



SHE'S TROUBLE  
IN PARADISE.

# ***RUNAWAY ROGUE***

CASSIE MINT

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# Runaway Rogue

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One

## Betty



I grip the arms of my backpack and heave myself up the slope, lungs burning. On my left side, the jungle bristles with life, with bird cries and monkey screams bouncing through the trees. Where the slope falls away on my right, molten rock creeps across an ashy lava field, moving at a slow walking pace.

The air up here is hot enough to cook my eyelashes. I'm frying.

Adjusting my grip on the backpack, I cough to clear my parched throat. In the distance, lava drips over the sea cliff into the water, steam hissing into the blue sky.

"Um, is anybody listening? Come—come in?"

The wire they put on me tickles my sweaty skin, threaded beneath my tank top. It's a constant reminder that they're listening. Listening, watching, wondering whether I'm useful after all. And probably whether they should bother bringing me home, because I know too much now, right?

When my earpiece buzzes to life, I get a tiny electric shock. "What is it, Miss Hale?"

The man I only know as *Echo* sounds bored. Tired of my shit.

Well, I've spent the last three days tramping around this godforsaken island all alone with no company but his cranky voice, so the feeling is mutual, buddy.

"He's definitely here? Somewhere near the lava?"

A pause, then a long sigh crackles in my ear. "That is our current best guess, Miss Hale. Agent Dawes is... elusive."

He's telling me.

"It's hot," I say, plucking the front of my tank top away from my stomach. White was a mistake. The fabric is mottled with yellow sweat stains after searching all morning, and streaked with god knows what from my hike through the jungle. Gross. "It's really hot up here, Echo."

"It's lava," he says, tone flat. "Of course it is."

*Lava*. From a volcano. The one that rises up in the distance, red-hot rivulets streaking down its sides. Huge clouds of black smoke belch into the air from its peak, and I keep freaking myself out thinking that the ground is shaking. That it's gonna erupt properly any minute, showering me in hot rock and choking ash.

This cannot be how I die. On a tropical island in the middle of the ocean—one that doesn't even exist on most maps. Dressed in army-issue boots and camouflage pants, with bug spray and sunscreen slathered an inch thick on my bare arms, when at this time on a Tuesday I *should* be checking the stock of paper cups in the cafe.

What am I doing here?

Is this a fever dream?

I pinch myself for the hundredth time since all this weirdness started. Nope, definitely awake. Awake, and pinned between a deadly jungle on one

side and a lava field on the other, hunting a man who could snap me in two with his bare hands.

*Agent Dawes.*

Despite the heat, I fight a shiver.

“What if he doesn’t want to be found?” Shading my eyes, I peer between the trees. Though the sun blazes high overhead, the shadows are thick between the giant leaves, like the light can’t penetrate. He could be watching me right this second, and I’d have no clue.

“That is why *you* are here.”

I lick my lips. My sweat is salty. “As bait.”

“Correct. And when you bring Agent Dawes back to us, you will be rewarded for your trouble.”

Ha. Whatever. I’m not doing this for money, and Echo knows that firsthand—turns out it’s really hard to refuse a bunch of armed agents who turn up at your studio apartment in the middle of the night. One look at the curved knives strapped to their thighs and I couldn’t offer them enough snacks, couldn’t be more polite, bustling back and forth in my crop top and ratty old sweatpants. *Would anybody like a coffee? I have decaf!*

Little idiot. I cringe thinking of myself three days ago, but then, what else was I supposed to do? Slam the door on a bunch of secret agents? As if that would work.

“Climb higher,” Echo orders, his voice clipped in my ear. “You’re barely halfway up the slope.”

“I’m catching,” I grind out, stomping my way up the bare rock, “my freaking breath. I don’t hear *you* working up a sweat, mister.”

The tracker blinks up at me as I walk, secured to the side of my boot. I tried prying it off with the penknife from my backpack earlier, just to see if it

would come off, and nope. That thing is stuck.

Of course, the *boot* comes off. But then I'd be in nothing but socks around all these snakes and spiders, on this rocky slope that's cooking my rubber soles. And what then?

No point running. I've got nowhere to go. All I can do is find Agent Dawes, and hope that Echo and his cronies won't vanish me for my trouble. Or that Dawes won't see it as a terrible betrayal and snap my neck.

*Why me?* The thought circles through my brain with each aching step, each scorching hot breath dragged into my lungs. The higher I climb, the more of the island comes into view, stretching away toward a turquoise ocean on both sides. *Why me? Why me?*

Agent Dawes barely knows me. I served him coffee a few times, that's all. Mostly.

Seriously. Why am *I* the rogue agent's bait?

\* \* \*

*Three months ago*

Customers at the cafe always come in waves. Ten minutes can go by with no line, ten heavenly minutes when we can wipe down surfaces and chat and roll our stiff necks, sipping from the water bottles we stash below the counter. Then *bam*. Five people burst through the doors all at once, all antsy for a caffeine fix.

They huff and puff while they wait in line, tapping their toes against the shiny tiles. They check watches and fold their arms.



Then as soon as they're all served, the rush fades away just like that. We're back to prettying up the cupcake display and people-watching from behind the cash register.

"First date," Miriam says, jerking her chin toward a nearby table. A young couple sit stiffly, neither slumped in their chair, and the woman tears a napkin to shreds as they talk. Her thigh bounces under the table.

"Or a break up," I say.

Miriam scoffs. Her black hair is tied in a topknot, and her lipstick is dark purple. "Where's your optimism, girl? Our coffees don't break people up. We're out here brewing the elixir of love."

Ha. If only. Wouldn't mind a sip of that myself.

"And yet our tips are so crappy."

She nudges me with a generous hip. "Preach."

I like shifts with Miriam. We fall into an easy rhythm as we work, and the people-watching is always top notch. She can *read* people, sometimes from just the backs of their heads, and tons of her predictions turn out to be right.

She says it's because her mama's got the gift, and a little taste of it rubbed off on her. She even keeps stacks of her mom's psychic hot line business cards, right by the glass jars of biscotti. It's been months, and the boss still hasn't noticed.

"Think your mom could tell my future?" I ask, leaning over to pluck up a card and turn it around in my hands. I'm half joking, but honestly, I'd totally pay for Mrs Toutant to read my tea leaves or whatever. I'm tired of month after month of living the same day, over and over.

Come to work at the cafe. Serve coffees, check stock. Wipe down tables and mop the floor. Then book club, or my running group by the river, and back home to my tiny apartment. Rinse and repeat.

I'm in a rut. Need something big to shake me loose. But Miriam gives me this *look*, pursing her lips, and my stomach twists.

"No one is gonna tell *your* future, Betty. That shit's messed up." The bell above the door rings as someone walks in, and she sighs and shakes her head. "Here it comes."

'It' is a man in his late thirties, dressed in gray jeans, boots, and a black t-shirt. His face is weathered and tan, his dark hair cropped short and lighter at the temples. Though his clothes are casual, his posture is not.

This is a man who's always on alert. The sort of man who never, ever gets jumped in an alley—not if the muggers know what's good for them.

I straighten behind the counter, my heartbeat picking up speed.

Maybe it's an animal reaction. Instinct, you know? My lizard brain whispering: *danger*.

Except I'm not scared as he approaches the counter, his dark eyes sliding briefly to the cupcakes then settling back on me. I'm not tensed to run.

It's weird. I'm... exhilarated.

This is the feeling I used to get as a kid, thrown about by the waves at the beach. The feeling I got from running as fast as I could, sneakers slapping against the sidewalk, the wind streaming against my face. That same thrill. A single look from this man and I'm sparking back to life, my body humming as it comes back online after months on the fritz. *Danger, danger*.

"All yours," Miriam murmurs, drifting away to the stock cupboard.

The man stops in front of the counter. I peel my tongue off the roof of my mouth. "Um. Hi. What can I get for you?"

His eyes are *intense*. So brown they're nearly black. The man doesn't smile when he looks at me, but something sparks behind those eyes. Some secret interest, like he's never seen anything like me before.

Ha. Blonde, tattooed baristas with rumpled aprons? We're on every block. The city is lousy with us.

"Coffee," he says. "Black."

"Like your soul?" I say, teasing before my survival instincts kick in.

The man's eyes glitter. "Something like that."

I make his coffee, steam hissing, beans grinding. I'm wearing a goofy smile the whole time.

When he walks away with his drink, I'm sad to see him go—until my eyes widen at the tip jar. When did he slide a hundred dollar bill in there? And *why*? I'm not that funny.

"Miriam," I call, "get your ass out here right now. You need to see this."

And we're so caught up with his giant tip, laughing and prodding at the jar, that I forget what we were talking about before.

I forget Miriam's warnings about my future.

\* \* \*

You'd think the higher I climb above the lava, the less intense the heat should be. But no—as I reach the top of the slope, the air is so hot it shimmers. I sway in my leather boots, dizzy from hiking for hours. My running group did not prepare me for this.

"What happens if it erupts?"

Silence. I wave away a bug.

"Echo. What happens if the volcano erupts?" The peak still seems like miles away, and if you looked at it fast, you'd think it was a snowy mountain top. But nope: that's ash, streaked with fiery lava.

“You must have studied Geography in school.” The agent sounds bored in my ear. “Or watched the news a few times. What do you think happens, Miss Hale?”

I think I die. I die a horrible, gruesome death, and assuming Agent Dawes survives, these jerks move on to plan B without losing a wink of sleep. *Tried that, moving on.*

“I’ll haunt your ass,” I grumble, trudging closer to the trees. “Don’t think I won’t.” Obviously, compared to an eruption, the trees are no shelter at all—but it still makes me feel better. Less exposed.

“Just don’t wander onto the lava field.” Echo says it like I have exactly one brain cell, and no spares. “Stay near the jungle, and look for signs of Agent Dawes. We didn’t bring you here for a vacation. Get on with it.”

The unfairness, no, the *audacity* of this man lecturing me from his comfy tent back at base camp—equipped with a generator and no less than three electric fans—makes me want to swan dive into the lava after all. He’s the secret agent! They all trained for this, they get *paid* for this, and they have the skills, the equipment, the freaking cardio.

Meanwhile, I’m in borrowed boots and pinned with a tracker, left to fumble my way through this nightmare. I should be dusting cappuccinos with chocolate powder right now, not wiping sweat from my eyes in the middle of the ocean.

Stomping alongside the jungle, I’ve never felt more helpless. Swept up in the grand scheme of events, and forced to play a role that I don’t understand.

*Bait.*

For a man I barely know.

A man who probably couldn’t pick me out of a line up. And what happens when Agent Dawes doesn’t nibble?

Two

## River



She's here. My barista is *here*, a thousand miles from home, barging along the treeline and making more noise than a rampaging elephant. Twigs crack beneath her boots; her breaths are ragged and wheezing. Betty snarks out loud every few steps, carrying on half a conversation, her blonde ponytail swinging in the muggy air.

How is she here? How is this possible?

The red light of a tracker winks from her boot, answering that question. Obvious, really. It's the agency, trying to entice me back in—dangling her like bait on a string. Should've known they'd see my interest in her, even as I tried to hide it.

Anger and hurt burn through my chest, but I keep silent, moving through the shadows. Why would Betty help them? Did they offer her money?

Doesn't she care that I don't want to be found? Can't she respect that?

As I watch, Betty brushes too close to the trees and a hairy spider drops onto her shoulder. It's stark against her pale top and tanned skin.

“Assholes,” she mutters, marching up the rocky slope, oblivious to her fist-sized hitchhiker. The spider lifts one leg, then another, and I keep parallel in the shadows, weighing my options.

That species is not venomous. Or not life-threatening, anyway. A bite might leave the barista with a swollen neck, but she won’t *die*. I shouldn’t interfere.

Because maybe this is the agency’s plan—to put Betty in lethal situations over and over, until I snap and reveal myself like a sentimental fool.

I won’t do it. Betty doesn’t want a spider bite? She shouldn’t have played this game. Should have stayed the hell away from me—here, and in that coffee shop.

She has no idea what kind of man she’s toying with.

“Agent Dawes,” the barista calls, her words sing-songing through the trees, “where are you? Come out, come out.”

And I’d think she was mocking me, except her ear piece buzzes like a hornet as someone from the agency yells at her, probably telling her not to scare me off. Betty winces, rolling her eyes at her boots. Lines of sweat run down her temples.

She’s... warning me. Huh.

And she still has a spider on her shoulder.

Glancing around, I pluck a flower from the foliage: white with a pink blush spreading through the petals. I’m out in the open for a single breath, feet silent, the breeze warm against my cheeks, then I blend back into the darkness again, tossing the annoyed spider behind me.

Betty lifts a hand to smooth her hair. Her fingertips brush the flower tucked behind her ear, and she jumps like she’s been electrified. She snatches the flower down and stares into the jungle.

“*Miss Hale,*” a tinny voice says, just on the edge of my hearing. “*Why have you stopped moving? Do you see Agent Dawes?*”

Cornflower blue eyes rove between the trees, and I melt back further into the shadows. A monkey screams high above, and leaves rustle. Shouldn’t have risked it, shouldn’t have moved, but Betty’s gaze sweeps right past me, and I sag, both disappointed and relieved.

“N-no,” she says.

No mention of the flower... so maybe she’s not in the agency’s pocket after all. Before she turns away, she smooths the crumpled petals, then tucks it carefully back behind her ear.

I watch her carry on up the slope, my chest burning.

\* \* \*

I track Betty back to base camp, staying hidden the whole time. It’s not hard—she’s too busy watching her steps to be observant, trying not to trip over roots or get tangled in a vine, and who can blame her? I’ve brushed two more spiders, a glossy beetle, and a large caterpillar off her before she reaches the camp. Betty’s a magnet for jungle critters—me included.

The canvas tents are clustered between the jungle and the beach, partly hidden by two rocky columns. I count five men in all—one with a headset, sitting at a table of electronics, and one in the kitchen space, chopping onions with a scowl. The other three lounge around the campfire in fold-out chairs, swigging beers as the pink sky darkens. I don’t recognize their faces.

Mercenaries, then? The agency does like using temps for the dirty work. And dragging me back in is the definition of *dirty*.

“There she is,” one man by the fire calls, grinning at Betty in a flash of white teeth. The pale line of a scar cuts through his beard. She approaches the camp with stiff shoulders, ignoring everyone and making a beeline for a ramshackle tent on the outskirts. “Nice flower, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart?

I’ll stuff a melon down his throat.

Hers is the smallest, shabbiest tent, patched and leaning to one side where the rocky dirt turns to sand. Of course they stuck Betty in that tent when she needs the most protection. If it rains, she’ll get soaked. Pricks.

See, this is why I’m done with the agency. Back in the day, I could stomach a few gung ho idiots, one or two assholes on each mission. We were doing important work, after all. Taking down global criminals and keeping people safe.

But lately, it’s less good work and more sloppy, macho bullshit. More secrecy and lies. I don’t recognize half the agents, and I’m tired of it, alright? Getting too old for this crap.

It’s easy to slip around the outskirts of camp, darting from rock to rock. The men are done for the day, more interested in the bottom of their bottles than keeping watch, and their bursts of rowdy laughter set my teeth on edge.

Betty’s not safe here. This is a different kind of jungle, and she’s trapped right in the middle of it. Juicy and tempting.

Have they hassled her already? Or are they building up to it? Peeling the back of her canvas tent open, I slip through the gap. I’ll be here when they do.

Betty squeaks when she sees me, clapping one hand over her mouth. She’s in the doorway, but she can’t stay there. Too suspicious.

I put a finger against my lips. She nods, her eyes so blue even in the dim



tent, then marches right back out.

Shit.

My gut sinks as her footsteps thump away against the dirt. Did I read this all wrong? Maybe she wants to be here; maybe she volunteered. The knife strapped to my belt whispers as I pull it loose, because I won't hurt Betty either way, but the rest of these fuckers are fair game.

But then: "Here's your earpiece. Now get this wire off me, will you?" Betty says on the other side of camp, her voice clear as a bell. "It's giving me a rash."

A man replies: "Fine. But keep those boots on."

"Sir, yes, sir."

I smirk at Betty's sarcasm, eyes adjusting to the gloom of her tent. My knife sighs back into its sheath.

There's a narrow cot with a foam mattress, a tangled thin blanket and a pillow. A makeshift nightstand made from an upturned box. A flashlight, a toothbrush, a bar of soap in a travel dish. A hairbrush and a stick of deodorant.

It's the barest sliver of her life, but I can't help moving closer, nudging the flashlight with my fingertip. I lift the soap silently, breathing in the scent, then place it next to the hairbrush, tangled with a few golden strands.

At the bottom of her cot, a duffel bag sags open, spilling crumpled vest tops and underwear onto the mattress. A towel hangs from the tent bars overhead, dusted with sand and left to dry.

Have they gone through her stuff? Did they watch her bathe? My pulse slams in my ears, and I thank god I followed her back here. She's alone with all these men, and so vulnerable. At their mercy.

Unacceptable.

I've been so caught up in getting an ocean away from this woman—keeping my distance. Keeping her safe.

I forgot there are worse monsters than me.

\* \* \*

*Two months ago*

I'm back at the coffee shop, ordering the same drink from the same barista. It's a pattern, and I know that's dangerous, but for some reason I can't resist.

*Betty*, her name badge says. It's clipped to her black polo neck, the corner snagging on her apron strap.

She grins at me as I approach the counter—stands a little straighter, and tucks a loose strand of blonde hair behind her ear. Her ponytail swings as she turns to check for her colleague, but the other barista slipped away when she saw me coming.

Smart woman. If only *Betty* had the same instincts around me.

There's blood on my hands, after all. If I ever touched her, she'd be stained too.

“Hey, stranger.” *Betty* always greets me the same way, her head cocked to one side and eyes sparkling. Eight times I've been here, now. Eight times in one month.

Like I said: it's a pattern.

Reckless. Stupid.

Electrifying.

“Black coffee?” She's already placing a cup in the machine; already grinding the beans. *Betty* watches me from beneath lowered lashes, her

tattoos so vivid on her bare arms. Roses and birds and a string of pearls, even an old fashioned anchor on her wrist. Every time she moves, I catch a new sliver of color. Another puzzle to solve.

I clear my throat. “Please.”

“For the mystery man,” Betty says when she places the take out cup on the counter. When she spins it around, the words are there in purple sharpie. *Mystery man*. And there are a thousand fake names I could give her, even names that I have passports to match, but for some foolish reason, I give her my real one.

“River.” The cardboard is hot in my hand. I take a scalding sip, and the coffee is dark and bitter. “River Dawes.”

“River,” Betty repeats, fiddling with the napkin holder. “Suits you. Sounds kind of... wild.”

It does, huh? I lower the cup, pulse spiking. Every time I see this woman, I’m left wrestling with my worst instincts—with the urgent desire to throw her over my shoulder and carry her away, that ponytail swinging against my hip. Finders keepers.

“You always come in when there’s no line, River.”

I lift one shoulder. “Lucky, I guess.”

Luck’s got nothing to do with it—I’m careful. Can’t afford too many eyes on me, not in my line of work, and especially not with this dangerous pattern I’m in. But Betty grins like she sees right through my bullshit, like she knows exactly how well-timed my visits are.

“Next time,” she says, her husky voice doing something to my insides, “you should come on my break. We could sit together. Shoot the shit. I’ll sneak you a free biscotti.”

I could never drink in, could never take such a risk, but when she says it

like that... it's tempting. *Too* tempting.

"I hate biscotti," I say.

Betty's eyes sparkle. "Too bad."

My neck is hot as I leave the coffee shop. Nerves prickle under my skin, and I can *feel* her eyes on me, watching me go. The bell rings above the door, and the street outside is hot and stifling, the air scented with baking concrete and ozone.

I need to stop coming here. Need to give Betty up.

She's not mine anyway—and she never could be.

## Three

# Betty



**A**gent Dawes is still in my tent when I slip back inside. The sight of him there, looming over my crappy nightstand and poking at my hairbrush, makes something agitated settle deep inside me.

Guess I figured he'd disappear. Melt into the night like a wisp of smoke.

Exhaling slowly, I raise my eyebrows at the man who turned my life upside down.

In the darkness, Agent Dawes frowns. Gestures me closer. Even with the crackle of the campfire, the low drone of voices and the distant sighs of the sea, he's too cautious to speak. To make a single noise. Because we're out of view in here, the canvas flap of my tent blocking out roving eyes, but that doesn't mean we're secure. It's not like Echo and his goons are the knocking type.

You know... I could yell right now. Could let those jerks know he's here, let them taze him or worse, then go back to my regular life at the coffee shop. Back to my rut. This would all be over—assuming they'd keep their word and deliver me safely home.

Instead, I step forward, my heart thudding against my ribs. Agent River Dawes is taller than I remember. Broader, too, his muscled shoulders stretching that black t-shirt.

Maybe I've just never looked at him properly. Seen him to scale, you know? After all, we've never stood in front of each other like this, without the cafe counter between our bodies—nothing but sticky evening air between us.

Dark eyes roam over me, detached and clinical. Agent Dawes takes my wrist and turns my arm to check for injuries; he scowls at the scrapes on my palm. They're pink and itchy, though I wash them with soap every chance I get.

"Tripped over a root two days ago," I whisper.

He puts a finger over his mouth again. Ooh-kay.

Silent pat-down it is. And as I let him poke and prod at me, turning me in a slow circle, brushing the dirt and sweat from my shoulders, a weird sense of calm settles over me. *Aaaah*.

It's so zen, having this big, scowling brute fuss over me. Ever since those agents pounded on my door in the middle of the night, I've been wound tight, a knot of panic twisting my belly.

I've seen movies, y'all. I know how this story ends for the idiot civilian. But with River here, his strong presence at my back and his breath puffing against my neck, I finally feel... safe.

It's nuts, really. He's one of *them*, after all. He's even got the same kind of curved knife strapped to his belt, though the blade's hidden in a dark sheath.

Do they hand those out at secret agent orientation? Welcome, Double-Oh-Whatever, here's your badge, your parking pass, and your big-ass knife? At

the coffee shop, I had to wait a month before I got my own apron.

With my back to his chest, River pauses at the flower tucked behind my ear. The flower he put there. And I press my lips together, fighting a smile despite the nightmare I'm in, and stare at the canvas tent wall as River strokes the fine green stem.

Shivers race down my arms, and it's like he's touching *me*. Stroking me. Our bodies are inches apart, but his warmth seeps through my clothes.

Out by the campfire, an empty bottle clinks against the ground. Someone belches, and someone else jeers. It's nearly fully dark in this tent, and I should light my lamp soon or it'll look weird. But two shadows behind the canvas will look even weirder.

"Food's up," one of the agents calls. Foxtrot, I think.

Boots scuff, chairs creak, and another glass bottle clinks against the ground. I scabble behind me for River's hip.

He's so solid. So sturdy and strong, his leather belt warmed by the sun.

"Don't leave me alone with them," I whisper, talking ban be damned, because I can't go out there again without his promise. I can't. They haven't laid a finger on me yet, but how long will that last?

"Never," River says, deep voice hushed.

One minute later, I stride out of my tent again, chin high.

\* \* \*

Dinner is chicken and potato mush, served in a scratched metal bowl with a spork. What our glowering chef Foxtrot lacks in culinary imagination, he's made up for in lashings of salt and pepper, and as I swallow the first sporkful, my eyes burn with the effort not to cough.

“Good, right?” The agent next to me says, leaning in and wafting me with his beer breath. He’s the only redhead of the crew, his bare arms pale and freckled. Known only as Tango, he set out a camp chair for me by the fire in a fit of gallantry—then immediately ruined it by scooching way too close. Every time he speaks, I see the food stuck in his teeth. “Our man Foxtrot knows his shit.”

“Sure,” I say, because I may think this is pig slop, but I’m not about to insult the armed man. Foxtrot has his knife across his knees, watching us all eat as he drags a stone along the blade. Isn’t he hungry? Or did he already taste it and nope out? “It’s great. Thank you.”

One day, I swear, I won’t have to play nice with men like this. I won’t have to be *polite*, and fake a thousand smiles, because I’ll be a scary motherfucker in my own right, and no one will dare cross me.

Except maybe the man I left in the shadows of my tent. I clear my throat and push all thoughts of Agent River Dawes away. Don’t want to blush and waft out pheromones around these jerks.

“Enough chit chat,” Echo says, glaring at me over the flames. “You didn’t find him. Again.”

As far as I can tell, this guy is the leader—even though he’s the smallest, and looks like an office worker gone feral. Like he just stripped off his shirt and tie one day, down to the white undershirt beneath, and walked into the forest, never to return. Echo’s brown hair is neatly cut, and he wears glasses at all times. He has a mustache, but it’s a real work in progress. He has pimples, for god’s sake.

But every time he looks at me, I get the chills. There’s something not quite human behind those lenses.

“It’s a big jungle,” I say, forcing my shoulders back. *Don’t show*



*weakness; he'll smell your fear.* “And Dawes is a trained agent. Of course it’s gonna take me a while.”

The firelight dances over Echo’s face, casting eerie shadows. Overhead, the stars spin slowly across the night sky. He doesn’t blink.

“I could go with her tomorrow,” Tango offers, but Echo shuts him up with a look. The mood around the campfire is tense, the beer-drunk frivolity suddenly gone.

“Check the caves,” Foxtrot says, frowning down at the knife across his knees. *Schniiiiick*, goes his stone across the blade. *Schniiiiick*. “Around the shoreline. Lots of places to hide there.”

Echo grunts. He’s still staring at me, eyes hard.

“Dawes knows we’re here,” he says slowly, like he’s thinking out loud. I shovel another sporkful of chicken mush into my mouth, chewing to hide any reaction. “And he’s not interested yet. She’s not tempting enough on her own.”

My throat works as I swallow, mush clinging to my vocal chords. Just as well, really, because the not-so-hidden dumbass in me wants to laugh and point to my tent and say: “Ha! How’s that for temptation?”

Instead I thump my own chest, trying not to cough, then shoot Foxtrot a wobbly smile. “Delicious,” I assure the big brute.

“I’d come for her,” Tango declares, slinging an arm over the back of my camp chair. I laugh nervously and shift forward an inch. “Dawes is missing out.”

Echo looks ready to slit the redhead’s throat in his sleep. When he leans forward, firelight flashes against the lenses of his glasses, and he looks like a big, mustachioed bug. “No one gives a shit what *you* would do, Tango. You

think if you took off anyone would follow? You think this girl would give you the time of day if she had any other choice?”

Tango reels back, his spork clattering against the side of his bowl. Even in the dark, his blush is fierce.

*Ouch.* It’s all true, but still... ouch.

I wince, staring into the fire. A log collapses in a shower of sparks.

Awkward silence rings through the base camp. Echo may be their de facto leader, but these men hold no love for him in their hearts, that much is clear. He rules by fear and fear alone.

“I’ll sleep on it,” Echo says, suddenly relaxed and all smiles. The flip in his mood makes me shiver, and I’m not the only one. The other agents shift in their chairs, all watching him closely. “Tomorrow, we’ll get him. I can feel it.”

## Four

# River



I wait with my shoulders bunched around my ears, too goddamn tense to do anything else until Betty slips back inside the tent, safe and whole. The others drift around camp, not even trying to move quietly and disguise their activities.

Someone washes up in the kitchen area; two others drink and chat by the fire. A fourth mercenary has collapsed in his own tent, already snoring, and the fifth is watering a nearby palm tree.

I put my finger to my lips again, and Betty nods quickly. She points at the handheld lantern on her makeshift nightstand, and I nod and sit beside her cot, arranging the blanket to hang down and hide my shadow.

A match flares. Old school, then.

Dim light spreads through the tent, washing over her sparse belongings like a sunrise.

A second snore fills the air. Then a third. One by one, the men fall asleep—all apart from the kid left to keep watch by the fire. The one with a crush

on my girl. He's muttering to himself, boot heel kicking against the dirt. He won't be any trouble tonight—too busy nursing his wounded pride.

After enough time has passed, Betty huffs out the lantern.

Still, I wait for another hour at least, until a fifth, reedy snore joins the chorus. Then I stand, knees cracking, and shake out my arms. Betty's stretched out on her cot, wide awake in the gloom. She watches me, with that blonde ponytail splayed over the pillow.

I jerk my chin at the back of the tent—at the slit in the canvas I entered through earlier. Betty presses her lips together and swings her legs off the cot, wincing as it creaks. Nearby, waves brush against the sand.

Our hands tangle together, palms slick from the heat, and I pull my girl out through the tent into the warm night air.

\* \* \*

*One month ago*

The coffee shop is empty. They've closed up for the evening, chairs stacked on top of tables, floors damp and shiny from the mop. Betty's colleague left two minutes ago, tugging a denim jacket over her polo shirt and calling out her goodbyes as she clattered onto the street.

Betty's still in there. Alone. Leaning against the brick building opposite, I tell myself every good reason I should turn and walk away.

Like: I might scare her.

She might have somewhere to rush off to. *Someone* to rush off to.

And the agency could be watching. They might sniff out my weakness for her, and get ideas about using Betty as leverage.

All smart reasons to turn around and never come back, but instead my feet carry me over the street. I curse myself under my breath, even as I push through the coffee shop doorway, bell ringing.

“Sorry, we’re closed—oh.” Betty clutches the mop where she’s cleaning behind the counter, her eyes going wide. “It’s you.”

I nod, shoving my hands in my pockets. “It’s me.” I’m dressed in my usual faded clothes, the worn jeans and t-shirt, all selected to keep me from being too memorable—but Betty stares like a celebrity just walked into her coffee shop.

This woman. She’s so goddamn sweet.

“Um.” Her fingers flex on the mop handle, and she looks at the coffee machine, expression dazed. “I already cleaned everything up for the night. I’d serve you, I really would, but—”

“I didn’t come here for coffee.”

Betty’s throat shifts as she swallows. “You didn’t?”

“No.”

My boots squeak against the freshly mopped floor. She should hate me for that—for messing up her cleaning routine. Betty should hate me for a lot of things. But as I reach the counter, the cash register dim and silent, her breath catches and she inches closer to the wood.

“Do you often lock up on your own?”

She’s still strangling the mop handle, her knuckles pale—but Betty’s smile is dazzling. “You don’t think I can handle it, River Dawes?”

“No, I do.” It’s everyone else in the world I don’t trust. The strangers who could walk in off the street and catch her here alone; the agency, always watching. “But lock the door next time. Just while you’re in here by yourself.”

Blue eyes roll, but Betty seems pleased to hear me fuss over her. She tucks a loose piece of hair behind her ear, the movement shy.

This woman is a bundle of contradictions. Brassy and bold in some ways, with her teasing grins and tattooed arms, but sweet and uncertain in others. That shy side has taken the reins, and Betty bites her lip as she watches me.

“If you didn’t come for coffee, why are you here?”

Does she sound hopeful? Has she thought of this too—being alone together? I move as close as the counter will let me, the edge pressing against my stomach, drawn by an invisible rope. Cars rumble past on the street outside, and my heart thumps against my ribs.

Shouldn’t be here.

Shouldn’t do any of this.

Shouldn’t let myself want this woman.

“Needed to see you,” I say, voice gruff, and we both stop breathing as my hand reaches across the empty space. Betty’s cheek is soft as I cup the side of her face; her silky hairs tickle my wrist. My thumb settles over the pulse point beneath her jaw.

Her skin is so warm, her pulse rapid. Over on the wall, the AC hums, gusting out frozen air.

The counter creaks beneath my weight as I lean forward, my free hand spreading over the surface. Betty steps closer too, drawn by my touch, and we meet somewhere in the middle.

The mop handle knocks against wood, and we exchange ragged breaths, lips brushing together in a featherlight touch. So close yet so far.

*Don’t.*

*Don’t do it.*

*Don’t risk her like that, asshole.*

When I slant our mouths together harder, surrendering with a groan, I've never hated myself more.

Fuck.

She's so sweet. So hot, so soft, and each bruising kiss, each nibble of her lip, each stroke of our tongues stokes my need higher. The coffee shop blurs around us, and the sounds of traffic outside fade, and there's nothing in the whole goddamn world except this woman, sighing against my mouth.

"Mmph," Betty says, fisting my t-shirt with both hands as the mop clatters to the floor. She kisses me back with gusto, again and again, and heat crawls up my neck despite the overeager AC. "You should," another deep kiss, "visit more often."

No, I shouldn't. I should leave this girl the hell alone.

And finally, far too late, those protective instincts kick back in. My inner caveman recedes enough for me to think straight. I take my hands off her then rock back on my heels, my t-shirt stretching in her grip before she lets go.

Betty frowns at me, confused. Who can blame her? I barge into her place of work, kiss her breathless—then back off. "Oh," she says, squeezing the edge of the counter. Her pupils are dilated. "Did I... did I do something wrong? I've never really..."

This burning sensation in my chest is my righteous punishment. I have no business kissing this woman; no business craving her and dreaming of her and coming back here over and over to get my fix. I can't offer her a normal life, nor a healthy relationship.

Can't offer her anything.

"No," I rasp, already backing toward the door. "That was my fault. Apologies."

“I—what?” Betty stares at me, baffled, as I wrench the door open, bell ringing. Her name tag got twisted upside down during our clinch, caught in her apron strap. “Are you coming back? Will I see you again?”

“No.”

The door swings shut behind me, but not before I hear a quiet, “Well, screw you too.”

\* \* \*

We make it down to the water’s edge before Betty tears her hand from mine. Base camp is out of sight, hidden by rocks and trees and a long stretch of coast, and the waves out here should muffle our words.

Still, I make a hushing motion as Betty rounds on me. “You *asshole*, River! You are such an asshole!”

I know. I know I am. Everything this woman wants to say to me—I deserve it and then some, but we still need to be careful.

“Let’s get out of this mess first, okay?” My ears strain for pounding boots or panicked calls; for any sign the mercenaries heard that and noticed Betty’s missing. Nothing, thank god. “Let me get you to safety. Then you can yell at me all you like, I promise.”

Betty huffs, wrapping her arms around her stomach. She looks so vulnerable, glaring up at me in the moonlight. The ocean sparkles where it laps the shore behind her, and the volcanic black sands are tinted silver.

“I am on an *island*, River. With a volcano.”

“I know.”

“And a bunch of strange, awful men who would kill me for fun.”

“I know.”



“And they made me look for you in that jungle. Do you know how much I hate spiders? There are probably tons of spiders in there!”

I bite my tongue, wincing at the memory of that tarantula on her shoulder. If Betty didn't notice, I'll never tell her. She'd never stop slapping at her bare skin. She'd be traumatized.

Besides, Betty shouldn't be here, sweaty and scared, her bare arms scratched up from the jungle. She should be tucked up safely in her own bed, dreaming sweet dreams, and the biggest hassle in her life should be a picky customer at the coffee shop. Not *this*.

This is exactly what I feared my interest would bring her. This is exactly why I forced myself to stay away.

“You know the real kicker, though?” Betty's jaw is set, her eyes hard. A finger jabs the center of my chest as she speaks. “The real kicker is that they brought me out here as *bait* for a man who kissed me once and then never bothered with me again!”

I catch her wrist, my heart hollow. I've done so many things wrong with this woman.

“I was trying to protect you,” I say, willing her to believe me. Her pulse beats rapidly against my thumb, but Betty's glare is unimpressed. I stroke her soft skin, and every part of my body aches at having her near again.

I gave this up. Forced myself to keep away, even though being away from her felt like sawing off a limb.

Now we're together again, alone under the stars, and there's no reason to keep away anymore. The worst has already happened. The agency knows she's my weakness.

“Protect me?” Betty repeats, her tone acidic. “Well, great job. Five stars.”

And she's right to be mad—but that's not why I step closer. It's the way

her chin wobbles, and the sheen of tears in her eyes.

Betty's not just angry. She's also scared and tired and vulnerable. And she thinks I don't want her—that our one kiss was enough.

Fuck that.

A shiver ripples through her whole body as I cup the side of her face, just like I did all those weeks ago. But there's no counter between us this time; no mop clutched in her hands. There's just the two of us, sweaty and bruised and swaying toward each other.

“Is this okay?”

Betty huffs out a sigh and steps near, our clothes brushing together. “It's okay. You giant jerk.”

I can't help it—I grin. There's so much fire in her. And she responds, a reluctant smile tugging her lips.

Kicking my boots off, I wait for Betty to follow suit, then pinch the hem of her tank top. She nods, and I drag it up over her head, ponytail dancing as it slips free. We undress silently, trading breaths, hopping in the uneven sand, until we're both bare in the balmy night air. Her nipples pebble, and I swallow hard.

“I'm sorry I dragged you into this, sweetheart.” Taking her hand, I lead Betty to the water, and it's warm as it laps at our ankles, our calves, our knees. Maybe it's not a hot shower and a bar of soap, but right now wading into the sea and letting the waves wash us clean feels like heaven.

“Make it up to me,” Betty teases when the water reaches my chest. She floats past on her back, the soaked strands of her hair drifting on top of the waves.

Oh, I will. I'll make it up to her. Once we're safe, once the agency is out of the picture, I'll make this woman wail loud enough to shake the trees.

But for now, we both rinse off and I let her float for a while, weightless and resting. My own eyes are glued in the direction of base camp, but no one comes. No one yells out or comes crashing through the undergrowth, and as we finally stride back up the sand, Betty squeezing out her ponytail, I let my eyes drift to her instead.

Toned. Tall and tatted and lithe.

Beautiful.

You know... my hearing is excellent. My instincts were honed over decades. If anyone comes near, I'll know.

And meanwhile Betty looks like a goddess, her skin glistening with sea water. Her tattoos are more vivid than ever, and it turns out they're not just on her arms. They're on her ribs, her thighs, her hips. Her whole perfect body is inked, and after living my whole life in grayscale, she brings so much color.

"Ew," she says when we reach our clothes, nudging the sad little pile of her tank top with her toe. "How badly do I want to set fire to this thing and never wear it again?"

"Soon," I promise, moving to stand behind her. A tremor runs through her body as my lips find her neck, and I pause but Betty pinches my hip.

"Oh my god, keep going. You are such a freaking tease, Agent Dawes."

My mouth curves against her throat. She wants me to keep going? I thought I was done with taking orders, but that's a command I'll gladly follow.

Winding an arm around her waist, I drag her back against me. Betty melts against my chest with a sigh.

## Five

# Betty



Okay, I'm on an unknown tropical island in the middle of the ocean, and my life is in danger. Sure. But now the secret agent I've been having x-rated dreams about for months is here too, and he's holding me. Kissing me.

Naked.

Is this a dream? My subconscious brain doesn't usually bother with plots, not even the *'Did anyone call for a plumber?'* kind. Whenever I've dreamed about Agent River Dawes—which was, oh I don't know, every night since we met—there's been no crazy plot line. No wild setting or supporting cast of villains. Just the two of us getting sweaty together in my apartment, the coffee shop, or one time, my aunt Janet's condo. Okay, *that* one was weird.

"Is this real?" I ask quietly. Somehow, it's hard to ask the question out loud—like it's more vulnerable than stripping naked. But I need to know.

River pauses, his breath hot against my neck. His arm is strong around my middle, his grip possessive, and wherever our bodies meet, we're already getting sweaty again, slip and sliding together. It's so freaking sticky here. "Is

what real? Do you mean this situation we're in? Or the way I'm kissing you right now?"

Swallowing against the sudden lump in my throat, I shrug. "Both, I guess."

There's a long pause, then River kisses my temple. "They're both real, Betty. But I'm going to keep you safe, I promise."

My chest aches, and the stars pulse overhead. Palm trees whisper in the breeze, and I hear myself say: "And after we escape? What then?"

Because this man is a master of the ol' disappearing act. He's my own personal Houdini. One moment he was a regular at the coffee shop, coming in every few days to stand across the counter, gazing like I was the center of his whole damn world. Then he finally kissed me, and *poof*.

Who says he won't disappear again? Trying to keep this man around is like trying to cup smoke in your hands.

"One step at a time," is all River says, and though it's not what I want to hear, I can't really argue. We don't even know yet how we'll get out of this alive, and I want a second date in the planner? So lame.

Maybe River isn't like that. Maybe he doesn't want domestic things—he chose this crazy life, after all.

Maybe I'm barking up the wrong palm tree.

Still, if this is my only chance to get him alone, you'd better believe I'll make the most of it. Wobbling around on the uneven sand, I throw my arms around the rogue agent's neck, grinning when he blinks in surprise. For all his muscles and knives and killer instincts, it's still so easy to take him off guard.

"Betty," he says, and it sounds like a warning.

Like a dare.

I rock up onto my toes and kiss him hard, sealing our bodies together all the way down. The hard line of River's cock presses against my stomach, but he doesn't rut against me or anything. Doesn't tug my hand down there. He's too busy gripping my waist, kissing me back like a starving man. Too busy groaning, low and deep, like the earth rumbling near the volcano.

I come up for breath, then dive right back in, head swimming.

His lips taste like salt.

*Slam. Slam. Slam.* With his heart beating that hard, so rough I can feel it, I'm surprised he doesn't crack a rib. River's fingers dig into my waist, hard enough to bruise, but I don't mind. I'm desperate for this too.

If this whole caper has taught me anything, it's that I could die any minute. Any of us could. And I'm not going out without feeling this man against me first—without rolling around with him on the silver-tinted sand.

“Need to keep watch,” River mutters, tearing his mouth away with clear reluctance. So duty-bound, even now. I trail open-mouthed kisses down his throat, tongue rasping against the short beard he's grown since I saw him last.

Guess there's not much point shaving in the jungle. His hair is longer too, curling around his ears.

He looks wilder than ever. I love it.

“That's okay,” I say, sinking toward my knees, but River catches my elbow with a pained expression. As he drags me back to stand, his voice is stern.

“After everything I've put you through? Absolutely not, Betty. We're not doing that.”

And I start to argue, because it's not like some freaking hardship, I *want* to go to my knees for him—but River guides me around, then nudges me down to lay on the beach. He arranges me with my head pointed toward the

hidden base camp, then follows me down, knees thumping against the sand. When he hunkers over me, those shoulders seem extra broad.

As he presses my thighs apart, River's teeth flash white in the moonlight.

"Try to keep it quiet, sweetheart."

Eyes fixed on the jungle behind me, River lowers down, beard rasping against my inner thighs. His breath tickles against my clit, and I clap a hand over my mouth, choking back a moan.

Oh my god.

Oh my god.

Beach head. *Beach* head.

I've never had anyone down there before, never hosted a fella between my thighs, and now Agent River Dawes is getting up close and personal with my bits? It's not like the evil mercenaries let me bring a razor and shaving cream here! And I just dunked in the sea, damn it. There's black sand crusted over my ass. I'm not prepared.

And yet...

"So fucking sweet," River growls, licking a long stripe up my slit. He's getting right in there, beard scraping against my thighs, nose rubbing on my clit. "You taste so fucking good, Betty."

I highly doubt that, but I'm not about to argue—especially when River scoops both hands under my ass and lifts me, tilting me up to his mouth. He feasts on me, breath hot, tongue probing, eyes fixed on the darkness behind me the whole time.

"Sh-shit." My hands burrow into the sand, squeezing two fistfuls until my knuckles creak. Each lap of his tongue, each scrape of his teeth, sends hot and cold shivers racing over my body. And we're in danger, naked on this beach

and so exposed, but I must have a screw loose in my brain because somehow that makes me even wetter. I whimper and squirm.

*Danger.*

It's that same giddy thrill I got when I first laid eyes on River. The same rush of toe-curling adrenaline. Hey, some people race sports cars; others skydive out of planes.

Me? Guess I spread my legs for a half-feral rogue agent under the moonlight. I win.

“So perfect,” River mutters, the words vibrating through my clit, though he sounds kinda mad about it. His grip is harsh on my ass, squeezing me like his personal stress ball. “Betty, you're so fucking perfect. Don't think I can keep away.”

Um... *good!*

If my pussy is what finally snares this man, so be it.

“Don't, then,” I gasp up at the stars. The tension twists tighter in my belly with each lick, with each of his hot, shuddering breaths, and I'm trying to hold off, trying to drag this out for another minute, but it's no use. He's mastered me, and River wants me to come. “Don't keep away.”

A low grunt. A bruising squeeze of my ass. My eyes slam shut, blocking out the waxy glow of the moon, and then there's nothing but the soft sigh of the ocean and the warm kiss of the island breeze, and River's greedy mouth between my thighs. The pleasure rises up like a wave, up and up and up—then crashes over me, hot and tingly, flooding me from my toes to the tips of my hair.

I shake like a rag doll on the uneven sand. It goes on and on and on, tossing me around in my own private maelstrom until I collapse, completely



spent. When I finally blink my eyes open in a daze, River has a hand clapped over my mouth. I think it's been there a while.

"You were loud," he says, thick eyebrows lowered in mock disapproval.

I lick the palm of his hand.

He grins.

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later, fully dressed in clothes that are stiff and discolored with sand, salt and sweat, we sit together on a rock by the ocean's edge.

The red tracker light winks at me from my boot. I rest my chin on my knees, rolling my stiff shoulders. Should I have left the boots behind? Maybe. I don't know. Surely if they found me missing, I'd be screwed either way—and at least this way, I'm a tiny bit less vulnerable.

"Tell me you have a plan, River."

His legs are drawn up too, his elbows resting on his knees. The rogue agent stares out to sea, contemplative and silent, but I know by now that his excellent hearing is trained behind us on the footpath from base camp.

"I have a plan," he says slowly, "but you won't like it."

Awesome.

"Does it get us both out of here alive?" I wrinkle my sunburned nose. "Because if so, I don't care about the details. I love it. Whatever you've got in mind, lay it on me. I'm in."

His mouth twists. He frowns at the glassy waves, barely bigger than ripples as they lap at the shore. The water's so crystal clear that even at night, I can see the pale outline of a starfish clinging to a rock down there.

"They brought you here on a boat," he says at last.

Yup. That's no big secret—it's anchored beyond the reef, where it's been rising and falling with the tide for days. I've thought about sneaking back to that boat and jetting off into the sunset about, oh, a million times.

"I can't drive it." Do you even drive a boat? Gah. This is the problem. "Or navigate or whatever. Can you?"

"Yes. But we need to get onboard first. And we need the agency to leave us alone."

There's a long, heavy pause. I wait, stomach tensing.

"And?" I say at last. "*And?* How do we do that, River? This isn't theater! We don't need a dramatic pause!"

The agent fixes me with a *look*. My tummy flips in response, and my insides go all quivery. It's like a switch flips, and then he's just so bossy, so commanding, so stern. I wriggle against the rock.

*Down, girl.* Plucking at my tank top, I blow out a long breath. Escape first, then sexcapades later.

"You won't like this," he warns me again. Oh, dear god.

"River," I say sweetly. "I don't care if you could kill me with your pinkie finger. If you don't tell me the damn plan, I will push you into the sea."

He huffs out a laugh. Shakes his head and squints at the moonlit horizon.

"Alright, Betty." A calloused hand finds mine, tangling our fingers together, and I cling on tight, like he's my personal life buoy. "Here it is: we're going to let them catch us."

He's right. That plan sucks.

## Six

# River



**I**t's my plan, but it still feels so damn wrong to slip back into Betty's tent and sit on the edge of her cot, the metal legs creaking. It grates on every instinct I have to stay put, Betty trembling in my arms, waiting to be discovered.

Hours pass, the sky lightening through the tent canvas, until the sounds of waking mercenaries fill the base camp. Muffled yawns and low mutters break the silence.

"It's okay," I tell her under my breath, over and over. "It's going to be okay."

But can I really promise that? Can anyone?

Betty goes tenser than a plank whenever boots thud past her tent, her breaths coming in panicked little puffs against my neck. But it still takes them what feels like a lifetime to finally come and investigate what's keeping their bait so long.

"Wakey, wakey," one of the men calls, stomping over and shoving the tent flap aside without knocking. She could have been half dressed! Asshole.

It's the youngest one, the redhead—the one with a crush on Betty.

He splutters when he finds us in a clinch. Freezes in the doorway, eyes wide. I could have escaped a dozen different ways before he finally yells out, “Hey!”

Boots slam against the dirt, four pairs running toward Betty's tent.

Finally. Must I do all the work in my own capture?

Pressing one final kiss to her temple, I set Betty away from me and stand up, moving into the center of the tent.

Five men. Five idiots.

And one girl I can't bear to see hurt. If she weren't here, if I only had my own skin to worry about, I'd fight my way out and be damned. But the situation has changed. The stakes are higher than I ever dreamed.

It's not enough to finish these lowlifes. We need the agency off our backs forever.

“Move,” the one called Echo says, shoving the redhead aside. He peers into the shadowed tent, eyes glittering behind his glasses. “Huh.”

Betty backs up a step. Though this guy is smaller and leaner than the others, he's the one she's most afraid of. Filing that tidbit away for later, I let my arms hang loose by my side.

“Got tired of playing hide and seek, Agent Dawes?” Echo's gaze flicks to Betty, then back to me. The other men crowd around the doorway, blocking out the pale dawn light. Nearby, someone's toast is burning.

I shrug. “Something like that.”

Echo steps aside and jerks his chin. “Bind his hands.”

Yeah, it's easy to bark orders like that when you're not the one risking his hide. I've had plenty of commanders like this guy—but not for long. And there are some huffs, some sideways glances, that say there's plenty of

resentment in this ragtag crew. No one here would risk their neck for their noble leader. No one will go out of his way to watch the guy's back.

That's good. Any weakness can be exploited.

The redhead wanders away, his movements loud in the echoing camp as he rummages through boxes and rattles tins in another tent. He comes back a minute later, holding a roll of industrial tape.

Good, that's good. Tape can stretch and twist; it gets slippery with sweat. Zip ties could have been a problem, but tape I can work with. As the mercenary steps inside the tent, I stretch my wrists forward, calm and helpful.

No such luck.

"Bind them behind his back, Tango." The leader sighs, long-suffering, as the redhead flushes and snatches the tape back, then gestures for me to turn around. "Is this your first fucking day on the job? Always behind the back. Always."

I join my wrists at the base of my spine, but I let Tango walk around me, refusing to turn. Not about to lose my eyelines, not with Betty at stake.

"Be careful," she blurts, when the tape wraps so tight it cuts off my circulation. The tips of my fingers tingle, and I roll my shoulders back, forcing myself to stay calm. I won't be bound for long, but numb hands won't help.

"Tape her mouth, too," Echo says.

You know what? Forget calm.

"If you gag her, I'll tear out your spinal cord and floss with it."

I smile, and I let my polite mask slip for a split second. Just long enough for them to see I mean it. I really, really mean it.

Tango stumbles back, and even Betty looks shocked. My gut twists at that, but there's no time to reassure her. And Echo scoffs, but I notice he

doesn't step forward to do it himself.

"Amateurs," he mutters, turning away. "Bind her wrists at least, then load them on the boat. Let's get off this piece of shit island already."

\* \* \*

"You missed my best plans." Echo's having way too much fun holding court on deck as we rumble away from the island, waves churning all around us. Tango disappeared to pilot the boat; the others stand at Echo's shoulders like cartoon henchmen as he gloats. Betty and I kneel in the center of the deck, hands bound and jaws tight.

I won't forget that they bound her. At least Tango was gentler with Betty, looping the tape carefully around her slender wrists. His ridiculous crush makes me want to roar and beat my chest, but in this case it's been useful. Her fingertips are pink and healthy.

"I was going to dangle her in a net over the lava field," Echo says with a broad grin. "Cook her slowly, you know? Watch you lose your damn mind."

Slow breath in... slow breath out.

He's trying to rattle me.

It's working.

The hard deck digs into my knees, and the hot sun beats down. The engine rumbles beneath us, and each time the boat rocks over a wave, the standing mercenaries fight for their balance.

They're not nearly as safe as they think they are.

"What would you hang the net from?" I ask, twisting my wrists slowly behind my back. I've been working the tape loose since they loaded us on

deck—pour one out for my wrist hairs. The salt spray is helping things along, but my skin is raw.

Echo frowns. There's a muffled laugh, turned quickly into a cough, and the others drift away to other parts of the deck, his admiring audience gone.

Betty ducks her head, shoulders trembling against a fit of the giggles. A seabird cackles overhead, wheeling through the blue sky, and as cool spray mists my face, suddenly I'm a thousand times lighter.

She's not scared. She's *laughing*.

Betty has faith in me. In our plan.

And you know what? The earth will crack open and swallow me whole before I disappoint this woman another single time. Tipping my head back, I draw in a chestful of fresh, salty air. It's a beautiful day.

"What are you doing?" Echo demands.

I catch his eye and grin. "Breathing."

"Well, stop it—"

I explode off my knees, wrists tearing apart, and slam Echo's face against the boat rail. He crumples to my feet, glasses shattered, but I'm already running for the next closest man. He's gazing out to sea, dolphin-watching or some shit, and he barely has time to turn around with a yell before I've wrenched his arm from his socket and tossed him overboard.

That's the pattern. A crippling injury, maybe a broken bone, then *splash*. *Splash*. *Splash*. The last guy pulls a knife on me, so he goes overboard with a blade buried in his gut. He started it. Our whole fight lasts less than three minutes, and the boat rumbles in a steady line, no sign that Tango's noticed his colleagues thrashing in the foam.

I turn back to Echo's limp body, breathing hard through my nose.

This is the problem with taking down amateurs. There's no satisfaction to

it, no real release. Like swatting a bunch of annoying flies. I rehearsed this moment over and over in my head all night, fretting about my girl, and when it comes down to it, there's not a mark on either of us.

Except my bald wrists, I guess. The true casualties.

Betty gapes from where she kneels on deck. She's paler than a few minutes ago, and locks of her hair have slipped loose from her ponytail, streaming in the wind.

Can she sense the blood lust still pounding in my veins? The desperate urge to tear out Echo's jugular with my teeth?

Maybe if she wasn't here, I'd do it. I've done a lot of things to survive in my time, things I'm not proud of exactly, but that I don't regret either.

But Betty will never see me like that. We're starting a new life, damn it, and I'm not freaking her out now.

"You were scared of this guy," I say, squatting behind her and gently slicing her duct tape loose. They even left my knife on my belt. No, there's no pride in this victory, just exhaustion.

"I was scared of all of them." Betty shakes out her fingers and circles her wrists.

"But especially him."

Betty snorts. "Well I'm not *now*."

True. It's hard to be scared of a glorified, passed-out office worker playing dress up. His forehead's all cut up from his lenses shattering, and there are shards of glass in his mustache. This asshole doesn't even know he's beaten yet, but he will.

"Well, you decide what we do to him."

Some guys might bring her flowers, but I'll do them one better. I'll bring her the helpless body of any man who threatens her. That's romantic, right? *I*



think so.

“What we... what we do to him?” Betty stares at Echo’s unconscious frown. Even passed out, he’s a pissy little jackass. “What do you mean?”

“Well, we could kill him.” I say it casually, like we’re discussing the merits of a picnic vs a restaurant dinner. “Fast or slow, either works. Or we could throw him overboard and let fate decide.”

That might be easier for her. More psychologically comfortable. Hitting the water might wake him up; it might not. The blood on his forehead might attract sharks; it might not. Tossing Echo overboard would give him a better chance than he’d ever face with me alone.

*Cook her slowly above the lava field.*

Prick.

“I—I don’t want to decide that,” Betty says, fumbling her words and shaking her head. “Don’t make me decide that.”

No problem. One swift kick, and there’s a slither of limbs across the deck, then one final splash.

“Done,” I tell her, helping her up. “I decided. That’s on me, okay? You never have to think about those guys ever again.”

Betty wobbles as she stands, and she looks queasy. “P-please don’t kill Tango,” she says. “He was the nicest to me.”

I suck in a deep, salty breath, trying with all my heart to ignore the wave of jealousy and bitterness that crashes through my body. I save her life, and now I’m the one she’s scared of? He’s the one she protects? The urge to march to the bridge and tear his freckled head off is strong, but I squash it down. That won’t help.

Betty relaxes when I nod, and her fingers tangle with mine. The roaring beast in my chest settles down, grumbling.

She just doesn't want more violence. That's fine. That's fair.  
I have other plans for the redhead, anyway.

## Seven

# Betty



One time, back at the coffee shop, Miriam and I spent twenty whole minutes with our elbows propped on the counter, watching a construction crew work across the street. It was a lull with no new orders, and those guys were better than TV. When the clouds parted and the summer sun blazed hot, they all took their shirts off, muscles slick with sweat.

“Damn,” Miriam said, whistling under her breath, but it wasn’t the bare chests we were swooning over. This was some kind of *elite* construction crew, not the stoned, jeering weirdos you sometimes get. They were serious, quick, moving together in perfect sync to build scaffolding at record speed. “Is there anything sexier than a truly competent man?”

I hummed along in agreement back then, but I had no idea. *No idea.*

Because River Dawes is the ultimate competent man. He fights, he tracks, he survives in the jungle. He commandeers a boat like it’s nothing, and back on that beach he ate my pussy like a dream.

Compared to River, poor Tango is a trembling kid. He keeps shooting me pleading looks, like *I* could save him, when he’s the trained agent or

mercenary or whatever. He's the one piloting our boat, River looming over his shoulder and barking commands.

When we first burst onto the bridge, covered in sweat and sea spray, Tango yelped and nearly fell out of his chair. He fumbled for his knife, but River moved faster than a blink, and then Tango was sprawled over the boat controls, chalky white behind his freckles, palms up in surrender.

"Do you want to die on paper, or for real?" River asked him.

"P-paper," Tango stuttered. "Definitely paper."

River clapped him on the shoulder—*hard*. I think part of him was secretly disappointed by that answer. "Smart man."

So now we're headed for the nearest city port, an unlikely trio. Tango reported our deaths to the agency already, and once we reach land, he's gonna disappear too. Start over. Or else face River's wrath, and no one with a single working brain cell would choose that.

"I might learn carpentry," Tango says now, squinting out at the water. "Or another trade. Find a nice girl and settle down." His eyes slide to me, then dart straight ahead when River snarls. Secretly, I preen.

I love when River gets jealous over me.

The sunset paints the ocean pink and gold. The mood relaxes the longer our captive's eyes stay off me—and Tango's calmed down a lot since he survived the last few hours. He won't stop chatting, pushing his luck. He's happier than I ever saw him around Echo.

Feeling bold again, he says, "I never really liked the whole agent thing, but once you're in, you're in, you know? It's not like you can hand in your notice."

"Yes," River says. "I know."

Tango flushes and refocuses on the boat controls. I choke back a laugh

where I'm lounging in the first mate's seat, bare toes wriggling in the warm air. My boots went overboard with their tracker hours ago.

It's not bad at all, this pirate's life. I've explored the whole boat from top to bottom; raided a kitchen area for bottled water and snacks. I even found a funny nautical hat, and it makes me look cuter than a sunburned button. Now and then, we'll see movement in the distance—a pod of dolphins racing along the waves, or a humpback whale breaching. Pretty damn cool.

River keeps shooting me worried glances, but I'm fine. Totally fine. Sure, I had a mini freak out earlier, my legs turning to jelly at the sight of Echo's floppy, lifeless limbs, but I feel a million times better since chowing down on a pack of chocolate cookies.

I'm *fine*.

So my crush is a lethal killing machine. So he didn't even blink as he offered to torture Echo for me.

He also winced as he peeled the tape off my wrists, like he felt every tiny prickle and sting. River *hates* seeing me in even the slightest discomfort. That's a heady sort of power.

And maybe there's more than one way to be lethal, you know? Maybe having the devotion of a dangerous man does the job too.

Sure wish we didn't have this third wheel, though. I know I asked that Tango be kept alive, but with each passing hour that River spends *not* touching me, I regret that decision more and more. Especially since Tango turned out to be such a chatty Cathy.

But I've started to wonder... what if River doesn't want to touch me again? What if he's *glad* we have this buffer? When I tried to ask about our future back on that beach, River dodged the question like a pro.

So maybe Tango's here to save River the trouble of turning me down,

you know? To save him that awkwardness. Maybe this was a tropical island fling, and that's all.

I slump in my chair, frowning. Because how would we even fit together? I'm a barista, and I'm not even great at it. I make a mean cappuccino, but my latte art sucks. I'm average in every way.

Meanwhile River is like a comic book hero brought to life. Oh god, is he desperate to get rid of me? To lose the dead weight? Will I have to fake my own death and start over... alone? What if there aren't coffee shops where we're going?

Maybe I'll learn carpentry too, like Tango. Gah.

"Stay on course," River says, taking my elbow. I jolt. Wait, when did he move close? He eases me up, his grip firm, and tells the other man: "If you deviate an inch, I'll slit your throat."

Tango's nervous laughter turns into a cough. "Yes, sir."

River turns to me, voice low. "Come on."

I stumble after him in a daze. "Can we trust him?" I hiss as River leads me out on deck, the sky blushing pink all around and reflected on the water. It's cooler now, the breeze cutting through my tank top and making me shiver.

River tugs me to the edge. "Not an inch. But we can trust him to save his own skin."

My fingers wrap around the metal rail, and I flex them, clinging tight. The engine rumbles beneath us, the boat cutting through the calm ocean, and the white dots of seabirds cluster together on the water, gossiping and preening their feathers.

*Ask him. Just ask him.*

*Ask him if he still wants you.*

Why is this so freaking hard? I just survived a band of mercenaries, damn it! I hiked up a volcano! I tramped through a jungle! Why are these feelings so much scarier?

River steps behind me, his chest warm and solid against my back, and grips the rail on either side of my hands. *Oh.*

I melt with relief.

“Betty,” he says, lips brushing my earlobe. Shivers cascade over my skin, and heat pulses between my legs. Thank god. Thank god. “Listen, I won’t force you to stay with me. If you’d prefer, I can make sure you’re safe, set you up somewhere new, then leave you be. Protect you from a distance. I won’t make you do anything, alright? If you’d rather—”

“But it’s an option?” I interrupt, squeezing the rail until my knuckles go white. “Staying with you is an option?”

There’s a long pause, and my stomach drops.

I can’t say goodbye to this man. I can’t.

“That will always be an option for you,” River says at last. The words scrape out of his throat, raw and confessional. “Whether you take it now, or in a year, or in ten years’ time—”

“I’ll take it now,” I say quickly. Adrenaline spikes in my veins, and there it is again: that thrill. That dizzy, flying feeling. I grip the rail with clammy hands, and I’m smiling so hard my cheeks hurt. The wind tosses my hair. “I want to stay with you now.”

River makes a rumbling noise, half triumphant, half disbelief, and crowds against me, head to toe. His booming heartbeat rattles my bones.

“I’m not a good man, Betty.” Calloused palms slide under my tank top, stroking my hips, my waist, my ribs.

“You are to me.”

And besides: what's life without that delicious edge of danger? You think some well-behaved accountant could ever make me feel this way? Buzzing with so much joy and excitement, I could levitate off the deck?

"That's because you're mine," River breathes against my neck, trailing hungry kisses over my skin. "Precious. Perfect. Mine." Then, quieter: "Fucking Tango. If he looks at you one more time, I'll gouge his eyes out."

I snort, because he's joking. Probably.

When I reach back and weave my fingers through his dark hair, River butts against my hand like a tamed jungle cat. When he flicks my pants button open, my legs go all wobbly, and I lean harder on the rail.

"Yeah?" River's breath is hot against my ear. He yanks the zipper of my too-big army fatigues down, then pauses. "Betty?"

I gulp down air, trying desperately to think straight. Every cell in my body is screaming for me to *bend over already, idiot!*

But we're not alone on this boat. I cough. "Can Tango see us?"

River's enraged snarl makes my belly twist. Hoo, boy.

"No," he grits out, chest heaving against my back. "He will never see a fucking inch of you." The breath saws out of him, strained and ragged. "Goddamn it, Betty. Now I need to kill someone."

My startled laugh calms him down. He shakes his head, the tension seeping slowly from his muscles, then mouths at my shoulder as blunt fingers stroke the waistband of my underwear.

River pauses again. Still waiting for my blessing. I nudge back with my ass, feeling bold again now I know this is truly private. It's just us.

Just me and the rogue agent I tamed. No biggie.

"You gonna let me touch you, sweetheart?" River's low voice thrums with satisfaction. Primal, male satisfaction, as his fingers dip inside my



underwear and coast lower. When he finds me soaked, he grunts and curls over slightly, like I've kicked him in the gut. "*Christ.*"

Blunt fingers saw up and down my seam, spreading wetness, circling my clit. Making me gasp.

"I'll do you one better," I tell him, and though my insides are all jittery and nervous, my words are steady. I tilt my hips and hope my meaning is clear—but then I think *hey, why be shy?* I didn't survive this caper only to swallow my words. "I'm gonna let you fuck me, River. Right now on our getaway boat. Claim me. Make me yours."

He groans, and it sounds pained. The fingers between my legs move rougher, possessively, coasting easily through the slickness, and his teeth scrape my jaw. "So I'm your man?"

"Yeah." I jut my ass out further, demanding now. "You're my man. My first and only. So what's taking so long, huh? Don't you want to see what you've won?"

River's bark of laughter startles a flock of seabirds, even over the noise of the boat engine. They explode off the surface of the water, white wings flapping, screeching their complaints, but River's too busy yanking down my pants and underwear to hear them. They're already fading into the distance behind us anyway.

He strips me all the way naked except for my tank top, the stained white fabric flapping in the wind. Gonna burn it so soon. Then he props my knee on the middle rail, spreading me open, and now I'm bared. On display.

Cool wind rushes over my body, tickling me *everywhere*. The metal rail is cool and slippery with seawater beneath my knee, but I don't care. I tilt my ass and toss my raggedy ponytail like I'm auditioning for a music video.

And maybe I look dumb—but judging by the ravenous glint in River's

dark eyes, I don't think so. He crowds close again, clothes against skin, and his knuckles brush my lower back as he works his belt buckle.

“You're mine,” he says again, and he sounds surer now. Strong hands grip my hips and tug me back an inch, putting me exactly where he wants me. “My perfect girl.”

The broad head of his cock nudges my entrance. I tense up for half a breath, the reaction automatic, but River strokes my spine until I melt again. “That's it, Betty. Be brave. Let me in.”

Brave? Oh, I can be brave. I'm the barista who hiked above a freaking lava field.

I bite my lip and sink back on his shaft.

## Eight

# River



“**O**h.” Betty’s breath hitches, her forehead dropping to the rail. “*Oh.*” Only two inches inside, and already her body is so hot and wet and perfect. She’s strangling me, sucking me deeper.

Salt spray flies across the deck, misting my hot face, but nothing could cool me down now. I’m burning up from the inside. Pleasure coils in my gut, and I grit my teeth against the urge to slam forward, rutting like a wild animal. The boat lurches over a wave.

“That’s it.” I stroke her back, the muscles shivering under my touch. Betty moans and rocks back again, taking another inch. “There, that’s it. Good girl.”

“*Oh,*” she says, her words slurred, shaking her head against the rail. “*Oh shit.* Why do I like hearing that so much?”

My grin behind her is savage, my chest puffing up. She likes my praise?

“So basic,” Betty wails, but she’s rocking back again, urging me on, and I can’t do anything except grip her hips and push forward.

*Christ.* Every inch is the sweetest agony. The torturous give of her body; the flutter of her inner muscles as they learn to stretch. Her little gasps and whimpers. It's taking me apart, piece by piece.

I've explored every continent on this planet, but *this* is heaven right here. I've found it.

The boat lurches again, and I glance up, quickly checking our route. We're scoring a straight line of foam through the sea, so no betrayal from Tango. He's just a shitty helmsman. Sounds right.

The mere thought of him spikes my pulse, and I grip Betty's hips harder, fingertips sinking into her soft flesh. She gasps and moans louder, getting slicker by the second, and I thrust forward, plunging all the way home.

Ah, hell.

Shouldn't have done that. Shouldn't be so desperate to do it again.

"You good?" I grit out, my ears ringing. I'm breathing hard, my shaft throbbing inside her. If Betty so much as wriggles, I'm doomed. "Betty?"

"Uh-huh." She sounds half-drunk with pleasure, draped over the rail. Her channel flutters around me, adjusting to my girth. "Oh—oh my god."

Shouldn't have lost it like that. Shouldn't have let the inner beast take over, not even for a second—but Betty doesn't seem to mind. When she turns her head and gazes at me over her shoulder, her pupils are blown, and her lips curl in a lazy smile. She's smug as a kitten with a bowl of cream.

My balls draw up. My teeth ache.

"Ready?"

She hums and nods. Her eyes are hungry. "Ready."

It's the most natural thing in the world—drawing out of her slowly, shaft slick and glistening. Plunging deep again into the hot welcome of her body,

nerves throwing off sparks. As I grunt and shift closer, thrusting slowly at first then gathering pace, I've never felt anything so *right*.

She feels it too. I know she does—and not just because of her hungry moans, her tossed hair, and the way she rocks back to meet me. Because she's *mine*. We understand each other wholly.

Betty's a wild card. She likes placing the big bets, taking risks, throwing her lot in with a man who most others would rather keep at a safe distance. Gambling on her most primal instincts. We may seem like opposites to the casual eye, but deep down, we're two sides of the same coin.

It will never come back to bite her—choosing me. I won't let it.

I may have stains on my soul, but I will make her happy. I *will*.

"River," she gasps, and hearing my name on her tongue like that, reedy and desperate, is such a drug. I grunt and thrust harder, angling my hips to hit that needy spot inside her, over and over.

So hot.

So slick.

So sweet.

Her thighs quake. Her peachy ass ripples with each pound of my hips, and her grip is white-knuckled on the rail. When I reach around and pinch her clit, Betty cries up at the wide, blue sky.

When I lick the back of her neck, I taste salt. When she clamps down on my shaft, moaning and twitching, I taste goddamn victory.

"Keep coming," I tell her, rubbing at her clit. "Go on, keep coming for me."

I'd drag this out for hours if I could. Maybe one day soon, when we have the luxury of a bed and a refrigerator full of sports drinks to rehydrate, I'll try. Gotta take care of my girl.

Still, Betty shudders and shakes and cries out until she's hoarse, and I don't let up until she collapses over the rail, batting away my hand.

"Enough," she gasps. "Oh my god, enough. I'm dying. I'm dead."

Okay. Roger that.

Thrusting all the way home one more time, I scoop her upright with one arm banded around her chest. She's trembling and flushed. I hold her close, her back to my front, hearts pounding together as I empty inside her, spurt after agonizing spurt. Her ruffled hair muffles my groan.

After a dazed minute, Betty turns her head, seeking my lips. I kiss her hard, still so desperate for her, even now.

We stay put for a long time, bodies aching, the wind cool. We both wince as we finally pull apart, but Betty turns and wraps her arms around my waist. Her bare toes scrunch against the deck, and her face presses into my chest.

"Shower?" I say.

Her breath catches. "There are showers on board? Are they hot?"

Guess her treasure hunt earlier didn't find *all* the good stuff. "Hell yeah. There's soap in 'em too. And I found spare clothes."

Betty squeezes me tight. "My hero."

I wish. But maybe one day I'll earn that label. Maybe soon.

I kiss the top of her head. "Go on and wash up first. We'll be there soon, and then we'll ditch the interloper and disappear. Just you and me. We'll start over, wherever you want in the world."

I brace for her trepidation, but Betty sighs so happily. "Can't wait."

Neither can I. My heart lurches as I kneel to dress her again, but it's not the waves this time. It's all her.

\* \* \*

*Three years later*

The beach is still warm even hours after sunset, the stars pulsing in a navy sky. Laughter floats across the sand, along with the lively strains of music. The waves sigh as they collapse onto the shore.

I stroll along barefoot, hands tucked in the pockets of my shorts. Even after three years of radio silence, even with my seemingly casual posture, my nerves are on high alert. I pick up every detail of my surroundings.

The screams of laughter from a hen party, the women staggering together along the surf, heels clutched in their hands as they splash barefoot through shallow water.

The glow of apartment windows on the cliffs above the beach.

The faint scent of incense, half covering up the smell of weed.

The shadow of a dog walker in the distance, his ghostly mutt zooming along the sand.

I sense it all, plus the warmth, the sticky humidity, the twinge in my left hamstring which says I need to stretch this evening if I want to stay on top form.

I do want to stay on top form. I *need* to.

Betty's counting on me. And not just Betty—not anymore.

I find my wife exactly where I left her ten minutes ago: resting on a sun-lounger a short distance from the beach bar, hands cupping her bump, eyes closed. A drained glass of cranberry juice stands on the little table next to her, ice cubes melting to slush, the glass sweating beads of condensation. The music thrums.

I stroll closer, but she doesn't move. Alarm spikes. My pace quickens, and I check our surroundings before kneeling at her side.

"Betty." I take her hand, checking her pulse. Normal. That makes one of us. "Sweetheart. Are you alright?"

"I'm *napping*," she says, grouchy from tiredness, but her mouth twists into a wry smile when her eyes open. "Ever heard of it, Agent Dawes?"

Nope. One of us needs to stay alert, sweeping the perimeter for signs of trouble. Obviously that's me, and it's always going to be me, but that's fine. I'm glad to do it.

Betty's doing a much more important job. Spreading one hand over her bump, I try to feel something—anything—through the cotton of her sundress. "Is everything okay?"

"Yep." Betty taps my nose. "And with you, Mystery Man?"

"Yes."

No signs of the agency. Since we disappeared with no trace, there have never been any signs—but I don't take chances and I never will. The stakes are too high.

Good thing we have lock boxes full of cash and jewels and other supplies, squirreled away in various cities around the world. We'll never have to fret about money, and we can focus on what matters.

On Betty.

On her bump.

"I think it's a boy," she says, tracing patterns over her belly. "He's really manspreading in there."

A boy? "You'll have to send Miriam a postcard and ask her. Bet she knows."

Betty's old coworker from the coffee shop makes eerily accurate guesses



about our lives—and we know, because whichever secret location we move to every few months, Miriam somehow magically knows our new address and sends us packages.

She gives us code names, at least. She's discreet in her own way. Her last letter was addressed to Dr and Mrs Carbinkle. So there's that.

The old River would have wiped her out—deemed her too much of a risk. Snipped that loose thread and moved on, ruthless and cold.

But the new me only cares about making Betty happy. And offing Miriam? Not a winning proposition.

I'll keep an eye on her. I already hacked her phone and computer and the security cameras on her street, so it's fine.

“Want another cranberry juice?”

My wife yawns so hard her jaw cracks. She shakes her head, fumbling for my hand. “No, let's go home. I've had enough adventure for one night.”

Somehow I doubt that. Whenever we lock the door of our beachside cottage behind us, Betty magically gets her second wind, and suddenly she wants me to bend her over a whole new piece of furniture that we've never screwed on before. We're gonna need to move again soon, just to get her a fresh supply of sofas and bookcases.

“Have you thought about where you want to live next?”

Our feet sink into the sand as we stroll away, fingers knotted together. She can't move fast these days, but I don't mind. The breeze coming off the sea is fresh, tugging at our hair.

Betty shoots me a mischievous smile. “I have a few ideas.”

Translation: coastal, hot, constant sand in my ass crack. I raise my eyes heavenward, but I don't really mind.

Betty thinks beaches are good luck for us. And you know what?

Can't argue with that.

\* \* \*

Thanks for reading Runaway Rogue! I hope you liked it. :)

For more sticky summer hijinks, check out [Stolen Summer](#). *I should be traveling around Europe this summer. Instead I'm held captive by a hot doctor.*

And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

xxx

# Teaser: Stolen Summer

As prisons go, Honey Cove is luxe. I'll give them that. The villa the doctor escorts me to is way smaller than my father's mansion, but almost as fancy and well built.

The ceilings are high, the windows huge and sparkling. Sunshine spills across tiled floors, and waxy green houseplants hang in baskets from hooks on the walls. There's a purple woven rug; a jug of cucumber ice water waiting on the counter. A butterfly flits by the nearest windowsill. A bookcase covers the length of the living room, and a bowl of juicy-looking peaches rests on the coffee table.

Beautiful. Not that it matters.

Pretty places can still be rotten underneath.

And there are clues, too—reminders that this is no vacation. There's no kitchen, for starters, and no sharp or heavy objects. When I peer around the bathroom doorway, the shower has some kind of lock on the temperature controls.

God forbid I hurt myself. I'm my father's property, after all.

"Does it pass your inspection, Miss Lennox?" The doctor's tone is sour as he follows me from room to room. And okay, I guess I've been kind of a brat to him so far. But hey, how else am I supposed to behave with my prison warden?

Even one with those deep brown eyes.

“It’s okay.” I close the bedroom door with a snap and stroll into the center of the living room, nudging at where the driver left my suitcase abandoned on one end. I flip the zipper over, scratching at the hardy fabric with my fingernail. “I mean, if you hold me captive here, I’ll sue you for every last cent you have—but sure, the cucumber water is a nice touch.”

It’s a bluff. I can’t afford a lawyer. Until I get my ruined summer trip refunded, I can barely afford bus fare.

But there’s that frown again. Thick eyebrows pinch together, just a couple of shades darker than the doctor’s bronze hair. He rubs a hand over his jaw, his stubble crackling in the silence, and watches me steadily.

“You’re not a captive.”

I beam at him. “Awesome. Then I’ll leave.”

He lets out a long sigh. Like I’m so unreasonable, when he’s the one playing jailer. “After your assessment, if you are deemed medically fit—”

I wave an airy hand. “Yeah, yeah.”

See, I’m sure Hot Doctor trusts the process, but *I* know that my medical notes from back home are worth jack shit. Every professional in a fifty mile radius is wrapped around my father’s finger; he probably wrote those notes himself, word-for-word, or at least got one of his slimy aides to do it, then told my doctor where to sign.

And those notes are gonna be my ‘context’? I’m never getting out of here.

Pushing down the gnawing despair, I stretch up my arms, yawning until my jaw cracks. Making a big production of how tired I am. “Well, it’s getting late—”

“It’s four fifteen.”

“—and you’ve still got all those other patients, right? So.”

“So,” Hot Doctor agrees. But he stands there watching me for another

long moment, the sunlight spilling over him through the window. The way it glints gold in his hair makes him look almost leonine.

His toned chest presses against his white coat with each breath he takes. Even with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders relaxed, I can *feel* the tension humming through his frame.

Damn. This guy really hates me.

Well, he can join the club. My father probably hands out lapel pins.

“Dinner is at seven.” I half listen as Hot Doctor rattles through the welcome talk, my fingernail still scratching at my suitcase. When I swallow, my throat is tight.

I can’t believe this is happening. Can’t believe my father did this.

It was just a *trip*. A few stolen weeks of independence. I wasn’t gonna embarrass him, or hurt his chances of reelection. I wanted to tour the freaking museums. Would that be so bad?

“Miss Lennox.”

I jolt back to myself, blinking my eyes into focus. Hot Doctor’s still watching me, but his frosty veneer has cracked the tiniest bit. He’s staring at me with something that looks suspiciously like concern, shifting his weight like he’s about to come closer.

“I’m good.” I hold up my palms, my laugh rusty. “Calm down, Doc. It’s all good. Don’t get your panties in a knot.”

Quick as a blink, that concern drops away—and maybe I *am* crazy, because I miss it. Instead, we’re back to a clenched jaw and open distaste.

“Come to my office at 9am tomorrow, Miss Lennox. We’ll do your assessment right away.” The doctor turns on his heel and leaves the villa without another word.

I watch him go, stomach churning.

Man. Even the doctor is desperate to be rid of me.

\* \* \*

*Click.*

The villa door closes behind Hot Doctor, the lock whirring into place, and the second he's gone, panic crawls up my throat. So am I well and truly trapped here? Will I need to crawl out of a window?

One step at a time, Poppy.

Gah.

My hands shake as I tug my suitcase down to lay flat on the rug. It smacks hard against the floor, the thump echoing in the large room, and I drop to my knees at its side. The zipper catches, biting down on the fabric, and I tug the case open in jerky spurts. The fiddly metal zipper is slick in my sweaty grip.

No time to panic.

Deep breaths. Deeeeeeep breaths.

This is a setback. A solvable problem. I'm gonna regroup here overnight, get my head on straight, and then it's time for sweet, vicious revenge. Except —

“No.” Tops and handfuls of underwear fly across the villa. A pair of black period panties smacks against a painting of the beach before dropping to the floor. “Shit. No. Shit, *no.*”

If Hot Doctor peers through my villa window right now, it won't help my assessment. I must look insane, hunkered over my open suitcase, flinging everything I own at the walls, but I can't find them.

My phone.

My purse.

The freaking tools of my escape.

What use is it being free to go if I have no money or phone? No chance at getting by? Especially since my father is richer than god, and once I expose to the world what he's done, he'll be out for my blood. I *definitely* packed them.

My ears ring as I sit back on my heels, the empty carcass of the suitcase splayed in front of me.

They're not here. Someone took them already.

*Fuck* Hot Doctor. Blistering rage fills me in a sudden flood, brimming up inside me until my bones ache and my muscles twitch. He acts so professional—so high and mighty—but he's just the same as the rest of them.

In my father's pocket.

Ready to ruin my life at a single command.

“Shit!” I yell it out, loud and shrill, because what does it matter now? Who cares if I seem crazy? They're gonna lock me up here either way. The proof is in that empty suitcase.

My lips are numb as I slide down onto my ass, flopping onto my back. Hours pass and the time for dinner comes and goes, but I stay here, gazing up at the ceiling.

\* \* \*

Check out [Stolen Summer!](#)

xxx



*Cassie Mint*



# About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT instalove with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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