get established and solidify our covers. Our intel says Kadyrovic will be visiting Baku later this week. When he does, we'll make our move and get him."

"This is a lot more dangerous than the last two missions," I said. "You're not doing security work, or training locals on how to use weapons. You're, like, kidnapping a guy!"

Archer and Jordy looked at each other.

"What?" I asked.

"We're not here to kidnap him," Jordy said slowly.

"Then what are you doing? Sitting down with him? Negotiating? I find it hard to believe you would negotiate with someone you compared to a rabid dog."

Both of them stared blankly at me. I didn't understand.

And then I did.

"No..."

"We're only telling you the details of our mission as a friendly courtesy," Archer said. "This is the job we took, and we are being paid quite handsomely for it."

"You're going to kill him!" I exclaimed. "You're *assassinating* a man!"

"A bad man," Jordy said. "This guy is a fucking lunatic, Trish."

"Still! The ethics of it..."

Archer patted my leg. "You need not worry about the ethics of it, because you aren't taking part."

The room was starting to feel too warm. “Not directly! But I’m taking care of your daughter. Which frees you up to do it. I’m, like, an accomplice or something!”

“We wanted to tell you so you would know the dangers we’re in,” Jordy explained. “So you would understand if we come home in a certain mood, or if we’re really tense. Would it help if we pretended we were here on a basic security contract instead?” He grinned at me. “We can start all over and make up a story for you.”

I ignored his joke. “Who ordered the assassination? The United States? Some other country?”

“NATO, probably,” Harrison called from the bathroom.

Archer shook his head. “We couldn’t tell you even if we wanted to. It’s a confidential client. Your guess is as good as mine. But ultimately, it does not matter.”

“Of course it matters!” I searched each of their faces. They had to be pulling a prank on me. This couldn’t be real. “You’re talking about *killing* someone! The context is the only thing that separates this from, like, a war crime.”

“You want context?” Harrison came out of the bathroom, and I did a double-take. There were bits of shaving cream left on his face, but otherwise he was totally smooth-cheeked. His beard was gone, revealing a chiseled jaw-line and a strong chin.

*Wow, I thought. He actually looks... good.*

He pointed at me with his razor. “The context is that this guy fucking sucks. He’s Putin’s bitch. We’re here to take him out, and we’re going to do it with *extreme* prejudice. You got a problem with that? Then fly home to Wilmington.”

Harrison stalked back into the bathroom, shaking his head with annoyance.

“Our friend has put it harshly, but he is ultimately correct,” Archer said softly. “This is the mission. It is happening. If you do not want any part in it, we can make arrangements for you and Kaylee to return home.”

“Why can’t you arrest him instead?” I bargained. “If this guy is so bad, take him to the United Nations. Or the Hague, or wherever that world court thing is. Do *something*.”

Jordy put a hand on my knee. “Trish...”

“I am sorry we could not tell you about the mission before now,” Archer said calmly. “But this is the way it must be. Are you in, or are you out?”

Their eyes were hard. To them, this was *normal*. More dangerous than most missions, but still a completely normal part of their job. Neither of them were going to be convinced by anything I had to say.

“Fine.” I got up and carried my suitcase into the room with Kaylee and closed the door behind me.



## Harrison

I heard the nanny storm off into the other room. That was fine. If she wanted to get her panties in a twist, I wasn't going to give a single fuck.

I wiped away the last bit of shaving cream with the back of my hand and examined myself in the mirror. I looked younger. I *felt* younger, too, which was a stupid fucking thing to feel after shaving a fucking beard. Nothing else about me had changed in the last five minutes. If something that simple could change my whole attitude, then I must've been hanging on by a goddamn thread.

*I hate it.*

It's not that I was attached to the beard. It was scratchy and too warm this time of year. But I felt like a prep. One of those rich kids back in high school who drove their parents' BMW and had everything in life handed to them. I snarled at myself.

*It's just for this job. Then I'll grow it back again.*

When I returned to the living room, Jordy and Archer were arguing softly. Their demeanor didn't show it, but I knew these guys. I'd been with them for eight years—even longer with Jordy. We had a fucking kid together, as crazy as that sounded. So when they fought, I noticed.

I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying, but I took a wild guess. "It was fucking stupid to tell her. Whichever of you is making that argument: you're the one who's right."

Jordy nodded victoriously. Archer turned to me in annoyance. "I'm quite happy that I told her."



“Even though she freaked out?” Jordy replied.

“*Especially* because of that,” Archer said pointedly. “If she is going to have a problem with what we do, I would rather find out about it now. When we can send her and Kaylee home.”

Jordy gritted his teeth. “I don’t *want* to send Trish home. I want her to stay. I would have expected the same of you, but apparently not.”

“Of course I want Trish to stay,” Archer said, biting off every word. “But keeping the truth from her to that end would have been a mistake. We filled her in on the first two missions. If we suddenly held back, she would have gotten suspicious. She would have assumed the worst.”

“Kaylee.”

Both men turned to look at me. “Huh?” Jordy asked.

“Kaylee,” I repeated. “You want *Kaylee* to stay, I’m sure you meant to say.”

“Yes, of course,” Archer answered. “That’s very clearly what we meant.”

*Like hell it is*, I thought.

“It’s too late now,” Archer went on. “The die is cast, so to speak. Why don’t we discuss our preparations?”

“About time,” I muttered.

“First things first, I’m glad I didn’t need to remind you to shave for this mission.”

“No point in putting it off,” I replied.

Jordy leaned over and patted my bare cheek. “Smooth as a baby’s ass. You look like a new man.”

I snatched his wrist before he could pull it away. “Touch me again, and you’ll be eating with your left hand the rest of this mission.”

“Everything with the helicopter company is prepared,” Archer cut in like a disapproving parent. He waited for me to

let go before continuing. “Jordy and I will spend every day giving tours of the city to tourists. Kadyrovic has already reached out for a private tour of the city, especially an aerial view of the Formula One course, but he has not booked a specific day with us as of this moment. I suspect he will be arriving at the last minute and expect us to drop everything to accommodate him. Which, of course, we will.”

“Why are we certain he’ll choose our company?” I asked. “Or what if he changes his mind?”

“Because we have promised Kadyrovic, who is a huge racing fan, a meet-and-greet with Daniel Ricardo.”

Jordy sat up straighter. “We’ve got Ricardo working with us?!?! The driver?”

“No. Daniel Ricardo, the famous Formula One driver, will not be with us on this mission,” Archer said dryly. “That is merely the bait for Kadyrovic.”

“Aww.” Jordy slumped back into the couch.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “And what happens when this Russian piece of shit shows up and we can’t deliver his celebrity dick-sucking? Is that when we’re taking him out?”

It was the perfect setup, now that I thought about it. Lead Kadyrovic into some private room where Ricardo is supposedly waiting. Tell him his bodyguards—I’m assuming he’ll have an entourage of bodyguards—can’t come. Strangle the asshole with piano wire, then make our escape before his bodyguards figured out anything was wrong.

“That is not when we’re taking him out.” Archer cleared his throat. “The specifics of the mission have changed.”

I gave a start. “Changed how?”

“Mission parameters never change once the contract is accepted,” Jordy said.

“It is unorthodox, and I raised these concerns with the contract administrator at Mathos HQ in Frankfurt,” Archer replied. “Apparently, a special exception was made in this

case. Kadyrovic's death now has to be made to look like an accident."

"Shit," I cursed under my breath.

"Why? Who cares if it's an accident?" Jordy said. "Putin runs around giving polonium tea to every Russian defector without repercussions, but we have to wear gloves for our job?"

"None of that is our concern. It is the contract as it now stands. And we are being paid *extremely* well for the work. Let's move past it, please."

"An accident." I rolled the word around in my mouth. It tasted bitter. "What, we drop a piano on him when he's walking around town? Tie his fucking shoelaces so he trips on the stairs?"

"The modifications to our plan are quite simple," Archer answered. He had a hint of a smile, the kind he wore when he was pleased with himself. "Quite simple indeed. Care to venture a guess?"

"I don't feel like playing games," I said.

"I'll give you a hint. It involves the business we are temporarily commandeering for the mission."

"I said I don't want to play games."

"You guys!" Jordy suddenly cut in. He showed us his phone screen. "Daniel Ricardo is in Baku *right now*. What are the odds?"

"Of course he is in Baku," Archer said dryly. "That is why our cover story works so well."

Jordy put his phone down. "Oh."

"Tell us the fucking plan already," I said.

Archer sighed heavily. "I'll take him up for a tour of the city. And then I will crash the helicopter."

Jordy gasped. "But... but you'll die."

“I won’t die, because I will jump before it crashes,” he answered. “With a parachute, if that wasn’t immediately obvious.”

I grunted. “Fuckin’ sweet.”

“What about me?” Jordy asked. “I’ve never jumped out of anything before. Nothing in the air, at least. I jumped out of my buddy’s car once on a dare.”

“Of course you did,” I said. Jordy flashed me a grin.

“There’s a ridge to the west of the city. That’s where I will fly them before initiating the crash. That will keep anyone from seeing me parachute away at the last minute.” Archer turned to look at Jordy. “A parachute is a device that allows you to fall without dying.”

“I know what a parachute is.”

“You’re acting clueless more and more lately, so I wanted to make sure.”

“I’m not clueless! I caught the terrorist in Oslo, remember?”

“And since then?”

Jordy went silent.

“You’ve been distracted,” Archer lectured. “In the past, you never would have allowed a rookie holding a MANPAD to recoil into you like that. The same goes for the accidental weapon discharge two days prior to that. You’re lucky nobody was hurt.”

“You’re the one texting Trish all day, every day,” he shot back.

I leaned back in my chair. *This is getting good.*

“I never mentioned Trish,” Archer replied. “I merely stated that you have been distracted. Which is an undeniable fact.”

“How about you worry about yourself,” Jordy muttered.

“So you tilt the chopper on a crash course, then jump out at the last minute,” I said. “There’s one problem with your plan.”

Archer gave me a bored look. “And what, pray tell, is that?”

“Chopper crashes.” I tilted my hand down to mimic the destructive act. “Fire department arrives. Or whoever the fuck Azerbaijan uses for that kind of thing. And they find Kadyrovic, and his bodyguards... and nobody else.”

“Hey, yeah!” Jordy exclaimed. “They’ll wonder where the pilot’s body went! That will raise a bunch of red flags, and they won’t buy that it was an accident.”

“This is a scenario I have anticipated, and have accounted for,” Archer said simply.

Jordy and I shared a look.

“Say more things,” I said.

“There will be a fourth body, presumably that of the pilot, on board,” the blond Brit replied.

I chuckled. “Damn. That’s cold. *Ice* cold.”

Jordy glanced back and forth. “I don’t get it.”

“A body,” I said. “Just not Archer’s.”

Jordy’s eyes widened. “We’re going to kill someone?”

“What? Of course not,” Archer shot back. “Christ, mate. Trish has you as daft as a dormouse these days. I purchased a body at the Baku morgue. No questions asked. The body will be stored in the rear cargo compartment of the helicopter during the flight.”

“How was I supposed to infer that without any context?” Jordy argued.

“Infer. Big word,” I said.

Jordy flicked me off, then turned back to Archer. “You said we don’t know what day Kadyrovic is expected to book the tour of the city.”

Archer nodded. “Correct.”

“What happens when he shows up?” Jordy asked. “We make him sit in the waiting room while we cart a two hundred pound dead guy out onto the helipad? Won’t that seem a little suspicious?”

“You’re exactly right. That *would* be suspicious. Which is why the dead body will be on the helicopter for every tour we perform, beginning tomorrow. And to answer your *next* question, it will be contained in a bag of dry ice to keep it... fresh.”

Jordy shivered. “I hate bodies.”

“That’s very sad for you,” Archer said. “Because it will be your responsibility to care for the dummy body both before and after the mission.”

Jordy’s jaw dropped. “What.”

I let out a cackle. “Weekend at Jordy’s.”

He flicked me off again. “Why do I get corpse duty? Why can’t you do it?”

“Because I’m flying the helicopter and giving the tours,” Archer replied. “I’m doing all the *real* work.”

“DRAGGING A DEAD BODY AROUND SOUNDS LIKE REAL WORK TO ME,” Jordy shouted.

The door to one of the bedrooms opened and Trish stuck her head out. “You guys mind keeping your voice down? Unless you want to explain to your eight-year-old daughter why you’re talking about *dead bodies*.”

“Sorry,” Jordy said, flashing her a thumbs-up. She rolled her eyes, glanced at me, and then closed the door again.

*What was that expression she gave me? I wondered. She hasn’t looked at me like that since she started nannying for Kaylee.*

Something stirred inside me. I frowned. Trish wasn’t hard on the eyes. All right, that was putting it mildly. She was fucking *hot*. And after spending the last three weeks thinking about all the sexy fun she’d been having with Jordy—and then Archer—I found myself imagining just how good she was.

*She’s Kaylee’s nanny, I reminded myself. Unlike the two of them, I don’t like to shit where I eat.*

“Dead bodies, chopper crashes, yada yada,” I said to distract myself from the semi that was growing in my pants. “There’s one thing you haven’t told me, and that wasn’t listed on the briefing. What’s my role in all this?”

“You can deal with the corpse,” Jordy said.

“Your job,” Archer said, “is to keep an eye on Kadyrovic once he arrives in the city. Tail him. Warn us if he’s heading to the airfield, so we’ll at least have some sort of advanced notice. And when everything is done and he’s a smoldering heap of Russian flesh, you’ll assist in my evacuation. I’ve taken the liberty to rent an all-terrain vehicle to facilitate such an act.”

“Score,” I said. “What do I do before Kadyrovic arrives in Baku?”

“Anything you want,” he replied.

I blinked. “So I’m just sitting on my ass until then?”

“I’ll trade with you,” Jordy piped up.

It was my turn to flick him off.

Archer rolled his eyes at our back-and-forth. “You’ll be receiving hourly intelligence briefings on Kadyrovic’s movements in Chechnya. I need you ready to move the moment he arrives.”

“That’s bitch-ass work,” I said.

“Firemen do the same thing,” Jordy said, grinning. “Are you saying firemen are bitch-ass?”

“Yes. Firemen are extremely bitch-ass compared to what we do.”

“Damn, dude. Pour one out for our first responders,” Jordy said.

I turned to him. “House fires don’t shoot back.”

“Those are the rough outlines of the mission, and the plan,” Archer said loudly. He met my gaze, then Jordy’s, imparting the importance of his next words. “This is it, gents. The last contract on this road trip of mercenary work. We succeed here

in Baku, and we can relax all next year and figure out what we want to do in the future. This contract will determine the rest of our careers, and our lives. If you have any questions, I would kindly ask you to piss off. And then, once you've pissed off real good, come ask me whatever you need to know. Jordy, you and I leave tomorrow morning at seven, so be ready. And put a smile on. You're working the front desk at the tour office."

He did flash a smile. "I don't mind. I like people." His smile faded. "People who aren't Russian psychopaths."

We ordered room service for dinner. My steak was overcooked, but I ate methodically and swallowed every bite. As far as I was concerned, it was fuel. Tasting good was just a bonus. Kaylee ordered an ice cream buffet for dessert, and squealed happily when we told her she could pour as much chocolate syrup on her sundae as she wanted.

*I would kill for that girl, I thought as I watched her. Whether someone else, or myself. I would do it and never think twice.*

The next morning, Jordy and Archer got up early and left for the airfield where they would be giving their tours of the city. I got up too because I didn't know what else to do with myself. Trish kissed them goodbye. As she did, I found myself unable to look away. The three of them were building something, against all odds. I didn't know what it was, or how deep it went, but it was *something*.

And it made me feel left out. It made me feel like I wasn't one of them.

I didn't get to kiss Trish, because I wasn't leaving. That made me feel excluded, too. It was a stupid instinct, and I hated myself for feeling that way. But it didn't stop me from feeling it strongly.

*She's a hot piece of ass, I told myself. Nothing more. Any guy would want to get some action with her.*

Yet as the guys left, and we settled in to relax at the penthouse all day, I wondered if there was more to it.





## Harrison

I spent most of the first day sitting around the hotel penthouse. I refreshed my email approximately thirty times per minute. I took a shower, ate breakfast, then took another shower because I didn't know what else to do with myself.

I didn't like not having anything to do. It made me feel like I wasn't in control. Of the mission, or of my life. Whatever a psychologist would say. Mostly, I was bored. I hated being bored.

Trish and Kaylee were sitting at the dining room table, playing Minecraft together. I knew it was my daughter's favorite game, and I had watched her play it before, but I had never taken part. Today, with nothing else to do, I pulled up a chair and watched her play for a while.

"This is a special chest," she explained. "It's where we store all our gold ore. And diamond."

"Is diamond special?" I asked.

"Daddy! Of course it is. It's *diamond*. It's the rarest in the game."

"Oh, wow," I said.

Trish removed her headphones and glanced at me. "What role do you play in the... mission?" she asked. She had started to say *assassination*, but had stopped herself.

"Sitting. Waiting," I said over Kaylee's head. "I don't know when I'll have something to do."

“I’m surprised you’re not enjoying the stocked bar,” she said. “There’s a lot of good whiskey there. They have a Yamazaki fifty year. I don’t know a lot about whiskey, but I Googled it. It’s like a thousand dollars a shot!”

“Cool.”

“Archer said everything is complimentary. So you could have some, if you wanted.”

I cocked my head at the woman. “Why would I want some?”

She blinked rapidly. “I don’t know. You seem to like to drink. Wait, that’s not what I meant! You seem to *appreciate* a good bottle of whiskey. That sounds better, like I’m not calling you an alcoholic.” She grinned awkwardly.

*What is this girl’s deal?*

“I don’t know when I’m going to be needed, but I have to be ready at a moment’s notice,” I replied. “No alcohol for me.”

“Oh. That’s a shame.”

“Whiskey is gross!” Kaylee piped up.

“How do you know what whiskey tastes like?” Trish asked.

“Because daddy gave me some. It was awful!”

Trish stared at me wide-eyed. “You gave your eight-year-old daughter *whiskey*?”

“I think she was six at the time,” I replied.

“You’re not helping your case!”

“I gave her a taste. The tiniest little sip. And she hated it. Now she wants nothing to do with alcohol of any kind.”

Trish stared at me. “That’s actually kind of shrewd.”

“I know how to parent. Sometimes.”

Trish nodded, and put her headphones back on. But I noticed that she was only staring at her laptop screen without actually taking part in the game. A few moments later, she took her headset off and turned to me again.

“I like you without a beard.”

The comment totally caught me off guard. All I could do was grunt.

“Your beard doesn’t do anything for you,” she said. “It covers up your square jawline. And it looks dirty. You’re much better this way. Right, Kaylee?”

“Yeah!” she said. “Daddy’s beard tickles.”

“I like my beard,” I replied curtly. Why did she have an opinion about my beard? “I had to shave it for the mission, because Archer says I’ll stick out too much in the city with it. I’m growing it back as soon as we’re done here.”

“Oh. Okay.” Trish hesitated, then said, “This mission is dangerous. Right?”

“Crossing the street is dangerous.”

“You know what I mean. This is dangerous for you guys. Much more dangerous than working security at a peace conference, or training some Ukrainians on how to use rocket launchers.”

“We’ve taken dangerous missions before,” I replied carefully.

“Like Prague?”

I tried to conceal my surprise, but probably failed. I wasn’t good at hiding my emotions like Archer or Jordy. “What do you know about Prague?”

She leaned forward, showing a bit of cleavage. “Not much. Nobody will tell me anything.”

I struggled to keep my eyes from drifting downward. She wasn’t well-endowed in the chest region, but what she had was shapely. “For good reason.”

“What happened?” She gave me a sexy smile. “Come on. You’re sitting here, at home, bored.” She put her hands over Kaylee’s headphones to help muffle what she said next. “I’m bored too. And I like hearing about what you guys do. Even the missions I disagree with. What happened in Prague?”

I wanted to tell her. I wanted to do anything to make her happy, I realized. She was smiling at me, and leaning forward in a way that gave me a view down her chest, and she *had* to know what she was doing. And damned if it didn't work. I found myself leaning toward her and opening my mouth to answer.

I stopped myself. Just barely. *Letting Trish get to me like that. I'm just as bad as Jordy or Archer.*

"What happened is that you should mind your own fucking business," I replied.

She recoiled. "Hey..."

"You're here to do a job. To nanny our daughter. You're lucky we've told you anything about our missions, let alone the past. It's about time you accepted your role and stopped trying to stick your nose where it doesn't belong. You aren't a part of this family. You're on the outside." I waved my hand around the table. "All of this? The three of us, and Kaylee, and *you*? It's temporary. It ends when this mission is over and we all go home. It's about time you remembered that."

Trish flinched like she had been struck, and for a moment I felt guilty for what I had said. I was too harsh. I was always too harsh with people who were outside the family. Lowering my guard didn't come easy.

But then I dismissed that guilt as easily as throwing away a tissue. I didn't owe this woman anything. She was just the nanny.

Before she could argue, I got up and went to my room. She didn't try to stop me, though I didn't know why I expected her to. I opened my laptop and checked my email there, as if it might be different than my email on my phone. There was still no news on Kadyrovic. Last we had heard, he was in Volgograd for some kind of strategic meeting.

As I hit refresh on my browser, I felt annoyed. At Trish mostly for butting in... but also at myself. I didn't know why she had that kind of effect on me. Usually, I was good at pushing people away without them getting under my skin. I

should have been able to keep her at arm's length, just like everyone else that had ever crossed my path in life. Just like every other woman, especially.

*Too much time has passed since Karina, I thought. I've forgotten what betrayal feels like.*

Yet as I listened to Trish and Kaylee laughing in the other room, I found myself wanting to get closer to her. To open up, even just a little bit. To break off a piece of my soul and share it with her. To see if she would accept it.

*This is all temporary, I reminded myself. And even if it wasn't, I can't open up. It only leads to heartbreak.*

I hit refresh on my browser for the hundredth time and cursed Archer for making me sit at home.

**Trish**

“Daddy said a bad word.”

I stared down the hall to the bedroom door Harrison had slammed. “He sure did.”

“He says bad words sometimes,” she said. “He tries not to do it when I’m around. All my daddies do. But Harrison is loud, and sometimes I hear.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, he’s loud, isn’t he?”

“That’s why I love him!” she said happily. “Did you mine more iron? We need to make better tools.”

“Oh, sorry,” I said, turning my attention back to my computer. Kaylee was serious about her Minecraft.

As I dove back into the game, I thought about what Harrison had said. *You’re on the outside. This is temporary.*

On the surface, I knew it was true. It was what I had been trying to avoid thinking about since we left Wilmington. But having him say it bluntly, like he was counting down the days until I was gone, stung in a way that surprised me. Since I began this nanny job, Harrison made it very clear that he didn’t like me. Or didn’t approve of my presence. So his comments weren’t exactly a surprise.

Yet still, as soon as he said them, I struggled to hold back tears.

*Why do I care so much about what he thinks? I’m not involved with him the way I am with Archer and Jordy.*

This job was almost over. We were on the third of three missions. And when it was over, I was gone. Sure, they were generously giving me several months of extra pay, but I would still be searching for a new job. That was a depressing thought, and not just because it meant I would be back at square one. I was sad to leave Kaylee, and the guys.

I wondered what would happen when it was all over. Would I still date Jordy or Archer? Or both of them? Even if they wanted to, I wasn't sure that was for the best. On my nanny profile, I listed that I would be willing to relocate for the right job. I could be sent anywhere. Staying in Wilmington to date one of them—or both!—would limit my future opportunities. I didn't want to prioritize a relationship over my career again.

*Relationship*, I thought with a scoff. *Right now, I don't even know if that's what we have. We have sex, which is great, but then we spend the rest of our time pretending like nothing is going on.*

Whatever thing I had with Jordy and Archer, I felt a powerful attachment to them. Even Harrison, for all his faults. I glanced in the direction of his room, where the door was closed. Without the beard, he had a strong, square jaw. His skin looked smooth and fair, except for the scar that crossed underneath his eye, which was more pronounced, now. And without the mess of a beard, his auburn hair seemed more neat and tidy. He reminded me of someone famous, but I couldn't quite place who.

Kaylee and I called down to the concierge to order a late breakfast. As Archer had instructed, I told them to leave the food outside because we were concerned about COVID. When it arrived, I looked out the peephole and waited until the delivery boy had walked all the way down to the end of the hall before I opened the door.

As I wheeled the cart inside, he gave me a wave from the other end of the hall. "Please enjoy, madam!" he said in an exotic accent. He punctuated it with a crisp bow before disappearing into the elevator.

*What a nice man*, I thought. It was a small thing, but that interaction made me feel more welcome here.

We were halfway done eating our waffles when Harrison finally emerged from his room. He moved slowly and hunched over a bit, which gave me the impression of a bear just out of hibernation. He sat in the chair next to Kaylee and cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he rumbled.

“For what?” Kaylee asked.

“I lost my temper. And I said a bad word.”

“It’s okay,” she replied. “I don’t care if you say naughty words. Sometimes I get mad when I’m playing my game and a creeper sneaks up on me.”

His eyes flicked to me for a brief second. They were like glowing emeralds, somehow made even more striking by his clean-shaven face. “Don’t tell daddy Archer, all right?”

Kaylee let out a giggle. “Why not? Will you get in trouble?”

“Maybe.”

“I promise not to tell him,” Kaylee said, “as long as *you* apologize to Trish.”

Those green eyes swung back to me again. “I was going to do that next. I’m sorry I lost my temper, Trish.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” I said curtly.

“Are we all friends again?” Kaylee asked.

“We never stopped being friends,” I told her.

She gave a single, emphatic nod. “Good.”

Harrison smiled. He had a charming smile now that I could see his lips. “Are you done with your waffles? Why don’t you run along and play your game, so I can talk to Trish alone.”

She stuffed the last bite in her mouth and went running off. Harrison watched her go. Now we were alone. He shifted in his chair, and I was acutely aware of his presence next to me. He had a dangerous aura about him, but it was brimming with



a new kind of energy. Like if our elbows touched, an electric current would jolt between us. It was almost sexual, though I knew that couldn't be true.

“About Prague...” he began.

I quickly shook my head. “I shouldn't have asked. I was—”

He held up a hand to stop me. “It was a few years back. Our contract was to gather evidence on a certain individual, Anton Novak, and apprehend him and transport him to Germany for trial. Don't give me that look—this was a bad guy. Sex trafficker. Real piece of shit. We spent three weeks there. Following this guy, recording his movements, passing it all up the chain. Novak liked to visit a strip club. Went there every day for lunch, and then again at night. Because of that, we became frequent visitors, too. And while this was happening... I got involved with someone.”

“Harrison,” I said with just a hint of teasing. “Did you fall in love with a stripper?”

He recoiled. “What? Fuck no. I've got standards.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It was the manager of the strip club I fell for,” he explained. “Karina.”

Her name rolled off his tongue, pregnant with meaning. He kept his face blank, as blank as it always was, but I could tell this wasn't an easy discussion for him.

“Karina and I had a fling. It was just sex. Nothing more.” He said it emphatically, like he was having an argument. “Until it became more. Turned into a full-blown affair. Worst mistake I've ever made in my life.” He shook his head. “Can't believe how stupid I was.”

“You let it get in the way of the mission?”

“Worse,” he replied. “Karina was working for the guy we were going after. She was pulling a job on *me*. And I never even realized it. When we finally had gathered enough evidence and it was time to kidnap Novak and take him to Germany, Karina sprung *her* trap. She drugged me. I've got a

high tolerance, so it didn't knock me out the way she expected. It almost worked." He touched the scar on his face. "Karina got away, and I got this for my troubles."

"What about the target? Anton Novak?"

"He got away, too," he said in defeat. "We apprehended his two brothers, but not Novak himself. He was the one who really mattered. It was the biggest failure of our career. The worst part is that Novak is still out there somewhere. Nobody knows where. And it's because we didn't do our jobs. Jordy still feels bad about the whole thing, because he was distracted by a girl he was texting back home, too. But mine was the real fuck-up. We almost died. Worse, we almost lost our standing with the Mathos Company. The three of us had a come-to-Jesus moment and vowed we would never let that happen again."

He spread his hands. "So what does Jordy do? He brings you along to watch Kaylee. And then you two start playing hide-the-pickle at night when you think everyone is asleep."

The metaphor was so crude that I couldn't help but laugh.

"And then Archer joins in, too. Archer, the guy whose best redeemable quality is that he usually knows better. Listen, I'm not judging you. You're consenting adults. Do whatever the hell you want. I'd be all about it if the roles were reversed and I was bunking with three Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders. But..."

"But you wish I wasn't here," I finished for him. "I get that."

Harrison shook his head. "No. Not anymore. I'm glad you're here. I would do anything for Kaylee. And I mean *anything*. I would kill for my daughter. I would *die* for her. And after seeing you two together, I get the impression you would do just about anything for her, too. That makes you okay in my book. But having you here, and seeing what you're doing with Archer and Jordy..." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's bringing up bad memories. That's all. So, I'm sorry I've been an asshole."

He took a deep breath and sighed. It seemed like the conversation had taken a lot out of him. Come to think of it, I had never heard him talk so much. He had probably said more in the past five minutes than he had in the past five *weeks*.

“I’m sorry too,” I said. “All of that is awful. No wonder you don’t open up much.”

I reached over and put a hand on his arm. I was trying to be reassuring. His skin was warm, and the bicep underneath was as hard as the marble floors of the penthouse. And for a brief second, it felt like an electric current passed between us.

He looked at my hand on his arm, then jerked away. “I’m not *opening up*. I’m just telling you what you wanted to know. Giving you context.” He tapped the table with a thick finger. “This mission is dangerous. I’ve got a bad feeling about it. So, have your fun with my partners. Do whatever you want. But do *not* get in the way of the job. When things get spicy, you need to back off and let us do our thing without becoming a liability. Understood?”

His emerald gaze bore into me intensely. Waiting for my response. I nodded. “I’ll try not to.”

“Good.”

I cocked my head. “Are you sure that’s what all of this is about? Getting in the way of the job?”

Harrison blinked slowly. “What else would it be about?”

“Are you sure you don’t feel left out?” I didn’t know why I was asking this, but it was too late to change my mind, so I kept going. “Are you sure you’re not... *jealous*?”

He barked a laugh to show how ridiculous that idea was. “No. I’m not jealous.” His eyes sparked at me for a moment. “Unlike the two of them, I don’t like to share.”

Harrison abruptly got up and returned to his room, leaving me sitting at the table alone with my half-eaten waffle.



### Trish

At dinner that night, Jordy and Archer regaled us with stories of their day pretending to run a helicopter touring company in Baku. They made three different flights, one of which included a Russian TikTok celebrity that none of us had ever heard of, but who apparently had over ten million followers. Jordy complained that it was difficult running the front desk because the customers had lots of questions about the city that he couldn't answer.

"You would be able to answer them," Archer said dryly, "if you spent the proper amount of time reading the briefing materials that I painstakingly put together for your review."

"It was sixty pages long!" Jordy complained, looking around the table for sympathy. "Why did you make it so long?"

"Because that's how much information a tour guide is required to know." Archer shook his head. "Fortunately, you are only running the office. I'm the one making the flights, and giving the actual tour. And *I* read the material."

"It doesn't sound like you're pretending to run a helicopter tour," I said. "You two are *actually* running one!"

"It's quite fun, I must admit," Archer said. "A shame it's not a more interesting city."

"How was it dealing with the..." Harrison trailed off with a glance at Kaylee. "The *popsicle*?"

Jordy blinked. "Popsicle?"

“Yeah. You know. The big one you have to keep on the helicopter. For the potential guests.”

“Oh.” Jordy’s eyes widened. “*Ohh*. It was gross. I kept my eyes glued shut the entire time.”

“Which caused him to almost knock the gurney over,” Archer muttered. “Quite professional indeed.”

“Why would a popsicle be gross?” Kaylee asked.

“It was grape flavored,” Harrison replied.

The little girl made a face. “Eww!”

“Hey! I like grape!” I said.

Kaylee stuck her tongue out at me. “Yuck.”

“What’s wrong with grape?” I searched around the table. “It’s a perfectly normal flavor.”

Jordy snickered while eating his food.

The layout of the penthouse had three bedrooms down one hallway, and two down another. Kaylee and I had the two bedrooms near each other, in case she needed anything in the middle of the night. But the walls weren’t particularly thick, so me and the guys slipped into one of their bedrooms on the other end of the penthouse.

The first night, Jordy declined to join us—his junk was still sore from his accident. Archer and I were happy to enjoy the time for just the two of us, once again falling into bed and wrapping ourselves together as we made love. I gazed up at his beautiful face as he drove into me, hard enough to rock my body on the bed. Being with him was every bit as wonderful as it was with Jordy, but completely different in a way I couldn’t really understand. I cradled his face and drank the sight of his pleasure as he came inside me, and I clamped down my inner muscles around him as tightly as I could.

The next night, Jordy was still apprehensive about the state of his junk—but a few sexy glances and suggestive motions won him over. I was as gentle as possible with him as we retired to his bedroom, running my fingernails over his shaft and caressing him tenderly. He must have been fine, because

when the two of them finally took their turns with me, switching off every minute or so like we had become accustomed to doing, Jordy didn't hold back at all. His cock was as thick, and hard, and eager for me as it always was.

"I knew we could convince you to rejoin the party," I said while the three of us cuddled in bed after. It was a double bed, so we had to really snuggle close to all fit.

"Your argument was very persuasive," Jordy purred.

"What argument?" Archer asked. "As far as I saw, Trish winked at you and lightly touched your thigh after dinner."

"That's all it takes," Jordy said happily. "I'm a simple man."

"I assumed it was jealousy," I chimed in. "Knowing Archer and I were having fun without you."

"That knowledge did tempt me," Jordy replied. "But I never felt jealous."

"Really?"

He shook his head, brown hair brushing against my arm. "Weirdly, no. Archer and I have a good partnership. For the past eight years, we've shared pretty much everything. Why not share a woman, too?"

"I still do not like sharing a bathroom with you at home," Archer said on the other side of me. "There's only one sink. You leave your hair products all over the counter."

"It takes a lot of effort to look this good." Jordy lifted his head and gave it a shake, like a supermodel in a shampoo commercial. "But no, I feel zero jealousy. As long as you always like me the most."

I grimaced. "Oh. Well, actually, now that you mention it..."

Archer roared with laughter. Jordy looked like a sad puppy dog, even though he knew it was a joke.

"It's nice that we're on the last mission," I said. It wasn't a great segue, but I had been wanting to ask this question and didn't know of a better time. "Do you know what you'll do once it's over?"

“Go back to Wilmington,” Jordy answered. “Relax. Maybe take some easy contracts. We’ll have the luxury of being picky, after the payday from this trip.”

“I’d like to take a real vacation,” Archer mused. “Travel somewhere for *fun*, not for work. Maybe an island, like the Azores.”

“That would be dope. I’ve heard good things about Ibiza.”

Archer raised himself up onto one elbow. “You mean ee-BEE-tha.”

Jordy snorted. “No, dude, the island I’m talking about has a Z in it. It’s in the Mediterranean. I thought you would know about it.”

“I do know about it,” Archer replied dryly. “We visited when I was a boy. And it is most certainly pronounced *ee-BEE-tha*.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jordy rolled his eyes. “Like I would ever fall for that.”

“This is not a prank. That is literally how it’s pronounced.”

“*Suuuuure* it is.”

While the two of them argued, I sighed. I had meant what would happen with *us* after the mission ended. Us, including me. But clearly that wasn’t on their mind at all.

*Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?*

# 30



## Trish

Baku was an interesting city. A combination of old architecture and culture, but with a growing high-tech industry. As Kaylee and I walked to the market, I wondered: was this how most older cities were? Istanbul didn't seem that way at all, and Oslo was more modern overall.

Visiting the market was mostly an excuse to get out and stretch our legs. We didn't need to buy much in the way of food: the room service in the hotel were some of the best meals I'd ever had in my life. They had a wide menu, very diverse, and everything was exquisite. That might have been my small-town, uncultured opinion, but still.

Our food was delivered by the same friendly bellhop every day. He was in his thirties, with dark hair, a smattering of freckles, and a perpetual smile that seemed completely genuine. He always dropped off the cart of food and then quickly hurried down the hall to give me as much space as possible. After the third delivery, he started including a small disinfectant wipe on the cart.

"If you are worried about the containers!" he called down the hallway. "Use that to wipe them down before eating! We want you to feel as safe as possible!"

Kaylee started coming to help me get the food, because she liked feeling helpful. The bellhop always waved at her, and would sometimes contort his face into a goofy expression. Soon, Kaylee was giggling every time she saw him.

I kept my space around Harrison. Ever since he opened up to me—which was clearly what he had done, no matter what he



said—he seemed to have his guard up. More than usual. I would have accepted it as just the way the man was in general, but it was a stark contrast to the caring way he acted around his daughter. He played with Kaylee throughout the day when he wasn't reviewing his hourly intelligence briefings. He stretched his muscular body out on the floor and played K'nex with her. He patiently listened to her explain all the intricacies of her Minecraft world, including the best way to fight spiders. He was a gentle giant around her, a sight that warmed my heart and made me look at him in a totally different light.

One day, I was getting extra towels out of the hallway closet when he emerged from the bathroom. He had just taken a shower, and had only a towel wrapped around his waist. Beads of moisture clung to every inch of his skin, and I had to focus to avoid staring.

*He's not as lean as the others, I thought, but he's definitely bigger. More powerful.*

I realized I was standing in his way in the hall. I quickly stepped aside and mumbled an apology.

Harrison gave me a knowing smirk and said, "It's your turn, you know."

"I already took a shower this morning," I replied.

He scoffed and disappeared down the hall into his room, leaving me confused about what he meant.

It took me a full day to figure it out. I was walking down the hall after putting Kaylee down for a nap when I noticed something off about the chess set. I had moved one of the white pawns forward... and now there was a black pawn advanced two squares.

*That couldn't be what Harrison meant, I thought. Could it?*

I made another move, then relaxed on the couch to read a book. Harrison emerged from his room, made himself a sandwich at the bar, and then disappeared again. But for a few seconds, it sounded like his footsteps stopped. As soon as I heard his door close, I jumped up and tip-toed into the hallway.

A black knight was now sitting in the third row.

We spent the rest of the day playing the game like that. Harrison went to the kitchen for a snack, or a drink, or to make a phone call. Every time, another piece was moved. Eventually, I got sick of the charade and moved the entire chess set to the coffee table in the living room.

The next time Harrison emerged from his cave, I heard him pause in the hallway. His bulk appeared a moment later. I stared back at him with an eyebrow raised.

He poured himself a glass of water, slid the ottoman around to the other side of the coffee table, and sat on the edge. He made his next move, and then I followed it up by advancing my bishop. Harrison marched his pawns forward, and I countered by castling my king. It wasn't speed chess, but it wasn't slow, either. He made careful, methodical moves. Ten minutes later, I realized I was in trouble. Five minutes after that, my king was trapped in a corner with no way to escape.

“Good game,” I said, tipping my king to the side in defeat. “I never would have expected you to play chess.”

“Why not?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don't know. You're kind of a...” I trailed off as he stared at me intently. “It's just not like your personality at all.”

“Or maybe,” he said while getting up, “you never discovered my personality because you made some assumptions about me.”

I thought about that the rest of the day. On the surface, Harrison was pretty one-dimensional. A rough-around-the-edges soldier who was quick to anger and comfortable with violence. Then again, I had never taken the time to get to know him the way I had with Jordy or Archer. Part of that was because he had been hostile to me from the moment I met him. Part of it was my fault for never trying.

I was further surprised the next day when I went downstairs to run on the treadmill in the hotel gym. When I returned, I found Harrison and Kaylee sitting on the floor of the living

room. Harrison's legs were spread out in a V, and his daughter was sitting between him.

And he was skillfully weaving her blonde hair into a single, thick braid.

"You're braiding Kaylee's hair!" I exclaimed.

Both of them looked up at me with surprise. "Why wouldn't I be?" he said.

"Daddy always braids my hair," Kaylee explained. "He does it better than my other daddies."

I suddenly remembered how Kaylee's hair was braided the first time I met her a month ago, at their house in Wilmington. She said her daddy braided it, but I assumed she meant Archer or Jordy. I never in a million years would have thought of Harrison.

When I stopped making assumptions about the man, I found him surprisingly sexy. Without the beard, I was definitely attracted to him. Yeah, that was incredibly shallow. I shouldn't have allowed a single physical alteration to change the way I thought about him. But I couldn't help it. It was like removing a filthy litter box from an otherwise beautiful home. It changed the entire vibe.

*I wonder what he feels like to kiss, I thought. Compared to when he kissed me with his beard.*

I noticed other things about Harrison, now that I was making more of an effort. He was a creature of routines. Every night, he poured himself a tall glass of milk and ate an entire sleeve of Oreos by himself. Every morning, he went to the hotel gym and exercised for two hours. And he made the exact same thing for lunch every day: two peanut butter sandwiches, with *lots* of peanut butter.

He usually ate after Kaylee and I did, so I started making his sandwiches for him. The first day, he came out of his room, looked at the plate, and then made his own sandwiches anyway. The next day, when he started to do the same thing, I got up and confronted him.

“It’s one thing to be stubborn, but another thing to waste food. You’re setting a bad example for Kaylee.”

I was afraid that comment might set him off, but it actually seemed to get through to him. He took the plate of sandwiches into his room, and accepted my offering every day after that. I chalked that up as a win.

We also played chess every day. A single game in the afternoon, when Kaylee was down for her nap. He beat me the second time, but it was very close. The third game I won after he made a mistake and lost his queen early. The fourth game ended in a stalemate.

I was looking forward to a rematch, but the next day Harrison was moving around in his room in a hurry. When he finally came out to the living room, he was dressed to go out: cargo pants, a plain grey hoodie, and sunglasses.

“Intel came in,” he said, grabbing one of the sandwiches I had made and taking a huge bite out of it. “The target is in Baku. I’ve got to go.”

“What’s your target?” Kaylee asked as she emerged from her room.

“It’s the store, Target,” he replied without missing a beat. “I’ve got a job there in the electronics department. I hope I’ll be home for dinner.”

“Okay!” Kaylee wrapped him in a hug, and Harrison picked her up and swung her around. She squealed happily until he put her back down.

“Do whatever Trish says,” he instructed, then turned to leave.

“Wait!” Kaylee shouted. “You didn’t kiss Trish goodbye!”

Harrison hesitated at the door. “We don’t need to kiss goodbye.”

“But you said you and Trish are *friends*. And adult friends kiss goodbye. Does this mean you two aren’t friends anymore?”

Harrison and I exchanged a look. We were caught in Kaylee's flawless eight-year-old logic. And *not* doing it would just raise more questions. Especially in the context of what Archer and Jordy and I were doing behind closed doors.

"Bye bye, Trish," Harrison said, and leaned in to kiss me.

It was quick. A brushing of his lips against mine. Noses touching for a brief instant. It was soft, and innocent.

Yet a lightning bolt of excitement passed through us in that moment. My heart began racing and my breath halted in my lungs. Harrison's eyes sparkled for a moment, and then he turned and exited out the door. I stood in place for a long while after. Something was stirring inside of me.

*That answers the question about the kiss, I thought while turning back to the room. It's much, much better without the beard.*

# 31



## Trish

I couldn't stop thinking about the kiss for the rest of the day. It shouldn't have been as hot as it was. I shouldn't have felt this turned on. But it was, and I did, and I couldn't help it.

Harrison returned that night and was secretive about what he had done that day. He, Jordy, and Archer sat down and quietly discussed things when they got home. It was clear that they hadn't assassinated their target yet. I began wondering when it would happen, and how long they would wait.

The only time I *didn't* think about the kiss was when I was having sex with my other two men that night. Jordy bent me over the bed and took me from behind, while Archer sat on the edge and pushed my head down onto his cock. We never had a chance to switch things up this night; all three of us were loving the way things were, and quickly reached our individual orgasms in succession.

But as soon as it was over, I began wondering what kind of lover Harrison was. Would he be surprisingly tender? Or did he like to throw a woman around in bed? The thought of being manhandled sent a sexy shiver up my spine, and that night my dreams were full of new fantasies that involved one extra person.

The next day, Harrison left in the morning with the other two. The kiss was a little bit longer than the first one, and less performative. On the third day, Harrison stayed in the penthouse until lunchtime before finally leaving to spy on the target. This time, Kaylee was only half-watching from the living room as we said our goodbyes.

Harrison cupped my cheek and crushed his lips against mine, and I closed my eyes and melted into him. Long after he was gone, I felt like I was weightless, floating around the hotel on clouds of air.

There was definitely something between us. Something powerful. Even the way he looked at me was different.

But I felt bad about the situation. I was already involved with two men, and there were questions and complications about what would happen with them when we all returned home. And now I was thinking about a third? It made me feel selfish. Like the rich girl I went to school with whose father bought her a stable and a pony, but then she insisted that she have *another* horse. After putting Kaylee down for her nap, I found myself wishing I had someone to talk to about it.

That's when I realized that I *did* have someone to talk to.

"Trish!" Lisa said when she picked up the phone. "It's about time you called me!"

"It's not too early there, is it?" I asked.

"I'm sitting on the balcony, drinking my morning coffee," she replied. "This is the absolute perfect time to call. How are Blondie and Brownie doing?"

"*Jordy* and *Archer* are doing just fine."

"Oh, I bet they're doing fine. F-I-N-E fine! Are you still having lots of sexy fun?"

I chuckled. "You have no idea. Do you remember that girl we knew freshman year of college, who slept with a bunch of guys on our floor? I think we judged her too harshly. Lisa, threesomes are *so much fun*."

There was a long pause on the line. I began to wonder if the call had been disconnected.

"You're having threesomes?" Lisa asked quietly. "With Brownie *and* Blondie?"

I gasped. "Oh no. Did I not tell you that yet?"

“NO, YOU DIDN’T TELL ME THAT!” she practically screamed into the phone. “Crap. I just yelled so loud that I scared our neighbor’s cat. He almost fell off their balcony. But no, you did *not* tell me this! When did it happen? Give me all the details!”

I backed up a few weeks and explained everything from the beginning. How we played *Truth or Drink*, which is when we learned that Jordy’s biggest fantasy was to have a devil’s threesome. What was supposed to be a single night of fun turned into a routine event, the dessert at the end of every day of the trip. And then I told her that Archer and I had slept together individually, too.

“I’m so sorry,” I said at the end. “I know you had a thing for Blondie. I mean Archer. But apparently he had a crush on me. And now we... ugh, I can’t even say it. I’m a terrible friend, aren’t I?”

“This is definitely going on your permanent record,” Lisa replied. “Fortunately for you, I’m not upset about it.”

“Really? You’re not?”

“It probably helps,” she said casually, “that I’ve been seeing someone.”

“What! Who are you seeing? Is it serious?”

“Brent, from work. The cute guy who sits by the printer. It’s not serious yet, but it has potential. Okay, enough about me! Tell me all about *your* adventures!”

“Well, I can’t tell you where we are, unfortunately,” I began.

Lisa made an impatient noise. “I don’t care about what country you’re in. I’m talking about your *sexy* adventures!”

I glanced in the direction of Kaylee’s room, then lowered my voice anyways. “The three of us do it pretty much every single night...”

I spent a few minutes giving her enough details to satisfy her curiosity. Then I mentioned how Archer grew up in a big, unconventional polyamorous family.



“No wonder he’s fine sharing you with Brownie. I wonder if Brent would ever be into kinkier stuff. He’s been kind of reserved in bed so far, but I can tell he’s holding back. When you guys get back, I’m happy to jump in and take your place if you ever get sick. Oh, or if you’re too sore! I bet you’re getting really sore.”

“When we get back... that’s actually one of the problems I’m worried about,” I explained. “More on that later. Right now, I have a more pressing issue. I’m kind of warming up to the third guy in their group. Harrison.”

“I thought he was... how did you put it? A scruffy pout-face.”

“I mean, yeah, he was,” I replied. “But he shaved his beard. And now I don’t know...”

“Your entire opinion changed because he removed his beard? Wow, and you say that *I’m* shallow.”

“I KNOW!” I exclaimed. “It’s so stupid! But now he’s all smooth-faced, and he reminds me of a smoldering Damien Lewis, and he’s starting to open up to me. He’s definitely a softy on the inside. He plays chess. And the other day I caught him braiding Kaylee’s hair.”

“Aww,” Lisa cooed. “I love it when a guy is affectionate with his daughter. Putting aside toxic masculinity to have a tea party.”

“So what do I do?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Lisa said. “You have two insanely-hot guys to occupy your focus. Don’t screw up that dynamic by adding a third. Even if it’s tempting.”

There was a noise down the hall. Kaylee’s door creaked open.

“You’re right,” I sighed. “I’ll enjoy what I have. I need to go, Kaylee just woke up from her nap.”

“You had better bring back a bunch of souvenirs for me!” Lisa said. “My forgiveness for your Blondie shenanigans will depend on how good my gifts are.”

“This feels like bribery,” I said.

“It’s not bribery,” she teased. “It’s friendship!”

I helped Kaylee get dressed, and then asked if she wanted to visit the market to help me get souvenirs for my friends and family back home. Instantly, all vestiges of sleepiness disappeared and she was raring to go. As we walked through the lobby, Kaylee pointed to the concierge desk. The friendly bellhop was there, showing another customer something on a map of the city. He saw us, and promptly made a face at Kaylee before turning back to the man he was assisting.

It was a short walk to the Baku market. It was an open plaza with covered stalls around the outside where vendors hawked their wares. Half the plaza was full of food items, while the other half was mostly touristy items. I led Kaylee by the hand in that direction while thinking about what Lisa had said.

Deep down, I knew it was ridiculous to think about a third guy when I already had two on my mind. Not just on my mind, but on my *body*. I was actively involved with them, practically every single night. I should have been trying to figure out which of them I liked the most—an impossible task at the moment—rather than considering a *third* man.

Yet I couldn’t stop thinking about Harrison. His quiet, deadly energy. The way his lips felt against mine. The protective way he treated his daughter, a trait which made my motherly instincts sit up and take notice.

I was wondering what to do about that when a hand grabbed my arm and twisted me around. A man with yellow teeth and a thin face snarled at me.

“Got you.”



## Harrison

The wind rushed through my hair as I raced through Baku on a motorcycle, weaving in and out of traffic along the narrow streets. All it would take was one careless driver who didn't see me and I would go crashing to the ground, or end up as a red smear on someone's windshield. But I didn't think about that. I had a mission with very clear objectives. I had the luxury of being laser-focused.

*Two more blocks*, I thought, positioning myself on the map in my head. *If the intel is correct.*

I reached the intersection I was looking for and hung a right. There, up ahead, I saw what I was looking for. A black Mercedes-Benz. The same car Kadyrovic had been driven around in since he arrived in the city. I eased up on the throttle and allowed myself to fall into traffic just like any other citizen of Baku.

I followed Kadyrovic's car for another mile before his driver stopped to let him out. I casually pulled off to a curb and left my bike leaning against the wall of a supermarket, and followed on foot. I pulled a faded baseball cap out of my pocket and put it on, tugging it low over my eyes. I didn't look like a local, but I blended in well enough.

Kadyrovic had one bodyguard with him as he strolled through a big, open marketplace. I shook my head in disgust. This guy was one of Putin's lap dogs, a war criminal in everything but name, and he had the balls to stroll around like a tourist. It was cocky. Arrogant, even. He thought he was untouchable.

I pulled out my camera, snapped a few photos of my surroundings, and kept my distance as Kadyrovic moved from stall to stall. He bought a kebab from a vendor and nibbled on it while taking in the sights. The bodyguard didn't look around at all; he was barely doing his job. On the first day our target arrived in the city, I thought that meant there were other men spread out to watch Kadyrovic's back. Surely his personal bodyguard wouldn't appear so casual unless he was redundant.

But no, there weren't other guards watching his back. I'd made certain of that after monitoring him for several days. It was just the one bodyguard and a sea of random people.

Not for the first time, I thought about how easy it would be to take him out right here, right now. I could pull the pistol out of my jacket pocket, walk right up to them, and end their lives with a snap of my fingers. I wouldn't even have to break a sweat.

But Archer had been very clear about the mission: it had to look like an accident. That was a requirement from whoever had issued the contract. No accident meant no pay.

That didn't stop me from fantasizing about it, though.

Most of my Army career was spent sitting around on my ass. They don't show that part in the recruitment commercials. You sit around doing nothing, then have drill once a month, and then you sit around some more. And the moments of excitement, when they *did* happen, were over so fast you'd miss it if you blinked.

I liked working for a mercenary group like the Mathos Company because we could choose our own missions. We were soldiers of fortune, guns for hire. But there was still a whole bunch of sitting around doing nothing. Even now, quietly following our target through a market, I wasn't really *doing* anything. I was jealous that Archer would be the one who eventually got to put this guy in a shallow grave.

For ten minutes, Kadyrovic was a perfect Chechen tourist. He smiled at vendors. He haggled with one man before eventually buying a hat—which he gave to his bodyguard and made him wear. The guard didn't look happy about it, but that

seemed to make Kadyrovic laugh even harder. It was a very boring, uneventful day.

And then Kadyrovic looked over his shoulder and slipped down an alleyway out of sight. I quickly circled around into the center of the market to get a better angle, just in time to see my target duck into a rug shop. The bodyguard posted out front, and the shopkeeper flipped the sign on the door to “CLOSED.”

*What’s he doing in a rug store? I wondered. Is this why he’s in the city in the first place?*

Two minutes passed. Then three. I was leaning against a stall that was selling minced pies, and the vendor started complaining about my presence. I reached into my pocket, pulled out a handful of coins without looking, and shoved them across the counter without ever taking my eyes from the rug store. The stall vendor suddenly loved me, and tried to hand me one of his pies, but a look from me sent him to the opposite end of the stall without another word.

What was Kadyrovic doing inside? Something important was definitely going down. Something out of the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I glanced over.

Trish was walking through the market, holding hands with my daughter.

The sight of them was sudden and unexpected. Trish was looking at souvenirs at a stall and describing them to Kaylee, who stood on her tippy toes to try to see. My first thought was to panic. If they saw me, they might blow my cover. I pulled my cap down lower over my eyes.

My second thought was of how *good* Trish looked. A woman who had never left North Carolina before, and here she was, totally comfortable navigating a Baku marketplace. I had been thinking about her a lot lately. I had always known that she was attractive, but now I found her *sexy*. Her golden hair swayed around her like an aura as she shook her head, declining whatever the stall vendor had offered. Her jeans hugged her tightly and showed off her long legs, and that apple-shaped ass that I desperately wanted to sink my fingers

into. How could I not? The kisses we had shared, although forced, had a level of spark that was undeniable. I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

I shook my head and tore my eyes back to the rug shop. I just needed to get laid. It had been three or four months. I wasn't a fan of paying for sex, but I might need to make an exception in this city if our mission went on much longer.

*It's not a random escort I want,* I thought while gazing at her some more.

I growled under my breath, which made my pie vendor buddy jump. I needed to focus on my job. There was movement at the rug shop, just inside the windows. I could see inside the window. I raised my camera to look through the telescopic lens. Kadyrovic was handing something to the shopkeeper. I snapped a few photos, then lowered the camera. Whatever was going down inside that store...

Motion out of the corner of my eye made me turn. There was Trish, standing at the mouth of an alley, but something was wrong. A man was gripping her by the arm. She tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip. Next to her, Kaylee took a cautious step back.

I never thought about it. I dropped my camera and took off at a dead sprint. My boots pounded on the pavement as I ran for all I was worth, ran toward Trish and my daughter, both of whom were in danger. I crashed through groups of tourists and weaved around vendor stalls. Everything around me faded to unimportant nothingness as I focused on reaching them as quickly as possible.

When I reached the alley, the man was dragging Trish away with a hand over her mouth. She was putting up a fight, God bless her, kicking and thrashing, but it was no use against the stronger man. Kaylee was still backing away, frozen in fear, her eight-year-old brain not understanding what was happening.

I took in all of this without slowing. The assailant saw me at the last possible moment as I slammed my shoulder into him at full speed. Everyone went flying, Trish included. My head

knocked against the assailant's, and for a few heartbeats my vision went white. Bright light flashed across my eyes, and I blinked rapidly to try to restore my sight.

Shapes began to return, and then I could see the basic outline of the alley. The assailant was grabbing Trish again, reaching at her waist. He pulled a wad of colorful Azerbaijani Manat bills from her pocket and then took off, stumbling as he escaped the alley and melded into the crowd. A few stray bills floated in the wind behind him.

I started to pursue him, but then Kaylee was clinging to my leg and whimpering my name. With immense restraint, I pulled my attention away from the attacker and turned toward the two women who truly mattered to me.



## Trish

I dreamed I was flying, Or maybe floating. Either way, I was among the clouds with the earth far below. Birds soared around me, swooping and diving in playful patterns. The feeling of the wind in my hair made me feel alive. It made me feel free.

When I opened my eyes, I realized I wasn't flying. I was being carried by powerful arms. I looked up and saw Harrison trudging along, a determined look on his face.

“What...” I murmured.

“Trish!” Kaylee squealed somewhere next to me. “Daddy said you were just sleeping, but I know he’s fibbing because he doesn’t want to tell me the truth. Are you okay?”

Slowly, my memory returned in pieces. We were in the market. I was declining a vendor who insisted I needed one of his woven scarfs. And then a man was grabbing my arm, and pulling me into an alley, and he covered my mouth before I had a chance to scream for help.

And then something crashed into us, and I hit the ground.

“Harrison,” I said, finding more life in my voice with every passing second. “Put me down.”

“Nope,” he replied without looking at me.

“I’m okay. Put me down. You don’t need to carry me.”

He grunted and kept walking.

“What’s that on... oh my God. Harrison, you’re bleeding!”



“He says it’s just a small cut,” Kaylee said. “He’s had worse. That’s what he *says*.”

“Put me down,” I repeated.

“We’re almost home,” he said.

I tried to resist, to jerk out of his arms, but it was useless. He was an order of magnitude stronger than I was. I would have had more luck trying to bend iron bars.

He was right about one thing: we reached the hotel a minute later. Only then did he lower me carefully to the ground. But as we went inside, he kept an arm around my waist to steady me. As I began walking, I was grateful for the support. With his free arm, Harrison held Kaylee’s hand.

The friendly bellhop was still behind the concierge desk, and his eyes widened when he saw us. I gave him a weak smile to let him know everything was okay, but he looked more worried than relieved.

When we reached the elevator, I said, “The man who mugged me...”

“*No*,” Harrison cut me off. “Quiet. No speaking yet.”

We reached the top floor and went into our penthouse. Harrison put a finger to his lips, motioned for us to stay put, then quietly stalked through the rooms. When he returned, he collected the electronic sweeping device Jordy had used when we first arrived and made another pass of the entire hotel suite. When he was satisfied, he finally led us over to the couch.

“It’s clean,” he said. “Tell me everything that happened.”

“I’m a little fuzzy,” I admitted. “But I remember being in the market, looking for souvenirs to buy for my friend Lisa. Then a man grabbed my arm and said, “Got you.” He covered my mouth and dragged me into the alley. Then everything went black.”

“That’s what happened,” Kaylee said with a nod. Her eyes were big, and she seemed to realize the importance of all of this. “I saw it all. Everything went black because daddy

tackled him. Then the bad man reached into your pocket, took a bunch of money, and ran away.”

“He *was* a bad man,” Harrison said, tenderly caressing Kaylee’s cheek with his thumb. The smile he gave her held all the love in the world. “Sometimes bad men do bad things. You should be careful because of that. But you don’t need to be afraid, because your daddies will always be there to protect you. *Always*.”

“I know.” She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. “I always feel safe with you, daddy.”

“I need to talk to Trish in private. Can you run and play in your room?”

Kaylee nodded, and hopped off the couch. She hesitated, then gave me a strong hug. “It will be okay, Trish. You have my daddy to protect you.”

I made myself smile. “I know.”

We watched Kaylee go to her room. Only when the door was closed did Harrison speak.

“Look directly at me.” He used his thumbs to open my eyelids all the way, and gazed into my eyes. “Look to your left. Now your right. Now look up. Down.” He carefully parted the hair above my ear. “You hit the pavement. There’s a little bruise, but nothing too bad. You aren’t concussed.”

“What about you?” I asked, pointing at the blood running down his temple.

“I’m fine. Fucking hell. I was afraid of this,” he growled angrily.

“I didn’t know it would happen,” I said defensively. “Archer said it was safe to visit the city...”

He quickly waved a hand dismissively. “I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at Jordy for bringing you and Kaylee along. I knew you might get targeted. Kadyrovic’s men must have noticed me following him. *Fuck*.”

“Kadyrovic...” I shook my head. I was still a little dizzy. “I don’t think so. That man was trying to mug me. Kaylee said he

took my money?”

“Or maybe he was trying to take your hotel key. It’s not in your pocket. I need to talk to the manager, get him to change it out.”

“You think... you think Kadyrovic sent that man to try to mug me just to get my hotel card?”

“I don’t know what I think. *Fuck.*” Harrison got up and began pacing. “Fuck. I lost my camera, too. Need to find that and wipe it. Fuck, there’s too much evidence on there. Whole mission might be in jeopardy. Fuck me, I fucked up.”

“That’s a lot of fucks,” I said. “And not the good kind.”

My joke didn’t have any effect on him. “You said someone was watching you in Istanbul. Did you ever see them? Was it the same man?”

“I... I don’t know. I might have been imagining it. Although I’m going to be super paranoid, now. Kaylee, too. Poor thing, she’s too young to witness something like that...”

“Kaylee is stronger than any eight-year-old should be,” Harrison snapped. “We ought to evacuate the entire country. Go home right fucking now.”

“Go home? What about the mission?”

“Fuck the mission!” he snapped. “Kaylee’s life was just put in danger. So was yours. We should never have done this.” He was shaking his head, now. “I don’t know why I let Jordy talk me into this. Archer is a fucking pushover sometimes, but I ought to know better. I—”

He cut off as I kissed him.

I didn’t plan on it. It wasn’t premeditated. But I saw how distraught he was, and I was thinking about how he had saved me from the mugging, or worse, and at that moment I couldn’t *not* kiss him.

With all our other kisses, I felt his lips come to life against mine. They came alive now, more than ever. But it only lasted an instant, a lightning flash of pleasure. Then he pushed me away with a forceful palm.

“No,” he snapped. “Distractions are the reason we’re in this mess.”

“I know you’ve been thinking about it,” I whispered.

“Of course I have. That’s the fucking problem!”

Harrison loomed over me, full of rage and lust and fear. I could practically feel the heat radiating off his body. He was alive with emotion, more than I had ever seen. It took my breath away in a way I couldn’t understand.

*I’m glad this man is on my side.*

“I need to make some calls,” Harrison said, then disappeared into his room.

I felt dirty, so I took a shower. The hot water helped, but only marginally. I had lost something that couldn’t be replaced. My innocence.

*I wish I were back in North Carolina.* Suddenly the world didn’t seem like such an exciting place.

I also felt incredibly guilty for kissing Harrison. Kaylee’s life had been in danger, and my reaction was to think about *romance*? It showed that my priorities were all out of whack. Harrison was right: I was a distraction.

Jordy and Archer came home that evening. It was immediately clear they didn’t know what had happened. That changed when Kaylee hugged them and started babbling.

“We went to the market, and Trish wanted to buy some souvenirs, but then a man grabbed her and took her money, but daddy tackled him and saved the day.”

Harrison came out and explained the situation in more detail. Jordy cursed. Archer shook his head, then pulled his phone out and answered a call.

“Are you okay?” Jordy asked me.

I nodded. “I think so. A little shaken up. It could have been worse.”

He sat on the couch and wrapped me in a hug. Within seconds, all of my anxiety and fear melted away. In his arms, I

felt safe. I didn't want him to let me go.

"I abandoned my post to save them," Harrison said. "Dropped the camera. I made some calls, but nobody has found it. Probably picked up by a kid or something."

"We'll buy another camera." Jordy rubbed my leg reassuringly. "The only important thing is that everyone is okay."

"No, that's not the only important thing," Harrison argued. "There are photos of Kadyrovic on that camera. If someone sees them, our cover is blown. Hell, it might *already* be blown."

"Daddy, language!" Kaylee said.

Harrison's chest filled as he took a deep breath. "Heck. I said *heck*." He turned back to Jordy. "I don't think it was a random mugging. I think it was someone trying to get a keycard to our room. I had the manager disable that card's ID number. It's probably best if we swap all of them out."

"Who would want to get into our room?" Jordy asked.

"Kadyrovic," Harrison said as if he were an idiot. "We've probably been made."

"What else makes you think that?" Jordy said.

"I don't need any other evidence. It's really fucking obvious."

"Random muggings happen all the time. Especially to someone who looks like a helpless tourist." Jordy glanced at me. "No offense."

"There's no way this was fu—" Harrison stopped himself. "There's no way this was *freaking* random. Archer, back me up, here. You're the cautious one."

Archer was hanging up his phone. He turned to the rest of us with a determined look in his eyes.

"None of this matters, because I just got a phone call. Kadyrovic wants to take a tour of the city on our helicopter tomorrow." He nodded. "It's go time."

# 34



## Jordy

As soon as I found out what had happened, a switch flipped in my head. I went into protective mode, making sure Kaylee was okay—and then Trish. Both of them were shaken up by the maybe-mugging, but otherwise seemed fine.

Then I started thinking about what I wanted to do to the guy who attacked her. There was probably security footage from the shops in the market; I could go through all of them until I saw the guy. The Baku police were notoriously corrupt, so a few well-placed bribes would get us all the other security footage in the city. We could track this guy down. We could find him.

And then I would beat him to within an inch of his life.

It shocked me how protective I felt of Trish. I had always been that way with Kaylee, of course. There was no comparison to the way a father felt about his little girl. But Trish was a close second, even though I had only known her a scarce month.

*We have something special,* I thought while reassuring her on the couch. *And it's more than just physical.*

What would we do when we got home?

That was a problem for later. I stored it away in my mental filing cabinet. It was time to focus on the mission. No more distractions.

“Forget the mission,” Harrison said. “We should leave the city. Tonight.”

Archer gave a start. “After all this, you want to pack up and go home?”

“Yup. This feels like a trap.”

Archer laughed. I laughed with him.

“What are the odds?” Harrison insisted. “We’ve been waiting for this Chechen jerk to book a tour. And he just so happens to do it mere hours after Trish and Kaylee are attacked? It’s too coincidental.”

“Sometimes a coincidence is just a coincidence,” Archer said. “I do not think the two events are related.”

“If Kadyrovic knew something was up,” I said, “wouldn’t he get spooked? Why would he step right into the trap?”

Harrison gritted his teeth. “I don’t know. But I don’t like it. The whole thing stinks. I can feel it in my bones.”

“We’ll take extra precautions tomorrow,” Archer said. “I’ll take a weapon with me on the helicopter. We’ll hire someone to escort the girls to the airport.”

*The girls.* I didn’t know why, but I liked the sound of that. Our little mercenary family.

“And if anything looks suspicious tomorrow,” Archer finished, “we’ll call the whole thing off. But until then, we go forward with the plan. There’s too much money on the line. We don’t want to abandon the contract and hurt our standing with the Mathos Company.”

It was that last part that got through to Harrison. If we ditched a contract this late, it would make the entire mercenary company look bad. We might get blackballed from future contracts. Or worse, they might drop us entirely.

“I don’t like it,” Harrison repeated.

“I dislike a lot of aspects of my job,” Archer agreed, “but I still do them. Focus on tomorrow’s extraction.” He clapped the big man on the shoulder. “It will go smoothly, Harrison. I promise.”

He let out a grunt of disapproval.

We ordered room service for dinner. Harrison and I collected it from the hallway; the bellhop who had made the delivery was standing all the way at the end by the elevators, and he gave a polite wave and a bow. When we were back inside, Harrison removed the lids off the trays and sniffed the food suspiciously. But after a few test bites, he relaxed.

Kaylee was totally unfazed by the excitement at the market. She seemed to think it was a game, and explained that she wished she had a bow-and-arrow like her Minecraft character. “I’m really good at shooting spiders,” she said confidently. “Creepers are a little tougher.”

“Maybe we’ll get you one for Christmas,” I said.

Archer gave me a pointed look.

“Um, Christmas in 2029,” I quickly added. “When you’re a teenager.”

After dinner, the three of us retired to the penthouse office to go over the plans for tomorrow one last time. Archer would take Kadyrovic up in the helicopter. I would stay on the ground, like any other tour. I would close the office for lunch, but in reality I would be heading to the airport.

“I will take them up to a safe altitude, then lock the cyclic stick in the forward position,” Archer explained. “Then I’ll grab the chute from underneath my seat and bail from the cockpit. The helicopter will crash within twenty or thirty seconds. Harrison, you will be waiting somewhere in the crash zone to evacuate me and the parachute. Then it’s straight to the airport, and celebratory pints in Bucharest before our connecting flight back to the States. Easy peasy.”

“If it all goes according to plan,” Harrison muttered.

There was an uneasy, somber mood among everyone that night. It was like nobody knew what to do with themselves. Once Kaylee was asleep, Trish told us that she was still shaken up and was going to bed early. I caught the subtext in her words: she didn’t feel like having sexy times tonight.

I was a little disappointed, but I understood. My nerves were on edge tonight, too. I always struggled to relax the night



before a really big mission.

But after brushing my teeth, I didn't want to crawl into my own bed. So I went down to the other hallway, knocked softly on Trish's door, and then let myself in. She was sitting up in bed, fiddling on her phone.

"Hi," I said.

She smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, but I'm not really in the mood for anything tonight. Is that okay?"

"Of course it's okay," I said, closing the door behind me. "I'm not here for that."

She frowned. "Then what are you here for?"

Wordlessly, I slid under the covers with her. I pulled her over until she was resting against my chest, then I gently caressed her back.

"Sometimes a guy just wants to cuddle," I said.

She laughed. "Cuddling is always good! As long as you keep your pajamas on. No trying to tempt me."

"Deal."

Trish clung to me, and I savored the way she felt. She probably thought I was there to comfort her, when in reality it was the opposite. Her presence was soothing. It helped me to stop worrying about tomorrow.

"Are you worried about tomorrow?" she asked softly.

I snorted. "You read my mind. Being with you helps." I trailed my fingertips up the back of her neck. "When I'm with you, I feel like I don't have to worry about anything in the world."

She let out a happy noise, and clung a little tighter to me. *Yeah, even if sex was on the table, I would prefer to cuddle. This is so much better than making love.*

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Uh oh," she replied. "What is it?"

"It's nothing bad. Just a small favor."

“Anything.”

I reached over my neck and removed my Army dog tags. I cupped one of her palms and dropped them inside.

“Keep this for me? Until we meet at the airport.”

She stared at the tags in her hand. “Of course. I’ll keep them safe.”

As she draped them over her own head and tucked the tags inside her pajama top, I felt myself relax. I had been worried she might not agree. Even though it was just for a day, it felt like a big commitment. Like giving someone a key to my apartment.

*More like a key to my heart.* I chuckled at the stupid metaphor.

Trish swung her big eyes up at me. “What’s so funny?”

I wanted to tell her the silly joke, but I didn’t want to make a big deal about it. “Nothing.”

Before she could call me out on it, there came a soft knock on the door. Both of us tensed, fearing that it might be Kaylee, but when the door opened it was Archer who slipped inside.

“I am not here for sex, I assure you. I wanted to—oh.” He blinked when he saw me. “I was coming to comfort you.”

“I don’t need any comforting,” I teased, “but I bet Trish would appreciate the extra man-warmth.”

Trish laughed at the joke, and so did Archer. He came around the other side of the bed, and Trish rolled over to curl against him. I twisted with her, spooning her from behind.

“I could use a bit of comforting, myself,” Archer revealed.

“Really? You still get nervous before missions?” Trish asked.

“Usually not, but it has been a while since I crashed a helicopter. And this will be the first time I’ve done it on purpose.”

“I would think crashing a helicopter is surprisingly easy,” she said.

“It is. Quite easy indeed. The trick is crashing it and escaping alive.”

“Oh. Right. That part is important.”

Archer glanced over at me, then back down at Trish. “I actually have another reason for being here tonight. If something goes wrong tomorrow, there cannot be any evidence that we are American or British mercenaries. I will be removing all identifying materials from my person tomorrow. But I would like you to hold onto my dog tags...”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, for fuck’s sake...”

“I did not intend for it to be a big deal,” Archer said, glaring at me. “I simply want someone to hold onto them for safekeeping. I trust Trish more than shoving these in my luggage.”

Trish laughed. “This is a lot of pressure.”

Archer frowned at her. “I am sorry. I would not have asked if I thought...”

“No, no, it’s not that.” She reached into her shirt and pulled out my tags. “This is why I’m laughing.”

Archer looked at the dog tags, then up at me. “Oh, piss off.”

“What? I was here first!”

“Only because I was kind enough to ensure our daughter was asleep before sneaking into the nanny’s bed,” he countered.

“Kaylee fell asleep an hour ago. You’re just mad that I won.”

“I can wear them both!” Trish insisted. She grabbed his dog tags and draped them around her neck. “You two are comfortable sleeping with me at the same time, but you think it’s weird for me to wear both dog tags while you’re gone? That’s ridiculous.”

Archer and I shared another look. “That is a valid point.”

“I’m fine with it as long as you are,” I said. “As long as mine doesn’t touch yours.”

“Indeed. No touching.”

Trish made a funny face. “Who cares if they touch? It’s not as if...” She trailed off. “Oh. I get it. Ha ha.”

She adjusted the tags into her top, then snuggled between us again. I molded myself against her body and sighed happily.

“Am I a distraction?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Quite so,” Archer agreed.

“Really?”

“Yes, but you’re a distraction in a good way.”

“So I haven’t gotten in the way of the mission?”

“What? Of course not,” I replied.

“Not in the slightest,” Archer said.

“Okay. Good.” She paused. “I never want to be a distraction, in a bad way.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” I said, kissing the back of her neck. “We only have one more day here. Then it’s over. We all get to go home.”

I meant it reassuringly, but I got the distinct impression that it only made Trish tense up more.



## Jordy

With my head buried in Trish’s silky blonde hair, I fell asleep almost immediately. I slept more deeply than I had in a long time—the last time I slept so well was when Trish and I first spent the night together, when we accidentally woke up cuddled together. I curled closer to Trish and wrapped an arm over her, holding her close while avoiding Archer on the other side.

That’s when I realized someone else was snuggled up behind me. Slowly, I twisted to look.

Kaylee’s big brown eyes gazed back at me, totally awake.

“Sweetie? What are you doing here?”

“I had a nightmare about the bad man,” she whispered.

“Oh.”

“Is that why you two are here with Trish?” she asked. “Because she had a bad dream about him too?”

“Uh... yes. That is exactly why we are here.”

Archer must have heard some of this, because he bolted upright in bed. “Dearie! Good morning! We, uh, are having a pajama party!”

Trish stirred between us. “It would be more fun if we weren’t wearing—” She cut off as I clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Say good morning to Kaylee,” I said. “She had a bad dream. I told her you had a bad dream too, which is why we

were comforting you.”

“Oh! Yes! A bad dream!”

Kaylee stretched and rolled out of bed. “I want breakfast!”

Everyone split up and we made our preparations for the morning. I showered, shaved, and then packed up my suitcase. When I walked out to the living room, Archer was all ready to go and was explaining everything to Trish.

“...will arrive at eleven o’clock to take you to the airport. The front desk will clear his credentials and send him up.”

“Okay,” Trish said.

“After yesterday, we aren’t taking any chances,” Archer went on. “Wait for him to come right to the door. He’ll escort you from the room.”

“Understood,” Trish said.

Off to the side, Harrison nodded. That was his requirement. Even with those precautions, he didn’t look happy about everything.

Then we were saying our goodbyes to Kaylee. I hugged her tightly and told her I would meet her at the airport with a special surprise. Harrison picked her up and swung her around the room, her blonde braid flowing behind her while she yelped. Archer kissed her and told her to take good care of Trish.

“She’s the nanny!” Kaylee replied. “She’s supposed to take care of *me*.”

“Oh, right,” Archer said, smacking his forehead. “Terribly sorry. I forget these things sometimes.”

I kissed Trish goodbye and gave her a long hug. I could hear the rattling of the dog tags just above her breasts. Archer did the same, cupping her cheek for a few tender moments before pulling away.

“You didn’t kiss Trish goodbye,” Kaylee told Harrison.

The big man scowled at all of us, then shook his head. “Enough games. It’s time to go.”

We followed him out into the hallway. “You didn’t have to be rude,” I said.

He didn’t slow down. “Fuck tact. Let’s get this job done and go home.”

We didn’t speak as we took the elevator downstairs. I knew it was pointless to argue with Harrison. If I was being completely honest, I knew we were lucky that he was agreeing to go on with the original plan at all.

As we walked through the lobby, I noticed some looks from the hotel staff. We were used to that; as three lumbering, muscular Americans, I knew we stuck out compared to the normal hotel guests. But there was one specific man, a bellhop behind the concierge desk, who stared just a little too long. When I turned to him, he immediately plastered a smile onto his face—but it disappeared as soon as he thought I wasn’t looking.

Alarm bells went off in my head. *Am I being paranoid, or is there something weird with that guy?*

“This is where we part ways,” Archer said to Harrison outside. “See you at the extraction point.”

He clasped our hands. “Good luck.” And then we split off in different directions.

Archer and I were silent as we drove to the helicopter tour office. Before we had arrived, it was a failing business. There were a lot of places in the world where helicopter tours were sought after, but Baku wasn’t high on the list. The Mathos Company, who we contracted through, purchased it as a shell company to funnel money through. It would be useful for this mission, the crash would happen, and then they would collect on the insurance policy. It would be a win for everyone.

As soon as we got there, I got the dirty work out of the way. I went to the industrial-sized freezer to retrieve the dead body. It was wrapped in plastic, which would melt in the crash, but I still felt sick to my stomach as I placed the body on a gurney and wheeled him out to the helicopter inside the single-aircraft garage.

“I can’t believe I did this every single day,” I muttered. “Totally pointless since we had advanced warning after all.”

“Quit complaining,” Archer said while running through his pre-flight checklist. “This is the most ideal scenario. We’re more prepared.”

“I’m not complaining. Just commenting.”

“Comment to yourself. I’m trying to concentrate.”

I returned to the office and took care of all the little things that needed to be done at a fake helicopter touring company as if it were any normal day. But it wasn’t. I couldn’t stop thinking about how today was *nothing* like a normal day.

Today, we would be killing a man.

I’d killed before. That wasn’t new. But in every situation, I was shooting at someone who was shooting back at me. It felt like a fair fight. Or at the very least, self-preservation.

But this?

“It’ll be all right,” Archer said. He must have sensed my mood.

“I know he deserves it,” I replied. “But it’s still difficult for me to wrap my head around.”

“Think of it like putting down a rabid dog,” Archer said.

I gawked at him. “Dude, that doesn’t make me feel *any* better. That makes me feel worse! Rabid dogs can’t help it!”

He sighed and put a hand on my shoulder. “It will be quick. You won’t even be there. Think of all the lives we’re saving by eliminating him. Or better yet, don’t think about it at all.”

That was impossible. As I sat behind the desk and stared at the computer calendar with the list of tours that day, all I could think about was what we were about to do.

At the exact time he was supposed to arrive, a black Mercedes pulled up to the office. It parked horizontally across three parking spots, and two bodyguards with hoodies on jumped out and opened the back door. They had their hoods up, obscuring their faces.



But the man who stepped out of the back didn't bother to cover himself. Aldi Kadyrovic was a hawk-nosed man with small, beady eyes. His dark hair was so greasy it looked wet. And he had a permanent sneer on his face as he gazed up at our building, like everything was a joke to him.

If I had met him randomly on the street, I would have known he had evil in his heart. I relaxed a little. That made all of this easier. I made myself smile as his bodyguard opened the front door.

“Welcome to Elite Baku Helicopter Tours,” I said. Working here all week had helped me hone my pitch. “Mr. Kadyrovic, you're right on time. Please, have a seat while we get you to sign some paperwork. Can I get you a water? Or coffee?”

He looked around the office. “Where is Daniel Ricardo?” he asked in a rough, accented voice. *The voice of a madman.*

I smiled apologetically. “He will be joining us after the tour, I'm afraid. But trust me, the wait will be worth it. Mr. Ricardo is excited to meet you. He is very selective with who he does these individual meet-and-greets with.”

Kadyrovic didn't take my offer to sit; he remained standing with his arms crossed. One of his bodyguards filled out all of his paperwork for him. The other bodyguard stood in the corner and stared at me. His hood was up, so I couldn't get a good look at him, but I got the impression he was staring daggers at me.

*He's right to be suspicious, I thought. We're going to kill his master today.*

Archer came out of the back room and introduced himself. He shook hands with Kadyrovic, but neither of the bodyguards made any move to do the same. The mood was tense. Forced.

“We are ready to depart at your leisure,” Archer said. “I've just wheeled the bird out onto the pad. If you'll follow me...”

“Anton is coming, too,” Kadyrovic said, gesturing at the bodyguard who had been staring at me. “Vasili will stay behind to wait.”

Archer glanced at me. This wasn't part of the plan. Kadyrovic had specifically requested that he be on the tour by himself, without any guards.

*It doesn't matter*, Archer said to me with his eyes. *It changes nothing*.

"That's quite fine," he said with a disarming grin. "Plenty of room. Come on, then. It's a beautiful sky for flying, today."

The other bodyguard and I stood at the edge of the building and watched them board the helicopter. The rotors spun up, and then it lurched into the sky. We waited until it was out of sight before going back into the office.

I glanced at the other guard. He took one of the seats in the office and stared straight ahead. That wasn't part of the plan, either. We had expected him to wait out in the car. But ultimately, it didn't matter, either. When I broke for my fake lunch, he could stay inside or go out to his car. It didn't matter.

*Here's hoping it works.*



### Trish

Kaylee liked packing. She saw it as a game, like Tetris, to fit everything into her little pink suitcase. She frowned down at it with all the seriousness an eight-year-old could muster, rearranging items here and there.

I was a bundle of weird emotions while packing my own suitcase. It felt like just yesterday when I had packed up to go on this month-long adventure. I was nervous, but mostly excited back then. I had no idea what was in store for me.

I never in a million years would have guessed how things would have turned out.

There was a nervous energy to my motions as I folded my clothes. I still felt somewhat violated after the attack in the market. I was sad about leaving. And I felt deeply, personally uncertain about what would happen next. The future was a big black blob, completely unknown and unpredictable.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one wondering.

"What do you want to do first when we get home?" Kaylee asked while zipping up her suitcase.

"What do you mean?"

"We could play a new videogame," she said. "Or we could play with my K'nex. We only brought one box of pieces with us, so when we get home we could build something *really* big. Or we could play something else, if you want."

I smiled at the innocent little girl. "I don't know what will happen. I might go home. To *my* home, I mean."

“But then you’ll come back. Right?”

“Maybe.”

She whirled toward me and spoke in a rush. “*Maybe* is what my daddies say when they mean *no*, but don’t want to say it. Why won’t you come over and play with me? We don’t have to do anything new. We can keep playing Minecraft. We *have* to finish that game. We almost have enough diamonds to make a full set of armor, and then we can use a Nether Portal to go into the Nether!”

“You’re right, how silly of me,” I said. “We have to finish our Minecraft game! Then we will figure out what to do next.”

She nodded as if that should have been the answer from the start. I smiled sadly. *If only it were that simple.*

At eleven o’clock on the dot, the penthouse phone rang. “Excuse me, Mrs. Caspian?”

*Mrs. Caspian.* They must have assumed I was Archer’s wife. The sound of that gave me a whole bunch of new, confused feelings. “This is Trish.”

“Yes, hello. This is the manager downstairs. Your driver has arrived to take you to the airport. I have checked his credentials, and everything appears to be in order.”

“Perfect,” I replied. “Please send him on up.”

“Right away, ma’am.”

I hung up and turned to Kaylee. “Our driver is here. Are you all ready to go?”

She looked around and pointed at objects. “Suitcase. Backpack. Tablet. Yep, I have everything!”

“Do you need any snacks before we go? I can make you a quick sandwich. I think we have a few bags of chips left...”

“I can wait until the airport,” she replied. “Daddy Jordy said he would have a surprise for me at the airport. I hope it’s ice cream!”

A knock came at the door. To be extra safe, I looked out the peep hole. The man standing outside matched the description

Archer had given me, and was wearing a badge over his breast with the three-ringed logo I was supposed to look for. Most importantly, he wasn't the man who had mugged me. That should have been a given, but it was something I wanted to make sure of anyways. Everything looked good.

I opened the door. "Hello, I'm Trish, and this is Kaylee."

The man smiled and stepped into the doorway. "I've been told all about you, ma'am. I'm here to escort you."

He swung so quickly that I didn't realize what was happening. His fist struck my cheek, and stars flew across my vision. The ground came up and hit me in the side of the head, cushioned enough by my arms to keep me conscious.

"What..."

"But the airport is not where we are going," he said, drawing a gun from a holster inside his suit jacket. His eyes were cold and uncaring.

"Kaylee..." I tried to get up but the room was spinning. No matter how much I blinked, I couldn't make it go still. Kaylee was in danger. That was the most important thing. I tried to tell her to run, but she was standing there, looking confused.

"Why did you hurt Trish?" she demanded.

The man snatched her by the hand, then turned to me. "This is for Prague. For Anton's brothers. Make sure they know why." He raised the gun to Kaylee.

I tried to scream, but no sound came out; my throat wouldn't work the way it was supposed to. I couldn't even get up. I was paralyzed with helplessness, the worst feeling in the world, even worse than how I felt yesterday in the market when the mugger was grabbing my arm. Kaylee was frozen too, staring at the pistol with innocent eyes, eyes that didn't recognize what it was. The sight was too horrible to watch, so I clamped my eyelids shut so I wouldn't have to see.

*Please no, I prayed. Please don't let this be happening.*

The gunshot was oppressively loud in my ears. So loud that everything sounded muffled afterward, like my eardrums were

stuffed with cotton. I opened my eyes, not because I *wanted* to look, but because I wondered if my prayers had been answered. If somehow this was all a cruel joke.

The attacker and Kaylee still stood where they had been before. The man lowered his gun. He seemed just as confused as Kaylee. That was strange. Moments before, he had appeared totally in charge. What did he shoot?

A red smear began spreading on the crisp white of his dress shirt, barely visible underneath the suit jacket. He looked down at it, touched the red, and stared at his fingertip as if he didn't believe it. The gun fell heavily to the floor, and then the man crumpled on top of it. The door to the penthouse tried to close automatically, but was blocked by his body.

Heavy footsteps pounded in the hall, and then Harrison appeared in the doorway. He kicked, and I heard the gun slide across the marble deeper into the hotel. He wrapped Kaylee in a big hug, said something to her, and then knelt at me.

“What did he do?” he demanded. “Where are you wounded?”

“He hit me in the face. A punch,” I managed to say. My voice sounded stronger with every second. “What are you doing here?”

“I didn't like any of this,” he explained while lifting me off the ground. He gently placed me on the couch. “So I trusted my gut. I turned around and came back. Good thing, too. If I'd gotten here a few seconds later...”

I cupped his smooth cheek. “You were right on time. You saved us. Twice in two days.”

“Daddy, what's Prague?” Kaylee asked.

Harrison whipped his head around. “Where did you hear that?”

She pointed at the man on the ground. “He said it. And something about brothers.”

Harrison turned to him with death in his eyes. “Sweetie? Go to your room. I need some privacy.”

As soon as she was gone, Harrison nudged the attacker with his foot to roll him onto his back. Then Harrison stepped on the gunshot wound in his chest. The man screamed.

“You failed, asshole,” Harrison snarled at him. “If you tell me why you’re here, I might let you live. But you’d better tell me quick. You’re losing a lot of blood.”

“Failed?” The man laughed. “We did not fail. A fake helicopter company? You believed that would work?”

Harrison glanced at me. And for the first time since I had met him, I saw that he was afraid.

“We are the ones who hired you!” the man said, spitting blood up on his chest in the process. “You fell right into our trap!”

I realized what he meant. *Oh no. Archer and Jordy!*

His dying laughter echoed through the room.



### Archer

I tried to act natural as I piloted the helicopter into the air and began my normal tour duties. I pointed out the Deniz Kenari Milli Park, which was beautiful when viewed from the sky. There was the Baku Boulevard, which would be especially beautiful when lit up at night. The three flame towers, the famous fountain square, the Ateshgah fire temple. We passed over Highland Park, which featured a war memorial dedicated to those killed by the Soviet Army in 1990. I left that part out of the tour.

I was well-practiced at the tour. That was part of the reason we had arrived early, after all. But underneath my cheerful exterior, I was more tense than I had ever been in my life.

How could I not be, with the Chechen devil sitting right behind me?

He didn't speak much during the tour. He grunted and acknowledged what I said, but didn't offer any of his own comments. When we flew over the old city, the little televisions on the seat backs displayed an overlay to show where the Formula One course ran. Neither of them seemed very interested in that, to my surprise.

*Of course not. They're here to meet Daniel Ricardo. The tour is probably just an annoyance to them.*

I felt bad for the bodyguard. He was just collateral damage in all of this. I consoled myself with the assumption that he was every bit as evil as Kadyrovic was. Perhaps even more so. Kadyrovic might have given the orders for all the torturing he did, but the bodyguards who accompanied him everywhere



were the ones who followed through on the acts. I shivered to think of what the hooded man might have done in his service.

“Our tour finishes with a pass over the north of the city,” I said into the headset receiver. “You’ll want to see this. There’s an old meteor crater that can only be seen from above two thousand feet. After that, we will head back to the office, where Ricardo should be waiting.”

“Yes, good,” Kadyrovic said.

I began the flight toward that direction. There was no meteor crater visible from the sky, but there was a dense forest where I would be able to parachute down to. And with any luck, the helicopter crash would ignite some of the trees and cause everything to burn just a little bit longer, obfuscating the trickery we had pulled here. I ran through the plan in my head. A five-minute flight to the location. A small ridge would obscure us from the city, ensuring that nobody saw my last-minute escape. I would jam the flight stick forward, throwing us into a vortex ring state. There would be no recovery from that, even if one of these two was a trained pilot. As soon as it began, I would grab the chute from underneath the seat, strap it over my chest, and jump out the door.

It was all so simple.

Yet as we flew out to the location, I began to doubt myself. I thought about Trish’s mugging yesterday. I considered Kadyrovic’s actions since he arrived in the city four days prior. He hadn’t done much of anything, according to Harrison’s notes. Driving around the city several times a day. Walking through the market.

My instincts were screaming at me: *something is wrong*.

I reached into my pocket for my cell phone. It was powered off, to ensure that my SIM card didn’t record my GPS movements during the flight or the escape afterward. A necessary precaution. I held down the button to power it on, not caring that it would ping my location to a radio tower. That was fine; I could turn it back off if everything was in order.

I held the phone between my legs where the guys behind me couldn't see. "The crater should be visible in just a minute," I said on the radio. The phone finished booting up and the home screen appeared.

Ten missed calls.

Fifteen text messages.

I opened the first one:

**Harrison: IT'S A SETUP.  
KADYROVIC KNOWS. GET OUT.**

Only thanks to years of practice was I able to remain completely calm. I tucked the phone between my legs and reached next to the seat with my left hand, where my pistol was stashed. My fingers felt around, touching the cheap plastic of the seat, before finally feeling the holster.

Before I could grab it, the cold metal of a gun barrel pressed into the side of my neck. "Nyet," Kadyrovic said into the radio receiver. "No touch."

*Fuck.*

"Do we have a problem, Mr. Kadyrovic?" I asked in a voice that was much calmer than I felt.

"Take us back to the city," he ordered. "Slowly. If you try to bank hard and throw us off, one of us will shoot you. I can assure you, I have a quick trigger finger."

I did as I was told, steering the helicopter around in a smooth turn. "I do not understand what is happening, but I am quite certain this is a misunderstanding. Or a mistake."

The hooded bodyguard had not said a word until this moment. Now he laughed. "The only mistake was what you did to my brothers in Prague."

The voice triggered a memory deep within my brain. The hairs on my neck would have stood up if not for the gun

pressed against them. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the bodyguard remove his hood. Even then, I barely recognized the man. He must have had some plastic surgery done to his face. But after hearing the voice, there was no mistaking him.

“Anton Novak.”



### Archer

“If you try anything, we will kill your daughter,” Anton Novak said with a sneer.

“You’re going to kill her anyway,” I said. The words made me want to throw up. *Kaylee. Oh God. Not Kaylee.*

“Maybe!” Novak admitted. “But perhaps not! Ah hah hah!”

Kadyrovic kept the gun pressed against my neck the entire flight home. My mind raced. I was quite certain I could throw the helicopter into a death dive before Kadyrovic could pull the trigger... but of course, I would die in the process. And it would ensure Kaylee’s doom. I couldn’t do that. I had to stay alive.

So I flew us back to Baku without a fight, and landed at the helipad behind our office. Novak hopped out first, then aimed his gun at me while Kadyrovic did the same. Then they had me exit the helicopter and walk across the runway.

As I had feared, Jordy was on his knees outside the office, with his hands bound behind his back. The other bodyguard stood a short distance away with a pistol trained on him. Jordy gave me a look of defeat.

“It’s not your fault,” I told him. I picked my words carefully, knowing they might be my last. “It’s nobody’s fault.”

“It’s *both* of your fault!” Novak said in a crazed, sing-song voice. He sounded like he was on drugs. “You sealed your fates for what you did in Prague. My brothers are rotting in a prison in Hamburg because of you.”

“We were fulfilling a contract,” I said. “We did not make the decisions. Blame the European Union, not us.”

“Big governments are so vague and faceless,” Novak said. “I blame them, but I like blaming you, as well. And all of Mathos Company.” He laughed again, on the edge of madness. “It gives me great pleasure to know that I have used your own company against you!”

“What do you mean?” Jordy asked.

Kadyrovic chuckled. “Stupid Americans. Too arrogant to see what is obvious to the rest of us.”

“The contract to assassinate him,” Novak said, gesturing at Kadyrovic. “*We* issued the contract. Put the money in escrow and everything. Worth it to lure you out here. We asked for your team, specifically. And you rushed here as fast as you could! Like moths to a flame! Ah hah!”

The bodyguard that had stayed back with Jordy spoke up. “Amir has not reported back. I suspect he has failed.”

“Your men are worthless,” Novak said acidly.

“My men are quite capable, I assure you.” Kadyrovic took out my phone and held it up to my face to unlock it. “Fuck. The big one stopped us from collecting their daughter and the nanny.”

“Harrison Gray.” Novak said the name like a curse. “I wanted him here the most. Give me that.” He scrolled across the screen. “They have location sharing enabled. He’s on the road, halfway between their hotel and this location.” He tapped the screen a few times and then held it to his ear.

“What are you doing?” Kadyrovic asked.

Novak waved him away in annoyance. “Mr. Gray! Or should I call you Harrison? No, no, wait, let me put you on speakerphone. Everyone should enjoy this.”

He touched the screen, then held the phone out. Harrison’s voice came through with only minimal static. “I said, who the fuck is this?”

I spoke as quickly as I could. “Harrison, we’ve been captured by Anton Novak and—”

The butt of Kadyrovic’s pistol hit me in the back of the head. I fell to my hands and knees, groaning.

“Your limey fuck of a partner is correct,” Novak said into the phone. “We have him and Mr. Mackey here. We would love for you to join the party.”

“Oh, I’ll be there all right,” Harrison shot back. “Should’ve killed you in Prague when we had the chance, rather than trying to take you alive.”

“Too bad you were busy getting your dick wet with Karina,” Novak replied. “I was afraid you three had become more disciplined since then, but I can see you’re as sloppy as ever. Come to the office. Alone. If you bring anyone else, we’ll kill your partners. And then we’ll track down your *daughter*.” He said the word slowly, drawing it out. “But if you do as you’re asked, we will leave her be. It’s you we want.” He glanced at his watch. “See you in ten minutes.”

The last thing we heard was Harrison shouting a curse before Novak hung up.

“What do you want with us?” Jordy demanded.

“He’s going to kill us,” I said weakly. I was still on my knees. There was no use fighting. Not yet, at least.

“Oh, I’m not going to kill you!” Novak teased. “We have *much* bigger plans for you. I’m selling you to Kadyrovic. Along with all the evidence of the contract to kill him. He’s going to take the three of you back to Moscow, where you will be paraded in front of the televisions for the crimes you’ve committed. An example of illegal NATO and American interventionism.”

“We don’t represent NATO, or America,” Jordy said. “We’re freelance mercenaries. Hell, *you’re* the one who hired us to come after Kadyrovic!”

“It does not matter,” Kadyrovic said with a smile. “We will get the propaganda we desire.”

“And I will become a wealthy man,” Novak said. “Maybe wealthy enough to get my brothers out of prison. We will see. Aldi? My money?”

Kadyrovic scowled. “You get the money when the job is done.”

Novak walked over and kicked Jordy in the shin. “I’ve delivered two-thirds of them. Surely I deserve two-thirds of the cost. Come on. Money makes me *happy*. Even happier than seeing these two on their knees, begging for their lives.”

I sneered at him, but said nothing. We hadn’t begged for our lives. Not yet. We still had our dignity.

*Oh, Kaylee. I’m so sorry.*

Kadyrovic sighed and pulled out his phone. “As you wish. I will initiate the transfer...” He trailed off as his phone rang. Frowning, he answered it. “Da?”

It wasn’t on speakerphone, but the volume was loud enough for me to hear. “Place your weapons on the ground.”

Kadyrovic grunted. “Excuse me?”

“Place your weapons on the ground. Then stand over in the middle of the helipad with your hands in the air. Do this, and you will all live.”

“Who is it?” Novak demanded.

*Who indeed?* I wondered. I didn’t recognize the voice. It sounded foreign.

Kadyrovic began turning in a circle. “I do not take kindly to threats.”

“This is your last warning,” the voice warned.

“Who is it!” Novak repeated. He snapped his fingers in the air. “Aldi. Who is it? Answer me, damn you!”

“Is the perimeter secure?” Kadyrovic asked.

The bodyguard with Jordy tensed. “It was when I last checked. Twenty minutes ago.”

Kadyrovic scanned the area around us, and I did the same. We were in an industrial sector of the city, with wide warehouses on all sides. I felt a trickle of hope.

“Listen to me, you little shit,” Kadyrovic said.

Everything happened very quickly.

As the last word left his lips, a rifle fired in the distance. At nearly the same instant, Kadyrovic’s leg exploded with blood. He fell to the ground, screaming. The other bodyguard raised his pistol, searching all around. The faraway rifle cracked again, and the bullet hit him in the chest.

Novak was quick. He darted to the ground as another crack sounded. A bullet hissed through the air and struck the ground somewhere nearby. The trained part of my brain told me that meant the shooter was elevated, probably on the roof of one of the nearby warehouses. Novak slid across the ground and came up next to me, wrapping one arm around my neck and placing the pistol against my temple.

“I’ll shoot!” he shrieked. “Surrender, or I’ll kill him.”

The stereotypical thing people said when they were about to die was that their life flashed before their eyes. That didn’t happen to me—not now, and not in the two other times when I thought I was going to die in my life. My entire body relaxed. An overwhelming sense of calmness came over me. I was totally comfortable with my fate, because I wasn’t in control. There was a kind of peace in that. In totally surrendering to whatever the universe threw at you.

*I love you, Kaylee,* I thought. And then, a second later, Trish pushed her way into the forefront of my mind alongside my daughter.

A gunshot fired, but it didn’t come from the rifle on a surrounding warehouse. It came from behind us. There was a pinching sensation in my shoulder blade, immediately followed by a dull ache surrounded by numbness.

Novak let go of my neck and collapsed to the ground. I turned to look, though I knew what I would see. Jordy was standing with the other bodyguard’s pistol aimed down at us.



And Anton Novak, the man who had gotten away in Prague all those years ago, was stretched out on the pavement like Christ himself. One of his eyes was a bloody mess, where the bullet had exited his brain and then hit me in the upper back.

As if thinking about it could conjure up the pain, my shoulder blade suddenly felt like it was on fire. I groaned and fell forward, putting my weight on my left arm.

Jordy was there in an instant, tearing open my monogrammed tour guide shirt to get at the wound.

“Nice shot,” I groaned.

“Hey, I did my best!” he replied. “I only had a split second to decide what to do.”

“That. Wasn’t. Sarcasm,” I said through gritted teeth. It felt like my nerves were being dipped in lemon juice. “It was. A good. Trade. How does it look?”

“It’s not deep. I think I can see the bullet. But it went into the bone.” He looked around. “Who the hell saved us? Harrison?”

“Not him,” I said. “Different voice. And we don’t. Have any. High caliber weapons.”

Jordy pointed. “There.”

Across the open area, at least a football pitch away, a man with a rifle slung across his back was climbing down a ladder attached to the wall of a warehouse. He discarded the rifle on the ground, drew his sidearm, and then approached at a jog. He looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t quite place him.

“You!” Jordy said. “You work at the hotel. You’re the bellhop behind the desk.”

The man ignored him and bent to check Kadyrovic’s pulse, then the other bodyguard. His movements were careful and with military precision. He didn’t bother to check Novak. “The hotel job is my cover.”

“Then who...”

“I’m an auditor with Mathos Company.” There was a medical kit in his hand, and he began unrolling a length of gauze. “The contract you took here in Baku set off a few red flags at the home office, so they sent me to monitor the situation. To make sure it was all legitimate.”

“Clearly not,” I said, wincing as he dabbed at my wound.

“I knew something was up with you,” Jordy said. “The way you were looking at us this morning.”

“I’ve called for a full clean-up team,” the faux bellhop explained while bandaging my wound. “They’ll take care of this mess. For now, let’s get you to a hospital to clean this up.”

A dirt bike came roaring around the corner in the distance, shooting through the alley between two warehouses like the world was on fire. Rubber burned as Harrison skidded to a stop in front of us, leaping off the bike and letting it clatter to the ground as he rushed to my side.

“You’re alive.” He took in the scene with one sweep of his gaze. “You. I know you. From the hotel.”

“He’s a Mathos Company auditor. They thought the contract was fishy, so they sent him to monitor. Good thing.”

Harrison bristled. “I knew you were watching us. That’s partly why I had my guard up all week.”

The man sighed. “I need to do a better job of that. In an ideal world, you would never know I’m here.” His eyes lit up. “Are Trish and the girl okay? I hated to leave my post to come here...”

Harrison lightly kicked Kadyrovic’s arm with the toe of his boot. “One of his men came to the hotel. He impersonated the escort you hired to take them to the airport. I hung back and caught him just in time.”

“You weren’t at the extraction zone?” I asked. “You never intended to be there?”

Harrison paused. “No.”

Jordy roared with laughter. “This is one time I’m glad you didn’t follow the plan, you stubborn son of a bitch.”



### Trish

I paced the hotel all afternoon. I checked my phone, and then I re-checked it. I resisted the urge to call the guys, or to text them. Harrison had made it very clear that we were operating under radio silence, and that any contact might put their lives at risk.

Speaking of lives being at risk, Kaylee and I were holed up in the hotel room, with both deadbolts locked and all the curtains drawn. Harrison had taken a spare gun out of the leather case and put it on the top of a bookshelf where Kaylee couldn't reach it, and told me to use it if necessary. Every so often, my eyes drifted up to it and I shivered. I had never fired a gun before, and hoped I wouldn't have to change that today.

It was late afternoon when I heard a keycard beep against the lock. But the door hit one of the deadbolts. I froze, wondering if I should speak or remain silent.

“Why won't my key work?” I heard Jordy say.

“I told her to lock it behind me,” Harrison replied. “Trish, you can open up.”

I hastily unlocked the door and threw it wide. The guys stood before me, smiling wearily. Harrison was in front, so I threw myself into his arms.

“I was so scared,” I whispered.

“We're here, now,” Jordy said.

“No! I was scared for *you*.” I hugged him next, squeezing so tightly that my arms ached. Then I pushed him out of the way

and did the same to Archer.

“Oof,” he grunted, resisting my embrace. “Not so strong. I’m a bit wounded, I’m afraid.”

“Wounded!”

“He took a bullet in the shoulder blade,” replied a fourth man that I hadn’t seen. “All taken care of now, but it’ll be tender for a while.”

I gawked at the man. It was the friendly bellhop who had been delivering our meals every day. His entire demeanor was different—he was wearing the same hotel uniform, but he carried himself differently. More confident and in charge.

“I’m really confused,” I said.

“He was our guardian angel in Baku,” Jordy said. “A backup sent by Mathos Company. We owe him our lives.”

The man shrugged and handed Jordy a stack of envelopes. “Your flight information is all there. Plus a bonus for the mission. Consider it an apology from Mathos for not properly vetting the contract.”

“Bonus?” Jordy said, opening the envelope. “You mean we’re still getting paid?”

“Novak and Kadyrovic deposited the contract fee in escrow,” he replied. “It had to look legitimate to lure you guys here. That money is yours. Congratulations.”

He crouched down and pulled out a stuffed teddy bear from his pocket. “This is for you, Kaylee.”

She looked to her daddies for confirmation that it was okay, then accepted the bear. “Does he have a name?”

“You can call him Patrick. Pat for short.” He switched to a whisper. “That’s my name, too.”

“Thank you, Patrick!” she said, clutching the bear to her chest.

The bellhop rose, gave me a little smile, and then clasped hands with the other men. Then he was gone, and the rest of us were all alone.

“I’m really confused,” I said slowly, “but I’m glad you’re all okay.”

“We’re glad *you* are okay,” Archer said, cupping my cheek and pressing his forehead against mine. “We never intended to put you or Kaylee in danger.”

“We weren’t in danger,” Kaylee said. “Harrison said that the man who came here was just playing pretend.”

“That’s right, he was,” Jordy said emphatically. “This was all just pretend. Are you all packed and ready to go?”

“I *was* packed, but then we stayed longer!” she replied. “I unpacked my laptop so I could play Minecraft.”

“Well, go get your things. We leave for the airport in ten minutes.”

She ran off to her room.

Harrison stepped up to me. “I owe you an apology, Trish.”

I gave a start. “What for?”

“I was blaming you for being here. I called you a distraction.” He rubbed at his jaw, as if he missed his beard. “It turns out, your presence helped us. You were the warning that something was wrong. If I had not hung back to check on you, I would have been at the extraction zone. Where Kadyrovic had men waiting to capture me.”

“You were our canary in the coal mine, so to speak,” Archer agreed.

Harrison hugged me, and I felt myself relax in his arms. His embrace was strong, yet tender. Gentle for someone like him. He even threaded his fingers into my hair.

“Thank you,” I whispered into his broad chest.

“Things could have ended really badly,” Jordy said. “We got lucky.”

“Quite lucky indeed,” Archer agreed. “I believe this is the wake-up call we needed. It might be time to end our line of work.”

“Really?” I asked.

“We’ll discuss it when we get home,” Harrison interrupted. “We shouldn’t make any rash decisions.”

“Harrison Gray,” Jordy said wistfully. “Cautioning against making rash decisions. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’ve grown since we left Wilmington.”

Harrison glanced at me, then shrugged awkwardly.

“But the important thing is that we’re going home.” Jordy sighed happily. “It will be good to sleep in my own bed.”

“I’m looking forward to Sal’s pizza,” Harrison said.

“Nearly two months away from home, and pizza is what you miss the most?” Archer asked.

“Not pizza. *Sal’s* pizza.” He licked his lips. “Fuck, now I’m hungry.”

“I do miss Cookout’s milkshakes,” Jordy added. “We’ve had good food on this trip, but sometimes a guy just wants good old American fast food.”

“This is why you’re all obese,” Archer said dryly.

“Hey! I’m not obese.” Jordy flexed an arm. “All of my calories go toward these guns.”

“I meant *you* as in Americans.”

“You Brits aren’t much better,” Harrison shot back.

Their jokes and laughter didn’t have any effect on me. There was a pit of emptiness in my stomach, and it was growing larger by the second. Before I knew it, I was wiping away tears.

“Kettlebells,” Jordy said, putting an arm around me. “What’s wrong?”

“I did not intend to insult all Americans,” Archer said. “Truly, I was only taking the piss with my idiot partners.”

“It’s not that,” I said. “It’s just... going home. It’s making me emotional.”

“I didn’t realize you were that homesick,” Jordy said. “A month was a long time...”

“It’s about you guys!” I finally blurted out. All of them flinched. “Now that the trip is over, my nanny gig is over. Which means all of *this* is ending. And I have to look for a new job.”

Archer and Jordy glanced at each other. “That’s what you’ve been worried about?”

“Of course it is! Why wouldn’t I be worried about that? This job is ending, and I have to say goodbye to Kaylee, and I might get a new job in a different city and then... then...” I couldn’t get the words out.

“We actually discussed this yesterday,” Archer said. “We were going to wait until we got home to mention it to you, but I suppose now is a good time...”

“We want you to keep nannying for Kaylee.” Jordy braced my arms and smiled at me. “You’re really good for her. The three of us spend plenty of time with her, and have raised her better than most people could have in the same circumstances, but you’ve been able to connect with her in a way we never have. Maybe she needs a female influence. Or maybe it’s because you’re totally focused on her, while we have our mercenary work to juggle, too.”

“Regardless of the reason, we would like to formally extend your contract for a full year,” Archer said. “Perhaps longer if you would like, but a year to start out.”

I hadn’t expected this at all. They had made it very clear that my services were only needed for these three missions. It was like begging for a life preserver while drowning, and instead getting a yacht.

“Are you sure?” I asked, glancing at Harrison. “You don’t mind?”

“Mind?” He barked a laugh. “Fuck, it was my idea.”

I blinked in surprise. That helped calm my nerves. But there was still another issue, one which I didn’t know how to broach...

“You aren’t thrilled about this?” Jordy asked, confused. “I thought you would be jumping up and down with excitement.”

“What about us?” I asked in a rush. “What about you and me? What about me and Archer? What about the three of us? Will we stay together and see where this goes? I don’t know what you guys want. Heck, I don’t even know what I want, myself. It’s all so confusing, but I do know that I like you both, and don’t want this to end, but if these relationships get in the way of Kaylee or make things weird for her...”

They shared another look. And then they did the one thing I didn’t expect.

They busted out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded.

“You,” Jordy replied.

I felt tears welling in my eyes again. “I didn’t realize I was a joke to you.”

“Of course you aren’t!” Archer said, brushing away a tear from my cheek with his thumb.

“Then why are you laughing!”

“Because you’re silly, that’s why,” Jordy replied. “Of course we want to stay together and see where this goes.”

“Really?” I asked.

Archer nodded. “Honestly, I never thought that was in doubt. You expected us to just... dump you?”

“I don’t know what I thought,” I said, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. I did feel very silly, now. “It was all one big unknown that I didn’t want to think about.”

Jordy took me in his arms and stared into my eyes. “We have something really special. I’m certain of it, and I know you feel it too.”

Archer put a hand on my back. “I am quite certain it’s not physical. Or at least, not *only* physical.”



“Physical is definitely a large part of it,” Jordy agreed. “But there’s a lot more beyond that. I want to see where it goes. We both do.”

“I was hoping for that regardless of whether you accepted a contract extension for a year,” Archer said. He raised an eyebrow. “You *do* intend to accept the contract extension, yes?”

“Of course I do!” I threw myself into his arms and held him tight.

“Not so strong, love,” he reminded me. “Bullet wound, and all.”

“Sorry!”

I glanced over my shoulder, where Harrison was still standing. His face was unreadable. I pulled away from Archer and cleared my throat.

“If we’re going to continue this, I need to be completely honest with you. With all of you. I think... I think I’m attracted to Harrison, too. Yes, I know that’s absolutely ridiculous to not be satisfied with just *two* men, but I can’t deny the spark I sense between us. If you don’t feel the same way, Harrison, then I completely understand. And if you two don’t approve of this, I also understand. But I needed to get it out, in the interest of full disclosure. I didn’t want there to be any secrets between us.”

There was a long moment of silence as they all considered this.

“Is it because he shaved?” Jordy finally asked. “I told you, dude. That beard does nothing for you.”

Harrison scowled and touched his jaw. “Fuck you.”

“The shaved beard was only a small part of it,” I admitted. “I don’t know what it is. Are you mad?”

“Why would we be mad?” Jordy asked. “I’m already sharing you with Archer. One more guy wouldn’t change much. Especially Harry.”

Harrison let out a low growl at the nickname.

“I was raised in a polyamorous family,” Archer reminded me. “I have no qualms about a non-traditional dating structure, whether that means three of us, or four.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I hadn’t known how that conversation would go, but this was the best possible outcome.

Until Harrison spoke.

“I told you: I don’t like to share.”

All of us swung our heads toward him.

“This whole thing is weird as fuck,” he continued, gesturing at the three of us. “I don’t mind weird things. My cousin got a sex change a few years ago. It’s weird calling him *Brian* instead of *Brandi*, but fuck, it’s his life, and I’m glad he’s being his true self. That’s how I feel about anyone. Do whatever makes you happy, as long as you’re not hurting anyone else.

“That’s how I’ve felt watching you three. It’s weird. I didn’t grow up with a polyamorous family or whatever, so it’s taken me some time to wrap my head around it. But even though I want y’all to be happy, that doesn’t mean I necessarily want to join in. I don’t know if I could see myself sharing a woman with someone else, let alone two other men. I’d have to think about it. Get used to it. I have no idea if I’d ever want to be part of something like that.”

“That’s totally understandable,” I said, smiling. “If you don’t want to explore this, that’s okay.”

“I never said I didn’t want to explore it,” he quickly clarified. He suddenly seemed sheepish, and stared intently at his toes. “I’m just saying I might need some time. That’s all. I do kind of like you. I mean, you’re hot and all. Fuck. I don’t know what I’m trying to say.”

I hugged him to shut him up, and he wrapped his arms around me. Jordy joined in a moment later, followed by Archer. The three of them held me together, a long moment of relief and victory. It had been a whirlwind of a trip, and even though it was coming to an end, *we weren’t*. We were going to

continue to some degree. And I was excited to find out just how much.

“I’m growing my beard back out,” Harrison said stubbornly. “My face feels naked without it.”

“You can do whatever you want,” I said. “I don’t want to make you change anything important about yourself.”

“Good. Because I’m not.”

“Okay then,” I replied.

“Fine.”

I suddenly remembered something. I reached into the front of my shirt and pulled out two sets of dog tags. “I kept these safe for you.”

Jordy stopped me before I could take them off. “Why don’t you hold onto mine? For a while.”

“They’re in better hands with you, anyway,” Archer agreed.

I tucked them back inside my shirt. Keeping their tags felt like a huge gesture, like being asked to meet their family. Or to move in together. But for some reason, it didn’t feel like it was too much, too soon. It felt right.

*If it feels right, then I’m not going to fight it, I thought. That’s one lesson I’ve learned on this trip.*

Suddenly there was another set of arms wrapping around our legs. “GROUP HUG! I’m all packed and ready to go. Why are we hugging? Is it because we’re all really good friends?”

“We’re more than friends, dearie,” Archer said. He brushed his nose against mine in an Eskimo kiss. “We’re almost like a family.”

# Epilogue



**Trish**

**One Year Later**

I was dreaming that I was on a faraway trip to Europe, a city I had never been to before. It felt like Paris, but it was ephemeral in that fuzzy sort of way that dreams were. Plus, I had never been to Paris, so I couldn't know what it actually felt like.

My dream faded away and I opened my eyes. I was laying on my side in bed with Jordy and Archer. The blond was in front of me, eyes closed and snoring softly. And Jordy...

I ground my ass back against the man who was gently kissing my neck. "Why, hello there."

"About time you woke up," he whispered in my ear. "I've been teasing you for five minutes."

I started to respond that I wasn't in the mood for morning sex, but then his hand slid over my hip and searched down between my legs. I spread them wider for him, giving him a better reach as he began rubbing my clit in a wide circle. My exhale went on and on.

Jordy rumbled a quiet laugh. "Knew I'd be able to convince you."

"You are. Quite. Persuasive," I breathed as he rubbed me faster.

I pushed my ass back against him, giving him a little sideways lap dance. His fingers dove deeper, curling up inside of me, his index finger and then his middle finger, too. He

made a *come hither* gesture inside of me, the motion causing the heel of his palm to rub my clit. I bit down on my lip and tried not to make any noise, and when my orgasm rushed into me like a full breath, Jordy clamped a hand over my mouth to keep me silent.

I was barely coming down from my blissful peak when he slid his cock into me. New pleasure erupted through my body, and I arched my back and twisted to kiss him.

Archer was still asleep, somehow, and I decided that was unacceptable. I shoved my hand under the covers and found his tight boxers, and slipped my fingers inside. He was soft, but that changed quickly as I stroked him while Jordy drove into me from behind.

Archer's eyelids fluttered open, and his sapphire gaze settled on me. "This is my favorite kind of alarm clock," he said, taking in the sight of both of us.

"Don't let him hit snooze," Jordy said, planting a hand on the back of my head. He pushed me forward, folding me down until my head was under the covers near Archer's crotch. I yanked his boxers down and took him in my mouth, swirling my tongue around his tip the way he loved.

Both of them groaned above me, a duet of masculine pleasure that was music to my ears. Jordy gripped my hip tightly for leverage as he fucked me harder, long strokes that crashed into me, reckless with desire. Archer grabbed his shaft and stroked himself into my mouth while I sucked him off. Being wedged between the two of them, filled from both ends, soon had me moaning with the aftershock of an orgasm. The way I clamped down around Jordy's cock caused him to gasp and shudder inside me, filling my swollen pussy with his seed. My muffled moans vibrated into Archer's dick, and then he was clenching his thighs together and crying out in warning as well. I kept my lips wrapped tightly around his tip as he exploded in my mouth, every salty rope hitting the back of my throat.

I kissed Archer after, and then twisted and accepted Jordy's tongue into my mouth. If he was bothered that another man's

cock had just been there, he gave no sign. If anything, it made him kiss me even more passionately.

Archer's phone suddenly blared on the side table. He groaned a different kind of groan and rolled over to turn it off.

I smacked his bare ass as he did so. "Just in time for your *real* alarm. You set it early."

"I intended to wake up and go for a light jog this morning," he said, rolling onto his back and propping an arm behind his head. "But I'm quite certain my legs are too weak at this moment."

"Your legs are weak?" Jordy replied. "You just laid there!"

"I assure you, I was tensing every muscle in my body quite thoroughly."

"I can vouch for that," I said with a grin.

We cuddled in bed and teased each other for a few more minutes, and then Jordy eventually got up. I snuggled against Archer's nude body until Jordy emerged.

"Your turn," he said. "Get up, sleepy head!"

I squealed as Jordy grabbed me by the waist and lifted me out of bed as if I weighed nothing. After a year together, one of the things I loved most about this relationship was that they could manhandle me with ease. They were incredibly strong, which piqued an ancient cavewoman part of my brain.

Man, strong.

Two man? More strong.

Strong is good.

I giggled to myself.

"What's so funny?" Jordy demanded.

I kissed him on the cheek. "Just thinking about how I feel like a cavewoman who was dragged away by two strong cavemen."

Archer sat up in bed. "I quite dislike that summary of our relationship."

“I wasn’t complaining!” I said. “Do you have the contract for the next year of nanny-ing? I’m ready to sign as soon as you give me the documents.”

Archer shrugged casually. “I do not think we have made up our minds at this time.”

“We’re considering other applicants,” Jordy agreed with faux-seriousness.

I stuck out my tongue at them and then slipped into the bathroom.

Once our fun was over, it was time to get ready for the day. Archer and Jordy had both left the mercenary life behind, and tendered their resignations at the Mathos Company. Archer had found a job as the pilot for a medical evacuation helicopter assigned to the local Wilmington hospital. Sometimes he freelanced as the pilot of the local traffic helicopter, too. Every day he left with a big smile on his face, and came back without any of the stress of his old job.

Jordy hung around eating breakfast and playing with Kaylee until ten o’clock, when his DoorDash shift began. Yep, that’s right: the big, muscular mercenary earned a living by running deliveries all day. It had started out as a way to bring a little money in and to keep himself occupied until he figured out what he *really* wanted to do with his life, but months had now passed and he still hadn’t stopped.

“Are you sure you’re happy?” I asked while kissing him goodbye.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s not very fulfilling. DoorDash isn’t exactly the kind of thing someone dreams about doing when they’re a little kid.”

He raised a brown eyebrow at me. “When I was a little kid, we didn’t have DoorDash.”

“You know what I mean.”

He gave me a soft kiss. “I bring food to hungry people. Everyone loves food. That’s pretty fulfilling to me. Much more so than what I was doing before, as a mercenary.”

“As long as you’re happy.”

He stroked my cheek. “Happier than I ever thought I could be.”

In my previous relationship, I felt insecure to the point that I always doubted whatever my partner told me. If he said he was happy, I wondered if he secretly wasn’t. If he told me he loved me, I spent all day assuming he was just saying what I wanted to hear. Now, I didn’t have any insecurities about that. When Jordy said he was happier than he ever thought he could be, I knew it was the absolute truth.

After Jordy was gone, Kaylee and I spent two hours playing Minecraft. We had a huge world built together now, and she was always thinking of new things she wanted to build. Today, we worked on constructing a replica of the Roman Colosseum. It was a lot harder than it looked, and we needed to pull up Google Maps to look at a 3D model of the actual building.

We broke for lunch, then settled down to another new routine of ours: reading time. At almost ten years old, Kaylee was the perfect age to start reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. It was a great summer reading project, and it helped reduce her computer screen time—which was already far too high.

We spent two hours a day reading. Our system was to sit down together in Kaylee’s room and each read our own copy of the book. At the end of the chapter, we paused and discussed everything that had happened. Kaylee was a slow reader, so I had to pretend to keep reading long after I had finished the chapter. But I was already noticing a huge improvement in her reading skills since we started. And she was really absorbing the material, and offering her own insightful commentary.

It was around four in the afternoon when I heard the front door open. “Did they cut your time block short again?” I called from the kitchen, where I was mixing the batter for a batch of cupcakes.

The man who appeared in the kitchen doorway was not Jordy. This man filled the space with broader shoulders and a



silent, dangerous aura about him. I almost dropped the bowl in my surprise.

“HARRISON!”

He gave me a satisfied smirk. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I put the bowl down and threw myself into his arms. “You weren’t supposed to get back until tomorrow,” I murmured into his chest.

He stroked my hair with a palm. “Plans changed.”

I loved everything about my relationship with Jordy and Archer, but there was a special way that Harrison folded me into his arms that made me feel extra safe. Like I had a big, grumpy grizzly bear for a boyfriend.

Unlike the other two, he had stayed on with Mathos Company. Being an individual gave him a lot more flexibility to join other groups for missions around the world, and to do reconnaissance work alone if needed. The money was fantastic, and he insisted he didn’t want to do anything else for a career. I was okay with that, so long as he avoided dangerous jobs. He promised never to take anything dangerous again, like Prague or Baku.

I pulled away and cupped his cheek. “I thought you said you were going to grow your beard back out while you were gone.”

He shrugged. “Didn’t get around to it. I’ll stop shaving tomorrow.”

He had been saying that for a year, now, but always woke up and shaved first thing in the morning. It had become our own private little joke.

I kissed him, and for a few moments I forgot all about the to-do list I had. The passionate, hungry way in which Harrison kissed me had a way of making me forget things.

“Daddy?” Kaylee asked, surprise turning into excitement. “Daddy!”

We broke our kiss as she tackled him around the midsection. “Have you grown since I’ve been gone?”

“Half an inch!” she said proudly.

“Wow. Half an inch. You’ll be bigger than me by Christmas.”

Kaylee’s smile faded away. “We were baking you cupcakes for your return. But they’re not ready yet.”

Harrison dipped a thick finger into the bowl and licked it. “I like the raw batter more.”

“Daddy! They’re not ready yet!”

He dipped his finger in again, but this time wiped the batter on Kaylee’s cheek. She squealed and tried to play-slap at him, but he deftly grabbed her wrists and held them out to the side.

“No fair,” she whined. “You’re too strong!”

“I have to be big and strong to protect my girls.” He glanced at me and smiled. “Guess where I was this time.”

“Um.” She furrowed her brow. “Raleigh.”

Harrison laughed. “I was a lot farther away than Raleigh.”

“Asheville?”

“I was out of the state, sweetie. Out of the country. I’ll give you a hint.” He reached down into his duffel bag and pulled out a stuffed kangaroo. “There were lots of these where I was.”

Her eyes widened. “Australia!”

He handed her the toy. “Wow, good guess. You’re so smart.”

“Trish and I have been doing geography quizzes every day. Did you know Antarctica is the seventh continent? Only a few people live there, though.”

“Wooooow,” Harrison said, making a show of being impressed. “I didn’t know that.”

Kaylee grinned then suddenly looked sad. “What’s wrong?” Harrison asked.

“I didn’t think you were coming home until tomorrow. Maggie asked if I can spend the night tonight.”

“You can spend the night with Maggie.” He glanced at me. “If it’s okay with Trish, of course.”

“But I’ve missed you,” she insisted. “You’ve been gone two weeks. And I feel bad...”

“I’ll take you to Maggie’s and tell you all about my trip,” he said, sweeping her up into his arms. “Then, tomorrow, we’ll spend *all day* together. How’s that sound?”

“Okay!”

“Maggie is really sweet,” I explained. “They had a sleepover here last weekend.”

“Maggie has two daddies!” Kaylee exclaimed. “She was really jealous when I told her that I have *three*.” She scrunched up her face in thought. “I think her daddies are different, though. They kiss each other the way you kiss Trish.”

Harrison and I exchanged a look, then burst out laughing.

“She’s lucky to have two daddies,” Harrison said while Kaylee got ready to go. “Some kids don’t have any daddies at all.”

I finished baking the cupcakes while Harrison drove her to her friend’s house. They were just coming out of the oven when he got home.

“Perfect timing. These will be ready as soon as I put the icing on them.”

Harrison came up behind me. “It’s not the icing I want to lick.”

I giggled. “That was the kind of cheesy line I would expect from Jordy. He’s rubbing off on you.”

“I want to rub off on *you*.”

I laughed harder. “That’s even cheesier!”

He kissed the back of my neck. “You have that effect on me.”

I started to say something else, but then I surrendered to the way his lips felt on my skin. Two weeks wasn't very long, but it was enough time for me to crave his touch more than anything. I leaned back into him and let him caress me, until finally he couldn't stand it any longer. He wrapped his arms around me and carried me into the bedroom—*his* bedroom—and tossed me on the bed.

"I just stripped the sheets this morning," I said. "I was going to put clean ones on before you got back."

"Don't care," he rumbled into my mouth. "Not enough time."

I sighed as he practically ripped off my clothes, then his own. I loved the way Harrison always *took* me, like he couldn't breathe if he didn't ravish me as quickly as possible. I was already drenched as he sank between my legs, filling me with ease, a reconnection that was two weeks in the making. There were no words as we made love like animals; we didn't need any. Just gasps and moans and the frantic grunts of two people who wanted nothing else in this world except each other.

We were both panting and laying on our backs afterward, too spent to move. "I love the way you take me," I breathed.

"I love *you*."

It took me a moment to realize there was no qualifier on the end of that sentence. Not, *I love your body*, or, *I love the way you feel*. Just, *I love you*. The simplest, and yet most complicated, phrase a person could say.

I rolled onto my side to look at him. "It's about damn time."

His eyes sparkled like emeralds as he blinked at me. "Huh?"

"I was wondering when you would finally say it." I leaned in close and brushed my lips against his. "I love you too, Harrison Gray."

He threaded his fingers into my hair and held my forehead against his. "How long have you been waiting to say it?"

"Oh, at least three or four months."

He gave a start. “And you kept it to yourself?”

“I didn’t want to spook you!” I replied.

Harrison sat up in bed and rolled his shoulders forward. “Why do you think I would get spooked?”

“Because you’re the most emotionally bottled-up person I’ve ever met.” I sat up and kissed his bare chest. “Which is part of what I love about you.”

“It’s tough to say that to someone,” he explained. “Especially when you don’t know if they’ll say it back.”

“Exactly! That’s why I held off until you said it.”

“You and Jordy said it after just three months.”

“Yeah, well, we had kind of a head start.” I cocked my head. “Is that jealousy I detect?”

He scowled. “I don’t get jealous anymore.”

“You get a little jealous.”

“Only when he hogs you,” he said. “I’m glad I came home early. To get a chance for us to catch up.”

I traced a finger along his abs. “Kaylee’s gone until tomorrow. So we have plenty of time to *keep* catching up.”

He smirked. “I was planning on it.”

I yelped as he dove on me again, crushing his lips against mine. Then he rolled me over and spooned me.

“You didn’t bring me anything back from Australia?” I asked.

Even though he was behind me, I could hear the frown in his voice. “I didn’t realize you were as needy as a ten year old.”

“A girl likes to be appreciated!”

“I actually do have a surprise for you.”

I perked up. “Really?”

“Two surprises, actually.”

“Gimme gimme gimme!” I demanded, twisting around to face him. “I want my surprise now, please.”

“We have to wait until Jordy and Archer get home.”

“That’s not fair! Kaylee got her surprise real quick.”

“Who’s the child, and who’s the nanny?” he teased.

I gave an exaggerated pout. “I’m the nanny, but only until tomorrow. Archer hasn’t given me the contract extension yet. Usually he’s very prompt with paperwork...”

The front door opened and closed in the other room. “Oh shit, is that Harrison’s bag?” Jordy said.

“I’m quite certain it *smells* like his bag,” Archer agreed.

“In here!” I called. “Hurry!”

Archer and Jordy came running. Harrison crawled out of bed and slipped his underwear on before hugging the other two men. I smiled at the sight of them embracing and clapping each other on the backs. *My three men. Who would have ever thought?*

“Is something wrong?” Archer asked. “Why did you ask us to hurry?”

“Trish is worried about the nanny contract,” Harrison said.

“Oh.” Archer looked down at his feet. “Yes. Well...”

“What is it?” I asked. “Are you not extending me for another year?”

“Not another year, no,” Jordy said.

I frowned at them. “Did you decide to extend me for even longer, then? Two years?” When they gave me blank stares, I said, “Three?”

“Trish,” Archer said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “The three of us have discussed it, and we do not want to extend your contract at all.”

I stared at him. “Is that a joke?”

“We are serious,” Jordy said solemnly. “We don’t want to keep you on as Kaylee’s nanny.”

Something in my chest began tightening. “This morning, you teased me about considering other options. I thought that was a joke. You’re serious?”

“Kaylee will be ten in a few months,” Archer said. “She’s old enough to wait for the bus alone. And she can be left by herself at home before we get off work. Especially with Harrison taking fewer contracts with Mathos these days. We just don’t need a full-time nanny anymore. Or even part-time.”

“I hope you understand,” Jordy said.

I felt tears welling in my eyes and desperately tried to wipe them away. “I don’t... I don’t know what to say.”

“This is for you,” Archer said, pulling out a small box. “As a parting gift for a year of good service.”

I didn’t feel like opening a gift and feigning excitement, but my fingers untied the red ribbon automatically and opened the lid. Inside was a single stainless-steel key. I recognized it as a key to the house where they lived. The house we were currently in.

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s a key to our place,” Jordy explained.

“I already have a key to the house.” I reached over to the floor where my jeans had been discarded and came out with my keychain. “You gave me a key when we got back from Baku a year ago.”

“Yes, but...” Archer said. “This is different.”

“It looks the same to me.”

“They’re asking you to move in with us,” Harrison said bluntly.

“Oh.” I looked at the key again. “*Oh.*”

“You’re a major part of Kaylee’s life, and ours too,” Jordy explained. “We don’t want you to be Trish the Nanny anymore. We want you to just be *Trish.*”

Now the tears were falling down my cheeks, but for a completely different reason. I hugged Jordy, and then the other

two were joining in.

“What do you think you’ll do?” Archer asked.

“I’ll say yes!” I replied. “Of course I’ll move in with you. I practically live here already. Oh, Lisa is going to be so happy for me. She’s been asking when I’m going to finally move in here.”

“No,” Archer said softly. “I mean, what do you think you’ll do with your time once Kaylee goes back to school? You can do anything.”

I frowned as I thought about it. I’d entertained certain fantasies in the last year. What I would do if I ever stopped nannying. For the longest time, I knew that I wanted to take care of a child—or, if I was lucky, children. Nannying for Kaylee fulfilled that desire. But I was more than a nanny, now. I was part of the family. I was getting that fulfillment without it needing to be my nine-to-five job.

“I think I might go back to school,” I said. “Or at least audit some classes at UNCW.”

“Really? What do you want to study?” Harrison asked.

“Video game design. I would love to make my own game. Like Minecraft, but with more gameplay options to build a family. To create a little army of people to fight all the spiders and creepers in the game. Something like that, anyway. I haven’t given it a lot of thought.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Archer said. “Kaylee will love it.”

I smiled. “The game was kind of her idea. She said she wished Minecraft had more players. That’s when I started thinking creatively.” I whipped my head back toward Harrison. “That’s only one.”

“One what?”

“One surprise. *You* said I had *two* surprises. What’s the other surprise?”

Jordy and Archer shared a look. “You only told us about the key thing.”



“Yeah. I had something else in mind.” Harrison sat on the edge of the bed. “Been thinking a lot about all this. The four of us. I’m comfortable with it all. Took me a while to get here. But I am. Now I want to try something new. Something you would really enjoy. Something that requires all four of us.”

He stared pointedly at me. I stared back, not understanding.

And then, suddenly, I *did* understand. “Really?”

He smirked mischievously. “Yup.”

“But I didn’t think that was your kind of kink. You don’t like to share!”

“I don’t,” he admitted. “I prefer you all to myself. But I’ll try this once. For you. When you’re turned on, Trish, *I’m* turned on. You’re my kink.”

I kissed him, a kiss of gratitude and thanks and love. That’s all it was, at first. A gesture of love. But then Harrison’s lips were churning against mine harder, and he pulled me into his lap on the edge of the bed. I felt his cock stir underneath me.

“Here’s the gift I brought you from Australia,” he said, pulling something out of his jacket on the ground. It was long and woven from blue wool, with red and white mixed in.

“A scarf?” I asked. “I don’t want to seem ungrateful, but it’s July.”

“It’s winter in the southern hemisphere,” he replied. “Besides, the scarf by itself isn’t the gift. It’s what we want to do with it.”

Before I could ask, Archer was taking the scarf and wrapping it around my eyes from behind. The wool was thick enough that it blocked out all the light.

And then Harrison was getting up and shoving me down onto the bed. Having my sight removed was a strange experience, far more than simply closing my eyes of my own accord, and it seemed to enhance my other senses. I was still nude from my reunion sex with Harrison, and could feel my wetness in the open air. I laid there on my belly for a long

moment. Waiting. The seconds dragged on and on, and with it my anticipation grew.

The cock forced its way into my pussy lips without introduction. I cried out at the sudden, unexpected sensation. Some of the best pleasure held a tinge of pain, and this was just the right amount to make me shudder and moan. Like the right kind of spicy food, burning your tongue—but not too much.

I thought I knew my three lovers intimately by this point, but without sight it was surprisingly difficult to tell their dicks apart. Knowing that I was all warmed up and ready to go, the unknown man grabbed my hips and began pounding me like I was his own personal fuck toy. It was either Harrison or Jordy, I decided, based on the way his fingers dug into my flesh. Bent over the bed, there was nothing I could do but take the eager lovemaking. I was nothing more than an accessory to his pleasure.

And it drove me wild with lust.

“Ohh,” I moaned, arching my back. “Just like that. Don’t stop.” I reached between my legs and began rubbing my clit. “I’m close...”

Despite my pleas, the man abruptly pulled out. Based on the groan, it was Harrison. It made sense they would let him go first.

“They told me it’s fun to tease you,” he rumbled. “So that’s what we’re going to do.”

Archer was next—at least, I thought it was him—to take me. He moved slowly, agonizingly so after I had just been taking it more roughly. But still, the lack of sight and the way they were using me catapulted me toward an intense orgasm.

Yet as I felt it build, just before I reached that sweet release, he stopped as well.

My groan was full of frustration. “Don’t stop.”

Archer—it was him after all—chuckled. “You’re not in any position to give demands.”

Now it was Jordy's turn. I was certain it was him as he took his place behind me, stirring the tip of his cock against my waiting entrance. But unlike the other two who had taken me quickly, Jordy hesitated.

"I want you badly," I said.

He chuckled. "How badly?"

"*So badly.*"

"I'm not convinced she does," Harrison chimed in. "I think she needs to beg."

"I like that idea," Jordy agreed, planting a hand on my lower back to hold me down. "Beg for it."

"Please," I begged, totally surrendering now. "Please fuck me. I need it. I need *you.*"

"Who do you need?"

"All three of you," I breathed. "*Please.*"

Jordy's cock slammed into me without warning. I screamed with surprise and ecstasy as my whole body came alive underneath him, burning for his touch as he began having his way with me. I didn't need to beg, now. He grabbed my ass with both hands and fucked me hard and fast, skin slapping together as he groaned above me.

And then there was another man kneeling on the bed in front of me, his strong fingers cradling my chin and opening my mouth wide. This time I knew it was Harrison as his cock slid into my mouth. He rumbled a moan from deep within his chest as he began fucking my mouth, using me in a way that heightened everything Jordy was doing from behind.

My orgasm crashed into me like a linebacker. All thought disappeared as pleasure exploded throughout my body, hard and intense and toe-curlingly good. Another man was on the bed now, kneeling next to Harrison, shoving in to get at my mouth. Archer, I knew. One cock was replaced by another, and I began sucking on him.

I sensed Harrison moving off the bed, taking over from Jordy. He was passionate with need now, his thick length

practically crashing into me with every desperate stroke. As he took over, Jordy knelt on the bed and grabbed one of my hands, demanding that I stroke him with my fingers.

They alternated like this, a sort of musical chairs for which part of my body they wanted to use. A guy could last a *long* time when switching around positions every few seconds, it turned out. Somehow, they seemed to know it was driving me wild. Somehow, they had the willpower to hold themselves back from their own climaxes. Another orgasm washed upon my shores, then a third. They came so rapidly it was tough to tell them apart, until I was caught in a never-ending cycle of intense ecstasy. It went on and on. Forever. An endless cycle of being shared between the three of them. Three men, each of whom was *mine*.

By the time Harrison was ready to come, I was vibrating with electricity. His climactic roar echoed through the entire house as he pulled out of me, shooting his warm seed onto my bare ass cheeks. Jordy and Archer were just behind him, pushing me down onto my belly on the bed so they could jerk themselves off onto my lower back. The sensation of their come all over my skin was a sledgehammer to my soul. The muscles inside my pussy spasmed and squirted as I came one final time, harder than I ever have in my life, held down by three rugged men as I shuddered with beautiful release.

They were gentle after, a stark contrast to the rough way they'd taken me. All three of them glistened with perspiration from their efforts, but their smiles were wide and genuine.

"See, old chap?" Archer said with a crooked grin. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Harrison grunted. "Actually, it was pretty fucking hot."

"Damn right," Jordy said, tilting my chin up to kiss me.

"I still prefer you all to myself," Harrison added, shoving Jordy aside so he could kiss me too. "I don't like it when my thighs are brushing up against theirs."

Archer fell onto the pillows. "Is that so?"

"I think you're forgetting Helsinki in 2013," Jordy said.

Harrison went stiff.

“What happened in Helsinki?” I asked.

Jordy was grinning widely. “Harrison here cuddled together with me for warmth.”

“That was different!” Harrison argued. “We were trying not to freeze to death.”

“Is that why you got a big old hard-on when we woke up the next morning?”

“I can’t help that.” He looked at me pleadingly. “I can’t help that.”

“No judgment here, big guy,” I said.

“I think I could help it,” Archer teased, a hint of a smile on his handsome face. “Were I ever in that situation.”

“Me too,” Jordy agreed. He gave me a wink. “Right, Kettlebells?”

“Right, Brownie.”

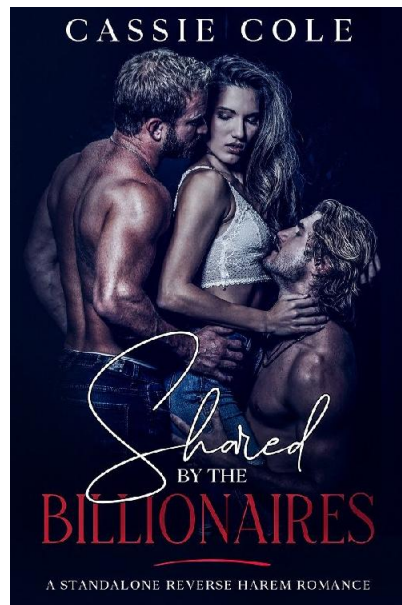
I laughed as my three men, my three lovers, my three *loves*, continued bickering to each other in bed.

# Bonus Scene



Still craving more? Want to read about how Trish meets Archer's huge polyamorous family unit a few years in the future? Click the link below (or type it into a browser) to receive a special fast-forward bonus chapter that was cut from the original book. It's extra sappy and extra sweet!

<https://bit.ly/3uLWXjC>



If you enjoyed this book, you're going to love this other Reverse Harem Romance from Cassie Cole: *Shared by the Billionaires*. You can [click here to buy it](#), or keep reading for a special sneak peek!



### **Amber**

*“Happy birthday, dear Michelle,”* everyone sang together, *“happy birthday to you!”*

We cheered and raised our glasses as my sister blew out the single candle on her cupcake. I smiled and gazed around at the view surrounding us. We had rented out the rooftop patio of *Marcello's*, one of the nicest bars in San Francisco. The view was spectacular: we were surrounded by towering

skyscrapers all lit up at night, with the burnt red beams of the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance to our left, and the Bay Bridge's slate-gray towers looming over the bay to the right.

I sighed and soaked it all in. It wasn't often that my sister and I got to enjoy this sort of thing.

Michelle's friends took turns standing up and giving toasts. Her childhood best friend. Her coworkers. Finally her boyfriend Phil got up and droned on and on like he wanted to show everyone else up, giving a speech that was far too dramatic and emotional for someone who had only been dating my sister for a month. It was like he was trying to filibuster the damn party.

When he was done, the rooftop music was turned up and everyone fell back into their previous conversations. My sister slowly made her way toward me.

"You're the best sister in the world, you know that?" she said.

"I do know it," I replied while hugging her. "But feel free to tell me as often as possible. Also, you still haven't told me what you want for your birthday."

"I don't need a gift! *This* is plenty." Michelle gestured around the rooftop bar. "Are you sure this wasn't too much?"

"It's exactly as *much* as it should be," I said. "Although I did cancel the party clown and magician at the last minute. They would have really messed up the vibe of this place."

My sister chuckled and said, "I meant the cost. Are you sure it wasn't too expensive? Renting out the entire *Marcello's* rooftop bar..."

She wasn't wrong: renting this space for four hours cost a metric *shitload* amount of money. It was a lot, even for San Francisco. My bank account was pretty much wiped out.

But money was just a number on a page, and I loved Michelle more than anything in the world. I would do anything for her, and give her anything she wanted. Especially since we didn't have anyone else. Just each other.



“It’s not every day my baby sister turns twenty-one,” I said, sidestepping the question of cost. “I had to be here when you had your first drink.”

Michelle winced. “I don’t know how to break this to you, Amber, but this isn’t my first drink.”

I made a joking gasp. “You mean you’ve been drinking underage at college? Like a *criminal*?”

“Don’t call the cops on me,” she replied. “I’m too pretty for prison. I wouldn’t last a week!”

“I’ll say,” her boyfriend, Phil, said while sidling up next to her. His arm slipped around her waist and he said, “This is really great, Amber.”

“Thanks,” I said with the most diplomatic smile I could manage. Phil was three years older than Michelle and worked as a network engineer for Western Digital. Even though he was a glorified I.T. guy, he acted like his job gave him the equivalent status as a foreign diplomat. He had the same pompous, haughty demeanor, too.

“I would love to contribute,” he went on. “Let me know how much my half of the costs are and I’ll Venmo you.”

“That’s not necessary,” I said, holding up my smile like it was a shield.

*Fucking tech-bros, always throwing their money around.*

Before he could open his mouth and protest more, I added, “I’m starting a new job tomorrow. Shelly and I won’t have to dip into savings anymore.”

“A new job? Outstanding.” He glanced at my sister. “You didn’t tell me she was starting a new job.”

My sister’s eyes never left mine. “This is the first I’m hearing about it, too.”

“I didn’t want to upstage your party,” I said.

“Where are you working?” Phil pressed. “Cisco? Facebook?” His eyes widened. “*Tesla*?”

“It’s a startup called Advanced Crypto Solutions,” I said.

Phil nodded thoughtfully. “I heard about ACS. They’re leasing a big new space on second street.”

“That’s why I rented the hotel rooms I did,” I said with a smile. “Tomorrow I’ll only have to walk a few blocks. Better than the commute in on the CalTrain.”

Just talking about tomorrow filled my body with a shiver of nervousness. I *needed* that job, and didn’t want to think about what would happen if it didn’t pan out.

*Shut up, brain. You can worry and over-analyze things tomorrow.* I gulped the rest of my champagne to make sure my brain complied with the command.

“Well, at least let me pay for the hotel rooms,” Phil said.

I was getting sick of his persistence, so I dryly said, “I doubt they take Bitcoin.”

“Everyone takes crypto thanks to my Coinbase card,” he replied smoothly. “It acts like any other credit card, but with a pass-through to my crypto accounts. In fact—”

“I know all about that,” I replied. “I have the same card. Not to mention I wrote a point-of-sale program on top of the Litecoin blockchain years ago. Before BitPay stole my idea.”

“BitPay. Sure. Of course,” he said with a patronizing smile.

“Less talk, more dancing!” my sister said. “Come on. You too, Amber! If you don’t start shaking your booty I will *literally* light you on fire.”

I got another champagne from the waitress and then joined them over near the railing. For a while, we danced and drank and forgot all about the other problems in our lives.

When we emerged from the group to get two new drinks, my sister said, “Any new investment opportunities lately?”

That was her code for asking if I had any men in my life. She was getting her degree in finance and thought everything was funnier in economic terms.

“None with an attractive return-on-investment,” I replied.

“Good!” she replied. “Because that guy at the bar has been looking at you like you’re a juicy REIT with a high dividend.”

Adjacent to our open rooftop section was an enclosed bar. A dozen or so people were inside, watching one of the bar TVs or mingling. The man my sister was talking about looked like he had just come from the office. A starched white dress shirt, blue tie, and blazer. Expensive-looking leather shoes and a matching brown belt. He was peering down at his drink through thin spectacles as if there was a puzzle contained within the ice. When he glanced up and saw that we were watching him, he quickly turned away from us and toward the bar.

“SEE!” my sister hissed.

“He’s not my type,” I replied.

That wasn’t really true. I didn’t have a type. In fact, I hated the *idea* of a “type.” Pigeonholing yourself into dating only a specific kind of person was dumb.

But the guy at the bar did look like the kind of dude I wouldn’t be interested in. He was giving off a stuck-up vibe. I mean honestly, what kind of guy wore a tie and jacket to a hip restaurant on a Thursday night? Someone who was trying to show off, that’s who.

“Not your type? He’s like a cute librarian boy!” Michelle said.

“Hard pass.”

“Come on,” Michelle begged.

“I’m here for your birthday,” I replied. “Not to try hooking up with a random stranger.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she groaned. “You like to get to know a guy first. Whatever. Just go get to know *cute librarian guy*.”

“Shelly...”

“Earlier, you asked what I wanted for my birthday.” She pointed. “This is what I want. I’ve just decided. I want you to meet a guy. And maybe hook up with a guy. *Tonight*. If you don’t go talk to cute librarian guy right now, I’m going to throw you off this roof into the traffic below. And then call a dozen Ubers to come run over your body.”

One thing I could always count on from my sister was a graphic threat of violence. It had been our fun little thing since we were children. By this point, the more graphic the threat, the more it meant *I love you*.

The guy at the bar glanced at us again, then quickly turned back to the bartender.

“Come *on*,” Michelle whined. “You haven’t dated anyone in... five years.”

I was grateful she didn’t come right out and name the event from five years ago, but the indirect mention still made me wince. She was right. Ever since five years ago, everything had changed. My life had become too crazy to worry about boys or dating or anything else frivolous.

I stared off and did what came naturally to me: I made a list in my head. Life could always be boiled down to lists of pros and cons. Stripping away all the emotion until the only things remaining were the cold, unpliable facts.

### **The Cons of Talking to Cute Librarian Guy:**

1. I was a nerd who was bad at meeting new people and even worse at small talk.
2. He could be a total douchenozzle.
3. He might not be interested in me at all, leaving me embarrassed for the rest of the night.

### **The Pros of Talking to Cute Librarian Guy:**

1. It would shut my sister up.
2. I could get it out of the way and go back to the party.

3. It *had* been a long time since I'd dated anyone, and I probably needed to practice my cheesy pick-up lines.

4. Cute Librarian Guy was, in fact, cute. *Very* cute.

The first item on the Pros list was what convinced me. I knew my sister. She wouldn't leave me alone until I at least went up and talked to the guy. I wanted to get it out of the way so I could go back to enjoying the night. We had only been here an hour, and we had the rooftop reserved until midnight.

I knocked back the rest of my drink and handed the glass to my sister. She let out a happy little giggle.

*Okay. Here goes nothing.*

**KEEP READING**  
**SHARED BY THE**  
**BILLIONAIRES**



Cassie Cole is a Reverse Harem Romance writer living in Norfolk, Virginia. A sappy lover at heart, she thinks romance is best with a kick-butt plot!

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