



SEAL'S

Grace

RED FALCON



BOOK THREE

LYNNE ST. JAMES

SEAL'S GRACE

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS FAKE MARRIAGE
PROTECTOR ROMANCE

RED FALCON

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About the Author

Books by Lynne St. James

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*For all the spouses and families who are patiently waiting for
their loved ones to return home.*

As always, for T.S., my real-life hero. I love you!

ABOUT THE BOOK

Love at first sight—hell no!

Lust? Oh yeah, they were all over that.

Luca “Lucky” Rossi knew Grace was a pain in the ass. She’d proved it months ago after the mission to save her UN Aid team in Marikistan. The last thing he needed was a civilian like her on a dangerous mission to infiltrate a child trafficking ring—except that’s exactly what he got.

Grace Miller was still furious she’d had to leave a helpless baby behind when the SEALs rescued her team—something she sure as hell hadn’t needed. She could take care of herself since she’d been in kindergarten. Then the gorgeous Navy SEAL threatened to spank her in front of everyone. It made her want to remove certain parts of his anatomy with a butter knife. Even then, she couldn’t deny the desire thrumming through her veins every time he was near.

Their fake marriage should have made it easy to adopt the baby—that and the \$50K to pay for her. Then they’re betrayed and their carefully planned mission falls apart. Will they be able to save the baby they’ve both come to love? Can they earn a happily ever after they never knew they wanted, but they so richly deserved?

CHAPTER 1



Luca “Lucky” Rossi’s long strides left footprints in the packed sand along the water’s edge. The sun rose over the horizon, painting the early-morning sky orange and gold, and a cool breeze licked along his bare legs as he ran. The North End Beach was one of his favorites, and he ran there every weekend he was home.

Finishing his six-mile run, Lucky grabbed a water bottle from inside his truck and drained it in one gulp. He leaned against his truck and took a moment to enjoy the peaceful sound of the waves hitting the shore, broken by the occasional squawk of seagulls. This was his happy place; it soothed the tension he’d carried home from the mission.

The team had returned yesterday after being down range for ten weeks. Brutal was the only way to describe what should have been an in-and-out recovery mission. They’d been successful, but not without casualties. Fergus “Doc” O’Brien came home with a broken leg. Not great, but not career-ending either. Career-ending was how they all judged injuries. If it wasn’t, then it was nothing.

As if the mission hadn’t been bad enough, Quinn’s debriefing had lasted a day and a half. Not for the first time, Lucky thanked God that Quinn Gallagher was the boss of the Red Falcon Team instead of him. Who the fuck needed that? He hadn’t joined the Navy to deal with any of that shit, and he’d do whatever he could to avoid it. The last thing he wanted was to be the one to interface with JSOC and Command.

Lucky took another deep breath, filling his lungs with ocean air before climbing into his truck and starting the engine. There were still a few hours before he needed to be at his teammate Josh's house for the barbecue. It left him plenty of time to grab a bagel and coffee on the way home and to take a shower before leaving for the party.

The entire team looked forward to these post-deployment barbecues at Josh's house. It was a tradition that started after their first mission together as a team. Each of the guys pitched in and brought something. Today was Lucky's turn to bring the beer. Since he didn't have to be there early to help set up, he'd stop at the store on his way. Now that Josh and Tempest were a couple, they had it handled.

As Lucky backed out of the parking spot, his cell phone rang. After putting it in park, he grunted as he grabbed his phone from the passenger seat. Early calls, especially on the weekend and right after a deployment, were never a good thing. When he saw his CO's name, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

Fuck. "Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Lucky. I apologize for calling so early. But something's come up, and it can't wait," Knox said.

Lucky gripped the phone until his knuckles turned white as his mind raced through a dozen scenarios. Why would his CO be calling him instead of Quinn? They'd just gotten home, and they never deployed this quickly. "Of course, sir. What do you need?"

"I need you to report to base."

"The team, sir?" Lucky's mind spun, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

"No, Lucky, just you. I'd appreciate it if you could keep this to yourself for now." Knox sighed into the phone. "I need you here ASAP."

A million questions swirled through his mind, but Lucky knew better than to ask anything over an unsecured line. "Yes, sir. I'll grab a shower and be there in thirty."

“See you then.” Knox disconnected before Lucky could reply.

Something was up. It could be a reprimand, but Knox would have just told him. At least, he thought he would. None of this made sense.

Seriously, WTF?

All this secretive bullshit got to Lucky sometimes. Not that he’d planned on waking anyone up to tell them he got called in. But still. Why did he have to keep anything from his team?

So much for his quiet morning. Lucky shook his head, then headed home. All his uniforms were at home. He probably should have told Knox an hour. He’d be cutting it close, but he didn’t have a choice. Shit was about to get deep. A clusterfuck, for sure. His gut churned as he grasped the steering wheel tight enough that his knuckles turned white. Forcing himself to relax, he eased his grip and took a deep breath. Whatever was happening, he’d deal with it head on. He was a fucking SEAL. The only easy day was yesterday.

*T*wenty-eight minutes and thirty seconds later, Lucky approached his CO’s door and heard muted voices. Interesting. Knox wasn’t alone. *The plot thickens.* Lucky shook his head to clear it and knocked on the door.

A moment later, Knox opened the door. “Come in, Lucky.”

Two men sat at the conference table. Knox tipped his chin and indicated for Lucky to take a seat. The churning in his gut increased. The coffee he’d practically inhaled on the way to base turning sour.

“Lucky, let me introduce you to Pavel Miller and Mikhail Rimkus. Gentleman, this is Luca Rossi.”

Lucky tried to read Knox’s expression, but it was closed tighter than Fort Knox. Then Miller’s name sank in. “Pavel Miller? Tempest and Grace’s father?” Tempest looked a lot like him—black hair, pale blue eyes, and a thin frame. But

Grace had golden brown hair and a curvy figure, only her eyes were the same.

Miller nodded. “Yes, I’m their father.”

Lucky waited for him to continue. Instead, Miller nodded to the other man at the table.

“I’m Mikhail Rimkus. You can call me Mike for now.” Rimkus was much younger than Miller. If he had to guess, he was probably closer to Lucky’s age. Even in the suit he wore, Lucky could tell the man was in good shape. His stoic expression indicated he was with one of the alphabet agencies.

After nodding at Rimkus, Lucky turned to Knox. “Sir?” He needed answers. Patience in the field was one thing. He had that in spades. Sitting at a conference table was something else entirely.

“I know you have questions. I’ll do my best to answer them, but first, I need you to read through these documents.” Knox slid a manilla folder across the table.

Opening the folder, he read the first line and stared at Knox. When his CO just nodded, he continued reading. If he’d been a weaker man, his hands would have shaken as he read through the folder’s contents. Only the murmurs between Miller and Rimkus in a familiar language disturbed the silence. Marikistani. He didn’t speak it, but had heard enough of it during the mission a few months ago when he’d first met Tempest and Grace.

As he continued to read, Lucky’s jaw tightened, and he could feel the pulse tick in his cheek. A bead of sweat slid between shoulder blades by the time he finished going through the ten pages. Clandestine missions happened. There were plenty of rumors flying around. At one time, he’d have jumped at the idea—the challenge. But that was before he’d found a family with the Red Falcon team. Why would Knox think he’d want this? No one on their team would, especially not Josh or Ry, since they had girlfriends to consider.

Knox met Lucky’s gaze. His expression was more serious than he’d ever seen it. “Before we can discuss this, you have a

decision to make. If you agree to sign, you'll get a full briefing. I won't order you to do this. It's a decision only you can make, and I hope you'll think it through before you decide either way. All I'll say is that you're our best hope for mission success. If you decide to turn this down, you'll walk out the door, and this meeting never happened. You can't discuss it with anyone, including your teammates."

"And if I accept? What happens then? Do they get read in, or will they be left in the dark?" Lucky didn't think he'd consider this assignment if his team thought he'd died or deserted them.

"I'll brief them. Your team will be your backup. But when this mission is over, you won't be coming home with them. Understood?" Knox answered.

Not exactly the answer he'd been hoping to hear, but better than nothing. Lucky nodded and re-read through the documents. Did he really have a choice? His sense of honor and duty were too strong to turn it down. Even though Lucky knew he'd agree to all the stipulations, he wondered how he'd handle being on his own. Or working missions with CIA operatives until he fulfilled the contract he was about to sign. If he made it back, he could rejoin his team, but that was a big if.

"Do you have a pen?" Lucky asked as he looked up from the stack of documents.

"Here you go," Miller said, pushing a Mont Blanc his way. Since Miller's suit probably cost more than Lucky's monthly paycheck, it wasn't a surprise for him to carry such an expensive pen.

"Are you sure? There's no reconsidering after you've signed," Knox asked, his concern evident in the deep brackets around his lips.

Was he sure? Fuck no. But would he do it, anyway? Hell yeah. Lucky didn't even know the details of the mission, just that he'd have to give up his life for one year—literally—maybe longer, depending on how things played out. But he'd

have no one waiting or mourning for him. His only family was his SEAL teammates, and they'd understand.

"I'm sure, sir," Lucky said as he signed the designated areas on the documents. When he was done, he pushed the folder across the table to Knox. "Okay, now who's going to brief me?"

Knox smirked. "Miller, I told you he was the right man for the job."

Miller nodded, then turned to his associate and said, "Mikhail, why don't you start?"

Lucky held back his grin, glad to know he hadn't lost his touch in guessing the other man worked for an alphabet agency. If he had to guess, he'd bet it was the CIA.

"As I'm sure you've guessed since Miller is here, this has something to do with Marikistan. What you don't know is that it directly relates to his daughter, Grace," Rimkus explained.

What the fuck? Their team had just removed her from there. Had she gone back? He couldn't remember if Josh had mentioned anything or not.

"Grace? Last time I saw her, she was back here, safe and sound," Lucky said.

"And she still is," Miller replied. "I understand that I have you to thank for that." The corners of Miller's eyes crinkled as he restrained his laughter. "Grace told me how you unceremoniously brought her to the EXFIL."

Of course, she did. That woman was more of a hellion than her sister. It must run in the family. "I meant no disrespect, but our mission was to return her and the rest of the group to the States."

"Yes, and I appreciate that you take your missions seriously," Miller said.

"I'm a SEAL. There is no other way to take them." Lucky realized the man wasn't insulting him, but it sure as hell felt like it.

“Let’s get back to the briefing,” Knox murmured. Lucky recognized that look. It was the one that meant extra PT for the team. He swallowed his grin since it wouldn’t earn him any points with his CO.

At some point, when Lucky had been going through the documents, Rimkus had grabbed his own folder. He leafed through the papers until he found a document he pulled to the front of the folder. “When Grace was in Marikistan, she was the nurse who helped Irina Pavlick deliver her baby. When the SEAL team rescued her, she had to leave the infant behind.”

Lucky nodded. To have taken the child would have been kidnapping at the least or child trafficking at the most. Either way, neither could have happened.

“The infant’s mother signed a document when she went into labor, giving Grace guardianship of the child if the mother were to die. There is some debate whether it was legal, and the witness has since disappeared with the infant.”

“What do you mean he disappeared?” Lucky asked. “Grace paid him money to take care of the baby until she could make arrangements to return to Marikistan or have the baby brought to the States. I saw her give the man an envelope with at least a thousand US dollars.”

“Grace had no way of knowing the man wasn’t trustworthy. Now, we need to retrieve the child,” Rimkus said.

“I understand, but why would that require me to go dark for a year? Can’t the team go in and rescue the baby like we’ve done in the past?” Lucky looked over at Knox. He had to be missing something, or as usual, the spook was hoarding intel.

Knox sighed with exasperation. “Rimkus, for fuck’s sake, either give him the file or explain. We don’t have all day for you to divvy out intel like you’re hoarding gold.”

If Lucky weren’t so frustrated, he would have given his CO a high-five, but enough was enough. He needed to know what the fuck was going on. He’d just signed the next year of his life away. There’d better be a damn good reason for it.

“My apologies, commander. I have been in deep cover as part of a child trafficking ring in Marikistan for the last two years. This man, Andrez, whom Grace trusted with the baby, is one of the key players. He takes motherless infants and children from orphanages and brings them to the leaders of the traffickers. There is an established pipeline to get them out of the country after they’re sold to the highest bidder.”

A pit opened in Lucky’s stomach, one large enough to swallow him whole. He couldn’t help feeling a little responsible for this child being trafficked. If he’d found a way for Grace to keep her, she’d have been living a good life in the USA instead of God knew where and with whom. Fuck.

“Do you know where the baby is at this moment?” Lucky asked.

“Yes,” Miller said. “Fortunately, she is still in Marikistan. She was too small and became ill, so they’ve had to hold off on selling her. That’s why we must do this now. I’ve promised Grace she can go back and get the baby. I’ll pay whatever fee they charge, but she can’t go alone.”

Lucky agreed. Dealing with human traffickers and the seedy underbelly they ran with would never be a place for an innocent. And no matter how tough she acted, she’d be helpless against the criminals.

Knox met Lucky’s gaze. “That’s where you come in. You’ll be going undercover as Grace’s husband. It’s the only way we’ll be able to get the baby and ensure her safety.”

“Her husband?” Lucky asked. Yeah, rescuing the baby was critical; that wasn’t up for debate. Obviously, since he’d just signed away the next year of his life, he hadn’t done it to be driven to the edge of sanity by that woman. After two hours with her in Marikistan, he’d been ready to toss her over his knee and paddle her ass. “Are you sure there’s no other way? This is too dangerous to bring in non-combatants. Even Tempest would be better. At least she’s trained.”

Rimkus shook his head. “Trust me. We have been over every scenario to do this without involving Grace. But anything else risks the life of the infant.”

“I’m not happy sending in my daughter to play with wolves, but they know who she is. She hasn’t stopped making inquiries. It will make sense that she’d do anything, pay anything, to get Hope back.”

“Do you really think they give a fuck who they sell that baby to?” Lucky asked, unable to hide his astonishment at what Miller proposed.

“We’ve already paved the way. That’s part of what Rimkus has been doing for the last couple of months,” Miller said.

“Exactly,” Rimkus said. “It’s taken almost two years, but I finally worked my way up to being the one to procure the buyers for the children. I brought in someone as backup about a year ago. He’s an enforcer and assigned to me. Between the two of us, we’ve been able to get several children out safely, but many more need help.”

Lucky could see anger and sorrow spread across Rimkus’s face as he continued outlining the details. There was no way he wouldn’t help Grace save baby Hope. Then he’d help tear apart the motherfuckers who thought it was okay to hurt children.

As Lucky listened to Rimkus, he struggled to stay focused. His thoughts kept turning to Grace. So not good.

“When Grace started making waves with the Marikistani government, I got in touch with Miller,” Rimkus said. “This is the best option we could come up with to get the baby out safely.”

The plan was fucking dangerous. Grace was untrained. There were too many what-ifs and the chance for collateral damage. Besides, Grace couldn’t stand him. Unfortunately, he got a hard-on every time he was near her. Oh yeah. This had fucking disaster written all over it.

“Grace has agreed to this?” Lucky asked after Rimkus finished explaining the plan.

Rimkus shifted in his chair and avoided Lucky’s gaze.

“No, she hasn’t. In fact, she doesn’t know about any of this. Yet. But she will agree, or she won’t be going.” Miller’s

tone was emphatic.

Lucky wondered how often the man steamrolled over what either of his daughters wanted. Not that any of it was his business, and he knew bone deep Grace wouldn't say no. That wasn't the problem. The problem would be keeping her alive when she wouldn't listen to him. He knew it, and so did every man at that table.

"Oh, I have no doubt she'll go," Lucky said. "But if she doesn't do as I say, we could all end up dead, including the baby."

"I'm aware." Miller practically growled. "I'll make sure she knows she has to do what you say."

Lucky couldn't restrain his chuckle. He'd had to toss her over his shoulder and carry her to the EXFIL. "If you believe for one minute that's true, then you don't know her at all. But I will do whatever it takes to bring her and the baby home safely. Though I'd wager a month's salary that Grace will fight me every step of the way."

Miller nodded. Maybe he knew her after all. "You do what you deem necessary. You'll get no trouble from me. Just bring them home to me."

Nodding, he turned to Knox. "When do we leave?"

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CHAPTER 2



Grace paced back and forth in her office. If she kept it up for much longer, she'd probably have to replace the damn carpet. Her father had called and said he'd be there in an hour to talk to her about the baby. There was something off about him. He almost sounded tired. Pavel Miller was the strongest man she knew, and nothing affected him.

Did that mean he had bad news? Was there something wrong with Hope? Grace checked her watch and paced some more. Uneasiness settled over her like a blanket. Her gut told her something was wrong, and she hadn't been able to sleep in weeks. She'd pray that he'd be coming with some answers, but she knew better. Instead, he'd probably come telling her to give him more time to figure it out.

"Dammit. I can't wait anymore. I need my baby girl." Grace sighed. There was no one to listen to her—yet. She'd tell her father that there would be no more waiting. The constant stress was taking a toll on her. Grace needed answers, or she'd get to Marikistan without his help.

For months, she'd been waiting to receive clearance to return to Marikistan. The hardest thing she'd ever done in her life had been to leave baby Hope behind with Andrez, the hospital administrator. He'd been the only one left in authority and had promised to keep the baby safe. *Bloody hell*. Grace had paid him a ton of money to make sure he did, but it hadn't ensured the baby's safety. Why had she let that pigheaded SEAL and his teammates have their way? Why had she let

them convince her to leave Hope behind? She should have fought harder to keep Hope with her.

Hope's mother had made Grace promise to protect her child before she died, and Grace had agreed without hesitation. It wasn't until she'd gazed into the deep-blue eyes of the baby in her arms that she vowed fulfill that promise in any way possible. Grace never cried, not since her own mother had died. But damn if tears hadn't welled in her eyes as the baby had turned her face into Grace's arms and fallen asleep.

That simple trust had cracked open the cement that encased Grace's heart. The numbness she'd lived with for as long as she could remember dissipated. It hurt, yet it didn't. Was it love? She didn't know. But in that instant, Grace would do whatever it took to ensure Hope had the best life possible.

Her sister, Tempest, had tried to make her listen to reason. Grace had known it was wrong to take the baby without official documentation but leaving her behind had torn her apart with worry. Danger lurked everywhere in the war-torn country, but in the end, she hadn't had a choice. The SEALs hadn't been able to bring the baby on the helicopter. They'd been on an official mission for the United States government. Kidnapping children wouldn't happen on their watch, even if it were in the baby's best interest. There'd been nothing she could do, and they'd left Hope in Marikistan with Andrez. Only now they were both missing.

As the doorbell rang, Grace took a deep breath. What was her father here to tell her? That she'd have to wait longer? That they'd found Hope, but she was dead?

Grace took a deep breath as she opened the front door to her townhouse for her father. Miller stepped forward and hugged Grace. She stiffened in his arms, not used to him showing affection. What the fuck was going on?

"*Tévas*, Papa, what's wrong?" Grace asked, unable to hide her worry.

"Nothing. Can't a father hug his daughter without needing a reason?" Miller muttered.

“Um, sure.” Grace scanned his face, looking for a hint of whatever was going on. There was nothing to see. His expression was the same stoic mask he always wore. Only the dark marks under his eyes gave away any sign that something wasn’t right.

“Do you want some tea? Or coffee?” she asked.

“Just some cold water, please. Then we need to talk,” Miller said.

Grace nodded and headed to the kitchen. When she returned, her father stood in front of the French doors in her living room, staring into the backyard.

“*Tėvas*, you’re worrying me. What’s going on?”

Miller sighed. “Let’s sit down, and I’ll explain everything.”

Grace put the glasses of water on the coffee table with shaking hands and sat on the sofa. Miller took the oversized chair across from her. He reached for a glass and took a long drink. He was stalling, and Grace didn’t like it. Patience wasn’t one of her special powers.

Unable to sit still, she leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “C’mon, you know I don’t have any patience. Don’t do this. Whatever it is, just spit it out.”

“*Maža mergytė*, you’re going to be the death of me one of these days,” Miller said as he put the glass down and sat back in the chair. His gaze locked with hers.

Dad hadn’t called her baby girl since she was in elementary school. And to say she was going to be the death of him... None of this made sense.

“Papa...”

“Grace, I know what you want to hear, and yes, you’re going to Marikistan.”

“I am?” Grace wanted to stand up and scream “halleluiah,” but watching his solemn face, she kept her celebration to herself. “I know you don’t want me to go, but I have to bring Hope home.”

“I know. Believe me, you haven’t stopped reminding me of this for months. I understand.”

“Thank you, *Tévas*.” Grace’s mind began to whirl. “When do I leave? Did your people find Hope? Is she okay? What about Andrez?” The questions bubbled out of her mouth one after the other. She couldn’t have held them in if she’d wanted to.

“We’ll get to all of that. You’re leaving tomorrow, but a few things need to happen first.”

“What needs to happen? Do I need money? I’ve got a lot saved, and I can get it from the bank tomorrow.” She wiped her damp palms on her pants and tried to calm her racing heart.

Where had these feelings come from? This wasn’t her. She wasn’t a nervous wreck. She was just as much of an ice queen as her sister, Tempest—maybe more so. But here she was, falling apart and in front of her father—totally unacceptable.

“Calm down. Don’t make me change my mind about allowing you to go.”

Drawing in a breath, Grace forced herself to relax. Miller could be a hardass, and if he forbade her from going to Marikistan, there’d be no way in hell she’d get there.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m worried about the baby. You can’t fault me for that.”

“Of course not. But you need to remember this is not a US adoption. You’re not dealing with government officials. If you can’t remain calm, you could get yourself and everyone else killed.”

As Miller’s words sank in, knots pulled tightly in Grace’s stomach. Everyone else? Why did she need anyone else to go with her?

“Please explain, *Tévas*.”

“You won’t like what I am about to tell you, but it’s not open for discussion. You either accept this, or you’ll remain

here until they bring Hope to you. Do you understand me, Grace?”

Unable to trust her voice, Grace nodded and threaded her fingers together in her lap.

“There is more going on than we thought. A child trafficking ring has Hope. Andrez has been part of it from the beginning.”

“Child trafficking?” *Her baby?*

It took everything Grace had to not jump from her seat. Years of her father drumming into them that they must keep their thoughts hidden was the only thing keeping her from breaking down.

“Is she okay?” Grace whispered, afraid to speak the words rolling through her mind.

“Yes. She’s alive and as well as can be expected. This is a well-known ring, and the CIA has someone embedded in their organization.”

Even though she was dying to ask more, Grace knew she wouldn’t be getting any specific answers. Tempest had figured out that their father worked for the CIA a few years ago and had shared it with Grace. It was times like this that she was thankful for that extra inside access.

“He will help you as much as he can while maintaining his cover, but you won’t be alone.”

Grace bit down on the inside of her cheek to stop from asking the obvious question. Getting answers out of her father was worse than pulling teeth. Everything happened on his timeline. He’d explain when he was ready. Tempest and Grace had wanted to strangle him countless times over the years, but it was always his way.

Before he said anything else, he reached into his jacket pocket and looked at his cell phone. After typing a response, he nodded at Grace as there was a knock at her door.

“You should go let him in, *Maža mergytė.*”

Grace ground her teeth as she rose and went to the door. What was her father up to? She knew she wouldn't like it when she found out. Not that she had long to wait. She looked through the peephole and sucked in a breath. No fucking way. Absolutely not.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Grace asked as she pulled open the front door. She didn't care if she sounded rude. The last time she'd seen Lucky, he'd tossed her over his shoulder and threatened to spank her ass.

"Nice to see you, too, Grace, or should I call you wifey?"

Before Grace could retort, her father called from the living room.

"What are you two plotting?" Grace hissed at the tall, dark, deadly, and infinitely sexy Navy SEAL.

"I guess the big guy hasn't told you yet?" Lucky tipped his chin toward her father in greeting as he entered the living room.

"Luca, do you want something to drink?" Miller asked as he poured two fingers of scotch from the bar table into a glass.

"No, thank you, sir. I'm fine." Lucky took a seat on the couch and draped an arm along the back cushions.

What the hell was going on? If Grace didn't get some answers soon, she'd toss them both out on their asses. Then, she'd find a way to Marikistan on her own.

Her father nodded and glanced at Grace. His raised eyebrow made her release her bottom lip from her teeth. Shit. Damn. Fuck. It was her tell, one he'd tried to break her of as a child so she wouldn't give herself away.

When she stressed or worried, she'd catch herself biting her lip until it swelled and even bled. It had been ages since he'd caught her at it. The incessant worry about the baby had her living on edge. It had been months since she'd seen Hope. Grace's shoulders ached, her stomach roiled, and she'd swear her hair was falling out.

Never in her life had Grace been this tied up in knots. Constant worrying had driven her usual calm indifference out the window. Lucky's presence in her living room set her teeth on edge until she was ready to explode. The ache in her stomach and feeling like ants were crawling up and down her arms had to be over her concern for Hope, right? No way could it be the infuriating man sitting on her sofa.

"You know Luca, correct?" Miller asked.

"Yes, you know I do, Papa." Grace concentrated her gaze on her father. What was he up to? She knew the expression he wore all too well. It never ended well, either. "I met their SEAL team when you sent them to rescue my group."

Grace still didn't understand why they'd needed to be taken out of Marikistan. Unfortunately, when her father wanted something done, he made it happen no matter what it took.

"Marikistan is even more dangerous now than when you were there. My man inside has verified the baby's location. These men are brutal, cold-blooded killers. I will not risk your life, Grace. *Velniop*. Fuck. It wouldn't surprise me if they tried to take you to sell to the highest bidder, too. Just the idea of you anywhere near them terrifies me."

Grace sucked in a breath. He never admitted weakness, and it wasn't until that moment that she knew Hope was in extreme danger.

She should have known Andrez wasn't a good man. Mentally kicking herself for her naivete, she willed her shoulders to relax and steadied her breathing. If she wasn't careful, her father would pull the plug, and she'd never see her precious baby again.

"I know how stubborn you are, Grace. No doubts about whose daughter you are. But hear me loud and clear, *Maža mergytė*—baby girl. Luca will accompany you. You'll pose as husband and wife. It will keep you safe and should make it easier to retrieve the baby. This is not up for debate, Grace. You either accept these terms, or we try to retrieve the baby another way. Without you."

If they had a CIA asset there, why did they need a Navy SEAL? And of all of them, why did it have to be Lucky? Shit. Tempest must have been using the voodoo doll on Grace again; otherwise, her luck wouldn't have been this bad.

Luck? Talk about irony. Because spending time with Lucky was the last thing she'd think of as fortunate.

The entire Red Falcon team was bossy, but if you looked up the word Neanderthal in the dictionary, you'd find Lucky's face on display. How could her father expect her to pretend to be his wife? Maybe they should place bets on how long it would take her to kick him in the balls.

"Why do I need a husband if you have the CIA guy there?" Grace asked as she focused on keeping her voice steady and her clenched fists at her sides. "It doesn't make any sense. They already know I want to bring the baby home. I'm sure Andrez would have told them." It wouldn't do her any good to piss her father off. Her fingernails would leave marks on the palms of her hands, but she didn't care.

"It's not safe for you to go alone, no matter what you think. Luca is making an enormous sacrifice to help you and help take down these traffickers. As I said, it's not up for debate. If he doesn't go, you don't go either."

Shut the fuck up.

Seriously?

Praying she'd misheard what he'd said, Grace glanced between the two men. Both looked dead serious. Nope. Her father must be losing his mind if he thought she'd go along with this fucked-up plan.

Except she knew he wasn't crazy, and he was serious. Pavel Miller didn't say anything he didn't mean. He'd lost all his humanity after the murder of their mother in the streets of Marikistan. The big teddy bear had disappeared, leaving behind a cold-hearted bastard. Grace knew he loved her and Tempest, but he never showed it unless you counted all his interference in their lives.

How the fuck was she going to be around Lucky twenty-four/seven without jumping him? Despite being bossy, she found him sexy. She'd have to remember to pack her favorite vibrator and the universal charging cord. Or she could just fuck Lucky and get it over with. Except no other man had affected her this way. Dammit.

Not for the first time, Grace wished she'd brought the baby back with her from Marikistan. However, if this was the only way to save Hope and bring her home, she'd do whatever it took. Hopefully, she wouldn't end up in prison for murdering her fake husband.

"I can take care of myself. You know I can, *Tètis*. You made sure Tempest and I were well-trained." Grace sighed. As much as this pissed her off, no matter what she said, it wouldn't budge her father's decision. Once he decided on something, there was no convincing him otherwise, and she'd learned to pick her battles over the years. "If this is what it takes to bring Hope home, then fine. I'll do it. But I won't promise not to kill him." Grace tipped her chin at Lucky.

The bastard had the balls to grin. Oh yeah, she was going to kill him. She'd make it slow and painful, but not until after she fucked him and scratched that itch.

CHAPTER 3



Lucky attempted to hide his grin but failed as Grace narrowed her eyes at him. It was cute that she thought she could hurt him, let alone kill him. Nope, that wasn't gonna happen in this life or any other. She might think she was a badass, but at this rate, she'd end up with the spanking he'd promised her when they'd been in Marikistan.

As amusing as her anger was, he understood it. He'd been there often, and he almost felt bad for her. Was Miller fooled by her outward calm? From where her father sat, he couldn't see her fists clenched behind her back, her knuckles white from the strain. Lucky would bet she had deep grooves in her palms from her fingernails. His wildcat would use her claws on him at the first opportunity.

Wait, *his wildcat*? Where did that come from? Sure, he loved pushing her buttons, and his hand itched to take her over his knee, but more than that? Nope, wasn't happening.

"If you feel this strongly," Miller said, "we can send Luca alone, or maybe Tempest could accompany him. If she wears a blond wig, she'd look enough like you to fool most people."

"Absolutely not. But well played, old man." Grace looked like she wanted to kick her own ass. He couldn't blame her. She'd walked right into her father's trap.

"I thought not. You're leaving tomorrow. Luca has the flight information and the mission details. Play nice, Grace. He's trained for this. You aren't. I know how stubborn you are,

but if you don't play nice, Luca has my permission to ship you home on the first plane. Do you understand, *Maža mergytė*?"

"Yes, Papa. I'll listen to the big bad Navy SEAL," Grace said.

She didn't fool Lucky for a minute. She'd say whatever it took to convince Miller to allow her to go to Marikistan. The question was how soon he'd end up with a bleeding ulcer.

"I need to get back to my office to make sure everything is in order. I'll see you when you return." Miller rose from the couch, nodded at Lucky, then walked over to Grace. He squeezed her shoulder with one hand and walked toward the front door, his footsteps echoing on the tile flooring.

After being around Tempest and Grace, Lucky couldn't figure out how such a cold-hearted bastard had raised them. Sure, they were prickly and stubborn, but he'd seen their affection for each other. Yet Miller knew how dangerous this was and couldn't hug Grace or tell her he loved her. What the ever-loving fuck?

Lucky didn't have to wait long for Grace's genuine reaction to the plan. As soon as the front door clicked shut, she turned toward him. If she'd been a cartoon character, steam would be shooting from her ears. Her cheeks flushed a beautiful shade of pink, and the anger glittering in her eyes only made her more attractive.

"You might as well just let it all out," Lucky said. "You look like you're about to explode."

Grace crossed her arms across her chest. He thought he heard her grunt. Why was that sound so damn sexy?

He admired Grace's fire. Just like her sister, she would fight 'til the end for what she wanted. Lucky was obviously a glutton for punishment. "I know this is the last thing you want. Trust me, this course of action is not my first or even fifth choice. The entire region is a powder keg ready to explode. Getting Hope out won't be like walking into an adoption agency here. These men are dangerous." Lucky ran his hand through his hair. "Fuck. That's an understatement."

She wrinkled her nose at him. “I’m not a two-year-old. You don’t need to hold my hand as we cross the street. The Navy didn’t train me like Tempest, but my father made sure we could both defend ourselves.”

“Defending yourself has nothing to do with it. These men won’t hesitate to shoot you if they don’t like your expression. From what the undercover asset has said, they’ve already lost three men trying to infiltrate this ring. We can’t blow his cover, either. If we don’t have him, we don’t stand a chance in hell of rescuing Hope.”

Grace dropped onto the sofa, her frustration and anger evaporating. “It’s really that bad?”

“Even worse. Imagine the worst-case scenario, then multiply it by ten. There’s a reason they’re sending you with me. If I could’ve convinced them to send me in alone to retrieve Hope, I would have. But we don’t have time to create a background for me as someone interested in buying babies and children for my pleasure. The asset said now that Hope is healthy, they’re looking to move her as soon as possible.”

As the words left his mouth, it took all his willpower not to punch a wall. The thought of anyone buying children, babies, or even grown women for sex roused the beast he’d kept buried since he’d left his family in New York and joined the Navy.

“Are you okay? You look like you want to kill someone.”

“Yeah, I’m good. These people need to be eradicated from the face of the Earth. Unfortunately, that’s not our mission. I’ll have to leave that to other people to handle.”

Grace nodded. She probably thought she knew what he was thinking, but no one did. Lucky had spent years hiding the monster inside him and even more time trying to salvage his soul once he’d become a SEAL. After years of suppressing his feelings, he had an ironclad grip on his control, and it would stay that way.

“Since we’re stuck together for the foreseeable future, how are we going to do this?” Grace asked, calmer than she’d been

since he'd walked into her home earlier.

It gave Lucky a ray of hope they'd get through this unscathed.

“You mean other than trying not to kill each other?” He grinned to lighten the tension that hung heavy between them.

“Yeah, that.” Grace shot him an unexpected smile.

It took his breath away and made his blood heat. Fuck. It looked like his future would be full of cold showers.

“How married do we have to be?” she asked.

Yeah, that was definitely the elephant in the room. “Real enough that everyone believes it. There can't be any doubts. We need to assume we'll be under surveillance from the moment we step off the plane. They might have eyes on us already. That means public displays of affection, holding hands, smiling at each other, and sharing the same bed. The only place it may be safe to discuss anything would be in the bathroom with the shower running.”

Grace grimaced and leaned her elbows on her knees. Then she rested her head on her hands. “I don't do couple's shit. I've never even had a boyfriend.”

“What?” Lucky didn't know how to unpack that statement. “You haven't...”

She glanced up, looking surprised. “Hold on there, lover boy, don't get the wrong idea. I've fucked plenty, but I don't do relationships.”

Damn. The woman was full of surprises. “Maybe you should download some romance books to read on the plane. I'm sure you can get plenty of ideas.”

She rolled her eyes. “You can't be serious.”

“Dead serious. One hundred percent. If we don't pull this off, that's what we'll both be and probably Hope, too. I sure as fuck don't want anyone else getting their hands on her. Do you?”

Lucky needed to make her understand this wasn't some game. This wouldn't be any easier for him to pretend. He'd been eighteen the last time he had feelings for a woman.

"Fine. I guess I'll be reading on the plane. Good thing we have a long flight," Grace muttered.

"It's possible we're already under surveillance. Your father and the CIA asset put the plan into place yesterday when I agreed to the terms of this mission."

"Why? How could they even do that from Marikistan? And what does it mean you agreed to the terms?"

"It means that I need to go out to my car and get my suitcase because, from this moment on, we're married and have been for over a year. I've been away on business, but I'm back so we can go to Marikistan to adopt our new baby. Oh, I almost forgot."

Lucky reached into his pocket and pulled out two small boxes. The first one held a necklace with a GPS tracker that Miller had made before their meeting. He'd been that sure Lucky would agree. Lucky didn't like being thought of as a sure thing, but he couldn't imagine anyone else on the team agreeing to do this.

Grace would still need a wedding band. With no time to shop, Lucky had stopped at the bank and grabbed his grandmother's ring from his safe deposit box.

He'd avoided even thinking about the ring and what it meant for years. It had always been meant for Maria—his childhood sweetheart. Then, she'd ended up as collateral damage in a bloody war between two mafia families. After that, he'd locked it away and had sworn never to touch it again.

Lucky should have felt something all kinds of wrong when he held it out to Grace. Instead, something warm settled inside his chest. He'd have to deal with that later, much later.

"Oh my God, it's beautiful. Is it real?" Grace asked.

"Yeah, it's real. It was my grandmother's, so try not to lose it, yeah? I think it'll fit. She had small hands like yours."

“I can’t take that.” Grace clasped her hands together.

“Yes, you can, and you won’t remove it either. We need to set some ground rules. You’ll follow them, too, if you want to bring Hope back.”

Lucky met her gaze. Sure, he sounded like a dick, but she needed to understand it was a matter of life or death for all of them.

Grace stared at him. Damn, he wished he could read her expression, but she had an outstanding poker face. Then she sighed. If he hadn’t been watching her so closely, he would have missed the flicker of fear in her expression before she held out her hand to him.

The little hairs stood up on the back of Lucky’s neck as he slid the antique ring onto Grace’s finger. It fit like it was made for her. As he gazed down at her small hand resting in his palm, a lump formed in his throat.

“I’ll be careful. I promise. I’m sure you’ll want to give this to your real wife one day,” Grace murmured so softly he barely heard her.

There’d be no wife, but she didn’t have to know that.

“I have one more thing for you.” Lucky pulled himself together and opened the second box.

Grace’s brows rose with surprise as he lifted the necklace out of the velvet box. The four-leaf clover locket had been engraved with their initials. He had to hand it to Miller. Lucky had taken it a step further—which she would soon discover.

“It’s beautiful. But why a four-leaf clover?”

“Because your father has a strange sense of humor, apparently.” Lucky shrugged. “I guess he figured it would work well with my nickname. Or maybe it was his way of hoping we’d be successful.”

“My father had this made?” Grace stared at the necklace dangling from his hand.

“He did, and it was made before I knew about the mission. It surprised me, too.”

The astonishment on Grace's face would have been humorous if the situation were different. At least, this way, it proved her bastard of a father cared about her. Or that's what Lucky told himself.

"Why would he do that? It seems like overkill because we already have the wedding ring."

"The locket has a GPS tracker embedded in it. If we get separated, I'll be able to find you. If something happens, try not to lose it or let anyone take it from you. I'm hoping it doesn't come to that, but it's one more safeguard. Okay?"

Grace nodded as she took the necklace from him. When she opened the locket, she gasped, then looked up to meet his gaze. "Surely my father didn't add photos of you and Hope?"

"No, that was all me. Tempest sent me a picture of Hope from when you were in Marikistan, and I added it along with mine. I figured if someone tried to take it, they'd understand why you'd fight to keep it. You know—the two loves of your life."

Lucky held back the smirk. That would have been his usual reaction when talking about feelings.

Their marriage might be fake, but he'd do whatever it took to ensure the rest of the world believed they were together. That meant covering every detail, including putting a photo of him and the baby inside the locket.

"We need to make this real, Grace. I'm not kidding. I know you don't like to be told what to do. While we're on this mission, you will do what I say, when I say it, without hesitation. Got it? No sass like the last time we were in Marikistan."

As desperate as Grace was to adopt the baby, he hoped she wouldn't give him any trouble. But she was stubborn, too. Lucky couldn't guarantee she wouldn't go off on her own to save the baby if she had the opportunity. Not that he had the right to demand her obedience. Fuck. The dull throbbing in his temples increased, and he rotated his neck, hoping to ease the

tension that had slowly built since he'd left Knox's office yesterday.

Missions always included risks, but his team took measures to mitigate them. Each of them knew there could be a time when they wouldn't come home alive. They'd signed up for that life. Grace and Hope hadn't. It would be on him to keep them safe, no matter what.

Fuck. Maybe he should have taken Miller up on that drink earlier. If he still prayed, he'd be on his knees asking for help to keep Grace and Hope safe. Too bad that boat had sailed long ago. Maybe his Nona still watched over him as she had when he was young. God knew they'd need all the help they could get.

Grace nodded and clasped the chain around her neck. The pendant rested just above the neckline of her blouse. Anger glittered in her gaze as she met Lucky's. "I'm not stupid. I know about danger. Marikistan isn't the only war-torn location where the UN has placed me. Besides, I grew up there. I know better than most how bad it is. In case you didn't know, they killed my mother in front of my sister and father."

"Trust me, little girl, you have no idea what we're walking into. And if you want to make it out alive, you'll do as I say without hesitation." Yeah, he sounded like a domineering asshole, but sugarcoating the truth wouldn't do either of them any good.

Besides, from the moment he'd met Grace, he'd fought the urge to dominate her. The more she pushed back against him, the more he wanted to toss her over his knee and smack her ass until she gave in.

"Don't call me that. I'm no one's little girl."

"What should I call you, then? What's an acceptable nickname from your husband?" Lucky couldn't hide his smirk as outrage turned her cheeks pink.

"What's wrong with calling me Grace?"

"All the couples I know have pet names for each other. I guess I could call you wildcat."

“I’d take that over little girl, any day. Just remember, sugar bear, that pet names go both ways.” Grace crossed her arms over her chest and grinned.

Did she think that would irk him? Fuck no.

“Do your best, baby. Just follow my directions, and you can call me whatever you want.” Lucky wondered if he’d regret his words as she raised her eyebrows and gave him a knowing look.

“I’m going to grab my bag. You should probably pack.” Shaking his head, he pushed up from the sofa to go out to the rental car he’d driven from Norfolk. They’d leave it at the airport in the morning. “We’ll be on an eight-a.m. flight. We also need to figure out something for dinner.”

When he didn’t hear a word from her, he turned to find her watching him from the couch. “Grace?”

“Yeah, fine.” She sighed as she stood up, followed him out of the living room, and headed up the stairs.

Lucky had no doubts Grace would be trouble, but he liked her fire. He’d just have to tame her enough to keep her alive so they could return home with the baby.

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CHAPTER 4



The next morning, Lucky was already downstairs by the time Grace was ready to go to the airport. She'd been about to ask him to pour her a cup of coffee when she saw him standing at her kitchen island. He sipped coffee as he swiped through his phone. One look at the new and improved Lucky, and she nearly swallowed her tongue.

After they'd said goodnight, and she'd left him to sleep in the guest bedroom, he'd given himself a makeover. Instead of a menacing SEAL, he looked like he'd stepped out of the pages of GQ. The bushy beard was now shaved close to his jaw, and he'd trimmed his mustache. He'd been a solid nine before, but this Lucky was near a fifteen now. It was all she could do not to drool.

Holy fucking hell. Swallowing hard, Grace made a quick turn to drop her suitcase by the front door so she could get a grip on her sex drive. The man was sex on a stick, and she wanted to lick every inch.

Except she didn't even like him. Lucky was the definition of a domineering Neanderthal. She just needed to remember that. Dammit. It would take the performance of her life to pull this fake marriage off. Did they give out Oscars for rescue missions? Doubtful.

Grace hadn't lied when she'd told Lucky that she didn't do relationships. Nope. She was all about the lust and never about love. Fuck that shit. The fewer complications in her life, the better. Her number one rule was to avoid dating alpha males.

Grace didn't do complicated. So, how the hell had she gotten herself into this situation?

After a few deep breaths, Grace got herself back on track. She'd walked into this situation with her eyes wide open. Or at least mostly open. Back in Marikistan, she'd been exhausted after weeks of working at the hospital. Between the hospital being shorthanded and the constant bombing, sleep had been a luxury. She couldn't remember how many lives she'd saved before that morning.

The morning Hope's birth mom had ended up in front of her, she'd been dead on her feet. It hadn't stopped her from promising the dying woman that she'd protect her baby and find her a loving home. But when Grace had looked into Hope's blue eyes, she'd known that she'd be the one to give her that home.

Fuck her sideways. Life was about to be more tangled than one of her grandmother's skeins of yarn.

"Good morning, Gracie," Lucky asked as she stepped into the kitchen. "Want some coffee? We need to leave in a few minutes."

"*Gracie*? I think I hate that more than little girl," Grace grouched as she ignored his question and poured herself a cup of coffee, then added two sugars and some fat-free half-and-half.

"Get up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"No, I was fine until you called me Gracie. Even my family doesn't call me that. Can't you come up with something that doesn't make me sound like I'm five years old?" She was being a brat, but every time she looked at him, her core clenched. Apparently, her libido hadn't gotten the memo that he was off-limits. Still, he was being nice, and she felt like a total bitch.

"Okay, no little girl or Gracie. Wildcat it is," Lucky said.

She didn't give him the benefit of a reaction as she sucked down her coffee. If she had any chance in hell of getting through the day, she'd need caffeine, and a lot of it.

“Did you hear from your team?” Grace asked as she refilled her mug and lifted the coffeepot toward him.

Lucky shook his head. “I’ve already had two mugs. I’m good. And yeah, I heard from Knox this morning. The team will deploy tomorrow and land in Lithuania like last time. Rimkus isn’t sure where we’ll be meeting for the exchange.”

“Rimkus? Is he the CIA asset?” It was the first time Lucky had called him by name.

“Yes, but you’re not supposed to know him. Neither of us are. He’ll know you from Andrez’s description. He may even have a photo of you. We’re not sure.”

Grace nodded as she drained her second cup of coffee, and acid churned in her stomach. Maybe she should have stopped at one mug. This felt a lot more real. Had she really expected to fly into Marikistan with adoption papers, get them notarized by the court, and then fly home with Hope?

“Hey, are you okay?” Lucky lifted her chin with his finger so he could meet her gaze. “You’re pale.”

“I’m fine. I think I just drank the coffee too fast.”

Lucky stared at her a moment longer. She could see he didn’t believe what she’d said, but then he nodded. “I know you don’t trust me. But I swear to you I will do anything necessary to get you and Hope home. Okay?”

“I believe you, and I appreciate it more than you know.” Grace was proud that the words sounded normal. Until she’d said them, she wasn’t sure. Still feeling a little unsteady, she wondered if this was what a panic attack felt like.

“We’d better get going since we have to return the rental car, too.”

“Right.” Grace grabbed their mugs, rinsed them, and put them in the dishwasher. Then she followed Lucky to the door and locked it as he stashed their luggage in the trunk. With one last look at her townhouse, she climbed into the car and put on her seatbelt.

Lucky closed her door, walked around the car, and climbed into the driver's side.

“Ready, Wildcat?”

“As I'll ever be,” Grace replied. She plastered on a smile in case they were being watched and wondered if she'd ever see her home again.

Two and a half hours later, they boarded the plane. Lucky directed her to a window seat in first class.

She looked up at him with surprise.

“We're sitting in first class?”

“Surprise. I used my frequent flyer miles. It's a long ass flight. We might as be as comfortable as we can.” He flashed her a panty-melting grin. But he drew closer and whispered, “Careful.”

Grace smiled and acted sufficiently excited, or she hoped she did. But she really wanted to kick her own ass for that stupid mistake. Questioning anything could be dangerous. Not that it mattered yet, but it would as soon as they landed. Maintaining the charade would be a lot more difficult than she'd figured, and she only had about twelve hours to settle into her role as Lucky's wife.

Shortly after takeoff, Grace grabbed her tablet from her purse. Before bed, she'd taken Lucky's advice and downloaded a bunch of romance eBooks. She'd bought a selection of mostly contemporary but had added a few romantic suspense and a couple of dark mafia books.

“Reading?” Lucky asked as he saw her open the tablet to a reading app.

“Yeah, I downloaded some books to help kill the time.”

Lucky grinned. “Oh yeah, anything interesting?” He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

She laughed. “Maybe?”

Was he flirting with her? And what the fuck was she doing, playing into it? *Staying in character, that's what.* She'd need to keep reminding herself that as charming as he seemed, it was all an act. Besides, she'd be more than happy to never to see him again after the mission was over. Right?

Grace tried to read, but her hands were so cold from anxiety it was hard to hold her tablet. She was about to give up when Lucky leaned close.

“We need to go over our story a few more times before we land,” he said. “When you want to take a break from reading, let me know. We can practice then.”

The heat radiating from him soothed the anxiety and took the chill. Moving in closer, she inhaled. Damn. He smelled delicious, like a spring wind with a touch of mint. How had she not noticed before?

Too soon, he pulled away, and she almost begged him not to go. But then he tipped her face up with his fingertips and touched his lips to hers. They were so warm and soft.

She sucked in a breath in surprise and parted her lips as her eyes closed. When his tongue slid against hers, she moaned into his mouth. Lost in the moment, she slid her hands over his shoulders and around his neck. He tasted like coffee and mint. When had a kiss ever felt this magical?

Too soon, Lucky broke the kiss. As his lips left hers, she opened her eyes, ready to ask for more. Then she gasped at his intense gaze, full of anticipation and heat that mirrored her own.

Heat flooded her cheeks, and she looked away. When she raised her eyes to his face, it was empty of all emotion. Had she imagined it? Did he want her, or was this just more acting on his part?

Grace was out of her comfort zone. So far out of it, she might as well be hanging onto the wing of the plane for dear life. If just one of Lucky's kisses had melted her panties, how was she going to survive this without jumping his bones?

Maybe that was the answer. They could fuck each other and get it out of their systems. It was what she usually did, and she'd never had a problem with it before. It seemed like the best answer, except she couldn't walk away until they'd rescued Hope. Dammit.

The flight attendant interrupted Grace's internal turmoil. She would've loved to order an alcoholic drink but decided on a soda. Lucky ordered the same. After they had their drinks, he turned toward Grace.

"I'm sorry if I surprised you with that kiss," he murmured. "We need to be comfortable touching each other. The sooner, the better."

"I know. I just didn't expect..." Grace didn't know what she wanted to say.

The corner of Lucky's lips tipped up in a slight grin. "I'm glad I wasn't the only one affected by the kiss. I know you don't like me very much, but if this is going to work, we need to act like we're in love."

"Yes, you've told me that enough times." Grace huffed quietly. The last thing they needed was someone to hear their discussion.

"So why are you sitting there looking like you want to either kiss me or kill me?" Lucky asked.

"What? Fuck." Was she? Grace wasn't sure what to do. With a sigh, she shrugged. "Sorry. You took me by surprise, and I didn't want to be affected by your touch. I feel better knowing you were, too."

He nodded, reached over to take her hand in his, and then laced their fingers together. "You're a beautiful woman, and for the foreseeable future, you're mine, and I'm yours. We might as well make the most of it. If you think about it, it would be worse if we couldn't stand each other's touch."

That was a good point. Too bad he was the one who'd made it. Grace didn't enjoy giving up control. She'd decide if she'd have sex and when. Lucky would take charge in the

bedroom, too. The thought made her squirm in her seat, and she frowned.

“Or maybe we can just ignore the attraction and focus on rescuing the baby,” Grace murmured.

Lucky sighed. “This is not my plan, but it’s one I’m stuck with. Do you really want to risk your life and hers?”

Fuck. Her sister had always said Grace didn’t play well with others. She’d probably be fine if she got to call the shots. If she was truly honest with herself, she had more of an issue with being forced to follow someone else’s decisions than she did with Lucky. Did she want to risk their lives and the other children’s lives? Of course not, even if the only way she felt safe was to be in charge.

“No, that’s not what I want,” Grace admitted. “I warned you; I don’t do relationships. But I’m trying, and I’ll keep trying to do better.”

Lucky squeezed her hand. “I won’t make it harder than it has to be. I won’t force you into anything unless it’s life or death. Fair?”

“Yes.” Some of the tension left her shoulders. He’d known what to say to her to give her back a little control. She could do this; for Hope, she’d do just about anything.

“Good. Did you want to read more? Or we can take a nap before they serve the meal.”

Grace fought back a yawn.

Lucky chuckled. “Nap it is. Lean on me, and when the flight attendant comes around again, I’ll get us a blanket.”

“Thank you, Lucky. I’m sorry I’m making this difficult.” There, that wasn’t as hard as she’d expected it to be. She’d apologized, and the world hadn’t ended.

“No worries, Grace.”

Unclasping their hands, he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to lean on him. As her eyes closed, she felt his lips on her forehead.

CHAPTER 5



Their plane landed at Resura Airport without incident. As Lucky and Grace exited the plane, he took in his surroundings. The airport wasn't large, but it was busier than he'd expected, considering Marikistan was still in the middle of a civil war.

Grace squeezed his hand, and Lucky looked down at her. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I guess I didn't expect it to feel so normal, you know?"

Lucky pulled her over to the side and out of the throng of people exiting their plane. "Remember, Wildcat, I won't let anything happen to you." He couldn't resist leaning forward, pushing a lock of her hair behind her ear, and stealing a kiss. The pink staining her cheeks was a bonus.

Grace smirked as he took her hand again. "I think you're enjoying yourself a little too much, buddy."

"Maybe I am." Lucky grinned, and her cheeks flushed brighter. "C'mon, let's get our luggage and find our hotel."

Lucky was told at the briefing with Knox they'd never make their hotel. As Grace's husband, he had to act his part and play surprised when they were waylaid at the airport and taken to one of the organization's safe houses. While there, they'd be under surveillance, and their identities would be verified. If nothing unexpected came up, they'd be moved to a different location after a couple of days.

He hadn't been able to share any of that with Grace. It would have put her in too much danger. The traffickers would expect them to be afraid and intimidated. Lucky hated the idea of Grace being terrified, even if it would help to keep her safe.

Rimkus had sworn that, if they kept to the plan, they shouldn't be in danger. Lucky wasn't sure he fully trusted the undercover asset. He'd seen too many men go bad over the years. The whole thing made Lucky itchy. Just because Miller trusted the man didn't mean he had to trust him, too.

"I hope we don't have to wait long," Grace said.

They stood at the edge of the conveyor belt as they waited for it to move and spit out their bags.

"Me, too. I can't wait to get comfortable." Lucky grinned.

"Are you stiff from the long plane ride, sugar bear?" Grace teased.

"Nah, I'm eager to get my wife alone."

The shocked look on her face almost made Lucky laugh. He was playing with her, but his words felt right, too. He'd expected a snarky come back, but Grace gasped at something over his shoulder.

Instinct had Lucky spinning around and pushing her behind him for protection. It took his brain a moment to catch up. He'd known this was the plan, but it took all his years of training to keep him from defending his woman.

After a deep breath, he faced the armed men. He hoped he looked intimidated and maybe slightly scared as he fought to keep his deadly side buried.

As the two heavily armed men approached, Lucky squeezed Grace's hand to reassure her. She inched close until she pressed up against his back. The warmth of her cheek against him shouldn't have made him feel so good, but he'd have to examine that later. He needed to keep his focus on the threat headed their way.

The muscular men stopped about a foot in front of Lucky with their guns drawn. Apparently, brandishing guns in the

crowded airport didn't cause a stir. Rimkus's intel about the Marikistani government was correct, considering security was stationed throughout the concourse, and no one approached them. If the government wasn't involved, they'd at least paid off security.

"You will come with us now," Thug One said in heavily accented English.

Every instinct screamed at Lucky to take them down and get Grace to safety, but they had a script to follow, even if he was the only one who knew it.

"I think you've made a mistake. We're here to adopt a baby." Lucky kept his voice low and respectful. The last thing he needed was one of them getting antsy.

"We know who you are...Mr. and Mrs. Rossi of Washington, DC in the United States. If you want us to assist you, come with us now." Thug One motioned with his gun, making it clear they had no choice.

"What about our luggage?" Lucky knew he was taking a chance, but he figured it would be odd if he didn't seem concerned about their bags. All he had with him was his laptop bag with the false bottom to hide the fifty thousand dollars needed to buy Hope.

Thug Two grunted and stepped closer.

"Your bags will be brought to you. Now, come," Thug One said, his patience at an end.

Lucky had expected this as well. They'd want to check their luggage for bugs, weapons, or anything that might show they weren't just a couple wanting to adopt a baby.

Grace whimpered behind him, but he couldn't reassure her. He'd do whatever it took to make her feel safe once they were alone. She just needed to hold on until then.

"C'mon, baby. I've got you," Lucky said softly. He grasped her hand and pulled her against his side. Her fingers were freezing, and she shuddered.

Thug One's eyes roamed over Grace's body, and his expression filled with lust. Lucky's muscles tensed with the need to react, but he couldn't—not yet. He'd sure as fuck make sure they paid for all of this before he left Marikistan.

“Come,” Thug One demanded.

Grace clung to Lucky's hand and didn't stray from his side as they made their way through the airport, sandwiched between the two thugs. Not one person acknowledged them, not even an eyebrow raised at the guns on display. It was like being invisible.

Lucky's gut churned as he thought about what could have happened if Grace had made the trip alone. He'd have to thank Miller if they got out of this alive.

The thugs herded them through the automatic doors and outside into the bright sunlight. A black panel van idled at the curb with two armed men leaning against it. At Thug One's nod, they pulled open the side door as Thug Two shoved Lucky and Grace inside, then slammed it shut.

It surprised Lucky that they hadn't cuffed them before they put them into the van. But their captors figured they were just another couple desperate to adopt a baby. He wasn't a trained frogman only playing at being weak.

Not that he could do anything other than go along with all of this. It was fucking frustrating. If this mission taught him anything, he would hate being a spook. Let him loose on the bad guys, and he'd be happier than a pig in shit. All this sneaking around and pretending just made him damn itchy.

Grace had crawled to his side as soon as the door slammed shut. Outside, the men argued in Marikistani. He understood the language, but their voices were too muffled for him to hear clearly enough to know what they were saying.

Doors at the front of the van closed, and it lurched forward.

“Are they going to kill us?” Grace whispered as she grabbed his arm.

The defeat in her voice tore at his heartstrings. Grace never backed away from a fight, but these men had put the fear of God in her.

“No, baby.” The van rumbled and sputtered, but he didn’t want to chance being overheard. Lucky shifted and pulled her onto his lap. He wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her against him to quiet her trembling and to disguise their conversation. “They’re trying to intimidate us to make sure we’re here to adopt the baby and aren’t a threat to the organization.”

“But why? Andrez would have told them about me, that I’d been here when Hope was born.” Grace sniffled, then rubbed her face against his chest, her tears soaking into his shirt.

Lucky rubbed up and down her back. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean you’re not a plant. These fuckers haven’t gotten this far by taking chances,” he whispered into her ear.

“What’s going to happen now?”

He could barely hear her with her face buried in his chest. “We do what they tell us. When they figure out we’re exactly who we say, they’ll let us see Hope.” Lucky mentally crossed his fingers that he was correct. Rimkus had said that it was standard procedure. There was no reason to believe otherwise at this point.

“Okay,” Grace said with a shudder. “I’m really glad I didn’t come alone.”

“So am I, baby. So am I.”

Her trembling quieted, but she didn’t slide off his lap.

For now, all they could do was wait and see where they ended up. The thugs hadn’t hurt them so far. Hopefully, that wouldn’t change. Lucky didn’t know how he’d be able to hold back if they touched Grace.

As Lucky soothed Grace, he checked out the front of the van. The thugs that had grabbed them in the airport were in front. The other two must have taken another vehicle. Most likely to check for tails. There wouldn’t be any, though. His

team wouldn't even be in the country until tomorrow. Knox had given them the tracking information from Grace's pendant. They'd know her location, just like him. But their mission wouldn't start until he and Grace had the baby in her arms. Until then, they'd be on standby in case things went tits up.

Grace was so still, he wondered if she'd fallen asleep. But as the van slowed down, she tensed.

"Shhh, it's okay," he said. "They won't risk their payday."

"Right. But they could take it anyway."

Lucky squeezed her when he heard the strength in her voice. His wildcat was back.

"Just follow my lead. And if they do anything to me, don't get involved. I'll be fine, but I won't be able to hold back if they hurt you."

Grace leaned away from his chest and squinted at up him. "I don't want you hurt, either. But I know I couldn't take one of those brutes, let alone both."

Lucky grinned. "Good girl."

She stiffened and muttered something under her breath he couldn't make out. Exactly the reaction he'd hoped to elicit. Grace hated being called a good girl, which is why he'd said it. He needed her to get through this in one piece.

The van came to a stop, and the men got out.

Lucky whispered into Grace's ear, "Here we go. Remember, no matter what, you protect yourself."

The side door slid open. "Time to get out unless you want me to pull you out." Thug Two motioned from the opening.

Fuckers. Lucky lifted Grace from his lap, shuffled across the van floor, and climbed out. Then he turned and offered his hand to Grace to help her. He half expected the asshole to push him out of the way and was glad when he didn't.

Lucky was happy he'd worn his high-tech watch. It enabled him to keep track of how long they'd traveled and in

what direction. They were northwest of the airport, and it had taken one hour and twenty-seven minutes to get there. The original rendezvous location had been in the city of Resura. Why take them so far away unless the initial meeting information was false?

Thug One walked around the front of the van and gestured to a small, dilapidated house in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing but trees for as far as Lucky could see.

“Welcome home,” he said with an evil laugh.

“Great, Boris is a comedian,” Grace mumbled.

Boris? It was more creative than Thug One. Lucky swallowed his grin and wondered what she’d named Thug Two. Not that he cared. He was just grateful she wasn’t cowering against him any longer.

Lucky grabbed Grace’s hand and followed Boris. He memorized as much as he could about their surroundings. As they stepped onto the front porch, Lucky saw the house wasn’t as rundown as it had first appeared. The front door had a state-of-the-art biometric lock. As Boris scanned his fingerprint, the camera blinked down at them.

Another camera faced the driveway. If Lucky had to guess, there would be cameras covering every exit of the house and more inside. It wouldn’t matter if Boris and his bro stayed with them. They’d monitor their every move, and unless he wanted to relieve Boris of his thumb, they wouldn’t be getting out without him.

Boris stood off to the side so Grace and Lucky could enter. As soon as they cleared the door, it slammed shut behind them.

Grace jumped at the sudden noise. “What the hell?”

“I wondered if they were staying here with us. I guess we have our answer,” Lucky said. He preferred it this way, even if they were under constant video surveillance. It was better than having to worry about Grace being manhandled by the thug twins.

“I’m relieved. I wouldn’t want to worry about Boris and Natasha breathing down my neck,” Grace said.

“Natasha? Seriously?” Lucky grinned.

“What? You didn’t watch Rocky and Bullwinkle when you were a kid?” Grace looked genuinely surprised.

“Ugh, maybe? Probably not, though. Cartoons weren’t big in my family,” Lucky said. By the time he was ten, they’d been grooming him for his role in the *family*. There’d been no time for cartoons or being a kid at all.

“Damn, that really sucks. Tempest and I loved Bullwinkle the moose and Rocky the squirrel. They always got one over on the two Russians—Boris and Natasha—although Bullwinkle was pretty stupid overall. Rocky was the smart one in that relationship. Kind of like us.”

It took Lucky a moment to realize she’d made a joke. “You think so?”

“Of course.” It was fun to watch her struggle not to laugh, and when she lost the battle, it was one of the best sounds he’d heard in a long time, like the chiming of tiny bells.

“You’re being pretty brave since we’re locked in here together, and I know just how ticklish you are,” Lucky said. Although he didn’t know if she was, it worked for their roles.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Grace tried to look serious, but she was still laughing. At least he had his answer.

He couldn’t resist and pulled Grace into his embrace. She sucked in a breath but didn’t pull away. Leaning down, he brushed his lips over hers. He wrapped her hair around his fingers and gave it a slight tug.

She sighed, allowing him entrance to her mouth. She tasted like berries and cream, and he couldn’t get enough of her. He deepened the kiss, his tongue tangling with hers.

Reluctantly, Lucky pulled away from her lips. She panted in time with him, her cheeks flushed pink. She felt so good in his arms that he wasn’t ready to release her.

The kiss hadn't been the smartest move. They hadn't made it more than three steps into the house. He hoped their captors had enjoyed the show.

“As much as I'd like to keep kissing you, we should probably look around. We don't know how long we're going to be here, and I'm getting hungry. You must be, too.”

He wasn't, but they were supposed to be civilians, and it had been hours since they'd eaten on the plane.

It had taken just about every bit of restraint Lucky owned not to go from room to room looking for their surveillance equipment. The only thing that stopped him was knowing an average guy wouldn't even think of it. Kissing Grace was so much better than punching a wall or two.

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CHAPTER 6



*H*oly fuck, that man could kiss. Grace had forgotten about everything while he'd kissed her. She'd almost groaned when he'd pulled back. Then she'd realized where they were. Whoever had taken them had probably seen it all, too.

Not that she cared, not really. She had no problem with PDA if it was her idea, but it had been all Lucky. He'd taken control, and she'd let him—he'd even pulled her hair. Dammit. Now, she was stuck in wet panties unless their luggage had arrived.

“Want to see about eating or look around first?” Lucky asked.

Grace's stomach picked that moment to growl, and she winced. “Let's see if they left food for us or if Boris and Natasha plan on starving us to death.”

Lucky grinned and took her hand. Expecting the kitchen to look as bad as the outside, Grace couldn't hide her surprise at seeing the modern appliances. The last thing she wanted to do was cook, so she headed for the refrigerator, hoping to find something ready to eat.

“Looks like we can have sandwiches or frozen pizza,” Grace said as she looked through the fridge and freezer. “What sounds good?”

“How about sandwiches? I really don't feel like waiting. It's been a fucking long day already,” Lucky said.

It had been a suckful day. One she hoped never to repeat. Ironic, really, since they were being held against their will, even if the place wasn't half bad.

Lucky pulled plates and glasses out of the cabinets while Grace gathered the cheese, meat, and condiments and placed them on the small kitchen table. There was even a loaf of fresh bread on the counter. It had to have been Natasha. He seemed to be the more domesticated of the two man-beasts.

Grace took a bite of her sandwich and groaned. She'd been starving, which made the food taste better than expected. Embarrassment warmed her cheeks until she looked across the table at Lucky. He chewed his sandwich like he was eating a meal at Ruth's Chris Steak House.

"Is food supposed to taste better when you're held captive?" she asked after taking another bite.

"Maybe? If we meet any other captives, we'll have to ask them, huh?" Lucky answered after swallowing. His eyebrow quirk made her realize what she'd said.

Shit. Fuck. Damn. If she wasn't careful, she'd get them killed. What would happen to Hope then? She shuddered, thinking about it. Thank goodness Lucky covered up her faux pas. She couldn't even blame being tired. None of this was real. It was all a ruse to enable them to rescue the baby. Letting her guard down couldn't happen again.

They cleaned up the kitchen and put the dishes in the dishwasher when they finished eating. The back of her neck itched with the feeling of being watched.

Grace tried to find the cameras she knew were there, but unlike the ones outside, these weren't easy to spot. She'd have to ask Lucky if he'd spotted any if they could find a place to talk without being monitored.

The house was small. Besides the living room and kitchen, there was a bathroom and two bedrooms off the hallway. There wasn't even a master bath. Lucky led her into the larger of the two bedrooms. Grace was relieved to see their suitcases on the end of the bed.

“At least we won’t have to wear the same clothes tomorrow,” Grace said. She unzipped her bag and gasped.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Lucky asked. When he saw the mess inside of her suitcase, he whistled. “Shit, they really fucked up your stuff. I can’t wait to see mine.”

Grace nodded. She’d put all the baby supplies for Hope in her bag. It creeped her out that they’d pawed through all her things. Fuck. They’d even torn open the diapers. Did they really think she would have hidden something in the sealed package?

Lucky’s bag wasn’t in any better condition. It looked like they had dumped it on the floor, tossed everything around, and then shoved it all back into the suitcase.

“I don’t understand. Why would they do this? They know we’re here to get Hope. Why would we do anything to risk losing our chance to adopt her?” Grace asked, her voice filled with outrage.

“I don’t know, Wildcat. I guess they’re making sure we’re not bringing in contraband...?”

“I wouldn’t even know what that is. But did they have to destroy all the baby stuff? We’re going to have to find new diapers for Hope. They trashed these.”

“Don’t worry, baby girl. They won’t keep us here forever. It’s got to be some kind of misunderstanding. Why don’t you take a shower? It’s been a fucking long ass day.” Lucky wrapped her in a tight embrace. While snuggling, he whispered into her ear, “Everything is going according to plan. They even gave us our stuff back, even if they did fuck with it. Trust me, and we’ll get through this, okay?”

Grace rubbed her face against his neck in acknowledgment. This surveillance stuff was getting on her last nerve. Although she had to admit it was better than being scared shitless at the airport. She’d take pissed off over terrified any day of the week.

Lucky was right. He’d warned her it wouldn’t be easy. Now she just needed to suck it up. They were in Marikistan

now, and maybe they'd get to see Hope tomorrow. These were good things. That's what she had to hold on to.

"Fine. But if they messed with my shower gel, they'll be sorry," Grace grumbled as she pulled out her toiletry bag and a T-shirt and shorts to put on for bed. No way was she sleeping in anything revealing. Fuck that shit. Nudity didn't bother her, but Boris and Natasha weren't getting any free shows.

The bathroom looked like it'd had a facelift, like the kitchen. It even had a large walk-in shower. The best part, it was clean. Thank God. Grace would have marched herself into the kitchen and had a sponge bath otherwise. This was where she drew the line. Maybe it made her a bathroom snob, but so be it.

Grace put her bath stuff on the counter and her clothes on the back of the toilet. She turned on the water to let it heat and mumbled while she looked for her toothbrush. "Please, get hot. I don't think I could handle a cold shower right now."

"Did you call me?" Lucky asked.

Startled, Grace jumped and screeched. "You know better than to sneak up on me like that. Especially in a strange place." He didn't, but Boris and Natasha didn't need to know that.

"Sorry, baby. I thought you were inviting me to join you in the shower. I guess that's just wishful thinking, huh?" Lucky wiggled his eyebrows and ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up on his head. As he'd raised his arm, she realized he'd removed his shirt.

Holy hell.

A half-naked Lucky was enough to jack up her heart rate all over again. He looked hot in clothing, but now she wanted to lick his pecs like a lollipop. Did she dare? It probably wasn't her best idea.

Still, he'd dropped the shower hint. She'd love to call him on it, but then there was Boris and Natasha. Dammit. She'd behave—for now. This thing between them would make them crazy if they didn't scratch the itch soon. If she got him out of

her system, her focus would be on getting Hope instead of impaling herself on his cock.

“As tempting as you are, sugar bear, I’ll have to take a rain check. Try not to be too disappointed.” Grace squeezed toothpaste onto her toothbrush, but all she had to do was look up to see him in the mirror. Thank goodness the toothbrush jammed in her mouth kept her from drooling.

She didn’t want him to know how much he affected her, even if she’d have to be dead not to notice his muscles had muscles. Her gaze continued down his chest. It was like watching a train wreck, and she couldn’t have stopped looking if her life had depended on it. Fuck. He could be on the cover of a romance novel—that Adonis belt was classic. But when her gaze dropped to the enormous tent in his jeans, dampness pooled between her legs. Fucking hell. At least she wasn’t the only one suffering.

Lucky chuckled as he shrugged his massive shoulders. “Your loss, baby.”

When their gazes connected in the mirror, she rolled her eyes and smirked.

It wasn’t until Grace stepped into the shower and was lathering her hair that she remembered what Lucky had said about running water. Shit. Fuck. Damn. Had he wanted to talk to her without Boris and Natasha listening in? Should she say tell him she’d changed her mind? Would that be weird? Ugh. She needed to stop letting her husband’s body distract her from the mission. Even though just thinking those words sent a delicious shiver down her spine.

Grace worried Lucky had needed to tell her something. What if he had new information? Not that he’d had a moment without her to get any news. No way would Rimkus leave something in the house for him. It would be too risky. Or maybe it wouldn’t? All this spy stuff was beyond her. She just wanted to feel Hope in her arms and get her to safety. Why did it have to be so hard? And why the fuck was she whining? This wasn’t her. If she wanted something, she took it. But she was out of her element. There were too many variables she

had no control over. Grace hated not being in control—except when Lucky took over. Not that she'd ever admit it to him or anyone else.

She turned off the water and pulled open the frosted glass door to reach for a towel. Lucky turned around with his toothbrush in his mouth and handed it to her. She'd heard him come into the bathroom but had figured he'd gone back into the bedroom.

As Lucky's gaze slid over her naked form, he didn't even try to disguise the lust that heated his expression. Grace could have pulled the door shut or pulled the towel against her. However, they were supposed to be married; it would be odd to hide from her husband. Besides, she knew she looked good and had curves in all the right places. There was no shame in her game.

“Your turn.” Grace stepped out of the shower and dried off.

“Umm, what?” Lucky pulled the toothbrush out of his mouth and looked confused.

“The shower, dear. Unless you're going to wait?” Grace gave him her wide-eyed, innocent look and tried to hold back her laughter.

“Ugh, yeah. Thanks.” Lucky shook his head and rinsed out his mouth.

Grace smacked him on the ass as she grabbed her clothes and slid by him. The bathroom wasn't small, but he took up more than his share. She needed some space between them.

Tension pulsed along Grace's nerve endings as she finished drying off and put on the shorts and T-shirt. The entire experience was so different from what she'd expected. She'd owe Lucky and her father an apology when this was over. Until then, she'd dream up all the ways she could make these fuckers pay for trafficking innocents.

Grace was sitting on the side of the bed, combing her hair, when she heard the first strains of Lucky's off-key singing. Or maybe he'd smuggled a beached whale in there. She was still

giggling just thinking about it when he opened the bathroom door, and Mr. Sex-on-a-Stick appeared in a cloud of steam.

Her laughter dried up as soon as she realized he was naked except for the towel hanging low on his hips. If it dropped, she'd finally get to see the whole package.

"Were you singing, or did a beached whale visit you?" Grace asked as she averted her gaze from her fake husband.

"Funny, baby girl. Remind me to punish you later. Did you pack your wooden hairbrush?" Lucky asked, his expression unreadable.

Grace's cheeks heated, and she had to fight to keep still as his implication raised goosebumps along her arms. What would it be like to have him punish her, to carry out the spanking he'd promised the last time they'd been in Marikistan? What the hell was wrong with her? It had to be the tension of being locked in the house after being scared out of her wits earlier. No way would she let a man put her over his knee, even if he was a sex god.

"I don't remember you sounding this bad at home," Grace said, remembering her role and how she would've heard him sing many times.

"Hmm, maybe it's the acoustics here, and I ran out of hot water."

"I call bullshit. I saw how much steam came out when you opened the door," Grace said as she continued to comb the knots out of her damp hair. She needed to focus anywhere but on him.

Lucky shrugged. "Damn. That was harsh, baby." Then he ripped the towel off and tossed it into the bathroom.

Fucking hell. She'd assumed he'd be well-endowed, but her imagination hadn't come close to the real thing. Her jaw dropped with his towel. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight of his chiseled body.

Lucky approached like a panther stalking his prey, and Grace's pulse pounded in her ears as he leaned closer. Instead of pulling her in for the kiss she craved, his rough fingers

cupped her chin and then pushed up to close her still gaping mouth. Fuck. She shouldn't be this disappointed, and it was all she could do not to punch him in the balls.

“Cat got your tongue, baby girl?” Lucky smirked.

Grace was going to kill him. Or maybe she'd just fuck him. The only things holding her back were Boris and Natasha. They were definitely watching and probably recording. She wanted Lucky so badly she could almost taste him, but making a sex tape had never been on her to-do list.

CHAPTER 7



It had been too easy to tease Grace. She'd expected him to kiss her. Lucky almost had—his mouth watered for more of her taste. The kiss in the kitchen had left him hard, and even the cold finish to his shower hadn't taken off the edge. Plus, he needed to talk to her.

After Grace had stepped into the shower, Lucky had made a quick reconnaissance of the house. Every room had at least one camera, with three in the kitchen and one in the living room. Lucky had expected those, but Rimkus told him the bathroom should be clear, except it wasn't. The motherfuckers had upped their game, or they had more than the usual suspicions about him and Grace.

The Red Falcon team had learned sign language for situations like this. Too bad he hadn't asked Grace if she knew it. Now, he wanted to kick himself for the oversight. He'd have to find another way to let her know that she'd have no privacy while they were in this house and probably wherever they went next.

Lucky didn't care who saw him naked, but the thought of these fuckers drooling over Grace infuriated him. Only his years of training kept him from putting his fist through the vanity mirror where they'd embedded the camera. Instead, he'd tried to block their view, but he knew they'd seen more than enough.

"Do you think we'll get to see Hope tomorrow?" Grace's voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

“I don’t know, baby,” Lucky said as he pulled on a pair of navy boxer briefs. When he turned toward her, he caught her checking out his ass. They needed to dispel the sexual tension between them, or they’d combust. It was a dangerous distraction when so much was on the line. But would one fuck be enough? Would she agree, knowing they were under surveillance?

“I’m worried about her. Now that we’re here, it’s torture not to see or hold her.” Grace’s frustration colored her tone.

“I know, baby. Hopefully, that will change tomorrow. I’m sure they want our money as much as we want Hope.” Lucky knelt in front of Grace and pulled her fisted hands into his. It always surprised him how tiny she was since her personality was huge.

“I hate this.”

If he hadn’t been touching her, he wouldn’t have felt her shudder. “I think I have the perfect distraction.”

“You do?” Grace narrowed her eyes at him but couldn’t hide the pink that spread over her cheeks and her sharp inhale.

“Baby, I’d give you everything, even the moon, if you asked for it. You’ve got to know that by now.” It surprised Lucky at how right those words felt.

Grace looked like she was trying to read his mind, but her shaking stopped. Releasing her hands, he zipped up their luggage and moved it to the corner of the room. Then, he sat down next to her on the bed.

He gave her a few seconds before lifting her onto his lap, so she straddled his hips.

“Lucky?”

“It’s all right, baby. Let me take care of you.” He needed to feel her come apart. Luck wasn’t sure when his desire to fuck this woman had changed to something more, but it didn’t matter. There was a damn good chance he’d never see her again when he got her and Hope out of Marikistan.

Lucky half expected her to climb off or punch him as she raised her hands. She slid her hands over his shoulders and through his hair. Her nails scratched at his scalp. He should have known better. This was Grace. A woman who took what she wanted when she wanted, and he'd give her all she could handle.

He pulled her closer until her hot pussy rubbed against his erection—only two thin layers of fabric between them.

“Oh, sugar bear, it looks like you have a little problem. Need me to take care of it?” Grace murmured. Their lips were so close he inhaled her minty breath.

“It's hardly little, love.” Lucky couldn't wait any longer, and he closed the gap between them. He grasped the back of her neck as he nipped at her bottom lip.

Lucky hoped she wouldn't fight him. He'd dreamed of dominating her since the first time he'd seen her. Her submission would be beautiful if she'd let herself give in.

Grace's moan parted her lips, giving him access to her mouth. He tongue-fucked her mouth the way he'd take her pussy. Taking possession of her mouth, he relished her sweet flavor mixed with her mint toothpaste and inhaled the scent of her arousal mixed with the citrus of her body wash.

Lucky's cock throbbed as she rubbed against him. Her arousal soaked through their clothes. He released her lips and leaned his forehead against hers as he tried to catch his breath. This woman would be the death of him, but what a way to go.

“Under the covers, baby, and get naked,” Lucky ordered. Then he lifted her off his lap and put her on the bed.

Grace looked like she was going to argue, but one look at his face, and she scrambled under the blanket.

“Good girl.” Lucky got up and grabbed his wallet from the dresser. He hadn't planned on having sex with Grace but always carried a few condoms with him. She was probably on birth control, but he wouldn't assume, and he couldn't ask.

After dropping two foil packages on the bedside table, Lucky smiled when he saw her sleep shorts and T-shirt on the

floor next to the bed. He shut the light off, took off his boxer briefs, and climbed into bed. If they stayed under the covers, it would give them some privacy even if the cameras had night vision.

Lucky slid under the covers and settled over Grace. He rubbed the head of his cock against her soaked pussy. Fuck. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted a woman as much as he wanted Grace.

"What do you need, baby?" Lucky whispered against her lips. They were listening, but he wouldn't make it easy on the bastards.

"I need your mouth on me," Grace said and arched her back to rub her breasts against him.

"Where, baby? Here?" Lucky knew what she wanted, but he needed to hear her say the words. He kissed her—hard. When he pulled away, they were both panting.

"No. Yes. I need more. Make me come."

There she was. His wildcat. Yeah, he wanted her submission, but he loved her fight, too.

"You want me to eat you, Wildcat?"

"Fuck, yes. Stop stalling," Grace muttered.

Lucky laughed. He would lick and suck on her until she screamed his name. But she'd have to wait. If this was going to be his only time with her, he'd take his time getting there.

Leaning close, he whispered into her ear, "We'll keep under the blanket. No sense in giving them a show. They'll still hear us."

Grace nodded, then turned her head and nipped his earlobe. "Stop teasing me, or I'll get myself off."

Lucky grinned. "I wouldn't try it unless you want to suffer the consequences."

"Hurry up, then," Grace demanded in a loud whisper.

"Clasp your hands over your head. Don't move them if you want to come." He wondered if she'd obey him. She

didn't make him wait long.

With a huff, she lifted her hands and grabbed her wrists. "Happy, Master?"

Sarcasm laced her words and made him want to prove he was exactly that. Fuck. Not that it was going to happen now or ever. But he'd control her orgasm, edge her until she begged him for it.

"Be careful, baby girl." Lucky bit her neck and sucked, needing to mark her, even if she wasn't really his. Then he slid under the blanket.

He kissed and licked his way down to her breasts, nuzzling along the underside until she wiggled against him. Smiling, he sucked a pert nipple into his mouth. The flesh pebbled under the gentle suction. So responsive. What would she do if he bit it? His teeth grabbed the tip, and he bit down until she gasped, then he soothed the pain with his tongue. While he alternated between sucking and biting, his fingers pinched and rolled her other nipple. Fuck, she tasted good. He switched breasts and continued to suck and bite until she whimpered, her head thrashing on the pillow.

"Please, Luca. I need..." Grace begged.

Fuck. He'd dreamed about making her beg for his cock, but her breathless words were so much sweeter than he'd imagined. Hearing her say his real name made more pre-cum ooze out of his dick. He couldn't remember ever being this hard.

"I know, baby girl."

Lucky wanted to sink his thick cock into her drenched pussy more than he wanted his next breath, except he hadn't tasted her yet. His mouth watered, and he kissed and nibbled his way down to her stomach. He loved her curves, more to hold on to, and he didn't have to worry about snapping her like a twig.

When he finally settled between her legs, he rubbed his nose against her mound, inhaling her sweet scent. "Keep your hands above your head, baby girl."

“Fuck, how...fine. Stop teasing me,” Grace complained.

He almost laughed. Except he felt her need as keenly as his own. Unable to wait, he used his thumbs to part her lower lips and dragged his tongue along her pussy.

The first taste of Grace almost made him come. Lapping at her soaked folds, he groaned. Sweet. Tangy. Perfection. He'd never get enough of her.

Except he wouldn't have a choice in leaving her when this mission was over. Forcing the thought to the back of his mind, he slid his tongue inside her pussy and licked at her juices.

Grace arched her hips against his mouth and moaned her frustration. Even though he'd like to spend hours eating her out, he didn't want to come as soon as he entered her.

Her clit beckoned him like a buoy in the middle of the ocean. He sucked it between his lips and bit down.

“Oh, fuck.” Grace moaned.

Lucky lapped and nibbled her swollen nub as he pushed two fingers into her tight pussy. “You can't come until I tell you.

“Damn you.” Grace groaned her frustration.

Nipping at her clit, he pushed a third finger into her and scissored them. He wasn't small, and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her. Her juices slid over his hand and her muscles clenched his fingers tightly. He'd made her wait long enough. His girl needed to come.

Lucky bent his fingers to rub against her G-spot. “Come, baby girl. Now.”

He wasn't sure she'd do it. She wasn't a trained submissive.

“Oh, my God. Yes,” Grace screamed.

Lucky continued to fuck her with his fingers as he licked and nibbled her clit. After her tremors subsided, he slid up her body and kissed her. Her essence painted his lips and chin, but she didn't pull away from his kiss. Instead, she slid her tongue

into his mouth and sucked on him like she was starving, and he was her last meal.

Unable to wait a moment longer, Lucky reached for a condom, tore open the wrapper with his teeth, and rolled it over his cock. Then he settled between her legs and slowly pushed the head of his dick into her passage. Fuck. She was so tight.

“Easy, baby. You need to relax,” Lucky whispered against her lips.

“I’m trying, but you’re fucking huge,” she muttered.

He reached between them and thumbed her clit as he slid in as slowly as he could, sweat beading on his forehead. Inch by agonizing inch, he sank, his muscles quivering. When he was all the way in, and his balls rested against her ass, he stilled, giving her a chance to get used to him.

“You need to move, dammit,” Grace pleaded.

He pulled out, except for the head, and thrust inside. Her muscles clenched around his dick, hugging him tight. He wouldn’t last long, but he wanted her to come again. He rocked his hips, grinding the base of his cock against her clit. Fucking her was better than any fantasy he’d ever had.

Grace kept her hands above her head, but she wrapped her legs around his hips and crossed her feet below his ass, urging him on. That was all the invite he needed. Tremors wracked her as he fucked her hard, his skin dampening with sweat.

His balls tightened. So close.

“Fuck. Grace, come for me,” he demanded and pinched her clit, sending her over the edge. He thrust twice more before coming deep inside her pussy.

Lucky gently kissed Grace, needing her to understand the feelings he’d never say out loud. As his breathing returned to normal, he rolled them over, his softening cock still inside her. She settled on his chest and rubbed her face against his neck.

Contentment like he’d never known filled him. His brain was quiet instead of the constant hum of thoughts and worries.

It would only be a matter of time before he'd regret this, but for now, he'd enjoy it while it lasted.

"You okay, baby?" Lucky hadn't held back. Had he been too rough, too demanding?

"Perfect, just perfect," Grace's sleepy voice answered him.

She needed to rest so she'd be ready for whatever waited for them tomorrow. Lucky moved Grace and slid out of bed to take care of the condom.

So much for his brain being quiet. Just the thought of what was coming made him want to put his fist through the wall. Miller swore Rimkus was trustworthy. If he was, they'd go to a different location to see the baby. But Lucky's gut told him something was off, and his gut was never wrong.

Lucky climbed into bed, and Grace moved closer until her ass snuggled against him. He rolled his eyes. Between the semi from Grace's ass rubbing against him and worries about tomorrow, it was going to be a long fucking night.

CHAPTER 8



Grace stretched as she woke up. Her eyes popped open. It wasn't her bed. Nothing looked familiar. Confusion had her pushing up to lean against the headboard. A chill raised goosebumps on her arms. She looked down and groaned at the love bites on her breasts. Why was she naked? Where were her pajamas? Damn, she was out of it. Yanking the blanket up to her chin, the events of the previous day flooded her thoughts. The airport. Boris and Natasha.

“Shit. Fuck. Damn.” Grace sighed.

She'd fucked Lucky.

Actually, no—he'd fucked her—that was so much worse. What had she been thinking? That was the problem. She hadn't been. At least, not with her brain, anyway. Grace never lost control, though. If she wanted to fuck, she did. So why did this feel different?

Grace couldn't remember the last time she'd come so hard. Luca Rossi might be a bossy asshole, but his orgasms had shattered her into a million tiny stars.

Speaking of Mr. Sex-on-a-Stick, where the hell was he? The other pillow was cold to the touch. He hadn't been in bed for a while then. The house sounded quiet, too quiet. Had they taken him while she'd been sleeping?

A wave of panic had her jumping out of bed, adrenaline sending her racing out of the room to find him. Nothing mattered but finding Lucky. Not stopping to pull on her pajamas or consider that Boris and Natasha were watching.

Relief at seeing him standing in the kitchen didn't stop her from launching herself into his arms and wrapping her legs around his hips.

"Hey, hey, baby. What's going on?" If Lucky was surprised that his fake wife was climbing him like a monkey, he didn't let on. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"Sorry. Yes, I'm fine. It's just when I woke up and you weren't there, I thought they might have taken you," Grace said. Her pulse pounded in her head, and she knew he felt her trembling.

"I'm sorry, baby. You were sleeping so soundly I figured I'd wake you after I made coffee and something for breakfast." Lucky tipped her head up. The heat of his gaze eased the chill in her bones.

Fuck. Now that the worry over Lucky eased, her brain kicked in. She'd run through the house naked and freaking out. Grace groaned at the show she'd put on for Boris and Natasha. She could just imagine what she looked like. "I guess I should put some clothes on." She tried to pull out of his arms, but he held her tighter.

"I've got you, baby." Lucky kissed her forehead and carried her into the bedroom before putting her down. "Are you sure you're okay? I hate that you were scared."

Grace nodded against his chest before putting some space between them. "It was stupid. I don't know what I was thinking."

"It wasn't stupid, Grace. Yesterday was scary as fuck. Then you woke up in a strange bed alone."

Grace searched his expression for some sign of sarcasm but only saw concern. "I should get dressed. I don't want to be naked if Boris and Natasha show up."

"Yeah, probably a good idea. I was going to make French toast. Does that sound good?" Lucky asked.

He didn't take his eyes off her face. She'd expected his gaze to wander since she was stark naked. But he kept

surprising her. Was he just an ass in front of his teammates? Or was this part of the role her father had forced on him?

“French toast sounds great. I’ll be out in a few minutes.” Grace forced a smile onto her face. It didn’t fool him because he pulled her against him and kissed her.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth yet,” Grace said.

“Really? You think I care about that? Your kisses are always sweet, baby.”

Fuck. The man could charm the panties off a nun if he put his mind to it.

She’d expected today to be awkward. Her morning-afters always were, but something had changed between them. Instead of just scratching an itch, they’d opened a door she hadn’t expected or wanted. It left her feeling unbalanced, her skin prickling with awareness and yearning for him to fill her until she didn’t know where he started and she ended. Except Grace didn’t do repeats—or relationships.

After brushing her teeth and getting dressed, she tried to do something with her hair but gave up and put it in a messy bun on top of her head. Then she packed everything back into her suitcase in case they had to leave.

The scent of cinnamon greeted her as she walked into the kitchen. Apparently, Lucky could cook—it was both a surprise and a relief since Grace burned water. Coffee and cereal with milk were the extent of her breakfast ability.

“That smells delicious. I’m surprised they had all the ingredients here,” Grace said as she made a beeline for the coffeepot.

“I was, too. But I’m not complaining. No bacon or syrup, though. But better than eating sandwiches again.” Lucky plated the French toast and carried it to the table.

Grace poured a cup of coffee and added milk and sugar. “Do you need a refill?”

“Thanks, baby.” Lucky held out his mug so she could top it off.

It was crazy how domestic they were, considering neither of them believed in relationships. Maybe it was being held captive that had changed the dynamic. Nothing else made sense.

“There’s some jelly in the fridge. Would you like that?” Lucky asked as he put a slice on her plate.

“Nah, I’m sure it will be fine. The cinnamon always makes it taste so good.” Grace was glad she remembered she would’ve had this before. The knot in her stomach grew as the unknowns crept into her thoughts. What if they didn’t even have Hope? Maybe they did this all the time just to steal the money.

Forcing herself to take a bite, Grace looked up to see Lucky’s questioning gaze. She didn’t know what to say or what would be safe. Instead, she shrugged her shoulders. “Delicious. I knew it would be even without the syrup.”

“You’re just saying that because you didn’t have to cook.” Lucky smiled, and some of her tension eased.

“You know me too well.” It was surreal, bantering back and forth. Could they really convince these people they were a couple? It felt like every conversation was like dancing around land mines, waiting for it to blow up in their faces.

After meeting Lucky the first time, she would never have believed he could be like this if she hadn’t experienced it for herself. He was so different, and yet, he wasn’t. Was it Grace who’d changed? Was letting Hope into her heart thawing the frozen rock that had lived in her chest since she’d lost her mom? There was too much going on to analyze any of this shit. Her focus needed to be on saving Hope and getting her home. The rest could wait.

“Do you think we’ll be stuck here all day? I don’t know why they didn’t just bring us to Hope,” Grace said. Then she got up to refill her coffee. She was too restless to sit still for long.

“I don’t understand it either. I figured they only wanted the money, and then we’d get Hope and all the papers to bring her

home. I could kick my ass for bringing you here and putting you in danger.”

Grace put her mug on the table and reached for his hand. She knew what he was trying to tell her, but she wouldn't go down that road. She was always going to come to get Hope. “I'd never let you come alone. I can't wait to hold our baby.”

Lucky pulled her into his lap and kissed her. Holding her close, he whispered into her ear, “They should let us see the Hope today. But my gut is saying something is wrong. We need to expect anything.” He nipped her earlobe before pulling back with a grin.

The knot in Grace's stomach twisted tighter. The traffickers could do what they wanted. It wasn't like this was a legal adoption. Grace wanted to cry when she thought about all the stolen babies and children. If it hadn't been for Hope, she'd never have known.

“I'll clean up since you cooked,” Grace said. She leaned into his embrace and rubbed her lips against his in a chaste kiss. As she tried to stand up, Lucky pulled her closer.

“You call that a kiss?” Lucky asked.

Uh oh. Grace was playing for the cameras, but the thick erection pressing against her hip was all too real.

“Umm, yeah? You have a problem with it?” Fuck this man. She shouldn't still want him.

“Yes, baby, I do.” Lucky's heated expression dampened her panties.

Lucky took possession of her mouth, swiping his tongue along her lips until she opened for him. He tasted like cinnamon and coffee, and she couldn't get enough.

They both heard the beeping of the biometric lock on the front door, and Lucky released her lips. Grace's first instinct was to jump off Lucky's lap, but he held onto her. Yeah, duh. If they were really a couple, she'd want to be as close to him as possible.

“Whatever happens, just follow my lead. I won’t let anything happen to you,” Lucky whispered. The tension in his embrace lessened with her nod. Whatever else she believed about this man, she knew without a doubt that he’d protect her and Hope with his life.

Boris and Natasha walked into the kitchen, and it was like they sucked out all the air. Grace said a prayer of thanks that they didn’t have their guns pointing at them.

“Come. We go for a ride now,” Boris said, his broken English making him sound even more like a thug.

Lucky squeezed her waist, then stood her on the floor. “Let me just grab our suitcases...”

“No, you come now,” Natasha growled.

Grace couldn’t remember if he’d spoken yesterday or not, but he sounded even more like an animal than Boris. Where the fuck had they found their henchman? They’d obviously skipped a few million years of evolution—and she’d thought Lucky was a Neanderthal. She almost laughed until she saw the lust on Boris’s face.

Fuck. A wave of nausea washed over her. Grace needed to get a grip. Even if they had seen her naked, they wouldn’t do anything. Hopefully. Maybe? She didn’t need to give them a reason to steal her away from Lucky. The thought had her reaching to make sure the shamrock locket was still around her neck. As long as she wore it, he’d find her. He’d promised.

“Are we going to see the baby?” Lucky asked.

Natasha grunted, but neither of them answered.

“I guess that’s a no?”

Well, shit. What was Lucky doing? Taunting them couldn’t be good and was probably out of character. A frisson of fear slid down Grace’s spine, leaving her chilled to the bone. So much for her standard bravado. Her father would be ashamed of her.

Lucky didn’t speak again and twined their fingers together. They followed the evil henchman out to the living room.

Lucky stopped to pick up his laptop bag. It had the money for the adoption, and they couldn't afford to lose it.

"Leave it," Natasha said.

Wow. He could make words. At least Grace's inner snark hadn't run for the hills yet.

Lucky hesitated. He didn't have a choice. They both knew it. If he didn't do as they asked, he'd blow his cover. With a small shrug, he put the bag on the coffee table in front of the couch. She could practically see the steam coming out of his ears. His earlier concern that something was off echoed in her mind.

Natasha held open the door while they followed Boris outside. It had gotten a lot cooler, and Grace was thankful she'd put on jeans and a sweater instead of a T-shirt.

The black van waited for them outside, with the side door already open. It was only Boris and Natasha, and Grace wondered if that was good or bad for them.

"Get in."

Yeah, they knew the routine. You'd think they could have a seat, at least. Lucky helped her climb up and then followed her in. He scooted to the opposite side and leaned against the side of the van. Grace winced as the door slammed and settled beside him.

"Where do you think we're going?" she asked quietly.

"I hope to see the baby."

"Why wouldn't they let us bring anything with us? Don't they want the money?"

"That might be the problem. They searched our bags and didn't find it. Maybe they think we don't have it."

Grace remembered Lucky saying it was a risk to keep the money hidden in the false bottom. But in the end, Rimkus had agreed that it was safer there than being stolen during the security or customs checkpoints. Not that they'd done either since they'd been dragged out of the airport.

“That’s not good.” The last time she’d seen Hope, she’d been three days old. That was months ago now. Would she even recognize the baby? They grew so fast. A lead weight settled in the pit of her stomach. She’d promised to protect her. So far, she’d failed miserably.

“Well, we can ask to see Mr. Rimkus since he’s the one who arranged all of this.”

Oh yeah, Grace had forgotten about him. If her father trusted him, he must be safe. A CIA asset, Rimkus had worked his way up the ranks of the trafficking organization for the last two years. He had to help them. She couldn’t contemplate the alternative.

CHAPTER 9



The road noise as they traveled the war-torn streets should have given Lucky and Grace some privacy. Except there was a fifty-fifty chance they'd bugged the van. He'd have done it if it was him.

Same as the day before, all Lucky could ascertain was the direction traveled and the duration. Neither was helpful. For all he knew, they'd left Marikistan and were in Lithuania. At least his team could track Grace. He just wished he'd been able to convince Rimkus to put a tracker on Hope. Then, even if this op went tits up, they'd have been able to locate the baby and get her out.

Years of working with a team left Lucky feeling out at sea. Grace was holding up better than expected, but if she didn't see Hope soon, she'd probably start losing it. Not that he blamed her.

Lucky hated being fucking helpless. He itched to pull out a KA-BAR knife from a sheath on his leg. He'd take out Natasha before he knew what happened. Then he'd force Boris to take him to see Hope. But the knife and the sheath were home, along with his other weapons. Without a weapon, he couldn't control the situation or protect Grace. It left him with no choice but to play the waiting game.

Grace shivered.

"Cold, baby?"

She nodded.

Lucky pulled her against his side and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Satisfaction eased some of his anger when she laid her against his shoulder.

“I don’t like Boris and Natasha. Just thought I’d let you know.”

Lucky rubbed his chin over her hair and smiled. “I agree. We should kill them as soon as possible.”

Her gasp made him smile wider. They should be more careful, but it was so loud they were probably safe.

“You’re not serious?” Grace asked.

“Maybe? No, of course not. We don’t know where Hope is yet.”

She nodded and rubbed her cheek against his neck. The more time he spent with the woman, the more he realized how much he’d misjudged her. Sure, she took what she wanted, but he was the same way. Just because she was a woman didn’t mean she couldn’t be a horndog. But she’d listened to him last night. It had been an incredible turn-on, knowing she’d probably never submitted to any man. Not that he wanted a submissive, but he needed control in the bedroom.

She sighed. “I thought this would be easy. Fly to Marikistan. Go to pick up Hope, pay the money, and fly home. Two days tops. Fuck, was I wrong.”

“I expected the same, although maybe not a two-day time frame. I figured they’d have to make sure we were who we said. But that should have been clear by now.” Lucky squeezed her shoulder. “Whatever it takes to get Hope, we’ll do it. Just think of the stories you’ll be able to tell her when she’s older.”

“True. I hadn’t thought of that. At least she’ll know how much she means to us.”

Grace kept saying “us” when talking about the baby, but was it because of their fake marriage, or was it something else?

There was a good chance he wouldn't make it home at all. He still had the rest of the mission after he handed off Grace and Hope to the Red Falcon team. He hadn't been able to tell her that he wouldn't be returning with her. Would she even care? Most likely not. Tempest joked Grace was relationship-averse. Lucky understood why she'd be that way, and after losing his high school sweetheart, he'd planned on spending the rest of his life alone. Except now, it didn't sound as appealing.

"You're going to be a wonderful mother, Grace."

"Really? I lost mine when I was so young. I've been worried I'm going to fuck it up. Maybe I should let someone else raise her."

He didn't like hearing his girl's doubt and tilted her chin up so she could see his face. "After all of this, you'd be able to give her up?"

Grace tensed against him, then let out a sigh. "No, I couldn't. I've done nothing but think about getting her back since your sorry ass dragged me out of there."

Lucky chuckled. He doubted she'd ever forgive him for that. "You know we had no choice, right?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't make it easier. Look at what happened because I didn't stay."

"Hey, you know chances were, if you'd stayed behind by yourself, that they'd have taken you, too."

"But it's a child trafficking ring? They don't do adults."

"You're kidding, right? You think that would have stopped them? Selling people happens no matter their age. Besides, you're a beautiful woman. Unfortunately for you, they'd have made a lot of money with your sale."

"Fuck. It would have made it worse."

Lucky nodded, happy she'd come to that conclusion with his help. She couldn't keep blaming herself. Leaving the baby behind had been the only option. The US government wasn't in the habit of stealing babies, and no matter how much she

had wanted to bring Hope home with her, it would never have happened.

“For your family, no doubt about it. You would’ve found yourself over my knee after we rescued you, too. It would’ve been an epic spanking once I made sure you were okay.”

“You’re not fucking serious...?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely, baby? Putting yourself in danger is not allowed.”

“Says who? You’re not the boss of me,” Grace mumbled against his chest.

“We’ll see about that,” Lucky answered. He was teasing her. But the more he thought about it, the more the idea appealed to him.

Before she could say anything else, the van took a sharp turn, almost dumping them over. Fuck. They’d been speaking too freely even if they had been whispering. He knew better.

“Boris needs driving lessons,” Grace said.

Lucky braced himself better and kept his arm around her. “I think we’re nearing our destination. If they separate us, I’ll find you. Just stay safe. Promise me. I don’t know what’s waiting for us, but you need to stay alive so I can find you.” He didn’t want to scare her, but with the way the hairs on the back of his neck were tingling, his gut told him they were about to be fucked.

“I promise. But if I have to risk myself for Hope, I will. You need to know that,” Grace said.

Fuck. Of course, he knew that. But that didn’t mean he liked it.

They stayed quiet with their own thoughts, a sense of foreboding growing with every minute. Lucky was grateful they didn’t have long to wait. Ten minutes later, the van rolled to a stop.

He’d have answers to where they were soon enough. But would they survive?

Lucky focused his gaze on the side of the van as the door slid open. He braced for gunshots, but they didn't come.

"Get out," Boris yelled.

Grace mumbled, "I guess this is our stop."

Lucky almost laughed. The woman never stopped surprising him. She should have been terrified, and she was making jokes.

"I'll go first, then I'll help you out," Lucky said. Then he slid across the floor and stepped into the bright sunshine.

Grace stuck close to him and grabbed his hand for him to help her out.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Rossi. I'm so happy you could make it."

Lucky squinted into the sun and counted five men. The odds were definitely not in his favor. But he recognized the voice, though Grace wouldn't.

"I'm Mikhail Rimkus. I'll be handling your adoption."

Lucky squeezed Grace's hand, hoping she wouldn't do anything to let on that she recognized Rimkus's name. She knew he'd do most of the talking. The less attention she drew to herself, the better.

"We're the Rossis. I can't say it's been fun so far. Do we get to see Hope now?" Lucky asked while trying to tone down his anger. Maybe Rimkus had had his reasons for not sharing everything in Knox's office, but Lucky didn't have to be happy about it.

"In good time. Please follow me. We have terms to discuss," Rimkus replied.

"Terms? We already arranged everything," Grace said.

"Easy, baby. Let's see what he has to say."

Grace met his gaze and winced, then mouthed, “Sorry.”

Rimkus headed toward another dilapidated house with two of the guards at his side. The other three surrounded Lucky and Grace as they followed him into the house.

A large table covered with paperwork took up most of the front room as they stepped inside.

“Please have a seat,” Rimkus said. His gaze went to the armed men. “You can leave us. I’ll call if I need you.”

Lucky held out a chair for Grace and then sat next to Rimkus. At least he’d dismissed the guards, but that didn’t mean they were safe.

The cameras were out in the open here, unlike where they’d been staying. Lucky looked around the room and counted four of them blinking red. He wondered who was watching on the other end and if they were calling the shots.

Rimkus shuffled the paperwork in front of him, sliding some into a manilla folder before meeting Lucky’s gaze.

Lucky couldn’t read anything in his expression. He had to hand it to the operative; Rimkus had an amazing poker face. But if he double-crossed them, it wouldn’t matter because he’d be dead.

“Is Hope okay? Did something happen to her?” Grace asked.

Lucky understood her concern, but they were playing a game she didn’t understand. He dropped his hand under the table and took her hand.

“We were told we’d just have to sign the papers and give you a donation to take Hope home,” Lucky said. Grace pushed his hand, but if the shit was going to hit the fan, it might as well be now.

“The baby is fine. She was ill, but the doctor took care of her,” Rimkus said. Then he laced his fingers and rested them on the folder in front of him.

He barely resembled the man Lucky had met in Knox’s office a few days ago. Fuck. It seemed more like months than

days. He couldn't decide if Rimkus was under suspicion or if it was them, but something wasn't right about any of this.

“What's the delay, then?” he asked.

“Actually, it's two-fold.”

“What the hell? We came all this way in good faith to adopt Hope. Not to play games with you.” Lucky detected a flicker of something in Rimkus's expression and tensed. Whatever he was going to say next wouldn't be good.

“My men informed me you don't have the, ah, contribution with you. Why would that be, Mr. Rossi? What game are you playing?”

Fuck. Rimkus knew he had the money.

“We have it. But your thugs wouldn't let us bring it with us.”

“Really? They searched your luggage, and there was nothing there,” Rimkus said.

“Of course not. I carried it with me until now. No way would I risk someone stealing our life savings by leaving it in an unattended suitcase.”

“It's a moot point now anyway, I'm afraid.”

“What do you mean?” Grace's voice shook with emotion.

Lucky knew if he hadn't been holding her hand, she would have jumped out of her chair and confronted Rimkus.

“Another party is interested in Hope and has offered more money. As you clearly just stated, you brought all your savings, so I'm sure you can't outbid them.”

“You never said this was even a possibility.” Lucky seethed. Rimkus would be dead if he thought it would change anything. Most likely, the decision came from higher up the food chain.

“It happens. Though rarely. Of course, if you can raise more money...” Rimkus shrugged his shoulders.

What Lucky wouldn't give for his team to burst through the door right now and help him take all these fucktards out. But they were on their own, and he had to make a decision that wouldn't end up getting them killed.

"How much will we need for the extra...donation?" Lucky asked.

"The current price is one hundred thousand American dollars."

Lucky's gut churned. He'd have to contact Miller for the additional funds. He sure as fuck didn't have access to that kind of money, and he doubted Grace did, either. But they hadn't come this far to fail now.

"If I can make a few calls, I'm sure I can have it wired to you. But I won't get into a bidding war for a baby. She is ours. The child's mother gave her to Grace."

"Understood. I can't promise, but I will see what I can do. You can have two days to raise the money."

"Can we have access to our luggage? And I'll need a routing number for the funds."

Rimkus nodded. "You'll return to where you stayed yesterday." He slid a scrap of paper to Lucky. "This is the routing number. If you have the cash for the initial donation, you can give it to the guards. We can call it a good-faith deposit. But make no mistake, Mr. Rossi, if you fuck with us, you won't need to worry about anything ever again, and we'll find another partner for your beautiful wife."

Lucky had expected a threat, though not one so blatant. Grace's hand trembled in his, and he hated she had to listen to any of this. Lucky wanted to reach over and grab Rimkus by the neck to strangle him. Not that it would have done any good. The other guards would have killed him before he'd finished the job.

"No problem. The money is at the other house. We'll turn it over when we get there. We'd like to see Hope before we go...since we're talking about good faith," Lucky said. It

wasn't an unreasonable request, like providing proof of life in a kidnapping. But it didn't mean they'd allow it.

Rimkus seemed to consider his response. Lucky would bet a week's salary that he waited to get approval from whoever was monitoring them. He was positive that Rimkus had a comm in his ear. "That's acceptable." He stood from the table and left the room.

"Is Hope here?" Grace whispered into his ear.

"I didn't think so, but maybe she is."

A moment later, Rimkus returned, holding a four-month-old baby. Lucky didn't know if it was Hope or not. The only photo he'd seen was of a newborn. He needn't have worried. As soon as Grace saw the baby, she was out of her chair and reaching for her.

"Oh my God, Hope you've grown so much. I missed you, my beautiful girl." The tears sliding down Grace's cheeks gutted Lucky. He went to her and wrapped his arm around her waist.

Hope stared up at him. The baby was beautiful, with big blue eyes and a head of black hair. Except for the eyes, she could pass for Grace's baby. Then she gurgled and smiled and stole his heart forever.

When he met Rimkus's gaze, he could see regret there. Lucky understood the precarious position the undercover agent was in, but it didn't make any of this right. If he had to pry Hope out of someone's cold, dead hands, he would.

"Satisfied?" Rimkus asked a few moments later.

"Can I please hold her a little longer?" Grace begged as she clutched Hope to her chest.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Rossi. That's all the time you get. Hopefully, your husband can come up with the rest of the money." The threat remained.

Another guard came in and lifted Hope from Grace's arms, making the baby burst into tears, and driving another nail into the coffin of everyone involved.

CHAPTER 10



*B*oris and Natasha drove them back to the house. Grace didn't feel like talking, and Lucky seemed to understand. He'd pulled her against him as the van drove away from Hope, shredding her heart. The pain of leaving her baby gutted her. She couldn't believe Rimkus was supposed to be on their side. Not knowing him, Grace couldn't read his expression. There had been cameras everywhere, but he should have given them some sign that things weren't as bad as they seemed.

The anger Grace had barely contained during the meeting flowed through her veins. The fucking brute who'd grabbed Hope from her arms should count his blessings that she hadn't kned him in the balls. It wouldn't have helped the situation. Plus, she'd been afraid he'd drop Hope. Then there was the money. Where were they going to get another fifty-thousand dollars? She sure as shit didn't have it and would bet Lucky didn't either on a SEAL's salary.

Natasha used his thumbprint to open the lock and let them into their jail. It didn't matter that it was a house. Locked in and monitored, sure as fuck felt like being imprisoned. Boris followed them inside this time, and waited by the door with his massive, tattooed arms crossed over his chest. He looked like something out of a John Wick movie. Too bad she didn't have a gun; she'd gladly have shot him between the eyes. Okay, maybe not. Her aim sucked, but at this range, she'd have hit him somewhere.

Lucky went straight for his laptop bag. She'd wondered if that's where he'd stashed the money. They hadn't discussed it, but it made sense since until today he'd kept it with him. As she watched, he unzipped the bag. After he removed the laptop, he triggered some kind of false bottom to reveal five bundles of one-hundred-dollar bills. As impressive as the false bottom was, Grace was more surprised at how little fifty-thousand dollars looked. No wonder he'd been able to hide it so easily.

Grace was familiar enough with Lucky now to see he was struggling not to go off on Boris and Natasha. She did the only thing she could—stepped up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “It’ll be okay. I believe in you,” she whispered. It had been so soft she wasn’t sure he’d heard her, but some of his stiffness eased and he leaned into her embrace.

Turning to face her, Lucky leaned over and murmured against her lips, “Thank you, baby.” Then he kissed her gently.

Happy that she could do this one small thing to help, Grace stepped back so he could give the money to Boris. They both needed to remember that revenge was best served cold. If Grace knew anything for sure, it was that Lucky would make sure they all suffered.

“Here’s the money you assholes were too stupid to find. All you had to do was ask. Do you really think we would have come all this way to fuck with you? We want Hope. She’s the only thing that matters.” Lucky thrust the money at Boris’s chest.

It surprised Grace that the fucker could move fast enough to grab it before it hit the floor. She held her breath to see if he’d react to Lucky’s attitude. They must have been under orders not to hurt them—yet. Boris thumbed through the stacks of bills.

“Get the rest of the money. Or next time won’t be good for you,” Boris threatened. Then he turned and closed the door behind him. Grace waited to hear the beep of the lock before throwing herself into Lucky’s arms.

“Easy, baby.” Lucky wrapped one arm around her waist and the other rubbed up and down her back.

“I can’t believe they’d give Hope to someone else. How could they? We had a deal. And now they want more money. How are we going to get that?” Grace’s voice cracked as she tried to hold back tears. She hated crying, but she was so pissed off it was inevitable.

“I don’t know. What worries me is the other buyer offered one hundred thousand. Why didn’t Rimkus ask for us to come up with more than that? Unless they’re trying to get more money out of us? Not that it matters. We’ll pay whatever it takes to get Hope back.”

“But where are we going to get the money? I don’t have, we don’t have that kind of money lying around.” Furious as she was, Grace needed to remember they were still being watched and had to stay in their roles. Although she had to wonder if they knew the truth and were just fucking with them.

“We’ll have to call your father. He’s the only one I know who could get it for us as fast as we need it.”

Grace wracked her brain. Had they discussed her father at all? Did they know who he was? Would blow their cover? Shit. She’d follow Lucky’s lead and pray it worked out. “I guess we don’t have a choice, do we?”

“No, baby. It’s a lot of money to wire in a short amount of time. If we had longer—”

“Dammit. I guess I need to call him. He’ll take it better from me, I think.”

“Probably, but I’ll talk to him too,” Lucky said and squeezed her waist.

Ahh. Lucky had a plan. For all she knew, they might have planned for this. Three days ago, she’d agreed to follow his lead under duress, but she’d learned a lot about her fake husband in the last seventy-two hours. Now she’d follow him to the ends of the earth, and trusted he’d ensure she and Hope were safe.

Lucky handed Grace his cell phone. He'd called and had his phone enabled for international roaming, voice, and text just in case they needed it. She never would have thought of it, since she didn't bother to bring her personal phone when she traveled, instead using the satellite work phone.

"You ready, baby?" Lucky asked and lifted her icy hand to his mouth for a kiss.

"Yes. Maybe? At least it's not in the middle of the night," Grace said as she checked her watch. Grace's stomach knotted, and she felt nauseated. It probably didn't help it was almost dinnertime, and she had barely eaten breakfast hours ago. "What should I tell him? I don't want him flipping out on us for doing this?"

"Just go with the truth. He knows we're here to get Hope. If he yells at you, hand me the phone. Okay?"

"Yeah, I can do that. I don't know what I'd do without you, Luca." There was so much emotion packed into those words. Grace hoped Lucky picked up on them. She scrolled through the contacts and quickly found her sister's and father's contact information, and saw she was his number one. He must have gotten a new phone before the trip. Of course, he did. She rolled her eyes at herself. He wouldn't bring his own phone and risk it being confiscated.

Grace sighed, then selected her father's number and pushed the call button. Pavel Miller picked up on the first ring.

"Luca? Is everything all right?"

"*Tètis*, it's me. We only set up Lucky's phone for international calling." Grace paced back and forth in front of the sofa until Lucky pulled her against his chest and wrapped his arms around her. It helped calm her racing heart.

"I didn't expect to hear from you until you returned. Or are you home?" Miller's voice sounded as disinterested as ever. But he had to be wondering the reason for the call. As far as she knew, it was never part of the plan.

"No, not yet Papa. Things have gone a little off the rails."

Lucky rubbed his chin against the side of her head. It shouldn't have calmed her, but it did.

“Tell me what’s going on? I have a meeting in ten minutes. I don’t have a lot of time.”

Of course, he didn't. Typical Papa. “We saw Hope today. She seems fine. But they want more for the adoption contribution.” No way was Grace using the words bidding war or human trafficking over the phone, even if they were on a mission. Who knew who was listening?

“How much do you need, Grace?” Miller said. She heard the creak of his desk chair as he sat back.

“Fifty thousand. It might not hurt to send a little more if you can.” Grace winced as she said the words.

“What? Isn't that what you already agreed on?”

Before she could answer, Lucky took the phone from her.

“Pavel, stop yelling at my wife,” Lucky said.

Grace looked up at him, and he winked. If it had been any other situation, Grace would have giggled. She'd have paid good money to see the look on her father's face when Lucky said that.

“You have nerve. Too chicken to call and ask for the money yourself? What kind of scam is this?” Miller's voice boomed over the phone.

Lucky held the phone between them so she could hear her father's half of the conversation. It was odd to hear him so upset. Was he angry? He kept his emotions hidden except with her and her sister, Tempest.

Grace wondered if he was angry or if it was part of the plan.

“You knew what the deal was when we left. They've raised the price. Trust me, you're the last person we wanted to ask. But you're also our only option. They need the money by tomorrow our time. We have an account number to wire it.”

“And you trust these people?”

“No, I don’t. But we don’t have a choice if we want to adopt Hope. I’m praying they’re not stringing us along.”

“What happens if I don’t send the money?”

Grace gasped. He had to send the money. If he didn’t, she’d never forgive him if they even got out of Marikistan alive.

Lucky pinched her, and she snapped her gaze to his. A small shake of his head told her that this was part of the plan, or she hoped it was. This was a fucking mess. And to think she’d wanted more excitement in her life. She had to be out of her mind.

“I don’t know. We won’t come home with Hope, though.” Lucky’s answer implied so much more than he said. She hoped her father would pick up on it.

“Fine. Text me the numbers and I’ll wire it after my meeting. But this better be it. I don’t care what the reason is, I’m not your personal bank.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Let me talk to Grace,” Miller demanded.

Lucky tilted the phone toward her.

“*Tètis?*”

“You be careful. I’m not sure I trust your husband to take care of you.”

“This is not the time, Papa. Lucky takes excellent care of me. Thank you for sending the money. You have Hope’s life in your hands.”

Miller sighed. “I’ll see my granddaughter when you return.” He disconnected the call. As usual, he hadn’t said goodbye.

“Well, that went better than I expected,” Lucky said. He pulled the paper out of his pocket with the account information and texted it to her father.

“I’m not so sure about that. I think we’re going to have to deal with a lot of his shit when we get home.”

“It will be worth it to have Hope home with us.” Lucky’s phone beeped with a message. “Your father acknowledged the text, and that he’d be paying attention, so I better not fuck up.”

“I don’t know why he’s giving you such a hard time.”

“He’s never thought I was good enough for his baby girl. You know that.”

Lucky wasn’t wrong. If they’d been in a real relationship, her father would have thought that.

“It’s okay. Now we just wait for the transfer to go through and Rimkus to contact us again. Let’s get some food into you.”

“I’m not hungry.” The last thing Grace felt like doing was putting food in her upset stomach.

Lucky chuckled. “I can hear your stomach growling from here.”

“No, you can’t,” Grace said as her stomach made a loud gurgling sound. “Okay, I maybe you did, but I’m not hungry. I’m worried about Hope.”

“I know, but right now there’s nothing we can do. If you don’t eat, you’re going to get sick and won’t be able to take care of her, right? Lucky asked.

Grace hated to admit that he was right. She wouldn’t promise that anything she ate didn’t come back up, though. The last few months had been nothing but worrying about Hope, but now they’d threatened her and Lucky. Being sold to some monster terrified her, but Lucky being killed would destroy her. The only reason they involved him in this fucking mess was because of her.

Lucky took her hand and led her into the kitchen. He’d made breakfast. She should handle dinner. It was only fair. She couldn’t cook, so it looked like sandwiches were on the menu again.

“Ham or Turkey?” Grace asked as she pulled out the lunch meat from the refrigerator.

“How about turkey since we had ham last night?” Lucky grabbed the plates, silverware, and glasses from the cabinet set

the table.

Grace stared at him for a moment. He probably felt her gaze and looked up.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing. Just thinking I guess.” It was a lie. It was such a domestic scene, the two of them preparing meals and eating together. Odder still, since neither one of them did relationships. So how come this felt so right?

“Yeah? Then how about you move it-move it. I’m so hungry I could eat you,” Lucky said and wiggled his eyebrows.

Grace felt the heat slide up her neck and onto her cheeks. Damn that man. Turning back to the refrigerator, she pulled out the rest of the items needed for the sandwiches. She even found a jar of pickles she missed the night before.

They made their sandwiches and ate in silence. Lucky kept pushing Grace to take another bite, but her thoughts kept returning to the meeting earlier and the threats Rimkus made against them..

“You are entirely too bossy,” Grace muttered.

“Are you complaining?” Lucky lifted an eyebrow.

“I am. I’m your wife, not your child. You can’t make me eat.” It still felt weird to call herself wife. *Ugh*. Grace knew she was acting childish when she had to stop herself from sticking her tongue out at him. Where had that come from?

“I bet I can. But that’s not what’s really bothering you, is it?”

Lucky knew her too well. She didn’t know how since they’d only been together a few days. But maybe it was the situation. Everything was so intense since they’d landed.

Grace knew from experience that you learned the truth about people when times got tough. She’d seen it on her UN Aid teams. Even had to send a few volunteers home when they couldn’t handle it. But Lucky seemed to see right into her brain to know what she was thinking and feeling.

“I keep thinking about what Rimkus said earlier. What if something goes wrong with the money?”

Lucky reached for her hand and laced their fingers together. “Nothing is going to go wrong. They want the money. Now they’re getting even more. There’s no reason not to give us Hope and let us go home.”

“You say that like it’s a done deal. But what if the other person bids more? How will we keep up? We can’t let anyone else have Hope.” Grace struggled for control as her eyes welled with tears.

CHAPTER 11



Tears swam in Grace's pale blue eyes. She was one of the strongest women Lucky had ever met, maybe even stronger than her sister, Tempest. To see her breakdown made him want to kill the men who caused it. Except he couldn't—not yet. They were in an untenable situation, and he'd just have to wait it out.

"Baby," Lucky murmured. "Come here."

When she didn't move, he reached over and pulled her onto his lap. "I wish I could promise everything will be fine. But I can't. You need to hold on to the faith that it will all work out."

Lucky wrapped her in his arms. Grace's head rested on his shoulder, and her tears soaked through his shirt. Her shoulders shuddered with each breath. As much as he hated to see her lose it, she'd earned it.

Finally, her sobbing stopped. She pushed away from him and shook her head.

His baby was not a pretty crier. Her red nose, swollen eyes, and tear-stained cheeks did nothing to change that.

He smoothed the hair away from her face. "Feel better?"

"A little." She patted his damp shirt. "I'm sorry I got you all wet."

"You know I don't care about that. Just you." Lucky tightened his arms around her.

She sighed. “I hate crying. I can’t remember the last time I broke down.”

“Looks like you were overdue, baby.”

“Maybe?”

“Not maybes about it. Ever since we landed in Marikistan, it’s been a nightmare. Neither of us expected all of this. I didn’t think getting Hope would be easy, but I never imagined we’d go through anything like this. I keep waiting for Liam Neeson to swoop in and rescue us.”

“Eh, he’s too old. It would be Tom Cruise. He pulls off all those impossible missions, right?”

“Nope, no way. He’s too short.”

“I don’t want to dance with him. He could do that spider thing and rescue us.” Grace rolled her eyes.

“What spider thing?”

“C’mon, you know. When he drops from the ceiling on a long cable and does whatever,” Grace said.

“Wait. Rescuing you is my job.” Lucky tried to look offended.

“But you just said we needed Liam Neeson.” Grace grinned.

“Fuck. I did, didn’t I?” Lucky smiled. Sure, he had, but it accomplished what he’d set out to do—distract her from all the shit—even if it was temporary.

“Yes, you did.”

Lucky let out an exaggerated sigh and rolled his eyes. “Fine. Tom can help me. But I get top billing.”

Grace giggled. “I can live with that.”

Lucky tucked a strand of her golden-brown hair behind her ear and lifted her chin. “On second thought, I changed my mind. No Liam Neeson or Tom Cruise. I’ll protect you, baby girl. Hope, too.”

Grace smiled and slid her fingers through his close-cropped beard. Tingles shot from her fingertips and along his skin. “I know you will. You’re my Lucky in shining armor.” She leaned forward and kissed him.

The soft press of her lips almost undid him. Lucky tried to maintain control until she groaned against his mouth. His groan joined hers, and he grasped the back of her neck and sucked her plump, bottom lip between his teeth before claiming her mouth. Inhaling her peaches and vanilla scent, he lost himself in their kiss. Their tongues tangled as he savored her like she was his last meal.

When he pulled away from her with a nip on her lower lip, they both breathed heavily. Grace’s cheeks were rosy, and her eyes sparkled like aquamarines. She took his fucking breath away.

“Do you want to watch a movie? Or get ready for bed?” Lucky asked. “Or we could watch the movie in bed after we shower.”

“Oh, so many options. What shall I pick?” Grace tapped her finger on her chin like it was a hard decision.

As his gaze watched that finger tap her sweet chin, he swallowed the lump in his throat. Somehow, their pretending had crossed the line into real life, talking about mundane shit like showers and popcorn.

He’d never have mundane or normal. His life wasn’t his to control. It wouldn’t be after helping to dismantle the trafficking organization. He’d agreed to go dark and handle black ops missions. For the next year, he wouldn’t be able to contact anyone from his life, including his team, even though they’d know the truth. JSOC would mark him as missing in action, presumed dead. It would have been a harder choice if he’d had any family left that he cared about.

Except now, he had Grace and the baby. These few days with her had changed something in him and had cracked that brick wall he’d built around his heart long ago. He wanted more of her, wanted to savor this bit of mundane before he went dark. Grace would forget about him and work on

building a good life for Hope. Soon, this time with him would just be a blip on Grace's radar.

Though he knew it was a mistake, he wouldn't deny himself this time together. Then he'd have to walk away, no matter how much it hurt.

"Is there popcorn?" Grace asked as she batted her eyelashes at him.

He couldn't hold back his smile. God, this woman was too much. Every time he thought he knew how she'd react, she went and surprised the shit out of him.

"Umm, I don't know. But that wasn't one of the original questions." Lucky chuckled.

"I know, but it will help me decide."

"You're going to have to get down so I can go look. I'm not sure popcorn is a staple in Marikistani kitchens."

"You won't know until you check." Grace smiled.

Fuck. Role or not, she had him wrapped around her little finger. "Fine."

Lucky lifted her off his lap and rose to go to the kitchen. Then he searched the cabinets and pantry. The last thing he expected to find was a box of microwave popcorn near the back of a shelf.

"It looks like you got lucky. Pun intended." Lucky held up the box.

"Yay. It's been forever since I—we—watched a movie and snacked on popcorn."

"Hmm, I guess it has been a while. Looks like we can take care of that oversight tonight. Want to shower before or after the movie?"

He hoped she'd say before. After their stress-filled day, he figured she'd be asleep as soon as she got comfortable on the couch.

"Might as well get it over with. I think you should take one with me. It'll be quicker that way." She grabbed his hand and

tugged.

Not that she could have moved him unless he allowed it. He had at least a hundred pounds on her. But it was cute she'd tried.

“Faster, huh?” His dick stirred at the thought of seeing her naked. “You really think so?”

“Yup. Don't you?”

It sounded like a perfect plan to talk. Was it a good idea? Nope. Would he do it anyway? Fuck yeah.

Lucky followed her into the bedroom and grabbed what they needed from their suitcases while Grace turned on the shower. After placing their night clothes on the vanity, he tested the water temperature and turned it up a bit. While they waited, she got out their toiletries.

As the steam rose over the top of the glass shower doors, the mirror fogged up from the condensation.

“Shit. I guess I made it too warm, huh?” Grace reached over to wipe off the mirror, but he stopped her.

“It's perfect, baby.” Boris and Natasha could watch the camera reel all they wanted but wouldn't see anything. And the noise from the water would muffle their conversation. Grace had questions she hadn't been able to ask, and this was the only way they could talk without being overheard.

They stacked their clothes on the edge of the vanity. Lucky stepped into the shower first and turned down the temperature before nudging Grace under the water.

“How about I wash your hair for you, baby?”

“Oh, sugar bear, I'll never say no to that.”

Lucky couldn't take his eyes off his curvy woman. Her breasts bobbed as she dampened her hair, the pert nipples practically beckoning to his mouth. A naked, soaking-wet Grace was an image he'd never forget.

“Are you just going to stare or get to work?” Grace teased.

Chuckling, he squeezed some shampoo onto his hand and rubbed it into her hair. As he massaged her scalp with his fingertips, she sighed, her eyes closing.

Lucky leaned close. “They have a camera in here, but the steam should block their view. If we speak low, they shouldn’t be able to hear us. But we’ll need to say some things at a normal level. We don’t want them to get suspicious.”

“Damn it.” She glared up at him. “Even in the bathroom? By now, I think they’ve seen all of me. A sex tape better not show up with my name on it.”

“We’ll make sure that never happens,” he promised.

“What the hell do they think we’ll do in here?”

“Who knows? I thought Rimkus had more control over the situation.”

“Do you think something happened before we got here?” Grace whispered.

“Possibly. There’s no way to know with all of us under constant surveillance. Your father will investigate it from his end.”

“Was the demand for more money part of the initial plan?”

“No, not initially. The fifty k was supposed to be it. We talked about it as a possibility and had a plan in place.” Lucky answered her in a whisper, then said in his normal voice, “Time to rinse so I can put in the conditioner, baby.”

Grace nodded and rinsed the shampoo from her hair. When she was done, she turned her back to him so he could apply the conditioner. As he worked, she whispered, “Will they give us Hope?”

He wondered about that himself. After their meeting earlier, he was convinced Rimkus had either turned or had been burned when he’d been in Norfolk to meet with him. Lucky wasn’t sure which, not that it mattered. Either way, he wouldn’t be able to help them, and might be working against them. He’d made sure Miller picked up on that during their

call. Grace's father might be an asshole, but he was a smart one.

"I think they will," he answered slowly. "There's no reason not to once they have all the money."

"I hope you're right."

"Me too. If it all goes to hell and they separate us, remember I'll come for you and Hope. Just do whatever it takes to stay alive. If possible, try to keep your pendant on."

"I will."

"Good girl," Lucky whispered. Then he said more loudly, "Let's get you clean so we can watch a movie and have that popcorn."

Grace leaned her head under the water to rinse out the conditioner. Lucky squirted body wash into his hands and rubbed it over her shoulders and down her back. Her skin was like the softest silk under his fingers, and he lingered on the curves of her hips, enjoying how she swayed in time with his caresses. She took a step back, her ass bumping the hard length of his cock.

She looked at him over her shoulder, her brow arched.

He smirked and shrugged. Touching her was addictive.

Turning her around to wash the rest of her, Lucky slid his soapy hands over her arms and down her sides. Unable to help himself, he massaged her breasts with slow, seductive circles.

"Mmm," she said, her teeth catching her lower lip.

"Yeah?" He took her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers and gently pinched until they were hard peaks. Her groans went straight to his balls.

If he kept this up much longer, he was going to embarrass himself. Not that he could stop himself from worshipping his goddess.

"Part your legs for me, baby," Lucky said.

Grace lifted her left leg onto the shower bench, giving him full access. He loved that there was no shame in her game and

would take what she wanted.

He slid his fingers through her wet folds and over her swollen clit, stroking the hard bud with his thumb. Grabbing the shower head, he rinsed the suds away so he could taste her.

“Fuck, baby. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you.” He knelt in front of her but looked up so he could see her face.

“No reason to hurry, sugar bear.” She gave him a wink.

Damn, she was feisty, and he loved every bit of her attitude. But he wanted to hear her come, to see her fall apart, to taste her. Sucking her clit into his mouth, he rubbed his tongue over the swollen nub.

“Yes, just like that. Oh God, Luca.”

Lucky slid one finger into her hot channel, and her muscles clenched, squeezing him hard. She was tight, even after they fucked the night before. Adding a second and then a third finger, he stretched her wider, gently pumping until she moaned, her hands sinking into his hair. Wetness slicked his hand, and she ground against his face, asking for more.

Fuck, yes. He’d give it to her. The tips of his fingers angled upward and rubbed against her G-spot as he softly bit her clit. Her juices drenched his fingers and slid over his hand, and she yanked at his hair.

“Fuck,” she screamed, leaning into his lips.

Lucky lapped her juices. As her grip on his head loosened, he removed his fingers from her core. When she whimpered, he slid his tongue as far as he could into her pussy. He couldn’t get enough of her taste.

When her trembling stopped, he stood and rinsed the rest of the soap off her. “Meet me in bed, baby. I’m not done with you yet. I’ll be right there.”

Grace kissed him hard, then slid past him through the shower door. As she wrapped herself in the towel and headed out the door, he blew out a breath.

Grabbing the base of his cock, he squeezed and counted to ten. If he didn’t ease the ache in his balls, he was going to

come as soon as he entered her.

Finally getting control of himself, he grabbed the soap, lathered, and rinsed off. The water had cooled, but not enough to clear the steam from the mirror. At least their captors hadn't seen her this time.

Lucky grabbed a towel and dried off. He couldn't wait to drive deep into her pussy and make her scream again. His cock tented the towel as he walked into the dimly lit bedroom. Grace had tucked herself into bed, her towel balled on the floor.

He dropped his towel next to hers and slid under the blanket on the bed. "Did you miss me?"

Grace's smile jammed a wedge into the cracked wall around his heart. He was in so much trouble.

"You know it, sugar bear." She took his cock and caressed it from root to head, then scooped up the bead of pre-cum with her finger. She brought her finger to her mouth and sucked. "Yummy."

Lucky groaned. "Are you trying to kill me, baby?"

"Never. You're too good at eating pussy. I wouldn't want to break in someone else."

"At least I know how I rate." He was glad he could string coherent sentences, since all the blood in his brain had dropped to his cock.

"Besides, I'm rather fond of you."

Lucky swallowed hard, unsure if he'd heard her right. His heart drummed harder, and it had nothing to do with the hand on his dick. They weren't really married. This was a ruse so they could rescue Hope.

But as much as he hoped she was playing a role, a part of him wanted what she'd said to be true.

CHAPTER 12



“*I* want to go for a ride,” Grace murmured as she continued to stroke his cock. Nothing would be more satisfying than to view all that hard, rippling muscle.

“A ride?”

Grace held back her giggle. Poor man couldn’t think. “On you, sugar bear. Roll over.”

It took Lucky a few seconds to process her words. Then he rolled onto his back, his erection springing to attention.

Grace straddled his hips, tore open the condom wrapper, and rolled it over his impressive length. Now that she’d seen his cock, she knew how he’d left a lasting impression on her bottom. She’d felt him with every bump the van drove over. She’d never take paved roads for granted again.

Leaning forward, she nibbled on his ear, then whispered, “You don’t have to be quiet.”

Unable to wait much longer, she sat up and lowered her slick opening onto his cock. Fuck. Even though she was still wet from her orgasm, he was a tight fit, one she’d relish.

Resting her hands on his chest for balance, she worked her pussy down his length. Her inner muscles quivered, and she bit her lip to keep from moaning. She wanted to hear his harsh breathing turn to a groan.

Finally, she settled with all of him inside. So good. With a sigh, she bucked her hips, sliding up and down.

Lucky thrust against her, rubbing the base of his cock against her clit. *Shit*. She was already close to coming again.

“I hope you’re close, baby, because I won’t last much longer.”

Neither was she. As she tried to keep a steady rhythm, he arched his hips and grazed that spot that wrecked her. Lucky gripped her hips and pounded up into her, and she came apart for him. Shocks of pleasure bloomed outward, heating her belly as she tipped over the edge of bliss.

“Fuck me,” Lucky yelled a moment later, his heat filling the condom.

Smiling, she dropped onto his chest, her cheek riding the rise and fall of his chest. They stayed that way until their breathing returned to normal, his hand caressing her back.

Finally, she rolled from him onto her back. Lucky rose to take care of the condom, then came back to bed with a warm washcloth to clean her up.

“Thank you, sugar bear.”

“My pleasure.” Lucky’s toothy smile pulled on her heartstrings.

When had he gotten under her defenses? Stupid question. As soon as she let herself see the real him, she was toast. But this was just sex, right? It couldn’t be more.

But what if this could become a real relationship? Fuck. She didn’t even know what that entailed. Besides, she lived in DC, five hours away from Norfolk, where Lucky lived. A long-distance anything wouldn’t work. Not that she’d ever tried it. She’d never even had sex two days in a row with the same man. It went against her one-and-done rule. Why had she broken it for Lucky?

It had to be the stress they were under. None of this was normal, and sex was the perfect release. If she repeated that mantra enough times, would she believe it?

Lucky slid under the covers and turned toward her. “Are you okay? Tired? Did you want me to bring the laptop in here

and we could watch the movie?”

Without thinking, she moved closer and kissed him, nibbling his lips until he parted for her. She drove her tongue into his mouth, licking along his teeth, sucking on his tongue. Desperation to keep him close rode her hard.

As he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her tight against him, the desperation eased. When she needed breath, she pulled back and rested her forehead against his. “Sorry.”

“For what?” Lucky murmured against her ear.

This was real, too real. What were they doing?

“Nothing. I just wanted another taste,” Grace said. She needed to get her emotions under control. “Let’s just get some sleep. Maybe they’ll bring us to Hope early tomorrow.”

“Okay, baby.”

Lucky looked confused by her sudden mood change. She didn’t blame him; she was giving herself whiplash. Neither of them needed the complication of emotions. They’d had amazing sex. It had to be enough.

Grace woke up crying as the remnants of the nightmare clung to her. She hadn’t slept well and kept waking up. In the darkness, she’d found relief in Lucky’s low snores on the pillow next to hers, reminding her she wasn’t alone. At one point, she’d almost wrapped herself around his body for comfort.

At least it was morning. If things went according to plan, they’d be going home today with Hope. Except she couldn’t shake the feeling of impending doom.

She glanced over at Lucky’s pillow to find him gone. She needed to get up, too. Dwelling on all the shit that could go wrong wouldn’t help anything.

He'd thoughtfully put sleep shorts and a T-shirt on the bedside table. She grabbed them and quickly dressed under the covers. No need to give Boris and Natasha a repeat of yesterday.

After brushing her teeth and washing up, she followed the scent of coffee into the kitchen.

"Good morning, sleepyhead." Lucky handed her a mug of coffee.

"Only good thing about it so far is this mug." She grabbed the milk out of the refrigerator and added it and some sugar to her coffee. Leaning against the counter, she took a sip and contemplated him over the rim of her cup.

"Didn't sleep well?"

"Not really. I guess I'm worried about Hope and all the shit that could go wrong today. What if—"

"Nope, I'm going to stop you right there. Let's not bring any nasty shit down on us by thinking about it. Your father sent me a text confirming he wired the money."

"He did?" She sighed. "I'll try. No promises. After yesterday, I don't have a lot of confidence in those people."

"Oh, I'm right there with you."

Grace nodded. Of course, he was. Lucky probably knew exactly how bad a shit show this could become.

"Want something to eat?" Lucky watched her as he refilled his mug.

"Nah. I'm not hungry. I think I'll get dressed in case they come earlier today." Her stomach was a mass of butterflies, and not the good kind. She worried if she tried to eat anything, it would come right back up. Even the coffee wasn't sitting well. All this nervous energy was wearing on her.

As she turned to leave, Lucky grabbed her wrist and gently pulled her toward him. "We'll get through whatever happens, baby." He kissed her on the forehead and let her go.

Grace nodded as she breathed a calming breath. Lucky had a lot of experience with this type of thing. She needed to get a grip on her emotions. There was always going to be a risk in coming back for Hope. These bad guys would have fucked her over if she'd come alone.

Grace owed her father an apology when they got back home. With Lucky, there was a chance this would all work out. That's what she had to hold on to. He was right; thinking about all the things that could go wrong wasn't helping. Instead, she needed to think about what she could do to help keep them safe.

After repacking their suitcases, Grace got dressed and went to find Lucky. He was sitting at the kitchen table typing on his laptop. She wondered what he was working on since they didn't think he'd have any access to the internet. Even if they did, Boris and Natasha could monitor everything he did. Or maybe, that was the point?

"Do you want more coffee?" she asked as she refilled her mug.

"I've had four cups, and I'm already buzzing. Probably better not." Lucky didn't look at her. He just kept typing.

"What are you working on?" Maybe she should have just looked over his shoulder. But she hated when people did that.

"Just answering some work emails. Give me a minute or two, then I'm all yours," Lucky said as he continued to type.

"Damn. They can't leave you alone at all, can they? Even when you're on vacation."

"You know how it is, baby. That's why they call it work and I get paid."

Grace leaned against the counter and wondered what he was really doing. They'd painted a cute little scene, but there was no job and no one to send him emails. Then a light bulb went off in her stressed-out brain. It was like hiding in plain sight and contacting his team.

The Red Falcon team waited somewhere in Marikistan to act as backup. But Grace hadn't thought about Lucky would

contact them. Apparently, it didn't matter how many episodes of Burn Notice she'd watched. She was still clueless about all this clandestine shit.

“Okay, all done. Sorry about that, baby.”

“It's okay. I shouldn't have bitched about it. I'm on edge and worried about Hope.”

Lucky closed his laptop and made his way across the kitchen to stand in front of her. Then he took the mug from her hand and placed it on the counter.

Grace melted at the flare of heat in his chocolate brown eyes. All her decisions that morning went right out the window as his hand cupped her jaw. A second passed, like he was waiting for her to push him away before he leaned in for a kiss. As their lips touched, heat pooled in her core. The need grew until she clung to him, their tongues rubbing against each other. He tasted like mint and coffee. She'd never get enough of him and was on the verge of ripping open his shirt when the beep of the lock broke through her passion-addled brain.

“Fuck.” Lucky took a step back and ran his hand through his dark brown hair. “Their timing is impeccable.”

“No shit,” Grace said as she tried to calm her breathing. She'd bet money that Boris and Natasha had been watching them on the camera. They should probably be happy that they hadn't waited until they were fucking against the kitchen counter.

Boris stopped at the doorway. “Time to go.”

Grace's stomach clenched, as she worried it would be a repeat of yesterday. It was hard to be positive when everything had gone to shit since they'd landed.

“Okay. Do I get to bring my laptop this time?” Lucky asked.

“Yes, and your bags. You will not be coming back here,” Boris said, then he walked toward the front door.

Lucky pulled her close. Anyone watching would think it was a kiss and a hug. “Looks like it's go time. Soon you'll

have Hope.” Then he laced their fingers together. “Let’s grab the luggage and get out of here.”

Grace allowed him to pull her into the bedroom. Instead of excitement, worry pounded in her head. She checked the room to make sure they weren’t leaving anything behind and zipped her bag.

“Got everything?” Lucky asked.

“Yup. I can’t say I’m sorry to leave either.” She could tell he was worried about her and tried to smile. From his expression, she’d failed miserably. It was the best she could do, though.

“I don’t blame you. I can’t wait to get home and cuddle with Hope.”

His words twisted the knots in her stomach a little tighter. She wanted it, too, even if she’d never tell him.

“And change lots of diapers.” Grace smirked. At least she hadn’t lost her snarky side.

“Yeah, that too.” Lucky chuckled.

They grabbed their bags and his laptop and followed Boris out to the van, where Natasha waited in the driver’s seat. Did it bode well that there were just the two of them? Or was it just lure them into a false sense of security?

The ride took forever, but finally, they arrived back at the house they’d met Rimkus the previous day. It surprised Grace as she stepped out of the van and there were no guards waiting.

“Bring your things,” Boris said.

Grace raised an eyebrow at Lucky. But he just shrugged. Then pulled their suitcases out of the van and slid the strap from his laptop bag over his shoulder. She grasped the handle of her bag and Lucky’s hand and followed Boris into the house, praying they weren’t walking to their deaths.

Boris led them into the house and had them put their bags against the wall and sit at the table.

“Where’s Rimkus?” Lucky asked as they sat down. “Can we see Hope while we’re waiting?”

Yes, please. Grace said a prayer. She ached to hold her baby, make sure she was safe and away from these fucking bastards.

“Soon,” Natasha said.

Grace snapped her head around as he stepped into the house and shut the door. He spoke so rarely his voice took her by surprise.

Lucky reached for the hand resting in her lap and squeezed. “Hopefully sooner than later.”

“Right? If they make us wait much longer, I might vomit on the table.”

Boris raised an eyebrow at her comment, but remained quiet.

Stress and fear bubbled in Grace’s belly like a witch’s cauldron. She’d had enough. The assholes were just playing with them now. Watching them over the video and seeing how far they could push them. She’d reached her limit. “What the fuck is going on here? You have our money. Give us our baby.”

Rimkus walked into the room a few moments later. It proved her point. “Patience, Mrs. Rossi.”

“I think we’ve shown more than enough of that already, Rimkus,” Lucky said.

“Perhaps.” Rimkus stood at the head of the table and stared at Lucky.

What the ever-living fuck was wrong with these people?

Anger warred with dread inside her. At that moment, anger was winning. If there’d been something on the table, Grace would have thrown it at him. Or maybe not. It sounded good in theory, but there was too much resting on this going well. The thought of Hope being sold to someone else sent a shiver of fear down her spine.

“I know you got the money. My father-in-law confirmed the wire transfer. Why aren’t we signing the papers so we can take our baby home?” Lucky asked.

Grace nodded in agreement. Then wished she had a modicum of his patience.

“The papers are on the way. There was difficulty—” Rimkus didn’t finish his sentence.

Fuck. This shit would kill her. Give her sick people and blood any day. But this shit—lack of control and hidden agendas—make her physically ill. People’s lives shouldn’t be a game of chess.

“I want to see Hope now. Let me have her while we wait,” Grace said. She tried to sound strong, but her voice cracked as she pleaded for her baby.

Rimkus touched his ear, then nodded. “Very well, come with me. Mr. Rossi, you will remain here.”

“I go where my wife goes.” Lucky practically growled.

“Either you stay here, or she doesn’t see Hope. We can’t have you trying to steal the baby.”

Grace swallowed her retort. Steal their baby? The one that should have been home with her months ago without paying a fucking fortune to criminals.

Lucky reached for her hand and shook his head. “Don’t do it. I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“It’ll be okay.” Grace prayed she was right.

“Why can’t you bring the baby here?” Lucky asked.

“This is not up for debate, Mr. Rossi. We’re trying to appease your wife. Is that not enough for you?” Rimkus’s expression revealed nothing.

“Is she in the other room?” Grace asked.

Rimkus nodded, but didn’t answer. Lucky’s warning about staying together echoed in her head. The need to see Hope was stronger. Grace stared at Lucky for a moment, committing his face to memory, then kissed him. She might be overreacting,

but given who they were dealing with, anything was possible. Lucky clearly expected the worst, or he wouldn't have tried to stop her.

“I won't be long, sugar bear,” Grace said. Somehow she knew if she walked out she might never see him again, and she fought the urge to tell him she loved him. Instead, she smiled, then turned and followed Rimkus.

CHAPTER 13



Lucky watched Grace leave the room and wanted to pound something or someone. He supposed it had been inevitable. They were always going to separate them. It would be easier to control their reactions. Fuck. She didn't even know how he felt about her and Hope. Maybe never would.

Willing himself to calm down, he sat back in his chair and crossed his arms, and stared daggers at Boris and Natasha. Although he didn't know what they were after since they'd received all the money. The only explanation he could think of was that Rimkus played them.

Lucky risked a glance at this watch. When Grace had asked what he was doing on the laptop earlier, he'd seen sending encrypted messages to his Knox and to Quinn, the boss of the Red Falcon Team. She knew they were in country, but he'd hoped to tell her they were coming to help extract them, but it had been too risky.

The team had tracked them with Grace's pendant. If all went according to plan, they'd be storming the building any minute. It had been one of three options they'd planned, and he'd hoped not to involve his team. It seemed like the best course of action when they didn't get Hope right away. The longer it dragged on, the less faith he had that the three of them could get out of Marikistan without additional help.

"What's holding everything up? We were hoping to catch a flight home today." Lucky addressed Boris and Natasha, but he knew it was the men monitoring the cameras that would have the answers. He doubted they'd be anywhere close. But

that's why he wasn't going home with Grace and Hope. He still had a trafficking ring to take down.

Natasha shook his head and grunted.

As the minutes ticked by and Grace hadn't returned, Lucky knew something had happened to her. "Where's my wife?"

Still no answer.

"Rimkus, where the fuck are you? Enough already?"

Several pairs of footsteps echoed in the hallway. Definitely not Rimkus. Lucky braced himself to deal with whatever walked into the room. It probably wouldn't be good for him. He'd just have to hold on until his team showed up.

Three thugs came through the doorway. Boris and Natasha joined them and spread around the room until they surrounded Lucky. Each man was heavily armed and built like a tank. Ink covered every inch of their exposed skin and led him to wonder if the traffickers were part of the Bratva—Russian mafia. When they'd asked Rimkus, he'd denied the mafia was involved. Now Lucky wasn't sure he believed a thing the man had said. Nothing had gone according to plan since they arrived in Marikistan.

"Where's my wife and baby? You got your money. Now let us leave," Lucky said. The men waited for something or someone to give them further instructions. The question was who.

"We can't do that, Luca," an accented voice said. It wasn't the same accent as Rimkus or Miller, but it sounded familiar. "Grace and the baby are no longer here." The voice was nowhere and everywhere, echoing out of hidden speakers inside the room.

Furious, Lucky stood up with such force his chair fell against the floor with a loud crack. The fuckers drew their Glocks, and he shook his head. "Really? Five of you to take down one unarmed man?"

"Maybe too much for a civilian, but you're far more than that. Aren't you, Mr. Rossi?"

Well, fuck. Did he know, or was he fishing? “I work in corporate advertising. As I’m sure you checked before we got here.”

“Nice try. Grace Miller isn’t married. Never has been. She’s the daughter of Pavel Mishkivnis, a traitor to his country. I can’t believe changing his name to Miller would protect his family.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.” Lucky didn’t know the story of Miller’s immigration to the United States. Apparently, he’d pissed off this asshole, and Grace and Hope were about to pay for it.

“When we discovered the woman who wanted to buy Hope was Mishkivnis’s daughter, I couldn’t believe our luck. Instead of allowing her to take the baby, we arranged to sell both Grace and the baby to one of our best customers. Mishkivnis will lose his daughter. It won’t make up for my taking my sister from me, but it’ll have to do.”

“You’re delusional. This sounds like some terrible movie of the week.”

“Tsk, tsk. Igor, please teach Mr. Rossi to have some respect.”

Lucky didn’t know which was Igor, and he took a punch to the kidneys before he could protect himself. Air whooshed out of his chest, and he doubled over. Forcing himself to take slow, deep breaths, he worked through the pain. He was a Navy SEAL. If these assholes thought one punch would take him down; they were delusional.

“If that was the plan, then why not just shoot me?” Lucky asked. He didn’t know where the next hit would come from, but he refused to show them any weakness.

“Because you have a choice to make.”

“Does it involve my wife and daughter walking into this room?”

“Ahh, a comedian. Maybe I should let the men have some fun with you?”

“Whatever. But if they kill me, you won’t get to offer me my choice.” Lucky didn’t give a flying fuck what the slapnut had to say. He cared about his teammates, though. .

Quinn would have followed the GPS signal and wouldn’t realize Lucky wasn’t with Grace until they reached her. Their mission was to transport Grace and Hope back to the US. Sure, SEALs left no one behind, but he wasn’t a SEAL right now and he has a different mission to accomplish. Getting his girls home was all that mattered.

“When we discovered you were accompanying Mishkivnis’s daughter, my people looked into your background. The Calabria and Stepanov families have had an alliance for generations. I called your uncle to find out why his family was trying to take down an arm of my organization. Santino wasn’t happy when I told him about you. He strongly suggested we offer you a job instead of sending you home in a body bag.”

“My name is Rossi, and Grace and Hope are my family.”

“Please, I tire of this. Why do you deny your family? You think the American Government will save you? Where is your backup?”

Lucky had cut all ties with his family when he’d watched his precious Maria get gunned down in a mob war. The day after her funeral, he packed his bag and left. He’d had his name legally changed to Rossi, his mother’s maiden name, and then joined the Navy. In the last eleven years, he’d never once looked back.

“You think it was hard to discover you were using your mother’s name?”

Helping Grace was only a small part of why he was in Marikistan. The true mission was to take down the organization behind the child trafficking ring. It had been a long shot that he’d be able to accomplish more than rescuing the children. But now a way in had fallen into his lap like a gift—of coal, maybe—but still a gift.

If Lucky got sucked back into that life, would it ever let him go again? A year was a long time. There would be tests of his loyalty he couldn't fake. What would it do to him? Could he face his teammates? Or Grace? He'd be dirty. Unworthy.

"Can I have a moment to think about it?" Asking made him want to vomit. It went against everything he believed in. Even hating the thought, he'd accept Stepanov's offer.

"You have five minutes. Then the house needs to be cleared. Remember, if you say no, it will mean your death. And trust me on this, Igor and his friends won't make it an easy one."

An easy death? No, he wouldn't expect that. The rush to leave surprised Lucky, though. It was possible Stepanov knew about his team. But he wouldn't know they'd be tracking Grace. If the asshole expected the team to show up for Lucky, it would buy them some time.

The Red Falcons were the best at what they did. They'd find Grace and Hope and get them to the EXFIL and back to the US. He wished he could have said a proper goodbye, kissed them both one last time. At least he'd know they were safe, and maybe someday he'd see them again.

The sound of someone clearing their throat brought Lucky's eyes to the doorway. It had to be Stepanov. Tall, silvery hair, a slightly smaller build than the goons surrounding Lucky. "Time's up? What's your decision?"

"I'll take the job. But I need to know a couple of things first?" Lucky said.

"You've got a set of *yaichki*."

"What?" Lucky understood, but played dumb. No one would expect him to be able to read and write Russian, except he'd worked hard to become fluent in the six languages he'd learned. As SEALs, they went where they needed to go, and it helped to know as many languages as possible.

"Balls." Stepanov sighed. "Ask your question."

"What's the shit between you and Miller?"

Stepanov contemplated his question. Then shook his head. “Skip that for now. What other burning questions do you have for me? I expected questions about what your new life would entail. Not worrying about some bitch who is no longer your responsibility.”

Lucky couldn't care less what they'd put him through—they'd make sure it wouldn't be easy. None of that mattered if Grace and Hope were safe and happy in the States.

Boris walked up to Stepanov and waited to be acknowledged. “*Pakhan*, your car is here. We should leave now.”

Lucky searched his brain for any information he knew about the Bratva. He'd been oblivious to most of the family business back then. His father had wanted him to go to college before getting further involved, and they'd limited his involvement to tagging along on the collection runs.

His life changed the night of his high school graduation. They'd all gathered at Luigi's for a celebratory dinner. Lucky had been shooting the shit with his friends and arrived late to find a bloodbath. His parents, two members of his father's security team, and Maria were dead. If he'd been there, he would have been lying there with them.

Everyone he'd loved had been brutally ripped from his life. When his Uncle Santino found him, he was sitting on the floor next to his mother and holding Maria in his arms. Lucky hadn't even realized their blood covered him. He wanted answers. His father was the head of the Calabria family. It shouldn't have happened. But his uncle couldn't or wouldn't give him any information.

As Lucky sat through the funerals, putting the only people he'd ever cared about deep into the ground, he built a wall around his heart. Never again would he let anyone in. Emotions only weakened the person, and he wouldn't allow that to happen ever again.

Maria's was the last funeral. In some ways, it was the most devastating. She was supposed to be his future, his happily ever after. Being murdered before her eighteenth birthday

wasn't supposed to be part of the plan. Once he'd said his goodbye, he disappeared from New York and his extended family. That life was over and should have stayed that way. But now it offered an opportunity to kill the beast from within, a chance he wouldn't pass up no matter how it went against everything he believed in. And shredded the love he'd finally allowed himself to feel again.

“*Da*. Let's go. I'll entertain the rest of your questions in the car.”

“What about our luggage?” Lucky asked as the men filed out the front door.

“Leave it. You won't need it.”

With one last look at the two bags and what they represented, Lucky packed away his emotions, and followed the men out to where three black Cadillac Escalades waited.

Stepanov climbed into the middle car, and Lucky followed him. Boris slid into the front passenger seat and Natasha got in the back with them.

“I have limited patience, Luca. Don't push your infamous luck,” Stepanov said.

Lucky grunted. *Motherfucker*. He had to tread carefully. It was like navigating a minefield.

“Why accommodate my uncle's request? How can you trust me?”

Stepanov's smile was pure evil. “Because I have something you care about.”

“What could you possibly have that would matter to me?”

“The woman and the baby. Your old team rescued her a half hour ago. The rat Rimkus is dead. But if you step out of line, break my trust, I will have her and the baby eliminated.”

Lucky took his first full breath since he watched Grace walk away. She and Hope were safe—for now. He'd make sure they'd stay that way. They were his heart, and he'd do whatever it took to protect them, no matter how long it took. It reinforced his decision to accept Stepanov's offer one

hundred-fold. The *Pakhan* might believe he had Lucky's balls in a vice, but he didn't know the real Luca Rossi.

"You're a real bastard," Lucky said.

"Thank you." Stepanov smirked.

"But what about your vendetta against Miller?"

"No need for you to worry about him. We have other plans for Pavel Mishkivnis."

At least Lucky still had a way to get messages to his team. It would be dangerous, but worth it to warn Quinn to watch their backs.

CHAPTER 14



Grace clutched Hope to her as Rimkus pulled her out of the house and shoved her into the backseat of the car parked outside. “What the fuck is going on?” Grace demanded after Rimkus got behind the wheel. Sweat beaded on his brow as he put the car in gear and slowly rolled around the side of the house. Once he hit the road, he sped up, but kept checking his mirrors.

“I thought you were smart. The head of the Bratva plans to take Lucky out and sell you and Hope. I can leave you behind. I wouldn’t recommend it, though.”

“You’re a real fucktard.” Grace snuggled Hope closer. Thank goodness she was sleeping. But that led to another thought. “Did you drug her?”

“Yes. It was the only way to make sure she’d stay quiet. Again, I’m trying to save your lives. You really don’t want to be owned by the man who paid for you.”

“Did you know about this all along? Why didn’t you warn us? There had to be a method in place.” Grace was livid that Rimkus had hung them out to dry and put all of them in danger. Was Lucky even still alive? He promised he’d come for her. She’d believed him. With her promise to do whatever she needed to stay alive, she reached for the clover pendant around her neck. As she rubbed her fingers over the engraved locked, it reassured that he’d find them.

“Enough with the questions. If Stepanov’s men catch up to us, we’re all dead.” Rimkus said. Then met her eyes in the

rearview mirror.

“I thought our cover was solid. What happened?” Grace tried to connect all the dots, but there was too much she didn’t know. How did they find out about Lucky? As relieved as she was to be holding Hope, a hole in her heart opened wider with every mile that separated her from Lucky. How could he get out of there alive? He was one person against the thug brigade. She prayed his SEAL team would swoop in like the calvary. Then he’d track down her and Hope and rescue them.

“I don’t know. We were careful.”

Hope lifted her hand to her mouth and sucked on it in her sleep. Warmth filled her and a love liked she’d never known tightened her chest. After all these months, she finally had her baby. Grace had been wishing for this, working for it, for months. Holding her child took her breath away. It should have been enough. Would have. Except without Lucky, there was still a piece missing. She blinked to dispel the tears that threatened. He’d be okay. He had to be.

“What happens now?” Grace asked.

“I’m taking you to a safe house that no one knows about.”

After everything else, Grace had her doubts this was a secret either. But she didn’t care as long as they were safe.

“Okay. Will there be food and diapers for Hope?”

“Yes, I paid someone to make sure. I’m hoping you won’t be there long.”

“Wait. You’re not staying?” Was he really going to leave them all alone with no way to defend themselves?

“I need to get back and see if I can figure out what went wrong.”

Grace wanted to reach over the front seat and strangle him. Asswipe. She wasn’t sure how long they were driving, but soon he slowed the car and turned into a driveway. The house looked similar to the other one they’d stayed in. Would there be cameras hidden in every room?

Rimkus stopped in front of the house. “Let’s get you inside. I won’t lock you in, but stay inside. Don’t draw any attention to yourself.”

“Got it,” Grace said. She looked around as he unlocked the door and handed her the key.

“I’ll make sure you have what you need, then I have to leave,” Rimkus said.

Grace figured she should be happy that he was even checking that they’d have food and supplies for Hope. “How long do you think we’ll be here?”

Rimkus checked the pantry and refrigerator. “I don’t know. You should have enough supplies for at least a week. Maybe longer.”

Grace shuddered and cuddled Hope closer. Everything was different now that she had a child to protect. “Do you have a gun you can leave with me?”

Rimkus looked surprised by her question. “You can shoot?”

“Of course. My father made sure my sister and I could take care of ourselves. I’m not as good as Tempest, but I’ll feel a lot better if I have a means to protect us while we’re alone.”

“Have you ever shot a person?”

“No, but don’t underestimate my need to protect this baby.” Grace stared him down.

With a sigh, Rimkus reached behind him and handed her a Glock. “No safety on this one.”

“I’m aware,” Grace said.

“Okay. Please don’t shoot yourself.”

She stopped before rolling her eyes at him. “Are all CIA agents assholes?”

“Probably. It comes with the territory.” Rimkus smiled.

“Okay, maybe you’re not a complete asshole. But I’ll refrain judgment until I get back home.”

The gunshot rang out. Rimkus cursed. Grace watched through the thin slats as he slipped to the floor. Bless the man for making sure he was propped against the pantry door.

“I told you, she’s not here.”

“You lying *podonok*—fuck. We have you on camera driving away with her. Did you think we weren’t watching the outside of the building, *zasranets*—asshole?”

“Killing me won’t help you. Try explaining that to Stepanov?” Rimkus said. His voice sounded weaker.

Not knowing where they’d shot him, she wondered how much blood he’d lost. Grace couldn’t see their faces from her position, but it looked like there were three of them, all waving guns around. Fuck. Rimkus would need medical attention, but she couldn’t give it to him from inside the pantry.

Warm liquid wet her legs where she sat on the floor. At first, she thought a bottle broke, until she looked down. Dark red blood seeped under the door. Way too much for Rimkus to survive. She didn’t know what to do. He was a trained operative. Grace had a baby to protect. If she tried to push open the door, the assholes would shoot first, and they’d all be dead. But it went against all her years of being a nurse practitioner to allow him to bleed out.

Grace couldn’t breathe, and her vision narrowed, turning black at the edges. If she passed out, she’d drop Hope. They’d be sitting ducks. Fuck. She was terrified and couldn’t control the panic racing along her nerves. Hearing Lucky’s words, reminding her to stay alive no matter what, she focused, calming her breathing. In. Out. Slow and steady. Finally, the panic receded enough that didn’t feel woozy.

Determined to protect Hope if they discovered their hiding place, Grace put the Glock on the floor next to her and moved Hope into the curve of her left arm. She might not survive, but she sure as shit would send a bunch of them to hell first.

Hope’s eyes opened and stared up at Grace. As happy as she was to see her awake and alert, she prayed Hope would stay quiet for a little longer, and that help would arrive soon.

Even from inside the pantry, Grace heard the thugs tearing apart the house, searching for her. When she didn't see them through the slats, she called to Rimkus.

“Where are you hurt?”

“My gut. Don't even think about coming out of there.” Rimkus's voice was getting weaker by the moment, and from the amount of blood seeping under the door, she didn't think had much time left.

“I won't. Thank you for protecting us. I take back every nasty thing I thought about you,” Grace said. Frustrated that she couldn't do anything to help him, she hoped her attempt at humor would ease some of his suffering.

He chuckled. “You're welcome. Give Hope a good life.”

It had gotten quiet, too quiet. The thugs stopped slamming things around the house and yelling in Russian. Maybe they gave up and left. Grace had been so focused on Rimkus, she hadn't paid attention to anything else. Stupid, really. Especially if they heard them talking.

Grace understood the silence a moment later. The sound of automatic machine gun fire filled her ears. Then she heard different voices—American voices. Then the shooting stopped, almost as quickly as it had started. She gave thanks to every saint whose name she could remember. Then thanked her mother for watching over them. They were finally safe.

“Rimkus, move away from the door so I can treat you,” Grace said. When he didn't answer, she tried to push on the door. He was too heavy, and it wouldn't budge.

“Grace? Where are you?”

It wasn't the voice she'd hoped to hear, but knew it was a member of the SEAL team. “In the pantry. There's a body blocking the door.”

“Sit tight and we'll get you out of there.” Verifying it was them through the slats in the door let her breathe easier. Then the door opened, and the tall red-headed boss of the team reached for her.

“I’m Quinn. Ready to blow this shithole?”

Grace handed him the gun first.

He looked surprised. “Always good to be prepared.”

“Yeah. I made a promise, and I was going to keep it.”

“Good. Let me help you out of there. Do you want me to take Hope?” Quinn asked.

Grace debated for a moment and then handed her precious cargo to the enormous SEAL. Hope looked so tiny in his arms. She’d probably look the same way in Lucky’s arms. Then she took the hand he held out to her and let him pull her up.

She hadn’t been on the floor for long, but the tension made her legs stiff. As soon as she was standing, Quinn handed Hope back to her.

“She’s a cutie.”

“Yes, she is. Thank you for coming and just in time. I don’t know how they hadn’t found us already.”

“We got here as soon as we could. The GPS signal blipped out a few times. Then your location changed.”

“You were tracking me?” Grace grasped the pendant against her chest. It looked like her lucky four-leave clover was lucky, after all.

“Yup, from the moment Lucky gave you the necklace.”

Grace closed her eyes and sent up another prayer. “Where’s Lucky? Didn’t he come with you?”

“All clear,” Josh said as he walked into the kitchen, with Ry following right behind him. “Tempest is going to be so happy to know you’re safe.”

“Me too. But Quinn. Answer me, where’s Lucky?”

Josh and Ry exchanged glances, then looked over at Quinn. It must be up to the big guy to tell her what was going on.

“Please, if he’d dead just tell me. I need to know.” Grace’s voice hitched as she held back a sob. She couldn’t lose him.

Quinn frowned. “Lucky’s alive. But he’s missing right now. We’re not sure where he is. We only had a tracker on you.”

“How do you know he’s not...gone?” Grace couldn’t bring herself to say the word again.

“Because we know Lucky. Didn’t he tell you he was going to have to stay behind and finish taking down the trafficking organization?”

“I guess I didn’t realize he wouldn’t be coming home with us.” Grace’s eyes filled with tears. “So that’s it? We just leave him here and hope for the best?”

“Grace, you’ve just spent the better part of a week with him. Don’t you think he will do whatever it takes to come back home?”

She sniffed. He’d promised he’d always come for her. That had to mean something, right? But not knowing was going to kill her.

“I have something for you. I was going to wait until we got on the chopper, but I think you need it now.” Quinn handed her a cell phone.

“A phone? Why do I need a new phone?” Was she missing something?

“It’s a burner phone. If you look at the contacts, there is only one number—Lucky’s. He told me to let you know if you needed him, he was only a text away. That he’d get back to you as soon as he could. I think that makes his intentions pretty clear, don’t you?” Quinn smiled down at her. “C’mon, let’s get some of that blood cleaned up and get you home. Sound good,” Quinn asked.

Grace was staring at the phone in her hand. He’d left it for her.

“Grace?”

“Uh, yeah. Sorry. Whatever you said, yes.”

Josh laughed. “Wow, one of the badass twins is getting soft.”

Grace rolled her eyes at him. "Don't count on it. It's just been a little rocky these last few days."

"C'mon, Tempest is waiting at your house for you. She can't wait to hold the baby," Josh said, and pulled her into a hug. "We've got you, girl. Okay?"

Grace nodded, more thankful than she could find words to express. For someone who prided herself on not needing anyone, she'd learned a few things about herself.

Josh held the baby while Grace got as much of the blood off as possible. Her jeans were ready for the trash, but she didn't have a change of clothes.

"Can we go home now?" Grace asked. She took Hope from Josh and kissed her tiny forehead. "You are the best baby."

Hope cooed and they all went "aww."

"You wish is our command. Unless you want Quinn to toss you over his shoulder this time?" Josh said.

"Oh, hell no. Once was enough." Thinking about how Lucky had tossed her over his shoulder and threatened to spank her ass made her heart hurt. She'd never told him she caught feelings for him. He hadn't told her either, but considering how she kept telling him she didn't do relationships. What did she expect?

CHAPTER 15



It seemed to take forever to get back to DC. The SEALs had a car seat for Hope for the plane and even scrounged up something for Grace to change into. She should have been ecstatic to get home, but without Lucky, life felt a less vibrant.

Grace didn't have time to dwell on it. When they landed in DC, a limo was waiting, courtesy of her father. She didn't understand why he'd send that for just her and the baby, until Quinn, Ry, and Josh piled in with her.

"You guys are coming home with me?"

"Oh yeah. I told you Tempest was waiting for you. She might have organized a welcome home/baby shower," Josh said. Then he grinned. No one could resist that smile. It had even melted her sister's frozen heart.

These damn SEALs seemed to make a habit of that.

"She didn't."

"Of course, she did. I hope she doesn't decide she wants a baby now," Josh said.

"Would it be so bad? The cousins could grow up together." Grace kind of liked that idea. But then she remembered Tempest and Josh lived five hours away, just like Lucky. Maybe it was time to think about changing up some things. Did she really want to stay in DC? It's not like she had a lot of friends, only work acquaintances, and they were always jetting off to different parts of the world.

“Now remember, act surprised,” Quinn said as they approached Grace’s front door.

Grace rolled her eyes at him, then smiled as she opened the door.

“Surprise.” Tempest pulled her into a tight hug. “Oh my God, she’s so beautiful. I hardly saw her last time.”

“She’s changed a lot, too. Babies grow so fast,” Grace said. She looked around at her front hall. Tempest had gone all out. There were pink balloons and streamers everywhere. “This is amazing. Did you do it all by yourself?”

“Nah. Everyone else is waiting in the living room. We didn’t want you to be overwhelmed or scare Hope,” Tempest said.

“Everyone?” Grace quirked an eyebrow at her sister. “Just how many people did you invite?”

“Just our team and their partners. Papa too. Even Whiskey is here. Since he couldn’t go on the mission. Harmony brought him up with her.”

“I wondered where he was, but it was so crazy I forgot to ask.”

“Umm, do you think I can hold Hope while say hi to everyone?” Tempest asked.

Grace smiled. She’d never thought her sister would fall in love, and definitely never figured she’d want a child. She kissed Hope on the cheek and handed her to Tempest. “Hope this is your Aunt Tempest.”

Hope gurgled and cooed that baby laugh that makes everyone melt. Tempest was no different, and Grace got teary-eyed. Seeing everyone sitting in her living room amazed Grace. She barely knew these people, and yet they’d come all this way to see her and meet Hope. Even her father had a smile on his face.

Grace leaned into Tempest and murmured, “Someone needs to get a photo of Papa smiling. Who knows when it’ll happen again?”

Tempest snickered. “Yeah, no shit. Oops, sorry Hope. No cursing in front of the baby. I don’t want to be the bad aunt.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. I’m sure her first word will be fuck.”

“Probably,” Josh said from behind them.

“You have no room to talk.” Tempest smiled at her fiancé.

“I can be good.” Josh pouted and everyone laughed.

“Geesh, bro. You’re going to ruin our rep,” Ry said.

Grace greeted everyone. It surprised her that even Lucky’s CO, Tony Knox, had come up from Norfolk. Providence had come with him. She and Tempest had become good friends. The other woman was Harmony, Ry’s fiancé. She had to be the sweetest woman, and the clumsiest.

“I’m glad you made it home safely, *Maža mergytė*. When they pulled that stunt for more money, I was concerned.”

“Me too, *Tėtis*. You were right. I’d never have Hope right now if not for Lucky.”

“He’ll be okay. He’s one of the strongest men I know.”

“I didn’t think you knew him that well,” Grace said, unable to keep the surprise and sadness out of her voice.

“I know a lot more than you give me credit for. When I heard how he carried you to the EXFIL point, I knew he was perfect for you. I just had to make sure you realized it.”

“*Tėtis*, are you playing matchmaker?” Grace couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Call it what you will. But I’m not getting any younger. I don’t want to worry about you. You need husbands who will take good care of you. Unfortunately, I’m going to have to wait a little longer for yours to happen.”

“I don’t even know what to say.” Grace was dumbfounded.

“How about, ‘thank you, *Tėtis*’? If I’d waited for you to find someone, I’d have been six feet under.”

“Thanks for your vote of confidence,” Grace said.

“We both know you would never settle down. Then you fell in love with Hope. After that, I knew you’d be open to more. We’re not all that different, you and I.”

Grace shook her head. It was crazy—her father playing matchmaker, her sister throwing her a baby shower. When had this become her life? And why did it have to hurt so much without Lucky here?

Tempest brought Hope back to Grace and announced the food was ready. They ate buffet style in her kitchen. The best was the enormous cake with a photo of Hope, and decorated with pink icing.

“I can’t believe you did all of this, Tempy,” Grace said after everyone went home. “Thank you for everything.”

It was a long drive to Norfolk, and she’d invited them to stay, but they turned her down. Everyone but Tempest and Josh. They were going to stay a few days and make sure she had everything she needed.

“You’re welcome. Just remember, you’ll have to compete with this when it’s my turn.” Tempest smiled.

“Oh yeah? Another competition, huh?”

“Always. Why stop now?”

“Are you going to try for a baby?” Grace asked. After what Josh had said earlier, she wasn’t sure he was ready to start a family.

“Nah, we’re not even married yet. But I love making Josh sweat about it.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Just wait. It’s the little things that help make the relationship fun,” Tempest said.

Grace nodded. Would she know? She wasn’t even sure how Lucky felt about her. Sure, he’d left her the cell phone, but that didn’t mean he wanted a relationship or a baby. It was one thing to play the role, quite another to live it.

“Stop thinking so hard, you’re going to hurt yourself,” Tempest said and hugged her. “He’ll be back and sweep you off your feet.”

“We’ll see.”

Grace went to check on Hope. They’d set up her basinet in Grace’s room, so she’d be close if Hope needed her. Her little girl had been through quite a lot in her short life, but Grace intended to spend the rest of her life making up for it.

As she watched her daughter sleep, Grace smiled. Finally, her baby was home with her, after so much fear and worry. It was almost perfect.

“Hey, Quinn forgot to tell you something about the burner phone,” Josh whispered.

“What did he forget to say?” Grace pulled the phone out of her pocket and turned it on.

“There’s already a message for you. It came while we were tracking you with the GPS.”

“Lucky?”

Josh shrugged. He gave her a hug, and then walked out of the bedroom to give her some privacy.

At first, Grace was afraid to read it, but then curiosity got the better of her.

LR: Baby girl, I’m sorry I wasn’t the one to rescue you. It was unavoidable. Believe me, if there had been any way to be there, I would have. I’d do anything for you, give you the sun and all the stars if you’d let me—both of you.

I’m going to be gone for a while, but one of these days, when you least expect it, I’ll come visit. I don’t expect you to wait for me. Live your best life, both of you, but know if you ever need me, I will always be there for you. I don’t know if I can ever explain how much you mean to me, but hopefully one day, I’ll be able to show you.

Grace dropped onto her bed. The tears she'd been holding back since she'd walked away from him poured unheeded over her cheeks. She ached to feel his arms around her. To kiss him and have her skin turn pink from his beard. To see his killer smile and tell him how she felt.

A short while later, Tempest came in and sat beside her. Shoulder to shoulder. She sat quietly, letting Grace know she was there for her. It helped. By the time her tears stopped, Grace was totally drained.

"I hate crying."

"Me, too. I think it's a gene that runs in the family," Tempest said. Then shoulder bumped her. "Was it a good message?"

"The best."

"So why the tears?"

Grace thought about it for a bit before answering. "He wants me and Hope to move on with our lives. Not to wait for him. Then he tells me I made him feel again. What am I supposed to do with all of that?" Grace said as she watched Hope sleep.

"What do you want to do with it?"

"I want to yell and scream that it's not fair. It fucking sucks. I finally find someone I care about, and I can't be with him. And I'm scared. What if I screw this up? I don't know how to do relationships. I mean, shit. The only one I've had is with you and Papa. I don't even know if I'll be a good mom."

"You won't screw it up, and you're already an amazing mother. Look at all you've done just to make sure Hope has a wonderful life."

"Maybe." Grace wasn't so sure.

"Gracie, you're going to have hard days, miserable days, and days where you feel like you're walking on air. That's what feelings bring. Trust me, you don't want to go back to that cold place you lived in."

“I know. It just hurts so much. I mean, I am over the moon to have Hope here. But—”

“I know. Maybe you should think about moving to Norfolk or at least closer. Then we could see each other more. Do you have anything keeping you here?” Tempest asked.

“I was thinking about that earlier. Maybe it’s time to make some changes. Besides, if I move closer, I’ll be able to get free babysitting from Auntie Tempest and Uncle Josh.”

“Think again, Gracie.” Tempest laughed. “Well, maybe. But remember, payback’s a bitch. With your luck, when I finally have children, I’ll have twins.”

“Holy shit. But that would be cool.”

“I’m not sure Josh could survive twins.”

“Hey, are you talking about me?” Josh asked from the doorway.

“Always, dear. You’re the center of everyone’s universe.”

“Of course, that’s exactly how it should be.”

Tempest rolled her eyes at her fiancé. “Try to get some rest. If you need anything, just yell.”

“Thank you—for everything.”

“Anytime. What’s family for?” Tempest hugged her tight, and then pulled the door closed behind her.

*T*empest and Josh stayed a week and helped Grace get everything set up for Hope. They also spoiled Hope rotten. Not that she’d complain. She missed her sister more than she expected after they left, and Grace realized how lonely her life had been before she’d found Hope.

Grace hadn’t heard from Lucky after the one message, though she checked the phone constantly. A few times, she’d started to text him. Or send a picture of Hope doing something extra adorable. But she was afraid she’d interfere in what he

was doing, or maybe blow his cover. Still, knowing he was on the other end of the phone made her feel connected to him still.

Hope got a severe case of the flu, and it felt like weeks before she got better. Grace was dragging her ass and feeling sorry for herself when she saw a TikTok about writing to your loved ones who are no longer with you. It resonated with Grace, and she ordered a journal from Amazon.

Grace started writing about her day, all the things Hope did, good and bad. But she didn't write it for herself, she wrote it for Lucky. So, if or when he came back to her, he could share the time he'd missed with them. It was like talking to him, sharing her hopes and dreams. Her nightmares and worries. Everything—even her fantasies went into the journal, and the next when she filled up the first one.

After going through the long, cold winter alone, Grace decided it was time. She called a realtor and had her look for houses with yards in Norfolk.

While the realtor searched and sent listings, Grace packed up her townhouse a little at a time. By springtime, she'd found the perfect place. For the first time in forever, Grace was excited and couldn't wait to move into the new house with Hope. A place she could grow and thrive around friends and family. Grace had tried to convince herself it was mostly for Hope, but it wasn't, it was for her too. And she prayed that one day Lucky would return and share it with them.

Moving day was sunny and cool. The perfect day and the weekend before Mother's Day. All the SEALs showed up to help, all but Lucky. Grace didn't know exactly when he'd return. The year was never set in stone, and depending on what he was doing, it could be longer.

"Ready to go on a new adventure?" Grace asked Hope as she buckled her into her car seat for the long ride to Norfolk.

"Yes, Momma," Hope said in her baby voice. Hearing her speak never got old, and every day she added more words. And every day, Grace added another more words to her journals.

Grace had shared what she was doing on one of Tempest's visits. She'd teased her, saying she hoped Lucky liked to read because it was going to take him years to catch up. Maybe she was right, but even if he had never read them, they'd saved her from drowning in sorrow when she needed him most.

It took them all day to unpack the truck and set up the furniture, but by the end of the day, it was feeling like home.

"How about pizza and beer? It's the least I can do for all your help?" Grace asked her friends as they finally sat down in the living room.

"Fuck, I'm exhausted," Josh said.

Hope giggled, then said, "Uck."

Grace and Tempest looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Nice one, Josh. Way to teach my daughter foul language."

"Hey, pot calling kettle black, no?"

"Nope, I've cleaned up my act. I didn't want her going to school and getting called daily for her potty mouth."

Josh laughed. "Fine. Blame Uncle Josh."

"Don't worry."

Quinn and Doc went to get the pizza and beer while the women set out paper plates and on the dining room table.

"I'm so glad you finally moved down," Harmony said.

"Me, too. I don't know why I waited so long."

"You needed to be ready," Tempest said as she set Hope in her highchair with a sippy cup.

"Probably. But it seems stupid now."

"No, it wasn't. We all know why you waited. But you made the right decision."

"I hope so." Grace had put it off, hoping Lucky would come back, and that they should find a place together. But in the end, she needed to do this for her and Hope. He'd either come back or not, but as he told her all those months ago, she

needed to live her best life. Not that she didn't long for him every day.

They were sitting around and eating pizza when the doorbell rang.

"I wonder who that is? Everyone I know here is at the table."

"Maybe it's one of your neighbors bringing a cake," Ry said and wiggled his eyebrows.

"Oh yeah, you'd like that." Harmony laughed.

"I don't think people do that anymore," Grace said as she headed for the door.

Before she could open it, there was another knock. "Damn, they're impatient," she said as she pulled it open.

"Hi, baby girl. Miss me?"

"Are you real?" Grace whispered. She'd wished for him to come home for so long she was afraid to believe he was standing in front of her. He'd look tired. His beard was longer, and his hair was shaggy, but it was her Lucky.

"Yup, it's me.

Grace couldn't speak, couldn't find any words, so she did the only thing she could. She jumped into his arms and kissed him with all the feelings she'd held onto for the last year.

When he released her lips, they were both out of breath and tears filled her eyes. "As me again," she said.

"Did you miss me?"

"Every fucking day."

"Me too, baby. Me, too."

"How did you find us? We just moved in today." Grace still couldn't believe he was there and holding her in his arms. Fuck. She was still wrapped around him like a monkey, too.

"You're still wearing your pendant. I tracked you."

Grace reached for the four-leaf clover she'd never taken off. "I hoped it would lead you back to me some day."

“It worked,” he said and gave her a huge smile.

“Are you home for good?”

“Yes, and if I have my way, I’ll never leave you again.”

A moment later, they were surrounded by their friends. Before he put her down to greet everyone, he whispered in her ear, “I promised you I’d come for you, and I always keep my promises.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynne St. James is an IT Project Manager by day and an Amazon bestselling author by night.

She has written 30 books that are mostly romantic suspense with military heroes and the strong women they fight to protect. All her books have passion, humor, and a happily ever-after.

Prior to moving to Florida twenty years ago, Lynne lived all over the U.S. But now that she's experienced the sunshine state, she's given up shoveling snow forever. Lynne is a wife and mom of two grown children. Her home is on the Atlantic Coast with her husband, Lulu the yorkie-poo, and an orange tabby named Pumpkin who thinks he rules them all—and mostly does!

When Lynne's not drinking coffee and writing her next book, she's making her way through her huge TBR pile, walking along the beach, or crocheting.

Lynne writes Romantic Suspense, Military Romance, and Contemporary Romance.

Where to find Lynne:

Email: lynne@lynnestjames.com

Website: <http://lynnestjames.com>

VIP Newsletter sign-up: <https://bit.ly/3iX8Tr0>



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