

The hunter becomes the hunted.

GAMMA



New York Times and *USA Today* Bestselling Author

Jasinda Wilder

GAMMA



JASINDA WILDER



Copyright © 2022 by Jasinda Wilder

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

[A Note From The Author](#)

1. [No Real Choice](#)
2. [No Matter What](#)
3. [Karahalios Reborn](#)
4. [The Vanisher](#)
5. [The Bad Man](#)
6. [Old Friends, Reunited](#)
7. [You've Been Warned](#)
8. [No Going Back](#)
9. [Shell Games](#)
10. [Innocence Lost](#)
11. [Reunited](#)
12. [Driving Away From It All](#)
13. [Evasions and Evaluations](#)
14. [A Brief Respite; A Mother's Love](#)
15. [Completion](#)
16. [Interlude in Tunis; Deeper Wounds](#)
17. [Eyes on the Prize](#)
18. [Alamut Valley; Spaulding's Demise](#)
19. [Home](#)
20. [Forever, Starting Now](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sign Up!](#)

[Also by Jasinda Wilder](#)

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Gamma is set in the theoretical future, twenty-ish years after the events of Alpha and Alpha One Security. But, in the interest of storytelling simplicity, I've written this without worrying overmuch about silly things like the technicalities of linear time progression. Valentine, Kyrie, Harris, and Layla, and the rest of the gang are in their 50s and 60s, and their kids are young adults. I've not attempted to guess at what the future society is like, since this isn't sci-fi, it's romantic suspense. Basically, if I've done my job right, you'll be able to just enjoy the story and not even really think about anachronistic continuity.

NO REAL CHOICE

“I don’t like it,” I say. “It’s too risky. Too much could go wrong.” Apollo squeezes my hand. “There’s not much of a choice, Rin. They have Yelena. She’s totally innocent in all this. She doesn’t even know I exist, nor her parents either. My actions put this innocent little girl in danger.”

Harris—my uncle Harry—sighs. “I don’t like it either, Rinny. I don’t. But this is the best plan we’ve got. Whoever is behind this is smart—the location of those coordinates is...it’s well chosen. We have to assume all approaches are being watched, which means I can’t even get scouts very close without being seen. Drone footage, satellite, it all tells me the same thing—if we want to get that little girl back, we have to play by their rules. To a degree.”

I feel my eyes burning, but refuse to let tears fall.

For six months, Apollo and I were deliriously happy. We lived together in Houston so I could oversee the build-up of Valkyrie’s operations—Valkyrie Extraglobal Solutions is dedicated to creating the first orbital spacecraft shipyard; Apollo is working on his various business interests. We’re not married, nor engaged. Our bank accounts are still separate. He hasn’t told me he loves me—those words are still very hard for him. I know he does, but verbalizing it is a different story. He shows me in a thousand other ways: he brings me breakfast in bed, or sometimes just coffee; he kisses me slowly, softly, passionately, aggressively; we make love and we fuck and everything in between; he takes care of me. He calls me beautiful. He anticipates what I might need and provides it. He makes me feel loved, cared for, seen. He *shows* me he loves me.

Do I need the words? Not yet.

Do I need the ring? Not yet.

I *want* the words and the ring, obviously, but I'm not going to push it. We have time. We have a lifetime together.

Or so I thought.

Then, Apollo received the decapitated head of his assistant and second-in-command, Tomás...and a photograph of Apollo's four-year-old cousin with a set of coordinates, a twenty-four-hour deadline to show up alone or the little girl's head will be next, and a message in blood on the wall: *it's not that easy, KARAHALIOS.*

It's not that easy. Of course not.

The coordinates on the back of the photograph are for a warehouse in Queens, Uncle Harry says. Preliminary assessment indicates it will be impossible to get anyone in or out besides Apollo. Meaning, he has to go alone. If we try to send a team, they'll be seen and we can't risk Yelena's life. We don't know who's behind this, and therefore we have to assume they mean business—that if we mess up, an innocent four-year-old girl will die...

The upshot of this is I have to allow Apollo to walk into that abandoned warehouse alone, unarmed, unprotected, into who knows what fate.

What choice is there? We have no intel—there is no real choice.

"To a degree," Apollo asks, repeating Uncle Harry's words, breaking my train of thought. "What does that mean?"

"It means we can't risk this little cousin of yours. But it doesn't mean we have to send you in totally blind." He produces a syringe. "We actually put one of these in Kyrie, when you, um...collected her." He holds up the syringe, and the naked eye can just barely make out a tiny silver something in the liquid. "It's a nearly invisible tracker. It'll allow us to, at the very least, monitor your location. It comes with certain risks, however: it is detectable by certain types of scanners, and if they were to scan you and find it, they might be pissed enough to do something punitive. Or, at least, disable it, if not dig it out of you. Which would be, needless to say, unpleasant."

He glances at me. "Sorry for the graphic imagery, but it's my job to be thorough."

I swallow hard. "I understand. It's up to Apollo, obviously."

Apollo takes the syringe and examines it. "Tiny little thing. And this will give you my location, but nothing else?"

"Correct," Uncle Harry says.

"And they can scan me for it. And if they do and find it, they could kill

me, hurt or kill Yelena, or just do something violent and painful to me to remove it.”

“Correct.”

“But you will know where they are taking me, at the very least, is the thinking.” When Harris nods his assent, Apollo sighs, musing, then meets my uncle’s eyes. “Is it worth the risks, do think? In your professional capacity, I ask you, not as... as something like family.”

Harris’s smile is faint. “Not something like, Apollo. You *are* family, now. Rin is family, and she loves you, therefore you’re part of the crew. And the way you’re responding to this affirms for me that she’s made the right choice with you.” He flicks the syringe. “I think it’s worth it, yes. It’s something, and in this case, something is better than nothing.”

“Very well. Rin trusts you, therefore I trust you.”

Harris takes the syringe. “I’ll place it somewhere that if they should find it and decide to cut it out of you, it won’t be likely to kill or maim you. That’s the best I can offer, unfortunately.” He moves behind Apollo, places a palm on the back of his head and tips Apollo’s head forward, baring the back of his neck. “I’m putting it under the skin at the base of your neck, under the hairline.

Apollo merely grunts his acknowledgment, and Harris slides the needle under his skin, depressing the plunger. The liquid and the nearly invisible speck vanishes, and Harris dabs at the spot with a Kleenex.

“There, all set.” Harris holds up a tablet, taps the screen a few times. “And...activated.”

He turns the tablet to show Apollo and me. It shows a top-down satellite view of where we are, in Houston, with the building’s footprint outlined, and a small red dot marking Apollo’s location.

“Since we’re close, I have more granular information.” Harris manipulates the screen, pulling the view to show the building in cross-section, with Apollo’s location marked in our specific location within the building. “If you’re in Europe and we are here, however, all I will be able to see is the basic satellite image, and the location will be approximate rather than precise. As we get closer, the program can build a more detailed composite model using...well, a bunch of technical mumbo jumbo that Lear would be better at explaining.”

“And all we can do is put that in him, send him in to them, and...what?” I ask, barely suppressing the fear and anger in my voice. “Wait? Hope they

don't just kill him and Yelena both?"

Harris shakes his head. "We're pursuing other avenues of investigation."
"Meaning?"

A shrug. "A lot of things, Rin. Underworld activity, sorting through suspects and who would stand to gain from Apollo's demise or capture. Ownership of the building. Satellite imagery to see if we can figure out who's in there. Lear has been cracking on this since Apollo called me. And if anyone on the planet can catch a lead in a situation like this, it's Lear."

Apollo looks at me. "You know them, not me."

I lean against him, touch my fingers to where Uncle Harry put in the tracker—I can't feel anything. "They're the best in the world at exactly this, Apollo. And they're my family. My parents trust them, with each other, and more lately, with me. They found you, right?"

Apollo frowns. "Indeed, and I took care to cover my tracks."

Harris nods. "And you did that very well. There are just very few humans on this planet who are capable of hiding from a determined Lear Winter. And those who do have that capability, even they cannot hide forever. Even in death, you can't hide from Lear for long. We are approaching this carefully, cautiously. We value life, and we never take action until we're sure of the results, especially when there are innocent lives at stake, like this little girl."

"Has anyone been in contact with her parents?" I ask, pointedly looking up at Apollo. "Darling?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know how to approach them."

"So all they know is their little girl vanished. They don't know why, or anything." I frown. "Apollo, babe. You *have* to talk to them. They deserve that much. This has nothing to do with them. It's not fair."

"What *is* fair?" he asks, rhetorically. "But I must admit, you are right. I cannot in good conscience allow them to suffer."

Harris pats him on the shoulder. "Good man. We have a jet ready."

Apollo glances quizzically at him. "You have a jet ready?"

A nod. "Yelena Konstantin was reported missing yesterday from Brooklyn. Four years old. Parents are Georgios and Elena Konstantin. Elena is your first cousin—your father had three brothers and a sister, and Georgios is your father's brother's child. Georgios runs a bodega and Elena is a housekeeper for a small motel. Yelena is their only child." He glances at Apollo with something like reproach. "Most of us only get one family, Apollo. You have us—" he gestures at himself, the rest of A1S, "*and* you

have them. That's a rare opportunity, Apollo. Don't let fear keep you from it."

Apollo sighs. "Fine."

"You have to get to New York anyway, since the warehouse is in Queens." He indicates to me. "You can go to New York together. If you approach your cousin with Rin at your side, it will be better. Makes you more...approachable, I guess. And I think you need her support."

"You make me out to be a coward," Apollo says, his voice bitter.

"No, not at all," Uncle Harry says. "Family is tricky. Much harder than business. It's not just numbers and rational things like profit and loss, or risk assessment and collateral damage reports. It's personal. It's emotional. And for you, I suspect it's a pretty fraught proposition, all things considered. The other side of your family has its...difficulties."

Apollo snorts. "Difficulties. A wonderful understatement." He looks at the photograph of his cousin: she's no more than four, small and adorable with a bob of black hair, wide, dark, serious eyes, and chubby little hands clutching a pink stuffed penguin. "This can only be the work of someone who feels slighted by my exit from the underworld. Someone involved in the trafficking ring I helped break up, most likely. That would be where I would start looking. I can provide a couple of names—people I suspected were associated with the trafficking but couldn't verify a connection firm enough to warrant being included in the raids we conducted. I didn't want to make unnecessary enemies, after all. It seems I failed in that endeavor, however."

"The names?" Harris asks.

Apollo hesitates. "Take no action without confirmation of my suspicions. You do not want to go poking any nests, and the names I would give you... disturbing them without due cause would definitely constitute poking a nest."

Uncle Harry only nods. "Of course. Not my first day on the job, Apollo."

A snort. "Of course not. You took out my grandfather. No small feat, that." Another brief hesitation. "Pyotr Alekseyevich Yevgeny is one, and Richard Isaac Spaulding is another. Yevgeny has connections to the Russian mob, but also to certain former Eastern Bloc powers who still wield influence in certain sectors. I know for a fact he owns whorehouses and runs many legal and quasi-legal prostitution rings, and it's not a stretch to assume he runs illegal ones as well. I couldn't find any hard evidence that he deals in underage girls which is what we were looking for—underage trafficking and kidnapping schemes.

“Spaulding is a rather...interesting figure,” Apollo continues. “And by interesting, I mean truly awful. Very seriously depraved and evil. You think my grandfather was bad? Spaulding is far worse. He’s an American expat based out of Prague. He deals primarily in narcotics, but his mule of choice is women—vulnerable ones. Spaulding has a notoriously violent temper, as well as a predilection for sampling his own wares, both the drugs and the women. His business model, if you can call it that, is to send his shipments via these women. They’re guarded, of course, to protect the goods. But the women are the mules, carrying the drugs, and they’re also a commodity themselves. Buy drugs from Spaulding, you get the drugs *and* a woman to play with when you take delivery...all for one flat price. I couldn’t find anyone with direct firsthand knowledge willing to talk to me, but it’s a sure fact that these women are exploited and manipulated, be it through money, family, or addiction. They’re left with few choices other than to work for Spaulding. My suspicion with Spaulding is that his dealings with human trafficking go well beyond using prostitutes as mules—if he uses them as mules, it stands to reason he trafficks in them, and with his temperament a known commodity, I doubt anything he’s associated with is going to be pleasant. If I had to pick one person I suspect being behind this, it’s him.”

Harris nods, taking notes on his tablet. “Both names are familiar to me, and I assure you, we will look into them—cautiously. In the meantime, the clock is ticking, so you two need to get in the air.”

Apollo straightens, nods. “Very well.” He glances down at me. “Shall we?”

As if we’re taking a business trip. He’s still in his work attire: bespoke suit in a pale gray, with a black crewneck T-shirt under the blazer instead of a button-down and tie. His long, thick black hair is bound back, artfully trimmed stubble shadowing his jaw. He is a very contained person, not given to showing his emotions easily. Indeed, even now, unless you know him rather well, you’d be hard-pressed to see any sign of stress or unease in him. Even his voice is smooth and controlled.

I know him, however, and he’s barely holding it together. He’s a taut wire, stretched so tight it hums and vibrates. His eyes betray his emotions, at least to me—they’re guarded, closed off, hard. Every muscle is tight, tensed—I feel it in him as we head to the roof, for my private aircraft which will take us to the airfield.

The flight to the airfield is both brief and endless at the same time—brief

because the jet is quick and our private airfield is close, and endless because we're silent and tense, lost in our thoughts.

The jet touches down some twenty feet away from the larger aircraft, which is already idling. We board, take our seats beside each other near the front of the ten-passenger plane. Four armed A1S guards follow us on board, having followed in a separate helicopter; they're plainclothes guards, dressed in jeans and combat boots with black T-shirts underneath A1S-logoed bulletproof vests, carrying subcompact machine guns, with black A1S ball caps and wraparound mirrored sunglasses. They're young men, intensely fit and highly trained. They space out, two behind us and two in front, standing until the captain announces take-off, and then they sit, buckle, and wait.

The flight to New York is long. There's nothing to say, and it passes in tense silence.

We're making our approach to the private airfield Daddy owns outside of NYC.

Apollo snorts abruptly. "I'm more nervous about meeting my cousins and telling them I'm the reason their daughter is gone than I am to walk into that warehouse."

"I know." I hold his hand. "It's going to be okay."

"They're going to hate me. And rightfully so."

"They won't hate you. They might be confused. Upset. Scared. But no one could have foreseen this. And we'll get her back, Apollo. If there's one person in this world I have total and unwavering faith in, it's Uncle Harry. He won't stop until that little girl is safe. And then, she'll never know that kind of danger again."

"It's my fault." His voice is miserable.

"You stayed away from them specifically to prevent this from happening, Apollo. Self-recrimination won't help you, them, or anyone." I squeeze his hand, hard. "You're a good man."

"Now." A bitter sigh. "Not always."

A pause in the conversation as the tires bark with our landing, the rush of air as we slow. A short taxi to the hangar, and then we stop. One of the guards opens the door and the stairs descend to the ground. The guards exit and take up position around the stairs and the waiting SUV.

"We'll be right out," I say, to the last guard as he ducks under the opening.

"Ma'am." His acknowledgment is a grunt and a nod.

I unbuckle and move onto Apollo's lap. Wrap my arms around his neck.
"Hey."

He brings a smile to his lips, love in his eyes as his hands cradle my hips.
"Hi."

"Have faith, Apollo. It's going to be okay."

"Faith."

"In yourself. In Harris and his team. In who you are now."

He sighs, a heavy exhale, closes his eyes, inhales slowly, and then opens his eyes and nods. "You are right, of course." A tentative smile. "I can face a boardroom full of grumpy, wealthy old men. I can face bloodthirsty gangsters and kingpins—I can face my own family." A wry grin. "And, for better or worse, in many ways I *am* my mother's son, and my grandfather's—when need be, I can be very...unpleasant. And these men, whomever they are, have endangered an innocent life. Anyone in the way of Yelena's safety will feel my wrath."

I bury my face in his neck. "That's what I want to hear, Apollo my love."

"I just...I had thought I left behind that part of myself. You know?"

"That part of you is still *part* of you. And it doesn't scare me, when you summon it for good. You can be terrifying—to the bad guys. Right?"

A nod, and then he stands up, setting me on my feet without letting go of me; he pulls me closer, tugs me against him. Cups my face in his hands.
"Thank you, Corinna."

I lift up and kiss him. "Always." Another kiss, brief, soft. "Now. Let's go meet your family."

NO MATTER WHAT

We pull to a stop at the curb in front of a modest apartment building in a decent enough section of Brooklyn. Our trio of custom, armored, hyper-luxury SUVs draws attention even on the high-money streets of downtown Manhattan. Here? They may as well be an alien spacecraft. People stop on the sidewalk and stare, cars slow to a crawl, windows sliding down to show openly curious and shocked eyes. I can feel them wondering who we are.

We wait until the rear vehicle parks behind us and disgorges two of our guards, two more exiting the foremost vehicle. A pair of guards waits with the small fleet, and the other two escort us to the door of the apartment building; the guards flank us, weapons carried openly and at the ready, relaxed but hyper-alert, heads on a swivel, eyes constantly roving.

Apollo presses the buzzer next to the nearly illegible name slot—*Konstantin*, except several letters are smudged so it reads *Ko st n in*.

“Yes.” A male voice, low and surly.

“Georgios Konstantin?”

“Yes. What do you want.”

“My name is Apollo.” A pause, a sigh of resignation. “Apollo Karahalios.”

“They are all dead. And good *fuckink* riddance to them all.” The Greek accent is thick with anger, here.

“Please. I need to speak with you. I...” Another soft out breath from Apollo. “It’s regarding your daughter.”

“You know where she is?” A note of hope.

“Please...just let us in. It will be easier to explain if I could sit and speak

with you.”

“Us? Who us?”

“Me and my...” a pause. “Girlfriend.” He looks at me apologetically—I’m more than his girlfriend, and we both know it.

But not formally, and he’s never had to introduce me in such a way before. We haven’t bothered with titles or labels.

I rub his shoulder. “It’s fine,” I whisper. “Later.”

“You have information about my daughter?”

“In a manner of speaking. It’s important, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“Fine.” The terse, snapped word is accompanied by the door buzzing noisily, clicking as the lock disengages.

One guard yanks it open and the others move through it, heading for the stairs in a swift march, muzzle pointing up the stairs as he ascends. Apollo and I follow, the second guard behind us. Three flights up a narrow, echoing, dimly lit staircase and down an equally narrow hallway. One of the doors is open, in it stands a short, barrel-chested man in his late thirties. He’s not unattractive, in a rough, weathered sort of way. Thick black hair cut short and swept back, dark eyes, strong jaw shadowed in stubble, wearing khakis and a white tank top.

He sees us, the guards with the guns, Apollo standing tall and hawk-like in his custom suit which probably cost more than what the man makes in a month, me in my meet-with-investors power suit and wedge heels. I suddenly see us as he might—reeking of money, power, and influence.

To his credit, Georgios holds his position without flinching, merely eying our approach with an air of proud anger. He gestures at the lead guard with a wave of a thick, hairy hand. “Who is this? You said you and your girlfriend.”

Apollo steps forward. “They are our security.”

“Why would you need this kind of security? You can’t protect your woman yourself?”

“It’s complicated,” Apollo answers. “Can we come in?”

Georgios flips a hand derisively and disappears into the apartment. “Fine. But the men with the guns stay outside.”

The lead guard meets my eyes and shakes his head—that’s not going to work. They follow us in, and Georgios turns and sees them, eyes narrowing.

“Outside, I said.”

Apollo holds up his hands. “We take our security very seriously, and they take their jobs very seriously. If you want them to wait outside, then they’ll

have to do a quick search.”

“What, you think the bastards who took my Yelena are hiding in here?” He waves a hand at his little apartment. “I am playacting, you think?”

“You have no clue the kind of people we’re dealing with, Georgios,” Apollo says. “That is entirely possible.”

“I have no clue what is happening at all, you bastard!” Georgios shouts, his nerves fraying. “My daughter goes to school, like every day. But this day, she is at school, and then poof, she is gone—right from playground. No one calls us. No one tells us what they want. We have no money. We have nothing. What do they want? Hmm?”

“Me.” Apollo lifts his chin. “They want me.”

“I don’t know you. Why take my little girl if I don’t even know you? You said your name was Karahalios. I know that name. In Athens where I grew up, everyone knows that name. What is a Karahalios to me, tell me that.”

“My father was Dmitri Konstantin. My mother was Gina Karahalios, and my grandfather was Vitaly Karahalios.”

Georgios’s eyes widen, and he crosses himself, dry-spits to one side. “The news reports...all members of the Karahalios family are dead. It was confirmed.”

“I was a secret. My grandfather didn’t know I existed. No one except my mother did.”

Georgios crosses himself again. “Dmitri, my uncle, he vanished when I was young. He was a drunk, always vanishing for a few days. But then one time, he never showed up again. We always thought he had fallen into the sea or something.”

Apollo shoves his hands in his pockets. “He was...acquired, let’s say, by my mother. As a sort of...companion. It resulted in me, rather unexpectedly for my mother who had thought herself barren from a childhood illness. I never knew Dmitri. Never saw him. He died of alcoholism before I was three.”

“So you are my cousin. How am I just now meeting you?”

“I didn’t discover the truth of who my mother and grandfather were until I was in my twenties, and it wasn’t until recently that I set about to find out who my father’s family was.” Apollo pauses, eyes roaming the dingy, dark apartment.

A threadbare couch faces a small TV with a low glass-topped coffee table between; a galley kitchen in the back right corner opens to a small area just

big enough for a four-seat table; a short hallway between the kitchen and the living room leads to two bedrooms and a bathroom.

“A genetic investigator figured out who my father was, and in turn that I have a rather large extended family, both here in the States and back in Greece. But...I stayed away from you all. For your own good.”

“For our own good, hmm? Didn’t help much, I think.”

“I guess not.” Apollo makes a sound that’s somewhere between a groan and a sigh. “I was involved in the same business my mother and grandfather were, for a time. Then, I met her.” He gestures at me. “She changed me, and I left all that behind. I thought I’d...taken care of anyone who might see me as an enemy, but it seems I was mistaken. Why they chose your daughter as leverage, I don’t know. But it’s about me. My past. My mistakes.” He meets Georgios’s eyes. “And I am sorry, cousin. You deserve better. Please rest assured, I will not rest until your daughter is safe at home with you again.”

“What are you going to do? How will you get her back?”

“They sent me a...threat, and a demand. I think they want to exchange me for her. Which I will do. And in so doing, once your daughter is safe, me and my friends—” he gestures at the armed guards standing with their backs to the door, “will handle the bastards who did this.”

“What was the threat?”

Apollo shakes his head. “Not important. What matters is that they want me and are using her to get me. It’s weak, vile, and pathetic, and it will not go well for them.”

Georgios glances at me. “Where do you fit in? I know you, I think. I have seen your face.”

“I’m Corinna Roth.”

His eyes go to the most recent *People* magazine on his coffee table: they recently did a piece on me, as one of the youngest and most influential CEOs in the world, with a profile on the work Valkyrie is doing. That article is the centerpiece of the issue, with my photograph on the cover.

He looks from me to the magazine and back. “Oh. But...why are you here? To support him?”

“That, yes.” I smile at him. “But I’m also connected to a security firm which specializes in abduction cases exactly like this. I know it’s frightening and scary, but I can promise you, there is no one in the whole world better at getting kidnapping victims back to their families unharmed.”

“I cannot pay.” He gestures at the apartment. “My wife had to go to work

so we don't get evicted, but I have to stay here in case the people who took our Yelena try to contact us. We barely make it, okay? I cannot pay for your services."

Apollo shakes his head. "We aren't asking you to, Georgios." He withdraws his cell phone from his suit coat's inside pocket and dials a number. "In fact..." he trails off as someone on the other end answers. "Michael, yes, I need you to do something for me. Are you ready?" He rattles off the address of this apartment building. "Purchase the building. Cash. Whatever it takes, I don't care. Once that's done, see that the residents of number three-ten never pay rent again." He glances at Georgios. "Address of your bodega?"

Georgios doesn't seem to be quite following what's happening and recites the address in a daze. "What...what are you doing?"

Apollo ignores the question. "Second, purchase this building," here, he gives the address, "and see that the bodega rented to Georgios Konstantin is...wait. Scrap that. Buy the building but we're giving it to Georgios Konstantin. I know, I know. Assign someone to help him navigate the ownership, taking rents, managing the money, building a portfolio, all that. Yes, Dante is perfect—he's as old-world as my cousin is. Good. Get it done and let me know when—wait, no, I'll be out of contact. Let Corinna know, okay? Great. Thanks, Michael."

Georgios, who had been standing near the kitchen this whole time, sits down heavily at the nearby table. "What did you just do?"

"Set you up." Apollo replaces the phone in his pocket. "I don't know you very well, but I suspect you would not take a handout. So instead, I'm giving you a little bit of a step up. In a few days, I'll own this apartment building, and you'll never pay rent again. In that same time span, you'll come to own the whole building your bodega is in. It's a valuable piece of real estate, and owning it will set you up for success, okay? You own it. You get the rents from all the residents and businesses. You'll have someone helping you figure out how the fuck to go from owning a bodega to owning real estate, because cousin, it's not simple. But if you can move here with next to nothing and end up owning a bodega? You can do this. Build up some cash. Invest in another property. Find something, fix it up, sell it. Or shit, once you own the building, turn around sell it and figure out your own idea of what to do with the money. I'm not gonna tell you what to do. It's not charity. It's just an apology. Your daughter is missing and it's my fucking fault. It's the

least I can do.”

“That’s your idea of I’m sorry? Buy a couple buildings?” It’s hard to tell if he’s amused, perplexed, angry, or all three.

A shrug from Apollo. “If I had offered you a check for...oh, I don’t know. A million dollars? Would you have taken it?”

Georgios snorts. “It won’t bring back my daughter. And a million dollars? It’s a lot of money. It would make my life easier. But would it end all of my troubles? Not in New York. This place is damn expensive. No one told me this, when I came.”

“Thus what I did. No more rent to pay. Income far above what you’d ever reach on your own, no matter what you did. Or maybe, if you make smart moves, you could get there in ten, twenty years. This jumps you ahead. But to really make a go of it, you will have to work, still.” Apollo checks his watch, an exquisite luxury timepiece meant more for fashion than function. “I have to go. I’m meant to go meet my enemies and I dare not be late.” He holds his cousin’s eyes. “I will return your daughter to you. Maybe after all this over... we could meet again, under better circumstances.”

Georgios rises and goes to Apollo. “You really did this thing? With the buildings? It wasn’t a joke?”

“Ask Corinna—I do not suffer from a particularly acute sense of humor.”

I snicker. “He doesn’t have one at all, is what he means.”

“I own a whole building?”

Apollo moves a shoulder. “Not yet, but soon. A man named Michael Naismith will knock on your door—he is my trusted assistant—and he’ll have you sign a lot of paperwork. He’ll explain it all to you. Another man named Dante Al-Rashid will be with him, and he will give you a crash course on how to not fuck up the whole thing. He knows money, he knows investments, he knows New York, and like you, he’s an immigrant who started here with nothing. Listen to him. Do what he says. Ask questions, no matter how trivial or stupid they may seem.”

Georgios nods, but his gaze is distant and thoughtful. “You are going to trade yourself to these people to get my daughter back?”

“Yes.”

“May God be with you, in that case.”

Apollo merely nods, turns for the door. Stops with his hand on the knob. “I’m sorry for this, Georgios. My problems shouldn’t be yours, and certainly not your innocent little girl’s. I’m doing everything I can to rectify it.”

Georgios is clearly struggling for a response. He rubs the back of his neck, huffs a rough sigh. “I won’t say it’s okay. It’s not. But...just get my daughter back. That’s all.”

“I will.”

“What if they call me?” he asks.

Apollo shakes his head as he opens the door and strides out. “They won’t. It’s not about you. You’re just an unfortunate pawn in a very shitty game.”

“Will they hurt her?” His voice is low, on the verge of shaking.

Apollo stands in the dim, dingy hallway outside the apartment. Shrugs, head hanging. “I hope not. I’m cooperating as fully as I can. They are not good people, though. So I...I can’t promise.”

Georgios growls. “If they do hurt her, I will not forgive you.”

“Me either.”

A gruff nod from Georgios. “As long as we are clear.”

I follow Apollo out, preceded and trailed by the guards. Back into the SUV, wreathed in a tense silence.

As we head out of Brooklyn, I take his hand and thread our fingers together. “That was an amazing thing you did for him.”

He shakes his head. “No. It wasn’t. It was a bare minimum. His fucking daughter was kidnapped because of me. Giving him a building worth a few million dollars is...it doesn’t touch my debt to the man.”

I snort. “A few million? Apollo. That building has to be worth—”

He cuts in over me. “The amount is irrelevant. I can afford it. I’ll sell off a business to recoup the cash loss if I have to. I don’t care.” He puts his head in his hands, covering his face. “I cannot have that child’s blood on my hands, Rin. *Cannot.*”

I wrap my arm over his shoulders, draw him against me. “We’ll get her back, my love.”

He’s silent as we head for Queens.

“Ten minutes out, sir, ma’am,” the driver says. “We will halt out of view of the meeting site and Mr. Dimitriou will continue on alone on foot from there.”

Neither of us answer—no answer is required.

My heart is pounding, and aching.

We make a series of turns that take us farther and farther from the main roads and into a no-man’s-land of abandoned warehouses and the shells of old buildings, a maze of crumbling brick and shattered glass.

The SUV halts with a crunching of tires.

“Here, sir.” The driver points ahead. “It’s the building you see ahead of us, the tall one with the rim of windows near the top. This is as close as we dare get—thermal imaging shows the approach from here is monitored by a large number of armed men.”

Apollo heaves a sigh and unbuckles. His hands are shaking as he exits the vehicle, straightening and adjusting the cuffs of his suit jacket. I get out with him. He’s staring at the building, shoulders hunched, tensed.

I wrap my arms around him from behind and rest my cheek against his shoulder blades. “It’s going to be okay, Apollo.”

He snorts softly. “I should be telling you that.”

“It’s okay to be afraid, Apollo. It doesn’t make you any less.”

He turns in my arms, gathers me in his and cups my jaw. “It’s not fear, darling. It’s rage.” His dark eyes flash, and I see a hint of murderous venom, quickly hidden as the love he still cannot quite voice bubbles up in his gaze. “If there is fear, it’s not for me. It’s for her. Fear that I’ll let my emotions get the best of me before she’s safe.”

I lift up and touch my lips to his. “We will get her back safely.”

His eyes probe me. “You cannot risk yourself, Corinna. Promise me.”

I shake my head. “I won’t do that. Can’t and won’t, Apollo. If I deem it necessary to risk myself for your sake, or Yelena’s, I will do so. And it will be my choice.”

“Not for me,” he growls.

“Yes, for you,” I argue. I smile up at him. “I love you. I would do anything for you.”

He tenses. “Corinna, I...”

I touch his lips with my fingers. “I know.”

He cradles the back of my neck with fierce fingers, and his lips crash onto mine, harsh and demanding, yet soft and thrilling. I writhe into him, feel his hard body rippling against mine, feel his hands clutch my hair, my buttocks. “Corinna...”

I laugh into his kiss. “You love me, Apollo. I know you do. I know it and I don’t doubt it. Not for a second. You don’t have to kiss me like that to prove it.” I bite his lower lip. “But please, continue. I don’t need it, but I like it.”

He heaves me into his arms, my legs going around his waist, arms around his neck, and he presses me up against the rear passenger window of the

SUV, kissing me until I'm breathless, kissing me like he kissed me in the tower back in Spain, what feels like a lifetime ago.

With a growl, he abruptly breaks the kiss and sets me on my feet. "Better go, or I'll show you how I feel, right here, right now."

"If I was more of an exhibitionist, I'd tell you to go for it," I murmur.

"You deserve more than that, though." He traces the line of my jaw from earlobe to chin. "So much more."

"How much more?" I ask, teasing him. "What do I deserve, Apollo?"

He swallows hard. "Love." It's a whisper. "Mine."

"I have it, don't I?" I ask, whispering back. "Don't I have your love, Apollo?"

"You do." A breath. "Such as it is."

"Such as it is...is wonderful, Apollo."

"Feels broken, sometimes. Since I seem to be unable to make myself say it."

"This is a conversation for when all this is over." I take his hands, thread both of my hands into both of his. "You go, now. You don't think about me, you don't worry about me. You focus on doing what you have to do." I hold his gaze. "Whatever it takes. You get that girl to safety, and you get yourself to safety. Back to me. No matter what. Okay?"

"No matter what."

I kiss him, once more, fiercely, and then I back out of his arms. "No matter what."

It's a stand-in. Three words which, in this moment, from Apollo, mean something else entirely, three totally different words. I know what he means. I hear it. I see it in his eyes.

He takes his phone from his hip pocket. His wallet. Removes his watch, a gift from me, a vintage Tissot with a message engraved on the back: *forever yours, for all of time—CAR.*

I put the watch on my own wrist, the supple, age-worn leather band on its tightest setting still loose around my wrist; the metal backing, still warm from his skin, bumps against the back of my hand. His phone and wallet go into my purse. He backs away from me—if he doesn't simply go, he'll keep finding excuses to hold me, to kiss me. My lips burn from his mouth, tingle with the desire to feel his kiss on them still.

To make it easier for him, I open the door of the vehicle and get in, breaking our line of sight by closing the door behind me. The tinted, mirrored

window occludes me from his view, even as I can see him, still. He stands a moment, and then I watch him gather himself. His shoulders go up and back, his chin lifts. He shakes his hands as if to shake the nerves away, and I see his eyes go cold, then icy. Then murderous.

He turns, strides away.

I watch until he slips out of view behind a turn in the alley.

I choke back a sob, stiffen my spine. If he can do this, I can too.

KARAHALIOS REBORN

My steps are slow. Measured. Hands in pockets. Shoulders back. Give nothing away. I feel eyes. See flashes of movement in shattered windows.

I am hyperaware of the kernel of rice under my skin, under my hairline in the back of my head.

The building which is my destination rises ahead of me. I feel Corinna behind me. Her strength is my strength—I draw from it. Focus on the memory of her arms, her lips.

In my suit coat pocket is the photograph of Yelena, the edges square against the sleek drape of the expensive material on my frame. The reminder of why I do this.

If not for her, they would all be dead already, cost and consequence be damned.

But there is Yelena, a little girl I have never met, alone and confused and frightened. There are her parents, innocent pawns caught up in this shit of mine.

I eliminated all of my enemies, or so I thought.

Pyotr? Spaulding? I think Spaulding. Pyotr is ham-handed, too much an aficionado of prostitutes to bother trafficking in little girls. Pyotr likes cigars and vodka and naked women. Spaulding, on the other hand? He gets off on pain and fear, this much I know from personal observation. I could not prove anything, could not pin anything on him directly. I didn't need any new enemies, either, so I left him alone. Clearly, I miscalculated. This scheme has his imprint on it. It smells of him.

If it had been Pyotr, I would have found Pyotr in my living room,

smoking a cigar and waiting to look at my eyes as he shot me—he's not one to waste time with theatrics. He just kills you and moves on.

I appreciate that about him.

This is Spaulding. And he will regret this.

I return my focus to my surroundings. The watchers are not hidden, anymore. A man paces on a rooftop to my left, a rifle aiming in my general direction. Another leans against a corner, rifle dangling from a shoulder, watching me lazily. A third stands in the doorway, seemingly unarmed.

I approach him. "I'm here. Where is she?"

His grin is unkind. "Not so simple, hey?" He gestures at me, and two men pat me down, finding me clear. "You come." He enters the warehouse.

"Where is she?" I demand, not moving.

"Not here. You think she is here? You think we are so stupid as you, hey?" He's tall, with hunched, bunched shoulders, a thick black beard, heavy eyebrows and cruel dark eyes. "First, you come."

"Where?"

He pulls a gun and puts it under my chin, the barrel cold and hard. "No more questions. Or you die. And you die, she dies. Pretty easy, hey?"

"Me for her. That was the trade."

He grins. "Trade? Who tells you this is a trade?"

I don't let him see anything on my face. "Let her go."

He gestures around—the warehouse is a massive, echoing, empty place. Drips echo, *plink-plink-plink*—weak light filters in from the broken windows up near the roofline; there is a catwalk near the ceiling, several men pacing along it in various places. "You see any girl? I do not. Hey? Your friends out there, they are watch us. Did they see us bring this girl here? No, they did not. You want the girl?" He lashes out with a fist, the barrel catching my forehead and cutting me open, blood immediately sluicing down my face. "Shut up and do as you are said to do."

I keep silent, let the blood run. Ignore the sting and the ache. I catalog his face. The scar on his eyebrow, the scorpion tattooed on his throat under his Adam's apple. He's a no one. A lackey. But he'll be the first to die, when the killing starts.

I've tried my damndest to leave the Karahalios in me behind. I never liked killing people, even if they deserved it. But this time around...

I think the Karahalios in me will revel when this asshole's blood stains the ground at my feet.

I just hope the demon will go back in his box, when it's all over.
Because it's time to let him out.

THE VANISHER

Uncle Harry's mobile command center is a tractor trailer parked in an alley a mile or so away from the meeting site, flashers on, actors with dollies coming and going with prop boxes, pretending to unload goods from the false rear opening. Within, on the other side of the fake wall near the rear of the trailer, is a bank of computer monitors, a rack of automatic rifles and magazines, and an array of other gear and equipment I'm less familiar with. Lear Winter sits at the center of it all, wearing a microphone headset, fingers flying on at least three different keyboards—he's tall and lean, with sandy blond hair going gray at the temples and pale green eyes, wearing dark-rimmed glasses reflecting distorted images from the various monitors.

"Anselm, report," Lear says.

I hear Anselm's voice from a small speaker in the ceiling. "I count at least a dozen tangos. No sign of the girl. I don't see any automobiles, either. So far, I think we have made the correct play."

"Copy," Lear says. "Colin. Report."

A young male voice, then. "I match his count. Twelve, at least. All over the place, too—covering all approaches. No gaps in coverage identified. Infiltration is not advised at this time, Command."

"Copy that," Lear says again. "Stand by."

Harris is beside me. "You have him, Lear?"

One hand continues to move on the keyboard, various readouts shifting as he taps and types. The other hand touches a screen, and a red dot. "This is him."

I watch with my heart in my throat. "Can that tell us if he's...if he gets hurt?"

“Negative,” Lear says. “Geophysical location only.” A pause. “Although...hold on, I might be able to...”

Lear goes silent and turns to a different screen and a different keyboard, the keys clicking and clacking in a rapid-fire staccato. A black screen pops up, white text filling it, shifting as he types.

“There *are* sensors in that thing,” Lear says. “Used for monitoring axial movement, mostly. But I might be able to tweak the programming...” he trails off, muttering under his breath.

He abruptly turns away back to the screen with the marker dot, a satellite view showing the maze of warehouses. A new array of information pops up—numbers, mostly, with letters which seem to indicate, to Lear at least, what the numbers mean.

“I have bio readout,” Lear announces. “Heart rate is high, but within normal range. Body temp normal. Damn, I’m good. I even have ground speed—currently, zero, meaning he’s standing still.”

“Great work, Lear,” Uncle Harry says. “Do we have any kind of visual on the building?”

“Thermal,” Lear answers, bringing our attention to a side screen—a field of blue, with pink and orange-red splotches. Some of the splotches are moving. He taps one splotch, one of the unmoving ones. “This is our boy, here.”

“No satellite?”

“Not that it would do any good.” He holds up a finger. “Aha, I do have something. Anselm, you copy?”

“Ja, of course,” comes Anselm’s voice.

“We’re going to try out the new feature on your scope.”

“Ah, ja. A moment, please.” A brief pause. “Pairing. You have it?”

A tap, a click, and then one of the monitors flashes black, flickers, and then we have a duplication of the view through Anselm’s scope, targeting reticle included. It’s trained on the doorway of the building, but from a great distance. The building itself is a small box in the scope’s field. As we watch, the view suddenly jumps, once, twice, and then the building is much larger.

“That is better, I think, ja?” Anselm’s voice. The reticle pauses over a small patch of shadows in the doorway. “This is the main honcho. The one in charge of this shitshow, locally. I saw his face for a moment when Apollo entered. I itch to put a bullet in him. I have seen him before, through my scope and have nearly done so. He is no good of a person, involved in many

bad things. Alas, I must wait yet, I think.”

“Name?” Lear asks.

“Uri Djakovic.”

Lear taps the name into a screen, and a face pops up. Ugly, scarred, scowling, a mug shot from some arrest or warrant. Information pops up beside the face, a litany of nasty shit he’s been responsible for.

“Known associates?” Harris demands.

“Hmmm. Nobody I’ve ever heard of,” Lear answers, running a finger down the list of names. “Seems like mostly local lowlifes. His biggest hit was three years ago. Mossad nailed him for an arms deal in the Hamas, but couldn’t put hands on him. It was a fuckin’ bloodbath, it looks like. They want his ass but bad, boss.”

“Ja, that is Uri,” Anselm says. “Arms dealing, drugs. Murder for hire. He will do anything, if you pay him enough. He is muscle for many unpleasant characters in the world of European crime. This is the first time I have heard of him crossing the pond, however. Usually he stays in his own backyard.”

Lear is still scanning the very long list of known associates. “Wait, I know this name—Sven Rasmussen.” A pause, as Lear racks his memory. “Why do I know that name? Anselm? It ring a bell for you?”

“Sven Rasmussen? It does. I cannot place it, though. Search it. Perhaps that will help.”

Lear is already typing. “On it. Okay. Yeah, so Rin, your boyfriend was right—I’d bet big money this is the work of Richard Spaulding. This guy down there, Djakovic, he’s done work for Sven Rasmussen, who is generally accepted to be the right-hand man for none other than Richard Spaulding. I can’t verify the connection, not without evidence, but it all links.” Some more typing, a pause, and a different mug shot pops up, of a Slavic man with a hawk nose and frightening, pale blue eyes. “Oh, and guess what? Mr. Rasmussen was just released after five years of a ten-year sentence in a Polish prison for attempting to murder a judge. And why, you ask, would Rasmussen do five years in a Polish prison? Why try to murder a judge? Well, that judge put out a warrant for...you guessed it, Mr. Spaulding, who is wanted in Poland for sex trafficking, extortion, money laundering, a whole bunch of stuff. I guess Spaulding didn’t like that and sicced his dog Rasmussen on him. Only, the judge is a former Special Forces operator turned lawyer and then judge, and foiled the murder attempt. Got away with his life, but Rasmussen fled...only to be picked up at the border. His release

was kept quiet, and no one is quite sure how it was approved in the first place. Suspicion is someone was paid off, threatened, or both.”

“This sounds like a Ludlum novel,” Harris says.

“Sure does.” Lear cackles. “And bingo! Guess who’s *also* wanted in Poland in connection with that same attempted murder plot?”

“Djakovic?” I ask.

“Got it in one. He was ID’d as the getaway driver. Local CCTV cameras picked him up.”

Harris grunts. “Spaulding has enough pull to get his henchman out of prison after attempting to murder a *judge*?”

“Seems so. Interpol actually just reported his last whereabouts were aboard a train headed for the west coast of Spain.”

“Spaulding’s whereabouts, or Rasmussen’s?” I ask.

“Rasmussen, sorry. Spaulding’s location is unknown.”

“But if we can find Rasmussen...” Harris prompts.

“We find Spaulding,” Lear confirms. “And if we can find Spaulding, we might have Yelena.”

Harris straightens, arms crossing, staring at the mug shot still pulled up on the screen. “Anselm, you and Duke head to Europe. Find Rasmussen. Do some recon, when you do. See if we can get a location for the girl. We’ll put in two full-fire teams for the snatch itself, when it comes. But for now, we just need intel, real-time, boots-on-the-ground, eyes-on-the-target intel.”

“Ja, understood,” Anselm says.

“Duke is standing by with the jet, so get what you need and head for the airfield.” Harris addresses the ceiling. “Colin, you copy?”

“Affirmative.”

“Still have eyes on?”

“No one in, no one out, so far,” Colin reports. “Not sure what’s going on. Okay, wait—there’s a van approaching. Yes, it’s turning in. Stand by.”

“Mark is on the move,” Lear reports. “Heart rate picking up. Walking. There’s the van—” he touches the thermal imaging screen, indicating the van as it arrives. “And there’s our mark, getting in. One, two, three, four with him, not including the driver.”

“Colin, keep eyes on the van,” Harris commands.

“Copy.”

“Lear, are you tracking the van?”

Lear just snorts. “Not my first day on the job, boss.” His fingers fly, tap.

“It’s inside the warehouse now,” Colin says. “Moving through it, looks like. Exiting the other side—left turn. About to lose visual.”

“Got it. Northbound.” A pause. “Heading for the tunnel.”

“The tunnel? To Manhattan? What sense does that make?” Harris asks; it’s rhetorical.

“Dunno, but—yeah, they’re in the tunnel. Thermal imaging lost. Tracker is online.” A pause. “Shit. They’ve stopped.”

“In the tunnel?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Lear mutters. “What are you fuckers up to?” He brings up a different view, this a satellite view of the tunnel exit in Manhattan, and another of the exit in Queens. “Looks like all traffic has stopped. Accident maybe. Don’t have a scanner queued up or I’d know.”

Abruptly, the red dot vanishes.

My heart stops. “What—what happened? Where’d he go?”

“Shit. Fuck, shit, fuck.” Lear taps the keyboard a few times, more in frustration than an attempt to do anything. “They wiped it.”

“They wiped *it*, though, not him?” I ask, swallowing hard.

“Yeah, if it was him, his biometrics would have reflected that—dropping heart rate, body temp. They scanned him and wiped it.” He looks at me, his pale eyes apologetic. “We knew it was a risk, honey. But don’t worry, we’ll find him.”

“Colin, head for the tunnel,” Harris commands. Find out what’s going on in there.”

“Copy, sir. Heading for the tunnel.”

A few minutes later, we hear the buzzsaw of a dirt bike motor zipping past us. Lear is intently watching the screens—traffic into and out of the tunnel is still at a standstill. Not an unremarkable occurrence, all things considered.

More minutes of waiting, of nothing at all. Then Colin’s voice. “Eastbound traffic is stopped for...looks like construction? Stand by.” We can still hear him, though, his mic still keyed. “Suspicious. They’ve got the high-vis vests and helmets, pylons, and barricades around a spot in the road, but from what I can tell, they’re not actually doing anything. This is a setup, if you ask me. A delay, so they can—” he stops, interrupts himself. “They’re moving things out of the way. Yeah, shit, confirmed, I can see an earpiece in the one guy’s ear. I’m behind the van a few cars...*shit*, the fake construction guys are looking right at me.”

“Hold your position, Colin,” Harris says, his voice calm. “Do anything abrupt and you’ll confirm their suspicions. Right now, you’re just a guy on a motorcycle.”

“They’re strapped, boss,” Colin says, his voice rising. “One’s got an HK.”

“Hold position, Colin,” Harris says. “Do nothing. *Nothing.*”

“A Range Rover just pulled up next to the van. Now the guys are milling around, obscuring things. Lots of movement, at least half a dozen fake construction dudes. Someone’s getting out of the van—the scarred guy from the warehouse. Something’s up, boss. He’s getting into the Range Rover... the fake road work is cleared up, traffic is moving. The van is moving, too. Range Rover is gone.”

“Stay with the van,” Harris says.

“Copy.” A silence, then, nerve-wracking. Many long minutes later, his voice comes up again. “They’re pulling into a paid parking lot...hold on, gotta pull over.” Another pause. “They’re leaving the van—I count three. Flagging a cab. Stay with the van or stay with the people?”

“Van.” A pause. “Wait. Three?”

Lear rubs his forehead. “I think we’ve been tricked, boss. Driver, Apollo, and four guards—should be six bodies total. Only Djakovic got out in the tunnel, and then somehow only three got out of the van.”

“They got a cab and they’re gone. Approaching the van.” Muffled sounds, from Colin’s end of the connection. “I got no fuckin’ clue what happened, boss. This van is empty. Looks...I dunno, normal.”

“Check for fake floors or something.”

“Nothing. Doors, floors, windows, all normal. It’s just a van. But where’d Apollo go? Where’d the other two dudes go?”

My hands press against my mouth. I’m shaking. “Where is he, Uncle Harry?”

No answer. Or not to me, at any rate. “Shit.” Harris rubs his face with both hands. “The Range Rover. Or the tunnel. One of the two.” He frowns, leans over Lear again. “Wait. Check the warehouse with thermal imaging.”

A pause as Lear complies. “Nothing. Everybody is gone. What’s up?”

“I don’t know,” Uncle Harry says. “I just had a thought—what if he never left the warehouse? That’s the simplest explanation.”

Lear hums thoughtfully. “You aren’t wrong. Let me...” the thermal imaging screen jumps, zooming outward to take in a larger section of the

area. “Bingo. There must be a connection between the warehouses, an underground supply tunnel or something. Because look—three bodies here, in this warehouse across the street.”

He trains a satellite on the warehouse, just as three bodies exit the building—each dressed identically in jeans and a black top, black hat. Indistinguishable. Three identical white sedans wait in a line, one individual getting into a car each.

They pull away, and scatter in three different directions.

“Shit.” Harris turns away. “One of those was him.”

“I can’t follow all three. Plus the Range Rover, plus the three in the van. Could have been any of them.” Lear tugs his headset off. “This was a slick operation, boss. Lots of moving parts, well planned, well executed. They knew our basic capabilities and took them into account.”

Harris finally looks at me. “We’ll find him, honey. I promise.”

“How?” I ask, my voice breaking. “And what will happen to him in the meantime?”

He shakes his head. “Rasmussen is our best bet. Lear—you still have the Range Rover?”

“Negative. We were tracking the van, not the Rover.”

“I find it hard to believe Spaulding or whoever is behind this is planning to carry out the rest of the operation here in the US,” Harris responds. “Watch all flights out of the US from the East Coast to Europe, public and private.”

I make a decision—the man I love is out there. I have to do something—anything. “Uncle Harry?”

He eyes me, but I can tell he’s thinking and only somewhat focused on me. “I’m going with Anselm.”

This shakes him from his thoughts. “You’re what?”

“I’m going with Anselm and Duke to Europe.”

“No, you aren’t.” He pulls out his phone, preparing to call my father, I would assume.

I lift my chin. “I’m an adult, Harris. Neither you nor my father can stop me. I’m going. We don’t know where Apollo is, now. We can’t track him, and we don’t know for sure where they’re taking him, or what they even want—although I have to assume it’s not anything pleasant. Which means our only hope is to get ahead of them and figure out where they could be going. And you said the last lead anyone had on Rasmussen was Spain. Therefore, I am going to Spain. And I will do whatever I have to do to find Apollo.”

My uncle eyes me steadily, thoughtfully. “I don’t like it. Your father will like it even less. It’s not smart, honey. You need to let us do what we do best.”

“You want me to just sit around and do nothing?”

“Not nothing. Wait for us to do our jobs: get Apollo back, and get Yelena back. We can and we will, I promise.”

“Fine.” I hook my purse over my shoulder and stomp angrily, determinedly for the exit, heels clicking noisily.

Harris’s hand latches onto my arm. “Where do you think you’re going?”

I yank my arm out of his grip. “I’ll go on my own, then. Start asking questions, see if I can find this Rasmussen guy on my own.”

“You’ll be dead within an hour of asking your first question, Corinna. Men like Rasmussen and Spaulding don’t like people asking questions about them. Especially not rich American girls.”

“And that will be on you. I can go on my own, or I can go with Anselm and Duke.” I meet his gaze, not flinching or backing down, despite the cold anger in his green eyes. “And I’m not just some rich American girl, Harris—I’m Corinna fucking Roth, and that *means* something. I *will* find my man, and I won’t stop at anything until I do.”

Harris pivots away from me, scraping a hand over his scalp. “God fucking dammit, Rin.”

“If it was you missing, what do you think Auntie Lay-Lay would do? You think she’d just sit around on her ass?”

Harris laughs, bitterly, reluctantly. “Hell no.”

“She’d tear Europe apart with her bare hands until she found you.” I poke his chest. “And if it was Dad missing, what would Mom do? Oh, wait, we actually know the answer to that one—she went in guns blazing and literally started killing people until she found him and got him back. What did she do when I was missing? Hmm?” I tap my chest. “*That’s* the family I come from, Uncle Harris. And if you think I’m going to do any fucking less than what they would do, you don’t know me very well.”

Lear eyes me, then glances at Uncle Harris. “I think you know how this is gonna go, man. She comes from a line of strong, stubborn, badass women, Harris. Quit acting like you don’t know how this is gonna go.”

“Fuck!” Harris turns back to me. “Your dad will kill me.”

“My dad isn’t in charge of me, Harris. You let me handle my father. You worry about getting me on that plane to Europe with Anselm and Duke.”

He nods, sighing roughly. “Lear, inform Anselm and Duke that they have a third in their party. Rin, I’ll get you to the airfield myself, but you have to inform your father what you’re planning and make it clear it’s over my objections and that I’m only helping you to keep you safe.”

A few minutes later, I’m in a helicopter piloted by my uncle as it takes off from a nearby tower roof. I’m patched through via my headset to my father.

“Rin, Harris says you’re about to do something reckless.”

“I’m about to do what I have to do, Daddy.”

“Which is what?”

“Find Apollo. They took him, and I’m going to get him back before they decide to just kill him.”

“Rin, honey. This is what Harris and his men do—and they’re the best in the world at it.”

“And that’s the man I love, Daddy. I’m not going to just sit around and do nothing.”

“Rin, please. Listen to me—”

“You’re not going to change my mind.”

“What will you do? What do you hope to accomplish? Anselm, Duke, Lear—this is what they do for a living and they’ve done it for almost thirty years.”

“Which means I’ll be perfectly safe with them.” I sigh. “Look, Daddy, you’re just going to have to trust me. Because I’m doing what I feel is necessary, and I’ll do it no matter what you or anyone says. I’d much rather have the help of Duke and Anselm because as you pointed out, this is their job. But if you try to stop me or something, I’ll do it on my own.”

“Do *what*, Rin? What are you going to do that they can’t?”

“You’re missing the point. But I’ll follow the leads we have so far—Rasmussen, Djakovic, and Spaulding. I’m going to find them, and I’m going to get Apollo and Yelena back. And I’ll kill anyone who gets in my way.”

“Corinna, I know that sounds badass, but—”

“Do *not* patronize me. You raised me. I’m your daughter, Mom’s daughter. Look who else helped raise me—Uncle Harris and Aunt Layla, and all the other A1S guys. Is it any wonder this is my response? If I can at all help it, I’ll leave the killing to the professionals. But I’m not about to let *anyone* get in my way.” I pause, and my father is silent. “I love him, Daddy. He’s in trouble, and I have to help him.”

“Moving to Houston, running Valkyrie, and living with Apollo...I know

you're not a child anymore, Rinna, but going to Europe and trying to track down dangerous, internationally wanted criminals who are capable of and willing to murder federal judges? That's different. You're not trained for it, Rin. You don't know what you're doing."

"Did Mom know what she was doing? Did Auntie Layla? Did Temple, Lola, Colbie, or Selah know what they were doing? Obviously Cuddy is different. But the others, before everything happened to them, were they trained?"

"That was different, Rin."

"The hell it is!" I shout. "I wasn't calling to ask your permission anyway. I was informing you."

"I could have them take you somewhere and keep you safe till this is resolved."

"You could," I say, making my voice calm. "And if you did, I'd never speak to you again." I pause for effect. "And if you think that's an idle threat, remember the daughter you raised, the person I am, and ask yourself if you raised me to make idle threats."

A sigh, more of a frustrated growl than anything. "I know you want to help. I know you're scared for his life. I just...Rin, I thought I'd lost you once, when Apollo kidnapped you. I can't go through that again."

"I'll stay with the guys at all times, and I know to obey without question if shit starts to go down. I'll try to touch base with you now and again so you know I'm okay. But I cannot and will not sit idly by while the man I love is in danger."

"I have to say it one last time, honey—I really, really wish you would leave this to your uncle and the professionals. They *will* get him back, alive, and unhurt. If anyone can, they can."

"And if I can run Valkyrie, I can do this—I can contribute. Do you know any other twenty-one-year-olds running multibillion-dollar companies? No, you don't. There's just me." I strengthen my voice, hearing the truth in my words as I speak them, and feeling my confidence soar. "I got kidnapped by a reclusive, dangerous billionaire and came out on top. I walked away from someone I knew I was in love with, because I knew it was the only way forward. I've gotten Valkyrie off the ground. We have rockets in space—and *I* did that, all of it. On my own. Not to mention, compared to people like Cain and Apollo's grandfather, this Spaulding character is small-time. He's peanuts. He made a huge mistake tangling with us, and he's about to find that

out the hard way.”

“Your mother and I raised one hell of a strong woman, didn’t we?”

“You sure did. And now you have to trust me.” I soften my voice. “Plus, you trust Anselm and Duke, right? I’ll be with them.”

A long groan of resignation. “No unnecessary risks. Listen to them. Think each move through a dozen times before you act. And most of all, if it comes to it, god forbid, and you find yourself faced with the decision to pull the trigger, you can’t hesitate. But be absolutely sure before you do, because that’s not something you can take back.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“Love you too, Rinna. Be safe, *please*.”

“I will.” I glance forward at Harris, who taps his wrist, and then points at the ground. “We’re at the airfield now, so I have to go.”

“Stay in contact.”

“I will as I can.”

“Bye, honey.”

“Bye, Daddy.” I hear the click as the line goes dead.

My stomach lurches as Harris flares the helo a few feet above the ground, and then we’re touching down.

Harris idles the helo, looking back at me as he does so. “Not too late, Rin.”

“It was too late the moment Apollo got out of the car, Uncle Harris, and you and I both know it.”

He nods. “Nothing to say that hasn’t been said, so...good luck and be safe.”

“The rest of you are working from here, right?”

“Of course. And the moment we find something actionable, we’ll move on it. You three are the initial recon. The tip of the spear, if you will.” He holds my gaze. “You’re going in as an honorary member of A1S, and as such, I expect you to behave like one. Meaning, Anselm and Duke are in charge and you’re the new guy. Don’t be rash or impulsive, and don’t let your emotions goad you into mistakes.”

“I thought you said there wasn’t anything to say that hadn’t been said?” I ask, smirking.

He arches an eyebrow at me. “Don’t sass me, child. You want to run with the big dogs, I’ll treat you like one.”

“Fair enough.”

He reaches into a pocket and produces a small, sleek phone. "Satellite phone. It's encrypted end to end and has numbers for everyone you need to contact programmed into it. It's the latest and greatest in secure communications technology."

I accept it, examine it, pocket it. "Thanks, Uncle Harry."

"Thank me when you come back alive."

I recognize his flat, cold delivery: he's upset with me, and worried about me, and deflecting. "I'll be okay."

"Until you're not."

"Uncle Harris. Come on."

He sighs, softens ever so slightly. "Just be careful, Rin. You won't do Apollo or Yelena any good if you get hurt or killed."

I open the door and Duke is there, all six feet six inches of him, bulky and massive and intimidating, grabbing me by the waist and lifting me from the helo to the ground.

"Don't let anything happen to my niece, Duke!" Harris yells over the roar of the rotor.

Duke sends me into a jog away from the aircraft with a shove of his hand. "She's my niece too!" he yells back, and then jogs after me.

Up into the interior of a long, low, sleek jet, a supersonic private jet designed by my dad's firm. It can get from New York to London in under two and a half hours, and from New York to Paris in just under three. That's if you're worried about keeping your passengers comfortable. At max speed, it can make the trip in far less.

The jet is already idling, the engines whining, straining. Anselm is already aboard, buckled into one of the high-G chairs. Duke guides me to another and straps me in, tightening buckles and double-checking them.

Anselm's eyes meet mine. "I understand your decision to accompany us. I do not say it is the most responsible or logical one, but I do understand it."

Duke takes his own seat and fastens himself in. "She's a Roth. Once they get something into their heads, there's no stopping 'em." He glances at me. "This is gonna be a hell of a bumpy ride, darlin'. We got a lead on Rasmussen's whereabouts, so we gotta make best possible time across the pond."

"What's the lead?" I ask, excited.

"He was spotted crossing the border into Portugal. Disguised and with a fake passport, but Lear's recognition software made him. We just heard this

from Lear while you were landing.” Duke tugs the straps of his buckles, lets out a breath. “Shit, I hate high-G takeoffs.”

I frown as I feel us begin to taxi. “What do you mean? Why?”

Duke just grins at me. “Never done a full power takeoff in one of these have you?”

I shake my head. “Uncle Harris took me up in his vintage Phantom once when I was younger, but Mom made him go easy. I don’t think he touched the throttle any more than he had to.”

Duke shakes his head. “Well, this ain’t no Phantom, baby girl. This thing has more raw thrust than four Phantoms, and our boy Merritt up there is about to hit us with every bit of it. Hold on to your ass, doll, because you’re about to—”

He cuts off with a whoop as the whining of the engines picks up until it’s deafening, despite the sound-baffling technology built into the cabin. And then...

Pressure like I’ve never felt before in my life crushes me against the seat, which cocoons me—and I suddenly understand the design of the high-G seat, as it absorbs the pressure and keeps me from being smashed against an immovable force.

“Breathe!” Duke yells, grunting past clenched teeth.

I realize I’m not breathing, then, that I’m barely able to move, barely able to swallow or blink or breathe. The pressure is endless, enormous. I feel like I’m being pulverized into jelly. I snarl and grunt like a feral animal, forcing oxygen into my lungs, forced to work hard for each lungful.

The noise fades, and the pressure slowly lessens.

I’m dizzy.

Nauseous.

“Holy shit,” I mumble.

“High-G takeoffs, baby,” Duke says, and then groans. “Fuck me, I hate that.”

“Please remain buckled for the duration of the trip,” a voice from overhead says. “At this velocity, turbulence can be rather violent. We should touch down in Barcelona in...two hours and forty-five minutes.”

“What would Rasmussen be doing in Portugal?” I ask.

Anselm answers. “Passing through, most likely. Although, there have been rumors of Spaulding setting up operations in Morocco, now that the government of Czechia has made it clear they are not going to tolerate his

operations much longer.”

“So...he could be going to Morocco, or he could be going back into Central Europe? Seems like a convoluted route, going through Portugal via Spain.” I try to figure out the benefit of that.

Anselm withdraws a laptop from a compartment in the armrest of his seat. “Either he is trying to take a circuitous route to throw off suspicion, or he’s not going back to Central Europe. My best theory is that Spaulding suffered some detriment to his operations when Apollo and his compatriot went on the warpath. Human trafficking cells all over the globe felt the repercussions of that, and many who would have preferred to stay unknown found themselves in the global news cycle. I have searched news reports from that period and have found no specific mention of Spaulding, Rasmussen, or Djakovic, but there are reports of imprisoned traffickers refusing to put a name to their benefactor, their primary employer. Some merely referred to him as The Vanisher, or local dialectic versions of that name. Rather melodramatic a name, I should think. But this Vanisher specializes in making people, well, vanish. Primarily pretty young girls from otherwise safe little villages in the Baltic States and Northern Africa. But if you talk about him, he will make *you* vanish. Sounds like our friend Spaulding, ja? He likes to make an impression. He likes fear.”

“What a tool,” Duke grumbles, and then switches to a mocking voice. “The *Vanisher*. Wooo. Fuck-nugget.”

I snicker. “He’s a dangerous man, Uncle Duke. You shouldn’t mock.”

“Yeah, he’s dangerous, that’s why you mock him. You know who else is dangerous? Me, motherfucker. I’ll cut his goddamn thumbs off with a pair of nail clippers. And *then* I’ll start hurting him.” He’s seething. “Kidnap little girls, will you? Vanish innocent people? I don’t think so. I’m coming for you, motherfucker.”

“Calm yourself, Duke,” Anselm murmurs. “My larger point in all this is that what little could be gleaned about this Vanisher character is that he works out of Morocco, Egypt, and sometimes Albania. Which would track with Rasmussen leaving Poland, being seen in Spain and then Portugal. A boat from Lisbon could take him around Gibraltar and to any one of those places. And once he’s on a boat, avoiding border spottings becomes a far more simple task.”

“So, where do we go first?” I ask.

“Lisbon. I have people there keeping watch on the port.” Anselm taps

laptop keys. “And other people listening who might hear things regarding a sudden resurgence of the sex-trafficking trade, which I think is what we are facing. Spaulding is probably short on cash, and plans to try to get it out of Apollo, by virtue of threatening this innocent child, Yelena Konstantin.”

Duke snarls. “She’s a fuckin’ baby. What kind of a monster is this guy?”

Anselm’s voice is grave. “The stories I have been told would curdle even your stomach, my old friend. I know I have not slept well since I began digging into Mr. Richard Isaac Spaulding.”

Duke settles his head back against the seat. “Well...that makes this easier.”

I frown at him. “How so?”

“Means I don’t have to be polite about going after him.”

“Duke, we’re not going after Spaulding, we’re here to get Apollo and Yelena to safety.”

Duke’s eyes slide slowly open and fix on me. Normally, Uncle Duke is the nicest, funniest, most genial and playful man you’ll ever meet. Now, that man is gone.

In his place?

Someone I’ve never seen before. Dark, cold, and violent.

“Then you hitched your horse to the wrong fuckin’ wagon, sweetheart.” He closes his eyes. “We’ll get them back. And we’ll take down Spaulding in the process. And we won’t be polite about it.”

I look to Anselm, but his eyes are hooded, almost blank. “Don’t look to me, Corinna. I, too, will not tolerate the presence on this earth a man like Spaulding. Not for a moment longer than I must. I shall endeavor to end him, be it with a bullet or a blade, or my bare hands.” He returns to his computer. “The fact that he brought himself to our attention by kidnapping Yelena and now Apollo has merely hastened his death.”

I find myself wondering what exactly I’ve gotten myself into.

It doesn’t matter, though. I’ll do whatever it takes.

Stay alive, Apollo. We’re coming.

THE BAD MAN

Once they spirit me out of the warehouse, a hood is put over my head, occluding my vision. I know better than to yell or cause a ruckus; I'm worth more alive than dead, clearly, but they will not hesitate to beat me senseless, as to do so wouldn't negate my value. Also, to struggle now is pointless.

What follows is hours of something worse than boredom. Torture, where the instrument of pain is time. I cannot see, can barely hear past the hood. My hands are bound behind my back with thick, police-grade zip ties. The first section of my journey is in a vehicle. I know no more than that—long straight stretches at what feels like highway speeds, an exit, a turn, more highway. Hours of it. A stop, wherein I am helped roughly from the vehicle, allowed to stretch my legs—they untie me and allow me to urinate. Some unknown sense makes me feel like we're outside. No sounds—no traffic, no animals. An empty stretch of highway in the middle of nowhere, perhaps. I'm bound again and prodded aboard a vehicle again—a different one; the engine sounds different. My sense of spatial awareness tells me it's a different vehicle. No one speaks.

I can only sit and let my mind wander.

My childhood. My mother.

Her infrequent presence. I would wake up one morning, and there she would be. Dressed in a slinky dress that barely covered her ass, tall heels propping her inches off the ground, her massive tits nearly falling out of the skimpy, low-cut dresses she wore to the clubs. As a child, it was all I knew, her like that, the way she dressed. The way she seemed to always be unsteady on her feet. The way she smelled funny—sour.

She was coming from the clubs, I realize now, with the hindsight of an adult. I believe she owned one, or several. The nightclubs were a common front for my grandfather's and mother's operations—logically enough. A ton of cash flowed through them each day, allowing them to launder massive amounts of money. The locations provided easy access to storage for drugs and shipments of arms, and the employee turnover allowed them to push prostitutes and sex slaves through them—yes, in digging into the inner workings of the criminal empire that is my legacy, I did discover that my grandfather was a trafficker.

Makes me sick to my stomach, to think about. I wonder if my mother knew. I think it impossible that she didn't. But as a woman, how could she condone it? I cannot fathom.

Mother, though.

I wonder at her. There were times—few, albeit, and usually alcohol-induced—where she would show something like maternal affection. She'd return late at night or the small hours of the morning, wobbling, kick off her shoes. I could always hear her coming—the elevator which ran up to our penthouse had a distinctive rattle when it stopped at our floor, and it would always wake me up. I'd scurry out of my room, onto the couch, and turn on the TV; it never seemed to occur to her that a four or six or eight or ten-year-old should not be up watching television alone at four in the morning. She would collapse next to me on the couch, fumble in her little leather clutch purse—expensive ones, I now realize, Balenciaga, Valentino, Chanel, Birkin—and fish out a slim platinum case full of cigarettes, and a gold-plated Zippo with her initials in diamonds. She'd light it. Puff twice. Always twice—and then exhale a thick curl of smoke from her mouth and inhale it through her nose before spewing it back out between pursed lips.

She would just watch TV with me. Her non-cigarette hand would drape across my neck, and she would idly play with the hair on the back of my head.

When some amount of time had passed—an hour, perhaps forty-five minutes—she would kiss my temple, rise unsteadily to her feet, and head to her bed. Rarely would she say a word.

That was it.

That was her mothering me.

But it was my favorite time of the day—of the week: it was the only time I ever got with my mother. Sober, she was cold, distant, and even cruel. She

would mock me for my speech, my stammering—she made me nervous, because I was never sure what she would say, how she would treat me, and so I would stammer when addressing her. Which only drew her mockery all the more, of course.

I worked with Koslov, my tutor, until I no longer stammered—this consisted of Koslov berating me, swatting me with sticks, and cursing at me in Russian while I recited poetry and read from classic Greek authors and Enlightenment thinkers until I could carry on my train of thought no matter the distraction.

Those late nights and early mornings with Mother—they were all I had of her, of having a real mother. The rest of the time she was...a presence. And a largely unpleasant one at that. But those moments watching American cartoons with my drunk mother...it was as close to love as I have ever gotten.

It makes me wonder that I somehow attracted a woman like Corinna. That she could see something in me. Something soft when all life has ever shown me is hardness and pain. She is the softness. The goodness.

She is the sweet sugar mixed in with the black bitterness of the coffee that is my life. Or, that was my life. Now, it's something else. Something new.

She wants more, my Corinna. I show her my feelings, as best I can. But I know she needs more. I have tried, so many times, to force my lips to shape the words—*I love you*—but I have always failed. And failure is not something I am accustomed to. It is not tolerated.

But this is not a skill, or a lesson, or an enemy. It is not a math equation or a tricky Latin verb conjugation. It is not a complex business transaction. It is...something that requires more of me. It requires I strip back the layers of myself. I had thought she knew all of me, that she'd seen all of my layers. But then I attempt to tell her I love her, and I realize that there are deeper layers yet to be revealed. It requires vulnerability. A kind of courage I do not know if I possess.

Why?

She knows I love her. More importantly, I know she loves me. But the words? There is something deeper there. Some blockage in my soul. The power of those words, which until Corinna I have never heard...it conquers me.

To tell Corinna that I love her is to bare the very last of myself to someone who could so easily destroy me. Because she possesses me.

All of me.

Even the lost, lonely little boy sitting on a couch at four in the morning with his drunk killer of a mother, watching twenty-year-old American cartoons.

When I have her in my arms again, after all of this, I will tell her.

I love you, my Corinna, my light, I shall say. I love you.

AN AIRPLANE THEN—A cargo jet, if I had to guess. I'm buckled into a jump seat, hands bound in front of me now. It's cold. Loud. Echoing, juddering, precarious.

Hours, endless hours of nothing.

A harsh landing, jouncing me awake from a dull, stuporous sleep.

Another vehicle, this one the bouncing bed of a truck of some kind, a long step up, a cold wind blustering around me. Something flapping. More endless hours of this.

Voices chattering in a language I have trouble making out. Arabic, maybe. I smell cigarettes, body odor, diesel exhaust. Horns honk now, all around. Clattering engines, stop-start-stop-start traffic. The air heats until I'm suffocating from it.

I haven't eaten or drank in I don't know how many hours. My throat aches, each swallow feeling like knives. I'm dizzy.

After time I cannot measure, we make a turn, slowing, a pause, shouts, a creak as of a gate. The language is most definitely Arabic. That doesn't narrow down my location very much, however. It is very, very hot. The truck stops, the tailgate is dropped with a loud clang. Hands shove me. I work to my feet and shuffle forward, but I'm shoved again, and this time I feel air around me and I'm falling, momentarily weightless...

And then I slam into the hard ground, and the breath is crushed from my lungs. I writhe in pain, trying to drag air into my chest. I'm hauled to my feet by rough hands. A voice snaps at me in Arabic, and I'm shoved forward again. I walk on shaky knees, still gasping for breath.

Footsteps echo as if in a low, narrow hallway, stone, perhaps. I feel a step down and manage to keep my balance rather than toppling down them, stumbling a few steps down before finding the rhythm. Something drips and echoes, telling me I'm underground.

A fist knots in my collar, halting me. Metal scrapes on stone, and I'm shoved forward, tripping, stumbling, and then I fall to the ground—hard, cold, damp flagstones.

CLANG.

I wait, catch my breath, let the aches and bruises pang and twinge.

Then, I hear it.

A shuffle.

A whimper—small, female.

“Hello?” I call.

I tentatively lift my hands, still bound in front, and work the hood off. I am underground, in a cell. Ancient, and to call it ancient is to underestimate its true age. Rusted manacles older than all of Western Civilization in a heap in one corner, a pile of bones with a grinning skull in another; a bench of stone fixed to the wall with fist-thick chain links.

Underneath the bench, huddled against the wall in as small a ball as she can make herself, a little girl.

No more than four. Short black hair.

I remain where I am, cross-legged on the ground. “Yelena.”

She shrinks away, or tries to. Shakes her head, whining a high-pitched hum of fear.

“It’s okay, Yelena. It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you, and I’m not going to let anyone else hurt you. Okay?” I keep my voice calm, as if trying to lure in a stray dog.

She doesn’t move; her dark eyes are fearful through the curtain of black bangs. “You know my name?”

“You are Yelena Konstantin, and you are from Brooklyn, New York. Your father’s name is Georgios, and your mother is Elena.” I recite her address. “You have a pink stuffed penguin.”

This gets her to uncurl a tiny bit. “Pepita.”

I snicker. “Pepita, huh? That’s your penguin’s name?”

A tiny nod. And then she frowns. “How do you know who I am? I don’t know you.”

“You don’t know me. But we’re...related. I’m...a cousin, but more like an uncle.”

She doesn’t move—I’m not getting anywhere with her. She remains under the bench.

“Has anyone hurt you?” I ask.

She shakes her head. "I was in a car for a long time, and then I was on an airplane for a long time, and then I was in a big truck for another long time. And now I'm here. I'm hungry."

"But no one has hit you or...or anything? They just brought you here?"

A nod. "Uh-huh." She wriggles slightly, as if she's thinking about leaving the relative safety of beneath the bench. "Are you gonna rescue me?"

"That's a big word, huh? Rescue?"

She just stares. "I watch YouTube."

"I see." I sigh, thinking. "Well, Yelena. I'm not going to lie to you. Since you can use words like rescue, I'm going to talk to you like a big girl." I pause. "Can you come out from there so we can talk together?"

A shake of her head. "Mmm-mmm. The bad man is coming soon. He has bad eyes."

"Who is the bad man?"

A shrug, the casual gesture belied by the fear written on every feature. "He's the bad man."

"What's he look like? Tall or short? Fat or skinny? Bald head, long hair, short hair?"

"He has fancy golden hair."

"Did he tell you his name?"

A shake of her head. "Mmm-mmm."

"What else can you tell me about the bad man?"

"His eyes are bad."

"Well, I'm here now, Yelena. I won't let the bad man do anything to you."

She wriggles a bit further. "Why did they get me here?"

"Because of me, I'm afraid."

She moves a little further, hesitates, and then fully commits, wriggling out and sitting cross-legged a few feet away from me. A toss of her head, and she uses her whole palm to push her hair out of her eyes.

"Why? I don't know you."

"It's complicated, honestly."

Her eyes go to my bound wrists. "Are you scared?"

I smile. "No, I'm not. I have friends who are going to come rescue us very soon. And then the bad man will...he won't be able to scare you anymore."

A distant sound comes to us through the small barred window in the

metal door—a clicking thud, as of boot heels on flagstones.

Yelena's eyes go wide, and she throws herself back under the bench, wriggling and curling up into a tight little ball against the wall. She's shaking all over, tears leaking from her wide, brown, terrified eyes. I move and sit with my back to the bench, putting myself between me and the doorway.

The boot heels click closer.

To the door.

It creaks and scrapes open, held by a short, swarthy man with khaki pants, sandals, and a knee-length tunic, wearing a scarf-like head covering and carrying an M-16. Through the door swaggers a second man, and this one I recognize.

Tall, slim, wearing a cream suit with a pale blue button-down, the top two buttons undone. As Yelena described, he does indeed have fancy hair, his blond hair expensively cut and styled. Clean-shaven. His eyes are so pale they're almost white, and they radiate malice. Bad eyes, indeed.

"Apollo Karahalios." His voice is silky, with an accent that makes his origins in the Southern US. Texas, maybe, or Tennessee. "How nice of you to join us."

"Spaulding."

He smirks. "You know me." He seems pleased by this.

I wait. No point in acting as if I have any leverage to make demands, and nor am I going to act afraid of him.

He's irked by my lack of fear and my silence; I think he expected theatrics, begging, bartering. "Your friends think they can find me."

I don't bother arguing.

He frowns, his brow tightening, jaw hardening. He swaggers closer—he's wearing alligator-skin cowboy boots. "You fucked me over, Karahalios."

"Dimitriou," I correct. "I changed my name."

A derisive snort. "Changing your name doesn't change who you are." He shoves his hands in his pockets and stares down at me. "I lost millions because of you, because of your little...game."

"There was no game, Spaulding. And I didn't do anything to you."

"Oh, but you did." His expression turns ugly, vicious. "You damn near ruined me. I had to come *here*." He gestures angrily at the walls around us. "Buyers vanished, supply vanished. Interpol on my ass. You *fucked* me." He crouches in front of me. "And you're going to pay."

"If you think killing me is going to help you get your business or your

money back, I have news for you—it won't."

"Kill you?" He rises, grinning. "Oh no, killing you would do me no good. You misunderstand, Karahalios. When I say you're going to pay, I mean *pay*. Actually pay."

I suppress laughter. "You could have approached me man to man, you know. Like businessmen. This is...unnecessary and isn't doing you any favors."

"Oh, just like that—make an appointment with your office and beg for minutes of your precious time? And tell you what? That you murdered at least half of my clientele and made it nearly impossible to find supply?"

"Supply," I echo. "You mean human beings? Innocent girls?"

"Ah." He turns away, hands in his pockets once more. "Now you'll preach to me. As if your very existence, not to mention the wealth you grew up in, didn't come from that same business. As if you weren't spawned by one of the most notorious madams in all of Europe."

"I'm not her, nor am I my grandfather. And even when I was...in the family business, so to speak, I never dealt in human flesh."

"You'll pay, Karahalios." He stands by the door. Glances at me over his shoulder. "And if you think your little club of killers is going to come to your rescue...I have news for you: I'm ready for them." He smirks, as if his use of my own words was especially clever. "Particularly that delicious little girlfriend of yours. I'm going to enjoy sampling her before I sell her, even if she isn't really to my...taste." A pause for effect. "I expect to get quite a pretty penny for the beautiful daughter of a billionaire."

I do not rise to the bait, even as protective, possessive rage boils inside me. "You're making a mistake, Spaulding. If it's money you want, I can get you money. I'll cut you a check right now for...shit, what do you want—what'd you lose? A hundred million?"

"It's not that easy." He grins at me. "I think you received that message once already, didn't you? My little present? I cut his head off myself, you know."

"The girl has nothing to do with this."

He rolls a shoulder. "I know. She's just leverage. I admit I'm reticent to actually cut her head off—infanticide is distasteful. Not that she's an infant, but close enough." A last glance at me, past me, where he knows she's hiding. "Don't press me, though, Karahalios. I said I'm reticent to, not that I won't."

“I’m here, aren’t I? And I told you I’d give you money, which you said this was about.”

“Money does me no good if I’m dead. I have to ensure I’ll live long enough to spend it. And to do that, I’m going to have to...deal with...your band of friends.”

Clearly, he’s setting a trap, with me as bait. I can only hope whoever is coming for me is smart enough to see that.

OLD FRIENDS, REUNITED

I trail behind Duke as we weave our way along a crowded street of Lisbon, Portugal. There've been a dozen dead ends, so far. A bar on the north end of town, where word is someone knows someone who's heard of Rasmussen, which turns out to be an old drunk who'll also swear to having seen Santa Maria herself as well, and not a word of it a lie. Each dead end sends us miles across Lisbon in a different direction chasing the next one.

"We're chasing our tails, Uncle Duke," I complain, as we press through the late afternoon crush outside what seems to be a very popular post-workday drinking establishment not far from the docks.

He just grabs my wrist with his massive paw and hauls me through the crowd, ignoring the protests in angry Portuguese. "This is the job, sweetheart: tracking down leads. You follow a hundred, and only one gets you anywhere."

"I didn't realize how hard it would be to find him."

Duke snorts. "Eight billion people in the world and you didn't realize how hard it would be to find *one*?" He glances around an intersection, at the phone in his hand, and then cuts around a corner. "Especially one who doesn't want to be found, like Rasmussen? This is what we do, honey—we find people who don't want to be found. And this cat is stealthy. Damn good at covering his tracks."

"Where is Anselm?" I ask.

No answer.

Duke scans the street, then seems to spy what he's looking for and angles for it—a hole in the wall bar on this narrow street that's more alley than thoroughfare. Inside, it's pretty much what you'd expect: a ceiling low

enough Duke is reflexively ducking, a few small tables populated by scattered pairs and trios of elderly regulars, all of whom regard us suspiciously over the top of their drinks, a long bar along one wall, behind which is a portly older fellow with a long black beard.

There's one person sitting at the bar—he's out of place, being middle-aged at best and wearing a decent suit, a glass of whiskey in one hand and a cell phone pressed to his ear with the other.

Duke sidles up to the bar and takes a seat, and I take one beside him—we're two spaces away from the businessman. I let Duke order for me; he apparently speaks Portuguese, albeit clearly not fluently, but well enough to be understood.

I receive a glass of white wine, Duke a glass of whiskey. I wait for Duke's lead. He sips, checks his phone.

The man at the bar ends his calls, tips back his glass and eyes us while swallowing. "*Você está procurando por alguém?*"

Duke's response is slow in coming, and in English. "Yeah. Been told he doesn't like being looked for, though."

"He does not." The response is in English, thickly accented. "He is no here. Gone."

"He was here, though?"

"*Sim*. I see him yesterday. He goes onto a boat, little shit thing, all rust everywhere. Is a boat for fish."

"What's it called?"

The man taps the bar top with a finger and sips whiskey. Duke slides his palm across the bar toward the man, leaving a folded note, which quickly disappears.

"*O Espirito Algarve.*"

"How do I know he's on there?"

The man shrugs. "You ask me, I tell you. You believe me, no believe me, *eu não ligo.*"

"All right." Duke tosses back his whiskey, glances at me and then the door. "Thanks, pal."

A wave of his hand. "*Pelo que?*" He doesn't spare us a glance. "A word of advice? Be cautious of what you ask for. Maybe you will find it, and it is not so good you have found it, *sim?* This man, he is...a friend only to money and to blood."

"Well, I'm not looking for a friend," Duke says. "But thanks for the

warning.”

I’d only pretended to sip my drink. Duke tosses some local currency on the bar and then we’re back outside. Duke pulls me into a fast walk, and we take a circuitous route seemingly nowhere—I can sense this isn’t a time for questions, so I simply do my best to keep up and keep a lookout around me. My heart pounds, for some reason—and it’s not the exertion.

I spot something—a figure, a block or so behind us, walking seemingly nonchalantly, but he’s wearing a coat that’s far too baggy for his frame, and it’s a hot day to boot. It sparks my worry.

“Duke.”

“Been following us since we left the bar. He’s why we’re moving like we are.”

“Who is he?”

“Lookout, most likely. Someone Rasmussen left behind to see if anyone’s looking for him—like us. He’s paid to listen, and if someone asks about Rasmussen, to shut them up.” He yanks me abruptly to the side, into the lee of a deep archway covering a thick wooden door. Blocks me with his body. “I expected it, but not this quick.”

“What do we do?” I’m realizing how far in over my head I am.

“Keep quiet, keep still, and let me handle it.” He glances at me over his shoulder and winks, his long red ponytail bouncing as he returns his gaze to the street. “You’re with your uncle Duke. Nothin’ to worry about.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Thinking maybe you shoulda stayed home, huh?” His voice is low, teasing.

It irks me. “No, I’m not thinking that.”

A huff of amusement. “Well, you’re game enough so far. And you handled Apollo neatly enough. But this is a different sort of carnival. Folks are gonna bleed, sweetheart.” He tenses. “Don’t scream. Don’t faint.”

“I was in the command center when you rescued the diplomat’s son from the kidnappers in Mogadishu,” I remind him. “I saw everything.”

“On-screen is one thing. In person is another.” He crouches a bit, like a panther preparing to pounce.

Our tail rounds the corner and passes right by us—and that’s when Duke strikes. It’s like lightning, faster than my eyes can track. One instant he’s blocking me in the doorway, all broad shoulders and thick muscles, and the next he’s pinning the man on the ground, a knee in his throat, a long, wicked

black blade held a centimeter from the man's eyeball.

"How many." Duke's growl is terrifying. It's a command and carries with it the promise of death.

The man babbles in Portuguese, gasping.

"Slow the fuck down, goddammit, my Portuguese ain't that good. Better yet, in English."

"Me, only me!" the man says. "One thousand euro a day, to see if anyone says his name."

"You tell him we're askin'?"

"I must! I tell him, he say find and kill."

"He ask who we are?"

"I do not know! I do not know, I tell him. He say no matter, just kill."

"Shit." Duke replaces the blade in a sheath somewhere on his body—I genuinely don't see where, only that it vanishes as if it never existed. Duke moves off the man.

"I oughta kill you. If my niece wasn't with me, I would. I don't like loose fuckin' ends." He glances at me, and then at the man on the ground. "Get. Go on. Get the fuck outta here before I change my mind. And if you tell him you found us, I'll hunt you down and kill you quicker than you can spit, you get me?"

"I got it, I got it. I lose you, is all. I find no one."

"That's right. You never found us. You heard someone was asking for him, but you never found them."

"Okay, okay." The man is young, barely an adult, with a scraggly goatee and shaggy hair. "I find no one."

Duke watches him scurry off around a corner, and then scrubs his jaw in frustration. "That's gonna come back and bite me in the ass."

"Why?"

"He's on the phone with Rasmussen as we speak, tellin' him all about me."

"So, why didn't you kill him, then?"

He huffs. "I don't kill people who aren't a threat to me. Even if that scrawny little scamp had had a gun pointed at me, he couldn't have killed me. I wasn't about to have his innocent blood on my hands."

"He's taking Rasmussen's money."

"He's a lookout. A local kid with no options. He's nothing. Nobody." He eyes me. "Ending a life is a big deal, honey. I don't do it lightly, and I don't

do it if I don't have to. I'm gonna have to at some point, I can already tell you that much. You might have to, too. But be sure, 'cause you can't take it back once you do."

"That's what Dad told me."

"Your father is a wise man. There ain't many men outside of my crew who I respect, but he's one of 'em." Duke chews on his lower lip a moment. "We gotta get a bead on that boat."

"Duke, where's Anselm? He vanished the moment we landed and I haven't seen him since."

"That man is a ghost, sweetheart. He'll find us."

"What's he doing?"

"Same thing we are, just...his own way."

"I don't know what that means."

Duke pulls out his phone and dials a long series of numbers, puts it to his ear. "It means he's tracking Rasmussen, Djakovic, and Spaulding. We may not see him again for a while. Or he could show up when we go around the corner. No way to know. Anselm does his thing, and the less I know about it the better."

"So he has a different way of getting information?"

"He's a hunter. You ever go stalk hunting?"

I laugh. "I was born and raised on a private island in the Caribbean, Duke."

"Oh, right. It's when you go hunting deer or something, but instead of sitting in a tree like a lazy pussy, waiting for the deer to walk beneath you, you go out and hunt it, tracking its scent, its tracks. That's what Anselm does, except with people."

"And when he finds who he's looking for?"

"Depends on the person. If they're someone like the guys we're after? You don't wanna know what he does."

I shiver. "That sounds...scary. You make sweet Uncle Anselm sound like the boogeyman."

Duke laughs, and it's a dark, frightening sound. "Sweetheart, your ol' uncle Anselm is what the boogeyman has nightmares about."

I stare at Duke. "That's a lovely thought."

He's been waiting for whoever he called to answer this whole time. "Come on, fucker, answer," he mutters. Finally, I hear a faint *hello* on the other end. "Took you long enough, y'douche-waffle...yeah, I got a bead on

Rasmussen. He left Lisbon yesterday on a boat called *O Espirito Algarve*. A fishing boat, I guess....what, like I fuckin' know where it is? Why does everyone keep asking me where the fuck Anselm is? I don't fuckin' know. Yeah, I am cranky, Lear—we were tailed by one of Rasmussen's little lookout squirrels, and my soft ass let him go, and now they're gonna send who knows how many more after us. And I got miss 'I gotta rescue my man' with me."

I whack him. "Don't be mean." It's like whacking a stone wall.

Duke ignores me. "We got any assets over here? I could use backup. You know how Anselm is when he's on the hunt. Shit yeah, if Alexei is available, I'll take him—I haven't seen that cat in years. All right, well, when you get a lock on that boat, call me. I'm assuming it's heading away from the Atlantic into the Mediterranean, but I need a destination. Yeah, just give him my number and we'll connect. Meantime, I'm gonna track down some iron heavier than this nine, which is all I brought with me. Something tells me I'm gonna need it."

A pause as he listens.

"You are one useful motherfucker, Lear ol' buddy. Perfect. Send me the address. Cool. Okay, bye."

He hangs up and pockets the phone. "Okay, change of plans. I guess Lear's old lady Cuddy has a stash spot here in Lisbon, so we're gonna raid that for some gear, and an old friend named Alexei is going to meet us there."

"A stash spot?"

His phone dings, and he pulls it back out, glances at it, and puts it away. "Gonna need a cab—it's on the other side of the city." He leads us away from the dead-end alley we've been in and to the main road, where we hail a cab; after Duke gives the driver the address, he answers my question. "A stash spot is a safe house. A little flat or apartment where we keep extra gear. Guns, ammo, cash, extra passports, shit like that. I've got 'em in a few cities across the globe, just not in Lisbon."

"And who is Alexei?"

"He used to work for A1S, back in the day. He helped us with the whole Cain situation. After that cleared up, he took a job over here somewhere, working for a friend of Harris's. I guess there was some tiff between him and Sasha, I dunno. Family squabbles, whatever, right? He's been over here—meaning Europe somewhere. He still contracts for us when we need him. He's a bad dude, and I mean that in the best possible way. If I can't have

Thresh or Puck with me in the shit, I'll take those crazy-ass Georgians any day."

The cab winds through Lisbon traffic.

"Which is why I've never met him, I guess."

He nods. "Yeah, he and Sasha made a helluva team together. Last time I remember directly working with him was when Cain snatched Lear and we had to shoot our way out of...where the fuck was it? Riga?"

I snicker. "Where the hell is Riga?"

"Latvia. Beautiful city. You and Apollo should go, once this is over."

"You seem certain it's going to end well for us."

Duke regarded me with a cold expression. "I get you don't know firsthand what it is we do. You grew up in a peaceable stretch of years. And I'm damn glad of it. But we, meaning we of Alpha One Security, *do not* fucking lose people. I say this with certainty. Your mother got snatched, we got her back. Layla got snatched, we got her back. Fucking all of us at one point or another have been off-grid and pursued if not in the hands of enemies, including your father and yours truly. We have never fucking *ever* lost someone. And we are not about to start now. Apollo is a smart, canny motherfucker. Tough, too. I don't know how much you know about that vigilante sting operation he ran against the traffickers, but that shit was gnarly as fuck."

"I only know what he told me, and what Uncle Harry confirmed—he and a...friend, I guess, took out some human traffickers."

A snort. "Ah, here we are."

The cab stops, let us out at a long low building, the door of which opens directly on the street; there's a keypad above the door handle, and Duke consults his phone and then enters a code, which unlocks the door. Stairs up greet us on the other side of the door, which takes us to a loft-style flat, a single open room. There's a kitchenette in one corner and a bathroom behind a free-standing wall of frosted glass. The rest is simply open space—occupied entirely by racks of gear.

My mind boggles. "You could outfit an entire fucking army, Uncle Duke."

He stands in the center of the room, rubbing his hands together with an eager expression on his face. "Yes, you could. Our girl Cuddy does not fuck around." His phone rings, and he answers it. "Yeah, hello? No fuckin' way! Alexei, my man, good to hear your voice...yeah we're in Lisbon, waiting for

word from Lear on tracking a ship. Look, filling you in any more should probably happen in person, because even secure lines ain't exactly secure, you know? When can you get here? Well, that's the issue—we don't *know* where we're going next, because we're still trying to get a lock on our target. Malta? Hmm. It is pretty central to where we're thinking the ship is heading. Okay, yeah, that'll work—we'll head there. I'll hit you up when we touch down. Cool, see ya." He ends the call, shoves the phone back in his pocket, and goes over to a rack of ultra-compact submachine guns.

"So, we're going to Malta?"

"He's in Rome right now, on a personal holiday, but he agreed to cut it short and meet us in Malta. Which is—"

I glare at him, cutting him off. "I know where Malta is, Duke."

"You didn't know where Riga was," he points out, smirking at me.

"Excuse me for not knowing too much about Latvia. I'm kind of a sheltered brat, in case you weren't aware."

"Sheltered, sure, brat, not really. You're the daughter of one of the wealthiest men on the planet, in the history of mankind, so being a little sheltered is excusable." He winks at me to tell me he's still teasing. "Not knowing basic European geography? Less so."

"Oh shut up. Let's get what we need and get going."

Duke runs his hands over the butts of the various firearms. "Let's do the HK..." He selects a weapon, slings it by the strap from a shoulder, and then moves to the rack of pistols. "I need a couple backups. Beretta? Glock? How about a Glock. Or two." He's murmuring under his breath. "Spare mags for both..."

He glances at me. "You know how to shoot?"

I shrug. "Some. I've done time in the shooting range back home. Mom and Dad's, I mean. I can generally hit the target, and I certainly know which end to, like, hold on to, at least."

"Good enough." He grabs a pistol from the rack, and a holster with a complicated webbing of straps. "Blazer off."

I never changed out of my power suit, so I'm wearing white tailored slacks and a matching blazer, with a mint green silk blouse underneath, and white Louboutin wedges. I shuck the blazer off, and Uncle Duke guides the straps over my arms; it actually fits much like a second bra, clasping in front under my breasts, with the weapon itself sitting along my ribcage midway down my left side. After I put the blazer back on, you can't even tell I'm

wearing it, unless you know what to look for.

Duke flicks a finger at me. “Draw.”

I reach under my blazer and fumble at the grip, clumsily yank it free. “That’s harder to do smoothly than I thought it’d be.”

“Exactly.” He moves beside me, a paw covering my hand over the weapon and pushing it down toward the floor. “Finger off the trigger, darlin’. Unless you’re planning on shooting me.”

I realize I have my finger inside the trigger guard. I hastily remove it and slide it along the outside of the guard. “Oh. Shit. I know better—sorry.”

He removes his hand. “This is a Sig, so it does have a safety. Make sure it’s on.” I do so, and he steps away. “Now. Holster, and practice drawing. Keep practicing until it’s smooth and natural. Safety on, trigger off the finger.” He turns back to me. “In fact, unload it. Eject the mag and the round.”

I obey, cautiously, and he thumbs the round back into the magazine, then sets the magazine on the nearby shelf.

“Now, practice drawing while I get my shit sorted.”

I holster the pistol, let my blazer drop back into place, and then practice drawing it; I manage to be smoother about it, but it still feels slow and clumsy. I keep practicing while Duke shrugs out of his windbreaker; he’s wearing Dickie’s khakis over combat boots, and a black T-shirt under a maroon windbreaker, a thin, light jacket meant simply to conceal his shoulder holster than as weather protection, which we clearly don’t need in Portugal in the summer. His holster is a fancy modular system, allowing him to fasten the subcompact machine gun to the holster opposite the pistol already there. His knife is on one of the shoulder straps, a second pistol up near his pectoral. A third, this one looking tiny in his massive paw, he Velcros around his left ankle, the cuff of his pants concealing it. With the windbreaker back on, you wouldn’t even know he’s carrying three pistols and a machine gun, plus a giant combat knife. He zips the windbreaker halfway up and then shoves the sleeves up around his elbow.

I eye him. “When was the last time you left home unarmed?”

He glances at me. “Like, without a gun? Or without a weapon of any kind?”

I shrug, holstering and redrawing again—this time it feels fairly quick and smooth. “Either—both.”

“Last time I didn’t have a gun at all was...shit, I don’t even know. When

I was seventeen, I think. Before I joined the Navy.” He muses. “Even in my dress uniform, I was strapped one way or another.”

“What about your wedding?” I ask.

He snickers. “Nope. I was carrying. Two, actually. One under my tux jacket, and an ankle piece.”

“At your own wedding?” I say with a laugh.

He shrugs. “Sure. It was a year or so after Cain was finally dead, but we weren’t sure there weren’t any other enemies out there wanting our blood. So yeah, I was armed at my wedding. I wasn’t about to let some shit go down the day I made that woman my bride. Hell no. Anybody wanted to step up and make trouble for me on *my* wedding day was gonna have a bad fuckin’ time.”

“And every day since?”

“Just doesn’t feel right. I feel naked without a gun. I’ve been a combat operative of one kind or another since I was eighteen, Rin. It’s all I know. Carrying a weapon is just second nature. Shit, I keep a piece in my damn bathroom at home—behind the toilet. Just in case, you know?”

“I guess that makes sense.” I hold out my hands. “I think I’m ready if you are.”

He gestures at me. “Let me see.”

I draw, holding it in both hands the way Sasha taught me when I was sixteen, one hand over the other, aiming it downward. Replace it. “How’s that?”

“Maybe we can get you a few minutes somewhere to practice popping off a few rounds. For now, though, pretty good.” He hands me the magazine, and I tap it into the handle, pull the slide, and holster it, making sure the safety is still on, first. “Now, a few things to keep in mind: do not draw that unless I tell you to. Do not fire it unless I tell you to. Don’t even take off the safety without my direct instructions. The only exceptions to this rule is if your life is directly and immediately in danger, as in someone is either aiming a gun at you, shooting at you, or in some way putting your life in peril. If that circumstance arises, you protect yourself at all costs. You don’t hesitate. You draw, aim for center mass, and fire. If you have to discharge your weapon in protection of your life, you shoot to kill. As I said, center mass, and you fire three times. Don’t bother with headshots, or grouping, just hit them anywhere between throat and groin. Three times, quickly.”

“Why three times? Won’t once incapacitate them?”

“Sure. But you’re not after incapacitation. You don’t have the reflexes or training I do—I can one-shot-kill someone without thinking from fifty yards, one-handed. Or I can knee-cap them so I can interrogate them. And I can make that decision in a split second. You’ve never taken gunfire, never faced someone actively seeking to end your life—it’s chaotic, at best. Intentions fall away, and you’re left with training. Which you don’t have.” He taps his chest, between his pecs. “So, if you have to shoot, you shoot right here, three times. Don’t just *blamblamblam*, though. Shoot, recenter, shoot, recenter, shoot. Got it?”

I nod, swallowing hard. This suddenly feels very different from how I imagined it would. “Do you think I’ll have to?”

He snags a pair of magazines for my handgun and gives them to me, and I slide them into the designated pockets of the holster, on the opposite side of my torso from the gun itself. “Yes, frankly, I do.”

He pulls his phone out, scrolls through his contacts, muttering to himself. “Where are you, Yates? Ah, there you are.” He taps the entry and puts the phone to his ear while it rings. “Yates, it’s Duke Silver. Yes, really. Dead? Why would I be dead? No, listen man, I’m in Lisbon and I need a ride to Malta, off the books. Am I *armed*? Bitch, have you *met* me?”

I cackle, and he frowns at me to be quiet.

“Fifty grand? Are you out of your goddamn hillbilly-ass mind? It’s not even that far...of course I can afford it, y’ugly mouth-breathing yokel. It’s the point of the matter—I know you can do better than that. A trade, you say? Well, how’s about this: I run a C-Q-C training academy in Colorado—I can give you and two others a full run-through, on me, if you can get me and my plus-one to Malta ASAP, off-book, no questions, no records.” He listens, nods. “Deal. Tell me where to be and when...yeah, the number I gave you and told you to never call or text under any circumstances. Good deal, thanks, Yates.” He stares at his phone after hanging up, and a message chimes through; he consults a map on his phone, and then gestures at me. “All right, girlie, let’s get to gettin’.”

“I’m your plus-one, huh?” I say, following him back down the stairs.

He keys a code into the keypad, repeats it, and then turns away. “Fancy-ass system Cuddy’s got, there. Some sort of nonrepeating, auto-generating passcode, so every time a passcode is used, it generates a new one and sends it to Cuddy in some encrypted packet. Have to look into that.” He crosses the street, rounds a corner, and we’re at a more major intersection, where he

edges to the curb and hails a cab. Once we're seated, he answers me. "Just means I'm bringing someone with me and that person's identity is not up for discussion." He eyes me. "And trust me, you don't want someone like Yates knowing who you are."

"He's not a good person?"

"What does that even mean?" Duke asks, meaning it rhetorically. "I can rely on him to get me transportation in a pinch, he doesn't ask questions and he doesn't run his mouth. His rides are reliable, as in you're not gonna find yourself on an eighty-year-old Cessna with a leaky piston. But is he *good*? Shit, I'm not even sure if *I'm* good, sweetheart. Yates has wandering eyes, wandering hands, and a wandering dick, and you're a damn beautiful woman. Being my plus-one is your protection against his inevitable advances—he knows if he so much as looks at you crossways, I'll gut him like a fresh-caught trout."

"Oh."

He pats my shoulder with a heavy hand. "You're formidable as hell, in a boardroom. And I got a lot of respect for you, just in general. Takes guts and smarts to do what you've done with that outer space rocket-building business, and you've done it on your own with damn fierce opposition. But this here is a whole different world, Rin. It ain't a boardroom. In a boardroom, saying someone is cutthroat just means they won't hesitate to fuck you over in business. In my world, saying someone is cutthroat is a literal statement—that person will actually cut your throat. I guess my point is I classify people differently than some others might. Good, bad...not my concern. Threat or not a threat, that's the real question. And then, if you're not a threat, the question is how far I can trust you. And the answer to that, with most everyone, is not far at all."

"Next topic. Should we let Anselm know the plan?"

Duke shakes his head. "Nope. Like I said earlier, he'll find us, if and when he wants to connect with us. My guess is once we figure out where the fuck your boyfriend is being held, Anselm will be there too, ready to party."

"Wouldn't it be more effective if we shared our information?"

"No, because Anselm's sources won't do me any good. They're not my sources. He could tell me what he's hearing, what he's finding out, but until he hears something actionable, it's all just rumors and hearsay. When he does find out something concrete, he'll move on it, and if he needs us or thinks we need to know what he's learned, he'll get ahold of me or he'll find us." He

waves a hand, sighing. “You don’t really understand Anselm, not as an operative. To you, he’s your uncle Anselm. The nice guy who held you on his lap and liked to spoil you with Selah’s fucking amazing gingersnap cookies. But that’s not who he is, out here.”

“You said he’s what the boogeyman has nightmares about.”

“Out here, he’s...I dunno how to put it. He’s no one. A shadow. And then, suddenly, you’re dead. But he can also find anyone. You know how Lear can do just about anything with a computer? Anselm is like that when it comes to hunting people down—finding them.”

“What about you?”

“Me?” He laughs. “I’m good at wrecking shit.” He shrugs. “I do okay with this whole following leads and asking questions bullshit, but I’m best when shit hits the fan. That’s why I’m here, with you. When we find Apollo, he’ll be well guarded, which means it’s gonna be a fight and a half getting him and the girl out in one piece. That’s where I come in.”

“What if there’s a lot of them?”

Duke just grins. “That’s half the fun, babe.”

“And what about me?”

“You won’t like the answer to that.”

I huff. “Meaning I should have stayed home and let you do your job without getting in the way.”

“But you’re here now, and we’ll make it work. Just do as I say, and everything will work out.”

THE NEXT SEVERAL hours are uneventful—there’s a meeting under a bridge, where we get into a sixty-year-old Range Rover, which takes us to the charter flight section of the Lisbon airport. We board a small charter jet, where the flight attendant greets us as “Mr. and Ms. Callahan,” and serves us chilled wine and a charcuterie. We land on Malta after a three-hour flight, where a Mercedes S-class is waiting.

“My guy Yates came through, huh?” Duke remarks as the driver drives us away from the airport without asking a destination—which turns out to be a five-star hotel, with a penthouse reserved and paid for under the name Callahan.

Duke had sent Alexei a message when we landed, and we’re scheduled to rendezvous with him later this afternoon.

We have some time to kill before our meeting with Alexei, and I use it to have a new outfit brought to me by a personal shopper, charged to the room. I get a pair of stretchy jeans with a wide brown leather belt, sturdy boots, a maroon T-shirt, and a gray, lightweight jacket to cover my holster. I feel less like the boardroom brawler and more like...well, a badass about to find my man, I guess. How badass I am outside the boardroom remains to be seen.

ALEXEI MEETS us in the hotel bar. Of an age with Duke and the rest, in his mid- to late-fifties, he's tall and broad-shouldered, with graying dark hair that's a little too long and a little too unwashed, and an unkempt, shaggy beard. His eyes are brown, hard, and speak of world-weary cynicism. Despite the unkempt beard, he's a devastatingly handsome man, and his body is hard and tight, rippling with muscle—he wears board shorts with some kind of slip-on boat shoes and a plain white short-sleeve button-down. Everything about him says “man on vacation”...unless you really look at him. And then you'd see the set of his shoulders, the coiled intensity, the pantherish grace in his walk, and you'd realize this was no average tourist. And then, of course, there's the old scar running from his forehead to his chin, pulling down the corner of his lip and barely missing his eye; a gnarled, ropy scar like that can only come from a knife, and it gives him a scary, dangerous look, even just sitting and looking inconspicuous.

He's sitting in a corner booth of the hotel bar, sipping an amber beer and munching on French fries, which he dips in ranch dressing. He rises to his feet as we approached, and he and Duke do the manly embrace thing, where they clap each other on the back so hard a lesser man would have cracked ribs.

“Duke *fuckink* Silver,” Alexei growls, his voice deep, bear-like, and hoarse. “My god, man, you've gotten fat.”

Duke just laughs. “Fat? You damn Ruski. I'll snap you like a twig.”

“Am from *fuckink* Georgia,” Alexei snapped, his eyes twinkling. “You think you would know this after twenty-some years.” His eyes go to me. “You are Corinna Roth, daughter of the great man himself, *da?*”

“I thought you were Georgian?”

He shrugs. “*Da*, but I learn Russian the same as learn Georgian, and then I join the Russian army and speak Georgian almost not at all. So now Russian is more of my primary language, along with English.”

We sit down with him, and Duke fills Alexei in on the situation.

Alexei is silent awhile, sipping and munching. When his fries are gone, he wipes his hands on a napkin. “American French fries are my favorite indulgence. I am on holiday, so I am allowed to eat them. Otherwise? This belly would be not so much flat, you know?” He swigs the last of his beer, muffles a belch, and then leans back in the booth, his eyes going to me. “Your man, this Apollo. Is not a good thing he has gotten into. Spaulding is bad, very bad. Not so bad as Cain, or his own grandfather, but still, it is a not so smart thing for us to underestimate Spaulding. He has much money, much influence. He does the selling of girls, *da?* Little ones, I have heard. To be eighteen is too old for his clients. I hear many things about him, and not one of it is a good thing. Also bad is he hires many of these goons, *hmm?* That is the right word, I think. The dumb soldiers who only shoot and beat up, *da?* This is the goon?” His eyes rove the bar, searching, scanning, assessing. “Anyway. I do have a few contacts who may know some things. But we must be careful of the asking questions. I hear some people go looking for this Spaulding piece of shit, and they are vanish soon after.”

“It’s true,” Duke rumbles. “We asked around in Lisbon and picked up a tail within a couple hours—and that tail had orders to make us quit asking questions, the hard way.”

“This could get very furry, very soon, if we ask the wrong question of the wrong people.”

Duke chortles. “Hairy, man. Things get *hairy*, not furry.”

Alexei snarls in disgust. “Stupid American sayings make no fuckink sense. How is a bad circumstance supposed to be hairy? What means, *hmm?* Stupid.”

Duke just laughs. “I dunno, man. I didn’t come up with it.” He reaches out and tugs on Alexei’s beard. “Been meaning to ask—what’s this about? Didn’t think you were the scruffy beard type.”

Alexei bats at Duke’s hand. “Wife is visit family in Minsk, one month. I have...a bad time was had in Minsk, and there are still some there who remember me and not so nicely, so I cannot visit wife’s family. So? I take holiday. Rome, Venice, *da?* I eat too much food and drink too much wine, and I do not shave only because wife say I look like this cave troll with no shaving. Always ‘you shave, you shave’ she says. Fuck shaving. But if I shave, she kisses me. So I shave. She is in Minsk one month, and so I do not shave.”

Duke nods. “Yeah, I know how that goes, man. But I gotta say, you look like shit with a beard.”

Alexei nods, laughs. “I know! I do not know what a cave troll is, but I look in the mirror and I see a man who should live in a box under a bridge, maybe. Is a matter of stubbornness, now. I wait until the wife is back from Minsk, and I let her see the ugly horrible beard, and then I shave it all off, for her.” He scratches at his jaw. “Is fuckink itchy.”

“How long you been married?” Duke asks.

“Oh, eight years? Nine, I think.”

Duke frowns. “And none of us were invited?”

Alexei’s expression darkens. “Was only her family. Sasha does not come.”

Duke hesitates—which is weird, because he never hesitates. “You mind me asking what happened there?”

Alexei growls wordlessly, then waves a hand. “You have brother?”

Duke shakes his head. “Nah. No family except Temple and her folks.”

“Is brother thing. Bad argument about stupid shit, and he is too stubborn to say sorry to me, and I am too stubborn also.”

“So you don’t talk to the rest of us for twenty fucking years?” Duke sounds genuinely hurt. “If I’d known you were gettin’ hitched, I’d have been there. I thought you’d know that.”

Alexei winces. “I am sorry, my old friend. In all truth, it was a bad argument. What about is something only for us. But it was bad. I take a job over here, in Berlin. Personal security chief for an important politics man, a friend of Harris.” He shrugs. “Is boring. Good money, easy. I meet Elsa—she is like Lear, the computers person, in the building where my employer does his work. She is so beautiful, with eyes like stars and smile to make the whole world more lighted up. She does not care that I am...cave troll, as she calls me. She just love me anyway.” He frowns, brow wrinkling, eyes distant. “I miss my brother. Nine years is stupid to not talk to brother, when for whole life he was my best friend.”

“I’m sorry you guys had that falling out,” I say, my first contribution to the conversation in a long time. “Can’t you just...one of you step up and end the whole thing?”

Alexei shrugs. “Maybe. I have pride, he has pride. We are in same room, maybe we fight with fists, beat each to bloody pieces. Then over, maybe. I don’t know.”

“Worth a shot.” I smile at him. “Right?”

He nods. “I will think on it.”

I glance at Duke. “Look, I’m glad we were able to have this reunion, but Apollo is still missing. And so is Yelena. And the longer we wait, the more likely it is something bad is going to happen. So...can we get to the part where we rescue him?”

Alexei grins at me. “I am boring old guy now, wearing suit, bodyguarding a rich politics man. But I am not totally a lost cause, okay? I know the situation before I come here, this Yelena girl, your Apollo, the grandson of our old enemy, Vitaly. My brother is the one who did the final killing of Vitaly—I don’t know if you know this or not.” He pulls a folded bar napkin from his pocket, on which is scribbled a set of geographical coordinates. “Already I have the place where Apollo was seen last. Is airfield in Tunis. He was sighted there, going from airplane to a deuce-and-half.”

“So we don’t need Rasmussen?” I ask, excitement ripping through me.

Duke holds up a finger. “No, we do. Unless your contact in Tunis knows where they went from there, we’re still short a clue as to where Apollo is being held. But at least we know he’s in Africa. Good work Alexei.”

“I am making a guess that Rasmussen will be going directly to Spaulding,” Alexei says. “So to track this ship will make us know this location. My contact is looking for more information, but I say to him to be careful, because he is no good to me if Spaulding kills him.”

Duke’s phone chimes, then. “Speak of the devil—it’s Lear.” He pauses, reading. “He has a tag on the ship—it docked in Algiers overnight and continued east the next morning. Whether Rasmussen was still on it isn’t certain. But he can stay out of sight on a boat, so I don’t know why he’d get off.” He muses. “So, Apollo was spotted in Tunis, Rasmussen—or the boat he was on, at least—in Algiers. But...why fly Apollo all the fucking way to *Tunisia*?”

Alexei scratches his beard again. “Is many places to hide and not many questions to be asked. Perhaps Spaulding has somewhere out of sight there? Is many old buildings, forts and jails and this kind of thing. To buy one is easy, and you could hold a prisoner there forever and no one will know, or care.”

“So Rasmussen is making his way to Tunis, then,” I surmise. “So we’re going there?”

Duke and Alexei exchange glances, and then Duke nods. “Makes sense to

me.” He eyes Alexei. “You have transportation contacts down here? I used my guy and already owe him. I can lean on him again, but I’d have to shell out a shitload of cash. It’d raise suspicions.”

Alexei just nods. “*Da*, of course. Is old plane but will fly just fine.” He jerks a thumb at Duke. “You still do the piloting, *da*? I got the plane, but not a pilot.”

“Yeah, I can fly it.” Duke exhales. “All right, well, let’s get a move on. To the airplane, then.”

WE TAKE off as the sun is setting.

The plane is, indeed, very old, like something out of *Indiana Jones*, two propellers and cigar-shaped body, with a hundred, thousand dials and switches, which Duke grumbles about as he works his way through.

It’s a long, slow, boring flight, and I doze off, despite the cold in the fuselage and the droning noise of the propellers.

THIS IS TAKING TOO LONG.

I can feel it in the sinking of my gut, the churn of emotions in my heart—I can simply feel it in my soul. It’s taking too long.

We have to find him, and soon.

YOU'VE BEEN WARNED

A day passes, maybe two. We are fed literally only bread and water. There's no toilet, not even a bucket. When I ask a guard about it, he points at a filthy hole in the ground in one corner, near the rusting pile of ancient manacles.

Another day. Maybe. It's impossible to keep track of time, here underground, without daylight. I attempt to keep Yelena occupied. I tell her stories, mostly nonsense cobbled together from my memory of Ancient Greek mythology.

A guard enters—we're between feedings, so this is something else. At the sound of boots and the key in the lock, Yelena scurries back under the bench, behind me. The guard snaps at me in Arabic, gesturing with his rifle at the door. Come with him.

I rise and move for the door. "Stay there, Yelena," I mutter. "I'll be back."

Only, the guard has other ideas; he gestures at the bench, snapping another order. Yelena doesn't comply, and the guard takes an angry step toward the bench, gesturing with the rifle and repeating the order.

"You have to come with me, Yelena," I say, keeping my voice low and calm.

She grunts a negative, shakes her head, shutting her eyes tightly, as if refusing to look can change what's happening.

"You have to, little one. They will hurt you or me if you don't."

She edges out from under the bench and stands up, but refuses to move an inch closer to me if it means going past the guard. I walk to her, reach for her hand. She takes it, fitting her tiny palm into mine. My heart surges with

protective adrenaline.

Past the guard, and he sticks the barrel of the rifle into my back, prodding me forward. We're in a long hallway with doors on either side, the ceiling barely an inch above my head. It's damp, and cool. Something drips, echoing—I remember the sound from my arrival.

Some of the dungeon doors are open to show empty cells, and others are closed—I picture others like me, locked away and forgotten until Spaulding decides to kill them. Or maybe that's where he keeps his sex slaves until he's ready to sell them.

We come to a doorway, and a narrow stone staircase going up. At the end of the stairs, a hallway continuing forward, an intersection heading left; we head left, and here the hallway has a higher ceiling and fewer doors. We come to one, alike to the others, and unmarked. The guard moves around me, unlocks the door and yanks it open, gestures curtly with the rifle barrel for us to go in.

We do. Within, a white flat sheet hangs over the back wall to create a backdrop. Opposite the sheet, expensive professional videography equipment—lighting, microphones, camera. I'm prodded to stand with my back to the sheet, facing the camera.

Yelena tries to stand with me, to cling to my hand, but the guard yanks her away by the arm—she howls in fear and protest, thrashing.

The guard's face takes on a murderous expression, and he looks at me, then Yelena, his fist raised to strike, his other hand bunched in her hair.

"Yelena!" I call, not daring to move toward her. "It's okay, Yelena. Look at me. Look at me."

She quiets, but continues to writhe in his grip.

"It's okay," I murmur. "Stand up, stand still. You're all right. I'm all right. They're just going to make a video, okay? You can still see me. Look at me. It's okay." I hold her gaze, soothing her as best I know how, hoping I'm not telling her a lie, that I'm not about to be executed in front of her.

As much as I don't want to do die, I even more so don't want this innocent child to have to witness such a thing.

She goes still, the guard releases her, only to shove her toward the wall where the camera equipment is, out of the way and off-screen. He then stands a few feet away and levels the rifle at her face.

"Don't," I hear myself say, not quite begging but willing to, if it saves her life; she doesn't deserve this, even if I do. "Don't, please. Tell me what you

want, just...don't hurt the child."

"She's leverage," I hear Spaulding's voice from the doorway. "Cooperate, and she won't be harmed."

I look to Spaulding—a dove gray suit, today, with a white shirt, no tie. Snakeskin boots. Gold and diamond cufflinks. Not a hair out of place. He has a notecard in his hands, which he hands to me.

"Read this, when you are given the cue. Deviate from the words on the card in the slightest..." His eyes cut to Yelena, the threat clear.

I hold the card in my hand; I'm glad my hand isn't shaking, even if my knees are. If it was just me here, I'd play this differently. But with Yelena's innocent life hanging in the balance, I dare not challenge him.

Spaulding himself operates the equipment, turning on the lights, which blind me, adjusting the microphone, training the camera on me, testing the sound levels and mix and such. Then, he hits record on the camera and points at me.

I read what's on the card, verbatim. "Nicholas Harris, Anselm See, Lear Winter, Duke Silver, Puck Lawson, and the one known as Thresh. This video serves as your only warning. Any attempt at rescue will result in my immediate death, followed by the torture and execution of the small child, Yelena Konstantin. There is no negotiation. They know your faces. They know your tactics. If you care about our lives at all, you will wait for further instructions. That is all."

The camera continues to record, and I look to Spaulding for instructions—he grabs Yelena by the arm and shoves her toward me; as afraid of him as she is, she's smart enough to not fight him the way she did the guard. I don't doubt Spaulding would hesitate to at very least backhand her if she were to struggle.

I catch Yelena as she stumbles over to me. I hold her shoulders, feeling her whole body shiver and tremble with fear.

A moment, recording the fact that Yelena is thus far unharmed, and then Spaulding jerks a thumb at the rear wall, and I nudge her toward it. "Go on, little one. It's all right," I murmur.

She stands against the wall, big serious dark eyes watching me.

Spaulding moves into the frame, keeping his back to the camera without blocking its view of me. He withdraws a large .45, the handle plated in platinum and crusted with diamonds. Ridiculous. He holds it against his thigh, his eyes on me, blank and cold and inhuman.

“To show that I am serious,” he says, turning his head slightly to address the camera without directly showing his face. “I shall administer this *one* warning. Any incursion will result in the next round going through his skull.” A pause. “You’ve been warned.”

Blam!

The noise of the report is unexpected and deafening in the small room. I see Yelena clap her hands over her ears and drop to the floor—

As blinding agony shatters through me, radiating from my left elbow.

I clutch my arm to my elbow, teeth gritted against the pain—I hear myself groaning through my teeth.

Yelena is screaming.

“Shut the girl up,” Spaulding warns, “or I will.”

I roll to my back, crane my head up and look at Yelena. “Hey, look at me. Yelena, look at me.”

Her eyes remain squeezed shut, tears leaking out. She shakes her head.

“Yelena, I’m okay. You hear my voice, right? I’m okay. Just look at my eyes.” I do my best to keep my voice calm and normal, but I can’t do anything about the tightness in it from the pain. “I’m okay, Yelena.”

Her eyes crack open, and she sees me. Or, perhaps, sees me on the ground, with the crimson spatter on the white backdrop. And her eyes clench shut again. But, at least she isn’t screaming.

“Take them back to their cell,” Spaulding orders, and then saunters out of the cell.

The guard gestures at me, at the door. I work laboriously, painfully, to my feet. “Yelena. We have to go back, now.”

She looks at me, at my arm, a red ruin dripping blood down my forearm and sluicing off my fingertips onto the flagstones underneath. “He shot you.”

“Yes, he did.” I go for a reassuring smile, but I have a feeling it comes across as more of a grimace than anything. “But I’ll be okay.”

Her gaze is skeptical. “It hurts bad?”

“It doesn’t tickle,” I admit. “But I will live.”

“Why did he shoot you?”

“To make a point,” I say.

“What’s that mean?”

The guard gestures at the door, and I walk over to it, resting against the doorpost for a moment, dizzy from the pain, and then shuffle out into the

hallway, trying to keep my arm immobilized against my stomach, each movement causing agony.

Yelena follows, and then moves up beside me and takes my good hand. “You can squeeze if it hurts too bad,” she says.

I give her hand a little squeeze—guilt wracks me, because in this moment, with excruciating pain lancing through me, I’m glad for her company. Her little hand in mine, her quiet, serious voice...I’m glad I’m not alone. And I feel even more like shit for thinking such a thing.

We reach our cell, and I collapse onto the bench. Yelena sits beside me, on the side opposite the wounded arm. Leans against me.

“My daddy tells me it’s okay to cry if I got a boo-boo.” She looks up at me. “Are you gonna cry, ’Pollo?”

It hurts so bad, I could. “No,” I say through gritted teeth. “I am going to be okay.”

A long silence, as I work to contain the agony as it radiates in thrumming, pulsing waves.

“’Pollo?” Her little voice, so quiet, so small.

“Yes, Yelena?”

“Are your friends still going to rescue us?”

I have to give her hope. Even if I myself, deep down, wonder how even they will pull this off. “Yes, they will.”

“I don’t wanna be ex-cuted.”

“You won’t be. Nor shall I. My friends do not fail. They will not. They will come for us.”

“Will they make the bad man go away?”

“Yes, they will.”

“’Pollo?”

“Hmmm.”

“I wanna go home.”

I remove my T-shirt and tie it as tightly as I can bear around my arm, barely suppressing a groan as I do so.

“Me too,” I murmur, gasping as the wave of pain passes, somewhat. “Me too.”

NO GOING BACK

We walk along the dusty, hot, crowded streets of Carthage—you learn about Carthage in ancient history class, mostly in relation to Rome; what they don't tell you is Carthage is still around, now a residential suburb of Tunis, in Tunisia, on the northern coast of Africa. It's bizarre and oddly disorienting to walk these streets, a place which has been occupied since the ninth century B.C.E. It boggles the mind, to be honest. It's hard to not feel like a tourist, even if I'm here on deadly serious business. The buildings are low blocks, mostly whitewashed to reflect the punishing African sun. Duke is beside me, Alexei just ahead. We're meeting a contact of Alexei's.

We reach a particular building and enter—within, it's dark, with low ceilings and fans slowly, lazily stirring the air, which smells sweet, slightly acrid. Groups, trios, and pairs sit at low tables, sharing hookahs, which is the source of the smell, and the writhing clouds of smoke. It's nominally cooler in here, for which I'm thankful. Alexei weaves through the hookah cafe to a back corner table.

The man at the table is Black, about my age or a few years older, with a thick, well-groomed beard and a shaved head, wearing olive green cargo pants, combat boots, and a black tank top. He's enormously muscled, and glinting with a sheen of sweat. He idly scrolls on a phone as he periodically puts a mouthpiece to his lips, hollows his cheeks, and spews out the smoke. He looks up, spies Alexei, and juts his chin upward in greeting.

"Alexei," he says, his voice pitched low—he says it *ahhh-LEX-eeee*. "How are you, my friend?"

We sit at the table, me sandwiched between the men.

"I'm good, Thomas. *Spasibo* for meeting us. You learn something, *da*?"

Thomas nods, sucks again on the hookah, gestures at it with his phone in offering, but Alexei shakes his head. “I learn something you like, I think.” He sets the mouthpiece on the table, and his phone face-down as well, leaning back in the chair until the front legs tip up off the ground, thick arms crossing over his chest. “Very risky, what you ask me. You know?”

Alexei reaches into his back pocket and withdraws a manila envelope, slides it onto the table. “Is extra, for the risk. I think after this, maybe you go on a holiday, *da*? Somewhere temperate. And far from here.”

Thomas shrugs, opens the envelope, thumbs riffling the bills within, doing a quick count. “You are good friend, Alexei.” He lifts the envelope. “Even for cash, I would not do this for just anyone. But, after that day in Cairo...” he trails off, shrugging again. “For you, anything.” He shoves the envelope in one of the cargo pockets and buttons it closed, then tips the seat down and leans forward. “In southern Tunisia, several hours’ drive from here, is an old fort. Abandoned, or most people would assume so. Very old. Changed hands for centuries, then no one wanted it anymore. But now? I have heard that it was purchased very quietly only just one year ago.”

His voice is rhythmic, lilting, and he gestures with a pointer finger as he speaks.

“Until you ask me to find your friend, I do not care who owns it—it is no business of mine. But you ask me, where could someone take a famous billionaire so he disappears and no one would ask very many questions? And I think to myself, Thomas, that old fort, it’s just the place, yes? So I take a little trip. Just to look around, of course. It is a very pretty place, down there. The ocean, have you ever seen water look so green? I do not think you have, until you have been there. This old fort, it’s not much to look at. The walls, they are breaking down. Much of the roof has fallen in. Still abandoned, I would think, to look at it. But I look closer, and what do I see? Tire tracks!” He pokes the table with his gesturing finger. “Deep tracks. From a heavy truck. They go up to the fort, through the gate, and stop. And you know what I realize? These old forts...they have jails, yes? Deep under the ground. And such a place? Who could ever see if you have someone hidden down there? Only the rats and the scorpions. And me, because I am crazy, and I will do just about anything for money.”

“You went inside?” Alexei asks.

Thomas shakes his head. “Inside? No, no. There were guards. But that is enough for me to know that someone is keeping someone or something down

there, if they need to post guards underground in a fortress which has been abandoned for more centuries than your American friend's country has existed."

Duke speaks for the first time. "How many guards, do you know?"

Thomas eyes him. "Guards are like rat—the one or two which you see means many more you do not see. I see five or six here, five or six there. They are not especially vigilant, because they are very far from anywhere and it is a fortress, hmmm? Who would be crazy enough to try anything?"

"Which is why I'd have the element of surprise, right?" Duke says.

Thomas shrugs. "Maybe yes, you would surprise them. If you are a very, very good fighter, you maybe could get some of them. If you are Rambo from the Hollywood movie, you might even find your friends. But to get out again, alive?" A dismissive wave of his hand. "Not so easy."

Duke crosses his arms over his chest—as muscular as Thomas is, Duke makes him seem scrawny. "I make Rambo look like a pussy."

Thomas laughs good-naturedly. "I know who you are, Duke Silver, and I believe you!" He goes serious, shaking his head. "But even for you, this is impossible. If you have an army, maybe you will win. But then, your friends are dead by the time you get to them."

Duke frowns. "You know who I am?"

Thomas laughs uproariously. "You are a legend, my friend! I am a mercenary, and I cut my teeth hearing stories of your exploits, you and your friends. And then, a giant of a man with a red ponytail shows up in Tunis, with my good friend Alexei, and they are asking about someone whose name people around here dare not even whisper? Who could it be, but the legend himself, Duke Silver?"

"I thought I was going incognito."

Thomas snorts. "Bah. You could not. But no worries, around here, people also know who *I* am. And I tell them, you have seen no one. You have heard no questions being asked." His eyes go to me. "Most especially, no one has seen any beautiful blond American girls."

"So what do we do, if an assault isn't an option?" I ask. "We *have* to get them out of there. *Have* to."

He regards me seriously, thoughtfully. "From the inside, maybe." He eyes Alexei again. "But this idea, it is truly crazy. I would be a fool to even suggest it, let alone help you pull it off."

Duke growls. "If you know who I am, then you must know the kind of

resources I can pull down.”

Thomas nods. “Of course. And I know who *she* is,” he says, flicking a finger at me. “Who her father is. What is your point?”

“The point is, Thomas,” Duke says, his voice low, growling, and razor-sharp. “You’re with us, or you’re against us. And that’s not a threat, it’s a promise. Meaning, if you help us, I’ll fuckin’ drown you in money. Okay?”

Thomas chuckles. “Like the angry Scottish duck from the cartoons, yes? Scrooge? He wears the swimming suit and dives into a sea of gold coins.”

Duke leans back with a huff. “If that’s your kink, sure.”

Thomas just snickers again. “It would not be comfortable in reality, so I think maybe I will take the suitcases full of cash like in your wonderful action movies.” He looks at me. “You, in particular, will not like what I am going to suggest.”

I hold his gaze. “I love him. There’s nothing I won’t do.”

Thomas’s humor is mercurial, coming and going as quickly as a tropical midday squall. He’s serious again, now. “So you say. But the only way in there is to be a guard, or to be...merchandise.”

Duke rumbles in warning. “Fuck no.”

Alexei runs his fingers through his hair, scraping the salt-and-pepper locks back over his scalp. “Explain.”

Thomas flips his phone over and searches for something—when he finds it, he twists the phone around to face us, landscape-oriented. On the screen is a video, which he taps to play. It’s grainy, shaky, and taken from far away, so even zoomed it’s hard to make out much. It’s the fortress in question, a looming, squat structure of giant stone blocks, crumbling with age—it must be at least a thousand years old. There’s an opening where a giant gate must have been in ages past, now simply a wide notch in the stone walls. On the other side, a small courtyard, which is the focus of the video. There’s a truck backed into the courtyard, a giant ex-military truck, the kind of thing used to move troops around. Several armed guards stand around the truck, carrying M-16s, AK-47s, HKs, and Uzis—their focus is on the rear of the truck, which from this angle is hidden.

For a moment, it’s just the guards standing there, waiting. And then a woman appears, clearly having just hopped or been hauled down from the bed of the truck. One of the guards gestures with his barrel, and the woman walks, head down, shoulders hunched, into the bulk of the fortress. The video is being recorded from too far away to make out much of anything except

rough features, but it's apparent the girl is a prisoner, perhaps even bound wrists in front of her. Another woman makes the short trip, and another. I count twenty-six in all. When they're done unloading, two of the guards take a side of the gate, lift it up, latch it, and then one of them whacks the side of the truck twice with a fist, and the mammoth vehicle trundles out of the courtyard and out of the frame—leaving at least a dozen guards milling around and chatting. Slowly, they enter the building where the women had gone, and then, just like that, it's an old ruin once more.

“No fucking way,” Duke growls, rage in his tone. “Not a fucking chance in hell.”

“Duke,” I say, swallowing hard. “I want to hear his idea.”

Thomas eyes me curiously. “You would consider it.”

Duke looks at me, stabs a finger at me. “Do *not* fuckin’ *consider* it for a single goddamn second, Corinna Abigail Roth.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “You don’t get to use my full name, Duke... middle name...Silver.” Duke can’t help but chuckle at that. “I also don’t remember asking your permission.”

“I wouldn’t send someone I hated into the lion’s den like this fool is suggesting—much less you.”

“When I said there’s nothing I wouldn’t do, I meant it.” I turn to Thomas. “But the only way me going undercover or whatever makes any sense is if there’s a plan to get us out.”

Thomas bobs his head side to side. “I did not say there was a plan—only an idea. You go in, pretending to be ‘merchandise’.” He uses finger quotes, here. “Someone else would have to be one of the guards, or...the truck driver, or something. If the girls go there, I think also there are people going there to buy them. So if you can find someone to pose as a buyer...” he gestures at me. “She finds the people you wish to free. The buyer is there to make sure nothing happens to her. On the outside, there will be a distraction. A shooting of the truck, after the girls are unloaded. Chaos, explosions, the killing of guards.” He indicates Duke. “This is where you come in. Make off with your imprisoned friends, and we have some kind of getaway ready not too very far away. It is the best I can come up with.”

Alexei’s eyes go to me. “Is a stupid plan, Miss Roth.” He sighs. “But I think is only one will work.”

Duke shakes his head. “Fuck no.”

I rub my temples. “So I get myself kidnapped by...” I drop my voice and

lean forward, whispering. “By Spaulding’s traffickers.” I resume a more normal tone. “I’m at their mercy all the way into the fortress. Once in, I have to hope and pray I find a way to escape wherever we’re being held, without being raped or killed. Then I have to find Apollo and Yelena, somehow get them free from wherever *they’re* being held. My only protection is... someone? Someone acting like a buyer, or something. Meanwhile, you guys attack a fortified position, outnumbered by at least a dozen to one. Then, once all that is done, me, Apollo, Yelena, and my so-called buyer will have to escape the fortress, reach you guys outside the fortress—and *then* we finally get away. Do I have that right?”

Thomas nods, shrugs. “Yes, that is it, more or less.”

I look at Alexei, and then Duke. “You guys have a better idea?”

Neither says a word.

Duke leans his elbows on the table, clutching his head. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck!* Your dad would kill me. And then your mom would resurrect me so *she* can kill me.”

Alexei rubs his jaw. “Many ways it can go wrong.”

“With a very small margin of success,” Duke adds.

A new voice enters the conversation. “But it really is the only thing we have.”

I start, looking to my right, over my shoulder, where the voice came from—a man at a nearby table, just within earshot; he’s wearing an olive drab bucket hat, dirty jeans, and a ratty gray T-shirt. He’s alone, his back to the room. I’d barely noticed him—I don’t know that even Duke had really seen him. Has he been here this whole time, or did he just arrive? I honestly can’t say.

Duke, for his part, frowns, peers at the newcomer, and then laughs. “Goddammit, Anselm. I fuckin’ hate it when you do that.”

I look again—he’s got a fake beard on, but the only reason I know it’s fake is because I’m now aware of who he really is, and that Anselm doesn’t have a beard—otherwise, there’s no way to tell it’s fake, so well done is it. He’s wearing sunglasses, as well, mirrored aviators—and he’s wearing them indoors. Not like Anselm at all, who is the least pretentious person I know.

It’s just enough of a disguise that I may not have recognized him even if I’d seen his face. But facing away, hunched over, silently puffing on a hookah? Even Duke didn’t recognize him, and they’ve known each other for thirty years.

Anselm shoves his chair toward our table, the back of it facing us, and straddles it, removing the sunglasses. He produces a cell phone from a pocket, sets it on the table, and presses play on a video he's got cued up.

It's Apollo. His face is carved from stone, expressionless. He's holding a note card, from which he reads in a monotone voice, not looking at the camera—his eyes flick, once, briefly, away from the note card, to the right. At some off-screen. Yelena? Spaulding?

“...If you care about our lives at all, you will wait for further instructions. That is all.” His voice trails off.

Yelena stumbles on-screen, as if pushed. Apollo catches her, his hands resting possessively on her shoulders. She's unharmed, but visibly terrified. Her eyes are fixed off-screen—on Spaulding, I imagine.

She flinches, shrinks against Apollo—at some silent command from the off-screen presence, I assume.

“Go on, little one,” Apollo murmurs, his voice calm, soothing. “It's all right.”

Yelena slowly walks off-screen, shoulders hunched up around her ears, her steps tentative.

A man moves into the frame, then, his back to the camera. He's tall, slender, with golden blond hair coiffured to the side, perfectly styled. His suit is immaculate, tailored. He has a pistol in his hand. He looks over his shoulder at the camera, not quite revealing his face.

“To show that I am serious,” he says, his smooth voice betraying an American southern twang. “I shall administer this *one* warning. Any incursion will result in the next round going through his skull.” A pause. “You've been warned.”

He lifts the pistol and fires in one motion—I hear a scream off-camera: Yelena. Apollo's arm explodes red at the elbow. He immediately curls around it, clamping the wounded arm to his belly, but his eyes are on Yelena, off-screen.

The video ends.

“It was sent to Harris a few hours ago. Apollo and Yelena must be rescued from within *before* any external assault can be made.” He retrieves his phone and pockets it. “My sources say that Spaulding is heavily guarded at all times, and that at any sign of danger, he is whisked away. So timing will be key. Rin, you must free Apollo and Yelena from their cell without alerting the rest of the personnel within, and you must wait to make your

move to escape until after we have begun our assault. If he assumes his prize prisoners are secure he will allow himself to be removed from the danger, and wait until his crew can deal with the insurgency. But if he thinks anything is amiss, he will likely just go in and execute them rather than risk their escape.” He muses for a moment, then continues. “It must be a sudden and comprehensive assault from multiple angles, not leaving him any time to react except to escape. Then, you, Corinna, must effect your escape from the compound with Apollo and Yelena. We will have a vehicle waiting just outside with covering fire. The vehicle then will take you to a rendezvous a few miles away, where Harris will be waiting with a helo for extraction.”

“Uncle Harry is coming?” I ask.

Anselm nods. “All hands are on deck for this operation.”

Duke stares at me. “I don’t like it. At fuckin’ all. You’re walking into something you got no capacity to understand, Rin. You’re not posing as a hooker for a police sting, here. And shit, even that’s dangerous as hell. This? It’s fuckin’ suicide, and that’s the best-case scenario. Worst case is, you get gang-raped and then sold into real, actual fuckin’ slavery. And sure, we’d pull down the gates of hell itself to get you back, but not before you went through a nightmare you cannot *begin* to fathom.”

“He is not incorrect, Corinna,” Anselm says. “You bear the most risk of all of us. We are all experienced in the risks of combat. Your part of this plan...?” He shakes his head, the rest unspoken but clear.

“I admit the idea of this plan makes me so scared I could puke.” I look from Alexei to Duke to Anselm. “But is there another way? That won’t get him killed, I mean.”

“This is dicey enough as it is,” Duke says. “There’s any number of ways it could go off the rails. But I’ve worked it over in my head a dozen ways, and I just don’t see it. Spaulding is clearly willing to kill Apollo, and probably the girl too. He’s that kind of a monster. But I don’t see a way of luring him out that won’t make him suspect something. You’ve got to have them hidden until the fireworks start, and then you’ll have to double-time it after we’ve gotten Spaulding to duck and run.”

“He’s in a fortified position,” Thomas points out. “Why would he run? Why wouldn’t he simply go down and wait it out?”

“Because we’re going to attack when the buyers arrive.” Anselm toys with the arm of his sunglasses. “I can confirm with a high degree of certainty that there will be a shipment of girls arriving at the fortress within the next

few days—Corinna must be on that truck. A few hours after the girls arrive, there will be a convoy of buyers. My sources tell me this is Spaulding’s pattern. His...M-O. That is the phrase, *ja*? Modus operandi? He will go out to greet them himself. This is when we will attack. If we can put a round through his skull at this time, all the better. But I foresee him getting away initially.” There’s a pause, and his voice drops to a hiss. “I will hunt him down, and I will personally put my knife between his *verdammten* ribs.” The murderous venom in Anselm’s voice shocks me to my core—the look in his eyes makes my blood turn to ice.

“Anselm, jeez.”

He only regards me with a cool expression. “You do not know the things I have discovered the last few days, *liebchen*. He is evil—evil. Your beloved’s grandfather...he trafficked in women, it is true. But those women were at least adults, and most of them had already chosen that profession—for the most part Vitaly only moved them from place to place, client to client. Perhaps they did not have a choice at that point, and it is disgusting that he did this—I do not excuse it. But Spaulding? I will have nightmares of the things I learned...the things I saw. Children. Little girls. Barely teenagers, at best. Passed from person to person, like...” he trails off. “No, what Spaulding does is not merely trafficking in prostitutes, even unwilling ones. He is worse—*much* worse.”

Duke looks at me. “And you’re gonna put yourself into that?”

Thomas looks at me. “Forgive me for how this will sound...” His eyes go to Anselm. “But is she not too old, in that case?”

Anselm shakes his head. “We are fortunate, in this. The young ones are his personal predilection. His playthings. The fortress is a place of business, and the bulk of his operation is in adults, not children. Even sex traffickers generally draw the line somewhere. This operation at the fortress is a staging ground for moving women to other venues. The buyers are what in another industry you would call middlemen, dealing not in the sale of the merchandise to the customer, but in moving the goods to the local distribution operators, the pimps, brothels, and madams, who then purvey them to the customer.” He exhales slowly. “This is why Corinna even stands a chance in hell of succeeding without being...harmed. It is business—and Spaulding does not allow his staff to *sample* the wares, so to speak. He himself will, but since this shipment is to be adult women, he will not be interested.”

“What about Yelena?” I ask.

Another shake of his head. “His preferred age is between eleven and thirteen. Yelena is safe from him—in that sense, at least. I know for a fact he would not hesitate to kill her, however.”

I’m chewing on my lower lip with agitated, nervous energy as I think about the plan we’ve outlined. “How do I find him? How do I rescue him? Where do we go? I can’t pick locks and I can’t guarantee I’ll find a gun.”

Thomas frowns. “Have you any training?”

I shrug. “I’ve learned self-defense from Sasha since I was a little girl. There was never anything like belts or tests, just...don’t let him get his hands on me—and the older I got, the harder he’d try. He even taught us how to counter someone with a knife. We also spent time at the range every week practicing with pistols, so I can hit what I’m aiming at.” I let out a breath. “Well, paper targets, at least.”

Alexei glances at me. “Your shooting practice. Was it range only?”

I shake my head. “The range was just what we called it. It wasn’t just a distance shooting thing. There was an underground room with targets Sasha could position in various places, with obstacles and fake doorways and noncombatant targets and stuff like that. He called it a mini C-Q-C training facility. So I’d have to, like, walk through rooms and find and hit targets, and Sasha would be there with a paintball gun, trying to hit me—I had to clear all the targets without being tagged.”

Duke frowns at me. “Wait, now. Hold on. You never told me this. I designed that practice compound—I assumed only the A1S operatives used it to keep their skills sharp.”

I shrug. “I assumed you knew—it’s not a secret Cal and I both worked at the range all growing up. We would have competitions, see who could clear the course fastest.”

Alexei smirks at me. “I am curious—who won?”

“Me.” I grin back. “At first just because I was older. But then once Cal was old enough to get good, I had to step up my game—and I guess I’m pretty competitive, because I couldn’t handle losing. He beat me...twice? Maybe three times, and we’d practice every week and have a competition every month, judged by Sasha, usually.”

Duke snorts. “When you said range, I assumed you meant the actual range.”

“We just called the whole compound the range as a euphemism for the

whole training facility.”

His frown deepens. “So you can actually, like, room clear and shit?”

“Yes.” I grin. “He would also hide in the rooms and attack us bare-hands, so we’d have to use hand-to-hand combat as well as our firearms.”

“This wasn’t with live firearms, though, I assume,” Duke clarifies.

“If Sasha was in there with us, no, that was all paintball or Airsoft. If it was strict room clearing, it was live weapons and he was in the command booth.”

“You ask this?” Alexei grumbles at Duke. “You know Sasha so long as you know me. He is not dummy.”

Duke waves a hand. “I know, I know. CQC training is what I do, most of the time. The question was force of habit.”

“What kind of idiot would train room clearing with live weapons and live combatants?” Anselm asks. “No one is that stupid, and I know Sasha is not.”

Duke snorts. “You’d think.”

“I believe it was your nineteenth-century author Mark Twain who once said you should never underestimate the power of human stupidity,” Thomas says. “Now. We have spent enough time talking. We must find a contact to be the buyer, and we must prep for the assault.”

Alexei glances at him. “I only paid you for the information, my friend. I do not ask you to participate in the assault.”

Thomas rolls his heavy shoulders, dark skin glistening dully in the dim light. A wicked grin crosses his lips. “I do this for the sake of my conscience, Alexei. The little girl a captive of a pedophile sex trafficker?” He gestures at me. “A billionaire’s daughter placing herself as the inside man on a multifront assault against a numerically superior foe in a fortified position?” He gestures at the rest of the men, including Alexei. “And a chance to work with the most famous mercenary security firm in modern history? I would not miss this for the world, my old friend. Oh no, not for anything.” His teeth are white and straight as he grins broadly at me. “But, I would not refuse a bonus when this is all over.”

I nod at him. “You’ll get it, Thomas. Like my uncle Duke said—you help us with this, and I’ll see that my father buries you in more money than you know what to do with.”

“It will be an honor, in that case.” He extends his hand to me, and I shake it.

Anselm taps the table to get our attention. “I have the contact.” He

glances at me. “I will personally vouch for him. I would not trust you with just anyone. But he is someone who can pass for the kind of person we need him to pretend to be. Such is his reputation. It is a reputation he encourages, but it is not the truth of the man he is.”

“The next question is how do we get me on that truck?” I ask. “Let me clarify—how do we get me on that truck without dangling me out there as bait for actual traffickers?”

Everyone is silent.

“That’s the part I like least,” Duke says. “I don’t know that there is a way to mitigate that risk entirely. Which means we cannot be sure that Spaulding’s men won’t take liberties.”

Anselm shakes his head. “Spaulding’s law on this is absolute. The merchandise is for buyers only. Each shipment is overseen by someone Spaulding trusts, and if someone takes too much of a liberty with the girls, that person is shot on sight. He prides himself on delivering unsullied goods, so to speak—fresh meat in good condition, I heard it said. If his *product* arrives battered and used, he will not get top dollar.” His voice is bitter and angry as he speaks of human women as if they are merely objects to be sold—his disgust and rage are clear in his tone and expression. “I do not minimize the risk you take, Corinna. It is not outside the realm of possibility that someone would be willing to risk death, especially for someone so attractive as you are. It is unlikely, however. From all that I have learned—and my sources are very close to the subject, if not first-degree witnesses—the most you will endure on the journey from truck to fortress is some shoving, and perhaps some overly eager wandering hands, but even that is not well tolerated. A grope will mean a reprimand, perhaps a fist for the person guilty of the infraction. It is outright rape and unnecessary violence which would result in visible damage that is not allowed.”

Thomas nods in agreement. “For all that he is a vile pig in need of a painful death, he does run a tight organization. It is simply to protect his own bottom line, however, and not from any kind of altruism. It simply works in our favor, for it means our inside man does not unduly risk herself beyond what is...reasonable.”

I close my eyes. “For Apollo. And Yelena.”

“I will make the call,” Anselm says.

“I have the way onto the truck,” Thomas says. “I wish I did not, but I do.” He winces. “Someone I once considered a friend...he is one of the locals who

will sometimes do the driving for Spaulding's operation. They travel many miles over many hours, and they must rotate drivers who know the area. My *friend* is one such."

"And you trust this friend?" Alexei asks.

Thomas's expression is unpleasant. "I possess...leverage over him. He will do as I ask."

"Go time," Duke says, his eyes on me, worried.

When everyone has scattered to make their various phone calls and arrangements, it's just Duke and me for a moment.

"My parents don't need to know about this until after," I say, touching his shoulder. "Okay?"

Duke just nods, looking unhappy. "I don't like it, Rin. I know there's not much by options, but I don't like it. It's my job to protect you, and here I'm putting you in unimaginable danger." He winces. "Your dad is going to kill me. Actual murder." He shakes his head. "I can't believe I'm allowing this."

I shake my head. "You're not allowing me to do anything. I'm *choosing* this. I'm an adult, and for a civilian, I'm actually very well trained for something like this. I never expected to need the training, that's the funny thing. It always felt like a game to Cal and me." I shudder. "Suddenly, it's all very much not a game."

"You can't hesitate, Rin." He holds my shoulder. "You rely on your training, your instincts." His pale blue eyes are deep, serious in a way Duke rarely is. "Bury your soul deep, Rin. There's no conscience. No good or bad, no right or wrong. There's just the objective—get Apollo, Yelena, and yourself to safety. You kill anyone—*anyone*—who gets in the way, who tries to stop you. You just shut your emotions down—there will be time to be afraid and sick to your stomach and all that after."

I hold his hand as it rests on my shoulder. "I can do this."

He nods. "If anyone can, you can." He smiles. "You're your mother's daughter, and your mother is the most badass woman I've ever met—tied with Layla, that is."

"So it's a three-way tie?"

He shrugs. "If I start ranking the women in my life, I'll get in trouble eight different ways," he says, snickering. "My point is, you're your mother's daughter, and I know she wouldn't hesitate to do what you're doing, in your place. She may hate me for not trying harder to stop you, but I know I couldn't stop her either, so..."

I pat his hand as we leave the hookah cafe. “Don’t worry, Uncle Duke, I’ll protect you from Mom.”

He just cocks an eyebrow at me. “Hey, she can be scary.”

I laugh. “Believe me, I know. She’s *my* mother, after all.”

Thomas jogs over to us from the street corner, pocketing his phone, joining us and directing us across the street. “Our timeline has moved up, I am afraid. My friend says the convoy is supposed to arrive in a couple of hours—it stops outside of the city to refuel and change drivers and allow the women to pee and stretch their legs. This is where you will join them. My friend will say he found you, a lone tourist lost in the wrong part of town in a city she had no business being in.” His expression is no longer so jovial as when I first met him an hour or two ago. “It is a very sad truth that this is all too believable.”

“What do I need to do?” I ask, as we round a corner into a narrow, dead-end alley.

“You will need to act scared—and once you meet my friend and see the convoy, I do not think it will be too big of an act. I think maybe some dirt. If we could make fake bruise for you on your cheek, so show you fought him? That would be best. But time is short. We have to get you to the meeting place.” He indicates a sixty-year-old Land Rover, dusty and ancient but well-maintained. “Get in, everyone.”

Anselm and Alexei arrive behind us, separately, and we pile into the vehicle, too many of us and not enough seats—there’s a second-row bench, and behind that, two more benches parallel to the length of the vehicle, facing in. I sit on one of these with Anselm beside me.

Anselm digs in a pocket and produces two small, thin lengths of metal and a lock. “A crash course on lock-picking.”

He shows me how to use the two pieces of metal to pick the lock, and then has me try. It feels impossible at first, in the back of jouncing SUV, but after some false starts and failed attempts, I get it. And once I’ve gotten it once, I understand the basic principles and mechanics of it. Thirty minutes of practice isn’t enough to make me an expert by any stretch of the imagination, but it’s a start.

“Some female operatives I know hide these in their hair, and others in the underwire part of their bra,” Anselm says, taking the lock from me and leaving me with the lockpicks.

I consider. “I feel like they may mess with my hair. The bra feels safer, to

me. Harder to access quickly, but less likely that they'll fall out or be found."

"I agree."

I pull my arms inside my T-shirt and remove my bra, and then slide my arms back out of the sleeves—I borrow Anselm's knife to make a slit in the bra along the underwire, and then slide the lockpicks inside, and put the undergarment back on. Retrieving them again will require taking the bra off, probably, but I feel confident they won't be found. As long as they don't take the bra, that is. But I can't let myself imagine that scenario, and why such a circumstance would occur.

I shut that line of thinking down—with extreme difficulty, I force my mind away from that and force myself to focus on the present—on what I can do, what I am doing. Still, my hands shake, and my palms are clammy, and my stomach roils with uncertainty and nerves.

"I tried to think of some way of letting you smuggle in a weapon. A knife, at least. But I must assume you will be searched. This is the best I can do."

He reaches into a different pocket and produces a metal card, about the thickness of a thicker-than-normal credit card; examining it, I discover it is a knife, cleverly designed so that it unfolds from the card shape into a small knife.

I unfold and refold it a few times. "Great, but...where should I keep it that they won't find it?"

He indicates my foot. "Give me your boot." I remove my right boot, and he reaches into it, lifting the insole and placing the card-knife inside. "It will be uncomfortable—you must not give away any hint of that discomfort, no limping, no walking strangely. And then, once you are certain you will not be searched again, you can put it in your pocket."

I replace the boot—not giving away that I've got a knife under my heel will be harder than acting afraid, I think. "I didn't do any training with knives," I say. "Only how to disarm someone else with one, and that was focused on breaking wrists and elbows, incapacitating, and getting away."

He nods. "It is so you have at least *something*." He taps his throat. "If you must use it, aim here." Another tap to the inside of his thigh, high up. "Or here, on either leg. Anywhere else will hurt them, definitely slow them down, but to kill quickly, it must be one of those places. Don't try to fight with the knife—dramatic knife fights are Hollywood bullshit. You stay away out of reach until you see an opening to hit one of the two places, throat or femoral artery. You make your strike, once, *hard*, and then it's done. If your opponent

has a knife as well, you must accept that you *will* be cut.”

I nod, swallowing hard. “Am I crazy for hoping to get a gun instead?” I shudder. “Killing someone with a knife sounds...worse, somehow.”

He shrugs. “Not crazy. It is worse. By all means, getting a gun into your hands is your number one priority. But remember the plan—do not make your presence known if at all possible until after we have begun.”

“How will I know when you’ve started your assault?”

“You will know.” A faint smile. “It will be...very much apparent.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure I like how that sounds.

A long silence. The SUV bounces, rattles, rumbles. Dirt flies behind us in a cloud—we’ve left the city proper and are on the outskirts, now.

With every mile, my stomach rises higher into my throat.

Finally, I feel the Rover begin to slow.

“Be ready,” Thomas calls back. “I see my friend.”

I look at Anselm. “I’m scared. What if I fail?”

He regards me steadily. “You will not.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you are a Roth.” He smiles, then, wrapping an arm around my shoulders in a rare show of affection. “And because you know that you cannot.”

“For Apollo and Yelena.”

“For Apollo and Yelena,” he echoes.

We slow to a stop. Tunis is behind us, a low line of blocks against the horizon. Dust skirls around us, tasting gritty and bitter in my mouth, crunching between my molars—the back of the Land Rover is open to the elements, no roof or walls, just bare metal roll bars where a soft top had once gone, long ago.

There’s a battered white Toyota pickup older even than the Land Rover we’re in. A man leans against it, arms crossed over his chest—he’s Arabic, of an ethnicity I am not worldly enough to determine; he wears khakis over flip flops and a white polo shirt with blue stripes, and has a short, neat beard and short black hair combed to the side.

Thomas jumps out from behind the wheel and strides over to the other man—they converse in low tones in what sounds like a complex combination of Arabic, an African dialect, and English.

Thomas gestures to me, and, knees knocking, I hop over the side and to the ground, joining Thomas and his friend at the truck.

Thomas gestures at his friend. “This is Ahmed.”

Ahmed nods at me, his eyes unfriendly and cold. A glance at Thomas. “She is too perfect. No one believe I take her, not so much as one hair out of place.”

I’ve long since gotten rid of all of my personal belongings. But he’s right—my hair is neatly bound back in a ponytail, my clothes are clean and nice, if a bit wrinkled and sweaty. I simply look too put together to be anyone’s captive.

I look at Thomas. “Hit me.”

He frowns. “No.”

“There’s no time for bullshit,” I snap. “Hit me. Hard enough to leave a bruise, maybe split my lip.”

“I do not hit women.”

“I’ve sparred full contact with trained killers, Thomas. I can take a punch. And I’m telling you to do it.” I brace myself, teeth clenched.

Thomas lets out a breath, and then his closed fist rockets into my face, smashing hard against my mouth and cheek. My head is rocked backward, pain lancing through me. Nothing I can’t take—Sasha has hit me harder when I failed to block. My lip is definitely split, and I’ll have a hell of a bruise. Before I can recover, Thomas’s arm goes around my neck, putting me in a supine headlock, cutting off my air supply. I hear shouts from Duke and the other, and instead of immediately freeing myself, I wave them off. Then, I make quick work of getting out of Thomas’s headlock, which leaves my hair messed up—the intention all along.

I straighten, panting, and dab at my lip. Duke, Anselm, and Alexei are all a few feet away, weapons drawn and trained on Thomas. “Stand down, guys. I told him to hit me.”

Ahmed hasn’t reacted at all. Now, he looks me over, nodding once. “Better. Now she look like a prisoner.” He indicates the truck with a rough jerk of his chin. “We go, now. Convoy will arrive soon.”

I look at the men, head held high. “See you soon.” Duke moves toward me, but I stop him with an outstretched hand. “No. Better to not.”

Duke, looking very, very pissed off, backs up. “No hesitation, Rinny.”

“Don’t fucking call me Rinny,” I snap. “You know I hate that.”

He just smirks. “I know. You need to be pissed. Pissed is better than scared.”

Ahmed reaches into his back pocket and comes up with a pair of black

zip ties. “You must be bound.”

I grit my teeth against the rippling fear—I don’t know this man, and have only Thomas’s word that he’s trustworthy. I’m really going into the lion’s den, now.

I allow him to bind my wrists, fastening the ends of the zip ties together and then around my wrists, zipping them so tight it hurts.

“Tight is good,” Ahmed says. “Tight, can break.”

“He is right. Hold your wrists apart, like so.” He presses his wrists together as if bound and then wedges the heels of his palms as far apart as they can go, without moving his wrists away from each other. “Then, smash on your knee, so hard as you possibly can.” He brings his knee up and smashes his wrists down on his knee, allowing his wrists to burst apart. “It will hurt. But it will break them and you are free.”

Ahmed lifts his chin at my wrists. “You struggle. Is good. Look more real, to have hurts on your wrist.”

I walk over to the truck and wait by the rear passenger door. My heart is pounding out of my chest, fear like a hot bar in my throat.

Ahmed opens the door and slides in, scooting to the middle.

The door closes—it’s stiflingly hot in the cab even with the windows down, smells of decades worth of cigarette smoke and body odor. Through the window, I see Alexei, Thomas, Duke, and Anselm standing together, watching me. None of them look happy.

Good.

If they’re unhappy, the bad guys are going to have a bad time.

Ahmed gets into the truck, starts the motor with a rattling chug, and then we’re clattering away to the south, leaving Tunis—and everyone I know, along with the last vestiges of safety—behind.

“You are brave,” Ahmed says, apropos of nothing. “Stupid. But brave.”

“They have the man I love, and an innocent little girl.” I *sound* brave—resolved, determined. I wish I felt that way inside; in reality, I’m terrified, shaking all over.

Ahmed frowns. “A little girl?”

“Four, maybe five. His little cousin. They took her to make him cooperate.”

Ahmed’s frown deepens. “I have a daughter. Just four. If anyone was to take her? I would kill everyone, until she was back.”

“That’s why I’m doing this.”

He nods. “Is good you tell me.” A glance at me in the rearview mirror. “I work for them. I drive trucks. I see what they do. Is no good. But I need the money, huh? They pay best. I don’t like it, you know.”

“I’m not judging. You’re helping us, after all.”

“Thomas save my life, once. I owe bad people much money. Thomas pays. Says someday, he ask for a favor.” He shrugs. “I am not a good man. But for a little girl, like my Aiza? I do this.”

“You’re doing the right thing, Ahmed.”

He shrugs. After a while, he eyes me again. “We reach the convoy, I must not be so good to you. Do not take it to heart. I will keep my eyes upon you.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

A WHILE LATER, we reach an outpost in the middle of nowhere, just a small hut with a large, freestanding gas drum and pump. At the pump is a large truck like I’d seen in the video. Several men mill around it, chatting, casually wielding automatic rifles.

Ahmed sits straighter behind the wheel, glances at me in the mirror. “Have courage.”

I nod, swallowing around the hot iron bar of fear in my throat. I can’t summon words.

We stop.

Ahmed opens the door, reaches in, and roughly drags me out, barely allowing me time to cooperate, to find my feet. It’s not much of an act to struggle against his hold, shooting hateful daggers at him with my eyes, at the men around me.

There’s rapid conversation in an overlap of languages I don’t understand.

Gestures, back and forth, at me, at the truck.

Ahmed gestures back the way we came, at me.

Knowing I need to sell this, I try to break away, as if I’d rather run into the desert and die there than submit to what I know is coming.

Ahmed yanks me back by my ponytail—he isn’t gentle. He can’t be, to sell this. I fall to the ground awkwardly, dirt scraping at my cheek, stinging in my cut lip.

I work gracelessly to my feet, spitting dirty, bloody saliva. Ahmed’s eyes

betray something vicious. “I do you favor, girl—you run, you die. Alive, you are worth money. If you make yourself more trouble than you are worth, you are dead.” He pinches my face between hard, cruel fingers, prying my jaw apart. “Understand?”

I stare back at him with hate and fear in my eyes—suddenly I can only hope this is all part of the charade for him. I’m on my own. I’m bound, surrounded by armed sex traffickers, about to be shipped to a compound for sale. And I have to rescue myself.

And then find and rescue Apollo.

It’s all in my hands—it’s all on me.

I feel my bladder threatening to give out from the raw shedding pulse of terror; I let that fear show in my eyes as I hesitantly nod at Ahmed.

What have I done?

What have I gotten myself into?

I’m shoved toward the back of the truck—by one of the other men, not Ahmed, who is receiving a stack of bills from one of the men. Makes sense that he’d get a cut, if he provided *merchandise*. The heavy tailgate is unlatched on both sides and hanging down. Within, some twenty, maybe twenty-five women huddle on the benches on either side of the truck bed. Most have bruises or split lips like me, others no visible signs of struggle. They are of all races and appearances, but they are all within the range of eighteen to thirty at most, and all are fairly attractive. No one is unduly overweight, or scarred, or otherwise undesirable to the type of men who are the prospective clients. They all stare at me, their eyes betraying fear like mine.

One girl, as I am shoved up and in—with a wholly unnecessary groping of my ass—sobs noisily. The guard who shoved me up into the tailgate snaps something at her, bringing his rifle around and pointing it at her. The sobbing girl looks East Asian, so I doubt she understood him any better than I do, but the meaning is clear: shut up.

She silences.

The tailgate slams up into place, and bolts are shoved home, chains rattling as they’re fastened.

A huge diesel motor catches to life with a clattering chug.

Doors slam closed, several in quick succession.

Then, with a jerk, we’re in motion.

I’m fully committed now.

There's no going back.
I can do this.
I must.
For Apollo.

SHELL GAMES

My ruined arm throbs like the fires of hell. I used my good hand and my teeth to rip my shirt into strips so I could fashion a crude sling, one strip cinched around the wound, the rest knotted together around my neck so I can rest my arm in it.

My suit coat was long since discarded, left on the truck which had taken me from the cargo plane to wherever I am—it had grown oppressively hot, and I'd stripped off the coat first, then the button-down. When I'd heard the motor slow and felt us turning, I'd put the button-down back on—out of habit, I think. Out of some instinct to wear formal clothes like some kind of mental armor. So, I'd removed the button-down, ripped the T-shirt into a bandage and sling, and was now wearing the button-down over the bandage.

There is not a moment it doesn't hurt worse than any pain I've experienced. Albeit, I've never been shot before.

Yelena is a tough little girl. She stays near me, always mindful of my wounded side. Her serious dark eyes watch my every move, watch my face. She knows I'm in pain, and I think she knows I'm playing tough for her sake. And so she, in turn, plays tough for me. She no longer cries. She also doesn't cower under the bench when the guard brings us meals, such as they are—triangles of flatbread and cups of brackish water. Sometimes there are a few small slivers of what I believe to be goat meat.

Assuming three feedings constitutes a day, we are left largely alone for another day and a half.

Before our third feeding on that day, we hear the telltale clicking of Spaulding's boots, and Yelena whimpers, shrinks against me. Instead of hiding under the bench, however, she merely wraps her arms around my

waist, buries her face in my side, and shakes like a leaf.

The door opens.

“What a darling sight this is—the prisoners have bonded.” Spaulding’s voice is bright, chipper. “The first of your services in payment to me are due, Mr. Karahalios.”

He leans in the open doorway in a baby blue suit, wearing different snakeskin boots, carrying a walking stick with a cobra head topper—a fashion accessory, obviously.

“Dimitriou.”

“Whatever. Call yourself Ronald McDonald for all I care.” The chipper tone vanishes for a moment. “Don’t fuck with me.” He strikes out with the stick, the heavy metal cobra head smashing into my wounded arm.

I cry out against my will, turning away and hunching over.

“I changed it legally,” I growl.

“Again, I don’t care what you call yourself.” He pushes off the doorframe and saunters out. “Follow me.”

I have no choice but to follow, and Yelena immediately beelines behind me, grabbing my good hand and putting me between her and the guard; the guard snarls something, gesturing at the child with his rifle.

When Yelena refuses to leave my side, the guard grabs her by the arm and hauls her away from me—causing Yelena to scream and screech and growl like a feral animal, struggling to get back to me.

Spaulding pauses, walking stick on his shoulder, and glances back. “Oh, let the child come. Just keep her quiet or I’ll put a bullet in her skull myself.”

The guard relinquishes his grip, and she sprints for me, slamming into my side.

I squeeze her hand. “Just keep quiet, okay?” I murmur to her. “It’s okay.”

She nods against my hipbone.

We wind through the halls, staying underground, ascending and descending a level here and a level there, turning this way and that until I’m thoroughly lost. Then, finally, we come to a room at the end of a hallway devoid of other doors. There’s a small window, here, opening to show that we’re high above the sea, in a cliff-face. The distant susurrus of the waves sounds like a mother shushing her child. There’s a small table under the window, on it a laptop and a small satellite dish pointed out the window, a folding chair pushed up to the table.

The guard takes up position outside the doorway, Spaulding just inside,

leaning against the rear wall with insouciant languor.

When I look at him askance, he gestures at the table. “Sit.”

I gesture for Yelena to sit on the floor nearby; instead, she sits under the table, clinging to one of my legs like a koala to a tree. I tap the space bar of the open laptop, and the screen brightens to reveal the login screen for a commercial business banking portal. I notice, as well, that there is a secure messaging portal open as well; it’s frustrating, doing all this one-handed; I move much more slowly, take a lot more time. Behind me, I feel Spaulding’s impatience.

“There is an offer in your messages box to purchase one of your subsidiary corporations—Patmos Commercial Realty. It is a comical, insulting offer. A pittance compared to what it is worth. You will accept it. It is a cash offer, and all necessary paperwork has been drawn up. Upon your acceptance and digital signature, I will become the new owner, but you will remain on file as CEO.”

I frown at him. “What good does that do you?”

He ignores my question. “In your portfolio of real estate, through Patmos, you, and thus soon, I, own several large, valuable properties. I’ve flagged the ones I’m interested in.”

I see his scheme as I scroll through the properties he’s marked. “You could have just told me you want to launder money through my real estate.”

Once again, he ignores me. “In the messages, you will have instructions for the real estate properties—who they go to and for how much. Get to it. I’ll be back.”

I spend the next few hours, bizarrely, doing the all-too-familiar work of real estate transactions. It’s simple, and easy, and no one suspects a thing. I do this all the time—only, legally, not to launder money. It’s a complicated shell game he’s having me play, moving large sums of money around the world via commercial properties he’ll then be able to leverage equity out of. If he, via several layers of financial shadow, owns PCR, but I remain CEO, he’s able to essentially sell himself the properties he needs without having to do any of the work to acquire them in the first place—I’ve already done that. Plus, he can acquire the properties he needs for exactly the amount he needs, since he’s selling to himself, just via subsidiaries no one would ever connect.

Of course, these maneuvers are going to raise flags all over the world, but by the time they’re onto what’s going on, he’ll have sold everything off and moved on, with me as the patsy for the whole scheme.

It's craftier than merely forcing me to wire him money, I'll give him that.
I anticipate more of such shenanigans, but in the meantime, I'm perfectly
happy to play moneyman for him, as long as it means he leaves Yelena alone.
As long as Rin stays out of his hands.
Please, Rin. Don't do anything stupid.

INNOCENCE LOST

I learned when Apollo kidnapped me that fear is impossible to sustain, long-term.

The ride is long, dusty, hot, and rough. We hit ruts and potholes that send us flying off the benches, sprawling on each other and on the floor, scrambling for balance. Those who share language exchange whispers and murmurs—there are at least four other girls I see that are European, but no one I can identify as American. One girl is French, her sobbed whispers understood by a Black girl who I think is from one of the African countries where French is spoken. There are several from East Asia, but none of them seem to share a language. Two speak German to each other. One mutters something in what I think might be Dutch. I'm no linguist, and I'm not fluent in any other language but English. Several of the girls speak multiple languages, and it is through them that we're able, in passed-along whispers, to establish some kind of rapport with each other.

No one asks what's happening, where are they taking us—we all know.

How much should I reveal? Will we be able to rescue them all? Because if the others think I'm going to escape with Yelena and Apollo and leave these poor girls to their fate in the hands of Spaulding, they have another think coming.

I decide I can't promise them anything. But I should at least warn them, right? And I'm not guaranteed another moment with them where I won't be overheard.

I position myself between some of the girls who are our interpreters. "I have friends out there," I whisper, gesturing at the walls of the truck. "They're going to take down this operation."

The message is passed along—side conversations cease and everyone focuses on me, and the interpreters around me. I wait until the message has been passed around and everyone seems to understand. There are more than a couple girls who don't share a language with anyone, and I'm not sure what to do about them. I can only do what I can do, right?

“Don't try anything. Just wait. When things start happening, you do whatever you have to do to get away. So just be ready. Because something big is going to happen, and you'll know it when it happens.”

There are a lot of questions, but I make it clear I can't say anything more than that—because I genuinely don't know. I can't promise everyone will be rescued. I don't know what, or when, or how. I just know it's coming.

I hope it's enough. I hope the guys have made provisions for the girls. I know Duke and Anselm, and I know there's not a snowball's chance in hell they'd just let these poor girls get sold, not while they have breath in their lungs and blood pumping through their hearts. I don't know Alexei or Thomas very well, but Duke and Anselm know and trust Alexei, and Alexei trusts Thomas, so...

Hours of bumping, and then we slow, pause, turn around, and back up. There's a flap over the back of the truck, so we can't see outside. The truck reverses slowly, stops, and then jolts and settles as the driver sets the brake. Chattering, some laughter. The tailgate is unchained, unbolted, and dropped, revealing a blinding rectangle of light. A body climbs up and in, lifting the flap and tying it off. Slowly, our eyes—or at least, my eyes—adjust and I see a crumbling stone wall, an open doorway leading to the interior of the abandoned fortress. The guard now in the bed of the truck with us is armed with a very new-looking fully automatic assault rifle; he gestures at the tailgate, indicating that we should exit.

The bed is a good four, almost five feet off the ground, so for most of the shorter girls, it's a drop almost as high as they are tall. Several guards stand around, weapons hanging barrels-up by straps from their shoulders, watching. All of us being bound, climbing down on our own is nearly impossible. Yet, none of them make any attempt to help. Being near the back of the truck anyway, I decide to be the first, rather than risk being shoved out.

I move to my butt, legs hanging off the edge, scoot forward, and then push off. I land hard, but part of my self-defense training with Sasha was how to fall, so I let my legs absorb the impact. It's not high enough to warrant a tuck and roll, but it does send a decent jolt through my ankles.

The next girl to jump mimics me, but when she lands she tips sideways. None the worse for wear, she makes her feet and gets out of the way, standing near me. One by one, the rest of the girls make the jump, and only a few of them twist their ankles, and not badly.

Once we're all out, one of the guards gestures curtly at us, indicating we should head for a doorway in a corner. I remember the surveillance video Thomas showed us, and this tracks with it. The doorway is dark, forbidding. For some reason, they have us go one at a time, waiting a seemingly predetermined amount of time before sending the next one; having been the first out of the truck, the way the line forms means I'm last. So I watch as one girl after another vanishes through the dark rectangle. There's no way to know what lies on the other side.

Finally, I'm next up.

I look around, and spot Ahmed. He's among a group of men, unarmed—drivers, I presume. He gives me the subtlest of nods. It helps my courage.

Through the doorway—stairs down. Steep, nearly ladderlike, and the steps are short, even for my fairly small feet, the walls narrow. The landing at the bottom is lit only by the now-distant square of light above. A right turn opens into a small chamber. There are two armed guards, and, seeming out of place in this ancient underground chamber, professional photography equipment set up, including a white backdrop; the camera is connected by a cord to a nearby laptop set upon a stack of milk crates.

The unarmed man I assume is the photographer looks at me as I enter. He's European, but I don't know much more than that—dark hair, dark eyes, fair skin, bad teeth, a hooked nose. Cruel, hard eyes.

One of the guards approaches me with a pair of wire cutters and snips the zip ties off my wrists, and then returns to his position by the door.

The photographer juts his chin at me. "Strip." His accent is... indeterminate. Slavic? I don't know. I'm too scared to figure out, too scared to care.

I swallow hard. "Wh-what?"

"Your clothing. Strip. All of it."

I look at the guards, the photographer. Swallow hard again, lick my lips.

"You will not be touched." He gestures at the guards with a jerk of his thumb. "At least, not by them, and not yet." His face goes vicious. "Last time I say—*strip*."

I waste no more time. I can do this. I'm no prude, not shy about my body.

Shit, I've gone to topless beaches with Apollo. This is different—very different. But clearly I have no choice.

Just...don't think.

Don't think. Just do it. Whatever it takes to survive, and get Apollo.

I peel off my shirt, untie my boots, praying they don't search my clothes. Jeans, socks. I leave it all in a pile. I hesitate in my bra and underwear, hoping he'll tell me that's enough. He doesn't, just arches an eyebrow.

So, the rest of it. My bra, with the lockpicks. Underwear.

Stand naked in a room full of leering men.

The photographer indicates the backdrop. "To there." He moves behind the camera on the tripod, contorts himself to frame me in the viewfinder. "Face camera. Arms down, look forward."

The camera clicks a few times.

I can't swallow past the bile in my throat.

"Turn side."

Clickclickclickclick.

"Turn to other side."

Clickclickclickclick.

"Turn to back."

Clickclickclickclick.

Silence, and I turn once more to face the camera—I force myself to ignore the desperate urge to cover myself. Head high. Eyes proud. Angry. Defiant.

"Dress." He doesn't look at me as he says this, but at the camera's display screen.

There is no interest in his eyes, no lecherous leer—he does this too much to be fazed anymore, I suppose. The guards, however, greedily stare at me, following every movement; one is Latino, the other is Black—my fear and anger and disgust preclude me from noticing any other details about them.

I dress quickly, and once I'm clothed, I feel more in control of myself, of my emotions. I still feel dirty from the experience, but my vengeful rage at this whole operation, beyond the obvious sin of having taken from me the man I love and an innocent child, is now burning with all the furious heat of the sun itself.

My wrath is fearful—it scares me. I have to control it, funnel it. Focus it.

Rage settles in my gut like acid, boiling and eating at me, setting my very veins to trembling with the need to decimate every culpable male in this

compound.

I can feel the evil in the air. It paints the walls, stains the floor. Bad, bad things have happened here.

The photographer gestures without looking away from his camera at a narrow doorway beside the backdrop. “Though there.”

On the other side of the door is another chamber, this one larger, and filled with the women. Their eyes tell me they’re all feeling the way I feel—dirty, violated, afraid, and angry. There’s no guard, here.

Two doors—the one we came through, and one closed, on the opposite wall. It’s thick iron, and bolted.

A long wait. We mill around. Some sit, crossed-legged or squatting. Others, like me, remain standing, pacing, shaking our hands loose, keeping our muscles warm.

After what feels like an eternity, the bolt scrapes against metal, and metal scrapes against stone, and the door is dragged open. Four guards stand beyond the opening, two on each side facing each other, armed with M-16s and AK-47s; there’s no point in waiting for the order, so I march through. The doorway opens to a long hallway paved with large, irregularly shaped flagstones imperfectly matched and unevenly mortared together. Doors are fitted into the walls, which are built from massive blocks of stone.

Down the empty hallway and around a corner to a short corridor, where four doors stand open two on each side of the corridor with a guard at each; the corridor turns right at the far end. We’re divided into the four rooms, five or six to a room. Once we’re in, the door is shut, and I hear the scrape-thunk of a solid bolt being driven home.

Shit.

I can feel the clock ticking.

I have to get free of this room and find Apollo and Yelena.

I wait for what feels like an hour or so, and then I unlace my boot, remove the card-knife, and replace my boot. Practice flicking open the knife until the action is smooth. Then, I strip off my bra and remove the lockpicks, reclothe myself; the other women in the room are watching me curiously, but say nothing—none of the women in here speak English or anything I can even attempt to communicate in. I put my hair into a high, tight bun and thread the lockpicks securely into it at crossed angles so there’s very little chance they’ll fall out.

And then I pound on the door.

I'm ignored for a while.

I keep pounding.

After another few minutes of pounding, the bolt scrapes and the door is yanked open, and I'm face-to-face with a pissed-off guard—he's Middle Eastern, judging by appearance, and by his clothing—the long tunic, slender trousers, and sandals. No head covering, though. He snaps at me in Arabic, or Urdu, or something; I'm woefully ignorant in so many things, this experience is teaching me.

He gestures at me with his rifle, snaps angrily.

"I have to shit," I say.

He just gestures at me, shoves my shoulder to push me back into the room.

"Toilet," I say.

He points at the far back corner, at a tiny, filth-crusted hole in the floor.

I wrap my fist around my thumb and pull my thumb out of my closed fist, downward. The guard smirks, points at the hole again.

I mime wiping myself.

He growls something, irritated, and shoulders his rifle, slams the door closed. The bolt goes back through.

I withdraw the card-knife from my pocket, hold it concealed but ready to flick open.

The bolt scrapes open, and the door follows. The guard has his gun hanging from his shoulder, and he's got a wad of paper napkins. He extends them to me.

I grab his proffered wrist and yank him toward me as hard as I can. He topples forward off-balance, and I snap open the card-knife—before I can second guess or hesitate or even think about it, I slash the blade across his throat, applying both pressure and speed to the slice.

His throat opens in a red gash, and he chokes, reaches for his throat...a moment later blood floods down his front. He collapses to his knees, gurgling.

I lunge at him, snatch his rifle from his shoulder. Blood coats his front crimson. When he slams face-first into the floor, I drag him over to the corner where the nasty hole is, so the rest of his blood will drain there instead of making a puddled mess of the floor.

The women are stoic, unfazed by his death.

I hold my finger to my lips, and they nod. I search the body—well,

actually, he's not dead yet, I hear him gurgling still, sucking for breath. I find a spare magazine for his M-16, and a sidearm, a very old Colt M119, with a spare magazine for that.

I'm more comfortable with the pistol, so I sling the rifle across my body and hold the pistol in one hand. I motion for the women to stay here, and close the door, but don't bolt it.

Out, then.

I have my card-knife in the other hand, because I don't dare fire my pistol. Tiptoe to the end of the corridor, peer around the corner. I don't allow my mind to replay for me the scene I just witnessed—the deed I just did. After watching for a moment, I feel comfortable that no one is coming. No doors, here. So I jog to the end. It comes to a T, here, going left and right. To the right, another long, empty hall; to the left, a short corridor with more open doors. I quickly check, but they're all empty, and this corridor dead-ends. Back the other way. Another T-intersection, another set of doors, all empty. Back the other way; I'm starting to get a feel for the layout: a square of empty corridors, with a branch off of each corridor, four cells to each branch. Sure enough, I'm back where I started, the corridor where my group of women is held; I recognize the pattern of flagstones on the floor. Now I have to find my way out of this area.

One of the T-intersections leads not to a block of cells but a different hallway, this one much longer than the others. I move carefully when I reach the end, peering out cautiously in each direction; duck back swiftly when I see a guard's retreating back. My heart pounds in my ears. He reaches the end of the corridor, and just stops. Stands awhile. Reaches into a pocket, produces a bit of a cigarette. Lights it.

Smokes a few puffs, head tipped back, exhaling as if immensely relieved by the nicotine hit. Then he scrapes the cherry off on the wall, pockets the butt, and begins to turn back to me.

I panic.

There's nowhere to hide.

Shit, shit, shit.

I have to kill him, and quietly. My hand is coated in drying blood, and so is the little card-knife. I ready it, pressed against the wall near the corner. I hear his footsteps approaching. My heart is pounding so hard, so loud in my ears it's hard to hear his footsteps. They stop. A shuffle.

I'm holding my breath.

He glances left, away from me. I inch toward him, moving as catlike quiet as I can, knife ready.

My hand shakes.

He turns this way, sees me—it's too late.

Slash—as hard and as fast as my body will move.

I feel like maybe this is too easy.

It's *not* easy, though. Panic soars in me, bile rises.

I can't put off the horror. But I have to.

Fuck.

I've killed two men with a tiny knife. Who am I?

I grit my teeth and choke back bile as the guard wobbles on his feet, clutching his now-gushing throat. I move behind him, grab him under the arms and yank him backward, haul him. He's heavy, weighs a ton, but I struggle backward with his weight to the nearest cellblock and into a cell. Onto the bench, on his side facing the wall. Maybe they'll think he passed out drunk or something.

I don't bother with his rifle since I can't carry another one, but I do take his pistol, spare magazines; he has a large folding knife in a pocket, and I take that—if I have to take out any more guards, a bigger knife will give me more reach.

I vomit into the waste hole in the corner, wipe my lips, spit, vomit again. Breathe slowly, until the nausea fades.

Push aside thoughts and feelings—I have to find Apollo and Yelena.

Out, down the corridor to where the now-dead guard smoked his cigarette, the larger folding knife in hand, blade out, the smaller card-knife folded into my back pocket. A right turn only, another long, empty corridor, leading to what seems to be another set of cellblocks identical to the other one.

This place is huge, the underground complex far larger than the structure above. I can see why Spaulding uses it.

The ticking clock in my head ticks faster. The guys won't wait long. The assault is coming, and I have to be hidden with Apollo and Yelena when it does.

I search the cellblock, but it's empty, all the doors open, no guard. Back to the previous intersection, where the T leads me to yet another set of cells; here, a T on the other side leads to a short set of stairs leading up; I don't search all the cells yet, just get my bearings. I do see a few closed doors, and

I suspect they're in this set of cells. Up the stairs, to a corridor with a few doors in it, most of them open, only one closed. One contains videography equipment—the warning video was filmed here.

I hesitate at the one closed door—it's not bolted, just shut. I hear sounds coming from the other side. Muffled, but distinct.

Whimpers, and grunts.

I don't know that I have a choice—I haven't seen a guard in a long time, and we're far underground. If I close the door, maybe the report will be muffled.

I put away the knife, withdraw my pistol. Check that it's racked and the safety is off. Visualize the action first—yank open the door with my body behind it, roll around into the opening; sweep the room, locate the target, and fire.

Deep breath.

Wipe my palm on my jeans, secure my grip on the handle of the pistol. Heart hammers faster than ever. Grasp the door handle—nothing but a rusted iron ring. Yank it open, keeping my body shielded behind the metal.

A snapped phrase in a language I don't recognize—angry. *I'm busy, go away, probably.*

I sidestep around the edge of the door, pistol held in both hands the way Sasha taught me for close-quarters work—elbows tucked against my sides, bottom hand gripping under the butt to steady the weapon, top hand on the grip and trigger, weapon held about a foot or so from my torso at chest height.

It's just paintball.

Me and Sasha and Cal.

I see a naked male ass, trousers around his knees. Rings are driven into the wall near the ceiling—chained to the rings, a pair of female hands. Delicate, slender. Pale. Bloody from struggling. She's chained upright, standing. Rings are driven into the floor as well, far apart, chaining her feet spread apart.

He's thrusting into her, wildly, violently. She's not making a sound except an occasional whimper of pain.

Fuck.

There's a bucket on the floor near the door, wads of cash piled within; I see what this is. The men here can't do what they want to the merchandise, so Spaulding provides one in this room, and they can rape her at will, as long as

they pay.

My pistol jerks in my hands, once. It's deafening in this small space, making my ears ring. Red paints the wall in a Rorschach pattern.

He slides to the floor, revealing a diminutive young girl, eighteen or nineteen. She had blond hair once, but it's matted, filthy, bloody. Her face is bruised, swollen.

It's clear she's been raped beyond counting.

Her blue eyes are dead, flat. They find mine. "*Töte mich. Bitte. Bitte!*" She suddenly gains unexpected strength, yanking forward against the chains, straining for me; she strains against her chains with such ferocity her wrists bleed. "*Ershieß mich! Ershieß Mich, Bitte. Bitte. Jetzt! Bitte ershieß mich.*" A sob, wretched, pitiful. "*Bitte...bitte.*"

I know what she's saying.

I can't do it.

I can kill the bad guys. I can't shoot her. I can't. I know it would be the kindest mercy for her, after what I dare not even imagine she's gone through.

I see the key for her chains on a ledge nearby, and I use it, one-handed, to unlock her wrist. The moment I have her second hand free, she attacks me, snatching my gun from my hand before I can react.

The bang takes me by surprise. There was no hesitation in her. She turned it to her temple the moment she had it in her hand.

She topples forward into my arms, wet warmth coating my arms. I lay her on the ground, retrieve my pistol from her hands. Back away on my backside, two bodies in front of me, blood everywhere.

I don't have anything left to vomit, or I would. It's a reaction of disgust at myself rather than nausea due to the blood.

Work to my feet. The pistol in my hand is slippery with gore, and I toss it on the ground near the bodies. The dead guard has one, a similar model but newer—a quick check confirms the magazines I have for the pistols will work for both. I like the comfort of knowing I have a backup.

"*Madha yahduth?*" A voice, scuffle and thunk of boots on stone.

I shove the gun in my waistband with the other, barrel tops pressed together, handles facing away. It's horribly uncomfortable and stretches my waistband until it hurts, and the blocky metal weapons dig into my skin. No matter—no time to care.

I'd tossed the knife on the ground in the doorway when I decided to make the shot—I pick it up and edge to the wall beside the door. Heart palpitations,

palms shaking, breath coming in shivering gasps.

“Yakub? *Madha yahduth?*”

A sandal in the doorway; the barrel of a rifle.

Shit.

I wait, and he takes a step in. Doesn't see me beside him, somehow. He's fixated on the mess before him, his slain comrade, the dead girl. The blood everywhere.

I dart sideways behind him, grab a handful of his hair in one hand and yank his head backward, hard—before he has a chance to shout, I drag the blade across his throat.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

This time, instead of merely seeping down his front, blood sprays everywhere.

I cry out in horrified disgust—I thought the blood spraying everywhere was a movie thing. Guess not. The way I had his head tilted back put pressure on it, maybe? I don't know. I'm disgusted with myself. I hate this. I want it to be over.

But I have to find Apollo.

I shove the dying man forward into the room and shut the door, bolt it.

Three people with a knife.

I don't know who I am, anymore. What kind of person am I that I can do this? That I can keep doing this? What kind of monster lives inside me?

Fuck.

I force my feet into motion, back to the cellblock where I assume Apollo and Yelena are being held, dry heaving on the way. I can only spit bile, and hope I find water at some point to rinse out my mouth.

I viciously shut down any thoughts, any feelings. Robot. Cold, calculating. Robot Rin.

Just do the thing, and figure out the feelings later.

The first cellblock in this section is all open doors, which I check anyway, just to be thorough. Nothing. The second is the same. Third same. The fourth features two closed doors. Moving cautiously, using the tactics and techniques Sasha taught me, I open the first closed door. A man lies on the bench, facing me. Alive, but barely. A former guard, I think. He's dressed similarly, but that means nothing much, since they're not uniformed. He's missing both hands from the wrists, bloody stumps that have been hastily cauterized—by a heated blade of some sort, although I'm no expert.

He whispers something, but I can't make it out even if I spoke his language. I close the door again and bolt it—he's not my problem. The next door. My heart hammers—this is it. He's on the other side—I know it.

Summon saliva and spit, still tasting bile.

At that moment, an explosion shakes the earth under my feet, making the whole world tremble. Immediately, I hear shouts. Distant automatic gunfire.

Time's up.

Shouts come closer, several of them.

I tuck the pistol into my hip pocket, shove the knife at my side between belt and jeans and unsling the rifle, drop to one knee behind an open doorway, prop my elbow on the upright kneecap, rifle stock braced in my palm. Sight down the barrel along the side of the door's edge.

A body skids into view, male, armed.

CRACKCRACK! Two rounds close together, center mass.

He drops.

Another body, pausing to glance down at the first—

CRACKCRACK!

Down.

A third, and what an idiot. Right into the opening. At least he has the sense to come in firing. His rounds go high, clang off the door high and to the left.

CRACKCRACK!

Three bodies in a pile.

Much easier on my soul than knife work, I must admit. Not by much, but it's something.

I wait a moment or two, and when no more assailants seem to be forthcoming, I yank back the bolt and throw open the door.

Apollo and Yelena sit side by side in the corner closest to the wall with the bench and the door, Apollo's arm around Yelena, cradling and sheltering her.

"Hello, love," I say, sounding bizarrely calm. "Let's go."

He blinks at me. "R-Rin?"

I smile. "Yes, it's me. In the flesh. We don't have time to waste, honey—the assault has started." I wiggle fingers at Yelena. "Hi there, sweetheart. I'm Rin. Are you ready to get out of here?"

She just stares at me.

I hear gunfire, close—exchanged. "Come on, you two. We have to go

now.”

I slide out the door, rifle trained on the hallway’s end. I can’t spare attention to make sure they’re following. “Stay behind me,” I murmur.

“Give me one of those guns,” Apollo says.

I withdraw the one from my pocket and hand it to him—he deftly checks the safety, then tucks it under the armpit of his wounded arm, ejects the magazine and checks it, replaces it, and then uses his injured hand to rack it, wincing. I hand him a spare magazine.

“How are you here, Rin?” he asks, his voice tight and low.

“It’s a long story, and you’re not going to like it,” I respond, moving forward toward the intersection. “We don’t have time for me to tell it. What you need to do is trust me. Keep Yelena close, and stick with me.”

“I should lead.”

“Don’t get macho on me now, Apollo,” I snap. “One, you’re injured. Two, it’s clear Yelena trusts you—me she doesn’t know. She needs your contact to stay calm, and trust me, this shit is going to get messy. It already is, actually.”

“Clearly.”

I look down at myself—my hands are coated in blood from fingertip to forearm. My shirt is soaked and caked. “Yeah, clearly.” I tiptoe into the hallway intersection, sweeping side to side. The exit should be left, since the right leads to the rest of the cellblocks. We pass the cell where the girl is—was.

The door is open—someone found my handiwork, clearly.

I point at the doorway. “Do *not* let her see in there, Apollo.”

“Why?”

I glare at him over my shoulder. “Should be obvious, looking at me.”

He covers her eyes with his palm, and she doesn’t fight it. Just places her little hand over his, holding his hand in place, letting him guide her steps.

He looks, though, and frowns. “You did that?”

It’s like I left it—dead guard naked face-down, the girl slumped over top of him, the other guard face-down just inside. Blood is everywhere, sprayed on the whole room.

“Yes.” I look away. “Except the girl. I got her wrists free and she snatched my gun from me and did that to herself. Not before begging me to do it for her, though.” I swallow a sob. “I just...I couldn’t.”

His hand rests on my shoulder, and I flinch. “Of course you couldn’t.”

I touch his hand, briefly, and then push it off when I feel something deep inside me respond, shake, soften. “I can’t have you touch me right now, Apollo. I can’t handle being comforted. I need to be...uncomfortable. I need to be angry. If you touch me, I’ll lose the edge I need to get us out of here. Okay?”

“I get it,” he whispers. He doesn’t like it.

“I can’t have your touch because I need it, if that makes any sense.”

He just grunts affirmatively. “I get it.”

The hallway ends at a right turn—I recognize this new hallway from our journey to the cell. I’d tried to follow the turns then, but there were too many and I was still reeling from the violation of being forced to strip naked and pose for a photograph.

I hear a series of gunshots, a pause, a few more, and then a different gun’s report, a different tone.

A female cry of pain. A scream, and several shots.

A male grunt.

I gesture for Apollo and Yelena to stay where they are and get down—Apollo does what I tell him, crouching and hiding Yelena with his body, pistol held close, finger along the guard.

I creep forward to the next corner—the exchange has stopped for a moment.

I hear voices.

Male.

Peek around the corner—four men face away from me, hiding behind open cell doors, two on each side. One of them sees me, shouts, pivots, lifts his rifle, fires.

Rounds zing past me, and one ricochets off the stone, chips stinging my cheek. Another round slices the outside of my ribcage, burning pain slicing through me. I throw myself to the side, spraying a line of shots from one side of the hallway to the other.

It was instinct and desperation, and fear—Sasha would be disappointed in the action; there was no purpose, no calculation.

Only one of my rounds hits a target, but it’s a kill. I slam to the ground around the corner, the breath knocked out of me. I’m on my back, the spare pistol digging into my spine. I’m bleeding from the side, and my face stings.

I wait, rifle trained on the hallway opening.

A body appears, shuffling in a sideways run, firing—too high. I riddle

with him a three-round burst, roll to my side and then lever up to my feet and crab walk sideways to the far side of the hallway.

Never be where they expect you to be, Sasha used to say. It will save your life, someday, maybe.

Sure enough, the next burst from the enemy hits the ground where I was—he never even looked for where I am, just assumed I'm where I was.

I drop him.

Then I dart forward—the other two were preparing to rush me. I drop one, sink to a knee and drop the fourth; the last one gets off a shot, however, and this one nearly ends me. It creases my cheekbone; I touch it, and groan at the sting.

I move past the doors; the men had been shooting down the hallway. “Hello? It's me!”

A small head appears from a doorway, cautiously. Female, Asian, bloodied. She says something to me, waves at me.

I go back to the intersection and motion for Apollo to follow. I find the majority of the group I'd come in with clustered in the room where we'd been photographed.

The blood on the Asian woman's face is not hers—it's the photographer.

Unarmed, they'd made short work of him. A few of them took some pretty nasty knocks, and it's clear he didn't go down without a fight, but go down he did. Messily. It looks like they kicked and stomped him to death, and then smashed the equipment to smithereens.

Good riddance.

But...gross.

I look away.

The doorway to the stairs is closed, and it's on this my group of girls is focused.

“Bad men, other side.” This is from the girl who'd been brave enough to peek around the corner at my voice.

She has the distinctive snappy twang in her accent that I identify with Vietnam. She has a pistol, which I recognize as the one I'd discarded in the evil room...that being how my brain identifies the room where I found the German girl. This girl, the Vietnamese one, is about my age and six inches shorter than me, slender, with black hair in a neat bob at her chin. She holds the pistol in both hands, barrel down and close to her body in a position that suggests she has some kind of training.

“How many?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Many. Out there, many. Other side of door? Don’t know.” She juts her chin at me. “You shoot good?”

I shrug. “Yeah, pretty good.”

“I police, Hanoi.”

I gesture at the door. “You open it, I’ll go through.” I withdraw my pistol and scan the room. “Anyone know how to use this?”

A Black girl steps forward—I recognize her as the one who speaks French. She’s nearly as tall as me and curvy under a loose, sleeveless cotton dress, her hair buzzed, with three large gold hoops through her ears on either side. Her eyes are cold, her demeanor calm—something tells me all this isn’t terribly shocking to her. Perhaps she’s seen worse, where she’s from. She takes the pistol from me and, moving with expert familiarity, checks the magazine, replaces it, and racks the slide. Meets my eyes and nods, once.

I point at Apollo. “Stay close to me.” I gesture at the Black girl, then the doorway leading to the interior of the underground complex. “Cover us.”

She nods, and heads for the doorway, holding the pistol upright against her chest with both hands, leaning against the doorframe and watching both directions with her head on a swivel. Looks at me, nods. All clear.

I move to the doorway where the stairs will lead us up and out. Replace my magazine for the fresh one, stuffing the partially depleted one in my back pocket. Suck in a breath, let it out. Assume a crouch, butt snugged against my shoulder. Rack the charging handle on my M-16.

No telling what’s on the other side.

I hear gunfire. A helicopter, faint muffled thumping. An explosion. More automatic gunfire.

I train the barrel on the doorway and glance at the Vietnamese girl. “Ready?”

She places her hand on the ring. Glances at me. Touches her chest with on hand. “Anh.”

I smile at her. “Hi, Anh. I’m Rin.”

She nods, smiles tightly. Shifts her weight, yanks the door open and keeps her body out of the way of the opening. The stairs are empty.

With the door open, the noise outside is far louder.

The chatter of gunfire is constant, deafening even down the stairwell.

Crump...BOOOOM!

I creep up the stairs, aiming upward. The noise is louder as I go. I glance

back—Apollo and Yelena are surrounded by a cluster of women, several of them armed. Yelena looks terrified, clinging to Apollo's waist, burying her face against him at the bursts of gunfire.

Reach the landing at the top.

Beyond the doorway...is a war zone.

REUNITED

Corinna is no longer the woman I knew.

The Corinna I know is sweet, if fiercely independent with a stubborn streak a mile wide and a mile deep, and a sometimes-fiery temper. But she's...kind. Good. Loving. Affectionate.

This new version is none of that. She's cold, calculating, efficient. She's a killer.

Did she always have this inside her? Where did it come from?

She can be a ruthless businesswoman and a demanding boss—she expects results and efficiency, and holds herself to standards higher than anyone else. But that doesn't explain the woman I'm with, currently.

I mean, I guess it makes a certain kind of sense. I suppose I knew, as an intellectual exercise, that Corinna was familiar with firearms and had been trained in room clearing and combat techniques. But I never really imagined exactly how *good* at it she is. And I doubt she ever expected to use those skills in real life. I think she always looked at the training she and Cal did with Sasha as just games, just for fun. Something to do to pass the time. Other kids play video games and hang out at malls and attend school, Corinna and Cal went through combat training with an elite black-ops expert.

I watch her at the top of the stairs, now. She's crouched on the stairs, feet four steps down, rifle trained across the landing through the doorway. Her rifle cracks three times, pauses, cracks three more. Another long pause, and then she ascends the last few stairs to kneel in the doorway, sweeping the opening beyond. Glances down and waves for us to come up.

The Vietnamese woman, Anh, is first up the stairs, the rest of us behind her—I'm directly behind Anh, with Yelena clinging to my side. The Black

woman with the triple piercings brings up the rear, backing up the stairs to keep a watch on our rear—I suspect Corinna took out all of the guards who were posted in the subterranean complex, but we can't be sure, and I'm glad for the rearguard. I would do it myself, but Yelena's protection is my sole duty, right now. She's the reason I'm here—the reason Corinna is here.

There are too many of us to fit in the landing, so we spill down the stairs, waiting for Corinna's orders.

“Anh, you see the Humvee out there, across the courtyard?”

Anh peers, nods. “With big giant in back?”

“Yes. The giant is my family. His name is Thresh. Take Apollo, Yelena, and two more and run as fast as you can for that truck.” She glances at me, expression shut down entirely. “Tell Thresh we have twenty-five women in need of evac.”

Anh nods. Gestures at me. “You come.” She points at a Middle Eastern woman with a bloodstained hijab, and an Indian woman in a traditional sari and head covering. “You come.”

“I'm not leaving without you, Corinna,” I say, not moving.

She glares at me, anger snapping in her blue eyes. “And I'm not leaving until these women have a ride out of here.” A bullet explodes against the rock above Corinna's head and she drops to one knee, head ducking and shoulders hunching. “And the entire fucking reason we're all here is you, so yes, Apollo, you *are* going.”

I glare back. I'm not going to argue with her, not here, not now. But if she thinks I'm going to get on a truck and drive away and leave her here to face danger caused by me? She doesn't know me very well, if that's what she thinks is going to happen.

The Humvee is over a hundred yards away, and the courtyard in between is a mess—several burning hulks of cars lay overturned, the massive transport truck partially blocking the exit; the truck is undamaged, miraculously. Overhead, a helicopter buzzes—Thresh, the one member of the A1S team I've never met in person, is firing at it from the Humvee with the gigantic bed-mounted .50-caliber machine gun. The distance is too great, however, and the helicopter banks low and zips away. Spaulding was on that helo, I'd wager.

I point at the truck. “Get the women on that,” I say to Rin. “Someone needs to drive it, though.”

Corinna eyes the truck, and I see the realization in her eyes that there's no

other real viable option for evacuating this many women. The Humvee can seat four or six at the most, in cramped quarters—I know, I’ve been in more than one.

She points at the truck. “Can anyone drive that?” She mimes moving a big steering wheel, and then pulling a shifter.

Several women translate in a variety of languages, and everyone looks around expectantly, but no one raises a hand.

“Shit.” She eyes me. “You’re not going to listen, are you?”

“Leave you here to fight alone?” I smirk at her. “Not fucking likely, my darling.”

The chatter of gunfire has lessened, but not ceased. I peer out of the doorway, trying to ascertain where the gunfire is coming from. I identify several starbursts from outside the fortress, but it’s impossible to determine the precise number, as they’re never in the same place twice—A1S, disguising their true numbers.

I lean farther out, watching for return fire from the fortress. I count at least four, probably more. This being a fortress, they’re going to have good cover and probably a lot of ammunition—short of a dedicated assault, they’re going to be very difficult to eradicate. And they have a direct line on the truck.

I can’t just sit here. Can’t wait for others to assume all the risk, especially not Corinna, my beloved Corinna. Injured or not, I’m going to contribute. They’re all here because of me.

“Cover me.” I point at the crumbling crenellations up top, in a particular spot I’ve seen muzzle flash. “Up there.”

“Apollo, no.” Corinna reaches for me.

I pry Yelena’s hands off me, glance down at her. “Stay here. Corinna will protect you. Okay?”

Yelena nods, otherwise silent.

“Apollo, you’re injured. What are you going to do?” She touches my face. “You need to stay with Yelena. You need to get her to safety.”

“Can you drive that?” I ask, gesturing at the giant truck.

“No, but—”

“I can.” I grip my pistol tighter. “Cover me. On three. One...two...*three*.”

I don’t give her a chance to argue with me—I cut hard out of the doorway, sprinting for the cover of the near wall, and slam into it. I hear her M-16 barking, hear shouts from above, and then an AK-47 chatters from the

roof, and I hear ricochets zing off walls, smash into the ground behind me, in front of me. Something hot buzzes past my ear.

A pained yell, and I look up just in time to see a body toppling through space above me. I throw myself forward as the body slams into the ground with a wet crunch. I scramble to my feet and don't look back. I hear the .50-caliber machine gun chugging, and debris rains down on me as the massive rounds chew up the ancient stonework overhead.

I'm parallel with the truck, now, and I have to leave the relative cover of the wall; no time to think. I just run. My injured arm protests the jarring, but it's irrelevant. I feel it distantly, adrenaline suppressing pain. Something zings nearby; an angry bee nips at my ear; fingers pluck at my sleeve and then at my pant leg.

The .50-cal coughs and barks and the gunfire from the roof subsides. I reach the truck, shove the pistol into my waistband at the small of my back, and clamber awkwardly up, balancing on the step as I yank open the door. This truck is an old beast, but I've driven them before, in my days running a criminal enterprise; I prided myself on not simply outsourcing everything, but taking direct part in every facet of the business, from supply sourcing to transportation to delivery to direct sales.

I start it up, and it catches immediately—old it may be, but it's a well-maintained machine. I hear and feel rounds clanging off metal. I shove the shifter into reverse, grab the wheel, and gun it. Tires skid and then bite as the enormous engine applies torque, and the vehicle rumbles backward; I turn the wheel so the rear of the truck aims at the doorway. Bullets plink off the rear quarter panel, and then the passenger door, and then the window shatters, and then rounds walk down the hood, denting the metal but not piercing.

Several different rifles speak, then, from the A1S members beyond the courtyard, as well as the .50-cal and Rin's, covering my efforts, suppressing the enemy.

I see Rin in the side-view mirror, on one knee, firing single rounds, conserving her limited ammunition. Anh appears in the other, waving me into position, then holding her arms in an X to stop me. I throw the shifter into park and shove open the door, stand in the opening with my pistol and train it on the crenellations where the firing seems to be concentrated.

I see the top of a head, and crack off a shot at it. I miss, but the head drops down. I glance back, and catch glimpses of bodies leaving the cover of the stairwell, hear them clomping into the bed.

It takes too long, but there's no way to rush the process.

The suppressing fire only works for so long, and then I see a rifle barrel poking over the top of the wall.

"We have to go!" I shout.

"Two more!" I hear Corinna respond. A pause. "Go!"

"You and Yelena?" I call back.

I see Corinna hanging off the rear of the truck, rifle in one hand, peering around the side, waving at me. "We're on! Go, dammit!"

I duck into the cab behind the wheel, throw it into first and slam the gas pedal to the floor. The truck jolts forward at the sudden application of torque, the frame protesting, the engine roaring. Bullets plink, clang, smash.

I hear the .50-cal over the din, but I can spare no more attention for anything but getting this truck out of this courtyard. The mess of burning wreckage is in the way, and I have no choice but to risk going through.

"HOLD ON!" I shout as loud as I can.

I hear a thump on the bulkhead between the cargo area and cab, letting me know they heard me.

I keep the pedal floored, pointing at a gap in the wreckage where the noses of two different cars touch. I brace my hand on the wheel, pedal floored, and the nose of the truck hits the burning wrecks with a concussive impact, jolting me backward. The noise is terrific, and I feel heat billow into the cab from the broken window, scorching me—I smell burning hair as my forearm is crisped by the blasting heat.

Then we're through, but rounds still clank off the roof of the cab, making me feel like I'm inside a bell being hit with a hammer.

I'm parallel with the Humvee, and the gargantuan man standing at the .50-cal throws me a jaunty two-finger wave, then gestures behind himself. "Four clicks that way!"

I've heard stories of the mighty Thresh, a man who stands seven feet tall, with the body of an award-winning bodybuilder even in his fifties, who speaks multiple languages, and can shrug off wounds that would cripple anyone else. Hearing the stories is not the same as seeing him in person. He makes the monster .50-cal machine gun look like a toy. The back of the Humvee sags under his weight.

I wave back and keep going; I hear the .50-cal start up again, but it's behind us and things are quieting. We're on a trail rather than a road, barely a two-track through the arid desert. The sky above is clear and pale, the earth

underfoot hard-packed and dry. There's nothing in any direction except the fortress, and the road heading past the ruins on its endless journey from north to south. This track I'm on heads west, away from the coast, and it's rutted and pitted, forcing me to slow or risk crashing.

Four kilometers takes both an eternity and an instant. I hear a helicopter, and the closer I get, the more deafening is the noise. We're in among olive trees, suddenly, the narrow track slicing between rows of low spreading trees in the loose light soil spaced in four-square formations, and they extend as far as the eye can see in three directions; there's a larger path ahead, an access road just barely big enough for the helicopter...which is a Chinook, a double-rotor monster of an aircraft. The rotors buzz just above the treetops, and the prop wash is so powerful the branches creak and wave and bow, threatening to snap. There's another .50-caliber machine gun in the side door, and someone I can't make out manning it. Whoever it is, he's gesticulating wildly, hurrying us.

I don't know who that is behind the gun or why they're so frantic, but if they're frantic, I'm going to listen.

I jam the brakes and slew the wheel, and the tires skid in the dirt, the weight of the truck slinging us sideways and leaning frighteningly hard onto the suspension, nearly toppling before slamming down onto all four wheels. Another glance at the gunner—they're smaller than I'd originally thought, wearing a black helmet with a microphone; through the skirling dust, I realize it's Layla, and she's gesturing at me to move forward, parallel to the helo. I glance out the shattered passenger window and see that the Humvee is now hurtling toward us at a reckless pace, jouncing and bouncing over the ruts, the back end squirreling sideways, expertly kept on course by Thresh.

I look past the Humvee, back the way we came: through the dust cloud, I can just barely make out another vehicle, a paramilitary special—a Toyota pickup with a bed-mounted machine gun.

Which is chattering, spewing bullets this way. High and wide, for now—but this is why Layla wanted me to move. I realize the rear bay door is open—the bay door is big enough and the Chinook powerful enough to accept the Humvee, but I think this truck is too big, or I'd just drive up and in. I pull forward more, and as soon as I'm out of the way, Layla opens up, firing right over top of the Humvee.

After that, I can't afford any more attention for that side of the action—I leave the truck's motor running and throw myself out, clambering down and

jogging to the back. Corinna is already out and dropping the tailgate.

“Cover us—I’ll get them on board.”

With a curt nod, she drops to a knee with her back to the rear double tires, drawing bead on the approaching Toyota. Which, I realize, is not alone.

The Humvee slews around behind the Chinook and lines up with the bed, the engine guns and it bounces up and in, tires squealing. The truck rocks as Thresh unfolds his mammoth body from behind the wheel, reaches into the bed of the Humvee and retrieves a weapon, a SAW.

From the rear doors, Duke and Puck, each armed for bear. All three men sprint at full speed out of the bay door—Puck rounds the rear of the helo to cover the far side, and I hear his carbine begin barking immediately. They’re over there, too?

Thresh drops to his belly on the ground beneath the bay door, firing alongside it toward the rear—I glance that way and spy shapes on foot heading this way among the trees.

Duke stands in the opening, scanning.

All this occurs in the space of sixty seconds, at most.

Dirt chews up toward the rear of the truck, and I realize I’m frozen, and the women in the back are huddled together, waiting. Yelena is surrounded by the women, at the center of them. Her eyes meet mine.

I reach up my one good arm, and the nearest body drops onto me—the pain from the impact is unbelievable, but I ignore it. Gunfire roars in all directions, and bullets fly, plinking off the truck and thudding in the dirt.

It’s chaos, then, and pain, as I reach up, bring a body down, send her sprinting up the ramp, covered by Duke and Corinna. I look up and see Yelena, waiting. She jumps confidently down to me, arms small and thin but strong around my neck, and I place her on the ramp myself.

“Go on up!” I tell her. “GO! It’s not safe down here.” She whimpers and inches up the ramp, but her eyes remain on me. “You have to *go*, Yelena! They’re going to take you home to Mommy and Daddy, okay? You’ll see me soon, I promise.”

A round smashes into the ramp near her feet, and she screeches, tumbling backward. Duke sees this, and leans down the ramp, his carbine tucked one-handed against his hip, grabbing Yelena by the waist and catching her up against his chest. Leaning into the bay, he sets her down, where she’s scooped up protectively by Anh, who’s still armed. Anh cradles Yelena against herself, pistol clutched in one hand, putting her body between Yelena

and any possible threat.

I continue my work, helping the women down from the truck—I don't see faces or features, they're just bodies to move to safety.

The truck is empty, then.

Anselm appears from the swirling dust, a giant rifle cradled in his arms. "Evac, now!" he shouts. "They are too many!"

He kneels on the floor near the bay door, unfolds the bipod, lies behind the rifle, and then there's a massive, concussive

BOOOM!

The girls on the helo all throw themselves to the floor, covering their ears. Puck scrambles aboard next, followed by Thresh.

The helo's double rotors pick up speed and noise. The wheels show signs of the weight lessening.

"Get on board!" Duke yells—at me, at Corinna.

Bullets hit the side of the helo. The dirt around me.

The Chinook is lifting off.

We're several feet from the helo, with rounds zinging between the helo and our position.

"We have to go!" Duke shouts. "We're taking too much fire!"

The massive rifle booms again.

The .50-cal is still talking.

Bullets fly, pinging off the side of the Chinook, which now hovers a foot off the ground.

Corinna isn't responding—

Mere seconds have elapsed since Anselm arrived, but it's stretched into an eternity...

Corinna is down, blood bathing the side of her face. I catch a glimpse of her chest rise, and I know she's alive.

The Chinook is too far, the risk too great—we'll both be hit. The truck is our only chance, now.

I yank my pistol from my belt and sprint over to her, pop a couple rounds off. A quick glance at her head tells me the wound is a glancing blow, enough to stun her and paint her face with blood, but not life-threatening.

Yelena is on board that helo.

She's the most important thing. She's the reason we're here, to get her home.

I scoop Corinna into my arm and throw her over my shoulder. Sprint for

the truck's driver-side door.

“GO!” I shout, over my shoulder. “GO, GO, GO!”

There are no second chances.

I hear the .50-cal sawing, feel rounds dig up the dirt at my feet, pluck at my clothing. The helo is lifting higher, and even as it lifts, Anselm is cracking off booming shots and Layla is at the door gun, laying down fire. Someone is firing from the other door, now, both sides. And the rear.

Covering for us even as they make their escape.

I can't afford to care about the pain in my wounded arm—I have to use it. I hold Corinna with one arm and climb up the fuel tank, yank open the door; my ruined elbow screams in agony, protesting. I can barely function with it, the pain overriding even my desperate need. Once the door swings open, I throw Corinna unceremoniously inside—thank god I left it running. She flops limp to the bench seat, but she moans. Her rifle is tangled up by the strap in her arms, the stock caught between her legs, which hang off the bench.

I shove the shifter into gear and floor it.

Corinna moans.

“Wake up, babe,” I say, sounding remarkably casual, even as rounds dent the hood and the door—one of them pierces the door and barely misses Corinna, smacking into the far door.

She groans again.

I don't know where I'm going—just through the trees, which smack against the windows and windshield and roof with a clattering din. The engine roars as I keep the pedal mashed to the floor.

“Corinna!” I shout, letting go of the wheel and keeping it straight with my knee as I shake her. “Rin! I need you, babe.”

I see a truck pulling up alongside us, in the next row over. The bed gunner swivels this way.

“Shit, shit, shit,” I say.

The steering wheel is too high to effectively be able to knee-steer it. I try my best anyway, draw my pistol and aim it...except the window is still rolled up. Shoot through it? Or—

The window shatters at that moment, spraying me with glass, and another round sings past my nose, and a third buries itself in the seat an inch behind my shoulder. I aim across myself at the driver—crack off a shot. It misses, hits high. Correct the vector of the steering wheel, fire again. Wide.

At that moment, Corinna coughs, groans. “Whaaa?” Struggles to orient

herself. “What? What happened?”

“You took a glancing shot to the forehead,” I say, pausing to squeeze off rounds—aiming this time for the bed gunner; I miss twice.

“I had to get you to safety, which meant the truck. We were taking fire, the helo was taking fire...”

I pause again, and crack off two more rounds, and this time I actually hit him, square on the chest, knocking him backward to topple over the side of the truck, flopping out of sight.

“Now we’re on the run in the deuce and a half, being chased by I don’t know how many of Spaulding’s mercenaries.” I glance at the truck and realize the driver hasn’t given up.

In fact, one of the passengers crammed into the single bench with the driver is climbing out of the window in an attempt to reach the bed gun.

Corinna gazes at me, still disoriented. “Yelena?”

“She’s safe. She’s with the girls. They’re all safe, on the Chinook.”

She wipes at her face, looks at her hand as it comes away red. “I’m bleeding.”

God, she’s dazed. “You are lucky as fuck,” I say. “Any slight difference in the angle, and you’d be dead.”

She probes at the wound, winces. “We’re alone?”

“I nod. Just you and me, baby.” I gesture at the window. “And them.”

This gets her attention. She untangles herself from the M-16, orients herself on the bench, and takes stock of the situation. “Got it.”

She ejects the magazine, glances at it, and curses. “Almost out. My other mag is almost out too.”

“Then you’d better be accurate.”

She rests the barrel on the window frame, leaning partially against me, and then worming onto my lap in search of a good shooting position. “Don’t mind me.”

I can’t help but snicker. “Never.”

“Hold it steady.”

“I am.”

I brace myself for the sound, but it still makes my ears ring when she cracks off a shot, just one. I spare a glance and see that she has indeed landed a kill shot—on the driver. The truck veers and smashes into a tree, the rear tires flying up and forward, throwing forward the man who’d just reached the bed. He’s impaled on a branch, and then the wreck is out of sight.

“How many more are there?” Corinna asks, moving off of me.

I bark a laugh. “I have no idea. I had thought most of them were dead—there were only a handful returning fire from the roof, and I think you got them all in the underground area. But as soon as we got away from the fort, they just...appeared in pursuit from all directions.”

“Did Spaulding get away?”

“I think so. There was a helicopter fleeing the area as we began boarding the truck.”

She crawls to the other side of the truck, peering out of the window around the side, then leans back in. “Nothing behind us that I can see.” A glance forward. “Where the hell are we, and where are we going?”

I snort. “Like I know? I was just getting us away. I think these olive farms can stretch for miles, though—I’m not even sure which direction we’re going.” I think about it for a moment. “The helo was due west from the fort, and I believe it was oriented facing north—the Chinook was, I mean. And I drove directly away from the helicopter’s tail end, so...I *believe* we are heading south.”

“Is there even anywhere *to go*?”

“I don’t know Tunisian geography much better than you do, Rin. I don’t know.”

She frowns, winces. “Fuck, my head hurts.”

“I would think so—you were shot, after all.”

She looks at me. “Your arm.”

I look down and realize all the activity has reopened the wound—it’s bleeding rather profusely, as a matter of fact. “Nothing for it, and I don’t think I will bleed out. It’s just seeping.”

“Does it hurt?” she asks. “Dumb question, probably.”

“Like hell,” I agree. I laugh. “We’re quite a pair, aren’t we?”

She sighs. “We did it, Apollo.”

“We sure did.” I look at her. “I can’t believe you’re here. I...you...how did you get inside the fort, anyway?”

Her expression closes down. “I don’t want to talk about that right now.”

I look at her hard, in between glances to make sure we’re not going to hit a tree—since we don’t seem to be pursued anymore, I’ve slowed down to a manageable pace. “Corinna. What did you do?”

“What I fucking had to, okay?” she snaps it at me, angry and shut down.

“Corinna, you mistake me. I’m grateful. I’m...in awe of you. You came

for me. You rescued me.”

Her expression softens as she looks at me, finally. “Of course I did, Apollo. Did you really think I wouldn’t?”

She’s on the far side of the truck, against the far door. I reach for her. “Come closer.”

She eyes me, then sets her rifle aside and slides across the bench; I’m driving so I can’t put an arm around her, but I can touch a quick kiss to her forehead, which is dotted with scabbed blood spots and spatters.

“Tell me what happened, Corinna.”

She swallows audibly, followed by a shivery in-breath. A long silence, except for the guttural roar of the diesel motor and the wind noise.

“I can’t. I can’t relax. Not till I’m sure we’re...safe. Or something like it. I can’t...once I break down, I’m not going to stop. And I can’t break down, right now.”

“Okay.” I touch her thigh, briefly. “I’m here with you, now, Corinna. You’re not alone.”

Another silence. “I...I did horrible things, Apollo,” she whispers.

“You did them for me. For Yelena.”

A nod. “But still horrible—awful.”

“Don’t think about it right now,” I say.

She shakes her head. “I can’t *not* think about it.” She points ahead—there’s a clearing in the hypnotic array of rows. “I think I see someone ahead.”

I squint and realize she’s right: a small truck with a few men clustered around it, carrying pruning shears, taking a break.

I slow the truck as we approach—their truck is blocking the row-end. One of them scrambles behind the wheel and backs their vehicle up to allow us out, the rest staring at us. I suppose we’re an usual sight: an old military truck, riddled with bullets, inside of which are two very much *nonlocals*.

One of them approaches my side as the truck squeals to a stop, and he queries me in Arabic.

I shrug. “Tunis?”

He stares at me a moment, blinking. We’re at a decent-sized road; he points along it, to our left. “Two kilometer.”

I nod. “Two kilometers that way. Got it.”

He makes a left-turn gesture, then waves a hand several times, indicating very far. “Many kilometer. Many many.” He says it *KEE-low-meter*.

“Easy enough. Thank you.” I nod at him. “*Shukran.*”

He nods back. Points at the truck. “Too far. No fuel.”

I shrug. “Have to try.”

A shrug in return. “Water?”

I shake my head. “No.”

He mutters something, probably insulting my intelligence. Calls out to one of his friends, who reaches into the open window of the truck and pulls out a liter bottle of water. His friend tosses it to him, and he tosses it up to me.

I thank him again, and he just nods, walking away, talking to his friends as they return to work.

I make the left, handing the water to Corinna. She opens it, takes a small sip, swishes it around, and then leans over the window frame and spits it out. Repeats, sipping, swishing, and spitting. Then she dumps a small amount into her palm and uses it to wipe at the tacky, drying blood on her face, then dries her face with the hem of her shirt. Finally, she takes one more small sip, and this one she swallows before handing me the bottle.

I take it, sip, cap it tightly, and lay the bottle on the bench between us.

She glances at me. “I wouldn’t normally waste water that way, especially when it may be all we have for a while. But I had to get the taste of vomit out of my mouth.”

I look at her, waiting for an elaboration. None is forthcoming, however.

Eventually, she shakes her head. “I can’t talk about it right now, Apollo. I know you want to know what happened. But I just can’t talk about it. I can’t even process it yet.”

I reach out and take her hand briefly, letting the truck’s steering track straight for a split second. “It’s going to be okay. I don’t know what you had to do, Rin, but I do know that it was justified. It was done in the name of protecting and rescuing me and that innocent little girl. You did what you had to do.”

Her smile is tight, but at least it’s a smile. “Thank you, Apollo. I do know that, intellectually. I just...knowing it doesn’t make it any less awful.”

There’s a long silence between us—I can see and feel her chewing on her experiences, processing. We reach the end of the two-kilometer stretch, which ends at a T-intersection, going north or south. The sea is in the distance, hinted at by that sense of space on the horizon, the bluer blue of the sky

I turn left, north, and bring the big vehicle up to speed. Let the silence stretch.

Rin stares out the window, chin resting on her palm.

Hours pass this way, and eventually, the strain from the previous... however many days Yelena and I were in that dungeon...catches up to me.

“Rin?”

She doesn’t react.

“Rin?”

A tear rolls down her cheek.

“Corinna?”

She startles, swiping at her face. “Hmm?” She wipes her face with both hands. “Sorry, sorry. I was just...sorry.”

I feel weak. Faint. I glance down at my elbow, and realize the T-shirt I’d wrapped around it as a bandage is so blood soaked from having reopened the wound that the once-white material is totally scarlet—as is the sleeve of the button-down, rolled up to just below the elbow. Blood loss, plus exhaustion, added onto by the fact that we were fed nothing but a few triangles of flatbread and small cups of water.

“I have to stop.” I pull the truck over onto the shoulder and to a stop. “I’m...I need to rest. I’m not...I am not feeling so great.”

Her eyes go to my elbow, and then widen. “My god, Apollo. You’ve been bleeding this whole time! You should have said something.”

“To what end, Corinna?” I ask. “There is no medical attention to be had, out here. And it’s not so bad. I’m not going to bleed out. I’m just faint. I need a few minutes to rest.”

She gestures at me. “Switch. I’ll drive.”

I frown. “I do not intend this as criticism, but can you drive a manual?”

She shrugs. “Nope. But I can learn.” She gestures at my arm. “We need to get you help. We need food. We need water. We need gas. We can’t just sit here when I’m perfectly able to operate this monstrosity of a truck.” A self-conscious laugh. “Maybe not *well*, but I can figure it out.”

I slide over, and she scoots over my lap. Before she can move off of me, I wrap my good arm over her thighs and pin her in place, burying my face in the side of her neck, inhaling the familiar scent of my woman.

She leans back against me, momentarily softening into my embrace. “Apollo...”

I kiss her neck, her cheekbone, her ear. “I know. I just...I had to. I need

you.” I swallow hard. “I need comfort, Rin. Just for a second.”

Moving cautiously so as to not bump my injury, she slides off of my lap, only to twist in place and straddle me, facing me. Her arms go around my neck, her hands burying in my hair. I feel my body respond, despite pain and exhaustion and the trauma response I’ve frankly been suppressing. She pushes her mouth against mine, seeking my answer. Her tongue slides on my lips, and I open for her, tasting her mouth.

“I probably don’t taste very good,” she murmurs.

I grasp a handful of her hair at the back of her head and tug her close for a renewal of the kiss. “Don’t care,” I mutter against her lips.

A moment of indulgence, mouths fused, breath synched, bodies clinched. She grinds on me, and I ache for her, hold her against me and writhe into her, needing her, needing more.

With a gasp, she wrenches herself away and rolls off me to the seat behind the wheel. “If we don’t stop, I’m going to do something to you right here in this truck. Which...doesn’t seem advisable under the current circumstances.”

“No kidding.”

She laughs, blushing, pushing her hair away from her face. “Suddenly, I’m so horny.” She glances at me with an inexplicably awkward laugh. “Is that weird?”

I shake my head. “Not at all. For one thing, it is a totally normal response to adrenaline, in general. For another thing, we haven’t spent much time apart at all since I moved to Houston with you, beyond working during the day, so we’re feeling the need to reassert our bond, you know? Third, we’ve been through an intense, traumatic experience, we faced death and survived, and it’s a response to that as well. I think also, we are just a couple which experiences a heightened sense of sexual chemistry, which doesn’t go away simply because we are in a difficult circumstance.”

“So you feel it too? Because all of a sudden, I’m so horny I can’t even handle it.”

I smirk at her. “No, I feel the same.”

She eyes me. “You do, hmm?”

I glance in the side mirror—we’ve been sitting here for a couple of minutes and haven’t seen so much as a single car. In fact, other than the orchard workers, we’ve seen no one at all.

“This is a pretty deserted stretch of road...” I say, twisting on the bench

to face her. “Just saying.”

She sets the parking brake and turns toward me. “Apollo, I...”

I reach for her, guide her back astride me, tug her hair the rest of the way free from the bun, and her long, thick, blond tresses tumble around her shoulders. I bury my hand in her hair, then brush my thumb over her lips—I huff a laugh as my hands find lockpicks buried in her tresses; I set them aside and sweep my hands through her hair again.

“What, Corinna?”

“I need you.”

“I know.”

“Right now.” She grinds on my lap, her hands pressed against my chest. “I just...my mind, my body, my emotions...they’re all going fucking haywire, and I need to...I need to *feel* something besides the...” a choked sob. “Something besides the awful shit that’s banging around in here.” She raps her temple with her knuckles. “I need to forget. I need to feel like...I need to know you’re...you’re real. That I’m here, you’re here—that we’re here, now, and not there anymore.”

I lift up and kiss her, and she kisses me back, briefly but intensely, before tilting her head back to bare her throat to me. I kiss her throat, her neck, her shoulder near the collar of the T-shirt. Using my one good hand, I roughly shove her T-shirt and bra up, letting her full, heavy breasts spill out, bouncing free with a sway. I tilt her backward and capture a nipple in my mouth and suckle until she gasps.

Abruptly, she pulls away, shoving her bra and shirt down. “In the back,” she says, scrambling for the door. “I’m not fumbling around with you in this cab like awkward teenagers when there’s a whole open truck bed.” She shoves open the door and slides to the ground.

I follow her, pausing to shut off the motor and take the keys with me. I hop to the ground from the passenger door as well, rounding to the tailgate. The flap was tied open, so instead of lowering the tailgate, she climbs up and over it. It’s a harder climb for me, one-handed. But my need for her eclipses everything, right now—I feel nothing except need.

Need to feel her.

To comfort her.

To be comforted.

Like her, I need to know I’m here, now. That I’m not dreaming this.

Once I’m up and in, she makes short work of dropping the flap and tying

it closed, bathing us in relative darkness.

I hear rustling. My eyes adjust, and I see Corinna stripping. She's untied her shoes and kicked them off and is now sitting on her butt wriggling out of her jeans. I grin, and follow her lead, toeing off my shoes and peeling out of my shirt, shucking my jeans. I watch her as I disrobe—it's dim in here, but my eyes have adjusted enough to be able to see her, to soak in the lush fullness of her breasts as they sway, bare, and the thick ivory wonder of her strong legs, and the shadowed V of her sex. She's naked for me, totally bare. It's daring, it feels like. Here, now, like this. In daylight, with no assurance that our enemies aren't still out there, when anyone could drive by and see what seems to be an abandoned military truck...

It's foolish, even.

It makes my blood sing, the thrill of it torching my arousal hotter, like an afterburner kicking in.

Rin has made a makeshift pallet with our clothing. When I slide my underwear off and stand naked in front of her, she shifts forward to her knees in front of me, gazing up at me. Her hands go to my cock, already swollen and upright, thick and hard and aching with need. Yet, as she touches me, caressing my length, it hardens further, to a nearly painful erection. I groan at her touch, her hands closing around my flesh and stroking downward, her palm cradling my balls and caressing them gently, lovingly. I almost whimper in delighted relief when her lips part and she takes me into her mouth. Sucks me, tongues my tip, swirls the flat of her tongue over the head, licks up the length of it like a lollipop. Takes me to the back of her throat, swallows around me, backs away.

When I start to hiss and huff, she closes her fist around my cock and tugs downward. "Lay down, Apollo."

I do as she says, lying on the pallet of our clothing. She crawls over me, breasts swaying, hair a curtain around her face—around our faces as she descends to kiss me, kneeling on either side of my hips with her hands on my chest.

I have other plans, however, before we join.

I palm her ass and guide her forward, and she nips her bottom lip in her teeth, knowing what I'm demanding and all too willing to give it to me. She crawls up my body until her sex lines up over my mouth, still on all fours above me. I lick her sex, a soft slow swipe of my tongue up her seam until my tongue meets her clit, and she gasps shrill at the contact. I suckle the pert,

erect little nub of flesh into my mouth, causing her to cry out—at the same time, I find her opening with my fingers and slide them inside her, my palm brushing my chin as I suckle and lick her clit, fingers curling and sliding in and out of her. She arches her back, and then bows it upward, teeth gritting around a suppressed scream as I find the rhythm and pressure with my tongue that drives her wild, the thrusting curl of my fingers that makes her mad with arousal.

“Oh fuck, Apollo...” she snarls, “fuck yes. I’m close. Make me come, Apollo. Fuck yeah, give it to me...” She grinds her sex on my mouth, then, as her orgasm rises up in her, hot and swift, mere seconds—less than a minute, probably—since I began devouring her delicious sex. Her juices soak my tongue, essence gushing as she drives higher, closer to climax, her hips writhing on me.

I feel her start to come, feel it in the way her pussy squeezes around my fingers, clamping down hard around them; I hear it in her voice, in the hoarse groans and the muted whimpers. I taste the tart, musky tang of her essence flooding my mouth.

And then she’s screaming out loud, heedless of anything else, a wordless cry of release—I milk her through it, tongue flying in circles over her clit and fingers driving in and out hard and fast, stroking her insides the way she loves it best.

The moment her climax peaks, she breaks away from my mouth and shimmies down my body, grasping my cock in her fist and guiding it to herself. Her eyes are open and fixed on mine, hooded, heavy lidded with release and wild with renewed need for me.

“Apollo...” she whispers. “Fuck me, please fuck me.”

The moment she has me notched inside her slick hot sex, I thrust deep, and she cries out, head dropping. Her body flattens down onto mine, her arms wringing around my neck, her hands pillowing beneath my head. Her ass squishes flat against my hips as I fill her, and I groan aloud now at the wild homecoming bliss of her perfect beautiful body welcoming me.

“Oh god, Rin. My Rin, my Corinna...” I whisper in her ear, breath huffing on her hair, against her ear.

She braces her palms on the floor of the truck bed beside my ears and pushes downward as I thrust upward. Her forehead touches mine, lips against mine, trembling and not kissing. “Apollo. Mine. My Apollo.”

I pull away, and she lifts up, and we meet again with a hard clap of flesh,

and then I feel myself aching, boiling, rising. There's no stamina, there's no lasting. She's come once already, and judging by the way she's gasping and thrusting to meet me, about to come again. And I have no shame in the fact that I'm going to come inside her in a matter of mere minutes. When there's need like this, the need to simply *feel*, to be joined, to be connected, to be reminded of what's real, it doesn't need to last forever. When you're united like this, whimpering and groaning together in a gathering storm of mutual climax, time ceases to have meaning.

There's only the moment. The Now. The Us.

Maybe it's two minutes since I entered her. Or five. Or less. I don't know. All I know is I feel her sweet sex clamping around me, her nascent orgasm demanding my own match hers. All I know is our mouths, fused, and her breasts crushed flat against my chest. All I know is our bodies joined, my cock driving into her with ever-increasing urgency, her pussy clenching around me with aching ferocity. All I know is her voice in my ear, chanting my name like a prayer, whimpering and panting and screaming as she topples into climax.

Her voice in my ear is an invisible caress on my soul, her touch on my skin erasing any knowledge of pain or memory of fear. All I know is her, her, her. Smoothing and soothing, caressing and kissing, loving me with her words and her body and her soul.

"I'm coming, Apollo!" she gasps into my ear. "Come with me, my love. Come with me, please, please—I need it. I need you. I need to feel you come inside me."

I feel her orgasm, and it pulls my own from me. Her words act like a command, a trigger. I couldn't hold it back if I wanted to—and I don't. I explode within her, crying out with my release, gasping her name—"Corinna, Corinna...Rin, Rin...my god, my Rin..."

I come inside her, flooding her, the mad intensity of my climax wrenching a shout from my throat as wave after wave of climax shakes me to shivering, quivering jelly beneath her.

She comes above me all the while, our orgasms synched, united.

When we both finally are spent, she collapses on me.

Panting hard, she buries her face in the side of my throat and kisses, kisses, kisses, tiny little nips and pecks. "I love you, Apollo Dimitriou."

It's ripped from my chest. Torn from the depths of my soul. "I love you, Corinna Roth."

This gasp from her is from shock, rather than pleasure.
At that moment, brakes squeal, and a door opens, closes.

DRIVING AWAY FROM IT ALL

We both freeze.

Apollo responds first, rolling me aside and yanking on his jeans one-handed, shrugging into his shirt awkwardly, with a lot of wincing and suppressed gasps of pain. He shoves his feet into his shoes barefoot, quietly unties the flap.

“Shit,” he hisses. “Guns are both in the cab.”

I’m working my way as silently as possible into my clothes. “Maybe they’ll go away?” I ask in a nearly inaudible whisper.

He shakes his head; whoever is out there has climbed up on the step—we feel the truck tip slightly.

I realize I lost the knife I’d had in my belt at some point—I remember it being there during the firefight at the fortress, but now it’s not. I dig in my pocket and withdraw the card-knife, creep as quietly as I can to Apollo, tap him on the shoulder, hand it to him.

He examines it, unfolds it—even in the dim light of the covered truck bed, the blade and handle are clearly coated in tacky blood. His eyes go to me, and I think he divines a measure of what I went through for him. He replaces the blade and holds the closed weapon in his hand.

A radio squawks, and the male outside responds in a mixture of Arabic and French. The suspension dips again as the man—police or military, most likely—hops down. Boots crunch this way.

Apollo glances at me, motions for me to get down. “Down, stay down.”

I open my mouth to speak, but he cuts me off with a harsh slice of his hand. He then moves the flap aside and swings a leg over the tailgate, then the other, and then jumps down.

“Hello,” he calls.

The response is a harsh, authoritative snap.

“I’m lost. I was just resting in the back...”

Another suspicious-sounding response.

“I don’t speak Arabic or French. English?”

“Bullet.” A tap on the side of the truck. “Shoot truck.”

“Yeah, no, I...I bought it like this. Taking it to Tunis to get it fixed.”

“Lie.” Angry, harsh, suspicious, thickly accented. “Shoot you. Shoot truck.”

Apollo sighs in frustration. “Okay, listen. Yeah, I got into some trouble.”

The question is in rapid Arabic.

“I don’t understand you,” Apollo says. “I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

What follows from the other man is definitely a long series of curses. There’s the digital beep of a cellular device indicating a microphone going active, and then a digital female voice speaks in English:

“Where are you going?”

“I told you. Tunis.” This is then translated into Arabic by the same digitized female voice.

Arabic from the man, translated: “What are you doing in Tunis?”

“Looking for my friends so I can go home and get this treated.” The translation follows, and there’s a pause.

Arabic, and the English translation: “There are guns in the truck. I should arrest you.”

“I’m telling you the truth. I just want to go home. I’m not here to cause any trouble. I’m going to find my friends and leave the country.”

“You are very far from Tunis.” A pause for the translation to catch up, and then he speaks again through the translation app: “You will run out of fuel first.”

“Are there any fuel stations I can go to?”

A pause. “I have a friend, in a place called Enfidha, near the airport.” Another pause. “He has an auto shop, mostly salvage and cheap repairs.” Another pause for translation. “Tell him Youssef sent you. You want to trade.”

“I understand. How do I find the auto shop?”

I hear a pen click, silence, and then paper ripping. “Keep going on this road, Highway A1.” Pause for translation. “Exit for Enfidha.” Another pause. “Like this.” I assume he’s drawing a map.

“Thank you for helping,” Apollo says, with the translation following.

The radio squawks again, and a voice, sounding impatient even to me, crackles across the line.

“You are lucky I have a meeting I am late for. Do not make me regret letting you go.”

“I won’t. Thank you.” Without the translation app, then: “*Shukran.*”

Boots crunch away, a door opens and closes, a motor turns over and catches, and then tires roll over gravel—finally, I hear the car speed away.

I wait.

“You can come out,” Apollo says. “He’s gone.”

I sit up, swing my legs over the gate and drop to the ground. “What the hell was that?”

Apollo is visibly sweating—he wipes his brow. “A very lucky encounter.”

“He just let you go?”

“And gave me a lead on how to get rid of this truck. To say it stands out more than we already do is the understatement of the century.” He shakes his head. “I have no idea why he let me go other than he was genuinely late for something even more important than whatever he thinks was going on here.” He waves at the truck, indicating the many, many bullet holes.

I mean, we’re not talking one or two or three—it’s riddled, and missing both windows.

He wipes his face with his palm. “Lucky break, I guess.”

He heads for the driver’s side, reaching for the handle to haul himself up, but he misses and stumbles backward off the step.

I take his hand. “Apollo, my god. You can barely function.”

I lead him around to the passenger side, step up and open the door, climb up and in, and then reach down for his hand, haul him up. When he’s in, I reach over him and close the door, and then scoot behind the wheel; I take a moment to put my hair back up in a bun.

I look at him. “Okay. How do I operate this?”

He blinks hard; I’m getting very worried about him. “Three pedals down there.” He points. “Far left is the clutch, push it all the way in with your left foot, and turn the key.” He frowns, and digs in his pocket, hands me the key. “You’ll need that.”

I push in the clutch, which requires more of an effort than I’d anticipated; when I turn the key, the diesel motor cough, chugs stubbornly a few times,

and then catches and turns over. “Okay, now what?”

He gestures at the gear shift. “Push in the clutch and hold it, foot off the gas pedal. Good. Now.” He covers my hand with his on the shifter and pulls it to the left and then back toward the bench; I feel it catch. “That’s first.” Pushes it forward, back right to the middle, and then forward again. “Second.” Straight backward toward the bench. “Third.” Horizontally to the right. “Fourth.” Back to the middle. “Neutral.” Across left and all the way forward. “Reverse.”

Keeping the clutch in, I practice the pattern a few times. “Okay, got it.”

“Clutch down, foot on the gas pedal, that’s the start.” He watches as I touch the pedal. “Push the gas pedal in, but keep the clutch in.” I do so, and the engine roars, but nothing happens. “This time, let off the clutch gradually. As you let off the clutch, push down the gas pedal—*gently*. Gradually. Trade it off, as much clutch as you let up, push the gas down the same amount.”

I try it, and the truck lurches, but then dies. “What’d I do wrong?”

He just waves. “If you’d have gotten it first try, you would be a prodigy, or something. No one gets it on the first try. Put it in neutral, start it up, and try again.”

I restart the motor, put it in gear, and try once more. I get a few feet, but it stalls again.

“More gas,” he says. “Too much, and you bolt forward and then stall. Too little, and you stall. You must find the Goldilocks zone, so to speak.”

It takes a few minutes of lurching attempts, but I get it going. The next challenge is shifting gears while moving—there are a lot of wince-inducing grinding sounds, but eventually I get the hang of it.

“You’re lucky this is a later version of the deuce-and-a-half,” Apollo says, once I’ve gotten the hang of it and we’re at speed; he’s slouched on the bench, resting his head, eyes drooping. “It has hydraulic steering. Most of the earlier versions did not, and those are a real bitch to drive.”

“Apollo, should I be worried about you?”

He shakes his head “Mmm-mm. I’m okay. Just...tired.”

“I’m worried about your blood loss.”

He cracks his eyes open and glances at his arm. “Just a slow seep. It is painful, but I will not bleed out.” He hands me a small sheet of paper with Arabic writing on it, and some numerals. On the back, a crude line-drawing map, with an asterisk indicating the desired location. “This is where we’re going. No idea how far it is from here. I’ll try to stay awake to make sure we

find it.”

“I can manage, Apollo. You need to rest. You’ve been through a hell of a lot.” I reach and out touch his shoulder. “That was superhot, by the way.” I smile at him.

He smiles back. “Yes, it was.”

I grin. “I didn’t break you, did I?”

A derisive snort. “Not likely.”

A long pause. I swallow hard. He meets my eyes, knowing what I’m thinking about. “You said it,” I say, alternating between looking at him and the road. “You told me you loved me.”

He nods. “I did. And I meant it.”

“I never doubted that you love me, Apollo.” I look away—I’m still not emotionally okay, nor am I ready to delve into the mire of trauma responses I’m actively suppressing. “I just...hearing you say it...it meant more to me than I can say. I don’t want you to think I missed it.”

“In the long journey here—” he waves at the window, meaning Tunisia in general, “I had much time to think. There were many, many, many hours of nothing but thinking. And I realized my hesitance to utter those words to you was nothing but foolishness. Fear, perhaps. I know you love me. The fact that you chose—and continue to choose—to love me after the way we met...my kidnapping of you...it never ceases to amaze me. It stuns me. I wake up in the morning, and your beautiful face is the first thing I see. I sleep at night and I have the unimaginable pleasure of holding you.”

He halts, eyes closed. I let the silence move between us, allow him the space to say what he needs to say.

“Your love is...it has done more to heal the wounds of my childhood than anything else ever could.” Another long pause. “No amount of talk therapy could do that, and believe it or not, I did try that.”

I frown at him in stunned disbelief. “You did? When?”

He shrugs. “In my mid-twenties. I thought perhaps it would help me feel more stable. More...able to accept who my family truly was—it was just after I’d really discovered the truth of who my grandfather was, the kind of empire he’d built. And my mother—the truth of what kind of a person she was. I mean, I knew she was a terrible mother. That was an unavoidable fact. But I could also tell she *did* care about me in some capacity. Just perhaps she was not capable of expressing that—which I understand, given what I know of my grandfather. He couldn’t have been a very wonderful parent himself,

obviously.”

He’s speaking with his eyes closed. A deep sigh escapes him.

“But finding out that your grandfather trafficked in people, that he was prone to murdering his own employees for the slightest infractions? Finding out he distributed drugs to children, sold arms to terrorists? How do you cope with knowing that’s where you came from? And my mother? Jesus.” He shudders. “The stories I heard about her. She had a predilection for torture, did you know that? People like my father, they were safe from that because she needed sexual partners who stayed...well, alive. But there were others. Stories that she would kidnap men, drug them, handcuff them to bed, rape them, torture them, and eventually kill them. Of course, she always got away with it, because everyone was terrified of my grandfather, and of her.” A disgusted sigh. “That’s who my mother was. She was jealous of your mother, that she’d caught the eye of your father. I’ve heard those stories as well. She hated that she couldn’t have him, so she kidnapped your father, and did terrible things to him. She also kidnapped your mother and planned to torture and kill her. But your mother proved the stronger, and killed mine, and rescued your father.”

I don’t know what to say. It was this history that had prompted him to kidnap me, in some misguided pursuit of...I don’t think he even knows what he was trying to accomplish, even still.

“Apollo....”

He shakes his head. “Your mother did the world a favor, killing Gina Karahalios. I can see that, now.” A rough huff of breath. “My point is, I was twenty-something when I finally got up the balls to dive into the truth of my family’s legacy. It really fucked me up. And I thought if I hired the best therapist money could buy, it would fix me.” A bitter laugh. “I hired a therapist of world renown from Vienna, flew him to Athens, paid him a fortune to live in Athens at my beck and call—to fix me.”

“How did that go?” I ask.

He snorts. “He refused payment, one day. ‘Young man,’ he said. ‘You need something I cannot give you. You need something no therapist will ever be able to give you, no matter how much you pay them. I cannot keep accepting your money and putting my practice aside when I know nothing I say, nothing I can teach you will ever truly help you.’”

I eye him. “You remember his words verbatim?”

“Pretty much, yes. It’s a speech that has been carved into my brain. I

turned it over in my head a countless million times in the years since.”

“Did he tell you what it was he thought you needed?”

He sighs. “I nearly shot him. My gun was on the other side of the room at the time, or I think I probably would have.” A pause. “He told me I simply needed to be loved. Real unconditional love. It didn’t have to be romantic, but that was the most likely source. His next words I couldn’t forget if I tried, not in a million years. ‘You were mistreated by your mother. Unparented. This, I can fix. I can help you learn to re-parent yourself. Your history is sordid, your family steeped in blood and greed and many other evil things. I can help you overcome your self-loathing, and I can help you learn to let the past simply be exactly that—the past. What I cannot do is love you. You suffer from an acute lack of love. You were not hugged. You were not cherished. No one simply cared for you, for no reason other than that they *enjoy* you. Until you are loved—until you are capable of *allowing* someone to love you, you will never be whole.’” He swallows hard. “Those words hurt me more deeply than any words I’ve ever heard in my entire life. Nothing my mother ever said cut me that deeply—perhaps I was simply used to that from her. His words hurt because I knew they were true. But also because I didn’t believe I *could* be loved. That anyone could love me—because no one ever had. The one person who should have, didn’t. Couldn’t.”

“God, Apollo.” I reach for him, and he tangles his hand in mine, and our eyes meet. “I *love* you. Unconditionally. Deeply. Permanently. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.” I swallow hard around the lump in my throat. “I said that, at the beginning of this. To Uncle Harris, I think it was. That I would do anything for you. But...it was really tested, today.” I wipe my face. “God, has it all been just today? It feels like a million years since I got on this truck for the first time.”

He looks at me. “It was hard to accept that you love me. Even...even after I left you, to become a better person, a person worthy of your love...it wasn’t--I hadn’t truly *accepted* that you love me. Deep down, you know? Not in my soul. I knew it, but I hadn’t...internalized it. And that meant I couldn’t be whole. And if I’m not whole, I can’t love you. Not fully.”

“So, when did that change?”

“When you opened the door to my cell.” He closes his eyes, a tear trickling down his cheek. He doesn’t wipe it away, isn’t ashamed of or threatened by it. “When the door opened, I expected Sasha, or Harris, or Duke, or...one of them. I knew they’d come for us. I knew that. And I think

in my gut, I knew you'd insist on being part of it. But I...I honestly had hoped you wouldn't endanger yourself. Because if anything happened to you, because of me? I couldn't bear it. But...when that door opened and you stood there like an avenging angel, covered in blood and looking so fierce, so beautiful...that's when something inside me just...clicked. I knew during the hours of travel that I loved you, and that you deserved to hear it from me. I knew I'd say it, I knew I'd find some way of forcing myself to say the words I knew I meant, that I knew I felt, that were and are true inside me. But it was that moment, seeing you in the doorway with the rifle, with such ferocity and such love in your eyes. That was the moment I understood. You *love* me. In a way I don't think most people could ever fathom. How we started, what it took for us to be able to be together...and then this? You stormed a fortress full of hired killers and you rescued me. You *killed* for me."

"I actually infiltrated. Harris and the guys did the storming." I glance at him. "You saw love in my eyes when I opened the door? It's hard to remember what I was feeling—that whole assault and rescue is a blur...except the parts that are frozen in my brain."

He nods, then shrugs. "It's hard to describe, honestly. You looked at me, and...yes, I saw love. A flash of it, at least—brief, but very potent. Relief. Anger. It was all wrapped up in this rabid ferocity, this sense that no one and nothing was going to stand in your way—and I was the focus of that."

I think, head tilted. "Yeah, that's about right."

He glances at a sign above the highway we're on—it's mostly in Arabic writing, but there are some numerals, and two words in English, the names of towns, I assume, with arrows pointing to the upcoming exit. "Take this exit." He glances at the crude map. "Then left, I believe...wait, no...right. Take the exit and then turn right."

The exit is a long wide curve which arcs all the way back around and over the highway via the overpass we just went under—this leads to another smaller highway, which extends a few miles through more arid desert, and then a roundabout takes us into a small town. It's quaint. Low buildings, cracked pavement. Apollo consults the map as we roll slowly through the town—there are a few people out, here and there; we receive long, curious stares. Finally, after a few wrong turns, we come to an auto repair shop on the outskirts of the town—there's a large lot attached to it, the pavement cracking and overgrown with weeds, the lot littered with old cars in varying states of disrepair, most of them in the process of being slowly stripped for parts. The

shop itself has two bays, open, one of them featuring a lift, on which is an old sedan of a make and model I don't recognize. Two men in dirty gray coveralls stand underneath it, peering at the underside—this is utterly familiar, the postures, the way they point and gesture, consult back and forth.

They see us approaching in the huge military truck, and turn away from the car on the lift, ambling slowly toward us as I bring the truck to a halt on the apron of their shop's driveway.

I shut the engine off, set the brake, and grab the handgun, check the load, and shove it behind my back, draping my shirt over it as I descend. Apollo follows suit, leaving the M-16 for now, the note from the officer in his hand.

The older of the men, stout and balding, approaches us. "American?"

"We speak English, yes," Apollo says.

"English, okay." He gestures at the truck. "Bad time, hey?"

Apollo hands him the note. "Yeah, you could say that."

The man takes it, scans it. "What you want?"

"Youssef sent us. We want to trade that," Apollo gestures at the truck, "for something...smaller. Not so much attention. Something that will get us to Tunis."

The man chuckles. "Tunis, hmm?" He walks over to the truck, fingers a few of the bullet holes. "You have trouble?"

"Hopefully not anymore."

A nod. "You pay?"

"No. Trade."

"Trade." He nods, scratches his belly. "Trade, okay. I got it for you. Come, come."

We follow him around to the back of the shop, where a dozen or twenty cars are lined up in rows. Some are fairly decent, on the older side but decent. Other are...salvaged is a nice term. Operational, but barely. He surveys the cars, muttering under his breath; turns and looks the way the truck is, as if he can see it through the building; scratches his bald spot.

He gestures at a four-door sedan. It was maybe a Volvo, once upon a time. Most of the body is pale blue, but one rear quarter panel has been replaced with a maroon piece that doesn't quite fit, hastily cut and soldered into place. The hood is different again, and doesn't latch properly. I'm not sure it has any windows, and it appears to not have a muffler, either, from what I can tell; I'm not exactly a car girl, but it's obvious this guy is ripping us off, even considering the age and condition of the truck.

Apollo frowns at the man. “Come on. It’s got to get us to Tunis in one piece.”

The man chuckles again. “Better, hmm? You beg, no choose, hmm?” He scratches his belly again, ambling along the row of cars, until he comes to a boxy SUV—a classic Toyota in fairly decent condition. “Like this? Is good. All in one piece. Engine good, hmmm?”

Apollo nods, opens the driver’s door and pops the hood, lifts it, leans over and examines.

I go over up next to him. “You know what you’re looking at?” I ask in a whisper.

He snorts softly. “Not a bit. Part of the game, though. Negotiating, I can do.” He lets out a deep breath, steadying himself; the rest seems to have done him a lot of good, but we both need a solid night’s sleep.

He lets the hood slam closed. Slides behind the wheel and turns over the motor—it coughs, chugs a few times, doesn’t catch; another turn of the key, more chugging, and then it finally catches with a coughed-up cloud of white exhaust, setting to idling.

The shop owner nods. “See? Is good. Deal?”

Apollo taps the fuel gauge, which is nudging toward empty. “Top off the fuel, and yeah, you got a deal.”

A nod, a scratch of the rounded belly. “Deal.” He extends a hand to Apollo, and they shake.

The owner wiggles himself behind the wheel of the Toyota, gestures toward the front of the shop. “Fuel up, change oil, okay? Quick.”

“Sounds good, thanks.”

Twenty minutes later, the Toyota—rusted red with a white top and newer off-road tires—is idling out front of the shop, beside the hulking deuce-and-a-half, freshly fueled up with new, clean oil. The shop owner even threw in a few cold, sweating liters of water. I climb behind the wheel—here, the shift pattern is printed clearly on the shifter knob, whereas on the military truck it was on a plate riveted to the dash. Apollo climbs up onto the step, reaches into the cab, withdraws the M-16 and the spare mag, quickly tosses them both onto the rear bench of the Toyota, while the owner’s attention is momentarily distracted by a shouted question from the other man, still in the shop working under the car on the lift. Apollo is about to turn away when he bends on the step, looking at the floor—he reaches in again and comes out with the knife I’d thought I’d lost. This too he tosses on the rear seat, then closes the door of

the cab and hops down.

His left arm has stopped bleeding, finally, but his shirt sleeve is reddened from mid-bicep down. He's lost a lot of blood, he's just playing it tough. No other choice, really.

He climbs in beside me, buckling in—I do the same. “To Tunis.”

“To Tunis,” I echo.

IT'S A LONG, hot, boring drive. Evening falls as we approach Tunis. Maybe it just feels like a long time—not much more than an hour, I'd say. Apollo dozes off, at some point, leaving me with the windows down, hot air rushing around the cabin.

As we enter the outskirts of Tunis, I nudge Apollo. “Hey, babe. We're here.”

He grunts, sitting upright. “Shit, I slept.”

“You needed it,” I say. “I'm glad you did.”

He glances at me as he stretches, yawns. “How are you holding up?”

I shrug. “I've had to pee for at least half an hour, I'm starving, and I have no idea where to go next. We have no ID, no means of communication, no money, and no prearranged rendezvous.”

“You don't know how to call anyone?”

I shake my head. “Their phone numbers are all super complicated, because they're these end-to-end encrypted phone lines and shit. So, no.” I eye him. “Do you have any way of accessing any of your bank accounts?”

He considers. “Doubtful. Like you said, no ID, no cards, nothing. And I'm not even sure there are any banks in Tunis that can access my accounts anyway. Plus, Spaulding is still out there, and I have to assume he's still looking for us, which means monitoring my accounts. I know for a fact he has that ability. And I know it's my money and business contacts he's after.”

“Did he make you transfer money to him or something?” I ask.

We're just trundling slowly along a four-lane boulevard through suburban Tunis, the sea in the distance to our right. Powerlines follow the road, which is separated on the right by a low stone wall, with a parking lane between the road and the one- and two-story shops and flats on our left. Once in a while, a car will pass us on our left, and the driver will stare—at me, in particular.

Apollo with his Greek skin coloring and black hair, maybe doesn't pass for a local but certainly doesn't stand out like I do, being pale white with platinum blond hair.

Apollo taps on his thigh with a fingertip, a rapid rhythmless thoughtful gesture. "I have contacts in Tangier—former, errr, business contacts, shall we say, with whom I'm still on good terms. But Tangier is at least...god, two thousand kilometers from here? We'd need money to refuel, at least."

An idea hits me. "I have something that may work. It's risky, especially since we have to assume Spaulding is actively looking for us, like you said—he's not going to just let us get away with this. And if Spaulding is looking for us, he's going to have Rasmussen and Djakovic on our trail, too."

"What's your idea?"

"Lots of holes in it," I admit. "But it's the best I can come up with. We have to find someone willing to let us use their phone to call internationally. I know Mom's cell number by heart. I can call her and be like, 'we're loving our vacation in Tunis, say hi to Uncle Harry for me,' or something like that. Mom will understand what I'm saying, and pass the message along. The risk is, if they're monitoring Mom's line, which we have to assume they are to be on the safe side, it will let them know we're here. So at that point, we'd have to hope Uncle Harry and the crew find us before Rasmussen and-or Djakovic do."

Apollo hums thoughtfully. "It's the best option we've got, I think—the *only* option, the way I see it." He glances at me. "Djakovic and Rasmussen. Who are they?"

I forgot he wasn't part of the investigation that led us to him—I was assuming he knew everything I knew. Exhaustion is getting to me, too.

"Djakovic is the guy from the warehouse in New York. Low-level criminal. Petty theft, cheap hits, smuggling, small-time drugs. Basically, Djakovic is muscle for the bigger fish in the European crime world. Spaulding doesn't know him, doesn't hire him—Spaulding tells his right-hand man, Rasmussen, to get something done. Say, we need this stolen shipment of TVs moved across the border from, like, Kyiv to Moscow or something, right? Rasmussen knows a guy like Djakovic, and hires him for the actual work."

Apollo is grinning at me with a wry expression. "Thank you, my love, for that very informative explainer on European criminal infrastructure." His tone is dry, sarcastic. "I would not have understood it, otherwise."

I frown, not following—as I said, I’m exhausted, mentally, physically, and emotionally drained. And then it dawns on me, and I laugh. “Forgot who I was talking to, for a second.”

“Indeed.” He pats my thigh. “Rasmussen. Rings a bell.” He muses quietly for a moment. “Sven Rasmussen?”

I nod. “That’s him.”

He slaps his knee. “I know him. I’ve done business with him. I was new to the game, just starting out after discovering who Grandfather was. Thought I could connect with my family history by being one of them, right? Get closer to Grandfather, to Mom. Well, I wanted this deal. Would have been my biggest acquisition ever—a major player in moving heroin from Afghanistan to Eastern Europe by way of Georgia, and guns the other way, had died of a heart attack, very suddenly, very unexpectedly. This left a power vacuum. I wanted control of that route, and so did Spaulding—he sent Rasmussen to negotiate with me.”

“What was that like?” I ask.

He snorts. “Rasmussen is a slick operator and a vicious son of a bitch. I hated him on sight.”

“Who got control?”

Apollo winks. “I did. I gave Spaulding a piece of real estate he’d been eyeing that I owned, a port warehouse in Odesa that was perfect for certain smuggling operations. I gave him that, and he gave me the route.” A laugh. “I got the better deal. See, I’d gotten wind Interpol had pegged that warehouse for being exactly what it was, and were watching it, so I’d planned on unloading it anyway. Ended up a win-win for me.” He soberes. “I do not much like the idea of Sven Rasmussen hunting us. Djakovic worries me less. But Rasmussen, as I said, is slick and very, very vicious. Not someone to fuck around with.”

“We tracked him to a ship docking in Algiers, but last I knew, that’s where I lost him. We were assuming he was heading to meet up with Spaulding, which is why we were tracking him in the first place, but then Alexei joined us and he had a contact here named Thomas, who got us more direct intel on your current whereabouts. Once we knew where they were holding you, we sort of left off keeping track of Rasmussen.”

“Logical enough.”

“Except now he’s a threat. And I don’t know that this plan of mine will work.”

“It’s what we’ve got. My next best idea was to try and sell this truck for cash and get a bus to Tangier so I can get ahold of my friend there—and then, at that point, I could get us somewhere safer, if not get ahold of your many uncles.”

“That’s an option too, but at least in this we have control over our movements.” I glance at the shops on our right. “So, where do we find a phone?”

“Better question is, where do we find a phone that they’re not going to want us to pay them to use?” A wry, bitter laugh. “Billions of dollars between the two of us, and we’re flat broke.”

“It is pretty ironic, isn’t it?” I can’t help but laugh at the observation.

We drive through Tunis at random for a while. Eventually, Apollo points. “There.”

It’s a small cafe, with a few tables on the sidewalk outside the open front. At one of the tables, a local businessman has a cell phone to his ear, and a small mug pinched between two fingers.

“Pull over,” Apollo says, gesturing.

I stop the vehicle across the street, put the shifter in neutral, and set the parking brake. When Apollo moves to exit, I touch his leg. “Wait—I should talk to him.”

He frowns. “I think maybe he would respond to another man better.”

“But who is he going to remember more acutely: a pretty blond American, or a man with a badly wounded arm?” I gesture at his face, at the purpling bruises left by Djakovic. “Plus, the bruised face.”

“Shit. You’re right.” He hisses in frustration. “I hate letting you assume all the risks.”

I smile at him and pat his thigh. “There’s little risk to this. I just have to play the pretty damsel in distress.”

“I know. But still.”

“I’ve got this, Apollo. It’s fine.”

I slip out of the SUV and head for the cafe. The businessman ends the call as I approach, seeing me and dismissing me—until I halt near him on the other side of the low, decorative fence. “Excuse me, sir.”

He eyes me irritably. “No English.”

“I just need to borrow your phone, please?”

He regards me with further annoyance. “No English.” He gestures at me, snapping something in Arabic.

I hold my fist to my ear, thumb pointing up, pinky pointing down, in what I would like to assume is international sign language for phone. “Please?”

He eyes me. “You lose?”

“Yes, I’m lost.”

“Call papa?”

“Yes, exactly.”

He pulls a pen from the inside pocket of his coat, sets it on the bar napkin on his table, slides them in my direction, taps it, gestures at his phone.

I write Mom’s cell phone number down, hand it to him. He dials—a long series of numbers before the phone number itself, and then presses dial and hands it to me.

“Thank you,” I say, taking the phone from him. “*Shukran.*”

He nods, sips at his coffee, or espresso, or whatever it is.

It rings four or five times, and then Mom answers, her tone distinctly suspicious. “Hello? Who is this and how did you get this number?”

“Hi, Mom!” I use a fake, bright, chipper voice. Nothing like my usual tone, which should set her suspicions rattling immediately. “It’s me. I lost my phone, you know how I am. So I borrowed this nice man’s so I could touch base with you.”

A sharp pause. “Corinna! How wonderful to hear from you. Are you having a nice time? I heard you and Apollo have been having quite the adventure.”

“Oh, it’s just grand. We’re in Tunis, right now. We just ran into a little hiccup, you know how it is. Before I lost my phone, Uncle Harry had been trying to call me, and I wondered if you’d talked to him.”

“As a matter of fact, your father is with him right now, they’re planning to meet up—oh, I forget where. Somewhere in the Mediterranean, you know how your father is.”

“Well, I just didn’t want Uncle Harry to worry about me, since I’m not answering my phone. So maybe you could pass along the message to him that we’re in Tunis and we’re *just fine*. But if they wanted to meet up with us here, that would be cool too.”

“I’ll be sure to pass along the message. Well, you be safe out there, honey.”

My throat is oddly, tight, hearing Mom’s voice. “Yeah, we will be.”

“Bye, sweetheart.”

“Bye, Mom.” I’m surreptitiously watching the phone’s owner while I

speak to Mom, and judging by the way he's attempting to look like he's not paying attention, I suspect he speaks a lot more English than he's letting on—or, understands more, at very least. Before I hand him his phone back, I delete the record of the call. “Thank you so much. Mom worries about me, you know?”

I'm sweating profusely—it's late evening, almost night, but it's still absurdly hot. I use the opportunity to snatch the napkin with Mom's number on it from his table, dabbing at my face with it, making sure to “accidentally” smudge the numbers.

He notices this too. He eyes me. “Trouble, you go to embassy.”

I smile. “Oh, no trouble. I just lost my phone, is all.”

He glances at the Toyota, at Apollo in it, waiting. “Boyfriend, no phone?”

I laugh, trying to sound a little ditzy. “He's one of those types who doesn't believe in phones, you know? Connect with nature and all that?”

A lift of his chin, something muttered under his breath—unkind, most likely. He glances at his phone, noticing that I'd deleted Mom's number, I think; he doesn't say anything though, just eyes me curiously. His phone rings then, a jaunty little digital tune.

I wave at him and turn away. “Well, I'll let you get that. Thanks a lot! *Shukran!*”

He waves back, a flick of his hand, almost a dismissal rather than a goodbye, swiping to answer the call.

Back in the Toyota, Apollo is sweating, slouched in his seat, appearing bored—his eyes betray sharp attention, however. “Get ahold of your mom?”

I put it in gear and pull away. “I did. She got the message. I guess Dad is heading this direction to meet with Uncle Harry—to look for us, I imagine. So we just have to stay out of trouble until they can get to us.”

He sits more upright in his seat, once we're away from the café. “Which means we have to keep an eye out any out for tails.”

“Maybe we could find a spot that's kind out of the way and park? I'm starting to drag. It's been a hell of a day.”

His eyes scan me. “I wish we had cash of some kind. I'd get us a motel room so we could catch some real sleep.”

I drive slowly, heading for the northern outskirts of the city. “Me too. But if wishes were fishes...”

A short trip on a highway, where at least the rush of air past the open windows provides some respite from the endless heat, exiting again into

residential suburbs. We wind and meander, ending up on the far outskirts, where buildings are boarded up and the streets largely deserted. Maybe it's not the same here, but in my admittedly limited experience with cities Stateside, I would not feel safe in an area like this.

Apollo seems to agree, since he hauls the M-16 forward and tucks it between his thigh and the door. I've had the pistol tucked under my thigh since I got in after the phone call.

We pass a short, narrow alley between two sets of buildings.

"There," Apollo says. "Back in."

I brake, check our surroundings—we're alone for the moment—and then reverse into the alley. I pull all the way back to the very end, where a wall about my height blocks us from whatever is on the other side. The buildings to our right and left are both two-story, festooned with power and phone and cable lines; there are no windows facing the alley, and little enough in the alley besides trash, a couple of broken wooden crates, a deflated soccer ball, and a stack of old pallets.

I shut off the motor and kill the lights. With the windows open, I can hear the engine popping and ticking as it cools; honks, traffic noise, shouts, and sirens are all in the distance.

It's disorienting, all of a sudden, to be motionless. There hasn't been a single second since I got into that car with Ahmed that I haven't been doing, going, watching, moving, assessing, or actively waiting.

"Why don't you switch with me," Apollo says. "Put the seat back and rest. I'll stay up and keep watch."

There's not enough room on either side of the Toyota to even open the doors, so I climb awkwardly into the back to allow Apollo into the driver's seat, and then I take his place in the passenger side.

Lever the seat all the way back. The M-16 is to my right, barrel facing the floorboards, butt beside my shoulder. There's only a handful of rounds left in it, I think, but it's better than nothing. I clutch the pistol in my hands, on my stomach.

"Why don't you let me hold that for now?" Apollo says, his voice gentle, taking the gun from me. "We're as safe as we can get, for now. I'm here, Rin. I'll keep watch."

I surrender it to him, and try to close my eyes.

I see myself, though. See my hand flashing out. See a throat opening up, blood sluicing down.

I open my eyes with a gasp, shaking, horror rising in me like acidic bile. “I...I can’t. I can’t.”

He rests the gun on the dashboard, near the windshield, and takes my hand, his thumb rubbing my knuckles. “Focus on me, Rin.”

I swivel my head to the side, look at him. Really, truly look at him. “I...killed them,” I whisper. “With my knife. That little card-knife. I cut their fucking throats. Three of them.” A tear rolls down my cheek, and a choked sob escapes my clenched teeth.

He squeezes. “They weren’t good or innocent people, Corinna. They were evil. They were involved in human slavery.”

“Worse than that.” I shake my head, close my eyes. Swallow hard. “While I was looking for you, I came across this room. All the doors in the area were open, except one. I heard...sounds. Coming from...from the other side. When I opened it, a guard was raping a girl. She was chained up.”

“Fuck.”

“It’s so much worse than you’re even thinking, Apollo.” I open my eyes, wipe at my face, at the tears flowing freely now. “Spaulding doesn’t let them mess with the girls, because that would undercut his bottom line. If the girls are all beaten and raped and bruised by the time he’s ready to sell them, he’ll get less. So they’re not allowed to touch...them.” I almost said *us*—unlike the other girls, I went in willingly, but I still felt like one of them. “To keep the men satisfied, he let them have one girl, which they could do whatever they wanted to. But they had to pay for her. They had to pay for each...use...of her. There was a bucket of cash by the door.”

“Fuck. Holy fuck.” He sounds sick to his stomach.

“It was clear she’d been...that she’d been there awhile. She was barely alive. Beaten almost unrecognizable. Just fucking...beyond brutalized. I don’t have the words for it. For what they’d done to her.” I sobbed, gasping, hyperventilating. Shaking my head, eyes shut, speaking through clenched molars. “I shot him. Painted the fucking wall with the contents of his skull, all over the girl. She...she was begging me to kill her. I don’t speak German, but it was...I could tell what she was saying. And I couldn’t—I couldn’t do it.”

“I saw the room,” he says. “I guessed at what had happened, but...”

I shake my head again. “I unlocked her wrists. She grabbed the gun and just shot herself. Not a single second of hesitation.” I sob again. “I don’t feel guilty, Apollo. Each and every one of those men deserved what they fucking

got—they knew what was going on. They fucking deserved it. But I...I can't stop seeing what I did to them. Shooting people was...it was *easy*, after the... after doing it with a knife, from six inches away. Getting their blood on me. Watching them...bleed out, gasping, gurgling...*fuck*.”

“You did what you had to do.”

“I know. But that...” I close my eyes tightly, until lights flash behind my eyelids. His hand on mine is all that anchors me to reality.

I let go of his hand, open my eyes, look at my hands. My hands just look...dirty. The blood has dried, flaked away. My shirt is crusty and stiff with it.

I take his hand again, hold it in both of mine. His hand is large, and strong. Not work-roughened and callused, but nor is it soft.

“I'm sorry, Corinna,” he whispers. “I'm so sorry my past forced you to do those things. I wish I could take it away.”

I shake my head focus on the solid reality of his hand in mine. “Will you tell me again, Apollo?”

He leans across the space between our seats, his lips ghosting across the shell of my ear.

He whispers, so quietly, so softly: “I love you, Corinna. I love you.”

I'm not sure if *sleep* is the right word for what I do, then. But it's sure as hell better than being awake.

EVASIONS AND EVALUATIONS

Staying awake through those long hours is one of the harder things I've had to do. My eyes burn, droop. The night, out here, is fairly silent. Occasionally, a car will drift past, lights like yellow spears across the cracked pavement. None stop.

Beside me, Corinna sleeps. Or, near to sleep. She's restless, uncomfortable. Dreaming. Remembering. I hold her hand—or rather, she holds mine in both of hers, clinging to my hand as if it's some kind of lifeline keeping her from drowning.

I'm losing the battle against exhaustion, eyes growing heavy. I pinch myself. Breathe in deeply, hold it, let it out. Focus on watching the road, the sidewalk, the sparse clusters of low, misshapen trees across from the alley.

I'm fighting the drowsiness with everything I have, but I'm losing.

My eyes close.

I snap awake, suddenly, starting with a gasp. I'm not sure why, at first.

A pair of headlights creeps past the alley, and the lance-beam of a flashlight sweeps toward the alley...

I slam my seat backward, too fast, hitting with a jolt, which rouses Rin.

"Hmm?" she mumbles.

"Sssh," I hiss. "Someone's at the end of the alley, looking."

She freezes.

Voices echo in the alley, a door opens, closes; another opens and closes. Feet clunk on pavement.

I hear a rustling, a soft clink of metal—Corinna is working the M-16 onto her lap, butt up over her shoulder, barrel on her thigh, ready to whip up and fire. I grip the handle of the pistol until my knuckles ache. Arabic, two voices

in low cross-chatter, not quite whispering, but not full volume either.

I hear a slide racking.

My heart thuds, hammers. Loud in my ears.

The flashlight beam hits the hood, the inside of the roof. Across the top of the cabin where the seats would be.

Each second stretches like taffy, oozing, twisting. I hear their footsteps, the echoes, their voices.

I thumb the safety to make sure it's off. Pull back the hammer slowly—the *click* is deafening.

The voices and the footsteps halt.

I'm not breathing, and I'm certain Rin isn't either.

A dozen questions ricochet through my head. But none of them matter, not in this moment.

I hear scuffing, as of someone inexpertly attempting to tiptoe.

Close, now. They can't get to the door, since there's barely six inches between the door and the walls on either side.

I look at Rin, and she meets my gaze. Using the hand gripping the stock, she holds up three fingers.

I nod.

Two fingers.

I suck in a breath.

She bobs her head, curls the last finger around the stock grip, and lifts up and out the window, knee going up and under herself on the seat, butt tucked against her shoulder. I mirror her movements, leaning halfway out the window, finger on the trigger.

It's a fraught moment—what if they're just police officers, doing their job? Or local citizens, curious?

The slide racking, the tiptoeing...

We each have a split second to make the decision.

Rin's an eye-blink ahead of me—her rifle cracks, once. My pistol is just behind, bucking in my hand. I'm not sure exactly what tipped the decision in my mind—I fired before I even really processed what I was seeing: two shapes, dim, shadowed, backlit only by the glow of their headlights a dozen feet away. Weapons drawn—assault rifles, not service pistols. Something about the crouching shuffle—ex-military, not police.

It's all in a blink, taking it in.

CRACK!—BLAM!

Our shots come almost in unison.

We look at each other for a moment.

“Now what?” Rin asks. “Drive over them?”

I frown. Look around, search for a solution. I’m not certain we have enough ground clearance to simply run over them, not how they’re arranged, at least; an idea hits.

“Take my place.” I scramble over into the back and out the rear, and then climb up onto the roof, slide down the windshield, off the roof, and to the ground.

The men are both dead with almost identical round, red-weeping holes to the forehead. They’re armed with suppressed HK MP-7s, small submachine guns, or machine pistols. Not policemen, then, nor even local military. Their garb gives it away, too—dark clothing in shades of gray and black, but private clothing rather than official issue. It’s dark and they’re wearing black gaiter masks over their mouths and noses, so I can’t tell too much about them.

I’m about to rearrange them so we can get the Toyota over them without making an unduly godawful mess, when I realize I’m being an idiot. I strip them of their weapons, and then rifle through their pockets.

I find, between the two of them, a shit ton of cash in a variety of currencies, local Tunisian Dinars, Euros, US dollars, and British pounds; I also come away with spare magazines for the HKs, a sidearm each with spare magazines, and two cell phones, both cheap, throwaway burners. No ID, no passports.

A decent haul that will set us up well.

I rotate the bodies side by side and perpendicular to the vehicle, heads and feet at either side of the alley walls, so we can just roll over them like squishy speed bumps—moving them is a lot of hard, awkward work with only one useable arm.

Ugh, gross mental image.

I back up and gesture for Rin to pull forward. The motor coughs to life, and the revs as Rin accelerates gently. The sound of the tires rolling over the bodies is sickening.

Once over them, I gesture for Rin to exit the alley, and then I hop into the dead men’s vehicle—it’s an ancient Lada 1300, falling apart, held together with rust and wire. The engine, still running all this time, rattles and squeaks as if it might die at any moment. So, we won’t be switching. The

transmission requires a bit of brute force to get into gear, and then I pull the old Lada into the alley, the right-hand side scraping the wall—this gives me just enough to squeeze out. Wincing and gagging, I drag the bodies all the way to the back of the alley and cover them with the old pallets and then pull the Lada the rest of the way forward, so the nose is pinning the pallets into place. The next step requires some contortion—I pop the hood and rip the spark plugs out, bringing the keys with me. Making it nearly impossible to move the car without towing will make it take that much longer until the bodies are found.

I join Rin in the Toyota, and we trundle away from the alley, slowly, unhurriedly. A half mile from the alley, I toss the keys out the window. Another mile so and a few turns later, the spark plugs join them.

Rin drives at random for a while, sticking to the outskirts. We find an old parking lot littered with broken-down junkers and stripped and salvaged derelicts, and park in among them. At a glance, the old Toyota won't stand out.

“Apollo?” Rin looks at me, after the motor is off. “How did they find us?”

“I have been trying to figure that out myself. I think they must have done some deduction. They knew we were in the deuce-and-a-half, and there will not be many of them around. They also knew we had to be within a certain radius, and the most likely place for us to be would be here in Tunis—there aren't many other major cities within a day's drive of the old fort. So from there, it's a simple matter of looking for the deuce-and-a-half. We couldn't have gotten far on foot—it's too hot, and we stand out. There's no other way for us to have gotten anywhere other than in a vehicle, so we had to have traded. Which means they had to merely find every possible location within a half-day's drive where we could have traded in the truck. Once they found the shop, they bribe or torture or otherwise convince the shop owner to tell them what he gave us. I don't think he would have taken much convincing—he owed us no loyalty, and his life wouldn't be worth ours.”

Corinna sighs, nodding. “And from there, it's a matter of scouring Tunis, and they got lucky.”

“And then unlucky.”

I shrug. “But it also means they're actively looking for us—and the sheer number of people at the fort means Spaulding has a *lot* of manpower at his disposal. They'll be watching all the major routes out of Tunis, including

highways and public transit systems. And probably also most public spaces in the city.”

“And we don’t know when—and maybe even *if*—Dad and Uncle Harry will get here, and also how they’d find us.”

“If Spaulding’s hirelings can find us, I’m assuming Harris’s people can find us even more easily.” I fiddle with the strap of the HK on my lap. “We need to ditch this Toyota, now that we can be relatively certain they know which particular vehicle to look for.”

Corinna frowns. “Why didn’t we take the car back there, in that case?”

“Because it was a deathtrap,” I say. “It was on its last legs twenty years ago. At this point, I’m not sure how it’s even still running, or in one piece. This FJ-40 may be easily identifiable, but it’s in halfway decent condition. We need to be mobile, and in something that’s not going to fall apart at the wrong moment.”

She nods her understanding. “We have cash now,” she says, looking at me. “We could find a room somewhere. I know it’s a risk, but...I need a shower. Your arm needs to be cleaned off and the bandage changed, and we both need better rest than we’re going to get in the car.”

I muse. “It *is* risky. We’d need some supplies—a bag to carry the weapons in, since we can’t leave them behind and we can’t carry them openly. Something to use as a bandage. Some water, some food.” I consider again. “It is very risky. It can’t be anywhere very nice or touristy.”

She frowns. “I disagree—I think it *should* be touristy. I in particular will stand out less in a touristy sort of place.”

“We only have so much cash, though.”

“And we only need one night.”

I grimace. “I don’t like it. We’d be trapped in a hotel.”

“What are we going to do, Apollo? Flit from alley to parking lot, dodging Spaulding’s henchmen? Sit and wait for them to find us?” She reaches for my hand. “The last...what? Seventy-two hours?—they’ve been chaotic, traumatic, and terrifying. And I know it’s not over. But I just...I need a moment of something like normalcy. Just to catch my breath for a few hours.”

I nod, exhaling roughly. “Yeah, yeah. You are right. I need that, and I know you do even more so.”

She turns the motor over, puts it in gear, and leaves the parking lot. By now, we’ve crisscrossed enough of the city to have at least some idea where

we're going. First, we find a twenty-four-hour drug store, and I go in alone. I purchase some bandages and sundry other first aid supplies; I also buy several liters of water and some food—junk food, but something to put in our bellies; they have tourist junk clothing as well, and I buy Rin and I each a new shirt and a black ball cap emblazoned with the Pepsi logo for Rin, to cover her bright blond hair. Since I can't be sure of the provenance of whether or not the cell phones purloined from the dead bodies, I also buy a cheap prepaid cell phone and minutes. The last thing I select is a cheap backpack. We won't be able to bring the M-16, but it's nearly out of ammunition anyway.

The clerk behind the counter eyes me with an expression of extreme boredom, seeming to barely even register my presence other than that I mean he has to perform a function other than watching something on his cell phone. He rings up my items, not bothering to even speak the total amount due, just waiting for me to tender my payment. I pull out the local dinars first, and fortunately the amount I have is sufficient to cover the purchase. I'll need to exchange some of the international currency, at some point. The moment I've received my change, the clerk utterly dismisses me, returning his attention to his phone.

I return to the SUV, piling the bags in the footwell. "And now we look for a hotel. Nothing super high-end, but not a no-tell motel."

Rin nods and drives out of the drug store parking lot—her eyes are narrowed, suspicious, focused on the rear-and side-view mirrors.

"What?" I ask. "Someone following us?"

She nods. "I think so."

I twist in my seat, HK on my lap—it's suppressed and a pretty small caliber, so it's not going to be very good at anything like distance; it's also going to be nearly impossible to use one-handed, so pistol it is. The nearest one to hand is one retrieved from the newly deceased henchmen.

I hand the pistol to Rin. "Can you rack this? I can't do it one-handed."

She drives with a knee, expertly ejecting the magazine and the round from the chamber, checks the load in the magazine, replaces the round into the magazine, and then the magazine goes back into the handle and slide is racked—handed back to me, handle first.

Back to scanning the road behind us—there are a couple cars, a Hilux and a small sedan of indeterminate make and model. "Make some turns," I say, twisting to slide awkwardly sideways in the seat so I can watch behind us.

“See who follows us.”

“Both cars have been with us since before the drug store,” Rin says, her voice tight. “I clocked them not long after we left the parking lot. I didn’t say anything because I wasn’t sure. But at this point, I’m relatively certain.”

She’s cruising at thirty-five mph, about to pass an intersection—she suddenly jams the brakes, throwing me forward against the dash, hauls the wheel and guns the accelerator.

Except the motor doesn’t respond.

“Downshift!” I snap, struggling to find my seat. “Put it in second gear!”

“Oh,” she huffs, easing off the accelerator and kicking in the clutch. “Defensive driving is hard when you’re not used to a manual.” She yanks the shifter into second and tries the accelerator again.

The vehicle responds properly, this time, the FJ’s sturdy inline-four suddenly roaring, pushing me backward now. We haul ass down the road, a narrow lane between major thoroughfares.

“Warn me next time would you?” I ask through gritted teeth.

She winces. “Sorry.”

My arm is throbbing, pulsating with pain—I bumped it hard when I toppled as she braked. There’s no way I’m going to get a decent shot off out of the passenger window, I realize.

“Keep it steady for a minute,” I say. “Moving to the back.”

I climb over the center console into the back seat and to the inward-facing jump seat behind Rin; the window here slides horizontally, providing just enough of an opening for my arm, if the other car is directly beside us. I don’t much like my chances of hitting anything if I have to shove my whole arm out and aim behind us, however. Especially since I don’t have the use of my left arm to steady myself.

Rin shoots a look over my shoulder. “Are they back there?”

A split second later, a pair of headlights swing around the corner, rapidly catching up to us; another moment after that, a second pair.

“Yes,” I answer. “They are. Both of them.”

“Are we losing them or taking them out?” Rin asks.

“Losing them seems unlikely. We are not equipped to outrun them, and we don’t know the city well enough to outmaneuver them.”

“We can’t allow any collateral damage,” Rin says. “No innocents can get hurt in the process due to our actions. That’s gonna make this tricky.”

“Right. Because I can’t drive the manual one-handed, and my aim is

going to be iffy at best considering I can't steady myself." We come to an intersection, where the narrow lane crosses a larger street. "Turn here and let them catch up—get one of them next to us, preferably on this side."

She snorts. "Yeah, no problem. Only just learned how to drive a stick a few hours ago."

I lean over the back of her seat and kiss her ear. "You're doing great."

She slowly eases off the accelerator, and the nearest headlights grow closer. I shrink in the back seat in an effort to minimize or eliminate my silhouette. Safety off. Finger along the trigger guard. Watching, waiting.

The headlights are within reach of our rear bumper, so close I could kick their front bumper if I had the tailgate open. I consider doing exactly that, throwing open the tailgate, but discard the idea. One-handed, it's impossible. I'd have to put down the gun, open the door, grab the gun, fire, put the gun down, close the gate. Nope.

Original plan is best.

The taillights swing out, into what would be oncoming traffic, if there were any. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it—there's almost no traffic this time of night, not where we are, at least. Up alongside us, then.

I brace my foot against the back of the SUV, my back against Rin's seat, sitting parallel to the wall on the jump seat. When the cab of the Hilux is even with the rear window, I sit forward, draw a quick bead on the driver, and crack off a shot. A second. A third. Barely taking time to aim again, just trying to get the rounds to do some kind of damage.

One round hits his headrest behind his head, the second shatters the windshield—the third spatters his brains over the cab. The truck wobbles, swerves, and then twists sideways—the wheels catch and the vehicle rolls in a shattering of glass and crumpling of metal.

"Nice one," Rin says. "One down, one to go."

The sedan jukes around the wreck—I hear its engine dutifully attempting to rev as the driver tries to catch up to us. I see more than one head in this vehicle. Indeed, as Rin slows again in an attempt to draw them up alongside us, I see their window open and an AK-47 extend out.

"Shit," I mutter.

I'm not fast enough—the AK's muzzle flashes, and several rounds plunk into our rear quarter panel, hitting low. Nothing for it—I shove my arm out the window and fire. I'm just aiming for the truck in general, the motor, the

driver, the shooter, anything. I pop off shots slowly; one hits the motor, and something starts smoking from under the hood, but the car continues apace for the moment at least; second and third rounds spiderweb and shatter the windshield, respectively. Another burst of muzzle flash from the AK, but these rounds hit the ground behind us and another flies wide and high. I fire again before they can, smashing through the hood; fire again where the shooter should be, more or less—I'm rewarded by a reddening of glass.

There's an explosion of glass as the driver finishes off the windshield with a burst from a small, handheld automatic; his face is a sheet of blood as he drives with one hand and fires at us with the other.

This time, perhaps through sheer luck, his rounds hit—the tailgate of the SUV dents, I hear the spare tire pop, and then the rear glass cracks as a round divots on the seam between metal and glass.

I aim carefully this time, or as careful as I can with one arm out the window. I crack off a shot, and it smashes the driver's side-view mirror. To the left a touch; *crack-crack*, and now my rounds finally hit flesh. One reddens his shoulder, forcing him to drop his gun, and the second hits his chest center mass a heartbeat later.

The sedan slows and stops in the middle of the road—my last image of the driver is of him slumping forward over the wheel.

I pull my arm in, rest against Rin's seat for a moment. Sirens howl.

"Better get scarce," I murmur.

"Working on it." She reaches behind herself, behind the seat. "You okay, babe?"

"Yeah, I'm good." I crawl awkwardly, painfully over the console and into the front seat again. "Luckily for us, they weren't very good shots."

"That's how many we've eliminated, now? Five?" she asks, looking at me.

I do a mental count out loud. "Two in the alley, one in the truck, two in the sedan. Yeah, five."

"How many can he send?"

I shrug. "No way of knowing. He can give them a few thousand dollars or whatever currency they want and promise them double upon confirmation of our death. He doesn't lose much even if we take out most of them, since then he doesn't have to pay them...and if they were to get us, he'd only owe one or two guys anything. It's chump change. Those first two in the alley were at least ex-military, I think. These other three? Third rate criminals at best,

judging simply by their lack of coordination and poor marksmanship.”

Sirens grow louder, approaching from several directions.

“You have to get off this road,” I say, trying to watch in every direction at once. “We cannot afford an encounter with local law enforcement.”

She makes a right, accelerates to the next intersection, a left—we spend the next few minutes turning and accelerating and turning again, until the sirens are in the distance again. Completely by happy accident, we find ourselves in the more tourist-friendly area, with a large body of water on our right—not the ocean. Here, there’s traffic, and the streets are more well lit. A few wrong turns and circling the same block, and we finally came to a large roundabout that features a Marriot.

I pulled out the roll of cash I’d liberated from the dead bodies—they’d been paid in cash, and had been paid at least a grand each in a mix of currencies, which meant we had plenty with which to pay for a night here. I pocket the rest and make short work of stuffing our gear into the backpack.

“The Marriot,” I said. “Just drive up to the front like you own the place.”

She eyed me. “We’re both covered in blood.” A wry expression. “And now the truck is riddled with bullet holes. Again.”

I shrug. “They’re looking for us. We know that. We know they have at least a description of our car, if not of us, which also seems likely. If the car is in a valet lot somewhere and we’re holed up in a room we paid for in cash under fake names, we might actually stand a decent chance of staying off their radar for a minute.” I smile at her. “This was your idea, Rin. Second thoughts?”

She shakes her head. “No. I just...no. You’re right.”

She pulls up under the portico, and a uniformed valet approaches us.

I palm a US \$50.

Rin’s eyes widen. “Shit, the rifle!” She reaches across me and grabs it, breaks it down into several parts in what must be record time, and shoves the pieces into the bag.

I eye her with a smirk as the valet reaches for her door. “That was incredible.”

She winks. “Sasha made us learn how to strip and clean most of the popular assault rifles and pistols until I, at least, can do it nearly blindfolded.”

“Sir, madam.” The valet’s face is carefully neutral as he holds the door for Rin. “Welcome to the Marriot Hotel. Do you have any bags?”

I shoulder the heavy backpack, moving it carefully so the many and

various weapons don't clank; the rifle doesn't quite fit, and I had to do some hurried rearranging to get it to zip. "Just this, and I will hold on to it." I approach the valet and slip the bill into his hand. "You have never seen this car," I murmur. "You have never seen me or her."

A surreptitious glance at the bill in his hand, and then at the obvious bullet holes in the side of the SUV. His eyes narrow. "I see many tourists every day, sir. How can I be expected to remember one or two?"

I pat the hood of the Toyota. "Just take care of my baby. She has been through a lot."

A fingertip touches a bullet hole in the metal. "I think you are right."

I laugh, as if something is uproariously funny. "Those are not new. They were there when I bought this beauty. Gives it some character, no?" I'm playing up my Greek accent. "Park it where no one can see it, so no one is tempted to steal such a treasure."

The valet smirks, quickly hiding it. "I will do this, sir. Enjoy your stay."

I breeze past him toward the entrance, taking Rin's hand. "Play the tourist, like you did to borrow that phone," I murmur under my breath. "Look around like you've never seen anything like this place." I dig in the backpack and pull out the hat. "Put that on. Hide your hair."

She hurriedly tucks her long blond hair up into the hat and pulls the brim low. "Better?"

I nod, and take her hand again. "Much." I smile brightly as we reach the front desk. "Now just play along."

The clerk behind the desk is a young woman, black hair bound neatly back, wearing a western suit and a wide smile. "Good morning, and welcome to the Tunis Marriot. Do you have a reservation with us this morning?" Her eyes scan us—we're a mess. Covered in blood, bruises, cuts, and scrapes.

"No, we don't." I offer a sheepish grin. "As you can see, there was a... misunderstanding. We misplaced our luggage and all of our identification. Lucky for us, I always carry a good bit of cash on my person." I peel off several of the hundred-dollar bills—US currency. "We just need a room for the night. We aren't picky."

"I am sorry, sir, but we're sold out."

I peel off a few more—it's most of the US currency, but now that a shower and a bed are within reach, I'm not holding back; the total is nearing a thousand dollars at this point. "I'm sure you can find something."

Her eyes flick to the pile of hundreds, to me, and to her monitor; finally,

she types rapidly, scans, types. Her eyes light up. “Aha! You are in luck, sir. We have a cancellation here.”

“Wonderful.”

“It’s a queen, but it is all we have at such a late moment.”

“As long as it has a bed and a shower, we’ll take it.”

“Wonderful. I’ll just need a name for the room?”

“Chuck Jones.”

“Very good, Mr. Jones.”

I slip her the stack of bills—she pockets half with a quick, hidden motion, setting the rest on the counter near to hand. Some typing, swiping a card through a machine, tucking the card into a little envelope with the room number written on it.

“Your room number is here.” She taps it with her pen. “Enjoy your stay with the Tunis Marriot. If there is anything else you may need, please do not hesitate to call down.”

We head for the elevator bank, hand in hand. We’re the only ones in the lobby at this hour, a few hours before dawn yet.

“Chuck Jones?” Rin asks with a smile.

“My favorite Looney Tunes director. And a common name.”

Our room is on the fourth floor, partway down the hall, on the left. A decent location—there’s an emergency stairwell further down the hall, and the elevators the other way, so we won’t be trapped if the floor should be breached by Spaulding’s men.

The room is, by our usual standards, tiny. But under the circumstances? We both breathe a sigh of relief.

I lock the door, hang the chain, and brace a chair under the handle. Unpack the bag and lay the weapons in a few spots around the room—Rin reassembles the rifle.

Suddenly, that job done, Rin looks...ready to collapse.

I pull her into a hug, cradle her head against my chest. “It’s okay, Rin. We’re safe, for now.”

She shudders. “I hate this, Apollo. I want it to be over.” Her voice is muffled against my chest.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“You couldn’t have anticipated it.” She turns her head to the side, her arms tucked together between us. “I don’t blame you.”

I kiss her forehead. Touch her chin, so she’s gazing at me. “You came for

me, Corinna. I won't ever be able to express how thankful I am."

"I was worried you'd be angry at me."

"For putting yourself in danger?" I smile and sigh. "I am, a little. I wish someone else could have done it. But I know you well enough to know better."

"I don't think anyone else could have done it—could have gotten inside like I did."

"Which was how?"

"By pretending to be one of them." She shudders again. "By becoming one of them. Thomas—Alexei's friend—knew someone who was a driver for Spaulding's operation between here and the fort. This guy owed Thomas a favor, and I was it. I was bound, with nothing but that card-knife hidden in my boot under my foot and lockpicks in my hair. I was put onto the truck with the rest of the girls headed for the fort. We arrived, and we were sent one by one inside." She pauses, swallows hard. "We were...processed."

"What does that mean?"

"Our hands were freed, and were told to strip naked, and were photographed, front, both sides, and back. That was it, just some pictures—so they could market us to buyers, I assume. So they could pick the girls they liked best." She swallows hard again; her voice is cold and sharp. "Once everyone was processed and photographed and dressed again, they put us in two cells. I got out my little knife, and pounded on the door. The guard came, and I pretended I had to shit."

"Effective. They didn't care about that, with me at, least. That awful hole in the ground is all I was offered."

"I suppose since we were meant to be sold and had to remain in...*salable* condition, they allowed us certain leeway. He went and got some napkins for me." She pauses. "When he handed them to me, I grabbed his wrist, yanked him toward me, and cut his fucking throat." Another pause; she pulls the card from her back pocket, opens it, looks at it. "I killed two more guards with this little knife."

I take the knife from her and toss it on the bed, pull her into an embrace again. "I'm sorry, Corinna. I'm sorry you went through that."

She shudders, shakes her head. "It was *awful*, Apollo. I'll never..." a choked sob. "I'll never get those images out of my head. That poor German girl—*fuck*."

"Let it all go, Rin. I'm here. I'm holding you. You're safe. You can give

it to me, now, my love.”

She’s stiff, tense, not even breathing. And then her shoulders start to shake. It’s gentle at first. Silent. And then I hear her gasp, as if finally catching a breath she’d been holding—and she’s sobbing.

Her knees give out.

I catch her, sink with her to the floor and cradle her as best I can with my one good arm. She clings to my neck and she sobs, face in my shirt, hot wet tears soaking it. She sobs so hard she curls into a ball on my lap, heaving great, wracking, wrenching sobs.

It goes on for a long, long time, and all the while I keep an ear out, listening for someone at the door.

At some point, after I time I can’t measure, the sobs subside.

A BRIEF RESPITE; A MOTHER'S LOVE

I hate crying—I especially hate the ugly sobbing. It's exhausting, leaves me feeling snotty and stuffed up, off balance and drained.

When I've cried myself out, I'm stiff from being immobile. Apollo has me clutched against himself on his lap, my head on his thigh, his arm hugging me to himself.

I inhale, suck in a ragged breath, and sit up. He shakes his arm out, twists and contorts to stretch his spine.

"Thank you, Apollo," I say. "I needed that."

He cups my face. "I wish I could take it away, Rin. Take it on myself."

"I know."

He stands, extends his hand to me. "Come on, up. You're taking a shower."

I groan at the thought. "That sounds...wonderful."

He leads me into the bathroom, twists on the hot water. While it runs and gathers heat, he brushes my cheek with a knuckle. Leans in, nuzzles a kiss to the corner of my lips. "Let's ease some of that stress, hmmm?"

I bite my lip as he pulls at the hem of my shirt at the small of my back; I allow him to pull the shirt off, and then my bra follows, both tossed over his shoulder onto the floor of the bedroom just outside the bathroom. Working deftly considering he only has one hand at his disposal, he helps me out of my jeans, boots, socks, and panties, leaving me standing naked while steam writhes around us; I shiver with eagerness, core clenching with anticipation, skin tightening and nipples going hard and sensitive as I prepare for his touch.

He guides me to sit on the closed toilet lid, and then sinks to his knees

onto the thick mat in front of the toilet. He nudges my knees apart, one hand sliding up my thigh, hovering over the apex of my sex, and then dragging down my seam. I suck in a sharp breath, leaning back against the cold porcelain of the tank. His hair is bound back, and I tug it free of the black elastic holder to spill over his shoulders, and then I bury my fingers in his thick black locks and greedily clutch at him as he flits his tongue over my seam.

“Apollo,” I whisper. “Yes. Please. Please—make me feel good.”

He just grunts a rough affirmative, an encouragement, an assurance that he plans to do exactly that. His tongue slides over my sex, slipping between my nether lips and wriggling against my clit. I gasp as the first featherlight touches of ecstasy flow through me at his loving kisses. It’s exactly that at first, oral caresses, tonguing kisses, affectionate and slow, meant to comfort and arouse. But as heat builds inside me, as pressure mounts within, I begin to need more. I let my knees fall wide apart and slouch lower on the seat, clutching his head and his hair and pulling him closer, grinding myself on his mouth. Begging for more without words.

He rumbles a laugh at my needy eagerness and gives me what I want.

His mouth, hungrily; his tongue, nimbly; his fingers, thrillingly.

I come in record time, exploding on his tongue as it circles my clit, clamping around his fingers as they surge into me, curling against my G-spot on the withdrawal.

“Apollo, god, god—” I gasp. “So fucking good!”

“More,” he growls, and assaults me with renewed fervor. “Give me another one.”

It’s not difficult to obey his command. A few more moments of his attention, and I’m rising to the edge, teetering on the cusp of orgasm. He adds a third finger inside me, curling and pressing just so, and suckles my clit between his teeth, and I smash over the edge, screaming through gritted teeth. My hips fly, grinding helplessly against his mouth, coming and coming—

A third climax crescendos through me hard on the heels of the second, and he takes no mercy even still, aggressively pursuing my pleasure until the orgasms have wrenched me into a shaking, gasping puddle of goo.

He can sense I’m done, and sits back on his heels, wiping his mouth with a satisfied grin, watching me regain my bearings and my wits.

I stare at him. “Wow. Holy shit.”

He just grins. “Now you shower.”

“But what about you?”

He shakes his head. “There’s time for that later. For now, you just take a long, hot shower.”

I accept his hand and let him tug me to my feet. Instead of letting him push me into the shower, however, I turn on him, wiping at his lips with a palm and then kissing him.

“Thank you, Apollo.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t thank me. I just want you to feel good. To know you’re loved. To know you’re taken care of. That you’re my priority.”

I plaster my body against his, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I do know that. And that’s what I’m thanking you for—for *you*. For being brave enough to love me.”

He laughs. “Loving you isn’t bravery, Corinna, it’s selfishness. Letting you love me is selfish. Showing you that I love you...is selfish. Everything I could possibly do for you, to make you understand that I love you...is selfishness. Because everything I do for you, makes me feel good about myself. Even coming to the point that I could *tell* you I love you was simply coming to grips with what I already knew was true, I just had to accept it and have the fucking guts to just say it.”

I step backward toward the shower, but I don’t let go of him. “I know you feel that way, and I get it. Because sometimes, getting to love you feels like a luxury or a privilege I can’t believe is mine.” I rip his shirt off, shove at his pants. “So I’m going to just be selfish, Apollo.”

“I had thought to let you take a shower, first. I just wanted to make you feel good. To erase the bad things.”

“I appreciate the thought, Apollo, but that’s not what I want.” I pause to help him out of his shoes and socks, and then he kicks his trousers off, underwear going with it; his eyes are fixed on me, soaking my naked body with greedy arousal.

“What *do* you want, then?” His voice is raw and low with need.

His cock juts proudly upright, and I grasp his length and pull him toward me and into the shower; I adjust the water to a tolerable heat level. His arm is still wrapped in the makeshift bandage, but I leave that, for now. I push him back against the rear wall of the shower and sink to my knees, hot water splashing on my back.

“Corinna...”

I run my hands up his thighs, over his belly. “I told you. I’m going to be

selfish. So shut up and let me do what I want to you. Okay?”

He sucks his belly in as my hands graze over his navel, brushing the tip of his cock. “How is this selfish?”

“Because it’s what I want to do.” I grasp him, then, cradling his heavy, thick cock in both hands. “I want to make you come so hard you see Jesus.” I lick the tip of him.

He inhales through his teeth, brow furrowing. “Fuck, Corinna.”

“See, that’s why this is selfish. Because I know you. And I know if I left it up to you, you’d let me suck on you till you were about to come, but then you’d stop yourself...” I plunge my fists around his length, pause to mouth the head, tongue swirling before I withdraw and finish speaking. “Because you want to be inside me. Don’t you?”

“Fuck...yes, my love. I *need* to be inside you.”

“And I need that too.” I caress his balls with one hand and stroke his length with the other, gazing up at him. “But right now, I need this more.”

“Why?”

“Because if I let you make love to me, I’ll get all emotional. And I need a break from being emotional.” I flatten my tongue against the side of his cock, licking upward. “I need this first. I need to just...indulge. I need to make you feel good. I need to just feel your cock in my mouth and make you come. I need to taste you as you come.” I stroke his length slowly, with a twist on the way down. “I need to watch you paint my tits with your cum. Anything and everything except heavy and real and deep.”

The water dots my hair, dampening it. Splatters off my back.

He rests against the wall and touches my cheek. “Whatever you want, love. Anything. Everything. Whatever you want, whatever you need.”

I grin. “Good answer.”

Both hands, then, one atop the other, gently gliding down, and up, and down, upper fist twisting at the top, lower hand occasionally descending to cradle his balls, cupping and massaging before returning upward. He rests his head against the wall, injured arm tucked against his chest, good hand resting on my shoulder. A groan escapes him as I roll my mouth over his cock and take him as far as I can. Back away, bob a few times shallowly, tongue swirling around his tip, and then I move my lips down his thick, veiny length again, tongue flat against him. To my throat, and then I open for him and take more.

“Ohhhh shit, Corinna. Your mouth. Fuck, your mouth feels so good.”

“Mmm-hmmm?” I encourage, hands pumping at his base until he grunts and flexes his hips.

Not yet.

I slow my ministrations. Stick my tongue out and move my mouth around his head, slowly. Another groan escapes him. I cup his taut balls with one hand and play with them, and with my other hand I caress his cock, my grip gentle and my motions exaggeratedly slow.

His knees dip, a weak groan breaking out of him. “Fuck...*fuck*,” he moans. “Corinna, I’m so close.”

I love it. I love hearing him weak and shaky and desperate. I love looking up at his handsome, strong face and seeing him, normally so stoic and in control, looking shocked and wild and fierce with desperate need.

More. More.

It’s time. I want his orgasm. I want his cum. I want him to scream my name as he explodes.

I twist one hand around his throbbing cock in a slow rhythm. I put my fingers under my lip and spit onto them, coating my fingers with my saliva. His eyes are closed, jaw clenched. He doesn’t know what’s coming for him.

I press those fingers along his taint to his asshole—he clenches, hisses, eyes flying open. I smile up at him, still slowly, lazily caressing his hard length with my other hand. And then I open my mouth, telegraphing my intentions. He groans as he fills my mouth, inch by inch. I stroke him faster, now, touch loose and light but quickening, even as I suck around his tip unhurriedly. At first, I simply press my fingers against him, along his taint and against his rear entrance. But then, as my fist around his cock speeds and my mouth swallows more and more of him, I press my fingers harder against the knot.

“Oh god, Corinna...” he growls. “What the hell are you doing to me?”

I look at him, my mouth still wrapped around him; I smile. It’s more with my eyes than anything else, but he understands it.

He doesn’t resist or protest. Instead, he relaxes, groaning. Trusting.

It’s not much, just a touch. A press. But as I feel him rising to the edge, I add more pressure. He groans again, and I slide my middle finger against the knot—my mouth moves slowly on him, sliding around his cock, my fist pumping up to my chin and down to his root. His balls rest on my palm as my finger presses more firmly, now. He growls, his hand burying in my hair. I suddenly take him deep, swallowing around him. At this unexpected move,

he hisses—and this is when I push my finger into him—just to the first knuckle.

He gasps, and the gasp turns into a groan. I pump harder, faster, and suck around him, then. He can't help but drive his hips, and I accept his thrusts between my lips rather than bobbing on him, letting him fuck my mouth. Open my throat and adjust the angle so he can fuck my throat, too, and I curl that finger to press against him, curling it toward myself.

Now, his groans are ragged and helpless. He can't even manage my name. His knees shake, and his thrusting goes ragged.

I take over, and he's still trying to thrust but he's too far gone, too close to the edge, and can only manage an occasional lift onto his toes. I feel him reach the end.

His groans and grunts are rapid, rough.

“Ohhhh....fuck...my love...” he whimpers.

I stroke him with my fist, suck around him, pulse my finger in and out.

He lifts onto his toes, pushing his cock into my mouth, against my throat...

And he comes.

I taste the initial flood on my tongue, swallowing even as I pull him away from my mouth, still jerking him as hard and fast as I can, finger still pulsing to milk his prostate. His eyes are open, watching us.

He spurts as I let his tip fall out of my mouth, and his hot sticky seed bathes my cheek and lips and chin, and then he spurts again, onto my throat. I take him back into my mouth and deep throat him, and then as I back away, he fills my mouth with another spurt of cum. I swallow, and then pull him from my mouth and lay him against my lips, mouth open, stroking him. He groans, his voice tight, shattered. Up on his toes, still, sinking to his heels and sagging backward against the wall even as he hunches forward, curling over himself as I continue to milk every last drop of cum out of him.

Dribbles of his milky-white, tangy, salty cum leak onto my tongue.

Finally, he releases his taut, held-breath tension with a gasp, and I let him go, pulling my finger from him. He slowly slides to his butt on the tile, my body shielding him from the spray of the shower.

“My god,” he gasps. His eyes fix on me. “Corinna. My god.” A laugh. “My goddess.”

I'm pleased with myself. “Now we get clean.”

He laughs and struggles to his feet. “You are...amazing.”

He wipes at my face, pushing us backward into the stream of water, and then he kisses me, tongue dancing on mine, surely tasting himself on me. Undeterred, perhaps even a little aroused by it, he kisses me wildly, hand digging into my hair, which is now soaked and sticking to my face and neck and shoulders.

For a while, we just luxuriate in the spray of hot water, making out. Just kissing. Tongues dancing and twisting, mouths fused, bodies writhing, pressed together.

How long?

Long enough for the heat to dissipate. I twist all the cold out of the stream so it's hot once more, laughing. "We'd better actually get clean while we have hot water."

He opens the bottle of shampoo, flips it upside down and squeezes a generous dollop into his hand, then works it into my hair. I do the same for him. It's kind of awkward, but fun, and we're both laughing and blinded by suds before we rinse off. We trade, then. I let him work conditioner into my hair and then lather up every inch of my body; once I'm rinsed, it's my turn. I gently remove the sodden, filthy, crusted strip of shirt from his arm, careful to make sure the spray doesn't hit the wound directly. Using a washcloth and moving as delicately and gently as I possibly can, I clean the wound and the area around it—it's ugly, and he's going to require significant surgery and physical therapy to have anything like normal use of the limb again. For now, though, it's clean, at least. I wash the rest of him, and we both rinse. By this time, the water is lukewarm.

He's first out, scrubbing a towel over his face, and twisting it around his waist, then holding one out for me. When I'm wrapped in it, he dries me with it, and I do the same for him.

I push him out of the bathroom. "Sit." I guide him to the bed.

He sits on the edge of the bed; I discard my towel and dig the first aid supplies he bought out the backpack. It's already been well cleaned, so I forgo the antiseptic and simply wrap the bandaging around his arm. There's enough leftover that once he's ready to dress, I'll be able to make a sling for him.

I cup his chin and kiss him. "You kept watch in the car while I slept. Now it's your turn. Get some rest." I take his towel from him. "You won't need this. I'll be waking you up, later."

He gazes at me with love blazing in his eyes. "You're sure? I can take

first watch.”

I shake my head, helping him tug the blankets over himself. “No. I’m going to dry my hair. Just rest. You’re gonna need it.” I wink at him.

His eyes close, immediately heavy, as if he’d been keeping his exhaustion at bay by sheer force of will. “I love you, Corinna Roth.”

“I love you too, Apollo Dimitriou.”

He’s asleep within seconds.

I keep the hair dryer on low, so I can hear over it, just in case. There’s a brush, too, which is nice.

I’ve got a nasty gash on my head where I took that glancing shot—incidentally lucky, that one. Nearly killed me—millimeters difference in the angle, and I wouldn’t be here.

Little dotted scabs where both stone and glass shattered too close. Apparently at some point I took a grazing round to the outside of my left bicep—I never even felt that one. Nor the cut on the back of my calf; not even sure how I got that one.

So far as it goes, considering the intensity of the firefight, I came out remarkably unscathed. Apollo, too, seeing as the wound to his arm wasn’t sustained during the fight but earlier.

I have the burner.

I call Mom again.

It rings barely half a ring, this time. “Rinna?”

I sob, at the sound of her voice. “They keep finding us, Mom,” I whisper. “I’m on a burner, but I have to assume they’re listening. I just...I needed to hear your voice. I...I don’t know what to do. It’s so scary. I’m trying to be tough like you were, but...”

She laughs, but it’s not unkind. “Honey, I was terrified. I just did what I had to do anyway. Which is what I’m sure you’re doing.”

“I’m trying.”

“Are you safe?”

“Sort of. They keep finding us.”

“Men like this Spaulding dickbag are relentless, and get stuck on this stupid idea of revenge. Or...or just refusing to let it go because that would be *losing*. It’s petty and pathetic. But they have more money than sense and can just hire as many brainless goons as they want. Those goons will do just about anything for money, and if that means combing every inch of the city to find you, they’ll do that. Just don’t stay in any one place for long, and keep

your head on a swivel, as the combat guys like to say.”

“Speaking of whom, are they coming, Mom?”

“They’re off-grid, babe. I can’t get ahold of them unless it’s a life-or-death emergency for me specifically. Cal and I are holed up somewhere as safe as can be—and believe me, Cal is *pissed* to be safe with Mom.”

“Well, tell him I’m jealous. This shit is not an adventure, and it’s not fun. It’s terrifying and awful and I fucking hate it.”

“I know, honey. *Believe* me, I know.” She sighs. “You’d better get off the line, now, babe.”

“I know.”

“I love you. Your dad loves you. Uncle Harry and all the others love you. Just stay safe and do whatever you have to, and I promise they’ll find you and extract you soon. Okay?”

“Love you, Mom.”

I end the call, toss the phone aside.

Apollo is lights out, snoring.

I sit on the bed beside him, and I think, ears open but mind wandering, the man I love slumbering beside me.

COMPLETION

I'm not sure I'm awake, at first.

Dreaming?

A fantasy?

Am I still in the cell, waiting for Spaulding to come back?

No, details of the escape return in jumbles and snatches.

So what's happening?

Something feels...amazing.

I wake up, eyes opening, and see Corinna lying across the bed, her face on my belly, my cock in her mouth.

"Hmmm?" I'm half asleep. "Rin?"

She smiles up at me, and her smile in that moment is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Like a sunrise. Like a field full of wildflowers. "Hi, you."

"What a way to wake up."

She runs her hands up my belly and over my chest, reaching for my face; she swings astride me as she does so, her movements slow and sensual. Her hands cradle my face and her lips touch mine with feathery gentility, and her soft heavy warm breasts drape against my chest; her sex is a V against my belly, my erection pressing against her thigh. I caress her soft warm silky skin from ass to shoulder, then bury my hand in her hair and pull her in for a harder kiss, a more demanding fusion of mouths, of souls. I taste her, lose myself in her, aching for her, desperate to escape into her warmth.

Her arms go underneath my neck, hands splaying against the back of my head. She whimpers into my kiss, writhing her sex against me. With an erotic lift of her hips, she brings my cock to her entrance, and then with a wiggle

and a twist, notches me inside her. I lift my hips, groaning at the bliss of her sex around me, and she drives down and I surge into her, sheathing my cock fully within her in a single slow thrust.

“Oh *fuck*, Apollo,” she gasps. “You feel so fucking good inside me.”

“Home...” I murmur, breath on her cheek, lips on her ear. “This is home. Inside you, united with you.”

We just move together, then, slowly, perfectly. No words, no desperation, just body on body, breath against breath, a delicious slide and an aching fullness. She moans, and I gasp.

I need to be deeper.

I roll, putting her on her back, and move up to my knees; she knows what I need, and shifts with me, hooking her knees over my shoulders. She guides me back inside her, and I thrust home, groaning as I drive so deep it aches beautifully. Her mewling gasp is breathless, then.

“Touch yourself,” I tell her. “I’m going to come, and I want you to come with me.”

She fits her fingertips to her sweet pussy, circling her clit, and now her hips begin to writhe, her arousal already rising, already on fire, so it takes a few quick brushes to send her to the edge. I move slowly, rhythmically, fucking into her as deep as I can, relishing in each slow inch, watching rapt as her perfect, beautiful pussy swallows my cock.

“Rin,” I growl. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

She just gasps, fingers flying, breasts swaying heavily. “Fuck me, Apollo. Let me feel you. Fuck me hard. Come inside me, Apollo.” She curls forward as her first orgasm detonates inside her. “Oh my fucking god, *Apollo*, Apollo, my love, my god, Apollo...”

I can’t help myself. My climax rips through me, tearing me apart like a nuclear bomb. I lose all control, hugging her thigh as I give myself utterly to our united climax.

I pour myself into her, slamming deep, my thighs slapping against her ass loudly, and she cries out, whimpering, wailing, her orgasm stretching, repeating, multiplying.

“I love you,” I gasp, “I love you, I love you, I fucking love you, Rin, god—I fucking love you...”

She unhooks her thighs from my shoulders and pulls me down to her, latching her heels around my back and her arms around my neck, her lips on my ear, her sex fluttering slowly against me, soaking every last moment of

hardness out of me as our climaxes subside.

“My Apollo, my love.” She bites my earlobe. “I love you so fucking much I can’t even stand it.”

We shift, then, and she cradles my head against her chest, my good arm trapped between us, silence wrapping around us.

We are blessed, then, with a long drowsing time to revel in the afterglow. Her heart beats against my ear, her breasts the softest, warmest pillows. Her arms cradle me. This...this is what the old therapist was talking about. This, with Rin—it’s healing me. Patching the cracks in my shattered soul with pure gold, turning my brokenness into art.

We don’t sleep—we don’t dare both sleep at the same time. We just...lie together in happy silence.

She wiggles, at some point. “I need to clean up.”

I roll off of her. “Let me.”

I get a damp, warm washcloth and clean her, thoroughly and gently. When I get back into bed, it’s my turn to hold her.

“Thank you for giving me space to...to not be okay, I guess,” she says.

“Of course.”

“So, Yelena.” She twists to look up at me. “She didn’t want to let go of you, there at the end.”

“We...bonded, I suppose. She’s a smart, tough, sweet little thing.” I hold the silence for a moment. “It really made me think.”

She stills. “About what?”

I look down at her. “Us.” I hold her hand, touch her ring finger. “The future—*our* future.”

She swallows hard. “Apollo, I just... you’ve told me you love me. And I want you to know that that’s enough. Just like knowing you love me without the words would have been enough.”

“I know that’s the truth, Rin,” I say. “But I also know there’s more you aren’t saying.”

A shrug. “Hearing you tell me you love me...it feels like...like a completion.” Her eyes water. “It means so...so much. I *know* you love me. But hearing it?”

“You should have heard it far sooner,” I say.

She shakes her head. “When you were ready. I *get* you, Apollo. I understand, and it’s okay.”

I touch her ring finger again, rubbing it gently. “I haven’t really had much

of a chance to process things until now,” I say. “And now that I have the chance, I’m realizing a few things.”

She watches me rub her ring finger. “Like what, Apollo?”

“Like, I’ve been the most foolish kind of coward, to hold back with you.” I touch her lips to forestall her protest. “I have been. With reason, perhaps, but a fool and a coward nonetheless. You deserve...everything. And I want to give you everything. You’re the daughter of a billionaire, and I’m not far behind him in terms of wealth. So when I say give you everything, I don’t mean material things. There’s nothing you could want that you can’t provide for yourself.” I kiss her finger where a ring would go. “This may be untraditional and...not the way you may have pictured this moment happening. It just...feels right—”

She swallows hard, her eyes tearing up, but bright. “Ask me, Apollo.”

“Be my wife, Corinna. Marry me, please? I don’t have a ring to put on your finger, but...when this is over, I’ll put the biggest, brightest diamond money can buy on your finger. Just...please, marry me.”

She cries quietly, happily. “Yes, Apollo. Yes. A thousand times yes. I’d marry you right now, if I could.” A sob, and she lifts up, crawls higher on my body to kiss me. “I don’t need the biggest diamond, either. That means nothing to me. Any old ring will do, as long as I get to be your wife.”

The kissing turns passionate, and then she turns in my arms, facing away from me. I spoon up behind her and fill her, holding her thigh up and away. Her head turns and our mouths meet again over her shoulder, and we kiss and we gasp and we move together and we meld into a single being. I ache inside her, and she squeezes around me, and then we’re exploding together, needing nothing but this union, this moment, this love to find completion in each other.

And then we hear something.

A footstep, perhaps. Or a whisper.

We freeze, eyes locking—

And then we burst into motion.

INTERLUDE IN TUNIS; DEEPER WOUNDS

He's rolling off the bed, forgoing underwear and simply jerking his suit slacks on commando. I too stand into my jeans without panties, but I do take a second to stuff my tits into a bra before donning the new shirt he got me.

There's no time for anything else—they're out there. I hear them, gear rattling, voices low but audible.

We each have an HK, and take up positions to cover the doorway. I kneel on the floor near the bathroom, while Apollo takes a corner by the TV—our positions are chosen so even if one or both of us miss, we won't be in each other's line of fire.

A fraught moment.

The door is kicked in with a loud crunch of splintering wood; the privacy chain is no match for a hard, well-placed kick.

A split second of silence—they're communicating, probably.

They enter the room side by side, rather than in a line—three of them, dressed as hotel employees, carrying submachine guns identical to the ones we're holding. They emerge from the doorway and fan out.

Apollo meets my eyes, nods.

We open fire at the same time, suppressed rounds still surprisingly loud. I take down the one nearest me, while Apollo's rounds hit the one nearest him. The middle figure takes several rounds from each of us. Within thirty seconds, all three are on the ground, either dead or nearly so.

Apollo holds his position, trained on the doorway—he has the weapon tucked under his armpit, his whole body turned sideways. With only one good hand, he can't properly grip the automatic weapon to keep it from

jerking upward with the recoil. His tactic here would only work in extremely close range, but it still works.

When another thirty seconds go by and no one else emerges from the hallway, we both uncoil.

I toss my weapon on the bed, glancing at Apollo. "I'll get the bodies in the tub while you pack us up."

He tosses his gun with mine and kicks the door closed, or as closed as it will go, considering the damage done to it by the forced entry kick. I drag the bodies one by one into the bathroom and heave them into the tub; I spare a moment to rifle through their pockets—more cash in a variety of currencies, and more spare magazines. I take it all. There's nothing to be done about the blood or the broken door. By the time I'm done, Apollo has our gear stowed in the backpack, leaving out a handgun each. We don our socks and shoes, he shoulders the backpack, and we head for the elevator.

The elevator dings and the door opens, revealing four uniformed hotel security employees.

"There were noise complaints from this floor," one of them says, "as well as reports of suspicious individuals posing as hotel employees. Have either of you seen or heard anything?"

"We have not," Apollo says, pushing past them to get onto the elevator, behaving as if he's in a rush. "Excuse us, we're late for a flight."

He grabs my hand and hauls me onto the elevator just as the doors swish closed. The ride to the lobby is silent and feels like it takes forever.

We stop by the front desk, where Apollo tosses the keycard on the desk. "Room four-one-four, checking out. We're all set, thanks."

The clerk taps at his computer, barely affording us a glance. "ThanksforchoosingMarriot," he mumbles, fumbling blindly for the card.

At the valet, Apollo tenders several large denominations of local dinar. "The vintage Toyota as fast as possible, please."

The valet accepts the money, hurriedly scans the open cabinet of keys, plucks the correct set, and takes off at a sprint. Less than a minute later, the Toyota squeals to a stop, and Apollo holds out another bill.

"You never saw us," he says.

The valet eyes the bill, pockets it, nods. "Slow day. No customer."

With a nod, Apollo juts his chin at me, gesturing for me to drive. I slide behind the wheel and gun it. We bolt out into the predawn. My heart pounds, waiting for sirens or gunfire—there's neither.

Once more, I drive at random, watching the mirrors obsessively for possible tails.

“I expected them to find us,” Apollo says, “but that was quick.”

“I called my mom from the burner while you were sleeping,” I tell him, “but we were on the phone less than two minutes and Mom’s end is encrypted, so I don’t see how it could have been that.”

He shrugs. “I don’t see that being how they found us either,” he answers, “But you never know. I was under the impression that in order to get a location from a phone call, you had to be tracking the specific device, and I also do not think you can reverse triangulate, like determine the location of who is on the other end. But I don’t know these things for certain.” His eyes flick to me, and he smiles. “I am glad we got the amount of time together that we did, at least.”

I reach out and touch his knee. “I’m glad too. For...quite a few reasons.” I smirk at him.

A pause, his eyes fixed on me. “I am going to buy you a ring the moment I have access to my funds.”

I shake my head. “Really, I’m not worried about that.” I fumble for him, and his hand tangles in mine. “Apollo, listen to me. I love you—I love you more than I can even make sense of. You proposing to me like you did, naked together, having just made each other feel incredible? It was perfect.”

“I just...I had to make you mine. I had to show you, somehow, that I am utterly yours, forever. Making you my wife is...” he sighs, trailing off, shaking his head. “Something I should have done already. I am a fool for allowing my fear of my past to keep me from making the utmost of my present.”

“I wouldn’t change a thing, Apollo. Nothing about us is traditional. I’m not a normal girl, you’re not a normal guy, and our relationship sure as hell is anything but normal.” I let go to downshift and make a left turn, then bring the gear back up to second and then third, and then take his hand back. “If you buy me a ring, I’ll wear it. I don’t care if it’s a billion carats or cubic zirconium, Apollo, I really don’t. I’d get matching tattoos with you on our ring fingers, if you wanted. I just want to be your wife. I want to be able to love you forever. I want to watch all the women in a crowd drool and swoon over you and know that you’re *mine*. Rings, weddings, none of that matters. Just you, me, my family, and the vows.”

He just stares at me, swallowing hard. “This is the third time you’ve

saved me, you know.”

I blink at the unexpected shift in topic. “Third? I’m not following your math at all, babe.”

He rubs my knuckle with a thumb. “After I kidnapped you, you knew your parents had a plan to have me shot, and you stopped it, literally putting yourself between me and Anselm’s rifle. That’s one. Then you walked away from me and forced me to choose between you and who I was—or perhaps who I was pretending to be. That was the second time, saving me from myself. Now, you have infiltrated a sex-trafficking ring and risked being molested, if not raped and sold. You were forced to strip naked and be photographed. You killed several men in the process of rescuing me, literally and physically.” He swallows hard again. “That’s the third. I might argue there’s a fourth way you’ve saved me—by agreeing to marry me, after all that.”

I shake my head. “I’m not counting, Apollo. And I was willing to wait for you to be ready to marry me for the rest of our lives, if that’s what it took. I told you that day I walked away from you that if you became a man *you* could be proud of, that I would love you. You did, and I do. And I don’t commit halfway, my love. I’m all in, forever, no matter what.”

He inhales deeply, holds it, sighs shakily. “We’ve already tested till death and for worse. So I think now we get to enjoy as long as we both shall live, and for better.”

I laugh. “I think you’re right.”

His eyes flick to the passenger side-view mirror. “Make a right. Slowly.”

I follow his gaze—a nondescript sedan, an aging Mercedes, is a car length or so behind us. “They haven’t been on us for long.”

“No,” he agrees, watching behind us as I make the turn. “Keep going like normal.” Another pause, and he hisses curses in Greek under his breath. “They passed several other cars to get behind us. Not very smart if you want to tail us. But if you’re trying to catch up and shoot us? A different story.”

“They made the turn after us?”

He pulls his handgun from the small of his back. “Yes, they did.”

“I’m getting sick of this. How do they keep finding us? And more importantly, how can we end this bullshit once and for all?”

“We have to get Spaulding for that.”

“So let’s find Spaulding.”

He snorts. “We have zero resources except for some cash and some

guns.”

I groan in frustration. “This is just getting us nowhere. He’s going to keep sending these half-ass goons after us and we’re going to keep killing them. I need to get ahold of Dad or Uncle Harry. Mom said they’re coming for us, but...how will they find us? How do we find them? And more to the point, how do we find Spaulding so we can put a bullet in his fucking skull?” I jerk the shifter angrily as I pull a left and gun the engine, deciding to try and shake them rather than play cat and mouse. “At this point, I’m pissed off enough that I’d kill him with my bare hands.”

Apollo watches in the mirror. “Agreed. I have to believe that your people will find us sooner than later.”

“Can we afford to wait for that?”

He eyes me. “You have another idea?”

I shrug. “Yes. Maybe not a good one, but something.”

Apollo snorts. “I am not sure I like the sound of that, but go on.”

“These guys sometimes have phones, right? Burners? Maybe one of them has a number for Spaulding? We just call him and...I don’t know. Here we are, come and get us yourself, you lazy coward piece of shit?”

Apollo laughs outright. “He doesn’t work that way. They won’t have his direct number. He will have some kind of redirect system in place. As in, they send a prearranged code to a dead-end number in a text message, like when you sign up for text message alerts or something, you know? And that code is forwarded to him, and he will then call them. They could not possibly directly reach Spaulding personally.”

“So we make one of them fake the code.”

“He would just ask for photographic proof of our death. Anything less than you and me obviously dead will just mean he deactivates that system and comes at us from a different angle. Different crew, different code system. He’s not stupid enough that we will easily corner him.”

I huff. “Dammit.”

“It was good a plan. You could not know the security systems a man like him has in place.”

I pull around another corner onto a long narrow alley, a street between the backs of two rows of buildings, overflowing dumpsters evenly spaced, trash littering the road, power lines draped in pregnant bulges between the buildings. I gun it, hurtling down the alley, squeal around the next corner, and again, all at breakneck speed, just to put some distance between us.

“Switch.” I shove the shifter into neutral. “I’m done with these fuckers. I’m getting pissy.”

He takes the wheel, holds it steady as the SUV bleeds off momentum; I climb over the console and into the back while Apollo takes the driver’s seat. He steadies the wheel with his knee, uses his good arm to pull the shifter into first, and then second—he switches his grip to the wheel and makes a right onto the thoroughfare, the engine sputtering as it struggles into too a high a gear for the RPMs. It catches all at once, and we jerk forward, rolling me to the tailgate. The backpack flops toward me, conveniently enough. I pull an HK from it, check the load, ready it to fire, and then wait with my hand on the inside latch.

“When I say now, you hit the brakes,” I call over my shoulder.

He nods. “Got it.”

The maroon Mercedes skids around the corner and accelerates to catch up; it’s just past dawn, now, the sky bleeding pink and gray, lightening. I wait until the Mercedes is less than half a car length behind us, the HK strapped over my torso, folding stock braced against my shoulder.

At that moment, my phone rings.

“Shit, shit, shit. Worst timing.” I pull the phone out, hit answer, shove it between shoulder and ear. “Hello?”

“Rinny.” My father’s voice, rough, harsh, emotional. It hits me like a ton of bricks, makes me feel like a little girl again, his voice alone able to make me feel better. “You’re alive.”

“Yeah, I am. I’m gonna need you to hang on a second, though, Dad.” I drop the phone onto the floor next to me, shift positions so I’m steady and braced, able to throw open the tailgate and grab my gun again swiftly. “On three, hit the brakes hard,” I call over my shoulder to Apollo. “One, two...*three!*”

On three, I shove open the side-hinge tailgate and then the glass. Apollo slams on the brakes. I brace hard against the opening, HK snugged against my shoulder. The Mercedes looms suddenly large, and I can see the men within—four of them, a driver and three passengers. I can see their guns, their faces; as has been consistent with Spaulding’s hiring so far, the men are a mixture of ethnicities, the desire to kill Apollo and me for money the only uniting factor.

I draw bead on the front passenger, click off three rounds at him. Before the driver can react, I plug him with three more rounds; the windshield

spiderwebs at the first burst, shatters on the second. The passenger is bleeding from the shoulder but not dead, and I didn't get the driver at all. I open fire again, but now they're firing back.

A taillight shatters, the bumper dings and crunches—something buzzes past my ear and thuds into the seatback where I would be sitting.

I don't quite spray-and-pray, because Sasha taught me better than that, but it's close. I dump rounds in a tight horizontal arc, starting with the passenger and ending with the driver. The passenger slumps, twitching and the sedan skids sideways. We've all but stopped at this point, so I hop out and move in a crouch for the rear of the vehicle. I crack off a round to pop the rear passenger window and then strafe several more rounds across the rear bench—just in time, too. Something hot slices across my rib cage, plucking at my shirt and burning my rib just below my elbow. My bullets hit a microsecond after that, silencing them.

“Let's go!” Apollo shouts. “We need distance between us and them.”

I jerk open the rear door, search the pockets of the dying man—his chest is holed and he's sucking and wheezing—and retrieve his burner phone, more cash, and more magazines for our HKs. I do the same for all three, coming away with a tidy sum in cash and plenty of spare ammo.

I'm about to get into the Toyota when an idea hits me.

The burner is a cheap off-brand no-contract type, but it can still record video from both front and rear cameras. I pull up the camera and set it to recording video. I make a circuit of the Mercedes, going close up on each dead or dying merc. I focus on the one still gurgling and wheezing.

“Say hi to Spaulding,” I say. “Can you say hi? No?”

The man just glares at me balefully, each gasp audibly painful, and slowing.

I turn around so my back is to the car, and then flip the phone around to the front-facing camera. “Your guys are shit, Richard. Or, do you go by Dick? You're more of a Dick, I think. You think you're going to win this, Dick?” I bring the phone closer to my face. “I'm going to find you, *Dick*, and I'm going to kill you.” I feel hatred bubbling inside me, anger poisoning me, rage bubbling in my veins. “Keep sending your rent-a-thugs. I can do this all day.”

There's only one number in the phone, and I send the video to that number.

Apollo is watching, twisted around in the driver's seat, a wry, amused

expression on his face. “Your dad is still holding, babe.”

“Shit!” I startle, juggling the phone before catching it and shoving it into my back pocket, jogging over to the back of the Toyota; I snatch up the phone. “Sorry about that, Daddy.”

“Corinna, what just happened?”

“Oh, nothing. Just, you know, taking some selfies for the ’Gram.”

He is not amused. “Corinna Abigail Roth.”

“What do you think just happened, Dad? We’re being tracked by Spaulding’s cheap-ass rental thugs. Right as you called, I was about to take care of the latest squad. Which I did.”

A sigh. “Like mother, like daughter.”

“Damn right I’m like Mom,” I say. “Where the hell is our backup? This running and hiding bullshit is getting old.”

“Approaching Tunis. We’re about...how far, Harris?” I hear Uncle Harry’s voice. “A hundred kilometers, he says.”

“We have to nail this guy, Dad. I’m not going to have my wedding ruined by this two-bit criminal.”

A pause. “Wait, wedding?”

I grin at Apollo, leaning against the back of the SUV. “Yeah, we got engaged.”

“While running for your lives and fighting off mercenaries?”

“Yep.”

Dad sighs. “Sounds about right.”

“We weren’t actively running or fighting when he proposed,” I say. “We were in the, um, hiding portion of the program, you might say.”

Dad snickers. “Yeah, I’m well aware of the effect high adrenaline situations have on sexual hormones, Rin. Very, very well aware. You, after all, by your own admission are very much your mother’s daughter.”

I gag. “Dad!”

“You started it.”

“I do not need the mental image of you and Mom getting freaky while the bullets fly.”

“You don’t get freaky *while* the bullets are flying, you get freaky *after*.”

“Yes, Dad, I know.”

“Just making sure. You can’t let hormones make you dumb.”

I groan. “Yep. Got it. On that note, we need to get scarce. Where are we going to rendezvous?”

A moment of muffled speech while they confer on the other end. “Best to not say over the phone. When we’re about to land, I’ll call you back. Until then, stay alive.”

“Not gonna lay down and die now. I’ve got a wedding to plan.”

“Does your mother know?”

“Just you. It’s pretty recent. Like, an hour ago. So let me tell her.”

“Got it.”

“Rin, darling. Gotta go.” Apollo’s voice is tight. “We’re attracting attention.”

I spin in place and see that a car is trundling slowly toward us. “Shit, I have to go, Dad. Get here soon.”

I end the call and stuff the phone in my other back pocket, slam the tailgate closed and hustle to the driver’s seat. “I can drive, if you want. I know it’s not easy with your arm.”

He hops over to the passenger seat and I slide behind the wheel, hanging the HK by its strap on my lap. I squeal the tires as I pull away, leaving the mess behind us. The other car is very slowly rolling past the Mercedes, gawking, and then, with a bark of tires, they’re gone in the opposite direction.

A few minutes later, sirens erupt in the distance.

It’s tempting to burn rubber and get away at top speed, but that would only attract even more attention.

“We have to get a different car,” I say.

“I agree.” He glances at me. “You got more cash from the last group?”

I dig it out of my hip pockets, a crumpled wad of cash in the same three currencies—pounds, dollars, and dinars. “Here.”

“Quite a haul from those four.”

“At this rate, we’ll be well compensated by this little adventure.” I look in the back, where I dumped the stack of magazines. “We have enough ammo to make quite a stand, if it were to come to that.”

Apollo follows my gaze. “True. But let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“So how do we get a different car?”

He frowns thoughtfully. “Used car lot, perhaps? Like we did before? We have some cash now to make the deal a little sweeter.”

“We just have to find one, in that case.” I snort. “You’d think for the amount of time we’ve spent driving around this city that we’d know it a little better by now.”

“We have been somewhat distracted. You know, by little things like

people shooting at us.”

We approach a gas station, and I pull in. Apollo nods. “Good thinking. I’ll ask the clerk when I pay for gas.”

It’s a short interaction that I can’t hear; he comes back with a map drawn on the back of a receipt. A few minutes later, we’ve put a few gallons—or liters—of fuel into the tank and are back on the road. The used car lot is a few kilometers away, and is closed when we get there—it’s still very early.

“Now what?” I ask.

A shrug. “We passed a restaurant a little ways back. We could get some food?”

“Real food would be amazing.”

We head back to the restaurant he’d seen—it is just opening as we park. We sit where we can see the whole restaurant and door, sidearms at our backs. I’m actively waiting for someone to burst through the door while we eat, so it’s hard to enjoy it. Apollo feels the same way, I can tell, so we don’t dawdle over the food.

By the time we’ve eaten and paid and get back to the used car lot, the first employee is arriving.

He eyes us suspiciously as we park. “Close.”

“We need a different car.”

He taps the hour’s sign on the door, and then the watch on his wrist. “Close.”

Apollo pulls out a few larger denomination dinars. “We’ll be quick. We just need to trade.”

The man shakes his head, shrugs; his English vocabulary is limited. Apollo points at the Toyota, then at a nearby sedan, a make and model I don’t recognize, then makes a swapping motion, holds up the cash.

The man eyes the cash, the Toyota, and then flicks his fingers in an upward gesture. It’s subtle, but easy enough to interpret—more cash.

“We’re going to get fleeced on this deal,” Apollo grumbles.

I laugh. “We’re spending money we stole from the bodies of people we killed, Apollo. I hardly think it matters.”

“I’m a businessman. The deal is the thing.”

I shake my head. “Just get us a different car, Apollo.”

Apollo sighs, and withdraws more cash, this time American dollars. “Good car.”

The man, older, tall and thin, sort of hunched, his lined features weather-

beaten, simply arches an eyebrow. Gestures at the Toyota, makes a thumbs-down gesture.

Apollo adds more cash to the stack in his hand. Shrugs.

When we approached, the man was in the process of opening the door—the keys still hang in the lock. He finishes unlocking and heads inside; we follow him. He sets down his briefcase, grabs a set of keys from a locked cabinet, and returns outside, crossing the lot to a specific car—an Isuzu SUV. It's not particularly ancient, but neither is it within twenty years of new, and it shows signs of hard wear...so far as I know about such things, which is very little. I stay quiet and let Apollo do the negotiating. Apollo slides into the cabin behind the wheel, accepting the keys. It starts right up, but the odometer shows a very high number.

I glance at Apollo, the unspoken question in my eyes.

He shrugs. "Engine sounds solid, no rattles or squeaks or knocks. A lot of kilometers on it, but I'm not trying to get a lot out of it." He turns on the AC, which squeals noisily before quieting; within a minute or so, it's blowing cool enough. He nods, gives the man a thumbs-up.

The man nods. "Good auto. Like me." He thumps his chest. "Old, still okay."

Apollo backs the Isuzu out of the spot and parks it by the building; I grab our bag, shoving the ammunition into it and zipping the bag. I leave the keys in the ignition. The salesman eyes the Toyota, doing a once-around, stopping to finger the bullet holes in the rear bumper, and the smashed taillight. His eyes ask the question of Apollo, who merely shrugs, as if he has no more idea than the salesman does.

Apollo makes a show of adding yet more cash to the stack. "No paperwork."

The man frowns. "Bad time, for you?"

Apollo points at himself and me, then at the salesman, covering his eyes and shaking his head. "You never saw us."

The salesman's face shows understanding, and he nods, says something in Arabic. "Big dollar. No paper."

Apollo chuckles. "The old crook is cleaning me out." He adds yet more again, and the man finally nods, reaching for the now-sizable stack of money. "Does it have fuel?" The man just shrugs at the question, and Apollo taps the fuel tank door, flattening his palm and lifting it upward in a rising gesture. "Fuel?"

“Ahh. Yeah, okay. Fuel all up. Is good.”

“The fact that all these people who live thousands of miles from the nearest English-speaking country all know so many words in English is astounding to me,” I say. “I mean, you know intellectually how widespread English is, but until you experience it, you don’t really know.”

“And here are we, knowing one word in Arabic between us. Kind of sad.” Apollo shakes the man’s hand, thanking him in Arabic. “Remember, you’ve never seen us.” He covers his eyes again.

The man nods, climbing behind the wheel of the Toyota. “No see. No people. Only me.”

“Good. *Shukran*.”

The man nods yet again, muttering something under his breath, and simply drives away, to check over his acquisition, I suppose. The Isuzu is automatic, which is helpful—makes it easier for us to take turns driving.

Apollo drives at random again, watching for tails.

A phone in my pocket rings—the *other* one. The phone I sent the video from. I hold it up for Apollo to see. “It’s Spaulding, I’d bet.”

“Don’t answer,” he says.

I grin. “I’m answering it.”

Apollo rolls his eyes. “Of course you are.”

I accept the call. “Hi, Dick.”

“You’re a real comedienne,” comes the voice on the other side.

“Not really, just calling it like I see it. So, what’s up, Dick?”

“You think you’ve won, don’t you?”

“Well, Apollo is alive and safe. Yelena is alive and safe. All the girls are alive and safe. Your Tunisian operation, at least, is shut down. Let’s see, what else? Oh, well, I’m aware that you forced Apollo into some sort of money-laundering shenanigans, and you can bet we’re going to shut that down soon, too. But, to be totally honest, no, I haven’t won. Not yet.”

“Oh?”

“I won’t have won until I’ve personally put a lead slug in your fucking brain.”

“You think the forces I’ve been sending after you are all I can bring to bear?” A harsh, sarcastic laugh. “I really don’t think it was wise of you to taunt me, Miss Roth.”

“Bring it, bitch.”

Another laugh. “But honestly, sending men to kill you was just meant to

keep you busy. See, I am well aware that my photographer is dead and his equipment destroyed. How sad. Whatever shall I do?” His voice is mocking and cruel. “What you may not be aware of, however, is that before he was killed, he did manage to send off electronic copies of his day’s work. I never trust my bottom line to any one person, you see. People are foolish and lazy and stupid, and mistakes are made. Cameras can be lost. Accidents happen. So, I arranged a system whereby my photographers upload photographs to a cloud account so I can access them.”

I don’t like where this is going, but I play along. “You’re tech-savvy. Bully for you, Dick. Enjoy it while it lasts, because you’re—”

“My reason for telling you this, Miss Roth,” he interrupts, “is that I have *all* of the photographs he took that day. Including those of you.”

Shit. My stomach turns.

“Like I said, Dick, enjoy it while it lasts.” I play it breezy, careless. “You wanna jerk off to pictures of me? Go for it. I don’t care. It’ll just be more fuel for my determination to see you dead.”

“You mistake me. You are *far* too old for my tastes, as I am sure you’re well aware. Oh no, my point is not salacious at all. I’m going to release those photographs. I have access to media all over the world. Very soon, the young heiress to the great Valentine Roth’s estate, the youngest-ever CEO of a fortune five hundred company and youngest female CEO of any major corporation, America’s socialite darling...you, my dear, will sit by and watch as those photographs circulate. And they *are* quite detailed, you know. If I had been able to get a video of you being raped by a buyer...now *that* would have been the real coup. But, I’ll take what I can get. I hope you enjoy *your* little adventure. By the time you’re back at home in Houston, those photographs will be in the hands of every website, magazine, and journalist in the country. I might even have someone fabricate a story about it. Something truly sordid, perhaps.”

I grit my teeth until my molars ache. Deep breath. Force myself to relax. “Have fun with that. If you think I’m going to be embarrassed or in any way harmed by some leaked nudes, you’re greatly mistaken. And I know the truth, remember. Those were taken in the service of rescuing twenty-five innocent women from sexual slavery. If having those photographs released is part of the deal, so be it. I’ve got no regrets. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a murder to plan. Bye, Dick!”

I end the call and drop the phone on my lap. Breathe slowly, deeply.

“Shit.”

“Glad you answered the phone?”

“Yes.” I close my eyes and breathe until my emotions settle. “Do I *want* those photos out there? Of course not. But they’re not, like, sexy nudes I took for you that were stolen or something. They’re clinical, more than anything. My naked body, and that’s it. It’s an invasion of privacy, it will be embarrassing, but it is what it is. I’ll deal with it. I just really have to make sure that man dies a horrible, slow, painful death.”

Apollo’s gaze is...pained. “I am not at all sure I like this violent, angry, spiteful version of you, my love.”

I swallow hard, closing my eyes. “Me either,” I whisper. “But it’s the version of me that’s getting us through this.”

“I am so very—”

I touch his leg, squeeze. “Don’t. Do not apologize again, Apollo. It was not your fault. You’re a victim as much as I am, as much as Yelena is, as much as those women are.”

“I just hate it. I hate that you have to become...this.” He gestures at the gun on my lap. “The killer. This hard, cold, hateful, violent...*thing*. It’s not you. I recognize the necessity of being that person, in this situation. I truly do. I had to get there myself, in going after those sex traffickers. I just hate it for you, and I *am* sorry my past has dragged you into this. I apologize not to admit or proclaim fault or guilt, but regret and sorrow.”

“Just...once it’s all over, you have to help me find myself again. You have to help me find the soft, sweet, sexy woman.” I hold his eyes for a moment, before he returns his attention to the road. “The woman I was in that hotel room. You have to help me get back to her, when this is over, okay?”

“I will,” he whispers. “I swear it on my soul.”

EYES ON THE PRIZE

We eventually find a spot near the docks, near the ancient Roman port ruins. Along a fence, empty, stacked shipping containers blocking our rear and left sides, open space in front and to the right, limiting the directions of approach.

Rin is expecting a call at any moment.

She's upset, angry, disturbed. And there's not a damn thing I can do, in this moment.

I can't help but feel like this *is* my fault. That I *do* bear blame.

Finally, the phone rings.

She answers it and puts it on speaker. "Hi."

"We're landing as I speak," her father says.

"The airport?" she asks.

"No, far too obvious, and far too difficult to offload our gear without uncomfortable questions being asked."

"Where, then?"

"Offshore. Your uncle Harris found a particularly useful aircraft just for this mission."

"Great." Her voice is clipped, flat. "So what's the plan? We're hiding out near the docks."

"Perfect. We do have plans, but I'll wait to explain in person."

"Super. Thanks for coming, Dad."

A pause. "You sound upset."

"That's because I am."

"Is Apollo okay? Are you okay? Hurt, I mean?"

"No one is hurt. We'll talk in person." She hesitates. "Is Lear with you

guys, by any chance?”

“He is, but he was going to remain with the aircraft and the rearguard.”

“I need him.”

“Corinna. What’s going on?”

“Dad, don’t. Just...I need Lear. Okay? Please? I need him.”

“All right, Rin.” Muffled, aside. “Lear—Rin requires your services; I’m not sure what for, we’ll find out when we meet.”

I hear his voice but can’t make out what he says.

“Hang tight, honey,” Roth says. “We’re coming.”

“See you soon.” She ends the call and tosses the phone between her thighs again.

“Rin,” I start.

She shakes her head, and I trail off. “I’m angry. Not at you, just angry. At Spaulding, for the whole fucking situation. At...at dirty evil fucking men so obsessed with sex and power that this fucking industry exists at all.” Her eyes are cold with rage. “When this is over, Apollo, we’re doing something about it.”

I nod. “You don’t have to convince me, my love. You know this.”

She’s staring out the window, molars pulsing as she grinds them. “I know. But...we have to do more. I want to throw the full weight of our wealth and position into fucking *ending* this shit. I’m talking whatever it takes. Lobby politicians. Buy off whoever we have to buy off internationally. Form off-book, black-ops hit squads to eliminate purveyors like Spaulding. With the sole exception of legal, *voluntary* sex work, I want to make it so dangerous to engage in trafficking that it’s not worth it. And I will go fucking *bankrupt* doing it. I wouldn’t count out torture for the evil fucks who do this shit to kids—I’m dead serious.” She meets my eyes. “You hear me, Apollo? We’re *ending* it. And it starts with Richard fucking Spaulding.”

“Sex trafficking is as old as humanity, Rin. I’m not sure ending it is a feasible goal.”

“Prostitution is, you’re right. And I qualified it—legal, voluntary sex work, be it strippers or prostitutes or Only Fans cam girls and everything in between, as long as the person engaged in sex work has chosen it of their own volition and is being paid a fair and equitable wage for that work. And making that the standard is the goal. Sex work is work. As long as it’s voluntary, and they’re getting paid and aren’t getting discriminated against—that’s a whole arm of the operation I’m envisioning. But the other arm is

ending human trafficking, globally. And we have to tackle it financially, politically, and through force. We need investors and donors. Our money will go a long way, and I know Mom and Dad and all the others will be in. But we'll need more. And when I say I'm going to shoot in the fucking face every single person who has trafficked in human beings, I mean it. I'll go on the ops myself."

"Rin, my love."

Her eyes flick to mine, furious. "Trying to talk me out of this would be a very bad idea, Apollo."

I touch her hand. "I'm not. I wouldn't. If you'll remember, I went undercover and personally did exactly what you're talking about—I personally, physically shot and killed sixteen men who I could directly tie via hard evidence to human trafficking. These were the purveyors, as you called them. There were ten more who I know were...distributors, on a regional and local level. The ones who ran the pimps. And if I encountered clients who were knowingly paying for sex with slaves, I shot them, too." I squeeze her hand. "But my only point is that, on the whole, your time and talents are best used at the top. Organizing. Driving the operations as a whole. Not that you're not good at fieldwork, to euphemize what we've been doing, but it's a much more effective use of your time and talents to let those who specialize in fieldwork do that work."

"You didn't do that."

"I was...atoning...for the sins of my mother and grandfather. You have nothing to atone for."

"Call it retribution, then—for the women I was with. For the things they went through. And those I was able to save, before anything too awful happened to them. Now I'm thinking of the thousands of women and girls Spaulding has trafficked through there that didn't get saved. It's retribution for them."

"I understand."

She shakes her head. "I don't say this to take anything away from you, or minimize what you've done, or anything. But you can't understand. Even I can't—not totally. I wasn't kidnapped from my home like those women were. I went into it voluntarily, with the knowledge that there were heavily armed and elite warriors backing up my play, ready to knock down those doors and get me out. I had a weapon. I had a plan, and a purpose. So even I can't fully understand. Those women were taken from their homes, against their will,

bound and shipped across the world to be sold like so much fucking cattle, destined to be raped time and again until they were no longer of any value, and then murdered.” Her voice is venomous. “But for a while there, I was one of them. Bound like they were. Helpless, like they were. At the mercy of the armed guards like they were.”

I squeeze her hand again. “If you need to do some of the wet work yourself, then I’ll be there at your side while you do it.”

She finally softens a tiny bit, looking at me. “Because you’re a good man, Apollo Dimitriou.”

Something niggles at me—a thought. An idea.

A realization.

Karahalios, Dimitriou. Neither name reflects the legacy I want to leave.

In fact, there’s only one name that does.

Roth.

I glance at Rin, and peace settles over me—I know what I’m going to do.

First, though, we have to get out of this alive.

We wait in silence for a few minutes, and then her phone rings again.

“Hi, Daddy,” she answers it, putting it on speaker again.

“Actually, it’s Harris.” His voice is no-nonsense, as always. “Take the P-1 south out of Tunis. About a mile after the built-up strip along the beach ends, there’s a dirt turnoff that heads east to the sea. Take that. You’ll see us from there.”

“Got it.” She hesitates. “Tell me you have a lock on him.”

“What the fuck do you think we’ve been doing this whole time, while you and Apollo have been single-handedly decimating his mercenary force?”

“I don’t know about that,” I say. “We’ve only taken out a few squads.”

Harris laughs. “You don’t have the benefit of our perspective. What you don’t and couldn’t know is that Spaulding’s resources are actually rather limited at the moment. He went all out for one last big gamble—those women you guys rescued represented a massive gamble for cash. He had to scrounge up every favor, scrape together every dollar he could to pay for the manpower necessary to run that operation. You cut his legs off, with that program you and your friend ran. He was running from people he owed money to, thus his presence in Tunisia. So, between his forces at that fortress getting wiped out and the guys you two have taken out, he’s on the ropes. He’s got no money. He’s got no credit with any of the underground lenders. He’s got very few men left to do his dirty work, let alone to throw at you.”

“It seems to us like he’s got an endless number of people to throw at us. Every time we turn around, every time we think we’ve lost them, they show up.” Rin’s voice shows her strain, her tension.

“That’s because he has a truly astonishing informant network set up in Tunis. We got lucky, you see. He was so focused on making sure his shipment of women came in and the auction went off without a hitch that he neglected to collect information from that network, or the fact that you guys were in Tunis asking about him and his operation would have been communicated to him. But he didn’t ask, so he didn’t know. That was his big mistake. Once you guys got away, he put out word that anyone with information on you two would be paid a thousand US dollars. I think that bounty alone has been burning through what cash reserve he has left.”

“He forced me to get a money-laundering front going for him,” I say. “It was all real estate, through a commercial real estate arm I own. Or, owned. He made me sell it to him and then set up a series of transactions to move his money around.”

“We know,” I hear Mr. Roth’s voice say, distant and then approaching. “I have my own informational network—when that subsidiary of yours got sold and then there was a flurry of major transactions, I knew exactly what Spaulding was up to.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“I sent a tip to a few friends in, not the highest places, necessarily, but the *right* places. The transactions were flagged, and the accounts in question frozen. He can’t access any of it. Which I’m sure only adds to his panic.” Roth clicks his teeth. “The real estate firm he forced you to sell to him is going to have to be a loss for you, I’m afraid—there’s no way to undo that. But I’ll see that you have whatever you require to start over. Perhaps we could go into business together.”

I laugh. “What’s a few hundred million matter, in the grand scheme of things? I’m just glad you were able to catch it and stop it.”

“The rendezvous point is several miles away,” Harris says, cutting in over the conversation. “We need to get moving and so do they.”

“I agree,” Rin says. “See you guys in a few minutes.”

The call is ended and we head out—at this point, we have crossed and recrossed the city enough to know how to find the P-1 going south out of the city.

It’s a quiet ride—traffic isn’t too bad yet. I’m glad for the AC in this

vehicle, as it hadn't worked in the ancient Toyota; the day is hot, already, and promises to get even hotter.

I think we're both expecting opposition at any moment—a car to come up behind us, guns blazing.

It never happens.

We reach the turnoff for the beach without issue. The sea is dark blue in the distance, and I cut off the AC, opening the windows. Sea breeze blows hot, and the crash of waves grows loud, and gulls caw and float in place, wing and wheel and flutter.

I stop as we near the beach, which here is wide and hard-packed, and scan in both directions. True to Harris's word, it's easy to spot them, from here—a few hundred yards south, there's a huge seaplane, a four-engine cargo plane, bellied up on the beach, tail end facing the land. It's a hive of activity, with several ex-military SUVs parked in the sand, crates of supplies being moved around by men in combat fatigues. The full might of A1S, being brought to bear.

As we head for the cargo plane, I hear helicopter rotors approaching from the sea, flying low and fast. There's a pair of helos flying side by side, and they split as they reach the cargo plane, flaring to hover just over the sand on either side of the massive aircraft. Six people in full combat load-outs hop down from the helos, three on each side.

I glance at Rin. "Why would they send more in helicopters when that cargo plane is plenty big enough to carry everything and everyone?"

Rin merely shrugs. "I don't know. We'll find out, I suppose."

A moment later, we're parking the Isuzu out of the way of the ongoing operation—I see all the core members of A1S—plus Valentine Roth, Alexei, and a Black man I'm assuming is Thomas—standing around a folding table set up near the tail of the cargo plane.

Valentine sees us exiting the vehicle, turns away from the table, and jogs toward us. Rin swallows hard, blinking back tears.

I nudge her toward him. "It's okay, Rin. We're actually, truly safe now."

There are no less than thirty armed operatives around us, including several on active guard duty, watching in every direction, including two with high-powered binoculars scanning the open sea.

She snuffles, throws the submachine gun by its strap around behind her back, and jogs to meet her father. They crash together, and Valentine lifts her clear off the ground, swings her around in two full rotations before setting her

on her feet again. I stay back, giving them a moment.

I can't hear their conversation, nor do I try to. He says something, she nods. A moment or two of this, back and forth. She shakes her head, gestures at me; she then meets my eyes and indicates that I should join them.

Valentine, instead of the handshake I was expecting, grabs me with a hug nearly as effusive as the one with which he'd greeted his daughter, slapping me on the back and squeezing till my ribs protest.

"Good to see you in one piece, more or less," he says, when he finally releases me. "Quite an ordeal you've been through."

Six core A1S members join us, surrounding us. I find Thresh, the seven-foot-tall giant with the muscles of a Mr. Olympia bodybuilder.

"The girl," I say, looking up at him. "Yelena. She's with her parents?"

He nods; his voice, when he speaks is as deep as you'd expect, rough and expressive. "I kept my eyes on her personally until she was reunited with her parents. As we speak, they're in a safe house guarded by a contingent of operatives, monitored by the highest tech security equipment money can buy. Once this is over, they'll be returned home. Currently, I believe they're watching Disney movies and eating pizza."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

He nods again, but his eyes are thoughtful as they regard me. "You know what she said to her parents? The first thing she said to them was that Mr. 'Pollo protected her from the bad man."

I choke up. "I tried. She should never have been in that position to begin with."

"You did everything you could have, Apollo." His huge, heavy hand claps on my shoulder like a ton of bricks, nearly sending me sprawling. "No one could have done more."

I shake my head. "It's hard to see it that way."

"I get it. But you can't hold yourself responsible for something you had no way of foreseeing. This guy, the way I hear it, wasn't even your direct enemy or opponent."

I shrug. "I'd done business with him, and I had sort of pulled one over on him, but it was business. I didn't think it would have been enough to make me his enemy enough that he did all *this*. I think it was financially motivated. I ruined his livelihood, cut his income stream. And to a man like Spaulding, that's *everything*." I laugh ruefully. "Funniest part is, I wasn't even targeting him. I didn't have any direct proof that he was involved, at that point, or I

would have taken him out with the others.”

Rin leans against me, arm circling my waist possessively. “His point is, you have to stop blaming yourself. Your past has things in it which you may not be proud of. But you’ve left all of that behind; you’ve truly, genuinely changed—you’ve become a *good* man.”

“You traded yourself for that little girl without hesitation,” Thresh says, “with no guarantee you’d survive it. That’s not the kind of goodness you can fake.”

I’m uncomfortable with this kind of praise, and change the topic. “So, we have a lock on Spaulding’s whereabouts?”

Lear, a laptop balanced on one hand, interrupts. “Before we get into that—Rin, Mr. Roth says you needed me for something?”

Rin looks around at the gathered men, her six honorary uncles and her father. “There’s no point in trying to keep this on the D-L I suppose,” she mutters to herself; then, louder, to Lear but so everyone else can hear: “You all know by now that I posed as one of the girls in the shipment so I could get inside the fortress and rescue Apollo.” A pause. I take her hand, hold it. “Part of the intake process, you could call it, was cataloging each girl. This meant being photographed. Naked.” Her voice shakes slightly, then hardens. “This includes me.”

I see eyes all around go murderous.

“It was not voluntary, obviously. It was limited strictly to being photographed, front, left side, rear, right side. I was not touched in any way. But it was done at gunpoint.” She pauses again. “I’m only telling you this for one reason, and this is the reason I need you, Lear: when the photographs were taken, they were uploaded to a cloud storage system so Spaulding could access them remotely.” Another pause. “I spoke to Spaulding on the phone. He is going to disseminate those photographs of me to the public, to the media, to leak sites like 4Chan and Gawker. Just to hurt me and embarrass me.”

“Over my dead goddamn body,” Lear snaps. “Say no more, I’m on it.”

“Over *his* dead body, preferably,” Rin says. “Not just mine, but all of them.”

Lear’s fingers are flying one-handed across the keyboard, typing faster with one hand than most can with two. “Oh, no worries there, honey. I’m going to find and destroy his shit one line of code at a time. And I’m going to have help.” He whips out a phone, finds a contact, dials, waits. “Artem, it’s

Lear. Remember that pedo ring we took out a while back? Well, I've got a job that's gonna make that look like a church picnic. Sex trafficking, on a global scale. Yeah, I'm serious. This shit is going to make your blood boil, my friend. I'll throw in money if needed, but you're gonna do this pro-bono out of pure rage, once you see what we're dealing with. Get all the guys, Artem. All of them. White hat, black hat, I don't give a shit. We're going nuclear on this...great. I'll send you what you need to know to get started. Thanks, buddy."

We're all watching him.

"Artem is the high-tech version of Anselm," Lear explains, putting the phone away. "He scares the shit out of me, and I'm not even kidding. I have to be pretty judicious in how, when, where, and why I use him, though, because setting him onto a project like this is akin to launching a nuke."

Puck, chewing on the unlit plug of a thick cigar, scratches at his long, thick, black-and-white beard with the stump of a middle finger. "Point him at the bad guys, then, and let's watch the fireworks."

Lear looks at Rin. "The photographs I'm expunging myself. There won't be a trace of them by the time I'm finished." He turns away, typing too rapidly to follow, his attention already homing in on the job at hand. "Don't worry, I've got your intel all squared away, and I'll check it again before it's go time."

"The photographer and his equipment," Harris says. "We need to make sure there aren't any extant hard copies of the photographs."

Rin laughs, and it's a darkly amused sound. "No problem there, Uncle Harry. After I made my move on the inside, the other women were not idle. By the time I got Yelena and Apollo and made for the exit, Anh and the others had already taken care of the photographer and his equipment." She eyes him. "You ever see what twenty-five pissed-off and scared women can do to one unarmed man?"

Harris nods, stoic. "I have, in fact. I hunted down a known child molester in Manila once—instead of turning him over to the authorities, I left him bound hand and foot with the mothers of the girls he'd hurt. When I went back to check on him, later, there was...he wasn't recognizable as a human being."

She nods. "Exactly."

Harris gestures at the table. "Let's go over the plan." He glances at Rin and then me. "I'm assuming there's no point in trying to get either of you to

stay back and let us deal with Spaulding?”

Rin shrugs. “Sure, I’ll stay back...with a sniper rifle and a promise that I get to pull the trigger with that asshole’s head in the crosshairs.”

Anselm has his rifle with the butt in the sand, leaning against his shoulder. “Sniping is not like hunting a deer or hitting a target at the range.” He taps the barrel of the Barrett. “It requires years of experience and training, as well as extensive knowledge of the math involved in calculating windage and drop and such things as this.” He meets Rin’s eyes. “I could teach you these things, but not in time to do you any good. I think maybe it is best for you to be on the ground with the kill squad.”

Rin laughs. “Yeah, Uncle Anselm, I know. That was my point.”

Anselm frowns. “Oh. I missed the joke, it seems.”

She just smiles at him. “You can handle the sniping. I’ll be boots-down with the kill squad.” Her eyes go to her father’s. “And no, you can’t talk me out of this, either.”

“Talk you out of it?” He shakes his head. “I’m going with you. Kidnapping me, kidnapping my wife, even kidnapping my daughter—” here, his eyes go to me, briefly, and I look at my toes, “I can...not forgive or understand. But all that is one thing. Kidnapping a totally innocent four-year-old girl? *That* earns you a special place in hell, in my book, and I’ll be there to make sure he gets a one-way ticket down there.”

Her expression, as she hears him say this, turns nearly worshipful. She wraps him a hug. “You’re the best, Daddy.”

I can’t help a cackle. “When most girls say, ‘you’re the best, Daddy,’ like that they are talking about a new Mercedes or a fancy condo or something. Not accompanying her on an operation to assassinate a sex-trafficking underworld kingpin. I’m sorry to laugh, but it’s a little amusing.”

We’re clustered around the table, then, with Duke going over the tactics for our assault.

“He’s holed up in the Alborz Mountains in Iran,” Duke says. “Not far from Alamut, actually, for you history buffs.” When no one replies, he shakes his head. “Look it up later. Anyway, we have satellite imagery of his caravan reaching a stronghold. Like the fortress here in Tunisia, this is old ruins that our intel says he’s since renovated into a refuge. His last resort, I suppose. The imagery shows six vehicles, Suburbans or Tahoes or the like, from the looks of it, which means he’s got at least six, if not eight men per vehicle. Do that math, we’re looking at anywhere from fifty to sixty men with him,

assuming he doesn't have more stationed there as well. And he's likely expecting us. So, this isn't going to be a straightforward assault."

Thresh eyes the topographical map on the tablet, pinching to zoom in and out, examining the lay of the land. "The terrain is going to pose a hell of a challenge."

Puck elbows him aside—or attempts to—in order to get a better look. "Move the fuck over, you giant damn rhinoceros."

Thresh just rumbles laughter but edges sideways to allow Puck closer; Puck does his own examination of the topography. "You ain't kiddin', big buddy. Mountainous as fuck. One road in or out. Thick forest. Even a HALO insertion isn't really feasible. And if they know we're coming, they'll have lines of approach dialed in with SAWs or whatever the fuck. Assuming he's as smart as we are, which is the safest assumption."

"It's a damn smart location for a last stand," Duke says.

Harris takes over the tablet, stares at it a long while, making a musing sound between his front teeth. "Okay, I've got it. I'm not usually one for trick plays, but I think this scenario calls for it. I'll get some buddies and we'll confuse them. I'm thinking five, six, maybe more helos, all coming from different directions. While not every helo will be carrying personnel, each one will descend to a section of road or a clearing as if to let troops fast-rope down. We'll be working in fireteams of six each, one per helo, and we will be approaching from multiple angles—the point of the extra helos, in case it isn't clear, is to obscure our numbers and angles of approach. We're going to have to descend pretty far down the mountain and just hoof it up the hard way, slow and quiet." Harris glances at Anselm. "Can you find a spot where you can provide sniper support?"

Anselm takes the tablet, then, and searches. "Very tricky, indeed. The nearest neighboring peak is quite some distance. Hmmm. I would need to infiltrate ahead of time and create a few nests in various positions. I think my best wager is to position myself in a tree. This is tricky with so large a rifle, but the distances involved certainly preclude anything smaller." He mutters under his breath—I think I hear German, Russian, and Finnish—the latter I am only guessing at. "*Ja*, it will work. To find the right perch, carry in the correct materials, create a disguised nest to support my weight and that of my rifle, as well as factoring in the back-blow and kick, while allowing me a useful field of vision on the target compound....it will be a difficult assignment, indeed, but a challenge such as I have not faced in many years."

He glances at Harris, nodding. “I will need a scout. The best sniper, who is capable at fieldcraft, knows the work of sniper scouting, and can act as my protection while I do the shooting work.”

Harris turns, puts two fingers to his lips and whistles sharply. “Chico!”

A shorter, thickly built Hispanic man jogs over—his hair is buzzed, but shows signs of salt-and-pepper, as does his beard, which is buzzed to the same length as the hair on his head. “*Sí, Señor Harris.*”

“You’ve got a sniper in your bunch, don’t you?”

Chico nods. “Dyani. A girl, and a young one, but truly *increíble*. Why? You need?”

Harris gestures at Anselm. “Our plan for the assault requires a sniper, and he needs a scout.”

Chico cups his hands to his mouth. “Dyani! *Acquí!*”

I lean close to Rin. “Who is Chico?”

Rin is frowning. “I believe he’s with RMI—Raze Mercenary Industries. Another mercenary security firm. Competitors on the face of it, but A1S has worked with them a lot over the years, when the situation requires it.”

I nod. “Got it.”

A slender young woman trots over; she has a rifle strapped to her back, beneath a bulging rucksack. She’s young, probably barely even twenty-one, and appears Native American. She’s pretty, and her eyes are serious and glint with intelligence and calculated cunning. “Yeah?”

Chico indicates Anselm. “I am assigning you to him. You are support and scout, what he needs, you do.”

The young woman looks at Anselm, and her eyes grow wide. “You are The Ghost.”

Anselm nods. “I am.”

“It is my honor to work with you, sir. My father was Mato—he knew you, he spoke of you to me when I was very young.”

Anselm frowns. “Mato. A good man. A hell of a sniper.” He sighs heavily. “His death angered me. It was unnecessary and avoidable. I tried to save him, I hope you know this. A good man. He did not deserve to die in such a way.”

Dyani nods. “His best friends told me the story, when I was old enough, when I joined the Marines. Jackson and Shaka—they told me how you went after him. You took out twenty men on your own, trying to save him.”

“There were too many. His superiors had abandoned him, and by the time

Jackson and Shaka knew what was happening, they were cut off from him. It was a bad, bad situation. Poor leadership, poor judgment, and your father paid the price. He sold his life dearly, though.”

Anselm leans his rifle against the table and slings his rucksack off his shoulder, props it on the table, and rummages in it. After digging to the very bottom, he comes up with a knife—a hunting knife, the sheath handmade leather, elaborately tooled and inlaid with exquisite, elaborate beadwork. The handle is antler. He holds the knife in both hands, reverently.

“I fought my way to his body,” Anselm says. “I recovered this. Nothing else he carried was of any value, mainly because it was an off-book operation. He wasn’t even wearing his dog tags. But this, he never went anywhere without. I did not know he had a daughter, or I would have found you and given it to you years ago.”

She doesn’t reach out to take the knife, but despite her obvious efforts to appear stoic and unmoved, it is clear she’s very emotional. “Jackson told me he had the knife when they shipped out for the op, but by the time they got to him, it was gone. They assumed the enemy had taken it.”

Anselm extends it to her. “I have carried it with me every single day since that one. He believed it was great medicine.”

“He was a traditionalist,” Dyani says, finally taking the knife. “He believed in the old ways. My uncles taught me the old ways, the way my ancestors hunted. I became a sniper to honor my father.” She withdraws the knife from the sheath—the blade is eight inches long, with a clipped point. “This knife was my great-great-grandfather’s, the sheath made by his mother, my great-great-great-grandmother, as a gift when he came into manhood.” She swallows hard. “I am thankful to have it back.”

Anselm shakes his head. “I am glad it is back where it belongs, with his family.” He shoulders his pack and rifle. “Come. We must prepare. I will tell you stories of your father’s exploits.”

Harris and Chico both watch the unlikely pair walk away together, and Harris glances at Chico. “Did you know about that connection?”

Chico shrugs. “I do not know anything about Dyani except that Raze recruited her before she could sign on with the Recons. She passed the tests easily, and scored higher on the fieldcraft and accuracy tests than anyone in something like twenty years. She is truly, truly remarkable.”

“Wouldn’t think it, to look at her. So skinny I’d wonder if she could do a single pull-up,” Puck remarks.

Chico snorts. “Do not let her appearance fool you, *amigo*. She’s strong, quick, and has a killer instinct like no one I’ve met since Cuddy herself. And even Cuddy won’t go all-out hand-to-hand sparring with Dyani.”

Everyone looks at Chico in shock when he says this. Lear, sitting on a crate a few feet away, typing swiftly, speaks without looking up. “Cuddy’s told me about Dyani. Says she’s the best sniper she’s ever seen.” A pause, keys clacking rapid-fire. “She said the only person on the planet who could touch Dyani’s skill with a rifle is Anselm himself, and the only reason Anselm would win is simply due to experience.”

“Well that’s the scariest thing I’ve ever fucking heard,” Puck says. “And I’m glad she’s on our side.”

Harris glances at me, then. “I know you’re going to hate this, Apollo, but I’m not sure you should come.”

I stare back at him belligerently. “You’ll have to hog-tie and sedate me to keep me back, Harris. I’m not leaving Rin’s side for anything.”

She leans against me. “It’s okay, baby.” She gazes up at me. “I’ll be safe.”

I shake my head, and I know my eyes spark with anger at the mere suggestion. “I know that. I will not sit idly by while everyone else assumes the risk. Spaulding is *my* enemy. This is *my* problem.” I indicate my wounded arm. “I’ve made it this far with the damn thing. I will not let it slow me down now.”

Harris pinches the bridge of his nose. “Figured as much, but I had to try. At least let Lucas check you out, huh?”

I shrug. “Fine. I wouldn’t mind some local anesthetic, or at least some aspirin.”

Harris whistles again. “Lucas!”

A middle-aged man strides over—salt-and-pepper goatee, a trim, tight figure, eyes that have seen the worst the world has to offer. “Sir.”

Harris waves at me. “This is Apollo. Fix him up the best you can and give him something to take the edge off the pain without compromising his focus.”

“Certainly, sir.” Lucas gestures for me to follow him. “This way, sir.”

Fifteen minutes later, my wound has been cleaned with professional-grade antiseptic and bandaged more thoroughly, and a field sling applied to keep my arm immobilized against my chest. I take some NSAIDs and am given a small packet to carry with me if I need more—I’ve become so

accustomed to the constant throb and pulse of pain since I was shot that when the NSAIDs kick in and the pain dulls, it's a bizarre, almost disorienting relief.

As I'm being treated, a helicopter lifts off and tilts across the water, flying almost recklessly low and fast. Rin sits beside me, gestures at the departing helo. "Anselm and Dyani. I guess there's a jet waiting for them in Malta, which will take them to an airfield outside Tehran, and from there, another helicopter to the insertion point."

"And the rest of us?" I ask.

She indicates the cargo plane. "That's us. We take off in a few hours."

I indicate the activity around us. "So then what's all this?"

She shrugs. "I had thought they were *unloading*, but I guess it's the opposite. The cargo plane was empty when it got here, flown by Uncle Harry with only the Original Six on board. The rest of the men and the gear arrived separately—this was the rendezvous point not just for us to hook up with Dad and the guys, but for Uncle Harry's various 'assets' around the world to connect in as well, both men and gear. A cargo plane full of military gear landing on the coast of Africa might attract unwanted attention, should they be spotted or searched by local authorities. But an empty cargo plane, with just some people on board? Less suspicious, easier to pay someone to look the other way than what could be construed as threatening. So now that everyone has rendezvoused, they're loading up and we're heading out. I guess the plan was to connect all the various players, load up, and be gone as quickly as possible, before anyone notices. So far, so good."

I watch, and realize like Rin, I'd mistaken the direction of the activity—crates and goods were going *on* to the plane, not *off*. I'd been so relieved simply to have gotten Corinna to something like safety that I'd not really noticed. I also notice that the camouflage everyone is wearing is forest-type, not desert—they knew ahead of time we were going to Iran and the forest, rather than staying here.

She leans against me, and I wrap my arm around her, tucking her head against my shoulder. "I've got to get mean again," she murmurs. "It's too easy to feel all soft and gooey and safe, being with Dad and the uncles. But it's not over."

"Almost, my love," I say. "One more phase of the whole thing and then it's over."

"You think he's really, like, dug in, up there?"

I nod. “Yeah, it’s probably safest to assume he is. The few times I did business with him, I was aware he was always operating on several levels at once. He’d be working a deal with me, but he’d have something else going on somewhere else, something totally different. When I worked with him, he presented himself as being primarily into running guns and drugs. His big thing was facilitating the movement of high-value goods. He didn’t procure the drugs or guns, or distribute them—he specialized in moving them. But I guess all that was a front for his real focus, the girls. But being a movement specialist means he has contacts and resources all over the world, and I know he especially was infamous even in that circle of people for being able to get footholds in places most Westerners couldn’t—Georgia, Turkmenistan, Iran, places like that.” I watch as the last few stacks of crates vanish into the cargo hold. “He may be on the ropes and nearly broke, but I would put good money on the fact that he’s always had this hideout in Iran ready as backup, in case things really went to shit for him. He’ll have men there, guns, ammunition, supplies. This will not be an easy assault. Not like the fortress. He wasn’t ready for that. He’ll be ready for this.”

Rin gestures at the cargo plane. “I don’t see how he can be ready for that. This isn’t a single security firm with a handful of wannabe badasses. Harris has my dad’s wealth behind him, plus his own, and for this, he’s also got RMI on his side. And RMI can field a hell of a lot of firepower. I would guess that the twelve guys Raze sent was just the tip of the spear. This isn’t going to be some half-ass attempt to shoot ’em up and hope they surrender. This is going to be a precisely executed military-style operation meant to take Spaulding down—and they’re not going to leave so much as two stones left standing.” She indicates the planning table, where her father, Harris, and the others are still conferring. “For every plan and contingency they discuss there, I guarantee Uncle Harry has half a dozen more backups and alternates and just-in-case scenarios ready as well that he won’t even tell you about.”

“So, Spaulding won’t get away, is what you’re saying.”

She shakes her head against my shoulder. “Not a chance.”

“He won’t go down easy,” I say.

She smirks up at me. “Maybe not, but I do.”

I snicker under my breath. “You’re going to tease me like that when we won’t have anything like privacy for who knows how long?”

She just shrugs. “You never know. Maybe we can sneak something in.”

I laugh. “Dirty girl.”

She nuzzles against me again, her voice dropped so low I can barely hear her. “I just...I don’t want to go back to being that version of me from the cellblocks. I’d rather snuggle up to you and think about having your big, hard cock in my mouth.”

I groan and shift as her words take effect. “Fuck, Rin.”

She laughs. “I know. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to get you excited when I can’t do anything about it.” She puts her lips to my ear, voice dropping even further. “When this is all over, I’m going to tie you to our bed and suck you off so many times you’ll beg me to fuck you. And when I do fuck you, finally, it’s going to be bare and I’ll be off birth control. I missed my dose, you know. So when I fuck you, you’re going to put a baby inside me. I want to be barefoot and pregnant when you make me your wife. Call me crazy or backwards or whatever, but that’s all I can think about.” She flicks her tongue in my ear. “I’m still dripping your cum from the last time, you know.”

I groan, head dropping, chest aching with love and my cock throbbing with need. “Rin, fuck—stop. Please, I beg you, have mercy on me. You can’t talk to me like that when I’ve got nowhere to take you.”

She bites my earlobe, letting it go. “Just giving you incentive to make sure you make it through this operation.”

“Spending the rest of my life making you happy and learning to be a good enough man to deserve the incredible woman that you are, Corinna? That’s incentive enough.” I laugh, a growling huff. “But knowing I’m putting our child in your womb...my god. That’s enough to turn me into a rabid monster.”

She giggles. “Save the rabid monster, my love. Keep him bottled up for me.” She pats my cock where it swells against the zipper. “And when we’re finally *home—alone*? Let him out and give it to me.”

I grip her wrist and pull it away. “Corinna, if you touch me again, you’ll embarrass me.”

She makes a show of looking around. “There’s really nowhere we could sneak off to, is there? Dammit.”

I laugh. “Save it, Corinna. Let’s get this over with, and then we can lock ourselves in our penthouse and not come out for a week.”

She rolls away from me and stands up. “A week? I’ll be just getting started on you after a week, Apollo. You don’t even know.”

I remain seated, trying to will my erection away. “I know you have always had a rather active libido, but this seems like...a lot...even for you.”

She yanks her hair of the messy bun and finger combs it. “I know. It’s something about this whole thing. The adrenaline is making me horny, for one thing. But it’s way more than that.” She turns to face me, head angled down with her eyes unfocused as she braids her hair. “You telling me you love me. You proposing to me. You talking about our future—I know you didn’t say it in so many words, but when you were talking about Yelena and how bonding with her made you think, I sort of assumed you meant it made you think about us having kids of our own.” She finishes braiding her hair, twists the long, thick braid into a tightly coiled knot and ties it off. “And the thought of us having a baby together makes me *especially* horny. So adrenaline horny plus I-want-to-have-your-babies horny plus we usually have sex every day or very nearly and I’m just not getting enough of your cock and I’m going through some kind of withdrawal...it all equals a ridiculous, out of control level of horniness.”

I finally have something like control over my dick, and I stand up, take her arms in my hands. “Corinna, my one true love...when this is over and we can go home, I swear to you, I will spend every waking moment sating your needs.” I pull her closer, gazing down at her with promise in my eyes. “I will make you come so many times you’ll beg me to stop. I’ll lay down and put myself at your mercy for as long as you need, and I’ll let you do anything you want, for as long as you want. I’ll fuck you and I’ll make love to you, and I’ll put our child inside you.”

Puck walks up as I’m saying this, and his eyes go wide. “Well, I sure walked up at the wrong moment of this conversation.” He scratches his nose with that stump of his forefinger. “Time to dust off, kids. It’s a long-ass flight to Baku.”

“Baku?” Corinna and I ask in unison.

“Yep, Baku. Capital of Azerbaijan. It’s right on the Caspian Sea, and conveniently for us, only two hundred and seventy-some miles across the Caspian from our target. Harris has people meeting us there with helos. We’ll load out into helos in Baku, coordinate our timing, and hit Spaulding all at once from a dozen different directions. I guess when Harris put out word that we were going after Spaulding, a bunch of nasty characters volunteered for the assault. Our guy’s got enemies.” He pulls the plug of cigar from his teeth, regards the chewed-up end of it, peels a piece of tobacco from his lip, and replaces the cigar between his teeth. “And while these dudes may otherwise be the kind of people we’d avoid at least, if not go after, in this case they’re

the enemy of our enemy, which makes them temporary friends. Also, money talks.”

Alexei, standing on the ramp of the cargo plane, whistles sharply, rotating his hand in the air over his head—the last SUV is rumbling up the ramp past him.

Puck turns away. “Come on, kids. That’s our cue.”

“What are the Hummers for?” I ask.

Puck chuckles. “Humvee, you mean,” he corrects. “A hummer is either a civilian knock-off, or something nice your girl does for you when you make her happy. *That*—” he points at the vehicle. “Is a Humvee.”

I snort. “Fine. Humvee, then.”

“They’re for support,” Puck answers. “Harris isn’t taking any chances. He hired out a few Chinooks for this. We’re going in loaded for bear. That fucker won’t know what hit him.”

“What if he escapes like he did at the fortress?” Rin asks.

Puck’s grin is wicked. “Aww, c’mon now, Rinna. You know damn well your uncle Harry can field fighter jets, and so can our buddy Johnny Raze. Trust me, escape by air won’t be possible either.”

“Why don’t the fighters just hit the stronghold with rockets or missiles or something, in that case?” I ask.

Puck stomps up the ramp. “Because when you’ve got an enemy like Spaulding, you need to see the body. You put the bullet in his fuckin’ skull yourself.”

The interior of the cargo plane is full, now. Men buckle into the jump seats along the walls, and we take our seats near Mr. Roth and Duke.

“I know all of us want to put a bullet in his head,” I say. “But if we can pick, I’d like first shot.”

Duke, on my right, clutches the straps of the five-point belt, eyes closed. “First priority is the kill shot, no matter who takes it.” He opens his eyes briefly and looks at me. “But we all know what you went through, what our girl Rinny went through. And so yeah, if we can secure the kill shot for one of you two, we’ll make it happen.”

I sigh, nodding. “As long as I can look at his dead, sightless eyes and know he’s dead, at the end of the day, I suppose it does not matter whose finger pulls the trigger.”

“Attaboy,” Duke says, eyes closed once more. “Eyes on the prize.”

I look at Rin when he says this. “My eyes will never leave the prize.”

Roth's eyes are on me—I feel them. He and I are going to have a conversation, soon.

ALAMUT VALLEY; SPAULDING'S DEMISE

Despite the anticipation and the adrenaline of knowing we're going to take out Spaulding once and for all, the flight from Tunis to Baku is long and boring, and I'm exhausted. I fall asleep soon after takeoff, as a matter of fact, even though the jump seats are hard and small and uncomfortable and the drone of the four massive engines and their propellers is deafening. I'm able to scrunch down far enough that I can rest my head on Apollo's shoulder, and before I know it, I'm nodding off.

At some point, I rouse, feeling the sluggish disorientation of having slept at least a few hours. Apollo's head is leaning on mine—I can just barely make out his heavy, slow breathing. On the other side of me, Dad is awake, a large, bulky phone pressed to his ear—a specially encrypted satellite phone. He's talking to Mom, his hand cupped around the bottom end near his mouth, eyes closed. He sees me awake, and gestures at the phone, mouthing *Talk to Mom? With his expression making it a question.*

I nod, accepting the phone. I sit upright, and Apollo's head slumps to my shoulder. I cup around my mouth and the microphone in an attempt to muffle some of the background drone.

"Hi, Mom."

"Rin, my baby. Are you okay?"

"That's a relative term, I think. I'm uninjured, and so far, coping all right. I'll have bad dreams and I'll need a therapist, probably, but...overall, yeah, I'm okay."

"And Apollo? I heard he was shot. That's all I could get out of Layla. She's still salty that she's not on that op with you guys. But I need her here. I need her support, you know?"

“He was shot. Spaulding shot him in the left elbow while he was in custody, as a warning of sorts. He’ll need surgery and PT, and I doubt he’ll use it the same way again, but he’ll be fine.”

“There’s something you’re not telling me.”

I sigh. “Did Dad spill the beans?”

The silence on the other end is sharp. “No, he didn’t. What is there to spill the beans about, Corinna?”

I laugh. “Oh, well, this isn’t how I wanted to tell you, but Apollo proposed to me.”

A pleased laugh. “He did?” I can almost hear the thoughtful frown, then. “Wait, while you guys are, like, in the middle of this whole thing with what’s his name?”

“Yeah. It was...perfect.”

“How did he manage to hold on to a ring while he was a prisoner?”

“There’s no ring, not yet. It was a very...nontraditional proposal. But it was perfect for us, and I’m happy.”

“That’s all that matters, that you’re happy.” A pause. “He’s a good man. He had kind of a rough start, but he made good. You guys are good for each other.”

“I think so, too.”

“So, when’s the wedding?”

I laugh. “I don’t know. We haven’t had time to get that far. But probably very soon. It’ll be super small, just the general A1S family. I want to have it on the island, though, if that’s okay with you guys.” Dad is listening, so I glance at him as I say this.

He just smiles and pats my knee.

“Of course. I’d be upset if you didn’t have it on the island, honestly. Can I help you plan it?”

“Mom, there’s not going to be anything to plan. We’re going to stand on the beach and say some vows, and then break out Dad’s *really* good whiskey.”

Mom tsks. “Honey, please. You have to let me have a little fun with this.” A muffled scuffling on the other end.

“Rin, baby girl, this is your Auntie Lay-Lay.” Her voice is chipper and threatening all at once. “You can keep it small and simple and still let your mother and I have a little fun. It’s not every day we have the first wedding in the family, you know.”

“Is Bryn still dating that musician?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“Yes, she is.” Layla sighs. “I hate him.”

“Layla!” I laugh. “When I talked to her a few weeks ago, she was happy, she was like, he’s so great.”

“He’s so fucking great that I never see my baby girl. She’s always off with *him* on another whirlwind adventure to somewhere amazing. I swear, he gets gigs in the coolest places. Right now, he’s performing in some exclusive club in the Swiss Alps that you can only get to by some sort of private cable car? I don’t know. I thought I was cool, but then Bryn started dating Zero.”

I cackle. “Zero? His name is Zero? My talk with her was superfast.”

“No, his name is something long and complicated and European. Luis Alfonso...MacGregor...shit, what’s next? Konstantine...Zeronsky. I think that’s it. His family is this big crazy Spanish-Irish-Ukrainian...thing. There’s a million of them and they all speak a dozen languages all at once, but the point is his last name is Zeronsky, and he’s just always gone by Zero. That’s his stage name, too, Zero.”

I laugh. “I can’t wait to meet them all.”

“Well, if you invite one of them, you invite them all, so just be warned, if you’re planning on keeping this wedding of yours small and intimate. I invited Zero’s parents to the Keys so we could meet them and fifteen people showed up, I shit you not. It was a blast.”

“Wait, hold on—they’re at the parents meeting each other stage already?” I ask. “When I talked to Bryn she didn’t act like it was *that* serious.”

A hesitant sigh. “You were all stressed out about the upcoming launch, sweetie. She didn’t want to bother you with her boring love life.”

I groan. “That makes me a shitty best friend, Auntie Lay-Lay.” I like this—the boring, normal family gossip; I can almost pretend I’m not on the way to kill a despotic kingpin.

“No, she understands,” Layla says. “You were launching billions of dollars’ worth of rocket and supplies to a first-of-its-kind orbital construction station. Her being serious enough with her boyfriend that Nick and I met Zero’s parents was not worth taking your focus away for.”

“I guess. But once this whole shitshow is over, she and I need some time together.”

“You’ll have to nail her down, and good luck with that. Those two take globetrotting power couple to a whole new level.”

I laugh. “Well, if anyone can do it, I can. And I don’t have to nail her

down, I can just figure out where she's going to be and show up. Perks of being who I am, you know."

Dad taps my knee, then his wrist.

"I think I have to go, Auntie."

"Yeah, these encrypted sat phones aren't really intended for family catch-up gossip." Her voice goes gruff, mimicking Uncle Harry. "Encrypted conversations should be short and to the point, woman. None of your running at the mouth."

"I swear, if you say one word about how he then threatened to fill your mouth, I'm going to be really pissed off."

She cackles. "You said it, not me. Hey, your mom wants to say goodbye."

"Hi, sweetie, I just wanted to tell you I love you, and be careful, okay? When in doubt, let the men do the dirty work. It's what they do and what they're good at."

"Would *you* sit around let the men do the dirty work of taking out your man's mortal enemy?"

"Hell no. I'd be first in line to shoot him."

"Exactly."

A sigh. "Just be careful."

"I will."

"Give me back to my husband."

"Bye, Mom. Love you."

Dad takes the phone from me and spends another minute or two talking to Mom.

An intercom crackles overhead, and Uncle Harry's voice echoes over the roar of the engines. "Making our approach for landing. Wake up and sit tight."

Dad ends the call and the phone vanishes into a rucksack clipped to webbing on the wall nearby. Apollo rouses, blinking awake, stretching. Duke is immediately and fully awake as if he'd never been asleep, and the other men around us are the same—accustomed to sleeping when they can and coming alert instantly.

There's the sensation of descent, my stomach lifting, lurching, and then a kind of softer, slower silence, the roar of the engines lowering. Another few minutes of what feels and sounds like maneuvering, accompanied by a pronounced rocking, and then there's a lurch and a steadying.

"Open cargo bay," comes the command from the cockpit.

Duke is the first one out of his seat, jogging to the end of the bay and slapping a button that sends the bay door to lowering itself with a mechanical whine. Daylight streams into the bay, illuminating the rest of us as we stretch tight muscles. I hear the engines still powering down, the propellers slowing. I hear other rotors—helicopters. Voices.

Descending the ramp, I find us on a narrow spit of land in the middle of a choppy blue sea. There's a stiff, cold wind, and a decided chill in the air. The spit angles away and vanishes in the distance—I can just barely make out what might be a larger mass of land way, way in the distance, looking more like a faint blue haze than anything.

Waves crash ceaselessly and noisily. There are at least a dozen helicopters in a long row along the beach, ranging from battered but well-kept Gulf Storm era Blackhawks to Russian Mi-8s, as well as other models I don't recognize—there are three Chinooks, as well, among them.

“Quite an operation going on here,” Apollo says, beside me.

“No shit.” I spy Alexei nearby and go to him. “Where are we? I know Puck said...Baka? Buku? I don't remember.”

Alexei gestures at the blue haze in the distance. “Chilov. Is an island fifty kilometers from Baku, Azerbaijan. We are on a faraway part of island from the people and the airfields and oil fields. Is like your Hawaii or Alaska, with big island and other parts not so big, far away, in the ocean. Here, is no eyes to see, and there is moneys paid to make sure no one is look for you, no one sees us come, no one sees us go. Pay enough money, someone is always agree to look another way.”

Apollo gestures at the helicopters. “And those? Who are they all?”

Men come and go from the helos, dressed in a wide variety of outfits, from quasi-military to traditional Arabic garb to Indian clothing to plain western blue jeans and T-shirts and ball caps.

“All people who are hating Spaulding as much as we do. He makes many enemy. When Harris calls his many friends to say we go after this shitbrain piece of *dick*, Spaulding, many have come forward to help be part of killing him.” Alexei points at the Chinooks. “These are for us.”

As we're speaking, three more helicopters arrive, flying in formation—and these are not support aircraft for carrying personnel, nor are they meant to confuse our numbers. These are for assault, bristling with rocket launchers and mini-guns and all sorts of deadly gear.

I can't help but laugh. “Apaches? Uncle Harry brought in fucking

Apaches?”

Alexie laughs with me. “Nyet, these are from Raze. Is good to have friends with big money and high connections, *da?*”

Apollo just watches as the trio lands at the end of the lineup. “This is going to be really something.” He looks at me. “How does someone even go about getting ahold of those? Much less the armaments for them? I dealt in arms, and I could not procure those.”

I just shake my head, laughing. “I have no fucking idea, Apollo. Between Daddy, Harris, and Raze, there’s an unholy shitload of money and connections. If you’re willing to pay enough, you can get anything...” I gesture at the Apaches. “Clearly.”

THE NEXT HOUR or so is a whirlwind of activity. The gear piled on the cargo plane is distributed among the Chinooks and a couple of the other personnel movers, while the SUVs are hooked up to be hauled by the Chinooks. Men are assigned to squads and fireteams, divided among the aircraft, and then there’s one more final briefing. It’s informal, all the men crouching near Uncle Harry, who has never looked so badass.

He’s in a black jumpsuit, a flight helmet under his arm, several sidearms holstered on his chest, wearing mirrored aviators and calf-high combat boots. Usually he just flies in whatever he feels like wearing—this is the first time I’ve seen him in actual flight officer gear.

The rest of the men are equally kitted out—this is no half-ass team of rookie mercs, this is a hand-picked outfit comprised of the most elite and battle-hardened warriors anywhere on the planet. In company such as this, Apollo and I are the odd ones out. I’m still in jeans and the T-shirt Apollo got me at the gas station, what feels like a millennia ago. Granted, in the process of getting ready for this briefing, I was given an armored vest and a combat helmet, as well as a full-size M-4 carbine; the pistol I’ve had since the fortress is holstered on one side of my vest, and my HK submachine gun is clipped on the other. So, all things considered, I feel more badass, simply by virtue of being geared properly. But still, the men around me have all seen far more combat than I have—in the case of my uncles and Alexei, decades more experience.

I can tell Apollo is considering similar feelings. “Fish out of water, huh?”
He snickers, nods. “More like a fish swimming with sharks.”

I elbow him. “Hey, we’re at least barracuda, right?”

Harris eyes us, a warning on his face as he begins his briefing. “All right gentlemen—and Rin. We all know what we’re here for—Richard Spaulding. He’s holed up in a mountain stronghold in Iran—we’ve gone over the plan at length, so I’m not going over it again, except in brief. Pilots, you know your routes. Chinook pilots, get as low as you can. Rin, Apollo—you’ve never been taught how to fast-rope or abseil from a helo, so you’ll be clipped to Duke and Thresh, respectively for the descent. Apollo, I’m sorry, I know it might be embarrassing, but that’s the way it has to happen. We can’t afford the risk, and you have one working arm.”

“Understood,” Apollo says. “No arguments here.”

“Great. Drivers, you’re working in tandem with the assault pilots, and you’ll have a small contingent of infantry. Your job is to clear the road and draw fire. Assault pilots—engage with care. There will be a *lot* of friendlies on the ground, so be sure of your targets. Infil teams—we’re going uphill, through the forest, with an unknown number of possible defenders and positions, with unknown combat capacity. In short, our intel as to what to expect on the ground is essentially nil. Point men, your heads have to be on a fucking swivel. Rearguard, you too.” Harris scans the group. “The rest of you pilots, just follow along and descend like you’re letting down troops. If you’ve got someone with you and you want to take some potshots at the stronghold, go for it. Just don’t get in our way. There *will* be air support in the form of some F-16s flying a holding pattern in case Spaulding manages to get away. But with the Apaches, I don’t see that happening.” Another pause. “Anselm and Dyani are out there somewhere, and even I don’t know their exact location, I just know when we reach the insertion zone, Lear as comms operator will patch them into us. Anselm is code name Ghost, and Dyani is code name Deerdancer; I don’t see this happening but I prepare for all eventualities—they’re both carrying smoke in case they get overrun. Ghost is yellow smoke and Deerdancer is red. Pilots, if you get that code, pop smoke yellow or red, or you see it, you respond and extract at all costs.”

There are assents all around, and Harris slaps his helmet on.

“Well, then. If there are no questions, let’s go get this asshole.”

THERE'S NOT much to see, on the inside of the Chinook. It's a lot like the inside of the cargo plane, actually, just smaller and equally as noisy. Apollo is on one side of me, Duke on the other, and Thresh on the other side of Apollo; Thomas is with us, as well. The rest of our team is comprised of A1S members from the central HQ in Colorado and the training hub in Montana, so I don't know any of them. They're all former Special Forces, hardened, experienced—none of them are green or new or young, these are all men who have had the hesitation bled out of them, the resolve and instinct honed to a razor point.

The other members of the Original Six are divided among the other two Chinooks, each leading a fireteam, with a bonus six-man rearguard fire team in a Blackhawk led by Alexei.

We're flying what Duke calls snakeshit, or so low our downdraft will stir the leaves on the forest floor below us.

"Insertion point, sixty seconds," comes a voice in my ear—the pilot, on the local channel.

"Ready?" I hear Duke say both in my ear and beside me.

My pulse hammers. My mouth is dry, my hands shaking. I nod my head. "Nope."

Duke laughs. "You've got it, babe." He unhooks and stands up, and I do the same—around us, everyone is doing the same. "It'll be a quick drop to the drop to the ground. Once your feet touch, you crouch and wait for me—I'll unhook you and then we're weapons-free. Got it?"

My carbine is clipped to my vest diagonally. I'm having trouble breathing. "Got it."

"Show me your hands."

I hold out my hands—they're trembling like a leaf. "I can't make them stop."

"Fear and adrenaline is totally normal." He stands behind me and I feel him connecting us. "Did you hesitate, back in Tunis?"

I shake my head. "Not for split second."

"Then you'll be fine. You're blooded. The hardest part is past." He tugs, double-checks the connections. "You've undergone the trial by fire, Corinna. This is just nerves." He holds out his own hands—I detect the slightest of tremors; he clenches his fist and shakes it out. "See? I've been doing this shit since I was eighteen, and I still get the shakes before I drop. It's cool."

I nod. "Trial by fire and blood. This will be easy compared to the

fortress.”

A laugh. “That’s the spirit. Just keep your head down. Follow your instincts. If your gut tells you to hit the dirt, you fuckin’ do it.”

I feel the helo flare, hover, and then descend. Doors open, on the right and left sides near the front, and the rear. Ropes are connected. Beyond the doors, forest—pines a hundred feet tall and hundreds of years old each, towering and swaying. Daylight, blue and endless and hot. When did today begin? Where?

It’s all a blur. When, where, how, what time.

Duke moves us forward, and I’m compelled to move with him. Ahead of us, a soldier steps out and vanishes. I gulp as we reach the door—the trees are a handful of feet below the wheels, but the earth is far, far below. Shit, shit, shit.

“Tongue in, teeth together. Deep breath.” Duke, in my ear, his voice also rumbling against my chest. “Ready? Stepping out in three...two...one...”

My stomach lurches upward, and we’re zipping downward. Around me, Uncle Duke is a massive, comforting presence. Treetops suddenly replace blue sky, branches, trunks, and then I hear and feel his feet hit, mine an instant behind. The moment I feel ground under my feet, I crouch as instructed. The downdraft from the double rotors of the Chinook is powerful enough to bend the ancient trees around us.

I hear a buzzsaw somewhere—a minigun? Rotors are deafening, everywhere. Gunfire echoes.

Birds flap, escaping, cawing their displeasure.

Duke unclips us, and the ropes disappear upward. There’s a Humvee dangling from the belly of the Chinook—how did I miss that? The Chinook moves forward a few dozen feet, hovers again—the SUV is lowered, and there’s a thud of the wheels hitting dirt. Ropes and fasteners are unhooked in a flurry of practiced, concerted movements by six men, and then the giant helo is tilting away.

A bark of an engine catching, doors closing. I’m still catching my bearings, and the Humvee is gone in a skidding of tires and a slurry of dust.

“Let’s move.” Duke’s voice is calm and measured, but carries.

The sound of rotors is more distant, now. I hear the buzzsaw of the Apache’s minigun and wonder who or what is in the way of it. There’s an explosion, tremors of it shaking under our feet. Assault rifles chatter, answer.

A few booms and cracks—long-distance rifles, from Anselm and Dyani.

It's a hot zone, right from the get-go.

We're moving, Duke hauling me into a jog. I glance behind me—Thresh and Apollo are a couple paces behind, Thomas behind them; Thomas is in combat gear as well, his black skin sheened with sweat already, eyes hard and serious. This isn't his first insertion into a combat zone, I can tell.

Unexpectedly, the next several minutes are boring, yet physically demanding. The terrain is brutal. It's steep, densely treed, with a slippery carpet of pine needles underfoot, interspersed with mossy boulders and littered with the crisscrossed trunks of downed trees in varying states of decomposition. There is no straight line, no path.

Duke is point, his carbine looking like a child's toy against his massive frame. He has the butt tucked to his shoulder, the barrel angled slightly downward, at the ready. He jogs uphill easily, head swiveling, eyes scanning. I struggle to keep up. The rifle is suddenly heavier than it seemed.

There's another buzzsaw echo, another staccato burst of exchanged automatic fire—it's hard to tell which direction anything is coming from, echoing off the hillsides. Duke occasionally pauses, checks a compass dangling from a braided loop of paracord clipped to his vest; he checks it any time we have to go around a downed tree or cluster of boulders.

There's a burst of gunfire again—close. Loud. Something snicks through the trees overhead, and Duke holds up his closed fist, and then flattens his hand palm down, pressing his hand downward: *Halt, get down.*

I drop to a knee, snugging my carbine to my shoulder and checking the charging handle, the load, set it to burst, readying it for combat.

Duke turns, catches Thresh's eye, and there's a quick exchange of sign language between them. Thresh nods, and the two creep forward. Duke pauses to motion for the rest of us to stay where we are, pointing to his eyes and then a scanning motion.

A moment later, Duke and Thresh vanish around a bend and over a hill—there's a sudden racket, a flurry of burst-fire, a more frenzied return indicating a lack of trigger discipline. Abruptly, the gunfire stops, and Duke and Thresh return a moment later, waving for us to join them.

We reach a flat area, where the hillside evens off in a plateau, and here the trees also fade into a decent-sized clearing. We pause, crouched, Duke watching. It's silent, suddenly. The rotor thumping is distant. No gunfire. I'm sweating—it trickles down my spine, smears on my lip and the back of my neck, slides tickling down between my breasts. I'm thirsty. I haven't seen

anything but trees, yet I'm terrified.

Duke and Thresh again communicate in sign language, coming to some sort of agreement. The fireteams—Duke, me, and four nameless soldiers, and Thresh, Apollo, Thomas, and three others—split up and go around the clearing in both directions. We skirt wide around the clearing and approach the far side at an oblique angle. I'm behind Duke, the other men behind me, single file.

Something hot bites my cheek, and at the same moment, gunfire explodes to our right. I drop to my belly, rifle at the ready. Duke is firing, but I can't see what to aim at so I hold—my breath and my fire. Then I see something move a dozen yards through the trees, something not forest, the wrong color, the wrong shape. I draw bead on it, wait. *Be sure of your target*—I hear Sasha's voice in my head. There's a flash of muzzle burst from the shape, and an eye blink after the muzzle-flash, I squeeze my trigger for a three-round burst, the butt kicking hard, the noise deafening. My ears ring. I scan visually, but see nothing—wait, another smear of movement, higher up. I'm more sure of my target now, so I fire immediately. This time, I see my target lurch, topple. It's not even a human, just a smear of movement and burst of muzzle flash. My mind settles, the fear recedes. Duke shifts from one knee to a crouch and crab walks sideways behind a tree; there's another tree a few yards from my position, a thick pine—I scramble for it, flatten myself behind it. Duke catches my eye, motions for me to wait. Peers around the side of his tree—it's silent, for a moment.

I feel a bead of sweat make a million-mile, million-year journey from the tip of my chin, over my throat, and down my chest. Each thud of my heart in my ears is spaced by an eternity; the thud of my heartbeat and the ring from gunfire is all I hear.

I watch Duke, wait for a command.

He stands upright, rolls out keeping the tree covering most of his body, fires two bursts in quick succession, drops to one knee, fires twice more. Exchanges his magazine without looking, his sense of proprioception telling him where the partially depleted mag goes, where the new one is. Fires again. Then he's waving at me and jogging forward—I have to sprint to keep up, and god, am I not built for sprinting, especially not in all this gear. The vest bounces, the small sack with spare magazines on my back bounces, the HK bounces, the helmet bounces—my tits bounce, my ass bounces. It's all I can feel, the fifty different things bouncing. I hear the men behind me, boots

stomping, gear shuffling and thumping.

Duke halts with a controlled crash against a tree, sweating and huffing from the uphill run—where he’s merely huffing, I’m panting desperately, gagging.

A soldier halts beside me, puffing and sweating—he’s got a dark blond three-day shadow, startling blue eyes.

“Running...in...gear...sucks,” I gasp-whisper.

He hides a smirk. “Yes ma’am, it does.”

“Try doing it...as...a woman.” I suppress the urge to massage my aching chest. “I felt like my tits were going to bounce away without me.”

He scans me—it’s a professional scrutiny, no more. He does something to my helmet, and then tugs at the sides of my vest, the straps of my bag, clicks things together, ties other things off. “There. Your shit was loosey-goosey. Gotta keep it tight, ma’am.”

“Thanks.” I eye him. “What’s your name?”

“Murph, ma’am.”

“Hi, Murph. I’m Rin Roth.”

He nods. “I know, ma’am. I was part of the cleanup at the fort. What you did back there was some cold-ass Rambo shit.” His tone indicates that this is the highest respect he can give. “All of us who were there?” He indicates the other three men, close by, listening. “We’d follow you into hell itself, ma’am. That was truly badass.”

I don’t know what do with this statement. “I...um. Thanks?”

He just nods, then juts his chin at Duke—he and Thresh have been conferring again, indicating the terrain ahead and looking at compasses and folded maps and small handheld devices. I hadn’t realized we’d connected with the others. Murph’s direction of my attention to Duke was to indicate we were about to move out again.

I spy Apollo, winded like I am, sweating, bad arm slung tight against the armored vest he’s wearing; he’s carrying a pistol in hand, a new one with an extended magazine. He smiles at me but remains in position in Thresh’s shadow. It was understood when fireteams were assigned that as the least experienced and least trained members of the team, Apollo and I would be the shadows of our respective guardians, and that under no circumstances were we to alter this arrangement.

We’re moving again, hauling ass uphill once more, at a jog now instead of a sprint—Murph’s adjustments to my gear has done wonders; the only

things bouncing now are the parts of me that are gonna bounce anyway, and that's tolerable. The gear jostling out of time was what was throwing me off. We duck between trees and scramble over downed giants and under them, angling always in the same direction up the mountainside. There's occasional gunfire in what sounds like half a dozen different directions, sporadic and shifting and echoing.

Sweat burns in my eyes, and my muscles ache. My legs are on fire. Everything hurts. I'm not in the kind of peak physical conditioning required to make easy work of this—and even the hardened soldiers like Murph are panting and sweating.

Abruptly, we come to a halt at a clearing—over Duke's shoulder, the terrain falls away in a steep hillside. I edge closer to Duke, and realize we've closed in on our target.

“Ho...leeeeeee....*shit*,” I hear Murph mutter beside me. “We're assaulting *that*?”

My heart drops out of my chest.

The stronghold is built in the side of a cliff-face, approachable from two directions only. Above, solid mountain stone outcropping. Below, a precipitous drop. The mountain rolls away to either side, but the actual approaches are going to be well-covered.

I see movement on the road approaching the stronghold—a Humvee. To my right, down below and far in the distance, the Apaches approach low and fast, skimming the tree line toward the cliff-face; as I watch, they zip closer, the noise of their rotors dopplering confusingly. Muzzles flash from the stronghold, but the shots are wasted.

The Apaches slow their approach and lift upward, rising vertically—in unison, their miniguns blaze, the distinctive rip-saw buzz echoing in triplicate. Their fire is concentrated on the hillside just above the entrances to the stronghold on either side and the ridge just above—tracers slash across the sky from those locations, returning fire, missing widely. Then, in a searing crescendo, the three Apaches launch salvos of rockets which concuss against the mountainside in a cloud of debris and a soaring fireball, chunks of mountain flying. When the dust settles, the three placements are silent.

“Take that up the ass, motherfuckers,” Murph mutters. “Never had Apache support on a stealth infil before.”

“Not sure it's a stealth infil anymore,” one of the others says, his voice containing a distinct Southern twang. “I think they know we're here.”

“Fuck yeah they know,” Duke says. “Okay, that was our signal. We’ll still face heavy fire on the approach, but those were the emplacements we were worried about. Satellite imagery showed them being built, but we had no idea what they’d put in.”

I hear the heavy chainsaw rattle of a .50-cal, and something pinging loudly.

“Gotta move,” Duke snaps. “Double-time. The boys in the Humvee need us on their asses—they’re suppressing for our approach.”

He’s gone, then, and I’m following at a dead sprint. Thick pine trunks whip past, pine needles are soft and slippery underfoot, threatening my footfalls at each step. Somehow I keep my feet. I hear Murph behind me. I can’t spare a thought or a look for Apollo—he’s somewhere close. Gunfire echoes—directionless, constant now.

How long can you keep up a flat-out run? I manage longer than I’d thought I was capable. My legs just keep pumping, the rifle clamped in aching hands. Then the Humvee is in front of me, the man behind the .50-cal sweeping, picking targets, firing.

Muzzles flash in the near-distance. Duke shoves me behind the Humvee and hunches behind me. Ducks out around it, fires.

Fuck the hiding. I lean out the other way and spot a muzzle-flash in the huge, arching, stone-block doorway. I send a burst at it. Slide back behind the now-moving Humvee.

The .50-cal is silent, for the moment. We’re jogging behind the SUV in a double line. I gasp for breath. Apollo is beside me, dashing sweat from his eyes with the back of his wrist.

He spares me a look, finds a smile for me. “Fancy meeting you here.”

I snicker despite the circumstances. “Jolly good show we’re having, eh?”

Duke, ahead of me, shoots me a dirty look, but I still notice a hint of a smile behind it. “That was the easy part.” He points at the stronghold ahead of us. “Now comes the real fun.”

It’s massive, towering, seeming carved directly from the rock face itself. I can see the lines where giant blocks are joined. In some places, the stone is crumbling with the weight of unbelievable age. The sense of time here is oppressive. This is an ancient place, which has seen a river of bloodshed. I can feel it, even now, despite the chaos and fear and turmoil.

“What the hell is this place, Duke?” I ask, voice pitched low; we’re walking, now, following the Humvee, watching for an attack from the sides,

from the slit windows up high.

“A castle built by Hassan Sabbah, or the group he founded. They’re all over this valley, the Alamut valley. The castle of Alamut itself is way, way up there—” he points at a peak in the distance behind us. “That one is the most famous. But he built a whole bunch more all over the valley. Most are ruins. This one I don’t think most folks knew about, which is why Spaulding wanted it—it was somewhat intact, and it’s hard to get to, and little known.”

“And who is Hassan...whoever?”

Duke glances at me. “Established a group called the Hashishans—fearless warriors who would get high on hashish and kill political rivals of Hassan. Hashishan became our word ‘assassin.’ This was probably built around eleven hundred or so.”

I marvel, despite myself. “No shit.”

“History lesson’s gotta wait.” He drops into a crouch as the Humvee crunches to a halt.

We’re a few yards from the massive arched entryway, now. Dust skirls in the shadows beyond the arch. The other entryway opposite is a distant oval of light. Nothing moves.

There’s no sound, except our breathing, and the rumble of the Humvee.

Tires crunch, and we move forward, under the arch—moss coats the underside of the arch, which spans some twenty feet overhead. Once through, light dims. Shadows tilt as our movement sends the dust dancing. Solid rock overhead.

Duke does something to my rifle—attaching a flashlight, which he flicks on. A dozen or so yards of the tunnel, and then another doorway. Flashlights bounce toward us from the other side, closing in.

My earpiece crackles—I startle, forgetting it was there. “This is Deerdancer,” comes a soft female voice. “Contact, on the ridge above your position.”

“We’re all inside the target, Deerdancer,” comes Harris’s voice. “Engage at will.”

“Weapons free, confirmed.”

There’s a distant *CRACK*, funneled to us by the entryway. Another, and another.

“They are making for an entrance into the castle from the hill,” comes Anselm’s voice. “They are coming from a tunnel in the ridge. Deerdancer, you take the entrance, I’ll take the exit.”

“Understood.”

BOOOM! Anselm’s massive Barrett.

We’re still moving—the doorway here is equally enormous, as if built for giants. There was a door, in ages past, but it’s long since crumbled to dust.

BOOOM!

CRACK!

It’s a rolling of thunder and cracking of lightning, then, as Anselm and Dyani wreak havoc on the reinforcements above.

Through the doorway, then. Our flashlights illuminate in narrow, small spears a gigantic space. Columns fifty feet high, missing chunks here and there. Flagstones underfoot. I kick something—an arrowhead, with a chunk of wood still attached. My beam swipes across a skull; cobwebs cover it.

This feels like Khazad-dûm, from *Lord of the Rings*.

A long, long hall. No sound but our footsteps.

Through another doorway, and here the way splits, left and right, up a steep, curving flight of stairs. We split, and climb. I look over my shoulder and catch a glimpse of Dad, carrying a carbine like the rest of us, crouched and moving with slinky grace, as if he’s done this before too.

Then they’re around the bend and out of sight, and I have to focus on the way ahead.

My heartbeat feels loud in my ears, pounding. Now, with nerves rather than exertion.

Duke unhooks something from his pack and hands it back to me without looking—a canteen. I take a sip, rinse my mouth and swallow, take another, hand it back.

I can think more clearly, now, somehow.

The staircase gives way to a long narrow hallway. To the right, slits, and a view of the valley and the approach we just came from. Several dead bodies are slumped together here—their foreheads are holed, the back of their heads gone—the sniper shots heard at the beginning of the assault. There are SAWs, here, huge machine guns on bipods. They would have torn us to pieces, if not for Anselm and Dyani.

A wide opening on our left. Duke angles for it, flashlight sweeping low.

Chaos explodes all at once—gunfire erupts, Duke grunts in pain and throws himself to the side, firing as he does so. I hit the floor on my knee, shooting at the opening, meaning to suppress. Something moves beside me, and then Murph is there, in front of me. I hear something hit, hard, three

times—*thwackthackthack*, and he staggers backward. His rifle speaks in bursts; he braces one leg backward, as if lifting up under a great weight.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I hear myself saying. “No.”

He drops to a knee, and I grab him, haul him parallel to the doorway. He weighs a thousand pounds and I’m weak as a kitten, it feels like. He staggers with me, and then someone else is helping. I don’t know his name.

“I got him,” the man says—the southern boy: *Ahhh gowt ‘ih-uh-mm.* “Y’all right, Murph?”

“I’m good, Dutchie,” Murph gasps. “Vest stopped it. Just...fuck. Can’t breathe. Need a minute.”

Dutchie, the southern boy, eyes me—he’s a shape in the darkness, whites of his eyes, teeth, body odor. “Git with the others. G’on. Ol’ Murph-boy’ll right as rain in no time.”

I jog away, realizing with a drop of my gut that Murph saw the threat and stepped in front of me. The bullets were at chest height for him—they would have smashed through my head.

This isn’t like the fortress at all.

Duke is at an intersection. “Murph?” he asks, not looking at me.

“Took three to the vest,” I say. “Says it stopped them, and he needs to catch his breath. Dutchie is with him.”

A nod.

“Is...was he lying, Duke? Is he hurt?”

Duke shakes his head. “Murph doesn’t lie, not ever. He probably has cracked ribs. He’s not going to die.” Duke glances at me quickly. “Focus.”

Two more soldiers are with us—I turn and look at them. One is Black, the other is white. Italian or Greek, perhaps.

“What are your names?” I ask.

“Dyson, ma’am,” the Black man says.

“Juice, ma’am,” the other answers. “Giuseppe. Juice.”

“Dyson and Juice.”

Duke nods at me, not sure why. He points at the intersection—we’re stopped around the corner. “Nest around there.”

“Where are the others?” I ask.

“Hallway split back there.” Duke points back where Murph and Dutchie are. “They’re checking it out.”

I hear gunfire then, muffled by multiple echoes.

“What do we do?” I ask.

Duke plucks something from his chest, a metal cylinder. “This.” He points at the corner. “Duck and cover, babe.”

I turn away and cover my ears. A moment later there’s a blinding flash and a deafening **BANG!** I’m pulled into motion, and I bring my rifle up, focusing. Duke is ahead and to my left, the other two behind me. Duke is firing—I can’t see. My flashlight hits a face—swarthy, acne-scarred, bearded—and I fire in surprise. It vanishes. Something burns past my ear, and I duck; my flashlight hits another something—an arm, a hand, a gun. My rifle kicks. Behind me, Juice and Dyson are in motion, swarming to either side of me, moving with the grace and speed of professionals. Around another corner before I can catch up, following Duke, who’s always first. Gunfire. Rattling, chattering, echoing. My ears ring. I round the corner and it’s over.

Everything is dark. The floor is crumbling underfoot. I see a pile of bodies, four or five. Juice is digging a bandage from his rucksack and winding it around Dyson’s arm.

Dyson’s face, nearly invisible in the darkness, splits into a white grin. “Just creased me, ma’am. No worries.”

“We’re nearly there, I think,” Duke says. His voice is tight.

I move up beside him. “You okay?”

He indicates the top of his left shoulder with a jerk of his thumb. “Nicked me good. It’s a seeper, but I’ll be fine.”

“Let me see.”

He snorts. “Babe, been gettin’ shot at since I was nearly too damn young to shave. I know when I’m good, and I’m good.” He looks down at me, winks in the darkness. “You good?”

“Murph took bullets for me.”

“He did.”

“He saved my life. They would have killed me.”

A nod. “He’s like that. Thank him later.” He points ahead. “I’ve got a feeling we’re about to reach the boss level.” He hums a theme song—the music that plays when you reach Bowser in Mario.

“How do you know?”

“A feeling.” He points back at the piles of bodies. “Multiple nests in layered locations. Last line of defense.”

Footsteps scuff in the darkness. Flashlight beams sweep. Oddly, I smell him, first—my Apollo.

I walk to him in the darkness with my beam aiming at the floor. I feel

him. I know the rhythm of his breathing. I wrap an arm around him; he's not surprised.

"Good?" he murmurs, kissing my hair.

I inhale him. Soak up the calm of his presence. "Good."

I know nothing of my surroundings—stone underfoot, low ceilings. That's it.

Ahead, Duke's light hits a door. This is new construction. The hinges are fastened to the stone frame with bolts two fingers thick, new and shiny silver. The door itself is thick beams of dark old wood strapped together with iron bands. It fits into the frame exactly—measured and built to fit. Duke's light sweeps the door, examining it. There's a ring-pull, the metal at least an inch and a half thick.

Thresh lumbers past, tugs. "Bolted."

Duke turns to eye the collected squad—I spy Murph and Dutchie. Murph is moving slowly, gingerly, but he's upright and moving and not dead. He meets my eyes, shoots me a finger gun and a wink.

I laugh.

"Anyone bring a door breach kit?" Duke asks.

One of the men on Thresh's team raises a hand. "I did, sir. I'm an explosives engineer, so I never go anywhere without some kinda boom-boom."

Duke gestures at the door. "Do your thing, then, my friend."

"Yes, sir. I'd love to."

It's a matter of seconds, maybe a full minute, and the explosives expert has the door wired. We all retreat back around the corner as he ignites it, and then jogs to join us, turning away at the corner.

The concussion is dull and muffled, the flash dim.

The moment the explosion goes, we're all in motion—I'm watching Duke for my cue. He starts moving the very instant the initial *crump* is heard, and I'm right behind him, rifle up, beam spearing the swirling cloud of dust. My feet crunch over debris. Duke steps through and I'm beside him, sweeping the opposite way. I sweep; spot a flash of movement, something glints. I step to the side, through the doorway, cracking off two shots. Duke is firing. Behind me, the others.

Muzzles flash in every direction, and I feel something sting my foot across my big toe. Another bites the outside of my knee. I move forward, not staying in the same spot. Layout: a long, wide room filled with rows of

columns outlining a walkway leading toward another doorway. Barricades hulk on either side of the doorway, framed by the columns. I hide behind a column and watch for muzzle flash—Apollo is one row down. Firing, firing, all around. My ears ring.

I feel sluggish.

That sense of time distortion, my heartbeat thudding every sixty seconds in my ears—*thud...thud-thud.....thud...thud-thud.....thud...thud-thud.*

Apollo's pistol cracks—I watch it buck in his hand; he's in a duelist's stance, body sideways, arm extended.

I feel my rifle kick against my shoulder—I'll have a hell of a bruise there. I don't remember my brain telling my finger to fire, but I am. My rounds are hitting the barricade, an inch low from where the flash is coming from. I adjust for the next burst, and there's a scream.

Silence.

The engineer jogs for the next door, another handmade custom door, new. Breached.

On the other side, we find a full-fledged firefight. Dad, Harris, and Puck with their squads, hunkered behind a barricade. Facing them, another barricade—they're made of chunks of stone, beams of wood, hoods from old cars; gunfire. A SAW rips the air.

Puck sees us, lifts up, fires over the barricade. Winks at us. "How nice of you to join us." His cigar is still in his jaws, unlit.

We take up positions at the doorway. Duke meets Harris's eyes. Something is exchanged.

"Boom-Boom," Duke calls.

The explosives expert shuffles forward. "Here, sir."

"We need that barricade gone. You got any boom-boom we can throw?"

He slings his pack around in front and rummages in it, comes up with a string of grenades on a length of paracord. "Why, it just so happens that I do."

"Good man," Duke says. "Have at it."

Boom-Boom unclips one grenade from the string, replaces the rest, and inches for the corner of the doorframe. A bullet spatters stone in his face, and he jerks back.

"Shit."

He wipes at his eyes, blinks, and then tries again, quickly. Another glance. And then he pulls the pin, tosses it, and ducks back. "Big boom."

BOOOOM!

There's silence, then, sprinkled only by the rattling and hissing of dust and debris falling.

"That's one way to end a good ol' shoot out," Puck says. "I was havin' fun, but whatever."

Dad sees me, scans me. Returns his attention to Harris.

"He's on the other side of that door." Harris exchanges magazines. "We've scoured the rest of the place. This is the only place he can be. Anselm and Dyani are watching the roof and the exits."

Boom-Boom peers around the doorframe, then jogs forward. Does his magic on the door with the breaching kit.

Another concussion, another sprinkling of debris.

I can feel him—a miasma of darkness on the other side of the door.

I hear a whimper. Soft, female, young.

"Don't come in here." The voice from the phone. "I'm warning you."

I have no memory of ever exchanging mags, but the weight distribution in my bag and vest tells me I have. I let my rifle sling down by the strap connected to my vest. Pull my pistol.

Creep forward. The dust surely obscures me.

I stop in the doorway. I can just make out the room beyond—there's a slit window here. Spaulding, in a damn suit. Nothing out of place, even now. He has a girl in front of him. Thirteen at most. Naked. Bleeding in a dozen places from cuts and bruises. Tortured, hurt for the hell of it. Her thighs are bruised. I can see the dark shadows on her pale skinny thighs. She's blond, blue-eyed. Skinny. Barely into pubescence. Still in that wiry little filly phase, where she's getting her height but not the curves yet.

Her eyes find me, tear-stained.

Rage burns in me like a thousand suns.

"Rin," I hear Dad's voice behind me. "Make the decision cold, honey."

I swallow the hate. Force it down. Ice. Nothing. Black, cold nothingness.

I'm shaking with rage. It's there, I still feel it, but it's subsumed under numbness.

I steady my hands.

"I had to bring something to play with," Spaulding says. His gun is to her temple.

Finger on the trigger.

"It's over, Dick." I assume the Weaver stance. "You're done. You're

dead. The girl's innocent. You've had your fun with her, now let her go. If you cooperate, we may kill you quick rather than slow."

"Bold words from someone with none of the cards." His voice is so calm.

"You're hiding behind a teenage girl, Dick. How long will that last. You think no one here is willing to shoot through her to get to you? Think again, Dick."

"Stop calling me that." The first hint of emotion in his voice.

"You don't like it? Aww, sorry little Dickie boy. Tiny, pathetic, weak little Dickie boy."

"You're going to get her killed."

"She was dead the moment you got your filthy fucking hands on her."

I can't tell if the girl can understand us. She's hyperventilating.

He peeks around her skinny little shoulder, hunched and contorted to use such a waif as a shield. "I might be convinced to let her go."

"Uh-huh. I'm listening, little Dickie." My bead is on that hint of eyeball, sliver of cheekbone.

"You'd have to agree to let me go."

"See, that doesn't quite work, Dick. We went through a lot of effort to catch you. It sure would be a pain to have to chase your pathetic carcass again."

"Then we're at an impasse, I'm afraid."

He shuffles, brings the girl with him. I wait.

"No?" His voice betrays a tremor. The gun at her temple slips. "You really think you're going to get out of this with the girl alive?"

"You're failing to take into account one thing, Dickie."

"And that is?"

"This."

I shift my aim down and to the left. I don't think. It's instinct.

I fire.

The bullet smacks between the girl's thighs, high, nearly creasing the underside of her naked sex—Spaulding screams and the girl throws herself aside, to the floor. All at once, there's a chorus of gunfire from around me.

Spaulding's body jerks, riddled with bullets from half a dozen guns.

I holster my weapon and run over to the girl. She's shaking, sobbing. Whimpering and wailing. I can't understand a word. I don't need to. I peel off my vest and helmet and toss them aside, scoop the girl into my arms.

"Sssh. You're safe now."

She flinches, and then realizes it's me, that I'm a woman. She curls into a tiny sobbing ball and just...dissolves.

"Anyone know what she's saying?" I murmur.

"It's Icelandic, I think," Harris says. "I recognize it but I don't speak it."

I look over my shoulder—Richard Isaac Spaulding is dead.

"Leave him there." I stand up with the girl. "Let's go."

I carry the girl through the darkness—Apollo walks beside me, lighting the way with the flashlight attached to the underside of his pistol.

We come out to daylight, blinking. The Humvee is waiting, idling—the man at the .50-cal is smoking a cigarette, snapping to attention behind his weapon with the lit stub in his teeth as we emerge.

Dad is beside me—he's already stripped out of his armor, and his shirt. He croons something, and the girl twitches.

"You speak Icelandic?" I ask, incredulous. "Since when?"

"I know a few words—I signed a deal there a few years ago. Your mother and I went, remember? I picked up some words and phrases."

"What'd you say?"

"That she's safe." He has his shirt in hand. "Let's get her covered."

I touch her chin. She unfolds, just a touch. I'm sitting on the bumper of the Humvee; her eyes flick to mine. I show her the shirt, and she blinks in confusion. Still in shock, still overwhelmed by trauma and terror.

I bring the neck of the shirt to her head, she shies, but lets me tug it down and over; then, she understands and cooperates in putting her arms through the sleeves. She's tiny and Dad is huge, so it's big enough on her to be comical, but it covers her. This alone does wonders to pull her from the trauma shell.

Dad opens the back door of the Humvee, and I slide in with her. She curls against me, head under my chin. Babbles something.

"I don't know what you're saying, darling," I whisper. "I just know that you're safe. No one else will hurt you. The bad man is dead."

"Bad man die?" Her voice is low, the English surprising me.

"Bad man die, yes."

She hums, shivers with the aftershocks of a sob. I just hold her.

"Bad man is dead," I repeat, closing my eyes. "The bad man is finally dead."

IT'S OVER.

HOME

There are Interpol interviews. Paperwork. Reports. Debriefings with international authority figures.

We fly the girl, Edda, to Iceland ourselves, in one of Mr. Roth's supersonic jets. Lear found her parents easily. She was kidnapped right off the street in broad daylight, not two weeks ago. Someone informs them what occurred, and a small fraction of our part in it. Mr. Roth assures them through a translator that any and all medical or psychiatric bills will be paid.

On to New York.

Rin and I make a visit to Yelena and her parents—once Spaulding was killed, they were returned home.

“Pollo?” She sits on my lap toward the end of our visit. “Is the bad man really, *really* gone?”

I nod, touching her chin. “He's really, really gone. He can't hurt you or anyone else, ever again.”

She nods seriously. “That's good. He was *real* bad.”

“He sure was, little one.”

She touches my face with a little hand. “You're gonna go 'way now?”

I nod. “Rin and I have to go home. We've been away from home for a long, long time.”

She ducks her head. “I miss you.”

“I'll miss you too, little one. But I will come visit. And maybe you and your parents can take a vacation to visit us. All the way down in the Caribbean, hey?”

“Can I get one of those drinks with the little umbrellas in it?”

I laugh. “Sure, as many as you want.”

A cough from her father.

“As many as your daddy says you can have, I mean.”

She sighs. “That means like one.”

“Well, I’m sure for a special vacation, he’ll relax the rules a bit.”

“Maybe.” She looks at Rin. “Thank you for rescuing us, Rin.”

Rin smiles, tucks a lock of Yelena’s hair behind her ear. “I was glad to do it, honey. I’m so glad you’re safe and back with your mommy and daddy again.”

“Daddy says we gonna get a new bigger house soon. Big as a whole building, maybe!”

Rin smiles. “If Apollo and I have anything to do with it, you’ll get a whole house to yourself. And a pony, and so many puppies you’ll drown in them.”

This gets a squeal of excitement from Yelena. “I always wanted a puppy, but Daddy says our house is too small and cities aren’t good for puppies.”

“Well, now things will be different.” Rin kisses her cheek. “We have to go now. But we’ll see you again soon, okay?”

I check that Georgios has gotten a good start on his new career—the paperwork has all gone through and he’s had several business lessons. There are goodbyes all around.

Another flight, this time from New York to Houston. It seems longer than the flight from Baku to London.

Then, finally, after what feels like a lifetime, Rin and I standing in our bedroom.

We just stand there, for a while, as if unsure what to do with ourselves.

Rin sags. “Honestly, right now, I just want a shot of whiskey, and to sleep for a long fucking time.”

I collect her in my arms. “That sounds like a perfect plan.”

She rests against me. “Perfect. You get the whiskey, and I’ll get the bed ready.”

By the time I’ve come back with a bottle of Yamazaki and two glasses, Rin has the eighty-seven throw pillows she insists makes the bed look pretty tossed aside and the blankets turned back, and she’s laboriously, exhaustedly kicking off her shoes and socks.

It’s been four days since she took the shot—we’ve crossed the world and sat for countless post-action events, because the ending of Spaulding and the events that led up to it were, it turns out, of international importance. We’ve

barely slept, except to doze on the planes.

She manages to get her boots and socks off.

“I don’t think I’ve been barefoot since Tunis,” she mutters.

I pour a measure of whiskey into the glass and hand it to her. Another into mine, and then set the bottle on the floor by my feet as I sit on the edge of the bed beside her. We clink glasses, and drink the fifty-five-year-old amber whiskey. It goes down smooth, burns like fire in our bellies.

“More,” she hisses. “One more.”

I pour another measure. This isn’t shooting whiskey, most certainly not—but this is an extraordinarily unique moment.

We sit together, swaying in exhaustion, sipping whiskey in too-big slugs. It’s making my head spin already.

Rin clumsily hands me her glass. “Okay. Can we go to sleep in our bed now?”

I set the glasses and the bottle on a table in the corner of our room. When I turn back, Rin is crawling to the head of the bed, exhaustion and alcohol making her delirious and funny.

I peel my shirt off, my shoes, toe my socks off, hopping awkwardly. Shuck the pants I’ve been wearing since I surrendered myself to Spaulding’s lackey.

We had word while in New York that both Rasmussen and Djakovic have been...found. Roth put a massive bounty on their heads, and that was that—A1S hunters did their work.

“Rin, let’s get your clothes off.”

She’s collapsed onto the bed, hair in her face. “Mmm-mmm.”

“Two seconds. Think how great it will feel to get that bra off.”

This gets her. “Titties haven’t been free since Tunis either.” She peers at me through a screen of messy blond. “Help?”

I haul her upright and help her out of her shirt. She’s wasted, the two full measures in less than ten minutes blazing through her already exhausted system. Normally a terrible idea. Still a terrible idea. But I know she won’t be able to bring herself down—not under these circumstances.

Instead of letting me help her with her bra, she flops to her back and struggles with the jeans, the tight, stretchy material catching on her thighs.

“I’m stuck.” She finally quits struggling and peers at me again. “Help.”

I laugh, and tug the denim off, toss it aside. “There you go, my love.”

She somehow manages to flop upright. “Titties. Free the titties.”

“It would be the greatest of pleasures to free the titties,” I say, kissing her shoulder as I lean against her front, to unhook the bra behind her back.

The garment removed and her beautiful, magnificent, perfect breasts freed, she throws her head back and sighs as she massages her breasts. It’s not at all erotic, purely a moment of relief, but I still watch with enjoyment.

Then, abruptly, she flings herself backward to the mattress, angling her toes toward me. “You can do the panties.”

“I thought you hated that word.”

“I do. I’m saying it out of some kind of perverse enjoyment. Panties, panties, panties. Ugh. Horrid word. Just get them off and cuddle me, would you?”

I make short work of sliding the undergarment off of her, leaving her nude. I just stare at her for a long moment.

“Quit ogling me, Apollo,” she mumbles, not opening her eyes, flinging a hand up to reach for me. “You’re gonna get me six ways to Sunday and then some, once we’re rested. Just get down here and hold me.”

There are fresh, alert A1S guards on the roof, in the stairwell, and in the lobby. Spaulding is dead. His men are dead. Reports are made. Interviews are done. There’s nothing to do and nowhere to go.

It’s really, finally over.

I shuck my underwear and climb into bed behind Corinna, my love, my darling.

Spoon behind her. Fill my hands with her warm soft skin, my nose with her scent. Her butt presses into the hollow of my hips and knees, our thighs mated, her backs to my front.

I take a deep, slow breath of peace, of safety, of home.

And then I fall asleep.

FOREVER, STARTING NOW

I don't know how long we sleep. I wake up and find that Apollo has set several chilled bottles of water on the bedside and some aspirin. I take them, and sit a moment in bed beside him, enjoying the cold water in my parched mouth. I notice the open bottle of aspirin on his bedside table, and a finished bottle of water.

I'm still woozy.

It's dark. I don't look at the clock, don't care. I just curl up behind him and go back to sleep.

WHEN I WAKE NEXT, it's dawn. Gray-pink light filters through the windows.

Nope, still sleepy.

AGAIN, I wake up. It's full daylight.

Apollo is behind me, now. His hand is loosely cradling my breast, which puts a smile on my face.

His cock is hard, poking against my ass. This too puts a smile on my face.

I'm awake now. And very, very eager to make good on the promises I made to him—whenever and wherever that was. It's all a blur.

What do I want to do with him first? Stay like this and just...slip him inside me? Roll my ass against him until he comes, just like this, on our sides, lazy and sleepy?

Maybe.

Or just turn to my back and take him in my hands and play with him. Let him make a mess all over himself...and then lick it all away. I'm a dirty, dirty girl, and I'd do exactly that and enjoy every drop of my man's seed.

Maybe.

Or slip under the covers and take him in mouth, and worship him with my tongue? Slurp and lick and gobble him under the blankets, tease and toy with and suckle him until he comes down my throat?

I think yes. It will be a delightful way for him to wake up.

And when I'm done, he'll throw me to my back and he'll eat me out until I've come a dozen times.

And then we'll fuck.

And fuck.

And fuck.

Oh yes, this is the plan.

Maybe we'll work a shower in there, during which we will...you guessed it—fuck.

My sex is slippery, weeping with arousal from thinking about all the things I'm going to do with man. Soaked. Slick. Begging for his tongue. Demanding to be filled by him.

My nipples ache, standing on end.

Tunis feels like a thousand years ago, and a blur. A moment of pleasure in a sea of trauma and tension.

I wiggle under the blankets, biting my lip. As if to make it easier for me, Apollo rolls to his back, snuffling, sighing deeply, thrusting his hips gently as if in an attempt to relieve the pressure.

Don't worry, my lover. I'll help with that.

I frame his hips with my hands in the darkness under the blankets and find his flesh with my lips—his thigh, a soft scruff of hair. Kiss upward. My nose nuzzles his balls, and I flick them with my tongue. He inhales through his nose—he felt that. I rest my palms on his belly, slide them down under the fat thickness of his erection, lifting it off his belly. My cheek rests on his navel, and I lift him to my mouth. He moans in his sleep as he fills my mouth. My tongue slides against his ridged, salty flesh. I pull away, slowly, slathering my tongue against his skin. He huffs, and his hips lift. I flicker my tongue against the now-moist tip of him, tasting his pre-cum.

Already, Apollo? Good. Give it to me. I want it all, I want you to wake up

coming, wake up to my mouth around you, sucking you dry.

I lick the tip, around the side. Cup his balls and massage them, squeeze them. He breathes out, soft and a little hoarse, not quite a groan.

I have to lift the blanket for a moment to get some fresh air, and then I take him back into my mouth again, this time pulsing around him, lower with each pulse. I cradle his heavy, taut balls in both of my hands and pull him toward me, lowering my mouth around him as far as I can, swallowing around him.

More.

He grunts in his sleep as I swallow around him, and then I back away, licking him with wiggling, slathering movements of my tongue.

He's coated in my saliva, now, and I use it as lubricant to caress him with both hands, pumping him gently, steadily. Keep pumping him as I take the fat, plump, lovely head into my mouth, suckling around his cock and stroking it—petting it, kissing it. Loving it.

He gasps, groans. His hips push.

“Mmmmm...” A wordless groan. “R-r-rrrrrin....” He gasps. “Rinna...”

I don't answer with words. Instead I do the thing I know he like best, when I blow him—I twist my hands as I stroke downward, while working the upper few inches of him with my mouth. Slowly at first, and the more swiftly. Once his hips are working, moving with me and giving me his need, I hold the pace there. No faster, not hurrying him to the edge.

Will he wake up?

I'm curious to find out.

I've woken him up like this before, and he's always woken up. Usually, he stops me before he comes and we make love—if I don't come during, he fills me with a dildo while eating me with his mouth, and he makes me come until I'm weak and limp.

But I kind of want him to not wake up. To wonder if it was a dream. Or to wake up as he's coming, shocked, gasping awake.

I steadily pleasure him, hands twisting on the downstroke, mouth moving around his head, tongue all over him. He rises to it, then, moaning in his sleep, hips helplessly beginning to thrust. He rolls a bit, hands wandering as if hunting for me. I let go of his cock briefly, just long enough to guide his hands to my head, into my hair—they knot there, instantly, and his groan of relief is a beautiful thing.

I pause, lick the tip again, let him fall back from the edge just slightly.

Not too far. And then I start again, just the way he likes it, with the twist and the tongue. He groans, and I feel him pulsating in my mouth, feel that vein on the underside of his thick long perfect cock pulsing against my tongue. He groans again, a long low sound in his chest that I feel as much as hear.

“Rin...” he murmurs. “Rin.”

More, then. Faster. Until his hips are pushing hard, fast.

I feel him prepare to burst.

When he’s an instant from exploding, I cradle his balls in my hands and massage them, finger pressing along his taint, and I take him deep, until his cock pushes against my throat, and I pulse there, deep to deeper, to the edge of my comfort.

He comes, then.

I feel it, a hot thick rush down my throat.

“Ohfuckwhat?” He curls up a little. “Ohhhh....shit. Rin...fuck...fuck!”

He flops back to the bed as I drain him, pulling back to suck and bob around the head, plunging one hand around his cock hard and fast, milking the orgasm out of him while I continue to play with and massage his balls with the other, fingering his taint and cradling the heavy softness of his balls.

Another burst floods my mouth, and I swallow it, tongue the head as yet more surges out of him. I pull away and stroke him, mouth open, his cock resting on my tongue for him to watch—he spurts once more onto my tongue, and then he’s done. I lick him, then. Suck every last drop out of him, feathering light caresses up and down his erection.

He’s gasping, chest heaving.

I don’t stop until his cock is a soft comma on his belly.

Crawling up his body, I rest my chin on his chest. “Hi.”

“Holy fuck, darling.” His voice is ragged, utterly destroyed.

“I love you.”

His eyes open and he looks at me. “I fucking love you so much.”

I stare at him, the snarling, rabid need inside me blazing from my eyes. “How much?”

He levers upright, throwing me backward, throwing the blankets off. I’m on my back before I know what’s happening, and his mouth is on me. Despite the sudden assault, his tongue is exquisitely gentle, probing up my seam. Tasting me, testing me. Sliding into me, slithering between my lips. I let my thighs fall open, and he lays in front of me with my legs over his shoulder, and he devours me. Slowly, eagerly. With consummate skill, taking

his time to build me to the edge, only to slow and let me sink away from it. Then, when his tongue has swirled and probed and his lips have suckled my clit until I'm hovering at the edge, he slides his thick strong fingers into me and I scream over the peak for the first time. He keeps me there, his tongue wild and fervent and tireless, flicking side to side with my thrashing, licking upward with my bucking hips. I grab his hair and hold him in place, and I ride his mouth, lifting my ass clear off the mattress to get more from his mouth.

A second climax is hard on the heels of the first, but it's a precursor only. He slows and lets me build once more to the threshold of the third, edging me away and back to it until I'm mad with desperation to finally hit it.

This is when he does something new.

In between licking me and fingering my opening, keeping me hovering right under the edge, he puts a bead of his saliva on his tongue, and I groan, knowing what he's going to do.

His mouth on my clit, three fingers inside me, he presses that saliva-smearred middle finger to my asshole. I spread wider for him, relax for his touch. Welcome it. It's slow at first, easing and pushing. He spits on his finger again and smears it on me, and now his touch slides inside me, filling in both places.

I come with a scream so loud my throat aches.

He is relentless, then. Dragging every last ounce of orgasm out of me, keeping me thrashing and bucking on the wave of climax, his fingers pulsing in and out of both of my holes.

I come until I'm limp.

Hoarse.

And then finally, he releases me.

I whimper when I lose his touch inside me.

"Turnabout...is fair play," I gasp. "Right?"

He laughs. "It is indeed."

"Go wash your hands."

He goes. Washes his hands thoroughly, several times.

When he returns, his erection is bobbing at half-mast. As he nears me, still sprawled naked on the bed, half-mast becomes full-mast. Simply looking at me.

God, so beautiful.

That knowledge, that he is so utterly mine that I can arouse him with a

look.

He crawls onto the bed and reaches for me, but I shake my head. “Uh-uh.” I push him to his back and crawl astride him. “I need you like this.”

He palms my ass as I lift up, grasping him and guiding him to my sex, notch him inside me and slide down onto him, all in one fluid motion. We both groan together as I bottom out on him, his cock speared fully into me.

I roll my hips in circles. “Bare. I can feel every bit of you.”

He gasps, pushing to get deeper, thrusting. “So fucking beautiful, Rin. You’re so, so fucking gorgeous. I can’t believe you’re mine.”

“I am. I’m yours, Apollo. All yours. Forever yours.”

He cups my breasts as I writhe on him, fondling them as they sway. “I’m not going to last long, Rin. You make it too good. I’m going to come inside you.”

I roll and writhe, faster and faster. “Good. Fill me, Apollo.” I clasp my hands over his, urging him to squeeze and touch and fondle me, holding his hands on my breasts as I ride him. “Fill me with your cum.”

“I want you with me. Come with me, Corinna.”

“I will,” I say, dropping one hand to my sex, to my clit. “I’m gonna come with you, Apollo.”

“Oh god, Rin. It’s so good. Watching you ride me. Watching you fuck me.”

I lift and fall, then, my eyes on his, his on mine. “Give it to me, Apollo. Fuck me hard. I want you to come—right now.” I move faster. “I want it. I need it. Fuck me until you come, until your cum spills out of me.”

He bucks into me, our bodies meeting. “Ohhh, fuck, Corinna.”

“Apollo....” I whisper. “Put a baby in me, my love.”

His eyes widen, and he surges faster, and I brace my hand on his belly and my fingers fly on my clit, and I come. I explode around him. I feel my inner walls clench around him, squeezing tight.

This is the last, for him.

He cries out and our hands find each other, palm to palm, fingers twining. I feel him pulse, feel him let loose. He bellows, shouts, surges, fucks, and I ride him through it, matching him, meeting him.

We come, and we come.

After a forever of united orgasm, I collapse forward onto him.

He holds me. Still inside me, slowly softening and slipping out, he just holds me.

After a while, I feel him move, reach. A drawer opens.

I crack an eye. “What are you doing?”

He kisses my head. “Don’t move.”

“Kay. I won’t.”

He puts something in my field of vision—a red velvet box. A very, very old one. The edges where the top and bottom meet are trimmed in faded gold.

He opens it one-handed. “This was my grandmother’s—Georgios’s father’s mother’s, my father’s mother’s. I never knew her, clearly, but her name was Ophelia Konstantin.” His voice is reverent. “I was talking to Georgio while you and Elena and Yelena were making cookies. I told him about proposing and not having a ring.”

“Apollo, are you serious?”

“He said he inherited this. But his wife will only wear the one he got her. So he gave it to me, to give to you.”

I swallow hard. “Oh, Apollo, it’s perfect.”

It really is. The gold is shiny with age, a slim gold band with a single small round diamond. Small, but pure, and perfectly cut glinting with fire.

“The story is, Georgios told me, her husband mined the diamond himself, and the gold. He made the band himself, and had the diamond cut and set. She wore it every day of her life, and then she gave it to her eldest son, to give to his wife when he married.”

I hold out my finger, and he slides it on—it fits perfectly.

“No shit,” he breathes. “I assumed we’d have to have it sized.”

“I guess not.” I marvel at it. “It fits like it was made for me.” I watch the diamond catch the afternoon sunlight. “I love it. So, so much.”

“You didn’t want anything huge, so I thought maybe you’d want something...meaningful. Something old.” He cradles me closer. “And I wanted to give it you when we were naked in bed together, after the most amazing lovemaking of our lives.”

I smile against his chest. “Let’s go back to sleep.”

He sighs happily. “Okay.” A pause. “Want me to clean you up?”

“Nope.”

“Okay.”

I kiss his chest. “When we get up, we’ll take a shower. You’ll feed me. We’ll fuck a few more times, and then we’ll fly down to the island, and we’ll let Mom and Auntie Lay-Lay plan our wedding.”

“Sounds perfect.” A long pause. “Do you think we got you pregnant?”

I nod. “Yeah, I do. I’ve been off my pill for over a week, and this is when I’m most fertile, according to my cycle.” I pat his side. “But if not, we can keep trying. I want to have your baby as soon as I can.”

“I want that too.”

“You do?”

He’s quiet, nodding; I feel the motion. “A little Yelena of my own, calling me Daddy.”

“Should we name her that?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not. We can talk about names.”

Another long silence.

“Apollo?”

Drowsy, but not sleepy. “I can’t sleep.”

“Me either.”

I roll to my back and pull him over me. “So fuck me again. Maybe that’ll make us sleepy.”

And so, he does.

EPILOGUE

FAMILY FOUND

Despite Corinna's continued protest that she only wants a small, intimate wedding, the planning ends up occupying a full eight weeks. And it swells to include...everyone.

There are lights festooning the palm trees, a white rose-wreathed arch with rows of white-swathed couches facing the arch, and the rippling turquoise sea behind it. There are caterers, and security so tight as to make a Buckingham Palace seem positively unguarded. Swans float in the surf. Red rose petals carpeting the sand to line the path to the altar. Dozens of guests—all of A1S Original Six and their wives and children, and Dyani; Bryn's fiancé Zero's whole family shows up, expectedly unexpected and in droves, chattering in half a dozen languages and accents, turning the party up to eleven.

Zero is tall, lanky, and debonair. Short messy black hair, but with freckles, and green eyes, and an energetic insouciance, wearing board shorts and an unbuttoned shirt, a hemp necklace around his neck and wraparound sunglasses on his eyes, night or day. He always has a ukulele or a guitar or a mandolin or something, once even a hurdy-gurdy, and another time a strange large-bellied, four-stringed instrument with a tilted head—a lute.

Bryn is gaga for him, but it's easy to see why—he's effortlessly, endlessly cool. He speaks who knows how many languages, plays who knows how many instruments, and plays them because he can't not play music. He's always singing, always playing. And if he's not, he's about to.

His family shows up while the preparations are still being made, but everyone else is already on the island, so it's simply a wild party that lasts a week. There are bonfires all over the beach, and people drift from one to the

other, and there's always someone singing or laughing or dancing.

Corinna wears a bikini and a gauzy wrap around her waist, and her hair is loose. We drift off in the dawn on the beach, and wake up cold and shivering and run home to her room in the main house and take a long hot shower together and fall back in bed. And when we wake up again, it's midmorning and the party is still going.

There's no formal announcement.

I just find myself one afternoon surrounded by all the A1S men, and Zero, and Sasha and Alexei, and I'm putting on a tuxedo. The hems are rolled up to my knees, and my bowtie is left untied, the top few buttons undone, and flowers are braided into my hair. It just works, somehow.

There's a bottle of something *very* old from Mr. Roth's cellar, and it's clear the wedding is happening, finally.

But I need to do something first.

"Can I have a moment with Mr. Roth?" I say, to the room in general.

Everyone leaves.

His eyes are serious, but welcoming and warm. "I think at this point you can call me either just Roth, or Valentine."

I pull a folded piece of paper from the pocket of the shorts I'd been wearing. "I'd like to ask something of you."

He senses the weight in my tone. "You're marrying my daughter. What could I possibly refuse you, Apollo?"

I show him the paper, and he scans it. He's shocked, his eyes going wide.

"Does she know?" he asks.

I shake my head, butterflies fluttering in my belly. "No. I haven't legally filed it yet. I wanted to ask you first." I blow out a breath. "I'd like to take Rin's last name. Your last name. If you will let me." I swallow hard. "I know...that the people I was born into...they hurt you. They hurt Mrs. Roth—Kyrie. All of you. And I..." I have to start again. "I became that. And I tried to leave it behind. It...it still caught up to me, and it pulled your daughter into it. I thought maybe if I took my father's name, I'd leave that part of me behind. But that's not enough."

Valentine is choked up, blinking hard.

"So I want to become a Roth. I know it's not...traditional. But it's...it's right. And I want your permission, before I say anything to Rin." I've never in my life struggled so hard to speak, to make words come out.

To keep my shit together.

Valentine just nods, blows out a sigh, and nods again. “Yes, Apollo. I think that’s the best idea you’ve ever had.” He pulls me into an embrace. “Aside from marrying my daughter, that is.”

He claps me on the back, lets me go to hold me by the shoulders. “I would be proud to give you our name, Apollo.”

I duck my head, swallowing. “Thank you.”

He pushes me gently. “Now, go marry my daughter.”

Music is playing. I walk through the crowd, the name change application in my back pocket.

Take my place at the front, facing the aisle, down which my bride will walk.

There’s a shift of energy—we feel it. Zero plays the Wedding March on a mandolin.

There she is.

Corinna Roth, walking toward me. Her dress is sleeveless, delicate white silk cupping her cleavage, molded to her waist and backside and around the upper portion of her thighs before spreading out into a loose pool around her feet, dragging behind her in the sand. Her hair is partially up, a braided crown around her brow, the rest spilling loose around her bare shoulders. She has a bouquet of irises and white roses and lilies, and the ring I gave her, my grandmother’s ring, glints on her finger.

She’s already crying as she walks toward me, her hand tucked around her father’s arm. Going against tradition in another way, her mother is on the other side of her. They both bring her to me.

Sasha stands before us. “I know, I know—a man like me, an ordained minister? Too weird to not be true, hey?” His distinct, pronounced Russian accent—although he’d correct you to say he’s Georgian, he just speaks Russian—twists the words into new shapes. “I’m not a man for big speeches. So. We all are knowing why we are here, together, on this very beautiful beach, on this very beautiful day. Look! The sun is shining, the waves look like these diamonds, *da?* It’s a beautiful day, and you know why?” He gestures at Rin and me—he has no book, no folder, just his hands gesturing. “Because these two beautiful people are being married. Such love, hey? Look at them. The way they look at each other. It’s beautiful, and it’s why we are all here, right now.”

He points to me. “Apollo. Give her your vows.”

I look at Rin. “Corinna. You changed me. You forced me to let go of who

I wasn't and helped me find the courage to become who I'm meant to be. I will spend every single day of the rest of my life striving to be the man you deserve. Striving to love you as you deserve to be loved—wholly, fully, completely. That's my vow."

Sasha gestures at Rin. "Your turn, lovely girl."

She looks at Sasha. "First, before I get to my vows, I just wanted to say something to you, Sasha. I wanted to say thank you. The things you taught me kept me alive and helped me keep others alive. Without all those crazy summer afternoons at the range, kicking Cal's ass at room clearing, I wouldn't be here." I wink at Cal, who just laughs good-naturedly.

Sasha puts his hands around mine, joined with Apollo's. "You were one of the best I ever trained, you know. Is my pleasure to do this thing for you." He points at me. "But now, please, vow to him."

"Apollo...our love is anything but usual or ordinary. You stole...well, me, first of all. And then you stole my heart." She snuffles. "And now that you've stolen my heart, I'm just so grateful that you did. I'd go with Tomás a thousand times onto that boat, blindfolded and terrified, if it led to you. I don't need to vow to you, though. I already proved my love. I went into hell after you, and I'd do it again. I love you. I'll always love you. I'll spend our life together loving you as best I can, and then some."

Sasha sighs. "This is good. So. You love her, she loves you." A glance at Kyrie and Valentine. "Mama, Papa, you agree to this wedding? *Da*? Good. So, together then. Corinna and Apollo, do you each take the other as your own, forever, no matter what may happen, and listen, I know some shit may happen, so you gotta have someone to love you, even when that shit happens, right? Right. So, Corinna and Apollo, Apollo and Corinna, you take each other as wife and husband, husband and wife, until the stars burn out and there is no more forever?"

"I do," we both say together, in unison.

"*Da*, of course you do." He smiles broadly. "I pronounce you married, now and always. Kiss her now, you fool."

I kiss her.

We join hands, and Sasha holds our hands in his. "So, it is done. They are married. So now I give to you Mr. and Mrs. Apollo and Corinna—"

I interrupt him. "Hold on." I turn to Rin, withdrawing the application from my pocket. Unfold it, show it to her.

She covers her hand with her mouth. "Apollo, you—really?"

“I already talked to your dad about it.”

There’s murmuring—the crowd can’t see the paper and doesn’t know what’s going on.

She lets go of my hands and closes in, holding my face. “It’s what you want?”

“More than anything.” I gesture first at her parents and brother, and then at the gathered crowd. “This is my family.”

I whisper something to Sasha, and he nods. “Is beautiful. Very touching. Smart man.” He gestures to us again. “So, a change of...not plans, but names. I give to you Corinna and Apollo Roth.” He points at me. “He’s changing his name, you see. He’s Apollo Roth, now.”

The cheers are deafening.

But none louder than the cheering in my heart, and my soul.

I may have been born into a shitty, evil family, and raised in chaos and loneliness and darkness, but I found the light. I found the peace.

I found a family, and they welcomed me in.

THE END

SIGN UP!

As a THANK YOU for reading my stories, I have special gift from me to you—a free, exclusive short story, *[Caught in the Surf](#)*.

[CLICK HERE](#) to sign up for my newsletter; I only send out newsletters when I have important Jasinda Wilder book world updates to share.

Visit me at my [WEBSITE](#) or my [AMAZON AUTHOR PAGE](#); you can also [EMAIL ME](#).

ALSO BY JASINDA WILDER

If you enjoyed this book, you can help others enjoy it as well by recommending it to friends and family, or by mentioning it in reading and discussion groups and online forums. You can also review it on the site from which you purchased it. But, whether you recommend it to anyone else or not, thank you so *much* for taking the time to read my book! Your support means the world to me!

My other titles:

[Forbidden Fruit](#)

[*Wild Ride: Biker Billionaire*](#)

[*Delilah's Diary*](#)

Big Girls Do It:

[*Big Girls Do It*](#)

[*Married*](#)

[*On Christmas*](#)

[*Pregnant*](#)

[*Rock Stars Do It*](#)

[*Big Love Abroad*](#)

The Falling Series:

[*Falling Into You*](#)

[*Falling Into Us*](#)

[*Falling Under*](#)

[*Falling Away*](#)

[*Falling for Colton*](#)

The Ever Trilogy:

[*Forever & Always*](#)

[*After Forever*](#)

[*Saving Forever*](#)

From the world of *Wounded*:

Wounded

Captured

From the world of *Stripped*:

Stripped

Trashed

From the world of *Alpha*:

Alpha

Beta

Omega

Harris: Alpha One Security Book 1

Thresh: Alpha One Security Book 2

Duke: Alpha One Security Book 3

Puck: Alpha One Security Book 4

Lear: Alpha One Security Book 5

Anselm: Alpha One Security Book 6

Sigma

The Houri Legends:

Jack and Djinn

Djinn and Tonic

The Madame X Series:

Madame X

Exposed

Exiled

The Black Room (With Jade London)

The One Series

The Long Way Home

Where the Heart Is

There's No Place Like Home

Badd Brothers:

*Badd Motherf*cker*

Badd Ass

Badd to the Bone

Good Girl Gone Badd

Badd Luck

Badd Mojo

Big Badd Wolf

Badd Boy

Badd Kitty

Badd Business

Badd Medicine

Badd Daddy

Goode Girls:

For a Goode Time Call...

Not So Goode

Goode To Be Bad

A Real Goode Time

Goode Vibrations

Dad Bod Contracting:

Hammered

Drilled

Nailed

Screwed

Fifty States of Love:

Pregnant in Pennsylvania

Cowboy in Colorado

Married in Michigan

Christmas in Connecticut

Billionaire Baby Club:

Lizzy Goes Brains Over Braun

Autumn Rolls a Seven

Laurel's Bright Idea

Standalone titles:

Yours

The Cabin

The Parent Trap

Wish Upon A Star

Non-Fiction titles:

You Can Do It

You Can Do It: Strength

You Can Do It: Fasting

Jack Wilder Titles:

The Missionary

JJ Wilder Titles:

Ark



*jasinda
wilder*