

The

HEIST

TEAM ZULU SERIES



JULIE WEAVER

RWAus Emerald Award Winner

The Heist

Team Zulu Series, Book 3

Julie Weaver

Epic Press

For my little family.

The only one who doesn't give me grey hairs is the dog, but
I love you all to bits.

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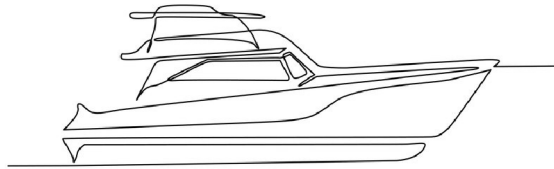
Acknowledgments

About Julie Weaver

A Note to readers

The Heist contains adult content including sex scenes, swearing, and violence. It also tackles some serious issues relating to domestic violence and coercive control. Additionally, it contains limited reference to the following: human trafficking, the loss of a parent to illness, a parent recovering from a stroke, a child recovered from a congenital heart defect, and PTSD.

Freya



My mother died when I was twelve. A short time before she passed away, she recorded videos for my sister and me. Knowing the relevance of her message would take shape as we matured, she asked that we watch them once a year. On each anniversary of her death, I'd do just that.

In mine, Mum reminded me why I'd been named after the Norse goddess of war, and as she'd done many times before, she retold the story of how I'd come into the world. How I'd been born blue in the face, with the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck, and how once it'd been removed, I'd screamed a battle cry so loud it'd shocked the midwife. She'd known at that moment that I was a fighter. Then she pointed out that I'd continued fighting ever since, and not only for myself.

She described how, despite being a slip of a thing at ten years old, I'd kicked the school bully in the balls when he'd thrown my little sister's macaroni craft against a wall. As well as the time I'd written to the Daily Mail and advised them that my father's newest building in London was not *ugly* as they'd

reported; rather it was ahead of its time, and they wouldn't know modern architecture if it slapped them across their weaselly faces. I'd been eight when I'd written it, but I remained satisfied I'd gotten my point across.

Their fierce little honey badger, Mum and Dad would sometimes call me. Initially, the comparison irritated me because I'd much rather have been likened to a stealthy lioness or a cunning wolf than some overgrown rodent that looked like the unfortunate love child of a Tasmanian devil and a skunk. But my mother had assured me a honey badger was a formidable foe that bowed to no predator. Often underestimated, the sturdy creature was intelligent, had thick, almost-impenetrable skin, and would viciously defend itself and its family against those far more powerful.

A honey badger pulled no punches.

A honey badger was badass.

The analogy grew on me, and I embraced it.

These qualities, Mum had convinced me, would be my greatest asset in years to come, despite the suggestion of others that it would be my pretty face.

In the final moments of her recorded message, Mum said to me, "Men will covet your beauty, Freya, and some of them will be intimidated by your fierceness. I know it's not in your nature to avoid a fight, but I urge you to walk away from those whose only goal is to crush your vibrant spirit. Remember to pick your battles, my love, because even the goddess of war cannot win them all."

She hadn't been wrong.



Beverly Crest, Los Angeles

I checked my gold Cartier wristwatch.

7:29 a.m.

The saltshaker slipped from Marceline's fingers and clattered against the water pitcher in the center of the table. No doubt the maid's hands were as sweaty as mine. She cast me an apologetic glance before righting the saltshaker and scurrying from the patio with moments to spare.

My eyes scanned the table, a nervous habit due to the ritualistic scrutiny that would determine how badly my day might go.

Bollocks. Marceline had used the wrong juice glasses, and at the place setting opposite me, the folded napkin sat crooked.

I needed to keep Andre placated. If he was in a foul mood, he'd find some excuse to punish me, and my plans would be ruined.

I repositioned the napkin, but there was nothing I could do about the glasses. With my back to the sterile modern mansion that would never feel like *home*, I straightened my posture, took a deep breath, and feigned an expression of stoicism.

I deserved an Oscar under the circumstances.

Despite the already-warm LA sun, ice flooded my veins when the glass door slid open and the familiar tread of Louboutins over granite paving approached the poolside table.

Breakfast with my tormentor of seven years, two months, and sixteen days was truly an appetite-destroying experience.

Dressed in a gray Armani suit, Andre lowered himself into the chair opposite me. There was nothing inherently threatening about his outward appearance. Salt-and-pepper hair, average height, average build, and well-dressed. The gentle lilt of his French accent and eloquent use of the English language gave him an air of sophistication. I'd once found his face handsome enough, although now I considered him as grotesque as the gargoyles we'd seen in Prague on one of his business trips. Funny how someone's personality could taint their facade.

Andre analyzed the table setting. Most would miss the barely perceptible lifting of his brows, but I didn't.

He's noticed.

Andre's attention fixed on the juice glasses, then his gray-blue eyes met mine. "Good morning, precious."

Thank God he'd let Marceline's mistake slide. The small relief didn't diminish the sensation of cockroaches crawling over my skin at hearing that godforsaken *endearment*.

Precious.

It was so very *Gollum*. Twisted. Dark. Possessive. And oh, how I wanted to tear the heavy gold ring from my finger and

toss it into the fiery pit of Mount Doom.

Might as well swan dive into the glowing magma with it.

No. I refused to think that way today. Not when I had fight left in me, and not when there was still a small chance at freedom.

“Good morning, Andre,” I said in the most civil tone I could muster.

I’d never come up with a pet name for him. At least not one I could use in his presence. *Dick Face* felt right, but I didn’t think it would be well received.

The bastard thought he’d broken me, but he hadn’t.

Not yet.

Admittedly, there were many days when I wished to end it all. Sometimes, I’d sink to the bottom of the pool, close my eyes, and scream into the blackness until my throat burned. If it was a particularly bad day, I’d dare myself to draw in a deep breath and fill my lungs with water. But then I’d think about my family and remember I needed to stay strong for their sake. Their safety and well-being were the reasons I continued to fight.

As Andre’s mistress, I shouldn’t have to wear his five-carat diamond on my ring finger. He already had a wife from a family of old French money, much like Andre himself. In the last seven years, she’d only visited LA once, preferring to stay in France with their two teenage children. In an awkward moment, we’d met eyes when she’d passed the library where

I'd been reading. She'd cast me a pitying glance as though she knew precisely how cruel her husband could be, then had carried on down the hallway.

Our single, brief encounter had spoken volumes. She felt sorry for me, and truthfully, I felt the same for her. We were both tied to the same monster, and I could hardly blame her for hiding in Paris to avoid Andre's attention, even if I resented her for it a little bit.

Despite my mistress status, Andre insisted I wear his ostentatious ring, saying he wanted other men to know who I *belonged* to.

Seriously? Who said misogynistic rubbish like that? What an obnoxious twat.

I adjusted my oversize sunglasses, ensuring they covered the lingering swelling around my left eye. Makeup covered most of the bruising. Andre had enjoyed his violent outburst three days ago, but he disliked looking at anything imperfect.

After shifting his chair closer to the table, Andre placed his napkin on his lap. I did the same.

He sipped his black coffee. So did I.

He picked up a fork and speared a cube of grapefruit. I picked up mine and fantasized about stabbing his eye with it. I even imagined the satisfying *pop* it might make as it found its target.

I couldn't recall the precise point during our relationship that I'd become so savage minded, but I'd never had such

bloodthirsty thoughts before being subjected to this man's depravity.

Andre swallowed his food and nodded at me. "You may eat. We have things to discuss."

The smile on my lips probably looked deranged. "Yes, of course." With cool silver clenched in my grip, I reluctantly aimed the fork at my food instead of the despicable creep opposite me.

Though bile rose up my throat, I ate with perfect etiquette and mechanical efficiency. The food was fine. It was what it represented that churned my gut. Andre controlled every facet of my life, right down to my calorie intake. He withheld meals if I was caught snacking, skipped a workout, or sometimes, simply because he felt like being a mean bastard. Restricting food was just one of the many creative ways Andre enjoyed tormenting me.

I should've guessed a person whose company designed and manufactured weapons and who boasted how effective his products were at eliminating human life would have a dark side resembling a black hole. Anything that brought me joy had been sucked into Andre's inescapable gravity and annihilated.

I hardly recognized the pathetic creature I pretended to be when I was with him. But on the inside lay a caged beast desperate to claw her way out. The honey badger still lived within me, and that thick-skinned bitch wasn't going down without a fight.

As if stuck in a demented version of Groundhog Day, I bided my time and played the role of the dutiful mistress.

Good times.

Andre patted the corner of his mouth with his napkin before placing it on the table. “What are your plans today, my precious?”

Gag!

The same thing I do every day. Plot a way out of this miserable excuse of a life.

“I have my weekly appointment at the salon.”

Where I’d be plucked, primped, and polished and still fail to meet Andre’s unachievable beauty standards.

I didn’t give two shits what he thought of my appearance, or what anybody else thought for that matter. What really annoyed me was that the rest of the world thought I was nothing more than a living doll on *his* arm. How stereotypical bloody Hollywood. The filthy-rich older man with the glammed-up young blonde by his side. Thank God Andre hadn’t ordered me to get a set of fake tits like the rest of them.

What use were a pretty face and perky ass anyway? All they had snagged me was the unwanted interest of an abusive psychopath with mummy issues.

“No lunch plans?” Andre asked.

I paused with the fork halfway to my mouth. Alarm bells rang loudly inside my head because this had to be a trick

question. “Who would I have lunch with?”

I didn’t have friends. Not anymore.

“Jillian Westmead called my office yesterday and left a message. She wants you to meet her at Latitude 43 today.”

Jillian was a rare breed in LA society. Kind, genuine, and generous with her time and wealth. She had significant influence and wasn’t a woman to be put in a corner. I was surprised Andre hadn’t labeled her a witch and called for her to be burned at the stake.

Andre didn’t allow me to socialize without him. But the Westmeads were too important to brush off, and I really would like to have lunch with Jillian. It’d been years since I’d shared a meal with someone I didn’t want to throw my plate of food at.

I put my fork down gently. “Jillian and her husband are potential investors in the new manufacturing plant. Perhaps I should meet with her.” I had no interest in talking business with Jillian. All I wanted was her friendship, but I could never tell Andre that.

“Please, Freya.” Andre scoffed. “You didn’t even finish secondary school. Do you really think you’re savvy enough to broker financial deals?”

I placed my hands in my lap, doing my best to remain calm. “I wasn’t suggesting that. I—”

“I’ll discuss investment opportunities with Trevor Westmead. *Not* with his wife. And I already declined on your

behalf. You're to stay away from that woman. She meddles too much and can't be trusted."

Jerk. Why had he even mentioned Jillian's invitation? It was yet another power Andre thrived on lording over me. Each happiness he squashed carved out a little more of my soul and sent me spiraling toward a new low.

When we'd first moved from London to LA, Andre had encouraged me to become friendly with the wives of those in his elite social circle. That notion had quickly dissolved when he'd declared them a bad influence and forbidden contact outside of business dinners. When I'd been made to turn down their invitations, they'd eventually stopped calling. Jillian would give up soon, too.

Far from London with no family, no friends, no prospects for employment, and no money to support myself, I was completely dependent on Andre. Exactly the way he wanted me. And if I ever tried to leave him, there were consequences too disastrous to allow.

No. Leaving Andre wasn't in the cards for me. There was only one way to escape him.

Andre took a sip of coffee, then frowned. "I suppose you'll find time to call your father."

I nodded. "It's Sunday."

Andre only allowed me to call home once a week for no more than ten minutes. Afterward, he'd be in a foul mood as if permitting me to make that short phone call were an extreme

act of benevolence he'd had to sell a kidney for. Sometimes I wondered if it was worth the hassle. But talking to my father each week was the only thing I looked forward to, and he was always so happy to hear from me.

After Dad's stroke, he struggled to communicate verbally, but we managed. I did my best to make him believe I was happy in LA so he wouldn't worry, and he told me of my sister's ballet achievements. I was so proud of Lena for making her dreams come true. The last thing I wanted was for either of them to know the struggles I faced, or that I stayed in this hellish situation to save them from financial ruin.

And worse.

Much, much worse.

Andre sighed. "I don't understand why you try to talk to him. The man is practically a vegetable. He can't even communicate."

I allowed myself one extra blink in defiance of his comment. "He can communicate. I understand him just fine. And his nurse says he becomes unsettled when I don't call."

"Then maybe they should sedate him."

My mouth fell open, and my eyes snapped to his. "He doesn't need sedating."

"I pay a lot of money for the best medical professionals in London to make decisions regarding your father's care. They don't need you interfering. From now on, you'll only call him

once a month.” Andre started scrolling through his phone, signaling the conversation was over.

My blank stare hid the fiery rage blazing inside me, but I couldn't stop my hands from choking the napkin in my lap or my chest from heaving with each hate-filled breath I drew.

Andre would take this last remaining happiness from me, too? How long before he ruled out all contact with my family? This was all part of his sick game. Adding to my misery one step at a time.

He glanced up from his phone. “Is something the matter, Freya? You almost look”—he tilted his head—“ungrateful.”

If by *ungrateful* he meant I wanted to tear the flesh from his bones with my bare hands, then yes, I supposed I was.

This was the part that excited Andre. He knew I had a headstrong personality, and he delighted in taming my willfulness. I was sure that was why he'd chosen me to be his mistress. For Andre, there was no satisfaction in bringing a submissive to heel. His eyes never sparkled more than when I was forced to do his bidding through a clenched-teeth smile.

Jaw aching, I swallowed down my wrath. “Ungrateful?” I said sweetly. “Not at all. It's very generous of you to provide such wonderful care for my father.”

“Of course I would do that.” He smiled smugly. “It's my responsibility to provide for you.”

And that was the kicker. I needed Andre. It was a wretched conundrum of wanting my family to be safe and financially

secure but also dreading each day in this man's presence.

I'd whored myself to the devil and should've read the fine print. Hopefully, I'd be free of him very soon.

The sudden bankruptcy of my father's business eight years ago had been as much of a shock as the several strokes he'd suffered soon after. Severe stress, the doctors had said, was the most likely cause of his ailing health. He required twenty-four-hour care, numerous physical therapy appointments, and specialist treatments. All of which cost an eye-watering amount of money. Money I hadn't had as a seventeen-year-old also trying to support my younger sister through secondary school. So I'd dropped out of school, worked three jobs, and my income had barely covered our food and rent.

A year later, Andre had attended a charity fundraiser where I'd been a server and he was the philanthropic guest of honor. His unexpected proposal to solve my family's financial woes in exchange for my *company* had seemed too good to be true. Yes, it had come with conditions. Physical intimacy was expected, as were fidelity, loyalty, and confidentiality surrounding Andre's business. It hadn't sounded so bad. There were worse things in life than a loveless relationship.

Or so I'd thought.

Andre sipped his coffee. "I'm flying south of the border tomorrow to meet with a client."

Although Andre had legitimate contracts with the US Department of Defense and their allies, he also ran a hugely profitable black-market operation supplying military-grade

weapons to less respectable clients. Ever the cautious control freak, Andre demanded illegal business be conducted face-to-face and away from surveillance so there'd be no electronic trail.

He didn't care what I saw or heard. If I reported his crimes to the police, my family would pay the price. Andre secured my loyalty through threats and intimidation.

This was the second time in a month he'd crossed the border to meet with a client. Last time, we'd cruised to Costa Rica on Andre's megayacht, the *Antoinette*, and entertained a bunch of rather ruthless Colombian guerillas. They'd been more than satisfied with the weapons demonstration conducted at sea, but negotiations had become tense when they'd requested to pay with cocaine instead of cash.

"Are you reopening talks with the Colombians?" I hoped the rebels hadn't resolved their differences with Andre. The animosity between them was an important detail of my plan.

Shit. If I had to travel with him, my one chance at escape would be shot, because it had to happen tomorrow.

Andre usually took me to these meetings because having a compliant piece of arm candy twenty-five years his junior made him feel powerful while surrounded by other powerful men. Frankly, I thought it made him look like a pompous git.

"No. There will be no deal with the militia. The new clients are in Mexico."

A cartel, then?

“Should I pack?” I asked, working hard to keep the nervousness from my tone.

“No. You will stay here.”

Cool relief washed through me. My plans were still in play, and Andre’s absence was a welcome, serendipitous bonus.

Yes. It would happen tomorrow. I knew it in my bones.

“As a precaution due to the Colombian situation, I’m having our security system upgraded.” Andre raised his hand and beckoned someone from inside the house. “And from now on, Omar will be your personal bodyguard.”

I turned and saw a hulking man in a black suit walking toward us. He stopped a short distance from our table, stance wide and hands clasped before him.

“If you leave the property, he goes with you. Understood?”

Ugh. A seven-foot-tall babysitter was a complication I didn’t need.

“Have the Colombians made threats?” I asked.

I knew about the security improvements. The company had sent a contractor last week to prepare a quote, and I’d escorted him around the property because Andre had been at work. But I’d assumed the upgrade resulted from his general paranoia, not actual danger.

“This is how those barbarians do business. I won’t bow to them.” He leaned forward and tucked my long blond hair

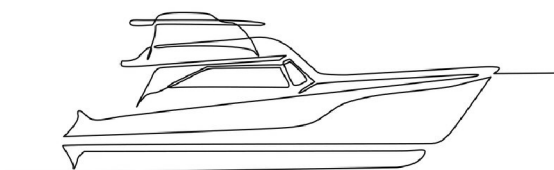
behind one ear. His touch made me shiver. “You’ll be safe, my precious. I would never let anything happen to you.”

I almost snorted. Andre terrified me more than anyone. At this point, I’d run gleefully into the arms of the Colombian militia and take my chances with them. But I was stuck with Andre. I’d say for better or worse, except there was no *better*. He was a taut, chafing noose around my neck. One wrong move and he’d kick the stool out from beneath my feet and bring suffering to me and everyone I loved.

My plan was risky, yet a small kernel of hope grew within me, because if every element came together, there was a chance I’d be rid of him for good.

Kane

Coronado Island, San Diego



If I were a pint-size contortionist, I might be able to remove the last bolt from the exhaust manifold of my aging flybridge. The cramped engine bay of my run-down motor yacht was no place for me or even a person of regular stature and flexibility.

“Douchebag. You home?” came a voice almost identical to my own.

“Down here, jackass.” I wiped a bead of sweat from my brow and climbed out of the engine bay onto the back deck.

My twin brother, Wyatt, and his daughter, Regan, walked along the floating dock and were almost to my slip when my niece sprinted past her dad to climb aboard first, waving a folded piece of paper.

“Uncle Kane, I drew you a picture.” Regan wore a purple swimsuit, flip-flops, and pink heart-shaped sunglasses, and her long black braid swung from side to side as she ran into my open arms.

I launched her into the air the way I always did and was rewarded with fits of giggles. While I held her with one arm, we did our secret handshake: a series of fist bumps, hand slaps, and the grand finale—a thumb to the nose and wiggly fingers. She might be my brother’s kid, but I loved Regan like my own. The thick scar that ran down her sternum from multiple heart surgeries was a constant reminder of how lucky we were to still have her with us. Every day, I thanked modern medicine and the skilled doctors for repairing Regan’s congenital heart defects and enabling her to become the healthy, happy five-year old she was now.

Regan unfolded the drawing, and an explosion of glitter sprinkled onto the deck. “Do you know what it is?”

“Is it a...sailfish?” I hazarded a guess at her colorful creation because Regan’s drawings were always of ocean creatures.

Like my brother and me, she was practically raised in the water and had learned to swim even before taking her first steps. We joked that she’d transform into a mermaid one day. She insisted that was plain stupid and she’d rather be a navy SEAL like her dad and uncle.

I’d strongly advise an alternative career.

“Don’t be silly,” Regan said. “It’s a narwhal. The unicorn of the sea.” She tilted her head and stared at me through blue eyes the same color as Wy’s and mine. “Did you ever meet one?”

“No, Monkey. I haven’t.”

“But you met one of these.” She traced her finger over the tattooed tentacle of the kraken extending up one side of my neck. The rest of the sea monster and the sailing ship in its grip spread across my shoulder and chest. It was one of the first pieces I’d sat for after getting out of Team Zulu four years ago. There’d been plenty more artwork added since.

I nodded. “It was only my team’s most epic battle.”

Regan had a lot of questions about what her dad and I had experienced when we were in the teams. Not much of it was suitable for a five-year-old, so instead, we regaled her with bedtime stories about SEALs rescuing sailors from a kraken. Sometimes we’d mix it up with a megalodon or the Loch Ness Monster.

She looked at my ink-covered torso and dropped her bottom lip. “There’s no room left on you for a narwhal.”

“Nope. Not unless that long horn goes on my—”

“Kane,” Wy grumbled in warning.

“Nose. I was going to say my nose, Wy.”

He shot me a *Yeah, right* look just as Regan wriggled from my arms and headed for the cabin.

“I’m going to stick it on the refrigerator with all the others,” she called out on her way through the cabin door.

If she could find room.

I closed the hatch on the engine bay so Regan didn’t accidentally fall in.

“What’s wrong with the old girl this time?” Wyatt asked, adjusting the brim of his Padres cap.

“Blown gasket on the exhaust manifold. At least that’s all I hope it is. There’s probably corrosion, too. Might be up for some new parts.”

Leaking oil, blowing smoke. Not good signs for the portside motor. The starboard wasn’t much better. I’d been putting off a rebuild for some time, but there was only so much patching up to be done on the diesel engines. What my home on water really needed was a full overhaul. That wouldn’t happen anytime soon, since I didn’t have a spare fifty grand. Hell, I’d be lucky to scrape together five-hundred bucks if I pawned some dive gear. And there was no way I’d sell my Harley or surfboards.

“I’ll lend you whatever you need,” Wy said.

“I already told you I don’t want your charity.”

“Stubborn bastard.”

“You would know.”

I grabbed a couple of beers from the small refrigerator on the back deck. “You want one?” I called out.

“At nine a.m.?”

“It’s five—”

“O’clock somewhere. Yeah, I know. Except you’re halfway through that six-pack already.” Wyatt shook his head at the

empty bottles strewn across the floor. “How do you look the way you do when your diet is worse than Elvis’s?”

“Crazy theory but hear me out.” I patted my belly. “Drinking six-packs gives you one.”

Wy groaned, his unamused expression making him look like our old man.

“Or maybe I’m just genetically blessed.” I shrugged, then twisted the bottle top off using the inside of my elbow.

My jokes were wasted on my twin. He was annoyed because he worked hard at the gym every day to maintain his leaner physique and I stayed bulked up by lifting heavy shit around the yacht club as part of my caretaker job.

Wy was probably the fittest person I knew. Losing his left leg below the knee from an RPG blast six years ago had only made him more determined to stay in shape. When handed that life-altering challenge, my brother had not only met it; he flipped it the bird and came through stronger than ever. I envied that about him.

As far as identical twins went, they didn’t come much more different than Wyatt and me in both looks and personality. I channeled a biker vibe, whereas Wy looked like a clean-cut surfer. Since medically discharging from service, my brother had become the dependable twin with a home and family, while I’d turned my back on any level of commitment or responsibility. I’d had enough to last me a lifetime.

It hadn't always been that way. Our time in the military had shaped the men we were today. Wyatt's SEAL career ended when he lost part of his leg; mine ended when I lost part of my soul.

As if being blown up by an RPG weren't bad enough, a year later, my brother's world had taken another brutal hit. After the initial joy of welcoming their baby girl, Wy and his wife, Maggie, received the devastating news that without immediate surgery to repair the multiple defects in Regan's heart, she wouldn't survive. It would be the first of several operations she'd need, and each came with a staggering price tag.

Ever resourceful and with a unique skill set from his time as a SEAL, Wy had found a way to ensure his family had the funds to provide Regan with the care she needed.

Heists.

No one would ever suspect that my twin had transformed himself into a master thief. Wy chose his targets carefully, only taking from those who had plenty to spare and had gained their wealth through less than honorable means. Now, Regan had made a full recovery and her bills were paid, but Wy and a few ex-SEAL brothers continued to pull a few jobs a year to anonymously help others in the same dire situation his family had once been in.

If I weren't such a screwed-up mess, I'd help them.

Regan kicked off her flip-flops and climbed onto the starboard gunwale. "I'm going for a swim." She launched

herself into the water, sending up an impressive splash for someone so tiny.

I tipped my head toward my favorite kiddo. “Guess she’s going for a swim.”

“Shit.” Wyatt’s hands landed on his hips. “I spent twenty minutes braiding ribbons into her hair for a pool party we’re supposed to be at already. Now I’ll never get her out.”

“Relax. No one’s going to care if she’s a few minutes late.” I tossed a foam noodle in for Regan to play with and sat on the side of the boat to keep an eye on her. “Is there something else bothering you? You seem more uptight than usual.”

Wy removed his cap and dragged a hand through his short sun-bleached hair. “Kind of. I came by to ask a favor.”

“Name it.”

“Rodriguez broke his leg mountain biking yesterday.”

“And?”

“And I’ve got a job going down tomorrow.”

I stared at my brother for a beat. He already knew my answer. “No,” I said firmly, and turned my back on him to watch Regan instead.

“Just hear me out, would you?”

“Find someone else.” I sipped my beer.

“It’s too late to find someone I trust on short notice. And it’s an easy job. Only the staff will be home, and all you’ll need to do is drive a car.”

I turned to face Wy. “That’s it? Just drive the getaway car.”

“Not exactly.” He exhaled deeply. “You know what? Give me one of those beers.” Wyatt snatched the bottle from the table. He popped the top and took a long drink. “We’re stealing a ’71 Hemi Cuda convertible.”

Nice car, and maybe worth a few hundred grand if it was in great condition. But Wy’s heists typically had higher-value targets than that. Unless...

A news article from a while back came to mind. I only remembered it because Wy and I had been shocked by the huge auction price of a Cuda that was one of only two ever made with a 425-horsepower V8 and a four-speed stick shift. The other was dust.

“You don’t mean the one that sold for three-and-a-half mil a few years ago?” I asked.

Wy nodded. “There are other things at the property. Artwork, cash, gold, diamonds. Total take should be around twenty mil. Maybe more. Hollis will handle the security system, Garcia will shift the artwork, I’ll crack the safe, and you’ll drive the car.”

Wy knew exactly why I didn’t want to be a part of his heist crew. It was too much like operating, and I’d sworn I’d never be involved in anything like that again. There were too many bad memories. Too much damage caused. I’d spent the last four years doing my best to repair what I’d done, but nothing could make up for my mistakes.

Wy glanced around my boat. “We both know you could use the cash.”

“I’ll get by fine without it.”

“Bullshit. You can’t keep patching up this old heap of junk. You’ve barely got enough income to live on, and you won’t accept anything from me. What are you going to do when the engines finally pack it in, the electrics short-circuit, and the plumbing dies?”

I pressed my lips together because he was right. My boat was held together with little more than duct tape and a prayer.

“This is a big one, Kane. We pull this job off and I’m done. I promised Mags.”

“You’re giving it up? Why?”

Maggie wasn’t thrilled with the risk involved in Wy’s heists, but she had confidence in his abilities and understood how much the money helped other families with sick children.

“Uncle Kane! Look, I’m a dolphin!” Regan porpoised through the water, sucking in gasps of air each time she surfaced.

Wy exhaled a deep breath. “We just found out Maggie’s pregnant.”

I was happy for him, and I loved being an uncle to Regan, but watching my twin experience the life I’d once imagined for myself left a burning ache in my chest.

I'd never have what Wy had. It was no one's fault but my own.

It took me a moment to snap out of my thoughts before pulling him in for a bro hug. "Congratulations, man. That's... that's great news."

"Thanks." Wy scraped a hand over his hair. "Maggie worries about me every time we do a job. It's selfish to put her under extra stress with a baby on the way."

"So call it off. Maybe Maggie getting pregnant and Rodriguez breaking his leg are signs you should quit while you're ahead."

"I hear what you're saying, but I feel strongly about this one. Twenty mil will help a lot of families. Plus, there's an increased chance this baby will be born with a heart defect, too. I want us to be financially prepared for the worst."

Hell, I really hoped this baby came out healthy so Wy and Maggie never had to go through that again. I'd felt utterly useless when Regan had been born. I could only imagine how traumatic it'd been for them. Wy was right. This final heist was important, because even though money couldn't guarantee the baby would survive, it'd give it the best chance.

I held my brother's stare and nodded. "Okay."

Wy's brows shot up. "You'll do it?"

I nodded. "Go ahead and explain what I just signed up for."

"It's straightforward, but it has to be tomorrow or we'll miss our window of opportunity. We're going in as workers from a

security company who are scheduled to complete upgrades. Hollis has checked the place out, and it's a goddamn gold mine. And get this. My underworld sources have confirmed the owner of the property is the biggest lowlife you're ever likely to find. He's a black-market arms dealer."

I snorted. "You should've started with that."

Black-market arms dealers were universally despised in the military. They were responsible for providing firepower to support the drug trade, terrorists, organized crime, and rebel militias. AKA scumbags who'd been constant pains in our asses.

Wy continued, "I've established pattern of life. No one will be at the house except a butler and maid. The Cuda needs to be handled with care. If it gets so much as a scratch, my buyer will be pissed. So when you're behind the wheel, think less *Fast & Furious* and more *Driving Miss Daisy*."

"That's disappointing, but I can handle it."

"Listen, you know I'd never ask you to be involved in a heist unless I had no other choice, but I still need to know. Are you sure you're up for a job like this? You haven't used a firearm since—"

"I'm squared away," I said in a tone that left no room for argument.

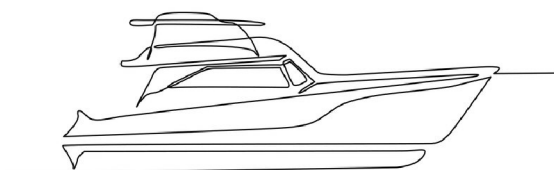
The most important thing to me was that Wy needed my help. We might have our differences, but I'd deal with my shit and do whatever I had to for him and his family.

“All right.” Wy downed the rest of his beer and tossed the bottle in the trash. “Be at my house tonight for a briefing.”

“Copy that.”

Kane

Beverly Crest, Los Angeles



“**W**hat do you call four SEALs in a van?” I asked.

In the driver’s seat beside me, Wy shrugged. “I don’t know. What do you call four SEALs in a van?”

“I don’t know, either. It just sounds like the start of a good joke. Work with me here.”

Wy groaned. In the back of the van, Dwayne Hollis and Tony Garcia, former teammates of Wyatt’s, chuckled while they checked over their weapons and tools. I figured the most help I had to offer right now was calming my brother through distraction. Wy usually operated cool under pressure, but there was a lot riding on this heist, and the strain was bleeding through.

He checked his watch before bringing the binoculars back to his eyes. “Any second now. She leaves at nine twenty a.m. every Monday morning like clockwork.”

We watched the target's house from a vacant property across the canyon. Wy had done his research. The sprawling mansion belonged to Andre Matisse, a French national worth billions who owned weapons-manufacturing plants in Italy, Spain, and the US. The shady crew Wy sold his heist loot to had it on good authority that Matisse's black-market military-grade arms had been fueling drug wars in Mexico and Central and South America. I couldn't think of a better asshole to steal from.

"We have movement," said Wyatt. "White Audi leaving the property. That's the wife and driver out of the way. Time to roll out."

We inserted our radio earpieces and checked our comms. I stepped out of the van and slapped *Global Security Systems* magnetized signs on the doors.

Wy started the engine, put it in gear, then stared at me.

"What now?" I asked.

"Buckle up."

I rolled my eyes as I fastened my seatbelt.

We followed the twisty roads along the canyon. Each of us understood our roles for the job. Wyatt had intercepted the request to upgrade the premises' security system. Last week, our tech guy, Hollis, had visited the property under the guise of quoting on the work, using the opportunity to scope out the house and its current security system.

We'd gone over floor plans, so we knew where to target. With both Matisse and his wife out of the house, the only people to manage would be the butler and the maid.

We arrived at the gate to the property. Wyatt pressed the buzzer and waited. His fingers thrummed against the steering wheel.

"How may I help you?" asked a male voice with a French accent. The butler.

Wy showed a fake identification card to the camera. "We're from Global Security Systems. Mr. Matisse is expecting us."

Without another word, the metal gate slid open, and we drove up the long, winding driveway. The flat-roof modern mansion was built into the hillside, its floor-to-ceiling windows taking full advantage of the view across LA. An enormous turquoise pool glistened in the midmorning sun.

We parked the van near the front door on the circular drive. The four of us were dressed in matching uniforms: navy cargoes and gray collared shirts with the Global Security Services logo stitched into the pocket. We wore caps with the same emblem and kept our faces angled down as we approached the front door. When we reached it, we pulled bandanas up over our noses.

The butler opened the door. He didn't have time to make a sound before I grabbed him by the back of the neck and pushed his face low. Wy wrapped duct tape around his mouth, then covered his head with a blackout sack. I zip-tied his hands behind his back and shoved him down the hallway.

One down. One to go.

When we entered the kitchen, a huge guy in a black suit stood behind an island. He froze and stared at us in shock with a bagel halfway to his lips.

Who the fuck is this?

The maid shrieked from the sink and threw her hands in the air. She shook her head and muttered something in French as Hollis went to give her the same treatment as the butler.

Big Guy dropped the bagel and reached inside his jacket.

“Ah-ah,” I said, and aimed my Glock at him.

He raised his hands. “Dumbasses. Don’t you know whose house this is?”

I didn’t indulge him with an answer. Instead, I strode toward him and clocked him across the temple with the butt of my pistol, knocking him out cold.

We put the three of them in the large supply room of the commercial kitchen. The butler rocked silently while the maid whimpered through her gag. The big guy would be out for a while, but Garcia zip-tied him just in case.

Wy helped me shift the refrigerator to block the supply room door. The staff would be found when the wife and her driver returned to the property. I felt guilty for the trauma this might cause them, but it was safest for everyone if they were kept out of the way.

Back in the foyer, Garcia had the front double doors open wide to shift artwork into the back of the van.

Wy used his radio to check in with Hollis, who was working on shutting the cameras down and erasing all footage of us entering the premises. So far, everything was running according to plan.

Wy and I headed for the study on the top floor. During Hollis's inspection last week, he'd noticed the room was shorter than marked on the floor plan, so when I saw a bookshelf along the back wall, I suspected the safe was concealed behind it.

After feeling around for a hinge point, Wy swung open a wide section of the bookshelf, revealing the door to the safe.

"Bingo," he said, and rubbed his gloved hands together.

Wy attached a small plastic explosive to the metal door. After setting the charge and fuse, we hid behind a wall for cover.

Boom!

Wy went through the contents of the safe. He held up a small velvet bag, shaking it, then feeling its weight. "Car keys." He tossed it to me. "You know what to do with those."

"Copy that." I left Wy to clear the rest of the safe and took the keys to the garage.

When I opened the door and flicked on the light, I let out a low whistle. The huge garage held a dozen vehicles, from

modern supercars to a race-ready classic Corvette. And in the first bay, there she was. The midblue '71 Cuda convertible.

The painted concrete floor squeaked beneath my boots as I walked toward it. My reflection shone off the polished hood. I pressed a bunch of key fobs, making bleeps go off through the room until the doors unlocked on the beast before me.

I popped the hood and used an electronic sweeper to search for the GPS-tracking security device. Not there. I checked under the dash, and the sweeper went crazy when I passed it beneath the steering wheel. *Found it.* It didn't take long to disconnect the small box from its power supply and remove it from the vehicle. That might send an alarm to a security company, but we'd be long gone by the time they arrived.

On the key chain, I found a remote for the garage door and pressed buttons until it opened. Daylight streamed in. I hopped inside the Cuda and acquainted myself with the vehicle.

Stick shift—no problem. I preferred it, even. I adjusted the mirrors, didn't buckle in just to piss my brother off, then started her up. The 425 V8 Hemi roared to life.

Wy's voice came through my earpiece. "I like the sound of that. You good to go?"

"You sure I don't need to blow the cobwebs out of this thing? You know, just to make sure it runs right for your buyer?"

"Miss Daisy. I mean it."

"Front gate's open," Hollis said.

“G, how are we looking?” Wyatt asked Garcia.

“Van’s full. I’m done,” came his reply.

The boys were wrapping things up. Time for me to go, too.

I shifted into gear. “On my way now. See you at the rendezvous point.”

As promised, I maintained the speed limit as I passed through the gate and onto the road. I itched to put my foot down just to see what she was capable of. I’d never get a chance to drive a car as special as this again. Instead, I took each curve of the winding road with caution. If so much as a rock chip ended up on the Cuda, I’d cop an earful from Wy.

Luckily, there was little traffic. I imagined only the filthy-rich folks who lived in the mansions along the canyon drove this way.

A few minutes into the drive, a strange wobble started up in the rear end.

Dammit. Flat tire.

Keep cool. Just find a quiet place to change it.

There’d better be a spare.

I pulled onto a side road and stopped at a vacant parking lot at the start of a walking trail. After shutting the Cuda down, I hopped out to inspect the rubber.

I kicked the deflated tire. “Perfect.” I tore my cap off and dragged a hand through my hair.

Since our radios were out of range, I phoned Wyatt. He picked up on the second ring. “Douchebag?”

“Small problem. Got a flat.”

“Where are you?”

“At a secluded spot.”

“Spare?”

“About to check now.” I headed for the rear of the vehicle. *Shit.* “Your buyer won’t be happy. The keyhole of the trunk is damaged. Looks like someone has jammed a screwdriver in it at some point.” I popped it open, hoping the spare was in decent condition.

What in the actual fuck?

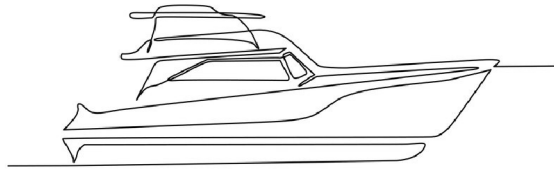
“Ah... Wy, I’m gonna have to call you back.”

“Everything okay?”

“I’ll let you know real soon.” I hung up before my brother could ask for a better explanation. I sure as shit didn’t have one, because inside the trunk was the most beautiful woman I’d ever laid eyes on.

So it kind of sucked that she had a pistol aimed at my head.

Freya



I'd been lying inside the boot of the Cuda since asking my driver to take the Audi for cleaning. Then, it'd happened—the burglary I'd crossed my fingers for. And just like I'd hoped, the thieves had taken the Cuda.

My body jostled with each twist and turn as the driver unknowingly transported me down the meandering canyon roads. The dark, stifling boot reeked of exhaust fumes. Unpleasant conditions, yet I couldn't wipe the smile from my face.

The car shook over a rut and kept on wobbling.

Wait.

Those weren't bumps. I grumbled a string of obscene curse words when the repetitive *whump, whump, whump* from a rear tire grew louder.

A flat wasn't part of my plan, but it didn't matter. I was the one holding the pistol. I was the one calling the shots. God help any bastard who stood in the path of my freedom. I'd never be Andre's pathetic, obedient whore ever again, and

anyone who tried to control me would face the full wrath of my inner honey badger.

The hardest part—getting away from Andre without it looking like it'd been my idea—was over. So when he received word that his house had been burgled and his mistress was missing, he'd presume I'd been kidnapped. And that would buy me time to initiate phase two.

The Cuda slowed and came to a stop. I readied myself for whatever might come next. The spare tire sat somewhere beneath the carpet I lay on, so I could only assume I'd be meeting my thief any moment now.

The best course of action, I'd decided, was to first assess the burglars and then either recruit them to my cause or say adios and make my own way in the world. And if they tried to stop me, I'd introduce them to the Desert Eagle in my hand. All I knew was whoever these thieving donkeys turned out to be, they couldn't be any worse than Andre.

I'd met one of them a week ago—the security contractor who'd visited to quote on the upgrade work. He'd said his name was Joe, which was likely fake. He was clean-cut with smooth dark skin and a handsome smile. *Great* arse. I could've watched him climb the ladder into the attic all day. He hadn't seemed like a thief at all, to the point that it made me think my overactive optimistic mind had lost the plot. Yet here I was, inside a stolen vehicle on my way to freedom. I'd been right after all.

The car door opened, and a man's deep voice caught my attention. The conversation sounded one-sided, so I hoped that meant he was on his own. A single criminal I could handle. More than that would be complicated.

Was it Joe? I hoped so. He'd been kind and polite, though I was under no illusions he'd be so well-mannered once confronted with my pistol.

I aimed the weapon toward the latch of the boot. It opened, and I blinked at the sudden brightness.

A man stood before me. A *huge* man. I sat up while keeping the gun pointed at his head. His body blocked out the sun, creating a glowing silhouette around his tall, broad form.

My eyes adjusted to the daylight, and his features became clear.

Oh.

Okay. Not Joe. And I wasn't disappointed.

The man had sun-bleached hair tied back in a messy pony, a full beard, and dark tattoos covering his arms and neck. And dear Lord, *the muscles*. From his wide shoulders and corded forearms to his thick thighs that filled out his navy cargo pants rather deliciously.

Did I seriously just think that? And now, of all times?

Yes. Yes, I did.

I had the urge to ask this stranger where his hammer and cape were hidden because my unwilling kidnapper looked like

an inked Thor. And not the overweight, depressed version from *Guardians of the Galaxy*. This man could be closely related to the god of thunder in all his *Ragnarök* glory.

Hopefully, he played nice. It'd be a shame if I had to shoot someone so ruggedly sexy.

Quit drooling and focus.

Strangely, the Viking's blue eyes stared at me like I was a freak-show curiosity rather than a threat. Was he missing half his brain, or had he yet to notice the pistol pointed at his nose?

"Wy, I'm gonna have to call you back," he said into a phone. "I'll let you know real soon." Then he hung up.

I lifted my chin. "Raise your hands."

Thor placed the phone in his top pocket and showed me his palms. He shifted back as I climbed out of the boot.

"Thanks for kidnapping me."

"You're a Brit?" He grinned, revealing straight white teeth. He might not comb his hair often, but at least he valued his dental hygiene.

Wait. Why was he smiling? Did he find this amusing? And how had he missed the part where I accused him of abducting me? There was something wrong with this one.

"How observant. Now, lay your weapon on the ground, and back your *Yankee* arse up."

His gaze raked over me from head to toe. "Listen, princess, I know we're all Yanks to you foreigners, but some people

find the word offensive.”

Okay. Half a brain it must be.

“That’s an awfully strange thing to mention when a person is pointing a gun at your face.” I shifted on my feet. “Look, this isn’t a game.”

“I can see that.”

“I could shoot you.”

“You could, but”—he pursed his lips—“I don’t think you will.”

Rude bastard.

I fired a round at the road beside his feet. Rocks flicked up, and the bullet ricocheted into oblivion.

Thor didn’t even flinch. “You missed.”

I aimed the weapon back at him and scowled. “I promise you I won’t the next time. I’m not going to ask you again. Lay your gun on the ground. I know you have one.” I didn’t know that for certain, but what kind of criminal didn’t carry a pistol?

“It’s in the car.” He nodded toward the front of the Cuda.

Was he telling the truth? There were no obvious bulges in his clothes. Well, apart from the substantial one in his—

“That’s a weapon in my pants, but not the one you’re looking for. You’re welcome to frisk me. Can’t hurt to be thorough.” He smirked again, which was becoming an annoying habit.

My face turned red. With irritation? With embarrassment? I couldn't be certain.

“Are you always so humble when talking about your... manhood?”

He lifted one shoulder. “Just stating a fact, princess.”

Ugh. Men.

There'd be no frisking. I wasn't daft enough to get close, where he could snatch my pistol. “Lift your shirt and spin around. Slowly.”

He did as I asked, raising his shirt above his belly button, and—

Holy mother of ink-covered abs.

More heat flared up my neck, and I vaguely recalled the reason I'd asked him to show me his waist in the first place. I adjusted my sweaty grip on the pistol as he rotated, revealing an equally muscular tattooed back. I realized I no longer had control over my eyes when they shifted lower to land on his shapely behind.

What in seven hells was wrong with me?

“Satisfied?” He finished his spin and lowered his shirt.

My gaze shot back up to catch Thor's amused expression. *Bollocks.* He'd caught me checking out his arse.

I nodded and cleared my throat. “Can you change a tire?”

His brows pinched as though he were offended. “Do I look like a man who can't change a tire?”

“You look like a man who’s about to have an extra hole in him if you keep answering my questions with more questions.”

“Yeah, I can change a tire. I’m very good with my hands.” His eyes lowered to my chest and lingered a moment before returning to mine.

Right. I was going to shoot him. “Did you just perve at my tits?” I scoffed.

“Settle down.” He held his palms out. “I wasn’t being a creep. I think it’s been a while since someone cleaned the trunk of the Cuda.” He pointed at my white shirt.

I glanced down and found oily black smudges across my breasts and stomach. My light-blue jeans were filthy, too.

“But now that you mention it, you do have a phenomenal rack,” he added.

I glared at him. “What’s today’s date?”

He arched one brow at my oddly timed question. “July tenth?”

“Great. Now you can call the mason and have them finish etching your gravestone.”

His lips quirked. “You’re funny. I like that.”

“I guarantee you’ll reconsider your opinion if you haven’t changed that bloody tire in the next five minutes.”

“All right, all right.” He went to the boot, pulled back the carpet, and removed the jack and spare. He ignored my

presence while he raised the rear end of the Plymouth and began removing the lug nuts.

“I didn’t know Matisse had a daughter,” he said, and I absolutely was *not* noticing his thickly veined forearms as the wrench strained in his grip. What had he been doing to get arms like that? Crushing boulders with his bare hands?

“I’m not his daughter, and I’d rather not be his *anything*.”

He dropped a lug nut on the ground. “You can’t be the wife. I watched her leave the house.”

“You assumed it was me that left. If you’d been able to see through the black tint, you’d know it was only my driver in the Audi. I asked him to take it to the car wash.”

“At exactly nine twenty a.m.? The same time you leave the house every Monday for that sauna yoga bullshit?”

“Brilliant, right?” I pressed my lips together. “And I’m not Andre’s wife. I’m his...mistress.” I hated that word. It made it sound like I got some level of enjoyment out of the relationship. “He makes me wear this ridiculous bloody ring because he likes people to think I belong to him.”

Thor cast me a curious glance at my choice of words, then he braced his huge man-hands on his solid thighs and huffed out a breath. “What is this? Do you want your stuff back? Why’d you say I’d kidnapped you? And how the hell did you know I’d take the car?”

“This feels like one of those predictable moments in a movie when the villain spends far too long revealing their plan

only to have it go tits up because they dillydallied.”

“I’m confused.” He squinted against the sun. “I thought I was the villain.”

“That’s not what I—” I brushed my hair out of my face. “Just hurry up and finish changing the tire, and I’ll explain what’s going on.”

With a shrug, he returned to his task.

“I want you to kill Andre.”

The wrench slipped and clattered to the ground. Thor faced me with an incredulous stare. “Come again?”

I scrunched up my nose. “Okay. That sounded really bad when I said it out loud. Try to keep an open mind. Maybe you could just, I don’t know, put me in touch with someone qualified to take care of the unaliving part.”

“Oh, this just keeps getting better.” He removed the last nut. “Must’ve been some argument you two had.”

“Believe me, there’s no arguing with Andre.” Was Thor even taking me seriously? On the upside, he hadn’t said no to my proposal. He could be my golden ticket out of here. Now that I had his attention, perhaps it was time to sweeten the deal. “I can pay. This ring must be worth a hundred grand. That ought to cover it.”

He removed the wheel from the axle hub and wiped his hands on his cargoes. “What the hell is wrong with you rich people? Why don’t you just leave him?”

“It’s not as simple as that. He won’t let me go.”

“What do you mean?”

This tire change was taking too long. “We really need to get moving.”

“I’m working as fast as I can. And I think I deserve a better explanation of what’s going on here.”

“It’s hard to explain.” I sighed. “Andre and I had an agreement, and this is me backing out of it without the people I care about getting hurt in the process. He isn’t a good man.”

“I know enough about him to agree with you there.” Thor lifted the spare into place, wiggling it until it aligned on the hub correctly. “And if I don’t help you? What then?”

“Then I shoot you and make my own way.”

Since plotting my escape, I’d wondered what kind of criminal I’d bind my life to when I climbed into the trunk of the Cuda. Aside from being a thief, would they also be a murderer? A rapist? Joe hadn’t seemed so bad, but my anxious mind had conjured up all manner of vile humans. I’d decided it didn’t matter. I’d still rather deal with them than Andre.

But now that I was here with Thor, he wasn’t at all like I’d expected a thief to be. He hadn’t made any threatening moves toward me. He hadn’t tried to boss me about. He hadn’t even asked me to lower my weapon. And I suspected, given those muscles and the fluid way he moved, he’d be capable of taking back control if he wished.

So why hadn't he? And could I really shoot him and take the Cuda if he refused to help? Five minutes ago, I'd thought I could. But now, I wasn't so sure. He might be a criminal, but I didn't think he was evil like Andre. This was a troublesome area of gray I wasn't sure how to handle.

"Listen, princess. This might be an exciting walk on the wild side compared to your pampered, boring life, but if your *poor little rich girl* stunt ends up in me getting caught, I'll spend my life in prison." He shook his head. "This is batshit crazy. I'm taking you back—"

"No!" I snapped, and tightened my grip on the pistol. "I'm *never* going back." We held a glare-off. I didn't falter. Neither did he. "I'd rather—"

If my options were going back to Andre or dying trying to escape, it wasn't a choice. I couldn't return now. There was no telling how sadistic he'd be once he realized I'd tried to leave him. He'd hurt Dad. He'd hurt Lena. He'd find new and creative ways to make me suffer.

I blinked back tears of desperation and straightened my shoulders. "I don't want to shoot you, but I *will* if you try to force me to go back there. Please, I'm begging you. I need your help."

His eyes raked over me again, this time assessing me more thoroughly, and not in a sleazy way. It was as though he were seeing me properly for the first time while also searching for the missing piece of a puzzle. I knew what this looked like.

Why would the spoiled mistress of a billionaire go to such extreme lengths to leave her sugar daddy?

Then Thor's gaze landed on the slight swelling around my left eye. His expression hardened, and his fists gripped the wrench. "What did that asshole do to you?"

Thor's outrage on my behalf caused an unexpected warmth to settle in my chest. Yes, I'd really have trouble shooting him now.

"That's a laundry list we don't have time for," I replied.

"What makes you think you're any safer with me?"

"I've spent seven years warming the devil's bed. I know evil when I see it, and you're not like him."

He remained silent while holding my stare.

"Am I wrong?" I asked. "Are you going to hurt me?"

"No. I won't hurt you. Curse you? Yeah, because you've created a clusterfuck of epic proportions." He tightened the last lug nut and released the jack, lowering the Cuda to the ground.

"Believe it or not, I'm sorry about that."

"I need to talk with the others." He threw the tools and the flat tire in the boot.

I followed close behind. "But you'll help me?"

He spun to face me. "I'm not killing your boyfriend. All I'm agreeing to is not turning this car around and taking you back home."

I exhaled a deep sigh of relief and lowered the pistol. Thor wasn't a threat. He was dangerous, yes, but not toward me. And now that he'd agreed to take me with him, I didn't think he'd leave me stranded somewhere in a vulnerable situation. Perhaps my ability to judge character was completely skewed from living with Andre. I'd spent so long living in a shark tank I wouldn't recognize the danger of a school of piranhas.

"What's your name?" I asked. "I can't keep calling you *Thor, God of Thunder* inside my head."

He smiled like he approved of my choice of moniker and held out his hand. "I'm Kane."

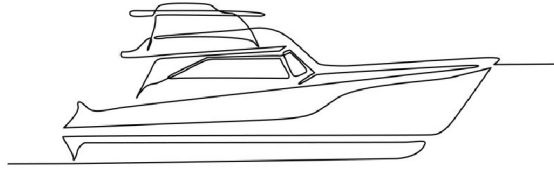
I gave him my palm, and we shook. His large, callused hand swallowed mine. It was warm and...strangely comforting. "Freya," I replied.

"The goddess of war." He arched one brow. "It was mighty considerate of your parents to give the world a warning."

Then screeching tires drew our attention to a black sedan careening around the corner.

And it was headed straight for us.

Kane



“U h-oh,” said Freya, whose face had rapidly lost its golden tan.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“My bodyguard.”

Shit.

“On the upside, I don’t think he’s got a weapon,” she added.

“Why would you think that?”

She showed me her pistol. “Because I stole it.”

There was no time to ask politely, so I disarmed Freya, hooked her around the middle, and tossed her in the trunk.

“Hey!” She shrieked, kicking out. “What are you doing?”

I flashed her a smile. “Kidnapping you. Remember?”

“Wait! You can’t—”

I slammed the trunk closed.

After releasing the safety on the Desert Eagle, I shot out a front tire of the approaching vehicle. It swerved, and the metal

rim sparked along the asphalt before the car crashed nose first into a ditch. Steam rose from under the hood. I kept the pistol aimed at the driver as I approached with caution. The bodyguard lay slumped against the steering wheel with the deployed airbag dangling in his lap. It was the big guy we'd left unconscious and zip-tied in the supply room. The bastard must have come to and escaped. I opened the door and checked for a pulse. He was out cold for the second time today, but fine. I pulled a couple of zip ties from my pocket and secured his wrists to the steering wheel. Didn't want him waking up and phoning for help right away.

Later, I'd think about that being the first time I'd fired a weapon in over four years and how easily I'd slipped back into operator mode. But right now, I needed to get us out of here.

Jumping in the driver's seat, I started the Cuda and put my foot to the floor. The rear end fishtailed down the road, leaving black tire marks in our wake.

I settled into a more subdued pace as I drove toward the rendezvous point.

My phone rang. Wyatt.

How did I explain the shit show his heist had become?

I answered the call. There was no point delaying the lecture I was about to receive. "Yeah."

"You get that tire changed?"

"Yep. On my way to you now, but we've got a problem."

"What kind of problem?"

“A hundred twenty pounds of blond-haired, green-eyed kind of problem.”

“Sounds like your favorite kind.”

“Not this one.” I winced. “I have Matisse’s wife in the trunk. Actually, you were wrong about her being his wife. She’s his side piece.”

Silence, then, “That’s not even funny, Kane.”

“Trust me. I’m not laughing.”

“Wait. You’re serious?”

“For once in my life, unfortunately.”

“You’re telling me she was still inside the house when we broke in?”

“Yep.”

“What were you thinking?” he yelled. I pulled the phone away before he burst an eardrum. “I told you to stick to the plan. Of all the stupid things you could’ve stolen on your way out, why would you take Matisse’s goddamn trophy wife?”

“Trophy *mistress*. And I didn’t take her. She hid in the trunk as part of some plan to escape, and I can’t figure out if it was pure genius or downright crazy. I found her when I changed the tire.”

“No, no, no. Stop the car. Just pull over and leave her on the side of the road.”

What? “I’m not gonna do that.”

“Why not? Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“Matisse is an asshole, and she needs a way out. I’m not dumping her out here.”

“Yes, you are. We’re not mediators for their relationship problems. Listen to me. Get rid of her right now.”

I swapped the phone to my other hand. “This isn’t a lovers’ quarrel, Wy. It’s worse than that. He’s hurting her. Badly, I think. And she’s trapped. He won’t let her leave.”

“And you believe all this after knowing her for what, ten minutes?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“Dammit, Kane. Why did you have to choose today to restore your hero status?”

“That’s not what this is about, and you know it. And I don’t see how all this is my fault.” My voice rose with my anger because Wy was being an unreasonable dick. “She wasn’t supposed to be home, and somehow, she knew about the whole goddamn heist. Tell me, how did that happen?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” He groaned. “Fuck!” There was a loud crash as Wyatt kicked or punched something. “This risks everything. Do you understand? She could sink us.”

“I’ll think of something.”

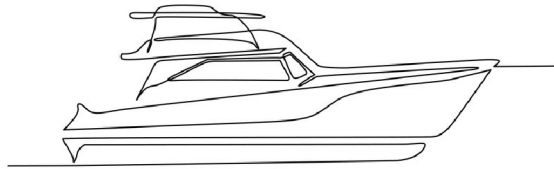
“Yeah. Tell that to my pregnant wife. Has this woman seen your face? *Our* face?” He gave a bitter laugh. “Of course she has. We’re so screwed.”

“We’ll sort this out. See you at the warehouse in twenty mikes.”

I hung up before my brother’s rant continued.

It’ll be an easy job, Wy had said. All you need to do is drive a car. This was exactly the kind of trouble I didn’t need in my life.

Kane



The warehouse's tall rolling door closed behind the Cuda, and I shut the engine off.

Hollis was changing the plates on the van while Garcia attached a set of car ramps to a shipping container on the back of an eighteen-wheeler. The Cuda had a one-way ticket to the dock where it would set sail to a sheikh in Dubai.

Wyatt stood nearby with a look on his face that told me he wanted to knock my block off.

Here we go.

When a loud thumping sound came from the trunk, Wy stormed toward my open window. "This is a fucking mess."

I stepped out of the Cuda and slammed the door, then gestured for Wy to follow me away from the car so Freya wouldn't hear.

In a low voice, I said, "What was I supposed to do? Think about it, man. What would it take for a woman to risk putting her life at the mercy of a group of thieves? She wasn't afraid

of me at all, but she's scared to death of Matisse. What's he been doing to her?"

"That isn't our problem," he snapped loudly.

So much for not being heard.

My face twisted with disapproval. "What happened to you? When did taking the easy road become more important than someone else's safety?"

Wy stepped up to me. "I've got people relying on me now."

"That doesn't mean you turn your back on doing the right thing."

"It's not like I have a choice, is it?" Wy dragged his hands through his hair, then braced them behind his head. "How exactly do you propose we unfuck ourselves from this situation?"

More thumps came from the back of the Cuda.

"Go on." He waved a hand. "Get her out before she puts a dent in the damn trunk."

"Word of advice?" I scratched my beard. "Don't stare at her tits. It makes her kind of mean."

Wy snorted. "Thirty-two and you're just figuring this out, huh?"

Ignoring my brother's dig, I went to the back of the car. When I popped the trunk, Freya somehow looked both pissed off and relieved.

“About time,” she said as she climbed out, ignoring the helping hand I offered. “I heard what you said just now. I appreciate you sticking up for me.”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

Freya dusted herself off, and when she stepped out from behind the open trunk, her gaze landed on my twin in the middle of the warehouse.

“Good Lord.” Her eyes widened. “There’re two of you.”

“Yep. He got all the brains; I got all the charm.”

“The charm?” She choked back a laugh. “Sorry, sunshine. Whoever told you that might’ve been exaggerating.”

Then she walked straight to my brother, shoulders back and chin up. I probably should’ve warned him what he was in for.

Wy gave her a once-over, then cast me a loaded glance, confirming my initial opinion. I wasn’t the only one who thought Freya was a goddamn stunner. Straight blond hair that went down to her ass, emerald eyes, pouty lips, and the pert tits and ass of a cover model. Skinnier than I usually liked my women, but there was no denying she’d draw attention wherever she went.

“Hi. I’m Freya.” She held out her hand, but Wy didn’t take it.

Freya dropped her arm to her side and turned to me. “Maybe you were right about the charm situation after all.” With a heavy sigh, she focused on Wy again. “Fine. Don’t introduce yourself. But you should know that *Grouchy Thor*

doesn't have a great ring to it. Besides, I already know your name is Wy, which must be short for Wyland, Wybert, or some other equally absurd American name."

Wy turned to me, looking unamused. "Has she been like this the whole time?"

I raised my brows. "It's been a real hoot so far."

"Do you know what I've just realized?" Freya's face lit up. "I'm allowed to swear again. I can say *bollocks* and *wanker* and *fuck*. I can finally call Andre *Dick Face* like he deserves." She rolled her shoulders and shook out her hands. "God, it feels good to be able to say whatever I want."

Wy eyed her with suspicion. "You might want to reconsider that."

I resisted the urge to shove my brother's shoulder. "Shut up, man."

"What? You're taking her side?"

"She's had a rough time. Cut her some slack."

"Cut her some slack?" Wy growled. "We'll all be lucky if we don't end up doing fifteen to twenty because of her!"

Hollis and Garcia stopped what they were doing to listen to our heated conversation.

"Everybody calm down," Freya said. "We have a lot to talk about."

Wy faced her. "Starting with how the hell you knew what we were planning today. I need to know what we missed."

“I didn’t know for certain. It was a sliver of hope, really. I showed Joe”—she pointed at Hollis by the Cuda—“around the house when he came to quote on the security work. Hi, Joe!” she called out, and waved. “Nice to see you again.”

Looking as guilty as...well...a thief, Hollis glanced between us and Freya and gave her a hesitant wave.

“Wait,” Freya said. “Before I continue, you have to promise not to get angry at what I’m about to tell you. Joe seems so lovely. I’d hate for him to get in trouble over this.”

Wy made a tight-lipped smile while glaring at Hollis. “Sure. I promise *Joe* won’t be in trouble. Go ahead.”

“So when I escorted your friend into the garage, his eyes landed on each vehicle except the most valuable one. Everyone who goes in there asks about the Plymouth. Ignoring it was the first clue. Plus, I noticed his shoes.”

“What about his shoes?” I asked.

“I know from my dad’s construction business that upgrading a complex security system would generally require a licensed electrician. Joe confirmed that he was one, but electricians should wear rubber-soled shoes to prevent electrocution. Joe’s soles were leather.”

Great. Impossibly beautiful, perceptive, and intelligent. She made us guys look like a bunch of knuckle draggers.

“I figured it was probably my overactive imagination or I’d watched too much crime TV, but a small part of me thought, *Holy crap! This could be my chance to escape!* If there was an

attempt to steal the Cuda, hiding inside would make it look like I'd been kidnapped. And if I was wrong, I'd spend an hour in the boot of the car, and Andre would be none the wiser. Like I said, it was a long shot, but worth a try."

"Which leads me to my next *What the actual fuck* question," Wy said. "Why go to the trouble of orchestrating your own kidnapping? There must've been an easier way to leave him."

Freya laughed bitterly. "No one simply *walks away* from Andre Matisse. He's the perfect storm of undesirable attributes: egotistical, manipulative, cunning, and vengeful. Throw wealth and power into the mix, and you've got an exceedingly dangerous person. I had to fake my abduction because if he thinks I've left of my own free will, there'll be severe consequences."

"What kind of consequences?" I asked. When Freya remained silent, I added, "We need to know exactly what's going on so we can help you."

If Freya's fear of Matisse was anything to go by, I already suspected what he was capable of. But I wanted Wy to hear this. If he knew what she was going through, he wouldn't turn his back on her.

Freya chewed on her bottom lip, then nodded. "It's my family. Andre will strip them of everything they own and leave them destitute. Then he'll follow through with the sickening threats he's made toward their personal safety. It's not a stretch to imagine what he'll do to me, although it can't be any worse than—" She swallowed her next words.

I folded my arms. “Can’t be any worse than what, Freya?”

She glanced between the four of us and for the first time seemed hesitant, because all eyes were on her. “Than the punishments he already hands out. That’s the part Andre really gets a kick out of.”

My jaw clenched so tight I almost chipped a tooth. “Punishments?”

“I’d rather not go into the details, but I assure you he can be a real delight.”

Wy and I shared a look. Judging by his concerned expression, he was finally on board. One thing I knew about my brother: he hated abusive lowlifes as much as I did.

“All right, then.” Wy waved a hand toward Freya. “Let’s hear this plan.”

“How much do you know about Andre?” she asked.

“That he has friends in high places, a net worth in the billions, and plenty more hidden away because of his black-market weapons deals.”

Freya tipped her chin up. “I’m impressed. You’ve done your homework. It makes me wonder why you’d choose to steal from someone so wealthy and well-connected. Not that I’m complaining, but surely there were more sensible targets.”

“There were,” Wy said. “But he deserved it the most.”

“Agreed.” She folded her arms across her chest. “You’ll be pleased to know Andre won’t go to the police.”

“Care to explain?” I asked.

“Andre’s going to assume a very disgruntled Colombian militia group are responsible for the robbery and my kidnapping, and he’d have a tough time explaining to the authorities why he’s been targeted. He’ll still investigate it himself, of course. At least, he’ll hire someone to do it.” She clapped her hands and grinned. “But the good news is, as long as you go along with my plan, you’ll be off scot-free. Happy days. Everyone wins. Except for Andre, hopefully.”

“Go back a second.” I frowned. “What Colombians?”

“Clients of Andre’s. Well, they were until the deal went bad. It’s why Andre wanted the security system upgraded, and why yesterday, he demanded a bodyguard tag along whenever I left the house. He didn’t go into detail, but he told me the Colombian militia had made threats. I Googled them, and this particular guerilla group are well-known for kidnappings. So when Andre finds out I’ve disappeared, he’ll presume I’ve been stolen and taken to the Colombian jungle, causing him to direct his hissy fit toward an already-enraged militia thousands of miles away.” She gave a sinister grin. “I can’t wait to find out how that unravels. Definitely going to need popcorn.”

“Christ, what have we gotten ourselves into?” Wy muttered toward the sky.

“I hate to bust up your celebration,” I said. “Maybe Matisse won’t call the cops, but what about the service staff? When your driver returns from the car wash and finds the house ransacked and the maid and butler tied up in the storeroom,

surely one of them will call it in. And someone will come across your bodyguard zip-tied to the steering wheel of his Cadillac soon enough.”

Wy recoiled. “Did you say *her* bodyguard?”

“Yeah. The big guy we left in the storeroom escaped and found us. Fun story,” I said with sarcasm.

Freya shook her head. “No. The staff will call Andre, not the police.” When I eyed her with skepticism, she continued, “They’re well aware Andre doesn’t want authorities poking around his home under any circumstances. Believe me, they won’t disobey him. Marceline and Henri are terrified of Andre because he controls them the same way he controls me. Omar is new, but I assume Andre holds something over him, too, because that’s how the slimeball operates.”

“Assuming all that is true,” said Wy, “what happens when Matisse questions the Colombians and they deny involvement? He might not believe them at first, but when your body isn’t found and no ransom demand is made, he’ll know something is up.”

“So”—she pursed her lips and toed the floor with her fancy white-and-gold tennis shoes—“I have a few ideas. Keep in mind, this is only if the Colombians don’t off Andre first—”

“She wants us to kill him,” I said.

Freya cocked her hip. “Way to go, Captain Subtle. I was working him up to that.”

Wy groaned into his hands. “You’re out of your goddamn mind.”

Freya’s head swung toward Wy. “Says the man who just robbed one of the most vindictive, calculating shit bags around. Did you think someone like Andre would let you get away with stealing from him? It’s only a matter of time before he finds out what you did and he comes for you, too.” Her gaze met each of ours in turn. “All of us are in danger. You’re underestimating Andre, and you don’t know what he’s capable of. If you’d had to live with him for seven years, you’d realize my plan isn’t as crazy as it sounds.”

The warehouse fell silent while we contemplated Freya’s words. If what she said about Matisse was true, maybe Wy had chosen his target poorly after all.

Freya shrugged. “Anyway, don’t get your knickers in a twist. You don’t have to be the ones to kill him. Just help me find someone who will.”

“Does someone wanna tell me how our day went from pulling a heist to planning cold-blooded murder?” Wy held up his palms. “You know what? Don’t answer that. We’re wasting time. We need to move the gear, and we need to decide where to stash Rapunzel until we figure things out.”

“I’ll stay at a hotel.” Freya lifted one shoulder. “I don’t care if it’s budget.”

“Nope,” I said. “Too many eyes in a hotel.” I glanced at Wy. “I think she should stay with you and Maggie for now. Just until we come up with a better solution.”

“Uh-uh. No way. She’s not staying with us. Maggie’s so full of pregnancy hormones she’ll tear my balls off and hang them around my neck by my intestines if I bring home a woman like her.”

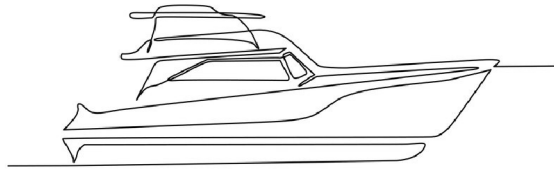
“A woman like me?” Freya squeaked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She can’t stay with me.” I laughed nervously. “There’s no room.”

“Figure it out, Brother.” Wy clamped me by the shoulder and pulled me in close. “Get the whole story out of her, then call me.”

Great. Just fucking perfect.

Freya



Kane's brother headed for the Cuda, leaving us alone.

“Wait, wait, wait.” The words flew from my mouth as I raised one finger in the air. “What just happened here?”

“It looks like you're stuck with me is what happened.”

The Latino thief came over and held out a plastic bag to Kane. “Shirt.”

Without a thought, Kane pulled the security-company polo over his head and tossed it into the bag. I assumed it was evidence that needed destroying.

I caught a glimpse of Kane's bulky, ink-covered chest and looked away, but not fast enough to avoid burning that glorious image into my brain. Good Lord. I couldn't share a house with *him*.

When I turned around, Kane was slipping into a black T-shirt.

The guy with the bag offered me his hand. “Hey. I'm Garcia.”

He had gentle eyes and an easy smile. He was a little shorter than the other guys and younger by a few years. The hand I shook was covered in lumpy scars that continued up to his elbow. His ring and pinkie finger were prosthetic and attached by a brace around his wrist. I had no idea what could've caused an injury like that, but it must've been incredibly traumatic.

I gave him a small smile. "Freya. Nice to meet you."

"And that's Hollis over there." He gestured over his shoulder. "Not Joe."

"Aha. Truthfully, I didn't think Joe suited him, anyway."

Garcia scraped a hand through his short-cropped dark hair. "This is kind of strange. I'm not used to meeting the people we steal from. Sorry, I guess."

"No need to apologize. You've done me a big favor."

"Right. Okay." He flashed me a shy smile as he backed away. "See you around."

I watched Garcia leave, and when my eyes returned to Kane, he was giving me a strange look.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." He stroked his beard. "It's just...you're not what I was expecting."

"Not the stereotypical LA bimbo? I should hope not." I curled my hair behind my ears. "Look, Kane, you seem decent

enough for a criminal, but it wouldn't be appropriate if I stayed with you. Not that anyone asked my opinion."

"All right." He nodded. "I'm asking now. Where do you want to stay?"

Oh. I hadn't expected that.

I blinked a few times before finding my words. "I think you're overreacting about the hotel. I'll wear a disguise, and I won't leave the room. I'll be fine. And"—I pulled an underwhelming wad of cash from my back pocket—"I have money."

You'd think, living with a billionaire, there'd be plenty of cash lying around and it'd be easy to accumulate a stash without being noticed. Wrong. Andre had kept such a tight leash on every dollar I'd spent that it'd been too risky to steal more than twenty dollars at a time, not to mention the challenge of hiding it.

Kane glanced at my pathetic collection of notes. "That won't get you far in LA, and I'm not about to dump you in some seedy motel on the wrong side of town. Plus, facial recognition doesn't care if you're wearing sunglasses and a wig."

"Facial-recognition cameras? At a hotel?"

"You'd be surprised how common it is nowadays. I'm guessing Matisse will hire the best to track you down. Anyone decent will be able to hack those cameras and find you. If I thought you'd be safe at a hotel, I'd be all for it. I don't like

the idea of you crashing at mine any more than you do. But if you're found, we all go down."

I was reluctant to admit that he had a point. Every move I made risked Kane and his crew of thieves, and that didn't sit well with me.

I was even more reluctant to admit that...I kind of liked Kane. Sure, he was a cocky bastard and kind of rough around the edges, but he was also deceptively sweet. He reminded me of a chivalrous caveman. A *hot* chivalrous caveman. What a strange day this was turning out to be.

"Staying with me will only be short-term," Kane added. "Just until we figure out something better."

"Will I be included in that conversation?"

He stared at me as if my question were odd. "Of course."

"Okay. Good. Thank you."

"I don't like that our options are limited here, and I can tell you like it even less. And my brother's sunny attitude probably hasn't made you feel welcome, but I can promise you this. You're safe with me. You're safe with all of us."

I shifted on my feet. "You really mean that?"

He nodded.

Kane's brother drove the Cuda up the ramps while Garcia directed. Hollis shifted Andre's prized art collection from a white van into a U-Haul.

My eyes moved back to Kane, who watched me closely. “Why do you seem so relaxed about all this?”

“I have some experience dealing with unpredictable situations.” His brow creased. “Although I’ve never encountered one quite like you before.”

Seriously, who was this guy? I’d known Kane for less than an hour, and he treated me with more generosity and kindness than I’d experienced in over seven years. He already seemed to understand my need for control. He’d even fought with his identical twin to stand up for me. And now, he was allowing me to share his home to keep me safe. Sure, protecting me kept them all out of trouble, but it still felt like a kind gesture. If they truly were bad guys, they’d have tried to kill me by now.

But could I trust Kane? I’d believed Andre all those years ago when he’d offered me a way out of a desperate situation, and look where that had landed me. It wasn’t as if I had a well-calibrated asshole radar.

Except Kane seemed nothing like Andre. From what I could tell so far, they were polar opposites, which was refreshing.

And very appealing.

Should I be concerned by how often I’d found Kane attractive today?

Probably.

Was I?

Not one iota.

Why shouldn't I appreciate the eye candy before me? Kane was rugged and untamed to Andre's refined and pompous. I'd never look at a clean-shaven man in an expensive suit again without a shiver creeping up my spine.

But big, bearded, and tattooed? *Yum.*

"And what if I told you I still want to stay at a hotel?" I asked, if only to gauge Kane's reaction.

"Better decide soon because your ride is leaving." He gave me a pointed look before heading for a white sedan parked on the other side of the warehouse.

I huffed out a breath and stomped after him. "Of course I'll stay with you, you giant oaf. That was just a test."

"I know." I didn't need to see his face to know he wore a smug grin.

Kane opened the boot and patted the carpet inside.

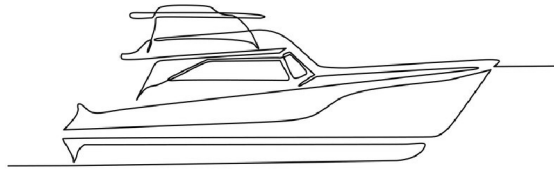
I frowned. "Not again. It's dark in there."

"There's no tint on this rental, and we'll pass about a hundred traffic cams on the way to San Diego."

"San Diego?" I asked as I climbed into the cramped space. At least the Plymouth's boot had been spacious.

"Home sweet home, princess. I'll try to miss the potholes." With a wink and a roguish smile, he closed me in.

Freya



When Andre had originally told me Los Angeles would be my new home, I'd been excited to experience life in the famous city built on the back of Hollywood movies. When I'd arrived, LA wasn't what I'd expected. It was a huge dirty city full of crime, homelessness, and millions of people pretending to be something they weren't. I guessed I fit right in with the latter.

I felt no sadness leaving LA, and if I never returned, that was fine by me. There were too many bad memories. And now, stuffed into the hot boot of a midsize rental sedan, I was on my way to San Diego. I'd been once before for a business dinner with Andre. It was roughly a two-hour drive south, almost to the Mexican border. Being crammed into this dark, confined space with the drone of the engine buffeting my ears and sweat trickling down my neck made the journey feel much longer.

I still couldn't believe this was happening. My plan had worked, and I'd somehow conned a crew of thieves into helping me to freedom. My stomach fluttered at the thought of

finally having escaped from Andre. *Bloody hell*. I might actually be done with him for good.

Those flutters turned to acid when my thoughts shifted to Dick Face himself. Had Andre arrived at his destination yet? Had he been alerted to the theft and that I was gone? Once he found out, would he still hold talks with the cartel, or would he insist on returning home right away? I doubted the Mexicans would allow him to up and leave before discussing their weapons deal.

The vehicle came to a stop, and the engine shut off. A moment later, one of the seats dropped down, exposing the interior of the car. I peeked through and saw Kane standing by the rear door.

“You all right in there?” he asked.

I sucked in a deep breath of fresh air. “Just get me out of here.”

“Crawl through to the back seat.”

I did as Kane asked, presuming this was so I wouldn't be seen climbing out of the boot.

When I stepped from the car, I shielded my eyes until they adjusted to the midday sun. We were in the parking lot of a marina. A palm tree-lined footpath separated us from rows of white yachts and powerboats. In the distance were modern white high-rise condominiums and the red spires of the historic Hotel del Coronado, the place Andre and I had stayed during our visit.

“We’re on Coronado Island?” It was home to a large naval base, but we must be on the civilian side.

Kane nodded toward the water. “My boat is docked at the yacht club.”

I followed him through a security gate and along the floating pontoon dock. The sun glinted off the calm water, and a gentle breeze provided cool relief against my sticky skin.

Three large gray helicopters flew overhead. “Is this a normal amount of military activity, or are we going to war sometime soon?”

Kane lifted his gaze to the helicopters. “Always training. Just another day in San Diego.”

On our way along the dock, we passed boats of different ages and lengths. Which was Kane’s? Thieving paid well, so I imagined his must be one of the larger vessels toward the outer reaches of the marina.

“That’s mine right at the end,” he said as if reading my thoughts.

Aha. I was right. It wasn’t as large as Andre’s megayacht, but this vessel was impressive. It was perhaps seventy feet long, with sleek lines, dark tint, a Jacuzzi on the bow, and enough room for thirty people to party in style. The name *Total Domination* was a little pretentious, but I supposed a boat this decadent could pull it off.

I squinted against the sun’s glare as I stared up at it. “Wow. She’s gorgeous.”

Wait. Hadn't Kane said earlier there wasn't room for me at his home? This thing must sleep ten or more.

Kane cleared his throat behind me—or was that a laugh? “Not that one.” I turned to face him just as he hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “This one.”

Oh. *Oh.*

The fishing boat had seen better days...in around 1990. The white paint was dull, and the clear plastic covers on the flybridge were milky and torn. The timber railings needed rubbing back and recoating, and the wiring hanging from the ceiling looked like an electric shock waiting to happen. Tools and beer cans were strewn over the deck.

I stared at the name written in cursive on the stern. “*Loose Lips?*” What the heck kind of name was that?

“Yeah, you know.” Kane smiled. “Sink ships?”

I gave him a blank look. “I’m familiar with the saying.”

“It’s an inside joke. I call her *Lucy* for short.” He stepped onto the low swim platform at the rear of the boat.

“So it was your idea?” I followed him on board.

“The name?”

I nodded.

“I didn’t think *Sunshine Sally* suited her.”

“And you changed it to *Loose Lips?* That was the best you could come up with?”

Kane ignored my jibe and opened a door to the cabin. It wasn't even locked. But then again, it didn't look like there'd be much worth stealing on board.

I sidestepped a tackle box and almost tripped over a bucket. "Isn't it bad luck to change the name of a boat?"

Something darkened in Kane's expression before he answered my question. "I don't believe in bad luck, just bad decisions." He gestured for me to head inside first. "Come on. I'll show you around. Sorry if it isn't up to your standards. I wasn't expecting a guest."

Kane moved around the cabin snatching up takeout containers and beer bottles. Despite the state of the space, it didn't have the aroma of a dumpster. If anything, it smelled slightly masculine, like the floating bachelor pad it clearly was. To say it lacked a feminine touch was a crude understatement. There was no danger of it reminding me of the sterile conditions Andre had insisted upon at his house.

I spun in a circle to take in the cherrywood walls and cabinets, then froze when I spotted glittery drawings over every inch of the refrigerator.

I pointed at them. "Do you have a child?"

"No." Kane scooped up a towel and a T-shirt from the couch. "Those are from my niece. Wy's daughter."

I glanced around the rest of the living space. Aside from the couch, there was a small dining table and a compact kitchen.

"It's...cozy," I said.

Kane gave me a tight-lipped smile. “Give me a minute to sort out the bedroom.”

A short while later, Kane came out with an armful of clothes, which he jammed into a closet before forcing the door closed to seal in the clutter. “You can sleep in here,” he said, waving me through to the nose of the boat.

I stepped inside what must be Kane’s bedroom. A faded beach towel hung from a hook on the wall, a spearfishing gun sat in one corner, and a poster of a very naked, very tattooed woman was stuck on the door.

Was that the kind of woman Kane was attracted to? With long dark hair and huge tits, she lay draped over a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. She was undeniably sexy in a badass, *I don’t give a fuck what you think of me* kind of way. As far as appearances went, you couldn’t find a woman more different to me. I guessed I wasn’t Kane’s type. I wasn’t sure why that thought entered my mind or why it bothered me.

“Let me just get that,” Kane said before removing the poster and folding it quickly.

“Is there another bed?” I asked, looking toward the other doors along the short hallway.

“There’s a small bunk room, but it’s crammed full of my dive tanks and fishing gear. I guess it’s not the luxury digs you’re used to.” Kane grabbed the beach towel, sniffed it, then flung it over his shoulder. “I’ll sleep on the fold-out couch if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I don’t mind taking the couch. Cramped spaces make me feel a little claustrophobic.”

“I’d rather you stay in here. If someone comes looking for you, it’s best they meet me first.”

I stared at him as he scratched his beard. Just then, an odd feeling came over me, and it took me a moment to realize what it was. I felt...safe with Kane, and I couldn’t recall the last time that had happened with any man since leaving London.

A thief I’d known for half a day was willing to put himself between me and anyone who tried to take me back to Andre. Kane might have his own reasons for not wanting me to be found, but I appreciated his protectiveness all the same.

“There’s a window,” said Kane as he pulled back the cream curtains. “And a ceiling hatch. You can leave them open if it makes you feel less closed in.” He propped one knee on the bed and reached up to release the lock on the hatch. It didn’t open easily, and his biceps flexed as he worked the handle.

My gaze shifted to where his shirt rode up, revealing the tattoos on his toned lower back. I had the absurd urge to inch closer to better study the strip of inked skin. Was that dark fin from a shark or a dolphin?

I lifted my eyes just as Kane turned.

“There we go,” he said.

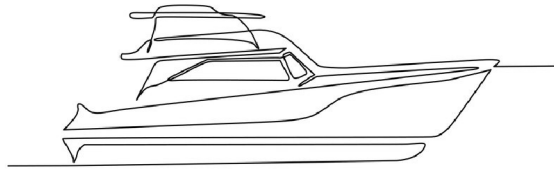
“That will help. Thank you.”

“Bathroom’s in there.” He pointed to the door behind me. “That’s about it.”

My stomach chose that moment to grumble loudly.

“I guess it’s time I find you something to eat.”

Kane



As usual, there'd been little food on board, so I'd gone to the clubhouse restaurant to find us a late lunch. Freya watched me closely as I entered the cabin and dumped the greasy paper bag onto the fold-down table.

After pulling out the burgers, fries, and onion rings, I grabbed a couple of bottles of water. Freya hadn't shifted from the couch, although her gaze remained locked on the food.

"Shit. I should've asked. Are you a vegan or something?"

Her eyes came to mine. "No. I just...can't remember the last time I ate this kind of food."

Right. She probably snacked on caviar, truffles, and whatever other ridiculous things rich people ate. "Sorry, princess. The Fish Shack was all out of foie gras and ceviche."

"Very funny." She glared at me. "You can knock it off with that *princess* crap. I might come from money, but I've hardly been living the indulged life you presume."

I slumped into a chair at the table and tossed a fry into my mouth. "All right, then." I pointed to the seat opposite me.

“Come and tell me all about it.”

I didn't mention that the reason I called her princess wasn't that she came from wealth. It was the way she carried herself under pressure. Shoulders back, chin up, ready to face whatever was thrown at her while maintaining composure.

With a reluctant nod, Freya sat at the table. She stared at the food with her hands clasped in her lap.

“Is there a problem?” I asked. “You're not waiting for me to say grace or something, are you? Because I don't do that.”

Her eyes met mine. “No. I was just waiting for—” She pressed her lips together and cleared her throat. “Nothing. Never mind.”

After trying the first fry, she closed her lids and let out an indulgent moan. One after another, she shoved them into her mouth as though she'd never tasted anything better in her life.

I took in her lean frame and protruding collarbones. “Are you one of those women who starves herself?”

Freya paused as if suddenly remembering I was still in the room, then spoke around a mouthful of fries. “Not by choice.” She unwrapped the burger and gazed upon it with adoration. “If this tastes half as good as it looks, I might have an orgasm.” She bit into it and chewed. Her eyes rolled back, and she slammed her palm on the table. After swallowing, she said, “Nope. I was wrong. There won't be an orgasm. There'll be multiple.” She shook her head and licked ketchup from her lips.

Lips I couldn't stop staring at while thinking about her coming. And that moan Freya had made earlier. Was that how she'd sound if I—

Whoa.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I blinked to erase the thought from my head, and a sobering one replaced it. “Did that asshole withhold food from you?”

She snorted. “It was one of his less creative punishments, although effective.”

“For how long?”

She shrugged while devouring her burger. “It all depended on how big of a prick he felt like being. A day. A week.”

“A week?” I growled, leaning forward and bracing my forearms on the table.

Freya blinked a couple of times at my raised voice. “Yeah. If I'd pissed him off enough. Occasionally, it was worth it. One time, I completely lost my shit and threw a filet mignon at his head. You should've seen the look on his face.” She reached toward the tray of onion rings and lifted her brows. “Are you going to eat those?”

I slid them toward her. “Be my guest.” I'd suddenly lost my appetite.

She grinned and tossed one into her mouth. “If I never see another boring salad for the rest of my life, I'll be a happy woman.”

Freya seemed relaxed enough. Time to get her talking.

“Why don’t you explain how your family is tied up in all this,” I said.

Freya nodded. “I suppose it all started eight years ago when my father hosted a polo event. The who’s who of London society attended, as they did every year. I was seventeen at the time and don’t even remember being introduced to Andre. I was far more interested in the polo players and their tight pants.”

When the ghost of a smile formed on Freya’s lips, I could almost imagine her as a carefree teenager.

“A week later, my father’s construction company took its first hit. Clients left in droves; projects were canceled; inquiries were withdrawn. Then there were a barrage of bogus compensation claims for structural faults and safety issues in the high-rises he’d built.” She curled her upper lip. “Lies, all of it. It was one business disaster after another.”

My knee bounced under the dining table. Why was I so uptight listening to this?

Freya continued, “The stress took its toll on Dad. He had a major stroke, soon followed by another. He couldn’t talk and could hardly move. He wasn’t able to fight for his livelihood because he was stuck in a hospital bed unable to communicate. In less than a year, the successful business that had been in our family for generations was declared bankrupt.” She sighed. “We lost everything. And because Dad needed full-time medical care and we had no money, he was moved into a state-

run facility. It was a depressing place. Awful, really. Dad struggled there and wasn't improving because he needed more intensive therapies than they provided."

Freya took a bite from her burger, then sucked ketchup from her finger.

I didn't allow it to distract me. Even though I'd suspected Freya's story would be difficult to listen to, my skin still prickled with unease over the sinister shape it was taking.

"I'd just turned eighteen, and my sister, Lena, was barely a teenager. I became her legal guardian, and we moved into a small rental property. I dropped out of school and got a job. Three, in fact. One of them was as a server for a catering company, which was embarrassing since it often brought me face-to-face with the people I used to consider friends."

Freya paused as though the next part were harder to talk about. "It was at a charity ball that Andre reintroduced himself. This time, he made sure I wouldn't forget. He waited until the end of the night when I was exhausted and my feet ached, then made his proposal. Not the *get down on one knee* kind. An agreement, which he spelled out in simple terms. He offered to clear my family's debts and buy our home back. He'd have it upgraded with medical facilities and provide full-time staff so Dad could move home and be with Lena while receiving the best care. Andre promised to pay for everything and anything my family ever needed. All I had to do was become his mistress."

She took a sip of water and licked her lips. “At the time, I tried to romanticize it all. Here was this ridiculously wealthy man offering to fix my problems in a way I’d never be able to no matter how hard I worked. He said he and his wife had an open marriage and there was no intimacy between them anymore. Truthfully, Andre seemed kind enough at first.” She snorted. “Talk about a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He stripped off the wool as soon as he brought me to LA where I was far from my family.”

Ice filled my veins. “It was Matisse, wasn’t it? He sabotaged your dad’s business to weaken your family.”

Freya nodded. “He admitted it during one of his bouts of anger. Getting me to become his mistress had been some kind of sick game. A perverse challenge. I’d never have agreed to it if it weren’t for the desperate situation my family was in. He was a forty-five-year-old man, and I was a teenager, for God’s sake. How twisted is that?” She frowned and popped more fries into her mouth.

Twisted didn’t even begin to cover what had happened to her. “Does your family know any of this?”

“They know I’m with Andre for his money, and I’m sure they suspect I’m unhappy. But no. I’ve never told them about his cruelty or how our family was manipulated. What good would it do? Stress is bad for Dad’s health. And the last thing I want is Lena feeling guilty for the lifestyle Andre’s money provides, even if it’s his fault we need it.”

I pointed at the shiner she'd tried to hide with makeup. "You want to tell me how that happened?"

Freya touched the area as though testing if it still pained her. Judging by her wince, it did. "Yeah. That was a special kind of fun," she said with sarcasm. "We were supposed to go to dinner with some of Andre's business associates. The shoulder strap on the dress Andre had chosen for me snapped, so I picked another one. Apparently, it displeased him." She pointed a fry in my direction. "He's not big like you, but he can pack a wallop when he channels all his mummy issues into it."

My hands balled into fists. I kept them under the table so Freya didn't see how much her words affected me, but I was seconds from pounding my knuckles through a wall just so I could pretend it was Matisse's face.

"Aren't you hungry?" She gestured to my untouched food.

"Not anymore."

She tilted her head. "This really bothers you?"

I blinked and raised my brows. "Yeah, this bothers me. I'd be pretty messed up if it didn't."

"If it's any consolation, the physical violence was a recent addition to Andre's list of entertaining ways to torment me." She took another large bite from her burger.

"What else did that piece of shit do to you?"

She stopped chewing and cast me a curious glance. "Why do you want to know?"

From the acid churning in my gut, I wasn't sure if I did. "You don't have to tell me. I just...I thought you might want to talk to someone about it."

Freya appeared to consider my words before putting the burger down and cleaning her hands on a napkin. "I suppose I can give you the condensed version. Andre isolated me from friends and family. If I disobeyed him, I was punished. If I was caught breaking his extensive list of rules, I was punished. And all the while he'd taunt me with horrible threats against Dad and Lena. Andre took control of every aspect of my life and essentially stripped me of anything that made me...well, me. He thinks he's broken me." She sipped from her water bottle and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "He's wrong."

How did someone endure what she had for seven years and still have fight left in them? She carried the entire weight of her family's burdens while under the dictatorial control of one of the most disgusting humans I could think of, which was saying a lot since I'd delivered justice to plenty of monsters in my time. Despite her small frame, Freya was one hell of a strong woman.

I shifted in my seat. "Listen, I don't want to ask this, but I need to know. Did Matisse...force himself on you?"

Freya tossed a fry back in the basket and glared at me. "Are we really going to do this? While I'm trying to eat?"

"You don't know me, and it looks like we're stuck together for a while. I'm trying to judge how careful I should be around

you. If you haven't figured it out, I'm not exactly the sensitive type. I don't want to scare you or make you uncomfortable by being a thoughtless jerk." She held my gaze and remained silent for so long that I said, "It's all right. You don't have to —"

"You know what?" She patted her mouth with the napkin before throwing it on the table. "It's fine. Really."

"Are you sure?"

"I said it's fine, and I mean it. I've eaten enough, anyway. I'm probably going to make myself ill if I keep going." Freya pushed the small remainder of food to the side and took a sip of water. "The whole time I was with Andre, I was never able to speak openly with anyone. Maybe there's some truth to what you said before. It might be good for me to talk about it."

"Okay." My heart pounded with trepidation at what she might confess. If it was difficult for me to listen, I could only imagine how challenging it must be for her to talk about.

Freya tapped her fingers against the water bottle. "He didn't force me. I let it happen. Don't get me wrong, I didn't want to have sex with him, but it was part of the deal. I mean, does a prostitute want to screw her clients? No. They do it for the money. For me, it meant my family was safe and provided for. Essentially, I was a hooker with one repulsive customer." She shrugged. "There's nothing unique about my situation. There are plenty of women desperate to escape an abusive relationship but unable to leave."

I should've expected to hear that. It didn't stop my jaw from clenching so tightly it made my teeth hurt.

I leaned back in my seat. "I feel sick."

"You said you wanted to know." Freya let out a deep sigh. "Honestly, the sex wasn't even the worst part about being with Andre. It was always over quickly—a few pumps and he was done. He only did it to assert his dominance, except he couldn't intimidate me with his underwhelming pencil dick if he tried. I hope he catches leprosy of the cock and the laughable thing turns scaly and falls off."

"Freya"—I shook my head—"how are you so pragmatic about this?"

"Out of necessity." She lowered her chin and held my stare. "To survive. Men always underestimate women's resilience. We're tougher than you think." Her eyes narrowed. "And how ought I react? Should I be a sobbing mess? Should I cower and whimper at the mention of his name? No. Uh-uh. That would be a victory for the demented fuck, and I won't allow it." She took another sip of water. "Don't worry. I'm fully aware I'll probably need therapy for the rest of my life. I have this coping mechanism where, on the outside, I attempt to be the perfect mistress and live up to Andre's demands, which are intentionally never achievable. But on the inside, I'm still me. Freya the badass. At least, that's how I imagined I might be if I'd never made that messed-up deal with the prick. I really have no clue who I am anymore." She picked at a perfectly manicured pink fingernail. "Anyway, all I can do now is try to

protect my family from Andre until he's dealt with. Then we'll truly be free." Her green eyes glimmered with their first signs of moisture, although I didn't think they were tears of sadness.

Freya wriggled the diamond ring from her slender finger. "Here." She dropped it onto the table between us. "I can't stand to look at that thing. If you can get me some cash for it, I'd appreciate it."

"I can do that. Wy has contacts." I picked up the ring, which was probably worth as much as a small apartment, and shoved it into my pocket. I'd put it in a drawer later for safekeeping.

I blew out a breath and rested my hands on my thighs. "Fuck, Freya. I don't know what to say. What you've been through, it's—"

"Don't you dare feel sorry for me," she snapped, her voice and expression firm. "I made my own crappy life choices, and I don't want your pity. What I want is revenge. And I want to make sure Andre can't hurt anyone else ever again. Help me get that, and you'll be doing the world a favor. And I'll be forever in your debt." Then her expression turned cold. "If he dies in agony, all the better."

I stared at the woman sitting across from me. She was so damn beautiful it was hard to look at her, but it was even harder to look away. Freya was much more than her appearance. She was a warrior. Matisse's treatment should've destroyed her, but she still fought with everything she had.

"What are you thinking?" she asked when I remained silent.

What was I thinking? That I wanted to hunt down the sack of shit who'd hurt her and end him in a very slow, painful way.

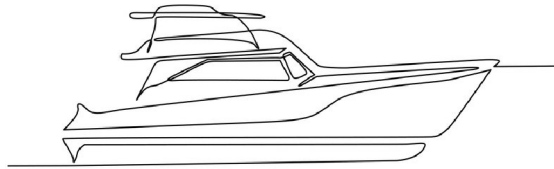
Four years.

Four fucking years and I hadn't once had to think about killing anyone. Then this woman, who might be the bravest person I'd ever met, hijacked my untroubled life, and suddenly my desire to deliver death had made a high-speed U-turn.

No. I wasn't that person anymore. As tempting as it was to take out Matisse, I'd promised myself I'd never return to that life. There had to be a better way to deal with this.

I rubbed my hands over my face. "I'm thinking I need to make a phone call."

Freya



I fanned myself with a surfing magazine. The afternoon San Diego sun shone through the windows of the old motor yacht, turning it into an oven. When I'd twisted the dial on the ancient air-conditioning unit, it'd clunked, then hissed, but no cool air followed.

Before Kane had left a couple of hours ago to return the rental car and run errands, he'd made a phone call to a man named Brandon. Apparently, this friend was good with computers, so Kane had asked him to gather information on Andre and call back tomorrow morning with an update.

The TV was another appliance that didn't work, but Kane had at least supplied me with entertainment—his sister-in-law's e-reader, which he'd told me she'd accidentally left here last week. I hoped she didn't mind me snooping through her collection. To my delight, there were enough books on this thing to last me weeks. And they were *spicy*. Andre would never have allowed me to read anything like this, so it was a real treat.

While reading on the couch, I dipped my spoon into a jar of peanut butter and scraped out a healthy dollop. It was six months past its Use-By date, but I figured it wouldn't kill me. As I sucked on the peanutty goodness, Andre's annoying voice reminded me I'd get fat if I kept eating this way. I told imaginary Dick Face to go fuck an angry porcupine, then went in for another scoop.

Sweat trickled between my breasts despite my rapid fanning. Jeans and a T-shirt had seemed like a rugged choice for my escape, but I regretted my decision now.

I placed my snack and the e-reader on the table and went to the kitchen to look for scissors. After finding them in the top drawer, I tore off my Gucci jeans and butchered them into a pair of shorts. I slipped into them, then looked more closely at the colorful pictures stuck to the refrigerator with magnets. There was a painting of a smiling purple jellyfish; another of a stick person surfing a giant wave, the border decorated with *Frozen* stickers; and a strange drawing of a glittery fish with a phallic protrusion on its forehead. I'd have to ask about that one.

Something about a big tattooed guy having a niece who loved him enough to bring him pictures and Kane proudly displaying them on the fridge for any of his friends to see warmed my insides.

While I was on my feet, I decided to snoop around.

As Kane had said, the bunk room was full of his things. I couldn't even step inside. Surfboards, dive tanks, fishing rods,

a wakeboard. I closed the door and headed for the bedroom. Once there, I went straight for the drawers beside the bed. I figured what was in there could tell you a lot about a person.

In the top drawer, the first thing to catch my eye was a stash of condoms. Not a huge surprise. He probably had to replenish them often. There were other knickknacks. Stray keys, phone chargers, a dive watch, headphones, pens, and an old wallet that was empty except for a few business cards.

The second drawer was filled with loose socks and a couple of baseball caps. Kane was definitely a free-range rooster, because there wasn't a single pair of underwear to be found. My fingers reached the bottom of the drawer and brushed against something small and metallic. I pulled it out, then held it up for closer inspection.

It was some kind of war medal. I didn't know much about them, but it looked like the type the military gave out for acts of valor. It had a gold cross attached to a blue-and-white-striped ribbon. In the middle of the medal was a sailing ship. Navy, perhaps?

"Huh," I said, and when I continued searching, I found three others of different shapes and colors. "I'll be damned."

I guessed it was possible Kane had stolen them during one of his burglaries, but I doubted it. Only a dishonorable jerk would steal someone's military medals, and Kane wasn't that.

Maybe they'd belonged to a deceased family member. Or maybe they were his.

Kane didn't have the clean-cut look I imagined a military guy would have, but there was something just so...capable about him. He'd been cool and calm while I'd waved a pistol in his face and then he'd disarmed me fluidly and stowed me in the Cuda's boot with ease. He might come across as a laid-back guy and claim his twin had all the brains, but I suspected Kane downplayed his strengths. I wasn't sure why he'd do that. Something about him didn't add up.

Shouldn't these medals be framed and mounted on a wall? Or at least stored somewhere safe? Why had they been shoved carelessly into the bottom of a drawer like some dirty secret? And why did that tug on my heart in an uncomfortable way?

With care, I returned the medals to where I'd found them, and since I suddenly felt guilty for looking through Kane's personal items, I abandoned my mission. Except now, I had more questions about my mysterious protector than before I'd started snooping.

Back in the living area, I flapped the hem of my filthy white shirt, trying to find some relief from the heat. In the search for fresh air, I opened the door to the back deck. A light breeze blew, and the only sounds were distant traffic and squawking seagulls. No voices. When I glanced around the marina, there was no movement on the dock or any nearby vessels. The green-blue water shimmered in the sun, beckoning me.

I scanned my surrounds again. *Nope*. Still no one around. Surely there was no harm in taking a quick dip to cool off.

I swiftly stripped down to my white bra and G-string. They'd pass for swimmers. This was California, after all. The beaches here were packed with people wearing next to nothing. Not that there was anyone around to see me. It was a good thing Kane's boat was the last on the dock, giving me privacy.

I didn't spend a moment longer overthinking my decision. I positioned myself on the side of the boat and dove into the glimmering water.

Instant bliss.

As the cool water flowed over me, it washed away some of the day's stress. It was hard to believe that only this morning I'd been stuck living with Andre, and now I was in a different city, staying on a run-down boat with a hunky criminal who, so far, seemed trustworthy. It almost felt too good to be true.

That's because it probably is.

Needles prickled my skin. Andre would be looking for me soon. Had I left any trace of my betrayal, or would he believe the kidnapping ruse? Either way, he'd hire the best to find me. How long before they did?

Perhaps, in my desperation to leave, I'd acted rashly. Could I really get away with this? Had I made a terrible mistake? Andre was an intelligent, meticulous bastard. Maybe I'd overestimated my ability to make this plan work. It was too late to fix it now, and worrying about things out of my control wouldn't solve anything.

I had to have faith that Kane would come up with a way to help. He was already looking into it by contacting his information guy. I'd give him a couple of days and see how things progressed. If I wasn't satisfied, I'd leave and come up with another plan. I really hoped it wouldn't come to that.

I drew in a lungful of air and dove deep, kicking hard and propelling myself farther. My ears ached, so I pinched my nose and equalized the pressure, then swam deeper until my hands touched the sandy seabed. Being underwater never made me feel claustrophobic like confined spaces did on land. Down here I felt calm and centered. I was safe from Andre, if only for the short time I was able to hold my breath.

When my lungs begged for air, I aimed for the sun's rays streaking through the surface. Once there, I wiped the stinging salt from my eyes, then floated on my back with my ears below the water to block out the city noise. I closed my lids and focused on nothing but the underwater sounds of the bay. My exposed skin warmed, and I sighed with the simple pleasure of this moment of freedom. God, how I'd missed it.

And then I felt it. A tingling sensation, as if someone were watching me.

My eyes shot open, and I inhaled sharply as I surged upright. "Jesus, you scared me." I placed a palm over my pounding heart.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to," said Kane, standing on the deck of his boat with a bag of groceries in his hand.

How long had he been watching me? He wore dark sunglasses, and I couldn't tell from his expression if he was mad that I'd snuck out for a swim.

"It was hot inside. There wasn't anyone around. Maybe I shouldn't have—"

"No. It's a great idea." Kane dropped the groceries, tore off his sunglasses and T-shirt, and dove into the water.

He resurfaced nearby, smoothing his hands over his shoulder-length locks. He smiled, and I couldn't help but return the gesture. Kane had kind eyes, I decided. Blue like the calm waters of San Diego Bay.

"I thought you'd be angry with me," I said.

He lowered his chin. "It'll take more than a dip in the water to make me angry with you, Freya."

"Oh yeah?" I arched a brow. "Like what?"

"Hmm. Like disrespecting the Padres."

"I wouldn't dream of it." I allowed myself a glance at the drops of water trickling down Kane's tanned, muscular neck and broad shoulders.

"Or going back to that slime bag."

I scoffed. "That'll never happen. Not willingly, at least."

"Good. I read somewhere that a lot of women return to their abusive partners. I just want to make sure you don't become one of them."

“Can I ask a favor?” I said, and Kane nodded. “Can you please never call Andre my partner or any title that implies there were ever feelings between us? It feels wrong.”

“Makes sense. What should we call him?”

“In my head I usually go with Dick Face or Satan Spawn. Sometimes Wank Stain.”

Kane smirked. “Those are all good options.”

“I have plenty more.”

“I’ll bet you do.” His smile grew wider, and I felt it in my stomach. “Listen, I know Matisse has conditioned you to be wary of every move you make, but you can be yourself around me. I’m not like him.”

I swallowed against the emotion clogging my throat. Kane’s words were kinder than he knew. “You might regret telling me to be myself. I can be a bit much for some.”

“Nah. I reckon I like that about you.” Then he quickly looked away as though he hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

I tried to ignore the way his words made my heart beat faster.

As Kane treaded water beside me, his keen gaze took in our surroundings. Was he cataloging potential threats because of my presence, or did he always pay this much attention to what went on around him?

“I’m not afraid of you, by the way,” I said. “Or men in general. Andre is a unique kind of monster and doesn’t

represent the entire male population. My father is very dear to me and one of the kindest men I know. And although you and I have just met, I suspect you're a decent sort, too. Thieving aside." I cast an assessing eye over his ramshackle boat. "Maybe not a very good thief, though."

"It's not really my thing. I only did the heist to help Wy. And I'll hear no unflattering words about *Lucy*. She's got a good hull and mostly reliable engines." Kane shrugged. "The rest is just cosmetic."

"Cosmetic? There's duct tape holding her together." I laughed and hoped my joke hadn't offended him, because I got the impression Kane loved his boat, faults and all. "I suppose you'll be able to buy a new one when you get paid out for the robbery."

"No. I don't want the money."

I eyed him skeptically. "What do you mean?"

"I'll take a small cut. Just enough to give *Lucy* the overhaul she needs, but that's all."

Surely he wasn't serious. "No new car? No trip to Vegas?"

Kane shook his head. "The money will go to people who deserve it much more than me."

That had me intrigued. "And who would they be?"

"Families with sick kids. Wy's daughter, Regan, was born with multiple congenital heart defects. She spent a lot of time in the NICU and had her first surgery when she was only days old. She's had several more since."

“Oh God. That’s awful.”

“It was a tough time for Wy and Maggie. Regan’s fine now. A perfectly healthy, rowdy five-year-old. But those medical bills stacked up fast. The first heist Wy and his crew ever did was so he and Maggie wouldn’t lose their home. During Regan’s treatments, they met plenty more families with the same financial struggles. So Wy decided to help by becoming a regular Robin Hood. He chooses rich assholes to steal from and gives the money to those who really need it. The donations are made anonymously, of course. They never know it comes from Wy.”

I hadn’t expected to hear that. It gave me a newfound respect for both Wyatt and Kane. They might be criminals, but they weren’t bad people. It’d never sat well with me that some of the richest people in the world did little to help those in need.

“That’s very honorable of him.” I pressed my lips together. “It’s hard to dislike your brother after hearing that.”

“Wy isn’t always such a jerk. He’s hostile toward you because you’re a threat to his family’s safety. He’s very protective of them.”

Somehow, Kane and I had shifted closer and were no more than an arm span apart. It surprised me, but I didn’t feel uncomfortable being this near to him. Maybe his rugged biker vibe wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea—I hadn’t even realized it was mine until I’d laid eyes on him—but the thing I liked most about Kane was how relaxed he made me. Despite carrying

out a multimillion-dollar heist and then being stuck with an unwanted refugee, he'd remained composed and upbeat. He wasn't judging my life choices, and he wasn't trying to tell me what to do. And not once had he given me the *ick* I'd constantly felt around Andre.

Everything about him stirred something long dormant inside me. Were these feelings for Kane inappropriate and poorly timed? Absolutely. It didn't stop them from happening. It also didn't stop me from wanting more.

After all, I was free to do as I pleased. I wasn't under Andre's rule, and I was a grown woman with wants like any other. Being starved of pleasure and affection for so long had only added to my craving.

Our fingers brushed by accident, and a small tremor of excitement rippled through me. Kane didn't seem to notice. Not like I had.

Ugh! I was such a dimwit.

Clearly, it had been so long since someone had shown me kindness that I was throwing myself toward the first willing dick I could find. I needed to get a grip on myself. And who said Kane's dick was willing? He'd said he liked my plucky personality, sure, but I was still a pain in his arse. My escapades could land him in prison. He'd be glad to wipe his hands of me.

"I think I'll take a shower to rinse the salt off." I swam to the back of the boat but realized there was no easy way to climb on board.

“Let me help.” Kane approached and unfolded a ladder from the swim platform.

“Thanks.” I hoisted myself up and only then remembered what I wore.

When I glanced over my shoulder, Kane’s gaze was fixed on my G-string-clad bottom. Not in a creepy way. More in an *I know I’m not supposed to be looking, but there’s a butt right in my face* kind of way. Then his eyes shot to mine.

I spun to remove the offending cheeks from his direct line of sight.

Kane’s focus shifted to my chest before he glanced away. “I should probably get you a towel.”

He climbed up and brushed past me to get inside, not caring that he dripped water through the cabin. He emerged a moment later with a large blue towel and held it up in front of me like a giant screen.

“Is something the matter?” I snatched the towel from him.

Kane looked skyward. “I know you hate when I stare at your tits, but I’m no saint, Freya. If you don’t cover up, I won’t be able to help myself.”

I glanced at my bra. It was a little see-through, and my nipples were hard, but everything was covered.

“Technically, you already got an eyeful.” I pressed my lips together to hide my smile while wrapping the towel around me. “All clear. Titty crisis averted.”

Kane exhaled a relieved breath, and our eyes met. The poor bloke still seemed stressed.

“Relax, would you? If we’re going to live together for a few days, I’m not going to slap you every time you look below my eyes.”

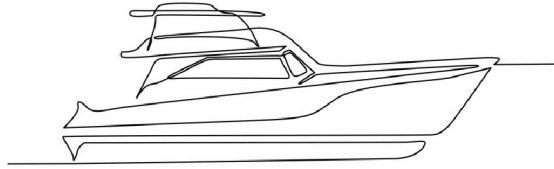
“I’m just trying to be a gentleman. It doesn’t come naturally to me.”

“Didn’t you just finish telling me to be myself? I don’t expect you to change who you are while I’m here. And just so you know, I’m going to stare at all this”—I gestured at the ink covering his bulky chest—“as much as I like and not feel guilty about it for a second.”

Kane chuckled and shook his head. “Yeah, you’re trouble.”

As I headed for the shower, I had a problematic thought. I hoped Kane’s commitment to being a gentleman faltered very soon.

Kane



We'd had a light dinner courtesy again of The Fish Shack. After that, Freya had read for a short while before letting out a loud yawn and asking if she could wear one of my T-shirts to bed.

My immediate and enthusiastic response had been yes. I might've been a little quick to rise from my seat and grab one of my old favorites for her. I wasn't sure what that said about me.

Once she'd headed into the bedroom, I'd folded out the couch, switched off the lights, and tried to get to sleep. So far, it wasn't happening.

I rolled over for the hundredth time, the lumpy mattress making it impossible to find a comfortable position. Not that I could clear my head enough to sleep, anyway. Freya, the botched heist, wanting to wrap my hands around Matisse's throat. All these thoughts consumed me.

After grabbing my phone, I checked the time—1:14 a.m.—then scanned my emails for anything from Brandon. When we'd spoken yesterday afternoon, he'd known right away who

Andre Matisse was and recalled his company, Matrix Defense Technologies, being involved in black-market dealings with the Wolf Street Mafia. Whatever information he could get would help Wy and me figure out the best move for Freya. I'd meant it when I'd told her the decision about her future would be hers. I'd lay out her options, give my best advice, but ultimately it would be Freya's choice which path she took. After having so little control over her life, she needed it now. That much I understood.

A noise came from the bedroom. It sounded like Freya mumbling in her sleep. Her words became louder, more agitated. She let out a pained moan before there was a thud on the floor. I sat up fast just as her doorknob jiggled.

"Let me out!" she cried, her voice laced with terror as she pounded on the door. "Help me. *Please!*"

More jiggling of the doorknob. It wasn't locked, but it stuck sometimes. Another thing I needed to fix.

I rushed to the door and flung it open. Freya crashed into me in her haste to escape. Fingernails clawed at my chest. "Air," she panted. "I need air."

Through the darkness of the cabin, I helped her to the back deck. Her skin was slick with sweat. I directed her to the bench seat at the stern. She clung to my arm, so I sat beside her.

"You're okay," I said. "Take slow, deep breaths."

She did and closed her eyelids, but then opened them just as fast, as if what she saw behind them terrified her.

“I think you were having a nightmare.”

She nodded but said nothing while drawing in lungfuls of air.

“Let me get you some water.” I went to stand, but Freya kept hold of my arm with a viselike grip.

“No!” she snapped. “Don’t go.” Her voice was thick with emotion. The moon reflected the moisture pooling in her eyes.

“Easy now,” I said to soothe her and sat back down. “I won’t go anywhere until you’re feeling better. All right?”

She released my forearm. “Sorry.”

She’d probably left scratch marks, but I didn’t care.

“It’s okay.”

I wanted to comfort her in some way, but I had no clue if an arm around her shoulders would be welcome or freak her out even more. To be safe, I decided to let her lead.

After a few minutes of deep breathing, she tilted her head toward the stars and dragged her hands over her face. “I should’ve warned you that might happen.”

“The nightmare?”

“Yes. And when combined with my claustrophobia, it doesn’t end well.”

Wait. Why would she have had nightmares in a confined space before?

A disturbing thought ran through my mind. “How do you know this?”

She cast me a wary glance but didn’t answer.

What had that asshole done to her?

“Explain, Freya. Now.” She looked unimpressed with my demanding tone, but I was about to lose my shit from the fucked-up scenarios I’d come up with. If she didn’t tell me otherwise, I’d continue assuming the worst.

She looked around like someone might be listening.

“No one can hear us. I’m down at this end of the dock because I make a lot of noise working on *Lucy* and no one lives on these boats.”

Freya nodded, then brushed sweat-soaked hair from her neck before bracing her hands on her knees. Wearing my man-size T-shirt, she looked fragile for the first time since I’d met her.

“There’s a room in the house,” she said. “I think it was originally designed to be a cool room. It’s small, completely dark, and insulated so no noise can get in or out.”

No, no, no.

I didn’t want my gut to be right about this. Unable to contain my rage, I stood and began pacing the width of the deck.

“Should I stop?” Freya asked.

“No.” I made a *roll-on* gesture with my pointer finger.

She licked her lips. “As a punishment, I’d be left in there, naked and with a small amount of water and a bucket. The red light on the ceiling told me I was being watched.”

I paused my pacing and folded my hands behind my head. My teeth clenched as a muscle in my jaw twitched uncontrollably.

Freya continued, “Time had no meaning. The only sounds were my voice or the one in my head. After a while, it became difficult to distinguish between the two. And when the nightmares came”—her breath hitched—“in my desperation to get out, I’d claw at the walls until my fingers bled.” She stared at her hands as if her nails were still torn and dripping blood.

I crouched before her. “Fuck, Freya.” I wanted to fix this for her, to ease her burden somehow. But I couldn’t turn back time. She’d have to live with those scars for the rest of her life.

The look of anguish on her face crushed me. And before I realized what I was doing, I reached for her hands and held them in my own. For a moment, I worried I’d overstepped, but then Freya curled her fingers around mine and didn’t let go. Her body trembled as a small sob escaped her.

I rubbed my thumbs over the backs of her hands. “You’re safe. He won’t hurt you ever again.”

“You don’t know that.” She sniffed and shook her head. “Andre might not look menacing, but he’s smart and conniving. He has dangerous allies and rubs shoulders with the country’s most powerful people.” She looked me dead in the

eye. “Kane, I think I’ve made a terrible mistake. I don’t know if I can beat him.”

“You will. *We* will.”

The glazed-over sheen in her green orbs told me she didn’t believe me.

“Aside from what he’ll do to my family, do you know what scares me most? I’ve had this tiny taste of freedom, not even one full day, and it’s even better than I remembered. The thought of losing that again is unimaginable. What if I only have hours or days before whoever Andre hires to find me does exactly that? It’s not enough.” She gripped me even tighter. “*Seven years*, Kane. I’ve lost seven years to that monster. I’ve missed out on so much time with my family, so many experiences I should’ve had. Andre sucked the life out of me and made me little more than a used-up husk of my former self. But already I’m coming back to life. I’m starting to remember who I used to be. I need more time before I’m dragged back to *him*.”

“No. Don’t think like that.” I shifted my hands to her shoulders and dipped to her eye level. “You’re not going back. Do you hear me? He can send ten men, and I still won’t let them take you.”

“How? I don’t mean to sound disrespectful, but you’re a part-time thief with a pistol. Andre won’t send amateurs. They’ll be good at what they do and probably armed to the teeth. I can’t ask you to go up against that. You could get hurt.”

“I won’t get hurt. If they come here, they’ll be the ones who get hurt.”

Or dead, most likely, but I didn’t mention that.

When I said no more, Freya held my gaze. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Shit. I didn’t like talking about this stuff. I wasn’t even sure how much I should say.

“Kane?” she added with an edge of warning.

I sat my ass on the deck and rested my arms over my knees. “I have military training. All right?”

Her shoulders slumped with relief. “Okay. That’s helpful. For a second there, I thought you were going to tell me you’re the grand champion at the local laser tag center.” She cast her eyes over me in a critical way. “What kind of military training, exactly? I think it’s time we properly assessed how safe we are here. Wait.” She sat upright. “The medals in your drawers.”

“You went through my things?”

“Of course I did. What kind of weirdo wouldn’t? I had to be sure I wasn’t shackled up with a psychopath.”

I supposed I couldn’t fault her for that. I’d have done the same. But what else had she found? “And?”

“I found a massive stash of condoms but no Buffalo Bill skin suits, so I decided you’re not deranged but probably a bit of a man whore.”

“Ouch.” There was no point in denying that.

“To be fair, I’d have been more concerned if I didn’t find condoms. I admire a man who’s proactive about protection.”

I scraped my hand over my face. “I had a similar conversation with my mom a long time ago, but thanks.”

“What about the medals? Are they yours?”

“They are.”

“So you’re a soldier?”

Here went nothing. “A sailor. I’m a SEAL. So are Wy, Hollis, and Garcia.”

“All of you?”

I nodded. “Yeah. We’ve all been out for a few years.”

I wasn’t sure if I should tell Freya about Team Zulu. But she was smart. If she asked the right questions, she’d figure out there was a big gap in my timeline after getting out of the SEAL teams. And when we talked to Brandon tomorrow, she’d soon realize he was military, too, and if she asked about our association, I didn’t want to lie. For some reason, being dishonest with her didn’t sit right.

More importantly, I wanted Freya to feel safe with me and know I could protect her better than almost anyone.

I picked a piece of dry seaweed off the deck and tossed it overboard. “After being in the teams for a while, I was selected for DEVGRU. That’s the navy’s tier-one unit for special missions. Spent a few years in Virginia Beach before I was recruited into another unit. Team Zulu. You wouldn’t have

heard of it, because it was mostly black-ops missions. That's how I know Brandon. I'll introduce you when he calls us with intel tomorrow."

"Okay. I wasn't quite expecting that." Freya tucked her hair behind her ears. "So it's not all bluster? You really can protect us here?"

I nodded. "There are few things I take seriously, but I promise you this is one of them."

"It makes me feel a little better to know that. I wish you'd told me earlier."

"I've already said more than I should."

Freya frowned. "The scars on Garcia's arm and his missing fingers. Did that happen in combat?"

"Yeah. His team got hit by an RPG. Wy and Hollis were caught in it, also. Hollis lost vision in one eye, and the blast tore up Wy's left leg below the knee. You might not have noticed his prosthesis because he walks almost as fluid as anyone."

"That's terrible." She rubbed her temple and exhaled deeply. "Is that why you got out? Were you injured, too?"

I should've realized this question would come sooner or later.

"No." I stared out at the glittering lights reflecting off the calm waters of the bay. "I had other reasons." My eyes came back to Freya's. "Look, I'd rather not get into it."

“Sorry. I shouldn’t be so nosy.” She gave me a sad smile. “Thank you for telling me what you could. Everything makes more sense now.”

In most of my missions, the objectives weren’t personal. Kill a warlord. Recover a diplomat. Destroy a weapons cache. We didn’t always agree with what we’d been tasked, but we still did our jobs because we were the tip of the spear that went wherever it was aimed.

For so long, I hadn’t questioned my role as a sniper. I’d been damn good at lining up enemies in my sight and taking them out. It didn’t matter who they were or what they’d done. All I’d known was they were the target, and doing my job well kept my brothers safe.

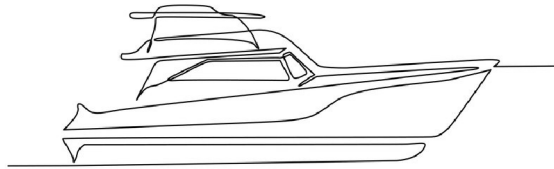
But with each mission I wondered more and more if we were really making a difference. The world was still a shitty place. We took out one bad guy only for another scumbag to fill his shoes. Had it all been for nothing?

It hadn’t been until my final mission, when the consequences of my actions so brutally ignited before me, that I’d realized I had to stop killing people. I was as bad as any of the men I’d shot. Maybe even worse since I was so efficient at it. The stains on my soul weighed heavily, and I carried them like an anchor around my neck.

After getting out of Zulu, I’d sworn I’d never become that person again.

Except to protect Freya, I might have to.

Freya



When I'd asked Kane why he'd left the military, the look on his face had screamed regret. But regret over what? Then I remembered those medals at the bottom of the drawer, and my chest tightened all over again. Kane wasn't proud of his career accomplishments. What had happened to make him feel that way?

"Are you feeling better?" Kane asked.

"Much better. Thank you."

"I have an idea." He stood and headed toward the door. "Let me get a few things from inside."

Kane returned a moment later carrying the double mattress from the fold-out couch. He laid it out on the deck, then dashed back for pillows, blankets, and some kind of snack in a foil bag.

He tossed everything onto the mattress. "When was the last time you slept under the stars?"

I chuckled. "Never. Before we lost all our money, family holidays were usually a cruise through the Greek islands or

staying in a Tuscan villa.”

“I’m so gonna call you princess still.” Kane smirked and handed me a blanket. It was such a warm night that we didn’t really need them.

“Is this okay?” He gestured to the makeshift bed set up for two.

“Actually, it’s kind of perfect.”

I really hadn’t been looking forward to returning to the small bedroom, and having Kane near made me feel safe. I had my own personal badass navy-SEAL bodyguard. He was a step up from Omar.

Kane’s elite military background had come as a surprise. I supposed it was foolish of me to assume someone ex-navy should be clean-cut and organized. The long-haired, tattooed man next to me certainly leaned away from that stereotype. I was glad for it, though. If I’d been forced to stay with someone regimented, they’d only remind me of Andre.

We both lay down and stared up at the sky. A half-moon shone brightly, but the city lights muted most of the constellations.

I focused on relaxing my muscles. The panic attack after my nightmare hadn’t been fun, but it was over. Being in the open air made my chest lighter. Maybe I should feel awkward resting beside a relative stranger, but I didn’t.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked.

Kane reached beside him and grabbed the packet. “Caramel corn. I keep it for when Regan stays over.”

He opened the popcorn and left it between us.

I tried a piece—*yum*—then had a few more.

“Sorry for waking you up,” I said around a mouthful.

“It’s okay. I wasn’t sleeping, anyway.”

I glanced at Kane and took in his moonlit profile. Strong brow, nicely proportioned nose, shapely lips surrounded by a coarse beard.

I’d never kissed a man with a beard. I’d snogged a few boys in my teens. It’d been fun, but after Dad’s first stroke and the downward spiral of his business, going out with friends and meeting boys hadn’t been important. Then I’d met Andre, and Andre didn’t kiss on the mouth. Thankfully, he was such a germophobe that he considered it unsanitary.

What would it feel like to kiss Kane? Would he be sweet and gentle or take control and leave me breathless? Would his beard tickle or scratch? I had the urge to reach across and run my fingers over the thick hair on his chin to find out if it was soft or bristly.

He must’ve felt my attention on him, because he looked my way and said, “What are you thinking about?”

I bit my bottom lip. “That I’m glad it was you who stole the Cuda.”

Kane's eyes darted to my mouth for the briefest of moments. "Yeah, I'm not regretting that decision, either."

My heart thrummed in my rib cage as he held my gaze. And there was that tumbling sensation in my belly again.

What did he see when he looked at me? A victim? Someone to pity? A whore? All I wanted was for Kane to see me for who I truly was. Just a woman with hopes and dreams like any other. What had happened to me was in the past and didn't define me. I wouldn't let it.

Kane folded his hands behind his head, making his biceps bulge and my mouth water. "What'll you do once Matisse is dead? I'm guessing an asshole like him won't have included you in his will. Won't your family be broke again?"

"I have money. I just can't access it yet. Years ago, Andre flew me to the Cayman Islands and had me open an offshore bank account. He uses it to squirrel away his illegal earnings. Having the account in my name gives him extra protection in case anyone traces the cash flow."

Kane made a growling sound. "Coward."

I grabbed another handful of popcorn. "I don't have the password to access the account online, but once Andre is dead, I'll fly to the Cayman Islands, show my identification, and gain control of the funds. There's probably enough in there to buy my family's home many times over."

"And then what? Go back to England?"

I swallowed and licked the stickiness from my fingers. “That’s the end goal. It’s all I’ve dreamed of for years. The thought of being reunited with my family is sometimes the only thing to keep me going. Dad isn’t well. I don’t know how many years he has left to live, so if I make it through this, it’s important that I spend them with him. I miss him and Lena so much.”

Kane angled his face toward me. “You sacrificed yourself for them.”

I scoffed. “I whored myself for my family’s financial security and well-being. Let’s not make me out to be some kind of martyr.”

Kane rolled onto his side and propped his head up with his palm. “I think you are. You were only a teenager, and Matisse manipulated you in the worst possible way. Don’t beat yourself up for accepting his offer.”

“I don’t. That’s the thing. I’ve thought about this a lot, and if I could go back, I wouldn’t change my decision, even if I understood what I was walking into.”

His brows pinched. “How can you say that?”

“Because saying no to Andre wasn’t ever an option. He’d set his sights on destroying my family and claiming me. If I’d turned him down, he’d have found some other way to coerce me into the deal. He’s too rich, too powerful, and too conniving to let an eighteen-year-old girl best him. There’s one thing that son of a bitch detests hearing, and that’s the word *no*.” I rolled to face Kane, mimicking his pose. “Ever since

moving to LA, Andre has taunted me with remarks about how attractive Lena is and that he picked the wrong sister. She was only thirteen when it started, so you can imagine how vile I found his comments. But now that she's an adult and his threats of replacing me with her are legally possible, I'm terrified." A gentle breeze blew over my skin, leaving goose bumps in its wake. "It's not just my life at stake here. My escape plan has to work."

"It will. We'll find a way."

A loud car raced along a street nearby.

"Is it safe for us to sleep outside?" I asked.

"Possibly safer than inside. Out here, I can hear the dock creak anytime someone walks down it. There'll be no sneaking up on us."

I flopped onto my back again. "It wasn't on my bucket list, but I'm glad you suggested sleeping under the stars."

"Your bucket list? I thought those were for old people."

"Don't be ridiculous. Anyone can have a list of things to do before they die. Or in my case, things to do as soon as I'm free."

"What else is on the list?"

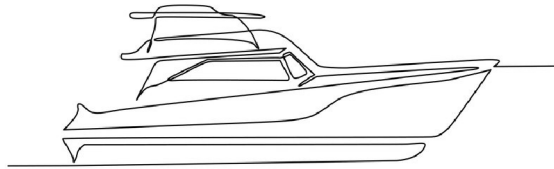
"Where do I start?" I smoothed my hands over the blanket covering my belly. "In no particular order: make friends, finish school, go to university, get a job, go to a party, get my driver's license, shop for my own clothes, eat *all* the food, do

bad karaoke, go out dancing, get drunk at a bar, get hit on in a bar and then—”

Kane tensed beside me. Had he heard a noise? Why was he suddenly on alert?

When I found his alarmed eyes boring into mine, I realized something was very wrong, only it wasn't what I'd thought.

Kane



“**G**et hit on in a bar and then what, Freya?”

I hadn't meant to sound so stern, but if Freya was about to tell me she planned to get drunk and go home with the first guy who caught her eye, that didn't sit well with me. Her head wasn't in a good space. It would be so easy for someone to take advantage of her.

A choked laugh escaped her. “Have sex, of course. And maybe have an orgasm that I don't give myself, if I'm lucky. What else would I want to get hit on in a bar for?”

“Do you really think it's a good idea to sleep with the first guy who pays you attention?”

She rolled on her side to face me, mouth agape. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“I'm only thinking of your safety.”

“My safety?” She pointed to her sternum. “What a load of crap. As if having a one-night stand is more dangerous than the seven years I've spent living with Andre. And excuse me,

Mr. *Drawer Full of Condoms*, how many women have you shagged on this boat and never seen again, hmm?"

When I didn't answer, she continued, "I thought so. Talk about double standards."

I held back a groan. "Here's the problem. You're gorgeous. Like, next-level beautiful. All the nice guys will be too intimidated to come on to you. That leaves the jerks, and I don't want your first time after *him* to be with another asshole."

She growled, and it was so fucking cute. I almost told her so but had the good sense to keep my mouth shut.

"If there were an award for both complimenting and insulting someone within the same breath, it'd go to you." Freya made the peace sign and wiggled her fingers. "Two things. First of all, who the hell do you think you are, trying to tell me who I can and can't sleep with? That's not a good look on you. And second, I'm planning on screwing someone, not marrying them. I don't care if they're a player. I'll kick them out as soon as I've gotten what I want, and in case you're wondering, what I want is to finally have sex with someone *I've* chosen and on *my* terms. Is it too much to ask that I have a sexual experience with a man I'm not utterly repulsed by?"

Wait. Did I hear her right?

I tilted my head in question. "Are you telling me Matisse is the only man you've been with?"

“Unfortunately.” Freya frowned. “Believe me, if I could turn back time, I’d have been far more adventurous in my teens so I’d have had some fun before landing myself in the pleasureless land of *Wham, bam, thank you, ma’am.*” Her lips pulled to one side. “Not that I ever received a thank-you. What a wanker.” She threw a couple more pieces of caramel corn into her mouth. “So if this freedom lasts, you can bet your arse I’ll be living my best life, and I won’t allow you or anyone else to tell me how to go about it.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “You’re right, and I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to come off so judgmental. All I meant was, after everything you’ve been through, I don’t want to see you hurt again.”

I didn’t mention that the notion of her giving herself to some punk she’d just met made me unjustifiably jealous. Once this was all over, if Freya wanted to get drunk at a bar, I’d take her. And if any cocksucker made a pass at her, I’d wait until she wasn’t looking and send them a strong message that they should leave or start Googling emergency dentists. I was proving my point that she’d only attract jerks, and I was the biggest of them all.

A small smile formed on her lips. “That’s kind of thoughtful, I suppose. And thank you for saying I’m beautiful. The last person who said that to me was one of Andre’s political cronies, and it made my skin crawl.”

I grunted. “I’m surprised you haven’t sworn off men altogether.”

“I’ve sworn off Andre, not men. I’m not going to put myself in a position where anyone can control me again, but a woman has needs, and I deserve better than the seven years of terrible sex I’ve had. Like I said earlier, I don’t think you’re all bad, and I refuse to let the actions of one loathsome bastard dictate my life. Andre wants me messed up and broken, and I won’t give him that. What I *will* do is erase the memories by making new ones. Good ones. Amazing ones! I can’t think of a better *fuck you* than to live a life where I’m happy and free.”

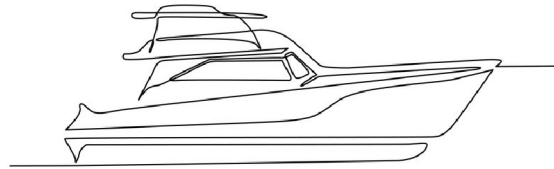
Her smile was infectious, and I couldn’t help but return it. “Then that’s what you’ll do.”

Every time I looked at Freya, my chest tightened. I was at a loss to explain what it meant. Was it pity for what she’d been through? Sadness that she’d have to live with it for the rest of her life? Or fear that she wasn’t completely safe until Matisse had been dealt with? All I knew was my fingers itched to reach for her, cradle her face between my palms, and promise to make everything okay.

This overwhelming urge to care for and protect Freya shouldn’t be possible so fast. I told myself it was because of the shitty time she’d had with Matisse. But deep down I knew, I just fucking knew, that wasn’t the only reason.

I needed to get her out of here ASAP.

Kane



I woke with the morning sun warming my skin and assaulting my eyes. Last night, it'd taken a while to fall asleep after everything Freya had shared.

I sat up and dragged my hands over my face. The spot beside me was empty, although the smell of bacon cooking told me where my new roomie was.

I stepped inside the cabin and found Freya in the galley, tending a sizzling frying pan. An old Van Morrison song played on the radio, and the blond locks piled on top of her head bopped in time with her hips. It didn't matter that she swam in my black Metallica shirt. She still looked sexy as fuck.

It was an inappropriate time for my dick to stir, but seeing a woman in my kitchen was having an odd effect on me. I really was a caveman.

While her back was turned, I let my gaze roam over the smooth expanse of her long tan legs. And then I made the mistake of imagining what they'd feel like wrapped around me

when I had her pressed up against a wall, my cock grinding against her while I devoured her mouth.

“Oh, hey. You’re up,” Freya said as she spun. “Just in time, too.” She scraped the bacon onto two plates, and when she licked grease from her fingers, my dick twitched again.

I took the opportunity to rearrange myself when she twisted to grab a saucepan from the stove.

“It’s been a while since I’ve cooked anything. I hope these eggs taste okay.”

Don’t just stand there staring at her. Say something, moron.

“I’m sure it’s better than whatever I could make.” I pinched a small piece of bacon from the plate nearest me and tossed it into my mouth. “Did you sleep all right?”

“Great, actually. Thanks to you.” She smiled brightly, and it did something to me. Warmth filled a cavity in my chest that I hadn’t even realized was empty. Freya was attacking me with her sweetness on all fronts.

I was so fucked.

Just a couple of days and she’ll be gone.

She scooped scrambled eggs onto each of the plates. “I made coffee”—she nodded toward the machine—“but I couldn’t find your mugs.”

“I’ll get them.” I reached for a cabinet above Freya’s head and took out two cups. The galley was cramped, with barely enough room for one person to work, so when Freya turned,

bringing us face-to-face, our bodies almost touched. I shifted to the side, but she moved the same direction. Then it became a clumsy dance where we both tried to get out of each other's way. We paused and laughed at the awkwardness of the situation. As Freya's smile faded, her eyes slowly followed a path down my neck and torso, inspecting my tattoos. I let her look her fill and liked the way her gaze heated with appreciation.

"Did that hurt?" she asked.

I arched a brow. "The ink?"

"No. I mean"—she pointed at the barbell through my left nipple, her finger hovering directly above the steel—"that."

"Not as much as the other one." I smirked.

"The other one?" She checked my earlobes and found them empty.

"It's a little lower." I glanced below my hips.

Her eyes widened to saucers. "*Oh*, you mean your—"

"Yeah. And *that* hurt."

"Good Lord. Why would you do such a thing?"

"You don't know?"

"I assume to prove how tough you are."

"No, Freya. Because it feels good."

She lowered her chin and leaned toward me. "Are you into pain?"

“I don’t mind a little.” I bit my bottom lip to hide my smile. “But when I said it feels good, I didn’t mean for me.”

Her brows drew together before recognition dawned. “Wait. Are you telling me you had a bolt put through the end of your knob just to satisfy your partners?”

I shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a giving kind of guy.”

She braced her hands on the counter behind her. “And is it...effective?”

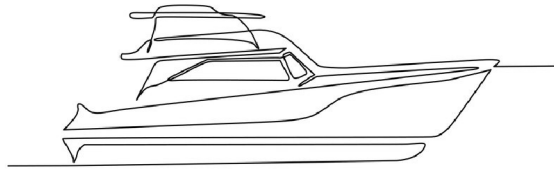
I didn’t bother trying to hide my smirk. “So I’ve been told. Often and quite loudly.”

Freya’s eyes narrowed. “You should know, Kane, that no one likes a gloating overachiever.” She flicked my nipple piercing hard, making me flinch. “Now, pass me those mugs and take the plates to the table, will you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I rubbed my stinging nipple before collecting the plates and squeezing past her.

Had to admit, I liked Freya’s feisty side. I one hundred percent knew I was playing with fire here, but I also couldn’t help myself.

Kane



We'd eaten breakfast on the back deck with the radio on low in the background. Freya had savored every bit, except for a few toast scraps she'd tossed to the seagulls. Normally, I'd have told her not to encourage them because they shit all over my boat, but she'd enjoyed their bickering so much that I'd kept quiet.

Freya interacted with the world with the fresh eyes of someone who'd just been released from a long prison sentence. Everything was new and interesting to her. She drew pleasure from the simplest experiences, and stupidly, I wanted to be the one to give them to her.

The dock creaked as footsteps approached. Wy was here because Brandon would call us shortly with intel.

Freya froze, then relaxed when she recognized my twin. She continued to stare as he drew nearer. Wy wore denim shorts today, so it was the first time she'd seen his prosthetic leg.

Before he reached *Lucy*, Freya gathered our empty plates. "I should go get changed."

Wy boarded just as Freya shut the door. “I don’t think she likes me much.”

“Can’t really blame her.” I sipped my coffee. “How’s Maggie handling the news?”

Wy lifted the brim of his cap and scratched his brow. “When she’s not yelling at me, she’s got her head in the toilet. The pregnancy hormones are kicking in hard.”

“What about yesterday’s take? Did the Cuda leave port without any problems?”

“On its way to Dubai as we speak.” Wy nodded toward the door. “How are you two getting along?”

“Having her here is”—I rubbed the heels of my palms into my eyes—“not easy.”

Wy smirked. “Pampered rich girl pushing your buttons?”

“You could say that.” Just not in the way he thought.

My phone rang from inside.

“That’ll be Brandon,” I said, and we both moved into the cabin.

I set the phone down on the dining table and answered on speaker. “Brandon, how are you?”

“Brother, all I’m going to say is I woke up with the most perfect pussy in my face this morning, and”—*thump*—“Ouch! All right, all right.”

Wy and I shared a confused look while Brandon’s fiancée, Sage, scolded him in the background.

Brandon cleared his throat. “Sage wants me to make it abundantly clear that we adopted a kitten last week. Her name is Nelly, and she likes to sleep on my pillow. Also, I can now only hear out of one ear.”

I laughed. “This explains why I haven’t received a wedding invitation yet.”

“I’ll get that band on her finger one day soon. Don’t you worry. We have a few important ops we want to complete first.”

Freya walked out of the bedroom dressed in her cut-off jeans and a white shirt of mine knotted in the front. Her long tresses flowed over her shoulders and had gone wavy since her dip in the bay yesterday. The bruising around her eye had healed a little.

She sat directly opposite me at the small dining table and nodded toward my brother, who’d taken the place at the end.

“Freya and Wyatt are here,” I said. “I think it’s best if they listen in.”

“Agreed,” said Brandon. “All right. Let me start with the good news. No one has notified the police, just as Freya predicted. And as far as I can tell, Matisse is still unaware of the heist and Freya’s disappearance.”

“How?” I asked.

“Because his phone hasn’t been switched on since yesterday morning when he boarded the Pacific Coast Cartel’s private jet at Van Nuys Airport. I was able to track the jet to Guadalajara.

After that, Matisse's location gets sketchy. My guess? They've taken him to the estate of Carlos Espinoza, the boss of the Pacific Coast Cartel, which is a location I'd very much like to know."

I folded my arms. "You planning a rescue mission?"

"Yeah. A big one. And the only way to stop the cartel from taking more women is to cripple their organization. The problem is, Pacific Coast is the most powerful cartel in Mexico right now. If they were to get their hands on Matisse's heavy artillery and armor-piercing ammunition, their control over the region would be unprecedented."

Wy leaned his elbows on the table. "Are you saying that if we take out Matisse, not only will we help Freya and protect our asses, but we'll be doing you a favor by keeping those weapons out of the cartel's hands?"

"Correct. But I have a problem with that plan," Brandon said. "I need Matisse alive."

Freya stared at the phone with a concerned expression. "Why?"

"Let me explain." Brandon cleared his throat. "Kane, you're familiar with the human-trafficking intervention I've been running, but I'll give Wyatt and Freya the rundown. Last year, I discovered links to several established sex-slavery rings operating throughout the world. I have a team of guys who carry out rescue missions and help return the victims to their families.

“We’ve been successful in dismantling some of the organizations involved, but that’s left a hole in the market for someone else to step into. Right now, the Pacific Coast Cartel is seizing that opportunity. But they’ve gotten savvy. The women used to wear GPS ankle trackers so the traffickers could keep tabs on them. It was also what we used to find them. They don’t use the trackers anymore, so now I have to rely on other sources of intel. And Andre Matisse could have the information I need to bring down the Pacific Coast Cartel and save a lot of lives.”

“You think this business trip he’s on means he’ll be able to tell you where their base is?” I asked.

“It’s a long shot,” Brandon said. “They would’ve had a blackout sack over his head after he landed in Guadalajara, but if there’s anything he can tell me about Espinoza’s estate—the terrain, overhead flight paths, vehicles coming and going—it could be enough for me to set up an approximate search area. It’s a big jungle. Narrowing the location down will improve our chances. And any information regarding the property’s security and how many men are guarding it will help me plan our assault.”

I picked up the Leatherman multi-tool I always left on the dining table. “So you want to interrogate Matisse.”

“I do. I’m sorry. I know this makes things more difficult, but there are innocent lives at stake. If I can get something useful out of Matisse, we could bring down the cartel. You can do whatever you want with him after that.”

“You’re wasting your time,” Freya said. “He won’t tell you anything.”

Brandon chuckled. “Don’t be so sure about that. I can be very convincing.”

“I have one request.” I unfolded the blade from the multi-tool and spun it on the table.

“Name it,” Brandon replied.

“I want to be involved in the interrogation. You ask the questions; I’ll motivate him to answer.” I looked at Freya and found her eyes already on mine. Approval shone through them.

“All right,” Brandon said with a hint of skepticism in his tone. “As long as you don’t kill him before I get what I need.”

Using the tip of the blade, I cleaned engine oil from under my nails. “Don’t worry. I’ll get him talking.”

Freya nibbled on her bottom lip in a suggestive way.

Was she turned on by us talking about Matisse’s torture?

Was I turned on by her being turned on?

Yeah. I was.

Freya slouched in her seat and slung an elbow over the back of her chair. A moment later, I flinched when something nudged my inner thigh, then crept toward my crotch. The Leatherman slipped from my fingers and clattered on the table.

“Sorry.” I glanced at Wy before giving Freya a stern look.

Petite toes inched closer to my cock. Freya's mischievous grin told me exactly how much she enjoyed watching me squirm. She twisted a lock of hair around one finger. If Wy weren't here, I'd wrap those long silky waves around my fist and demand to know why she was being such a brat.

I moved back as far as my seat would allow, and Freya's foot dropped to the floor. She pouted at having her fun spoiled, but it only made me want to lean across the table, take that plump bottom lip between my teeth, and—

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Wy muttered under his breath. His unamused gaze shifted between Freya and me while he shook his head.

I inwardly groaned, knowing I'd cop shit from my brother about this later. Freya just rolled her eyes and gave Wy a look that told him exactly how little she cared about his opinion on the matter.

"How do you guys feel about bringing him in?" Brandon asked.

That got our attention.

I sat up straight. "Wait. You want *us* to do it?"

I'd assumed Brandon would want his own team to run the operation.

"Here's the thing. I try to keep these kinds of ops off US soil. Matisse has a berth booked for his megayacht, the *Antoinette*, at the Ensenada port next week. Probably another meeting with a potential buyer. Either way, he'll be sailing in

Mexican waters, which will provide the perfect opportunity to snatch him.”

Wy pulled his cap off and tossed it onto the seat beside him. “Surely once Matisse learns about the heist and Freya’s disappearance, he’ll cancel the trip.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Brandon said. “The kind of people he’s dealing with can be very demanding. Freya, what do you think?”

She pursed her lips. “I think my disappearance is an unfortunate inconvenience for Andre but unlikely to alter any business plans. He’s been motivated to source a new buyer since the Colombian deal fell through.”

I leaned my forearms on the table and hung my head. “There must be some other way to capture Matisse. Why don’t you have your guys grab him in Ensenada?”

“Too many eyes. I’ve looked at all the options, and taking him at sea is the best one. You know what that means—I need frogmen.”

My brother’s face lit up, and he slapped his palm on the table. “Fuck yeah. I’m in.”

I glared at him. “Don’t look so excited.”

“Are you kidding? I’ll never get an opportunity like this again.”

Losing a leg had been a huge setback in Wy’s SEAL career, but returning to the teams had still been possible. Other operators with similar injuries had done it, and seeing how

capable Wy was now, I had no doubt he'd have made it. But the life of a SEAL was unpredictable. We could be deployed for months or sent on a mission with a few hours' notice. So when Wy and Maggie had received Regan's diagnosis, my brother had chosen his family over operating.

"I miss it, man. Don't you?" he added.

"No," I grumbled.

That wasn't entirely true. I missed the brotherhood. The community and support that came with being in a close-knit unit meant my SEAL and Zulu teammates had been like family. I'd been the one to push them away by ignoring calls and invitations to meetups because my brothers had become a constant reminder of the reason I'd gotten out of the teams.

My hands clenched into fists. Protecting Freya on my boat was one thing, but carrying out an op to capture Matisse would trigger dark memories I fought against every day. Not only were my past mistakes already at the forefront of my mind, but now, I'd have to put on my tactical gear and become the trained killer I never wanted to be again.

Then I looked at Freya. She'd survived trauma and was willing to put everything on the line to escape Matisse. And somehow, she'd handled it all with composed bravery and fierce determination.

I'd been wrong calling her princess. Freya was a fucking queen. She didn't realize how incredible she was.

I could do this op. I'd do it for her. And once I got my hands on Matisse, I'd make that piece of shit wish he'd never been born.

"I don't like this." Freya gave a sharp shake of her head. "What if something goes wrong and you get hurt? What if Andre gets away?"

"Kane and Wyatt are the right guys for the job, Freya. There's no one more qualified to run this op than the men you're sitting with."

Brandon was mostly right. Yes, we were qualified. As for being the right guys for the job, I didn't doubt my twin's readiness. My own was a different story.

Freya glanced toward me, then Wy.

My brother nodded.

She shifted in her seat. "Does that mean I need to stay here for another week? Is that safe?"

"For now, yes," said Brandon. "As soon as Matisse's phone goes back online, I'll monitor his movements and who he contacts. When he gets nowhere with the Colombians and recruits someone to find you, I'll know about it. And then I'll do my best to make sure they're looking in the wrong direction."

Freya chewed on a fingernail. "I don't mean to doubt your abilities, but can you really do all that because you're handy with computers?"

I scooped my hair up and tied it back. “I might’ve understated his skills. Brandon’s good at this shit. Don’t worry. He’s got you covered.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Brandon, can I ask you a favor?”

“Shoot.”

“Could you check on my dad and sister in London? If Andre finds out I wasn’t kidnapped, his retaliation could start with them.”

The sound of fingertips moving fast over a keyboard came through the phone. “I’ll get on it right away and let you know.”

Freya’s posture relaxed. “Thank you.”

“You guys come up with a plan and put a team together, and I’ll run support,” said Brandon. “Vaughn’s in Mexico following leads on the cartel right now, but I can send him to San Diego next week with any gear you need for the op. Weapons, comms, drones. You name it. Go ahead and start making a list. It’s time to dust off your wet suits, boys.”

I held my finger over the End Call button, ready to be done with this conversation. “Copy that. We’ll talk soon.”

I hung up, leaned back in my seat, and faced Wy. “What do you think?”

He shrugged. “Civilian vessel and crew? It should be straightforward. Even easier if it’s a night op.”

“Agreed. Talk to Hollis and Garcia. This concerns them, so they should be on the team.”

“They’ll want in.” Wy stood and headed for the door, giving Freya a nod goodbye. She waved, then took our coffee mugs to the sink.

When Wy gestured for me to follow him, I joined him outside on the dock.

As soon as we stepped off *Lucy*, he spun on me. “Really, Kane? Freya has been here less than a day, and you’re already hitting on her? I honestly never thought you were so stupid that I’d need to warn you to keep your dick in your pants.”

I held my palms up. “Nothing has happened. Nothing *will* happen.”

“Are you sure about that?” He stepped closer and lowered his voice. “You can have any woman you want, man—*any* woman.” Wy stabbed his finger toward the cabin. “Except that one.” His gaze bored into mine. “Do I need to remind you she’s a fugitive of one of the most powerful men in the country? You can’t afford to drop your guard for a moment. So you’d better quit treating this like a dirty weekend and stay focused on keeping Freya safe, because if someone comes looking for her, you’re gonna have to remember who the fuck you used to be.”

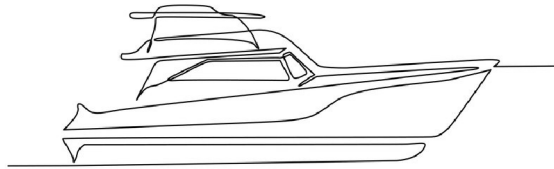
“I haven’t forgotten.” Although I’d spent years trying.

“Good.” Wy narrowed his eyes. “Now, are you squared away?”

“Of course I am,” I growled. “I can handle my shit, all right?”

The look Wy gave me said he wasn't remotely confident I could handle my shit. “Remember what I said. I'll call you tomorrow.”

Freya



The phone call with Brandon had left me conflicted. I was comforted by the knowledge that Andre didn't yet know I'd disappeared, but the thought of Kane and the guys carrying out some risky at-sea operation that sounded like something straight out of a blockbuster action movie filled me with unease.

The twins' reactions to Brandon's request that they capture Andre couldn't have been more polarized. No surprises there. Although Kane and Wyatt shared the same DNA, they were nothing alike. Wyatt had been thrilled with the opportunity to relive his SEAL heyday, whereas Kane looked like he'd rather have a root canal minus the anesthetic.

Kane had said he didn't like talking about his military career, so I wasn't fool enough to ask difficult questions when I had no right to pry. But it was becoming clear he'd locked that part of his life away in an impenetrable box. Did he even speak of it to his brother? To anyone?

And now, Kane would have to step back into a role he obviously wanted left in the past. All because of me.

After seeing Wyatt off, Kane came back inside and slammed the door. The tight set of his shoulders and his reluctance to make eye contact told me I had some apologizing to do.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. As if that could make up for this new burden thrust upon them. Kane and Wyatt must seriously regret choosing my home to burgle.

He spun to face me and planted his hands on his hips. “What the hell was that?”

Okay. That wasn’t the reaction I’d expected. Had I done something else wrong?

“Care to be a whisker more specific about what’s got your knickers in a knot?”

He folded those huge inked arms over his bare chest. “Right. You’re just going to pretend like nothing happened. Like you didn’t know exactly what you were doing.”

“Wait.” I scratched my temple, replaying the last ten minutes in my head. “Are you upset about my covert under-the-table foot action?”

“Yeah, I’m upset about it.”

I choked out a laugh. “Are you serious? Out of the whole phone call with Brandon, that’s what got you in a tizzy?”

“You were about to fondle my balls with your toes!”

“Loosen that man bun, would you? You promised you wouldn’t get angry with me for being myself around you.”

“I’m not angry!”

“Then you’re being an incredibly hypocritical prude, Mr. *Women Keep Tripping and Landing on My Oh-So-Satisfying Cock Jewelry*. Yeah. That’s right. You”—I poked him in his stupidly hard pec—“started the flirting. Which I think is a fantastic idea, by the way. No objections from me. All I want to know is why are you flipping out over a failed attempt at a dick tickle?”

“I’m not flipping out. I’m—” He made a pained expression before dragging both hands over his face. “Look, I shouldn’t have said the stuff about my piercing. It was out of line. But this is serious, Freya. I need to stay focused to protect you. That means no distractions, okay?”

I must’ve stared at him a fraction too long, because he went to the kitchen, added a squirt of dishwashing liquid to the sink, and began filling it with hot water. If he thought this conversation was over, he couldn’t be more wrong.

I followed him and picked up a dishrag. “I don’t understand.”

Kane dunked the coffee mugs. “What’s not to understand?”

“Last night, we slept under the stars, and you were full of assurances that I’m in no danger as long as I’m with you. Brandon just confirmed the same and said he’d alert us if Andre started sniffing around. Then thirty seconds after you have a conversation with your ornery twin, you’re suddenly the fun police.”

He placed a mug on the drying rack and kept his eyes on the sudsy water. “What exactly is your point?”

“I’m trying to figure out if I’m in danger right now or not.”

“At the moment, no. But that could change fast.”

“And Brandon will let you know if it does?”

Kane nodded while looking unimpressed with how I’d laid out the facts.

Since I’d escaped, I couldn’t stifle the niggling sense of dread that’d been trickling down my spine. For as long as I’d known Andre, he’d always come out on top. His ability to outsmart his rivals and keep himself one step ahead in the game was the secret to his success. He might be a piece of shit, but he was a clever piece of shit. Even if there were a zombie apocalypse, Andre would somehow survive and recruit the brain feeders as his personal army.

Which meant I didn’t share Kane’s confidence that I’d never have to return to my old life. So I wasn’t going to waste my days pretending I wasn’t attracted to Kane, like some shy damsel. There was one thing I knew. If you didn’t grab life by the balls and direct it where you wanted, you’d miss out on all the best parts. I wouldn’t be sent back to Andre wondering *what if?*

Time for negotiations to commence.

“Since there’s no immediate danger and we’re stuck together for at least a week while you plan your mission, why shouldn’t we enjoy it?”

“Freya,” Kane groaned, setting his wet hands on the edge of the sink.

“It’s on my bucket list, you know.” I leaned my hip against the counter while drying a mug.

“Dick tickling?” Kane asked hesitantly.

“In defense of my actions, I was very turned on by your declaration to cause Andre extreme pain. That was...so hot.” I pressed my lips together. “Hmm. Perhaps I’m going to need more therapy than I thought. That’s beside the point. I meant flirting. Flirting is on my bucket list.” Along with other activities, which I intended to work Kane up to, but since he looked spooked, I decided to ease him into it.

“That wasn’t flirting. Flirting is a smile across a room or flicking your hair. It isn’t initiating a...a”—he waved one sudsy hand while searching for the words—“foot job.”

“Exactly! Seven years is a long time to be out of the game. Let me hone my skills on you before I’m tossed into the real world to unleash my atrocious seduction abilities on unsuspecting men.”

“What?” His eyes bugged out. “No! That’s a terrible idea.”

“Which one? Practicing with you or the unsuspecting men?”

“Both!” he snapped a little too emphatically.

Hmm. Did I detect a hint of jealousy? Or was he being protective again? I liked both but hoped his burst of emotion was driven by the former. Did that make me a wicked person? Probably.

Kane gave me a pointed look. “And I’m not stupid. I know where flirting leads, and I know what else is on your bucket

list. There's no way I'm going to be involved in that."

I put the dry mug on the counter. "You don't need to worry about me falling in love with you and turning into a stage-five clinger. I want a man in my life as much as I want another unsatisfying salad. No, thanks."

Kane sighed while scrubbing a plate. "I'm not worried about that."

"Then stop being such a Debbie Downer."

He shook his head. "It doesn't feel right. You're vulnerable."

I stared at Kane's profile since he was suddenly unable to look me in the eye. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Throw me an unwarranted pity party. You're acting like I'm some fragile victim, like I need to be wrapped in cotton wool. That's the last thing I want."

"I know." Kane rinsed the plate and placed it on the rack.

"Then treat me as you would any other woman."

He laughed bitterly. "Yeah, I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because the things I do with other women are never gonna happen with you."

My stomach sank like a rock tossed overboard. Why did those words hurt so much? I hardly knew Kane. Why did I care what he thought of me at all?

This was stupid. I wanted him to like me, and I wanted to do much more than flirt with him, but I needed to remember that for all his kindness, I was nothing more than a monumental inconvenience. And Kane was a good-looking man who could have his pick of women. Why would he want someone as sullied as me?

He finally glanced my way. “What’s wrong?”

I wrung the dishcloth in my hands. “Do I disgust you?”

“What?”

“I’ve been Andre’s plaything for seven years. That’s not a very attractive quality.”

“No, Freya. That doesn’t make me think less of you. It makes me so goddamn furious I feel like tearing a path to wherever that asshole is right now and ending him with my bare hands.”

“What is it, then? What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong with you.” Kane’s brow furrowed. “You escape an abusive relationship yesterday, and today you wanna fool around with a guy you just met? Doesn’t that seem like a bad idea to you?”

My hands dropped to my sides. “Wow. Are you seriously slut shaming me right now?”

He shook his head. “That came out wrong. What I mean is, I don’t think distracting yourself from your problems is a healthy way to deal with them.”

“I’m not trying to distract myself from my problems. I’m taking control of them.” I stabbed a finger in my chest. “This is my body. Mine to choose what I do with. *He* doesn’t get a say in it anymore.” Kane frowned, looking unconvinced, so I added, “Why don’t you tell me all the healthy ways you deal with your problems, huh?”

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t have any problems. My life is exactly the way I want it. At least it was until yesterday.”

Ouch.

Kane rubbed his forehead. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No. I deserve it. I’ve made a mess of your life.” I held his gaze. “My relationship with Andre was nothing more than a transaction where I got the raw end of the bargain. And I don’t see why I should continue to deny myself enjoyment now that the contract is void. If you were a slimeball, there’s no way I’d propose something like this. But you’re not. You’re a big hunk of sexy sweetness, and”—I lifted one shoulder—“you make me feel safe, which is important to me. I know you’d never do anything to hurt me. I know it to my bones.”

Kane gave me a sad smile. “I’d sooner hack my arm off with a spoon.”

“See?” I squeezed his forearm briefly. The solid muscles beneath his skin felt better than I’d imagined. “There you go being all adorable again. I’m utterly defenseless against it.”

Kane focused on the spot where I'd touched him as if I'd left a mark.

“What if I don't have the rest of my life to get through my bucket list? What if this freedom doesn't last?”

His eyes came back to mine. “You really need to stop thinking like that.”

“This isn't one of those situations where positive vibes will make everything turn out okay. There's more margin for error now. Capturing Andre? Interrogating him? That gives him the opportunity to escape.”

“He won't.”

“Oh really? So in all your missions, nothing ever went wrong?”

Silence filled the cabin. Kane's chest rose and fell while he stared into the dishwasher.

His throat bobbed before he answered. “Of course things went wrong sometimes.”

“Then if this is it for me, if this is the only chance I'll get to enjoy my freedom before some hired thug hauls me back to *him*, I plan on making the most of it. So you can either help with my bucket list or be a self-cockblocking pain in the arse.” I stepped toward him and gazed up into his Pacific-blue eyes. “Come on, Kane. I need some fun. *Please.*” I batted my lashes for extra impact. “Is this working, or do I look pathetic?” I pointed to my eyes. “I'm going for helpless puppy or kitten,

but I really have no clue what I'm doing. It's entirely possible I look like I have something stuck in my eye."

Kane grunted. "It's working."

"See? You're already helping with my technique." I folded my arms. "It's just a little harmless flirting, and if it turns into something more—"

"Which it *won't*." He gave me a firm look.

"But if it *does*, I won't be disappointed. How about we start with something small." I tapped a finger against my lips. "I'm going to go out on a limb and say foot jobs are off-limits?"

"No touching." Kane pointed at me like a cranky schoolteacher.

"No touching?" I screwed my face up. "How boring. What fun stuff does that leave?"

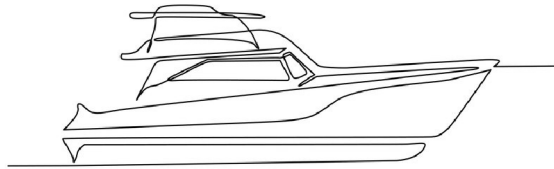
"I don't know." The giant jerk grinned. "Use your imagination."

You bet your bloody arse I will.

I tilted my head while considering his unreasonable condition. "Fine. Zero-contact flirting. Challenge accepted."

Game on, big man.

Kane



Wy was right. Allowing Freya to distract me from my primary objective put us all at risk. But whenever she looked up at me with those sultry green eyes, saying no to anything she asked was almost impossible.

And now, she was hell-bent on adding *roommates with benefits* to my job description.

This was a huge fucking problem.

I'd known a lot of women. And by known, I meant we'd have a few drinks, a few laughs, and follow it up with hot, vigorous sex. Their place or mine, it didn't really matter.

When it came to hookups, I had two firm rules. I always ended up in my own bed and without company, avoiding the awkward morning after, and I never slept with the same woman twice. No hearts were broken. I was always careful to spell out what I was offering.

My rules had been easy to stick to. They kept my life commitment- and complication-free, and I'd never once doubted my ability to hold true to them.

Until now.

Because I knew without a shadow of a doubt that if I ever got a taste of Freya, once wouldn't be enough. Those rules, which had been so easy to follow, would be as forgotten as my hookups' phone numbers. What was up with that?

Freya had a strange effect on me that I struggled to understand. What confused me the most was why her small gestures—a brief glance, a brush of skin in passing—had more pull than any of my one-night stands.

There was something...addictive about her. If she smiled, I wanted to see it again. When she laughed, I wanted the next one to be louder. And when she touched me, my weak-ass brain jumped to a whole new level of indecency and imagined all the dirty things I wanted to do to her.

She deserved so much better than me.

I didn't want her to find someone else.

And that made me a shitty person.

Unfortunately, my dick was absolutely on board with lapping up every scrap of Freya's attention. I had to stay out of her way because this flirting game I'd agreed to was more dangerous than a trip wire in a Taliban tunnel. This boat wasn't big enough for the two of us.

So now, being the chickenshit I was, I hid from Freya by working on the portside engine. If she'd noticed my cowardice, she hadn't mentioned it yet. She seemed relaxed and happy inside the cabin, reading and listening to music,

both things she'd been denied while living with the dead man walking.

“Need any help?”

I shot up at Freya's voice and hit my head on the top of the engine bay. “Dammit!” I growled.

“Oops.” She giggled. “That must've hurt.”

I winced and rubbed the back of my skull. “It didn't tickle.”

“I know how to make it feel better.” Freya smiled seductively, and I immediately felt it in my balls. “I brought you a beer.” She held the bottle toward me, but before I could grab it, she snatched it back, brought it to her lips, and took a long pull. As she handed me the beer, she licked her lips and held my gaze.

Well played, ma'am. Well played.

I did my best to act as if the sight of her in my white shirt, top buttons undone and cleavage popping, weren't making me salivate. And her hair, all that goddamn long wavy hair, was going to be the death of me.

Be strong. Act casual.

I scraped a wire brush over the thread of a rusty bolt. “Beer straight from a bottle. The princess is full of surprises.”

“It might shock you what things this princess would like to wrap her mouth around.” Her eyes slowly traveled down my bare torso and stopped at the crotch of my board shorts.

This woman was going to land me in the hospital with heart palpitations. “Go easy on a man, Freya. You’re a little too good at this.”

“I thought you said you’d play along.”

“I never agreed to that.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re no fun. Points out of ten for technique?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Yes!” She made a fist pump.

I wiped sweat from my brow. “But you’re shooting too high.”

“No way.” She rested a hand on her hip. “Too high would’ve been giving the neck of the bottle a blow job.”

I wasn’t religious, but I looked to the sky for some all-powerful being to give me strength. “You want to build intrigue. Flirting is supposed to be about working them up for the chase.”

“But I’m a sure thing.”

“Men don’t need to know that.”

She folded her arms. “What if I can’t do subtle?”

“You wanted to practice.” I climbed out of the engine bay and cleaned my hands on a rag. “Practice that.”



After completing my caretaker duties around the yacht club, I spent the rest of the afternoon washing *Lucy's* exterior, splicing new ropes, and checking on my neighbors' boats to make sure they were secure. All legitimate jobs I needed to do, just not in one day.

Freya put together a quick dinner of leftover chicken pieces and potato salad, then we sat on the back deck and watched the sun set below the high-rises on the Strand.

My phone pinged with a message. It was an update from Brandon. *Shit*. Not great news, but I'd known this was coming.

"Everything okay?" Freya asked.

I frowned. "Devil Spawn is on his way back to LA. He's making inquiries with PIs."

"Oh." Freya's hand flew to her belly as though she'd been hit with a sudden bout of nausea. "Are we safe here? Do we need to leave?"

"For now, it's safest if we stay put. But it's a good idea to have a small bag packed in case we need to move fast."

"Okay." She nodded, but her rapid breathing suggested she wasn't okay at all. "The pistol I had when you found me in the Cuda. Where is it?"

"In a cabinet. Why?"

"I'd feel safer with it close by. I don't mean to carry it on me or anything. I'd just like to know where it's kept. Would that be okay?"

“Do you know how to use it?”

“I know enough not to shoot myself in the foot.”

I smiled. “Sure. Come on.” I went inside, and Freya followed me to the galley. I retrieved her pistol from an overhead cabinet. “Where do you want to sleep tonight?”

“Now that I know Andre has people searching, I’d rather stay inside. I think I’ll be okay in the bedroom if I leave the door open and a lamp on.”

“All right. Let’s leave this on the nightstand, yeah?”

“Thank you.”

We settled in for the evening. Freya read on the couch while I flicked through a surfing magazine at the dining table.

“What are you reading?” I asked.

“Alien smut,” she answered without taking her eyes from the e-reader.

I paused and stared at her. “Excuse me?”

“You know. Giant muscly aliens. Intergalactic adventures. *Lots* of steamy sex. It’s brilliant. Please thank your sister-in-law for me.”

“*That’s* what you’ve been reading this whole time?”

Her eyes met mine. “I’m up to book three in the series, and it just keeps getting better and better. These novels are binge-reading crack.”

“And Maggie reads this stuff?”

She scrunched her nose up as if she smelled something nasty. “Don’t be so judgmental. I guarantee it’s more entertaining than your magazine.”

I turned a page. “It can’t be that good. You look as interested as if you were reading a cookbook.”

Freya held up a finger. “This is one of the benefits of not having a dick. A woman could be sitting next to you on a bus, and you’d be clueless that her heart is racing and her panties are soaked from what she’s reading.” She tapped her temple. “It’s all going on up here. And generating plenty of tingles down there.” She made wiggly fingers toward her lady parts. “No real-world man required.”

Surely words on a page couldn’t get that kind of reaction. “Read me some. What’s the title?”

“Taken by the Savage Alien Prince.”

“Pfft. Sounds ridiculous.”

She raised one brow. “Do you want to hear it or not?”

I nodded.

“Lucky for you, I’m up to a spicy scene. Right. Here we go.” Freya cleared her throat. *“Jessica was moments from reaching her climax when Brazus broke down the bathroom door and roared like one of the territorial mountain cleavers that roamed his home planet. A shriek left her lips, and she attempted to cover her nakedness with her hands. Despite the cool spray of the cleansing booth, embarrassment heated Jessica’s cheeks. ‘Do not hide yourself from me, little human. I*

know what it is you do in here.’ His nostrils flared as he scented Jessica’s arousal, then his eyes drifted to the hand cupping her mound.”

I snorted. “Her mound? Seriously?”

Freya gave me a stern look. “Yes, Kane. There are only so many words for pussy. Be reasonable, here. Now, shall I go on, or have you heard enough?”

I shrugged. “Maybe a little more.” It sounded kind of interesting, I supposed.

Freya shifted in her seat and continued, “Where was I? Aha. *‘Get out!’ she yelled. Brazus charged forward. ‘No. I am the only one who will give you pleasure.’ Jessica retreated until her ample rear hit the cool wall. The alien beast sunk to his knees before her and tore her hand from her cleft. ‘This is mine,’ he growled. Utterly naked before him, Jessica squealed in both shock and anticipation. But she made a very different sound when Brazus’s warm forked tongue licked along her slit, demanding entrance. ‘Part your thighs for me, sweet human.’*”

“Whoa, whoa, wait,” I said. “She’s going to let an alien with a forked tongue go down on her?”

“Uh, yeah,” Freya replied as though I were dense for asking. “You know, Earth men could learn a thing or ten from these books.” She gestured to the e-reader. “Wait until you hear about Brazus’s schlong.”

“I don’t think I want to hear about—”

“It’s huge, ridged, and vibrates on demand.”

“The alien dude has a sex toy for a cock?”

“I know.” Freya sighed wistfully and looked toward the ceiling with arms out wide. “Take me to your leader and sign me up for your breeding program. Comes with a lot of perks. Did you see what I did there?” Her brows waggled in a suggestive way. “*Comes* with perks. Get it?” She laughed at her joke while I stared at her in stunned confusion, still processing the last five minutes of our conversation. “On that note, I’m taking this bad boy to bed.” She rose from the couch and paused. “I know I said I’d sleep with the door open, but I’m just going to leave it closed for a little bit while I’m... reading. You might want to knock first if you need anything.” Freya tilted her head. “Are you all right? You’ve gone awfully quiet.”

I made a choking noise. “I’m fine.” I wasn’t fine. “Enjoy your *reading*.”

“I will.” She smiled, and it was smug as fuck. “Goodnight, then.”

My gaze followed Freya as she went to the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

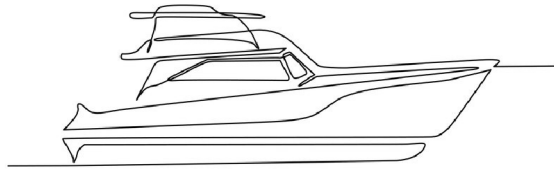
Had that just happened?

Yeah, she was good. She was *real* good.

Freya had upped her no-touching flirtation game, and one thing was becoming glaringly clear.

I was fighting a battle I couldn’t possibly win.

Freya



The next day, Kane and I continued the game where he pretended to be busy while I tried my hardest to draw his attention. I'd had the most success when I'd taken a swim in my underwear then sunbathed on the deck near where he worked on one of the engines. And by *success*, I meant Kane had seemed agitated, distracted, and more accident-prone than he ought to be with those capable hands.

Late in the afternoon, we'd washed up to head to Wyatt's house for a video call with Brandon. Hollis and Garcia would be joining us, and since *Lucy* was too cramped to comfortably accommodate that many large men, the guys had decided Wyatt's was a better location.

I was both excited and terrified about leaving the safe haven the boat had provided these last few days, but Kane had assured me it wasn't dangerous since I'd be well hidden on the journey.

I slipped my arms through the leather biker jacket and felt like a kid playing dress-up in their parent's clothes. "Is this a spare?"

“Nope.”

He helped me put on the helmet and fasten the chin strap.

“What protection will you wear?” I asked.

Kane smirked as though I were cute for worrying about him.

“I’ll be fine.”

We walked along the floating dock to the yacht club parking lot. I probably looked silly wearing the huge jacket and helmet, but at least I’d remain concealed.

Behind a secure gated area, Kane removed the cover from a matte-black Harley-Davidson motorcycle. He stowed the cover in a nearby locker and returned to mount the bike.

Legs astride the Harley, Kane looked sexier than ever in faded black jeans, a tight white tee, and heavy biker boots. His hair was tied back messily with one escaped lock hanging loose around his jaw. He pressed the ignition switch, and I flinched as the engine erupted in a deafening roar. So much for not drawing attention.

Logically, I knew I couldn’t be identified. It didn’t stop me from feeling utterly exposed and like every passerby might be looking for me.

Kane tapped the seat, and I climbed on behind him. He turned to me with a pensive expression. “You’re the first person to ride on the back.”

I got the impression that was significant in some way. Why did I like that he hadn’t shared this part of his life with others? Women, specifically. That was just ridiculous.

I looked around for handles but found none. “So...how do you want me to do this?” I asked loudly so he could hear me over the noisy engine.

With a roguish grin, Kane reached behind, took my hands, and wrapped them around his waist. “You hang on tight and don’t let go.”

My stomach fluttered, and heat flared up my neck. I sent up a silent cheer that flirtatious Kane was back. Sitting on the bike, he seemed relaxed and in his element. Maybe that was why he’d dropped his guard and shown his playful side again. Whatever had brought it on, I hoped it was here to stay.

I remained hypervigilant during the fifteen-minute commute, although the feel of Kane’s abs through his T-shirt made it very enjoyable. Did my hands wander more than they should? Probably. But Kane didn’t stop me, and I wasn’t about to point out how badly we were breaking his silly no-touching rule. Perhaps we could forget it’d ever existed in the first place.

We arrived at Wyatt’s house an hour before sunset. I hadn’t expected us to pull into the driveway of a regular family home. There was nothing lavish about the suburban bungalow: manicured lawn, white Jeep parked in the driveway, and an American flag by the porch. Sure, Kane had told me Wyatt’s heists had been to fund his daughter’s expensive medical bills, but I’d figured they’d have taken a little extra for their troubles. Maybe I’d been wrong to make that assumption.

Kane kicked down the bike's stand and waited for me to hop off, then he did the same. He ushered me through the side gate before helping me remove the helmet and jacket.

The sounds of splashing grew louder as we neared the backyard. In a swimming pool surrounded by palm trees and rocks, a dark-haired young girl jumped into the water. She popped up a second later, only to swim to the edge, climb out, and launch herself into the pool again.

Wyatt approached, holding a couple of beers. He handed one to Kane and offered me the other.

"Thanks," I said as I took the bottle, then nodded to the cheerful girl in the pool. "That must be Regan."

"The one and only." Wyatt's gaze shifted to his little girl. He wore the adoring look of a parent completely besotted with their child.

It caused my heart to stir and made me think of my father. I tried not to get my hopes up, but returning home to be reunited with Dad and Lena would be...there were almost no words to describe the elation I'd feel at seeing them again.

Regan climbed out of the pool and ran toward us, dripping a trail of water in her wake. It was hard not to stare at the thick scar on her chest, which started just below her throat and disappeared beneath her swimmers.

I couldn't imagine how hard it must've been on Wyatt and Maggie when Regan was born with a life-threatening heart

defect. Thankfully, she'd made a full recovery. By the looks of it, Regan had as much energy as any healthy child.

Kane and his niece completed a crazy handshake before she said, "Uncle Kane, want to come for a swim with me?"

He crouched to Regan's height. "Not today, Monkey. Hey, I want you to meet someone. This is my friend, Freya."

"Hello." I wiggled my fingers for a wave. "It's nice to meet you."

Regan looked up at me through foggy goggles and long strands of dark hair clinging to her forehead. She giggled before returning her attention to Kane. "She talks funny, but she's pretty."

"You're right about both of those things," Kane said.

Regan tugged at the shimmery pink one-piece that had ridden up her bum. "I can do a cannon bomb. Wanna see?" Without waiting for my response, she ran to the pool and jumped in. When she resurfaced a moment later, I clapped and gave her a thumbs-up.

A sliding door opened nearby, and a stunning Latina woman emerged wearing a cute polka-dot wrap dress and strappy sandals.

"Baby, you're home," said Wyatt with a hint of apprehension in his voice. "I thought you had book club."

Aha. So this was Maggie. She was taller than me by several inches and curvy in a way I envied. Dark wavy tresses fell past

her shoulders, and a huge diamond glittered on her ring finger. Okay, maybe Wyatt had splurged on something, after all.

“I forgot the cheese platter.” Maggie folded her arms and glared at me. “What’s *she* doing here?”

“We’re planning the op. The other guys will be here soon.” Wyatt extended an arm around his wife’s shoulders, but she brushed him away.

“So you brought her here? Into our home so she can endanger our family further? And you’re all just”—she waved a hand at us—“standing around drinking beer?”

Kane inched closer to my side. “Calm down, Mags. You’re overreacting.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down. What if someone saw her and followed you here?”

“No one saw her,” Kane said.

“I was covered the whole time.” I pointed to the helmet and jacket Kane had left on the outdoor table.

Maggie’s steely focus zeroed in on me. “What if the bike had broken down? Or you’d had an accident?”

“But we didn’t, and we’re not going to,” said Kane with a furrowed brow. “What’s with the hostility? This isn’t like you.”

Maggie’s palm landed on her pregnant-but-still-flat belly in a protective gesture. She wasn’t worried about herself. She

was worried about the people she loved. I could understand that.

I took a small step toward her. “I’m sorry—truly sorry—for bringing this mess upon your family. I know you’re under a lot of stress right now, but please believe I never would’ve asked for help if my situation weren’t so dire.”

Maggie pressed her lips together but remained silent, so I added, “Kane and Wyatt assure me they have the skills to fix this, so I’m putting my faith in them. Maybe you should, too.”

We stared at each other until Maggie released a shaky breath. “I’m not happy about any of this.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“But I guess you’re right.” She glanced between Wyatt and Kane. “They know what they’re doing, and I trust them. Things have been a little tense around here lately.” Maggie gave me a pitying look. “I’m sorry. Things can’t have been easy for you, either.”

“There’s a lot on my mind, but”—I looked up at Kane—“I’m safer now than I have been in years.” The small smile he aimed at me made my tummy tingle.

Wyatt put his arm around his wife. “It’s not too late to go to book club if it’ll help you take your mind off things.”

Maggie frowned. “Screw book club. I can’t even drink wine. What’s the point?”

“We can talk about books.” I handed my beer to Kane. If Maggie couldn’t drink, I’d join her out of solidarity. “You left

your e-reader on *Lucy*, and I'm up to book four in the *Savage Alien* series. I hope you don't mind. I've been kind of bored, and it's helped me pass the time."

It made sense that Maggie would be standoffish with me, but if we bonded over books, maybe I could win her over. I was suddenly excited about the prospect of having a female friend to talk to, even if it was only for a short while.

She gave me a skeptical look. "You like sci-fi romance?"

I nodded emphatically. "Absolutely. It's a total escape from reality, which is exactly what I need."

"We don't really talk about books at book club. It's mostly a chance to drink and gossip."

"We can do that," I said a little too quickly. "Minus the drinking, of course."

Maggie wiped her palms down her dress and shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

I grinned and turned toward Kane. He wore an amused smile as if our exchange pleased him. There was something soft in his expression, and it made my heart beat a little faster. Why did the big guy have such a profound effect on me?

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get that," Wyatt said.

"That'll be the guys." Kane rested his hand on my shoulder. His large palm warmed my skin, sending a small ripple of delight through me. "We'll be in the workshop behind the

garage. You're welcome to join us and listen in at any time, all right?"

It was thoughtful of him to remind me of that. Kane knew I needed to feel included in their planning, even if I couldn't be with them on the op.

I stared into his blue eyes. "Thanks. Maybe later."

"Okay." Kane's gaze roamed my face before settling on my lips. His attention there made me moisten them, and a little crease formed between his brows. Despite the inappropriate timing, I really wished he'd kiss me. I was almost certain he wanted to.

Maggie cleared her throat. Kane pulled his hand from my shoulder and stepped back.

"I'll see you soon," he said, and went inside.

I joined Maggie by the couch overlooking the pool. She handed me a bottle of water from an outdoor refrigerator, and we watched Regan as she dove to collect pegs from the deep end.

Maggie picked at a worn piece of cane on the armrest. "Sorry about my attitude earlier. I know it's no excuse, but I've been nauseated for weeks and haven't pooped in three days."

I almost choked on my water. "I'm sure that would put me in a bad mood, too. Congratulations, by the way. About the baby, I mean. Not the pooping. I'm awfully sorry about that part. Is that a pregnancy thing?"

“Yeah. I can’t wait to be done with this first trimester.” Maggie uncapped her bottle of water. “Five more minutes, Monkey,” she called out. Regan ducked beneath the surface, ignoring her mum’s request. Maggie shook her head. “She heard me just fine.”

I crossed one leg over the other. “She loves the water.”

“Just like her dad and uncle. She looks like me, but she’s a Daniels through and through.” Maggie’s golden-brown eyes met mine. “The guy you escaped sounds like a grade A asshole.”

I gave a bitter laugh. “Yeah. He really is. But if it’s all right, I’d rather not talk about him. He’s consumed enough of my energy, and I won’t give him any more than he deserves.”

“Can I ask you something else, then?” Maggie shifted in her seat.

“Of course.”

“How does Kane seem about this op they’re planning?”

“He makes it sound like it’ll be a cakewalk since they’re SEALs, but at the same time, I can tell he’s not thrilled. I get the feeling he doesn’t want me to know how much it’s on his mind.” I took a sip of water and glanced at Maggie. “Did something bad happen to him when he was in Team Zulu?”

My nervousness escalated the longer Maggie took to answer. Eventually she said, “I don’t know all the details, and even if I did, it wouldn’t be my place to say. All I know is there was an accident during his last mission that messed him

up pretty bad. Bad enough to make him get out of the teams and never look back. He was...different after.”

I wanted to ask how he was different, but it didn't feel right to pry. Kane didn't owe me an explanation for anything that had happened in his past, and if he'd wanted me to know, he'd have told me. But I hated that he was still hurting, and I wished he felt comfortable enough to open up to me about it.

“Wy thinks there's something going on between you two,” Maggie said.

I paused with the bottle halfway to my lips. “There isn't.”

Her gaze met mine. “Do you want there to be?”

I lowered the bottle to my lap. “That feels like a loaded question.”

“It isn't. I know you've been treated badly, and I'm not about to judge whatever life choices you make now that you've escaped. Enjoy your freedom, I say.”

“Crappy first impressions aside, I knew I was going to like you.” We both smiled. “All right. Kane is”—I blew out a deep breath—“there's a lot to like about him.”

Maggie's grin grew wider. “The rich girls always want a piece of the bad boys.”

“It's not that. I mean, yes, all those tattoos and muscles are incredibly tempting, but that's not the only reason I'm attracted to him. He's sweet, you know? And kind. And he makes me feel safe. I've had little joy in the last seven years, but being around Kane makes me very happy.”

“Have you told him that?”

I nodded. “In many unsubtle ways. I’m throwing every move in the playbook at him, but he’s immune to it all.”

“He’s not. I’ve seen the way he looks at you.” Maggie sipped from her bottle. “Don’t take it personally. Kane doesn’t do relationships.”

“And that’s the last thing I’d want with anyone right now.”

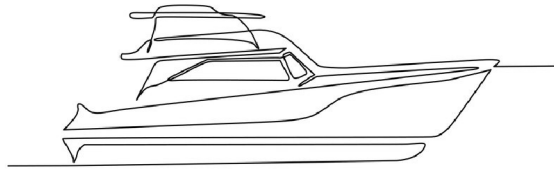
“Maybe he doesn’t want to make things weird between you. You’re staying together, right? And Kane has these rules. He —” She pressed her lips together and seemed reluctant to say any more, which only piqued my interest.

“What rules?”

Maggie tucked one leg beneath her and angled her body toward me. “Ever since Kane got out of the teams, he hasn’t slept with the same woman more than once, and he never lets them spend the night. He doesn’t like things to get... complicated.”

And I was as complicated as they came.

Kane



After filling Hollis and Garcia in on the latest developments with Matisse, we'd come up with a rough op plan for the maritime interdiction. Now, we stood around a workbench with Wy's laptop set up in the middle.

Brandon's face filled the screen. "Matisse is still preparing his megayacht, the *Antoinette*, for its voyage to Mexico. He's opted for a skeleton crew of a captain and bosun plus two service staff, which all but confirms he's meeting with a black-market client. Matisse has also engaged his regular security detail—a four-man team. Refueling is scheduled, and catering supplies are ordered. The berth in Ensenada is booked for seven a.m. With an approximate sailing time of twelve hours, that means they'll be traveling overnight."

I nodded. "That works in our favor."

I caught movement from my left and found Freya standing at the doorway to the workshop. I gestured for her to join us. This operation's success would have a huge impact on her life. She deserved to know what was going on.

Freya nodded to Hollis and Garcia before coming to stand beside me. “Hi, Brandon.” She waved, then leaned down to peer closely at the laptop. “Good Lord. Why did none of you tell me we’re working with Henry Cavill’s brother?”

Brandon’s fiancée, Sage, appeared on-screen. “Correction. Henry Cavill’s *annoying* brother.” The dark-haired beauty smiled and waved. “Hi, Freya. I’m Sage.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Freya replied.

Sage hooked her thumb toward Brandon. “If you want this man’s head to stay within the limits of your monitor, I recommend toning down the compliments.”

“Don’t listen to her.” Brandon hauled his fiancée onto his lap. “She’s just jealous because the woman from the ranch next door brought me cookies this morning and tried to set me up with her daughter. They were good cookies, too.” Sage rolled her eyes when Brandon nuzzled her neck. “Why don’t you bake me treats, baby?”

Sage scrunched her nose up. “Does anyone know if Montana has the death penalty for first-degree murder?”

I laughed. “Can you wait until this op is over? We need him.”

“Fine,” she grumbled, and climbed off Brandon’s lap. “He’s all yours.”

Brandon slapped her on the ass and watched her leave the room with a mischievous grin on his face. Then he returned his attention to the screen. “How are you holding up, Freya?”

Freya glanced at the four of us before shifting her gaze back to Brandon. “Well, my hot-guy bingo card is full, so things could definitely be worse. Kane is taking good care of me, and I’m very grateful to have you all in my corner.”

“We’re happy to help,” said Brandon. “The way I see it, we’re all benefitting if we get a good result from this op.”

I had to agree. Freya and her family were foremost in my mind, but equally important was making sure the heist didn’t come back to bite us on our asses. And if we eliminated a source of superior black-market weapons and helped wipe out a human-trafficking ring along the way, we were doing our fair share of good deeds for the week. The follow-on effects of this mission were huge. We had to nail it.

“And I have some good news for you,” Brandon added. “I checked on your family, and they’re fine. Your father is well, and your sister is busy training for a performance this weekend. There’s been no contact from Matisse, and they’re unaware of your disappearance.”

Freya’s shoulders relaxed. “Thank you. That’s a relief.”

Brandon nodded as if it were no big deal, but I knew how much Freya worried about her family. Learning they were safe took a load off her mind.

“All right,” said Brandon. “Let’s hear the plan our frogmen have come up with.”

Since I had the most experience, I’d taken on the role of team leader. I didn’t want it. Hell, I’d rather not do the op at

all, but I felt responsible for Freya's safety, and I'd never abandon Wy, Hollis, and Garcia to tackle this on their own. But every time I thought about slipping back into operator mode, uneasiness set in. My last mission had brought suffering and death to innocent people. Those memories were coming back tenfold as the hour of this op drew nearer.

There'd be civilians on the *Antoinette*. I couldn't afford to make another mistake. But Freya needed me. I would put my fears aside and do the op for her. If this brought her freedom, it'd all be worth it.

I picked up the pen from the notepad before me and clicked the end repeatedly. "Here's what I'm thinking. We go incognito in a Mexican fishing trawler and wait a couple of clicks from the *Antoinette*'s expected trajectory. When they get close, we infil on a RHIB. The radar on a civilian vessel won't be able to detect our approach with an inflatable craft. We board, snatch Matisse from his cabin, and with any luck the crew won't realize he's missing until they dock the next day."

Freya's arm brushed mine as she shifted position. Standing room around the table was cramped, but I liked that she aligned herself closer to me than the others. I had the urge to put my arm around her and bring her even nearer. Despite my no-touching rule, it almost felt odd not to. Freya wouldn't mind. Hell, she'd spent the last two days practically daring me to put my hands on her. She was a temptation like no other I'd been presented with, and I struggled to recall why I was so determined not to act on it.

Because she doesn't need another selfish asshole taking advantage of her.

Because you need all your concentration to protect her.

Because once will never be enough.

Yep. That was the bucket of icy water I needed thrown over my head.

Wy leaned against a tool cabinet. "And if things don't go so stealthy?"

"We'll wear masks and minimize casualties," I replied. "The crew is civilian. Restrain them if you need to, and hopefully none try to be a hero."

"I'll put up a drone so we have eyes in the sky," Brandon said. "I'll monitor from above during the op."

"Where do you want to do your interrogation?" Wy asked.

"Let's keep it offshore," said Brandon. "I'll run intel from the trawler, and once you exfil and bring Matisse on board, we'll get to work on him."

"All right." I tapped my pen on the bench. "We'll make a list of resources and get it to you tomorrow. Priority is sourcing an indigenous trawler that won't break down."

"Leave it to me." Brandon typed something into his phone. "Vaughn has contacts in Mexico. Maybe he can locate a suitable vessel. There's something else we need to talk about." Brandon's lips pressed into a grim line. "Matisse has upped his search for Freya. The guy he's hired is good. Really good."

Freya went statue still beside me.

“What are we looking at?” I asked.

“Dustin Campbell. Scottish national. Twelve years in the British SAS followed by eight with MI6.” Brandon brought up an image of a guy in his early forties wearing a slick suit, with short-trimmed dark hair and a beard. He’d resemble a politician if it weren’t for his broad chest and shoulders. “Nowadays, he operates a tracking business. If you’ve got enough money, he’ll find anyone you want. His clients are mostly criminal organizations who appreciate Campbell’s no-questions-asked service. Of course, he charges handsomely for that. Campbell has a similar skill set to me, which means he’s good at covering his tracks and has plenty of tricks. You’ll need to be careful.”

Shit.

“I’ll call Dylan,” I said. “See if he has any sway over him.”

Dylan was another Zulu teammate, who now worked with the CIA. Spies talked to one another, didn’t they? Maybe he knew this guy.

“I already have,” Brandon said. “He didn’t have anything good to say about Campbell. He confirmed he’s gone rogue and is unlikely to give up pursuing his objective. His exact words were ‘Like a starving dog sniffing out a meaty bone.’ He takes pride in his work and boasts about his success rate.”

“Which is?” Freya asked.

There was a moment of hesitation before Brandon said, “Flawless.”

“Wait.” Freya held a hand up. “Are you telling me he’s never once failed to locate the person he’s searching for?”

I hated that panic laced her voice.

Brandon leaned back in his chair and placed his hands on his thighs. “Not until now.”

Freya choked out a skeptical laugh. “How can you sound so confident?”

“Because he’s never come up against us,” Brandon replied.

All color leached from Freya’s face as she gripped the bench.

I turned to her. “Brandon’s a cocky son of a bitch, but he knows what he’s talking about. We’ll stay a step ahead of this guy, all right? Try not to worry.”

She gave me a tight nod. I needed to take my own advice because this news had me rattled, too. The situation was evolving rapidly. Suddenly, the op to snatch Matisse couldn’t come soon enough.

“Here’s what I know so far,” Brandon said. “Campbell has assigned a team to follow up on the stolen goods, and he’s taken the lead on another team to find Freya.”

“Great,” I groaned, and massaged the tight knot in the back of my neck. “What do you suggest we do about him?”

“The good news is Campbell’s private jet is on its way to Colombia. It’s the first place I’d look, and I can only assume the militia won’t be helpful when questioned about Freya’s disappearance. It’ll take Campbell a while to fully clear them of the kidnapping, but if he heads back to the States before our op, you’ll need to take precautions.”

“A safe house?” I asked.

“It may come to that. For now, your boat is a secure base. And there’s less risk if Freya stays in one place. You’re only using burners, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Brandon ran his hand along the five-o’clock shadow darkening his jaw. “In that case, I’ll continue to monitor Campbell and let you know if you need to move.”

“Appreciate it,” I said.

Freya wrapped her arms around her belly as if she’d caught a chill.

Brandon propped his hands behind his head. “Right. I’ll start getting everything together. I can spare a few guys from my team, and I have the C-130 available to fly the gear out to you in a few days. I wish it were under different circumstances, but it’ll be good to see you again, Brother. It’s been too long.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets. “It has. We’ll talk soon.”

Wy ended the call.

Freya listened in while the guys and I ran through the logistics of the op. A boat with a civilian crew and a small security detail would make this one of the easiest jobs we'd done, but we considered every step carefully because the stakes were so high.

Afterward, Hollis and Garcia said their goodbyes and Wy saw them to the front door.

Freya gave me a remorseful look.

I rested my hip against the workbench. "You'd better not be about to apologize again."

"It's very annoying when you read my mind." She stepped toward me. "I know this mission will be difficult for you. You don't have to tell me why. Just know that I wish you didn't have to do any of this."

I wanted to tell Freya about the accident. She'd shared some of her most difficult memories; the least I could do was explain why I was such a screwup. But the words caught in my throat.

Freya chewed on a fingernail. "The man hunting me. Campbell? He sounds dangerous."

I folded my arms. "He is, but so am I."

She hid her smile by pressing her lips together.

"What? You don't think I can take him?"

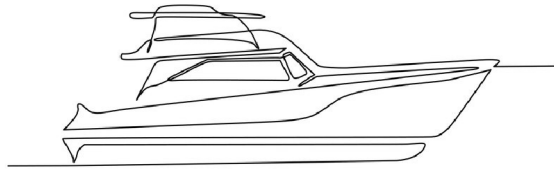
"I do. It's just that you're...you. You're sweet and funny. You wear board shorts and flip-flops and buy me junk food to

make me happy. It's a little hard to imagine the lethal version.”

She was right. I hadn't been that man in four years. But he was still in there. As much as I tried to ignore my baser instincts, a killer lurked beneath the surface, ready to face any threat that came our way. Anyone who tried to take Freya would get no mercy from me.

“Let's hope you never have to meet him.”

Freya



The streets were dark as we rode the Harley back to the yacht club. When we arrived without incident, I breathed a sigh of relief. But only a small one, because my head was filled with a hundred different things that could go wrong in the very near future.

I didn't care how confident Kane and the guys were. If any part of their well-laid plans collapsed, I'd end up back where I started. And if Andre figured out I'd orchestrated my own abduction, my life would be even worse than the last seven years I'd endured. How would he use that information to punish my family and me? What *discipline* would I receive?

And what would he do about Kane, Wyatt, and the guys? At best they'd end up in prison, but I didn't believe Andre would allow their transgressions to be handled so civilly. No. He'd hire someone to kill them, because he was a twisted, vindictive bastard. I hoped I hadn't condemned them all to a sickening fate.

Kane flicked the cabin light on and closed the door behind us. "You were as stiff as a board on the bike. Either my riding

skills need work or you're freaking out about the news we received at Wyatt's."

I passed him the jacket, and he tossed it onto one of the beds in the bunk room along with the helmet. "It's a little hard not to overthink it. Are you sure we're safe here?"

Kane met me in the middle of the living room. "Campbell isn't in the country. And even if he were in California and found us, he'd still have to get through me."

"Were you listening when Brandon outlined Campbell's resume? SAS, MI6. Andre might as well have sent Jason Bourne after me."

"So?"

"Are you really that good?"

Kane only lifted one brow and smirked. Whatever skills he had, he wasn't one to boast about them.

I stepped in closer and cast my gaze over the white T-shirt clinging to his broad chest. Traces of dark ink showed through the thin material. "And what else are you good at?" I bit my lip in a way I hoped made me look sexy rather than like a bucktoothed beaver. I really couldn't be sure.

"There is something else, actually." He shifted closer and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind my ear.

"Yes?" My lids fluttered closed as I savored the gentle caress.

“I am the goddamn master of resisting every one of your scheming attempts to get into my pants.”

My eyes snapped open, and I found Kane’s baby blues twinkling with amusement.

I scowled. “You’re mean.”

Kane belly laughed and headed for the kitchen.

I stomped after him. “And boring. Did I ever mention that? We could’ve spent the last few days shagging each other’s brains out, but instead you’ve been doing what? Getting greasy while tinkering on an engine and avoiding looking at my tits. How bloody dull!”

“Freya”—Kane opened the refrigerator —“have a beer and calm down.” He handed me an opened bottle and watched as I chugged half of it.

“You really know how to crush a girl’s self-esteem. You know that?” I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “How did I manage to turn a man whore into a prude? I mean, I’m sure that’s some kind of talent, but it’s not one I particularly want right now.”

“One day, you’ll thank me for setting boundaries.” He sipped his beer.

“No, I won’t.” I pointed the neck of the bottle toward him. “You should know that I plan to visit a witch doctor and have you cursed with involuntary celibacy. Better yet, I’ll have them make a Kane voodoo doll, and whenever I’m feeling especially frustrated, I’ll slam its testicles in a drawer.”

Kane laughed and almost spat out his beer.

“This isn’t funny!”

“I’m not saying it is. It’s just that you’re cute when you’re all riled up.”

“Cute?” I recoiled. “No woman trying to seduce a man wants to be labeled *cute*. Rub salt into the wound, why don’t you?”

He made a poor effort of trying to hide his mirth. “Bad choice of words. I’m sorry.”

I rested a hand on my hip. “How sorry are you?”

“How sorry?” His brow creased.

I shrugged. “I think you should make it up to me.”

Kane groaned. “Freya, we’re not—”

“Having sex. Yes, I know.” I rolled my eyes. “You’ve made it abundantly clear that you’re no fun at all and your peen is a no-go zone. What I want is for you to help me with the other things on my bucket list.”

Kane eyed me with suspicion. “Why are you so eager to start crossing them off?”

“If you haven’t noticed, shit is getting very real with Super PI on my trail and the mission to capture Andre fast approaching. The next few days might be my only opportunity to experience the things I’ve been dreaming about for years.”

“I wish you’d stop talking like that.”

“And I wish you’d get your head out of your arse and consider the possibility that the universe isn’t under your complete control.”

He stared at me with the frustrated expression of someone without a comeback.

“Humor me, at least,” I said. “What’s the problem with going through my list and seeing which ones are feasible? I can think of one.” I gulped the last of my beer, then wiggled the empty bottle with a smile.

“You want to get drunk?”

“Bingo, big guy. Who ever said navy SEALs are dumb?”

He frowned. “People think we’re dumb?”

“No. They think you’re a bunch of macho womanizers.” I held my palms up before he protested. “Which *you’re* obviously not. I’d be on my back with my legs in the air right now if that were the case. Shame.”

“All right. I guess I can bend on this one. But for the record, you’re going to regret this tomorrow when you wake up feeling like death.”

“And you have permission to laugh at me. A big fat *Ha-ha*, *I told you so*. Now, do you have anything stronger than beer so we can really get the party started?”

Kane reached for a cabinet above my head. “You wanna mess yourself up, this is your poison.” He showed me the bottle of yellowish liquor, but I didn’t recognize the simple-looking label.

“Tequila?” I asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

My eyes widened. “Now that’s what I’m talking about.” I’d never tried tequila but was interested to see what all the fuss was about. How many movies had I watched where people slammed back shot after shot at a bar? This was perfect!

“Matisse never let you drink?” Kane asked.

I followed him to the back deck. The twinkling lights of San Diego Bay shimmered over the water, and somewhere nearby a ferry blasted its horn.

“No. If we were at an event, Andre would have me hold a glass of wine to appear sociable, but I wasn’t allowed to drink it. He said it was because he always wanted me on my best behavior. I figured it was just another form of torture, because any chance to numb myself to his maliciousness would’ve been a blessing.”

Kane grunted his disapproval while laying out the bottle and a single shot glass on the table.

“Aren’t you going to join me?”

“No hard liquor while I’m on duty.” He unscrewed the lid and poured a dash into the glass.

“Suit yourself.” I picked up the tequila and gave it a sniff, screwing my nose up at the strong odor. “Is it supposed to smell like hand sanitizer?”

“It’s not top-shelf, princess.”

“Well. Bottoms up.” I tossed the shot back fast and instantly regretted it. Unable to swallow, I held the liquid in my mouth and must’ve made a very peculiar face if Kane’s entertained expression was any indication. Eventually, I managed to get it past my throat, shivering at the burn it left behind. “That”—I coughed, and another small convulsion rocked my body—“was truly vile.”

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t that rancid foulness. Pour me another.” I took a swig of Kane’s beer to wash the taste away.

He shook his head with a smile while he refilled my shot glass.

Knowing what to expect, I downed the next one easier. “I wish I could say it tasted better that time, but I’m pretty sure warm cat piss would be more appealing.”

“Maybe you should slow down.” Kane aimed a concerned look at me. “I should’ve fed you first. Let me see what I can find.”

When Captain Responsible went inside, I poured myself another shot. I had a feeling he’d hide the bottle if I got too tipsy.

Kane reappeared a short time later with a bag of crisps and a half-eaten tube of Oreos. “Dinner of champions,” he said, and dumped them on the table. “We’re low on groceries. I’ll go to the store tomorrow.”

I snatched an Oreo, twisted the biscuit sections apart, and licked the white icing from the middle. “Am I doing it right?”

“Like a pro.” He opened the crisps and shoved a few into his mouth.

I knocked back more tequila. It was still gross but getting easier to tolerate, especially if I chased the shots with beer. I smacked my lips together as a cozy warmth settled over me.

We spent the next hour snacking and chatting. I did my best to act normal, but I felt floaty and more relaxed than I had in...forever. I felt brave and invincible with Kane by my side. Part of me wished I could find Andre, slap him across his smug face and yell *Look at me, arse licker! I'm happy and free!*

“So what else is on your list?” Kane asked. “Things you can do here, I mean.”

“Hmm. Let me think. I guess this is kind of like a party.”

Kane switched on the outdoor radio, and an upbeat tune I didn't recognize came on. “Does that help?”

I nodded and ate a crisp. “Karaoke is on my list, although I'm not sure the yacht club residents would appreciate me belting out a dodgy rendition of ‘Girls Just Want To Have Fun.’ ” I tapped one finger against my lips, then sat up straight. “I've got it! Okay. Try to have an open mind.”

“Now I'm worried.”

I grinned wickedly. “We're going skinny-dipping.”

Kane tensed in his seat. “Absolutely not.”

I made an annoying buzzer sound. “Wrong answer. And it doesn’t matter. I wasn’t asking for permission.” I got up and tried to pull my T-shirt off, except it got stuck around my head. I wobbled on my feet as I finally tore it free, then pitched it at Kane’s stunned face.

“Freya!” He growled and stood so fast his chair almost tipped over. “Stop taking your clothes off.”

I undid my fly and yanked my cutoffs past my bum. “Would you listen to yourself? I bet that’s the first time you’ve spoken those words to a woman.” I hopped as I pulled one leg free, then landed on my bottom with a thud. Strange. It hadn’t even hurt. I burst into a fit of laughter at being such a klutz.

Kane didn’t find it amusing.

“I mean it,” he said.

“Or what?” I rose to my feet, leaving my shorts in a crumpled pile on the deck. “What exactly are you going to do about it, Mr. *I’m All Tattooed and Badass But Too Scared to Skinny-Dip with a Girl?* Huh?” I widened my stance when the boat started to sway. Or was it me?

Kane came for me until we were toe-to-toe. Me in my bra and knickers, him towering above me with a look on his face that suggested he either wanted to kill me or fuck me. I really hoped it was the latter.

He clamped his hands around my upper arms and hauled me inside the cabin. The door slammed behind us.

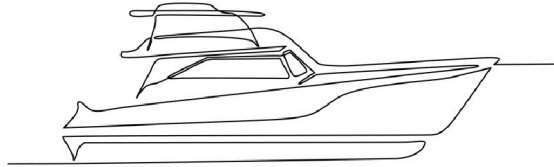
Before I knew it, he had me pushed against the wall and his face all up in mine.

“I should put you over my knee right now and make you think twice about being such a brat.” His chest heaved, and his wild eyes made him look a little unhinged. I’d never seen Kane flustered before, but I’d finally managed to get him worked up.

“Well”—I flashed him a devious grin—“now we’re finally getting somewhere.”

Then I kissed him.

Kane



Freya tasted of cheap tequila and every filthy thought I'd had about her since the moment we met.

She clung to my neck, fingernails digging into my flesh while her eager lips plundered mine. And I let it happen. Hell, I did more than that. I met every inviting lash of her tongue with my own and then some.

My rapidly tenting jeans proved an inconvenient truth: I wanted Freya more than I'd wanted any woman in my life. It didn't matter that somewhere deep in my subconscious I knew this was a bad idea. Every part of my body screamed that this was *right*. It demanded I devour her until I'd tasted and taken every part of her thoroughly, then do it all over again.

I gripped her jaw and pulled away, keeping her pinned against the wall. A small smile curved her parted lips. A confident smile that said *I've got you now*.

“Why are you doing this?” I growled, my tone harsher than I'd intended, but I lacked the control to rein in any of what I was feeling. “Why do you keep pushing every one of my goddamn buttons until I can't think straight?”

Freya panted against my mouth. “Because I don’t want you to think straight. I want you to stop telling yourself this is wrong. I want you to let go and take what you want. Take *me*.” She licked her lips. “Please, God, just do it. I want this so badly. Just once. That’s all I ask.”

My breath came sharp and ragged. I was so close to doing what she begged of me. What I wouldn’t give to wrap her legs around me, tear that flimsy thong to shreds, and plunge deep inside with one hard thrust. There’d be no holding back. I was so worked up I’d rut her like a frenzied beast. And that...that was *not* what Freya needed. *I* wasn’t what she needed.

“You don’t know what you’re asking of me.” I winced with the effort of holding back.

“I know exactly what I’m asking for. For the last seven years, I haven’t chosen a single thing for myself. But I’m free now, and I won’t live under anyone’s thumb ever again. I need this, Kane.” She clutched my forearms hard. “I need to take back what he took from me. And I choose *you*. I want *you*. So you can either do something about it or continue to deny us what we both desperately need.”

Freya was temptation personified. Everything about her called to me in a way I’d never experienced before. Yes, she was beautiful, but her strength, determination, and bravery set her apart. I admired the way she spoke her mind, wore her heart on her sleeve, and loved her family fiercely. That she’d survived her ordeal and maintained her sense of self was testament to her resilience.

Freya was right. The only person stopping us from enjoying this moment was me. She didn't want me to treat her like a victim, and I had no right to. She was safe with me; that was all that mattered. And I'd treat her the way she deserved. I'd respect her. Worship her. I'd give her more pleasure than she knew was possible.

As though sensing I was close to giving in, Freya added, "All Andre did was take and take, and the only thing he gave back was fear and pain. But you." Her brows drew together. "You're good and kind and so damn sweet, sometimes it makes my teeth hurt. You do things to make me happy and expect nothing in return. And you're tall." Freya leaned her head against the wall with a thud and stared up into my eyes. "God, you're so tall it makes my head spin. Like *really* spin. I don't remember it making me feel quite so dizzy before." Then she shut one eye and squinted the other as though struggling to focus.

Because she *was* struggling to focus. Why had it taken me so long to recognize that Freya wasn't just a little drunk? She was wasted.

"These muscles." She took hold of my biceps and squeezed. "They should come with a warning sign. *Ladies, beware! Spontaneous ovulation imminent! Double down on your contraception!*" She angled forward until her nose almost hit my chest. Greedy hands danced over my pecs and shoulders. "And your delicious tattoos." Her fingers traced the kraken tentacle up my neck. "They make me want to run my tongue

over every. Inky. Line.” She stuck her tongue out and stretched on tiptoe.

I grabbed her shoulders and shifted her back before she made contact.

“Do you want to hear something depressing? I’ve never once enjoyed sex.” She frowned and waved her hand in the air, almost smacking me in the face. “How bloody sad is that? Andre and his disgusting, selfish pencil dick can go to hell.” Freya leaned in close and spoke in a low tone. “But you don’t have a pencil dick, do you, Kane? And I bet you’re not selfish, either.”

She reached for my cock, and I snatched her wrist. “Freya —”

“Does my voice sound strange to you? It feels like my tongue isn’t working properly.” She ran it across her top teeth and smacked her lips together. Then she pointed at my face. “For the love of God, can you please stop moving around? I can’t figure out which of your heads I should be talking to. I mean, I can totally work with two heads. I’ll put them both to good use. Neither of you will miss out.” She made an exaggerated wink.

I smiled and shook my head. She was a happy drunk and a darn cute one, but she was going to be in a world of pain tomorrow. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I have ideas. *Lots* of ideas. You can thank the alien smut.”

“Mm-hmm. I think it’s time you went to bed.”

“You mean it’s time *we* went to bed.”

“I definitely mean just you. Singular. Solo.” Christ. She was hammered, and I’d almost fucked her hard against a wall.

“Do you wanna know what I think?” Freya poked me in the chest. “I think...I think”—she swallowed thickly and did a slow blink—“I think I’m gonna be sick.”

She shoved against me, but I didn’t let her go. Instead, I helped her to the back deck just in time for her to purge her guts over the side of the boat. I held her long locks out of the firing line as she groaned and clung to the edge with a death grip. She only had time to take a few labored breaths before more came up.

Freya moaned with exhaustion and slumped to her knees. “I don’t feel so good.”

I grabbed a bottle of water and unscrewed the lid. “Here. Don’t drink too much at once.”

She rinsed her mouth out and gave me a dirty look. “You knew this would happen. Didn’t you?”

“I should’ve taken better care of you. Made sure you ate a decent meal first and drank more water.”

“But you do take good care of me, Kane. The best.” She slapped at her eyes and stared at her wet fingers. “What is this shit? I don’t cry.”

I crouched beside her and rubbed her back. “You’re extra emotional because of the alcohol. Is your stomach any better now?”

“It feels like I ate a moldy burrito, then went on a rollercoaster. My gut will never forgive me for this.”

I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around Freya. Then I sat next to her and put my arm around her shoulder. “Come here.” She leaned against me, resting her head in the crook of my neck. “At least you can officially cross getting drunk off your bucket list.”

Freya grunted. “Too soon, Kane. At least have the courtesy to wait for the boat to stop spinning.” There were a few minutes of silence before she said, “I put my tongue in your mouth.”

“You did.” How could I forget?

“You kissed me back.”

I dragged a hand through my hair and let out a deep sigh. “Guilty.”

“I liked it. A lot.”

“Me, too.”

She wriggled in closer. “Does this mean we’re allowed to touch each other now?”

“Maybe a little.” I glanced down and caught her staring up at me with a megawatt grin.

That did it. I was officially pussy whipped without even having a taste of it.

We sat without talking, listening to songs on the radio while Freya sipped water and occasionally moaned in discomfort. At

one point, her breaths evened out, and I thought she'd fallen asleep with her head against my shoulder, but when I'd checked, she'd been gazing at the lights of the bay, deep in thought.

A navy helicopter flew low along the coast toward the base.

"Have you ever thought it's strange that you live here?" Freya asked.

"San Diego's my home. It's where I was born."

"No. I mean Coronado Island. So close to the navy base. You wanted to escape that life, but you're living a stone's throw from where it all began. I would've thought you'd want to be as far from here as possible."

"Living close to base serves as a reminder."

"Of what you were?"

"Of what I never want to be again."

Freya paused for a moment. "Was being a SEAL such a bad thing?"

I didn't know how to answer that and told her as much.

"Are you punishing yourself?" she asked.

"How come you don't slip into an alcohol coma like every other person who's had too much to drink?"

"Let me rephrase that." She ignored my question. "Do you think you're a bad person?"

I took a moment to consider before answering. "I don't think I'm a bad person, but even good people's actions have

consequences. Every decision we make can alter the course of other's lives." I changed position, pulling my knees up but keeping my arm around her. "I'm a trained killer, Freya. It doesn't matter that it was sanctioned. I never got to choose the targets, and I didn't always understand why I was sent to take out the people I did. But when you put high-powered weapons in the hands of a person like me, it's only a matter of time before you kill someone who didn't deserve it. Call it what you will. Collateral damage. Casualties of war. In any other place and time, it would be murder. The fact remains: if I'd never become a SEAL, innocent people would still be alive."

Freya pulled back to look me in the eye. "And how many more would be dead?"

I stared out at the bay. "It doesn't make up for what I did."

"What happened, Kane?" Her voice sounded small and uncertain.

I didn't want to talk about my last mission, but Freya deserved to understand how I'd come to be the messed-up person I was today. It'd been so long since I'd spoken about what had happened in Russia that I wasn't even sure where to start. So I gave her the brutal truth.

"I made a mistake, and it cost sixteen people their lives. Dozens more were injured. Men, women"—I glanced away—"children."

Despite the horror of my confession, Freya only rested her hand on my arm and waited for me to continue.

“I was with Zulu in Moscow. The op involved taking out a rogue CIA agent who’d defected. It was a sensitive mission because all hell would break loose if Americans were found operating in Russia, even if our government denied any involvement. That was the thing with our missions. If we got caught, we were on our own. It meant the team had a close bond. We had each other’s backs and left no man behind.

“This spy must’ve been valuable to the Russians, because they assigned him a top-level security detail. The safest way for us to get the job done undetected was by sniper shot. Minimal time in-country and we didn’t need to engage with the team protecting him. But getting to the spy was a problem. The only place I had a clear shot was at a hospital he visited once a week where his wife received cancer treatment.

“While she had her appointment, he’d sit in a waiting room. I was set up for the shot, but there was a change in location, and they went to another wing of the hospital. Our backup plan was to attack his vehicle as it left the hospital’s underground parking lot. Engaging like that put the team at risk, so I decided to find another way to make the shot. I didn’t have much time to reposition, but I did it and lined him up in my sight. The shot was clean. Straight through his temple. But when the bullet came out the other side, it hit a gas line and caused an explosion. News reports said it was a faulty pipe, although the FSB must’ve known it was an assassination.

“The op was rushed. I got sloppy. If I’d had time to focus on what else was going on in that room, maybe I’d have noticed the hazard. Maybe those people would still be alive.”

Freya's hand found mine. "Even if you'd had more time, maybe the result would've been the same. And you were trying to protect your team. Did any of them challenge your decision?"

"No. They trusted me, and I made the wrong call. One rushed decision. One bullet and sixteen innocent lives gone in a split second. Maybe another sniper would've chosen differently and sent the team to engage with the vehicle. Either way, I didn't want to be in that position again. I didn't have confidence in my judgment anymore, which made me a liability to the team. And I was done with it all. The killing. The orders we weren't allowed to question. I had to get out."

"I can understand that," Freya said quietly.

"After that, I went through a pretty dark time. It didn't feel right that I was never held accountable for my actions. Each of those lives weighed heavily on me. I didn't want them to be just a number or a name. They deserved better than that. I wanted to know who they were. I wanted to know their faces, where they'd lived, how their deaths had affected their families. It wasn't good for my mental health, but I needed to understand the pain I'd caused. I guess it took its toll on me, because I became a real nonfunctioning asshole for a while. Distanced myself from my teammates and family. Started doing stupid things and took risks that could've gotten me killed. I didn't acknowledge it at the time, but I think that was what I was hoping for."

Freya pulled my hand into her lap and squeezed tightly.

“Eventually I realized that was stupid and would only hurt the people I cared about. So I decided I had to do something to make a difference. I couldn’t fix my mistake, but there were things I could do to help. And when I was sitting in the house I owned, my big-screen on, truck in the garage, I realized I didn’t deserve any of it. Not when those families were suffering.

“So I sold everything. Had Brandon find out which of the victims’ families were struggling the hardest so I could anonymously transfer funds to them. Kept just enough to buy *Lucy*, but otherwise I’ve been living week to week ever since. Wyatt bought me the Harley and called it a birthday gift, but the truth is he got sick of me asking for a ride. Plus, he said it’s the closest thing I’ll get to therapy. I have nothing else to my name and no plans to change that. I’ve made as much peace with my mistakes as I can. I still have to live with what I’ve done for the rest of my days.”

“I’m so sorry, Kane. I’m sorry for the burden you carry, and I’m sorry you gave so much for your country and still feel like you failed.” She placed her warm palm on my cheek and stared into my eyes. “I wish you could see what I do. I wish you could see that you have a kind heart and a selfless soul, and that you *are* worthy of happiness and love. The mistake you made was tragic, but it was an *accident*. You don’t deserve to atone for it forever.” Her brow creased and she lowered her gaze to the floor. “You won’t allow yourself to have anything that brings you joy,” she said, seemingly to herself. Then her

eyes came back to mine. “This is why you don’t let anyone get close.”

I presumed she meant women. I wasn’t exactly sure how Freya had drawn that conclusion, but I guessed she was right.

I’d always imagined that one day I’d be like Wy, with a wife and family of my own. Guilt from the accident had kept me from pursuing that path, and my choice to live a minimal life had given me some level of peace. But I was happy enough, wasn’t I?

“I’ve been having other thoughts lately.” I rubbed my thumb over the back of Freya’s hand. “That if I didn’t have my SEAL training, I wouldn’t be able to help you. Feels like our paths crossed for a reason.”

Freya needed me, and maybe, just maybe, our time together was exactly what I needed, too.

She gave me a sad smile. “It does. And I’m very grateful for it.”

“So am I.” I exhaled a deep breath. “Come on. It’s bedtime.” I scooped her up in my arms. She must’ve been tired, because she didn’t fight it. She just leaned her head against my shoulder.

Of course that much tequila had made her unwell. She weighed next to nothing. It sickened me that Matisse’s neglect had made her this way. I’d do my best to put some meat on her bones while I could.

“Big breakfast for you tomorrow,” I said.

Freya moaned. “Keep talking about food if you want me to vomit again.”

I carried her to the bedroom and laid her on the mattress.

“Wait.” She clutched my hand before I could leave. “Sleep here with me tonight. Please.” When I looked at her with uncertainty, she added, “No funny business. I promise. This sounds so stupid, but I’m scared of the dark.”

“It doesn’t sound stupid.” Not since I knew why she was afraid of the dark. “Let me turn the music off and close up, then I’ll be back.”

“Thank you.” Her relieved expression made something twist inside my gut.

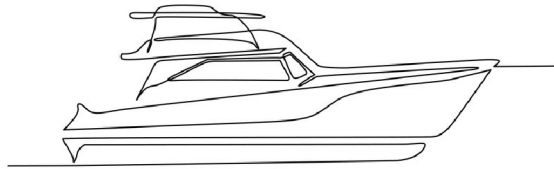
I wanted to fix the shitty things in Freya’s life, to be her rock so she never had to fight her battles alone, and to comfort her when the nightmares and vivid memories struck.

And that was the problem. I couldn’t be those things for her. Aside from the fact that she didn’t want a man doing any of that, if all went according to plan, she’d be gone from my life in less than a week. Freya would return to her family in London, and I’d go back to the commitment- and responsibility-free life I’d created.

That was the best outcome for everyone, wasn’t it?

Yet the hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach told me that when Freya left, nothing would be the same ever again.

Freya



A light tap at the door woke me from my restless slumber. When I opened my eyes, sunlight from the bedroom's small oval windows elevated my splitting headache to DEFCON 1. And if the world ended within the next ten seconds, that would be just fab because then I wouldn't have to deal with this godforsaken hangover.

I slapped a hand over my eyes to lessen the pain. Lord have mercy. What was wrong with my mouth? Had I cleaned the floor with my tongue last night?

"How are you feeling?" came Kane's rumbly voice from nearby.

I rolled over with a groan and covered my head with a spare pillow. "I'm dying."

"You're not dying." He had the sense not to laugh at my appalling state, but I heard the amusement in his tone all the same.

"What if I am? What if I'm the first person to actually die from a hangover? Then you'll feel terrible for mocking me."

One side of the mattress sank under Kane's weight. He dragged the pillow from my grip, and I opened one eye to see the smug look on his annoyingly handsome face.

"Shut up." The room spun when I lunged at him and snatched the pillow back.

Kane chuckled. "I didn't say anything."

"Yes, but your face is yelling *I told you so*."

"You wanted life experiences and to learn from your mistakes."

I scowled. "That pistol is around here somewhere. If there weren't a hundred tiny hammers playing a vigorous game of Whac-a-Brain Cell inside my head, I'd go find it."

"You won't shoot me, because I'm going to make you feel better."

Interested in his proposal, I opened one eye again and spied Tylenol, a bottle of water, and a toasted sandwich on the nightstand.

With effort, I sat up and took the pills, then looked at the sandwich with a frown. "My stomach is violently protesting the idea of food."

"I promise it's what you need. Try a few small bites."

I placed the plate in my lap. The sandwich was a crisp golden brown and cut into four perfect triangles. Kane had even trimmed the crust the way Dad used to. Something in my chest squeezed.

“You made me grilled cheese?” I asked.

“Pro hangover cure.” He watched me with a look of anticipation. It reminded me of when my sister would bake cookies and wait with bated breath for our father’s approval. He always gave it to her. Even the time she used salt instead of sugar.

I picked up one portion and nibbled on a corner. *Yum*. Okay. Maybe my queasy gut needed food after all. I bit off a larger section. “It’s really good,” I said around a mouthful. Something I’d never have done in Andre’s presence, but Kane didn’t care.

“It’s a Daniels family specialty. My mom used to—”

And then he said something about extra butter and a particular brand of cheese, but I wasn’t paying attention. I returned the portion to the plate and stared at it while my vision blurred with moisture.

“Freya?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s wrong?”

“You made me your mum’s special grilled cheese.”

“Yeah.”

“And you brought me headache pills to make me feel better.”

He scratched the back of his neck. “It’s no big deal.”

“And last night, you let me throw an impromptu boat party and get drunk just so I could check it off my list. And you’re not even mad that I turned into an inebriated mess, tried to molest you, and very nearly covered you in vomit.” I swallowed against the tight knot clogging my throat. “Since I arrived, you’ve given me more freedom and happy moments than I’ve had in the last seven years. You’ve provided a roof over my head, protected me from danger, given me hope for the future. I don’t know how to thank you.”

My windpipe closed over. Nope. Nuh-uh. I wouldn’t cry.

“Freya, look at me.”

But I couldn’t. Not without bursting into tears.

I dropped the plate onto the nightstand, intent on fleeing the room and locking myself in the loo. Silly, yes. But I wasn’t about to have an emotional breakdown in front of Kane. I shoved the blanket off my legs.

Kane braced his hands on either side of my hips. “Get back in the bed.” His commanding tone took me by such surprise that I froze. Not because I was scared of him. Never that.

He held my stare. “You don’t owe me anything. This is what decent people do. We care for those who need help. We protect the ones who can’t defend themselves.” He took two slow breaths. “I won’t ever expect payment for taking you in and treating you the way you deserve. For as long as you need my protection and a roof over your head, you’ll have it. Do you understand?”

I nodded because I couldn't talk coherently if I tried.

“Besides, I like making you happy.” Kane reached out and ran his thumb along my trembling bottom lip. “And while you're here, I'm going to keep giving you that, so get used to it.”

Oh boy. Could I ever.

“We're really doing the touching thing?” Hazy memories returned from last night when I'd sat snuggled against Kane's chest, his arm around my shoulders and his hand slowly stroking my hair. Despite how ill I'd been, sitting with him had been special. And what he'd told me about that tragic accident had been difficult to hear, but I was honored he'd shared his story with me.

“Yeah.” He smiled. “We're really doing the touching thing.”

I cleared my throat. “Just to be clear on the touching thing, how much is allowed?”

“I don't want you rushing into anything and regretting it later, so we should take it slow.”

I neglected to mention that my plans definitely didn't involve taking things slow. “What made you change your mind?”

“I realized you're right and I'm an idiot.”

I imagined his reasoning was far more complex than that, but I wasn't complaining. “In that case, just let me brush my teeth.”

Firm hands held me in place when I tried to climb out of bed.

One of Kane's brows lifted. "I thought you were dying?"

"I've had a miraculous recovery."

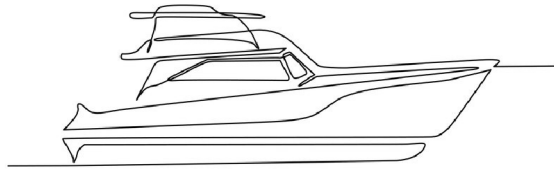
His lips twitched. "I'm glad to hear that, but I want you to rest up."

He jerked his chin toward the door. "I'm heading to the store to get us some supplies. Just got off the phone with Brandon. He said Campbell is still chasing dud leads, so you'll be safe on your own for a short while. More good news. He's found a trawler for our op. Wy's heading to Ensenada port to check it out today. It looks like everything's coming together." He kissed me on the forehead, and I thought I might melt.

I nodded and gave Kane a small smile. Despite his optimism, I couldn't share the same feelings. Every time I thought about what he and the guys planned to do, a knot of anxiety coiled inside me. It wasn't that I lacked faith in Kane's abilities; it was that Andre had an uncanny ability of worming his way out of any situation.

Kane pulled a burner phone from his pocket and left it on the nightstand. "There's one number programmed in there. Call if you need anything."

Freya



After Kane left, I ate most of the grilled cheese sandwich, then took a short nap. Feeling much better, I showered and settled back into bed to continue reading *Savage Alien* book five. I almost jumped out of my skin when the burner phone rang from the nightstand.

I smiled when I checked the screen and it read *God of Thunder*.

I answered. “Make it quick, Thor. Charlotte is about to get impaled on some monster alien cock, and I’m going to need my hands free for other things, if you catch my drift.”

“It sounds like someone is feeling better.” Kane’s deep voice only added to the warmth settling low in my belly.

“I’m definitely feeling something. This book is the hottest one yet.”

“I’m really glad I decided not to use speakerphone. The store lady is already giving me strange looks.”

“And why is she doing that?”

Was she checking him out? Flirting with him? I had the sudden irrational urge to punch this ogling store bitch in the face.

“Because I’m in a department store and I’ve been wandering around the lingerie section looking lost for almost fifteen minutes.”

I sat up. “You kinky bugger. Are you buying me sexy knickers?”

“That wasn’t my intention. I bought you some new clothes because you only have the one set and are probably sick of wearing mine. Then I figured you’d need panties and bras, too. Apart from the racks of thick-strapped beige abominations my grandma might wear, everything else is lacy and silky and... tiny. It all looks sexy to me. So yeah. I guess I am buying you *sexy knickers*.” The last part he said in his best posh British accent, making me giggle.

“And now you’re wondering what I’ll look like in them, aren’t you? Are you walking around the store with a hard-on?”

“No,” he said a little too emphatically. “Just...can you help me out, here?”

“With the raging boner you’re pretending you don’t have?”

“Freya,” he groaned.

It was too much fun messing with him. “All right, all right. What’s the problem?”

He sighed. “Will you please tell me what bra size you are so the next time the lady asks if I need help, I don’t have to use

inappropriate hand gestures or references to fruit?”

“That depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“On whether you tell me what fruit you’d have chosen to describe my tits.”

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Not a chance.”

“Fine. Grapefruit.”

“Would you say...ripe ones?”

“That’s it. I’m buying you ugly bras.”

“Don’t you dare!” I told him my size quickly just in case he felt tempted to follow through with the threat.

“One more thing,” he said. “Thong or some other style of panties?”

“You know I wear a thong.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t sure if that was your choice. I’m giving it to you now.”

“Good answer.” His sweetness made my chest tighten while simultaneously making my lady parts clench. “Thong.”

“Goddamn.” That one raspy word did more strange things to my insides. “I like that.”

My breath quickened at knowing he was turned on by this phone call as much as I was.

“Color?” he asked.

“Why don’t you choose whichever ones you like best.” My hand crept between my legs, and I squeezed my thighs together. There was something so intimate about having Kane’s voice at my ear. I imagined him lying next to me, his lips on my neck while his hand moved over the thin barrier of my underwear.

He took a moment to answer. “I can do that.” More silence, then, “Freya, what are you doing?”

“Just...lying in bed.”

“Asking this question might be the worst idea I’ve ever had, but...why are you breathing so fast?”

“I think you already know the answer to that.” I let out a small moan when my fingers slipped inside my panties.

“You’re killing me, here.” He exhaled roughly. “Have you done this before?”

“Touched myself? Of course.”

“No. I mean phone sex.”

When he said it like that, his voice low and just for me, it sounded so dirty. I wanted more. “Is that what we’re doing?”

“It will be if it goes much further.”

A small smile formed on my lips. “Let’s keep going.”

He made a noise of appreciation, as though he’d just sipped a fine whiskey. “I’m heading for a quieter part of the store. I need you to do exactly as I say.”

“Okay.”

“Put me on speaker and lay the phone on the pillow beside you. Are your panties still on?”

“Yes.”

“Get rid of them.” The eagerness in his tone made me even more excited.

I shimmied them down my legs and tossed them to the floor.
“Done.”

“Now, lay back and get comfortable. Then I want you to close your eyes and listen to my voice.”

I did as Kane said, then my heart rate kicked into overdrive.

“Spread your knees wide.”

His rough words sent a jolt to my core. I let my legs part, and cool air met my exposed flesh. This felt so different to other times I’d done this when I’d been on my own and hidden away under the covers. Kane might not be with me physically, but he was right here.

“Are you nice and open for me?” he asked.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Good. Now I want you to slide your fingers along that sweet pussy and tell me how wet you are.”

Hearing Kane say sexy things about my lady parts made my stomach tumble over a cliff.

I moved my hand slowly down my body until I reached between my thighs. Every part of me felt hypersensitive.

“I’m wet. Really wet.”

“Hallelujah for alien smut. Now, tell me what you’re doing.”

“Slow circles. On my clit.” I closed my lids when my insides clenched.

“That’s perfect. You’re doing so good.”

His words sent another muscle spasm through me. How was he able to turn me on so thoroughly when he wasn’t even in the room?

“I wish I were there watching. I’m never going to look at my bed without thinking of you spread out on the covers, your hand at your pussy.”

“Oh God.” A rush of warmth spread over me.

Kane let out a satisfied laugh. “My princess likes it when I talk dirty.”

“Yes.” I really did. More surprising was how much I liked him saying I was *his*.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“You. That you’re here, standing at the end of the bed watching me do this.”

The growling sound Kane made had a devious edge to it. “Baby girl, if I were there, I wouldn’t be content just watching.”

“What...what would you do?”

“I’d have to taste you. I’d have my mouth between your legs in a heartbeat, and have you writhing beneath me the

next.”

He said it with such certainty that a needy sigh ghosted over my lips.

“Is that what you want me to do, Freya? Do you want me to work your pussy with my tongue until you can’t take it anymore?”

“Please” was all I could mutter as my touches grew more urgent.

“You don’t know how much I want that, too.” Kane’s voice sounded strained, as if he were hanging on to a sliver of control. “Push your finger inside. Tell me how it feels.”

I did as he said, arching my hips off the bed to drive in as deep as I could. “Warm. Soaked. Like I need something more inside me.” With each thrust, I allowed the heel of my palm to brush against my clit.

Kane’s chuckle sounded devious. “Well, we can’t have that. Add a second. Fill yourself for me.”

I imagined it was Kane entering me. What would his piercing feel like as he moved within me? What would it feel like to have his weight above me, pressing his hips into mine?

“I bet you have a gorgeous pussy. All pink and glistening from how turned on you are. So soft and ready for me. It must look so fucking hot with your fingers sliding inside. It’ll look even better when I fill it with my cock.”

A pained cry slipped from my throat. “Keep talking.”

“You couldn’t stop me if you tried. Go back to working your clit. How does it feel?”

“It’s swollen. So sensitive. Tingling,” I said, almost breathless.

“Good. Work it faster.”

I squirmed on the bed, so close to release.

“Now imagine I’m there with you. Imagine it’s my hands holding you open. My beard against your thighs as I go down on you. My fingers fucking you. Dammit, Freya. I’m so hard right now just thinking about all the things I wanna do to you.”

“Kane. I’m going to come. I’m—” With a raspy moan, I tipped over the edge.

All at once my inner muscles pulsed, my limbs tensed, and my entire body flooded with molten heat.

“That’s it, baby girl.”

Kane continued saying filthy things in a hushed voice, but I was so lost to my climax nothing made sense anymore.

My pulse raced. Sweat covered my skin. I’d never come so hard in my life. It was like an epiphany orgasm because yes, sex with another person could be fantastic, even if it was over the phone.

“Fuck. That was hot,” he said.

“Thank you. I really needed that.”

“Two things, Freya. One. You don’t ever thank me for making you come. I got more pleasure out of that than you’ll

ever know. And two. Get used to it, because hearing you make those sounds is addictive, and I want more of it.”

“I made sounds?”

“Princess, I have a hard-on that isn’t going away because of the noises you make when you come. There’s a good chance I’ll be arrested soon if I don’t get out of here.”

“Then get out of there.”

“I’m already walking. Do me one favor.”

“Anything.”

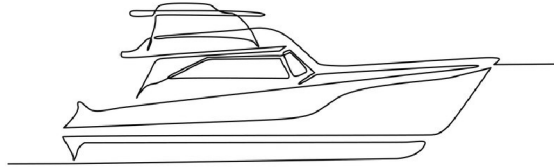
“Don’t shower. Don’t even wash that hand. Okay?”

“You’re a dirty, dirty man.” I rolled onto my side and stretched like a cat, basking in endorphins.

“You have no idea, but you’re about to find out. I’m coming home right now.”

“Hurry,” I replied, but Kane had hung up.

Kane



I stepped inside the cabin, kicked the door closed, and dumped my phone, keys, and shopping bags on the dining table. Freya stood fast from the couch. She hadn't been reading or listening to music like she usually did. If I had to guess, I'd say she'd done nothing other than wait for my return. Why did I like that so much?

Her long blond hair sat in a messy pile on top of her head, and the old Metallica T-shirt she wore reached midhigh. Gone was the manicured princess I'd picked up days ago. Freya had been beautiful then, but now—makeup-free, light freckles across her nose and cheeks, and the golden tan she'd gained sunbathing on the deck—she looked like my goddamn dream woman.

She looked like *mine*.

Freya shifted on her feet as we stared at each other in silence. The only sounds came from the gentle whir of the refrigerator and the ragged breaths I took while barely holding myself back from hauling her into my arms.

Did she regret what we'd done on the phone? Did she want more? Freya touching herself was one thing, but me laying hands on her was very different.

"It's not too late to change your mind," I said, my hands twitching at my sides.

"I haven't." She shook her head sharply. "I won't."

I dropped my chin and gave her a pointed look. "I still think we take this slow."

She shrugged one shoulder innocently and might as well have said *That's cute, but I own your dick now, so stop telling me what to do.*

I was so fucked.

The question I'd been desperate for an answer to came out in a hurry. "Did you do like I said?"

Freya licked her lips and nodded.

Three fast strides and I stood before her. She craned her neck to look up at me, and I swore she hadn't blinked once since I'd walked through the door.

"Which one?" I asked.

Her brows pinched in question.

"Which hand did you make yourself come with while you thought about me?"

She raised her right hand. I took it and inhaled deeply. Freya's lips parted while she watched me through widened eyes. My dick stood to attention when her musky scent

overwhelmed my senses. *Perfection*. And now all I could think about was burying my face between her thighs until she came so hard she begged me to stop.

Her emerald-green eyes held me transfixed. My body hummed with a phantom electric current, urging me to fuse myself to the goddess standing before me. What had she done to me? I was under Freya's spell and at the tipping point of giving in to her every wish.

Freya didn't want or need to be coddled. She wanted to experience life in all its vivid colors. She wanted to call the shots and make her own choices because that control had been taken from her for so long.

Freya was ready for this.

But...was I?

My *one and done* rule existed for a good reason. It left me with zero chance of getting attached and wanting something I didn't deserve.

Maybe I didn't have to break my rules. If Freya and I slept together once, she'd be out of my system, and the craving that had rapidly built to an obsession would vanish.

Bucket list checked. Itch scratched. Things could return to normal.

Yeah, right.

As if I'd be able to stop after having her once. If I got even a taste of Freya, I might as well sign myself up for an addiction therapy group. Maybe that was what I deserved. To

have her, to know her sweetness, and then for it to be torn from me when she left. Because I suspected the day Freya returned to her family thousands of miles away, she'd leave a gaping hole in my life where her beauty and vivacity had already taken root.

We shouldn't do this. I knew it. Wyatt had told me a bunch of times. Deep in my bones I recognized it was a one-way ticket to trouble.

And still...

"Fuck it," I said, and crashed my lips against hers.

With one hand at Freya's neck and the other at her waist, I pulled her against me. Tongues lashed and hands gripped as we devoured each other in a frenzy. I should be gentle. I should go slow. But I fucking *needed* this woman more than air. It felt like I'd waited an eternity to have her, not days.

"How far do you want this to go?" I asked between impatient kisses.

"All the way. I want everything." She reached for my T-shirt and yanked it over my head.

I backed Freya up until her ass bumped the table. After clearing everything from its surface with one hurried sweep of my arm, I lifted her onto it.

I stood between her legs and clasped her jaw, forcing her to meet my stare. "Then you should know that I'm going to feast on you and fuck you until you lose count of how many times I make you come."

She made a whimpering sound and gnawed on her bottom lip, drawing my attention there. I growled and claimed her mouth with a dominating kiss.

As I ground my hips against hers, we let out a simultaneous groan of pleasure. The rickety table creaked.

“Will this thing hold us?” Freya asked.

“Not with everything I want to do to you.”

“We’re going to destroy your boat.”

“Don’t give a fuck. I’ll fix it later.” But there *was* something I cared about. I pulled back to look her in the eyes. “I want you badly, and there’s a good chance I’m gonna lose my mind and forget to be gentle with you. So I’m going to ask you what color you’re feeling. If you’re good, you tell me green. If you want things to slow down, you use orange. And if at any time—and I mean *any* time, Freya—you want me to stop, you say red. All right?”

“Okay.” She drew me in for another kiss, but I stopped her.

“Promise me. It’s important. I only want this to be good for you.”

“I promise.”

“That’s my girl.” I took her mouth again. “You’re in complete control here. You can ask me to do anything you want. Tell me what you like.”

A shiver ran through her when I moved my lips to her neck. “I...I don’t know what I like.”

I held back a growl of disgust for the piece of shit who'd never shown her an ounce of tenderness. I'd find out what Freya liked. I'd relish every second of learning what set her on fire and elicited those sexy little sounds she'd made over the phone. One thing already came to mind.

“You enjoyed the way I spoke to you earlier.”

“Yes. God, yes. More of that,” she said, her voice deepening.

I smiled against the delicate skin at the base of her neck. “Princess really does like my dirty mouth.”

“I do.” Freya's fingers dug into my scalp. “I hope it's capable of more than just erotic words.”

“You'd best believe you're about to find out.”

I kissed her with renewed vigor, desperate to taste her again. Freya moaned and lapped her tongue against mine. She might not be experienced in receiving and showing affection, but she matched my demanding advances like a natural. There was no shyness or awkwardness.

Freya had been hoping this would happen between us. Was this how she'd imagined it would be? I wanted her to use me, to learn with me. I'd show her how good this should be and pray she never settled for anything less.

I ran one hand down her neck, past her collarbone, and over the luscious curve of her breast hidden beneath the T-shirt. She arched into my palm, urging me to take her firmly. I squeezed her soft fullness—a perfectly overflowing handful—then

rolled her peaked nipple between my thumb and forefinger. Freya's hands landed on my shoulders, and she bit down on my lip.

"Color?" I asked.

"Green," Freya snapped. "Don't stop."

"Yes, ma'am."

I lowered my other hand to her knee and ran my palm up her thigh, over her hip, and—

Fuck me.

"Baby girl, why aren't you wearing panties?"

She gave me a knowing smile. "It seemed like a waste of time putting them back on."

Slowly, I lifted her shirt to her belly. Any blood not already in my dick made its way there for backup, rendering my brain utterly useless. "Christ, Freya. Look at you."

My cock twitched and strained against my shorts as if trying to stage a breakout. It was no secret I loved pussy. Eating it, fingering it, fucking it. But staring between Freya's parted legs, I didn't feel worthy. To me, she was...perfect. Dusky pink lips slick with arousal. More moisture coated the tops of her thighs. My girl was wet for me, and didn't that make my balls tighten? I still couldn't believe Freya wanted her *real* first time to be with someone like me.

My eyes shot back up to meet hers. Each breath made Freya's chest rise and fall. Her heated gaze encouraged me to

continue, but I must've been too slow, because she said, "I swear to God, if you don't touch me there in the next three seconds, I'll do it myself."

"Ah-ah." I shook my head. "You had your turn earlier. This is mine to play with now."

I ran one finger through her wetness, then rubbed small circles over her clit, the way I knew she liked because she'd described her actions while on the phone.

She flinched and spread her thighs wider, leaning back on her arms. "More," she demanded.

I liked that she wasn't shy about her body or letting me know what she wanted. Her boldness was such a turn-on.

I plunged a finger inside and let out a growl. "Fuck. You're tight."

Freya hissed and clenched around me as she arched her spine.

I almost shot my load at the feel of her wet heat and the sight of my finger entering her. Most girls closed their eyes at this point. Not Freya. She watched my hand working her as if it were the wickedest thing she'd ever witnessed.

"Is that a problem?" she asked.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of you."

"I know you will. You always do." Freya gasped when I pushed in farther and curled my finger. "That feels amazing."

"I need you to do something. Relax for a second, all right?"

She nodded and let loose a long exhale. Just then, I worked in a second finger, and Freya's lips parted on a breathy "Oh."

"Color?" I asked.

Freya smirked. "Do you really need to ask?"

I lowered my chin. "Maybe I just like hearing it."

"Green as clover as long as you don't stop."

Her firm grip around my fingers eased as I slowly continued my movements. Freya was no virgin, but she'd only been with Pencil Dick before this. I was a decent length and thicker than most. She wasn't ready for me yet, but we'd have fun getting her there.

She sucked on her lip. "That feels really good. So full."

"This is nothing, baby girl." I grabbed her hand and pressed it against my aching cock. "Do you think this sweet little pussy of yours can take all of me?"

Freya ran her palm from tip to base. Her unblinking eyes followed her hand's movements. "That's...that's a lot."

I took her hand and pinned it to the table. If she kept touching me, I'd come before she did. "It is. But I promise to make it feel so good you'll want every inch of it."

She made a small, needy sound and clamped down on my fingers again.

"That's perfect. Squeeze me. Keep making those noises. Do whatever feels good, because there aren't any rules here."

I leaned down and claimed her mouth with a scorching kiss.
“Take the T-shirt off. I want to see all of you.”

She obliged and tossed it to the floor.

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

Those tits had teased and tormented me for days, and they were even more gorgeous than I’d imagined. And I’d spent *a lot* of time imagining them. Freya was a walking wet dream.

“Why’d you stop?” she asked.

Had I? Shit.

My eyes roamed her body. “Because you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever laid eyes on. Because you being naked with my fingers inside you is making it difficult for me to multitask.”

She smiled. “How exactly are you multitasking?”

“I also have to remember how to breathe, Freya. Cut a man some slack.”

She laughed but abruptly stopped when I began pumping my fingers again, making sure to stroke her clit with a gentle rhythm. Shifting from her elbows, she lay back on the table and made a low sound that had my dick throbbing.

I bent over and took her breast in my mouth, sucking hard on the firm peak.

“Oh God, oh God.” Freya clutched my hair and held my face to her chest.

My tongue circled her nipple. “That’s it, baby. Pull my hair, scratch my skin, mark me any way you like. I want you to. It makes me so fucking hard.”

I kissed my way down her belly until I knelt before her, exactly how she deserved.

My princess.

My goddamn *queen*.

With my head between her thighs, my mouth took over from where my thumb had been circling her clit. Freya gripped my hair with renewed strength and almost bucked her ass clean off the table. Using my free hand, I hauled one of her legs over my shoulders. The other followed suit.

Then I fucking *devoured* her.

Already I knew I’d spend as much time as possible with my tongue buried in her pussy. I’d never been so turned on by giving someone else pleasure. I always took the time to make a woman come before me, but it was as much about my sense of male pride as it was their enjoyment. With Freya, it was different. I didn’t care if I gave her a thousand orgasms and had to relieve my aching balls myself. It’d be worth it just to hear her blissed-out moans and watch her beautiful face each time I sent her over the edge of oblivion.

No, this wasn’t about me at all. It was about making Freya feel good. It was about giving back her control. It was about righting so many wrongs inflicted upon her by a psychopathic motherfucker I’d end with my bare hands one day very soon.

What was it about this woman that drove me blind with lust to the point of insanity? I'd never wanted someone with such rabid craving in my life. I was never jealous or possessive over women, but the thought of Freya with someone else sat as comfortably as dipping my junk in a bucket of icy water. As sure as the sun would set today, I'd sooner murder a man than let him have this. Her beauty. Her playfulness. Her gorgeous fucking body laid out before him begging to be taken.

She made me question every one of the rules I'd stuck to for years. She made me forget the sins of my past. She made me want what I'd promised myself I'd never have.

Freya writhed and moaned so hard I stilled her with one firm hand against her chest. She cried out, and sharp fingernails dug into my scalp.

"Color," I growled without taking my mouth from her.

"Green. Really bloody green. It's just...intense. Don't stop."

And I didn't. The barbarian in me took undeserved satisfaction in knowing I was the only man to take her this way. She was divine. The feel of her on my tongue. Her taste. The way she squirmed beneath me.

My balls ached. My cock was an uncomfortable rod in my shorts. I put my needs aside and focused on bringing Freya pleasure. I wanted her to know how incredible this could be. That she deserved to be worshiped every day of her life and should never accept anything less than utter care and devotion from a future partner.

But fuck me, I wanted to be the one to give it to her.

I had no right to lay claim on her, especially when the last thing she wanted was some guy telling her she was his.

It didn't stop me from rolling the idea around in my head. What if she wanted to stay? What if I could keep her?

More importantly, who the hell was I anymore? I didn't do relationships. I fucked. I said goodbye. My time with Freya would be no different. It *couldn't* be any different. She'd be gone from my life in a matter of days whether I liked it or not.

So I'd spend whatever time we had left showing her exactly how a man should treat her. A foolish part of me wanted to imprint this experience on her so she'd remember me for years to come even if she was thousands of miles away. It was only fair. Time and distance wouldn't stop me from thinking of her.

Freya panted, and another desperate moan cut through the silence of the cabin. I grabbed her thighs and held her pinned to my face. Her hips jerked against me while I thrust my fingers inside her and lapped at her swollen clit.

Freya's breathing quickened. "Kane."

A growl rumbled in my throat. "Say that again. Fucking love the way my name sounds on your lips when you're breathless."

"Kane!" she called out louder this time.

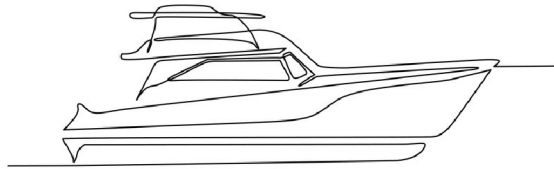
Then I sucked on her hard and drove my fingers in deeper.

Hips bucked. Hands grabbed. Freya muttered curses and thrashed on the table in a frenzy. She cried out. Her thighs clamped around my face, and her pussy throbbed around my fingers. I felt like the luckiest son of a bitch on the planet as I watched my girl completely shatter with a powerful climax.

The importance of this moment wasn't lost on me. Like a phoenix unfurling its wings and rising from the ashes, Freya was taking control of her sex life, and it would only empower her further. Each day since her escape, she'd grown bolder, stronger, and more determined. Nothing could distract her from fulfilling her dreams now.

Not even me.

Freya



My body pulsed, and my heart thumped wildly. Fire licked across my sweaty skin.

Kane infiltrated every one of my senses in the most overwhelming way. I was surrounded by his salty masculine scent. He was in me. On me. My hands still clutched his long wavy hair, and my legs remained curled around his shoulders.

I...I'd had no idea an orgasm could feel *that* good. This was revolutionary. A game changer. Was it always this earth-shattering with another person? Or was it just Kane?

His fingers continued pumping slowly as I came down. I propped myself up on my elbows to watch Kane kiss the inside of my thigh. His beard tickled where it brushed against my skin. He stared at me like I'd just discovered a cure for cancer or walked on water. Strange since he'd been the one with all the skills. I'd just lain here and taken everything he'd given.

“Do you think this sweet little pussy of yours can take all of me?”

A shiver of anticipation rolled through me.

Too right I'd take all of him. I'd ride that man into the sunset hollering *yeehaw* the whole bloody way.

Kane kissed my other thigh. "That was the sexiest goddamn thing I've seen in my life."

He made me feel safe. Safe to be myself, safe to let go of my troubling past experiences, and safe to trust him with my body.

He made me brave enough to ask for whatever I wanted. And right now, I wanted *him*.

I panted and swiped sweaty strands of hair from my face. "Kane?"

"Yes, baby girl."

Two silly little words that made butterflies take flight in my stomach. I was neither a baby nor a girl. But when spoken by him, I felt...treasured. *Ugh*, his sweetness was killing me. I needed dirty-mouthed Kane to return before I melted into a puddle on this table.

I lifted one brow. "Get up here and fuck me."

Still between my thighs, Kane clicked his tongue in mock disapproval. "So bossy."

"Would you move any faster if I said get up here and fuck me *please*?"

He stood to his full height. God, I loved how he towered over me. I marveled at his broad, tanned shoulders and lean

hips. The ocean-themed ink covering his muscular arms and torso was a work of art I could get lost in for days.

Kane leaned his body over mine, his hands braced on either side of me. “Princess, do me a favor and take hold of my cock.”

I complied, running my hand over the thick bulge tenting his shorts. Holy hell, he was big. But I was ready. *So* ready.

“Do you feel how hard I am?” he asked while his blue gaze held mine.

I licked my lips and nodded.

“That’s what you do to me. You only need to look at me across the room and I’ll be ready for you in a split second. So you never need to beg me to fuck you. You ask. I give. And I’m going to keep on giving for as long as I have you because that’s what you deserve. Understand?”

I nodded again and swallowed deeply. Moisture pooled in my eyes, but I blinked it away. “Okay.”

“Good. Now we need to move because this table won’t survive the next part, and I don’t want you getting hurt when it comes crashing down. Hold on to me.” Kane picked me up, and I wrapped my limbs around him. He kissed me all the way to the bedroom, and I tasted myself on his lips. It reminded me of what we’d just done, sending a new shot of heat to my core.

He laid me on the bed and stripped out of his shorts. I’d have to explore the tattoos on his hips and upper thighs later. I was only slightly surprised to discover that his dick was ink-

free, although the barbell through the end was an enticing adornment.

Kane was... God, he was so beautiful it made my breath catch in my throat. I never wanted to think of Andre ever again, but I couldn't help but compare him to the man before me. Needless to say, my positive experiences with naked men were sorely lacking. Until this moment. Not only was Kane the most protective and considerate man I'd ever met, but he was also the hottest, and I couldn't stop staring at him, wondering how I got so lucky.

Noticing my interest, Kane took his erection in hand and stroked slowly.

I licked my lips. "Is your jewelry going to damage my teeth?"

Kane made a low rumbling noise.

"Or my tonsils?"

He gave me a look as though I were testing his resolve. "Not today. Today, I worship you. Tomorrow, you can get on your knees for me."

Oh God. I really wanted that. Taking Kane in my mouth and driving him wild sounded like a whole lot of fun. Except I'd never done it before. Thankfully, Andre hadn't made me give him blow jobs. I presumed he was sensible enough to realize his dick wasn't remotely safe near my teeth. Although it could've been his germophobe tendencies showing through. In

his opinion, people's mouths were a disgusting breeding ground for bacteria.

So, what if I sucked at...sucking?

"Anything you do will be amazing," Kane said.

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm sure I've already told you how annoying it is when you guess exactly what I'm thinking."

"Your face is very expressive." Kane climbed on the bed and positioned himself between my legs. All seriousness now, his look of determination resembled that of a wolf stalking its prey. And this excited bunny very much wanted to be caught and played with.

Taking my jaw in a firm grip, he parted my lips with his thumb. "Really want to fuck your mouth, and when it's time, you're going to take it slow until you're used to me."

I sucked on his thumb like a lollipop, swirling my tongue around the end.

"Yeah, just like that." Kane's scorching gaze zeroed in on my mouth. "You're going to be such a good girl and learn how I like it."

I moaned around his thumb. The idea of pleasuring him as much as he'd pleased me made my insides clench.

"Enough of that." He removed his thumb and flipped us, hauling me onto his lap so I straddled him. Sitting upright, Kane leaned his back against the headboard while my hands rested on his bulky shoulders. "Are you ready for more?"

“Yes.” A breathy sigh escaped me right before Kane pulled my lips to his. God, I could kiss this man forever. It was my new favorite thing to do.

“We’ll do it like this the first time because if you’re under me, it’ll be hard and fast.”

My belly tightened at the thought. “What if I want it like that?”

“This way for now.” He squeezed my ass in his lap. “You decide you want to change it up, you just ask.”

His meaning was clear. He wanted me on top so I had control of how things progressed. Once again, Kane was considerate enough to put my needs above his own. Sometimes I wondered if he knew me better than I knew myself.

I ground myself against the base of his hard length. Kane’s mouth sunk into my neck, where he nipped and sucked, sending goose bumps rippling across my skin.

“Fuck, you’re delicious. Your skin. Your mouth. Your pussy. I can’t get enough of tasting you.”

I dug my fingers into Kane’s hair and angled his face up so I could claim his mouth fiercely. “It’s time,” I said, then wrapped my hand around his cock. “I want to feel you inside me.”

Sitting above him gave me a sense of power I’d never owned before. For the first time, I was calling the shots, and

this man would do anything I asked for the simple reason that he wanted to make me happy.

He made me feel valued, beautiful, and protected. Everything that Andre had taken from me, Kane was giving back tenfold.

He reached across to collect a condom from the nightstand drawer and rolled it on. “Do whatever feels right. There’s no rush. I’m yours to use. Yours to experiment with. No judgment. All right?”

“Okay.”

I rose up on my knees to fit his broad head at my entrance. After coating it in my wetness, I lowered myself onto him.

Lord have mercy.

He was only in an inch, but it was enough to make me inhale a sharp breath. Not from pain, but from the delicious feeling of being filled in a way I’d never known before.

Kane grabbed my thighs. “This is the sweetest fucking torture I’ve ever known.”

I bore down farther, another couple of inches, and there was still more to go.

“That’s it,” he said gently. “You’re doing so good.” His eyes were ablaze, watching me as I took him inside my body.

I grasped his shoulders and worked my way deeper still. Kane’s large hands clamped low on my hips, and he thrust up just as I slid down the rest of the way. We both moaned when

our pelvises met. I felt stretched tight around him but oh so perfectly full.

We stayed like that for a moment, staring into each other's eyes, neither of us talking. It was just us, together, and finally joined in a way it felt like we were always meant to be.

I didn't understand why I was having thoughts like that. Surely it was some sex hormone wreaking havoc with my emotions.

Kane took my face between his palms and brought my mouth to his. "Woman, you have no idea what you do to me." His raspy voice made my belly flip. He could make me come with words alone.

I adjusted myself, just a small wiggle of my hips.

Kane groaned and closed his eyes.

"Kane?"

His gaze shot to mine. "Yes. Anything you want. The answer is yes."

I chuckled at his eagerness. "Sweet man, I'm ready to move."

"Then ride me. Take what you need."

So I did.

Holy mother of all things divine.

I braced my hands on his wide shoulders and slid myself over him slowly at first, but once he was slick with my arousal, I built my pace.

This position was new to me, but my body knew what to do. I rolled my hips to meet each of Kane's thrusts from below.

"Fuck, Freya. Look at you." His gaze once again focused on where we were joined. "You're taking me so well. Just like I knew you would."

I made a small noise. Every time Kane spoke to me that way, it *did* something to me.

My muscles clenched around him, and he let out a low growl.

"Baby girl, you keep gripping my cock like that and I'll come in seconds."

"I can't help it." I panted and raked my fingernails over his collarbone. "Feels too good."

Taking hold of my waist, he used his sheer strength to drag me up and down his cock. Every time he slammed home, a place deep inside me tingled.

"Oh God. That spot right there," I cried out.

"You like my piercing now?" Kane grinned like he knew exactly what his jewelry did to my overstimulated lady parts.

"Yes. More." Apparently single-word sentences were all I was capable of now.

Kane growled, and his hold on my hips tightened. "This. Being inside you feels so perfect. So right. It's like you were made for me."

A small moan rose up my throat. I shouldn't enjoy hearing such intimate, possessive words. I shouldn't respond so acutely to them. But I did. In the heat of our lovemaking, in this foolish, foolish moment, I wanted to be Kane's, and I wanted him to be mine.

"This is all I've thought about for days," he added. "Now I know what it feels like to have your pussy wrapped around my cock, and it's fucking incredible."

As our bodies moved in sync, my heart thumped against my rib cage. Heat coursed through my veins. All I knew was Kane and the way he felt as his hands grasped me and I moved on top of him. My entire world revolved around his rock-hard length sinking into me, changing me. Nothing else compared to this. Nothing else mattered.

A euphoric sensation continued to build inside me. "Kane. I'm close," I panted. A bead of sweat ran between my breasts. I was burning up.

His thumb found my clit and rubbed circles around the sensitive nub.

And I.

Was.

Gone.

I cried out, gasping for precious air while convulsing around him.

"That's it, baby girl. Goddamn. You're coming so hard I can feel you clamping down on my cock."

My orgasm went on as Kane continued driving into me from below. Then my legs weakened, and I clung to his shoulders for support. I needed him to take over.

“Your way,” I muttered while breathing heavily. “I want more, but I want it your way.”

His eyes met mine. A muscle ticced in his jaw.

Moving fast, he flipped me onto my back. And when he pushed inside me again, I realized Kane hadn't been lying. He fucked me like a man possessed, slamming into me deep and hard, just as he'd said he would. And I absolutely loved it. I clawed at his back and dug my heels into his ass.

There was something about giving myself over to him freely and trusting him to care for me while taking what he needed. Despite Kane's determination to make this experience solely about me, I wanted it to be good for him, too. Pinned below him, watching the intensity of his expression and the tensing of his muscles with each thrust, I reveled in the raw emotion of his lovemaking. He needed me, too, and that was a heady feeling.

Kane kissed me again, keeping his eyes open the whole time as if staring into my soul. “Freya,” he said reverently against my lips, making my heart skip a beat.

Not baby girl.

Not princess.

Freya.

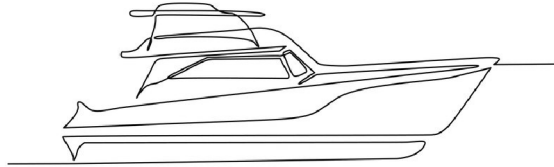
He buried his face in my neck, and I clung to him. A moment later, he came with a feral growl. I squeezed my eyes shut when tears threatened to spill over.

Why was I so emotional? This was just sex. Great sex, sure. It didn't matter how incredible it was. I needed to remember that this was a temporary arrangement and it was foolish to want more. Us sleeping together was supposed to be about me reclaiming my body, my choices, and my independence. Nothing else.

So we'd enjoy our time together as we'd set out to do, because that was all this could ever be.

And I wouldn't waste a minute of it.

Freya



Sweat dripped down my neck. My heart pounded as though I'd been chased through the streets by a pack of starving zombies. And I was thirsty. So bloody thirsty. But there was something I needed more than water, air, or any other life-sustaining necessity.

“When can we do that again?” I asked.

Kane flashed me a grin that was pure male pride and smug satisfaction. “Soon.” His still semihard cock twitched inside me.

I guessed Kane's one-and-done rule didn't apply to me. Why did I like that idea so much?

If our first time was earth-shattering, I could only imagine it'd improve once we were more intimately familiar with each other.

I walked my fingers up his chest. “Do you think next time we could do it with nothing between us?”

His brow creased. “Without protection?”

I really wanted to feel Kane skin to skin. I'd have brought it up earlier, except the timing hadn't felt right.

"I have the contraceptive implant, so I can't get pregnant." I pointed to where the thin rod sat beneath my skin on the inside of my upper arm. "And I'm clean." Andre wasn't the type to sleep around. If he had, he'd have used it to taunt me somehow. Plus, he was terrified of catching a disease or virus. Despite me being a virgin when we'd met, he'd had me tested twice for STDs and other communicable diseases before he'd so much as touched me. I couldn't imagine him screwing just anyone without them receiving a clean bill of health from two trusted doctors. "Since your drawer is well stocked, I'm assuming you're careful."

He nodded. "Always. And I had a clean test recently. Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Yes." I drew his lips to mine. "I trust you."

Kane deepened the kiss and pressed his weight onto me. God, I loved the feel of him above me. If it were anyone else, I might panic at being trapped by someone so large and strong. But Kane's closeness only brought me comfort.

He pulled out of me, and when I frowned, he wiped it from my lips with another firm, languid kiss.

"Stay here. I'm not done with you yet."

He headed toward the bathroom. I admired the view of his rear end as he left.

"I'd been wondering if your arse is tattooed," I called out.

He glanced over his shoulder, one side of his mouth curved up. “Well, now you know.”

Kane returned a short time later and lay beside me, handing me a bottle of water. I took several large gulps.

“Thanks.” I licked my lips and passed him what was left.

He finished it in no time, and as soon as it was out of his hands, he took hold of my thigh and wrapped my leg around his waist, pulling me closer.

This...this was all so new. In a way, it felt like losing my virginity for real. As if what I'd been doing with Andre hadn't been sex at all. Just a means to survive and keep my family safe.

I traced the tip of my finger over the fish scales inked onto the brawny muscles of Kane's left shoulder. “That was incredible, right? I mean, it wasn't just my imagination.”

He smiled. “It wasn't just your imagination.”

“But is it always that good?”

With a pensive expression, Kane held my stare before tucking my hair behind one ear. “Not always. It was”—his throat bobbed as he swallowed—“different for me.”

I snuggled deeper into his arms and gazed into his eyes. “Thank you for making that perfect.”

“Trust me. I should be the one thanking you.”

Not true. Kane's lovemaking skills would likely leave all other men paling in comparison. Perhaps that explained the

tightness in my chest as I thought about the inevitability of our time together coming to an end.

When I looked away, Kane hooked a finger under my chin and tilted my face toward his. “Hey. Talk to me. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

I blinked away the moisture in my eyes and forced a smile. “That I’m happy. And that you’re awfully attentive for an ex-military biker-slash-thief. Shouldn’t you be kicking me out of bed and ordering me to bring you a beer?”

Kane snorted. “Nah. I reckon I’d like to keep my dick.”

“Wise man.”

He ran his palm over my waist and hips before gently cupping between my thighs. Tingles shot straight to my center, and I leaned into his touch.

“Now tell me how you’re feeling here.” His fingers moved slowly over my soft, slick flesh. “Are you sore?”

“What makes you think I’d be sore?”

“Because I wasn’t gentle, and you’re not used to me. And before you accuse me of being full of myself, I’m not. Just stating a fact.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Your confidence is both irritating and sexy, and I’m not sure what to do with that.”

“How about you ignore it and try answering my question? Or do I need to make you come again to get you talking?” His fingers shifted a little higher until they found my clit.

“I’m also not sure what to do with this bossy, dirty-talking version of you.”

“Liar. You know *exactly* what to do with this version of me. Now talk, princess, and I’ll make it worth your while.”

No arguments from me. “Fine. I’m not sore. A little sensitive. Like I can feel where you’ve been, but in a good way.” I sighed. “Keep doing that.”

“I have something better in mind.” Then he flipped onto his back and hauled me on top to straddle him. He was already hardening beneath me, so I rocked against him. “Ah-ah,” he said, and grabbed my ass, shuffling me forward.

Off-balance, I braced my hands on his chest. “What are you doing?”

“Come here.” He dragged me higher again. “Sit on my face.”

“You...you want me to do *what*?”

Kane laughed. “I don’t believe it. Something I said finally shocked you.”

“It did not.” Okay, it did a little. “It’s just...I don’t want to suffocate you.”

“You won’t. Now get that delicious pussy up here.”

When I hesitated, Kane lifted my hips until my knees were planted on either side of his head. “Sit, Freya,” he demanded, then arched up and latched onto me with his mouth.

“Oh, *fuckfuckfuck*.” How did that feel so good? And why did it feel so wicked?

“Hold on to the shelf,” he said.

I assumed he meant the one above the headboard. I hoped it was sturdy.

Since Kane seemed certain this was a good idea, I cautiously lowered my hips so he didn't have to strain his neck. At my compliance, he moaned, sending vibrations through me. “That's it. Give me your weight. I mean it, Freya. Ride my mouth.”

What? Surely, he didn't mean—

Then he clenched my hips and pulled me down the rest of the way, using his strong hands to hold me in place. He closed his eyes and let out a long satiated groan.

The man was a demon with his tongue. A relentless demon with skills that were quite possibly illegal in several conservative nations.

Kane used his sheer strength to maneuver me to his will. One callused palm traveled up my torso to squeeze my breast and pinch my nipple, feeding electric current straight back to my core.

And I did ride his face. Lord help me, I couldn't have stopped if I'd tried.

I was so close. “Kane?” I pleaded. For what, I wasn't sure. His beard tickled my thighs. His hands and tongue were everywhere. But when his blue eyes met mine, I came apart.

Warmth radiated from my center. The shelf creaked under my grip. Kane held me pinned to his mouth while my hips bucked uncontrollably. It was as if he'd obliterated every molecule in my body, then put them back together the way they were supposed to be. The way they'd been before I'd made a deal with the devil.

Kane was making me whole again.



We ate a late-afternoon lunch, then snuggled in bed, both of us drifting to sleep for a short while.

It was dusk when we finally made it to the bathroom to shower. Kane's meticulous soaping of my body resulted in him taking me again. This time slowly and thoroughly while his sturdy arms supported me against the wall. There were no dirty words. Just the sounds of our moans and ragged breaths while Kane drove into me again and again. Taking him inside me without protection was a whole new level of bliss.

I couldn't get enough of him. I was sure he felt the same.

We had sex on the couch, the kitchen counter, and after taking a quick swim, Kane hustled me inside, took me to the floor, then went down on me again while we were both still dripping wet and salty.

There was an urgency to our lovemaking. We had little time left together and were determined to make the most of it.

And as the date of Andre's capture and interrogation drew nearer, the siege that Kane, Wyatt, and Brandon had planned felt like a ticking time bomb. I told myself I was just nervous because Andre was involved, and anything to do with him caused me anxiety. Kane and the guys were trained for this type of operation. I had to have faith in their abilities, because if anything happened to Kane, I'd—

“Why are your hands shaking?” Kane asked.

He sat before me on the bed while I combed his long wet hair.

“I...it's nothing,” I replied, and continued brushing.

He turned to face me with a frown. “You're as white as a sheet. What's going on?”

I dropped the comb into my lap and focused on the pretty material of the sundress bunched around my thighs. It was one of three Kane had bought, but I liked this one best because it was white and covered with tiny yellow sunflowers. He'd said it reminded him of me. I also now had swimmers, flip-flops, a sun hat, and other casual clothes. Kane had even managed to remember to buy underwear on his hurry to exit the department store.

I sighed. “Just thinking, I guess. About your mission.”

“You're worried?”

“Of course. Aren't you?”

“No. Hey.” He cupped my jaw and pressed his lips to mine. “You let me do the worrying about the op. You've got enough

to deal with.”

I nodded to appease him, but nothing could remove the kernel of terror that continued to grow and fester in my gut.

“We’ll capture him and ask our questions. Then we’ll see if he’s any further use to Brandon’s investigation.”

“What happens to him after that?”

Kane shrugged. “It’s a big ocean with a lot of hungry sharks.”

“Really?”

“What? You thought I’d let him live after what he’s done to you?”

Truthfully, I hadn’t allowed myself to think that far ahead. It seemed like bad luck to presume the mission would be a success. Beyond that, there was another problem.

“I thought you were done with taking lives,” I said.

When I’d first met Kane, I’d asked him to help me find someone to kill Andre. I still wanted him dead, but did Kane have to be the one to do it? He’d spent years dragging himself out of a dark place after leaving his military career behind. Would this send him back there? I didn’t want that for him. I didn’t want any of this on his conscience.

He exhaled deeply. “I am. But in this case, it’s the right thing to do. It’s the *only* thing to do. I’ve stepped away from the fight for a long time, but I’ve never been more motivated to hit a target.” He took my face in his hands. “I’m doing this

to stop him from hurting another woman. I'm doing this so he can't come for Wyatt and the guys. And I'm doing this so he can't continue to sell his weapons on the black market and kill more innocent people. But most of all, Freya, I'm doing this for you. Because from this day on, I promise you, if I find out any man has laid an unwanted hand on you, I'll snap each and every finger that dared to touch you, then I'll put a bullet between his eyes."

I stared at him in stunned silence.

He raised one brow. "Too much?"

"I'm almost certain that last part wasn't supposed to be arousing, but it was." I moistened my lips. "Definitely going to need therapy."

"You and me both." Kane smirked and pulled me into his lap. "Matisse's time is coming. You have my word. You'll never have to fear him again." He kissed me gently. "Why don't you grab us a couple of beers while I put some food together? We'll eat on the deck. It'll be cooler out there."

I gave him a wan smile. "Okay."

Kane worked in the kitchen while I popped the tops on two bottles. I sat near the ladder on the rear swim platform with my feet dangling in the water. There was barely a breath of wind. The moon and surrounding harbor lights reflected off the bay like a mirror. Further out, a boat similar to *Lucy* cruised by. The sound of its loud diesel engine traveled clearly across the still water while its wake rippled over the inky, glassed-off surface.

Kane said something from inside the cabin. When I glanced his way, he had his back to me with a burner phone to his ear. He dragged a hand through his hair before propping it on his hip. The muscles along his shoulders tensed.

Something was wrong.

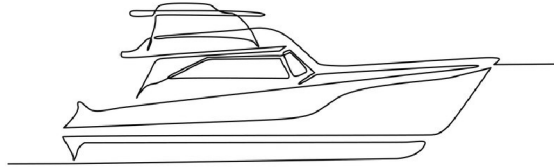
Kane scribbled a note on a piece of paper before slamming the pen on the counter. He ended the call, then did the most unsettling thing yet. He removed his pistol from a kitchen cabinet and secured it in the waistband of his board shorts.

A cold tremor crept up my spine. It extended along my limbs as I watched Kane head toward the bedroom.

The passing boat's wake reached us. *Lucy* rocked, and the floating dock creaked.

There was a splash behind me. A solid arm hooked around my waist and yanked me into the water. I barely had enough time to draw a lungful of air before I was dragged under.

Kane



Eleven missed calls. Six from Brandon and five from Wy, plus a whole bunch of text messages demanding I call them both ASAP.

While Freya and I had been fucking around, some serious shit must've been going down. *Dammit*. I should've been more vigilant about checking my phone. I'd lowered the ringer volume so it wouldn't wake Freya this morning when she'd been hungover. Then I'd forgotten to turn it up again. The phone had ended up on the cushioned bench seat beside the dining table, gone from my mind as soon as I'd gotten Freya naked. To say I'd been distracted since then was an understatement.

I dialed Brandon's number. He answered right away.

"Kane. Shit, I was starting to worry about you."

"What's going on?"

"It's Campbell. He knows he's being watched, and he's activated a decoy. He's not in Colombia. You need to move."

“Do you know where he is now?” I glanced at Freya. She sat with her feet hanging in the water while staring out at the bay. How was I going to break this news to her? She’d freak out, and any attempts to calm her nervousness would be pointless.

“Wish I did. It isn’t reassuring that he’s gone into stealth mode. All I can guess is that he went looking for evidence of Freya’s kidnapping and found too many security cameras wiped. If he suspects he’s dealing with professionals, he might’ve upped his game.”

“What the fuck, man? How did this happen?”

“I told you he was good. I also said I’d give you plenty of warning, and if you’d checked your phone anytime within the last five hours, you’d have had that.”

I scraped my hand over my face. “You’re right. Sorry, it’s been a strange day. We’ll leave now. Does Wy know?”

“He’s picked up Maggie and Regan and is on his way to you as we speak. I’ll give you the address of a safe house. Write this down.”

The location he gave was in Mexico, roughly a hundred miles south of the border. And if my knowledge of the area served me right, Brandon had located us a short drive from Ensenada, where our fishing trawler for the op was located.

“Get rid of your phones,” said Brandon. “There’ll be new ones for you at the safe house. I’ll be in touch. Stay safe, Brother.”

“Copy that.”

We ended the call. I tucked my pistol into the back of my shorts, then headed to the bunk room to collect our go bag. I added the clothes I’d bought Freya today.

Lucy rocked as the wake of a passing boat lapped against her side.

It was time. I had to tell Freya what was going on. Even though we’d suspected this moment would come—planned for it, even—neither of us was ready to move on from the temporary heaven we’d shared today.

A noise came from outside. A splash?

I shot out of my room and looked toward the back deck.

Freya wasn’t there.

My heart pounded as I headed outside, telling myself she must’ve gone for a swim. But she hadn’t put her swimsuit on. “Freya!” I called out.

I spun in a circle.

This wasn’t right. Where was she? *Lucy* stopped swaying, but the black water still stirred. My eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness.

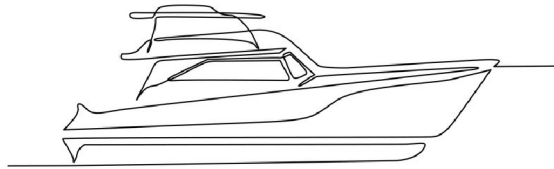
And then I heard it. A muffled scream and more splashing. I searched the direction it’d come from and caught movement in the water.

Two shots rang out. One hit *Lucy*; the other barely missed me.

No way was I going to let some asshole take her.

I climbed onto the gunwale and took a deep breath, ready to dive into the water. Then a spray of bullets came at me.

Freya



I fought against the giant bastard hauling me through the water. I kicked. I thrashed. I clawed at his face and arms. I tried desperately to scream, but he kept one hand clamped firmly around my mouth.

My captor was a strong swimmer. With powerful strokes, he dragged me through the water, my back to his chest. I yanked on his arm, trying to tear his hand from my mouth. He pulled me under again. Beneath the surface I struggled harder than ever. When he let me up, I sucked in precious air through my nose. Flailing on my back, I couldn't turn and face my attacker. The harder I fought, the more he forced me underwater, but I'd sooner drown than let him take me.

Salt water stung my eyes and burned up my nose. The next time I resurfaced, he had a pistol aimed at *Lucy*. The moon illuminated Kane's silhouette.

No!

I slapped his arm, and the shots went wide. He snarled and shoved me underwater, jerking me to the side. When I

resurfaced, he fired more rounds. There was a loud splash. I looked toward *Lucy*. Kane was gone.

Oh God. He'd shot him.

I screamed into the hand covering my mouth. My captor swam with renewed vigor. Seconds ticked by. I searched the water for Kane. Nowhere in sight. A frantic sob caught in my throat.

Where was he? He must be hurt and bleeding out. Or worse. He'd drown if no one helped him.

This couldn't be happening. I wanted to keep fighting, but my limbs turned heavy. My lungs ached. My heart couldn't handle this.

A splash sounded close behind us. My captor's grip was wrenched from me. And then he was gone, pulled beneath the surface as if taken by a shark.

Still in shock, I coughed and searched the dark water around me. Nothing.

Wait. Bubbles rose to the surface.

What the hell?

More bubbles appeared. Then they stopped altogether.

Heart pounding, I scanned the calm surface. Where was my attacker? Where was Kane?

There was a splash nearby, followed by a gasping breath. I turned, and there he was.

"Kane!" I swam for him fast.

“It’s okay. You’re safe.” He wrapped his arms around me, holding me to him. Although breathing heavily, he seemed fine.

“Are you shot?” I asked while checking him for injury.

“No.” He held my face. “Did he hurt you?”

Unable to talk through sobs, I shook my head and clung to him, peppering kisses over his lips. “Did you... Is he—”

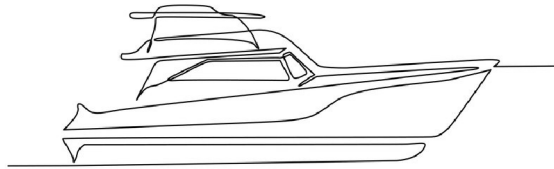
“He’s dead. Let’s hustle. We have to leave the yacht club right now.”

We swam back to *Lucy*. As we were almost to the swim platform, footsteps pounded along the dock.

Kane pushed me behind him, positioning me between him and the boat.

Oh God, no. We were under attack again.

Kane



“**K**ane!” Wyatt called out as he ran toward us along the dock.

Thank fuck it was my brother and not another of Campbell’s henchmen.

“Help her up.” I kept one hand on Freya until Wy jumped on board and pulled her onto the swim platform.

Her dress clung to her shivering frame. Wy quickly grabbed a towel from the rope clothesline and wrapped it around her.

I hauled myself on board after.

“What the hell happened?” asked Wy.

“Someone came for Freya. He tried to put a bullet in my brain when he caught sight of me.”

“Campbell?”

I shook my head. “Wasn’t him.” The body at the bottom of the bay had dark skin. Campbell was white.

“Must be one of his men. There’ll be others.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “We have to move. Maggie and Regan

are in the truck, and I don't want to leave them unprotected.”

“Give me two minutes, and I'll meet you there. Get rid of your phone if you haven't already.”

Wy nodded, then jogged toward the parking lot.

I grabbed a spare burner and dialed Brandon's number.

He answered after the first ring. “Yeah?”

“One of Campbell's men was just here.”

“Only one?”

“Yeah. I'm guessing they were going off a hunch and the guy was surprised to find Freya here.” I grabbed our go bag and tossed in what ammo and weapons I had on board.

“Where is he now?”

“Bottom of the bay. He had her, man. He almost—” The words got caught in my throat.

I swallowed hard and glanced at Freya. Her bottom lip trembled while she held the towel tucked tight around her slight figure. *Fuck*. I'd nearly lost her. The phone shook as I clenched it in my wet hand. Fear, anger, and shock threatened to overwhelm me. *Get your head back in the game*.

“Wy's here,” I said. “We're leaving now.”

“Good. Call me when you arrive at the safe house.”

“Copy that.”

I tossed the phone into the bay and kept Freya tucked against me as we swiftly made our way along the dock to

Wyatt's truck in the parking lot.

Maggie spun fast to face us as we climbed into the back seat. Her eyes widened when she took in our soaked clothes. "Are you guys all right?"

"Just went for a little evening swim." I leaned across to ruffle Regan's hair. "Hey, Monkey."

Regan looked at Freya with curiosity. "You forgot to put your swimsuit on."

Freya didn't miss a beat as she partially unwrapped the towel and glanced down at her wet dress with mock surprise. "Gosh. How silly of me."

Regan giggled, thankfully unaware of the shitstorm that was brewing.

Wyatt hopped into the driver's side. A moment later, we left the parking lot and headed south along the Strand toward the Mexican border.

"Are you ready for an adventure?" I asked Regan.

"Mom says we're going on vacation and I don't need to go to school for a whole week."

Maggie gave me a tight-lipped smile.

My nerves ramped up as we approached the border. We were unlikely to be stopped, but there was still a risk. Since Freya had no identification and there were firearms in the truck, a vehicle search would be a big problem. When we

passed through without incident, my heart rate returned to normal.

I kept my arm around Freya and kissed her forehead. “How are you holding up?” I asked quietly.

“Better now.” She snuggled against me, inhaling deeply.

Regan watched a movie on her iPad and fell asleep before we’d even made it past Tijuana. Maggie stared out the window, biting her fingernails.

Wy glanced over his shoulder and cast a critical look at the way I had Freya tucked against me, her forehead resting in the crook of my neck and her hand on my thigh.

“There something you want to say?” I was in no mood to explain myself, but I was pissed off enough to take my anger out on him.

He glared at me through the rearview mirror. “You had two jobs, Kane. Keep your dick in your pants, and keep her safe.”

“Wyatt,” Maggie scolded.

“No, Mags. He’s put all of us at risk.” Wy’s eyes narrowed on me. “Why didn’t you answer your phone? What were you two doing all day that had you so preoccupied? Huh? Are you taking this seriously at all?”

“Not now,” Maggie said.

“Yes, now,” snapped Wy.

“Fuck you,” I said, keeping my voice low to not wake Regan.

Wy gripped the steering wheel hard. “Ever since Russia, you haven’t given a single fuck about anyone but yourself. You shut us all out when we tried to help. You quit your job. You quit your friends. You gave all your money away and live week to week on that rust bucket of a boat. And for what? To make yourself feel better over something that wasn’t even your fault?”

My jaw clenched so hard I couldn’t have talked if I’d tried. It was clever of Wy to bring this shit up while he was behind the wheel and his pregnant wife and child were in the car, otherwise I’d have forced him off the road and pummeled his face into the dirt.

Freya sat up. “If anyone is to blame, it’s me.” She squeezed my thigh as if to say *I’ve got this* because she somehow sensed the anger, pain, and grief that paralyzed me. “From the very beginning, my actions were responsible for putting you and your family at risk. Kane has done nothing wrong. And he’s done far more than protect me. He’s helped me through a difficult time with the utmost respect and kindness. And yes, we were *distracted* today, but I can promise you that wasn’t Kane’s fault, either. So if you want someone to take your anger out on, take it out on me. But while you’re at it, remember that it was your decision to rob the home of a black-market weapons dealer and one of the most powerful men in the country. If you want to discuss actions that have endangered your family, you might want to start with that.”

Wy stared straight ahead. A muscle in his jaw flexed repeatedly, but he had no comeback to Freya’s statement.

When my shoulders relaxed, Freya took my face in her palms and kissed me. Then she gazed deep into my eyes, giving me a meaningful look that needed no words. She had my back just as much as I had hers.

I pressed my forehead to hers and swallowed against the uncomfortable tightening in my throat. Not for the first time today, I marveled at finding this strong, brave woman. Her worst nightmare had almost come true tonight, and here she was supporting me.

I took a moment to process that I'd killed a man tonight. Something I'd sworn never to do again. I supposed I should feel some way about that, but I didn't. Well, except for relief that I'd finished him before he'd made off with Freya.

Christ. They'd almost taken her. Despite Freya's assurance that I wasn't to blame, I really had screwed up. As much as the mistake I'd made years ago had messed me up, Matisse capturing Freya would've wrecked me even more.

My feelings for her were...complicated. Before Moscow, I'd had girlfriends. They were fun while they'd lasted but usually left once they realized they came second to a job I couldn't disclose. None of those relationships felt as intense or significant as what I had with Freya, which was crazy. We'd only known each other for days.

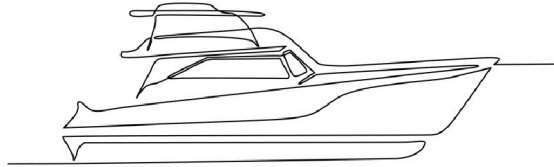
Yet the thought of giving her up soon or anytime in the future caused me to break into a sweat. I should be more concerned about Campbell hunting us down, or capturing Matisse, if that op was still going ahead. But the one thing

tearing me up inside was that Freya would be gone from my life when she returned to her family in England. It was what she'd dreamed of during the lonely, terrifying years Matisse had controlled her, and I'd damn well make sure it happened.

Even if it hurt.

Even if it broke me all over again, because I'd do anything to make her happy.

Kane



After driving for a couple of hours, the busy traffic we'd encountered in Tijuana dwindled to the odd passing car. The last ten minutes of our drive had taken us along dark, dusty roads. The properties in this area were spaced well apart and looked to be part of a housing development that had fallen on hard times. The houses were in a state of stalled construction, overrun with weeds and littered with dumped garbage, except the one we arrived at.

It was late in the evening when we pulled into the driveway. Out front of the hacienda-style home stood a guy in his midtwenties with short dark hair, dressed casually in jeans and a dark T-shirt. Over that, he wore a tactical vest complete with radio, weapons, and ammo. Another guy waited near the door, dressed similarly but with an assault rifle slung over one shoulder.

"I'm guessing that's Owen Decker. Vaughn's brother." Wy gestured to the one in the driveway. "Brandon arranged for him to check the place over."

I didn't know Owen, but his brother Vaughn was a Zulu teammate with the uncanny ability to fly anything with wings or rotor. He worked with Brandon now, taking down human-trafficking rings and still being an all-around surly smart-ass. Vaughn suffered from the unfortunate combination of having no filter and giving zero fucks what anyone thought of him. We tolerated his bullshit because he was a brother, and also because he hadn't always been that way. He'd gone through hell when he was captured and tortured five years ago. We'd gotten him back, but he'd returned to us a very different man.

The guy waiting for us was a younger, cleaner-cut version of my hardened Zulu teammate. I couldn't see any tattoos on Owen, whereas Vaughn was almost as covered as me.

We came to a stop, kicking up dust in our headlights. Wy and I got out of the car to meet Vaughn's brother on the driveway.

"Owen Decker." He reached out and shook each of our hands.

"Kane Daniels. This is my brother, Wyatt." I'd known Vaughn had siblings, but he'd rarely spoken about his family. Things had been tense between him and his dad, a decorated air force general. "You're military?"

"Marine. Much to my old man's disappointment."

"Not ours. We could use a guy like you right now. What's the sitrep?"

“We’ve cleared the property. Place is clean. No threats. We’re at the end of a local road, and yours is the first car we’ve seen since we arrived three hours ago. You should be safe here, but Tanner and I will stick around and keep watch.” He nodded toward the guy by the door, whose cigarette glowed softly as he inhaled. “Let me help you with your things. Your bedrooms are upstairs. There’s a bunk room on the lower level where Tanner and I will sleep, but not until tomorrow when backup arrives.”

“What kind of firepower do we have?” I asked.

“Not much right now. We have supplies arriving in the morning. You expecting trouble tonight?”

“Can’t say for sure, but let’s hope not.”

We took the girls inside. Regan didn’t wake when Wy carried her upstairs. Maggie followed, holding Regan’s favorite teddy and blanket.

Freya and I took a second-floor bedroom at the back of the house. As soon as I dumped our bag on the bed, I wrapped my arms around her. She clung to me, burying her face in my chest and letting out a deep sigh.

“What’s happening, Kane? What does all this mean?”

“It’s too soon to say. I need to find out what Brandon knows. And I need to talk to Wy. Will you be okay on your own here for a while?”

Freya glanced around the simple bedroom and nodded. The space contained little more than a double bed, a chest of

drawers, and a small window with flowery curtains pulled closed. A dusty smell lingered in the air, as if the room hadn't been opened in a long while. The ceiling fan hanging from an exposed timber beam provided just enough airflow to keep us cool.

“Try to get some sleep. I'll join you when I can.”

I changed into jeans and boots, gave Freya a parting kiss, then headed downstairs. Wy was already in the kitchen talking to Owen.

Now that we were under lights, Owen looked a lot like his older brother. Same dark hair and eyes, which they'd inherited from their Colombian mom. Other than that, the brothers were as different as Wy and me. Owen appeared relaxed but professional, and I remembered a time when Vaughn had been that way. Before his helo had gone down in Venezuela and he'd been beaten, burned, cut to ribbons, and was never the same again. He was still the best pilot I'd ever met, but that man had a darkness inside him I wasn't sure any amount of therapy could rectify.

Owen handed us a phone each. “Clean burners. Brandon's number is in there. He said to give him a call as soon as you're settled in.”

I dialed Brandon's number, and he picked up right away. “It's good to hear from you.” An engine revved in the background and a reversing beacon beeped.

“You, too,” I replied.

“Did you run into any trouble on your way?”

“Smooth sailing. Have I caught you at a bad time?”

“No. I’m at the airfield loading the last few things onto the C-130, then Vaughn and I will spin up and head your way. I’m bringing a few guys from our team with us.”

I braced my hands on the counter. “I thought you weren’t flying in for another couple of days.”

“Figured it couldn’t hurt to give you some backup in case Campbell ramps things up.”

“Is that likely? Tell me what you know.”

“I think the guy at your boat was a scout, and one of many Campbell has sent to various locations in the last few days. I don’t think they knew for certain Freya was with you, and my guess is your attacker wanted to be a hero and bring her in to take the glory. Otherwise Campbell would’ve sent a team to carry out her extraction. Security cams at the yacht club show that no one’s gone to your boat to look around, but Campbell will send someone soon when his man doesn’t report back.”

Wy folded his arms. “What about Matisse?”

“My intel says he’s laying low at his mansion in LA but hasn’t canceled his cruise to Mexico, so our op is a go. Once we have him, we’ll get him to call off Campbell, and all this will be over.”

No. It wouldn’t be over until I watched the life drain from Matisse’s eyes.

“And if Campbell finds us first?” I asked.

“We’ll be ready for him.” A jet took off near Brandon, making him hard to hear. “There’s a private airstrip not far from you. We’ll land there before sunup. I’d tell you to get some sleep, except I know that won’t happen.”

“Not a chance.” We were four guys in the middle of nowhere with a few weapons between us, and our three girls to protect. If Campbell came for us now with his team of mercenaries, we were vulnerable.

“All right. We’ll see you in the morning.”

We ended the call.

Wy, Owen, and I stood around the breakfast bar in the kitchen.

Owen passed around handheld radios, tactical vests, and night-vision goggles. “How do you guys want to play this?”

“Two at the house, two at the perimeter,” I said, slipping into my vest and slotting the radio into one compartment.

Owen strapped on his NVDs, keeping the goggles on top of his head. “I’m sure the women will feel more comfortable with you guys at the house, so Tanner and I will take the perimeter.”

Owen left through the back door, and Wy and I went out the front. All four of us did a quick comms check, then I was left standing on the porch feeling more uncomfortable beside my twin than I ever had in my life.

“We need to talk,” said Wy.

“I don’t need a lecture right now.”

He turned to face me. “Whatever shit exists between us can stay buried until this situation is through. Right now, I need to know where your head’s at.”

I snorted. “Just peachy.”

“What’s going on between you and Freya?”

My eyes scanned the perimeter. It was easier than making eye contact with my brother. “Just two consenting adults making the most of shitty circumstances. That’s all.”

“Really? Because I haven’t seen you like this with a woman since—fuck, I don’t know—ever.” He stepped closer. “The way you look at her, it’s like you’re addicted to cocaine, and she’s dusted in the stuff. Even now, I can tell you want to go to her.”

I ground my teeth but said nothing because, dammit, he was right. Freya was all I could think about. And I *did* want to go to her now. I wanted to touch her. To smell her. To claim her mouth and her body because it felt like the only way to calm my frayed nerves.

“Is that your plan now? We put Matisse down and she stays with you?”

I snorted. “You make it sound like I’m the bad guy here.”

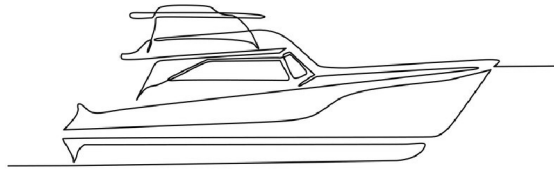
“This can only end badly, Kane.” Wy kept his voice low. “When Matisse disappears, the police and the Feds are going

to notice if Freya runs straight into the arms of a man with the skills to dispatch one of the most powerful businessmen in the country without leaving a trace.”

“I know that,” I snapped. “I get it. There’s no hope for us, okay? She doesn’t want to stay here, anyway. She wants to go back to England to be with her family. And she definitely doesn’t want a man in her life. Even if she did, she deserves better than me. This whole thing is just...it’s completely fucked.”

Wy sighed and shook his head. “It is, man. I’m sorry you’ve finally found someone and it isn’t going to work out. The best thing you can do for Freya is keep her safe, then let her go.”

Freya



It had taken me hours to fall asleep. More than once, I woke from unpleasant dreams, gasping for air and with my sheets drenched in sweat. Thankfully, they weren't the claustrophobic kind that had me screaming blue murder and clawing at the door. But when I rose the next morning, I felt more tired than I'd been the night before.

Kane hadn't made it to bed, which didn't surprise me. He'd probably be in constant protector mode from now until Andre and Campbell were dealt with.

After using the bathroom and washing my face, I dressed in cut-off shorts and a white T-shirt.

The TV on the first floor played a cartoon quietly while pots and pans clattered in the kitchen. The smell of burnt toast and bacon wafted upstairs.

I paused in the middle of the bedroom when a faint thumping sound grew louder. A helicopter? I tore back the curtains, revealing a dry, dusty landscape framed by mountains. The only dwelling nearby was a half-finished construction about five hundred meters down the road.

Then I saw it. Low on the horizon, a dark-gray helicopter traveled in a straight line directly for us. The ominous sound grew louder as it approached.

My stomach dropped. Was it Campbell? Had he found us?

I raced down the stairs two at a time and almost barreled into Kane at the bottom.

He caught me by the shoulders before I crashed into him. “Hey. I was just coming to check on you. What’s the hurry?”

“There’s a helicopter coming.” I stabbed a finger in its direction.

“It’s one of ours,” Kane said. “Brandon and Vaughn are here.”

“Thank God.” I slumped against Kane and clung to his vest. It was stuffed full of ammunition, a handheld radio, and other gadgets. I tucked one finger below the shoulder strap. “Now *this* is sexy.”

When I stepped back to take in the whole ensemble, Kane shook his head and smiled.

I cast my eyes over his tall, impressive form. He wore heavy boots and faded blue jeans. A black T-shirt clung to his muscular torso, leaving his forearm and neck tattoos on display. With his hair tied back and a pistol at his side, he looked confident, capable, and thoroughly fuckable.

Yum.

Suddenly, I wasn’t tired anymore at all.

“I think I like your badass alter ego.” I bit my lip.

“You’re looking at me the same way you looked at that burger and fries the day I brought you home with me.”

Yes. And I’d devour Kane just as fast.

“Sweet man, you’re far more tempting than that.” I leaned into him and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Since your friends will be here any moment, can you take leave from guard duty?”

“Yeah.” He grabbed my hips and pulled me closer. “So I can get some sleep.”

I frowned. “That sounds awfully boring. Lucky for you, I have a much better idea. If I recall correctly, it’s my turn to take care of you”—I ran one finger down his neck and kissed him softly—“from my knees.”

Kane’s gaze focused on my lips. “Christ, Freya. You don’t need a weapon to kill me. That mouth of yours will take me down faster than a fully loaded M4.”

I assumed an M4 was one of the lethal-looking automatic rifles the guys carried.

Just then, the sound of the approaching helicopter became too loud to ignore.

“Come on. I’ll introduce you to the guys.” Kane winced and adjusted his crotch. “After I rearrange my hard-on.”

He took hold of my hand, and we stepped outside through the rear sliding door. The large helicopter circled the property

before landing where someone had marked out a helipad with rocks.

We covered our faces when the downforce from the rotor blades sent dust in all directions.

“What *is* that thing?” I yelled, and shielded my eyes.

“Black Hawk,” replied Kane.

There were machine guns and missiles—*missiles!*—attached to each side.

“Are we going to war?” I asked.

He turned and faced me, all seriousness. “If we have to.”

The engine whirred as it shut down, and two men climbed out. A third remained in the cockpit. I recognized Brandon right away from the video call we’d had a few days ago. Good Lord, what had they been feeding the Team Zulu men? Brandon was every bit as large as Kane, and although his appearance was the opposite of my Viking’s—clean-cut with dark wavy hair and no visible ink—he certainly drew the eye. He strode toward us confidently in black cargoes, a gray T-shirt, and an easy smile on his face.

The other man was...not smiling. And while a little shorter than Brandon, he was somehow more menacing. Maybe it was because he looked like he’d just attended an underworld funeral. Black shades, black boots, black jeans, and a black leather jacket slung over one solid shoulder. Or maybe it was the creepy tattoos extending down his arms and up his neck. I made out skulls, the grim reaper, and a hideous devil-man.

“That’s Vaughn.” Kane scratched his beard. “You probably shouldn’t stare at him so hard.”

Aha. Vaughn, the pilot Kane and Brandon had spoken about. He looked more like a villain than the hero I’d built up in my head after hearing about his skills. Despite his handsome face, he was kind of terrifying.

“Well now that you’ve said I shouldn’t stare, of course I’m going to.” I rolled my eyes and braced for Vaughn’s approach because, yes, he’d caught me assessing him. He dealt with it by stowing his sunglasses on top of his head and aiming me a look so cold it could put an end to global warming. I glanced away first and gripped Kane’s hand a little tighter.

“Kane.” Brandon shook Kane’s hand, then mine. “Freya. It’s nice to finally meet.”

“Likewise,” I said.

Kane fist-bumped Vaughn. “Good to see you, Brother.”

“Yeah,” was all Vaughn said as he pulled a cigarette from his back pocket and lit it. His dark gaze landed on me once again. “And this must be the reason for our little Zulu family reunion.” His mouth twisted into something that mocked a grin.

“Vaughn, this is Freya.”

“Hello.” I held my palm out, then quickly pulled it back when Vaughn glared at it like I might be infected with Ebola.

He looked me up and down, then turned toward Kane. “I suppose she’s hot enough for this much fuss. I hope she’s

worth it, Bruh.” Vaughn walked toward the house. “We got any beer in this place?”

Brandon groaned, and Kane bristled with poorly contained rage.

I placed my hand on Kane’s chest when he looked like he might go after his pilot buddy and throttle him. “Hey, Vaughn,” I called out.

He stopped at the doorway and raised one brow, letting the cigarette hang from his full lips. I wondered if that expression of bored insolence was permanently affixed to his face.

I strutted to him, snatched the cigarette from his mouth, and butted it out in a nearby potted plant. “We have a child and a pregnant woman staying with us, as well as other people who care about their lung health, so there’ll be no cancer sticks inside. We didn’t think to stop for beer on our way here after my attempted abduction almost ended in Kane getting shot. And if you must know, yes, I’m worth it. As is any woman who’s had to live with a manipulative piece of shit who gets off on making their life a misery.” I folded my arms and nodded. “Thank you for coming. I appreciate your help.”

Vaughn gaped at me as though no one had ever had the audacity to speak to him like the ill-mannered man-child he was. This time, I held his stare, although it didn’t seem like either of us would be backing down anytime soon.

Eventually, he huffed out a laugh. “Holy fuck. Maybe this week won’t be such a bore after all.” Then he swaggered inside as if he owned the place.

Kane came up behind me and put his arms around my waist. He nuzzled my neck, sending goose bumps across my skin. “Wish we’d had you on our team back in the day. There aren’t many who can shut down his bad-tempered bullshit.”

Brandon winced. “I apologize in advance for any offense Vaughn causes. Unfortunately, that’s probably not the last of it. Great with aircraft. Not great with people.”

“I forgot what an asshole he is,” added Kane.

I waved them off. “Please. I can handle him.”

The three of us headed inside.

“Where are your bags?” Kane asked.

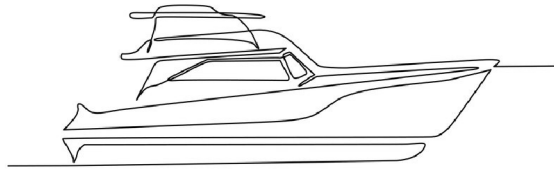
“I’ve got guys bringing supplies from the C-130 in a pickup. They’ll be here soon with the first load.”

Vaughn stood in the kitchen talking quietly to his brother, Owen. Tanner and Wyatt were helping themselves to bacon and eggs, and Maggie and Regan ate breakfast while watching TV in the living room. Brandon opened his laptop at the dining table and started working right away. The house was suddenly a hive of activity and felt cramped with so many large weapons-clad men filling the space.

They all seemed completely at ease with what we were facing. I guessed this was what they did best—crisis management and adapting to ever-changing dangerous scenarios. I wished I shared their confidence, and I wished there were something more I could do to help.

Vaughn's words rang in my ears, and despite how boldly I'd responded to his taunt, I couldn't help but wonder. Was I worth all this? So many lives were at risk because of me.

Freya



The next two days passed in a blur.

Brandon's intelligence confirmed that despite the attack at the boat, our move to the safe house had once again put us a step ahead of Campbell. The battle we'd feared might arrive on our doorstep had never come.

While Kane was busy, I spent time with Maggie and Regan. Getting to know them distracted me from the impending op, and since Maggie still struggled with morning sickness, Regan sometimes hung with me to let her mum rest. We drew pictures, braided each other's hair, and played endless games of Go Fish. She taught me the dance moves to her favorite song, and I told her all about my talented ballerina sister, showing her Lena's recital clips on YouTube. Regan wanted desperately to meet her. I didn't have the heart to tell her it was unlikely to happen.

Kane spent his days with the guys, planning the siege on the *Antoinette* and readying their weapons and equipment.

But the nights were ours. It didn't matter how tired Kane was. He always came for me as soon as his watch ended at

midnight. I washed the dust from his skin in the shower and then we made love with a desperation both thrilling and heart-wrenching. Sometimes it was fast and hard, other times slow and tender, but always with the lights on as though both of us needed to remember every detail of our time together.

I was painfully aware we were no longer having sex just for fun. Had it ever been solely about that? The intensity of our intimacy was so much more profound than I'd imagined possible. Neither of us spoke about it. It was like a splinter in that if I left it alone, it didn't hurt. But each time I thought about leaving Kane, it stung as if a needle pierced my chest. So we lived in the here and now, in complete denial of what lay in our very near future: the inevitable end of us.

There were two likely outcomes of the upcoming mission. It would either be a success, or Andre would outsmart us all. The former resulted in me returning to England. The latter resulted in death. Kane's, mine, everyone's in this house. They'd all placed their lives at risk the moment they'd agreed to help me. And whichever way things went, it didn't end with Kane and me together.

“Are you nervous about tonight?” I asked.

In the cozy double bed, I traced one finger over Kane's bare chest where the giant tentacled kraken clung to the sinking sailing ship. We rested naked on the mattress under the gentle glow of a nightstand lamp, surrounded by crumpled sheets. The slowly revolving ceiling fan cooled our sweaty skin.

This was it. Our last morning together before the men went after Andre. Kane had woken me at four a.m. with gentle kisses all over my back and then the rest of my body. He'd spooned me, my leg propped over his muscular thigh, and taken me from behind, whispering filthy words in my ear and plowing into me deeply while his hand worked my clit. We'd come at the same time. That had never happened before, but it made it even more exhilarating.

Now, Kane lay on his back with his arm wrapped around my shoulders. His palm ran back and forth along my forearm. "I don't like that there'll be civilians on board. The vessel's crew has nothing to do with the weapons deal."

"You're worried they'll get hurt?"

He nodded. "It's one of those *greater good* calls. We risk the lives of a few so Matisse and his black-market weapons don't go on to cause the deaths of many. Doesn't make me feel any better about putting them in the line of fire."

"Hopefully it doesn't come to that. When you're out there, lean on the guys if you're not comfortable making a judgment call. They've got your back."

"They do."

"It's like a family," I said quietly, still swirling my finger over Kane's pec.

"Hmm?"

"The way you are when you're together. You haven't seen your teammates in years, but they're here for you when you

need them. Everyone's doing what they can. There's a closeness between you all. A bond. The way you joke around, accept each other's faults, and don't hesitate to call out one another's bullshit. You really are like brothers."

Kane made a grumbling sound. "I haven't been a good friend since getting out. It's a lame-ass excuse for ghosting them, but being around the Zulu guys used to bring back a lot of hard memories."

"And now?"

"Now"—Kane tightened his hold around me—"Now it's a little easier. I thought having them here would be triggering, but their support has had the opposite effect. It's helping. And I'm proud of the things they're doing. Brandon and Vaughn taking on human traffickers and the cartel, it's nasty work, but it's commendable. They're saving lives and repairing families. They're using their skills to make the world a better place. And what am I doing? Sitting on my boat, drinking beer, and ignoring the truth."

I froze. This was the most Kane had spoken about his personal troubles since he'd told me about that fateful final mission in Russia.

"What truth is that?" I asked.

"That it's time I pulled my head out of my ass and started doing something honorable with my life."

"Like what?"

"Like helping them."

I sat up and stared at him. “Help Brandon and Vaughn free slaves from traffickers?”

He nodded. “Brandon needs good men, and there’s no shortage of assholes out there making people’s lives hell.” He curled my hair behind one ear. “I never became a SEAL to be a hero or change the world. I did it because I was chasing a thrill and it seemed like the ultimate adventure. To get paid for it was even better. Maybe I was too focused on getting the bad guy and not thinking about the wider impact of those kills. But this week with you...it’s made me realize that making a difference in even one innocent person’s life is important. It *means* something. And if I continue down the path of doing nothing, I’m not making people safer by staying out of the fight. I’m letting them down.”

I made a small noise in the back of my throat. This was huge. A breakthrough. And one step on the road to Kane forgiving himself and welcoming genuine happiness back into his life.

“Freya?”

I nodded and drew in a shuddering breath.

“Baby girl, why do you look like you’re about to cry?”

“Not going to cry.” I shook my head. “But if I did, they’d be happy tears.” I threw my arms around him and pressed my face into the side of his neck. “I think you working with Brandon sounds like a wonderful idea.” I pulled back and sniffled. “Don’t get me wrong, the thought of you being in

dangerous situations terrifies me, but it's a very noble thing they're doing. You'd be the perfect addition to their team."

Kane hauled me on top of him and took my face in his hands. His blue eyes flickered between mine. "Why does it feel so damn good to make you happy?"

"Because despite every effort to resist my charms, you actually like me."

"Like you?" In a flash, he flipped me onto my back, parting my legs to make way for his body. "I think I'm fucking addicted to you. Now give me that mouth." He held my jaw between his thumb and forefinger and pressed his lips to mine.

Instantly, I melted into him, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck. Each of Kane's kisses conveyed hunger. Be they slow and languid or fast and desperate, they always delivered enough passion to send tingles to my core and fire through my veins.

"Need to fuck you," he said, dragging his hard cock against me.

I pushed his hair from his face. "Again?"

We'd only finished making love a short while ago. The man was insatiable, but so was I.

"Yes, again," Kane said against my lips. "One more time before I go."

One more time.

Those words made my heart twist with fear.

I refused to think this was the last time we'd make love. Kane would return to me. He had to. And when he did, the countdown to my departure would officially start, and our last time together *would* happen. I could leave America and return to my family as early as tomorrow. How did I want this to be over but also for it to never end? These conflicted feelings had me tied up in knots.

Focus on the here and now, I told myself. The only truly important thing was exactly where I needed him to be. In my arms.

Kane ground his pelvis against me, creating a delicious friction between us. He kissed me, and I breathed him in, soaking in his warmth and comforting scent. The gentle way he handled me made me feel like a priceless heirloom. There was something utterly breathtaking about a man so powerful, so dangerous, treating me with reverent care.

He touched his nose to mine, nuzzling me. "I know this is fucked up, but I want him to smell you on me when I tighten my hands around his throat. I want him to understand that I'm doing it for you. That his miserable fucking life is forfeit because of what he put you through. I want him to look in my eyes when he takes his last breath and know that *you've* won. Maybe you don't want to hear that I'm capable of something like that, but that's me, Freya. Sometimes I'm a bad man. But only to those who deserve it."

I kissed Kane fiercely, letting him know he'd never disappoint me by taking his anger out on Andre. Yes, what he

had to do was messed up, but Andre had brought this upon himself. I'd endured his torment for years. Kane and Brandon interrogating him and granting him a quick death hardly seemed cruel enough.

“Tell me what you want.” Kane’s mouth shifted to my breast, sucking on one nipple, then moving to the next.

I took hold of his length, tracing my thumb over the silver barbell at the end. “I want you inside me.”

“Again?” he teased, throwing my words back at me.

Forever, I wanted to tell him, but I kept the foolish word to myself.

“Yes. I need to feel you.”

“Anything, baby girl. Anything you want. Always.”

Before I had a chance to process that, he entered me in one long thrust.

I sucked in a sharp breath. *Sweet mercy*.

Was this what taking a hit of cocaine felt like? I could understand getting hooked on this euphoria.

He pressed his forehead to mine. “Goddammit, Freya. I’ll never get used to how good it feels each time I bury myself inside you.”

This. What we had right here in this room felt like the only thing on earth I needed. With Kane, I felt safe and protected. He made me feel cherished and happy, and like I could be myself without judgment. My personality was a lot. Too much

for some. But Kane valued my boldness and embraced it. He didn't try to change me or let it intimidate him. With him, I felt truly free. Free from Andre. Free to be me.

I rolled my hips to meet his, drowning in the bliss of his powerful strokes. "Faster, Kane. I want it hard."

So he gave it to me hard, slamming into me the way he knew I loved. On each drive, his piercing rubbed against a sensitive place deep inside me. Already, the early stages of an orgasm blossomed. I chased the feeling, letting my eyelids flutter closed.

Kane paused his movements. "Look at me, Freya." His voice was deep and raspy, thick with emotion.

When I gave him my eyes, he reared back and pushed into me slowly, again and again. Kane's tender side always threatened to unravel me.

"Is this normal?" I asked. "Wanting you every waking second?" I had little experience with men and relationships. Did everyone feel so consumed when they found someone special?

"Nothing about this is normal, I promise you." He brushed a strand of hair from my cheek, and his lips found mine again.

"It's overwhelming," I whispered. "It scares me."

"I feel it, too, baby girl. It's too late to stop it now."

My rapid infatuation with Kane surprised me. He was the first thing on my mind when I woke pressed against him and the last thought as we fell asleep entwined in each other's

arms. His smell lingered on my clothes. I felt the ghost of our constant lovemaking in the sweet ache between my thighs. He was everywhere and everything, and I...I didn't know what to do with that.

So I shut it down. This wasn't the time or the place to dwell on troublesome thoughts of what could never be. Instead, I focused on Kane. The way his beautiful inked skin shone with a light sweat under the lamplight. The way his muscles bunched and released as he moved above me. The way his eyes held mine, saying so much without a single word.

Kane lifted my arse from the bed, tilting my hips up, then drove in harder. He wasn't being delicate with me anymore. In a way, it was easier for me to accept him like this. Raw. Unrestrained. Fierce. Gentle Kane made my throat knot and made me long for things I shouldn't. Wild Kane made my toes curl and took me to the edge of ecstasy. But even when handling me roughly, it was as though he tried to convey every unspoken word between us, every sentiment, every wish, with each powerful thrust. If I could capture the essence of him to take with me, it would be right here and now when it felt like we were two halves of a whole, connected in the most intimate way.

“God, Kane!” The way his pelvis hit my clit on each thrust brought me closer to release.

“That's it. Say my name. Scream it. I don't care if the whole fucking house hears you.”

He hitched my legs higher. My fingernails dug into his shoulders, clawing for grip. Obscene sounds filled the room from the ferocity of our movements.

“I’m so close.” I arched my hips to meet Kane’s frantic pace. My heart beat so fast I thought I might go into cardiac arrest. If my time was up, this was a marvelous way to go.

“Come for me, baby. Show me how much you love this.”

Because his wicked words always set me on fire, I tipped over the edge. Waves of pure ecstasy pulsed through me. I might’ve been loud. I honestly couldn’t say, because I was completely lost to my orgasm.

“Yes,” Kane hissed.

His heavy body pinned me beneath him. Each deep stroke elicited a primal grunt from Kane’s throat. And then I watched his handsome face as he came, thrusting into me mercilessly. He’d never been more magnificent.

Kane nuzzled my neck as he came down. His hot, panting breaths blew against my skin. I brushed his hair back and kissed his shoulder.

He pressed soft lips below my earlobe. “I’m not ready to let you go,” he whispered.

From the melancholy in his tone, it was clear he didn’t mean letting go of me to leave the bed. He meant letting go of me forever.

He’d done it. Kane had gone and verbalized the horrible truth we’d avoided confronting. Now that it was out in the

open, it was real and needed dealing with. Except I still wasn't sure how to proceed. All I could offer was honesty.

So I replied, "I'm not ready to let you go, either."

He sat up fast, and his intense blue gaze held mine. "Then stay with me."

Okay. That was *not* what I'd expected to hear.

After a beat of silence, I asked, "What?"

Kane knew I had to return to England.

"I know this is a dick move," he added. "I know there's a chance you'll hate me for asking, but *please*, don't go."

I didn't want to hurt him. God, that was the last thing I wanted to do. "I...I don't know what to say."

He clasped my jaw in his palms. "Say you'll stay. Say you'll give us a chance. Yes, what I'm asking is crazy. And I promised myself I wouldn't do this. I promised myself I'd let you go, but I"—his expression turned pained—"I can't. Not without trying. I've only just found you, Freya, and now I can't bear the thought of not waking up with you in my arms every day. I can't pretend any longer that I'm okay with watching you leave me."

I shook my head. "Kane, please—"

"We can do all the things on your bucket list. Then we'll add more to it and do them, too. We can swim every day, and I'll make love to you every night. I don't have much, but I

swear I'll treat you so well. The way you deserve. Let me prove to you how—”

“Stop!” I pushed hard against his shoulders, and he rolled off me. I stood from the bed and pulled Kane's T-shirt over my head. I paced the bedroom, one hand pressed to my forehead and wetness leaking down the inside of my thigh.

“I can't stay here with you.” I could hardly stand to look into his hurt-filled eyes. “You know my family needs me. I don't know when Dad might have another stroke. What if the next one is worse? What if it kills him? My sister has been the only one there for him for so long. I know Lena wants to travel the world to perform, yet she's stayed in London to be with Dad. She deserves to live her dreams. She's worked so hard for them.”

He shifted to sit at the edge of the bed. His large feet thudded as they hit the floor. “And what about your dreams? You've sacrificed your life by living with that psycho to help your family. When do you get what you want?”

“That *is* what I want.” I stopped pacing to face him. The urge to run into his arms and never let go was strong, because, yes, I wanted to go home, but I also wanted Kane. If life had taught me anything, it was that we didn't always get what we wanted. “I care about you so much. And I would be happy with you. I know that. But no matter how much I want to, I can't stay. Not even for a chance at—”

Love.

I swallowed down the word that had been on the tip of my tongue.

No. I couldn't be in love with Kane. Not after such a short time. The life-threatening situation and the amazing sex must be toying with my emotions. They were probably messing with Kane's, too.

He rose from the bed fast and came toward me. God, he was beautiful. So tall and rugged. All those muscles and ink. His heat and scent had me leaning into him.

His callused hands cradled the nape of my neck. "Not even for a chance at what, Freya?" When I pressed my lips together and remained silent, he demanded, "Say it."

"Why? It doesn't change anything."

"You're wrong. It could change everything if you admit what you're feeling." He took one of my hands and placed it over his heart. It pounded beneath his ribs at the same frenetic pace as mine. "What we're *both* feeling. You don't have to stay here. Let me come with you."

"To London?"

He nodded.

"London is a huge, bleak city where it rains all the time. The nearest beaches have ice-cold water, no waves to surf, and are made of pebbles. You'd absolutely hate it there."

"Not if I were with you."

“But your whole world is here. Could you really move away from Wyatt and Maggie when they’re expecting another baby? They’ll need you. And what about Regan? When the baby is born, she’ll need her favorite uncle more than ever.”

Kane grimaced and hung his head. He loved Regan as if she were his own. Leaving her to live thousands of miles away would devastate them both.

I took Kane’s face in my palms and brought his eyes to mine. “When I was with Andre, all I dreamed about was being free and having my independence. I still need that.” I shook my head. “I love the way you care for me, and it would be so easy to let you keep doing that. But I need to stand on my own two feet and find out who I am again. I need to know I can support myself—emotionally and financially—and be happy without relying on anyone.” I drew in a shuddering breath. “And I can’t do that if I’m with you.” My voice broke on the last word, and the tears I’d held in streamed down my face.

Kane’s expression twisted as if I’d shot an arrow through his chest. I felt it, too. I’d never wanted anything as much as I wanted Kane. Giving him up might be the biggest regret of my life, but I had a duty to my family and a promise to keep to myself. One I’d vowed never to let a man interfere with, even one as sweet and perfect as Kane.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Kane dragged his hands through his hair. “Deep down I knew that would be your answer.”

From downstairs came the early-morning rumblings of the men starting their day. Low voices murmured, and doors opened and closed as they loaded the pickups in preparation for their op.

Kane stared at me for a moment longer before leaving my side to get dressed. He and the guys would soon be heading to Ensenada port to board the fishing trawler and head out to sea.

He finished tying his boots, then came to where I still stood silently in the middle of the room. “I only want you to be happy. I wish that were with me, but as long as I know you’re living the life you want, I’ll try to find comfort in that.” He took my face in his hands and tilted my chin up. “I love you, Freya. I’ve never said those words to another woman, and I know it’s fast, but I feel them to my soul.”

I made a pained sound as my heart threatened to tear itself in two.

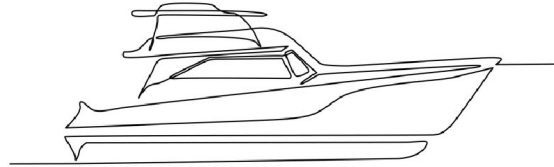
He continued, “And I need you to remember something. I don’t care where you are in the world or how long it’s been since we were together. If you need me, I’ll find you. I’ll always find you, no matter what. Promise me you’ll never forget that.”

I nodded because I couldn’t speak past the tightness in my throat. I squeezed my eyes shut, and more tears slipped down my cheeks.

Then he pressed a firm kiss to my lips and walked out the door to put his life in danger for me.

And if I'd thought my day couldn't get any more awful, I was completely fucking wrong.

Kane



I couldn't recall feeling this miserable in a long time. Staying busy hadn't kept my mind off Freya. Not even being on the water could pull me from my funk. Ordinarily, the clear starry sky and calm seas would've quieted my agitated thoughts. Even the trawler's cloying diesel fumes might've provided comfort.

Not tonight.

And now that we were twenty clicks offshore in a rust bucket of a fishing trawler with nothing to do but hurry up and wait, all I had was time to think. It was killing me.

I loved Freya. It had happened fast, and I didn't care what anybody thought about that. The woman had me tied up in knots. It didn't feel real that once this op was done and that piece of shit Matisse dealt with, she could leave the country within days. Maybe it was best to rip off that Band-Aid. The longer she stuck around, the harder it would be to let her go.

Asking her to stay had been a shitty thing to do. I should never have pressured her to put me above her family. It was my own fault I hoped for something more. Freya had been

clear from the start that she wanted to return to them, and that her freedom and independence were just as important. All I'd done was smother her, like some insecure, clingy teenager wanting to keep her all to myself. Just like the goddamn monster who'd tried to own her.

I was such an asshole.

Wy planted his ass on the large crate beside mine. He'd already changed into dark clothes for the night op.

I felt his eyes on me before he said, "You look as happy as a cowboy whose horse just died and he's got no whiskey to drown his sorrows."

I ignored his jibe and continued sharpening my knife.

"I heard you and Freya arguing this morning."

"Yep."

"Is it over between you two?"

I snorted. "Did we ever really start?"

Wy stayed silent for a moment. "You want to talk about it?"

"Not really in the mood to hear *I told you so* right now."

"I wasn't going to say that. I was going to tell you that I've got your back. All of us do—Maggie, the Zulu guys. We've been trying to help you for years, Kane. When are you going to get your head out of your ass and see that?"

I paused my sharpening and fixed him with a hard stare. "So you're going with tough love now, is that it?"

“I just want to make sure you’re squared away before we board this yacht.”

I stabbed my knife into the top of the timber crate I sat on, right beside my thigh. “I wish you’d stop asking me that. Yes, I can handle my shit, all right?”

Wy only shook his head.

Maybe he was right. I needed to put this drama with Freya out of my mind. A Green Team instructor had once told me that when a situation got chaotic or stressful, I should focus on the things I could control. None of the what-ifs mattered. Overanalyzing them would only cause fear, and fear was what got you or your teammates killed.

“Are you going to murder Matisse as soon as you lay eyes on him?” Wy asked.

Fair question, I supposed.

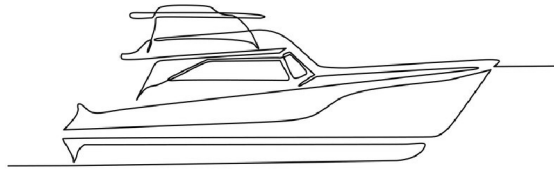
I pulled the knife from the crate and held it before me. Moonlight glinted off the sharpened blade. “The logical part of my brain says no. The animal inside me says that shit bag will be lucky to draw one last breath before I end him.”

“Brandon went to a lot of effort to pull this op together so he could interrogate him. Maybe you should let me bring Matisse in.”

“No. He’s mine.” I turned to Wy and secured the knife in the leather sheath at my hip. “I’ll control my baser urges, all right?”

“Good.” He slapped his hands on his thighs and stood.
“Gear up. It’s time to go.”

Freya



“**W**hy don’t you try to get some sleep,” Owen said when I covered my yawn with the back of my hand.

“Not a chance.”

It was 2:30 a.m. Roughly the time Brandon had predicted they’d commence their siege. My eyes shifted constantly to the phone in the middle of the breakfast bar around which Owen and I sat. It could ring at any moment with news.

The house was eerily quiet without the rest of the guys. Owen had gotten sick of my pacing, so he’d taught me how to play poker. Tanner patrolled outside, and Maggie was upstairs with Regan, but I assumed only one of them slept. Maggie was only slightly less anxious than me.

I tossed down my two worst cards. The replacements Owen dealt weren’t any better. Honestly, my head wasn’t in the game.

Owen laid his cards out. Three tens and two jacks. Impressive.

He leaned back on his barstool and folded his arms. “All right. Show me what you’ve got.”

I turned them over.

Owen lifted a brow. “That’s it? A pair of fours?”

“Well, yes.” I tapped my cards. “But I also had a three.”

“And that helps you how?”

“It’s close to a four. I almost had three of a kind.”

“Either you’re the worst poker player ever, or I’m a terrible teacher.”

“Who taught you to play?” I pushed my cards toward Owen.

He gathered them and reshuffled the deck. “Vaughn. Don’t ever gamble with my brother. He’ll take your money, your watch, and your girlfriend.”

I snorted. “He doesn’t seem the type to have a girlfriend.”

Owen tilted his head. “He used to be.”

“What changed?”

A short burst of static sounded through the radio at Owen’s shoulder. We waited to hear Tanner’s voice, but it never came.

Owen pressed the button on the receiver. “Two, this is One. How do you copy?”

Crickets.

My heart started racing. “What’s wrong? Why isn’t he answering?”

Owen stood, his chair scraping over the tiles. “It’s probably nothing. His radio battery might be dead. Let me check it out.”

On his way through the rear sliding door, he tried contacting Tanner again, but there was still no answer. A chill went up my spine when Owen removed his pistol from its holster and crept around the side of the house.

What was happening? I tried to slow my breathing by telling myself it must be a false alarm.

What if it wasn’t? What if one of Campbell’s men had found me again?

I needed a weapon. Why hadn’t I asked for a pistol? Probably because until now, I’d been surrounded by a bunch of burly well-trained men armed to the hilt. It had hardly seemed necessary.

There must be a gun around here somewhere.

I stood, and a hand clamped around my mouth. My feet slipped as I was yanked backward against a large body.

Short stubble scratched my cheek. “You have been a very difficult lass to find.”

A Scottish accent.

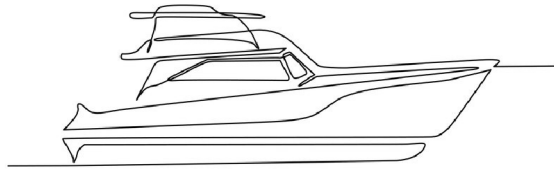
Campbell.

“If you make a sound, everyone in this house dies while you watch. Nod if you understand.”

I nodded as terror forced rapid breaths through my nostrils.

“Good. You’re coming with me.”

Kane



There were five of us on the inflatable boat: Wy, Garcia, Hollis, and I, plus one of Brandon’s marines as a skipper.

On board the sleek megayacht were four civilians: two crew members and two service staff. Thankfully, Matisse had opted for a skeleton crew to minimize witnesses to his cartel meeting. In addition to that was a four-man private-security detail, and although we were a small team, they’d be easy pickings.

Brandon ran intelligence from the trawler, which mostly involved being our eyes in the sky with a small drone, and Vaughn was on standby with the Black Hawk back on land. If the op turned into a total clusterfuck, he was our backup for exfil.

I pressed the radio receiver on my shoulder to talk to Brandon. We used numbers as call signs, and Brandon would go by TOC—Tactical Operations Center. It was a throwback to our time in the teams.

“TOC, this is One. What’s the sitrep?” I asked.

“One, can confirm the target is two mikes out. The vessel is moving south at eighteen knots. IR cam on the drone shows four males on deck armed with assault rifles. Bow, stern, port, and starboard.”

“Copy that. Approaching for infil.”

The *Antoinette* was 250 feet of sleek black hull and arctic-white trilevel superstructure. She came complete with a swimming pool, Jacuzzi, helipad, and enough gold-plated internal trimmings to impress royalty. Aside from the navigation lights, the motor yacht remained shrouded in darkness as it steamed through Mexican waters.

We lowered our night-vision goggles and lifted bandanas to cover the lower halves of our faces. The *Antoinette*'s radar wouldn't detect our inflatable, and the noise of the motor yacht's large engines would mask our approach.

As we neared the stern, I used infrared binoculars to gain a visual on the guards. “Port and starboard Tangos are patrolling the length of the yacht. Looks like the guard at the stern is smoking a cigarette and looking at his phone.” I waited until the moment all guards' eyes were averted from the stern and gave our driver the command to bring the RHIB alongside the *Antoinette*'s swim platform. Stealthily, we transferred across.

Since Wy boarded first, he took out the guard at the stern. His suppressed M4 rifle barely made a sound above the engine noise.

“Tango on the stern down hard,” he said into the radio.

We'd studied the floor plan of the yacht's interior, and Freya had shown us which cabin was Matisse's, so we knew exactly where to go.

"On me," I said, and with rifles drawn, we moved steadily in formation toward the middeck.

Once there, we split into two teams. Hollis and Garcia positioned themselves to deal with the starboard guard while Wy and I went for the portside. Wy dispatched our target efficiently and threw his body overboard in case the crew found it and raised the alarm. Garcia radioed in to let us know they'd done the same.

All four of us made our way to the midship access door. Wy and I went inside while Hollis and Garcia moved to take out the last remaining guard at the bow.

Rifles at the ready, my brother and I moved along a dim hallway illuminated by intermittent floor lights, up a set of stairs, then along another hallway until we came to Matisse's room.

I put my ear to the door. Voices? At this hour? The French accent belonged to Matisse. The other was harder to hear because it came through a phone speaker.

"This is pleasing news," said Matisse.

"There's something else you should know about the lass." Scottish accent. It had to be Campbell. "I don't believe she was a hostage. She seemed to be on friendly terms with the other people at the property."

No! They've found Freya.

Wy gripped my shoulder, and I held my hand up. I needed to listen to this.

“Are you telling me she wasn't kidnapped?” Matisse asked.

“Looked like she'd been enjoying a Mexican holiday with some well-armed lads. She was nae thrilled when I removed her from their company.”

Not only had Campbell found her. He *had* her.

Fuck this shit. We were going in.

“Bring her to me. Right now,” Matisse growled.

I tried the handle. Locked. I stepped back and kicked the door in with enough force to knock down a brick wall.

Matisse jumped from where he sat on the bed. His hands shot up when he saw my M4 pointed at his face.

“Get him to stand down!” I shouted and pointed at the phone held in his raised hand.

Matisse reared back until his ass hit the wall. He looked stunned, confused, and like he might shit his pompous black silk pajama pants at any second.

I never shifted the aim of my rifle from his torso. “You tell Campbell to let Freya go, or you're dead, he's dead, and any motherfucker who so much as lays a finger on her goes on my hit list.”

The phone screen was black. Had he hung up already?

Matisse's eyes narrowed, as if he were trying to piece the puzzle together. "You're the ones who took her from me."

Not a question. A statement. I guessed I hadn't hidden my distress over his plans for Freya.

I lunged for him, snatched the phone from his hand, and slammed it against his chest. "Unlock it, asshole. Otherwise you're no use to me alive."

He took the phone and looked at the screen, seeming to consider his next move. A moment later, his eyes came back to mine. The shit stain had the nerve to stand a little straighter as he smirked. "No."

I punched him in his arrogant fucking face. It felt good, so I did it again. Then I grabbed him by the scruff of his collar and threw him against the wall.

Blood poured from Matisse's busted nose and lip. "Hit me as much as you want. You can't have her. She belongs to me. I own her!"

I pressed my forearm to his throat. "She was never yours, and she never will be."

Matisse grimaced and made a gurgling sound as I leaned in harder. One final push and I'd crush his windpipe.

Wy came up behind me. "Don't finish him yet. Remember why we're here."

With a growl, I released my arm from his neck, and Matisse dropped to the floor.

Jesus. In my rage, I wasn't thinking straight. I got on the radio to Brandon. "TOC, call Owen. Campbell's been at the safe house. Find out what the fuck is going on."

"On it," he replied.

Wy shook his head. "If anything has happened to Maggie and Regan—"

"I know. Now do you understand why I want to kill him so much?" I gestured to the wheezing excuse for a human on the floor.

Matisse coughed and massaged his throat. "You're too late. I have Freya, and there's nothing you can do about it."

I kicked the pathetic sack of shit in the stomach. He curled up in the fetal position and groaned. Gripping him by the hair, I snarled up close in his face. "Last chance before I do the world a favor and put a bullet in your motherfucking brain. Call Campbell!"

When he didn't respond, I pulled my fist back, ready to deliver another beating.

"Okay, okay." He winced and held a hand up. "I'll do it."

About fucking time.

From the floor, Matisse dialed a number, and after two rings, Campbell answered.

"Is there something else you need, Mr. Matisse?"

"Yes. If anything happens to me, kill her." Then he pitched the phone against a cabinet, smashing the screen before it

landed on the floor.

I roared and hauled him to his feet. “You just made the biggest fucking mistake of your life.” I shoved him against the wall hard enough to rattle his teeth. “You shouldn’t be worried about me killing you. You should be worried about everything I’m going to do leading up to that moment, because if anyone hurts Freya, I swear to God I’ll take my sweet time removing every tooth and nail from your body.”

A sinister grin stretched across his red-stained lips. “So you’ve had her, then?”

I didn’t dignify that with an answer.

“Does it bother you to know that all I had to do was snap my fingers and she’d strip, bend over, and take my cock in that tight little cunt of hers? Any time. Any place. The more she hated it, the better it felt.”

I exploded with rage.

The first punch knocked him out. The second and third opened up a gash in his cheek. In the background, a voice called my name. I didn’t stop pummeling Matisse. I wouldn’t stop until his face was pulp. I lost count of how many more blows I delivered before someone pulled me off him.

“Kane!” Wy yelled. “We’ve got what we came for. Let’s go.”

We could still fix this. We could still get Freya back once we interrogated Matisse. We’d keep him alive until she was safe.

“One, this is TOC.” Brandon’s voice came over the radio. “Be advised you have two skiffs approaching your portside at high speed, each with two hostiles on board and what look like Dushkas mounted up front.”

Dushkas?

Wyatt and I shared a glance. The heavy Russian machine gun was a serious piece of weaponry that would be difficult to defend against, and this yacht wasn’t built to withstand an attack.

“Shit,” said Wyatt.

Things weren’t going to plan, but I reminded myself to keep cool. “Good copy, TOC. What’s their ETA?”

“Roughly two mikes.”

“Three and Four, did you copy that?” I asked.

Hollis and Garcia both gave an affirmative.

“Matisse didn’t know we were here until two minutes ago,” Wy said. “He didn’t even have the chance to call for reinforcements, so they’re not here to help him. Maybe it’s the Mexican cartel coming out early to meet with him?”

“Could be. Or what if it’s the Colombians coming for their pound of flesh?”

We’d find out soon enough.

I hit the radio receiver button. “Three and Four, position yourselves portside and fire if fired upon. We’ll join you on the main deck ASAP.”

“Copy that. Moving now,” Garcia replied.

“You’d better grab him.” I gestured to the unconscious, bleeding asshole on the floor. “If I have to touch him again, I’ll kill him.”

Wy hefted Matisse over his shoulder with a grunt.

As we made our way down the long hallway, large-caliber bullets slammed into the hull.

I guessed that answered our question. The skiffs weren’t friends of Matisse. Colombian, then.

I got on the radio to Brandon. “TOC, we’re taking heavy contact. Requesting Zulu Five get his ass out here for a helo extraction.”

More bullets found the portside of the *Antoinette*. A woman screamed nearby.

“He’s already on his way. ETA ten mikes,” said Brandon.

Shit. We had to deal with the skiffs for ten minutes before Vaughn and the Black Hawk arrived with any substantial firepower.

“Finally got hold of Owen,” Brandon added. “I have confirmation that Freya’s been taken. Maggie and Regan are fine.”

Fuck. “Copy that.”

I didn’t allow myself to process that too deeply. Maggie and Regan were safe. Freya wasn’t. The only way to fix that was to keep my head in the game.

Focus on the things you can control.

We emerged into a living area and found two female service staff members surrounded by shattered glass. The one on her side, bleeding out from a nasty head wound, was already gone. The other sat slumped against the wall with bloodstained hands pressed over her stomach. She sucked in shallow breaths as she stared at us pale-faced.

Shit. This was exactly what I'd been worried about going into this op. But there was no time to be pissed off about it right now. We had to act fast.

I glanced at Wy. "Do what you can to help her." After he dumped Matisse on the floor, I handed him my med kit. "Use my morphine, too, if she needs it."

My brother gave me a solemn nod. We both knew she was unlikely to survive, but we could at least make her comfortable.

The *Antoinette's* engines grew louder as it accelerated through the water. It maneuvered with hard left and right turns, the captain doing his best to evade the skiffs.

"One, we could use a little help out here," Garcia said.

"I'm almost in position," I replied, and headed outside.

The skiffs were on us. They circled the yacht, both laying down heavy fire toward the bridge. They wanted this vessel stopped.

I got on the radio again. "Three and Four, aim for the portside skiff. I'll take starboard."

“Copy that,” said Garcia.

The skiff machine-gun operators were protected by thick metal shielding, so I aimed at the skipper and told the others to do the same.

Steady...steady.

Fire.

The driver collapsed. The skiff veered off course abruptly, forcing the machine-gun operator to abandon his weapon and take the wheel. Once he regained control, he turned tail and sped away.

One skiff down.

The other maintained its assault, still firing upon the *Antoinette*'s helm. Large bullet holes peppered the bridge. The yacht banked hard left and continued in a tight circle. It never corrected course. If either of the crew was alive up there, it'd be a miracle.

The yacht's engines shut down, and it lost speed fast. The electronics must've been damaged. Once the *Antoinette* came to a complete stop, an eerie silence surrounded us.

Wait. Why had everyone stopped firing?

“One, we have a problem.” Garcia breathed heavily over the radio. “Our skiff has stopped at the bow. I don't have a direct shot. Odd place to try to board. Maybe they're doing something to the hull.”

“Get to a position where you can take them out,” I replied.

“Already moving.”

We needed eyes on that skiff. “TOC, can you get a visual for us?”

“Repositioning the drone now,” Brandon said.

When a whirring started up, I glanced toward the upper deck.

What the hell?

I couldn't see the helipad from here, but I recognized the unmistakable sound of rotor blades spinning up.

A sickening sensation overcame me as I pressed the radio receiver button. “Wy, tell me you have eyes on Matisse.”

Not a second passed. “Shit! He's gone. Sorry, man. I've been busy here. I'll go after him.”

“No. I'll go. You stay there.” We could use Wy out on deck, but the thought of leaving that woman to die alone didn't sit right.

“TOC, can Matisse fly that helo?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” came Brandon's reply.

I knew I should've killed him the moment I laid eyes on him.

“Matisse is trying to escape in the helo. Does anyone have a shot at the tail rotor?” I asked.

When Hollis and Garcia confirmed a negative, I hustled toward the stairs, then sprang up them two at a time.

The skiff that'd been at the bow took off at top speed, headed for the coast.

"There's a package attached to the hull," Brandon said. "From the size and shape of it, I'm guessing twenty pounds of C-4. Get the hell out of there."

I paused at the top of the first set of stairs. "Fuck!" I yelled, and slammed my fist against the wall. I needed to stop Matisse, but I had to get the team off the yacht, and they wouldn't leave without me. With that much C-4 stuck to the bow, if this thing blew, she'd tear open like a tin can and go down fast. We had to hustle.

I got on the radio. "All channels, move to the exfil point. Fast."

I raced back down the stairs. Wy met me at the bottom. His hands were covered in blood.

He shook his head. "She didn't make it."

Goddammit. The civilians on board had been shot to pieces, yet the biggest scumbag I'd had the displeasure of meeting still survived. Hopefully not for much longer.

Wy and I jogged toward the swim deck. Hollis and Garcia were already waiting for us on board the RHIB.

From the sound of the helo, it'd take off at any moment. I steadied to aim my rifle at where it would soon appear. I still had a chance to bring it down with a few well-placed shots. But Matisse would almost certainly die if his chopper ditched

in the ocean. Would Campbell follow through with the order to kill Freya?

The helo rose and banked fast in an evasive maneuver.

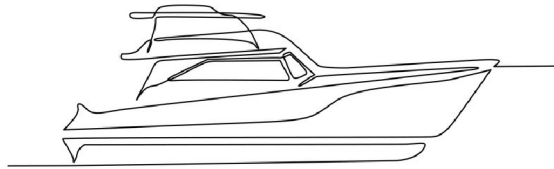
My aim followed, my finger on the trigger.

“I can track the helo,” Brandon said over the radio, probably watching my every move with the drone. “It’ll lead us straight to Freya.”

He had a point, but I didn’t want that son of a bitch anywhere near her. If I let him go, he’d have her, and Freya’s worst nightmare would become a reality.

That was the last thought I had before a massive explosion knocked me on my ass and everything went black.

Freya



Our black SUV traveled at high speed along a bumpy dirt road. I tried not to let my galloping heartbeat overcome me. My toes dug into my flip-flops. I fidgeted against the aggravating zip ties around my wrists.

As it turned out, being kidnapped for real wasn't as pleasant as orchestrating your own. And the man sitting beside me was nothing like Kane.

Campbell looked exactly like the photo Brandon had shown us. Forty-something, short-clipped dark hair, and a neatly trimmed gray-streaked beard. His ruddy, weathered skin told of a life in the harsh outdoors, and his intelligent eyes were the color of an arctic glacier and just as cold and intimidating. His tall, broad body might be wrapped in an expensive tailored suit, but I'd be a fool to mistake Dustin Campbell for a gentleman.

The brute faced me and propped his arm over the backrest of the rear seat. "Start talking, lass. Where are the rest of your mercenary friends?"

“I’ll answer your question if you answer mine first.” I did my best to sound composed by trying to even out the quaver in my voice.

“That’s not how this—”

“Did you hurt Tanner?” When Campbell glanced at me with a confused expression, I added, “The guard outside. He wouldn’t answer his radio. Is he okay?”

“Aye. He’ll have a nasty headache from the bump on his head, but he’ll be fine.”

I sighed with relief. No one had been seriously hurt during my abduction. After Campbell’s threat of violence against the others, I’d gone with him peacefully in the hope he’d remain true to his word. So far, he had.

The Scot raised his brows. “So? The mercs?”

I shrugged and feigned ignorance. “They don’t tell me where they go or what they do.”

Campbell let out an exasperated breath. “Must I give you the speech about the easy way or the hard way?”

I choked out a laugh. “What? Do you really think a group of mercenaries would give me those details?”

I might be terrified on the inside, but I wasn’t about to crumble under his questioning and rat out the team.

“I think you know more than you’re letting on.”

“You want proof I’m telling the truth? Tell me, where are you taking me?”

He clicked his tongue. “You know I won’t tell you that.”

I tried to fold my arms, then realized that was impossible with my wrists bound. “See? Kidnappers don’t hand out travel itineraries. I’m as clueless about their movements as I am about yours.”

“Except they weren’t your kidnappers, were they?”

Bugger. I’d hoped he’d assumed my comfort level at the safe house was due to my abductors being kind, not that they were my saviors. My extended silence gave Campbell the answer he needed. I guessed the ruse was over.

Did it really matter, anyway? Hopefully soon, Campbell would receive news that Andre had been captured and killed. And with his contract null and void, we could all go home.

But if he didn’t receive that call? If Kane’s mission failed and Andre escaped?

I needed a backup plan. What were you supposed to do when captured? Appeal to your abductor’s conscience? Make them see you as a real person, not a dollar figure? It was worth a try. Perhaps he had a shred of decency despite his reputation.

I shifted in my seat. “I don’t want to go back to Andre. He isn’t a good man.”

Campbell snorted but didn’t take his eyes from the phone he thumbed. “Aye. Good people dinnae typically use my services.”

“You’re sending me to a life worse than death if you take me back to him.”

His glanced my way at that, as though finally giving my words serious consideration. “Let me guess. You’re upset your sugar daddy didn’t buy you the new Gucci handbag you wanted?” Then he laughed and went back to scrolling.

How dare that wanker joke about this?

I glared at his profile. “Fuck you.”

Hmm. Maybe tactful negotiations weren’t my strong suit.

Campbell’s brows shot up. “Well haven’t you got a mouth on you? I bet your merc boyfriend enjoyed using it. Tell me, which of them were you screwing? Or was it more than one?”

Despite my bound hands, I wanted nothing more than to slam my fists into his irritating face. But Campbell was a big man who knew how to fight. One retaliatory hit from him and I’d be out cold. Instead, I narrowed my eyes and tried to hurt him in a different way. “Why don’t you take that phone and shove it up your arse?”

As if protesting my suggestion, the phone in Campbell’s hand rang.

I gestured toward it. “If it’s set to vibrate, it might be more fun than you think.”

He pointed at my face. “I’ll deal with you in a minute.” Then he looked at the screen with confusion before holding the phone to his ear. “Campbell,” he said. “Apologies, Mr. Matisse. I didn’t recognize the number.”

Oh God. It was *him*.

The hairs on the backs of my arms stood on end. Pins and needles prickled my extremities.

Campbell's posture stiffened at whatever Andre told him. "Aye. I thought your last call was rather cryptic. Mercenaries, you say?" His accusing gaze shot to mine. "That was ballsy. Did any of them survive?"

Survive? What...what did he mean? My stomach dropped through the floor when I put the facts together.

Andre was alive. Kane didn't have him. People—mercenaries—were dead.

"Excellent. Your package is on schedule for delivery. We'll see you soon." Campbell hung up the phone and faced me with a sinister smirk.

Blood rushed through my ears. I clutched my linen shirt to stop my clammy hands from shaking.

No. No.

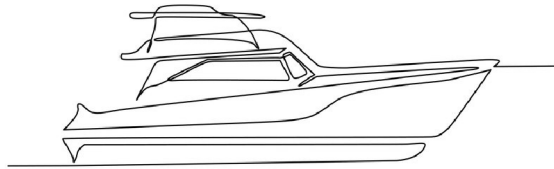
Whatever Campbell was about to tell me, I didn't want to hear it. I tried to tell him as much, but I couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe.

"A team of American mercenaries boarded the *Antoinette* en route to Mexico. Their plans went awry when some trigger-happy Colombians arrived on the scene. Maybe you're right about Matisse being a bad person. He isn't very well-liked, is he? Despite having two groups trying to kill him, he escaped on his helicopter. The mercenaries were on board when the boat exploded and sank. They're all dead."

“No.” I shook my head as tears welled in my eyes. “You’re lying.”

“You might as well accept it, lass.” He slotted the phone into his breast pocket. “No one’s coming to save you.”

Kane



My eyes flew open when my back thumped against something hard. The floor of the RHIB. Someone shook the shit out of me, and I coughed up more salt water than I ever had during Hell Week of BUD/S training.

“There he is,” Wy said with a grin, then slapped my cheek with a little too much brotherly love.

My ears rang, and my skull pounded. I did a head count and found the whole team on board. Hollis grimaced as he wrapped a tourniquet around his bicep, and Garcia wiped blood from a cut on his cheek. Everyone looked banged up and exhausted but mostly intact.

Thick liquid clogged my eye. Blood. I winced when I touched a gash on my forehead. That explained my throbbing headache.

“The crew?” I asked on the slight chance the captain and bosun had survived the Colombians’ attack.

“They all went down with the yacht. I’ve never seen a vessel sink so fast.”

Our inflatable sped away from the scene. After sitting up, I took in the carnage left behind. Flames licked the surface of the ocean. Pieces of burning flotsam littered the area, but the *Antoinette* was just...gone.

Wy removed his combat helmet and night-vision goggles. “The coast guard will be on their way.”

Which meant we needed to make a hasty departure. That explosion would’ve been seen for miles, drawing the attention of anyone nearby.

The motor yacht’s fiery remains grew smaller as we traveled toward the trawler.

“We have to get back onshore,” I said.

“I know,” said Wy as he scraped his hand over his face. “We’ll find Freya. Vaughn will be here with the helo any minute now.”

My chest ached, and not only because I’d almost drowned. Was this what Wy had felt when he’d woken in the hospital in Germany and learned his leg was missing? Because losing Freya felt like a vital piece of my soul had been stolen from me.



We couldn’t risk being blamed for the *Antoinette*’s bombing, so we’d grabbed whatever equipment we could

carry, loaded it on the RHIB, then scuttled the trawler. Vaughn had roped us into the Black Hawk a short time later.

We were beat-up, almost out of ammo, and since Brandon had only salvaged one laptop from the trawler, we had no way to track Matisse's helo until we returned to the safe house. So that was where Vaughn flew us.

Upon landing, Owen had recounted Freya's abduction, although there was little to tell. He'd searched for Tanner when he'd failed to answer a comms check and found him unconscious by the Joshua tree at the back of the property. When Owen had returned to the house, Freya had been gone. There were no signs of a struggle. She'd simply disappeared. Maggie and Regan had been upstairs during Freya's capture and had heard nothing. That they'd all remained unhurt was a blessing.

Owen felt like shit and hadn't quit berating himself for his mistake since our return an hour ago. He shouldn't have left Freya unprotected. Not even for a minute. But the fault wasn't his alone. We'd left Owen and Tanner undermanned while we carried out the op. It was a risk we'd chosen to take and were now paying for.

Now, Matisse had a solid head start on us, and Freya's worst fears had become real. Not being able to help her while she was scared and at the mercy of the man who'd brought her immeasurable pain was screwing with my head. The thought of Matisse hurting her again turned my blood to ice. I'd faced enemies while serving. At times, I'd been hell-bent on

delivering revenge for fallen brothers. It'd never turned me into the rabid dog I was now.

I could've ended him. I *should've* ended him. Despite my instructions to capture Matisse, if I'd put a bullet in his brain when I'd entered his cabin, this whole mess could've been avoided. If anything happened to Freya because I'd let him live, I would never forgive myself.

Freya had told me enough about Matisse that I'd expected to find a cold bastard on board that yacht. But looking into the psychopath's cruel eyes had made me realize he wasn't right in the head. He didn't see Freya as a person. He thought of her as property. A thing to do whatever he pleased with. And right now, I had no doubt he wanted to make her suffer. Was he doing something awful to her at this very moment? It took all my willpower not to punch a hole in the wall out of frustration at being so goddamn hamstrung.

I had to get her back. The soft glow in the dawn sky reminded me that time was ticking away, and every minute was critical.

The team stood around the breakfast bar. The last place Freya had been seen. Wy, Hollis, and Garcia looked as fatigued and battered as me, but this wasn't our first rodeo. We were fighters, and it took more than a few bullets flying past our heads and a boat blowing up to keep us down.

I braced my hands on the counter. "All right. What do we know?"

All eyes shifted to Brandon beside me. From the moment we'd touched down, he'd worked to track Matisse. It was our best hope of finding Freya.

“Once Matisse’s helo left the *Antoinette*, it traveled directly to a private terminal at LAX. It hasn’t moved since. He either stayed there or swapped to another aircraft. I’m still following leads.”

“What about Campbell?” I asked.

“I haven’t started tracking him yet.”

“Why not?” I gripped the edge of the counter so hard my chafed knuckles turned white.

“You know I lost my other laptops on the trawler. I need more time to configure the backup units and get them processing data.”

“So we don’t even know if he’s still in-country?” I snapped.

Brandon’s head tilted. “Easy, Brother. I’m working with my hands tied here.”

I stared at him without blinking. A muscle twitched near my eye. “This op was your idea. I’d have taken Matisse out with a single shot from a thousand meters if it weren’t for your plans to bring him in.”

“You know we needed to talk to him. There are other people’s lives at—”

“I don’t care about them!” I yelled, stepping in close. “I care about *her*.” My voice gave out on the last word. “Freya is the

only thing—*the only thing*—that matters. I need her back.”

My whole body trembled. My chest heaved with each rage-filled breath. How the hell had this happened? I’d promised Freya I’d never let Matisse take her, and I’d failed.

Brandon stood his ground, his lips pressed together in a straight line. The others watched our tense exchange closely. No doubt they were ready to intervene in case I lashed out.

Brandon held my stare. “I’m going to remind you that I’ve been in your position, so I know what you’re going through. It’s a hell like no other, and that’s the only reason I haven’t put you on your ass already.”

I lowered my chin. “You could try.”

Brandon exhaled slowly. “I get it. You feel helpless and angry, and you’re looking for a place to take out your frustration. But every second you waste trying to knock my block off is going to delay us finding Freya. You being hotheaded won’t help get her back.”

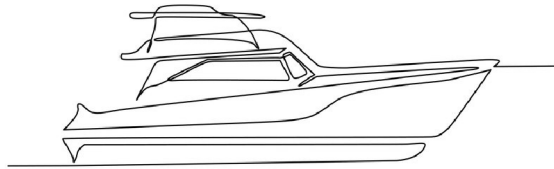
Brandon was right. I shouldn’t have bitten his head off. More than most, he understood how it felt to have a loved one taken. His sister had gone missing a few years back, kidnapped by human traffickers. He hadn’t found her in time, but her disappearance was what drove him to hunt down and eliminate sex-slavery rings all around the world.

“Find her,” I said after a long moment of silence. My hands balled into fists. “Give me a target. Give me something to fight so I can get her back.”

Brandon gave me a somber look and nodded. "I will."

How long would it take him to locate Freya, and what state would she be in when we got to her? This was killing me. I couldn't imagine what it must be doing to her.

Freya



Campbell and a half dozen of his men had hustled me onto a small propeller plane in Mexico. The zip ties had been cut from my wrists to allow me to use the bathroom and hadn't been put back on after. I supposed a bunch of burly mercenaries expected little trouble from one small woman.

We'd flown for only a few hours before transferring to a helicopter just as the morning sun had peeked over the horizon.

We were somewhere in the United States—the flight time and landscape told me that much—and possibly back in California, but I couldn't be sure.

While on the noisy helicopter, I mentally prepared myself for confronting Andre. I'd spent a lot of time fearing this moment, terrified of what it would be like to face him again.

But now I felt no fear.

I felt pure, unhinged wrath.

I'd hated Andre before, but those turbulent emotions were nothing compared to the rage coursing through my veins now.

Kane was dead. So were Wyatt, Hollis, and Garcia. Probably Brandon, too. They'd given their lives to try to save mine.

Another tear slid down my cheek. I'd thought I'd cried them all, but the drops fell freely from my puffy red eyes.

When Kane had told me he loved me, I hadn't reciprocated his words because I'd thought acknowledging that I felt the same way would only make things harder when I left. I'd been so wrong.

Now, Kane was gone forever, and I'd never told him how I truly felt. I'd never told him that I loved him, too, and that he was quite possibly the love of my life, only I'd been too scared to admit it.

God, this hurt. Thinking about Kane made my chest ache so badly it felt like my ribs might cave in. It was enough to swallow me up if I let it. And I would, in time. But right now, I couldn't let the pain of Kane's death drag me under. There was something far more important I needed to focus on.

Murder.

Andre's, specifically, but if Campbell or anyone else stood in my way, I'd kill them, too.

There were no other options left. My cover was blown because Campbell had relayed to Andre that I hadn't been held captive, which meant retribution against my family and me was a certainty. I had nothing else to lose. Killing Andre was

the only way to protect Dad, Lena, and myself. And if it meant I'd spend the rest of my life in prison, I'd gladly pay that price.

I didn't care what Andre did to me. What cruelty could I endure at his hands that I hadn't already suffered through? He could hurt me, starve me, humiliate me. None of it compared to the agony of losing Kane.

So I wasn't afraid of that son of a bitch, but he should be very afraid of me. I would end him or die trying. That was a very real possibility. The tenacity of my inner honey badger might be the only thing to keep me alive.

Our helicopter dipped over sunburned jagged mountains and descended toward a large secluded property.

Wait.

I recognized this place. I'd been here once years ago when Andre had invited several important clients to witness a weapons demonstration. It was the Matrix Defense Technologies test facility in Northern California. The blades whipped up debris as we approached the vast green lawn overlooked by a huge, luxurious log cabin. Andre used the lodge to entertain and accommodate distinguished guests.

The firing range was a few hundred meters away, as were the commercial buildings that housed some of Matrix Defense Technologies' most advanced weapons systems. This particular location, nestled between mountain ranges, had been selected to naturally shield surrounding communities from the noisy testing that happened regularly.

Outside the lodge, groups of men wearing tactical gear erected large machine guns on pivot stands while others stacked sandbags around them, forming a protective wall. More men transported crates from the nearby warehouse to the lodge. Household goods and food provisions were unloaded from a truck at the side service entry. And just as our helicopter touched down, men carrying duffel bags disembarked from a bus. More mercenaries, from the looks of them. Campbell's men, perhaps.

I had to hand it to Andre: he operated well under pressure. Following the sinking of the *Antoinette*, the threat from the Colombians had clearly been received, and instead of hiding, he'd prepared for war. The next time they attacked, he'd be ready. And if they came at him on home soil, he'd have a distinct advantage. What kind of crazy person launched an assault on a weapons facility? It was smart of Andre to choose the battleground. If the Colombians wanted him, they'd have to come and get him.

While the rotor blades still spun, Campbell grabbed me by the upper arm and walked me across the lawn toward the lodge. The racket from the helicopter eased when he closed the wide timber door behind us.

Preparations were in full swing inside also. Men shifted boxes and crates with Matrix Defense Technologies logos on the side. Rifles and ammunition, most likely. The men from the bus filed upstairs toward the lodge's bedrooms.

Campbell brought me around a corner and into a spacious den. There he was. The dick face of my nightmares, relaxing in a recliner before a giant unlit fireplace as if those around him weren't preparing for Armageddon.

Except Andre looked...awful. His face was a patchwork of purple and blue. One eye was so swollen it had closed over completely. A plaster covered his cheek on the same side. The splits on his lip and the bridge of his nose looked fresh. Someone had beaten the crap out of him very recently.

He'd had time to change, because neither his crisp white shirt nor his gray suit pants bore a single drop of blood. Pity. I would love to have seen him before he'd cleaned up.

As I neared, Andre lowered a hardcover book to his lap. Despite his injuries, he still had the gall to look self-assured. Of course he did. His smarmy arse always managed to win.

I supposed killing him myself was a long shot. I had no fighting skills. What I lacked in physical power, I'd have to make up for with guts, determination, and intelligence. My confidence relied solely on unjustified bravado and the hope that Andre would underestimate me. If he was busy preparing for an outside attack, there was a chance he'd miss the threat from within. I kept a lookout for a weapon. Plenty of them around here, but I needed something I could conceal and bring out at the opportune moment.

Andre's stoic expression transformed when his eyes landed on me. He sneered, then winced when the movement aggravated his split lip. Still, it was impossible to miss the

look of sheer delight on his smug face. I'd seen that expression on him many times. It was how he looked right before he doled out a punishment. And he had me right where he wanted me. Alone and vulnerable once more.

My feet stopped moving. Campbell tugged at my arm, but I dug my heels in. His grip tightened painfully as he hauled me forward. My head swam, and my heart pounded. My body's reaction to Andre was involuntary, from years of cruel conditioning. I was nothing more than a messed-up version of Pavlov's dog.

No. He didn't get to enjoy that response from me anymore. Even if my palms sweated and my legs trembled, I wouldn't let it show.

I took a deep breath, straightened my spine, and continued walking toward him. I stopped a short distance from Andre and made a circling motion toward his face. "I like this new look you're sporting. *Huge* improvement."

Andre's brows drew together as if he were trying to decide if he'd misheard me. He'd yet to be introduced to the *real* Freya Palmer. Even when we'd first met, I'd stifled my directness, knowing someone like him would frown upon it. That had been nothing new. I'd often had to rein in my words in certain social circles. Andre had seen flashes of my brashness over the years, but never for longer than a fleeting moment. The promise of punishment had always forced me back into submission. But now, I didn't give a shit how much I pissed him off. He was in for a real treat.

I jerked my chin toward the hive of activity outside. “This seems like a bit much, doesn’t it? Although I suppose in your case, it isn’t an overreaction. Who wants to kill you now? No, wait.” I held up my hand. “That’s the wrong question. Who *doesn’t* want to see you six feet under?”

Andre let out an amused chuckle. “Are you done yet?”

I folded my arms. “Oh, I haven’t even started.”

“Welcome home, Freya.” Andre removed his wire-framed reading glasses and cast his assessing gaze over my body, frowning at my cut-off denim shorts and loose-fit white linen button-down shirt. “You’ve gotten fat.”

That voice. It sliced like razor blades inside my skull. I’d rather burst my eardrums than listen to him. No offense to French people, but I didn’t think I’d ever be able to endure that accent again without vomiting in my mouth a little.

And who was this wanker calling fat? I’d be lucky to have put on two kilos since I had left, and I could happily add another eight.

I shrugged and cocked my hip. “Unlike in my time with you, I’ve been well cared for. And this isn’t my home.”

His smile widened, and he licked a fresh bead of blood from his lip. “Your home is wherever I am.”

“You truly are a delusional fuck, aren’t you, Andre?”

His face went deadpan, and he froze. The only movement came from the flaring of his nostrils. “*What* did you say to me?”

“You heard me perfectly. Guess what? I’m not playing your games anymore.”

“It’s you who is delusional. You will remember your place. But please, continue with this brattish behavior. It will make your punishment so much more enjoyable.”

I ground my teeth together, and I’d be lying if I said the mention of Andre’s punishments didn’t send a chill up my spine. Too late to hide it. The bastard had noticed.

“Did you miss me, my precious?” he added with an arrogant smirk. “I’ve thought about nothing but getting you back since they took you from me.”

“Cut the bullshit, Andre. I’ve had enough of your thinly veiled threats. It’s time you spoke plainly, because I won’t censor myself any longer.”

My candor yet again left him speechless.

“Just in case there’s any confusion, let me spell it out for you. They didn’t take me. I escaped. I happily put my life in the hands of criminals because even if they’d been vile, lecherous creeps, their company would’ve still been far more pleasant than yours.”

Andre snorted. “I know what you did. I wanted to see if you would be bold enough to admit it.” He folded one leg over the other. “I will deal with this insolence in due course. The main thing is I have you back. You’re still my *whore*.”

When he spat the last word, I saw red. I took a step closer, almost standing over him. “I’m not your *anything* anymore. I

left you, and I left behind that pathetic person I pretended to be just so you could feel like your insignificant pecker was almost average. News flash, Satan spawn. A dick that looks like a crooked finger isn't normal.”

Someone nearby covered a chuckle with a cough. Andre's face turned blotchy with rage. He looked like he'd forgotten how to breathe. I sincerely hoped he did the world a favor and continued to forget for another few minutes.

“Yeah. That's right.” I sneered. “Better get used to this bitch, because she's here to stay.”

No more cowering. No more hiding my true self. I might've been laying the insults on a bit thick, but he'd hurt me for years, and I wanted to hurt him back.

This was a dangerous game I played. My escape meant my family was already a target, and my ongoing disobedience would win them no favors. But I was banking on two things. One, Andre would be too distracted with the Colombian threat to worry about tormenting Dad and Lena right now. And two, I planned to kill him before he exacted his revenge.

Andre rose from the recliner and came for me, hands outstretched as though he were about to wrap them around my throat.

I batted them away. “Don't you fucking touch me!” I growled and shoved his chest with enough force to stall his advance.

“Control her!” Andre yelled, spittle flying from his mouth.

Campbell grabbed my wrists and yanked them behind my back.

“This should be good.” I glared at Andre. “Are you going to do your own dirty work? Or are you going to order the man twice my size to do it for you?”

Andre’s slap came as no surprise. I wanted him to lash out. It showed *his* weakness and proved I’d gotten to him.

I licked blood from my lip and smiled even though it stung. “You’re a joke. A pitiful excuse of a man who can only get hard when someone is suffering. I despise you.”

Andre landed a stabbing punch to my gut. I doubled over and made a strange wheezing sound.

Fuck. Okay. That hurt. I might throw up. It’d be fun if it went all over Andre’s Louboutins.

Behind me, Campbell hauled me upright against his body. “Shut up, lass,” he growled low in my ear.

No thanks.

I sucked in a few gasping breaths. “You know, I fucked one of the men who helped me escape. Screwed him so many times I lost count. I can’t wait to tell you about all the wonderful, nasty things he did to me with his monster cock. I can still feel the blissful ache between my—”

Andre’s fist slammed into my face, and my head snapped to the side. Stars filled my vision. My ears rang.

I ran my tongue across my teeth and tasted iron. Luckily, they were all intact. My cheek throbbed from where he'd punched me, but I was okay.

Andre wasn't. He shook his hand and grimaced in pain.

Ha! Posh boy didn't know how to throw a punch. I hoped he'd snapped a few fragile bones.

Andre held his wrist as if it were made of glass. I laughed. It was the cackle of a deranged person, but I couldn't have held it in if I'd tried.

He put his face in front of mine and snarled. "Laugh all you want, and tell me your stories about how that savage fucked you. And when you do, remember that he's dead. He and all his friends. Their bodies lay at the bottom of the ocean, being torn apart by sharks. I wish I could take the credit for their deaths, but that, *my precious*, goes to you."

My smile fell away when Kane's image filled my mind. His roguish smile, his clear-blue eyes, those beautiful lips I'd never feel again. True pain hit me then, far worse than any physical blow.

Stay strong, I reminded myself.

"They never should have come for me on the *Antoinette*. Nor should the Colombians. I will destroy anyone who tries to take what's mine. You knew better than to send them after me, Freya. *You* sent them to their deaths."

I stared at Andre but didn't see him. Moisture blurred my vision.

Kane. I called his name like a silent prayer. *I love you.*

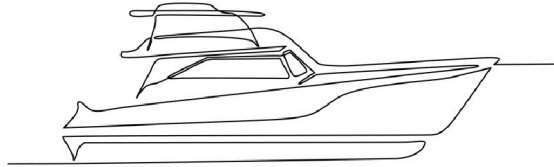
What I wouldn't do to be with him back on his ramshackle boat. To kiss him. To hold him close and take him inside me one more time. I swore I could still smell him on my clothes and feel his lips against my skin.

He's really gone.

Silent tears ran down my cheeks. Slowly, my eyes rose to meet those of my tormentor. "I'm going to kill you." I fed every ounce of my agony into those words. I couldn't recall my voice ever sounding so malevolent. But I meant what I'd said. Andre's days were numbered.

"I doubt that very much." He placed his hands in his pockets before smiling wistfully. "It took me many years to choose a mistress, but it was worth the wait to claim you. When we first met, I saw a girl trying to fight the world to save her family. Nothing has changed. You're still running into battles you can't possibly win. That unyielding stubbornness has given me so many years of pleasure. Don't quit now, precious. There's still fun to be had." He nodded toward Campbell. "Take her upstairs."

Kane



It'd been twenty-nine hours and twelve minutes since Campbell had taken Freya. Since then, I'd thought of little else but what she must be going through. I barely ate or slept.

With Campbell helping Matisse and endless locations where they could be hiding, Brandon's job was proving difficult. Following every possible lead had left him exhausted. His fiancée, Sage, had flown in from Montana last night to split the workload. Brandon had taught her a lot since they'd started working together a year ago because Sage wanted to help with their missions. I was grateful for any extra assistance we could get.

Our location in Mexico had been compromised, but we didn't care. In fact, we wanted nothing more than for Campbell or his men to show up here. It'd give us the opportunity to capture our enemy and gather intelligence. And having someone to fight would be a welcome distraction. One I desperately needed.

I sat on the rear porch with my back against the wall, staring at the Black Hawk as the morning sun rose behind it. A gust

swept through and kicked up an eddy of dust. The helo was fueled and loaded with weapons, ready to spin up at a moment's notice. If only we knew which direction to fly it.

Was Matisse hurting her? *Stupid question.* Of course the asshole was. I dropped my head into my hands and clutched my hair. Sitting here doing nothing while Freya suffered was too much to bear. She'd already endured years of his abuse and had known it'd be worse if he ever got his hands on her again. I couldn't imagine the hell she was going through.

The back door slid open and closed, then Maggie sat beside me.

She passed me a plate of food. "Eat up. You're going to need your strength when Brandon finds her."

I supposed she was right. Even though my gut churned, I picked up a piece of bacon and ate it mechanically.

Maggie bumped her shoulder against mine. "How are you holding up?"

The woeful look I gave her told her enough. "I hate not being able to do anything. I hate not knowing where she is or what she's going through. I hate that this is taking so long. We should've gotten to her by now. What if she thinks we're not coming for her? Maybe she even thinks we're dead."

"You could use that to your advantage though, right?"

I shook my head. "Matisse still has the Colombians trying to kill him. If he's smart, he'll have gone into hiding. We had one chance, and we blew it."

Maggie glanced toward the window behind her. “If Brandon is as good as you say, he’ll find her.”

“Yeah, but will it be too late?”

What if Matisse decided he’d had enough of tormenting Freya or snapped and hurt her worse than before? He could kill her before we got there.

“Freya’s strong. She must be to have put up with him for seven years. That also means she knows Matisse better than anyone. She’s brave and intelligent. Maybe she’ll find her own way out. Hell, she was smart enough to get away from him once before.”

A heaviness weighed on my chest when I recalled the moment I’d popped the trunk of the Cuda and found Freya inside, waving a pistol in my face and ready to take on the world. I thought I’d fallen a little bit in love with her right then.

“What about you?” I asked, pulling my head out of my ass for long enough to think about someone other than myself. “How are you feeling?”

Maggie groaned and rubbed her still-flat belly. “I’ve only thrown up once today, but there’s plenty of time for the nausea to floor me again.”

“And Regan?”

“She doesn’t really understand what’s going on. Just that Uncle Kane is sad because Freya went away. I’m not sure I should tell her more than that. She misses her, too.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been a good uncle lately.”

“No one expects you to be anything right now. We’ve all had shit cards handed to us over the years, so we understand some of what you’re going through.” Maggie shifted beside me. “Do you remember that time after Regan’s second surgery when she ended up back in the hospital with an infection?”

I picked up another piece of bacon. “How could I forget?” It’d been a terrible time. Seeing my full-of-life niece unconscious and plugged into so many beeping machines had paralyzed me with fear.

Maggie continued, “She was so sick, and when the doctors told us she might not make it, Wy and I were a mess. I remember you being there for us. Making sure we ate, bringing things to the hospital so we didn’t have to leave her side. I don’t know what we’d have done without you.”

“I felt almost as helpless then as I do now.”

“That’s my point. This isn’t easy, but we’re all here doing what we can because we care about you. And we care about Freya, too. I can see how much she means to you.” Maggie rested her hand on my forearm and squeezed.

I gave her a small smile. “Thanks, Mags. For the food and the company.”

She mussed my hair. “You’re welcome, knucklehead.”

In the distance, a white SUV sent up a cloud of dust as it headed toward us.

“Are you expecting anyone?” Maggie asked, and we both stood.

“No.”

“Friendlies incoming!” yelled Brandon from inside.

We headed to the front of the property. A couple of minutes later, the SUV pulled into the driveway. When the passenger door opened, a familiar roan-brown pointer leapt out first.

“Hey, buddy.” I patted Ranger’s floppy ears while his stumpy-tailed butt wiggled in excitement.

His owners stepped out of the car next, and man, was I glad to see my Zulu teammate, Shep, and his woman, Cam.

“Friends of yours?” asked Maggie as she leaned down to give Ranger a pat.

“You could say that.”

Shep didn’t really do friends. He worshiped Cam. The rest of us, he tolerated.

Cam took one look at my sorry state and came straight over. “Oh, Kane.” She threw her arms around my neck.

I held on tight and rested my chin on the top of her head. “What are you guys doing here?”

Cam and I had become good friends about a year ago. Shep’d had a situation back in Philly with the Mob and had sent Cam to San Diego to keep her safe while he sorted things out. He’d asked me to watch over her since she was in my hometown. She was one of the sweetest people I knew, loyal

to a fault, and had somehow fallen in love with the emotionally stunted hitman. Freya would like her.

Shep watched our exchange closely. When it came to Cam, there was no reining in his overprotectiveness. And I bet the territorial beast hated that I had my hands on his woman right now, despite him knowing our friendship had only ever been platonic.

Cam pulled back to look me in the eyes. “What do you mean, you numbskull? Of course we came. As soon as we found out what happened, we left the cabin and headed for the airport.” She held my shoulders firmly. “We’ll get her back, okay?”

“The quicker, the better,” Shep said as he approached and held out his knuckles for a fist bump while simultaneously pulling Cam back to his side. Shep hated hugs almost as much as Vaughn did.

“You’ve come out of retirement to help us take down this asshole?”

Shep adjusted the brim of his ball cap. “Not many I’d do it for, but I’ve got your back.”

All of us were trained killers, but Shep was the biggest and meanest of the bunch. His hitman days were over, but in Philly’s seedy underbelly, he was still the most feared man on the East Coast. That reputation was deserved. I didn’t know anyone as lethal or ruthless as Shep.

I shoved my hands into my pockets. “I appreciate it.”

“Let us know if there’s anything we can do, all right?” said Cam.

I nodded, and my throat worked as I tried to swallow. Wyatt, Brandon, Vaughn, and Shep were all here to help. They’d brought their significant others to chip in also. Dylan and Lilly would be here, too, except they were deep undercover for the CIA in Serbia. Still, they’d provided us with this safe house and were helping Brandon with intel where they could.

I hadn’t been a good friend to my teammates. After the accident, I’d distanced myself from anything that reminded me of my time in the military. I’d rarely returned their calls or texts, and I’d only accepted Shep’s request to watch over Cam because she’d been in real danger. Despite all that, my brothers had shown up for me when I needed them. I didn’t feel worthy of their support.



Around lunchtime, we got the breakthrough we’d been waiting for.

“We’ve got something!” called Brandon, and I rushed to the table crammed with computers where he and Sage worked side by side.

“Have you found her? Is she alive?” I looked between their screens, but all I saw were maps. I’d been hoping for video

footage of Freya or some evidence she was okay.

“I don’t have that intel yet,” Brandon said. “But I think I’ve found Matisse.”

I gripped the back of his chair. “Then that’s where she’ll be. Where is he?”

“There’s good news and bad news,” said Sage as she finished tying up her long dark hair. She zoomed in on a map of Northern California. “The good news is he’s still in California. Here.” She pointed at a location on the screen. “At a remote property in the mountains near Yosemite National Park.”

“And the bad news?” I asked just as Wy, Vaughn, and Shep joined us.

“That’s the location of the Matrix Defense Technologies weapons-testing facility,” Brandon replied. He brought up a satellite image of the heavily defended compound.

Shep leaned closer to the screen. “Is that the new MT-50X machine gun?”

Brandon nodded.

Wy scraped a hand over his hair. “Holy shit. They’re not messing around.”

“Are you telling me Matisse has been hiding in plain sight this whole time?” I asked. “Why did it take so long to find him?”

Brandon removed his black-framed glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. The dark shadows beneath his eyes told how little sleep he'd had these last couple of days. "Because he's making full use of Campbell's skills, and he's gone to a lot of effort to hide his whereabouts until this moment. He had satellites scrambled and decoys all around the world leading to dead ends. Sage and I have been chasing ghosts. Except now, it's almost like he wants to be found. And judging by the satellite images I've just been able to access, I assume that's because he's ready to face an assault."

"You think he's waiting for us?" I asked.

"My guess? His biggest concern is the Colombians." Brandon tapped one finger on the table. "Campbell knows this is our base, and he hasn't sent a single scout. I'm betting they think our team went down with that yacht along with everyone else."

"The Colombian militia is trigger-happy and reckless," added Vaughn. "If Matisse and Campbell think we're dead, they won't expect a coordinated assault from a black-ops team. That's something at least."

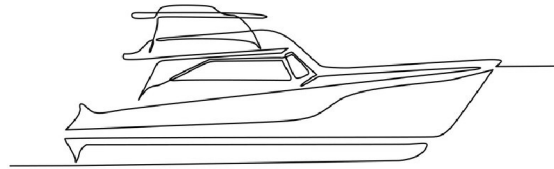
Brandon propped his hands behind his head. "On the downside, Matisse has access to some of the best artillery in the country. We'll be outmatched in numbers and firepower."

I glanced at each of my brothers. I needed them now more than ever. "Then I guess we'd better come up with a good plan so we can outsmart the most cunning bastard in the country."

Hold on a little longer, baby girl. I'm coming for you.

40

Freya



I'd lost track of how long I'd been locked in this godforsaken room. To be fair, *room* was putting an undeserved positive spin on things. *Prison cell* described the modified bathroom more aptly.

When Campbell had dumped me in here, I'd been surprised to find a shower, a toilet, and a small window. It was positively luxurious compared to the black box Andre had punished me in at home.

I shouldn't have gotten excited. The water had already been cut off, and the window had been boarded up from the outside before they'd even locked the door. No food or drink had been delivered since my arrival, which, at my best guess, was two or three days ago.

None of this treatment came as a surprise. It was all preparation for phase two of Andre's plan to force my submission. Truly, could the dipshit not have come up with something more creative? I supposed it had worked in the past when I'd had no choice but to play along with his psychotic games.

Not anymore.

Maybe Andre would break me this time, but if he expected me to transform into a disconsolate mess, he was in for a shock.

My stomach growled so loud it echoed off the tiled walls. Each time I stood to pace the room, I felt more light-headed and lethargic than the last. My gut ached in a strange gnawing way, and I grew more irritable with each of its noisy protests. Worse than that was the dryness in my mouth fueled by dehydration. I swallowed my spit and licked my chapped lips, desperate for relief. My thirst was a constant craving. I dreamed of searching for water while I slept in fits and starts. I was grateful, at least, that the claustrophobic nightmares had stayed away.

I've done this before, and I can do it again, I reminded myself.

Voices came from the hallway at all hours. Sometimes I called out and pounded on the door, hoping for a response. No matter how much noise I made, they never answered.

Spineless bastards.

Andre would send for me soon, even if he was distracted by the impending Colombian invasion. I wished they'd hurry up and attack. If they were a coordinated militia, perhaps they'd overthrow Campbell's army, kill Andre, and then we could all high-five while toasting his demise. Well, that was how it happened in my fanciful daydreams. I doubted the Colombians would be sympathetic to my situation.

My backup plan was to secure my safety using bribery. Once Andre was dead, the guerrillas could have the millions in the offshore account he'd forced me to open, the one containing the proceeds from his black-market dealings. I wasn't a belligerent fool like him. If I could negotiate my way out of this mess, I would. All I wanted was my freedom.

If I was unlucky, the Colombians would arrive, find themselves outclassed, and run with their tails between their legs. Which would leave me in the same position I'd always been in.

Me versus Andre.

I must've thought up a hundred different ways to kill him while locked in here. The most fun ones involved inflicting a painful, bloody injury, but I'd be almost as satisfied if he'd choke on a meatball or fall down the stairs, snapping his neck. I didn't care how he died as long as he was gone.

The security panel on the door bleeped—a sign someone was about to enter. A burst of adrenaline shot through me. I sat up fast, more alert than I'd been in days. Was it Andre? This could be my chance to finish him.

I snatched up the only weapon I'd been able to find—a round crystal doorknob from the bathroom cupboard with an inch of threaded steel rod protruding from its center. I shoved it into the pocket of my denim shorts and untucked the front of my button-down shirt so it hung loosely, concealing the bump.

The door opened.

Campbell. Number two on my shit list. I wanted to stab him in the heart almost as much as I did Andre. But I didn't like my chances of taking the big bastard down. My efforts would only land me in handcuffs—not helpful. Plus, I needed him to continue believing I wasn't a threat. Lashing out early would give my violent plans away.

The Scottish brute entered the small room with a suitcase and a long garment bag. I rolled my eyes, already knowing what they contained. A designer dress, expensive heels, hair products, cosmetics, and the perfume Andre had ordered me to use every day since I'd moved in with him.

The same scent his mother had worn.

Gag!

That French bitch must've really done a number on him. If she were still alive, I'd send her a Mum of the Year award for creating such a sadistic prick.

I folded my arms and faced Campbell. "You're a shit butler. Don't you know you're supposed to knock before entering a lady's room?"

He snorted and lifted one brow. "Aye, princess. Well, it's lucky you're nae lady."

I flinched at him calling me princess. Memories of Kane flooded back, including the first time he'd called me that.

Hold it together. Do it for him.

"The water has been switched back on." He tossed the suitcase on the floor with a thump and dumped the garment

bag on top of it. “You have thirty minutes to make yourself presentable.” He turned and left the room.

“Tosser!” I yelled, and flipped him the middle finger as he locked the door behind him.

I stared at the luxury items on the floor. They were probably worth thousands.

I knew what was expected of me. Glam myself up for a formal dinner where Andre would taunt my starved stomach with a table full of delicious food. Then he’d humiliate me by demanding I apologize for my *indiscretions*. Only after I groveled repeatedly would he allow me to eat. Afterward, he’d fuck me—face down, arse up—just to drive home his dominance. That was why he wanted me to wash my oily hair and scrub the stink from my body. Because he’d never have sex with me in my current state, especially knowing I’d been with another man. He’d probably wear two condoms out of fear of catching something.

Screw that.

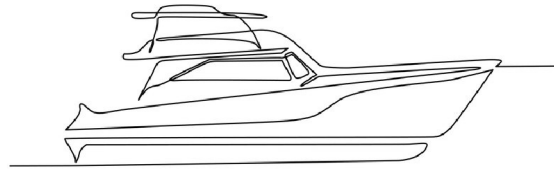
I wouldn’t give him what he wanted. I wouldn’t touch his food. I wouldn’t beg for forgiveness. And if he demanded to ram his underwhelming dick inside me before I could kill him, he’d have to endure my filth.

So I drank my fill of fresh water from the sink, resisting the urge to spew it all back up. Food I could manage without, but rehydration was vital. I switched on the shower but didn’t step inside. Instead, I tossed in the pretty black evening gown, the

satin Jimmy Choos, and everything else in the suitcase. All of it, drenched.

I gave a satisfied smile at my sodden handiwork, then waited for the shit show to erupt.

Kane



We'd driven as close as we could to Matisse's hideout without raising suspicion, then hiked the rest of the way through mountainous terrain under the cover of darkness. When we'd been a couple of clicks from the target, Brandon had infected Campbell's drone with a malware program that wiped out its infrared camera. To the drone operator, it would seem like nothing more than a technical glitch, and it bought us time to get closer to the lodge without being spotted from the air.

Vaughn and Sage waited five clicks away with the Black Hawk, ready to respond at short notice. It had heavy firepower on board, but this was a delicate mission. Charging in and blowing shit up would only endanger Freya's life. We needed to move swiftly, neutralize threats with precision, and adapt to the constantly changing situation.

Each of the guys on the team was experienced with those conditions, but for me, the stakes had never been so high. I was nervous about my role as team leader on the op and making a wrong decision, but if there was an important call to

be made concerning Freya, I wanted to be the one making it. Not because I didn't trust my teammates. It was because I'd made Freya a promise to keep her safe, and this was me following through on it.

When we were half a klick from the target, Brandon launched a small four-prop drone.

"What have we got?" I asked, looking over his shoulder at the tablet showing a bird's-eye view of the property through an infrared camera.

"They have the high ground, so most of their security is protecting the south side of the lodge. They've also got heavy artillery here and here." Brandon pointed at the two large machine guns at either end of the mansion. "A dozen men outside, and I'm assuming there are just as many inside the lodge. Shift change was four hours ago, so hopefully, those inside are sleeping and will be unprepared when we hit them."

I shook my head. "I don't like those numbers."

Our team consisted of Wyatt, Brandon, Shep, Hollis, Garcia, Owen, and me. We were seven against roughly two dozen mercenaries armed to the hilt.

Brandon hit the button on his radio. "TOC, this is Two. I've got the drone in the air. How are you receiving the image?"

"Crystal clear, Two. That's a lot of Tangos and some big-ass weapons," Sage replied with a note of concern.

Sage was running intel on a laptop back at the helo. She'd be our eyes in the sky while we concentrated on the assault.

Shep approached to look at the drone image. “Told you we should’ve brought Sage along. She’d take out half a dozen of these assholes without breaking a sweat.”

Brandon groaned. “I meant to thank you for encouraging her earlier. She gets herself into enough trouble without you suggesting she join the fight.”

“I heard that,” said Sage, sounding pissed.

“Sorry,” Shep said with a smirk. “Must’ve accidentally bumped my radio.”

Brandon aimed his glare at the hitman. I guessed Shep still hadn’t forgiven Brandon for screwing him over last year, even if he’d had a solid reason for doing it.

“Sage can hold her own,” Shep added. “Stop being an overprotective jerk and making her miss out on all the fun.”

Brandon snorted. “Are you really lecturing me about being an overprotective jerk? I think I can hear Cam belly laughing at the irony from here.”

“All right, kids,” I said. “Time to focus.”

Shit talking was what we did to ease the tension pre-op. It stopped us from overthinking and allowing nerves to creep in.

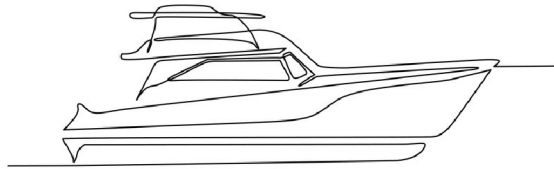
The rest of the team gathered around. “Our plan is still solid, and being outnumbered is nothing new. I’ll try to set up for the shot on Matisse, then we neutralize the Tangos outside before the ones inside even know something is going down. Owen stays with me as spotter. The rest of the team will split into two. Brandon leads Team One on the west side of the

lodge. Shep leads Team Two on the east. You each take down one of those machine guns as a priority. From there, I'll take point as we move inside through the west entrance to clear rooms and search for Freya. There may be nonhostile civilians inside, but anyone holding a weapon is fair game. We clear?"

They all voiced their agreement.

"All right." I nodded. "Time to move into position."

Freya



Campbell opened the door of my cell. “Shite,” he muttered when he realized I hadn’t followed any of his instructions.

About the only thing I had done that he’d approve of was brush my teeth, and that was for my benefit, nobody else’s. In the unlikely event Andre tried to kiss me, I’d bite his putrid tongue off.

“If you keep pissing him off, you’re going to get yourself killed,” Campbell said.

I stood, light-headedness forcing me to rise slowly. “An order you’d likely enjoy receiving.”

“Despite what you think, murdering women isn’t something I take pleasure in.”

“But you’ll do it for the right price.”

Campbell grunted but didn’t disagree with me. He took hold of my upper arm, leading me toward the door.

I patted him on the hand. “Don’t fret, petal. Andre won’t make you kill me. That would be short-term fun, and he’s all

about the long game. Now tell me. On a scale of one to rancid, how bad do I smell?”

He scrunched up his nose. “You’re somewhere between pubescent lad and deodorant-averse hipster.”

“Dammit. I was really hoping for bag lady.”

He took me down the hallway toward the stairs. My steps were uneven as I willed my weakened body to maintain balance.

“It’s not too late to smooth things over with him,” said Campbell. “You’re only making this harder for yourself.”

I gave him a mocking grin. “Ah, straight for the victim blaming like every privileged white male who’s never been oppressed or abused by someone more powerful than them. What a lucky lot you are. And you’re always so helpful with your marvelous suggestions. *Why didn’t you just leave him? It’s your own fault for arguing back.* And my personal favorite, *You shouldn’t have worn those clothes.* How about this: *Blokes, don’t be shit bags!* There. Simple. Why is that so hard?”

“You really hate men, don’t you, lass?”

“Could you blame me if I did? But no, I don’t hate all men. There are plenty of good ones in the world. Unfortunately none are in this house.”

We walked down the wide stairway, Campbell firming his hold on my arm in case I stumbled.

It surprised me that so many lights were on throughout the lodge. Every curtain was closed, and since there were no glimpses of sunlight peeking around the edges, I figured it was nighttime.

“This place is lit up like a Christmas tree. Aren’t you worried the Colombians will attack?” I asked.

“We’re not hiding. We’re waiting. And believe me, if there were any hostiles within a two-kilometer radius, we’d know about it. They wouldn’t remain a threat for long.”

When we reached the bottom of the stairs, a delectable smell hit me. Roasted meats, herbed vegetables, and then, like an actual knife through my hollow stomach, the scent of fresh-baked bread almost dropped me to my knees. I paused, grasped the handrail, and inhaled. My mouth salivated, and my jaw ached.

Andre, you cruel bastard.

Campbell’s boots clomped across the floorboards while my flip-flops squeaked. My dirty white shirt was untucked, and my oily hair hung limp over my shoulders. I inwardly smiled, knowing Andre would cringe at the sight of me. I only hoped it enraged him enough that he came at me with another punch. Then he’d be within range to stab in the throat with the pointy end of the small crystal doorknob tucked safely in my pocket.

We approached the large dining room, and as expected, Andre awaited us, sitting at the head of a long rough-hewn timber table. What sat atop it resembled the lavish Christmas dinners we’d had before my father’s business collapsed. It

almost looked too perfect to be real. If it weren't for the delicious aromas wafting through the room, I'd think my addled brain had conjured a mirage.

Except this wasn't my food-deprived imagination. It was Andre's brand of cultivated cruelty. And he was only getting warmed up.

Dick Face grinned from his seat, but his smile dropped as soon as he realized I looked a feral mess. He glared at Campbell.

"She tricked me," said the Scot as he shoved me into a chair at the opposite end of the table, a dozen chairs and a feast away from Andre. Perhaps he worried I might attack him after all.

Andre reached for a gaudy crystal goblet filled with red wine. "That seems to be happening a lot lately. I didn't realize, Freya, that you were so skilled in manipulation."

"I can't take all the credit. When you spend so much time in the company of a repugnant, scheming bastard, you tend to learn a trick or two." I shuffled my chair closer to the table and placed the napkin in my lap out of habit, even though I wouldn't touch any of the mouthwatering food before me.

Campbell stood in the far corner of the room, looming like a guard dog. *Shit*. Having him here would make any attempt on Andre's life much more difficult. That wouldn't stop me from trying.

I jerked my chin toward Campbell. “I’ll take the red, please.”

The only sign of the Scot’s annoyance was a tightening of his jaw.

“Oh, sorry. I must be confused. With the way you’ve been following Andre around, doing all his undesirable work, I assumed you were his new manservant.”

“Enough!” Andre slammed his fist on the table, rattling the plates and glasses. His face still looked beat-up, but the swelling had eased.

I rearranged the order of the neatly set out cutlery just to mess with him. “You’re looking a little stressed, Andre. Does the small army you’ve recruited have anything to do with it?”

Andre calmly placed his palms on the table as though willing himself to regain his composure. “That isn’t your concern. When the Colombians come, they won’t outmatch the technology and force of my firepower. We are ready.”

I frowned. “It sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself of that. Just so you know, I’m Team Colombia all the way. Ooh. Are those candied pecans?” I pointed at a bowl on the far side of the table.

A muscle near Andre’s jaw twitched repeatedly. “You’ve made me look like a fool with your fake kidnapping. I will not tolerate your disobedience and ungratefulness a moment longer. When you agreed to our arrangement, surely you didn’t expect to be free anymore. Your family was destitute, your

father's health ailing. I've given them wealth and the best medical care available. You knew it wasn't for nothing. You knew it meant I owned you."

"Own me?" I choked out a laugh. "Would you listen to yourself? I'm not a farm animal or a piece of furniture, you gobshite."

He stared at where his palms spread out on the table and slowly clenched them into fists. "You know why I've brought you to this table. If you think you have a say in how the evening goes, you're mistaken."

I leaned back in my chair and folded my arms. "You can stuff your table full of food straight up your arse, Andre. Jam it all up there and plug it with the spiky end of that pineapple decorating the fruit platter. I won't bend to you anymore. I'm done."

"No," he growled, and his icy stare met mine. "You're never done with me. Not unless I say so. Perhaps you need a little reminder of our agreement." He snapped his fingers, and Campbell left the room.

"I don't need a reminder." I stood fast. "Take me back to my cell."

"Sit. Down!" Andre yelled.

"Make me!" I shouted right back.

Andre rose from his chair, and it clattered to the floor behind him. This was it. His anger overrode his sense of self-preservation. Campbell was gone. Andre had completely lost

his cool and was about to lash out. Perhaps he thought he'd beat me or drag me upstairs. I wasn't sure, and it didn't matter. All I needed was for him to get close.

I placed my hand over my pocket, feeling for my makeshift weapon.

Andre took a step toward me but paused when Campbell walked back into the room with—

No! Oh God, please, no!

“Lena,” I cried, gripping the table for balance.

Campbell dragged my little sister farther into the room while keeping her in a firm hold.

“Freya? What’s going on?” She tried to tug her arm away from Campbell. “Hey! Get your bloody hands off me, you creep!”

A wave of dizziness hit me. *Strength, don't fail me now.*

Lena struggled against Campbell. He clutched her long strawberry-blond hair, yanking it back until she hissed and winced with pain. Lena was taller than me, but her toned ballerina frame was no match for Campbell's size and strength.

I faced Andre. “Let her go. You have me. What more do you want?”

Andre's eyes lit with excitement. “I've grown tired of your insolence. Perhaps I should give your sister a chance to save your family.”

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

Not Lena. She was a gentle soul and didn’t have the fortitude to handle Andre. He’d ruin her.

“Lena has grown into a great beauty, has she not? Her exquisiteness surpasses even yours. And she’s such a sweet, innocent girl. So well-behaved. So biddable. I would’ve waited four years until she was old enough to claim, but when I met you, I was drawn to your strength of character, knowing how much enjoyment I’d take in destroying it. You have been the entertaining challenge I’d hoped for. Now it’s time I test the delicate sister. I hope I don’t break her too quickly.”

“You don’t touch her!” I yelled.

My head throbbed, and my vision flickered, but not from hunger. It was out of sheer unstoppable fury. With the shriek of a Valkyrie, I swept the plates and glasses from the table before me.

I wasn’t thinking right. I knew that. Campbell could hurt Lena because of my actions, but I just...I couldn’t take Andre’s depravity anymore. I’d put up with his monstrous ways for years. Now, he’d threatened my family, hurt me, starved me, and was the reason the man I loved had died. Andre had driven me to madness, and he was about to face the full force of my wrath.

“I will kill you!” I snarled as I rounded the table and stalked toward him.

Andre stabbed his finger in my direction. “Get her!”

But Campbell was the only one in the room, and he was busy subduing Lena. She screamed and bucked against him like a wild horse. Not so docile after all.

As I approached, I hurled food at Andre. A fat roasted potato. A whole chicken. What was I thinking? There were better things to throw. I grabbed one of the ugly wine glasses and pitched it at Andre's infuriating head. He dodged it, and it smashed against the wall. The wine bottle followed, leaving a red mess splattered over a beautiful tapestry. I picked up the candelabra and pegged it at him next. He ducked and crawled under the table to hide.

"Get out here, you coward." I tore chairs from the table so I could get at him.

Campbell still had his hands full with Lena's violent struggles. He groaned when she stamped on his instep with the heel of her boot. He took one hand away to use his radio, and she elbowed him in the gut. Then she pushed her hips back and broke free of Campbell's grip altogether. Where had she learned how to do that?

A window shattered at the same time a strange high-pitched whiz pierced the air.

Campbell's body slumped to the floor with a heavy thud. Lena screamed and hunched over, covering her ears.

Blood poured from a hideous injury at Campbell's head. His lifeless eyes stared straight ahead, and there were chunks of... *Oh God*. I looked away. My gut heaved at the horrific image burned into my brain. Campbell was dead. *Very, very* dead.

Holy shit. The Colombians were here. We were under attack.

Lena ran toward me.

“Get down!” I shouted as I grabbed her by the arms and dragged her low.

We scurried under the dining table for cover.

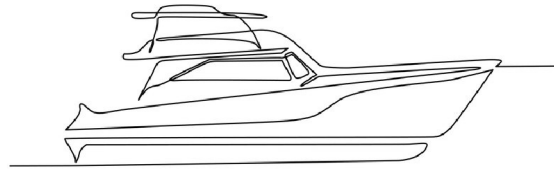
Wait. Where was Andre?

That slimy bastard!

He was at Campbell’s body, frantically trying to pull a pistol from his belt.

Then rapid gunfire erupted outside, and all hell broke loose.

Kane



All was quiet at the property. The guards maintained their positions outside, occasionally moving around to smoke a cigarette or talk to each other. Those manning the machine guns never left their posts. On the veranda, a tech scratched his head while inspecting their drone. We didn't have much time before he realized he couldn't fix it and launched a replacement.

Downstairs, there wasn't a single dark window, although every curtain was closed. No, Matisse definitely wasn't hiding. He welcomed an attack by the Colombians, and the cocky son of a bitch thought he'd slaughter them. He probably planned for this to be a lesson to other clients who thought to cross him. Unfortunately for Matisse, he wasn't dealing with Colombians. He was dealing with us, and we had a few tricks up our sleeves.

Like the thermal-imaging scope I'd attached to my rifle. It detected heat through the curtained windows but didn't penetrate walls. I watched three people in the dining room, where platters of steaming food remained untouched.

Owen lay beside me as spotter, looking on with thermal binoculars. “Do you think that’s them?”

I adjusted the scope to zoom in. “Fancy dinner, two at the table, one lingering in the corner. I’d bet my left nut that the heat profiles of the seated ones belong to Freya and Matisse.”

Through the curtains, the thermal image wasn’t clear enough for me to be certain who I was looking at. They were warm bodies; that was all I could tell.

“One, this is Three. We have one Tango approaching our position,” said Shep over the radio. “I think he’s headed this way to take a piss.”

“Hold your position, Three,” I replied. “Something’s going on inside.” The person standing in the corner of the room left in a hurry. One of the people at the table stood quickly. So did the other. “I think they’re arguing.”

A moment later, the corner lurker came back into the room hauling a smaller person with him. It had to be a woman. Wait...could that be Freya?

“I’m gonna need to do something about this guy real soon, or he’s going to piss on one of us,” Shep said with a hint of urgency. “Do you have the shot, One?”

“Negative. I need more time.”

Shit got crazy in the dining room. The argument between the pair around the table grew more heated. One snatched objects from the table and pitched them at the other. The

woman being held by the big guy kicked and struggled to get away.

“We don’t have more time,” whispered Shep. “If I take this Tango down, it could wake up the neighborhood.”

I kept my scope aimed at the guy restraining the woman. I had my target. He was too big to be Matisse, but we needed to commence the assault because the situation inside was escalating rapidly.

The last time I’d fired a sniper rifle, I’d made the biggest mistake of my life. Tonight, as I held the MK 13 in my grip, one eye at the scope, one finger on the trigger, the innocent lives I’d taken years ago were in the front of my mind. But so was Freya’s. I had to make this count.

Just then, the struggling woman broke away from the big guy.

“I have the shot,” I said.

“Send it,” Owen replied.

I exhaled and pulled the trigger.

Big Guy’s head flung back, and he dropped to the floor.

“Target down hard,” I said into the radio.

Suppressed gunfire cracked from our teams’ positions. Hollis and Garcia, both experienced snipers, delivered head shots to the two machine-gun operators first. The rest of the team picked off the other guards, but a few were able to find cover and return fire. I found one in my scope, waited for him

to pop up, then took him out. Wy and Owen were in the best position to take down the rest.

Shep used the M79 Pirate Gun to launch frags at the mounted machine guns. That ought to put them out of action. He sent another toward the helipad, leaving Matisse's helo a twisted wreck. The asshole wasn't escaping this time.

Shouts came from within the house. Rise and shine, motherfuckers.

"RPG upstairs," called Brandon. "Take cover."

A guy on the balcony had the launcher on his shoulder. I lined him up and fired. He went down hard but still pulled the trigger as he fell to the floor.

"Incoming!" I yelled.

Brandon's team hit the deck. The grenade went wide, obliterating a bunch of trees.

"All units," I said over the radio, "we're sitting ducks for their big firepower out here. Make your way to the western entry."

Brandon and Shep replied their affirmative and moved their teams toward the lodge. Owen and I made it there shortly after the others, dispatching a few rogue shooters on the way.

More shouting came from inside. If these mercenaries were any good, they'd be armed and ready for our assault.

I pressed my back to the wall alongside the others. "Freya could be in the dining room, so we'll clear each room in the

west wing to make our way there. If we don't find her, we'll clear the east wing, then move upstairs."

They all nodded their agreement.

"Let's see if these guys are scared of the dark. Shep, would you do the honors?"

The grumpy bastard flashed a rare grin and pulled a detonator from his vest. Earlier, he'd set a charge to disable the junction box. When he flicked the switch, an explosion rocked the property and the lights went out.

I lowered my night-vision goggles over my eyes. "All right. Let's do this."

Opening the door, I tossed a flash-bang inside. Then in I went, my brothers close behind.

We encountered two Tangos right away. I dropped one. Shep, right beside me, nailed the other. The hitman and I had usually paired up to clear rooms in our Zulu days. We easily slipped back into our old routine.

Farther along the hallway, we reached a closed door. I waited for Shep to tap me on the shoulder before flinging it open. I swept for threats on the right. Shep took the left. Nothing.

"Clear!" I called.

Brandon called the same from down the hall.

Gunfire erupted nearby and didn't let up.

“One, this is Five. Taking heavy contact. Third room along,” said Owen, breathing hard. “Fuck. Man down. Four is down.”

No, no. Wy had been hit.

“On our way,” I said. “Hold tight.”

Hollis and Garcia were already helping in the firefight by the time Shep and I arrived. Owen dragged an unconscious Wy to the cleared room across the hall.

A bullet slammed into the wall beside my head. I came to my senses and followed Owen into the room. Shep came, too, since he had the advanced med kit in his pack. Aside from being the Zulu weapons specialist, he’d also been our combat medic.

Owen laid Wy on the floor.

I crouched next to my brother, searching for his injury. “Where’s he hit?”

“I don’t know,” said Owen. “He took a bullet and went down.”

Wy’s eyes fluttered open only to squeeze shut again in agony. He grunted and clutched a hand to his chest.

“Get his plate carrier off,” Shep said.

Of course. I wasn’t thinking straight. The bullet must’ve hit his armor. It was like getting kicked by a bull.

I unstrapped Wy’s vest and lifted his shirt. A dark bruise the size of my entire palm radiated from his sternum. He probably

had a few broken ribs.

Wy continued drawing in lungfuls of air. Each one troubled him.

I clamped my hand on his shoulder. “Jesus, Wy, you scared the shit out of me.”

“I’m fine,” he panted with a wince. “Stop fussing over me and go save your girl.”

I glanced at Shep. “Stay with him. Guard this jackass with your life.”

He nodded.

“Owen, you’re with me,” I said, and he followed me to the door.

With the commotion of Wy getting shot, it took me a moment to realize the gunfire had ceased.

“Two, I need a sitrep,” I said to Brandon.

“All Tangos neutralized on this level. I can hear more shouting orders upstairs. We’re about to head there now. How’s Four?”

“Took a round to his chest plate. It didn’t penetrate. He’s hurting, but he’ll be fine.”

“Copy that. Good news.”

A single shot rang out, and a terrified scream pierced the air.

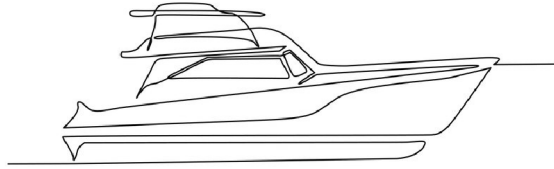
Freya.

“Two, do you have eyes on that?” I asked as I held my rifle at the ready and moved down the hallway with Owen close on my tail.

“No. It came from upstairs,” replied Brandon. “Heading that way now.”

“Meet you there,” I said.

Freya



Lena and I stood huddled in the corner of my cell, listening to the intense firefight on the lower level. I'd thought I'd mentally prepared myself for this attack, but I hadn't been ready for this amount of carnage. I was positively shitting myself.

After Andre had snatched the pistol from Campbell's body, he'd aimed it at me and ordered us upstairs. He'd seemed crazy enough to use it, so this time, I'd done as I was told. On the upside, this was probably the safest place in the house right now. That was, unless the Colombians made their way through the rest of Campbell's men and found us locked in here. I was starting to think they were capable of it, too.

Lena gave me a stern look. "You have some explaining to do."

"You're right. I don't even know where to start. I'm so sorry you've been dragged into this mess. I only ever wanted to protect you and Dad."

"Why don't you start by telling me who is attacking? Since you seem terrified, I'm guessing they aren't here to save us."

“No. A rescue is”—my chest tightened when I thought of Kane—“not going to happen. They’re a Colombian militant group. They’re here to kill Andre and anyone who gets in their way. If they find us in here, I’ll try to negotiate with them. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?”

“That sounds overly optimistic.” My sister raised her brows.

“I know, but it’s all I’ve got. I’m all ears if you have a better plan.”

Lena exhaled a deep breath. “*This* is who you’ve been living with for the last seven years? What is Andre? Some kind of warlord?”

I snorted. “Not far off it. He supplies their weapons.”

She tossed her hands into the air. “When were you going to tell me he’s a complete psycho?”

“Sometime after he was dead, most likely.” I shrugged. “It didn’t start out this way. You knew I agreed to be with him to ease the burden on our family. At first, Andre pretended to be decent. When we got to LA, everything changed, and I was stuck with him. He would’ve harmed you and Dad if I’d tried to leave him.”

Lena looped her arm through mine. “I just wish I’d known what you were going through. We could’ve figured something out together.”

“I didn’t want you or Dad worrying about me. It would only have made us all miserable.”

Urgent shouts went up amid the cacophony of gunfire outside.

An explosion rocked the foundations of the house. The lights flickered and went out, plunging us into darkness.

Lena squealed and dug her nails into my forearm. “What the hell was that?”

I clung to her just as tightly. “I don’t know.”

I took back what I’d said about being Team Colombia. These guys weren’t messing around. Their approach was definitely *Shoot first, ask questions later*. What little I’d glimpsed of the early stages of the battle proved the Colombians were...how did I put this...brutally efficient. Andre had seriously underestimated their capabilities. The mercenaries outside had put up a fight, but one by one, they’d dropped like those little tin bunnies at a carnival shooting gallery.

It looked like I might get my wish. The Colombians would probably put a bullet between Andre’s eyes before the night was over. But I wasn’t fool enough to believe Lena and I would fare any better.

The door of our cell opened, and Andre rushed inside, the flashlight in his hand illuminating the room. Lena and I froze. Andre slammed the door behind him and locked us all in by pressing the pad of his thumb against the control screen. His other hand gripped the pistol he’d stolen from Campbell.

Great. Dick Face had decided to make my cell his personal panic room. I was surprised he didn't toss Lena and me outside as Colombian cannon fodder. Except in his panicked state, he didn't seem to take any notice of our presence.

No. Andre was *not* okay. He paced the small room, thumping the butt of the pistol against his temple while staring at the floor in a daze. He was more agitated than I'd ever seen him.

Andre shook his head and muttered to himself. "I don't understand. We should've seen them approaching. How did this happen? And so fast. Inconceivable."

If I weren't so terrified of the Colombians bursting into the room and killing us all, I'd have had a good laugh at watching Andre coming unstuck.

Lena pulled me closer and whispered, "We need his gun."

"I know. I'm trying to figure out how to do it without either of us getting holes put through us."

"I'll distract him. You grab it."

"What? No! You hide in the bath. I'll tackle him."

Andre continued shaking his head and mumbling like a crazy person, still paying us no mind.

Lena frowned. "You're bonkers if you think I'm going to cower in the tub while you take all the risk. And no offense, Freya, but I'm pretty sure I could knock you over with a gentle nudge right now. I might be lean, but I'm strong. I can take him."

Lena was right. I had all the strength of a soggy noodle, and my sister had the formidable muscle tone of an elite dancer. She could probably crack a walnut shell between her thighs. Still, I couldn't put her in harm's way like that.

I sighed. "Lena, I—"

"No more fighting battles on your own." She lowered her chin. "We're doing this together, and there's no time to argue about it. We move on him when his back is turned. Ready?"

We were out of options and out of time. We either mugged Andre or sat around waiting for dangerous men with weapons to deliver our fates. I knew which I preferred. "Okay. I'm ready."

Lena had changed. She'd been thirteen when I'd left London. In those days, she'd been a shy people pleaser, happy to let me do the talking and take on the role of protective big sister. It was as if I'd stolen all the plucky genes in the family and left the demure ones for her. Or so I'd thought. She'd grown into a confident woman. I supposed she'd been forced to step up with me being gone. Or perhaps she'd been hiding her assertiveness all along.

"All right." Lena let go of my arm and tucked her hair behind her ears. "Let's do this."

And then I watched in abject terror as my baby sister launched herself at Andre. She landed on his back, her legs tight around his waist and both arms clamped around his neck.

Unprepared for the attack, Andre stumbled forward. His hands crashed against the wall when he tried to brace himself. The pistol went off, then clattered to the floor along with the flashlight. I screamed and covered my ears, but a shattered tile had taken the brunt of the bullet.

When I realized Lena wasn't hit, I dove for the floor and scrambled for the gun. I grabbed it and stood. My head spun from the sudden exertion.

One clean shot and I could end Andre. With the pistol heavy in my hands, I aimed at him. He tried to fling Lena from his back by spinning and pulling at her arms. She held on with all her might. It was too risky to pull the trigger. I didn't want to hit Lena.

The firefight flared up inside the house. This time, it was much closer than before. Heavy boots rushed along the hallway. Shit. The militia fighters would be on us soon.

Andre reared backward and rammed Lena against the wall. When her hold on him loosened, he dragged her in front of him, using her as a human shield. He wrapped his arm firmly around Lena's neck. She panted but held still.

"Do it!" Lena yelled.

I'd have to send the bullet right between Andre's eyes, but with him so close to Lena, I wasn't confident I'd safely make the shot. Especially since my head was cloudy and this pistol already felt like it weighed twenty kilos.

Indecision warred within me. I didn't have much time. Gunfire cracked outside the door. I was sure I heard a body thud against the timber floor in the hallway.

In the end, Lena made the decision for me. She slammed the back of her skull into Andre's face, then rammed her elbow into his gut. He roared. Blood poured from his nose, and a savage sneer twisted his features.

Lena struggled in Andre's grip, but he held on tight. I cried out when he shoved her against the wall. Her head made a sickening smack against the tiles, and she slumped to the floor. Her eyes were closed. She didn't move.

Lena!

It took all my willpower not to rush for her. I had to keep my cool. Except I couldn't. Rage was a living, breathing beast within me once again.

That bastard had hurt my sister. It was time to finish Andre for good.

I aimed the pistol at his chest. His eyes widened in disbelief. Then I pulled the trigger.

Click.

Nothing. What the hell?

Click. Click. Click.

No bullets.

An evil grin spread across Andre's face. "Foolish woman. You thought you could kill me." He laughed. "When will you

learn that—”

“Seriously, shut the fuck up.” I threw the pistol at his head. It spun through the air like an axe at a target.

Andre threw his hands up to deflect it, but the butt caught him in the brow. He bellowed in pain. It was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard. Blood trickled from a cut down the middle of his forehead. Added to the beating he’d taken days ago, Andre’s face was a gruesome mess. I stored the mental image away for future gratification and sent up a silent prayer that I lived long enough to look back on it fondly.

Lena stirred and rolled over, probably awoken by Andre’s pathetic caterwauling. When she saw Dick Face still standing, she kicked the heel of her boot into his calf. He buckled, and his knees crashed to the tiled floor.

The door handle jiggled, drawing my attention.

Shit. The Colombians.

Nope. No way. They didn’t get to kill Andre. That honor was mine by right.

“Freya!” Lena shouted in warning.

Andre lunged for my ankles and knocked me over. I landed hard on my hip and shoulder. And then he was on top of me, snarling like a rabid wolf. He had me pinned beneath him and wrenched one hand above my head. He went to grab the other, but it was already in my pocket, digging out the crystal doorknob.

I yanked it free and stabbed the protruding thread into his throat. Full of adrenaline, Andre hardly noticed, so I tore it out and slammed it home again, this time hitting the throbbing vein at his jugular.

Thick, warm liquid spurted from Andre's neck and landed on my white shirt. And still he kept coming.

"Fucking die already!" I yelled, and stabbed him again.

The Colombians struck at the door. It sounded like they were trying to kick it in, but it was solid. They'd not get in easily.

Lena pounced on Andre's back and bashed her fists against his head. I had to give the shithead credit. He was much harder to kill than I'd imagined.

I stabbed him in the neck again for good measure. He ignored Lena's attack and wrapped his hands around my throat. I tried to tear them away, even stabbed his arms a couple of times with the doorknob, but he wouldn't let go.

He throttled my neck so tightly I couldn't draw breath. My vision grew patchy. I was already weak. It wouldn't take much to do me in.

Lena screamed and continued pounding. Andre snarled, his eyes never leaving mine.

Fuck that. His revolting face would *not* be the last thing I saw before I died.

I clenched the doorknob in my fist and, with the last of my meager strength, jammed it into Andre's eyeball. He let out an

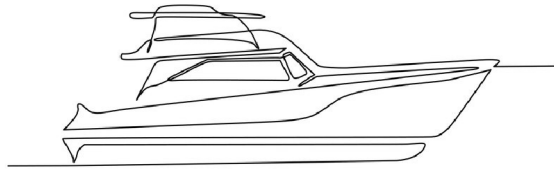
inhuman howl.

Then the door crashed open.

Our time was up.

45

Kane



I'd experienced fear plenty of times in my life. On the battlefield, sure, but the most crippling moments had been learning Wyatt was in critical condition after being blown up by an RPG and waiting at the hospital to find out if Regan had made it through her long open-heart surgeries.

None of those times compared to hearing Freya's desperate screams, then kicking in the door and finding her covered in blood, that asshole Matisse above her with his hands around her throat.

That fear quickly morphed into deadly focus as I took in the rest of the situation.

Matisse shrieked as though someone bored a hole into his skull with a power drill. Another woman was on his back, pounding her fists into his head.

Owen swept into the room right behind me.

"Get her away." I gestured to the woman on Matisse's back.

Owen grabbed her.

"Let me go, you bastard!" she yelled.

In her wild state, she redirected her fight toward Owen. As soon as she was out of the way, I pulled the trigger on Matisse. Two shots to the head. His lifeless body collapsed over Freya. I wished I could've made his death last a whole lot longer, but my priority was making sure Freya was safe. She coughed, and it was the most beautiful sound I'd heard, because it meant she was alive.

“Ew, gross.” She shoved at the body slumped on top of her but wasn't strong enough to shift him. “Parlay,” she said while panting. “But if you insist on killing me, can someone at least remove this vile pig from me first?”

Kill her?

She didn't know this was a rescue?

Freya must've assumed we were the Colombians. I supposed the flashlight didn't allow her to see much, and she was covered in a corpse.

“No one's going to kill you, baby girl.” I grabbed Matisse's body and dragged him to the corner so Freya didn't have to look at him a moment longer.

The woman in Owen's arms bucked and kicked. “Don't you touch her! I'll tear your—”

Her words turned muffled when Owen clamped a hand over her mouth and shushed her. He used a soothing voice to reassure her that we meant no harm.

I flipped up my night-vision goggles and dropped to my knees beside Freya. Blood covered her white shirt. “Where are

you hurt?” I switched on my flashlight, held it between my teeth, and unfastened the top two buttons of her shirt to look for the source. No cuts. No bullet wounds on her torso. The blood wasn't hers. I took the flashlight in my hands and shone it over the rest of her body. “Talk to me, Freya. Are you okay?”

But she didn't answer. She just stared at me, shook her head, then slapped her bloodstained hands over her face.

I gently peeled her fingers away. “Please don't hit yourself like that. It upsets me.”

When Freya tried to sit up, I pulled her into my lap. Goddamn, it felt good to have her back in my arms. I brushed hair aside and cupped her jaw.

“It's really you?” she asked, her eyes glassy with unshed tears.

“I made you a promise, remember? I told you I'd come for you if you needed me.”

Freya's bottom lip trembled. “I'm only going to ask this once, and it's going to sound incredibly stupid, but I really don't care right now. Are we all dead? Because that would suck and be a very shitty ending to our story.”

I smiled down at her. “We're not dead.”

“You're absolutely sure?” A tear cut a path down her dirty cheek.

“Does this feel like we're dead?” Then I kissed her gently because her poor lips were dry and cracked.

“Hard to say. Do it again.” She threw her arms around my neck and pulled me in for a firmer kiss.

Fuck. There’d been countless moments these last few days when I’d thought I’d never have her like this again. I could hardly believe she was safe in my arms.

Freya wore a dreamy grin when she released me.

I chuckled. “I’m happy to report we’re all very much alive. Except for *him*.” I gestured to the body in the corner. “You don’t ever have to worry about that asshole again.”

Freya searched the room until her eyes landed on the woman Owen was holding. “Lena, are you okay?”

Wait. *Lena*? Freya’s sister, Lena?

Now that I got a better look at her, the family resemblance was unmistakable. Lena’s features were similar to her sister’s, although she was a few years younger, with reddish-blond hair.

“I’m all right,” said Lena. “My head hurts like the dickens, and I’m a little dizzy, but I’ll live.”

She’d stopped fighting Owen and had instead allowed him to wrap a steadying arm around her waist.

“Sit tight. Let me call this in.” I held Freya against me and radioed the team to let them know she was safe and Matisse had taken a dirt nap.

The firefight was over, so now it was a matter of tying up loose ends. Brandon located the security-system server and

erased all footage since before Freya had been brought in, and Vaughn was already on his way with the Black Hawk for exfil.

“Time to go,” I said, and scooped Freya up in my arms.

Owen did the same to Lena. She looked a little surprised but didn’t protest.

We headed for the door, but Freya squeezed my arm. “Wait. Turn around.” I did, and she stared at the body crumpled in the corner. “This is how I want to remember him.”

I watched Freya closely, then shifted my gaze to Matisse. The guy was a mess. It looked like Freya and Lena had almost finished him before we arrived.

“What...what happened to his eye?” I asked.

“He had a nasty accident with a crystal doorknob.”

“That’s my girl.” I gave her a wink. “I’m sorry I pulled the trigger on him. It should’ve been your kill.”

“I figure it was a team effort. He made your life hell, too, right?”

I pressed my lips together to hide the true level of despair I’d been in. “The last few days have tested me.”

My carefree life had transformed the instant Freya had burst into my world. In the last week, I’d been shot at, blown up, and stepped back into shoes I’d never thought I’d wear again.

I’d also fallen in love.

What a wrecking ball that had turned out to be.

And the crazy thing? I wouldn't trade a single moment of it if it meant I was able to save Freya. Even if I didn't get to keep her now that this was through.

As I carried Freya down the stairs, she nuzzled my neck and tightened her arms around me. "I thought you were dead. Campbell said you were all killed when the *Antoinette* exploded. I cried myself into premature dehydration over you."

"I'm sorry you went through that." I kissed her forehead because I couldn't help but put my lips on her. "We got a little beat-up, but we're fine. It takes more than that to finish my team."

She glanced up at me and scrunched her nose. "I smell bad."

"You smell *alive*. That's all I care about."

Vaughn and his copilot descended in the Black Hawk and landed on the lawn. Shep and Brandon were the first to meet it. Quickly, they grabbed two duffel bags full of C-4, then ran back inside the lodge to set several charges. Since the Colombians had obliterated the *Antoinette* using plastic explosive, we'd figured what better way to pin our siege on the militia group? And by turning the place into a pile of ash, we removed any evidence of us being here.

As I carried Freya across the lawn, she pressed a hand to my chest. "You can put me down. I can walk."

I held her a little tighter just in case she tried to wriggle out of my grip. "I don't care if you can run. I'm not letting you

go.”

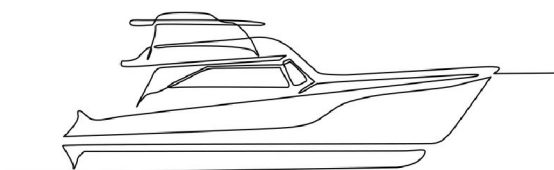
The rest of the team climbed on board the helo, and while Wy got there a little slower, he made it without any help.

Once we were in the sky and had passed over the first mountain, Shep detonated the explosives, and Matisse’s lodge went up in a fireball. Freya continued to stare at the faint glow long after we’d departed the scene.

I kept my precious cargo in my lap until the Black Hawk arrived back at the C-130, and dreaded the thought of letting go of Freya anytime soon.

Freya

San Diego



The sun was up by the time I found myself soaking in a bathtub at Maggie and Wyatt's house. The warm, scented water soothed my weary body, and although I was exhausted, there was no way I'd sleep until I scrubbed the grime from my skin.

The trip back to San Diego had taken hours. We'd flown in the helicopter to a small airfield and transferred to Brandon's transport plane.

While we were on board, a very serious, stern-looking man named Shep had hooked me up to a drip to rehydrate me. He wasn't much of a talker, but his hands had been gentle.

Most of the guys had settled into their seats and shut their eyes. I'd wondered how they could sleep after so much craziness. I figured this was the life they were used to, and my rescue had been just another mission to them.

During the flight, I'd scoffed a sandwich and two chocolate bars before I'd started to feel queasy. Lena had sat with me,

our arms looped through each other's, and we'd begun making up for lost time. Our phone conversations had been far too brief over the years, and it was obvious I hardly knew my sister as an adult.

Kane gave me space to be with Lena but watched me closely. Back in Mexico, we'd had a difficult conversation before our lives had taken a disastrous trip down Catastrophe Lane. And now that Andre was dead and Kane had kept his promise to keep me safe, where did that leave us?

I ran my finger along the edge of the bath and closed my eyes. The sounds of people in the house calmed me. Owen's distinct laughter. Dishes clattering in the kitchen. Regan watching cartoons up loud.

Everyone was safe. Everything was going to be okay.

So why did my heart feel so heavy?

There was a light tap at the door.

"Knock, knock," said Lena. She cracked the door open an inch. "Want some company?"

"Come on in. How's your head?"

She gently patted above her left ear and winced. "I took some painkillers, but it's a little tender still. Shep assures me there's no sign of a concussion." Lena grabbed a small wooden stool from the corner and sat beside the bath. She scooped foam in her hand and blew it at my face. "You always used to do this. Are you sure you added enough bubbles?"

I wiped them from my neck with a smile. “You can never have too many.”

“Does it feel good to be clean again?”

I wrung the washcloth out. “You have no idea.”

“You still look like shit.” Lena chuckled.

“Thanks, Sis. Nothing decent sleep and a few burgers won’t fix.”

She rested her forearms on her thighs and clasped her fingers together. “I met Maggie. She told me some more about what you’ve been through these last seven years.”

Kane must’ve blabbed to his sister-in-law while I was gone.

“What did she say?”

There were a lot of details I’d omitted when Lena and I had spoken on the plane. Things she didn’t need to know I’d endured.

Lena made an unamused grumbling sound. “Enough to make me wish I’d also had something pointy to stab Andre with.”

As I scooped up bubbles, staring at them in my hands, I felt my sister’s gaze analyzing my profile. Then she added, “I’m sure everything you’ve been through is difficult to talk about, but I’m here for you whenever you’re ready. I don’t want you to hide those things to protect me. I’m not a little girl anymore.”

“I can see that.” I smiled. “One day, I’ll tell you everything, but not today.”

Lena toyed with the end of her ponytail. “Maggie and I also spoke about Kane.”

I pressed my lips together and tamped down the sudden tightness in my chest. “He’s a good man. He’s saved me in ways I can’t even begin to explain. Even before last night’s rescue.”

“It’s serious between you two.” She hadn’t framed it as a question, although there was no judgment in her tone.

My feelings for Kane were another not-so-minor detail I’d glossed over. I was about to dismiss Lena and tell her Kane and I had only known each other a week. How could it possibly be serious? But I’d promised I wouldn’t lie to her anymore. What Kane and I felt for each other after such a short period of time shouldn’t be possible, but here we were. Not that it changed our circumstances.

When I kept my focus on the bubbles and remained silent, Lena said, “I’ve noticed the way he stares at you. That man is in love with you, Freya.”

My eyes shot to hers.

“When he looks at you, it’s like”—she shook her head—“like it physically pains him if he can’t be near you. Do you love him, too?”

I frowned and nodded.

She leaned forward. “Then why are you pulling that face?”

“What face?”

“That one!” She pointed at my mug as if it offended her. “You look like someone took a dump in your favorite pair of shoes. What gives?”

Lena’s frankness came as a surprise. Despite my absence, she’d turned out like me after all.

“Isn’t it obvious? As soon as I’m able, I’m going home so I can be with you and Dad. It’s all I’ve dreamed of for years.”

She folded her arms and glared at me. “So you’re tossing aside the man you love, who rather heroically rescued our arses, I might add, because of geography? That’s the dumbest excuse I’ve ever heard. You wouldn’t be the first person to have a long-distance relationship. There are these amazing flying metal tubes called aeroplanes, and they zip between London and LA multiple times every day. And there’s also this fancy thing called video chat where you can talk to someone face-to-face anytime, anywhere.”

“Very funny.” I rolled my eyes. “I don’t need you to solve my problems for me, Lena.”

“I beg to differ. You’re making a terrible mess out of this.”

My mouth gaped at my sister’s brutal honesty. Before I could respond, she held up one hand and added, “Just hear me out. You’ve been tackling our family’s problems on your own for years. Let me help you for once.”

“Be my guest, O wise one.” I waved toward her, dripping water and bubbles over the side of the tub. “I’m all ears.”

“If you’re happy in San Diego—*truly happy*—maybe Dad and I could move here to be with you.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I scoffed.

“Is it? I’m sure there are fantastic facilities here where Dad can continue to get the best care. He’d love California. Don’t you remember how happy he was every time we holidayed in Spain? He’s always preferred a warmer climate. He won’t be sad to leave the UK, especially if it means his daughters are happy.”

“Yes, Lena. He’ll want *both* of his daughters to be happy. What about your ballet?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been dying to get out of London for years. I’ve had offers from overseas dance companies, but I’ve turned them all down because I didn’t want to leave Dad. Maybe I could apply for a season with the Los Angeles Ballet? Or get a job teaching. Coming here would be the change I’m desperate for.”

I shook my head. “I could never ask you to upheave your life for me.”

“You haven’t asked. I’m offering. And I’ve just told you it’s something I want to do.”

I stared into green eyes that were a shade paler than mine. Lena had a determined look about her. Her offer was a serious one.

“You’ve really thought about this, haven’t you?” I asked.

“Yes. Admittedly, only briefly, but I think it could work. Don’t you?”

I exhaled deeply. “It’s not as simple as overcoming geography.”

“What do you mean?” Lena looked at me with confusion, and I wondered how much of this explanation she’d understand.

“I mean I spent so long under Andre’s control that I hardly know myself anymore. I need freedom and independence. I know it sounds clichéd, but I need to spread my wings and learn how to fly again. To learn how to just be...me. I made a promise to myself that if I ever escaped Andre, I’d never rely on a man for anything ever again.”

Despite me not wanting to think about what I’d undergone, my mind took an unsanctioned journey to some of the worst moments. I wasn’t sure I’d ever share those with Lena.

I shivered and pulled my legs up to my chest, leaving my exposed knees covered in bubbles. “He trapped me, Lena, in the worst possible way. He threatened to hurt you and Dad if I didn’t obey him. And even if I could’ve left, I had nothing and nowhere to go. No money, skills, or qualifications. No friends or family nearby. I don’t even have a driver’s license. And I know Kane is nothing like Andre, but those promises I made myself are still worth chasing. After what I’ve been through, I’m a firm believer that every woman should have a plan B. Not only in case she needs to leave her partner, but what if he dies, or abandons her? So, no. I won’t allow myself to become

dependent on a man. And if I run straight into Kane's arms now, that's what'll happen." I rested my chin on my knees. "I need to take control of my life, and I need to do it on my own, if only to prove I can."

Lena cast me a pitying look. "No. You don't. You've already been on your own for seven years. Since the day you agreed to live with that monster, not a single soul has been there to look out for you. You don't need to prove anything to anyone, especially not yourself.

"And you can still keep all those promises you made. If Kane loves you, he'll support you and help you achieve them. Being with him—*loving* him—doesn't have to diminish your strength and independence. You don't have to choose between the two." Lena reached across and took hold of my hand. "I know this is scary for you, but it's time to stop fighting. It's time to let Dad and me look after you. Let *Kane* look after you. Let him love you the way you deserve."

My breath hitched, because, God, I was so tired of fighting. Being in Andre's presence had left me in a constant state of alert. Each day, I'd had to brace myself for his cruelty. It'd been exhausting.

But I'd escaped Andre, and Kane had made sure I never had to worry about him again. Where would I be without him?

Allowing myself to be vulnerable in any way was terrifying, but if I refused to lower the wall around my heart for Kane, would I regret it for the rest of my days?

Tears welled in my eyes, and a lump lodged in my throat.

“Find a way to make it work, Freya. He could be *the one*. What you both experienced this week has to be worth something. Don’t throw it away. You deserve to be happy.”

A fat tear rolled down my cheek. Another quickly followed.

“Come here,” Lena said, and she pulled me in for a tight hug.

I sobbed into her shoulder. Could my baby sister be right? Was my stubbornness in clinging to past promises clouding my decisions about the future?

I pulled back and wiped the tears away. “When did you become so insightful?”

“I did a lot of growing up while you were gone.”

“I’ve missed so much.” Lena’s graduation, learning to drive, ballet recitals. I hadn’t been there for any of it. “Tell me, does your sudden eagerness to move to California have anything to do with a certain marine who’s been paying very close attention to you?”

From the moment Owen had torn Lena, kicking and screaming, from Andre’s back, he’d barely left her side. He’d put himself in charge of looking after her, bringing her food and drinks and commandeering the spare bedroom in Wyatt and Maggie’s house so she could rest in comfort. When she’d mentioned her head still hurt, Owen had brought her more painkillers and an ice pack, then demanded Shep check her over again despite him already giving her the all clear for a concussion.

“There aren’t men like Owen back in London.” Lena’s lips twitched. “And he’s a really good kisser.”

I gasped. “He kissed you?”

“Not exactly. I kissed him.” When my eyes widened, Lena quickly added, “It was only supposed to be a peck on the cheek to say thank you for taking such good care of me. But you’ve seen how hot he is, and he’s absolutely my type. Dark hair, dreamy eyes, *banging* body. And when I leaned in to kiss his cheek, he smelled divine, so...I changed the target to his lips. Anyway, he didn’t seem to mind. Quite the opposite, actually, because things got really—”

“Lena, stop right there.” I held my palm up.

“What? Oh my God.” She covered her mouth. “Is he married? Am I a home-wrecker? He never mentioned—”

“No.” I chuckled at the unnecessary terror on my sister’s face. “Owen is very single, and he’s lovely. I’m just going to need some time to get my head around the idea that you’re old enough to kiss men now.”

Lena made an amused expression. “I’m twenty-one, Freya. I like to do a lot more than kiss them.”

In the few times Lena had been in Dad’s room when I’d phoned, her sex life most definitely hadn’t been up for discussion. Dad had never mentioned anything about boyfriends, and I’d always assumed Lena had been too busy with ballet for a relationship. How foolish of me to think that meant she hadn’t been having sex.

“Right.” I cleared my throat. “Of course you do.”

Another thing I’d need to get my head around: my little sister was probably far more experienced and knowledgeable about men and relationships than me.

“Owen’s not the reason I’m suggesting Dad and I shift our lives here, but I definitely wouldn’t mind getting to know him better. And by that I mean as soon as my head feels better, I’m going to shag him senseless.”

“Okay,” I said slowly.

“I bet he has great stamina.”

I laughed. “Oh my God, Lena! You only met him last night.”

“That’s the thing I’ve learned seeing Mum die young and Dad struggling with his health. Nothing in life is guaranteed. If you find something you want, you take it. Don’t let it slip through your fingers, because the opportunity might never present itself again.” She took hold of my hand again and squeezed. “That’s why I came in here to talk to you. Don’t lose Kane, okay? Not for us. Not for anyone.”

I nodded.

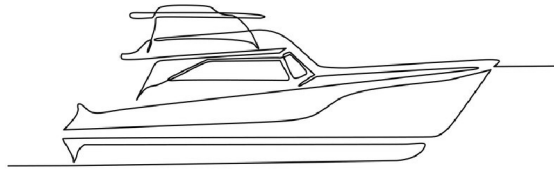
“Does he know you love him?”

I shook my head. “I never told him.”

Lena rose from the stool. “The bathwater must be cool by now. What are you waiting for?”

What was I waiting for, indeed.

Freya



I tightened the sash of my bathrobe, then rested my hand on the doorframe of Maggie and Wyatt's bedroom. "I thought you were supposed to be sleeping."

Kane, who'd been staring at the ceiling fan while lying on the bed, sat up with a start. He was freshly showered and wearing what I presumed were Wyatt's board shorts and T-shirt.

Butterflies filled my belly as he shifted his long legs over the side of the bed and met me at the door.

"I'll sleep once I know you're doing the same." His large, warm hands cupped the nape of my neck. "Do you feel better now that you've washed up?"

"Much better." I put my arms around Kane's waist and stared up into my favorite pair of blue eyes. Eyes I'd thought I'd never see again until only a short while ago.

His gaze roamed my face. "Are you hungry? Thirsty? Need any painkillers?"

I chuckled and shook my head. "I'm fine, really. Whatever cocktail of vitamins and electrolytes Shep's drip pumped into me has helped."

I sighed and pulled Kane closer, resting my cheek against his solid chest. His arms tightened around me, and I soaked up his reassuring scent and warmth.

"We need to talk," I said, and Kane's body tensed.

He released his hold on me and closed the bedroom door to give us privacy. "Yeah. We do." He led me to the bed, where we sat side by side, our knees angled toward each other.

"I'm sorry," we said at the same time. Then we both laughed.

I squeezed Kane's thigh. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I do. I should never have asked you to choose me over your family." He shrugged and shook his head. "I don't know what came over me. It was terrible timing, and forcing that decision on you was a shitty thing to do. I wasn't thinking right. I guess I'm not used to...feeling so much. I'm sorry for screwing things up."

"You didn't screw anything up. I did." Kane frowned as if he didn't believe me, so I shimmied closer to him. "I'm a coward. A complete chicken."

He snorted. "You're neither of those things."

"I am when it comes to you."

Kane eyed me with skepticism.

“While I was locked up in the lodge, I had a lot of time to think. Granted, I spent a good deal of it plotting brutal ways to kill Andre, but I spent more thinking about you.”

That familiar knot in my throat returned. The days I’d believed Kane and the guys were dead were the most distressing of my life, and I’d had plenty to benchmark them against.

I drew in a deep breath. “I have regrets. About the way we left things in Mexico. About the things I said, and more importantly, the things I didn’t say.”

Here goes nothing.

My palm framed Kane’s jaw. “I love you. And I’m so sorry I didn’t return those words when you first said them.”

Pain filled his expression, and he dropped his chin to his chest.

I angled his face toward me, bringing his troubled gaze back to mine. “I thought you’d be happy to hear that.”

“I am, but it doesn’t make letting you go any easier.”

I sucked on my bottom lip to hide my grin. “What if you didn’t have to?”

He froze. “Woman, you’d better not joke about something like that.”

“I’m not.” My smile grew. “Well?”

Faster than I thought possible, Kane pulled me over his lap so I straddled him. His strong arms embraced me, holding me

pinned against his chest. Then his long fingers thrust into my hair, and his mouth found mine in a hard, searing kiss. We moaned against each other's lips, our tongues twining, tasting.

He released me and pressed his forehead to mine. "There's nothing I want more than to be with you. You already know I'll do anything to make that happen. But...how?"

"Lena's convinced me she'd be thrilled to move here, and she's sure Dad will want to come, too. She made some very convincing arguments and explained that I was being a stubborn idiot for pushing you away. I still need to go home and talk to Dad and work out the logistics. But Lena's right. All he's ever wanted is for his girls to be happy."

Kane's hands landed on my arse, dragging me closer, and the roguish smirk I'd come to love appeared on his lips. "And being with me would make you happy?"

"Ecstatically." I traced over his broad shoulders with my hands. "But I thought...maybe you and I could take things slow? I'd like to have my own apartment and be self-sufficient while still spending time with you."

"Anything you want, I'll make it happen."

"No." I clasped my hands behind his neck. "*I'll* make it happen. I mean it, Kane. I know you want to dote on me, and I love you for that, but I need to take care of myself. That doesn't mean I won't ask for help, and it doesn't mean I won't want you to catch me when I fall. But it's time I learned how to stand on my own two feet, even if it means making mistakes."

He raised one brow. “Like another hangover?”

I choked back a laugh. “God, no. Never let me drink that much ever again.”

“If you do, at least you know I have a good cure.”

I pursed my lips. “Are you referring to grilled cheese or orgasms?”

“Both. In any order you want them. At the same time if it makes you feel better.”

I trailed my fingertips down his cheek. “I’ll never find someone as giving or thoughtful as you.”

“Damn straight, so you can stop looking.” Kane tightened his arms around me. “I promise to try not to smother you, but you’re so lovable and fuckable that it’s going to be hard.”

“You’re pretty lovable and fuckable yourself.” I sighed. “Will you wait for me? I have a lot to organize before bringing Dad here, and I don’t know how soon I can return.”

He brushed my wet hair back from my shoulders. “I’ve waited my whole life for you. I can wait a little longer.”

“That was”—I scrunched up my nose—“super cheesy.”

His beard tickled my neck when he kissed below my ear. “You might need to get used to that.”

Drawing back, I said, “I’d ask you to come with me, but—”

“You need to do it on your own. I know. I’ll be a phone call away if anything comes up. What I said in Mexico still stands. If you need me, I’ll find you.”

“And what if I need you right now?” I wiggled in Kane’s lap, adjusting my position over the bulge in his shorts, and undid the sash on my robe.

Kane’s eyes traveled lower as the robe loosened. “Fuck, baby girl. You’re not wearing anything under that, are you?”

I bit my lip and shook my head.

His fingers gently parted the robe, slipping it over my shoulders until it hung at my sides. And then his rough hands curled around my waist. He exhaled a ragged breath and cupped my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my peaked nipples. “So goddamn beautiful.”

I arched into his touch and moaned. “Am I going to have to beg for more? Because I recall you telling me I’d never have to.”

His hungry eyes came back to mine, and in an instant, he had me flipped on the bed and his large body pressed between my thighs. I wrapped my legs around him and dug my heels into his back.

“Shouldn’t you rest?” he asked.

I tore his shirt over his head. “I don’t want to rest. I want you. Right now.”

“I want you, too.” Kane growled and freed himself from his board shorts.

Surrendering to our mutual desperation, he lined up his cock and pushed into me with one powerful thrust.

I gasped at the feel of him filling me, stretching me in the sublimest way. How had I ever thought I could give him up? If I'd tried, I'd have been on the first plane back to California with my tail between my legs, utterly miserable and pleading for Kane's forgiveness.

I basked in the feel of him as he moved inside me. My greedy palms roamed his inked skin, marveling at the hard muscles beneath as they bunched with his dominating strokes.

I took Kane's face in my hands and said, "I love you."

He paused above me, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips, then tracing over my cheek with his thumb. "I love you, too. I know you want us to take things slow, but I'm still going to tell you that every day and show you as often as you'll let me. And I promise to never stop treating you like my queen."

I fought back the moisture in my eyes and the tightness in my throat. "Okay."

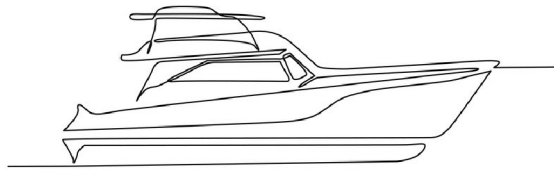
It was hard to believe that Andre was dead, Kane was alive, and I got to keep the sweet, sexy man in my arms.

Despite having our whole lives ahead of us, I kissed Kane like I might never get another chance and silently vowed to honor him with the love and devotion he deserved, too.

And then, as Kane moved above me, setting fire to my blood, we both made a start on living up to our promises.

Epilogue - Kane

San Diego, 6 weeks later



I lowered the kickstand on my Harley and removed my helmet. Then I took my first deep lungful of salt air in three weeks.

When Brandon had asked, I'd jumped at the chance to join his team on their next op. Anything to keep my mind off missing Freya. Since rescuing her and Lena, I was more determined than ever to start using my skills for good.

The mission in Jalisco had been a success. A sex-slavery ring squashed, six women saved from being sent to their new *owners*, and a fentanyl-trafficking route eliminated. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been nervous about operating again, but the flashbacks to Moscow had been few, and I felt confident I could manage them in the future.

Since we'd had to remain deep undercover for most of the mission, the hardest part had been the limited phone contact with Freya. I'd taken solace in knowing she was safe in London enjoying time with her family.

Following the siege at Matisse's lodge, we'd come up with a plan for Freya to avoid any fallout from the authorities. Initially, I'd rejected it, thinking it too risky, but Freya had assured me she was up to the challenge and understood what she had to do.

So the last time I'd seen her was when we'd dropped her near the British embassy in Bogotá, dirty and feigning exhaustion. Elaborate, sure, but it had been the best way to make it look like she'd been kidnapped and released by the Colombian militia. After Freya gave the embassy officials a rehearsed story of how she'd been taken from her home during a burglary, flown out of the country, and held hostage in an underground prison for a week, she'd been sent back to California for further questioning.

The Feds and ATF had plenty they wanted to ask her, and since Matisse was dead, she'd taken great delight ratting out the son of a bitch's black-market business without fear of repercussions.

Freya had told them everything. How Matisse had transported the weapons south of the border, whom he'd struck deals with, where the money had gone. She'd been so detailed and convincing that when she'd described how her Colombian captors had bragged about being responsible for sinking the *Antoinette* and going after Matisse at the lodge, the Feds had believed her.

A week later, the Feds had allowed Freya to return to Matisse's LA mansion—which was still considered a crime

scene—to collect her personal effects so she could return to England and recover from her kidnapping trauma with the support of her family.

And that was where she'd been ever since. I couldn't wait to have her back in San Diego. Another month or two and her sister and dad would have their paperwork in order. Every day without seeing the woman I loved was a day too long.

I pulled my phone from my backpack and called Freya.

“You're back?” she answered excitedly.

“Just arrived at the yacht club.” I tucked my leather jacket under my arm and headed across the parking lot. “How's my girl?”

“Great, actually. I had an interesting phone call from Agent Williams today. She said, despite the FBI's efforts to track the one hundred million dollars I transferred to the Colombians, it looks like the money has vanished and will be impossible to recover. Such a shame,” she added with sarcasm.

During her questioning, she'd told the Feds that the only way to secure her release had been to pay her own ransom from an offshore account in the Cayman Islands—the one Matisse had set up in Freya's name to funnel his black-market profits. Of course, the 100 million dollar transaction hadn't gone to the Colombians. Brandon had made sure the transfer was untraceable and had sent a hefty chunk to Freya and her family to set them up in California. The rest had gone toward funding the human-trafficking rescue operations, a cause Freya felt passionate about.

My boots thudded as I stepped onto the dock. “So I guess that’s that, then.”

“I guess it is.” Freya let out an amused chuckle. “Enough about me. I want to hear all about you. Is it good to be home?”

“It’d be better if you were here.” What I wouldn’t do to see her smile, take her in my arms, and breathe in her delicious scent.

“I know, sweet man, but I’ll be back before you know it. Why don’t you do something fun to celebrate your first mission?”

“There’s only one way I want to celebrate, and I can’t do it without you.”

“You randy bugger,” she crooned. “Are you missing my vagina?”

“I’m missing *all* of you. Maybe we could switch this call to video once I get on board?”

Phone sex had become a whole lot more interesting with a camera involved.

When I was halfway along the dock, I spotted *Lucy*. Next week, she was coming out of the water to have some much-needed repairs. Money wasn’t so tight now that I had a well-paying job.

Freya sighed dramatically. “I’d really love to, but I’m just about to meet up with someone and check off another activity from my bucket list.”

Lena had been helping Freya work through the list. She'd taken her to one of her ballet recitals, and they'd had nights out partying, drinking, and dancing. It bothered me that I'd missed out on those things with Freya, but she and Lena had used it as a bonding experience. Freya had assured me that no matter how many guys hit on her, none would be successful. It didn't ease my jealous, overprotective thoughts in the slightest.

But...who was she meeting with, and what bucket-list item was she talking about?

"Oh yeah?" I asked. "What do you have planned?"

"I'm going on a date." Freya squealed in a way that made me think she was squirming with excitement.

What the actual fuck?

I froze on the dock. "Come again?"

"Don't be angry. I've waited a long time for this one."

Heat flared up my neck. I held the phone so tightly it was seconds from cracking. "Freya, if I need to get on a plane and snap some punk's fingers—"

She burst into laughter. "Calm down, big guy. You should see the look on your face."

Just then, the door to *Lucy's* cabin opened, and Freya stepped out with the phone still at her ear. She wore the sunflower dress I'd bought her, the one I'd told her was my favorite.

“Oh shit,” she said, and she must’ve noticed that my murderous expression hadn’t dissipated, because she added, “I may have underestimated the effectiveness of my prank. Are you upset?”

“I was. I’m not anymore, but you’re still going to pay for that.” I grinned wickedly. “You’ve got a five-second head start.”

Freya’s spine straightened. “To do what?”

“Run.”

She glanced at the cabin behind her. “Run where? I’m cornered.”

“That’s *your* problem. I’m coming for you. One...”

“Kane,” she said in warning, and took a cautious step back.

“Two.”

She shrieked, dropped the phone on the table, and bolted inside, slamming the door behind her.

“Five.” I shoved my phone into my pocket and charged the rest of the way down the dock toward Lucy.

I stepped on board and tested the door. Locked.

Inside, Freya aimed a mischievous grin at me, then held up my keys, jangling them in the air. They were the only pair I had, which I usually left hidden in an outdoor cabinet. She shifted on her feet nervously as she watched for my reaction.

I tossed my backpack on the floor and removed a lock-picking tool from a small compartment. When I showed it to

Freya, her smile vanished, and she mouthed something that might have been *bollocks* while taking a retreating step.

It didn't take long for me to unlock the door and step inside. We stood facing each other.

My fingers twitched with anticipation. "You should've tried to hide."

"Not that it would do me much good." Her lips curved up. "And maybe I want to be caught."

I stalked toward Freya, eager as fuck to get my hands on her.

Goddamn, I'd missed her.

Moving fast, I picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around my waist. "Going on a date, are you?"

"Mm-hmm." She fisted my hair, tilting my chin up to meet her heated gaze. "With you, silly."

"You're not going on a date. You're not going anywhere for days, because I'm going to keep you here and fuck you until you can't walk straight."

Freya licked her lips. "Or we could do that."

Then she kissed me.

Hard. Hot. Perfect.

I dropped her onto the kitchen counter and hauled her against me.

When my fingers dug into the soft flesh of her thighs, I growled with appreciation because Freya had put on weight.

“Fuck, baby girl, you look good enough to eat.”

She rocked her hips. “Fabulous idea.”

“I’ve missed you,” I said against her full lips. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t stand being away from you a moment longer.” Freya panted the words while continuing her frantic kisses. “I’m here for a week before I go back to London to help Dad and Lena pack.”

“I guess that means I’ll have time to take you on that date. But not tonight. I’m not ready to share you yet.”

“I’m not ready to share you, either.” She drew me closer. “And it’s okay. We have all the time in the world.”

Freya was right.

Our forever started right now.

The End

Afterword

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading *The Heist*. I truly hope you enjoyed it. If you did, please consider leaving a review on Amazon as this is a fantastic way to support indie authors.

If you're new to the Team Zulu series and would like to read more, you can find them here:

[The Rescue \(A Team Zulu Christmas novella\)](#)

[The Hit \(Team Zulu book 1\)](#)

[The Payback \(Team Zulu book 2\)](#)

The next Team Zulu book will be Vaughn's story. His cranky ass is about to be handed to him by a woman of course (nasty author laughs evilly). I love my job.

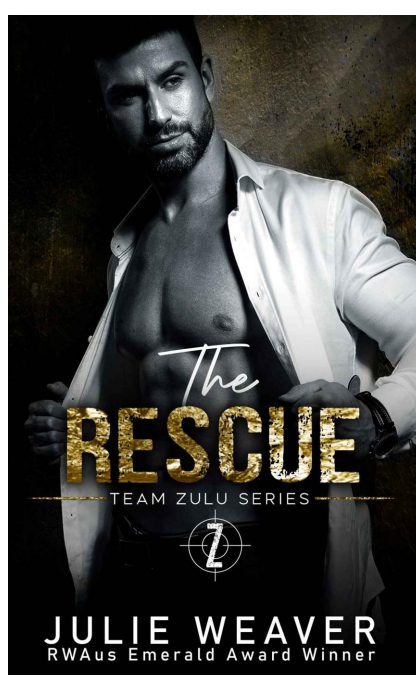
And if you'd like to discuss all things Team Zulu and receive updates on new releases, teasers, and giveaways, why not join my Facebook reader group **here**.

Until next time, take care!

Jules

Also By Julie Weaver

A Team Zulu Christmas Novella



Free to download [here](#).

Agent Dylan Fox can't believe his luck when a gorgeous brunette crashes into him on the sidewalk and drags him into a crowded, dark bar. But when he realizes it's none other than Lilly Hart, the intelligence analyst with the sweet voice he's fantasized about for three long years, he thinks all his Christmases have come at once. Although, with an assassin on

their heels, it could be a rendezvous to remember for all the
wrong reasons.

Also By Julie Weaver

Team Zulu Book 1



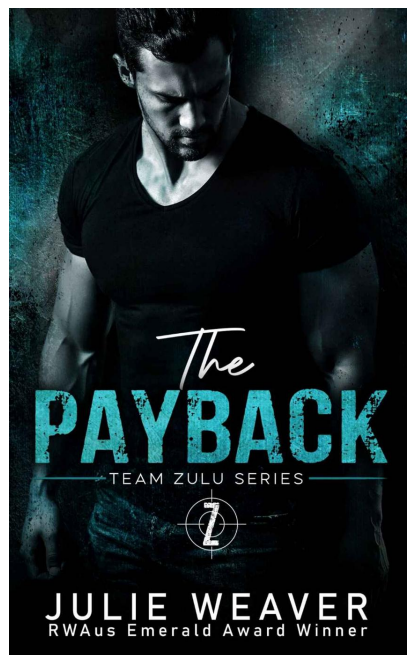
Winner of the 2021 RWAus Emerald Award.

Get it on Amazon Kindle Unlimited [here](#).

When a reclusive hitman accepts a Mafia contract, he doesn't expect his mark to be a woman—or the sexiest thing in grease-stained overalls he's ever laid eyes on. Despite the risks, he'll do whatever it takes to protect her, even if it means kidnapping her to his remote mountain cabin.

Also By Julie Weaver

Team Zulu Book 2



Get it on Amazon Kindle Unlimited [here](#).

Three years ago, the Mafia murdered my first love and shattered my chance of happiness. I won't stop searching for the gunman until justice is served, even if every step toward the killer is a step into the gaping jaws of Philly's notorious underworld.

If only the new guy in my building, AKA Mr. Tall, Dark, and Annoyingly Alpha, would leave me and my secrets alone. My body might want him, but my head knows better. I've lost too much to risk giving my heart away again, especially to someone as deliciously tempting as Brandon Lewis.

When the Mob catches on to my revenge plans and delivers a deadly ultimatum, my persistent new neighbor discovers we share a common enemy. Brandon might be an incredibly skilled hacker, but why isn't he scared of taking on the most dangerous men in the city? And how does a computer geek get the body of a warrior, bullet scars and all?

Teaming up with the fierce, overprotective man next door becomes a proposition too appealing to resist. Except the more I get to know Brandon, the more I realize he's the last person I could let pay for my foolish mistakes. If it happened again, neither of us would survive.

Acknowledgments

Big thanks to my superstar editor, Kelley Luna, for making this baby shine. I'm always in safe hands working with you. Your patience and wisdom are exactly what I need to make it through the editing phase without having a nervous breakdown.

I think you'll all agree that my cover designer, Sarah Paige from The Book Cover Boutique, did an incredible job. We really had no other choice but to feature Kevin Creekman on the front of *The Heist* because he's the perfect Kane.

My ARC team. What can I say? You guys know how to make an author feel loved and appreciated. Your kind words and encouragement make this all worthwhile.

Special thanks to my husband, Dan, for all his support and embracing extra Dad duties while I've been at the keyboard. And shout out to my kids for telling their teachers that Mum is

an author. Teachers, if you read this book, can we just pretend that you didn't...please?

And lastly, thank you to my readers. I have so many more story ideas inside my head. I can't wait to get them to you!

Jules

X

About Julie Weaver

Julie Weaver is a RWAus Emerald Award winner and author of spicy, action-packed romance. Her Team Zulu series features morally gray, ex-elite military heroes and the feisty, kick-ass heroines who challenge them. To find out more, visit her website:

www.julieweaverbooks.com