

CLASSIFIED  
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**TOP SECRET**

**ATTENTION: ELI BRANT**

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ADDRESS  
FIELD



1. The following

2. A copy  
of the  
1010

For all  
copies

Handwritten note  
to administrative  
assistant

# **PUCKER** **FACTOR**

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

# PUCKER FACTOR

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# AN OPS PROTECTOR ROMANCE

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

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*To Dingo*

# CONTENTS

## Cast of Characters

### Pucker Factor Meaning

1. Eli
2. Eli
3. Sarah
4. Eli
5. Sarah
6. Eli
7. Sarah
8. Eli
9. Sarah
10. Eli
11. Sarah
12. Eli
13. Sarah
14. Eli
15. Sarah
16. Eli
17. Sarah
18. Eli
19. Sarah
20. Eli
21. Sarah
22. Eli
23. Scottie
24. Eli
25. Sarah
26. Eli
27. Sarah
28. Cash
29. Eli
30. Sarah

31. Eli
32. Sarah
33. Eli
34. Sarah
35. Eli
36. Fox
37. Eli
38. Sarah
39. Eli
40. Jack

Also by Giulia Lagomarsino



## CAST OF CHARACTERS

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

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

### **Team 1:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Team 2:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **IT Department:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Other Guys:**

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

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

**Rafe-** Evildoer posing as the good guy. Or is it the other way around? Dangerous antihero with not a single redeeming quality who stays hidden in the shadows. Unknown relationship to Cash.

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

is she???

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

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

**Nicholas Tate:** Former SEAL that worked with Fox. Still a mystery, but currently works as a cop in Kansas after Cash got him a job. Must be crazy to be friends with Fox.

### **The Young Squad:**

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

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

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

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

# PUCKER FACTOR MEANING

## **Military Meaning:**

A phrase used to describe the level of stress and/or adrenaline response to danger or a crisis situation.

## **OPS Meaning:**

How tight your asshole is squeezed in preparation for what's about to happen.



## ELI

“Four tangos, two o’clock,” I whispered into comms.

“Three more at your nine,” Kavanaugh answered from across the room.

“I have eyes on the target,” Cash said. “Southwest corner of the room. This won’t be an easy extraction.”

I huffed at that. “When is it ever easy?”

“I could think of about ten more situations that have been easier than this,” Cash answered.

That had me curious, but I couldn’t move from my position without giving myself away. Hiding out just past the hallway that led to the elevator banks, it was the only protection offered to me at this point, and we weren’t ready to move in yet. Not until Cash gave the green light.

“IRIS, we’re going to need you on forty.”

I groaned internally. If Cash needed IRIS, that meant explosives were involved. And IRIS loved to set them off more than he liked to dismantle them. I just had to hope that he wouldn’t actually set one off when there were thirty-plus hostages on this floor alone. The rest of the building had already been evacuated, as far as we knew. The police department was sweeping the rest of the building, ensuring no one else was injured if something went wrong.

“Hold your places until we can figure out what the fuck we’re dealing with,” Cash said.

“Copy that,” I answered, hearing the same from everyone else.

Normally, we wouldn't be in the building because of a hostage situation, but this was a special case. We were called in to protect a new client just as all hell broke loose at the very building he worked in. It took an hour of arguing with the local P.D. about who the fuck was in charge, but we finally took possession of the building and hauled ass to the fortieth floor where our guy was currently hiding out. At least, we hoped he was hiding.

“We've got hostages moving around in there,” I whispered, adjusting the grip on my weapon. “Where the fuck are you, IRIS?”

“Hold your dick. I'm coming. It's not like I could take the elevator up like you lazy asses.”

I could hear his heavy breathing as he climbed the stairs, probably carrying a shit load of gear with him.

I grinned to myself as I answered. “It's a good thing someone's not about to blow up or anything, old man. I think Jane's cooking has made you lazy.”

“Jane doesn't cook. Not well, anyway. And if you tell her I said that, I'll let that bomb explode.”

“You're so fucking slow,” Thumper huffed. “You're letting a man with a wooden leg beat you up the stairs.”

“That's a bionic foot,” IRIS argued. “You're like Iron Man or something. And you're not carrying all the EOD gear. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Hey, someone has to watch your six.”

“You're in front of me!”

“Yeah, to make sure your ass doesn't get taken out.”

“I would just like to point out that I'm in the opposite stairwell,” Slider grumbled. “And no one offered to come with me and watch my back. I'm just saying, that's kind of shitty.”



“I’m with you,” IKE answered, sounding slightly offended.

“Yeah, but you didn’t offer. You were told to come with me.”

“Why the fuck did I say I’d come work for this company?” IKE grumbled. “I could have stuck with my current profession and wouldn’t have to work with anyone else.”

“Because apparently, Jane needed you,” IRIS snapped. “Don’t ask me why. She has me. I’m not sure what the fuck she needs you for.”

I chuckled again, refocusing on the hostages in the room. One day, I’d hopefully find someone like IRIS had. Jane was a hot mess, but she was driven and fun. That was the kind of woman I needed. Although, I could do without Jane’s love of bombs. She bonded a little too much with IRIS over that particular part of his job. And I definitely didn’t want my woman, whoever she was, to have a fascination with a man like IKE. It was just wrong.

“Alright, I’m on thirty-nine. I need a sit-rep.”

“There’s no clear path inside,” Cash answered. “All exits are covered by tangos. We’re going to have to flush the toilet and hope we don’t swirl any hostages in the process.”

“Fucking great,” IRIS muttered. “I’m so glad I got out of bed this morning to face probable death. You know, Jane wants to try for a baby.”

“Seriously?” I heard Thumper ask.

“Not really. She just uses it as an excuse to have sex.”

“She needs an excuse?” I asked. “Why are you holding out?”

“I’m not, but she thinks it somehow makes it more exciting.”

“Ladies,” Cash snapped. “Can we get back to the job? There’s a woman shaking with fear as she faces imminent death.”

“Dark and twisty, boss. I like it,” IRIS retorted. “Alright, let’s get to work. And remember, if you shoot the bomb, it goes boom and we all die a horrible death where no one will ever find our bodies.”

“Thanks for the clarification,” I muttered as if we didn’t know that already.

“Alright, on my count, let’s plunge these fuckers,” Cash said.

“Wait, plunge?” Kavanaugh interjected. “I think you mean we’re going to flush them.”

“Yeah, he’s right, boss,” Slider spoke up. “Plunging them would actually be like reviving them.”

“Actually, it would be reviving them, only to send them swirling down the toilet,” Red clarified. “I would say he had it right.”

“Does it really fucking matter?” Cash snapped.

“Just want to be clear on the job, boss,” Kavanaugh laughed.

“Fuck this. You guys talk too much,” IKE muttered just before shoving the door open and stepping out into the room, firing at the tangos before the rest of us were truly ready.

Gunfire erupted and I quickly moved in, firing at the tangos to my right, taking out two of them before Kavanaugh took down the third. Screams filled the room as the hostages scurried under any surface they could for cover. I moved swiftly through the room to a closed office. Flinging the door open, I saw a man shaking with fear and a woman with a bomb strapped to her chest, looking completely calm, holding a dead man’s switch.

“Fuck,” I swore, turning to the window where I knew Cash could see me from his sniper’s nest in the opposite building. “You could have told us she had a dead man’s switch.”

“I can’t see through doors. I only got a glimpse of her,” Cash retorted.

IKE strolled over to where I stood and stared at the woman holding the switch. “That wasn’t nearly satisfying enough.”

“Yeah? Didn’t get to kill anyone with your bare hands?”

He shrugged slightly. “I miss the scent of fear. This isn’t the same. They didn’t even know we were coming.”

I shook my head at his fucked up perspective. “Yeah, sorry we took you away from all that.”

“What are you gonna do, you know?”

“Go back to killing people on your own?” I suggested.

“Let’s clear the floor and get to work dismantling that bomb,” Cash said. “I’ve got the watch.”

“Copy that.”

“Yeah, you guys do the simple work and I’ll dismantle the bomb,” IRIS snickered as he walked through the door with his gear.

“Everyone, listen up!” I shouted. “If you’ll please follow us in an orderly fashion to the elevators—” But I didn’t get a chance to finish as screaming ensued and people got up, running to get out of the building. “Don’t push!” I shouted as a stampede of people pushed and shoved to get to the elevator first. I was shoved from behind, and nearly fell to my damn knees as a screaming woman swung her twenty-pound bag at my head like I was a fucking terrorist she was trying to escape. I grabbed her by the arm and almost cold-cocked her, but thought better of it when I saw the terror on her face. I had to remind myself that these people weren’t used to being surrounded by danger.

Red and Kavanaugh took over directing traffic to the elevator while Thumper and Slider grabbed the man from the office and led him out. I walked over to the tangos and started searching for identities. IKE joined me, scoffing and kicking them as he passed.

“Eli Brown,” he read the name off. “What a fucking joke. Like the guy is actually named Eli.”

I frowned at him. “My name is Eli. What exactly are you saying?”

He shrugged. “Nothing. It’s just...who names their kid Eli?”

“My parents,” I argued.

“I’m just saying, it’s a made up name.”

“Clearly, it’s not or I wouldn’t have the name,” I gritted my teeth. “And what kind of name is IKE?”

“A really fucking awesome name,” he grinned.

I rolled my eyes and walked away when I heard the woman giggling that had the bomb strapped to her.

“Lady, you have to stay still.”

“It tickles. What does this do?” she asked.

Something about the lilt of her voice jarred my brain. I knew that voice from somewhere, but I didn’t have a fucking clue where. I didn’t get a good look at her face before. I was too busy looking at the bomb strapped to her chest and the switch in her hand.

“What if you take this out?”

“Would you fucking stop touching things, lady!” IRIS shouted at her.

I turned to face her, horror dawning when I saw the woman that stole my fucking wallet. “You!”

Her head jerked up and her eyes went wide. “Uh...hey,” she smiled, waving slightly.

“Would you stop moving? Do you want to blow up?” IRIS snapped.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I said, stalking over to her.

“Um...” She cocked her head to the side, pursing her lips. “I’m...currently trying not to blow up.”

Frustrated, I huffed out a breath. “You know what I mean. You stole my wallet.”

She cocked her head to the side like she was questioning my sanity. “Well, I was with you last night, and then I decided to come to work. Great plan, I know, but it happens.”

“She stole your wallet?” IKE asked.

“Yes,” I gritted my teeth.

“Like, at a bar?”

“You know, a little quiet would be appreciated while I try not to blow us up,” IRIS grumbled.

“We met at the bar,” the woman clarified, “but then he took me to this hotel.”

“Last night?” IKE stared at me. “No wonder it took you forever to get your ass out of bed.”

I sighed heavily. “What the fuck do you care?”

He laughed slightly. “I don’t. It’s none of my business, but it explains why you’re dragging ass. Must have been really good.”

“Oh, he was,” the woman laughed but quickly schooled her features when I glared at her.

“Did you get her number?”

“Actually, I snuck out,” she told IKE.

He sucked in a breath. “That bad?”

“It was actually very good. He broke my streak,” she said with a grin. It was strange that she wasn’t freaking out. She had a fucking bomb strapped to her. But despite all that, I was curious about what exactly I broke.

“Streak of what?” I asked curiously.

“Remember the ex?”

I nodded, remembering the hair job after her bastard boyfriend cheated on her. So, she hadn’t slept with anyone since then. In a sense, I popped her cherry.

“So, you left him in the middle of the night,” IKE continued.

“Well, I had a flight to catch. It turns out I might have wanted to miss that flight. Then I wouldn’t be strapped in, ready to explode.”

“We’ll get you out,” I said reassuringly.

IRIS stopped what he was doing and looked up at me. “We? I’m sorry, what are you doing other than distracting me?”

“I’m distracting her so she doesn’t freak out on you,” I pointed out.

“Oh, I won’t freak out. Simon told me it would be quick.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, not wanting to ask the next question. “Simon?”

“The bomber,” she grinned. “He was very nice.”

“He strapped you to a bomb!” I exploded. “That doesn’t make him nice!”

“Well, he was just doing his job, trying to survive. I can’t blame him for that.”

I stared at her incredulously. I didn’t get it. What kind of person didn’t panic when they were about to die? “You do realize that if IRIS can’t dismantle this bomb, you’re going to be blown to bits.”

“Way to keep her calm,” IRIS muttered.

“Yes, I’m aware of what will happen. And it sucks, but what are you going to do? Oh, by the way, if things do go south, can you go back to my apartment and get my cat and goldfish?”

There were no words left. Either she had a death wish, or something was missing inside that beautiful head of hers. “Sure.”

“Thanks,” she smiled sweetly at me. “I really appreciate it. My cat’s name is Horatio, after Horatio Hornblower.”

“Who?” I asked, not sure I wanted the answer.

“You know, the Horatio Hornblower books? They’re amazing. See, he’s this midshipman in the beginning and he works his way up through the ranks in the 1700’s around the Napoleonic wars. They really are very exciting books.”

I just stared at her. I had nowhere to go with this conversation. “How long?” I asked IRIS.

“Uh, ten minutes.”

So, I had ten minutes more of her insanity, and then she’d either blow up or I’d have to spend more time with her. I wasn’t sure what was preferable at the moment.

“And Leonidas is my fish. Make sure you take extra special care of him. He’s been with me for two years.”

I nodded, not asking another question. I didn’t want to know the answer to anything else. But IKE didn’t keep his damn mouth shut.

“I’m guessing Leonidas was named after King Leonidas?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “Three hundred Spartans! It’s an amazing story.”

“Can we discuss what’s really important? Like why the hell you’re strapped to a bomb?”

“Um...”

“You say that a lot,” I snapped.

She tossed her hands up in frustration. We all watched in slow motion as the dead man’s switch slipped from her grasp and went flying through the air. Without thinking twice, I leaped for her, tackling her to the ground and covering her body with mine. I heard the metal clang of the switch hitting the ground, but nothing happened. Slowly, I lifted my head and looked at the others huddled on the ground also. One by one, we stood and stared at the switch laying at our feet.

IRIS bent over and picked it up, clicking it a few times. “It’s a fake. A very good one. What the fuck?”

“But very noble of you to jump on the girl with the bomb. Not only would you not have protected her from the bomb

strapped to her chest, it would have been a direct hit to you,” IKE snorted.

“It was instinct,” I argued.

“It was stupid. You should have let her blow up.”

“Hey!” the woman snapped.

While I was arguing with IKE, IRIS was checking out the work on the bomb, rubbing his hand across his jaw. “Agreed, you should have let her blow up.” His fingers ran along the wire, pulling at one that was now free from the vest. “You just yanked the wire on the timer!”

“What?” the woman shrieked.

“How much time do we have?” IKE said.

“Two minutes,” IRIS said, immediately getting to work on the vest again. “If we’re lucky.”

We didn’t have time for the elevator. This was going to be a fast extraction. I ran to the window, grabbing a chair on the way and tossing it at the window. It bounced off, nearly hitting me in the process.

“That was very effective,” IKE said.

I pulled my gun, irritated, and fired off several rounds. IKE joined in, and soon the window started to shatter. This time when I grabbed the chair, the glass shattered and the chair fell forty floors beneath us. I ran over to my bag, pulled two parachutes, and tossed one to IKE.

“You have a parachute? Why the fuck do you carry around a parachute.”

I quickly started attaching it. “Because we flew with Scottie.”

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“It would if you flew with him,” I said, buckling myself in. I ran over to IRIS just as he was cutting the vest from the woman’s body. I grabbed her hand and hauled ass to the window. “You’d better hang on tight.”



She pulled her hand from mine, staring at the gaping hole plunging forty floors in sheer terror. She shook her head slowly, then looked back at me. “You want to go out the window?”

“It’s either that or get blown up.”

“I’ll get blown up!”

“Lady, we don’t have time for this!”

“My name isn’t lady.”

“Where’s my parachute?” IRIS asked.

“I only had two. You’re riding bitch,” I answered.

“I’m not going out that window,” the woman argued.

“Hey, if you get blown up, it’s no skin off my nose,” IKE said to IRIS.

“Why do I have to do this?” he whined. “I’ll trade you. You like danger.”

“You blow things up for fun,” I retorted, grabbing the woman and strapping her to me as best I could. I scooted us closer to the window as her fingers dug into my shoulders.

“I can’t do this!”

“You can do this.”

“We’ll take the elevator!”

“Are you ready? Take a deep breath.”

“Can’t we discuss this?” she shouted as I stepped off the ledge and plunged us to the depths below. The cars and people on the street came rushing up at us just as I pulled the cord and the parachute deployed. I kept a tight grip on her, keeping her snug to my body. I glanced to my right as I heard a male scream that sounded way too girly. IKE went shooting past me with IRIS barely holding onto his waist. Then the shoot deployed and they jerked before continuing their descent.

I could hear the woman breathing heavily as she clung to me, her eyes squeezed tight. “Are you okay?”

“This is not normal!”

“Lady, you just had a bomb strapped to your chest and you were pulling at the wires!”

“That was different! We’re literally falling to our death!”

“And you were about to be blown up,” I said, pulling the cord to direct us away from the building.

“Yeah, but that didn’t actually happen. This is actually happening!”

“It’s about to—” I didn’t get to finish my sentence as an explosion tore through the building, the force of it hitting my body like a full speed car. My fingers tightened on her body as we went swirling in the wind, narrowly avoiding hitting another building.

“Hang on!” I shouted, grasping at the cord just as it slipped free of my grip. I grabbed it, but it was too late. We crashed into the glass of the adjacent building, my back taking the brunt of the hit. Then the chute caught on something and tore. “Fuck,” I muttered as we started falling faster to the ground.

“Why are we speeding up?” she shrieked.

“Um... funny story,” I chuckled.

Her eyes finally flicked up to mine and she glared at me. “That’s my line!”

“We’re about to hit the ground,” I shouted over the wind. I glanced down, hoping we hit the awning that was quickly coming up to meet us. She screamed as she buried her face in my chest. We hit the red awning and bounced, falling off and hitting the ground hard. I groaned as I finally released her from my grip and rested my head back on the ground.

Moments later, IKE appeared before me, grinning like this was all so fucking funny. “You made it.”

“Is IRIS still alive?”

He shrugged. “More or less.”

Then he walked away. The heat from the fire licked at my body even from this distance, but I was too fucking sore to

move. The woman sat up, her nose twitching slightly as she stared at me.

“So...funny story. I should tell you my real name.”

“I’d rather have my wallet back.”

“Um...there’s a slight possibility it was in the building.”

I sighed and closed my eyes. “And you didn’t think to tell me that when we were inside?”

“I sort of had a bomb strapped to my chest. There were more important things to think about.”



# ELI

*24 hours ago in Florida...*

“She’s eye-fucking you, man,” Kavanaugh said, shoving his shoulder into mine. I downed my shot and turned discreetly to face the woman at the end of the bar. She was talking to the bartender.

“She’s not even looking this way,” I said, barely suppressing a huff of laughter. “And she’s got blue hair.”

“Partially blue hair. It’s a style.”

“It’s a fucking disaster waiting to happen.”

“Maybe she’s going through a mid-life crisis. Maybe her hair is a statement of the feelings she’s burying deep inside.”

“Maybe she’s a fucking psycho and when I wake up in the morning, I’ll be missing my wallet.”

“Wow, you have a very low opinion of your fellow American.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Did we not *just* kill four men this afternoon?”

“Well...right, but they were bad Americans. She’s clearly a patriotic American. You would feel differently if she had white and red in her hair, also.”

“Actually, I think I would stay firmly away from that.”

“Come on!” he grinned. “What’s not to love about that? She’s feisty and fun, but she’s also got that sexy side. Have you seen those legs? What I wouldn’t give to have those wrapped around my waist for a few hours.”

“Then you go get all the venereal diseases you want.” I took a drink and slammed my glass on the bar.

“I already have my eye on someone. Besides, a chick like that doesn’t have venereal diseases. There’s not a single tattoo on her body.”

“That you can see. And since when do tattoos signify whether or not a person has diseases?”

“Well...okay, they don’t. I’m just saying, she’s a good girl that’s taking a walk on the wild side. And you’re the wild side, man!”

I slowly turned and looked at him. “Since when am I the wild side?”

He stuttered, trying to find some way to prove me wrong. We both knew he couldn’t do it. I wasn’t as strait-laced as Lock, but I definitely didn’t fuck everything in sight like Kavanaugh.

“You shoot people.”

“Bad people. It’s not like I walk down the street and take out anyone that looks at me the wrong way.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You have an unhealthy obsession with practical jokes.”

I widened my eyes comically at him. “You’re right. Man, I’m a bad boy.”

“Man, you need this. Go talk to her. It’s been like...four years since you got laid.”

I rolled my eyes at his exaggeration. “Four months. That’s not the same thing at all.”

“Months, years...does it really matter? It’s way too fucking long.”

Red slouched on the stool beside me, raising his empty beer glass to the bartender. “What’s way too fucking long?”

“Kavanaugh thinks four months is somehow going to kill me.”

“Going without sex?” he asked. He shrugged, taking the glass the bartender slid across the bar. “It’s too long, but it won’t kill you. See anyone you like?”

Kavanaugh spoke up before I could get the chance. “The woman at the end of the bar is eye-fucking him.”

Red glanced down there, then turned back to us. “She’s not even paying attention.”

“Thank you!” I practically shouted. “My sex life is not up for debate or in need of a change.”

“I beg to differ,” Kavanaugh said, taking his shot. “You were nearly killed today. Take the lady home and remember what it’s like to live.”

“A bullet grazed his arm,” Red said, frowning slightly. “Are we counting that as almost dying?”

“No, we’re not counting it,” I said irritably. “All it did was sour my mood by tearing a hole in my brand new shirt.”

Red shook his head at that. “Those fuckers deserve to die for that alone. How would they like it if we went and tore their shirts?”

“Well, we did kill them, so I would imagine they’d prefer a torn shirt,” I answered.

I turned to Kavanaugh to tell him once again to back off my personal life, but he wasn’t there. I spun around, looking to find who his latest conquest was. “Where’d he go?”

Red nudged me, then jerked his head in the direction of the brunette/blue-haired woman at the end of the bar. I rolled my eyes, groaning to the heavens. If he was trying to set me up, I was going to kill him. Then he started walking my way with the woman in tow.

A huge grin split his lips as he walked toward me, guiding the woman by her elbow. “*Lori*,” he emphasized as if to tell me that she had a completely normal name and that I should give her a chance because of that. “This is Eli, the guy I was telling you about.”

Now I was worried about exactly what he told her. “Look, I’m sure my teammate is well-meaning, but whatever he told you is complete bullshit. I didn’t almost die today. I don’t need to get laid, and I most definitely don’t need help meeting women.”

Her lips twitched in amusement as she stared at me. “Well, I’m glad you didn’t almost die. I really don’t need to know about the last time you had sex. And I’m glad you can meet women on your own.”

I glanced at Kavanaugh, watching as he swallowed his laughter behind his hand. That fucker set me up. “And just what exactly did he tell you about me?”

“He said that you’re from Chicago. I grew up in the suburbs. I was actually just heading back there. I just stopped for a drink before the flight.”

That fucker set me up. I nodded to her, not knowing what else to say. I had really stuck my foot in it, but in my defense, what was I supposed to think? “Well...I hope you have a safe flight.”

“You too.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’ve always wanted to go to that big skyscraper...”

“Willis Tower,” Lori answered Kavanaugh.

“And the blue hair was a prank her friends played on her after she got drunk when her boyfriend of five years cheated on her.” Kavanaugh grinned.

“I’m still trying to grow it out,” she smirked. “But I’m getting used to it.”

Well, damn. She seemed perfectly normal. There was something wrong with this situation, though. There was no



way she was normal, not if she was talking to Kavanaugh.

“Red, how about a game of darts?” Kavanaugh asked, leaving me alone with Lori.

“Yeah, sounds good.”

I wanted to grab his arm and keep him from abandoning me, but the fucker chuckled and walked away. It wasn't that Lori wasn't nice, but I didn't like the idea of being set up, and I liked even less that I was now forced to spend time with her because someone else deemed her an appropriate love interest for the night.

“Your friend is kind of crazy,” she grinned, turning to the bar.

“Yeah, sorry about that. He thinks I need to get laid,” I said, chastising myself as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

“And do you?” she asked, not bothering to look at me as she flagged down the bartender again.

“No. Well, that's not completely true. You can't really have too much sex.”

“I don't know,” she said, nodding to the man as he slid her a drink. “Is it too much sex if you can't walk properly for a few days after a weekend of fucking?”

She turned to me and sipped her drink in this sexy way that made her eyelashes flutter over her eyes, giving her a dangerous look. Fuck, now I was getting hard in the middle of a bar. I shifted slightly, and she didn't miss the movement. Her eyes flicked to my dick, which didn't help the situation at all. I was going to need a drink.

“Bartender!”

Her lilting laugh had my whole body stiffening in warning. A woman that sent shivers down my spine was not a good thing. It was a warning system my body had developed over the years. To women, shivers were a good thing. To me, it was like a flashing light blinking overhead, telling me I was about to hit DEFCON 1. Others called it your body's warning

system, letting you know shit was about to get bad. I called it the pucker factor—like when you clench your ass and prepare for whatever shit storm was headed your way.

I grabbed another shot and downed it immediately. She was still staring at me, still watching me with those disarming blue eyes that perfectly matched the color of her hair. Fuck, this was bad. I needed to get out of here fast.

She slid closer to me, her hand gliding up my arm, making the hairs stand on end. Fuck, that was worse than when the hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention.

“So...are we going to get out of here and break that streak you have going?”

I swallowed and nodded against my will. I couldn't help it. One minute, I was avoiding all eye contact with her, and the next, I was sucked into the depths of those blue eyes and doing whatever the fuck she told me to. It was instinctual and a terrible idea.

She drank the rest of her cocktail and slid her hand through my arm, down to my ass. With a firm squeeze, her eyes widened. “I love a nice, hard, thick...ass.” Her tongue flicked out, catching the corner of my mouth. I turned toward her at the last second, capturing her lips in mine in a bruising kiss. Lights burst behind my eyes and my whole body shuddered. I knew at that moment my instincts were correct. This was going to be very bad.

But I followed her out the door anyway.

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I unlocked the door, but hadn't even pushed it open when she attacked me from behind, spinning me around and shoving me up against the door. I hit the handle, barely getting it open as we fell into the room. I didn't even hear the snick of the lock as her lips latched on mine and she tore at my shirt. I hissed as she scratched her nails over the wound on my arm.

She immediately stepped back, her eyes going directly to the gash. “Wow, your friend wasn’t joking. You did almost die today.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “You said he didn’t tell you that.”

“I lied,” she whispered, running her fingers over the damaged skin. “Do you want to tell me how you got this?”

“Not at all,” I said, tearing her shirt over her head. My lips immediately latched onto her neck, and I groaned when I tasted the sweet flavor of her skin. I grabbed her around the waist and picked her up, carrying her over to the bed. No sooner had I tossed her on the bed did she have my zipper in her fingers and she was yanking it down.

My cock bobbed in front of her as she tore my pants down my legs and dropped to her knees. My hand worked on instinct, grabbing a chunk of her blue hair in my fist and guiding her head toward my leaking cock. The moment her lips closed around my dick, I was a goner.

“Fuck,” I groaned. Her lips wrapped around my length, pulling me deep inside her wet mouth. The noises she made were downright indecent. I grew inside her mouth, getting larger by the second. I could feel my balls pulling up, ready to spill every last drop in her mouth. I tried to pull back, tried to make this last, but she was like a damn vacuum refusing to let me go.

“Lori!” I cried out, my cock jerking in her mouth. Something about the name didn’t ring true, but I didn’t give it too much thought as she sucked my cock even harder, refusing to let me go. I tried to pull back, even yanked on her hair, but she refused to give.

My cock wouldn’t even go down after the intense orgasm. As long as she was wrapped around me, he was ready for more. But I was anything but a selfish lover in the sack. I did the only thing I could and forced her jaw open, pulling out before she could get her lips around it again. Hauling her off her knees, I tossed her on the bed and kicked off my pants, tearing the shreds of my shirt overhead.

I could smell the desire coming off her, and while I didn't normally go down on women I just met, I felt it only right to return the favor. And when I pressed my nose between her legs and smelled her intoxicating scent, I had to have her.

"Baby," I said, looking up at her with a wicked grin on my face. "You're gonna want to hold onto something."

Her breath hitched as I tore the panties from under her dress and grabbed her hips, pulling her pussy right against my face. That first taste exploded on my tongue, but the second...I got lost in eating her, devouring every last drop. I could hear her screaming, crying out for me to slow down, but my mind was gone. I was one hundred percent lost in her. With every swirl of my tongue, I ate her harder. My tongue fucked her with a viciousness I'd never felt before, and my fingers played with those plump lips.

"Eli!" she cried out, grasping my hair in any way she could.

I finally tore myself from her body and flipped her over, hauling her hips up as I sank my cock deep inside her. She cried out with every thrust, her fingers clawing at the sheets and tearing them from the corners of the bed. My cock swelled with every pump, sending tingles over every inch of my body. My ass clenched just as it did in the bar. With a roar, I came hard inside her, collapsing on her back and smearing her sweat across my face.

My eyes slipped closed as sleep rushed over me. I didn't even feel her move out from under me, and it wasn't until morning that I even realized she was gone.



# SARAH

His heavy weight on my body was suffocating in the best way. It had been a long time for me too, though I didn't tell him that. Ever since Tank and I broke up, I hadn't been able to get back on the horse. After five years together, he went and threw it all away on some waitress at a bar. It was a little ironic that I took a man home from the bar tonight, almost like I was getting revenge. Not that it was revenge on Tank. I was pretty sure he didn't care at all who I slept with. His last words to me were basically telling me I needed help and not to contact him again.

A slight snore filled the room, and I decided it was time to go. As fun as this was, and thoroughly enjoyable, I needed to catch my flight soon. I shoved the beast of a man off me and stood up, wobbling slightly from how shaky I was. I grinned, thinking about the last time I felt this way. It had been way too long since I'd been fucked so hard.

Walking around the room, I gathered my things and tossed them on the chair. I definitely needed a shower before I left. There was no way I was getting on a plane full of strangers smelling like sex. Humming softly, I went into the bathroom and showered quickly. My hair was a mess, but it would have to do until I got home. When I was done, I took the little bottles they left in the shower and on the counter, slipping them into my purse. After quickly dressing, I picked up the rest of the stuff on the ground, folding Eli's clothes and placing them on the chair. I found his wallet just under the bed and grabbed it, flipping it open to stare at his picture. He was handsome, and just a few years older than me.

Grinning, I stuffed his wallet in my purse and walked to the door, closing it softly behind me. I had just enough time to make it back to my hotel and check out before my flight. I had to be in the office first thing tomorrow, and my boss wouldn't accept the excuse that I was getting laid for the first time in months. Even though I knew that she secretly had a fetish for younger men and would hit on anyone that was over twenty, but under twenty-five.

By the time I made it to the airport and through security, I had just twenty minutes before my flight, which was cutting it close, but was well worth it. I made sure to take my meds before I got in the cab, so I was relaxed and ready for this flight. Also, the fucking Eli gave me had definitely calmed my nerves. My phone rang as I waited to board, and pulling it out, I saw it was my best friend Julie.

“Hey, girl,” I answered, a smile on my face.

“You got laid. Who is he?”

I shook my head, though she couldn't see me. She knew me so well. “He was someone I met at the bar.”

“Yeah? How do you know he didn't have any venereal diseases?”

“He was full of tattoos.”

“And that's supposed to mean something?”

“Well, if he had diseases, I doubt he would go near a needle and risk further infection.”

“You know that makes no sense, right? He could have gotten those tattoos twenty years ago!”

“No, one was a date from a year ago.”

“Maybe it was a date for the future,” she argued. “Maybe it was the date he wanted to be married by or the date he planned to start a booty call service.”

“Yeah, he tattooed that date on him,” I said laughingly.

“Maybe he has amnesia and has to tattoo dates on him so he can remember them.”

“I think you mean dementia.”

“Whatever. I’m just saying, you could have dated someone, and then slept with him.”

I bit my lip, remembering just how amazing Eli was in bed. “Nah, he was worth it, even if I end up with herpes.”

The old lady sitting next to me turned slowly and glared at me, then stood and walked to another seat across the lounge.

“Did you give him your number?”

“No, but it doesn’t matter. He lives in Kansas.”

There was dead air on the other end. “Girl, please tell me he told you that and you didn’t do what I think you did.”

“Hey, in my defense, he dropped it on the floor.”

“That doesn’t mean you steal his wallet! You have to return it!”

“I will!” I said defensively. Sighing, I knew I had to fix this. “I’ll mail it back to him in the morning.”

“Why can’t you just call the police and tell them you found it on the ground? He’s going to know you took it.”

“I’ll just say it got wrapped up in my stuff and I didn’t notice until I was on the plane.”

“Yeah,” she snorted. “It got wrapped up in your panties, and you didn’t notice the bulge for hours!”

“It could happen,” I argued. “Besides, this is a good thing. I have a name to put with the face. His name really is Eli, by the way.”

“Well, I’m glad you got something out of stealing his wallet!” she practically shouted at me. “Girl, what are we going to do with you?”

“Me?” I asked incredulously. “What about you?”

“There is nothing wrong with me!”

“Sure. I know a lot of people that have never laughed in their life!”



“Hey, that’s not something I can help!”

“Well, same goes double for me.”

“That doesn’t even make sense!”

I glanced around and noticed others were starting to get in line to board. I must have missed the announcement. “I have to get on the plane now. We’ll talk about this later.”

“Don’t you dare forget to send that wallet back.”

“Fine,” I said grudgingly, hanging up my phone and then sticking my tongue out just to give it to her one last time. I quickly got in line and waited my turn to board. After getting in my seat, I sighed in contentment until a man sat next to me. A handkerchief was hanging out of his pocket, still neatly folded, so I was pretty sure he hadn’t used it. As he bent over to grab a magazine, I slipped it from his pocket and quickly stuck it in my purse. Then I leaned back in my seat and enjoyed the flight.



## ELI

Pounding on the door had me jerking awake. I could feel the lines from the edge of the bed embedded in my face. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I rolled over, only to fall off the bed, forgetting I was already on the edge.

There was more banging, and then Red was shouting. “Eli! Get your ass out of bed!”

“Fuck,” I grumbled, hauling my ass off the floor. I stumbled over to the door and flung it open, glaring at Red. “What the fuck do you want?”

“We gotta move,” he said, shoving his way inside. He glanced around the room, probably looking for Lori. I hadn’t even heard her leave, but I couldn’t say I was disappointed to wake up alone. It saved me the awkward conversation that was bound to happen. The truth was, while she was fantastic in bed, I knew it was a mistake to sleep with her. The warning signs were all there. Thankfully, we lived worlds apart, so I didn’t have to worry about running into her again.

“What’s going on?”

“New client. Sensitive intel, possible threats to his life... the usual.”

“Right,” I mumbled, walking over the chair where my clothes were neatly folded. I grabbed them and stuffed them in my bag, then pulled out fresh clothes. “Are you going to stand there while I get dressed?”

“Do I need to?” he asked.

I looked at him, wondering why he was asking. “I think I got this, man.”

He grunted and turned around. After dressing, I dug through my bag for my wallet, but it wasn't there. I patted down my pants again, wondering how I missed it when I picked up the clothes, but it wasn't there either.

“What the fuck?” I said, looking everywhere for it.

“What's going on?”

“I can't find my wallet.”

I got down on my knees and searched under the bed, but it wasn't there either. I tore the covers off, but still came up empty. Red joined in the search, but by the time the place was torn apart, it was clear it was nowhere in sight. I turned to face Red, my face mottled in rage.

“I'm gonna kill Kavanaugh. She actually fucking stole my wallet!”

“What are you talking about?”

I ran my hand through my hair, still trying to process the fact that the woman I slept with last night had actually fucking stole from me. “That woman I took back here, she fucking took my wallet. I fucking told Kavanaugh this would happen!”

“Yeah, that really sucks, but...” He jerked his thumb toward the door. “Bad guys, threats...sort of more important than your missing wallet.”

Shaking my head, I followed him out of the room. As much as it grated on me, I had to remember that there was a life or death situation out there that had to be dealt with first. “Fine, but when I see Kavanaugh, I'm gonna shoot him,” I said as we stepped onto the elevator.

“Wait until after the job. Who knows, maybe he'll get shot and the situation will resolve itself.”

He had a point.

I hauled my bag over my shoulder and headed downstairs with him. Everyone else was waiting in the vehicles, ready to

take off for the airport. “Where are we headed?”

“Chicago.”

Didn't Lori say she was from Chicago? She looked like she could be from the Windy City. Hell, she fit right in with that blue hair waving around. It was a tad outside what I normally went for, but I couldn't deny that she was amazing in bed.

“Hey!” Cash snapped in my face. “We're trying to have a meeting here.”

“Sorry, I'm listening.”

I shoved the images of her naked body writhing below mine to the back of my mind, and focused on the job at hand. By the time we were at the airport, we were fully briefed on what we needed to do. Thankfully, it wouldn't take that long to fly to Chicago.

As soon as we were all on board, we geared up and prepared for the mission, going over the schematics of the building and where we'd all be positioned. Thankfully, after the last job, there were twelve of us.

“I'll cover from across the street here,” he pointed to the screen, “on this rooftop. I need a spotter.”

“Gotcha covered, boss,” Brock nodded.

“Good, then Lock, Edu, and Scottie can cover the east stairwell. Eli, you'll head up the west side. I don't know what we're going to find when we get there.”

“What's our extraction point?” I asked.

“Here,” he pointed at the blueprints. “Safest way out with Lock waiting in the alley. You'll take him to the safe house while the rest of us ensure you're not followed. Eli, you'll break off first and head to the safe house.”

“Gotcha.”

“Once we're sure nobody has followed you, we'll reconvene at the safe house and go from there. If you don't

hear from us within one hour of last contact, you move to the secondary safe house.”

“Roger that,” Lock nodded.

“Alright, let’s prepare for landing,” Cash ordered. “Let’s get in and out with no one injured this time around.”

He looked pointedly at me, which I took offense to. “Hey, it’s a scrape. It’s not like I’m actually injured.”

“You’re up in the rotation.”

“Meaning what?”

“Your time has come,” IRIS grinned. “Do me a favor, if you’re gonna get banged up, make it interesting. Jane’s been bugging me for new ideas for a book.”

“Sure, I’ll do my best to help out.”

“Ooh, and Zoe has that manuscript coming up,” he winced. “Don’t forget.”

“My days of being in front of the camera are over,” Lock insisted. “I had enough to last a lifetime.”

“Don’t worry,” Red grinned. “I don’t think she has any parts available for a lovesick model.”

“I wasn’t lovesick.”

“You went shopping on HSN,” I retorted. “Your house is filled with useless crap. Tate moved out because he couldn’t walk anywhere without tripping over boxes.”

“And rightfully so,” Lock answered. “It’s my fucking house. I’ll have whatever boxes I want lying around. Besides, that contract wasn’t binding. Who pays someone in Funyuns?”

“Fox,” we all answered.

“Well, everyone can relax,” Cash cut in. “I talked with the contractors, and they said they should be done this year. That means everyone can finally have the space they need.”

“Hey, what about the mansion?” Kavanaugh asked. “Who gets that?”

We all looked at Cash curiously.

“Hey, it’s my company. I should get it.”

“If anyone’s going to get it, it should be me,” Thumper responded. “I have the bum leg.”

“You already have a house,” I said.

“Clearly, it should be me,” IKE cut in. “I just joined the company. I have no house plans set in motion, whereas you guys already have plans laid out. If I decide not to stay with the company, no one has built a house unnecessarily for me.”

“Bullshit,” Brock snapped. “If anyone’s going to get it, it’s whoever has the most kids.”

“That’d be me,” Red grinned.

“You have a house in the country. Why the fuck would you want to live in that mansion?”

“Because I have the most kids,” he said as if I was stupid.

“And it’s connected to the electric at the silo,” Kavanaugh surmised. “This is about an electric bill.”

“This is not about an electric bill,” Red insisted. “This is about taking what is rightfully mine as the man with the most kids.”

“Actually, in just a few months, Fox will have another one.”

“Yeah, and don’t discount the rest of us,” Thumper snapped. “Just because we don’t have kids yet doesn’t mean I won’t pump out a few in the next couple of years.”

“Yeah, you can’t do that,” Cash cut in. “I sort of need Bree to stay focused on the accounting end. Maybe you could wait a few years. Or more.”

“Sure, I’ll plan my procreation around the company’s needs.”

Cash grinned. “I knew you’d understand. And the house stays in my hands. Sorry, you can go fuck yourselves.”





# SARAH

I was late. Even with setting my alarm clock, I still couldn't get out of bed on time. In my defense, I had a red-eye flight and only got one hour of sleep when I got home. I probably shouldn't have even gone to sleep, but Eli had thoroughly fucked me and all I could think about on the plane was his body between my legs.

“Sarah! My office, now!”

I spun around and stared at my boss's angry face as he glared at me before storming into his office and slamming the door. I wasn't sure why he slammed the door if he wanted me to go inside. I hurried over to my desk and dropped my purse and briefcase by the desk. I dug inside, knowing he would want the information from my trip.

“Late night?” Miranda smirked at me from her desk.

“I caught the red eye,” I told her, digging through for the paperwork I needed.

“Yeah, that's not exactly what I meant. You have that just fucked look. Did you even wash your hair?”

Flushing red, I patted my hair, remembering how I thought I would take care of it when I got home. “Shit,” I muttered.

“Giiirrl,” she laughed. “Was he good?”

“The best,” I said dreamily. Then I remembered what I was supposed to be doing and plopped my briefcase on my desk and started unloading it since digging around wasn't helping.

“I knew you needed a good boner.”

“You’re so disgusting,” I laughed.

“And you’re so nasty. I think I still see cum in your hair.”

I instantly shoved my hands into my hair before remembering that nothing that sordid happened. I narrowed my eyes at her. “Nice try.”

“I still gotcha.”

“Sarah!” my boss shouted.

“Shit, I am in so much trouble. What’s up his ass today?”

She shrugged, grabbing her coffee off the desk, spinning in her chair lazily. She didn’t have a care in the world. Of course, nobody else was under pressure to make sure Mr. Nelson had what he needed. That laid firmly on my shoulders.

“Ginny told me that he didn’t leave the office until after ten last night, and then this morning, he came in and started tossing his office.”

Ginny was his assistant, and she always told us what kind of mood he was in. He wasn’t the friendliest person, but I’d never seen him quite like this before.

“Fuck, I can’t believe this! Where’s the file?”

“What file?”

“From my trip,” I answered, my high-pitched voice giving away how much I was freaking out. “I was picking up some documents for Mr. Nelson because God knows he couldn’t wait the three days it would have taken for the company to send the information he needed. And apparently, it couldn’t go in the mail because it was sensitive,” I said mockingly, using air quotes and everything. “And now I’m screwed because I can’t find it!”

I upended the bag as Ginny came around to my side of the desk and started helping me sort through everything. “Okay, relax. You put it in your bag, right?”

“Of course.”

“And where was the bag when you were with your midnight lover?”

I glared at her. I was not in the mood for teasing, but she had a point. “It was at my hotel.”

“Any chance someone could have broken in and taken the papers?”

I sighed in frustration. “I don’t know. Why would anyone do that? And how would they even know who I was?”

“Corporate raiders,” she nodded.

Was that a real thing? I just couldn’t imagine someone breaking into my hotel room over documents. Nothing at this company could be that important. “But hotels don’t just let people into other people’s rooms. It doesn’t happen!”

“Girl, you have so much to learn. Money can buy anything.”

“Sarah!” my boss shouted again.

My head jerked up and my pulse pounded. I was in so much trouble. As he stared me down, the blood drained from my face and I scrambled through the papers, not even seeing what I was doing. “He’s going to kill me.”

“He’ll fire you,” she waved me off as if that wasn’t a big deal.

“I can’t afford to get fired! I have an apartment and a very needy cat. And a goldfish!”

She grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me hard. “Would you relax? Go in there and tell him you must have left the documents in your other briefcase.”

“I don’t have another briefcase!” I said, panicking and sweating out of control.

“He doesn’t know that. Just buy yourself some time.”

“But I’m a terrible liar!”

She gave me a deadpan look. Yeah, I didn’t buy that either. “Fine, I’ll just...make something up as I go.”

“That’s the spirit!” she said cheerily. “Man, I wish I had one of those spy cameras right now so I could see his reaction

when you tell him.”

And now I felt panicked all over again. “You said this would be fine!”

“Actually, I think I said the worst he could do was fire you,” she said thoughtfully. “You’d better get in there before he eats you alive.”

She gave me a firm shove from behind, nearly making me stumble and fall. Somehow, I managed to regain my footing and walk with very little confidence across the room. If I lived through this, I was going to kill her. Clearing my throat, I knocked on his door, wincing when he yelled for me to come in.

I turned the knob and immediately noticed how his eyes dropped to my hands. Rage took over and I almost slammed the door. In fact, I would have if it weren’t for the other man in the room that had me frozen in my tracks. I didn’t know who he was, but the look on his face screamed danger. Dark eyes hooded by the tendrils of dark hair that fell across his forehead only added to my fear. But it was the scowl on his face that had me taking a step back. It was a mixture of hatred and calculation. I didn’t know him, but I had no doubt he knew exactly who I was.

“Where is it?”

I swallowed hard, unable to take my eyes off the menacing man that sat in the corner chair, casually flicking a knife open and closed. “Um...”

“Sarah, where’s the fucking paperwork?”

I finally tore my eyes away and looked at my boss. I could see now that he wasn’t just upset. He was scared. This man was here for nefarious reasons, and I was now caught in the middle of it. Suddenly, my excuse that it was in another briefcase didn’t seem so bad. “Um...I forgot I took a different briefcase with me and left it at home. I just need to run out and get it.”

The man stood, flicking the knife open once more. Slowly, he walked toward me until he stood just inches from me.

“Why do I think you’re lying?”

Because I was, and I was terrible in a crisis. I always had inappropriate reactions, which was why I couldn’t help the next words out of my mouth. “I don’t know you well enough to guess how smart you are. But you look like a really bad guy, and if that’s the case, you’re probably not that bright. You flick that knife open like it’s going to scare me. Which, it has, but if you were really smart, you’d use something more intimidating to get the information from me than just flicking a knife. It’s really very juvenile.”

That may have been the wrong thing to say, but as I said, I had terrible reactions to situations like this. And that was how I ended up in the corner of the office with a bomb strapped to my chest.

“All this over paperwork?” I huffed. “If I had known it was so important, I would have faxed it over last night.”

“There was a reason I wanted the hard copies!” my boss shouted.

Now, I was in a pretty bad situation, you know, with things that went boom strapped to me. Thankfully, my boss wasn’t too much better off, which gave me at least a tiny gleeful feeling in my gut that if I died, he would too.

I watched as he wiggled in his chair, strapped down with duct tape and unable to move. Okay, technically, he was better off than I was, but at least if this thing went off, I’d be dead before I knew what was happening, so...bonus points for me.

“Where are the fucking documents, lady?” the man shouted in my face. I tried really hard not to flinch, but spit flew at my face and that was just disgusting. I was pretty sure some even got on my lips. Now I had gross man spit on me.

“Well, at least we know you probably don’t have cavities,” I mumbled.

“What are you talking about?”

I wiggled my nose, trying to somehow move the spit from my lips. “You have a lot of spit, and that’s great for helping to keep your teeth healthy. You should be happy that you’re not

one of those crazy, knife-wielding people that have rotten teeth. Although, that might give you more of a menacing air. Not that you're not super scary. You are. And the fear factor is definitely there. This is my first time being strapped to a bomb, so I'm pretty terrified right now."

"You don't sound terrified," he argued. "Which makes me think you have more to hide."

"No, not really. I just...don't know how to respond to these situations. Although, as I said, this is my first time strapped to a bomb. If there's some other way I should respond, please feel free to give pointers."

He looked at me like I was crazy, and frankly, I certainly felt that way at the moment. If I had a guardian angel, she would be hovering over me telling me to keep my mouth shut if I wanted to live. I'm sure other hostages in situations like this stood stock still and shook in fear. Maybe their eyes were wide and their pits were stained with large circles of sweat. Some of them probably even passed out. That would be the normal response, I was sure, but my body almost went into a kind of refusing to give any type of response. It didn't make sense, but then again, neither did being strapped to a bomb for not having papers. I should probably be more focused on that. It would probably save my life.

"Look," I said, trying to get to the heart of the problem. "I'm sure this is all some big misunderstanding. You want papers, and I'm supposed to have them."

"But you don't," the man hissed. "And why is that? Who are you working for?" he said, stepping toward me with his knife jabbed in my face.

I flinched back, gently raising my hand to push the knife away from my eyeball. "It's actually a pretty funny story. See, I got the papers and put them in my briefcase. Then I went to my hotel room and set them down. I went to the bar for a drink and met this super hot guy—"

"Was he the spy?" the man shouted.

I flinched back again, this time at how close he was to my face. He obviously didn't understand anything about personal space. Glancing over at my boss, I thought maybe he would interject or something, but he was the one shaking in his thousand-dollar shoes, and he didn't even have a bomb strapped to him!

"No, I'm pretty sure he wasn't a spy. He was more of the...desirable nature."

"You slept with him?" he accused.

"Well, in my defense, it had been a while. See, my boyfriend of five years slept with a waitress at a bar," I snorted. "As if that's not cliché."

"Douchebag," the man muttered.

"I know!" I exclaimed. "That's exactly what I thought. And then during one drunken night, my friends decided I needed to liven things up, hence the hair."

"It suits you," he said conversationally.

I beamed at his approval. It was strange. I probably shouldn't be happy that this man that terrified me just moments ago while holding a knife to my face was siding with me, but it somehow put me at ease.

"So, anyway, last night was my first night back on the horse, so to speak."

"Was he good?"

I grinned at him. "Amazing. But, we didn't exactly exchange numbers, so it's very unlikely I'll ever see him again."

"He didn't give you his number?" the guy said angrily. "Does he have any idea what he's missing?"

"Actually, I snuck out after we..." I cleared my throat and shrugged. "I couldn't miss my flight."

"And when you got back to your hotel, what happened?"

"Nothing," I shrugged.

“You’re probably going to want to stop moving. Remember, you have a bomb on you.”

“Oh,” I grinned sheepishly. “Sorry.”

He nodded. “Did it look like anyone had broken in? Gone through your stuff?”

“No, but then again, I was in a sex haze, so it’s possible I missed something. I literally grabbed my stuff and headed for the airport.”

“Nobody followed you?” I shook my head. “Did you ever set down the briefcase?”

“Possibly, but it was by my side the whole time. I don’t think it’s possible that someone rifled through it without me noticing.”

“So, it most likely was taken while you were with the guy from the bar.”

“That would be my guess.” And then I thought of something. “Hey! I bet you could get security footage from the hotel and see if anyone was in the hallway outside my room!”

“That’s not a bad idea,” he said, his brows pulling together. “I’ll be on my own, though. When the boss finds out I failed, I’m as good as dead.”

I snorted, pointing to myself. “Yep, I know how that feels.”

He turned and glared at my boss. “You’re an asshole.”

“You’re the one that put the bomb on her!” my boss shouted.

The man stalked over to my boss and cold-cocked him, knocking him and the chair to the ground. I smiled gleefully, grateful the man sided with me.

He walked back over with a frown. “I’m really sorry about this. If I could, I would take the vest off you and put it on that asshole, but I don’t know how to reverse it. You have about twenty minutes.”

“That’s okay,” I said with understanding. “You were just doing your job.”



“Yeah, but still...”

A siren sounded from outside and he spun around, looking out into the main office area where men were swarming. “My boss must have sent in a secondary party when I didn’t check in.” He faced me again. “Well, that sucks.”

“You can get away. That door leads out the back of the office,” I said, jerking my head to the door at the back.

“You’re helping him?” my boss spat. “He put a bomb on you!”

“Because of you,” I glared at him. “He’s just doing his job.” I faced the man again. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you anymore. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Simon,” he said as if I was waiting for the name.

“Simon,” I grinned. “You know, it doesn’t really suit you.”

He waved his hand at his face. “This is all a look. My boss said I needed to look more menacing. I usually wear glasses, but my boss made me wear contacts. I fucking hate them.”

“I’m sure. I couldn’t imagine sticking my finger in my eye every day.”

“It’s horrible. Anyway, I have to go, but it was really nice to meet you. And I’m sorry about the bomb thing. You’re a really nice person.”

“Sarah,” I told him. “And it was nice to meet you too. I hope you get what you need.”

“Thanks.” He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. I slipped my hand around to his back pocket out of habit and stole his wallet. Before he stepped away, I had it in my pocket. “I hope you somehow make it out of this.”

“Well, if I don’t, at least it’ll be over fast.”

He nodded, looking at me sadly before turning around and rushing out the back door. My boss glared at me, clearly unhappy with me.

“What’s your problem?” I snapped. “You’re not the one strapped to a bomb.”

---

When I imagined how I would die, it was never while attached to a bomb. Who goes that way? Suicide bombers, but not regular citizens. Maybe this was my penance for the bad things I did in life, though I was going to have to have a talk with God about just how bad my crimes were.

But a bomb would have been the more pleasant way to go. Screaming as I clung to my sexy one-night stand while free-falling from the fortieth floor was not the way I would have chosen to go. A bomb would have been instantaneous. I would have been dead before I knew it. But now, I knew my doom was rushing up to meet me. I would die a painful death. Maybe I wouldn't even smash into the concrete and die instantly. What if I bounced a few times and had internal injuries, all the while awake and feeling every second of the pain?

So, I was falling to my death, clinging to the man that gave me more orgasms than I'd had in a very long time. The chute opened and we jerked to a stop from our freefall. I breathed a sigh of relief that I hadn't smashed into the concrete and grabbed him a little tighter.

Man, he had really nice muscles. They were so hard. He pulled on the cord, yelling something at me, but I couldn't hear him over the rushing in my ears. It wasn't from the wind. It was from pure desire. I barely felt the explosion as part of the building blew up, but I used the opportunity to allow my hand to slip down his chest and brush over his cock. Call me crazy, but I wanted to feel him again.

As we swirled through the air, I felt his fingers tighten around me and remembered what it was like as he grabbed my hips and thrust inside me last night. I moaned, which he mistook as fear, pulling me closer to him. I wasn't going to say no to that.

"Hang on!" he shouted as he grabbed the cord. He tried to direct us away from the building coming at us fast, but had

little luck. We hit the building hard, but I didn't feel a thing as his strong body protected mine. But then we started falling really fast toward the ground and...yeah, I was still thinking about his hard muscles. But I did have the good sense to at least scream.

I had to pretend I was terrified.

“Why are we speeding up?”

“Uh...funny story,” he laughed.

I looked up into his gorgeous eyes and said the only thing I could think of. “That’s my line!”

“We’re about to hit the ground!”

Yeah, I kind of figured that, but was surprised when we bounced off an awning before smacking into the sidewalk. His arm was still wrapped around me for just a brief second before he rolled me off him. I instantly felt the loss of his body and sighed. For just a few seconds, I had him again. Damn, I really liked his muscles.

Sighing, I sat up and looked down at his dirt-streaked face, which did nothing to diminish his looks. When this was all over, he'd walk away from me and our one night together would be nothing more than a wonderful, orgasmic memory. At least I could think of him when getting myself off. Maybe I could ask him for a picture. Then I'd at least get to stare at his beautiful face while I laid alone in bed.

On the other hand, he thought I was a different person. Maybe I could still turn this around.

“So...funny story. I should tell you my real name.”

He didn't even look at me. “I'd rather have my wallet back.”

“Um...there's a slight possibility it was in the building.”

He sighed heavily, closing his eyes. “And you didn't think to tell me that when we were inside?”

“I sort of had a bomb strapped to my chest. There were more important things to think about.”

His eyes flew open and he sat up. “Why is that?”

My eyebrows shot up. “Should I have been thinking about something else when I was about to die?”

His frustration was obvious as he got to his feet, pulling me up with him. I giggled as his strong hands wrapped around my biceps and hauled me to my feet as if I weighed nothing. I pressed my hands to his pecs and leaned into his body. If he noticed my desire to be close to him, he didn’t say anything.

“I meant, why were you strapped to a bomb?”

“Oh, well, that’s a good question. See, Simon needed the paperwork from my briefcase, but I didn’t have it on me.”

“Simon? Is that the guy that called us?”

“Called you? I’m confused.”

He growled under his breath, but come on...I just fell out a window. I needed a minute to catch up.

“I work for a security company. We were called in to protect a man with sensitive information. Was that Simon?”

I snorted at that. “That was most likely my boss. No, Simon was the one that put that bomb on me. He didn’t actually want to, but that’s the business, you know?”



# ELI

That's the business.

What the fuck was wrong with her? I thought at first that I misheard her, but no...I was pretty sure she said that right.

“Are you friends with Simon?”

I waited for her answer, my body tensing as I waited. A jealous rage swarmed through me as I watched her lips twitch. If she said yes, I was pretty sure I'd hunt him down and rip him to shreds for putting her in danger.

She cocked her head to the side and grinned. “Can you really be friends with someone you just met?” I opened my mouth to answer, but she rushed on. “Simon had the unfortunate task of retrieving the information from my boss, but when I didn't have it, he had no choice but to strap a bomb to me. He didn't want to, but that's the job,” she shrugged.

“That's the job?” I didn't think I needed to ask if she was insane. I already knew the answer.

“Well, if it had been my boss, I'm sure he wouldn't have minded so much. Simon is really very misunderstood. I don't think he enjoys his work. I should really get ahold of him to try and get him to find another job, a more fulfilling one.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, about to lose my shit. “You want to contact the man that nearly killed you to help him find more meaningful work?”

“Hey, everyone deserves a second chance.”

IKE walked over, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “We have the client. We need to get going.”

I nodded, unsure of what to do with Lori. “You need to come with us.”

“Why?”

“Because you need to tell us what happened.”

“Oh, well, I could do that right now.”

“Lady—”

“It’s Sarah,” she interrupted.

I squinted at her in confusion. “You told me your name was Lori.”

“Well, yeah, but I had just met you. What if you were a psycho?”

“So, let me get this straight. You didn’t want to tell me your real name because I might be crazy, but you slept with me?”

“Like I said, it had been a very long time,” she said by way of explanation.

I didn’t get any of it. The woman was a conundrum I didn’t have time to deal with, but I also didn’t want to let her out of my sight, especially if she was making friends with people that were trying to kill her.

I grabbed her by the arm and started dragging her after me.

“Where are we going?” she asked, trying to keep up as her heels clacked on the pavement.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t, not if I wanted to keep my sanity. Besides, I wasn’t entirely sure what I was going to do with her when I got her back to the hotel. Fucking was probably out, and not just because I had a job to do, but also because I wasn’t entirely sure she was all there. That, and she stole my wallet. I was still going to have to get to the bottom of that one.

“You know, this was not the way I wanted to start this day. I could use a few more hours of sleep. And maybe some breakfast. Is there food where we’re going? I’m so hungry.”

I spun around and glared at her, not because I was angry, but because I was trying my damndest not to kiss her. “Do you ever shut up?”

Her jaw dropped open in shock. “Um...”

I raised my eyebrows waiting for her answer. “Well?”

“I’m confused. You want me to shut up, but then want me to talk. Which is it?”

Damn, I hated that she was right, so I continued walking and pretended none of that had happened. By the time we got to the minivans that were waiting in the parking lot, I was thoroughly worked up. Cash was handling the police, which meant we could slip out undetected, but it wouldn’t be long before they came knocking to question her. I had to make sure she was prepared for their line of questioning. If she started talking about how nice the bomber was, they were going to assume she was an accomplice.

“Man, these minivans are killer!” she exclaimed as she climbed inside.

Kavanaugh turned around from the front seat with a grim look on his face. “Yeah? Try being stuck in the back with a mummy. It might sound cool, but it’s freaky as hell.”

“You had a mummy back here?” she asked excitedly.

“Great,” Red muttered. “Another woman that’s excited by the action. Where do we find them?”

“I didn’t find anyone,” I clarified. “And she’s not with me.”

“Sure, you say that now,” Red huffed.

Not understanding, Sarah spoke up. “I’m sorry, are you talking about me?”

“Look,” I turned to her. “I know the action seems like a lot of fun, and maybe it’s even a turn-on for you, but we’re not



together.”

A confused expression came over her face. “We’re not together.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Abort, abort,” Kavanaugh coughed.

“Um...okay,” she said, her eyebrows pulling down. “Did *you* think we were together?”

“You’re acting like we’re together. I’m just clarifying, we’re not.”

An amused grin came over her face as she stared at me. “You know, if you remember, I left you in the hotel last night. And you followed me out here. Some might even say you were stalking me.”

“I didn’t know you were going to be in that building,” I argued.

But she continued as if I hadn’t said a word. “And then you stayed behind to get that bomb off me. Frankly, I was aware I was going to die. I was prepared for it. I didn’t ask you to jump out a window with me.”

“Oh, please,” I argued. “I felt your hand brush over my cock when we were falling.”

She nodded gleefully. “I won’t apologize for that. You have a nice body. But I digress, I didn’t ask you to jump out a window with me. You did that all on your own. And then you could have left me behind with the police, but instead, you brought me to this killer minivan. Some would say it’s you that has a problem letting go.”

Again, Kavanaugh turned around in his seat. “You know, she’s got a point.”

“I was protecting her,” I shouted. “It’s what we do! Was I supposed to leave her up there to get blown up?”

He shrugged. “Sounds like she was ready to go.”

“So, now that you’ve dragged me away from my job, where are we going?”

Red finally pulled out of the parking garage and took us out of the city. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't speaking to Sarah unless I absolutely had to. But there was the case of my wallet. I had to know why she took it. Maybe there was more to her than I realized. Maybe she purposely took me upstairs to get information on me. But for what purpose?

I just wasn't ready to deal with her answers yet.

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"Fancy," she said in an approving tone as we stepped into the house.

Thumper's team was on standby, waiting for us to get back so we could figure out just what the fuck happened.

"Where's the client?" I asked.

Thumper jerked his head toward the room. "I locked him in there. He was driving me fucking crazy.

"Who's the client?" Sarah asked, her eyes lighting up with curiosity.

"Your boss," I answered, shoving my way further inside.

"My boss? You're protecting him?" I nodded. "You know he tried to have me blown up, right?"

"If you had stood still, I could have dismantled the bomb," IRIS grumbled as he walked into the room. "You know, most people are terrified to move when they know they're about to be blown up."

That point had me looking at her differently. "Unless you never thought you were going to die."

She cocked her head to the side thoughtfully. "Oh, I knew I was going to die. I just expected it to be fast." She shrugged as if it was no big deal. "Why worry about something you can't change?"

That was about the most fucked up way to look at things and had me even more curious about the woman I'd slept with.

I mean—the woman I rescued from being blown up. I had to forget that I'd slept with her. That didn't factor into the job at all.

“Can we just go back to why you even had a bomb on you to begin with?”

She walked around the room, admiring the decor when she sat on the couch with a plop. “Well, my boss sent me to gather these documents from our sister company, and after I did that, you know what happened.”

“The bar,” I guessed since she wasn't going to be concise.

“Precisely. I got the red eye home and went to work this morning, but I was running late, which only further pissed off my boss. Seriously, I was only twenty minutes late. The man needs to chill.”

“And these documents...what were they?”

I shrugged. “That's above my pay grade. I was told to go to the man in the CEO's office and retrieve the documents.”

“Wait, that's what your boss said? Go to the man in the CEO's office?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, don't you think that's weird? Why wouldn't he say to meet with the CEO?”

She looked at me like I was nuts. “Well, clearly he has a few screws loose. I don't know why he chose the language he did.”

I turned to Kavanaugh and Red. “We need to find out who the CEO is and who would have been in his office.”

I grabbed a paper and pen, then set it on the table in front of her. “I'm going to need all the information you can tell me about where you went and who you met with.”

“Okay,” she said, leaning forward to snatch the items. She started writing, but then glanced up at me. “What do you think the chances are that I won't have to go through all the hassle

of getting my license back? Do you think they'll just issue me a new one?"

"I don't know," I gritted my teeth. "What are the chances I won't have to explain to the DMV that my license was blown up in a building after it was stolen?"

"Technically, I didn't steal it. I would have returned it."

"You took it from me," I argued.

"Yes, but how do you know that it didn't just end up in my bag? We were a little preoccupied that night."

"She's right," Kavanaugh said as he walked over eating a yogurt. "You can't say for sure that she took it."

"Did you take it?" I asked her point blank.

"Yes."

Kavanaugh nodded. "Well...there you go. At least she's an honest thief."

"I'm not a thief. It just happened."

I scoffed, sitting down across from her. "Yeah, I always just happen to take other people's things."

"See?" she beamed, clearly not understanding my sarcasm.

Choosing to ignore that, I moved on. "Do you have a description of the bomber?"

"Tall, dark...his name was Simon. Oh, he wore contacts."

"How could you tell?"

"Because he told me. Can you believe his boss won't let him wear glasses because he thinks they're not menacing enough?" she snorted. "He favored a knife. He kept flicking it open, which I found weird because there are definitely scarier things than a pocket knife."

"It was probably all he could get through security," I grunted. "When did you have this in-depth discussion about his glasses?"

"Oh, right after he strapped the bomb to me. Yeah, he felt really bad about the whole thing. And he wanted answers

about the papers. That's when I told him that I went back to the hotel and met you. Let's just say he wasn't exactly enthusiastic that you didn't get my number."

"You left me," I said accusingly.

She nodded. "Oh, believe me, I told him. I think that'll endear you to him if you ever meet."

I stood, angry now that she was so worried about his guy. "I don't want to endear myself to this guy. He's crazy. He tried to blow you up!"

She stood right alongside me, raising her arms as if to calm me down. "Yes, but it was on someone else's orders. He really did feel bad about the whole thing."

I was about to lose my shit, which Red saw and came to take over. "Did you see how he left? Was he one of the men we took out?"

She huffed out a laugh. "No, of course not. He still had a job to do. I didn't want him to get in trouble, so I helped him escape."

"You—" Even Red was speechless at this point. "Why?"

"He was really very nice."

"You know, I think you have this whole reaction thing all wrong. You're not supposed to help the person who tried to murder you."

"Maybe it's Stockholm Syndrome," Kavanaugh said from across the room.

"After five minutes?" I argued.

"Look, I wasn't under the influence of his power or anything like that. Sometimes people make the wrong choices in life and you have to help them out. That's all I was doing."

"But by letting him go, you ruined a very good lead! We could have figured out what your boss wanted and had this whole thing wrapped up. We don't even have anything to go on other than he's tall, dark, and his name is Simon!"

“And he wears contacts,” she chirped. “But I also have his wallet.”

She pulled it from her pocket and handed it over, grinning at me the whole time. I slowly took it from her hands and sighed when I opened it. “This is Kavanaugh’s wallet.”

Her cheeks flushed red as Kavanaugh searched his pockets. “Oops.”

“Hey, what the fuck?” Kavanaugh stormed over. “How did you get my wallet?”

“It was falling out of your pocket in the van. You should really find a better place to keep it,” she explained. Then she handed over the other wallet. I really hoped it was this Simon guy and not one of my other teammates. I held out the wallet for Kavanaugh, who promptly searched it for anything that might be missing. When he stormed away in a huff, I assumed it was all there.

“This is good,” I said, handing the wallet over to Red. “See if Rae can pull up anything on this guy. Hopefully, he hasn’t already fled the state.”

“I’m sure he will. I suggested he check the camera footage from my hotel room. I bet they have whoever stole those papers on camera.”

If she wasn’t doing everything possible to ruin the case, I might actually hire her. Despite being a thief, she actually gained some very good intel for us.

“Red, call Scottie. We’re going to need the plane.”



## SARAH

“Wait, you want me to do what?” I asked, pulling my arm from Eli’s grasp as he dragged me toward the plane.

“We’re getting on that plane and you’re coming with us.”

“For what possible reason?” There was no way I was flying in that death trap. Didn’t they know the likelihood of dying? I’d already had enough close encounters to last a lifetime. Then again, if anyone looked back on the last twelve hours of my life, they’d think I was crazy for having this reaction. After all, I had come to peace with the fact that I would die.

“Well, first of all, you have some kind of weird friendship with this guy—”

“He has a name,” I cut in.

“And because of that, we’re more likely to get information out of him if you’re with us.”

I jerked to a stop after he tried pulling me along again. “How do I know you won’t hurt him?”

“Why do you care? He tried to blow you up!”

This guy just didn’t get it. Simon was so nice. He didn’t want to be there. He probably didn’t even like his job. “I don’t judge people based on one thing they do.”

“So, what exactly does it take for you to stay away from someone?”



I glared at him, feeling rage boil up inside me. “Well, if someone’s a jerk, I definitely don’t stick around.”

“I’m a jerk?” he asked incredulously.

“You’re being one right now. You’re judging him, just like you judged me.”

“Yes, I use basic reasoning to determine if someone is worthy of my attention.”

I couldn’t help but snort at that. “Worthy? I had no idea it was such an honor to be in your company!”

“That’s not the way I meant it,” he gritted out. He took a deep breath, staring at the plane as if pondering something. “Why him?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t entirely sure myself. I just had a feeling about him. “He was nice to me. I could tell he didn’t actually like his job. Maybe he was a troubled youth and got into that line of work for all the wrong reasons. You never know what makes someone tick. Now, if he hadn’t been remorseful, yeah, I wouldn’t be so willing to help him.”

“What about your ex?” he asked suddenly, his eyes searching mine.

“What about him?”

“He cheated on you. That’s not nearly as bad as trying to blow you up. Does he deserve your forgiveness?”

That was an easy one to answer. “Possibly, but I’ll never speak to him again. He broke my trust. He was with me for five years. I could more easily forgive someone that doesn’t even know me than someone that’s supposed to be the man I share my life with. That’s a deal breaker.”

He nodded slightly. “I can understand that.”

“So...does that mean I can go home?” I asked hopefully.

His lips twitched. “Nope, you’re still coming with us.”

He turned and headed for the plane, leaving me slack-jawed. I hurried after him, wondering why this was so

important. “You don’t need me to come with you! You already know who he is!”

“Are you in a hurry to get back to the office?” he asked over his shoulder. “I would think the fact that there’s a big hole in the building would mean you have at least a few days off work.” He stopped walking and turned to me curiously. “What do you do anyway?”

I stumbled to a stop, nearly running into his chest. Flustered at my hands suddenly pressed against his hard muscles, I fumbled over my words. “I work doing various... administrative things and...what does it matter?” I snapped.

He shrugged and continued. “What about your boss?”

“What about him?” I asked, walking quickly again.

“His job. What does he do?”

“He works in accounts payable for the company.”

“Boring,” Eli answered, shaking his head. “It sounds like your boss has been dipping his toes in the company profits.”

I wouldn’t be surprised by that, but how could he make such a bold statement without proof? “Whether he has or not, it doesn’t affect me.”

“It sort of does. He did have you strapped to a bomb.”

We reached the bottom of the steps, but I was still determined not to go on this trip. More than that, I knew going up in this hunk of junk would be the end of me. “I can’t go. I have a cat and goldfish to take care of.”

But he continued up the steps anyway. “I’ll make sure they’re taken care of.”

“How? You don’t even know where I live!”

“I had Cash run your ID,” he said over his shoulder.

That had me running up the steps after him. “You did what?”

“Yeah, like you can talk. You stole my wallet. Besides, it’s like I said, I needed your help. I had to make sure you were—”

But I didn't hear the rest as he entered the plane and turned down the aisle. Frustrated, I ran after him and chased him down the aisle.

"—all ready to go?" he asked one of his coworkers.

"Scottie's just doing the final check."

"Excuse me," I cut in. "We were having a conversation."

He turned back to me and frowned. "I thought we already worked this out."

"No," I said in an exaggerated tone. "You told me I had to go with you. Then you drove me to the airport and just kept walking away whenever I tried to discuss this with you."

"You should take a seat. You're in the way."

I turned and saw another bulky man making his way down the aisle carrying several bags. "Sorry," I said, slipping into the seat and making room for him.

"No problem," he nodded, walking past me.

I stepped back into the aisle to argue further when the man named IRIS suddenly got up.

"I just need to slip past you."

"Of course," I said, stepping out of his way, then facing Eli again. "You can't just order me around," I said as I was once again shuffled as another man walked toward me with a huge bag that nearly knocked me over.

"You're not in the military," Eli nodded.

"Exactly," I said, sidestepping the next man to walk toward me. Geez, I felt like I was on a commercial airliner instead of a private plane. "I'm not one of your men."

"Trust me, I know that," he grinned, reaching into an overhead bin and taking a bag from a man that walked up behind me. "Step back." I did as he asked, getting out of his way. "And I would never want you to feel like you don't have a choice."

Finally, we were getting somewhere. “I’m glad you see things my way.”

Eli motioned me into the row of seats, so I slid in, then another as he crowded in next to me. I followed suit when he sat down. I felt like we were finally getting somewhere.

“As I was saying, I can’t just up and leave my life. I have animals relying on me.”

His eyebrows pulled together. “Is a fish considered an animal?” He grabbed the seat belt and pulled it across my waist, motioning for me to lift my arms. Out of habit, I did as he asked while he secured the strap.

“Yes, they have brains and can feel pain.”

“Huh,” he nodded. “I guess you learn something new every day.”

“It’s actually a member of the carp family.”

“I would not have guessed that.”

*“Please make sure all barf bags and weapons are stored. We are now clear for takeoff.”*

“Takeoff?” I screeched as I tried to stand, but was jerked back in my seat. My eyes flicked to the door, but it was already closed. “But I have to get off the plane!”

“You should try to calm down. Scottie’s a nervous flier.”

“Who’s Scottie?” I screeched. At this point, I was about to jump out of the plane.

“He’s the pilot. He’s usually pretty steady, but we’ve had some bad luck lately. Most recently, a bird got sucked into the engine. Everyone on board had to jump.”

My eyes widened in panic as I slowly turned to face him. “From the plane?”

“Well...yeah.”

“That’s it!” I yelled, struggling to unbuckle. I finally worked it out, and when Eli wouldn’t move, I climbed over the seat and jumped into the aisle. I could hear him calling after

me, but all I could think about was getting off this plane. “Help! Someone help!” I started yelling as we rolled down the tarmac. I could see the ground turning outside as the plane got into position. I didn’t know much about planes, but I knew if I got on one, I was likely to die a very slow, painful death. Then again, if I fell to my doom, I might just crash and burn, which would at least be quick, if not painless.

I started jerking on the door, but was ripped away at the waist as Eli carried me back to my seat. I slammed my foot into the seat we were about to pass to prevent him from carrying me further. “No! You can’t make me fly!”

“It’ll be a short trip,” he said as if I wasn’t losing my shit right now.

“I don’t care if it’s a five-minute trip! You can’t make me go up in this death trap!”

“It’ll be fine,” he said again.

Why was he so calm? Why wasn’t he freaking out about going up thousands of feet in a metal machine that wasn’t meant to take to the skies?

He finally pushed me past the seat, but I twisted in his arms and grabbed the seat as he tried to carry me further. My nails dug into the fabric as I screamed for my life. Then I glanced out the window and saw the plane lifting off the ground.

“No,” I whispered, sagging in his arms as we climbed higher and higher. I didn’t even notice us soaring up into the clouds as the light faded and I passed out.



## ELI

“That worked out well for you,” Red snorted as he watched me buckle Sarah into her seat. Hell, if I knew she was going to panic and then pass out, I would have just sedated her.

“It’s not like I knew this was going to happen.”

“And what exactly did you think she would do when she started clawing at the seats? Man, you really misread the situation.”

“We need her,” I insisted.

He looked at me with those knowing eyes. “Do we really?”

“Oh, like you have room to talk. You got us all involved in Zoe’s screenplays. You had us all over for dinner at her mother’s house. Hell, Cotton is practically part of our lives on a daily basis!”

“And I’ve given into the fact that my life is better with Zoe in it. You should do the same instead of making excuses. Right, Kavanaugh?”

He looked up from his magazine, raising his eyebrows in question. “What? Sorry, I stopped paying attention after she passed out.”

“You’re a dick,” I said, taking the seat across from him. “You’re the one that wanted this to happen.”

“For a night,” he said slowly. “I didn’t intend for you to follow her to Chicago and get her involved in this.”

“I didn’t follow her. We just happen to be going to the same place.”

“And she just happened to be in that building?” he asked. “Doesn’t that seem suspicious, especially after you knew she stole your wallet?”

“Hey,” I pointed a finger at him. “I fucking told you that would happen. If anything, this is all your fault.”

He snorted, flicking his magazine open again. “Who took her to his hotel? Who passed out and didn’t keep an eye on her?” He closed the magazine, crossing one leg over the other as he leaned forward. “Who insisted on bringing her on this plane?” He leaned back again and opened his magazine. “If she’s involved, you only have yourself to blame.”

“Involved in what? You think she somehow found me in a different city, slept with me, stole my wallet, then had her boss call Cash for protection, then had some psycho strap a bomb to her...all in the attempts of achieving what?”

Kavanaugh nodded. “That’s the question.”

Red glanced her way, then leaned forward. “Do you think this has to do with Rafe?”

“In what way?” I asked incredulously.

He shrugged. “No one ever knows until his plans play out. Look at Liberty. Hell, look at Asher. That job destroyed his life.”

And while that was true, I just couldn’t see Sarah as some pawn in Rafe’s game. “If that were true, you’d have to show me how any of this is related to The Syndicate. Until then, this is all a terrible coincidence.”

IRIS came stomping down the aisle, plopping down in the seat next to me. “You and I have to talk,” he sighed.

“About what?”

“Well...” He glanced over at Sarah, who was still passed out. “This chick...what exactly do you know about her?”



“Here we go,” Kavanaugh grinned. “Looks like I’m not the only one with suspicions.”

“She’s just a woman I slept with,” I spit out. “Don’t tell me you’re buying into this whole crap about her being involved.”

“Just think about it,” he said, shifting in his seat. “Have you ever seen someone so calm when strapped to a bomb? And then the very wire that triggered the bomb was pulled when you tackled her to the ground? That has to be some kind of fucked up fate.”

“Precisely. It is fucked up. And so she has a terrible reaction to being strapped to a bomb. Who wouldn’t?”

“She was asking what the different parts of the bomb did,” he hissed. “I’ve never seen someone so calm when they knew they were about to blow up. Well, aside from Rae, but she’s a different can of worms.”

“I wouldn’t let her hear you refer to her as worms,” Red grinned.

“My point is...” He glanced behind him at Sarah again. “I think we need to do a little digging into this woman.”

“I already had Cash run a background on her. It came back clean,” I hissed. “What more do you want?”

“I wouldn’t mind a dental,” Kavanaugh shrugged. “Maybe she switched faces.”

“Switched faces?” I said, looking at him like he was an idiot.

“Anything is possible with Rafe. Look at what happened with Johnny’s woman.”

This was insane. They were all insane. “Look, I agree that this all seems like a weird coincidence—”

“More than weird,” IRIS huffed.

“But we are not—” My body jerked as the plane dipped suddenly. I latched onto IRIS’s hand, though I’d meant to grab the armrest.

“Now’s not the time to get chummy,” he snapped.

“What the fuck is going on?” I snapped, unbuckling and getting up to check on Sarah. She was slumped against the seat, still passed out. The plane dipped again and I fell into her lap. She jerked awake and upon seeing me, slapped me hard across the face as she screamed.

“Sarah—”

She screamed again, her hands slapping and scratching as she shoved her knee into my stomach and shoved me away.

“Now’s not the time for hanky panky,” Kavanaugh shouted.

“I’m not—oomph!” I fell hard backward as she shoved her foot into my stomach and kicked me away. I fell into IRIS’s lap, who shoved me to the ground.

“What the fuck did I just tell you?” he glared at me.

“I was—”

“Help!” Sarah started screaming. “Help! They’ve kidnapped me!”

“Lady, will you shut up! We’re in the air. No one can hear you!” Kavanaugh shouted.

Red turned and punched him across the jaw. “That’s no way to speak to a lady. Not even one we suspect of being a double agent.”

I shoved off the ground and swiped at the blood on my lip. I must have caught my face on the seat as I fell. The plane dipped again and the oxygen masks dropped from the overhead compartment.

“Oh, God! I knew it was going to end like this!” Sarah shouted.

“You know, I had a prime seat picked out in that building,” IRIS said conversationally. “The bomb would have gone off and ended me just like that,” he snapped his fingers, then sighed dramatically. “Now we have to go through this whole waiting game. Will we die? Will we live? This back and forth is giving me an ulcer.”

I rolled my eyes and headed for the front of the plane. Jerking back the plastic, I sat down in the co-pilot's seat. "What's going on?"

"What?" Scottie shouted.

I grabbed the headset and pulled it on. "I said, what's going on?"

He motioned to the front of the plane. "Bad weather. What's it look like?"

"But everything's okay?"

"Sure," he shrugged. "As long as we don't get struck by lightning or fall into some weird third dimension."

"Piece of cake," I grinned, but the steely look I got from him was not one of agreement.

He tore off his headset and turned to me in anger. "Why the fuck would you say that?"

"Say what?"

"Piece of cake. Piece of cake! Like I don't have enough bad luck in a plane, and then you have to go say that and ruin everything!"

"I—"

"I," he said in a whiny voice. "Yes, you! Why the fuck did you come up here? I was doing good! I took Dramamine and actually felt really great about this trip. Even when the storm clouds rolled in, I knew everything would be fine! Now, you've ruined everything!"

"You can't possibly blame this on me!"

"If we go down, I'm telling Cash you're never flying with me again!"

"If we go down, we'll all be dead!"

Lightning flashed outside and I gripped the seats, preparing for the plane to go down. The turbulence was crazy, and over all that, I could hear Sarah in the back, screaming for dear life.

“Aren’t you going to go check on her?”

“Are you crazy?” I shouted. “I’d rather die up here with you than in the back with a screaming woman who beat me up!”

“She beat you up?” he asked, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye.

“Is that really the most important thing right now?” I yelled.

He frowned, then leaned forward and tapped the flight deck. “Hmm.”

“Hmm? What does that mean?”

“It means hmm,” he said, flipping switches and tapping it some more.

“Yes, but why did you say it?” I asked, a hint of panic in my voice.

“Um...it’s not a big deal. The radar went out.”

My eyes widened in fear. “What do you mean? Of course, it’s a big deal! Don’t most pilots need that to fly the plane?”

The plastic jerked back and IKE stood there, staring at us angrily. “I was trying to get some sleep. What the fuck is going on?”

“The radar went out,” I snapped.

“Just watch the horizon,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Just watch the horizon,” Scottie said mockingly. “Thanks for that. Like I hadn’t already thought of that!”

“How does the horizon help you know where we are?” Was I the only one who saw the major problem with this? “Without radar, aren’t we flying blind?”

Scottie’s jaw clenched as he kept a tight grip on the yoke. “It’s not a big deal. It’s happened before and it all worked out fine. Of course, it was night then and I had the moonlight to help.”

“It’s not night,” I pointed out.

“Really?” he said sarcastically. “Everyone’s full of brilliant things to add today!”

The plane jerked harder as the turbulence increased. I strapped in and held on for dear life as IKE stood beside me, his arms crossed over his chest as if we weren’t about to crash.

“Will you go sit down?” I yelled at him. “Scottie’s trying to concentrate, and he can’t do that with you lording over him.”

His eyebrows twitched as he stared at me. “Are you intimidated by me?”

I laughed at that. “Sure, I’m really scared of your fancy suits and metal bracelet.”

“Hey, that bracelet is killer,” Scottie argued. “And it’s more distracting that you’re yelling at him than it is for him to stand there.”

“Sure, take his side,” I huffed in annoyance.

The plastic ripped back again and Kavanaugh joined us. “Were you planning on coming back and calming your woman down?”

“She’s not my woman,” I argued.

“She had your wallet,” IKE pointed out. “That seems like something a girlfriend might have.”

“She has it because she stole it, not because I gave it to her for safekeeping.”

“Do you think it’s a bad thing if we end up someplace other than our destination?” Scottie asked.

“I’m just saying, she’s your responsibility. She kicked Red in the face!”

“She did what?”

“Why would we not end up where we’re supposed to?” IKE asked Scottie.

“Yeah, he was trying to calm her down and she freaked out,” Kavanaugh exclaimed. “I got the hell out of there. I’m

not about to be taken down by your woman.”

“Because I don’t have any fucking radar!” Scottie yelled. “Why are there so many of you in here?”

We all turned at the sound of running. The plastic was torn down as Sarah flung herself into the cockpit, screaming as she looked at the storm. “We’re gonna crash!”

IKE turned back to me with a raised eyebrow. “Is this your idea of controlling your woman?”

“She’s not my woman!” I shouted, unbuckling and standing up just as she turned to me, her eyes wide with fear.

“You did this to me!” She tried to slap me, but I caught her by the wrist, preventing her from completing her mission. But that didn’t stop her from kneeing me in the balls and then jerking her wrist out of my grasp. Her elbow connected with Scottie’s head as I bent over, groaning as my balls shriveled up.

The plane dipped as Scottie took the hit. Lights flashed and an alarm sounded as the plane started to nosedive. My body was tossed forward into the flight deck.

“Get off the yoke!” Scottie shouted, trying to push my body away, but I was pinned by Kavanaugh, who fell on me.

“Christ, what a mess,” IKE grumbled, uncrossing his arms as he pried Kavanaugh from me, then grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me off the yoke. Scottie quickly pulled up, and the alarms died down. Sarah was still screaming, making us all go deaf. In one swift move, IKE wrapped his arm around her neck and put her to sleep.

Red ripped the plastic back and glared at all of us. “What the fuck is going on up here?”

IKE hauled Sarah’s body backward and practically tossed her at Red. “Here, hold this.” When he turned back around, we were all staring at him like he was crazy. “What? We all wanted to do it.”

---

“This is not Florida,” IKE said as he stood at the top of the stairs of the plane.

“Hey, I told you the radar was out,” Scottie argued. “I was just trying to make sure we landed at an airport.”

Sarah was bent over in her seat, hyperventilating even though we were on the ground. “I can’t believe you did this to me. I told you I didn’t want to get on the plane!”

“I didn’t think you were serious!” I said in frustration. “You just took a flight home the other night!”

“Yes, but on my terms! I had my medicine and I was calm. This—” she pointed around us, “was most definitely not on my terms! You kidnapped me!”

I was about to open my mouth and argue that point when Kavanaugh stepped in. “You can’t kidnap someone you know.”

She looked at him, then turned and shook her head slowly as she stared at me. “What kind of psychos are you? Do you realize how insane this is? I’m an American citizen! You can’t treat me like this!”

“Are we doing this, or do you need me to knock her out again?” IKE asked, turning around to face us.

“That was you?” she said accusingly. “How dare you!”

“Yes, how dare I stop a hysterical woman from taking down the plane. Good point. I should have let us all die. Can we go now?”

He turned and walked off the plane, not bothering to help with the luggage or anything.

“I’m through with this job,” Scottie muttered. “You can get your own ride home.”

“I can’t just get another ride,” I argued. “We have weapons!”

He turned and got in my face, hissing at me through clenched teeth. “Up until Cash started making me fly for the company, I had a stellar flight record. Sure, I threw up occasionally, but I never lost a plane. Now, we’ve lost three planes and I almost crashed again, all because your woman couldn’t keep her shit together!”

I stared at him as I slowly wiped the spit from my face. “And how were you planning to get home if not in your plane?”

He opened his mouth to argue, but instantly realized his problem. “I’ll hire someone else.”

“Yeah,” I snorted. “Like you’d ever let anyone touch your plane.” I clasped him on the shoulder and squeezed slightly. “It’s okay to admit you like the thrill of it.”

“I do not,” he bit out. “Do you know many pilots that enjoy throwing up when flying?”

I thought about that for a moment. “Well, since you’re the only pilot I know, I would have to say yes. You wanna help with the luggage?” I asked, jerking my thumb over my shoulder.

Before he could answer, I turned and walked away from him. I was going to have to have a talk with Cash. Scottie was quickly losing his grip on reality. We needed a few wins under our belt in the flying department if we were going to convince him to keep flying for us.

I desperately wanted to just unload and move on, but I had Sarah to deal with. She was slightly less hysterical, but I needed to calm her down if I wanted her to behave on this trip.

“You ready?” I asked as if we just had an extremely pleasant flight.

She slowly looked up at me with a scowl. “Ready? Ready to get off this plane? Yes. Ready to go home? On a train. Ready to never see you again? Absolutely.”

I nodded in understanding, but I couldn’t really fulfill her requests. “We can definitely get off the plane, but going home



on a train isn't possible. We're not exactly in the United States anymore. And—"

She stood suddenly and marched into the aisle. "What do you mean we're not in the United States? Of course we are!"

I really hated when I had to keep repeating myself. And with Sarah, it was clear I was going to have to do it many times. "The radar went out. We're in the Caribbean."

"The—but that's part of the United States!"

"Only two of the islands. Yeah, we're not on one of them. But don't worry. We just need to hop off, get the plane fixed, and then we'll be on our way."

She pursed her lips at me. "I'll take a boat."

"I can't let you do that."

"Why not?"

"Because technically, you're under my protection."

"I don't need your protection."

I cocked my head at her. "Just earlier today, you had a bomb strapped to your chest. The evidence points to you needing all sorts of protection."

She uncrossed her arms, stomping her foot in frustration. "I was a victim of circumstance!"

"Yes, and until we figure out what's going on, you need someone to watch your back."

"I refuse," she said indignantly.

"I refuse your request."

Her jaw dropped, but I ignored it, turning and grabbing my bag. Since I hadn't been back to OPS yet, I still had clothes that would at least keep me somewhat cool in the warmer weather. At least we had the ocean breeze down here.

"Are you coming?" I asked, turning back to her. The guys were almost done unloading the plane, so all that was left was for us to skedaddle.

Her body was tense, but the longer she stood there, the more she realized she didn't exactly have a choice. "Fine, but just so you know, I won't enjoy one minute of this."

I rolled my eyes. "I will expect a bad mood from you the entire time."

With that, she gave a swift nod and marched past me to the steps of the plane. By now, the sun was going down, but the humidity was sticking to my skin as if it was midday. Still, it was a nicer view than Kansas, and while I didn't ever particularly have any interest in seeing the Caribbean, I couldn't deny that it was a nice place to get stuck.

Or so I thought.



# SARAH

Don't ask me how they did it, but the guys somehow managed to get us huts right on the water. Despite how I arrived here, I had to grudgingly admit that the scenery was beautiful. Even if I did have to share my lodgings with a man that basically kidnapped me.

I plopped on the bed and closed my eyes, wishing I could just wash away the day. I was exhausted after my late night last night and eventful day. All I wanted was to go to sleep and wake up tomorrow in my bed, but that wasn't going to happen.

"What are you doing?" Eli asked.

I heard him walking around the room, but I was ignoring him.

"Hey, I need that side of the bed."

I rolled over and snuggled further into the bed. "Nice try, but I always sleep on the right side."

"Okay, well, here you're going to sleep on the left side. I need that side."

Sighing, I opened my eyes and stared at him. "And why's that?"

"Because I have to protect you. Do you see this?" he pointed at the curtains that covered the doorway. "That's all that protects us from any threat."

I stared at him, completely baffled by his explanation. "Okay, and how does the right side provide you with... whatever it is that you need to protect us?"

“Because I can easily grab my weapon from the right nightstand.”

I nodded over and over, my eyes comically wide. “Right, and it would be so difficult to go left.”

He snorted. “I never go left.”

“Well, tonight you are.”

“No, that’s not going to happen.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, refusing to give in on this. “And just how do you plan on stopping me from taking this side?”

It was the wrong move, a challenge to the sexy man that already knew how to make me bend to his will. He stalked over to the bed, then grabbed me by the legs and yanked me toward him. I squealed as he jerked my legs apart and kneeled on the bed between them. My eyes widened at the sight of his growing cock behind his pants. This had not been my intention when I challenged him.

“Are we going to have a problem here?” He bent over, sliding his hand under my shirt to cup my breast.

I whimpered with need and hatred at my body betraying me. This was not the way any of this was supposed to go. I squirmed, hoping to get away from him, but all that did was encourage him. His eyes darkened as he tweaked my nipple. The visible shudder of my body was my undoing. His lips crashed down on mine and his fingers threaded through my hair, pulling me into him.

I moaned loudly, grinding my body up against his. The thick length of his cock ground against my pussy, making me want things that I shouldn’t. This was all wrong. He kidnapped me, and took me to this beautiful island to protect me!

Fuck it. The situation wasn’t really that bad.

I rolled over him over and sat up, grinding my body against his. My head fell back as I enjoyed the friction. His hands landed on my hips, guiding me along his cock as he hissed with every movement.

“I’m still sleeping on the right side,” I cried out when he thrust up against me.

“Like hell you are.”

I was flipped onto my back seconds later, and my pants were torn from my legs. I wasn’t sure how he did it, but I didn’t care as his cock nudged at my entrance. The man had hidden talents of undressing a woman. As infuriating as he was, I couldn’t deny the sexual chemistry between us. Every touch from him felt like electricity zapping through my body. Tingles skimmed over my flesh, causing me to shiver and shake. Of course, that could have been from his thick cock slamming hard inside me, or the way his fingers played my clit like he’d been doing it for years.

My whole body quivered and my breathing was shaky at best, and as I stared up at him, I knew I couldn’t give him the upper hand. I sat up, shoving my breasts in his face as I straddled his legs. His lips immediately latched onto my nipple, sucking it into his hot mouth. I took the opportunity to ride his cock, shoving him deeper inside me, making him forget who was really in charge here.

But as my orgasm swept over me, I forgot my original mission and nearly passed out in his arms from how hard I came. My whole body shook as I collapsed in his arms. Sweat dripped down my spine, and it wasn’t until he laid me down on the bed that I knew he had won.

“You’re still sleeping on the left side of the bed,” he grumbled.

I tried to slap him, but failed miserably as he grabbed my hand and pressed a kiss to my palm.

“Don’t be sweet,” I panted. “I haven’t given up yet.”

He chuckled darkly across the bed. “Keep trying. I’ll enjoy the challenge.”

And that’s how round two started.

And I still ended up on the left side of the bed.

---

The morning light filtered into the hut, waking me up long before I was ready. But the peaceful sound of the waves lapping at the shore was undeniably my new favorite sound. I sat up in bed, brushing the hair from my face as I held the blanket up against my chest. Eli was sitting in the corner of the room, sipping on coffee as he scrolled through his phone.

“I hope you have some of that for me,” I mumbled, still not feeling awake yet.

He held out his hand, offering me his cup. He didn’t even bother to look at me or get up from his seat. That just wouldn’t do. I slipped from the bed, stark naked, and sauntered over to him, snatching the cup from his hand. I stood in front of him, drinking his coffee. I watched as his fists tightened as he tried to ignore me, but he failed miserably.

After several seconds, he finally looked up at me. “What exactly are you hoping to accomplish?” he asked, his eyes firmly locked on my face.

“You mean besides getting you to acknowledge me?”

He fought to keep his eyes on my face, but failed miserably when I thrust my breasts out. His jaw clenched hard as he stared at me, and I couldn’t help but feel just a little proud that I still had what it took to make a man do what I wanted. Now that I got what I wanted, I turned and walked back to the bed, plopping down and covering myself with a blanket. Leaning back against the wall, I stared out the front at the ocean.

“How long are we going to be here?”

He tossed his phone on the table and walked over to me, sitting beside me. “Scottie found someone to fix the plane, but he’s having trouble negotiating pay with him.”

He grabbed the coffee cup from my hands and took a sip before handing it back.

“I need something to wear. There’s no way I’m putting on yesterday’s underwear.”

“You can borrow some of mine.”

My nose crinkled at that. “You want me to wear boys’ underwear?”

He narrowed his eyes at me, clearly offended by my statement. “It’s manly underwear.”

“It’s used underwear. That’s disgusting.”

“I have very clean underwear. You can either wear mine or you can go naked.”

And just like that, he presented another opportunity for me. He thought he was making me uncomfortable, but little did he know how much I could use this to my advantage.

“I think I’ll go commando. And you can take me dress shopping. I can’t wear pants down here.”

He scoffed at that. “I’m not taking you dress shopping.”

“Fine,” I grinned. “I guess I’ll just have to go out like this,” I said, flinging the blanket off my lap. I started for the door, wondering how far he was going to make me walk before he stopped me. Thankfully, by the time I got to the door, I was hauled off my feet and over his shoulder.

“Fine, you’ve made your point,” he grumbled. I slid down his body as he lowered me to the ground.

I couldn’t help the satisfied smirk that crossed my face as he grew hard against me again. “We don’t have time for that,” I said, pressing my hands to his chest. “We have things to do.”

His grip tightened on my hips and then his lips crashed against mine in a most indecent kiss that was interrupted by the clearing of a throat. I was immediately thrust behind his back as he did his absolute best to cover my nakedness with his body. I peeked around his shoulder, burying my face in his back when I saw one of his teammates standing there. This was the last thing I needed.



“Not to interrupt, but Scottie’s having some trouble with the mechanic.”

“Yeah, I already knew that,” Eli grumbled.

“So, I thought I’d stop by and see how you were doing. Clearly, you’ve got plenty to entertain you.”

I could hear the laughter in his voice and felt Eli tense under my touch. This probably wasn’t the way he wanted his teammate to find him, not that I relished it either. “Maybe you could leave so I can get dressed,” I said, not showing my face.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want you to be... uncomfortable,” he said with laughter in his voice. “I’ll be outside when you’re ready.”

After a moment, Eli turned around and sighed. “Well, that’s that.”

“That’s what?” I asked, confused by his statement.

“The guys know.”

“They already knew,” I pointed out. “It wasn’t exactly a secret. Now, I need to get dressed so we can go to town.” I walked around the room, collecting what clothes I could find. “What did he mean by he’d be waiting for us when we’re ready?”

“Breakfast,” he grunted.

My head shot up at that. “Ooh, I could really go for a bowl of fruit. I always imagined that fruit on an island was so much more delicious than at home.”

Again, he just grunted, but I caught the way he adjusted himself as I pulled my clothes on, sans underwear. I pulled my hair back in a ponytail and turned to him with a sigh. “Ready.”

“That’s it?” he asked, eyeing me warily.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“You’re not going to spend an hour in the bathroom?”

“Why would I do that? It’s not like I have anything here with me. And even if I did, I hate makeup. It just makes my

face feel icky.”

Again, he looked like he didn’t believe me, but he didn’t argue further. He jerked his head toward the steps and I followed him out. His friend was leaning against the hut, chewing on a blade of grass.

“Ready?”

“Yes!” I said excitedly. Suddenly, this little trip didn’t seem like such a bad thing. I mean, aside from the reasons I ended up here, I was pretty jazzed about the breakfast. “What’s your name?” I asked as I fell into step beside him.

“Kavanaugh.”

I beamed up at him. “I’m—”

I was jerked aside as Eli stepped between us and grabbed my elbow. Kavanaugh chuckled at the move, but stopped the minute Eli glared at him.

“Like I was saying, I’m Sarah.”

“The wallet stealer. Yep, I knew that.”

“I didn’t steal his wallet. It just happened to find its way into my possession.”

“Which is going to make it difficult for me to pay for anything since it’s now burned to a crisp in Chicago,” Eli muttered. “Looks like you’re buying.”

He snorted. “What’s new?”

“You also have to buy her a dress.”

Kavanaugh stopped walking, shaking his head. “No, I’m not buying that shit.”

“She can’t walk around in those clothes. She’ll roast.” Then he lowered his voice. “She’s not wearing any fucking underwear.”

“Ah, so that’s the problem.”

“Wait,” I cut in. “Why is it not new for you to pay?”

“Because his daddy’s a senator,” Eli jeered.

Kavanaugh brushed it off, but I saw the tension around his eyes. He didn't like that. "Yeah, and because he has money, I must have it too."

"He's actually dirt poor," Eli joked.

"Not dirt poor," Kavanaugh corrected. "I'm stingy with my money. There's a difference."

"Well, no need to be stingy now."

"Hey, I don't have to pick up the bill. Cash can cover our expenses. This is a work trip, after all."

They continued to banter as we walked into the diner and took our seats. I looked over the menu, practically salivating over the menu. I was starving, but then again, I hadn't eaten since sometime yesterday.

"Do you think all the fruit is fresh?" I asked, never taking my eyes off the menu.

"We're in the Caribbean, so I would assume so," Eli said.

They were silent as I looked over the menu. Then I saw all the different coffees. Wow, it was amazing. I didn't see this coming when we walked into the diner. There was nothing special about it. When the waitress came by, I put in my order, earning shocked looks from the guys when they heard how much I wanted.

"What? I'm hungry. So, what's it like to be in protection services?"

"It's..."

"Fine when you don't have a client that's being a pain in the ass," Kavanaugh muttered, cutting off Eli's response.

"Oh, do you have many of those?"

Eli turned in the booth to face me. "You do remember the plane ride, right?"

"Of course. You kidnapped me."

"You attacked all of us. You nearly broke Red's nose. And let's not forget you kneeling me in the balls. You're lucky I was

able to get it up last night.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Oh, I’m lucky? I had no idea it’s such an honor to be fucked by you after you dragged me onto a plane unwillingly.”

“Would you keep your voice down?” he hissed, then grinned at a couple staring at us. “How’s it going? Beautiful morning.”

“You tried to take down the plane,” Kavanaugh said, narrowing his eyes at me. “What aren’t you telling us?”

“About what?” I asked, confused by the question.

“Was it your boss? Were you trying not to get him into trouble?”

Okay, now I really wasn’t following. “Why would I not want to get him into trouble?”

“Because you were splitting the pot,” Kavanaugh said as if it was common sense.

“Splitting the pot...you think I somehow got myself into that vest to...make his story more plausible?”

“It’s crossed my mind.”

I turned to Eli, wondering if he had the same reaction. He held up his hands, shaking his head. “Don’t look at me. I don’t sleep with people that try to blow themselves up.”

Well, at least I had one person on my side. “So, let me get this straight,” I said to Kavanaugh. “Your premise is that I’m working with my boss.” He nodded. “And something went wrong with the paperwork that I was supposed to bring back. But before I even showed up at work, he called you and asked you to come in. And with that, he was already prepared to have Simon on standby to put me in an explosive vest. I’m still not sure what that would achieve, but we’ll go with it. And as this was all happening, I just went along with it because...” I shook my head, still not sure why. “I’m sorry, you’re going to have to fill in the rest for me. I’m confused.”

“Me too,” Eli huffed.

“Let’s say you’re working with your boss, and he called us in for protection. This Simon guy needed the papers and neither of you wanted to hand it over, so you concocted a plan to pretend you didn’t have what he needed. The vest was just a bonus to make you look innocent,” he smirked.

“Sure, I could see how that would be a plausible scenario.”

“See?” Kavanaugh grinned, leaning back in the booth.

“Except, I’m not sure why I would willingly go along with being strapped to a bomb all so I could get some money. If that was the case, I would have to know the bomb wouldn’t go off. And if a bomb squad was brought in, they would instantly know the bomb was a fake. In which case, the bomb would have to be real. And no sane person would strap themselves to a bomb just to get out of what...maybe prison time? Is death by bombing a better alternative?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

He shifted uncomfortably. “Well, it was a working theory. You were too calm about the bomb.”

I leaned forward so he could really see my face and understand what I was about. “I’m one of those people that don’t react well to situations. I laugh at funerals. Like, uncontrollable laughter, and always at the worst moments. A coworker told me her husband decided to become a woman and I laughed in her face. We’re not friends anymore. And last year during a parade, I bought a hot dog from a street vendor. I had it all loaded up and ready to eat when I was shoved and it fell to the ground. I burst into tears.” I leaned in even closer. “Over a hot dog,” I stressed.

Kavanaugh swallowed hard. “Maybe it was your time of the month.”

I rolled my eyes and leaned back in the seat. “Right, blame it on my period.”

“Face it,” Eli stepped in. “She’s not working with Rafe, and she didn’t try to blow herself up. You’re going to have to get over this.”

“Who’s Rafe?” I asked, curious about this new turn of events.

“Someone you don’t ever want to meet,” Eli said, then sighed loudly. “But something tells me you will.”

And on that ominous note, the food arrived.

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The food was fantastic, but even better were all the clothes, and I didn’t even like shopping. But being on an island made me suddenly want to wear a dress and walk on the beach. It was everything I always wanted on a vacation, aside from the men following me around. Well, I didn’t mind Eli being there so much.

The shopping area was one large outdoor market, filled with everything a girl could want. And it wasn’t just the fabulous dresses that caught my eye. The handbags were to die for.

“Ooh, look at this one!” I exclaimed, grabbing a bright blue dress with large, colorful flowers on it. I held it up to me and beamed at how beautiful it was.

“Please tell me you don’t actually expect me to help you pick out a dress.”

“No, but you could at least gush and tell me how beautiful I would look in it.”

“Again, we’re not dating. That falls strictly in the boyfriend territory.”

“Yes, but it also falls in the territory of a man that wants to get laid again tonight.”

He rolled his eyes at me, but stepped forward and eyed the dress. “I mean...it’s a dress and it’s blue.”

“Wow, so observant of you.”

“I’m a guy. I don’t know anything about this stuff.”

“Well, you know what you like to see on a woman.” I held the dress up to me again. “What do you see when you look at this?”

This time, he actually seemed to be thinking about it. “Without seeing it on your body, I would say, it’s fun and flirty.”

“That’s it?”

He scratched the back of his head. “The blue matches your hair.”

I rolled my eyes and replaced it on the rack. He was a terrible shopping partner. I turned and walked away, but he quickly caught up.

“You can’t just walk away like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m trying to protect you.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said, contorting my face comically. “Is there someone hiding in the dresses?” I dramatically pulled the dresses aside on the rack and looked for any sign of danger. “Or maybe there’s someone hiding behind the counter, just waiting to pull a tommy gun.”

“You’re not taking this seriously.”

“Because we’re shopping. What could possibly go wrong?”

“You want a list?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest. “Alright, you could piss off the sales clerk.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Your winning personality?”

My nostrils flared in anger. “I have a fabulous personality. I’m nice to everyone.”

“Maybe this person finds that kind of sweetness annoying. Maybe he doesn’t want you to be nice to everyone.”

“So, he wants a woman to be a bitch? That’s what he’s looking for in a customer?”

“Did you ever think that sweetness can be confused with flirting?”

I scoffed at the incredulity of it all. “Oh, so he’s worried I’ll be flirting with him and trying to get something for free?”

“Maybe you are. Maybe you’re the type of woman who uses men with her beauty and charm to wrap a man around her finger.”

I pursed my lips. “He doesn’t have to sell anything to me.”

“Maybe he can’t resist getting that sale.”

“Well, if that’s all she is to him, maybe she doesn’t want the clothes after all!” I snapped.

“Are we still talking about shopping?”

I turned and looked at Kavanaugh and the confused expression on his face. “Maybe we should just get back to picking out clothes.”

“Let’s do that,” he said, dragging me over to a dress rack. “What about these?”

“I’m sure I could find something that wouldn’t make the sales person feel like I’m using him for his clothes.” I angrily started shoving the clothes from one side of the rack to the other. But within minutes, I was checking out each dress and had completely forgotten about my argument with Eli.

“It’s just so hard to choose. I love them all.

“Sure,” Eli nodded, “it looks great.”

He wasn’t paying attention, though. His eyes were focused on something else across the street. I glanced behind me, but didn’t see anything.

“What is it?”

“Huh?” he asked, his eyes narrowing further.

I turned fully this time, but was spun around and guided over to the dressing room. “You should try it on. I want to see it on you.”



“But I could just wear it once we get home. Then you’ll still see it. Ooh! Look at this one!”

“Sure, it’s great.”

Was he going to say that about all of them? I eyed another absolutely hideous dress, just to see what he would say. I held it up in front of me and very innocently looked at him. “What do you think of this?”

“It’s gorgeous,” he said, his eyes firmly locked across the street. “It really brings out your eyes.”

I rolled my eyes and put it back. I knew men weren’t interested in shopping, but he wasn’t even paying attention to me. If he was watching some other woman, I was going to nut him.

“You know, you should look over here,” he said, practically shoving me across the market. “Look at these.”

He had pushed me up against a wall of phone cases, and when I tried to step away, he moved in front of me, never allowing me to get around him. I sighed heavily, tired of whatever game we were playing.

“Can I finish shopping?”

“Uh...” Without looking, he grabbed a giant sack of a dress off a nearby rack and shoved it at me. “Try that on.”

“There’s no way I’m wearing that.”

“Humor me,” he said, shoving me inside a nearby fitting room and jerking the curtain closed.

I immediately started stripping, but it was only a few seconds later that other dresses were tossed over the top of the curtain, making it bow under the weight.

“Try those on too!”

“Geez, the man doesn’t look at a single dress I pick out, but then he’s suddenly a clothing expert.”



## ELI

From the moment we walked into the market, I had a feeling of unease skittering down my spine. I knew Kavanaugh felt it too. His eyes were taking in every person nearby, checking them out just as I was. There was something off about this place, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I felt like we were being followed, but for what reason? Nobody knew us down here. We were essentially tourists like everyone else.

"I don't like it," I muttered to Kavanaugh after spotting someone across the street that didn't fit.

"Something's off. We need to get out of here."

"Agreed," I nodded, about to grab Sarah and leave when I felt another set of eyes on me from behind. Casually, I turned around, pretending I was checking out the merchandise. That's when I saw it. We were surrounded. Men were slowly closing in on us.

"You see this?" I asked Kavanaugh.

"I count ten. You?"

I nodded, wondering how the hell we were going to get out of here. If we ran, we'd be putting Sarah in danger. It would be better if we could stash her and take these assholes out without her ever knowing. Based on the plane ride, she'd freak out, and then we'd really be in trouble.

"I sent an S.O.S. We just have to hope someone gets here in time," Kavanaugh said.

“Ooh! Look at this one!” Sarah exclaimed from behind me.

“Sure, it looks great.” I was totally ignoring her, but in my defense, I had bigger things to worry about at the moment. I continued to follow her around the market, trying to locate a good place to stash her when I saw one of the men say something into a walkie-talkie. He was the one giving orders, and they were about to make their move. I had to get her someplace safe now.

I shoved her into a dressing room, not even aware of her arguments as I scrambled to get the situation under control. Just as I closed the curtain, I spun and landed my fist right in one of the men’s faces. Another man rushed at me, and I bent over, ramming my shoulder into him and tossing him into a rack of clothes. Kavanaugh was already fighting with another man, taking them out as fast as he could. I quickly grabbed more clothes and tossed them over the curtain, just to keep her busy.

“Eli! This dress is weird!” Sarah shouted.

“Yeah?” I shouted, ducking just as another fist flew past me. I grabbed the guy’s wrist and snapped it to the side, then bent it back, bringing the man to his knees. “Let me see!”

When I heard the curtain slide, I quickly kned the guy in the face, shoving him under the dresses hanging nearby just as she stepped out. Leaning against the rack, I grimaced at how frumpy she looked.

“It’s not really your style.”

“You’re the one that told me to try it on,” she pointed out.

I heard the guy groan and start to stand. “Get another.”

“But—”

“Let me see the orange one.”

She rolled her eyes and turned just as the man kicked my legs out from under me. Falling hard on my back, I rolled as he grabbed the metal rack and tried to plant it in my face. I

gripped the bar and twisted it, hitting him hard in the knee. He went down, crying out as I slammed it into his face.

“Is everything okay?” Sarah called out.

“Uh...yeah, I just stubbed my toe!” I told her, grabbing the man from behind as I wrapped my arms around his neck and started choking him out. His hands swung around as he tried to poke my eyes out, but slowly, his movements died down until he collapsed to the ground.

“He—” My breath was suddenly cut off as a leather belt was squeezed around my neck. Instinct kicked in and I tried to pry my fingers under it, hoping to alleviate the pressure. I felt like my eyeballs were bulging out of their sockets with every second that passed. I hadn’t wanted to kill anyone, but this guy was leaving me no choice. I scrambled for the knife strapped to my ankle, then turned the knife and slammed it into his stomach.

Just as quickly as the belt was wrapped around my neck, it was gone and the guy was falling backward. Bending over, I sucked in a breath and took a moment to collect myself. Then I stood and yanked the knife from his body. I was just about to wipe the blood on the man’s clothes when the curtain was jerked open and Sarah stepped out. The smile on her face quickly vanished as she looked from me to the man lying on the ground.

“Is he dead?”

I nodded my head to the side. “He will be soon.”

“And you did it.” Her voice was calm. I was waiting for the freakout that was bound to come.

I glanced down at the knife in my hand. “Yes.”

“Is he a bad guy?”

“Clearly.”

“Clearly,” she repeated. Not in a question or even a statement.

But I didn’t have time to think about that when her eyes went wide and her hands flew to her mouth. I could feel the

brush of air and ducked right before I was hit in the head. My fist slammed into the man's stomach, and I followed it with an uppercut. Blood sprayed across my face as the man bit his tongue and collapsed to the ground.

I stared at the lamp beside him and shouted at him. "Really? A fucking lamp?" I kicked him hard in the side but quickly abandoned the man at the sound of Sarah's scream. I spun around and bolted into action when I saw a man haul her over his shoulder and take off through the crowd.

"Everyone can see my underwear!" she screamed, beating at the man's back.

He glanced over his shoulder, then knocked a cart in my path. I leapt over it, nearly falling on my ass when I skidded on the strewn merchandise. Quickly regaining my balance, I shot forward, refusing to let this asshole take out a client. I never lost anyone. I grabbed a baseball off a cart as I ran through the streets, then whipped it at the man's knee, taking him down instantly.

Sarah screamed, rolling as she went tumbling away from the man. I hauled her off the ground, needing to get her away from here. I still had no idea if backup was on the way or not, or how many more of them would come after us.

"This is not the dress for a chase!" she screamed as I continued to drag her with me.

I glanced over again at the bright orange outfit. She was right. There was no way she'd blend in, but there wasn't time to change either. I steered her to the right side of the road and grabbed a scarf as we ran, ignoring the man yelling at me for stealing.

"Here!" I shouted, shoving it at her. "Wrap it around your head."

"You think this is going to disguise me? I'm a bright orange flamingo dancer!"

"Flamenco," I corrected, instantly hating myself for listening to Fox so much.

“I can’t believe this! All I wanted was a dress and clean underwear!”

“Well, you have the dress,” I shouted over my shoulder, cringing when I remembered she had gone commando.

The crowd grew thicker the further we ran down the street, to the point that I could no longer run through the crowd, let alone keep her right by my side. I spotted a guy getting off a moped and shoved my way to the side of the road until I reached him. He was already turning away, so I hopped on and jerked my head at Sarah.

“Get on!”

She quickly complied as I yanked on the wires to start it, but Sarah shoved her hand over my shoulder and handed me a set of keys. I glanced at her questioningly, but she just shrugged. I’d have to talk with her later about her penchant for stealing. I started the moped and sped off, watching in the mirror as the man tried to chase us down. It was a slow getaway, not just because of the vehicle, but also because of the crowd. The first chance I got, I took an alley and got us the hell out of there.

Sarah’s arms wrapped around my body, clinging tight to me as I finally picked up speed, as much as I could in a moped. I pretended not to feel the way her fingers skimmed over my abs, or how she dropped one hand indecently high on my thigh. However, not all parts of my body chose to comply with my brain.

When I was sure we were far enough away, I skidded to a stop on the side of the road and tore her hands from my body as I got off the tiny bike. “What the fuck are you doing?” I shouted.

“Me?” she asked, her eyes wide with confusion.

“Yes, you! You don’t feel a guy up while he’s driving!”

“I was holding on because you made me wear this ridiculous dress!” she said, getting off the bike and nearly falling to the ground with all the added material. “It was like wearing a parachute while you were driving!”

I hadn't thought of that. In fact, my brain short-circuited around the time she touched me. Still... "You had your hand on my thigh."

"I was holding my dress down," she argued.

I wasn't sure what to say to that either. I was positive she was trying to grope me, and all the while, she was trying to stay on the bike. "Well..." That was it. The only brilliant answer I had, so I resorted to being like Dash. "Clearly, you never grope a man while he's driving."

She narrowed her eyes at me and stalked closer. "*Clearly*, you should be more considerate when driving with a woman on the back of that contraption!" she snapped, her finger pointed at the moped.

Again, what the fuck was I supposed to say to that? I didn't have a clue, so I stalked forward and wrapped my hand around the back of her neck as I crushed my lips to hers. Screw words. They weren't important right now. All that mattered was tasting those sweet lips again.

And it would have been fucking great if it weren't for my phone interrupting us. I tore my mouth from hers and grudgingly shoved my hand in my pocket.

"What?" I snapped, not at all happy with this turn of events.

"Geez, why don't you yell at the guy who you abandoned in the market? Thanks for checking on me, by the way," Kavanaugh grumbled.

"Are you shot?"

"No."

"Do you have a knife wound?"

He snorted. "Of course not. What kind of idiot do you take me for?"

"Then why the fuck are you calling?"

"Oh, I don't know. Because we were attacked, then you took off. Call me crazy, but I wanted to make sure you didn't



need assistance.”

I glanced down, wincing at the bulge in my pants. I definitely needed assistance, but not from him. “We got away clean.”

“Glad to hear that,” he said drolly. “I’ll make sure to tell all the rest of the fucking team that showed up to save your ass.”

“Any idea who they were?” While I was on the phone, I might as well figure this out.

“Traffickers.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, sure I heard him wrong.

“Apparently, the Caribbean is not the best place for women to come if they don’t want to get snatched up and traded into the sex slave market.”

And we had an open fucking hut on the beach. Anyone could walk in there and take her in the middle of the night while I was sleeping beside her. “That’s fucking great. Any word on the plane?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fixed when the guy wakes up out of his drunken stupor.”

I clenched my jaw in irritation. “We’ll have to set up a security detail tonight.”

“Already on it.”



## SARAH

I may have been stretching the truth when I said I was holding my dress down. But it wasn't like I was going to tell him that I really was feeling him up instead of worrying about someone chasing us. That would be insane. It was his fault, though. I wasn't wearing underwear, and my bare skin was rubbing against his jeans. A girl only had so much self-control.

While he was on the phone, I took the opportunity to look him over again. He was just so pretty in a very manly sort of way. He wasn't like all the other men I dated—not that I was dating him. He made that pretty damn clear. When I compared him to others I went out with, I realized they were all boys. They still had that slight baby face. And what was with all the men wearing skinny jeans and bright colors? I felt like the age of truly masculine men had passed, and now we were left with guys that dressed like women. Sure, a guy could wear pink, but look beefy while doing it.

But it wasn't just the way he dressed. He still had that military swagger to him. I grew up in a military town, so I could spot one immediately. There was nothing sexier than a man in uniform, other than one *out* of uniform. I was a sucker for those bulging biceps and arms covered in tattoos. I loved when a man walked around with a *don't fuck with me* look. Some women liked a man in a suit. I liked a man to show me exactly how defined his body was, and then prove to me it wasn't all for show.

“Sarah?”

I jerked my gaze from his body and looked him in the eyes. He caught me staring at him, but I played it off like I was lost in thought. “Yeah?”

“Something you want to tell me?” he asked with a cocky grin on his face.

“Yes. This dress is chafing with no underwear. Perhaps we could get some.”

He groaned as I lifted the dress and got back on the bike. I may have lifted it a little higher than necessary, giving him a look at what was underneath the layers of fabric. Not that he didn’t already know.

Sighing, he climbed back on and waited for me to scoot forward. I made sure to rub my crotch against him, just so he would have to suffer the whole ride home. This was all his fault, after all. I had no idea where we were, but Eli drove through the town as if he’d been here for years.

When we pulled up outside our little hut, I reluctantly let him go and got off the scooter. I couldn’t wait to get inside and get out of this dress. I’d wrap a towel around my body and walk around like that all day if it meant I didn’t have to wear this hideous thing.

I turned to walk inside when Eli grabbed my arm. “Hold on a minute. We need to talk.”

“About what?” I asked, curious where this was going. Maybe he was going to tell me that our kisses were magical and he needed to have me again. Or that he realized he couldn’t live without me. Not that I needed him to say any of that. I only intended for our one night to be just that. But the man was growing on me.

He held up the keys, quirking an eyebrow at me. “Want to tell me about this?”

“Um...they’re keys. What exactly do you need me to tell you?”

“How about how you got them?”

“Well, the guy had them in his pocket. I just took them.”

“Without him noticing?”

I could see where this was going. It was better to cut him off before he went too far down this road. “They were hanging out.”

“Uh-huh. Like my wallet?”

And now the fun would begin. There would be an interrogation into my...skills, and it wouldn't stop until he knew everything. So, now was the time to throw him off the scent using whatever means necessary. “Look, I just saved your ass. We were being chased down. I thought you would appreciate the help.”

“I would appreciate knowing how you ended up with not only my wallet, but Kavanaugh's also. And while you're at it, you can explain the keys.”

“I don't explain myself to anyone,” I shot back, turning and walking away before he could say anything else. I hurried inside and tore the dress over my head. As I hoped, it was enough of a distraction to keep him from asking further questions.

He stormed inside, ready to tear into me when he stopped and stared at my naked form. His fists clenched as he stared at me, trying his best to remember what the hell he was about to say. I turned away from him and smirked as I heard the low growl emanating from his chest. “You can't just do that.”

“Do what?” I asked, looking over my shoulder at him.

“This!” he pointed at my body. “You don't like our conversation, so you strip? Who does that?”

“Did it work?”

His mouth dropped open as I turned to face him. I slid my bra off and let it drop to the floor, standing completely naked in front of him.

“You were saying?”

It was probably wrong to use my body against him like I was, but he had it coming. He dragged me out here against my

will. I was perfectly happy with returning to my apartment and wallowing with my cat.

“I was...um...”

When he couldn't come up with an answer, I sashayed my ass over to him. I fully intended to distract him, but my plans were foiled when one of his teammates walked into the hut unexpectedly.

“Thanks a lot for—whoa!”

I blushed bright red as Kavanaugh stared at me in all my naked glory. Eli, however, quickly snapped out of his gawking and rushed toward me, grabbing the sheet off the bed and wrapping it around me.

“What the fuck? You don't knock?”

“I wasn't aware I needed to,” he chuckled. “Why is it that everyone else always gets the girl?”

“Out!” Eli snapped, jabbing his finger at the door.

“Was I interrupting something?”

“Get the fuck out right now!”

I watched as Kavanaugh smirked at him, refusing to budge. Eli was getting awfully worked up over this. After all, it wasn't like we were an item. Well, we'd slept together twice now, but that didn't make us a couple.

“Would you relax?” I laughed. “I'm covered now.”

Eli's gaze swung to meet mine, and the burning I saw in the depths of his eyes had me fanning myself. Holy crap, that was a good look on him. “He doesn't get to see you naked.”

“He sort of already has. Honestly, I'm not that worried about it. I doubt he sees anything but a naked woman.”

“A hot naked woman,” Kavanaugh corrected.

I flushed bright red, taking the compliment to heart. What woman didn't like it when a man called her hot? “That's very \_\_\_”

“Inappropriate,” Eli cut in. “She's a client.”

“That you’ve slept with. Twice,” he snorted.

“It’s rude to listen in on other people.”

“Yeah, nobody really had to listen. You’re very...loud. And enthusiastic. Both of you. Really, you could make it an Olympic sport. I’m pretty sure wild animals started getting it on just to compete with you.”

Eli was obviously irritated by his friend, but I found the whole thing rather funny. “Did you have a point of coming over here, or did you just want to be a pain in the ass?”

“Oh, being a pain in the ass is what I live for,” he winked at me. “But I actually came over to give you this,” he said, pulling a bag out from behind his back. “Since you didn’t get to finish your shopping at the market, I picked out a few things. And a few...undergarments. I’m sure you’ll both appreciate them.”

He winked at me again before he turned and walked out of the hut, laughing to himself. Eli brought the bag over, but the moment he opened it, he looked up and squeezed his eyes closed. It couldn’t be that bad.

I walked over and pulled out the first item. It was...stringy. There really wasn’t anything to it, but it was better than going commando. I dropped the sheet, which Eli immediately picked up and held in front of me like a curtain.

“Jesus, you can’t just stand there naked for everyone to see.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m pretty sure everyone has seen way more of me than I care to admit. Besides, what does it matter?”

“It matters because you’re not theirs to see.”

I spun, holding up the flimsy piece of underwear, and quirked an eyebrow at him. “Really? And you have the right to see me?”

“I have more right than they do,” he snapped.

“So...what you’re saying is that we’re sort of dating.”

“No,” he said firmly. “Dating would imply that I took you out somewhere.”

I shrugged as I pulled on the strings. “I wouldn’t say no to some food. I’m starving.”

“You just ate,” he argued.

“Yes, but that was hours ago, and another man was there.”

He considered this for a moment before responding. “I can get you food, but that’s not a date.”

“And why don’t you want to take me out on a date?”

“Because you’re a client.”

He said that a lot, like it was a huge sticking point with him. “And you’ve already slept with me. What does it matter?”

“Because it’s against the rules. I could lose my job.”

“I highly doubt that,” I laughed. “Red was telling me that he married a woman he was protecting.”

“He was protecting her before she was ever really a client. And I don’t think you could really classify it as protecting her.”

“And a guy named Fox is married to an actress that he was obsessed with?”

The strings were getting caught on my thighs. I wasn’t entirely sure I was doing this right. Maybe I had my legs in the wrong spot. I almost fell over, but Eli caught me by the arm, sighing loudly.

“Just sit down. I’ll help you out.”

“Why, thank you,” I grinned. I plopped down on the bed and waited as he tried to find a way to continue to hold up the sheet while also helping me with the underwear. Finally, he gave up and snatched the panties out of my hand. He held them up, staring at the multiple strings that ran across the material. After a minute, he worked out what was supposed to go where and started sliding them up my legs. The problem happened when I stood. My crotch was directly in front of his



face, which stopped his hands from doing what they were supposed to.

I grabbed the material and pulled them up the rest of the way, adjusting the multiple straps so it sat properly on my hips. Then I grabbed the bra, which was more of a thin film of fabric, and pulled it over my breasts. It did nothing to hide my nipples, but then again, it was so hot, I wasn't sure I needed anything.

I spun in a circle, feeling rather girly. "So, what do you think?"

He swallowed hard as he stared at my body. I felt so sexy in this. Kavanaugh had great taste, even if he wasn't the one I was interested in. Just seeing the desire in Eli's eyes was enough to make this uncomfortable contraption worth it.

After a minute, he stormed back over to the bed and grabbed the bag, pulling out the dress Kavanaugh picked up for me. I chuckled under my breath when I saw it wasn't that much better than just standing in the underwear. The material was practically see-through and hung from my shoulders by two thin straps. The front of the dress draped over my breasts, leaving little to the imagination. And on top of that, the dress was cut just a little too high on my thighs.

"You can't go out in that."

"It's better than the sheet."

"You look like a hooker!" he snapped.

I flinched back, pissed that he would say that. I thought I looked great. I never dressed up, and while I knew the dress wasn't exactly the most conservative, this was the Caribbean. What did he expect me to wear?

Pissed, I walked back over to the bag and grabbed the strappy sandals Kavanaugh purchased, then slid them on. "Well, I guess I'll take my hooker self and go find some food."

"Sarah—"

He grabbed my arm, but I jerked my body away from his. "If I look like such a hooker, maybe you should have paid me

the other night,” I snapped.

“You didn’t look like a hooker then.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, but I couldn’t help the overwhelming feelings rushing to my eyeballs. Crap, I was going to cry, and then he really wouldn’t know how to handle me. I started waving my hands in front of my eyes, willing myself not to cry. This was not how I wanted him to see me.

“Uh...what’s going on?” he asked, taking a step back as he looked at me like a rabid dog.

“Nothing.” But a sob broke free, preventing me from sounding like I was really okay.

“Um...I don’t know a lot about women, but I know when you say nothing, it means there’s something wrong. Was it the hooker thing?”

I squeaked, trying to hold back, but the floodgates opened and tears poured down my cheeks. I hated when this happened. I always cried when I got my feelings hurt.

“It’s just...I...ought I looked...nice,” I cried, hoping he understood me through the tears and hiccups.

“You do,” he said quickly. “Beautiful! Don’t listen to me. I’m an idiot,” he rushed on. “Guys say stupid things all the time. You can’t listen to a word I say!”

“But—” Another sob was wrenched from my body, and the look on Eli’s face told me all I needed to know. I was freaking him out with my hysterics. This was not good. He wouldn’t sleep with me now, not when he saw what a lunatic I was. “Oh God,” I cried, looking up at the sky as I sucked in one giant breath after another, hoping I could calm the racing of my heart, which would in turn slow the tsunami pouring from my eyes.

“Uh...” Eli raced over to the bathroom, returning with a giant wad of toilet paper, shoving it in my face. “Here. For... the snot.”

“The what?” I cried.

He pointed at my face, wincing when I wiped my hand under my nose and came away with a giant snot ball.

“Oh, my God!” I started crying even harder as I shoved the toilet paper under my nose, hoping nothing worse came out. This was so mortifying.

“Hey, are we—”

I looked up at the familiar voice and saw the look of sheer terror on Kavanaugh’s face. That was it, I was officially the worst person to be in the Caribbean with.

He turned to Eli, shaking his head. “You know, this is not the reaction I expected when I went shopping for you.”



## ELI

I stood at the bar waiting for my drinks when IKE walked over and took a seat on the bar stool.

“Heard you made Sarah cry,” he grunted.

“Fuck, I don’t even know exactly what I did.”

“You opened your mouth,” he said, signaling to the bartender that he wanted a beer.

“Yeah, but...I don’t get it.”

“Christ,” he muttered. “Another man that doesn’t know how to handle a woman. What did you do?”

“I...I may have said she looked like a hooker.”

He snorted in amusement, but it wasn’t funny. “Well, that’ll do it.”

“It just took me by surprise.”

“No, it didn’t. You didn’t like that she looked good, and you wanted to ensure she wouldn’t go anywhere dressed like that. Mission failed,” he said, glancing over at Sarah, who sat with the rest of the guys, drinking and laughing. At least she wasn’t crying anymore. I couldn’t take that again.

“That was not the point. Look at her.”

He grinned at me. “Oh, I’m looking, and so is every other man in this place, which is precisely what you didn’t want.”

“You’re getting this all wrong. This has nothing to do with me. You saw those men in the market. They were after her. I

was hoping she'd come out with us looking slightly less..."

"Appealing? Yeah, that's not going to happen. Have you bothered to look at her?"

If he even thought he was going to take her... "Of course I have. You'd better not."

"No can do," he laughed. "That is not a woman you don't look at. She's fucking gorgeous, not that she really gets that."

I frowned as I looked over at Sarah. "What do you mean?"

"If she's aware that she has tits or an ass, she certainly doesn't act like it. She's just one of us."

"No," I shook my head, sure he was wrong. "She knows what she's got and how to use it."

"Maybe, but she's not like the other women you know."

"She picked me up in a bar," I pointed out. "She obviously has the confidence to do that."

"Yeah, but you were a stranger. Now she has to hold onto you, and your reaction basically told her she wasn't good-looking. She's fucking hot!"

"Hookers usually look good," I pointed out.

"That doesn't mean a woman wants to be compared to one. Besides, not every hooker has a nice body, and I can guarantee she jumped to the worst conclusion. All women do."

"Are you here to help or make me feel like shit?"

"Neither," he responded, grabbing his beer. "I'm here to drink. When the fuck is this plane gonna be fixed anyway?"

"Why? Have something better to do?"

He sighed heavily, picking at the label of his beer. "I shouldn't have told Cash I'd do a trial run with the company. I miss my life."

"Tell IRIS that. There's nothing he'd love more than to get rid of you."

"And that's the only reason I'm staying," he said with a cocky grin. "There's nothing I love more than pissing him

off.”

“Like you really have so much to go back to.”

“I’ll have you know that I’ve been turning down jobs left and right to try and...do what you guys do.”

“Uh...protect people?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “No, keep on the straight and narrow. Do you have any idea what it’s like to have the power to take a life, and then suddenly...poof, that’s all gone.”

“So...you miss killing people.”

He shrugged, taking a swig of his drink. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I killed just anyone. But man, taking out drug dealers and pimps...those were the days.”

I widened my eyes comically. This guy was a little insane. He reminded me of Fox...and maybe a few other people. Why couldn’t we just have some normal guys working on the team with us?

“Well, as enlightening as this has been, I think I’ll get back to my girl.”

He smirked at me, taking another drink. “Yeah, you do that.”

“Don’t you have someone to kill?” I asked as I turned away. I walked over to the table and stood beside Kavanaugh, waiting for him to move his ass. “Hey, get your ass up,” I said when he didn’t immediately move.

His eyes looked up at me with humor. “Why? Am I taking your spot?”

“You know you are,” I bit out. Why the fuck did he have to make this so complicated?

“I don’t know. She’s not yours,” he pointed out. “You made that very clear.”

“Kavanaugh, don’t be a dick,” Red snapped, tossing an olive at him from IRIS’s drink.

“Hey! Don’t stick your fingers in my drink,” IRIS complained.

“It was an olive. You’ll survive.”

“The olive is what makes the drink,” he argued. “You just ruined it, not only by removing it, but by sticking your grubby fingers in my drink.”

“The alcohol kills any bacteria,” Red argued. “That’s why we pour it over injuries.”

IRIS scoffed. “How would you feel if I stuck my fingers in your beer?”

He shrugged. “I’d still drink it.”

“This is useless now!” IRIS scoffed.

“Men are such babies,” Sarah said, reaching across the table and grabbing his glass, chugging the entire thing.

“Whoa!” I gasped, jerking the glass out of her hands, though it was a little pointless now that it was all gone. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Drinking. I thought that was pretty obvious.”

“Yeah, but out of another man’s glass. That’s not cool.”

She cocked her head at me, a grin splitting her lips. “I’m sorry, did you want me to only drink from your glass? After all, you are my pimp.”

My eyes narrowed dangerously at her as the rest of the guys laughed.

“You had that one coming.”

I leaned over, pressing my hand to the back of her chair. “I am not your pimp, and I didn’t mean that you were actually a hooker.”

“Uh-huh, but that’s what you said.”

“I said—” I stopped myself, knowing there was no way for me to get out of this. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“No woman wants to hear that, especially when the words out of your mouth should have been about how beautiful I



look.”

“You did look beautiful. You looked like a fucking wet dream,” I whispered in her ear. “And that’s something I want to keep for myself, if you don’t mind. Now, we’re out having drinks, and every fucker in this place wants you for himself. It fucking pisses me off. Do you know what it’s costing me to not pull out my gun and shoot every single person in this place?”

I watched as her throat bobbed as she swallowed hard. If I pressed my fingers to her throat, I was positive I would feel her heart racing.

“Then maybe it would be best if we leave before you do something you’ll regret,” she whispered.

“I think that would be a wise idea.”

I stood, adjusting my cock as discreetly as possible while she cleared her throat and slid back from the table. “I’m really tired. I think I’ll call it a night.”

“Yeah, ya are,” IRIS grinned, but immediately stopped smiling when he saw the glare on my face.

I grabbed her by the elbow, refusing to listen to the catcalls and inappropriate comments as I pulled her out of the bar. I knew Kavanaugh and Red had my back, and would be right behind me, keeping watch as we headed back. I hadn’t exactly told Sarah about this new threat, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. Women tended to freak out when they learned they were in danger. That was the last thing I wanted right now. As long as we were watching her, she would be safe.

“You know, I was just having fun back there,” she muttered. “There was no need to end the night early.”

“You were taunting the guys.”

“I was taunting you,” she corrected. “And you couldn’t handle the pressure.”

I scoffed at that. I was steel, unbreakable. Okay, steel was breakable, but not easily. Either way, it didn’t matter. This wasn’t about me. This was strictly about keeping her safe.

“Let’s just get back to the hut. We need a good night’s sleep before we leave in the morning.”

“By boat?”

I stopped and looked at her funny. “No, by plane.”

She barked out a laugh, shaking her head at me. “You really think I’m getting on a plane? Do you remember what happened the last time you forced me on a plane?”

“Yeah, but...I thought that was just because you didn’t want to come along. We’re going home. Well, we have to make a pit stop in Florida, but—”

“No, I already told you. That’s not happening. I don’t do planes.”

“You’ve already been on a plane,” I argued as she started walking away from me.

“Yes, and as I told you before, I had medication. I had things to keep me calm. Do you know the percentage of planes that go down in flight?”

“Um...not nearly as many as the number of car crashes per year.”

“.06 per one million flights.”

“That’s...not that many,” I said hesitantly.

“Yes, and if I stay off planes, that reduces my chances of dying in a plane crash to zero. You can’t die by plane crash if you’re not on a plane.”

I couldn’t argue with her on that point. It made sense, but still, there were other ways to die.

“You could get hit by a bus and die.”

She nodded emphatically. “You’re right, but I wouldn’t see a bus coming. I would die instantly. On a plane, there would be turbulence, and those masks would fly down. I would have minutes of sheer terror, knowing I was about to die.”

“But you were strapped to a bomb,” I argued. “You knew you were going to die then.”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t feel it! It would have been instantaneous.”

“So would a plane crash!” I shouted.

“Not necessarily. What if the plane skidded through some trees and broke apart? What if I was still alive, stuck in that chair, and then wild animals came to tear me apart?”

“What if you got caught under the tires of the bus and dragged for miles before you actually succumbed to your injuries?”

“If I was dragged for miles, I would probably be unconscious, not feeling a thing,” she spat.

I just couldn’t believe what she was saying. She was more insane by the minute. “What if none of that happened and you survived?”

She seemed to think about it as if it might actually be a possibility. “Look, I appreciate your efforts to make me feel better about all this. It’s really sweet of you to try, but we both know with my record, it’s not very likely.”

And with that, she turned on her heel and walked away.

I stood there for a moment, trying to figure this woman out. She was scared, she wasn’t scared. None of it made any sense. I thought she would be happy to get out of here, and instead, she was telling me potential death rates. My head was spinning. There was only one thing to do. I was going to have to fuck her into submission.

It was a hard job, but someone had to take one for the team.

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I stared up at the ceiling, panting hard from what this woman just put me through. All that shit about this being a one-night stand was looking less and less like the reality of the situation. Could it still be a one-night stand if you had sex more than once? I highly doubted it, and the guys would rag on me for

days on end if I tried playing it off that way. And even more so if they heard me fucking her all night long.

Now, I laid here wondering how exactly I was supposed to get myself out of this situation. I was sleeping with her to get my way, but ended up getting myself in more trouble in the process. I should have thought this through first.

*Yeah, you only slept with her to get your way. Keep telling yourself that.*

I got up, irritated that my conscience knew me better than I knew myself. I wanted to be able to say this was all in the name of the job, but my dick knew better. Even he was smarter than me. He didn't stand to attention for just anybody.

I stood and grabbed my pants off the floor. I had to do something. I couldn't just lay in bed with her all day. Then I'd start fucking her more, and that would lead to kissing and hugging and things like snuggling. The last fucking thing I needed was to snuggle this woman.

"Where are you going?" she asked sleepily.

"I have to check in with my boss," I lied.

She made a noise of acknowledgment, but otherwise didn't move from her spot. I waited for her to hold out her hand or ask me to join her in bed again, but none of that happened. That was weird, right? I stared at her for a moment, just waiting for it to happen, but it never did. After a minute, I gave up and walked outside, stretching as the ocean breeze drifted over my body.

"Have fun?"

I turned and scowled at Red, who sat on the chair outside my hut. Fuck, he probably heard everything. "What are you doing?"

He was playing with a deck of cards, shuffling them as he discreetly watched our surroundings. "You know, just waiting for the moment you decide she's the one for you."

"She's not," I said forcefully. "We're getting on a plane and going home."

He chuckled, not saying anything more.

“Anyone talk to Cash?”

“And say what, exactly?”

“I don’t know, but...” I glanced back into the room and knew I needed a distraction. “We should tell him what’s going on.”

“Scottie already did.”

“Yeah, but he’ll want an update,” I said, pulling my phone out of my pocket. “Where’s Kavanaugh?”

“Back of the hut,” he said, jerking his head behind us.

“And IKE?”

“Scouring the town for undesirables.”

I huffed out a laugh. “He just can’t sit still.”

“Says the man that’s doing anything he can to escape the pretty lady in his bed.”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” I argued. “In case you forgot, we’re on a job.”

He nodded, shuffling his cards some more. “Oh, I think we all know what this is.”

“We’re protecting the client.”

“The client that could have gone into police custody,” he pointed out. “After all, she was vital in finding out what the bomber she so easily bonded with was after.”

“Yes, but they could have come after her next,” I argued.

He shrugged. “You have a point.”

“Then what is this all about?” I asked in frustration.

He chuckled, getting to his feet. “This is about you realizing that you like this woman. She’s not just a job. Maybe that night you took her back to the hotel was good enough, but now you’ve seen her again, and you like her.”

His tone really perturbed me. He was implying more than I was okay with. I wasn’t like these other guys. I didn’t fall for

clients. I didn't let my dick do the talking. I got shit done. That's what Eli Brant was all about.

"If that's all, I need to check in with Cash."

"By all means," he grinned.

Rolling my eyes, I turned away from him and called Cash. "Yeah?" he answered.

"Uh...we're still waiting on the plane."

"Yeah, I know. Scottie told me."

"And the client is...safe."

It was silent for a minute. "Okay," he finally answered. "Anything else?"

I scrambled for something to tell him. "You know, this isn't going to be an easy job, boss."

"Which of our jobs are easy?"

"I know, but..." Fuck, I had literally nothing to tell him that he hadn't already heard. "She doesn't like flying."

"Neither does Scottie."

"Yeah, but she needs meds."

"I've been told. Red's on it."

Damn, I was running out of shit to say fast. If I didn't come up with something, I'd have to face Sarah again. That would end badly for all of us, no matter which way I sliced it.

"You know, I was thinking maybe this has something to do with Rafe."

"In what way?"

"You know...because of the serious nature of...things."

He sighed heavily. I knew I was pissing him off. One thing Cash absolutely hated was people wasting his time. "This is not related to Rafe."

"But how can you be sure?"

“Because Rafe doesn’t deal with men like her boss. I’ve already looked into him. I dug deep. There is absolutely nothing to tie him to anyone in The Syndicate. You’re reaching. What I want to know is why.”

“Just making sure we cover all our bases, boss. You know, after what happened with Asher.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Asher was a sore subject all around. I knew Cash felt guilty for allowing him to get involved with Rafe. He knew how his brother was, and still let Asher make the terrible decision to toss his hat in the ring with him. The problem with Rafe was that he never actually helped anyone unless he was helping himself.

“Asher was a very unfortunate situation, one that I don’t want to repeat. Keep your head on straight.”

“I am.”

“Are you? Because I know you already slept with this woman. Just how far are you willing to go to protect her?”

“She’s like any other client,” I said defensively.

“Uh-huh. Is that why you’re calling me, trying to find anything to discuss to get you away from her?”

How the hell did he do that? We were thousands of miles away, and yet he still knew exactly what I was doing.

“You fucked her, and now you feel responsible. Maybe you even like her. That’s fine, but keep your dick in your pants until the job is finished.”

I looked down at my crotch and knew that just wasn’t going to happen. As much as I wanted to think I was strong enough, I’d already broken Cash’s rule multiple times.

“Will do, boss.”

“No, you won’t,” he snorted. “You could at least pretend that you have shit under control.”

“I swear, nothing else will happen. The plane will be ready later today, and I’ll get her on it and back to Florida. We’ll find out what’s happened, and that’ll be the end of it.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it. Oh, and Eli?”

“Yeah?”

“Next time you call me, you’d better have something to tell me other than you’re falling for your client.”





## SARAH

“—The plane will be ready later today, and I’ll get her on it and back to Florida.”

I jerked back from where I was hiding and ran over to the bed, grabbing my shoes. There was no fucking way I was sticking around to be put on a plane. I’d take a boat if I had to, but they weren’t putting me on a plane. I slipped into the bathroom and tried to concoct a plan to escape, but the guys were swarming all over the place. My best chance was getting to Kavanaugh. He was so easygoing. I could probably distract him long enough to get what I needed.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door, thankful that Eli was still outside, and tiptoed through the room to the back door. Once I was outside, I could slip into my shoes and be on my way. There had to be someone around here that would help a woman like me find a ride.

As casually as I could, I walked out the back door and sat on the chair on the back porch. Kavanaugh saw me out of the corner of his eyes, but made no move to come over and chat. That was going to be a problem.

“Tell me, how is a guy like you still single?”

He was leaning against a tree and trying to ignore me, but I didn’t miss that sexy twitch of his lips.

“Is it because you’re too handsome?”

Still, he didn’t say anything.

“What’s your first name?”

He sighed heavily, his eyes trained on everything around him as he did his best to not hear me. I was guessing this had something to do with the fact that I was sleeping with Eli, and as much as Kavanaugh loved to tease him, he didn't want to end up with a broken nose.

“So, your dad is a senator. What's that like?”

That got his attention. He turned to me with murder in his eyes, then stalked over to me with all the rage of a bull that had a red flag waved at him.

“Don't ever talk about him to me.”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. He hadn't looked at me like this the whole trip. “You ask me questions.”

“I said don't talk about him,” he snapped.

“Whoa.” I know he told me not to mention him, but holy shit, that guy was always in the news. “So, you're his son. What's the big deal?”

He rolled his eyes, clearly pissed that I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

“I'm sorry, but it's pretty impressive to have a senator for a father.”

“It's nothing to me.”

“Except that he's some big shot and—”

“He's a jerk,” he snapped.

Man, Kavanaugh had some serious hatred for his father. It wasn't that long ago that he was all over the news, but I couldn't remember why. I remembered a picture of a guy showing up alongside the senator, but it definitely wasn't Kavanaugh. This guy was about the same age, but had dark hair. Then I remembered why he was in the news.

“He was your brother, wasn't he?”

Sympathy filled me as I watched Kavanaugh's whole body tense. They were brothers. That had to be it.

“Two years older than me,” he grumbled.

“What happened?” I should have remembered this part, but it was escaping me.

“Don’t you know how to mind your own business?”

“I was never very good at that. How did he die?” Kavanaugh spun on me, stomping toward the door. I stepped in front of him, pressing my hand to his chest. “Hey, I’m not trying to be rude.”

“Rude was when I said I didn’t want to talk about it. Now you’re just pissing me off.”

I stared into his eyes, watching the hurt that swirled in their depths. Whatever happened, it greatly affected him. And why wouldn’t it? Losing a sibling must be horrible. “I’m sorry. I can’t even begin to imagine what it’s like to lose someone.”

For just a moment, he truly let me see his pain, but then it was gone. “It was years ago.”

“But I thought—”

He scoffed, glancing away from me as his jaw clenched. “That’s what everyone thought.”

“How did it happen?” I asked quietly, hoping he wouldn’t be too upset.

I knew he wasn’t going to answer. He didn’t know me from any other client, but still...I couldn’t help but ask. What I wasn’t prepared for was the look on his face when he finally turned back to me.

“How did your mom die?”

I was so stunned by the question that I didn’t know how to answer. How did he even know about that? I stepped back, swallowing hard as my eyes dropped to the ground.

“Yeah, I didn’t think you’d want to talk about that.”

He stormed past me. The slamming of the door made me jump, nearly making me forget my real purpose of coming out here. I opened my hand and stared down at the keys to the Jeep and decided it was time to get out of here.

Glancing back at the hut, I felt slightly bad for what I was about to do. After all, they needed my help with whatever was going on with my boss, but you'd think they'd at least ask for help instead of just dragging me off to wherever they were going.

I sprinted across the sand until I reached the parking lot, then jumped inside. I knew as soon as I started the truck, they'd come running. I leaned over to the glove box and prayed there was a map for around town. I was not the best with directions, and since I'd only been here a day, I had no clue where to go.

Money was another problem. I didn't have a lick of cash on me, nor did I have any credit cards. That posed a small problem, but surely there was someone that would help a poor American woman stranded in the Caribbean.

After mapping out a route to the docks, I took a deep breath and cranked the engine. As expected, the door to the hut flew open and Eli came running out. I shifted into reverse and hightailed it out of there. If there was one thing I knew about Eli, it was that he never gave up. I had to move fast.

I felt like Jason Bourne as I sped through the streets, watching for any vehicles that were trying to run me off the road or open fire. I half expected someone to jump from one building to the next above me, just trying to keep up with me. I took a few wrong turns on purpose, hoping to throw his team off the scent. The whole time, I didn't actually see a single suspicious person. It actually kind of killed the thrill of it for me.

I screeched to a halt at the parking lot right across from the docks. A ferry was leaving soon. It didn't matter where it was going, as long as I was on it and could escape these crazy men with their crazy ideas. I would not be getting on another plane, no matter how many times they told me it would be fine.

Jumping out, I locked the door and shoved the keys in my pocket, though it didn't really matter since I wasn't taking the Jeep with me. "Hey!" I shouted at a man that was just about to pull the rope from around the post on the dock.

“Yeah?”

“I need a ride. Any chance you could spare some room?”

He grinned at me, striding toward me. The predatory look in his eyes had me taking a step back. “Of course. Always happy to help a woman in need.”

Shit, this was not good. I thought he was just another guy working on a boat, but the vibes I was getting from this man told me I’d greatly miscalculated. Suddenly, that plane didn’t look so bad.

“Um...” I took another step back, hoping I could still escape him. “Actually, I just remembered my friend—”

“Yeah,” he huffed out a laugh. “There’s always a friend. Get on board,” he said, snaking his hand around my elbow before I could run.

With a shove, I stumbled onto the boat, falling to my knees. I got up and made a break for it, but he’d already untied the ropes. He grabbed me around the waist and held me back as the boat pulled away from the dock. I screamed for help, hoping someone would hear me, but his hand quickly muffled my cries.

I should have stayed with Eli. Hell, I shouldn’t have gone to work yesterday.



## ELI

“I swear to God, I’m going to throttle this mechanic,” Scottie said as he walked into the room. “He’s a fucking drunk.”

“Then why don’t you call someone else?” I asked.

“Don’t you think I would if I could?” He sighed, sitting down in a chair. “Cash is gonna kill me.”

“He can’t do that. Not until you’re back, anyway.” My phone rang and I pulled it out, frowning when I saw his name on the screen. “Well, shit. That’s not good.”

“It’s him?” Scottie asked, panic lacing his voice.

“I just talked to him. Why is he calling back?”

“Answer the phone and find out, dickhead,” Red snapped.

“Don’t answer!” Scottie shouted. “I can’t take the pressure.”

“I can’t just not answer,” I argued. “It’s my ass on the line.”

“It’s his plane and he will kill me,” Scottie pleaded.

“Like he doesn’t know that you’re stalling,” Red snorted. “Answer the goddamn phone!”

The pressure built up until I pressed the answer button. “Yeah?”

“Tell me you’re leaving within the hour.”

I glanced at Scottie, who was holding his head in his hands. The poor bastard looked like he was going to throw up,



and this time it had nothing to do with being airborne. “I would love to tell you that, but that would require our plane to be functioning.”

“I just got a call from the police chief. He wants to know where our witness is. Do you know what I had to tell him?”

“That she’s resting from the trauma?” I said warily.

“I told him she would be back today. Do you hear me, Eli? Today. Get your asses back here.”

“Boss, the plane—”

“I don’t care about the goddamn plane. Take a boat. Swim if you have to. Hell, get some pigeons, lasso them together, and fly the fuck out of there!”

“I’m not sure pigeons would be strong enough,” I said stupidly.

“Do you want me to shoot you when you get back?”

“I’m going to take that as a rhetorical question and not answer.”

“When you took Sarah from the crime scene, you said you would get me answers. So far, I have zero answers and one very pissed-off police chief.”

“Yeah...” I said slowly. “If it makes you feel any better, she’s a real pain in the ass.”

Kavanaugh walked in the door, slamming it behind him. I didn’t see Kavanaugh too upset very often, so whatever pissed him off had to be bad.

“Boss, let me call you back.”

“No—”

I hung up and jerked my head at Kavanaugh. “Something wrong?”

He narrowed his eyes at me, jabbing a finger in my direction. “You want to know what’s wrong? Why don’t you tell your girlfriend to keep her mouth shut.”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Um...she’s not my girlfriend. And what did she say to you?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, clearly pissed at whatever happened. “I don’t want to talk about it. Just—”

I jerked my head toward the back as I heard the sound of the Jeep starting up. “Kavanaugh, tell me you didn’t give her the keys.”

“Of course, I didn’t give her the keys,” he said as he stuffed his hand in his pocket. His eyes widened and he started patting down all his pockets. “Son of a bitch!”

“You let her get the keys?” I shouted.

“Well, you let her take your wallet!”

“So did you,” I retorted, racing for the back door. I flung it open just as she peeled out of the parking area. “Fucking great! How the hell are we supposed to get her now? We don’t have a fucking vehicle!”

“I would say we could take the plane, but it’s not fucking fixed yet,” Scottie said angrily.

“Yeah, we’d just fly around the island looking for her,” I retorted.

I heard a deep chuckle behind me and spun, seeing IKE leaning against the doorframe, swinging a set of keys. “I don’t suppose these would be any help?”

“You have a vehicle?” I asked, storming toward him. I reached for the keys, but he held them over his head. The man was not only extremely good-looking, but tall. I hated him.

“Of course, I have a vehicle. Did you really think I’d be stuck down here with no way of escape? Besides, there are crazy people on this island. It’s only natural that an operative, such as myself, would have the forethought to procure another vehicle for a situation such as this.”

I rolled my eyes at the use of his big words. “Yeah, I would have gotten a vehicle too if I thought we were going to be here longer than one night. Now, hand over the fucking keys!”

He tskd, shaking his head at me. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. I’ll have to drive,” he said, turning and heading for the door.

“And why’s that?” I asked, snatching my gun off the table and shoving it into my holster.

“Because you’re not on the paperwork. If anything happens to this vehicle, which it will,” he said over his shoulder, “I have to be the one driving. Which I will be. Do you really want to further piss off Cash by making him pay for a new vehicle?”

“He’s done it before,” I said as I ran outside and jumped into the Jeep.

“Why do you get the front seat?” Kavanaugh griped, climbing into the back.

“Because she’s my wo—responsibility.”

Red grinned as he got in. “See what he did there? He almost called her his woman.”

“Would you move over?” Scottie snapped. “Some of us need ball space.”

“Oh, I’m sorry your balls don’t have enough breathing room,” Kavanaugh yelled at him. “Maybe you should ride bitch so they can air out.”

“Ladies!” IKE snapped, taking a deep breath. “Perhaps we can save the antics for another time. There are nefarious criminals on this island, and I would prefer to not be caught in a melee and mess up my very nice suit.”

I snorted at that, choosing to keep my mouth shut. Not everyone was as nice as me, though.

“Melee? Seriously, who brought him along?” Scottie Dog griped. “Doesn’t he know none of us carry around a dictionary with us?”

“And what criminals aren’t nefarious?” Kavanaugh snorted. “That’s gotta be a double negative or something.”

“Gentlemen,” IKE said, staring at them in the rearview mirror. “Can we continue on? Or would you prefer to sit here

and argue while there's a woman in distress?"

I rolled my eyes. Like he actually cared if she was in distress. "Can we just go?"

He smirked at me, then shifted into drive. "Get ready, boys. This is going to be fun."

My body was flung back into the seat as he hit the gas. Jesus, this was a tad overboard for chasing down a woman in a Jeep, but what the hell?

"Hey!"

I spun around and caught sight of IRIS growing smaller in the distance. He was hauling ass, trying to catch up, but at the rate IKE was going, he'd never make it.

"I don't suppose you'll slow down so IRIS can catch a ride?"

IKE sighed heavily and let off the gas. "Precious moments wasted all because someone can't pay attention."

Scottie Dog leaned forward between the seats. "Did you ever think that maybe he was on the shitter and didn't hear the conversation? What does IKE mean anyway? Did your parents just not like you?"

"Maybe he was named after Eisenhower," Red suggested.

"Or maybe IKE is like IRIS," I said thoughtfully. "I kill everyone."

"I keep everything," Kavanaugh said,

Scottie snorted. "That's just lame. You can't think of something better?"

"Fine, if you're so smart, you come up with something," Kavanaugh grumbled.

"I...kneel easily," Scottie grinned. "I guess you're on your knees a lot."

IKE sighed heavily. "If you must know, it means I know everything."

We all stared at him for a moment before Red shook his head. “Nah, that’s not it. Maybe it’s something in another language.”

“Do you know any other languages?” I said, turning around to ask.

“Of course, I do, but my Kurdish is a little rusty.”

“Maybe it’s Mexican. He looks Mexican,” Kavanaugh said.

“I’m not Mexican,” IKE started, but didn’t get to finish.

“He’s got that Spanish kind of look to him. Or European,” Scottie said.

“Spanish or European? What the fuck does that even mean?” I asked, twisting around in my seat.

“Well, Spain is in Western Europe.”

“It’s still fucking Europe,” I snapped. “You can’t be Spanish or European. They’re one and the same.”

“Technically, he’s right,” Red cut in. “You can be Spanish and European, but just because you’re European doesn’t mean you’re Spanish.”

IRIS came jogging up, leaning against the vehicle as he took deep breaths. “What...the fuck...was that? You made me run like...” He pointed behind him. “Like a half mile.”

“Ooh, a half mile?” Red said in mock shock. “That must be rough.”

“Hey, I haven’t eaten yet. I’m feeling light-headed. And I just took a massive dump. I basically depleted my resources.”

“Ha! I told you he was taking a dump!” Scottie smacked the back of the seat.

“So, where are we going?” he asked, sweating profusely.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course I am.”

“Because you don’t look okay. You’re sweating a lot.”

“I just ran a half mile!” IRIS snapped.

“And you’re extremely pale.”

Kavanaugh snapped his fingers at me. “I had an uncle that was always pale. Couldn’t run up the stairs to save his life. Slept all the fucking time. Turns out, he had hemorrhoids but didn’t want to tell anyone. By the time we got him to the hospital, he needed like four blood transfusions. The doctors were surprised he had any blood left in him.”

“I don’t have fucking hemorrhoids!” IRIS snapped.

“Is there blood in your stool?” I asked.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Red shrugged. “It’s part of life. Kind of like IKE with his ketoacidosis.”

“My what?” IKE asked.

“It’s in your name,” Red drolled on.

“I don’t have fucking hemorrhoids,” IRIS continued.

“Then why were you on the shitter so long?” Scottie asked.

“Yeah, I try to limit my time to five minutes. Do you know they have a countdown clock so you don’t put too much strain on your ass muscles?” Kavanaugh said conversationally.

“Exactly, because sitting too long gives you hemorrhoids,” Red said.

“They even make a stool,” I started.

“The Squatty Potty!” Scottie Dog grinned, pointing at me. “Man, I love that thing. You put your feet up and the shit just slides right out!”

“Seriously?” Red asked. “Sounds like they should be installed in all bathrooms. It would really solve the ongoing hemorrhoid epidemic in this country.”

We all looked at IRIS like we were proving a point or something.

He shook his head, yanking open my door. “I fucking hate you all.” He shoved me aside, closer to the gear shift.

“Whoa, what are you doing?”

“Are we actually going somewhere, or did you just want to talk about my hemorrhoids the whole time?”

“So, you do have hemorrhoids,” Scottie shouted. “I knew it!”

IRIS turned around in his seat and glared at the man. “Do you want to shout that a little louder?”

Scottie’s eyes grew wide. “Man, if I had known, I never would have busted your balls over it.”

IRIS gritted his teeth. “I don’t have hemorrhoids. I just don’t want you shouting that to the whole fucking world.”

“Technically, it’s just the Caribbean,” he pointed out. “I’m sure it’s not a threat to national security.”

IKE sighed heavily. “So, this is very enlightening, but weren’t we off to save your woman?”

Shit, I already forgot about that. “Yeah, stop talking about shitting,” I said, internally smacking myself for getting wrapped up in their nonsense. I shifted, trying to get comfortable as a full-grown man practically sat on my lap.

“Any idea where she went?” Red asked, leaning forward.

“If you were trying to escape, where would you go?” I asked.

“I’d hide in plain sight, but your woman really doesn’t want to be around us.”

“She’s not my woman,” I said testily. “But you’re right. She wants to get away, and she won’t fly, which leaves the docks.”

IKE headed in the direction of the port, glancing at me out of the corner of his eyes. “If she’s not your woman, why do you keep sleeping with her?”

“Yeah, he’s got a point,” Kavanaugh said. “You know, it’s okay to love.”

“Fuck you,” I snapped.

“Seriously, what do you have against love?” IRIS asked. “Love is like...the most uplifting feeling in the world. You’d die for that person, just to know she’s happy.”

“And that’s uplifting?” I asked. “To die a hard, horrible death just so you know someone else is going to live?”

He frowned at me. “What’s the difference between what you do now and that? At least it would be for someone you knew. Are you seriously telling me you’d rather die for some Joe Shmoe?”

“At least Joe Shmoe can feel guilty for the rest of his life, knowing that a stranger died for him,” I snapped. “I don’t want my potential wife to feel overwhelming guilt, knowing she got me killed.”

“I say it’s the best way to go,” Kavanaugh nodded. “Think about it. It’s like...eternal revenge. For everything you ever did to fuck up, what can she really say about you that’s negative?”

“He’s got a point,” Scottie agreed. “*He always forgot to take the trash out.*”

“*Yeah, but he did take that bullet in the gut for you and die an excruciating death,*” Kavanaugh finished.

“See?” Scottie grinned. “There is literally nothing bad she can ever say about you for the rest of her life. It’s like...a get out of jail free card.”

I stared at him like he was an idiot. “Yeah, and all it costs me is my life. I don’t actually get to witness her overwhelming guilt or laugh every time she tries to talk bad about me... because I’ll be dead.”

“Right, well...no scenario is perfect.”

We pulled up to the docks, spotting the Jeep immediately. There was no sign of Sarah anywhere in sight, and the boat that was docked here was already fading in the distance. I got out and ran over to another man working the docks.

“Hey, do you know where that boat is heading?”

He huffed out a laugh. “You’re not a local, are you?”



“Um...no.”

“That’s headed to another island.”

“And that’s funny?”

“Son, that’s what they call the ladies’ boat.”

I nodded in understanding. “So, it’s an escort service.”

“If you want to call it that. I’d call it more like a slave trade.”

Okay, I clearly had this all wrong. “Um...what?”

“Son, that boat carries the lonely women around town to a new location where they’ll be traded into sex slavery. Everyone knows that.”

“Clearly not everyone, or I would know,” I gritted out. “Did you happen to see a woman about this tall,” I said, holding up my hand, “driving that Jeep?”

He glanced at where I pointed and then nodded. “Yep, she walked on willingly.” He chuckled to himself. “Bet she didn’t see her future going that way.”

I ignored the crazy man and ran back to the vehicle. “She’s on the boat. It’s going to another island.”

“So, we’ll catch up with her there,” Scottie shrugged.

“It’s a boat for sex slaves.”

“So, we’ll blow them up,” IRIS grinned, rubbing his hands together. “Man, this job just keeps getting better and better.”

“This feels like an up close and personal job,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, no one messes with what’s yours,” Red said, a dangerous glint in his eyes. “I say we go for knives.”

“It’s a shame Fox isn’t here,” Kavanaugh said. “Where is he, by the way? He always just shows up on jobs.”

“Anna’s pregnant. He’s probably annoying the hospital staff for her upcoming delivery.”

“Doesn’t she still have a few months?” Kavanaugh asked.

“What’s your point?” I asked sarcastically.

“Why doesn’t he just ply them with Funyuns? That always works.”

“Forget Fox,” I snapped. “We don’t need him. We’ll get a boat, slip onto the island, pretend to be tourists. Then, at nightfall, we’ll slip into their compound and tie them all up while they’re sleeping. Then, when we have them right where we want them, we’ll—”

“Or...” IKE said dramatically. “We could just walk in there and shoot them all.”

We all stared at him like he was an idiot.

“Well, sure,” IRIS snorted. “If you don’t want to have any fun.”

My phone rang again and I sighed when I saw Cash’s number. “Uh...this is a bad time.”

“A bad time because you’re in the air?”

“So, shoot to kill?” IKE asked.

“Shoot who?” Cash asked.

“Um...”

“I really want to use a bomb. It’s more efficient,” IRIS said a little too loudly.

“Do not let him use a bomb!” Cash shouted.

“You know, this isn’t the best time, boss.”

I hung up and winced, shutting off my phone. I was going to catch hell for that later.



# SARAH

This really wasn't my day. Or week. I probably should have listened to Eli when he told me there was danger, but he pissed me off so much. Technically, a person could see this as all my fault, but those people probably weren't dragged onto a plane against their will. I had a bone to pick with a lot of people right now.

"Excuse me," I said as kindly as possible. Again, my terrible reactions to bad situations were kicking in. I should probably be scared, but instead, a sense of calm washed over me as I sat in this cage, along with ten other women.

"Shut it, bitch!" one of them shouted, slamming his hand against the cage.

"That's just so rude," I muttered to myself as I stared at the men just on the other side.

The women around me were looking at me like I was an idiot. They were all terrified, trembling in the corner. But being scared wouldn't get us out of here, and neither would having an attitude.

"I'm sorry, but if I could just have a quick chat with one of you," I said, hoping there was at least one nice person in the bunch.

Most of them ignored me, but one guy in particular walked over. He looked young, maybe twenty-five. The way he kept glancing over his shoulder indicated that he wasn't all that comfortable with this situation. It was like he didn't want me to get in trouble.

“Lady, you need to keep it down.”

“I’m really sorry. I know you’re just doing your job, but I have to warn you, my boyfriend is coming.”

He sighed heavily, running his hand through his stringy hair. “That’s what they all say. Trust me, you’re not getting out of here. I wish I could help you, but I have a job to do.”

I nodded in understanding. Plenty of people did things they didn’t want to. “And I completely understand. I won’t cause any problems. I just want you to be aware. I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

He stared at me in confusion. Honestly, it would be much easier if he would just listen to me. “You do realize that you’ve been kidnapped, right?”

“Oh, I completely understand.”

“And that you’re being sold into the sex trade.”

I nodded again. “I figured as much. None of these girls look like addicts.” I motioned to one in the corner. “She looks like she was on vacation.”

“Yeah, they’re always young and innocent. Except for you,” he added.

“Hey, I’m still youngish.”

“Oh, no offense. It’s just, they usually get the young ones because they get more money at auction.”

“Oh, is that what we’re doing?” I asked, now curious about the process.

“You’ll be here maybe another day before they move you to an underground location. That’s where they’ll sell you off,” he answered, glancing over his shoulder again.

Most of the men had wandered off or were engaged in conversation, so I continued talking to him. “How much do the men pay?”

“Anything from a few thousand to a hundred grand.”

“Really?” My eyes lit with fascination. “Do you think I could get that?”

“Sadly, you’re too old. The men will look at you and know you’re too experienced.”

Well, that just sucked. In a society where men loved experienced women, now I was *too* experienced. “You’d think I’d get bonus points for knowing what I’m doing,” I grumbled.

“Hey, I’d pay a lot for you if I had the money.”

“You’re just saying that.” I shouldn’t feel so dejected, but man...society put way too much pressure on women being young.

“No, really. I’d buy you myself and let you go, but I need the job. I’m trying to save up for my kid sister getting a kidney.”

I gave a sympathetic look. “Oh, I’m so sorry she’s sick.”

“Yeah, it’s been hard. That’s the only reason I got this job. I’m hoping to find one on the black market.”

“Be careful. You don’t want to get scammed out of your money.”

“Oh, I know. I met with this one guy,” he scoffed. “The fucker tried to get an extra hundred grand out of me.”

“No,” I said in shock.

“Yeah, and I would have paid that for Jenny. She’s amazing. Bright little girl. She’s gonna go places, you know? But I just didn’t have the money.”

“If I had it, I would give it to you.”

“That’s sweet, but you have your own problems to think about,” he said, motioning at the cage.

“Hey, don’t do that. Everyone has problems. Maybe they’re not all the same, but that doesn’t mean yours are any less important than mine.”

“Are you crazy?” one of the girls asked from behind me. She shook her head in anger as she got up and walked over to

me. “Why are you sympathizing with the man that took you?”

“Well, he didn’t take me,” I pointed out. “It was one of those other jerks. And besides, he’s just doing his job.”

“Yeah, and his job is to sell us!” she snapped.

“Shh!” I hissed, trying to keep her quiet. The last thing we needed was more interest over here. “You have to keep your voice down.”

“Why? Are you afraid they’re going to come over here and not be as nice as him?” she motioned to the guy.

“Um...the thought had crossed my mind.” Geez, was everyone so stupid? I was bonding with this man. It was good to get someone on your side. Besides, it was clear this wasn’t the life he wanted to lead. I would try to help him find different work, but I wasn’t sure the guys would hire him after what he’d done, even if I did defend him.

“Look, I don’t want to cause any trouble,” the guy said.

“Really?” the woman hissed, grabbing the bars of the cage. “You don’t want to cause trouble by locking a bunch of women up that were on vacation?”

“Calm down,” I urged. “My boyfriend will be here soon.”

“Oh, yeah, let’s just wait around for your boyfriend,” she spat.

“Trust me, he’s not like other boyfriends. Although, he’s really more of a one-night-stand that turned into multiple one-night-stands. Does that count as being a boyfriend?”

“Did you stay the night with him?” the guy asked.

“Yes, but only because our plane landed here instead of Florida.”

He huffed. “That’s rough.”

“Tell me about it. I didn’t even want to be on his stupid plane. He dragged me on there to get away from some bad guys. Frankly, I would have rather taken my chances in my own home. My cat would have protected me.”

His eyes lit up. “We have a cat, too. Feisty thing. Just yesterday he gave me this,” he said, holding up his hand. It was red and irritated.

“You should get antibiotics. Was that a bite or with his claws?”

“Bite.”

I nodded. “Yep, you need antibiotics. That thing will swell up in no time, and then you’ll get your sister even more sick.”

“Yeah,” the girl snorted. “Keep giving that sicko more advice on how to stay alive.”

I slowly turned around, my lips pursed as I glared at her. “You know, I’m trying to have a conversation with...”

“Dean,” he interjected.

“With Dean. If you don’t have anything nice to say, go sit down.”

The nasty look she shot me irritated me, but I wasn’t about to start an argument with a bitch like her. I rolled my eyes as I turned back around and faced Dean.

“Anyway,” I said in an exaggerated tone. “What were we talking about?”

He winced, rubbing the back of his neck. “You know, you probably should listen to her. I’m not a good guy.”

“Nonsense. You’re just doing this to supplement your income.”

He was about to answer when the door burst open and bright light penetrated the dim room. I smiled at him, shrugging slightly. “That’s my boyfriend.” Gunfire filled the silence as men scrambled to take out this new threat they hadn’t expected. As Dean was distracted, I slipped my hand through the cage and pulled the keys out of his pocket. “Now, promise me you’ll leave this life behind when you find a kidney.”

“I swear.”

“Good, now if you could step back, I’ll let myself out.”



“Huh?”

I nearly laughed at the look of confusion on his face as I slid the key into the lock, contorting my hand in the process. My tongue poked out the side of my mouth as I concentrated on the task at hand.

“Where did you get that?”

“From your pocket,” I said, swinging the door open when it unlocked.

The baffled look on his face was all worth it. I could have let him get the door open, but this was more fun. He ducked down as a bullet struck the cell, probably terrified that his sister was going to die of kidney failure all alone. I scurried out, putting my body in front of his, making sure no one accidentally shot him.

“Come on, ladies!” I shouted, waving them out. “Just stay against the wall so no one shoots you!”

“How do we know it’s safe?” one of them asked.

“They’re a security company. They won’t shoot you unless you try to kill them. So...don’t try to kill them.”

As expected, Eli came storming over with a gun raised at Dean. Thankfully, I was standing in front of him because the way Eli was staring at him, it was clear he was out for blood.

“Don’t shoot!” I shouted, raising my hands in the air.

“Sarah, get the fuck out of the way,” he snapped, his jaw clenched hard as he stared at the man who was just trying to take care of his sister.

“Eli,” I warned. “Don’t make me kick your ass,” I snapped. “This is Dean. He’s a good guy. You can kill everyone else, but not him.”

“He kidnapped you!”

“No, he held me. There’s a difference. And he had a good reason. See, his sister needs a new kidney. He’s just trying to help her.”

Eli's eyes widened for a moment, and then he lost it. "Would you stop making friends with people that are trying to kill you!"

His teammates came rushing over, tackling Dean to the ground. I sighed heavily, knowing I was going to have to really work to get Eli to forget this whole thing. When they wrenched Dean's arm behind his back, I lost it.

"Okay, you're going to have to stop hurting my friend."

Kavanaugh looked up at me like I was weird. Which I was, but that wasn't the point here. "I'm sorry, did you want me to gently restrain him?"

"Actually, I was hoping you could just let him go," I said, slowly leaning over and slipping the zip ties off that Kavanaugh had yet to tighten. He watched in amazement as I grabbed Dean's hand and pulled him to his feet. "Now, I know you all think Dean is a bad guy for holding me in this horrible cell, but he's just trying to make it in a hard world."

"Do you hear yourself?" Eli snapped. "The man would have sold you as a sex slave."

"Yeah, but I might not have even been bought. According to Dean, I'm too old, which really sucks. I'm not that old, but too old to be a sex slave? Since when is knowledge a bad thing?"

It was so quiet in the room, you could hear a pin drop, and then Eli exploded. "I don't know if I should be pissed that you have so much experience, or that you're mad that you wouldn't fetch enough money!"

"She's right, though," Red said. I really liked him. He seemed to have a solid head on his shoulders. Eli did too, but he was too focused on what he perceived as me messing up. "Everyone puts such a high price on looks, but why not experience? I'm sure you've given enough blow jobs to be proficient."

"Oh, I've—"

"No," Eli snapped. "We are not talking about the number of blow jobs you've given."

I rolled my eyes. “Like I actually counted. But yes, it was enough to be really good at it.”

“Can we just take this guy out and call it a day?” IKE asked as he walked up. “I’m already bored.”

I gasped and shoved Dean further behind me. “You will not kill him. He has a sister to take care of. She’s sick!”

“That doesn’t excuse what he did to you,” Eli snapped.

“No, but have some understanding!”

“Oh, you’re all full of understanding,” he said, throwing up his hands, “when you’re kidnapped or strapped to a bomb!”

“You were strapped to a bomb?” Dean asked.

I looked over my shoulder, shrugging. “Yeah, just the other day. It hasn’t been my best week. But the guy was really nice.”

Eli stormed forward and pressed his gun against Dean’s head, his arm resting just over my shoulder. I very gently pressed my hand to his arm and made eye contact with him.

“Maybe don’t fire a gun right next to my head.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” he said through clenched teeth. “I was hoping you’d be smart enough to move.”

“Yeah, if I move, you’re going to shoot him.”

“Just let him go,” IKE sighed. “He’s just a kid.”

Eli spun around and got in IKE’s face. “A kid that was trying to sell off my wife! Girlfriend,” he quickly corrected. His face grew red. “My...Sarah.”

“She just told you he was doing it for his sister. Have a heart,” IKE said.

I grinned at the man I only knew from when I was strapped to a bomb. These guys were beginning to grow on me. “I knew I liked you.”

“Well,” he shrugged. “I’m a sucker for sick kids.”

“You’re insane,” Eli spat.

“Actually, I kind of agree with them,” Red shrugged. “He’s a kid himself, just trying to support his sister.”

“Yeah, I’d let him go,” Kavanaugh agreed.

Eli tossed up his hands in frustration. “I don’t believe this! You would have shot him on the spot if he hadn’t told you this sob story!”

“Yeah, but...” Kavanaugh shrugged. “Your girl likes him. She’d be mad at you, and then we’d all have to deal with your grumpiness.”

I beamed at how well they all understood me. It was nice to know despite their rough exteriors, they all had hearts of gold.

IKE jerked his head at Dean. “Get out of here before I change my mind.”

Dean shot me one last glance, smiling at me slightly as he hesitantly walked for the door. “Thanks, Sarah.”

“No problem. Oh, find me in Chicago. Sarah Williams! Let me know how Jenny’s doing!”

“I will. Thanks!”

I smiled as he slipped out the door, satisfied that another life was saved today. But when I turned to face Eli, it was clear I was going to have to prove a thing or two about my blow job record to make this up to him. It was times like this that experience did matter.



## ELI

I grabbed her by the elbow and dragged her out of the building. Seriously, what the fuck was she thinking?

“Will you slow down?” she shouted, purposely dragging her feet. “You know, I was just kidnapped. A little bit of sympathy wouldn’t be unwarranted.”

I spun so fast, she took a step back with wide eyes. “Sympathy? You want sympathy from me? You just made friends with the man that kidnapped you.”

“Technically, he was just holding me for the kidnappers. That’s not nearly as bad.”

“He took part in the kidnapping! Do you not get that? What is so fucked up about your brain that you not only make friends with these people, but then excuse their behavior? You could have been killed! Or worse, you could have ended up as a sex slave!”

She snorted as if this whole thing was so fucking amusing. “I highly doubt that. According to them, I’m like...undesirable or something. Which I just don’t get. It’s not that I think I’m runaway hot or something, but come on...I’m not disgusting.”

My jaw clenched in anger, but not at hearing her talk about becoming a sex slave. No, I didn’t like hearing that she didn’t think she was good enough. I grabbed her around the back of the neck and hauled her up against my body. “You’re fucking beautiful. If you were a sex slave, I’d pay a million above the highest bid. I don’t care if I had the money or not. I’d find a way to get it just to have one fucking night with you.”

“That’s so sweet—” she started.

I slammed my lips down on hers and slid my tongue into her mouth. Sparks ignited around us. My cock swelled to an unbelievable size as I considered stripping her right now and shoving my dick inside her, just to feel her warmth tightening around me. Those men were all insane if they thought she was past her prime. She was fucking amazing, and as soon as we were off this fucking island, I was going to spend the whole night worshipping her magnificent body.

“Yeah, he’s not willing to die for her,” Scottie snorted.

I kissed her one last time, memorizing the feel of her plump lips against mine, just in case she decided to run away again and get kidnapped. Her glassy eyes stared into mine as if I hung the moon and stars. I knew I was fucked, but probably in a good way. I was okay with her wanting me like this, even if it meant that I was wrong about every fucking thing I’d said so far. I’d get hell from the guys, but I could handle them.

“So, we’re good now, right? We can go back to the island, wake up the fucker that’s supposed to be fixing the plane, and get on the road,” Red said.

“Actually, we’ll hit the skies,” Scottie corrected. “There are no roads up there.”

I turned on my phone, sighing when I saw the number of voicemails left for me. “I don’t suppose Cash called any of you.”

“Of course,” Red snorted. “I directed him to you.”

“Yeah, me too,” Kavanaugh grinned. “After all, you are the team leader.”

“Maybe I just won’t answer this for now.”

“Sure, avoidance is always the answer,” IKE said, heading to the vehicle. “Can we hit the road now?”

“Wait,” Sarah cut in. “How are we getting back? There’s no boat,” she said, looking at the empty dock.

“We know a guy,” I winked, wrapping my arm around her neck, then immediately removing it. What the fuck was wrong

with me? I had some serious issues to work out.

“Then let’s get out of here,” she said, sliding my sunglasses on her face as she headed off on her own.

I patted down my shirt where they were just hanging from the neck. “How the hell does she do that?”

IKE chuckled beside me, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched her walk off. “Yeah, she doesn’t mean a thing to you.”

I rolled my eyes and shoved him as hard as I could. He tripped over his feet and fell off the dock, splashing into the water. I walked away with a grin on my face as I heard him shouting at me. The fucker deserved it. Who wore a suit to a shootout anyway?

Once we were all on the boat, I nodded to the old man that had informed us of this place and we were off. IKE was dripping wet, scowling at me for messing up his pretty hair and suit. He could suck it. I didn’t give a shit. It wasn’t like I had to work with him. He wasn’t going to be on my team when this job was done.

“So, are you done running from us?” I asked Sarah.

“That depends. Are you going to stick me on a plane?”

“Eventually.”

“Why can’t we just take a boat?”

“Because a plane is faster.”

“Do you have drugs?”

“What kind?”

“The kind that calms the nerves?”

“No, but I can get some,” I answered. In reality, I’d just knock her out.

She thought about it for a moment. “Fine, I’ll go along with you, but you have to stop making me do things I don’t want to do.”



“Then you have to listen and stop fighting me. You get that I’m trying to protect you, right?”

“As long as you understand that I have a cat and a goldfish at home that desperately need me.”

“I told you I would take care of it.”

“And did you?”

“Of course,” I snorted. I totally forgot.

She sighed and leaned back against me, using my chest as a pillow. My eyes widened in surprise as I stared at Kavanaugh. What the fuck was I supposed to do in this situation? He motioned for me to wrap my arm around her, but that seemed too intimate. And I couldn’t just shove her off me. That wouldn’t get me that blow job I knew she was willing to demonstrate just to prove she wasn’t too old.

And I didn’t actually mind her leaning against me, but...I was in front of the guys. There should be some kind of boundaries so I didn’t look like a pussy. Then again, I was getting laid when we got back to the hut. Snuggling seemed like a small trade to ensure I got head.

I slid my phone from my pocket and sent her address over to Cash, asking him to somehow take care of her cat, even though he wasn’t even in the same state.

*Cash: How the fuck am I supposed to feed a cat in Chicago when I’m in Kansas?*

*Me: There’s got to be a cat feeding service.*

*Cash: You’re really pissing me off.*

*Me: Is that a good thing or a bad thing?*

*Cash: That depends. Do you want to die?*

*Me: Is it for a woman or just in general?*

*Cash: Is the woman worth dying for?*

*Me: It’s too soon to tell. Too many variables. I may need Lock on this one.*

*Cash: You already fucked her. There aren't many choices here.*

*Me: I don't think I should be talking about this with you.*

*Cash: You're on the job!*

*Me: This is more a series of random events than a job.*

*Cash: I'm getting out Betty.*

*Me: Alright, alright! Geez, put her back in your pocket. I promise to be a good boy.*

*Cash: You're with IRIS. I know that's not true.*

Well, we hadn't blown anything up. That had to be a win. I glanced around the boat and then back to the shore. IRIS was staring at it too, a funny grin on his face.

"IRIS."

"Yeah?"

"What did you—"

The building Sarah had been held in exploded, sending a gigantic ball of fire into the sky. I sighed, shaking my head. "You just couldn't resist."

"Hey, nobody was in the building," he said defensively. "Well, no one alive."

Red nodded. "He was hiding the evidence."

"See? Aren't you happy I'm with you now?"

---

As soon as we docked the boat, I knew we were fucked. There was no mistaking the local authorities closing in on us. And they weren't here to have a friendly conversation. I grabbed Sarah's hand and pulled her directly behind me. I wasn't the only one that noticed.

"Looks like we drew some attention," Scottie Dog said, pulling out his phone.

“Any word on the plane?”

“Not yet,” he sighed. “I say we go to the airport and take our chances.”

“And if the plane doesn’t take off?” I asked.

“Would you rather stay here and end up in jail?”

He had a good point.

Sarah tapped me on the shoulder. “Um...why are we going to end up in jail?”

“Because this isn’t American soil and we’re Americans.”

“Except for IKE,” Kavanaugh pointed out. “He’s Spanish or European.”

“I’m not fucking Spanish,” IKE growled. “Let me take care of this. I’m the only one dressed to talk in a civilized manner.”

I held back a laugh as he shoved past us, dripping wet from when I shoved him off the dock. “Sarah, you still have the keys to the Jeep?”

“They’re in your pocket,” she whispered over my shoulder.

Frowning, I felt my pocket, then glanced at her. “You know, we’re going to have a talk one of these days.”

She smirked at me as I started pulling her off the boat. “Do I get to drive?”

“No, you don’t get to drive,” I scoffed. “If anyone’s going to drive, it’s going to be me.”

“Not if I get there first,” she laughed, dashing for the Jeep.

“Sarah!” I shouted, taking off after her. She couldn’t go anywhere without the keys, I laughed to myself, but when I reached for them, they were gone again. “Son of a bitch!”

“I’m riding shotgun!” Scottie shouted as he raced past me.

I put on a burst of speed and reached the vehicle at the same time he did, fighting over who got to sit in the passenger seat just as bullets pinged off the side of the Jeep. I jumped in

and covered Sarah's body with my own, but she was already starting the engine and shifting into gear.

"Are we taking the rest or leaving them behind?"

"Taking them!" I said incredulously. Though, when I looked back at IKE, I wasn't entirely sure about him. He was currently in a fistfight with one of the local authorities. It would be so easy to just drive off.

Kavanaugh and IRIS jumped in the back seat, but we couldn't leave without Red. Zoe would never forgive me, and she'd probably make me do all those films with her as a form of torture.

"Goddamnit! Go back for them," I shouted as Sarah laughed and drove straight at the police. My eyes widened when she didn't slow down as she approached. "Sarah..." Instead, she put her foot down and we sprang forward, heading right to the water.

"Oh shit! What is she doing?" IRIS shouted.

"That's right, bitches!" Sarah shouted. IKE and Red leapt out of the way just before she clipped one of the guards and spun the wheel hard to the right. Kavanaugh screamed as he was flung from the vehicle, only being held by IRIS's grip. The Jeep rode the edge of the concrete, narrowly avoiding falling into the water as she corrected and got the Jeep under control.

"Get the fuck away from the edge!" I shouted.

"Get me the fuck inside!" Kavanaugh shouted.

"Get me to a fucking toilet!" IRIS cried.

Sarah laughed maniacally, tossing her head back as she barely paid attention to the road. She slowed down just long enough for Red and IKE to grab onto the vehicle. They weren't even squished inside with us as she took off again.

"So, where to?" she asked, brushing her hair out of her face as she rested her elbow on the window ledge.

I clung to the dashboard, squeezing my eyes closed as I tried to gain my composure. What the fuck was that?

“Airport,” Scottie barked. “Just...follow this road.”

I glanced to the side just as he leaned over the door and puked all over the side of the Jeep.

“Not my suit!” IKE shouted as the puke flew back onto him. “What the fuck? Now I have to burn this!”

I didn’t even see how we made it to the airport. I was pretty sure someone else was directing her, because I was too busy trying not to puke as fumes of vomit wafted in my direction. When she came to a screeching halt, Scottie fell out of the Jeep and puked again. I was still gripping the dash as if my life depended on it.

Sarah turned to me with a smile. “That was so much fun.”

I slowly turned and looked at her like the lunatic she was. “You’re fucking crazy.”

Red clapped me on the shoulder, laughing the whole time. “Relax, it’s not like we haven’t done the same thing before.”

They all jumped out of the Jeep, but I didn’t seem to be able to move. “Yeah, but we all know what we’re doing!”

They weren’t even listening. They started running, glancing behind them. I finally looked over my shoulder and swore when I saw the police racing down the street. “Fuck, we just can’t catch a break!”

I hauled myself out of the Jeep, stepping in Scottie’s vomit on the way. My feet ate up the pavement as I raced toward the Cessna waiting for us. In a lawn chair just outside the hangar was a man in a pink shirt and a fedora, sleeping with a cigar in his mouth.

“Max!” Scottie shouted. “We need to move now!”

The man snorted as he jerked awake, dropping his cigar in his lap. “Fuck,” he muttered. “Don’t you know better than to yell at a man when he’s napping?”

“We need to leave!” Scottie shouted again.

“Alright, alright. I’ll have it fixed in the—”

Bullets pinged off the hangar and he ducked to the ground, his eyes wide as he stared at the police. “You fucking brought the police with you?”

“You said you’d have it fixed!”

“So, you ratted me out?” he shouted, running toward his own plane.

“No, we blew up a sex trade building.”

“Oh, that’s fucking perfect!” he shouted, about to climb up into his plane, but stopped and pointed a finger at Scottie. “You owe me a plane!”

“You owe me a plane!” Scottie retorted. “Mine isn’t fixed yet!”

I missed what this guy Max said as he climbed into the Cessna which looked way too small to fit all of us. “Scottie, what the fuck are we doing?” I asked, shoving Sarah up the steps.

“We’re getting on the fucking plane!”

“This plane?” I asked incredulously.

He turned back to me with a scowl on his face. “No, the one that doesn’t work,” he retorted. “I was going to just wait things out there and see what happens!”

I started climbing, shoving Sarah by the ass into the plane. “You know, we’re gonna have a talk about—”

“Yeah, you’re gonna have a talk with everyone. All you want to do is talk,” he snapped.

“Get the fuck in here!” Max shouted, flipping switches, all while smoking his cigar.

“Is he qualified to fly this plane?”

Max turned to me, pointing at me with his cigar between his fingers. “I’ll have you know I am a highly qualified pilot. I used to fly all the time in the war.”

By the looks of him, he had been drunk for the past ten years. “Which war exactly?”

He waved his hand at me as he continued to prep the plane. “You know, the one where they were shooting at everyone.”

I turned to Scottie with wide eyes and grabbed him by the shirt. “Go fly the plane!”

He tore my hands from his shirt, shaking his head furiously. “You never fly another man’s plane. Are you fucking insane? That’s bad luck!”

“You’re just scared of flying!”

“Exactly! Which is why he’s flying the plane!”

“Are we all in? I’m leaving!” Max shouted.

“There’s nowhere to sit,” Kavanaugh said, turning to me in horror. “There are only four seats!”

IKE, Sarah, Red, and IRIS had already strapped in, which left Kavanaugh, Scottie, and me with nowhere to sit. I grabbed onto the back of the pilot’s seat as we started moving much faster than this hunk of junk should be going.

“That’s it, baby. Purr for me,” Max said lovingly to his plane.

“Where did you find this guy?” I shouted to Scottie over the engines.

“He came highly recommended by the locals.”

“The locals are trying to kill us,” I retorted.

Max glanced over his shoulder, smirking at us. “Relax, I’ve kept this baby well-maintained since she retired.”

I couldn’t have heard him right. “Retired? Retired from what?”

He chuckled at me like this was all so fucking hilarious. “From production. They stopped making these things in the early ’80s.”

“The eighties? Do you know what they’ve done with technology since then?” I said in exasperation. “We’re going to fucking die!”

“Oh, relax. I know what I’m doing,” he said as he pulled back on the yoke and we started to lift off.

“This is not the way you’re supposed to fly!” Kavanaugh shouted, trying desperately to hold onto something.

“Look on the bright side. At least there are no mummies,” Red chuckled.

I screamed as we climbed higher and higher in the air. I was pretty sure no plane was supposed to climb this high this fast. My feet were barely staying on the ground.

“What are you doing?”

“I have to lose them,” Max said. Then the plane started to turn. My body went airborne as the sky became the ground.

“Holy shit!” Kavanaugh shouted. “We’re going to die!”

“Ugh, I don’t feel so good,” Scottie groaned, clutching his stomach as the plane rolled again. He fell to the floor of the plane, then threw up. But his vomit didn’t stay down as we rolled again. “This plane is not meant to go upside down!”

Max laughed uproariously. “That’s what they say about everything. It’ll be fine!”

And that was the moment I knew we were fucked. No good thing ever happened after someone said everything would be fine. I gripped the back of his seat tighter as the plane took a sudden dip. He started tapping on the panel, frowning as he started fidgeting with things.

“Huh.”

“That’s never good,” Scottie burped.

“What does huh mean?”

“It means gosh darn, oops, dagnabit,” Max said over his shoulder. “Or if you prefer...oh fuck.”

Kavanaugh was near tears as he shook his head. “I don’t like oh fuck. Let’s go back to gosh darn. It has a nicer ring to it.”



“Nicer or not, this plane is going down!” Max said, standing from the pilot’s seat and shoving past us.

“What are you doing?” I shouted. “You’re supposed to be flying the plane!”

“Yeah, the plane’s going to crash.”

My mouth opened, but not a sound came out. I looked at Sarah, thinking I was going to have to calm her down, but she was unusually serene. I clawed my way over to her and knelt so I could see her face.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said, taking her hand in mine.

“I know,” she nodded.

“You know the plane is going to crash, right?”

“Oh, well, that seems par for the course, don’t you think? But you know, I’m very lucky. All my close encounters have left me in the position to die quickly. It’s a good thing.”

The longer I stared at her, the more I wanted to get away from her. She was insane. Nobody was this calm in the face of death, and I worked with a bunch of guys that made a living out of cracking jokes in times of peril.

I got up and rushed the two feet over to Max. “What’s the plan?”

“See this?” he said, pulling out a big yellow thing.

“Yeah.”

“We’re gonna pull this tab and it’s going to blow up.”

“In the plane?”

He grinned, tossing back his head and laughing. “In the—man, you crack me up. Of course not. It won’t fit in the plane. This plane wasn’t designed to carry more than five people.”

“Then why did you let us all on here?” I snapped.

“Should I have left you behind?”

I thought it over. Sure, I would be in prison by now in a foreign territory, but at least I would be alive. Cash would find

a way to get me out. Months of torture, I could handle. This was certain death.

“Yes!”

“Oh,” he frowned, then slapped me on the arm. “Well, sorry I ruined your plans. Better luck next time.”

“There is no next time!” I turned and grabbed Scottie, hauling him to his feet. “Go fix the plane!”

“Sure, let me just push you out first.”

“What?”

He grabbed me by the cheeks and squeezed. “We’re overloaded! This plane is ancient! There is no way we’re not going down!”

I turned and looked out the windshield, watching as the ground slowly came up to meet us. And there wasn’t a fucking thing I could do about it.

“Alright, listen up, people!” Max shouted. “Now, when the plane is about to hit the water, we’re all going to jump out of the plane. Then we’ll get in this raft and wait for someone to rescue us. If you jump too soon, you’ll hit the water like concrete, so...try not to do that.”

Sarah got up and stood beside me as if she was waiting in line for lunch. Red was eerily calm too, and IRIS looked like he was going to a party. As for IKE, he was still sitting in his seat, picking at his nails. What the fuck was wrong with everyone? At least Scottie had the decency to puke.

“Alright!” Max shouted. “I’m gonna open the door. Hang onto something so you don’t get sucked out and cut in half by the wing.”

This guy was just full of fun, delightful things to say. I held tight to Sarah, gripping the seat as best I could. Seconds later, the door opened and he turned back to us one last time before pulling the string on the boat and tossing it out. “Time to go!”

He jumped as if it was completely normal. We were coming up fast on the water. There was nothing left to do but

jump. I grabbed Scottie off the floor and shoved him to the door, pushing him out as he screamed like a girl. IRIS was next, shouting like this was fun on the way down. I looked at Sarah one last time, pulling her in for a rough kiss. If this was going to be my last time, I wanted to make it count.

I pulled back and cupped her cheeks. “Sarah, if this is our last moment—”

“I think we should jump!” she interrupted. “You know, so we don’t die!”

“Right.”

We stepped forward together holding hands and jumped from the plane. I pointed my legs toward the water, hoping she didn’t break her neck on the way down. We hit the water hard, sinking quickly into the depths of the ocean. I fought like hell to hold onto her hand as I kicked my way to the surface. I broke free, sucking in my first gulp of fresh air, but Sarah was no longer holding my hand.

“Sarah!” I shouted, spinning around as I searched for her. “Sarah!”

I spun, seeing everyone else spread out across the trail from where we jumped, but she was nowhere to be seen. I dove under the water, trying to find her, but the salt water burned my eyes. I broke the surface again, hoping this time I would see her.

“Sarah!” I shouted over and over again.

I spun around and around, finally catching sight of her about fifty feet from me, struggling to stay afloat.

“I’m coming!” I shouted. “Just float!”

“I can’t swim!” she shouted as she bobbed under the water before coming back up.

“Then why did you jump?” I yelled, knowing it was irrational to be angry at her right now. When I finally got to her, she wrapped her arms around my neck, nearly taking me under. I was going to drown if she didn’t calm her shit down.

“It got this, man,” I heard from behind me, then her body went limp.

I glanced over my shoulder at IRIS, who winked at me. “What the fuck did you do?”

“I put her to sleep,” he said, looking at me funny. “Strange that we keep having to do that, don’t you think?”

Then he swam off, leaving me with an unconscious woman in my arms. “Thanks for the help!” I shouted sarcastically.

He waved and kept on swimming.



# SARAH

I woke to a floating sensation with warmth on my skin. Sighing, I rolled and snuggled into the warm body beside me. This was so cozy.

“You smell like salt water taffy,” I mumbled, wiping my eyes that felt crusty. In fact, everything about me felt crusty.

Chuckles sounded around me and I finally peeled my eyes open, only to see Eli glaring at me. If he was there, then who was I... I turned and looked up into the eyes of a very happy Max.

“Hey, there, darlin’. Have a nice nap?”

“I was sleeping?” I asked, sitting up and yawning.

“Yeah, I had to put you to sleep,” IRIS said. “You wouldn’t stop trying to drown Eli, and as much as I’ve thought about it myself a few times, and this was the perfect opportunity, I thought I’d step in and save him.”

“Thanks,” Eli said sarcastically.

“Wait, when was I trying to drown you?” I asked, not remembering that at all.

“About two minutes after you so gleefully jumped out of a plane with me, without mentioning that you couldn’t swim.”

Oh, that’s right. “Well, in my defense, I didn’t think we were going to live.”

“Of course, we were going to live,” Max snorted. “I had a plan and everything.”

“Your plan sucks,” Kavanaugh grumbled. “We’re in a raft in the middle of the ocean.”

Max pointed at him. “Yes, but you’re not in prison, so it all worked out. Except, I lost my cigar on the plane.” He sighed, leaning back his head. “At least I still have my hat and sunglasses.”

The rest of us were without either, and I could feel the heat beating down on my skin. “Um...how long can we live out here?”

“Without water? Three to five days,” IRIS said as if calculating in his head. “But dehydration will set in and cause hallucinations. It won’t be long before one of us tries to eat the other.”

“Sarah’s first,” IKE said.

“Excuse me?” I glanced around the group, confused by what was going on. “I’m the first to eat someone else or the first to be eaten?”

“To be eaten,” IKE snorted in laughter. “You’re the weakest link. Everyone knows you get rid of the weakest link first.”

My jaw dropped as I stared at Eli, who just shrugged at me. “I am most definitely not the weakest link.”

“How do you figure?” Scottie asked.

“Well, for starters, I didn’t panic when the plane was going down. And I definitely didn’t puke all over everyone!”

“She’s right. Sorry, Scottie Dog,” Kavanaugh clapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey, I might puke, but I’ve saved your asses a number of times. You can’t just arbitrarily decide I’m the weakest link. Besides, if we’re going to get rid of anyone, it’s this lazy ass,” he pointed to Max.

Max pulled his sunglasses down his nose, glaring at Scottie. “Lazy? Is that what you just called me?”

“Well, yeah. When you’re hired to fix a plane, but you sit around drinking all day instead working, I call that lazy.”

“Hey, I just flew your ass out of the Caribbean, saving you from local police that wanted to throw your ass in prison for interrupting their sex trade operation.”

“And you were too drunk to fly properly,” Scottie snapped. “Besides, none of us know you. It would be easier to cut you up and eat you than any of us. We all know each other.”

“That’s true,” Red nodded. “I think it might be a little hard to eat Eli. Kavanaugh, on the other hand...”

“Thanks, man. That makes me feel great.”

“I’m just saying... you’re kind of a pretty boy.”

“On the other hand,” IRIS said thoughtfully, “if we came across any pirates, we could trade him for passage. What do you think he’d fetch?”

We all turned and stared at Kavanaugh, trying to determine what a good price would be.

“At least two nights,” I said first. “With a few hot meals.”

“That’s it?” Kavanaugh said, his eyes bulging. “I’m worth way more than that!”

“Maybe three meals,” IRIS said. “Definitely not enough for all of us. We’ll need another. I vote for IKE.”

IKE chuckled. “Trying to get me out of the way?”

“I’ve been trying to do that since I met you. Think of how easy it would be to say to Jane that you hit the water so hard you didn’t survive.”

“And then sharks ate him,” I added. “You know, if you think about it, nobody will ever truly know what happened out here.”

That might have been the wrong thing to say. Suddenly, all of us were looking at each other like we were planning the next murder and how to split up the remains.



“So, if I’ve got this right,” Eli spoke up, breaking the tension, “Max is first, then Kavanaugh and IKE. Any complaints on that?”

Kavanaugh raised his hand. “I would really like to not be second. Surely, I rank ahead of IKE.”

“Yeah, nobody likes a guy in a suit,” Eli said, staring at the handsome devil in the suit. “What’s with the tie, anyway? Don’t you know that’s the easiest way to get strangled?”

“James Bond wore a tie,” IKE answered.

“Yeah, like you’re James Bond,” Eli snorted.

I looked at him carefully. “I could see it. He’s got that suave, debonair look to him. And that suit fits him perfectly. What’s not to like? I bet he’s good with a knife too. Look at those hands.”

“Hey!” Eli snapped. “You’re only supposed to be looking at my hands.”

I cocked my head at him, holding back a smile. “I’m sorry, I thought we were just fucking.”

“Ooh, burn,” IRIS laughed.

Eli’s eyes practically scorched me as they roamed over my body. “There is absolutely nothing between us that’s just anything. I was trying to tell you when we were about to jump out of the plane.”

“Yes, a deathbed confession. Every girl’s fantasy,” I smirked.

“Better than no confession,” he retorted.

This guy was so cocky. He needed to be knocked down a peg. “I change my mind. I think we should eat Eli first.”

His jaw clenched hard. “And why’s that?”

“I’ve seen your body. I know how much there is to eat.”

Scottie raised his hand, looking at all of us like we were crazy. “Um...I’m not sure if anyone’s thought about this, but we could just go fishing.”

“And ideas like that are why we’re going to eat you first,” IKE snapped. “Go fishing,” he snorted. “What kind of moron are you?”

“The kind that uses his brain and says, *Hey, there’s a great source of food right at our fingertips. How about we eat that instead of becoming cannibals and potentially die from Kuru.*”

“What the fuck is Kuru?” Eli asked.

“Encephalopathy,” Scottie retorted. “It’s a disease that attacks the nervous system and...other things that eventually kill you.”

“Never heard of it,” IRIS said quickly. “I still say we take out Max first.”

We all looked at him, but he was passed out, his head leaning back on the edge of the boat, his mouth open as he snored loudly.

I looked at the others, shrugging slightly. “Now would be the perfect time. He wouldn’t even see it coming.”

Eli narrowed his eyes at me. “I think we need to redefine the terms of our relationship.”

---

“I’m so hungry,” I groaned, holding my stomach. “I need food! Let’s just kill him and get it over with.”

Eli grabbed me as I was about to leap forward and wrap my hands around Max’s neck. He pulled me against him and started running his hands up and down my arms to calm me. “It’ll be fine.”

“How can you say that? I’m roasting out here. My skin is literally burning. I’m so thirsty!”

“Eating Max is not going to make you less thirsty,” he pointed out.

“No, but it’ll make me feel better.”

“I’d just like to point out that killing him will most likely add blood to the water, which will then attract sharks,” Scottie said nonchalantly. “Not that you have to listen to me. I’m just another guy in a lifeboat, not wanting to die by a gigantic shark tearing me to pieces.”

“We wouldn’t be in this position if you hadn’t landed us in a foreign country,” Red grumbled. “I have a kid at home.”

“Oh, so the rest of us can die,” Kavanaugh mumbled. “Great to know I’m so dispensable.”

“Who do you have? Who was the last woman you remember by name?”

He opened his mouth to answer but then snapped it shut. “I don’t want to say.”

“That means it’s someone we know,” Eli said, sitting up straighter. “Who was it?”

“No one, okay?” Kavanaugh tried to turn away from us, but there was nowhere to go.

“Face it, man. We’re going to die out here,” IRIS said. “Do you really want to take this to the grave with you?”

“Yes,” he snapped.

“Fine, no skin off my nose. But that sort of thing would eat at me. I would want to get anything like that off my chest.”

“Then why don’t you tell us what’s bothering you?” I asked, smirking at him.

IRIS narrowed his eyes at me but relented. “Fine. If you must know, it’s eating me up that I don’t know if Jane slept with Alexander Pierce.”

“Oh, come on,” Eli huffed out a laugh. “You know she didn’t sleep with him.”

“She *says* she didn’t sleep with him,” IRIS retorted. “How do I know that she’s not just saying that because she doesn’t want to admit that she slept with a murderer?”

“Wait, who is Alexander Pierce, and who did he murder?”

“A bunch of people from Jane’s books.”

“Wait, he killed fictional characters?” I asked Eli.

“No, he killed people in the same scenarios that her characters were killed in her books. And Alexander Pierce was her next-door neighbor that she was going crazy for,” Eli smirked.

I gasped, holding my hand over my mouth. “And you married her?” I shrieked.

“Hey, she didn’t know he was a murderer when she was fantasizing about him,” IRIS said in defense of her.

“No, but she was in love with a killer, and you love to blow stuff up! That has to be some kind of weird... connection.”

“Are you saying she loves me because I’m a version of him?” IRIS said angrily.

“I—”

“Because I’m not a version of anybody!”

“You’re a version of me,” IKE grinned. “I was in her book first.”

“And you die in the next one!” IRIS shouted. IKE’s face turned deadly as he scowled at IRIS. “Yeah, that’s right. I had her kill you off. She wanted you to fall in love and move to the Bahamas, but I convinced her it would be better for her readers if you were dead. Go out with a bang, if you catch my drift.”

It was quiet for all of two seconds before IKE launched himself at IRIS, strangling him as he yelled at him. “You son of a bitch! I had a good character! I worked my ass off to become that character!”

“But you’ll never be as good as me,” IRIS choked out, his face turning red. “I got...the girl!”

“Should...we stop him?” I asked Eli, watching as IRIS’s eyes bulged.

“Nah, he’s got this.”

“But...”

Max snorted awake, sitting up as he watched in fascination as IKE strangled IRIS. “I should have stayed asleep.” He replaced the hat on his head and closed his eyes.

Finally, IRIS kicked IKE in the balls and rolled over, choking as IKE curled up in a ball, holding his...balls. I had no idea men could be so...vicious with each other, and all over a book. This was fascinating to witness, and suddenly, I wasn't so hungry anymore.

“Yeah,” IRIS choked. “That's right. You could have had her.” He wheezed in a breath and sat up. “You waited too long.”

“I fucking hate you,” IKE croaked out.

“Did you really want her?” I asked, feeling bad for him now.

“What? No, but you don't kick a man in the balls. It's just wrong.”

“You were choking me and no one was helping,” IRIS argued. “It was warranted.”

IKE finally sat up, taking a deep breath. “You know, I tried to be a nice guy. I have no qualms now about telling Jane how you shit your pants when you jumped out of the plane.”

My eyes flew to IRIS, who was staring at him in horror. “You swore you wouldn't tell!”

“I lied!”

“Then I'll tell her how you made up that whole story with the guy from Egypt!”

I gasped again. “What story? What happened with the guy in Egypt?”

“Dude,” Kavanaugh chuckled. “And I thought I had it bad.”

“Oh, just tell them you slept with Carly,” Scottie sighed.

“You slept with Carly?” Eli exclaimed.

“Who’s Carly?” I asked, but no one answered me.

“Bowie kicked her out and she saw me at the bar,” Kavanaugh said defensively. “She’s the devil!”

“I can’t believe you slept with Carly,” IRIS snorted. “Were you that desperate?”

“It was a moment of weakness!”

“Who’s Carly?” I shouted.

“How weak can you be? She’s slept with half the men in town,” Red laughed. “Holy shit, this is so funny. Just wait until Rae finds out.”

“Who’s Rae?” There were too many names and no one was answering my questions!

“Yeah? At least Fox didn’t bone my mother-in-law.”

My eyes widened at the revelation, and I didn’t even know who he was talking about.

Red’s face turned...red. “Take that back.”

“You take it back!” Kavanaugh shouted.

“Who’s your mother-in-law? And why did Fox bone her? Was this before or after Anna? And who is Carly?” I yelled, standing up to get their attention. I lost my footing and tripped over Max, falling into the ocean with a yelp. Moments later, I was pulled up by my shirt and hauled back into the boat. Eli patted my back as I choked on the water.

“You okay?”

I nodded.

“I think maybe that’s enough sharing for one day,” Red grunted.



## ELI

“How the fuck do we find ourselves in these positions?” I asked Red as night fell. Everyone else was asleep in the boat, but I couldn’t close my eyes knowing someone might miss us in passing.

“Well, I would say it’s all your fault. It started the moment you slept with her.”

I shot him an incredulous look that he probably couldn’t see in the dark. “I didn’t cause this by sleeping with her.”

“Think about it,” he said, keeping his voice low. “If you hadn’t slept with her, you wouldn’t have cared who she was when we found her strapped to the bomb. But the moment you saw her again, you decided to take her with us. Now look at where we are.”

I hated that he was right. While this couldn’t be directly linked to me as all my fault, it sure felt that way at the moment. I glanced down at Sarah curled up by my side. Somehow, I didn’t regret a thing.

“You know, she’s a little weird.”

He snorted in laughter. “Don’t let her hear you say that. Women tend to not like it when we call them weird. Or hookers.”

Still... ”But don’t you find it strange that she didn’t get freaked out at all when we were about to die?”

“A little, but people react differently in life or death situations.”



“Okay, then what about how she freaked out getting on the plane? But did you notice she didn’t even bat an eyelash getting into that Cessna?”

He shrugged. “People were shooting at us?”

“That’s all you’ve got for me? People were shooting at us? She nearly took us down when we were flying to Florida. She was losing her shit. And *now!* We’re in the fucking middle of nowhere, floating around in the ocean and she’s not panicking at all. That’s just wrong.”

“Would you prefer a hysterical woman?”

“I don’t know!” I nearly shouted, catching myself at the last minute. “I don’t know what I want. I like her just the way she is, but it’s fucking wrong. No woman should react that way. She should be terrified and shaking. She should *not* be sympathizing with her kidnappers!”

He scratched his jaw. “Well, you heard her. The guy only held her. Technically, he didn’t kidnap her.”

“And you don’t find it fucking strange that she distinguishes between the two?”

He sighed heavily. “What do you want me to say? Zoe wasn’t exactly easy to read either.”

“Whoa, don’t compare this to Zoe.”

“Why not?”

“Because you married Zoe. I’m just...transporting Sarah.”

“Yeah, that’s what this is.” He jerked his head at her. “You have your arm wrapped around her.”

“I’m keeping her warm.”

“You kissed her on the plane. You were going to tell her something. What was it?”

I snapped my mouth closed, refusing to answer.

“Come on, man. It’s me. You can tell me.”

“I don’t know what I was going to say, alright? It was a moment of weakness. We were about to jump out of a fucking

plane! I had vomit on me from Scottie Dog!”

“And you were going to say what?” he asked slowly. “That you hoped she forgave you for allowing Scottie to puke on her too?”

I rolled my eyes. We both knew I was trying to get out of what I really was on the verge of saying. “Look, whatever I was about to say, it doesn’t matter now. That was then, and this is now.”

He nodded. “Right, now you’re alive, so you should keep all those feelings bottled up.”

“Exactly.”

“I mean, what’s the point in living if you have to spill your guts and make things uncomfortable?”

“That’s no way to live,” I agreed.

“Much better to just keep putting yourself in life or death situations so you can get that cheap thrill of having her cling to your arm as you scream and she calmly takes everything on.”

“I don’t scream.”

“You screamed a little,” he disagreed.

“As I recall, I was perfectly fine until she tried to drown me.”

“You freaked out when she was driving.”

I turned a little to face him. “Yeah, what was with that shit? Where did she learn to drive like that? Or did she just get in and hope for the best? And why was she so terrified to get on a plane, but driving to the edge of a dock was totally fine?”

He shrugged, not having an answer for me. “I can tell you one thing, Kavanaugh will never get in a vehicle with her again.”

“I doubt any of us will,” I muttered.

The night slowly passed after that. I started to drift off, but every time I started to fall asleep, a wave would wake me up and I would look around for the boat causing it. Of course,

there never was a boat. But as the sun was starting to rise, I finally gave in and let myself drift off.

“You’re such a liar!”

I was startled awake some hours later. The sun was higher in the sky, but it was still morning. And my feisty...friend was arguing with IRIS.

“I didn’t lie.”

“You so did!”

“How do you lie when you’re playing rock, paper, scissors?” IRIS countered.

“I don’t know,” she glared at him, “but you did.”

He scoffed and leaned back against the raft. “I’m not playing if you’re gonna be a baby about it.”

“Like I would play with you anyway!”

Max slid his glasses down his nose, eyeing me. “This is your woman?”

“She’s not my woman.”

Sarah turned to me, her arms crossed over her chest in anger. “Really? Now I’m not your woman?”

“You’re the one that left me,” I argued.

“Because I had a flight to catch!”

“And you didn’t give me your number.”

“Like you would come to Chicago to see me,” she said in irritation.

“Uh...as you recall, I did just that.”

“Oh, please,” she rolled her eyes. “You weren’t there to see me. You were there for a job.”

“Where I saw you,” I pointed out. “And saved your life.”

“Technically, I saved her life,” IRIS sighed. “Not that anyone cares about my contributions.”

“I jumped on her and pulled the wire out of her vest.”

“Yes, and blew up a building. Good job,” he grinned. “And Cash thinks I’m the one with the problem.”

Now I was just getting pissed off. “The only one with the problem is her,” I pointed at Sarah. “Maybe if she could make up her mind, none of us would be in this situation.”

“That’s why you leave it all behind,” Max said, staring up at the sky through his sunglasses. He raised his hand as if painting a picture. “You just walk away from life and say fuck you!” He raised both middle fingers to the sky, then slumped back down.

I stared at him, wondering if he was truly okay. “You alright, big guy?”

He scoffed, shaking his head slightly. “I’m on a raft in the middle of the ocean. I’m fucking perfect.”

“Really?” I had to question his sanity. “Because I could think of about a thousand places I’d rather be right now than right here with all of you.”

“Hey,” Scottie Dog snapped. “This is not the worst situation we’ve been in after jumping out of a plane.”

“Maybe for you,” I pointed out. “As you’ll recall, I haven’t been with you all the times you’ve crashed.”

That made Max sit up. “Just how many times have you crashed?”

“Why? Does it matter? You crashed too.”

“Right, but we were overloaded in a very old plane.”

“Oh, don’t give me that,” Scottie argued. “Everything went to shit approximately when you started pulling tricks out of your ass. You knew that plane wasn’t supposed to go upside down.”

“I also knew we were going to die if we didn’t escape them,” Max shrugged. “I took my chances.”

“And nearly killed us!”

Max chuckled. “Sounds like you’ve almost done that more than a few times.”

I had to agree with him.

“Hey, there were extenuating circumstances,” Scottie said. “There were people firing at us, and birds...and more people firing at us.”

“Sounds like you need a fighter jet,” Max said, leaning back against the raft.

Scottie looked at me curiously. “Do you think I could convince Cash?”

“To buy you a hundred million dollar plane that you’ll inevitably crash?”

“Hey, not all of them are a hundred million.”

“How much are they?” Sarah asked.

“Some are only eighty-five million,” Scottie countered. “That’s a savings of a whole fifteen million dollars.”

“Which Cash will kill you over if you don’t die at the bottom of a mountain the first time you take it out.”

“You know, I’d just like to point out that IRIS blows up buildings,” Scottie retorted.

Max sighed loudly again. “Like I said, fuck off and live in peace.”

“Yeah, that’s working out really well for you right now,” I said, spotting something in the distance. I sat up, cupping my hands around my eyes to block the sun. “Uh...guys?”

“Hmm?” Red grunted, not bothering to open his eyes.

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

They all sat up and looked, aside from Max who pulled his hat further over his eyes.

“What do you see?” Red asked.

“That,” I pointed at the small thing in the distance that looked like it was headed right toward us.

“Is that...” Scottie asked.

“I think it is,” IRIS answered, still squinting.

IKE, who had been quiet this whole time, finally spoke up. “Should we...”

“Finish a sentence?” Sarah asked. “What are you guys looking at?”

I grabbed her by the chin and shifted her focus. “See there?”

She shook her head, but then stopped. “Oh, God.”

“Now, Sarah, this is not the time to panic,” I said, trying to calm her down.

“But that’s—”

“Right.”

“And it’s coming—”

“I know.”

“I think now’s a good time to put that cannibal scenario into play,” Scottie muttered. “Not it.”

“Not it,” I answered, strictly because it was what you were supposed to do when someone else said it.

Everyone else said the same, all except for Max. He finally lifted his hat off his face and looked at all of us. “What? Why are you guys looking at me like that?”

“Because we’re about to feed you to a shark.”

He snorted and replaced the hat. “Yeah, good idea. Give the shark blood so he’ll know where the food source is. Then we can all die.”

“Well, what’s your brilliant plan, genius?”

He sighed again and sat up. “Maybe if you all sit really still and stop talking, he’ll swim right by us.” Then he leaned back and covered his face again.

This guy didn’t have a care in the world. He literally didn’t care that a shark was swimming right for us.

“Yeah, I’m not getting eaten by a shark today,” IKE said. “I know how this goes. I’m the new guy—aside from him,” he

pointed at Max. “And he’s the native, so he’ll live. Which means I die first. Who has a gun on them?”

“You didn’t bring one?” I asked with a smirk on my face.

“I have one, but the other fell out when we hit the water. Call me crazy, but I’m not going to look for it right now. And unless that shark comes out of the water to eat us, firing at it is the most ridiculous thing you can do.”

“Why?” Sarah asked. “It works in the movies!”

“Because bullets lose momentum when they enter the water,” I explained. “IRIS, you can rig something up, right?”

“With just bullets?” he laughed. “Sure, I’ll get right on that.”

“Well, firing at it will only draw attention. What if we don’t kill it right away?” Red asked.

“Okay, I’ve got it,” Scottie said, rubbing his fingers together in concentration. “Here’s the plan. Okay.”

“Do you want to tell us before the shark eats us?” I asked testily.

“Okay, we have this paddle,” Scottie pointed to the side of the raft. “We whittle it down and create a harpoon, then stab it to death.”

My jaw clenched in anger as I stared at him. And by the looks of it, everyone else hated the idea too. “Whittle? That’s what you want to go with? In the three minutes we have until that shark reaches us, you want us to whittle a harpoon?” I shouted.

“That’s right,” Max grinned. “Draw more attention by yelling.”

“If you know what to do, then do it!”

“I already told you,” he drawled. “Stay still and stop. Fucking. Yelling.”

My eyes slid back to the shark and I finally gave in to the fact that no matter what, this was how it was going to end. I’d survived war, jumping out of planes, and buildings exploding.

Yet, the way it was all going to end was by a giant shark chewing me to pieces.

I pulled my gun, determined not to go out this way. Not just for me, but for Sarah's sake too. I didn't know her that well, but there was definitely something between us. And if there was ever a time to lay down your life for someone, it was when you knew that person could have changed your entire world.

I turned to her one last time, expecting to see the calm facade she had through this entire ordeal, but instead, she looked like she was on the verge of freaking out. I grabbed her by the arms and pulled her to me. Although it was hard to concentrate with the skimpy dress clinging to her sweaty body. And then I remembered her skimpy, stringy underwear Kavanaugh bought her. Man, it was going to be really hard to take the hit for this knowing what a perfect body I was leaving behind. "I'm going to take care of this. Stay with Red. He'll look after you."

Kavanaugh scoffed. "Of course, you didn't choose me."

I shot him an irritated glance, but turned back to her, my heart pounding in my chest. "I swear to God, you will get out of here and you will live."

Tears filled her eyes and kept flicking back to the shark about to attack. "Eli..."

I smashed my lips to hers, knowing now what I had to do. After just a few moments of feeling that spark deep in my gut that told me she was the one for me, I tore myself from her grasp and ignored her pleas for me to stay. I shuffled my way over to the edge of the raft, my eyes slipping closed as I prepared myself to fight the demon in the water. This was it, the moment where my life counted, not just for Sarah, but for my friends.

My family.

With a battle cry, I leapt from the raft, drawing the attention of the shark to me. His fin raised out of the water and

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Fox popped up grinning at me, laughing his ass off as I fell into the water with a splash. I quickly swam to the surface, wiping the water from my face as I grabbed onto the fake fin attached to his back.

“Man, you should have seen your face!” He mocked me with a wide, silent battle cry, raising his arm over his head. “Classic, Eli. Man, I love you!”

“What the fuck was that?” I shouted, tossing the fin away from me.

He looked forlorn as he watched the fin start to float away. “You know, I spent a lot of money on that fin. That’s just rude.”

“What the fuck are you doing? What were you thinking? Are you insane?” I shouted.

“Which question do you want to be answered first?”

It didn’t matter. I had just practically poured my heart out to Sarah, thinking I was about to die, and it had all been for nothing. I swam to the edge of the raft, taking Kavanaugh’s hand as he pulled me. Dripping wet, I made my way back over to my spot, scowling the entire time.

“Do you still—”

“Shut it,” I snapped at Red.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him holding his hand over his mouth, eager to say something.

“I suppose you want to come in too,” Kavanaugh said to Fox.

“Well, I did swim all the way out here. The least you could do is let me aboard.”

Water splashed all around us as Fox clumsily climbed into the raft, nearly sinking us when one side dipped and water started to fill the raft.

“Hey! I was sleeping, man!” Max shouted.

“Sorry about that,” Fox grinned, holding out his hand. “People call me Fox, but you can call me Lo.”

I rolled my eyes when Max shook his hand as if they were old chums. What a fucking joke.

“So, what’d I miss?” Fox asked, finally taking a seat.

“Well, just as you were about to attack us, Eli was professing his...” Kavanaugh frowned, looking over at me. “What exactly were you doing? Was that a declaration of love?”

“Nah, couldn’t be love,” IRIS said. “Trust me, I’ve seen a few love scenes from Jane’s novels. They’re more in-depth than that.”

“Jane writes mysteries,” Fox said in confusion.

“Yeah, but since she met me, I’ve convinced her to add some love stuff,” IRIS said, wagging his eyebrows.

“Sure,” IKE snorted. “You can believe it was you.”

“And I suppose you think you sparked her sudden interest in writing something a little more romantic.”

“Alright,” Red cut in. “Trust me, I’ve read her romance. It sucks. Now, if you want to know how to play this right, I could ask Zoe to give you some pointers.”

I glared at him, wondering why the hell he would think I would want to go to his woman for tips on how to tell a woman I loved her. If I even loved her, which I was pretty sure this was more of an infatuation.

“I think I got it, but thanks.”

He winced. “I don’t know. That whole thing about you protecting her? It was a little cheesy.”

“I actually told her that *you* would protect her.” Geez, couldn’t he even get the details straight?

“Yeah, but you did say you were committing this great act for her. That, in and of itself, is you protecting her. Now, here’s how I see it,” he said, shifting in the raft. “Let’s say you’re with a woman—”

“Ooh, that’s me!” Sarah piped up, once again smiling.

“Right,” Red grinned. “And you’re about to save her life. Maybe try to look less constipated when you’re speaking.”

I caught IKE nodding out of the corner of my eye. “Yeah, you know you did have that look.”

“I did not,” I snapped.

“It was kind of that look like when you think you need to fart, but you might shit yourself instead,” IRIS added. “Definitely don’t want that look while you’re professing your love. Am I right?” he laughed.

“Dude,” Fox winked at me. “You were really going to tackle a shark for your lady friend? That is so...beautiful. They should write a musical about you.”

“Sarah,” I bit out. “Not lady friend.”

“Oh, right,” he said, standing and holding out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too. I liked your costume, by the way. Very convincing.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, ready to lose my shit if someone didn’t come rescue us soon. It was bad enough that I had to sit on this raft with all these guys, but now Fox joined us. And that made my head snap up.

“Wait, how are you out here?”

“Seriously? I tracked you.”

“Yes, but where’s the boat?”

“Boat?” he laughed, shaking his head. “No, man. See, I knew your plane went down. According to your tracking, you were going very fast, and then very slow. And you were still breathing, so I knew you were out here. Yeah, I had a guy fly me out here and then I jumped. I’ve been swimming around for the better part of the morning, and then I found you!”

“You were swimming around?” Max asked.

“Navy SEAL,” I muttered.

“Makes sense.”

“Question,” Max asked, leaning forward. “Why the shark fin?”

“To confuse the sharks, of course. It’s like when you put up those stuffed mice to scare the other mice out of the house.”

Max looked at me. “Have you heard of this?”

“Never.”

“And you actually think that worked? Did they teach you to do that in the Navy?”

Fox tossed his head back in laughter. “No, they’re not that clever.”

“And while that story is really great, what exactly did you plan to do when you found us?”

Again, he looked at me in confusion. “Well, save you. I thought that was the whole point of a rescue mission. Unless... was there some other reason you’re floating around out here?”

He looked at all of us for another explanation, which none of us had. Then he nodded at Scottie. “What happened this time? Was it another bird?”

“I wasn’t flying the plane, asshole.”

“Really? Cuz, when Cash showed me your vitals...let’s just say it was pretty clear what was happening.”

“And you just assumed I was flying the plane. It couldn’t have been anyone else?” he exploded.

“Well, given your history and the fact that you ended up in the Caribbean instead of Florida, it wasn’t that far-fetched an idea...”

“It was me,” Max sighed. “Give the guy a break. He was just a passenger.”

“Oh, that sucks, man. Tough break.”

“Well, you know, that’s what happens when you’re saving lives,” Max shrugged.

“I don’t fucking believe it!” Scottie snapped. “It’s okay for him to crash and you feel bad for him, but it’s a given when it

happens to me?”

Enough was enough. I just wanted to get the fuck out of here. “Can we get back to how the hell you planned to rescue us once you found us?”

Fox grinned at me and I knew it was going to be bad.



# SARAH

“We’re taking a fishing boat?” I asked as Eli helped me climb aboard. “Doesn’t your company have the money to...get us something nicer?” It was huge, but way too dirty for my liking. And after spending way too long in a raft, I thought maybe we’d get a luxury ship or something.

Fox walked over, slapping Eli on the shoulder. He was already pissed at him, so I wasn’t sure why the guy was pushing it. “Man, this is gonna be great. I got us a sweet deal. They’re giving us free passage. We just have to help with the fishing shit.”

“Fox, we’re all tired and hungry,” Eli said through a wonderfully chiseled jaw. I should have stopped staring, but his speech made me swoon just a tad. I didn’t care what the guys said. I thought he was damn near perfect.

“Yeah, I know, and we’ve got all this fish around us. Pretty awesome, right? Fresh catch!” He wiggled his eyebrows at us before walking away.

Sighing, I leaned heavily against Eli. I felt like I could sleep all day. I was worn out from all that time in the sun, and I needed food now. “Is he really going to make us fish? I don’t know the first thing about being a fisherperson.”

“I’ll talk to the captain.” He leaned back, examining my tired face. “Are you feeling okay?”

“You mean, other than how my face feels like worn leather?”

He winced, brushing his thumb over my cheek. Just the slight touch burned. “Just go sit over there in the shade. I’ll see what I can do.”

I just wanted to collapse in his arms, but the thought of getting in the shade was too tempting. As soon as he walked away, I was hurrying over to the shade, sinking down against the wall. I closed my eyes, but felt a presence near me and startled.

A man was standing in front of me, holding out a bottle. I wasn’t sure what it was, but it was liquid, so I took it and chugged. I should have sniffed first. I winced as it burned a path down my throat. Seconds later, the bottle was pulled out of my hands and Eli was scowling down at me.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

I licked my lips, eager for more despite the fact that my throat was on fire. “I was thinking I was really thirsty and this nice man was offering me a drink.”

He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to my feet. I stumbled instantly, my head swimming the moment I was upright.

“Whoa, what the hell was in that drink?”

“Alcohol, and no doubt, something else.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, stumbling behind him as he pulled me across the boat.

“It means that you should never take a drink from someone you don’t know. What the fuck were you thinking?”

I was pretty sure I already told him that. Why was he asking me to repeat myself? He gripped me by both arms and stared into my eyes. The two images of him...maybe three, swam in my vision. Maybe he wasn’t repeating himself. Maybe this was all in my head. Maybe I was in a dream with him.

“Do you think it’s possible for us to be dreaming the same thing?” I asked, tilting my head to the side, which was a terrible idea when my whole body started falling sideways.



“Christ,” he grumbled, hauling me up into his arms. I giggled, tossing my arms around his neck as he carried me around the deck. I took a deep sniff of his neck and grimaced. Wow, he smelled sweaty. I looked back up at him, amazed when I saw him wearing an eyepatch and a pirate’s hat. Well, that explained the smell.

“Do you always dress like this?”

“Like what?” he asked, looking down at me curiously.

“You know, like Jack Sparrow. It’s so sexy,” I whispered, giggling at how silly I sounded. “But I have to admit, I’m glad you have better teeth. Do you have a peg leg?”

He sighed loudly, setting me down somewhere else. The whole boat was rocking, making me feel sleepy. I laid down, staring up at the black sails as Eli chatted with one of his pirate buddies.

“Aye, matey, it’s no good, but our only choice is mutiny.”

“We have to protect the girl,” Eli growled. “She’s the key to everything.”

“Aye, she knows where the booty is.”

I frowned, rolling over to try and look at my own butt, but just ended up rolling around the deck. How the hell had I ended up on a pirate ship? I wasn’t aware pirates even existed anymore. Although, I had to admit, the adventure was pretty awesome.

I got to my knees and started crawling over to my sexy pirate. I felt like a sex kitten, about to pounce and take what was mine. I’d never seen a man in all my life look at me with so much lust in his eyes. I needed him. I got to my knees and ran my fingers up his legs, ignoring how he tried to shake me off him.

“Argh, I’ve got booty to take care of,” he growled.

“Mmhmm,” I moaned. “My booty.”

He grabbed me by the arms and hauled me to my feet. My eyes slid shut involuntarily and my head lolled to the side. I was trying desperately to get to him, but my body wasn’t

cooperating. All I wanted was to feel his hands touch mine, to feel that feather in his hat tickle my most intimate areas.

“I’ve never done it with a pirate. Want to show me how you raise your flag?”

Okay, not the best line, but it seemed to do it for my sexy pirate. He growled before dragging me over to the corner. This was it. I was about to be shown how the dangerous man could ravage my body.

My head felt too heavy for my shoulders and my eyes just wouldn’t stay open anymore. I tried to tell him to take me anyway. There was still a chance I would remember it, but my mouth wouldn’t work. I was slipping into the darkness, and I had to hope my handsome pirate was waiting for me when I woke up.



## ELI

“What is she saying?” Red asked.

I hung my head in exasperation. “She thinks I’m a pirate.”

“Why?”

“Because she drank from someone’s bottle in the two seconds I was gone,” I snapped.

“Whoa,” he burst out laughing. “Doesn’t she know better?”

“Apparently not.” I glanced around at the ship of savages. I couldn’t trust any of them, especially not after they tried to drug her just minutes after stepping onto the ship. “We need eyes on her at all times. No one leaves her alone for even a minute. Got it?”

He nodded. “Where are we going to put her?”

It was way too fucking hot to leave her on deck, but I didn’t want her out of sight. If she was below deck, something could happen, and I wouldn’t know about it. Even if my guys were with her, something could still happen. We were on a boat filled with men that were out for whatever they could get.

“She’ll have to stay up here.”

“Hey!” Fox walked up, slapping me on the back.

I slowly turned and shot him a death glare. “This is all your fucking fault.”

“What? The fact that I rescued you?”

“She’s drunk already,” I snapped, pointing at where Sarah was rocking on the deck. “And there was something besides alcohol in that drink. She thinks I’m a fucking pirate.”

Fox tossed back his head, pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes. “No way! That’s so crazy!”

I grabbed him by the collar and swung him around to the edge of the boat. “That is not so crazy. That is fucking unacceptable! What the fuck would you have done if someone did that to Anna?”

He nodded seriously. “Right, I see where you’re going with this. We need to kill them all and toss their bodies overboard. I have this great way to make it look like they all died in a fiery explosion at sea.”

“Except we need the boat,” I gritted out. “How did you find these guys anyway?”

He glanced over his shoulder and then back to me. “Yeah, me and Emilio go way back. He’s my buddy.”

“Then why would you want to kill him?”

“Well...I guess he’s not that good of a buddy.”

I rubbed my hand across my forehead. “Fox, just how well do you know this guy?”

“Um...I said, *Hey, buddy. Can I get a ride on your boat?*”

“Wait, so you don’t actually know him?”

His wide grin set me off. I knew the moment I saw Fox, this wouldn’t be the cakewalk I had hoped for.

“How well do we really know anyone? It’s actually a pretty funny story. See, I was talking with Cash about how I tracked you down. It wasn’t hard.”

“I know,” I snapped, shoving my arm at him. “I have a fucking tracker in my arm!”

“Exactly! That’s what I said to him when I found you, but he was more interested in the fact that I had taken over a spy satellite to find you. Can you believe that?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Really? Because I thought he’d be okay with it. Interesting.” He cocked his head to the side in thought. I snapped my fingers in his face to focus his attention. “Right, so he was really pissed at me, so I sort of went rogue.”

“It’s what you do,” I nodded.

“And *obviously*, I wasn’t going to leave you alone out here with those guys,” he pointed at everyone else.”

“They’re my team. Well...sort of my team.” IKE and IRIS weren’t on my team. And neither was Scottie Dog, but they worked for OPS, which meant they were always on the same side as me.

“Yeah, but...” He leaned in so only I could hear. “It’s me. Seriously, who’s better?” When I didn’t answer, he took a step back and shifted uncomfortably. “Okay, I was not expecting that answer, but it’s okay. I mean, I thought we had something special, but *clearly*, you see things differently.”

“Fox!” I yelled. “The story.”

“Yeesh, alright. Anyway, while Cash was busy throwing his fit, I followed the tracker and—”

“Wait, if you had the tracker, why did you have to hack the satellite?”

Again, he shot me that funny look. “Why does anyone hack a satellite? So, I followed it and came down here to rescue you. That’s where I ran into Emilio and was like, *Hey, Emilio!* I mean, I’m pretty sure that’s his name. You know, come to think of it, that might be why he was looking at me funny when I called out his name.”

“So, you found Emilio and hitched a ride. How did he know where to find you?”

“Um...I thought you would have figured that one out, big guy. Did you hit your head? I gave him my tracking data.”

I whipped out my knife and grabbed his arm, jabbing the blade deep into his skin. He didn’t even scream. In fact, he sort

of looked like he was enjoying it. Fucking weirdo. I pulled out the tracker and tossed it overboard after cracking it.

“Nice, I like the way you think.”

I took a step into his space and lowered my voice. “You handed over your tracking data. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“Seriously, it was a choice between finding you and exposing myself. What did you think I was going to do? You know, I think you underestimate just how far I’d go for you.”

“You’re going to get us all killed,” I bit out. “These guys already drugged Sarah. You don’t even know who they are!”

He fucking rolled his eyes at me. “Okay, I may have withheld a teensy bit of information from you,” he said, holding his forefinger and thumb just a scant inch apart.

“And what was that?”

He glanced over his shoulder again, then grinned at me. “They’re not really fishermen. I just told you that to get you on the boat.”

“And what do they really do?”

“Oh, cartels and shit. Yeah, this is an arms dealer’s hot spot. I actually found out from Asher. He would have been pretty helpful in this situation. You know, if his wife hadn’t died and he didn’t walk away from everything.”

“So, you knowingly put us in a situation that could get us all killed.”

He slapped me on the arm. “Man, you are way too uptight. You sound just like Lock. You need to loosen up and live a little! This is going to be so much fun!”

He turned and walked away. “What’s going to be fun?” I shouted, but he didn’t bother answering. I knew I was going to regret this, but what other choice did I have but to go along at this point?

---

I'd been watching Fox intently since he dropped his little bomb about the cartels. Maybe I should have been watching the strangers on the boat, but Fox had something up his sleeve, and I wasn't going to be surprised when everything blew to shit.

"She's coming around," Red said as he walked up to me. "Whatever they gave her, it's finally wearing off."

"She only took one fucking drink," I muttered as I tied a rope the way one of the guys taught me. I was going through the motions, pretending to help out, but something very fucked up was about to happen. "Do you think she'll be ready?"

"For what?" Red asked, grabbing another rope.

"For whatever the fuck Fox has planned."

"Well, I can't guarantee she won't do anything stupid. This is Sarah we're talking about."

I snuffed at the thought that just a few days ago, I didn't know this woman from a hole in the ground. Now, I felt like I could predict her moods and whatever bad decisions she was going to make just by looking at her face.

"Any idea what Fox has up his sleeve?"

I shook my head. "It has something to do with Rafe."

"How do you figure? This whole fucking trip was unplanned. There's no way Rafe could possibly know where we are or what moves we'd make."

I stopped and turned to him. "Really? Fox is here because he hacked a spy satellite, something I doubt he has the skill set to achieve. That has Rafe written all over it. And he gave away his tracking data. Does that sound like Fox to you?"

"He says he did it to find you," Red said, though I could tell he wasn't convinced.



“Exactly. There’s no way he’d leave Anna all alone by coming to save our asses. Especially when he could have found any other form of getting to us. He fucking set this up for a reason.”

“Fuck, I hate it when he does that,” Red grumbled. “So, what’s the plan?”

I glanced back over at Fox. “He’ll let us know soon enough.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I nodded in agreement, then caught sight of the way one of the workers kept looking at the stairs. “Who’s with Sarah right now?”

“Scottie,” Red answered.

But Scottie was currently on the other end of the boat with IRIS. “Shit,” I swore, racing for the stairs. I nearly hit my head as I ran down there, and stumbled to a stop when I heard her talking.

“I completely understand. It’s rough when you’re at sea with no female companion. But trying to force yourself on someone is not a very nice thing to do.”

I rolled my eyes as Red came to a stop beside me. “She’s at it again.”

“What?” he huffed.

“Making friends with people that want to hurt her.”

“I really am sorry,” the guy continued. “Everyone else says it’s the way we do things.” I heard his grunt of disapproval. “I never wanted this life. But my old man doesn’t take no for an answer.”

“And he’s the captain?” Sarah asked.

“Yeah, if you want to call him that. He thinks I don’t know what’s really going on here, but I’m not stupid.”

“What’s really going on?”

I inched closer so I could hear.

“They’re not really fishermen. They sell weapons to really bad men.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Trust me, the amount of fish we actually catch wouldn’t keep this boat running. Plus, one night, I saw my father meeting with this guy. Dark, dangerous sort of asshole. He was dressed in a fancy suit and he was inspecting something in a crate. After an hour, my dad’s guys went down in the hold and started hauling up crates and transferring them to another boat.”

“That sounds nefarious. Why haven’t you left?”

“What reason would I give?” the guy asked in defeat.

“Um...I don’t want to live a criminal life?”

“Sounds good in theory. I actually got a picture of the guy. My dad doesn’t know it.”

“Can I see it?” Sarah asked suddenly.

I was dying to get closer, but knew this guy would close up if he knew I was around. I peeked around the corner as he showed Sarah the image. She smiled at him in sympathy, patting his arm. Why the fuck was she always so attracted to these assholes?

“I just don’t know how to get out.”

“We’ll figure something out. Do you have any coffee? I need a clear head to think.”

“Yeah.” He slid the phone into his pocket, but before he could stand, Sarah pulled him in for a hug.

“I know this is hard, but we’ll get you out of this life.”

I watched in amazement as she slid her hand into his pocket and stole his phone without him even noticing. “Damn,” I muttered under my breath.

“She’s good. That explains how she got your wallet.”

That wasn’t entirely true. My wallet wasn’t on me when she took it. I pressed my back to the wall in the shadows as the

guy stood and made his way toward us. Red followed suit, and as soon as he passed, I walked into the room, startling Sarah.

“So, is this a profession of yours?”

She quirked an eyebrow at me. “What’s that?”

I nodded to the phone in her hand. “Stealing.”

Her lips twitched. “I would call it more of an involuntary compulsion. But I always try to return what I take.”

“And why did you take his phone?”

“For the photo, of course.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “So, you knew I was standing there.”

“Oh, please. Like I couldn’t hear those clodhoppers coming down the stairs?”

I stared at her in surprise. Not because she heard me, but because she was so strange. “So, this guy tried to force himself on you, and once again, you made friends with him.”

“And aren’t you glad I did?” She turned the phone to face me and showed me the asshole in the suit.

I snatched the phone out of her hand and quickly sent the photo to Cash, then erased all traces of having used the phone. When I handed it back to her, I leaned in and brushed my lips against hers. “Try not to get too friendly with this guy. I won’t be held responsible for my actions if you start hugging him again.”

“Well, I do have to return his phone,” she said breathlessly, her eyes slipping closed as my lips slowly slid over her cheek to her neck. I pressed a kiss just under her ear, then stepped back. She swallowed hard as she finally opened her lust-filled eyes and stared at me.

I would have taken her again right there if it weren’t for the fact that the guy was returning. I slipped out of the room just as his footsteps sounded on the stairs. I stood stock still in the shadows, doing my best not to walk in there and slam this

guy's face into the wall for daring to think he could touch what was mine.

"Man, you have got to calm down," Red whispered. "You're putting off killing vibes."

"That's because I feel like I'm about to kill someone."

"Well...maybe wait just a little longer. We have to get Fox's plan in place."

I didn't have time to wait. While Fox was leading us on his own adventure, this woman was just inches from me, driving me insane. I needed her. I had to touch her. The man got up and walked out of the room. I hadn't even seen if she replaced the phone before I was storming in to take her.

"Or just do whatever you want," Red shouted. "I'll stand guard."



# SARAH

The boat rocked as Eli stalked into the room, slamming the door behind him. I didn't even worry about the previous guy hearing him. I only had eyes for Eli, and right now, he had a determined look on his face with only one thought in mind.

To devour me.

I sat back on the hammock, my heart kicking up a notch as he stormed toward me, his belt off in seconds. My eyes never left the storm in his eyes. I knew this was about to be sensational, something I would never be able to escape once he had his grip on me. Everything before this had just been playing.

This was my last chance to escape his clutches. But as his hand slid up my chest, wrapping slightly around my neck, I knew I didn't want to run from him. His thumb brushed my jaw, and then he guided me to his lips, locking onto me with an electrifying shock that I felt all the way through my body.

I gasped into his mouth, opening wider for him as he swung the hammock back just enough for his cock to rest right at my entrance. I didn't miss the throbbing sensation against me. Even through all the layers of fabric, I could feel how much he wanted me.

His fingers slid down my dress, pulling the fabric up inch by inch. When the hem brushed across the top of my thighs, I knew I was in for a wild ride. His hot breath fanned over my lips as he hovered just a centimeter from them. I could taste his lips already, needing him desperately. I flicked my gaze up

to his in challenge, and that's when all hell broke loose. My dress was yanked the rest of the way up and his cock was nestled deep inside me. I didn't know when he pulled out his cock or how, and frankly, I didn't care as he sank so deep inside me that I could barely breathe.

“Yes!” I hissed, grinding my body against his. “Oh, God.”

“Are you ready for this?”

I nodded, unable to say anything else. His hands gripped both sides of the hammock, fisting them tightly and drawing my body right against his. All the breath left my body in a whoosh as he smirked at me before pulling back and then slamming hard inside me.

I cried out, my hands clutching his arms as he relentlessly pounded into me. I was sure my screams could be heard around the boat, but that only seemed to urge him on until he finally swallowed my cries with a deep, soul-shattering kiss. I slid my hand through his short hair and held his mouth to mine. I never wanted to break this moment.

His cock swelled even thicker inside me, and then he tore his lips from mine, gasping as he jerked against me. “Fuck, I'm coming.”

But the rest of his body didn't seem to get the message. His hips pistoned against mine at a brutal pace, thrusting into me until I was struggling to breathe and clawing at his back. My body clenched hard around him until I slumped back from the exertion. He just barely caught me, laying me back against the hammock as sweat dripped from his forehead onto my face. I didn't even care as he panted over me, his cock still hard inside me.

“You're not running out this time,” he growled, smashing his lips to mine.

I pressed my hand to his cheek and grinned. “Well, I'm sort of on a boat.”

“When we get back—you're coming home with me.”

I chuckled because what other reaction would a woman have when a man told her she was going to pick up her life

and move in with him? At least, I was pretty sure that's what he was trying to say.

"Yeah, okay."

"I'm fucking serious."

Again, I grinned because what guy committed after just a few fucks and random...rescues around the globe? "I bet you are. You've got that serious look on your face right now. It's very convincing."

Before I knew it, I was jerked upright, held tight to his body. Now I could see his eyes in the dim light, and I knew this was no joke. "You're coming to Kansas with me. End of story."

And because I was so great at reacting to strange situations, I said the first thing that came to mind. "My cat gets his own bedroom. It's a requirement."

His brows twitched in confusion as he stared at me. "That's...that's what you have to say?"

"Sorry, you threw me off guard. Let me soak this in and then I'll get back to you with a more appropriate response."

"There's no soaking anything in. I don't give a shit what you have in Chicago. That's all over."

"Yes, sir," I saluted him, not meaning to mock him, but come on!

"I can't tell if you're going along with this or just making fun of me."

"Yeah, my brain is on the fritz at the moment. Was it your idea to spring this on me right after you made me boneless?"

"You're definitely not boneless," he grinned, shoving his very hard cock against me.

"What about my goldfish?"

"Does he require a room?"

"No, just a place where he can be seen. And he likes to be called a good boy."



That made Eli flinch. “You want me to talk to a fish?”

“Oh, it’s something you’ll do all on your own when you see him. And Horatio likes to be read to.”

He sighed heavily, staring up at the ceiling. “Horatio is your cat?”

“Yep!”

“And I suppose you have a certain book you want me to read to him.”

A smile twisted my lips. “Well, he really likes to hear about his life. If you can’t guess, it’s the *Horatio Hornblower* series.”

“Is that about the Navy guy?”

“Yep!”

He looked even more confused now, and that’s what I liked about our relationship. I had to keep him on his toes. “So, you want me to read him books about him, that aren’t really about him.” I nodded. “And I’m guessing this is fiction.”

“Does that matter?”

“Other than the fact that your request just keeps getting weirder and weirder?”

I smiled at him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him closer. “You like me weird. In fact, I can’t wait to show you all the weird things I’d like to do to you.”

His eyebrows shot up and he shifted uncomfortably. “Uh...” He jerked his head to the side. “What’s that, Red?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t you hear that?” he asked, stepping away from me and pulling up his pants.

I scrambled to figure out what was going on. Everything was great, and then he freaked out and pulled back. “Was it something I said?”

“I have to...check on something.” He flung the door open and stepped right up to Red. “Good, you called. Let’s go check

it out.”

“Check what out?” Red asked.

“The thing...you know, the thing you were...” He glanced back at me and frowned. “Anyway, we should go.”

He walked out with Red trailing behind in confusion. I quickly got up, rushing to the door as I adjusted my dress. What the hell just happened? But as I ran up the steps to the deck, ready to give Eli a piece of my mind, I stopped immediately, snapping my jaw closed at the sight in front of me.



## ELI

“What the fuck is going on?” Red asked as he rushed behind me.

“Nothing, I just have to—”

A gun was pressed to my head. I should have seen it. Hell, my senses were all off the minute she told me she wanted to do weird shit to me. I wasn’t sure why I freaked out, but I had to get out of there before I started asking questions and found out exactly what she wanted to do. I still had a job to finish, though I couldn’t remember what it was at the moment.

“Hey...” I said, looking at the captain out of the corner of my eyes. “What’s going on?”

“Hands in the air.”

I did as he asked, slowly raising my arms. After a quick look around the boat, I saw that all of my teammates were in similar positions, all being held by someone on the boat. But there was a look in Fox’s eyes that settled the nerves inside.

“Sure. Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Why don’t you tell us? You’re the one that boarded our boat.”

“Look, our plane crashed—”

“Yes, right in the middle of our job.” He stepped in front of me, his eyes calculating my every possible move. He thought we actually came here on purpose. That couldn’t be further from the truth, but I had no doubt Fox had actually intended for this to all work out just the way he wanted.

“And what job is that?”

His eyes bored into mine, and then he started laughing. “You’re very good. Tell me, how did you know where we would be?”

“Like I said, our plane crashed.”

“Yes, a well-timed plane crash in the middle of the Caribbean, right in our trade routes.”

“It wasn’t very well-timed, in my opinion,” I muttered. “I would have loved to make it to the mainland.”

“Who told you our coordinates?” he said, his jaw clenching.

“Like I said—”

He slammed the butt of the gun against the side of my head. My vision blurred as I stumbled to the side, but I quickly caught myself and stood up straight. If it weren’t for the fact that every one of us was at a disadvantage, I would have fought back. But I was positive Fox had set this up for a reason, and I had to wait for his signal. Besides, I had a woman depending on me to keep her alive.

“Still nothing to say?” he asked. When I didn’t say anything, he nodded to someone behind me. Then I heard her scream and knew the game had changed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her being dragged by her hair to the center of the boat. The man holding her had a gun pressed to her head. But once again, my beautiful, crazy woman didn’t look scared.

“If you want information from me, this is not how to get it,” she argued. “Now, I’m sure you have some very bad business to conduct, so wouldn’t it be more beneficial for you to just send us off in a raft and allow you to proceed with your business?”

“Sarah—” I started but was immediately struck again. She would get us all killed if she tried to get us put in a raft. These men wouldn’t bother going to all the trouble of gently sending us on our way. They’d put a bullet in each of us and call it a day.

“Seriously? You’re such a brute!” Sarah shouted. “Ooh, smack a helpless man who can’t defend himself!”

That wasn’t at all true. She was actually making me sound like a pussy.

“How did you get out here?” he asked her. “Who sent you?”

“Nobody sent me!” she snapped. “He kidnapped me! Well, technically, it was less than kidnapping, but I didn’t go willingly. So, yes, I’m going with kidnapping! Which, I can tell you right now is a very bad thing. So, if that’s what you intend to do with us, I ask that you reconsider.”

The captain turned to me, laughing at everything Sarah just said. “You’ve got a feisty one on your hands.”

“Don’t I know it,” I muttered.

“Look, we didn’t come out here to put a damper on your business,” she continued.

As she spoke, I caught the faintest movement from Fox. He was doing something, but with Sarah rambling, she was causing the perfect distraction. I just had to keep her going.

“—sure you’re lovely bad guys. In fact, I’m sure you have every reason in the world to do the terrible things you’re doing.”

“Would you fucking stop?” I shouted. “They’re bad men, one of which tried to rape you not too long ago, and you’re sympathizing with them?”

“I was trying to calm them down,” she said through gritted teeth. “You’re not exactly helping the situation.”

“Because you can’t rationalize with men that want to kill you. And if you keep rambling about how they really are good human beings, they’re going to put a bullet in your skull and enjoy every last second of it.”

She scoffed at me in shock. “How do you know that? Not everyone is a truly evil person. Some just fall into the business and don’t know how to get out. Or...maybe their parents were

really bad role models. Did you ever think they might need someone to believe in them?”

“I believe them,” I laughed. “I believe they will kill us and dump our bodies in the ocean to be eaten by sharks!” Fox signaled to IRIS he was about to move. Whatever was going on, IRIS already had a trap in place. “And I believe that if anyone here is going to get us killed, it’s going to be you because you can’t keep your damn mouth shut!”

“My, my,” the captain laughed. “This really is quite entertaining, but—”

An explosion tore through the side of the boat, sending us all flying. I used the distraction to run to Sarah, grabbing her hand and pulling her to the other end of the boat by IRIS.

Scottie and Kavanaugh were already firing at the crew, taking them out much faster than I expected for arms runners.

“What’s the plan?” I shouted to Fox.

Fox grinned at me, then ran for Scottie.





## SCOTTIE

Fox ran over to me, grabbing my hand just after I took out one of the crew. “What—”

He grinned as he pulled me into him, spinning me around before sliding his hand behind my back and pulling me flush against his chest. That’s when I heard it. Strains from *The Nutcracker* were playing from his pocket.

“No,” I said forcefully.

“It’s gonna happen.”

I tried yanking my hand from his, but he held me tight. “It’s so gonna happen. You know you’ve missed this.”

“I haven’t missed it at all. You can’t make me do this,” I argued.

And then he stepped forward as I stepped back. “It’s a waltz. Just flow with it,” he said, tilting his head to the side as he started to waltz.

“Fox, this is not happening!”

“Then why are your feet moving to the same rhythm as mine? You know you want this. You can feel the passion flowing through your veins. It’s go time!”

It was go time. Time for me to get the hell out of there. But I was already wrapped up in the music, swaying with him to what I believed was *The Waltz Of The Snowflake*. And then the tempo started picking up, and he swung me around. I pulled my gun, firing a shot just before he pulled me back in.

“That’s it! Yes!” Fox shouted. “Feel it!”

I waltzed my ass off, leaping out of his hands in time with the music, flipping over one man and grabbing his neck, breaking it in the next instant. Then Fox motioned for me and I ran at him, leaping into his arms as he lifted me over his head, spinning me around as I fired over and over again until all but the captain fell to the deck as the music turned quiet.

Slowly, Fox lowered me. I pointed my toe, touching down in a grand jeté. I really fucking hated that I saw The Nutcracker at the theater with him last Christmas. The captain shook his head, mostly in disbelief at what he was seeing.

“Are you ready?” Fox asked.

“Bring it,” I said, still staring at the man. The music sped up again and I spun, holding my arms out in first position as I pointed my toe and turned again, always maintaining eye contact with the man. Damn, my ballet was on point. The closer I got, the faster I spun until I was just feet from him. Then I leapt in a tour jeté, raising my arms in the air as I spun and landed in a somewhat perfect grand jeté.

I sighed, smiling wide as I took a deep breath and glanced at the man kneeling at my feet with one of Fox’s daggers straight through his heart. He slumped to the side and fell to the boat deck with a thud. Fox walked over and pulled the knife he had thrown, wiping it on the man’s chest.

“Man!” Fox laughed. “That was awesome! I had no idea you’d been practicing so much!”

“Neither did I,” Eli said as he stared at me with his arms crossed over his chest and an amused grin. “Nice...pointy toes. Especially while in combat boots.”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, well...” There was no getting out of it this time. I had willingly participated, and now everyone was going to know it. At least there were no cameras.

“So, are you two done, or should we wait for the second act?” Eli asked.

“As much as I would love to do another dance, we have company,” Fox said, pointing in the distance. And that’s when the plan became clear.



## ELI

For just a moment, I forgot why we were even taking out these assholes. The show Fox and Scottie put on had all of us laughing, wishing we had our phones to record it. I chuckled to myself as Sarah looked at us all like we were weird. She'd get used to us.

“So,” Fox clapped his hands together, grinning at us. “Now, let's get down to the real reason we're here.”

“Which is?” I asked, still confused by this whole thing.

He scoffed, rolling his eyes at me. “Obviously, we have to take out the next ship,” he said, pointing off in the distance.

I turned and cupped a hand over my eyes, shielding them from the sun. It looked like a freighter ship, but I could be wrong. “And what exactly are we doing with them?”

“It's this really awesome plan,” he grinned. “You're gonna love it. Scottie's gonna drive the boat—”

“Sorry, I'm gonna what?” Scottie said, eyeing Fox like the crazy man he was.

“You're going to drive the boat and we're going to lead that freighter out to—”

“Again, what?”

Fox sighed loudly. “You know, if I could just get through my explanation before we have any more questions...”

“Yeah, I'm still stuck on the part where you said I would drive the boat.”

Fox looked at all of us, twirling his finger by the side of his head as he mouthed, *He's crazy*. “Look, I get that you don’t like to be the pilot. You get airsick. But we are firmly planted on the ground in the ocean. It’ll be okay.”

Scottie shifted his feet, looking at me, then IRIS, then back to Fox. “But I don’t know how to drive a boat.”

“Sure you do,” Fox laughed. “It’s just like riding a bike. Or flying a plane.”

“It’s nothing like riding a bike,” Scottie said.

“Yeah, I’m with him on this one,” IRIS jumped in. “I’m pretty sure there’s more to steering a boat than just peddling really hard and balancing.”

They continued to bicker. Meanwhile, I looked back at the ship approaching. Whatever we were going to do, we needed to do it now. The ship was closing in fast.

“—about you?” Kavanaugh asked. “You were in the Navy!”

“A Navy SEAL,” Fox snorted. “We didn’t actually learn how to drive a boat. We swam around them all stealthy and shit.”

“Then what the fuck are we doing here?” Red snapped. “I was perfectly fine on that raft, away from cartels and people that want to kill us.”

“I should have just stayed on the island,” Max sighed, leaning against the side of the boat. “I was happy. I had my hut. I had plenty of booze. And there was a woman named Lolita that frequently called me Raúl. I’m not sure why, but she gave great head, so I didn’t question it.”

IKE whistled loudly, getting our attention. “See, this is the problem with all of you. There’s a ship coming for whatever reason that only he knows,” he pointed at Fox, “and instead of finding a solution, you’re all arguing about it.”

“Then what’s your idea?” I asked.

“It can’t be that hard to start this boat and get the hell out of here,” he said, marching over and flinging open the door

where the captain was driving earlier. I followed him in, purely out of curiosity. He frowned as he stared down at all the controls. "It can't be that hard."

"You already said that."

Sarah was the next to join in, staring at the panel like it would suddenly light up with information. "Maybe there's an instruction manual?"

"For driving the boat?"

"Well...why do men never want to ask for instructions?"

"Because this isn't something you learn to do from a piece of paper!" I shouted.

"Whoa, calm down," Max said, walking over to me and resting his hands on my shoulders. He started massaging them, easing the tension from my body. "Ain't no big deal. You probably just have to push this handle thingy." He pushed it forward, but nothing happened. "Huh, I really thought that would work."

"Maybe there's a key to turn it on," Red said, looking all over for it.

"Or a Go Button?" Kavanaugh suggested.

"I say we just blow it up," IRIS said not-so-helpfully. "See, the way I figure it, if the boat blows up, they'll turn around, thinking that something nefarious is going on."

"There's that word again," Scottie muttered.

"Blow up?" IRIS asked.

"Nefarious."

IKE scoffed. "Like you've never read a dictionary before?"

"Actually," Scottie countered. "I haven't. I read books that are actually enjoyable."

"Yeah? Like what?" IKE snapped.

"You know...that one about the prison break. And...*Pride And Prejudice*," he said, trying to look tough.

“You read that?” Kavanaugh asked. “Was it good?”

“Oh, really good. Yeah, I was only reading it on a bet, but I really got into it. I’m still reeling over who exactly was prideful and who was prejudiced. Because really, it could have gone either way.”

“Don’t spoil it for me,” Kavanaugh cut in. “I was thinking about getting a library card and checking it out.”

Scottie grinned. “You saw Elise, didn’t you.”

“Man,” Kavanaugh groaned. “Have you seen her legs?”

“Yeah—I mean, no,” he said quickly, clearing his throat. “Don’t mention this to Quinn.”

“I gotcha, man. I never heard a word you said.”

“Why can’t this Quinn know what he said?” Sarah asked.

“Because then she would know I was staring at another woman,” Scottie explained.

“Interesting. So, does that mean women can’t look at other men?” she asked.

“Uh, yes,” Scottie said, disbelief lacing his voice. “No man wants his woman looking at other men.”

“But you look at other women. Why is it different?”

“Because it is,” Scottie argued.

“Guys!” I shouted, effectively shutting them up. “It’s great that you enjoy books and found a woman that has nice legs, but if we don’t figure out how the fuck to get out of here, you’re never going to read about how Mr. Darcy first slighted Elizabeth Bennet, then proposed in a most callous way, but still managed to win her over in the end. Nor will you have the opportunity to discuss it with Elise!”

It got quiet all around me, and then Kavanaugh shook his head disappointedly. “Thanks for ruining it for me. I was really looking forward to reading that.”

“Looks like we don’t have time for anything else,” IKE turned to us. “They’ll be here in two minutes.”



“IRIS, do you have time to rig something up?” I asked quickly.

“I have to see what we’re working with.”

“Let’s get to the holding...fish thing. That’s probably where they’re storing the weapons.”

“What should I do?” Sarah asked, grabbing my arm as I turned to rush away with IRIS.

“Oh, she can stay with me,” Fox grinned. “I’ll keep her safe.”

I was at a loss for what to do. I didn’t want her anywhere near Fox, but I didn’t want her around IRIS either. It was a toss-up. Either she’d learn how to blow shit up or kill someone with a dagger. And she’d already had a close encounter with a bomb.

“Fine, but I do not want to see her with an engraved set of throwing knives,” I told Fox.

“I make no promises. We’ll see how good she is first.” He winked at me, and I instantly regretted my decision, but time was of the essence, and I needed to get something rigged up with IRIS before we all landed in the hands of the cartels.

I had no other choice but to follow IRIS and hope Fox didn’t get her killed. We ran down the steps and headed for the door to what I hoped was where they were storing the guns. IRIS was already cranking the handle and pulling it open by the time I reached him. He stepped back and stared at what laid inside.

“Holy shit,” he whispered. “It’s like a wet dream.”

“You have wet dreams about explosives?” I asked, running a hand over my jaw. “Holy crap, we’re going to die out here.”

“Well, you didn’t die with the shark.”

“Yeah, but the shark was Fox. Unless you tell me Fox is really hiding under all these explosives, I’m gonna go with we’re all gonna die.”

He slapped me on the shoulder as he walked inside. “It’s gonna be good. I got this.”

“You’re sure?”

“Like eighty-five percent sure.”

“Why does everyone always do that?” I asked, rushing in after him, careful not to touch anything. “Don’t give me percentages unless I ask for them.”

“I thought you were a numbers guy,” he said, staring at me a little baffled.

“Normally, but this is not something I want numbers on. Unless you tell me that you need ten sticks of dynamite.”

“I could actually use that right now.” He popped up and looked over the room. “Ah, right over there beside you. Make yourself useful and grab me some.”

Normally, I was all over the dangerous shit, but I was on edge with Sarah on board. I felt like any move I made would get her killed. “Maybe this is a bad idea. Maybe we should try something else.”

He stared at me, his face twisted in confusion. “If you didn’t come down here to help, then why are you here?”

“To make sure you didn’t blow us up!” I shouted, then winced, hoping my yelling didn’t set anything off.

“And how would you know? Honestly, have you ever tried to dismantle a bomb?”

“No, but—”

“In fact, the only time that you’ve actually done anything with an explosive was when you accidentally pulled the wire from Sarah’s vest!” he shouted.

“Hey, that turned out to be for the best.”

“I could have handled it. I’m ninety-eight percent sure about that!”

I threw my hands up in the air, spinning away from him. “Oh, well, I’m so glad you only had two fucking percent

doubt!”

“Hey!” IKE yelled, rushing into the room. “Are you gonna do something down here, or are we just going to let the cartel take over and kill us?”

“Two minutes,” IRIS shouted.

“You’ve had three and all you did was argue!” He grabbed a dynamite stick, pulled a lighter from his pocket, and held the flame up.

“What are you doing?” I shouted.

“Taking care of business.”

I glanced at IRIS in slow motion, then took off for the stairs as I saw IKE hold the flame closer to the fuse. The length of the fuse would give us enough time to get off the boat if we were lucky. I raced up the stairs, my face a look of pure horror as I grabbed Sarah and raced for the edge of the boat.

“Jump!” I shouted, grabbing her in my arms as I dove overboard.

I spun in the air, seeing my fellow teammates jump overboard, and just as I hit the water, the boat exploded, sending a wave of heat over my body. I swam further, dragging Sarah behind me as I tried to escape the flames. Once we were far enough away, I swam for the surface and pulled her up beside me.

“Are you okay?” I asked Sarah, trying to check her out for damage.

“I’m...” She nodded over and over again. She was clinging to me like a life raft, which was making it really hard to swim, but she was barely holding onto her shit right now. “You know...I’ve had worse. A bomb strapped to me. Being kidnapped and forced onto a plane. Nearly getting trafficked. Almost dying in a plane crash. Surviving a shark attack.” She nodded her head to the side. “It’s been a busy week.”

“Baby, that’s just been the last few days.”

“Right...I guess it’s been a slow day.” She grinned, but it was strained.

I was surprised she wasn’t panicking like the last time. “Do you need to do some breathing exercises or something?”

“No, I’m good.”

“You’re sure?”

She nodded again. “It could be worse, right? We could be that other ship.”

I looked behind me and saw the other ship sinking in the water. When the boat exploded, it must have damaged the cartel ship.

“Maybe we can find a life raft.”

“Or a...big twig to keep away the sharks.”

“I don’t know about a twig, but maybe a piece of driftwood.”

“Sure, that sounds better. Something larger and...” She started nodding over and over again. I had a bad feeling she was about to pass out. So, I did what any rational man would do. I kissed her hard. She gasped, at first panicking because of the shift of our bodies, but after a minute, she relaxed into me and kissed me back. Before I knew it, her arms were wrapped around my neck and she was practically crawling up my body.

“Whoa,” I broke away from her. “As fun as that sounds, I’m not sure this is the appropriate moment.”

“You mean, after we just almost died?” she panted.

“Right, well...when you put it like that.”

I was about to get right to it when splashing had me turning around.

“What the fuck was that?” Kavanaugh shouted, swimming closer to me.

“That was fucking IKE.”

He shook his head, his eyes wide with anger. “No, you could have fucking warned us. You just jumped overboard

without a goddamn word.”

“The fact that I was jumping overboard should have clued you in,” I retorted, even though I knew he was right.

“Has anyone seen my hat?” Max shouted, swimming around the wreckage in search of his hat. “Goddamnit, I loved that hat!”

“Red!” I shouted when I didn’t see him.

“I’m good!” he yelled from his position. “Just some minor burns. Possible concussion. And I think I broke my pinky toe jumping overboard!”

“At least it wasn’t the big one,” I yelled back.

Fox came swimming over, a grin on his face. “Well, it wasn’t exactly how I planned it.”

“And how did you plan it?”

“Oh, we were going to draw them in for Rafe, disable their ship, then radio for Rafe to swoop in and take hostages.”

“And you planned to do all that without filling us in?”

“Well, I really thought of the plan after the boat exploded.”

“So, you really didn’t have a plan.”

“Not at all,” he shook his head.

I sighed, pulling Sarah closer to me. “That’s twice now we’ve had to jump into the ocean.”



# SARAH

“Spicy or mild?” Fox asked.

I laughed at his ridiculous questions. I wished it was Eli asking them, but he seemed to be moping because he didn’t have my full attention. “Spicy. Is there another way to do it?”

Fox waggled his eyebrows at me. “I like the way you think. But then again, there really isn’t another way to eat tacos.”

“Unless you’re boring,” I agreed.

“I like mild,” Eli muttered.

I was floating on a piece of the boat, staring at the sky as we waited for darkness to fall. That’s when the fear would really sink in. I was grateful they were all doing their best to keep me calm.

I rolled my head to the side and peeked out through slit eyes. “Really? You don’t strike me as the mild type. You’re so...” I remembered how he took me in the hammock, the hut, and the first time we met. There was nothing about this man that was mild and boring.

“I’m so what?”

“Exciting,” I said, unsure I could come up with a better word.

I heard someone scoff nearby, but I didn’t dare take my eyes off Eli.

“I don’t think anyone has ever described me as exciting.”

“Well, not like Fox, but—”

“Hey, now,” Fox interrupted. “Don’t throw shade. Eli’s a great guy, full of fun and good times.”

I sat up, careful not to rock my wooden life raft. “Throw shade?”

“Isn’t that what the kids are saying these days?”

“I have no idea what they’re saying. I’m not a kid.”

“Right, but...you’re younger than us.”

I quirked an eyebrow at him. “And how young do you think I am?”

He sized me up carefully. “I’d say about twenty-four.”

I heard Eli groan and turned to look at him. “What? You don’t think I could pass for twenty-four?”

“Not with the way you give blow jobs.”

“See? Experience matters. And I could totally be twenty-four.”

Eli grabbed the rope he’d used to lasso us together and pulled me closer. “There’s no fucking way you’re twenty-four.”

“Why?” Now I really was getting offended. Hell, I didn’t look old.

“One, because there’s no fucking way I’d sleep with a twenty-four-year-old. I’m way too fucking old for that shit. Second, unless you took classes, no twenty-four-year-old has the moves you have. And third, I saw your fucking driver’s license.”

Yet, there was still one crucial thing missing from his statement. “Nowhere in that conclusion did you mention that I’ve got that mature look to me.”

“Like I’d fall into that trap,” he snorted. “There is never an acceptable time to call a woman mature.”

“That’s not true. Scottie, you’ve got a woman. Wouldn’t you call her mature?”



“That’s difficult to answer,” he said, speaking a little since he was further away. “See, Quinn literally moved across the United States to get away from me after sleeping with me one time. All because she didn’t want to tell me she didn’t want to see me again. So… I’m not sure I could classify that as mature.”

“Aren’t you married?”

“Of course. She’s fucking perfect.”

These guys didn’t make sense. I sighed and laid back down, closing my eyes so the sun didn’t burn my retinas. I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to go to the ocean again. This trip was enough for me, and I was still trying to keep up the hope that we would be rescued, which was looking worse by the second.

“Do you think anyone from the other boat survived?” I asked, though it was a stupid question.

“If they had, I’m sure we would have seen them by now,” Eli muttered.

“I wonder how Horatio’s doing? Did you send someone to check on him?”

“Yes,” he sighed. “And Leonidas. They are both being looked after.”

“You don’t sound very confident in that.”

“And why do you say that?”

“Well, you sighed, making it sound like a big chore. Plus, you weren’t very willing to send someone out in the first place, so how do I know you didn’t just say you sent someone out there?”

He rolled and stared at me. “I guess you’ll just have to wait until you get home to see if they’re alive or dead.”

“That doesn’t make me feel very good.”

“Then maybe you should have fucked someone else,” he snapped.

My jaw dropped as I stared at him. What the fuck was that? Seriously, what a dick thing to say.

“This is one of those times I wish we could just exit this uncomfortable conversation,” Max muttered. “See, this is why I was on a beach, far away from anyone I knew.”

“To avoid couples fighting?” Kavanaugh asked.

“To avoid people in general.”

I propped myself on my elbow and glared at the man I was  *fucking*. “And who do you suggest I fuck instead of you? Should I have gone for Red?”

“Hey, I’m taken,” Red retorted.

“Or maybe Kavanaugh. Would he have been the better choice? Does he like spicy food? Maybe I should check it out.”

“Not that I don’t think you’re hot, but I don’t want to be dragged into—”

“So, you don’t think I’m hot enough either?” His eyes went wide the longer he stared at me. “Am I not good enough to pass for twenty-four?”

“I feel like this is one of those times a bullet is coming at me, and it’s best to just take it and let it kill me,” he answered.

“Or what about you?” I asked IKE. “Am I good enough to fuck you?”

“Look, that’s not what I meant,” Eli cut in.

“Really? Then how was I supposed to take it?”

“Not by offering to fuck my teammates!”

“That’s not what I was doing. I was asking who I should fuck.”

“Maybe we could just drown them,” IKE said. “Nobody would know but us. It’s like with the Donner Party. Does anyone really know if anyone ate anyone else?”

“Of course they did,” Fox grunted. “I bet it was just like shawarma.”

“Nobody is drowning anyone,” Eli snapped. “God, why is it so fucking hot out here?” he shouted.

“Um...I’m pretty sure that’s because we’re in the middle of the ocean with the sun beating down on us, but I’ve been wrong before,” Red answered, sounding slightly bored with the whole conversation.

“Yeah? Well, we’re not supposed to be in the middle of the fucking ocean. This never would have happened if Scottie hadn’t landed us in the middle of the Caribbean.”

“Whoa,” Scottie sat up. “None of this would have happened if the drunken pilot hadn’t spun us around like a top in a toy plane!”

“Sure, blame the pilot,” Max huffed.

“Technically, none of this would have happened if Eli had just let me do my fucking job and dismantle the bomb. But as usual, everyone thinks I’m going to screw things up,” IRIS said.

“Because you like to see shit blow up,” Red argued. “You did blow up the OPS building in California.”

“One time. One fucking time!” IRIS shouted. “Seriously, I still got the bad guys.”

I watched in fascination as they all continued to rip each other to shreds. Were they friends? Were they enemies? I couldn’t tell, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. Why did men always act like this? I couldn’t even remember what started the argument to begin with, but yelling at each other in the middle of the ocean hardly seemed productive.

I shoved my fingers into my mouth and whistled loudly. The yelling instantly ceased and everyone stared at me. “Seriously, I’m the woman. I’m the one that’s supposed to be freaking out. I mean, we’re floating around on driftwood. You guys are in security. You’re supposed to figure shit out, but you’re all yelling at each other instead.”

“Because Fox made sure we wouldn’t have a way to get out of here,” Red pointed out.

“Actually, that was because of me,” IKE grinned. “You guys were taking too long, and I didn’t feel like fighting off cartels.”

“And lazing around in the ocean is so much better?” Kavanaugh asked.

“Well, it would be if I could just drown you. But not returning with all of you would look suspicious.”

“Again, what is with all of you threatening each other?” I snapped. “You’re grown men. Stop bickering like old ladies!”

They all sat up and looked at me. “Old ladies?” Eli asked.

“That’s a little harsh,” Fox scoffed.

“Yeah, we were arguing like men,” Kavanaugh added.

“*This* is what men do?” I screeched.

They all looked at each other, then nodded at me.

“And men are going to save the planet,” I scoffed. “Seriously, if I was with women, we’d already be back in Florida.”

“Sure you would,” IKE laughed. “Just tell me how you would save us all and get back to Florida. Because from where I’m sitting, you haven’t come up with a single good idea yet.”

“Yeah, tell us what you would do?” Eli asked.

Okay, now I was about to look really bad. Until I saw a very large ship in the distance. And none of them had seen it yet. “Well, the first thing I would do is flag down the large ship.” They all looked at where I was pointing. “The second thing I would do is show them my breasts. That should get me passage on the ship.”

Eli’s head whipped around to meet my eyes. “Those tits are mine.”

“Oh, really? Now they’re yours?”

“I gotta agree with her,” Kavanaugh shrugged. “She’s the only one with tits. I doubt we’ll get passage by showing our dicks.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen the size of my dick,”  
IKE smirked.



## ELI

It turned out there was no need for Sarah to show her tits. The moment the ship was close enough to us, we knew exactly who was on it. I just wasn't sure I wanted to get out of the water and deal with him.

"I really fucking hate you," I said to Fox as the ladder was dropped for us.

"Why? This is what you wanted. A ship taking us back to the mainland. A night with your lovely lady..." He elbowed me like this was all fun and games.

I turned to Sarah and held out my hand to her. "I'm really sorry about this."

"About what?"

"You'll see in a minute. Just...don't trust anyone but me."

She looked at me warily before starting the climb up the ladder. I glared at Fox one last time before following her up. Thankfully, she didn't freak out once she reached the top and Rafe grabbed her, patting her down.

"Hey! Hands off," I snapped.

"Who the fuck is she?"

"Sarah."

"You brought a woman on a mission?"

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I'm not on a mission. At least, not for you."

“You’re on my ship,” he scowled.

“Yeah, and this was a job for her, hence her being with me.”

He stormed past me and marched up to Fox just as he came over the side. “You brought a woman.”

“Yeah, but she’s cool.”

“I highly doubt she’s trained to take out members of the cartel,” he snarled.

Fox, being his jovial self, slapped Rafe on the arm, ignoring his bad mood. “Relax. It’s all good. Oh, the bad guys are dead,” he winced. “Sorry about that.”

“This wasn’t what we agreed on when you asked for help!”

“Right, I could see where you’d be upset with that, but shit happens. Nice digs, by the way.”

Rafe stared as more of the guys came over the side. “Christ, how many people did you bring? Have you never heard the word covert?”

“All the time,” Fox nodded. “So, did you get what you need?”

“Do you see any men on my ship being interrogated?”

Fox stared at him for a moment. “You know, you’re a little more testy than usual. Funyun?” he asked, pulling out a snack-sized bag from his back pocket.

“You had Funnys on you?” Kavanaugh snapped. “We were starving!”

“Yeah, but you can’t split a snack pack. I was saving it for after you guys died. I didn’t want to have to eat you.”

“And Funnys were going to save you?” I asked.

“Not to interrupt, but we’re all a little tired and hungry. Maybe you could save your plotting for after we’ve all had a chance to get some rest and eat,” I cut in.



Rafe's eyes cut to mine. I could tell he wasn't happy about any of this, but he snapped his fingers at one of his men and walked away. I slipped my hand into Sarah's as two of his men walked over and motioned at us, all while carrying guns.

"Why does this not feel like we're someplace safe?"

"Because we're not," I muttered under my breath. "Don't go anywhere with Rafe."

She nodded, and we followed one of the men to our quarters. As the guard opened the door, he jerked his chin at me.

"I need to check you."

I held out my arms, but he wasn't going to find anything. I had lost it all in the last explosion. Then he turned to Sarah and patted her down. "I'll be back with food." He shut the door, but he didn't lock it, which I found unusual. Rafe didn't trust us on this ship, not that he would, no matter where we were.

"Let's take a shower."

"Um...before we do that, I should probably show you this," she said sheepishly, pulling a phone out of her back pocket. "I sort of stole it from Rafe."

"You—" I scratched the back of my head, unsure of where to go with this. "Why?"

That was it, all I could come up with. I wasn't sure what else to say at this point. Did she steal randomly from people, or did she have a reason for doing it?

"I just...it just happens."

It was as good an answer as any, I supposed. I took it from her, but immediately knew it wouldn't be any use to us. "Rafe wouldn't be stupid enough to leave his phone unlocked," I mumbled.

"Can't you hack it?" she asked hopefully.

I shook my head, knowing it was useless. "Sorry, I don't have those skills. I need to plant this on Rafe before he realizes

it's missing. Why don't you take a shower?"

She didn't look too happy about it, but she nodded and walked across the ten-foot space to the shower. I wasn't sure how I was going to get this back to Rafe, but I had to do it soon before he realized that Sarah took it from him. He wasn't exactly the most generous guy I knew.

Finding him didn't take long. I just followed the sound of scared feet running away from the booming voice. As the last guard stormed out of the office, I slipped inside and shut the door behind me. But I wasn't alone. IKE was already inside, and he didn't look too pleased to be there.

"Did I miss my invitation to the party?" I asked, sliding his phone across the desk to him. There was no point in trying to plant it on him. He would notice immediately. I wasn't even sure how Sarah managed to steal it from him. That itself was worrying.

Rafe's gaze narrowed his eyes slightly, flicking his eyes toward mine. "Do I want to know how you managed this?" he asked, picking up his phone.

"I guess you're not as observant as I thought."

I watched as his eyes shifted back and forth as if he was remembering something. "No, it wasn't you. How'd she do it?"

My back stiffened. I knew it was a possibility he would figure it out, but I was betting on him not thinking anything of a woman we were protecting. "Not sure what you're talking about. I was hoping to get a message to Cash, but—"

"Don't bullshit me," he spat. "I know you well enough."

"Yeah? From our few weeks together where you impersonated your brother?"

"He could do it," he pointed to IKE. "But not you."

"Wow," I said in a bored tone. "I'm impressed. What's he doing here, anyway? Recruiting?" I turned to IKE. "I strongly suggest you walk away before you consider anything he has to say to you. People don't tend to live when he's around."

“I already figured that out on my own,” IKE answered, leaning against the wall. Even after spending days in the same fucking suit, he still managed to look just as slick as when we stepped off the plane in Chicago.

“If people would stick to their jobs, they wouldn’t end up dead,” Rafe snapped.

“Is that what you tell yourself to sleep at night?” I asked, getting really pissed off now. “Is that how you justify what happened with Asher?”

“Asher knew what he was getting into. Cash tried to talk him out of it, and he still accepted the job. That’s not on me.”

“He was too fucking young for that job!” I shouted. “You never should have put him in the middle of The Syndicate!”

Rafe was around the desk in two seconds, his knife pressed to my throat. But I didn’t flinch. If he wanted to kill me, he wouldn’t have let me on this ship. Hell, he wouldn’t be staring at me with that uncertainty in his eyes. He knew he fucked up with Asher, but Rafe never admitted to any of his mistakes.

“If I were you, I’d watch what I say next.”

“Yeah? Are you gonna kill me the way you got Asher’s wife killed?”

“Asher got her killed. He fucking knew she needed help, and he did nothing.”

“He was dealing with a job that was too big for him. You sent him in with two fucking guys to have his back while he dealt with one of the most ruthless men in The Syndicate.”

“What do you know of it?” he sneered.

“Unlike you, the men I work with trust me,” I spat. “And the minute he walked away, we all knew why. Let’s say it was a lesson to all of us.”

“He walked away because he couldn’t handle the job. I should have fucking known better.”

“He walked away because working with you cost him everything,” I hissed. “Do you even care that a woman died?”

He took a step back from me, his knife falling to his side. “There’s the job and only the job. That’s the way it is in this business.”

“Is that why you’ve left Jack rotting in prison so long? The job isn’t finished?”

“Who says I had anything to do with that?” he scoffed.

“Please. Do you really expect us to believe that Jack just decided to murder a cop after suddenly becoming a junkie? This has you written all over it.”

“Jack is doing his fucking job,” he finally admitted.

“He’s wasting away in prison. And for what? What is it you’re after?”

“That’s between me and Jack.”

I caught IKE’s smirk out of the corner of my eye. “What?”

“Nothing,” IKE shook his head. “This dynamic...it’s interesting.”

“The only dynamic between us is hatred. Before you agree to anything Rafe wants, just remember, he left his own brother to rot in enemy hands while he took his place in the company.”

“I saved his life.”

“You refused to ask for help,” I argued. “It doesn’t matter how you cut it, Rafe. You don’t trust anyone, and because of that, other people die.”

“Get the fuck out of my office!”

“Where’s FNG?”

“He’s not one of my men. Last I heard, he blew up. Sounds like his luck finally ran out.”

I searched for any sign that he was lying, but Rafe was hard to read. Even this whole back and forth with me, it was all a show for IKE. He wasn’t normally this argumentative. He wanted IKE to see him as human. I laughed to myself, knowing there was no point in even continuing this with him.

I turned back to IKE. “What you see right now isn’t the real Rafe. He doesn’t have a heart. He doesn’t fucking care about anyone but the endgame. He sacrificed his own man, a man who had been loyal to him for years, all so he could get in further with The Syndicate.”

One final glance at Rafe, I could see the truth shining in his eyes. Cold, dead...utterly ruthless. There would only ever be one person in this world he would actually be honest with, and even that depended on the day.

“You can drop us in Florida. We’re not part of whatever you have going on here.”

“I have a deal with Fox.”

“Then I’ll let you work that out with him,” I smirked. “I know how much he loves to...negotiate terms.”

I turned and stormed out of the room knowing there was no way he’d go up against Fox. We would be in Florida by tomorrow.

---

“Everything go okay?” Sarah asked as I opened the door to the room. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, eating the fruit in front of her. She’d already gone through two bottles of water. Her body was wet from where her hair hung down her back and over her shoulders, dripping into the towel that barely covered her breasts.

“Yeah.”

“Why do I not believe you?” she asked, popping another piece of fruit in her mouth.

I sat down on the bed beside her and snagged a piece. “Is this fresh?”

“We’re in the Caribbean. Of course it’s fresh.”

I popped it in my mouth and groaned. “Fuck, that’s delicious.”

“So, what happened?”

“I returned the phone,” I said, watching a drop of water slip under the towel.

“And?”

She shifted slightly and the towel loosened, giving me a better peek at her beautiful breasts. Then she grabbed another piece of fruit and slowly bit into it. The juices ran down her chin, drawing my attention. And then her tongue popped out, swiping at the corner of her mouth.

“Eli?”

“Hmm?” I asked, not really paying attention to anything she said.

“You were about to tell me what happened.”

Was I? Because staring at her lips, the only thing I could think about was slipping the knot free from her towel and having my way with her. I leaned in, brushing my lips against hers. The sweet taste of cantaloupe on her lips had me pushing her onto the bed and covering her body with mine. She started wiggling against me, pushing at my shoulders.

“Eli, you were going to tell me something.”

“Was I?” I asked, running my lips down the curve of her neck. I slipped the knot from the towel and spread it open to devour her nipple.

“You need a shower.”

“Fuck the shower,” I mumbled against her skin. “I need you.”

“You stink,” she pressed on.

“So stink with me,” I said, unzipping my fly.

She didn't complain too much after that. Not when I nudged at her entrance or when I settled my cock deep inside her. “You were saying?”

“Um...” She groaned as I rocked inside her.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” I murmured against her skin. I couldn’t stop touching her. The savage jealousy I felt when she started asking me who else she should have fucked lingered in the back of my mind. It was a stupid comment, one that could have cost me everything. There was only one option, and that was to make sure she knew exactly where she belonged.

When she came, I dragged her from the bed and into the small shower with me. There was nowhere for her to escape now that I had her cornered. She stood there, boneless and exhausted, as I quickly scrubbed my body clean.

“Why am I in here? I had a nice spot on the bed.”

“Like I’m giving you a chance to change your mind,” I grunted.

She yawned, rubbing her eyes. “And why would I do that?”

“Because I was a dick to you.”

Her eyes flicked up to mine in surprise. “You’re admitting that?”

“Of course I am,” I said, pulling her under the stream of water with me. “I would be a fool if I didn’t.”

“Um...this is new territory for me. No man has ever admitted to being...”

She dragged it out, obviously wondering if I was going to say it. I didn’t let her down. “Wrong. Yes, I was wrong. And I’m sorry.”

“Wow,” she said, staring at me like an enigma. “Admitting you’re wrong and saying you’re sorry. Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because no man ever says he’s sorry. I mean, it’s like pulling teeth to even—”

I slanted my lips over hers and kissed her hard. She moaned as I slid my hand between her legs and played with her pussy. “I’m not your typical man,” I said, nipping at her

ear. “It takes a real man to confess to a woman that he did something stupid.”

She gasped as I pulled at her clit.

“It takes a real man to see that the woman in front of him deserves honesty from him.”

“God, this is like porn,” she moaned. “Tell me more.”

“Like what?” I asked, sucking on her neck. “What do you want to hear?”

“Tell me how you feel about me.”

It was a trap—a very well laid out trap, but hell if I wasn’t going to walk into it. “I feel like I need you in my life. I feel like this whole thing is crazy.” I slid my hand up to her hip, hiking her leg around my waist. “You keep stealing shit, and I don’t understand that.” My cock was already hard and weeping for her. I pushed her against the wall and slid deep inside her. “And you scare the crap out of me when you’re around anyone dangerous. I’m terrified that one of these days, you’re going to find yourself around someone that isn’t as nice as you want them to be, and it’s gonna get you killed.”

She gasped as I thrust deep inside. Her eyes locked on mine, staring at me like she finally understood me. “And you won’t be able to handle letting me down.”

I shook my head slowly. If something happened to her, I would never forgive myself. If I couldn’t do this one thing, what was the point of having all these skills? Keeping her safe was all that mattered.

“And what happens when we go home?”

“That depends. Are you coming home with me?”

Her eyes fluttered closed as I drove inside her over and over again. I would fuck her into submission if I needed to. “I think this is a conversation for when you’re not inside me.”

I grabbed her by the hips and hoisted her up against the wall. She clung to me as I fucked her harder and harder. Her back slid up and down the wall with every thrust. If she didn’t



want to agree to this now, I'd make sure she was so fucking tired there would be no further discussion about it.

“Eli!” she shouted as she clenched around my cock. Her fingers dug into my shoulders, but if she thought she was going to stop me, she was sorely mistaken.



## SARAH

I had some serious misgivings about this whole situation with Eli. People didn't just announce their feelings like that, especially men. And I didn't miss how he was trying to stop me from asking more questions by fucking me even harder, making me come three more times before he let me out of the shower. That man could go for hours if I let him. Thankfully, he gave my body a rest about the same time someone banged on our door.

"Wait here," he murmured, kissing me on the lips before exiting stage right.

Yeah, like there was an option for me other than staying here. My hips were aching from his brutal thrusts, and my legs were shaking, barely holding me up.

"Sure, no problem," I muttered after the door shut.

Screw that. I wasn't standing here. I slid to the shower floor and closed my eyes. What was I thinking? I shouldn't have asked him how he felt. I wasn't expecting those answers. It was stupid, really. Whenever a woman asked those things, the man usually ran away. But like he said, he wasn't like other men.

I banged my head against the shower wall. "You're so fucking stupid."

And what was I supposed to do now? Things were moving way too fast, and I wasn't prepared for the battle ahead of me.

That battle being Eli.

“Sure, ask him where things go from here,” I said, slapping myself in the forehead. “Way to go. Lay down a challenge for him.”

The door swung open and Eli stared down at me curiously. “Everything okay in here?”

“Sure,” I lied. “Just too tired to move.”

He bent over and hoisted me up. “Well, you’re going to have to move. You can’t lay on the floor all day.”

I groaned as he dragged me from the shower and over to the bed. Within minutes, I was towel-dried and wore a shirt that was ten sizes too big. But it was really comfy and just what I needed to snuggle up and take a nap.

Eli pulled me down into his arms and pressed his body to mine, but my mind wouldn’t allow me to go to sleep, no matter how tired I was.

“Hey,” I nudged him. “Are you asleep?”

“No,” he mumbled. “But I’m trying to be.”

“I think we should talk.”

“Later,” he grumbled. “I’m tired.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But nothing. We just spent days running for our lives. We’re safe now, so lay your ass down and go to sleep.”

“I’m already laying down,” I pointed out. “But I can’t sleep. There are things we said and...we should really talk about this.”

He sighed and rolled over, releasing my body from his grasp. “Fine. What do you want to talk about?”

Wow, way to show enthusiasm for the conversation we really needed to have. “It’s fine. We can talk later.”

“Sarah, you just fucking woke me up to talk. So talk.”

“Actually, you were still awake, so I didn’t wake you up.”

A low growl emitted from his chest as he turned his steely gaze on me. “What do you want to talk about?”

I thought about not saying anything and just letting him go to sleep, but he did seem determined to talk now. I would be a fool to keep my mouth shut. “Okay, if you insist.”

“I insist. Just say whatever it is you need to say so I can get some sleep.”

“You know, you really aren’t making this very easy. If you don’t want to talk, just say so.”

“Sarah! Would you just fucking say whatever it is you want to say?”

“Alright, alright. There’s no need to yell at me,” I grinned.

He sighed heavily, resting his hand on my stomach as he turned toward me. His eyes were already drooping shut, so I knew I had to make this quick.

“I just think this is moving too fast. I mean, we’ve known each other for barely a week. I’m not even sure if it’s been that. I’ve lost track of my days. And most of the time, you’ve been yelling at me for not doing what you want me to do. Granted, we’ve been in a lot of high-pressure situations, but still, I’d think you could have just a little bit of patience with me while I try to deal with all the stuff thrown at me. Take, for example, when I had a bomb strapped to my chest. I went with the flow of things and tried not to freak out. That’s kind of what I think we need right now. Just to go with the flow and forget about all the crazy stuff that’s been happening. And we should definitely think about slowing down this crazy train we’re on. I mean, who knows someone for a few days and tells them they should move home with them? My life is in Chicago. My goldfish and cat are there. I can’t just pick them up and move them. Cats are notorious for not traveling well. And Leonidas just got used to his new fishbowl. Would it really be fair to him to move him all the way to Kansas in a rocking fish bowl? I’m not even sure fish can handle that much jiggling. Now, if you could find me a fish moving service, then we could talk... Maybe in a few years I would be comfortable with taking that chance. Leonidas is very special to me. And I have all Horatio’s books to think about. That’s a lot of packing. There are like...eleven books in that series, and

I should really finish the one I'm on to make him comfortable before the move. Not to mention that I have to pack and find a job. I can't just move out there without finding something new. I refuse to be one of those women who lives off her man. Come to think of it, I don't even know what kind of house you have. Maybe you don't have a house. Maybe you only have an apartment. Are they pet-friendly? And what about doctors in the area? Does Kansas have health care? What if I come down with smallpox? Will they be able to sufficiently take care of me? I should really check with my doctor first and make sure it's safe. And let's not even get started on hairdressers. Do you have any idea how long it takes to find someone to do your hair that you're comfortable with? Six months," I nodded. "At the very minimum. And then nail salons are another biggie. I can't let just anyone give me a manicure. And those are just a few of the things I need to think about."

I took a deep breath, feeling like I covered the majority of my issues.

"So, you see, there's a lot to think about, so I really need a lot more time to even consider a move as big as the one you're talking about. Right?"

He didn't answer, which probably meant he was mad. But then I heard a soft snore and shifted to face him. He was asleep! How dare he fall asleep when I had all that important stuff to say! He missed everything about the books and the fish bowl. Not to mention my need to avoid smallpox.

On the other hand, if he fell asleep, that meant he can't deny that he agreed with me on everything. So, I was calling this one a win. With that off my mind, I felt like I could finally fall asleep. Except, when I closed my eyes, a loud snore tore through the room, making me jerk upright in bed.

"What the hell was that?" I snapped.

I turned to face Eli, shoving him hard, but he didn't even wake up. If anything, he snorted and snored louder.

"Oh, this is not going to work."

I grabbed my pillow and straddled his hips, hoping to wake him up, but nothing happened. Sighing, I lifted his head and crammed the other pillow behind his head. Not even that woke him up.

“You’re ex-military,” I said loudly. “Aren’t you supposed to be always half-awake?”

Yep, that didn’t wake him up either. And shoving the pillow under his head only seemed to make it worse. So, I yanked both pillows out from under his head, watching him flop back on the mattress, but that didn’t work either. And he didn’t wake up. I considered slapping him hard across the face, but that seemed like it would be crossing a line.

Not sure what else to do, I pinched his nostrils together and waited for him to run out of oxygen. His mouth popped open and he started huffing out large puffs of air right into my face.

Screaming to myself in frustration, I got off him and slammed the pillow down on his face. Did he take a sleeping pill? What the hell was I supposed to do now? I shoved the hair out of my face and stomped toward the door. If he wasn’t going to let me get any sleep, I would just have to find someplace else to sleep.

I yanked open the door, slamming it hard behind me, then stood there waiting for him to wake up. Nothing. I rolled my eyes and headed down the hallway in search of someplace else to sleep. But everywhere I turned, all I found were more locked doors. Did nobody trust anyone on this ship?

I nearly stumbled when I turned the corner and ran smack dab into Fox, who grinned at me as he steadied me. “Hey, there, pretty lady. Lost?”

“Looking for someplace to sleep,” I grumbled.

He frowned hard at me. “Did Eli kick you out? That bastard!”

“No, he was snoring,” I said, completely aggravated with the situation.

“Well, look no further. We’ll find you someplace to rest that pretty little head.”

He was a bit of an oddball, but the offer of someplace to sleep was tempting. “Is Rafe going to be upset that I’m not in my assigned room? I thought the guards were locking us in earlier.”

“Yeah, like Eli would allow that,” he huffed. “Did you get something to eat?”

“I had some fruit.”

“Fruit?” He stopped suddenly, looking at me like he was horrified. “That’s all you had?”

“Well, I—”

“No wonder you can’t sleep. You need food in that belly.”

“But, I—”

“Don’t say another word, little lady. We’ll have some food in you in no time.”

---

Now that we were entering the mess hall, I realized I really was hungry. Fox talked the entire time we walked the length of the ship. Most of it, I didn’t understand, but he seemed friendly enough.

“Here we are,” he said, spreading his hand out wide. “This is just what you need.”

“But they’re closed,” I said, pointing at the sign.

He frowned, stepping toward the sign and flipping it over. “Now they’re open.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“Never fear, Fox is here.” He took my hand and dragged me into the mess hall. “Yo!” When no one answered, he walked over to where the line would normally start and banged on the metal tray slide. “Hey, you’ve got customers!”



“It’s really okay,” I said, trying to stop this. I didn’t need any food, and he was only going to get us into trouble.

He turned to me, a serious look on his face. “Did you or did you not just survive days in the ocean?”

“Well—”

“And are you hungry?”

“I’m—”

“Enough said.”

He turned away from me, even though I hadn’t answered any of his questions. I wasn’t even sure what the point of me being here was. Fox just took over and basically decided everything. I guessed I was going to have to be okay with that. It wasn’t like I had a choice. Although, now I was wishing I had just stayed in bed with Eli, no matter how annoying his snoring was. Come to think of it, Eli was exactly like Fox. Did all these men take over and just decide how things were going to go?

“Ah! There you are,” Fox said to the man that came out of the back. “We need some food.”

“We’re closed.”

“No, you’re not,” Fox grinned.

“The sign—” The man frowned as he stared at the front. “It should say closed.”

“I know. I turned it around.”

“You can’t just turn the sign around.”

“Uh...I think I did,” Fox laughed.

“That doesn’t mean we’re open.”

“And just because you turn the sign doesn’t mean that people won’t be hungry. Now, we need to order some food.”

“I just told you—”

Fox jumped up on the tray slide and grabbed the man by the shirt before he had a chance to react. I squealed in surprise, but tried to keep my reactions under control.

“I just said that the lady is hungry. Would you like her to starve?”

“I won’t starve,” I tried to cut in, but he wasn’t listening.

“Now, we’re going to order, and you’re going to serve us. Am I making myself clear?”

The man nodded quickly, obviously terrified by whatever he saw. Then Fox grinned at him and hopped down, wiping off his hands.

“Now, what would you like?”

“Um...”

“Come on, you can say. Don’t be shy. Our friend is willing to do anything.”

I swallowed hard, feeling like I was under some sort of test. “I...I could go for some tacos.”

“Tacos,” Fox grinned as he turned to the man.

“We don’t have—”

In a flash, Fox threw something at the man. He cried out as he was pinned to the wall by some kind of knife lodged just under his armpit. His eyes were wide as he stared at Fox.

“The lady wants tacos. Are you going to make them?”

“We don’t have any shells.”

“You don’t—” Fox turned, pacing a few steps before swinging back to the man. “It’s like you’re not even hearing me. The lady wants some fucking tacos!”

“Alright! I can...I’ll find something!”

“That’s good,” Fox said calmly. “You’re not bleeding, are you?”

The man shook his head wildly. “No sir.”

“Good, because we don’t need extra seasoning in the meat.”

“Of course not.”

“This isn’t shawarma, okay?”

The man looked at him funny and nodded. “Right.”

“Alright, just bring me my knife.”

“I—” The man swallowed hard, looking like he was about to shit his pants. “I think I’m stuck.”

Fox tossed back his head and laughed. “Right, sorry about that.”

He walked around the corner behind the service island and yanked the knife out of the wall. “I forget my own strength sometimes. Hey, and no bad feelings about the shirt. It’s a small hole, but I’m sure the missus can fix it.”

“No...no missus.”

“Really? A good guy like you?” Fox clamped his hand on the man’s shoulder and squeezed. “That’s a shame. No one in mind?”

“There’s—there’s one girl. Charise, but I don’t think she even knows who I am.”

“Have you tried serenading her?”

“Um—”

“You gotta serenade her. When we’re done eating, let’s talk. I’m sure we can get her to come around in no time. You just have to find the right song.”

The man nodded wildly, but still looked terrified. I had a feeling I should be scared too, but I was too fascinated to register the fact that Fox was probably a borderline psychopath.

“Alright, you get started on those tacos, and we’ll be out here waiting.”

“Sure, no problem, Mr.—”

“Just call me Fox.”

The man’s eyes widened even further as if that name meant something to him. In a flash, he was gone and the doors to the back were swinging wildly in his wake. Fox walked

back around to me, wrapping his arm around my neck as we headed for a table.

“What a nice guy.”

“Sure,” I nodded, taking a seat at the table.

“So, you and Eli, huh?”

“Um...”

“Uh-oh. Do I sense some hesitation?”

“About Eli? No, he’s a good guy. But he’s moving awfully fast.”

He nodded and leaned his elbow on the table, staring at me intently. “In what way?”

“Well, we’ve only known each other less than a week.”

“And that’s a problem for you,” he said, eyeing me carefully.

“It’s...weird.”

“Why?”

“Well...we don’t know each other. He’s talking about me moving to Kansas from Chicago. I have my fish and cat to think about. It’s a huge decision.”

“Huge because you don’t know if Eli’s the one.”

“Huge because...because I don’t know that I want to give up everything and move across the country.”

“It’s only a few states over,” he pointed out.

“Right, but who just packs up and leaves for a man they’ve known less than a week?”

He nodded. “Yes, I see where you’re going with this.”

“Good.”

“You’re chicken.”

I flinched back. “I’m sorry, what?”

“See, it’s really just a location. Let me ask you this, are you happy with your job?”

“Well...it’s a job.”

“And it’s blown up at the moment.”

“There’s that,” I acknowledged.

“And someone tried to kill you there. Strapped a bomb to you from what I heard.”

Yes, there was that. “I guess.”

“And it’s not like this job was going to give you fulfillment for the rest of your life.”

“You don’t know that,” I argued.

“I do, actually. If you were really happy at your job, you would have gushed about that before your goldfish and your cat. That was your first mistake. Then there’s the fact that you haven’t once mentioned anything about needing to get back to work since we’ve been gone.”

“Well...we were sort of floating around in the ocean. I really just wanted to survive.”

“Exactly, and who did you cling to?”

“Eli,” I answered, but I really felt he was missing the whole point of this.

“And when you get back to Chicago, who is the first person you’re going to call?”

“Um...my dad?”

“Is that a question?”

“You know, this is very confusing.”

“It’s really not. Life is an adventure. You seem like a stable person. You have a good head on your shoulders. Now, if you were like me, slightly crazy with an affinity for Funyuns, I would say you should figure that out first. You don’t want to drag anyone else into your crazy world. But you don’t have a crazy world. You’re perfectly normal. Maybe even boring.”

“Hey—”

“And boring is okay for some people, but you just met Eli, and he’s offering you a chance to really live life.”

“A life I don’t know if I want,” I argued.

“And what do you do if you don’t like your situation?”

This felt like some kind of test. “I change it.”

“Right, so you move in with Eli and see how it goes. Your cat and goldfish will be transported to Eli’s home—if he hasn’t done that already—and you’ll see how it goes. Or you can stay in your little one-bedroom apartment, reading to your cat every night while you pretend that you’re perfectly happy not having amazing sex.”

My mouth dropped open in shock, and then I picked apart something he said. “How do you know I read to my cat?”

“So, are you going to do it?”

“And how do you know I live in a one-bedroom apartment? I didn’t even tell Eli that!”

He slid his chair back and smiled as he walked over to where the man was walking out with a tray full of tacos. “Awesome! You really are the best. And I haven’t forgotten about that conversation.”

When he came back over, I was full of questions, none of which I thought would be answered anytime soon.

“Fox, how exactly do you know this about me?”

“Know what?” he asked, sliding the tray over. “Do you mind if I take one?”

“I—”

He grabbed one and bit into it, moaning loudly. “Man, this is so good!” he shouted to the man who wasn’t even there.

“Fox—”

“You should really eat.”

“How did you know all that stuff about me?”

“Are you gonna eat all those?”

“Fox!”

He swiped at his face and grabbed a second taco. “I looked into you before I came down. This isn’t my first time stalking someone.”

“You—you were stalking me?”

He rolled his eyes as if explaining it was absolutely ridiculous. “Sarah— if I can call you that,” he narrowed his eyes.

My cheeks flushed red the longer he stared at me. Crap, he knew.

“I look into anyone that might become a potential mate for my friends. It’s how we keep each other safe. I had to make sure you weren’t evil before I rescued you.”

“Why would I be evil?”

“Well, you did have a bomb strapped to you.”

“Yes, but it was put there by someone else.”

He seemed to think that over. “You know, not too long ago, a woman I work with voluntarily strapped herself to a bomb. It’s been known to happen. But she works on our side, so I wasn’t worried about it. You should really eat those tacos.”

“But—”

“Mmm! We should get some Funyuns.”

And then he stood up and walked over to the vending machine, leaving me with so many unanswered questions.

---

“So, what exactly do you do for the company?” I asked as we cleared away our trays.

“That’s the question, right?”

I looked at him in confusion. “Um...yes, that’s why I asked it.”

“Right, I get it.”

That still wasn't an answer. I felt like everything with Fox was a riddle that I would never uncover.

"It's the Funyuns, right? They were so good."

"I guess they added a certain crunch to the tacos," I admitted. "I never considered putting snacks on tacos."

"Oh, you can put them on anything. My personal favorite is shawarma and Funyuns. My two favorite foods. You can't go wrong combining them."

"I've never had shawarma."

"Just wait until you come back to OPS. I make excellent shawarma." Then he turned to me with big eyes. "We should have a party. I could make shawarma, invite the Kamau, maybe even his annoying sidekick who thinks he's his best friend."

"Who's that?"

"The sidekick?"

"The Kamau," I answered, not even sure I said it right.

"He's my bud. Yeah, but he has this annoying guy always hanging around him. I guess they served together. I served with Tate. You don't see me dragging him everywhere."

"Who's Tate?"

"My other best friend. Just don't tell Kamau. I don't want him to be offended."

I shook my head, trying to wrap my head around all this. I didn't even know Kamau, so how was I supposed to let that secret slip? It was becoming clearer and clearer by the minute that if I just agreed to things with Fox, everything was a lot smoother.

"Right, no problem there."

"You'll actually meet him soon."

"The Kamau?"

"No," he laughed. "Wouldn't that be great? No, Tate's coming aboard."



“He is? Won’t Rafe have a problem with that?”

He snorted, pulling me up to the deck. The sound of a helicopter had me spinning around as it landed on the other end of the ship. “If he’s upset about that, he’s really not going to like who else I brought along.”

He tugged me behind him, ducking low as we approached the helicopter. The men had already gotten off and the helicopter was lifting off just as we reached them. Within minutes, I could actually hear again. Fox walked over to a man that I could swear was Rafe. What was going on?

“Didn’t I tell you I’d get you here?”

Fox walked over to the man and slapped him on the back. The man didn’t look too pleased, but awkwardly patted his back anyway.

“Boss, this is the lovely Sarah.”

I noticed his eyes narrowed on me again when he said my name. I stepped forward, feeling like I was being summoned. The man held out his hand as he looked me up and down.

“Cash.”

“You’re...”

“Not Rafe. He’s my twin.”

“Oh, thank God,” I said, letting out a breath. “I take it you’re the nice one.”

He smirked at me and goosebumps skittered over my skin. Okay, not the nice one. Maybe nicer than his brother.

“Um...are you here to take us home?”

“I’m here to kick my brother’s ass. Excuse me.”

He stormed past me just as Rafe appeared. I watched with wide eyes as Cash walked right up to Rafe and slammed his fist into his face. He stumbled, but didn’t drop. But Cash didn’t stop there. He hit him again, then kneed him in the stomach, dropping him to the ground.

I covered my mouth at how brutal the attack was. “Isn’t someone going to stop this?”

“Nah, this is a long time coming.”

“But...he’s going to kill him!”

Fox looked at me funny. “You think this will kill him? Nah, this is just a warm-up to what will happen later.”

I didn’t think I wanted to know, but I asked anyway. “What’s going to happen later?”

But he didn’t answer. He turned away and walked over to another guy, grabbing him in a big hug. “Tate! My man!”

“I just saw you,” Tate grumbled. “Why are you hugging me?”

“Come on. I want you to meet Sarah.”

Tate sighed and walked over to me, staring at me with a bored expression. Wow, I could really feel the love coming off this guy.

“This is Sarah,” Fox announced proudly. “She ate Funyun tacos with me.”

He nodded, then turned to Fox. “Was this why you dragged me out of bed two hours after I got off shift?”

Well, that explained the grumpy attitude.

“Oh, it’s better than that. I think we’re on the verge of finding FNG.”

Tate sighed, grabbing Fox by the collar and pulling him toward him. “Fox, I want you to listen to me. Really fucking listen.”

“Gotcha.”

“FNG is dead. Do you hear me? Dead. I know you don’t want to believe it, but I’ve seen the files. I’ve looked at all the reports. Hell, Rae looked at them with me. He. Is. Dead.”

Fox nodded. “That’s what’s so brilliant about it all. He’s so great at appearing dead that he even fooled you. And you can’t be fooled!” Fox turned to me, jerking his thumb at Tate. “He

can't be fooled. He was the best investigator on our team. Trust me when I say he's the best."

"Um...okay."

"So, what I was thinking is that the milk bottles aren't working. We need to really amp up the missing person aspect. Maybe send out a notice to The Syndicate. That's no doubt where he is," Fox frowned.

"The Syndicate?" Tate asked.

"Yeah...hmm, I probably shouldn't have mentioned that. Let's keep that between us." Then he turned to me. "And us."

"Sure." I would go along with anything at this point. I didn't know anyone or what he was talking about, so it really didn't matter. "Maybe I'll just—"

"Sarah, you had a sort of marketing job, right?"

"Actually, it was more of—"

"So, you can handle the PR for this whole thing. And then we can make a movie about it," Fox continued. "Zoe can write the script with Anna. Oh, and we'll need some actresses, of course."

"There's no way you're getting Anna to play a part in a movie," Tate snarled.

"I would never ask her to. No, we'll hire some B-list actors. It'll be good."

"Um...what exactly are we doing?"

Fox turned to me, clearly irritated with having to explain himself. "Trying to find FNG. We were just discussing it."

"Right, but I don't know anything about—"

"Fighting. Yes, we should fix that."

He stormed off, leaving me alone with Tate. He seemed to know him well, so I dug a little. "Is he always so..."

"Yes," Tate answered immediately.

"It's like he can't calm down."

“Nope. You’ve gotta just go with the flow.”

“How do you know him?” I asked.

“The Navy. We were both SEALs.”

“Really?” I asked in surprise. “Somehow, I don’t see Fox as someone who follows anyone else’s rules.”

Tate smirked as he watched Fox drag over a board and set it up as he argued with one of Rafe’s men. “He’s not. That’s why I stood beside him all this time.”

“Because he’s a rule breaker?” I asked in confusion.

He turned to me, all traces of humor gone from his face. “It’s what saved my life.”



# CASH

I knew my brother. This whole setup with Fox was all part of his game, and I was done being dragged into his shit. OPS was about protecting the innocent, not getting involved in jobs that were too big for any of us to handle. This war he'd started with The Syndicate was out of control.

“Red,” I snapped. “You’ve got the watch.”

He nodded as I turned to IKE, who had a gun trained on my brother, and jerked my head for him to follow. IKE was good, a shadow in the night that didn't mind getting his hands dirty. There was a specific reason I brought him to OPS, and that had everything to do with his complete lack of empathy for anyone.

Fox was good, but deep down, he would always have a softer side that he kept hidden. I saw how Anna brought it out in him, tore down the demons he was constantly fighting to bring him into the light. Yeah, he still had his rough days, but it took a lot for him to be dragged into the darkness. And knowing how his life had been, the last thing I wanted for him was to fall into that dark pit again.

IKE, on the other hand, had no tragic story. He had a moral code all his own, and he followed whatever he felt was right. That's why I needed him. He didn't care that Rafe was my brother. He wouldn't hesitate to take out Rafe if it was required. I knew I wouldn't be able to do it. And everyone that worked at OPS would hesitate. I knew they wouldn't do anything to hurt me, which by extension, included my brother.

But I knew there would come a day that Rafe would go too far, cross a line that would put all of us in danger. And when that day came, someone would have to be willing and able to pull the trigger.

I flung open the door to a small room on the lower deck and waited for IKE to walk my brother inside. He shut the door and waited for me to make the first move. I was pissed. Actually, that wasn't a good way to describe what I was feeling right now. Hatred for his actions topped the list. But the way he treated Eva still burned in my gut. I knew he had his reasons, and that he was trying to protect me. But he hadn't trusted my team, and my wife ended up getting hurt in the process.

Finally, I stopped pacing and turned to Rafe. He was still the cocky bastard from a year ago. Nothing had changed. I knew what happened on deck was all for show. He wouldn't normally allow me to kick his ass. In his eyes, he was throwing me a bone, allowing me to feel like I was getting some retribution. But why, I wasn't sure.

“So, what was Fox's job?”

“Simple,” he shrugged. “To intercept the sellers and draw in the buyers. I was going to bring hell down on them, but as usual, your guys just can't resist fucking up a situation. Now, all my evidence and the men responsible are sitting at the bottom of the ocean. Dead men can't talk,” he pointed out.

“You could have had a hundred different men do what Fox did.”

His eyes twinkled as he stared at me. “But I didn't want a hundred different men. I wanted Fox, and he needed something from me.”

“I fucking told you to leave my guys out of it,” Cash hissed. “You just can't stop fucking up other people's lives!”

“All your people are alive and well. Including the woman Eli dragged along. Don't ask me what the fuck he's doing with her. She's a liability.”

“She’s the job,” I spat. “None of this is about you. When the fuck are you going to realize you can’t just jump into the middle of our lives and take over?”

“Don’t forget that I gifted you that anonymity you so desperately crave,” he said, stepping closer.

“It wasn’t supposed to be at the expense of my people.”

He rolled his eyes, scoffing at me. “Don’t tell me this is about FNG.”

“Where is he, Rafe? Did he really die or is this another one of your jobs?”

He dropped his head, rubbing his hand across his forehead. “Look, it wasn’t supposed to go like that.”

Anger built in me with every word he spoke. We had no fucking idea what happened to FNG, but I had a feeling all those answers were about to come out. “What wasn’t supposed to go like that?” I bit out.

“The job. Cash, I swear to you, we had a plan.”

“And I’m just now hearing about this?”

“You weren’t ever supposed to hear about it,” he snapped. “Christ, you just have to have all the answers!”

“Says the man that won’t stop this fucking crusade!”

“This was different. My guys were there the night of the attack at the bar. FNG slipped away and it was all good, but Johnny wouldn’t stop digging.”

“Because you framed Tahlia!”

“Because he’s too fucking good at his job,” Rafe snapped. “FNG agreed to do a job for me. That’s all it was supposed to be. One fucking job. We made it look like he died in that truck. That’s the way it had to be. He fucking agreed to it.”

“And that makes it alright?” I spat. “He was my employee. He was one of us and you just decided to snatch him up without even consulting me.”



“It’s the way it had to be. No one could know what was going on. As it is, everyone still thinks he’s alive!” he shouted.

“And is he?”

Rafe’s lips tightened the longer he stared at me. A sinking feeling in my gut told me I wasn’t going to get the answers I wanted. “We had to stage a second death. You were there. Your company saw it.”

“And it went wrong. He was on the fucking plane and it blew up,” I concluded.

“No, he was still alive. He went on the job as planned.”

“And?”

He clenched his jaw, glancing at IKE. “It didn’t go as well. I lost contact with him after four hours. When he didn’t check in after twelve, I sent a team in. He was already dead.”

I took a few seconds to allow the force of his words hit me. I knew he was dead all along, but with so many failed attempts, what would it take to convince everyone now? “What was the job?” I forced out.

“Does it fucking matter? I blew it. Is that what you want to hear? He’s fucking gone.”

I stared at him, waiting for any sign that he was lying to me. There wasn’t a twitch of his lips or a vein throbbing in his neck. He didn’t glance away from me or even tap his fingers. Nothing. No sign that he was deceiving me. Either he’d gotten better at lying or FNG really was dead. And I had a bad feeling it was the latter.

“So...that’s that.”

He nodded. “Didn’t turn out too well for me either.”

In a flash, I had him pressed up against the wall and a gun to his head. He didn’t even look scared. He knew I couldn’t pull the trigger. I wasn’t as ruthless as he was, not when it came to family. “It didn’t turn out too well for you either? Is that what you just fucking said to me?”

“He knew the job.”

“Is that going to be your excuse every time someone dies? What about Asher? Do you care at all that you ruined his life?”

He shoved me back, sure I wasn't going to fire the gun. But IKE was on alert, his gun firmly trained on Rafe. All it would take was one word from me and he'd end his life. And right now, I wanted to tell him to do it. I wanted to end the chaos around us and just live my life in peace. But I knew as soon as his body dropped to the ground, the regret would tear me apart.

I stepped back, needing space from him.

“I didn't tell Asher to take the job. You were in the fucking room with me. You heard me tell him it was dangerous.”

“I told him that, asshole.”

“I told him he would be alone.”

“Again, that was me,” I shot back. “How many more people have to die to fulfill your crusade?”

“Until The Syndicate is taken down!” Rafe shouted.

“Why are you so obsessed with this?”

“You're okay knowing these assholes are out there?” Rafe asked. “Look at what they did to you. They fucking tortured you because they thought you were me.”

“Yeah, because you put yourself in the line of fire. You dragged me to that job, knowing they were after you. You should have warned me.”

“I couldn't possibly know—”

“Don't give me that bullshit, Rafe. This is me you're talking to. I'm not Jason, Johnny, or Jack. I don't buy into your line of crap about saving the world. This is a personal vendetta for you. I don't know why or who it's against, but this is one hundred percent about you. All that bullshit of it being about the job doesn't fly with me. I've known you my whole goddamn life. I know the selfish prick you are.”

“If you really know me, you'd dig deeper for answers.”

I paused, staring at him in a different light. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Exactly how it sounds. If you don’t believe my intentions, dig deeper.”

“Where?”

He stalked toward me, his eyes dark and hard, but underneath was something different. It was almost like he was scared, but Rafe didn’t get scared. “You always were the saint. The sniper that our parents could be proud of. They still have that fucking award hanging on the wall for you. It’s their pride and joy.” He stared at me for a moment. “The fucking Congressional Medal of Honor for their favorite son.”

“Rafe—”

“Why’d you give it to them?”

“What?”

“The medal. They have it hanging on their fucking wall. Was it so they would always think of you?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

This wasn’t like Rafe. He was never jealous of me. We both had our own paths in life, and whether or not our parents approved of his life choices was the last thing on his mind. But again, there was that look in his eyes. Something was coming, but I had no fucking clue what it was. And as long as he kept playing these mind games with me, I might never find out.

“You can get the fuck off my ship now,” he said, turning to leave. The pretense of being held against his will was gone. He stormed right past IKE without a care in the world.

I followed and shouted for him, but he didn’t stop. “Rafe! What the fuck is going on?”

He turned around one last time and glared at me. “If you’re not here to help, you don’t have a fucking purpose on this ship. I’ll have a ride waiting for you.”

“We’re in the middle of the ocean,” I retorted.

He quirked an eyebrow, smirking at me in typical Rafe fashion. “Then I guess it’s going to take you a long time to row to shore.”



## ELI

I rolled over, expecting to find Sarah beside me, but the bed was empty. Jerking upright in bed, I grabbed a spare pair of pants from the closet and yanked them on, grabbing a shirt as I shoved my bare feet into my boots. How the hell did she slip away without me noticing?

I stormed out of the room, my pulse hammering as I ran down the corridor in search of her. The thought of her out there with Rafe sent chills down my spine. I didn't like the way he was looking at her, and I wouldn't put anything past that bastard. I ran up the steps, terrified of what I'd find on the deck. I skidded to a stop when I saw Fox standing with Sarah and they were fucking laughing.

"That's right. Just put a tad more spin on it."

Sarah lined up her target and flung a throwing knife across the ship into a board. She squealed, jumping up and down when she hit the chalk target. What the fuck?

I stormed over to her and pulled her away from him just as she flung herself in his arms, holding him tight. "What the fuck are you doing?" I growled.

"Learning how to defend myself. It's just like playing darts at the bar!" she said excitedly.

"Except these kill people," I spat. Then I saw Tate sitting just feet away, practically sleeping where he was. "And what the fuck are you doing here?"

He pointed at Fox. "Apparently, he's found FNG. So, I decided to take a nap."

“And while you’ve been sleeping, princess, I was teaching your lady love some self-defense. I’m surprised you haven’t done that yet, you know, with all the trouble you’ve been getting into.”

“I sort of ran out of time,” I bit out.

He tapped me on the nose like a kid. “But you still had time for sex. I think you have your priorities mixed up. However, you’ll be pleased to know that I’ve convinced her to come home with us.”

I did a double-take, sure I’d heard him wrong. “You what?”

“Well, she has doubts. Something you would have known if you hadn’t fallen asleep when she was talking to you.”

I looked at Sarah, who just shrugged.

“And this all happened in the last...” I looked at my watch. “Four hours?”

“We had to pass the time somehow. The little lady couldn’t sleep with all your snoring.”

“I wish I was snoring,” Tate grumbled.

“How did you even get here?” I asked him.

He pointed to Fox. “He choppered me in with Cash.”

“Cash is here?”

“Yeah, he’s in the lower levels with Rafe. I’m assuming he’s beating his ass. He said I wasn’t allowed to come. Then again, maybe they’re bonding. Rightfully so. They’ve been estranged for way too long.”

“And Rafe went willingly down below?” I questioned. That didn’t seem at all like Rafe. He never relinquished the upper hand. That had to mean something else was going on here. “Where are they?”

Fox shrugged. “When Cash said to stay up here, I did it. He’s the boss.”

“Since when have you ever listened to anything Cash says?”

“Since I found a new woman that’s an aichmomaniac.”

I wasn’t even sure that was a word. “A what?”

“A person that loves knives. Now I have a little harem of women that are just like me,” he grinned.

“She is not like you. And you do not have a harem.”

“I beg to differ. Look at how awesome she is,” he said, pointing to the wood across the ship.

I glanced that way, but I really didn’t give a fuck. “Yeah, that’s great. Can you put the knives away now?”

“Do you realize what you have here? This is like...the holy grail!”

“I’m not seeing it the same way you are.”

He frowned. “That’s because you don’t understand the true strength of her power. Go stand over there while she throws a knife at you.”

I burst out laughing. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Yeah, just go over there. She’ll throw the knife and you’ll see how truly awesome she is.”

“Are you fucking crazy? Of course you are. I’m talking to Fox. Look, normal couples do *not* bond over whether or not one person can throw a knife really well at the other.”

“Ah, but you’re not a normal couple, are you? See, you had a one-night-stand. She nearly died because of a bomb. You jumped out a window with her. Then you kidnapped—”

“I don’t need a fucking replay of what happened! What I need is for you to not turn her into a psychopath.”

“Ouch. That hurts, man. You know, I was on your side. I was rooting for you the whole time.”

“Me too, which is why I need you to back the fuck off and stop doing your Fox shit.”



“Fine,” he stiffened. “But don’t come crawling to me when you need a woman that can throw a knife and there’s no one around. I mean, besides the other women I’ve trained.”

That was enough crazy for one day. The problem with Fox was that he was always around when you didn’t want him. And unfortunately, there were a lot of times you did need him. So, he was pretty much always there.

“So, you don’t like him teaching me to defend myself,” Sarah said.

“Can we just take this week one crisis at a time? Do we really need to add to the mix by you potentially cutting off a finger?”

A door slammed open behind me and I spun around, watching a very pissed off Rafe storm across the deck. “Marcus! Get the boat ready!”

“Sir—”

“Our guests are leaving.”

“Um...” Cash walked up to me, shaking his head. “What’s going on, Cash?”

“The usual. Rafe is kicking us off the boat for not being useful.”

“Can’t we just get a helicopter?”

“We could, but I don’t think he’ll allow us the time to organize one.”

I nodded, shoving my hands in my pockets. “So, back in the ocean.”

“Thank fuck,” Max grinned. “I can’t wait to get home.”

Cash jerked his thumb at the new guy. “Who’s this?”

“He’s the genius that crashed the plane.”

“Oh.” Cash nodded thoughtfully. “I just assumed Scottie did that.”

“Hey!” Scottie shouted across the deck. “I heard that!”

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“Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily—You know, it’s not any fun if you guys don’t sing along,” Fox sighed.

“We’re here, so it doesn’t matter now,” I grumbled, raising my oar out of the water as I carefully stood and placed my hand on the dock. It was dark as fuck. It had to be well past midnight at this point, but we were finally on dry land, and that was all I gave a fuck about. “Fuck, my back hurts.”

“At least you didn’t have to sit right beside the live musical for two fucking days,” Kavanaugh grumbled. “He’s lucky I didn’t toss him overboard.”

I got out of the boat and tied it to the post, then reached down for Sarah to take my hand. “Are you okay?”

“You mean besides the ache in my back and the desperate need to shove a knife through Fox’s eyeball?”

I smirked, glad that his charms had worn off. “We’ll find a hotel for the night. A nice one.”

“With what wallet?” Red joked.

“And spend the whole day in bed tomorrow?” she asked dreamily.

“Sure,” I said, though I wasn’t sure that would be possible. But after two days of rowing to Florida, there was no fucking way I was telling her she couldn’t stay in bed all day. Her skin was toasty and the few supplies Rafe put on the boat just barely got us through the trip back to the mainland.

“I’m gonna kill Rafe the next time I see him,” Scottie said, groaning as he stood.

“Get in line,” Red grumbled. “Fuck, I don’t think my body hurt this much when I was in the fucking military.”

“I feel great!” Fox grinned. “There’s nothing like a good rowing exercise to get you back on track.”

“That wasn’t a fucking rowing exercise,” Tate snapped. “Fuck, I never should have gotten on that helicopter.”

“Trust me, the rest of us have been saying that since the moment we got on the plane with Max,” I retorted.

“Hey, I saved your ass.”

“Is that what you call what we just went through?”

“You know, a little fucking respect. I didn’t have to leave my humble abode in the Caribbean to save your ass.”

“If you had fixed our fucking plane, you wouldn’t have had to, but you were too drunk,” Scottie argued.

Max stretched, groaning as he looked around him. “If I’m going to handle being back in the U.S., I’m going to need a fucking drink.”

Cash climbed out of the boat, still fuming from being kicked off the ship by Rafe. He glanced at his phone and sighed. “Finally, we have reception again.”

IRIS raised his hand. “I vote we all get sat phones to replace the company phones.”

“Agreed,” Scottie said.

“Done,” Cash answered without a second thought.

“And a fucking fighter jet.”

“Not a chance in hell,” Cash said, taking off down the dock.

“It was worth a try,” I said, trying to commiserate with Scottie, though we all knew there was never really a chance he would get the fighter jet.

I wrapped my arm around Sarah’s neck and pulled her into my side as we strode down the dock.

“So, what’s next?” she asked.

“Uh...” I frowned, trying to remember why the fuck we were here other than for the fact that it was land.

“Something to do with Sarah,” Kavanaugh said.

“Wow, thanks for that,” I grunted. “Really informative.”

“Hey, you don’t remember either.”

“I don’t even know what fucking day it is,” I retorted. “How am I supposed to remember what the point of this job was?”

“Easy,” Kavanaugh answered. “It’s Sunday.”

“No, it can’t be Sunday,” Red shook his head. “I was supposed to go with Zoe to the movies on Sunday.”

Kavanaugh dramatically rolled his eyes. “Oh, well, then you’re right. It couldn’t possibly be Sunday if you had plans.”

“No, I think he’s right,” I said after thinking about it. “Isn’t it Saturday?”

“We were only gone for four fucking days,” Scottie answered.

“That can’t be right. We were in the ocean for like...ten days,” IRIS said.

I stopped and turned to them, holding out my thumb first. “Day one was the day of the bomb—”

“When you couldn’t just let me fucking handle it,” IRIS grumbled.

“And then you kidnapped me and put me on a plane.”

“I would like to point out that you can’t kidnap someone you know,” Fox said.

“He didn’t know me,” Sarah argued.

“Uh, you did sleep together.”

“Do you call all your one-night-stands people you know?”

“I don’t have one-night stands. I’m married.”

“It doesn’t matter!” I cut in. “We stayed at the hut that first night.”

“Day two was at the market,” Red said thoughtfully.

“Yeah, and then she ran off and got herself taken by those traffickers.”

“I didn’t get myself taken,” Sarah grumbled. “I...happened to run into some bad people.”

“Sure, we’ll call it that,” I said snidely. “And then we rescued her, and Max crashed the plane.”

“I’d still like to know how that happened,” Cash said.

“And we spent one night in the raft.”

“No we didn’t,” Sarah snapped. “We went on board the ship.”

“*After* we spent a night on the raft,” I argued.

“Does it really fucking matter?” Max shouted.

“Yes!” We all turned and said at the same time.

“Day three was the pirate ship and being rescued by Rafe,” IKE said.

“That was day four,” I answered.

“That can’t be right,” Fox said.

“Christ, it’s been six fucking days,” IKE said as he stomped past us. “It’s right fucking there on my watch,” he said, holding his wrist up for all of us to see the date.

“Why didn’t you just fucking say that?” IRIS spat.

“Enough!” Cash said, spinning around to face all of us. “Can we just find a fucking hotel and get some shut-eye?”

Fox raised his hand like a kindergartener.

“I’m not getting you Funyuns.”

Fox lowered his hand as a mournful look crossed his face. “Geez, after my daring rescue, I thought for sure a few Funyuns would be in order.”

Cash turned his phone around for all of us to see. “One mile. That’s all we have to walk to get to the hotel. I’ll call on the way and get rooms. Until then, can everyone just shut the fuck up?”

He turned and stormed away. I heard Fox chuckling beside me and turned to glare at him. “Somebody’s testy,” he said

before following.

“Do we really have to walk an entire mile?” Sarah grumbled. “I’m so tired.”

“Climb on my back,” I said, bending over for her to climb on.

“Are you sure?”

“That I don’t want you walking when you’re dead tired? Yes, I’m positive.”

“Fine, but I’m doing this under duress.”

She climbed on and plopped her head down on my shoulder, her arms draped around me, but not really holding on. “Aren’t there any cabs in this town?”

“Sweetheart, what kind of town do you think this is?” Kavanaugh asked as he strolled along beside us.

“One that should definitely have cabs,” she murmured.

“Yeah, you’d think they’d at least have a few cabs by the dock for people coming in,” IRIS muttered.

We all turned and looked back at our dingy that Rafe put us in, sitting alone in the water.

“Must not be very many boaters out tonight,” Red said.

“Still, they could have some fucking cabs,” Kavanaugh griped.

After an excruciatingly long walk, we were finally in front of the hotel, along with a whole fucking line of cabs. Before Kavanaugh could start, I stalked toward the hotel. “Don’t fucking start.”

“Did you hear me open my mouth?” Kavanaugh asked. “There was nary a peep from these lips.”

“Nary,” Sarah chuckled. “I like that word.”

I set her down on the ground, lowering her into a chair that she quickly curled up in. Cash was sorting out the rooms, and I desperately wanted to sit down, but didn’t dare in my current

condition. I didn't have the money to replace all the furniture. But I wouldn't tell Sarah not to sit down.

"Okay, I got four rooms."

"I'm with Kavanaugh," Red said immediately.

"IRIS," Cash called out.

"Wait, what's going on here?" Max asked.

"No, no, no," Scottie chuckled. "I see where this is going. You all bunked up together, and now I'm stuck with the new guy or Fox."

"I can share a room with Fox," Sarah suggested as she stood.

I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into my side. "Like hell you will."

She looked up at me with humor. "He's married."

"He's still a man, and you're not sharing a room with anyone but me."

"Wait, if you got four rooms, where does that leave me?" Max asked. He stared at all of us as we recounted. "Well, shit. I guess that leaves me out on my ass. I mean, I did fly your asses out of the Caribbean. And lose my plane. But that's okay. I'll just sleep on the sidewalk tonight."

"I'll get another room," Cash grumbled.

"But I still get stuck with either Fox or the new guy. What the hell?" Scottie snapped.

"If I stay with Fox, you can stay with Eli," Sarah said.

"I swear, one of these days I'm going to put duct tape over your mouth," I said, barely holding onto my temper.

"I am not staying with Fox," Scottie argued. "He'll sing show tunes all night and keep me awake. You're friends with him, Tate. You take him."

Tate chuckled, stepping back. "Nope, I served my time with him. I love him—"

"Awe, I love you too, man," Fox grinned.

“But there is no fucking way I’m sharing with him.”

Fox’s face fell. “You know, that really hurts.”

Tate shrugged, not caring. “I’ll bunk with IKE.”

“Why does he get to bunk with you?” Scottie cut in.

“Fine,” Tate rolled his eyes. “I’ll share with you.”

“Why should I have to share with any of you? For all I know, you’ll rob me in my sleep,” Max interjected.

“Alright, alright!” Cash shouted. “Max, you’ll get your own fucking room.”

“And what about me? Should I sleep on the sofa?” IKE asked, staring at all of us. “You drag me out here and then forget about me?”

“Fuck,” Cash groaned. “This should not be so complicated.”

“Sarah and Eli are sharing a bed, so Fox can bunk with them. IKE, you’re with the new guy.”

“Just to clarify,” Fox cut in. “The new guy and not New Guy. Let’s be real clear on that. You can’t just replace a guy without a name.”

“Noted and don’t care,” Max said. “There better be alcohol in the room,” he said as he headed toward the elevators.

“No drinking!” Cash shouted.

Max held up his middle finger and continued walking.

“Great, now that that’s all sorted, can we go to sleep?”

Sarah walked over to him and patted him on the cheek. “You’re such a good guy. Does your wife know that?”

Cash blushed as she walked away. I grabbed her hand, yanking her toward me. “You gotta stop telling other men that you like them.”

“That wasn’t what I said.”

“Close enough. You’re going to make me question our entire relationship.”



“Oh, the multiple near death experiences didn’t already do that for you?” she asked.

“You’re not getting off that easily,” I said, tugging her into the elevator.

Just as the doors were closing, I heard Cash shout, “Has anyone seen my wallet?”



# SARAH

I groaned as I walked through the door of the hotel room. It was beautiful. Of course, anything was beautiful compared to staring at the faces of ten angry men for the past two days. I nearly whimpered as I walked closer to the bed, desperate to plop down. My whole body tilted forward, but was denied the pleasure of landing on the soft covers when Eli scooped me up in his arms and carried me away.

Crying out for the luxurious softness, I held my hand out, reaching in desperation for the comfort that only a king-sized bed could bring at the end of a horrible trip on the ocean. “Why?”

“You’re dirty,” Eli said, his voice thick and gritty. “Trust me, you’ll thank me when you’re clean and relaxing in bed tonight.”

“This morning,” I said with a yawn. “It’s already one in the morning.”

Since I was denied the comfort of bed, I snuggled into his chest even though we walked into the bathroom. When he set me down on the edge of the tub, I snuggled in deeper, refusing to move.

“Sarah,” he sighed. “You’re making this difficult.”

“I know you didn’t just call me difficult,” I mumbled against his chest.

“Now I am.”

I relished the way his voice rumbled through his chest. I really should have taken advantage of this position more when we were on that boat. “You’re so comfy.”

“Yes, but the water will get you clean.”

He was right; smooshing my face against him would feel even better when he didn’t smell like an old shoe. “Alright, you talked me into it.” He turned on the water as I climbed off his lap, pulled the t-shirt over my head, and dropped it to the floor. I hadn’t thought much over the last two days about the fact that I wasn’t wearing pants.

Or underwear.

Or a bra.

There were more pressing matters than a lack of undergarments. And as uncomfortable as it was to sit on a boat and constantly worry about my girls showing, frankly, it was just too hot to care. My lady bits enjoyed the fresh ocean breeze as the sweltering heat made me sweat in all the most uncomfortable places.

“I can’t believe I didn’t kill anyone on that boat.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you didn’t. It would have started another debate on who we were going to feed to the fish. And I’ll be honest, one conversation was enough for me.”

He grunted as he stood, pulling his shirt over his head. I sighed as I got lost in the musculature of his body, watching how he flexed as if he was putting on a show for me. If I could get paid to watch him take off his shirt all day long, I’d snag that job in an instant. After all, my job was gone as far as I knew. Maybe there was someone at his company that needed to keep an eye on their physiques. I could totally volunteer for that job.

“Are you going to watch me all day?”

“If I had a glass of wine, this would be my dream job.”

He smirked slightly as he stalked toward me. Those beautiful hands slid up my arms until they rested on either side

of my jaw. I swallowed hard as I stared up into his gorgeous eyes.

“So, does this mean you’re coming back with me for sure?”

“Is there a job opening for watching you strip?”

“Now, who’s calling who a hooker?”

“Men are escorts,” I said breathlessly. “And it’s a compliment coming from a woman.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Get in the tub.”

“You’re not going to kiss me?”

“I have terrible breath.”

“So do I.”

“Then let’s not ruin what we have.”

He stepped back and tested the water before holding out his hand. “Ladies first.”

I scoffed, shaking my head at him. “Oh, so now I’m not good enough to kiss? After I showered, you didn’t care that you were making me smelly and gross.”

“That was then.”

I took his hand, but stopped when I was about to get in. “Wait, does this mean that I’m gross and you don’t want to touch me until I’m clean?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“You implied it.”

“No,” he said slowly. “I implied that we’re both dirty and tired. I don’t want to kiss you or touch you in any way that deters me from getting to that bed. I’m tired, and I was rowing a boat for two days. I look like a lobster, and I’m not sure I could get it up if you grabbed my dick and started sucking it. So, I’m going to get in the bath and soak my muscles for a few minutes. You can join me, but if you try to have your way with me, I’ll have to send you to bed without dinner.”

I quirked an eyebrow at his humor, despite the horrible situation. “I think I’ll just take a shower.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Not because you get your way,” I clarified. “But because I don’t want to sit in your man scum.”

“You do what you have to do. I’ll be in here.”

Okay, I was slightly put off by his less-than-enthusiastic attitude about me being in the bath with him. But once I had the chance to think about it, I realized that I was too tired for sex too, and arguing about him wanting me was just silly. In fact, by the time I got out of the shower, I was practically dead on my feet.

I plopped down on the bed, letting my face smooch into the comforter as I sank in deep. Holy cow, this was the best feeling in the world. I was pretty sure my body hurt just from trying to relax. How was that possible?

The bed shifted as Eli sank down beside me with a groan. “Oh, that’s it.”

“Right?” I asked, knowing exactly what he was talking about.

“It hits all the right spots. It’s like it was made for me,” Eli sighed.

“You were right. No hanky panky. Let’s just go to bed and sleep for twelve hours straight.”

“Agreed.”

I started to drift off to sleep as contentment drifted over me. The cool air in the room lulled me into a peaceful slumber after I crawled under the covers and pulled them up to my chin. Eli was already snoring beside me, but I didn’t care. Elephants could walk in the room right now and I wouldn’t care.

Bright light blinded me, making me pull the covers up over my face. “What is this insanity?” I cried.

“I’ve got Funyuns and a movie. Who’s in?”

I tore the covers away and glared at Fox. I had completely forgotten he was sharing a room with us, and now I was going to make good on my threat to shove a knife through Fox's eyeball.

"We're sleeping," I growled.

"Right, but it's like we're having a sleepover. Don't worry about me. I'll just..."

He jumped on the bed and crawled between Eli and me, snuggling under the blankets. I sighed heavily, unsure of how to kick him out of bed.

"So, are you ready for the best movie ever made?"

"Does it have singing in it?"

He grinned at me, wrapping his arm around me as he pulled me closer. "You know me so well. This is gonna be good."

"Somehow, I highly doubt that," I said as he turned the TV on and tore open a bag.

"Funyun?"

"Why not," I grumbled. "It's not like I'm getting any sleep tonight."

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"What the fuck are you doing?"

I sat upright in bed, rubbing the sleep from my eyes as I looked around the bright room. I was supposed to be sleeping in this morning, and based on the light in the room, it was way too early for this shit.

"What's going on?" I mumbled, still trying to wake up. I looked over at the other bed and snorted when I saw Eli desperately trying to untangle himself from the covers and Fox's arms. He fell off the bed, tugging the sheet so his naked form wasn't on display.

"Why are you in my bed?" Eli snapped.

“I was—”

“I went to bed with her!” he pointed at me, wrapping the sheet around his waist. “Why are you in another bed?” he said accusingly.

“Um...”

“I put her there,” Fox piped up.

“Why? She was perfectly comfortable in bed with me!”

Fox looked at him in surprise. “Actually, she couldn’t sleep with the three of us in bed. It was sort of cramped.”

Eli looked like he was about to lose his shit. “And why were you in bed with us?”

“Because while you were snoring away, Sarah and I were watching a movie,” Fox explained. “You should really be more attentive to your woman after such a horrible experience.”

While I couldn’t totally disagree with what Fox was saying—I did love a man that spoiled me—I was just about to fall asleep when he came into the room. So, technically, Fox had this all backward. But I was getting the idea that he always got his way, no matter who was involved.

“She was about to fall asleep when I got in bed,” Eli argued.

“Well, when I walked in and turned on the lights, she was wide awake.”

Eli’s mouth dropped open, then he looked at me, shaking his head. “You let him get in bed with us?”

“He sort of just climbed in. What did you want me to do?”

“Um...maybe tell him he’s not allowed in our bed?”

Fox scoffed. “It was just for a movie. I only moved her so she could be comfortable.”

“She was comfortable with me!” Eli shouted. “It’s fucking weird that you think it’s okay to sleep in the same bed as me.”



“It’s not like we haven’t done it before,” Fox grumbled. “Why is it so different now?”

“Because we’re not in the middle of fucking nowhere without supplies. Because there were enough beds for all of us. And most importantly, because I have a woman and should have been sleeping with her!”

A knock sounded on the door and Eli turned around, yelling, “What?”

“Everything alright in there?”

I wasn’t sure who it was, but when Eli stalked over to the door and swung it open, I saw Red and Kavanaugh standing outside, grinning.

“Problems in paradise?” Kavanaugh asked, shoving his way inside. His eyebrows shot up when he noticed the disheveled state of the bed Eli was in, and the fact that Fox was in the same bed. He let out a low whistle and spun back toward Eli. “It seems we have a very interesting situation in here.”

“Did you sleep with him?” Red asked Eli.

“I didn’t sleep with him. He helped himself to our bed and then moved Sarah to a different bed.”

“We were watching a movie and she fell asleep!” Fox argued. “I wanted her to be comfortable after a harrowing experience.”

Kavanaugh walked further in, plopping down on the bed with me. “West Side Story?”

“Annie,” Fox answered.

“Fitting,” he nodded.

“In what way?” I asked, shoving my hair behind my ear.

“Hard knock life?” Kavanaugh answered. “I thought you would get that.”

“Me too,” Fox said, cocking his head at me. “Did you pay attention to the movie at all?”

“Again, why did you think it was okay to get in bed with me when you had a perfectly good bed over there!” Eli shouted.

“Dude, you need to calm down,” Fox said, getting out of his bed in only his boxers.

I gasped when I saw the morning wood sticking out. Slapping a hand over my mouth, I averted my eyes and tried to pretend that I was anywhere else.

“Fox, that’s just fucking disturbing,” Eli snapped.

“What? It’s morning. I can’t help it.”

“You’re surrounded by guys,” Red said, walking over and snagging the open bag of Funyuns. “Don’t you find that a little weird?”

“Who said you could eat those?” Fox asked, yanking the bag from his grasp. “Do you see me wandering into your house and eating your food?”

“Um...you do it all the time,” Red said, frowning at him. “Just a week ago, you took the steak that Zoe made for me. We had an argument and everything.”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t Funyuns,” Fox said. “That was just food.”

“And there’s a difference?”

“Fox, put some damn pants on,” Eli muttered, rubbing his temples. “Take a cold shower. Go fuck your hand. Anything to get you and your giant dick out of my face!”

“You could just stop staring,” Fox grinned.

“My woman is right there!” he pointed at me.

“I see what the problem is. You’re worried she’ll get a little feisty and come after me. No problemo, man. I’ll get out of your hair so she doesn’t get the wrong idea.”

He winked at Eli, slapping him on the back as he passed. Moments later, the shower started and Fox was singing some song at the top of his lungs.

“Does this mean I can go back to bed now?” I mumbled, feeling even more tired than last night.

“We’ve got things to do,” Red said to Eli. “Cash wants us to go check out the hotel she stayed in and see what we can get.”

“Yeah, just let me get dressed.”

“And I can go to sleep?” I asked hopefully.

Kavanaugh laid back with a plop, thrusting one arm under his head. “Sure, if Eli thinks he can trust Fox with you.”

“Not a chance in hell. Scottie can stay.”

“Not IRIS?”

“She learned to throw knives the other day. I don’t need to come back to find she learned how to make an explosive device.”

“So…” I looked at all of them. “That’s a yes on going back to sleep?”

Kavanaugh sat up, smirking at Eli. “Scottie has to figure out how to get the plane home.”

“Then IKE,” Eli argued.

“No can do,” Red shook his head. “Cash wants him on this one.”

“Max,” he continued.

“Max doesn’t even work for the company,” Red scoffed. “And he was drunk the entire night. Do you really want to put him in charge of looking after your woman?”

This was ridiculous. It would go on forever if I didn’t put a stop to it. “I know this is hard to believe, but I’m perfectly capable of watching myself in my own room while sleeping.”

They all studied me for a moment before Red turned back to Eli. “Maybe we could convince Cash to hold back on the investigation into who stole the papers from her hotel.”

I screamed through clenched teeth as I flopped back on the bed. “Sleep! That’s all I want right now. And while you guys

are in here arguing about who's going to watch me sleep, there's a very nice bomber out there probably getting all the information ahead of you. There goes your lead and your answers. Now, are you going to sit here and watch me or are you going to get the not-so-bad guy?"

"Do you even realize what could happen to you?" Eli snapped, walking over to me.

"I could get some sleep," I answered with as little sass as possible. Though, that wasn't really possible with the mood I was in, so it came out pretty much the opposite of how I intended.

"Sarah, let's face it. There hasn't been a single day—no, I take that back. There hasn't been a single six-hour period in which you didn't almost die. Explain to me how you're going to keep yourself safe when you're sleeping."

God, I really hated how sexy he looked when he was pissed. And I swear to God, I tried my best to be angry at him for how he was treating me, but those amazing eyes stared at me with so much passion that I completely forgot what my argument was. I sighed dreamily and stared at the man who had stolen my heart in only six days.

"How the hell does he do that?" Kavanaugh asked, watching me in amazement. "Did you see that? Did you see how he yelled at her and still managed to get her to fawn over him?"

"Like you don't have your way with the ladies," Red retorted.

The cocky look on Eli's said he knew he won. And I really wanted to be mad at him, but damn, he still looked too damn gorgeous. And if I tugged on that sheet just a little, maybe we could finally get what I'd been deprived of for the last three days.

A throat cleared, pulling me slightly from my lust-fueled fog. "And on that very uncomfortable note, I think it's time for us to go," Red said, jerking his thumb toward the door.

Kavanaugh quickly followed him out, shutting the door behind him. Eli was already kneeling on the bed, bending over me and taking my breath away with his perfect kisses. The sheet was down as his thick length was nudging against my entrance in just seconds.

“Baby, you’re making me forget what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“Sleep,” I said breathlessly. “We’re supposed to be sleeping.”

“Fuck sleep,” he said, taking my lips in a bruising kiss. I wrapped my legs around his body, pulling him in closer, gasping when he thrust deep inside me. I moaned loudly, only to have my cries swallowed by the most indecent kisses as he pounded hard inside me. I grabbed his ass cheek, pulling him in closer until there was absolutely no space left between us.

“Eli!” I cried out, already shaking from the brutal force of his thrusts.

There was nothing like this. Nothing else mattered at this moment than fucking him. There were no bad guys, no sleep, no boats, no cats or goldfish, no—

The door to the bathroom opened and Fox walked out, rubbing his hair with a towel. I squealed, pulling the sheet over us even as Fox got a really good look.

“Glad to know I wasn’t the only one getting off,” he grinned.



## ELI

“Would you get over it?” Kavanaugh grumbled. “So Fox saw you fucking. What’s the big deal?”

I turned to him as we were walking into the hotel and scowled. “The big deal is that I deserve a little bit of privacy.”

“You’re the one that forgot he was in the bathroom,” Red laughed.

“Thank God it’s not just me that’s been caught,” Cash said as he shoved past us.

“Thanks for the sympathy.” I followed him inside, ignoring my teammates, who didn’t seem to think this was a big deal.

We walked over to the front desk where Cash flashed his security badge. “We have a client that stayed here about a week ago. The next day, she was nearly killed for something we believe was taken from her hotel room.”

The desk clerk frowned at me. “You’re her security?”

“That’s right.”

“But...we already had someone stop by and look at the footage.”

She backed away from the counter with a wary look on her face.

“We’re aware someone came by,” Cash said. “He wasn’t her security. He was the one that tried to kill her.”

“No,” she shook her head. “He was very nice.”

“Again, what is it with this guy?” I muttered to Red.

“He must be a nice guy,” he shrugged.

“You need to leave. I’ve already hit the alarm.”

Cash shot her a knowing look. “There’s no alarm. It’s in the office where the safe is. Nice try, though.”

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” she said as her eyes kept flicking to the door.

“Uh...boss?” I said, thinking maybe she was telling the truth.

“I’m telling you, I’m that woman’s protection detail, and I’m not leaving until I have that footage.”

“If you were really her detail, why didn’t you come earlier when the other man came?” she asked, backing all the way up to the wall.

Cash gritted his teeth while the rest of us wished the ground would swallow us up whole. “We had trouble with the plane and ended up in the Caribbean.”

“And it took you all this time to get here? I’m not buying it.”

“It’s actually the truth,” Kavanaugh spoke up. “And then we had to run from sex traffickers, and the plane went down in the ocean. Then we got caught up in an arms’ deal gone wrong...And...then we had to row to Florida from the middle of the fucking ocean.”

She scoffed, shaking her head at us. “You expect me to believe that?”

“It does sound far-fetched,” I said to him.

“You need to leave!”

“Lady—”

“Is there a problem?” another woman asked as she walked up to the front desk.

“Yes, I’m trying to access video feed from a client that was here a week ago.” Cash pulled his badge again and showed the



woman. She pursed her lips, not looking impressed.

“The name of the client?”

“Sarah Williams.”

The lady was about to search for her name when she paused and looked up at us. “I’m sorry, but we already gave the security footage to her security team.”

“That’s not possible since we’re her security team,” Cash bit out. “As I explained to this woman, the man that was here before was not her security team, but the man that tried to blow her up with a bomb.”

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave, or I’m going to call the police.”

“Yeah, that’s what she said,” Cash snapped. “Listen, I have been rowing from the middle of the fucking ocean for two days. I’m tired. My guys are tired. We desperately need some fucking sleep, which we can’t get until we get that footage and find out who the hell snuck into her hotel room and stole the documents she was carrying. Now, you’re either going to give me that footage, or I’m going to get your boss on the phone and have you fired in the next five minutes. I don’t care what you have to do or say. You will get me the information I need.”

“Sir—”

Cash squeezed his eyes closed, his temper rising by the minute. I had a terrible feeling about all this and stepped forward, placing my hand on his arm, but he shrugged me off. “Look, I have a wife at home who would very much like to see me since she just had a baby. It’s our first. She’s tired and would like a break. But instead, I’m here with you ladies that stand there in your power suits, thinking you can tell the world to fuck off because you’re women that don’t need a man to tell you what to do. Guess what? I’m all for women’s rights. Feminism is a fucking beautiful thing, but until you get your ass out there and defend a client, knowing that every moment could be your last, and your brother tells you to fuck off instead of helping, you can fuck feminism and everything that goes along with it!”

I winced when he was finally finished with his speech. The women behind the counter clearly weren't impressed, and the rest of us were just desperate to drag Cash out of the hotel and never return.

I cleared my throat and grabbed Cash around the arm. "I think it's time to go."

"Fuck that! We came here for evidence and I'm not leaving until we get it!" he shouted, his eyes wide and crazy.

"Right, but this isn't the way to get it. Did you get any sleep last night?"

"No," he snapped. "And you want to know why? Because the kid won't sleep. Eva was on the phone with me all fucking night because she was losing her fucking mind. And where was I? Down here, trying to sort out this mess because you landed in the fucking Caribbean instead of here!" he pointed at the floor. "Florida, do you hear me? That's where you were supposed to be. Now I have the police chief, the district attorney, and my fucking wife calling me every five minutes wondering where the hell I am! *When are you going to be home? We need the evidence! The baby won't stop crying!*"

I stared at him with wide eyes as he lost his shit right in the front of the hotel. Other patrons were now gathered around, holding up their phones as they recorded Cash's spectacular meltdown.

"Red," I said out of the corner of my mouth. "Get ready to move."

"Yup. It's gonna have to be fast."

"Roger that," I nodded.

"I got three o'clock," Kavanaugh said.

"Cash," I said softly, using the tone I usually used on female clients when they got hysterical. "We're going to figure this out. I swear. Why don't you let me talk to the ladies, and then we'll get out of here."

"Like I would trust you to handle any of this," he scoffed. "You had one job! One fucking job and you landed in a world

of shit.”

“Technically, that was Scottie’s fault, but I’ll take the blame if it makes you feel better.”

He spun back to the desk, ready to lay into them again when I heard sirens in the distance.

“Time to go!”

I shot forward and wrapped my arm around his neck. He struggled hard, fighting back like the badass he was. Thankfully, I had Red and Kavanaugh with me.

“Get his legs!” I shouted to Kavanaugh.

He grabbed them, hauling him off his feet as we dragged him to the back exit with about twenty people staring at us.

“Get the door!” I shouted to Red. He ran ahead, flinging the door open as we hobbled out into the morning light. Cash struggled less and less with every step we took until he finally passed out. Red took off around the corner, and Kavanaugh and I repositioned Cash in our arms, making for an easier getaway. Red came swerving around the corner in the minivan, opening the door just as we heard the police stop at the front of the hotel.

Kavanaugh climbed in the back as I unceremoniously dropped Cash inside and closed the door. Seconds later, we were hauling ass out of the back parking lot with the sliding door slowly closing. I spun in my seat, checking the rear to see if anyone was following yet.

“We’re clear.”

“Yeah, but it won’t take them long to find us,” Red muttered. “We need to get out of here.”

“Even if we get back to Kansas, that won’t make this better. They’ll still know who we are. Did you see how many people were recording his meltdown?”

“So, what’s the plan?”

There was no good plan. There was only one thing to do. “Get Rae on the phone. She has a lot of work to do.”



# SARAH

“I’m not watching another musical,” IRIS spat, grabbing the remote from Fox’s grip. “Let someone else pick.”

“Oh, and you think Sarah’s going to want to watch some show about blowing things up?” He grabbed the remote back and held it over his head as IRIS jumped in the air, trying to reach it.

“It’s better than listening to a bunch of girls singing about having a rough life!” IRIS yelled, wrestling the remote away from Fox again.

I stood, hardly able to stand the arguing anymore. It had been like this from the moment IRIS walked through the door just five minutes after Eli left. IKE and Max were nowhere to be found. And from what I understood, Scottie was off on a mission to retrieve the plane in the Caribbean. As for Tate, I had no idea where he was.

“Children!” I shouted as I stood. I marched over to them, grabbing them both by the ears and dragging them across the room. “What is wrong with you?”

“You’re hurting me,” Fox whined.

“Yeah, you’re so mean!” IRIS snapped.

“If you weren’t behaving like two-year-olds, I wouldn’t have to get like this.” They both shut up immediately, turning to me with reproachful gazes. “Now, I know you’re essentially my babysitters, but that does not mean I won’t kick your asses if you don’t shut the hell up! I hardly got any sleep last night, and since you’ve been in here, all you’ve done is argue!”

“But he won’t let us watch—” IRIS started, but I shut him up with just one scathing look.

“I don’t care what you’re arguing about. First, it was the Funyuns. Then it was the menu for lunch, which I still haven’t gotten. Now, it’s the remote. Do I need to call your wives?”

They both hung their heads, shaking them slowly. “No.”

“Frankly, if either of you were my husband, I would divorce you if I knew you were acting this way. Why can’t you discuss the latest bomb? Or, who makes better shawarma?”

Fox snorted. “That’s me, hands down.”

“Yeah, I don’t even make shawarma,” IRIS admitted. He glanced at Fox, shrugging slightly. “It is pretty good. I liked how you made it last time.”

“Thanks, man. It was inspired by my love of fried tarantula.”

I grimaced, not wanting to hear anymore. Seriously, these men all needed to be slapped around a few times.

“Hey, and the next time you’re at the house, I’ll make it for you.”

Then Fox turned to me. “And since you’ll already be there, the invitation is always open.”

“Already be where?” I asked, cocking my head to the side in confusion.

“You know, at the house.”

“What house? Eli’s?”

“Nah, he doesn’t have his own place yet. But Cash assured us they would be done soon.”

“Wait, so where does Eli live?”

“At the mansion, with the rest of us,” Fox grinned. “It’s really a sweet gig. We’ve got multiple bathrooms, and now that some people have moved out, there aren’t nearly as many incidents of people walking in on others while they’re screwing.”

“Right, and the kitchen is amazing.”

“Which is how I make the righteous shawarma,” Fox grinned.

“You’re gonna love it there. I mean, personally, I’m glad I’m not there anymore. It’s a lot to clean.”

“Right? And the women don’t seem to want to do it,” Fox said in agreement. “It’s not like we can hire someone to come clean with all the security around the place.”

“And we’re at work all the time,” IRIS said in agreement. “I mean, yeah, Jane’s excluded because she’s got that book she’s finishing.”

“And Zoe and Anna are working on a new script.”

“And Bree works in the office, but really, that’s a slacker’s job.”

I listened as they went back and forth about why women were best suited to clean the house. Honestly, they just sounded like a bunch of lazy men that wanted to be waited on hand and foot by their mothers. How did they end up married?

“—since you’re out of a job, it really would be a perfect fit for you,” IRIS nodded excitedly.

“A perfect fit for me,” I repeated numbly.

“Right, I mean, don’t worry. My wife will do my laundry. I wouldn’t ask you to do that.”

“Yeah, but some of the other guys might, so have that scrub brush ready.”

Again, I stared at them in confusion. “Scrub brush?”

“You know,” IRIS leaned forward, whispering like someone might overhear us. “Skid marks. We all get ‘em from time to time.”

I suppressed a shudder as I stared at both of them in disgust. Skid marks? They actually thought I would deal with that? There wasn’t a chance in hell.

“How good are you with vacuuming stairs?”

“Yes!” Fox nodded. “They get so dirty.”

I had to be in some alternate reality because there was no way I was really standing here, listening to these men plan out my life for the foreseeable future.

I turned on my heel as they continued to discuss my future employment. Slinking into the bathroom, I closed the door, shutting my eyes as I leaned back against it and let out a harsh breath. Was this going to be my life from now on? If I went to live with Eli, was this really what I had to look forward to? Would these men plan my life as if I didn’t have a say? And even if I did find a job and leave the luxurious life of a maid behind, would they always be around, bickering and in need of adult supervision?

I had enough of that with my goldfish. Horatio, on the other hand, was very well-behaved. He came for snuggles at night and right when I got home. We had a good routine for when I fed him, which I was pretty sure was ruined now. But other than that, I only had to change his litter box. How was I supposed to go from that peaceful life to one where I had to listen to the crap out there every single day?

My promise to Fox that I would try was quickly dissipating. I looked down at the phone I picked off IRIS and resigned myself to make the call. I needed to get out of here, and I couldn’t do that without a little help.

“Daddy?” I asked when he picked up the phone. “I’m in a little trouble. I’m going to need some help.”

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My foot tapped nervously on the floor as I waited for my father to appear. He always had a soft spot for me, but that was natural coming from a parent that was never around when I was growing up, or when my mother died. The moment I called him ‘Daddy’, I got whatever I wanted. Maybe I should be ashamed of that, but I wasn’t. I did what was necessary in times of need. I just always saved up those phone calls for really desperate situations. Landing myself in a bomb vest



hadn't seemed that dire, but going to live with a man that lived with a bunch of oversized toddlers definitely called for intervention.

"He's going to be fine," IRIS said, leaning back on the bed, eating popcorn.

He was spilling all over the sheets, which meant I was going to have butter-flavored skin tonight, and not because of something Eli and I got up to.

"I'm not worried about that," I sighed, plopping down in the chair.

"Then why are you pacing so much?"

"Nothing," I muttered, staring out the window. He promised he would be here by nightfall. I just had to pray our situation didn't suddenly change in the next few hours.

A knock at the door had me standing upright. My heart pounded out of control as I waited for one of them to answer the door to the terrifying face of my father. Maybe this was a bad idea. I didn't want to see any of them hurt, especially not Eli. I just didn't want to be dragged back to the compound in Kansas and forced to clean toilets for the rest of my life.

Fox placed his hand on my shoulder. "Relax. We won't let anyone hurt you."

I winced at his gruff tone. Poor Fox. He had no idea who was coming for him. And while I was pretty sure Fox could handle himself, my father didn't mess around. He nodded to IRIS, who had his gun out as he looked through the peephole.

"Who is it?"

"Simon."

My shoulders sagged in relief. As much as I wanted my father to come, I wasn't quite ready to face what was to come. I walked toward the door, ignoring IRIS's glare as I put my hand on the doorknob.

"What are you doing?"

“It’s Simon,” I said. That pretty much summed up why I was answering the door.

“And you just want me to open it for a man that tried to kill you?”

“Do people in your business normally knock before they kill someone?”

“People in my business don’t kill. People in *his* business do,” he said, pointing the gun at the door.

“Right, but I already told you that he didn’t want to kill me.”

“That’s beside the point!” he hissed. “Why can’t you see that?”

“Because I have empathy.”

“Serial killers could have empathy. That doesn’t mean they won’t kill you.”

I pursed my lips at the ridiculous statement. Seriously, who was he trying to fool with that?

“Okay, maybe serial killers were a bad example,” IRIS huffed out.

“You think?”

“The point is, we can’t just open the door.”

I was getting really irritated now. I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him. “And you’re telling me that two crazy people like you and Fox can’t protect me against one man who couldn’t even stand to blow the bomb himself?”

“Nobody blows the bomb unless they live in the Middle East and are literally called suicide bombers!”

“And he’s not one, so you will be just fine stepping aside as I let my friend in.”

“Friend—” He scoffed, turning to face Fox. “You wanna help me out here?”

“Are we thinking acid or swinging from trees?”

“Swinging from trees?” I asked, confused as hell.

“Well, we are in the south. It seems fitting.”

“Yes, but not all of Florida is considered the south,” I smirked at him, happy that my googling before my Florida trip paid off.

“Really? But it’s in the south,” Fox frowned. “South of Georgia...I’m not seeing how it can be further south, but not part of the south.”

“Because the lower half of Florida has such a distinct cultural difference from those in the deep south,” I answered.

“Does it matter?” IRIS hissed. “Do you even hear how she’s distracting you?”

“Yes, but it’s good information. You never know when this kind of stuff will be useful.”

“Like right now,” I pointed out.

“Exactly,” Fox grinned. “Okay, he’s clear.”

“Why is he clear?” IRIS asked.

“Well, she has a point. We’re both here. And I can guarantee if he tries anything, I will personally deliver his head on a spike to Eli. He’ll love that.”

I rolled my eyes. That was taking things a little far. And while I could appreciate blood-lust as much as the next psychopath, I didn’t want to think about Fox taking things that far.

“Well, you’ll never know if you don’t open the door!” I shouted, pointing at the door handle. IRIS stared at me with the same anger as a five-year-old, proving once more that I was working with toddlers in grown-up pants.

“Fine, but if anything happens to you, Eli will know this is all your fault.”

“Noted.”

He sighed, shoving me back a step as he opened the door, aiming his gun at Simon. This was so overkill. He took a step back, motioning for Simon to come in. I smiled as my friend entered and walked right over to me. I was just about to give

him a hug when IRIS stepped between us, shoving Simon up against the now closed door.

“Just what the fuck do you think you’re doing?” IRIS spat.

“Me or him?” I asked.

“Both of you. What are you doing here?” he asked Simon.

Simon made the mistake of shoving his hand in his pocket, immediately putting the guys on alert. I felt like a ping pong ball as Fox grabbed me and practically flung me across the room. Geez, they were getting way too worked up over this.

“Put your hands on the ground!” Fox shouted.

Slowly, Simon got to his knees and put his hands on the floor, peeking up at me with a grin. “I’m glad you have protection.”

“Why? So she doesn’t almost get blown up again?” IRIS asked.

“That’s one reason. The other is because of what’s on the flash drive in my pocket.”

“Fox, get it,” IRIS commanded.

“Me? Why not you?”

“Because I have my gun on him.”

“So do I.”

“You’re the psychopath.”

“You’re the EOD expert. What if he has a bomb in his pocket?”

“Christ, you guys are ridiculous,” I said, trying to step around them. Again, I was thwarted as Fox pulled me back a step.

“Calm down, little lady. We’re more than capable of handling the situation.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Hey, it’s just some friendly banter among colleagues.” He turned back to Simon and quickly extracted the flash drive.

“So, you brought this to us for what reason?”

“Well, I felt bad about the whole bomb thing.”

I nodded as I smiled at him, but my security detail clearly didn't feel the same as me.

“Oh, you felt bad, did you?” IRIS spat. “Was it hard to walk away knowing you were about to blow up a perfectly innocent woman?”

“Actually, it was. Can I get off the floor now?”

Fox nodded but stepped in front of me again.

“I really did feel bad about leaving you.”

“I know,” I said in commiseration. “But you obviously took my advice and went to the hotel.”

“Yeah, the security there is very lax. I'm not at all surprised that someone got up to your room.”

“Did you find out who it was?”

“I saw it, but I don't know who it is.”

“Then why did you say you're glad she has security?” IRIS questioned him.

“Because of how he broke in and...what he did. This guy is sick.”

Fox, now curious, walked over to his computer and started booting it up. I watched as he went through lines of code, checking for something. If I knew anything about computers beyond what the average person did, I might understand what he was doing.

“Is the flash drive all code?”

“No, I'm scanning it before I open it. It's software Rae installed for our remote computers.”

I shook my head. “There are too many people at your company.”

“It's good. Let's see what's inside.”

The screen opened to the footage from the hotel. We all migrated around the screen, watching as the man easily walked down the hall and let himself into my room without a single person stopping him. But it was when he opened the door and let himself in that I really got chills.

“Does he look familiar to any of you?”

“Nope,” Fox said, still watching the computer.

We watched as the man went through my bag and found what he was looking for, but then he didn't leave. He walked over to my luggage and opened it.

“What is he looking for now?” I asked, leaning closer to the screen. I really shouldn't have.

The man pulled out my clothes and started sniffing them. When he grabbed my underwear, he held them up to his nose and inhaled deeply.

“Dude, that's not cool,” IRIS growled.

“I need a shower,” I said, my whole body shivering in disgust.

Simon snorted. “And you thought I was bad. I at least had the courtesy to feel bad about what I did. This guy is just sick.”

Fox, however, was eerily quiet. I studied his face as he watched the screen. When the guy started undressing, I could have sworn he was going to lose it. But when he pulled off his underwear and pulled on mine, Fox pushed back from the table and stormed toward the door.

“What's going on?” I asked in confusion.

“Oh, shit. This isn't good.”

“What's not good?”

Fox was already opening the door, but the man who laughed and joked about Funyuns was gone. In his place was a man that looked like he was about to murder someone.

Over underwear.

I rushed after him, but IRIS yanked me back. “Just stay here. I got this.”

“Got what?” I asked as he pulled out his phone.

“Tate, I need you to run interference for me.” His brows furrowed and he swore, spinning away from me. “No, I didn’t know you already left. It’s fine. I’ll take care of it.”

He hung up and started texting, but I was still lost. “What’s going on?”

“Fox is losing his shit,” he grumbled as he continued texting.

“Over underwear?”

His eyes finally met mine. “Fox doesn’t do so well with perverts like this.”

“Okay, and what does that mean?”

“It means I need to send someone to intercept him before he goes on a killing spree.”

My jaw dropped in shock. “Over that?” I pointed at the screen. “He’s a pervert.”

“And you’re Fox’s friend. Did you not catch onto that?” IRIS asked.

“I...I guess, but why would he kill that man over underwear?”

“Because he’s a sick fuck, and Fox won’t tolerate anyone hurting anyone close to him.”

“But I’m not hurt!” I argued, hoping I could somehow break through the insanity of what I was hearing.

“Not yet. But that man knows who you are. It’s as simple as this—Fox will eliminate him before this sick fuck can take things any further. That’s just the way it is. There’s no stopping him now.”

“Then why are you calling in reinforcements?”

“To deal with the aftermath.” He smiled at me, placing his hand on my shoulder. “I guess you’re officially part of the

family now.”

IRIS turned and walked away, leaving me wondering how I would have made it into the family if it weren't for the sicko trying on my underwear.





## ELI

“He weighs a million pounds,” I grumbled as I dragged Cash’s body into his room.

“Just be glad you didn’t have to have him on your lap the whole way,” Kavanaugh complained. “Do you have any idea how traumatizing it is to have a man’s head that close to your crotch?”

Red swung his legs up on the bed as I tossed his body on the bed. He flopped sideways, his arms sprawled out as his face smooshed into the mattress. I cocked my head at his prone form, wondering if we should just leave him as is.

“What are we going to say when he wakes up?” Red asked.

“Maybe we should just leave him a note,” I offered. “*Sorry to leave you like this, but you were losing your shit and we had to knock you out.*”

“Right?” Kavanaugh laughed. “We were the ones stranded for so long in the Caribbean and in the ocean. Two days and he was freaking out.”

“Yeah, but that was because of Eva and the cops.”

“Still...” Kavanaugh shook his head as we continued to stare down at him.

“Well,” Red clapped his hands together. “Should we get some lunch?”

“I could eat,” Kavanaugh nodded. “But we should pick everyone else up first.”

“Wait, what about the footage?”

“We’ll have to find this Simon character,” Red said. “We’ll put Rae on it.”

“We put her on everything.”

“Yeah, but she loves it,” Kavanaugh shrugged. “It’ll be fine.”

We walked out the door without looking back. “Maybe one of us should call Eva and fill her in on what’s happened.”

“Not it,” Red and Kavanaugh both said.

Sighing, I pulled out the phone I’d picked up this morning on the way to the hotel and dialed Eva’s number as we walked to my room.

“Where is my husband?”

I winced at her tone, trying to play this off like it was no big deal. “He’s sleeping. He had a long night.”

“Eli, don’t you dare try and pull one over on me. I’m not stupid.”

There was really no way out of this. It was best to just tell her the truth. “Look, he had a bit of a rough time, and we had to...make him sleep.”

“So, you drugged him.”

“No.”

“Who did it?” she snapped.

I looked at the other two. They couldn’t hear the conversation, so this was the perfect opportunity for me. “Kavanaugh,” I said without a second thought.

He frowned at me as Eva started shouting into the phone. I pulled it away from my ear and held it out to him. “She wants to talk to you.”

“I’m not taking that,” he said, stepping away from me like I was holding a venomous snake.

I shoved it further at him until he had no choice but to take it. “Eva—”

All I could hear was shouting, but I wasn't the least bit concerned as I continued down the hall as Kavanaugh tried to talk himself out of the mess I just dropped him in.

I slid my key in the lock and opened my door, stopping when I saw IRIS, Sarah, and another man sitting around chatting.

“—loved the dead man's switch,” IRIS grunted. “Nice trick.”

“Yeah, I didn't want to accidentally blow myself up.”

I saw red, storming across the room the minute I understood who this asshole was. “What the fuck are you doing here?” I shouted, hauling him up by his collar and tossing him over the couch.

“Whoa, calm down.” IRIS stood, holding up his hands. “Simon brought us a gift.”

“Yeah? And how the fuck did he know where we are?” I snapped.

“I've been hiding out across from the hotel. I figured one of you would show up eventually to retrieve the footage,” Simon said as he stood. “Geez, you almost knocked my head off.”

“That was the point!”

“He brought us the footage. I didn't recognize the guy, but Fox lost his shit and ran off to kill him. Rae's working on finding out who he is.”

“So, you decided to sit down and chat with him?” I asked angrily. I turned to Sarah then, who didn't exactly look impressed with me. “I suppose you think I'm being mean.”

“Mean? No. A jerk? Absolutely. Simon is here to help us.”

I stared at her, still not able to believe it after all this time. “He. Tried. To. Kill you!”

“You know, you keep saying that, but how many people have you killed on this trip?”

I was totally speechless. Was she really comparing me to someone who strapped a bomb to her?

“Those people all have families too. Why is it only you that gets a free pass?”

“I didn’t say—”

“You might as well have. Without Simon, we wouldn’t have this lead to begin with. You should be thanking him.”

I couldn’t even begin to process the craziness coming out of her mouth.

“May I make a suggestion?” Red said from behind me.

“Why not.”

“Simon, I strongly recommend that if you want to live, you exit this hotel room immediately and never return.”

I hated that I didn’t get to put a bullet in him, but this was probably for the best. He would be out of my hair and away from Sarah, and she wouldn’t be pissed at me for dumping his body in the ocean.

“Alright, I’ll go,” he said, eyeing Sarah.

“Thank you for coming by,” she beamed. “I really appreciate you looking out for me.” And then she walked over to him and wrapped her arms around him, giving him a fucking hug. It took everything in me not to walk over and beat his ass.

Finally, after way too many Mississippis, she stepped away from him. He was fucking fawning over her, practically drooling at her feet. Enough was enough.

I stepped forward and tore the man from her arms. “That’s enough.” I shoved him toward the door, stalking behind him until he opened the damn thing. “If you value your life, you won’t come anywhere near her again.”

“Eli!” Sarah gasped. “You’re being rude!”

I glared at him, refusing to give in to Sarah. “Are we clear?” I growled.

“Yeah, man. Clear.” But his eyes drifted back to Sarah. I shoved him out the door and slammed it, turning around to face a very pissed off girlfriend.

She crossed her arms over her chest, pursing her lips angrily. “That was completely unnecessary.”

“No, what was unnecessary was the way you hugged him.”

“He’s a friend,” she shot back.

“He tried to blow you up. Why do you keep forgetting that?”

“Why do you have to be such a bully?”

It took everything in me not to strangle her. “There’s a reason you don’t hug people that tried to kill you. It’s the one recurring theme in this whole debacle! You’re lucky I let him walk out of here alive, and that’s only because I was outnumbered. If it were up to me, Fox would be taking him to his torture chamber right fucking now!”

The door slammed open behind me and I spun around, already pulling my weapon, but it was only Cash. And boy did he look pissed.

“What the fuck happened?”

“We had to knock you out,” Kavanaugh said. “Well, technically it was Eli. Blame him,” he said, literally pointing his finger at me.

“Boss, you were losing it. It was bad.”

“I don’t remember,” he said, shaking his head.

“Well, let’s put it this way. You basically threw Betty out the window. If there was a box nearby, she wouldn’t have been sitting on it. There was no place for her anywhere in the hotel.”

“Yeah, I got it,” he grumbled, walking further into the room and flopping down on the couch.

“Um...there’s one more thing,” Kavanaugh cleared his throat. “Eva...sort of knows.”

“Fuck,” he grumbled, leaning forward to rest his face in his hands. “Any chance she thought it was all a joke?”

“Not likely,” Red snorted, then schooled his features when Cash glared at him.

“But the good news is, we have the footage from the hotel.”

“How the fuck did you get that?” he asked, standing suddenly and stalking toward me.

“Apparently, Simon the bomber stopped by and just handed it over.

Cash’s gaze slid to Sarah questioningly. “And I suppose he just wanted to help you.”

Apparently, Sarah didn’t like his tone of voice. “Why does no one believe me that Simon is a genuinely good guy?”

“Because he tried to kill you,” Cash said automatically.

“Yeah, but only because he was ordered to. I’m telling you, under that rough exterior is a man with a heart of gold.”

“Can we lay off the sentimental hogwash?” I snapped. “Remember who you’re supposed to want to be with.”

She rolled her eyes dramatically at me. “I never said I wanted to be with him. I just think he’s misunderstood.”

“Where’s the footage?” Cash asked, switching gears.

“Right here,” IRIS answered. “Fox saw it and...”

“And what?”

We all looked at each other, wondering just how much we should tell Cash.

“Well, he went all Fox and stormed out of the room.”

“Fucking great,” Cash muttered, throwing up his hands in frustration. “Just what I need. Another fucking mess to clean up.”

IRIS snorted. “You know Fox never leaves a mess. He’s very thorough.”

“Just another reason for me to get out of here,” Sarah muttered under her breath.

I was about to question her about just what exactly she meant when Cash went into full work mode. “Alright, we need to get back. Sarah needs to meet with the local LEOs in the case, and we need to find out just who this is and see if there’s anything left of him by the time Fox is done with him. IRIS —”

“I already have Dash tracking him.”

“Good. Eli, we’re taking Sarah back to Chicago now. Book us on a private jet and get us the hell out of here. The rest of you will return with Scottie once he gets my fucking plane functional.”

“Uh...boss, how do you expect us to get the plane back? In case you forgot, we barely made it out of there.”

“I’ll make a few phone calls.” He narrowed his eyes at IRIS. “I want my fucking plane back. Make sure it happens.”

“And what about Max?” he asked.

“Drop him back in the Caribbean and leave him to his whiskey. I want us out of here within in the hour. Let’s move!”

---

“Shouldn’t we wait here?” Sarah asked.

I watched her twist her fingers anxiously. “Look, Red got you the medicine you need. You’ll be fine. You just have to take the pills.”

She looked at the bottle, but didn’t make a move to take them. “I was just thinking, we’re rushing home and maybe that’s not a good idea. What if...Scottie can’t get the plane. Shouldn’t we wait here?”

“Scottie will be in the Caribbean. It doesn’t really matter if we’re in Florida or back in Chicago.”

“Right, but...”



“But what?” Why was she acting so weird? I had the pills for her, but she still didn’t want to get on the damn plane. And then I remembered the words she muttered just before Cash started spouting orders.

*Just another reason for me to get out of here.*

“What did you mean when you said it was another reason for you to get out of here?”

Her cheeks flushed as she ducked her head. “Nothing, I just—”

“You just what?”

She pursed her lips, jerking her head to look past me when the door opened. “That’s our ride,” she said, scurrying past me.

Red walked over to me and eyed Sarah carefully. “What’s going on with her?”

“I have no idea. She was all on board to come home with us, and now she’s wanting us to wait. I don’t get it.”

“Did she take the pills?”

I looked at them still in my hand and shook my head. “She wouldn’t take them. I don’t get it.”

“Do you think this has to do with Simon?”

“In what way?”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to leave him.”

I scowled at my friend. “And why wouldn’t she want to leave him?”

“Not for the reasons you think. I don’t know, maybe she wants to try and reform him.”

“Too fucking bad,” I grumbled. “Let’s get out of here. I’ll figure it out later.”

“I’ve got the bags,” he said, hauling up the last two. “You get her down to the car.”

“Easier said than done.” I walked over to her and wrapped my arm around her waist, thinking I could put her at ease, but

she laughed and stepped away from me. “Everything okay?”

“What? Yeah, it’s fine.” She glanced at the door, then directed her eyes to the ground. She was avoiding me, but I had no idea why.

“You’ll be fine once you get home and see your goldfish.”

She nodded in this crazy way that confused the hell out of me. And then it hit me. We’d had a day of relative peace. She wasn’t worried about the fucking plane. She was wondering what was coming next. Every time it seemed we caught a break, something else came along and fucked things up.

“Hey,” I said, taking her by the arms and forcing her to look into my eyes. “I’ve got this. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

She huffed out a laugh. “Of course.”

“I’m serious. I will protect you with my life. There is absolutely nothing I wouldn’t do for you. I need you to believe that.” I took her hand and placed it over my heart. “Do you feel that? It beats for you. Since you came into my life, nothing has been how I thought it would be. You’re this crazy, beautiful woman that I can’t control. You hug people that want to kill you and make friends with the strangest characters, but it only kicks my protective instincts into high gear. You make my heart hurt just worrying about what trouble you’re going to get into next. I’m pretty sure I’ll die from a heart attack before a bullet gets me. But despite all that, you’re the only woman for me. I’ve fallen so fucking hard for you. Nothing will keep us apart now.”

I cupped my hand around her jaw and pulled her in for a kiss. And that’s when I felt the tears streaming down her face. I totally killed that speech. When I stepped back, she smiled and ducked her head. I was so getting head tonight.

“Go with Kavanaugh downstairs. I’ll be there in a minute.”

She quickly followed him out the door and Red walked over, crossing his arms over his chest. “That was some speech.”

“Better than the shark one?”

“Not as intense, but then again, you thought you were about to be killed.”

“Well, not all speeches can be given during life and death situations.”

“True. But maybe next time say something about procreating together.”

“Yeah,” I snorted. “That’ll keep her around. Who says procreate, anyway?” I grabbed one of the bags and headed for the door.

“People say it,” he argued, following me out the door.

I stopped and turned to him. “Trust me, I’ve got her right where I want her. I don’t think I need speech advice from you.”

---

Sarah wouldn’t stop fidgeting in the seat beside me. We were just ten miles from the private airport, and she still hadn’t taken her pills. I pulled them out of my pocket again and handed them over.

“Just take them. You’ll feel better.”

She shook her head, staring out the window.

I sighed and shoved them back in my pocket. There was no point in forcing her to do something she didn’t want. But it didn’t make any sense that she wouldn’t take them after the last time she freaked out.

“We’ve got someone coming up on us fast,” Cash said, looking out the side mirror.

I turned around in my seat and saw a black SUV driving like a bat out of hell, with at least three other SUVs behind it. “Who the fuck is after us now?” I asked, pulling out my gun.

“We’re by the airport. Maybe they’re not here for us,” Kavanaugh suggested.

“Better safe than sorry,” Red said, pulling his own weapon. He went to reach under the seat and swore. “Fuck, we don’t have extra ammunition.”

“I have two guns,” I answered, feeling the second weapon at my ankle.

“Same,” Kavanaugh said from the driver’s seat. “Any ideas?”

“We should pull an FNG,” I suggested.

“Except FNG had help. We’re all alone.”

“Is there an umbrella in the back?” Cash asked.

I looked over my shoulder into the trunk, but it was pointless. This was a rental, and you didn’t tend to get umbrellas as a bonus.

“Just keep steady,” Cash said. “We’ll know soon enough if they’re after us.”

“Sarah, be prepared to get on the floor,” I said, taking her chin and turning her to face me. “It’ll be okay.” Then I slammed my lips on hers and kissed her like it was the last time.

“Enough kissy face,” Cash snapped. “They’re here for us.”

I looked up and saw the SUVs crowding around us. One pulled up beside us and moved in closer, pushing us to the edge of the road. “Kavanaugh, hit the gas!”

We hit the gravel on the road and he did his best to steady the vehicle, but then the SUV jolted forward as we were hit from behind. I turned and fired off two shots, taking out the back window, then fired at the SUV behind us. The bullets bounced off the windshield, causing zero damage.

“Fuck, they have bullet resistant glass. Save your bullets.”

The SUV lurched forward as Kavanaugh jerked the wheel, forcing us back onto the road as he plowed into the vehicle beside us. He sped up, but whoever was after us refused to let us get away without a fight. Bullets pinged off the side of the

vehicle and the glass burst inward as a bullet hit the window beside Red.

“Stupid fuckers!” Red shouted, unbuckling and climbing into the backseat.

“Get on the floor, Sarah.”

I shoved her to the floor and climbed into the back with Red. “Kavanaugh, get us as close as possible!”

Red hit the button for the back hatch, and as it opened, he climbed out, then jumped onto the top of the SUV, but bounced and started to fall. He was hanging off the top, barely holding on. “This is not the way FNG did it!”

“Grab onto something!”

“Really?” he retorted. “Great fucking advice!”

I rolled my eyes and waited for my opportunity. As Kavanaugh swerved closer, I jumped, grabbed the luggage rack on top, and pulled myself up. I crawled over to Red. “Give me your hand!”

“I got this!”

“You’re about to be roadkill!” I yelled.

“I can make it!”

“And when you fall and break your neck, I’ll tell Zoe it was because you were being a dumbass and wouldn’t take my fucking hand!”

He finally reached up and I caught his hand, hauling him up the side of the SUV. It swerved wildly, nearly throwing us off. I spun and slammed the butt of my gun into the window over and over again with no luck.

“Fuck, I wish we had an umbrella right now,” I muttered.

“What’s your plan now?” Red shouted over the wind.

“Me? You were the one that jumped out. I just came for moral support!”

“Moral support is going to get these assholes off our tail!”

I turned and aimed my gun at the SUV behind us, unloading my magazine on the front tire, finally hitting it with my last shot. The SUV swerved wildly with the high speed, driving into the ditch as it lost control.

“That’s how you do it!” I shouted.

The SUV swerved suddenly and I went rolling off the side. I grabbed the bar, barely holding on as my fingers began to slip. The man in the passenger seat smirked at me. “Open the fucking window and smile at me, asshole!”

“He’s not gonna open the window!” Red shouted. “Here! Take my gum!”

“I’m not taking your gum!” I shouted, looking up at him like he was crazy.

“Just do it! And then grin at him like you’re about to blow him up!”

“With gum?”

“It worked in *Mission Impossible!*”

“That’s because they had a real explosive!”

“You’re such a baby! Stop crying about it and just do it!”

Rolling my eyes, I reached up and grabbed the gum, then grinned at the man inside, smashing my hand against the window. I kicked off the SUV at the same time I let go of the bar, falling to the ground and rolling with the impact. I immediately looked up at the sound of the crash. They’d taken the bait and freaked out. They all jumped out of the SUV, and I jumped to my feet, running hard despite the massive case of road rash I was sporting all over my body.

I tackled the first guy to the ground while Red went after another. I slammed my fist into his face until he was barely conscious. Another body rammed into me, hitting me hard and knocking me off the guy I was just hovering over. I rolled, swinging my leg around his body and twisting until I had him under me.

“Who the fuck do you work for?”

The screeching of tires distracted me, earning me a brutal uppercut, smashing my teeth together. But the sight of our vehicle careening into the ditch put the fear of God in me. I slammed my fist into the man's face three times before pushing off him and sprinting toward the overturned vehicle.

"Sarah!" I shouted, racing as hard as I could to get to her. I promised I would protect her, but I left her alone.

As I approached, the smell of smoke filled the air and one of the tires spun slowly from the crash. I climbed on top of the SUV and ripped open the door, relieved when I saw Sarah buckled in. I dropped down into the vehicle and pressed my hand to her face. "Sarah, wake up, baby."

She jerked awake, her eyes wide as she stared at me.

"Are you okay? Does anything hurt?"

She shook her head slightly, looking around the vehicle. I heard Red's boots on top of the vehicle before I saw him at the door, peeking inside. "She okay?"

I gave a thumb's up and he moved on to Kavanaugh and Cash, who were already grumbling in the front seat about this job sucking.

"Okay, we're gonna get you out of here. I'll hold you to me, and I want you to release the belt."

"Sure," she nodded, keeping calm as ever.

"On three. One, two, three." She pressed the belt and I caught her body in my arms, keeping her from crashing into the other door. "Alright, I'm going to climb up and pull you out."

"Yeah, no problem."

I eyed her, waiting for her to break, but just as always, she was totally fine. "You're sure."

She rolled her eyes. "Unless you want to stay here and press your body to mine for a little longer."

I paused, almost willing to take her up on the offer, but we had bigger problems at the moment than whether or not I was

going to get laid. I grabbed the top of the door frame and hauled myself up, my muscles straining slightly from exhaustion. When I looked back down, Sarah was fanning herself.

“Do you want to come down and do that again so I can watch you again?”

“Sure, we’ll give the bad guys all the time in the world to get us.”

“About that—”

“If you’re going to tell me they’re really misunderstood and we should talk first, we’ll have a problem. Now, give me your hand.”

I reached into the SUV and grabbed her hand, pulling her up. Once she was laying on top, I hopped down and held out my hands for her to jump into. She looked past me at the other vehicles, but I needed to get her to focus on one thing at a time.

“Sarah, look at me.” Her eyes flicked to mine with uncertainty. “I’ve got this. Just jump down.”

She did as I asked, and then I turned, putting her behind me. I was about to draw my gun when a bullet tore through my shoulder, forcing me back a step. I heard Sarah scream as she wrapped her arms around me.

“Daddy!”

As the blood rushed to my head, I wondered why the hell she was calling me daddy. Now was not the time to get kinky, and I wasn’t into that shit anyway. I gripped my gun tighter, pressing Sarah further behind me to shield her as my guys surrounded me. I glanced at my shoulder and frowned. Shit, that wasn’t good. Blood gushed down my chest and arm. Red liquid was already dripping from my fingertips.

“Daddy!” she shouted, breaking out of my grasp and running toward the man, positioning herself in a way that we couldn’t return fire.



“Uh...that’s not good,” I muttered, feeling lightheaded already. But the most important thing was keeping Sarah safe. I clenched my jaw and pushed through the pain.

“Stay away from my daughter!” the man shouted.

I realized in that moment that time had slowed, and this guy was her father. And now the daddy comment made a little more sense, but still...

“Am I hearing this wrong?” I asked her. “*He’s* your father?”

She shrugged, nodding that he was.

“And he’s what? CIA?”

She winced. “Secret Service.”

“Secret—” I took a step back, ready to explode, but also feeling like I would pass out from blood loss. I just had to hold it together for a few more minutes.

“Sorry, I should have told you,” she said, moving back toward me slightly, but still keeping herself in front of her father.

I couldn’t believe it. I thought of all the times over the past week that she held it together so easily, and now it all made sense. She’d probably been trained to keep her cool in desperate situations, but still...

“Sybil, get over here.”

I did a double take as I watched her flinch. “Sybil?”

“Yeah, sorry.” She shrugged again. “Dad changed my name and cleared my whole background so no one would link me to him.”

I just continued to stare at her, thinking over every second of the last week and trying to figure out how I didn’t pick up on it sooner. The pickpocketing, the cool demeanor in a terrible situation...it was all starting to make sense.

“So...you didn’t need protection.”

“Well, he didn’t know I was in trouble until I called him.”

“And when was that?” I snapped.

“Earlier today. I feel really bad, but Fox was going all crazy about that guy, and then IRIS was talking about making me a cleaning lady for the house! And I haven’t even seen my cat in a week. Leonidas might be belly up in his bowl! You can’t ask me to leave my life behind after knowing you for a week. It’s just weird.”

“Then you say that! You don’t call your dad to have me killed!”

“I told him no killing,” she said quickly.

“Oh, well,” I threw up my hands, wincing when pain tore through my shoulder.

“You should really try not to move. I think he might have hit an artery.”



## SARAH

He glared at me as I opened my mouth to offer to help him. This was not my fault. I told my dad not to kill anyone. Okay, it was mostly not my fault. I stared at Eli, my eyes drifting to his blood-soaked shoulder. He really didn't look too good.

"Maybe you should sit down."

"Maybe you should explain to me why you called your father," he shot back. "And an explanation that doesn't include Fox."

"But..." I looked around at the men surrounding me. Eesh, Dad looked slightly upset, but I couldn't be sure if it was at me or the situation. "You took control," I exploded. "I already have one man in my life who controls everything. And then you walk in and just tell me I'm going to move with you to Kansas. *Kansas!*" I shouted. "Does anyone ever do anything in Kansas? And what about my cat and my fish?"

"Oh, Christ," Dad muttered. "Not this again."

I glared daggers at him. "The whole reason I moved to Chicago was to get away from you because you kept trying to run my life."

"Wait, so, you're not from Chicago?"

She shook her head. "Virginia."

"I knew it!" Kavanaugh laughed. "Nobody from Chicago calls the Sears Tower the Willis Tower."

I'd have to remember that for next time. "Look, I'm really sorry about this. It's been...interesting, but I can't stay."

Eli's face contorted in confusion the longer he stared at me until he finally dragged me away from prying eyes. Well, he probably meant to drag me away. It was really more of him holding onto me as he walked.

"Is that it? You're really going to walk away after everything?"

"I never wanted this. When I said it was for one night, I was serious."

"Yeah, but you felt the chemistry between us."

I stared at him, completely dumbfounded. "Eli, I called my secret service father out here to remove me from this situation because you're too overbearing to realize that I don't want this."

He nodded slightly. "You want your life back in Chicago with your cat."

"And goldfish," I added, though it seemed silly after I said it.

"And that's all. The next man that touches you, you won't wish it was me. And when you need a real man to stand by your side, who will be there?"

He had a very valid point. I did like Eli, way more than I wanted to admit. Maybe I was even falling for him. But that's what scared me. It was all happening so fast. Our relationship was based entirely on him saving me after I got myself into trouble. That hadn't happened until the very moment I met him. I was beginning to think he was my bad luck charm. Although, the speech he gave right before he attacked the "shark" did amazing things to my lady parts. But that still didn't mean I could just give up my life to move to Kansas.

"Eli, what we had was...amazing. I don't think I've ever felt what I did when I was with you. But I need some space to..."

"To what?"

"To get you out of my head," I said without thinking. I winced at the anger on his face.

He took a wobbly step back and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Well, don’t let me stand in your way.”

“Eli, that’s not what—”

“You’ve made yourself perfectly clear. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’d like to get to a hospital before I pass out.”

“I’m really sorry.”

He jerked his head toward my father. “You wanted to go, so go.”

I bit my lip, wanting to tell him that I did feel a massive, overwhelming amount of feelings for him. But what would that help? What I needed was a clean break, to get away and know that I wanted him for him, and not because we were in these life and death situations. I’d seen it before with my father. He rescued my mother, and look where that got him. He was married and divorced the year after he had me. And then his job got my mom killed. He never forgave himself for not saving her life, and that was something I didn’t want to go through, not after seeing how it tore him apart.

But there was nothing I could do to explain this to Eli. He wanted something from me that I wasn’t prepared to give. And it was better to walk away than to stick around and hurt him. “Goodbye, Eli.”

He huffed as I walked past him, but didn’t stop me. My father didn’t take his eyes off anyone until I was by his side, and then he nodded at his men as he guided me toward the SUV. I wondered what was going to happen with all the damage and the injured men, but my father always took care of that stuff.

He opened the door and let me in, then slid in beside me. “So, why did you so desperately need to leave him?”

“Because he wouldn’t let me go.”

“He kidnapped you?”

I laughed as Fox’s words ran through my head. *You can’t kidnap someone you know.*

“Is that funny?”

“No, it’s just something one of his teammates said. He didn’t really kidnap me. He was...trying to protect me.”

He sighed heavily. “Honey, I don’t understand this. You found a man that would go to the ends of the earth to protect you, and you walked away from him.”

“What if I don’t want a man that will protect me?” I retorted as the driver got in and started the vehicle.

“Yes, you’re right. Better to find a man that’ll throw up his hands and walk away when you’re in trouble. What happened, anyway?”

I sighed, leaning back in my seat. “It’s a long story. Do you mind if we discuss it later?”

“On one condition. Is this over?”

“I’m pretty sure. One of the guys, Fox, is a little psycho and—”

“Did you say Fox?” he said suddenly, sitting up straight.

“Yeah,” I said warily. “Why?”

His jaw clenched hard as he pulled out his phone. A minute later, he turned it to face me. “Is this the man you’re talking about?”

It was definitely him, crazy smile and all. “Yep.”

“Hell, if I had known he was involved, I would have gotten down here sooner.”

“Why?” I asked, suddenly uneasy. “Is he dangerous?”

“Only if you plan on pissing him off.”

“How do you know him?”

“Trust me, he’s been on secret service’s radar a few times.”

That had me sitting up in my seat. “Why?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“But you just brought it up!”

“And this guy Eli works with him. I’ll have to do some digging.”

“Into Eli? Why?”

“Because you were with him. I need to know he’s above board.”

I snorted at that. “No problems there.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because he’s so...” I held out my hands like I was wringing his neck. “He’s so uptight.”

“About what?”

“Everything! Geez, all I did was talk to someone and he was ready to kill him.”

“I need his name and when you last saw him,” my dad said, going into work mode.

I sighed, leaning back in my seat. “You’re not going to kill Simon. He’s perfectly normal.”

“I need more than a first name to go on.”

I looked out the window and thought about all I’d been through over the past few days. “And he’s so intense. Like... who gives a speech about how much they love someone after a few days?”

“Yeah, I need you to run a trace on a Simon.”

“I mean, sure...we were about to be eaten by a shark, or so we thought, but that doesn’t mean he should spout about love.”

“I don’t have a last name. Just run the name and check anyone that’s been in the Chicago area in the last week.”

“Although, if I’m being honest, it really was very moving. Not many men would so easily talk about that stuff.”

“Then get Jameson on it. I don’t care what you have to do. I want to know who this guy is.”

I remembered the way his body fit against mine and how quickly I fell for the man. Not that it was love, but man, did I



love his muscles. And his warmth. And his body. And his gorgeous eyes. And his biceps. And his body.

“Sybil,” my father said, pulling me out of my daydream of Eli’s gorgeous body.

“Yeah?”

“Please don’t tell me about how much you want another man’s body ever again.”

Oops.

---

I pushed the door open to my apartment, only to be shoved aside as my father strode ahead of me to check out the place. I rolled my eyes and plopped down on a stool, leaning on my hand. My father didn’t have to go far to check out the place. It was just a small one bedroom apartment.

Horatio jumped up on the counter, meowing at me and rushing over to be petted.

“Oh, who’s a good boy? Who needs momma’s lovin’? You are a good boy. Yes, you are. Yes, you are!” I grinned, rubbing him down. The poor thing missed me terribly. And who could blame him after being left alone for a week. After my dad left, I’d have to check the litter box. It was probably disgusting. And poor Leonidas. I hope no one overfed him. I didn’t need to see him face up in the fish bowl.

“Everything’s clear,” my father said as he walked out of my bedroom.

“I knew it would be.”

“So, what’s your plan?”

He stood in that fatherly pose—not the gentle one, but the one where he was about to interrogate me.

“Um...well, I guess I need to check in with work and—”

He was already shaking his head at me. Clearly, that wasn’t the answer he was looking for. “You’re not going back

to work there, Sybil.”

He didn’t know everything that happened. All I told him was that Eli had rescued me after someone attacked us at work.

“Dad, it was just—”

“A bomb. Do you think I don’t have ways of finding out these things? The minute I heard a bomb exploded in Chicago, I was on it. The problem was, you took off and I didn’t know who you were with. I was going out of my mind trying to find you.”

“I was with OPS the whole time. And since when do you have time to drop everything to come see me?” I asked, hopping off the stool. “The last time you came for a visit was three years ago.”

“I call you every week.”

“To interrogate me,” I said over my shoulder, walking into the small laundry room where the litter box was. To my surprise, it was perfectly clean. That was odd. I started walking around in search of cat poop or pee, but I’d smell it if it was around here.

“Sybil, after your mom died...”

“Yeah, I know. It was too painful to see me.”

“I thought you’d be safer away from me,” he corrected. “You have no idea what it’s like to watch the woman you love —” He stopped and I turned around to face him.

“But you divorced Mom.”

“Only because I had no choice. It was too dangerous. There were threats and...I had a new baby to think about. If it was just your mom, I could have stashed her away somewhere. As it was, even that wouldn’t have worked.”

“And sending me off to live with other people did?”

“I came to see you when I could.”

I snorted at that. “You came three times.”

“It was too dangerous,” he argued.

“You keep saying that.”

“I called you all the time.”

“Yeah, there’s nothing like a long distance father,” I said, tossing the covers up on the bed. I got down on my knees and searched under the bed, but it was clean.

“Sybil—”

“It’s Sarah. I go by Sarah now.”

“That’s not the name your mother gave you.”

“It’s also not the name I’ve gone by for the last twenty years,” I shot back. “Look, you helped me out today, and I appreciate that, but I don’t need you charging into my life now. Besides, isn’t it too dangerous?”

“You know I’d be here for you no matter what if I thought you were in trouble.”

“Right, just not when I actually need you to be, say, a father.”

He sighed heavily, resting his hands on his hips. “I just want to know you’re okay. I don’t understand why you would want to leave a man that cares about you so much.”

“So I can end up like Mom?” He flinched. “I meant broken-hearted because the man I love left me out of some kind of misplaced sense of duty.”

“You don’t know that he’s like me. In fact, he seems to be the opposite of me.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean I should be with him. I need to find myself a nice, skinny man that doesn’t have tattoos or bulging muscles...” I sighed dreamily. “Or is so magnificent in bed.”

“Again, I don’t need to hear that.”

“I mean, yeah, he’s wonderful, but just like you, he’ll leave for a job and I won’t see him again.”

He sighed and tugged on my hand, pulling me closer to him. “I know I’ve let you down, kiddo.” I rolled my eyes. I was most definitely not a kid. “I had my reasons for leaving, but that doesn’t mean he will too.”

“You don’t even know him,” I argued.

He averted his eyes for a brief moment, giving me all the information I needed.

“You already looked into him.”

“You called and said he was holding you against your will. What did you think I was going to do?”

I scoffed, walking away from him. Of all the overbearing men in my life, I really should have realized he would do that. After all, he was in the secret service. Looking into people was what he did.

“And so you approve of him.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Let’s say I approve of him more than any other man you’ve dated.”

My eyes went wide with realization. “All the other men? Dad, how many men have you looked into?”

“All of them,” he said without an ounce of remorse.

“But how could you possibly know?”

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I guess it’s about time you should know that I’ve had cameras in your apartment since you moved in.”

“What?”

“And a tracker in your purse. Not that it did much good since it blew up in your office. I’ll have to make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

“My office blowing up?”

“No, putting a tracker only in your purse. And I may have also tapped your phone. Again, that didn’t help when your office blew up.”

“I don’t believe this.” I shook my head walking away from him as I processed just how far my father went to keep tabs on me. And that would be my life if I was with Eli. I knew it. Just one more reason to stay away.

“Honey, it was for the best.”

I spun around and jabbed a finger at him. “It was an invasion of my privacy!”

“And a lifesaver a time or two. Daniel? He was a woman.”

I gasped, covering my mouth. “Take that back.”

He shrugged. “Sorry, but he was only posing as a man. Or she...” he said thoughtfully. “Thankfully, that didn’t go any further.”

“That should have been my mistake to make.”

“The man was a predator. The woman,” he added, completely flustered. “You know what I mean.”

“The point is, you’ve been interfering in my life, but never actually been there for me. You don’t get to step in now and play the hero.”

“I’m not trying to. I was letting Eli do his job.”

“Yeah,” I laughed, “right up until you shot him.”

“He jumped on the roof of my SUV!”

“And your guys nearly had me killed when they shoved us off the road. How was that helpful?”

He shrugged. “They got a little out of control.”

“A little? Dad, Fox has more control, and I’m pretty sure he’s a few screws loose of a psychopath.”

He nodded in agreement. “I’m going, but I want you to be careful, and don’t discount Eli completely. He would be good for you.”

“Yeah, fine,” I grumbled.

He turned to leave, but then stopped and eyed me in that Dad way. “And Sybil? Stop stealing people’s wallets.”



## ELI

“I can’t believe her father shot you,” Kavanaugh scoffed.

“Didn’t I say no one was supposed to be injured?” Cash said, sitting down in the chair across from me.

I glanced around the mansion and sighed heavily. I still couldn’t figure out why she left me. And she called her dad of all people to make sure she could get away. It reeked of desperation—to get away from me. That was a hit to the gut.

“It’s not like I intended to get shot,” I replied. “And it’s only a shoulder wound.”

“You were about to bleed out,” Red said as he sat down, handing me a bottle of water.

I grimaced, looking at the clear liquid like it was about to attack me.

“Hey, you heard the doc. No alcohol.”

“Yeah, but water?”

“If you wanted beer, you shouldn’t have gotten shot,” Cash snapped.

“It wasn’t my fault. I was protecting her.”

Kavanaugh shook his head again, staring off into space. “Secret Service. Who would have thought? He could have you disappear in an instant.”

“I know.”

“Like, we’re talking deep cover shit,” he continued. “This is just like Kennedy.”

I rolled my eyes as he continued to rant.

“JFK. You can’t tell me that was some random shooter. No, he was taken out. And then there’s his lover—shot in broad daylight?”

“Who?” Red asked.

“Mary Meyer,” Kavanaugh nodded. “Her ex-husband was CIA. And then it came out that she was one of JFK’s lovers. There’s no way that wasn’t a hit. And what about Marilyn? Do any of us really think she overdosed?”

“Do any of us care?” I asked.

“You should. You’re about to become expendable. Not that we won’t care. I mean, we’ll hold a nice funeral for you, just like with FNG. Only, your body will actually be in the casket.”

“FNG is dead,” Cash sighed. “Rafe confirmed it.”

“What?” I asked, scooting forward in my seat, wincing as my shoulder pulled. “Are you serious?”

He nodded, swirling the beer in his glass. “The plane was blown up to make us believe he actually died. He was alive and well when Rafe sent him out on a job. FNG agreed to it,” he sighed. “And that cost him his life.”

“He died on the job?”

Cash nodded. “He stopped responding, and when Rafe went in with a team, he was already dead.”

I sat back in shock. I guess we all knew FNG might really be dead, but after all this time, we just figured he would make a magical reappearance. “That sucks.”

“Can we really trust Rafe?” Red asked.

Cash nodded reluctantly. “I didn’t see any signs he was lying.”

“But the bones...” Kavanaugh said. “The coroner’s report said those were his.”



“A setup by Rafe.”

“So...who did we actually bury?” I asked.

Cash shrugged. “I don’t know. But we have to move forward now. We know the truth and we need to accept the fact that he’s gone.”

It was silent for a moment before Kavanaugh spoke. “It all feels a little anticlimactic, don’t you think? I mean, I really thought when FNG went out, it would be with a bang.”

“Carrying an umbrella,” I grinned.

“And yelling at Fox,” Red laughed.

It grew silent again, and then Cash raised his glass. “To FNG. He was a pain in the ass, but we all loved him.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Kavanaugh muttered. “But here’s to the craziest fuck I know.”

I raised my bottle, shaking my head. Water was a poor sendoff for a friend. “What are we going to tell Fox? He already had all those milk cartons made.”

Cash downed the rest of his drink before slamming it down on the table. “We have to tell him the truth. This can’t go on any longer.”

“Yeah, but...he just went all psycho. No one’s seen him since...”

I waited for Red to finish, which he obviously wasn’t going to. “One of us should check on him.”

“Maybe that should be Anna,” Kavanaugh suggested.

“You want to send his wife in to check on him when he’s gone dark?” Cash asked.

“Who else is going to get through to him?” Red asked.

The answer was obvious to me. There was only one person to send in to draw Fox out of the hole he was sinking into. But I wasn’t sure anyone else would agree with me on this one. My gaze flicked to Red’s, and for just a moment we were locked in a stare down.

“No,” he said, pushing out of his seat. “Are you fucking crazy?”

“You know she could help him.”

“She’s my wife!”

“She helped him the last time he was falling apart,” I argued.

“Yeah, and look how that turned out.”

Cash grinned. “Fox became your kid’s godfather. I think it’ll work.”

“No, it won’t work, because I won’t use the mother of my children to stop him from going apeshit.”

“He would do it for you in an instant.”

“Fox is crazy,” Red argued. “No, that’s my final answer. I don’t want to hear another word about this.”



# FOX

*“Run!”*

I squeezed my eyes closed, trying to get the images out of my head. I slammed my fists against my forehead, trying to push the images further back in my mind. They assaulted me the moment I stepped into this room, refusing to leave my brain.

*The statue weighed heavy in my hand, but all I could see were her pleading eyes, begging for me to run. But I was the man of the house, no matter how small. I couldn't allow anyone to treat my mother like this. I ran at him and swung hard, smashing the statue into his head. A flood of happiness filled me with every drop spilled. That smug look on his face was soon disfigured so badly that no one would be able to identify him.*

*Men like him didn't deserve to walk this earth, to be allowed to touch something so precious like my mother. She might not be the best mom, but she did everything she could for me. This man took advantage of her, used her for his own amusement, and I would never allow that to happen again.*

I spun around and faced the man currently stretched out on the table. Blood ran like a stream off the table, dripping into the little puddles on the ground. I flipped the knife in my hand over and over, trying to regain some control, but the darkness had taken control.

I bent down so he could really hear me. After all, he only had one ear. The other was laying beside him on the table.

“You will never touch another woman again, you sick fuck.”

He whimpered, but the fun was gone. He was barely conscious. It wouldn't be too much longer before he was gone. My gaze slid down the length of his body to where his stomach was ripped open. His insides spilled over the table, and his blood was barely pumping through his veins. I gave him another five minutes before his suffering ended.

It was a shame I couldn't make it last longer. I got a little carried away tearing apart his body, and the enjoyment didn't last nearly long enough for me. But after I watched that video of him breaking into Sarah's room, I knew I had to take him out. The need thrummed through me, leaving me unable to settle until I found out exactly who he was. And what I found was even worse than what was on that video. The number of innocent lives that he touched...it made my stomach churn. With him out of the picture, he would never hurt anyone again.

I stepped back and flipped the knife again. My pulse was still jumping, telling me there was more to do. But this man was far beyond any form of torture that would make his last moments hurt. It just didn't seem like enough. Nothing was ever going to satisfy that hunger inside me to kill the men who would hurt the innocent.

“Fox.”

My head snapped up, but I didn't turn around. I couldn't be sure it was real. That voice, so soft and gentle, reminded me of a woman that touched my heart like no other woman had. I swallowed hard, wondering if it was really her.

I glanced down at my bloodstained clothes and grimaced. This was no way for me to see her. What would she think of me?

“Fox, I need you to look at me.”

For just a moment, I was ashamed that she had to see me like this. At least it wasn't Anna. She would understand a little too much. I closed my eyes and resigned myself to the fact that I had to look at her. But every time I saw her, it was like looking at her mother with that radiant smile that made me feel

at home. I'd known her for only a few short months, but she changed my life, made me feel like I had family again. And then she was gone.

I slowly spun on my heel, shoving my knife in the pocket at my hip. Her eyes watched me carefully as I did my best to smooth my features.

"Done?"

I slid my gaze slowly over the man on the table and nodded. She held her hand out to me.

"It's time to come home."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"But I have a very important job for you," she beamed. "It's time for you to come home and be a godfather again."

My head snapped up and a wide grin split my lips. "You're gonna have another baby?"

"Yeah, what?" Red asked, stomping out of the shadows.

"I just found out," she grinned.

"And you want me to be the godfather again? I know I screwed it up last time with the holy water. I thought you were supposed to drink it," I said honestly.

"Why is he finding out *again* that you're pregnant before I do?" Red snapped.

"We have baby names to discuss and a nursery to paint," Zoe continued. "And I have an idea this time it's a boy."

My eyes widened in awe. "A boy. We could name him Neal."

"Maybe," she laughed.

"Or we could name him after me," Red growled.

"Nobody wants to name their kid after a tree," I scoffed. I sighed, finally feeling content and ready to go home. "Another baby."

"You have your own kids," Red argued. "Go fawn over them."

I picked up a rag and wiped off my hands, then tossed it on top of the man that had now expired. “I just love babies. They’re a sign of life. And look! I just took one life, and you’re replacing him with one so much better!”

“Well, I prefer not to think of this when I deliver my kid,” Zoe laughed, “but I like the sentiment of taking someone bad out of this world.”

“Again, not that you care at all about my opinion, but maybe we could *not* link a murder to our baby. It’s gotta be bad juju or something,” Red added as we walked out the door.

Cash jerked his head at me. “Feel better?”

I looked up at the sky and sighed. “New babies always make me feel better. Should we go home?”

“What about the body?” Red muttered.

I waved my hand at him. “Don’t worry about it. I have it covered.”

“Of course you do,” he grunted.

“You know, I get the feeling you’re not happy about this baby,” I said, wrapping my arm around Zoe and drawing her closer.

“I would be if I was actually the first to find out.”

“You found out right alongside me. That’s something.” I slapped him on the shoulder good-naturedly.

I watched him grit his teeth in anger. The man really needed to kick back with a bag of Funyuns and chill.

“Can we just get out of here?”

I nodded, excited to get home now that a baby was on the way. But I didn’t miss the conversation going on behind me.

“Let’s hope he doesn’t go down the rabbit hole again,” Red muttered.

“Yeah,” Cash huffed. “It’s not like Zoe can be pregnant every time there’s a crisis.”





## ELI

“Are you really giving up?” Red asked as we drove into town.

We were back in our routine, going out on jobs and saving lives...yada, yada, yada. It had been two agonizing weeks without her. So many times I had picked up the phone, but I didn't dial her number. I just couldn't do it. I still couldn't believe she walked away from me, that she called her father to save her. Or that her father was Secret Service. I had completely missed that one.

“Eli.”

“Huh?” I turned to him, ignoring the smug look on his face.

“I asked if you were really giving up. It's not really your style.”

“I think she made it pretty clear that she doesn't want me. Her father shot me.”

“It was a shoulder wound.”

“He hit an artery. I wasn't even allowed to do anything but run comms on our last job. What fun is that?”

“Yeah, because this is all about work.”

“Well, it's not about her,” I grumbled.

“Listen, it was a lot to take in. I mean, let's say it was just the bomb. That alone would have been enough to scare someone away, but then there was everything after that.”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure it scared her away. She said something about IRIS saying she could do the laundry and be the maid. I have no idea what that was about. Is that the reason she left?”

He laughed. “Leave it to IRIS to fuck everything up. That’s not exactly every girl’s dream job. But I doubt it was just that. I’m sure it was just too much at once.”

“And you would recommend I run after her,” I laughed. “I’m not sure how that would turn out.”

“Hey, it’s gotta be better to give it one last shot than to walk away and never know if it’s really over.”

“What would I even say to her?”

“That you love her. You do love her, don’t you?”

He looked at me like he wasn’t sure. I, on the other hand, was one hundred percent certain that she was the only woman for me. “You know what it’s like when you find someone that just fits so well with you?”

“Of course. I have Zoe. Even if she does have an unhealthy obsession with Fox,” he added under his breath.

“And she drives you so crazy you want to throttle her, but at the same time, she’s this fascinating person that you wouldn’t dare change. Because changing even one thing about her would alter everything you love so much about her. It would be like living in the tropics but never having rain. Or living in the desert but never having sand. You know what I mean?”

He was silent on the other side of the vehicle, and I looked over, expecting him to be tearing up or something. Instead, he was looking at me like a deranged lunatic.

“What?”

“You should save that for when you see her. Seriously, that was probably your best and worst speech.”

“Why the worst?”

“Well, for one, you said it to me. She should really be in the room. If you try it again, you’ll just fuck it up. Second, since when did you start wearing panties?”

“Excuse me?”

“That was by far the most flowery speech I’ve ever heard from one man. Seriously, you can’t walk around pretending you don’t have a dick.”

“Harsh,” I grumbled. “I was just saying what I truly feel. Since when is that a bad thing?”

“Uh...since you’re not like that and it’s making me question everything about you.”

“Love will do that,” I snapped. “I can’t just turn off this spigot free flowing with love for her. I can’t pretend my heart isn’t bleeding every day we’re apart. My head is overflowing with thoughts of her, and when I close my eyes at night, she’s the only one I see. Except, she usually has a bomb strapped to her or she’s hugging a rapist. But that’s beside the point. She’s all I see. I can’t turn that off.”

He cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably. “Again, you’re sharing a little too much. I’m not sure we should go to the bar.”

“Why not?”

“Because if you start talking like that, I’m gonna take you out back and beat the shit out of you.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Like you could beat my ass.”

“I could and I will. Seriously, bring back my friend with balls that went around shooting people and saying shit like *where’s my beer.*”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t sound like that.”

“That’s not the point. If you’re going to wallow in your beer, then you can go home. But if you want to strategize how to get your woman back, let’s do that, because I really don’t want to have to kill you.”

I rolled my eyes at his dramatics. I wasn't that bad. We pulled into the parking lot of the bar and parked. I slammed the door as I got out, stomping inside. After snagging a bar stool, I glanced to my right, seeing a woman with brown hair and blue tips. I stared at her just a moment too long, and then her friend leaned in to whisper, most likely about me. The woman turned, but she looked nothing like my Sarah.

Sighing, I ordered a beer and stared at the bar top, feeling even more depressed than just a moment ago. How was I going to keep going, always seeing her face? It just wasn't fair.

"You said you wouldn't wallow," Red muttered.

"Wrong. I didn't answer you."

"That's the same fucking thing as an answer," he snapped. "When I tell you you can't wallow and you don't answer, I take that as an affirmative response. Otherwise, you should have stayed in the truck."

"That's not how it works!" I argued.

"Jake," he said, turning to the bartender. "Tell me if I'm right or wrong. I tell you there's no wallowing allowed. If you don't answer, I can take that as an agreement, correct?"

He frowned as he continued to dry a glass. "That depends. Are we in private or public?"

"Public."

"Yeah, that's definitely an acknowledgment of agreement."

"In what way?" I argued.

"In every way. Everyone knows you're not allowed to go into public and embarrass your friends by acting like a big baby around them."

"I'm not a big baby," I muttered.

Jake leaned on the bar, leaning down to whisper. "Look, it's clear that some chick dumped you. That sucks, but this is a place for people to get drunk and forget—not listen to some beefcake pouting about the love he lost."

"Beefcake?"

He shrugged. “My boyfriend dumped me. I’m allowed to hit on anyone I want. And do you see me wallowing? No, I’m playing the field, which is what you should be doing,” he said as he walked away.

I turned to Red, astonished by this new development. “Did you know he was gay?”

“Jake?”

I nodded.

“No, but then again, I don’t usually go into a bar and start asking people their sexual preferences.”

“Huh, you think you know a guy...”

He snorted. “I’m not sure his name is even Jake. I just threw that out there.”

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“His name is Jake,” I argued, refusing to be wrong about yet another thing.

We walked into the IT room still arguing about the same fucking thing since we left the bar after only one beer.

“Why are you arguing about this? I said his name could be Jake.”

“His name *is* Jake!”

“He started last week. Have you even been in the bar since then?” Red asked.

“No, but that doesn’t mean his name isn’t Jake,” I said sharply.

“Fine, his name is Jake!” he yelled, tossing up his arms in frustration. “Fuck, just drop it already.”

“How can I drop it when you’re just saying his name is Jake to please me?”

Dash turned around in his chair, lazily chewing a candy bar as he watched us argue. “Whatcha talkin’ about?”

I stormed over to him, ready to settle this once and for all. “The new bartender...his name is Jake, right?”

His brows pinched as he stared at me. “Do you have money riding on this?”

“Does it matter?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. I might have a favorite.”

“How can you have a favorite over who’s going to win an argument about a name?”

“I think the better question is why are the two of you arguing over a bartender’s name? Is there something I’m missing about this story?”

I grunted under my breath. This man was so frustrating. “There’s nothing more to the story. He said the man’s name was Jake, then he tried to take it back.”

Dash leaned back in his chair, gasping as he pressed his hand to his chest. “He took it back? You don’t say.”

“You know, I can still hand you over to Fox,” I said, glaring at him.

“Did you come here for something other than to argue with me about a man’s name?” Dash asked as he spun side to side in his chair.

“Yeah, I need to check on Sarah. I need video footage from outside her apartment.”

Dash eyed me carefully. “From outside...”

“Yeah, any street cams, her front door, anything you’ve got for me,” I said in irritation. “You’ve done this before. Why are you making such a big deal about it?”

“Why don’t you just go see her?” he questioned. “Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“That’s what I said,” Red muttered.

“You didn’t say that at all. In fact, you didn’t even know why we were coming down here.”

He huffed out a laugh. “I can guarantee I knew where we were going the moment we left the bar. You’re so obvious.”

“Oh, please. I am anything but obvious.”

“Right,” Dash laughed. “That’s a good one.”

“What are you talking about? Name one thing I’ve done that’s obvious,” I said, looking at both of them expectantly.

“Fall for a woman you hardly know,” Red replied.

“Jump on her to save her from a bomb that’ll blow her up.”

“Spout poetry to tell her you love her.”

“I never did that,” I argued.

“Take a bullet to save her,” Dash continued.

“Put cameras in her apartment.”

“Check them every day.”

“Hold on,” I shouted, stopping the back and forth. “What are you talking about? I never put cameras in her place.”

“Well, someone did,” Dash grinned. “I hacked into them after Daddy dearest brought her home. Then again, he’s secret service, maybe he had them installed so he could spy on her.”

“You mean to tell me that you’ve had footage of her this whole time and you didn’t tell me?”

“I kind of thought you wanted it to be kept private. You know, something for the spank bank,” Dash grinned.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to control my temper. “And you thought her dad put cameras in her bedroom to keep an eye on her?”

He opened his mouth to respond, then snapped it shut.

“Pull up the footage from when it first started,” I ordered.

He spun around in his chair and got to work. Within seconds, he had the very first footage pulled up, and in the corner, the date. “Look at that. That’s just a day after the bomb went off.”

“That’s weird.”

“If her dad knew she was involved in a bombing, why would he install cameras, but not go after her?” I asked, pacing the room.

“Dash, where does that IP address go?”

He had the decency to look sheepish when he turned back to his computer. “I probably should have looked at that instead of the striptease she was putting on for the cameras,” he muttered under his breath.

I was about to lunge when Red grabbed me around the arms. “I wouldn’t do that until we get the information we need.”

He released me but didn’t go far as we waited for the answer. “Uh...it looks like it’s being sent to an address in Chicago. Huh, that’s weird. Hey, wasn’t that guy that tried to blow her up named Simon?”

I turned to Red, immediately knowing there was no time to waste. Sarah was in danger, and if I didn’t get there in time, I might never see her again. “We need to get to the plane.”

Red sighed. “Fine, I’ll get the parachutes.”

We ran out the door with Dash shouting after us, “And the bartender’s name is Bob! You’re welcome!”





# SARAH

Miranda pulled out one of the many bottles of wine she picked at the liquor store. We were having a sort of *out of work* party. We were the only ones invited. I took down two glasses and set them on the counter, ignoring her chastising look. If it were up to her, we'd drink straight from the bottle.

“So, have you started looking for another job?” I asked.

“Why bother? Do you know how much I'm collecting from the company right now? Emotional distress, ptsd, traumatic overload, loss of wages...Seriously, I'm not looking for a job until they stop paying.”

“Don't you feel bad about that? I mean, you're basically taking advantage of the company because of one man's actions.”

She nearly choked on her wine as she looked at me like a crazy person. I was getting a lot of that lately. “Excuse me? You were strapped to a bomb. You nearly blew up, and you think we're taking advantage? Okay, maybe me, but you should totally milk it for all it's worth.”

“I couldn't do that.”

“Why? Sarah, you do realize that you could have died that day, right?”

“Of course, but I didn't. Plus, I don't believe in lawsuits and stealing money from companies.”

“This isn't stealing. You were traumatized!”

Was I? Everyone seemed to think that I should be, but honestly, I would have been more traumatized by a spider jumping at me from my bathroom mirror. But if I said that out loud, I was pretty sure everyone would look at me like I was insane.

“Look, some people may be able to do that, but what happens when the money runs out? I mean, I want to be settled into my new job long before they decide to stop paying.”

“I guess that’s what rational people do,” she grumbled, taking another swig of her drink. “Not that I agree with it. I still think you should hold out.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“So, you already started looking?”

I winced. “Well, not exactly. I can’t figure out what direction to go.”

She nodded like she totally understood. “Because of the hot guy that saved your life. Yep, I get it.”

I hadn’t actually told her anything about Eli. I had no clue where this was coming from. “Uh, no, not because of that. How did you know about him?”

She snorted. “Are you kidding me? I saw you jump out the window with him. And I saw him being so careful with you as you walked away from the building. Girl, that man was draped around you like a second skin. It was hot.”

“He wasn’t draped around me,” I argued.

“Yeah? Then where have you been for the last week? You know, I stopped by several times and you were never home.”

“I was...out of town.”

Her eyes widened as she shifted closer. “With the hottie?”

“Yes, well...no. Technically, I went against my will.”

She slapped me, gasping with a smile. “Shut up! That is so awesome!”

I opened my mouth but had no clue what to say. It struck me at that moment that this was how others looked at me. I was the crazy person in the room, and now I had a friend to join me.

“So, Miranda...” I said in a leading way. “Suppose a man saved your life and then you slept with him...”

“Yes, the hottie from the building. Go on.”

“And let’s say that man was also the man you had a one-night-stand with the night before he rescued you...”

“Shut. Up! You’re joking! How is that even possible?”

“He works in security. It just happened, I guess.”

“Okay, and what’s the question?”

“Well, it was fun and I had a great time with him, but... what if that’s all it was? I mean, he wants to get serious and move me out to Kansas.”

The look of horror on her face perfectly reflected the way I felt. “Kansas?”

“I know. And I’m pretty sure it’s in like...a really small town. What would I even do there? Who would I drink with? I wouldn’t have any buildings to jump out of that were higher than two stories!”

“And only sexy men to save you,” she added. “But can he really save you from two stories up?”

“Exactly,” I said, glad she understood where I was going with this. “And what about my fish?”

“Does Kansas even allow fish?” she asked. “How can you be sure Leonidas would survive the trip?”

“That’s what I said! And what about poor Horatio?”

She sighed, cocking her head from side to side. “I mean, I guess they have books in Kansas, but then you have to buy them all again.”

“Or lug all eleven books with me.”

“It’s a tough call,” she said in commiseration. “I mean, I would totally move Leonidas and Horatio without a thought if it weren’t to Kansas. I mean, even Dorothy tried to run away from home.”

“Yeah, but then she wanted to go home at the end of the trip. I’m not sure that’s the argument we go with.”

“Right, so you want the hottie, but you don’t want Kansas.”

I plopped down, flinging my head into the couch cushions. “It’s not even that. He’s gorgeous and amazing and gorgeous, but...I’ve only known him a week. It just seems so reckless.”

“Oh, it totally is. Then again, you’re young and you have money, right?”

“I have some money.”

“And you can afford a little frivolity.”

“But what if it doesn’t work out? What if I give up my apartment and move in with him, only to become the maid? I don’t want to clean up after a bunch of grown toddlers!”

She stared at me with wide eyes, then took a huge swig of her drink. “When you say a bunch, how many are we talking?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know. Twenty?”

She nearly choked on her wine, swiping at the dribbles running down her chin. “Twenty? Girl, sign me up!”

“No, that’s not—”

“I can see it now. Rodrigo! Rodrigo! Save me, Rodrigo!”

“I don’t think any of them are named Rodrigo,” I said in confusion.

She jumped up from her spot and grabbed the wine, shoving it into the air. “This is going to be so awesome. I’ll go home and pack up my stuff. Then I’ll be back in say... a day. We’ll head out there, surprise your man, and get us some good lovin’!”

“Wait, I don’t want to move out there.”

She slammed the wine bottle down on the counter and hurried over for her purse. “This is going to be so amazing. We’ll get mani/pedis and then get our hair done. We’ll look absolutely beautiful when we arrive in Kansas!”

She flung the door open and nearly walked right into someone. “Oh, excuse me.”

“Hey, is Sarah here?”

I knew that voice and rushed over to yank the door wider. “Simon.”



## ELI

I called her again, but she still didn't answer.

"We're almost there. Calm down," Red said, trying to keep me from losing my shit.

"What kind of person doesn't answer her phone?" I nearly shouted.

"The kind of person that talks to bombers, rapists, and traffickers like they're her best friend," Kavanaugh retorted.

I turned around in my seat, growling as I stared at the man. "That's not helpful considering the company."

He shrugged. "I'm just saying, you gotta learn to let these things slide. Once you get her home, stick a tracker in her and call it a day."

"That says a lot coming from a man who doesn't have a woman," Red laughed.

"Turn here!" I shouted.

"I have GPS," Red snarled. "Stop fucking yelling at me."

"I'm sorry, but you saw that guy. He's fucking obsessed with her. He put cameras in her apartment. He snuck in there and..." I shivered as I remembered him rifling through her things. "What a sick fuck."

"It was all that gushing over him," Kavanaugh said. "You saw the way she fawned over him. I'm telling you, that's his love language."

"His what?" I asked, turning around in my seat.



“Yeah, it’s like...everyone has their own language that they speak when it comes to love. For some people, it’s money. Some need hugs. This guy needs a woman to fawn over him. And she did that.”

“I’m not sure now is the time to bring that up,” I snapped.

“Zoe’s love language is meat.”

“Say that again? I thought she hated meat. I thought she was against all killing of animals.”

Red grinned. “I brought her around. It was slow going, but the truth is, ever since she got pregnant the first time, she can’t get enough of it.”

We turned down the last road and I could see her apartment in the distance. “Remind me to get her a deer for her birthday,” I said as Red jumped the curb and threw the truck in park. I quickly got out and ran toward the building. I should have been stealthy, but getting to her was the only thing that mattered. God only knows what she’d do if he got to her before I did.

Red butted up against the building as I peeked in the door from the other side. Kavanaugh motioned that he was going around back. After a quick check, I pulled the door open and let Red take the lead. We cleared the entryway before taking the stairs up to the second floor. As we rounded the corner, Kavanaugh met us from the far end of the hall, quickly moving toward us.

I held up my hand outside her door, signaling for everyone to stop. I pressed my ear to the door, seeing red when I heard a male voice inside. Stepping back, I planted my boot right at the door jam, breaking it in. Sarah screamed inside, and that was all I heard after I breached the door.

Simon caught sight of me and pulled a knife, pressing it to Sarah’s throat as he hid behind her like the coward he was.

“Simon, put the fucking knife down,” I ordered, holding my gun steady. If he moved just an inch to the right, I’d have him. But I wouldn’t take the chance unless I had to. I didn’t want Sarah covered in blood.

“What are you doing here? She’s mine. You can’t have her.”

“Simon, you don’t get to just decide she’s yours.”

Sarah snorted, not at all fazed by the situation she found herself in. “Why not? You did it.”

“That was different,” I bit out. “We have a connection.”

Simon scoffed. “You think because you slept with her that means something? I have a deeper connection with her than you ever will.”

Sarah frowned. “I’m not sure that’s entirely true—”

He jerked her against him, squeezing her tight. “We were meant to be. I saw it in your eyes.”

“When?” she practically shouted. “Because I’m pretty sure I’m meant to be with him,” she said, pointing a finger at me, “but look where we are.”

“Yes, look where we are,” I snapped. “All because you couldn’t stop making friends with people that are trying to kill you. I warned you—”

“Are we really going to do this now?” she asked, not even caring that this fucker had a knife to her throat. “Because I have to tell you, if you’re trying to win me back, this is not the way to do it.”

“Ooh, you can win me this way,” the other woman in the room said, holding up her hand. “What do I do? Do I just step into her place and one of you rescues me?”

“What the fuck is wrong with these women?” Red muttered.

“Simon, lower the fucking knife before I blow your goddamn head off.”

“Yeah, because everything should be solved with a gun,” Sarah muttered.

“And where did making friends get you?” I asked.

“Just because I don’t immediately see evil in everyone doesn’t mean I’m naive. I know very well that Simon could be one screw loose, but I choose to think he can change.”

“Yeah, he changed into the psychopath that fell in love with the woman he tried to blow up!”

“Like that couldn’t have been you?” she yelled, stomping her foot hard on Simon’s foot, then swinging back with all her might, elbowing him in the gut. The knife scraped against her skin, but she shifted just enough to give me a shot. I fired without a second thought, hitting him right in the center of the forehead. His eyes showed a flicker of life for just a moment before the light died and he slumped forward onto Sarah, nearly taking her down. I rushed forward and pulled her into me as his body slumped to the floor.

She sighed heavily, staring at her shirt. “Well, I guess I can’t wear this anymore. I’m not sure I could ever get the blood out.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to wear it because of the blood. Not because of the reminder that a man just held you hostage,” I muttered under my breath.

“Well, it was a nice shirt,” she snapped.

“Wait, so that’s it?” her friend asked. “I didn’t get my turn.”

I rolled my eyes, “Kavanaugh—”

“On it.” He strode over to her and pulled her aside, probably already hitting on her.

“Well, I guess that means I won’t be getting my deposit back,” Sarah said glumly.

Hope filled my chest as she looked up at me expectantly. “Does that mean you’re coming home with me?”

“Well, it’s not like I can stay here now. My father will never allow it. And this blood won’t come out of the carpet. And I really don’t want my apartment to appear in one of those crime scene photos where the chalk outline is surrounded by all those yellow markers.”

“Yeah, that would be a shame.”

Her cat brushed up against my legs and then trotted over to the body. I thought for sure he was just sniffing, but then he started licking furiously at the body.

“Horatio! No! Bad kitty!”

I winced as he started gnawing at the corpse. “That’s disgusting.”

“Stop him!” Sarah shouted. “I can’t have him licking me after he’s chewed on a dead body!”

I rushed over and snatched the cat up, barely avoiding his claws as he growled at me for taking him away from his midday snack. I shoved him into Sarah’s arms and directed her to the bedroom door. “Lock him up so he doesn’t eat the evidence.”

The door burst open and her father came striding in, stopping when he saw the gruesome scene in front of him. “I see I’m late.”

“Do you know this fucker?” I asked, assuming he did since he was here.

“Saw him on the camera footage.”

Sarah shut the door and spun around. “You have cameras here?”

“He’s here too,” her father grumbled.

She turned to me then. “How did you know to come?”

“Dash hacked into the cameras this fucker set up. We wondered why there were cameras set up at your apartment.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, clearly not ready to move on. “And why were you looking for cameras?”

The silence in the room was deafening. Even her father looked uncomfortable.

“Well, clearly, I can’t trust you to stay away from men that want to kill you.”

Kavanaugh choked out a laugh. “Not the way I would have gone.”

“It’s the truth,” I said, standing my ground. Sure, I was taking my life and relationship with her in my own hands, but someone had to say it. “First, the bomber. Then the traffickers.”

“Traffickers?” her dad asked in surprise. “When did this happen?”

“When she ran away from me in the Caribbean.”

He scoffed, shaking his head. “Her mother was the same way, God rest her soul. The woman never listened to a damn thing I said.”

“Right? Like mother, like daughter. I swear, she thinks I make this shit up for a living.”

“I hardly think—” But her father cut her off.

“And let me guess,” he laughed, “she thought he was a nice man.”

“She let him go,” I said, shaking my head, still baffled by the situation. “His sister needed a kidney transplant.”

“And I suppose that excuses his behavior,” her father said, shaking his head.

“And don’t get me started on the rapist. Oh, and taking a drink from a pirate! He fucking drugged her!”

“Typical women.”

“Now hold on a minute!” Sarah yelled, stomping her foot. “I hardly think you can say I have poor judgment based on a handful of events.”

I pointed at the body on the floor. “Case in point.”

She winced. “Alright...well, they didn’t all turn out that way.”

“They don’t need to all turn out that way,” her father argued. “Just one time is all it takes for you to end up in a

body bag. Or worse, missing for the rest of my life. I have enough gray hairs.”

“Tell me about it,” I chuckled. “Well, not the gray hairs, but it won’t be long when I take her home.”

“Who says you’re taking me home?” Sarah asked.

“I do,” the woman smiled, joining her and linking her arm through Sarah’s. “It’s really for the best. I mean, we get into so much trouble, and where would we be without these beefcakes to keep us from trouble?”

“Beefcakes?” I asked.

“And don’t you dare give them any excuses about your fish or the books you have to lug to Kansas.”

Sarah spun on her, jabbing a finger into her chest. “You agreed with me just a half hour ago!”

“Yeah, but that was before I found out how many hunky, burly men worked with Eli.” She turned and waggled her eyebrows at me. “I’m all ready to be saved.”

“Davis!” her father snapped. “Get a team down here and take care of this mess. I don’t want my daughter’s name linked to this in any way.” Then he turned to me. “From what I understand, you’re pretty well hidden at your current location. I expect weekly updates.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Nobody is giving updates on me!” Sarah stomped her foot.

“And try not to let her make too many new friends.”

“Judging by the ones she made on this trip, she won’t be speaking with anyone I don’t approve of.”

“You will not tell me what to do,” she said, marching over to me and pushing me back a step. “What if I choose not to go with you?”

“Well, you told him you were coming home with me,” I gestured at the corpse.

“Desperate times,” she said, narrowing her eyes at me.

“You were pretty calm, as you are in all life and death situations. This should be good for us,” I said, turning and walking toward the door.

“Hey! I never agreed to go with you!” She ran after me like I knew she would. But there would be no fooling her this time around. I turned and scooped her up, hauling her over my shoulder as she shrieked, beating her fists against my back.

“Let me down, you big brute!”

Her father grinned at me as I walked past him. “Good luck with that.”

“I’m gonna need it,” I laughed, narrowly avoiding her fist flying into my face. I grabbed her hand and held it down, preventing her from striking me again.

“And Eli,” her father called out. I turned back to him, ready for the speech I knew I would get. “If you hurt her, I will wrap your body in chicken wire, stuff cat food in your mouth, and sink your ass to the bottom of the river with cement blocks.”

I was surprised at that. “I was really expecting a death more fitting of Kennedy.”

He scoffed at that. “Like I’d ever give you that much attention.”





# JACK

## *Beaumont Texas Federal Prison*

“Cates!” the prison guard shouted. “You’re up.”

I rolled my head in his direction and narrowed my eyes at the guard who liked to make my life a living hell. If he only knew who he was fucking with, he’d never have laid a hand on me. As it was, the last time he tried, I beat him until his face was unrecognizable. That was three months ago. I did two months in solitary because of it, but it was worth it.

My reputation spiraled out of control after that. No one would mess with me, and because I was housed with Rico Gelbero, the man I was supposed to be protecting, it only worked in my favor. Because they feared me, they didn’t dare go near Rico.

I slowly stood from the bench where I’d been working out and glared at the men around me. They all quickly averted their eyes, not wanting to be the one to challenge me. I quickly learned exactly who the threats were in prison, and though I was well-trained, these men had desperation on their sides. Despite their fear, if one of them had the chance, they’d take me out just to ensure their position at the top.

The metal door opened, leading me into a room with multiple phones separated only by plexiglass. I hadn’t had a single visitor since I arrived, and this was my monthly phone call, aside from the times I was in solitary. I took the seat the guard motioned to, glaring at him before picking up the phone.

“Yeah.”

“How’s prison life?” Rafe asked.

“Same as always.”

“I wish I could come for a visit, but I can’t get the time off work.”

I gritted my teeth at his lack of news. Since the calls were monitored, he always spoke as if he was a friend, not the man who purposely put me in here to get a notorious criminal out of prison, all to get to his father.

“You know, after a year, I didn’t really expect you to come.”

“I’ll be there when I can.”

“Uh-huh,” I snorted. “Keep telling yourself that.”

I hung up the phone and stood. I knew what I was signing up for when I took this job. There was no way to sugarcoat how awful prison was. Sharing a cell with a man who took pleasure in murdering others was the best part of this job. Constantly watching my back was exhausting, and even if I did trust Rico, sleeping in the same cell was difficult at best. I hadn’t had more than four hours of sleep in one night since a week before I murdered that cop. I doubted that would change any time in the future.

I was guided back to my cell since my time in the gym was over. Rico was sitting on the bottom bunk, and raised an eyebrow as I entered.

“Good news?”

“Mind your own fucking business,” I snapped, not in the mood for chit-chat. I might have to keep his ass alive, but that didn’t mean I’d become his friend.

“Had some good news myself yesterday.”

I didn’t say a word.

“Looks like I’ll be out of here within the month.”

“If someone doesn’t kill you first,” I muttered. Hell, I’d like to do the job myself. There were many nights I considered shanking the asshole just for the pleasure of never hearing his voice again. But that would defeat the purpose of this entire job. And I didn’t sell my soul to the devil just to ruin everything.

The door buzzed and a guard entered, his eyes flicking to mine before sliding over to Rico. “On your feet,” he ordered.

Like the lazy fucker he was, Rico slowly got out of bed, smirking at the guard as he shoved his hands in his pockets. The guard’s nostrils flared at the lack of respect shown to him. He stormed forward with his baton and swung at Rico, aiming for his head. I stepped in at the last minute, knowing this was going to cost me.

I twisted the baton out of his grip and slammed him up against the wall, the baton pressed up against his throat. He gasped for air the harder I pressed, his eyes bulging with every moment that passed. And the fucker would have died if not for the second guard that ran into the cell and grabbed me from behind, tossing me into the opposite wall. A swift kick to the stomach had me bending over and gasping for air, but it wasn’t over yet. Rico joined in the fight, grabbing the guard from behind, only to be attacked by the first guard.

I rushed forward, slamming the second guard into the wall, my fist hammering into his face over and over until he was knocked out with blood dripping from his face. I heard a sickening crunch and turned just in time to see the first guard fall to the floor, his neck broken as Rico stood over him, heaving with the exertion from his fight.

Then he shoved his hands in his hair and stepped back, freaking the fuck out. “Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Fuck!”

“Get on the fucking bed,” I ordered. “Now!”

He turned and grabbed the bed, hauling himself up. Two seconds later, four guards stormed into the cell, staring at the men on the floor and then at me. The first one came at me hard, swinging his baton straight into my side. The second one

was lights out. I barely saw the hit coming right before the baton smashed into the side of my head.

When I woke up hours later, it was in that black fucking hole.

Alone.

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