



HONEY  
TRAP

THE GUILD #1

T A T E J A M E S

USAT AND INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# **HONEY TRAP**

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THE GUILD #1

TATE JAMES

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**Tate James**

**Honey Trap: The Guild #1**

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Honey Trap: The Guild #1

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Cover design: Tamara Kokic

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*For that hard assed bitch who nearly made me quit, four and a half years ago before I ever published my first book. The one who implied I was a crappy writer, but that my storyline had potential.*

*This one is for you.*

*Lucky the tough love thing worked for me, huh Heather?*

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## SHADOW GROVE WORLD

*Interconnected series*

While each series in the Shadow Grove world can be read independent of the others, this is the *recommended* reading order for a chronological timeline.

You do not *need* to read in this order, but it may help with overall background and cameo character appearances.

### MADISON KATE

#1 Hate

#2 Liar

#3 Fake

#4 Kate

### HADES

#1 7th Circle

#2 Anarchy

#3 Club 22

#4 Timber

### MADISON KATE NOVELLA

#4.5 Vault

### THE GUILD

#1 Honey Trap

#2 Dead Drop

#3 Kill Order

## CONTENT WARNING

**T**he Guild series is a part of the Shadow Grove world which contains several interconnected series. The tone and content tends to lean toward the dark, and reader discretion is advised.

PLEASE BE mindful of your own content triggers and limits.

THE CHARACTERS within The Guild series are not heroes or heroines, please kindly don't hold them to a heroic standard as they will fall short of expectations. They do bad things, and they own their actions.

IF YOU'RE cool with this, then please read on with an open mind and hopefully you'll fall for these lovable psychopaths as hard as I have.

- Tate

# LEON

Shadow Grove. Such a curious place, full of all manner of interesting people and surprisingly one of the easiest cities I'd ever disappeared in plain sight within. The people of Shadow Grove—and the neighboring Cloudcroft and Rainybanks—were so acclimatized to the criminals running their city, they simply kept their heads down and minded their own business.

It was *odd*. But I liked it. Maybe I would buy a house in Shadow Grove.

Except I'd made a promise to keep someone in this town off the Guild's radar... which meant I probably shouldn't draw any unnecessary attention from the Circle—the Guild's leadership council—by moving in down the road.

Still, it was the casual anonymity of criminals on these streets that had brought me back to Shadow Grove just over a year since I'd last visited. Apparently, Hades's and her Timberwolves' iron grip over this area had made it the perfect hiding place for fugitive mercenaries.

“Can I get you anything else?” A waitress leaned over my table, clearing my empty pie plate away and offering a friendly, slightly flirtatious smile.

I gave her a bland smile back, adjusting my glasses that I didn't even remotely need. “Another coffee, please.”

She nodded, and I watched the swing of her hips as she headed back to the counter to make my coffee. She was pretty. Maybe my mission could wait another night while I sampled some of the local goods.

The waitress disappeared into the kitchen, and my gaze caught on a child

sitting at the counter, wearing some expensive black and gray private school uniform. A child who was staring directly at me.

My eyes narrowed and she didn't flinch. How peculiar. Children generally didn't like me, that was no great surprise. But she was *staring* at me, when everyone else in the coffee shop had barely noticed I was sitting there. Either I wasn't blending into the background as well as I should or this kid was more observant than most adults.

"What?" I snapped when the kid didn't look away. She didn't even blink. Weird girl.

She quirked a brow, totally unfazed. "Is that a Beretta M9?"

My brows shot up and my spine stiffened. Who the fuck was this kid? The crest on her school uniform said she attended the local school, Shadow Prep, and her copper red hair was tightly wound into two braids making her look as innocent as pie. Except for her eyes. This was a kid who'd been to hell and back.

I clicked my tongue, putting the pieces together from my previous research into Shadow Grove's key players—and their weaknesses. "Good eye. Diana, right?"

Her brow dipped in a scowl. "And who the fuck are you?"

An old woman reached over from behind the counter and gave the girl a light cuff around the ears. "Watch your mouth, child. Leave the man alone."

The kid—Diana—just scowled harder but turned her attention back to the school books open on the counter in front of her. A moment later, my pretty waitress returned with my coffee and another flirtatious smile. My focus was still on the kid, though. Sharp little thing, spotting my concealed weapon *and* accurately identifying it from a distance. Her guardians were training her well.

I quickly pushed the curiosity from my mind, though, when the man I'd been waiting for walked past the cafe window.

"Thank you," I said quickly, cutting off the waitress's offer to meet later for a drink, "I have to go."

Not bothering to wait for a check, I tossed a wad of cash onto the table and made my way out of the coffee shop to tail my mark. He'd been harder to track down than a lot of my assignments, but that was to be expected. After all... he was a mercenary, just like me.

Okay, not *quite* like me. But he was Guild-trained, meaning it'd taken me several weeks to get this close rather than the easy couple of days it took for

mundane targets. In a way, I was sad this assignment was almost over.

The best part was yet to come, though.

My mark, for all appearances, was a boring, unremarkable kind of guy. In his mid-thirties, dressed casually in jeans and a sweatshirt, with no less than three guns—Glock 19s by my guess—and six knives decorating his body. Thank fuck for that. I was in the mood for a good fight, and nothing was more disappointing than a Guild-trained mercenary just surrendering when they saw me.

It only took three blocks before my target noticed me following him, and the corners of my mouth kicked up. This might be more fun than I'd anticipated. I should have known Shadow Grove wouldn't disappoint.

His pace quickened dramatically, and within a few more blocks, he was full on running. I no longer needed to hide the fact that I was tailing him, so I matched his pace easily but made no attempt to catch up. Why would I when he was doing all the hard work of getting away from the public for me?

Chuckling under my breath, I chased my scared little rabbit away from the busy shopping street and into the quieter, run-down residential area. I was still in no hurry to catch up, leaving the same hundred yard gap between us no matter how fast he ran. It must be infuriating for a skilled mercenary to be toyed with like this.

He ducked around corners and jumped fences, doing everything he could to shake me, but it was futile. Now that I had him in my sights... surely he had to know the Guild wouldn't just let him go?

A moment later, my sneaky mark disappeared out of my sight, and I needed to pause to decide which way he'd gone. Left. Definitely left. I barked a sharp laugh as I realized that my prey hadn't run into a park, like I'd initially thought. It was a cemetery.

Shadow Grove never failed to entertain me, that was for sure.

Up ahead of me, I caught a glimpse of my target sprinting down a row of taller headstones, some carved angels and monolithic stone crosses. Seeing as how I couldn't have picked a better location to kill a man than this, I launched myself over a series of grave markers and increased my speed.

Silent and deadly.

He never even saw me coming, too busy looking for me over his shoulder until he ran straight into my knife.

The impact reverberated up my arm, but I held strong, bracing against the man's momentum.

To his credit, my prey didn't scream. He didn't shout for help or beg for his life. He just grunted, peering down at his midsection where I still gripped the handle of my knife, its blade entirely buried in him—and probably poking out the other side, too.

“You fucked up, Jean-Claude,” I informed him, as though my blade in his flesh wasn't driving that point home enough all on its own. “Don't worry, this isn't the one that will kill you.”

The mercenary winced, clearly understanding that I meant to make his death painful.

“Leon,” he croaked. “Not who I expected.”

I felt the corners of my mouth curl in a cold smile. “I never am, Jean-Claude.” Yanking my knife free of his gut in a squelching tug, I then quickly slammed the hilt into his temple to knock him unconscious. It wasn't necessary, but it sure did make things easier.

The disgraced mercenary crumpled to the ground, and I carefully wiped my blade on his sweatshirt before tucking it away. Jean-Claude wasn't a small man, so I needed both hands to drag him off the path and farther into the cemetery where it was *less* likely we might be overheard.

Just to be safe, I'd keep it quick. The last thing I needed was for some nosey Timberwolves to intervene, because then I'd have to kill them and deal with the fallout from Hades. Doable, but not my idea of entertainment. Better she not know I was ever in town.

Using zip ties, I bound my assignment to a particularly decorative wrought-iron fence around a family plot. Once he was secured—and stripped of his weapons—I took the little sachet of ammonium carbonate from my pocket to wake Jean-Claude up. I didn't have the time or patience to stand around tapping my foot and waiting for him to regain consciousness. Nor did that steadily bleeding wound in his gut, for that matter.

“We'll keep this brief,” I announced when he started groaning. “The Guild knows you've broken the secrecy protocols. We know all about the secret meetings with a journalist by the name of Gillian White, and the evidence you provided to her to expose the Guild. Rest assured, none of it will ever see the light of day.” I smirked, unable to help myself. “Nor will Miss White.”

Jean-Claude moaned in pain. He'd spilled Guild secrets during pillow talk, then allowed his bed-buddy to talk him into an exclusive interview. The kind of article that could make a young journalist's entire career. The kind of

article that got silly young journalists killed and their house burned down.

“What we want to know,” I continued, “is what on earth you thought you were going to achieve, Jean-Claude? Surely you knew you couldn’t get away with this.”

The dying man gave a hacking laugh, then rolled his head back to meet my eyes. His lips clamped tight together, and his gaze held steady. I knew that look well. He wasn’t talking.

Shrugging, I pulled a pair of ear plugs out of my pocket. It was my job to ensure Jean-Claude’s death was painful, but I sure as shit didn’t need to lose my hearing in the process. So I popped them into my ears and smiled at the instant quiet all around me. It was a surreal thing, torturing a man and barely hearing his screams.

Jean-Claude’s mouth moved in horror, his lips rounding with terror as I went to work with my pliers. Removing his fingernails took no time at all, really, then because I was in no mood to be caught in the act, I quickly cut out his tongue and went to work stitching his lips shut.

Jean-Claude ultimately drowned in his own blood, which was a terribly dramatic way to go. It sent a message, though.

When I was done, I placed a call to the closest cleanup crew on Guild payroll. We valued our secrecy, so I wouldn’t risk leaving the body strapped up in the cemetery for any unsuspecting Shadow Grove local to find. But the message would be clear to the cleanup crew. And word would spread from there. The Guild didn’t tolerate loose lips.

I stood for a moment, staring down at my own handiwork. It was neat stitching across Jean-Claude’s mouth. The recent uptick in defectors had given me plenty of practice, that was for sure.

It took almost a whole packet of disinfectant wipes from my coat pocket to clean up my hands and tools, then I effortlessly blended back into the shadows some distance away to keep an eye on the kill site until the cleaners arrived.

Leaning against a stone cross, I folded my arms and settled in to wait. I didn’t ever have a problem simply *waiting* without turning to a fidget like smoking. But a few moments later, my phone vibrated in my pocket with a call coming through.

Frowning to myself, I pulled the phone out and checked the caller ID, then stood up straighter.

I normally would have ignored all distractions until my assignment was complete, cleanup included. But this... I couldn't seem to resist taking this call.

Connecting the call, I brought the phone to my ear and said nothing. Listening.

In the background, gunshots rang out and glass shattered, but I was more interested in the gasping breath of the caller.

"Leon," the husky female voice coughed out, closely followed by a series of louder gunshots.

I smiled as my blood pumped faster. She was calling me from the middle of a firefight? This was new.

"Danny," I replied. "Sounds like you're in the middle of something there."

She laughed, low and rough. "You could say that. Hold on a second?"

More rapid gunfire and short, sharp breaths from Danny as she no doubt finished up whatever she was working on. Then after a minute, the shots stopped. I waited patiently, eagerly, as a woman's high heels clicked on a hard floor, seventeen steps—I counted them—then three more shots in quick succession.

"Sorry, Leon," she said with a heavy exhale. "What was I saying?"

I couldn't help myself, I grinned. Danny and I had worked together on a handful of assignments, but I hadn't heard from her in a long time.

"I have no idea," I admitted. "What *were* you saying?"

She huffed an irritated sound. "Right. I need a local medic that can stitch up a GSW. I'm in Prague."

My brows raised with curiosity. "Who got shot?"

Danny gave a small growl. "Me. Can you help or not? I can't go to the Guild medic here. I need someone outside the organization."

Danny got shot? No way. I must have heard her wrong. Danny DeLuna was Guild *royalty*. She was totally untouchable... in more ways than one. But shit, consider me curious enough to play her game.

"I can help," I confirmed. She already knew I could, or she wouldn't have called me. The real question was *would* I? "I'll send you his number. Why can't you go to the Guild medic in Old Town?"

She gave a short sigh. "Because the Guild just tried to have me killed." A car door slammed on her end, and an engine revved. "Send me that number, Leon. I'll owe you one."



The call ended abruptly, and I smiled as I forwarded the number for a discreet medic in Prague to Danny's phone. The Guild tried to kill her? Not possible. If a kill order had been issued for Danny DeLuna, I'd have been the first one to hear about it.

But *someone* must have been believable enough to have Danny spooked.

Tapping my foot on the ground, I brought up my secure flight booking app. Looked like my next mission would need to be rescheduled, because I was heading to Prague.

## DANNY

The dull ache of my freshly stitched gunshot wound made me hiss in pain as I paced the dirty carpet of my shitty hotel room. I needed to move on to a new location, a new country, and lay low for a while. My *easy* job had turned out to be an ambush, and I'd left one hell of a mess over in the east side of the city. If I hadn't been shot in the process, I'd have already been halfway around the world by now.

As it was, I was stuck in my hotel room and trying to work out how the *fuck* I'd been set up like that. And why. I was barely even listening to my phone, which was wedged between my ear and shoulder. The bullet had gone through my side, not hitting anything unfixable, but holy hell it hurt now that the adrenaline had worn off.

I refused to take painkillers, either, which didn't help.

"Do you know when you'll be back in town?" my friend asked on the other end of the phone call. "I was thinking it'd be good to get together with Sabby if we can line up our free time. It feels like forever since the three of us have hung out in person."

I grimaced, peeling the hem of my shirt up to check my aching wound. It'd been neatly stitched up, though, and the dressing was still perfectly in place and not seeping blood. I was just being paranoid.

"I'm not sure," I admitted with a sigh. "Things have gone a bit... off plan here."

My friend paused on the phone. "And *here* is... where, exactly?"

I gave a short laugh at her teasing tone. "Nice try, Jude. Look, I better go."

I need to get somewhere safer.”

Jude was one of my two friends, and although she technically worked for the Guild, too, she wasn't privy to my assignment details. She knew I was on a job, and that was it.

“Okay, but hey,” she quickly said, before I ended the call, “please take care of yourself. Call me back when you're safe? I worry.”

I smiled, dropping my shirt back down. “I know you do. I'll be fine, though. I always am.”

Jude huffed, but she couldn't disagree. I hadn't told her that I'd been shot. Fuck me, I could hardly believe I'd told *Leon* of all people. I'd blame shock for that lapse in judgment.

“Alright fine, I'll let you go,” my friend muttered. “Love you, DeLuna.”

“Love you, too, Mackenzie,” I replied, feeling the warm fuzz in my chest that only my two friends could ever muster up.

Ending the call, I tossed my phone onto the bed and hunted through my small bag of clothes for a clean top. I groaned in pain as I wrestled my way out of the dirty one I'd been wearing, but before I could reach for my replacement, a familiar click sounded through the room.

A split second later, the door swung open.

“Holy shit, you really did get shot,” my intruder commented, eyeing my exposed abdomen as he tucked his lock-picks away.

I glowered. “You're lucky I didn't shoot *you*. Ever heard of knocking?” My gun was in hand, I'd grabbed it and aimed without even forming conscious thought.

Leon just offered a lopsided, confident smile and shrugged. “Figured this had a better dramatic flair.”

I rolled my eyes, lowering my gun but not putting it away. Not just yet. “You always do like dramatics, don't you?”

Leon and I had worked together on and off for years, but the assignments were never particularly involved or in depth. He was a hacker, one of the best in the Guild, and we'd typically been paired up on reconnaissance missions or thefts. Neither of those were really my specialty, but that was likely why I hadn't worked with him in a while.

Actually, those jobs I'd worked with Leon still stuck out in my mind as odd assignments for my skill set. But they'd been easy, didn't require me to sleep with anyone, and paid well, so I hadn't questioned it.

His sharp gaze ran over me, reminding me that I wasn't wearing a shirt. I

wasn't modest about him seeing my bra—or my tits, seeing as my bra was little more than lace and see-through mesh—but I didn't like the way he eyed my injury.

“You're one to talk about dramatics,” he commented, his gaze flicking back to my face as I reached for my shirt once more. “Calling me in the middle of a gun fight to say you'd been shot?”

I grimaced, placing my gun down ever so briefly while I tugged my clean tank top on. “Yeah, well... you were the first person who came to mind. What are you doing here? I thought you were in Shadow Grove?”

Leon stiffened ever so subtly. He was so thoroughly *Guild* that he probably had the Circle's crest tattooed on his ass. That is to say, for a techie, he was still an impeccably trained mercenary. His body cues would've been totally imperceptible to anyone who hadn't gone through the exact same training.

“How'd you know that?” he asked in a cool, expressionless voice.

I smirked. “You're not the only one with connections, Leon. But I asked a question, and you haven't answered.” My gun was back in my hand, held casually at my side but ready to shoot if he gave even a flicker of threat.

He knew it, too. His gaze dipped to my gun, then back to my face. “I'm not here to kill you, Danny.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Would you admit it if you were?”

His lips curled slightly. “I suppose I wouldn't. But I suspect they'd need to send someone a whole lot better than a hacker to take down the infamous DeLuna herself. I'm not suicidal.”

He had a point there. I wasn't dumb enough to think he wasn't deadly in his own right... but certain Guild members simply excelled in non-combat areas. As good as Leon was with tech, I doubted he'd be the one sent to kill me.

“So why are you here?” I repeated.

“Curiosity,” he replied without a lick of deception on his face.

I studied him a moment longer, then made up my mind. He wasn't here to finish the job the Algerian mobsters had started the night before.

“Well, I hope you're satisfied,” I sighed, strapping on my thigh holsters and sheathing my guns. “Because I'm in a hurry to get the hell out of Prague.”

Leon didn't seem rushed, though, instead leaning against the wall near the door and tucking his hands into his pockets. “You said the Guild tried to have

you killed. Wanna fill me in? Maybe I can help, if you've landed in trouble?"

I scoffed a bitter laugh. "Oh yeah, you're gonna help a fugitive from the Guild? No thanks, I'll do just fine on my own until I work this out."

"Suit yourself," he murmured, seemingly unconcerned by my refusal. Which was at odds with him turning up in Prague after a two-minute phone call from me.

I wasn't in the mood to pussyfoot around why he was really here, though, and didn't want to remain in one place for too long. Those mobsters last night had been expecting me, which says someone leaked my mission. Maybe it wasn't a Guild kill order, but it was as good as. Only the Circle members had access to active missions. If someone leaked, then it was someone on the Guild's leadership council.

Not wasting my breath on chitchat, I stuffed all my belongings back into my backpack and slung it over my shoulder with a wince.

"Well, it was nice to see you, Leon. Thanks for the assist last night." I jerked the door open and exited. He followed me closely, and I wasn't even a little bit surprised. "No offense, but I think I'm better off on my own."

Leon didn't seem bothered by my unsubtle implication that he was a liability, just followed me into the stairwell. I hated feeling trapped in elevators and wasn't keen on standing out in the hall to wait for it. Besides, I was only on the third floor.

"I can't argue with that," he replied after a few flights of stairs, "but at least let me give you a ride out of the city. I've got a car here, and it'd save you being in public."

I halted sharp enough that he bumped into my back.

"Leon... *why* are you here?" I demanded, spinning to face him. He was just a step above me but seemed to tower over me with our already substantial height difference.

He pushed his black-framed glasses up his nose and shot me a boyish smile. "I had a gap in my schedule, and when you called... I dunno. We had fun on our last assignment, didn't we?"

We did. But that didn't explain him showing up unannounced and uninvited when I'd just had a damn close brush with death.

"I don't believe you," I announced, continuing down the stairs, "but I also don't have time to torture you for answers."

He gave a short laugh. "So, is that a yes to accepting a ride?"

"Hell no," I muttered. We hit the ground floor, and I hesitated a moment

at the door to the lobby, checking that the coast was clear before exiting the stairwell. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, so I hustled across the run-down foyer and out into the street.

Leon reached out and grabbed my wrist before I could disappear into the midday tourist crowd, and I jerked to a halt.

“Danny,” he said with an edge of frustration.

I spun around to face him, a scowl set on my face as I prepared to threaten him. But whatever he—or I—was going to say was irrelevant as the hotel we’d just exited exploded.

## DANNY

**T**he force of the blast threw us several yards into the street, and the air whooshed from my lungs as my side hit the hard pavement. Something heavy landed on top of me, and my freshly stitched side screamed protests of agony.

“Fuck,” I coughed. Or I thought I did. My ears were ringing with a high-pitched whine, rendering me temporarily deaf. All I could see was dark pavement and thick smoke, but I was still alive. So that was something.

The heavy weight on top of me rolled off, and a moment later, a strong hand gripped my wrist to pull me to my feet.

Leon didn’t waste words, just kept his fingers locked around my wrist as he dragged me away from the burning shell of a hotel. All around us were bits of debris and damaged cars; it was damn lucky we’d escaped in one piece.

Luck? Or by design?

“I swear to god, Leon,” I coughed as we ran, “if you planted that bomb —”

“I didn’t,” he snapped, shooting me a sharp look over his shoulder.

He tugged on my wrist, pulling me around the corner with him and away from the carnage and noise of the explosion site. A black Mercedes sedan sat parked between similar cars on the side of the road, and its lights flicked on and off as we approached.

“Get in,” Leon ordered, going for the driver’s side door.

I hesitated a moment, weighing the risk factor. But Leon had nothing to

do with last night's ambush, and if he'd had anything to do with that bomb, I doubt I'd have been outside when it detonated. So I tugged the passenger door open and slid into the seat as he revved the engine.

For a few minutes, neither one of us spoke as Leon drove us away from the destroyed hotel. Then he glanced over at me with a frown of curiosity on his brow.

"So... someone's trying to kill you, huh?"

I snorted a laugh. "What gave you that idea?" My side throbbed and I grimaced, shifting in my seat to try and find a more comfortable position. No question, a few of those stitches would have pulled when I hit the ground like that. Nothing I couldn't fix myself, though, once we got somewhere safe.

Once I got somewhere safe. No offense to Leon—I liked him as well as I liked any Guild mercenary—but I was better off on my own.

"It's not the Guild," he commented, his expression neutral as he drove.

I arched a brow. "What makes you so sure?"

He flicked a quick glance at me, too quick for me to read any emotion in his eyes. "Because it was sloppy, and you're still alive. If there was a kill order on you, the Circle would send an executioner and you'd be dead."

He had a point there. I grunted. "Yeah, well, maybe this isn't a kill order. But someone sure as fuck set me up last night. My job was an ambush, and you know full well—"

"Only a Circle member could have leaked the info," he finished for me, sounding grim. "That's not necessarily true, you know?"

I stiffened. "What do you mean?"

Leon didn't immediately respond, his eyes glued to the streets ahead of us as we drove toward the outskirts of Prague. Eventually, he gave a small frustrated exhale.

"In theory, only the Circle has access to active missions. They assign the jobs, and only they have the details of which merc is on which job at any one time. Right? Well... not true. Or so I've heard. The Circle themselves are too busy and have a lower tier who handles those tasks. An outer circle, so to speak."

I groaned, rubbing a hand over my face. "Great. So my suspect pool is no longer just the seven members of the Circle, it's now also an *outer circle* of god knows how many people."

"Six," Leon corrected. "There are only six Circle members currently."

What the fuck? He was just dropping information like grenades right



now.

“Since when? It’s always been seven. Seven founding families, seven seats on the Circle.” I squinted at him, but he kept his eyes on the road.

“Since about fifteen years ago,” he replied casually as hell, like this was common knowledge. “One of the Circle died with no living heir. That seat has been empty since because the remaining six can’t come to an agreement over which family line should inherit the position.”

I blinked several times, letting that new information sink into my brain. “How do you know about this?”

He flashed me a toothy grin but didn’t give any other response. Of course, he was a hacker. One of the best. No doubt he’d taken a snoop through the Guild servers for some reason or other and helped himself to privileged information.

Not that I could blame him. I’d do the same if I had the necessary skills.

“Just drop me on the west side of the city,” I told him after several minutes of silence. “I can find my own way from there.”

I half expected him to argue with me, but Leon just nodded and drove in the direction I instructed. We didn’t speak about the hotel explosion again. I indicated for him to let me out at Praha-Ruzyně—a train station not far from the airport. Hopefully if anyone was following, they’d think I either took a train or jumped on a flight.

“Thank you for the ride,” I told Leon as I climbed out of his car. A familiar wet trickle down my side made me cringe, and I pressed my hand to the dressing to try and make it re-stick.

Leon got out as well, coming around to the pavement where I was gingerly putting my backpack on. Fucking gunshot wound was making me into a little bitch. I definitely needed to get the hell out of Prague so I could heal up.

“I’m glad you called me, Danny,” he said with an unreadable expression. “What will you do now?”

I flashed him a smile. “You know I can’t tell you that. Don’t worry, it’ll take more than this shit show to take me out for good.” I waved a hand in the direction of the city and the mess I’d left behind.

Leon tilted his head to the side. He was so fucking handsome, but that was one of the assets the Guild valued highly. Beautiful people—as a generalization—were more charismatic, more confident, and made for better mercenaries. What a shame I didn’t date other mercs, or I’d have hit on Leon

about four years ago when we first met.

“You’re not going to defect, are you?” He seemed genuinely concerned by that idea.

I shook my head. “Unlikely. I like living too much. No, I just need to work out who has it in for me, and... I dunno. Deal with that. Somehow.” In a somewhat subconscious gesture, my hand rested on the butt of my gun sitting in my thigh holster. Then again, that was *usually* what I meant when I said I would deal with something.

Leon gave me a long look, his brows dipped slightly in concern. “Okay. Well... call me if you need anything.”

I smiled. “Sure. See you around, Leon.”

His lips kicked up in the ghost of a smile. “I’m sure you will.” He stared at me a moment longer, like he was trying to work something out. Then he gave a nod and climbed back into his car.

He didn’t lurk there, waiting for me to enter the train station, and I appreciated that he was treating me as an equal rather than as a defenseless woman. It also saved me the charade of pretending I was taking a train anywhere.

Once Leon’s car disappeared from sight, I bypassed the train station and quietly broke into a car sitting dormant in a parking space nearby. I had it hot-wired a minute later and let out a long breath as I drove back into the city. Given that someone had just detonated a bomb in the hotel I’d stayed in for all of eight hours, it was safe to assume I was being tailed somehow. So I spent the next two hours winding my way through the streets of Prague and doing everything possible—including changing cars several times—to ensure I was *totally* alone before heading out of the city once more.

I needed to get over the border and into Poland. More specifically, I was heading to a safe house in Kraków, which was an easy five-and-a-half-hour drive from Prague. Once I was there, I could breathe again.

Even with several more vehicle changes along the way, it was only six hours later that I keyed the code into the safe house combination lock. Everything was dark inside, but I still drew my gun and swept the apartment carefully. I’d be an idiot not to in my line of work.

Only when I was satisfied that I was entirely alone did I drop my bag and head to the bathroom for a shower. I was bloody, sweaty, and dirty. Dust and ash from the hotel explosion coated my silver white hair, and the bags under my eyes were big enough to carry a small circus. Good thing I *wasn’t* trying

to sleep with Leon, because this was far from my best look.

“Fucking hell,” I whispered at my reflection. It’d been a *long* time since someone had come so close to killing me. Maybe I was getting rusty in my old age? I may only be twenty-eight, but I’d been an active mercenary for the Guild since I was eight. Twenty years of killing was bound to age a woman, wasn’t it?

As carefully as I could, I peeled my clothes—and weapons—off and stepped into the hot spray of the shower. My dressing was already so messed up that I just peeled it off and tossed it out. I’d need to re-stitch the wound myself, so it couldn’t hurt to rinse the crusted blood away first.

When I was clean, dressed, and re-stitched, I grabbed my phone and checked what time it was in the UK. Relieved to see it was only early evening, I dialed my best friend and put the phone on speaker while I browsed the kitchen for supplies.

“Danny, hey!” Jude answered after the line rang a couple of times. “Shit, sorry, give me a sec.” That second part was said in a hushed whisper, and I smiled as I pulled a sealed bottle of vodka from the freezer. Thank fuck for that.

“You good?” I asked after a couple of moments of muffled noises.

“Yep,” she replied, and a door closed on her end. “Sorry, I’m still at work, and you know how Franklin is.”

I gave a low chuckle. Jude was a librarian, and her boss, Franklin Godwin, was a level eighty twat. That man needed to get laid worse than anyone I’d ever met, he was so tightly strung. And he *hated* Jude talking on her phone at work, even if there was no one in the library.

“Fucking Franklin,” I muttered. “How come you’re there so late?”

Jude huffed a sigh. “Because I was worried sick about *you*, so figured all my nervous energy was better spent here on the archive project. I just didn’t expect Franklin to fucking stick around to ‘help’ me.”

“Well, this is your official call to say that I’m still alive. And *safe*.” That was really all I could tell her, and she knew it.

Still, she gave a frustrated huff. “Alive, sure. But are you hurt?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her about being shot and about the hotel exploding, but any details at all would give her clues about my mission, and that directly violated the Guild secrecy laws. I *never* should have told Leon I was shot or that I was in Prague. But I couldn’t undo the past, so I had to chalk that up to careless mistakes made in shock. I also had to pray Leon

wasn't a stickler for the rules to report me.

"I'm fine, Jude," I replied with a small sigh. "Just wanted to call you and chat about... anything. How was work today, other than Franklin being a prick?"

Jude gave a short pause, like she wanted to push me harder for answers, but she knew better, so after a small sigh, she launched into the latest gossip from her day in Edinburgh's oldest privately owned library. Jude and I had been friends since we were twelve, meeting at boarding school in Vermont. She'd been living and working in Scotland for over ten years now, but somehow still couldn't shake her American accent, which always seemed to lead to cute stories of the people she interacted with during the day.

I envied her for her normal life.

But I was a Guild mercenary, through and through. For me, there was no option for normal. It was work... or die. And call me crazy, but I had no desire to meet the executioner any time soon.

I needed to work out the Prague mess. Soon. Then get the fuck back to work.

# LEON

**D**anny drove non-stop between Prague and Kraków, barely stopping even when she was swapping cars. It was impressive but gave me no opportunity to research her mission that had resulted in her being shot.

I couldn't risk letting her out of my range for even a moment, though. She was too good at her job, and she'd be in the wind. So I forced myself to remain patient and wait until she'd been inside the apartment building for a solid fifteen minutes before I relaxed and pulled out my computer.

The first thing I checked after hacking into the Guild main server, was outstanding kill orders. I wasn't the only executioner for the Guild, I was just the best. So it was *possible* someone else had been assigned her job, and I gave a short exhale of relief when I didn't find her name on the list.

That was something, at least.

The next area I accessed was harder to get into. Danny DeLuna was originally from France. She'd grown up in a Guild-owned orphanage in Lyon, so she fell under Emmanuel Blanchet's authority. Which meant only Emmanuel Blanchet and his outer circle members had access to the exact mission Danny was on.

"Motherfucker," I cursed as I ran into a new firewall. The paranoid bastard had overhauled his systems since I'd last taken a browse through his files. Groaning, I tossed my non-prescription glasses into the passenger seat and scrubbed a hand over my face. Why couldn't Danny be under a stupid Circle member like Carol Atwood? Her systems were so badly protected a

six-year-old could hack in undetected.

A light flicked on up on the seventh floor of the apartment building, and I stared up at it, wondering if that was where Danny was staying.

Why was I so fucking fascinated by her? She was a habit I *thought* I'd kicked a year earlier when I'd flagged a *do not assign* between our files in the Guild database, but here I was. One fucking phone call from her, and my curiosity—my *obsession*—was back worse than ever.

My best explanation was that she was simply too good to be true. She was the *perfect* Guild mercenary... and no one was perfect. The fact that I had requested a half a dozen missions with her, some of which spanned weeks of tedious surveillance with nothing to do but hang out and chat, yet *still* hadn't figured her out? Yeah, it had been turning into something unhealthy. That was why I'd cut myself off and put her out of my mind for the better part of a year.

“So if pretty little Danny DeLuna is so fucking perfect,” I muttered to myself, still staring up at the apartment block, “then why does she think someone is targeting her?”

She must have broken a rule. It was the only explanation. Guild members didn't get killed for no reason; the assassins in particular were too damn valuable. It took *years* of training, which cost money. They were far from disposable. *She* was far from disposable.

With a sigh, I tore my eyes away from the lit-up apartment and turned back to my computer. Maybe it would help if I could at least work out what job she'd been on in Prague.

Giving up on hacking Emmanuel Blanchet—for now—I turned my efforts to one of his outer circle instead. Jacques Lavigne was the most likely candidate for assigning missions in this area, so that's who I targeted next.

A few moments later, my laptop dinged a happy sound as I gained access to Jacques's digital database, and I smirked. “Moron. Alright, let's see...”

I had to scroll back through the job logs for a few weeks, but then I spotted Danny's ID number—3982—against a job link. I double-clicked the file and scanned the details, but nothing jumped out at me as a red flag. It was a standard run-of-the-mill hit on a mid-level Algerian mobster—not even a boss—who'd been hiding out in Prague with his girlfriend.

“How did *that* job get messed up?” I pondered aloud. Not to mention the hotel bomb. Someone must have tracked her back from the shoot-out.

For some reason I couldn't explain, I was reluctant to drive away and

leave Danny alone. So I distracted myself by researching who owned the safe house she'd run to. It wasn't a Guild-owned site, but that made sense if she thought someone was targeting her. Instead, it was owned by a Colombian drug runner named Carlos.

How the fuck was she mixed up with him? Boyfriend?

Another ten minutes of research into Carlos told me that Danny must have met him on a job three years ago, but she was working for his rival at the time. It was an information grab, most likely a honey trap, knowing what I knew about Danny's specialty.

So had they just continued sleeping together after the mission was over? More to the point, why did that idea bother me?

"Fucking hell," I muttered, scrubbing a hand over my face. I'd been sitting outside the apartment building for over an hour and hadn't seen her leave. I had to assume she was in for the night. Hell, she probably wouldn't leave the building for the next couple of weeks until her bullet wound was healed up.

It was what I'd do.

Drumming my fingertips on the steering wheel, I made the decision to head back to Prague. But not before tapping into several CCTV cameras around the apartment building and setting myself a facial recognition alert. If Danny left the building, one of those cameras would catch her and ping me.

Yeah, I knew how that sounded. I was bordering real close on stalker territory.

Whatever. I'd already flown halfway around the world, why stop now? Which was exactly why I drove back to Prague. I wanted to take a look at the ambush location, see if there were any clues left lying around. Maybe I could even find a mobster to torture for information. That'd be fun.

Buoyed with that excitement, I barely even noticed the drive time. My snoop through the mission logs had given me several addresses within Prague that Danny's target had owned or frequented, and based on the background noises when she'd called me, I took a guess that it'd all gone down at a warehouse near a private airfield on the outskirts of the city.

Sure enough, flashing lights of the *Policie České republiky* confirmed my guess as I approached.

I drove right up to the policie cars and parked beside them like I had every right to be there. A quick hunt through my laptop bag found the ID I would need, and I slid my glasses back onto my face.

Clearing my throat, I stepped out of my car and strode toward the taped-off crime scene with purpose. My gaze took in everything in sight. Cars riddled with bullets, broken glass, blood stains... yup, this was the right place. It didn't look like Danny's usual seamless style, but that lined up with her being shot.

One of the local police spotted me and stormed over to undoubtedly tell me to get the hell out of their crime scene, but I flashed him my fake ID badge before he could speak.

"ICC?" the policeman grunted. "This just got more interesting."

I flashed him a smile and shrugged. "Just following a lead. Mind if I take a look around?" My British accent wasn't perfect, but it was good enough to pass. An American working for the International Criminal Court would have stuck out a lot more in this man's mind than a Brit.

"Have at it, friend," the policeman told me, waving his arm behind him. "Not much to find, though. Looks like a mob dispute gone bad, with not a single man left alive for questioning."

That sounded right. Even shot and bleeding, Danny was a professional. She wouldn't have left loose ends lying around. Except for whoever followed her to the hotel, that is.

I wondered if that bomb hadn't been these Algerian mobsters at all. Maybe it was whoever had tipped them off? I made a mental note to look into the travel logs for any of Emmanuel Blanchet's outer circle. They were the most likely suspects.

Looking around the crime scene gave me exactly nothing to work with, which was frustrating. I had an itch to torture and kill, and no one to take it out on. I barely even nodded to the policie on my way out, sliding into my car and slamming the door a fraction too hard.

I needed to get my shit under control, but every step I took seemed to be creating more questions, more mysteries, all around Danny DeLuna.

My fascination with that white-haired goddess was becoming unhealthy. The best thing I could do for either of our sakes was to fly my ass back to America and pretend she didn't exist. That's what I told myself, anyway, as I drove back to Kraków.



## DANNY

**I**t only took about ten days for my wound to heal enough that I could remove the stitches, but I stayed inside the safe house another ten after that. It wasn't good enough to simply take the stitches out. I needed to be back in peak condition before taking any new assignments.

I'd marked myself as *unavailable* in the central database. The Guild, for being over a thousand years old, was always keeping up with modern technology. Almost all of our communications were through an encrypted dark web browser, and I wasn't naïve enough to think my amateur hacking skills could get me anywhere near hunting out a suspect for that Prague ambush.

Leon could probably do it, but I was reluctant to ask him for help again. The fact that he'd turned up right before the hotel exploded had me leery of his intentions. He's always struck me as the kind of guy who put up a good front of being personable, but deep down hated all humans.

For three weeks, I didn't leave the apartment even once. I had groceries delivered the day after I arrived, and survived off that for the rest of my stay. The last thing I needed to do was make myself an easy poisoning target by ordering takeout every night.

My days consisted of working out in the living room, listening to true crime podcasts and groaning with how idiotic some of the serial killers were, and talking shit with Jude via video chat. Our other best friend, our third musketeer, was working around the clock at the moment, and I refrained from the urge to distract her simply because I was bored.

Eventually, though, I was healed enough—and restless enough—to go back to work. Taking another job was the only way I was going to work out who was trying to kill me, but this time I'd be better prepared. I'd keep someone alive to torture for information.

Upon leaving the apartment, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Most likely, that was just a byproduct of remaining sequestered for three weeks. But still, I kept my guard up and my eyes sharp as I headed down the street to catch a taxi. Nothing caught my attention, though, which made me think it was just paranoia.

It didn't take long to find a waiting silver gray taxi cab, and once we were moving, I shot off a text to Carlos—the owner of the safe house—and let him know that I'd gone. Then I texted Jude to let her know I was heading home. She immediately replied and said she would come and stay with me over the weekend when she had a couple of days off work.

I should have refused, if only to keep my friend safe from the target on my back. But it'd been ages since I'd seen her, and I was craving some authentic human interaction. So I gratefully accepted and promised I would have food in my fridge before she arrived.

The trip from Kraków back to my home in Iceland was a long, tiring trip that included several car transfers, a train ride, and a helicopter trip. But it was *always* worth the effort when I stepped through the front door of my house.

The instant my keys hit the table and the door clicked shut behind me, I was *home*.

My house wasn't even really a house. More like a cabin, it was located a half-hour drive from Reykjavík and perched on the edge of a cliff looking out over the North Atlantic Ocean. I was totally off the grid, my electricity from a hydro turbine, and my water collected from a nearby waterfall.

“Hello, Stanley,” I murmured with a sigh, dropping my bag to the ground and kicking my boots off. “You look like you're still doing well, despite my extended absence.”

I headed straight over to my little galley kitchen and grabbed a large plastic jug, filling it with ice cold water from my tap. It was the first thing I did every time I came home.

“That mission went totally off the rails,” I confessed aloud, my chest loosening as I put voice to my looped thoughts. “I got *shot*. Can you believe it?”

Laughing slightly at my own incompetence, I carried the jug of water over to Stanley, my house plant, and poured it into his bone-dry dirt. He was a *Pedilanthus tithymaloides* or better known as Devil's Backbone. Somehow, Stanley just refused to die. Jude had given him to me as a gift nearly ten years ago when I moved into my cabin in the middle of nowhere. Not long after that, I ended up on an extended mission for three months and fully expected to find a dead plant when I got home.

Stanley was a fighter, though.

"Good to see you, buddy," I told my plant, then went to shower and change out of my grimy travel clothes.

When I was clean and my bag unpacked, I turned to my pantry for something edible. Jude hadn't been wrong to remind me about food; I was so infrequently home that perishables weren't worth buying. Luckily, I had some packet pasta that only needed water to cook. Winner.

My phone pinged with an alert while my pasta simmered on the stove, and I picked it up expecting to see a message from Jude.

Dinner was instantly forgotten, though, when I saw what the alert was for.

"Shit, that was quick." I'd only reactivated my status in the Guild database when my helicopter had touched down in Iceland. I sure as hell hadn't expected another mission quite so soon.

Not that I was complaining. For one thing, taking another job was my only lead in working out who was trying to kill me. For another, I *liked* my job. More than a couple of days at home, and I grew painfully bored.

Turning off my stove, I headed over to my computer and booted it up so I could read the assignment details. As mercenaries, it was our choice whether to accept the missions or not—usually depending on the price tag attached—but it was fairly well-known to be bad for your health to decline too many jobs.

This one seemed like an easy task. Intel gathering on an arms dealer, focusing attention on one of his medium-level management. If the Guild was offering it to me, it was probably safe to assume this man had loose lips in the bedroom.

The contract price on it was hefty, too, making the decision a no-brainer. I clicked the button to accept the job, and my emails immediately lit up with the rest of the dossier on my target, along with any other pertinent information.

Like whether I would be working solo or in a team.

“What do you think, Stanley? Is this gonna be another ambush?” I called out to my house plant. As per usual, I got no response. Heaving a sigh, I clicked to download the file. “You’re a man of few words, Stan. My kinda guy.”

My internet was as good as it got in my remote location, and the file didn’t take long to unpack onto my desktop. The first thing I checked was the target profile. Name, age, photo... nothing unusual there. He was a mid-thirties guy from Alabama. Sandy blond hair, sun-damaged skin, beady eyes. Definitely not my type, but that hardly made a difference to the mission. What mattered was whether *I* was *his* type.

For the next while, I read through all the intel gathered on my target—Mr. Edward Gates—and better acquainted myself with the assignment. It seemed simple enough, but these jobs were rarely *easy*. The dossier told me that a second mercenary would also be assigned to the project, but I didn’t recognize the ID number, so that was my next order of business.

I ran the number through the Guild database and came up with a basic mercenary profile, same as everyone working for the Guild had.

“Petr Wagner,” I read aloud. “You reckon this guy looks like a hacker, Stanley?”

My plant had no opinion. Shocker.

“Hacker for *sure*,” I answered my own question, memorizing Petr Wagner’s face. The Guild gave us these details so that it wouldn’t be so easy for “the good guys” to take out one of our mercs and substitute in one of their agents. It’d happened in the past—before my time—and the Circle had decided we were safer this way.

Of course, no one knew who the Circle themselves were. So I had no clue how they maintained their own security without breaking secrecy. The whole thing hurt my head when I thought too hard on it, but that’s why I was assassinations and infiltrations. I’d leave the genius-level shit to the actual geniuses. Like Leon.

Fucking hell, why was I thinking about Leon again?

“Dammit, Stanley,” I muttered aloud, heading to my kitchen to grab some vodka from the freezer. “This is the result of too long without good sex, you know that? My *tiny, insignificant* crush on Leon from like three years ago has turned into a whole thing inside my head.”

I poured myself a shot and knocked it back. The ice-cold spirit burned down my throat, but it was a good kind of burn. Comforting.

Stanley was a great listener, but fuck me, sometimes I needed someone to actually give me advice. I guess that's what I had Jude and Sab for.

Pouring another shot of vodka, I dialed Jude and set the phone down on the counter, speaker on.

"Hey, babe," she answered, right before it would have gone to voicemail. "Good timing, I just got out of the shower."

"Ooh, I caught you naked? How salacious," I teased.

Jude chuckled. "Yeah, yeah. You made it home safe, then?"

I yawned, running my fingers through my long, damp hair. "Sure did. Stanley is still alive, if you were wondering."

"Aw, good to hear," she replied with another laugh. "That plant will probably survive the apocalypse in all fairness."

She had a good point. "Hey, so I wasn't just calling to tell you I'd made it home."

Jude gave a groan of dread. "No... what's happened? I thought you just wanted to chat. Did you crash the helicopter? Desmond will *murder* you if it's damaged."

I snickered a laugh, but it was a valid concern. Not long after I'd moved to my cabin in Iceland, it became abundantly clear that commercial flights weren't going to work for my commute. So I'd sweet talked my way into a long-term loan of a Guild helicopter. Desmond, who ran the Guild airstrip in Scotland, had a weakness for petite women and brazen flirtation.

"I didn't crash the helicopter, Jude, my god, have a little faith. No, I *did* call to chat, but I also want your advice on a thing." I wrinkled my nose at myself and tossed back my shot of vodka.

"A thing?" Jude repeated, skeptical as hell.

I sighed. "A guy thing."

There was a pause on the call long enough to make me check if it was even still connected, but it was. I'd just caught her off guard.

"Um... Dan, are you *seeing someone*?" Jude all but shrieked that last part, and I screwed my face up, cringing at my own awkwardness.

"No," I replied, quick to get her back on track. "No, fuck no. Not since... well, you know."

Jude made a sound. "I do know. Hence my shock. So, what guy-thing, then?"

I poured another shot. My new assignment wasn't for a couple of days; I could afford to get a light buzz in the safety of my own home.

“There’s a guy,” I muttered, then gulped my shot. “And I can’t get him out of my head.”

“Oooooooh,” Jude laughed. “I see. What guy?”

I blew out a long breath. “Doesn’t matter. I met him years ago and had a *tiny* crush, but it never turned into anything and it was during the whole Carlos thing anyway, so terrible timing—”

“The worst,” Jude agreed. “But you’ve seen this guy again?”

“Uh huh,” I confirmed, picking my words carefully. “I called him a few weeks ago to ask for a connection for a thing, and then he sort of just showed up out of the blue to check up on me.”

I was well aware how vague and confusing that sounded, but Jude was used to my careful dance around details. She just took it in stride, and it was probably why our friendship had survived all these years.

“He just... *showed up*?” she repeated. “Uh, red flag, babe. That’s weird. Isn’t it? Unless he was already in the area?”

I groaned. “He definitely wasn’t. But it wasn’t creepy or anything, he just seemed... I dunno. Concerned?” But *concerned* didn’t seem the right word to go with Leon’s intense stare. Fascinated seemed more accurate, but that just opened more questions. “Anyway, it didn’t get weird. He just helped me out with a thing, then gave me a lift to the train station and... that’s it.”

Jude was quiet for a moment, but she was doing a quiet *thinking* hum, so I knew she was still there.

“That’s it?” she finally said. “He dropped you off and just left?”

I frowned. “Yeah. Why?”

She made a scoffing sound. “Well, I dunno. He didn’t say that he’d call you or arrange to meet up somewhere or... anything?”

I scratched the bridge of my nose, staring out my floor-to-ceiling windows to the darkness of the ocean beyond. “No, nothing. That was it.”

“Huh,” she murmured. Then drew a breath. “So... why is this a *guy-thing*?”

“Because I can’t get him out of my head!” I exclaimed. “I started with that part, Judith. Listen. It’s been three weeks, and I think about him at least once a day. That’s not *me*, so now I’m stressing out, and Stanley is *no fucking help*.”

Jude snickered a laugh. “Well, duh, he’s a plant. Okay, I get the problem. Why don’t you just call him then? It’s been forever since you dated anyone, maybe it’s time to move on?”

I sighed. “I can’t. There’s... extenuating circumstances.” Like how I refused to sleep with other Guild mercs because that *never* ended well for either party. Also the fact that I doubted Leon was even remotely attracted to me in that way. “Anyway. I just needed to talk it out because I got a new job, and I was a little bit disappointed when I saw the joint contract *wasn’t* with him. And now I feel stupid. So... advice please?”

“Uh, you took another job already?” Jude sounded genuinely surprised. “I thought you were taking time off?”

I grimaced. I was a workaholic, no question, but I loved my job, so was it really such a bad thing? But Jude had been planning to come stay with me for the weekend, so she was probably hurt I was canceling.

“Sorry, Mac,” I groaned, using the shortened form of her surname in an attempt to soften her up. “I’ll come see you on Friday instead?”

“It’s fine,” she murmured, “I just thought you needed a proper break, that’s all. Friday is cool, though. Uh, as for this guy? I think you just need to get under some strange dick, my friend. Your lady garden is probably so overgrown it’d be like a “Tomb Raider” mission, but I can almost guarantee that would flush this dude out of your head.”

I laughed. “So long as it’s *great* strange dick. Yeah, you’re probably right. Thanks, Mac. You always have the best advice.”

“Mm-hmm,” she replied. “Hey, I better go, someone’s at my door. I’ll see you Friday?”

“Count on it,” I said firmly. “Love you, Mackenzie.”

Jude sighed. “Love you too, DeLuna. Hey, check in with Sab for me, would you? I’m worried about her, and she’s not replying to me.”

That sounded like par for the course with our third. She went dark for *months* sometimes, then turned up on one of our sofas with a bottle of champagne in hand and wild tales to tell. Still, I promised I’d call her and ended the call with Jude.

The sudden silence after the call ended left me feeling uneasy, so I poured more vodka and toasted Stanley with it.

## DANNY

Jude was up to no good. I knew it from the moment she called to change our quiet dinner at her place to drinks at a cocktail lounge called The Voodoo Rooms. It was one of Jude's favorites, being an easy walk—or stumble—from her home, and I had to admit we usually had a good time there. They made good drinks, and that was half the battle.

“You know I can't drink tonight,” I scolded her as we took a seat on an overstuffed leather sofa. As much as I favored vodka when I was home, I never drank heavily while on a job, and I never wanted to risk a hangover messing with my head and getting me killed. My assignment started the next day, so I'd be on a one-drink limit tonight.

Jude rolled her eyes. “I know. But you're fun even without the alcohol, so just order something *virgin*.” She grinned at me with that word, and I shook my head with a laugh.

“You're going to try and get me laid, aren't you?” I groaned. “Jude...”

Her eyes went wide, feigning innocence. “What? Me? No. It just sounded like you needed to get out and socialize with real people for a night. So here we are. Surrounded by *real* people.”

I blew out a sigh. “You're right about that.” After all, I'd just spent three whole weeks locked up inside a safe house while waiting for my gunshot wound to heal, then went home to my isolated cabin in Iceland with no company other than Stanley the house plant. Holy hell, Jude was right. I was bordering on recluse level. The only people I'd interacted with face-to-face in



over a month were job targets and assets. And Leon.

No wonder I'd been crushing all over him again. I was just starved for authentic human interaction.

"You're kinda awesome, Jude. You know that?" I shot my friend a warm look, and she beamed.

"I did know that, thanks. But you can still tell me whenever you want." She raised her head to catch a waitress's eye, then ordered a couple of cocktails for us along with a huge amount of food.

I gave her a pointed look, but she just wrinkled her nose. "You can have *one*. What time do you need to leave tomorrow anyway?"

"Early." I pouted. I needed to get over to New York, but thankfully the time zones would work in my favor this time. That, and the fact that I could use Carlos's private jet rather than sticking to commercial flight schedules.

Jude gave me a sympathetic frown, then shook her head. "Okay. Let's make tonight worthwhile, then. Who knows when I'll get to see you again?"

"Good point," I agreed.

Our cocktails arrived and we slid into our easy conversation about anything *not* work-related. Which, considering I had no life outside of my job, usually consisted of me asking Jude a ton of questions about *her* work. It never failed to fascinate me how many interesting people she met inside a freaking library. Then again, it shouldn't shock me. Readers were living multiple magical, fantastical lives all within their heads. It was enviable and made sense that they were vivacious people inside their happy place.

"Wait," I interrupted Jude, laughing as she told me a story about a woman she'd found tucked up in a sleeping bag in the romance section, "she was *sleeping* there? For how long?"

Jude spread her hands wide. "We have *no* idea. She'd somehow been staying out of the CCTV line of sight, and it was in the publicly accessible area, so you know security isn't super diligent up there. It was just so funny, because she was totally rational when she explained that she couldn't stand the thought of leaving all her book boyfriends behind at night."

I grinned, but hell if I could judge that logic. I talked to my fucking plant, after all.

"Hello," Jude said, batting her lashes at a handsome guy who had just approached our table.

He flashed her a smile in return. "Hi. I'm sorry to interrupt, I hoped maybe I could ask you for a favor?" He was English and dressed nicely in

well-fitting jeans and a button-down shirt.

He had a *great* smile, too, which Jude must have noticed. She gave me a long, pointed look, then jabbed me with her elbow in case I missed her unsubtle hint.

“What’s the favor, stranger?” I asked, teasing. Okay fine, *flirting*. Maybe Jude was right about a one-night stand clearing my head out. It hadn’t actually been as long as she thought since I’d had sex—it was a requirement of my job more often than I cared to admit. But it’d been a *long* time since I’d slept with someone for fun.

The guy grinned, his pretty eyes twinkling with attraction. “Stranger? No way. We’re good friends who just don’t know each other yet. But about that favor... my buddy set me up on a blind date with this girl, and things have turned awkward. I wondered if I might join you two for a drink until he’s, uh, done?”

He nodded his head to a booth not far from ours, where a bearded man had his tongue halfway down a blonde woman’s throat, and his hand pumping away under a brunette’s skirt while she kissed his neck.

“Oh, *that* kind of awkward,” I commented with a laugh. “Struck out, huh?”

The cute guy winced. “Big time.” He ran his hand over the back of his neck, making his shirt pull across thick biceps. “But I’m staying at his place, so I can’t leave without him.”

“Well, in that case, you’d better take a seat,” Jude announced brightly. “I’ll go order us a round of drinks and give you two some time to work on that *friendship*.” She winked at me, as tactful as a sledgehammer, then grabbed her cane to stand up.

The guy waited while she shifted past him—the bar had gotten busy in the time we’d been eating—then slid into the booth beside me. Closer than a *friend* might sit, which gave me excited flutters of sexual anticipation.

“She’s a smooth matchmaker,” he joked, nodding at Jude making her way to the bar. She used her cane to walk, leaning heavily on it to compensate for her left leg.

I smiled. “Ultra smooth. I’m Danny, by the way.” I put my hand out to him to shake.

“Danny,” he repeated, making it into a sexy sound. “I’m Thom. Single, no kids, no drama.”

I coughed a laugh. “Oh wow, just laying that right out there, huh?”

He grinned, knowing perfectly well what effect that smile had. “American girls usually like the direct approach, don’t they?”

I didn’t correct him on my nationality, because general American was my default accent. I spoke multiple other languages fluently, and technically I was born French, but American suited my anonymity. Particularly with the number of jobs I was assigned to in the States.

“You’re not wrong,” I murmured, taking a sip from my drink. I’d swapped to non-alcoholic after that first cocktail, but I didn’t need the buzz of liquor when I had arousal lighting me up instead.

Jude returned to us with a tray of drinks balanced on her hand, and my new friend jumped up to take them from her. She sat back down in the booth and introduced herself to Thom, and he turned on the charm for her as well. I did notice that his gaze kept drifting back to me, though, sending me flirty glances and deliberately brushing my hand on the table as he reached for his drink.

Classic flirtation. It was kind of nice not to have to initiate for once. I was so used to being the aggressor, being the assertive one in a flirtation, that I quickly found myself having an amazing time letting him take the lead.

So much so that I didn’t even notice how late it was getting until Jude waved her phone under my face and reminded me that I had to be up early tomorrow.

Reluctantly, I peeled myself out of the booth when she got up.

“Danny, wait up a second,” Thom said, heading out of the busy bar with us, “Uh, maybe... could I grab your number? Maybe next time we’re both in town, we could meet up?”

Tempting. *So damn tempting.*

“I’ll just... go call a cab,” Jude told us, waggling her brows suggestively and heading further down the street to give us some level of privacy.

“So?” Thom prompted. “Can I get your number?”

I wavered, seriously considering it. But I wanted a quick one-night flirtation, maybe some hot sex. Not a relationship. So instead of denying him, I looped my arms around his neck and pulled him down to meet my lips.

He didn’t hesitate in kissing me back, his lips hot and hungry as his arms banded around my waist. *Goddamn*, it felt good to be all pressed up against a good-looking man. I curved my body against him, moaning as his tongue delved deeper into my mouth.

Okay, so he wasn’t the *best* kisser in the world. Little too much saliva and

the stale taste of beer on his breath. But you know what? It wasn't the be-all and end-all. So long as he could take directions and make me come... that's all that mattered, right? It wasn't like I wanted to marry him.

"Come to think of it," Jude called out from half a block away, "you two take your time. I'll leave the door unlocked, Danny!" Her laughter echoed in the crisp night air, but fucking *whatever*. This was her intention all along.

"Fucking hell, you're so sexy, Danny," Thom groaned as he ground his medium-sized erection against me. "My buddy probably won't even be home for ages. We could go there... I'm on his couch, though."

Oh... sex on a stranger's couch. Tempting. But part of me probably preferred a quickie around the corner in the alleyway beside the trash. At least then I didn't need to do an awkward dance to leave again later.

Thom seemed to read my mind, glancing in the direction I'd just looked. Then he gave a low, husky laugh. "Danny, dirty girl. You like fucking in public?" He didn't wait for my answer, just grabbed my hand and headed for the alley.

Damn. Why was I suddenly finding him ten times less attractive than before he'd kissed me? There was a lot to be said for the sexual tension *without* the sex... and Thom was no longer doing it for me.

Before I needed to bullshit my way out of ever seeing Thom again, a loud gunshot cracked through the night. I acted on instinct, knocking Thom to the ground and grabbing my concealed Glock 42 and scanning for our attacker.

"Whoa, what the hell?" Thom exclaimed, sounding irritated. "It was just a car backfiring. Chill out, Danny."

When no further shots came, I reluctantly let him up but didn't put my gun away. Not until I was sure no one was shooting at us.

"Is that a *gun*?" Thom stared at my weapon like I was brandishing a hissing viper. "Okay, you know what? I think it's probably time I called it a night." Not waiting for me to object—not that I planned to—he hurried away down the street but not before I caught the words *crazy bitch* muttered under his breath.

Great. So much for a fun one-night stand.

I scanned the area again, searching for the shooter, but came up blank. Maybe it had been a car backfiring? Yeah, not likely. I didn't make mistakes like that. To confirm my suspicions, I spotted a bullet lodged into the brick wall just outside the alleyway I'd planned to fuck Thom in.

Someone definitely took a shot at us. So I remained cautious and kept my

gun in hand as I headed toward Jude's apartment and was distinctly disappointed when I made it inside without any more incident.

# LEON

**I**t was a damn good thing my Guild mentor had her throat slit five years earlier, because she'd be having a field day with my recent choices. Still, her being long dead didn't stop that little voice in my head sneering at my uncharacteristic lack of control or mocking my obsessive tendencies that she'd worked so hard to stamp out.

Fuck that bitch, though. If I wanted her continued opinions, I wouldn't have killed her.

Admittedly, taking a shot at that guy mauling Danny last night hadn't been my most rational moment. It had the desired effect, though, making the handsy fuck back off. Had he *seriously* been thinking of dragging her into that dirty, trash-filled alleyway to fuck?

Disgusting.

I'd left it at scaring him off, choosing to keep an eye on Danny instead of following the creep. I almost thought she'd spotted me at one point, too. Holy hell, it'd gotten my blood pumping.

And now here I was, checking into a Palazzo New York hotel suite.

"There you go, Mr. Smith," the woman behind the check-in desk said, sliding a magnetic keycard over the counter to me. "Room twelve-oh-eight. Your wife already checked in about an hour ago."

She was early.

"I have a reservation in our restaurant for you tonight at eight, is that correct?"

I dipped my head in a nod. "Yes, that sounds right. Thank you"—I

checked her nametag and offered a dazzling smile—“Rebecca. You’ve been great.”

She flushed pink at the praise, but I didn’t give it another thought as I took my keycard and picked up my suitcase. She was already checked in. I wondered what she was doing. Going over the assignment objectives? Cleaning her guns? Or showering…?

Why that thought even crossed my mind, I had no idea. Yes, I liked women, but I had very strict rules over who I screwed around with. *She* wasn’t an option.

I carried my own luggage—not trusting the delicate electronics inside to the bellboy who offered—and made my way up to the twelfth floor. I didn’t bother to knock, swiping my keycard and pushing the door open as soon as the green light blinked.

“Honey, I’m home,” I announced, stepping into the opulent room. It was only one of the mid-level hotel rooms, but there was no such thing as a bad room at the Palazzo.

Danny stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in just a towel, her silvery white hair damp from the shower. “Leon? What the fuck are you doing here?” Her glare hardened with suspicion. “Are you stalking me? Because I’d hate to have to put a bullet between those pretty eyes of yours.”

*Oof.* Yes, I was stalking her a little bit. But she thought I had pretty eyes. I liked that observation way more than I should have.

Clearing my throat, I set my luggage down and adjusted my glasses. “Last minute changes. You didn’t get the notification?” She should have, I pushed it through to her alerts myself.

Wrinkling her nose, she crossed the room to pick up her phone. “I must have just missed it when I got in the shower.”

I said nothing in return, trying really fucking hard not to stare at the long, bare expanse of her legs from beneath that towel. Or think about her lack of clothing beneath it.

“So you were planning on greeting Petr in just a towel? Lucky him.”

She tossed her phone back onto the bed as I lifted my case onto the table. “That’s weird. I thought you data boys went through the same basic training as the rest of us.” She arched a brow. “Nudity hasn’t caused me any unnecessary modesty in a *long* time. Was it different for you?”

I bit my tongue to keep from saying what I wanted to say. To stop myself from telling her what I *really* thought about her specialist department of the

Guild. Instead, I just shrugged and focused on setting up my equipment.

“No, it was the same,” I murmured. In fact, mine was worse than most. But maybe not Danny DeLuna’s. A mercenary didn’t gain a reputation like hers for skating through on passing marks.

She paused a moment before responding, like she was considering my answer. Then she shrugged. “Cool. Just checking.” Then she dropped her towel.

Dropped. Her. Fucking. Towel.

“So if this was any other last-minute call in, I’d probably be cancelling the assignment for tonight,” she told me, casually sorting through her suitcase for clothing while stark naked. I used to think I was unshakable, that I was the ultimate master over my own desires and they held no power over me.

I was wrong.

Swallowing hard, I sat down at the little table and focused my attention on my equipment. “Oh yeah?” I replied, keeping my voice calm and even. “But you’re not?”

“Nah, we’ve worked together enough for me to know you’re capable of improvising. I’m guessing you’ve already gotten at least briefly up to speed on the job?” She held up two lacey scraps of lingerie, one in each hand. “So, knowing what you know of our target, black or red?”

My mouth went dry. Her tits were fucking phenomenal. “Neither,” I croaked, then cleared my throat. “His favorite color is blue.”

Danny smirked. “Right answer.” She tossed the black and red lingerie aside and started dressing in a sinful set made of royal blue satin and delicate lace. “Here’s hoping the intel is solid this time. Let’s not forget what happened on my last job.”

She grimaced and my gaze snapped to her midsection as she clipped the bra over her perfect tits. The scar from her wound was still a vivid red against her pale skin, but it seemed to be healed really well already. If anything, the scar was only going to add to her appeal.

As a mercenary, I meant.

Yeah. Sure. That’s what I meant.

Gritting my teeth, I shifted my attention to the computers again. I needed to get it all set up and the programs ready to run, but honestly it was something I could have done in five minutes. Pretending it was more complicated gave me something else to focus on, though.

Danny continued chatting about the assignment, calm and confident as



anything. She was so incredibly comfortable in her own skin. Not skittish or nervous to be in the same room as me in the least. I guess that was due to her own lethal nature, though. I'd sworn off sleeping with mercenaries for so long I forgot how different we were from regular people.

She remained in just that sexy lingerie as she applied her makeup and blow dried her snowy hair until it fell in softly curling waves all the way to the small of her back. Then she *really* tested me by propping a leg up on the bed to strap a gun to her thigh.

Shit. My dick was getting hard now. *Come on, Leon. You're not a blushing virgin, just think of unsexy things!*

Easier said than done when our whole conversation surrounded seduction, weapons, torture and information extraction. All my biggest turn-ons.

Drawing a deep breath, I shifted in my seat and locked my focus on the programs I was booting up. I needed to hack into the hotel's security system so that I could locate which room Edward Gates had checked into, then clone the access card, monitor CCTV... plenty of things to keep me busy and *not* wondering how soft Danny DeLuna's skin would feel under my hands.

"Leon," she snapped, jerking my attention up to her sapphire blue eyes. She was leaning on the table behind my computer, frowning at me. "Are you paying attention?"

"Of course I am," I replied, flicking my gaze back to my screen. I definitely wasn't paying attention. Not to what she was *saying* anyway. Damn it, this was why I'd put a block on her file for joint assignments, because I knew I wasn't myself around her. I was... weak. I hated weak.

Danny made an annoyed sound that sparked my temper. I was so close to pushing back my chair and—

Nope. No. Guild agents were not good fuck buddies. I gritted my teeth again and pushed the desire aside.

"Alright, well, we only have half an hour before our dinner reservation. Wanna run through the plan with me at least once so we're on the same page?" Her sassy tone had me looking back up to meet her eyes again—against my better judgment.

Shit's sake. She couldn't be *more* different from Layla... why the hell was I so obsessed? I needed to get my head onto the assignment, or we'd both end up dead tonight.

"Sure. You run me through it, and I'll tell you what doesn't work." I sat back in my chair, linking my arms behind my head. Her eyes flicked over my

biceps ever so briefly, and I smiled internally. Yeah, about damn time Danny noticed I didn't fit the skinny, pale hacker profile.

She gave a vexed sound at my patronizing tone but pulled out the chair opposite me and sat down nonetheless. Her reputation hadn't been exaggerated when it said she was all business, all the time. She just sat there all decked out in satin, lace, and weaponry, laying out our mission like she was chatting about the weather.

Somehow, I had a feeling that image would be revisiting me at a later date.

Clearing my throat, I focused on what she was saying—rather than just the shape of her lips as she spoke—and offered corrections to areas of the plan that I thought could be done better. Overall, though, her idea was solid.

“Alright, this *should* go off without a hitch,” I agreed when we were both happy with our tasks. “So long as no one tries to kill you again.” I winked at her before I could stop the action, then mentally slapped myself.

Her brow creased as she stared back at me. Like she was asking herself whether I'd been involved in the Prague mess again. Then she shook it off with a laugh.

“Good luck to them if they do. Just so we're clear, I want them alive if they *do* try anything.”

I ran my thumb over my lower lip, reading far too deeply into that statement. “You've got no leads, huh?”

“Clearly,” she replied with a small, adorable growl. “Just get out of the way when the shooting starts, alright?”

I almost laughed. Almost. Instead, I just shrugged and shifted my gaze away. “Yes, ma'am. I better get dressed so we can get this job done.”

She checked the time on her delicate white gold watch. “Good point. Hurry up, I hate being late for things.”

My eyes narrowed briefly at her bossiness, but I got up and grabbed my suit bag anyway. I needed to shower... and get some physical distance from Danny. Easier said than done in a hotel room.

I had no one to blame but myself, though. I left the bathroom door halfway open when I got in the shower, and couldn't stop watching her in the mirror as she dressed. When I got out, I was in a foul mood because *not once* had she taken the opportunity to check me out while I was naked.

Danny DeLuna really was all business, no play. Which was a good thing. I should be *glad* she wasn't attracted to me, so I didn't have to break her heart

when I turned her down.

*Should be.* But I wasn't. Not even a little bit.

## DANNY

Okay, logically I knew Leon had just been proving a point by leaving the bathroom door open. Showing me that he was just as unaffected by nudity as I was. But *goddamn*, it was tempting to get an eyeful as he showered. He had a ton of tattoos covering an *incredibly* toned body, and it took a serious amount of willpower not to bust in there and take a closer look. Especially at the ones decorating his left thigh... holy *shit*.

I should have gone home with beer-breath Thom last night. Maybe then my libido wouldn't be losing its ever-loving *shit* over Leon right now. I'd always been attracted to him, but when we'd worked together in the past, I was all tangled up in a toxic relationship with Carlos's brother. Now, though? Whole different story.

"Head in the game, Danny," I muttered to myself as I slipped my feet into a pair of boring—but expensive—nude pumps. From the corner of my eye, I watched Leon buttoning his charcoal gray shirt over those washboard abs, and my mouth watered a little. Thank *fuck* for my peripheral vision, that's all I was going to say on the matter.

"Did you say something?" he asked, making my spine stiffen.

"Nope," I lied. "You ready?"

He shot me a narrow-eyed look, seeming pissed off about something, but didn't respond as he passed me a tiny communication earpiece. We were playing the roles of a rich, bored married couple, so we were both dressed like idiots. Leon could pull it off, though. Instead of looking like a Wall Street banker, he looked like a fashion model.

I just looked like a trophy wife with my dress neckline only just low enough to show off my push-up bra assisted tits and my makeup far more *suburban* than my usual palette of dark liner and crimson lips. The three-carat diamond ring on my hand wasn't fake, either. Nothing like a cubic zirconia engagement ring to blow an undercover mission.

"Shall we, Mrs. Smith?" Leon offered me his arm, then opened the door.

"Just a sec," I murmured, pausing in front of the mirror. I stared at myself a moment, then closed my eyes and drew a deep breath. When I opened my eyes again, I was staring back at a stranger. My gaze was vacant and placid, my lashes fluttered like little butterflies as I blinked, and my resting bitch face had transformed into resting twit face with an idiotic smile settled on my lips.

"That's fucking scary," Leon admitted when I turned to him and took his arm.

I gave a tinkling laugh, like the clueless, overmedicated arm candy I was supposed to be tonight. "Oh, Toby, you're too nice. Keep up with those compliments, and we won't even make it to dinner."

My wink was heavy and suggestive, but that was the part I was playing. Horny, bored, airheaded arm candy with an inattentive husband. We were out in the hotel corridor, heading for the elevator, so it was game on. We were Tobias and Michelle Smith.

Even so, Leon stiffened when I looped my arm through his. For a flash, hurt and irritation rippled through me at his reaction to touching me. But then I realized it was perfectly in character for Tobias Smith, a man who was getting his dick wet anywhere *but* at home. These weren't fabricated identities—those were far too flimsy. No, the Guild didn't take chances on these things, so the real Tobias and Michelle Smith were probably drugged and tied up in a van somewhere.

I puffed out a small sigh but continued to hold his arm as we got into the elevator. Quietly, I was liking having my hands on him, even if it was just his forearm through a blazer. Yeah... I had issues. Maybe I'd strike it lucky and Mr. Edward Gates would get me off tonight while I squeezed him for sensitive information. After all, there was no reason why I couldn't get something *extra* out of my mission.

Neither of us spoke for a couple of floors, but when an older couple got into the elevator on the seventh floor, I started telling Leon—or *Toby*—about a ladies' high tea that Michelle was helping to organize for a Daughters of the

Mayflower fundraiser. It made my brain bleed, but I'd thoroughly studied my character on the flight over. I had Michelle Smith down pat.

"That's nice, dear," Leon drawled as the elevator reached the lobby level. His bored tone was perfectly on point, and amusement rippled through me when he patted my hand on his arm in a patronizing way.

I just batted my lashes and bobbed happily along beside him as we made our way through to the hotel restaurant. The maître d' showed us over to our table near the window, but I'd already spotted Edward Gates at a single table near the back of the restaurant.

We barely even sat down before I started making a fuss about an imaginary breeze from the sealed window. The maître d' was quick to hurry back over and reseal us as far away from the non-existent chill as possible. Right beside Mr. Gates.

Leon took the seat against the wall—beside Edward—and left me to sit facing him. Easy position for me to catch the attention of our mark while my "husband" wasn't paying attention.

The best way to lure in a target was to let *them* approach first. It made them feel like they were in control of the situation. That they couldn't have possibly been manipulated, because it was *their* choice to initiate contact. Right?

Wrong.

Manipulation was so much more nuanced than mere words. Take Mr. Gates for example. Throughout our meal in the restaurant—which was delicious—I never met his curious glances. No matter how many times "my husband" cut off one of my insipid stories about kittens or embroidery group with harsh words, or how many times he pulled out his phone to ignore "his wife" even more thoroughly.

Eventually, Leon announced that he was going to the bathroom and walked away without waiting for a response from me. I gave it a second, then let the placid smile slip from my lips. My posture drooped, and I picked at the dessert I'd barely touched. Michelle Smith was constantly watching her weight, after all.

"Sorry, I don't mean to intrude," Edward spoke up, right on cue, "but are you okay?"

I bit the inside of my cheek to stay in character and not roll my eyes. Edward wasn't a *nice guy*, he just liked to pretend he was. Mr. Edward Gates had a fetish for married women.

With glassy eyes, I sniffed dramatically and pasted a watery smile over my lips.

“Oh, yes,” I replied in an embarrassed voice, “yes, sorry, I hope we haven’t disturbed your meal. I know I talk far too much.”

Edward Gates gave a sympathetic frown, shaking his head. “Not at all. You just seemed a bit sad, that’s all.” He glanced up, then quickly sat back in his seat. “Sorry, enjoy the rest of your night.”

A second later, Leon’s hand rested on the back of my neck, and I gave a small flinch. Just enough for Edward to notice.

“Michelle, I have a conference call in twenty minutes,” Leon barked, “let’s go.”

I nodded, placing my napkin on the table and giving Edward Gates a shy smile as I stood from my chair. Leon grabbed my hand a little rougher than necessary and started halfway dragging me out of the restaurant behind him.

We stepped straight into the elevator, and Leon brought up the restaurant’s security footage on his phone. We needed to keep an eye on Mr. Gates for a little over twenty minutes, but I was fairly sure he’d still be where we left him. He seemed to be settling in for the night with a bottle of scotch on his table and a book of crossword puzzles to keep him entertained.

Neither of us spoke until we were back in our room, then Leon went straight over to his computer equipment.

“What are you doing?” he snapped when I lifted my dress to unstrap my gun holster.

I arched a brow at him, tossing the whole apparatus on the bed. “The intel was wrong. Edward didn’t look at my tits once, but the way he eyed my ass? He’ll find my gun in a heartbeat, and our cover will be blown.”

Leon scowled, his computer forgotten for the moment. “So you’re going back down there unarmed? That seems incredibly foolish, Danny.”

I snorted a laugh. “It’s cute that you think I need a gun to defend myself. Time check?”

He glowered at me a little longer, then checked his watch. “Ten minutes.”

“Good.” I flipped my perfectly curled hair forward and ruffled my fingers through it, messing it up. Then I went to the mirror and used my thumb to smudge my lipstick ever so slightly, but all the while, I remained hyperaware of the way Leon watched me. Like he was decoding a puzzle. Or coding one.

“You know what you need to do?” I checked with him, pressing my finger to the communication device in my ear.

He gave a small nod in response and tapped something on his laptop that gave a soft ding in my ear.

“Working,” I confirmed, then checked my watch. “I should get back down there. He still at his table?”

Leon shifted his gaze back to the computer and double-clicked. “Yup, and he has a friend with him now, too.”

Irritation ran through me. “Dammit. Who?”

Leon shrugged. “His back is to the camera. He hasn’t taken his coat off, though, so he might not be staying long.”

“That explains why he was sitting there alone all night,” I pondered aloud. “He must have been waiting for this guy.”

Leon nodded. “Give me one minute.” He pulled Edward Gates’s keycard from his pocket—lifted from him when Leon had gotten up to “go to the bathroom” earlier. It took no time at all for him to scan the card and duplicate it, then he stood up to hand the original back to me.

I tucked it into the small pocket in the seam of my dress, then checked the mirror to make sure it didn’t show through the fabric.

Leon hadn’t gone back to his computers, instead standing just a fraction closer than necessary as I checked over my costume.

“What?” I asked, meeting his eyes in the mirror.

He arched a brow, running a hand over his facial hair. It wasn’t long enough to really be a *beard* per se, but it was deliberate enough to be more than stubble. There needed to be a word for that in-between length.

“That looks fake,” he told me, indicating the way I’d smudged my lipstick.

My eyes narrowed. I hated being questioned on my methods. This was one of the major reasons I preferred to work alone. Because other merc’s *always* thought they knew better. Arrogant assholes, all of them—myself included.

“You’re an expert now, huh?” I held his gaze in the mirror, confident that he was just being critical for the sake of being critical.

The corner of his lips kicked up in a tiny smirk. “Just think you could make it look more convincing, that’s all.”

“Oh yeah?” I replied, spinning around and planting my hands on my hips. “And how do you—”

Okay, maybe I was being a bit of a fucking idiot there. Because there was only one other way to make it look believable, so it really shouldn’t have



come as such a surprise when Leon grabbed me by the hair and crushed his lips to mine.

It *shouldn't* have been a shock—if my wits were about me. But my brain had been glitching ever since the moment I got shot in Prague. Ever since I decided to call Leon for help, instead of Carlos. So I was stunned for a hot second before eagerly kissing him back.

My lips parted for him, and my body melted into his touch. Then he pulled back abruptly, his chest heaving slightly and his eyes glassy.

“There,” he said in a rough voice, “now it looks real.”

Huh?

Leon swiped his thumb over his lower lip, stained with my lipstick, then casually returned to his computer setup. “Good luck. Let me know when you have him ready.”

What?

Oh. The mission. Of course.

“Sure thing,” I murmured, shaking my head to clear the potent cloud of lust before leaving the room. The mission. Focus on the mission, Danny.

## DANNY

**A** quick glance at myself in the elevator mirror confirmed that Leon had been right. Now I looked like I'd just taken a quick—albeit unsatisfying—roll in bed with my shitty husband. Now I was putting out sex vibes that were impossible to miss. It'd be all Edward Gates would be able to think about... hopefully.

Leon had just been looking out for the mission. Or I was pretty sure that's what that was about. And yet I couldn't seem to stop my lips buzzing with the memory of his kiss as I rode the elevator back down. I ran a hand through my hair, and the little tangle I snagged reminded me how aggressively Leon had grabbed my hair. Rough sex really wasn't my thing, but goddamn, I'd been into that.

*And then he went right back to his computer like he'd brushed lint off your skirt, dumb ass.*

The elevator reached the ground floor again while I mentally scolded myself for thinking Leon was kissing me because he was actually attracted to me.

*He's probably forgotten about it entirely already.*

My professionalism howled a dying wail as I quietly hoped Leon hadn't forgotten about it already. I wanted him going over it in his mind just as badly as I was right now. Wondering where things might have gone if we didn't have a job to fulfill.

"Mrs. Smith," the maître d' greeted me as I re-entered the restaurant. "Did you forget something?"

Her eyes ran over my disheveled appearance quickly, and I smoothed my hair self-consciously.

“No,” I replied in that breathy voice that my version of Michelle used. “I just came down for a drink at the bar, if that’s okay?”

The hostess’s eyes softened with something bordering on pity. “Of course, come over here.” She escorted me to the bar and set me up with a wine list. “First one is on me.”

“Oh, thank you,” I replied, fluttering my lashes like I was on the verge of tears. “That’s so kind of you.”

The maître d’ just gave me a warm smile, then gestured to the bartender to tell him my first drink was free. She didn’t linger with awkward conversation, making her way straight back to her desk at the front door and leaving me alone at the bar.

Not that I’d be alone for long.

Edward Gates was still speaking with his friend in low, hushed tones, but I caught him glancing over at me more than a few times. A minute later, the unknown man handed over an envelope to Edward, then got up to leave.

“Our friend is on the move,” I murmured into my wine. “You get his face?”

“Got it,” Leon replied in my ear. “I’ll run facial recognition later.”

I didn’t reply, because there was no sense in risking being caught talking to myself for no good reason. Instead, I just sipped my wine and looked as bored and pathetic as possible.

Sure enough, a few moments later, Mr. Gates strolled over from his table and rested his hand on the back of the barstool beside me.

“Hi,” he said, offering me a friendly smile. “Is this seat taken?”

I batted my lashes and resisted the urge to point out that literally *no one else* was sitting at the bar, so there were plenty of vacant seats. I smiled and murmured for him to join me.

“Where’s your husband?” he asked after ordering *another* scotch. I could smell it on him, and his eyes held a glassy sheen that spoke to a decent level of intoxication. I was going to need to be quick about working him over, or he’d pass out and be utterly no use whatsoever.

I licked my lips nervously. “He’s got a conference call,” I said in a mousy voice. “They usually run for a couple of hours.”

Edward grunted a sound like satisfaction, and I gritted my teeth. What a creep.

“So, can I buy you a drink, then?” He studied my face, his gaze pausing on my mouth, which I knew must still be puffy from Leon’s kiss.

I shifted on my stool, crossing my legs and letting my skirt rise up somewhat, instantly pulling his attention. I’d definitely made the right call in taking my thigh-holstered gun off.

“That would be lovely,” I replied in a simpering voice. “I’m Michelle, by the way.”

His smile was pure predator as he took my limp hand to shake. “A pleasure, Michelle. I’m Ted.”

“Ted,” I purred back, “how exotic.”

He slid his seat closer and our knees brushed. When I didn’t move away, Edward’s smile spread wider, and his hand rested on my leg, much higher than my knee. Oh yeah, Edward was drunk and crazy horny.

“So, Ted,” I murmured, giving him a coy smile, “how come you were here all alone tonight? Your wife isn’t here with you?”

His fingers stroked my thigh. “I’m not married, Michelle.”

“Oh,” I breathed, sounding surprised. Then when his hand pushed my dress up slightly, I bit my lower lip as though I was turned on. It was all I could do not to shove him away, though. I’d never been so bothered by a mark touching me before.

I was raised by the Guild. My body was *not* my own, and I was well aware of that. It was a fact I’d accepted a long, *long* time ago. My body, my sexuality, it was a weapon to be used however the Guild saw fit. I’d let countless men—and a handful of women—use me in all sorts of ways when the job called for it. Sex—like torture—was simply a means to an end, and often a whole lot less cleanup afterward.

And yet, here I was with Edward Gates *barely* groping me, and I wanted to throat punch him. What the fuck had gotten into me lately?

Leon. Obviously. He’d fucking gotten into my head with that kiss, and now I was all messed up for it. *Goddamn*, maybe he was in on the plan to kill me after all? Distracting me in the middle of a job was a good way to get me killed, that was for sure.

“What do you say we get out of here?” Edward suggested, licking his lower lip in a way that I was sure he meant to be seductive. He was drunk enough that it just came off as sloppy, but I still fluttered my lashes and nodded eagerly. Michelle was an unhappy, rich, bored trophy wife. Michelle was *desperate* for a man to pay her attention.

Edward stood up, and I put a small wobble in my step as I slid off the stool. Better he think I'd had just as much to drink as he had. That way there would be no possible way I could be playing him.

"I'm in place," Leon said quietly in my ear. "You ready?"

"Oh, dear," I said with a giggle, wobbling another step, "that wine has gone straight to my head."

Edward, gentleman that he was, generously looped his arm around my waist, pulling me in close as he helped to steady me in my high heels. I took the opportunity to slip his keycard back in his pocket, not even remotely listening to the sleazy bullshit he was murmuring as he led me out of the restaurant.

The hostess flashed me a worried look as we passed her, but I just gave her a reassuring smile before leaning in closer to Edward Gates.

"Oh... I really shouldn't go to your room," I said reluctantly as he tried to steer me toward the elevators. "If my husband finds out..."

Edward's eyes flashed with irritation through the alcohol haze, but he quickly masked it with a smile. "Of course, that was presumptuous of me," he replied, his voice soothing. "You do look a little pale, though. Perhaps a breath of fresh air?"

Pale. Hah. I was permanently pale. But I obligingly smiled back. "Yes, that sounds good."

Edward gave a confident nod, changing direction to head out to the lobby courtyard. No sooner had the doors closed behind us than he had me up against the wall. His whiskey breath was heavy as his mouth clamped onto mine, and I officially ditched any hope that he might be a good lay.

Better to get what we needed and get the fuck out.

"Stop, Ted—" I protested, pushing him away weakly. "I just... I need a moment to catch my breath."

"Don't think about it too hard, Michelle," he snapped, his tone losing the charm entirely, "you wouldn't want to give yourself a headache."

Oh wow. He was going to be lucky to make it out of this hotel alive, pushing my buttons like that. But Michelle was a doormat. She wouldn't even flinch at a scathing comment like that.

"Okay, sure," I simpered back, "I guess I'm ready then."

"Finally," Leon muttered in my ear. "Okay, first word I need is *squirrel*. Thirty seconds, go."

I rolled my eyes, but Ted didn't notice, he was too busy sucking on my

neck. Fucking voice activated password systems were such a pain in the ass, but so easy to hack like this. All I needed to do was have Edward say the randomly generated words out loud. On the other end of my communication device, the computer would hear him say the passphrases, and hopefully unlock for Leon.

Easy, right? So long as I could get Edward to say the stupid words within the thirty second time allotment, *without* tipping him off to what we were doing.

I let him kiss me sloppily another moment, then pulled away with a small shriek.

“What?” he demanded. “What happened?”

“S-sorry,” I stammered. “There was something moving. Just over there in that tree.” I pointed a trembling finger at the tree in the middle of the courtyard.

Edward rolled his eyes, not even turning to look. “It was probably just a squirrel. Ignore it.”

He went straight back to mauling me, his hands sliding up my skirt as Leon confirmed the voice scan on his end.

“Next word is *Zimbabwe*.”

“Oh my *god*,” I groaned aloud, mentally cursing the stupid random word generator. Edward thought I was all kinds of turned on, though, and it just encouraged him to grind his erection against me.

“Twenty-five seconds, DeLuna,” Leon snapped. “Come on.”

“Shit,” I breathed. “Hey, Ted, have you traveled the world?”

“Huh?” he replied, pulling away from my neck that he’d been slobbering all over to look at me in confusion.

I shrugged and gave him doe-eyes. “You seem so worldly. I’ve always wanted to travel. You know what’s the top of my list? That country in Africa that starts with Z. Ugh, I can never remember the name of it, but it sounds so exotic, you know? Like with elephants and stuff? What’s it called?”

Edward frowned. “Zambia?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s a longer word. Gosh, this is going to annoy me until I remember.”

He shook his head. “Zaire.”

*Okay, firstly that was a shorter word, dumbass, and secondly, it’s called the Democratic Republic of Congo now.*

“Unh-unh, no, that’s not it.” I held him at arm’s length.

Frustration darkened his features, and his hands grabbed at me a little more insistently. “Fucking Zanzibar, then. Why are we even talking about this?”

“Running out of time, DeLuna,” Leon reminded me. Meanwhile, this idiot had named a *city* before the other one of two African countries starting with the letter Z. For fuck’s sake. Stupid voice biometrics.

“That’s not it *either*,” I huffed. “Come on, Ted, you’re a smart guy...”

He looked equal parts flattered and pissed off. Then his expression brightened. “Zimbabwe? But seriously, who fucking cares, Michelle? I thought we were going to fuck, but if you’re just going to talk the whole time —”

Goddamn it, I *really* didn’t want to go through with that. But there were usually four words on voice access scanners, and I had to keep Edward interested and distracted until Leon could clone his computer.

Leon confirmed the voice match in my earpiece as I bit my lower lip and rubbed Edward’s dick through his pants. “I’m just shy, Ted. I’ve never cheated on my husband before...”

Edward groaned, pushing his hips into my hand and grinding a little. “That’s okay, baby. I won’t tell him if you don’t. You never need to see me again. Let’s just have a good time.”

Gross. Somehow, I got the feeling Edward Gates was the kind of guy who didn’t much care whether his bed partner was having a good time or not, so long as he shot his own load off.

“Fucking hell,” Leon muttered in my ear. “Let’s get on with this. Next word is *purple*.”

Oh, easy. Thank fuck for that.

“Ted,” I moaned, gripping his erection harder through his pants. “What color underwear do you think I’m wearing?”

He gasped as I flicked his tip with my thumb. “Um, who cares? I just want them around your ankles, Michelle. Show me your pussy.”

I gave a small giggle. “No, I want you to guess... but I’ll give you a hint, okay? It starts with *p*.” I winked like it was a fucking *great* game.

He just looked annoyed. “Purple?”

I beamed. “Yes!”

He smirked back. “Now take them off.”

Acting shy, I ducked my head and took my time as I reached under my dress to slide my panties down. It was dark enough in the courtyard that he’d

never notice they were blue.

“Pineapple,” Leon said in my ear.

Edward eagerly pushed my dress up, his face descending back down to kiss me again, but I halted him with my finger over his lips.

“Wait,” I exclaimed. “We need a safe word.”

“A safe word?” he replied, perplexed. “Baby, I don’t think that’s necessary. This is just a quick—”

“Pineapple,” I announced, nodding firmly. “That’s the word, okay?”

He scowled. “Sure, whatever.” Shaking his head, he unbuckled his pants and pushed them down just far enough to pull out his underwhelming dick. From his jacket pocket, he produced a condom. At least he was wrapping his tool when he fucked drunk, depressed married women in random hotel lobbies.

“Pineapple,” I repeated. “Okay?”

Ted wasn’t even listening, busy rolling his condom on. For fuck’s sake.

“Five seconds, DeLuna. Hurry up,” Leon snapped.

“You’ve gotta say it, Ted, so I know we’re on the same page.” I tugged my dress back down to give him some incentive.

His eyes snapped back up to me with a flash of anger, like he wanted to hurt me.

“Fine,” he growled. “Pineapple. Happy? Now, stop being such a fucking cock tease.”

“I’m in,” Leon confirmed. “You can probably kill him now if you want.”

I laughed out loud before I could stop myself, and Edward’s eyes narrowed.

“You think it’s *funny*?” he hissed, thinking I was laughing at him calling me a tease. Or maybe he thought I was laughing at his four-inch cock? I bet that’d happened before.

“Um, no...” I searched for an escape. Leon was already cloning Edward’s laptop, there was *no* need for me to actually screw this creep. Which was new for me, because a month ago I would have just seen it through to make my ploy that much more believable.

I couldn’t do it, though. Not with Leon in my ear, listening to everything and probably tapped into security cameras for a visual.

“Actually, this was a bad idea,” I announced, pushing him away just enough to lower my dress. I bent to swipe my panties from the ground, and instantly knew I’d misread Mr. Edward Gates.



I saw the backhand coming from a *mile* away and could have more than easily avoided it. But not without jeopardizing my Michelle Smith identity. If Edward suspected he'd been played, all those files on his laptop would be wiped. Permanently. And our objective was to secure certain information *intact*. So I braced myself and took the hit when it landed, letting the force knock me to the ground.

I cried out like I was shocked and scared, scrambling away from Edward as he leaned over me. The raw, potent desire to snap his neck with my hands was almost overwhelming, but I was a goddamn professional. Until we had the data we came for, I couldn't break character. Michelle Smith was a victim, and tonight would be no different.

Nonetheless, I couldn't make it *too* easy for him. So I fought back like a wet kitten, scuttling away on hands and knees until he jerked me back with a handful of my hair. *Motherfucker*, that felt entirely different when Leon had pulled my hair.

"Ted, stop!" I protested. "My husband—"

With *shockingly* perfect timing, Edward Gates was wrenched off me. Leon's green eyes flashed with pure murder behind his glasses as he slammed *Ted* into the wall that we'd just been kissing against.

"Hey man, whoa, I wasn't—" Ted's bullshit cut off short when Leon's fist cracked across his face, and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

Instead, I scrambled to my feet and rushed forward to grab Leon's arm before the next punch landed. "Toby, baby," I whined in a voice that annoyed *me*. "Baby, leave it, he's not worth the assault charges. You only just got off the last manslaughter case."

That was only slightly embellished from our cover stories. Tobias Smith had been charged with assault and battery two years ago after a drunken bar fight with a business competitor.

"Toby, please," I whimpered.

Leon flashed me a look that was so intense and possessive I damn near believed him myself. I clearly hadn't given my hacker partner enough credit in the undercover arts.

"Fine," he snarled, giving Ted another shove before releasing his shirt. "You so much as *look* at my wife again, and I'll slit your throat. You hear me?"

Ted gave a pained laugh. "Yeah, I hear you."

Leon grabbed my arm in a bruising grip and started dragging me out of the courtyard, but Edward just *had* to have the last jab.

“Your wife’s a fucking whore, though. Just so you know, she’s the one who came onto me. I bet she’s been spreading those legs for men all over town while you’re on those conference calls.”

Leon paused, his back tight with tension. He shot me a glance like he was asking if we could kill Edward. Or that’s how I read it, anyway, so I gave a small shake of my head. We needed him alive and well until our mission was cleared as a success.

“Let’s go,” I said in a firm voice.

He hesitated only a second longer, then continued out of the courtyard with his hand still wrapped around my wrist like an iron manacle. I definitely shouldn’t have liked it as much as I did.

# LEON

**D**anny didn't say much on the way back up to our room, staying in character as Michelle for the sake of security cameras. On the off chance that Edward Gates suspected something was amiss, we couldn't break cover anywhere that hotel security could see us.

So her shoulders curled in and she kept her eyes downcast, seeming fragile and delicate like a woman expecting to feel the wrath of an abusive husband. Unable to help myself, I'd wrapped my arm around her shoulders, and she'd cuddled into my side.

Damn, I liked that.

I saw her back to our room, then continued up two floors to cover my tracks before Edward returned to his room. A quick check of the hotel cameras on my phone told me he'd returned to the bar to nurse his pride with more scotch. I was quick about it nonetheless, entering his room with my cloned keycard and heading straight for the window overlooking the courtyard where he'd laid hands on Danny.

My jaw clenched tight as I reeled in the line I'd used to rappel down the side of the hotel. It had been a foolish risk to take; someone could have seen me. But I hadn't been thinking clearly. It'd taken all of thirty seconds to duplicate Edward Gates's hard drive, but then I'd heard Danny scream and... well, the next thing I knew, I was in the courtyard about to rip that fucker's head straight off with my bare hands.

In my defense, the elevators were slow.

I clipped the retracted length of woven metal cable back onto my belt,

then gave the room a once over to ensure there was no sign of me ever having been there. When I was satisfied, I returned to my room with a strange feeling coiling inside me.

Danny was in the shower when I let myself back in, and it took far more willpower than I was willing to admit just to stop myself busting in there to join her. It was official: she was the first mercenary who'd gotten my dick hard in nearly four years.

I was spiraling something wicked. The sooner we finished this mission, the better. I was an *idiot* to take this job with her. My obsession was worse than I'd even realized, and it would end up in her getting killed. Just like Layla.

With that sobering thought, I returned to my computers. All the data I'd retrieved from Edward's laptop had been heavily encrypted, and part of our assignment was to deliver it *unencrypted*. That was the main reason a data analyst had been assigned this mission. If it was simply retrieval, Danny would have done it alone. She'd probably have had to sleep with the creep, then break into his computer another way, but those sort of missions were fairly standard for the *honey* mercs.

The Guild wanted *this* data unencrypted on the spot so it could be verified while we still had Mr. Gates under surveillance. He was a man known to drop off the radar, and if he needed to be hauled in for more *hands-on* questioning, then now was the best chance for that to happen.

Whoever Edward worked for, they'd done a decent enough job with their encryptions. No way in hell had that idiot done it himself. It was nothing I couldn't crack, but it would probably take me a couple of hours.

Danny emerged from the shower a couple of minutes later, her long hair wet and smelling of hotel shampoo despite the fact she'd just washed it earlier in the evening. Fair call, though. She probably wanted to wash away any hint of Edward Gates.

"Find anything good?" she asked casually while grabbing fresh clothes from her bag.

I adjusted my glasses and gave her a sidelong look. "No *thanks* for saving your ass downstairs?"

Her laugh was low and throaty. Total sex. Pure fucking honey. "Trust me on this one, Leon. I didn't need saving. But I definitely enjoyed the drama of it. How'd you get down there so fast?"

I bit back a smug smile. "Teleportation, obviously."

She grinned. “Of course. Apparently, I need to talk to the right people to upgrade my tech, because that would come in handy.”

She dropped her towel to get dressed, and my breath escaped in a pained sigh from behind my teeth. I needed to *not* look. The taste of her kiss was still on my lips, and the soft press of her body imprinted into my mind. If I looked, I would really lose control. More than I already had.

So I forced my eyes back to my screen and worked on coding a program to unravel Mr. Gates’s computer contents. As soon as I cracked it, I could upload the data into our job portal and get the contract paid out in full. Then I could walk the fuck away and erase Danny DeLuna from my mind.

From the corner of my eye, I watched her dress in a soft black T-shirt that hugged her slender curves way too well, and a pair of black silk shorts. Then she peered in the mirror to inspect the red mark on her otherwise flawless cheek. Fucking Ted had hit her, and she’d *let* him.

I said nothing, continuing with my work and trying to ignore her as she rummaged in the minibar for something cold. She pulled out a can of Coke and pressed it to her cheek for a moment, then gave a frustrated sigh.

“I’m going to get some ice,” she announced. “Back in a sec.”

A panicked jolt ran through me as she turned toward the door.

“Wait,” I snapped before I could catch my tongue. “You don’t need ice.”

She spun to face me on bare feet, arching a perfect brow. “My face disagrees with you, Dr. Leon.”

That sass again. It made me want to do bad things to her.

“Sit down,” I ordered her, getting up out of my chair and crossing over to my suitcase. Most of my luggage had been tech equipment, but I also had some spare clothes, a shit load of weapons, and a few toiletries. I found the little purple pot I was looking for and crossed over to where Danny had perched on the end of the bed... surprisingly obedient, I might add.

She frowned suspiciously at the medicine in my hand. “What’s that?”

“Poison,” I replied sarcastically, opening the lid and dabbing some of the white cream on my finger. Just to shut her up, I handed her the whole thing to read while I smoothed the strongly peppermint-scented cream over her bruised cheek.

Her breath caught as my fingertip caressed her cheekbone, but I’d probably just pressed a bit too hard on a fresh bruise.

“Arnica, St. John’s Wort, calendula, peppermint, cloves, and eucalyptus,” she read aloud from the ingredients list. “How very homeopathic of you, Dr.

Leon.”

I smiled, making sure the cream was all rubbed into her skin before stepping back. “You can save the mockery, DeLuna. It already feels better, doesn’t it?”

She wrinkled her nose, handing the pot of cream back to me. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I think what you mean to say is *thank you, Leon.*” I gave her a pointed look. She just leaned back on her hands, looking up at me with total confidence and... an edge of flirtation?

“Thank you, Leon,” she purred in the most sinfully sexy voice I’d ever fucking heard.

It was the kind of tone that made my pulse race and my palms sweat.

Hardening my features, I jerked a nod and returned to my computer. I had a shit load of encrypted data to decode, and there was no time like the present.

An awkward silence fell between us, and I couldn’t help missing the easy almost-friendship we’d shared on the jobs we’d done together a couple of years ago. I’d been attracted to her then, too, but I’d also still been hurting from Layla’s death. It was enough to let me firmly put Danny into an untouchable category. It was enough that I’d been able to enjoy her company without constantly thinking about kissing her, and touching her, and slamming my—

Nope. Danny was a merc. She may as well be another *nonsexual* species.

“Alright, well if you’re gonna be working on that for a while, I’m going to sleep,” she announced.

Good. I didn’t reply, because I was dangerously close to offering her a whole other bedroom activity and ditching my codes for another day.

She spent a couple of moments combing through her damp hair, then placed a loaded gun on the nightstand. In any other situation, it seemed like a crazy paranoid kind of thing to do. Especially when she then added a long hunting knife under her pillow. But in our line of work it was just sensible.

Not that I’d let anything happen to her while she slept. I’d keep her safe, just like I had for three weeks in Kraków while she healed from being shot.

Shit. Maybe I did need to go back to therapy.

Nah, my slight edge of insanity was what made me who I was. It was what allowed me to do the things I did and feel zero regret or remorse. If I lost that, I’d just be *normal*... and no one wanted that.

She fell asleep shockingly fast, her breathing evening out into a gentle rhythm and her facial features softening. I gritted my teeth and continued on with my decoding, though. I wanted to be done by the time she woke up, and if she was anything like me—like most mercenaries—she wouldn't sleep for more than a couple of hours.

My attention kept being dragged back to her, though. Every shift she made in her sleep, every restless sigh or groan, and I was enraptured. Eventually I needed to put my headphones on and play music to try and block her out. Just long enough to get the job done.

Mr. Edward Gates was a nobody. He sure as hell wasn't the key figure in an arms dealer empire that the mission had made him out to be. He was a glorified assistant, handling schedules and travel arrangements for a number of unidentified individuals with fake names.

It made me roll my eyes, thinking how crappy his world geography was when Danny needed him to say *Zimbabwe* earlier. Then again, most of the itineraries he coordinated were between major cities like New York, London, Sydney, Singapore and Tokyo. He had nothing to do with the countries that were typically involved in arms deals.

I saw no value in the information I decoded, but without access to the bigger picture, I was likely just missing a key point. There could be a smoking gun buried in those schedules, for all I knew.

My next point of business was going to be investigating who this job was for and what specifically they were requesting. But that could probably wait... I packaged up all the data and uploaded it to our secure assignment portal buried deep within the dark web, then tugged my headphones off.

The instant quiet of the hotel room made me still. Then Danny's soft breathing filled my ears once more, and my pulse raced.

Like the deranged creep I was, I couldn't seem to stop myself crossing over to the bed where she slept. For a minute or ten, I just crouched beside the bed, watching her sleep. She looked like an angel, straight out of heaven, with her porcelain skin and silvery white hair. The bruise on her cheek didn't seem to be getting any worse, which made me happy to see.

I wet my lips, eyeing the space on the bed beside her. Perhaps I could just lie down with her for a minute. Would she wake up if I did?

Danny shifted in her sleep, making me freeze and hold my breath. She muttered something sleepily about Ted's tiny dick, and it brought my priorities back in line. I silently went back to my computer to check that the

upload had been accepted.

I needed to wait a few more minutes, then the status changed and the electronic funds payout lit up on my phone. Our assignment was officially complete.

Smiling to myself, I silently left the room and took the fire stairs up two levels.

Using the cloned keycard, I let myself straight into Edward Gates's hotel room and let the door close quietly behind me. It was past midnight, and *Ted* had passed out drunk some time ago, if the stale smell in the room was anything to go by. He probably hadn't lasted much longer at the bar after our encounter in the courtyard.

Creeping closer, I curled my lip in contempt as I peered down at the snoring man. Then I pulled a knife from the sheath at my belt and used it to slit Ted's throat. Messy, but effective.

I said nothing, never even waking him up before he died. I just cleaned my knife on the hotel sheets, then washed my hands in his bathroom before returning downstairs to where Danny slept so peacefully.

Maybe I would lie down with her. Just for a minute. Then, when she woke, I'd let her know the assignment was complete and we'd go our separate ways.

It was better this way. She was becoming a distraction... and either she'd get killed or I would have to kill her myself. First thing in the morning, I'd place the block back on her profile.



## DANNY

Something was wrong. I felt it before I even fully woke up. Or... maybe not *wrong*, but different. Odd. Unusual?

I stayed dead still, opening my eyes just a fraction to work out what had given me that feeling. But I sure as hell hadn't expected to find someone else in bed with me. How? I was such a light sleeper. How the *fuck* had I not woken up when the mattress dipped?

Leon was fast asleep on his side, facing me, and shirtless. Holy *hell...* that glimpse I'd gotten of him in the shower yesterday was nothing on the real deal up close. For a hacker, Leon was spending a crap lot of time in the gym.

It wasn't him being in bed with me that had given me such an uneasy feeling, though. Quite the opposite, I was perversely pleased to find him like that. No, I was off-balance because it was *daylight*.

I hadn't slept more than three consecutive hours at a time in *years*. Decades, if I were honest. For one thing, my brain was wired all wrong for restful sleep. For another, it was an easy way to get killed on a mission. Much safer to only sleep in short bursts so I was less likely to be caught unawares.

And yet, the daylight streaming through the hotel window said I'd been asleep for at least six hours, and that was assuming it was just past dawn. For all I knew, it could be much later.

My phone was on the nightstand, but on the opposite side of the bed from where I lay. I must have been moving around in my sleep. Not a huge surprise, considering how restless my dreams often were. Blame it on being

still half asleep, but for some reason, I decided to reach *over* Leon to check the time rather than getting out of bed.

*Holy shit, nine in the morning!*

“Uh, good morning,” a deep voice rumbled, and I looked down to meet Leon’s green eyes peering up at me.

“Sorry,” I winced. “I never usually sleep this... long.” I retreated back to my side of the bed so I wasn’t hovering my tits in his face any longer, but again I failed to get my ass up out of bed.

What the fuck was wrong with me? I was having a cozy morning-after pillow chat with a guy I hadn’t even had sex with? Maybe Ted had hit me harder than I’d thought.

Chasing that thought, I touched a hand to my cheek, testing the bruise.

“Does it still hurt?” Leon asked in a sleepy voice, raising his hand to cup my face. The gesture was so casually intimate that my breath caught and my heart raced. His thumb stroked over my vaguely tender cheekbone, and I needed to wet my lips before I could make words come out.

“Actually not too bad,” I admitted. “I need to get some of that magic minty cream.”

He didn’t say anything back, but he also didn’t take his hand away. For a second, I pictured myself closing the gap between us and pressing my lips to his... kissing him intentionally rather than just to bolster our cover identity. Would he be into it? Or push me away?

Before I could make a fool of myself, though, he drew a sharp breath and rolled away from me.

“The payout already processed,” he told me, sitting up and giving me his back. His tattoos wrapped both arms and shoulders, but most of his chest and back was clear of ink. So there was no distraction away from the way his muscles bunched and shifted when he stretched.

*Fuuuuuck.*

“Hmm?” I just registered what he’d said. “Oh, we’re done already? Shit, Leon. I forgot how good you were at cracking codes.”

I took his cue and sat up myself. I’d fallen asleep in my T-shirt and satin shorts, so I was far from indecent. But something about the way Leon watched me as I crossed to my bag to find clothes made me feel totally naked. Weird. He had barely even flinched when I’d dropped my towel yesterday.

I grabbed a handful of clothes and ducked into the bathroom to freshen up

and change.

“So I guess we’re done then, huh?” I called out to him after brushing my teeth.

“Uh, yeah. I guess so.” His reply was flat and unemotional. Distracted. He was probably already thinking about his next assignment. Someone with Leon’s skills would *constantly* be in demand.

I wove my hair into a loose braid and secured the tail with an elastic, then left the bathroom to pack up my own crap. Leon was busy disassembling his tech and carefully packing it into his padded suitcase, and I took my time strapping on my everyday *concealed* weapons.

“I’m kind of hungry,” I blurted out when I’d run out of things to stall for time on. “I might grab some breakfast before I head back home. I don’t suppose you want to join me?”

Leon looked up at me in surprise. He’d put his glasses back on, but his eyes were sharp as he stared at me. I thought for sure he was about to decline—Leon was even more professional than I was—but then he gave a sharp nod.

“Sure.”

I blinked at his unexpected acceptance. “Oh. Cool. Um...”

“Just give me two seconds to pack all this up,” he said, indicating his equipment, “then I could do with some coffee.”

That made me embarrassingly happy. Oh my god, I was being so ridiculous. Anyone would think Leon was my first crush with how girly I was getting over him. He’d barely even shown me a flicker of interest, and I may as well be doodling *Mrs. Danny Marx* on my notebooks.

*Play it cool, Danny. Don’t scare the sexy nerd away.*

Biting my cheek to keep from babbling nonsense, I grabbed my phone and checked that the electronic funds transfer for our completed contract had gone through. Not that the Guild had ever shortchanged me before, but I trusted no one. Least of all the world’s oldest mercenary guild.

After transferring the funds from my Guild account to one of my untraceable, highly secure accounts based in the Cayman Islands, I checked my messages.

I only had one, from Jude. It was a cute message teasing me about my failed hookup with beer-breath Thom the other night, and it made me smile.

“Ready?” Leon asked, jerking my attention away from my phone.

Fuck yes. “Uh huh,” I replied. *Keep it casual, DeLuna.* “Let’s go.”

I didn't wait for him to open the door for me, because I was no *lady* waiting on a chivalrous man to sweep me away. Instead, I took the lead and left Leon following behind with his much larger suitcase in hand.

The elevator was busy, being a Sunday morning in a tourist city, so we didn't speak on our way down to the lobby. Exiting the elevators, I zeroed my gaze in on the door to the courtyard, and I wrinkled my nose with distaste. Ted had been *far* from my worst mark, but I was still relieved as hell that Leon had intercepted when he had.

"Here's hoping we don't run into Ted at breakfast," I muttered as we handed our luggage to the concierge to store while we ate.

Leon gave me a sideways glance, and his lips tipped up in a tiny smile. "I don't think he will be a problem."

That seemed awfully optimistic, but whatever. Our assignment was completed; there was nothing stopping me punching Ted in his sleazy face if we saw him this morning.

We took a table near the windows this time and ordered from the a la carte menu for our breakfasts. When I headed home, I'd be surviving on my own cooking again, so I may as well take advantage of restaurant fare while I was here. Not that I was a bad cook. After ten years of living alone with Stanley, I was passably good. But more often than not, I just couldn't be bothered and ate peanut butter toast instead.

"Did you get a facial recognition hit on the guy Ted was meeting with last night?" I asked when the waitress had left with our orders.

Leon gave me an odd look, then gave a small headshake. "I forgot to run it," he muttered, scowling as he looked out the window.

He forgot? That seemed... out of character for Leon. Our waitress appeared a moment later with coffee, and I waited until she was gone before replying.

"I suppose it doesn't matter now that the job is complete, anyway."

He gave a stiff nod, then took a sip of his coffee.

"What was the data?" I asked quietly when Leon made no further attempts at conversation. In fact, he seemed decidedly uncomfortable sitting opposite me. Like he'd rather be anywhere but here right now. It made me wonder why he'd even accepted my invitation in the first place.

He cleared his throat, setting his coffee cup down. "Schedules and travel plans for a bunch of fake names. Probably going to turn into a kill mission for whoever those fake names represent, if I were to guess."

It made sense. We were never privy to finer details of our contracts, like who was paying and what their motivations were. Those details had no bearing on our job, anyway. So long as the money got paid upon completion, then it didn't matter who it came from. And it always got paid, because the Guild held the funds in trust before even assigning a merc.

An awkward silence settled over us again, and I regretted suggesting breakfast. We should have simply gone our separate ways as soon as the mission was completed. Guild agents didn't work in *teams*. We were lone soldiers who occasionally needed to work together.

"If you've got somewhere else to be..." I was irritated now and mentally kicking myself for getting carried away. Leon wasn't some hot guy I'd met in a bar. He was a mercenary, same as me. We were all damaged. Broken. It was foolish to think there was actually something between us. That kiss was *just* for the mission, and he'd slept beside me because he was tired. Simple as that.

"I don't," he replied. But his tone was harsh and his jaw tight as he stared at me like he was trying to figure out a puzzle. "Do you?"

My brows shot up before I could control my reaction. "Not really. I have a private plane, so they work to my schedule."

A small smile touched his lips. "High roller, huh?"

I wrinkled my nose. "It's not *mine*. I just... use it." Well, if that didn't sound cagey, I don't know what did. But, fuck it. That was easier than explaining my complicated relationship with Carlos.

Leon stared at me a moment, his head tipped slightly to the side. "Do you live far away?"

I grinned before I could catch myself. "You could say that."

Knowing he'd already taken a browse through the Guild's servers—something that he could be killed for if anyone knew—I was surprised he hadn't run a search on me. Or maybe he had, but he was just making polite conversation.

"What about you?" I asked back, lifting my coffee to take a mouthful. "Your American accent is solid, I'm thinking you live somewhere on this side of the world."

He just smiled, and something fluttered in my chest. Holy hell, Leon had a great smile.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out to check as our waitress arrived with the plates of food we'd ordered. I'd opted for avocado

on toast with poached eggs and blanched asparagus, with a side of extra crispy bacon. Leon had ordered a big breakfast, complete with a stack of pancakes covered in syrup, along with an extra side of bacon.

My stomach rumbled with the delicious smells, but as soon as I unlocked my phone, my appetite disappeared.

“What’s wrong?” Leon asked as I scowled down at my phone.

I read the alert over again, then sighed and put my phone on the table. “New assignment already. No rest for the wicked, I guess.” Except I was almost positive this next job was going to achieve what was failed in Prague. It was a suicide mission, through and through.

But it was also going to be my best bet at working out who was trying to kill me. It did seem odd that nothing had gone wrong on *this* mission. Maybe because I was working with a partner?

Or hell, maybe I was just being super paranoid and no one was actually trying to kill me after all.

“It hasn’t even been twelve hours since your last contract paid out,” Leon pointed out. “What’s the job?”

I gave a short laugh, picking up my cutlery to eat. I could look closer at the assignment when I was on my way home. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

Leon stared at me a moment longer, then ran a hand over his scruffy chin. “You always follow the rules so strictly, DeLuna?”

I almost choked on my mouthful.

“Yes, Marx, I do. And I’m willing to bet *you* do, too. No one gets to our level within the Guild by playing vigilante.” Except, I knew he’d hacked files that he shouldn’t have. Maybe Leon was more of a maverick than I gave him credit for.

Which would be disappointing... because rule breakers within the Guild didn’t last long. The executioners took them out swiftly, and it’d be a shame to never see Leon again.

He just smiled back at me. Then swiped my phone off the table.

“Leon!” I protested, reaching for it. The screen was locked, though, so I wasn’t *that* concerned. He was just teasing.

“Danny,” he shot back with a smirk, running his thumb across the screen and *motherfucking unlocking it*. “Chill, you’re not *telling* me, so no rules are being broken. Eat your breakfast before it gets cold.”

The sheer authority in his tone almost made me do what he said, then I

sucked a sharp breath and swiped for my phone again. He moved it out of my reach as he read the job description, leaving me with the options of letting him have it... or causing a scene getting it back.

As tempting as it was to leap across the table and wrestle it back, it was irrelevant. He'd clearly already seen exactly what I'd seen in that job assignment, because his smile slipped and his eyes widened.

"Danny, you can't take this job."

My temper flared. "Screw you, yes I can."

Leon glared but handed my phone back to me. He'd seen as much as he needed to see already.

I gave a frustrated sigh. "I don't really have a choice. I already declined three contracts this year." While we were *allowed* to pick and choose our contracts, it was only within reason. No one knew for sure, but the limit seemed to be three declines per year. I'd never even *met* another merc who'd declined more than three... and lived to tell tales about it.

"The fourth decline execution is a fucking myth, Danny," Leon scoffed. "The Circle perpetuated that rumor themselves to dissuade agents from declining jobs. They're not going to kill an asset for being a bit fussy on acceptance."

"Yeah, well, I don't feel like testing that theory. Besides, the payout on this one is bigger than my last three years of work combined." I shrugged like I wasn't internally panicking.

Leon threw his hands up, breakfast entirely forgotten. "Because they don't *actually* expect you to make it out alive. Danny, this isn't a normal contract. That target has been on the Circle's personal hit list for *years*. Do you have any clue how many mercs have gone after him and never made it back?"

I gritted my teeth. "No. But you clearly do."

His gaze flashed with frustration, and his jaw tightened. Evidently, this particular assignment was hitting a nerve for him, for some reason. Perhaps he'd known one of those previous mercs?

"Don't underestimate me, Leon. I'm one of the best the Guild has right now, and this job is *not* beyond my abilities." I pushed my food away. So much for a nice breakfast.

Leon's nose flared, and his hand tightened into a ball on the table. "I wasn't questioning how capable you are, Danny. But *this* target? He gets even the slightest hint that you're Guild, and he *will* kill you. No questions

asked.”

Oh yeah. This looked personal for him. Who had he lost?

Licking my lips, I tamped my anger and pride down. “Well then, I better not slip up.” I unlocked my phone and clicked *accept* on the contract.

Leon paled. Then he shook his head slowly. “This is suicide, Danny.”

“Every single mission we take could be suicide, Leon. We just have to be better than our folly.” I picked up my coffee and took a long sip. Even if I were leaving for the airstrip with an empty stomach, I needed a little caffeine in me. Then an idea popped into my head. “If you’re so concerned, do it with me.”

Leon’s eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

I indicated my phone. “The assignment called for two agents. Given the nature of it, I can assume the other was a tech bunny.”

He scowled. “What did you just call me?”

“Tech bunny,” I repeated, trying hard not to laugh at his outrage. “We make a good team, don’t we? I bet they already sent you the contract. Just accept it so you can watch my back again.”

Leon stared at me for a long moment, then ducked his eyes away. “I can’t.”

Oh. “Why?”

“I didn’t get the contract.”

But he hadn’t even checked his phone. And it was common knowledge that contracts were offered out to multiple tech bunnies, as they were less specialized. It was often a first in, first served for them.

“How do you know?” I pushed. Something was up.

He swiped a hand over his hair and looked back up to hold my gaze. “Because I put a block between our profiles. They won’t assign us any of the same contracts again.”

*He did what?*

“I wasn’t aware that was something you could do,” I murmured, trying really fucking hard not to let that hurt my feelings. “When did you do that?”

He gave no signs of remorse or apology. No explanation. “This morning.”

Ouch. So he must have really hated working with me. What other reason was there to specifically request *not* to be assigned with a specific merc in the future?

I let that information sink in a moment, tasting the disappointment and feeling the sharp sting of rejection. Then I finished my coffee and nodded.



“Well then. I guess I should head out; I’ve got a plane to catch.”

“Danny—” he protested, but I wasn’t sticking around for the awkward reasoning. It was written all over his sexy fucking face. He’d noticed I was flirting, and the feeling was *not* reciprocated.

How utterly humiliating.

I walked the fuck away, and Leon didn’t follow.

# LEON

She walked away without so much as a backward glance, and I forced myself not to follow. Not immediately, anyway. I paid the bill for our uneaten breakfasts, then lurked inside the restaurant until I saw her striding out of the lobby with her bag slung over her shoulder.

I left my luggage with the concierge so I could come back to get it later. For now, I needed to give in to my perverse desire to follow Danny DeLuna.

I'd activated the block on her profile right after I accepted her offer of breakfast. The fact that I'd said yes to that so damn easily confirmed that I was losing my head over her. I needed distance, or she was going to wind up dead.

That hadn't made it any easier to see the hurt flash through her eyes when I told her, though. Nor did it quell the panic flowing through me over her next assignment. So I fucking followed her like a goddamn stalker through the busy streets of Manhattan.

She never spotted me, because I was more than just... what had she called me? A fucking *tech bunny*. How insulting.

A couple of blocks from the hotel, she got a call, and I drifted closer to listen in. She was talking to her friend Jude. Judith Mackenzie. I'd done my research on *every* aspect of Danny's life several years earlier when I couldn't get her off my mind, but she'd been particularly hard to get information on. Not unusual for mercenaries, but frustrating when I wanted to know every little detail about this woman.

"...yeah, I know," Danny sighed as I eavesdropped when she stopped

with a bunch of other people waiting to cross a busy street. “This one might take a while, I’m not sure. Will you check in on Stanley for me? You know how he gets when I’m gone for a long time.”

Stanley? Who the *fuck* was Stanley?

“Thanks, babe,” Danny said to whatever Jude had responded. Presumably that she would visit whoever the hell *Stanley* was. “I’m not going to bother flying home. This next job is going to need prep work before Halloween.”

She wasn’t going home. So where *was* she going? Halloween was the date listed on the contract as the first opportunity for contact with the target. The relevant details of *where* would have been sent to her with the rest of the contract once she accepted. I needed to see that fucking contract.

The traffic lights changed, and she started crossing the street, so I dropped back a bit before she spotted me lurking. In doing that, I noticed someone *else* was tailing her, too.

She’d said someone within the Guild was trying to kill her, and I was inclined to believe her. Especially now. Her tail wasn’t Guild, but the fact that she would be *here* must have been leaked from someone within our organization.

I dropped back further still, my focus shifting from gorgeous Danny DeLuna to the dark-haired assassin with eyebrows like black caterpillars. By my guess, he was a local hire. Someone unaffiliated with the Guild and probably totally unable to be traced back to the source.

Danny was leaving the crowded streets, still talking on her phone, and the guy followed. No way in hell was I risking him taking a shot at her, though, so as he rounded the next corner, I sped up to catch him.

“Hey, what—” he protested as I seized the back of his neck and dragged him into a tight alleyway behind a Greek food shop. Whatever else he would have said was lost in a pained gurgle when my knife slammed into the side of his neck.

Not a single word left my lips as I dragged him behind the dumpsters and pulled my knife free. He wasn’t dead yet, but it wouldn’t be long. I ignored his wide, desperate eyes as I patted him down. No ID, but he had a phone that I pocketed. I’d hack it later and trace his calls and texts. Maybe they’d lead somewhere.

For now, I had to be satisfied that he was the only tail on DeLuna, because by the time I sauntered back out into the street, I’d totally lost her.



IT WAS ALMOST EMBARRASSING how easily I accessed the Guild's main server to download a copy of Danny's new contract. Then again, it was hardly the first time that I'd taken a little wander through the Guild's ultra-secure mainframe.

I knew where and when Danny would have her best opportunity to move on her target, and I knew who had accepted the task of being her *tech bunny*. It irked me more than I'd have liked how long it took me to track down where she was staying while prepping for this mission.

When I *did* find her, I almost wished I hadn't. What the fuck had happened to my plan to walk away and never think about ethereal Danny DeLuna again? Huh? Oh yeah, she accepted a suicide mission, and I realized I'd rather risk my own sanity than let her get killed on the job.

Fucking hell. What was it about this girl? She wasn't soft or sweet. She wasn't light or joyful. No, she was pure sarcasm and sass. She was all hard edges, quick temper, and wielded her sexuality like a weapon... exactly as the Guild trained their honey traps. In short, Danny was *nothing* like Layla had been. And Layla was the only woman I'd ever loved.

And yet, there I found myself, staking out the apartment she was staying in for the two weeks prior to Halloween. Every day she would go for a run before dawn, then spend hours working out in the fifth-floor gym before retreating to her apartment. It took me a hot second to get eyes inside so I could stay up to speed on her prep work. Eventually I grew frustrated and broke in while she was in the gym.

My planted camera gave me a full view of inside her apartment, and the bug I placed in her computer let me see what she was researching. Ethical? Fuck no. Necessary? Absolutely.

It was because of my *observation* that I knew the where, when and how of her plan. So I surely should have been content to just hire some additional backup for her and leave it at that. Right?

Wrong. So freaking wrong.

Knowing what I already knew about my fixations, it wasn't exactly shocking that I made the choice to forgo my own assignments and tail Danny all the way to Shadow Grove—of all fucking places—to attend a Halloween party hosted by one of the more powerful crime families around right now.

"How very fitting," I murmured as I flashed my forged invitation to the

bouncer at the door. It was a VIP party to celebrate the opening of a new club made from a converted warehouse. Lucky for me, it was Halloween, and I could conceal my identity in a costume.

Not that I gave two craps about the criminal guests seeing me there, but the hostess was a little too observant for my liking. I'd rather fly beneath her radar for the time being.

"Target spotted," Danny's husky voice said in my ear.

I smirked as I replied. "Copy that."

There was a pause before she replied. "Leon? Where's Derek?"

"He's a little... tied up. We had a last minute job swap." Okay, that wasn't totally the truth, but close enough.

Danny gave a soft snort. "Again? That's starting to seem suspicious, Leon Marx." She spoke softly, and it was almost like she whispered directly in my ear. Hot as hell. "Whatever, I'm not aborting this mission now. Did Derek fill you in?"

"I know the plan," I evaded, not willing to admit I'd bugged her apartment.

"Good enough," she muttered.

I spotted her across the bar, dressed as a sinfully sexy version of Catwoman. Her white blonde hair was up in a high, severe ponytail, and a black latex cat mask covered the top half of her face. Her "costume" consisted of a biker chick bra and a tight black mini-skirt. All completed with absurdly tall black lace up boots. My dick twitched at the sight of her, and my mouth watered as I imagined stripping her out of that outfit and fucking her in just the boots.

*Fuck.*

I started to move through the crowd to get closer, but someone's hand on my arm halted me. I stiffened, peering down at the hand, then up at the owner of it.

"Leon," the guy said with a small frown, "I thought that was you."

I stared at him a moment, unblinking, then gave his hand on my arm a pointed look. He took the hint, quickly releasing me and holding his hands up defensively.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I just wanted to grab you before you disappeared in another puff of smoke."

I smiled on the inside. "I'm not here for you, Lucas."

The younger man gave a small smile of relief, running a hand over his

hair. “Well, that’s good to hear. I wanted to say thank you, though. For, you know, what you did last year.”

He meant erasing any record of him ever existing. Making him into a ghost. I hadn’t done it for him—he was a stranger to me—but because I’d promised Layla. Lucas was her little brother, and before she’d died, she had asked me to help her protect him. To hide him from the Guild. I’d simply completed the task she’d set out to do herself.

“Don’t mention it,” I murmured, giving him a hard look. “Seriously. Don’t. As far as I’m concerned, kid, we’ve never met. Leave it that way.”

Lucas gave a tight nod. “Understood.” Then he hesitated. “Does Hayden know you’re here?”

I smirked. “Doubt it.”

“You need help over there, superstar?” Danny asked in my ear, and an uncomfortably warm feeling curled in my chest.

“Don’t stress yourself,” I told both Lucas *and* Danny. “We won’t make a mess on Timberwolf territory. Not tonight, anyway.”

Seeing as I didn’t care much whether Lucas told his bloodthirsty wife that I was at the party or not, I walked away before he could reply. Danny had a plan to hatch and a mark to snare the interest of. And I had every intention of helping her in every way I could.

“What was that about?” Danny asked as I approached. Her expression was hard to read behind the mask, but her sapphire eyes were sharp and calculating. I needed to be more careful, stalking her like I was. She was going to catch me soon.

Unable to help myself, I placed a hand on the small of her back as I leaned into the bar. My fingers caressed the bare skin between her bra top and miniskirt, and I could have sworn she gave a tiny shiver on contact. Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

I glanced back in the direction I’d left Lucas, but he was already gone. “Friend of a friend.”

Danny scoffed but didn’t move away from my touch. If anything, she leaned into my hand. “You have friends, Leon?” she said with such disbelief I *should* have been insulted. I probably would have been if I were a normal person.

I ignored the question, leaning over to shout a drink order to the bartender. My fingers stroked Danny’s back again, like they had a life of their own. Fuck, her skin was soft. Where was the scar from her bullet wound? It

must be just below her skirt, seeing as it sat high on her waist.

My gaze drifted casually over the crowd until I spotted Danny's target. He could hardly be missed, oozing kingpin energy with a veritable harem of women fawning all over him in a lounge area some distance away from us. He was dressed ironically, in a toga and Greek-style armor that was probably concealing very real weapons, considering who he was.

"Seriously?" I muttered, gritting my teeth. Just looking at him, knowing he would soon have his hands all over Danny... I wanted to kill him right here, right now. But that was not only against the mission—the Guild needed information before he was killed—it was against the rules of the premises.

I had no doubt Danny and I would be the ones to walk out alive, even if every other person inside the bar died in the process. But it was a conflict we didn't need in our lives. Hades wasn't a forgiving sort of hostess, and her rules were strictly enforced.

"Looks like you're a bit late, DeLuna," I teased quietly, my hand *still* on her back. "Your god of war already has his hands full for the night."

Danny didn't even seem slightly discouraged, though, much to my annoyance. If anything, she looked determined as she reached past me to snag my untouched drink.

She raised it to her perfectly crimson lips and took a long sip. Then screwed her face up in disgust. "Is this *nonalcoholic*?"

"Of course it is," I replied. "We're working."

She stared at me for a long moment, amusement playing through her eyes. Then she gave a small shake of her head and puffed a sigh. "Whatever, Boy Scout. It'll do. Sit back and watch how a pro gets the job done."

Her wink did something unusual to my chest, then she spun on those impossible heels and sashayed away from me.

I hated that. I never wanted her to walk away from me... no matter what the reason. I was no longer in control of my actions at that point, I simply reacted.

## DANNY

I made it halfway across the space to where my mark sat with a bikini-wearing woman writhing in his lap as she kissed his neck. I'd gotten close enough that he locked eyes with me, his drink pausing en route to his lips... then someone seized my wrist and spun me around.

"What the—" I barely got those two words out before Leon's lips crashed into mine.

It shocked me enough that, for a moment, I kissed him back. I leaned into his strong grip and parted my lips against his, letting his tongue meet mine in a possessive, desperate kind of way. The sort of kiss that made me forget who and *where* I was.

Leon gave a small groan as he pulled me closer, his knee sliding between my legs and hitching my already short skirt up higher. As hot as it was, I suddenly remembered what I was meant to be doing. And it sure as fuck wasn't making out with Leon in the middle of a Halloween party.

Mustering up way more willpower than I thought I needed, I pushed him away and gave him an incredulous glare.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I demanded in a strangled whisper, all too conscious of how on display we were. My target had been staring straight at me when Leon grabbed me. Was he still watching? Or had he moved on to easier prey? Everything I'd researched on this man said he liked to keep his sexual dalliances transactional and drama-free. Unlike Edward, this man was not even remotely interested in a taken woman.

Leon's expression was fierce and determined, and I couldn't help my



gaze dipping to his mouth when he ran his tongue over his lower lip. “Saving your life, DeLuna,” he growled. “I can’t let you go through with this suicide mission.”

Anger and outrage swept through me, and my open palm smacked across his cheek faster than he could block me. His head snapped to the side, and pure fury flickered across his face.

“Fuck you, Marx,” I said in a harsh whisper. “You don’t get to make that call, and you don’t know me anywhere near well enough to make such an insulting assumption. This is what I *do*. If it’s over your head, then walk the fuck away, and I’ll complete it solo.”

I was so mad that I was shaking slightly. Usually I held such an even temper, because emotions were messy and interfered with the job. But something about *this* situation had made me snap. Something about Leon treating me like I wasn’t capable... it’d broken my careful control over my emotions, and suddenly I was *raging*.

Instead of dealing with it the way I wanted to—by stabbing him with the folding knife I had tucked into my bra—I shook my head and stalked away. I needed a goddamn minute to pull myself together and re-strategize my assignment.

“Danny,” Leon snapped, starting to follow me, “where are you going?”

“None of your fucking business,” I snarled back, shooting him a furious, disgusted look over my shoulder. “You’re too close to this, Leon. Go back to base. I can handle things from here. Alone.”

His eyes widened at the clear insult. I was benching him, but that was my right as the lead on this contract. I didn’t hang around to debate his fuckup any further, pushing through the crowd to get to the restrooms. It felt like I couldn’t fucking *breathe* in the crowded club. Not with Leon’s eyes locked on me like a homing beacon.

Maybe that block on our profiles was a smart idea after all, because he was actively sabotaging my mission right now. It made me question whether he was trying to kill me... again. I was *sure* someone had been following me after I left him in New York a few weeks ago. At first I’d assumed it was him, then I’d spotted a muscle-for-hire on my tail, which confirmed my theory that someone within the Guild was trying to have me killed.

But then when I’d made myself easy bait and wandered into less populated streets, luring my attacker out, nothing had happened. He was simply gone, like I’d imagined the whole thing.

Now I was wondering if Leon had something to do with it.

I used the restroom—anger made me need to pee—then washed my hands a little more aggressively than I really needed to. I was so lost inside my head, puzzling out what fucking angle Leon was playing, I didn't even notice the woman beside me until she spoke.

“You okay?”

I stiffened, blinking down at my pink hands and then looking up at the woman who'd spoken. “Shit, sorry, I must look crazy. I was just in my own head.”

She was a beautiful woman, taller than me—not that *that* was hard—and dressed as Lara Croft. Her inky black hair was bound in a long braid, and her warm brown skin was highlighted artfully with metallic bronzers. I also recognized her from my intel package on my mark. She was one of his inner circle.

“You're fine,” she told me with a knowing smile. “I saw that altercation with your boyfriend out there. You smacked him good.”

I bit back a smile. Her accent was mixed and hard to identify. Definitely not American. I liked it, whatever the mix was.

“Most definitely *not* my boyfriend,” I replied with a groan. A few weeks ago, I'd have been thrilled to call Leon my boyfriend, but it seemed like every interaction we'd had since waking up in New York had been insult after insult from him. I wasn't the kind of girl to put up with that shit from a guy I liked.

The woman raised her brows at me. “No? Sure looked like something going on there.”

I tugged my mask off and rubbed at the bridge of my nose. I didn't even need to fake the headache building there, but I was rapidly coming up with a backup plan.

“He's a colleague,” I told her. “Like... we're not even friends. I ran into him at the bar, and we chatted.” I gave a shrug, like it was beyond me to try and explain what had gone through his head. And really, it was beyond me. What in the fuck had he been thinking? Other than the obvious, that I wasn't good enough to complete this assignment.

Well, fuck him. I'd prove him wrong, then rub his face in my victory.

My new friend gave an understanding nod. “Men are just wired differently, I swear. Anyway, you look stunning, I'm sure your night will improve from here.”

She'd finished washing her hands, so she dried them off with a paper towel as I subtly checked her over. The guns strapped to her shorts were no props, but that was hardly surprising in this crowd.

I gave her a smile back and pulled my lipstick from one of the tiny pockets of my skirt. I wasn't armed—aside from my little folding knife in my bra—because if things *had* gone to plan, the self-proclaimed god of war would have had me naked in his hotel room by now.

Bronzed Lara Croft left the restroom as I took my time fixing my lipstick—Leon had smudged it again—then tucked the tube back in my pocket.

“Not even friends,” Leon's voice sounded in my ear. “I think my feelings are hurt, DeLuna.”

Anger rippled through me again. “Shut the fuck up, Leon. I'm beyond mad at you right now.”

His response was quick. “So come to the utility room, and we can fight it out. It's not healthy to bottle these emotions up.”

I gave a sharp laugh. “You fucking wish. Just stay silent, or I'll take my comms out. I've got another angle to work.”

He didn't reply, and I was glad for it. I wasn't actually dumb enough to take my comms out just because I was mad at him, so I really didn't need him calling my bluff.

Peering in the mirror, I reattached my cat-ears mask and smoothed a hand over my pony tail. Good enough. Pulling my shoulders back, I made my way back out into the club. I spotted my Lara Croft friend over in the group surrounding my target, but I didn't look her way as I headed over to the bar.

This time, I ordered my own drink, knocking back a double of Copper Wolf vodka—my favorite brand—before peering around the room with an uncertain expression.

It only took a minute before Lara Croft was getting up and heading over to me with a friendly smile.

“You look like you're about to bail out for the night,” she commented, leaning on the bar beside me.

I gave a grimace. “I am. I think my friends have either hooked up or gone already, and I'm not much for the solo party.”

She leaned over to shout a large order to the bartender, then turned to me with a brow raised. “You're gonna let that creep from earlier ruin your night?”

I shrugged. “Apparently.”

Her jaw tightened. “Hell no. You’ll come have a drink with me. The guys are mostly on their best behavior tonight, anyway.” She jerked her head in the direction she’d come from, and I let my gaze follow.

“I dunno,” I replied, sounding reluctant. Yes, most of the guys in her party were just chatting with one another or watching the room without even trying to hide the fact they were there as protection for someone. But my target? Practically drowning in drunk women. Not that I could fault their taste, because the man was pure sex. All rippling muscles, black and gray tattoos, smoldering stare...

“Ignore my brother,” my new friend told me in a drawl. “He’s on some kind of personal quest to catch as many STDs as possible tonight. I could use some female company, though. Someone *not* trying to suck Kai’s dick under the table.”

Well, that might make it awkward to cozy up to my target. Truthfully, I had no idea if this backup plan was going to work or not... but it was the best I had now that Leon had fucked my chances of pretending to be an easy, no-strings lay.

“Kai?” I repeated, sounding confused.

Lara Croft nodded. “My little brother, but also my boss.” She extended a hand to me. “I’m Mo, by the way.”

I smiled, taking her hand. “Mo? Unusual name. I’m Danny.”

She tipped her head back to laugh. “Mo is short for Moana, but, you know... since the movie came out, it’s easier to introduce myself as Mo. Danny isn’t exactly the most common name either.”

Grinning, I shrugged. “Suits me better than Danielle.”

I could have sworn I heard a faint laugh from Leon in my ear, but I ignored it. Asshole.

“Come on, it’s just a drink,” Mo coaxed when I made no moves to join her group. “If you’re not having fun at the end of your drink, I’ll personally send you home in one of our cars.”

I wrinkled my nose, a small smile on my lips. “I don’t have a drink, though.”

Mo barked a laugh and slung an arm around my shoulders. “I think I can remedy that.” She indicated to the bartender again, then escorted me over to her group without waiting for the drinks to be made. No doubt they had table service, and she’d just come over because I’d been standing there looking lost.

One of the big-breasted women fawning over Kai had taken Mo's seat, and I watched with interest as my smiling companion flipped her bitch switch and scared the other woman off with nothing more than a hard glare. I was liking her more with every passing second. Especially when she ousted a second woman to make space for me to sit with her on a velvet sofa.

It was going to suck when I had to kill Mo.

## DANNY

**I**ntroductions were easy, considering I already had all of the key players in my mind from my research notes. There were seven in the god of war's inner circle, and they were a multinational crew. There was Jae-Hwa from North Korea, who told me with a flirtatious wink to call him Jae; Cyryl from Poland; Mauricio from Venezuela; Elimu—or Eli—from Tanzania; and Sam from England. Then Moana, and her brother Malachi—who was only introduced as Kai—both originally from New Zealand.

Kai barely gave me a glance when Mo introduced him, then seemed to totally dismiss me as the woman in his lap whispered in his ear. A moment later, he smirked and let her lead him away from the group.

The second they were out of sight, money started changing hands between his crew, and I tipped my head in question.

“We like to take bets,” Jae told me with a broad grin, handing several hundreds to Cyryl.

I gave a short laugh. “I can see that. What are you placing bets on?”

Sam scoffed, glancing in the direction Kai had disappeared. “What do you *think* we’re betting on, pussycat?” Something about his British accent actually made that *not* sound like an insult.

I bit my lower lip, thinking. Then I shrugged. “I have no idea. How long does it take him to prematurely ejaculate all over that nice girl and ruin her night?” As soon as the words left my lips, I cringed. Insulting their friend was *maybe* not the best way to stay close to them all.

But a moment later, all five of the guys busted up into peals of laughter,

and even Mo snickered into her drink.

“Oh, ho, pussycat has claws,” Eli chuckled, his voice a deep rumble.

A waitress arrived with drinks for everyone, diverting the conversation before anyone could explain to me what they were *actually* putting bets on. Mo had ordered a round of Long Island Iced Teas, and handed me one first.

“To vacations,” she announced, holding her drink out for her crew to cheers her. “And new friends.” She winked at me, and I smiled back.

The guys all clinked glasses, and I joined in.

“What’s your angle here, DeLuna?” Leon muttered in my ear, but I ignored him. He’d done enough tonight, and I wouldn’t risk him sabotaging this any more.

For half an hour or so, I worked on becoming friends with Mo and the guys. I carefully avoided mentioning Kai at all, seeing as Mo had made it clear she had no time for the women hanging off him. Instead, I just bided my time with his inner circle and tried to think of another way in.

Nothing said I *had* to seduce him to get the information the Guild had been contracted for. That was just the most obvious route. Especially now that I’d seen firsthand how easily he was led by his dick. But there was more than one way to skin a cat, and I might have found mine through Mo’s obvious need for a friend.

When Kai returned, he was in a bad mood. Money changed hands between his crew again, which Kai seemed not to take any notice of as he barked a drink order to the waitress. I quirked a brow at Jae, who was the chattiest of the guys, but he just smirked and shot me a wink.

Damn it, now I really wanted to know what the bet was on.

Eli shifted closer to talk with Kai, but the boss didn’t seem terribly interested in conversation. He just glared at anyone who came near the group and drummed his fingertips on the arm of the chair he sat in. Sure as shit didn’t have the relaxed air of a man who’d just blown a load.

I did my best to seem like I was ignoring him, despite keeping him firmly in my peripheral vision, and it seemed like the more I ignored him, the more he stared at me.

“Remind me again who she is and why she’s sitting here?” he eventually asked, not even slightly lowering his voice. His glare was hard and full of dislike. Either he didn’t like blondes—probably a fair assumption based on the girls he’d had earlier—or he didn’t like being ignored. My money was on the latter for why his panties were in a bunch now.

“Cut it out, Kai,” Mo snapped back, her dark eyes fierce. “I invited Danny to join us. You don’t dictate who I can make friends with.”

He grunted. “You sure about that, Moana?”

In response, she flipped him off and gave me an apologetic look. “Ignore him,” she said firmly. “He’s just bitter because he can’t—”

“Mo!” Sam cut her off with a sharp voice. She glared at him, and he gave a firm shake of his head.

She rolled her eyes, shooting her brother a scathing look. He just continued staring at me, not paying his sister any mind as he sipped his drink. It probably would have been unnerving, if I were just an innocent slightly drunk girl Mo had met in the bathroom. Seeing as how I was a mercenary with more blood on my hands than Kai’s whole crew, it was just a little amusing.

Still, I played the part of seeming uncomfortable and made a lame excuse to try and leave. To my delight, it wasn’t only Mo who protested when I made to get up. Jae, Caryl, and Sam all voiced their reasons for me to stay. Eli remained silent, his dark gaze on Kai like he was curious to see what the boss would say.

When Kai simply continued to stare at me with narrowed eyes, I gave a small sigh. “Sorry, guys, this was fun, but I can see when I’m not welcome. Enjoy the rest of your vacation.”

This time, I really did walk away, but Mo and Jae caught up with me before I could get to the door.

“Come on, Danny,” Jae coaxed, “you’re not seriously letting that grumpy bastard scare you off, are you? We were just starting to have fun!”

“Jae’s right,” Moana agreed, positioning herself between me and the exit. “Stay and have fun. Eli can keep Kai busy, and he’ll probably take off with another chick soon anyway.”

I hesitated like I was uncertain. Like I just needed them to convince me to do something I already wanted to do. “I don’t know, guys... you seem like a tight-knit group, and I don’t want to cause trouble. Besides, it’s late...”

Jae scoffed. “Fuck off, Danny-cat. Come dance with us at least.”

He extended a hand to me in invitation, and Mo nodded enthusiastically.

I glanced between the two of them, then cast a quick look over my shoulder to where Kai *still* stared at us. He looked *beyond* pissed, too. Like he was furious that Mo and Jae had chased after me when he’d scared me off.

“Tell you what,” Jae added with a grin. “Come dance with me and Mo,



and we'll tell you what the bets were for."

I gave a sharp laugh. "Fine. Deal. But I really should go soon..."

"Fifteen minutes," Mo negotiated, snatching my hand in hers rather than waiting for me to take Jae's, and dragging me toward the dance floor with her.

Laughing, I let her coax me into dancing with her and Jae, bobbing and swaying to the heavy beat of the music. Professional dancers in very little clothing were dotted through the room in cages, high above the patrons, and it gave the whole place a decidedly seductive vibe. I locked eyes with the gorgeous blonde dancer on the stage, and she gave me a wink. Sabby was a fantastic dancer, but I missed seeing her. She'd been undercover on this mission way too long, but it'd certainly benefited me in getting an invitation tonight.

To my surprise, I actually found myself having fun. Fifteen minutes came and went all too quickly, but I made no attempt to leave. Not with Jae and Mo doing their best to keep me dancing non-stop. I almost forgot all about the dark cloud of Kai lurking across the club, but I couldn't forget Leon thanks to the small comments he bestowed on me every few minutes.

He was watching from somewhere. I wouldn't have put it past him to have hacked the club's security feed or something. Or shit, he might be right there in the crowd with me. Thank fuck my tolerance for alcohol was extraordinary, or I'd have been totally blitzed with how many drinks I'd had.

As it was, after Mo snagged us a round of shots from a passing waitress, I noticed Jae getting decidedly more handsy on the dance floor, and I was buzzed enough that I did nothing to discourage it. An in was an in, and Leon had blown my one chance at Kai himself. So maybe Jae was my next best option.

The small frown tugging at Moana's brow when Jae cupped my breast as we danced made me hesitate, though. She was a stronger option, Kai's second-in-command and his *sister*. If anyone could get me the data I'd been tasked to extract, it'd be her. So I couldn't risk putting myself on her bad side if she thought I was just using her to chase bad boy dick.

My brain short-circuited briefly as Jae's fingers edged up under my miniskirt, but the looming shadow of Kai approaching acted like a bucket of ice water.

"I'm gonna go pee," I announced, giving Mo a pointed look before hurrying away from Jae *and* Kai. She took the hint and quickly followed me,

which reassured me that I hadn't burned my bridges with her just yet.

She said nothing as we entered the restroom, and I went through the motions in silence until we reunited at the wash basins.

"So... you're into Jae?" she asked bluntly, a small tilt of disappointment on her full lips.

I lifted my brows. "Uh, he's fun. Sure. But I'm not here to pick up, if that's what you're wondering."

The relief that flashed through her eyes was palpable. I'd made the right choice in picking her over Jae.

"Okay," she replied with a puff of a sigh. "Sorry, so many girls... sorry. Never mind. I made assumptions."

I shrugged. "Fair assumption, Jae's hot. He strikes me as a wicked player, though. If I wanted to be messed around by an emotionally unavailable asshole that piles on the charm until he gets his dick wet, I'd have gone home with Leon earlier."

A spluttering curse sounded in my ear, and I didn't try to hide my smile.

Mo gave a small laugh back. "That was the guy you slapped earlier? Yeah, fair call. He was *next level* fine, but the way you hit him screamed red flags."

Leon definitely should have been insulted, but all I got from his end of the comms was a throaty chuckle. Was he *flattered*? Psycho.

I was hot and sweaty from dancing, so I pulled my cat mask off again and wiped the mascara smudges from beneath my eyes. "Holy hell," I groaned, "I should get home. It's so late, and I have work tomorrow."

Mo leaned a hip against the vanity, in no hurry to leave. "Fuck that, you can just sleep under your desk or something." I'd told her I worked in a bank, of all the boring things. "Come on, I'm due to fly home tomorrow, don't cut the night short yet."

That was exactly why I'd needed to strike tonight, because this was the only confirmed data extracted from Edward's files. After tomorrow, Kai and his crew disappeared again.

"You're such a bad influence," I said with a laugh. "Where are you staying? My head is pounding from the music, but maybe we can hang out at your hotel?"

"Smooth," Leon purred in my ear.

Mo crinkled her nose, looking indecisive. Then she gave a heavy exhale. "Yeah. Fuck it, yeah, let's go." She grabbed my hand again, but this time her

fingers intertwined with mine. Maybe I'd misread why she was frowning at Jae touching me earlier?

She pushed through the restroom door, leading the way back to her group with a determined set to her shoulders and my hand firmly grasped in hers.

Kai was ready for her, though, waiting with his *massive* bronze arms folded across his chest and a *don't fuck with me* expression on his face.

"Danny's coming back to the hotel with us," Mo announced, and Jae winced visibly.

Kai's lip curled. "No, she's not."

Moana gripped my hand tighter. "Kai, you aren't—"

"Something came up, Mo. We need to wrap up business sooner than anticipated." Eli was peacekeeping, giving Mo a pleading look even as he stood at Kai's shoulder like a dutiful soldier. "I'm sure Danny needed to be getting home soon, anyway." His gaze shifted to me, and the silent message was clear: Don't throw a match on the already volatile situation between brother and sister.

"Eli's right," I said, peeling my hand free of Moana's. "This was fun, though."

I started to walk away, but Mo hurried after me with a determined set to her jaw. "I'll drop you home," she told me, shooting a glare over her shoulder. "I'm not just walking out and leaving you here after all those drinks. Any creep could take advantage."

Hah. They could try.

Still, it was unbelievably sweet that she cared enough to get me home safely, and my chest tightened with the knowledge that I'd probably be killing her before sunrise. In another life, Moana and I could have been good friends.

"For fuck's sake, Mo," Kai snarled, stomping after us as we exited the club. "Go back to the hotel. I'll drop your pet home safe and sound." The sneer in his voice was unmistakable. It made me all kinds of curious... did he not like any of Mo's friends? Or was there something about *me* specifically triggering him?

Moana looked uncertain and likely would have stood her ground against him. But I reached out and wrapped her in a tight hug before she could push the argument any further.

"I'll be fine," I assured her. "Promise. You've got my number; you can call me in half an hour to make sure I'm still alive. Okay?" I said it as a joke,

but her frown only dipped lower.

“That’s not comforting, Danny,” she muttered. Whatever had happened while we were in the restroom had to be important, though, because the other guys were all business. Jae tugged on Mo’s arm, leading her away to a blacked-out Escalade that had just pulled up. If I were to guess, I’d say Sam was driving.

“You want me to come with you, boss?” Cyryl hung back as the others climbed into the vehicle after Moana.

Kai gave me a dismissive glance. “No, I can handle this. Just get us packed up and ready to fly out at dawn.”

Cyryl nodded, then gave me a tight smile. “Nice meeting you, Danny.”

“You too,” I murmured back, then watched as the Escalade rolled away from the curb, leaving me alone with Kai in his stupid fucking toga. “I appreciate you trying to save an argument with Mo, but I can take a taxi home.”

He gave a grunt. “Good. I’ve got better shit to do, anyway.”

*What a gentleman.*

Rolling my eyes, I stalked away down the street with my heels clicking on the concrete.

“You’re not going to call your boyfriend to pick you up?” Kai called after me. I bit back a smile but didn’t reply. He was searching for a fight for some reason, and I wasn’t going to make it easy on him.

A taxi rounded the corner ahead, so I flagged it down. I had Moana’s mobile number; I could work a long game. Maybe Leon could somehow track her using it.

Not bothering to look back at Kai, I climbed into the back of the cab and gave the driver my hotel details. Before the words were fully out of my mouth, the toga-wearing asshole was sliding into the back seat beside me.

“A hotel?”

I gave him a sidelong look, choosing not to answer his questions. But curiosity pricked at my mind, so a moment later, I gave a small sigh.

“What are you doing, Kai? Don’t you have some business emergency?”

He stared at me for an extended moment, then reached out and knocked on the driver partition. “Let us out here, please.”

I stiffened, glancing out the window. I hadn’t spent a whole lot of time in Shadow Grove and didn’t recognize the area we were in. Safe to say, it was the middle of fucking nowhere, though. *That* had me worried.

He indicated for me to get out, and I was intrigued enough to do as he wanted. The taxi departed almost immediately, leaving us entirely alone.

“Kai... where are we?” I asked, peering around at the dark, seemingly abandoned buildings around us. “Why are we here?”

He quirked a brow at me, then pulled a gun from the back of his toga. “We’re here, *Danielle*, to confirm a hunch I have about you.”

## DANNY

“Please,” I begged, my hands up and my eyes wide, “don’t shoot me. I don’t understand—”

Kai scoffed. “Cute act. Get inside.” He nodded to the house we were standing outside of. The whole damn street looked totally abandoned, with most windows boarded up and doors nailed shut.

“DeLuna, what’s going on?” Leon snapped in my ear. “Do you need backup?”

“No,” I replied sharply, answering Leon before he could go all savior-complex on me again. I was more than capable of handling one man with a gun, but it didn’t need to come to that.

Kai raised a dark brow. “Excuse me?”

I feigned terror, letting my hands shake as I held them out in surrender. “N-no, if I go in there, you’re going to kill me. I’ve seen this movie. What kind of—”

Kai grabbed my shoulder and whirled me around, pressing the gun to my back. “I *said* get inside. Maybe you weren’t paying attention at the club, but I don’t appreciate my orders being questioned.”

He pushed me none too gently, and I stumbled in my stiletto boots as I approached the dark house. For dramatic effect, I gave a small sob out loud, and Leon muttered expletives in my earpiece. He needed to calm the fuck down, or he was going to totally blow my cover. Worse than he already had.

“Stand down,” I breathed ever so softly as I reached out for the door handle. “I’ve got this.”

“Did you say something?” Kai demanded, stepping closer behind me and pressing the muzzle of his gun harder into my spine.

I shook my head, keeping my face set with terror. The door opened easily, and Kai nudged me to enter the house.

“Do you know where we are, Danielle?”

I peered around, taking in the vacant, dilapidated building. Graffiti decorated the walls, and a distinct chill ran through the hollow structure. I didn’t even need to lie when I shook my head and told him I had no clue.

He kicked the door shut behind us and pushed me further into the house. “This area of Shadow Grove used to be owned by one of the local gangs,” he told me in an expressionless voice. “Now it’s totally abandoned, so, you know... there’s no one around to hear you scream.”

A violent shiver of arousal ran through me. Kai saw it, and I let him assume it was fear. Better that than have him see the dirty track my thoughts just raced along. Obviously, I knew I shouldn’t be still thinking about seducing him when my cover was hanging by a thread... but it sure would muddy his train of thought. It wasn’t too late to salvage the assignment and walk away alive.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked with a bit of a whine. “I don’t understand. Is Mo not allowed friends?”

His glare was flat and impatient. He snatched an upturned chair from the side of the room and slammed it down in the middle of the floor. “Sit down, Danielle. You and I are going to have a chat.”

I did as I was told—like a good girl—and blinked up at him with huge eyes. Thank goodness I’d ditched the mask or my perfect innocent act wouldn’t be anywhere near as dramatic.

“And then what?” I asked, wetting my lips. “Then you’ll let me go?”

He grabbed another old chair and put it down in front of me, sitting down so close that his knees bracketed mine. The gun was held loosely in his lap, but not forgotten. It was a Smith & Wesson model 617 K-22, a fucking *revolver* and a decidedly phallic-shaped one at that, with its thick silver barrel. The arrogance of this man, to think he could defend himself with just ten bullets... blew my damn mind.

“No, then I’ll kill you,” he told me without even a flicker of remorse. “But if you make this easy, I won’t torture you first.”

Tears slipped from my eyes, and my lower lip wobbled. “Y-you’re going to kill me?” I choked out. “But why?”

Kai shook his head. “You’re good, I’ll give you that. Who are you working for?”

I blinked rapidly, spilling more tears. “What? I-I work for the Private Reserve Bank of Cloudcroft. Is that what this is about? Is my boss doing something illegal? I don’t know anything about—”

“Stop *lying*,” Kai barked. His deep voice bounced through the empty house and reverberated against my skin with a power that made my insides twist. “You’re covert, I’m *sure* of it. CIA?”

More tears as I blinked my confusion. “What? CIA? No! Kai, I’m just a bank teller. I just—”

“No, you’re right,” he murmured, his brown eyes seemingly black in the darkness of the house. The only light came from the broken windows, and it cast an eerie shadow across his features. “You’re not *American* enough for CIA. MI6 maybe. Or Mossad. Possibly even DGSE. Stop me when I strike the right note, Danielle, it’ll be quicker that way.”

I almost laughed at his assumption I worked for a governmental agency. As though I was one of the self-proclaimed *good guys*. Cute. If he knew how *appallingly* they all paid their covert operatives, he’d understand why those guesses were amusing.

“Kai, I’m not a *spy*,” I exclaimed, wringing my hands and giving a nervous laugh. “Is this a joke? You’re messing with me, right? Does Mo have anything to do with this?”

He didn’t answer, just stared at me a moment longer before pulling a phone from his costume belt and bringing it to his ear.

“Yeah, Cyril?” He paused to listen, his eyes still locked on me. He wasn’t looking away, so I pushed more tears from my eyes, sniffing dramatically. “I’m handling it.” He ended the call, putting his phone away and leaning forward into my space.

“Here’s the thing, Danielle. I’m in a bit of a hurry and don’t have time to play games. Tell me who you work for, and let’s get this over with.” His tone was hard and threatening, but he had *no* idea who he was playing with.

I just sat there trembling like a cold Chihuahua and sniveling pleas for my life. I’d seen the flicker of uncertainty in Kai’s eyes when I’d first started crying. He wasn’t *totally* convinced I was under cover, so I was confident he wouldn’t actually shoot me until I gave him some kind of confirmation. Which I would *never* do. Not even under the most depraved torture.

“Give it up, Danielle,” Kai roared. “I saw you eyeing me up at the club,



way before you targeted my sister in the bathrooms. I *know* you were there for me.”

More sobs. Damn, I was good at that. “Wh-what? *Target* Mo? She approached me! And I wasn’t—”

“I saw you. Before your boyfriend kissed you, I saw the way you looked at me. Just tell me who you’re working for, and I’ll end this quickly.” His jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed, but there was uncertainty in his posture. He was already second-guessing himself. Did most agents break so easily? Spy agencies really needed to train their people better if they did.

I dragged a shuddering breath, swiping my hand over my wet cheeks. The sting of my mascara running was helping to maintain the fake tears, though, so I didn’t wipe too much away.

“I thought you were *hot*,” I blurted out like an accusation. “I was *checking you out*, not planning to kill you!”

His brows flicked up ever so briefly, betraying a hint of surprise. He hadn’t expected that. How curious.

“That was before I realized what a total psychopath you are, though,” I continued, spitting the words at him with fear-drenched venom. “Before you opened your mouth and showed me that beauty really is only skin-deep. How the fuck someone as lovely as Moana is related to *you*, I have no idea.”

He reared back slightly as though I’d slapped him. “You really want me to believe you were just *flirting* when you kept looking over at me?”

I gave a bitter laugh. “Yeah, Kai, I was. But right now, I’d rather have sex with a barbed wire dildo while swimming in crocodile-infested waters than kiss you. Sorry if *that’s* not the truth you were hoping to get out of me here, but that’s all I’ve got.”

He stared at me for a long moment, the shadows shifting to hide his expression. Frustrating as hell because I was relying on reading his moods to know which angle to push in my character. Aggressive, insulting, and terrified seemed to be the sweet spot, though.

I gave another shaking sob and sat up straighter in my chair. “If you’re going to kill me, then you should just do it. But you’ll be killing an innocent woman, Kai. Do you really want that on your shoulders for the rest of your life?”

He’d killed before, of course. Plenty of times, if his file was to be believed. But had he ever killed someone he believed to be an *innocent* in terms of his world? I didn’t think so. Regardless of his status and the

countless deaths his gun sales had been responsible for, I hadn't seen any *real* fuckups in his history. His kills had all been other criminals or people trying to take him down.

Me, though? As far as he was concerned, I was sweet innocent Danielle the bank teller, and *nothing* would prove that false even if I were dead.

Still, he raised his gun and flicked off the safety. The cool muzzle pressed against my forehead, and I froze, my eyes wide with fear.

"Danny," Leon said softly in my ear. "You're in over your head. I'm coming to help."

"Stop," I gasped, my gaze locked with Kai's. "Please, *stop*. You'll regret this."

"Maybe I will," Leon replied, knowing full fucking well I was talking to him. "But I can't stay here and listen to you get killed."

"Maybe I will," Kai murmured, and the echo of Leon's words jolted through me with a weird feeling. "But I can't take chances. Who do you work for, Danny?"

I let more tears fall free, running down my cheeks as I raised my trembling chin with bravado. "I already told you. I work at the bank."

For a split second, I wondered if I'd misjudged Kai. Maybe he really would pull the trigger? I didn't care how close Leon might be, he wouldn't be able to save me from a bullet to the head at this close range.

But then Kai exhaled a curse and lowered the gun.

I sagged in my chair, my whole body trembling as I gave soft, pathetic sobs.

"Go!" Kai roared, his free hand clenched in a fist on the arm of the chair. "Get the fuck out of here, and lose my sister's number. I never want to see your angelic little face again, Danielle, or I swear I *will* pull the trigger."

"Holy fuck," Leon exclaimed in my ear. "That was *too fucking close*."

He was telling me.

I scrambled out of my seat and hurried for the exit. "Trust me, you crazy fuck, you'll never see me again." I gave another shuddering gasp, wobbling on my heels as I reached for the door handle.

No sooner had I pulled it open, though, than it snatched out of my grip and slammed shut with an echoing bang.

"Just because I'm letting you live," Kai growled from *right* behind me. His hand was still planted on the door, holding it shut as I stiffened in fake fear. "Doesn't mean I will tolerate that kind of disrespect." He bit the words

off in anger, finally snapping on how many times I'd pushed his buttons tonight.

I turned around slowly, looking up at him through my heavy lashes. "Then maybe you need your head examined," I told him in a quivering voice. "Because if you think I'm going to *thank* you for this, then you're fucking deluded."

Kai gave a low chuckle, but it was *far* from amused. Then his huge hand wrapped around my throat, and my back slammed into the door as he applied pressure.

"I think I just changed my mind about letting you go."

## DANNY

**K**ai's grip was tight enough that I couldn't have spoken even if I'd tried, but I rounded my eyes in panic and gripped his wrist like I wanted to pull him away. Like I wasn't insanely turned on by the power play going on between us, and beyond entertained by how readily he was eating up my weak damsel act. His fingers loosened after an extended moment, and I sucked air greedily like I'd been genuinely convinced he was going to strangle me.

He didn't remove his hand entirely, though. Instead, he just crushed me harder to the door with his bulky body and used his grip on my throat to hold me still.

"Why am I finding it so hard to let you leave?" he demanded, the edge of frustration clear in his voice.

I pretended to try pushing him away but, in reality, just rocked my body against him in a way that made him grunt.

"Maybe because your dick has been hard since the moment you saw me," I suggested with sass but kept the panic in my eyes. He seemed to like the juxtaposition, and I wasn't bluffing. That one movement had proven it... Kai wanted to fuck me so bad it was messing with his better judgment.

He was getting off on seeing me scared, and now I had a solid idea what his friends had been putting bets on at the club. If I were to guess, I'd say he'd done something to scare the girl he'd disappeared with, and she hadn't wanted to play along. Either she'd ditched his ass, or she hadn't been sufficiently scared enough... but either way, he hadn't been satisfied.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Leon muttered in my ear, reminding me he was still there listening to every word, every breath. *Why* did that knowledge just make my insides flutter and my pussy throb?

Maybe Kai wasn’t the only psycho in the room, after all.

“Get on your knees,” Kai ordered me in a rough voice.

I swallowed hard, sniffing away my tears. “Go fuck yourself, Kai. I’m not going to suck your dick.” Oh man... I definitely was. Even if this wasn’t part of my job description, I’d be doing it just for fun. The fact that Leon had to hear it all go down? Icing.

His gun was back out in a flash, pointed at my head even as he pushed me to the floor. “I’m getting real tired of repeating myself, Danielle. See, the thing is, my sister is persistent. She likes you, and there’s one surefire way to ruin that.”

Oh, that was cute. He was going to try and pretend he wanted to fuck me so that his sister would hate me? Damn, the denial was strong in this one. Not that I gave a fuck about his flimsy excuses, I’d been worked up and on edge since Leon kissed me in New York three weeks ago.

I mean, the logic was sound enough. I’d seen the way Moana had looked at those girls who’d been hanging off her brother at the club earlier. She clearly had little to no respect for women throwing themselves at him, and if it seemed like I’d *used* her to get close? Yeah, she’d hate me for sure.

Which surprisingly disappointed me. Strangely, I’d grown really fond of her in just one night of drinking and dancing. Not fond enough to fuck up my chance at completing my mission... but enough that I had a small pang of regret.

Then again, I’d likely end up killing her before she ever found out, so what the hell? May as well have some fun along the way.

“Please,” I whimpered, laughing on the inside, “don’t force me...” As if he could. Then again, the file on Kai’s background and training had been vague enough that it was surely hiding vital info. Maybe he’d put up a good fight if tested. Ultimately, though, I would win. I always did.

Lucky for Kai, I wasn’t in the mood to fight.

The gorgeous fool tapped my cheek with his gun, like he was reminding me that *he* was in charge and held my life in *his* hands. I reacted the way he expected, trembling and crying, pouting up at him with big pleading eyes while my nipples hardened with arousal in my leather bra.

His breathing quickened, and he tugged his toga free with his other hand.

The fabric pooled on the floor, leaving him in his leather weapon belt and a pair of white boxer briefs that were doing a terrible job of containing his erection. My mouth damn near watered, and I couldn't help a small gasp as he freed himself and stroked his fist down his length.

"Fuck off," Leon groaned in my ear. "You're into this."

Hell yeah, I was. Not that I'd let Kai know. Instead, I shook my head and tried to get away. My back was to the door, though, my knees biting into the rough floorboards, and there was nowhere to go.

Kai flicked the safety off his gun again, the threat clear. "I feel even a hint of teeth on my dick, and I'm shooting you in the head," he informed me. "Understood?"

I bobbed my head in a nod, pretending to cringe away from the gun. Blinking up at him through my wet lashes, I parted my lips ever so slightly.

His gaze was pure fire as he stared down at me and swayed closer, bumping his tip against my lower lip and leaving a smear of pre-cum behind.

"Wider," he demanded in a rough voice.

I did as I was told, opening my mouth wide and giving a gasp when he pushed his dick past my lips. The salty taste of his arousal coated my tongue, and I deliberately tightened my throat so that I gagged when he pushed deeper.

He hissed a breath through his teeth and grabbed my hair with his free hand. "Take it," he growled, pulling out ever so slightly, then pushing back in. This time, I closed my lips around his cock, sucking lightly.

"Fuck," he groaned. "Yes. Suck it. Harder."

"I hate you, DeLuna," Leon groaned in my ear, and I almost laughed. Good thing my mouth was full.

I reached up with shaking hands to steady myself on Kai's belt and sucked him harder. I couldn't seem *too* eager, but I quit gagging when he hit the back of my throat and worked my tongue around his tip. His breath came in harsh, jagged gasps, and a few moments later, he released my hair.

If I had any questions about *how* exactly he intended to prove this encounter, the distinctive click of his phone's camera would have answered it.

"Keep going," he ordered, giving a groan as his thumb moved over the phone screen. No doubt he was sending the picture to one of his crew, who would tell Moana that her new friend was nothing more than a social-climbing whore.

It was a shame, but such was the nature of my job. Friends outside the Guild simply didn't exist.

"Jesus, DeLuna," Leon muttered, "hurry up and finish him off. Then get the hell out of there."

I could have been mistaken, but Leon sounded a little husky himself. A touch breathless. It encouraged me to take Kai deeper and moan a little around his girth. Instead of losing his mind like I'd expected, he withdrew from my mouth entirely and grabbed my jaw in a rough grip.

"D-did I do something wrong?" I asked in a panting whisper. His eyes were narrowed, and his brow drawn in a tight, confused frown.

Shit. He was starting to think with his head again. Starting to question why I wasn't screaming and trying to get away. I wondered if that might have been more of what he was into... the *chase* rather than the submission. Curious.

"Something's not right," he muttered. Releasing my face, he stalked away a couple of paces and swiped his hand over his face in frustration. He even put his gun away, but I couldn't help noticing his dick was still as hard as ever.

Licking my lips, I debated how to get him to snap again. My enthusiastic participation seemed to have been what confused him, so...

Scrambling to my feet, I took advantage of the opportunity while his back was turned and made a run for it. But I didn't do the sensible thing and simply open the door behind me, that would end the fun far too quickly. I ran further *into* the house and into the pitch darkness of the boarded-up rooms.

Kai only took a second to chase after me, but I got enough of a head start that I felt safe to whisper a threat to Leon.

"Don't you fucking dare try to save me, Marx," I breathed as I pretended to stumble around a corner. "I have this perfectly under control." Then to cover my words as Kai got closer, I gave a small scream of terror.

"Fine," Leon snapped back as I reached the dilapidated staircase and "tripped" on the first step. My shoulder hit the light switch on the wall, and the dim bulb above us flared to life—shocking me more than anything else that night.

Kai caught me in a flash, his huge hand seizing my shoulder and flipping me over. His gun was out again, pointing right in my face as he stared down at me in fury and excitement. Now I was kind of glad for the light so I could watch his shifting expressions.

“I should shoot you right here,” he told me in a cold voice. “You’re becoming a *problem*, and I don’t tolerate problems walking away while still breathing.”

My breathing was harsh and fast, my chest heaving as I gave him huge, pleading eyes. “I’m sorry,” I whimpered. “Please don’t shoot me. Please. I’ll do whatever you want.”

My skirt had already risen up when I landed on my back against the stairs, but just to really emphasize my point, I squirmed enough to reveal my tiny black panties.

Kai took the bait, glancing down at them ever so quickly. “Why do I get the feeling that you *want* me to take whatever I want, Danielle?” he demanded. His dick was still rock hard and glistening with pre-cum, though, so he was most definitely still into the game.

I shook my head in denial. “I don’t,” I whined, “but if it means you won’t shoot me...” I reached down and hooked my thumb under the crotch of my panties, pulling them aside.

Kai drew a sharp breath, his eyes glued to my exposed pussy.

“Please,” I moaned, “don’t kill me.”

His eyes flicked to my face, and his tongue swiped over his full lower lip. Then the gun aimed at my face wavered, and he dropped to one knee on the stairs.

“Anything?” he repeated, the challenge painted all over his face.

I nodded quickly, sniffing away tears. “Anything you want,” I confirmed. “Just don’t kill me.”

His lips tugged in a small smirk. The gun was no longer aimed at my face, but it was still in his hand, still loaded and pointed at my chest. I was *almost* positive he had no intention of shooting me... not yet. But the small percentage of doubt had my adrenaline thrumming in the most incredible way.

Kai grabbed onto the waistband of my panties and tugged them down. I took the hint and wriggled them the rest of the way off my legs. His hand was on me before I even kicked the lingerie away, his thumb finding my clit and making me moan loudly.

“Holy shit,” he murmured, his index finger dipping inside my pussy and making me quiver, “you’re soaking.”

“I’m shocked,” Leon commented with heavy sarcasm in my ear, and I bit the inside of my cheek *hard* to keep from laughing.



I said nothing in response to either of them, and Kai shook his head slowly. “What’s got you so turned on, Danielle? Is it this?” He removed his hand from my pussy to grip his cock, giving it a firm stroke. “Or this?” He trailed the muzzle of his gun down my body, scraping over my belly and pressing against my pussy.

A deep shudder wracked through me, and this time I doubted I could pass it off as fear so easily. Kai gripped his dick harder, watching with hungry eyes as he brushed the barrel of his gun over my swollen clit, causing rapid shivers of desire to tremble through me. Fuck, I was losing it.

“You’re going to want to stay *really* still,” he told me in a breathless voice, a slightly unhinged smile on his lips. Then, before I could object—as if I would—he dragged the gun lower and pushed the tip of the barrel inside my pussy.

I gasped and wasn’t even faking it. *That* I hadn’t expected. “Kai—”

“Don’t move,” he snapped, his breath rough as he pushed the gun deeper.

It was a fucking miracle I didn’t come right then. Obviously, yes, I was going to need a hell of a good wash out when I got back to the hotel, because guns weren’t *clean* objects. But right now, I didn’t give a flying fuck.

“I-is that loaded?” I asked with a shaking voice, even though I knew perfectly well that it was. It was almost a shame to see the safety was back on.

Leon gave a small groan in my ear. “Please tell me he’s not doing what I’m picturing right now.”

Kai glanced up to meet my eyes but didn’t answer my question. Instead, he just pumped the barrel of the gun in and out a couple of times, driving me fucking *wild*. My orgasm was way closer than I’d realized, the whole fucking game I’d been playing with Kai having edged me all damn night.

“Stop,” I gasped, “Please, stop—” *Because I’m seriously about to come with the barrel of your loaded gun inside me, and I don’t know how safe that is...*

“You said anything,” he replied, his thrusts gaining speed. His other hand pumped his cock in time with the gun, and the next thing I knew, I was crying out with my climax. I tried to keep as still as physically possible, but the way the orgasm crashed through me had my back arching and my fingers clawing at Kai’s forearm.

The waves of pleasure crashed over me, again and again as my pussy throbbed and contracted around the metal, then as it started to ebb, Kai

withdrew the gun and grabbed me by the throat. My vision was still spotty from orgasm aftershocks as he dragged me up to my knees. I barely sucked a breath of air before his cock was so deep down my throat I choked on it.

His movements were frenzied and out of control, his gun discarded as he gripped my hair and fucked my mouth. I held onto his hips to keep from being pushed over, and my ears rushed with static as endorphins and adrenaline flooded my brain.

It wasn't long before his cock thickened and pulsed, shooting hot cum into the back of my throat, and I swallowed reflexively.

Panting, he jerked away and stared at me with a slightly horrified expression. Then his gaze shifted slightly to the left, and he reached out to pick something up from the ground.

In a flash, his confused, tortured, fascinated, aroused gaze shifted to straight *murderous*, and he slammed my head against the wall, knocking me clean out.

# KAI

**F**uck. *Fuck*. What the *fuck* had just happened?

My chest heaved and I swiped a shaking hand over my mouth, staring down at the crumpled, lifeless body of an angel in front of me. A dark line of blood trickled down her perfect face, staining her white blonde hair and mesmerizing me. Was she dead?

Holding my breath, I pressed two fingers to her soft throat, feeling for a pulse. The relief I felt when it throbbed against my fingertips was staggering. Why? I should have killed her. Why the fuck had I only knocked her out? Why wasn't I finishing the job now?

Swallowing heavily, I peered at the tiny communication device I'd picked up off the ground.

She was a liar. A fucking *liar*. She'd played me the whole fucking time... and I'd fallen for it. Hook, line and goddamn sweetest-pussy-I'd-ever-seen sinker.

Panic flashed through me, and I dropped the earpiece to the ground, stomping on it before racing back into the living room to find my phone. Whoever was on the other end of that device would be coming for her... and me.

"I need collection *ASAP*," I barked into the phone when Eli answered immediately. Where the fuck were my underpants? "How far away are you?"

"Less than a minute, boss," he replied with a deep chuckle. "Jae sent me to pick you up after he got your picture message. Subtle."

I grunted, tugging my boxer briefs back on and tucking my dick away.

Fucking hell, it was still wet from Danny's mouth. The fact that I'd actually finished was a new development, but the way that woman had sucked me... *fuck*.

I'd snapped the picture of her mouth around my dick and sent it to Jae because I'd seen the way he'd been looking at her. The desire in his eyes and the drifting hands while she danced. Yeah, I wanted him to tell Mo, but I also wanted to stake a claim.

Irrelevant now. "Hurry up," I snapped to Eli as I strode back through to where I'd left Danny. "Turns out the little angel is a devil in disguise."

Eli hissed a curse. "Understood." He ended the call, and I stooped to retrieve my gun from where I'd left it on the stairs. Fuck *me*. I could never look at this gun the same way again. Swallowing hard, I put it away and scooped up Danny's unconscious body.

"What the fuck are you doing, you idiot?" I muttered to myself as I carried Danny's limp form out of the house. I should have left her there with a bullet in her head. I *should* have just let her walk away outside the club, but I just had to satisfy my burning curiosity. Now look where that'd left me.

The blacked-out Escalade rolled up to the curb, and Eli leapt out of the driver's seat, with raised brows. "Dead?"

I grimaced and shook my head.

Eli looked even more shocked at that but opened the rear door for me to deposit her inside. Without a word, he slid back into the driver's seat and waited for me to get in the passenger side before pulling back out into the street.

"Lost your toga somewhere, boss?" Eli murmured after several minutes of driving in silence.

I shot him a narrow-eyed glare. "Shut the fuck up, Eli."

He smirked but did as he was told, driving in silence while I stared out the window and tried not to sink into a total fucking panic attack. That comms device was sophisticated, ahead of the market. Definitely not government budget. Which meant she was private sector.

I should have killed her. *Fuck* me. What the hell had I been thinking? She wouldn't have been the first undercover agent I'd killed on a hunch, and I doubt she'd be the last. But something about the way she'd looked up at me with those huge sapphire blue eyes... the way her mascara had run dark rivulets down her cheeks... I'd *believed* her.

Maybe because she reminded me of someone else. Someone who I hadn't

hesitated to kill when push came to shove. Someone I *regretted* pulling the trigger on, because I'd been *wrong* that time.

The truth of the matter, though, was that I couldn't let her walk away. She was undercover for *someone*, which meant she needed to die, if only to send the message that I wouldn't be messed with. But I couldn't fucking do it. I couldn't shoot her. And I couldn't let her go, so...

"She's coming with us," I announced into the silence of the car. We were arriving back at our hotel, and I knew I would face more issues when I got upstairs.

Eli pulled into the parking garage, waving his keycard at the scanner for access, then gave me a hard look. "Why?"

Anger flashed hot through me. "Because I fucking said so."

Eli was smart enough not to question me when I gave a direct order, so he just nodded silently and went to the trunk. I glanced over at Danny, at the dark blood staining her pale skin and white hair. Even knowing she was a snake in the grass... I still wanted to fuck her. I'd *never* been so easily led by my dick in my life, and I didn't appreciate her uncovering this new weakness.

With a frustrated sigh, I got out of the car and waited while Eli opened the back door.

Danny stirred slightly as Eli hefted her deadweight from the back seat, but he calmly shifted his grip and clapped a chloroform-soaked rag over her mouth and nose. Her tensed muscles turned to liquid almost instantly, and Eli tossed her over his shoulder.

I waited for him to walk ahead of me, fighting the urge to carry her myself. Her hair had escaped its elastic at some point in the abandoned house... maybe while I fucked her mouth or when I chased her through the darkness... but now it hung down in a silken sheet that nearly brushed the ground as Eli walked. For some fucking reason, I couldn't stop staring at it.

"How long do you want her out?" Eli asked as we rode the elevator. It stopped a couple of times, but the guests waiting took one look at us and decided to wait for the next car.

The answer should have been *forever*. It would have been simple enough to ask Eli to deal with her. As she was now, she would be no trouble at all. He could strangle the life out of her and dispose of the body in a crematorium before our flight departed.

"The whole flight," I replied instead. "We can't risk her knowing where we're going."

Eli nodded.

A few moments later, he gave me a small frown of concern. “If she comes to the fortress—”

“I know,” I snapped. “She’s never leaving. Not alive, anyway.”

Because that was how highly we valued our privacy and our secrecy. If anyone knew where to find me or my crew on our downtime, we’d already be dead. Someone would have dropped a bomb on our private island already. If I insisted on taking Danny there... I’d have to kill her eventually.

“So be it,” I muttered aloud, determined.

The elevator opened on our floor, and I stalked along the corridor ahead of Eli in an attempt to shift my focus away from the lifeless siren draped over his shoulder. She still wore the mini-skirt and leather bra, the absurdly tall stiletto boots still on her feet. But her panties were gone, and when I glanced back at Eli, it was all I could focus on.

He misread my look and handed me the keycard to unlock our suite door. Gritting my teeth, I forced myself to turn away again.

I drew a deep breath, then pulled on my business face as I shoved the door open. My whole crew was there, and I barked commands at them like we were back in the Royal Marines. They jumped to obey on instinct, too. Only Moana remained after I was done with my orders, standing there with a furious set to her jaw and her arms folded.

“Are you deaf, Moana?” I snarled. “I said *move out*. Someone is going to be looking for this bitch, and this will be their first stop.”

She looked like she wanted to accuse me of something... but then thought better of it. Silently, she just shook her head at me in disappointment, then stomped off to finish packing up her shit to leave. As she left, though, I caught the hurt look she cast in Danny’s direction.

My sister fucking broke my heart sometimes.

Eli deposited Danny onto the couch and called Mauricio over to give him my instructions for keeping Danny sedated for the duration of the flight home. Mauricio arched a curious look in my direction but didn’t argue as he opened up his bag of tricks to mix a drug cocktail.

Six minutes was all it took for my team to clear out of the hotel suite.

I climbed back into the Escalade, with Eli at the wheel. Jae and Cyryl were in the back seat, with Danny slumped between them, and I couldn’t seem to stop glaring at them both in the mirror. What did it say about me that I was *still* feeling the need to keep their hands off what I considered my

property, and she wasn't even conscious?

Jae was pissed at me, too. I could see it in the angry glares he shot back. He was a fucking fool for thinking he'd been in with a chance with her. I was her target all along, and she'd damn near fooled me.

Moana, Sam, and Mauricio were still loading our luggage into their Escalade when we pulled out, but I trusted them to meet us at the airstrip. We had our own private plane waiting there, and Sam had already called ahead to change our flight plans. According to documentation, we were heading to Hong Kong, but no one would find us there if they searched.

We pulled into the private airstrip ten minutes later, and I was relieved to find the staff had already gotten our plane ready to go. Money really could buy you anything in Shadow Grove. I must remember that.

Silent and efficient, we all piled out, and Jae carried Danny up into the aircraft with gentler hands than Eli had used earlier. Cyryl followed, but I hesitated, frowning.

"Boss?" Eli asked, pausing on the lower step of the stairs.

I huffed a deep exhale. "I've got a bad feeling."

My friend looked in the direction I was staring. Jae—our pilot—was already in the cockpit, warming the engines up so that the moment we were all on board, we could leave. Even mad at me, he wasn't slacking on his job.

In the distance, headlights lit up the night, and I breathed a small sigh of relief.

"Alright, let's go!" I shouted. "They're here!"

Eli and I started up the stairs as our second Escalade came speeding across the tarmac toward us, much faster than necessary. As they drew close, I noticed the bullet holes in the glass.

"Go!" Moana screamed at us, jumping from the driver's seat before the car even fully stopped. Sam burst from the back seat, his gun raised and bullets popping off at the black Maserati currently flying toward us all. "Get on the fucking plane!" my sister bellowed, shoving Eli and me the rest of the way into the aircraft.

Sam continued shooting as he followed us up the stairs, and Eli shouted at Jae to get us in the air.

Our crew was a well-oiled unit. The aircraft rolled forward, and Moana pulled the cabin door closed while Sam fired a few more bullets to deter their pursuer. Moments later, we were picking up speed along the runway, and I peered out the window to see the Maserati speeding alongside us.

It was no use, though. Jae raised the aircraft nose, and we gained altitude, carrying us out of reach. The Maserati skidded to a stop, and I watched a man step out. He held a gun in his hand, but it was too dark to make out his features even as he tilted his head back to track our ascent.

“Alright, who the *fuck* is she?” Moana exploded, gesturing angrily at Danny, who someone had strapped into a reclined chair. “That fucker was no amateur, and he wanted her back. *Bad.*”

I swallowed hard. That was what I wanted to know, too.

“Where’s Mauricio?” I asked instead.

Sam gave me a hard look and shook his head. “Dead.”

That one word was a blow worse than any physical wound. Angelic little Danielle had a lot to answer for when she woke. And it wouldn’t be pleasant if she refused.



## DANNY

**M**y first thought as I slowly regained consciousness was that Leon was going to be so smug that I'd fucked up. I'd been so confident I had Kai under control, and so irritated at the implication that I wasn't good enough for this mission, that I'd shot myself in the foot.

Fuzz clouded my brain, and I found myself slipping in and out of sleep as I tried to shake off whatever they'd given me. When I did, though, I kind of wished I'd stayed out longer. My head was *thumping*. No doubt I had a hell of a bruise where Kai had knocked me out, too.

I couldn't raise a hand to check, because I was bound to a chair. Damn it.

Blinking away the drug haze, I quickly assessed my surroundings. The room I was in had to be underground. There were no windows, and the air had that cool, damp quality of being subterranean. The walls and floor were stone, but not newly laid. At a guess, I'd say this room was a heck of a lot older than me. Which was probably a good thing, as it might have flaws that could be exploited. Especially if the metal bars in the door were rusted.

I was alone, so that was something at least. Gave me a second to take stock and *think*. It wasn't the worst situation I'd ever found myself in, but goddamn, it'd been a long time since someone had gotten the jump on me like that.

My wrists were bound with zip ties, which would be easy enough to break if I were inclined to. There was no sense in showing all my cards too soon, though, so for now I stayed put. A minute later, I spotted the freshly installed camera in the corner of the roof. I was being watched.

What was my best game plan? Kai had knocked me out and abducted me. He could have killed me at *any* point after my head met that wall, but he hadn't. Was he still second-guessing himself? If so, I could maybe convince him that the comms device hadn't been mine.

One thing was for sure, I would *never* reveal that I was Guild. Torture was nothing new, and I could almost bank on the fact that Kai and his team wouldn't push me anywhere near as hard as my own trainers had. They were weapons dealers. Glorified businessmen. I'd bet not a single one of them had the stomach for true torture techniques.

Meanwhile, the longer I stuck to my cover identity, the more likely it'd be to find an escape route from wherever I was being held. All it'd take would be one slipup from one of Kai's crew...

Arguing voices reached my ears from outside my prison cell, and I tilted my head to listen. I was still groggy from the drugs, though, and the way the voices echoed made it impossible to make out who it was. Maybe I wasn't with Kai's crew at all? Maybe they'd handed me off to someone else?

Nah. His ego was too inflated to do that. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say he'd taken me to his home. Silly, silly Kai. Maybe I'd complete my mission *after* I killed them all. What better place to find all his deep dark secrets than in the belly of the beast itself.

A moment later, my cell door opened, and Jae strode in with a thunderous expression. Cyryl followed him, glaring at me with hatred as he stood in the doorway and folded his arms over his chest.

"Jae?" I asked in my most pathetic, confused voice. "What's going on? Where am I?"

Cyril wasn't buying it, his eyes rolling with exasperation. Jae just crouched down in front of me with a deep scowl set on his brow.

"Don't try to run," he told me in a hard voice. "There's nowhere to go, and Sam is looking for any reason to shoot you."

I rounded my eyes, letting tears spill out. "I d-don't understand," I whimpered. "Why are you doing this?"

Jae's expression tightened, but Cyril scoffed.

"Just hurry up, Jae," he snapped, pulling a Glock from the back of his pants and pointing it at me. "One wrong move, and I'll shoot."

I shook my head frantically as Jae cut my cable-tied hands apart. "Shoot?" I squeaked. "But I haven't done anything wrong! I went over this with Kai... He thought I was like... a *spy* or something. Ask him! He said he

was letting me go!”

Jae grabbed my upper arm, hauling me to my feet. “Just... stop it, Danny,” he muttered, pushing me past Cyril and into the damp corridor outside. It was narrow, but he didn’t direct me to the stairs on my left. Instead, we went right, and he pushed me into an old bathroom.

“You need to take everything off,” he told me in an expressionless voice. “Take a shower if you want, and there’s clean clothes there.”

I turned to face him, wrapping my arms around myself like I was terrified. “Jae, what’s happening? Are you going to kill me?”

His gaze flicked up to meet mine for a second, and regret shone through. Then it was gone, and his eyes shifted away. “Hurry up, Danny. The shower wasn’t technically approved by the boss.”

I drew a shaking breath, looking around. But it was way too soon to make a break for it. I had no clue what I’d find waiting at the top of those stairs... I needed to bide my time and gather intel. So I took another step toward the exposed shower cubicle before giving Jae an uncertain look.

“Are you going to stand there and watch me shower?” I tried to sound horrified by the idea. Normal women would be, I think.

Jae folded his arms, looking uncomfortable. “Yes. Now hurry up.”

Acting shy and humiliated, I stripped out of my Catwoman costume—or what was left of it anyway—and cranked the water on the shower. It was cold, but there was only one tap, so I figured I would make do. Under any other circumstance, I’d have probably played up the “I can’t shower while you watch” act, but I really did need to wash. The last thing I needed while being held captive was a bad case of vaginal infection from the gun oils.

I showered quickly, scrubbing my whole body with the chemically harsh soap Jae had left beside the shower. After less than two minutes, he was tapping his foot and muttering at me to hurry up, so I focused on getting the important parts clean, then dressed in the sweatpants and T-shirt they’d provided.

The pants were too long, and the T-shirt loose around the chest, but they weren’t falling off me. I had to assume they were Moana’s, seeing as she was the only female in Kai’s crew.

Jae cleared his throat when I was done getting dressed, and I looked up at him in question.

“I need your watch, too,” he told me, nodding to my wrist.

I inhaled sharply, covering it with my hand. “But... it was my

grandmother's..."

Jae winced. "Sorry, Danny. Boss said everything."

Simmering with anger, I reluctantly took the delicate silver watch off. It *wasn't* my grandmother's, seeing as I was an orphan. But I still didn't want to part with it for personal reasons.

Jae gave a heavy sigh as he took it from me, tucking it into his pocket.

"Will I get it back?" I asked in a small, pleading voice.

He grimaced and shook his head. "Probably not. Come on, we've been too long down here already."

Giving a couple of whimpering sobs, I let him grab my arm to lead me back into my prison cell again. He pushed me to sit back down, but he didn't tie my hands. Instead, he left Cyryl with a gun trained on me and left the cell for a minute. When he returned, he had a camp mat—barely thicker than a yoga mat—and a blanket.

"How long are you holding me here?" I asked, begging with my eyes as I wrapped my arms around my body. "I'm not worth anything. No one will pay a ransom for me."

Neither one of them answered me, though. They just left the room, locking the door after themselves and leaving me in solitude. I listened to their footsteps fading away, counting how many steps they took before opening the door at the top of the stairs. Sixteen.

I released a long sigh when silence fell, and stood up from my chair. The camera in the corner of the room still watched my every movement, though, so I couldn't give anything away. Jae and Cyryl's visit had given me something to work with.

Acting like any normal, scared person, I tried to look out the barred window on the door. Then I let my shoulders slump, and I retreated to my pathetic "bed" in the corner of the room. Sinking down to the ground, I curled up in a ball and pretended to cry myself to sleep.

They were keeping me alive for some reason... They *wanted* something from me. But what? They couldn't possibly know I was Guild just from that comms device. Plenty in the private sector had the funding for cutting edge tech like that, and there were *hundreds* of companies operating in the elite private mercenary sector. None as good as the Guild, though.

So what did they hope to gain from questioning me? I had no doubt torture was in my near future. Why else keep me in a cell like this? It sure as shit wasn't for pillow fights. Nope, they wanted something that they thought I

knew, and I was willing to bet they planned to torture it out of me.

I mean... they could *try*.

Jae was going to be the weak link. I could exploit that, if I could get him alone.

For now, all I needed to do was whimper and cry. Look terrified and deny all knowledge of *spies* and mercenaries. I was just Danielle, an innocently naïve bank teller from Cloudcroft, California.

## DANNY

**T**hey left me alone long enough that I took another quick nap, and it helped to clear the remaining drug haze from my brain when I woke once more. I subtly stretched out my muscles while pretending to pace the room anxiously, and was relieved to find no injuries other than the bruise on my head. A little stiffness, but that was to be expected. They'd likely stuffed me in the trunk of a car to get out of Shadow Grove unnoticed.

Eventually, footsteps sounded on the stairs, and I readied myself to play the innocent, confused victim role under torture. Two sets of footsteps, one lighter than the other. The door opened and Mo entered with a hard scowl set on her pretty face. I caught a glimpse of Sam behind her, an AR-15 in his hands, but Mo kicked the door shut to leave him on the other side.

It was cute that they thought one guy with a gun could stop me... but who knew what was above ground? Probably at least five more guys with guns.

“Mo!” I exclaimed, throwing myself into the act once more. “Thank fuck you’re here. What is going on? Why am I here? Your brother—”

“Stop it!” she barked, making a slashing motion with her hand. “We know you’re lying. We know you targeted me to get close to Kai.”

I blinked at her in confusion. “Targeted you? What?” my voice was all high-pitched in shock. “Mo... you’re not serious. *You* approached *me*. Twice! I never forced myself on your group, and I never once flirted with your psycho brother, so if you’re victim-blaming for what he did to me—”

“What *he* did to *you*?” she shrieked, losing her cool entirely. Oh wow, she was too easy. “From what I can see, *you* set out to seduce him all along! I bet

you were begging him to fuck you the second my back was turned. Real low, Danny. What was the plan? Slit his throat in his sleep?"

I gaped at her in outrage. "You're insane," I whispered. "You're all totally insane. Oh my god, I'm going to die here. This is like a Liam Neeson movie, but without Liam Neeson." I dropped my face to my hands, pretending to sob hysterically as I backed away from Mo.

She gusted a sigh, and I watched from the corner of my eye as she shook her head.

"I can't fucking do this," she muttered under her breath, then rapped her knuckles on the door. It opened a second later, and she addressed Sam. "She's all yours. I'll send Cyryl down to watch the door."

The grim smile on Sam's face gave me a small trickle of dread, and I cried out for Mo to wait.

"Please, Mo, don't leave me here. This is all a mistake!"

She wasn't listening, though. Sam stepped into the cell, and Mo slammed the door shut. Her footsteps barely even retreated before the butt of Sam's rifle slammed into my stomach, knocking the air out of me.

I crumpled, taking the hit like a bitch and wheezing as the air knocked from my lungs. That answered my debate over which of them would take the *bad cop* role. Sam wasn't just doing his job either... he kicked me in the ribs with the fury of a man wronged. Like I'd taken something personal from him. Was he bitter that I'd sucked Kai's dick and he hadn't?

He hauled me up by the front of my loose T-shirt, and I gave a pathetic whimper, croaking out another plea. Then he threw me into the wall, and I forced my body to hit it hard. Limp. He was right there on me as I hit the floor, grabbing my hair and jerking me up again.

"Who *the fuck* are you working for?" he snarled, spittle on his lips and enraged veins throbbing at his temples.

I cried out in pain and terror. "The bank! I work for the bank! You already know this!"

He released my hair with a rough shove, causing my head to knock into the stone floor right on the bruised part. Motherfucker.

"You lying *whore*!" he roared, kicking me in the side again. I shifted just in time to avoid him breaking my ribs, taking the brunt of his kick in my tensed abs instead. "Who was he? Who was your friend that came after us?"

I coughed, gasping for air. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Sam flipped me over onto my back, his hands going around my throat. "I.

Don't. *Believe. You.*"

He snarled the words at me while his hands tightened, cutting off my air. I briefly considered breaking his hold, just in case he got carried away and killed me. But I knew I could survive without oxygen for a crap load longer than I'd guess Sam could keep that pressure on my throat. I wasn't quite at the official world record of twenty-four minutes, but last time I'd trained, I hadn't been far off that milestone.

Laughing internally, I made my body go lax, my eyes rolling back in my head as I simulated death by strangulation.

A moment later, Sam's hands released, and I controlled my body's natural instinct to suck air back in and inflate my lungs.

"Oh shit," Sam breathed in horror. "*Shit.*"

He scrambled away, knocking frantically on the door, and I used the opportunity to draw some air. When the door opened and Cyryl came in, I was the picture of death once more. No wonder Sam was currently shitting his britches, he thought he'd killed me. Hah. Sucker.

Cyryl cursed at him, then knelt down to check my pulse. He found it after a short pause and exhaled a heavy sigh of relief. "She's still alive," he told Sam. "Just unconscious. Fuck man, you were barely in here for five minutes, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"Me?" Sam roared in response. "That *bitch* got Mauricio killed! He's dead because of *her*, and I swear to god, Cyryl, she needs to pay."

Oh... that was an interesting development. Mauricio was dead? How? What had Sam been asking me in his fit of rage? He wanted to know who my "friend" was. *Motherfucking* Leon... he was truly terrible at covert operations. I was going to need to file a complaint about him when I got home.

Although, I couldn't deny the fact that my chest warmed at the idea that he'd tried to save me. It was protocol to walk the fuck away when one merc was compromised, not attempt a half-cocked rescue mission and draw attention. What did it say about Leon that he'd broken protocol? Did he like me like I liked him?

Wow. Was I seriously daydreaming about my crush while playing dead in an unknown prison somewhere? Yes. Yes, I was. Dissociation was a strength I never intended to lose.

"She will," Cyryl assured Sam. "But this could have landed you in huge trouble with the boss if she was actually dead. Go have a cigarette or



something; you need to calm the fuck down.”

Sam grunted a sound of reluctant agreement. “What about *her*?”

Cyryl paused a moment, staring down at me. My eyes were open just the tiniest crack, my long dark lashes disguising my sneaky observation of them.

“There are better ways to get the answers we want, Sam,” he said in a hard-edged voice. “You just need a little more finesse than this. Come on, we’re done here for now.”

The two of them left my cell, locking the heavy door before stomping up the stairs. I waited a few minutes after the next door slammed before “waking up” from Sam’s attack.

I went through the motions of how an *innocent* woman might react to that kind of beating, sobbing and crying, calling out for someone to help me, then I retreated to my “bed” in the corner to think.

Mauricio was dead... That explained a lot. If my only indiscretion was being a spy, then I’d be dead already. They would already know I’d never give them anything they wanted to know, and really, it was more risk than reward in keeping me alive. But if their judgment was clouded by grief over one of their own losing his life? Yes, I could see why they’d attempt to interrogate me. Surely they didn’t think they’d get anything substantial, though?

Or shit, I dunno. Maybe the last covert agent they caught had folded like a deck of cards under pressure. I had a feeling the CIA wasn’t training their agents as well as they used to. Maybe they were soft these days.

Mauricio was dead... so they wanted vengeance. They wanted me to ID Leon so they could take an eye for an eye and exact revenge for the death of a dear friend. Understandable, but misguided. For one thing, they were *dreaming* if they thought I would be the one to provide key intel. For another, I got the feeling Leon would only be found if he wanted to be found.

Furthermore, killing Leon *and* me wouldn’t bring their friend back. It would only open them to more attacks, given how many other enemies Kai must have. After all, I sure as shit hadn’t paid my own contract for this job. Someone wanted him dead and was willing to pay top dollar for it.

Once they chalked my contract up to a loss, someone else would be assigned. They wouldn’t stop until the mission was complete or the funding was pulled.

My body ached from Sam’s kicks and punches, but the dull ache of it was little more than an annoyance. I couldn’t forget what Cyryl had said. That

interrogating me would require more *finesse* than Sam had shown. Which meant one of them was experienced in torture techniques. Great.

I curled up and let my shoulders shake for a while to give the illusion I was crying myself to sleep again. It wasn't long before Moana quietly opened the door and deposited a tray of food and a gallon bottle of water just inside the room. So they weren't going to starve me to death... small mercies, I supposed. It'd be fun to see what they'd do when I needed to take a shit, though.

Only time would tell. In the meantime, I was all kinds of curious to know what Leon was doing to try to get me back. Because somehow, I *knew* he hadn't given up, no matter how many rules he was breaking in the process. Foolish little tech bunny.

# LEON

I resisted the urge to tap my fingers impatiently on the table as I watched Danny's best friend limping her way along the street at a painfully slow pace. She used a cane, and my research told me it was due to a workplace incident when the girls were seventeen. Judith Mackenzie had ended up needing titanium screws all through her leg, and she'd never quite regained a full range of motion.

Her gaze found me instantly on arriving at the cafe, and she headed straight over without even a flicker of hesitation.

"I'm guessing you're Leon," she said, pulling out the chair opposite me and sitting down without waiting for an invitation. "You already know my name, age, and blood type, so I won't bother introducing myself."

Funny. I could see why Danny was so attached to Judith Mackenzie. Despite her disability, she was assertive and confident.

A waitress came over to offer menus, and Judith accepted them before I could brush her off.

"Why don't you tell me why I'm here, Leon?" she asked, perusing the menu. She made her mind up quickly and called the waitress back over with a small wave. "I'll have the eggs benedict please, with a large coffee. Leon?"

I blinked at her a moment, confused why the fuck she was ordering breakfast while her best friend was missing. But then, I was kind of hungry myself.

"Mushroom omelet, black coffee," I told the waitress, handing my menu back to her.

Once the waitress was gone, I turned back to Judith with a frown. “I’m here because you’re Danny’s best friend.”

She arched a brow. “And?”

I sat back in my chair, studying her. She showed no worry or concern... no *stress*. “And she’s been taken prisoner by Malachi Arden. I figured you could help me get her back.”

Judith’s brows shot up, and her lips parted in shock.

“You didn’t know,” I observed, tilting my head to the side as I studied her.

Her shocked expression shifted to outrage. “Of course I didn’t know! How would I have known? What the fuck, Leon, she was taken by”—she lowered her voice to a strangled whisper—“Ares? The arms dealer? Calls himself the god of war? That Malachi Arden? Are you fucking with me?”

“Shh,” I hissed, “keep your damn voice down.”

Judith gaped at me, then glanced around with embarrassment heating her face. “Sorry. That... I wasn’t expecting that. He has Danny? Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I’m positive.”

Judith frowned, looking down at the table for a few moments. Then she glanced back up with tears in her eyes. “She’s dead.”

Cold fury swept through me. “No, she’s not. She’s been *taken*.”

Judith shook her head, tears spilling over. “No, you don’t get it. *Ares* the infamous arms dealer? He doesn’t take captives. At the slightest hint of a threat, he shoots first and asks questions never. If Danny’s cover was blown, then she is *dead*. End of story.” She swiped the tears from her cheeks with her napkin, then dropped it on the table. “Thank you for telling me, but now I need to go deal with Stanley.”

Stanley *again*. None of my research had given me even a hint on who he was to Danny, and that drove me crazy. But right now, I had more pressing matters to deal with... like how the *fuck* I saved her before *Ares*—the arrogant bastard—killed her.

“She is *not* dead,” I snarled, damn near losing my cool. Judith froze halfway out of her seat, staring at me in confusion. Whatever she saw in my eyes made her slide back into her seat.

“You seem sure of that,” she said in a hoarse voice, sniffing away tears.

I nodded. “Security footage showed them strapping her into the back seat of a car. You wouldn’t do that with a body, you’d throw it in the trunk. They loaded her onto a private aircraft, but I got there too late to stop them.”

Judith frowned, thinking. “Flight plans?”

I gave a frustrated sigh. “False plans filed. They could be anywhere by now.”

She bit her lip, the tears drying up for now. “If she’s still alive, and that’s a huge *if*, then she’ll get herself out.”

*What the fuck?* “Seriously? That’s the best you’ve got?”

She spread her hands wide, anger flashing across her face. “What else did you want from me? In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not a mercenary.” She lowered her voice on that last part to avoid being overheard. “I’m a *librarian*. Unless you think the secret location of Ares’s stronghold is buried in ancient tomes at the library, then I am less than useless on this. Literally all I can do is *hope*.”

Fuck. The truth of those words did something to my insides that I *really* didn’t like. How was I so fucking *attached* to Danny DeLuna already? This was beyond admiration for her skills. Way beyond.

I swallowed heavily, trying to gather my chaotic thoughts. Why had I felt so compelled to reach out to Danny’s best friend?

“She must have some kind of worst case scenario plan,” I said quietly, my fingers linked together on the table to avoid hitting something. “All mercs have contingencies in place for this kind of thing.”

Judith’s brow cocked. “Do you?”

Irritation made my teeth grind. “If anyone knows Danny’s backup plan, it’s you. So?”

She bit her lip for a moment, seeming lost in thought as our waitress returned with our breakfast orders. My stomach growled loudly as she placed the food down, and I took a forkful before Judith spoke again.

“I might... have an idea.”

Hope soared so fast it left me a little dizzy.

She held up a hand to pause me before I got carried away. “To be clear, I *don’t* know if she has a backup plan. Like I said, I’m a librarian and a crippled one at that, I’m hardly the one she’d call to run a life-or-death rescue mission. But... I might know who she would ask.”

I scowled. “Sabine?” I had thought to go to her first, but seeing as she was on an extended deep cover mission within Shadow Grove, I wasn’t even supposed to know where she was. Let alone potentially blow her cover by being seen meeting with her. If I got one of Danny’s only two friends killed, she would murder me herself.

Judith shook her head. “Sabby? No way. Let me make a call, okay? Five minutes, eat your breakfast.”

She levered herself up from her chair with the aid of her cane, and I resisted every urge to demand she make her call right here in front of me. For whatever reason, she didn’t want me to listen in. That made me want to listen even more... but I wasn’t wasting time with petty power plays when every minute counted toward getting Danny back alive.

So I sat uncomfortably and inhaled my breakfast omelet while Judith stood just outside the cafe, speaking to someone on her phone. I watched through the window, hoping to lipread, but she kept her back turned the whole damn time. Sly bitch. She might only be a librarian *now*, but that wasn’t always the case.

*Finally* she returned to our table, and I noted that her tears were all gone. That had to be a good thing, right?

“I was right,” she announced, sitting back down heavily. “She has a... *friend*. Someone not connected to the Guild but with the resources to help her in a worst case scenario. She had him install a sort of GPS panic button in the watch I gave her when she graduated training.”

The delicate silver watch she wore all the time. I knew it had some sort of sentimental attachment for her, but now I knew it was also practical.

“So, he can track her?” My pulse raced with excitement. Smart girl.

Judith grimaced, though. “No. It’s an emergency button and set up to be undetectable for scanners and crap. Otherwise, it’d just be instantly confiscated the second they scanned her for bugs, right?”

It made sense, but why the fuck wouldn’t she have used it the second she woke up? The camera footage showed her still wearing the Catwoman costume, and the watch had been on her wrist.

“Carlos said he would call the moment he got the alert,” Judith assured me, “but so far it hasn’t been activated.”

I scowled into my coffee, my emotions a mess of hope and disappointment, with despair and panic clawing at the edges of my mind. “She hasn’t used it,” I muttered, thinking it over. “She still thinks she can complete her contract... it’s the only reason. She’s still determined to see the job through.”

Judith’s face crumpled with grief once more. “Or she’s dead. She can’t activate the tracker if she’s *dead*.”

I shook my head firmly. “She’s not dead. As much as I hate to admit it,

Ares won't want to kill her so quickly. He was..." *Smitten*. I'd recognized the possessive, unhinged, obsessed look in his eyes while he'd watched her dance with his friend back at the party. I'd seen it on my own fucking face. "He'd taken a liking to her. If nothing else, he'll keep her alive to torture."

Especially now that I'd killed one of his inner circle. Shit. He might want to take payment from Danny in blood. I needed to get her back, *soon*. Preferably before she realized how badly I'd jeopardized her cover already.

Judith didn't look convinced, but nodded anyway. "If you say so."

I'd had enough of her negativity. She looked like she was already mentally planning for Danny's funeral and sinking into mourning mode. Disgusted, I tossed some money onto the table to cover both our meals and pushed to my feet.

"Where are you going?" she demanded, looking up at me with a scowl.

"I can't just sit around and cross my fingers that she'll activate that tracker. She might not even *have* the fucking watch anymore." I grabbed my jacket from the back of the chair and pulled it on. "I'm going to do my own research to track their plane. I got part of the tail number... eventually I'll find where they landed."

She blinked at me in confusion, like that hadn't occurred to her. "Okay, well... call me if you find anything?"

I grunted a noncommittal response. "I expect you'll tell me if this *Carlos* hears from her?"

Judith nodded her agreement, fresh tears already swimming in her eyes. If she was looking for a hug and comfort, she would need to find it elsewhere. I had work to do and a white-haired Valkyrie to save.

## DANNY

**A**fter eating the food that Mo had left for me, and drinking almost all of the water, the inevitable happened.

“Hello?” I called out in an uncertain sort of voice. A normal *innocent* version of Danny would be scared and confused, but also starting to get pretty angry. “Hello! Is anyone there? I need to pee!”

Knowing full well that they were watching me on camera, I made a show of hopping around with my thighs clenched, and a minute later the door at the top of the stairs opened and footsteps came closer. Who had drawn the short straw this time? Would it be Jae, seeing as he had been the one kind enough to let me shower? Or maybe Moana with her hurt accusations. Part of me felt bad for deceiving her, she clearly wanted a friend so badly. But that was what had made her an easy target.

She might thank me, one day, for exposing that weakness. Or she would if I didn’t kill her when I escaped.

The door opened and I was somewhat surprised to see Eli there with an Uzi in his hands and a perfectly neutral expression on his face.

He didn’t say a thing, just jerked his head for me to exit the cell while he waited in the corridor, blocking the access to the stairs.

I gave a small sigh, because during my assessment of the entire crew while we’d been hanging out together at the party, I’d picked Eli as the hardest nut to crack. He was the most professional, the one who carefully guarded his expressions and reactions to everything and kept his gaze sharp and alert. I’d be wasting my breath begging him to release me, even if that



was in character for this version of Danny.

So I kept my head low and my shoulders slumped with defeat as he let me into the tiny bathroom and stood in the doorway while I peed.

“I suppose I’d be wasting my time to ask you to let me go,” I commented in a weak, self-pitying voice as he escorted me back to my cell.

He said nothing, just slammed my door shut and locked it once more.

It was new information to add to my mental dossier on this team, though. So far I had a solid reading on how each of them would handle an interrogation. All except Kai himself.

Where was the god of war, anyway? His black-market code name was Ares, which I found amusing, given the host of other criminals around the world using Greek and Roman deity names. Like Hades, the female gang boss in Shadow Grove, her little sister Persephone—who wasn’t anywhere near as innocent as she acted—or Hermes, who was fast on track to become history’s most notorious thief.

Those were just the few I’d had personal run-ins with, too. I’d heard rumors of various others floating around the globe, doing bad things and hiding behind their godly code names, but until someone hired me to kill them—or they hired me themselves—their business was none of mine.

Ares. He suited his real name better, in my opinion. Malachi Arden. His absence went against my assumptions of his personality. I’d have thought he would have been the first one down here, getting up in my face and demanding answers for my lies. But so far... nothing.

Maybe he wasn’t even here? No, that seemed too far out of character, especially when his whole team seemed to be present. Except Mauricio, of course. I was curious about how he’d been killed, but couldn’t exactly ask. Maybe I could goad one of them into talking next time they paid me a visit. Jae was a safe bet, but Sam was the one who couldn’t control his temper. It might hurt, but I’d put my money on Sam for spilling the most useful intel.

I didn’t have to wait for long before my door opened again, and Jae entered with Cyryl guarding the door once more.

“Jae,” I sobbed, hugging my knees and cowering in the corner. My skin was decorated in bruises from Sam’s visit, and my throat felt tender. “Please tell me, why are you doing this? I’m not rich, no one will pay my ransom.”

The handsome Korean man glanced over his shoulder at Cyryl, then closed the door to lock us in. Or maybe to give us some privacy?

“Danny, we know you’re not who you pretended to be,” he said softly,

crouching down near where I cowered. “We *know*. Kai found your comms device, then your friend chased after us and killed Mauricio. Sam wants you dead, as vengeance for Mauricio.”

His voice was pained, his jaw tight as he spoke. The conflict in his eyes was clear as day. They’d picked him to play “good cop,” and he was well suited to it. I doubt he had the stomach to torture me if—when—it came to it.

Hot, wet tears streaked down my face. “I didn’t have anything to do with that,” I whimpered. “This is all a mistake. First, Kai assaulted me, then I get knocked out and wake up *here*, and Sam beat me the hell up. He nearly killed me, Jae! Look!” I pulled down the neck of my loose T-shirt, confident Sam’s handprints would be evident around my throat. I could feel the dull ache from the bruising already.

Jae’s brow creased and he looked to the floor for a moment. “He’ll do worse if you don’t tell us who you’re working for. Who your friend was that killed Mauricio. Why you targeted us.”

I gave a cry of dismay. “I don’t *know* what you want to hear, Jae. I never targeted you. Mo approached *me*. Kai dragged *me* into that old house. None of this was me... it was all on you guys. I’m not this super spy you all think I am. Would I still be here if I was? Wouldn’t I have escaped by now?”

Jae gave a small huff. “You couldn’t, even if you got out of here. Unless you’re a fish.”

Interesting. We were on an island, then.

“Not really the point, Jae,” I argued, sounding panicked. “Wouldn’t I have stopped Sam trying to kill me? I don’t even know how to throw a punch, but I’m, what? CIA? Do you even hear how insane that sounds?”

He winced. “You could be acting.”

I laughed internally. “Acting? Jae... *look* at me. I’m beaten to hell and less than half Sam’s body weight. I’m no fucking Wonder Woman Amazonian, and I seriously doubt women as small as me would make good CIA agents.”

Lies. We made spectacular agents because we were so often overlooked for our stature, not to mention how valuable women *like me* were in the intel gathering game. Half the time, my marks never even knew who’d lifted their sensitive data—usually too blinded by post-coital bliss. The other half never lived long enough to tell tales.

Jae, though, the sweetheart was swallowing my bullshit whole. He was my strongest case for the fact that Kai’s crew wasn’t in the interrogation

game. They were merely opportunistic businessmen with good marksmanship. Yes, they had killed a lot, but it was a very different thing shooting a man quick and clean versus getting up close and personal as you inflicted excruciating pain. It took a really twisted individual to hear someone howl in agony and feel nothing.

That wasn't Jae... but it could be Cyril. And it could easily be Eli. I could take it, though. I'd trained for it.

"Danny," he said on a groan, running his hand over his hair. "How do you explain the comms device? Why the hell would you have that if you're innocent?"

I blinked up at him with huge eyes. I had him on the line already. It was almost too easy.

"I *didn't*," I insisted. "One minute, Kai was, um, you know." I forced a blush to my cheeks like I was embarrassed about the fact that I'd been enthusiastically choking on Kai's thick cock before he found the device.

Jae's brow creased. "I do know, he sent me a picture."

I forced that blush harder, a skill that had been harder to learn than the fake crying. "Right. Well. One minute, we were doing *that*, and then he, um, finished... then he picked something up off the floor and went all psycho. The next thing I knew, I woke up here and Sam tried to *kill me*."

Uncertainty crossed Jae's face, and he stood up abruptly to pace the room a little.

"You believe me, don't you?" I asked in a small voice, giving a little hitch at the end.

He scrubbed his hands over his face, turning back to face me with a tortured expression. "Yeah, I do. I'm so sorry, Danny. I'll... I can talk to Kai. I'll try and get him to think objectively about this. Someone could have easily planted that device on you in the club and it fell off."

He paced a few more moments, then spun around to face me with a deep frown. "How do you explain the guy who chased Mo and Sam? The one who killed Mauricio?"

I sniffed, letting more tears spill. "You guys don't have any *other* enemies? I'm kind of getting the impression you're mixed up in some bad shit. Would someone else want you dead?" I held his gaze and let my lower lip wobble. Fuck, I was good at my job.

Jae blinked down at me, like that idea hadn't even occurred to them. They'd been so fixated on me being the guilty party, they hadn't considered

whether someone else could be responsible. Which, all things considered, was rather narrow-minded of them. I was far from the first mercenary to receive a contract for Malachi Arden.

“Shit,” Jae breathed. “I’ll talk to Kai, okay? But just... if Sam comes back, try not to piss him off.” He rapped on the door with his knuckles, and Cyril opened it for him on the other side.

“Me?” I squeaked. “He’s a psychopath! Please don’t let him hurt me again, Jae. Please!”

Jae gave me a pained look but left without offering any empty promises. I’d already worked out that he and Sam were roughly the same rank within their inner circle. Which meant Jae didn’t hold the authority to order Sam to stand down.

I needed to win Mo over. She was Kai’s second in charge. If I won her, I’d be as good as free.

## DANNY

**J**ust my fucking luck, Mo wasn't the next one to visit my cell. Not even to deliver food and water—that was Eli's job this time—and several hours later, right when I needed to pee again, Cyryl came to play.

Instead of taking me to the bathroom like Eli had done, Cyryl just slammed a bucket down on the floor and nodded to it with his arms folded.

Oh that was cute, he was trying the humiliation technique. Luckily, I didn't give a flying fuck who watched me pee, so I just faked a bit of embarrassment and got about my business. Much to his disappointment.

When I was done, I waited for him to leave, but he just stood there with his arms folded, squinting at me.

"Whatever you want to know," I said in a tired, defeated voice, "just ask me. I have nothing to hide."

Cyryl huffed a short laugh. "Sure, you don't." He grabbed the chair from the side of the cell and plonked it down in the middle of the room. "Sit down, Danny. Let's chat."

Meekly, I did as I was told and perched on the chair. Cyryl stood close enough to make me tip my head back, playing up the physical intimidation by towering over me. Typical fucking man didn't consider the fact that I was five foot three. Literally *everyone* towered over me, including my best friend. I was well used to it and confident in the knowledge that size did not equal strength.

After a moment of looming, Cyryl pulled a couple of cable ties from his

pocket and proceeded to fasten my wrists to the arms of the chair.

“What are you going to do to me?” I whined in panic. “I said I’d tell you anything you want to know. You don’t have to hurt me. Please, Cyryl—”

“I’m not sure how much you know about me, Danny,” he commented, cutting off my pleas. “Probably everything. I’d be surprised if you would come after Ares without doing your research on the whole team. So you would know that I was born and raised in Warsaw, Poland.”

“Y-you don’t have an accent,” I replied, sounding pathetic.

Cyryl gave me an amused look, his weathered face creasing up briefly. According to my documents, he was in his late forties, but an exact birth date was unknown. Like a lot of their crew, they’d done a decent job wiping away evidence of his existence.

“Neither do you,” he replied. “Isn’t it funny how a simple change of accent can change a stranger’s perception of a person?” He crouched down in front of my chair and pulled a small fabric pouch from his pocket. It was folded up and secured with Velcro, and when he unfolded it, I was unsurprised to see several sharp metal implements.

Still, I gave a dramatic gasp and thrashed a little in fear. “What are you doing? I said I’d tell you! Just ask me what you want to know!”

“See, that’s the thing,” Cyryl commented, selecting a long, thick needle from his pouch, “I find people tell *better* truths when they’re in pain. You already knew that I worked for the Agencja Wywiadu didn’t you, Danny?”

“I don’t even know what that is!” I protested, tugging on my restraints.

Agencja Wywiadu was just a horse of a different color. Government-funded spy agency but with less *rules* around what was considered humane treatment of prisoners. Compared to some other government agencies, they were still on the “nice” end of the torture scale.

“Sure you don’t,” Cyryl commented, “and I’m the Queen of England.”

He pinched the skin on the back of my wrist and pushed the needle through. I gave an obligatory scream, because it was either that or burst out laughing. I’d had piercings that hurt more than that, so I was going to assume Cyryl hadn’t tortured someone in a *long* time.

“Who are you working for, Danny?” he asked in a calm voice as I sobbed and thrashed.

I moaned. “I already t-told you. I work at the bank in Cloudcroft. I’m a teller.”

Another needle through the skin of my forearm, and I bit my cheek to

stop the smile that wanted to creep up. It was so tempting to mock him, to tell him that he was *doing it wrong*. But that would be the fastest way to blow my cover, and I was smarter than that.

“Who was the guy who killed Mauricio?”

“I don’t know,” I wailed. “That had nothing to do with me!”

Cyryl seemed to think his methods were sound, because we continued like this for seven needles—none of which hurt much more than a tattoo on my sternum—and none of his questions got any kind of truthful answers out of me. He was out of his league on this one.

Eventually, someone knocked on the door, and Cyryl shot me a frustrated look before going to answer it. Moana was there, whispering something to him. Her gaze flicked past Cyryl to me, tied to a chair and bleeding from my arm as I sobbed, and her eyes widened.

“Cyryl—” she gasped. He cut her off by shoving her out the door and closing it firmly, leaving me right where I was.

He also left the needles piercing my skin, which was a test if I’d ever fucking seen one. Hah, foolish man thought I would fall for that? Think again. My pain tolerance was second to none, as was my patience.

With nothing better to do, I counted the seconds while Cyryl was gone. Then the minutes. It was around an hour and a half before my cell door opened again, and Mo stepped inside with a basic first aid kit in hand.

“Please,” I croaked, giving her huge pleading eyes, “Mo, please help me. I told Cyryl everything, I answered his questions, why are you still doing this?”

She tightened her lips, focusing on my arm as she tugged the first needle free. I cried out and she flinched, but she didn’t say anything until all the needles were removed.

“This will sting,” she said quietly, holding up a spray bottle of antiseptic solution.

I cringed. “Worse than having needles shoved through my skin? I doubt it.” My tone was bitter and angry, and her jaw tightened.

The spray *did* sting, but it was the kind of sensation I’d long since become numb to. My brain registered it as pain, but it never quite reached my parietal lobe to make me *feel* it.

Mo did her best to gently clean the puncture wounds, then finally cut the cable ties so she could bandage up my entire forearm. “They’ll hurt for a bit but should heal okay,” she said, sitting back on her heels to meet my gaze

properly for the first time since entering my cell. “It’ll be worse the next time Cyryl visits, though. This was just a warning.”

I made my whole body tremble as I hugged my injured arm to my chest. “Mo, I know you barely know me, but... you *know* I’m not who they think I am. This is all a huge mistake or a setup.”

She bit the edge of her lip, seeming conflicted. Then her expression shuttered, and she pushed to her feet. “You might have Jae fooled, but the rest of us aren’t so gullible. I suggest you start talking soon, or you’ll be praying Kai had shot you back in Shadow Grove.”

The door slammed shut with a heavy thud behind her, and I took a moment to stand and stretch the kinks out of my back from sitting in the same position so long. It was nice to have Mo confirm that Jae was still taking my side. Perhaps he just needed a little longer to plead my case to Kai. Because I was under no illusions that this was being done without his specific orders.

Breathing a sigh, I returned to my makeshift bed and lay down. My torso still ached with bruises from Sam’s attack, and I peeled up my T-shirt to check the damage. My ribs were all intact, which was a relief, but blue black welts decorated my stomach. All things considered, Cyryl had been rather gentle piercing my arm.

I didn’t doubt Mo when she warned that it would escalate from here. That was to be expected. But the longer I held out, the longer I failed to fight back or failed to try and escape, the more they’d second-guess themselves.

Ultimately, I needed those doubts to start playing with Kai’s head, whether indirectly through his team or directly... if he ever had the guts to face me himself.

Part of my Guild contract had been to duplicate his phone. I never really speculated on the motivations for my contracts; if someone wanted to pay the Guild’s fee, then it was none of my business why they wanted what they asked for. But now that I had some time on my hands, I gave it a little thought.

They wanted his phone duplicated, *then* have him killed once the data was verified. Much like my job with Edward Gates, with the addition of a kill order. That meant that the client wasn’t positive the intel they wanted was actually on his phone, and they’d have likely modified the job if it hadn’t been there. That was the whole reason I’d been given tech support for what would have otherwise been a run-of-the-mill honey trap.

Thinking of tech support had my mind wandering to Leon, wondering



whether he was still searching for me. Somehow, I knew he was, even if we hadn't been on *amazing* terms when I'd been abducted. There was something between us. Something electric and undeniable... chemistry on crack.

Shit, I needed to stop pining after Leon. Focus, Danny. Figure out the motives of this mission. They'd wanted to verify data that was important enough to keep Kai alive until it was obtained. And they thought the info would be in his personal phone.

So... what were they hoping to find? Contact details for someone? Email correspondence? Text messages? Call logs? Surely it wasn't just for dick pics; Kai was all too happy to snap those and share them around like candy already. That reminded me, I would have to erase my photo from his and Jae's phones once they were dead.

My train of thought cut off abruptly as almost deafening Russian thrash metal music started blasting from the speaker beside the camera. I covered my ears with my hands and rolled over to face the wall, finally giving in to laughter.

# KAI

**F**or the first time in a *really* long time, I considered canceling a meeting. It was one that had been on my schedule for months, to meet with an Uzbekistani freedom fighter about supplying his organization with the firepower they needed to do whatever the fuck they wanted to do.

Okay, I wasn't that uncaring. Even though my customers weren't required to disclose what they intended to use my weapons for, I still looked into their motives and likely actions to ensure they aligned with my interests. This customer met my approval criteria, and so I hadn't canceled despite every fiber of my being telling me I shouldn't leave my island. That I shouldn't leave *her*.

"Relax, brother," Moana drawled, flopping down into the recliner chair opposite me. She had a glass of wine in her hand, and it splashed onto the cream leather as the plane hit a patch of turbulence. Cyryl was nowhere near as good of a pilot as Jae was.

I scowled at my sister as the plane bumped a few more times. "Shut up, Moana. This is your fault, remember? If you hadn't tried to make a new friend—"

"Yeah," she snapped, sitting up straighter, "you're right. It's *my* fault that Danny's locked up in our old wine cellar, being tortured and terrified. Last I checked, I wasn't the one who sexually assaulted her, then knocked her out and dragged her back to our *private sanctuary* based entirely on circumstantial evidence. Face it, Kai. This is entirely *your* fault, and I'm

starting to think Jae's right. She's not guilty."

Anger and determination flared hot inside me. "If she's not guilty, then —"

"Then you've assaulted, kidnapped, confined, and tortured an innocent woman. And now you'll have to kill her, too, because we both know she's never getting off our island alive." My sister's glare was hard and accusing.

I swallowed heavily. She was right. Danny needed to die... I was just stalling for time now. Putting off the inevitable while inflicting more pain on her, and for what?

With a sigh, I pulled out my phone and opened the app that showed me her cell. It'd been four days with that ear-bleeding thrash metal playing at full volume through the room every second she was alone, but she hadn't cracked. Not even the slightest bit. Not when Cyryl was cutting small, surgically precise slices in the sole of her foot, or when Moana had offered *kindness* in treating the wounds afterward. Not even while she was alone, with hours on hours of deafening metal music filling her head.

At some points, I wondered if it was more painful for me to watch it all and hear her pitiful pleas and declarations of innocence. Then I'd give myself a pretty solid slap and stop being a dramatic *pūkeko*. I was the one pulling the strings. I was the one in charge. If I didn't want her to hurt, I could make it stop.

And yet. I hadn't. As vehemently as I insisted that it was because I truly believed she was undercover, deep down I knew the truth. I *wasn't* certain. The comms device could have easily been planted on her *or* on me... as rough as I'd been with her back at that house in Shadow Grove, it could have shaken free from anywhere. It didn't necessarily mean she knew about it.

As for the bastard who'd killed Mauricio? Well... like Jae pointed out to me earlier in the week, I had a whole lot of enemies. That could have been linked to any number of different criminal organizations, none of which connected to Danny.

But the fact remained that I hadn't stopped the torture. Because she reminded me of a great regret, one that had haunted me far more than I cared to admit. It made me uncomfortable, and it was easier to let Sam and Cyryl continue to hurt her than admit it to myself.

"She could have trained to withstand torture," Eli commented in a quiet, thoughtful voice from across the aisle. The four of us—Cyril, Eli, Moana and me—were heading to the meeting. Sam and Jae were staying behind to guard

Danny, and it already had my stomach in knots.

I glanced up from my phone, from the camera feed showing Danny pacing her cell while covering her ears. I hadn't even realized I was still watching it.

"If she has, then how do you break her?" I barely even recognized my own cold voice. Here I was talking about *breaking* a woman who may not even be guilty of anything beyond being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was fucked up, but I couldn't seem to back down.

Mo shook her head, the disapproval sketched all over her face. "I can't be involved in this anymore, Kai. This isn't what we do."

I flicked a sharp glance at her. My sister was no stranger to casual murder herself, but torture was... something different. It was messing with her head.

She just glared back at me and gulped her wine in one mouthful. "I need a refill," she muttered, then got up and headed for the galley to leave Eli and me alone.

"So?" I prompted, already sick to my stomach at the idea of breaking Danny more.

I expected Eli—who'd had his first taste of violence at age seven when he was forced to cut off his own father's head with a machete—to suggest something truly messed up. So I was shocked speechless at his idea.

"Play her at her own game, boss," he said, folding his newspaper and stowing it away. He folded his fingers and gave me a level stare. "If she's trained to withstand torture, then you're going to risk her dying without ever telling you anything. So..." He shrugged like the alternative was obvious.

"So... what?"

"You know what they say. You catch more flies with honey?" His lips curled in a cruel smile. "She's playing the part of an innocent victim, why not play along? Offer kindness and a gentle touch rather than a harder stick. She wants to mess with your head; mess with hers right back."

I frowned, running the idea through my head. Would she buy it? Surely not. Then again... I glanced down at my phone in my hand, the feed from her cell still playing, and I watched her curl up in a corner with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her greasy, tangled white hair fell around her in lank clumps, and her shoulders shook as she cried.

What if she *was* innocent? I still had to kill her. I'd known it from the moment I put her on our plane in Shadow Grove, that there could be no walking away from my island.

Somehow, I suspected that if I showed her even an ounce of kindness, I wouldn't be able to go through with it in the end. That ultimately, all I'd be able to see when I aimed my gun at her, was the innocent girl I'd shot a few years ago.

"Think on it," Eli suggested. "In the meantime, let's focus on this meet. Sam and Jae can handle her for a week."

A whole week. What state would she be in when we got back?

I'd made the decision to leave Jae with Sam, because he'd keep him from killing Danny while my back was turned. Sam wanted her blood, badly, but I'd given them *strict* orders on what was okay and not okay in my absence. Hopefully they obeyed. Both of them.

I grunted a non-response at Eli and turned my attention back to my newest obsession, watching Danny through a crappy black and white camera that Eli had installed before she woke up. I felt like I was watching that feed more than I was participating in real life, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

We touched down some time later, arriving at our neutral meeting location in Vienna, Austria. Mo and Cyryl supervised the ground crew unloading our cargo while Eli and I went on ahead to the hotel. Our meeting with the customer wasn't until the next day, but we always arrived a day or two earlier to minimize the risk of having law enforcement waiting when they *expected* us to touch down.

Also, it gave us time to ensure the meet site was safe from bugs, cameras, booby traps and bombs. You never could be too careful when selling such large quantities of weaponry.

My team and I had been working together a long time; we had our systems and procedures in place. But this time, I felt like I was a million miles away. Or at least a thousand miles. I begged out of dinner early, claiming to want an early night. Then I spent half the night staring at Danny while she lay on the floor of her cell and stared up at the camera.

It was like she could see me.

When I eventually slept, my dreams were plagued by a white-haired siren with huge eyes and smudged mascara. Of a sensual goddess who fell to pieces when I fucked her with a loaded gun. Of a terrified woman, whose eyes held nothing but hatred and disgust as she told me never to touch her again.

Come morning, my mind was more exhausted than if I'd never slept at all.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered to myself. “Stop thinking about her. Just *stop*. She’s a viper, not a rabbit.”

Shoving her out of my mind as best I could, I got up and went to shower. Inevitably, though, my thoughts returned to her about two minutes later, and I found my hand wrapped around my own hard cock, pumping it the way her lips had worked me over. With my eyes shut tight and the water beating down on my back to drown out any noise, I could imagine it was her.

For what felt like the hundredth time in the week since Halloween, I found my release under the hot spray of the shower and imagined it was down her throat. Or on her face. Or deep inside that tight, sweet cunt that had gripped my gun barrel so damn nice.

I needed my goddamn head examined.

My team was all getting ready in the living room of our suite, relaxed and joking just like any other trip we’d taken together. I was the only one who seemed to be walking around with a shock collar around my neck.

“Shake it off, boss,” Eli murmured as we exited our hotel. “We’ll be back to normal in no time.”

He was my best friend, my brother by choice rather than blood. But fuck if he was sometimes too perceptive for his own good. I shot him a hard glance, but Eli was smart enough to know when to keep his mouth shut. Which was more often than most people realized.

We made our way to the meet site, a container yard near one of the industrial train stations, and found our customer already waiting for us with three heavily armed guards watching his back. Mo and Cyril had already swept the area during the night and installed one of our own hidden cameras. We were as confident as we could be that no one was setting us up or rigging an ambush.

The four of us got out of our vehicle, and Eli went to the trunk to get out our sample box. I glanced over at my sister, a heavy feeling of dread weighing down my usually high spirits during a sale.

“Stay alert,” I murmured to her. “Something feels off.”

She gave me a concerned glance but nodded and scanned the containers around us as we approached our buyer. He didn’t step forward to meet us, his own gaze shifty.

I’d survived a long time trusting my gut, and fully intended to continue surviving.

“Get down!” I shouted at my team, just a fraction of a second before a

bullet would have hit Mo in the face.

Chaos broke out in an instant, bullets flying as I shoved my sister toward our car. Eli crouched behind an open door, laying down cover fire while we dove into the back seat, then I popped my head out to aim a few choice bullets at our so-called fucking *customer*. He'd set us up. That *motherfucker* had set us up.

"Get us out of here!" I roared at Cyril behind the wheel. We had no way of knowing how many assailants were approaching, and I had no plans to die in a firefight today.

The vehicle tires squealed as we peeled out of the container yard, and a bullet shattered our back window. I immediately aimed through the opening, popping off rounds in the vague direction the shot had come from, while Moana did the same from beside me.

Our customer was gone, as was his team, but someone was still shooting. As we sped out of the yard, a dark hooded figure stepped out from between the containers with a gun raised.

No, not a gun. A grenade launcher.

"*Turn!*" I bellowed at Cyril.

He didn't question the order, taking a sharp, high speed corner between containers and smacking our back end into one of the steel boxes. Moana and I both jolted on impact, but it was a hell of a lot better than being blown to pieces by a grenade launcher.

The deafening boom that followed a moment later said we'd only narrowly escaped that fate.

"Holy shit," my sister breathed, her hands steady as she reloaded her gun and glanced behind us. "That was unexpected."

"Was it, though?" Cyril snapped, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. "This is clearly about *that woman*. I'm almost certain that was the same guy who shot Mauricio."

"Then why the fuck are we running away?" Mo shouted, punching the back of his seat. "Turn the fuck around, and let's kill that bastard."

I shook my head. "No. He was prepared. I don't feel confident that we would all come out alive."

Eli turned slightly to give me a long look. "You think this was to do with Danielle?"

Did I? "No," I admitted with a long sigh. "There's no way she was involved in this. The meeting was only set *after* she was in our custody, and

she had no opportunity to get word out. I think, if anything, this proves the attack in Shadow Grove was also unrelated.”

The silence that followed my statement was deafening, and the accusation in my sister’s eyes was enough to turn my stomach. If I was right about that, then it was possible Danny wasn’t an undercover agent at all. And that meant I’d been torturing an innocent woman.

*If*. Deep down, I just wasn’t convinced.



## DANNY

I lost track of the days that I spent in the little cell. The lights were never turned off, and that deafening music played every minute that I was alone. Something was different, though. Cyryl stopped paying me visits, as did Mo and Eli. Instead, the only people I saw for... a while... were Jae and Sam.

Sam had clearly been warned about not killing me, because while he was still rough and heavy-handed, he didn't try choking me to death again.

Jae, on the other hand, had swallowed my narrative whole. His "interrogation" visits mostly consisted of him bringing me food and water, and allowing me to use the actual toilet. On his fourth visit, I pleaded to use the shower, and he let me have two minutes under the freezing spray.

Of course, he watched me the whole time, his eyes raking over my naked body in a way that was far too friendly for a captor. I was careful to angle my body away so he wouldn't see the obvious bullet scar on my side, but that didn't hide much of the rest of me.

When I was clean-ish and dressed in my dirty clothes once more, he escorted me back to my cell and left without hanging around to chat. I breathed a sigh of relief when he locked the door. His attention had been growing more *familiar* in the past few days, and it was leaving me with an uncomfortable feeling.

Not that I was morally opposed to fucking someone as a means to an end, and if I genuinely thought Jae would help me escape, then I'd have already tried that angle. But he *wasn't* the one calling the shots, and I had a strong gut

feeling that seducing Jae wouldn't land well with Kai. I saw the way he'd stared at me that night... before he'd found my comms device. He had been confused and shocked, but underneath it was raw possession. The core message in the way he'd looked at me, was *you're mine*.

The fact that none of his men had sexually assaulted me backed that theory.

The metal music started up again a minute later, and I stretched out on the floor. It was designed to drive a person insane, constantly overriding their thoughts and making them *anxious*. I'd discovered a long time ago how to filter it into white noise, so it didn't really bother me.

I kept my gaze on the camera because I liked to think it would make whoever was watching—probably Kai—uncomfortable to have me staring at them. In tiny movements, hopefully small enough not to be noticed, I ran my body through some very light exercises. Hovering my legs just above the ground to train my abs. Soon enough, I'd get an opportunity to escape, and I would need to be strong.

Sometime later, the door to my cell burst open. I hadn't heard anyone approaching, because the music was still pounding through the small space, so I was genuinely surprised when Sam hauled me up off the ground and threw me into a wall.

“You *bitch!*” he screamed over the music. “You almost got them all killed! Again! It wasn't enough to take Mauricio from us?”

*Got who all killed? The rest of the team?*

Sam had officially snapped, his blows rained down on me with the ferocity of a man on a mission. He wanted me to hurt. He wanted me to bleed. And then he wanted me *dead*.

*Goddamn it, Sam, don't make me break character just to put your dumb ass in its place.*

“It's all your fucking fault,” he screamed, his eyes red with unshed tears and his fist like a mallet slamming into my face. I let my body go limp, the punch knocking me to the floor. Carefully, I rolled to avoid taking his kick in the chest and analyzed his break in sanity.

Was the rest of his crew away right now? I guess their lives didn't stop simply because they'd taken a hostage. But that information would have been nice to know sooner. This could have been the perfect opportunity for a jail break. Damn it all to hell.

Sam delivered a couple more vicious kicks as I rapidly assessed my

options. Fight back now and make a break for it before the team returned? Or ride it out and trust that Kai's orders were to keep me alive? If I left now, it'd be empty-handed. No copy of Kai's phone and no confirmed kill. It'd forever be a black mark on my otherwise spotless record.

Regardless of the fact that I'd been sent on a suicide mission, undoubtedly by whoever wanted me dead, I wasn't willing to sully my perfect contract completion record simply to save myself a few bruises. I'd complete this mission and send a huge middle finger to whoever had assigned me.

Not to mention collect one hell of a payday out of it.

But then Sam had to go and pull a gun on me.

"Please," I sobbed, plastered against the floor, and looked up at him with my left eye rapidly swelling shut. "I didn't do anything." Yet. But I would have to soon if he didn't back down.

The music cut off abruptly, and Sam flinched. He didn't put the gun away, though, keeping it aimed at me as his chest heaved with ragged breaths.

"It was the same shooter," he said in a hoarse, emotion-choked voice. "I know it. You know it. The man who *murdered* Mauricio just fired a grenade launcher at the rest of my team—my *family*—and it's all your fault. I don't even care who you work for now, I just want you *dead*."

"Sam! *Stop!*" Jae bellowed, bursting into the cell and seizing Sam's wrist. The gun went off, the crack of the shot echoing in the tiny cell and making my ears ring. The bullet lodged harmlessly in the wall, though, and Jae wrestled Sam out of the cell. I had noticed when we met that, for an Asian man, Jae had a lot of height and muscle bulk. More than Sam, anyway, and that was what counted here.

They didn't shut the door, but my head was ringing too much to make out their heated argument in the corridor anyway. Sam had fucked me up this time, and I winced as I tried to push myself up from the floor.

Jae was right there a moment later, a gentle arm wrapped around my shoulders as he helped me stand. He muttered something under his breath about how Sam was going through some *shit* right now, but that had been crossing a line.

*No shit, Sherlock. He almost shot me.*

Instead of patching me up and leaving me in the cell, Jae picked me up in his arms like a baby and carried me out. *Well, this was a new development.*

The motion of being carried made my head swim, though, and my stomach rolled. Shit snacks. *How hard had Sam hit me in the head?* Darkness swept over my vision, and vertigo lurched through me. The motherfucker had given me a concussion, because I was about to pass the fuck out.



PANIC FLOODED through my system as I woke, but I didn't sit up with a gasp like the idiot women did in the movies. I woke, but I stayed dead still while I assessed my surroundings. I was in a bed. A *real* bed, not the camping mat and blanket I'd used in my cell since waking up in the cell.

It took a few moments to remember what had happened, and that was a few minutes too long. Fucking Sam had done more damage than I'd initially thought.

The room I was in was silent, no sounds of anyone else breathing in the vicinity. In the distance, I could pick up the gentle rush of tidal water lapping at a shore, and the squawk of birds, which said I was now above ground. How curious.

I peeled my lids open to look around and quickly realized that I could only see out of one eye. The other... I raised a hand to gently prod at my face. Yep, the other was swollen shut and tender as fuck. Nice. I bet I looked a damn *treat*.

Carefully, I levered myself up to sitting. My body screamed protests at me, but I just shoved the pain into the back of my mind, along with all the other useless human emotions like fear or self-preservation. I had no time for that crap, they just clouded reasonable decision-making.

The room I was in... it was no holding cell. It was *someone's* room. Personal touches were everywhere, from the choice of furnishings to the artwork on the wall. Grunting with the effort it took, I climbed out of the queen size bed and hobbled over to the dresser. In addition to Sam's beating, my feet were all still fucked up from Cyryl's attempt to torture me. He'd given it his best, I'd commend him for that.

Tugging one of the drawers open, I found it full of men's clothing. A sniff of the T-shirt I pulled out confirmed my guess that this was Jae's room.

He must have been *really* worried that Sam would kill me, if he'd brought me into his own bedroom. What had Sam been raging about? His team

getting blown up or some crap?

The door opened and I dropped Jae's T-shirt back into the drawer before spinning around to face him. "Jae," I breathed. "Where am I?"

He frowned at me, then eyed the dresser with the top drawer half open. "You should be in bed, Danny," he scolded. "I think you've got a concussion."

I nodded, then winced as my head thumped. Meekly I climbed back into his bed and played my role as victim. "Sam tried to kill me," I said in a small voice, sniffing a bit. "Why did he do that? Why does he want to hurt me so bad?"

Jae exhaled heavily, sitting down on the side of the bed and holding his hand out to me. In it, he had a couple of white pills, and beside the bed, there was already a glass of water. "They're just painkillers," he told me quietly. "You probably need something to take the edge off. Can I check your ribs? If they're broken—"

"No," I cut him off. "They're not broken."

He frowned. "They might be. Sam kicked you pretty hard."

I glared back. "I'm well aware, I was on the receiving end of it. My ribs aren't broken." To distract him away from the idea of *checking my ribs*, which would show him my gunshot scar, I took the pills from his hand and quickly swallowed them with a gulp of water.

"No offense, Jae," I said quietly, "but I don't want anyone touching me right now. You can understand that, can't you?"

His face creased with guilt and apology, and his shoulders slumped as he nodded. "Yeah, of course. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking."

I said nothing in return, letting the silence grow thick and uncomfortable until Jae ran a hand over his hair and stood up. "Um, I've got to go... do some stuff. Help yourself to some fresh clothes if you want. But you should really just go back to sleep. It'll take a while to heal... all of that."

Again, I didn't reply, and Jae left the room a moment later with a small sigh.

Once I was alone, I dismissed the idea of wearing his clothes. It was one thing to sleep in his bed, but I really didn't need to go dressing in his clothing, too. Even though I was *revoltingly* dirty. I drank some more of the water, then lay back down. Jae was right about that, I would need plenty of rest to recover from the knocks to my head above all else. Because I wasn't going to risk escaping an island when I was dizzy and lethargic.

Fucking Sam. I would have to slit his throat before I left here.

It was too easy to drift back into sleep, and it made me appreciate just how much my body had gone through recently. I slept heavily and without dreams. Just thick darkness of restorative sleep, thanks to the absence of thrash metal music and bright light.

I slept a long time, but without a clock, I had no real concept of time. All I knew was that when I woke again, my whole body was stiff and tight from being still too long. That, and the yelling. The yelling was what had pulled me back out of sleep.

My heavy lids opened—the swollen one actually parted a little—just in time to see Kai’s huge fist slam into Jae’s face, sending him stumbling across the room with his hands raised defensively.

“What’s going on?” I asked in a slurred voice. Wait, had I been drugged again? Why was everything so hazy?

Both Jae and Kai jerked like they’d been electrocuted, each staring at me with wild eyes. Then Kai shot a harsh, warning glare in Jae’s direction before jerking the bed covers off me.

“...the fuck?” I mumbled, raising a hand to rub my temple. Shit, that hurt. My head was swimming, and the room was tilting on its axis. I’d definitely been drugged. Painkillers, my fucking ass. I made a mental note to quit trusting Jae no matter how sincere he seemed.

Kai said something, his expression fierce, but it was like listening to him underwater. All muffled and incoherent. He scooped his strong arms underneath me, lifting me out of the bed in a smooth motion, and I groaned when his grip pressed into a particularly tender bruise on my thigh, just above my knee.

He didn’t put me down, though. He just shook his head and strode out of the room. The sheer speed with which he moved made the whole damn globe tilt, and my stomach lurched dangerously.

“I’m going to be sick,” I moaned a moment later. “Let me down, I’m going to be sick.”

He held me tighter, kicking open the double doors at the end of the hallway and striding into what was clearly the master suite. He bypassed the bed, carrying me right into the bathroom and depositing me ever so gently onto the marble tile floor just in time for my stomach contents to empty into the toilet bowl.

*Zopiclone.* Jae had given me *zopiclone*. If he’d cared to ask, I could have

told him I was slightly allergic. Vomiting was the way I'd trained my body to reject any poisons, and zopiclone processed like a poison in my system.

I gripped the edges of the toilet, heaving up every last drop of water in my already empty stomach, and Kai held my greasy, tangled hair out of my face. Not that a bit of vomit would make a lick of difference after... who knew. Two weeks? More?

When I ran out of anything to throw up, I collapsed back onto my butt, and Kai stood up to fetch a washcloth. Wordlessly, he handed it to me and watched with blazing eyes as I dabbed my face and wiped my mouth.

Then all of a sudden, he was gone. A moment later, the sounds of a heated, full-volume argument broke out, quickly followed by the sound of something breaking and Moana screaming at everyone to calm the fuck down.

I sagged to the cool tiles of the floor, pressing my bruised cheek against one. My game plan had shifted, and I wasn't even remotely mad about it. This... was going to be interesting.

## DANNY

**A**pparently, I fell asleep again on the bathroom floor, because I jolted awake with a flood of adrenaline when Kai touched my shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” I snapped, shrinking away and tucking up in a ball with my back to the wall. “Don’t *fucking* touch me.”

Kai remained crouching where I’d been lying a moment ago and just watched me with a shuttered expression for a moment. Then he gave a small nod and rose to his feet. Instead of forcing me to get up, he left the bathroom without a word.

Color me curious, that wasn’t how I expected him to react based on what little I knew of him so far.

He returned a few minutes later with a small stack of neatly folded clothing in his hand. Watching me with a hooded gaze, he placed the clothing down on the vanity, then arched a brow at me.

“Are you going to get in the shower willingly?” His voice was a deep rumble that did delicious things to my insides. Fuck *me*, he was even sexier than I remembered him being. Maybe it was the fact that he was in jeans and a close-fitting black T-shirt rather than a stupid fucking toga.

I wanted to climb him like a tree. Suddenly all I could think about was the look on his face while he’d fucked me with his gun. *Goddamn*, that had been hot, and totally worth rolling the dice on bacterial infections.

Still, I had a character to play, and Danny the innocent bank teller who has been tortured and brutally beaten would *not* be happy with this asshole



right now. Damn it.

“What are you going to do if I don’t?” I snapped back at him, letting my face show anger and disgust and hopefully none of the lust.

His eyes narrowed. “You stink. If you don’t shower willingly, then I’ll force you.”

I sneered. “Oh gee, really? I wonder why that is? Oh yeah, maybe because you’ve had me locked in a fucking dungeon for fucking who knows how long while your *thugs* tortured me for shit I have *nothing* to do with? Maybe that is why?”

His brows lifted slightly, and the corner of his mouth twitched. “I see they didn’t erase that spark, so maybe they didn’t try hard enough.”

I glared death, but internally grinned at the sass of his response. I liked a man who didn’t back down from a fight. “Fuck you,” I spat instead. Then dropped my eyes to the tiles and rounded my shoulders. “Besides, I doubt I can stand long enough to shower.”

To clarify my point, I stuck my bandaged foot out. I was lying, of course, I’d barely even noticed it when I took that brief shower earlier. Or yesterday? Whatever. Cyryl had cut the arch of my foot, meaning it didn’t get any pressure when I stood, and the cuts had already healed well in the few days since he’d done them.

Kai frowned at my foot and the dirty, peeling dressing that Mo had applied days ago. Then he huffed a sigh and crossed over to the huge sunken tub.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, even though it was pretty fucking obvious when he put the plug in and cranked the water. Apparently, he also thought it was obvious and didn’t respond as he grabbed a bottle of something from beside the tub and squirted it in.

Within moments, the rushing water created soft white bubbles in the tub, and the bathroom filled with a sweet, fruity scent that made my stomach growl. At the end of the tub, there was a small decorative table holding neatly folded towels, which Kai swept aside. He picked up the table and placed it *inside* the tub, then turned the water off just before it reached the top of the table.

“There,” he said, turning back to arch a brow at me. “Put your foot up on the table to keep it dry while you wash. I’m going to sort some things out, so I suggest you get in the tub yourself. If not, I’ll be dropping you in, fully clothed, when I get back.”

He stalked out of the bathroom, and I briefly debated calling his bluff. But... innocent Danny wouldn't want his hands on her in any capacity right now, so with a sigh of regret, I pushed to my feet and stripped out of my gross, dirty clothes. Getting into the tub without wetting my foot was a mission, and a generally pointless one, seeing as I'd soaked it in the shower already. Nonetheless, eventually I sank down beneath the fluffy bubbles and into the hot water.

A long, slightly obscene groan escaped my lips as I relaxed into the water.

Kai cleared his throat in the doorway, but I barely gave him a cursory glance before closing my eyes. He wanted me to bathe, he could twiddle his thumbs until I was good and clean. Prick.

Sexy prick, though. I cracked my lids slightly and watched him from between my lashes as he came closer. He was big and built, all rippling muscles and deep bronze skin covered with monochrome tattoos. His eyes were a dark whiskey brown, but at a distance, they seemed totally black. So hot.

He knelt down beside the tub and placed some medical supplies on the ledge. When he reached out to touch my exposed foot, I gave a dramatic flinch that made him pause.

"Your dressing needs to be changed," he told me in a low voice. "Or do you *want* to get an infection and die of sepsis?"

I narrowed my glare. "Might be better than letting your fucking puppet beat me to death, so yeah, it doesn't sound so bad."

Kai gave a small eye roll—the bastard—and grabbed my foot firmly by the ankle before I could pull away again. "Trust me, sepsis would be worse." That was all he said before peeling the dressing off the sole of my foot and gently cleaning the cuts. I dimly recognized that it should hurt, so I made sure to flinch whenever his antiseptic wipe touched my skin. He just held my ankle tight, keeping my foot still.

When he was done cleaning it, he applied a fresh sticky dressing, and this time it looked like the waterproof kind. He even went as far as taping the edges down with a plastic tape to prevent moisture getting under the dressing.

"Done?" I asked when he released my ankle.

He nodded, watching me from under his long lashes while he gathered up the trash.

"Good," I muttered. "Now fuck off and leave me to bathe in peace."

It was a whole lot more attitude than Danny the bank teller had started with, but I felt all the torture and confinement would have hardened her edges significantly. Besides, the scared, crying act was grating on my own nerves. It was either adapt or kill *myself* for being so annoying.

Kai huffed a short laugh. “Nice try. Show me your arm.”

If I was under any doubts whether he’d condoned and witnessed the torture Cyryl had inflicted, that confirmed it.

Holding his gaze with an accusing glare, I lifted my arm out of the water. It was covered in those sweet, fruity bubbles, but Kai just swept them off with a gentle stroke of his hand. I liked that touch way too much, given his current status as my captor. Then again, Belle had always been the Princess who resonated most with me... nothing wrong with a little Stockholm syndrome, was there?

Kai held my wrist, inspected the multiple puncture wounds in my arm, both sides. They’d all scabbed over a day or so ago, and the dressing had annoyed me, so I’d taken it off.

“These seem okay,” he murmured. “Just make sure they stay clean.”

I scoffed a bitter laugh. “Easier said than done, if you’re intending to put me back in your dungeon. Why don’t you just kill me rather than playing these fucking games? You *know* I don’t have any useful information, so what the fuck are we doing here?”

He stared at me for a moment, his expression totally closed off. Then he gave a short sigh and reached for a bottle of shampoo beside the bath. “Wet your hair; it needs a wash so badly I can smell it from here.”

I blinked in shock. He just kept throwing me off-balance, and I wasn’t sure if I liked it. “You’re going to wash my hair?” I gave a sharp laugh. “Am I in some kind of... oh crap. I’m in a coma, aren’t I? Sam hit me too hard and now I’m dying. Well, that’s just fucking great.”

Kai gave me a flat glare, then pushed my shoulder to dunk my head under the water. It was only quick enough to saturate my grimy hair, but I still made a whole show of it when I popped up, spluttering and coughing. Screwing my eyes shut had my bruised cheek aching, but I’d mostly blocked the various pains of Sam’s beating out already.

“What the fuck?” I screamed. “You could have drowned me! If this is some new bullshit torture technique—”

“Danielle,” he snapped, pouring shampoo out into his hand. “Stop fucking talking.”

His huge hands went to my hair, lathering the shampoo into my greasy roots, and I couldn't have kept talking even if I wanted to. The firm pressure of his fingers against my scalp had me turning into jelly, and my eyelids fluttered closed as I leaned into his touch.

Dammit. Dickhead men shouldn't be allowed to wash women's hair. It was an unfair advantage.

My hair was so long that it took him several more handfuls of shampoo to soap all the way to the ends, then when he quietly ordered me to dip my hair back to rinse, I did as I was told without argument.

He repeated the process twice more, getting *all* the dirt and grease out—and using up the entire bottle of shampoo in the process—then after applying conditioner, he reached into the tub to pull the plug.

“What are you doing?” I asked with a flash of panic.

He cocked a brow at me. “You need to rinse with fresh water, Danielle.”

Fuck it, it was too late to hide my scars now. I'd just have to give a good explanation. But *Danielle* would be shy... wouldn't she? So I wrapped my soapy arms around myself to try and hide my nudity as the water drained out. Kai helped me stand up, keeping my damaged foot on the raised platform and out of the water. It also made it all kinds of impossible to act demure. The best I could do was angling my bent leg somewhat so my vagina wasn't wide open.

Kai's gaze heated, and his lips curled in the ghost of a smile. “You're acting like I haven't already seen your cunt. Relax, Danielle, I just want to rinse that conditioner out.”

I gave a furious huff. “Do you often find your prisoners relax just because you told them to?”

He flicked me a sharp glance, then reached for the shower attachment to rinse my hair out. Along with the conditioner, it washed away the bubbles still clinging to my skin, and I caught him staring at my tits more than once. Or maybe he was just trying to make out the tattoo that sat low between my breasts, along my bra-line so it was almost always hidden.

I kept my hand over my scar, but when he offered me a towel to dry my hair, I had to grit my teeth and let him see it.

“What is that?” he growled, right on cue.

I glanced down at my dark red scar, then continued drying my hair with the towel.

“Did you hear me?” he barked. “I asked you a question.”

With a sigh, I finished rough drying my hair and wrapped the towel around my body. “Are you going to help me get out of here, or shall I slip over and break my neck?”

He did one better, wrapping his arm around my waist and lifting me completely out of the tub. When he set me down on the soft bath mat, I took a deliberate step away from him.

“Not that it’s *any* of your business,” I snapped, “but I got mugged on my way home from work.”

Kai’s eyes narrowed. “And you got shot?”

I jerked a nod. “Clearly. That party at Halloween was the first time I’d gone out since waking up in the hospital after surgery and look how *that* turned out.”

Guilt and regret creased Kai’s face, and I mentally patted myself on the back and took a fucking bow. Yeah, motherfucker, feel *bad* for innocent little Danielle.

He drew a sharp breath, then gave a small nod. “Get dressed. I’ve got some shit to do.”

Without waiting for my response, he strode out of the bathroom.

“Wait! Kai, you can’t just—” My protests cut off with the slam of his bedroom doors and the distinctive click of the lock closing. “I suppose you can,” I murmured softly, dropping all my prudish indignation and picking up the clothes he’d delivered.

I expected to find more of Moana’s sweats, but the clothing was brand new, tags still attached. A pair of yoga pants and a fitted T-shirt, even a soft, stretchy crop top and a pair of panties. All my size, all new.

“Kai, you creepy fuck,” I whispered, ripping the labels off and getting dressed. It felt good to have underwear on again. Now I just needed my watch back...

Then, once I had my escape plan secured, I could complete my assignment.

# LEON

**F**or all his faults—and he had *many*—I couldn’t fault the infamous Ares on his ability to clean up loose ends. By the time I tracked down my snitch, the guy who’d set the meeting with the gun runner for me, he was little more than human goo. No exaggeration, it looked like he’d been tied to a chair, then handed a live grenade. Boom. Splat.

“Dramatic,” I muttered, nudging a chunk of charred flesh with my toe. I was a little bit impressed.

Of course, I hadn’t *really* intended to kill Ares and his minions at the container yard. If I killed them all, I would never get Danny back. And somehow, for *some* reason, she’d become my sole focus. My only priority. I was quite prepared to burn the whole world to ash just to get her safely returned to me... and I really had no clue when my casual obsession had turned into such full blown possession.

It seemed pointless trying to psychoanalyze my own damage at this point though. Only one thing would help me now, and that was recovering Danny. Once I had her back... well, I’d cross that bridge when I came to it. Either I’d fuck her until she was out of my head or kill her. Or both. Probably both. But that would be on *my* terms and not *his*. He’d already taken enough from me.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out to answer.

“They’re somewhere in Europe,” my helper reported when the call connected.

I drew a deep breath, inhaling the coppery meat smell of exploded body. “That’s the best you’ve got?”

I'd ambushed them to rattle their cage a little. To make them slip up in their diligent record of covering their tracks. To my irritation, they hadn't slipped up *enough*.

"Yeah, for now it is," the *tech bunny* on the other end of the call told me, "and that is based off the variance in fuel levels at the airstrip that I'm *assuming* they used. It's circumstantial at best, but it's also all I've got. Somewhere within Europe... I'd say maybe Greece at the farthest. Maybe Turkey? But that would be pushing it on that much fuel. My best guess... Italy or Croatia. Or Norway. Maybe Latvia. Or they could be in—"

"I get it," I snapped, cutting off his prattle. "You have no idea. Somewhere in Europe. Keep fucking looking." Ending the call, I stuffed my phone back in my pocket and exited the blood-soaked warehouse without disturbing anything more than I already had.

It wasn't my mess, I wasn't going to go cleaning it up.

Flipping the hood of my jacket up, I kept my face lowered away from security cameras and made my way back out to the parking lot. To my irritation, I found my new *friend* waiting beside my car.

"Did you find him?" the tattooed Latino man asked, his hands stuffed casually in his pockets as he eyed me up.

I glared at him, vividly picturing all the ways I could kill him. "I found him," I confirmed rather than doing what I really wanted to do. As much as it prickled at my skin, I *needed* this smug bastard for the time being. "But Ares found him first."

Carlos winced. "That was quick."

"He doesn't fuck around." Apparently. Which made it all the more curious that he'd *taken* Danny instead of killing her on the spot. A thread of doubt crept into my mind, but I shook it away. She was alive.

Danny's *friend* just nodded. He wore a knitted hat pulled down over his ears, and his tattoos covered his whole neck. This was the kind of guy she liked? He seemed nothing special. A common gangster.

"Alright. So what's our next steps?" Carlos looked at me like I had all the answers. Like maybe I was sitting on information and not sharing with him. He was right, of course, but I sure as shit wasn't admitting that.

I gave a shrug. "They can't stay hidden for long. Ares has weapons to sell, and the type of people he sells to don't take kindly to being blown off. Our best bet is to follow the money. Who is he selling to next?"

Carlos gave a nod, staring off into the distance. "I'll make some calls. A

while back, I heard whispers of a turf war brewing between the Bratva and Odessa. One of them will be buying from Ares, for sure.”

I arched a brow. “You have contacts in the Bratva and Odessa?” And high enough in the hierarchy to know who they were buying weapons from too.

Carlos just offered me a toothy grin, showing off his gold-capped incisor. “I got contacts *everywhere*, amigo. Why do you think Dan set up her panic button with me and not one of you *Guild* pricks?”

Dan. He called her *Dan*. So fucking familiar with *my Danny*. I would kill him slowly, I decided.

“Probably because she knows that no one in the Guild can be trusted completely,” I muttered aloud, not really caring that Carlos heard me. It was the truth, after all. Even I would put the Guild above everything else... and had in the past. It was why Layla was dead now.

Carlos just smirked at my comment, though. Because I was agreeing that Danny trusted him more than anyone else in her life. And that made me hate him even more.

“Just call me if you get a lead,” I told him with a hard glare. I’d ditched my fake glasses *and* my fake personality along with them. The version of me that Carlos got was a whole shit load different from the one I’d presented to Danny.

He gave me a mocking salute with tattooed fingers. “Yes, sir. Tell Jude I say hello.”

I scowled at him, not understanding that comment, but didn’t stick around to ask questions. Carlos was still standing there in the parking lot as I sped off in my rented Mercedes, heading back to my hotel.

My phone rang again, and I hit answer on the steering wheel.

“This better be more useful information,” I snapped at the Guild tech bunny on the other end. I’d assigned him the job as an “official” contract, so he had no idea that I was the client. He didn’t even know who he was reporting to, only that I was a superior.

“I think so,” he replied. “I found some heavily altered legal documents from about nine years ago. I’ve only just started unscrambling them, but it points toward Ares buying property in Italy.”

Good. That wasn’t far away. “Italy is not specific enough, William. Get me coordinates.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”



“Do better than that, William.” I ended the call and tightened my grip on the steering wheel. If his info was accurate, then I was a huge step closer to getting Danny back. My lips curved up in a smile, and I nearly didn’t recognize myself in the mirror when I got out of the car at my hotel.

I made it all of two steps inside the foyer when I understood Carlos’s parting comment.

“Judith,” I said, narrowing my eyes at Danny’s best friend. “What are you doing in Brussels?”

She scowled back at me, leaning heavily on her cane as she stood up from where she’d been waiting. “I came to ask why the fuck you haven’t answered my calls, Leon. And to help find my friend.”

I briefly considered shooting her just to stop the annoyance. But we were in the very public foyer of a five-star hotel, and the cleanup cost alone would make it less than worth it. So I sighed and continued toward the elevators, knowing full well that she would follow.

“Are you going to answer me?” she demanded, stepping into the elevator right before the doors closed.

I gave her a cool glance. “Out here, where anyone can overhear confidential information? No, Judith, I’m not.”

Her lips parted in shock, and her cheeks pinked with embarrassment, but she shut the fuck up, so that was something.

“I understand you’ve been relegated to the library for a long time, Judith,” I commented with a slight edge of scolding, “but you know better than that. Honestly, meeting you now, I have no clue how you were ever on track to finish top of your training class.”

Her cheeks darkened, as did her glare, but her lips pursed tight, and I smirked slightly. How the fuck Danny had the patience for all these *friends*, I had no idea. We would have to change that when I had her back.

There was nothing quite as potent as the loss of a loved one to help foster a new, less healthy relationship.

## DANNY

**A**fter my bath, Kai left me locked in his room. I didn't have much to complain about, though, considering it was a goddamn palace compared to the cell they'd been keeping me in.

I took my sweet time snooping through every drawer, his whole wardrobe, and even under the bed. To my disappointment, I found nothing fun at all. Not even a box of condoms. Kai was turning out to be more unexciting than I'd first assessed him to be.

Looking out the window was a bust, too. There was a metal roller blind down from the outside, totally blocking out the view... whatever it was. Did he do that because he knew I'd be in his room? Or was it a standard safety feature when the crew was out of town? So to speak.

Eventually I grew bored and turned on the huge flat screen TV mounted on the wall facing the bed. It wasn't connected to any local stations, so I got no clues to our location, but it *did* have some streaming apps. Small win. I searched out the teen vampire drama I'd been watching the last time I'd watched TV and flicked through to the episode I'd been up to.

The heroine of the show had a love triangle situation going with two sexy brothers, and I had my money on the bad boy to win her heart in the end. Then again, love triangles always seemed to result in the boring, *good guy* as the hero. Snore.

Somewhere around the fourth episode I watched back-to-back, I fell asleep. In my defense, Kai's bed was like a goddamn cloud. It was so comfy. Nothing at all like Jae's hard mattress I'd woken in earlier.

When I woke a couple of hours later, though, the room was pitch black—the TV off—and I wasn't alone. The mattress was weighted down beside me, and body warmth radiated beneath the light blanket.

I kept my breathing steady as I opened my eyes, peering through the darkness to confirm it was Kai and not some other creep. Although, if it were Sam, I hardly thought he'd be sleeping peacefully beside me, and as for Jae... well... who fucking knew what he'd been doing while I was in that drugged sleep earlier.

Experimenting, I shifted my position and watched to see if Kai would wake. When he didn't move at all, I slipped out from under the blankets and stood. Still no reaction. Wow... was he for real? How fucking easy would it be to kill him right now?

Hmm. No, Ares hadn't survived this long by being a moron. Suspicion rippled through me. This fucker was faking to see what I would do.

Well, so be it. Danielle the bank teller would see this as her opportunity to escape. Danny the mercenary saw a perfect opportunity to case out the house a little better. Gather intel to form a better escape plan for when I did get a real opening.

Silently, I padded around the huge bed and tried the door. It was locked, of course, but Kai had to have the key somewhere in the room. When I found it sitting innocently on the bedside table, I rolled my eyes. Oh yeah, this was a test *for sure*. He could have made it just a touch less obvious. But then, I suppose Danielle the bank teller would be so desperate to escape, she wouldn't notice the setup. She would take the key, unlock the door, and *run*.

So that's what I did.

The entire house was dark, silent, and seemingly empty. Like *that* wasn't suspicious in the least. But I kept running, searching out an exit as I mentally mapped the floor plan. I even deliberately bypassed an exit so I could see more of the house before taking the door on the far side of the kitchen, out into the night.

The air was cool, and a shiver ran through me as I followed the white marble pavers across the beautifully manicured lawn. The pavers soon turned into steps, and I raced down them. At the bottom, inky dark water lapped at the small sandy shore, and a long jetty jutted out into the ocean.

My bare feet slapped the wooden planks, but I soon reached the end and found nowhere else to go. There were no boats tied up—which was interesting—but in the far distance, the sky was lit with a glow from a city.

I inhaled deeply, testing the smells in the air for clues on our location. The jetty decking creaked with heavier footsteps approaching behind me, and I didn't need to look to know it was Kai. The perverted fuck wanted me to see for myself how futile escape was.

Joke was on him, because I knew nothing was *truly* futile. Not when you used a little creativity and a lot of determination.

Still... Danielle would be terribly defeated right now, so I summoned up those crocodile tears once more as I looked out across the water.

"We're on an island, aren't we?" I asked in a small, dread-filled voice.

"We sure are," Kai replied, standing close enough to my shoulder I could *feel* his presence like a cloak. He was more than a foot taller than me, something that hadn't been so obvious when we'd met, thanks to the six-inch platforms I'd worn.

I breathed in another deep breath of the sea air. I loved that smell. It was different from the sea I lived on in Iceland, though. Hmm, I wonder where Kai would have situated his secret lair. The plant life hadn't given me any clues as I'd escaped the house, either. Which told me we probably weren't in the South Pacific where Kai and Moana were from.

Nor did I feel like we were in America, based on the climate. No, my guess was somewhere in Europe.

"Are you ever going to let me go?" I asked, making myself sound totally beaten down. The bruises all over me had to help with that illusion, surely. My eye *thankfully* had gone down enough that I could see out of it, but the bruising was puffy and tender.

Kai took a moment before responding, his fingers stroking down the silken sheet of my hair cloaking my shoulders. I shivered at his touch, but gritted my teeth to stop myself leaning back into him.

"Ask me something else," he finally said, giving a heavy sigh.

I bit back a smile at his head games. Quietly, I was loving the thrill of it all. "Fine. Are you going to kill me?"

He gave a small huff of laughter, but it wasn't a kind sound. "I haven't decided yet."

At least he was honest? That had to count for something... I suppose.

"Then... if you don't kill me, what are you going to do with me?" I tried really hard not to let my dirty thoughts bleed into my voice, but I think I failed.

Kai let the silence hang between us a long time, using my own tricks

against me and not even knowing it. Silence could be so *very* powerful, because it let your prey's fear feed itself. Their anxiety would heighten without even a word, because silence led to the mind summoning worst case scenarios.

"I don't know yet," he admitted eventually.

Honesty again. Although I'd bet he had a few ideas of what he *wanted* to do. I'd seen how excited he'd been back in Shadow Grove, when he thought he was scaring me. Maybe he'd get off on having a sex slave chained to his bed.

Then again, that mental picture didn't match up right in my mind. There had been an element of disgust in his eyes when he'd forced me to my knees, and I was thinking it was at himself.

I drew a shaking breath, the cool air making my skin pebble. "Are you sending me back to the dungeons to be tortured more? If so, I might be better off jumping in this water right here and drowning."

Kai's sharp inhale said I'd pissed him off. "No. You'll stay in my room from now on. Where I can keep a closer eye on you."

I smiled into the night, knowing he couldn't see my face. But goddamn if that wasn't going to work perfectly for completing my mission.

When I said nothing back, he gave another sigh. "You know, in the town I grew up in, there's a bronze statue of a woman sitting gracefully and staring out to the ocean. Her name is Pania, and she was a sea maiden, a siren, a creature more beautiful and bewitching than any human woman." He paused, his fingers trailing down my hair and my arm once more, then his hand gripped my elbow and pulled me back ever so slightly to lean into his chest.

I didn't resist. The night air was cool, and his bare skin—since he only wore sweatpants—was like a furnace.

"Pania would spend her days in the ocean, swimming with the dolphins and other sea creatures, then at night she would rest upstream, among the flax bushes. It was no coincidence that her resting place was also where Karitoki, the handsome son of the local Māori chief, came to drink each night. She grew obsessed. One night, she revealed herself to him, and Karitoki was enchanted by her beauty."

Kai's warm breath on my neck made my skin tingle, and the strong grip on my elbows didn't loosen. Goddamn, why was I so turned on by this?

"They were in love, but come morning, Pania had to leave. She explained that she was a creature of the sea and couldn't change who she was. She

swore to return each night, and for a while Karitoki was satisfied with their arrangement. But the more he fell in love, the more possessive he became. He was no longer content to share his wife with the ocean, so he sought advice from the village elder. Advice on how to trap her and keep her with him forever.” His voice dropped low and menacing, his grip pulling me closer until he held me in a tight embrace.

I bit my tongue, waiting to hear the rest of the story. These old legends never ended in a happily ever after.

“One night while Pania slept, her husband, Karitoki, placed a piece of cooked meat inside her mouth, because if a creature of the sea, a siren, ever swallowed cooked flesh, she would be bound to the land forever.”

I couldn’t help myself. “And was she?”

Kai huffed a laugh. “No, she was woken by Ruru the morepork screaming a warning, and she realized what Karitoki was doing. She was so heartbroken by his act that she fled to the ocean where her siren sisters held her close, never to return to the land again.”

For a long time, there was silence between us. He held me almost like a protective lover as the first rays of daylight began to glow on the horizon, and I let him.

Finally, I sighed and twisted slightly to look up at him. “It’s a pretty story, but what does it have to do with me?”

His dark gaze locked with mine, and a small flicker of an apology crossed his face. “Legends are left by our ancestors as a warning. To help us learn from our mistakes. Karitoki fucked up, ever letting Pania leave that first morning. I won’t repeat his mistakes.”

He released me from his grip, taking a step away as his gaze shifted to the water. “Take as long as you need out here, Danielle. Make peace with your new reality, because you will *never* leave this island.”

## DANNY

**A**fter Kai left me, I sat down on the end of the jetty and dangled my feet over the edge. I had no need to “make peace with my new reality” as he had so very dramatically put it, because I had no intention of remaining on his island any longer than I needed to carry out my assignment.

The fact that he thought he *could* keep me gave me confidence that my deception was flawless thus far. It was the homestretch now, and this was the part I was best at.

After a while sitting there and listening to the gentle lap of water on the shore, and watching the sun rise on the horizon, I slowly retraced my steps back up to the house.

Everything was still dead silent as I made my way back to the master suite, and I peered around to add to my mental floor plan. As my fingers closed over the handle to Kai’s bedroom, an odd rush of apprehension washed over me. Nervousness.

Was I in over my head on this?

No. *Fuck* no. Just because of that one slipup with the comms device—which I *hated* using anyway—didn’t mean I was out of my league. But goddamn if Leon’s warnings didn’t keep repeating in my head as I opened that door. His utter conviction that this was a suicide mission... that *no one* expected me to come out of this alive.

Why? What did he know about Kai, or about *Ares*, that he hadn’t told me? I’d so quickly dismissed his warnings as being a lack of faith in my skill.

But what if it had nothing to do with my abilities at all, and everything to do with Kai?

Shit. Was Kai playing me right back?

He wasn't back in bed, but the water was running in the bathroom, so it wasn't hard to guess where he was. My pulse raced in a way I hadn't experienced in a long freaking time when I crossed the room and pushed open the bathroom door. Not because he was naked in the shower and I was quietly *drooling* over his body. But because I was no longer so confident in my own deception.

What did it say about me that I was suddenly a thousand times more interested in the infamous Ares, now that I'd considered he might be playing me at my own game?

"See something you like, Danielle?" he purred seductively from the glass-walled shower. It was steamed up enough that the finer details were obscured, but I'd already been up close and personal with his dick, and it was safe to say hell yes, I liked what I'd seen.

Instead, I folded my arms and gave him a petulant, resentful glare. "Am I supposed to starve to death, or should I expect rations to be slipped under the door sometime soon?"

I wasn't even that hungry but needed a distraction away from what I really wanted to do. Shower. With him. And get all kinds of dirty.

Kai swiped a hand over the foggy shower glass and met my eyes across the bathroom. Regardless of whether he knew what I was thinking, the invitation was clear in the curve of his lips and tilt of his head.

"You sure you don't need to take a shower first? You've been sitting down there on the dock a long time."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm quite sure. So, what's a prisoner got to do to get a coffee around here?" His smirk spread wider, and I threw my hands up. "Forget it, I'll find it myself. Or am I not permitted to leave the room?"

My only response was his laughter. He'd only so recently told me that I was his prisoner, *never* to leave the island we were on... and he was *laughing*? Holy shit, Malachi Arden might be more messed up in the head than I was.

Also, his laugh was incredible. Like sex coated in chocolate with a side of vodka.

I needed to swipe a hand over my face after I retreated out of the bathroom. The dull ache in my cheek gave me a little clarity, so I gave it a



deliberate poke to wash away the lingering lust Kai seemed to stir up in me.

“Get your head in the game,” I muttered to myself. “This man is your captor. He had a sweet, innocent bank teller tortured and hasn’t even so much as apologized for it. He’s either playing a game, or he’s a bigger asshole than he first seemed.” Which sounded impossible, and yet here we were.

Either way, I needed to quit thinking with my clit. He needed to earn fake-Danny’s forgiveness, so there better be some groveling or grand gestures soon. If he really thought it’d be as easy as a weirdly romantic yet threatening story on the dock, then some suggestive glances... well, then I needed to work on being less fucking obvious.

I used the short walk from Kai’s suite down to the kitchen to reflect on my character. On the role I was playing here. I’d been letting her slip a little, letting a bit too much of *me* show through when I interacted with Kai. He was short-circuiting my brain a little, and I was going to blame that hot encounter with his gun.

It wasn’t hard to locate a coffee machine in the enormous kitchen, and I fired it up. It’d been *way* too long since my last cup of coffee, and it was a miracle I managed not to kill anyone in a caffeine-withdrawal rage.

The soft scuff of feet on floorboards alerted me to someone approaching just a moment before they entered the kitchen.

“Oh, Danny,” Moana said with a small gasp, “I didn’t expect to see you —”

“Out of my cage?” I sneered, looking over at her with accusation in my eyes. “Sorry to disappoint.”

Her brow creased and her eyes studied my bruised face. “I was going to say *awake so early*. I already knew you weren’t locked up.” She came closer, hugging her oversized hoodie around herself. “You look like crap, Danny. That must hurt.”

There was nothing menacing in her voice. She sounded... guilty. Apologetic. Maybe Jae hadn’t been the only one pleading my innocence case to Kai after all. Fake-Danny, the one who is scared and hurt, she would be *furious* at Mo for letting them do this, though. I couldn’t soften toward her too quickly, or it’d be suspicious.

“Not at all,” I replied with heavy sarcasm. “I can barely feel it.”

Her lips tilted in a half smile. “Funny. I’ll get you some arnica cream if you make me a coffee too?”

She was trying to mend bridges, that much was clear, and if I did end up

stuck in this house for a while—even if it was for another week—then I might need an ally who *didn't* want to sleep with me. So I gave a small nod of acceptance, and she pulled an enormous box of medical supplies from the pantry.

I made coffee for both of us while she sorted through what seemed to be Mary Poppins's bag of first aid, then pulled out a little brown jar. She indicated for me to come closer and opened the jar to swipe out some of the cream on her finger.

Playing nervous, I eyed the cream suspiciously despite already knowing what arnica was.

“This will help the bruising go down about seventy-five times faster than if you let nature take its course,” Mo told me as she reached out to gently rub it into my face.

I flinched and winced as she worked, but in reality, her touch was featherlight and felt kind of amazing working the herbal cream into my bruise. “Is that the medically proven result?” I murmured with an edge of amusement.

She gave a small eye roll. “It's the Moana Arden proven result, and that's as good as fact. I'm guessing you have more bruises than just this one?” She took my wrist without me offering it and carefully dabbed the cream on the purple skin around each puncture site. Her lips tightened as she worked, but she didn't comment.

When she was done with my arm, she glanced back up at me. “Show me the rest?”

I gave a small frown, biting my lip with false modesty, then raised my T-shirt up. Mo gave a hiss of sympathy as she smeared the cream over probably seventy-five percent of my visible skin, and I did a whole show of acting like it hurt. Honestly, I deserved some kind of acting award when I got back to the Guild with Malachi Arden's severed head in hand.

Yes, the client had requested proof of death.

Messy, but understandable. And lugging a whole grown man's dead body was beyond inconvenient, so I generally just took the head.

“Danny,” Mo said with a heavy sigh when she was done, “I don't even know what to say. *Sorry* doesn't really feel like it will cut it.”

I furrowed my brow, smoothing my T-shirt back down over my sticky skin. “You're right. It doesn't.” I picked up my coffee and moved away from her, putting physical distance between us to make it clear that she wasn't

even *close* to off the hook. “You let them torture me, Mo. *Torture*. Do you have *any* idea what that’s like?”

Mo gave a humorless laugh. “Yeah, actually. I do. Trust me, Cyryl isn’t the worst that’s out there.” She bit her lip, wincing. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make this a competition. And just because all of us have gone through bad shit doesn’t mean we can’t have some common decency and compassion. I’m sorry, Danny. If it’s *any* consolation, Sam wasn’t supposed to touch you. We thought Jae had things under control while we were gone.”

I scowled. “That means fucking *nothing* to me, Mo. He tried to kill me.”

Her expression was pure guilt. “I know. I’m so sorry.”

I shook my head. Fake-Danny wasn’t ready to accept this apology, even if I was quietly pleased that Mo would be an asset within this house. “And what about everything Cyryl did? You knew about that, and no one stopped him. Hell, you guys probably *told* him what to do. Or Kai did, didn’t he?”

Mo cringed, then licked her lips. “There have been others... Our team, Kai in particular, we have a lot of enemies. A lot of people would be a hell of a lot happier if we were all dead, so people pay big money to try and make that happen. Can you really blame us for thinking you were involved?”

I blinked at her in outrage. “Can I... *are you kidding?* Of course I can blame you, Mo! You were *wrong*, and now look!” I indicated my bruised face. “You did this to me. All of you. Sam was just the weapon wielded by all six of you.”

She nodded, accepting her responsibility. It gave me a stab of guilt, but I quickly squashed it down. No matter how much I liked Moana, she was a means to an end. I couldn’t afford to develop real feelings for a target.

“Danny... if there was anything I could do to make it up to you...” She trailed off, giving me a pained look.

I tightened my jaw and tipped my chin up as I glared back at her. “Get me off this island,” I challenged her. “Let me go, and it’s forgiven.”

She didn’t flinch away from my gaze, but shook her head. “I can’t do that, Danny. Ask me for *anything* else... but you can’t leave.”

“Then I don’t think we have anything left to discuss,” I whispered, summoning up a bit of mistiness in my eyes. “Thanks for fucking nothing, Moana.”

She groaned, following me when I started out of the kitchen and gently grabbing my arm to stop me from leaving. Where the fuck I thought I would go, I had no clue. So it was a good thing she wasn’t giving up so easily.

“Danny, please,” she said, “not to add insult to injury, but if Kai is serious about keeping you here, then we’re kinda going to spend a lot of time together. Wouldn’t you rather be friends than enemies?”

She didn’t mean it as a threat, more of a plea. It was endearing and made me like her even more. Dammit, Moana, be bitchier for fuck’s sake.

But she needed to try a bit harder. This apology just wasn’t stacking up to the shit they’d put fake-Danny through for the last few weeks. So I jerked free of her grip and gave her a bitter, accusing glare.

“I think I’d rather Kai just killed me and got it over with.” With that dramatic statement, I whirled around with every intention of storming off but ran straight into my least favorite person in the house.

“I’m sure I can help make that happen,” Sam sneered at me when I caught my balance on the wall. “Give me your gun, Mo; I can end our little problem right now.”

“Pull your fucking head in, Sam. You were given an *order* not to harm her, and look what you did.” Mo’s tone was crackling with authority, and I watched with internal glee as Sam flinched.

“She’s still breathing, isn’t she?” he replied, his glare narrowing as he stepped closer to me. “For now. I bet I can still convince Kai to let me gut you for what you did to Mauricio.”

I made my body tremble, shrinking in on myself to look small and fragile. “I didn’t do anything to your friend.”

A flash of pure rage crossed Sam’s face, and he gave me a firm shove as he moved into the kitchen. It was barely more than a shoulder check, but I let the momentum carry me off my feet just to make it look good. I gave a startled cry as I hit the wall and collapsed to the floor, and Sam stared down at me with a bewildered look on his face.

“Sam!” Moana roared. “Unacceptable!”

But her reprimand was like a kitten hiss compared to the expression on Kai’s face when he entered the kitchen a moment later.

His furious gaze took in my position on the floor, and I huddled into myself tighter, giving a little sob. Then he looked to Sam, standing over me with his fists clenched at his sides.

I saw the switch flip in Kai’s eyes at the same time as Mo. She just took a generous step out of the way, and Sam noticed too late to avoid the punch that Kai threw at his face.

The hit landed solid, causing Sam’s head to snap to the side, and he

stumbled a couple of steps before drawing a deep breath and looking to his boss in disbelief.

“What the *fuck*?” Sam snarled. “I barely touched the bitch!”

“I made myself perfectly clear,” Kai barked back, throwing another fist. This one took Sam right in the solar plexus, and he doubled over with a harsh, forced exhale. “You’re not to lay a fucking *finger* on her. Don’t even *breathe* in her direction. If I find even one more bruise on her skin, I’ll make you regret ever disobeying me, Sam.” He threw another heavy fist at Sam’s face, sending blood splattering, and I winced a little. Kai packed a hell of a punch.

They’d moved slightly out of the kitchen, and Moana offered me a hand up from the floor, which I accepted as I kept my eyes glued to the fight.

“Ignore them,” she said to me with an apologetic smile. “This probably would have happened last night instead, if Kai hadn’t been too worried to leave you alone for long.”

I wrinkled my nose at her. “What are you talking about? He left me in his room for *hours*; I fell asleep watching TV.”

Mo shot me a lopsided smile. “Yeah, while he sat out in the hallway and guarded the door like a fucking German shepherd.” She waved a hand to the fight that seemed to be heating up in the hallway outside the kitchen. Sam was hitting back now, which was both irritating and entertaining to see. “They’ll do this for a while, but no one will get killed.”

I huffed a sigh. “What a shame.”

Her answering smile was tight. Sam was still part of her family, even if he was an asshole who’d tried to kill me on more than one occasion. “Mauricio and Sam were... involved,” she told me in a soft voice. “He’s taking it pretty hard.”

Now *that* made a whole lot more sense. In the hallway, Sam was backing away from Kai with his bloody hands raised defensively.

“She’s got you all fucking fooled,” he spat, pointing in my direction. “Mark my words, that *bitch* is faking. She’ll be the end of us, just wait and see.” He spat blood onto the wooden floor, then cast a venomous look in my direction before stalking away.

*Oh Sam, buddy. I almost feel bad... This is gonna sting when you realize how right you were, but by then it’ll be far too late. Your friends will be dead, and I’ll be long gone, drinking vodka with Stanley in Iceland.*

## DANNY

**M**oana had grabbed a stack of antiseptic wipes and dressings, and given me an apologetic smile before going to patch Sam up. That left me with my surly jailer, who slouched onto a bar stool at the kitchen island.

I folded my arms, watching him as he reached for the medical box and started hunting through it. My patience snapped all of twenty seconds later.

“Oh my god, *stop*,” I exclaimed. “You’re getting blood on all the first aid supplies, you gross thing.”

Kai’s head snapped up, looking at me like he was surprised to find me still in the kitchen. “Excuse me? I’m not gross.”

I twisted my lips in disgust. “Are you sure about that? What if you have some blood-borne disease and the next person who goes to get a Band-Aid gets infected because you’re too arrogant to clean up your hands?”

His brows hitched. “First I’m gross, now I’m arrogant too?”

Scowling, I jerked the medical kit out of his reach and took out the antiseptic wash and some wipes, then found a handful of dressings. He seemed to only have two small cuts on his face and split knuckles on his right hand. Nothing major.

“Trust me, you’ve always been arrogant,” I muttered, putting the lid on the box to keep it somewhat sanitary. “And I’m happy to slap you with a whole dictionary of adjectives if you’d like me to really destroy that inflated ego more.” I pushed the supplies across the counter to him.

He stared at the pile a moment with a small frown on his brow. Then he

awkwardly picked up a wipe with his left hand and tried to open it with his teeth. Pathetic.

I gave a small sound of frustration and rounded the island to snatch the wipe from his teeth. “This is painful to watch,” I muttered, tearing the packet open. Not bothering to give him any warning, I liberally doused the splits on his knuckles with disinfectant solution.

Kai hissed, and I ignored him, cleaning up the blood with far from gentle swipes. He was a big, tough arms dealer; I wasn’t going to baby him over a couple of split knuckles.

“Fucking hell, Danielle,” he grunted when I applied the Band-Aids to his hand and peeled open another wipe for his face. “I think I’d rather get patched up by a pissed off porcupine.”

I glared at him while soaking my fresh wipe in the antiseptic solution, then held his gaze as I slapped it against the cut on his cheek bone. He flinched, and I bit back a smirk of satisfaction.

“Don’t be a fucking baby, Kai,” I said, wiping the cut far more thoroughly than it needed. “It’s not like I’m torturing you.”

He went silent, his mood souring with an obvious shift. Tough shit, sweetheart. You don’t wanna feel bad? Don’t torture people. Otherwise, suck it the fuck up and own your decisions.

Of course... I couldn’t give him that opinion. Not when I was his *victim* in this scenario. So I just pursed my lips and finished patching up the two cuts on his face. One on his cheekbone and one on his eyebrow. He watched me with those whiskey dark eyes as I worked, and I tried really hard to ignore how close we were.

“I would have thought you’d know how to block a punch better than this,” I eventually said, simply to try and break the building tension between us.

He huffed a short laugh. “He came out second best. Always does.”

“Good,” I murmured, sticking the last Band-Aid on and pressing the edges down far too hard. “You’re done. I’m going to shower.” I took a big step away from him and felt like I could actually breathe again with some space between us.

He tilted his head, watching me with a curious expression. “I thought you were hungry?”

My stomach gurgled at me like it’d been summoned. Fuck, yes. I was *starving*. “I suppose.”

Kai gave a nod. “Then sit down and drink your coffee. I’ll make breakfast.”

I tried to summon up an indignant refusal, to tell him where to shove his offer of breakfast because I was his prisoner not his friend. But my stomach cramped hard, and I gave a small grimace instead.

“Fine,” I muttered. It was a good thing I hadn’t been holding my coffee when Sam knocked me over, or there would be more than blood to clean up off the floor. And I’d much rather spill blood than coffee any day of the week.

Kai smirked at me like he’d won something, then pushed my coffee closer as I slid onto the stool he’d just vacated. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Cooked,” I replied, being deliberately difficult.

He didn’t take the bait, though. Instead, he just flashed me that fucking *blinding* smile and nodded. “Cooked eggs, coming up.”

I glared, then when he turned his back to get ingredients out of the fridge, I took a long look at his backside. Oh yeah, the infamous Ares definitely didn’t skip leg day. His butt was totally bitable, and his thighs... holy hell. The strength in those thighs, even through his charcoal gray sweatpants, had me imagining all kinds of things. Most of them naked.

It wasn’t until someone cleared their throat beside me that I realized I’d been staring. Then I blushed *for real* and gave Eli a nervous look. Somehow he’d slid onto the stool right beside me, and I hadn’t even noticed him approach. Either I was losing my touch in a big way or I had just been hypnotized by Kai’s ass.

“Good morning, Danny,” Eli murmured in that deep voice of his. “How are you feeling?”

I frowned at him. Eli was the hardest to read, and not just because of his tendency to listen rather than talk. His poker face was flawless, not a single thought crossing his face as he stared back at me. I knew very little about him from the file I’d compiled on Kai’s crew either. He was thirty-nine years old, born and raised in Tanzania, indentured to become a child soldier at a very young age. Somehow he made his way from an African warlord’s service to the British military, then into the Royal Marines. That was where most of this crew had met originally. They were all ex-armed forces from various countries, including Mo.

“I feel like I’ve been kept in a dungeon for an indefinite amount of time, tortured, terrified, and nearly killed,” I told him in a clipped voice, narrowing



my eyes with accusation. “But thanks for asking. Did it help ease your guilt over being complicit in all of that?”

Eli’s brows rose ever so slightly, and I gave myself a mental back pat for getting a reaction out of him.

“Oh yeah,” Kai said over his shoulder as he scrambled eggs in a pan, “turns out all we did was make her prickly.”

I wanted to laugh, but fake-Danny wouldn’t find this very funny. Not at all. So I slammed my coffee cup down on the counter and rose out of my seat. “Is this *funny* to you? I’m so glad my *terror* and imprisonment provides you with so much goddamn entertainment, you jacked up meathead. What kind of sick fuck—” I cut myself off, shaking my head in disbelief. “You know what? Fuck you. Both of you. I think I’d rather starve to death than sit here and pretend what you’ve done to me is in any way *okay*.”

Although it pained me more than I would ever admit, I backhanded my half-full coffee off the counter. It smashed on the floor, splashing dark liquid all over the cupboards, but I forced my feet to take me out of the kitchen, completing my tantrum.

I took the door to the outside, the one I’d taken before dawn when I’d “tried to escape.” My feet were still bare, and the day was cool, but I continued back down the path to the jetty once more. I’d have liked to explore the island a little more, but angry and scared Danny wouldn’t be in an exploring kinda mood. She would just sit on the end of the dock and cry.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered under my breath as I strode down the wooden jetty. “I’m going to run out of tears before I get off this island.”

Heaving a sigh, I sat my butt down and stared out at the horizon to summon up the waterworks. It wasn’t enough to just shed a few tears while someone was staring right at me, I needed to look like I’d been sitting out here sobbing my eyes out. They needed to be red and puffy.

It didn’t take long to trigger the right part of my brain to let the tears build up and start spilling over. I separated myself from the tiny, painful part of my mind that gave me that ability. Instead, I thought about Stanley and wondered if Jude had visited him to give him some water. Poor guy.

Then my thoughts wandered to Leon. Someone who’d featured far too prominently in my head for the time I’d spent in captivity. It sounded like he’d gone after them back in Shadow Grove when I’d been taken. But that seemed super risky for a hacker who probably hadn’t been involved in an active firefight since graduating the Guild training. His expertise was in

computers. Tech. Data.

Unless there was more to Leon than he'd shown me so far.

For some reason, I kept coming back to that job we'd done in New York. Because I still hadn't worked out how he'd made it down to the courtyard so damn fast when Ted the creep had hit me.

Footsteps vibrated the jetty boards beneath me, and I huddled in on myself to seem more distraught. Briefly I wondered if it might be Eli who had followed me out, but of course it was Kai himself. I was *his* prisoner, and he was making it crystal clear that he owned me by becoming glued to my ass tighter than a shadow.

He said nothing, though. Just sat down beside me and dangled his feet off the dock. His legs were so much longer than mine that his feet swished in the water, and I watched the blue green water swirl around his tanned feet.

"I don't know what to do with you, Danielle," he admitted after several minutes of sitting there beside me.

I sniffed dramatically, swiping my hand over my cheeks to wipe tears away. "Let me go."

He shook his head, still staring at the water. "It's not an option. For your own safety as much as ours. If I let you go..." He trailed off with a heavy sigh. "You'd be dead within a week. Or worse."

So, he wasn't worried about me going to any kind of law enforcement and screaming about my abduction, but more concerned that one of his enemies would squeeze me for the location of his top secret hide out. Even the biggest villain was vulnerable when they were asleep.

"Stop calling me Danielle," I muttered. "My name is Danny."

In truth, I had no idea what Danny was short for. But there was a very real employee of the Cloudcroft Bank named Danielle, so I'd assumed her identity. For as long as I could remember, I'd only ever been Danny DeLuna. Nothing more.

Kai tipped his head, giving me a side-eye look. "I like Danielle. It's more delicate."

I scoffed. "Is that what you think of me? That I'm *delicate*?"

A grin flashed across his face, but he didn't answer my question. Instead, he turned his gaze to the water once more.

"I love the ocean," he confessed after a moment of silence. "When I was a kid, I used to run away from home. Moana would always find me at the beach, tossing stones into the waves. Even though she's the one named after

the ocean, I was the one always drawn to the water. Our beach was a dangerous one, too. Massive undertow right there from the shore that had dragged kids out and drowned them before. Beautiful, but deadly.”

He turned his head slightly to stare at me, but I pretended not to notice. “Why did you run away from home?” I asked instead.

Kai ran a hand over his close-cropped hair, like he was thinking how much to tell me. Maybe how much to fabricate.

“My mum was a shit human,” he admitted. “She was beautiful, though. Or so my *kuiia*—my grandmother—used to tell us. But kids were a commitment she didn’t want, so when I was born, and Mo was only eighteen months, we got dumped on our grandmother’s doorstep. Mum never came back for us, and when our *kuiia* died, we were handed over to our father.”

This part of his file had been vague at best, so I was curious to hear the story from Kai himself. Call me bored or something. I had to build trust between us *somehow*.

“I get the feeling your dad was an even bigger piece of trash than your mom was?” I leaned back on my hands, watching Kai from under my lashes.

He nodded. “Yeah. Understatement.” A long silence fell, and Kai seemed lost in his own memories for a minute. Part of his file had given a cursory mention of domestic violence in Kai’s paternal home, largely based on the fact that his father was an ultra-conservative, married, white man who’d had two biracial children with his secret lover.

Kai drew a sharp breath and looked over at me. “Were your parents any better?”

I swallowed hard, pushing aside the unfamiliar feeling of guilt as I prepared my story. “Uh, I didn’t know them. They both died in a car crash when I was two. My grandmother raised me, too. So I guess we kind of have that in common. She’s the one who gave me the watch Jae took when I woke up here. On her deathbed. It’s all I have left of her.”

It was a lie, of course. The real Danielle—whose life I’d adopted for this cover story—had lost her parents in a crash and been raised by her grandmother who died peacefully at age ninety-three, so I had to stick to the “truth” in case Kai had looked into “me” already.

“So you have no family left?” he asked in a quiet, thoughtful voice. “What about friends?”

I hadn’t delved that deep into my cover identity, not thinking I would need that much detail. So I had to wing it from here and hope that he was just

trying to foster a connection rather than catch me in a lie.

“I have two best friends,” I told him, thinking fondly of Jude and Sabine. “Janet and Sarah. We all met at boarding school when we were twelve and stayed friends ever since. I don’t see them very often, because we live a long way apart and work gets in the way. But when we do see each other, it’s like no time has passed at all.”

His gaze was pure interest. Not a hint of deception that I could see... but who was to say he hadn’t practiced that look just like I had?

“So, when you’re not visiting them, you live alone?” He was fishing for something, but it felt more like casual curiosity than an investigation.

I shook my head. “No, I have Stanley.”

*Where the fuck had that come from? Not even changing his name?*

Kai’s brows hiked. “Boyfriend?”

A laugh escaped me before I could catch it, then I felt obligated to explain. “Stanley is a plant. But he’s been my only roommate for so long that he’s sort of developed a personality in my head. My friends are so used to it I don’t even notice when people assume he’s a person.”

Kai grinned, and goddamn, that grin was sexy. “Stanley the plant? I like it. I mean... it’s a step further than being a cat lady, but it’s cute anyway.”

“Fuck you,” I muttered, fighting a smile and forcing my mood to sour. “Not that it matters now, anyway. Janet and Sarah will assume I’m dead, and Stanley will shrivel up with no one to water him. So, thanks for fucking my whole damn life up, Kai.”

He frowned at me. Then gave a small shrug. “If you’re waiting on an apology from me, Danielle, you’ll be waiting a long damn time.” He got to his feet, peering down at me with a hard, unreadable expression. “Then again, that’s the one thing you have plenty of now.”

He walked away, leaving me *once again* sitting on the end of a jetty and reeling from his whiplash mood changes. If that motherfucker was playing me... he was a damn expert.

# LEON

**T**he absolute last place on earth that I wanted to be right now was exactly where I was. Fucking Shadow Grove *again*. About as far away from Italy—where my best intel told me Danny was being held—as I could be. But when the email came through, I couldn’t ignore it. My loyalty would always be to the Guild above all else.

So here I was, back in motherfucking Shadow Grove of all goddamn places, tracking down an idiot who thought he’d switch from Guild service to nice, cushy gang life. Lazy shit. He might have been left right the hell alone if he hadn’t started running his mouth about Guild business.

Unluckily for him, the powers that ran Shadow Grove had no desire to land in a war with the Guild, and now here I was.

“You again?” the pint-sized firecracker of a girl sitting at the counter blurted out as I walked through the door to the cake and coffee shop.

I quirked a brow. “And you. Shouldn’t you be at school?”

She shot me back a sassy grin. “It’s Saturday, dipshit. You here to kill someone? Nadia says you’re part of the Guild.”

I gave a quick blink of surprise, then shifted my gaze to the old woman behind the coffee machine. She’d been listening in and just gave me a shrug. “I’ve got a good memory for faces.” She turned back to the little girl. “I told you to keep your trap shut though, little madam. Just wait until I tell—”

“Nadia!” the girl exclaimed. “You wouldn’t. Come on, I just asked a question. Look, see?” She turned back to me and mimed zipping her lips. “See? No more questions. This never happened. But also, is that a Nighthawk

VIP?”

I snorted a laugh and pulled my jacket over my concealed weapon. Fucking kid was a weapons recognition prodigy. If I hadn't promised to steer clear of Hades's family, I'd be recommending the little spitfire for recruitment.

“I just came to get a coffee,” I told the old woman, Nadia. She was the owner and a grandmother, but also so much more. “Takeaway, please.”

She gave me a flash of a smile and a nod. “Coming right up.”

I'd come to her shop for two reasons: one, because it was the best coffee in this curious, crime-run city; and two, because she was located within the territory run by a local gang, the Shadow Grove Reapers. It was within that gang that my chatty former mercenary was hiding.

“Why always this town?” I muttered to myself, eyeing the patrons and pointedly ignoring the red-haired girl staring at me. As much as it suited my curiosity to visit Shadow Grove and check in on how Layla's little brother was doing, it was better for everyone involved if I *weren't* here.

Just the fact that I'd had to take this job at all, that there was no one closer... it was concerning. There had been a lot of deaths on the Guild payroll recently, some of which I'd admit I played a part in. But not *all* of them. Lots had been written up as jobs gone wrong, just like Danny's death would have been if she hadn't escaped in Prague.

“There you are,” Nadia said, placing a large takeaway cup in front of me. “On the house.”

I dipped my head in a nod. The version of Leon I played here was a nice but shy hacker, so I should really keep that act running. “Thanks. Nice to see you again.”

The old woman gave me a shrewd look. “The man you're here for is usually over at Scruffy Murphy's at this time of day. You'll find him playing pool.”

Nadia—the owner of the coffee shop—was grandmother to one of Shadow Grove's criminal kingpins. Her shop was deep within Reaper territory, and there were three good reasons I always popped by for a visit while in town. Her coffee was excellent, her cakes were to die for, and she *knew everything*.

Offering her a bland smile, I sipped my coffee. “I'm just here for the coffee. But thanks.” Unable to help myself, I shot a glare at the kid, who was *still* staring. “Stay out of trouble, Diana.”

It really was good coffee, and I wasn't much for vices. Scruffy Murphy's, Nadia said. That wasn't too far from the coffee shop, so I took my time drinking my coffee while I walked over there.

I finished it just before I reached the gang-owned bar, and dropped the cup into the trash before letting myself in. The sign said they wouldn't be open for another couple of hours, but I never was one for following *rules*.

"Hey, you!" a bearded man in leathers called out. "We're closed."

I ignored him, heading straight for the back of the bar where several pool tables were set up. A dozen rough-looking gangsters stood around, either drinking beer or playing pool. My target stuck out like a sore thumb. He was too clean-cut for this crowd.

"Hey, I'm talking to you!" the bearded guy bellowed, grabbing my shoulder.

"Whoa, Cuddles, back down," another man exclaimed, standing up from the table he'd been drinking at. "Seriously, big guy, step away."

I eyed the huge, meaty hand on my shoulder, then glanced up at *Cuddles*. "You heard the boss," I murmured in a low, dangerous voice. "Back off."

The big guy glanced from me to his boss—a barely twenty-year-old man named Roach—then peeled his paw off my shoulder.

"My apologies," Cuddles rumbled.

I ignored him, turning back to meet my target's frightened eyes. "Brenton. Let's go."

The defected mercenary shook his head. He looked to be maybe a year or two younger than me. Maybe Danny's age, twenty-eight. Shit, why was I thinking about her in the middle of a kill order? She was quite literally haunting my every waking moment—and sleeping, for that matter.

Christ... the things I would do to her when I had her back... I regretted very little in my life. Very little. But the opportunity that I missed that night in New York when I'd kissed her to mess up her lipstick and she'd melted into my arms... Fuck me, I regretted not taking that further.

"You can't do this," Brenton was saying, shaking his head and giving the Reaper boss an imploring look. Oh yeah, I was working. Head in the game, Leon.

"Sorry, bro," Roach said with a shrug, "Shadow Grove doesn't mess around in Guild business. You sealed your own fate when you started flapping your trap. Go quietly with this scary bastard, or we will forcefully remove you from the premises."

Brenton blanched but still looked undecided. With a sigh, I pulled out my gun. “I don’t have time for games, Brenton. You knew this was coming, now let’s go before I have to make a mess in this lovely establishment.”

The tattooed gangsters all snickered, and Brenton looked like he was seriously considering running. He thought better of it, though, and sighed heavily.

“Fine,” he groaned. “But I need to tell you some shit before you kill me.”

They always did.

“Let’s go,” I snapped, turning my back on him and striding out of the grimy bar. He would follow, because he knew it was pointless to try and run. He was also smart enough not to try and shoot me while my back was turned, because right now he’d be hoping for a merciful death. Pissing me off wasn’t the way to achieve that.

Once we got out into the street, I arched a brow at him in question. “I parked a couple of blocks away; you have until we get there to tell me all the things you need to say. Then you’re dead. Understood?”

Brenton winced but nodded quickly. It was so much easier when they were cooperative. More often than not, they just wanted to tell me about where they’d hidden their fortune—because it was unusual for a merc to die a pauper with what our contracts charge—or messages for loved ones that never get passed on. My job was to clean up the Guild’s loose ends, not deliver messages from the dead.

Except for Layla. Her last wishes had taken me several years to complete, but I owed her that and so much more. She’d been too fucking good for the Guild.

“Okay,” Brenton started, licking his lips nervously as we walked down the street together, “okay, so I know you’re just an executioner, but have you ever heard about Project Remus?”

*Just an executioner.* Much like how Danny thought I was *just a hacker*. Ugh, sorry, *tech bunny*. Fucking Danny, inside my head again.

“Enlighten me,” I drawled, despite the fact that I probably knew more about that fucking experiment than most Guild employees. Well. Those who were still alive, anyway.

Brenton nodded, like he wasn’t surprised to be explaining it. “Okay, you’re gonna want to slow down a bit, there’s a whole lot of info to get out.”

I shrugged. “Talk fast.”

“Fine. I’ll stick to the important parts. Project Remus was an IVF



program that the Guild started running after World War Two because so many mercs had died in combat and they needed to swell the ranks again. They didn't want to be recruiting subpar skilled people from the general population, though, so some sick fuck in the Circle came up with the idea of breeding genetically selected mercenaries. Super soldiers, kind of. Like there was no supernatural sci-fi shit going on, no one was born with wings or whatever, but they did this whole breeding program by using genetic material—you know, sperm and eggs—from their elite level mercs. The guys who, well, you know. Like you. Lifers."

He was rambling, but so far his intel was correct. No wonder I'd been assigned to kill him.

"That was nearly eighty years ago, Brenton, better get to the point quick." Because now I was interested in what he thought he knew.

"Shut up and listen," he snapped. "So they started this whole program with making babies to be raised in Guild-owned orphanages where they would be raised to be like... child assassins. Kids in these orphanages were being sent out on kill missions as young as seven or eight, because literally *no one* would suspect a child, right?"

I gave a vexed sigh. "And?" He hadn't really hit on the worst of it. The part that saw the project get shut down. The reason that I'd spent the last several years cleaning up the last remaining project leaders and burning their research. Layla's uncle had been one of them, right here in Shadow Grove.

This fucking city was a constant source of fascination and frustration.

"That doesn't make you sick?" Brenton exclaimed. "At least the rest of us make a *choice* to join the Guild. These kids were literally bred into servitude."

"Tell me this," I said, pausing on the sidewalk, since we were almost back to my car already. "How do *you* know all about Project Remus?"

Brenton scowled. "My best friend was one of their test tube babies. He never knew it, none of them do. But some girl tracked him down a few years ago and told him to watch his back. Apparently, someone was killing anyone involved in Project Remus, wiping all the information off the face of the earth. Something seriously fucked up must have been going on if the Guild was killing off anyone who knew anything."

I bit the inside of my cheek. Fucking Layla. I *knew* she'd been up to no good before her death.

"Where's your friend now?" I asked.

“Dead,” Brenton replied. “A week after he tells me all this shit, he gets sent on a run-of-the-mill protection detail job. Gets shot point blank by the man he was meant to protect. The paperwork says it was a case of mistaken identity, but... I think the Guild had him killed.”

Probably. But that sort of *accidental* death wasn't an executioner like me. That was something less sanctioned. Something a whole lot like Danny's ambush in Prague.

Fuck.

“Do you know anything else about this Project Remus?” I asked casually, starting to walk again.

Brenton nodded. “Yes. I do. Maybe I could be useful if you keep me alive.” I just gave him a flat stare, and he grimaced. “Worth a try. Look, I ran from the Guild because I knew I'd be next. It seems like anyone who knows anything about these genetic freak babies is being killed, and I thought maybe I could start over.”

“You thought wrong.” Low level mercs could occasionally cut a deal to “retire” from the Guild, but those were special circumstances and usually benefitted the Guild in some way. The rest of us? Whether we knew it or not, we were in it for life.

“The girl who contacted my buddy? She said there was more to it all, that Project Remus was hiding a huge secret.” Brenton looked at me in panic as I turned into the alleyway where I'd parked my car. “Something that the Circle never wants anyone to find out... or something like that.”

As far as I knew, only two members of the Circle knew about the existence of Project Remus, and one of them was missing... presumed dead. It wasn't a joint project, that was for sure.

“And did this girl tell anyone her big secret?” I asked him carefully. I thought I knew everything Layla had uncovered on Project Remus... but maybe not. Maybe she'd hid something, even from me.

Brenton nodded. “My friend said she was worried someone was going to kill her, so she hid the data.”

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. With an annoyed click of my tongue, I gestured for him to continue. “*Where* Brenton? Where did she hide it?”

He spread his hands wide. “I have no clue. We were super drunk when he told me this whole story, and if he gave me an exact location... I dunno. I must have missed it.”

*For fuck's sake.* I pinched the bridge of my nose and silently counted to five.

“What *do* you remember?” I pushed. “Anything at all?”

He wrinkled his nose, thinking. “Uh, just that she was leaving on a job that day and that she planned to leave the data somewhere the Guild would never find it. Or... something like that. Sorry, man, like I said, we were pretty wasted, and he told me like four years after he spoke to her. I only remembered most of the details after my friend got killed, and it all clicked together in my head.”

Super reliable information, right there.

“Do you know *anything* else about this girl or her secret data? Is she still alive?” Maybe it wasn't Layla that he was talking about.

Brenton shrugged. “No idea, sorry. That's everything I know. Or everything I could remember.” He met my eyes, and his gaze was resigned. “You're still going to kill me, aren't you?”

I popped the trunk of my hired car open, revealing the plastic lining. “Of course.”

Pulling my Nighthawk from my holster, I shot Brenton three times in the chest, giving him a small push so as he fell, he crumpled into the plastic-lined trunk. Then I tucked his legs in, shot him between the eyes, and slammed the lid closed.

I hadn't even needed to use a silencer, because this was Shadow Grove and the cops were little more than uniform-wearing Timberwolves.

As I drove out of town, heading toward a local pig farm to dispose of Brenton's body, I pondered what he'd told me. If it was Layla... where the fuck would she have hidden intel? The fact he said it was somewhere the Guild would never find it told me it was somewhere well out of my reach. And that thought gutted me like a knife. I'd loved her, with almost my whole heart.

Apparently, it hadn't gone unnoticed by her, that I loved my job more.

## DANNY

**A**lmost a week passed in my new situation as Kai's pet. I didn't see Sam again, or Jae and Caryl for that matter. Eli was around but rarely spoke more than a few words to me, and I spent most of my time hanging out with Mo. I was right in thinking she would make my time on the island less boring because she went out of her way to show me around. Along the way, though, she was firm in pointing out how very isolated we were. That there was only one way off the island, and that was from their personal airstrip on the far side of the island. The plane was missing when she showed me, which meant their missing team members must be off-island.

As much as I hated to admit it even to myself, I enjoyed spending time with Mo. She was more like me than Jude, and I grew to see why she was Kai's second in charge. For all her kindness, she had her own demons. She was brittle and quick to anger, and from what I could tell, a *highly* trained soldier. Just a lonely one with a lot of demons haunting her mind. Which was what made her such an easy target for someone like me.

Of course, Kai was *constantly* around. So much that I started to think of him as my extra shadow. It genuinely seemed like he was trying to earn my "forgiveness" for everything he'd done. Which was amusing, because I held no grudges. If anything, I thought he'd gone far too easy on me... after all, I *was* undercover, and I was winning this game.

But fake-Danny would still be furious. Any normal person would, I think. She'd be bitter and confused but probably growing resigned to her fate by now. Maybe she'd be trying to make the best of her situation, which was the

angle I played in fostering my friendship with Moana.

Trauma responses were so unpredictable, though. Even when it seemed like a victim had taken huge strides toward healing and acceptance, a small thing could send them spiraling. Or a big thing, like seeing their personal torturer for the first time.

So when Cyryl entered the kitchen at dinner time that night, I deliberately gasped and dropped the plate I'd been carrying. It smashed, drawing everyone's attention. Jae had followed Cyryl into the kitchen, and he quickly clapped a hand over his friend's shoulder.

"Too soon, bro. I warned you." Jae's voice was low and regretful. The look he gave me was full of apology, too.

"Out!" Kai barked, pointing at Cyryl.

I shook my head quickly, making my hands tremble. "N-no, no. This is your home, I'm just a prisoner. I'll go." Not waiting to hear protests or conversations, I raced out of the kitchen and retreated up to Kai's bedroom. My bedroom too, now.

He'd slept beside me every night, claiming that the bed was plenty big enough and he wasn't gentleman enough to sleep on the hard ground. But he had yet to make a move, and I was getting all kinds of impatient. This, Cyryl's appearance, was the perfect push to heighten some emotions.

Kai had a protective alpha male streak a *mile* wide. Since he'd clearly decided I was, in fact, innocent of everything he'd accused me of, he'd taken it on himself to become my guard dog. The bust up with Sam that first morning had just been the tip of the iceberg, and this would hopefully give him a shove in the right direction.

I slammed the doors behind me and went straight over to the oversized armchair near the floor-to-ceiling windows. Kai had retracted the roller blinds that first morning—they were a security feature when they had high winds forecast—and I'd grown fond of sitting in the armchair with a coffee in the morning. His view was to die for, looking out across what I was guessing to be the Adriatic Sea. Or maybe the Ligurian. The climate seemed to place us somewhere in the Mediterranean at any rate.

Curling up in a ball, I rested my chin on my knees and took a few calming breaths to get into the right headspace for what was coming. I needed to lure Kai in, snare him... then get the fuck off this island. I had a feeling today was the day, for all of it.

And I needed not to let my personal feelings get in the way. Kai was just

a job. Mo would simply be collateral damage. I was a professional, and I wouldn't weaken now.

The door opened right on cue a couple of minutes later, and Kai closed it softly behind himself. He crossed over to me and crouched down beside the armchair.

For a moment, neither one of us spoke. Then he reached out and brushed a finger across my dry cheek. "You're not crying," he observed in a quiet voice.

I gave a long sigh. "I think I've run out of tears. All I feel now... is hollow."

His brow dipped slightly, then he gave a silent nod. He stood up and went to the bathroom. A moment later, the sound of the tub being filled reached my ears, and the sweet, fruity smell of his personal bath products filled the air. I quietly *loved* those products and had already printed the labels in my mind so I could buy more of them when I got home.

Kai took a couple more minutes inside the bathroom, letting the tub fill, then returned to me while drying bubbles off his bronze, tattooed forearms. "I need some time to work out what to do with my team," he told me with a tight expression. "It'd be better, I think, if you weren't involved. Will you stay up here? Just take a bath, relax."

He genuinely seemed to be giving me the choice. If I wanted to push the issue and insist on being a part of his discussion with his team, then he'd let me. It was... oddly endearing. Guilt was such a powerful motivator in falling for a ruse.

"Sure," I muttered, turning my gaze back out the window. Night had fallen already, but the faint glow of a city in the distance held me captivated. What city could it be? Judging by the packaging in the kitchen, I had to assume it was somewhere in Italy.

Kai stayed a moment longer, staring at me with a worried frown. Then he sighed and left the room. He didn't lock the door—he never did anymore—but I had no intention of making a break for it. Even if the team was all back, along with their jet, I couldn't escape that way. As much as I now regretted it, I'd only ever learned to fly helicopters, not jets.

I'd have to rectify that gap in my skill set when I got off this island and back to my real life.

Alone again, I stood from the comfy chair and stretched out my back on the way to the bathroom. I paused briefly as I stepped inside, finding Kai had

lit the room with a dozen lightly-scented pillar candles. The bubbles overflowed the tub, just the way I liked them, and a strange sensation warmed my chest. The whole scene was... *romantic*.

Shaking my head at that wildly out of place idea, I turned on the sound system to drown out my own turbulent thoughts. Kai would probably be ages, so I may as well relax and prepare myself for my escape. If all went to plan, I'd be gone from the island by dawn.

I stripped out of my clothes—Kai had somehow filled a whole dresser with brand new outfits in my size that first day—and stepped into the near scalding bath water. Perfect.

I'd taken the dressings off my foot a few days ago, and it was so nice not to need to stick my foot out of the water while I bathed. Mo had been diligent about making me apply arnica cream twice a day, too, and my bruises had all faded to just a faint brownish yellow.

At some stage while I was in the tub, I dozed off. When I woke up, the water was significantly cooler and my fingertips were wrinkled. Yuck. I hated that feeling.

Groaning, I pulled the plug and climbed out of the water with loose, relaxed muscles throughout my whole body. I dried off and wrapped my towel around my body before wandering out to the bedroom in search of pajamas.

I made it halfway across to my dresser before I spotted Kai sitting in my armchair, dead still and looking at something in his hand.

"Holy shit, you scared me," I admitted with a small laugh. "I didn't hear you come in."

He looked up at me with an odd expression, then the corners of his full lips curled up. "Because you were asleep. I was just debating whether I should wake you up so you didn't drown."

I gave a short laugh. "It'd take more than a bath to get the better of me."

I was still waking up, and he genuinely had surprised me. So I wasn't fully in character. Parts of *me* were bleeding through, but if I were totally honest, it'd been happening more often than I'd have liked. How the hell Sabine had survived almost three *years* in disguise, I had no idea. But I suddenly had newfound respect for my friend.

Kai didn't seem to notice, though. Or if he did, he didn't show it. Instead, he just peered up at me in the low light from our bedside lamps and gave a lopsided smile. "I'd believe that."

There was still something *off* about him, though. Something pensive. Maybe to do with his *chat* with his team?

“Are you... okay?” I asked with a frown, folding my arms over my towel. “You seem like you have something on your mind.”

He grunted a soft sound of agreement, looking back down at whatever was in his hand. Then he sighed and met my gaze once more. “I sent the team away. It was ignorant of me, not to think about what seeing Cyryl or Sam might do to you. You’ve seemed so well adjusted this week, it was easy to forget what we’ve put you through, but that’s no excuse. I’m...” He trailed off, his gaze flicking to the ceiling for a moment as he seemed to roll the apology over on his tongue. Then he shrugged. “I should have been more sensitive to your trauma, Danielle. Trauma that we caused.”

I frowned down at him, biting the inside of my cheek. He sounded so sincere, it was really messing with my head. “So... you’re sending them away?”

Kai gave a small nod. “They’re already gone. All of them, including Eli and Mo. I thought... I dunno. I thought maybe you could benefit from some breathing room while you get used to living here.”

Well, that was an unexpected but happy turn of events. It also gave me a solid reason not to kill Moana when I made my escape, and I was shockingly pleased for that.

His gaze dropped to his hands again, and curiosity got the better of me. “What’s that?”

When he looked back up at me, it was from beneath his inky lashes. “Something for you,” he said after a beat. When he didn’t elaborate, I stepped closer to get a better look as he opened his palm out.

Surprise jolted through me. “My grandmother’s watch.”

He silently held it out, and I took it like it was the precious family heirloom I’d told him it was. Part of me wondered if he’d found the dormant tracker buried within the mechanics of it... but I didn’t get the impression he was building up to killing me. If anything, he was apologizing. In his own stubborn, arrogant way.

I slid it over my wrist, clicking the band shut, then hugging it to my chest. Swallowing hard, I summoned up a bit of moisture for my eyes. Just enough to look misty as I whispered, “Thank you. This means so much to me.”

“I’ve taken your freedom and your future,” Kai said softly, “the least I can do is return your watch.”



Oof, that hit me right in the feels. I actually felt *bad* for him and for how guilt-ridden he sounded. It was an insanely sweet gesture, even if the bottom line message was still that I was his prisoner for life. Why the fuck did that still turn me on, though? If I wasn't playing a part, I'd say I'd developed a touch of Stockholm syndrome myself.

So I did the only thing I could think of. To protect *myself* from emotions that were beginning to feel far too real. I lashed out.

“So, how's this supposed to play out? You give me my own watch back, then I'm supposed to be so overcome with thanks that I immediately drop to my knees and suck your dick?” I twisted my expression to show anger and resentment. Disgust.

Kai jerked slightly, taken back. “What? No, I—”

“That's why you sent your team away, isn't it? So you didn't need to worry about them interrupting or coming to my rescue if I screamed? Or were you worried I would prefer to share a bed with one of them instead?” I took a large step backward, away from him as my chin tilted up defiantly.

I watched the switch flick in his eyes, and he drew a deep breath as he rose from the armchair.

“I fully understand the fact that I've trapped you here,” he said in a low, dangerous voice, taking a step forward as I took a step back. “Believe me, I *know*. But you need to get one *very* important thing clear in your head, Danielle.”

He stepped closer, and the backs of my legs touched the bed. He had me trapped, and a ripple of excitement tingled across my skin. “Oh, yeah?” I tipped my chin up higher so I could hold his gaze. “What's that?”

His eyes burned with anger and arrogance and arousal while his hand came up to rest on my throat. It wasn't a violent gesture, but it was possessive and threatening. My pussy heated just at the implication.

“You need to know, no matter *how* long it takes for you to forgive my actions, *you're mine*.” His words vibrated with a power that made my skin prickle and my pulse race. “If I ever catch another man laying his hands on you, I'll kill them without question. Are we clear?”

I swallowed hard. “Even your own team? They're your family, aren't they?”

His lips tilted in a smile, but it was a cruel one. “Especially them. They know better.”

Oh man. I was so *screwed*, because he was speaking directly to my pitch

black soul. My real, authentic self, not this bullshit act I'd been putting on from the moment I'd met him.

Words failed me as he held me captive in those bottomless, dark eyes with his huge hand wrapped so softly around my throat.

Several long, tense moments passed with neither one of us blinking. Then his thumb stroked across my collarbone, and his gaze dipped to my towel.

"I should leave you to get dressed," he murmured but made no move to step away or let me go.

"Why bother?" I replied in a slightly breathless voice. "If you own me, why not just take what you so clearly want?"

He flinched slightly, his brow furrowing. "Excuse me?"

I wet my lips, excitement and anticipation filling my body like a drug. "You heard." I tugged my towel loose and dropped it to the floor. "You don't even have to pull a gun on me this time." Which was a shame... but I couldn't see a repeat of *that* encounter happening again here.

His breath caught, and he took a long look at my naked body right there in front of him. It was hardly a secret how attracted to me he still was. It was evident in the lingering looks throughout the day, and in the way he groaned my name while showering—when he thought I was downstairs.

So I was surprised when he gave a small shake of his head. "That wouldn't end well," he told me in that quietly threatening voice. "Not like this."

He took a step away, releasing my throat, and I instantly missed his touch.

"I figured as much," I scoffed, scooping my towel up and draping it over my body with false modesty. "You can't get it up unless your victim is scared and crying, huh? You need me to fear for my life before you can come?"

He'd been turning away when I said that, and he froze mid-motion with his shoulders bunching beneath his black T-shirt.

"What did you fucking say?"

My heart raced faster, and my breathing sped up. "You *heard* me. You've got a rape fetish. Or a fear one. The fact that I'm suddenly *willing* just turned you right the fuck off, didn't it?"

Boom. He closed that gap between us in the blink of an eye, his hand returning to my throat with a much more forceful grip. His other hand went to the small of my back, pulling me so close my arm ended up trapped between us.

“Does that *feel* like I’m turned off?” he growled, pulling me tighter into his body.

I gasped slightly, stretching my neck out and taking note of every finger press on my skin. It was the sort of memory I’d store in my *forever* file. “So, what are you waiting for?” I challenged, wetting my lips again as he bent his head down to mine. “Do I need to cry and beg for mercy?”

He didn’t kiss me, though. Not yet. He stopped just short, close enough to feel his breath on my skin. “You have *no idea* what you’re talking about, Danielle.”

Determination filled my chest. “Enlighten me. If I’m doomed to remain on this island indefinitely, then it’d damn well better come with benefits. If you won’t provide, I’m sure I can convince Jae to lend a hand. Or mouth.”

His grip intensified, and a small moan escaped my throat. Kai heard it, and his eyes widened with a flicker of disbelief. Then one side of his mouth curled into a smirk.

“You let Jae so much as *look* at you naked, I’ll slit his throat while you watch.”

Oh shit, I was officially *fucked*. And in way over my head. Maybe this would be the mission that broke me, because suddenly I wasn’t in such a hurry to leave the island.

I studied his eyes from just inches away, letting the heady lust shine through. I *wanted* him to fuck me, and it was about time he recognized it.

“Danielle...” he uttered my assumed name like a final warning, like it was my last chance to pump the brakes.

“Malachi...” I purred back, stomping both feet on the gas.

## DANNY

Some kind of fucked up moral code had held him back from me all week. Despite me sleeping in his bed every night, despite waking up each morning with his hand inside his boxers, and his furious shower wanking... he hadn't tried to fuck me. He hadn't even touched me in a sexual way since that night in Shadow Grove.

All of that had been tossed out the window, now. I closed the gap between us, sealing my lips to his before he could second-guess himself. Before his backward sense of decency could mess with what promised to be a hell of a night between us.

He barely hesitated a split second before kissing me back, though. His soft lips engulfed mine, taking control and forcing his kiss deeper until we were breathing the same air. His kisses were utter perfection, my new obsession. His mouth was simply made for kissing, and I was already desperate to feel those lush lips all over my body. To feel him kissing my cunt this deeply.

The towel disappeared from between us, and I slid my hands under his T-shirt, pushing it up with a clear demand. *Get naked, Kai.*

He stopped kissing me only momentarily while he whipped his shirt over his head, but it was long enough for a rush of pure desperation to sweep through me. How the hell was I going to be able to kill him when this was over?

Swallowing those dark thoughts down, I tugged on the waistband of his sweatpants. There was one sure fire way to clear my head, and he'd been

teasing me with it for weeks now. Fuck the foreplay, I needed to get to the main event.

Kai gave a low groan, then shoved me backward. I let out a surprised squeak as my back hit the mattress, but he was right there a second later. His hands pinned my wrists to the bed as he kicked his pants away, and I grinned into his kisses. His tongue explored the shape of my lips, and I arched my back, spreading my legs to pull him in closer.

His hot, hard erection ground against my core, and I moaned, looping my legs over his hips.

Kai gave a low chuckle, his grip shifting to hold both my wrists in one hand. “So fucking impatient, Danielle.” His other hand drifted down to cup one of my breasts, his fingers tugging on my nipple. “What if I wanted to take my time?”

I gasped as he rolled my nipple between his forefinger and thumb, my body surging into his touch. “You don’t,” I replied, breathless and aching with need. My hips shifted and I pressed my heels into the backs of his thighs, lining us up perfectly. “Kai... please...”

I rocked beneath him, desperate for more as his tip notched at my throbbing core. His eyes widened, his pupils dilating as he stared down at me in surprise. Over what, I had no clue. I also didn’t fucking care, I just wanted him to—

“Oh, fuck,” I exclaimed as he pushed inside with a hard thrust. I was wet enough that there was little resistance, but Kai was a big boy; it still hurt a bit. In the best kind of way.

“Holy shit,” he breathed, his lush lips parted with a distinct edge of disbelief as he stared into my eyes. “Danielle—”

“More,” I demanded, because he wasn’t fully in yet. “Kai, please just fuck me.”

A flicker of indecision passed across his face, but it was gone in an instant, replaced by determination and lust. Desperation and *obsession*. This thing between us was way past casual attraction or infatuation, and far less healthy. It was toxic and powerful, soul damaging.

He shifted his position, then grunted as he slammed home. I cried out at the forceful move, then gripped him tighter with my legs, writhing beneath his weight as I silently pleaded for him to keep going. To fuck me so hard I saw stars and forgot my name.

He got the message and pulled out just far enough to thrust back in with

enough force to make me gasp.

“Look at me,” he growled when my eyelids fluttered closed.

I groaned, rocking into his thrusts and only opening my eyes less than halfway. Which was apparently not good enough. Kai’s grip on my wrists pressed harder, and his free hand moved back to my throat. I loved it there. His right hand was my new favorite necklace.

“I said *look* at me,” he ordered, slightly breathless as he fucked into my tight cunt. My legs were wrapped so hard around his hips that we were basically one body, but as he tightened his grip on my throat, I obeyed the command.

Opening my eyes wide, I locked my gaze on his. Like this, there was no hiding from him. No hiding from *myself*. I was vulnerable and raw, unable to avoid the intense, terrifying look in his dark eyes. But in return, he didn’t shy away from my searching gaze. He held my eyes steady as his hips pumped faster between my legs, building my orgasm with shocking ease.

“Shit,” he breathed sometime later when I was a panting, moaning mess, desperate for the intense release his cock was promising. “Danielle, what have you done to me?”

There was a strangely tortured tone to his voice, but I was too far gone to examine it further. I just arched my back, pushing against him with each thrust of his huge dick and crying out when he got the perfect angle to strike my G-spot.

My orgasm started to crash over me, all my muscles locking up as he continued to hit that precise spot deep inside my pussy. His hand on my throat tightened, his fingertips pressing in exactly the right place to make my vision black and my airways to constrict, catapulting my orgasm into a whole new level.

My screams were soundless as I shattered into a million pieces, my legs holding Kai tight against me, and my cunt spasming around his thickness.

He didn’t follow me, though, despite his teeth sinking into his lower lip as he watched me with hungry eyes. He released my throat as my climax faded, and I inhaled deeply, gasping and moaning. Before I could even fully catch my breath, his mouth was on mine, kissing me, tasting me, *claiming* me in a way that shook me right to my core. For a moment, he remained still inside me, just kissing me like we’d pressed pause on the world.

Then I rocked my hips, and he gave a low groan against my lips.

“Will you come again, Danielle?” he asked in a husky voice, kissing my

throat where he'd probably bruised my pale skin. "You fall apart like a dream."

"Yes," I responded without even a second's hesitation. "Fuck yes."

His lips curved into a smile against my skin. "Good." He sat up and reached for a pillow. "Lift your hips, beautiful."

Only good things came from those words. I eagerly did as I was told, never losing connection with him as he shifted our position. He looped his arms under my legs to plant my feet wide on the bed with my knees bent, then rocked his hips to check the new angle.

When I gasped and whispered a curse, he shot me a smug grin. "Perfect." His voice was pure lust, and he grabbed onto my hips with a confident grip. "This time, I wanna hear you screaming my name, beautiful. I wanna hear you *howl*. Understood?"

I nodded quickly. "Understood," I panted back, wetting my lips when he started to move once more.

He held my hips firm, pulling me into his every thrust and grinding his pelvis against me in a way that teased my clit with perfection. All the while, his blazing eyes stared down at me, drinking in every inch of my body and barely blinking. Like he was afraid that it was a dream he might wake from if he closed his eyes.

I lowered my arms from where he'd been pinning them above my head, cupping my own breasts as he fucked me breathless. His eyes widened, his teeth dragging over his full lower lip as I played with my nipples and moaned my pleasure. It wasn't going to be hard to come again like this. He fucking knew what he was doing with this angle, that was for sure.

"Christ, Danny," he groaned, his pace increasing in intensity, "you're too good to be true."

My chest tightened. He very rarely called me Danny, and it reminded me who I was. What I was really doing here. I hated that. I wanted to be his *Danielle*. I wanted to just stay in this bed with him forever...

Suddenly I knew I should have listened to Leon when he tried to warn me away from this mission. Not because I was likely to lose my life, but because I was losing my heart.

That sobering thought brought Leon's face back into my head, and the perverted part of my mind imagined him listening in on me and Kai again. The way he had back in Shadow Grove. How he'd listened to me coming, how he'd heard me moaning and choking as Kai fucked my mouth. Had he

been jerking himself off at the same time? I think he had.

Out of nowhere, my orgasm crested, and I screamed in ecstasy. But it wasn't enough for Kai; he wanted me to scream out *his name*. Something he reminded me of as he brought a hand between my legs and found my clit. Before that climax could end, he was rubbing my swollen, aching clit with determination, shoving me headlong into another.

This time I did what he wanted, crying out his name, over and over, begging him to fuck me harder, faster, make me come again.

His breath came in rough, harsh gasps as he gave me what I pleaded for, the slick sound of his flesh slapping against mine harmonizing with our groans until he cursed and gritted his teeth.

"Kai," I moaned. "Are you gonna pull out?" It was curiosity more than anything. We hadn't had the *safe sex* talk, but that was nothing new in my line of work.

His nostrils flared as he looked down at me with overflowing desire. "Fuck no," he snapped, then his hips jerked and he came hard, filling me up, then thrusting his cock a half dozen more times like he wanted to make sure he had coated every last inch of my pussy in his release.

It was hot as hell but terrified me for what must be going through his head in that moment. As far as he knew, I wasn't on birth control. Was he seriously thinking about knocking up his prisoner?

Panting and gasping, he pulled out slowly. His wide eyes watched his slick, cum-soaked dick slide free of my cunt, then he stared down at me with confused fascination.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask what the hell was going through his head, but he just leaned down and kissed me with a gentle reverence that made my chest tight and my stomach flutter.

Silently, he climbed off the bed, then picked up my jelly-like body in his arms.

"Kai, where—"

He cut off my question with another kiss, and I cupped his face to kiss him back as he carried me into the bathroom. He put me down as he reached into the shower to crank the water, then while he waited for it to warm up, he pinned me to the cool tile wall and returned his mouth to mine. We were like magnets, unable to separate our lips for longer than a few seconds. Even when the steam started to fill the bathroom, Kai just picked me up, never breaking our kiss as he carried me into the shower with him.



Neither one of us spoke while we showered, instead spending the time exploring each other's body under the guise of getting clean. Then when Kai's dick hardened again, I gripped his neck and boosted myself up, wrapping my legs around his waist. He braced my back against the shower wall and slid home inside my pussy with the most blissful sigh I'd ever fucking heard.

Reality could wait just a little bit longer. I would finish my contract eventually, but for now, I just needed to give in to my body's base desires. Because *Kai*...

## DANNY

**A**lthough it had been part of my plan, I didn't end up leaving the island that night. My opportunity was right there in front of me when Kai passed out some time before dawn. He was exhausted, our shower having turned into a whole series of more sessions back in bed. I could have left, but I didn't. I just relaxed into his strong hold and slept instead.

When I woke a few hours later, he remained in a deep sleep. But I still didn't leave. I got up and showered—because he'd come inside me more times than I could even count—then wrapped in a silk bathrobe to make a coffee in the kitchen.

I carried my coffee back to our bedroom and curled up in my armchair by the window, letting my gaze float over the peaceful view of the ocean as I sipped my drink.

I should leave. My chance might never be so good again. I had my watch back, I could activate the tracker at any moment, and Carlos would be here in a matter of hours. But I just sat there and stared out the window, holding my coffee close and feeling totally calm.

Only one thought kept disrupting the peace in my mind, though, and surprisingly it wasn't guilt about leaving Stanley or Jude. It was Leon.

I somehow knew he would still be looking for me. He had that obsessive personality that wouldn't let him give up without confirmed proof of death. While I was still alive, he was likely to keep searching... and I *liked* that. He'd haunted my dreams all too often in the nights since Prague, and even as

blissful as my night with Kai had been, I still couldn't get Leon out of my head.

The rustle of bed sheets behind me pulled my thoughts back to the present, and I tipped my head back to receive Kai's kiss as he bent down to me. He was naked, his thick cock hard, and I couldn't help myself. When he straightened up, I handed him my coffee. Then without a word, I wrapped my fingers around his erection and brought him to my mouth.

He gave a small grunt of surprise, then placed a hand on the back of my head in encouragement as I sucked him deeper. My tongue explored his length, tasting myself all over his flesh, and I found it only turned me on more. I gripped his hips, my fingernails digging into his muscular flesh as I bobbed my head, sucking him faster.

He groaned, whispering curses and pushing in deeper as I swallowed. His fingers tangled in my hair, holding my head tight as his hips took over the rhythm, fucking my throat hard and fast, then spilling his load onto my tongue.

I swallowed, licking my lips as I sat back, and Kai peered down at me with a dazed smile on his face.

"Good morning to you, too," he murmured, then took a gulp of my coffee. "Here." He handed my mug back to me, then sank to his knees on the carpet in front of my chair.

I willingly shifted my position as he tugged on my ankle, resting my heels on the edge of the chair and sinking back into the cushions. The first swipe of his tongue down my pussy had me sighing with bliss, and I placed my coffee down on the side table to save from dropping it.

Kai took his time, using his whole mouth on my cunt to torture me, tease me, make me beg. Then when my legs were shaking and my hands holding his head against me so hard he might suffocate, he finally pumped his fingers into me. He fucked me with his hand while his mouth sucked my clit, causing me to detonate and come with toe-curling intensity.

"Good morning indeed," I agreed, panting as Kai sat back on his heels with a smirk.

He licked his lips, and it was the sexiest fucking thing... "I'm going to shower," he told me in a husky voice. "Then I want to do this all again on the kitchen counter."

I gave a short, slightly unhinged laugh. "Sounds like my kind of breakfast."

He leaned in to kiss me, then swaggered that muscular butt of his into the bathroom. I rearranged my robe, then picked up my coffee once more. I needed to catch my fucking breath, and I needed to work out what *the fuck I was doing*.

When Kai emerged from the bathroom just a few minutes later, his towel draped around his hips and water still clinging to his chest, I needed to swallow the rapidly building dread in my throat. This was all fake. It could never last forever, and I wasn't sure that I would want it to. I loved my job, I could never be happy staying here... no matter how good the sex was.

"We should probably talk about a few things," I murmured, rising up from my chair.

His brow dipped slightly, but he nodded. "Let's talk over breakfast. I don't know about you, but I'm starving." He rubbed his washboard abs and grimaced, and I bit my lip to keep from drooling.

Because I didn't trust my voice, I just nodded and led the way out of our bedroom. No one else was home, no one else was even on the island, so there was really no need for clothes at all. I was just keeping my robe on to try and give myself a hot second to collect my thoughts.

Not that it mattered. Before we even opened the fridge to make breakfast, Kai had me laid out on the island with his cock buried inside my pussy again.

When we finished, he took his sweet time pulling out. Then he used his hand to push me for a second orgasm, his thumb rubbing my clit and his fingers thick inside my cunt. The way he watched his own motions, I got a strong feeling he was deliberately pushing his cum back up into me, not letting it drip out without his cock holding it in.

I let him do it, relishing the sexual release and the heady rush of endorphins. But when my head cleared, I gave him a hard look.

"*That* is what we need to talk about, Kai."

He helped me down off the counter, giving me an innocent expression. "What is?"

I rolled my eyes as he went to the fridge to pull out ingredients for breakfast. "Um, gee, I hate to be the grown-up in this situation seeing as I'm *pretty sure* you're older than me—"

"I'm thirty-two," he told me, quirking a brow over his shoulder.

"Case in point," I replied, folding my arms and propping my hip against the counter. "I'm twenty-eight."

"I know," he replied. "So what?"

I gave an irritated sigh. “Safe sex, Malachi. We’ve just fucked *how* many times and haven’t even discussed the noticeable lack of condoms. Not to mention the number of diseases you might have. I saw the way you were at the Halloween party. Don’t even try to pretend you didn’t fuck that girl you left with.”

He placed the breakfast foods down on the counter and casually started preparing them. “I didn’t,” he replied after a beat.

I scoffed, and he leveled me with a hard look.

“I didn’t *fuck* her.”

“Okay, so she sucked your dick. But I bet there have been countless others. Mo even said you were on a mission to fuck anything that moved that night.” I was starting to sound jealous, and that wasn’t my intention. But this was the normal, expected conversation for new bed partners to have, and I couldn’t risk making him suspicious now. Not when we’d come so far.

He didn’t respond immediately, just calmly chopped vegetables for an omelet. Then he glanced up at me with a small smile on his lips. “I don’t have any STDs if *that* is your only concern. I get tested pretty fucking regularly and had my last check after Halloween.”

I arched a brow. Well, that was reassuring. Usually I took a whole course of antibiotics as soon as I completed a honey trap, *just in case*. It wasn’t medically advised and was probably terrible for my body, but it was better than finding out I’d caught some gross STD and having to take time off work.

“What about you?” he shot back at me, cracking eggs into a bowl.

I bit my lip, sliding back into character as sweet bank teller Danny. “I don’t sleep around,” I lied. The bottom line was the same, though. I was clean of anything nasty and infectious.

Kai shrugged. “Good. See how easy that was? Now, what do you want in your omelet? Just ham and cheese?”

I nodded at his offer, debating whether to call him on the *other* elephant in the room. The one that was now dripping down my thigh. But then... something stopped me. It seemed almost pointless, knowing I would need to leave sooner rather than later and that it would become irrelevant.

Fake-Danny would be freaking out over the prospect of being pregnant while captive to this man. Wouldn’t she?

“You seem like there is something else on your mind, Danielle,” Kai commented, abandoning his food prep and coming around the island to where I stood. “Is there something *else* we need to discuss?” His hand slipped under

my robe, like he'd just read my mind. His fingers collected up the slickness on my thigh and pushed it back inside my pussy, making me moan.

It was my own fucking fault. Kai had overheard me talking to Mo earlier in the week, spinning my bullshit backstory of growing up an only child with deceased parents. I'd told her wistfully I would have loved a family of my own one day, that I adored children. But I'd also said that I had a loving childhood with my very caring grandmother. None of which was true.

"Hmm?" Kai prompted, stroking his fingers inside me a couple more times, then pulling them out and sucking them clean.

I shook my head, swallowing hard. "Nope, nothing else."

His smile was pure victory. Undiluted possession and *ownership*. Dude was even more fucked up than me, and that was saying a lot.

"Good." With that settled in his mind, he went back to cooking us breakfast like we were a happy, normal couple. Like one of us wasn't holding the other captive and trying to lock her down with pregnancy. Like one of us wasn't secretly working up to kill the other in his sleep.

Beauty and the Beast had nothing on us.

## DANNY

Six days. It took me six days to convince myself to leave, and every day that passed, every kiss from Kai's lips and caress of his hands, it became harder to go. Eventually, as I lay beside him in bed, freshly fucked and relaxed as hell, I knew. I either left now or I'd never find the strength.

Swallowing past the dread and guilt, I quietly climbed out of bed. Kai was asleep already, his breathing deep and relaxed, and he didn't even stir as I got dressed into one of the swimsuits he'd bought for me. The house had its own pool, but the weather had been too cold to use it.

I didn't give myself a chance to think too hard about what I was doing. I just quietly used a hair clip to pick the lock on Kai's bedside table drawer where I'd seen him drop his phone earlier in the evening. He never made a big deal of it, maintaining the illusion that I somehow wasn't a captive. But he'd been careful to always lock his phone out of reach.

His phone was there, as expected, but so was his gun. The thick-barreled Smith & Wesson model 617 K-22 that he'd fucked me with that first night. I stared at the weapon a long time, knowing I needed to use it. I needed to tie up my loose ends.

Glancing over at Kai's sleeping form, I took the phone and tucked it into the high neckline of my swimsuit. Then I closed the drawer and locked it again.

I quickly left the room, hurrying through the house to the kitchen and telling myself that I was just being practical. My contract had specified that

the data needed to be verified *before* Ares the god of war was executed. So, really, I was just following instructions. What the client wanted may not even be on his phone, so they'd need to try again.

In the kitchen, I worked quickly, using the tip of a knife to pry open the back of Kai's phone to remove the GPS tracker that I'd guessed would be in there. I'd watched him put his password in a few days ago, so it was no effort at all to disable the normal tracking software and activate flight mode so he couldn't follow me.

That done, I dropped the phone into a ziplock bag, then used duct tape to strap it to my waist. It was a waterproof device, but it was better not to take too many risks with its functionality.

I hesitated only once as I opened the door to the outside. Just a brief flicker of doubt and regret, but I pushed it aside and stepped out into the night. I'd delayed too long already, and Kai's team wouldn't be gone forever. If I stayed any longer, I'd be signing my own death certificate.

So I ignored the dark feelings swirling within me and quickly made my way down the path to the jetty. By the time I hit the boards of the dock, I was running. I didn't slow down as I reached the end, diving straight off and into the ice-cold water.

The sharp temperature change made my lungs tighten, but it was nothing I hadn't experienced before. I pushed through, swimming beneath the surface for a long time before coming up for air. When I glanced back to the island, everything was still dark. Kai was probably still asleep, blissed out on all the sex we'd been having. I wondered when he would notice I was gone. What he would do.

But that was no longer my concern. If he were lucky, he'd never see me again.

I tried to pretend my heart wasn't aching with every inch of space I put between me and the island, because I was a professional. This was just part of the job. It was simply unlucky that I'd enjoyed this assignment so much, but they always had to end. This time next week, I'd be on a new contract, and Kai would be little more than a distant memory.

Kai's island was far enough from the mainland that I could understand why he might think there was no escaping without their jet. But he underestimated how strong of a swimmer I was. It took me a *long* time, no question about that—mainly due to the month I'd taken away from proper exercise—but eventually the shore came closer. The glow of a city grew



brighter every time I popped up for air.

When I finally touched the sand of a beach, I gave a small gasp of relief. My muscles screamed at me, and my lungs burned from the exertion, and I took a few moments to just lie on the shore, catching my breath.

Then I pushed to my feet and whispered a quick goodbye to fake-Danny. I was leaving her behind on Kai's island, where she was happy. I didn't need to walk far to reach a tourist area, and it was a simple enough task to steal some dry clothes, shoes, and money. From there, I worked out that I was in Croatia. Pula, to be precise. So I'd been close in my guess of our location.

I used some of my stolen cash to pay for a ride into the port, then boarded the next ferry about to depart. I used my native French accent as I purchased a coffee and sandwich from the onboard cafe, and hid my distinctive hair by braiding it and tucking it under the hood of my sweatshirt.

Only when the city of Pula shrank away in the distance did I activate the tracker in my watch. Carlos could find me in Venice, because that's where my ferry was taking me.

A small voice in the back of my mind accused me of protecting Kai by not activating the tracker right there on his island. And it was right. Part of me knew I'd made the wrong choice in leaving him alive, but I also knew it was the only way I could walk away.

I finished my food, tossing the trash away, then headed out to the bow of the ferry where there was outdoor seating. It was close to midnight, and there weren't many people on board. I took a seat right at the front and tucked my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. Kai's phone was still taped to my waist, and I'd keep it there until I was safely picked up.

As hard as I tried to remind myself that I was doing the right thing, that I was simply following through on my contract, I couldn't seem to fully shake the heavy mantle of regret. But why? Kai was no innocent victim. He'd sexually assaulted me, abducted me, had me *tortured*, and then announced he was keeping me imprisoned for life. And to add insult to injury, he then tried to impregnate me the *first* time we fucked. He was far from a damn Boy Scout.

But maybe that was what I liked about him. He had done bad shit, to me and to countless others, and he owned it. He knew he was in the wrong, but he did it anyway. That spoke to some deep psychological damage that only someone as damaged as me could recognize. He didn't know it, because he'd never met the real me, but we were a lot alike.

Cool sea air whipped up, chilling my face, and I startled when I realized I'd been crying. When the *fuck* had that happened?

I didn't cry. Not authentically. The only tears I ever shed were simply to solidify a cover identity, to manipulate, and to deceive. It shocked me enough that I pulled my mind out of the self-pity party it'd been throwing, and I stood up to lean on the railing.

The ferry crossing was four hours—I'd struck it lucky to catch this one, as it only sailed once a week—so by the time I reached Venice, Carlos should already be there.

Then, when I was safely out of Kai's reach, I would need to work out what the fuck to do next. I would turn his phone over to complete at least *half* of my contract. But then? Then I needed to face the very real problem of someone in the Guild, probably someone in the Circle, trying to kill me.

I spent the rest of the ferry ride thinking over my options as I paced the deck. When I stepped off the boat in the Port of Venice—evading security as I had no ID—I had made up my mind. I needed to get out of the Guild. At least for now. Just until I could do my own investigation into who wanted me dead. And *why*. I'd never broken any of the Guild's rules... not that I was aware of, anyway. So what motivation was there to have me killed? And off the books too. These setups were intended to look like accidents. Like so many other Guild mercenaries had died when they got in over their heads.

It would have been stupid to just sit at the port, waiting indefinitely for my emergency contact to collect me. If Carlos had been anywhere outside of Europe, it could be a *long* wait. I was banking on Jude having called him to alert him that I was missing, though. She would have worked out he held my worst case scenario alarm. So rather than sit around, I headed into Venice itself. My tracker was still active in the watch, Carlos could find me within the streets of the floating city without any trouble.

As I wandered through the narrow streets of Venice, I became conscious of someone following me. Despite being pre-dawn, this was Venice, so there were still people out on the streets. It made it hard to work out if I was just being paranoid, but nope, I was definitely being tailed.

Not that it mattered. If it was a pickpocket, they wouldn't find much on me. If it was someone wanting to harm me, I would quickly show them the error of their choice.

But the longer I walked, the more familiar my tail felt. By the time I stopped in the middle of a bridge, I was resigned to the confrontation that was

brewing.

“You put a tracking device in my watch, didn’t you?” I asked in a calm voice, turning to face Kai as he approached. My chest tightened at the sight of him, guilt and regret filling my whole body at the hard look on his face. “You never trusted me.”

“I could say the same about you,” he replied, stopping a dozen feet away. I glanced to the far side of the bridge and spotted Eli lurking near the end, his gun barely even concealed.

Sadness swept through me, and I gave a bitter laugh. “Just walk away, Kai,” I implored him. “I could have killed you while you slept, but I didn’t. Don’t force my hand now.”

His lips twisted in a brittle, self-deprecating smile. “You had me fooled, Danielle. You really did. Is that even your name?”

I shook my head. “No. Danny is, though.” Why I felt the need to tell him that, I had no clue.

A silence passed between us, and the pain in his eyes made me feel sick to my stomach. Carlos had better get here soon, because if Kai pushed me...

“You know, this is called the Bridge of Sighs,” he said in a flat voice. The same voice he’d used when he told me the legend of Pania. “Because only the guilty would pass over it, on their way to incarceration. That seems strangely appropriate right now, doesn’t it?”

I gave a low chuckle. “Cute, but you’re wrong. This is the Bridge of Canonica. *That*”—I pointed to the stone enclosed bridge further down the canal—“is the Bridge of Sighs, connecting the Doge’s palace to the prison. Sometimes, Malachi, a story is just a story.”

He said nothing in response to that, and I knew he—like me—was thinking of his warning about never letting Pania leave the land. Ultimately, though, it was never his choice to *let* me leave. It had only ever been my choice to stay as long as I did.

“How much of it all was real?” he asked softly, swiping a hand over the back of his neck. “How much of that girl I fell for was *you*?”

I swallowed past the unfamiliar emotions thickening my throat and shook my head. “Very little.” But I wasn’t the only one who’d been playing a game. The fact that he’d given me a tracker, then sent his team away... it was a test. One that I’d failed, but the fact remained that I hadn’t been the only one pretending. “What about you? Was anything real for you?”

I don’t know why I even felt the need to ask. I didn’t want to hear the

answer.

But his reply was hoarse and sincere, the agony creasing his brow impossible to fake. “Too much,” he admitted, sounding like I was physically tearing his heart out. “I fell for you.”

*Fuck.*

“No, Kai, you didn’t. You fell for a girl who never existed. Danielle was a fabrication, designed to manipulate you.” I arched a brow, hardening my face to hide my own hurt. “And it worked.”

Further down the canal, I spotted a speedboat coming toward us, much faster than boats should be traveling on this stretch at dawn. On the back of it, I thought I glimpsed a Colombian flag, and I took the gamble that this was my rescue vehicle.

Glancing from Eli on one side of the bridge, to Kai on the other, I climbed onto the stone railing.

“Danielle, *don’t!*” Kai barked, taking a hesitant step forward. Eli pulled his gun, aiming at me, but Kai put up a hand to stop him shooting.

I gave Kai a sad smile. “Like I said, Danielle doesn’t exist. Say goodbye to Mo for her, though.”

Before I could change my mind, I jumped. I timed it *just* right, landing in the back of the speedboat as it slowed ever so slightly under the bridge I’d been standing on.

“Fuck,” I hissed when my ankle rolled slightly on landing, but the driver caught me in a strong grip even as he slowed the boat further.

I glanced up, expecting to find Carlos sweeping to my rescue, but gasped when I found Leon looking down at me instead.

“Leon!” I exclaimed. “What are you—”

My question was cut off as his lips crashed into mine. The arm around my back hugged me tight, and he kissed me like a long lost lover... all while still keeping our boat from crashing.

I gave a small sound of shock but melted into his kiss all the same as he guided our boat under the famous Bridge of Sighs and toward the lagoon. As incredible as it felt to be in Leon’s arms—*kissing* him after dreaming about it so fucking often—I couldn’t help peeking a look in the direction we’d come.

Kai stood on the bridge, staring after us, and a chill raced down my spine. His words from a week ago echoed through my mind, his vehemence as he’d promised to kill anyone who touched me... because I was *his*.

Did that still apply, now that he knew I’d played him?

Leon banked the boat sharply after we passed under the Bridge of Paglia, turning us into the lagoon and out of sight from Kai and Eli.

“Hey, babe,” he said in a husky voice as I gripped his waist for balance.

I grinned, unable to help myself. He wasn’t wearing his glasses, and there seemed to be something drastically *different* about him. But maybe that was just the situation we were in.

“Leon Marx, you’re just full of surprises,” I said with a laugh, releasing his waist and sitting down in the passenger seat of the speedboat. I lifted my shirt up and ripped the tape off that was holding Kai’s stolen phone, showing it to him.

Leon tossed his head back with a bark of laughter. “Damn, DeLuna. I underestimated you.”

“People often do,” I replied as my mood plummeted and my gaze drifted behind us. As elated as I should have been to finally be free again, a horrible hole had opened inside me. One that I was willing to bet only one person could ever fill.

I should have listened to Leon from the beginning. I never should have taken this job. Now, I had to live with the consequences.

# KAI

She'd been utterly fearless as she jumped from the bridge and into the boat below. Even though it felt like she was ripping my heart out and taking it with her, I couldn't let Eli shoot. Not even when she kissed that slick piece of shit driving her getaway boat, I just... couldn't do it. So I stood there on the bridge, watching him pull *my* woman close and kiss her like she was his everything.

Bile rose in my throat as I thought about his hands on her porcelain pale skin, his mouth on her perfect breasts and—

“Her tracker is still active, boss,” Eli told me in a low voice, jerking my thoughts back to the present.

She was gone.

I shook my head slowly. “It won't be for long, now that she knows it's there.”

Eli frowned at me. “You let her go. That wasn't the plan.”

Agony rippled through my chest, making me grimace as we left the bridge. “I know,” I said. None of it was *the plan*. Not really. I had told the truth when I said I'd fallen for her. What had started as a double cross, as a ruse to play her and manipulate her, had ended in me totally losing my head. Somewhere along the way, I'd truly believed her.

“She's good,” I said after a long silence between us.

Eli gave a heavy sigh, checking his phone. “One of the best.”

I nodded. “I'd believe that.” She hadn't broken for even a moment. Not a single clue had peeked through her disguise, so much so that I'd let my guard

down. I hadn't *let her go*, she'd bettered me.

"No, I mean she's *actually* one of the best," he told me with a wince. "Sam just finished hacking into CIA's classified list of known mercenaries. The ones who they leave active because they're too dangerous to go after."

"And the ones they occasionally use on unsanctioned jobs. Yeah, I'm familiar." My stomach clenched with dread. "She's on their list?"

Eli showed me his phone, Danielle's perfect, angelic face in the picture along with a case file number. "Danny DeLuna. Boss, she's with the Mercenary Guild."

Rage and disbelief swept through me so hard I staggered and needed to catch myself on the wall we were walking past. "Guild," I gritted out from behind clenched teeth. "That explains so much." Like how she could fake her feelings so convincingly. I'd foolishly convinced myself that no one was that good, but if anyone could pull it off... it *was* the Guild.

"What about the guy?" I gritted out, letting my anger burn away the hurt. "Who is he?"

Eli consulted his phone again. The team hadn't been gone from the island to give Danny *space* to get used to her captivity. They'd been working on this hack. My job had simply been to kill time, to keep her distracted until we could access the secure servers and uncover some concrete evidence on her. It was just my fucking luck that she escaped mere hours before Sam got into the files.

"No idea, yet. He's not on the CIA's list, which just means he's probably not at her level."

I grunted, shaking my head. "Bullshit. You saw that shit in Brussels. He's no amateur. Tell Sam to get working on the Guild database. I want to know *everything* about Danny DeLuna and her *partner*. Fucking *everything*."

My job had only been to distract her. To possibly win her trust and persuade her to confide in me. But somewhere along the way, I'd lost sight of the objective. Now I was too far gone.

Eli grunted as he checked his phone again. "You were right. Her tracker just went dead. Did she get away with anything we need to be worried about?"

I shook my head. "No, she took a ghost phone. It's full of encrypted nonsense. The Guild will spend weeks decoding it, only to find *nothing*." Would she come back to me when they didn't find anything? Would she try again? *Fuck, I hope so.*

My friend gave a small sigh of relief. “Good. You don’t think they’ve worked out what we’re doing, do you?”

“No,” I replied confidently. “No way. This is unrelated to that, I’m sure of it. Or we’d all be dead already.”

Eli nodded his agreement with that. There was *no way* a Guild agent had been sent after us for anything less than a massacre if they knew what we’d been working on. Nah, this was an info grab above anything else... or that’s what my gut told me.

“What do you think they were looking for? What have we got that the Guild wants so badly that they’d send one of their top-tier mercs?”

“That’s what I want to know too,” I admitted. I had my own personal hatred of the Guild, but that was nothing new. Plenty of people had *hired* the Guild to try and kill me, but that had all stopped a few years ago when none of their people completed the job. Something about this felt more personal, like the Guild themselves were behind the contract.

Or maybe that was me being arrogant. “It was probably someone like Sandeep Dara again. I heard he recently came into a windfall; he might have decided to throw some money at eliminating the competition.”

Eli frowned, unconvinced. “So why didn’t she kill you?”

Why indeed? My gun was in the drawer beside the ghost phone, and it was loaded. She could have shot me while I slept, but she hadn’t.

“Have you spoken to Mo?” I asked instead of answering Eli’s question.

He shook his head. “No offense to Moana, but I think I’ll steer clear of her for a few days. She’s not only going to be pissed off at Danny...”

I winced, but he was right. I hadn’t filled my sister in on the ruse I’d been running on my beautiful prisoner. I hadn’t spoken about it with anyone except Eli on the flight home from Brussels. Mo would be furious with me for letting her develop real feelings for Danny.

Well, she wasn’t the only one.

“Just get the boys working on the Guild database,” I snapped. “I want to know *everything* there is to know about Danny DeLuna. Including where I can find her again.”

Eli gave a short nod. “Yes, boss.” He paused, then gave me a long look. “What will you do when you find her?”

The answer should have been an easy one. It should have been that I’d kill her, just like I should have done the moment I spotted her comms device. But I knew I couldn’t. I *wouldn’t*. Because I still wanted to capture her and



keep her all for myself.

That bastard who'd kissed her would die, slowly and painfully. Then I'd take my siren and *never let her go*.

## DANNY

Leon and I barely had a moment to talk as we fled Venice. We took the speedboat all the way across to Marco Polo International, then jumped straight into a waiting car marked with Carlos's altered Colombian flag. The driver just gave us a nod and bypassed all of the airport security to take us through to where Carlos's private jet waited on the tarmac.

My friend was standing at the bottom of the stairs, checking his watch and looking irritated, but when our car pulled up, he grinned.

"Dan, you made it!" he exclaimed as I leapt from the car and into his arms. "I knew you'd be fine. You're like a cat with nine-hundred lives."

"Thank *fuck* you still had my GPS receiver," I replied, laughing as I hugged him tight. "I missed you, shit head. It's been ages!"

"You could have just called, this was a bit extreme." He smacked a kiss on my cheek, then shot Leon a hard look behind me. "Where's Juan?"

"Didn't make it," Leon snapped back, sounding seven levels of pissed off. "Are we going?"

Carlos just looped his arm around my shoulders, guiding me up the stairs of his plane and leaving Leon to follow behind. Something gave me the feeling these two were having a bit of a pissing contest.

Whatever it was about, I doubted it was any of my business. I just needed to shower and eat and *sleep*. My whole body ached from the hours-long swim from Kai's island, and my soul ached from the conversation on the bridge.

He'd been playing me all along.

For all the countless men and women I'd honey trapped over my years in

the Guild, I'd never had it happen to me. I'd never had someone turn the tables and play my own game against me.

It didn't feel good.

Regardless of that pained look on his face back on the bridge, the fact remained that he'd set me up. He'd laid a trap, because he had never believed fake-Danny. And stupid fucking me, I'd thought he was *really* falling in love with her.

"Hey, are you okay?" Carlos asked as I buckled my seat belt silently.

I nodded, then shifted my gaze out the window. From the corner of my eye, I caught Leon throwing a slightly harder than necessary elbow at Carlos, edging him out of the way to take the seat beside me.

Leon didn't ask me if I was okay. He understood where my head was at better than Carlos ever could. Instead, he just sat silently with me as the plane started to taxi down the runway.

When we took off, ascending into the air above Venice, a handful of rogue tears slipped from my eyes. Leon reached over and gently brushed them away, then took my hand in his, linking our fingers together in a firm gesture of support. He knew. I'd lost myself on this mission, and it was going to take a hot second to slip back into *me*.

Sometime later, he raised the armrest between us and pulled me close. I rested my head on his shoulder, breathing in his smoky gunpowder scent as I closed my eyes. Hopefully, when I opened them again, the whole month on Kai's island would be in its proper place within my mind. A distant, detached memory and nothing more.

As I had in that New York hotel, I slept far longer than I ever normally would. When I woke, I felt refreshed, though. Clear and calm.

"Where are we?" I asked with a yawn, uncurling from Leon's side where I'd been snoozing. He'd reclined both our chairs so it was almost a bed, and it'd been shockingly comfortable for a plane.

"Somewhere over Canada," Leon replied, his own voice thick with sleep and his eyes bleary. "We refueled in Toronto, but you slept right through it."

Holy crap, I really needed that sleep. I ran a hand over my messy, tangled hair and cringed. It was crusty from the salt water and the previously tight braid was coming loose. "Where's Carlos?"

Leon gave me a long look, then shrugged one shoulder. "Left him in Toronto. He had to get back to Bogota for something business related."

That sounded like Carlos. I wasn't even surprised to hear he'd gone

already, but I'd have to call him when we landed to say thank you for the assist. Sooner or later, my credit would run out with him, and I'd need to start paying for this kind of help.

I stood up and stretched the kinks out of my body with a long groan. Leon watched me with an unreadable expression, then swiped a hand over his face.

"We have another hour before we land," he told me, glancing at his watch. "One of Carlos's guys delivered some clean clothes when we refueled." He nodded to the seat where my friend had been sitting earlier, and I saw a small pile of clothing store bags.

"Thank fuck for that," I said with a sigh. "Back in a minute." I grabbed the whole stack of bags, then headed to the back of the plane where I knew there was a shower inside the bathroom. Carlos had all but given me this plane for my own personal use a few years ago, despite pretending it was just a loan.

Untangling my hair from the braid took longer than my whole shower, and I wrinkled my nose at the generic scent of the shampoo and conditioner in the aircraft bathroom. Once I was clean, though, I felt a million times more like myself.

I combed out my wet hair carefully, then blasted it with the hairdryer to take the moisture out. If we were over Canada, it was going to be cold when we landed—a guess that was supported by the warm clothing Carlos had ordered for me.

When I was dressed in new jeans and a tight long-sleeve black sweater, I returned to my seat beside Leon.

His eyes traveled up and down my body, then the corner of his mouth tipped up. "You look more like you."

I smiled back at him. "I *feel* more like me. So, where are we going?"

"Uh, my place. I hope that's okay. I figured you could probably do with a break before the Guild finds out you're back in action... and no one will find you at my house." He sounded uncertain, apologetic, but his gaze was steady and confident.

Suddenly I remembered the way he'd kissed me on the speedboat, and the heady rush of desire flared to life within me. Had it just been a heat of the moment thing that I'd taken too far? Or did Leon feel that electric connection between us, too?

"I'm flattered," I murmured, trying not to let my thoughts show on my face. "A mercenary's home is their safe place."

He gave a short laugh. “Is that your way of saying you wouldn’t invite me to *your* home? Where is it again? Norway?”

*Close.* “Not a chance in hell, Marx,” I replied with a chuckle. “You’re cute, but you’re also a mercenary. And I’m getting the impression you aren’t *always* a tech bunny.” I narrowed my eyes at him in suspicion.

His answering smile was pure innocence. “You think I’m cute. Not the best adjective, but I’ll take it for now.”

He was teasing, and it was exactly the lighthearted mood I needed. “My bad,” I apologized, smiling. “But bunnies *are* cute.”

The heated look that flashed across his face was far from fuzzy and adorable, and I got a strong suspicion he was thinking all kinds of dirty, delicious things about me. But it was gone in an instant, and he gave me a relaxed shrug. “I guess I’ll need to work on that.”

I grimaced. “Speaking of work... have you looked into that phone?”

Leon shook his head. “Not yet. I’d rather wait until I have my equipment and a signal jammer in place to prevent Ares tracking us down.”

It made sense. “I think you were right about it being a suicide mission... which either means the client was so desperate they paid the Guild a higher fee to assign a valuable asset”—I wasn’t being arrogant, I just knew my worth to the mercenary guild—“or whoever sent the contract is the one who wants me dead.”

Leon’s expression shifted dark. “There was no client.”

My brows shot up, and I blinked at him. “What?”

“There was no client on this. I took a little look into the back-end data for your contract and, like I said, there was no client. This was assigned directly by a member of the Circle as a personal job.”

I hissed a breath between my teeth. “Great. More dead ends.” Because no one knew who was in the Circle. Not even the other members of the Circle. Their anonymity was a whole fucking thing, the sort of secrecy that belonged in stories and Bond films.

Jude had uncovered a ton of old documents in the archives—a perk of her job—that detailed the creation of the Guild over a millennium ago. Back then, it had been a group of friends who worked together to found a mercenary guild. An unbiased organization that held no political or kingdom alliances. But somewhere along the line, one of the Circle had tried to kill another, and they’d gone into the shadows.

“Not necessarily,” Leon murmured.

I gave him a sharp look, and his answering smirk was pure mischief.

“We can discuss this further at my home,” he told me. “Where I can be sure we’re safe.”

*Well, shit, way to build the suspense, Leon.*

I glared at him, but I also agreed with the caution. If he was about to confess that he knew the identity of any of the Circle, then it was definitely not something we could risk *anyone* overhearing. And I wasn’t dumb enough to think Carlos didn’t have security devices installed in his plane.

I huffed a frustrated sigh. “Fine.”

“Good,” he agreed. “I had something else I needed to take care of before we landed, anyway.”

I was sulking a little bit, now that he’d dangled a carrot of highly confidential information in front of my face. So I wasn’t fully paying attention, my mind still whirling over how he might have uncovered the Circle. And what *else* he’d found in the process. Leon was so much more dangerous than I’d first realized.

“What’s that?” I asked, still distracted.

He flashed me a dazzling smile, reaching out to cup the back of my head with one hand. “This.”

He leaned in close, pressing his lips to mine and making me gasp slightly with surprise. Apparently, I *hadn’t* read too much into that boat kiss after all. He pulled back slightly, meeting my shocked eyes with a clear question in his.

I answered him with my lips. *This* kiss held no miscommunication. It wasn’t to solidify a ruse or to sabotage a mission or under the rush of adrenaline. It was straight up attraction between two people. A culmination of dozens of daydreams and fantasies, and it didn’t disappoint in the least.

Leon kissed me carefully, taking his time like he was committing every press of our lips, every stroke of our tongues into his memory. It was the sort of kiss that made my pulse race and my stomach flutter, and if the plane hadn’t chimed to tell us we were landing, I probably would have ended up in his lap.

We both glanced up at the landing light, and I reluctantly sat back to fasten my seat belt. Leon took my hand in his, linking our fingers together, then bringing my hand to his lips. He kissed my knuckles with adoration, and I released a shaking breath.

Suddenly I couldn’t fucking *wait* to get to his home and continue *this*

conversation in greater detail.

And yet, a nasty little part of my mind prickled at me, comparing Leon's kisses to Kai's. I shoved it firmly aside, because there was no comparison. Kai had *used* me. None of it was real. Leon had nothing to gain by kissing me. As far as I knew, anyway.

## DANNY

Leon's home was totally unlike anything I would have pictured for him. The security was impeccable—better than my own—and we needed to access via snowmobile as his house was located way off-grid in the middle of nowhere Alaska. The house itself, though, was an architectural masterpiece. It had to have cost him a *fortune* to have built, probably needing to helicopter all of the materials and equipment in for the build.

The complex layers of identification and locks were in line with his superior tech skills. Once we finally got inside, I pulled off my gloves and blew on my freezing fingers. I'd been pasted to his back for the better part of an hour since we left our car on the main road, but I was still chilled right to the bone.

"Sorry," Leon said with a lopsided smile. "I like the snow." He picked up a remote off the coffee table and pressed a button to ignite the huge gas fireplace. It was set into a double-height stone-clad chimney flanked by huge panes of glass.

"It warms up pretty fast," he added when I said nothing. "I should have turned the heating on before we arrived, but I hardly notice the cold anymore."

I gave him a grin of disbelief, shaking my head. "Can I look around?"

He nodded. "Make yourself at home, DeLuna. I'm going to get this into my office, then I'll figure out dinner." He held up Kai's phone, and I bit the inside of my cheek to stifle the overwhelming emotions it threatened to bring



back up in me.

Distracting myself, I looked around the enormous living room we were standing in. “You cook, too? I’m starting to think you might be too good to be true, Marx.”

His answering chuckle was edged with something sexy and dangerous. “Oh, you have no idea. I’ll be right back.”

As curious as I was, it felt too rude to go aimlessly snooping around his house, even if he had given me permission. So I just went over to the huge windows and peered out at the view. The house was positioned at the edge of a frozen lake, surrounded by soaring mountain peaks, everything coated in white. It was serene but totally at odds with where I’d expected Leon to live.

I must have zoned out as I stared at the snowy view, because his soft touch on my lower back made me flinch as I slammed back inside my own head.

“Hey,” Leon said softly, sweeping my braided hair over my shoulder, “I know how it is, coming back from a job that went longer than expected. It takes time.”

He placed a gentle, tingling kiss on the side of my neck, and I sighed, leaning back into his chest.

“It never usually gets to me,” I admitted in a whisper.

His arms looped around my waist, and for a long time, we just stood there in total silence while snow began falling outside. His embrace was so comforting, so soothing, it was addictive.

After a while, I sighed heavily and turned around to face him. He wasn’t as tall as Kai, but seeing as I was only five foot three, he still towered over me, so I needed to tip my head back to meet his emerald green gaze.

“Thank you,” I said with sincerity. “I knew you hadn’t given up on finding me. I heard about the attack in Brussels. That was you, wasn’t it?”

Leon just gave me a bemused smile. “I don’t know if you’ve ever met *you*, Danny DeLuna, but you’re not the kind of woman who can easily be forgotten or left behind.” He kissed my lips softly, then released me from his embrace. “I’ll get dinner started, then I’ll show you the house.”

He was striding back to the kitchen as he spoke, and I pressed a hand to my chest to try and quell the sharp pain his words had given me. Would Kai forget me now that I was gone? Or would he make good on his promise?

If he did... then Leon was in danger.

Swallowing hard, I controlled my breath and forced myself into calm. No

one would find us here; that was the whole reason Leon had brought me into his sanctuary.

“...might take me a few days. If that’s okay with you?” he was saying as I joined him in the kitchen.

I licked my lips, trying to remember what he’d just said. Something about decoding Kai’s phone, so we could submit our contract as partially complete. I nodded quickly. “Totally fine,” I assured him. “You won’t even know I’m here. Do you have a gym at all? I haven’t been able to properly work out since I was taken, and I feel *weak*.”

Leon shot me a crooked smile. “I doubt you’ve been weak in your entire life, DeLuna. But I’ve got you covered. I’ll show you after we eat.” He opened the fridge to reveal it fully stocked with fresh food.

“I have a couple of people who I trust to run errands,” he explained when I gave the food a curious look. “Otherwise we’d be surviving on freeze-dried foods.”

“People you trust?” I questioned, and he barked a laugh, reading between the lines.

“Okay, not *trust*. But people I pay well enough that they’re as close to trustworthy as possible.” He slapped down a thick piece of meat onto the counter. “Steaks work for you?”

I nodded enthusiastically and sat down to watch him cook. It was harder than I wanted to admit, not to be reminded of Kai making me breakfast every morning. Goddamn, he really had messed me up. Now all I was left with was the sick feeling of being utterly duped. Every memory of Kai was now tainted with the knowledge that he was acting just as much as I was.

There was nothing to be gained by dwelling on the past, though. There was no changing what was done, so I needed to let it go and move the fuck on. Maybe I needed to take another contract sooner rather than later.

“About the Circle,” I prompted while he cooked. “You seem like you know more than you’re supposed to know.”

He flashed me a sly smile. “You could say that.”

I nodded slowly. “Do you know who in the Circle sent me on this suicide mission?”

He hesitated a moment before replying. “I think so, yes.”

“Will you tell me who it is?”

He shook his head. “I can’t. For your safety *and* mine. But... I can look into it more. I have a starting point, which is more than nothing.”

Bitter frustration welled up inside me, but I couldn't argue with him, even if I wanted to. Knowing the identity of any of the Circle would be painting a massive target on my face, and while I wasn't afraid of much, I *was* afraid of the Circle. They weren't just mercenaries, they were psychopaths. Cold-blooded murderers and master manipulators, every single one of them.

If Leon thought he could dig into one of them without getting us killed, I was going to trust him. After all, he hadn't given up on getting me back from Kai, so I had confidence he wouldn't give up on this, either. It was that inexplicable chemistry between us—he *totally* felt it too.

Leon was a good cook, and the steaks were delicious. After we ate, he gave me a brief tour of the house. Mostly showing me where his gym was located, and offering me free access to his bedroom. It wasn't a sexual offer, he was quick to point out that he'd be spending most of his time in his office working on the phone decoding. Among other things. I got the impression he was working multiple contracts at once, but that wasn't uncommon for tech bunnies.

He seemed anxious to get to work, so I mentioned needing to call Jude to let her know I was safe. His brow dipped slightly at that, but he gave a short nod and passed me his phone to use before disappearing into his tech-filled office.

Leon wasn't exaggerating about spending all his time working. For several days, I fell asleep before *and* woke up after him. The only telltale signs that he'd slept at all was the messed up blankets on the other side of the bed and the light smell of his hair product on the pillow. I spent my time in the gym, strengthening my body *and* my mind, and I'd taken to bringing him meals and coffee in his office while he remained buried in what seemed like every piece of technology yet to hit the market.

To my surprise, he didn't push the attraction between us. He was affectionate, without doubt. His desire was clear in the lingering looks and stolen kisses when I delivered him coffee. But that was as far as it went.

I got the feeling he was deliberately giving me space. Room to breathe and time to heal from the damage Kai had done on my heart.

It was a sweet thing, and I appreciated it more than I could ever vocalize. Leon *got* me on a level no one else ever had. He knew how I was raised, how I was trained, and how I operated. Because he wasn't so different, himself.

Five days after we'd arrived at Leon's sanctuary, he came out of his office early with a furious expression on his face, making me pause on my

way to the gym.

“What’s happened?” I asked, worried.

He strode over to me with purpose, pinning me to the wall and slamming his lips to mine with desperate need. I happily kissed him back, melting my body into his touch and moaning when his hands gripped my ass. He lifted me, boosting me up to his height and deepening our kiss as my legs gripped his waist.

His dick hardened against my core, grinding into me in a way that made me shiver with heady desire. But instead of taking it further and fucking me right then and there, he backed off. His kisses eased in intensity, and he gave a frustrated sigh.

“The phone was a decoy,” he told me in a husky voice. “It was a load of encrypted bullshit. Recipes, mostly. But nothing, I mean *nothing*, useful.”

Words failed me as I stiffened in shock.

Leon kissed my lips again quickly, then let me down to my feet. “It gets worse. Someone is trying to hack the Guild personnel files, and coding signatures suggest it’s Ares’s team.”

I swallowed hard. It was a decoy phone. *All that...* for a decoy phone. For nothing. I should have fucking killed him when I had the opportunity. Then again, the gun probably wasn’t even loaded.

“I need to get back to my computer and boot them out, but I just...” Leon looked down at me with a blazing gaze. “I needed this.”

He kissed me again, harsh and hungry, stealing the breath from my lungs and leaving me trembling all over. Then he was gone, stomping back into his tech cave with determination.

“What the *fuck*,” I muttered, continuing into the gym. Suddenly I was feeling an extreme need to punch the crap out of a boxing bag. That *fucking* phone had been a decoy, and now they were trying to hack the Guild files? To find me?

“Shit.” I breathed the curse on an exhale and grabbed Leon’s boxing gloves to protect my hands.

For the next hour, I threw all my anger and frustration into the bag, hitting it until my shoulders burned and my breath came in rough gasps. I was coated in sweat and felt no better for it. Kai just *kept* screwing me over. And I’d bet he was so fucking smug right now, genuinely thinking he could have knocked me up. It hadn’t been enough for me to fail my mission by bringing back a decoy phone and for allowing him and his team to live. No, he wanted

to really twist the knife by leaving me pregnant too?

Luckily for me, that was a physical impossibility. Small mercies, I supposed.

Ripping off the gloves, I tossed them aside and stomped back to Leon's bedroom. His attached bathroom was the sort of thing I'd only ever seen in travel magazines, and it was exactly where I wanted to be right now.

I pressed the button to fill the tub—if it could even be called a tub—and steaming hot water started gushing from three dozen hidden jets to fill the enormous space quickly.

Trying really fucking hard to control my own raging emotions, I stripped out of the clothes I'd borrowed from Leon's wardrobe and waded into the deep tub. It was more of a plunge pool than a bath, but the part I liked the most was that it was partially outdoors.

When the water was deep enough, I held my breath and dove under water, pushing through the plastic flap that led to the outdoors. When I surfaced again, the sharp bite of the mountain air stole the breath from my lungs, and I shivered despite the near scalding water I'd filled the pool with.

The edge of the pool was high up, above the frozen lake, and I braced my arms on the cool ledge. Silently, I made a promise to myself. The next time I laid eyes on that lying bastard Malachi Arden, I wouldn't hesitate. If he wanted to come looking for me, then he was sealing his own fate.

I'd kill him and not feel an ounce of regret over it.

## DANNY

I took my time, leaning on the edge of the pool and letting my legs float behind me as I systematically packed away all the memories, all the lingering emotions of fake-Danny. I'd foolishly held onto them without even realizing that's what I'd done. But enough was enough.

Eventually, when I inhaled the freezing air, I felt like *me* again. Danielle the bank teller was *dead*.

The water shifted around my body, and I smiled when Leon popped up beside me.

"Did you kick them out?" I murmured, referring to Kai's team's hack.

Leon flashed a toothy grin. "Sent them packing, along with a virus to seriously fuck up their systems for a while." He folded his strongly muscled arms on the edge of the pool beside me. "Do you mind the company?"

I leaned my cheek on my cold arms, my face tipped toward Leon. "I'm glad for it, actually."

He stared back at me a long time, his gaze searching my face for something. "You look less conflicted," he commented eventually, "more determined."

"I think your house has magical properties, Leon. Can I stay here forever?" I meant it as a joke, but there was no mistaking the hungry, possessive look that crossed his face.

Before I could really examine that passionate response, his mouth was on mine. This kiss echoed the one he'd given me in the hallway earlier. It was hot and demanding, utterly consuming, the kind of kiss that made my whole

body light up with arousal.

“Danny,” he sighed against my lips. “You have no idea...” Whatever he was saying, he trailed it off in kisses down my throat. I tipped my head back, giving him free access as he floated around behind me in the hot water of the pool.

His hands placed mine back on the edge, the instruction dead clear as he stroked his hands up my arms while his chest pressed to my back. Was he naked, too? It hadn’t even crossed my mind to put on a swimsuit to get in this pool. It was just a big bath, after all.

Leon kissed my neck, and I sighed in delight as his hands found my breasts under the water. He gave a small groan when I dropped my head back to rest on his shoulder, pushing my chest into his hands in encouragement. This was *exactly* what I needed. What I’d been craving from him for far too long.

His strong fingers toyed with my nipples, rolling and pinching, and his hardness pressed against my ass in the water. He *was* naked, too. That made me smile.

“Leon,” I moaned as his teeth teased the skin of my neck. “I want you so bad.”

His lips caught my earlobe, sucking it into his mouth, then tugging with his teeth. One of his hands drifted from my breast and danced over my belly, making my abs contract as excitement rippled through me. He cupped my pussy with a confident grip, just the tip of one finger dipping inside, and I gasped. My hips rocked, my body begging for more, but he gave a frustrated sound.

“Danny,” he said in a husky voice, “this is a terrible idea.”

I pushed harder into his hand, and he responded by slipping two fingers inside my cunt. “Why?” I asked on a groan, tensing around his fingers, “because we’re technically still working together?”

He muttered a response that I couldn’t make out, his thumb finding my clit and making me quake. His body pressed tight against my back, pushing me into the wall of the pool as his fingers pumped harder. I moaned and trembled, but I wanted more than just his hand.

“Leon,” I whispered, reaching beneath the water and grasping his hip. “Please...”

“Please *what*, DeLuna?” he teased, nipping my neck with a bite. He pushed a third finger inside me, stretching my pussy in a way that made me

moan loudly.

“*Please,*” I begged, reaching between us in search of his cock. It was hard against my butt, not difficult to find, but I sucked a sharp breath when my questing fingers touched metal studded through his tip. “Holy fuck, Leon, if you don’t put this inside me, I swear—”

My threats were unnecessary. He shifted his hands to my hips, then he was filling me up with one hard, tight thrust of his pierced dick. I cried out in satisfaction, my hands returning to grip the edge of the pool for balance. He didn’t pause to wait for my pussy to adjust around him, either. He just pumped hard beneath the water, fucking me fast and frenzied, like I’d just opened a flood gate.

My tits bounced in the water as I arched into him, taking him deeper as I bent from the waist. Both of us were breathing hard, my moans and cries echoing through the snow-filled valley, but when his fingers found my clit again, I *shrieked*.

The orgasm hit me so hard I almost slipped under the surface of the water, but Leon held me up, his dick buried deep inside my cunt as he kissed my throat with reverence.

“We should move this inside,” he murmured. “You’re trembling.”

I gave a low, somewhat unhinged laugh. “That’s got nothing to do with the cold.” My voice was rough and my breathing heavy, but we weren’t done. Not even close. “But yeah, let’s go in.”

His erection slipped free as he gave me space to turn around, and I looped my arms around his neck to kiss him. Post-orgasm euphoria held me in its claws, and every stroke of his tongue on mine had me quaking with micro climaxes.

Leon kissed me back like I was his whole entire world, scooping me up in his arms to float us through the water back to the bathroom. We both ducked under the surface to pass the trapdoor, then he picked me up again on the other side to carry me—still soaking wet—into his bed.

I wasted no time pushing him back into the pillows and climbing into his lap. I pressed my lips to his once more, kissing him while my hand skated down his body. Just like I’d seen in New York, he was incredibly ripped, every ab defined to perfection and his tattoos a work of mastery, highlighting his body’s tone. But there was one thing I wanted to explore more than anything else, so I slid down the bed until I could get a better look.

Four metal studs decorated his cock, like the points of a compass nestled



in the ridge at the base of his tip. I smoothed my finger over each with fascination, then glanced up to see him staring down at me with a hooded gaze.

“Are you satisfied?” he asked in an amused tone.

I grinned back at him, then used the tip of my tongue to trace the piercings just like I’d done with my finger. His hips jerked as I ran my tongue over his smooth cock head, and I hummed as I briefly sucked the whole cap into my mouth.

He hissed a curse, hauling me back up with a muttered plea for mercy. I laughed as I settled back into his lap, but that laugh quickly turned into a moan when I sank down on his cock.

Leon’s eyes widened briefly, his fingers biting into the flesh of my hips as he urged me to move. To ride him. I was all too happy to oblige, too. Bracing my hands on his tensed abs, I fucked him hard and fast, moaning as another orgasm teased me. My breasts were bouncing like crazy, right in Leon’s face, but the expression of pure rapture on his face said he didn’t much mind the view.

He was getting close, I could feel it in the way his thighs tensed beneath me, in the tightness of his jaw. His grip on my hips shifted slightly, pushing me to lean back as he bent his knees. His thighs supported my weight, and he took over our rhythm, fucking up into me as I gasped and cursed.

“Make yourself come, Danny,” he ordered me. “Let me see it.”

I sure as shit didn’t need to be told twice, I was already so close. Biting my lip, I brought my hand to my cunt, spreading myself wide and giving Leon an uninterrupted view of his own dick inside me.

His brows hitched, and his tongue swiped over his lower lip as he watched eagerly, his hips bucking to maintain pace while I rubbed my clit with my middle finger.

I was no amateur, I knew how to make myself come. Within moments, my walls were locking up and a low moan rolling from my throat as the climax swept through me. Leon lost it, too, his motions becoming rough and frantic, his thick cock jerking as he came inside me.

Exhausted and with limbs like jelly, I collapsed into a heap beside him, my face buried in a pillow. I stayed like that for some time until I felt the soft caress of Leon’s lips against my shoulder.

“Mmm,” I mumbled, turning my face to peer up at him. “Hi.”

He stared back at me, his fingers tracing a gentle pattern on my spine.

“That wasn’t what I expected,” he told me in a hoarse whisper.

I gave a slight frown, rolling onto my side and propping my head up on my hand. “It wasn’t?”

He shook his head, his expression dazed and full of adoration. Somehow, I thought it was a *good* thing... that I’d somehow exceeded his expectations? Still, I couldn’t miss the opportunity, so I gave him a sly smile.

“Well then, I probably suggest we try again. And again... and again... for research purposes?”

Leon gave a small frown, then laughed and shook his head in disbelief. “Good idea. Wait here, I’ll grab protein bars and hydration. We’re not leaving this room until we’ve covered every variable.”

He scrambled off the bed and left the room without stopping for clothes, and I smiled into the pillow. Leon was everything I’d been fantasizing *and more*. It was safe to say that I really didn’t know him, besides the fact that I was crushing *hard* and that he’d just gone to some extreme lengths to “save me” from imprisonment. The prospect of getting to know him better had me all fluttery with excitement, though.

Goddamn, he was gorgeous, too.

# LEON

I left my bedroom in a haze of endorphins and post-ejaculation bliss. When I'd told Danny that fucking her hadn't been what I'd expected, she misunderstood. I'd meant what I said, though. I had expected my sick obsession with her to clear from my head once I'd fucked her. That's how it'd worked in the past, the few times I'd developed an infatuation with a woman. One fuck and I was done.

Not this time, though. Not *her*.

Every kiss, every touch, every silken brush of her hair against my skin... it had been a test. A test I'd just failed in explosive fashion. I thought maybe I could control myself. *Not* sleep with her... because I was enjoying having the object of my obsession here in my space. I didn't want to get over it. I never wanted to get tired of watching her sleep or of the sound of her voice or the sweet taste of her lips on mine when she visited my office.

But when I saw her in my tub, her long wet hair clinging to her bare back as she stared out at the snow... I'd broken.

Except nothing about that had gone according to my expectations. Yes, the sex had been good. Better than good. Fucking exceptional. But instead of immediately wanting to be rid of her, to shower her smell off my skin and kick her out of my bed, I wanted *more*.

I needed to leave the room, because the intensity of my obsession had just kicked into overdrive, and I wasn't entirely sure *what* I was going to do. My hands trembled as I made my way down to the kitchen. I was out of control.

I *despised* being out of control.

Breathing hard, I poured a glass of ice cold water from my fridge and drank it quickly. It did nothing to calm me down, though. So then I tried splashing the freezing water from the tap on my face. Nothing.

Shit, even just *thinking* about her had my dick hard again. Seriously counterproductive while I was trying to work out what the fuck had just happened and how the fuck to deal with it.

One thing I knew for certain. She was becoming a weakness for me, and that couldn't happen.

I drank another glass of water, then silently returned upstairs. Instead of going back to my bedroom and all the euphoria that awaited me in the shape of Danny DeLuna, I headed into my office. Before I saw the hack from Ares's team, I'd been working on Emmanuel Blanchet's server.

With a sigh, I sat down naked in my computer chair. Sometimes, the zeros and ones would give me the clarity I needed in other decisions. But not this time. I barely sat there a couple of minutes before my mind was wandering back to the goddess in my bed.

"Screw it," I muttered. "Once more can't make things worse. Surely."

I stood up, then scooped up my phone from the desk. Maybe I'd take some pictures this time, or a video. Perhaps if I had some visual media, I could let the real Danny go. It was a long shot, but certainly worth the try... Would she let me? Or would she play shy and hide from the camera?

My phone lit up in my hand before I got back to the bedroom, though, and I paused to check what the notification was. It was a new contract offer on my executioner ID number. Although I'd told Danny that it was a myth that mercenaries weren't allowed to decline contracts, the rules were a little different for executioners. We were recruited for that position because we *never* declined a contract. Ever. The Guild's needs always came before our own, and no lines were too hard to cross.

Executioners were barely even human. *I* was barely even human. Which was why my visceral reaction to Danny DeLuna had shaken me so deeply.

It was a daily struggle not to think of Layla around her. But with every moment that passed with Danny in my house, with her scent on my sheets and her kisses on my lips, I had come to a sobering realization. That I'd never truly *loved* Layla.

I cared for her. I liked her. But the sheer intensity of what I felt for Danny made my history with Layla seem pale in comparison.

I wasn't idiot enough to go declaring that I was *falling in love* with

DeLuna. The obsession I had for her was far less healthy than love, despite how carefully *normal* I'd been acting around her all week.

Returning to my office, I sat back in my chair and opened the notification I'd just received. To my surprise, it wasn't a contract. It was a personal communication from none other than Emmanuel Blanchet himself. How very coincidental.

Of course, he didn't know I knew it was him. The Circle were *very* careful to maintain their anonymity. It was what kept them all alive and their bloodlines safe. When seats of power passed down family lines, the only way to ensure that power never shifted was to be beyond paranoid.

When I read the message, a cold shiver ran through me, and I sat up straighter.

"*Why?*" I asked aloud, reading the request for Danny's execution a second time over. There was no explanation—there rarely was—just her assigned ID number and a polite if terse request to provide proof of death within a timely manner.

I sat there a long moment, reading the sparse details over and over, as though more words would appear on the screen. Then I frowned and typed out a response.

*Understood. I'll await the contract.*

Because the request was just that. A request. I didn't have to comply until a formal contract was provided. Such was the way with *all* Guild assignments. At the root of the organization, it was a business. Every job was a transaction with clearly defined expectations and payment details. Without that, I was under no obligation and, truthfully, I would be a fool to accept. Contracts protected both parties.

Blanchet responded to me almost immediately.

*No contracts. Just get it done and you'll be paid.*

I quirked a brow at that response. If there was no contract, then it was a personal vendetta for Blanchet. Furthermore, it meant he either hadn't attempted or hadn't gained the support of two more Circle members. Executions—kill orders on our own mercenaries—needed to be authorized by three Circle members.

With a sigh, I drummed my fingers on the arm of my chair. The mere fact that I was even *considering* refusing this request said my obsession had gone way too far. I'd never questioned my loyalty to the Guild before. Not once. Not even when Layla feared for her life, convinced someone was trying to

kill her.

The Guild was all I'd ever known. Both my parents had been Guild and had raised me to be the man I was today. Cold, ruthless, immoral. The perfect asset to the organization. It was people like *me*, the ones who did what needed to be done without hesitation and without guilt, we were the ones who maintained the Guild's power. It was because of the executioners that the Guild had survived over a *thousand* years in business.

Nothing and no one was more important in my life than my loyalty to the Mercenary Guild. Not Layla, not my own mother. Yet here I was, for the first time, seriously thinking about refusing an order.

For *her*.

Danny DeLuna.

An unpleasant, nauseating feeling swirled through my stomach as I acknowledged that disturbing fact.

Danny was dangerous. Not just to those she went after, but to *me*. She was a problem, and I didn't pussyfoot around my problems.

Tightening my jaw, I left my office once more and headed to the weapons supply room along the corridor further. I didn't let myself dwell on what I was about to do, I just picked up the closest dagger and closed the room up again before I could change my mind.

My footsteps were silent as I entered my bedroom, my breathing shallow and quiet as I tensed for a fight. But I only needed a moment to realize it wouldn't be anything so dramatic. Danny was asleep.

I stood frozen at the foot of the bed, letting my breathing return to normal as I stared down at her. Dusk had only just started to fall, and the room was still well lit. Nothing obscured my view of her achingly perfect body, those unbelievable full breasts rising and falling with her breath.

She hadn't even bothered to get under the blankets, seeming to have fallen asleep right where I left her, then rolled onto her back at some point. Her legs were slightly spread, one knee hitched, and I inhaled deeply when I saw the wet sheen of my cum in her pussy.

Swallowing hard, I clenched the dagger tight in my left hand but used my right to take her photo on my phone. The picture was perfect, hiding nothing. I needed more.

My murderous intention was abandoned for a few moments as I captured every glorious angle of Danny on my camera gallery. My cock was so hard it ached, but I didn't dare wake her. I just snapped my perverse gallery,

knowing I would look at them later. Many, many times.

She sighed in her sleep, and I froze dead still as she shifted slightly. Her legs ended wider apart, like an *invitation*. I took more pictures, then tossed my phone onto the chair to grasp my erection. Maybe... maybe my head would be clearer if I could come one more time. Maybe if I did it while she slept, then I wouldn't be at risk of losing myself in those gorgeous sapphire eyes of hers.

*Fuck*. No. I was losing my determination already, and that was unacceptable.

Gritting my teeth, I released my dick and resolved myself to do what needed to be done.

I shifted the dagger into my right hand, admiring the way the setting sun gleamed off the seven-inch blade. It was so clean, but about to become drenched in the blood of an angel. I already knew I would never wash it. I'd mount it in a frame and hang it at the end of my bed, a constant reminder of the closest I'd ever come to true human emotion.

Danny didn't wake as I climbed onto the bed with her, but when I straddled her waist, she mumbled my name in her sleep. It made me pause. She was dreaming about me. *Me*. Not that manipulative fuck who'd held her captive for a month... *me*.

Conflicting emotions swirled through me as I stared down at her perfect face, serene with sleep.

I knew what needed to be done, though. No matter how badly it would haunt me later, no matter how much I wanted to lose myself in the fantasy, I couldn't allow her to weaken me.

Danny DeLuna needed to die.

Steeling myself, I brought the blade to her throat, pressing down just enough to draw that very first droplet of vivid red blood against her alabaster skin.

Her eyes snapped open, locking on mine.

# KAI

A storm lashed the windows of my bedroom, the sea beyond whipping up in a frenzy, but I refused to close the shutters. I couldn't bring myself to shut out the view that Danielle—or *Danny*—had loved so much. Every fucking minute since she left me on that bridge in Venice had been pure torture, picturing what that guy was doing to her.

It had been made all the worse by Sam's failures in hacking the Guild files. I wanted *answers*, goddamn it. I wanted to know *where to find her*. Was she okay? Was she *happy*?

Was she pregnant?

She would come back to me if she was, I could feel it in my bones. Even if it was just to spit in my face, I would see her again.

But if she wasn't... I couldn't just cross my fingers and hope. I had to find her myself.

A sharp knock on my door dragged me back to reality, and I stormed over to bark at whoever was interrupting my melancholy mood. I wasn't in the fucking mood for more bad news, and sooner or later, someone was going to catch my ire in the form of physical violence. Worse than Sam had, too.

That scuffle had been a setup, intended to win Danny over by defending her honor. But when I'd seen the frightened way she looked up at him, I'd lost my shit. Those punches had been a hell of a lot harder than they'd needed to be, and Sam had taken a few days to forgive me for it.

"What?" I demanded, throwing the door open.

My sister glared back at me, her arms folded and her bitch face firmly in



place. “I see your foul mood hasn’t improved with time.”

I snarled. “Fuck you, Moana, you have no idea—”

“How thoroughly she had you fooled? How utterly *stupid* you feel now? How badly you regret opening up to her and showing your genuine feelings? Yeah, Kai, I have *no idea*. Get off your fucking high horse, she played us all.” She sneered at me, and I resisted the urge to slam the door in her face.

I would never hurt my sister, no matter how badly she pissed me off. She was the only person who had ever truly loved me. I would quite literally do anything for her, not that she ever needed saving. Moana was the reason I’d joined the military. She was my idol, my inspiration, and then the Guild had ruined her.

It was for *her* that I would destroy the Guild.

“I have info for you,” Mo told me when I said nothing back. “Our contact reached out again.”

My brows shot up in surprise. “Danny—”

Mo shook her head. “Not about her. About the guy. Leon.”

My eyes narrowed. “That’s his name?” *Leon*.

“As soon as I heard it, I remembered the night of the Halloween party. The guy that kissed Danny near the bar, and she slapped him? Right before I met her in the bathrooms? His name was Leon.” Her face twisted in disgust and bitterness. “Turns out, she wasn’t lying. He *is* her colleague. But he’s also more than that, and I bet she doesn’t even know.”

A turbulent storm of emotions ripped through me, and my fists clenched at my sides. “Who is he, Moana? Who has her?”

She gave me a pained look, pitying. “He’s on the Circle, Kai. He’s not just one of the snakes... he’s their handler.”

Blackness swirled in my head, and I punched my fist through the wall with a scream of rage. I had to save her. I *had* to get her back. But what if I was already too late?

**TO BE CONTINUED**

DEAD DROP  
MARCH 28TH, 2022

## **A NOTE FROM TATE**

I'll spare you the blah blah this time, but I do want to hear from you! Please come find me on Facebook -

[www.facebook.com/groups/tatejames.thefoxhole](http://www.facebook.com/groups/tatejames.thefoxhole) xxx

**ALSO BY TATE JAMES**

## **Madison Kate Story: (Dark NA Contemporary Romance)**

#1 HATE

#2 LIAR

#3 FAKE

#4 KATE

### **HADES**

#### **(Dark NA Contemporary Romance)**

#1 7<sup>th</sup> Circle

#2 Anarchy

#3 Club 22

#4 Timber (2021)

## **The Royal Trials: (Complete Fantasy series)**

#1 Imposter

#2 Seeker

#3 Heir

### **Kit Davenport**

#### **(Complete PNR series)**

#1 The Vixen's Lead

#2 The Dragon's Wing

#3 The Tiger's Ambush

#4 The Viper's Nest

#5 The Crow's Murder

#6 The Alpha's Pack

Novella: The Hellhound's Legion

Box Set: Kit Davenport: The Complete Series

## **Dark Legacy: (Complete Dark Contemporary high school romance)**

#1 Broken Wings

#2 Broken Trust

#3 Broken Legacy

#4 Dylan (standalone)

### **Royals of Arbon Academy**

**(Complete Dark contemporary/dystopian college romance)**

#1 Princess Ballot

#2 Playboy Princes

#3 Poison Throne

## **Hijinx Harem: (Compete RomCom PNR series)**

#1 Elements of Mischief

#2 Elements of Ruin

#3 Elements of Desire

## **The Wild Hunt Motorcycle Club**

**(Dark PNR/Fantasy series)**

#1 Dark Glitter

#2 Cruel Glamour (TBC)

#3 Torn Gossamer (TBC)



## **Foxfire Burning: (UF/PNR series)**

#1 The Nine

#2 The Tail Game (TBC)

#3 TBC (TBC)

### **Undercover Sinners**

**(Dark Contemporary Suspense Romance)**

#1 Altered By Fire

#2 Altered by Lead

#3 Altered by Pain (TBC)