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**TOP SECRET**

ATTENTION: DEAN HELMER

ASSIGNMENT



**BALLS TO THE**

**WALLS**

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

# BALLS TO THE WALLS

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# AN OPS PROTECTOR ROMANCE

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

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*To Mr. Rogers.*

*This will always be your neighborhood.*

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Also by Giulia Lagomarsino



## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Cash Owens-** Owner of Owens Protective Services, sniper, and overall badass.

**Eva James-** deadly mistress of throwing knives and Cash's...person

### **Team 1:**

**Jerrod Lockhart-** Complete hardass, rule follower, and generally the guy considered to always have a stick up his ass.

**Juliette Cassinelli-** Junk food addict, avid runner, tiny human that can't reach the top shelf. Oh, also a fabulous model who has stolen the heart of the unmovable Jerrod Lockhart.

**Edward "Edu" Markinson-** Hater of hospitals, slow drivers, and references to anything in the '80s.

**Brock "Rock" Patton-** Wannabe model, obsessed with his looks and constantly combing his hair...A ferocious fighter for a man so obsessed with his looks. Also, as a side note—he can't act for shit and hates the word 'loins'.

**Scottie Dog Thacker-** Tactical vomit expert, hater of flying planes, and always up for a good time. If you're with him, have a barf bag in hand. Has never had even a sip of alcohol in his life.

**Quinn Lake-** Awesome geologist who is terrible at telling people no. She's a runner—running from situations so she doesn't have to grow a spine and deal with confrontation. Awesome at Battleship and Twister.

## **Team 2:**

**Marcus “IRIS” Slater-** His name stands for *I Require Intense Supervision*. EOD expert that has taken up a new love...blowing up shit.

**Jane Layne-** IRIS’s sidekick in real life and in her mystery novels. Also known as Shayla Jacque. Absolutely despises technology, and goes so far as to use a typewriter to avoid it.

**Mick “Slider” Jeffries-** Not Slider from *Top Gun*. Sorry, ladies, I know he was gorgeous, but it’s not the same hottie.

**Tate “Thumper” Parsons-** No, not named for the adorable furry rabbit. Thumper got his nickname after losing a foot to an IED. Now using a robotic foot, he is probably the fastest person on the team.

**Bree Wilton-** Financial guru, killer of the boardroom, and newly appointed partner in her firm. Wilts under the sun. Hates hiking, dirt, bunnies, and generally all things that don’t come with a luxury sticker.

## **Team 3: Now known as The Ditty Boppers**

**Eli Brant-** Fierce team leader, but will put you in your place with a good practical joke when necessary.

**Sarah Williams-** Pickpocket, crazy lady that reacts inappropriately in tense situations.

**Red Warren-** Funny, meat-eating, California-hating, rifle owner. Proud to take out the bad guys in any way possible.

**Zoe Thacker-** Screenwriting badass that hates guns, refuses to eat meat, but loves a good gunfight.

**Bradford Kavanaugh-** Son of a senator, terrified of mummies, scarabs, and basically anything from ancient Egypt. Loves practical jokes, except when they’re about him.

## **IT Department:**

**Rae Dennon-** Sarcastic, witty, badass woman. Terrified of nothing, will take down any man with little effort, and has an intense feud with Dash.

**Duke Mason-** The mechanic. Sexy, dirty, and the man every woman wants. His hands alone could have a story written about them and all the things they can do. Not afraid to have his ass kicked by Rae.

**Dash-** Awesome with computers and a skilled fighter. Constantly being compared to Rae, the sexier version of him. Still trying to convince Fox he's just as awesome.

### **Black Ops Team: Also known as The Three Js**

**Jack Cox-** Team leader who loves aviator sunglasses as much as a good gun fight. Willing to take one for the team as long as the mission is long and hard...just like his johnson.

**Johnny Wood-** Dangerous cowboy, loyal to Rafe—a man that would kill his own mother if it finished the job. Respects a man willing to get the job done.

**Tahlia James-** Mad scientist...well, coroner. Desperate for the truth and willing to do anything to get those answers, as long as it doesn't include enclosed spaces. Not afraid of Johnny and his sexy body.

**Jason Long-** Number 3 of the baddies. Dangerous and dark, always full of threatening wisdom. Stay out of his way.

### **The Other Guys:**

**New Guy- Also known as FNG-** Doesn't have a death wish, but firmly believes he can never be killed. Willing to take horrible risks to prove he's unstoppable. Medic and smart as a whip, but also one of the most ridiculous men you've ever met.

**Honey-** Wife of FNG. Named for her honey scent and the way she sticks with FNG. Oh, also the daughter of a dangerous cartel leader.

**Jones-** Spotter for Cash during their military days, with a bad attitude since losing the use of his leg. Like you really need one of those.

**Rafe-** Evildoer posing as the good guy. Or is it the other way around? Dangerous antihero with not a single redeeming

quality who stays hidden in the shadows. Unknown relationship to Cash.

**Liberty-** Pretty ballerina with hidden talents. Obsessed with Rafe and willing to sacrifice anything to be with him. Or is she???

**Fox-** Works in training, has an undeniable fascination with throwing knives, and loves singing show tunes...sometimes a little too much!

**Anna-** Gorgeous Hollywood star who has captured Fox's twisted heart. Her looks aren't nearly as deadly as her right hook.

**Nicholas Tate:** Former SEAL who worked with Fox. Still a mystery, but currently works at OPS, though he can't seem to find his place. Must be crazy to be friends with Fox.

**IKE-** Roguishly handsome with a penchant for cigarettes, action, and a writer lady named Jane. He moves in the shadows, taking only the dangerous jobs. He's the man nobody wants to be compared to. Well, him and a mechanic.

**Max Huxley:** Former military. Licensed pilot. Rivals Scottie Dog's amazing flight skills. Has a bit of a drinking problem and loves his pink Hawaiian shirts and straw hat. Don't even thinking of taking his cigar from him.

### **The Young Squad:**

**Asher White:** This suit-wearing enigma has a thing for dangerous jobs, fast women, and...trains. Yes, you heard that right! Don't come between a man and his love of locomotives.

**Jade Buchanan-** The wife of the elusive Asher. Forced into an arranged marriage by her power-hungry father, she suffers from terrible nightmares, longing to leave this horrible life behind. Died when she crashed a minivan into a tree.

**Chase Carter:** Tattooed badass with a bullring in his nose. His wacky personality is nearly as irritating as his love of playing Monopoly.

**Patrick Cook:** This is no ordinary gigolo. Hang onto your hats ladies! You're not just getting a striptease with this stud!

# BALLS TO THE WALLS MEANING

## **Balls To The Walls Origins:**

First attested in the 1960s in the context of aviation. Probably coined by pilots whose throttle levers had round, ball-like tops and for whom putting the “balls to the wall” (the firewall of the aircraft) meant making the aircraft fly as quickly as possible.

-the vast internet

## **OPS Meaning:**

To do something at maximum speed. To go all out on a mission.



# DEAN

*OPS COMPOUND.*

*Exactly 1 year, 3 months, 27 days, 15 hours, 33 minutes, and 23 seconds from the day everything fell apart.*

*Also known as FNG-Day.*

BLOOD POURED FROM MY SIDE AS I PRESSED A RAG TO THE wound. Honey stood beside me, her fingers interlocked with mine. I pressed my thumb to the sensor, surprised when it activated immediately and the doors opened. The entry was dead, but that wasn't unusual for this hour.

“So...this is it,” she nodded, looking around. “It’s impressive.”

I smirked at her fake adoration for the reception area. She hadn't seen anything yet. “Come with me.”

I led her over to the elevator and hit the button. Again, it scanned my print and allowed me access. I thought they would have removed me from the system after what happened. Maybe it was a trap. They were drawing me in because they knew I was a traitor. They just wanted me to think they were still on my side. I guess I'd find out soon enough if my actions made them lose all faith in me.

“Where are we going?” she asked as we stepped inside.

I tore my eyes from her green gaze and pressed the button labeled T3. The doors closed and we descended into the depths of the nuclear silo. “You’ll see.”

I could practically feel her rolling her eyes at me. “Always so mysterious.”

“But it works for us,” I answered, wincing slightly as my side pinched. If I made it down there alive, I hoped they’d treat me before interrogating me.

What we really needed was elevator music, something to lighten the mood as we plunged into a whole new reality. The anticipation built up in my gut. This would only end one way. I just had to make sure I directed it correctly so I didn’t end up with yet another hole in my body. Cash...he was the one I was most worried about. But it was time to pay the piper.

The doors opened and I stepped out, half expecting guns to be immediately pointed at my face. Instead, the whole scene was anticlimactic. I guided Honey to the IT room, knowing at least someone was there. I looked directly at the camera as I passed. Someone was always watching. What I wasn’t expecting was the conference room to be moved to this level. Or for everyone to be gathered around, yelling as if they were in the middle of a crisis.

But those shouts all died down the minute I opened the door and walked through. Dash shook his head at me. Cash looked like he was about to explode. But it was Fox that surprised me the most.

“Man! I fucking knew it!” He jumped up from his seat and ran around the table, wrapping me in a big hug. My hand slipped from my wound, smearing blood all over his body, but he didn’t care. He stepped back and slapped both of my arms. “I fucking knew you couldn’t die! Did you see the milk cartons?”

I nodded. “I saw the milk cartons. The umbrella was a nice touch.”

“I had them specially made. I just knew you were out there.”

“I told you—”

“You can’t die,” Fox grinned. “I fucking knew it!”



“Excuse me, but what the actual fuck?” Cash snapped, throwing his pen down on the table. “Where the fuck have you been? And who is that?”

I looked over at Honey and shrugged. “This is my wife.” Again, they all just stared at me. “So, what job are we working on?”



# CASH

“WHAT JOB ARE WE WORKING ON?” I asked, completely baffled by the words coming out of FNG’s mouth. “Did you seriously just ask what job we’re working on?”

I was ready to explode, to grab him by the collar and shake the stupid out of him. After all this time, the entire fucking year that passed where I tried to convince these guys that he was dead because all evidence pointed to the fact that he was fucking buried in the ground...and he walked through my door at the most critical moment.

“Well...I’m not sure what you want me to say,” he laughed. “There really is no good way to return from the dead.”

Kavanaugh stood up, backing up a few steps. “But you weren’t...” He glanced around the room at everyone, swallowing hard. “You weren’t actually...you know...dead,” he half whispered. “This is really you. I mean, you’re you and not some zombie version of you. Or a ghost. Or even...a mummy.”

“No,” FNG said slowly. “This is pretty much me.”

But Kavanaugh didn’t look so convinced. FNG took a step toward him, but that was all it took for him to flee to the other side of the room, tossing chairs out of his way to get away from the man he suspected of being...well, I wasn’t sure what he thought FNG was. If I had to guess, he assumed FNG was carrying the plagues of Egypt.

“Just stay away!”

“Kavanaugh, it’s just me—”

“Do you think I’m fucking stupid? That I would fall for that so easily?” he scoffed. “No, you need to prove it’s really you. Strip!”

FNG balked at the order. “You...you want me to strip?”

“That’s right,” he said with more confidence than I knew he had. The man was perspiring like he’d been sitting in a sauna for three hours.

I looked at FNG, then back to Kavanaugh. He was serious. He wasn’t moving until FNG proved that he wasn’t a vampire or zombie. And now that I thought about it, I sort of wanted proof too.

“Why don’t you just...prove it,” I said, glancing around the room, noting the others were on the same page as me. I don’t think any of them really thought FNG was a zombie, but a little proof would go a long way in making us all feel better.

Sighing, FNG pulled his pants off first, which in hindsight was a bad move since he wasn’t actually wearing any underwear.

“Oh!” I shouted, covering my eyes. “Alright, that’s good. We’ve seen enough. Pull your damn pants back up.”

He did as requested with a grin on his face the whole time.

“Good enough?” he asked with a cocky grin.

“No, the shirt too,” Kavanaugh snapped, his eyes narrowing in on the red stain coming from FNG’s clothes.

“Honey?” he asked, turning to his wife. “A little help?”

She smiled at him and lifted the hem of his shirt, being extra careful around the wound. But when the shirt was overhead, all we could do was stare.

“Is that...” IRIS stared at his chest with extreme fascination.

“It can’t be,” Eli whispered.

“It is,” Kavanaugh declared. “He’s a fucking vampire! I fucking knew it!”

Commotion broke out around the room as everyone scooted out of their chairs, pulling their guns or finding any weapon to defend themselves.

“Seriously, guys? Bullets don’t kill vampires!” FNG shouted over the noise.

“I’ve got a silver bullet with your name on it!” Thumper shouted.

“You don’t have a silver bullet,” FNG said, rolling his eyes.

“Bullets won’t work anyway,” Kavanaugh screamed, standing on a chair now.

I turned to him, shaking my head. “You hide on chairs for mice, not vampires,” I muttered under my breath.

“Just stay the fuck away, you demon monster!”

“Guys, none of this is going to help. I know none of you have a silver bullet. Lock, tell them. I already have a fucking stake in my body. If that didn’t kill me, I must not be a vampire.”

Lock shifted his position, trying to reason with what he was seeing. “Vampires need a stake to the chest. You only have one in your side.”

“Let’s stake him!” Edu shouted.

“With what? We don’t have a stake,” Brock said in an incredulous tone.

“Don’t tell him that!” Edu snapped at his teammate. “You don’t tell a vampire you don’t have the means to kill him!”

“I’m not a vampire!” FNG shouted, but his declaration fell on deaf ears.

Chaos ripped through the room as everyone tried and failed to come up with a valid solution to the problem. Having enough of this, I walked right out of the room and headed for the break room. Grabbing the salt, I strode back to the

conference room and stood right behind FNG, spinning him around as I poured salt all over his body. He didn't start melting, but he screamed like hell as the salt met his wound.

"What the fuck was that for?" he shouted. He doubled over in pain as far as his body would allow. I felt slightly bad for injuring him further, but not bad enough to actually tell him I was sorry. The man had a lot of explaining to do.

"I was proving you weren't a vampire. Doesn't salt kill vampires?"

He gripped me by the shirt and dragged me over to him, squeezing my arms tight as he breathed harshly in my ear. I half expected him to bite my neck, but that never happened. And the more time that passed, I glanced around the room at the rest of the guys, watching as they slowly came to the realization that FNG had not turned.

I slowly unclenched his fists from my shirt and tried to get the wrinkles out. Failure number one of the day. Sighing, I took a step back and looked him up and down. "So, you want to explain why you have a chunk of wood sticking out of you?"

"It's a long fucking story."

I glanced around the room knowing I had lost these guys for the time being. The potential job would have to wait. "I think we're all more curious about where you've been."

"And why you have a stake sticking out of your body!" Kavanaugh shouted.

I turned and gave him the motion to simmer down. The guy was going to have an ulcer if he kept getting this riled up. At least he didn't have a mummy on him this time.

"Maybe before I tell the story, someone could remove the stake from my body that's potentially poisoning my bloodstream and sending me into toxic shock."

I was about to nod and tell Lock to help him out, but Fox stepped forward, running his hand over his jaw. He slowly circled FNG, looking him up and down. Then he poked him a few times, just to be sure he was alive.

“Well, you certainly look like FNG.”

“Because I am FNG,” the guy said through gritted teeth. “You just hugged me. I walked through the door and you fucking hugged me!”

“But I can’t be sure.”

“What changed in the three minutes I’ve been standing here, bleeding out all over the floor.”

“Well, as you say, you should be bleeding out. Yet, you’re still standing.”

“You hugged me!” FNG repeated.

“Yes, but I’m having second thoughts.”

“And why’s that?”

“Yeah? Why do you say that?” Brock asked curiously.

Fox spun on his heel, facing everyone in the room. “What is the one thing that gives FNG away?”

We all looked at each other, not sure where he was going with this.

“Um... Fox, what are you—”

“In all our times with FNG, what is the one thing he’s known for?”

“Not being able to die,” I said in frustration, “which he clearly hasn’t because he’s standing in front of us now.”

“No, oh wise one,” Fox grinned. “You would think that would be the tell-all, but in fact, everyone knows FNG claims he can’t die. No, the true test of whether or not FNG is really standing before us is based on one simple thing that he’s neglected to do so far.

We all glanced around the room, wondering what this mysterious thing was.

Fox walked forward, getting right up in FNG’s face. “*Obviously*, you’re an imposter.”

FNG rolled his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. “I’m standing right the fuck—”

“Ah-ha!” Fox shouted, taking a step back as he pointed his finger at the man we all thought was FNG. “You heard it just as clearly as I did. Tell me you still think this man is FNG!”

I stood there awkwardly, not sure of what was happening. But Fox seemed to think he had proof. I wasn’t sure how to refute that.

And then Dash walked forward, his face pissed as he stared at the man in front of us. “So, you think you can pass yourself off as FNG.”

“I’m not passing myself off as FNG. I *am* FNG!”

“Guys—”

Dash turned to me, shaking his head. “Boss, I’m with Fox. This is not FNG. It can’t be.”

“Why?” I asked, with no possible way of explaining what was happening here.

“Boss, you heard it for yourself. The challenge was laid down and he didn’t reciprocate,” Dash snorted. “This guy is an imposter, a poor man’s FNG. Let’s get this trash out of here.”

Immediately, IRIS and Slider grabbed FNG by the arms and started dragging him toward the door. I wanted to stop it, but they all thought he wasn’t really FNG. I didn’t know what to do or how to stop the insanity.

“Wait!” I shouted, gaining the attention of my men for just a second. I didn’t have much time to make this theory work, so I had to move fast. “When we were in the mountainside camp with Rae, what did you do?”

He rolled my eyes. “Seriously, boss?” When I didn’t give in, he continued. “I told you I couldn’t die. You didn’t believe me, so I grabbed the electrified bars and my heart stopped. I’m pretty sure I was out for about five minutes. And then I woke up and you guys were suddenly surprised that I was no longer dead. I told you, but no one believed me.”

That was good enough for me, but my comrades didn’t seem all that impressed. “Say it,” Fox yelled. “Fucking say it now or I’ll—”



“Boil me in acid?” FNG said in a bored tone. “Are you still doing that after all this time?”

Fox paused, frowning as he looked at him. “You think it’s gone out of style?”

“You know, I saw some really cool things over the past year. I was thinking...you need a new signature move, maybe something to really strike fear into the hearts of your enemies. I think with a good brainstorming session, we could come up with something even more pleasurable. Oh, and I finally watched *My Fair Lady*,” he grinned. “Killer movie.”

Fox beamed and wrapped his arm around the guy. “I always knew I liked you.”

He slapped FNG on the back, who winced as he shifted forward. The man needed medical attention, and based on the wound, he was going to pass out soon if we didn’t get him the help he needed.

“Lock, take him to the med room.”

“Boss, you can’t be serious,” Lock snorted. “He’s not FNG. Rafe told us—”

“I know what Rafe fucking told you,” I snapped. “Even I believed him, but this is FNG. Like it or not, he and all his craziness has returned.”

“Thanks, boss,” FNG grinned. “I knew I liked you.”

“Yeah, don’t thank me yet. Someone still has to pull the stake out of your side.”



## FNG

I LIMPED DOWN THE HALLWAY, feeling a little worse for wear after my ordeal. Frankly, I was a little hurt that no one believed it was me. I leaned on Honey, even though it made me look like a wuss. I tried to be strong, but I did have a stake sticking out of me, and it had been for over six hours now. That piece of wood was the only thing keeping me from bleeding out all over the floor. And even though I was pretty damn sure I couldn't die, there were plenty of horrible things to live through in the process. I'd already had my fair share of them over the past year.

“In here,” Lock said, eyes narrowing as he scowled at me. He held the door open to the medic room, but part of me was concerned that this was a trap somehow—that I'd walk in that room and he'd lock the door, then give me a lethal injection.

I turned to Honey, nudging her back gently. “You'd better wait out here.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, her brows pinched in a frown.

With one glance back at Lock, I knew this was for the best. “I'll be fine.”

She didn't look any more convinced than I was, but if he was going to kill me, it was best she wasn't around to witness his attempts. It could get pretty hairy when he realized no matter what he did, I would just wake up a few hours later.

I gave her a kiss on the cheek and turned back to Lock. “You know, you could at least pretend to be happy to see me.”

“How do I know you're not an imposter?”

“Run my prints. They’ll prove I am who I say I am.”

“You faked your death how many times?” Lock asked. “Yeah, I’m not trusting your prints, even if it’s a one hundred percent match.”

These guys were so paranoid, but I couldn’t say I blamed them. After everything that happened, I wouldn’t trust me either. I walked through the door of the medic room and sat down on the table, relief pouring through me as I finally got off my feet.

“You know, this isn’t the welcome home I thought I would get.”

“Yeah?” Lock mumbled, digging out a fresh pair of gloves. He turned to me and snapped one on. “We didn’t expect you to come back at all. You’re lucky we even want to hear you out.”

“I told you, I can’t die. What part of that would even allow you to consider this isn’t me?”

“The fact that we buried you, and then were told by Rafe that you were dead.”

I snorted, remembering that particular incident. “Yeah, figures he’d tell you that.”

“And why would he tell us you were dead?”

“Uh...for the mission? I’m not sure what other reason you could think of. Rafe is out for himself, always has been.”

Lock considered this, and I knew I was bringing him around. “Cash said he was positive Rafe wasn’t lying. Why would he think you were dead?”

“Because I was dead,” I sighed, leaning back further on the bed. God, I was so fucking tired. I just needed some sleep.

He leaned on the edge of the gurney and got real close, his eyes burrowing into mine. “So, you mean to tell me that you were dead, so dead that Rafe thought you were dead. And then you just magically came back to life?”

“More or less.”

“And Rafe didn’t know.”

“Well, he wasn’t there anymore.”

He stepped back and pulled on the second glove. “Alright, hotshot. Give it to me from the top.”

“Which part?”

“How about who this woman is that’s walking our halls, pretending to be your wife?”

“Honey?” I sighed when I thought about her. “Yeah, she’s something, isn’t she?”

“I don’t know. I just met her,” he snapped.

“Me too,” I grinned.

“And that doesn’t seem suspicious to you at all?”

“What? That I just met her?” I frowned, wondering what he was getting at. “When you meet anyone, you’ve only known them for a few hours or days. There’s no way to meet someone and have it be longer than the time it’s already been.”

“What?” he said in confusion, then got in my face. “If you just met her, why the fuck did you bring her here? Are you fucking stupid?”

“Stupid in love,” I grinned. “Hey, do you think you could remove this stake from my stomach? It’s starting to bother me a little.”

His nostrils flared as he continued to breathe on my face, his nose just inches from my own. I had the absurd thought to pinch his nose like I would a kid, but that would most likely piss him off further. Just when it was really starting to get uncomfortable, he took a step back.

“I’ll work on the stake. You start talking.”

Well, there wasn’t really a whole lot left to do other than get down to business. As much as my side hurt, talking might dull the pain.

“It all started two nights ago.”

“Wait, you mean to tell me you just met her two nights ago?”

“I just told you that.” Was he not listening to anything I was saying? Or was I having one of those delusional dreams where I thought I was saying something, but wasn’t actually speaking at all? Or maybe this was a dream within a dream and the dream sequence was all messed up.

“You said you just met her,” he argued, interrupting my thoughts. “I figured you meant in the past few weeks, not the last two days. Was your meeting that good?”

I grinned at him. “It was magical.”

“So is herpes. I don’t suppose you used protection.”

I frowned. “Wow, you really have no faith in your fellow man.”

“Definitely not, and not in my fellow woman either. So, you met her two nights ago.”

I got lost again in the memories of that night. Nothing better had ever happened in all my life. “I met her in Mexico, just across the border. We were in this old cantina, one that locals frequent. I can still feel the humidity in the air and how my shirt stuck to my skin. At first, I was miserable, thinking this was the worst place in the world to hang out. But then I saw her. A brunette beauty with hair flowing wildly down her back in a tangle of waves. I remember thinking in that moment that I was going to marry her.”

“Because she had a tangle of waves?” Lock asked like I was stupid.

“It was the image of her. Her ethereal beauty was what snagged me.”

He stared at me, his expression one of boredom. “Ethereal?”

“Well, I thought so at the time. She had on this white top that dipped between her breasts, accentuating the curves, clearly indicating that she was looking for a good time. But not with just anyone.”

“I had no idea breasts told so much,” he muttered as he examined my side.

“They do,” I sighed. “And she had on this flowy white skirt, you know the kind that makes you want to hoist her up on the bar and slide your hands underneath?”

“Not sure I’m familiar with that one,” he grumbled.

“You should be. It’s so fucking awesome.” I winced as he pulled at the stake. “Careful. You could at least add some numbing agent.”

“But then you wouldn’t feel the pain as I rip this from your body. Only then can I be sure you really aren’t a vampire.”

As sad as it was to say, he was right. “Go for it.”

He started wiggling some more, checking the wound for God knows what. “Anyway, you were saying?”

“It was at that moment that I knew I found my match. Not just any woman, but the woman I was destined to spend the rest of my life with.”

“Just like that.”

“Just like that,” I grinned.

“So, what happened?”





# FNG

*SOMEWHERE IN MEXICO.*

*Approximately 47 hours, 18 minutes, and 45 seconds ago...*

I SWALLOWED THE ENTIRE GLASS OF TEQUILA, NEARLY CHOKING on it as I watched the dangerous vixen in front of me. With an olive complexion and the most vibrant brown eyes, I could swear I was being set up to take the fall for something. Her eyes danced as she watched me. With a tray balanced on one hand, she served the drinks the locals ordered, but her eyes always came back to meet mine.

I sat in the dark corner, unable to draw my attention from her gorgeous figure. With just a look, she had me captivated. She chatted with the locals, grinning as she fiddled with the pendant around her neck. I stared at it with an intensity I'd never felt before. Not because I had interest in the necklace, but because it rested just between the swell of her breasts.

It didn't take long for her to make her way to my table. The way her hips moved, slowly swishing from one side to the other left me incapable of looking anywhere other than the small tattoo at her hip. The top she was wearing left a good two inches of skin at her midriff.

“Anything I can get you?”

There was so much she could get me. A night with her wouldn't be enough to calm the urges surging through my

veins. I wanted nothing more than to wrap my hand around her thick mane and pull her against my body, feeling those breasts in my palms. But that wasn't on the menu tonight. At least, not until I made my move.

“Whiskey.”

Her lips turned up in a sly smile. “Any preferences?”

I saw my opening and couldn't resist. I leaned forward, lowering my voice so she'd have to lean in to hear me, giving me a prime view of those luscious breasts just a foot away from me.

“What do you have that's complex but subtle?” Her eyes lit up. “I like something full-bodied. Rich and long-lasting with a hint of honey. Do you happen to have anything like that?”

“I think I know exactly what you're talking about.”

Her hand went to her pendant again, twirling it slightly as she gave me a coquettish smile. I had her. Now I just had to close the deal.

“Single or double?”

“Double,” I answered, my voice gravelly the longer I stared at her.

“I think I can give you that. Give me just a minute and I'll be back.”

She winked at me, then turned around, her hips swaying from side to side as she walked to the bar. As she placed her order, she looked back at me, tucking a tendril of hair behind her ear. It was almost more than I could take. Sitting here, waiting for our tête-à-tête to commence once again when she returned with my drink. I could barely control my cool demeanor, knowing the minute she looked at me and sent me a wink, I would once again be under her spell.

As she turned back to the bartender, I saw a single string of hair the color of honey standing out in that mane of dark hair. *Honey*. Just like I asked for the whiskey, with a hint of honey. It was a fitting name, the way her new name slid over my

tongue, warm and inviting. I would find out later just how similar her nickname was to the rest of her.

The cantina door slammed open and she spun around, her eyes filled with fear. I was immediately on guard, watching every move around the joint. Most people didn't flinch. They simply ignored the new presence, pretending they knew nothing. This new foe, whoever he was, wouldn't be trifled with. However, my little vixen didn't respond like everyone else. While they chose to ignore this man, she was terrified, though she tried to hide it.

The urge to get up and protect her was strong, but I forced myself to stay seated, to get more information before I made my move. If he so much as touched her, I wouldn't hesitate to take action. But for now, I waited in my dark corner for this man to force my hand.

He strode through the cantina, staring only at one person. Honey glanced my way, but quickly diverted her gaze, not wanting to let the man know I was watching. But she was sending me a signal. She needed help and fast. Still, I waited. I needed to know this new foe before making my move.

A passing waiter caught my attention and I signaled him, paying for a cigar before he moved on. They were never my fancy, but the moment was right, the setting perfect for a mysterious figure sitting in the dark, with no one noticing him aside from the cigar that lit up when he took a drag.

Striking the matchbox, I lit the end and took several puffs, then blew out the smoke and waited for the man to make his move. Meanwhile, Honey hurried behind the bar, pouring a drink as she tried to distract herself.

Boyfriend. That was my guess. Ex, based on the way she was moving. She didn't like this man, was even afraid of him, but she wasn't stupid enough to make a spectacle in public. Which meant this man had leverage. He was someone to be revered, someone she knew could end her life with just a snap of his fingers.

And no one would lift a finger to help. They all feared this man. They ignored him as he walked through the bar, only

giving him a smile as he stopped by their table.

He was smooth and charming in his own right, but none of them wanted to interact with him. They didn't want to face his wrath when that charm suddenly vanished. As soon as he moved on, the tension at that particular table relaxed instantly, though everyone still kept their guard up.

This man, he was irrational. He was the type of devil that no one crossed, not even if they were drunk. I glanced around and noticed no one appeared drunk. They came here to drink, but wouldn't dare do anything to put themselves in danger. They knew this wasn't the place.

I took another drag of my cigar, barely holding back a cough. I wasn't used to smoking these. Cigars weren't my drug of choice. Then again, I didn't normally do any kind of drug, unless it was to save my life.

I watched as the man walked up to Honey, grabbing her by the arm. She tensed immediately, her eyes flicking to mine. The man yelled at her in another language, his spit flying at her face as she barely kept control. The woman was terrified.

I glanced around the room. There were no other men willing to help, but there also wasn't anyone who appeared to be on this man's payroll. No one moved. No one even paid attention. With only my Sig at my hip, I slowly pulled it and checked the weapon. In the darkness, no one paid attention to me. In the darkness, he would never see me coming.

But I wasn't one to fire at someone without giving them a fair chance to defend themselves. Not unless danger was clear and present. I took another drag, then set my cigar down in the tray, then casually lifted my gun and aimed for the bottle of alcohol just above his head. With a single shot, the bottle shattered and liquor poured over his face. He released my femme fatale immediately, spluttering as he turned around to find the shooter.

I picked up my cigar and waited for him to notice me, the lone ranger sitting in the corner with zero fucks to give. It didn't take him long to notice the man who had nearly taken off his head. Well, had I aimed a little lower.

In a rage, the man strode around the bar, storming over to my table. He pulled a gun from the waistband of his pants, aiming directly at me. But I wasn't afraid. It was in his stance, the way he held his gun, the way his finger wasn't quite in the right position. This man threatened people with a gun, but he wasn't nearly trained enough to use it.

"You dare shoot me in my own bar?" the man shouted.

Ah, so he was the owner, using his position to threaten those around him. He intimidated my Honey with his position, using deplorable tactics to get what he wanted. I knew men like him. I killed men like him.

"I didn't shoot you," I said casually, tapping the end of my cigar and letting the flakes fall into the dish. "If I was shooting at you, I wouldn't have missed."

The man spluttered, his face mottled with rage as he stared at me. "You need to leave my bar."

"Not without Honey."

His eyes flicked to the woman he was just threatening. "She is not yours."

"She's a hell of a lot more than mine." I stood, holstering my weapon. Yeah, he still had his out, but that did nothing to make me flinch. The man couldn't hit me unless he was holding the gun against my chest, and even then, it was highly unlikely he'd kill me.

"You have no right, gringo," he spat.

I walked around the table until I was standing right in front of him. His gun pressed against my chest and he really started to sweat. "Do it," I hissed. "Pull the trigger."

"I—"

He didn't know what to say and didn't want to become a murderer. His eyes flicked to Honey again, and then he pressed the gun harder against my chest. He wanted to do it. He wanted to watch the blood seep from my body, but he couldn't.

In one swift move, I grabbed the gun from his hand and slammed it down on his head. He dropped to the ground, out cold and not going anywhere anytime soon. Honey came rushing over, her eyes filled with tears as she leapt into my arms.

“You saved me,” she cried. “No one has ever done anything like that for me before.”

I slowly lifted the cigar to my mouth and took a long drag. “And you’ll never have to know what it’s like not to have me around.”



# LOCK

“WAIT,” I cut in, my hands stopped just as I was about to sew up FNG’s wound. “You’re telling me that you rescued Honey from a bar in Mexico and no one else came after you?”

“Well, you didn’t really let me finish the story,” he grinned. “It gets really good.”

“I thought Honey had something to do with why you were missing,” I snapped. “So far, all I’m hearing is some Mexican tale of you rushing in to save the day. Were you wearing cowboy boots and chaps?”

“Chaps? No, I don’t wear chaps.”

I tossed the instrument back in the tray and stood back, staring at the man. “What the hell does this have to do with why you went missing?”

“It doesn’t,” he said, staring at me in confusion.

“Then why the hell are you telling me?”

“Well, it’s a really good story, and you asked.”

“I—” Fuck, I couldn’t remember if I asked or not. It was a good story, but I wasn’t sure I believed it. He was supposed to be dead. This was insanity. “So, you just met Honey and you married her.”

He squinted slightly. “Sort of.”

“What does *sort of* mean?”

“Well, I did just meet her, but I didn’t exactly marry her just because she was there. Although, that would be a great



story to tell the grandkid. Not nearly as good as the actual story, though.”

I was beyond confused what she had to do with any of this. I wanted to take my scalpel and rip him open just so he’d tell me what the fuck was going on. But I wasn’t Fox, and hurting your teammates was generally frowned upon.

“Okay, so she has never met Rafe.”

“Correct.”

“And she has nothing to do with why you were missing.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Are you trying to do some Jedi mind trick on me? Of course, she has nothing to do with that. I just met her. How could she possibly be involved in my disappearance?”

I just had to be clear. I had a feeling this story was going to be all over the place. The first thing I had to do was get him sewn up. His wound was infected and he was going to need a good round of antibiotics to clear up the nastiness from the stake.

“Someone didn’t actually think you were a vampire, did they?”

“No, but how awesome would that be?” he asked, staring up at the ceiling with a grin on his face.

The man was so weird. “Alright, so let’s start at the very beginning—”

“A very good place to start,” he laughed.

I rolled my eyes at him. “You’ve been hanging around with Fox for way too long. What really happened the night of the explosion?”

“You mean, was I in that truck?”

“You couldn’t have been. You’d have been burned to a crisp.”

“Exactly.”

I gritted my teeth, tired of his games. “Are you going to tell me or keep walking around the subject?”

“Well, since you asked so nicely, and you are stitching me up, I think a tale is in order.”

“No, no tale. The truth.”

“Fine,” he huffed. “The truth.”

Thank God. Here I was, thinking this was the prime opportunity to get answers out of him, and he was telling me tales about finding his wife. If this new story didn’t lead to some real answers, I would be willing to hand him over to Kavanaugh to stake a second time.

“It all started when Rafe sought me out about a month before that night. He needed someone to get on the inside for him.”

“The inside of what?”

“Ah, that is the question. The very same thing I wanted to know. But with Rafe, nothing is ever as it seems. When I saw him staring at me that fateful night, I knew my life would never be the same.”

“So, why did you agree to a meeting?”

“Curiosity?” he answered. He tilted his head up so he could look at his wound. “Are you going to finish closing that? I understand my story is captivating, but I wouldn’t mind being sealed up so I don’t bleed out all over the place.”

I stared at him drolly, then picked up a packet of QuikClot and poured it over his wound. “There. You’re not going to bleed out.”

He winced, giving me a thumbs up. “Thanks. Not exactly what I was looking for, but...”

I leaned on the table, getting in his face again. “This story isn’t exactly what I was looking for. I guess we both lose.”

He chuckled slightly. “You know, you’re not that different from Fox.”

I took great offense at that. I was nothing like Fox. I had rules and boundaries that I followed. I didn't go off the deep end. And pouring QuikClot on his wound wasn't crossing a line. It was...motivating him. Yeah, that's it.

“Why don't you just get on with the story?”

“Where was I? Oh, yes. Rafe wanted to get me on the inside of some operation.”

“I thought that's what the three J's were for?” I grunted as I resumed stitching him up.

“Ideally, yes, but they've been around Rafe too long. He needed someone that had no connection to him. The three J's were essentially tainted.”

“So, he called you,” I surmised.

“At first, I wasn't on board. I mean, who would be with Rafe?”

“Only someone insane.”

“Exactly. And I may not be able to die, but that doesn't mean I wanted to get involved with Rafe. Mutilation is not high on my list of things to try.”

“So, how did he convince you?”

“He kidnapped me one night.”

I stopped and looked up at him. “I'm sorry, what?”

He nodded. “Yep, I was just going to bed when I was attacked from behind.”

“You expect me to believe that someone got the drop on you in our house.”

“He did own this place before giving it to Cash. Is it really that unlikely that he wouldn't have access to it without us knowing?”

I thought about it, but couldn't see how it was possible. “Rae worked on the system with Dash. There's no way Rafe got in undetected.”

“Believe me or not, that’s what happened. When I woke up...well, I think you know exactly how I felt,” he said with a grin.



# FNG

*SOMEWHERE IN THE SKIES.*

*Approximately 1 year, 4 months, 27 days, 22 hours, 13 minutes, and 44 seconds. 45. 46...*

MY SURROUNDINGS SLOWLY CAME INTO FOCUS. THE SOUND OF the jet engine rang in my ears, telling me I wasn't in Kansas anymore. I glanced around the plane, trying to gain all the intel I could before we landed. Or worse, before one of them attacked, ensuring I would never see the light of day again.

A man sat across from me reading a newspaper. His eyes scanned the pages with vague interest. Clearly, this man was no great scholar. But with looks like his, no woman would be paying attention to his IQ. Ruggedly handsome, it was like I was looking in the mirror. Although, I had to admit, he looked better in a suit than I did. With looks like that, he could have any dame he wanted. His hat sat cockeyed on his head, giving him that rugged appeal that so many women found charming.

A worthy opponent, I knew I would have to outsmart this fella using my wits. A man like him was loaded for bear. I could tell he was packing and probably had a Tommy gun just inches from him at all times. That fedora may look appealing on him, but underneath was a dangerous man.

While he was distracted with his daily rag, I checked the bindings around my wrists, wiggling my hands to see if I could break them. It was no use. These men tied me up tight. I could fight them with my hands tied behind my back, but

escaping would be the hard part. There had to be something on this plane that could break me from this dastardly confinement.

If I waited long enough, one of them would start running their mouth and I could use that to negotiate my freedom. I could see a game of strip poker in my future, and I just so happened to be excellent at the game. Men like this needed a little entertainment on a long flight. It was the perfect chance for escape. They would assume that it was safe since I had nowhere to go. They didn't realize the lengths I would go to in order to gain my freedom.

Another man walked up, this one even darker than the one sitting across from me. Dressed in a black suit, with a black hat tilted to cover his eyes, it didn't take a genius to figure out this guy was bad news, even worse than the man sitting across from me.

“We land in twenty.”

“Smitty says he's ready. We just need to unload and then get this guy to Quincy.”

Quincy, that was interesting. I had no idea who that was, but I was determined to figure a way out of this with my life still intact. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dangerous had a six shooter at his hip and the fanciest shoes I'd ever seen. Just one slip on some ice would do the trick, knocking him out and leaving me a clear line to take his gun and jump from the plane.

“Hey,” the man across from me snapped. He stood, buttoning his zoot suit jacket as he walked closer. “You can't pretend to be asleep forever.”

“I wasn't pretending. You were just too daft to notice I was awake.”

He grinned at me. “A wise guy, eh?”

He slammed his fist into my face. My head snapped to the side with the force of the blow. The man had hands like a sledgehammer, and as he stood in front of me cracking his knuckles, I knew I had to get out of these ropes fast.

“Why don’t you take off these ropes and fight me like a real man?” I taunted.

“Why give you an advantage?”

“It’s only an advantage if you think you can’t hold your own,” I grinned.

The man glanced at Dark and Dangerous, then strode forward, undoing the ropes around my wrists. I feigned relief for all of two seconds before popping him one in the jaw. He stumbled back, landing in his seat with a thump. The man to my right hit me hard, sending me flying into the side of the plane.

I picked up the food tray and slammed it against the side of his head, taking the opportunity to rush him as he tripped over his own feet and fell into the seats, losing his hat in the process. I grabbed his gun and held it on him, knowing I needed to get out of here if I had any chance of living to see tomorrow.

“I wish we could have ended things differently, Tommy, but those are the breaks,” I said, holding the gun on him. I shot him once in the knee, then made a break for the back of the plane. I didn’t have long to make my escape, and even less time to figure out a way to survive this.

The parachutes that were normally stored on a plane were nowhere in sight. I looked out the window, trying to judge how high we were, but all I saw was blue down below. There was a bag hanging on the wall labeled Inflatable Raft. I snatched it and headed for the door, knowing it was my only way out.

“Get him!” Dark and Dangerous shouted.

I grabbed the handle next to the door and held on for dear life as I opened it. The gust of wind nearly sucked me out of the plane, but I shoved my foot against the doorframe and held on with everything I had. Just as Mr. Tommy Gun came at me, I grinned and let go of the handle. I was sucked out of the plane, getting caught in the turbulence for just a second before falling toward the ocean.



I flipped to my back, letting the wind catch me and slow my descent. With a two-fingered salute at the man staring out of the plane at me, I rolled and straightened my body, increasing my speed as I fell from the sky.

The water came rushing up to meet me. I had to time this just right. If I pulled that string even a second too late, I would smash into the ocean at a fatal rate of speed. I wrapped my fingers around the pull cord, said a quick prayer, then yanked with all my might.

But nothing happened. I tried again, but still, the raft refused to inflate. With mere seconds left, I made one last ditch effort and—



# LOCK

“HOLD ON,” I snapped, irritated with this story already. “Let me get this straight. You somehow got kidnapped and transported into some bad forties movie?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked like he didn’t know.

I rolled my eyes, slapping a bandaid on his wound. He winced, glaring at me for being so rough. I didn’t care. I was beyond the point of believing anything FNG said. I could be working a real job where people were actually in danger. Instead, I was treating a man who just couldn’t stop telling tall tales.

“Tommy guns and fedoras?”

“I never said fedoras,” he said quickly.

“Like I couldn’t tell where you were going with that? It was a poor man’s gangster movie.”

“Hey, I resent that,” he said, sitting upright with a wince. “I’m telling you what really happened.”

I washed off my hands, glancing over my shoulder at FNG. “And what really happened is some version of an Indiana Jones movie?”

“What are you talking about?”

I snatched a paper towel and turned, drying off my hands as I laid it out for him. “I’m talking about the fact that Indiana Jones jumped out of a plane with a raft. Do you really expect

me to believe that in today's modern age, they didn't have a parachute? Only a raft for you to jump to your death with?"

"It...was an old plane."

"You said a jet."

"I...why do you have to ruin my story?"

"Because it was a horrible story," I snapped. "No one in their right mind would believe you. Half the time, you weren't even speaking like a real gangster."

He slid off the table, hobbling over to me as he kept his hand pressed to his side. He had to be in pain, and if he didn't stop with this shit, I would make it hurt a whole lot more.

"Oh, I'm so sorry I got some of the details wrong. Clearly, I'm no artist."

So, we were going that route. "Obviously, you need to watch a few more movies before you try and pull that off."

"It's called dramatic license," he argued.

"It's called a complete lie. We all know you didn't get on a plane with two thugs and then make it back in time for work the next morning."

"Rafe has connections."

"Rafe wasn't on the plane," I argued.

"He was Mr. Dark and Dangerous. I thought that much was obvious."

"If he was Mr. Dark and Dangerous, there's no fucking way you would have gotten the drop on him, let alone made it out of that plane in a fucking raft. Not to mention that Rafe wouldn't transport you like that. Or wear a fedora!"

"Alright, so maybe Rafe wasn't on the plane, but he was responsible for all of it. And you know as well as I do that even Rafe can be tricked. We did it before at his mountainside compound. What makes you so sure we couldn't pull it off again?"

“Because at the mountainside compound, there was a whole team working to get out of there. Sorry if I don’t believe that you pulled that off all on your own.” I shoved the antibiotics at him. “Take two a day. And try not to overdo it with your outrageous stories between now and when the stitches come out. We wouldn’t want you to die from bad storytelling.”

I turned and opened the door, walking out of the room.

“Wait! You said you wanted to know what happened!”

He was limping down the hall after me in only his pants. The truth was, I needed to know what happened, but not if he was going to tell me some bullshit story that didn’t make any sense.

I turned, and he nearly slammed into me. “Fine, tell me the truth, but if I hear anymore mention of Tommy guns, I’m out of here.”

“Cross my heart, hope to die,” he grinned.

“I wouldn’t bet on that. With your luck, you’re a dead man either way.”

“Um...with my luck? Did you really just say that to me? You all thought I was dead for the past year.”

I hated that he had a point. “Fine, tell me the real story.”

He motioned for me to walk forward. I headed for the break room and grabbed a pan, preparing some food for us. Even if I didn’t like the guy’s lies, he still needed to eat, and people tended to talk more when they were shoving food in their mouth.

“So, Rafe really did come see me about a month before the explosion.”

“But I take it he didn’t toss you on a plane.”

He grinned at me. “Well, that’s where it gets tricky,” he said, leading into another story.



# FNG

*BEFORE THE AIRPLANE RIDE.*

*Approximately 1 year, 4 months, 27 days, 23 hours, 12 minutes, and 54 seconds ago...*

THE COMMON ROOM WAS DEAD. IT WAS JUST ME AND RED, AND the only reason he was here was because Cotton and Zoe were taking care of the kids. So, we were watching some stupid movie about a woman trying to ensnare a man. This man had made the dumbest move ever.

“Ugh!” I sighed. “Why do men always make this mistake? I’m so fucking tired of watching movies where men are idiots.”

Red turned and raised an eyebrow at me. “Why is he an idiot?”

“Because obviously the woman is going to have some sick fascination with him now. Everyone knows you never let a woman spend the night.”

“He’s dating her. What was he supposed to do?”

“I would think that’s pretty obvious. He kicks her out.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that won’t help him get another date.”

“What if he doesn’t want another date?”

Red pointed at the guy on the TV. “He just said he really likes her. Why would he kick her out and ruin what he has

going for him? Do you know nothing about women?”

“In fact, I do, that’s why it’s stupid for him to let her stay,” I argued. “Once a woman spends the night, that’s it. It’s over. Soon, she’s showing up at all hours. At first, you think it’s great because you get a booty call, but then you realize she’s always going to spend the night. And those booty calls turn into expected dates that you don’t plan. And then she comes over just to hang out and she steals the remote. Those action movies? You can kiss those goodbye. Pretty soon, you’ll be watching sad movies about kids with cancer or those sappy Christmas movies where the man and woman refuse to fall in love, but then the perfect person comes along and it’s a Christmas miracle!”

God, I was ready to gag. The whole thing was disgusting and left a horrible taste in my mouth.

“I watch those Christmas movies with Zoe,” he muttered.

“See!” I pointed at him. He was the epitome of everything that was wrong with men and dating. “She ensnared you and you didn’t even know it.”

“I married her.”

“Right, and now you’re stuck for the rest of your life. This is all because you let her stay the night.”

“Actually, it’s because I started helping her out. It had nothing to do with her spending the night. And I fell in love, dipshit. You sort of make a commitment when you love someone.”

I snorted, kicking back in my chair. “Yeah, well, there’s no way that’s happening to me. These women,” I said, pointing at the TV, “they’re out to take over your life. I don’t want to wake up one morning with pictures of people I don’t know in my house.”

“You live in this house. A house you literally share with a dozen other guys.”

Whatever, I didn’t need his stupid facts. “But no one around here puts pictures of their family on the end table. Do



you see this?” I said, pointing to the table in front of me.  
“What do you see?”

His eyes swiveled to the table in front of us, clearly unimpressed. “Chips, magazines, and old take-out containers.”

“Exactly. I think I’ve made my point.”

“Your point is that you’re a slob and so is everyone else that lives here.”

“Yes, but it’s my choice. How often does Zoe tell you to clean up your stuff?”

When I saw the grin on his face, I knew that was a bad example. “Since I’m the clean one, it’s usually me telling her to clean up.”

“Alright, fine. But the point is, once you let a woman stay the night, it’s all over. Your freedom is stripped from you and you’re essentially a shell of the man you once were.”

“And you know this from experience?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve never gone down that path. I’m too smart to ever let that happen.”

“You’re telling me you’ve never let a girl spend the night?” Red said in disbelief.

“Not intentionally. I think there was one time I passed out after drinking too much. That wasn’t a night to remember.”

“Because you were drunk?”

“No,” I said, my brows furrowing as I stared at him. “Because I drank an entire bottle of Jameson by myself. I literally couldn’t remember a thing that happened. I’m not even sure if the woman I woke up next to slept with me.”

“So, you pick them up at the bar and only go to their place?”

“If I go to the bar. Sometimes I meet a woman in a grocery store or Subway.”

“Like, the restaurant?” He looked at me strangely.

“I’ll have you know that Subway is an excellent place to meet women. You’ll learn all you need to know by what she orders.”

“How do you figure?” Red asked, not believing at all in my strategy.

“For example, a woman who orders a salad is worried about her weight. I don’t need that kind of drama in my life. A woman who orders something with chipotle sauce is looking for a good time. And then there are the women who order things with onions. While they’re a tasty treat, it makes for horrible after dinner breath. Not really my style.”

“Yeah, now we’re discarding women because they like onions,” Red muttered.

“If I was looking for a woman to take home night after night, of course I’d let her eat onions. They’re tasty.”

“You’d let her? Do you even hear yourself?”

“Of course, but I’m single. I’m allowed to be discerning.”

He rolled his eyes at me, clearly not impressed with my methods. “So, what else kicks a woman out of the running?”

“Well, high heeled shoes are never a good thing. Yes, they look good, but if you’re running from someone with a gun, do you really want a woman that’s flapping her arms for balance?”

“You know, not every woman is running from someone with a gun.”

“True, but it’s still something to think about. Oh, and another great place to meet women is a car dealership.”

Again, he stared at me like I was an idiot.

“Hey, you call it ridiculous, but it’s a foolproof plan. I like a woman that knows how to haggle. And, if she’s there alone, you can almost guarantee she’s single. It’s a fast way to weed out the married from the non-married.”

“Yeah, I bet you meet a lot of single women at a car dealership.”

“Well, where would you go?”

He held up his ring finger. “I’m married. I don’t go anywhere.”

“Where would you go before?”

“The bar.”

“Exactly, but don’t you get tired of that?”

“So, you pick a woman up at a car dealership, then take her to her home for a quickie and leave?”

I thought it over. “Yeah, that’s about it.”

“And you find that exciting?”

“I wouldn’t say exciting. I would say...I get what I want out of the deal and so does she.”

“So, you’re never bringing a woman here.”

“Not unless I end up married, and I can tell you right now, that’s not happening anytime soon,” I laughed, walking away from him.

I wasn’t really ready to hit the hay yet, but there was nothing left to do. And I wasn’t in the mood to go out hunting for women, so I decided to just hang out and watch some TV until I was bored enough to go to sleep.

I whistled as I headed to my room, fiddling with the key in my pocket. We didn’t have locks on the doors when we moved in, but after Brock ended up in my bed three times with a woman, enough was enough. I slid the key into the lock and swung the door open. I immediately knew something was off. I pulled my gun, but didn’t get any further than that. Something hard struck my head, and as I struggled to stay upright. A bag was thrust over my head and a needle was jabbed into my neck.

Lights out.

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MY STOMACH ROILED AS WE SWAYED FROM SIDE TO SIDE. I wasn't sure if I was on a boat or if it was the drugs in my system making me feel like the world was about to flip over. Whatever was on my head smelled of sweat and old socks, a combination I could do without. They could at least wash it between kidnappings. Was it too much to ask for someone's dirty feet to not be shoved up my nostrils?

"He's awake," someone said, walking over to me. Based on his gait, I would say he was six foot tall. Based on the force he used to rip the cloth off my head, I would say he was more muscle than twig. So, not someone I could easily overpower with my head still swimming.

And unfortunately, when I opened my eyes, I was disappointed by who stood in front of me. "Seriously? You couldn't have just picked up the phone?"

"What fun would that be?" Rafe asked, strolling over to a small bar with alcohol bottles half full.

"Have you ever heard of the wash cycle? That rag was disgusting. I've sweat in the jungle and smelled better than that."

He shrugged. "I couldn't make the experience too friendly for you. I wanted to ensure you could go home with a good cover story." He paused as he was about to pour a drink, then looked over at me. "That is, if you choose not to take the assignment I have for you."

"Like I would take an assignment from you. Do you realize what you put me through after what happened with Eva? I had to keep your dirty little secret."

He took a long swallow of his whiskey. "You didn't have to."

"I did it for Eva. She was fucking humiliated after what you did to her."

He rolled his eyes as he walked over to a bench and sat down. "Are we really going to do this? You know why I did that. I didn't have a choice."

“You could have told us all what happened. You could have—”

“Fucking hell,” he interrupted. “How long are you guys going to drag this up? It’s in the past. I did what I had to do.”

“You didn’t trust us,” I snapped.

“Of course, I didn’t. My brother was in the enemy’s hands. Do you really think I’d trust anyone else with his life?”

“I didn’t know you cared,” I snapped.

“About him? Always.”

“Then explain how you could shoot him.”

He shrugged. “Purely an accident. Besides, Cash and I have always had a bit of a rivalry.”

I snorted, finding his version of a rivalry hilarious. “I had no idea you took it to such great lengths.”

“You know, I’m really not here to talk about my relationship with my brother.”

“And I’m not here to help you. I would never do that to him.”

“He would understand.”

“Cash hates you.”

“Yes, he does,” he nodded. “But think of how much fun it could be working on my side for a change.”

I stared at him, trying to muster up some enthusiasm to throw his way. Yep, nothing. “Ooh, I’m so excited to work with you,” I said in a monotone voice.

“You will be when you see the job.”

“Somehow, I doubt that. People around you tend to die.”

“Yes, but you can’t die,” he grinned. “Which is precisely why I chose you.”

That was intriguing. A job so dangerous that there was likely no outcome in which the agent would survive. Except

for me because I was just that damn good. Or lucky. Or...well, I wasn't sure what it was about me.

"I'm listening."

He grinned and walked over, cutting the tape from my wrists. "Come with me."

He turned and walked out of the room, leaving me to follow. "Come with me," I said mockingly.

I couldn't help it. Rafe was one of those guys you just wanted to tease. He was so intense, so...well, there wasn't a word to describe him any better. Still, I was slightly intrigued, so I followed him, glancing at the clock on the way. Only three hours had passed.

When I stepped out of the room, a warm breeze smacked me in the face. I really was on a boat. I stared at the waves crashing around us and calculated the time it would take to get here. There was no way this was possible.

I turned to Rafe, who just grinned at me. "Don't try to figure it out."

"So, what is this job that you need me so desperately for?"

"That," he said, pointing to an island in the distance.

"It's pitch black out. Why don't you just tell me what this place is?"

"Not until you take the job. And even then, not until you're on the job. However, I will tell you this. That island belongs to a man who's holding several women against their will. Along with a handful of children."

Typical cause for Rafe. I wasn't seeing the excitement part yet.

"Okay, and I'm guessing you're not going to tell me how I'm going to extract these women and children."

"Actually," he grinned, "that part I will tell you."

I waved him forward. "Impress me."

“A boat is out. There’s only one place to dock, and that is on the south side of the island. It’s patrolled all hours of the day, and in order to dock, you have to have clearance, along with the proper paperwork, which can’t be faked. There’s an official seal on your entrance document that only comes from inside the main office, and only one person has access to it.”

“And that’s the boss,” I surmised.

“Precisely. And he never leaves the island, so there’s no way to get to him. Everyone working for him is under strict orders. If they disobey in any way, he goes after your family and forces you to watch as he slowly mutilates them for hours. It’s something he finds enjoyable.”

“Okay, so getting a boat is out. What about swimming ashore?”

“You could, but he has sharks that surround the island.”

“And you can’t lure them away?”

He grinned. “This guy has them enclosed around his island for added security.”

Death by shark didn’t sound good to me, and even though I couldn’t die, I wasn’t too fond of losing an arm or a leg.

“So, you have to drop in.”

“Precisely. But anything that enters the atmosphere on his island immediately triggers an alarm.”

That didn’t make any sense. “So, you’re telling me I have to parachute in, but I will trigger an alarm, thus making the whole plan ineffective.”

“I have a solution...but you can’t have a parachute.”

“I...can’t have a parachute,” I repeated. “If I have broken legs, how exactly am I supposed to walk out of there?”

“I can mask your appearance at night, but only on certain nights when the stars are hidden by cloud cover. But a parachute would be too noticeable. Think of yourself as dropping into the water from a helo.”

“Except, I won’t be dropping into the water.”

“Nope.”

“You know, I’m not seeing a great way out for me.”

“There’s really not. It’s actually probably a terrible choice to infiltrate this place.”

“Then why would you have me do it?”

“Because you love the impossible.”

I thought it over. The idea was intriguing, and I couldn’t deny I liked his willingness to try anything, but I still didn’t understand the extraction method.

“So, let’s say we get close enough to the island, completely undetected, and then I drop in, landing on my feet and not breaking any bones, how exactly am I supposed to find the women—”

“Oh, and there are also a good fifty guards roaming the property at all times.”

I nodded. “Okay, and get past the guards, rescue the women and children, and then get off the island?”

“You don’t.”

I did a double take, sure I had heard him wrong. “I don’t.”

“Not in the way you think. I’ll stage an attack on the island. Twenty or so guards will die, and they’ll need to be transported off the island. There’s no great place to bury the dead,” he said, giving me a pointed look. “The attack won’t happen right away, though. If we do it too soon, he’ll suspect something else is going on. There’s too much chance you could get caught.”

“You still haven’t gotten to the point of how I get off the island.” Though, I had a pretty good idea of how this was going down.

“Easy,” he grinned. “You’ll ride out under the corpses of the dead in the coffins.”

The idea made me want to puke. I was all for trying new things, but this was insane. “And why not just ask Cash for help?”



“Because no one can know of your involvement. You need to be dead when this happens. It’s the only way to ensure that this guy doesn’t trace any of this back to Cash.”

“He wouldn’t flip on you.”

“I’m not concerned about that. If this in any way leads back to Cash, it leads back to me. So, do we have a deal?”

“Like, you want an answer now?” I asked.

“It would be nice.”

It was a suicide mission. All of this for a few women and children? It didn’t make sense. There had to be more to why Rafe was doing this, but I doubted he would tell me. Still, if I was going to do this, I had to know why.

“What’s your endgame?”

“To save the women and children.”

I shook my head. “Not good enough. There’s no way you would risk so much just to save a bunch of civilians.”

“You must think I’m a terrible person,” he said, swallowing the last of his drink.

“Just motivated by things that move your agenda forward.”

“This moves my agenda so far past the goal post that I might actually consider taking a vacation.”

I snorted. Like that would ever happen. “Who is she?”

“Who do you mean?”

“The woman? It’s the only thing that makes sense. You need her, which means she must be something to you.”

His body tensed for just a second. “When you take this mission, you’ll understand why I need her. She has inside knowledge of his entire operation. With her, we can finally work to seriously take down the whole fucking system. Without her, all of this has been for nothing,” he finally admitted.

I thought about it for a moment. Honestly, the job didn’t mean anything to me. But if he was coming to me, not wanting

anyone else at OPS to know about this, it had to be important.

“Alright, sign me up.”

“No one at OPS can ever know about this,” he reiterated.

I grinned at him. “Just tell me when I get to jump out of the plane.”



# FOX

“THAT’S BALLSY, man. Did you do it? Did you really jump out of the plane with no parachute?”

I still couldn’t believe that he was here in front of me. I knew he was alive all this time, but no one believed me. They all wanted me to accept that he was really gone. But FNG couldn’t die. He proved it time and time again.

FNG frowned. “You didn’t let me finish telling the story.”

“I’m sorry. It’s a killer story,” I grinned, holding up my knife. I was just about to cut some shawarma off the rack. A well-timed return from the dead deserved an equally impressive meal, and I had just the meal for him. The door opened and Honey walked in, pausing when she saw me holding the knife. But that wasn’t what she was interested in. Her eyes trailed over my purple apron with ruffles around the edges. It wasn’t my usual choice of apron, but I had accidentally burned all the others in an unfortunate cooking accident that involved ham, whiskey, and a little too much seasoning.

She looked like a deer in the headlights, so I held out my hand, beckoning her over to me.

“Did you get a shower?” FNG asked, his eyes twinkling as he stared at his lady love.

I sighed in contentment. This was what it was all about. A good guy finding the love of his life. And FNG was the best of the best. I had always been impressed with his mad umbrella

skills. Not many could pull off a job quite like he could. Well, aside from me and the great Kamau.

“Yeah, I need a nap, though.” She walked over, her eyes sleepy as she smiled at him.

“Ah, the nap,” I said, shooting him an exaggerated wink. “We all need a good nap.”

“She means an actual nap,” FNG said.

“Oh.” Come to think of it, she did look a little dead on her feet, but she wasn’t going to sleep before trying the amazing dish I had prepared. I rushed around the counter and guided her over to the chair beside FNG, giving her a sweeping bow. “Before a nap, you must eat. It’s a requirement.”

“I could eat,” she grinned. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was until you said food.”

I watched my old pal as he pulled her chair closer, wrapping his arm around her neck and pulling her in for a kiss. It was hard to believe that he found her just a few days ago and was already madly in love. I should come up with a song for them.

“Man, this is just like in the movies. I mean, not one of my movies, but any other normal movie.” I couldn’t wipe the grin off my face. “I swear, you two are gonna make beautiful babies.”

“Babies,” FNG said, startled by the sudden change in topic. “We’re not there yet.”

I nodded, completely understanding. “You need time for just the two of you. I get it. Still in the newlywed phase.”

“It wasn’t exactly a typical marriage.”

I turned back to the shawarma and cut a thin slice, popping it in my mouth. I moaned, tossing my head back as I delighted in the deliciousness of the meal I just created. “Well, they can’t all be a fairytale like mine and Anna’s.”

“I would hardly call yours a fairytale,” FNG muttered.

I started cutting more meat off the rotating spit. By the time I was done with this, no one would be saying anything about being hungry.

“So, how exactly was it you two met?” I turned around, pointing my knife at him. “It was the milk cartons, wasn’t it?”

He shook his head. “No, but that did get me in a world of trouble. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“How could they possibly get you into trouble? It was ingenious.”

I took the plate of fresh meat over to the counter and set it down, then started gathering the ingredients for the wraps.

“It worked a little too well. I was trying to stay undercover.”

My head jerked up. Now I felt terrible. “Dude, sorry, but that wasn’t supposed to happen. Where did you get caught?”

“Marrakech,” he answered as he started to put together his wrap.

“Marrakech? My milk cartons made it all the way to Marrakech? Dude...”

I was impressed, but FNG looked less than. I didn’t understand it. Did he not understand what a marketing feat this was? I had essentially started a one-man marketing campaign and reached millions around the world. If the FBI ever needed to find someone, I was their man.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t say it was a good thing. It came into play at a rather inconvenient moment.”

I rolled up a wrap for him, making sure to add in all the fixings. This was a homecoming meal if I ever saw one. I slid the plate over to him, then wiped my hands on a rag and laid it over my shoulder. “So, what’s in Marrakech?”

He shrugged, rolling up his wrap with a grin on his face. “Man, I really missed these.”

“As any normal person would. There’s nothing quite like shawarma to welcome a fellow comrade in arms home.” Then

I looked at his wife. “Or his lovely lady.”

She blushed bright red, then took a bite of my food. I leaned on the counter, my chin in my hand, as I watched her chew. Devouring a shawarma wrap was a magnificent sight.

She covered her mouth as she spoke. “It’s delicious.”

“Thanks,” I beamed. “I killed a guy the other day and decided this was a good way to celebrate,” I said, turning around to lower the heat.

I heard choking and turned around, only to see Honey spitting out her food. “I’m eating a dead man?” she shrieked.

“Of course not,” I laughed. “I’m not a cannibal.”

“But you said you killed a guy and decided to eat him.”

I looked at FNG who nodded. He also had set down his food. “No, I killed a guy, and as I was ripping my knife from his flesh, I thought *What better way to celebrate than to make some shawarma?* This beast you’re eating is one hundred percent cow. I thought about making it with chicken for a change, but it really is so much more delicious when it’s a good slab of beef.” I winked at her. “I even slaughtered the cow myself. I wanted to make sure it was done just right.”

Honey gagged, then got up and raced from the room.

“Was it something I said?” I asked, looking at FNG questioningly.

“I think it was everything you said.”

“But you like it, right?”

He shoved his plate away and leaned back in his seat. “I think I need a few minutes.”

I picked at the food on his plate, thinking back to what he said. “So, my milk cartons made it all the way to Marrakech. That’s pretty fucking awesome.”

“It would have been if I wasn’t chasing down a lead.”

“What kind of lead?”

“There was a guy who knew a guy. I was following him around the city.”

“Did you get him?”

FNG glared at me. “No, because your stupid milk carton gave me away!”

I stood up, offended by his callousness toward my amazing work. “I’ll have you know that I was the only one that never gave up on you. I knew you couldn’t die.”

“Well, I almost did that night.”

“Bullet?”

He grimaced, shaking his head. “It was so much worse.”





# FNG

*MARRAKECH.*

*A few months after FNG-Day...*

“TARGET SPOTTED,” I SAID TO NO ONE IN PARTICULAR.

I was on my own in Marrakech, but it made me feel better to think I was talking to teammates scattered around the city, buying wares from the locals and trying to blend in.

The man I was tracking was notoriously sly, constantly slipping a tail. But that wouldn't happen to me. I was too damn good at my job. I sat at my table outside the small restaurant, my sunglasses perched on my nose to conceal where I was looking.

“What would you like?” the waiter asked me.

“Water.”

“Bottled, sparkling, flavored—”

“Just give me tap,” I said, uninterested in drinking all that fancy water. I was just here to watch and learn. I didn't need the distraction of the waiter trying to upcharge me over a basic drink.

“As you wish.”

He bowed and walked away, leaving me to get back to work. The man moved from stall to stall, checking out the wares as if he was a potential buyer. But I knew better. He was meeting someone, and today, I would find out who that was.

My knee bounced slightly as the anticipation built. All I had to do was finish this job and I was home free.

“Sir,” the waiter said, setting my glass on the table.

I removed my sheshia—a reed hat handwoven by the people of Marrakech—and set it on the table. Though it really wasn't my style with its bright colors adorning the brim, I had to admit, it did the job, keeping the sun out of my eyes. I was pretty sure this was more for people working in fields, but I wanted to fit in like the locals. I glanced down at my jeans and t-shirt and knew I failed miserably. But the hat was awesome.

I casually picked up my glass and took a long gulp. Maybe I should have gone for the bottled water. At least then I could take it with me. But I refused to pay for the plastic it was contained in.

The man glanced around, then slipped past a stall and disappeared around the corner. Sitting upright, I watched, waiting for him to return, but he didn't.

“Shit,” I swore, grabbing my wallet and pulling out money. I had no idea how much I threw on the table, but I didn't have time to count out the appropriate amount. I grabbed my glass and drank the rest of the water, then rushed off.

Snapping my finger, I realized I left my awesome hat behind and rushed back to the table for it, plucking it up and slipping it back on my head. I tried not to run as I made my way through the market. I kept glancing overhead at the wooden beams that ran from one building to another, sure an assassin was about to jump down and take me out. Or maybe he was waiting at the end of the ally with a gigantic sword, just like in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*.

I turned the corner and there he was, having a heated argument with another man by a truck. I shoved through the crowd, desperate to get to him and find out who the elusive man was.

“Hey!” someone shouted as I passed.

But I kept going. I had no time to look at the merchandise.

“Hey! It's him!”

I made the mistake of turning around, and that's when I saw it. The man in the stall was holding up a milk carton and my face was plastered all over it, along with a reward for more money than most of these people had ever seen. I stumbled back a step, needing to get out of there before I was mobbed, but it was already too late.

Men encircled me, grabbing my clothes and pulling me in all directions. One of them took my awesome hat, which really pissed me off. I didn't want to have to resort to violence. After all, these weren't assassins I was dealing with. They were just ordinary people who wanted to make a quick buck.

I glanced around, hoping to find something to help me out, and that's when I spotted it. My salvation—the one thing I knew would help more than anything. I shoved one man away and took off for the corner stall that was brimming with umbrellas. Snatching one, I opened it and used it to ward off the hundreds of men surrounding me.

“Back off!” I shouted. “I'm not afraid to use this!”

I swung it from side to side. The men stared at me like I was holding a knife or a gun, terrified that I might actually use it on them.

“I so have to tell Johnny about this when I get home,” I muttered under my breath.

I leapt forward, stabbing the umbrella in their direction, not enough to actually hit them, but just to scare them. They gasped and stepped back, then made a large circle around me.

“Uh-huh,” I nodded. “That's right. This is a dangerous weapon and I'm not afraid to use it!”

They started whispering to themselves but didn't come any closer. This was my chance. I had to get out of here now before they changed their minds. I turned around and came face to face with the very man I was hunting.

And he was holding a gigantic knife.

“You are looking for me.”

“No, I’m not,” I lied. “Just going for a stroll through downtown Marrakech.”

“You came for me.”

I flicked where my hat should have been and grinned. “Actually, I came for the hat. We don’t have anything like this by us. I was thinking of opening a shop back at home.”

“You came to kill me.”

“Kill?” I laughed. “Why would I kill you? Look, I came, I drank some fine water—out of a glass,” I snorted. “Who would pay for the upcharge for a bottle, am I right?”

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “Anyone who doesn’t want to get diarrhea.”

“Diarrhea? How can you get diarrhea from water?” This was not a smart man if he thought I was going to fall for that line. He was trying to trick me.

He smiled slightly, almost laughing at me. And that’s when I remembered all those stories about poor drinking water in Africa. He might have a point. And the longer I stood there, the more I felt my tummy rumble. It had to be psychological. I couldn’t worry about that right now. I had to get out before my cover was blown.

“You come with me.”

He went to grab my arm, but I took a step back, pointing my umbrella at him. “I don’t think so.”

“It wasn’t a request.”

He looked behind me, whistling and jerking his head at what I could only assume were other men. Not that I could look right now.

“Fellas,” I grinned. “I think we can work something out.”

“The time to work something out has passed.”

He lunged at me with his knife and I held up the umbrella between both hands, blocking his strike. He glared at me with evil eyes, then spun away, swinging his knife at me. I blocked the hit, turning just once to spot the other assailants. Three

more came at me, all armed to the teeth. I spun over to the umbrella stand and grabbed a second, twirling it in the air and punching it at the first man to attack.

I stood between them, armed with umbrellas in both hands as I fought them in a fake sword fight. One of the men to my left ran at me, flipping through the air over my head and landing on my other side. There just weren't enough umbrellas in the world to take out these men like this. But luck, it would seem, was on my side. The man ran at me, his arm held high as he was about to strike.

In a last ditch effort, I rammed the umbrella at him, poking him in the eye. He screamed, falling to his knees as blood poured from the socket. And then I saw the eyeball slip free, dangling only by the nerves still attached. One of the men turned and puked, giving me ample time to take him out. I slammed the umbrella right into his buttocks, then grimaced at the grisly scream that left his lips. I immediately dropped the umbrella, not wanting what was on the other end anywhere near me.

I was grabbed from behind, a knife pressed to my throat. The man I was after approached me from the front, smiling as he twirled his devious mustache.

“So, you think you can fool me.” He held up the milk carton. “Mr. Helmer. You are not as sly as you think.”

“I just came for the culture, mister.”

“And I just came for the entertainment,” he grinned.

Movement above us drew my attention just long enough to give me hope. A monkey jumped from the rafters, landing on the man's head. He screamed as the monkey's claw dug into his face. Then he jumped off the man's head, leaving a bloody trail of claw marks behind. I turned my umbrella and slammed it back into the man's gut. He released me and doubled over, giving me the prime opportunity to take him out. I flipped over his back and stretched the umbrella across his throat, holding tight as I choked him out.

His legs kicked out, desperate to hit me, and his hands clawed at the umbrella. There was no hope for him. He was a goner. Meanwhile, the man I was tailing took off, leaving me with only two options. I could chase him or stay and ensure there was only one man after me. The man ran through the market, knocking over stalls as he held his hand to his face to staunch the blood flow.

Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, the man I was holding passed out. Either that or died. I didn't care at the moment. I released him from my grip and ran after my target. With only an umbrella to defend myself, I knew today was the wrong day to leave my gun at home.





# FOX

“YOU’RE INDIANA JONES!” I exclaimed, totally blown away by his story. “The monkey, Marrakech...it’s unrealistic.”

He frowned at me. “Which part?”

I laughed at how amazing it was. It was like he was this adventurer, out there living the life that most of us only dreamed of one day having. I leaned on the counter, my chin in my hands as I stared at him. “So, what happened? Did you get him? What happened to the monkey? And did you really only have an umbrella?”

FNG was about to answer when Thumper snickered from the other end of the table. It was clear by the look on FNG’s face that he hadn’t even heard him come in.

“Do you have something to say?” FNG asked, turning in his chair.

“You mean, other than the fact that the whole fucking thing is bullshit?”

FNG stood, not liking to be challenged, especially when he fought tooth and nail to get back here. Anyone with a sense of reason could see it. “Bullshit?”

“Oh, come on. A monkey saved your life? And what were you even doing in Marrakech?”

“That’s classified,” FNG retorted.

Thumper stared at FNG like he was an idiot. Clearly, he had no sense of adventure. “And I might believe you, except for the fact that you just told us the whole fucking story.”

Ooh, he had a point there, but there could be any number of reasons that FNG was allowed to tell bits and pieces of the story.

“But I didn’t tell you who I was after.”

Thumper stood and walked over to FNG. I had a feeling there was about to be a showdown, so I slid the shawarma out of the way. There was no sense in wasting good food.

“And you really expect us to believe that you went after this man and didn’t even have a weapon on you?”

“It was supposed to be reconnaissance.”

“Yes, reconnaissance in a foreign country where you have nothing to protect yourself,” Thumper laughed.

“Hey, you weren’t there,” I came to FNG’s defense. “You don’t know what it was like.”

“I know he didn’t fight off four men with only an umbrella.”

“There were two umbrellas,” I corrected. “And why couldn’t he? FNG has proven to be more than a little wily.”

I wasn’t about to let my friend get dragged under the bus when he was so obviously the hero in this story. A story that I hadn’t yet heard the end of. I was dying to know how it all played out.

Did he ever find out what the man’s plans were in Marrakech?

Did the man with one eye die?

What about the guy he poked in the ass with an umbrella? That had to hurt like a bitch.

And where did the monkey run off to?

“You can stay and listen all you want,” Thumper said to me. “I’m heading to bed.”

“But you didn’t hear the ending!” I shouted, chasing after Thumper.

“I don’t need to. It’s all a lie.”

“Yeah?” I challenged him. “If it’s all a lie, then how do you explain him escaping death not once, not twice, but three times? Rafe said himself that FNG was dead.”

“Well, I guess he lied.”

“Did he? Or is FNG really that lucky?”

Thumper paused. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t refute the evidence right in front of him. We’d never met anyone like FNG, someone that could live through most anything and come out swinging on the other side.

“Fine, I’ll admit that something else is going on here, but right now, all I want is to go to bed.”

“Me too,” FNG said, standing up from his stool.

I rushed back over to him, grabbing him by the arms. “But you can’t go to bed yet. I haven’t heard the ending!”

He slapped me on the shoulder, grinning the whole time. “I’ll tell you in the morning. I’m bushed. And thanks for dinner. It was amazing.”

I nodded. “Well, don’t tell Honey, but I didn’t exactly tell the truth when I said it was beef.” I grinned and shot him a wink. I swear, his face paled to a ghostly shade. If he was going to leave me hanging, I was going to ensure he didn’t get any sleep tonight.

“I...I’m going to bed.”

He turned and walked out of the room. I leaned back against the counter, grinning the whole time. “Damn, it’s good to have him back.”



## FNG

I WALKED INTO MY ROOM, shutting the door quietly behind me in case Honey was already sleeping. Her hair was strewn across the pillows like something out of a fantasy. I couldn't believe I was married. I looked down at the ring on my finger and smiled. It wasn't at all what I was expecting, but sometimes that's how life worked.

I looked around my old room. Not a single thing had changed. No one had cleared it out. Dust covered every surface, almost as if they were trying to preserve me in their memory. In actuality, they probably hadn't sent anyone up to take care of it yet, but a man could dream.

I walked over to the bed, easing down on the edge. My side pulled painfully and all I wanted was a good night's sleep. But I needed just a few minutes to watch the woman that saved my life. I wouldn't be here today without her.

I wondered if she would want me in her bed or if she would ask me to sleep on the floor. Either option was fine, though I wouldn't mind spending the night with her. I took a deep breath, finally feeling my bones settle after so much time on the run. But with that deep breath came an odor so horrible, I was surprised no one had said anything to me earlier.

I shoved off the bed, but didn't get far. Honey had her fingers intertwined with mine, and she was staring at me with those bedroom eyes that I noticed the night we met at the bar. Fuck, she was beautiful.

“Where are you going?”

“To shower. I smell like a four day old dirty sock.”

Her nose wrinkled up in this cute way that made me want to press it. “I can’t say I’ve ever smelled a four day old dirty sock.”

“And you never want to find out. Trust me, it’s not a good thing.”

She tugged slightly on my hand. “So...do you want some company in the shower?”

“Oh,” I said in surprise. “I mean, if you want. I thought with everything...it was...but if you want. Not that I’m going to pressure you. Or that I don’t want to. We hardly know each other.”

She slid out from under the covers and walked up to me, pulling her shirt off along the way. The fabric fell from her fingertips, landing softly on the ground. I swallowed hard, staring at the most beautiful sight. Her tits were round and plump, just as I had imagined. And those hips...talk about an hourglass figure. I was already hard, on the verge of coming in my pants, and that was not the way to start this marriage.

“So...” she said shyly.

Shy my ass. She wasn’t shy. She was playing coy. Damn, I loved this woman. That is, if you could fall in love with a woman in forty-eight hours.

“So, we should—” I jerked my thumb over my shoulder, taking a step back without watching where I was going. I hit the edge of the metal bed frame with my ankle, then stumbled onto a pair of shoes, nearly falling over.

I stood up straight and tried to pull myself together. I wasn’t like this. I wasn’t clumsy and fumbling. I was FNG, the lady killer who couldn’t be killed. “Let’s do this.”

Great opening line. Fuck, I was such an idiot.

She followed me into the bathroom, her hands resting on my hips as I walked. I turned on the water, ready to get in when she giggled.

“Are you going to get undressed?”

“Oh, right,” I laughed awkwardly. But as I tried to pull my shirt overhead, I winced at the stretching where my wound was. That wasn’t going to work. She ran her hands up my chest and leaned in close.

“Let me,” she whispered.

“Sure,” I said, because...well, what the fuck was I supposed to say? A woman was standing in front of me, wanting to undress me. There was no way in hell I was going to say no to that. And she was my wife. It had to be a cardinal sin to walk away from her.

She reached behind me, pulling open the drawer I was resting against. I shifted to allow her access. My eyebrows shot up when I saw a small pair of scissors in her hands, ones that you would find in a nail kit. She cut a small slit in the bottom of my shirt. The metal pressed against my skin as she slowly slid it up the fabric, cutting it all the way to the top.

Again, I swallowed hard. Did she have any idea how sexy she was?

Her hands slid over my pecs, running over my shoulders as she slid the fabric down my arms. Her fingers lingered on mine, tangling slightly, enough to make me feel shocks all the way in my cock.

She didn’t stop there, though. Her fingers trailed along my waistband, hovering just over the button at the top of my jeans. I stared at her, daring her to do it. Not that it took much encouragement. The woman didn’t seem fazed by anything. In just seconds, my jeans were being lowered down my body and I was standing in nothing but my birthday suit.

She turned to the shower, shooting me a sly grin over her shoulder as she bit her lip. “Are you coming?”

Hell yes, I was coming. In more ways than one. I started toward her, nearly tripping over my pants on the way. I hopped on one foot as I yanked the jeans from my leg, then repeated the process with the other. I stepped inside the shower and yanked the curtain closed. She pounced in just that one second, wrapping her arms around my neck as her lips latched

onto mine. It wasn't our first kiss, not by a long shot, but it was the first real kiss between us. The first one where I felt like she was truly mine.

I wrapped my hands around her back, pulling her in closer to me. She shoved me back against the wall, her hands sliding down my arms and over my muscles. And then she gripped my cock.

I laughed slightly, pushing her back just a touch. "Okay, if you start doing that, I'm not going to last more than two seconds, and I definitely want this to last."

"Who said anything about making it last?"

"Um..." I was confused.

"I'm going to make you come, and then I'm going to take you to bed and do it all over again."

"Right, but it's not that simple with guys," I said as she stroked my cock. "Things are...longer...hummm...that's really...we should..." I stopped talking. More like babbling. My body convulsed and I shot my load into her hand. The relief was so startling that I practically fell on her. She held me up, chuckling into my neck. This woman was insane.

"So, do you want to take this to the bedroom?" she asked.

"Shower first," I mumbled, still coherent enough to know that my first time with her would not be when I smelled like this.

She yanked open the shower curtain and stepped out, winking at me. Man, this woman loved to wink, and it did nothing to tame the little guy down south. I laughed slightly, waving to her before shutting the curtain. I quickly got my shampoo, squirting it in my hand and rubbing it all over my head and face.

This was going to be so amazing. The woman of my dreams in my bed, ready for little FNG to—

My eyes flew open and I cried out as the shampoo stung my eyes.



“Everything alright in there?” Honey called out from the other room.

“Uh...” I ran my face under the water, finally feeling the burn subside. “Uh, yeah, everything’s good!”

Everything was *not* good. I was about to have sex with my wife, and while that was great and everything, I didn’t have a condom. Not a single one. There was a time I had them in my room, but that was over a year ago. They were probably all expired. There was no way I was having sex with a woman I barely knew without wrapping it up. That was just insane.

I didn’t have time to run to the store, but maybe I could make it to one of the other guy’s rooms. I could claim I was getting strawberries and champagne, or...milk. Hell, I wasn’t sure if we even had anything in the house to drink. This was all going so terribly wrong. I thought I would have time to make everything go smoothly.

I finished scrubbing every inch of my body, then shut off the water and wrapped a towel around my waist. I was going to have to be fast. I couldn’t leave her waiting in bed forever.

I stepped out into the room, trying to look casual. She was completely naked on the bed, just waiting for me to make love to her. Fuck, this was hard to walk away from.

“I’m just gonna head downstairs.”

She got up and sat on her knees, her perky breasts drawing me in and begging me to do unspeakable things to them. “Why? We have everything we need here.”

Everything except the one thing that would prevent us from being parents in nine months.

“I just want this to be special,” I said, hoping that would make her gush.

She slid her hands up my chest, but then immediately went for my dick. “It’s special just having you here.”

I cried out in a sort of scared, but so happy scream, if that made sense. Backing away, I shook my finger at her. “Mrs. Helmer, you’re not getting off that easy. I mean, you will get

off easy when I have my way with you, but not until I say the time is right,” I rambled. “Just give me two minutes.”

“Two minutes and not a second more,” she pouted.

I spun for the door and yanked it open, shutting it tight behind me. Leaning against it, I tried my best to gather my wits before I went pounding on every door known to man. I ran down the hall to the first door and started knocking. Last I knew, Brock was in this room. When he didn’t answer, I knocked again.

“Brock!” I hissed.

He finally opened the door, staring at me in annoyance. His eyes trailed over my body and the towel draped around my waist. “Did you need something?”

“Condoms,” I said quickly, looking back at the door.

“I’m kind of busy right now.”

He kept the door nearly closed so I couldn’t see what was going on, but that didn’t matter. I didn’t care if he was balls-deep in another woman. This was an emergency.

“Listen, it’s been a while and...well, I sort of forgot...you know,” I said, hoping he would catch my drift.

He sighed heavily, rolling his eyes. “If you’ve forgotten, you probably shouldn’t try to remember right before you fuck your wife.”

“But I need this!”

“How do you even forget?” he hissed. “It’s like riding a bike.”

“I know that, but we were on the run and then we showed up here. It’s not like I had time to run out and buy some.”

His brows furrowed. “Buy some what? Lessons?”

“Lessons? What are you talking about?”

“You said you forgot!” he snapped.

“Yes, condoms,” I said, still confused by the situation. “What did you think—oh! Shit, no. I just didn’t have time to

get condoms, and frankly, I wasn't even sure I'd need them. I've known the woman forty-eight hours."

He crossed his arms over his chest as he leaned against the door frame. "It really takes you forty-eight hours to close the deal?"

I wanted to wipe the smirk off his face. "This isn't funny."

"Oh, it's fucking hilarious."

"Can I have the condoms or not?"

"Why bother?" he asked. "Are you worried you're gonna knock her up? She *is* your wife."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. This was ridiculous. "Can I have them or not?"

"Fine," he said, shoving the door closed. But he wasn't getting off that easy. I blocked the door from completely closing and strolled right in. A woman on the bed squealed, pulling the sheets up to cover her breasts.

"Sorry, baby. I'll be just a minute."

"Yeah, I don't think so," she muttered, standing from the bed as she wrapped the sheet around her body.

Brock looked back at me, glaring at me for intruding on his lady friend. That wasn't my problem. I had urgent business to take care of. But I did feel a little bad about interrupting them.

Brock blocked her path, laughing nervously. "You don't have to leave. I just have to get the man condoms."

"Thanks, man," I said, feeling just a tad embarrassed.

"Brock, this is twice now."

"Twice?" I asked, looking at my teammate. "Twice what?"

"Nothing," he snapped, but the brunette glared at me.

"Twice that we've been interrupted."

I sucked in a breath. That was bad. Almost as bad as me not having condoms. "You don't have to leave. He's a good guy, a fantastic lover," I said, trying to talk him up.

The woman looked at Brock in surprise. “Um—”

“He didn’t mean it like that,” he blurted out, then shot me a nasty look.

“Right, not like we’ve been together or anything. I’m totally, one hundred percent heterosexual, and I’m sure Brock is too.”

Brock stared up at the ceiling, shaking his head. Maybe that was the wrong way to put it.

The woman smirked at Brock and slipped past him. “It was fun.”

“Yeah,” he nodded.

When the door shut, I jerked my thumb where she just was. “She took your sheet.”

“Really?” he said, snapping his gaze to mine.

“I’m just saying, it’s kind of rude. You don’t take other people’s sheets.”

“You ran her off in the middle of sex. What was she supposed to do?”

I winced. “If you were in the middle of sex, why did you answer the door?”

“I wasn’t technically in the middle.”

“Then you shouldn’t have said that. In the middle is like... balls deep in the woman. In which case, you should never answer the door for any reason. Unless there’s a fire. That might be a good time to answer the door,” I nodded. “On the other hand, you might not know there’s a fire unless you answered the door.”

“The fire department would shout,” he argued as he walked around and started picking up the clothes.

“That’s true. In which case, you really shouldn’t have answered the door.”

“You were being relentless. You wouldn’t stop fucking knocking!”

“Right, well, I was about to have sex...” I thought about how much time had passed and wondered if sex was even still on the table at this point. “So...can I have the condoms?”

“No,” he snapped, stalking toward me angrily. “That is the second time I’ve been interrupted when I was about to have sex with Miranda.”

“Who’s Miranda?” I asked in confusion.

“The woman that was just in here!” he shouted. “And thanks to you, it probably won’t ever happen again! I was this close,” he said, pinching his finger and thumb together. “God, it would have been so good.”

“Then you probably shouldn’t have stopped.”

The look he shot me wasn’t one of warning. More like he was about to pounce at any second. I scrambled for the door and slammed it behind me, sinking back against it in relief. But it was short-lived. The door flew open and I fell backward, landing on my back. Brock smirked down at me, then bent over and hauled me into the room. I yelped, hoping someone would hear me. As soon as my feet were dragged across the threshold, I knew it was over.



# HONEY

AFTER A DISAPPOINTING END to my night, I got up early and wandered around the house looking for coffee. I must have stayed up for three hours waiting for my beloved spouse to return, and finally, I fell asleep on top of the covers. When I woke up in the middle of the night, freezing and alone, I took it as a sign that things were not going to go as planned.

But what did I really expect? Our marriage wasn't exactly planned. In fact, we didn't even know until we were standing at the altar that we were going to be hitched. But that's what happens when you have a gun pointed at your head.

I walked into the kitchen and started rifling through the cabinets for the coffee. It was still pretty early around here. I figured most people wouldn't be up for at least another hour. So, I was surprised when a woman entered the kitchen, looking a little more zombie than human.

"Coffee," she muttered.

"I was just looking for it."

She pointed to the cabinet in the opposite corner and slumped down in a chair, resting her chin in her hand.

"Rough night?"

"You could say that," she grumbled. "Little fucker wouldn't let me sleep."

"Oh, you have a kid?"

She nodded, but didn't actually say anything.

“Is he teething or something?”

She frowned. “No, he slept through the night. It was my husband that was making life difficult.”

Well, that made so much more sense. “What happened?”

She snorted, her eyes drifting shut the longer she sat there. “What didn’t happen?”

That was vague, but I wasn’t about to press the issue since I didn’t know this woman. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m—”

“Honey,” she finished for me.

Yeah, something like that. It seemed everyone knew who I was, but I didn’t know any of them.

“So, you met FNG at a bar?” she asked, squinting at me.

“Yep. It was...interesting.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, let’s just say he’s not exactly the type of man I fall for,” I said, grabbing the coffee. I desperately needed it to survive this day.

“And what is your type?”

“Not tall, dark, and dangerous.”

She huffed out a laugh. “Dark? I mean, he’s definitely tall and dangerous, but I wouldn’t call him dark.”

“Then you haven’t seen him in action.”

That perked her up a little. “Actually, when I first came here, FNG was on the team that saved my life. He’s quite eclectic.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Eva.”

“So, you didn’t come here of your own free will?” I mused.

“Not even a little. I pretty much fought it every step of the way.”



I walked over and sat down beside her as the coffee brewed. “You said he was on the team that saved your life. What was he like?”

“Weird. I don’t know how else to describe it.” She bit her lip as she thought about it. “The man really can’t die.”

“Is that a joke?”

“Nope. Absolute truth. There was a time when we thought he died. Several, actually,” she laughed. “This one time, he was fighting these guys who were in a vehicle racing after me. He actually handed one of the other guys an umbrella as a weapon.”

“So, that’s where that came from,” I said wistfully.

“He did it with you too?”

I laughed, remembering our getaway. “Yep. He was so sure the umbrella was all he needed.”

“And was it?”

“Well, to answer that, I have to give you a little background. See, I’m not just some random chick he met in a bar.”

“I never thought you were.”

I smiled at that and continued. “I was born in Mexico. My father was part of the cartels, pretty low ranking at the time. I was kept at home. A good girl was supposed to learn to cook and take care of her man...blah, blah, blah—all that stupid bullshit. At the time, there was a lot of tension in the cartel. There were two ways of thinking. You could stay and do things the old way or join the others and adapt. He chose the latter. He never was one to let others pass him by.”

“Wait, you’re from Mexico?” Eva asked. “You don’t have an accent.”

“I left when I was six. And trust me, I did everything I could to lose it. The last thing I wanted was to be associated with my father in any way.”

“How did you get out? I doubt your father just let you leave.”

“He didn’t. My mother stayed behind, but she sent me away with my grandmother. We figured there was a better chance of escaping if my mother stayed behind. We had help, of course. It wasn’t like we just walked away.”

“What was it like?”

I had blocked that part from my memories. If I thought really hard about it, I could remember what it was like before I left. The constant danger and feeling of unease when strange men entered our small house was the only glint of a memory I had. And leaving was hard, I knew that much. It wore on my grandmother in ways I never knew. And she died before I thought to question her about how we got out.

“I honestly don’t remember. We got away, and that’s all I remember. We grew up in Texas, close enough that a friend could still get us updates on how my mother was doing. Apparently, when I disappeared, my mother was able to convince my father that the former cartel leader took me as revenge. For years, he’s torn Mexico apart looking for me.”

“And you were basically right under his nose,” she surmised.

I nodded, standing at the beep from the coffeemaker. Taking down two mugs, I poured us each a cup and walked back over, sliding one across to her. The jolt of caffeine was a godsend so early in the morning.

“So, what made you go back to Mexico?”

“Well, I was a good girl. I went to school. I graduated college. But then the messages about my mother stopped. My grandmother died a few years ago, and she was the only one who ever had contact with anyone back home. If I called, it would send up red flags and my father would have found me immediately. So, I got a job in a bar right across the border, and I kept my ears open, listening for anything that might give me some insight into my father or the cartels. I got a few clues here and there, but never anything concrete. And then my new

husband walked into the bar, and for just a moment, I forgot about it all.”

“And then it all went to shit.”

I nodded. “It all went to shit.”



# HONEY

*SOMEWHERE IN MEXICO.*

*Approximately 45 hours, 12 minutes, and 32 seconds ago since FNG's return.*

“YOU SAVED ME,” I CRIED. “NO ONE HAS EVER DONE anything like that for me before.”

He slowly lifted the cigar to his mouth and took a long drag. “And you’ll never have to know what it’s like to not have me around.”

I was enraptured with everything about this man. He was sexy and dangerous, not at all the man I wanted in my life. Ever since I was a kid, I knew a man like him would one day get me killed. But he saved me from a man I knew would take what he wanted.

The way this man looked at me was unlike anything I’d ever felt before. But falling for a man I just met was dangerous. I wasn’t here for a man. I was here to find out information about my mother. But as I stared into his eyes, my mind forgot the original mission and focused solely on finding a way to stay beside this man.

“We should get out of here,” I said breathlessly. I knew it would be dangerous to come here, but I had hoped I would get at least a few answers. The likelihood of that happening now was dwindling by the second. Word would spread of what happened in the cantina. My father would find out an

American woman was saved by an unknown man and he would start to investigate. Staying here was no longer an option.

“I know just the place.” He started to turn, and that’s when I saw him. The man came in here every day, always watching me. I was uneasy with him, but since he never made a move, I figured he was just like any other man, wondering when he would get his shot at me.

“Wait!” I hissed, grabbing the man’s arm. “We have to go out the back.”

The man looked around the room, and I knew the moment he saw the man that had been watching me. “I’ve got this, darlin’.” He reached for his gun, but instead of using it, he handed it to me. “Do you know how to use this?”

I nodded, carefully taking it from him. I hadn’t held a gun in a good six months, not since I came to Mexico.

“Shoot anyone that comes at you.”

“What about you?” I asked desperately. If something happened to him, what was I to do?

He smirked at me like he could do this with one hand tied behind his back. “Don’t worry about me. I’m very hard to kill.”

He grabbed me around the waist and pulled me into him. For just a moment, our lips were just a scant inch apart. Then he crushed his lips to mine in a kiss that I felt all the way down to my toes. But just as quickly, it was all over and he was gone.

Dazedly, I pressed my fingers to my lips. A small smile broke out over my face until I heard the first punch being thrown. The cigar man punched the man in the throat, grabbed him by the neck, and tossed him out the window.

It was the wrong move. In just seconds, the bar was crowded with all the wrong kinds of men. The patrons scattered, knowing this was not a fight they wanted to be involved in.

He told me to save the gun for myself, but with so many men rushing him all at once, I knew there was no time to delay. I took my stance and aimed at the man closest to my rescuer, firing a single bullet. It struck him in the neck and he immediately went down.

Cigar man spun and slammed his fist into a man approaching him from behind. I methodically went around the room, taking out anyone close to my savior. But all too soon, I ran out of bullets and was left with nothing but an empty gun clicking as a monster approached.

I stumbled back, trying to come up with a way to defend myself, scrambling to find something on the bar that would be useful. And that's when my hand felt the hard screw of the wine opener. Gripping it between two fingers, I waited for him to get closer. He grabbed me around the throat, dragging me closer to him.

“Putá, I knew it was you.”

“Yeah? Do you know how you can tell I'm his daughter?”

“You look just like him.”

“I kill just like him, too,” I said, slamming the corkscrew into his eyeball. He screamed, but he wasn't dead yet. I twisted it like I was opening a bottle of wine until I heard a pop and yanked his eyeball from the socket. He dropped to the ground, bleeding all over the floor.

I lied when I said I killed just like my father. That was my first kill ever, and it scared me how much I enjoyed it. Not that I wanted to go around killing people, but the fact that I could defend myself was a thrill I never knew I needed.

A renewed rush of energy shot through me as I charged toward the next man, letting out an animalistic shout as I attacked with only my corkscrew. I was so focused on killing these men who were so much like my father that I didn't notice anyone else in the room.

That is, until I looked up and saw my mystery man in a sort of duel with another man, using only an umbrella as a weapon. I watched in fascination as the man lunged at his

attacker, stabbing the man first in the stomach, then in the neck, and finally in the eye. I relished the fact that we were so much alike.

When the final man collapsed, it was only me and my cigar-smoking man left standing. I rushed over to him, still holding the corkscrew in my hand. I was covered in blood, but I couldn't deny it felt amazing.

“Where's the gun?”

“I used all the bullets.”

Breathing heavily, he looked around the room and nodded. “Well done. I think you got more than me.”

“Well, I had a little help,” I grinned, holding up the corkscrew.

“Nice. I like the way you think.”

“Well, you know, when you're in a bar...”

He grabbed my hand and started for the door. “We should leave before more of them show up.”

“Then I guess I'd better hang onto this,” I said, holding up my weapon.

“And I'll hang onto this.” With his umbrella in hand, he guided me toward the door.

“Where did you get it?”

“I found it on the floor. I can't believe someone would just toss away such an amazing weapon. I once used one to fight off a man in a truck.”

I stopped him right before we went outside. “Wait, where are we going?”

“We have to get across the border.”

“My father will be watching,” I said, hating that I had to admit what I knew.

“And who is that?”

“Manuel Ruiz,” I said, hoping he didn't know who that was.



But all he did was toss his head back and laugh. “Then I guess we’d better be careful,” he said, shoving the door open and fleeing into the night with only a corkscrew and an umbrella to keep us safe.



# CASH

“WAIT A MINUTE. You’re Manuel Ruiz’s long-lost daughter?” I asked incredulously. I’d heard of the man. He was legendary, and his fight to find his daughter after she had been kidnapped had torn Mexico apart, dividing loyalties and causing the bloodiest war in the last century.

“Not only that,” FNG said around a mouthful of food, “her uncle is his right-hand man. Ever heard of the Bouillon Butcher?”

“The...” I paused and thought about that for a moment. “Like the stuff you put in soup?”

“Exactly,” he grinned. “Yep, her uncle is known for killing people with bouillon.”

“Then why do they call him the butcher?”

“Because after he smothers people to death with bouillon, he cuts them into tiny pieces,” Honey answered.

I shook my head, wondering if that was really true. It sounded like something out of Grimm’s fairy tales. “So, you really escaped with only an umbrella and a corkscrew?”

“I told you umbrellas were a great weapon,” FNG said. Mayo dripped from his mouth. He’d already devoured three BLTs, and the way he was eyeing the fourth, I was pretty positive he was nowhere near done. I slid my plate over to him, barely snatching my hand back before he pounced.

“So, you just escaped the cartels,” I said, getting back on the subject.

He snorted, looking over at his wife. “*Just* escaped? Cash, let’s be realistic. There is no escaping the cartels.”

“Then how are you alive?”

“Well, obviously, we got married.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, still not understanding. “And that did what for you?”

His head popped up and he sniffed. “Do I smell tarantula?”

“FNG, focus!” I snapped. “How did getting married do anything for your situation?”

He shoved his chair back, grabbing Honey’s hand. “Oh, hell no. There’s no way I’m being subjected to Fox’s tarantula food again. That shit’s disgusting!”

He turned and ran out of the room with me chasing after him. There were too many unanswered questions. If FNG was going to stay here, I needed the story of what actually happened.

“Hey!”

FNG slipped into the elevator, nearly escaping me, but I shoved my hand between the doors just as they were about to close. His eyes widened and I spun around, smacking the button to close the doors as I saw Fox running toward us with a tray of fried tarantulas. I was with FNG on this. There was no way I was eating that shit.

“Trust me,” he said to Honey. “You do not want to try that. He makes a lot of good food, but spiders are out.”

“I don’t know,” Honey shrugged. “I seem to remember eating one as a kid. I think they were a lot like frog legs. A little chewy, but good flavor.”

I ignored Honey, pressing the issue of FNG’s sudden return. We could discuss weird eating habits later. But what happened in the last twenty-four hours could very well affect us in a very bad way if what I thought happened was true.

“Look, I need to know what happened. There are too many missing pieces to the year you were gone. Rafe said you were

dead. Was he lying to me to throw me off?”

“Oh, no. He really did think I was dead.” He sighed heavily. “Yeah, it was a rough one. I’m not gonna lie. I thought that time I might not actually make it.”

“Where did it happen? *What* happened?”

The elevator opened and FNG pushed past me with his wife’s hand in his. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to treat my lady to a spa day. I think she deserves that much after the last forty-eight hours.”

“You mean the forty-eight hours you haven’t told me about yet?” I snapped.

He stopped and turned around, lowering his voice. “If you really want to know, just come with me. I’ll tell you anything.”

“I have a business to run,” I said through gritted teeth.

“And I have blisters on my feet from running through the desert. What’s your point?”

I rolled my eyes, knowing I wasn’t going to win. “Fine, but I want to hear everything, starting with why Rafe thought you were dead.”

“No problem. You’re driving, right?”

“Why not,” I grumbled.

“Good because my truck was sort of blown up a year ago.”

“I remember. I was there.”

“Well, then you know getting around isn’t going to be easy. Anyway, where was I?” He headed outside, right over to my truck, frowning as he looked at it. “No minivan? My baby rides in luxury.”

I’d about had enough of this shit. “Get in the damn truck.”

“Alright, alright,” he sighed. “Geez, no need to get all huffy.”

I walked around to my side and got in, slamming the door just a little harder than necessary. Honey was in the middle seat and FNG was in the passenger. This was really a

conversation I wanted to have alone, but that wasn't going to be an option. "Now, the job with Rafe."

"Right, the one that nearly got me killed. Well, it all started on a dark and stormy evening. If you'll recall, he wanted me to do a dead drop in the middle of the night."

"Jumping out of a plane. How were you supposed to land?"

"Well, that's the thing with Rafe. He never tells you anything until it's completely necessary. So, I found out about ten seconds before I hit the ground."

I stared at him incredulously. "You jumped out of the plane, not knowing if there was any way to land safely?"

"It was Rafe," he scoffed. "Like he was going to send me in and then have me killed immediately? I don't think so. He hadn't gotten what he wanted yet."

"And what exactly did he want?"

"Not what. Who."

"Who?"

"Who what?"

He was fucking with me and I wasn't in the mood for it. "FNG—"

"Anyway, there was this chick I was supposed to get tabs on."

"And did you?"

"Not exactly."

"Do you have a name?"

"Not exactly."

"Is there anything you can tell me about her?" I asked in frustration.

"Not exactly."

Honey giggled beside me. *Clearly*, she thought FNG was charming. And there I was, saying *clearly* in my head, even

emphasizing it just the way FNG and Dash did. I was losing my goddamn mind.

“Just start at the beginning.”

He didn't need to be told twice. If there was one thing FNG loved more than bragging about not being able to die, it was talking.

“As I said, it was a dark and stormy night. Rafe wasn't there, of course. He sent me in with a black ops team. You know, I really miss working with the three J's. At least they understood me.”

“And this black ops team went in with you?”

“No, they were dropping me. I was supposed to check in after twelve hours and give an update.”

“Twelve hours?” I asked incredulously. “And you were just supposed to sneak around the grounds until then, all the while hoping you weren't caught?”

“I had to be very methodical in my movements. I had it all laid out. So, anyway, it was a dark and stormy night.”

I rolled my eyes as he started all over again.

“We were in a stealth aircraft and let me tell you, what a ride it was.”





# FNG

*SOMEWHERE IN THE SKIES.*

*Approximately 1 year, 3 months, 1 day, 12 hours, 02 minutes, and 03 seconds ago...*

IT WAS LIKE RIDING ON A COMMERCIAL AIRLINE. THE RIDE WAS smooth and the cabin was free of noise. That didn't mean this trip was going to be as pleasant. I had one objective: Get in and find the girl, then get out. With my team around me, this mission couldn't fail.

"I need to talk to my boss about getting one of these," I grinned at the guy sitting next to me. "Of course, he thinks I'm dead, so he probably won't be too keen on helping."

The man stared straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge me. I glanced over his armor, noticing his apparel was a little more advanced than mine. And then I saw his gun.

"Holy shit. Where did you get that thing?" I asked, reaching for his holster.

Yeah, I should have known better, but I was just so excited to see this magnificent piece of weaponry. In a flash, he grabbed me and flipped me over, smashing me into the ground. I laughed, not trying to counter his attack because we were on the same side.

"Don't ever reach for my weapon," he growled.

I held up my hands, showing him I wasn't going to do a thing. "Hey, no problem. I've just never seen that gun up

close.”

“And you never will again.”

“Well, that sucks for me.”

He shoved off me, getting back in his seat without another word. I sat up, straightened my flight suit, and got back to my feet.

“You should sit down. It’s about to get fast,” another man said.

“Ooh, I like it fast!” I grinned. “Any chance I’ll get to see the cockpit?”

The man looked away, completely ignoring me. Geez, a guy just couldn’t get a break around here. These guys were worse than the three J’s. At least they had personality.

I took my seat again and strapped in. “So...uh, any chance someone is going to tell me how exactly I’m supposed to land without a parachute?”

The man beside me said nothing.

“Not that I’m opposed to jumping out of a plane with no protection. I can’t die,” I grinned. “That’s why Rafe hired me.”

Still, he stared ahead.

“But still—”

We jolted forward, picking up speed at a rate I’d never felt before. Man, I just loved Rafe’s toys. If he wasn’t such an asshole, I’d come work for him just for the goodies. I held on tight as we continued to catapult through the sky. The skin on my cheeks felt like it was peeling away and my whole body was vibrating. This was some serious shit.

“Preparing for departure,” a voice said over the intercom.

The man beside me stood up, unsnapped my belt, and then hauled me out of my seat.

“Oh, we’re going?” He dragged me to the door and opened it, glancing back at me. “Yep, we’re going,” I said right as he shoved me unceremoniously out of the aircraft.

The wind hit me with a force so strong that it was hard to breathe. “That felt deliberate!” I shouted, knowing the man couldn’t hear me. I tried to guide myself toward the drop zone but found it nearly impossible. And then something strange happened. My hands clasped to my sides, almost as if they were magnetic. Then, I zoomed forward through the clouds toward the landing zone.

My eyes widened in horror as the ground rushed up to meet me. Once again, my arms slammed outward as if by some invisible force. I stared in awe at the wing-like cape that slowed my descent. And then I landed on my feet and the wings retracted.

I held my arms out, staring at the flight suit, wondering where the wings had gone. “This is the most badass suit ever! I’m like a superhero!” My head snapped up and my face grew serious. “I really am Iron Man.”

“Stop stalling and get your ass in place,” the black ops leader said through comms.

“Right, dangerous job and all that.”

I took off toward the house, sticking to the trees as best as possible. The guards were constantly changing their movements around the property, which meant I was flying blind. The only way anyone knew where I was located was because of the tracker Rafe not-so-gently inserted into my thigh. Every time I ran, I could feel it.

I was just about to the house when I was yanked back. A hand covered my mouth and a knife was pressed to my throat. For just a moment, I thought about letting him do it, just so he could see me rise from the dead. However, severe blood loss would make it more difficult to escape.

“Who are you?” the man hissed.

“Your worst nightmare.”

I twisted in his arms, slamming my hand into his wrist, breaking his grip on the knife. It fell to the grass with a soft thump, but I had already moved on, poking my two fingers

into his eyeballs. He screamed, grabbing at his face as blood dripped from his eyes.

Oops. I might have poked him a little harder than I thought. I wiped my finger off on my clothes, not wanting his eyeball juice on me, then slammed my foot into his chest. He toppled backward, falling to the ground. I pulled the knife from my hip and climbed over him, slitting his throat from ear to ear. Blood sprayed at me, catching me in the face. I grimaced, wiping it off with my sleeve, then jumped up and took off for the house.

But as soon as I entered through the back door, I was swarmed by guards with no way out. I stopped as guns were pointed at me from all directions. They were closing in fast. I immediately took in my surroundings, noting I was in the back hall just by the kitchen. If I could get there, I'd have plenty of weapons.

The chair in the corner.

The mirror on the wall.

The coat rack covered with at least five coats.

And most importantly, the umbrella holder that currently had three of my favorite weapons inside.

My lips slid up in a grin as I let the party begin.

The men rushed me, and I grabbed the coats, tossing them at the men closing in. Grabbing the coat rack, I swung with all my might, taking out two of them in just seconds. Then I was slammed into the wall, my head cracking on the mirror. I reached overhead and yanked it off the wall, slamming it down on my attacker's head. The glass shattered into tiny pieces on the ground.

With more approaching, I grabbed an umbrella, swinging it hard and hooking one man around the neck, yanking him toward me as my knee met his face. Four more men ran at me, all of them holding guns, but none of them firing, which was odd.

I raced into the kitchen, scaring the crap out of the woman preparing food. She must have been getting ready for the next

day. I ran past her, grabbing a croissant and stuffing it in my mouth as I grabbed the still hot pan off the stove and threw it across the room, hitting one man in the face. He screamed as hot liquid splashed over his skin.

I jolted forward as someone attacked me from behind. My stomach slammed into the kitchen island filled with goodies, and all the food went flying. I jerked my head back, hitting the man in the face with my unusually hard head. His grip loosened just enough for me to turn, grabbing the flour on the counter in the process and throwing it in his face. He stumbled back, spluttering as he tried in vain to see.

I rolled over the counter, landing on my feet on the other side as I ran out of the kitchen, past a small table for the servants. They had Chinese food tonight. I grabbed the chopsticks and raced out of the room and down the hall.

I was tackled from the side, and this time, there was no way out. The giant man on top of me quickly restrained me, yanking my hands behind my back. I was hauled upright as the man breathed heavily beside me. His breath smelled like onions, oddly, reminding me of Fox.

“What are you grinning about?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing,” I laughed. “You know, just good times.”

“They won’t be so good in a few minutes,” he said, shoving me forward.

I thought maybe he was going to take me to meet his boss. At least then I would die (or pretend to die) knowing who was trying to kill me. Maybe I’d even know why.

I was marched out of the house, having not achieved my goal. Rafe was going to be pissed at me, and I knew when I missed my check-in, there would be nothing he could do for me. It wasn’t exactly the way I saw this going, but then again, taking a job for Rafe was always going to be a little more than challenging.

I was taken out back by the edge of the property. They probably didn’t want to kill me near the house and ruin the pristine lawn. But as we walked further away, I understood

why they were taking me out here. Under the cover of trees, large mounds of dirt were spaced about three feet apart. It was a graveyard, well hidden from satellites, which was why Rafe didn't know about it.

Or if he did, he wasn't sharing.

The man shoved me forward, making me trip and fall to the ground. I felt the snick of a knife around my wrists and made my move, grabbing the man's wrist and yanking. Little good it did. I was immediately tackled to the ground by another man, who proceeded to slam his fist into my face. The taste of blood filled my mouth, making this officially the worst vacation ever.

He grabbed my wrists once again and pulled them together in front of me, then zip-tied them. Then I was hauled to my feet again and a shovel was placed in my hands.

"Dig."

"Sure," I nodded, spitting blood on the ground. "You're... what? Six-five?"

"The grave isn't for me," he grinned maliciously.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Oh, I'm sure."

Well, there wasn't much arguing to do here. I was outnumbered and zip-tied. Not that I couldn't get myself out of this situation. I was nothing, if not wily. I'd get out of this one way or another. I just wasn't sure how yet.

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☆

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"I'M PRETTY SURE THIS ISN'T THE WAY THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO go," I muttered as I laid in the ground with only a small pocket

of air over me.

As soon as they pushed me into the ground and started piling dirt on top of my body, I cupped my hands over my mouth and nose to ensure I had a nice airway. Not that it would last long being buried in the ground. In order to get out of here, I had to free my hands, but I couldn't do that without space to move. I tried digging with my fingers, but the dirt just kept collapsing back on me, which wouldn't help me get out. What I needed was more time, a way to get some air that would allow me to work at the pace I needed.

And then it struck me. I wiggled through the dirt, doing my best not to let the dirt fall on my face. "If I can just...reach," I said, wiggling my fingers through the dirt until I felt the wooden sticks in my pocket. I grinned despite the situation and slowly slid the chopsticks up my body with two fingers until I could finally get a good grip on them.

I was already running short on time and air. I wiggled my hands up until I could finally start clawing at the dirt with the chopsticks, but I was still running low on air. I needed a hole. I started poking a hole with one chopstick, wiggling it around just enough to allow air to flow through the hole. It took way too long, and black spots appeared before my eyes. I was losing air too fast. I abandoned any hope of digging an air hole and got to work whittling my way out of the dirt—





# CASH

“HOLD ON,” I interrupted the ridiculous story. “Are you telling me that you dug your way out of a grave using only chopsticks?”

He cocked his head at me. “Are you saying I didn’t do it?”

“I’m saying, I don’t believe a fucking word of it. How the hell would that even work?”

“Very slowly,” he said, tipping his glass of champagne in my direction.

I sat in a robe in a reclining chair at the spa as we got pedicures. It was ridiculous, but I wanted answers. Well, real answers. I wasn’t sure what the hell kind of story he was telling me right now, but I’d get the truth out of him one way or another.

“Very slowly. That’s all you’re going to tell me.”

“Well, I’m not sure what more there is to tell,” he said thoughtfully. His brows furrowed in thought, and then he snapped his fingers. “It was like mice.”

“Mice.”

“Yep, you know, I was digging like a mouse. Or maybe an armadillo,” he said, cocking his head to the side. “Either way, yeah, that’s how I did it.”

“With chopsticks,” I repeated.

“Pretty classic, right?” he asked, taking another sip of champagne.

I shifted in my seat, really trying to get through to him how outrageous this story was. “Tell me, if it was impossible for anyone to get on the island, how did they have Chinese takeout?”

“Ah, you know, as I was laying in my dirt grave, the same thing crossed my mind. I was digging with those sticks, and I realized they were new. So, they hadn’t been in the house before. And there were takeout containers from the mainland. And as I started using them to dig, I was thinking, where did these come from?”

“You never said that in your story.”

“Well, you interrupted me before I could get to that part.”

“And which part was that?”

“Well, I was digging like an armadillo, and I was about halfway to the surface when I looked at the chopstick and realized it was new.”

“Except, you had already been digging at that point. The chopsticks would have been dirty, thus making it impossible to tell if they were new or old.”

He sighed heavily. “Are you going to tear apart every detail of my story?”

“Yes,” I said without a moment’s hesitation. “Because I call bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit.”

“Then how did they get the Chinese food?”

“Same way I got there. They airdropped it.”

I nodded slightly, my eyes widening at the incredulity of the story. “So, they ordered Chinese food from the mainland, had someone fly overhead and airdrop it. And what is this amazing restaurant that owns a plane and can airdrop food? And how is it possible that they were allowed in the airspace over the island if this guy is so private? And why would they order Chinese food when it would be cold when it arrived?” I shouted.

He stared at me for a moment. “Wow, you really don’t think outside the box. Okay, see, the way I figure it, the people at the restaurant must be forced to work for this guy. And you’re right, they wouldn’t be allowed to fly over the island. I figure there’s a special contractor who gets the order and has to pick it up, then is forced to fly over the island with the implicit instructions to never land, or face death.”

“And how did they keep the food warm?” I asked.

“You know they have warming bags for that,” he laughed. “Man, you are way too much of a stickler.”

“For the truth.”

“I’m telling you, every word is true.”

It was really fucking hard to control my temper when all I was hearing was a bunch of tall tales. When I said I wanted the real story, I stupidly thought I would get it. I wasn’t sure what he was telling me, but it couldn’t possibly be the truth. There was no way he dug himself out of that grave using only chopsticks.

Right?

“Okay, let’s pretend for a moment that you were able to dig yourself out of the grave—”

“I did.”

“Anyway, let’s get back to this airdrop over this guy’s house.”

“Totally awesome, right?”

“You zoomed through the clouds?” I said skeptically.

“Hey, it really happened. I’m telling you, your brother has some amazing spy shit.”

I took a sip of my champagne, still marveling over his story. “Okay, let’s say you actually did have some specialized flight suit that was controlled by another person—”

“Who said it was another person?” he asked, taking a strawberry from the bowl at his side and popping it in his mouth. Red liquid spilled from his lips as he chewed. “See, I

think it's actually a technologically advanced flight suit that you can program ahead of time."

"That's the same fucking thing!"

"No, see, you think it was someone flying me like a toy helicopter. But based on the markings on the flight suit, I'd say the whole thing is programmed to follow specific movements. I mean, you should have seen the weapons these guys had."

That had me curious. "Like what?"

He glanced around, then leaned closer. "Like the thing we saw that time out at the place with the massive...thing."

Understanding, I nodded. "They had those? I thought they were still in the testing phases."

"Well, apparently, Rafe's guys are testing them out, and they're not sharing."

"Okay, but you had a weapon in the house. Why didn't you use it?"

The look he shot me was one of those *you're an idiot* looks. "Well, because then it would alert everyone that I was there."

"They already saw you," I argued. "It would have been reported that there was an intruder!"

"Sir?" A masseuse walked over with a gentle smile on her face. "You're disrupting the other guests." Just as I thought she was about to kick me out, she came to my side and grabbed my hand. "Let's work that tension out."

She started massaging my hand, which I was pretty sure wasn't the source of my tension, but actually seemed to have a very calming effect on me. I took a deep breath and another sip of champagne.

"Okay, so you were fighting these guys, and no one actually fired their gun?"

"I know, right? It was totally weird."

"It was an impossible mission. I just can't figure out why Rafe thought it was a good idea to send you in."

“Because he’s Rafe,” FNG answered, sipping his own champagne. He leaned back in his seat as a woman came over and placed a cucumber slice over both eyes. “Thanks, doll. That’s amazing.”

He was lost in a dream world, enjoying his pedicure and massage, but I couldn’t get past the story he told me. It was impossible.

“The thing is—”

“Hey,” he said, removing his cucumbers. “I’m trying to relax here. There is nothing more important to me than ensuring my wife’s happiness, and you’re kind of ruining it.”

“Her happiness?” I hissed. “You just got married! You’ve known her for two days!”

“It’s three, actually. And what does that matter when you’re in love?”

They met at a bar. How in love could they be? “FNG, I understand you’ve been gone for a long time and need a... recovery period, but I need answers.”

He popped a cucumber in his mouth, crunching on it as he stared at me. “You know, the more I think about it, the more I’ve come to realize that I’m not the one with the issues here.”

“Really.”

“Cap, it’s okay to take a break and breathe in the wonderfulness that is nature.”

“We’re in a spa. There is nothing *nature* related about this. And it’s Cash.” His eyes quickly flicked away from me, and that’s when I got that feeling in the pit of my stomach that said there was more to the story. “FNG,” I said in warning.

He placed the lone cucumber back on his eye and laid back in the chair. I jerked the handle, making him fly forward in his chair. He looked at me incredulously.

“I was just starting to relax!”

“You went to Reed Security, didn’t you?”

“What? How could you say that? I would never betray you in such a way!”

“When was it?”

“I swear—”

I grabbed his champagne and held it away from him. “No more of the good stuff until you answer every question I have.”

He huffed in irritation, motioning for me to give it back. “Fine, but you know, you really are just like him.”

“Who?”

“Cap.”

I wasn't going to bother responding to that. We were both ex-military. Of course we were alike. “Just tell me when you saw him.”

“About two days after my truck blew up.”



# FNG

*ON THE ROAD.*

*Exactly 2 days, 8 hours, 7 minutes, and 18 seconds after FNG's truck blew up...*

“I STILL DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY WE’RE DRIVING ALL THE way out to Pennsylvania. This seems a little drastic, don’t you think?”

Rafe kept driving, refusing to look at me. I was getting really tired of the silent treatment. He was the one that needed me, but wasn’t giving me a damn bit of insight into the situation.

“Look, you asked for my help. If you don’t want it—”

“Fuck, alright!” he snapped. “Why can’t you just follow orders like my other guys?”

“You mean the ones you handed over to Cash and don’t use anymore? Hmm, you’re right. I should be more compliant.”

He sighed, finally giving in. “Sebastian doesn’t know that I’m Cash’s brother. I need a favor, and the only way to accomplish that is by using Sebastian.”

“Don’t you think the gig will be up when he calls Cash?”

“He won’t. I’ll make sure of it. And you won’t say anything either.”

I snorted. “Of course not. We’re on a super spy mission.”



“You’re supposed to be dead. It’s best if you do your part and play along so we can all go home at the end of the day.”

“Well, I know I will. I can’t die. I don’t know about you.”

“I haven’t died yet,” he retorted.

“Right, but it’s just not the same thing as me.”

Apparently, he didn’t care for my chatter. He was silent the rest of the way to Reed Security, and only spoke once we arrived at the gates. “Just remember to let me do the talking.”

I motioned that I was zipping my lips, to which he glared at me. He really was nothing like Cash. The man didn’t have a sense of humor, and frankly, I wasn’t sure how he was going to pull this off. I mean, he did fool all of us, even though we thought he was acting strange.

“Cash Owens,” he said to the guard, showing his ID. “It’s extremely important that only Sebastian knows I’m here.”

The guard nodded and walked back to the guard booth, checking Rafe’s credentials. I shouldn’t have been amazed that he was able to get his hands on a duplicate of Cash’s ID, but I still was. Even without the reach of the FBI, the man was still able to pull off some amazing shit.

“Go through,” the man said, returning Rafe’s credentials.

As his window rolled up, he turned to me with his typical Rafe look. “Don’t fuck this up. You stay hidden and you don’t say a goddamn word about what we’re doing here.”

“You got it, captain.” I gave a fake salute, which earned me a scowl from the man beside me. He really had no sense of humor.

Rafe pulled into the underground garage and parked in the far corner. It was well-lit in the garage, making it impossible to hide from anyone else. Sebastian walked out of the building and headed straight for our vehicle. Rafe got out, and I followed, though I was pretty sure he wanted me to stay in the car.

“Cash,” Sebastian said, jerking his head at me. “Who’s this?”

“I need you to keep him hidden.”

Sebastian’s eyebrows rose. “Really? No hello or anything?”

“This is urgent,” Rafe said. “I can’t keep him at OPS, and it’s of the utmost importance that he stays safe until I can get him out of here.”

“Utmost importance?” Sebastian said, grinning at his choice of words. “So, what did he do?”

“It’s not what he did, but what he’s going to do. I need you to hide him out until the time is right.”

“Sure, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Rafe stepped forward, gripping Sebastian by the arm. “I’m serious. No one can know about him. No one can see him. You don’t call and ask me about him or let anyone know that he was ever here.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Sebastian said, looking at Rafe funny. I was sure he was going to catch on that this wasn’t Cash, and for a moment, I saw him eyeing the missing chunk of Rafe’s ear. “That’s new,” he said, flicking his own ear.

“Someone took a shot and missed.”

“Better the ear than your head.”

“Exactly,” Rafe retorted. He turned to me and narrowed his eyes. “I’ll be back in two days.”

“Gotcha.”

He turned to get back in the vehicle, but Sebastian stopped him. “Hey, how’s Eva doing?”

“Fine, why?”

Sebastian shook his head, but I could see the wheels turning. He was suspicious. “Just wondering. You know, with the baby and all.”

Cash didn’t have a baby. I was sure Rafe was busted. After all, he didn’t keep close tabs on his brother, but he didn’t fail this one.

“You must be mistaken. Eva’s not pregnant.”

Sebastian nodded again. “My bad. Don’t wait too long.”

He totally nailed him. I was sure of it, but I didn’t think he was going to call him out. He was going to dig, and that meant he was going to interrogate me. I would have to be on my toes at all times.

We watched as Rafe pulled away, and the minute he was out the gate, Sebastian turned on me. “So, where’s Cash?”

I laughed slightly, doing my best not to give the game away. “Uh...he just left.”

“That was not Cash.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Look, I don’t know Cash very well, but I do know that the man doesn’t act like he has a stick up his ass.”

The mission was going down in flames. I had to save it fast. “Look, he doesn’t want anyone to know, but he’s having a hard time with Eva. They’ve been trying for a long time to have a baby, and it hasn’t been working.”

Sebastian’s face instantly cleared of all suspicion. “Seriously? I had no idea. I thought they were just waiting.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s been rough on them. I’m not sure they’re going to make it.”

That seemed to really hit him, and I almost felt bad for lying. It was true that Cash had been trying to get Eva pregnant, but I had no idea if they were actually having trouble or if it was just bad timing.

“Crap, well, that certainly explains why he’s not acting like himself. I had no idea.”

“Yeah, well, he doesn’t want anyone to know, so don’t mention it.”

“If he doesn’t want anyone to know, how do you know?”

“I overheard them talking. Well, more like fighting,” I snorted. “It was pretty heated, and I knew he didn’t want me to

hear it, so I pretended I didn't hear a thing.”

“Wise.”

I nodded and waited for his reaction, but that seemed to be it. We fooled him successfully. I just had to hope I could pull it off for the rest of the time I was here.



## FNG

“YOU TOLD him I was having trouble with Eva?” Cash shouted, interrupting my story once again. He shot upright from the table, throwing off his towel, instantly surprising the masseuse who just moments ago had her hands on his body.

Didn't he know what he was giving up right now? I hadn't ever had a massage like this. It was just wrong to get up and leave when you had these magical hands on you. But the way he was storming around the room, I knew I needed to follow.

“Boss, I had to keep cover!” I followed his lead, getting up from the table, but I took my towel with me. I was a married man now. I couldn't allow other women to see my body.

“You brought my marriage into your lies. You said we were having problems having a baby!” he shouted as he pulled on his jeans. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I didn't understand the problem. It wasn't like it was true. “I...Boss, you have a kid. What's the problem?”

“The problem?” I laughed sarcastically. “We really were having problems getting pregnant!”

Well, I didn't know that. I had been gone for over a year. “Okay, but that's over and—”

“And it's nobody else's goddamn business.”

He grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head. Meanwhile, I was still standing there in my towel, wholly unaware of how to fix the problem in front of me.

“That’s not the kind of shit a man wants broadcasted,” he said, turning to me with one last glare.

I realized in that moment that he was truly pissed and was going to walk out on our amazing massage. My day of fun was over. I hustled over to my clothes, but before I could get them, he snatched them up and walked out of the room.

“Guess you’ll be staying behind.”

I stared at him incredulously. My boss had a mean streak. I just didn’t realize it until this moment. No bother, I would just follow him out in my towel. It wasn’t like I was shy. Besides, my nudity wasn’t nearly as important as fixing this rift growing between us. I followed him right out in only my towel, earning more than a few shocked looks from the ladies in the waiting area. I winked at them, making sure to keep a hand on the knot of my towel. I didn’t need to shock the hell out of them when they saw my package.

“Boss, you can run all you want, but you won’t get away from me! I don’t mind running around in a towel.”

“Aren’t you forgetting your wife?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Oh, snap!” I stopped in my tracks, my mind warring with indecision. I couldn’t leave her behind. On the other hand, it would be downright mean to interrupt her massage the way Cash had with mine. No, it was better to leave her behind.

I rushed over to the desk, giving the woman a disarming smile. “Hey, my wife is in the middle of her spa day. Why don’t you throw in a few extras for her and put it on my card. I’ll be back to get her at the end of the day.”

“Of course,” the woman smiled.

This was going to cost me an arm and a leg, but at least it was one problem solved. I ran out of the building, not even putting on my damn shoes before I raced to Cash’s truck and yanked the door open just as he was about to peel out. He glared at me, then shook his head.

“You can run, boss, but you can’t hide.”

“Unlike you. Apparently you’re very good at hiding.”

“Boss, it wasn’t like that. I wanted to tell you.”

“You told Sebastian,” he muttered.

“Is that what this is about? I didn’t want anyone else to know either. That’s what Rafe said.”

He turned to me, smacking his hand down on the steering wheel. “You should have fucking trusted me!”

“I did, but it wasn’t my call. It’s like when you go into Witness Protection. It’s not like you want to leave everyone behind to think you’ve disappeared or been eaten by an alligator. That’s just the way it goes.”

“Except you weren’t eaten by an alligator.”

“Would it have made you feel better if I was?”

When he didn’t answer immediately, I felt a little hurt. “Wow, so death by sharp teeth is preferable to me telling a little white lie.”

He suddenly jerked the steering wheel and pulled over on the side of the road. Dust kicked up all around us as we came to a stop. “Little white lie? We thought you were dead. Do you know how much shit I had to put up with because of your supposed death? A woman almost lost her job and her life because of this lie.”

“Who?”

“Tahlia, Johnny’s woman.”

I cringed. Me and Johnny were tight, and knowing that his woman got in trouble because of me wouldn’t help our friendship. In fact, he hadn’t even come to see me since I returned from the dead. I was a little hurt by that.

“Okay, I can see how that may have been a little... inconvenient.”

“Inconvenient?” he laughed. “Do you know what I had to put up with around work? With Fox? The man didn’t stop looking for you. I thought for sure he was going to fall into a depression if he didn’t find you!”



“That’s because he’s a good friend,” I grinned. “See, a true friend would be torn up over my demise. You didn’t seem too upset.”

“Because I had a business to run,” he argued. “I was the only one that actually believed you were dead and mourned you.”

“And maybe that’s the problem,” I pointed out. “Maybe you’re not angry because I wasn’t dead, but because you believed it when everyone else had faith in me. I think the real problem here is you.”

Okay, so I thought I was making a logical point that would turn this whole thing around. As it turns out, that wasn’t the case by a long shot. If anything, I enraged the beast in my boss.

“The problem is me? Is that what you’re going with?”

Well, it was too late to turn back now. “It’s natural that you would feel betrayed after you grieved for me,” I said, trying to soften the blow.

“I feel betrayed because you let everyone think you were dead. Not because I was grieving for you.”

“But you did grieve for me,” I reiterated. “Huh? Come on. It’s okay to say it.”

“Yes, I did, but—”

“I knew it!” I laughed, leaning back against the door as I draped my arm over the seat. “Not that I’m happy you went through that, but I knew you loved me.”

“I don’t love you.”

“Come on. Just a little?” I asked, pinching my thumb and forefinger together.

He rolled his eyes, about to shift into drive when we heard the siren behind us. I looked out the back window and cringed. Shit, this was not good.

“Great. Just fucking great. Let me do the talking,” he muttered.

“No problema,” I answered, trying to adjust the towel to cover myself a little more.

I heard the crunch of the officer’s boots as he approached my window. It wasn’t uncommon for officers to approach the passenger side to avoid getting hit by traffic. This just wasn’t the day for any of this to happen. Cash rolled down the window and gave a two finger wave.

“Officer.”

The man removed his sunglasses and let his eyes slide over my body. “Son, is there a reason you’re only in a towel?”

I laughed. “Actually, there is. See, we were getting massages—totally platonically—and he got mad at me. See, I hurt his feelings because I had to fake my death. And he was mourning my loss, and all the time I was alive. It was for the greater good, though. So, when I came back to life and had to explain where I was, things got a little intense. We had a bit of a spat, and he ran out of our massage. I had to chase him, but we’re working it out now.”

I grinned up at the officer, hoping that would appease him.

He continued to stare at me, and that good feeling inside of me started to sink. “Are you on drugs?”

“No, I don’t take drugs. I mean, if we’re being honest, there was this one time that I almost had a secondary inhale of marijuana. Yeah, I swear I was hallucinating just from almost having it. No, I never touched the stuff after that happened.”

He cocked his head, looking past me to Cash. “Is he serious?”

“Not at all,” Cash said, throwing me under the bus.

“Hey—”

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to step out of the vehicle.”

“But—”

“Sir, I won’t ask again. Step out of the vehicle,” he said, drawing his taser.

“I didn’t take anything! And I’m not some crazy person. We really did have a fight. My wife is back at the spa right now! She can attest to everything!”

“You went for a spa day with your wife and this guy?” he asked. “Get out of the vehicle now.”

Rolling my eyes, I shoved the door open and got out, still holding my towel.

“Sir, release your hand if you don’t want to get shot.”

“But it’s holding up my—”

“I won’t ask again! Put your hands down!”

Sighing, I let go of my towel. Thankfully, it stayed up the whole time.

“Now, I’m gonna need you to walk ten paces toward my car and then back.”

I flinched back at that. “You want me to do a sobriety test?”

“This will go much faster if you just follow my orders.”

Maybe I should have stayed gone. At least then I would have the satisfaction of knowing Cash was suffering. I started walking, but kept stepping on sharp rocks. My balance was all off as I tried and failed to avoid cutting up my feet.

And then my towel started to fall. I gripped it, which only pissed off the officer.

“Hands where I can see them!”

“But my towel—”

I didn’t get another word out because fifty thousand volts of electricity shot through my body. I flopped on the ground like a fish, my eyes rolling back in my head with every second that passed. Finally, the pain stopped and I laid on the ground wishing I had just stayed gone.

---

“I CAN’T BELIEVE I’M IN JAIL IN A TOWEL,” I MUTTERED AS I sat on the bench.

Cash sat beside me and huffed out a laugh. “I can’t believe I’m in jail beside you in a towel.”

“See, that was unclear. Anyone who overheard would assume you’re in a towel too. I’m the only one in that position.”

“Because you’re the only one stupid enough to run out of the spa in only a towel,” he retorted.

“I was coming after you. I couldn’t let you think that I didn’t care.”

“I know you care,” he snapped. “I was angry. I wanted some space.”

“Space from what? The situation? It won’t help the hurt you feel inside,” I said, pressing my hand to his chest.

He looked down at my hand, then his nostrils flared as he glared at me. I carefully removed my hand and rested it on my lap. This wasn’t at all how I thought my day would go.

I looked down at my feet and sighed. “You know, it’s a shame I tore up my feet after such a great pedicure.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have run out barefoot,” Cash muttered.

“I’m serious. What was the name of the shit they used on us?”

“It was a Himalayan mask,” he answered. “It was pretty amazing.”

“And now it’s gone,” I sighed.

“I actually thought the massage was better.”

“Really?”

“Janice’s fingers were magic,” he sighed, leaning back against the wall. “Don’t tell Eva I said that.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“I had no idea such a small woman could have so much power.”

“Well, think of Rae. She’s tiny and could kick my ass in less than three seconds.”

He laughed at that. Thank God, he wasn’t as pissed anymore.

“So, tell me the truth,” he said, turning to face me. “What really happened out there?”

“I swear to God, Cash. Everything I told you was real.”

“All of it?” he questioned.

“What in the hell is this?”

My head whipped around at the same time as Cash’s. Lock stood on the other side of the bars, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared at us curiously.

“I’m not sure what I’m seeing here.”

“We went for a massage,” I said, hoping that would be enough of an explanation.

“And they kicked you out without your clothes?”

“Not exactly.”

His eyebrows shot up. “So, you chose to leave this way?”

Yeah, there was no good way to explain it. I already tried with the officer and now we were in jail and I was sporting taser marks on my chest.

“Are you here to bust us out?” Cash asked, standing and walking over to where Lock stood.

“You? Sure. Him? I think it would do him some good to stay here.”

“Actually, I would really appreciate getting out of here. I left Honey at the spa.”

“And you’re naked,” he pointed out.

“Right, and that. I meant to say that first.”

Lock turned his attention to Cash. “They’re working on your release papers. You should be out in no time.”

“Thank God.”

“Heads up, Eva’s a little pissed that you went for a massage and left her with the baby.”

“I was trying to get answers.”

He nodded. “Yeah, boss, the way I see it, you should have sent Eva to the spa with him to get answers.”

“You might be right.”

“Hey,” I stood, holding onto my towel. “There is nothing wrong with a man taking care of himself. In fact, I would say it’s a priority in our field of work.”

“You mean ours,” Cash said, motioning between him and Lock. “You run around with umbrellas and call it protection.”

“Hey, those umbrellas have worked on numerous occasions,” I argued.

“Well, an umbrella isn’t getting you out of here today,” Lock grinned. “You get to go before the judge.”

“For what?”

“Indecent exposure.”

“It was only indecent because the cop made me move my hands!”

“And you can argue that in court,” Lock grinned.

The officer walked forward and unlocked the cell, letting Cash out. I tried to worm my way out behind him, but didn’t have any luck.

“At least get me some pants!” I shouted as Lock walked away.

“I’ll send Honey over with them later,” he said over his shoulder as he walked away.

Sighing, I sat down on the bench. “Just fucking great.”

A man slumped in the corner sat up and grinned at me. “If it makes you feel better, I think you look great in a towel.”

---

AFTER A COLD NIGHT IN JAIL, LOCK FINALLY BROUGHT ME MY clothes. I had to keep the towel wrapped tight just in case the guy beside me had wayward thoughts. But he stuck to his corner and I stuck to mine. Besides, it wasn't the worst place I'd slept over the past year. If anything, it was quite pleasant. The jail was mostly quiet and someone brought me food. I called that a win.

Now I just had to get out of this violation without any further blowback. I walked into the courtroom and sat beside my lawyer. Cash was nice enough to hire one for me.

“How's it looking?”

“Well, since the officer caught you in only a towel, not too good.”

“But I was in a vehicle. They can't arrest me for getting a ride in a towel.”

“Look, just let me do the talking.”

We rose as the judge walked in. If it was just the public indecency charge, I wouldn't be worried. But that's not why I was here today. No, that was because I argued with the officer, refusing to obey orders. He discharged his taser because of me. Well, I thought the whole thing was unnecessary, but apparently, he didn't.

“How does the defense plead?”

I stood up before my lawyer could say anything. If I could just make the guy understand, this could all go away.

“Your Honor, this is all a big misunderstanding.”

The judge removed his glasses, looking at me like every other convict he'd had in this courtroom. “Oh, so you weren't running around naked?”

“No, sir. I was in a towel.”

“Which you dropped in front of a police officer.”

I snorted at that. “You know, this is entrapment.”

“In what way?”

“Well, I was in a vehicle in my towel. That much is correct. And we were pulled over on the side of the road while I talked to my boss.”

“And what was so important that you had to pull over and talk to him while naked?”

“Well, it was about my disappearance over the last year.”

“Your disappearance?”

“Yes. I was on a classified mission and had to allow everyone to believe I was dead.”

“A classified mission for whom?”

I chuckled. “Sir, if I told you, that would be breaking the law. I would end up in prison.”

He huffed in irritation, shoving his glasses back on his face. “Son, you’re not doing yourself any favors by not explaining yourself.”

“It’s true, though. I was gone for a year. I had to fake my death and everything. Twice!”

“Twice? Why would you have to fake your death twice?”

I thought about how much I could tell him. It was a dicey area, and technically, I was stretching the truth when I said it was classified. Since Rafe no longer worked for the FBI, it couldn’t actually be classified. However, as long as I didn’t tell any details of the mission or who I was working for, it should be fine.

“Well, sir, the first time didn’t really hold with my colleagues. They didn’t believe I was dead.”

“And how did you die the first time?”

“My truck blew up outside a bar. They thought I was in it.”



“In order for that to work, you would have to have a body.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but realized I’d just stepped in a can of worms. “Yes, one was provided.”

“A random body,” he laughed. “You just...conjured up a body and tossed him in to be blown up.”

“Well, it wasn’t random. My boss—not the guy back there—my other boss, is the one that procured the body.”

The judge chuckled again. “I like how you say procured, as if that makes it less illegal.”

“It’s not illegal if the body is donated.”

“And was it donated?”

“You’d have to ask my boss. Again, not that one,” I pointed to the back of the room.

“Yes, the other one,” the judge muttered. “And who is this boss?”

“Well, again, I can’t tell you that without—”

“Ending up in jail. Yes, I can see we’re going to go around and around on this one.”

“But it’s all true.”

“Let’s say I believe this. How did you kill yourself the second time?”

“Uh...” That one was a little more hard to explain. “I... sort of blew up in a plane.”

The judge stared at me, then tossed down his pen and leaned back in his chair. “If you blew up in a plane, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Right, but it wasn’t me.”

“So, you’re saying you didn’t blow up in a plane.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And your boss—not that one—is the one behind this explosion.”

“That’s correct.”

“But you won’t tell me who your boss is.”

I thought about it all in my head, then nodded. “That’s correct.”

“Yes, I can see everything’s correct with you.”

“It’s true.”

“I still don’t see how any of this relates to you being in a towel in a truck.”

“Well, Your Honor, I was somewhere...doing a job...and it didn’t go as planned. And everyone thought I was dead—”

“For a third time?” the judge asked.

“Well, first time for my boss.”

The judge nodded and waved for me to continue.

“And I had to get out of there on my own.”

“So, why didn’t you just return to *this* boss once you escaped? Or is that classified too?”

I grinned at his humor. “No, Your Honor. But I wasn’t exactly in a position to get home.”

“And why not?”

“Because I was in Russia being held by an oligarch. He was former KGB.”

The judge rested his chin in his hands as he stared at me. “I think I’m going to need to hear this.”

“So do I,” the prosecutor said.

“Well, it happened after the job. I was floating in the ocean—”

“Why were you floating in the ocean?”

“Because I escaped and...that’s all I can tell you.” The judge rolled his eyes, so I continued. “Like I said, I was floating in the ocean when I was picked up by a Russian vessel. When they figured out where I had come from, I was immediately taken to the mainland. The man I met that day

was very intimidating, but I knew I could escape given enough time.”



# FNG

*SOMEWHERE OFF THE RUSSIAN COAST.*

*Approximately 14 hours, 22 minutes, and 16 seconds after the failed mission...*

RELIEF WAS IN SIGHT, BUT I KNEW IT WAS SHORT-LIVED THE moment I heard their accents. Russians. This wasn't good, but at least I would be out of the ocean, even if I did have a bullet in my head twenty-four hours later. There was only so long a man could float around in the ocean.

They yelled at me as I was dragged by my arms out of the water. I allowed them to pull me across the dry land and toss me down just outside a house. I was shivering from the cold I still felt deep in my bones, but the moment he stepped in front of me, I knew I had bigger problems.

He was every bit as intimidating as I imagined a Russian to be. Tall and muscular, he was heavily tatted and just as mean looking. The orange glow of his cigarette lit his face just enough to see a thick mustache. I knew then I was in trouble. There was no one coming to help me, and even if by chance someone showed up, how was I ever supposed to get out of here alive?

“You are trespassing,” the man said.

“Technically, only because you pulled me from the ocean,” I said, hoping he would see reason.

“You come on my property uninvited.”

“Again,” I said, trying to stop my body from shaking, “I only came on your property because I was dragged out of the water.”

The man stepped forward, tossing his cigarette on the ground beside me. He stomped it out with his boot, then motioned for the men to pick me up. He turned on his heel and started for the house. I had a sinking feeling in my gut that this was not going to end well.

The doors opened and I was dragged into the back of the house through the kitchen. I saw the door standing open that clearly led to the basement and felt my heart kick up just a tad. Once I was down there, I’d never be seen again. I might not be able to die, but I could be tortured until I ended up in a bed, unable to communicate in any way.

I frowned when we passed the door and headed through the house to a very nice living area. Was he going to kill me right here where he watched TV? But instead, I was placed on his sofa—his very nice and expensive sofa. I immediately stood up and the man turned to me, his eyes narrowing on me.

“You no sit?”

“I couldn’t. I would ruin your furniture. I’m soaking wet.”

He waved me off and turned to pour himself a drink. “It is just couch. Sit.”

I glanced back at it and decided what the hell. If I was going to die, I might as well be comfortable first. He walked over to me, handing me a glass of what appeared to be vodka. But how could I be sure? Just one drink and I would be dead. No blood needed.

He held up his glass and said some kind of toast, then threw back the contents of his glass. When I didn’t immediately drink, he narrowed his eyes at me.

“It is rude not to drink. You drink. You get warm.”

Well, when he put it like that...yeah, it was still a bad idea to drink just so I wasn’t seen as rude, but what other choice did I have? I downed it, knowing that if it killed me quickly, at

least I wouldn't have to be tortured. I winced at the burn, but quickly felt it warming my body.

"So, you are floating in ocean," the man said, taking the seat opposite of me.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"And how is it you come to this...this position?"

"Floating in the ocean?" He nodded. "It's classified."

The man leaned back in his seat, running his finger over the top of his lip. "Yes, I know all about classified."

I bet he did. The man looked like he killed people for a living.

"It is enough for one night. You get some sleep and we talk in the morning."

I twirled the glass in my hand, wishing I had just one more drink to keep me warm as I was thrown in the cellar for the night. As if reading my mind, he walked over with a decanter and poured me another glass.

"Drink. You feel better."

I tossed it back and stood, my body shivering in the process.

"You need warm bath. Come, Alexei will show you to your room."

"My room?" I asked. Surely there was some mistake. Maybe he thought room was the correct term for cellar or basement. But I wasn't taken down. I was guided to the stairs and down the hall of the second floor to a set of double doors. The man pushed them open and I walked slack-jawed into the most comfortable room I'd ever seen in my life.

"This is for me?" I asked Alexei.

"You stay here. Bathroom is there," he pointed to the other side of the room. Then he turned and walked out, closing the door behind him. He didn't even lock it like I expected.

I huffed out a laugh, but then realized maybe they were just making me comfortable until they could kill me in my sleep. But at least I would die in luxury. The first thing I did was strip out of my wet clothes and run a hot bath. I wasn't normally a bath guy, but I needed hot water surrounding me. And frankly, I didn't think I was strong enough to stand. It was only when I was about to sink down in the hot water that I saw the arrangement of various bath salts and oils waiting for me on the ledge.

Honestly, I wasn't sure I should go for it. After all, I was a guest in his house—until he decided he didn't need me anymore. And on that thought, I dumped in the bath salts and a little bubble bath as well, then leaned back and basked in the warmth of the water. This was the good life and I was going to enjoy it for as long as I still had a head.

I must have fallen asleep at some point because when I woke up, a man was standing over me. It wasn't Alexei and that had me worried.

“My name is Sasha. I am here to—”

“Kill me,” I nodded.

He looked at me funny. “No, to bring you food. Come, you get out of tub and I prepare dinner plate for you.”

“Seriously?” I asked, still expecting him to draw his gun and shoot me in the face.

He walked over to the door and took a robe off the back I hadn't even noticed. “I hope it is what you like,” he said, handing it to me.

“Uh...I'm sure it's good.”

He looked stricken at my comment, almost like I had insulted him. I felt the fabric and smiled for him. “It's perfect. So soft and fluffy.” When my eyes met his again, he seemed pleased with that answer.

“Is good, right? I wash in special detergent by hand. And then...” He pursed his lips together, chuckling slightly. “No, I cannot tell you. It is secret.”



This was the weirdest thing I'd ever experienced. "Um... then you'd better not tell me."

"I will see you in other room. Don't worry about cleaning up. Olga will be in tomorrow to take care of you."

Ah, so they sent women in to do the dirty work. This was a sick game they were playing, allowing me to enjoy one final night before they took me out by way of a woman. And in some ways, it was poetic justice. Rae could kick my ass at home, and now this Olga woman would take my life.

I wrapped the robe around me and walked into the other room, sitting at the table Sasha had prepared for me. He walked over with a napkin and laid it on my lap. I stared at the massive amount of food in front of me and felt my tummy rumble. Sasha chuckled, then picked up a bottle and poured me a glass of something.

"Is special recipe to regain strength."

The way he was watching me, it was like he was waiting for me to eat. Well, that made sense since he was going to kill me. I took my first bite and nearly sighed in relief. It was the most amazing food I'd ever tasted. I forgot all about him killing me or how I was going to get out of here. All I wanted was to fill my belly. Before I knew it, I was chugging whatever he poured into my glass, and within fifteen minutes, the massive amount of food on my plate was gone.

I rested back in my seat, closing my eyes in contentment.

"Is good?"

"Very good," I answered without opening my eyes.

"Come, you sleep well now."

I got up and walked over to the bed as he turned it down for me. It was almost as if he lived to make other people happy. Maybe he wasn't trying to kill me. I got in and was asleep before he even left the room.

---

“JESUS CHRIST!” I SHOUTED WHEN I FELT SOMETHING touching my toes the next morning. I jerked my foot back, only to find Sasha at the foot of my bed. “What are you doing?”

“You sleep long time. I cut your nails.”

“You...what?”

The man sat up straighter and grinned at me. “I do not know when you will wake up. So, I cut your nails for you.”

“My nails?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “They are very long. You go back to sleep while I finish.”

His head disappeared at the foot of the bed and then I felt his hands on my feet again, but I couldn’t do it. The bath and the dinner were great, but there was no way I could allow him to trim my toenails. That was crossing some kind of line.

“You know what?” I said, tossing off the covers. “I think I’m ready to get up for the day.”

He rushed over to a wardrobe and pulled it open. “I have taken the liberty to wash your things. However, we have a few more suitable choices if you are interested.”

I grabbed the first thing I saw and yanked it from the wardrobe. Then Sasha walked over to a dresser and picked out a pair of underwear for me. This was by far the strangest experience of my life. Then again, I was standing in front of him naked and he didn’t seem to care.

I quickly dressed as he stood there waiting for me. By the time I was dressed, he was eagerly waiting by the door. He pointed at the floor where a pair of slippers waited for me. I put them on as he opened the door.

“Come, we go to breakfast.”

I followed him downstairs, surprised at how comfortable the slippers were. Still, I couldn’t get too used to this life. I could be dead at any second. I walked into the dining room where the man from last night was waiting. He stood as I entered, smiling as he motioned for me to sit down.

“Ah, you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Is good. Is very good. Now, we eat.”

“You don’t drink at breakfast, do you?”

He burst out laughing, clapping his hands together once. “Oh, you are funny man. No, we drink juice this morning. Sit, sit. You tell me all about yourself.”

I was about to pull out the chair when Sasha rushed over and did it for me. I sat down and stared at the man who took me in. “Uh...well, I’m an American.”

“Yes, very good American. You fight in military.”

“How do you know that?”

He laughed again. “My dear Mr. Helmer, I already know everything about you.”

“How?”

“I am former KGB,” he said, pressing a finger to the side of his nose. “Is very hush-hush. But I have no secrets from my friends.”

“And we’re friends?”

“Of course! I lay out red carpet for you.”

“But why? I’m nobody.”

“Ah,” he said, standing from his chair. “Any friend of our mutual friend is a friend of mine.”

As he walked over to me, I got the uneasy feeling that we weren’t on the same page. “And who is our mutual friend?”

He leaned over, his hand resting on the arm of the chair as he whispered in my ear. “He walks in the dead of night like ninja.”

As if that was supposed to tell me something. I had no clue who he was talking about, but I wasn’t about to let on that little fact. If I was no longer a friend of our mutual friend, he might have me killed.

“So, if you already knew who I was, why did you ask me to tell you about myself?”

“Because I want to know real you,” he said, strolling around the room. “You see my paintings. Everyone tells a story, but to really know what the artist is thinking and feeling, you must meet the man, yes?”

I nodded, understanding what he was saying. I had a choice now. I could tell him about myself or I could choose to keep things a secret. Either way could be dangerous. But better to keep my enemies close, and until I figured out if he was friend or foe, I had to play this safe.

“Well, first, I would ask your name.”

He walked back to his seat, smiling at me the whole time. “Ivan.”

Well, at least I had a name to go with the face. “Alright, Ivan. What do you want to know?”

He leaned forward, his eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Tell me, how do you come to be called FNG?”

How the hell did he know that?

“Um...I was the new guy on the job.”

“And this is some kind of good nickname?”

“Fucking new guy,” I answered. “It’s a military thing.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “When I joined military, they call me Ivan the Slayer.”

“That’s...okay. And was that because you slayed dragons?”

“No,” he chuckled. “No, I was slayer because of how I kill my enemies. Sadly, the name dropped when I join KGB.”

“What was that like?” I asked curiously.

“It was...the best of times,” he said poetically. Heaving a big sigh, he stared up at the ceiling as if remembering a great memory. “Those were the days. Do you know, I have not

killed a man since the dissolution of the Soviet Union? Is very sad.”

“Yeah, I can understand that.”

“But...here I am, surrounded by beauty. I want nothing more than to live the rest of my days in peace.”

Yeah, I believed that after he said he missed killing people. I raised my juice glass, hoping to keep him happy. “To peace.”

“To new friendships,” he saluted.

We drank to our new relationship, but I was still wary, unsure how this would end for me. We ate as he filled me in on the good ol’ days in the USSR. With the fall of the Communist Party, his days of ruling were over, aside from the fact that he was rich and still at the top. And in order to stay at the top, I was pretty sure he still had his fingers in some rather illegal operations. After all, he was former KGB.

“So, you stay with me, Mr. Helmer. You serve me as Sasha and Alexei serve me.”

“I serve you,” I said in surprise.

“Yes, you will be my personal butler. And Sasha will be yours.”

So, the butler had a butler. That was interesting. But it meant I was staying alive for a little bit longer, so I went with it.

“And what are my responsibilities as your butler?” I really hoped he didn’t want me to cut his toenails. That was just too creepy.

“You will be my personal...friend.”

“Okay, and what else?”

“You know...you go with me places. You will be my companion.”

Companion to a former KGB agent. I could do that. It would keep me alive. That is, as long as he wasn’t still going out and spying on other countries. That could get me killed fast. Or even seen as a traitor to my own country. Either way, I

had to play this right and stay on his good side. My life depended on it.



## FNG

“WHAT DOES any of this have to do with why you were naked?” the judge interrupted.

“We were at the spa and he was going to leave. I couldn’t let him go without explaining.”

“Explaining what?”

“Well, why I didn’t contact him.”

“So, you ran out naked?” the judge asked.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“And how is any of this entrapment?”

“Well, Your Honor, I was only naked because the officer ordered me to release the towel. He knew that the moment I let go, the towel would fall. Is that the very definition of entrapment?”

He sat back in his seat, sighing in disbelief. “So, you want the court to believe that you went out on a highly classified mission, escaped in just the nick of time, then were picked up in the ocean by a former KGB spy who ordered you to be his butler?”

I knew how it sounded, but did the judge want me to lie? “Every word of it is true.”

He huffed out a laugh, shaking his head. “That is by far the most far-fetched, inconceivable, ridiculous story I have ever heard. I’m not sure who’s stupider. You for telling it or me for listening. Charges dismissed.”



He banged the gavel and got up from his seat, storming out of the courtroom. I turned to my lawyer with a grin on my face. "Thanks for the help."

"Not sure I did anything," he answered, stuffing his notepad in his briefcase. "Do me a favor. Tell your boss if he ever needs my services again for you, don't bother calling."

I turned and waved to Cash, who rolled his eyes at me. Honey was sitting beside him, practically bouncing in her seat as she waited for me. I walked to the back and wrapped her up in my arms, glad that was over.

"How the fuck did you manage to talk your way out of those charges?"

"I was telling the truth."

Cash shoved up out of his seat and glared at me. "Really? You stayed with a KGB spy? For how long?"

I thought it over. "You know, it's hard to say. Time kind of slipped away from me, but I think it was for a good two months."

"What happened? Did he get tired of you?"

"You know, that's just mean. We were actually good friends until he died."

"You were good friends with a Russian," he said mockingly.

"Why is that so unbelievable?"

He ignored me and headed out of the courtroom. I took Honey's hand in mine and followed. What was it going to take for him to believe me?

"Hey!" I snapped.

Cash turned around and got in my face. "How the fuck is anyone supposed to believe you when you keep lying?"

"I'm not lying," I insisted.

"So, you have proof that this spy took you in? You must have pictures or something."

I laughed at that. “Pictures of a former spy? You’re crazy.”

“I’m crazy?” he barked out a laugh. “You know, you should respect us more than this. Everyone spent months looking for you, never giving up. The one thing you could do is give us a little fucking credit for knowing a lie when we hear it.”

He turned and walked away, but I didn’t follow this time. I wasn’t sure what more I could do or say to convince him at this point.

“Are you okay?” Honey asked.

“Psh, of course I am,” I lied. “It’s no big deal. I just have to give them time to come around to the fact that I’m not dead. It hasn’t sunk in yet.”

“That could take a while,” she said, running her hand up my chest. “You know what we could do to pass the time?”

“Shawarma?” I said, sighing heavily.

Then I felt her tongue lick the shell of my ear and a shiver ran down my spine in the best possible way. I cocked my head toward her, catching the sly grin on her face.

“I was thinking of something a little more—”

“Let’s go,” I said, grabbing her hand as I dragged her to the road. I held my hand up, waiting for a cab that would never come. It was too small a town, but surely, someone would see my hand and know that this was a desperate situation.

She giggled beside me as I waved at people. “FNG, don’t you think we should just call for a ride?”

I spun and pulled her into my arms. “Dean,” I whispered just before I kissed her. “Always call me Dean.”

“Okay, Dean.”

I was just about to kiss her when I realized that I sort of wanted this marriage thing to work. Maybe a lot more than sort of. I wanted the stability that my friends had. I wanted the girl to settle down with. And I could have it all with her, but not like this. I needed to know her better.

“I have a different idea.”

Her eyes lit up. “I’m not really into that, but maybe if we stay hidden...”

“No, this has nothing to do with sex,” I corrected her. “I want to take you on a date.”

Clearly, she was confused by the concept. “Like...a date, date?”

“Exactly.”

“Why would we do that?”

“To get to know each other better,” I suggested. “Imagine how much better the sex will be when we actually know each other.”

“But that’s what makes it interesting right now,” she argued. “We don’t know each other. It’s like a continual one-night stand.”

“We’ve been to the spa together and you’ve stood by me through court. I think we’re past that stage.”

She glanced down at her watch. “It’s only breakfast.”

“Who says dates have to happen at night?” I tugged her with me across the street to a diner. Once inside, we grabbed a booth and sat across from each other. “Order anything you want. Nothing’s too expensive for my girl.”

Then I looked down at the menu and saw that practically everything was under five dollars. Okay, not my best first impression, but it wasn’t like I’d always be taking her to cheap diners.

“What are you going to get?” she asked.

“A cheeseburger, fries, and a strawberry milkshake.”

“For breakfast?”

“Why not? Who says you have to eat breakfast at breakfast?”

The sparkle in her eyes was just like the night I met her. Part of me wished we were back in that cantina, just the two of

us as we danced to the sultry music.

“What?” she asked, cocking her head to the side.

“You’re beautiful,” I said, unable to stop myself from staring at her. I knew now our kids would be beautiful.

“Well, you’re not so bad yourself. So, tell me, why were you in the cantina that night?”

“I was there for you,” I said smoothly.

“You were not,” she grinned. “I remember seeing you in the corner, wondering if you were dangerous. Something about you drew me in and I couldn’t stop staring at you.”

She plopped her chin in her hand as she continued to smile at me. Man, I couldn’t resist this woman.

“Well, if I’m being honest, I wasn’t there for a drink.”

“I never thought you were. A white boy like you at the cantina? I knew you were there for something else.”

“I was. There was a man I was supposed to meet. But I got a little sidetracked.” I shot her a wink, not that she needed me to tell her it was the sway of her body as she moved across the room that had me so enchanted.

“Who was this man?”

“I was going to find out that night.”

She nodded knowingly. “But then you met me and that fight broke out.”

“Precisely. I was more worried about staying alive and getting you out of there than the meet I had.”

“Okay, so what was this all about? I know pretty much everyone that walked into that cantina. Remember, I was on my own mission.”

She had a point. I didn’t want to drag her into any of this, but she might be able to help. If my contact was a regular around there, she would know him.

“Well, to tell you that, I have to go back a few months. As you know, my original mission failed and I ended up all over

the place, trying to find a way to get back to OPS.”

“Why did it take you so long?”

The waitress walked up with a smile on her face just at that moment. Luckily, Honey didn't push for more information in front of the woman. We ordered and waited for her to leave before I continued.

“What do you know about the Aztec Empire?”

“Um...not really much.”

“Yeah, me neither, which is where this tale gets a tad tricky. It was about two months after I fled Russia. I was out of money and had no way to get ahold of anyone at OPS. I went to an American Embassy, but when I got there and they ran my name through their database, I came up as a wanted man. So, I ran and got passage on a small vessel that would take me to Mexico. However, things didn't go as planned.”

Honey grabbed her milkshake from the waitress as she arrived at the table, then sucked it down as she stared at me intently. “What happened?”

I took my own milkshake, spinning it on the table as I considered how best to tell her this next part.

“It was no ordinary vessel. I knew that much as soon as I got on board. The men...they stared at me cautiously, like I was an outsider. At first, I thought it was just nerves about having someone new on the ship. After all, I could be there to rob them. The only reason I got passage was because I promised to earn my way across the stormy seas. As it turns out, I might have been better off taking my chances in Russia.”



# FNG

*ON A SHIP.*

*Approximately 5 months, 6 days, 21 hours, 14 minutes, and 45 seconds after FNG-Day...*

I WAS CAREFUL NOT TO LOOK ANYONE IN THE EYE AS I GOT TO work on the captain's orders. The air was thick with tension as the men continued to watch me. I kept a knife strapped to my ankle at all times, afraid these men were after something more dangerous than transporting cargo from one port to another.

"You're done," one man said, walking over to me with his muscles bulging.

He was trying to intimidate me, to show his authority over me. I had no problem with this, though. I needed some space to figure out my next move. All I had to do was make it to Mexico, but I had the feeling this wouldn't be a simple journey.

I heard the whispers as I walked to my bunk room. Normally, I would be in with the rest of the crew, but they didn't trust me. They stuck me in some small cargo hold. I didn't even have a cot or hammock to sleep in. And apparently, it didn't matter to them. They weren't here to make my accommodations more comfortable.

I looked around my small quarters and sighed. Aside from a few barrels and some boxes, there wasn't much in my quarters to sleep on. And a crate didn't sound very

comfortable. There had to be something on this ship that I could use, maybe a blanket or some netting. I quietly opened my door and peeked out into the darkness. Not a soul moved, but there were supposed to be others that came down at the same time as me.

I snuck out, tiptoeing across the wood floors until I heard voices coming from just around the corner. I pressed myself against the wall, hoping no one heard me. The last thing I wanted was to be thrown overboard.

“How can we be sure about this information?”

“I have studied this for years. Trust me, if we stay on this course, we’ll never get there in time.”

“And how do you expect to get to Spain? This ship is not headed in that direction.”

“Then we force the captain’s hand. I have the coordinates. We just need someone to get us to the dig site.”

“Wait, you’re saying someone is already looking for the gold?”

“Yes, but they don’t know where to look. I’ve got it all figured out. Now we just have to get in and find it before they do.”

“And the captain?”

Silence stretched the conversation leaving an ominous feel. “If we can’t bribe him, then he needs to go.”

That was enough for me to know that I had to hightail it out of there. I was on the wrong ship, and if I didn’t find a way off, I was going to get caught up in a murder plot, along with some kind of thievery. This was not going to help me get back to my life.

I turned to leave when a heavy hand landed on my shoulder. I was spun around and shoved up against the wall as a gun was pressed to my head. The man who stood in front of me was taller than me, with a thick frame that rivaled some of the men I worked with. That, however, was where the



similarities ended. With foul breath and rotting teeth, I knew this man didn't have a regular dental routine.

"You shouldn't be listening in on private conversations."

"I...no, I wasn't. I—"

He dug the gun into my temple, effectively shutting me up. "What exactly did you hear?"

"Nothing," I said, but that wasn't the truth. "Okay, I heard something about gold and going to the wrong country. But that was it. Oh, and how you plan to get the captain to either go along with the plan or murder him. Personally, I'm not for unnecessary violence, but that's me."

His eyes narrowed as he stared at me. "Are you an idiot?"

I thought about that for a moment. Given my current circumstances, there was every possibility that I was. However, I saw a way out of this.

"Not at all. Just a guy looking to make a little money." And not die mysteriously at sea. "What you don't realize is that if you get rid of the captain, you still need someone to get you to Spain."

"You're saying you can get us there?"

I snorted at that. "Totally." I'd never driven a ship in my life. I wasn't even sure if drive was the right word. Steer? Did one glide or float? I didn't know the terminology, but I didn't have to. I just had to convince this guy I wasn't expendable.

He stared at me curiously, then stepped back, holstering his weapon. "Why don't you join us," he said, not really asking.

I followed him around the corner to a table. Three men were watching me carefully. I had to play this cool, like I knew exactly what I was doing. I took a seat and stared at the map in front of me. I wasn't familiar with the area, but he said it was in Spain.

"So, what's the take?"

"Aztec gold," he answered. "A lot of it."

"We're a long way from Spain."

“What’s your point?” another asked, glaring at me.

Yeah, I got it. I didn’t belong. I was the new guy and they didn’t trust me.

“I’m just wondering how you can be sure we’ll get there before someone else finds it.”

“Why is he here?” one of the other guys asked.

“Because he can get us where we’re going if the captain doesn’t cooperate.”

“And you trust him?”

They all turned to me questioningly. I chuckled, holding out my hands. This was going downhill fast. “Guys, I’m like you. I just want to make money.”

“Yeah?” one of them jerked his head at me. “And why’s that?”

“Well, basically, I worked a job and it ended badly. Then I ended up in Russia and I’ve been trying to get home, but I’m now listed as a wanted man. So, you can see how landing in a big pile of money would help ease the discomfort of not having anywhere to call home for the time being.”

It took a minute for them to all nod, but eventually, they came around.

“Krill,” the first one said, then it continued around the table.

“Omnis.”

“Mallock.”

Then we reached the guy who held a gun to my head. “Tim.”

I almost burst out laughing, but held it back. “FNG.”

“What’s that stand for?” Omnis asked.

“Fucking new guy.”

It was a shame that I was once again the new guy. And with this crowd, I hoped I wasn’t the new guy for long. With any luck, I could lose them at the next port.

Now that introductions were out of the way, it was time to get down to what exactly they were after. Aztec gold was a vague response. “So, what makes this gold so special that everyone’s looking for it?”

Tim turned the map around and pointed to the right-hand corner. “This is where I think the gold is. Have you ever heard of Montezuma’s treasure?”

“No.”

“It’s been missing for five hundred years. According to the legend, when Montezuma ruled over the Aztec Empire in 1519, a Spanish conquistador named Hernán Cortés landed on the shores of what is now Mexico. Now, Montezuma had spent years expanding the empire. By the time Cortés got there, the cities were filled with gold and silver. Rumor has it that the Spanish spent six months there before massacring hundreds of the Aztecs. After killing Montezuma, they fled with all the gold they could carry.”

“Yeah, but the gold is lost now,” Krill said. “The legend says that the Spanish had to dump the gold as they were fleeing.”

“It would have been found if they had dumped it,” Tim argued.

“Not if they hid it.”

“Yeah, but why would they go to all that trouble to kill hundreds of people and then leave the gold behind?” I asked.

“Because they returned,” Krill said. “A year later, Cortés returned and overthrew the new ruler. That was the end of the Aztec Empire.”

“According to legend,” I clarified.

“Some people say the treasure was taken into the United States,” Mallock said. “They’ve searched as far as Utah for it, but have come up empty.”

“Then why aren’t we looking in Mexico?”

“Because it’s been searched a million times. Everyone goes to Mexico to look for the treasure,” Tim said. “If it was

there, someone would have found it.”

“Someone did find it,” Omnis interrupted. “In 1981, there was a piece of gold found there that was a piece of Montezuma’s treasure.”

“Yeah, because they dropped a piece along the way,” Tim argued. “When Cortés returned, he took the treasure with him.”

“He was the supreme ruler,” Mallock argued. “There’s no evidence that he returned to Spain until years later.”

“Maybe he took it over as a peace offering,” I suggested. “Becoming ruler would make quite a few enemies.”

“Could be,” Tim sighed. “He died a poor man.”

It was an interesting story, but not one that would likely help me in any way. If men had been searching for this treasure for so long, it was unlikely we were going to find it. On the other hand, with three men ready to kill me, I didn’t have much of a choice but to go along.

“So, where do we start?”

---

THE WINDS ROARED, RIPPING THE MAINSAIL AS WE FOUGHT THE harsh waves. I’d not seen a storm like this in all my years. Rain pelted me, sending pinpricks of pain through my face. Still, I did everything I could to help the crew through this treacherous storm.

A particularly large wave crashed into the deck, swooping me off my feet and sending me sliding across the massive expanse of the ship. I just barely latched onto the side before going over. Not even the rail was enough to battle this ferocious storm.

A hand latched onto my wrist and I looked up into the evil eyes of Mallock. Since the day we met two weeks ago, I could feel his eyes watching my every move. He didn’t like me and

didn't want me participating in their scheme. And now he had the perfect opportunity to get rid of me.

I glanced down at the icy waves, praying for a quick death. But instead of having the sensation of free falling, I was dragged over the railing and tossed on the deck. When I looked up, Mallock bowed his head slightly.

“You owe me now.”

I swallowed hard knowing that was a debt that would soon come due. I scrambled to my feet and returned to my post. On the horizon, I could see light as the storm ebbed in the distance. If we could just make it through this storm, it wouldn't be too much longer until we put our plan into effect.

I ran behind the wheel, cranking it hard to the left to counteract the waves trying to topple us. I spun the wheel, each time straining with how difficult the task had become. I was failing my mission, and then I'd never get home. I'd never see my friends again. I couldn't allow that to happen.

A flame lit in my belly, igniting as I slowly looked up into the eye of the storm. “You won't win!” I shouted. “This is my day! I will conquer you and claw my way back from hell if you try to take me!”

My war cry was drowned out by the sound of the waves crashing into the ship. My hands slipped from the wheel and I was flung back as another wave hit us. As my head smacked against the bridge, I knew it was now or never. The wheel spun in every direction, going wherever the storm led us. With every ounce of strength left in my bones, I crawled back to the wheel and hauled myself up. I caught the spokes, grunting at the force it took to hold them in position.

My muscles burned as I fought to gain control over the beast. With one final spin, I righted the ship and cried out into the night. As if the storm knew who had won, the winds died down and the sea calmed. Lightning flashed across the sky one last time, striking in the distance.

My hands shook from the strain of holding the wheel. But as the waters calmed, I finally released my hands and stared at

the blood dripping where the wheel tore apart my palms. I huffed out a laugh, knowing that should have turned out so much worse.

Tim walked up to me, clapping me on the shoulder with a grin. “I never should have doubted you.”

I stared at him for a moment, unsure what he was talking about. Then I remembered I told him I could captain the ship. “Right,” I nodded, trying to get back into character. “The ocean is no match for me. No storm has ever bested me, and it never will.”



# JOHNNY

“NO STORM HAS EVER BESTED me, and it never will?” I asked as I ducked down behind the bush.

“What?”

I glanced over at FNG crouching beside me. “Are you a fucking writer now?”

“I could be.”

“But you’re not. What really happened?”

Shadows moved on the side of the house, pulling my attention from FNG. If I wasn’t careful about this, I would get us killed, along with the one man that risked everything for me.

“I told you what happened. Why does no one believe me?”

“Because you don’t know how to steer a ship,” I retorted.

The whole thing was fucking ridiculous. And instead of doing the job I needed to in silence, I had FNG tagging along behind me. I wasn’t even sure why he was here.

“Shouldn’t you be back with your wife?”

I didn’t wait for his answer. I shot out from behind the bush and followed the men creeping around the side of the house. Pressing my back to the siding, I drew my gun and attached a silencer. No one could know I was here. Least of all, the man inside the house.

“Who are we killing?” FNG said, sneaking up behind me and whispering in my ear.



I nearly jumped, then closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “What the fuck are you doing?” I asked. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

He huffed out a laugh. “Yeah, like I haven’t heard that in the past year.”

I stared at him like the idiot he was. “Do you know what I’m doing here?”

“Not really. I just jumped in the car when you ran away from me.”

“I ran away for a reason. I don’t give a shit about your stories. I’m here for a job, and you’re fucking that up.”

I snapped my fingers, knowing exactly what he needed. “Okay, so here’s the plan. I’ll go around the other side and pull out my umbrella and give it a few twirls. I’ll have the bad guys so mesmerized that they won’t see you coming. You’ll take down the first one, and I’ll use my umbrella to give the final one-two punch. Then—”

I held up my hand, stopping him from saying any more. “There will be no distractions, no umbrellas, and no twirling. Am I clear?”

He opened his mouth to argue, but stopped the moment he saw the look on my face. I wasn’t fucking around today. I was here to protect my teammate, not listen to his insane story about weathering a storm.

I peeked around the corner and saw the man at the sliding door. The moment I fired, they’d not only know where I was, but one of them would get away. Jack could never know I was here. He’d kill me if he knew I was checking up on him. I wasn’t even supposed to know his new address.

I turned back to FNG, knowing there was no other way. “Alright, here’s the plan. No guns. We move in fast and take them down. No sound. Got it?”

“Got it, boss.”

I stopped and turned back to him. “I’m not your boss.”

“Right, but you sort of are,” he grinned.

I gritted my teeth, drawing on all the patience I had left in me. “No, I’m really not. Get your ass around the house.”

“Righty-O,” he grinned as he turned. He whispered *boss* just as he rounded the corner. I rolled my eyes and got back into position. As I looked around the corner, I cursed under my breath. They were just slipping into the house. Jack was going to know I was here, and then he’d really kick my ass.

I slipped around the corner, running full tilt for the back door. I couldn’t wait for FNG. I shoved the door open and raced inside, tackling the first man in my path. We landed with a grunt on the kitchen linoleum and his gun skittered across the floor. I didn’t have time to look for the second man as I grabbed the first in a choke hold and wrapped my legs around his arms, ensuring he couldn’t fight me. But I should have been looking for guy number two in the dark.

Suddenly, my air supply was cut off and the urge to fight back shot into overdrive as something sliced into my neck. But the strain around my throat only made my muscles tense around the man in front of me. I could hear his strangled gasps for air and increased the pressure. With every second that passed, I could feel the life draining from my body. The room faded in and out of darkness until all that was left was a dim light in the distance.

And then the pressure was gone and I collapsed to the floor, struggling for every ounce of air as I stared up at the dark ceiling. Jack’s face appeared above me, the anger evident as he knelt down.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Saving your ass,” I grumbled as I rolled over, kicking the man in front of me out of the way. I pressed my fingers to his throat for several seconds, but felt no pulse. Jack’s hand wrapped around my bicep and then he hauled me to my feet. I was a little unsteady, stumbling back a step into the kitchen table.

“Again, why the fuck are you here?”

“Someone just broke in to kill you,” I said, my voice coming out a raspy tone. I pressed my hand to my throat, clearing it in the hopes of easing the ache.

“Yeah, and I would have taken care of it. Do you have any fucking clue what will happen if someone finds out you’re here?” he snapped.

I took a moment to look him over. He looked rough, like he hadn’t slept in weeks. He was only released from prison a month ago. I would have been here sooner, but it took me that long to figure out where he was. Even Rae couldn’t find him, but that was the point when Gelbero set him up here. He was supposed to be a ghost.

Jack walked to the back door, pulling a gun as FNG rounded the corner, coming to a halt with his hands in the air.

“Hey! It’s you!” FNG said enthusiastically. “Man, have I got a story for you.”

“I don’t want to hear a fucking story,” Jack said, grabbing FNG by the shirt and dragging him inside before shutting the door. He turned to us, the anger on his face clear as day. “If they find out you’re here, I can’t vouch for you. Don’t make me put a bullet in your head because that’s what they’ll be expecting.”

I knew the risks when I came here, but what was I supposed to do? I hadn’t seen Jack in way too fucking long. I needed to know he was okay, that he didn’t need my help. His time on the inside could fuck up the hardest men.

“I wasn’t followed, and I’ve been casing the place for two days. I got in clean.”

“You got in, but that doesn’t mean no one saw you. I tagged you the moment you drove past the first fucking time.”

I grinned at him, knowing he wasn’t lying. Jack always did have eyes in the back of his head. “You could have said hello to an old friend.”

“Could have, but that would have blown my cover.” He turned to FNG. “What did you bring him along for?”

“I didn’t bring him. He followed me.”

“I thought he was dead,” Jack grunted as he moved through the house, closing the blinds.

“Yeah, we all did.” I grabbed the feet of the first guy and dragged him toward the door. The man weighed a fucking ton, probably fifty pounds overweight. I stopped and shot a glare at FNG. “Are you going to help or be just as fucking useless as you were a few minutes ago?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” he said, rushing over to grab the man under the arms. “I tripped on my shoelace.”

I stopped moving and stared at him. “You what?”

“Yeah, see, I was running past the bushes. They really need to be cut back, by the way,” he said over his shoulder to Jack. “Anyway, the lace snagged on a bush and came undone. It totally tripped me. I have this massive gash on my shin from where I hit the concrete steps. You should see—”

He stopped talking the moment he saw the pissed off look on my face.

“Anyway, this is more important. I’ll tell you about it later.”

“What do you want us to do with the bodies?” I asked Jack.

He strode back into the room and started rifling through their pockets. “Let’s see who they are first.”

I grabbed the other man’s wallet and pulled it out, reading the name. “Elmer Fudd. Not sure that’s going to help us.”

Jack sighed, tossing the wallet back on the man. “We can’t move the bodies right now. The streetlights would give us away in seconds.”

“Who’s watching you?” I asked curiously, though I was pretty sure I already knew.

He got in my face, keeping his voice low. “You need to get the fuck out of here. Leave your vehicle behind and find another way home. If I knew you were sneaking around,

chances are someone else saw you too. This guy doesn't fuck around."

"Gelbero," I answered, knowing he wouldn't openly say it.

"Just get the fuck out of here. I'll handle the bodies."

I knew I wouldn't get any answers when I got here, but once we were on the inside, I hoped I would get something from him. But he was stonewalling me, and based on how jittery he looked, I wondered if Gelbero was his only concern.

"FNG, take a walk," I said in a low voice.

He didn't argue as he opened the door and stepped outside. I turned back to Jack, ready to hash it out with him if he wasn't honest with me.

"Tell me the truth, are you okay?"

"I'm not in prison," he snapped, his eyes wild with anger.

I grabbed him by the arm and pulled up his sleeve, fighting him as he tried to get out of my grasp. Fresh needle marks dotted his arm. He was fucking using.

"Jack, what the fuck are you doing?"

He jerked his arm away and ran his hand through his hair as he turned away from me. "Leave it alone."

"Are you fucking serious? Not a chance in hell."

"It's part of the job," he snapped, spinning back and getting in my face. "Did you honestly think I would get out and this would all be over?"

I stared at him, my jaw ticking angrily as I stared at the man who was slowly disappearing. "No, but you can't do your job if you're fucked up. Find a way around it."

"Don't you think I'm trying?" He shook out his hands, walking away from me. He was on edge, probably barely holding on. "It's not just that. When I...before prison, I spent a week fucked up. It did something to me, something that I can't just push out of my mind."

"But you didn't use in prison, right?"

His haunted eyes met mine, and while I was sure now that he didn't use in prison, I knew there were other things that happened to him. Things he wouldn't share with me. And as long as he was working this job, he wouldn't get help.

"No, I didn't. But now I'm out and..."

"The temptation is there," I finished.

Sweat trickled down his forehead, just the beginning signs of withdrawal. I didn't know what to do, how to help him. Maybe I could get on the inside with him.

"Bring me into the fold."

"Are you fucking crazy?" he laughed. "First, I don't bring anyone in. I'm here out of sheer luck that I didn't fucking die in prison. I had to earn every fucking ounce of this guy's trust. And even then, I'm still under his thumb."

"Then let me fucking help you," I insisted.

"No," he shook his head, swiping his hand under his nose. With every second that passed, he was spiraling out of control.

"You can't do this on your own," I snapped, grabbing his arm again. "Let me help you."

He let out a humorless laugh before his voice turned dark. "No one can help me now."

"Bullshit. We're a team. You need me here. You're falling apart."

But he wouldn't listen. He jerked out of my grasp and paced away from me.

"You need to leave. Now."

"Why? So you can take another hit without me watching? This has gone on long enough. You're destroying yourself. Every fucking second you stay here is one more that you might not make it out of this alive. I don't want to hear about you overdosing on the news."

"It wouldn't make the headlines anyway," he muttered.

"Jack—"

“Two months,” he said suddenly. “You know where I am. Give me two fucking months to make some headway.”

“And if you’re dead in two months?”

He didn’t say anything, just stormed over to the back door and flung it open.

I shook my head, not wanting to leave him behind. “I’ll take the bodies. You couldn’t get rid of them right now if you wanted.”

“I can handle it,” he argued.

“Yeah?” I got right in his face, laying down a challenge. “And how are you gonna handle it when you’ve got a fucking needle sticking out of your arm?”

He swallowed hard, telling me everything I needed to know. “FNG, grab a body.”

He walked in and looked at the lumps on the floor. “Oh, so we’re taking them with? Cool.”

“We’ll dump them on the way out of town.”

I bent over and hauled one over my shoulder. I just had to pray we didn’t get caught as we walked across the street to the car.

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EVIDENCE WAS ALL OVER THE BODIES. I COULDN’T LET ANY OF it lead back to me or Jack. So, I drove out of town and lit their asses on fire. Someone would find them eventually, either because of the wild animals or from the flames. Either way, no one would link these men to us.

“Man, this is just like the good ol’ days,” FNG said beside me.

“How do you figure?”

“You know, me and you in the same car,” he laughed.

“That happened once.”

“Nah, it had to have happened more than that.”

“It didn’t,” I replied, just wanting him to shut up.

Lights flashed in my rearview mirror as a car approached from behind. It was too fucking late at night for someone to be out driving. Not that it couldn’t happen, but it couldn’t be a coincidence that someone was hauling ass to catch up to me. For just a moment I considered the possibility that it was Jack, but he was too fucked up to follow me out here.

“We’ve got company.”

FNG spun in his seat, then clapped his hands together as he laughed. “Man, I knew it. Okay, so what’s the plan? Are you going out the window again? Or do you want me to this time? I can show you my trick with the umbrella.”

He grabbed it from between his legs and started to open it.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I shouted, slapping at the damn thing as it expanded too wide and nearly hit me in the face.

“Sorry!” He fumbled with it some more, almost closing it before his hand slipped and it popped open again. “Oops!”

“Put the fucking thing away!”

I rolled down my window and grabbed it out of his hands, tossing it out onto the road. FNG stared at me in shock.

“I can’t believe you just did that!”

“I can’t believe you tried to open a fucking umbrella in a car!”

“It’s an SUV, thank you very much! And if you would just give me a chance to show you what I wanted, we could take them out in a matter of a few minutes.”

The vehicle behind me pulled to my side, speeding up until he was nearly beside me. I didn’t wait to find out what he wanted. I jerked the steering wheel, slamming my car into the one beside me, but I didn’t back off. My eyes met those of the man driving the other vehicle. He didn’t intend to leave us alive. I slammed my foot on the gas and pushed him to the



side until he hit the edge of the road and lost control. I spun the wheel, my tires squealing as I hit the brakes and tried not to go into the ditch myself. We slammed to a stop against a guardrail, narrowly avoiding rolling over.

I looked out the front windshield, as we were now facing the other vehicle, or where he should have been. I shoved the door open and got out, pulling my spare gun. It was unregistered, exactly the weapon I needed on hand for an occasion such as this. I stalked through the darkness with only my headlights illuminating my path.

The man in the front seat was desperately trying to undo his seatbelt as he hung upside down in the overturned vehicle. The wheels still spun as the engine smoked. If I walked away now, he might just blow up in the vehicle. But I wasn't taking that chance. No witnesses.

This was just as bad for Jack as it was for me. If this guy worked for Gelbero and called it in that I had just been at Jack's place, they'd want to know why. And Jack would never answer that question. He'd take a bullet in the head first. No, there was no other way.

I walked up to the driver's side window and slammed my gun against it, shattering it instantly. The man fumbled for his gun, but wasn't fast enough. I put two bullets in his head, then checked out the back seat to be safe. I opened the door and found his phone lying on the roof. Using his thumb, I unlocked his phone and scrolled through recent calls. There was only one, and he placed it ten minutes ago.

By the time I got back to the car, FNG was on his phone, probably relaying the events to anyone who would listen. I slammed the door and shifted into drive. At least there were no cameras in the area.

“Yeah, baby. I gotta go. I'll be home soon.”

I glanced over at him, shaking my head. “And you thought that was the perfect time to call her?”

“Well, you were taking a while.”

“I was searching for evidence,” I bit out, handing over the phone. “The last number dialed—find out who he called.”

“Sure, sure. It’s just...I’m not sure Rae wants to talk to me. I think she’s pretty pissed at me.”

“She’ll be even more pissed if you don’t call her and this blows back on Jack.”

“Good point. Yeah, I’ll give her a call.”

He cleared his throat a few times, then dialed her number. I kept my eyes on the road, watching for anyone who might be following us, but so far, we were in the clear.

“Yeah, it’s FNG—don’t hang up!” He huffed out a breath. “She hung up.”

I snatched the phone out of his hand and dialed again.

“Don’t ever call me again—” she started.

“It’s Johnny. I need you to run a number for me.”

“He’s with you?” she asked incredulously. “Why? Why would you spend time with him after all the hours we spent looking for him?”

“I need a number,” I said testily. “Are you gonna fucking help me or not?”

“Fine,” she grumbled, “but don’t bring him anywhere near me.”

“Trust me, I wouldn’t wish him on my worst enemy. He clung to me like lice.”

“Technically, lice don’t cling to you,” FNG cut in. “They—”

“Shut the fuck up,” I snapped. “Give her the damn number to trace,” I said, handing over the phone.

He relayed the numbers, then hung up with a heavy sigh. I wasn’t in the mood for his shit. I didn’t want to know why he left or what caused him to come back. Right now, all I could focus on was making sure that Jack was as safe as possible. I

was pretty damn sure he couldn't take care of himself right now.

"You know, I get it. You're pissed that I didn't tell you what was going on. We're tight, and I should have found a way to tell you. And I swear I would have."

"I just murdered a man," I snapped, wondering how he could think I was still thinking about him.

"Right," he nodded. "I'm sorry my disappearance pushed you to that. You know, this is not unlike something that happened to me when I was gone. See, it all started about six months ago."

I gritted my teeth and kept driving, hoping Rae would call back soon and give me something to go on. I wasn't sure how long I could drive around with FNG before I made another body disappear.

"In truth, she could have been the love of my life. Well, if I hadn't met Honey. But it wasn't meant to be. I just wish I could have had the opportunity to tell her that. Her name was Sarah. I'll never forget because when she introduced me to herself, I instantly started singing to her. You know that song—"

"I know the fucking song," I said before he broke out singing.

"Man, I knew we had the same taste in music. Anyway, I was on a job in Utah, trying to find the hidden Aztec gold. Her brother was looking for the same thing and had been for some time. See, the interesting thing about the treasure is that it was rumored to have crossed into the U.S. after Montezuma was murdered. I was just glad to be back in the United States. But when I saw her, I knew she was special."



# FNG

*UTAH.*

*Timeframe a little fuzzy, but it was definitely 22 hours, 13 minutes, and 12 seconds since crossing into Utah...*

“I’M DEAN.” I HELD OUT MY HAND TO THE BEAUTY STANDING in front of me. She didn’t look like she belonged in a place like this. With long, golden hair, a dark tan, and those killer legs, she should be on the runway somewhere. But I wasn’t going to argue if it meant I got to spend some time with her.

“Sarah,” she smiled.

It was like a lightning bolt to my chest. I could feel the song humming in my stomach. Either that or it was the taco I’d eaten from the gas station. But I chose to believe it was her. No woman had ever snagged my attention like this before. Those baby blues had me practically on my knees, begging for her to give me just one chance to show her how good it could be between us.

“Uh...” I laughed nervously. I was totally out of my element. At OPS, I was FNG. I had my weapons and no fear. But out here on the road with no weapons and no backup, I had no self-confidence. “I’m new to the area.”

“I can tell.” Her eyes flicked out the window to my Jeep. “But I like your ride. I could show you around sometime.”

“Really?” I asked, leaning on the counter. “And how much would you charge for that?”

“For you? No charge at all.”

I loved her friendly demeanor, but we had to get one thing straight. “Listen, as much as I’d love to drive around with you, you can’t go offering every guy you meet a tour. What if I was trying to kill you? There are plenty of places to dump a body out here.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about it,” she said, shooting me a sly wink. Then she pulled a gun from her back and pointed it right in my face. “Would you like to know if I’m a good shot?”

Again, I laughed, but only after I grabbed her wrist and wrenched the gun from her hand. “I would gladly let you demonstrate, but let’s not shed blood just yet.”

I handed over her gun just to let her know that she still had a weapon if she needed it. Normally, I would never give someone back their weapon after they pointed it at me. But this girl was harmless for the most part.

“So, is there anywhere in particular you’d like to see?”

I leaned on the counter, grinning at her as I laid on the charm. I had to be smooth about this. If I let on why I was really out here, she’d probably sashay that sweet ass out the door.

“How about someplace with a little history.”

“Are you here about the treasure too?”

I pretended to not know what she was talking about. “Treasure?”

She sighed in exasperation as she pulled a book out from behind the counter. As she flipped through the pages, I watched as her face took on all manner of expressions from humor to disgust to intrigue. She flipped the book around and pointed to the very thing I was searching for.

“Aztec gold? Here?”

“According to legends, but no one has ever found anything.”

“And what makes people so sure there’s gold out here? The gold rush ended a long time ago. Wouldn’t someone have found it by now?”

She glanced over at her manager across the store. He was busy stacking new books on the shelf and wasn’t paying attention to us at all. “Well, from what I understand, the treasure would have been buried in the caves. But that was hundreds of years ago. Just think of how the rivers and caverns would have changed since then. It could be at the bottom of a river now, for all we know.”

“Well, I don’t know much about treasure hunting, but I am all for going on a hike through caves. What do you say you take me out there and show me the best sights?”

She bit her lip, batting her eyes at me. “I get off in an hour.”

I had a feeling I would be too.

“I’ll be back in an hour.”

With a wink, I turned and walked out the door, slipping on my sunglasses. Scanning the area, I was relieved to see I hadn’t been followed. That would make this whole expedition go a lot smoother. But the fact was, I had little to go on. With an hour to kill, I made my way down the rocky terrain to my Jeep and got in. I had just enough time to go back to the motel and check in.

It was nothing like the grand hotels I liked to stay in, but it was better than sailing on a ship in the middle of a storm. I walked into the office and smiled at the old man behind the counter.

“One room, please.”

“Do you have a preference on size?” he asked, pushing up out of his chair. It took him a good minute just to walk to the counter.

“I’ll take a suite.”

He let out a low chuckle and tossed me a key. “Sure, last one I got.”

I caught it and raised it in thanks. “How much?”

“Fifty for the night.”

I sucked in a breath, shaking my head at him. “You drive a hard bargain.”

“That room has color TV.”

“No kidding?”

“First room we installed it in.”

“I guess I’m living the good life,” I said as I plopped down a couple hundreds. “I’ll need it for a few nights. No need for housekeeping.”

He slowly took the money, his head nodding like a bobblehead. “Don’t have it anyway.”

Well, that explained why the room was so cheap. “Anything good to do around here?”

“Most folks go diggin’ for gold.”

“Gold?” I said, pretending to be shocked. “Is there a lot around here?”

He shook his head. “Never found any yet.” He pulled out an old map and grabbed a pen from his coffee can. “Right here.” He pointed at the map, drawing a circle around an area just north of town. “Most folks head this way.”

“And why’s that?”

“Well, best I can figure, the river was blocked off from the town for many years. But after one very heavy storm, the dam broke and flooded the basin. It’s rumored that people found gold flecks for miles. So, they search upstream.”

That was interesting. I studied the map a little closer, but decided not to give away too much about where I would be. “Do you mind if I take this with me?”

“Sure,” he answered, then turned and headed slowly back to his chair.

Since I had been dismissed, I headed to my room and used the key to unlock what was surely a palace on the inside. I let



out a low whistle when I saw the TV that probably had to be hauled in by four men. The thing was larger than anything I remembered from my childhood, and wouldn't be the first thing any robber would try to steal.

I kicked the door shut and walked over to the table, laying out the map to study. But I didn't make it very far before my phone rang. I stared at the incoming call and thought about ignoring it, but then I remembered the man who was waiting on the other end.

“This is Dean.”

“Any news?”

“I just checked into a motel and I'm studying a map of the area. I've got a woman taking me out in a half hour.”

“I don't think I need to remind you what will happen if you don't find that treasure.”

My hand clenched involuntarily around the phone. I hated being threatened, but even worse, I had no way to stop the events that would unfold if I failed.

“People have been searching for the treasure for years. What makes you think I'll suddenly find it?”

“Because you know what's at stake. Don't let me down. The countdown has started.”

I tossed the phone on the table and thought for just a moment about calling Cash. With his help, I could wiggle my way out from under this guy's thumb. But calling him was dangerous. Not to mention, I didn't have the time to get anyone else out here in the time allowed.

I ran my hand across the scruff of my jaw and stared at the map again. Everyone was going north because of where the dam broke, but as I studied the map further, it looked like another river ran just south of town. If the river had been dammed off a long time ago, it was possible that those two rivers were once connected and ran along the west side of town. But when the dam broke, it cut a new river through the land.

Going west was the only option. I folded up my map and stuffed it in my pocket. Grabbing my bag, I opened it and pulled my borrowed Sig from the bag and quickly took it apart, cleaning every inch of it. I stole this gun off a man in Spain, and he clearly was not a gun fanatic based on the cleanliness of his gun. I loaded the weapon and stuffed it in the back of my jeans.

I cracked my knuckles and then my neck. “Time to get me some gold.”



# JOHNNY

“THAT’S YOUR TAGLINE?” the asshole that was strung up said.  
“Time to get me some gold?”

He snorted in laughter and I had to agree with him. It was a terrible line. But this wasn’t about our mutual dislike of FNG’s taglines. This was about why the fuck this guy sent men after Jack. I’d hunted this fucker down after finding out he took the call from the asshole I drove off the road.

I walked forward and kicked him hard in the stomach, sending him flying backward into the wall. His body swung from just his wrists and the metal links bit into his hands. The man had already withstood an hour of torture with no signs of giving in. But I was just getting warmed up.

“What would you have said?” FNG asked. He was lounging in a chair by my workbench with his feet kicked up as he ate a bag of Funyuns.

The man clenched his teeth, biting back the pain. “How about, ‘I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse.’”

“Dude, I can’t do that. I would be stealing a line from a movie,” FNG scoffed. “No fucking respect.”

“Better than your line,” the man spat.

FNG stared at him, then his eyes flicked to mine. “Can I kill him now?”

“No.” I picked up the blowtorch and turned to face the man. As I slowly rolled the knob, the blue flame lit at the end. I didn’t particularly like the smell of burning flesh, but I

needed answers. The man's eyes were glued to the torch as I got closer. The panicked breaths he dragged in through his busted nose got harsher by the second. But still, he said nothing.

"I'll ask you one more time. Why did you send those men to the house?"

His nostrils flared as he prepared for the worst of it. I was done fucking around. I held the flame against his skin and watched as it turned bright red, then started peeling as the man screamed and tried to jerk away from me. I grabbed his arm and held him close to me, making sure he felt every second of agony.

"Tell me what I want to know!"

I started trailing the flame across his belly, drawing an X that would stay with him the rest of his short life. His screams echoed off the walls, but that didn't matter. No one would find us out here in the middle of the night. I finally turned it off and stepped back, admiring my handiwork.

He was sweating profusely, tears streaming down his face as he closed his eyes in relief. He wasn't going to give. I walked back over to the table and snatched his phone off the table. I didn't want to threaten anyone in his life. I'd been there. It was fucking hell. I would rather be tortured than know that my family was out there and I couldn't help them. But the time had come when I had no other choice. If I was going to end this, I needed answers now.

"Can you pick up milk on the way home," I read off the most recent text.

The man's face paled as I walked closer to him. His eyes flicked to his phone and then he started to shake. "Please," he whispered.

"What's that?" I asked, leaning in closer.

He was fucking terrified. I could see his heart pounding wildly and his throat worked hard to swallow. I had him right where I wanted him.

I grabbed him by the wrists and pulled him down, straining the ligaments in his shoulders. “I really don’t want to have to go after your family,” I said in a low voice. “Women are innocent, but I will do whatever I have to in order to keep my own safe. So...why did you send men to that house?”

“You promise you won’t hurt them? Any of them?”

I gave a tight nod. That was the only reassurance he was going to get.

“It was a test,” he said, his voice shaking. “Gelbero got him out of prison. He needed to know that Jack could be trusted.”

“By trying to kill him?”

“By making sure he wasn’t too high to take care of things himself,” the man choked out. “Whatever your guy did to impress Gelbero, there’s no walking away once he’s in. And since he’s not dead, I’m assuming he passed the test.”

“Are you supposed to contact him?” Again, he didn’t answer. I pulled on his body again until he screamed in pain. “Don’t make me gut you and send the pictures to your wife.”

“They were Gelbero’s men,” he screamed. “He’ll know that Jack’s good when they don’t return.”

“And you? What’s your part in his organization?”

“I take care of the jobs he doesn’t want to handle himself.”

“Then I better make sure to give you a good sendoff.”

His eyes grew wide with panic. “But you said—”

“I said I wouldn’t touch your wife or your family,” I hissed. “I can’t let you live.”

“He’ll know!” he shouted, trying to find a way to save his own life.

“There are two ways we can handle this. I can kill you and make it look like an enemy got to you, or I can make it look like you died a traitor. The latter will force his hand. He’ll go after your family and kill them. It’s your choice. Tell me what you want to happen.”

Resignation settled on his face. He had been in the business long enough to know there was no way out. Men like him didn't tend to have a long life expectancy. But he would do anything to keep his family safe.

"Fine. I'll tell you. But you have to do exactly what I say."

I nodded.

"He has an enemy that kills the same way every time."

"Who?"

"You don't need to know that. The only thing that matters is that you do exactly what I say."

I disagreed. He could be lying to me to send a message to his boss.

"My family's life is at stake. Trust me, I'm not going to do anything to put them in danger. If I give you any more information, it could trigger a string of events that you don't want to be in the middle of. I need to give my family a chance to escape and get somewhere safe."

"Fine. Tell me what I need to know."

"When you kill me, it needs to be—" His eyes dropped for a moment before he looked at me again. "You have to shoot me in the face. It's his version of wiping his enemies from all existence."

"Okay," I said, accepting what he was saying. No man would ask to be shot in the face. He was telling the truth.

"You need to leave my body in a location that sends a message. Uh...there's a shipping warehouse—Gelbero does all his business out of there. If you leave me in front of the gates, he'll get the message."

"And trigger a war," I added on.

"But my family will be safe, which is all I care about."

"Then I'll make it happen."

I pulled my gun from the holster and pointed it at his face. "Any last words?"

“Make sure they’re safe. I’m trusting my family with you.”

I didn’t make him any promises. I just pulled the trigger and made his death quick. His head flopped back as he continued to hang from his wrists. I didn’t move for a long time. I stood there with my weapon still pointed at his head. A sharp pain lodged itself in my chest, something close to regret.

I’d seen death way more than a man should in his lifetime. It had never been a problem before, but I’d also never used a man’s family against him. All I could think about now was if I was in his shoes and how much danger I was putting Tahlia in. This shit with Rafe had to end. I never thought I would want to work for a man like Cash. I stupidly thought that I was serving a higher purpose because I worked for Rafe. How wrong I was. I almost got my brother’s family killed and now Jack was in serious danger that only he could get himself out of.

It was time to head back to OPS and finally get on board once and for all with Cash. I would protect my family and find a way to get Jack out alive. Because if he didn’t make it out, I knew I would never be able to forgive myself for allowing him to step into my shoes.

“That’s a shame,” FNG said as he walked over, munching on Funyuns. “You know, it sort of reminds me of the woman in Utah.”





# FNG

*UTAH.*

*23 hours, 13 minutes, and 12 seconds since crossing into Utah...*

“SO, WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO GO THIS WAY?” SARAH ASKED as I drove past the outskirts of town.

The wind was whipping through the Jeep, making it difficult to hear. But it also prevented her from asking too many questions, which was a good thing for me. As much as I liked this woman, she couldn't be involved with me. It would never work out. My life was too dangerous.

“Everyone else was heading north. I figured we'd have a little more peace out this way,” I answered loudly.

“Right here,” she pointed at a turnoff.

I took the road, glad I was in a Jeep when we started bouncing all over the place. Clearly, the town wasn't interested in filling in potholes out here. I pulled to a stop just outside a large rock formation and looked around the area, trying to see anything that might hint at treasure. Not that there would be a sign. That would be a little too obvious.

“So, what is this place?”

“It's an old cave,” she grinned, unbuckling her seat belt. She hoisted herself up and jumped over the door, then took off toward the formation. I quickly followed, eager to spend time with her. I should only be thinking about the gold and what

would happen if I didn't find it, but right now, all I could do was stare at her ass as she ran.

I nearly caught up to her when she glanced over her shoulder, then took off running faster. She squealed as she tried to get away from me, which only made me chase her harder. I felt like a kid in my teens again, completely carefree and ready to have sex for the first time. Except, I wasn't a kid and I had no time for sex.

Still, I had a part to play.

I caught her in my arms and spun her around as she laughed, tossing her head back. This woman was so carefree and lively. I wanted to take her home with me, to see where this could go, but I wasn't free.

I set her down, the laughter dying from my voice. Sliding my hand through her hair, I stared into her eyes right before I slanted my lips over hers, feeling that spark grow between us. With every second that passed, I pulled her closer until there was nowhere left for her to go. I got lost in her scent, in the taste of her lips against mine, and high on the feeling of being in love.

I stepped back, shaking my head. "Baby, we can't do this. I'm not a free man."

Her thick lashes fluttered as she looked at me quizzically. "But, there's something between us. I can feel it."

"Me too, but that's not the way this story ends. We can never happen. My life is just too dangerous."

I hated having to break her heart in this way, but some things just weren't meant to be. I took her hand in mine and guided her to the caves. I could at least enjoy what time we had left together.

"Where do you usually go?"

"Down there," she said, pointing to a cave that disappeared into darkness. "It goes on for miles."

"Ever get lost in there?"

She shook her head. "Never had anyone to get lost with."

The way she was looking at me right now, like I held the sun, the moon, and the stars in my palm made me wish I could give her everything she wanted. “Maybe someday.”

“Why do we have to wait?” she asked breathlessly, stepping into my space. Her small breasts pressed against my chest and her hands slid over my shoulders until one hand was playing with the back of my hair. “I like danger.”

That’s what they all said. “Baby, the kind of danger I bring will get you killed.” I sighed, wanting so badly to make this happen. “Trust me. I’m not the man for you.”

As much as I wanted to throw her down on the ground and have my way with her, I had a treasure to find. I headed into the cave, pulling a small flashlight out of my pocket. I thought I could hear water dripping the further in I went, but there was no telling which tunnel I had to go down to reach it.

“Hey, have you ever seen a stream or anything down here?”

“Um...yeah, I think it’s down this way,” she said, heading to the right.

I followed her into the darkness, shining the light ahead of us as we wandered ahead. The ground was uneven and rocky. There probably hadn’t been a lot of people down this way recently. I grabbed Sarah’s hand and held her tight to keep her upright beside me.

“This wasn’t exactly what I thought we’d be doing this afternoon,” she giggled.

“What can I say? I like hiking.”

“I like hiking too, but I do it in the daylight.”

“You don’t come out here often to explore?”

“Hardly ever,” she said.

I wished I could see her face, to get an idea of what she was thinking, but it wasn’t like I could shine the light in her eyes. “So, these people looking for treasure, are they always out here?”

“Pretty much. The town is used to them coming around. It’s the only thing that keeps us afloat.”

“Really?”

She shifted closer to me, her hand brushing up my arm until she grabbed my bicep. “This isn’t exactly a tourist town. But the people that come out here stay for weeks at a time to search for the treasure. It gives the town a little pick me up.”

Based on the number of people I saw around town in the hour I was there, I could see her point. The town couldn’t have more than five hundred people in it, and the closest town was a good twenty miles away. It wasn’t like there were booming job opportunities.

We walked for what felt like miles until the cave finally expanded, opening into a large cavern. Clear blue water filled the bottom of the cavern, leaving only narrow walkways around it.

“Wow,” I murmured, impressed by the beautiful sight.

“I’ve never seen this before,” Sarah said, staring at the water.

I walked over to the edge, bending down to dip my hand in the water. It was warm to the touch, much warmer than I expected. “This is probably great for skinny dipping,” I joked.

“I don’t think we should be here,” she said nervously. She turned and headed back the way we came without even asking if I was ready to go.

I ran after her, grabbing her arm to stop her as I caught up. “Hey, where are you going?”

“I don’t think it’s safe down here.” Her eyes kept flicking to the water. It was almost as if something bad had happened and this place was bringing it all back. The way her body shook with nerves, how she kept staring at the water—they were both classic signs of trauma.

“Hey, it’s fine. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I just want to leave.”

I sighed, looking back at the tunnel. We'd come so far. I wasn't ready to leave and waste all the time I had spent getting out here. I handed her my flashlight. "Here, take this with you."

"You're not coming?" she said in alarm.

"No, I want to hang out a little longer."

"But—" Her eyes flicked to the water again and she swallowed hard. "Please, let's just go."

"Sarah, I promise I won't be long. Why don't you sit over there," I pointed to the far wall, a long enough distance from the water. Man, I was not going to win her over this way, but that couldn't be helped. It wasn't meant to be anyway.

She took the flashlight and nodded, but her eyes remained glued to the water. I couldn't stand around here waiting all day. I figured I had maybe fifteen minutes before she completely freaked out and I had to get her out of here. I walked along the wall, looking for any signs of hieroglyphs. I knew jack shit about tracking this stuff, but there had to be a clue left behind if the Aztecs dropped the gold here.

The path narrowed to the point where I could barely make it across. I hugged the wall, doing my best to walk over the slippery rocks. I made the mistake of looking back to check on Sarah just as I stepped on a particularly slippery rock. My foot slid out and I whirled my arms to catch something as I fell toward the water. With a splash, I sank about ten feet before floating back to the surface. I swiped the water from my face, swearing at my own stupidity. I swam back to the edge, just about to pull myself up when I spotted something shiny near the ledge just under the water line.

"What is this?" I muttered to myself.

I grasped it in my hands, amazed when I came up with none other than a piece of Aztec gold, just like the one I'd seen in the picture. "Holy shit," I whispered. "I actually found it."

The rack of a gun drew my attention back to my surroundings. Shock tore through me as Sarah stood over me,

holding her gun on me.

“I really wish you would have just turned back. We could have had something special.”

“You knew this was here?”

She shot me an evil look that had me rethinking my trust in beautiful women. “For years. Why do you think everyone’s still looking for the treasure?”

“But they’re all looking north.” It didn’t make any sense. She led me here. “If you knew it was here, why didn’t you stop me from coming out here?”

“Every once in a while, we need a good story about someone drowning in the caverns. It’s what keeps the tourists from venturing this way.”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You brought me out here to kill me?”

“You men are all the same. You see a blonde with tits and ass, and you just can’t help yourselves.”

“But I wasn’t even here looking for the treasure!” I lied.

“Do you really think that’s what the police will find?” she asked, cocking her head at me.

“Yes, because I’m not going to die in here.”

She tsked as she looked at me with pity in her eyes. Fake pity. That’s what this was. If she really pitied me, she wouldn’t be holding a gun on me.

“You know, I thought we had something.”

“We could have, but I guess now we’ll never know.”

This was not the way this was supposed to go. If I was dead, I would never get back to OPS. Fortunately for me, she didn’t know that I was impossible to kill. Sometimes, luck just wasn’t on your side.

“If you’re going to shoot me, you’ll have to catch me first.”

I hoisted myself up out of the water and grabbed her leg, jerking as I fell back into the water. She screamed as she fell, the gun firing just as she pointed it in my direction.





# SLIDER

“AND?”

“And what?” he asked as he followed me into the barber shop.

I walked over to my usual chair, nodding at Tom who always cut my hair. FNG sat in the seat beside me, fixated on his reflection as he pushed his hair to the side.

“Are you going to finish the story?”

“Do you think I need a new style?” he asked, completely ignoring my question.

His hair had grown out a lot over the past year. Instead of the short military cut he usually sported, it was shaggy and hanging in all the wrong places, almost as if he had tried to cut it himself.

“If you don’t want to look like a wannabe rocker,” I retorted.

“Hey, asshole,” Tom greeted me with a grin on his face. “Fucked anything up lately?”

I shrugged. “Blew up a set Zoe was working on.”

“Really? Was that the explosion we all heard a few weeks back?”

I narrowed my eyes in the mirror. “Not a word.”

He chuckled as he swung the apron around my lap and snapped it behind my neck. “Like anyone believes a thing you say.”

“They should. It could be true.”

“Could be, but rarely is. I can’t believe you guys are still pretending you’re bodyguards. With all the housing developments going up, you’re not fooling anyone.”

I grinned at him, wondering if he would ever believe us. The night of the fire at the bar—the night FNG disappeared—the police kept our business under wraps, despite the fact that the bar burned down because of our involvement with Rafe. To this day, it was a wild tale that no one believed. So, we fed the stories, knowing no one would actually believe them.

“So, what’ll it be today?”

I stared at my bald head in the mirror as he grinned at me from behind. “I think I’d like a mohawk today.”

He studied the few hairs on my head and plucked at them with two fingers. “We might be able to do something about that.”

He grabbed a hot rag and laid it over my head to prepare for my shave. I could do this at home, but I liked to support local businesses when I could. Besides, it was good to get out and mingle with the locals. It made us appear more normal.

“Hey, do you have time to do my hair too?” FNG asked.

Tom stared at FNG, shaking his head. “Son, you don’t need a cut. You need a fucking weed whacker.”

“It’s not that bad,” FNG grumbled.

“If you were growing it out for the ladies, you made a serious miscalculation,” Tom chuckled.

As the rag was warming my head, Tom grabbed the oils and lotion. I rested back, trying to relax and enjoy my weekly routine. But FNG just couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

“Do you really think my hair looks that bad?”

“Yes,” I said, not bothering to open my eyes.

“Come on. Be serious.”

“I am. Do everyone a favor and shave it off.”

“I was actually thinking I should try to be more like Lock.”

I squinted out of one eye at him. “You don’t have the hair for it.”

“I do too!” he said indignantly. “My hair is just as good as his.”

“It’s stringy. You look like a fucking drug dealer.”

“Not when I pull my hair back.” He scooped it into a bun at the back of his head and grinned, showing me his profile. Yeah, he looked slightly better, but not enough to keep it styled as it was.

“Like I said, shave it off.”

With a huff, he leaned back in his seat and glared at himself in the mirror. He was completely ruining my day of relaxation. Between training and going out on jobs, there wasn’t much time to treat myself to a good haircut. Well, it was really more of a massage. There was hardly anything to cut at this point.

Tom removed the towel and started massaging the oil into my scalp. I groaned at how good his fingers felt. He was getting a fat tip when I paid.

“So, what’s with you?” he asked. “Haven’t seen you around in over a year.”

“Oh, I was out on a super secret mission.”

Tom snorted. “Right.”

“No, really, I was.”

“And I bet you rescued some really hot woman.”

“Actually, he returned with a wife,” I filled Tom in. “He married her two days before he showed up at our doorstep.”

His fingers stopped massaging my scalp and I opened my eyes to see why. He was staring at FNG in shock.

“Hey,” I said, tapping his arm.

“Sorry. I’m just surprised someone married him.”

“So were we.”

“I don’t see why,” FNG muttered. “It’s not like I’m not a good catch.”

“You didn’t even know her. She probably married you to get out of Mexico.”

“Mexico?” Tom said.

“It was a last minute thing. But I knew the moment I laid eyes on her—”

“Twenty minutes before—”

“—that we had something special. And when she killed those men with the corkscrew, I knew I’d met my match.”

Tom chuckled again, grabbing another hot towel to rest on my head. “You guys have the most outrageous stories. Tell me another one.”

“It’s not a story,” FNG insisted. “See, this fight broke out at a bar and she had to kill people with a corkscrew while I took out everyone else with an umbrella. It was a magical moment for both of us.”

“I’m sure it was,” Tom said, rolling his eyes.

“So, what did you do after you fled the bar?”

“Well, it was Mexico,” he snorted. “What do you think we did?”

I watched him intently. “Got drunk on whiskey?”

“No, but that would have been a great idea,” FNG nodded. “Let’s see...now, where did I leave off?”

“You and your new wife killed people with a corkscrew and umbrella.”

“Ah, yes. We took a moment to rejoice, basking in the joy of our shared interests. Mostly wine and cool weapons,” he grinned, shooting me a wink.

I glowered at him, not at all impressed by his story. They were long and drawn out, and then never seemed to have an ending. He just jumped from the middle of one story to the next.

“Anyway,” he said, staring off into the corner as if he was imagining Mexico from far away, “we ran out of the bar with only the clothes on our backs and a few bills to get us across the border.”

“Why didn’t you just use your passports?” I asked, interrupting his story.

His jaw snapped shut as he turned to face me. “I was getting to that part.”

“But you said you only had a few bills. Wouldn’t you find out first if you had your passports before describing the scene as having only a few bills to get across the border?”

He pursed his lips, clearly not happy with me interrupting his story. He shoved out of his chair and pulled a cigar from his pocket, then lit it up, despite the no smoking sign in the window. He took a puff, then looked up at the ceiling again, blowing out little o’s as he shoved his hand in his pocket and slowly walked around the shop.

“As I said, we fled the bar into the dark night. I headed for my truck, but she grabbed my arm and pleaded with me not to take her home. But we had to get out of Mexico. After the wreckage we’d left behind, it wouldn’t be long before half the cartels were after us. Fleeing was our only option, and in order to do that, we needed cash and identification. I still remember how wild her eyes were as she pleaded with me.”



# FNG

*MEXICO.*

*Approximately 43 hours, 18 minutes, and 12 seconds since FNG's return.*

“No!” SHE SHOUTED, PULLING ON MY ARM. “YOU CANNOT make me return to my apartment. If I do, I will face certain death.”

I grabbed her arm and pulled her against my body. “If we don’t, we’ll be killed before we reach the border. There’s only one way out of this, Honey. We have to risk it. To not do so would be foolhardy.”

Tears swam in her eyes as she stared up at me. Her ruby red lips pressed together in a firm line as she stared into my eyes. She jerked out of my grasp and spun around, burying her face in her hands. “I cannot do this. He will kill me!”

“Who, doll?” I gently placed my hand on her shoulder, hoping to comfort her. The dame was falling apart right in front of my eyes. There was nothing worse than seeing a woman cry, other than a woman crying when we were in a desperate situation. We needed to move if we had any hope of staying alive.

I spun her back around, holding her upper arms as I shook her gently. Her head flopped back as she cried. “Pull it together! Now, tell me. Who’s going to kill you?”



“My...my father,” she whispered, then tossed herself in my arms, burying her face against my chest. I could feel her tears soaking through my shirt. She needed someone to save her, someone to protect her. And I could be that man, but not like this.

“Honey,” I said, lifting her chin to look at me. “I will keep you safe, but you have to help me. Who’s your father?”

She sniffled, barely able to look at me. “Manuel Ruiz.”

The name sounded familiar, but I didn’t piece it together until I saw his name on the side of a building in the distance. He was a businessman in the car industry. But that wasn’t what he was known for. Smuggling was his trade of choice, and he would do anything to protect his operations. He ran one of the biggest cartels in Mexico, and she was his daughter.

“Are you sure he will kill you?”

She sniffled again, looking up at me as she shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve been gone for so long. He’s never found me before. But I came here looking for my mother.”

I cursed under my breath. This was worse than I thought. He wasn’t just protective of her. He was looking for his long lost child, and I was now the one keeping her safe. I would never let him get his hands on her, but there was no way I could go up against an army like his.

“Please,” she pleaded. “You have to help me. I have to get back to my grandmother before he kills us both!”

I pulled her head against my chest, rubbing her back as I shushed her. “There, there. Have a good cry. I’ll make sure no one can ever hurt you.” I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and dabbed at her eyes. “There...all better?”

She sniffled and nodded at me.

“We need to get back to your apartment and grab everything that can identify you. Then we’ll head for the border. It’s our only chance of escape.”

“But what if he’s already found me? Those men in the bar were not regulars.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to protect you. I swear on my life.”

I grabbed her by the arms and pulled her in for a scorching kiss. Her tears mingled with my lips for just a second before I pulled away. I took her hand in mine and raced to my car. Within seconds, we were headed down the road to a small two story shack on the outskirts of town. I killed the lights just as we approached the parking lot.

Everything was quiet. A little too quiet. I had a feeling we were walking into a trap, but it was too late to turn back now. Our only hope of getting out of this alive was to grab her passport and get the hell out of here. I walked around the car and opened her door, keeping her behind me the whole time as we made our way toward the building.

I pressed her to the wall, holding my finger to my lips. “Don’t say a word.” I removed my gun from my holster and took my position at the door, scanning the inside before slowly opening the door. I cleared the lobby before motioning for her to enter. I pressed her to the wall and shielded her with my body as we moved soundlessly up the stairs.

“Keys,” I said as we reached her apartment. She pulled them out and placed them in my hand.

As quietly as possible, I slid the key in the lock and turned it. The harsh snick had me flinching as it echoed down the empty hall. As I turned the knob, every decision I ever made flashed through my mind. If this was it, at least I was going for a good cause. I flung open the door and stepped inside, my trusty gun my sole source of protection.

I scanned the room. There wasn’t a soul in sight. Not that I could actually see very much. Her curtains were drawn, blocking out all light from the room. I moved through the kitchen, clearing every nook and cranny before moving on to the bedroom. I pushed open the door and spun as something brushed across my back. Honey squeaked when the gun came within inches of her face.

After motioning for her to stay back, she nodded and did as I said. My heart was racing a million miles a minute. Something about this just wasn’t right. And I found out why

when I stepped into her room just a few seconds later. Tall, even sitting in the small chair in the corner, he reminded me of a man I once knew while serving in the military. The light from his cigarette was the only thing that gave away his position, but it was enough to see the menacing look on his face. At once, I knew who I was dealing with.

“So, my daughter has returned,” Manuel Ruiz said, his voice more gravelly than commanding.

“Papa,” Honey said as she stepped into the room.

“I’ve spent years looking for you, and after all this time, I find you working at a bar. Who is this gringo?”

Honey pressed her lips together, unsure of what to say. Hell, at this point, I didn’t know what to say.

“We want no trouble,” I went with, hoping that would diffuse the situation.

“No trouble,” the man said, pushing out of the chair. As he rose, he buttoned the front of his suit jacket, brushing off something from his sleeve. “It’s disrespectful to come into my territory without paying me a visit. You are with my daughter, yet you have not come to see me. I know nothing about you. I have not given my permission for you to be near her.”

I chuckled, sure he was pulling my leg, but then it became clear when he pulled out his gun that he wasn’t messing around.

“Sir, I can assure you, I am not disrespecting your daughter.”

But his eyes weren’t on mine. Even in the dark, I knew I was being dismissed. After all these years of not seeing her, all he wanted was his daughter back.

“Come closer, my child.”

A small squeak came from Honey as she stepped around me. None of this was right. I couldn’t allow her to go to a man she feared.

“Wait,” I said, holding out my arm to stop her. “This goes no further. You’ve seen the girl. That’s where this ends.”

My statement was bold and held a fierceness that even I didn't know I possessed. I hadn't known Honey for more than a few hours, but I was sure I would stand by her through anything, no matter the cost.

"You dare step between me and my daughter?" he asked.

There was a time in every man's life when he had to choose between the hard way and the easy way. I was at the fork in the road. I could walk away and pretend I never saw Honey. She'd go on with her life, and I'd hopefully get back to mine. I was never one to insert myself into other people's problems. Then again, I never walked away from a challenge. I tipped my imaginary fedora at the man and stood my ground.

"Nobody walks all over Honey."

"I do not walk over her," he hissed. "She is my daughter. I am here to protect her."

"She doesn't need protection from the likes of me. I intend to keep her safe, to protect her with my life."

"And you are willing to shake on this?" the man asked, inclining his head. "You will swear an oath to protect my daughter at any cost, for all eternity?"

"For all eternity," I vowed.

He thrust his hand toward me. I let it dangle there for just a moment. I was not a man to back out of a deal, but I also knew what I was getting into. Joining his family would put me in the crosshairs of a raging war I couldn't control. But the time had come, and there was only one way forward.

I grasped his hand and squeezed hard, pulling him in for a hug. As he wrapped his hand around my back, I whispered in his ear, "You will never get her. She is mine now."

"She is only yours once I see you walk down that aisle." He stepped back and smiled at me. "We go to the church."

He strode past us, whistling loudly as he stormed into the kitchen. Two men in leather jackets appeared, both of them packing and ready to kill.

"Come, we have much to do."

“Boss, is this your daughter?” the one man asked.

Manuel turned and slapped his hand across the man’s face, instantly reminding him of his place. “You do not look at her. She is not yours to watch. Remember that.”

The man nodded, ducking his head. Wrapping my hand around Honey’s, we followed her father out the door and down the stairs. He was in charge now, and there was no backing out. We had to see this thing through to the end, or face a death so terrible, not even the vultures would find us.



# BROCK

“So...WHO exactly are you in this story?” I asked. “Indiana Jones? Some forties mobster? I can’t get a handle on who you’re trying to play.”

I grabbed the gel off the counter and massaged it between my fingers, spreading it evenly for the best coverage in my hair. I stared at myself in the mirror and started sliding my fingers through the thick strands, making sure none of the pieces were either too thick or too thin. Some days, everything went to shit and I had to wash my hair again, just to get it right. But today was a good day. My hair fell into place exactly as it should. I grinned and shot myself a wink in the mirror.

Forgetting that I wasn’t alone, I turned and nearly scared the shit out of myself when I saw FNG leaning against the doorframe. “Jesus Christ, can’t you make some noise?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be highly trained?”

“I am, but I’m at home. I should be able to relax without you sneaking up on me.”

“I was actually having a conversation with you, but you got lost in doing your hair.”

“I just want to look good today. I have a date.”

“With who?”

“Don’t know. It’s a blind date.”

I walked out of the bathroom and whistled as I turned down the hall and shoved open my door.

“What about that chick Miranda?”

“You know about her?” I asked over my shoulder.

“Uh...remember? I interrupted you the other night when I needed a condom?”

I walked over to my closet and scoured through the dozens of shirts hanging up, trying to decide which one to choose. A dozen white button-down shirts hung in a line, followed by a dozen black shirts. Then there were the blue tones, all of which brought out my eyes.

“So, what happened with her?”

I chose the light blue, snagging it off the hanger. I undid all the buttons, then shrugged it on over my white tank. “With Miranda?”

“Yeah.”

A whole hell of a lot. Not that it mattered. We were interrupted twice and she decided we weren't meant to be. The shitty part was, we had great chemistry. It took me weeks to get her to give me another shot.

“She's just a chick,” I responded.

“That's not what I heard.”

“Well, you heard wrong.”

I tucked in my shirt, then walked over to the carousel of ties hanging in the corner of the closet. I didn't want to be too matchy-matchy. Yellow would really pop, but might be too bright. I grabbed two ties and turned to face him. “What do you think of these?”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You want me to choose?”

“Give your opinion. Just because you choose one doesn't mean that's the one I'll wear.”

“Then why even bother asking?” he said in irritation.

“Because I want to know. What color tie did you wear to your wedding?”



“I wore a shredded t-shirt and jeans.”

What the fuck? “To your wedding? How could you do that?”

“Well, I had just been stabbed with a stake. It didn’t seem to matter at the time.”

“The stake you showed up here with?”

He nodded. “So?”

“So, that thing was in you for a very long time. How did you just walk around with it sticking out of you?”

“Very carefully. Go with the blue and silver. It’ll make you look like less of a douche.”

I frowned as I looked at the tie. I liked it, but I didn’t think it was the better choice. “Why not the yellow?”

“Because it *will* make you look like a douche.”

“Then what about this one,” I said, snagging a third option from the carousel.

He blew out a harsh breath, rubbing his hand over his jaw. “Seriously? You want to wear a tie with flowers?”

“They’re not flowers. It’s paisley.”

“It’s flowery. You can’t wear that. She’s going to think you’re stuck up.”

“*Or,*” I snapped, “she’ll think I have excellent taste. What’s not to like about it? It’s gold with blue. That’s fucking awesome.”

“And fucking pretentious,” he snorted.

“You know what? I’m not taking advice from a guy that got married while bleeding out.” I hung up the other two ties and walked over to the floor length mirror, sliding the tie under my collar.

“You know, you wouldn’t have to go out on dates if you had just married Miranda.”

I slowly turned and faced him. “The option was never on the table. See, most people don’t marry someone they’ve only

known for twelve hours.”

“Forty-eight.”

“No, twelve. According to your timetable, you married her before you’d known her twelve hours.”

“Ah, I only said that her dad showed up. I haven’t gotten to the part about us getting married yet.”

I scoffed and turned back to finish my tie. “You should have played the field more. Why would you hitch yourself to one wagon like that?”

“Well, as far as I know, you can only hitch yourself to one wagon anyway. It’s not like I could have multiple hitches.”

“Get creative,” I grumbled, finishing the knot. I pulled the tie a little, adjusting here and there to make it just perfect. Then I walked over to my dresser and opened the top drawer where all my tie pins were. Picking the perfect one was easier said than done.

“Just go with silver,” he snapped.

“I can’t. The tie has gold in it. It’ll clash.”

“Your whole outfit clashes,” he retorted. “How do you even work here?”

“How are you even married?” I asked. “Seriously, you’re now related to the cartels, and for the rest of your life, you’re going to be answering to her father.”

He shrugged. “He has to die sometime. And as a cartel kingpin, that’ll probably happen sooner rather than later.”

“You could have chosen any other woman!” I argued. “Why her?”

He thought it over and sighed. “Well, there was this other woman, but we weren’t right for each other. My life was too dangerous for her.”

“The Utah chick? Didn’t she try to kill you?”

He shook his head. “Not her. Although, she would have made the perfect Mrs. FNG. No, this woman was...everything

I ever dreamed of.”

“Do yourself a favor. Don’t let your current wife hear you say that.”

“Ah, she already knows about Giselle.”

I was about to put on my shoes when I stopped and looked up at him. “Giselle?”

He nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Ah mi.”

“What?”

“She was...magnifico.” He stood in front of me like a statue, his hand raised in the air with his fingers all pinched together. He looked like an idiot.

I was already tired of this conversation. I needed to get out of here and get laid. “Look, I have a date, so...”

“Yeah, I’ll be quick,” he said, completely ignoring my hint. “It was summer on the French Riviera. The sky was blue. Everything smelled of coffee and fresh pastries. The music was magical. I can still see her standing there on the rampart of Antibes. The sun was setting with a pink hue that could have been painted by Monet.”

“Monet painted water lilies,” I corrected.

“And sunsets,” he huffed. “Anyway, her black hair was pulled back in this fancy...thing. She looked so elegant, so full of joy and happiness. Our days there were some of the best memories of my life.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “You know, we visited Fort Carré where Napoleon was imprisoned. Those days were magical.”

“Yes, magical,” I said sarcastically. “And you’re criticizing my date choices.”

“My friend, you have never dated until you’ve done it on the French Riviera.”



# FNG

*SOMEWHERE IN EUROPE.*

*Sometime over the past year...plus 14 hours, 13 minutes, and 12 seconds...*

I EASILY MADE MY WAY ACROSS THE BORDER, NOT EVEN bothering to hide my face. In Europe, it was much easier to travel from country to country without being noticed. And while there was still a bounty on my head, the French didn't seem to care that much. At least, I hoped that was the case and not just good luck.

I'd stolen some money from my thieving friends before bolting from Spain. I needed to be stingy with my earnings—that's how I chose to look at it. After all, I'd steered a ship across a raging ocean. This wasn't stealing. It was money for services rendered.

Either way, I had to figure out a way to get home, and since flying was out, I decided the best course of action was to cozy up to someone rich enough to pull strings. It was a long shot, but the best idea I had at the moment. Pride prevented me from calling Cash. I desperately wanted to, but how would I even begin to explain this to him? And wouldn't he think it was a prank by someone?

Rafe had told me I wasn't allowed to break cover for any reason, that too many lives were on the line. Hell, my life was on the line right now. That should be reason enough to hang up my doubts and pick up the phone. But if I ended up getting

someone else killed because I broke protocols, I would never forgive myself.

I haggled with a man over a used motorcycle, giving up way more of my savings than I was comfortable with. If I had my gun, I might have thought about holding him at gunpoint while I stole it, but that would only put another target on my back. If I had my umbrella, I could have snuck up on him and let him think he was being held up.

I chuckled as I got on my new ride and strapped on the helmet. How I wish I had my umbrella right now. I hit the road at seventy miles an hour, finally feeling like a free man. The wind slid over me, giving me the freedom I hadn't felt in way too long. It was tempting to just stay on my bike and ride until I ran out of road, but eventually, I'd end up right back here. With nowhere to go.

I drove all day, only pulling over for gas in the city of Antibes. Everywhere I looked, the women wore big hats and sundresses. The men were dressed casually, as if they were always on vacation. Then again, this was the French Riviera.

And I was doing a horrible job of blending in. I parked my bike outside a shop and walked in, getting some raised eyebrows from the salesclerks. Unsure of where to start, I walked over to the men's section and picked up a pair of shorts that looked way too fancy for a guy like me. I just needed some cargo pants and a t-shirt, but it was clear I wouldn't find that here.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked in a French accent.

“Uh...I'm an American.”

She pursed her lips. “Yes, this I could tell when you walked into the shop. It is why I am speaking English.”

So, she assumed I didn't speak French. From everything I'd heard, the French didn't like having to speak English to tourists. But I supposed she wanted to make a sale more than she wanted to piss me off.

I huffed out a laugh. “You caught me. So...what does one wear around here?”

She looked me up and down, pursing her lips once again. “Not this.” She turned and waved her fingers at me. “Come, I will get you clothes.”

I studied her fine ass as she walked away. Wearing wide legged white pants, I could still make out her fine ass. This woman was the epitome of style and class. At least in my mind. I didn’t know much about style, but I liked what I saw on her.

I hurried after her as she grabbed clothes off the racks on her way to the back of the shop. She shoved me into a room and hung up the clothes, pointing out which outfits went together. None of it was my style.

“I don’t think all of it will fit. You have too many muscles. But it is the best I can do.”

She turned on her heel and walked away without another word. I pulled the curtain closed and stared in the mirror at my appearance. That was the first time a woman had ever told me I had too many muscles. In America, that was a good thing. Maybe they didn’t go for that over here.

I pulled off the pants on the hanger, holding them up in front of me. White linen...did people actually wear this shit? I didn’t know a single man that willingly wore white. But the whole point was to blend in.

I shucked my pants and was about to pull on the pants when I realized I had black underwear on. It would show through. I pulled the curtain open just enough to peek my head out when the woman came back to me carrying a handful of underwear.

“I assumed you did not have the necessary undergarments. Here.”

I took the pile from her, frowning as I stared down at the tiny fabric she considered would pass for underwear. “Um... there’s a mistake. I don’t wear briefs. Or thongs.”

“You are in France. Men do not wear...” She yanked open the curtain and let her eyes trail over my body. “—boxers. You will wear these.”

Then she yanked the curtain closed and walked away. Well, I couldn't keep wearing the underwear I had on. I didn't even want to know how many days it had been since I'd had a change of clothes. It was best not to think about it.

I set the pile down and weeded through them until I found something that was passable as underwear. Stepping into it, I cringed at the feel of the fabric cutting off just below my butt cheeks. It was...weird. I kept pulling and bending, trying to make sure they would be comfortable enough before putting on the pants. I checked out my reflection in the mirror, turning and looking at my ass. They actually looked pretty good on me. It was amazing at how defined my ass was now. And my package...I let out a low whistle and gave my cock a good tug, impressed with how big it looked in this particular pair of underwear.

“Not bad at all.”

I clapped my hands together as I whistled, grabbing the pants and stepping into them. They were cool for certain, but made me look like a pretentious jerk. I grabbed the blue button-down next and pulled it on. I had a feeling it was supposed to be tucked in, but I couldn't go that far. I left it hanging out, then pulled on the linen jacket. I didn't look half bad. I would definitely blend in a lot better now than how I showed up. But there was no way I could drive my motorcycle like this. The linen would get all wrinkled.

I jerked open the curtain to find the sales clerk waiting for me. I spun three hundred and sixty degrees, holding my hands out wide. “Huh? What do you think?” I asked with a wide grin on my face.

She slowly perused my body, her eyes wandering over me appreciatively. “Much better.”

She nodded to the floor. “And those.”

At my feet were a pair of...”You want me to wear loafers?”

“It goes with the outfit.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Lady, I don't wear loafers.”



She pushed off the wall, stalking toward me slowly. A thin expanse of her belly showed as she raised her arms and wrapped them around my neck. Her lips were just a scant inch from my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

“You look so decadent right now. This is the final step to blending in, to making the outfit look just...right,” she said just before she nipped my ear with her teeth. I shivered again as she stepped back and batted her eyes at me.

How could I argue with that? I mean, I absolutely hated loafers. No man in his right mind would wear them, especially if there was the possibility he would have to run from someone. But she said they would make the outfit complete, and who was I to argue with her?

I slid my foot inside the first one, cringing at how they made me feel. I tried to imagine running from a baddie in these. They’d probably give me blisters or fall off my feet. But she said I should wear them. I slid my other foot in the second shoe and grinned at her.

“So? How do I look?”

She cocked her head to the side as she walked forward, running her fingers down the front of my suit. “You kept the shirt untucked.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t do it.”

Her fingers played with the skin just below my collarbone. “I like it,” she whispered. “There’s just one final touch.”

She winked at me as she turned and walked away. I swallowed hard, wondering what she could possibly want to add to the outfit.

“I’m not wearing any gold jewelry!” I shouted. I looked at myself in the mirror one last time and sighed. “I do look really good.” I could never wear something like this around OPS. I would get the shit beat out of me. And since I was in another country...

I picked up my old clothes and shoved them in a bag resting on the counter. After double-checking my stash of

money, I tucked it into my pocket, making sure it couldn't easily be snatched.

Sliding my hand into my pocket, I casually strolled out of the dressing room and around the corner where the sales clerk was waiting for me. The way she stood, swaying ever-so-slightly from side to side, had me ready to pounce. I had never been with a French woman before, but I could imagine just how erotic it could be.

She pulled a hat out from behind her back and held it out to me. It looked like some kind of straw fedora. Not exactly what I pictured Indiana Jones wearing, but it was pretty cool.

"It's called a Panama." She lifted it, gently setting it on my head. "There, it's perfect."

I caught my reflection in the mirror behind her and studied myself. It did look good on me. I slid my finger and thumb along the brim of the hat, feeling every bit the part of 007. Yeah, I could get used to this.

"Will that be cash or charge?" she asked, walking behind the counter.

"Cash." I pulled out the wad of cash and watched as her eyes widened. She probably thought I was rich, that I walked around with this as my spending money. In fact, it was everything I had to my name. Well, to this fake persona I was living. Back at home, I still had a bank account with a fairly decent amount of money in it. Not that I could touch it. The government would be on me in a flash.

I counted out the money for her, hoping I got it right. I wasn't used to paying in foreign currency. She handed me my change, then walked around the corner with a coquettish grin on her face.

"You look good enough to take me out to dinner."

"Uh..."

"I'll be expecting you in one hour."

With a wink, she turned and walked away. Did I have a say in this? She was totally demanding that I come back here and

take her out. She didn't even care if that was what I wanted! For all I knew, she was using me for my money. And why was I so upset about this? A hot woman was commanding me to take her out. The immediate words out of my mouth should have been *hell yes!*

With an hour to kill, I walked down the cobblestone street until I found a hotel with vacancy. Since I didn't know how long I was staying, I booked several nights and hoped I didn't have to eat the cost if I had to leave early. I picked up a local magazine and flipped through the pages until I found the perfect restaurant. Right on the Riviera, it was the perfect spot for a romantic evening out with her. And since I already had the clothes...

I quickly took off my new suit and laid it out on the bed. Things were going to happen tonight, and I had to be prepared for anything. I called down to the front desk and asked for a few bare essentials to be brought up to my room. While waiting, I started the shower and pulled on a robe just as there was a knock at the door.

I thanked the concierge worker and whistled my way back to the bathroom. I had to hurry. I didn't have long to get cleaned up. I scrubbed myself raw, feeling like years of dirt washed down the drain. After a quick shave, I dressed and was on my way, slipping my keycard into my pocket. Tonight would be a night I would never forget.

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SHE SHOVED ME UP AGAINST HER FRONT DOOR, SPREADING MY suit jacket with her hands and shoving it off my shoulders. Her lips were all over me, kissing up my neck and across my collarbone. I couldn't get enough of her. Two weeks of dating and teasing. I'd spent most of my money on her, taking her out for fine dining and romantic walks along the Riviera. Now, I was finally going to get what I had been waiting for since the moment I laid my eyes on her.

I fumbled for the doorknob, trying to get us inside, but it was locked. My brain was on the fritz, forgetting how to work with all this woman draped over my body. Her hand slid down my pants and cupped my girth. I gasped, squeezing my eyes closed so I didn't come in her hand. She moaned in my ear, nipping at my earlobe. I was about to lose it. I couldn't take it anymore.

I could feel her stripping me, taking off my pants right out here in the open. But I couldn't bring myself to care. I was about to get laid. My hands slid around her neck and deftly undid the tie holding her indecent dress up and preventing everyone from seeing what I could only imagine were the most remarkable tits I'd ever seen. Her dress started to fall and then the door swung open. I stumbled backward, tripping over my pants that were now down around my ankles. She fell on top of me, laughing as she flung her hair to one side of her head and smiled down at me before pressing her lips to mine.

I slid my hand down the back of her thigh, drawing the material from her dress higher and higher until I was cupping her very firm ass. This was heaven. Who needed guns and ammo when you had a woman like this on top of you? I rolled her over and pressed myself between her spread thighs, grinning when she wrapped her legs around my waist.

The clearing of a throat snapped me out of my lust-filled haze. I jerked my head up, shocked to find one man sitting in a chair, and another four men surrounding him like he was the Godfather.

Giselle kept pulling at my face, trying to bring me closer to kiss her. I pulled her hand away, trying to get her to listen to me. "Gise—Giselle! There's someone here," I whispered, never taking my eyes off the men.

She rolled her head until she could look behind her. Sighing, she pushed me up and got to her feet, adjusting her dress. Her tits were hanging out, so I quickly rushed forward and pulled the ties up around her neck.

"How kind of you to make my wife decent," the man in the chair said.

Stopping immediately, I peeked out from behind Giselle and looked at the man with raised eyebrows. “Your...”

“Wife,” he finished. He cocked a finger at her. “Come here, baby.”

A brilliant smile filled her face as she pranced over to him, leaving me exposed to everyone. I quickly pulled up my pants as I watched her throw herself into the man’s arms, laying an indecent kiss on his lips. What the fuck was going on?

“I see you found another toy to play with.”

She gave him a pouty face. “Please, Antoine, may I keep him?”

*Keep me?* I mouthed.

“Ah, but you know I can never say no to you.”

“Um...excuse me...Antoine, is it?”

He didn’t even bother to look at me as he playfully kissed his wife. “Find out what he wants,” he said, waving his guards toward me.

I backed up a step, wondering how best to extract myself from this situation. I had been out of the game too long, with no weapons to defend myself. This was bad. Very, very bad.

“You will come over to Antoine and explain yourself,” the first Frenchman said.

“Explain,” I chuckled. “See, this is all one big misunderstanding. I didn’t know she was married.”

“Yes, that is what they all say,” the second Frenchman said.

They were starting to surround me, leaving me little room to escape. The door was still at my back, but it wouldn’t take them long to catch up. I needed an exit strategy. I quickly assessed the room, seeing what I could use to defend myself.

I snatched my hat off the floor and tossed it right in the face of the first man coming at me. He swatted it away, giving me enough time to land a punch right across his jaw, then knee him in the nuts.

“I’m so sorry,” I apologized as I spun and slammed my fist into the next guy. I was grabbed from behind and used my momentum to kick up and back, kicking the next guy in the face. Then I leaned forward and tossed the guy holding me over my head. He landed on his back with a thud, wincing in pain as he tried to move. A hard punch sent me scrambling toward the door where none other than an umbrella hung from a coat rack. I grabbed it and turned around, swinging with all my might and stabbing the man right in the stomach. He doubled over in pain, exposing his face to my foot. I winced when blood gushed from his nose. I really did feel bad.

I tipped my hat to the Frenchman holding my girl and turned on my heel, racing out the door with only my umbrella. “I really fucking liked that hat,” I muttered as I ran down the stairs. Bursting onto the street, I turned right and headed back to my hotel. I just needed to grab my bike and then I was out of here. I walked at a steady pace, doing my best not to draw attention to myself. With quick glances over my shoulder, it appeared I was in the clear.

Everything I needed was on me. I didn’t bother going inside once I reached my hotel. I hopped on my bike and roared out of the parking lot, heading for the hill at the end of the street. I was so close to getting out of town, but I knew I hadn’t seen the end of the Frenchman.

Once I hit the outskirts of town, I opened her up and sped down the road, taking the turns faster than I should in order to get away. My jacket flapped around me with the wind, making it difficult to move the way I needed to. I came around a particularly sharp curve and bent my knee out, skimming the ground just slightly. When the bike was straightened out, I knew I’d fucked up the pants.

As the road straightened out, I hit an even higher speed, desperate to get away from whatever situation I’d gotten myself into this time. But it was not meant to be. Just as hope blossomed in my chest that I would get out alive, vehicles swarmed the road up ahead, cutting off all chances of getting away. I slowed, but didn’t stop as I assessed the situation. There was a slight gap between two of the vehicles. It would

be close, but if I made it, I would stand a chance of getting out of here.

I cranked the engine and hit the gas. My hair flew back from the force of takeoff. The men yelled at me in French, waving their hands at me, but I refused. I wasn't going down this way. If I got caught, it would be on my terms. The men grew panicked the closer I got, jumping out of the way as I barreled right toward them. The space between the cars looked a little more narrow the closer I got. I was more likely to cut off my legs than actually make it through this unscathed.

I jerked the bike to the left at the last second, then maneuvered right. The tires squealed and the smell of rubber filled the air, but I made it, shooting past all of them, home free and on my way to wherever the road took me. I grinned, laughing at how hard my heart was pounding from that little adventure. It could have turned out so differently.

A high-pitched noise caught my attention. I looked up, wondering where it was coming from, and that's when I saw it. The metal hit the ground, bouncing only once. It was as if everything happened in slow motion. I jerked the handlebars to the right just as the explosion went off just in front of me, sending me flying through the air, skidding across the pavement.





# DASH

I SAT IN MY CHAIR, my ankle crossed over the other thigh as I stared at the man with a bored expression. Where he came up with this shit, I would never know. His tall tales were becoming a bit much to handle. Who would actually believe this shit?

Why couldn't he just say that he had to get away and faked his death? Or tell us that he was on a mission for Rafe? It was ridiculous to think that he went on a mission for maybe a week and then was just missing for over a year. Nobody around here was stupid enough to believe that. He stared at me, waiting for me to respond in some way, but I still didn't have a single logical thought to come back with.

“Don't you have some questions for me?”

“Do you want me to have questions?”

“Well...” He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I mean, I've been telling you this amazing story and you haven't interrupted me once or asked any questions. Don't you have questions?”

“Oh, I have questions all right, but not about the story.”

“Then what?”

“Your sanity.”

I turned back to the computers and got to work. Yeah, it was a fun story, but like all good things, they had to come to an end. I had a shitload of work to do, and the only way to get back into the field was to make sure they could hold down the

fort without me here. And I desperately needed to kick some ass.

“Hold up,” FNG said, rolling over to me. He stopped when the chair smashed into the desk, nearly knocking over my water. “You don’t have a single question for me? Maybe about who the lady was or what happened after the bomb went off?”

“You’re still here, so I’m guessing you survived.”

He frowned at me. “You know, *clearly* you don’t understand anything about storytelling.”

“*Obviously*, I do if I already know how the story ends. Maybe it’s you that needs to brush up on your storytelling skills.”

He scoffed, shaking his head at me. “It’s like no one cares that I was gone for a whole fucking year.”

“That’s because you haven’t told us anything we can believe yet. I mean, come on. Even that story about how you were dropped down onto the property from a super secret spycraft is just ridiculous. Rafe is out of the FBI now. He doesn’t have the same access to the equipment he used to.”

“How do you know he’s not working for someone else? Maybe he’s got someone else funding his jobs.”

“Yeah, and maybe I don’t give a shit. Look, you had fun. So, you needed some time off and didn’t want to tell anyone. I’m not saying a word. You broke. It could happen to any of us when the pressure’s on.”

“I did *not* break. How could you even say that? You were with me on that job with Thumper!”

“That wasn’t a job. That was...some weird, completely unnecessary spying expedition that went FUBAR overnight.”

“Okay, but it turned into a job. We were a great team.”

“And you broke up that team,” I snapped, letting my anger get the best of me. It was the wrong thing to do. I gave too much away, revealing how upset I really was that he was gone.

His face softened as he cocked his head at me. “You missed me.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t the same without someone constantly trying to kill himself.”

“Man, I love you too,” he grinned, trying to hug me. I pushed him away, right off his chair.

“Don’t you dare ever try to hug me again. That’s just wrong.”

“There’s nothing wrong with showing brotherly love.”

“What’s wrong is that I’ve had to listen to you for the past hour telling me some made up story that you think will make you sound awesome. Here’s a news flash. It doesn’t. You’re supposed to be some badass and you didn’t even have a gun on you.”

“Didn’t you hear anything I told you? It was taken from me by the pirates.”

“Yeah, the guys that were looking for gold. Totally believable.”

“It was!” he argued, getting to his feet. “Do you really think I would make up a story so wild and come back here to give you *that* as an excuse for where I’ve been? Even I wouldn’t believe it.”

“Then why didn’t you make up a better story?”

“*Obviously*, you aren’t listening to me! I didn’t make up any of it!”

“Then *clearly*, you’re delusional,” I shot back. “Look, so you say you went out and played *Mission Impossible*. I get it. Everyone wants to be Tom Cruise. But one, you don’t have the looks for it. Two, you’re too tall. And three, his stunts are awesome, while yours involve fighting people off with an umbrella. It’s just not believable.”

He got a cocky look on his face and smirked at me. “Oh yeah? What if I can prove that I not only pulled off a Tom Cruise move, but also that it was caught on film?”

I shook my head slowly. This guy was never going to stop. “I would say it’s a fabricated video.”

“Not when you see it.” He rushed over to my computer and started typing something into the search. “When you see this video, it’ll change everything you ever thought was true about me.”

He found the video and pressed play. It was basically a recreation of that one Mission Impossible movie where Tom swung from one building to another and released the cable just over the second building, all so he could break in.

“Yeah, it’s a great recreation, but that’s all it is.”

“Aren’t you even a little curious as to what I was doing?”

I looked at the screen again and shook my head. “No, but I’m a little curious as to what this guy was doing,” I said, pointing at the screen.

“That guy is me. I’m him. We’re one and the same! Can’t you see that?”

“I’m about to sit through another story, aren’t I?”

“It’s a good one. I swear.”

I pushed out of my chair and walked over to the mini fridge. “I think this calls for a little bit of alcohol.”



# FNG

*MARRAKECH.*

*A few months, 30 days, 15 hours, 11 minutes, and 12 seconds after FNG-Day.*

I RAN THROUGH THE MARKET IN MARRAKECH WITH ONLY MY umbrella to defend myself. My target was in the wind, and if I didn't find him soon, the whole mission would be ruined. Not to mention, millions of lives would be in danger.

I ran down the next alley, dodging people on bikes and random goats in the middle of the narrow road. Carts were stacked along both sides of the buildings for sellers to hawk their wares. I slammed into one patron, spinning to avoid falling to the ground, but ended up running right into a stand. The merchandise crashed to the ground, causing a scene I didn't need.

The crowds gathered around me, and that's when I saw him just ahead. He turned for only a moment, but it was enough for me to positively identify him as my target. I jumped up on the table, shoving people out of my way in an attempt to get past the growing crowd. Baskets were crushed under my feet as I jumped from table to table.

I nearly fell as one seller tried to shove me off the table. But with nowhere else to go, I jumped and grabbed onto a beam running between the two alleys, then swung myself up, balancing on the thin board. I jumped to the building rooftop,

then started my chase again, this time having the vantage point from higher up where it was less likely I'd lose him.

I spotted him just one building ahead of me, looking over his shoulder every few seconds for me as he pushed through the crowd. He wasn't so tough without his army at his back. I leapt from one roof to the other, rolling as I landed. I jumped to my feet and chased after him again, making a hard right when he turned down another street.

I paused at the edge of the rooftop, waiting to see which direction he would go. He looked up at just the right time, then grinned at me and took another right. Bad choice. For me, not him. The road was wider, meaning the buildings were further apart. It wouldn't be an easy jump.

But I was never one to back down from a challenge.

I ran back, stopping about halfway and faced my target. I could do this. I took a deep breath, that ran flat out all the way to the ledge, leaping with all my might to the other building. My legs cartwheeled through the air, making me grin as the other roof was in sight. But all too soon, I lost my momentum and started to fall. With a yelp, I grabbed onto the ledge. My forearms pressed against the stone, digging into my skin.

My feet clawed at the wall, trying to gain purchase so I could hoist myself up. I heard laughter from down below and took a second to glance down, which was a mistake when I saw how far I had to fall. Okay, it wasn't that far, but I could still break something. My target was standing below me, laughing at the situation I found myself in. I might have laughed along with him if it weren't for the fact that I was the butt of the joke.

"Great," I muttered. I pushed off the stone again, but lost my grip on the ledge. I slipped far enough that I was only holding on by my fingers. They strained to hold onto the edge, but I wasn't going to last too much longer, and then this mission would be over.

"It looks like you couldn't outrun us."

I looked up into the sun, groaning when I saw one of the men from the market. He stood tall with his hands on his hips as he took in my situation.

“You look like you could use a hand. Or do you prefer to die?”

“Ha,” I laughed. “You’re mistaken,” I said, wincing as my fingers started to cramp. “I can’t die.”

“Everyone dies.”

“Yeah, well, not me,” I said. I tried to reposition myself, but I just didn’t have enough energy to do that while holding on like this.

The man snapped his fingers and two more men appeared behind him. “Get him up here.”

“That’s okay,” I said as they reached for my wrists. “I’ve got this.”

They hauled me up, nearly tearing my arms out of their sockets with the force they used. I was tossed carelessly across the roof, rolling as tiny rocks dug into my skin. I winced, rolling to face them.

“I could have done that myself.”

The man tossed back his head and laughed at me. “I would pay money to see that. But my boss has other plans for you.”

“Oh, good. Because I was really hoping I could have a chat with him. Yeah, I saw his hat and it’s way cooler than mine. Well, the one I had. I lost it when someone attacked me for no reason.”

“We attacked you because you were following us. Now, you will pay the price.”

I glanced up at him through one eye since the sun was beaming down on me. “Any chance that price is a nice glass of lemonade?”

A low growl emanated from his throat as he hauled me up by my arms and shoved me at one of the other men. I stumbled, wishing I had my umbrella right now. I must have



dropped it when I was running through the market. It was a shame. It was a great weapon.

“It is time to meet the man you are after.” He shoved me toward the rooftop door, making it clear there was only one way I was getting off this rooftop. Since I had no gun, I decided to follow his instructions. I might just get some information that could save my life and finish the job I came here to do.

The door squeaked open and I was guided down a very steep circular staircase. I stayed to the right, knowing the steps were too thin at the center. Every once in a while, the man behind me would poke me. At first, I didn't say a thing, but by the fourth time, I lost it.

I spun around, catching him off guard. I slammed my fist into his junk since it was at just the right level. He yelped, covering his groin as he bent over and fell down the stairs. I obligingly moved out of the way, not wanting to get tangled in his feet. However, some of his comrades weren't as lucky. The man in charge looked back up at me, shaking his head.

“This brings me great displeasure. I did not want to have to subdue you.”

“Yeah, well, you would have done the same thing if he was poking you.”

The man looked at me curiously. “He poked you?”

“Yes, three times in the back. I may be going with you, but that doesn't mean I need to put up with poking.”

The man nodded. “I agree. I never liked him anyway. I married his sister. Now we are related for life. It was the worst deal I ever made.”

“Maybe you should have punched him in the junk.”

“It is out of my hands,” he shrugged. “But now you have done me the honors and I can say I had nothing to do with the injury.”

“Well, happy to help out.”

“Come, we will go see my boss now.”

I could have fought him, but I was a little too curious about this boss. I'd been tailing him for so long, and now I had the perfect opportunity to get close to him. Yeah, there was a chance they might kill me, but it was a chance I was going to have to take.

We stepped into the sunlight once again, over the bodies at the bottom. I was pretty sure they weren't dead, just knocked out. The man in the white suit was waiting for me as he held his jacket over his shoulder with a single finger.

"So, it is you."

"It is I," I repeated, mocking him.

"You are not what I expected."

"Frankly, neither are you."

"And what did you expect?"

I sized him up and shrugged. "I guess someone a little... beefier."

He laughed at that, "It is not strength that matters. Only the mind."

He could say that all he wanted, but it was a hell of a lot easier to win a fight when you had strength on your side.

"Well, I'm here. What did you want to see me about?"

"It is not me that wants to see you. You wanted to see me."

"I think you've got that wrong. I'm just here on a holiday."

He chuckled, then turned on his heel and walked away.

"What does that mean?" I asked the muscle.

"It means we follow."

"Right, to his yacht."

"To his house. He has a very big back yard."

He nudged me forward a step. "To see his gardens. I bet they're beautiful this time of year."

"He has no gardens. Only a reflective pool."

Who the hell was this guy? What person had a reflective pool? Did he sit out there all day and stare into it, trying to decide just how bad his crimes were? Or maybe that's where he tried to drown people that crossed him.

My stomach lurched suddenly, but it wasn't out of fear. "Oh, crap," I whispered.

"What?"

"I had the tap water."

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YES, MY STOMACH DID ACHE, BUT IT WASN'T AS BAD AS I assumed it would be. However, this could work in my favor. I just had to play my cards right. I kept making all the appropriate noises, moaning every once in a while just for effect. And it was working too. The muscle kept looking at me like I would explode at any moment. There was a good possibility I might, but I was pretty sure I had this under control.

We pulled to a stop outside a very luxurious estate on the outskirts of the city. The fountain in the front immediately drew my attention. If it wasn't for the fact that this man was a criminal, I might actually consider coming to visit him one day.

"The boss wants to see you immediately."

I saluted the man, keeping my grin hidden. I found it hilarious how uptight they all were. It was like they didn't know how to have any fun. It reminded me of when I first started working at OPS after those two years of working at the vineyard. That first thrilling adventure I went on, the one where I nearly got blown up by an RPG, was the first time in years I'd felt alive. I couldn't imagine walking around here with a stone-cold look on my face and always walking with my hands crossed in front of me. They had clearly seen one too many action movies.

“This way,” the man said, guiding me to the house. I noted that we didn’t go in the front door. That was reserved for guests, which I clearly was not. We went around back and past the house to a smaller house. It was fancy on the outside, but I was pretty sure the inside was set up for interrogations.

The door opened and the smooth suit stood inside, smiling like he knew something I didn’t. But the shoe was on the other foot this time. He didn’t know it yet, but I had the upper hand in this game.

“Mr. Helmer,” he said, slowly walking toward me. “It’s so nice of you to join me at my home.”

“It’s my pleasure. I just loved the fountain.”

“It was a piece my late wife commissioned. Sadly, she died.”

“That’s a shame.”

He fidgeted with the cuff of his suit. “Yes, she was sleeping with another man behind my back. Now, they are sleeping together for all eternity.”

I laughed out loud because...well, it was funny. But apparently, he didn’t think so. He and his goons looked at me like I was crazy.

“I think you don’t understand why you are here, Mr. Helmer.”

“Oh, I understand,” I nodded. “You want to get all the information you can out of me.”

“And you don’t think I can achieve that,” he smiled.

“Well...I don’t like to brag, but I’m kind of hard to break.” I winced at a stomach cramp. It wasn’t really that bad, but I played it up anyway for their benefit.

“Something wrong?”

“Nah, just made the mistake of drinking the local water.”

“Oh, that can be an unpleasant experience.”

“I take it you’ve experienced it also.”

“Debilitating cramps, sweating, nausea, diarrhea...the list goes on and on. However, so do the effects, and it can make it very...uncomfortable.”

“Much like this conversation,” I grinned. “There’s nothing that brings two people together quite like the talk of bowel movements.”

The man never flinched. He thought he was larger than life, that nothing could touch him. That might have been true in the past, but I was here now. And the one thing he didn’t count on was me having a plan.

“You know, I didn’t even get your name.”

“I thought for sure your agency would have told you,” he answered.

“Oh, I’m not with an agency.”

“Sure,” he laughed.

“No, really. You can check it out. They didn’t want me. Something about being too reckless and unable to follow rules. And there may have been something in there about a cavalier attitude. I don’t know. It all sounded like bullshit to me. They really know how to screw the man.”

He studied me for a moment, then nodded to one of his men, who left immediately. They wouldn’t find me in their database, and then the fun would begin. Who was I working for? What was my objective? Yada, yada, yada. They wouldn’t get any answers out of me because they wouldn’t be able to break me.

“So, if you don’t work for an agency, who is your employer?”

“Oh, I’m not employed by anyone right now. See, I was supposed to “die” for a job, but that went south fast. I’ve been floating around, trying to get back home. So far, I’m not having much luck.”

“I don’t think that’s about to change anytime soon.”

“Well, you know, all you need is an umbrella and you’re right as rain.”

“An umbrella?”

“Yes, they’re very useful. See, everyone assumes that they’re just for staying dry, but in reality, they can have all kinds of purposes. I like to use them as a weapon,” I grinned.

Okay, I wasn’t expecting a lot of laughs or even a smile, but come on, would it kill the guy to loosen up a little?

“Mr. Helmer—”

“Dean. Or you can call me FNG. It’s sort of a nickname.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “I didn’t catch your name, by the way. Or anyone else’s. And not to press the issue, but it’s sort of rude to have someone in your home and not introduce yourself, or even offer a beverage. Maybe something with seltzer to calm my stomach?”

“I don’t think you understand why you’re here.”

“Oh, you want to torture me for information. Or beat me up. Personally, I would go with torture. Beating up is so...L.A. Ya know?”

“No, I don’t know.”

“Everyone in Hollywood does it. It’s really overdone. If you want information, you have to get to the source of the problem faster. At least, that’s my opinion.”

“And you want us to torture you?” he asked.

That was a ridiculous question. Who wanted to be tortured? Certainly not me, but it was a stall tactic.

“Oh, I’m just giving you some pointers. I know this guy —” I rolled my eyes for dramatic effect, “—the guy loves torturing people. His favorite is boiling people in acid. A little overrated if you ask me. Don’t get me wrong, he’s great at extracting information, but after a while, you lose that creativity.”

“Boss, can I shoot him?”

“Ooh,” I winced, shaking my head at the man. “Big mistake.”

“And why’s that?” the suit asked.

“Because I can’t die. I’ll just bleed all over your floor and cause a big mess. That’ll leave behind a lot of evidence you’ll have to get rid of. And the things they can do with crime scenes nowadays is nothing to sneeze at.”

“You could always just tell us what we want to know.”

“I could do that. In fact, if you let me use the bathroom, I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“You want to use the bathroom?” he repeated.

“Tap water, remember? I’ve got a bit of a situation going on. Now, that would not be fun to clean up,” I snorted.

“Take him,” the suit said, jerking his head toward the door.

The man grabbed me around the arm and hauled me across the room to the bathroom. After shoving me inside, I got to work. I dropped my pants for the sake of sticking with my story, then slipped off my shoe and removed the sole. I snatched the phone and clicked it on, making sure the program showed my location.

“Oh, man!” I moaned. “You would not believe how painful this is!”

I quickly shoved the phone back in the sole of my shoe and clicked it back into place. My stomach twinged again, but I pushed through. It wouldn’t be long before we had company.

I moaned one more time, just for the sake of making it all real, then waited a minute before flushing the toilet. A handy can of air freshener would mask the fact that I hadn’t actually used the bathroom. I sprayed it, then washed my hands for good measure. It didn’t matter that I hadn’t actually gone to the bathroom. It was a habit, and bathrooms were disgusting.

I swung the door open and strolled out, feeling even better about my plan. The suit now sat in a comfy oversized chair and motioned for me to take the seat across from him.

“Why, thank you, good sir.” I sat down, making myself at home. “So, what is it you’d like to know?”

“Why were you following me in the market?”

“Because you were my target.”

“And what were you supposed to do? Kill me?”

I laughed at that. “Kill you? I’m no murderer.”

“Then what was the point?”

“To gain intel,” I said. “Surely, that was obvious.”

“Mr. Helmer, many people try to gain intel on my activities. So far, no one has succeeded.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why they sent me.”

He huffed out a laugh. “We caught you.”

“Did you?” I asked, cocking my head at him.

“You’re sitting here,” he pointed out.

“Yes, I’m sitting here, in your lair. Of course, I understand where you’re coming from. You spotted me in the market. That was my fault, which really does make me look like a bad spy—if I was a spy. Then I was chasing you, but couldn’t catch you. Any good spy would have had you in no time. And then there was the whole rooftop debacle. Man, I really did think I could make the jump.”

“But you didn’t,” he smiled.

“No, I didn’t.” My lips curved up as I stared at him. For a few long moments, this went on until he finally started to put the pieces together. “Such an inept agent coming after you. No gun, no weapons of any kind. And far too easy to catch. You thought for sure I wasn’t a real threat, which is why you brought me back here when you would normally take me to someplace unattached to you. Isn’t that right?”

His nostrils twitched, but that was the only sign that I was getting to him.

“I’m guessing you’re wondering right about now how I could possibly have anyone helping me. What is my endgame? I couldn’t be trying to bring you down. By myself, that would be pointless.”

“Then what are you here for?” the suit asked.



I paused for dramatic effect, wanting to really let him feel the tension of the scene. I had laid it all out perfectly for him. Now, all that was left was the finale.

“You.”

He frowned, then raised his hand, waving everyone off. “You? That’s what you’re going with?” The suit stood and walked over to me. “FNG, I loved your banter through all this, but if you’re going to make it realistic, you have to have something better than *You* as a closing line.”

“I thought it was good.” I pushed out of my chair, wondering how I could have played it differently. “It’s the mystery of all that could mean. It was brilliant.”

“It would have been brilliant if you had backup. They could swarm just as you said the line. You’re right. It would have been good. But you’re on your own. How on earth would you have me when I’m surrounded by men?”

I scoffed at his narrow-minded thinking. “I would use my secret weapon, of course. My umbrella!”

“Which you lost during the chase.”

“Okay, but look around the room at everything I have at my disposal. I’m trained for this. Of course, I would have gotten out.”

He walked over to the bar and poured himself a drink. “You’re going to have to be more convincing if we have any hopes of pulling this off. You need a better exit strategy.”

“Killing everyone *is* the exit strategy. I thought we were clear on that.”

“For a low-budget film, yes!” he said, slamming his glass down. “This is real,” he said, walking over to me as his eyes burned with intensity. “This is what is going to put us on the map!”

“Ralph—”



## RAE

“RALPH?” I shouted. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I stood from my chair, kicking it over to FNG in anger. “I just sat through an hour-long story about you tracking someone in Marrakech, and it was all fake?”

FNG looked stricken by my anger. As if I didn’t have enough to deal with, now I was listening to stories about him gallivanting around the world making movies?

“You didn’t let me get to the end of the story.”

“Yeah? What would have happened? Did you shit your pants after drinking the local water?”

His face flushed bright red as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I don’t want to talk about it. It was a horrible time in my life, and that’s all I’ll say on the subject.”

“Yeah, it must have been so horrible for you. Meanwhile, the rest of us were back here, trying to figure out where the fuck you were!” I rushed over, gripping the arms of his chair as I got in his face. “I saw you blow up in a plane,” I whispered. “I thought I was going crazy!”

“Technically, I did blow up. I mean, a version of me did. Part of me died on that plane.”

“Maybe all of you should have died,” I hissed, “because the rest of your days aren’t looking too bright right now.”

“But you don’t even know why I was with the suit!”

I pushed off his chair, storming away from him. It didn’t even matter at this point. Everything out of his mouth was lies.

“I don’t have time for this. I have real work to do.”

I sat at my desk and brought up the files I was sorting, but I couldn’t concentrate. I was too angry. There had to be more to the story, something more than a silly film to explain why FNG had gone missing for over a year. And I wouldn’t be able to concentrate until I figured it all out.

I spun around in my chair and glared at the man still sitting in my IT office. “So, if you were making a movie with this suit guy, what was the point of it all?”

“Well—”

“And don’t lie to me,” I snapped. “I will kick your ass and bury you in a shallow grave where animals will tear your remains to pieces. If you really think you can’t die, why don’t you give me a reason to test that theory?”

“Ouch,” he said, flinching back in his seat. “You didn’t even let me finish the story.”

“I told you it was a waste of time,” Dash said from across the room. He was immersed in his work. About the time FNG started talking about going back to this suit guy’s lair, he decided the story was no longer appealing.

“Fine, if you want me to believe you, then you’re going to have to start by giving me some answers. Who is the suit?”

“Uh...I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s classified.”

“You already told me his name was Ralph.”

He snapped his jaw shut, refusing to give me any more information. I spun back to my computer and got to work. “Fine, if you don’t want to tell me, I’ll find out on my own.”

My fingers flew across the keyboard as I started searching for the elusive suit named Ralph. That could be his real name or a code name. And he was in Marrakech last year at some point. I still wasn’t clear how long after FNG went missing that this whole charade took place. So, I added in the most

likely parameters for the date. Then I narrowed it by race and age. I couldn't be certain that this man was older, but I got the feeling that he was at least in his forties by the way FNG talked about him. And to obtain that amount of wealth was certainly a red flag.

And then there was the way FNG described the property. There was a fountain out front—a very nice fountain. If I did a grid search for properties with a fountain, I might find something. He also said there was a separate house at the back of the mansion, so I narrowed my search even further, then added in an aerial search of properties near Marrakech.

That didn't get me much luck, as there were many rich people that owned houses in the area that were rich. But I could still search other aspects and narrow the list down even further. A man like him would most likely own a yacht or a plane. Rich men loved their toys, and in Morocco, it was even more likely that this man would have a yacht since he was so close to water.

If FNG was with this man, it had to be for a reason other than some kind of movie deal. He had to be on one of the alphabet agencies' radar for illegal activities. And since Morocco had no extradition, it was the perfect place to lay low and conduct business with no one watching.

“What are you doing?” FNG asked, looking over my shoulder.

“I'm hacking into the CIA.”

“Are you crazy?” he said practically shoving me aside. “You're going to get yourself killed!”

I shoved him out of the way and got back to work. “Not likely. I'm too good.”

“Not CIA good.”

I snorted at that. “Better. They tried to recruit me.”

“They did?” he asked in surprise.

I split my focus, talking to him as I continued my hack. “It was a long time ago. They couldn't afford me.”

“I didn’t know you were in it for the money.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant. It was never about the money. It was about the cause. And I didn’t feel they were working toward the same goals as me.”

“Right, taking down corrupt foreign agencies and bad guys. Definitely not the same line of work as we’re in now.”

“The point is I didn’t trust any of them. And neither should you.” I was almost in, just a few more steps and... “Got it!”

I quickly put in the search parameters. I had maybe thirty seconds before I was detected and my location was given up.

Dash was over by me in a flash, studying the screen as I continued to search for what I needed. “Holy shit. I can’t believe you got in.”

“I’m that good.”

It didn’t take long to get the information I needed. I didn’t bother to study the files. I downloaded them, then scrubbed all traces of my presence on the site.

Spinning around in my chair, I grinned at FNG. “So, should we open the files and see who you were with?”

“Yes,” Dash said at the same time FNG shook his head.

He slapped his hand over mine, staring at me intently. “Rae, I’m asking you not to do this.”

“And I’m politely declining your request. No more secrets.”

He sighed, knowing I wasn’t about to give in. As he stepped back, he shrugged. “It’s your funeral.”

“I’ll believe that when the men in black show up to arrest me.”

I spun back around and opened the files. The first wasn’t our guy, not even by a long shot. He fit all the parameters except one. He was too old. “It’s not him.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because this man is eighty years old, and you said you chased him through the market. There’s no way he would have outrun you.”

“Maybe he was a spritely eighty-year-old man,” FNG grumbled.

“And this guy,” I said, pulling up a second image, “is clearly not our guy.”

“Because he’s a little portly?” FNG asked.

Dash smacked him upside the head. “Any fool could figure it out. Not only is he portly, but he would look terrible in a white suit. It’s not his color. Besides, look how pale he is. He’d burn in the sun, and in a place like Morocco, he would stand out like a sore thumb.”

“Except sore thumbs don’t stand out,” FNG replied. “They’re just thumbs.”

I ignored him and continued. “Which leaves us with option number three. Ralph Miller, *clearly* a fake name. His real name is Rupert Hughes. He fits all the criteria, including the fact that he’s wanted in almost every country for conspiracy, fraud, and murder. He’s also on the terrorist watchlist.”

“Are you sure about that?” Dash asked. “He doesn’t look like he would lift a finger if it meant he would get his suit dirty.”

“I doubt he does the heavy lifting.” I turned to FNG. “So, would you care to fill us in on how you know Rupert and what you were doing with him?”

“I already told you, I was making a film with him.”

“And that’s it? How did you even meet a man like this?”

He didn’t want to tell us, but I wasn’t leaving here until I had some answers.

“Okay, we weren’t exactly making a movie. Well, he thought he was. I was just playing along.”

“And what was your real objective?”

“To understand that, I have to take you back to the beginning.”

“Christ,” Dash muttered. “Not this again.”

“Not the beginning of when I went missing. I mean...I have to take you back to my last job.”

“For OPS?”

“No,” he winced. “When I was working at the vineyard.”

I looked at the man on the screen and then back to FNG. I couldn't wait to hear how this was all connected.

“I was working in Italy at a vineyard, a very small vineyard that had clients with very discerning tastes.”

“What were you doing in Italy?”

“I was actually there on...” He cleared his throat, glancing away from us. “I was there on my honeymoon.”

I couldn't have heard that right. FNG never let a woman sleep over, and before his wife, we'd never actually seen him in a committed relationship. But he was married?

“Um...” I was still trying to find the words to ask the right question.

“I wasn't actually married,” he clarified. “I was supposed to be married. “It was...a tricky situation. We'll leave it at that.”

“Like marrying a woman because she's the daughter of a notorious cartel leader?” Dash asked.

“Something like that. Anyway, I was there because I was supposed to be on my honeymoon. Although, the marriage didn't go through, so I went on my own to enjoy the sights and get a break from all the gossip.”

Gossip? “Who was your fiancé?”

“Her name was Paris.”

“Paris?” I repeated, trying to think of anyone that might be gossiped about in such a way that he would run all the way to — “You mean Paris, Paris?”



He nodded in a roundabout way. “Yeah. It was never meant to be.”

“Wait,” Dash interrupted. “Paris, as in—”

“As in she was about to inherit millions from her father when he suddenly recovered from his terminal illness and forced his daughter to call off the engagement to a man he didn’t feel was worthy,” I finished. “Holy shit. I can see why you went to Italy.”

“Yeah, I dropped off the face of the earth after that scandal broke. I really did love her. It wasn’t a scam, but since her father didn’t approve of me, there was no way for us to continue our relationship. She didn’t want to lose out on millions of dollars. I guess I wasn’t worth it.”

Shit, this explained so much about FNG. He was a loner through and through, but always with a positive attitude. He just kind of rolled with the punches and kept moving forward.

“So, anyway, I was on my honeymoon. I had just landed at the airport and there was this sign with my name on it. I figured it was part of the package I bought for the honeymoon. I thought I forgot to cancel some services. So, I followed him out to his car and got in the backseat. That’s when it all went to shit.”

“You were forced into being a male gigolo!” I shouted, getting wrapped up in the story.

“No,” FNG shook his head, staring at me funny. “I was drugged and taken to a location outside the city. They thought Paris would be with me and were looking to make a quick buck. And when they realized I was telling the truth, that we had broken up, they stole what money I had on me and my passports, then stranded me on the side of the road.”

“You know, for an ex-military guy, you sure do let people get the drop on you a lot.”

“Did you not hear the part where I was drugged? When I came to, I was still swimming from the effects of the drugs. And I was tied to a chair.”

“Oh, well, if you were tied to a chair, that explains it all,” Dash rolled his eyes.

FNG glared at him. “Anyway,” he continued. “I had to find work, so I walked until I came upon a winery. I figured I could get a job picking grapes or something, and then I could work on getting my passport back. It just took longer than expected.”

“And where does Rupert Hughes come into play?”

“He was making deals and moving product through the winery. That’s how they stayed open and thriving with such a small list of clientele. I’ll never forget the day I met him. It was by sheer coincidence that I ran into him, and it changed my life forever.”



# FNG

*A LONG TIME AGO, in a land far away...*

*Before OPS. Many hours. Many minutes. Many seconds...*

I WIPED THE SWEAT FROM MY BROW AS THE MIDDAY SUN BEAT down on my head. Sweat stained the front and back of my shirt as I hauled yet another basket of grapes onto my shoulder and walked the dusty path back to the wagon we were currently filling. I nodded to another worker who had been here just as long as I had.

The work was brutal but oddly fulfilling. I was constantly alone with my thoughts, which should have made moving on even more difficult. I thought I really loved Paris, and that she loved me. But when it came down to it, she was only interested in the money she would inherit when her father bit the dust. Maybe in another life, I would have been enough for her.

“Hey, Dean!” my boss called me over.

I set the grapes on the top of the wagon, then dumped them in and set the basket down. Wiping off my hands, I made my way over to him and the owner of the winery.

“Dean, we have a job for you. It’s a few more hours, but you’re the most reliable worker we have.”

I found that hard to believe. There were plenty of other men who worked here and showed up for all their shifts. “What’s the job?”

“We need a man to help out with special orders. You would still work here during the day, but after hours, you would work in packing, specifically in the back room.”

The way he said it didn't sit right with me. It was almost as if he was trying to avoid saying what the job really was. I wasn't interested in getting involved with anything illegal. I was finally happy, enjoying my life as much as I could while picking grapes in a foreign country.

It wasn't anything like the jobs I was used to, but I'd left my old job behind when I asked Paris to marry me. She didn't like the danger. And when I lost all my money and my passport, it seemed like this was a good place to regroup and get my head on straight while I earned enough money to get home.

“We would of course give you a substantial raise in pay for the extra hours,” the owner said quickly. A little too quickly.

As much as I wanted to say no, something twinged in my gut, telling me to take the job and find out what was really going on. While I didn't want to be in the middle of this job, the thrill of being on the hunt was enticing me back.

“When do you need me to start?”

“I'll take you over there now,” my boss said.

He jerked his head at me to follow him, and as I passed the owner, I could have sworn he was assessing me as to whether or not I was a threat. It was times like this that I wished I still had my gun on me.

We walked across the property to the distribution center. It wasn't a very big building, but it connected to the warehouse where all the barrels were stored. My boss nodded to men as he passed, each of them studying me as well. What the hell was going on here?

Once in the back, my boss shut the door and turned to me with a stern expression. “There are things that happen in this warehouse that I expect to be handled with the utmost care. I would be very unhappy if I were to discover that secrets were revealed to anyone. Do I make myself clear?”

I nodded. Now I had to know what was going on. Also, why did this guy think I would be so easily manipulated?

He turned on his heel and continued through the large room until he reached the back where several boxes were lined up. “Every week, we receive special orders for some of our most important clients. As a courtesy to them, we sometimes transport items that are of a sensitive nature.”

“Like what?”

His head snapped up as he glared at me. “We do not ask what they are transporting. Ever.”

I nodded to appease him, but if he was giving me this job, it wouldn't be long before my curiosity got the better of me.

“Your job is to pack each shipment with the corresponding crates. You never open the crates. Just pack the wine on top and seal it for delivery. That's it. Are we understood?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You've already worked in packing before, so this shouldn't be too much of a change for you. All the information is on that sheet. And as I said, don't go sticking your nose where it doesn't belong.”

He slapped the clipboard against my chest and walked out. I studied the packing list, counting the number of crates that had to be shipped by the end of the day. The list was long, and I didn't recognize any of the client names, but that didn't surprise me. If people were using the vineyard for illegal activities, they wouldn't exactly advertise who they were.

I got to work, crossing off the shipments as I fulfilled them. The burning need to see what was inside each crate grew stronger with every shipment, but I somehow held off. I had only two shipments to go when I heard a noise coming from the front of the warehouse. Everyone else in the warehouse had gone home hours ago. I slipped around the corner, keeping to the shadows as I made my way to the front. I snatched a crowbar off a crate and kept it at my side.

I heard whispered voices headed my way, but they were down the center aisle. I kept myself hidden as they passed. My

boss was one of the men, but the other, I didn't recognize. He was dressed in a fine suit and was carrying a briefcase to the back of the room. They stopped at the back and my boss looked around before continuing his conversation with the man.

“I want a ten percent cut.”

The man laughed. “Ten percent?” His hand struck out at my boss, grabbing him around the throat. “Do you know what I do to men when they get greedy?”

My boss clawed at the man's hand, but before I could even move, the man dropped his briefcase and slid a knife across my boss's throat. He snapped his fingers and two men appeared beside him. “Clean it up. Make sure no evidence is left behind.”





## RAE

“WAIT, so a man was killed in front of you and you did nothing?” That didn’t sound like FNG at all.

“I was going to, but then his men entered and I realized that they might not be the only ones in the building. I tucked myself in-between some crates and waited for them to leave an hour later.”

“What about the guy in the suit? I assume he’s the same man you were with in Marrakech.”

“Precisely,” FNG grinned. “It was by happy circumstance that I ended up in his company. He doesn’t even know that we met all those years ago.”

“What were they moving?” Dash asked. “Did you ever find out?”

“They were moving priceless artifacts from World War II, things the Nazi’s had stolen and stashed across Europe. Instead of returning the items to their rightful heirs, Rupert sold them and kept the money for himself. I tried to find a way to take him down, but as a one-man band, there wasn’t much I could do in a foreign country. I thought about going to the police, but if they were on his payroll, I would end up just as dead as my boss.”

“So, what changed this time? You were on your own in Marrakech.”

“I may not have been entirely alone,” he answered.

“And who were you working with?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s—”

“Classified,” I answered for him. “Are all of your stories classified?”

He thought about it for a moment. “Not all of them. I could tell you how I found Rupert again. Ooh, or how I met my first wife.”

“Your first wife?” I said incredulously. “Are we talking about Honey?”

He laughed at that. “No, I’m afraid not.”

I couldn’t believe this. Not only was I unsure if any of his stories were real, but he was supposedly married sometime before he met Honey? “Wait, how could you be married before Honey if you were on the run?”

“Well, because technically, it was Theodore Roberts that got married.”

He grinned at me, then shrugged like a kid caught with his hand in the candy jar.

I was getting a headache from all of this. I was tired of trying to figure out who FNG really was and what he was doing during the year he was gone. I walked over to my computer and put it to sleep, then turned for the door.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“Leaving.”

“But, I didn’t get to tell you about Francesca!”

I spun on my heel, getting in his face as he tried to stop himself from running into me. “I don’t care about Francesca or the suit or what you were doing for the past year.”

“That hurts,” he said with a pout on his face.

“I don’t care. You’re going to tell me some crazy story about this woman and how you married her because you had

to keep your cover. Or you'll tell me that you fell in love while picking blueberries in France!"

"Do they grow blueberries in France?" he asked.

"I don't know! And you know what? I don't care either. I asked for the truth and all I'm getting are more stories that feel like a bunch of lies."

"But it's all true!" he said, rushing around me and blocking the door.

I kned him in the gut, then grabbed his hand and twisted until he fell to the floor in agony. I got down low, whispering in his ear. "If you want to tell your stories to someone else, be my guest, but I don't have time for this anymore."

I released him and walked out the door. I wanted to believe him, to think that he was on some higher expedition for the past year, but so far, all I heard were wild tales that made me question why he was even here to begin with. Maybe we were right the first time. Maybe this really wasn't FNG, but an imposter here to infiltrate our business.

The elevator dinged just as I was walking past, and Cash stepped off. "Hey, Rae, hang on."

I spun, crossing my arms over my chest. I wasn't in the mood for sticking around today. All I wanted was a hot bath and an action movie to erase all the bullshit I just heard.

"What do you want?"

He shifted from one foot to the other as he waited to see what I would do. Yeah, I was being a bitch.

"Um...just wondering if you found anything out from FNG."

"You mean, anything useful that could actually tell us something other than what we already know? Maybe the reason why he was gone for a year when he should have been home much sooner?"

"Something like that," he muttered.

“I have nothing, Cash. The stories he’s telling me are so far-fetched that I don’t know what to believe. I wish I could say that he’s telling me something that will lead us in the right direction, but to be honest—” I cut myself off before I could say anything else.

“You don’t think he’s FNG.”

“Isn’t that ridiculous?” I laughed. “He’s right there!”

When he didn’t answer right away, I got suspicious. “Cash...what aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. I have no idea. I was...thinking the same thing.”

I moved closer to him, lowering my voice. “But if he’s not FNG, then who is he?”

“And why is he here?” Cash said. He grabbed my elbow and dragged me into an office, closing the door behind us. “These stories are ridiculous, which makes me think it’s really FNG.”

“But they’re also so ridiculous, you wonder if they’re made up,” I added.

“Exactly. And who would want us to think FNG was here?”

“Rafe?” I suggested.

“To what end? I saw his face. He really thought FNG was dead. No, it can’t be him.”

“If not him, then who?”

He was silent for a moment. “Maybe FNG.”

I shook my head, not understanding. “Wait, you think FNG sent a lookalike in to pretend to be FNG?”

Cash looked at me uncertainly. “It would be hard to pull off. And not hard at the same time. None of us really knew FNG.”

“No, but this guy knew a lot about us. He’s basically filling in the blanks about FNG, telling us what he wants us to know. And how can we corroborate any of it? We don’t know what

he was up to for the past year. Did you know he was married once before?” Cash shook his head. “Or that he almost married Paris?”

“Paris?”

I nodded, eyes wide. “*The Paris.*”

“No,” Cash said, his eyes narrowing slightly. “It can’t be.”

“That’s what I thought. None of this makes sense. It doesn’t line up with what we know about FNG.”

“Then how are we supposed to find out who this guy really is?”

I almost didn’t say what was on my mind. It was bad enough to think it, but to even suggest it out loud...”We could...maybe let Fox have a run at him.”

Cash winced at the suggestion. I knew it was a lot to ask, but we needed to know the truth.

“If we’re wrong about this, FNG will be gone for good. He won’t even look back.”

“But if it’s not FNG...”

“We’d be weeding out an imposter.”

“So?” I asked. “What’s it going to be?”

“Well, I suppose it’s not completely absurd. After all, my brother stepped into my shoes here. Maybe FNG has an identical twin we don’t know about.”

“So, that’s a yes to Fox interrogating him?”

He sighed. “I’m going to hell if I’m wrong.”



# FOX

“YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT?”

What they were asking was ridiculous. It was FNG. I was sure of it. He knew about *My Fair Lady*, and how I told FNG he would love it if he just gave it a chance. Nobody else would have chosen that detail to share with me.

“It’s just to make sure it’s really him,” Cash said.

“How could it not be him?” I laughed. “It looks just like him.”

“And he’s faked his death multiple times before. We can’t trust him. Besides, you guys all thought he was a vampire when he first showed up.”

“Okay, I’ll admit we may have overreacted when he first came here, but why do you think something’s wrong now? You were the one that insisted it was him.”

“Because nothing is making sense. His stories are so outrageous and he was married!”

“Of course he was married. He brought his wife here.”

“No, before that,” he said, shocking the hell out of me.

“Wait, FNG was married before Honey? And he didn’t tell us?”

“I think it might have happened during the year he was gone. Apparently, her name was Francesca.”

“Okay, just a thought. Before we stick electrodes to the guy, how about we run his prints and DNA?” Was I the only

one with any common sense?

“We don’t want you to electrocute the guy. Just... interrogate him in your own special way.”

“Yeah, that would involve electrocuting him, and friends don’t let friends electrocute other friends,” I said pointedly.

“I don’t want you to electrocute him. I want you to talk with him like you would a suspect, but without all the scary death threats.”

That would be an interesting idea. I’d never considered just having a conversation with someone that wasn’t strung up. It seemed irrational to waste all that time when there were other faster, more effective ways to get the answers that were needed.

“So, you just want me to talk to him.”

“Yes.”

“No acid or dangling from the rafters.”

“No.”

I frowned. “Can I threaten it? You know, just to get answers. I mean, can I set the stage?”

“I suppose if you think it will get you the answers you need. But I do not condone any actual torture.”

This could be an interesting experiment—a way to test my skills and find out just how good I really was. Of course, it wouldn’t give me the same thrill I got when I saw a man’s skin being peeled away by acid. But I wasn’t really in the mood for that anyway.

The ladies had kept me distracted with babies and godfather duties. Not to mention that torturing a friend was the equivalent of having sex with your sibling. It just wasn’t appealing.

“Alright, I’ll do it. But I need a little time to set the stage. Don’t let him go anywhere.” I turned to leave, but then thought of something. “Maybe you could kidnap him and have



him blindfolded for me. Ooh, and maybe you could stick him in a dark room with dripping water.”

“For what reason?” Cash asked.

“To get him in the mood for the interrogation, of course.” I slapped Cash on the arm and walked out. This was going to be good.

I rushed down to my interrogation room and pulled down the chains from the ceiling. After that, I got to work laying out all my tools on the table. I usually did it while my suspect was in the room with me, just so he could have time to think about everything that was about to happen to him. When that was done, I grabbed the wooden chair and set it in a massive metal tub that I had already filled with water and poured in salt for better conductivity.

With just a few finishing touches, my room was exactly how I wanted it. I had the electricity on standby and a mop and bucket in the corner, along with a huge container of bleach. FNG would see right through it. There was no way he’d ever believe that I was going to torture him. But it would be fun to see if he’d play along.

I sent Cash a text to bring FNG in, and then leaned against my workbench with my arms crossed over my chest, trying to keep the smile off my face. Usually, I would smile, but it was that one that let everyone know I was about to do some crazy shit. The smile that was threatening to break across my face right now was more along the lines of a kid having a secret.

The door opened and Cash shoved FNG inside. He was blindfolded as I requested, and his hands were bound behind his back. He grinned when I grabbed him by the arms and led him over to the massive metal bucket.

“Fox, is this what I think this is?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like.”

“Except, I can’t see, so I don’t know what it looks like.”

“You’ll know in a minute.”

I shoved him into the chair that sat at the edge, then dragged it into the center of the miniature pool. With his hands now behind the slats of the chair, he was exactly how I wanted him.

I walked around, keeping my steps silent as I moved. His head twitched in my direction as he followed my movements. A grin spread across his face when I stood in front of him.

“So, is this some kind of test? Are you going to practice interrogation techniques on me?”

“Practice?” I snorted. “I don’t need practice.”

“Ooh, you know, something I saw overseas was very interesting. I would be happy to try it for you. They tied a guy up, much like you have me, but without the water. Then, they removed his shoes and strapped his feet down. Over the course of three hours, they ran a feather over the bottom of his foot. The guy snapped like a twig.”

Now, that was interesting. I pulled up a chair and sat down in front of him. “So, they tortured him with tickles?”

“Well, it wasn’t really tickling. It was something about the sensory something or other and the mind games of the...I really don’t know. But it was awesome and it totally worked.”

“Well, as interesting as that is, we have more important matters to discuss.”

“Okay, shoot.”

I laughed at his joke. “That’s a good one. So, first of all, what’s the deal with you being married and not telling anyone?”

“That? That’s what you want to discuss?”

I didn’t like looking at him with a blindfold on. It was distracting. I liked to look into the eyes of the man I was interrogating. I quickly removed it, stuffing it in my pocket.

“So, who’s this woman?”

He sighed with a smile on his face. “Francesca.”

“Okay, that right there,” I pointed at him. “What are you sighing happily about? You’re a married man.”

“You’re not going to tell Honey, are you?”

I might not like the way he was saying this Francesca woman’s name, but I was no snitch. “Not as long as you tell me everything.”

“Well, you can relax. I wasn’t married before I came here.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“I was engaged, but it didn’t work out.”

“Paris,” I nodded. “I’ll be honest, I really don’t know much about her, but I saw her picture. She was gorgeous.”

“With a vicious, green heart,” he grumbled. He frowned, looking down at the water. “Did you add salt?”

“Yeah, it’s for better conductivity.”

“It’s nice,” he said, wiggling his toes. “Exfoliating. Do you think you could add in a little oil to help soften my skin?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any down here. I have some motor oil, but I don’t think that’ll work the same way. So, back to this woman.”

“Francesca or Paris?”

“Francesca. You actually married her while you were gone?”

“Me? No, I didn’t marry her. My alter ego did. And let me tell you, he really enjoyed that marriage.”

A grin split my lips as he continued.

“She was a job. Actually, she was the suit’s daughter. She was on board his yacht when he found me drifting at sea.”

“I thought the suit was the guy you were following in Marrakech?”

“He was, but that was all a ruse, part of a bigger ruse.”

Now it was getting interesting. I didn’t even have to torture him. We were just having this conversation like we always

would. I was beginning to wonder why Cash wanted me to interrogate him.

“So, this Francesca,” I said, waving him on.

“Oh, yeah! I was drifting in the ocean after the guys threw me off the ship. It was a really sucky situation. I’d just saved all their lives by getting them through the storm and they made me walk the plank.”

“The actual plank?” I asked, sitting up taller. “They had one? Did they wear eye patches?”

“Nothing like that. And the plank was metaphorical.” He glanced past me. “Is that a branding iron?”

“Yeah, electric. Did you find out why they threw you over?”

“That’s a tough one. I’m guessing it was either the fact that they found out I wasn’t actually who I said I was, or they got greedy and wanted to cut me out of the deal now that they were so close to shore. Are you going to electrocute me?”

“That depends. Are you going to give me something to electrocute you over?”

He thought about it for a moment. “I gotta be honest, I did a lot of bad things while I was away. And I can’t talk about all of it. If you want answers, you’re going to have to torture it out of me.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“I’m just being honest. As much as I would love to tell you the truth, I just can’t.”

I was afraid he was going to say that. I really didn’t want to go down this road with him. “Cash wants answers.”

“I understand. You have to do what you have to do,” he nodded.

I stood and walked over to the table, but I just couldn’t pick it up. I spun back to him. “He doesn’t want me to do this.”

“What? Electrocute me? It won’t hurt me. I can’t die.”

“Everyone can die. It’s a fact.”

“Yeah, but not me. You know this to be true.”

“It was true in the past, but if I get my hands on you—”

“You already have your hands on me. I’m telling you, light me up. It won’t work.”

“Honestly, I’m just not in the mood,” I admitted. I slumped back down in the chair and sighed. “You know that feeling of release you get from a really good murder?”

“Not really.”

“I’ve been missing that lately. For a short time, I felt like I was back. We were attacked by another security company not too long ago. Someone shot Cash, and I was all over it. I was in my element, but in the middle of interrogating the guy, I just...had trouble performing,” I said, hoping he would understand. “I had to fake the whole thing. It was horrible. That darkness deep inside just sort of vanished mid-torture. I haven’t been able to get it back yet. I feel dysfunctional.”

His lip quivered as he stared at me. “I think that’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard. That darkness is part of you.”

“I know!” I said. “What does it say about me if I’ve lost it? Then I’m just Fox, the show tune singing regular guy. No one will call me a psychopath anymore. This is so horrible.”

“Hey. It’s not that bad. We’ll figure it out.”

“How?” I grumbled. “I can’t even do it to you.”

“Yeah, but I’m your friend. You need someone you can really let loose on.”

“I had someone in the chair and I was a mess. It took me days of hiding out in my room to get over what happened. Everyone thought I was getting dragged down into the darkness even further, but really...” I looked around making sure I wasn’t being overheard. “I really spent that time watching reruns of *Gilligan’s Island*.”

FNG gasped, shaking his head at what I had just admitted. “No way.”

“I know. I’m so ashamed. I couldn’t even watch a musical. I’m the guy everyone turns to for this stuff. What are they going to do if I don’t get my mojo back?”

I sat there in silence and shame. I couldn’t believe I’d just told him my greatest weakness. What would everyone think of me? How would I ever get back to who I was? My whole life was defined by the shadows I walked through. Was I just supposed to be happy now? That was no way to live.

“Maybe I could help you,” FNG spoke up. “You know I can’t die. Maybe you could electrocute me and work out your frustrations on me.”

“Nah,” I shook my head. “I couldn’t do that to you.”

“But you’re not. I’m refusing to tell you what you want to know. The only way to deal with a witness is to make them talk.”

I shoved out of my chair and turned my back on him. “It’s a nice offer, but I couldn’t take you up on it.”

“Then I guess you’ll never know who the suit really is.”

I glanced over my shoulder, narrowing my eyes at FNG. “Are you saying you’re refusing to tell me the information you know about the man that you were spying on?”

“Exactly. It’s classified. I could be tortured and killed if I gave up that information.”

A slow smile spread across my face as I walked over to the cables on the ground by the metal pool. I picked one up and tossed it in the water, then grabbed the other end and placed my hand on the knob that controlled the voltage.

“Who is this man and why did you marry his daughter? What did you get out of it?”

“I can’t tell you,” FNG said, his lips forming a smile. “You’ll have to make me talk.”

I cranked up the voltage and strolled over to the pool. “You asked for it.”



# FNG

*SOMEWHERE IN THE OCEAN.*

*29 days, 2 hours, 32 minutes, and 16 seconds since boarding the ship with the pirates.*

THE WATER CARRIED ME FOR MILES. AS I STARED UP INTO THE cloud-covered sky, I wondered just how long I would have to float out here until someone found me. I'd been drifting on my back since yesterday, turning over every once in a while to get my bearings. But it was the same every time. Miles and miles of ocean with no one in sight.

I shouldn't have been surprised when those guys double-crossed me. It was to be expected with villains like that. Still, I did get them through a raging storm that threatened to sink our ship. At least I had it better than the captain. The poor bastard was bludgeoned to death in the middle of the night. Had I known it was going to happen, I would have tried to stop it.

There were a lot of things I wished I could stop over the course of the past month. Had I never taken this job with Rafe, I might be at home right now, snug in my bed. Instead, I was without weapons, without friends, and without a boat to take me home. Hell, I'd take a dingy right now if it meant that I could stop floating aimlessly around the ocean.

A sound in the distance caught my attention. It was probably nothing, much like the imaginary ship I envisioned a few hours ago or the sound of a horn a few hours before that.



Being alone in the middle of nowhere did crazy things to your mind.

Still, I sat upright and doggy-paddled as I peered into the distance for any sign of life. I kept spinning in a circle until I had gone three hundred and sixty degrees. Disappointment shot through me, but then I thought I saw a flash of some kind in the distance. It might be nothing, but if it was another ship, I didn't want to miss my chance.

I started swimming, using all the energy I had left to get to that distant spot before it disappeared. My arms were heavy and my stomach growled and pinched in hunger, but I kept pushing on. Salvation was just a short distance away. I started laughing as I saw the yacht getting closer and closer. With any luck, I'd be feasting on a great meal in just another hour.

"Man overboard!" I heard someone shout.

I started waving my hands, even though the man had already seen me. But my smile soon slipped from my face as he pulled out a rifle and pointed it in my direction. I had a feeling I would be sleeping with the fishes a lot sooner than expected.

"Who are you?" the man shouted. "Identify yourself!"

"Uh...my name is FNG!" I shouted in return.

"What are you doing out here?"

That was a story that I didn't want to get into while floating around out here. "I was sort of...displaced from my ship."

I thought my eyes were deceiving me because a woman dressed in only a small, white bikini appeared beside the man. She was a vision of beauty with tanned skin and sleek, black hair. I was in awe of her. So much that I slipped beneath the water when I forgot to keep swimming. I came up spluttering, internally grinning when just moments later the woman winked at me. The man threw me a life preserver, then pulled me in.

"Thank you," I said as I climbed aboard.

The man didn't seem all too pleased about me coming aboard, but the beauty standing beside me was staring at me like I was her next meal—and a good kind of meal.

“So, do you always float around the ocean?” she asked.

She sashayed over to me, grabbing the towel I had wrapped around my body and pulled me closer to her. My brain went on the fritz when she pressed her body against mine. Then she pulled at the hem of my shirt and yanked it over my head, forcing me to drop the towel. Her eyes wandered over me appreciatively, then her hands followed the same trail.

“Now I know why you stayed alive out there.”

“Because of my devilishly good looks?” I grinned.

“That and your very muscular body.” She crooked her finger at me as she headed over to a table. “Come sit with me.”

I wasn't about to argue with that. After all, she was smoking hot. “Do you by chance have some water that doesn't have salt in it?”

“What kind would you like?”

“Just plain water.”

She snapped her fingers, getting her way immediately. I wasn't normally amused by the sight of people wielding their power over someone that worked for them, but I wasn't going to argue right now. I needed hydration. I grabbed the water bottle out of the man's hand and chugged the whole bottle in just under a minute.

“It must have been so hard out there, staying afloat in the hot sun.”

It didn't sound like a come-on, but when her foot slid up my leg, then nestled right up against my cock, there was no mistaking what she was after. Thank God, I'd drank the whole bottle, otherwise I would have spit it out in front of her.

“Uh, I should probably introduce myself before we get *too* acquainted. I'm FNG,” I said without thinking. “That is—Dean. People just call me FNG, but it's not a real name.”

“I didn’t think so. I’m Francesca.”

My heart skipped a beat just hearing the way she rolled her r’s. “That’s a beautiful name,” I answered, struggling to sound normal. Christ, I was acting like a seventeen-year-old boy that just saw his first supermodel. It had to be the sun. That’s what was making me act so strange.

I cleared my throat, shifting in my seat to arrange her foot in a way that wasn’t touching my balls. Not that I didn’t like her foot rubbing against me, but it was hard to think straight like this.

“So, Francesca, where are we?”

“Drifting.”

“Yeah, I sort of got that. I was drifting out there,” I said, jerking my thumb over my shoulder. “This is much more pleasant.”

“I can make it even better,” she whispered, leaning forward to snag a strawberry off the table. “Should I show you?”

My eyes drifted back to the food on the table. It all looked so good, but then again, it would be rude not to take her up on her offer after she rescued me. On the other hand, how was I supposed to perform in the way she needed without sustenance?

“Maybe I could just...grab a bite to eat really quick.”

“Make it very quick,” she said, shoving back her chair. She walked over to the stairs, then glanced back at me. “I’ll be waiting for you downstairs.”

I nodded in a jerky way, then turned back to the table and loaded up a plate. I was starving, but I also desperately wanted to get downstairs and see what that woman had on the menu for tonight. I stuffed a roll in my mouth and decided that was going to have to be enough for now. I could eat when we were finished.

I rushed over to the stairs and nearly fell down them in my attempt to get to her. I shoved her door open and stumbled

inside, yanking the door closed behind me. She was already on the bed, laid out and naked.

I swallowed hard, staring at her beautiful body. Holy shit, this was really going to happen. I was rescued from the water by a sexy raven-haired beauty who wanted to have sex with me. This was the best failed operation I'd ever had! I quickly shucked my shoes and socks, then got to work on my pants. I crawled on the bed, cupping my hand behind her head as I kissed her hard.

“Francesca—”



# CASH

“ARE you really down here telling Fox about the moves you put on this woman?” I asked as I walked into the room.

FNG was cupping the air with his hand as he stayed completely still with his lips pursed in a kiss. He quickly wiped the look off his face and grinned at me.

“Hey, Cash. I was just telling Fox about how I met the white suit.”

“So far, all I’m hearing is that you kissed a woman,” I snapped. “Fox, why is he in the water? And why are you holding jumper cables? I said no damage.”

“Oh, I told him to, boss. We’re...working on perfecting his technique.”

“He doesn’t need to perfect his technique,” I argued. “He’s more than capable.”

“Right, but I can’t die, so it’s good practice for him,” FNG said.

A look passed between FNG and Fox for just a moment. Something else was going on, but I didn’t know what it was. Fox was only secretive when he didn’t want to get caught doing something wrong.

“Boss—”

“Shut it down. I don’t know what’s going on here, but there’s no way you’re lighting him up just for the fun of it.”

“Well, it’s not just for the fun of it,” Fox grumbled, finally speaking up.

“I thought you didn’t want anything to do with interrogating him.”

“Were you worried about me, boss?” FNG grinned.

“Well, you did just come back and you were talking weird. I had to be sure. No offense.”

“None taken,” he said, still smiling at me. “I like it. In fact, I think you should take it a step further. Make him go all the way with it,” he said, nodding to Fox.

“I’m not going to make him electrocute you.”

“Come on, you know you want to.”

“I really don’t.”

“Yeah, you really do.”

“No, I really don’t.”

“But you do,” he said in a sing-song voice.

Every time he opened his mouth, I did want to send Fox forward with the assignment. But one of us had to be rational.

“Think about it, boss. All those months I was gone, all that crap you had to put up with. Wouldn’t this make you feel so much better?”

“No, it wouldn’t. I wanted answers, and it was stupid to send Fox down here. I knew he wouldn’t get anything out of you.”

Fox’s head snapped up as he glared at me. I saw it coming, that moment when he was about to lose it. I rushed forward, but I was too late. He stabbed the line right into FNG’s pec right as he dropped the other cable into the water. FNG jiggled in his seat as the voltage shot through him.

“Stop! What the fuck are you doing?”

“Is that it?” he shouted over the noise. “You think I’ve lost my edge? That I can’t handle this?”

“No, that’s not what I was saying! Would you stop!” I shouted. When he didn’t release FNG, I ran to the wall and jerked the cable out. The noise died down, but as I spun around, I saw we had another problem on our hands.

I rushed over to FNG, sitting him upright from where he was slumped in his chair. “Hey!” I yelled, slapping him across the face. He didn’t respond. I dragged him off the chair and over to the cement floor. Pressing my fingers to his pulse, I waited to feel even the faintest heartbeat, but there was nothing.

“What the fuck did you do? He just came back to us.”

Fox scoffed. “It’s FNG. He can’t die.”

“He just did!” I said, pointing at his lifeless body.

Fox strolled over without a care in the world. “Boss, how many times have you seen FNG die before? I’m telling you, he’s fine.”

“He’s not fine. He has no pulse!”

“Right, but it’ll come back,” he said confidently.

“And if it doesn’t? How the fuck am I supposed to explain this to anyone?”

He frowned a little. “Well, it was you that said you wanted me down here interrogating him.”

“Right, but I said no torture. I specifically stated that.”

“You know, I’m not sure anyone’s going to believe you. It’s your word against mine.”

“Yeah? And who’s the resident psychopath around here?”

“Boss,” he frowned. “Those words hurt. They might be true, but I still have feelings, the same as you.”

“So does he! I’m sure he’s feeling a little dead right now.”

Fox studied FNG, grinning the whole time. “Nah, he’s taking a nap.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to gain some control before I snapped his neck and ended up in jail right



beside him. “Fox, you can’t electrocute someone just because they say they can’t die.”

“Why? We test boundaries all the time. Like, if you were to say that Funyuns were disgusting, I would make you try one in front of me, just to make sure your reaction was appropriate. That’s the only way to know for sure that it’s true.”

“But we’re not talking about eating Funyuns. We’re talking about living versus dying.”

“And he’s still alive,” he repeated.

“No, he’s not,” I gritted out. “The man is laying on the floor without a pulse!”

FNG gasped for air, sitting upright, nearly knocking heads with me. “Holy shit, that was a crazy ride.” He turned and looked at Fox, then held up his hand for a high five that Fox gave very enthusiastically.

“See, boss? I told you he couldn’t die.”

He hauled FNG to his feet, then patted down his hair. “You’re a little singed.”

“Right? I can still feel the current running through me. It’s a total high.”

“I’ll have to try it sometime—”

“No,” I snapped, getting to my feet. The insanity had to stop. “No more. You won’t be testing out any more theories on each other. I’m ashamed that I even considered having Fox interrogate you. I should have known it would end up this way, but I stupidly assumed he’d force you to watch musicals with him until you broke.”

Fox snapped his fingers, nodding at FNG. “You know, that would have been so awesome.”

“Maybe next time.”

“There will be no next time,” I argued. “Never again will I ask you to do this!”

“Now, boss,” Fox chuckled. “Don’t be too quick to throw out judgments. Remember, I just interrogated the man that

shot you. See how that turned out?”

“Yes, they all died.”

“Well, yeah, but they were trying to kill us. I thought you wanted me to kill baddies.”

“I do, but—” I wasn’t going to sit here and have this argument with him. “Did you at least find out anything?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said excitedly. “He was just getting to the part where he was about to be seduced by Francesca, his future wife.”

“And what does that have to do with the man in Marrakech?”

“Well, you interrupted the story, boss. If you want to know the ending, you have to stick around for it.”

That was one thing I couldn’t do. I’d wasted enough time trying to get answers out of FNG. I wouldn’t waste any more. “Just...don’t do anymore experiments on him.”

Fox tapped the side of his nose, then winked at me. “You got it, boss.”



# FOX

CASH WALKED out of the room moments later, leaving me alone with FNG. As soon as the door closed, FNG hopped up and slapped me on the back.

“Man, that was awesome! See? You’ve still got it!”

I hung my head in shame. It was all a lie. I didn’t get a thrill out of electrocuting him, and while I was happy to see his record of not being able to die still held true, I didn’t feel one bit better.

“Hey, what’s going on? You did it!”

“Yeah, by force,” I grumbled. “Did you see him? He baited me into electrocuting you.”

FNG’s brows furrowed. “I don’t think that’s what he was doing.”

I kicked at the dust on the floor, so ashamed that I was losing my edge. Grabbing the chair out of the pool, I plopped down in it, hanging my head like a puppy in trouble. “You had to argue with him to get me to do anything, and even then, it was just to prove that I still could. There was no satisfaction in it for me. I’m telling you, I’m losing my edge.”

“Hey, don’t talk like that. You’re not losing anything. You’re adapting to your environment. I don’t know another guy that can torture quite like you do. Yes, you use the same techniques over and over again, but you give it style. You know just how far to push before you’ve crossed the line. Just like now. You knew when to stop.”

“Not true,” I pointed out. “Cash pulled the plug. I would have kept going just to prove a point.”

He sighed and sat down on the floor beside me, leaning against the wall. “Yeah, I know how you feel. That’s what it was like the whole time I was out there. I felt like an imposter.”

“Right?” Man, I was so fucking happy that someone understood. “I always thought I needed Anna to calm the demons, but something changed. I’m...happy. Like all the time. That can’t be normal.”

He snorted. “Look, it’s not the end of the world. So, you’re happy? What’s so wrong with that?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong with it. It starts as being happy. Yes, I have a wife that I love and would do anything for. And I have kids, which is something I never thought I’d have. It’s all so fucking amazing. But what’s next? When you’re happy, there’s no place to go but down.”

“You could always get a dog. Maybe then you’d be even happier. Just don’t get one of those lap dogs. Get a real dog.”

I liked where he was going with this. “Yeah, like a Husky or a German Shepherd.”

“Exactly, and you can train it to be your sidekick. It could go with you on missions and be in the basement with you when you torture people.”

For just a moment, it sounded like a great idea, but the whole torturing people thing just wasn’t really working for me anymore. “What if...what if I stopped doing the whole...boiling people in acid thing?”

He looked at me funnily, like he didn’t understand the point of it all. “You don’t want to do that anymore?”

“Sadly, I just don’t think it’s in the cards for me any longer. When the pleasure in taking a life is gone, what’s the point in doing it?” Decision made, I slapped my knees and stood. “That’s it. I’m just not going to kill any more people. I’m taking a vow of...not killing.”

I was pleasantly surprised with how good it felt to make that decision. It was like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders and I could finally breathe again.

FNG jumped to his feet, his face filled with panic. “Whoa! You can’t just decide not to kill anymore. What if we’re out on a job? Are you going to kill then?”

“Nope,” I grinned. “I’m going to be the calm, rational person that talks the maniac down. I’ve seen it before on cop shows. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

I headed for the door, but FNG quickly caught up with me. “It’ll be fine? You know that’s fiction, right? Those characters could just as easily die as they could come back to life!”

“Just like you,” I laughed. “Isn’t it great?” I pulled the door open and strode down the hallway, eager to get back to a normal life. I wasn’t sure what that felt like since I’d never had anything normal in all my years, but I was excited to find out what it was all about.

“No, this is your job!” he urged. “What’s Cash going to do to me when he finds out you’re no longer his secret weapon? This is all going to come back on me. Just like it did with the suit!”

I stopped and turned back to him, curious about this story. “Speaking of which, you never finished telling me about Francesca. Did you sleep with her? How did you get married? Was it a sunset trip where the minister pronounced you husband and wife just as the sun was sinking into the ocean?”

“Not exactly.”

Man, I couldn’t wait to hear how it all ended. FNG had the best stories. “Well, don’t leave me in suspense! How was it?”

“It was...everything a guy dreams about. Aside from the threats that followed.”

“Ooh, tell me all about it.”

“She was a seductress...” he sighed. “The night was the best night of my life. Minus the night I married Honey,” he quickly corrected.

“Yeah,” I grinned. “So, you sealed the deal that night?”

The elevator dinged and we stepped inside. He slapped me on the shoulder as he stared off into space. I could almost envision it with him as he described it.

“It was magical. The moonlight filtered in through the cabin window and the gentle rocking of the boat really set the mood. Normally, I might get a little seasick with all the swaying, but with her, it felt as if none of that existed.”

I waited for him to give me more, but that was it. The elevator doors opened and he stepped off, leaving me hanging on his every word. I rushed after him, hoping he was going to divulge more. “And what happened?”

“I slept with her.”

“Yeah, I got that much. But what was it like? Was she kinky? Gentle? Did she lead or did you? And did the rocking of the boat make it easier or more difficult?”

“I can’t tell you that, especially now that I’m married.”

“I think that only applies to your current wife. Past marriages are totally on the table for discussion.”

“Not in this situation.” He stopped suddenly and gripped my shoulder hard as he pressed me against the wall. “If my current wife ever found out what it was like with my old wife, that would be a situation that could land me in a grave.”

“Ah, because of the father-in-law.”

“Exactly. He may be in Mexico, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have the reach to put me in the ground. So, anyway, back to Francesca, our time together was magical, if not short-lived.”

“Did you marry her also because you had to?”

He winced, clearly not liking the question. “It wasn’t a forced marriage on my part, but there was definitely some deception involved.”





# FNG

*A YACHT.*

*Two weeks, 6 hours, 13 minutes, and 59 seconds since being rescued.*

WE LAID ON THE DECK, BASKING IN THE SUN. I FED HER grapes and champagne while she laughed at my stories. For two weeks, we were completely uninterrupted. The warm breeze from the ocean made it easy to forget about making it home. As long as I was with Francesca, I didn't have to think about the responsibilities that were waiting for me. It was paradise.

But it wasn't meant to last. No matter how much I tried to forget my old life, I knew it wouldn't be long before it came back to haunt me. Her guards left us alone for the most part, only checking in with her in the morning and in the evening. I'd asked her why she had men watching her, but she would never really answer the question.

I got my answer two weeks after I first boarded the yacht when I woke with a gun in my side. I jerked awake, immediately reaching for Francesca, but she wasn't there. I heard her scream from across the room and immediately slipped into my old ways. I slammed my palm against the gun, then kicked out at my attacker. My foot connected with his stomach and then with his face. He dropped to the ground, still conscious and ready to fight, but I was faster. I lept to my feet

and grabbed his weapon, immediately turning it on him and putting a bullet in his head.

I swung the weapon around to the man holding Francesca. She looked panicked more than scared, which meant she might end up doing something stupid. I had to end this before it went any further.

“What do you want?”

“I’m here for the girl.”

“That’s too fucking bad because so am I.”

I really hated to pull the trigger with her face so close to his. She’d have blood all over her, but sometimes you just had to get a little messy to get the job done. A sense of calm washed over me right before I pulled the trigger, then rushed forward to catch Francesca as she fell with her assailant.

“Who were they?” I snapped. “And where are your guards?”

A slow clap filled the silence as a man in a suit walked down the stairs. Shoving Francesca behind me, I trained my gun on the newest threat. Her cleaning bill was going to be outrageous.

When the man came into focus, I thought I recognized him, but I couldn’t place where I’d seen him before. “It’s not very often that someone gets the drop on my men. Especially not when he’s in his underwear in my daughter’s bed.”

“Your—” I almost lowered my weapon. *Almost*. Just because he said he was her father didn’t mean that he was a good guy or someone to trust. Quite the opposite, in fact. “What do you want?”

He hit the bottom steps and kept walking toward me, stopping in front of the guard I’d just shot. He kicked him lightly with his foot, then looked up at me. “I heard about your little rendezvous, Francesca. I thought we talked about this.”

“I love him,” she said from behind me.

I would choose to be shocked later. For now, I had to focus on the problem at hand, like the fact that because she just told

her father she loved me, I might end up back in the ocean. I didn't relish the thought.

"You love every man that sleeps with you."

Ouch. Okay, that hurt a little.

"He's different. I swear it."

"And what makes him different?" her father asked.

The question was directed at his daughter, but his eyes were on me. I wasn't backing down, no matter what he threatened.

"He's standing in front of me, protecting me. No one has ever done that for me."

"I've done that for you," the man said angrily.

Something in his voice triggered a memory I thought I'd forgotten a long time ago. The hint of danger that laced every word and the scowl on his face. Suddenly, it hit me. The man in the vineyard that slit my boss's throat—this was the guy. Now I knew why his daughter needed protection. She was probably in constant danger because of his business dealings.

"Step away from my daughter," he commanded.

That was probably the worst thing he could do. I was shit at following orders, and even worse when it was from someone I didn't trust. "I don't think so. If you want me to stand down, you're going to have to take my gun from me. And trust me when I tell you it won't be easy."

His lips turned up at the corners as he snapped his fingers. Boots pounded on the stairs as he stepped aside and let them through. I shoved Francesca back another step until we reached the bathroom. It wasn't any safer in there than it was out here. Bullets could easily penetrate the door, but at least it might slow them down. I swung the door open and pushed her inside, then stood my ground in front of it.

"If you want her, you'll have to go through me. And I can guarantee that won't end well for you."

“You’re outnumbered,” the suit smirked. “You don’t stand a chance.”

“I’ve seen worse odds.”

The man snapped his fingers and the goons charged me. Two humongous dudes just waiting to kill me, and the only thing they had going for them was brute force, but I had skills and brains on my side. Okay, I fired two shots and took them both down in a matter of seconds. It was really kind of anticlimactic as they fell to the ground, staring up at the ceiling sightlessly. Each was a kill shot, which I’m assuming they hadn’t expected, but I wasn’t just the average guy holding a gun.

“Anything else you want to throw at me?”

The man walked forward and examined their bodies. “Perfect shots,” he muttered. His eyes drifted up to mine, assessing me carefully. “So, Mr. Helmer, it seems you can take care of yourself.”

“Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“I’ve had men on this yacht with my daughter. Did you think they wouldn’t report back to me? Your fingerprints are everywhere, including on my daughter’s body,” he said, his voice suddenly strained.

“And what was this? A test?”

“Yes, and you passed. Very nicely done.”

“What about your men?”

“I’ll leave it to you to get rid of the bodies. Oh, and I would recommend dumping them sooner rather than later. We’ll be heading into port by the end of the day.”

He turned and walked up the stairs without another word. I stared down at the men in front of me, wondering what the hell just happened and what I was supposed to do now.

The door to the bathroom slid open and Francesca peeked out. “Is it over?”

“Yeah, I think so. Was that really your father?”

“Yes, and I don’t think he’s very happy with me for bringing you on board.”

“Does he test everyone like that?”

“Unfortunately. I can’t say it’s the first time he’s done something like that, but it is the first time he’s lost.”

“So, does that mean I’ve passed the test?”

“It means that you passed one test.” She walked past me into the room, staring down at the bodies. “I guess my vacation is over.”

“I need to clear the deck and then get rid of the bodies. Are you okay down here for a while?”

“With the dead people? No, I’ll go with you. I promise, it’s fine.”

“Stay behind me,” I said, ejecting the magazine to check how many rounds I had left. With any luck, I wouldn’t have to kill anyone else in the next twenty-four hours. Then again, I just met a man that I knew to be dangerous and a criminal. I wasn’t sure luck was on my side right now.

I slowly walked up the steps, peering over the top of the deck just enough to make sure no one was about to shoot me. Seeing that it was all clear, I walked the rest of the way up and checked out the rest of the yacht with Francesca on my six the entire way. She clutched my shirt like she was afraid I was going to leave her. I probably should at this point. I had fun with her, but it was time to get back to my real life.

I stowed Francesca away from where I’d be dragging the bodies, then got to work. Of course, none of her father’s men helped me. Why would they when they had me to do their work for them? I was just tossing the last body overboard when one of the goons strolled over to me.

“Come. The boss wants a word with you.”

He turned on his heel and headed for the other side of the boat. I rolled my eyes in annoyance. How the hell did I get myself into these situations? Still, I followed because I didn’t want to get another bullet hole in my body.

Francesca's father was sitting at a round table covered with a white tablecloth. A small vase of flowers sat in the center and spread all around was all the food I could ever want. My mouth watered at the sight of the steak and chicken. I could do without the fish. I'd spent a little too much time with them in the ocean.

But after a rather rambunctious night with Francesca, I was starving.

"Please, sit."

I sat in the seat and tried not to stare at the food. I didn't want to get my hand shot off while reaching for a chicken wing.

The man removed his hat, running his fingers through his thinning hair. "So, tell me what you're doing out here in the middle of the ocean."

I kept my face neutral as I leaned back in my chair and played it cool. "I was trying to get back to the United States, but some pirates took over the ship. I ended up in the water."

He chuckled, picking up his wine glass. "That's quite a story. Pirates, you say."

"It was a case of bad luck."

"It looks like you have a lot of bad luck. And you just happened to end up on my daughter's yacht. A likely story."

"Not very likely if I want to live," I retorted. "There are more of you than me."

He chuckled at my quip, digging for more information. "So, why are you trying to get back to the United States?"

"It's where I live."

"But why is it so difficult?"

That was a gray area I couldn't really discuss, but it also opened up an opportunity for me. "I was doing a job and it didn't go as planned. I had to get out on my own, and then I was declared an enemy of the state."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “My, my. So, you’re not some businessman who got lost on the way home.”

“Not at all.”

We sat in tense silence for a few minutes, both of us staring at each other. He was waiting for me to break as he asserted his power over me, but it wasn’t going to work. A man like him only truly respected an adversary that didn’t back down.

Finally, he relented, but I knew he had other plans in mind for me. “Eat, and then we’ll talk. I think I might have just the job for you.”

It was a command, not an invitation to discuss the job. Clearly, the only way I was staying on this yacht was if I did as he expected. That wasn’t too hard for me. I had nowhere else to go, and I wanted to take this guy down. The only way to accomplish that was to figure out exactly what I was involved in and MacGuyver my way out of it.

“So, do you always board your daughter’s yacht and scare the piss out of her?”

He smirked at me, then glanced over my shoulder at Francesca. “She is not the most careful with who she brings aboard. You can understand my need for caution.”

He had a point. While I was grateful for her dragging me aboard, I could have been anyone, and that could have been the end of her life. “That won’t happen as long as I’m around.”

Surprised, he crossed one leg over the knee, smiling at me curiously. “And what makes you think I’ll allow you to stick around?”

“Because despite not having a weapon, I took down your men and protected your daughter. This is what I was trained to do.”

“Yes, I’ve read your file. You’re very impressive. But what makes you think I want a guy like you around my daughter? How do I know where your allegiances lie?”

Ah, the good old test of proving myself to the bad guy. I loved it when they did this shit. I was down for anything they wanted to throw at me. “My allegiances lie with her. They will always be with her.”

“And what if I have a better offer?”

Tricky. If I said I would abandon her for him, that would only prove how untrustworthy I was. On the other hand, if I didn't, it would show I wasn't willing to go the extra mile for him. There was only one way to answer that.

“Your daughter's safety always comes first. As long as that offer doesn't affect her in any way, I'm on board.”

“So quick to join,” he said skeptically. “Why is that?”

I held out my hands as I looked around the boat deck. “As you can see, I have nothing else going for me right now. There's nothing to rush home to, no wife, no kids...no job. But I earn my way in this world, and I would never take advantage of your daughter to get ahead.”

The way he stared at me gave me second thoughts about this plan. I could see my future growing smaller and smaller with each second that passed. But then he surprised me, clapping me on the shoulder as he grinned.

“You fuck up even once, I'll make sure the last thing you see is my knife going into your eyeball.”

“Fair enough.”

“Oh, and one more thing...you are family now. The wedding is Sunday.”

He snapped his fingers and headed to the boat anchored right beside us.

“Um, excuse me!” I shouted. “What wedding?”

“The one where you marry my daughter,” he laughed as he disappeared onto the other boat.

I turned around, stunned at this new revelation. “Huh.” That was not expected.





# IRIS

“So, this criminal basically tells you you’re going to marry his daughter, and your reaction is *huh?*”

I pulled to a stop outside the ten story building, ignoring the sounds of the police sirens all around me. I wasn’t here to help them in any way. My job was to diffuse the bomb. The city we were currently in had no bomb squad and it would be hours before a team arrived. I was their best chance at diffusing this thing.

I walked around to the back of the minivan and pulled out my gear, shoving it into FNG’s arms as I grabbed the final bag.

“Do you think I made a mistake?” he asked.

I checked my weapon, then reloaded my magazine. “That depends on how the story ends.” I pressed my finger to my ear, checking comms. “Bullseye, you copy?”

“Roger that. I have a position in the northwest building. All clear for entry.”

“That’s a good copy.” I grabbed the rifle and shoved it into FNG’s other hand. “Take that and don’t fucking drop it.”

He shot me an incredulous look. “This isn’t my first time doing this.”

“Could have fooled me. If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t call you FNG. What did you say your real name was?”

“Does it matter?” he grumbled. “It’s not like you’ll use it.”

That was true. I shoved past him and headed for the building. “So, did you end up going through with it?” I asked over my shoulder.

Thumper and Slider were already waiting for me at the door. As far as we knew, the building was clear, but that didn’t mean the bomber wasn’t hiding inside somewhere and escaped notice. I nodded to them as I entered, pulling my own gun as we headed to the stairwell.

“I knew it wouldn’t last,” FNG whispered in my ear.

I jerked at the feel of his hot breath on my skin. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“You asked if I went through with it.”

“Now? You want to discuss this now?”

“You asked!”

“Yes, but now we’re about to dismantle a bomb. Maybe now isn’t the best time to talk about it.”

Before he could open his mouth again, I nodded to Thumper as he pulled the door open. Slider was through first, clearing the stairwell up and down before motioning me forward. I kept to the wall as I headed downstairs to the basement. The bomb was located in the elevator shaft, and while the basement wasn’t the last entrance to the shaft, it was the only accessible one. We couldn’t risk opening the doors without knowing what we were dealing with first.

“Crowbars,” I ordered.

FNG set down the bag and pulled out two, then took a position opposite me. We slowly pried open the doors, giving Thumper and Slider the chance to clear the rest of the shaft before we entered. Upon the all clear, I stuck a wedge in the door and got out my gear.

“Well, boys, time to have some fun.” I hooked up my gear to rappel down the cable, then slung my pack over my shoulder. It was time for FNG to have some fun. Thumper and Slider were always with me and they hated it. They didn’t

have the same love for explosives that I did. “You’re with me,” I grinned.

“But—”

I ignored him and grabbed the cable in my hands. Clicking the cable slide into place, I let loose and slid down to the bottom of the shaft, stopping just short of the bomb. After unhooking, I gave a thumbs up to FNG and waited for his slow ass to make his way down here. I held the cable still as he descended, not wanting to accidentally set off the bomb because of his stupidity.

“You good?” I asked when he was finally on the ground.

“Sure. You know, this is good for me. Everyone can use a little extra training.”

“Exactly. So, what do we have here?”

I bent down on my haunches and studied the explosive. It was fairly simple, which really bothered me. If someone wanted to blow up a building, why would they make it so damn simple to diffuse?

“Something’s not right here,” I said, pushing to my feet. “Thumper, you copy?”

“Yeah, what’s going on?”

“This isn’t right. The bomb was made by an amateur at best.”

“Okay,” he answered slowly. “And your point is?”

It irritated me when they questioned me. “My point is that an amateur would go for a smaller target first to make sure their plan worked. There’s something else going on, maybe a second bomb. I think this was just a distraction.”

“For what purpose?”

“To distract us from the actual bomb. It’s been a good hour since we were called. We had to gear up and wait for the building to be cleared. It took time to get down here.”

“So, if it were you, where would you put the second bomb?”

That was a good question. “Give me two.”

I studied the bomb again, looking for anything that might point me in the direction of what the actual target was. The bomb was big enough to cause some damage, but not take down the whole building. And since it was detected so early, we were able to get everyone out.

That was it.

“Who called in the bomb?”

“Uh, janitor, I think.”

“And how did he happen to find the bomb at the bottom of the elevator shaft? The only way to see it is when the elevator is past the first floor or when the maintenance door is opened. If there was no call for repairs, then what the hell was he doing down here?”

“Copy that. Hold one.”

I waited at the bottom of the shaft for answers. There was no way I was diffusing this until I was certain it wasn't linked to something else. I got down on my knees and flattened my face to the ground to look underneath the device. A small timer ticked down the minutes, but that's not all I saw. There was a secondary timer right next to it, connected with wires. Someone was pulling a Rocket Chaser.

“Thumper, there's a secondary line under the bomb. It's attached to another device remotely. If we diffuse one before the other, they both go off.”

“Copy that. We're coordinating with the department now.”

“Fuck that,” I muttered, hooking myself back up to the cable.

“Whoa, where ya goin'?” FNG laughed nervously.

“I'm heading up to find the other device. You're going to stay down here and babysit this one. Whatever happens, you do not touch that device until I give the go ahead.”

“You're leaving me down here?” he asked, clawing at my arm. “That's not a good idea. I touch things all the time.”

“Do you want some advice?”

He nodded furiously.

“If you don’t want to blow up, don’t fucking touch it.”

I started pulling myself up the cable, ignoring the chatter on comms. There was nothing going on but a bunch of arguing over who was in charge. Thumper held his hand out for me when I reached the top. He was going to be really pissed with me in a moment.

“Thanks,” I said once I was outside the shaft.

“So, what’s our next move?” Slider asked.

“We look for the other bomb. Thumper, you’ve seen me dismantle a hundred times over. I need you to stay here and wait for my signal—”

He interrupted me with a bark of laughter. “You’re shitting me, right? I don’t do bombs. Hell, I barely survive when I’m with you.”

“Your leg was very helpful that one time. You got this.”

“I’ve got nothing,” he snapped as he grabbed me right when I was turning away. “You can’t leave me to dismantle a bomb! There’s a difference between watching and doing.”

I nodded, completely understanding his dilemma. “Okay, I’ll stay here and you go find the other bomb.”

“Right,” he nodded.

“It’s likely to be bigger and trickier to diffuse, but I’m sure you’ve got this.”

I grinned at him, knowing he would give in. I’d worked with him too long for him to pull that crap with me.

“What about me?” Slider asked.

This was the fun part. “You get to come with me. This is going to be good.”

“Good?” Slider asked.

“Yeah, fun, you know?”

“No, I don’t know. It’s a bomb.”

“Yeah, but just a tiny one.”

“You said the next one would be bigger and trickier!”

“Right, but that doesn’t mean it’ll be huge. Worst case scenario, you end up in the hospital for a few days with third degree burns. I mean, as long as it’s not complicated.”

I moved to leave, but he stepped in front of me, placing a hand against my chest. “Complicated? You do this for the thrill of it.”

“Right, and I’m good. Don’t worry about it.”

I tried to move again, but he stopped me. “You’re contradicting yourself. You said it could be tricky and we might get blown up, then you tell me you’ve got it. Which is it?”

I thought about that. “What would make you feel better?”

Okay, that probably wasn’t the best thing to say to convince him we were fine. But I had this. I mean, once I found the other bomb. It would be good as long as nobody did anything to fuck this up.

“I knew I should have stayed in bed today,” Slider muttered.

“That’s the spirit! Tally-ho! We’re off to find an explosive and do our best not to set it off!”

“You know, I liked it better when you were down there and I was up here!” he shouted after me.

I chuckled to myself as I climbed the stairs back to the first floor. Two bombs and it wasn’t even noon. This was going to be a good day.





## FNG

“YOU KNOW, this reminds me of this one time—”

“I really don’t want to hear another story right now,” Thumper snapped. He’d been twitchy ever since he joined me down here fifteen minutes ago. I wasn’t trying to annoy him. I just thought he would appreciate the distraction.

“It’s a good story,” I said to myself. “I was actually in a very similar situation.”

It was dark down here and kind of creepy. Not that I was scared, but it was a shitty place to sit with a bomb. Not to mention the lack of space for Thumper and me when neither of us wanted to sit too close to the device that could essentially blow us to smithereens.

He finally looked over at me. “When you were missing?”

The question was out of sheer boredom. There was nothing for us to do down here but wait. And with the device between us, that left out all kinds of fun activities, like rappelling down the cable to see who could go the fastest.

“Yeah. I mean, there was no elevator and there was only one bomb. And I didn’t have an IRIS to dismantle the bomb. So, maybe not quite the same.”

“That’s not at all the same,” he huffed.

Though he wouldn’t admit it, I could tell he was interested in my story. I couldn’t blame him. It was a good story, and I was the best storyteller. In just a few more seconds, he would ask me to share. I just had to wait it out.

I counted to ten in my head, then to twenty, and he still didn't ask. "Alright, since it's so obvious you're not going to leave me alone until I tell you the story, I'll get to it."

"I wasn't going to ask," he said, staring up into the abyss.

"Well, that's subjective. So, it all began on a—"

"Dark and stormy night. Yeah, you start a lot of your stories that way."

"I do not," I said, slightly offended by his tone. "I'm pretty sure only one story started that way."

"Whatever," he grumbled.

"Anyway, it was a...dark and twisty...evening." There, that was better. "I was with Ivan—"

"Your former KGB operative?" he snorted.

"You know, he's real, and I really don't appreciate your disrespect toward him."

"If he's even real, and that's a very big if."

"Why would I lie about that? He's a great guy. Well, he was a great guy before he died."

Thumper's head snapped to face me. "Why can't you just admit that you were pulling a disappearing act and you let it go on for too long? Enough is enough!"

"Because that would be lying and I don't lie."

Geez, what was it going to take for these guys to believe me? I was putting it all out there, giving them all the details they needed to know what I was doing. Okay, some of it was exaggerated just a smidge, but it was all real.

"I'm telling you all of it was real."

"Except you have no way for us to verify any of this information. We all know you tried to pull a vanishing act. That's why you walked around the bar that night telling us you were going to die. It would seem off to us, and that would help ensure that your little ploy worked."

Damn, he was good. “Okay, you have part of that right. I did tell everyone I was going to die, but it was only to make my disappearance believable. There was no other ploy. I really was on assignment for Rafe.”

“Yeah, we know that much, but you didn’t intend on returning. It was the perfect opportunity for you to slip away and let us all think you were really dead.”

Man, I could see this was going to be harder than I thought. I never imagined I would come home and no one would believe me.

“Look, if I could prove that Ivan was real, would you believe me then?”

“Maybe, but I don’t know how you’re going to prove anything about a KGB operative. Maybe if he was CIA. At least that’s within our government. Good luck getting anything out of the Russians.”

He had a point there. This was going to be harder than I thought. “Okay, you’re right. There’s absolutely no way that I can prove anything about my time with Ivan. I have some great stories he told me, but I doubt you would believe me if I told you. Which is a shame because someone should remember the man beside me. He was a legend.”

“All of them are,” he said, rolling his eyes.

Again, there wasn’t much I could say—

That was it. I couldn’t tell him. I needed to show him.

“Okay, but if he weren’t real, would I be able to show you this?”

“Show me—”

I moved fast, just like Ivan showed me, drawing my knife as I tackled Thumper to the ground, then wrapped him in the Slayer hold. With his neck exposed, I slid the knife right across his neck, not actually breaking the skin. He was incapacitated with my body laying flat over his and my arms blocking both arms as I gripped his hair, pulling back his head to expose his neck. Yes, he could roll, but not without slicing

his own neck. The beauty of the hold was how simplistic it was, but you had to move fast or get rolled by your opponent.

“Is this supposed to prove something?” Thumper gritted out.

“This is the Slayer hold,” I said, grinning down at him. “You’ve heard about this, right? It’s how Ivan incapacitated his targets.”

“Your junk is rubbing against mine. It’s weird.”

“Yeah, I felt the same way the first time he showed me. But then I realized that no matter how I moved, I couldn’t break the hold without risking slitting my own throat.”

“You could have looked this up online,” he muttered.

“Right, I could have, but I wouldn’t have found anything. Not even the KGB knew exactly what he did to immobilize his targets. That’s something he only shared with me.”

“I could just tickle you.”

Huh, I hadn’t thought of that. “Why don’t you try it and see if it works.”

“And risk you slamming that knife into my throat? I don’t think so.”

“Which is exactly why this works,” I reiterated. “It really is a genius move.”

“And yet, it still doesn’t prove a thing.”

It didn’t. I shoved off him, holding out my hand for him to take. He slapped it away, rolling to his knees before standing. “So, what’s it going to take to prove to you that everything I said really happened?”

“Show me some fucking proof. Didn’t you take pictures while you were gone?”

“No phone,” I answered.

“Your tracker,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “It went dead that night.”

I pulled up my sleeve, showing him the scar on my arm. “Rafe dug it out. And he wasn’t exactly nice about it. For a man that needed me, he really had a shitty way of showing it.”

“Yeah, well, that’s who he is.”

“Does that mean you believe me?”

He huffed, stepping away from me. “Not even a little.” He pressed his finger to his ear. “IRIS, any word on that second bomb?”

“Not yet. We’re still clearing the buildings in the area.”

“And what if the bomb isn’t close by? What if it’s on the other side of the city?”

“I already thought of that, but the remote won’t be more than a block away. And in order for our bomber to trigger both devices, he has to be in range of both of them. I have Cash running background on everyone that hasn’t been evacuated from a one block radius.”

“That could take hours,” I grumbled, hearing the same thing he was.

“Roger that,” Thumper responded. “Just don’t make me wait too long down here or you’ll have a murder on your hands and it won’t be from the bomb.”

I glared at Thumper, not that he was paying attention.

IRIS’s laughter crackled through comms. “Have FNG tell you the story of how he dismantled a bomb. That’ll help pass the time.”

Thumper released the button and turned to me. “You already told IRIS?”

“Well, yeah. Unlike you, he was interested in my story.”

Sighing, Thumper walked over to the wall and slid down to the floor. “Fine, entertain me.”

It took everything in me not to roll my eyes at the man. I wasn’t just making this shit up. “Are you going to listen?”

“I asked you to tell me, didn’t I?”

“Grudgingly,” I said, sliding down the opposite wall. “It wouldn’t kill you to pretend you’re actually interested in what I have to tell you.”

“Fine. Oh, please, FNG! Tell me everything you know. I’m dying to hear this story,” he said, faking the enthusiasm that he should be feeling upon listening to such an amazing story.

“I don’t buy it, but I’ll tell you anyway because it truly is an amazing story.” Clearing my throat, I got back in the mood. “As I said, it was a dark and eerie night.”

“That’s not what you said the first time.”

“Do you want to hear this or not?”

He mimed zipping his lips, so I continued.

“Ivan and I were out on patrol in the city. As a former KGB agent, he didn’t have a great trust for anyone, and that included men from his own city. He always told me the city was filled with men that worked against the Russian government for profit, but finding out who they were was difficult. Not many wanted to talk for fear of what would happen if they were caught. After the Cold War, many people fell into even greater poverty, despite the fact that the new government was supposed to change the political atmosphere in Russia. But those that were already in power retained their status, making the working people desperate to find a means of supplementing their income. It truly was a terrible, despairing time.”



# FNG

*RUSSIA.*

*Sometime during his stay with Ivan at 11:32:12.*

“WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE LOOKING FOR?” I ASKED IVAN AS WE drove through the city.

While most of the city was shut down for the night, other areas were just starting to come to life. Women looking for an additional payday stalked the streets looking for their next prey. Men in fancy suits paid a dime a dozen for them, refusing to pay what they were worth. It was truly a desperate situation for most of Russia’s citizens.

“We are looking for anything suspicious,” Ivan said, taking us down another dimly lit road. “My people are desperate for change, but it will never happen this way.”

“What way is that?”

He pointed at the dozens of women that walked the streets. “It is too late for the change that is needed. The people want power, but have had to resort to demeaning themselves for an additional ruble. And the money they make will never help them in the long run. They become desperate with every day that passes. Violence and anger fill the minds of my people. It makes them do crazy things.”

“Are we here to stop them or help them?”

He slowly turned to me. “Stopping them is helping them. We must show them that they are only destroying themselves.”



“But if they don’t fight back, who’s going to help them?”

He shrugged. “Russia is not known for helping the people. Yet, they are very loyal to their motherland.”

“So, what’s the—”

I was cut off when Ivan suddenly jerked the car to the side of the road and slammed on the brakes. I threw my hands out to keep from hitting the dashboard, then looked out the window, trying to find the threat.

“What is it?”

He shoved the car in park and slowly undid his seatbelt. “Make no sudden movements.”

I did as he asked, slowly unbuckling as my eyes scoured the area to see what he was watching for. Then I saw it. A woman pushing a stroller was stopped on the sidewalk next to a building. At first, everything looked normal. Then I saw the fear in her eyes and tears running down her face. And the detonator in her hand that she held away from her body.

“Is that a—”

“Yes.”

“She doesn’t really have a baby, does she?”

“It’s possible. But she may not be the one that forced her to hold the detonator. We must move quickly, and you must do whatever I tell you to.”

“Right,” I nodded. “No problem there. I’m great at following orders.”

That wasn’t precisely true, but we’d go with it for now. I gently pushed open my door and set one foot on the street. Every second that passed made me think of my friends back at OPS, and what I would be doing now if I were with them. I didn’t know if Ivan had any experience dismantling bombs, but I’d seen IRIS do it a time or two. I might be able to handle it.

“Slowly,” Ivan warned as I started to shut my door.

I nodded, then took small steps toward the woman who was now shaking. Sobs wracked her body, making this even more dangerous than when we first arrived.

Ivan said something to her in Russian that I didn't understand. I picked up on a few words, but I doubted that asking for the bathroom would be very helpful right now. I kept pace with Ivan, stopping when he did. But I was close enough to see that the bomb was in the stroller—right next to a baby.

“Holy shit,” I whispered.

“She is sleeping for now,” Ivan said. “But if she wakes up and moves, it could trigger the explosive. We need to be fast.”

He spoke to her again in Russian, but all I could focus on was that bomb. Who would put one in a stroller with a baby? That was just wrong on so many levels.

I just started to reach in when Ivan shouted, “Stop!”

I instantly froze, peeking over my shoulder at him. “You don't want me to remove the baby?”

“There could be a pressure plate. If you lift her, it could detonate, instantly killing all of us.”

The woman pleaded with Ivan to save her child as she wailed incessantly. I knew this was hard for her, but a little quiet would go a long way in helping us think.

Ivan got down on his knees and checked out the bottom of the stroller. Hearing his heavy sigh, I knew immediately we were screwed. He stood, pulling me away from the stroller.

“There is a pressure plate with a secondary trigger if we attempt to disarm it.”

“I could be wrong, but that sounds bad.”

“It is very bad. I need you to take the mother and make her move across the street.”

“What? You want me to leave? No way.”

“It is for the best.”

“No, what’s for the best is that we get that baby out of the stroller and dismantle the bomb. If we move her, she’s only going to be a problem.”

“And what would you suggest?” Ivan asked testily.

“You mean, to dismantle the bomb?”

“No, what do you suggest I wear to dinner tonight?”

I nodded at him with a lopsided grin. “Yeah, I see what you’re doing there. But you can’t rattle me. I’ve got this. Okay, here’s the plan. That baby weighs maybe three pounds, right?”

Ivan gave me a droll look. “You are not around babies much, are you?”

“Never.”

“That child is at least three months old, which puts it between ten and seventeen pounds.”

My jaw dropped. “Are you fucking kidding me? How can a kid weigh that much? Is the stroller even equipped to handle that much weight?” Ivan’s jaw tensed at my outburst. “Right, I’m not helping. Okay, so we need to find something that weighs as much and pull an old switcheroo.”

“There is no switcheroo. It will not work.”

“It worked in *Indiana Jones*,” I grumbled.

“Your hero unleashed a gigantic rock that rolled after him, nearly killing him. Not to mention all the other damage it did to such an incredible find.”

Okay, now this was getting a little weird. “You know that place was imaginary, right? The director made it up for the storyline.”

“Did he?” Ivan asked, sending me a shrewd look.

My eyes widened as I caught on to his meaning. “No.” I glanced around, then lowered my voice and leaned in close. “Are you telling me that the treasure in that place was real? That—”

“Keep your voice down!” he ordered. “The point is, it did not work so well for Indiana Jones. We cannot just replace the baby and hope we don’t set off the bomb.”

“Right, so what do we do?”

“We must dismantle the bomb.”

“Cool,” I nodded. “I can do that.”

“No, you cannot. You do not have the skills to do this.”

I snorted at him. “I’ve worked with an EOD expert. I think I can handle this.”

“And I think you will end up in tiny pieces on the ground with only the dogs to sniff you out and confirm you are human.”

Well, when he put it that way, it did make me rethink my abilities. “Okay, then what’s the plan? How do we save the baby and dismantle the bomb?”

“It is not possible to do both. But, if I can delay signal for just two seconds, you could take baby and run.”

“Two seconds,” I nodded. “I’ll need a flak jacket and some kind of cage to shove the baby in to protect her when the bomb goes off. I can attach it to the front of my chest and you can shove the baby inside. Then I’ll slam the cage closed and run across the street. We’ll still take the hit, but at least it gives the kid a chance.”

Ivan smirked at me. “I was actually thinking that there is drainage system right there,” he pointed down the sidewalk. It was one of those large grates that could fit a whole person, possibly even the stroller. But if it got stuck, it would explode in our faces. But it was better than my idea.

“Okay, then let’s do this.”

“We must be very careful when we move stroller. Too many bumps could set off the bomb.”

“Right.”

“And we cannot wake the baby.”

I nodded again. This was going to be easy peasy. “So, who’s going to push the stroller?”

“I will push stroller. You will place your hand on baby’s stomach to prevent her from shaking.”

Put my hand in the stroller with a bomb? “Yeah, that sounds like more of a you job. See, I was thinking that since you’re the expert in this area, I would push the stroller and you could hold the baby. Then, when we get to the hole, you can lift the baby while I shove the stroller in.”

“But I need to delay the timer. I cannot lift the baby and delay the timer.”

“So, we need a third person. Someone who’s willing to do anything for you and isn’t afraid of getting hurt.”

We both looked at each other. “Sasha,” we said at the same time.

“I will call him. You look after baby.”

He ran off before I could counter his orders. I stood next to the stroller, peeking inside to make sure the little tike was okay. Despite everything going on around him, he was still silent as the grave. Maybe a little too silent. God, I hoped he hadn’t died from like...radiation from the bomb or something.

Meanwhile, the mother was still standing there, crying as she watched me.

Not knowing what else to do, I jerked my chin at her. “So, how’s it going?”

I winced when her sobs grew louder. Shit, that probably wasn’t the best thing to say.

“He is on his way,” Ivan said as he came back.

“You know, that blanket is maybe wrapped a little tight around him. Are you sure he’s still breathing?”

“We cannot risk moving the blanket until I have delayed the timer. Sasha will be here soon and we will move fast. Are you ready for this? It is very dangerous. I cannot guarantee your safety.”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I grinned. Now might be a good time to tell him that I was basically indestructible. “You don’t know this about me, but...I sort of can’t die.”

“Everyone dies,” he said without hesitation.

“Right, but not me. Trust me, I’ve tested it out many times. I’ve been blown up by an RPG, survived a very high jump out of a hospital, and even got shot in the chest. Trust me, I’m good.”

He walked slowly toward me, giving me that *you’re fucking crazy* look. “This is bomb. There is no coming back when the shrapnel hits your body. You will die either very fast or die very slow with metal pieces sticking out of hundreds of spots on your body. It is very painful way to go.”

“And I realize that, but trust me, I’m all good.”

He shrugged and turned around. “It is, how you say...your funeral.”

That got a good laugh out of me. “Yeah, been there, done that. Got the coffin.”

Sasha pulled up moments later, squealing to a stop on the side of the road. He walked to us with purpose, knowing that whatever his boss needed, he would provide. After a quick explanation, we were ready to go.

“Alright, here is the plan,” Ivan said. “Mr. Helmer will very slowly push the stroller over to that drain. I will watch the bomb and advise you. Sash will hold his hand on baby and ensure he doesn’t move. Once in position, I will set the delay and give you the signal. Then—”

“Wait.” I raised my hand. “What is the signal?”

“I will nod.”

“But what if you accidentally nod while delaying the detonator?”

“He is right,” Sasha agreed. “We need a better signal.”

“Okay,” Ivan sighed. “I will say monkey nuggets.”

“Is there a story to go with that?” I grinned.

“There is, but you will never know what it is. When I give the signal, Sasha will lift the baby at the same time Mr. Helmer will shove the stroller down the hole. Then we will all run. I guess we will have two seconds. Three, at most.”

“Alright, let’s do this,” I said, clapping my hands together. This was going to be good. We’d save a baby and be heroes of the day.

I placed my hands on the stroller and waited for Ivan’s signal. He got down on the ground and checked the device one last time.

“Alright, very slowly now.”

As gently as I could, I started to push the stroller down the sidewalk. Each step was slower than I thought, giving me time to think about all I had left behind. It made me miss my team and wish that I could be back home with them. However, I wasn’t so sure Ivan would let me go. We had a good rapport, and if I said I wanted to leave, he might break his streak and slit my throat.

“Stop,” Ivan said. “This is good. Be ready.”

He got down on his back and stared up at the device. Very carefully, he worked on the detonator. I couldn’t see exactly what he was doing from my position, but this would have been a great learning opportunity for me.

“Almost there.”

My palms were sweating as I waited for him to finish. This next part was fairly simple. I just had to shove the stroller inside and run before the bomb went off. That was easy. No harm, no foul. Well, aside from the fact that I might blow up.

“The delay is set. On my word, everyone move in.”

“Wait!” I shouted, wincing at how loud my voice was. We all peeked into the stroller, relieved that the baby didn’t wake up. “Just...need to wipe off my hands first.” I rubbed them up and down my jeans, then cracked my neck for good measure. Once that was done, there was no more delaying.

“Okay, I’m good.”

I nodded to Sasha, who nodded to Ivan.

“Ready? Monkey nuggets!” he shouted.

Sasha quickly snatched the baby right as I shoved the stroller into the hole. I barely had time to turn when the bomb exploded, sending flames shooting straight up into the air. I glanced around, seeing Sasha laying right on top of the baby. I scrambled to my feet and rushed over to him, hauling him off the kid.

“Is he breathing?” Ivan shouted.

I quickly shed the blankets from around his body, then stared in disbelief.

“What? What is it?” Ivan yelled as he scrambled to my side.

“It’s...heroin. With a baby head.” I picked up the doll’s head and showed it to Ivan. “I guess this means I won’t be getting my name in the paper.”





# IRIS

“ARE you positive there’s another bomb?” Slider asked. “We’ve been searching for hours without a single clue.”

I pulled the door open to the control room in the fifth building we were searching. This was our last hope at finding the bomb. Other teams had searched the other buildings, and if we didn’t find anything here, I wasn’t sure how we were going to proceed.

“It could have been a distraction,” I admitted. “The bomber could have placed the secondary trigger to throw us off, but what would be the point?”

“To waste our time?” Slider suggested. “Maybe he just wanted to fuck with our heads and let the time run out for you to dispose of the bomb.”

“If he really wanted to do that, why wouldn’t he have just built a more sophisticated bomb? It doesn’t make sense.”

“He’s a bomber. Nothing about him makes sense.”

I scanned the room, carefully removing the control panels one by one to search the insides. I thought for sure the room was going to come up empty. Then I removed the final panel and stared at the masterpiece in front of me. It wasn’t a bomb at all. Wires were fed out of a central device going to all different circuits throughout the panel.

“Cash, I’m gonna need whoever’s in charge of this building to get their ass inside and down to the control room. Stat.”

“On it.”

“What is this?” Slider asked.

“This is the job. The first bomb was meant to go off, and when it did, it would trigger this one, cutting off all the power in the building, and disabling everything inside the building. We need to know what’s in here that someone would want to get their hands on.”

“Wait, I thought you said the first device was there as a distraction— that it was a simple device that could easily be dismantled.”

“That’s what I thought too. I’m guessing if I had attempted to dismantle the device, it would have been more complicated than it appeared. And that would have set this one off. It’s perfect, really. With the explosion, everyone would be investigating that building. No one would even realize someone tampered with something in this building until days after the fact.”

“So...what happens when we disable this?” he pointed at the control panel. “Is the other bomb gonna go off?”

“Shit.” I hadn’t considered that yet. There were too many variables to consider. And if that bomb was more complex than I originally imagined, then there was no way Thumper or FNG could handle it. “Thumper, do you copy?”

“Loud and clear. I don’t suppose you have good news for us.”

“Sure.”

Silence lingered for a moment. “Your voice dropped when you said sure. What are you hiding from me?”

“No, it was a sure, like I have good news for you.”

“Then why didn’t your voice go high? Sure,” he said, pitching his voice higher. “See the difference? That was a positive sure.”

I rolled my eyes. “Is FNG telling you to say that?”

“Maybe,” he said after a moment.

“Regardless of how I said ‘sure’, we have bigger fish to fry.”

“I don’t think I like where you’re going with this.”

“That’s because it’s nowhere good,” I replied. “We’re in a bit of a FUBAR situation. We need to find the bomber, and we know he’s close by. But it’s going to take time to locate him in this mess. Since non-essential personnel are being cleared from the area, we can assume that whoever puts up a fight and refuses to leave is a good suspect.”

“Unless he’s working on the inside,” Thumper replied.

“Yeah, there’s that, but I don’t want to go there yet.”

“So, in what way are we FUBAR?”

This was the part I didn’t want to tell him. “It occurred to me—”

“Actually, it was me,” Slider interrupted.

He shrugged off my glare as if it meant nothing.

“I’m just saying, it was me that put this together. This old noggin isn’t just sitting up here for nothing,” he said, tapping the side of his head.

“Anyway, it’s possible that your bomb is the distraction for this bomb.”

“You already said that,” he responded. “How is that Slider’s idea?”

“That’s not the part he thought of. Strictly speaking, if that bomb is the distraction, it stands to reason that if we find out what the target of this device is, yours might still go off.”

“And you can’t be in two places at once,” he concluded.

“Ooh, I can do it,” FNG cut in. “I’m all over this. “

“No, you’re not touching a damn thing,” I said urgently. “We can’t make a move until we know more.”

“But it could blow in the meantime,” FNG said. “We don’t even know how long we have. We could be blown to

smithereens in a matter of seconds. I say we just disable this bomb and take our chances with that one.”

“Negative,” I said into comms. “We don’t know yet what will happen if you disarm that weapon!”

“It’s simple,” FNG said. “I just cut the red wire. It’s always the red wire—”

“Don’t touch it!” Thumper shouted.

I heard a scuffle, lots of cursing, and FNG’s chuckle. This wasn’t good. I sent Cap a distress signal, hoping he would get his ass over to FNG before he blew us all up.

“I got this!” FNG shouted. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Don’t fucking touch—”

“Oops.”

I stood there waiting for an update on what was happening. My mind swirled with all the worst case scenarios that could happen if he cut that wire. I turned to Slider with a grim expression. We had to clear the building now.



## FNG

“OOPS? That’s all you have to say?” Thumper shouted at me.

“I didn’t mean to cut the red wire! You shoved me,” I argued.

“I was trying to push you out of the way before you killed us all!”

“I could have just dismantled it and—”

A loud beeping filled the air, getting progressively faster with every second that passed. I looked at Thumper in horror. This was really fucking bad.

“What the fuck did you do?”

“I—”

“We need to get out of here,” he shouted, hooking his gear back to the cable to start the climb.

There wasn’t time to get out of here. This was my fault, and I would be damned if someone else was going to pay the price for my mistake. I laid down on my belly and got another look at the device. The beeping was erratic now, barely even a string of sound at this point.

“FNG, get your ass out of there!” Thumper shouted as he reached for the elevator doors to haul himself out of the shaft.

I looked back at the bomb one last time. I had to do something now. My pulse raced beneath my skin and my life flashed before my eyes. For the first time in my life, I thought I might actually die. I grabbed the device from the ground,

knowing that no matter what happened next, I was about to die.

With a warrior's cry, I hurled the device across the shaft, slamming it into the wall. It crumpled to the ground, the lights blinking several times before shorting out and going silent. I waited for it to blow, but nothing happened. Slowly, I crept toward the device and nudged it with my toe. The trigger fell to the side, showing no signs of still being active.

I released a harsh breath and slumped against the wall. Looking up, I saw Thumper staring down at me with an incredulous look on his face. I raised my shaky hand to my ear and called it in.

“All clear. The bomb seems to be inactive.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” IRIS shouted.

“I—uh—threw it against the wall. It's silent.”

“Get the fuck out of there now. Touch nothing else. Do you copy?”

“Roger that. FNG, over and out.”

My legs gave out and I collapsed in a heap on the ground. I couldn't move if I wanted to. I stared at the bomb, then started laughing. Out of all the times I thought there was even a remote possibility of dying, this was by far the most scary. It must be because I had a wife at home to think about now.

“FNG, get your ass up here!” Thumper shouted.

“Yeah, I'm gonna need a minute to get my legs in working order again.”

“If I have to come down there and drag you to the surface, you're gonna have more problems than spaghetti legs.”

It was time to pay the piper, or whatever the fuck the saying was. I hauled myself off the ground and attached my rigging to the cable. It took a hell of a lot longer to get to the top than it should have. And when I was finally parallel to the elevator doors, Thumper stood in the opening with his arms crossed over his chest and an evil look on his face.



I flopped into the elevator opening and rolled over to face the ceiling. Thumper appeared above me, still scowling.

“So, you still think that was a good idea?”

“It wasn’t my best, but it worked.”

He shook his head and held out his hand to help me up. I wasn’t ready to be on my feet again, but it was clear I wasn’t being given the option. He slapped me on the shoulder, his hand gripping me tight.

“If you ever do something like that again, I will put a bomb under your bed that not even IRIS can dismantle. And then I’ll put the timer on the ceiling so you can watch as your life slowly counts down in front of your very eyes.”

“I could just close my eyes.”

“I could tape them open,” he sneered.

Right, this wasn’t the time for arguments. “Cool, so, no more bombs for me.”

“No more anything for you. I’m benching you.”

“Yeah, you can’t really do that. You don’t have the authority.”

“Watch me.”

He grabbed me by the vest and walked me to the exit of the building. A man came rushing over to me, followed by a slew of reporters. “Mr. Helmer! Are you the one who deactivated the bomb? This city owes you a debt of gratitude.”

“He threw a bomb against the wall,” Thumper argued.

The mayor shot him a dirty look and dragged me to the edge of the steps where all the reporters could see me. “Your bravery and courage is something we should all aspire to. We can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for the city today.”

I grinned at the reporters, resting my thumbs in my belt loops. “Well, it was just another day at the office, Mayor. Anyone would have done the same.”

“Mr. Helmer!” one of the reporters shouted. “What was it like down there?”

I shook my head. If only they knew. “It was intense. But because of the amazing training I’ve received, I was able to keep a cool head and dismantle the bomb with no harm to anyone in the city.”

Another hand shot up. “Mr. Helmer, tell us about your training!”

As in, how did I know to throw an explosive against the wall? Sheer luck. “I was trained by the military—the best of the best.”

“Who was behind this attack?”

“Do you have any suspects?”

“Was your partner there with you the whole time?”

“How did you deactivate the bomb?” another reporter yelled.

“Well—”

An explosion shook the ground. Everyone screamed, grabbing for something to hold onto. The force shattered the windows on the lower level of the building and dust poured out from the broken panes. When everything settled, I looked back at the angry crowd.

Chuckling, I cleared my throat. “And that is why you don’t play with bombs.”

And then I exited stage left.

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“SIT YOUR ASS DOWN AND DON’T MOVE,” CASH GRUMBLED AS I followed him into the office.

I took a seat, waiting for the lecture that would soon follow. I hadn’t meant to blow up a building. I got twitchy sitting there and waiting for the bomb to go off. It was a complete accident.

Cash paced the room, muttering to himself every so often, then he would glare at me and continue. It went on for so long that I started to doze off.

“Am I boring you?”

His booming voice jerked me awake. I sat up, clearing my throat as I locked eyes with him. “Not at all, sir.”

“Then why are you sleeping?”

“Catching up on zzz’s. It’s been a long year.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel bad for you?” He stormed over, grabbing the chair as he jerked me toward him. “You blew up a building!”

“Technically, I blew up the elevator shaft. The damage was contained to that location and—”

“I didn’t tell you to talk!”

I zipped my lips, knowing there was nothing good I could say right now.

“Why did you do it?”

I didn’t say a word. I was pretty sure that was a rhetorical question.

“I want a fucking answer!”

“Oh, I thought we were still doing the whole no talking thing.”

“The only thing I want to hear out of your mouth is why you ignored IRIS’s orders to stand down.”

“Because there was a bomb about to explode and I didn’t want to die.”

“According to you, you can’t die.”

“Right,” I said slowly, “but Thumper was down there with me. I had to think about him. And the building wouldn’t have blown up if he hadn’t jerked on my hand when I was trying to cut the red wire.”

“You’re blaming this on him?” he laughed sarcastically. “Wow, that’s fucking amazing.”

“I’m not blaming him,” I countered. “I’m explaining that while I understand he didn’t want me to touch anything, he made things worse by interfering with my work.”

He scoffed, turning away from me as he paced some more. “And then you had the brilliant idea to throw the bomb against the wall.”

“Hey, it would have worked if the explosives weren’t so unstable.”

“They’re explosives!” he shouted. “They’re supposed to be unstable. The whole point is for them to blow shit up!”

I opened my mouth to say something, but thought better of it.

“What? What is it?” he shouted.

“I didn’t want to point it out, but C4 is very stable, and that’s meant to blow shit up.”

“Are you trying to be the biggest pain in the ass I’ve ever met?”

“Not at all, sir. Just trying to acclimate to being home again.”

“And why do you keep calling me sir?”

“Be...cause I don’t want to get yelled at again?”

“Too late for that. You should have considered how much you would get yelled at when you were about to cut the damn wire.”

“Honestly, I was thinking about how much I had to pee, and the fact that I didn’t want anyone to find me with a wet spot on my pants. Sir.”

Sighing, he walked away from me, eventually making it to another chair and slumping down in it. Things could have gone better today, but at least no one got killed. I had to look on the bright side of things. Then again, after causing so much damage, maybe it would have been better if I never came back. I was pretty sure I was about to be fired.

“I’ll just grab my things and hit the road,” I said carefully. “Honey still has her apartment in Texas, so—”

“You’re leaving?”

“Well, I figured I would be fired after the whole...building debacle.”

He huffed in amusement. “I should fire you. Hell, I should make you pay for all the damages.”

“Yeah, I don’t have any money aside from what was in my account.”

“You’re dead,” he reminded me. “Or you were. I transferred all your money into an account under the business. You’ll have to get yourself declared undead if you want your money back.”

That wasn’t exactly him telling me to stay. “Right, I won’t take too long. If I could just stay here for a few days until I get it all sorted out—”

He rolled his eyes at me. “You’re not leaving. I couldn’t make you leave if I wanted. Fox would kill me.”

“He does seem especially happy that I returned. I’m not sure why. I mean, we got along, but it wasn’t like we were best friends.”

“Doesn’t matter to Fox. He collects people.”

Yeah, that sounded like him. “Still, I don’t seem to fit in around here anymore.”

“You just got back,” he sighed. “Give it time.”

“Time is something I...” I shook my head, not even knowing where to go with that.

“Time is what?” he asked curiously.

“I don’t know. I’ve already lost so much of it at this point. I was never supposed to be gone more than a month.”

“Yeah, Rafe has a way of tricking people into doing shit for him. You should have come to me first. I would have set you straight.”

I snorted in derision. “If only I had. I never thought things would go that way.”

“So, it wasn’t as glamorous as you planned.”

“Not even close. Don’t get me wrong, there was a ton of adventure. It was quite the experience, but coming back...”

He clasped his hands as he leaned forward. “How did you end up with a stake in your side?”

“Worried I’m still a vampire?”

“No, but very curious how that even happened. The last you told me, you ran with Honey from the bar and got married because of her dad. But what you didn’t tell me was how that all came about.”

“Yeah, that’s a bit of a long story.”

“Do you have somewhere else to be?”

I didn’t. In fact, I really didn’t want to go to Texas. It was hot and there were rattlesnakes. I survived a ton of shit over the last year. It would be a shame to die from a snake bite.

“Well, you know about the bar fight and the meeting with her father.”

“Right. You were about to be married.”

“Except, Honey had other plans. She didn’t like the idea of being forced into marriage by her father.”

“I can see that turned out really well,” he said sarcastically.

“Hey, it was still the best thing that could have happened.”

Cash rolled his eyes at me. “Can we get to the story?”

“Right, let’s see,” I said, tapping my finger against my lip. “What happened next?”

“Are you just making this shit up?”

“Of course not. I had a head injury, boss. Give me a minute.” I thought about the timeline and then it hit me. “Right, so we were leaving her apartment, but Honey didn’t want to go with her father. She had big plans to escape. Long story short, we fled as soon as we left the building.”

“Just like that.”

“Pretty much. I mean, there were details, but I won’t bore you with those.”

“Right, we wouldn’t want pesky details to get in the way.”

I grinned at his sense of humor. “We got away clean until we were on the road in the middle of nowhere. Headlights flashed behind us, shining so bright that I could hardly see.”

“Who was it? Her father?”

I shook my head. “Police. This guy hit the lights as soon as we flew past him. I thought for sure that was the end. I was a white guy in Mexico. Let’s face it, it wasn’t gonna go well. So, I pulled over and waited for the guy to come to the driver’s side. But that didn’t happen. He turned on a spotlight and blinded the hell out of me.”

“I think I can tell the way this story is going.”

“You would think,” I grinned. “Just wait. It gets better.”





# FNG

*MEXICO.*

*Approximately 35 hours before the return of FNG.*

HONEY SPUN IN HER SEAT AS SOON AS THE LIGHTS FLASHED behind us. I already knew I was in for a world of hurt. I didn't have my passport on me, and landing in jail would not help my situation any. Everyone assumed I was dead. A call from a prison in Mexico wouldn't be taken seriously.

“What are we going to do?” Honey asked as I pulled over.

“We're going to stay calm and answer the officer's questions politely.”

“They work for my father,” she cried. “They'll take me to him and then I'll be killed.”

“I won't ever let that happen, alright? We just need to keep level heads.”

She nodded as tears streamed down her cheeks. I wanted to tell her everything would be okay, but things weren't looking up. Hell, nothing had gone as planned from the moment I helped Rafe fake my death.

I rolled down my window and waited for the officer to approach. Keeping my hands on the steering wheel was the best way to show him I wasn't about to shoot him in the darkness. When he didn't immediately get out, I started to worry. Then he hit us with a spotlight, and I knew we were screwed. What I wouldn't give for a .45 right about now.

A squeal echoed through the night right before his voice came over the bullhorn, yelling something in Spanish. I turned to Honey, hoping she could translate for me.

“He wants us to put our hands out the window.”

“Do as he says.”

She nodded and rolled down her window, shoving her hands out. I did the same, wondering if this cop was really on her father’s payroll or if this was because of the bar fight.

I heard his boots kicking up gravel as he approached the vehicle from behind. In the side mirror, I could see his gun, shaking slightly in his hand. He was not a skilled marksman, nor was he trained properly to deal with suspects. That could work in my favor.

“Let me see your hands!” the man shouted again. Well, I assumed that’s what he said. It sounded like what he had said previously. I shoved them further out the window, waiting for him to finally get to my side so I could talk my way out of this. Either that, or I’d have to take him out, and I really didn’t want to kill anyone else today.

When he finally appeared outside my window, he chanced a glance at Honey, shouting something at her in Spanish. She responded, shaking slightly as she pleaded with the man. I was so caught up in trying to figure out what she was saying that I didn’t see him whip out the cuffs and link my wrists together.

“Hey, I—”

He stepped back, shouting as he pointed his gun at me.

“Okay, okay!” I yelled. “Calm the fuck down!”

“I don’t think that’s helping,” Honey cried.

“Well, what does he want me to do? I can’t understand a fucking word he’s saying.”

“He’s telling you to get out of the vehicle.”

I grabbed the handle from the outside and opened the door. Very slowly, I stepped out, keeping my hands where he could see them. He took another step toward me, then grabbed me by

the arm and spun me around, shoving me up against the car. His hands started patting me down, getting just a tad too frisky in some areas.

“You know, I didn’t really sign up for a cavity search today,” I said over my shoulder.

He stood, slamming me against the car again as he yelled at me in Spanish. But when Honey stepped out and he pointed the gun at her, I lost it. With a roar, I spun around, slamming my fists into the man’s face. The gun clattered to the ground as he stumbled backward, falling on his ass. I snatched the gun off the ground, pointing it at him, but he wasn’t moving.

I kicked his leg, but it only moved with the force of my kick, then went limp again. “Oh shit,” I muttered, staring at the man. I got closer, peeking around his head. That’s when I saw the rock and the pool of blood gushing from his head. Wincing, I took a step back, biting my fist as I tried to figure out what to do. This was bad. Really fucking bad. I just killed a police officer. A *Mexican* police officer. I was the white boy from the other side of the border. There was no way in hell I wasn’t going to hang for this.

Honey ran around the car, skidding to a stop at my side. “What happened?”

“I just—Fuck!” I yelled, spinning away as I gripped my hair. “Okay, get it together, FNG. You got this.”

“Who are you talking to?” Honey questioned.

“Alright, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m gonna dump the car and the body. You’re going to follow in our car and then we’ll drive as fast as we can to the border.”

“Why would you dump his body?”

“Because he’s dead!” I snapped. “Normally, I would have a cleanup crew for this, but since I haven’t been home in over a year, I’m guessing a phone call from me right now wouldn’t be taken seriously.”

“Just because you haven’t been home?”

“Well, they think I’m dead.”

She grabbed my wrist as I was about to pick him up. “There has to be something else we can do. We can’t just dump his body!”

“Look, I know what I’m doing. Trust me, it’ll be okay.”

I could see the uncertainty in her eyes, but she nodded and grabbed the other end of his body, helping me drag it to the trunk of the police car. We tossed him inside and I slammed the trunk, choosing to forget that I’d just killed one of the good guys. It was a total accident. I couldn’t think about it right now.

“Take our car and follow me. If anyone starts following us, break away and head to the border.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine, baby.”

“We should stick together,” she pleaded.

I cupped her cheek, stroking her skin with my thumb. “Baby, my life is too dangerous for you.”

She surged up into my arms, throwing her own around my neck as she pressed her lips to mine. I swallowed her cries, kissing her as if I’d never see her again. This was a dangerous game we were playing, one that could end with both of us dead. If I never saw her again, at least this would be my last memory of her.

“Go,” I commanded, shoving her away from me.

With tears swimming in her eyes, she backed up, then turned and ran to our vehicle. I got in the cruiser and headed further into the darkness. I didn’t know much about where I was going, but as long as I stayed away from the lights, I should be fine. Her headlights stayed in my rearview the entire way. When I pulled down a dirt road, she followed, keeping her distance from me.

We were almost in the clear, so close to tossing the body and then getting the hell out of Dodge. I drove for miles, looking for a good place to dump the man’s remains, but there were no lakes around that I could see. I couldn’t keep driving

around in this vehicle. Eventually, someone would report the officer missing, and if I was still in the vehicle, it wouldn't be long until I was found out.

I pulled to a stop and shifted into park. I would have to move his body and make it look like he was in his vehicle when he was attacked. That wouldn't be easy considering he was hit on the back of the head. Then again, I could leave trace evidence in the backseat. I'd have to wipe everything down first, making sure nothing could be linked back to me.

I shoved the door open and got out, wiping down every surface I touched. Once it was clean, I was ready to move the body and plant the evidence. "Honey!"

She got out and rushed over to me, but before she could make it, a hooded figure jumped out of the darkness and snatched her around the waist. I reached for my gun, only to remember I didn't have one. The officer's gun was in the trunk with him.

Honey screamed, grasping at the man's arm that was tightly stretched across her neck. I took a step forward, but paused the moment he pulled out a knife.

"Don't do it," I warned.

"You ran out on the boss. Nobody gets away with that!" the man shouted.

I heard the crunch of gravel behind me and knew there was no way out. Slowly, I turned and came face to face with the very man we'd been running from.

Manuel Ruiz.

The only reason I could tell was the light from his cigar illuminating his face. The man was the devil personified. We were so close to escaping. Now, there was no way out.

"Manuel," I said in acknowledgment.

He didn't say anything for a moment. I could hear movement all around us as his men moved in around us. This wouldn't end well no matter what I did.

"FNG," he finally said.

“We meet again.”

“It is a dangerous thing for you to be driving around out here. With my daughter, no less...especially after I specifically told you that you were to marry her.”

Yeah, that was a bit of a problem from his perspective.

“I appreciate you bringing her back to me.”

“Oh, I wasn’t bringing her back to you,” I corrected. “Just the opposite.”

A harsh laugh burst from his lips as he walked closer. “You, my friend, do not know who you’re messing with.”

“Yeah, I do. You’re a pretty big deal. You rose from nothing to lead this cartel. I get it. You’re a big deal.”

“Yet, you don’t sound impressed. Are you not afraid of dying?”

I shrugged. “Not really. I can’t be killed.”

He drew so fast that I almost didn’t see it. “My gun says differently.”

“Well, I would say you should give it a try, but I’m not really in the mood for a fight right now.”

“And when is a good time for you?”

I could hear the laughter in his voice, along with the chuckles from his men. But did I back down? Never. As much as this man wasn’t to be trifled with, I also could stand my ground, even if I was surrounded by a bunch of men who followed a psycho like him.

“And what is your plan, if not to fight me?”

“Escape, rescue the lady, and walk into the sunset while you rot in the ground.”

Another chuckle left his lips. “High ambitions.”

“Well, my mother always said I would either end up dead in the gutter or become president.”

“And you think you’re the latter.”

“Well, since I can’t be killed, I guess that’s my path in life.”

“How is it you think you’re going to walk away?”

I didn’t really have that many options. But there was a dead man in the trunk, and from what I saw, a small arsenal. I just hadn’t given it much thought since I was more worried about getting the hell out of there.

“I have something to show you.”

“And what is that?”

“You see this car,” I gestured beside me.

“A police car. You are a thief.”

Well, he might have a point there. “I’m also a murderer,” I said with as much menace as possible, which was really hard. I was a nice guy. I didn’t like lying or manipulating people. I was the happy guy who always had a positive outlook on life. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

“And who is it that you murdered?”

“Who do you think?” I shot back. I jerked my head, then reached inside and popped the trunk very slowly. They could still shoot me, and even if I didn’t die, it sure as hell would hurt.

I motioned for him to follow me. Very slowly, I moved to the back of the vehicle. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Honey struggling against the man who held her ransom. I was just around the corner of the vehicle when I made my decision. I snatched a grenade out of the trunk and pulled the pin, holding it high for all to see.

“You shoot either of us and I’ll release this, taking you down with me,” I shouted.

Ruiz held up his hand, telling them to stop. He was too close. The blast would at the very least send shrapnel into his body. At worst, he would be dead in seconds. “What is it you want?”

“Leave. Walk away and never come near Honey again.”

“And if I don’t? Are you really willing to kill yourself for my daughter?”

My eyes connected with Honey, and in the brief seconds that passed, I knew my life would never be the same without her. It was do or die. And I never died.

“In a heartbeat,” I answered.

It only took a second of hesitation on his part for me to see the subtle signal he sent his men. I didn’t waste another second tossing the grenade at his feet and leaping behind the vehicle. The explosion rocked the ground around me, and in the next instant, I was on my feet, pulling the rifle from the trunk. With a yell, I fired into the night, spraying and praying that I killed every fucker that dared come near my lady.

I stopped for just a second as I stared at the scared shit that still held her hostage. He trembled as he backed up with nowhere to go. There wasn’t a single sound in the night, not a footstep or a scuffle. I was all alone with Honey and this asshole.

“Let her go,” I commanded.

He shook his head, refusing to give in. He took another step back, dragging her with him. I locked eyes with Honey and nodded once, hoping she would make a move.

She dropped her body weight and I took the shot, hitting him right between the eyes. He released her, dropping to the ground with a thump as dust floated in the air around his body. She rushed toward me, throwing herself into my arms as tears leaked down her cheeks and onto my neck. I held her close, scanning the darkness for any more threats. There were no sounds in the night, only the heavy beating of our hearts.





## ZOE

I GROANED, resting my head back against the couch as FNG carefully dug his thumbs into the arch of my foot. After spending all day on my feet, I desperately needed this. Who knew that growing a baby inside of you could be so exhausting? I didn't remember feeling like this with the last two. I sank further into the couch, ready to take a nap right here. Red was out on a job, and because of that, Cotton was staying here to help out, even though his house was just at the back of the property.

“Caleb and Olive are asleep,” Cotton sighed, sinking down onto the couch.

“Thank you,” I muttered, blindly reaching out to grip his hand. He really was the best uncle. He read them bedtime stories, some of which were a little inappropriate for their ages, but they loved hearing his voice right before they fell asleep.

“I don't think they understand what I'm saying,” Cotton grumbled. “Maybe I need a different book, something easier. They're just not grasping the concept of aerodynamics.”

I peeled one eye open and tried not to laugh at his distress. “They're not even in school yet.”

“But you have to start them young,” he answered, worrying his hand through his hair. “When I was four, I was already listening to stories about World War II.”

“I think they'll turn out okay. And if they turn out to be the stupidest kids on the planet, it'll be no fault of yours. You're a

great uncle.”

“Not to interrupt, but this is not the soothing atmosphere I was going for,” Fox said as he walked in from the kitchen.

I cranked my neck to look at him over the back of the couch. He was carrying a bowl steaming with what smelled like lavender. Burnt lavender. I waved the scent off, nearly vomiting at how bad the aroma was.

“Fox, what is that?”

He frowned, looking down at the bowl. “Do you not like it?”

The way my stomach was rolling, the baby definitely didn’t, but I had the feeling that even if I wasn’t pregnant, the smell would be horrible. “I’m pretty sure nothing like that is supposed to be calming.”

His shoulders slumped as he continued to stare at the bowl. “Man, I thought I had it this time. I wanted to turn this living room into a zen palace for you.”

“Using burnt lavender?” FNG questioned.

I moaned as he dug into just the right spot. Man, this was the life. Three men, all taking care of me, catering to my every whim. “Could you get me a bowl of ice cream?”

“Actually,” Fox leaned over the back of the couch, placing the bowl just inches from me inadvertently, “ice cream isn’t really good for your body right now. What you need is something to clean out the toxins to make sure the baby gets all the proper nutrients.”

“Fox,” I mumbled.

“Yeah?”

“You’re shoving that bowl right in my face. If you don’t want me to vomit, you should move it away from me.”

“Right,” he said, jerking the bowl back too hastily. Some of it splashed, landing on the couch between me and Cotton.

I stared at it for a moment, then tears welled in my eyes. I wasn’t sure why, but it had been happening a lot lately. If my

coffee wasn't the perfect flavor, I burst into tears. If one of the kids cried, I cried in response. And when Red told me he had to go on a job, I was inconsolable for hours.

That was when Cotton stepped in. And when he couldn't handle my emotional outbursts, he called in Fox. FNG was soon behind him. I'd mostly gotten the crying under control over the past few days, but every now and then, it crept up again.

"I need ice cream," I said, holding back the tears.

"I'm on it," Cotton said, shoving up from the couch.

He wasn't really interested in getting me ice cream. He just didn't want to be around the crazy woman that was crying.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Fox chuckled. "Ice cream is not good for the baby. I have this smoothie that's absolutely delicious. It'll cure all your cravings and give little Foxy everything he needs," he said, bending over to pat my belly.

I very slowly turned and glared at him. "Are you rubbing my belly?"

He swallowed hard, removing his hand as if he'd been burnt. "I thought it would be soothing."

After staring at him for a good ten seconds, I felt composed enough to answer, though my tone was deadly. "It's not."

I swore he broke out in a sweat from just the look on my face. "I'll just...grab that smoothie."

"Ice cream!" I shouted over the back of the couch, but he'd already rushed into the kitchen.

Sighing, I rested my head back again. "FNG, finish telling me the rest."

"The rest of what?" he asked.

My head snapped up and I glared at the man, who was pretending there was something insanely fascinating about my foot. I wiggled my toes in his face to get his attention, but he still refused to look at me.

“FNG, the rest of the story!”

“There’s really not much to tell.”

“Really? You killed a bunch of cartel guys in an insane shootout that you shouldn’t have won. Yet, you refuse to tell me anything about your wedding or how you were impaled with a stake! I think there’s a lot you’re leaving out.”

“Not really. It’s just one of those completely irrelevant stories that isn’t all that exciting.”

That wasn’t good enough for me right now. If I was going to be surrounded by these men, I needed to be entertained. “Even if it’s not exciting, you can still tell me the story.”

The front door swung open and Dash strolled through, his eyes lighting up the moment he saw Cotton. This guy was never going to give up. Cotton decided early on he didn’t like Dash because of how rude he was. And Cotton never really gave second chances. Once you had a black mark in his book, that was the end for you.

“Hey! Cotton, my man! How’s it going?”

Cotton stood from the couch and headed for the kitchen. “I forgot Zoe’s ice cream.”

“Yes, please.” At least someone was listening to what I needed.

“Man, I thought I had fixed things between us after the whole filming debacle. I gave up the director’s chair for him.”

“And he told you that was just the beginning,” I shrugged. “Why are you expecting miracles?”

Slumping down on the couch, he stared down at his hands. “I just thought I was finally getting through to him. I was just having a bad day when I met him! What more do I have to do?”

He perked up instantly. “Yes! That’s exactly the right question. I could get him that new game he wants.”

“You can’t buy his affections.”

Dash's head jerked in my direction. "I'm not buying his affections. I'm a guy. There's no affection involved."

"Excuse me," FNG cleared his throat. "I'm trying to maintain a calming atmosphere and you're ruining it with your shouting."

"One delicious smoothie served to the beautiful Zoe," Fox grinned, strolling in from the kitchen.

I nearly vomited at the greenish-brown look. "I'm not drinking that."

"But I went to all the trouble of getting all the proper veggies for you. I sliced each one with love and devotion."

I couldn't take the crestfallen look on his face. He really was going all out for me, doing everything possible to make this pregnancy easier on me. "Fine, give it to me."

His face lit up as he handed over the smoothie. I stared at the contents, wondering how I was going to drink this when my stomach was craving only ice cream. Maybe I could have just a little bit and then eat my ice cream. I would be getting the good stuff and then treating myself for being so good.

I glanced back at Fox and gave a shaky smile. "Here goes nothing."

I swallowed the first bit of the smoothie, barely holding it down as the overwhelming urge to vomit became more prominent. I slapped a hand over my mouth, squeezing my eyes closed as I tried to hold it in. I was too big to run to the bathroom like I used to when I was only six weeks along. I was now fourteen weeks. I waddled more than ran. You would think I was carrying twins with how big I already was.

"I don't think that's a good sign," FNG said, dropping my foot and stepping back.

"Should we..." Dash glanced at Fox and Cotton warily, then retreated to the door. "I think I need to—" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, then bolted out the door.

"Let me just take that," Fox said, reaching over my shoulder to snatch the smoothie from my hands.

Cotton returned moments later, saw the look on my face and instantly shoved the bowl of ice cream in front of me. I greedily grabbed the spoon and shoved it in my mouth to wash away the disgusting taste. I closed my eyes and sighed. That was better.

“I can’t believe it,” Fox grumbled. “I thought it would be really good.” He tipped it back and took his own sip before turning and running into the kitchen. I heard him vomit—hopefully in the sink—and smiled to myself.

Digging into my ice cream, I motioned for FNG to continue. “So, finish telling me the story.”

“Like I said, it was nothing.” He knelt down at my feet again and started massaging.

“Come on,” I whined. “I’m fat and severely lacking in entertainment. Please!”

He turned bright red, ducking his head in embarrassment. I didn’t know why. Even if his stories weren’t true, they were quite entertaining.

“Alright, but this stays here,” he said, glaring at everyone in the room.

“Scouts honor,” I said excitedly, shoving another spoonful in my mouth.

“It was everything I imagined my wedding would be. We were on the run with no one to help us. Just the stars and the sand surrounding us...it was something out of a fairy tale.”

“Seriously?” I grimaced. “That’s your dream wedding?”

“Well, it was romantic as hell. I’d just saved her life, killed her father, and taken down part of the cartel. I’d call that a pretty fucking amazing night.”

“Yeah, but not for a wedding.”

“Okay, maybe not, but it was still magical. I knew when I held her in my arms amongst all the bodies that I would never leave her. Even when she started crying as she stared down at the bits of her father that hadn’t been blown up. She wasn’t really sad. It was more of a deep-seated hatred that had

festered for too long, and the emotional toll was more than she could stand. I held her in my arms as she cried and kicked the pieces of his corpse out of sight. And love blossomed.”

The way he was staring off into space with a grin on his face was a little disturbing. I didn’t know anyone that bonded over body parts like this. But I wasn’t going to be the one to tell him how fucked up that was.

“Anyway, now that her father was dead, there was nothing left to do but find her mother. The first place to look was at their old house. So, I drove her out there and we knocked on the door. Color me surprised when we found her mother alive and in one piece.” His smile fell and his face turned grim. “That’s where it all went to hell.”





# HONEY

*MEXICO.*

*Approximately 1 hour, 3 minutes, and 12 seconds before the nuptials of FNG and Honey.*

“I DON’T KNOW IF I CAN DO THIS,” I SAID NERVOUSLY. I WAS A wreck. My whole body was shaking with dread. I wanted to see my mother again, to hug her and remember what it was like to have her around. But it had been so long. What if she didn’t remember me? What if she didn’t want to see me?

“Hey, it’ll be okay,” FNG smiled, taking my hand in his. “We just took down your father. What could possibly go wrong?”

I smiled at him, trying to see the bright side of things, but the truth was, no amount of reassurance would make this easier. “You’re right. We just have to rip off the bandaid.”

I opened the door and stepped out, but that was as far as I got. A light flicked on at the front door and men rushed around me, holding their weapons on me. Terrified, I raised my arms, praying they didn’t shoot us.

“Hey, hey, hey!” FNG shouted. “We come in peace!”

“Get down on your knees!” one of the men shouted.

This was not how I saw this going. The silly girl inside me thought I would reunite with my mother and everything would be wonderful. The scared girl said that at the worst, she

wouldn't want to see me. Never in my life did I imagine I would be held at gunpoint.

When I didn't immediately move, a man grabbed me from behind and shoved me forward. I tripped, falling to my knees. Gravel dug into my skin, cutting me all the way to the bone. FNG rushed to my side, only to be hit in the head with the butt of a gun. I cried out as he fell to the ground, blood gushing from the wound.

"FNG!" I bent forward to help him, only to be dragged backward by my hair. I screamed as the man pulled a clump of hair from my head, ripping it out with zero mercy. Tears pricked my eyes as a sharp pain lanced through my chest. At first, I thought I had been shot, but then I realized it was just the agony of seeing the love of my life laying lifeless on the ground.

"Tell us who you are," the man shouted. Spittle fell in tiny droplets all over my face and the disgusting odor coming from his mouth made me gag. I had to think fast. With FNG down for the count, I had to find a way out of this. Squeezing my eyes closed, I forced myself to remember my legacy.

I was the daughter of an infamous cartel leader. I would not bow to anyone. I would not beg for mercy or bow at their feet. With a steely resolve, I stared at the man gripping my hair and spit in his face.

"I am the daughter of Manuel Ruiz. You will unhand me!"

His eyes flashed in recognition. A wave of panic fell over his face as his eyes flicked to everyone around him. I was dragged to my feet, forced to move forward, away from the man who had saved my life. The man shouted in Spanish, calling for the men to bring the boss outside.

My heart started pounding with dread. Had someone already replaced my father? Did they know that I had killed him? I was banking on the fact that no one knew what happened just an hour ago. Now, it seemed that logic was going to lead me to my doom, and kill the man I loved alongside me.

The door to the house opened. Time slowed as I waited for the boss to step outside. With just one look at FNG, I knew I was alone in this fight. In the darkness, I couldn't see who was coming toward me, I only heard the *click-click* of the shoes as they descended the steps of the house.

The light shone over the face of a woman I thought to be dead, or at the very least, a shell of the woman I remembered. "Mother," I breathed out.

"So, the prodigal daughter returns."

A sinister smile spread across her face as she examined me. Instead of the warm rush of tingles and joy, I felt only dread. This was not the woman I remembered. There was no love in her eyes, no promises of hugs that would wrap me in feelings of safety and protection. Here stood a woman who dominated, who lied for years. But why?

"I don't understand," I whispered as she walked closer to me. I tried to step back, but a man grabbed my arm, holding me in place.

"You never did," she smirked. "It would have been easier if you were a boy. That's what I needed to make this cartel thrive. A strong boy that would grow up to take the reins of our family business and turn it into the empire our family deserved." Her eyes slowly roamed over my body in disgust. "But instead, I was blessed with you."

The way she said *blessed* made it clear it was the complete opposite of a gift. She was disgusted by me, revolted that she had produced such an insignificant offspring.

"Then why?" I asked, my lip quivering. "Why didn't you just kill me?"

"Because it was better this way," she smiled. "You were a nuisance, but you still had your purpose in this world. When you disappeared, rumors spread that you had been taken from me. It fueled hatred throughout the cartel. Because of you, my men found a higher need. We took out competitors in your name and slashed the profits of all our rivals. Because of you, we are the leaders in our industry!"

“Your industry?” I scoffed. “You’re murderers and...and horrible people!”

“I did what I had to. I survived in a man’s world!”

I shook my head. I didn’t understand any of this. “What about my father?”

“You mean the man you just killed?” Her eyes flicked to FNG. “He was very useful. It’s a shame he has to die.”

“No,” I said fiercely. I tore my arm away from the man holding me and rushed to FNG, placing my body over his. “You will not touch him.”

“I would love to see you stop me,” she laughed. “Then again, you both could still be useful. For years, I used your father as the face of the family. He only acted strong, but in reality, he was a weak, pathetic man. Tell me, could your beloved FNG be the man your father never was?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. My father wasn’t the tyrant I always assumed he was. He’d only been the face of the cartel while my mother led the charge. What kind of messed up family did I come from? And now she wanted me to continue with her legacy, using FNG as some kind of...beard for me?

“He would never be as weak as my father,” I hissed. “He’s a good man, a strong man.”

“Darling, they all say that. But when you need them, they don’t come through.”

Not FNG. I hadn’t known him long. I really didn’t know him at all, but one thing burned deep in my gut. He was a man who would never let me down. He was there for me when I needed him, and I would defend him with my life and get us out of here. I just didn’t know how yet.

“So, you’re going to kill me if I don’t do what you ask?”

She stared at me intently, then waved her hand at the guard. “Take them away. She is not prepared to do what is necessary.”

The man grabbed my arm, jerking me toward him. Something snapped inside me. My mind floated above my

body, watching how the scene would play out. Suddenly, I wasn't the girl that grew up in Texas. I was a warrior, determined to overcome evil and destroy those that would decimate my world.

With an answering grin, I wrenched my arm up and turned, slamming the heel of my hand into the man's chest with lightning speed. He jerked backward, his face contorted in shock as he fell. In one swift move, I snatched the gun from his side and spun, firing round after round at the men surrounding the woman I used to call mother.

They dropped like flies, not even having enough time to draw their weapons. And amidst the fog of gunfire stood my mother, watching me take down her empire one by one. I felt a prickle of awareness on the back of my neck right before I heard the shot being fired. I dove to the side, rolling as I leveled my gun at the man who dared to fire upon me. With a single shot, I took him down. Just one bullet that hit him in the center of his forehead and ended his miserable life.

Silence descended upon us as the smoke from the gun filled the air. Only two were left standing—me and my mother. She held her head high as she watched me walk to my new throne, the one she'd resided on for way too long. With a soft smile touching her lips, I could almost remember the warm hugs and loving kisses she gave me as a child. But that time had passed. I was no longer the woman that bowed to others and allowed people to push me around. I was a warrior, a new-age *Xena: Warrior Princess*. I would not yield my kingdom.

“Goodbye, Mother.”

I raised the gun, aiming at her face, and pulled the trigger. The smile was still etched on her face as she crumbled to the ground. I gasped, sucking in a breath as my shaky hand lowered the weapon. I just killed my mother, my last living relative. I was all alone in this world.

“Holy fuck,” FNG groaned, rolling over on the ground.

I rushed over to him, dropping my gun in the gravel as I pulled him to a sitting position. Cupping his face, I studied him through teary eyes. “Are you okay?” I cried.

“What the hell happened?” His eyes took in the gory scene, finally landing on my mother. “Who did this?”

“Um...” I let out a watery chuckle that turned into hysterical laughter.

He clutched me by the elbows, pulling me against him. He rocked me back and forth as my laughter turned into ugly sobs. “Hey, it’s okay. We’ll get whoever did this.”

“I did this,” I cried, beating my fist against his back. “I lost it. I killed my own mother!”

“You did all that?” He asked incredulously. “What the fuck—I mean...it’s okay. We all go a little crazy sometimes.”

I pulled back, swiping the tears from my eyes. “Yeah?”

“Totally. I mean...” His eyes wandered over the destruction again and he turned to me with a quirky smile. “It’s totally normal.”

“You’re sure?”

“They’re gonna love you back home.”

The watery smile I gave him perfectly matched the way I felt inside. I was happy it was over, but crying over the loss of what I hoped to be a perfect reunion. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I mean—maybe leave out the part where I was unconscious on the ground the whole time. That doesn’t make me look very good.”

“Or it makes you even more amazing because you have this kickass woman who took down her evil mother.”

“Speaking of which, I doubt this is all of them. We should probably leave before they catch up with us.”

“They can track us wherever we go. How will we escape?”

His brows furrowed thoughtfully as he considered this. “The church.”

“The church?”

“Yes, we’ll ask for sanctuary while we formulate a plan.”

“I really doubt the church will protect us from the cartels.”

“It’s the only plan we’ve got,” he said, hopping to his feet as he staggered a few steps. His grip was tight around my hand as he pulled me to the nearest vehicle. “But we need to leave now.”

He shoved me into the passenger seat and ran around to get in the other side. The tires kicked up gravel and dirt and we tore down the road to the nearest church. If memory served right, there was one less than five miles away. I could almost hear the bells as they rang for early morning mass.

“There!” I shouted, pointing at the fork in the road. “Go right.”

He jerked the wheel, taking us down the road of illumination. In just a few minutes, my memories came rushing back to me. Me in a white dress with a blue bow tied at the waist. My mother holding my hand as she walked into the church with a large hat shadowing her face. All of the congregation turned to face us, terror etched in their faces. And now I understood why.

“We’ve got company,” FNG said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I saw the headlights in the mirror barreling down on us. “We don’t have much time!”

“Then let’s make it count.”

He spun the wheel, slamming on the gas as he turned into the empty parking lot. At this hour, there wasn’t a soul in sight. As soon as he hit the brakes, I was flinging the door open and rushing for the front door with FNG hot on my heels. As I pushed the front doors open, the candlelight in the distance drew my gaze.

“There!” I shouted, pointing to the old man kneeling before God.

Hand in hand, we ran down the aisle, all too aware that these could be our last moments.

“Father!” I called out, stumbling to a stop just feet from him. He slowly got up and turned to face me.



“Child.”

“Father, it’s me,” I said breathlessly. He was still here after all these years, and as he studied my face, I saw the moment of recognition flare in his eyes.

“Could it be?”

“Yes, Father. We’re seeking sanctuary.”

“From your mother?”

“She’s dead,” I answered bluntly. “But other members of the cartel are upon us. Please, Father, will you help us?”

He glanced over my shoulder, he lifted the stole from around his neck. “Clasp hands,” he ordered us.

I grabbed FNG’s hand and placed it over mine. Father wrapped the stole around our joined hands, then closed his eyes and began to pray. I wasn’t sure of what he was doing. I was too worried about the men chasing us. With a quick look over my shoulder, I knew we were out of time as they rushed inside, guns drawn. But as they saw what was happening, they suddenly stopped, bowing at the end of the aisle.

The Father continued to speak, but I zoned out, completely focused on the men here to kill us. Whatever was happening, the men didn’t move an inch.

“You shall move forth into your new life as husband and wife.”

“What?” I gasped, turning to FNG.

“Yeah, what?”

“In God’s eyes, you are now married, my child. Use this strength to fight your enemies in the name of God.”

My jaw dropped at the declaration. He didn’t even know our names! Well, he probably recognized me, but he didn’t know my...husband. Was this even legal?

“Stand and make your presence known,” he commanded.

Unsure of what else to do, I turned with FNG and faced the men surrounding us. “What do I do?” I whispered out of the

corner of my mouth.

“Make yourself known. Command them.”

My heart pounded in my chest as I tried to come up with the words. Waves of dizziness washed over me as I understood the implications. I was married and taking my rightful place at the head of the family. Though my mouth was dry and my pits were sweating, I knew this was the only way forward.

“I am the daughter of Manuel Ruiz—the one true leader of the Ruiz Cartel. You will obey me or die.”

With every silent second that passed, I feared I’d made the wrong move. On the verge of hyperventilating, one man held me steady through it all. One man forced me to be the woman I was born to be. I held firm as FNG dropped to his knees and bowed his head.

To my utter shock, they all followed, bowing to me as their one true leader. It worked. We were going to be okay.



# CASH

“LOCK, do you have eyes on the girl?” I whispered into comms.

“Negative. I need another minute.”

“She might not have a minute.”

I scanned the windows through the scope of Sally 2. There was a ton of movement on the inside, but from my vantage point, I couldn't tell who was who. The roof wasn't going to do it. Decision made, I got to my knees and grabbed Sally 2, slinging her over my shoulder as I snatched the stand from the roof.

“Moving to a better vantage point,” I said, running to the rooftop door.

“Bullseye, we don't have time,” Eli hissed.

“Make time,” I said, flinging the door open. “I don't have the shot.”

FNG was hot on my heels, running behind me with my case and additional ammo and weapons. I ran down two flights of stairs before flinging open the door and running down the hall. I counted the doors as I passed, stopping when I got to the second to last door. It was too far from the location across the street. I rushed back one more door and kicked it in without knocking. The old lady inside screamed, tugging her pink robe tighter around her neck as I rushed through her apartment.

“Sorry,” I called out, not bothering to stop and explain.

“What are you doing in my home?” she shouted.

I glanced at the windows, going into the bedroom for a better spot. I jerked the blinds open and scanned the building across the street. This was the perfect spot. I set down the stand and grabbed Sally 2, placing her on it. I grabbed the chair at the vanity next, dragging it across the room to my position. After looking through the scope, I was ready.

“In position.”

“You can’t be in here!” the woman shouted.

“Ma’am, we’re dealing with a hostage situation. We need you to stay in the other room,” FNG explained.

“Hostage situation? I’m the hostage!” she yelled. “Do you see these rollers? Someone will see me like this!”

“FNG, take care of it!” I shouted, needing the silence to concentrate.

“Bullseye, do you have the target?” Lock asked over comms.

“Roger that,” I answered, adjusting the weapon between my hands. I felt the power wash over me, the intensity of the situation that I could only truly feel immersed in when I had Sally by my side.

“Eli, are you in position?”

“Locked and loaded.”

“Lady, you don’t have to call the police. We’re working with them!” FNG shouted.

“This is a crime. False imprisonment! Vandals! Thievery and treachery! I will not be silenced!”

I grabbed the gun from my thigh holster and slid a dart into place, then spun and fired a dart right in the side of her neck. She immediately stopped yelling and slumped to the floor. FNG caught her, lowering her at the foot of the bed before turning back to me.

“Harsh, boss.”

“She wouldn’t shut the fuck up,” I muttered, turning back to my scope.

“Alright, people, let’s get in and out with as little damage as possible,” I said.

“Right,” Eli snorted. “Bullseye, you do realize that IRIS has control.”

“On my mark,” Lock said. “Three, two, one, mark!”

I took the shot, taking out the first target that was closest to the window. After he dropped, I shifted to the second target, taking aim, and firing another round into the man screaming at Lock, who just busted down the door.

“Bullseye, we’re in a standoff,” Lock said. “We do not have a shot. I repeat, we do not have a shot.”

“Moving positions,” I said, grabbing my rifle and rushing into the living room. The target had moved to the right of the window, which I could now get a bead on. “Come on,” I whispered. “Just a little to the right.”

The target wasn’t giving me enough to work with. Any way I looked at it, there was only one option. “Lock, I need to shoot the hostage.”

“You’re gonna do what?”

“I don’t have a clear shot. When she drops, you take the shot.”

“Bullseye, that’s a negative!”

But I was already lining up the shot. If I hit her just right, there wouldn’t be much damage. Not permanently anyway. I took a deep breath, calming my body as I counted off in my head. “There you go, Sally,” I said, running my hand over her barrel lovingly. “That’s it. Give it to me, girl.”

“This is like listening to a porno,” Lock muttered right as I took the shot.

The bullet struck her in the leg. She screamed as her body weight collapsed, giving Lock just enough time to take the shot. The hit was true. Blood splattered from the back of his head and then it was over.

I saw Lock's team move in and scanned the rest of the floor for any activity. It was all clear.

"Nice shot, Bullseye."

"Weren't you just telling me not to take the shot?" I asked Lock.

"I'll let you fill in the chief of police as to why you felt shooting the hostage was the best way to go."

"It all worked out for the best," I laughed. I was just about to put away the rifle when I spotted movement two floors down in the stairwell at the end of the building. I swung the rifle to the window below and waited for the figures to pass. Two men ran down the stairs, both armed and wearing masks.

"Movement in the stairwell on the east side of the building," I said into comms. "FNG and I are giving chase," I said, slinging my rifle over my shoulder and abandoning my stand. I ran out of the room, grabbing FNG on the way. We rushed out of the apartment and hit the stairs two at a time. "Someone get eyes on the suspects!"

"Roger that," Fox answered. "I have the perfect music for the chase."

I rolled my eyes, expecting to hear *West Side Story*, but instead, a long, low sound emitted through comms, making me flinch as it ricocheted through my mind.

"What the fuck is that?"

"It's Icelandic throat singing, boss."

"It's irritating as fuck. Turn it off!"

"It's supposed to be soothing. See, if we're calm, the suspect will be calm."

I ran down the last flight and shoved the emergency exit open, rushing out into the alley. "That's not how it works, Fox! If I'm calm, they'll fucking shoot me!"

"You really think so? It's totally got me in the mood for some tea and meditating."

I turned onto the street and pushed through the crowd that had gathered on the sidewalk. “We’re supposed to be catching a killer. Not going to a seance!”

“Boss,” he laughed. “Those are two totally different things.”

“Move!” I shouted, pushing people out of the way as I finally got through the crowd and broke into a flat out run, cutting across the street going east. “Anyone have eyes on the suspects?”

“I’ve got two men heading north on Pine.”

That was just ahead. I ran straight through the intersection, narrowly avoiding being hit by a car. It didn’t sound like FNG was so lucky. Tires squealed and a loud thump sounded from behind me, but I kept pushing it.

“Shit, that hurt,” FNG grumbled. “Don’t worry, boss. I’m good.”

“Then get your ass moving,” I snapped.

I turned the corner, heading down Pine Street. I was never going to make it at this distance. I needed something faster. A cab was headed my way and I flagged it down. But when he slowed, I yanked open the driver’s door and pulled him out.

“I need to borrow your car,” I said as I got in and closed the door.

“Boss!” FNG shouted.

I saw him in the side mirror and started driving. He could catch up.

“Man, that’s not right! I would never leave you behind!”

I slammed on the brakes and gave him two seconds to catch up. After that, he was on his own. He grabbed the handle for the back door and pulled it open, jumping inside.

“Man, I thought you were going to leave me behind,” he laughed.

“I was. You’ve gotten slow.”



“I was hit by a car,” he retorted.

“And when has that ever stopped you?”

“True,” he nodded. “I see your point.”

With one look in the rear view mirror, I saw the blood dripping from his forehead. Okay, I felt a little bad that he was injured.

“Be advised, FNG and I are in a yellow cab in pursuit of the suspects.”

“He just ducked into a building,” IRIS said, his breath huffing out as he ran.

“Which building?” I shouted.

“Parking structure on the west side of the road.”

I slammed on the brakes as I almost passed it, then jerked the wheel and crashed through the rising arm gate at the entrance.

“Boss, you know that’s illegal.”

I glared at FNG in the mirror. “What’s your point?”

“No point. Just saying...”

The tires squealed as I rounded the structure faster than I should have. On the second level, I saw him ahead, trying to break into a car. “I’ve got him on level two. IRIS, what’s your location?”

“Coming at you from the elevators.”

“Taking the lazy way,” I muttered, slamming on the brakes as I flung the door open and stepped out, leveling my gun at the man now cornered.

He slowly held up his hands, checking over his shoulder for an escape, but there was nowhere to go. “Hands on the car, asshole!”

“Boss, I know this guy.”

“Not now, FNG!”

The man's jaw dropped open as his eyes connected with FNG. "You're alive?"

"Dude, I thought you were killed by the Chupacabra," FNG said in amazement. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

The man stepped forward, pissing me off because he was more interested in FNG than the orders I was giving. I fired a warning shot into his leg and felt a ridiculous amount of satisfaction when the smile on his face turned into a grimace of pain.

"Boss!" FNG shouted. "Did you not hear me just say I know this man?"

"Did you not hear me telling him to put his hands on the car?" I snapped. "IRIS, do you have the second suspect?"

"He's headed for the basement. On his six."

I took my eyes off the suspect for only a moment. "You have ten seconds to tell me how the fuck you know this guy."

He snorted. "Boss, that's a hell of a story. It's gonna take longer than six seconds."

"Give me the cliffs notes."

"Okay, uh...storm, pirates, thrown overboard, and ended up on the boat with Francesca. Oh, and the last time I saw him was in Mexico riding a camel."

I sighed, walking over to the man and grabbing his wrists, yanking them behind his back. After I slid the zip tie over his wrist and tightened it, I turned to FNG. "I'm gonna have to hear the story, aren't I?"

The smile on his face was almost more than I could take. I shoved the man to the cab and into the back seat. "Fine," I said, turning to FNG. "Who is he?"

"Do you remember the man I told you about from the ship? The one that didn't like me?"

There were so many fucking stories, I couldn't keep them straight. "No."

When I didn't return his smile, he cleared his throat. "Right, well, his name is Mallock. He really fucking hated me," he chuckled. "Probably about as much as you do right now. Anyway, there was a bit of a riot on board and since nobody liked him, he had to walk the plank," he said with a pirate accent.

I did not find it funny.

"Geez, tough crowd today."

"FNG, who is he and why is he here?"

"Ah, well, he's a treasure hunter, which is how I met him. We were on the same ship when this whole thing about the Aztec gold came about. Some of the guys believed the treasure was still in Mexico, but Tim believed it was in Spain. He was the leader of the group," he reminded me. "And when Mallock spoke out against him, he was tossed overboard to avoid a coup. I actually felt kind of bad for the guy. That is, until I was thrown overboard later that night. But somehow, we both ended up in the same place."

"Which is Mexico."

He nodded. "After the whole mess with Francesca—"

"You still haven't told me how that ended," I interrupted.

"Yeah..." He rubbed the back of his neck. Fuck, there was going to be another long, drawn out story. But he surprised me. "Actually, most of that story is classified."

I rolled my eyes. "You've already told me half of it."

"Yeah, but not the part I wasn't supposed to."

"Which is the part that explains what the fuck you were doing with her. I suppose you got a divorce or something?"

"Uh...actually, she died. Yeah, she turned on me and tried to kill me. It was actually pretty shocking. I thought we were in love."

"You floated around the ocean with her for a few days. How can that be love?"

“Well, I only knew Honey forty-eight hours before I married her,” he answered.

“That’s my point.”

“Boss...are you saying you think Honey is going to try to kill me like Francesca did?”

“I don’t know,” I snapped. “None of your story makes sense. You haven’t finished a single goddamn story you’ve told.”

“Well, that’s because—“

“It’s classified,” I finished for him. “Yeah, I got it. So, what’s the deal with Mallock? How did he survive? And what the fuck does it have to do with the woman that was just held hostage?”

“That’s a good question. See, when we were in Mexico, everyone was looking for this guy known as El Cuco. He’s the equivalent of the boogeyman. Now, legend has it that he kidnaps children, but this man, he was a legend for stealing priceless artifacts. When I found out about this guy, I visited a local curator, and guess who I ran into?”

“Mallock.”

“Exactly. When I approached him, he grabbed the woman and used her as a shield, and then escaped with her. I always thought she looked a little comfortable with a gun at her head, so I’m wondering now if the woman held hostage is the same woman I met in Mexico.”

“That’s a bit of a stretch.”

“Is it? I’m just saying, you should at least let me take a look at her before you release her. Then I’ll know for sure if she has anything to do with this.”

“And Mallock?” I asked, jerking my thumb at the backseat.

“Our story didn’t end when he escaped with the woman.”

“Of course it didn’t.”

A grin spread across his face. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Does it really matter whether or not I do?”

“Not really. Okay, so Mallock escaped with this woman, the curator. I didn’t have a gun on me, so I hoped that he would let her go as soon as he got away. But when I ran to the back of the museum, they were both gone. There were tire tracks leading away from the museum, but that’s as far as I got until I met Gordo.”

“I know I’m going to regret this, but who’s Gordo?”

“Gordo was the man that eventually led me to the treasure.”

“So, you’re saying you found it.”

A funny look crossed his face. “Boss, I already told you I found it. Remember? In Utah?”

This shit was getting really old. If a treasure had been found, the whole world would know about it. I wasn’t even sure why I was listening at this point.

“Fine, so, how did Gordo help you?”

“Well, it was a hot summer night. I was at the local watering hole, drinking away my troubles when I saw an old map hanging on the wall. It was dated back five hundred years, and I got curious about how it compared to a current map. Gordo was the bartender and was bored out of his mind, so he told me all about the area and what he knew about the legend. That’s where it got interesting. Gordo was descended from the Aztecs, though no one believed him. He was the laughingstock of the village. But a lead is a lead, so I listened to the story. He said that while the Spanish were fleeing after the invasion, some of the Aztecs took the gold and traveled north, hiding the gold in various locations. And one of those locations happened to be his grandmother’s house,” he said with a grin.

“Convenient,” I said, totally unimpressed.

“I know, right? And that’s when the story took an interesting turn.”



# FNG

*THE RUINS of the Aztec Empire.*

*525,600 minutes before the return of FNG.*

“THIS IS YOUR GRANDMOTHER’S HOUSE?” I ASKED AS WE descended the stairs into a dark cavern.

Gordo turned to me with a grin. “It’s more than just a house. It’s a maze.”

I grabbed him by the arm, sure he was punking me. “Hold on, a maze?”

“You’ll see.”

He walked to the end of a bookcase, stuffing the flashlight in his mouth as he grabbed the sides. “Gaaa a an.”

“What?”

He took the flashlight out of his mouth and pointed to the other end. “Grab that end.”

Following his direction, I grabbed the side of the bookcase and slid it away from the wall. I wasn’t expecting the hole in the wall or the torch just inside the narrow tunnel. He took the torch out of the metal hanger and flicked a lighter, illuminating the end of it. Flames shot up for a moment before dying down to a small flame.

“Do you believe me now?” he asked, shining the flame onto the wall.

“Wow,” I whispered, running my hand over the gold-encrusted walls. “This is amazing.”

“This is part of the original Aztec Empire. It runs underground for miles, but it’s cut off from the main temple. Nobody knows this is down here.”

I was so engrossed in what I was seeing that it took me a moment to understand what he was saying. “Then why me?”

“You are not hunting for treasure, but for answers. I trust you to carry on my family’s legacy, to let them live in your mind. You will not destroy my secret, will you?”

“No,” I answered immediately.

“The gold must be returned to the temple. It is the only way to restore what was once a great empire.”

“But your people are all gone. What good will it do? Others will plunder it for themselves.”

“Not if you return it to the Gods.”

I had no clue how to do that or why he was asking me. I was a nobody. The only friends I had thought I was dead. But he was so insistent. There had to be another reason.

“Why can’t you do it?”

“It is not my path. All of my ancestors have sought the gold, but we have all failed.”

“And you?”

“My time is coming to an end.” He paused for a moment, then his eyes met mine. “I want to show you something. You must promise that you will fulfill my wishes.”

“What do you mean? What’s going to happen?”

“Do I have your word?”

“Gordo—”

“I will not show you if you do not promise. This is very important to me, my last wish.”

I didn’t know what any of this was about or why he was so insistent on me fulfilling this dream. He didn’t even know me.



How could he be sure I would do as he asked and not take the gold for myself? He saw something in me that maybe I didn't see.

“Alright.”

“Be careful where you step,” he said as he turned forward and led me through the narrow tunnel.

I ran my hand along the wall, feeling the cool walls with every step I took. How could all this be hiding down here for so many years and no one else had discovered it? We walked for miles until finally coming to a fork in the tunnel.

“All roads lead right,” he said, nodding to me.

“Okay—”

“You must remember this.”

“What about the left roads?”

“You will be lost to the tunnels forever. There is no way out once you take that route.”

“Good to know,” I said in jest, but he didn't return my smile. “Should we continue?”

“From here on out, it is your path to take.”

“Aren't you coming with me?”

“I will be right behind you.”

Warily, I took the torch from him and continued to the right. I studied the floor as I walked, noticing that it too was shimmering. I held the light lower and saw the gold sparkle back at me. This place was amazing. The hieroglyphs on the walls were so intricate and stunning. I couldn't believe that all of this was down here and no one ever saw it.

I came to another fork in the path. I was curious now about what was to the left, but not enough to actually take it. Thick cobwebs covered the entrance, giving it an eerie feeling. A sudden gust of wind shifted the cobwebs for just a moment, making it appear as if there was something down that tunnel. I took a step in that direction, but Gordo stopped me.

“Remember what I told you. If you go down that path, you will never be seen again. It is meant to lure you to your fate.”

With one last look down the tunnel, I made the decision to go right. We twisted and turned under the ground until the tunnel finally expanded. The air wasn't as stuffy here. I could actually draw a full breath without feeling like the walls were caving in on me.

“I will lead the way now,” he said, taking the torch from me. He walked through the space as if he'd been here a million times before. He pressed the torch against the wall, igniting a torch in a sconce on the wall. One by one, he walked around the room, lighting the other torches. I stood in amazement as light filled the room and treasure appeared before my very eyes.

“Wow,” I whispered.

He lit the last torch and walked over to my side. “It's amazing, isn't it?”

“How is all this still down here?”

“The Spanish never found this. It was my ancestor's private collection.”

“Your ancestors?” Understanding dawned on me. “You weren't just descended from the Aztecs. You're the descendant of the king.”

He nodded. “My lineage is not pure. The king had many mistresses, and I am from the descendants of that line. My father was the last man in the line to procure a son. And now...”

“And now you can carry on that line,” I said.

“No, as I said, my time is almost up.”

“How do you know that?”

His eyes roamed the room as if he was looking at it all one last time. This was his legacy. “I have a brain tumor. The doctor gave me a few weeks, but I can feel my body weakening already. This is where it will all end.”

“What do you mean?”

He smiled at me, then began walking again. “Come.”

This wasn't at all the way I thought this hunt for the treasure would go. In reality, I never thought anyone would actually find it. I was just trying to stay alive the whole time. But now...how could I stop looking when so much was on the line?

Gordo stopped in front of the wall on the other side of the room. In front of us was a small divot where it appeared something had been carved out. He took something out of his pocket and pressed it to the wall. It fit perfectly in the divot. He turned to me and then pressed the piece in further. The wall shook as the wall slowly shifted, splitting apart until there was just enough room for us to walk through.

“This is where it ends. Two may enter, but only one will leave.”

“Why?”

“It is the way it must be. When you are through, you must place this in the matching piece on the other side.”

He shoved the piece in my hand, then started forward. I grabbed his arm, pulling him back. “Gordo, what are you talking about? What other side?”

“You will see.”

He was so calm about all this, but was talking so cryptically. It was unnerving. I never saw it coming. He was in front of me one second, and then he was gone, pierced against the wall by a spear to his chest.

“Gordo!” I shouted, rushing forward. I tried to yank the spear from his chest, but it was pierced all the way through, cutting into the wall behind him. Blood gurgled from his throat, dribbling down his chin as his eyes met mine one last time.

“You...must complete...you must find the gold. Return it...to its rightful...resting place.” The air hissed out of his

lungs and his head slumped forward. I pressed my fingers to his throat, feeling no pulse under my fingers.

I spun around, looking for anyone else around me. “What the fuck!” I shouted, sure someone was going to jump out and tell me this was all a practical joke. I looked down at the piece in my hand and knew what I had to do. I would finish this for Gordo if it was the last thing I did.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I turned to the far wall and spotted the divot that matched this piece. I didn’t know if it was a trap or not, but I was positive Gordo would not have given his life unless he was sure I would be able to continue from here. I placed the piece into the wall and pushed.

The wall opened up, revealing a smaller room with what looked like an altar at the far side. This was where the gold had to be returned. I slowly spun around the room, taking in all the beauty, and finally looked back at Gordo. A life had to be sacrificed to reach this room. And now it was my duty to make sure his legacy wasn’t forgotten.



# CASH

“YOU KNOW, there’s not a single fucking thing about that story that explains where this guy comes into the picture.”

FNG frowned slightly. “Well, I was getting to that, boss. You sort of interrupted me.”

“Because this story is going nowhere!” I snapped.

“Boss!” IRIS shouted, running toward us, shaking his head. “We’ve got him cornered in another building.”

“Why didn’t you just call me over comms.”

“No reception,” he answered. “The parking structure is interfering.” He stopped beside me, hands on his hips as he peered inside the car. “Who’s this guy?”

“Gordo,” FNG answered. “He’s—”

I cut him off before he could spin another tale. “He’s someone FNG knows.”

“From your mission year?” IRIS asked.

“Actually—”

“It’s not important right now,” I cut him off again.

IRIS looked at me funny, but FNG was getting pissed. Good, because I was fucking irritated as hell that I had to continue to listen to these stories, never knowing which elements were true.

“It’s actually very important,” FNG snapped. “If you would just listen—”

“Why?” I questioned. “So we can hear more half stories? So you can tell us that he’s connected, but then tell us it’s classified? We still don’t know how it is you managed to get a stake in your body!”

He flushed bright red, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. “Okay, I’ll level with you on that one. It’s...a little embarrassing.”

“More embarrassing than your wife killing a cartel while you were passed out on the ground?” I asked, digging the knife in just a little deeper. I didn’t feel bad, though. After all the tall tales, he could take a little heat from his coworkers.

“Actually...yes. After all that happened, we were finally free.”

“What about the reason you were at the bar to begin with?”

He shrugged. “It didn’t matter anymore. I was married. My only thought was bringing her home with me.”

I snorted at the word married. “You had no formal paperwork. It’s not even legal.”

“When you’re in love, none of that matters. We’re wed in our hearts.”

I really couldn’t take much more of this crap. “The stake, FNG. Tell us about the stake.”

“It was...” He cleared his throat, glancing away uncomfortably. “It was a fence.”

“A fence,” I repeated.

“Yeah, we were just across the border and I wanted to impress the lady by jumping a wooden fence. But...it was rotted and when I jumped...it cracked and I impaled myself.”

Out of all the stories he came up with, that was actually the most believable. “Well, I can see these stories are really helping us with our current problems. In fact, I feel so good about this, I think we can make an arrest.”

“We’re not cops,” FNG answered.

“No shit! I was being sarcastic.”

“You know, I think you would greatly benefit from some meditation.”

I glared at FNG, turning back to IRIS before I blew a gasket. There was a time that I thought IRIS was the biggest pain in my ass. Now, he looked like the normal one.

“Where’s the other suspect being held?”

“The basement.”

“Good, let’s go question him.”

“What about me?” FNG asked.

“You stay with this guy.”

I walked away without another word. The last thing I needed was another story that FNG would undoubtedly tell that would get us nowhere.

“Do you think he was telling the truth?” IRIS asked.

“About which part?”

“Any of it.”

“I feel like maybe there are kernels of truth in his stories, but I can’t believe any of it. And where does that leave us? How do we move forward with him on the teams when we can’t trust him?”

“Maybe he’s telling the truth about the classified parts.”

“So, he just made up a bunch of stories to cover for what really happened?”

“He’s done crazier shit than that,” IRIS chuckled. “Hell, Fox has done crazier shit.”

“If Fox had told those stories, I might actually believe them.”

IRIS stopped, grabbing my arm lightly. “Hold on a minute. This is FNG. He’s the epitome of an unconventional employee, and that’s coming from the man that loves to blow shit up. Isn’t it possible that some of this actually happened?”

The more I thought about it, the less I believed any of it was real. “Let’s just talk to this guy and figure out what’s



really going on.”

As soon as we got to the basement level, I switched to interrogation mode. I was done with the wild tales and the drawn out stories that got me nowhere. Right now, I just wanted answers.

The man was zip tied in the far corner of the basement, staring at everyone with wild eyes. “You have to let me go!”

“And why’s that?” I questioned, nodding to Fox. We were going to get to the bottom of this right now.

“Because if you don’t, that man you were with is going to die.”

I huffed in laughter. More scare tactics. “Fox, get to it.”

“Me, boss?”

I did a double take, looking at the wide-eyed expression on his face. “Yeah, you. This is what I hired you for.”

“Right, but...” His eyes scanned the man, then flicked back to mine. “I can’t.”

“You can’t?”

He shook his head wildly. “Boss, I’m serious. I can’t do that anymore.”

“And why not?”

“You know why not,” he hissed. “I’ve lost that...lovin’ feeling.”

“If you start singing, I’m gonna slit your throat,” I threatened.

His shoulders slumped as he stared at the ground. “I wish that was the problem. Really, boss, I do. It’s just...there’s nothing left to be angry about. I told you, I can’t do it anymore.”

“Then how the fuck are we supposed to find out what’s really going on?”

“I could—”

“No!” I snapped. “You’re not going to meditate with him. You have a job. Now do it!”

Fox walked forward, slowly pulling the knife from his sheath. He stopped right in front of the man, holding the blade just inches from the man’s neck. “Um...I’m going to...to make an incision on your neck. It’ll probably hurt a little, maybe a lot. I’m really sorry about this. I’ll try to be as gentle as possible, but it would really help me a lot if you could just tell us what you know.”

“Fox!” I snapped. The man I once considered crazy walked over to me with the weight of the world on his shoulders. It was as if all the joy he once got from an interrogation was gone. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“I told you, boss. It’s gone. I can’t do it.”

“You’re telling him you’re going to be gentle with him. That’s not how we interrogate suspects. You hang them from the rafters. You boil them in acid. You cut them to pieces! That’s how you get answers!”

“At one time,” he nodded. “Maybe...maybe I could try something different.”

“Like what?”

His eyes suddenly lit up and he grinned at me. “Just go with me on this.” He didn’t wait for an answer. He spun on his heel and jauntily strolled back to the man with a smile on his face. “Hey! So, we’re going to try something here. I’m going to name a place, and I want you to tell me what that represents.”

The man looked at me, waiting for me to intervene, but I was gonna go with this. At least for the moment. “Uh...okay.”

“Great. So, I want you to imagine Mexico.”

“I’ve never been to Mexico.”

“Really? It’s a great place. Lots of culture and—”

“Fox!” I snapped.

“Right,” he nodded. “Anyway, I want you to imagine what you were chasing in Mexico.”

“I wasn’t chasing anything in Mexico.”

“Then what were you chasing?”

“Something in the United States.”

Fox nodded. “Now we’re getting somewhere. Okay, so imagine you’re a dog.”

Again, the man looked at me. “Why would I do that?”

“It’s a...just go with it. Close your eyes.” The man sighed, but did as he asked. “Alright, you’re a dog and you’re sniffing for something. You know it’s not far away.” The man’s nose wrinkled slightly as if he was actually sniffing. “You’re tracking it like a bloodhound. You’re so close. All you have to do is track that scent until you find what you’re looking for. Do you smell it?”

“No.”

Fox’s brows furrowed. “Why not?”

“Because gold has no scent.”

“Ah-ha!” Fox snapped, looking at me in victory. “So, you *were* searching for the gold.”

The man’s eyes flew open. “Hey, you tricked me!”

“Actually, I was trying hypnosis. I guess I’ll have to brush up on my skills.”

“You’re a psychic?” the man said in awe.

“No, that’s...that’s not at all the same thing. Dude, where did you go to school?”

“Why? Do you think that’s somehow related?”

“To your intelligence? Very likely. Unless of course, you were just a bad student. You know, one of my teachers always told me that it’s not about the school, but the student. If the student has no desire to learn, it doesn’t matter how good the school is.”

“Right, but if the teachers don’t know how to teach, it doesn’t matter how great the desire is to learn,” I cut in.

“Huh, so you feel it lands on the teacher’s shoulders,” Fox said, turning to me.

“No, I think it’s an equal distribution of—why are we talking about this?” I asked in frustration. “We’re supposed to be interrogating a suspect!”

“I was, but it was a valid question.”

This was getting nowhere fast. I walked over to the man and slammed my fist into his face. “What the fuck were you looking for with that woman?”

“Man, that really hurt!” the man cried out.

“See, this is why I don’t like to do this,” Fox sighed.

I ignored him and continued, slamming my fist into his face again. “Tell me what I want to know.”

His whimpers didn’t get to me. But then I realized it wasn’t him crying, but Fox. I slowly looked at him, then jabbed my finger toward the exit. “If this upsets you, leave.”

He swiped at his eyes, sniffing back fake tears. “I’m good. I just...I’ll be okay.”

Turning back to the man, I grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him close. “One of you is going to end up in the trunk of my car. We’ll go for a long drive to the middle of nowhere. No one will hear your screams. I can torture you for hours, and when I have what I need, I’ll dump your body in a river after it’s weighted down with concrete. They won’t find your remains until rocks have beaten your body to shreds and fish have gnawed on your remains. Do I make myself clear?”

The man’s wide eyes never left mine as he nodded slowly. “Understood.”

“Now, what were you after?”

“The location of her husband.”

“Her—what?”

He huffed out a breath, the anxiety rippling off him along with the fear. “Her husband knows the location of the gold.”

“And who is her husband?”

He paused for just a moment, then dropped the mother of all bombshells. “Dean Helmer.”



# FNG

EVERYTHING CAME SLOWLY INTO FOCUS, screwing with my perception of reality. I wasn't sure what happened or how I got here, but something was definitely very wrong. My hands were going numb above my head, but when I tried to move them, nothing happened.

I peered up, finding them bound by zip ties to a pipe. "What the fuck happened?"

"Ah, a very good question," Mallock said, coming out of the shadows.

I shook my head, sure I was seeing things. This was Mallock, my friend who saved my life countless times on that ship. Yes, I caught him, but I was going to find out what he was after. I had no intention of ever handing him over to the authorities.

"You see, you have always been a problem for me."

"I have?" I said in confusion.

"I tried to put my personal feelings aside for a long time. I do like you, FNG, but I've come to realize that I have let that interfere for way too long. There's only one way out of this for you, and that's to give up the gold."

"The gold? I don't have the gold," I said, laughing at the thought of me carrying around all the gold like a prize.

"You know where it is. I found her."

"Found who?"

“Your wife!”

Fear rippled through me. How could he have Honey? It wasn't possible. She was safe at OPS. I made sure of it. “You're lying.”

“Who do you think I was talking to in that building?”

“I have no fucking clue, but it wasn't my wife!”

He chuckled darkly. “Blonde hair, blue eyes...a pixie of a woman. She really is the most gorgeous creature I've ever beheld.”

“My wife has brown hair and brown eyes,” I clarified.

“What?”

“Brown hair. Brown eyes,” I said slower. “You've got the wrong woman.”

“No, I found the marriage certificate.” He pulled something out of his back pocket, then shoved it in my face. I stared at the paper, and sure enough, that was my signature next to...

“Holy shit,” I murmured.

“Yes, Cody Moran. Do you still not recognize your wife?”

My mouth gaped open the longer I stared at the paper. There was just no way, no possible way...Then again... “I married her?” I shouted, my voice taking on a weird pitch. “Are you sure?”

“The paper doesn't lie.”

“But...all I did was dance around a fire pit. That can't seriously be a real thing!”

“Whether you did or not, you are in fact married to her.”

“But she doesn't know anything about me!”

“Then how did I find you?” he laughed.

“Sheer luck,” I snapped. “That's all this is. A pure coincidence.”



“I don’t believe in coincidences. And it doesn’t matter how you came face to face with me. The point is, I have you and now you’re going to tell me what I want to know.”

Yeah, there was no way that was happening. I watched as he pulled a knife from his side, then walked toward me with the menace of a man on the edge. There was only one way out of this for me. I waited for him to get closer, keeping my breaths calm and even as he approached. The knife drew closer and closer until it was just inches from my face.

In one fell swoop, I lashed out, kicking him in the balls with every ounce of strength I had. He jerked forward, hissing in a breath. I shifted to the right as the knife came way too close to my neck. I kicked him again, this time knocking him to the ground. With one hard yank, I broke the zip ties and landed on my feet. I reached for the knife, only to jerk my hand back as Mallock pulled a gun from his back and fired right at the knife.

Outgunned with nowhere to run, I took a step back. Mallock’s gaze met mine as a sinister look crossed his face. He raised the gun, pointing it directly at my face.

“I suppose now wouldn’t be a good time to remind you of how I saved your life.”

“You could try,” he grinned. “But it would be—”

The loud crack of gunfire echoed around the garage. Blood bloomed from his chest as his last breath gurgled in his throat before he collapsed to the ground. Another shot fired, nearly taking my head off as it struck the wall behind me.

“Why is everyone always trying to kill me?” I shouted, running for cover. If I could get outside the parking garage, I might find some of OPS stationed there. I sprinted across the open expanse, hoping to get to the exit before this guy landed a shot.

“Anyone copy?” I shouted into comms. “In case you want to know, there’s someone firing at me, and I think he’s really pissed!”

There was no answer.

“I know you guys don’t believe me, but I think this guy really wants me dead!”

I was almost there. The light from the outside was a balm on my battered soul. After a year of being missing, this was not the way I wanted to die. Gunfire licked my heels, barely missing me with every step I took. I was almost there, almost free when I was tackled to the ground by a large bulk of muscle, and a bullet lodged in the wall right where I was about to run.

The bullet just barely missed my head. I didn’t know who saved my life or why. I was just happy I was yanked to the ground in the nick of time. I rolled over just as a man was getting to his feet. He was massive, a real beast. And when he turned, I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“Ivan?”

“Come, FNG, we must move.”

I scrambled to my feet, pulling my weapon as I ran behind the man who had just saved my life. But instead of leaving the building, he was taking me back inside. “I thought you were dead!”

“Yes, it was mistake.”

“Mistake?” I hissed. “I was your butler and you let me think you were dead.”

He stopped at an open doorway and peeked around to clear the area. “Yes, it was unfortunate, but necessary.”

“Ivan, I saw you. You weren’t breathing. You were gone!”

He turned back around, looking a little sheepish. “I wanted to tell you. It was matter of life and death. I took capsule. Everyone thought I was dead. It worked.”

“For everyone but me. I mourned you,” I griped.

“We talk about it later. Right now, we kill bad guys.”

“What about your not killing streak?”

He grinned at me. “I think it is time to break it.”

He spun and fired a single shot. I peeked out from behind him, watching as the man crumpled to the ground in a heap. Ivan ran over to him, grabbing him by the arms.

“Come, you take his legs.”

I didn't bother questioning anything. I was just happy the man was alive. Together, we dragged him further into the maintenance room and set him down on a metal workbench. Ivan pulled a package from the inside of his fur-lined coat and unrolled it on the table. Pliers and knives were placed in each of the pockets. He took out the pliers and walked around where the man was breathing heavily on the table.

“You try to kill my friend. Why?”

The man stared at Ivan, refusing to answer. He thought he could hold out, but I knew that wasn't likely to happen. Ivan struck me as a ruthless man. Not to mention, the stories about him were insane.

“You know,” Ivan said, slipping the pliers around one finger. “Most men, they break the fingers. It is useless.” His eyes flicked up to the man. “Tearing them out is so much easier.”

He jerked hard, pulling with all his strength until the man's finger literally ripped off his hand. The screams were enough to send chills down my spine. Not even with Fox had I ever heard a man yell in so much agony, and Fox was kind of crazy.

“Now, you tell me what I want to know or I move on to next finger.”

The man's breathing was erratic now as he stared at Ivan pleadingly. “I swear, I don't know anything.”

“Lies!” Ivan shouted, grabbing another finger and ripping as hard as he could. Another finger tore off and blood squirted at me, splattering all over my shirt. “You were here. You try to shoot me.”

“Because you tried to shoot me!” the man yelled.

I was certain he was telling the truth, but Ivan grabbed another finger, pulling just as ruthlessly as the last time. I

wanted to cover my ears to block out the screams that echoed around the room. I wasn't a squeamish guy, but Ivan was another brand of crazy.

I really wanted to go back to my old job and pretend I never heard of the man before. Then again, it was better to be on his good side than be the one laying on the table.

"FNG, you do the honors," Ivan said, holding out the pliers for me.

"Oh, that's okay. I prefer umbrellas."

"Umbrellas?" he asked, his eyebrows shooting up. "How you use?"

"Um...usually I just pretend it's a sword," I nodded. "Simple, but effective."

"I see. And you have umbrella on you now?"

"Well, no."

He shoved the pliers at me. "You use."

I slowly took them from him, trying not to touch all the blood, but it was impossible. I knew I wasn't going to be able to do this as well as him. I didn't have any experience ripping off fingers.

"Like this?" I asked, placing the pliers over the knuckle.

"A little higher."

The man on the table stared at me with pleading eyes. I felt really bad about this, but...not that bad. "Okay, here goes nothing," I said under my breath.

I pulled with all my might, but couldn't rip the man's finger off. I started twisting, but still, couldn't accomplish the mission.

"Is okay," Ivan said, taking the pliers from me. "It took me three tries the first time."

"Really?"

He patted my shoulder and smiled. "Is good. I finish with him."

“Cool. Yeah, this is really more your thing anyway.”

The door burst open and Cash came storming in, followed by Fox and IRIS.

“Hey!” I grinned, running over to them. “How did you guys find me?”

“We followed the trail of blood. Who the fuck is this?” Cash pointed to Ivan.

I ran back, waving the guys over. “Oh, hey, this is the guy I was telling you about. Ivan!”

Cash stared at me incredulously. “*This* is Ivan?” I nodded. “I thought you were making that shit up.”

Fox walked past Cash to the table and grinned at the man laying in there. “I totally see it now.” He turned to Ivan with a grin. “Man, I’ve seen your work before. You were amazing back in the day.”

“I am still amazing, as you say. It has just been long time since I have had the pleasure of feeling a life drain away in my hands.”

Fox nodded. “I totally get how you feel. There’s nothing quite like watching the life slip away from someone’s eyes. Bad guys, of course. I don’t kill random people.”

“Of course not. It would be disgrace to profession.”

“I gotta be honest with you. I’ve lost my taste for it. It’s not what it used to be.”

“I cannot agree with you. I am still one hundred percent dedicated to my job.”

“Have you ever tried another route?” Fox asked.

“Can we get back to the man on the table and why he’s looking for your wife?” Cash asked.

“Right, about that—”

“How many times were you married?” he interrupted.

“Uh...”

“Why is this man after you?” Cash demanded to know.

“You know, you’re asking a lot of questions. Which answer do you want first?”

He stared at the ceiling in frustration. I could commiserate. I was feeling a little testy myself.

“Who is he?” Cash asked calmly.

“Oh, him? Not completely sure, but I know he’s after the gold.”

“So, we do not need him,” Ivan said with a shrug. In a swift move, Ivan broke the man’s neck and turned back to me, placing his hand on my shoulder. “Is good to see you, my friend. We must see each other again soon.”

“I’d like that, Ivan.”

“Good. I see you in Russia.” He nodded to Cash, IRIS, and Fox before strolling out the door, whistling a cheery tune.

“Wait, that’s it?” IRIS asked. “He knows you, saved your life, but he doesn’t care about the gold?”

“He’s already rich. He doesn’t live for money. It’s the thrill of the chase.”

“But...”

“If you guys don’t mind, I think I’m gonna head home to my wife.”

“Which one?” IRIS snorted.

I cringed. Yeah, that was going to be a hard one to explain. “To Honey.”

IRIS narrowed his eyes at me. “Man, I gotta ask. Is Honey really her name?”

That was another issue that I knew would come up eventually. “Not sure, but it stuck with me like honey,” I chuckled to myself, but none of them laughed.

“So, you’re saying that we don’t know your name and we don’t know Honey’s name. Does anyone else find that odd?” IRIS asked. “Shouldn’t we...give them other names?”

“What would be the fun in that?” I asked, turning my back on them.

“Wait!” Cash stopped me. “You said this is all about the gold. Now, everyone that was after that woman is dead and there’s no one to corroborate your story.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“Then how do we know you’re telling the truth about any of this?”

I grinned, shoving my hand into my pocket, feeling the hard metal in my hand. It probably would be better if I let things die right here with me, but then Cash would never trust me. Some things just weren’t meant to stay a secret.

“You’re absolutely right, Cash.” I pulled the coin out of my pocket and flipped it to him with a smirk. As I walked away, I could envision the wonder on their faces as they stared down at the only piece I’d kept for myself.

I didn’t need to see their reactions. I could hear it in their voices as I strolled to the exit in satisfaction.

“Is that...”

“Aztec gold.”

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