



# Black Site

**Author:** *Jisa Dean*

**Category:** Romance, Thriller, Action

**Description:** Because a man like Jim would do anything for Liberty.

Jamison Archer has spent his life toeing the line between being one of the good guys and being...not so good. His first impression of Liberty Anderson has him wanting to push her away for her own good. But Liberty's world and his are about to crash together and it's going to take a man like Jim to get her out safe.

Libby's main goal in life is to take care of her sister and just survive the next day. She's immediately drawn to a man like Jim for his ability to come out on top of any situation life throws at him but he keeps pushing her away. She should be upset at his alphahole ways and tell him where to stick his gun. So why does she feel that he holds the key to her happiness and that if something happens to him it would devastate her?

A trip, a club full of illegal drugs, and some shady assassins are all conspiring to push Libby and Jim closer together. Keeping each other alive and safe is going to be a lot harder than it sounds when the men who cost Jim his career in the military come looking for them. Can they get over their hang-ups in time to get under each other?

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

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Libby

There is something so damned sad about plain white walls. They tend to glare back at the person doing the staring. At least, that's what mine are doing these days. Not that I have a lot of time to sit and look at the wall but on mornings like this one, when I wake up all alone and missing my family, the walls seem sad. I roll over in bed and switch from staring at the walls to the popcorn ceiling above me, also white. I'm not sure what time I got in last night but it had to be sometime after three.

My eyes are dry and gritty and if we're just being honest, I should have showered last night and not waited until this morning. I was just so damned tired. My alarm will go off soon and I'm going to drag my half-dead ass up and out of bed so I can go to my first job of the day. I have three.

Six to four, I work at the inn, God I love the Ramseys for cutting me slack and understanding on the days I'm running a little behind. From five-thirty to two I work at the diner. On my days "off" - that's a big joke, as if I have days off - I work in a little gift shop on the outskirts of town from ten to six, which is most weekends. Sometimes I work at the gift shop and then the diner too.

I'm twenty-two years old. I should not feel this damned old. I should not have to put an eighteen-year-old through college. I should be getting drunk on the weekends and fucking everyone on campus. I mean I guess that's what I'm supposed to be doing. It's

what everyone on television thinks people my age are doing.

But instead, I am working three jobs to put my baby sister through college so she can have the life I started to have. And I'm too tired to fuck anything. God, it's only been four years since the car wreck that took our mom and dad but it feels like forever. I guess time flies when you're too damn tired to care what time it actually is. The thought of my little sister sends a spasm of pain through my heart. God, I miss her, but I want her to have a better life, and to do that she has to go to college. And it's not like I won't see her over the summer or during long holiday breaks. Still, it hurts to have the house so quiet after four years of listening to her blare her music anytime I was at home.

She's only been gone for two weeks but I feel every day of those two weeks. How in the world am I going to make it through four, or six, or eight years of her being away from me? I drag myself out of bed and hit the shower; I can't do anything about it right now so dwelling on it is just a waste of what little energy I have left. I take the bus to the inn, it's not like my broke ass has a car to roll around in. The car my mom and dad were in was totaled and that was about as close as I've come to owning a car.

The bus doesn't run all the way to the inn, so I have another walk once I'm off. I usually leave my house at four forty-five. I have an hour on the bus and then the ten-minute walk to the inn. Most mornings I can spot the regulars but today the bus seems a little more crowded. I search my mind to think of any festivals or conventions that might be in town to make it so full but I'm so out of touch with stuff that I can't remember if someone said something about it or not.

I have to grab a seat in front of two really scary-looking men with tattoos all up and down their arms. Typically I don't judge - okay, I try not to judge - but something about these guys feels off. When I sit down I pick up hints of an accent. It's Russian I think but the bus is really loud today so I don't hear all of what they say.

My sister and I started learning different languages as a coping mechanism, something we could do together to bring us closer together. Lexi didn't take the deaths of mom and dad well. Not that saying that isn't the biggest duh in the world. I mean who takes the death of their parents well? She blamed me for having to sell the house to cover mom's medical bills. It also didn't help that I was the person who 'pulled the plug' on mom when they told us she wasn't coming back. A decision that still haunts me at night, usually in Lexi's voice, asking me if I'm going to pull the plug on her too if something ever happened to her.

I don't sleep a lot. So I guess all the work I do isn't so bad when all I would be doing sitting at home would be pacing the floors or watching television. I want to believe that somewhere down in the core of who I am that eighteen-year-old is still there, still fun, but I'm not sure if this experience hasn't killed her.

A sentence drifts to me from behind. The men are whispering about taking care of the man in the cast. Ah, that explains it; they are here taking care of a family member or friend who's hurt themselves. Not that we don't have a lot of different ethnicities in town, the beach is only an hour away and some of the tourist stuff spills over into our neck of the woods sometimes. When the bus pulls up to my stop I think about turning around and wishing them a nice day or a good visit but at the last minute, I can't bring myself to do it. Guess the wreck killed the outgoing Libby off too.

I arrive at the inn with just enough time to sign in and look over anything I need to do for the rest of the day. It's run by a husband and wife that used to be military so a lot of military men and women choose to stay with us. I hit the front desk just as Marnie comes around the corner that leads into the kitchen.

"Oh hey Libby, I have friends staying in cottage number nine so don't rent that one out okay." I nod, making a mental note. "I didn't enter them in because they're old friends of ours."

I've been working for the Ramseys for almost as long as my mom and dad have been gone. I can tell what she's saying is code for 'they're still active and don't want to be bothered' - and by bothered I mean they may still be 'dark' so keep my mouth shut that I saw anything or anyone here. It took me months to figure out what was going on but once I did I let them in on the fact I knew. They were cool about it, taking me aside and telling me that some of the 'friends' staying here are undercover or working missions from a safe place. I would be okay if I kept to myself, remembered which cabins were officially off the books, and didn't say a word about what I saw.

So far, it's worked for us. Who the hell do I have to tell anything to anyway? I don't have any friends. When you work as many hours as I do you don't have time to socialize outside of work. And because I work three different places I'm not close to any of the people I work with.

"Number nine, got it Marnie." The rest of the day passed how most of them do. I make reservations, do paperwork that needs to be done for tax time - so much easier to do it a little at a time than to wait right up until the deadline, and make sure the guests have what they need.

I'm caught up in computer work when the phone rings or else I wouldn't have picked it up - the light is there showing me number nine. I do though.

"Hey, who am I speaking to again?" a thick voice that is deep and I'm sure sexy to some causes my focus to snap to the phone. Shit, I'm not supposed to pick up calls from the cabin.

"Um, I'm so sorry." What the fuck am I supposed to do now? I look around for Dave or Marnie but it's just me.

"No need to be sorry, I just wanted to find out who has the prettiest voice I've ever heard, and maybe get your name." His southern accent is strong and I think if I had to

guess I would say Mississippi or Louisiana.

"I'm Libby from the front desk." I think the guy on the phone is flirting with me but I have no idea if that's right or not. It isn't like I have a ton of experience dating. I had one boyfriend in high school and I thought we would be together all through college but as soon as I had to drop out and take care of a teen he bailed. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Now there's a loaded question, isn't it sugar." The guy on the other end of the phone could be a total creeper but he sounds charming on this end. I'm not sure how to answer him so I don't. After the silence stretches on for a little while, long enough to have me squirming in my chair, he finally takes pity on me. "We just need some more towels. There are kind of a lot of us and we tend to go through them."

"Oh, okay. I can do that. I'll be right over." He tells me he'll be watching for me and I hang up and go to grab him more towels. He didn't really say how many he needed but he did say a lot of people were staying so I grab a whole armful. I lock the front desk where we keep the money and cut the answering service on. I'll only be gone for ten minutes at the most.

I walk to the back where all the cabins are and take the path to number nine. I knock and wait for someone to open the door. It takes a little while but the door opens to a man dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. He's a lot older than me and his hair has just a hint of salt and pepper in it, I think. He might be light brown-haired and those are strands of blond in his hair. What gives me pause are his eyes, they are an intense green that makes him seem sexy and dangerous. His black-framed glasses do nothing to detract from how stunning they are. In fact, they only compliment them.

"Can I help you?" not the voice on the phone with me. This one is absolute sin wrapped in velvet and tied up with silk. I lean back a little to make sure I actually got the number of the cabin right and didn't fuck up.

"Um, towels." I hold the towels out for him to take but he doesn't. Instead, he moves his arm in full view so I can see the cast on his arm. Well, fuck now I feel like a moron. I'm about to apologize to him when I hear the voice on the phone shout from another room.

"Is that my towel lady?"

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

Do I want to be his towel lady? What does that mean? Is that code for something? Why the hell did I pick up the phone?

"Apparently." The stranger with the beautiful green eyes moves back and uses his head to usher me in. "Lay them anywhere."

I nod like an idiot and go to set them on the table in the hallway leading into the living room. His eyes never leave me and I can feel them the entire time. It just makes me more nervous and so when I set them down I don't put them all on the table good enough and some drop to the floor. Fuck!

I dive for the towels as the man waits with his cool green eyes tracking my movements like a big cat tracks prey. It takes me a minute before I realize I'm still squatting down and have stopped going for the towels, totally mesmerized by this man's gaze. There is a clatter in one of the rooms in the back and a brown-haired man leaps over the back of the couch. I'm not sure what I'm more impressed by, the fact he made the jump or the fact he seems to be doing it to get to me.

"Well, hello ma'am." He's not even winded and when he speaks his voice is just as deep and charming as it was over the phone. He leans against the corner that closes off some of the living room. "Thank you, sweetheart, for coming so soon."

Every word the man says seems to be an innuendo. I understand the message about cumming, I may be naïve but I'm not dense. I give him a tight smile hoping it shows him I'm not interested. I don't have time for flirting and I don't date. I recently tried that and it didn't work out so well. I chance a peek at the green-eyed man and find that he's still very much watching me.

"Have you worked for the Ramseys long?"

Fuck, this is one of the social things I'm not good at. Do I say yes and they think I know something I shouldn't or do I say no and run the risk of them thinking I'll say something I shouldn't? I go with a shrug and a head bobble that can be either. I turn to leave when I almost run right into the man with the cast on. God damn, no one should smell that good and have eyes like his. He smells delicious, for the first time ever my lady bits are starting to wake up and take notice.

Oh hell no, I don't have time for this. I maneuver around the guy and start to reach for the door so I can go back to the front desk. As I brush by him, he reaches out and grabs my arm with his free hand. When I look up at him his eyes have gone from a placid, cool green to bright and hot like a glowing emerald.

"What's your name?" his voice makes my panties melt, there I said it. Doesn't mean I am going to do any fucking thing about it. Movement catches my eye and I become aware of two more men standing close to the hall that I didn't see before. In fact, I think the only reason I can see them now is because they want me to. They are freaking' huge too.

Maybe I should have been nicer to the deep-voiced guy. At least he was flirty and didn't look like he's going to take me apart body part by body part.

"Hey, eyes on me. What's your name?" the tone of his voice is very domineering and I can't help but rankle a little bit because of it. I jerk my arm away from him. Or rather I try to but he doesn't let me go. His hold on me just gets tighter.

"Libby." I tell him hoping it's going to be enough that he'll let me go. These guys have gangbang written all over them and I don't think that's going to be on my to-do list at all.

"Last name?" how can he have such sexy eyes and smell so good and have such a wonderful voice and still be a douche when he opens his mouth and speaks. I raise my chin and consider defying him. He knows I'm thinking about doing it too.

"Anderson." I look pointedly at his hand on my arm and wait for him to let me go. The deep-voiced guy moves to stand in front of him and he still doesn't let me go.

"I can take it from here, boss. Nothing to worry about. So Ms. Libby Anderson, when do you get off tonight?"

I literally feel my mouth go into an 'o' shape. I'm stunned that he's still flirting with me. "Two a.m. I have to get back to the front desk."

Finally, the hand that had such a tight hold on me drops.

"Well, I'm Remy and I hope I'll be seeing you again. Maybe not tonight but tomorrow."

Freedom is so close, my hand on the doorknob, and yet so far away. "Um, I work. All the time. But thank you." I jerk the door open and run back to the inn. God, I never want to do that again. As I melt into the chair and think about how I'm going to tell Marnie about what I did the realization that the guy had a cast on his arm and men were talking about taking care of someone in a cast on the bus grabs my attention. Surely they weren't talking about the guy I just saw standing in number nine. He doesn't look like he needs anyone to take care of him? Hell, even hurt he acted like he could have killed me thirty different ways before I reached the door.

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By the time I'm halfway through my shift I finally start to calm down. Yes, it took me that long. I talked to Marnie and she said everything was okay but I wasn't to do

anything like that again. Her disappointment in me made my shoulders slump for hours afterwards. The diner is full and keeps my mind off of missing my sister, disappointing Marnie, and the sexy green-eyed guy - until I look up and spot five men sitting in a booth in my section.

My gaze clashes immediately with hard emerald eyes and a frown. Fuck! The only thing I have going on for me is lover boy is one of the men with Green Eyes. Maybe he can keep them from killing me because I know too much. I'm about to head over, no use hiding, when I turn into a tray full of glasses. The noise is loud enough to cause the whole diner to quieten down.

I get the death stare from my least favorite waitress to work at Joe's. Diana, she hates me with a passion that will one day make some man very happy - or have her sent away for stalking. "Jesus, Libby, why don't you watch where you're going? Klutz!"

"I'll get this up and deliver the drinks to your table if you'll take mine for me for just a second." I see her eyes narrow and she's calculating what more she can get out of the deal.

"I get the tips for both tables." Fuck! I give her a nod. "And, you tell Joe this was your fault and you'll pay for the broken glasses."

The bitch! Still, beggars can't be choosers so I take the deal. I disappear behind the counter to clean the glass up and let out a huge fucking sigh of relief. Diana is...well, she's a lot better at flirting than I am. She should be able to handle the table full of men better than I would. I clean the glass up and take drinks to the table that's been waiting. I try to smooth it over with all the people at that table. Some of them are pissed but most of them are understanding enough. I focus in on the pissed-off ones and honeyfuggle my shit loose so they're happy again. By the time I leave the table everyone is good again.

The men stay for a long time. I try not to pay any attention to them and just focus on my tables but it's a little hard to do that when Green Eyes is watching my every move. I take my break just in time to see Diana shove her tits in his face and tell him her address. Fuck that shit. I don't need the complications of dating or flirting. If I tell myself enough times maybe I'll start to believe it. Because it sure would be nice coming home to someone instead of a cold empty apartment. It would be nice to have someone who would give me attention and care like I give all the people in all my jobs. Fuck it! I've gone this long without companionship.

Oh, and there was the failed attempt at dating. Never ever date online. The one guy I went out with was a total creeper and I had to threaten him with legal action before he left me alone. Thank God I waited until after Lexi left before I even tried. If that bozo had been sitting waiting on her when she got home from school I would have lost my shit on him.

I grab something to eat from inside and take it out to the little picnic table Joe put there for his employees to eat on. I'm about to dig into a huge ass salad when a shadow falls over me and for one brief moment I think about the old saying about speaking of the devil. But when I turn my head and look up it's not the crazy guy I went out on a date with. It's the guy from the phone call. Remy, I think he said his name was.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

"Hey, I wanted to apologize if I came on too strong this afternoon. I don't want you to think I'm a douche bag or something." He looks bashful and maybe a little ashamed of what he did so I cut him some slack.

"It's okay. You weren't the one who put his hands where they weren't supposed to be." The guy sucks in his lips and widens his eyes at something or someone behind me. God damn it. I know exactly who is behind me before I even turn around.

"Maybe I should apologize as well." Dark velvet whispers across my ears and I have to fight hard to control my shiver. All I wanted to do was eat my salad. I roll my eyes because I'm going to have to be nice to this guy since clearly, he's hitting two out of three of my jobs and I don't put it past him to find out the third and show up there.

"Nonsense," I turn so I can look at him, "none of you have to apologize for anything since there is nothing to apologize for. Now if you'll excuse me I have to go back to work."

I stand and take my salad with me. A part of me mourns the loss of that crisp crunch of lettuce and the smothered goodness of all the bacon bits I could fit on the top of it. But I don't feel comfortable eating in front of people. It's one of my hang-ups. Don't ask me why, but it has always been a problem.

"But you just got here." Genuine disappointment is in Remy's voice.

"Actually I just remembered I have to work through lunch to pay for all the glass I broke. So, I have to go. I'll see you around." It's a throwaway statement you make when you want to leave - I'll see you around; catch you later, bye for now. I'm almost

worried Green Eyes will try to touch me again.

"Libby," I pause so I can turn to Remy with my warm friendly waitress smile. "It was really nice to meet you. Maybe we can talk some more sometime." I'm not sure if this is another throwaway statement or more flirting so I give him a smile but I don't nod or shake my head just in case.

Back inside my heart is pounding in my chest so hard the whole restaurant can probably hear it. God, what is wrong with me that I can't seem to get control of myself when he's around.

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Libby

Four days the men have been coming to the diner and each time they make sure to sit in my area. I stopped trying to bribe Diana to cover it for me when I realized I was going to be working to pay for her college if I didn't grow a backbone and just deal with what is happening. Surely if they were going to kill me they would have done it by now.

It's not all bad, I really like Remy. He's flirty but he doesn't mean anything by it. I've even started making a small effort to flirt back with him because he knows nothing is going to come of it. I finally learned that Green Eyes' name is Jamison but they call him Jim. And that they are in town on 'business'. I also met Evie. She's Ace's girlfriend. They call him Ace because...well I'm not why they call him Ace but they do. She is warm and bubbly and reminds me so much of Lexi that the night I got to talk to her I had to go in the bathroom and cry after they left.

As I step on the bus to head to the inn on the fifth day I wonder how long they're going to stay. The men from before, the big guys with scary tattoos, gets on the bus and brush by me to sit one seat behind me. Chills run up and down my spine and this time I can't seem to control them. They start talking about things and even though I try not to listen the bus is quiet today. Again it's in Russian and again they are talking about taking care of someone. It doesn't take me too long to catch a name - Archer.

I have to work really fucking hard not to gasp so loud they can hear me. Instead, I settle for letting my mouth fall open just a little bit. By the time I'm ready to step off the bus I'm sweaty and my mind is racing. I don't remember walking the fifteen minutes to the inn. I can remember how afraid I was that they would find out I was listening to their conversation or that they would get off at the same stop I did. Before I could stop to think if this was the smartest thing I've ever done I was at number nine knocking on the door.

It's still dark outside. I am so wound up I forget they may still be asleep. I start to have some sense come back to me right as the door opens and I'm confronted by a shirtless Jim - and damn! What the hell was I knocking for? His shoulders are wide enough I could sit on them and I do not have a scrawny ass at all. Golden tanned skin with a fine dusting of hair right in the middle of his broad chest round out the hot as hell package. I didn't think the guy was small or anything but I didn't think this was hiding underneath his shirts either. As I stand there he's pulling his shirt down over his head and working his cast through the armhole like an expert. He also reaches for his glasses and now that he's covered most of his hotness up I can finally regain speech - and higher thought process.

"Some men on the bus are talking about killing you, in Russian." Okay so maybe not fully back to higher mental processes. I expect to be greeted with worry or strain or hell mild interest. Instead, his eyes never change and his body remains as still as one of the big cats I'm constantly thinking of when I'm around him. He takes me by the upper arm and pulls me into the cottage. He drags me all the way to the kitchen and

kicks out a chair he plops me in and immediately I'm surrounded by big scary men. Shit!

"And you know this how?" his voice drops and I can just barely pick up on the lethal undertones. Even Remy isn't looking too friendly this morning. Maybe I should have waited for them to wake up.

"They were sitting behind me on the bus." Maybe he's going to have one of those delayed reactions and the news just hasn't sunk in yet.

"I understand that part," okay, that theory is blown all to hell, "I meant how do you know they spoke Russian and how could you tell what they said?"

Oh, that makes sense that he would want to find that out. "Um, I can speak a little bit of it."

Silence rings out in the room at my statement like the sound of guns cocking. I'm really starting to regret my decision to come straight here and tell them anything now.

"You expect me to believe someone who barely has a high school education is fluent in Russian?"

Dick! He doesn't have to be such an ass about it. I can't figure out if I'm mad or hurt by what he said. I have a sensitive spot about having to quit college, so yeah for him. He found that button to stomp on.

"We know who you are Liberty." The way he says my name makes it sound like a curse word. He could be saying nutbutter or twathole and he would use the same inflection. "We know where your sister is at and what she is doing as well."

I sit up straighter in the chair. What the hell does Lexi have to do with any of this?

"We know you took over raising her when she was fourteen. How does she like the campus? Is she having fun away at college?"

What the fuck did I do? I should have just stayed away. I should have listened to Marnie and not done anything else with them or for them or anything else.

"I know how your parents died." In my head on repeat I'm thinking, 'please don't say anything about taking my mom off life support, please don't say anything about taking my mom off life support.'

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

"So tell me how a waitress from a tiny town who barely gets by and has no education whatsoever can speak Russian. I'm all ears, baby."

I lose my temper about halfway through his little speech. I don't have red hair for shits and giggles; I have the fiery temper to go with it. I speak to him and spit the words out hoping he understands what I've said to him.

"What did she say?" he looks to another member of his team, this one is big and dark but has readers perched on his nose and a computer in his lap.

"It's Greek boss. But um, I would rather not say what she just said."

So I switch to Mandarin. Nope still has to ask his man and yet I'm the uneducated one.

"I said you can stick your own dick up your ass as far as it will go. So much for uneducated, huh. I'm done talking to you."

Green eyes narrow behind his lens and for just a second I wonder if he's going to kill me. Instead he keeps asking me questions for the next three hours. I'm late to work, they took my phone when they took my purse and dumped it, so I can't call to tell Marnie I am right outside the inn, being held hostage. Would she even care, these men are her 'friends'? God just once I wish I had someone in my corner. Someone who would care that I didn't make it where I needed to be on time, or took care of the creepers for me, or just wanted to listen to me talk.

I guess these guys want to listen to me talk but I don't think that's what I'm looking

for. Although I am sure I could yell spy or some shit like that they would definitely be concerned with where I was at.

They finally let me go and I rush to the front desk and nearly plow into Marnie. Damn it, she doesn't look happy. She looks like she doesn't trust me either now. Wonderful, I try to help a guy out by telling him someone is trying to kill him and I'm the fucking bad guy who might lose her job. I clock in and wait for what I know is coming. She's either going to fire me or she's going to remind me she told me to leave them alone, to pretend they weren't here. She told me not to go around them again.

"Libby," I'm not sure if it's more upsetting getting the quiet voice Marnie uses when she is disappointed or that she knew where I was for the last three hours. She knew where I was and she did nothing to try to stop it. I've always been good at one thing, when life kicks me when I'm down I have the unfortunate ability to be just stubborn enough to stick it out. A lot of that has to do with wrapping myself in temper instead of hurt. I absolutely refuse to let any of these people see me cry. I won't let myself forget what happened. I might have disappointed her but she disappointed me too.

"I warned you not to go back to the cottage. I told you to leave them alone."

"Then maybe you should tell them to fuck off and stay the hell out of my section in the diner. How about that Marnie?" I brush by her so mad my eyeballs nearly vibrate. I turn around and take in her open-mouthed stare. "If he dies it serves him right for acting like an ass. Only he won't, will he, because it seems only good people die leaving everyone stuck with the dicks that are left." I grab towels and make my way to the top floors.

I don't have to do the housekeeping duties, they have someone who comes in to do that depending on how many stay with us depends on how often. But I also can't stay downstairs a minute longer without getting myself fired. Once I am upstairs I take a deep breath and start worrying about my job security since I let my mouth run away

with me. Guess not all of the teenager I once was is dead; I still have a smart mouth that is going to get me in so much trouble.

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Two days later I'm sitting in the front typing a receipt for someone about to check out. Thankfully Marnie must have told the guys what I said because they've not been in the diner since. I feel fucking awful about it too. I even kind of miss seeing them every day and pseudo-flirting with Remy. Not that I will ever admit it.

A shadow falls over me and when I turn around I see the two men from the bus standing at the front desk and feel the bottom drop out of my stomach. Well, damn. I turn on the smile I use for pissed-off people at the diner. I make my way to the counter and pick up the phone as I do.

"Just a moment gentlemen and I will be right with you, I just have to let the people in 2b know it's check-out time." The smile must be working because they give me big grins and actually turn around to study the little lobby. It makes it easy for me to hit nine on the programmed numbers and wait for someone to pick up. When they do I am eternally grateful that it is Remy, I can tell by his voice.

"Yes, Miss. Terry. It's almost check-out time and you requested a reminder call. I believe you said two." On the other end of the phone, I hear him start to question me, "No ma'am no trouble at all. Remember the bus." I place emphasis on the word bus and turn to look at the men. They are watching me now and I give them an 'I'm so sorry' look and mouth the words to them. "It runs every other hour so you don't want to be late, you'll miss getting back. Remember two. Alright ma'am, and thank you. You too."

If they knew I was talking to myself for the most part I wonder if they would be relaxed enough to lean on the counter like they do now. I act like I'm going to hang

up using my hand and the phone to block the fact that I've hit the speakerphone. If they don't look hard enough they won't be able to tell I have it on. Unless Remy hangs up on me and the dial tone comes through the speaker. Maybe I sounded like a crazy person to him too and he hung up on me.

"Gentlemen what can I do for the two of you today?" I understand getting as much information to the men as fast as I can will help them if they even need my help. I might be just making a bigger ass of myself.

"We are looking for a friend. He is tall man, green-eyed, sandy hair, has his arm in a cast. He is our friend and we want to make sure he is alright. Do you know what room he is staying in?" the man's accent is so thick that if they are on the other line there will be no doubt the guy is Russian.

"I'm sorry sir; I don't think anyone is staying in the inn that fits that description. Are you sure he is staying with us?" It's not really a lie. Jim and his group of men are not staying in the inn, technically they're out back.

The second man, who doesn't seem to be as smiley or as patient as the first man, is quick to shoot me a death glare," Yes, we are very sure he is here. Can you please check the rooms for us?"

"Of course, sir. It will take this thing a little while to get me to the right page but if you just bear with me," I bring up the reservations for the inn and leave off the list of cabins. "I am so sorry for asking and I hope you don't think I'm rude but are your accents Russian? I've always wanted to be able to speak in Russian. Such a mysterious and dark language. I took it for years but I don't think I got very good at it." The first man smiles at me and the second man grimaces. He is letting the game play out for now so they can charm what they want out of me. When the screen pops up I turn and give them my brightest smile and treat man number one like I would Remy.

"What is your friend's name?"

"Archer, Jamison Archer. But it may be under Jim." The second man is the man who answers me so I turn back and click the name in, thanking God above the Ramsey's don't put everyone in the system. It pulls up blank and I turn the computer showing the men.

"Yes, see I was right. There is no Jamison Archer staying in the inn with us at this time. Do you gentlemen think you may have gotten ahead of him? Sometimes the weather slows people down if they come into town on the southbound interstate."

"No, he is here. Check the cabins around back. I am sure he is in one of them." Shit!

"Oh I'm so sorry, sir. I can't pull that up, only my boss can. I can call him if you like and let you ask him." The angrier of the two takes his buddy to the side to talk to him. He speaks in Russian thinking I won't be able to tell what he's saying. Hopefully the person who helps Jim will be able to as well.

They talk about killing me and taking the information but the first one stops that idea when he mentions passwords they may need to get into the files. They talk about waiting for him to come out of the cottage and then taking him down but that is not quick enough. Apparently, murder has an expiration date. Who knew? They finally settle on trying to charm the information out of me. Pft, like that's ever going to happen.

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When the first guy comes back over to say something to me his eyes go to the phone. The voice inside is screaming for him not to notice the red light but I realize when he straightens up and calls the other guy over I am not going to be so lucky. The second guy looks at the light and then his eyes narrow. He slides them back to me and I'm reminded of a snake. His eyes are cold and they hold no humanity in them at all.

He reaches across the desk and grabs me by the shirt. I wrap my hand around his in a futile effort to stop him from tugging me closer.

"You know where the Archer is, don't you?"

I start to shake my head no but he yanks me across the desk and I am beyond surprised that I actually go. How much effort must it take to yank an adult across a partition? I am so fucked! My shirt is ruined and I am going to have bruises all over me if I make it out of this alive. Which isn't looking likely. The other man is behind the desk where I used to be.

"She put us on speaker, Vladilen."

It cannot be a good sign that they are using first names around me. At least I think it is the first name of the man who shakes me now like I am nothing more than a ragdoll. He wraps his thick meaty fingers around my neck and squeezes down until it becomes harder and harder to breath.

"You will tell us were the Archer is, now." He slams my back against a wall that I am pretty sure is on the other side of the room from the desk. It's kind of hard to keep track because my feet haven't touched the floor since he yanked me over and with his

hand squeezing the life out of me I'm lucky to even be conscious at this point. I work up enough nerve to spit at him and tell him to fuck off in his native language. He slams the back of my head into the wall causing everything to get fuzzy.

"You will talk or else I will take great delight in showing you all the ways a woman is vulnerable to men like me."

Oh, like that's not going to make me push him until he just kills me. Wow, the choices a girl has these days. Stay alive and get raped and beaten, or push the guy to just snap my neck and put me out of my misery. And why the fuck am I doing this to myself again? Keeping someone from killing a man who is a complete asshole and who would rather see me dead than smile at me. Why? Oh yeah, right thing to do and all that crap.

I'm trying to gasp for breath but he's making sure I get none. I kick my foot out at his thigh but the effort to breathe takes all my energy and the kick does nothing to him. As the black around the edges of my vision creeps in closer and closer I hear the sound of shattering glass and something small ting on the floor behind Vlad. Then a loud bang and a bright light fills the room and causing my ears to ring. A gun goes off and for a second I am sure one of the men has shot me but Vlad's head actually jerks to the side and pink mist sprays out one side of his head.

I'm released and slide down the wall in time to watch Vlad hit the ground too. His eyes still open, staring at me. Holy shit I just saw someone get killed right in front of me. It hurts to swallow and I still can't hear very well. Everything sounds like it's in a drum or far away. I'm sitting in so much glass one wrong move and I'm going to look like I went a couple of rounds with a porcupine.

Men crowd into the room, dressed in black with masks and helmets on. There's no skin showing at all. They look a little like insects with the goggle looking things covering their eyes. I count five of them before I am jerked up by the hair and held

tightly to the second guy. I try to resist but it's too painful and brings tears to my eyes when I do. He has a pretty good hold on me. I don't know if it's the thing they threw in the room before or the lack of oxygen from Vlad choking me but I don't feel the blade of the knife right away. By the time I realize he has a knife pressed to my neck almost all of the smoke has cleared the room and five scary as fuck men are pointing guns at me and Guy Number Two.

"I'll kill her." He leans in on the blade and something warm and wet runs down my neck. I can guess what that is.

One of the men reaches behind and takes off the mask and helmet. Green eyes stare back at me and Two with so much calm and control that if I had a weapon I would want to hand it over. Apparently, Two doesn't feel the same way and shakes me a little bit like maybe the guys didn't notice me standing in front of him.

"Go ahead and do it if you're going to do it." That bastard. I should have known not to literally put my neck on the line for him. Of course, this is no big shock either. I understood from day one that if something happened I was going to be the least of the concerns to these men. Hell, after the other day, I think my boss wouldn't give a shit either. God, what an undignified way to go out. My shirt is torn open so I'm giving everyone in the room a hell of a show, I'm streaked with blood, and I am sure by now those bruises have had plenty of time to form making me black and purple.

"Stupid," Two jerks behind me when I call him out, if I'm going out I might as well finish this so at least it wasn't all in vain and the dick lives. If he dies after all of this I am going to be so mad. "He would shoot me just so he could get to you. You picked the wrong person to be your shield buddy."

He shakes me and yells for me to shut up. Jim shrugs but never lowers the gun in his hand. He isn't wearing his glasses and for an insane second, I wonder if he can even see well enough to shoot me and this guy. Hell for that matter he doesn't have the

fucking cast on his arm either. I knew something was off about that damned thing. It felt more like a prop he was using than an actual injury but I wasn't going to be a dick and say anything about it.

"You won't shot with the girl in the way. You're bluffing." There is a hint of a quiver in the guy's voice. He's starting to wonder if he did pick the wrong person but when none of them shoot he just pulls me in closer to him, wrapping his arm around my waist.

"Why would you think I wouldn't shoot you, Nikola? You know who I am, you've heard of me. Have you ever known me to hesitate to pull the trigger because someone stood in my way?"

Okay. Two, or Nikola, and Jim clearly know one another. I am so fucked! The guy standing in front of me is never going to let this guy go and Nikola isn't going to smarten up and realize we are both going to die.

"I don't want to have to kill you, Nikola. I want answers and if you drop the knife and answer my questions I will let you walk in the end."

That is a good deal. I would take it. But not my Russian buddy, he just spits out slur words in Russian and squeezes me tighter to him.

"If you let me go the man who hired me will hunt me down and kill me. Either way, I am a dead man." I spot the interest flaring up in Jim's eyes. He wants the name of the man who hired Nikola bad enough he would do anything to have it. "But you haven't shot me yet so I am thinking she means more to you than you let on. Why else would she try so hard to save you?"

What a fucking idiot. "Maybe I just have a hero complex, have you ever thought of that?" I'm rewarded for my sarcasm by being shaken again and told to shut my

fucking mouth.

"Fine, you don't want to talk to me then you can eat a fucking bullet, Nikola." Jim's eyes are clear and unclouded with guilt and worry for another human. Man, I wish I could be more like him. It doesn't really matter now though because I have a choice of either getting my throat cut or being shot to death. Today just really hasn't worked out for me in the either/or category.

"And yet you still don't fire when I am right in front of you. You aren't a soft man, Archer. If you really didn't care you would have shot me already and stepped over her body to come after me. I think maybe I will call your bluff this time." He switches to Russian and yells one word that causes my stomach sink and chills to run all over me in this overwhelming sense of dread. He isn't holding me so tight anymore and starts to back up away from the room full of men.

"What did he say?" oh, now he wants to know how good I am at speaking Russian. I lock eyes with him and tell him what Nikola said. "He said shoot."

The silence in the room is almost deafening and no one moves. Men still have their weapons pointed at me and Nikola. Jim is still standing with his gun raised but somehow time seems to have slowed down. Every tick of the clock is a reminder of the closer I come to death. I wiggle to try to get further away but he still has a death grip on my hair.

I close my eyes and take a breath, knowing what I am about to do is the stupidest thing I have ever done. When I open them I am hit by how beautiful Jim's eyes really are. It's easy to see them now because they are locked on me with an intensity that would make my panties wet if I wasn't about to die. He is a stunning man.

I say a prayer of thanks that he is looking at me and I do one last thing before I go all stupid. I mouth a request to him that I hope he allows. He watches as I let the large

piece of glass I was able to pick up off the floor before Nikola grabbed me drop out of my shirt sleeve and into my hand.

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Take care of my sister.

3

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Libby

I turn into him and thank God he relaxed his hold on the knife he had at my neck. Before he can bring the knife up I've stuck the piece of glass into him and pulled it out to stab it in him again. He's a big guy and I don't know how many times I'm going to need to do this before he dies from it. The glass is getting slippery with a mixture of his blood and mine, the sharp, jagged points cutting into my palms with every jab and yank.

I had the element of surprise on my side for the first couple of stabs. He let go of my hair and I got far enough away that I can see what I am doing a little better than the first time. He tries to cut me with his knife still clutched in his hand but I move away from him. I drive the shard into his stomach one final time. I'm so afraid I'm going to lose the glass, that it's going to be ripped from my hands and used against me that I bear down harder to make sure I can keep hold.

He lashes out with the hand that doesn't have the knife in it and knocks me down but he comes down too. I hit so hard that my head bangs against the hard floor and causes my teeth to clack together. I take a second to be amazed that stars really do pop up when you hit your head, just like in the cartoons. Not dancing around your head but they are definitely dancing behind my closed eyelids. I have no idea where my shard

of glass went but I need to get it back. I roll over right as Nikola brings his knife down. He barely misses me but from the streak of fire I feel on my hip I don't know if he did after all.

The pain burning up my body is enough to make me forget about my search for the glass or a replacement piece. Nikola grabs me by the ankle and pulls me back and I don't have the energy to roll away again or crawl or fight him off. I've been choked, shaken – repeatedly -, had my head knocked against the wall and the floor, stabbed, and now I just don't have anything left in me to fight with anymore. Hell, I can barely even see the guy as I have to blink hard to keep him in focus.

He raises the knife to bring it down on me one more time. Behind him a dark shape comes closer. It worries me that it takes me a minute to recognize it as Jim. Thinking hurts my head and moving too fast makes me want to throw up. Out of all the things that have happened in what amounts to about ten minutes' worth of time I can tell something is really wrong with me.

Jim takes Nikola by the hair and slides something seamlessly across his throat. It isn't until the sight of the long red line blooming across his neck from ear to ear that I realize he's cut his throat. I look up at the man that was going to kill me and even though I shouldn't some small part of me, that I will go to church to take care of after all of this, delights in the look of fear in his eyes. I would be laughing and pointing my finger in his face telling him to suck it but I just can't move anything right now. The effort that would take is too much for me to care about actually doing.

Jim jerks the man away and drops him in a place I can't turn my head to see. God this place is such a mess. They are going to have to hire more cleaners for this one. The other men fall behind Jim and start handing things back and forth between them. Jim hovers over me and it's not until something presses into my hip that I realize they got something to help stop the bleeding. Someone on my right takes my hand and does the same thing. It burns and I try to jerk my hand away but whoever has it is strong

and won't let go.

There's a lot of yelling back and forth. Jim finally looks away, taking those hypnotizing eyes with him and my vision starts to waver. A man is throwing something through the air at him and another bandage goes on the hand that is nearest Jim. Someone asks if they need any more hemo...something or other. Jim shakes his head.

"Ace, bring the doctor." Aww, he doesn't want me to die after all. Either that or one of his men was hurt when they broke the windows and came through. Might not be for me at all.

"He's already on it boss, he'll have him here in forty minutes." I wonder where Evie is if Ace is here. He doesn't let her go very far without him being right beside her. It could be considered creepy but I found it cute and sweet.

"Tell him to make it thirty." Jim barks back before turning his eyes back to me. "Stay with me. Stay awake."

His voice sounds far away and his form in front of me is blurring with every long blink I take. Lord, I am so tired. I just want to close my eyes for a little while but when I do pain lances up from my hip and jerks me back awake. I open my eyes to give the person pushing on my hip a go to hell look.

"You got to stay with me, Libby. I need you to focus on the pain until Doc gets here and checks you out." God, his eyes are intense. No wonder people do what he tells them to when he looks at them with those eyes. I do another slow blink but I feel pressure again and jerk my eyes open.

"Get her up. I want her out of this fucker's blood and I need to clean her so I can see if she's wounded anywhere else." The way he's snapping orders it's not hard to figure

out that Jim is in charge of all of these guys. His unit or team or whatever they call them in the military seem to jump in line when he orders. Makes sense, he was the one asking the questions the other day when he kidnapped me and wouldn't let me leave his cottage.

Hands lift me up and place me on something hard causing my body to seize up in pain. Jim isn't one of the men carrying me instead he walks beside me constantly monitoring my level of consciousness and telling the men where to go and how to go there. I lose him for a second as I'm taken through a door. He has to hang back so the guys carrying me can get in without dropping me.

As soon as we're through the doorway he's back and watching me like a pissed-off guardian angel. But Jim is no angel. He's more like Death dressed in all black combat fatigues. My body is picked up again and placed on the cold floor of a shower. It takes me a while but I eventually identified the shower as one of the nicer ones in the cottages. Water is turned on and Jim is back hovering above me. He is definitely Death.

4

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Jim

God damn it, talk about everything being a cluster fuck. I knew the minute this girl showed up at the door she was going to be nothing but trouble. And didn't I try to tell the woman to stay the hell away from us. Someone still standing hands me the dual shower head sprayer so I can run the water over Libby and make sure she's not bleeding out anywhere we can't see.

I don't have time to worry about her dignity. I take out the safety cutter hooked to one

of the loops on my belt and slice through her shirt and slacks. I try to stay away from her hip. I couldn't see how deep the damned thing was before I had her pants ripped open and slapped the hemostatic pad to the wound. Even though the water is still running red I can't find another wound on her body.

Fucking redhead. I should have tied her to a chair and not let her out of my sight when she came to the cottage telling us Nikola and his henchman was in the area snooping around. If I had tied her to the chair she wouldn't be all cut up with a busted head and handprints around her throat. I trace the bruises forming there with my fingers. They piss me off.

As soon as Remy ran to tell me what was going on and we heard her talking to the two Russians I gave the order to suit up and went through the plan of attack with everyone. We've been together a long time; we've gone on missions where some of us didn't come back. We work pretty well together and we work in tandem almost thinking like one mind and working like one body. You don't do as many missions as we have and come back if you aren't good.

My team used to be the fucking best. They were the men sent in when no one else wanted to go in. We've saved hostages, found hideouts, and took out so many bad guys there's not a place we can go in the world that someone doesn't want to kill us, which in this instance is a good thing - means we're doing our job right. We used to be the best because about a year ago some government spunk monkey decided it would be fun to sell the names of covert agents and black ops teams to the highest bidder. My men were on that list so the government we worked so well for decided it was time we 'retired'.

It took us six months or more before we realized something wasn't right. It was one of the only times I feel like I let my team down. Three of our men died and they almost got Ace and his woman too. It seemed that the lynchpin who controlled the network of stolen names, women, guns, and money was someone my team and I knew. And

that someone didn't just want us burned they wanted us dead.

This whole thing was set up to draw someone out to try to kill us again. We all knew it was going to happen so why not use it to our advantage. When they came we had planned to force them to tell us who had hired them but our chance of learning any names is laying in a puddle of his own blood and that's too good for the fucker.

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I try to be as gentle as I can when I raise her head and run the water over her hair but she grimaces anyway. She has a cut near her hairline on the side of her head where it made contact with the floor. I run my hands under her so I can check to make sure there's nothing there to worry about. I find a few lumps on the back of her head but nothing bleeding. When I focus back in on her face I can see how glazed her eyes are. She's not going to be able to hold consciousness much longer.

"I need an ETA on the Doc, someone," I shout causing it to echo in the small shower. She jumps a little so at least she's still responsive.

"Been twenty, Boss. You got to give him time to get in the air. It's probably going to be another twenty."

I close my eyes and cuss. I don't know if she'll be able to maintain consciousness for another twenty minutes.

"Hey, stay with me okay. Let's talk about something. Anything."

Her face scrunches up and she tries to talk to me, it comes out as I whisper so I lean closer to her.

"What are you, a woman? Talk, really?"

Did she just insult me and half of the population with me? What the hell is that even supposed to mean? Before I can ask her, Remy sticks his head back in and tells me Ace is headed back with the doctor.

"Okay, I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that last part so if you die your last words won't be to insult your own gender." She narrows her eyes at me but doesn't respond with anything else. "The doc will be here soon and we'll be better prepared to fix you up. All you have to do is stay with me."

She tries to nod for me but her eyes lose focus again and she starts taking long, slow blinks again until at last, she doesn't open her eyes again.

"Libby, Libby." She's not opening her eyes again for me. "Liberty!"

I'm met with a pair of beautiful whiskey eyes when I say her whole name. She tries to say something but I can't make it out well enough. I position myself so her head is in my lap and lean over her hoping that she'll say it again.

"Take care of my sister."

Fuck, she's bleeding, she has a concussion, and she just watched us kill two guys right in front of her and she still worries about her sister. I nod and look up so I can grab one of my guy's attention.

"Steve, go find the sister. Have P help you. She can get close to her better than any of you guys would be able to. Have Hades watch her during the day and you watch at night. It shouldn't be too hard for him; he's there watching P anyway."

"You trust him?" Jack, the darkest of my men other than maybe Dante asks it like I would send someone I didn't have complete trust in to watch over her sister.

"Yeah, I trust him." Hades and his "brothers" have been working for me in an unofficial capacity for a very long time. If there was something I needed done that couldn't be linked back to me or needed to have done that would be frowned on by the people I work for then I would go to one of the Brothers. They really aren't

brothers at all but a group of men that work together and take care of each other. They're assassins. And some of the best in the business. Up until a couple of months ago, now all of them are married and settling down like Ace and his Uncle. If it's something in the water I think I'll stick to whiskey and save everyone the trouble of seeing me lose my mind over a woman.

"Just make sure Zeus knows so he can keep Hades in line. He has a tendency to shoot teenagers." I mention another of the Brothers that I had helped not too long ago.

When I look down again, Libby has closed her eyes. This time no matter how fiercely I say her name or yell at her she doesn't open them. The doctor picks that moment to come through the door pushing my men back so he can get a good view of who he has to work on.

"Well you certainly made a mess, Jim. Is she something you did or something the guy with a bullet in his head did?"

"If you had time to observe the guy with a bullet in his head, a much-deserved bullet I might add, then you are taking too long getting to the person you are supposed to be taking care of."

Doc has never taken my shit. I've never intimidated or scared him but then I guess having your hands in enough people really puts things in perspective. Doc is a Jim too but everyone in my team calls him Doc. Hell, I think I've heard his momma call him Doc before. He was on my team with my guys, has kept more than one of us from dying, and still talks to most of us even knowing we are grumpy assholes. He's invaluable.

"Can we move her to the bed or maybe the dining room table? Whichever one has the best light and the cleanest surface."

I stoop to take Libby in my arms. This might be the first time I've actually picked her up. She's too skinny. She needs to eat more. Even when I pick her up and move her she doesn't open her eyes for me. It has me worried. I try not to show it because if I act worried my men will start to worry and there is no place on the battlefield for worry, doesn't mean that inside I'm not screaming at her to open her eyes. The doc works fast, something he's had to learn to do from working with us. He's methodical and the stitches he puts in her are tiny and won't leave much of a scar at all. I hover taking in everything done to her.

"She's going to need a transfusion. She's lost a lot of blood. As small as she is I'm guessing she didn't have much to give in the first place." He mouths the word anemia to me. It happens even to people like us, especially when you're shot and bleed out a lot more than you can build back up.

From the living room, Duncan wheels himself from his laptop sitting on a desk in there to the entryway of the dining room. "Type O positive. Should be easy to find a donor."

"I'll do it." I start rolling up my sleeve but the doc stops me.

"It would be better if it maybe came from one of the others or I could make a call and have the local hospital donate some bags."

"No, I appreciate your concern but if something is being put in her it's going to come from me. No one else."

A whistle from behind me makes me turn to Remy standing with Dante. "Damn, I knew when you finally found a woman it would be bad but never this bad, Boss. You won't even let someone else's blood inside of her."

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

I think about walking over and slapping him upside the head but before I can Dante does it for me without even turning his head. He is good. Some of the men joke that Dante can read minds, and sometimes I almost believe he can too. Remy gives him a 'what the hell' look that doesn't affect Dante one little bit.

I lie down and try to focus on what needs to be done. In my head, I make a mental list of things. Hunting down the fucker who killed my men is still a top priority but now so is this woman lying on the dinner table. Keeping everyone safe and giving them a place to come if we have to tighten security is going to be key in moving forward. It has to be a place easy to defend and away from most people. I start flipping through my list of contacts to think of who might know of a place like that.

We need somewhere safe to lie low until I can hunt this fucker down and make sure he isn't going to be a threat to any more of my men or to my newest member of the team -Libby. What we need is a black site, a place to do the work we need to do to get the job done. One last job before we all really retire.

5

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Libby

Consciousness comes back to me slowly and brings pain and terrifying memories with it. I dreamed of blood and violence just before I come back enough to try to open my eyes. It's not easy because everything hurts and my lids feel like they are made of iron or steel. When I finally do blink them open everything is just a little

fuzzy and out of focus for just a second.

One of the first things I realize is how damned soft the bed is I'm lying in. Also, my hands have bandages on them. Both of them. I hold them up in front of me so to study the white wrapping that is tied tightly around them. A sound to my left makes me turn my head too fast and sends the world spinning. When it finally settles back down I see the man with the cast on his hand sitting on a cot-like bed that's been shoved against one of the walls.

Jim. He's Jim Archer. He's the dick who threatened my baby sister just because I was trying to tell him about the Russians. Oh fuck, the Russians! I try to sit up but he's beside me pushing me down and keeping me still with the weight of his hand on my chest. I watched him kill a man right in front of me. Actually, I watched him kill the man that was trying to kill me so I can't be too worked up about caring that he killed someone. The asshole kind of needed to be killed.

His hand on my chest drives home the fact there is nothing in between me and the sheet on top of me. It takes me a full minute before I finally find my voice, "Why the hell am I naked?"

"It was easier to help you that way and I didn't really want you to lie in wet underwear. That can't be healthy."

"Why were my things wet?" I try to think back but can't remember any reason for them being wet in the fight. I remember the blood but that is the only time I can remember anything wet.

"I had to put you in the shower to wash the blood off so we could see where you were injured." His other hand comes up to brush away hair from the side of my head, his eyes intense and glaring. I guess what he says makes sense.

He doesn't move his hand though. In fact, he doesn't even acknowledge the fact that I am trying to move his hand which is annoying as fuck. Before I can ask another question he yanks the sheet down, leaving me uncovered.

"What the hell?!" I would shriek if I had my full voice back. Instead what comes out is more of a gasp and whisper. My wrapped hands go up to cover my boobs. What the fuck does he think he's doing? His hands slightly roll me and I become aware of yet another bandage on my body. He pulls back the tape and his fingers prod my skin which feels too tight and kind of itches.

"You're healing nicely. There's no sign of infection and as long as you don't move around too much it shouldn't take too long to heal up."

"You fucking asshole, you kept pushing against it."

"To keep you conscious, yes, I needed you to stay alert so we could monitor your concussion." One of my hands drifts to the side of my head but when his eyes land on my uncovered boob my hand flies back down to cover it up.

I glare at him but it does nothing to him. Instead, he sticks the tape back on and throws the cover back over me. His grip on my wrists forces them away from my breasts. He starts to unwrap the binding on them when another thought goes through my head. There are a ton of guys coming and going all the time here. If Jim is the person taking care of me it must be because the other men are busy with something else and he had to be the one to do it. How many other men have seen my tits?

The thought of so many people looking at my unconscious body bothers me. I squirm and his eyes track my movements. "What is going through that head of yours?"

"Um, how...did...shit, how many other people have 'checked' me out? All of you guys? Did you all take turns taking care of me?"

A look crosses his face and something dark and stormy comes into his eyes like a storm on the ocean. "I'm the only person who's tended to you since the doctor left. No one else is allowed in here."

His gaze goes back to my palm before wrapping it again.

"Why?" he looks at me with a questioning eyebrow, "Why is no one else allowed in here besides you?"

Is he still afraid I'm some sort of undercover agent sent to beguile his men and undermine his mission, whatever the hell that is? Or because he thinks it's completely beneath his men to waste the time to take care of me? I look at him but all he does is take my other hand and start unwrapping that one too. Wonderful, his silence is deafening. I'll take that to mean it's a little bit of all of the above. At least every one of his men didn't see me bare so that's something I guess.

A knock on the door has both of us turning at the same time. Evie pokes her head in and when she sees me with my eyes open she pushes the door open further. "You're up, that's great. Now I have someone else to talk to other than men." She rolls her eyes. She takes in Jim's stance at the side of my bed and waits for him to move out of the way but he doesn't. Instead they both stand in an epic stare down that has me jumpy.

I guess I can understand why he wouldn't let Evie near me if he thinks I am a danger. Evie huffs and finally moves to the other side of the bed. "Jesus, Jim, can you be any more like a dog with a bone? I mean everyone doesn't know how things are yet." She rolls her eyes at him as sarcasm drips from her words. What does she mean 'how things are yet'? "You want to get out of here for a little while? I'm sure you're tired of being trapped in here with Sergeant Grumpy for company."

I open my mouth to reply when his voice barks out before mine can, "She can't. She's

not allowed up until Doc gives her the go-ahead and says she's clear to start doing things again."

Him telling me I can't makes me want to throw the covers back and do it anyway. Who knew I was such a brat? Oh yeah, everyone who has ever told me to do something in that high-handed way he has about him.

"Fine, I'll sit with her for a little while so she doesn't have just you to talk to. By the way, when is Doc supposed to come back?" She too brushes the hair back from my face but it has nothing to do with looking at my wounds. She's just doing it to be kind.

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"This afternoon," he's reluctant to tell her.

"Wonderful, then we can go do something fun." She doesn't let his frown halt her enthusiasm.

He growls in answer, "If she's cleared." It's like watching a tennis match. With each lob they take at one another my head goes back and forth to follow the action.

"Of which I have no doubt she will be since you've taken such good care of her these past three days."

"Three days?" I must have heard her wrong. She couldn't have said three days. I try to sit up but once again Jim's hand is on my chest, heavy and ever-present, holding me down.

"Leave." It's a command, one that even Evie has to follow.

She leans close to whisper right before she leaves. "I'll be back soon." She gives my hand a soft squeeze before she rises.

As soon as the door shuts he takes my chin in his hand to steer my attention back to him and his green eyes hidden behind his glasses. Fuck this; I can't afford to be down for three days. I have too many responsibilities to just lie around. My hand wraps around his wrist but it doesn't persuade him to move his hand off of me.

"I have to get up. I have to call the restaurant and the store to tell them what's happened. I can't just not call and not show up for three days."

"Libby," the use of my name has me halting my efforts. "Even if the doctor says you can get up and maybe walk around a little bit you won't be able to go as hard as you did before. There is no way you can work in the diner for a full shift."

"That may be alright for you to say but I have to keep working and being sick or hurt isn't going to help pay my bills so I don't really care what the doctor says I am 'cleared' for I have to go to work today."

I finally struggle up and clasp the sheet around me. He sits on the side of the bed and gives me that look that makes me want to smack him. It's the look that tells me he's going to try to tell me something to do that I'm not going to like.

"Libby, the store didn't save your position. When we got in contact with them they said that with the season dying down and all of their workers wanting as many hours as they can get they couldn't work around you taking time off and it would be better to just agree that you would take the time off and try to get rehired again in the spring."

The rushing sound in my ears is making it hard to focus. I'm going to be sick. If I don't have that job it's going to be twice as hard to make ends meet and still pay for college for Lexi. I don't want her to have to take a year off; she might not go back if she does.

"Okay, but I still have to go to the diner to let them know I'll be there for..."

"Libby," he ducks his head so that he can look at me eye to eye, "the diner knows what happened as well. They can't wait for you to heal up enough to actually go back to work any more than the gift shop. It's going to take several more days before you have enough strength to stand for long periods of time and even longer before you can do so without hurting."

"Screw hurting, I'll take a hand full of Tylenol and be fine." I'm down two jobs already. No way the inn is going to be presentable enough to work in for a few months so I can't look for help there. All I have is the diner until I find something else to take the two other spots. "I can go in today."

"One, there is no way in hell you are going anywhere today or the next. Two, I am not going to allow you to stand up and fuck around and hurt yourself more than you already have."

He's not going to allow me. That's laughable. "Look, I'm sure you are the type of man who is used to everyone just doing whatever you tell them to do but you have no control over me so you can't tell me what to do or when to do it. I'm not one of your men."

"Actually," his eyes run over me and I have a sinking suspicion that I am not going to like what he is about to say to me. "You are one of my...," he runs his eyes down to where I am clutching the sheet to my breasts, "people now."

"What?"

"I want to hire you."

"No." Fuck him! I came to him trying to tell him what was going on and he not only shut me down, he straight-up thought I was the enemy. "I won't work with someone I don't trust. Surely you of all people can respect that."

His eyebrows go up in a disbelieving look like he doesn't understand how anyone can call his character into question. "You...why the hell do you not trust me?"

His eyes have gone that storm-tossed sea color again. "Because I don't. Look at me," I hold my palm up and wave it at him, "I'm cut in more places than I can count, I

almost lost my life because of you, and..."

He puts his finger on my lips to halt my rant, "I'll pay for your sister's college tuition. The whole thing."

Well, that certainly takes the wind out of my rant sails. Damn it. Lexi wants to be a psychologist; she is going to be in school for a long ass time, and yeah she got half of her first year done already in her last two years of high school but I'm still looking at seven or eight more years of college fees and book budgets. What he's offering me is a wonderful opportunity. But nothing comes for free so what does he want out of it? Is he going to make me do something awful like sleep around to extort information?

"I'm not saying yes, but what would I have to do if I did agree to work for you?"

I have to be cautious because it's not just me I have to think about. I don't want to sleep around but...

"Answering phones, in whatever language the person on the phone speaks in when they call, filing stuff, light desk work, translating when or if I go to other countries and need that help. Sound like anything you would be interested in?"

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It would be nice to use the languages I have learned over the years. It might be fun to travel some.

"I wouldn't have to sleep with anyone?"

"Fuck no! I'm not asking you to be a whore, Liberty, just a translator."

"And you'll pay for Lexi's college? All of it?" It sounds too good to be true. He doesn't sound like he's telling lies but you wouldn't be able to tell with someone like Jim.

"For however many years she wants to stay in, yes."

"How? How does a retired military...leader have enough money to send a kid to college and not blink an eye about the amount?" I have no idea what his title is. Or what branch these men work for.

His brow cocks. The high-handed way he narrows his eyes shows me he isn't used to people questioning him. Whatever he wants from me I don't think it is going to work because I question everything, repeatedly.

"You want to know if I'm just telling you what I have to so you'll do what I want. Okay, that's fair enough I suppose." He takes a deep breath and takes off his glasses so I can see his eyes better. "I am retired. I did work with the military, and other... agencies." He smirks and I can guess which 'other agencies' he's talking about. The one with the three capital letters for a name and it's not the FBI. "I also did some work for some people who could have been looked at as...", he pauses and looks

around like he's searching the bedroom for the word he needs."Assassins."

"You're an assassin." What? The? Fuck?

He rolls his eyes like I'm being crass calling him what he is, "I prefer a free agent."

He takes a card out of his pocket and hands it to me. On it is nothing but an hourglass with a scythe and a handgun over the top of it. I flip it over but the back is blank.

"Assassins have business cards?" I can't keep the sound of incredulity from my voice. Or stop the smile from tipping the corners of my mouth up. This guy is too much. He takes the card out of my hand and puts it away. He's not smiling now.

"My codename is Kronos, the god of time. When people see the card they know they've been marked for death and they've run out of it."

"So you're like Death, a faceless monster who hides behind a mask waiting to strike people down when they least expect it."

"Wow, when you say it like that it takes the entire badass vibe out of it."

I actually laugh out loud at him now. He's so full of himself. If I take this job I am going to love knocking these men down a little. Telling them no every chance I get, being a pain in their asses.

"Why did you not shoot me?" I drag serious eyes up to stare into his. I need to know if I can trust him not to look at me as expendable.

He cups my cheek with his hand before answering me, "Don't ask questions you aren't ready to hear the answers to."

What the hell is he talking about? I want to know why he didn't shoot me like he said he would. It's not like he likes me or something. I was no better than a tissue to him, something to use and toss away.

"In China, they have a myth about someone saving another and how the person is always responsible for that person ever after. People confuse it all the time and so some will tell you it's the person being saved who is in the other one's debt while others say it's the person doing the saving since they take that person's care and concerns on themselves. Either way, you and me, we're responsible for one another. I take my responsibilities very seriously."

Fuck, I guess he did save me. And I kind of saved him? I guess. It doesn't seem like I did a very good job but what I did might have made a difference. I would save him if he needed me to again. I can't really see this man needing to be saved from anything. His eyes track over my face like he's trying to memorize it down to the smallest detail. I've never been looked at the way he is looking at me or with as much intensity in all my life. It's disconcerting and kind of scary.

It's also kind of exciting and new. Maybe having this adventure will help me not miss Lexi so much. Maybe this will be a good thing for me and Lexi. Maybe I'll finally be useful for something other than cleaning messes up and serving people. I look up from under my lashes at the man offering me everything. I have no idea if he's an angel sent to save us or the devil meant to lure me in. Either way, I don't have a lot of other options.

"Yes."

The smile that spreads over his face when I say the word makes me lean towards the latter. I surprised myself by saying yes to him. But I have a feeling that I'm going to be shocking myself a lot while I work for Jim Archer.

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Jim

"So you're not coming home? Because of work?" I shouldn't be listening to her private conversation but fuck it. It's what I do and who I am. In the three months that Libby's been working for me she's done amazing work. Half of the people who we talk to or communicate with would rather do so with her instead of me or the other guys.

As soon as she said yes I went and asked one of my friends about a plot of land near a lake close to his town. He's been on covert missions with us before and he fit in well. I would have recruited him for part of the team but he wanted to go back home and settle down. I couldn't blame the guy for wanting a more peaceful life. He helped out a lot with the purchase of the black site, sending me pictures, telling me who to use to buy the land, and walked through it with me in person. He's a great guy and I'm more than a little happy that he'll be close by in case we ever need anything. Doesn't hurt that he's the deputy for the nearest sheriff's department either.

He also tried to charm the skirt off Libby which did not make me happy at all. Libby though doesn't let anything like a two hundred and thirty-pound guy flirting with her intimidate her. Believe me I've tried and she shuts me down every time. Most women really gush over the whole man of mystery thing that seems to cling to me but Libby couldn't give a shit less who I am or where I've been. All she cares about is doing her job so she can take care of her sister.

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She's become something like a mother to all of the guys though. Hell, even Remy's stopped flirting with her so much and started treating her like she needs to go up on a pedestal. Not me. When I look at her I don't see mother anywhere in the title I want attached to her unless she wants to get kinky with me and then I wouldn't be opposed to calling her momma.

Hell, if she can take Jack's shit and not bat an eyelash she has to be the one. She gives him the most shit of any of the other guys, well besides me. The day she came through our temporary offices and saw all eight of us sitting on the stairs hanging out she's been throwing boy band references at us, which drives Jack mad.

She came through and had to step over me to get inside. "What is this? Nsync? The Backstreet Boys? A comeback tour?" I didn't get the reference but Remy burst out laughing.

"Boy Bands. That's a good one." He still laughs when he hears her call Jack a boy band member.

It did make my week to see her hand over a mission to the six-foot-four dark scary son of a bitch telling him as she gives it to him, "Relax, Boy Band, I got this." Yeah, she's not taking shit from any of us and that's what makes her special.

She's even sat down with me and an architect who runs in the same circles as me and my men to help design the fucking compound we're building as we speak. She's such an integral part of our team now that hearing her sad because of something doesn't feel right. It feels like we should go kill whatever it is so she can be happy again. That's one of the things that made me start listening.

"No, no, I understand, Hon. You go have fun and don't work too hard okay. Take some time to enjoy being eighteen please." I know exactly who is on the phone with her and that means killing someone isn't going to be an option. Lexi. She missed coming home for Thanksgiving because she told her sister that she got a small retail job close to the college. When I checked to make sure she wasn't just blowing her sister off she was, in fact, working. All through Thanksgiving so she could pick up an extra class in spring.

But now she's not coming back for Christmas and I can tell that hurts Libby. Not that she would ever say anything to Lexi about it. No Libby would cut her own hand off before she mentioned how much she misses Lexi or how lonely she is without her.

Alexandria knows that Libby has a new job and that she does translation and office work. She's also aware that next semester is all paid for but I can tell Libby had a huge effect on the kid because she works just as hard as her sister and is twice as determined to succeed. She needs to slow down though. I got her back on this and she doesn't have to work quite as hard as before. Hell, her sister doesn't have to work as hard anymore but she does.

"Love you," what now? Oh yeah, that was meant for her sister and not my old cranky ass. "Bye."

I quietly step away from the doorway but don't miss the huge, sad sigh she lets slip out. Fuck this! I can't stand to hear how sad she is. I don't want to question why it matters so much to me but it does and in my profession, you take action when your gut is telling you to act.

"Liberty," God what a name. I love calling her that even though everyone else calls her Libby. The added fun is it pisses her off. At the sound of my voice saying her name, she turns around to look at me, focusing those big blue eyes on me. "Are you free to work this week?"

She gives me a look like she's suspicious I might have been listening, which means she's good because I was. "Yes, my sister is staying with a friend of hers until the campus opens back up for winter classes. She has to work most of the break."

"What's the name and birthday?"

Her eyes grow round and she just barely keeps her mouth from falling open, "Jesus, Jim, she's just staying on this kid's couch for a couple of days, you don't have to dig up all the dirt you can find on the girl."

"So it is a girl she's staying with? What if this girl has a pervert for a brother? One who happens to be home for Christmas?"

She wheels back around and grabs for a piece of paper. "Beth Martin, and I don't know her birthday but I can ask Lex."

"Don't worry about it, I'll have my guys hack into the school records and find her there."

"Okay but this is the last time." That's a fucking lie. We both know it won't even be close to the last time I go looking for the background and criminal history of everyone around Lex. I've got so many eyes on the kid that if Libby knew about all of them I would probably be in trouble but my new mission is to take care of Libby and the people she loves. And she loves no one more than Lex.

She waits patiently for me to put a call in and run some stuff down. When I step out of the office again it's almost time for her to start packing up. It's just me and her in the office because most of our men have families they want to go home and see. Jack might be lurking around somewhere but I wouldn't know until I call for him. Me and Jack are a lot alike.

Both of us are silent and brooding. Both of us have seen too damned much to be fully human anymore and both of us are loners who work better with no one else around. Or at least I was like that - before Libby.

"Why did you need to know about this week and my availability? Do you need me this week?"

"Actually, I need you to go somewhere with me."

I have asked her to go with me several times now so she doesn't hesitate to tell me yes.

"Good, oh, by the way, we'll be in Russia."

Her smile slips off her face and she goes a little pale. "I...I can't go to Russia."

"Why not?"

"I've never been outside the United States before. Don't I have to have a passport or travel papers or anything?"

"Not where we're going. Don't worry about any of that stuff; it will all be taken care of by the time we are wheels up."

Libby

There is something so exciting about traveling, especially when you haven't had the opportunity to do it. The fact that I am in a whole other country is mind-numbing. All I can think about is how awesome this is. Ace flew us here in a private plane that was generously donated by a person who needed the guys help once upon a time and owed them. For my first time flying it was a pretty cool way to cross the ocean. We landed in Croatia and a car met us to take us to the Zagreb hotel. Fresh snow was lying on the ground and right in front of the hotel ice skaters made their way around a rink. Everything was so beautiful.

"I don't know how to speak this language, Jim."

"You won't have to. We are meeting a man at a restaurant, he speaks Russian. He's a defector from his mother country and a man who can answer some questions for us." We check-in and are lead to a room.

"I thought you said we were going to Russia."

"We are. That is where we will end up after I take what I need from this man."

The porter holds the door open for me and him and he turns to make sure to lock and secure the door behind us. "This room only has one bed, Jim." I look over at the man who brought me here. Since we've been working together he's not been so monotone with me anymore. He even cracked a joke the other day. True it was at Remy's

expense but it was an improvement.

"Very good counting skills, Ms. Anderson. I knew there was a reason I pay you so much."

"Oh cut the shit, Archer. You pay me because you can't do half of what I do by yourself. Now explain."

"This isn't a vacation. The people we are meeting are...dangerous and this way I don't have to worry about them trying to take you to get to me."

His words make me swallow the knot that forms in my throat. Oh my God. I was so caught up in the thrill of going to new places that I forgot the person I am with and the reason I am doing all the traveling. I can totally agree with him about not wanting to be used as a human shield for anyone again. Next time he might just say fuck it and shoot.

"Jim, I don't think I am cut out for this spy shit. I am way too direct and in your face to be of any good to you and I haven't been anywhere. I'll likely end up embarrassing you and letting stuff slip that I shouldn't. What were you thinking bringing me here?"

"I was thinking that you are more than competent to have my back if I need you too. You are loyal and you read people quickly and precisely. You are the best translator I have ever met and you can hold your shit together better than a lot of the men I have gone into battle with. That is what I am thinking, Liberty."

God, I hate when he uses my whole name. He knows it too. The bastard.

"We have a dinner to attend at six. Wear something...nice."

He wants nice I'll give him nice. I thought maybe I might need dresses for wherever

Jim is taking me so I bought some just before we left - with his credit card. It's a business expense after all. I spend a good portion of the evening getting ready for whatever he has planned. I figure one of the reasons he wants me with him is for a distraction so I plan to be the best distraction he could ever ask for.

He's waiting in the lobby when I walk down the front stairs. Seeing his face is payment enough. I made a good call on the dress. It's beaded and long but there are cutaways on either side of my hips, in the front stopping just above my belly button and in the back all the way to the two dimples right above my ass. The top fastens in a choker style collar that wraps around my bare neck. I chose to wear my hair up with wisps of curls coming down on either side of my face which is made up heavier than I normally would. The whole thing is a green that matches his eyes.

I walk by him and make sure I put extra sway in my hips. It takes him a while to stand up so I look over my shoulder at him. "Are you coming?"

My question has his beautiful green eyes growing larger until he finally stands and moves towards me. I might be playing with fire but I just can't help myself where he is concerned. Besides, it's safe because he doesn't want anything to do with me like that.

I rake my eyes down his body before meeting his eyes. He doesn't look so bad himself wearing a black tux. He comes up beside me and whispers low enough so only I can hear. "Tell me you're wearing underwear?"

I move my lips up into a mischievous smirk, "There wasn't enough room."

"You better be glad I have enough C-4 on me to blow up half the nation or you would be in so much trouble right now."

"You have no idea how much trouble I can get into." I walk a little bit ahead of him

and try to steel myself when the heat of his palm on my lower back startles me. The entire time we ride to the restaurant he doesn't say anything just looks at me. His hand doesn't leave my back the entire time he walks us to a table where a large man is sitting. The man looks from Jim to me and back to Jim like there might be a question he is trying to ask Jim without saying the words. "Archer, I expect there is a good reason you wanted to meet with me."

"Always, Lebedinsky." He doesn't actually tell the man why he wants to talk to him which I can tell pisses the man off. His eyes shift to me and linger too long for my liking.

"Who do we have here, Archer? You didn't tell me you were bringing someone with you."

"Eyes on me or I cut them out." The man's eyes fly back to Jim and I have to slow my reaction to his words down. What the fuck?

After considerable silence, the man finally speaks again, "Sit, please." Jim seats me in the chair farthest away from the man. I'm not sure how I am supposed to distract this man when I am so far away from him. "The entertainment for the night is exceptional and a rare talent if I do say so myself."

The lights go down and everyone in the restaurant turns to a stage that has risen out of the floor when food is passed out. A woman is lying on the floor as music starts to play. The woman's body starts pulsing to the rhythm of the music like her body is breathing the music. Her top shimmies as she uses long strong legs to push her body up off the ground. She's dressed in red silks with jewels that sparkle at her hips and on her bra. Her body flows with the music and her hips rise and fall with each beat of the drum.

All the confidence I had when I walked down the hotel stairs is gone. I don't have

what it takes to play when this woman is in the room. She is beautiful and all eyes are glued to her as she bends and shakes across the floor of the stage. Her body is full and curvy while still being lithe. Her hair is as dark as midnight and her face is stunning with high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. I peek to my side and see Jim's full attention riveted on her.

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This is the type of woman that would make him take notice of her, someone strong and mysterious that can ooze sexuality. All I can think about is Mata Hara when I look at the woman on the stage. She is someone who would be able to keep a man like Jim's attention from straying. "If you like her I could work something out where you could meet her, Archer."

My stomach turns at the thought of Jim saying yes to the big Russian. I sit straight-backed and don't let on that I am disgusted by how easy this man barter out his 'star performer'.

"I'm good."

"Are you sure? We could always talk a one-night trade." The man's eyes run over me again. Normally I would get up to leave putting distance between myself and the douche bag that thinks he can have whatever he wants but I can't do that in this situation. So like before I sit stiffly waiting for what Jim is going to say.

"What did I tell you about looking, Lebedinsky?"

His hand finds my thigh under the table and I jolt a little bit. I wasn't expecting him to touch me. I don't understand why he is. It's not like the Russian can see under the table so why would Jim try to act all...what, territorial? Possessive?

The woman has come off the stage and is slowly dancing around the room. She dances over to where Jim is sitting and bends over backwards so low I think her boobs might fall out of her top. She grins at him before taking a pitcher off the table and pouring it into a waiting glass right in front of him. She reaches for him but he

leans out of her reach and looking pissed as hell. I wonder what she sees when she looks at him. What he lets her see? Is he flirting back with her by playing hard to get.

The big man speaks in Russian. I don't think he knows I can understand him. Jim squeezes my thigh and I lean closer to him. I don't really want to tell him what was said but that is one of the reasons I am here after all. "He says she choose you to offer her 'bounty' to. It is a custom that the man accept what is being offered to him."

The Russian laughs when he realizes I can understand him and have translated for Jim. He gets a kick out of the fact I can tell they are talking about Jim spending the night with this woman. I'm not sure if it is because he thinks it will make me jealous but if so he has read the situation all wrong. Jim's eyes slide to the man's. If looks could kill the man would be dead right now.

"It is a good thing I'm more than a man, isn't it." There are hidden undercurrents here that I can't begin to understand.

Something comes over me and before I can stop myself I use the tips of my fingers to push against the glass causing it to tilt and fall over sending wine running along the white table cloth. Jim watches as the red seeps into the linen before he turns to Lebedinsky.

Lebedinsky's eyes narrow on me and I think for the first time he might not see me as someone he wants to fuck for the night. I'm not sure what was in the wine but whatever it was he really, really wanted Jim to drink it if the go-to-hell look he is shooting me is any indication. Jim picks up on it too. His mood changes to something that makes the whole restaurant grow colder. Waiters hurry over to take care of the mess I made as the woman from the stage comes out of the back in a stunning white dress that doesn't hide any of her curves.

The dancer that was all hips and rhythm comes over to sit beside Lebedinsky. The

way they are together I think they are more than boss and performer but I keep my mouth shut. I try to hold in the cattiness that wants to crop up because that isn't the kind of woman I am and I have no reason for being catty in the first place. Jim isn't mine. We aren't together and I can't be jealous of another woman wanting him. He is beautiful in a dangerous sort of way and some women like sleeping with tigers, or snakes.

Comparing the two of us would be like comparing a porn star to the lady's choir director at a Sunday church service. Her dark eyes all but fuck him across the table. Hell by the end of dinner I might need an after-sex cigarette if that is still a thing people do. She reaches her arm out to walk her hand closer to him on sharp red nails that look lethal. I could maybe use my heels to stab someone since all my nails are unpainted and short.

I reach across the table to snag a grape that has fallen off the vine. I tend to fidget and I can't fidget here. So I put all of the fidgets into the grape, biting it in half and using my teeth to remove the skin from the second half of it before putting that into my mouth. I become aware of the quiet first. When I look up everyone's eyes are on me and Jim's hand is squeezing my thigh again. The looks range from shocked to pissed.

"Why is everyone looking at me?" I whisper as low as I can because the last thing I want is for the goddess sitting at the end of the table to realize I messed something up. God I hope I didn't embarrass him or make a social faux pas that is going to bring him trouble.

Jim's eyes glitter behind his glasses before he answers me, "Because you just tongue fucked a grape."

I try hard to school my features so his words don't let anyone else know how surprised I am. Note to self: don't fidget with your food, especially not in front of other people. Mata Hara is shooting me looks to kill and Lebedinsky sits forward

staring at Jim.

"We can make a trade. You want the name." His eyes slide over to me, "And I want something from you."

Fuck! I'm not sure how I got myself into this mess. Jim really wants the name of the man who forced his men to retire and then tried to kill them. He wants it badly. Bad enough to give me to a big-ass Russian? Probably.

Jim laughs and sits forward with his hands steeped in front of him. "I could just wait until you leave. Take out your guards - there are five of them here tonight if I'm counting right," he slides his eyes over to the woman sitting beside the Russian, "and your entertainment for the night and take what I want from you. That will leave me hours to play with you."

The man turns ashen and looks around like he might be checking on where all the guards are. He motions for one of the waiters to come over to him before taking a piece of paper from him and writing something on it. He slides it over to Jim. Jim puts his palm over it but when he pulls away there is a card lying on the table in the paper's place - like some magic trick that has the whole table going quiet. It's the same one he showed me months ago with his symbol on it.

"See you around, Lebedinsky." He stands and helps me from my chair.

"But I gave you what you wanted." The Russian looks like he is trying to launch a defense to spare his life. Sweat breaks out on his forehead and he's so white he could be a ghost. Every person at his table is quiet and staring at him like he just found out he had the bubonic plague. "I gave you the name."

Jim leans over the table and gets right in the man's face. "And I told you not to look at my woman."

He straightens and moves back to me. His hand drops to my hip. I had to have heard him wrong - right?

"I didn't know she was yours. I mean that you were, um...," Jim turns to stare him down. "If I had known she...I wouldn't have..."

"And now you never will again."

He leads me to the front of the restaurant and the waiting car. So much has happened that I have to digest it makes my head spin. I don't think I'm ready to live the life of a spy if everyone around you knows things you don't. How the hell are you supposed to find them out? What the hell is going on with Jim? Surely it's him just being protective of one of his 'people'. Once we are in the car I don't have the courage to ask him about any of the things said or done tonight. Sometimes the less you understand the better.

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Libby

Despite what Jim said about wanting to keep me close he left in the middle of the night last night. I hate that my mind goes to the mystery woman who might have warmed his bed while he was gone. The last thing I need is a complication - especially one as big as Jim. One, no matter how hot I think he is I am not acting on it. I need this job. Lexi needs this job. Two, Jim is way out of my league in every way possible. There are days I feel kind of confident and I can joke and pretend to be able to take on all of these men but there are days where I'm totally outnumbered and outsmarted also. Those are the times I have to remind myself of why I am involved with any of these men at all. Not because I am part of their team, or that I have any significance to their cause. I'm here because I can translate well and they most likely felt sorry for me.

First thing in the morning, Jim is packing us up and we are flying into Russia. "Tonight we'll be going to a nightclub. Wear something short and black." It is the only two sentences he says to me as he makes his way up to the front of the plane to talk to Ace and Jack who met us at the airfield when we boarded. I put in a call to Lexi to make sure she is doing alright.

I can't help but think she would love to be doing all of this, the travel, the clubs and restaurants, and especially the mental mind games. I get ready for the night but don't put as much time or care into my appearance this time. It's a club, it's not going to be lit like a restaurant or have the same people in it. I don't think.

Jim scares the crap out of me when he sneaks up behind me as I am finishing up. Guess this time he isn't going to be waiting down in the lobby. His hands slip around my neck and for just a second I think I might have pushed him to far but I can't think of how. Not right now anyway. His hands slide down to my bare back as he drags his fingers along the line of the silk ribbon holding my dress together. It doesn't have a back just the ribbon zigzagging back and forth.

"You're not wearing underwear again." My eyes search for his in the mirror. He's different tonight. He isn't wearing his glasses and is in all black. Something else is different about him but I can't put my finger on it. He seems...bigger than he was before. It's stupid but I swear he looks broader and taller.

"I have panties on. This time."

"Hmm," He opens a box behind me, "You're also going to have to wear this."

"What is it?" I turn in my chair and stare down at the box. Inside on the soft blue velvet is a silver band. He picks it up and puts it around my neck. The cold of the metal lies heavy against my skin even if the necklace isn't very big. It's not adorned with anything and has the same width as one of my fingers and from it hangs an 'O' ring. Off the ring hangs a small, diamond hourglass. I don't see how he fastens it and when I look I can't find a place to take it off.

"It's...a way for the people at this club to know to leave you alone." For just a second I think he is going to reach out to touch my face but Jack comes in. His eyes flash to the necklace around my throat and it causes him to raise his eyebrows at Jim.

"Don't start with me Thorn. I'm in no mood."

"Just find it all interesting, is all." I turn back and finish getting ready. I don't understand what he is talking about so I focus on the things I do have control of. Jim

walks into the next room leaving me with Jack. I meet his eyes in the mirror very similar to the way I did Jim's. "You have no idea do you?"

"Listen, New Kids on the Block, I have no idea what you're going on about nor do I want to. I just want to do my job and get my paycheck so I can put my kid sister through school." Out of all the men, Jack is the one most like Jim. Dark and broody, they have a fuck off vibe that either sends a person running or makes someone want to test just how dangerous they are. Unlike Jim I don't have the same drive to push Jack.

"Why don't you ask Jim about what's around your neck and see what he says."

"He said that it was a way to make sure I'm left alone at the club we're going to."

He gives me a grin and moves closer. "You know anything about where you're going tonight?" I shake my head and give him a look that clearly says I am in no mood to be fucked with. "Do you know anything about BDSM? Because you just got collared which means Jim owns you."

He's fucking with me. He has to be, right. Right? "Jim!"

Jim comes back in and looks between me and Jack. A sinking feeling comes over me like hot water being poured on my head. Jack might be right. Jim's eyes come back to mine and I am very glad that I am sitting down. "You just had to tell her didn't you?"

"You don't do something that big and not tell a person. That's some shit the Brothers would do. Need I remind you that we are not that bad - yet?"

"Need I remind you that I am their fucking boss as I am yours? I don't need my motives questioned or actions doubted. I can't divide my time protecting my translator and trying to lift the book we need."

"Somebody better tell me what the fuck is going on before I go in somewhere and get blindsided." I look over at Jim, "What the hell is this thing around my neck and why did you put it on me?"

Jim doesn't respond right away. In fact, we engage in an epic stare down and I start to wonder if he's going to answer me at all. Finally, he does, "The place we are going tonight is a BDSM club owned by a Russian who put out the hit on me. He has a book with him at all times with the names of the people he does business with. In that book is the man who hired him to try to kill me, the same man who caused my team to retire and who is hunting them down now. I want that book. I want that name."

I understand his want to find out who is after him and the men. I really do but I don't see what that has to do with the collar.

"The collar is for others, so they will leave you the fuck alone. I underestimated your attraction when I asked you to be my translator." Wow, I'm not sure where to even go with that statement there is so much to unpack. The glaring statement there is that he didn't think others would look at me and see someone desirable. Good to know nothing has changed where Jim is concerned. He still wants nothing to do with my ass. "The collar stays on and you stay safe. These men don't know me as Archer the government secret agent. They know me as Kronos, an assassin who would just as likely kill them where they sit than have to talk to them. These men don't play around and they won't take no for an answer but they won't lay a finger on you if you wear my mark." He flicks the hourglass. "Don't take it off, Libby."

The mixed messages I'm picking up from him are giving me fucking mental whiplash. Jack looks like he isn't buying any of it. I think I hear Jack mutter under his breath.

"Pussy."

Once at the club Jim gives me further information that would have been good to have before I stepped foot in the dark scary world of underground BDSM clubs. "Don't look anyone in the eyes, don't agree to anything, and don't leave my side."

The club is done in almost all black with accents of red and orange. The walls are designed to look like the walls of a cave. Jim seems to know just where to go because he doesn't dally on the dance floor. Instead he walks to the VIP section and grunts at one of the guards whose eyes become three times bigger when he looks up and recognizes who it is.

He lets Jim behind the rope and we walk up a set of stairs that aren't lit at all. There are several people lounging on couches drinking. I look over and spot one man getting a blow job from a half-dressed woman who seems to be wearing a collar too - only hers is connected to a leash.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

A Russian is sitting in the middle of the room with two women slithering on top of him. When he sees us he cusses in Russian.

"Oh, Fuck!" I translate without Jim having to ask me to.

"Yeah, I know that one." His eyes are intense when they look back at me, "I get it a lot."

The Russian stands and eyes Jim like maybe he might be something lethal set loose in the club. "Kronos, why are you gracing us with your presence tonight?"

"It's rude to not ask us to sit with you, Alexabdrov." His voice drips ice and the man I am used to working for is gone. I don't know who this man is but he is scary as fuck. I met him briefly when he did the card trick at the restaurant yesterday but it is so much more now. A shadow behind me makes me turn slightly to find Jack standing behind us. I didn't realize he was coming in with us and didn't see him until just now. I wonder if Dante is here too. Lurking somewhere in the darkness.

"Please sit. I see you brought your own entertainment for the night." Jim walks closer and sits across from the man when I move to sit next to him he pulls me down into his lap. There is a silent battle of wills between us for all of two seconds before those cold green eyes turn to me and he gives a head shake. Jack doesn't sit instead he stands behind us with his hands crossed in front of him. "Are you here to play? Tonight is oral night."

I turn my head and tilt it down so I can use Jim's shoulder to hide how surprised I am at this man's words. That explains the blow job going on over near the door and why

the two women are crawling on him. Jim turns his head slightly so his lips are close to my cheek. "Stay exactly where you are unless I move you, yes."

It isn't a question but I give him a nod just to show him I understand. The Russian speaks in his language to a woman standing beside him. I move my mouth closer to Jim and whisper what I have to tell him, "He's ordering drinks for everyone." One of his men laugh and start speaking, "The man that is laughing says Americans can't hold their liquor and asking the big guy in charge if he's trying to get you drunk before he kills you."

The man in charge pales and tells the other guy to shut the fuck up that this is no normal man but Kronos. He looks to Jim, "He's new." He laughs but it doesn't reach his eyes or sound real at all.

Jim leans back and I move my hands down to keep myself from falling off his lap. I can't stop the gasp that falls out of my mouth when I feel his gun he's wearing under his coat and the one he has strapped to his back under his shirt. Damn it, the last thing I want is for the man sitting in front of us to pay any attention to me at all. He isn't like the guy at the restaurant. This guy oozes evil and I don't think a lot of good things happen for people who are around him for very long. Jim slides his eyes over to me but before I can figure out what he is trying to tell me he slides them back to the man.

"I came for information, Alexandrov."

"Ah, yes I heard that you had some trouble back in the summer. I don't know anything about that. The way I heard it you already handled the men who were hired to kill you."

"That's the problem, there were only two of them and I wasn't done."

Libby

I roll my lips over my teeth to keep from giggling like an idiot. This Jim has a way of saying things that are smart assed as hell but he delivers it like it's nothing which makes it kind of funny. Apparently, I am the only one who feels that way though because everyone else looks like they might be holding their breath.

"I'm sorry to tell you, I don't have any information to give you."

Jim sits back further still and starts playing with my earring. When I look those green eyes are focused on me. "That's too bad, Alexandrov. I would have paid handsomely for just a name."

The atmosphere in the club is changing and more people seem to be hitting their knees. I look up and see the people around us starting to really get into the theme of the party. One man is eating a woman like she is covered in candy. Men are standing, sitting, or leaning against a wall and all have their pants undone. Women are sucking on their knees, or lying on their backs or standing while someone else fucks them from behind.

I hate it but I squirm in Jim's lap at all the sex going on around me. The Russian asks Jim if he is going to participate. I'm not sure if he is asking Jim to join him with his two women or if he is asking him if...yeah, that isn't going to happen. Libby doesn't do public sex, especially when she hasn't done sex privately first.

One of the men in the room is staring at me but I don't stare back. He's got a lady on his dick so I don't know why he keeps looking over at me. Jim runs his hand up my

thigh until it disappears under my dress causing me to jump and yelp a little bit.

"Your woman seems nervous, Kronos." My eyes flash to his with a look of apology. I told him this would happen. No one is going to believe that me and him are together or that I am used to being in places like this. "Is this her first time?"

I stiffen in his arms. Jim laughs but it doesn't hold any warmth, "That's funny." Jim plunges his hand in my hair and pulls me closer, "Straddle me. Now."

He doesn't have to ask twice. I do it because the last thing I want is for someone to think that we aren't together. I'll think about how weird it is to have my thighs wrapped around my boss's hips later when I don't feel like I'm at a feeding frenzy where everyone else is a shark and I'm the latest catch.

Shit, I should have worn pants. I knew I should have worn pants tonight. My head is tucked in Jim's neck so it takes me a while to figure out what is going on. When I pull back and look up there is a fine mist of something like water being sprayed out from what must be the water sprinkler system. I look up and notice one of them is very close to us. My heart is beating hard because I don't have a clue what is being sprayed out.

Jim looks up to where I am looking. "It's cocaine."

I'm pretty sure my eyes are going to bulge out of my head and go rolling off without me and he says it so casually like it is just tap water. He once again takes the back of my head and holds me still so he can move his lips closer to my face. "Duck your head and try not to breathe too much of it in."

"What about you?"

The smile that stretches slowly across his face is full of naughtiness. "I've been

trained so that none of this affects me."

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

Cocaine doesn't affect him anymore. He might as well have told me he was a fucking green alien. "Jack too?"

His eyes narrow on me, "How about you just worry about me since it's me you're sitting on."

I have to take a deep breath because I think I'm feeling the effects of the cocaine. Yeah, I know breathing more of the stuff in isn't going to help anything but I swear I can't help myself and my body is starting to be super alert to what is going on around me. Which is all sex-related.

I turn my head and see the Russian getting his cock sucked by one of the women with him while the other is eating her.

"Eyes on me, Beautiful." Did he just call me beautiful? He pulls my face closer and for just a minute I think he is going to kiss me but instead of taking my lips he pulls my head back and kisses my throat. I have no idea what the hell is happening. This is not...um, right. It's not right to be so turned on by your boss. But when he nuzzles into my neck all I want to do is wrap my arms around him and lean my head back further so he can get closer.

The lights are brighter and the music is so loud that it throbs throughout my body. A body that is currently wrapped around Jim. He pulls back from me so he can look at my face as his hands lower to the globes of my ass and pulls me closer. Oh holy fuck, I think he has a shotgun down his pants. I wiggle on it just to make sure it isn't a stick of dynamite or something before he pushes and pulls me down on it.

So big. "I don't know how I would ever be able to fuck something that big."

His beautiful green eyes start twinkling and I think I might have said that out loud instead of in my head. His hands knead my cheeks causing the thong I'm wearing to push further inside of my outer lips. The thong – which is soaked by the way - is never going to be right again.

Jim starts rocking me back and forth causing amazing sensations to course through my body. Every time he moves my hips back and forth I can feel him hit...everything. So many nerves, so many feelings pooling in between my legs and causing me to move on my own to chase those feelings down.

My hands go to his face to touch his cheeks and caress his face. To have this man under the tips of my fingers is like having lightning in a bottle. "So dangerous."

"You don't have to be afraid though. Never." He pulls one of my hands closer to his mouth and bites down on the fleshy part of my palm. The sting is there but he doesn't do it hard enough to hurt me, showing me he'll never hurt me. Fuck that's sexy.

His other hand is still working my hips over his hard-on. I slide the hand he bit into his hair and pull him closer. His tongue runs between the valley of my breasts and causes me to cry out. My nipples harden and my breasts grow tender. "You should've worn a bra. Then I could be sucking these right now."

"What's stopping you from doing it?" I cannot believe I just ask my boss why he isn't going to suck on my tits. What the hell is wrong with me? But the thought of those soft, pillowy lips wrapping around my hard nipple has me dancing closer and moving harder.

"Because if I sucked you everyone would be able to see them when my mouth wasn't on them."

"So?" I still don't see the problem.

"And then I would have to kill everyone in this club, innocent or not."

"Oh," I give him a small smile before continuing, "I like when you threaten people because of me." I pull back and try to think through that statement. "I shouldn't have said that." I shouldn't but I can't think why that would be such a bad thing to tell him, to let him know. Especially when he smiles at me with those sexy lips of his.

"I'm going to get you off, baby girl and then I'm going to kill that assfuck who has been staring at you all night - and maybe the woman with him. Haven't decided yet."

I gasp. How did he know? His back has been to the guy this entire time. He pushes my thong out of the way at the same time he grabs my hair and yanks my head back, lowering his mouth to mine. His fingers lightly rub over my furled asshole at the same time my bare pussy slides across his pants-covered cock and I let go.

I cry out but his mouth is over mine so no one can hear me shout his name. My body shuddering in his arms is the last feeling I have before he moves me to the side, his gun already in his hand. He shoots the guy who stares and pops his friend who comes to help. He pulls out a gun from his other side and aims it at the big Russian who holds one of the women in front of him as a human shield.

The guy's eyes slide over to me as he pulls his own weapon but Jim is already shooting the woman and the guy. They both fall to the ground, her on top of him. Wow! Jim really is an asshole who would shoot the human shield without blinking. Of course in this instance, I'm alright with that since the guy was going to shoot me if Jim hadn't shot him first. I sink down on my hands and knees and crawl over to the two dead people, not that these are the only two. The club seems to be filling up with corpses quickly because Jack is shooting now too. He throws a knife at some guy's head and it sticks in his forehead.

I push the woman off the big guy and start searching his pockets. More people come running up the stairs with weapons and the sense of urgency is making me sweat. Or maybe it's just the lights in the club. When my hand closes over the spine of what I was looking for I smile but then my head is yanked back and I am staring up into mad eyes.

"Archer, I have your woman." The man called Jim by his last name and not the assassin moniker. That can't be good. Jim turns his head after snapping the neck of the man he was fighting with. I try to pull away from the man but he holds me tighter causing pain to bloom along the places he is pulling my hair. I wince and try again. "Stop moving bitch."

Jim starts walking toward the man who has me and along the way Jack and Dante come up behind and slightly to the side of him with guns raised. He shoots one man in the fucking head and doesn't even look to see if he killed him or not or even who he shot. The next man who gets in his way he smacks across the face before shooting him in the chest - twice. The man who has me is backing up now trying to make it to the stairs. There is no way in hell I am going with this guy.

I stomp down on his foot with my heel and the guy cries out. Jim reaches for him over my head and grabs the man by the neck. Not the way you would someone you intend to choke but with curled fingers like an animal who intends to rip out a person's throat. I sink down to the ground as Jim pulls out a knife and makes a sharp movement from one end of the guy to the other except the knife gets stuck halfway up and Jim is left to watch the life drain out of the man's eyes as parts of him start to fall out. I turn my head not wanting to see any of that. I can't believe I started to see it before I stopped looking. Hands land on me and I jump but when I look up I look into green pools.

"Up!" I try to find my feet but I can't get them to work for me so Jim just lifts me and carries me down the body-littered staircase and through the club. Jack and Dante are

still shooting occasionally and most of the club cleared out when they first heard the gunshots. All the energy I felt, the adrenaline that was pumping through my body has stopped and I feel myself start to crash.

"The book." I push it into his hands. At least I hope it is his hands as the book is taken from my curled-up fingers where I was clutching it tightly. Hands are the only thing I can feel as I am being moved. Too many to be just Jim's. I feel a slight pinch in the bend of my arm and then everything goes blissfully dark.

The next thing I know I'm jolting upright in a big ass bed and I don't have any clothes on. This is not my apartment, not my bed, and not good.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

Jim

She's trying to kill me. That thing with the grape, dry humping me in the nightclub, and now she's sitting up in my bed letting the sheet I covered her with fall to her waist. She sees what is about to happen and makes a grab for it but not before I get a quick glimpse of the finest set of breasts on Earth. Not that this is the first time I've seen them - or that she's been naked in my bed for that matter.

I stayed with her all night waiting for her to wake up. We got on a plane and got the hell out of the country. I carried her into the house and up to my room. No way was I letting anyone else around her. She sleepily started taking off her dress as soon as she felt the cool sheets at her back and I helped her so she could be comfortable. I was torn for all of two seconds and then I took my cock out and relieved myself of all the built-up frustration of not being able to fuck her when I had her across my lap in the club. Seeing my seed splash across her belly and thighs helped a little but the tension that is always there with Libby is back.

Her eyes find me finally. There's fear in them, she's scared about what happened. Or what might have happened. Also, worry and self-loathing are present but there isn't regret. Anywhere.

"Wh...what happened? I can't remember. I...don't remember anything after the club and now I'm naked. In a bed."

"Calm down. You're safe." For now. The only thing she is wearing is my collar that I refused to take off so she might not be so safe for very long.

"All I can remember, like the last thing I remember is...hands, touching me."

"I can tell you that the only person touching you was me and will be only me." Something settles behind her eyes. She's not opposed to me being the only person allowed to touch her. I think that's a win. "You might have been feeling the guys helping me put you in the car as we drove back to the airfield but I can assure you they didn't touch anywhere I would kill a man over."

I'm still not happy I had to have their help putting her in the car but she was freaking out and I needed to calm her ass down. I didn't want anybody else to do it so they held onto her until I got the sedative ready. I raise a bottle of water to my lips and take a drink noting how Libby's eyes follow my movements the entire time.

I hand it to her after I've drunk from it. Yeah, I know I'm a bastard but I don't care. She will eat my food, drink after me, and if I have my way sleep in my bed every night of her life and be my wife. I don't think she's ready to hear all of this. Libby is extremely independent - something I love about her - so going in stealthily might be the best plan.

"Why am I naked?"

Shit. I don't have an answer for that.

"Jim, why am I naked? When exactly did I get this way?" Ah, she's worried about someone seeing what is only mine to see.

"I thought you might be more comfortable this way. The drugs make your core temperature rise high fast. By the time we got home your dress was soaked. You'll need to drink lots of water today to flush your system." I nudge her hand with the bottle in it and watch as she takes a drink. Better she think it me that wanted her bare for me than the fact that she wanted more of what I offered in the club.

Libby's not ready to admit that she trusts me with her life just yet but she will. She'll learn that for her I would set the world on fire and all because she asked me to. Better tell her that slowly. She'll need time to let the fact she controls one of the most dangerous men in the world sink in.

She's knocked back more than half the bottle when a knock on the door makes her stop and look at me. Her eyes are big and round but again she gives me that trust when she looks to me for protection from whatever is on the other side of the door.

"They won't come in unless I tell them to." I sit back and cross my leg over my knee before I ask louder, "What is it?"

"Got her clothes, boss." I wait. They wouldn't come to my door if there wasn't something that happened. "I, uh, need to talk to you about something else though."

There it is. Something raised the hackles of the two men I sent to pick up Libby's clothes. Duncan and Dante wouldn't just stand out in the hall for shits and giggles or interrupt me when I am in my bedroom with my woman. I give her a long look before answering Duncan. "Meet me in my office."

"Yes, sir."

I move finally to walk across the room. She watches me the entire time. I like her eyes on me. I don't know what it says about me, a man who is a ghost, being glad that this woman can't seem to take her eyes off of me but I'm just about sick of fighting it too. I'll give her another two weeks to make peace with the fact that she is mine but then I will be coming for her.

I open the door and pick up the clothing the men placed on a hallway table before leaving for my office. I move the clothes to a chair before turning and looking at her. I walk back over to run my finger down her cheek. I can't stop myself. It pisses me

off at the same time it thrills me. I don't want to be controlled by anything – thus the tolerance for street drugs that each of the men have built up. At the same time, she is the only time I feel alive unless I am taking a life. Maybe she's my last chance at humanity, the last sliver of a heart, I have left.

I turn from her and walk out the door before I push her back and join her in the bed she's sitting on. Good thing fate gave it to her, she'll keep it safe, keep it alive while I make sure no one will ever touch her. I would fight Death to keep her safe and close to me. Given the fact he's on my payroll, I doubt I'll have to go that far. It's good to be the one calling the shots.

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Libby

I step into my apartment and can tell something's not right. Everything is in the right place but it feels off somehow. Maybe I'm still reeling over the fact I woke up naked in my boss's bed after spending the night dry humping him to orgasm and stealing a book of names from a Russian gangster that could have me destroyed in a finger snap if Jim hadn't already killed him. Yeah, I got a lot to unpack and the least of it is my suitcase from the trip.

Next time I'll just stay home if this is a typical business trip with Jim. More people got killed in this business trip than in a natural disaster and I didn't get to ice skate once. The thing that is really bothering me is that Jim stayed in his office the entire day. He didn't come out for lunch which most of us try to do together in the dining room downstairs. He didn't say good night to me when I told him I was leaving and when we did talk his answers were one word and monotone again.

Glad to see everything is back to normal, sheesh. He said the cocaine didn't affect him but clearly, something did because he was a much nicer person when I was high. Besides the fact he shot up a nightclub and killed twenty or thirty people. I unzip the pencil skirt I wore today and let it fall to the floor. I walk to the bathroom and pull my panties off along with my shirt and bra, throwing them into the hamper sitting by the sink.

I found out today that he went back to the restaurant from Croatia. Not to rendezvous with Super Hips either. He killed the man and her from what the papers are saying. Although I'm not sure why we have a Croatian newspaper just lying around, I wasn't going to not read it when it was left lying out. The papers assumed that the woman killed him and then shot herself but with Jim who knows the order things happened in. He was gone all night so he had some time to play around if he wanted to.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

God, listen to me. I so need a vacation and I've only been working for him for four months. I start to take off my make-up when a knock makes me stop and reach for the silk robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door. I tie the belt tight as I move towards the door. The knock comes again and a small hint of fear creeps in. I still have psycho-ex to deal with along with making sure Lex has a great college year and taking care of eight men.

"Open the door, Liberty." Oh shit. I walk faster to keep him from knocking again. He must have been a cop in a past life to be able to beat on a door loud enough to let the person inside know you mean business.

On the other side of the door is a pissed-off Jim in a black tee that looks like it is going to give at any minute. Good Lord, the man is ripped. I'm so used to seeing him in dress shirts and jackets. Even at the club, he wore a black dress shirt. I had no idea his arms looked so...large that they would stretch the sleeves of a t-shirt beyond what it could hold. The one time I saw his bare chest it wasn't long enough for me to truly appreciate his body.

He waits for me to pull my attention back up to his eyes before he speaks again. "We need to talk."

Oh shit! What have I done now?

I hold the door open wider so he can step into my tiny apartment. Is this about the Croatian newspaper? Was I not supposed to read it?

"What the hell do you think you're doing not telling me the truth?" He doesn't sit but

turns on me as soon as I shut and lock the door.

"I never lied to you. The paper was lying on the bench out front, anyone could read it."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? What are you talking about?" Good Lord, he's lost his mind.

He hands me papers and my stomach starts to sink. It's the restraining order I got on the guy from the dating app.

I try to hand him back the papers but he's got his arms folded over one another and won't take them back. "This doesn't concern work."

"The fuck it doesn't." He spins around, "Don't you think this is something you should have told one of us about?"

"No! It happened before I started working for you. It's done. There is nothing more to say about it."

"Then why the hell did my men come to your place to pick up more clothes for you and find your fucking door standing open?" He reaches inside the pocket of his jeans and hands me something. It's a note written on the back of a receipt I left lying around my place. A receipt for a green evening gown and matching heels. I flip it over to read what was written. In big black marks, the note starts with the word whore.

Cheating whore.

You think you can cheat on me and not be punished for it.

When I find you I'm going to make sure you know who you belong to.

"This was in my apartment?"

"Yeah, it was." Okay, so I guess him threatening me might be of some concern to the people I work for but not enough to cause all the fuss Jim is causing.

I'm much more worried about Lexi who might have come home at the wrong time and been caught up in my drama. "Lexi?"

He looks like I've slapped him, "God damn it, woman! Are you really telling me the first thing you worry about is whether your kid sister might find out what you do when she goes off to college?"

"No, the first thing I think about is her safety."

He looks like he is about to have a heart attack at my words. "The kid didn't come home for Christmas, Libby. I don't think she is going to pop a surprise visit on you and find your stalker in your place instead of you."

My temper flares and even though I try to breathe through the anger what he said hurt, "Don't you talk about my sister like that? You have no right..."

"I have every right when I'm the man helping you raise her."

Now I might be the one having the heart attack because I can feel my blood pressure rising. "Help me raise her? Help me raise her? Really, I must have been looking the other way when you dried her eyes when a boy from school broke her heart, or when she was an emotionally unstable orphan who didn't want anyone around her after

losing mom and dad because I can't remember you being there."

He starts to say something but instead turns and walks across the room before turning back around to me, "You don't have to do it by yourself anymore and if I had known about you I would have helped then."

"I don't want anybody to help me!" Both of us are on the verge of shouting and I can only imagine what the neighbors are thinking right now. "I don't want your help with Lex. I don't want your help with this." I wave the paper in the air, "And I damn sure don't want or need your help with my life!"

I can tell I pushed too far a second before he comes over the couch for me. I spin around and high tail it to the bathroom but he stops me. He pulls me around right as I step over the threshold. "You might not want my help but you've got it and you will use it when it comes to protecting yourself. I'm sick and tired of you putting everyone else before you. It stops now, Libby."

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

I yank my arm out of his hold, "You don't get to tell me what to do? I'm not one of your men to boss around, Jim. You have no control over me or my life outside of work and this thing is none of your business."

"You're so fucking wrong, Liberty. You haven't got a fucking clue just how wrong you are." He looks serious as fuck and I don't think he's talking about helping me put my sister through college or take care of a fucked up ex.

"Yeah, why don't you show me! If you can."

I'm pushed up against the door before I can think of why it's a bad reason to kiss my boss, his lips on mine and his tongue asking permission to come inside. I kiss him back for just a second. For just a second, I'm not Lexi's sister or her guardian; I'm not the house mother for all eight men I work with. For just a second, I'm that eighteen-year-old who's excited and thrilled that I can kiss a boy I like.

For just a second. And then I allow reality to crash back down around me. I push him knowing the only reason he backs up is because he can tell I want him to. I couldn't really push him off of me if he didn't want to move. Normally that would scare the hell out of me, to be alone with a much larger man who wants to do naughty things with me but Jim is different. Jim has always been different.

I can't ever be that eighteen-year-old carefree girl again and I have to remember that. I have to...to make sure what's left of my heart after my parents' car wreck is safe and protected.

"I quit."

His eyebrow raises at my two words, "What did you just say?"

"I...quit. I can't...," I shake my head but can't go on. The last thing I need is for him to see how hard this is for me. "You need to leave. Now." I point to the door even as my heart breaks. Guess I wasn't careful enough with my heart after all.

"No." His one-word response takes me so far back that all I can do for a second is stare at him with my mouth hanging open in shock.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said no. The only reason you're kicking me out is that you're scared. You're afraid. And I'm not going to let your fear dictate our lives so - no."

My hand comes up and I've slapped him before I can talk myself into a better solution to get rid of Jim. What's worse is I try to slap him a second time before he is holding tight to my wrist and pulling me into his arms back to front. I try to head butt him but I'm not nearly tall enough. Fucker grew another three inches and he isn't wearing his glasses. I should've known something was up. It always is when Jim doesn't have his glasses on.

I step down on his foot but I'm barefooted and it doesn't really do much damage except to my soft sole. By the time he has me pinned to the floor both of us are sweaty and flushed. Both of my wrists are in each of his hands and his lower half is pushing me down keeping me from moving an inch.

"You son of a bitch." I will not do this. I promise I won't.

He moves so that one of his hands is holding both of my wrists as he takes me by the chin and forces me to look at him. "What are you so afraid of, Libby? I've seen you fight off a man twice your size, maybe three times bigger. Hell, you're fighting with

me. So what is it, Libby? What are you scared of?"

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Libby

I will not cry in front of this asshole. I damn sure will not confide in him. His green eyes rake over my face and I swear he sees through me.

"Is it me?" He's so smug, thinking he knows what I am feeling or thinking. He's too used to knowing everything. "Are you afraid of getting too close to me?"

My mouth falls open and the gasp I take is out before I can stop it. Fuck!

"Are you afraid you might fall in love with me? Scared I'll leave? Talk to me."

He's too close for comfort so I do what I'm good at. I lash out. I snap my head and nail him right in the mouth. He doesn't let me go or back away. Instead, his tongue comes out to lick away the blood from his busted lip and he grins. His eyes heating like he might just like the pain.

"You want to make me bleed, baby? You want to put me through it, cause me pain? Go for it. I'm not letting you go and you're not running away." Those damned green eyes of his change turning more towards the predator he was in the club. "You need time, I'll give you time but don't ever say you're going to leave." He moves close so that his breath fans across my face. "Or so help me, I'll keep your ass tied to a chair or the bed until you agree to stay with me."

He leans down for a kiss but I turn my head. Again he gives me that cocky ass smile

that tells me he's not going to be stopped and licks me. He fucking licks me! "You finally met someone who isn't going to take shit from you, little girl. So go ahead and kick and hit and throw a fit. It will just make what comes next so much more rewarding."

I give him a sound that is somewhere between indignant Bronte heroine and Miss. Piggy. Damn it. His lips find mine and before I realize what I'm doing I'm not only kissing him back but my arms and legs are wrapping around him holding him to me instead of pushing him away. I can taste the blood on his lip and instead of repulsing me it makes me want to pull him closer, hold him harder.

I don't understand what's going on with me, or why I'm acting so crazy. I just know that when he kisses me it feels like the years I've had to worry and struggle and be afraid are gone. I bury my hands in his hair at the back of his head and try to pull him closer still.

I don't realize my robe has slid up and open until his big hand skims up my bare thigh. "Do you realize what you do to me? Do you have any clue what you've done?"

I try to shake my head but he doesn't stop kissing me, my words come out muffled and hesitant because it feels like I need him to breathe all of a sudden. If I don't kiss him one more time I might not survive a second longer. If this is what lust feels like no wonder men sell their souls for it. His hand brushes the curve of my ass before pulling back just enough to push my robe off my shoulder.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

It's not fair that he's dressed and I'm lying on my bathroom floor in nothing but a robe. I start working his shirt up so I can glide my hands over the strong lines of his back. Fuck, he feels good. Strong and solid. Something to hang onto when things don't make sense like they do right now. His mouth moves down to my neck to nip and kiss as his other hand finds my breast and cups it.

Suddenly I can't think of a good reason not to have his chest touching mine. He helps me pull his shirt over his head so I can do just that. At the first brush of him against my skin my nipples tighten even more than they already were and my breasts grow heavy. The feel of his chest hair against me is so odd a sensation that my mind isn't sure how to process it but my body is delighting in the feel.

I'm growing wetter and wetter as he keeps kissing me, alternating between my lips and throat. Until he dips his head and takes my nipple in his mouth. I cry out so shocked and unprepared for the wet feel of his mouth enclosing around the hard bud. I push my hips up trying to find something, some friction to make the ache in between my legs ease.

He kisses a trail down the valley of my breasts before swirling his tongue around my belly button causing me to giggle. I'm actually fucking giggling during this. I've not giggled in...well, I think I might have giggled when I was high but I don't think that should count. He pulls back on his heels and holds my hips between his hands. His eyes are on fire as he stares down at me, so dark green they remind me of emeralds.

I move my hands to cover myself but he just captures them again, holding them above where I had them as he takes me in. I squeeze my thighs together so he can't see everything but it does no good. His other hand drops to my thighs and he pulls

them apart slowly. And a lot more gentler than I thought he would be.

"Men kill for this."

"Pussy?" I jerk my hands out of his to slap them over my mouth. I cannot believe I just said that word in front of him.

He pulls my hands down so I can see his face, "Oh, she's got a dirty mouth too. Not that I'm too shocked you did tell me to go fuck myself in three different languages."

"You were being a dick." His eyes flash as he slowly runs them over me again.

He nudges my thighs further apart so he can sit between them. "Not just pussy, Libby. You know this isn't just sex."

I roll my lips between my teeth so I don't say something else that might come back to embarrass the fuck out of me.

"This...is so much more. And worth killing for." I wonder if he is talking about the guy at the restaurant or my stalker. "What's more, it's worth dying for."

He slides to his belly and has his mouth on me before I can figure out what he intends to do. Oh sweet Special Forces in the morning, the man is good with his tongue. He is pretty much doing the same thing he did to my top lips and it is just, or more, amazing. I sink the fingers of one hand into his hair while we entwine our fingers together with the other.

His tongue dives inside and he finds my clit so easily. It took me two or three years to find out what works for me and he took only seconds. His touch is so soft and yet so fucking commanding. Even with just his tongue he takes control and leads me where he wants me. I wonder if being with someone like Jim means never being in control

again.

The sexiest thing about everything that he is doing to me is his eyes, they never leave mine. The entire time these gorgeous green eyes full of heat and lust are trained right on me. It's almost too intense and for just a second I close my eyes against how strong the emotions are welling up inside of me.

"Eyes on me, Beautiful." I snap my eyes open to meet his. Those are the same words he said to me in the club. He gets to his knees and leans back with my hips in his hands. The only thing on the ground is my shoulders and head. The position causes me to be spread open more and lets him dive deeper while still looking me in the eyes.

His tongue bathes my clit working back and forth. He's already taken my breath away with his kiss now he's trying to take my sense too - and is succeeding. All I can think about is him and how good he's making me feel.

My body is strung tight waiting for his next command. I love and hate it. I don't want someone else to have this much control over me. I don't want to feel this much for someone, especially not someone who lives such a dangerous life. He could be taken from me any minute because of the life he leads.

All of the sensations build until my whole body tingles and there's this rush to reach something I don't understand or know how to get to without Jim. He wraps his arm around my hips to keep them up off the floor as he finds my hand to bring our fingers back together. My breath leaves me in a sob as my body winds tighter and tighter.

"Cum for me, Libby." His voice is muffled by me, by my flesh. And I do exactly what he wants me to do. My body breaking and rearranging until I don't know where he ends and I begin. I'm nothing but pulses and throbs as my body releases for him. Everything for him.

He doesn't give me time to come down, to find my footing. He rolls me over on my belly and lines himself up. He must have opened his pants when he had me floating on air with his tongue. I should tell him but then he would stop and I...don't want him to stop.

He pushes forward in one strong slide that has me catching my breath to try and hide the pain of having him inside of me causes. My whole body feels like I'm being torn in two. I hit my open palm against the floor to try to negate some of the burning pain I feel.

"God damn it, Liberty!" Fuck! He knows.

"I...I wanted it to be you."

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Jim

Her voice comes out sounding small makes me want to kick my own ass even more. I'm six inches in with another four to go and all I can think about is cumming inside. Trying to hold still long enough for her body to adjust is going to kill me - but I'm going to do it, damn it.

"You should have told me." I wrap my arms around her, holding as much of her off the fucking floor as I can. My other hand finds her clit and starts to work on relaxing her. When she told me she wanted me to be her first I filled her little body full so we shouldn't have to worry about either of us being too dry.

I can't believe I took her fucking virginity on the bathroom floor. Fuck, I can't believe

I took her to a club and dry humped her in front of other people and she never said a word about being a virgin. I just assumed that she had a history before me. I work her harder needing to move with the thought of being Libby's first. And last. No other man will ever know what this feels like.

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I pull both of us up so that I am balanced on my knees and toes while the only thing that is touching the ground on her is her cute as fuck toes. She's splayed out on my lap and I can control how hard we fuck.

"D...don't stop."

She has no idea how much she owns me. She will with time. I'll show her but for now all I want to do is work all of my cock in her. "Baby, there could be a whole army trying to keep me from this and I wouldn't stop." I loosen my hold on her hips to let her sink a little further down my shaft.

"Oh God!" She didn't realize there was more for her to take.

"Pain?" Her body shakes and her hands drop to the sides of my thighs as she sinks her nails in. "Ah fuck, baby. Sink 'em in deeper, make me bleed for you." Her head arches back and rolls so I can capture her lips with my own and swallow the little moans and quick gasps that she gives me.

For the first time, I move in and out of her causing her sweet, tight, little pussy to flutter around me and take another inch. "Oh my God, Jim!" she shakes through her first orgasm with a dick inside of her. I have to bite down on the inside of my cheek hard to keep from going over with her. I'm not about to do that again until I'm all the way inside of her.

As soon as her body relaxes from her climax I push the other few inches inside of her, seating myself fully in her. She cries out and sinks her nails further in me, making my cock swell harder. I didn't really know I liked it this way and maybe I didn't until

Liberty. But my busted lip and scratched-up thighs make my dick ache to drive her higher and higher to find out what else she'll give me.

I drop my lips to her throat and kiss the place right above the collar I wasn't about to take off of her today. The fact that I can see her lying in nothing but my fucking collar on the bathroom floor was enough to drive me wild but when Libby talks during sex it's like she has a direct line to my balls.

"I feel so full!"

"That's because that pretty little cunt was made just for me and my cock. I'm going to be your first. And your last." I cup her tit in one of my hands playing with the nub with my fingers.

"Oh God, Jim, you're going to make me cum again. I'm so close. Don't stop."

I give her shoulder a small bite as I work her hips back and forth in my lap not wanting to pull out now that I am in so deep. "I don't intend to ever stop, Liberty. I'm going to stay on you until one of us takes our last breathes and then I'll find you again. Even death isn't tearing you away from me."

"Yes, yes, I need more. I want it h...harder."

Fuck, I'm on my feet before I can blink. I sit her down on her feet but don't let her go. She has to stand on tiptoes to keep me in. "Grab the door frame, beautiful, and hang on." With me squatted down just a little and her up so high, we meet in the middle perfectly. I pull almost all the way out before I plunge back in, holding her hips in my hands. Her head falls back.

"Shit, it feels like you're all the way in my tummy. And you're hitting something. Oh God are you hitting it!" She breaks off to scream out my name as her thighs shake

against the front of mine and her pussy tightens up around me again. This time when she cums she stiffens up and gushes for me.

Both of us look at how wet she's made her thighs, some even dripping to the floor. God damn, is she the fucking perfect woman. I take us to the floor before she can ask what happened. I can see it on her face. She's not really sure what just happened but I'll explain it to her later. When my back hits the floor I start pushing up into her rocking her up and down and playing with her clit again.

"Oh God, I'm so sensitive! Jim, I'm...I'm too, ah!"

"Fucking take it, baby. Take it. Give it to me!" Her knees are spread wide on either side of mine and she is riding me hard, only stopping every now and then to shake through a mini-gasm. The times she slows down I speed my hips up and make sure I still drill inside of her fast and hard just the way she said she wanted.

"Fuck, Jim! OH MY GOD!" her body shakes on top of mine as her pussy clenches and spasms over and over on my cock. The feeling too good not to let go and follow her to release. Her thighs are still shaking by the time I regain consciousness, her whole body twitching as she has orgasm after orgasm because my dick is still inside of her, still pressing up on that pocket of nerves that it was made to touch and rub against.

I brush her hair out of the way where it stuck to her neck and cheek. Both of us are covered in sweat. I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to walk or get us up out of the floor and her eyes are closed, she's completely limp in my arms. Thank fuck I brought Dante with me to stand guard outside the building. I don't know where my fucking gun is. I could still kill someone if I had to but it's been years and years since my gun has left my hand and me not know or care about where it is.

I'm not certain how long we both lie on the floor recovering but finally the sound of

my phone is enough to pull me from my Libby haze. Her phone goes off a minute behind mine when I don't answer. She sits up and gently lifts herself up off me. I see the wince she tries to hide as she goes to find out what the hell is going on. I also spot the ring of blood around my cock and some barbaric part of me wants to smear it on me everywhere and wear it like a warrior would, a badge of honor that my lady bestowed upon me.

I don't think Libby would be alright with that though. I'm just getting to my feet when she comes back looking pale and scared. Something isn't right, I can tell immediately. "What's wrong, Libby?"

"Answer your phone, Jim." Tears are standing in her eyes and I pick up on the first ring this time as I take her in my arms.

"We have problems, Arch!" Ace sounds like he might be flying.

"Where are you at?"

"Coming into the landing strip near Doc's house. It's Jack!" God damn it! I sent Jack out on a routine mission. All he was supposed to do was track down two men on the list of names and see if he thought we could persuade them to give us any information on who the hell sold my team out to the Russians. So why the hell was Ace already flying to pick up Doc?

"Get your ass to the compound now!" It's finished enough that we can all meet there.

"Already planned to head that way with Doc."

"Jack?"

"Remy's got him....its bad Jim." It must be because my men hardly ever use my given

name.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

"I'll meet you there." I hang up. This entire time Libby has been nestled in my arms with her face buried in my chest. I look down at her and see the fear in her eyes. "Pack a bag. Expect to stay for a couple of days - a week maybe. Quickly!"

She's already turning and dumping her still packed suitcase from the trip we just took. In less than five minutes she is back. She doesn't ask me questions or try to put up a fight. I don't know what they told her when she answered her phone but I am thankful that she is going along with all of this without giving me grief.

Jack. He is the man I have worked with the longest. I recruited him to the team straight out of the SEALs. The guy could have stayed in the SEALs and led his own team but he made the choice to go with me. He's been my closest confidant and friend for years, fucking years. Dante and Duncan are outside waiting on us when we come out. I slide in the back beside Libby and am surprised when she reaches over to take my hand in hers, giving me comfort without me having to ask her for it.

I turn my hand over so that I can grasp hers, taking what she is offering me. We make it to the compound about the same time the helicopter is landing on the raised helipad. By the time I meet up with the rest of the men Doc is already working on Jack.

"He took five before going into the water. We got there about ten minutes after his comms went off and had to fish his ass out of the ocean. He was barely hanging on when we got him loaded. Doc came as soon as he heard. We don't know what happened, Jim."

Jack is the best. He doesn't make mistakes and he doesn't fuck up so whatever

happened had to be bad. I follow them into the room we set aside for emergencies; with eight men in the line of work we're in, it was a necessary room. I look back I find Libby standing in the door, a look of shock and fear on her face.

"Someone get her out of here." Remy runs over to her and takes her somewhere she won't have to look at the blood and death that cling to Jack. She doesn't need to see this. Not after finding out about her fears of the people she loves leaving her. I don't know where this leaves us but I damn sure am not walking away from her and what we did. Not after she showed me so much during the time I was with her and while she was trying to comfort me.

Libby is mine. And as soon as this shit gets straightened out I'll be coming for her again. This time I won't give her the time to think about why she shouldn't be with a man like me. Next time I won't let go.

14

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Libby

"I bet you think since you got shot I'm going to be nice to you. But that isn't what you need right now, is it?" I've been sitting at the bedside of a man who might not ever wake up for the better part of a week. Doc says the wounds are healing nicely but Jack hasn't said one word or even blinked since he was operated on. No one knows what he saw or what transpired that ended with him being shot six times. At first, we thought it was five but Doc found another one while he was fixing him up.

"Right now you need to be told to get the hell out of that bed and off your ass because your team needs you. So get up." I smooth the cover over his chest and notice my fingers are trembling.

I've not seen much of Jim since he yelled for one of his men to take me out of the operating room. I guess I understand why he didn't want me getting in the way and it wasn't like there was a lot of time to explain in nicer words but all I have right now is time. He could have sat with me for a few hours and explained.

I stand and walk to the side table that has water sitting on it. I've been talking to him all this time hoping he'll wake up pissed at me and tell me to shut the fuck up.

"I was so worried Jim was going to break my heart. I had no idea it would be you causing me so much pain."

"Does that mean you love me?"

I spin around and see Jack looking at me with one eye open and the other scrunched up to the blinding light coming into his room. The cup falls from my hands making a mess on the floor at my feet. "Jack!"

"Cause I'm flattered and all but I just got shot. I don't think I could take Jim on right now and he would definitely try to kill me."

I am yelling for the guys before I can move my stunned body over to his bed and give him a hug gently. It doesn't matter; he still grimaces at the pain. "I could kill you for scaring me like this."

He starts to laugh but stops and it turns to a groan of pain. Serves him right for scaring me for a whole week. When I straighten the men have all filed into the room. I see Jim take in the fact that I'm hugging Jack and for a moment I think Jack might be right about Jim trying to fight him. It makes me let Jack go and take a step back.

"I'll go find you something to eat, you must be starving." I hurry out of the room so the men can talk. By the time I'm back the only two still in the room are Jim and Jack.

Jack is sitting up in bed and his color has come back a little. He doesn't look like death warmed over.

"Libby, meet me in my office while I finish up with Jack."

Wow, dismissed again. I give him a cocked eyebrow before leaving and making my way to his office. I go over to the desk to straighten up for him when hands wrap around me and my mouth cutting off a scream I was about to unleash. No Jim!

The hands pull me back and show me a large knife, "Scream or call for the others and I make your death slower and a lot more painful."

"You should have kept your ass out of affairs that have nothing to do with you. It would have kept a pretty girl like you alive longer." Someone with a heavy accent has me.

My heart is pounding in my chest so hard I can barely hear what he is saying to me. The door to the office swings open and in the blink of an eye Jim has his gun pulled and aimed at the man who is trying to squeeze the air out of me. God this is eerily similar to the first time someone tried to kill me. So similar that I'm not sure where Jim stands on me being a priority to the team any longer.

"You're making a big mistake my friend." He pulls his glasses off as Remy and Duncan enter the room. I'm uncertain if they were following Jim or if he somehow called them because of the trouble. "Do you know who I am?"

"I'm not here for you...friend." Oh shit, that means..., "The girl shouldn't have taken the book. The people in that book want to remain anonymous and have paid good money for me to make sure everyone understands how serious this is."

Jim laughs. Oh shit, I hate when he laughs. It means someone is about to die and the

rug is an antique. "She's mine, friend. Think real carefully about what that means before you sign your death warrant."

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

The guy's hold on me loosens just a bit like he might have made a mistake. It gives me enough wiggle room to pull the letter opener I was hiding out and stab backwards with all my strength. I don't know where I hit the guy or if I did any damage but Remy is pulling me behind the men before I can turn around to find out. Jim comes over and waits for a second his gun trained on the man.

His eyes find mine before he pulls the trigger and shoots the man. I turn from the scene I'm sure is splattered all over that antique rug that will never be the same again. He gives a look to the other men who have a silent conversation with one another before all of them nod and I'm in Jim's arms.

Out in the hallway, Remy sticks his head out of Jim's office, "Hey Archer, you want us to lock it down."

Jim doesn't answer right away. He finally gives a nod of his head that most wouldn't see but Remy gives his own nod before disappearing back into Jim's office.

"Lock it down? What does that mean?"

"It means no one goes in and no one gets out of this compound. The gates are closed and set to explode if something tries to come through them. The house is locked down and all communication with the outside stops." I stiffen in his arms. "Lex is a part of that plan, Libby. Steve will make sure she understands you're safe and that it will be better if she waits to get in touch with you. My men are good, let them do their job."

He takes me into his room, the room I woke up in naked the other day. It's done in

deep blues and heavy creams. It fits him. He sets me down on the bed and starts taking off my shirt. I grab it and fight him to keep it on. If he gets me naked I'll forget I've been mad at him for ignoring me for days.

"You have blood on your shirt, baby." His words shock me so much that I don't fight him this time when he goes to pull it over my head. His hands drop to my pants and I put mine over his. These don't have blood on them so why is he trying to take them off. "I have to leave."

I don't know what to do with that statement. It works though because I don't stop him from taking my pants down. I'm about to ask him what he means but he doesn't give me time. He picks me up again and takes me into his bathroom sitting me on the edge of the sink. "In the past, when a warrior was going off to fight his woman would be with him to ensure his mind was where it was supposed to be."

He walks off to fill the tub. "I thought warriors were told not to have sex right before a battle because they wanted all that pent up aggression and need going into the fray?" I cock my eyebrow at him.

He gives me a smile that is cocky as fuck before yanking his shirt over his head. "Some societies but others thought that there was a lot of energy to be harnessed in the Lovers. It gave the men something to fight for, a reason to finish and come back home, and a way to carry his love with him." He comes to stand in front of me, spreading my legs so he can pull me closer to him. "I've been a lot of places, done a lot of bad things, Libby, and I can tell you Love is a hell of a lot more powerful than anything else on Earth."

His hand comes up to cup my cheek. I understand what he's trying to tell me without saying it. It's not the right time to tell me. I lean closer to him, so close his breath fans across my face. I put my hand up in a mirror of his and he nuzzles into my touch, "You better come back."

"Always." Our lips meet and at first it's soft and tender but quickly builds to something that's anything but. It seems we can't be together without causing some pain as he pulls my hair so my head falls back to let him plunder my mouth more thoroughly and I bite his bottom lip hard enough to taste blood.

Our clothes are off as each of us grapples with getting the other one naked. He slides me off the edge and I wrap my legs around his hips to stay even with his mouth not wanting to break the kiss. He steps in the hot water and sinks down taking me with him. I can feel the hot hard length of him just below me waiting.

He breaks from our entwined lips to trail open-mouthed kisses down my throat as I reach down in the water and find him. He's so...big. It doesn't seem like that could have fit inside of me but it did. I position him so that he's right at my entrance. I don't want any more build-up or foreplay. I need him now. His width spreads me open and causes me to let out a moan. I'm still virgin tight so it takes time to pry myself open for him.

He helps by pushing up slowly so that eventually I am seated fully on him. My hips make little rocking motions to get used to him being inside of me. I'm so full when he's like this.

"Fuck, you're so tight, Lib." He surges in and out of me causing water to slouch over the side of the tub but we don't care. I gasp from the sensation of him moving inside of me.

"You feel so good inside me," I tell him wanting him to know. I wrap my arms around him holding him close to me. He takes me by the hips and helps me ride him until we're both breathless and clinging to each other. His cock hits something inside of me that makes me want to speed up, to thrust on him harder. I find his mouth with mine before whispering against his lips, "Harder."

I watch as his pupils dilate wide, eating up almost all of the beautiful green around them. He pulls out and turns us so that I am draped across the edge of the tub. He slides in behind me and plunges hard. I cry out at the new sensation of having him so deep. His hand comes up to cup my breast and play with my nipple while his other one goes to my clit to stroke me there.

All I can do is feel, wrapped in a cocoon of touch and sensation. I start crying out his name in short gasps and moans as he takes me higher and higher with his body. I reach around so that I can sink my nails into his flank causing him to go harder still.

My body tightens until I think I might break apart. My thighs shaking as he pounds into me over and over again. I'm aware of what's happening this time. I know what being with him feels like and I try to push back my release so I can have more of him longer but he won't let up or give me a break.

"Cum for me, Libby. Cum for me and show me who you belong to, baby."

I do as he commands, my mind shattering into thousands of pieces as my body spasms around his over and over until I feel his release as well. It coats me from the inside and slips down my thighs until it's washed away by the water. His hold on me is so perfect, so tight that I believe he'll be with me forever just like he promises. It makes me emotional enough to let a tear slip out, my reaction to him beyond my control.

He turns me and doesn't say anything about the lone tear tracking down my face. He uses his thumb to wipe it away before kissing me soft and gentle again. "I promise."

"I know."

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Jim

Ten days. I've been away from my girl for ten days. I've hunted down so many men and killed so many along the way that I probably have a new moniker now - Death. I sit on the plane back and think about the last minutes I had with my Liberty.

I shot the guy in the face who had tried to take her. She killed him but I shot him. The guys understood why I did it. I didn't want her to think she had been the one to take his life. She doesn't need to live with that guilt when I can take it on for her. I would gladly bear her sins for the right to keep her for my own, to keep her happy and safe.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

I told her right before I got on the helicopter with Ace and Dante and Remy to stay in the compound. I left Duncan there to protect my most prized gift. Then I kissed her hard right in front of my men, not caring that they knew I had fallen so hard.

"Stay with Jack. Even on his back, he's more dangerous than any other man I know. He knows what you mean to me."

She shook her head and followed Duncan out of range of most of the wind off the blades of the helicopter. Still, her hair whipped around her face and when I looked I could tell she was crying. It gutted me to know that I did that to her, that I made her worry. That I put her in danger because of the life I live, the life I should have given up so I could have someone like Libby and be able to keep her safe.

If I can find out who is ordering death warrants for me and my men then I can put a bullet through his brain and start that life with her. A life I never thought I would have or want. Until then I have to do all that I can to make sure she is safe. I can't give her up or let her go but I can kill anyone who even thinks about coming near her with bad intentions.

Me and my men are closer to finding out who did this to us. We have a name that stood out to all of us. He wasn't the leader - he's not smart enough. But he can lead us back to the person pulling the strings and that is more than we had before we left.

We touch down when it's night. The other men, Duncan and Jack, know we're home but I'm not sure if she does. Hell for all I know she could be asleep. I move through the house quietly and quickly after dropping my pack in the weapons room. I make my way up the stairs to my room and ease the door open. I don't really want Libby

seeing me like this now. I'm dirty and covered in blood and mud. But I also need to verify that she is here and safe with my own eyes. I'll clean myself up after I get my look at her sweetness.

But Libby isn't in our bed. I move to the bathroom, my heart racing. If something happened, if she tried to leave, my men would have informed me immediately. The shower is on. I can hear the water falling down the tiles from the double showerheads. I have a shower that doesn't have any doors. It is hidden behind the huge tub with openings on both sides and a bench running along the back of it.

I made this bathroom with Libby in mind. I don't need all this shit to stay clean but she would like the big ass tub with the jets in it and the shower with enough room for five people to fit in at the same time. Okay, so the shower might have been done more for me. As soon as I sketched it out I wanted her little ass in the steam and heat spread across the bench. I start dropping my clothes as I walk towards the sound until I'm standing at one of the entrances naked. My vision adjusts to the mist and I see her there in the stream of water.

Her head is tipped back so the water can run down her bare body the same way I want to. God, she doesn't have a clue how tempting she looks standing there unknowing, innocent. Her wet hair hanging down her back turns a darker color when it's wet but there are still strands that gleam bright red like she caught the setting sun. Her curves are on full display for me and I can't stop my hand from dropping to my cock and fisting it.

Her hand trails down the swell of her breast as she rolls her head to the side. Her eyes open and she gasps when she sees me standing there. Her eyes are quick to run down my own body which is still covered in blood and dirt.

"Jim...is any of that...?"

She wants to know if the blood on me is my own. I shake my head, unable to lie to her about who I am. Her tongue comes out to touch her bottom lip and I wait for her next words. She's seen me kill before but something about this time is different. Maybe it's the amount of death that clings to me or all the bodies I piled up before coming home to her.

"Then what are you waiting for?" her voice is low and has a sexy breathlessness about it. When my eyes meet hers they are shooting sparks that have nothing to do with how many men I've killed. I walk closer slowly, giving her time to make her move. This is how it is with us. We both have to be in control for a little while and we both have to have the pleasure/pain the other offers.

I reach my hand out for her and spin her so I can push her against the cool tile. Her lips part, as her eyes roam over me. I kick her legs open wider. I reach around her to play with her but she uses her butt to push me away from her. She ducks out from under my arm and cocks her eyebrow at me. Oh my beauty wants to play tonight. I can't fight the smile that spreads across my face.

I take one step towards her and she retreats one step until I have her against the other side of the wall. She grins as I come in for a kiss, but before I can reach her she's pushed me back and tripped me with her foot. I rebalance not going all the way down as she laughs and dances across the shower to the other side. I let out a growl and dive for her. Both of us are slippery and this probably isn't the smartest thing for us to be doing in the shower but this is exactly what I needed. I wrap her up in my arms and pull her down to the floor. Her arms are wrapped around me too. Her legs spread and waiting for me to slide in but I have other ideas. I want to hear her scream.

Once I have her safely on the ground I slide down and have my mouth on her before she can try to push me away. Her hands dig into my hair and the tugs and yanks have my cock aching for release. She doesn't try to fight me any longer and instead raises her hips to bring her closer to my mouth. I lick her slowly at first and wait until she's

twisting to get closer, to make me do it harder. I really sink into her then and make a meal out of eating my mate's pussy.

She rewards me by getting louder. Her head rolling back and forth trying to fight the release I am driving her to. In this moment I could do anything to her and she would accept it, no questions asked. She makes me feel like the god everyone else calls me.

"Don't stop! Don't ever stop!"

I mumble around her flesh in my mouth, "Never." I will never stop giving her what she wants and needs. I bring a finger up and slide it inside turning it to find the hidden spot inside that drives her crazy. Pretty soon I am adding a finger to stretch the tight sheath for my cock when I take her.

I feel her release draw closer like it's my own heartbeat. Her feet plant firmly on the tiles by my head and her head arches back, her red hair flowing out like the blood I spilled for her protection. God damn she is beautiful. She screams my name and her body convulses around my fingers and tongue. I have her flipped on her belly with my cock at her entrance before she can finish shaking through her orgasm.

"Yes! Oh God, Jim, I've missed you so much!" I pull her up to her knees and she flips her hair back over her shoulder so that the water sprays across my body as I start driving into her.

"Missed you too. So fucking tight. It's tightened back up not having me inside of you for days."

"Then don't ever leave again and it won't try to strangle you."

I push her down which brings her ass up higher in the air. She tries to fight for the upper hand but all she does is make her pussy even tighter for me. She thinks it won't

strangle me if we do it enough but she's wrong. This pussy is always going to squeeze up around me, begging me for what only I can give it.

She cries out as she topples over the edge and into her orgasm. I keep pounding into her until she is shaking into a third and a fourth before I let myself follow her over, filling her womb with the seed that has been waiting for her for days. I roll over and take her with me so that both of us are lying under the warm spray of the nozzles. She drops little kisses on my chest until she straddles me and sits up. She finds me and slides down my pole and we are off again. Both of us fighting for domination and submission. This time she's on top and I bleed a little for her. She sinks her nails into my chest and rides me until her body is quivering from release and both of us are covered in cum and sweat.

16

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Libby

"The only time I felt alive was when I watched the life drain out of another man's eyes. Until I found you."

We finally made it to a bed and now I am sitting propped up on a stack of pillows listening to Jim as he paints my toenails.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

"I've been at this a long time." He uses a long knife to get excess paint from around my toes. I would be afraid but he's so gentle and knows what he's doing with one.

"When did you start?"

"The military? Right out of high school. What I do now? About five years in. Some guy came to my commanding officer and told them they had an offer for me. I could help my country better if I went a different route than the normal soldier." He looks up with the lightest green eyes I have ever seen. He still hasn't put his glasses back on. I'm still not sure if he actually needs them or not. I lean towards no. Me and Jack have a bet going though and I hope I'm right. I have two hundred dollars at stake.

"I didn't realize what exactly that entailed at the time. Some of the guys I worked with had families and could function very well. Hell, some of them had more than one." My eyebrows climb high. "They used them as cover stories."

"I started getting really fucking good at what I did and my reputation grew. I didn't want any of the blowback to come to my momma so...I faked my own death."

"Oh my God!" Not what I thought he was going to say.

"I couldn't stand the thought of her being hurt because of something I did. It was just better to die and be reborn as Jamison Archer - Kronos. I still check in sometimes but it's hard to stay distant."

I put my other foot on his hand and force him to stop. "You better not do that to me. I will find you Jamison Archer and when I do nothing will be able to save you."

He chuckles, "Don't think that will ever happen, Libby. IF I die this time you'll be coming with me."

I move my foot so he can finish. He's told me everything since we got out of the shower. His involvement with a certain group of assassins that still do odd jobs for him if he needs them but who have all found love, his family that he had to leave, even his real name. He used to be James Miller. I am probably the person that knows all of him, besides maybe Jack. He even told me about why he's so close to Jack. He brought him on his team first and has been with him the longest.

Our eyes meet and the air suddenly starts to heat like we're in a furnace. A knock on the door has both of us turning to look at the door with pissed looks. "Archer, I didn't want to bother you but I knew you would want to know - Jack's AWOL."

Remy's voice is close to the door and sounds worried. Jack isn't supposed to be doing too much since he is still healing. He's healing well but anything could cause him to have a setback. Jim gets up and pulls his pants on. He waits for me to pull on his shirt before he opens the door. On the other side of the door are Remy and Duncan.

"You want us to try to track him down or just let him do his own thing." As Remy is talking Jack walks behind him to reach the room he is staying in. All four of us turn to watch as he walks by.

"Sup?"

"Where the hell did you go, man? You scared the crap out of us when we went to check on you and found the bed empty."

"I had something to take care of in town." He looks to Jim. Jim cocks his eyebrow. Again the four men share a look with each other and Remy and Duncan move on.

"What do you guys say to one another when you give each other those looks?"

"We've been together for a long time, baby. It just comes natural to kind of know what the other is thinking. Like the fact that I can tell Jack is up to something."

"I went to handle something." Jim waits. "For Libby."

My mouth falls open, "What?"

"The guys went to your apartment. Jim's having your stuff packed and brought here."

"Really?" I turn to look at Jim who just shrugs.

"Someone broke in and wrecked some stuff and the guys told me about your little problem with an ex-boyfriend."

I blush at the reminder of the mess I still have to take care of. My heart starts pounding at the thought that the psycho was back in my apartment for the third time. I wonder if I should call the cops to report that he broke the restraining order. I don't have any proof, not really.

"So...I took care of it."

"What did you do, Jack?"

"I took care of your problem because you took care of me. But don't worry, Libby. I still owe you one."

He walks off whistling as he goes, leaving me stunned. Did he just tell me...?

"Did he just...?"

"Yep. You just got adopted. Jack sees you as family now. Congratulations." He ends in a laugh but I am still stunned.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

"Wait Jim, what does that mean? Jim...?" His laughs again as he pulls me into the bedroom and shuts the door behind us. "Jim...?!"

### Epilogue

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Jack

I sit in the leather chairs that aren't nearly big enough for a man as big as me. I shift and feel the scar tissue catch in one of the holes in my back. It's been four months since I got shot the hell up. Four long months. I look between Jim and Libby. They called me in here for something, now I just have to wait for them to tell me what that reason is.

"I realize you haven't had an easy year, Jack."

No shit! I got shot six times, lost my fiancé, learned that she was fucking cheating on me by walking into the room while another soldier was throwing it to her, and just learned that other soldier might be responsible for the reason I was shot and Jim just told me I couldn't kill the guy. Yeah, my year is not going great.

"I understand letting Don come here is rough for you." He turns those green eyes on me, staring me down behind the frames of his glasses. "I also know you understand why it has to be this way, how important it is for us to get the information we need from this guy."

"Yeah, I promised I wouldn't kill him - yet."

"There's something else I'm going to need you to do." Oh shit!

"I just found out that Don and his sister aren't the only people coming this week." Jim takes his glasses off and folds them, giving me a silent cue that the shit is about to hit the fan. "He's bringing Bambie."

Bambie is the top-heavy blonde that hangs out with my ex-fiancé. I really don't want to have to put up with her. She's a little handsy. "Okay, so I promise not to kill her either - yet."

"That's not...oh God Jim, maybe we shouldn't do this. Maybe there's another way."

I sit forward. I owe Libby so if she needs something from me, it's hers. Jim keeps going. "Yeah, I know Don and Bambie are a problem but that's not why I called you in here. I need a favor. I...Libby needs a favor."

"Just spit it out guys." God I hate having to 'people'. And I like these guys so the fact that this place is about to be full of people I hate is going to be tough. I've made my peace by moving out to the cabin out back.

"My sister is coming."

My stomach starts to sink. Oh no! No, no, no.

"You know what kind of man Don is, Jack. I need someone who can take care of the girl. She's completely innocent which is like catnip to someone like Don. I need a man who is going to be able to keep her safe. Maybe teach her self-defense. She's not like Libby. She can't...."

Jim doesn't finish his thought. He doesn't have to. I wasn't in the room but the guys have told me, Libby took a guy out by stabbing him in the throat with a letter opener. Not to mention the Russian she fought off giving us time to suit up. She's a badass when she wants to be; when it matters. Now they want me to take care of her kid sister who apparently can't take care of herself. They want me to babysit.

"Look I realize I got shot but that doesn't mean I can't kick someone's ass when the time comes."

"Yes, that is exactly what I'm afraid it's going to come to."

Ah hell no. I stand to walk away but Jim is up and blocking me before I reach the door. "That woman watched over you when you were completely out of it. She sat for days talking to you. I don't have to remind you that you told me you heard her voice calling you back more than once. You owe her and this is the way she is asking you to repay that." His eyes bore into me. "She's going to take her to a hotel if I can't promise her Lexi is going to be safe. I don't want to give her up for three months so she can spend time with her sister. I don't have to tell you how important this - how important she - is to Libby."

God damn it! I turn to look at Libby's worried eyes. I'm going to do it. They know it too. It's why they ask me the way they did. I reach for my arm unconsciously as the scar there pulls.

"Fine. I'll do it but only because I owe you, Libby." Jim smiles at Libby and I see her give him an uncertain look. Good, she should be concerned. "But the kid is going to have to do exactly what I tell her and when. I control her. If she can't live with that then you're going to have to find another person."

I spin around and walk out. I don't have to see her face to know Libby is sure she just made a mistake putting her kid sister in my hands. You know what they say about

good intentions.

The End!

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Continue reading for a preview of my next novel,

Dangerous Seduction.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

By:

Akio knows that his world is one of darkness and death as a child of a member of the Yakuza, Japan's most notorious criminal network. He doesn't deserve anything as good and as pure as the little influencer, Quinn, in his life. But when she needs help from a shadowy threat he is the only man who can walk in both worlds to stop what's coming for her. With the help of his grandfather and her mother can he find a way to keep Quinn after all of this is over or will his Cherry Blossom float away from him forever?

Quinn wants nothing to do with the world Akio is from. She wants to make her videos and enjoy her vacation to the land she has always been fascinated with but when he saves her from being harmed in her hotel room she starts wanting more than just Akio's protection. Which scares her most of all.

This is the sixth book in the Taboo series and it has all the best parts of a true international taboo love story. If you like your happy ever after with a sweet virgin social media star and an over-the-top alpha bad boy then this one is for you! Kick up your feet and take a ride with Quinn and Akio through the neon lights of Japan and across the ocean to America. This love is so big it spans continents.

Aiko

I roll over and take in the empty room I am laying in. I'm visiting my grandfather in Japan for the next couple of weeks and every time I come home I feel like I am missing something. I don't know what it is because when I am in America I feel the same. Maybe this empty feeling will always be inside of me. Perhaps it is the product

of the sins of my father and his father before him and I am the one meant to carry it around with me.

I take my cock in my hand and hope that I can rid myself of some of this restlessness that has taken up residence in my soul. I'm not really thinking of any particular person when I'm stroking myself, just some nameless, faceless woman who inspires a fire in me. I don't even know if that is possible. It's not like there haven't been offers or that I haven't taken the offers some times but over the past two or three years I find no urge to dip my cock in anyone, male or female.

I close my eyes and think about what the woman would have to look like to make me hard. Auburn, blonde, brunette? Would she have light skin or dark? Eyes that are like mine which have set me apart from the others in my country because of my American mother or will she have the dark eyes that stare back at me when I look at my grandfather? In my head I see the woman who I think will be the one. She'll be small, with lots of curves. I need curves to fill my hands with. Soft, round breasts and a nice full ass that I can squeeze is what I need. I grunt as my cock swells at the thought of taking a woman's hips in my hands and driving my cock deep inside of her. She will have to be willing to be taken over, dominated. It's just in my nature, as it was in my father's and my grandfather's before him.

She would smell nice. Scent is very important to me and a nice scent can drive me crazy. Lately I haven't smelled anything that has even made my dick twitch but my dream girl will smell good enough to eat. My mind goes to rolling the woman over and spreading her thighs as I bury my face in her responsive, pink pussy. The woman will be vocal too. I love a responsive woman screaming my name when I hit her just right. My balls tingle and I reach down to give them a tug so I can hold off on the orgasm a little longer as I think of yet another way I want to take my mystery woman. I would make her take my dick in her mouth and make her suck me until the cum I was saving for her fills her mouth to overflowing and tears streak down her cheeks.

I grunt when I realize I can't hold off any longer and let myself go. Spunk spurts out so fast and hard that some of it lands on my upper abs. I finally lay back and try to catch my breath before I get up to clean myself off and go have breakfast with my grandfather. Another day with all the demons I drag around and no angel to save my soul in sight.

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Quinn

The club we are in isn't the most touristy one a couple of American's can go to. In fact, to come here we had to go through the red light district but Hoshi, my friend that's been taking us around showing us the sights and wonders of the Kabukicho entertainment district said it was a good place to go. We just came from the wildest restaurant I have ever been in. There were more neon lights flashing in it than there are in this club. In fact, this club is pretty tame compared to what we just got for the dinner show.

The music is good and the lights aren't bright enough to cause a headache so I think we can stay for a little while. Hoshi has been great about showing us all the sights, not just the wild neon nighttime ones. This is the first time me and Hoshi have ever meet face to face. We've been friends for years and even called a few times to chat but nothing like this. And now here I am, in Japan with my mom and Hoshi parting in a club.

I'm a social influencer which is short for saying a make goofy videos of myself doing silly random stuff and upload it to the internet so other people can see how goofy I am. It started out with me doing a lot of scary video games with a lot of jump-scares because apparently I have the best 'oh shit' face out there, and then branched off to me

just letting people into little parts of my life like when I had my wisdom teeth taken out or when my brother broke his wrist tripping over one of my sister's toys.

For some weird reason people like watching me. They like it enough that this is my full-time job and while I am not rolling in the money on my mattress, I did make enough to fly me and my mom out here for this social influencers' convention. I try to do at least one of these a year but when I saw that this one was going to be in Japan I had to come to this one. I have always loved Japanese culture. For some reason, the area just calls to me and I have always wanted to come. So here we are.

I try to take in everything around me. To be honest there has been more than a little culture shock over the past two days we have been here. There's so much to assimilate and digest that, even after we go back home, I know it will be days before I have calmed back down and experienced everything fully. For being someone in front of the camera a lot I tend to live inside of my head. It's easy when you don't have a live audience to think about. I just treat my audience like they are one big, giant friend coming for a sleepover or a small visit with my family and that helps. If I thought about the numbers while I was recording I wouldn't do it.

"This is a really popular place on the weekends but it gets kind of...laggy on the weekdays."

"Laggy?" What does that mean? This is a Friday night and it seems pretty busy and lively tonight.

"Um, slow. It doesn't have as good music or shows on those days as it does on weekend nights."

"Oh you mean it's quieter and not as much fun."

Hoshi smiles and shakes her head. She speaks very good English but some of the

words I use are colloquial to my area of the U.S. and confuse her which ends up confusing me. It has been so much fun trying to learn from one another though.

"I'm going to hit the dance floor. You want to come, mom?"

"No," she gives us a chuckle as me and Hoshi stand, "you two go ahead. I think after that last restaurant I need to rest a minute before I'm back up for mingling." Her laugh ends her sentence and I can almost bet it won't take her long to be right back out here with us.

Mom is great. She could have lost her shit when she realized what I was doing but she was cool with it and not just supportive but has gone out of her way to help me with my career. It might help that she is a writer. She's a different breed, set apart from the usual moms who work in offices and school rooms, so the fact I wanted to be a social influencer didn't cause her to bat an eyelash.

We dance for two songs and then make our way back to our table but my mom isn't there. I really hope she just had to go to the bathroom. I cast worried eyes over to Hoshi who looks white as death. I start to freak out when two big men come up to our table beside us.

"Your mother is with Mr. Haruyoshi. You will follow us and we will take you to her." Hoshi grabs me by the wrist. Her hold is tight and almost painful and her palms are sweaty.

"Do what they ask." She whispers through visibly dry lips. Both of us walk in between the two men up a narrow flight of stairs and into a private area that is dimly lit and less noisy than the rest of the club. Hoshi is shaking and her anxiety over what is going on is freaking me out.

As soon as I see my mother I run to her. She is all smiles and pulls me over to a table.

"Quinn, you'll never guess who I started talking to. This is Mister Haruyoshi." She pauses before going on excitedly but in a whispered voice, "He's a member of the Yakuza."

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All the blood drains from my face at her words. "Oh my God, mom! Do you know what that is? Of course you do, you're a writer. How do you get in these kinds of messes?" And more importantly, how am I going to get us out?

We prefer the title ninkyo dantai, actually." My mom interrupts the man doing the talking.

"I was just hanging out at the table and saw all the men walk through and knew in a second it must be someone very important like that. Once I got a look at that wrist though I knew." She seems so proud of herself for picking out the member of the biggest criminal empire in Japan in a packed nightclub. My eyes drop to his exposed wrist where his sleeves are rolled just a little way up and tattoos are all over his skin and running up under the shirt.

"Please sit. Call me Emon, please." He gestures for us to sit next to my mom and I don't think we have any other option but to sit. Leaving doesn't seem to be on the table just yet. "Your mother is telling me about your channel and about her books."

Mom leans her head over with a giant smile showing me how proud she is of me.

"My daughter-in-law was from America and my grandson went to school there. His English is better than mine but mine is not bad, yes."

"Oh I think your English is very good." Mom compliments him on his ability. "He's been telling me about how he met and fell in love with his late wife." She reaches out her hand to place it over Emon's hand and the whole room seems to tense up but mom

can't tell or just doesn't care. Emon laughs and pats her with his other hand.

We spend the next two hours being entertained and taken care of by Mr. Haruyoshi. His hair is salt and pepper and his face is covered in wrinkles but his eyes are kind and jump with amusement when he listens to my mother talk about her children. He tells her all about his late wife and says mom reminds him of her because she loved romance stories and American culture.

"You two are here by yourselves with no one to watch out for you?" His deep voice is filled with question when he asks.

Oh God, why is he asking if we are here all alone. "My husband had to stay back in the States with my younger children and of course there was the monetary aspect of it all. We have an excellent guide in Hoshi though. She is showing us this beautiful country of yours."

His brow crinkles and he frowns, "It is not safe for three very attractive women to be walking around always."

Please don't sell us into slavery, please don't sell us into slavery. All I can think of is how unsafe being here with this man and all of his trained thugs really is.

"You will take my grandson with you. He will offer you protection while you are visiting our city."

"Oh, we wouldn't want to put you out or be a bother."

"No bother. I insist." He calls one of his men over and whispers in his ear. For the first time since we sat down beside her, my mother looks less than thrilled and maybe a little worried. We all wait until a shadow fills the entrance of the VIP section and in steps a tall, well-built man with striking eyes. "Akio, Akio, come." He waves the man

over and speaks to him in Japanese. The man doesn't look at anyone but his grandfather.

Hoshi leans over to me and whispers in my ear, "He is telling his grandson that we need protection and that he would like him to guard us."

The son speaks in rapid Japanese back to him. By the look on his face, he doesn't seem pleased to be put on guard duty.

"The grandson is saying he is not a babysitter."

The grandfather speaks again and the tension in the room ratchets up so high it is almost tangible. The grandfather slams his hand down on the table and speaks again.

"He is telling him to not disrespect us or him by calling it that. He says it is a favor for his grandfather that the boy should do out of respect and love for him."

"I don't think you can call him a boy, Hoshi." I whisper back to her but the room goes silent and I feel like I am at the center of attention for some reason. God, I hope I didn't say something that is going to cause problems for us. I straighten and turn to find the grandson's attention fully on me. His gaze bores into me before he turns back to his grandfather who is watching all of this with a very interested eye.

Without looking away from me he speaks to his grandfather who is sending curious looks back and forth between me and his grandson. "I'll do it, grandfather."

By:

Gunfights, dead bodies, and one pissed off Russian is not Kat St. Claire's idea of a good time. But that's exactly what she has on her hands all while trying to stay alive long enough to become an old cat lady. The next time she prays for excitement in her

life she's going to give herself a swift kick in the a\$\$\$. Ivan Dragomir's entire world is a repeat of nothing but vice, blood, and death. He left Russia to start a new life, one that didn't include the violence of his past, but violence wasn't done with him yet. Now he's on the run in his new country with a woman more used to dealing with paper cuts and printers than knife wounds and getting blood out of denim.

These two are on a collision course with a dark fate if they can't figure out how to work together to take down a very powerful Senator before he gets away with more than just bad political moves. Hot Russians, violent murder, and sex so hot it could melt Siberia; this full-length romance has it all and then some.

In typical Jisa fashion, this insta-love thriller promises Happy Endings ;) for everyone. None of the main characters die and even though some touchy subjects are hinted at I try not to stay in that part of the book for too long but if you are sensitive to that sort of thing this book may not be the right one for you or you could skip that chapter, it's up to you, dear reader. It's all here, something for every one of my Lovelies, and sweet like baklava. Happy Reading.

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Ivan

I realize how close winter is when the slap of cold hits me in the face like an angry lover. Normally I don't mind D.C. in the winter but I've been thinking of moving somewhere warmer lately. The cold reminds me of things I would rather leave buried in the icy ground of Russia. American winters are never going to be as bad as Russian winters but sometimes when I'm in my apartment and I've been holed up for days working I'm reminded of where I came from. It's usually then I have to leave and head to my favorite café close to my apartment.

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Most days I take a break to walk there for a large black coffee and to people watch. It helps remind me that I'm not back in a dank cramped cell. I've made a life for myself here in D.C. One of the best things about D.C. is the influx of so many people and cultures and languages in one area. That and it is really easy to hide in a place that is constantly changing faces from day-to-day.

Today, when I swing the door open and the smell of coffee hits me I make sure to stare down each person in the café. I am just a moody bastard today I guess. Not that I'm not normally moody. I stand at the back of a line and wait my turn. In front of me are the two older women who have been trying to get me to tell them my story for months. Both of them are fighting the battle of the gray and yoga mats and weird green drinks are always in their hands. I've joked with them and called them cougars much to both of their delights. They come up with stories when I don't give them anything on who I really am.

This week I'm a Romanian Duke who had to flee his motherland because of a government upheaval. Last week I was a spy for the USSR that had to go into hiding. I wonder if they would still flirt and find me appealing if they knew how close to the truth they were.

Behind them is another regular, the lawyer. He's a total dick waffle to everyone who doesn't make a certain amount a year or wear a business suit. I've threatened to cut him plenty of times for talking down to the pretty, young barista that always makes my coffee. If he isn't talking down to a woman, he is trying to hit on them.

When cold air from the swinging door hits my back I find the other regular standing behind me. I've had to threaten the lawyer about her more than once. Fucking pervert.

If he isn't eying her tits with his hand in his pocket playing the one dick shuffle then he's leering at her ass making rude sounds loud enough everyone can hear him. Not that she gives him any attention at all.

The only reason I know this fuckwad is a lawyer is because he tells me every time I threaten to end his life. It's a tired song and dance and eventually one day I'm going to have to come through with some of the stuff I've promised to do to him. But damn do I not want to have to.

I want to be able to sit back and enjoy the simple things in life - like freedom and fresh air. I don't want to have to go back to the violence I left in Russia. I damned sure don't want my hands to be stained with any more blood. I left that life when I left the land of my birth.

But the woman standing behind me reminds me of Moscow in the heart of winter. She always dresses in muted colors; today her suit is all white. Who does that? Her hair is the color of pale moonlight on the snow and she always has it pulled up in some kind of knot at the back of her head. She has an icy beauty that makes men shiver and women not realize how much of a threat she is to them until it's too late.

It's her eyes that make her more than just an ice queen, a frigid beauty held apart from people. Her eyes are huge chocolate orbs that seem to take in everything around her and give nothing away. She would have made very good money in my Russia as an assassin, or a government official. Of course, in Russia sometimes you can be both.

Her damned eyes always make me crave chocolate. I've been coming in here for years and haven't ever asked for a fucking hot chocolate but one day behind her after taking in her melted pools of brown I ordered a hot chocolate. I don't think I've said more than ten words to her during the months she's been coming in but somehow she's sank her talons into me and made me crave something warmer than my lonely studio apartment overlooking a river of pavement.

It pisses me off. She pisses me off, with her perfect face, and her perfect hair, and her soft perfect voice. I step out of line and gesture for her to move up. I don't like having her at my back. I don't like having anybody at my back. Old habits and whatnot.

She gives me that polite, icy smile of hers that's just a little too tight to be friendly and starts to move ahead of me when the chill from the door catches my attention again, but this time something else has the hair on the back of my neck rising other than the D.C. air.

In Russia, especially the prison system, you have to develop almost a sixth sense for knowing when bad shit is about to go down. It saved my life more than I care to admit and today is no different. When a man stands in front of the door wearing a large overcoat scanning the people in line I can tell something is off. I don't hesitate to drop to the ground and roll. Yeah, I could come off looking like a complete idiot who just lost his mind but at least I will be alive to be that idiot.

I take the woman with me. Thankfully when we were switching places she was already in a good position for me to grab her by the hips and pull her back, nestling her ass deeper into me. And, wow, what an ass. We've hit the floor by the time the man has his gun up and firing. I make sure I take most of the force of the fall by landing under her. Two more men come in behind him and start shooting as well. We've rolled under the swinging half door that separates the counter space from the front of the café but that is not going to keep us safe for long.

During our roll, I've ended up on top of her and somehow she's flipped over so that I can look down into brown pools of melted chocolate laced with fear. This is not the time to have a fucking hard-on but my body has told me to fuck off and got one anyway. If I'm fucking extremely lucky she's in shock, which will make it a lot easier to control her movements and actions. And possibly hide the little fucker in my pants. Behind the counter, I force myself to push off of her and crawl to the barista who's served me coffee every day for years. She's dead, shot through the head with her eyes

still open.

She was a college kid who just wanted a date for a football game coming up at the end of the month. She had dreams and hopes and now she is lying on the floor, a puddle of blood spreading from the back of her head. I make a silent promise to her and all of the other dead bodies littering the floor that I will end the people responsible for this.

I reach for the gun the café keeps behind the counter checking to make sure it's loaded. The men who opened fire on the dining area are shouting at one another trying to decide who is going to look in the bathrooms and the back of the store. My time is running out and so is hers.

She sat up, but doesn't move any further. I grab her by the hand and pull her closer to the door leading into the back of the store where they keep their supplies and a small kitchen is set up. She lets me slide her along the linoleum. I'm trying to think of a way to go in the back without them knowing the door has swung open when a man comes through the back.

He has a café logo on his shirt and must have been in the back office when the men came in. As he's walking out I grab the woman and run for the door before it closes back while remaining low. Wood chips are raining down on us from the door frame and the guy who just came out is about to drop fast. I push her ahead of me and slap her on the ass to make her move faster.

Once we're behind the door we can hear the sporadic blasts of gunfire dampened by silencers. I run to the office and shut and lock the door behind us. The deadbolt should keep them busy for a little while, at least until they search for the key in the dead manager's pockets. There's a small window up off the ground and both of us may be able to slip through, although it would be a tight squeeze for me. I know they have others outside waiting for people to come out. I know because that's what I

would do if I was hitting a place like this. Hell, it's what I have done when I excelled at my past profession.

I worked for my government for years before power changed hands and the new people in charge felt I was too dangerous to be allowed to walk free. So they came for me, and I killed a lot of them. They finally arrested me and threw me in a high-security Russian prison. But you don't put dark things in dark places and expect them to rot away and die. Let's just say I was very well received in prison for my skill set with improvised weapons. Killing for the mob is not so different than killing for your government; both are corrupt and full of and backstabbers waiting for the first scent of blood to hit the air.

I got away from that; okay I broke out and ran from that, and now look at where I am. Inside a box with people trying to kill me and my life depending on if I can improvise my way out of shit. America was supposed to be my big change, my retirement from pain and violence. So you can bet I am more than a little pissed that fuckweasles like these guys come in and hit my favorite café. There will be hell to pay.

First I have to get us to a safer place than the back office. The gunmen will be here any minute and I feel each of those minutes ticking by as I look for a way out or a weapon to fight my way out. My eyes take in everything about the room. The window, the desk, the stack of crap in the corner that I'm guessing is product of some kind, bingo - the attic door in the ceiling.

Wide brown eyes watch me as she hunkers down in front of the door. She's trembling and silent tears are slipping down her cheeks making her mascara run in black tracks down her face. Why the hell does that get me hard? It has to be the adrenaline. My body is so used to having it pump through my veins from before that now it's remembering it like an old lover blowing through town. Or maybe because she would look the same with my dick shoved so deep tears are running down her face and she can't take her next breath without me controlling it by taking it out for her.

Whatever the fuck it is, it's pissing me off. So when I go to stand in front of her and speak my voice comes out like rusty nails. "If you are going to stay with me, you are going to have to keep up. Can you?"

Lovely way to make a first impression Ivan, oh and the accent is thicker because your pissed your dick is up after years of not fucking working for anything other than your hand. Sure, take it out on her.

She looks at me for all of a split second and then gives me a big nod that has more tears running down her face.

"We go up, then over, yes?" I need her to understand what the goal is so we don't have to stop in the middle of being killed for me to explain what the fuck is going on.

Again she nods but she doesn't stand up. I hold my hand out for her and she slips hers into mine which is all I need to pull her up and yank her to me. I half drag, half walk her to the desk. I hop up on it and move the piece of tile that is made to look like any other. If you didn't know what the fuck you are looking for you would miss it. I stick my head up first to make sure no one is in there. When all I see is dust and boxes I reach down to pull her on the desk with me.

"You need to lose the heels, princess." She wasn't going to be able to do a lot in those things.

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For the first time the Ice Queen speaks, "No." What the hell just happened? Did she just tell me no? I've killed people for that, not for a while but I can remember doing it.

"Are you fucking kidding me? You do realize we have to be fucking quiet? You can't climb in those and if we get caught you damn sure aren't going to be able to run and I will leave your ass behind."

"You'd be surprised by what I can do in heels." Her chin goes up like I just issued a fucking challenge to her instead of a threat and she carries herself even more like royalty above the commoner than before. While her back is turned I adjust myself and go to help her. She's trying to reach the edge of the hole but can't reach even in her heels. I take her by the waist and lift her so that she can grab the bottom and pull herself up. I don't waste time, following her and replacing the tile.

"Don't move!" I am aware of how thin these fucking floors are, the sound of footsteps are going to sound like a marching band to the people we don't want knowing where we are. I army crawl over to a box and check how heavy it is. It's pretty heavy. I lay back and use my legs to push the box over the tile slowly. When I'm done I reach for the woman taking her by the ankle to pull her to me.

The look she gives me tells me she's wondering what the hell I think I'm doing pulling her ass across a dusty floor. "It's a lot quicker than telling you what to do and having you tell me 'no'."

I still can't believe she told me no. I crawl and pull her all the way over until we're at the roof access that can be used in case of fires. Not sure who would be going up

during a fire, but it is what it is. I grab her close to me and use the wall to push both of us into a standing position near the window that's been permalocked by layers of old paint and time. So much dust is covering the thing I'm not too worried about anyone from street level seeing in.

No, the only worry I have is a nice tight ass rubbing my cock and trying not to think about how long it's been since I sank my dick into a woman. I also have to think of the easiest, quickest way to get her sweet little ass up to the roof now that I'm all out of desks.