



Lethal Deceit

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Category: Romance, Thriller

Description: He vowed to take her down.

Now he'll risk everything to keep her alive.

After being left for dead in a terrorist plot, US Coastguardsman Mick Weston isn't waiting for justice—he's chasing it down with both fists. The woman who played him nearly cost lives...and now, he's hunting her.

Live on primetime, Mick promises the nation he'll bring her in.

But when Samantha sees his face on-screen, she knows her time is up. Trapped by enemies on all sides, her only hope is the man she betrayed.

She holds the key to exposing a leak inside Homeland Security.

He holds her fate in his hands.

With time running out and trust shattered, Mick turns to Hightower Security for backup—and a last-resort plan that could destroy them both.

Dangle her as bait. Lure out the real enemy.

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One

Four Seasons Hotel, South Beach, Miami, Florida.

Samantha

I smooth my hands down my too-tight dress and shimmy into the dining room. Pendant lights cast a soft glow on polished marble, and the low murmur of conversation hums beneath the clink of crystal.

A sea breeze drifts through the terrace doors, brushing past linen-draped tables and waiters in black.

All of it is lost on me. I might as well be walking into a glass-walled interrogation room—sleek, silent, and impossible to escape.

In a way, I am.

I spot her sitting at the bar. Looking immaculate in her white pantsuit and heels. Her green eyes find me almost immediately, and I catch the mildest flickering of her lips before it disappears in a flash.

I extend my hand, tilting my head to one side, pitching my voice as though uncertain. “Gretchen Green?”

Mona accepts my hand, and this time she does smile, but it’s not for me. It’s for the benefit of the bartender and the businessmen currently checking us out. At forty-

seven, Mona is still stunning. High cheekbones, full lips, emphasized by expert application of makeup that takes a decade off.

She's also lithe and lean. A dancer's body. Graceful and elegant.

Her eyes shift to the right. A subtle sign she can't stay long. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Aurora. Your Insta is most impressive. Can I get you a drink before we get down to business?"

She gestures to the bartender, who practically skips to her. I place my order and try not to let my nerves show.

For a few minutes we carry on the ruse. That I'm a fame-hungry actress looking for representation. Then the businessmen depart, and the bartender is busy fixing the overly complicated order I placed.

"I had the dream again," I say quietly.

Her face hardens a fraction. "You shouldn't have come back to Florida so soon."

I take a breath and slowly release it. I know she's watching me like a hawk. Every micro expression, every pacifying movement of my hands. Waiting to see how I perform under stress.

"I had to. I needed to switch out passports." When the groove between her eyebrows deepens, I swallow. "He's haunting me."

She scoffs. "So melodramatic, darling. You're starting to sound like Anne Shirley."

The conversation pauses as the bartender slides my daiquiri in front of me. His eyes linger too long to be polite.

I flick my brunette wig's hair behind my shoulder and watch him closely for his cues.
“Thanks, sweetie.”

His eyes move away from my face, and his lips press together then turn down slightly.

Rats. He doesn't want a bimbo. There goes my free drink.

I can almost hear Mona's voice even though she's not saying a word. Never pay for anything if there's a man who'll foot the bill.

I try again, watching him carefully, unwilling to be beaten. “Do you know where the closest Walmart is?”

He nods and quickly gives me directions, politely, but his feet and body are angling away from me.

“Thanks. I promised to pick up a few things for my mom, but I don't have transport.”

Better. His attention is back on me, and he's nodding in empathy. “It's not far. Long as you have better footwear, you should be fine.”

Perfect. His smile is genuine, and he's right on the cusp of offering to drive me. “Oh, well, no, I don't. I'm such a ditz. I had this appointment with...” I pause to gesture to Mona and pull a face. “But I was so worried when Mom called, I left my sneakers at the motel.”

His eyes shift briefly to Mona then back to me. “I'm heading that way in a little bit. I could...”

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I inhale sharply and reach over the bar to place my hand on his, blinking rapidly as though dispelling tears. I can cry on demand when required—I learned that skill when I was twelve years old—but I’m wearing too much mascara to risk it. “Could you? You have no idea what that would mean to me. Mom is... She’s not doing so well, and the bills... well.”

I glance at Mona, duck my chin, and feign embarrassment. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m being rude. She’s... she’s all that I have left.”

I sniff, and Mona gives me the motherly smile I’ve only ever seen when we’re working together.

“Oh, of course! I understand completely. You’re obviously the kind of person we’re looking for. I can’t tell you how many vapid models I’ve interviewed. It’s all me, me, me. This level of warmth and selflessness is refreshing.”

I shake my head, batting my eyes at the bartender. “Oh, no. My mother is so wonderful... Well... I know you’re busy.”

As though I snapped my fingers, the bartender draws away, but it’s with enough hesitancy that I know he’s right where I want him.

The moment he’s out of earshot, Mona tuts. “You’re distracted. You should have been able to read him in your sleep.”

I let out a sigh and pretend to sip my drink. I never drink alcohol. Order it, yes; find creative ways to tip it out, certainly. Alcohol makes people pliable. And stupid. I’ve

lost count of the number of times I've managed to lift someone's wallet from right under their nose because they've been too drunk to notice.

"Yeah, well, this much heat would throw anyone off their game."

Mona's jaw tightens, letting me know how disappointed she is in me. "With this much heat on you, darling, one slip and you'll be dead."

A lump forms in my throat, but I don't dare swallow. I blink. Once. Twice. Keeping my blink rate normal, not too fast, not too slow. A sure giveaway that I'm not handling the pressure.

"I told you to stay in Hawaii," she says.

I straighten and wish I'd chosen a dress that wasn't so tight. She'll notice if I start to shallow breathe or if my breathing rate increases. Good posture and loose clothing conceal a lot.

"Something didn't feel right... How would you have handled it?"

Her lips pinch. She takes a sip of her own drink. Not a single indication that she's concerned. Either she isn't, or she's hiding it so well, even I can't tell.

Mona doesn't answer my question. She asks one of her own, deflecting. "I wouldn't have allowed myself to be set up."

I lift my chin in defiance. Does she really think I'm that stupid? "He was a businessman from Saudi. It was supposed to be a prank."

Mona blinks slowly, calming herself down before speaking as though I'm a naughty child. "How much did he pay you?"

I know better than to try to lie to her, so I answer immediately. “Fifty thousand.”

Fifty thousand dollars to don a flight attendant’s uniform, entice a Coast Guardsman back to an apartment, slip something into his drink, then leave. Easy money.

Except it wasn’t.

Her eyelids flutter, the closest I’ve seen her to flustered. “Can you identify him?”

I shake my head. “The money was wired to me. Half up front, half after. I never met him. They used a cutout to pass on information and left the uniform in a locker.”

“Who was the cutout?”

I shrug. “Just a random. No one I have ties to.”

Her eyes close, and my heart rate jumps in response. I’d hoped meeting her would reassure me that this would all blow over, but her behavior is having the opposite effect.

Her cadence slows, and for the first time since I’ve met her, I pick up on a pacifying movement of her hands as she twists one of the rings on her fingers. I hold my breath, waiting for her to speak. But when she does, her words are like knives slicing into my chest.

“You ran headlong into this mess. You have no one to blame but yourself.”

Indignation makes my voice pitchy. “Do you still have the contact or not?”

Mona gives me a half eye roll. “He’ll get you to Cuba, but I can’t guarantee it’ll be pleasant.”

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I swallow to try to keep my voice even. I hate boats, and the open water. Traveling to Cuba with a greasy drug smuggler is about as appealing as using them. “I can take care of myself.”

Which we both know is true. From the time I was cast aside, I have been. Mona may have provided shelter and taught me how to provide for myself, but she is not my mother, nor has she ever tried to be.

She reaches into her purse and slides a burner phone across the bar. “Bring ten thousand.”

As I grab hold of the phone and deposit it into my own purse, she pushes back from the bar and slides off the stool. It takes all my control not to launch to my feet and beg her not to go.

“What do I do if Juan doesn’t show up?”

Her chest moves once. Twice. Three times. In rapid succession. She’s breathing too fast. Her pupils are wide, and in horror I recognize she’s as scared as I am.

Mona never shows fear. Is she finally concerned about my welfare? For two brief seconds, my hope soars—only to be obliterated when a cold smile replaces any genuine emotion on her face.

True to form, she walks away with three little words I’ve heard too many times to count: “Not my problem.”

Mick

From the corner of the bar, mugs of beer clink together, a splattering of laughter from a bunch of college kids mingles with Kenny Loggins on the jukebox, and as I wait, I catch the hint of buffalo wings as the waitress brings them out of the kitchen.

She smiles as she passes my table. Nice smile. An invitation. It's the third one she's given me in the twenty minutes I've been sitting here. She's cute too. Blond. Curvy. Blue eyes. Natural. Just my type.

I curl my fist around my draft and avoid her gaze. Not interested. Not since the last blonde I met in a bar nearly cost me my life. As if falling for it wasn't bad enough, the dressing down I received from my CO and the teasing I got from my friends would have been more than enough to keep my libido in check.

Two weeks of debriefs in D.C. with suits demanding answers I don't have—and now they want to pin a medal on me for something I didn't do.

Then there's Hightower. The only reason I'm here, nursing a beer, instead of riding home in a flag-draped box. If Verity hadn't cut the vest off me...

And now I'm chasing the woman who put it there. A con artist. A traitor. The last face I saw before everything went black.

In the corner, the laughter gets louder, and snatches of their crass conversation reach me, assaulting my eardrums and making me pity the waitress for having to serve them.

I take a long swig before I tap Hightower's card on the table and try again to make sense of the bold white text stamped over the shiny black.

Humility before honor.

What's that supposed to mean? Honor is everything. No guts, no glory.

And the way Verity and Reese dealt with the situation was frickin' glorious.

A loud curse interrupts my thoughts and makes me look up. The waitress is apologizing for spilling a beer over one of the kids. He's on his feet, and his face is splotching beet red.

"What's the matter with you? I'm going to stink all afternoon."

She blanches and swallows. "I'm sorry. You moved and knocked the tray out of my hands."

Not satisfied with yelling at her in front of his pals, he threatens her. "Where's the manager?"

Ah, crap. If there's one thing I can't tolerate, it's an entitled bully. Sighing, I get to my feet and announce my presence. "What's the problem?"

His eyes travel over me, and he steps back, his feet angling away from me. As the waitress scoots away to get fresh beer and napkins, one of his pals decides to get brave.

"Go kick rocks, man. This doesn't have anything to do with you."

My back straightens. "Yeah, it does, junior. You're making a nuisance of yourselves."

His chest puffs out, and he's so wasted, he telegraphs his intention to take a swing so

far in advance I only need to sidestep.

He stumbles and crashes into an empty table. Chairs clatter, and he curses as he collects himself off the floor. The head bully rounds the table, not as drunk as his pals but full of adrenaline and outrage.

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“Don’t you know who I am?”

I squint at him. “I don’t care who you think you are; it’s time you paid the lady and found another bar.”

His nostrils flare, and his hand slides to his pocket. Nope. Not going to allow that.

I grab his arm, twist it behind his back, and slam him against the wall. “Pay the lady, and leave.”

He squeals like a rat caught in a trap. “Fine, fine. Let me go, let me go,” he says, panting.

I yank him around and look at his friends. “You hear that? He wants to go. Pay up, and get out.”

The guy who took a swing reaches for his wallet and for his cell on the table, and he hauls out a fistful of twenties. “Here, here, just let him go,” he says.

I eye the other two, who seem frozen in place at the table. “Time to skedaddle.”

Both spring to their feet, but it’s not until they exit past a massive figure watching from the doorway that I spot they all have their cell phones out.

I release the head bully and give him a little shove, propelling him out the open door.

I’m met with a grin that’s almost as massive as the man in front of me. “Looks like I

missed all the fun,” Caleb says.

With a smile, I pick up one of the toppled chairs as the waitress cautiously approaches.

“Thank you. I was freaking out. We have a bouncer, but he’s off sick. I’m on my own until five, and the cook is a little old woman from Vietnam. She barely speaks English.”

I give her a lazy smile. “No worries. Maybe next time, threaten to call the cops.”

She shakes her head, eyes widening as she puts a plastic ketchup bottle back on the table. “I can’t do that. His father’s a lawyer. And he is not a good guy.”

Caleb grunts. “What’s his name?” He pulls out his phone and dials. “Delilah, you have time to run a check on someone for me?”

Whatever her response is, it makes him chuckle. “You know the Lighthouse Bar and Grill? Yeah, that’s it. Call it now. There’s a waitress who needs your help.”

He ends the call and winks at the waitress. “Don’t look worried. Delilah and Adena will deal with him.”

Her brow creases in confusion when the phone rings at the bar, but she leaves us to answer it.

As curious as I am to see how this plays out, I’m not here to drink beer or to deal with the product of too much education and not enough discipline. “Silas said Hightower has a better chance of catching her,” I say.

Caleb nods. “We don’t have to go through the same channels as law enforcement

does. But if we agree to work this, we'll need your continued discretion."

I work my jaw as I consider. "You mean you want me to continue to keep my trap shut about what I heard and saw on the plane?"

He nods. "Without compromising your commitment to homeland security, of course."

I hold back a laugh. "Of course."

A wry smile appears on his lips. "Verity said you kept your cool. Not sure I would have."

I swallow a mouthful of bitter liquid. "Can't say I agree. I should have done something."

"What? One move and you'd have been blown to bits."

"And your point being?"

"You're here. Must be for a reason."

As I mull that over, the waitress finishes her conversation, stunned, glances at us, gives a weak smile, then heads into the kitchen.

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Perplexed by her response to the call, I return to Caleb's statement. "If I survived for a reason, it's to find her and bring her in."

Caleb's eyes narrow in on me. "You don't have the resources."

A knot grips my stomach and doesn't let up. "I may not have pilots and bomb techs on speed dial, but I have resources."

He holds my gaze. "You're talking about your sister? You sure that's wise, involving her?"

My shoulders instinctively pull back. "She volunteered. Not every day her baby bro almost gets blown to kingdom come."

"These people are dangerous. Just think you should consider that."

He's not wrong. I need to consider that, but since a hot blonde led me like a lamb to the slaughter, I've been struggling to consider anything but putting her behind bars where she belongs.

"It's a matter of honor."

His eyebrow hitches. "You sure it's your honor talking? Smells more like revenge to me."

My chest tightens. "Does it matter?"

Caleb releases a long sigh. “That you don’t know is what concerns me.”

Two

Samantha

The second I’m inside, I kick off my heels, toss my Walmart bags on the lumpy bed, and close the door to my two-star motel room.

It’s a significant comedown from the opulence of the Four Seasons, where Mona is staying, but laying low means slumming it. As much as I hate staying in places like this, it’s fitting for a gal from Thomasville, Georgia, hoping to make it as an actress.

For whatever reason, I’m exhausted. And it’s not just because of the trip to Walmart with the generous bartender to shop for my fictitious mother.

Thanks to being in the same state as Mick Weston, I can’t sleep.

Ridiculous, I think as I pull items out of the bags, most of which I’ll leave here, and sort through what I can take. “Pack light,” Juan said. Which is code for “It’ll be tossed, and I’ll scuttle the boat if the Coast Guard stops us.”

Immediately my thoughts are back on him.

It would be just my luck if Mick Weston boarded us. Except I already know he’s in Tampa Bay. Even if he hadn’t told me, I’d have learned it thanks to the media frenzy surrounding Al-Jadi’s capture.

A plane crash. That’s how they reported it to begin with. Then as updates came in, it became apparent that it was so much bigger than an ordinary crash. As far as news cycles go, it doesn’t get bigger than a terror attack. Throw in a good-looking Coast

Guardman, an injured US Air Marshal, and a private security firm that refuses to be named, and the media is salivating for more information.

They don't know the half of how Mick ended up on that plane.

I rip the tag off a hideous sweater and scowl at the warped mirror on the wall before heading into the bathroom. Careful not to wreck my nails, I pry the lid off the toilet and reach inside to pull out the Ziplock bag I left taped to the side. I shake it off, use the towel to dry it, and unzip the bag to haul out my bank card, phone, and passport.

Goodbye, Samantha Duke; hello, Sally Jones.

With a quick glance in the mirror, I wash my hands then remove all the makeup on my face, starting with the eyelashes I glued on this morning. The wig can stay on for now, but I tie it back with a band. After peeling the skintight dress off, I change into cheap, shapeless jeans and a T-shirt with the words Miami Vice emblazoned on them and pull out cheap sunglasses and a baseball cap.

I have three full hours before I need to be at the bay. Juan only ferries passengers at night, but I have one final stop before I can leave for Cuba by way of the Bahamas. I grab a bag of peanuts, swallow a motion sickness pill, and pop the tab of a can of warm Coke. I'm not about to venture out in a boat with an empty stomach, nor am I willing to risk eating anything Juan might have.

Hard to trust someone who's just as likely to sell you for body parts as they are to get you safely to another country.

I jam the peanuts into my mouth, take a long, sickly sweet drink, and open the concealed bottom of my suitcase. I thumb through the cash, lacking the usual thrill I feel when handling this amount of money.

He's to blame. The Coast Guardsman. He's the reason I didn't enjoy spending a single dollar of it. Fifty thousand dollars should have bought a lot of happiness, and I'm still at a loss as to why I haven't been able to enjoy it.

I take out the ten thousand Juan wants then reattach the false bottom, packing lightweight cheap clothes, toiletries, and sneakers on top of it. He'll look. I know he will. He'll check for weapons. My only bargaining chip is his greed. If he gets me to Cuba safely, I'll give him another ten thousand.

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It's double his usual price. But it's the only way to be sure he doesn't take the money by force then throw me into the water. A shiver runs down my spine at the thought of being eaten by ravenous sharks.

Fear clutches at my entire body, and I have to slow my breathing to calm down. "You can do this. You can do this," I say, repeating it as a mantra.

I close my eyes and picture myself walking through the streets of Old Havana, dressed in designer clothes, sleeping on fifteen-hundred-thread-count sheets, sipping on Dom, and completely and utterly at peace.

But my peace is destroyed when a familiar voice tickles at the back of my mind.

No one will care if you die.

"Yeah, yeah. What else is new?" I say aloud.

I need a distraction. Anything to occupy my mind.

I grab the remote, switch on the TV, and return to packing, barely listening but glad for the noise so I don't have to think too much.

Shorts, bra, hat, wig, glasses, cash...

Behind me, commercials blast into the room, then a newsreader breaks into my concentration.

Ugh. Who wants to hear about some junkie who's washed up on South Beach? I reach for the remote and hit the mute button.

A picture flashes on screen, then a video runs. The junkie, who's with a woman wearing a Disneyland T-shirt, accepts something from her then walks away. The location is obvious from the Miami Ferris Wheel in the background.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I hit the mute button again, catching the last snippet from the anchor.

"...police would like to speak to the woman. If you know her whereabouts, contact the Miami?—"

I change the channel, heart in my throat as I locate another news channel also playing the same footage.

"...wanted in connection with the death?—"

I switch again, and this time, I sink onto the bed in despair.

"...examination reveals the man sustained a bullet wound to the temple and can confirm he's been missing for over a month. The police are appealing to the public for any information about the last hours of his life."

I shut the TV off, hands trembling as I try to reason my way out of this.

I blow out a breath. Slowly.

They're tying up loose ends.

And if I'm not careful, mine will be the next body they feature on the news.

Mick

I twist my fork idly and shovel in the lasagna Mom made me. It's good. It always is, but even her cooking and the apple pie she baked isn't enough to drag my thoughts away from the woman who humiliated me. As my thoughts cloud, my fingers grip the fork tighter, and I don't realize I'm stabbing the food rather than eating it until I look down and see it's cut to ribbons.

From my second-floor apartment window, the sky is clear and blue. No wind. Water is dead calm.

I should be at work. Would be if it weren't for some BS about trauma. They think it'll impact my judgment or my ability to focus.

It's an insult.

Focusing on helping people would be better than sitting around replaying every moment I spent with her to the time I woke up with explosives strapped to my chest.

I force the dish of lasagna down, not out of hunger but because I know Mom will call to make sure I'm eating properly. Then Dad will get on the line and ask me if I want to take the boat out. Which really means he's disappointed I haven't been to church in a while.

I abandon my lunch and get to my feet, so I can watch the beach instead. Hardly any swell, but that doesn't mean there won't be accidental drownings today. I should be out there, not trapped inside.

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She's the one who needs to be locked up. Why am I the one suffering?

A quiet knock at the door jolts me out of my thoughts. I'm not in the habit of arming myself, but since this happened, my trusty SIG Sauer M17 hasn't left my side.

I palm it, and stand to one side of the door. "Yeah?"

"It's me," a female voice answers.

I unlock the dead bolt and fling the door open, perplexed. "What are you doing here?"

Brooke's arms are filled with brown sacks, and she's carrying her briefcase. "What do you think I'm doing? You asked me to help, so I'm helping."

I close the door behind her and lock it again. "Yeah, but what are you doing in Florida?"

Her reply comes out muffled as I follow her into my tiny kitchen. She dumps the bags on the counter and pushes a strand of her inky hair behind her ear. "My editor gave me a little rope on a story, so I made it stretch all the way to Tampa. I think I might have found something."

As she starts pulling groceries out of the bags, my eyes snag on the briefcase. "What is it?"

"Give me a sec, will you? I'm hungry." She sniffs the air, and her eyes widen. "Is that

lasagna?”

I nod. “Mom’s filled my freezer.”

She groans as she abandons her store-bought junk, opens the cutlery drawer, and hauls out a fork. “Is there any lasagna left?”

I gesture behind us. “On the table.”

She lets out a yip then almost skips to the table, sinks in to the seat opposite mine, and pulls the dish toward her. “Thank you, Lord, for this food!”

As she demolishes my leftovers, I grab her briefcase and put it in front of her. “What did you find?”

She ignores me, shoveling in mouthfuls of food like she hasn’t eaten in a week.

“Oink, oink, Miss Piggy,” I say.

Her face twists, and she replies in between bites. “At least I take the time to chew. You swallow food whole.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, I have to eat on the fly. What’s your excuse?”

She ignores me completely, so I toy with the lock on her briefcase. “Since when did you start locking this thing?”

Her fork pauses midway to her mouth. “I’m working on something I need a little extra security on.”

“But you’re being careful?”

She puts her fork down and pushes the dish away. “I didn’t come here to talk about me. I came because I found something.”

If I wasn’t so curious about what she’s found out, I’d push it a little more. Brooke has a knack for getting herself into trouble.

She might be older than me by eighteen months, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t the one trying to look out for her. I’ve lost count of the number of times she said something, or did something, or found out something that backfired. We got pretty skilled at hiding things from Mom and Dad, but there were times growing up I’d prayed for a less adventurous sister. She’s smart and determined, but sometimes she’s too stubborn for her own good.

But right now, that’s exactly who I need on my side.

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a key then opens the case. “Before I show you, I want you to promise to visit Mom. She’s worried about you.”

I can feel my forehead creasing in annoyance. “I saw her a week ago.”

Her mouth tugs down. “Yes, but that’s like a year in Mom time. You could have died on that plane, Mick.”

“I realize that.”

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Her shoulders droop. “All I’m saying is that she has the right to be concerned. We’re all concerned. You’re... becoming obsessed with this woman.”

I choke out a laugh. “She strapped a bomb to my chest. Wouldn’t you be looking for her?”

She tilts her head to one side. “I’m just saying... no one faults you for wanting her to be caught, but it’s changing you. I haven’t heard you rejoice that you survived once. Aren’t you thankful?”

I rub my hand across my mouth. Thankful. My sister wants me to be thankful I was humiliated by a leggy blonde.

“Are you going to show me what you found or not?”

Brooke lets out a sigh. “You promise to visit Mom?”

I nod.

Her eyes narrow, but she relents. “I can’t stay long. My flight leaves in two hours, but I was talking to a secretary at the FBI, and he sent me the artist’s impression you worked on with them.”

Every muscle in my body tenses. Even I don’t have a copy of it. Too personally involved. “That’s it?”

Brooke’s lip catches on her teeth, and she taps her finger on the file. “The FBI is

trialing new facial recognition software. Strictly hush-hush after the last debacle where two people were wrongly arrested, but they have an eighty percent positive match off two CCTV images.”

“Taken where?”

She clears her throat. “I’m getting to that. What you need to know is that the CCTV images connect her to at least one homicide victim.”

A chill snakes down my spine. “I’ve been saying all along she’s a killer.”

Brooke’s lips purse. “It’s not exactly a smoking gun. She could have just been talking to him. The man has been ID’d as a tourist with no prior convictions.”

“Has been? This is recent?”

She nods, pulls out a grainy photo, and points to the date stamp. “This was taken a month ago.”

As I squint at the photo, realization slams into me like a thunderclap. “That’s the Bayside Market.”

Brooke blows out a breath. “Yep. She was in Miami.”

Miami. Four hours’ drive from where I live and work.

“I need to do something.”

“The PD are working with the FBI and trying to locate her.”

I grab the photo and jab my finger into it. “This was taken a month ago. She could be

long gone.”

Brooke nods. “Right. I know. Which is why they are appealing for members of the public to help locate her.”

I scrunch the paper in disgust. “Unless there’s a reward, we have no chance.”

She leans back in her chair. “You’re not thinking. If they offer a reward, they’ll be inundated with false reports.”

In annoyance, I push back from the chair. “She’s probably in South America by now.”

Brooke rises to her feet. “I knew I shouldn’t have told you. They’re making progress, but instead of being pleased, you’re angry.”

“No, I’m not pleased. I’m sitting here on my butt while the woman who tried to kill me is picking off her victims.”

She closes her eyes and mutters something under her breath. “Calm down. You’re going to bust a valve. If you react this way when I bring you good news, I’m not helping anymore.”

I’m so agitated that I’ve started to pace. “There must be people who know her, know her plans.”

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“Sure. Which is why they’re utilizing the news to?—”

I spin around. “It’s not enough. People are desensitized to death. They want something sensational to entertain them. That’s the only way to get more airtime.”

Brooke’s face twists. “Never let a tragedy go to waste. Works for politicians too.”

My brain starting to spark, I nod. “Right? So let’s give them something that will get people’s attention and make them look for her.”

“Such as?”

“Get me on prime time. That reporter you know... the one who wanted an exclusive. I’ll tell the public what kind of a woman she is.”

Brooke’s face falls. “I don’t think your superiors will approve of that.”

I give her a head shake. “They think I helped capture a terrorist. May as well take advantage of it.”

Brooke’s eyes shift upward, and she swallows. “I need some time to think this through. You haven’t been authorized to give an official interview. You could be risking your career or a serious misconduct charge.”

A warning tickles my gut, but I brush it aside. “Make the call, Brooke. It’s time we showed the world who she is.”

Samantha

I close the door to my motel room, on edge, and feeling queasy even though the motion sickness meds should have started working. If they aren't settling my stomach now, what hope do I have onboard a cruiser for four hours?

I breeze down the stairs, heading to the parking lot below. I'm not about to call attention to myself by leaving without checking out, so I go through the motions, ready to carry on pretending I'm here visiting my mother.

The clerk is behind the desk, eating a sandwich that stinks to high heaven. Behind him, the TV is on, reruns of Friends, and he's swiveled his chair so he can watch.

I drop my suitcase with a thump, drawing his attention. "Room 203, checking out," I say.

He drops the sandwich and looks me over. "Riiight. Key?"

I hand it over and idly watch the screen as he wipes his hands before punching my room number into the computer.

"You take anything from the minibar?" he asks.

"Nope." I didn't need to. The door locks were so flimsy, I was able to clean out the minibar in the room next to me.

Again, his eyes trail over me, and I shift my weight. "Something the matter?"

He squints. "I feel like I've seen you somewhere before."

It takes all my patience not to roll my eyes. "You checked me in three days ago."

His mouth flops open, his eyes narrowing to slits. “Yeah, yeah. That must be it. You looked different.”

I purse my lips and check my watch. “Is that it? I have somewhere to be.”

He nods, the perplexed expression glued to his face. “Sure. Yeah. Sure. You want a receipt?”

I grab my suitcase and turn my back on him. “Enjoy your sandwich.”

“Sure,” he says.

Picking up my pace, I wheel my suitcase behind me and unlock my rental car. Unlike the motel, I have no choice but to abandon it somewhere, which will place a red flag on the name I used to rent it. Pity. I liked playing the role of the dutiful daughter, but thanks to my mistake in Tucson, it’s unavoidable.

I close the door, lock it in case of carjackers, and blast the air conditioning as I reverse out onto the Jimmy Buffett Highway. With the light traffic, I make it to my destination with plenty of time to access my storage locker and get to the marina.

Finding a parking space isn’t going to be an issue. I locate one, drive into it, then reach into the glove compartment for my Accessible Parking Space Permit and leave it on the dash. To really sell it, I slowly climb out of the car, as if each movement causes me pain. When I’m sure that no one is watching me, I pick up my pace and fast walk until I find my locker. I haven’t been here in over a year, so I check the lock hasn’t been tampered with before I remove the key from around my neck, push it into the lock, and open the roller door.

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Inside is nothing but a refrigerator.

With a glance behind me, I open the freezer compartment, grab the ice tray, and flip it over. Stuck to the back is a memory card with enough information to call into question the integrity of the entire justice system. With this, I can buy my way out of almost any situation.

But not yet.

Not when I can still salvage my livelihood.

Feeling lighter now I have it back, I push it into my bra, put the tray back, and close the freezer door. I don't bother to close the locker. There's nothing of value in it now anyway, and the woman who rented it a year ago is about to disappear forever.

As I return to my car, my phone rings. Only two people have this number, and I don't want to hear from either of them right now.

I climb into my car and remove the permit. Leaving it will draw too much attention. A missing woman is one thing; a missingdisabledwoman is another.

When I recognize the number on screen as one of Mona's burner phones, I smile. "Calling to wish me bon voyage?"

"You haven't seen it," she says.

I tug the seat belt across my body and click it into place. "Seen what?"

“Where are you?”

I glance at the storage locker. “On my way to the marina. What’s going on?”

“It’s him. Your Coast Guardsman. He’s...everywhere.”

I freeze, sure I misheard. “What are you talking about? He can’t be everywhere.”

Her voice comes out shrill. “Call me back when you’ve seen it.”

A blip sounds in my ear as she sends me a link, and I yank my phone away to see what’s gotten her so spooked. I click the link, and my breath catches in my chest.

Him. Filling the screen. Heat tracks over my cheeks and spreads to my entire body as I read the banner scrolling along the bottom.

NBC6 Exclusive: Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer Vows Revenge.

A voice-over begins, mixed with dramatic music. “You’re about to hear a chilling story straight out of the mouth of a man who, by rights, should be dead.”

I swallow as he appears, gazing out over the water as if searching for someone to rescue.

“Meet Mick Weston. Helicopter Rescue Swimmer. He’s been touted as a hero by the president, but you won’t hear him call himself that. He says he’s a victim, a victim of a woman who may be a cold-blooded killer.”

The camera cuts to the reporter. She’s in her late forties, her hair styled in a chin-length bob. Her expression is serious, empathetic, as she speaks. “Mick, you’ve shied away from telling your story. The question on everyone’s lips is ‘Why now?’”

“Because people deserve to know the truth,” he says.

“Mick, it’s been reported that you helped thwart a terror attack to rival 9/11. Are you saying that’s not true?”

He shifts in his seat, clearly uncomfortable. “The truth is that the threat is still out there.”

The reporter nods. “And by ‘threat’—you’re talking about the female terrorist who lured you into a death trap?”

I curse under my breath. “I am not a terrorist.”

Mick’s shoulders stiffen, and his jaw works. “The public has a right to know she may still be in the US. But if there is any chance of catching her, we need everyone to be vigilant.”

On screen flashes an artist’s sketch of me so eerily close to how I look there is no doubt in my mind that Mick recalls every last detail of our brief encounter.

“She may look different now, wearing baggy clothing, maybe changed her hair or eye color,” he says.

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My mouth runs dry.

“She’s ruthless, and she’s desperate. There’s every chance she murdered a man to cover her tracks.”

The reporter feigns shock. “There’s evidence?”

His eyes shift to someone off camera before settling on the reporter. “What we need are eyewitnesses to come forward. That’s the only way we can stop her before anyone else gets hurt.”

The reporter’s breathing increases. “Is there anything else you’d like to say?”

His chin rises, a vein in his neck pulses, and his nostrils flare. “Yeah. I’m going to direct this to the woman who made the mistake of messing with me.” He leans forward and jabs his finger as though punctuating his words. “Whoever you are, know this: I swear on my honor as a United States Coast Guardsman that I will find you and bring you in.” He sits back, body rigid and his face set in hard lines.

My fingers curl around my phone as waves of nausea flow over me.

“You heard it here first. Mick Weston is a man on a mission. If you’ve seen this woman, contact...”

My stomach heaves, and I toss the phone on the passenger seat as a wave of dizziness hits me. There is no way Juan will take me to Cuba now Mick’s called on the Coast Guard to search for me. Mick Weston just painted a target on my back.

I'm as good as dead.

Three

Mick

Three seconds after the interview hit the airwaves, the phone calls started.

Most from buddies and my crew, who took it as an opportunity to rib me even more, and for the past three hours I've been inundated with friend requests and messages—mostly from women—and had to set my profile to private.

Brooke has sent me a solitary message that reeks of sarcasm. You're now the pinup boy for the Coast Guard.

She's not wrong. I'm getting attention for all the wrong reasons, and my CO isn't happy I've dragged the reputation of the Coast Guard into the fray.

I crack open a beer and settle down in front of the TV, switching on ESPN. If I'm lucky I might be able to catch some of the Gators/Tulane game.

The Gators have managed to extend their lead when music starts to play. Tinny music like it's coming from a cheap speaker. I mute the TV and listen as I try to locate the source of the music. When it's apparent it's coming from close to where I'm sitting, I leave my beer bottle on the coffee table and start looking. My eyes snag on the corner of a red plastic phone underneath the cushion at the end of the sofa.

What the—? Where did this come from?

Thinking Brooke or one of my friends must have left it here, I pick it up and answer. "Yeah?"

The voice that rumbles down the line has me scratching my head. “So, we’ve established you’re impulsive. Anything else I need to know about you?” Silas says.

“Why is there a cell phone in my couch?”

“For emergencies,” he says.

“Yeah, but how’d it get here?”

“Trade secret. Back to your stunt on prime time. Dumb. Really dumb. For multiple reasons.”

I sink into the sofa. “What choice did I have? You said you’d help, but you’ve done squat.”

He grunts. “There’s a right way to do this.”

“The right way isn’t yielding results fast enough.”

Silas lets out an exasperated sigh. “Start using the brain God gave you. She’s desperate and cornered. Two things she wasn’t before. Who knows what she’s prepared to do.”

“All the more reason to catch her as quickly as possible.”

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“I told you I could help, and I meant it. The question is, are you ready to stop thinking about what you want and consider the big picture?”

“I am thinking about the big picture.”

“Really? And in this big picture did you factor in that whoever hired her now knows your name and can find out where you live?”

He may as well have sucker punched me. “Let them come. I can deal with them.”

Silas chokes out a laugh. “You sure about that? We managed to get a cell phone into your apartment, and you didn’t notice.”

My gut tightens, and my anger flares at the reminder. “I’ll be more careful.”

“It’s too late for that. If you’re going to throw tantrums, you’re going to make this harder than it needs to be.”

“Who—”

“Do I think I am? I’m the person who knows exactly where she is, that’s who I am.”

My voice escapes in a hiss. “You found her?”

“Caleb’s outside your door waiting. You have one more chance, and we cut you loose. Got it?”

Sure enough, a hefty fist pounds on my door. “Open up.”

I throw open the door, phone cradled between my ear and shoulder. “If you really do have her location, you have my word.”

Silas rumbles in my ear. “Swear it on your mother’s life.”

Another low blow. “I swear. Where is she?”

“Pass the phone to Caleb.”

I shove the phone into his brawny chest, and he jams it to his ear. His forehead grooves as impatience makes my foot tap on the carpet.

His eyes lock onto mine. “Got it,” he grunts. He tosses the phone at me. “Time to go.”

Samantha

I walk into the nail salon, holding a box, and remove my shades as my eyes adjust. The salon is open, and all the reclining chairs are full with women either in the process of a cheap pedicure or soaking with their fingertips wrapped in foil to remove shellac from their nails. Barely any spare me a glance as I breeze past, heading right to the back, announcing to any of Irina’s staff that she has a delivery.

They know better than to ask questions, and the generic uniform I keep in my suitcase with a vague logo, the fake pager, and the device that mimics the scanner couriers use ensures that no one else will ask why I’m here either.

The door is closed, so I rap my knuckles, once, twice, then four times, and hope she hasn’t changed it since we last spoke.

“Da?” she calls out.

I try the door. Locked, as always. “Delivery.”

The door opens, and she peers out at me, eyes heavily rimmed with black, a cigarette in her hand. Today, like most days, she’s dressed to look like what she wants people to think she is, a Russian immigrant, part gypsy, part businesswoman in her flowing dress and shawl.

Her eyes widen then instantly narrow as she looks over my shoulder. “No deliveries today,” she says.

My heart rate quickens. Irina’s salon is a front for her more lucrative business of selling passports. She’s the best in Miami. Without her I stand no chance.

I hold up my hand to reveal a wad of rolled-up cash concealed in my palm. A thousand dollars just to gain entrance is a small price to pay.

She blinks rapidly, almost as if mentally counting the notes, before she beckons me inside. I barely have time to orient myself before a gun is jammed against my temple.

The empty box tumbles out of my hands, and Irina kicks it aside. “Why are you bringing trouble to my door?”

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I swallow and try not to flinch. “I need another passport.”

Irina mutters under her breath in Russian. “I’m an artist. You think I can pluck one out of the air?”

I try for a casual smile. “You’re a magician. Everyone knows that.”

She laughs, and the cool metal leaves my temple. “You look like crap, Samantha. Here, come, have a drink. Then we talk business.”

The last thing I feel like is vodka, but I’m hardly in a position to decline. I settle down on the velvet couch and watch as she pours two fingers of vodka.

My gaze locks on the glass as she hands it to me. I lift it to my lips and linger before I see her tip hers back. She may be my ticket out of here, but that doesn’t mean I trust her.

I swallow in one gulp, hoping that’ll lessen the hit my empty stomach will take. “I need a Canadian passport.”

Irina frowns and takes a drag of her cigarette. “And you need it?”

I tap my finger on the top of my index nail. “Overnight.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “She thinks I’m a miracle worker now!”

As much as I dislike being mocked, I laugh along with her. “Can you do it?”

Irina's mouth twists to one side, exaggerating her wrinkles. "No."

My stomach drops to my toes. "No?"

"Nyet," she says, repeating it in Russian.

"I have the cash."

"Da. But you are not worth the risk."

I slowly rise to my feet. "You took my money..."

The gun appears in her hand almost as if she were a magician. "Proshchaniye."

I raise my hands, backing up. "I'll pay double."

She shakes her head and advances on me, shooing me out of her office.

"Triple," I say.

Her eyes narrow. "You're not worth it."

The familiar sting of rejection stabs into my chest as I straighten up, pull my shoulders back, and try to project confidence I no longer feel.

I step out into the bright sunshine, and my shoulders start to itch. Like someone is pointing a gun at my back, just waiting to pull the trigger. With practiced care, I tuck away my emotion, hold fast to the hope that I can still convince Juan to transport me, and walk toward where I parked my car.

I have less than twenty minutes to make a decision, and if I get it wrong, my next

mistake could be my last.

Four

Mick

After hustling to throw a few things together, including extra ammo and handcuffs, I'm ready to leave. Technically, I can't arrest anyone on land, but I can detain someone while the PD is called.

I flick Brooke a quick text so she knows I'm not going to be at home for a while then follow Caleb outside. When he gestures to it, I toss my bag in the back of the black Jeep parked out front and climb in.

Heavy metal fills the interior, making me wince. Never been a fan of that kind of music. I'm not even sure if it qualifies as music. Noise, maybe.

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Rather than sit in the front, Caleb slides in beside me and gestures to the driver to pull out. “Turn it down.”

The driver, a guy younger than me, grunts and turns the volume down with all the petulance of a teenager.

“What’s his problem?”

Caleb clicks his seat belt into place. “Newbie’s sulking because Reese didn’t let him fly the plane on the way out here.”

In front of him, the driver groans. “When are you going to quit calling me a newbie? My name is Jake.”

Righto. “Mick,” I say to him.

Jake nods and smirks in the rearview mirror. “Yeah. I know. After that interview everyone knows who you are.”

Caleb points at my belt. “Safety first.”

I ram the belt into place and look across at him. “Where is she?”

He takes his time answering, rubbing his chin. “Don’t you want to know how we found her?”

“You can tell me after I have her in cuffs.”

Caleb nods. “You hungry?”

I squint at him. “What? No.”

His eyes snap to the driver. “Jake? You hungry?”

Jake nods. “I could eat.”

Caleb rubs his hands together. “Settled then. Find the nearest drive-thru, and we’ll eat on the way.”

“On the way where?”

“You’ll see. But I think you’ll be right at home.”

Something isn’t lining up, but I owe these guys my life, so I ask another question. “Why aren’t Reese and Verity here?”

Caleb smiles. “Reese is here. But he’s at the hangar with the plane, and Verity is at home, training their new pooch.”

I’d probably have known that if I’d ever called her back.

“So they aren’t why you’ve found her?”

He grins at me. “They did their part. But after we knew she was in Miami, it’s just been a matter of following the trail of destruction.”

It’s not an answer, but I play along.

“How?”

“She has an MO, same as any criminal. Trouble is, she’s smarter than most.”

She could be a frickin’ genius for all I care. All criminals look dumb in orange jumpsuits.

“Tell me about the trail you’re following.”

He gives me a clipped nod. “The PD were inundated with calls after your broadcast went out. Think they took you off their Christmas card list.”

My gut twists into a knot. “Yeah. I figured. But something must have come out of it if you’ve located her?”

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Caleb shakes his head. “We found her because we already had an idea of where to look.”

“How?”

His gaze falls, and he looks downward, stalling maybe. “We have our own people on this, and we have access to programs they don’t.”

“That’s conveniently vague.”

He laughs lightly. “I’m not about to give away all the ingredients to our special sauce. Let’s just say that we had a head start.”

This guy is grating on my nerves. I’m itching to find her, and he’s wasting time. I’m opening my mouth to ask another question when Jake pipes up.

“There’s a Chick-fil-A up ahead. You want that?”

Caleb cranes his neck to see out the windshield. “Yeah. Get seven grilled chicken sandwiches.”

I cock my eyebrow. “Seven?”

Caleb grins. “Yeah. I’m not that hungry.”

Five minutes later, Jake distributes the food, but rather than dig in, he twists in his seat and eyes Caleb.

In response, Caleb closes his eyes. “Thank you, Lord, for this food. Please bless our efforts, guide us, be our shield, strengthen us, and help us to not be led by our emotions. Amen.”

I can’t help but think that prayer was mostly about me, but I add my “amen” before chomping into the sandwich I wasn’t planning on eating.

Caleb puts away three, and Jake only manages two, which he eats almost faster than Caleb does. The second he’s finished, we’re back on the road again, with Caleb dropping tidbits about the woman who we’re on the hunt for.

“Based on the tip-offs, we have around a dozen men who have reported spending time with her over the past six months.”

“She’s a pro?”

He shakes his head. “No. Things never get physical. And each man has a different impression of her. To one man, she’s demure; to another, she’s confident.”

“Oldest con in the book. Become whatever you think they want you to be. All the better to fleece unsuspecting marks,” Jake says from the front.

Caleb nods. “As far as we can tell, she’s had at least six identities that she rotates,” he says.

“Do you have her real name? She told me it was Stella.”

His mouth presses down. “Yeah. We think we do. Not a pretty story.”

Is this guy for real? He’s feeling sorry for her.

“What? She grow up on the streets or something?”

He shakes his head and puts his half-eaten sandwich down. “Parents handed her over to a total stranger when she was seven. Cute kid, she was, too.”

Hard to brush a statement like that off without coming across as heartless. “Can parents do that?”

It’s Jake who answers, grinding the words out. “Yeah. Parents who want to give up their kids just find Facebook groups full of wannabe adopters and claim they’re looking to give their kid a better life.”

I glance at Caleb for confirmation. His jaw’s set, expression tight. “Plenty of parents happy to sign away their rights.”

I thought I’d seen the worst humanity had to offer. Turns out I was wrong.

“And this is legal?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

Jake barks a humorless laugh. “Yeah. It’s called rehoming. Like kids are pets.”

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Disgust coils in my gut. I stare out the window, watching the world blur past. “It’s abandonment. Dressed up with paperwork.”

Jake swerves around a corner, harder than necessary, and I grab the handhold to brace myself.

Caleb exhales slowly. “Samantha Duke was rehomed twice before she was eight.”

Jake blows out a breath. “She would’ve gotten real good at trying to be whatever the family wanted.”

My fingers clench into a soft fist. “You know all this—does that mean you know her real name?”

“Samantha Abigail Duke,” Caleb says.

Samantha. I finally have a name to put to the face I see each night in my dreams. But the picture Caleb and Jake are painting of her isn’t the one I’d dreamed up.

“Plenty of people have lousy childhoods. That doesn’t give them a free pass to do whatever they want.”

“Never said it did. But you branding her a terrorist isn’t entirely accurate.”

I choke out a laugh. “She tried to kill me. How is she not a terrorist?”

“I’m not convinced she did. But guess we’ll find that out soon enough. Long as you

keep your head, that is.”

My appetite gone, I fold the wax paper over the rest of my food and look out the window. Just beyond, beside Government Cut, sits the Miami Beach Marina—no fixed bridges, deep water, and direct access to the open sea.

I swing my gaze back to Caleb. “You think she has a boat?”

He swipes his mouth and balls the wrappers in his fist. “I think she’s trying to get out of Miami undetected. She’s not at the airport, and we’ve put the word out at the other marinas. That leaves this one.”

“And we stopped to get food?”

Caleb stuffs the remaining sandwiches into the bag. “She’s not going anywhere until it’s dark. We’ve got time.”

His relaxed attitude is starting to get to me. “You don’t know that. Smugglers are getting smarter. They’re hiring charter boats and posing as tourists. She could be halfway to the Bahamas.”

He’s silent, and Jake doesn’t say a word. “What? You know what boat she’s on?”

“We know enough.”

My jaw starts to ache from clenching it. “Stop the car.”

Caleb’s eyebrow raises, and I catch Jake’s confused expression in the rearview. “We’re nearly?—”

“Stop the car, or I’ll stop it for you,” I say.

Beside me, Caleb lets out a sigh. “You don’t want to do this.”

As Jake pulls into the nearest vacant parking spot adjacent to the marina, I grab my pack.

“Yeah. I do. You’re not being straight with me. No way am I going to run into this with two guys I can’t trust.”

I give him enough time to come clean before I wrench the door open, pausing only to pull my pack on and tug the straps tight.

“Tell Silas thanks but no thanks. I’ll find her on my own,” I say over my shoulder before I stalk across the road.

Samantha

Anxiety and paranoia clutching at me, I leave my rental as far away from the marina as I can. No longer sure it’s such a good idea to bring my suitcase, I retrieve everything of value, including my gun, money, and a change of clothes and shoes. The memory card is encased in plastic and still lodged firmly inside my bra. If I do get wet, it should be fine.

With a pack on my back, my hair hidden under a pink bucket hat, aviator shades on my face, and the running shoes and baggy clothes I’m wearing, I look like any other tourist out for a stroll to see the expensive yachts before the sun sets. To add to the effect, I’m carrying a bag filled with souvenirs.

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I walk unhurriedly, but to be really careful, I drag my left foot, which completely changes my gait. There is little to no chance anyone will recognize me; if anything, they'll mistake me for a teenage boy, but every step I take is still excruciating.

As I reach the entrance, a man appears on the jetty with his dog.

Smothering a curse, I pull my phone out and press it to my ear. "Hi, it's me. Where'd you say the boat was again?"

He passes by, shoulders juttied back, mouth pressed down, probably thinking I'm the hired help for one of the other yachts.

He's still in earshot, so I continue in case he questions me. "Okay, yeah, sure. Right at the end, thanks. No, no. I can find my way there. But the uniform is provided, right?"

His footsteps recede, and I angle my phone so I can check to see if he's really gone.

On a whim, I call Mona. I'm not even sure why. Maybe to say goodbye. Maybe to say I'll call when I reach Cuba.

Maybe to hear her voice before I embark on what could be my final voyage.

A soft breeze rustles my plastic bag as I wait for her to answer. But it's not her voice that echoes in my ear. It's a mechanical female one I shouldn't be hearing.

The number you have tried is no longer in service.

I glance at my screen to confirm I called the correct number before trying again. Again, the disconnected phone number message bleats in my ear. In a daze, I push the phone into my jacket pocket and continue down the jetty toward the slip where Juan's yacht is moored.

The sun is starting to disappear, and along with it, my courage. First Irina. Now Mona.

At least Irina told me to my face.

But Mona cutting me out of her life... It stings more than if she'd slapped me. Hot tears are brewing in my eyes for the first time since I was a kid. Furious with myself for caring, I blink them away and allow my anger to propel me forward.

I'm stupid. So stupid to think she'd care.

Why would she? I'm worthless to her now.

My eyes fix on the slip number, and I freeze. Juan is on the jetty, but it's the two cops beside him that make me suck in a breath.

Momentarily caught in indecision, my feet angle to the exit, my shoulders already turning when my brain snags on details. I slide my glasses down a fraction to let in more light, confirming this may be about Juan and not me.

The uniforms are standard blue, but the arm insignia isn't a yellow Miami PD emblem. For whatever reason, out-of-state cops are talking to Juan. It's weird, but it's not something I can think about now. I turn on my heel and take two faltering steps before I realize there's someone else heading this way.

The light is fading fast, and the only illumination comes from the lights inside the

yachts. I squint, my sunglasses making it even harder to make out the details. He's moving with purpose, his eyes shifting from a piece of paper in his hand to slip number after slip number, as though he's checking them.

Nothing about him screams cop, but something about how he carries himself commands my attention. Physically, he's strong. Broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist. Maybe a dock assistant?

I pick up my pace, crossing my fingers Juan doesn't do anything stupid to draw attention to me. I don't want to explain the amount of cash I'm carrying, but he's hardly likely to do that when he's already under scrutiny.

Distracted and tired, I abandon my slower walk to get out of here quicker. Ahead of me, the man looks up and seems to do a double take. Probably looking at the cops behind me.

Still... better to be cautious. I take my glasses off and keep walking. With any luck, he'll be too focused on what he's doing to notice me.

But he has noticed me. His body has gone rigid, and his methodical search for slip numbers has been abandoned. His pace increases. As he passes a brightly lit yacht, I catch a flash of determination, set jaw, lips compressed, and eyes locked on me like I'm a target.

I suck in a breath as recognition slams into me so hard it knocks me back a step.

Him.

He's here.

Panic gripping me, I frantically run through my options. Behind me is my way out.

But even if I can talk my way past the cops, he'll be hot on my heels. My breathing starts to speed up, and I take short, shallow breaths, which only leads to hyperventilation.

I search alongside the jetty for exits and find none other than the inky water. There's barely enough space between to slip into it, and I stand no chance against a Coast Guard rescue swimmer.

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Heavy footsteps come from behind me, making me spin around. The cops are running, and one appears to be reaching for his weapon.

“Get down!” someone yells.

I have no time to think about why when a shot is fired. I duck, screaming as I search for cover. With nowhere to go and no hope, I leap for the closest yacht. I miss by an inch—my head slams against the yacht’s hull, and I plunge into the water, my scream cut off as I gulp in a mouthful of salt and panic.

Pain screams through my skull, sharp and blinding, but I fight against it—holding my breath, straining to spot the boat’s ladder as my clothes drag like chains around my limbs. My head breaks the surface, and I’m mortified to see the current has pulled me away from the lights of the jetty.

Stupid. So stupid.

I suck in a breath, salt stinging my throat, only to plunge under again. Panic flares. I thrash upward, hands clawing through the freezing dark. Gasping, I break the surface—just long enough for my palms to slap uselessly against the waves.

Pressure builds in my chest, lungs screaming. A voice—familiar, cruel—rises from the pit of memory and sinks its teeth in like a ravenous dog.

You deserve to die. You’re worthless. No one cares. You’re pathetic.

A wave crashes over me. Water floods my mouth, and I choke, spluttering as I try to

breathe. My head slips under again. Panic takes over, and I inhale—deeply this time. Saltwater scorches its way into my lungs. I convulse, limbs turning to lead.

The voice gives one last command.

Give up.

And I do.

With no hope and nothing left to fight for, I let myself go. The black swallows me whole.

The cold wraps around me, soft and smothering. The marina's depths close in, and for a moment—just a moment—it almost feels like a mother's embrace.

Five

Mick

I'm still on high alert when my brain clocks the sound of a boat launching.

Cursing, I scramble to my feet, gun in my hand and heart thumping against my ribcage as I search for the source of the noise. Sure enough, the yacht in the slip at the end of the jetty is on the move. A quick scan of the jetty lets me know Samantha is gone too.

Growling under my breath, I try to process what just happened. One minute I had her in my sights, then maniacs dressed as law enforcement were firing directly at us.

"US Coast Guard!" I shout, sprinting to the nearest yacht. "Sweep your searchlight across your port side—slow and wide!"

The man fumbles for the switch, and I jump onto the swim deck.

“Keep it steady!” I bark. “I need reflection, movement—anything!”

The beam slices through the dark like a sword, rippling off black water. I scan for the telltale break in the pattern, the shimmer of skin, the splash of panic. A cry. A ripple.

Anything.

I grit my teeth. No flotation, no backup, and the marina’s crawling with people who’ll be dialing 911 any second.

I unbutton my jeans, kick off my shoes, and dive off the side of the yacht. I chop through the waves, using my arms as blades until I reach the patch of blue illuminated by the searchlight.

Nothing.

I take a breath, flip over, and kick downward, descending as quickly as I can. In seconds, I’ll lose the illumination the searchlight provides.

Alternating between praying and running through my training, I catch sight of blond hair trailing like seaweed in the water. I kick harder and grab the pack she’s wearing, jerking her upward until I reach the surface.

Instantly, I press the heel of my hand on her forehead, tilting her head back to open her airways. Taking a breath, I pinch her nostrils closed, turn her body and head toward me and give four quick breaths. Ready myself for her to vomit, I wait then give her another four short breaths.

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She coughs in my face, shuddering in my grip as her eyes flicker open and she sucks in a gulp of air.

“Just relax. You’re okay,” I say.

Her body goes limp, and she lets me start my slow crawl back to the jetty.

When I’m a few feet away, I look up and see two men silhouetted. Given the size of the second man, it’s obvious who decided to join the party.

Caleb.

As I swim closer with my arm locked around Samantha’s chest, Caleb extends his hand, ready to grab her. “We don’t have much time,” he says.

I grunt a reply, too focused on getting her out of the water. “Keep her upright.”

He nods, his face grave in the searchlight. “Roger that.” His hands snag on her clothing, and he yanks her up onto the boat.

As I haul myself up the ladder, another face appears. Jake’s talking to the owner of the boat in placating tones. “...emergency, we’ll intercept the cops and let them know how helpful you’ve been to our investigation.”

Investigation? Who is this kid? I don’t know what other lies he’s telling, but I don’t have time to care. Not when I have a drowning victim coughing up bay water and shivering.

“She needs to go to the hospital,” I say to Caleb.

Samantha shakes her head vehemently.

As I accept a towel from him, Caleb lowers his voice. “I agree. Not an option. We lost sight of the boat, but they left us a message.”

I frown, yank my jeans over my wet boxers, and grimace at the sensation. “What message?”

He mimes slicing his throat. “Owner of the boat.”

Samantha groans behind us and croaks out a name. “Juan.”

As the owner steps inside the cabin, Jake gains our attention. “We need to get out of here. PD are about two minutes away.”

Samantha tries to get up but collapses on the deck. Without thinking, I pull her upward and into me. She staggers, but when Caleb grabs my shoes, she lets me guide her off the boat and back onto the jetty.

Caleb hooks his arm under her, and we half drag her down the jetty until Jake points out the obvious. “Faster to carry her.”

With no time to draw straws, I defer to Caleb, who hefts her in his arms and stalks off down the jetty as if she weighed no more than a sack of potatoes.

I glance at Jake as we pick up our pace so we can go ahead of him. “You saw me check in with the dockmaster?”

He laughs. “Silas told us to watch your back. And Caleb figured you’d save us the

legwork.”

Something tells me they already knew who was moored at each slip, but I let it go, too concerned about Samantha’s condition. I skirt around Caleb, hurry past him to the Jeep in the parking lot, and open the back door. “She needs a medical assessment,” I say.

Caleb nods and eases her into the backseat. “Jake? Get us out of here. I’ll call Axel and see who we’ve got in the area.”

Jake gives him a clipped nod then slides in behind the wheel again. When Caleb takes the passenger side, I climb into the back so I can fasten Samantha’s seat belt. I reach across her, and she shrinks back, pressing her spine against the door. Even with minimal lighting, it’s apparent she’s terrified of me.

Not a response I’ve ever had to deal with after I’ve saved a life.

“Can you reach your seat belt?”

Her response is weak, almost pathetic. “Yes.”

With trembling fingers, she pulls it taut, and I click mine into place just as Jake floors the accelerator.

I glance over my shoulder and catch the flash of blue and red lights as they speed into the marina carpark. A knot of guilt wedges in my gut that I’m not going to be there to help explain. Not that I can explain. I’m about as clueless as I was when Reese and Verity showed up on the plane and saved my life.

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As Caleb and Jake confer, I keep my eyes on Samantha, praying that she wasn't under the water long. The next few hours will be crucial. If she develops breathing difficulties, sleepiness, or confusion, nothing is going to keep me from getting her to the hospital.

"Someone want to tell me who those guys were?" I say.

Jake rounds a bend too quickly.

"We'll talk more when we get there," Caleb says.

"And where is there?"

Caleb replies. "B and B on Lenox Ave. A nurse is waiting. Sinai is an eight-minute drive away."

It's not ideal, but at least I can get her on ALS if she deteriorates.

I glance at Samantha. Her arms are wrapped around her body, and she's shivering. Whether it's from cold, shock, or fear, I won't know until someone checks her out.

We make it across town in record time, but by the time we reach Lenox Avenue, she's still shivering, her teeth are chattering, and she's slumped against the door.

Jake pulls up outside a pale pink, art deco-style house with curved corners and glass block windows. I unbuckle while Caleb opens the door for Samantha like she's royalty.

Samantha, for the most part, looks bewildered, but when he holds out his meaty forearm for her to grab, she reluctantly accepts his help and allows him to walk her toward the house.

I slam the door shut as Jake comes alongside me and smirks under the street lamp. “I was expecting a knockout, not a drowned rat.”

I reward his lousy attempt at humor with a glare. “Not funny.”

Nothing about this is funny.

Not a single thing.

The woman I so badly wanted to see in chains is just as helpless as any other victim I’ve rescued.

Jake’s smile lessens. “Yeah. Well, don’t forget she’s a con artist. Wouldn’t be surprised if she faked drowning to get sympathy.”

He shoves his hands into his pockets and walks into the house, whistling, planting a seed of doubt that instantly replaces my concern.

Samantha

As the hulking man bustles me inside, I’m shivering so hard I can’t think about anything but getting warm.

The interior is dim and still, the faint scent of lemon polish clinging to the air.

Retro tile floors stretch beneath my feet, and curved archways lead into a quiet sitting room furnished with mid-century chairs and faded tropical prints. A ceiling fan spins

lazily overhead, stirring the heavy silence.

I don't understand any of this. Not the cops, not Mick saving me, not the fancy bed-and-breakfast. None of it makes sense.

I should be dead.

Given who I'm with, that might still be the better option.

A woman appears, khaki pants, loose linen shirt, sensible shoes. With her short nails, hair tied back, and no makeup on her, either she's the nurse they arranged to be here, or she's posing as one. The concern on her face seems real enough, but I know better than anyone that appearances can be deceiving.

"Oh, you poor thing, come with me," she says.

Caleb hands me off to her, and she grips me tight as though I might topple over any minute. Not a chance. Whatever happened to me is over and done with.

Time to regroup and find a way out of here.

The nurse leads me into a bedroom, where she's set up a makeshift medical center. Supplies are spread across a desk and nightstand—gauze, antiseptic, a blood pressure cuff, and a small oxygen tank. A portable monitor beeps softly in the corner, and a box of gloves sits beside a roll of medical tape.

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As the nurse helps me to peel off my wet clothing, I nod toward the ensuite.

“Can I use the bathroom?” I say.

“I’ll take you?—”

“I’m fine. I can take the rest of my clothes off by myself.”

She hesitates, obviously under obligation to keep an eye on me. “Well... okay. But leave the door open a crack in case you need my help.”

I smile weakly, wondering what she’s been told about me. Maybe nothing. Maybe she doesn’t care who she treats as long as she gets paid.

I know that’s all I’d care about.

She helps me to the bathroom, switches on the light, and leaves me alone to assess my surroundings. The bathroom’s small but spotless, with checkerboard tile, a pedestal sink, and a vintage mirror edged in rust. A stack of neatly folded towels sits beside a bar of unopened soap, and the air smells faintly of bleach and coconut.

There’s one possible exit. A window that I know I’m in no condition to utilize. My chest hurts, and aside from being freezing, I’m exhausted and confused as to why a cop would kill Juan.

As I slip behind the bathroom door, hiding from her view, I dig into my bra and pull out the memory card. I can’t risk taking the time to see if it’s bone dry, and I have no

way of testing it, so I unsnap my bra, slide into one of the robes hanging on the back of the door, and leave my underwear on the bathroom floor. I need a place to hide the memory card until I can retrieve it.

“Are you all right in there?” the nurse calls.

With little more than seconds to spare before she comes looking, I grab the sewing kit on the vanity and slide the memory card inside the cardboard concealing it. Since she’s listening, I flush the toilet and wash my hands before rejoining her.

Her smile is a mixture of professional patience and concern as she gestures for me to sit. “I need to check your vitals, but if everything looks good, I can help you take a shower if you like?”

My lips flick upward into a smile at the offer. “That’s okay.”

As she pulls out a stethoscope and gestures for me to pull down the back of my robe, my eyes stay on my backpack two feet from the bed. The money is in a sealed bag, along with my passport. If I can just get out of here, I still might have a chance.

After a few breaths in and out, she slips a device on my finger that starts to blip. I watch the numbers rise until they reach ninety-eight percent.

“Your oxygen saturation is good, and I can’t hear any fluid in your lungs.”

“Great,” I mumble.

She carries on fussing around me. “Does it hurt anywhere? Were you injured? Any open wounds?”

I press my hand to my head. “I knocked into something, but it doesn’t hurt too bad.”

She carefully examines my forehead. “Hmmm. I can’t see anything. If you develop a headache, let someone know.”

I nod and pull my robe tight.

“Thank the Lord you had someone there to save you.”

Huh? “Right. God saved me, sure thing,” I mutter.

She pats me on the hand. “I’ll go update Caleb.”

Her eyes travel to my sodden pack. “Do you have any spare clothes?”

When she moves toward the pack, I grab her arm. “No!”

With a frown, she stoops down to pick up my T-shirt and squints at the label. “Okay. I’ll see if someone can get you some warm clothes in... size eight?”

In an attempt to draw her attention from my pack, I smile. “On a good day.”

A ten would be better, because I need loose clothing so I can climb out the window. But I can’t tell her that.

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She chuckles and peers down at my shoes. “These will take a few days to dry out, but I don’t expect that’ll be an issue.”

My heart thumps a little harder. “It won’t be?”

She gets to her feet and starts packing away her medical equipment. “Not if you’ll be staying here for a while.”

I pull the robe tighter, and a fresh wave of panic overtakes me as she pads out of the room.

I get to my feet, a little wobbly but desperate to know what’s going on in the next room. When I hear the nurse’s voice, I position myself behind the door and listen in as she gives her report.

“She’s doing well, but someone needs to stay with her just in case her condition worsens.”

It’s Caleb who answers, confirming that he’s in charge of this puzzling rescue mission. “Mick, you know what to look out for?”

My eyes widen. No. No.No!Anyone but him.

“Of course I do, but I?—”

Caleb cuts him off. “Jake and I need to follow up on the boat. As far as anyone knows, you’re out of town. Let’s keep it that way.”

My toes dig into the carpet. Mick's supposed to be out of town? That explains the pack I noticed in the Jeep.

"You can't expect me to stay here with her. Alone," he says.

Caleb's reply confuses me even more. "She might be able to identify the cops."

The nurse seems to be scolding them all. "Whatever you boys are doing this time, she needs time to recover. I can drop by again after my shift, but I'm not leaving until I know she's in capable hands."

"She is."

The nurse still doesn't seem convinced, but she relents, and the sound of her leaving makes my stomach plummet.

"Isn't there anyone else at Hightower who can babysit her?" Mick asks.

Hightower? What is Hightower?

"Nope. Relax. Jake will drop some clothes and food off for you in a few hours."

So Mick isn't calling the shots? Whoever Caleb is, he has a hold over him.

But that won't mean anything once Mick and I are trapped here together. I move as quickly as my wobbly legs allow for and unzip my soaking pack. I have no idea if the gun will still work, but I'm not facing him without protection. The idea of spending any length of time with him makes my pulse spike.

As the other two men leave with promises to stay in contact, I slide the gun into the pocket of my robe.

Six

Mick

I stare at the wall and give up trying to rationalize how Hightower thinks I'm the best man for this. I'm cold, wet, and want answers. Usually after a rescue, I have time to shower, get changed, and eat—debrief later, maybe log a report. Not stand dripping in the corner of a dim, coral-painted room with floral curtains and a lamp shaped like a flamingo.

I glance at the door and let out a sigh. I'm not risking taking a shower to warm up, so I settle on filling the coffeepot and switching it on to brew. With my eyes on the door in case she enters the living space, I change as quickly as I can and leave my damp clothes hanging over a chair.

I can avoid her for a while, but the nurse was right. I do need to keep a close eye on her.

Blowing out a breath, I grab a complimentary package of chocolate-covered cookies and pour a mug of coffee. "Either you come in here or I come to you. It's your choice," I call out.

No reply.

I strain to hear any sound of movement. Nothing noticeable.

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“This is serious. The next three hours are do or die.”

Movement at the door makes me spin around.

Samantha.

Blond hair starting to dry, hands loose at her sides. Dressed in nothing but a white toweling robe, in stark contrast to her tanned skin.

“Then why bother?” she says.

I blink. The flatness of her tone is almost as worrying as how normal she looks. Like she just took a shower and we’re here together because we want to be.

“You think I risked my life just tokillyou?”

She shivers, her eyes lingering on the coffee in my hands, but keeps her distance. “Isn’t that what you wanted? To see me dead?”

I take a step closer, extending the coffee and the cookies. “The rescue swimmers’ motto is ‘So others can live.’”

She licks her lips. “You saved me because of amotto?”

“It’s more than a motto. It’s a belief.”

Her chin lifts, her eyes shifting from the coffee to my face. “I saw you on TV. You

didn't seem to be too concerned about my life then."

Tension makes my muscles coil. I give up waiting for her to accept the coffee and cookies and leave them on the coffee table. "Yeah, well. Wanting someone to die is different than wanting justice."

She snorts but edges around the coffee table, ignoring the mug and walking to where the pot is. As surreal as this is, it gets even worse when she pours herself a cup and starts to walk in the direction of the bedroom.

"Where are you going?"

Her eyebrow arches. "You've seen me. I'm still breathing. Now you can tell your boss you followed orders."

"He's not my boss," I say, grinding it out.

Her lips twitch into something way too close to a smile. "Uh-huh. Sounded like it to me."

I eye her as she turns on her heel. "If you go back in there, I'm going to have to come in."

She freezes and looks over her shoulder at me. Her cheeks flush with annoyance, and her shoulders square.

"What? Were you planning to escape?"

A slight narrowing of her eyes is all I have to go on. "Fine." She eases into a chair, tucks her legs under her, and brings her coffee cup to her lips.

Following her example, I reach for mine and watch her closely in case she chokes.

When the first swallow goes down easily with no sign of distress, I grab the cookies and rip them open.

I need to keep her talking, so I ask the question that's been bugging me ever since I saw her in the water. "Can you swim?"

Her eyes meet mine. "What?"

I take a sip. "You can't have been in the water for more than a few minutes, so why weren't you swimming toward the jetty?"

She doesn't answer, but her fingers have tightened around the mug.

"Can you swim?" I say again.

"Yes, I can swim," she snaps. A faint flush appears on her cheeks before she shakes it off.

“Who taught you?”

Her entire demeanor switches. Her posture relaxes, and she bats her eyelashes at me.

“Why were the cops shooting at you?”

I take my time answering. I’ve obviously hit a sore spot. “I don’t know that they were.”

She presses her lips together. “Is that why I’m here and not under arrest?”

I’m not going to give her any more information than I need to. “You’re here because I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

She swallows. “If I’d been arrested, I’d get to make a phone call.”

I choke on a laugh. “Go ahead. I’d love to see who’d come to get you. Your terrorist friends maybe?”

Her eyes flash with anger. “I am not friends with any terrorists.”

“You’re a liar,” I growl. My fist clenches, and she notices it immediately.

Her back straightens, and she slowly puts the coffee mug down, her eyes cast downward. “It’s the truth. But I guess that’s not important to you.”

I laugh too harshly. “Do you even know you’re lying?”

“I’m not lying.”

“Define a lie.”

Her mouth parts, and she chews on her bottom lip before replying. “Something said or done in order to deceive someone or make them believe something that isn’t true.”

I lean forward so she knows I’m serious. “You can’t even look me in the eye.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “That’s a myth. Liars make more eye contact.”

“I don’t believe you.”

She shrugs. “I don’t care.”

I pick up my coffee, more to give my hands something to do than out of desire to drink it.

“Show me. Tell me something that can’t possibly be true.”

Her lips quirk, and she keeps her eyes locked on me, never moving. “I’ve never had a cup of coffee before.”

Smiling, she returns her attention to her coffee, leaving me flummoxed by her behavior.

Samantha

I should have known he’d be armed. My own tiny gun weighing down my pocket is little comfort. Not when he has his cannon strapped to his side.

How did I not notice that before?

I shiver and take a swallow of the coffee he made. It's not terrible, and the warmth soothes the irritation of sucking in so much salty water. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him pick up the cookies and pop one in his mouth.

In response, my stomach growls, and he sounds amused as he speaks. "Dinner won't be here for a few hours."

I ignore him, trying to think about something other than my stomach or being trapped here with him. The robe is long enough and large enough that it covers my legs, but if I get the chance to leave, I don't really want to do so half-dressed. "I need clothes."

His eyes narrow, and he assesses me as if he knows what I'm thinking. "You can wait for those too."

I huff out an irritated breath and stare straight ahead as I return to my coffee.

“Why did you do it?”

I jam my lips together so I’m not tempted to answer him.

“Did you need the money? Or do you enjoy killing people?”

I glare at him. “I’m not a murderer,” I snap.

His eyebrow hitches, his mouth presses down, and his chin juts out. “What about the guy who wound up facedown in the ocean?”

I swallow hard. “I’m not answering any of your questions. You’re holding me here illegally. I’m going to sue you and Hightower when I get out of here.”

He cocks his head to one side, and he bursts out laughing. I sit up a little straighter as he brings himself under control. “You’re a piece of work, lady. You really think you can sue me? You made the FBI’s most wanted.”

A strange, cold pressure closes around my chest. I blink, trying to process the words, but they don’t make sense. My heart lurches, then pounds so fast it feels like I can’t catch up. “That’s not true.”

He shakes his head, all mirth gone as he replies. “Yeah, it is. You’re wanted in connection with my attempted murder and the attempted terror attack. Presumed armed and dangerous.”

I knew I was in trouble, but the FBI’s list is for the worst of the worst.

“But... I... I just,” I whisper.

“Just what?” he says.

My stomach starts to roil, now-familiar nausea settling in on me and spreading like wildfire. “I... made a mistake.”

His reply is cold and cruel. “Yeah, you did. You picked the wrong guy.”

I shake my head, too out of sorts to know what I’m saying. “I didn’t pick you.”

Before I can take it back, he pounces. “Who did?”

I dig my fingernails into my palm and try to think. But my brain refuses to obey. Whether out of tiredness, or shock, or fear, I can’t find a single way to backpedal.

He shifts closer so he’s sitting on the chair nearest me. “Who told you to start flirting with me?”

I clench my fists. “I... never met him.”

He smashes his hand on the arm of the couch, making me jump. “Quit lying to me.”

I shrink back in the chair. Fear makes my voice pitch too high. “I don’t know his name. I never met him. We communicated by phone, and he transferred the money when I left you at the apartment.”

He growls something under his breath. “Do you have his number?”

I shake my head. “We used a cutout. Everything was done through him.”

He furrows his brow. “A cutout?”

“A middleman.”

The furrow deepens as he processes the information. “The guy in the bay?”

I wince, and he takes it for acknowledgment. “That’s why you were trying to leave town?”

I let the question go unanswered.

“Was it even your apartment?”

Why he needs to know the details seems irrelevant, but I humor him with the truth.

“No. I borrow it sometimes when the owner is out of town.”

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“Borrow, as in pretending it’s yours?”

I’m not dumb enough to answer that.

He scratches his chin. “Did you kill the middleman?”

I shake my head. “Why would I? He’s just as guilty as I am.”

His face hardens. “Did you know what they were planning?”

“No!”

He narrows his eyes, doubt so easily readable on his face. “How much did they pay you?”

Oh no. I hastily scramble for something that will occupy his mind. “Are you in the habit of having casual flings with women you meet in airport bars?”

Mick’s face blanches. His mouth opens and closes as if he has no response that will justify the part he played.

I lean forward. “Not so innocent then, are you?”

His jaw works hard. “It was a lapse of judgment.”

I huff out a laugh. “Yeah, well. So was mine.”

Thick tension fills the room. He's mulling it over. Trying to find a way to blame me when he can't. I didn't force him to leave with me. I didn't hold a gun to his head. Whether he wants to admit it, he was motivated purely by his own desires.

Not exactly something to be boasting about.

The look on his face is so perplexed that I can't resist the jab. "Truth hurts, doesn't it?"

He rolls his shoulders back, his eyes flashing with anger, but his silence is so satisfying that it's hard not to smirk at him.

Mick

I'm not about to be lectured to by a criminal. Even if she does have a point.

I shouldn't have gone with her. I knew better, but my attraction to her overrode my common sense.

"Don't you have a conscience?" I ask.

She waves a hand through the air, cutting off my question. "Don't you have any morals?"

The answer's out before I can stop it. "I was raised a Christian."

She barks out a bitter laugh. "So what? You don't even live like it. Hypocrite. You've got no right to judge me."

The word stings more than I want to admit. I don't flinch, but I feel it.

She leans in, eyes hard. “You’re just like all the others. Holier-than-thou on Sunday, and hanging out with women like me the rest of the week.”

I clench my jaw. “Is that what this is now? You flipping it on me?”

She shrugs. “I’m just saying, don’t sit there acting like you’re better than me. You’re not.”

“What do you want? An apology?”

She gives a half-smile. “I don’t want anything. But if you really believed God was watching, you never would’ve even thought about sleeping with me.”

That lands like a punch to the gut—and this time, I do flinch.

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She's working her way under my skin. Making me think about things I'd rather not.

"You're right. And I regret it. Every. Single. Day," I say, grinding out the words.

She snorts. "Likewise."

I need to get away from her. She's already driving me nuts, and it's been less than an hour since I pulled her out of the water.

I reach for the TV remote and switch it on, anything to distract me from her presence. She doesn't protest, just glares at me, but when the local news comes on, her eyes snap back to the screen.

Just like Brooke promised, my plea to find her airs along with an update about how the PD have received almost a hundred possible sightings of her. None of them are anywhere near the marina. Nor is there a story about the shooting or a dead body found on the jetty.

A commercial plays, and I hit the mute button.

Samantha speaks before I can. "If you've caught me, why is that still playing?"

I tap my finger on my thigh. "It's complicated."

"Who's the liar now?"

I'm done with her questioning my integrity. "I'm not going to tell you the details."

You should be grateful you're in a safe place."

"Wow. Really? I should be grateful I'm being held against my will?"

"You should be grateful I didn't let you drown," I mutter.

She shoots to her feet, then wobbles. I'm up in a flash, catching her by the arm. "Hey—easy. I was joking."

A low groan slips from her lips, and whatever irritation I felt vanishes. She looks like she's about to pass out. "You breathing okay?" I say.

I haven't heard her wheezing, but I'd be the first to admit I'm not one hundred percent focused.

With a quick bob of her head, she collapses in the chair again. "Just... lightheaded."

I sit alongside her and grab her wrist so I can check her pulse. Her skin is a little clammy, but after a minute, I'm relieved to find her pulse is strong even though her hands are trembling. "When did you eat last?"

She jerks her hand away from mine and swipes it on her robe. "This morning."

That explains it. "Stay there. Don't try to move."

She barely acknowledges me, so I hurry to the kitchenette and locate the hot chocolate. The sugar-packed liquid will be the fastest way to raise her blood glucose. I dump in another teaspoon of sugar and stir before handing it to her. "Drink."

When she hesitates, I sigh and take a sip. "Satisfied?"

She squints at me but holds out her hands so she can take the mug. Rather than stand over her, I sit where I was, close enough to keep an eye on her but far enough away that if she decides to throw the hot chocolate at me, it won't do too much damage.

Probably should have thought of that earlier.

She gulps the drink so quickly, she's probably burned her tongue, but when she puts the mug on the coffee table alongside her empty coffee cup, it's empty.

"You want another one?"

She tosses her head. "I can get it myself. I'm not an invalid."

"No, just prone to collapsing."

She shoots me a glare sharp enough to slice. "Funny. When are the clothes showing up?"

I glance at my watch. "An hour. Maybe two."

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She groans. “Can we call a truce? I’m exhausted.”

“Truce.”

“Good.” She leans back with a sigh. “Now turn down the volume. You’re not exactly soothing.”

I grab the remote and lower the sound without a word.

She curls deeper into the chair, her head tipping back as her eyes flutter closed.

And for reasons I’m not ready to admit, I watch her a little longer than I should.

Just to make sure she’s breathing.

Seven

Samantha

A door closing jerks me awake. As the room comes into focus, I zero in on the food bag sitting on the coffee table in front of me. Thai food. And him. Staring at me.

My stomach grumbles, and I move to reach for the food when Mick hands me two shopping bags.

“Clothes. Get dressed, and I’ll dish up.”

I hesitate, and he sighs. “But if you’re that paranoid, I’ll wait for you.”

I snatch the bags out of his hands and hurry into the bedroom again. I close the door and tear open the bag, hoping they’ve provided something that won’t be memorable to anyone if I manage to escape.

I pull out gray sweatpants, a gaudy fluorescent-pink T-shirt, a yellow synthetic cardigan, and beige underwear that looks like it belongs to an overweight retiree.

Are they messing with me? That has to be the explanation.

“You aren’t the only one who’s hungry,” Mick calls.

Sighing, I scuttle across the room, keep my eyes on the door in case he enters, slide the gun under the mattress, and unzip my pack.

As I’d feared, my clothing is either damp or wet. Muttering to myself about my ongoing bad luck, I pull the ugly clothes on, pick up the underwear I discarded earlier, wash it in the vanity, and hang it up on the shower rail to dry.

I zip the bag, slide it under the bed, and glance at the mattress, trying to figure out how to keep the gun close with what I’m wearing. With a muttered curse, I leave it where it is and step into the other room.

I stop short—he’s setting the table, lining up water bottles like we’re about to host a dinner party.

Thankfully, the bag is still stapled shut with the order attached so I know he hasn’t touched it. My stomach growls in response to the savory aromas, and I don’t bother to sit as I reach for the bag. His hand covers mine, and I flinch.

“Take a seat. I’m going to give thanks first.”

Frowning, I shake my head. “I don’t want to sit at the table with you. This isn’t a date.”

His eyes travel over me, and he covers a laugh. “Nice outfit.”

I sit back, glowering at him. “Get on with it. I want to eat.”

His smile fades, and he clears his throat, shuffles in his chair, and stares at his plate for so long I think he’s changed his mind. “Lord, uh, thank you for this food. And uh... thank you that you’re a forgiving and merciful God. Uh... Amen.”

Well,thatwas painful. He looks up at me expectantly, waiting for me to add my “amen” to his.

“Amen,” I say. Anything if I can finally eat something.

He tears open the bag and places the containers on the table. I grab the closest one, so hungry I don’t pay attention to what it is.

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I cram a crispy spring roll into my mouth and grab the container of fried rice, dump some on my plate, and start forking it in.

“Slow down. I don’t want you choking,” he says.

I swallow, perplexed as to why he even cares, but I do what he says, mostly because I don’t want him to jump into action and perform the Heimlich maneuver on me if I do choke. I leave the rice and fork out some less-risky pad Thai instead, talking to distract him. “You don’t do that often.”

He swallows a mouthful of food. “Do what?”

I grab a chicken wing and wave it in the air. “Say grace. Or give thanks or whatever it’s called.”

He scratches his neck before replying. “Eat your food.”

I shrug and carry on gorging myself on Thai food until I belatedly realize I should have eaten light. I should be planning to leave in a hurry, not overindulging in starchy foods that will slow me down. I push the plate away, groaning at my stupidity.

“What’s up with you?” he says.

Thinking fast, I gesture downward. “My feet are cold.”

He chews his food, searching my face, then gets up and walks over to his pack. With his back to me, I can’t see what he’s doing, but when he turns, a pair of balled-up

socks is in his hand. “Here. They’re clean.”

He tosses them to me, and I snatch them to my chest, bewildered at his act of kindness.

“Nothing wrong with your appetite, though,” he says.

I’d be more insulted, but I have made a pig of myself. Something I’ve never done with a man before.

“I told you I hadn’t eaten since this morning,” I snap.

His eyebrow hitches as he forks rice into his mouth. “Yeah. You never told me why?”

I ignore him and unfurl his socks. They’re thick, wool, and padded in the heel and toe. I stretch out my leg and tug one over my foot. It’s two sizes too big, but they’re soft and cozy.

“So, you were planning on taking a yacht to...”

My eyes snap to him as he looks to one side as though thinking.

“Either the Bahamas or Cuba. Both are common smuggling routes.”

As confronting as it is, him telling me what my plans were, it’s not surprising. That’s literally his job.

“What does it matter now? I’m not going anywhere.”

He uncaps a bottle of water and takes a swig. “No. You aren’t. But I’d still like to know.”

“In case I try to keep to the same plan?”

His lip curls. “I wouldn’t put it past you.”

I laugh lightly even though all my muscles have primed. “I nearly drowned today. I’m hardly likely to try to get on another boat.”

His finger taps the water bottle. “Sure, but just in case, smuggling doesn’t usually end well. The ones who make it to their promised destination alive are among the lucky ones. And even if you’d made it to your location, there would have been no guarantee that there wouldn’t have been someone waiting to take advantage of you as soon as you arrived.”

“I... I was aware of that.”

“But you were still prepared to risk it?”

“What choice did I have? You made it impossible for me to stay.”

He glances down at his empty plate. “I did. You robbed me of my honor. I wasn’t going to sit back and let you make a fool of me.”

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“So that’s what’s fueling this? Your wounded ego?”

His shoulders stiffen. “More than that. You’re a menace to society. Someone needed to stop you.”

I lean in a little closer. “Why? Because I flirt with men, tell them what they want to hear, and they respond by giving me things? That’s not a crime.”

He barks out a laugh. “Is that how you sleep at night? You tell yourself that nobody gets hurt?”

I shrug. “Nobody does get hurt...” When he glowers at me, I hastily add, “Usually.”

His expression turns hard. “Yeah, well. It was only a matter of time. You think you can do whatever you like and leave people like me to clean up the mess you make.”

I push back from the table. “People like you? You mean the men who are so conceited they couldn’t conceive of the idea that the woman flirting with them isn’t doing so because she’s madly in love with them?”

He scowls. “I never thought you were in love with me.”

“No. You thought I was your dream girl—easy on the eyes and just plain easy.”

He shoots to his feet, fury etched into every line of his face. “That is not what I thought.”

I cross my arms. “Then tell me. What did you think of me?”

He scrubs a hand over his jaw, voice rough. “I thought I was the luckiest guy alive—that a beautiful woman like you picked someone like me.”

My stomach flips. Normally, that line wouldn’t faze me. I might even like it. But hearing it now—after everything I’ve done, after what I nearly cost him—makes me want to crawl out of my skin.

He drags a hand down his face. “I’d had a crap week. There were reports of a body in the water. We got there, and the place was crawling with cops. It was pitch black. Eerie. We found her tangled in seaweed. Face down. Pink puffer jacket. Sneakers.” His voice cracks. “She was just a little girl. Been missing for days.”

I choke on a breath and cover my throat like I can shield myself from what he’s just said.

The image he paints slams into me—and suddenly I’m small again. Cold. Flailing. My arms cut through water that feels thick as tar. A man’s voice shouts from the dock, but no one’s coming in after me. My lungs burn. The surface slips farther away.

I blink hard, dragging myself back into the room.

His eyes are locked on me. “But you don’t think about that, do you? Guys like me are just walking wallets to you.”

The cold cuts deeper now, but not for the reason he thinks.

“It wasn’t like that,” I whisper, voice flat. “Not this time.”

He locks eyes with me, and heat blazes through my body. “Yeah. I was the only one

who came after you.”

I lift my chin, desperately trying to find a way to talk my way out of this. But I can’t. Nothing I can say would take back what I did to him.

It’s just another black mark on my already filthy soul.

Mick

My cell rings, and I abandon the futile conversation with Samantha for another one I’m overdue to have. I pick it up, keeping my eyes on her as she sits in the same chair, curls into it like a cat, and switches the TV on again.

“You have an update for me?” I ask.

“How’s our patient?” The voice is a low rumble, and I instantly snap to attention. Silas.

I glance at Samantha and back up into the small kitchen. “Mouthy,” I say.

Silas chuckles. “Mouthy is good. The more she talks, the more likely she is to tell you something useful.”

“Yeah. I don’t know.” She’s too savvy for that.

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“Have you searched her bag yet? Surveillance from the marina shows her on a cell phone. Delilah wants to check it out.”

My eyebrows hike. “Should I ask how you managed to get ahold of that?”

“Probably not.”

I lean against the countertop, my eyes never leaving Samantha as she aimlessly channel surfs. “I’ll do it after we get done talking.”

“Do it soon. When you find it, slip it out the bathroom window, and I’ll have someone pick it up. I don’t want her contacting anyone until we’ve placed tracking software on it. If she calls anyone, I want to know.”

“Got it. Who’s coming to pick it up? Same person who’ll relieve me?” I hope. I don’t want to stay here with her a second longer than I have to.

He pauses before answering. “Caleb’s still chasing leads at the marina, and Jake’s doing his thing with the criminal element. Reese is on standby, but I’m leaving him out of the action for now.”

That’s understandable. The guy should, by rights, be six feet under. Watching him fly a plane after being stabbed in the chest, with Verity in the copilot seat, was one of the most surreal experiences of my life. I’m pretty sure the hand of God himself got us on the ground. There is no way Reese should have been able to. From what Verity says, he’s well aware of it too.

“Who, then?”

“Your closest neighbor is a contractor of mine. He’s here with his fiancée and her grandmother. He’ll pick the phone up, but you won’t meet him unless you run into something you can’t handle.”

A blip sounds in my ear. “That’s his number.”

I hold the phone out from my ear and read the screen. “Luke,” I say.

“You don’t want to engage him unless absolutely necessary. The man is a bullet magnet.” He chuckles as though that’s amusing.

I glance at Samantha yawning in the chair. I need to find an opportunity to search her backpack. That’s the easy part. What’s the headscratcher is how Silas expects me to watch her and get any rest.

As though he’s a mind reader, his gravelly voice comes down the line. “Just be mindful of how cunning she can be. She’s a master manipulator, and if she thinks there’s a way out of this, she’ll use every trick in her book.”

Does he really think I’m going to fall for the same act again?

I glance at the mismatched, unflattering clothing they’ve chosen for her. “I’m aware of that. I have complete mission clarity.”

“Good to hear it. Unless I have something urgent, I’ll contact you again tomorrow morning.”

The idea of spending a night with her turns my insides to stone. “I have to get back to the real world. I have a life.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but until we find the men shooting at you, you’re on guard duty. Food will be there in the morning, and you can order lunch and dinner using the credit card Caleb gave you.”

“Do I get exercise time?”

“Feel free to run in circles.”

“I already am.”

He ends the call with little more than a grunt of acknowledgment.

Samantha’s gaze slides to me, and she mutes the TV. “Guess your stunt backfired on you, huh? Now we’re both in jail.”

I slide my phone back into my pocket. “My stunt worked just fine. Guys you’d conned came forward.”

Her smile slips, and her mouth presses downward. “Who?”

“Some bartender you lied to about having a sick mother. You fleeced him for a couple hundred bucks. I can’t remember the other ones.”

I take no pleasure in her surprise. I’m being punished just the same as she is.

“He was a nice guy. Trying to help you out.”

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When she doesn't say anything and just stares at an Art Deco painting on the wall, I blow out a breath, staring at the leftover food, now cold on the table. I need to stay occupied until she goes to bed, so I skirt the coffee table and start clearing it up, putting lids on containers of food we can eat later.

I've already hidden the knives in the kitchen, but I should probably do a search for any other weapons just in case. If I'd been thinking straight, I would have done so before now.

I stack the plates one on top of another, carry them over to the sink, and scrape off the scraps.

"So domesticated," she says.

I ignore her and carry on clearing the table, until I realize she could be helping out. "Get the rest. We don't have a dishwasher. I'll wash; you dry."

Her eyes widen in surprise, and she chokes out a laugh. "You can play house all you want, but leave me out of it."

I stalk across the room, pluck the remote out of her hand, switch it to a praise and worship channel, turn the volume up, and tuck the remote into my back pocket. "Then you lose your TV privileges," I say.

Turning on my heel, I return to the sink, fairly confident she'll cave. I angle my body so I can watch her and fill the sink with hot soapy water. Next meal, I'll ask Hightower for something that doesn't require any cleanup.

I'm whistling along as familiar songs play over the TV, and Samantha groans and throws up her hands. "Anything to make it stop," she says.

Hiding a smile, I plunge my hands into the soapy water and scrub the plates until they shine. Beside me, Samantha grabs a dish towel and silently fumes as she picks up the items I've washed, dries them, and stacks them neatly.

The second the final dish is dried, she extends her hand. "I've done my chores. Can I watch TV now?"

Smirking at her sarcasm, I yank the remote out of my pocket and slap it into her palm. "Knock yourself out."

She slinks away, grabs her water bottle, and sits back in her chair.

Well, this is going to be fun.

Since I'm on guard duty, I sit down, pull out my phone, and tap out a quick message to Brooke just in case she's wondering where I am. Her reply comes in before too long, and she's not impressed at my disappearing act.

Mom and Dad are worried. So am I.

Sorry. I'm safe. And you can quit hassling your contacts. We've found her.

You what? When? Is THAT why you've been so hard to get hold of?

I glance at Samantha, thinking as I tap out my reply.

I'll explain when I can. But I'm going to be tied up for a few days... at least.

As Samantha yawns and turns the channel to a reality show, I grimace. “No way. Find something else.”

Her eyes narrow, but she doesn’t say a word, just randomly presses buttons.

When *The Beverly Hillbillies* comes on, I hold up my hand. “Leave it on this.”

Her eyes snap to the screen, disgust evident in her lack of inflection. “It’s in black and white.”

“So? It’s a classic.”

She doesn’t look convinced.

“Didn’t you watch it as a kid?” I ask.

Her blank stare is as confounding as her shoulder shrug.

“You don’t know?”

Anger flickers across her face. “I don’t remember.”

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Huh? Who doesn't remember what shows they watched as a kid?

Her eyes shift to the TV screen, and she tugs her cardigan tighter, like she's trying to protect herself.

Knucklehead. She probably is trying to protect herself. If she suffered any abuse during her childhood, she's not going to want to relive it. Mentally slapping myself, I sit back and watch as the opening credits close and Jed Clampett fills the screen.

At first, she doesn't react. She just stares straight ahead, arms folded, every part of her broadcasting disinterest. But then I hear it—a soft, involuntary snort. I glance over just in time to catch the corners of her mouth twitch.

A few minutes later, she lets out a real laugh. Not that polished one she used to get what she wanted—this one's different. Warm. Unfiltered. It rolls out of her without hesitation.

She leans back, watching the screen with a look I haven't seen on her before. Unworried. Young. For a second, she's not the woman running from danger or calculating her next move. She's just... a girl enjoying something ridiculous on TV.

When a kiss scene goes off the rails, she turns slightly, catching me watching her. I start to look away but she doesn't flinch, just holds my gaze with a flicker of something I can't name.

The show ends and she sighs, curling deeper into the chair like maybe, just for tonight, she's safe enough to stay.

“You want to watch another episode?”

She shakes her head. “I’m tired. Do I have your permission to sleep? Or do you need to run it through a committee?”

This is the opportunity I need. “You can sleep. Give me a minute to use the bathroom first.”

When she shrugs, I get to my feet and enter the bedroom, eyes on the pack pushed into a corner of the room. Grabbing it, I head into the bathroom, leaving the door open in case she decides to ignore my instruction.

As expected, everything is wet, so I carefully haul out clothing and dump it into the basin, mentally tallying everything as I go. Sneakers, underwear, T-shirt, sundress, hat, sunscreen, glasses... As I haul out a plastic-wrapped package the size of a brick, my stomach tightens.

There are only two things I’ve ever seen wrapped that way. Drugs and money.

I leave the package to one side and shake out the pack, opening every compartment until I hit the jackpot. A cell phone tumbles out onto the pile of clothing. I put everything back the way I found it, including the money, and tap out a text to Silas.

Located phone.

His reply is so quick it’s almost as if he pre-programmed it.

It’ll be returned in an hour.

An hour. What if she opens her pack and sees it’s missing?

I begin to ask him how it'll be returned but pause to think it through. If she notices it's missing, she'll either assume I took it or that she lost it when she was in the water.

I zip the pack, crack the window, and drop the phone out with a breath that borders on prayer, hoping she hasn't somehow picked the front lock. If Silas is good for his word—and I've no reason to doubt him—she wouldn't make it to the end of the street before his guy spotted her. I slide the pack back in place and glance into the living area, relieved to find Samantha thumbing through a visitor's brochure.

I glance at the layout of the bedroom. Nice going, Silas. A king-size bed.

Hopefully it's two singles pushed together and I can separate them. I could take the sofa, but it's too short, and it's tough to keep an eye on someone if you're not in the same room as them.

Frowning at my continued bad luck, I throw back the covers on the closest side and do a mental fist pump when I see it's two singles. As quickly as I can, I strip the bed, leave her half the sheets and coverings, and toss the pillows on top. I grab the mattress, ready to drag it off, and nearly drop it again when I see the object tucked beneath it.

It's a hasty hiding place, but it's as good a place as any to hide a Ruger.

I freeze. Then I slide my gaze to the door.

This time I don't hesitate to text. But it's not Silas; it's my sister.

What was the caliber of the weapon used on the guy in South Beach?

Unlike Silas's, Brooke's reply doesn't come in immediately. Seconds pass into minutes until I have no choice but to remove the gun. I grab a hand towel, wrap it

around the gun, and scan the room for a place to keep it hidden.

When I can't find a suitable hiding place, I return to the bathroom, crank open the window again, and fire out a text to Silas.

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She had a Ruger 22. It might be evidence, so it'll need to be handled carefully.

Chores done, I use the bathroom, brush my teeth using one of the two guest sets, and stalk back to the living area.

“All yours.”

She yawns and unfurls herself from the chair, her legs dragging as she passes me by.

After a quick check that the windows and doors are secure and the only way out is via a key in my front pocket, I return to the bedroom. Rather than getting ready for bed, she's standing stock still in the middle of the room, staring at the dismantled bed. I keep my expression stony as her eyes slowly shift to me.

Her mouth flops open. “Where...”

I can only guess she hasn't checked under the mattress. Possibly because she's hoping I didn't find it.

I slide my hands into my jeans. “Did I put the murder weapon?”

Her eyes widen, and she sucks in a breath, wincing as her lungs remind her they're still recovering. “I didnotmurder anyone.” She chokes it out.

I shrug off her comment. “Time to sleep. Do what you need to, but leave the bathroom light on.”

She hesitates, her chin lifting, her shoulders squaring as her eyes dart from the bathroom to me. “I can’t sleep with the light on.”

As she hovers, I kick off my boots and take the bed farthest from the door. “Try an eye mask. There’s probably one in the bathroom.”

I fold my hands behind my head as she scowls at me, backs up, switches off the lighting in the room, and pulls the bathroom door closed a fraction so less light spills into the room. “It’s just?—”

I let out a growl. “This isn’t up for negotiation.” And it’s not. I’m not dumb enough to risk her sneaking around in the dark.

Her shoulders stiffen. “Fine. I’ll take a shower?—”

I shake my head. “You can wait until the nurse shows up tomorrow.”

A delicate shade of crimson colors her cheeks before she slams the bathroom door shut at precisely the moment I realize I never checked the bathroom for weapons.

Eight

Samantha

What a jerk. Bad enough I’m stuck here with him, but he’s just as vindictive as I thought he’d be.

No shower. Lights on. Is he trying to make me as uncomfortable as possible?

Except... the socks.

I twist my mouth to one side. And maybe the food.

And, admittedly, the old TV show he picked was pretty funny.

Shaking off the thought that he's not one hundred percent jerk, I check to see if my underwear is dry enough to wear again. I should've guessed—it's still damp. Without thinking, I grab the hair dryer off the wall, yawning as I switch it on. It'll take longer than a real dryer, but at least the memory card will be safer tucked in my bra than stashed in my bag again.

I don't even get the chance to make progress before the door flies open and Mick yells over the whir of the dryer, "Turn it off!"

To provide evidence of what I'm doing, I dangle my bra in his face. "I'm drying myunderwear."

His face twists, and he leans back as if the lace is on fire and he might get burned from a spark. "It'll dry overnight."

"But—"

His chin drops, and he leans in closer, his eyes narrowing. "Are you trying to get on my last nerve? Because it's working."

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“No,” I snap. “I’m trying to avoid chafing.”

His lips compress, and his jaw works as he processes that. “Quit stalling. I’m tired and have no idea what kind of trouble we might be up against tomorrow.”

I pull my arm back, no longer focused on the task but on what daybreak might bring. I swallow. My mouth runs dry as I slowly lower the dryer. “But we’re safe here?”

He exhales, his face tightening. “Safer than we were at the marina.”

It’s a nonanswer but just what I’m coming to expect from him. “But no one knows where we are?”

“Only people I can trust.”

My fingers curl around the handle of the hair dryer. “Hightower?”

He gives his reply quickly, and his expression shows no hint he’s lying to me. “They have... resources.”

They do if they can pluck a nurse out of thin air. “Resources and muscle,” I say.

Mick chuckles, shaking his head and grinning at my lame joke, making my stomach somersault. “Yeah. Caleb has that in spades.”

I open my mouth to say he’s not lacking in that area, but slam it shut so fast my teeth click.

His eyes lock onto mine, and the space between his eyebrows crinkles. “What?”

I clutch the hair dryer to my chest and shake off the thought. “Nothing. I’m... You’re right. We should get some sleep.”

He angles his head, and his eyebrow arches. “No more games?”

“None.”

He draws back, his eyes never leaving my face. “Make it quick.”

Nodding, I close the door in his face and let out a sigh that reeks of despondency. Silently, I hang the hair dryer, put my bra back on the shower rail, and unwrap a toothbrush from its plastic wrapping. As I squeeze the toothpaste out of the tiny tube, I glance at the sewing kit. As far as I can tell, he hasn’t touched it.

Mick might have a lot of faith in these Hightower people, but he can afford to. He’s armed, his entire future isn’t hanging in the balance, and his insurance policy isn’t currently wedged into a flimsy piece of cardboard that could easily be thrown in the trash.

I finish up, avoid looking at my reflection in the mirror, and exit without switching the light off. Mick is waiting for me, standing beside his half of the bed, but he doesn’t look prepared for sleep. He looks like he’s preparing for battle.

“One more thing,” he says.

“What?”

His eyes drift over me. “I need to pat you down.”

My eyes pop as he steps closer. “You aren’t going to frisk me.”

His face clouds. “You hid a gun. I won’t take the chance you’ve hidden another weapon on your person.”

I choke out a laugh. “On my person? And where exactly on my person would I have hidden it?” I pluck at the ridiculously oversized pants to emphasize my point and then yank my cardigan off. “I have no pockets and no capability of carrying anything, let alone a weapon.”

His hand slides over his face. “Look, just put your hands on the wall, please?”

Glaring, I pivot and slap my palms on the wall, looking at the ceiling as he approaches. I should have guessed this was coming. I already know he’s a hypocrite, and he’s going to prove it by groping me. Disappointment settles in my midsection and solidifies my resolve to get out of here as quickly as possible.

If he wants to make it easy for me, fine. I’ve dealt with worse. So much worse.

Tensing my muscles in preparation, I close my eyes and try not to hold my breath when I feel his hands on my arms. He starts with my shoulders and gently pats in random places, not following any real system, so I open one eye, wondering if he’s even looking. Twisting my neck as far as I can turn, I snort when my suspicions are confirmed.

He’s patting me down by feel, but he’s staring at his feet. “Turn around,” he growls.

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Covering a laugh with a cough, I do as he says. Mick Weston is confounding. Any other man would have been all over me by now.

So, why isn't he?

I chew my lip to stave off a nervous giggle. "FYI, your eyes do need to be on my person."

His hands leave my shoulders and run the length of my spine. "Had a lot of experience with clothed body searches, have you?"

At the humor in his voice, I smile. "Enough to know you've missed a few areas I could be hiding something."

He grunts a response. "Yeah, well... we usually have a female deal with... female persons."

Oh. I see. He's still trying to be professional. Now that's got to be a first.

Without thinking, I turn around, catching him off guard. "Then allow me."

I flatten both my hands over my chest and pat down every part he's avoided. "Voilà."

His eyes meet mine, and his chest rises and falls too fast. There's a hint of color in his cheeks, and his voice lacks the hard edge that was present beforehand. "Thanks."

I respond far too breathily for someone facing her enemy. "Don't mention it."

“Right... I should...” His eyes slide to the bathroom. “I just need to remove anything sharp from the bathroom.”

Panic ignites in me at the caution stamped on his face, which I immediately tamp down. He’s hardly going to consider a sewing kit a lethal weapon. “Go right ahead.”

His brow crinkles, and he slowly shakes his head at me before turning on his heel and stalking into the bathroom.

Mick

To avoid having to body search her again, I check the bathroom thoroughly and place anything even remotely resembling a weapon into the trash. That means the disposable razor and the nail clippers. My eyes linger on the sewing kit. It’s sure to contain needles, but I doubt she’s able to do much harm with that.

Unless I get close to her, which is not going to happen.

I grab the trash can and exit the bathroom, leaving the door open so enough light spills into the room to see but leaves it dark enough so we can sleep.

My phone vibrates as I enter the bedroom again.

Knock, knock.

Silas.

Samantha eyes me from where she’s lying propped up in bed, covers pulled up to her neck. “Where are you going?”

“Delivery,” I say.

Her eyebrow arches. “At this time of night?”

I lift a shoulder lazily. “It’s a special delivery.”

Not waiting for what is sure to be a sarcastic reply, I hurry to the front door, drop the trash, and pull out my gun. Cautiously, I open the front door, scan the street, and find nothing of interest, except for a Bible and Samantha’s phone.

Unless there’s something hidden inside it, the Bible is a head scratcher, but I reach down and scoop it up, leaving the trash in its place. As I straighten, a note falls out from behind her phone.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

“Subtle,” I mumble.

But as much as it burns, it’s the truth. Samantha’s already called me on it, so it’s a truth I need to face up to now I’m stuck here with her for the next few days.

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I slide her phone into my pocket, leave the Bible on the coffee table, and head back into the bedroom. When I check on Samantha, she's facing away from me and using the eye mask to block out the remaining light. Thankfully, she says nothing as I stretch out on the bed.

The day's events play on a loop as my eyes adjust to the semidarkness. The phone Hightower left, the impulsive interview with a fame-hungry reporter, the gunmen who could have killed Samantha.

With a growl, I roll over onto my side, but thanks to my sidearm, I can't get comfortable. I flip over onto my back again, close my eyes, and flex my muscles. But I still can't seem to relax. There are too many possible outcomes. There are too many things that could go wrong. I'm placing my trust in people I barely know solely because, as a result of my interest in Samantha, I'd have died without two of their members.

I give up the pretense I'm going to sleep anytime soon. What I need is peace of mind.

Hauling myself off the bed, I wander back into the sitting room. Yawning, I pick up the Bible Silas sent over.

I flip through until I reach Proverbs and skim for something solid—something I can hang my thoughts on.

There.

In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their

steps.—Proverbs 16:9

I stare at the words.

My plan had been simple: find Samantha and bring her in. Getting shot at—and saving her life—wasn't part of it.

But maybe... it was part of His.

My grip tightens around the Bible.

Dad always said the answers were in the pages. But if this is the answer, I don't get it.

I set the Bible down and pull out my phone. Can't text Dad this late, so I go for the second-worst option—Google.

How does God's providence work?

The top result loads with frustrating clarity:

God's providence is the divine orchestration of every event in the universe, including suffering, evil, and chance, all working together for His ultimate plan and glory.

I frown. That doesn't help. If anything, it raises more questions.

So, what—getting ambushed and nearly killed is divine orchestration? Samantha working with terrorists was ordained? Part of some glorious plan?

I lock the screen and set the phone down, unsettled. If this is providence... it sure doesn't look like it from here.

I slide the phone into my pocket and look toward the open doorway. She's quiet in the other room. Still breathing. Still here.

Whether I like it or not, our paths have crossed.

And it's not an accident.

However I'm meant to figure it out, it won't happen tonight. It's late.

Groaning, I haul myself out of the chair, yawning so hard I almost miss the unmistakable sound of a woman screaming. Yanking my gun from my side, I burst into the room as adrenaline washes through me.

No one is inside the room apart from Samantha. Still in bed, eye mask askew, covers pushed down to the edge of the bed, and hands out as if warding off an invisible intruder.

Just a night terror. Brooke had a couple as a kid. Best thing to do is leave her to go back to sleep. Come morning, she won't remember a thing. Brooke never did.

I lower my gun, holster it, and start to turn away... except my feet aren't budging, and I can't seem to tear my eyes off her. Her breaths are coming in so fast that she's in danger of hyperventilating.

My toes inch closer as an overwhelming desire to reassure her she's in no danger starts to propel me forward.

"Don't touch me," she whispers.

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I freeze. Is she talking to me?

“Just leave me alone,” she mumbles.

The idea that she’s that afraid of me curls inside me like toxic smoke. “Wake up. You’re just dreaming.”

No response. Her eyes are still closed, and she’s squirming as if she’s in pain.

I edge closer. “Samantha, wake up.”

Her eyelids flicker, and she lets out a whimper that rips into my chest.

Not wanting to scare her, I open the bathroom door wider so more light spills into the room, then I perch on the edge of the bed. I reach out and gently tap her shoulder. “Samantha. Wake up.”

Her eyes fly open, surprising me so much I instinctively shift my weapon so she can’t reach it.

She bolts upright, rips the eye mask off her face, and grabs my arms. “Don’t let them hurt me,” she chokes out.

I say the first thing that comes to mind. “No one is going to hurt you. Not while you’re with me.”

And Heaven help me, I mean it.

Nine

Samantha

You're a natural, Samantha. A pretty little chameleon. But you need to grow up and stop waiting for someone to come and save you.

I wake with the words on my lips and immediately recognize them as Mona's first words to me. Words she repeated daily until it became like a mantra.

Grow up. Stop waiting to be saved.

Her warning is precisely why I don't rely on anyone but myself and why I have my insurance policy hidden in the bathroom.

The bathroom. Right.

My eyes snap open as the events of the day before become clearer in my mind.

Him.

Mick.

I'm here with him.

And he saved my life.

But he didn't save me.

I'm still in deep, deep trouble. Just like Mona said.

Eyes still blurry, I squint across the room to where he pushed his half of the bed. He's flat on his back, lying on top of the covers, fully dressed, still armed, and snoring lightly. I have no idea what time it is, only that there's a little grayish light mingling with the artificial light from the bathroom.

With my eyes shifting from him to my bag, I ease out of bed and tiptoe across the room. I slip my hand into the side pocket and pull out my burner phone to see if it's still working after being submerged in water. Scanning quickly, I check the relevant information. It's just gone six a.m. Half the battery is remaining, and the signal is strong.

All of that information is useless when I have no one to call.

Even though I didn't expect to see any texts or messages from Mona, I feel a jab of pain at the confirmation she hasn't checked in to see if I made it to Cuba. For a while after she "adopted" me, she'd routinely text on the phone she gave me. At first I thought it was because she was worried, but by the time I reached puberty, I'd wised up.

To her, I was a walking investment. Nothing more. Nothing less.

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A low grumble jerks me out of my trip down memory lane. “You talk in your sleep,” Mick says.

I spin around, slipping my phone back in the pocket as I reply. “I do not.”

He runs a hand over his sleep-tousled hair and yawns. “Too early to argue... but if you want proof I can record you tonight.”

Well played. He’s calling my bluff at the same time as reminding me I have to endure another night spent here with him.

“You snore.”

He groans as he stretches his arms over his head. “You’re not the first person to tell me that.”

I hold my tongue as I consider whether I really did talk in my sleep.

I don’t share my bed with anyone. Ever.

It’s the only rule Mona laid down for me that I’ve never broken.

As he slides his boots back on, I ask the obvious question. “When is the nurse coming back? I want to shower.”

His eyes bounce from me to the open bathroom door. “I’ll find out when I get us some breakfast.”

I twist my hair into a knot and loop it so it stays in place. “I don’t suppose I get to choose?”

His eyes linger on me before a smile curls his lips. “You don’t want oatmeal?”

I wrinkle my nose. “Is that what you’re having?”

A slight vibration causes his eyes to shift to his pocket. Given it’s so early, it’s got to be the people he’s working for. “Guess we’ll find out what we’re having together.”

At the use of “together,” I cringe and sneak back into the bathroom to see if my underwear is dry.

I release a breath as my fingers meet the material and I find it bone dry. Mick’s voice has gotten louder, so I leave the sewing kit where it is and listen closely.

“...not what we agreed on. She needs—” His voice gets higher, a sure sign he’s under stress.

From the choppy conversation, whoever it is he’s talking to is interrupting him and appears to be telling him plans have changed.

“...what about the nurse? Right, Alice... Why can’t she...” He lets out a growl. “But Luke... Good... Yeah, yeah. It’s not a problem. These things happen... I’ll keep you updated.”

When he exhales a long sigh, I enter the room. “No breakfast?”

His eyes meet mine, and he graces me with the tiniest of smiles. “No nurse. Her mother had a fall, and she wound up in the ER.”

“Oh.”

His mouth twists to one side. “So... go ahead and shower. Breakfast should be?—”

A thump at the door makes us both jump. Immediately his hand moves to his gun, and he waves me back, almost as if he’s protecting me. From what, I’m not sure.

“I thought you said we were safe here?”

His eyes narrow, his impatience growing as he replies. “Nothing wrong with taking precautions.”

Rather than argue with him, I back up and wait behind the bedroom door, my stomach rumbling acknowledgment that I need to eat again as a key slips into the lock and my pathway to freedom is opened.

In under a minute, Mick calls me back out, and while there are now two bags from a bakery on the countertop, along with two brown grocery sacks and a six-pack of soda, he doesn’t look pleased.

As I approach and see the mountain of food, I begin to understand why. There’s enough to feed us for a week. And it’s not all breakfast.

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He holds out a note, a wry expression on his face. “Looks like we’ll be cooking a few meals. Hightower had a surplus of venison.”

I peer into the bag and jerk back as I spy the mass of ground meat. “I don’t cook. And if I did, it wouldnotbe that.”

He mutters under his breath and hauls out a box of cereal. “Too bad. I make a mean bowl of chili, and there’s a game on.”

I choke out a laugh. “That’s your idea of fun?”

He jerks back as though I’ve slapped him. “Just trying to make the best out of a bad situation.”

My brow knits as I shake off his bizarre comment. There is nothing that will make this better.

As he tackles one bag, I examine the contents, growing more irritated with each item. “They expect us to live on burgers, corn, and salad?”

Mick holds up a package of tortillas. “And tacos. Don’t forget tacos.”

With a half eye roll, I grab a bag of chips and toss it on the counter. “This isn’t a sleepover, and I can’t live on junk food.”

His eyes sweep over me before he peers into the remaining food sack. “Looks like you don’t have to.” He slides it toward me, and as I peer inside it, my annoyance

lessens.

Whoever Hightower are, they did a better job of choosing the food than they did my clothing. Aside from tuna steaks, there are crawfish, mangos, passionfruit, papaya, apples, and bananas, along with citrus fruits, avocado, asparagus, and strawberries.

It's uncanny. Almost as if someone knew exactly what I'd like to eat. Given that Mick's already ripped open a box of cereal, they had an idea of what he likes to eat for breakfast too.

I grab a banana and peel it. "How well do you know... Hightower?"

He grabs two bowls and, without asking me if I want any, pours two servings. "Well enough."

He douses his cereal in half-and-half then slides the carton toward me. "Coffee?"

Nodding, I pick up my bowl and my banana and take a seat at the table. As he puts the food away as though we're on vacation and not in danger, the awkwardness only increases.

I cram a spoonful of cereal into my mouth and chomp my way through it, thinking as I chew. "But you don't work for them. You're Coast Guard."

He scratches his chin and leans against the countertop, spooning his cereal into his mouth as we wait for the coffee to brew. "Is that a question or your way of letting me know you haven't forgotten I saved your life yesterday?"

At the quirk to his lips and the creases around his eyes, it doesn't take a genius to figure out he's joking. I can do humor. What I can't figure out is why he seems lighter this morning. Almost as if a weight's been lifted from him.

“Neither. I’m trying to figure out why you’re here with me, and not doing your job.”

His brow creases, and the mirth slips away. “Since you’re in the mood to chat, how about you tell me when you started making money off of innocent men.”

“They were hardly innocent.”

He shakes his head. “Unsuspecting. You like that better?”

I purse my lips then take another mouthful as a means to ignore him.

But he’s not giving up. He carries his bowl over to the table and sits opposite me. “Do you ever pity the guys you con?”

I glare at him. “Isn’t the coffee brewed yet?”

He stares up at me as he shovels cereal into his mouth. “Did someone teach you to do it, or is it instinct?”

I drop my spoon with a clatter. “What do you want me to say? That with you it was different, that I felt guilty? Well, I didn’t.” To emphasize my point, I lean closer and jab my finger into the air. “If I don’t do it, someone else will, and that person is probably a whole lot worse than I am.”

“That’s how you justify it? By comparing yourself to other criminals?”

I shrug and pick up my spoon. “Everyone compares themselves. Even criminals.”

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When he doesn't answer, I lower my voice, jut out my chin, and mimic having muscled arms. "I go to church sometimes, and I'm a glorified lifeguard. I'm so much better than everybody else."

He folds his arms and leans back in his chair. "I never said I'm better than everybody else."

I scoff. "No, but you keep reminding me of my faults. It's a sure way to draw attention away from your own."

He narrows his gaze. "I know what my faults are."

"I'm listening," I say.

With a head shake, he pushes his chair back. "I'm taking a shower."

He abandons his half-eaten food and makes for the door. A surge of panic rises in me as I think of him in the bathroom.

Jumping to my feet, I block his exit. "I need to go first."

"Why?"

Usually, I could think of a myriad of reasons, but my brain seems to be on the go slow. "Because... ladies first," I say slowly.

He shifts his weight to one leg and folds his arms across his chest. "You're not a

lady. Ladies don't cheat, steal, and lie."

My shoulders tighten at the insult, but I edge toward the bedroom door, blocking him from entering. "There you go again, pointing out my faults without acknowledging your own." I take a step backward.

A tiny vein pops in his neck, but he doesn't move.

Too easy.

I take another step.

"You're going to have to confess to all your crimes. You must know that," he says.

Another step closer. "Maybe. But I don't need to confess them to you."

He lets out a loud sigh.

I risk a quick glance to check where the furniture is.

"I am still law enforcement, and I am trying to help you."

I'm halfway into the room, and he still hasn't moved. "I never asked for your help."

His gaze travels to the ceiling, and he mutters something I swear must be a prayer.

"Yeah, well, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me either. But here we are."

The bathroom door is so close now, that if I stretched out my fingers, I could touch it.

"You could let me go, make up a story, and no one would be the wiser," I say.

His eyes snap to me, and a deep crease appears on his forehead. In seconds he crosses

the room and breezes past me. “My parents taught me not to lie, and I’m not going to start now,” he says.

The door closes in my face before I can think to close my mouth.

Mick

Frustrated—and still hungry—I avoid looking at her underwear drying on the rail, leave my gun in easy reach, and shower as fast as I can. Every second away from her is a risk I’d rather not take. But the woman is an argumentative menace. The conflict is messing with my ability to reason.

As a rescue swimmer, I’ve dropped into Gulf waters whipped by storm surge, hoisted fishermen off sinking trawlers, and braced against rotor wash with seconds to spare. I’ve trained to keep a level head in chaos, stay focused, and stay sharp.

But none of that prepared me for this.

The reasonable thing to do would be to call this Luke guy, tell him I’ve had enough, and walk out the door. Drive straight back to Tampa, check in at Air Station Clearwater, and let someone else untangle this mess.

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There's only one thing stopping me.

Loyalty to the security team that saved my life.

With that thought, I get dressed and scan the room again—checking for weapons, or anything that could be used as one. Pointless, really. She's smart, resourceful. If she wanted to hurt someone, she'd find a way.

I yank the door open and step into the living area. She's curled in the same chair, sipping the coffee I brewed, picking at her thumbnails like she's peeling away more than skin.

I close the door quietly, open her pack, and check that her phone is still where I left it. No calls out, no calls in. At all. She's deleted her entire call history.

Good thing Hightower has installed tracking software.

With my eyes on the door, I push the phone back where I found it and unzip the main compartment.

The money is missing.

Does she really think I'm that stupid?

With a grunt, I rezip the pack and dump it back on the floor. There's no point searching for the money now. There aren't many places she could have hidden it, and I need caffeine and a better breakfast than granola.

I pull out my phone and dial Silas, hoping to get an update.

But instead of Silas, a woman answers as though she's his secretary. "Hey, Coastie, Silas is having his morning prayer time, but he told me to take your calls."

Prayer time? I glance at my watch. It's not even seven. My dad would definitely approve.

"Sorry, have we met?"

"Alas, we haven't. I'm Delilah. I live at Hightower HQ. I'm more behind the scenes, but I've got your back just the same."

My phone blips in my ear, and I check it quickly, grimacing as I see the low battery warning.

I press the phone against my ear again and hope she has the info I need. "I was calling for an update. Can you give me one?"

"About the guys who shot at you? Nope. Caleb and the Rook are handling that. I think he's going to check in with you soon. But I can tell you about Samantha's phone, if you want?"

I glance at the door and peek out to make sure she's where she should be. "Has she used it?"

"Nah. She hasn't sent or received any texts on it since yesterday at the marina. And that call wasn't answered. I've traced the number, but it's a dead end. It's no longer in service. If I had to guess, it was a burner, like Samantha's is."

I mull that over and tug my boots on one-handed as I talk. "Let me guess, you're the

tech whiz at Hightower?”

She chuckles. “I prefer cyber goddess, but tech whiz works. Did you like the food? Zack handled the healthy stuff. I’m more of a heat-and-eat kinda gal.”

“It was fine. Who’s Zack?”

“He’s who Silas is praying with. Zack’s kind of like our Father Mulcahy. You ever watch that show?”

“M*A*S*H? Sure, it’s a great show.”

“Yeah, he’s like that. A sweet outer layer, but with a chewy Chuck Norris center.”

My phone blips again.

“Ruh-roh. Somebody forgot to charge their phone,” she says in a singsong voice.

I laugh. “Yeah. I’ll go charge it now.”

“Righto. Silas should be done in an hour or so. But Caleb will be in touch if there’s anything you need to know.”

“Great. Thanks.”

I start to say goodbye, but she interrupts me. “It’s kinda sad, though, when you think about it.”

I scowl. “Think about what?”

“That she doesn’t have anyone who cares about her. No family, no friends.”

My fingers hover over my laces. “That’s because she uses people and throws them away when she’s done with them.”

“Maybe. But... I dunno. Her parents gave her away to total strangers like she was nothing. What would that do to a kid?”

I drag my fingers through my damp hair. “I don’t know.”

“Yeah, well... maybe think about that. Adena and I have been digging up more of her history. She’s incredibly clever, and she’s very careful with who she targets. They won’t report her because they’d incriminate themselves.”

I don’t know who Adena is, and I don’t have time to ask.

“You sound like you admire her.”

“I admire her resilience and resourcefulness, not that she’s hurt people. I’m hoping to meet her so I can slap some sense into her.”

The idea makes my lips twitch into a smile. My phone sounds another alert, giving me no more time to talk. “My phone’s going to die.”

She exhales loudly, almost as if she’s disappointed in me. “Yeah. Go plug in, but will you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Look out for her, Coastie. Right now, you’re the only person who can.”

Ten

Samantha

While my infuriating excuse for a captor occupies the bathroom, I thumb through the brochure and mentally formulate a plan. I’m curled into an overstuffed armchair that’s seen better days but still manages to be the most comfortable thing I’ve sat in for weeks.

Thanks to the handy walking distances on every page, I know I can reach the closest mall in around thirty minutes. Maybe fifteen if I run.

All I have to do is wait for an opening, find a way to retrieve the keys from his pocket, then breeze out the front door with my money. It’s the how to retrieve the keys that I’m struggling to figure out.

Under ordinary circumstances, I’d flirt with him, ply him with drinks, and take what I wanted and go. For the briefest of moments last night, that seemed like a viable option.

Until... he did the one thing I didn’t expect him to.

Getting him to let his guard down is going to be a challenge.

Movement from the doorway draws my attention back to reality. Mick glances at me then leans down and reaches into his bag, obviously looking for something.

I keep my eyes on him, gauging his reaction. “So, what do you think your faults are?”

He shakes his head, gives me a tight smile, then pulls out his phone charger and plugs it into the wall. Then, with a frown, he stalks into the kitchen. “We’re back on that again? I thought you wanted a shower?”

I shrug and sip my coffee. “I can wait.”

The ridge between his eyebrows grows more pronounced as he pulls out a pan and a carton of eggs. “I need eggs. You want some?”

I screw my face up at his offer. “No, thanks.”

His eyebrow lifts. “You don’t like eggs? My dad makes great eggs.”

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I chew my lip as the familiar cold dread starts to spread through me, just like it always does whenever normal people bring up family. “Good for your dad. I don’t care if I never eat another egg again.”

“Why? You allergic?”

I hate talking about myself—myrealself—but the more I talk, the more likely it is he’ll give me what I need. “I lived with a family who kept chickens.”

He drops a chunk of butter into the pan, and it sizzles. “You ate a lot of eggs?”

I toy with my coffee cup, staring into the black. “I had to.”

He cracks an egg, and my throat starts to close over. “What about pancakes? Did you ever get pancakes? Waffles?”

I toss my head. “Just watery poached eggs. When he found out I didn’t like eggs, their son told me they were white slime that bled snot.”

Mick grimaces. “Sounds like a nice kid.”

“Oh, yeah. He was great. He was twice my size, six years older, and liked to lock me in the hen house when I wouldn’t do his chores for him. I was trapped in there for three hours once. I missed dinner.”

I hadn’t screamed for long. Just long enough to realize it wouldn’t change anything.

No footsteps down the path. No one calling my name.

They knew I was missing.

They just didn't care.

He stops stirring the mixture. "Didn't anyone come looking for you?"

I choke out a laugh. "Who? The parents? They were hardly home. That's why they fostered kids. They'd get the money, and the oldest kids in the house were supposed to look after their biological kids. After I tried to tell them about the hen house, they said I was a liar and had 'behavioral issues.' My word didn't count. Because I don't count."

His gaze searches my face, sharp and unblinking. "You don't think you count?"

I backpedal fast, heart hammering. "I meant I didn't count. Back then."

"But that's not what you said. You said, 'I don't count.' As in present tense."

My hands clench into tight balls at my stupidity. "I just meant in a big family you can fall through the cracks."

His mouth presses into tight lines. He doesn't look angry. Just caught off guard. Like I've said something he doesn't know how to fix. His gaze holds mine, unflinching, but there's something different in his eyes now. Something quieter. Sadder.

"I don't know who told you that, but it's baloney."

I open my hands. "Why do you care what I believe? It doesn't change what I've done to you."

He gawks at me. Stares down at the half-prepared eggs, grabs the bowl, and dumps them down the sink.

My eyes pop as surprise takes hold of me. “I thought you wanted eggs?”

When he turns back, he’s wearing a wry smile that baffles me further. “My cholesterol is probably getting too high anyway.”

Given his job and his physique, that seems unlikely. “Don’t deny yourself on my account.”

He rubs his hand over his face. “Was it like that with all the families you were with?”

A groan slips past my lips before I can stop it. “Why don’t we talk about your family?”

I’m rewarded with a smile and warmth that lets me know his upbringing was exactly what mine wasn’t.

“What do you want to know?”

What do I want to know? Everything.

Did he have his own room? Birthday cakes and wrapped presents? A packed lunch waiting on the counter? Did anyone come to his school plays or clap just for him? Did he ever fall asleep knowing someone would still want him in the morning? Was there food in the fridge—his food—or a light left on just because he was afraid of the dark?

Did anyone ever make him feel like he didn't have to earn their love just to stay?

Was there ever a moment—just one—when he didn't feel like he had to prove he was worth keeping?

I don't ask any of that. Instead, I go for the safest option I can find. "Are your parents still together?"

He grins. "Oh yeah. Still crazy about each other after thirty-five years."

I tilt my head, half-sneering. "I seriously doubt that."

He laughs and abandons his coffee to grab his phone. "I'll show you."

Before I can say I'm not interested in family photo albums, he punches in his passcode and shoves the screen in front of me.

"Last year. Their anniversary dinner."

I squint at the photo. An older couple beams back at me—not the fake kind of smile people paste on for pictures, but the real deal. Eyes crinkled, joy radiating off them like warmth from a fire.

His dad looks like a broader, slightly older version of him—same green eyes, same confident posture, full head of salt-and-pepper hair. His mom is soft-featured, pretty in a way she probably doesn't think about anymore, with shoulder-length hair she's left to grey and a loose pastel blouse chosen for comfort, not vanity.

They look happy. Not perfect, not posed. Just... content.

The photo is so unbelievably real, and Mick is so proud, that my jealousy bone snaps. "I hate to tell you, but your dad has probably cheated on your mom multiple times."

Mick pulls the phone away from me. The corner of his mouth drags down, and a spark of anger flashes in his eyes. "You say that because your entire view of the world and everyone in it is skewed by the people who've let you down."

Heat ignites inside me, and I get to my feet. "And you've got your head in the clouds if you think anyone can be faithful for that long."

He grits his teeth and rams his connector into the phone. "They can if they love each other."

A bitter laugh escapes me. "What happens when they don't love each other anymore?"

His chest puffs out a little. "Then there's the commitment they've made. The contracts they signed."

I wave my hands in the air, my breathing rate starting to increase as emotion makes my voice crack. "Contracts can be broken. People do it all the time. They promise to

do something then walk away.”

He jerks away from me, a horrified expression replacing the anger. “Is that what happened to you? Someone promised to love you?”

My breath catches. Just like that, he’s stripped me bare. I blink hard, but it’s no use—he’s already seen too much.

“What?” I manage, though it barely makes it past my throat.

His gaze sharpens, narrowing like he’s zeroing in on the truth. “When you were a kid. Someone promised to love you… then changed their mind, didn’t they?”

Something twists deep in my chest—something old, bruised, and not quite healed.

I shift my gaze to the floor, jaw tight, willing the sting behind my eyes to fade. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” I take a step, but he skirts around me. To avoid his gaze, I focus on his socks covering my feet.

“Look at me,” he says softly.

When I don’t, his fingers tug my chin upward, forcing me to meet his gaze. His face is pinched as though in pain.

“You do count,” he says.

My stupid eyes let me down again, so I push his chest hard enough to warn him. “Says who?”

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I shove him, but he barely moves. His feet are planted firmly on the ground, almost as if he expected resistance.

“God.”

My hands stay on his chest. He’s breathing as rapidly as I am, and just like last night, the close proximity is making my stomach back flip.

“Spare me. You’re the one who nearly got me killed. You want me dead, you just can’t admit it.”

He flinches, his eyes never moving from me, as if I’m the only thing that matters to him. “That was before...”

He swallows hard, and I do the same, my mouth running dry as my hands slowly move down the swell of his chest muscle. His heart is racing. His pupils are dilating. All the telltale signs of attraction.

How is that possible? I look ridiculous, and I’ve done nothing but insult him since he saved my life.

My lips part, and his eyes slowly move to them as if drawn.

I slide my hands up his chest again, rest my sweaty palms on his broad shoulders. “Before what?” I whisper.

His nostrils flare. “Before I understood that this is all an act for you.”

If this were any other time, any other situation, I would have laughed in his face, but when his fingers lace into mine and he draws me in closer, laughing is the furthest thing from my mind.

His hand releases one of mine, and he slides it down to the small of my back, almost as if he's leading me on the dance floor. I place my hand around his neck and shiver when he slow blinks as if enjoying the contact. As if we're thinking the same thing, he starts to sway, and my body responds without conscious thought.

After all I did to him, after his brazen plea to find me on the news, this makes as much sense as his dumping the eggs in the sink and then pretending he hadn't done it for me.

Slowly, as if he's got all the time in the world, he leans in, closer, so close it's impossible to misread his intentions. I lean in to meet him, lift my chin so my lips are an open invitation, and let him bridge the final gap between us.

Mick

Okay.Okay.

This isn't going to plan.

This is going so far off the plan, it doesn't even resemble the plan.

Whatever grudge I held toward her seems to be chiseled away under a tumult of emotions that I can't put into logical order. Every time I get a glimpse of who she could have been, the more my desire to protect her seems to swell.

But this? This doesn't have anything to do with my protective instincts.

I'm aching to touch her. To press my lips against hers, to kiss the tender skin of her neck and see if she responds the way I think she will.

Her cheeks are flushed, her fingertips drawing slow, maddening circles on my skin. She licks her lips—nervous, maybe—but her gaze doesn't drop. It holds mine like a dare.

A low sound escapes me—raw and involuntary—and she rewards me with the kind of shy smile that could bring a man to his knees.

Before I can stop myself, my mouth finds hers.

The first brush of contact steals my breath. Her lips are warm, tentative, then bold—like she's spent a lifetime pretending she didn't want this and can't fake it anymore. Her fingers tangle in the hair at the back of my neck, and I slide my hands to her waist, anchoring her to me as if I could keep her from vanishing.

She leans in, answering every movement with one of her own, deepening the kiss with a hunger that knocks the sense clean out of me.

She tastes like risk and promise. Like something I was never meant to touch—but can't let go of now.

Then—metal scrapes.

The unmistakable sound of a key turning in the front door punches through the haze, and I tear my mouth from hers, breath ragged, heart thundering.

I wrench myself away from her, spin around, and try to find my way back from a hormone-soaked fog as the front door opens and Caleb steps inside.

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His clothes are rumpled, his eyes red-rimmed and shadowed, and his massive shoulders are sagging. His electric-blue eyes land on me then shift to Samantha before they narrow to almost a squint.

Heat tears across my skin, followed by guilt so profound it might as well be my father standing in the doorway.

Behind me, Samantha clears her throat and can't meet my eye. As she scurries out of the room, Caleb's gaze follows her, fixing on her feet. Swallowing hard, knowing what's about to come, I head into the kitchen and pour him a coffee. He takes it without a word and sinks into the closest chair, sighing as he takes a sip.

I get the feeling he's drawing it out, trying to find the right way to let me know he's disappointed in me. I refill my own cup, settle into the chair that Samantha favors, and wait for the reprimand. With every moment of silence, the tension in the room grows, and somehow the anticipation is ten times worse than if he'd actually laid into me.

If it's a tactic, it's working.

I switch between simply waiting and glancing at my watch, counting the seconds that pass while he just quietly works his way through his coffee.

By my count, it's been over five minutes, and he's not spoken a word. The man is either exhausted or he's trying to figure out the best way to let me have it. Either way, I don't have a lot of time. Samantha is in the bathroom, and I still don't have an update.

“I spoke to Delilah earlier,” I say.

He places his coffee cup down on the table next to Samantha’s and eyes me. “You know why Silas hired Delilah?”

Since it’s an impossible question to answer, I let him answer it himself.

“Because she’s trustworthy and she has integrity.”

If he’d slugged me, it would have wounded me less. “Look, I know?—”

He cuts me off with a frown. “No, you look. We all make mistakes—Lord knows I’ve made plenty of them—but you are playing with a fire that’s already burned you once.”

“So why did you force me to stay here with her?”

His eyebrow rises. “Are you blaming us because you can’t keep your hands to yourself? Last I knew, you were the perfect man for the job.”

My shoulders square. “I was. I am. It’s just getting...”

He finishes for me. “Complicated?”

I run my hand over my face and almost growl my words. “Yeah. Okay, it’s complicated. I didn’t think it would be, but it is.”

He closes his eyes and mutters something under his breath. “I didn’t come here to be your agony aunt. I came to tell you that the trail has gone cold. The yacht she was supposed to be on was scuttled, and the dinghy was gone.”

My stomach drops.

Gone.

The word echoes, hollow and sharp, bouncing around the empty spaces in my chest. I knew this was a long shot. I knew the chances were slim. But still, some reckless, desperate part of me had been holding out.

“They could be anywhere in Miami by now,” I say.

His eyes drift to the bedroom door. “I don’t know what she’s told you to make you go gaga over her again, but I’d take it with a grain of salt.”

“I’m not gaga over her.”

He sighs and shakes his head. “Then what was that?”

“A moment of weakness.”

His forehead wrinkles into a frown. “Two days ago you wanted revenge. What happened?”

“I can’t... I don’t know. I can’t explain it. She’s...”

His face puckers. “Possibly manipulating you, and that’s not something we can allow to happen.”

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“You won’t allow it? I’m not a teenager. I can control myself.”

He yawns then pointedly looks at me. “Would you bet your life on that? Because if she’s playing you, you’ll be dead before you realize.”

When I don’t answer, he rises to his feet and looks down at me as he stretches his arms over his head. “I’ll text Luke and tell him you need his assistance here.”

I balk at the idea of a chaperone. “There’s no need. It won’t happen again. You have my word I won’t lose sight of why I’m here.”

I extend my hand, and he accepts it, the force of his grip so powerful I work not to flinch.

“Expect a lot more drop-ins until this is resolved,” he says.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Eleven

Samantha

The murmur of male voices merges with the frantic pounding of my heart.

Muscle Man is not happy. Who knows what he’ll do. Maybe change his mind and hand me over to the PD?

I'm completely at their mercy, and thanks to Mick's confusing kindness, I'm making foolish errors that could cost me my life.

Quickly, I snap my bra on, grab the sewing kit, slide the memory card into my bra, and toss the kit into the trash. But even that doesn't dampen the panic raging like a wildfire inside me.

I smear my hand over the fogged-up mirror and growl at myself. My lips are still swollen from his stubble. What was I thinking kissing him? And what am I supposed to do now?

One little kiss hasn't changed anything between us. It can't have. He's still law enforcement, and I'm still a criminal in his eyes.

Pulling my shoulders back, I dress in my borrowed clothes, leaving my feet bare, toss his socks back on his bed, and cross the room so I can listen at the door.

Nothing. Either they've gone silent, or I missed his exit. Stupid, really. I should have stayed around in case I heard something I could use in my favor.

Mick is in the kitchen when I enter, his back to me, and is washing dishes with too much gusto not to be angry at me.

Before I can speak, he preempts me. "I shouldn't have kissed you."

"Says who?"

He turns, soapy water dripping off his hands as he pokes his thumb into his chest. "Me."

For some stupid reason, I feel like arguing with him. "Are you sorry you kissed me or

sorry you got caught doing it?”

He shakes his head and turns back to the sink. “I don’t know. But I won’t let it happen again. It can’t.”

His coldness after such a hot kiss grates on me. “Because I’m going to jail?”

He mutters something so low I can’t make it out.

“What did you say?”

“I said, I don’t know.”

At least we’ve got that straight. Everything else might be a mess, but it’s clear where he draws the line.

“Got it. No point investing anything in me when I’ll be behind bars before too long. Guess I’m not worth the time after all.”

He spins around, a flash of anger crossing his face. “That’s not what I said. Don’t twist my words.”

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I shrug. “I’m not. I’m just filling in the blanks. It’s fine. I have no expectations. At least we know where we stand.”

His expression softens. “Westandon opposite sides of the law, Samantha. Forgive me if I’m having a hard time dealing with that.”

I laugh lightly. “There’s nothing to deal with. Just let me walk out the door, and you’ll never have to see me again.”

The bowl he’s holding onto slips out of his hands and into the water. “Even if that was what I wanted, that’s not an option.”

I flip my hair behind my shoulders, trying to stay calm while my insides are churning. I’m supposed to be in control, but he’s making me feel things I never have before. “So, whatdoyou want?”

His jaw works as he fishes the bowl out of the water. Then his expression sets before he says, “What I always want. To see justice done.”

I speak without thinking, and with so much malice he recoils as though I’ve struck him. “Yeah, well. Good luck. I’ve waited a whole lifetime, and I’ve never seen justice.”

When he has no reply, I lace my tone with venom. “But go ahead and believe you can make a difference. You can’t.”

He dumps the dish back into the sink and stalks toward me. “Did it make a difference

to you when I pulled you out of the water?”

I toss my head. “My life is over anyway. You just bought me some time.”

He frowns and glances at his phone, as if remembering what I said about his parents. “Do you feel better about yourself when you rip into other people? Is that why you do it?”

“What? No.”

With a head shake, he grabs hold of my hands and drags me toward him.

I tug against him, but his grip is too strong. “What are you doing?”

Still holding my hands, he nods toward the exit. “From the front door, you can’t see into the kitchen.”

My eyes widen as he explains. “Silas Hightower is testing my integrity, but he’s the best chance we have right now.”

I swallow, my throat thickening as he caresses the top of my hand with his thumb. “We?”

His lip curls. “Yeah. We. We’re in this together now.”

“You don’t believe I’m a terrorist?”

A shadow crosses his face, and it sends a shiver down my spine. “I believe there’s more to you than you want people to see.”

For a second, I forget how to breathe. Not because he’s wrong, but because people

only ever see what I let them. He shouldn't be looking deeper—not him.

I force a smirk. If I don't, I'll flinch. And if I flinch, he wins. "Does that mean you'll let me go?"

Rather than respond, he draws me closer. His chin whiskers tickle my earlobe as he leans in. "I don't think I could let you go now even if I wanted to," he whispers.

I don't respond. I can't. This is getting real, and I don't do real.

Instead, I plaster on my demure smile, ease a butter knife off the countertop, and slide it up my sleeve.

Mick

Caleb was right. I need a chaperone. Not because I can't keep my hands to myself, but because I'm out of my depth.

Samantha is damaged in a way I can't even begin to understand. She wears that pain like armor—sharp edges and hard glances—and every now and then, something slips through, just enough to make me want to reach in and try to fix it.

But this goes beyond responsibility. Way beyond attraction.

I want to prove her wrong.

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I want to show her that there are still people in this world who keep their word. Who don't walk away when things get hard. Who mean what they say—and back it up with action.

I draw back, offer a small smile, and return to the dishes I abandoned. The water's gone lukewarm, the soap bubbles fading fast. "Go take a shower," I say. "I need to..."

I trail off. I don't know what I need.

Time to think, mostly. Something I haven't been doing a lot of lately.

"Pray," I say, and the word lands between us like a confession.

Her eyebrows shoot skyward, and she actually backs away a step, like I've just said something truly distasteful.

"Pray? For what? A miracle?"

I rub the back of my neck, my skin still damp from the shower I barely remember taking. "Guidance," I say quietly. "I've been going about this all wrong."

Her shoulders shake as she contains a laugh, like the idea of me praying is the punchline to a joke she's heard before.

It should sting. Maybe it does. But I can't blame her. Why would she believe I have faith worth anything?

I say I'm a Christian—but what does that mean when I'm neck-deep in a mess of secrets, violence, and compromise? If Jesus really changes lives, then mine should look different.

Dad always told me and Brooke that faith isn't supposed to sit on a shelf or get dusted off when it's convenient. It reaches into every part of your life. And there was no denying he lived that. Mom, too. Even Brooke—you can see it in the way she fights for truth, for people, for justice.

But me?

I'm just trying to stay afloat, dragging a broken woman through the fallout of my choices and pretending it's something noble. That's not faith.

I don't even know what it is anymore.

Gritting my teeth, I rinse the final plate, dry my hands on the towel slung over my shoulder, and do what I should have done weeks ago.

“Lord,” I whisper, barely breathing the word, “I don't know what I'm doing. I don't even know if I'm the right one for this.”

I hesitate, my hand resting against the counter.

“She needs more than I can give her. But if You've brought her here for a reason, help me not to mess it up.”

The silence that follows isn't heavy. It's expectant.

I breathe in deep to steady myself.

And pray she doesn't come back before I've said all I need to say.

Samantha

I clutch the knife in my hand, breathing hard, and wonder if showering really is the best idea right now. It'll leave me vulnerable, and that's not a chance I'm willing to take.

At the quiet murmur from the next room, I peep through a crack in the door. What I see leaves me even more convinced Mick is crazy. He's actually gotten down on his knees and is quietly praying earnestly. I have to strain to listen, but when I do, heat blazes across my body. Not only is he repenting for his sin of being angry with me, he's praying for my salvation!

Either the man is nuts or he really does believe in this stuff. And considering I'm trapped here with him, I'm not sure which option is the better one.

I twist, my feet turning toward the bathroom, when his voice rises ever so slightly, as if by doing so he thinks God will hear him better. "Please grant me personal integrity. Please, Lord, help me not to compromise."

Integrity?

What a joke. The man is a joke. Where was his integrity when he kissed me?

This entire situation is getting more absurd the longer I'm forced to stay here, and after this abrupt about-face into pious religiosity, I'm done with it.

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I grab my pack, yank my money out from behind the bed, and carry it into the bathroom. I have one weapon I know he'll be powerless to refuse, and it's time to pull it out.

I strip down, hide the butter knife as best as I can, shower, and use the blow dryer so my hair frames my face and flows down my back. I slip into my underwear, wriggle into my dress, and leave my feet bare. The dress is still a little damp, but that will work to my advantage too.

After making sure everything is where I need it to be, I pinch my cheeks, heft up my bosom, and sashay across the bedroom. I tentatively enter the living room, lowering my voice so it comes out husky. "Have you finished?"

Apparently, he hasn't. He's still on his knees, eyes closed and mid-prayer, when I interrupt him.

As his eyes focus, he sucks in a breath then averts his gaze. "Where are the clothes they gave you?"

I cross the distance to him and keep my voice light and teasing. "Why? Don't you like this?"

He rises to his feet, still unable to look at me as he turns away. "Put the other clothes back on. You're showing...waytoo much skin."

I huff a breath. "I want to go sit outside. I can't wear sweatpants outside in the heat."

His voice is so strained I know he's wavering. "This isn't going to work, Samantha."

At his insistence, I lift my chin. "Whatever do you mean?"

He whirls around, anger flashing on his face, before he yanks his phone off the charger and dials a number. With his eyes on his phone, and not on me, he almost barks into the microphone. "Send whoever you want over. Preferably a woman."

He nods then shakes his head at me, so I push my chest out in a final bid to get him to see reason.

"You're afraid to be alone with me now?"

He ignores me, glances at his phone, and grimaces. "Great. My CO is trying to get ahold of me."

I'm so annoyed he's not responding that I don't filter my speech. "Maybe you shouldn't have gone on TV."

His brow furrows. "Get changed. I need to make a phone call before I lose my job."

I chew my lip, switching tactics. "And if I don't?"

Without blinking, he reaches into his pack and pulls out a pair of handcuffs. "Then I quit being nice and handcuff you to a chair."

I extend my hands, pouting in a last-ditch bid. "I'd prefer to be handcuffed to you."

His cheeks flush, then he swallows. "Quit it."

"Don't want to."

He growls and snaps the handcuffs open. “Don’t test me.”

I inch closer, hands still extended. “Are you going to tell yourrealboss you’re keeping me prisoner against my will?”

His eyes drill into me, his irritation rolling off him in waves.

“Didn’t think so. Imagine if it gets out... It would ruin you,” I say.

His jaw tightens, then he whips out his hand and slaps the cuff on my wrist. Cold steel bites into my skin, and he grabs my other hand, ready to snap the lock into place. “Quit. It.Now,”he growls.

Now just as annoyed as he is, I lean into him, crushing my chest against his, invading his space. “I don’t know why I thought you might be different. Homeland Security is just as corrupt as any other department.”

He grabs my wrist, his mouth pressed down and his eyes narrowed as he tries to process the validity of what I’m saying. “Is that your opinion, or do you know something?”

I tug my wrist, and he releases me, focused on my face. This isn’t how this was supposed to go. “I knowpeople.”

Specifically one person. One person who loves money more than he loves his country, apparently.

“You have any proof?”

I slam my mouth closed. I have never met a man who infuriated me as much as he does. My breathing is rapid, my hands are shaking, and I’m so angry I want to punch him. “If I show it to you, do I get to walk away?” I don’t know what I’m saying—it’s almost like some force has taken control of my mouth.

He tilts his head to one side, doubt growing on his face. “Where is it?”

Without thinking, I answer him truthfully. “In my bra.”

He flinches, bares his teeth slightly, then grabs my wrist again. “Enough with the games.”

Before I can explain I’m serious, he grabs my arm and drags me to the table. The metal chair scrapes across the floor as he yanks it out and pushes me down. Cold steel bites into my wrist as he locks the cuffs, chaining me to the frame like I’m nothing more than a threat to manage.

I gape up at him, breath caught in my throat. “You’re kidding, right?”

He doesn’t answer. Just walks away—calm, detached—like he’s done arguing. Like I’m not worth another word. The cuffs rattle as I tug against them, more out of disbelief than anything else.

“You don’t believe me?” I ask, voice sharper than I mean it to be.

He stops halfway across the room. Doesn't turn around. Just lets out a long, tired sigh. "If you hadn't tried to seduce me again, maybe I would have."

The words bite more than the cuffs.

He turns his back to me, and just like that, I'm alone again—even with him in the room.

I sink lower in the chair, curling into myself like I can fold the edges in and disappear. My throat tightens. My chest aches in a way I don't have language for.

I've felt a lot of things in my life—anger, fear, hunger, hatred.

But this? This is different.

This is shame.

And I can't remember the last time I felt it.

Mick

If temptation could be bottled, I'm pretty sure Samantha would be on the label. If I hadn't been praying right before she decided to turn on the charm, I might have fallen for it again. Even now, when she's glaring daggers at me, that dress is stirring the most primal parts of me, fighting against what I know is right.

To be sure Samantha knows where I'm drawing the line, I pick up the Bible Silas left and read from it aloud. "'No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.'"

The mocking is evident in her voice when she says, “Are you going to read the whole Bible until I’m converted?”

I flip through the pages, looking for inspiration and a means to keep my mind off her until backup arrives. “If I thought it would make a difference, I would.”

She laughs. “So I’m a lost cause then?”

I wish I had the answer to that. But I don’t. A few hours ago I was so sure of my trajectory, but one kiss and I’m struggling to separate my plans and God’s.

“No one is. God desires all to be saved and to know the truth.”

“Riiight.”

I ignore the sarcasm and try again. “Don’t judge God by how badly I’ve messed up. He’s perfect. I’m not.”

She rattles the cuffs against the metal chair frame. “How long do I have to stay like this?”

I start to shake my head, but a knock at the door makes me propel myself away from the chair. “Guess we’ll find out.”

I pull my gun from the holster and step to one side. “Who is it?” I call.

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As we arranged, Luke calls back with “Carl Adino.”

I drag the key out of my pocket, slide it into the lock, and open the door.

Luke steps inside without a word.

He’s all sharp angles and unreadable shadows—lightweight linen and sunglasses meant to blend in, and the kind of stillness that says he could vanish or strike with equal precision.

A single head bob acknowledges me, but his attention’s already sweeping the room. One glance—quick, calculated, complete—and I know he’s cataloged everything. Me included.

“Sorry to drag you away from... whatever it was you were doing.”

His gaze shifts to Samantha as she taps her fingernails on the table. “No problem. It’s why I’m here.”

Rather than chastise me for cuffing her, he just raises a solitary eyebrow and sniffs the air. “Coffee?”

When I nod, Luke pulls a chair out and sits opposite Samantha, placing his chair so his back is against the wall. She stiffens, her eyes never leaving him as he waits patiently for me to make a fresh pot of coffee. I have no idea if his silence is typical behavior for him. I don’t know anything about the man except that he’s the one who likely picked up the items I dropped out of the bathroom window.

The silence in the room only increases my tension, but as Samantha assesses Luke, it's apparent she's sizing him up. Probably for weaknesses she can exploit.

Luke, however, is more interested in the Bible. As I pour him a cup, he smiles. "From Silas?"

I nod. "Special delivery. You want anything in your coffee?"

He rolls his shoulders back, apparently not bothered by Samantha's sullenness or her handcuffs. "I'll take it how it comes."

I leave it unadulterated and carry it over to him. He reaches out to grab it and peers into the mug before taking a tentative sip. Without acknowledging whether it's to his taste, he holds the mug and slides a gaze toward Samantha.

Her eyes narrow, and her bottom lip protrudes slightly. "Are you here to interrogate me?"

He shakes his head. "Not my job."

"Then why are you here?"

Luke sniffs. "Same reason as Mick is."

Her lips stiffen. "To torment me?"

His fingers curl around the mug, and he leans forward, eyes fixed solely on her. "You've been in a lot of worse situations and in worse places."

She cocks her head, and instantly her demeanor shifts into one I've witnessed firsthand. Somehow her eyes widen, her lips plump, and her shoulders jut back. And

even in the cuffs, and even though I know it's an act, she still sparks interest in places I wish she didn't.

"Does your wife know you're here with me?"

My eyes shift from her to Luke's fingers. Bare. No sign of a wedding band.

Luke frowns, then his lips curl into a smile. "What else did you notice about me?"

She brazenly appraises him, chewing her lip as she does it. "You live in a cooler climate, are ex-military, and possibly worked in intelligence."

His expression remains unreadable. "What was my tell about the cooler climate?"

She jerks against the metal chair, cuffs clanging as she moves. "Let me out of these cuffs, and I'll show you."

While I'm floored she could garner so much information just from looking at him, Luke just smiles as if he knows something that I don't. "You'll be out just as soon as a female member of Hightower arrives."

"Verity?" I say.

Luke shakes his head. "Adena. She's been handpicked for this assignment."

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Samantha chokes out a laugh. “I’m someone’s assignment now?”

He ignores her, sips his coffee, and focuses his attention on me. “Go get some fresh air. I’ve got this.”

When I hesitate, he makes it clear that this is not up for negotiation with a single look I’m not arrogant enough to disregard.

Samantha

This has gone from bad to worse. Not only did my anger take control of my tongue, but Mick was a pushover compared to this guy. It’s like flirting with a lump of stone.

“Are you going to try to convert me too?”

He glances at me over the top of his coffee cup. “No.”

My eyebrows hike as I repeat his answer. “No? Why not?”

“You’re not ready for the truth.”

“How do you know?”

He stretches out his hand, eyes fixed on the pale groove where his wedding ring used to be—the one he’s been hiding with makeup. His jaw tightens. Then, just as quickly, he drops his hand and shifts gears without warning. “You should take better care of your weapon.”

I scrunch my nose up at him, forgetting I'm trying to win him over. "What?"

He flexes his hand before answering me. "You haven't fired it since you took it to a range three years ago."

"How would you know—" I slam my mouth shut before I give away any more than I already have.

I have no interest in talking any more than I have, so I resolve not to complain about the awkward angle my body is in and stare straight ahead, waiting for the female member of Hightower to arrive.

Out of habit, I add up the amount of money in my various accounts. Usually, it soothes me. Each one was opened under a different name, in a different state, tied to a different story I spun. I stayed in luxury hotels, wore designer clothes, ate five-star meals—all on someone else's dime. But now, thanks to Mick, those accounts have names and faces. All willing, sure, but all chumps. I told them what they wanted to hear, played whatever role got the job done.

A thump on the door jars me out of my reflection and draws my focus to the door. "Open up, Luke. It's humid, and I need food."

Luke? Not Carl? Why the name change?

He mutters under his breath, but he opens the door, and we both assess the woman who steps inside. I eye her as Mona has taught me to whenever another woman is present.

Don't think you can be friends with other girls, Samantha. If she's pretty, she's your competition. If she's ugly, you can manipulate her into doing things for you.

Remember. Always take care of yourself. No one else will do it.

My guard stays up as I examine her, trying to decide whether she's a possible ally.

She's petite and pretty—dark hair and eyes, high cheekbones—but she carries herself with too much confidence to give me hope I can manipulate her.

Adena looks me over, and I hold her steely gaze. She doesn't blink. Whatever her story is, she isn't someone who is likely to risk herself on my account.

Her eyes move back to the guy, and I catch the tiniest of inhales and a widening of her eyes as she does. "You handcuffed her?"

He shakes his head as he rises to his feet. "Our aquatic friend."

"Well, get them off her. I need to talk to her."

Small mercy, he goes in search of Mick, leaving me alone with the tiny woman. She spares me a single glance then goes into the kitchen. "You got food, right?"

I nod, not sure what else to say to her.

She's obviously ravenous because the second she locates the bag of baked goods, she grabs two pastries, starts eating them standing in the kitchen while gawking at me, and has just about demolished one before Carl slash Luke returns with the key.

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He shakes his head at her as he places the tiny keys on the countertop. “There are plates.”

She shrugs and finishes the last bite of the first pastry before reaching for a coffee mug and pouring herself a cup. “No time for manners. I’ve got to be out of here in an hour.”

With a subtle disapproving look, Luke refills his coffee and departs without another word.

As she slurps her coffee, my eyes stay on the keys. My arms are starting to ache, and watching her eat is making me wish I’d eaten one of the bagels too.

Thankfully, she finishes quickly, dusts her hands off, and picks up the keys. As she approaches, she narrows her eyes into a half squint. “Keep still. You move suddenly, I’ll assume you’re attacking me, got it?”

I smile as sweetly as I can. “I understand.”

She pushes the key into the lock and twists, and the cuffs slide off, catching my wrist bone and making my eyes water. I rub my arm as she jerks her thumb at the bedroom door.

“So we can talk in private,” she says.

Since she’s hardly the type to want “girl talk,” I’m not surprised when she elaborates. “I want to see your passport and any papers you have.”

“Why?”

She smiles faintly, almost as if my company doesn't unsettle her. “I want to see how good they are.”

I'm not in a position to deny her, so I shrug and trail into the bedroom.

“And put the ugly clothes I got you back on,” she says.

I whirl around, my hands sliding to my hips. “Why would you do that to me?”

She jabs a finger an inch toward my partially exposed breasts. “Exhibits A and B.”

My exasperation mounting, I throw my hands in the air. “Fine. Not like I'm getting anywhere with him anyway.”

She snorts. “That's not what I heard, but glad to hear he's got a line he won't cross. Get changed, but don't drag your heels. And bring me your IDs.”

“Yes, ma'am,” I grumble.

Wow. This woman could have been a drill sergeant.

To save my energy, and to not waste any more breath, I relent and change back into the hideous clothes that I now know she's responsible for purchasing. With more than a little hesitation, I remove my passport from my bag and exit the bathroom, ready to part with it.

In my absence, she's grabbed an apple and a can of soda from the kitchen. She casts both aside as she rips the passport out of my hands.

I sit on the edge of the bed. I'd been positive she was going to take my passport from me. What I didn't expect was for her to pull lots of gizmos out of the bag she dropped inside the door. Even more perplexing is when she pulls out a magnifying glass and hovers over the serial number at the bottom of the passport.

Slowly, a smile forms on her face, her posture relaxes, and she seems to be relieved. "It's good. Not as good as I can make. But not bad."

"You're a forger?" These people get weirder and weirder.

"Only for Hightower. And only under certain circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

She ignores me, too busy looking at my passport. Then she says, "Let me guess—Irina in South Beach made this for you?"

Mutely, I nod, stunned.

"She still exploiting illegal immigrants?"

This time the words tumble out of my mouth. "How could you know that?"

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She shrugs. “It’s what I do. And Delilah helps me keep track of anyone who I might need, just in case.”

Delilah. Right.

“What is Hightower?”

“We’re the people here to give you an opportunity.”

“So you’re here to save me too?”

She cracks open the soda and sinks onto the bed. “I’m here because Mickisn’t a member of Hightower, and Caleb has concerns.”

She examines her apple and rubs a blemish from its skin. “Not that I mind. I finally got to fly in the jet.”

“You have a jet? Just how big is this Hightower thing?”

Amusement flashes across her face. “It’s growing all the time. But the jet is a loaner.”

There’s obviously more to this story than she’s telling me, but that’s not my primary concern.

“You can’t keep me here indefinitely.”

She bites into her apple. “No, but we can keep you out of trouble.”

“And what about Mick? Why is he here, since he obviously doesn’t want to be?”

She smirks at me. “Really?”

“Yes, really. He’s been an arrogant jerk the entire time.”

Her eyes twinkle with amusement before she barks a laugh. “Even when he was kissing you?”

Does everyone know about that? “Forget it. I don’t know why I’m even bothering. I’m the bad guy here no matter what I do or say. Everything I say has to be a lie.”

Her amusement dissolves rapidly. “I’m not going to apologize to you. You are a criminal. You lie and cheat, and we’d be morons to trust you.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “Right. Got it.”

She frowns like the effort costs her. “Silas sent me because we have more in common than you think.”

I snort. “Highly doubt that.”

She chomps into her apple like it’s chewing on her patience. “I didn’t exactly come from the nuns-and-kittens crowd. Before Hightower, I spent years with people who’d make your worst decisions look like charity work.”

I arch a brow. “What, you dated politicians?”

I expect her to smirk, maybe roll her eyes. Instead, she looks away. Her shoulders drop, not slumping—just... resigned.

“Close enough,” she mutters. “Let’s just say I woke up before the damage was permanent.”

“So you’re here to save my soul,” I say dryly.

“No.” She takes another bite, chews, swallows. “I’m here because you’re still breathing, and that means you’ve got time to figure out where you’re going.”

I tilt my head. “Vague. Comforting. Almost biblical.”

She shrugs. “Take it how you want.”

“So what—Hightower is some kind of outreach program?”

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She huffs. “I don’t do programs. And I don’t do babysitting. But Silas says you’re worth the trouble, so I’m here.”

“And I’m just supposed to... trust you?”

She finally meets my eyes. “No. You’re supposed to trust that if we wanted you dead or dragged off, it’d be done already.”

I blink. “Wow. That’s... reassuring.”

“Wasn’t trying to be.” She leans back on her hands, watching me. “But I’m not your enemy. And neither is Hightower. Think of us as an ally.”

But I know better than to hope for allies. I don’t get allies—I get leverage and consequences.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” I say with a shrug, casual enough to pass for agreement, just enough to make her stop looking at me like she’s trying to see inside my head.

Twelve

Mick

Alone in the small back garden—if you could call it that—I stole the opportunity not to take a breath, but to call my CO back. The space is more novelty than nature: artificial turf curling at the edges, a few cracked stepping stones, and a cluster of

garden gnomes with peeling paint and crooked hats standing like weary sentries beneath a faded umbrella.

Now I'm wishing I hadn't made the call.

Commander Farrell didn't bother with hello. He came in hard, voice sharp, clipped, escalating with every word.

By the time he was done, my ear was ringing and I was seriously regretting not taking Brooke's advice.

"You compromised your credibility, you embarrassed the service, and you may have triggered an internal investigation," Farrell snapped. "We've got Public Affairs scrambling to contain this mess. Your face is everywhere."

I tried to explain—briefly, carefully—that I was trying to protect civilians, that this wasn't some attention grab. But Farrell didn't want to hear it.

"The chain of command exists for a reason," he'd said, quieter, which was worse. "You don't get to freelance with national security, Weston. The next call might come from Homeland."

Now I'm standing in the middle of a fake yard with a phone hot in my pocket, and a dangerous woman inside who has been placed into my care.

A woman I just kissed.

Luke joins me outside, and he sits on a lawn chair and stretches out his legs. "Gave you a chewing out? Not surprising. I would have too."

I hide my scowl. "Can I get away to the base?"

Luke hitches a single eyebrow. “That’s exactly where they’ll start looking for you.”

“They aren’t stupid enough to attack a base filled with Coast Guardsmen.”

“Why not? That’s exactly the target they’re looking for. The bigger the better.”

“So, that’s a negative?”

He nods. “We’re still in the dark on way too many things. The biggest one is why you were chosen to get on that plane in the first place.”

This time I don’t bother to hide my emotions. “Samantha?—”

“Was paid to seduce you.”

I flinch.

“She told you?”

“I didn’t believe her.”

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A beat of silence stretches between us, heavy and pulsing with things neither of us wants to say.

“How much did Caleb and Jake tell you about her childhood?”

“Enough to know it was rough.”

“More than rough. She shouldn’t have been born.”

“That’s a little harsh.”

“It’s not a judgment. It’s a fact. Delilah has her medical records.”

My stomach twists. Birth records? How could they have gotten access to something like that?

“I thought her mom and dad didn’t want her when she was seven.”

“They didn’t want her, period. They were teenagers who tried to leave her at the hospital. And their parents weren’t much better. They were the leaders in a pseudo-Christian cult.”

That explains her reaction to the Bible. The tension in her spine every time Scripture comes up.

“Some people don’t deserve kids,” I growl, heat rising in my throat.

He nods once. “What about the woman who took her under her wing? Has she mentioned her?”

“Don’t think so.”

He lifts the lid of the grill and flips it back. “Delilah managed to locate the adoption records and found an alias. Leslie Duke. She matches the description of a woman who stole over a quarter of a million from a dying widower three decades ago. She passed herself off as a caregiver from a Catholic charity then drained his bank account. She was gone before anyone realized.”

This is who was supposed to be taking care of Samantha? “She was a fraudster?”

He sips his coffee and nods. “The charity didn’t exist, and neither did Leslie Duke.”

“Where is she now?”

He shrugs lightly. “Jake and Delilah are following a few trails. Miami is her favorite haunt. Lots of rich elderly men.”

I run my hand over my face. “This isn’t easy to navigate. She’s infuriating and manipulative, but she’s also...” I grope around for the right word. “Helpless.”

Luke graces me with a clipped nod. “So stop reacting to emotions and your mood. Think about the future.”

“What future? She should be in jail for what she’s done.”

“And we’ll have to deal with that, but right now, Hightower’s concern is for her immediate well-being.”

“Even though she’s not a member of Hightower?”

He scratches behind his ear. “With the right training she could be a force for good.”

My jaw slackens. “That’s why you got involved? You want to recruit her? She’s wanted by the FBI, right? How is that going to work out for you?”

He laughs quietly. “Our involvement was as much a surprise to us as it was to you. But the more we learn about Samantha Duke, the more intriguing she is.”

On that, I have to agree wholeheartedly.

It’s whether she can get out of this mess without permanently losing her freedom that I’m not sure of.

Samantha

I lock the bathroom door behind me, grateful for the excuse to get out from under Adena’s stare.

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The butter knife is still where I left it—tucked behind the sink pipe, untouched. Dry. Waiting.

I raise my eyes to the mirror. Bad move.

The woman staring back looks like she hasn't slept in weeks. Hair wild, face pale, dark circles doing all the talking. The clothes hang loose—like I borrowed someone else's life and it doesn't fit right.

No makeup. No armor.

Just me.

I look... unfinished.

My chest tightens, and I glance down, focusing on the edge of the vanity.

Pretty girls get what they want. Ugly ones get sent back.

Mona's voice slips through the cracks of my memory like smoke. I was too young to know better, too desperate to question her logic.

Your worth is in your beauty. Lose that, and you're nothing.

I press my fingers into the counter to ground myself, but the words won't shake loose. They cling like cheap perfume—sweet, poisonous, and impossible to forget.

She trained me to wear beauty like a weapon. Smile when it hurts. Pout when it's useful. Never, ever let them see your real face.

But here it is. Unpainted. Exposed. The face that Mick chose to kiss.

And that's not all that's different. The voice that usually runs its mouth when I'm like this—that mean, familiar whisper that tells me I'm worthless, that I'll ruin everything—it's not shouting tonight.

It's quiet.

Weirdly quiet.

Maybe she drowned in the marina instead of me?

Voices float through the cracked bathroom window. Male. Low. Serious.

“...a con artist. A highly skilled one. She fooled you once.”

Luke.

“And she won't fool me again. I know when I'm being lied to.”

Mick.

I go still, my spine stiffening.

“Yeah. No. You don't,” Luke shoots back. “She's good, and your judgment is clouded. You're falling for her.”

A pause. Then Mick: “Give me a break.”

“I’m not judging you. It happens. I fell for my fiancée on an op.”

Long silence. Too long.

“I have better judgment than to fall for her act again.”

Again.

The word slices deep.

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Luke presses harder. “So you’re immune to her backstory? Because I shared it with you for a reason. This mission isn’t just about your guilt.”

I grip the sink. My hands tremble.

“If Caleb hadn’t walked in when he did,” Luke says, voice low and cold, “she’d have taken your gun and the key. We’d be chasing her—and hoping she didn’t drag you down too.”

“It wasn’t ever going to go that far,” Mick says, but his voice doesn’t sound certain.

“Really?” Luke’s laugh is hollow. “You think you’ve got that much control?”

“I’m not going to make the same mistake twice.”

Luke doesn’t reply. He doesn’t need to.

Then, finally, the one I’m not ready for.

“Because you aren’t falling for her?” Luke asks.

My breath hitches. I hold it.

“Absolutely not,” Mick says.

No hesitation. No kindness.

Just the truth.

Something tightens in my chest—then cracks. I let go of the sink and steady myself. The sharp edge of rejection slices through whatever fragile hope I was holding.

A knock rattles the door. Adena's voice, flat and irritated. "Time's up."

Yeah. It is.

Whatever I thought was happening here—I was wrong.

He doesn't see me. Not really.

Fine.

He'll get what he wants. I'll smile. I'll behave.

But the second it's dark?

I'm gone.

Mick

Luke slides his phone back into his pocket and rolls his neck. "Adena needs to be somewhere else, but I can stay if you need me?"

As I'm considering whether I need him after this pep talk, my phone chirps, and I yank it out, praying it's not my CO again.

It's Brooke. Finally returning my text from earlier.

Except it's not a text, it's an image, and it's not a ballistics report.

Weirdo that she is, she's sent me a selfie. She's holding up a newspaper and is grimacing as though she's in pain.

Right. Got it. Her baby brother making the news is probably making her look bad. She writes under a pen name, but her colleagues all know I'm her brother.

Another thing I didn't consider. How this impacted her work life.

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Shaking my head, I slide the phone back into my pocket as Luke looks at me. “Problem?”

“Just my sister being a freak, and I should be okay. Good to know you’re close by if I need a break.”

He hikes his chin. “We should head inside.”

When I hesitate, thinking of what’s waiting on the other side of the door, no longer cuffed to the chair, Luke offers reassurance. “Relax. She won’t be wearing the dress. I wouldn’t be surprised if Adena has ripped it to shreds.”

“Tough, is she?”

“From what I hear, yeah.”

With my mind on the other woman inside, I head back in and try to gauge the feel of the room. Samantha isn’t attached to the chair, and thankfully, Luke was right, she’s wearing the unflattering outfit that doesn’t make my thoughts plummet into the gutter. Adena is seated at the table, eating a pastry and drinking coffee, while Samantha is curled into the chair, looking at the guest brochure with the highlights in the area.

“Jake’s picking me up in twenty. He wants a shower and to eat, then he’ll take me back to the airport,” Adena says to Samantha.

Samantha doesn’t bat an eye, just turns a page. “Have a pleasant flight.”

“Think about what I said.”

Samantha smiles benignly. “Of course.”

What is going on? Why is Samantha being so polite? It’s like someone flicked a switch and she’s in Little Miss Sunshine mode.

Adena exchanges a look with Luke, who gives her the slightest shrug as if to tell her not to worry about it. That he’s not bothered doesn’t make me any less concerned. He hasn’t just spent the last twenty hours with her.

As I’m reconsidering whether I should stay here alone with her, my phone chirps again, and I pull it out, checking in case it’s my CO.

Brooke again. Probably with another mocking message.

Except it’s not. It’s a text, and as I scan the message, all the blood drains from my face.

We have your sister. Call the police and she dies. Take too long to reply, she dies. Will send further instructions. Be ready.

Praying this is a prank, I scroll back up to the image sent a few minutes ago, and my stomach hits the carpet. What I mistook for her making fun of me by holding up today’s newspaper is proof someone really does have her. Given the terror etched on her face, and the swollen lip I missed, it’s obvious she put up a fight.

A curse slips out of me, but that’s the least of my worries.

“What? Your CO playing hardball?” Luke says.

I'm too shaken to speak, so I hand him my phone. When he reads the message, he issues an oath of his own, though with more discretion.

“What’s wrong?” Adena asks.

I reach for my phone, but it chirps in Luke’s hand, and he reads it without my permission. When he does, his face sets hard and his eyes lock onto Samantha, crumpling the relaxed manner she was projecting.

“They want cash, and they want an exchange.”

Samantha goes rigid as I try to slow my breathing in the hopes it will calm me down.

“For Mick?” Adena asks.

Before Luke replies, my rapid heartbeat synchronizes with my rapid prayers.

Please, God, let that be what they want. Don’t let them hurt my sister because of something stupid I did!

But somehow it’s so much worse. “They want Samantha,” Luke says.

Samantha

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This is where they show their true colors. Where a choice has to be made. Between the girl who is loved and the girl who isn't.

Confirming it, Adena and Mick confer between themselves as if I'm not even here. And I don't even hear what they're saying. I'm already leaping ahead, planning, trying to figure out how exactly I can slip away unnoticed.

Only Luke stays silent, but his eyes aren't on me. He's tapping out a message and is showing as much tension as the other two.

While Mick is pacing the room, Adena is trying to calm him down. "Nothing is going to happen to her. We'll find her."

He shakes his head violently and answers almost as if he didn't hear her. "This is my doing. I asked her to help. Caleb warned me that involving her was a risk."

"You couldn't have known," she says.

"I was selfish. I wasn't thinking about Brooke."

His eyes drift to me as if acknowledging I'm the one who's really to blame. I hold my tongue, not wanting to draw attention to myself, and drop my gaze to carry on memorizing the route to the closest mall. I just need a diversion.

Luke's voice penetrates my bubble. "This doesn't smell right."

I lift my head and peer up at him. Adena stops mid-sentence. "You think it's a

setup?”

He bypasses her and looks directly at me. “I want to get your take on this.”

I swallow. “Why?”

Mick’s disbelief echoes mine. “What for?”

Luke runs his tongue across his teeth before he hands Mick his phone back. “I want to hear her thoughts.”

Adena crosses her arms across her chest and squints at me. “Go on then. Let’s hear it.”

A dozen thoughts enter my mind at once, causing me to pause as I sift through them all. “I think...”

Mick seems to lean closer, every muscle in his body tight, like he’s bracing for a hit he knows is coming.

I flick a glance at Luke—cool, unreadable Luke—and hate him for putting me on the spot. Does he actually expect me to hand him the truth? Here? In front of Mick?

My throat tightens.

“I think that...” I hesitate, the words sticking like thorns. “They really want Mick. If he doesn’t go, they’ll kill her.”

Mick groans, low and guttural, sinking back like I just drove the breath out of him.

But Luke?

Luke doesn't move—except for the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Are you sure about that?”

His voice is mild. Too mild.

I swallow hard, heart pounding like it's trying to get ahead of the lie—or the truth, I'm still not sure which one I've just told. My palms are slick. My mouth dry.

I want to look away, but I can't. Luke's face is blank, almost bored. But there—right there, between his brows—a flicker of something. A crease. A frown.

Disappointment.

It hits harder than I expect.

He doesn't believe me. Or worse—he does, and he's disappointed I didn't say more. Or say it sooner.

Either way, I feel the weight of it, sharp and cold, pressing on my chest.

Well, too bad.

I'm not a nice person. Never claimed to be. And if he expected something else, that's on him. Not me.

Still... I don't look at him again.

Adena finally loses patience. "Whatever spy crap it is you're pulling, quit it. We don't have much time?—"

A knock interrupts her diatribe, and she stomps across the room and yanks the door open. The driver from last night appears there, yawning, carrying a Starbucks coffee, and looking like he crawled out of the sewer.

Luke is the first to speak, gaining his attention. "There's a situation. Caleb's on his way."

I wince. I need fewer people here, not the big hulking brute from last night who looked like he could rip the door off its hinges.

Luke's phone rings, and he raises a finger, apologizing. "Give me a minute. It's Chloe."

He turns slightly, his back offering him privacy and meaning he's distracted just as Adena pulls her phone out and dials as she speaks to Mick. "I'm calling Reese. He'll have to hang around for a while longer while we figure this out."

Mick's phone chirps, and everyone freezes, all eyes on him as they wait for the next demand to be made.

It has to be now.

Slowly, I unfurl my legs from the chair and clamp my hand over my mouth. "I need the bathroom."

When Adena just waves her hand at me, too distracted to care, I steal the opportunity and dash out of the room.

Mick

My heart stammers in my chest as I hold my phone, terrified of answering it and terrified not to.

"All phones other than Mick's on silent," Luke says. "I'll go intercept Caleb."

I'm glad he's thought of it, when I'm unable to think of anything other than what my sister is going through, and Adena and Jake hastily mute their phones as Luke exits via the front door.

I take a breath, breathe out, and press the speaker so everyone can hear. "Hello?"

"They want me to talk, but I'm only allowed to say what they allow me to."

Brooke. At least she's alive.

My voice cracks as I think of her swollen lip. "How badly are you hurt?"

"I'm fine... but... they say it won't stay that way if you don't give them exactly what

they want.”

I swallow hard. “Tell me what they need, and I’ll make sure they get it.”

Caleb enters the room swiftly and silently, with Luke on his heels. Luke has a notepad, and he has written down questions for me to ask.

“They want Samantha and five hundred thousand,” Brooke says.

Luke gestures to the pad, and I read it verbatim. “We have the woman you want, but we need time to get the cash together.”

“You have until midnight.”

The phone call is cut off before I can ask any more of Luke’s questions.

All the energy drains out of me, and I slump against the countertop, unable to meet Caleb’s eye as he approaches. But rather than an “I told you so” expression, he’s wearing a look of genuine concern. He slaps his meaty hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

“We’ll do everything in our power to bring her home again.”

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I offer him a weak smile and accept his comfort with as much humility as I can muster. “You have experience with hostage negotiations?” I ask.

He shakes his head and jerks his thumb to Luke, who’s conferring with Jake and Adena. “He does. You want an extraction, I’m your man.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

He reacts to my reply with a look of caution as he places radio equipment down on the countertop.

“Where’s Samantha?” Caleb asks.

Adena, her phone glued to her ear as she speaks to Delilah, says, “Bathroom.”

Jake mumbles something and glances up at me from a tablet. “Seriously, you people are too trusting.”

Luke gives him the side eye before nodding. “You’re right. Go check on her.”

Shaking my head, I move before he does. “I didn’t even see her leave.”

No one replies. Adena is talking to Delilah about trying to triangulate the call—whatever that means—Luke and Jake are looking at Jake’s tablet, and Caleb is pouring himself what I imagine will be the first of a lot of cups of coffee.

That leaves me.

I stalk into the bedroom, frustrated, anxious, and furious at myself for letting this happen.

At the sound of the shower running, I bang on the door. “Get out of there.”

No response.

Great. Everyone else is otherwise occupied. I have to be the one to wrangle her.

With anger driving me, I ram my fist on the door and yell loud enough that she’ll hear me over the water running. “I’m not kidding. Open up, or I’ll come in there and drag you out.”

When I get no response, I immediately step back and aim my heel at the lock. It gives under the force, and I shove the door so hard it swings back at me, nearly hitting me in the face.

When she doesn’t scream at me to get out, I step into the room as steam billows out into the bedroom. In seconds the steam disperses enough for me to see why she didn’t reply.

The window is open, and Samantha is gone.

Samantha

I scramble over the second fence, landing with a thud that makes me regret not packing my running shoes.

It was a risk taking the precious moments to change into the only other outfit I had, my shorts and T-shirt, but there was no way I could have left the house wearing clothing that would have stuck out. If that was their strategy, they really should have

removed the clothing I had in my pack. Adena may have tossed my dress in the trash, but even that has worked to my advantage. My pack might be damp still, but it's lighter, and the outfit will keep me cool in the heat.

Out of breath from the exertion of climbing over three fences so I could get to another street, I take a moment to check out my surroundings. I might be out of breath, and I might be a sweaty mess, but I'm now a whole lot closer to my destination. Adjusting the pack on my back, I increase my pace to the nearest street sign and smile to myself when I see I'm one right turn away from the mall.

Perfect. I have my cash. I have my insurance policy.

Everything is perfect.

Except that an innocent woman is going to die because of you.

The smile dies, and my steps falter as if something pulls them back.

But I can't go back.

I have to keep putting one foot in front of the other, just like I've always done.

I increase my pace, walking as fast as I can, my lungs burning as if I'm sprinting. When I'm safely in Cuba, I'll find a doctor and get a proper examination to ensure I didn't sustain any lasting damage.

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What difference does it make if you do? No one cares if you live or die.

I squeeze my eyes shut as the sunlight pierces them, boring holes into me.

“Shut up,” I growl.

But it won’t. And with each step, the voice grows more insistent.

Tired of fighting, I start thinking about something else.

Random thoughts enter my mind, and I pluck one out, grabbing onto it as a lifeline.

“You do count.”

Mick. Just before he kissed me.

Hot tears sting at my eyes, and I squeeze them shut, taking hold of the straps of my pack as I hurry.

It’s not true. He’s deluded if he thinks God is out there, watching, just waiting for us to wake up to that fact.

I have to get to the mall, filled with distractions and a way out of the area. Traffic is getting heavier—lots of commuters heading into work—so I wait at the crosswalk and try not to keep checking over my shoulder. I’m so anxious to get inside that I start when the Walk sign finally illuminates, propelling me across the road.

My heart is thumping too quickly and sweat is snaking down my spine, but I make it to the parking lot just over eighteen minutes after I left the house.

Not bad for someone who doesn't know the area.

Rather than pat myself on the back, as soon as the glass doors open, I locate the map and head right into the first designer clothing store I see. It takes me just under three minutes to select a new outfit, purse, wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses, and strappy sandals, another five to find the nearest restroom, and just two more to remove the tags, change, dump the pack in the trash, and head toward the makeup counter.

The line to the counter is too long, so I select mini versions of lip gloss, mascara, and bronzer, palm them, and turn on my heel, sliding them into my purse as I walk away.

With the glasses on and the new outfit, it's easier to blend into the early morning shopping crowd, but what I really need is a way out of here. Since I no longer have a phone to call an Uber, I buy fresh juice, ascend the escalator to the rooftop level, and hang around the entrance, sipping and watching for the right target. Dud after dud walks out, and I start to get desperate. I can't stay here for much longer.

The glass doors slide open, and a little girl toddles out. She's blond, her pigtails are askew, and chocolate ice cream stains run down her Lilo and Stitch T-shirt. I watch her, unable to look away, wondering where her mother is and why she's alone. She doesn't seem concerned, but cars are streaking past, and she's getting dangerously close to stepping out in front of one.

I edge closer, and she spies me and toddles toward me, arms out as if expecting me to pick her up. Her chin starts to wobble, and her eyes water.

Oh crap. She's lost.

I scoop her up in my arms, trying not to get her sticky hands on my six-hundred-dollar dress, and awkwardly carry her back to the exit. Her mother had better be nearby, or I'll have to carry her to the nearest security guard.

The little girl wraps her sticky fingers into my freshly washed hair and leans into me, pressing her chubby cheek into the hollow of my neck. "You pretty," she says.

I stiffen, unsure of how to take the compliment. She probably thinks everyone is pretty. Little kids are like that.

"Thanks," I mumble.

With her as a dead weight, I return to the top of the escalator and sigh, as there's no panicking mother in sight. "Great," I mutter.

Tucking my purse under my arm, I adjust the little girl in my arms and look down at her. She's fast asleep.

Unbelievable. This is the first and last time I try to be a good Samaritan.

On the other hand, she does make an excellent disguise. Mick and co are hardly going to recognize me if I look like a mom.

Juggling her in my arms, I take the hat off and tuck it under my arm before sliding my sunglasses over my hair like a hairband. Halfway down the escalator, I spy a security guard and regret removing the best part of my disguise when the frazzled woman beside him looks up and squeals. She's so panicked that she tries to climb up the escalator to reach us before the security guard tugs her back.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you, Jesus!" she cries. She clasps her hands together, holding them to her mouth and looking skyward, her lips moving as if thanking the God Mick

believes in before breaking down in tears.

As I step off the escalator, she leaps toward me, wrapping me in a bear hug, crushing me into her and her daughter. She's hot and sweaty, obviously stressed, so maybe losing her kid isn't usual for her, but I still want to tell her she's lucky I was the one who found her and not some sicko with a thing for kids.

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“Thank you, thank you, you have no idea... My baby. I thought my mom was watching her, and she thought I was.”

With the amount of fuss she’s making, people are stopping to stare. Not only that but the security guard is on his radio, his eyes on me, a cautious smile on his lips. Hopefully, he’s calling off the search. Again, I regret my choice to intervene. This is the opposite of what I need right now.

“No problem.” I try to hand the kid over, but she’s stuck to me like a leech. Her arms tighten around my neck like she’s known me longer than three minutes.

“Sammy, come to Mommy. Let the nice lady go,” her mom calls, rushing toward us with relief written all over her face.

Sammy?

I hesitate, shifting the little girl slightly in my arms. “Her name is Samantha?”

Her mom grins, brushing blond wisps off her forehead. “Samantha Jane. After my grandmother.”

I freeze for a second longer than I should, the name snagging like a hook in my chest.

Samantha.

What are the odds?

A sign? A message?

I don't believe in either.

But for some reason, my heart stumbles over itself as I pass her off, like I've just given up something more than sticky arms and a warm cheek.

Names are just names. Coincidences happen. They don't mean anything.

Still...

With my eyes sliding to the security guard and back to her, I return her smile. "Are you finished shopping? I had a fight with my boyfriend, and he left me stranded. I could really use a ride."

The mom frowns at my fictional boyfriend then nods eagerly. "Absolutely. I'll just find Mom, and we can take you anywhere you need to go. I'm parked right outside."

Inwardly, I groan. I should have checked first. Who parks out in the open in Miami?

As the mom asks me if she can buy me a coffee or a smoothie by way of thanks, the security guard's posture switches from relieved to anxious. He backs up a few steps and tugs at his collar, and rather than getting ready to call off the search, his eyes dart to the escalator below us.

Still holding a superficial smile on my face, I glance down, and my stomach flips.

Ohcrap.

Several security guards are on their way up, and two Miami PD are right behind them.

Mick

I tumble out of the car, barely waiting for it to come to a stop before half sprinting to the entrance. The late-afternoon heat clings to my skin, but I push through it, adrenaline drowning out everything else. Caleb outpaces me and reaches the sliding glass doors a fraction of a second before I do.

Adena catches up, breathless and holding a small black tracking device in her hand.

We enter the mall—an airy, upscale sprawl of polished concrete floors and skylights that flood the space with natural light. A giant sculptural palm tree rises from the center of the atrium, flanked by designer storefronts and the smell of espresso, cologne, and freshly opened packaging. Music hums low over hidden speakers, and a group of teens draped in boutique streetwear loiters near the escalators, scrolling their phones.

Caleb stops and scans the map close to the entrance, then he taps his finger where we are standing and along the most likely routes she would have chosen. “She had a twelve-minute head start, but she won’t stay here long. She’ll be looking for a way out.”

I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the roots, frustrated I let Samantha get away and worried for Brooke. “I should have taken the money.”

Caleb slides his finger to the exit points. “If she didn’t have money, she would have stolen whatever she needed.”

“Or found a guy to buy it for her,” Adena says.

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Caleb shrugs. “What she might have done is irrelevant. She’s here, and it’s up to us to ensure she doesn’t leave.”

He turns to Adena as she twists the tracking device and points directly ahead. “The ladies’. Guess this one’s on me, gents.”

We haul butt to the nearest ladies’, and as Adena enters, Caleb and I station ourselves on either side of the door. To avoid looking like a lurker, Caleb pulls out his phone. And I keep my eyes glued to the tracker.

“Even with a butter knife, she shouldn’t have been able to open that window,” I mumble.

Caleb grunts his response. “Looks like she used something as leverage to break the hinge. We dropped the ball. Brooke’s involvement isn’t something we’d planned for.”

I look across at him. He’s tense. Shoulders bunched and forehead lined.

“And I dropped the ball on watching Samantha. How about you and Hightower help me get her back, and we’ll call it even.”

He grins. “Roger that.”

His phone buzzes, drawing his attention. “Jake? You see her?” he says.

Adena exits, carrying the pack and glaring in an anger I share. “In the last stall. Price

tags from a store inside, along with her phone.”

I resist the urge to smash my fist into the wall. “She could have left the area by now.”

Adena glares even harder. “I know that. We all know that,” she snaps.

Caleb ends his call and beckons for us to follow him. “Zack’s heard from a pal of his. There’s been a sighting of a woman matching her description. Upper level, near the escalator. Cops think she just tried to abduct a kid. They’re minutes away from arresting her.”

I’m already increasing my pace as my anger turns to horror. “Why would she do that?”

Adena answers in a snarky voice. “She doesn’t live by the same moral code you do. You live to save lives; she lives for her own.”

Caleb doesn’t agree, but he doesn’t disagree. Instead he makes a cut-off sign in the air. “The cops think she might be armed. They’re approaching with caution, and the kid is working in our favor, thank the Lord.”

I send him a clipped nod. “We need to intercept the cops before this goes from bad to worse. I’ll take the stairs and see if I can come at her from the side.”

Caleb nods, and Adena speaks before she’s issued any direction. “I’ll get above.”

After a warning from Caleb to be careful and to stay in contact, we split up, and I start praying God gives me an opportunity to make things right. I yank the door to the stairwell open and ascend the stairs two at a time, my footsteps clanging on the metal as I try not to think about Brooke’s well-being. Sweat is clinging to me as I reach the upper level, not from exertion, but from the fear Samantha is going to be in cuffs and

Brooke will pay the price.

I push open the door and take a breath as I walk out as casually as I can, scanning the area. In seconds my eyes light on her, and I do a double take at the woman and kid she's with. Rather than acting fearful, the kid is in her arms, and I'm close enough to see she's smiling. Whatever scheme Samantha is pulling, the woman and the kid are oblivious to the potential danger they're in.

A shaky security guard is just about hidden behind a potted plant, looking like he's about to throw up in it, and more are milling around as if awaiting instructions.

There's no sign of the cops, so Caleb must have intercepted them, but I have no idea how much time that will buy me, so I raise my hand and yell to get her attention. "Honey! I've been looking all over for you."

Samantha's jaw flops, her eyes widening, and she quickly pushes the kid into the mother's arms and twists as if preparing to run.

Good luck to her in that dress.

The woman flicks me a disgusted look. "Is this him?"

I have no idea who she thinks I am, and I don't have time to explain. I grab Samantha's hand and yank her away from the pouting kid. "Time to go," I say.

When she resists, glancing at the terrified mall cop, I tighten my grip on her hand. "It's me or the real cops."

She quits protesting and lets me guide her into the elevator. The second the doors close, I slam my palm on the ground floor button and turn to face her. She jerks away from me, face pale and chin tucked as she backs into the corner.

“I have to check in and say I found you,” I growl.

Her mouth twists to one side, but she doesn’t respond as I tap out a text to Caleb.

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The doors open, but I'm not ready to end this conversation, so I close them again. "My sister's life is on the line. She might already be dead because of you."

She lifts her chin, and the fear dissolves into something I don't understand. "Why is her life more important than mine?"

I gape at her, still buzzing with adrenaline and anger and worry, making my emotions run too high. "That's why you ran? You think I care more about her life than yours?"

She blinks rapidly, her chin wavering slightly, as she stares down at her new sandals. Her lips are wobbling, and she's trembling. "Of course I did! She's your sister. You love her." She looks up as if daring me to confirm her beliefs.

Tension grows in my chest as she slowly meets my gaze. Without really knowing why I need to, I grab her by the back of the neck and pull her in, pressing my mouth to hers. "If we get out of this, we're going to have a lot to talk about."

The elevator doors open, and I release her, alarmed to see moisture in her eyes. I slip my fingers into hers and gently tug.

She sniffs and clears her throat, tension growing on her face. "Just let me go."

As if on cue, Jake pulls into the parking garage, tires squealing, before he leans over to open the door. "Get in!" he yells.

Samantha hesitates, so I pull her hand a little harder. "I'm going to do whatever I can to help you. You have my word."

Her lip catches in her teeth, and she tugs at it.

“Move it, sister, Caleb can’t stall the cops forever,” Jake growls.

She swallows, looks at the elevator doors as they close, and then blows out a shaky breath before nodding. “Okay.Okay.”

Thirteen

Samantha

As I fumble with the seatbelt, a quiet thought creeps in—maybe he actually means it. Not just the rescue, not just the plan.

He wants to help me. Not because he’s being paid, or because someone told him to. Because hewantsto.

Mick slides into place beside me, glaring at the front seat. “Slow down,” he growls at the driver.

Jake doesn’t answer. He just cranks the air-con and glances at me through the rearview mirror. “Nice dress.”

I ignore him and turn to Mick. “So now what?”

He frowns. “We negotiate for Brooke’s release.”

Uncertainty curls in my chest, tightening like wire. But Mick’s voice stays calm, measured. “This would be the time to give me anything we can use to find them.”

I glance at Jake, then take a slow breath and make the biggest gamble of my life. “I

can give you a bank account. If you find the owner, you'll have a starting point."

Mick threads his fingers through mine, not caring if Jake sees. "Thank you."

My lips twitch. "You have a pen?"

He shakes his head and pulls out his phone. "Write it in the notes."

I take the phone from him, tap out the company name I memorized, and move to hand it back to him. Jake swerves into another lane, and I accidentally slide my finger so all the open apps show.

One of them is the messaging app. In the seconds it takes Jake to straighten up, I get a glimpse of what I was trying not to think about.

Mick's sister. In a typical hostage pose, holding up a newspaper. Her lip is swollen, her eyes show their whites, and there's bruising on her cheek.

Animals.

I hand the phone back. to Mick, unable to meet his eye. "I'm sorry," I mumble.

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“Me too. I brought this on her head.” His voice is far too tender given I’m responsible for the condition his sister is in.

I frown at him, ready to tell him he’s ridiculous, when Jake curses. “We’re being followed.”

I twist in my seat as Mick does the same. “Where?”

“Blue sedan. Second lane behind the red convertible. Get down. Both of you. I’m going to try to lose them.”

I slide down in my seat, keeping as low as I can.

“How’d they find her?” Mick asks.

“The same way we did. By keeping an ear to radio chatter,” he says.

I glance at Mick and find him grim-faced and with his hand close to his sidearm. He catches me looking and winks at me. “It’ll be fine.”

The words are hardly out of his mouth when Jake swerves, cursing loudly as we nearly collide with another car.

Mick rights himself and grasps the seat. “What’re you doing up there?”

“Not me. We blew a tire,” he yells.

I grab onto the handhold and twist around to peep through the glass. Horror surges through me as I see a man aiming a gun directly at me. “It’s not a flat! They’re shooting at us!” I yell. I shrink as far down in my seat as I can and hang on as we bump along the road, the rim of the wheel making a grinding noise.

“Don’t even think about slowing down. We’re sitting ducks!” Mick yells at Jake.

Jake barely acknowledges him, too busy trying to control the car and stop it veering into the next lane.

Alongside us, drivers are honking their horns and making obscene hand gestures.

“Call Caleb or Luke!” Jake shouts over his shoulder.

I grit my teeth as Mick hauls out his phone and dials before ramming the phone to his ear. Whoever he called must have been anticipating the call, because there’s no preamble whatsoever. They already seem to know what’s happening.

“Take the next left. Luke is going to cut them off,” Mick says.

The words have barely left his mouth when a Miami City Works truck comes up behind us at speed, blasting its siren and causing drivers to yield. Jake tears down a side street then floors it as he reaches a parking garage. While I try to catch my breath, he limps the car into a space and turns off the ignition.

He turns to look at us and grins. “I need to get a new ride. Lady’s choice.”

I turn to Mick, who releases a sigh. “Do we really need to steal a car?”

Jake’s eyebrows hike to the roof. “We aren’t stealing a car. I am, and I’m good with it.”

I'll bet he is. He might be part of this crazy Hightower crew, but he's buzzing. I've been conning people long enough to understand why we do what we do. And while a law-abiding citizen like Mick is struggling with the morality of the situation, Jake is getting an unrivaled dopamine hit.

To lessen Mick's guilt, I glance out the window and point to a white sedan. "There. Modified Pontiac G8."

Mick's eyes pop. "You want him to steal a street racer's car?"

Jake grins then grabs something from the glove box. "Challenge accepted."

When the door slams and he stalks off, hands in his pockets, it's apparent he's broken into cars before.

As I watch him work, Mick asks the obvious question. "You know about cars?"

I shrug his question off. "I know what kind of people drive certain cars."

"How?"

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“Mona and I used to play match the driver. It was a game. I got good at it.”

When his brow furrows and his mouth presses down in displeasure, I gaze out the window at the closest car. The one car in the lot I would never have chosen. A twenty-year-old silver minivan with scratches down the side, a taillight held on by duct tape, and three car seats inside.

“She used to take me to bar parking lots on weekends, and we’d study the cars parked outside. At first, it was boring, and I’d have trouble staying awake. That’s when she started giving me caffeine pills.”

I’d press my forehead to the glass, watching shadows move under yellow lights, too scared to blink in case I missed something.

She’d be still beside me, writing, judging. I wanted so badly to get it right. To guess the car. The man. The make. The match. Be useful. Be wanted.

My stomach twisted every time she sighed or shook her head. The pills made my hands tremble, but at least I stayed awake. Sleep was weakness. Mistakes meant we stayed out longer and I’d risk falling asleep at school.

“How old were you?”

I think back and shake my head. “I’m not sure. Nine? Ten?”

“Then what?”

“Then we’d go inside, and I’d have to see if I could match the driver to the car.”

I don’t need to see his face to catch the disgust in his voice. “She was teaching you to be a criminal.”

I close my eyes as I try to see it his way. “She was teaching menotto be a victim.”

He’s silent, but I can hear his thoughts churning.

“Did you ever think what you were doing was wrong?”

I turn and look at him, defensive and protective of the one person I shouldn’t be. “To begin with, I thought Mona wanted to be my mother and that we could be a family. That’s what she told everyone. For a while, she fooled me too.”

He works his jaw. “But she abandoned you, didn’t she? She disconnected her number just when you needed her help.”

I throw my head back, laughing to cover the pain. “So that’s how you found me? You were tracking my phone. I should have guessed.”

He slides closer, forcing me to look at him. “You deserved a home and a family.”

Even though his words cause tears to burn in my eyes, I lift a shoulder, brushing him off. “I survived. Can we change the subject?”

He sits back, glancing at Jake as he turns his back to us, fiddling with the door. “Why not box them in and run them off the road? You had the manpower—and I’m assuming the vehicles—to do it.”

Mick shakes his head. “Aside from the risk that would have posed to civilians, Caleb

and Adena need to follow them.”

My eyebrows rise. “To see if they lead him to where they have your sister?”

He blows out a breath then runs his hand over his face. “Caleb told me they could hustle. I wasn’t sure if he was blowing smoke.”

I unbuckle my seat belt and glance out the window as Jake opens the driver’s door of the Pontiac and gestures for us to join him.

When Mick moves to get out, I grab his arm. “Wait. I wanted to tell you...”

What was I even trying to say? That I’m sorry? That I wish I were better? That I wish this could be something—when it can’t?

He tilts his head, brow furrowed. “What is it?”

I bite my lip, half convinced I’ve lost my mind for trusting him, then reach into my bra and pull out the memory card.

“If you’re serious about helping me, start with this.”

Fourteen

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Mick

I stare at the tiny memory card in my hand, the weight of it heavy for what it might contain. Evidence. Leverage. Maybe a way to keep her out of jail?

Carefully, I wrap it in the plastic she gave me and slide it into the slot behind my DOD ID. Not the most secure place, but it'll do for now.

Samantha watches every movement like she expects me to change my mind. Like trust is a door she's bracing to have slammed in her face.

"You need a better spot for that," she mutters, worrying her bottom lip. "Wallets get lifted all the time."

I glance up, something twisting in my gut. "This is what you were talking about before? You were telling the truth."

She shrugs, her voice low as she meets my gaze. "Guess you weren't ready to believe that was even possible."

She's right. I wasn't. Not then.

I smile anyway, climb out of the car, and fall into step beside her as we head toward an antsy Jake. "Luke's meeting us at a taco shack. He brought a change of clothes for you."

Samantha groans. "No thanks. I like what I'm wearing just fine."

Jake casts a glance over his shoulder. “So do I, but we want you to blend in, not stand out.”

Samantha flicks her hair over her shoulder, thankfully conceding. “Fair point, but it better not be a city worker’s coveralls.”

Jake turns back to the front. “We have three minutes to get there, or we’ll have to find another meeting spot.”

I climb into the back again, grimacing at the smell of vape fumes and dodging the empty cans of energy drinks. The way Jake drives, it’s probably safer, and I don’t want Samantha thinking she’s alone, not when I’m finally making progress with her.

“Is he still driving the truck?”

Jake snags the docket for the payment slip and starts the engine, gunning it before Samantha and I have buckled in. “Yeah. But he’ll ditch it ASAP. Said he’s already getting grief. Some guy asked him to take a look at his mom’s drainage problem.”

Samantha snorts a laugh, and despite the knot of worry still tightening in my chest for Brooke, I have to fight a smile as we walk out.

Once again, Jake drives like a maniac, but this time, and in this car, it probably makes sense to do so. The only downside is that this is probably the worst car for drawing therealcops’ attention. If we get stopped, it’ll be a game-ender.

As Jake navigates the streets, using GPS and an uncanny knack for shortcuts that actually work, by some small miracle we make it unscathed to a tiny taco truck with tables outside and a dozen other parked trucks.

While the vehicle Samantha chose is noisy—and thanks to the modifications, we’re

easily visible—Luke isn't easy to spot, and I get the feeling that's just how he likes it. When I do locate him sitting alone at a table, he's on his phone, talking, with a soda and a half-eaten taco beside him.

As we rumble into the lot, he glances up but immediately returns to his phone call, picking up his taco and taking a bite. Jake hops out, and after a quick scan of the lot, I encourage Samantha to join me as I do the same.

"I'll go order. Grab the table next to Luke's. Sit facing him, but don't look at him when you talk," Jake says.

"Wow," Samantha says under her breath.

With my eyes on Luke, who is skillfully ignoring our presence, I guide Samantha to the table and sit as Jake directed.

Alongside us, Luke laughs into his phone, belying the seriousness of what comes out of his mouth. "Silas is en route. I'll stay to coordinate with Caleb, you and Jake will meet him at the airport."

I start to turn, ready to ask him a follow-up question, when Samantha reaches over the sticky table and grabs my hands, smiling as if she didn't hear what he said.

She squeezes hard. "Where's my change of clothes?"

It takes me a millisecond to recognize that she's not addressing me but Luke, who doesn't miss a beat. "In a bag under my seat. Get changed immediately."

Following their lead, I smile back at Samantha, trying to speak through the smile. "Did Caleb lose them?"

When I hear the crunch of his taco shell and someone walks past our table, coughing,
all my muscles tense and I hold my breath.

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As if this is second nature to her, Samantha keeps her cool. “Relax your shoulders, and stop smiling. You’re baring your teeth at me, and you look like you’re about to slug someone. You’re just a guy out with his girl, about to eat a taco.”

Luke clears his throat, as if agreeing with her, so I roll my shoulders and force the smile off my face, instead praying for Brooke and for God to give me peace in the midst of the storm.

Samantha’s lips twitch. “Better.”

Luke doesn’t say another word until Jake sits beside Samantha, handing her a taco and a soda and dumping ours on the table. While my impatience is burning through me, neither of them displays any outward signs they’re feeling any anxiety. When I risk a glance at Luke, he’s hunched over, eating.

Somehow, he manages to project his voice loud enough for us to hear while still eating his messy taco. “I’ve lost communication with Caleb. Silas will give you an update when he has one.” Without another word, he balls up his wrapper and rises to his feet, leaving me hanging without the confirmation I needed.

Underneath the table, Jake kicks my foot. “Eat your taco. By the way, you owe me ten bucks.”

Wondering if he’s joking, I glance at Samantha and find her one step ahead of me. She’s unwrapped her taco and is handing Jake a folded-up ten-dollar bill.

This is surreal. How can they carry on as if nothing is wrong when my sister is in the

hands of the same terrorists who strapped a bomb on me?

“I’m not hungry,” I say to Jake.

He shrugs. “Neither am I, but this is how we roll.”

I jerk forward, straining to keep my voice low. “We’re running out of time. They only gave us until midnight.”

Jake jams his taco into his mouth and talks between chews. “I know that. We all know that. Delilah is working something out.”

“You aren’t going to pay them, are you?” Samantha asks him.

Jake shakes his head. “Nah. She’s just rigging an account that can make it look like we did.”

Samantha toys with her taco as I pop the tab on my soda can. “How?”

Jake opens his hands in an “I dunno” gesture. “Trick of the trade, I guess. What she does is out of my area of expertise.”

Samantha purses her lips. “Which is?”

Jake grins at her. “Similar to what you do, but with a few added bonuses.”

She rolls her eyes at him and looks across the table at me. “If they send you a bank account, we can see if it matches the one I gave you.”

I smile at her, encouraged that she’s thinking of Brooke’s well-being while Jake finishes his last bite of taco. “You have a bank account number? Send it to Silas.

He'll pass it on to Delilah.”

I do as requested, pulling my phone out of my pocket to send Samantha's note to Silas, praying they are dumb enough to use the same account as I type out an explanation. He doesn't reply, but there's a message from my dad, asking me if I've heard from Brooke.

Swallowing down a lump of guilt, I put my phone back into my pocket and pick up my taco. It may as well be chalk and cardboard, but I chew and force it down as I try not to think about having to call Mom and Dad and explain to them why Brooke's not returning their calls.

Jake glances at his watch and picks up his soda, draining half of it before letting out a burp. When Samantha grimaces, he gets to his feet and stretches out his back. “Let's book it.”

I snatch up my trash and am on my feet and walking toward the car before I realize Samantha is dawdling. I spin around, ready to give her the hurry-up, when I see why she was delayed. She remembered what I had forgotten in my hurry to get to Silas—the bag Luke left with her change of clothes. She swoops down casually, picks it up, slides her glasses over her head, and catches up to us.

Jake gets to the car first and opens the door, a smirk growing on his face. “You going to sit in the back or up here with me?” he asks me.

I frown, ready to ask why, but Samantha holds up the bag. “Up front. And I don't want to see either of you looking in the mirrors until I'm dressed.”

Heat rushes to my face, and I fumble as I yank the front door open and climb in. Behind me the door closes, and Samantha unzips the bag, sighing deeply as she examines the contents.

Jake grins alongside me. “Having fun yet?”

I glare at him. “Seriously?”

He pulls a face at me. “Relax. Hightower is the best of the best. They’ll get her back.”

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When I don't say anything, he jerks his thumb behind us. "They found her, didn't they?"

Samantha grunts in acknowledgment. "We need to get out of here before someone reports the car as stolen."

He nods and starts the car, glancing in the rearview. "Eyes straight ahead," I growl.

"How am I supposed to see whether anything is coming if I don't look?"

"You're clear," Samantha says.

Sullenly, Jake puts the car into reverse and rolls back slowly, trusting Samantha to be his eyes. When he's lined up, he swings the nose around as she wrestles into a new set of clothing in the back.

At a break in traffic, he plants his foot, making Samantha curse. "Watch it!"

Offering her little more than a shrug in reply, he crosses two lanes while I fight the urge to check on Samantha. He keeps driving like that, and with her unrestrained, she's going to get hurt.

I double my prayers, now praying for Brooke and Samantha, and for Jake to slow down, keeping my mind occupied until I hear an audible click as Samantha fastens her belt. I flip the sun visor down and angle the mirror to see what outfit Hightower have put together for her this time.

Samantha catches me looking and tugs at the camo pants. “At least I have pockets this time.”

Holding back a laugh, I scan the rest of her, glad she’s wearing flat canvas shoes and a white T-shirt. “And you’ll blend in rather than stick out.”

She smiles, but it holds an element of uncertainty which twists my knotted stomach even further.

I face the front again and resume praying. Praying that Caleb has found Brooke, that Delilah can organize the money, and that nothing goes wrong.

This is on me. All of it. My lousy choices fueled by vengeance, pride, and anger led to this. If Brooke dies... the pain it’ll cause my parents will be indescribable.

I glance into the mirror again, and my chest squeezes as I see Samantha shifting items from her purse to the pockets of her pants. She trusts me. She actually trusted me enough to give me a memory card with information she believes can protect her freedom.

Whether it does is irrelevant right now.

I have to get Brooke back somehow without exchanging Samantha.

If I don’t, I’ll spend the rest of my life knowing their blood is on my hands.

Samantha

With Mick sitting up front, nervous energy starts to build in me, along with some doubts.

The clothes they've once again forced me to wear don't fit as snugly as I'd like, the cotton isn't soft, and the canvas shoes are scuffed. While the outfit is practical, it reveals their intent. After assuming the worst, it's now obvious that if they wanted to force me to do something, they have the manpower and resources to do so.

I keep my eyes on the back of Mick's head, studying the lines of his neck and the creases in his skin as he looks out the window. He must be sick to his stomach. But he's trying not to show it. Trying to be brave, or macho. Neither of which will help him get his sister back.

I swallow hard and am pleased Jake isn't driving as erratically now that we're on the freeway. The rest of the drive passes by in a blur of emotions I don't understand and am fighting to control. Pressure is building up in my chest, and my eyes are stinging. What is wrong with me? I'm like a bottle of champagne whose cork has been partially popped. All the force inside is slowly compelling the contents to pour out.

I squeeze my eyes shut and clench my fists as Mick and Jake carry on a conversation I'm not even sure if I should be a party to. I wouldn't be so open if I were in their shoes. I'd probably have stuffed me in the trunk of the car, handcuffed just for good measure. Their continued patience and kindness are baffling.

As Jake takes an exit, my thoughts continue to batter me relentlessly. "Where are we going?" I call out.

Mick twists to face me, and all my muscles seem to tense at the stress lines forming around his mouth and eyes. "Silas is meeting us at an old aircraft repair station."

"Who's Silas?" I say.

Jake replies. "The guy keeping you out of jail."

Mick's expression turns frosty as he glances at him. "Just drive."

His reaction gives me a little reassurance that he does genuinely care for me and that his words haven't all been in the heat of the moment. But still, when he breaks eye contact and twists back to look out of the windshield, my confidence wanes—more and more the closer we get to our destination. If Silas is powerful enough to command a man like Mick, he must be something to behold.

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By the time we arrive at Miami International and detour to the maintenance section, my nerves have cranked up so high, adrenaline is making my hands tremble. This far away from the main airport there are few security checks, but when a solitary security guard waves us through as though expecting us, it's apparent Hightower really does have everything covered.

Jake comes to a sliding stop outside a building marked "903," jerking me against the restraints. My heart leaps to my throat as two men appear, both around the same height, both dressed in camo gear, boots, and aviator shades, but only one has a radio and visible weapons strapped to his body.

Unsure of whether to exit, I wait for Mick to give me direction. Rather than leave me floundering, he immediately climbs out and opens my door for me. While his posture is tense, the protective hand he places on my back once again brings reassurance while my world is collapsing. He's something solid and tangible.

The man I guess is Silas speaks first, extending his hand to Mick before his eyes flick to me. This is the do-or-die moment, so while Mick shakes the hand of the other man, who identifies himself as Reese, I freeze as Silas casts his eyes over me. He doesn't say a word to me, just tells Jake to hide the car around the back then gestures for us to follow him and Reese inside.

With Mick at my side, I step into the building, instinctively scanning for exits. The air is dry and metallic, thick with the scent of rust, old fuel, and something acrid I can't name. The space is cavernous—an abandoned aircraft hangar with faded hazard signs peeling off the walls and a roof that groans every time the wind picks up.

Barrels of chemicals are stacked along one side, their labels faded or scraped off entirely. They sit beneath a grimy window layered with cobwebs and dust so thick it filters the daylight into a dull haze. A folding table has been shoved against the wall—on it, a battered laptop hums beside tangled cords, stripped radios, and what looks like surplus military gear.

Silas perches casually on one of the barrels.

“Good news. Caleb has Brooke’s location.”

Mick lets out a breath before running his hand over his face. While it is good news, based on their body language, neither Reese nor Silas are telling Mick the whole truth.

“What’s the bad news?” I ask.

Reese eyes me before answering. “There’s only one way in.”

Mick slumps against the wall as Silas speaks. “They haven’t made contact again, and they haven’t left the area. These are all good signs they’ll negotiate.”

“Where are they holding her?” Mick asks.

“They’re holed up in a house in the Everglades,” Silas says.

Mick squints at the laptop, where a map of the area has been enlarged and magnified. An X has been placed where Caleb has located Brooke.

I point out the obvious since no one seems to mind my speaking. “That’s sitting right on Lake Okeechobee. The entire area is wetlands.”

Beside me, Mick nods. “They probably have a boat slip.”

Silas folds his arms across his chest and nods. “We’ll have confirmation just as soon as Delilah has access to the satellite imagery.”

Jake walks in, his whistle echoing and grating on my nerves.

Silas catches his attention. “I need you to get on the phone to a Realtor.”

Reese interrupts by tapping the screen. “If they hired a seaplane, it’s twenty minutes to Chokoloskee Bay. I’ll make some calls and go see if I can find out.”

As Reese walks away, Mick’s back stiffens. “You think that’s their plan? Hire a charter again, finish what they started?” he asks Silas.

Before Silas can answer, I risk a theory of my own. “If they planned to martyr themselves and blow something up, they would have done it by now.”

Silas’s lips twitch, but he gestures for me to continue, so I clear my throat and go on. “Running around Miami wearing out-of-state uniforms is just moronic. People would have noticed them. Othercops would have noticed them. It’s almost like they wanted to get the attention.”

Silas scratches his chin stubble. “You’re thinking about how you’d act. That doesn’t apply here.”

“Why not?”

“Because evil doesn’t play by your rules. It doesn’t have to make sense.”

I almost laugh—until Mick lets out a low growl.

“So how do we fight that?” I ask.

Silas’s jaw tightens. “By remembering we’re not just dealing with people. There’s something darker behind this.”

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“That sounds like superstition,” I mutter.

They both look at me like I just missed the obvious.

Silas’s voice is calm but sharp. “There’s good and there’s evil. Whether you believe it or not doesn’t change who’s pulling the strings.”

Thankfully, I don’t have to reiterate that I don’t believe him because Adena arrives, out of breath, drawing their attention away from me.

“Caleb’s in place and has a good view of the house, but he’s sweating like a pig and needs water and shelter. I gave him what I had,” she says. To prove her point, she uncaps a water bottle and guzzles half as Mick looks to Silas for confirmation.

“I’ll go,” Mick says.

Silas shakes his head. “Luke’s on his way. He’s taking an airboat. They aren’t leaving without us knowing about it.”

Mick holds his gaze then blows out a breath. “I’m going nuts here. I need something to do.”

Silas’s reply is interrupted by Jake returning.

“Well?” Mick asks him.

Jake pulls out his phone. “It’s like Caleb said. Only one road in. But I found this. It’s

a rental, and there's a view of the house. Sending you all the link."

They all pull out their phones, leaving me empty-handed and out of the loop.

"Nice find, Rookie. Internal access to the garage," Adena says.

Silas bobs his head. "We'll use a minivan. Adena, you and Jake can sit up front and play the role of new parents. We'll take the back."

Jake chuckles. "You're going to have to take the twins for a walk while I unpack."

Adena groans. "That's so sexist. Why can't you take them this time?"

While Mick and I exchange a look, Reese joins the conversation. "No seaplanes rented to that area, but that doesn't mean they haven't found another way."

"Luke will confirm that when he arrives." Silas checks his watch. "Jake, go find a rental, and don't steal anything. Adena, take Samantha and go hunting in the office for anything useful. Reese..."

At my inclusion, my stomach dips to my toes and back again. Mick offers me a half smile.

While Reese's back straightens in expectation, Silas's instruction makes the blood drain from Mick's face. "Go get your wife."

Reese grimaces at him then looks across at Mick. "As a precaution."

Mick tries to shake it off. "If there is another bomb, there's no one I'd rather be there."

A shiver runs down my spine as Adena crooks her finger at me. “Come on.”

I feel an element of panic at going with her, but I don’t exactly have any other option. I’m completely at Hightower’s mercy, and I get the feeling that’s exactly what they wanted.

Mick

As I watch Samantha depart with Adena, my anxiety cranks up a little. “Is that a good idea?”

His brow creases. “You don’t trust her?”

I jam my hands into my pockets. “To a certain extent. But we’re literally at an airport. The cops are still looking for her.”

“You think she’ll escape through the window again?”

I scratch my head, thinking of what will happen to Brooke if Samantha disappears. “The thought did cross my mind.”

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Silas starts to smile, but it vanishes before it's fully formed. "Adena isn't going to let that happen. We're all doing everything we can, and we won't stop until we have the situation resolved."

I choke on a bitter laugh at his detachment. "My sister isn't a 'situation.'"

His expression turns grim. "Poor word choice, but I stand by it. We need to keep our cool."

I sit on one of the barrels and glance at the laptop. "So, what's the plan?"

Silas shifts closer and gestures to the location of the rental Jake found. He traces his finger over the map onscreen, zooming in on the narrow access road and the thick tree cover surrounding the property. "It's Everglades terrain. Swamp on three sides, one approach in. Luke and Caleb will provide overwatch and intel. We'll go in quiet, stay dark, and get her out fast."

I nod, but my pulse kicks up. This isn't a stakeout. It's a snatch and run.

Silas doesn't blink. "We'll figure out everything else on site."

"And Samantha?"

His face tightens. "That's the final piece of the puzzle. We're trying to figure out how to make the exchange without any casualties."

The word "casualties" makes my blood pressure spike.

“But you have the money sorted out?”

His nod is clipped. “Delilah’s ready and awaiting orders.”

I don’t know whether to thank him or thank God Hightower is involved. “What if they’re just waiting for the money to come in? If they hurt Brooke...” The thought is so overwhelming that I can’t finish my sentence.

“That’s where timing comes in. She can’t transfer the money without possibly causing some red flags. We have to get Brooke out before the bank investigates.”

I swallow. “And the cops are called?”

“Right.”

My mouth twists to one side. “I am not letting my sister go through what I did. Doesn’t matter if Verity and Reese are on board.”

“Then we need to pray it doesn’t come to that.”

Pray. As if I’m not already.

I give him a weak smile. “Any other sage advice?”

Silas lifts his chin and squares his shoulders. “If you find a moment to pray with Samantha, do it. She needs you.”

When I’m too stunned to reply, he turns away for a moment, allowing me to pull it together. Then he says, “As soon as Jake gets back, we’ll head out. In the meantime, I could use a hand.”

I clear my throat and follow him to an old utility room. Inside the door are multiple bags and equipment, along with two cases of bottled water and a block of plastic-wrapped granola bars.

“Unless this drags out past tonight, this should be enough,” he says.

I grab the case of water and follow him back to the entrance. “How likely do you think that is?”

He picks up a bag and shrugs. “Hard to know.”

“But you’ve done this before?”

I’m sure I spy a faint flickering of annoyance on his face before it vanishes. “More times than I can count. So has Caleb, and Luke is one of the most experienced contractors on my team.”

“Contractor?”

He nods and walks back to the utility room. “Hightower manages too many security details for our core team to handle. I need people I can trust on call. Luke is one of them.”

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I heft the granola bars and wait for Silas to grab the bag before asking him a follow-up question. “He mentioned something about Samantha becoming a team member?”

Silas’s lips quirk. “He’s always thinking three steps ahead. It’s what makes him so effective.”

“And Jake?”

He laughs. “He’s what I call a ‘fixer-upper.’ He’s had it rough, but with God’s grace, he’ll get there.”

“You employ a lot of car thieves?”

Silas reaches for another bag, one I didn’t see. “It’s a useful skill that we utilize out of necessity.”

I frown at the disclosure even if I appreciate that he’s being frank. “When this is over, I’d like to meet the rest of the team. Say thanks.”

He smiles. “How about we meet you at the Lighthouse Bar and Grill?”

My eyebrows hitch. “You know about that?”

“Caleb mentioned you came to the aid of a damsel in distress. Seems to be a theme for you.”

I don’t sense he’s mocking, so I shrug it off. “Just doing my job.”

He drops the bag at his feet. “You checked in with your CO recently?”

I grimace and shake my head. “That’s the last thing I’m thinking about now.”

His gaze drifts from me to the tarmac outside, his eyes narrowed as if he’s trying to see something in the distance. “But he’s expecting you at the base?”

“Yeah. Twohoursago.”

He leans against the steel door and works his jaw. “Leave it with me. I’ll see what Justus can do.”

“Justus?”

He smiles, turning to look at me. “My father. If anyone can buy you a little time, it’s him.”

I blow out a breath. “Thanks. I mean... for everything.”

His smile slips from his face, and his words lock in just how dire the situation is. “Save your thanks until after we get Brooke back.”

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Samantha

The next few minutes pass quickly. Everyone seems to be in motion as Jake arrives with a minivan, and Mick and Silas start loading up the vehicle. As if things weren’t weird enough, Mick keeps checking on me, a puzzled expression on his face, as if he can’t quite believe I’m still here.

And maybe I wouldn't be, if Adena hadn't been stuck to me like superglue. At Silas's instruction, I clamber into the back of the van and sit closest to the window so I can see where we're heading. Surprisingly, I don't have to guess. As Jake and Adena climb in, Silas sits in the seat in front and pivots so he can answer my unspoken question.

"We're all heading to the Glades. Stay close to Mick, and he'll tell you anything you need to know."

My nerves start to increase when he reaches across and slides the door closed. "The only thing I need to know is whether you're going to hand me over," I say.

From the front, Jake answers before Silas can. "If that was the plan, don't you think you'd be handcuffed and gagged by now?"

Adena mutters just loud enough for me to hear. "It's not too late."

Silas frowns at them and yanks his belt across his lap. "Unless you want to drive back to HQ when we're done here, keep your unhelpful comments to yourselves."

Jake glances at Adena, smirking as she gestures out the windshield. "Just drive, newbie."

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He grins at her, then he floors the gas and turns too sharply, causing Mick to crush into my side. He rights himself, apologizing as Silas reprimands Jake for his careless driving.

“From this point on, drive like you’re a cautious father of two,” he says.

Jake responds with little more than a shrug, but he slows down, and we breeze past the yawning security guard, who lazily waves a hand in acknowledgment. As we exit, Silas opens the laptop, and after a quick glance over his shoulder, I turn to stare out the window.

Mick doesn’t say a word to me, but almost as if taking Silas’s instruction literally, he slides his fingers into mine—and doesn’t let go. Not once during the entire thirty-minute drive into the Everglades.

We leave the city behind, skyscrapers giving way to flat stretches of scrubland and sun-bleached asphalt as we head west. The road narrows, hemmed in by dense greenery that grows thicker and taller with every passing mile. Before long, we’re swallowed whole, surrounded by tangled sawgrass, still black water, and towering cypress trees draped in ghostly Spanish moss.

If there’s one place I’ve never wanted to spend much time in, it’s here. Swampy. Wild. Unforgiving. A place where the air itself feels alive—heavy, wet, and pulsing with heat. The kind of humidity that seeps into your bones. Alligators lurk just beneath the surface. Snakes vanish into the brush without a sound. And the silence? It pulses with the creeping sense that out here, no one would hear you scream.

I shift in my seat, tugging my hand just slightly to test his grip. He holds on tighter. I don't say anything, and neither does he.

I glance at the endless stretch of murky water beyond the guardrail and swallow hard.

Wherever we're headed, I really hope they have air conditioning.

Mick draws my attention away from the view outside by removing his hand. When he subtly flexes his fingers and swipes his palm on his thigh, it's apparent I was squeezing too hard. With a smile, he slides his arm along the back of the seat, as though proving he's serious about protecting me. A lump settles in my throat and doesn't ease up when Jake drives us down a street running parallel to wetlands.

All heads swivel to look at the woods, and Jake slows to a crawl while Silas shuts his laptop down. "Okay, we're on," he says.

He turns to look at Mick. "Once we get inside the house, we'll look for a place to plant a directional microphone. At this distance we should be able to pick up conversations. We'll need to position it near a load-bearing wall for best resonance capture."

Adena raises her hand. "That's where I come in. The mic will be under the twins."

I glance at the stroller and the two infant seats complete with eerily realistic plastic babies strapped into them.

Mick looks equally impressed and relieved.

"Glad to see you came prepared."

With a smile, Silas reaches over and hits two buttons on the laptop. Instantly the

babies start crying, and Jake and Adena climb out and immediately start bickering, loud enough for anyone nearby to hear.

To add to the authenticity, Jake grabs the babies out of the back of the minivan.

“Just great. You woke the twins.”

“I didn’t wake them, your lousy driving woke them,” Adena says.

Jake hands her the baby carriers and gestures to the house.

“Take them inside. I’m putting the van in the garage.”

With a sneer, she turns on her heel and stomps to the door.

“This better be nicer than the last dump you rented us.”

Jake pulls a face at us as he slides the door closed.

“It’s not. It’s way worse than the two-bedroom in Dallas where we pulled this last.”

The van door slides shut, and seconds later we’re pulling into the garage.

As soon as the garage door lowers behind us, Silas steps out and gives Jake a nod.

“Nice job.”

The internal access door opens, and Adena appears. The babies’ cries are still audible from somewhere in the house, adding to the authenticity.

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“I’ll go pull the drapes upstairs so you can set up.”

Silas follows her inside the house, and we all trail in after him.

“Good. You’ll need to be out the door within the hour. I don’t want Caleb alone out there. He’ll be scouting the perimeter and tagging possible entry points.”

“On it.”

Jake appears, phone in hand, a frown on his face.

“Luke arrived a few minutes ago. He’s got eyes on the back of the house.”

Silas sets his laptop down and nods.

“Mick? Can you grab the supplies and bring them inside? We’ll stage gear in the bedroom for rapid deployment if needed.”

Rather than wait around, I preempt Mick, going back into the garage and opening the driver’s door to locate the latch to open the trunk. Mick joins me, his face tight with concern as we pull out the equipment and food in the back.

“I thought I would have heard from them by now,” he says.

“Maybe I should try calling them?”

I shake my head. “You want them to think you’re scrambling to get the money

together back in Miami."

He drags his fingers through his hair and looks at the garage door.

"She's right down the street. What if Hightower gets it wrong? What if Brooke gets hurt?"

I draw him to one side, so we're hidden behind the van.

"I'm not going to pretend I know what you're going through, but I do know what it feels like to be helpless and to have to rely on other people."

Unable to look at the pain on his face, I slide my arms around his waist and press my cheek against his chest. Instantly, his arms wrap around me, soothing and comforting, causing me to release more words in a tumble. "The people I relied on weren't like everyone here. They didn't care what happened to me, but Hightower cares about you, and they care about your sister too."

Mick huffs. "Look at me."

I look up, and his fingers brush across my chin. "They care about you too."

I start to shake my head, but he frowns. "Is that so hard for you to believe—that people can care about you?"

"How could they? I've done nothing to warrant it."

He shifts his weight, his expression softening as he speaks.

"No one earns God's love. He gives it freely. Maybe that's why it matters so much to us that you know that."

My mouth runs dry, and somewhere in the pit of my stomach, a knot forms.

“Everything I’ve done to you...”

Mick blinks slowly then leans forward and gently kisses my forehead.

“I’m going to forgive you for. Can you forgive me for being such a self-righteous moron?”

Moisture swells in my eyes, and warmth spreads throughout my entire body. I feel like I’m having an out-of-body experience. Like I’m looking down on myself and seeing a moment in my life that shouldn’t be happening.

“I don’t know how to do any of this,” I say, my voice croaky.

He pulls me in closer, wrapping his arms around me, drawing me in and locking eyes with me, making me face the enormity of what’s happening.

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“Neither do I. Guess we’ll have to play it as it comes.”

I bite my lip then release it as a swell of emotion floods me. I twist my fingers into his shirt and press my mouth against his, trying to explain without using words. The kiss deepens quickly, his frustration and his own need for comfort evident as he returns it eagerly.

For a moment, I forget we’re in a garage, hiding behind a van, and revel in the knowledge that Mick isn’t going to let anything happen to me. He cares about me.

When was the last time someone cared for me?

Not because I was trying to be sexy, or trying to be smart, or trying to be capable, or proving I could think on my feet, but despite those things.

I have never spent so much time with a man and not wanted anything from him other than his love. I stopped hoping for such foolish things a long time ago when Mona said chasing after love was like looking for the end of a rainbow.

I’m vaguely aware when my back hits the concrete wall of the garage, semi-conscious when Mick’s hands run down my spine, but it’s not until a door slams loudly and Mick tugs his lips away from mine that I realize we’ve been gone way too long.

Just when I think I’ve hit my breaking point, he pulls away—and flashes a toe-curling smile that sets me on fire.

“You okay?” he says.

When I answer him, being truthful is harder than lying to him.

“No,” I whisper. “Not even close.”

Mick

Kissing Samantha again may have turned my brain to pudding, but it did at least provide a brief reprieve from worrying about Brooke. It may not have started out that way, but I needed a distraction. Something to occupy my mind rather than all the what-ifs.

With Samantha’s help, we shift the supplies into the kitchen while keeping one eye on what’s happening in the house. In a matter of minutes, the upstairs bedroom with the best view of the end of the street becomes a nerve center. While Jake searches for the nearest hardware store, Silas and Adena set up laptops, test gear, and unpack weapons, juggling calls with Delilah and someone named Zack at the same time. Weapons are kept within immediate reach, concealed but accessible, in case of breach or early move-up.

Maybe just to keep us busy, Silas tells us to grab extra chairs and rearrange the beds so we can sleep in shifts—just in case Brooke’s not released on time. Twenty minutes later, he calls us in with the next update.

“Jake’s going to leave to make it look like he’s picking up boxes. On his way back he’ll park, locate Caleb, and drop off more water and bug repellent. He’ll park in front so he can carry the boxes in the front door.”

“When does the directional mic get planted?” I ask.

“A few hours after that. We don’t want Adena to go out too soon after Jake gets back. Too much activity in a short space of time will look suspicious.”

I glance at my watch and wince. “We’re cutting it fine.”

“It’s better to leave it until sundown. Adena will have more cover in the shadows.

Less exposure risk, and if it gets hot, Luke will signal for abort.”

Adena shudders. “So will the gators. Seriously, how do people live here with the humidity?”

I shrug. “You get used to it.”

Silas interrupts. “Jake, it’s been long enough. Pick up dinner for everyone too. Mick? Can I have a word?”

Adena huffs and turns to look at Samantha. “I need help reaching the coffee maker in the kitchen anyway. Come get it down for me,” she says.

Samantha’s brow furrows, but she follows, leaving me alone with Silas.

“Caleb’s been out in the open for going on two hours. I’m going to relieve him so he can get some food and rest. He’s doing perimeter recon and verifying our fallback routes.”

I nod, pleased he’s thinking about his team when I’m not thinking about anything but Brooke and Samantha. “What about relieving Luke?”

Silas smiles. “That’s where you come in. You’ll rotate up to overwatch, cover the rear. Luke’s got the long rifle, but you’ll keep eyes on the house and call signs from

our fallback spot.”

I grimace. “Got it. Good thing Jake needs to run a few trips to make this convincing then.”

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Silas nods and glances at the door Adena and Samantha left through. “There’ll be a gap of around thirty minutes each change. That means you’ll be here with Adena and Samantha.”

To emphasize his meaning, he lowers his chin and narrows his eyes. “This is a complicated situation. I don’t want it complicated even further, and I will not allow my people to get hurt because you can’t control yourself, understand?”

I shift my weight to one leg, unable to look at him directly as I consider what just happened in the garage. I’m acting like an out-of-control teenager who’s never seen a pretty girl before.

“I got it.”

Silas extends his hand. “I need to know I can trust you. Can I do that?”

I hesitate before slapping my palm against his. “You can.”

Samantha

With Adena watching me like a hawk, I reach into the top cupboard and clasp an ancient coffee maker. It weighs so much, my arms are straining as I maneuver it onto the countertop. It’s covered in dust and grease, and drinking coffee out of it is as appealing as drinking the swamp water surrounding us.

“That was pointless. It’s unusable,” I say.

Adena purses her lips. “You don’t know that.”

I scoff. “Yeah, I do. It’s too grubby and is probably rusty. No one is going to want to drink coffee out of it.”

Adena reaches behind the refrigerator and switches it on. An overloud hum fills the kitchen as she opens the freezer door and grabs an ice cube tray. Her eyes stay on me as she carries it to the faucet. “So clean it so people can. There are cleaning supplies and gloves under the sink.”

She cannot be serious.

“No thanks. I don’t need coffee anyway.”

She shakes her head and dumps the tray in the sink then bends down to open a cabinet door, revealing gloves and cleaning agents I’ve only seen in commercials. “But the men out there might. Mick might. And when we bring Brooke back, she might too. So get to it.”

She tosses a pair of slimy old gloves at me, and I cross my arms so the pink rubber gloves fall to the floor. “I’m not your slave.”

Adena leans her hip against the countertop and heaves a sigh. “Okay. Let me phrase it another way. We’re a team, you’re alive because of us, and this is how you can show some gratitude.”

My temper flares, and I lift my chin. “I spent all my crappy childhood cleaning up after people, and I am not going to go back to living that way just because you think I owe you.”

She frowns and points to the gloves on the filthy floor. “I asked you to help because

cleaning this dump is a two-person job, and everyone else has skills that are better utilized elsewhere. If you think Silas or Caleb wouldn't clean if needed, you have a lot to learn about how Hightower operates."

She holds my gaze unblinking, and I get the feeling that if I were to try to stare her down, I'd come out the loser. A niggle of remorse starts to work its way up my body, overtaking me, until I snap at the waist and snatch the gloves off the floor. I turn my back on her as I grab the detergent and find the sink plug. "Fine. I'll clean it, but I will not be held responsible if anyone does get sick."

Adena's mouth quirks, but she doesn't say a word, just walks out of the room, leaving me with no choice but to slide my fingers into gloves that are likely crawling with germs. Grimacing, I gingerly pull them on and shudder as I try not to think about what kind of a person wore them last.

Monanevercleaned her apartment. She paid someone to do it, and her voice echoes in my mind as I take the water compartment out of the machine.

You were made for better things than scrubbing toilets.

It's a nice sentiment, and until a few days ago, I never considered that maybe she was wrong. I'd never have thought to question her on anything.

Pushing that idea aside, I fill the sink with hot, soapy water and find a scourer that will work. Adena can think what she likes, but nobody is going to be fool enough to drink anything out of this cruddy thing, even if I do scrub it.

More out of anxiety than anything else—and to keep my mind off of what might happen to me after this ends—I attack the machine as if it were my mortal enemy. I keep working, oblivious to what's going on in the rest of the house, scrubbing until my fingers are cramping and my neck and shoulders are aching from looking down.

The first indication that something has changed in the house is the slam of a door, more activity in the next room, and the scent of garlic wafting toward me. I stop what I'm doing and turn just as Mick enters the room, followed by Caleb, who's slick with sweat and downing water while trying to answer Mick's questions about Brooke.

As Caleb sinks into a chair at the table, Jake appears, laden with pizza boxes. Adena is right behind him, with grocery bags and a roll of paper towels. Her eyes meet mine then shift to the now-clean coffee machine. A faint smile appears on her face before she nods her approval.

Jake tosses the pizza on the table and slumps into a chair. "One of the neighbors stopped me. He wanted to know if there was anything he could do to help."

Caleb bobs his head. "Nosy old coot. But he does know a lot about the neighborhood. Says our 'friends' at the end of the road have been there for a few months—and two vehicles and a BMW arrived after dark a few days ago."

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Jake flips one of the pizza boxes open, and my stomach grumbles as the scent of basil and salami wafts toward me. “He’s going to show up here sooner or later. Can guarantee it.”

Caleb must be exhausted, but rather than dig into the pizza, he gestures for everyone to take a seat, including me. It’s a little cramped, but I tug off the gloves and sit down as everyone bows their heads.

Oh, right. Here we go with the giving thanks thing again. I glance at Mick—he shoots me a quick smile, then closes his eyes and bows his head over the table I really should’ve wiped down. I drop my head and look at the cloudy green pattern and a chip in the Formica as Caleb begins his prayer.

“Thank you for this food, Father. Keep watch over Luke and Silas. Blind the enemies from seeing them, and confuse their plans so we may do your bidding. Thank you for the army of soldiers who stand ready to take up arms and fight at your command.”

My brow wrinkles, and I fidget in my seat as everyone else says “amen.”

I sneak a look upward and aim my question at Caleb. “What army? Are there more Hightower people coming in?”

Caleb opens his mouth to speak, but Jake answers before anyone else can. “He’s talking about angels.”

My eyes pop. “Oh, come on. You can’t believe in that too.”

But given everyone's body language and hesitancy to reply, it's apparent they do.

"Now's not the time for a Bible lesson. We need to eat," Caleb says.

Adena takes a piece of pizza and nods. "And you need a shower. Lucky for you, I cleaned it."

A smile grows on my lips as Caleb chuckles and tries to swallow a piece of pizza. "I owe you."

Adena covers a smile. "And I'll absolutely hold you to that."

Despite the easy camaraderie between them, Mick isn't eating, and he isn't looking at me either. He's playing with the pizza in his hand and hasn't said a single word since Caleb's strange prayer. I pick up my own piece of pizza and take a bite, ignoring the rubbery smell lingering on my fingers, and slowly reach out my foot to nudge him.

While the other three Hightower members dive into the pizza and make small talk, Mick meets my eye. This might be business as usual for everyone else, and they might have complete faith in their God, but Mick's starting to unravel. He's radiating tension. His shoulders are bunched, his jaw is clenched, and he's trying to soothe himself by spinning his watch on his wrist.

The desire to comfort him is so strong, I have to tear my eyes away from him.

I don't belong here. With him. Sitting at this table, surrounded by people who have wild ideas about God and even wilder ideas about me. I force down a piece of pizza, every bite going down in hard lumps as I struggle to swallow.

Caleb finishes first and pushes back from the table. "Sorry, kids. I need a shower, then I'll check in with Luke. Adena, can you check in with Delilah and pull up the

blueprints when you're done?"

Adena nods and finishes her pizza, reaching for a paper towel to wipe her hands. "I'll go make sure they're up on Silas's laptop, then I'm going to get ready to take the twins out."

He gives her a thumbs-up then looks longingly at the coffee machine. "Kudos to whoever cleaned that beast. Someone want to put a pot on?"

As Mick volunteers, my face twists into a grimace. Caleb doesn't seem too concerned about the potential risk. He just breezes out of the room, taking his radio with him.

With Jake playing third wheel, I leave Mick alone and watch Jake instead, wondering how he ended up here—and why Hightower draws such a strange mix of misfits.

Jake catches me looking at him and cocks his head. "What? I have sauce on my face?"

I wave my hand in the air. "Just wondering how you got here."

He swallows and reaches for his water bottle. "Long story. Maybe I'll tell you if you stick around."

If I wasn't so distracted by Mick, maybe I'd put more time into figuring Jake out, but he's the least of my concerns.

As the coffee machine gurgles to life behind me, Caleb returns, freshly showered but with a grim expression that makes my stomach tighten.

"We have a visual on Brooke," he says.

From where he stands at the counter, Mick fires questions at him. “Is she okay? Did they hurt her? Which room is she in?”

Caleb answers them in order, his voice clipped. “We can’t confirm that. Luke only got a passing glimpse. She’s either asleep or unconscious on a bed in the back bedroom, closest to the exit.”

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Mick blows out a breath. “That’s good, right? Easier to get her out.”

“Yeah.”

“I feel a ‘but’ coming,” Jake says.

I’d have to agree. If Brooke’s not moving, she’s either badly hurt, drugged, or dead. No one wants to say it out loud to Mick, and I’m not about to be the one to point out that drugging victims seems to be their MO. It keeps people pliable, less likely to fight back—and from what I saw, Mick’s sister wasn’t going down easy.

Jake’s prediction is unfortunately correct. Caleb’s shoulders tense, his jaw works, and he zeros in on Mick. “There are large quantities of nitrocellulose inside.”

When he receives nothing but blank looks, he’s forced to elaborate, and his words land like poisoned arrows. “It’s the same compound used to blow Verity’s apartment.”

Mick

I lurch to my feet, fear mingling with frustration as I fire words at Caleb. “I need to switch places with Luke. Now.”

Caleb holds his hand up. “I know you want to move, but now isn’t the time.”

Is he kidding me? He drops that and expects me to just sit tight and wait?

“We’re running out of time to get her out,” I say.

“We’re on schedule. But we need to keep the element of surprise or we have no chance,” Caleb says.

“Let me leave now so we can confirm whether she’s injured,” Adena says.

I nod, gesturing at her as I try to plead my case with Caleb. “If you won’t let me go, then listen to her.”

Caleb rubs his hand over his smooth jaw and looks around at the laptops set up on makeshift desks around the room. “Fine. Gear up, and take the twins out. Jake, I want you with her, and I want you both armed. No one takes any unnecessary risks.”

He grabs a handheld signal mirror and a low-light flashlight from the gear pile—silent tools for fallback signaling.

Jake gives him a sloppy attempt at a salute, and as Caleb looks at the blueprint of the house, he slips out of the room with a fierce Adena in tow. I’m so preoccupied by the specs and Caleb’s thoughts on the layout that I miss Samantha’s entrance into the room until she speaks.

“Is there anything I can do?”

Caleb’s eyes don’t leave the screen as he answers. “Don’t think so, sweetheart.”

I glance over my shoulder at her, and she peers down, picking at her nails, then sits, perching on one of the chairs we dragged in here.

“We need to enter from the roof, the back, or the window,” I say.

Caleb nods. “Our best bet is a synchronized attack.”

He taps three points on the blueprint—window, rear entrance, and hallway junction.

“What about the explosives?”

“They aren’t explosives yet. They’re ready to be assembled. If it comes to that, I can handle disarming something simple. Anything more complicated, Verity will be on hand.”

“When are they arriving?”

“They’re en route.”

I glance around the bedroom. Once Adena and Jake return, it’s going to be a tight fit. “It’s going to get crowded in here.”

His lip twists. “We can’t risk any more trips today. If this runs over to tomorrow, Jake will get them first thing, but until then, they’ll be waiting down the street in their rental with a radio jammer that will knock out all cell coverage and all radio signals.”

He holds up a small field map. “Verity will trigger the jammer manually if the call comes. Until then, we maintain comms through line-of-sight and hand signals.”

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“That won’t help if they detonate from inside,” I say.

“No, it won’t. And we can’t use the jammer yet or they won’t be able to contact you.”

My eyes drift to where my phone is resting against my hipbone. “So we just pray they don’t decide to make bombs until we’re ready to move?”

His answer is given without a hint of irony. “Praying is all we can do right now.”

At the sound of footsteps behind me, I glance back—Adena and Jake. If they’re carrying weapons, I can’t see them, but Jake’s enthusiasm is evident in how he bounces on his toes. Guess he really is the rookie they keep referring to him as.

A little doubt nudges at me before Adena smothers it quickly. “We’re all set. We’ll preempt the old guy and say hello in case he comes knocking on the front door,” she says.

“What about diapers?” Samantha says.

We all look at her, probably equally puzzled, and she wrinkles her nose. “If you’re doing this right, you should dump some in the trash outside.”

Adena’s hands slide to her hips, and she appears a little peeved at the suggestion. “We have done this before.”

Jake, however, sends Samantha a shifty smile. “She’s right. I’ll go get some ready.”

Adena lowers her hands, eyes narrowing just a little, then mutters a grudging thanks. “Who’s going in the front door?” she asks.

Caleb jabs his thumb into his chest and returns to the screen.

Adena frowns. “How’s Mick going to get to the side window?”

Caleb pivots so he can face her. “Distraction. Verity is going to help with that one.” He pulls out a timer and passes it to me. “Thirty seconds after impact. That’s your gap.”

Adena assesses me, looking me over. “And you think you can haul your sister out the window if she’s a dead weight?”

A flickering of annoyance sets my veins on fire. “I’ll drag her out of it if I have to.”

Fed up with being ignored, Samantha cuts in and points at Caleb. “If anyone should be getting your sister out, it’s him.”

Caleb’s eyebrow hikes, but he gives her a grim nod before turning his attention back to me. “We go in as soon as it’s dark.”

Sixteen

Samantha

The more I listen, the more my stomach sinks. They’re serious. They’re actually going through with this insane plan instead of handing me over to the same terrorists who paid me fifty grand to seduce Mick.

It makes no sense.

I try to catch Mick's attention, but he's too focused on the floor plans of the building down the street to notice. Frustrated, I leave the room and head back to the kitchen—a depressing space that reminds me of too many childhood kitchens.

Looking for anything to distract me from the madness unfolding next door, I gather up the empty pizza boxes and start stacking them, trying to figure out how to stop Mick. But stopping him feels like trying to halt a freight train going full speed. Once he's moving, he's not stopping.

“These people are going to get him killed,” I mutter.

“If Mick gets killed, it'll be because he didn't listen.”

I spin around. Adena's just walked through the door. “You're back already?”

She nods. “We only had to plant the mic and intercept the old guy, which we did. Then I picked a fight with Jake about forgetting the twins' pacifiers so we could bail.”

To her credit, that's a bold move. If the nosy neighbor had looked too closely at the babies, he would've known they were fake.

I trace the edge of a pizza box, head shaking. “He's going to get himself killed trying to save her.”

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Adena unscrews her water bottle cap. “He’s trying to save you too. Don’t forget that.”

My shoulders tense, and my pulse speeds at the suggestion. “Butwhy?”

She pulls out a chair and settles into it. “I dunno. I barely know the guy. But if I had to guess, I’d say it was for the same reason he saved your life the first time. It’s who he is.”

“I can’t let him do that for me.”

Adena rolls her neck until it pops, her eyes narrowing. “You won’t get a say. It’s already in motion.”

The words tumble out before I can stop them. “I have a better plan. They won’t expect it. Put a camera on me. You’ll be able to see how many are inside and what condition Brooke is in.”

Her head jerks back, body rocking slightly in the chair. She’s not the only one caught off guard.

My chest tightens, breath shallow, heart pounding. I don’t even know where the idea came from—just that it burst out like it had been waiting, buried somewhere beneath the panic and guilt and desperation. My voice shakes, but I don’t try to take it back. It’s reckless. Probably stupid. But it feels right.

I can’t watch Mick sacrifice himself for me.

“What makes you think you’ll get inside?”

The plan comes together so rapidly in my mind that my mouth struggles to keep up. “Someone is in charge over there. It isn’t a solitary guy with a gun. I’ll show up and tell them I have information the leader needs to hear.”

“It’s a nice idea, and kudos for having the best of intentions, but that doesn’t mean they won’t shoot you and then Brooke.”

Oh. Crap. This is the part that’s going to be tricky.

“I need Mick’s phone. They’d need to receive a text from me saying I’ve escaped.”

Her cheeks puff before she blows out a breath. “You’re not just gambling with your life. You’re gambling with Brooke’s.”

“Isn’t this all a gamble? We both know she could already be dead. There is no sense in everyone risking their lives for a dead woman.”

Adena purses her lips and fixes her gaze on a spot on the grimy Formica table. “How long have you been thinking about this idea?”

I brush her question off. I can’t tell her it formed out of a deep panic that Mick was going to die. “I can get Mick’s phone off him and make the call, but I’ll need your help to leave.”

Adena’s eyebrow arches just slightly, her mouth curling at the edges. “There are easier ways to prove you want to change, you know.”

I toss my hair over my shoulder and shrug like it’s no big deal. “Maybe. But this will work. I know it will.”

She grimaces. “Why? Because you’re in love with him?”

The words stop me cold.

I laugh—too quick, too forced—but it dies halfway out. I start to deny it, but nothing comes. The silence stretches. My chest tightens.

Love?

No. That can’t be right.

“Are you going to help me?”

She rises slowly, walks around the table, and plants her hands on my shoulders with a solid thud. I flinch, but hold steady.

“You, Samantha Duke, have ovaries of steel,” she mutters. “But you’re running on pure emotion. No one’s signing off on this just because you’ve fallen for Mick.”

My stomach sinks. “You have to let me do this.”

“No, I don’t.” Adena crosses her arms. “For some reason I can’t explain, you’re growing on me. And I don’t send my friends off to die because they think that’s how they earn a man’s love.”

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I suck in a breath, stunned—not just that she saw straight through me, but that she used the wordfriends. “How could you?—”

She lifts her hands, eyes closing as she exhales hard. “But in this case, I actually think you could pull it off. So I’m going to talk to Caleb and Silas.”

She turns toward the door, then pauses and looks back. “But I want you to promise me something, okay?”

I swallow hard and nod, unsure what’s coming.

“If things go sideways, call on God. Got it?”

I don’t argue. I don’t push back. I just give her a shaky smile. “Got it.”

She frowns, backing away slowly, leaving me alone in the shabby kitchen—and taking what little confidence I had in this insane plan right out the door with her.

Mick

Caleb presses a finger to his comms earpiece, lifting one side so he can hear me. “We’ve got a signal. Receiving loud and clear.”

I blow out a prayer of thanks. “What are they saying?”

His brow tightens. “Arabic. I don’t have the dialect for it.”

Jake steps forward. “We need Delilah’s translator running. I’ll call her.”

Caleb nods. “Tell her to patch into the feed from the bug we planted. We’ll need onscreen transcription.”

Jake already has his phone out. “She’s on it. But she says there’ll be a delay—and it won’t be perfect.”

“How long?” I ask.

Jake shrugs. “Depends how fast they talk. Plus, dialect makes it tricky. A human translator would be safer. AI’s not perfect—might mix up words with multiple meanings.”

I wince. A mistranslation at the wrong moment could get us all killed.

“Can’t we loop in someone who speaks it?”

Caleb shakes his head. “Not with the window we’ve got. Verity and Reese are already parked and standing by. Jammer’s prepped but not active yet.”

Jake’s phone buzzes. He looks up. “We’ve got access. Check the live link. First translation’s coming through now.”

Caleb taps away at the laptop. “Got it. The text will appear on screen in around thirty seconds.”

My nerves crank even higher as I watch a green cursor blinking Matrix-style on a black screen. I’m half expecting “Wake up, Neo” to appear until the first sentence arrives unceremoniously, and it’s so disturbing I’m transported right back to the plane again.

“Your siblings, your grandchildren... All of us remain steadfast on your path, and we will not leave it until every last one of us is martyred, with God’s permission.”

Jake mutters, “What the heck is that?”

Caleb’s lips move as he rereads the words onscreen. His face blanches, and he clenches his fist. “Encouragement from home. Probably reading an email from his mother. Mothers think it’s an honor for their sons to die as martyrs.”

My stomach curls. “That’s sick.”

No one disagrees with me.

Behind us someone coughs, drawing our attention. It’s Adena, and her eyes are locked on me. “Samantha needs to talk to you,” she says.

“Tell her I’ll be there in a few minutes,” I say.

Adena shakes her head. “This can’t wait. She’s... upset.”

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She's upset? What could she possibly have to be upset about? She's safe—unlike my sister.

I huff out an irritated breath. "I'll be back in five."

Jake smirks at me but doesn't say a word as I walk past a poker-faced Adena. "She's in the last bedroom down the hall."

I'm still irritated, and my gut twists into knots when I enter the bedroom and find Samantha staring out of the window, her back facing me.

"It's going to rain," she says.

I lean against the doorframe and fold my arms across my chest. "That's what you're upset about?"

She turns, slowly, tears tracking down her face as she shakes her head and drops her gaze to a hole in the thin carpet.

Sighing, I drop my arms and cross the room to her. "I told you you're safe here. Don't you believe me?"

Her brow wrinkles, and she blinks rapidly, dislodging another tear. "I believe you, but I don't believe them."

I don't have time for this, and I can't allow myself to get distracted again. Not when we're so close to going in and retrieving Brooke. I allowed this to happen, but I'm not

allowing Hightower to take all the risk.

“They could have let the cops catch you.”

She chews her lip, chin wobbling as she edges closer to me. “I guess.”

I glance at the door. “I should get back. They’re receiving?—”

Her arms slide around my waist, and she looks up at me. “Can’t you stay with me for a minute longer?”

Frowning, I place my hands on her wrists. “I can’t.”

She swallows, her face twisting, as she slides her hands up my back. “Thirty seconds?”

Before I can say no, she lifts her chin and brushes her lips against mine—so softly my lungs seize and I forget how to breathe.

“I’m scared,” she whispers.

My arms go around her without thinking, and she leans into me, her body pressing closer. “You’re going to be okay,” I say.

Her brow knits. “You don’t know that. You could be killed.”

She’s right. I can’t promise her I’ll make it back. So I give her the only reassurance I can—a kiss that says what I can’t. That she matters. That she’s not alone in this, even if I can’t stay.

My mouth finds hers, deeper this time—fierce, steady, lingering. I pour everything

I'm not saying into it, and it takes everything I have to pull away.

"You're going to be okay," I say again.

She won't look at me, her hands hanging loose at her sides as she backs up and presses against the wall. "Be careful. I don't... I wanted to say..."

She's flustered. And I'm not that conceited to say it was just the kiss that caused it. "Say what?"

She swallows and looks over my shoulder. "Don't die."

A lump settles in my throat. "That's up to God, but if you care, you can pray."

Samantha's smile is weak. "I'm not sure He'll listen to anything I have to say. I'm not exactly on His good side."

My heart squeezes in my chest. "So get on His good side. Ask Him to forgive you. Ask Him to take control of your life."

I don't get to hear her reply because Jake calls me from the hallway. "Time to get geared up."

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I look back at Samantha one last time, smile gently, and turn away—lifting a silent prayer that God will prepare her heart, and that He'll let me be part of whatever He's doing next.

Jake tosses a vest at me. "Rest of the gear is in the back of the minivan."

I follow him, bypassing the bedroom where Caleb and Adena are speaking in hushed tones, and return to the garage. The rear door is open, and Jake has set up a small armory beside the car seats. I pick up a radio and headset.

"You brought all this with you?"

He reaches in and pulls out a set of PVS-14 night vision monoculars.

I whistle. "Those don't come cheap."

He grins. "You should see the sexy gear Verity and Reese have. Fun times."

Except it's not fun. None of this is. Not when this is my sister's life at stake.

Jake hands me a sidearm, which I refuse in favor of my own. I pat my holster as I shake my head. "I'd rather use a weapon I'm familiar with."

He eyes me, amusement flickering across his face before he gestures to an unopened bag. "Can you get the vest over that thing, though?"

"What?" Jake says.

I slide my arms through the vest and fasten it around my waist. As I do, it bumps against the holster, making it impossible to secure properly. My fingers move to the gun, ready to take it off—then I pause, realizing something else might be wrong.

I pat the front pocket of my jeans, expecting to feel my phone.

Nothing.

Frowning, I glance down. The square outline that had been digging into my thigh all day is gone.

“My phone.”

Jake reaches into the back of the minivan again and pulls out a phone. “This it?”

I take it from his fingers and instantly know it’s not. “No.”

He shrugs. “It’ll be around. I’ll look in here if you want.”

Nodding, I rush out of the garage, retracing my steps, nausea churning with every stride.

How could I lose my frickin’ phone?

My heart pounds harder. They could call any second—and I won’t be able to answer. I won’t even know. Brooke’s life could depend on it.

Stupid. So stupid.

My steps quicken, breath coming faster. Every second feels like it's slipping through my fingers.

I tear through the kitchen, checking every surface—even digging through the trash just to be sure. Nothing.

Heart hammering, I head back into the ops room. Caleb and Adena are focused on the screen, talking to Silas, but I can feel their eyes on me as I move through the space—frantic but trying to stay systematic.

I retrace every step, every corner, but it's not enough. The panic builds until I can't hold it in anymore.

“I can't find my phone.”

Caleb glances at Adena, and they both exchange a knowing look.

My back straightens. “You know something I don't?”

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Caleb scratches his stubble. “Sit down, Mick.”

Something in my chest snaps—right along with what’s left of my hope. “Is it Brooke? Is she...”

Adena hastily shakes her head. “Nothing has changed.”

Jake enters the room, eating pizza, and strolls to the window. “Clear,” he says.

My eyes dart to him then back to Caleb, who gets to his feet. “Your phone isn’t lost. Samantha took it out of your pocket when she kissed you.”

Cold seeps into my veins, chased by white-hot anger as I scan the faces watching me.

The tears. The emotion. None of it was real.

Of course she can fake cry. She’s probably done it a hundred times to get what she wants.

I spin on my heel and storm down the hall toward the bedroom where Samantha put on her little show. I throw the door open so hard it bangs into the wall and sticks.

The room is empty. A soft breeze filters through the open window—she’s gone. Climbed out. Ran.

Rage rises like a tide, choking off thought. I whirl around, ready to confront Caleb, when something flutters on the bed.

A piece of paper.

I snatch it up, and the second I read the four words scribbled across the page, the fury drains from me—replaced by something far worse.

So others might live.

Samantha

Following Adena's rushed instructions, I slip into the adjacent property just as the first drops of rain begin to fall. This is the worst possible time to get caught outside—and an even worse time to be seen lurking in someone's backyard.

If the nosy old man decides to come calling now, I won't even have a chance to hide.

The air feels charged, like the storm isn't just weather but warning. Another drop falls, slow and deliberate, and heavy clouds roll in overhead, casting the whole street in a deep, oppressive gloom.

Jake said the owners wouldn't be back for at least an hour. I'm counting on that. But all it takes is one neighbor looking out their window and calling the cops.

Increasing my pace, I cross the street so I can walk in the opposite direction. It's been over ten minutes since I climbed out the bedroom window. By now Mick will know I'm gone. He'll know I deceived him, and he'll know Hightower has too.

He's going to be furious.

My footsteps falter, trepidation and fear making me clumsy, but I can't stop now. I've committed, and there's a chance the men have already seen me approaching. I concentrate on breathing and placing one foot in front of the other, flexing my hands

to try to keep them from trembling. If I don't pull it together, I'm going to mess this up, and people will die.

Mick's phone vibrates from inside my pocket, and I jump. I have to stop walking to check in case it's the men holding Brooke replying to my text, so I pull it out and glance down at the screen. It's a message, but it's not the reply I was anticipating.

Will you be at church on Sunday? Dad and I would love you to come.

His mom. His pretty and kind mother is trying to contact him. The mother who raised him and made him the kind of man who would risk his life to save someone else's even though she nearly got him killed.

Numbness starts to spread through my body, and I pick up my pace, holding the phone so tight that my hand starts to cramp. I turn the corner and jut my shoulders back, raising my chin so my posture exudes a confidence I don't feel. Everything in me wants to run, but as I get closer, I realize that might be the worst thing I could do.

Someone is watching me. I can just make out a shadow standing in the front room facing the street. No lights are on. The curtains are all drawn. But from this angle I can make out vehicles parked behind the house. Behind the vehicles is the swamp, and the sight of it makes me shudder. If Luke is perched on the neighboring roof, I can't see him, and if Silas is hidden somewhere in the overgrown piece of land next to the house, he's invisible too.

I clear my throat, preparing to project my voice as loudly as I can. "As-Salaam-Alaikum," I call out.

The shadow disappears. My hands are getting clammy, and my heart is pounding so violently I'm in danger of passing out. I keep moving closer, not quickly, but not slowly either. Giving them plenty of time to adjust to seeing me approaching.

Too many people in the neighborhood are at home for them to risk shooting me in the open like this, but once I'm inside...

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The curtain moves to one side, but it's impossible to tell who's behind it.

"I want to make a deal!" I shout.

I reach the gate, and I place my hand on the latch and push it open. The hinge groans loudly, echoing in the quiet street. I walk into the overgrown yard, my awareness heightened to every sensation, the humidity clinging to my skin, and the swampy stench seeping into my pores.

The front door opens, just a crack. An invitation to come inside.

I inhale. Exhale. Try to still the panic rising. This is it. The moment of reckoning.

As I wade through the ankle-high grass, a startling thought enters my mind.

If I die today, someone might actually care.

It's that thought that gives me the final burst of courage to push the door open and enter.

Seventeen

Mick

I stalk back into the front bedroom and wave Samantha's note in the air, interrupting their conversation. "She's gone, and she took my phone with her."

Caleb grimaces then turns his back. "...roger that. We'll check in again in two."

Jake and Adena freeze before sending me furtive glances. Oh, I get it. Nice. Real frickin' nice.

I screw the note up in my fist and toss it against the wall. "Youlether go?"

Adena is the first to admit it. "She gave us everything we needed to trace the account holder."

I shake my head, pressing my finger and thumb to the bridge of my nose. "They're going to shoot her."

Jake says, "Not if they want to know how she was able to track them down. She's bought us time, and if she gets inside we'll be able to see Brooke."

Caleb turns to face me, pulling the headphone away from his ear again. "This is precisely what she's good at. Deception and distraction."

Fury fires through my veins. "You people are unbelievable. I told her you were going to keep her safe—and you've thrown her into a snake pit."

Adena growls. "We didn't. She came up with this idea."

My jaw slackens. "Why? What did you threaten her with?"

Caleb frowns. "Nothing, man. She volunteered."

The floor seems to shift beneath me, the air too thin to breathe.

Volunteered?

That doesn't make sense. Why would she walk straight into danger like that?

I rake a hand through my hair, trying to get a grip, but the pieces aren't adding up. None of it fits. Unless?—

No. She wouldn't do it for me. Would she?

“She volunteered,” I echo, barely recognizing my own voice. “This is a suicide mission.”

Adena exchanges a look with Caleb. “She's wearing a camera, and she's giving your sister the best chance of survival. Thanks to her, we'll be able to find out who we're dealing with.”

Caleb nods. “And with the directional mic Adena placed, we'll hear what's happening.”

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I drag my hand over my face. “What if they search her?”

“They won’t find the camera. It’s in a button in her shirt.”

Jake’s face darkens. “Unless they have an RF detector. Then we might have?—”

Adena glares at him, and he raises his hands, pulling a face at his lack of tact.

“Go get the SIGINT kit,” she barks.

Jake’s face creases in annoyance, but he exits, muttering as he heads back to retrieve the high-end signal intelligence gear Hightower brought with them.

“She’s inside, and we’re receiving,” Caleb says.

I’m so focused on her—and desperate to see Brooke—that I nearly miss the seat beside Caleb, my eyes already fixed on the screen. Caleb removes his headphones and turns the volume up on the laptop. I lean closer, every fiber of my being tuning in to hearing what Samantha could have to say in a situation like this.

The video is coming in at an angle. All I can make out is an olive-green blur, but it’s apparent they’re patting her down when we hear her protests coming through the mic.

“I’m not armed,” she says.

The green blur steps back, not far enough away from her that I can see his face, but we all hear his voice.

“How did you find us?”

“I didn’t. The Coast Guardsman spotted the boat you’re using. He figured out you were headed to the Glades.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. I stole his phone and ditched him in Miami two hours ago.”

An audible slap makes me grip the seat of the chair.

“Here... check his phone. His boss keeps calling him. He’s probably returned to the base before he loses his job.”

A smattering of Arabic fills the air, letting us know there must be others in the room. My eyes dart to the text translation.

“Go check on the street again.”

They’re not stupid. They know full well this could be a setup.

Samantha curses. “I have information that can help you and your cause. I know how to get access to places you couldn’t dream of.”

Caleb tenses. “What is she doing?”

“What she does best,” Adena says. “Make men think she can give them everything they want.”

I shake my head. “Not with these maniacs. They wanted her dead.”

Jake isn't so sure. "If that was all they wanted her for, why not kill her the second she walked in the door?"

I eye Caleb, who shrugs his massive shoulders and gives me a pointed look. "We assumed they were shooting at her at the marina. Maybe they weren't."

I let out a grunt. "Why kill the owner of the yacht?"

Adena points at the screen. "Listen, and we might find out."

Frowning, I twist back to watch the scene on the screen unfolding. Whoever it was who slapped Samantha steps back, and for the first time we get a clear view of the layout of the room she's in.

She moves slightly, and the man's face comes into focus. Dark beard, a prominent nose, crooked teeth, and calculating eyes that are penetrating even through the glasses he wears. His face remains impassive as he speaks in a heavy accent. "There is nowhere we can't reach."

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Samantha holds her ground. “If that were true, you wouldn’t need people like me.”

A flickering of a cold smile appears on his face before he lunges at her. Samantha yelps, and the camera blurs again.

With no way of being able to see what is happening, I leap to my feet, pull my gun out, and make for the door. “This ends now. I never should have let this happen.”

Caleb grabs my arm, pushing me back. “You do that, you’ll all be dead before you reach the front door.”

I try to shake him off. “You shouldn’t have let her go.”

“Why? Because it doesn’t suit your agenda and your plan?”

“Because she’s going to get my sister killed.”

“You have to trust. God has been preparing her for this moment.”

“You’re serious? After all this, it comes down to a con artist?”

Caleb releases me, but his gaze holds me fast. “No. It all comes down to God’s providence.”

I shake my head. “Not for this. Not with Brooke’s life at stake.”

Adena steps in, putting herself between me and Caleb. “You’ve lost perspective.

Samantha isn't going to do or say anything to risk her life—or Brooke's."

As if backing her up, Jake chimes in, his phone in his hand. "Delilah's going through the information Samantha gave you. It looks like she really does have something she can give them. Something she can bargain with."

In frustration, I start to pace, my gun still in my hand. "Buthow?"

"Pipe down," Caleb says.

My eyes snap to him, and I hastily apologize and slide my weapon back into my holster before settling down on the chair again. In the seconds I tore my eyes off the screen, Samantha has moved. The angle is different, lower, and we get a good view of two heavily armed men in the room with her.

Adena speaks softly. "Caleb, are those XM7s?"

Caleb growls. "Yeah. American made. They were only rolled out last year. Think I just vomited in my mouth."

I groan. "Someone is supplying them with weapons our troops probably haven't even tried out yet?"

Jake says, "Delilah said she's looked at some of the info on the memory card. She thinks there's stuff about a weapons manufacturer. She needs more time to look at another encrypted file." His statement only adds to the gloom descending on the room.

Caleb glances at him before returning to the screen. "Has to be connected. Too big of a coincidence. They hire her then go to extreme lengths to locate her again."

A thought penetrates past everything else that's going on. Past the worry and doubt, past the scattered thoughts and fear, and crash lands heavily. She said as much, but I didn't want to believe her.

"You think Samantha gained access to top-level security information?" I say.

All eyes slide to me, and from the grim expressions, I know I have my answer.

On screen, Samantha clears her throat. "I want out of the country. Get me to Cuba, and I'll give you everything you need to gain entry to the US embassy there."

Nobody moves. The only sound in the room comes from the Arab who assaulted Samantha.

My eyes move to the screen, and I hold my breath as the translation appears.

"Put her with the other one. See if she's carrying it. If she isn't, find out where it is."

One of the men with the automatic rifles nods and wrenches Samantha to her feet, causing her to curse at them both. An order is given, and we get a good view of the carpet then a boot aimed at her middle as Samantha's viewpoint changes.

I close my eyes, praying feverishly, trying to calm the rage and frustration that's boiled up from knowing she's being assaulted and I'm sitting here watching it play out.

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Adena groans and frowns at Caleb. “We should have given it back to her.”

“We don’t know what’s on it yet,” he says.

I’m so out of sorts that it takes me a full five seconds to work out what “it” is. When I do, I almost wish I hadn’t.

The same terrorists who think it’s an honor to kill innocent Americans want the memory card.

Samantha’s low groaning and the sound of her feet being dragged along the floor make bile rise in my throat. How can I sit here and watch?

These men are savages. And there’s no telling what they’ll do when they realize she doesn’t have what they want.

Samantha

Fighting through the pain growing in intensity in my ribs, I let the thug who was responsible drag me down the hallway. He stinks of garlic, cigarettes, and stale sweat, but I hang on to him, slowing him down as much as possible so whoever is watching gets a better view.

When he shoves me away from him so violently that I smash into the wall, I bite my lip to keep from crying out. He opens a door and pushes me against another wall. My heart leaps in my chest as he starts patting my body down so roughly I know he’s doing it on purpose. When he reaches the parts that Mick avoided, I close my eyes

and try not to let him see how much it's hurting me when he squeezes and fondles areas he has no business touching.

I'm so mad, I speak without filtering myself. "Are we finished?"

He raises his hand, and I wince, clenching all my muscles to prepare for the strike.

"Think I heard someone calling you, Hamza," a voice says.

I look past him, and as my eyes adjust, a woman comes into focus. Brooke. On a mattress in the corner of the room, with her hands bound together and her back pressed against the wall. Given the glazed look on her face, she's just woken up. That explains the lack of movement.

Hamza sneers at her, but he leaves me be, closing the door and locking it behind him. The second he's gone, I turn to face her, hoping there's still enough light to activate the night vision so Mick and the others can also see.

"You know his name?" I ask her.

She gives me a wry smile. "I have a knack for getting information out of people." Her eyes pop wider as she looks me over. "What are you doing here?"

I ease onto the mattress, groaning as I try to find a position that will allow Mick to see her clearly but not aggravate my burning ribs. "Getting molested. I should have worn a burka," I say.

"I think you mean ahijab." She pauses then says, "So, you are a killer."

I shake my head, unsure of what to say to her. If there is any chance that they're listening to our conversation, I need to be very careful.

“I haven’t killed anyone. I’m just trying to stay alive right now. Same as you.”

She flicks her tongue over her split lip. “Mick said he found you.”

“He lost me again. He’s back in Miami. He’s in trouble with the Coast Guard.”

Her head rests against the wall. “Itoldhim not to get permission first. He’s such an idiot sometimes.”

Despite the pain I’m in, I cover a smile and look down at my hands. Outside, the rain has grown heavier and is pelting against the window pane, making it even darker. I wish I could ask her about Mick, but the risk outweighs the reward. It seems like such a redundant question, but I know it’s what Mick would want to know if he were here. “Are you injured?”

Brooke shakes her head and gestures to her swollen lip. “Just this when I talked back. Something I’d advise against doing.”

I smile at her. “What about food, water, bathroom breaks?”

She cocks her head, and her brow wrinkles slightly. “They’re treating me fine. But I think that could change if I don’t quit praying so loudly.”

She’s been praying? Wow. Okay.

She’s remarkably together for someone who’s been kidnapped.

“Why aren’t you... you know, afraid?”

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She laughs lightly. “Who says I’m not?”

I raise a shoulder and wince as pain shudders through my midsection. “Did they drug you?”

“Nope.”

The door opens before I get a chance to ask her anything else, and I shift my position so the camera picks everything up. The same man who let me in the house appears, and he doesn’t look happy.

“Where is the memory card you stole?” he says.

Cold dread leaks into my bones. The memory card was hidden. Locked up. No one knew where it was.

Did they?

I replay the moment I stashed it in the locker. Was someone watching? An attendant?

Was I followed?

I thought I was careful. I was careful.

But someone knew.

My skin prickles.

And if they found that... what else do they know?

“In a storage locker in Miami.”

He roars in anger and reaches for his gun.

I hold up my hand, stalling and hoping against hope Hightower is ready to move.

“But I sent all the information to the cloud in an encrypted file. Get me to a computer, and I can give it to you.”

His fist curls around the weapon, but he backs up and slams the door.

“What’s on the file?” Brooke asks.

I peer at her. How can she be so calm? “What’s it to you?”

She shuffles forward, an eager look on her face. “Whatever it is, they want it badly enough to risk kidnapping me in broad daylight to get it.”

Does she really think I’m going to tell her everything that’s on it? For all I know, they may have told her they’ll let her go if she gets me to talk.

I shrug. “I don’t know what’s on it,” I lie.

Her lips purse, and her eyes narrow. She’s not buying it. “Is it to do with the Coast Guard?”

I pull a face at her. “No.”

“Thought you said you didn’t know what was on it?”

I smirk at her, and she returns it. “If it’s not about the Coast Guard. Why target my brother?”

“I didn’t target anyone.”

But she’s not listening. She’s caught up in her thoughts, her finger tapping against her leg. “And now you’re trapped the same way he was.”

I’m scared and in pain, and I wasn’t prepared for Mick’s sister to attack me when I’m trying my best to help. “Yeah. What goes around comes around.”

Her expression shifts, and a little of the malice slips. “If you’re here, it’s because God wants you here.”

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My mouth twists to one side. Fabulous. Not only do I have to deal with an overly aggressive reception, I'm also being hit by this faith stuff from all sides.

"I'm here because I made a mistake. Pure and simple."

Her eyes drift around the room before landing on me. "You and me both. I should have started carrying the mace Mick asked me to."

The idea of Mick trying to protect her makes my stomach hurt even more. "It wouldn't have helped. If anything, it would have made it worse."

She glances at me then looks at the door. "I should be in Arizona by now. My source is going to think I bailed."

I cock my head in confusion. "Your source?"

She releases a breath. "I've got a whistleblower ready to talk."

"Which industry?"

Her gaze lands on me, and her lips twitch. "What's on the memory card?"

I snort a laugh, and she smiles in response before picking at a hole in her jeans. "We're probably not going to make it out of here. Pretty sure they're planning on blowing something up in Miami," she says.

I shiver as dread makes cold spill through my body. "So tell me then."

She opens her mouth, pauses, then heaves a sigh. “I can’t. I swore I wouldn’t tell a soul, and I’m not going to.”

“Even if you never get a chance to write the story?”

She sighs again. “It’s not just about the story. It’s about doing the right thing. Maybe you should consider doing that sometime?”

There’s the tiniest pitch to her question that makes me hesitate. “Like I said. I’m getting what I deserve.”

She doesn’t get a chance to reply. The door opens again, and the same thug who punched and kicked me fills the doorway. “Move,” he barks.

To avoid any further manhandling, I haul myself up, trying not to aggravate my injuries any further than they are.

“They won’t give you mercy,” Brooke whispers, “but God will.”

Mercy. The word scrapes something raw inside me.

No one’s ever shown me mercy. Not the system. Not the people who should’ve protected me.

No one... except Mick.

I stagger out—only to be yanked sideways into a dim kitchen with peeling walls and shadows that press in close.

A slender, solitary figure, dressed in an elegant pantsuit with a hijab covering her hair, is seated at the table. Her face is hidden until she looks up from the laptop in

front of her. Familiar cool green eyes meet mine.

I rear back, stunned, and try to turn but am blocked by the brute smirking at me. He grabs my shoulders, holding me in place.

She looks me over and then raises a sculptured eyebrow. “Darling, what are you wearing?” Mona says.

Eighteen

Samantha

The air is thick with the smell of garlic, old olive oil, and something sharper—pickled turnips maybe, or yogurt left too long in the heat. The sink overflows with dishes crusted in lentils and charred onion, while a single fly loops lazily around a sticky jar of tahini.

Apparently the terrorists have been too busy hunting me through Miami to worry about doing the dishes.

Gathering my composure, I sit opposite her. “You knew.”

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Amusement dances across her face. “Darling, I was the one who told you about the senator. Did you really think I was just giving him to you?”

I wince as I recall the night she called me and casually mentioned the conference. “You set me up. You knew he had the memory card.”

She pouts. “I told you not to trust me, but you didn’t listen. You were so desperate for a mommy. Poor little unwanted Samantha. Still so gullible.”

I smile sweetly, forcing my face to lean into it rather than show her how much her words still hurt. “I don’t know why I’m surprised, really. At your age, work is hard to find. You should be planning for your retirement.”

The smug smile slips from her face, and her nostrils flare. “Careful, darling, the only thing stopping these men from shooting you is my guarantee you have what they need to finish the job they started.”

Her eyes flick to the man behind me, widening as she puts on a show of fervor. “And what glory awaits. This will be the attack that changes everything. Allah willing, Sharia will reign.”

The man behind us replies in Arabic, and she offers him a pleased smile before turning back to me, her tone shifting. “I know you took it out of the fridge. Where did you put it after that?”

I blink, slowly. Buying everyone more time. The darker it gets outside, the easier it’ll be for them to approach without being seen. “You told me I brought this on myself,

but I didn't. You brought it on me. You recommended me." A horrible thought strikes me. "Did you choose Mick?"

She looks down her nose at me. "He was such an obvious target, darling. So arrogant and pathetically patriotic with that ridiculous tattoo on his arm."

My stomach muscles tense as fury starts to build in me. If there weren't an armed man behind us, I'd punch her. Instead, I lazily lift a shoulder.

"Where is it, Samantha?" she asks again.

This time, I'm ready for her. "You tell me. I sent it from Hawaii just like you asked me to."

Her eyes widen, and I catch a moment of panic as the man behind us shifts his weight. She laughs lightly, but there's a hefty element of fear in her eyes as she lowers her head, feigning reverence. "Don't be foolish. I don't have it."

I lean forward, knowing that every word I utter will confuse the situation even more. "Is this why you asked me to send it to your alternative address?"

Her eyes flick to Hamza, who rounds the table, uttering what I can only guess are Arabic obscenities at her. She shrinks back in her chair, angling her body away from him as though genuinely afraid. He jabs a finger at her, rattling something off before stalking out of the room.

The minute we're alone, she reaches across the table and grabs my shirt, yanking me toward her. "Tell them where the memory card is, or we are both going to die."

I grab her hands and dig my fingernails into her skin until she lets go. "What makes you think I'd do anything to save your life? You used me. Just like you've always

used me.”

She throws her hands up in the air. “You think if I hadn’t come along when I did that you wouldn’t have wound up somewhere worse? Your parents were ready to sell you to perverts for drug money! I did you a favor, and this is the thanks I get.”

I choke out a bitter laugh. “A favor? You robbed me of the last part of my innocence and stole my chance at a normal childhood.”

Her lips curl in a pitying smirk. “You’re pathetically soft and sentimental. You had so much potential. Don’t you get it? This is the con, the final one. I’ve been waiting all my life for a payout this big.”

I gesture around the grimy kitchen, smirking at her. “I can see why you’re right at home with the rest of the reptiles and snakes.” As fury builds on her face at my insults, I gesture to the fabric covering her head. “It covers the grey, but no amount of money is worth losing your soul.”

Thunder rumbles overhead just as Mona’s face twists into a mocking sneer. “My soul? Is that what that ridiculous Coast Guardsman told you? He wants you for your beautiful soul?”

Lightning flashes outside, lighting up the room as she cackles. I recoil, disgust twisting in my gut. There’s nothing left but revulsion for the woman I once thought loved me. She’s like a polished apple—shiny on the outside, but bite into it, and a worm’s already hollowed it out from the inside, leaving only a shell behind.

Too focused on the laptop in front of her, she’s oblivious to my disgust as she sits back down and spins the computer around so I can see a bank account in the Cayman Islands. “You see that number, darling? That’s what my soul is worth,” she hisses.

My gaze drops from her face to the savings account deposit—stacked with more zeros than I can process.

Her face brightens as she taps the screen. “Be smart. Fifty thousand is a drop in the bucket for organizations like these. Imagine what you could do with another fivemillion.”

The number spins through my head. I try it on like a new identity, just for a moment—five million.

I picture the things I could buy: a penthouse with thick curtains and unlisted keys. A burner phone that never rings. A new passport with a name I actually chose. Enough clothes to reinvent myself in every city from Barcelona to Bangkok.

I imagine a safety deposit box in Zurich. A studio in Prague. A bolt-hole in Morocco. The kind of life where no one’s tracking me, no one’s using me, and I never have to run again unless I want to.

Freedom. Power. A future.

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And all I'd have to do is bury the last piece of myself.

But at what cost?

I know exactly what's on that memory card. Selling it might mean the deaths of millions of innocent Americans. People like Mick. Like Brooke.

No amount of money could make up for that.

And no matter how many zeros were in my account, it would never be enough to fill the hole inside me.

A woman's voice floats down the hallway, catching us both off guard. For a moment I think Brooke's calling, but she isn't.

She's praying. Loudly.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

Heat rushes through my body. Footsteps clomp down the hall before someone bangs on the door, presumably to tell Brooke to be quiet.

Mona waves her hand in the air. “And that one. They should have taken the frumpy mother instead.”

I shift my hands under the table so she won't see my fists curl. I will not give her the

satisfaction.

The odor of garlic wafts toward me, followed by heavy footsteps, but it's not Hamza who's in the room, it's the man who's running the show. I angle my body upward, just in case, so his face is clear before he fixes his gaze on me. He slowly pulls out his handgun.

Opposite me, Mona jiggles in her seat. "Time's up. Hand it over, he kills the sister, and we're done here," she says.

No. No. No.

His eyes lock onto mine before the gun swings toward my chest. "I do not have patience for this."

My mouth is so dry I couldn't speak even if I wanted to. Once again, through the door, Brooke's voice wafts down the hallway, except this time, she's not praying, she's singing.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now I'm found.

Was blind, but now I see.

"I can't," I say quietly. "I can't do that to Mick."

Seemingly oblivious to the man holding a gun on me, Mona scoffs. "Oh, darling. He doesn't care about you. A man like that can't love women like us."

Somehow, for whatever reason, Brooke continues to sing unfettered, and every word stirs something inside of me until I'm struggling to breathe.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear

And grace my fears relieved

How precious did that grace appear

The hour I first believed

Tears fill my eyes, and I don't bother to hide them from her. What's the point? I'm going to die anyway.

I straighten my back. "Maybe not, but God does. He sent His Son to pay for all my sins."

Mona's whole body jerks, and the mask drops. The face I once thought was the most beautiful I'd ever seen contorts into a sneer as she shoots to her feet and points at the door. "Will you do something to shut her up!" she snaps.

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The man's face darkens, his eyes blazing. "You dare speak to me like that?"

She doesn't get a chance to backtrack.

He raises the gun to her head—and pulls the trigger.

Nineteen

Mick

Do. Not. Panic.

Brooke is alive. You just saw her. Samantha is too.

For now.

The words circle like vultures in my skull, slamming again and again as I watch in horror. The woman Adena confirmed as Mona drops in a heap, blood spattering the table and laptop.

Samantha doesn't flinch. Doesn't speak. Just stands there—motionless.

"Mona forgot who she was dealing with," Caleb mutters. "Muslim extremist with a superiority complex? No way he'd take orders from an infidel woman."

My heart hammers. Sweat beads down my face, and my T-shirt sticks to my back. The room is coiled tight with readiness. The van is packed. We've rehearsed the plan

four times.

I know my position. I know what's expected. But the adrenaline's making me pace.

Delilah ran facial recognition from the photo Adena sent—confirmed it. The man in the room is Amer El-Maati.

A name that shouldn't be real. A ghost. If he's here—really here—this isn't just about Brooke and Samantha anymore. It's bigger. Much bigger.

Now, he leans over Mona's laptop, calm as anything, retrieving the money he must've paid her—wiping her out like it's just another transaction.

Behind us, Adena groans. "Delilah opened the file. She and Zack read some of it. It's bad. Really bad."

As much as I want to know what's on that memory card, I can't take my eyes off the screen. Samantha is still upright. Barely.

"We have to get in there," I grind out. "He's going to kill her too."

Caleb lifts a hand—calm. Infuriating. "Not yet. Move too soon and they shoot Samantha and Brooke."

"What's on the file?" Jake asks.

I barely listen, eyes locked on Samantha, trying to gauge how much longer she can hold it together.

But what she says next punches the air from my lungs.

“You should have killed her earlier. We could have saved a lot of time.”

What the?—?

His expression darkens. He slaps her—hard—driving her into the wall.

“Where is it?” he snarls.

Too much, too fast. My head spins. How much more can she take?

“No wonder they want it,” Adena mutters. “The damage they could do with that amount of info would be catastrophic.”

I whip around, confused.

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She sees it in my face. “OPM’s been breached. The senator used Mona to find buyers.”

“What’s OPM?” Jake asks.

Caleb, still watching the screen and coordinating with the team, answers. “Office of Personnel Management.”

My thoughts align in an instant. “How bad is bad?”

Adena exhales. “Twenty-two million records compromised.”

Jake looks baffled. I’m cold with dread.

“What’s the big deal?” Jake presses.

“The big deal,” Caleb says, “is OPM stores sensitive data on government employees.”

“Not just employees,” Adena says. “Their families. Anyone vetted for a background check. Names. Addresses. Birth dates. Socials. All of it.”

Caleb scrubs a hand down his face. “If that card falls into the wrong hands, they can find and target the families of high-level officials. Kidnapping. Blackmail. Worse.”

The room goes still.

“If she gives them that memory card...” Adena starts.

But I’m already gone.

Samantha

He grabs me and slams me against the wall so hard my vision sparks.

“You ask questions you should not,” he says, his voice quiet, accented, each word deliberate. “So let me give you one answer.”

His hand clamps around my jaw, forcing me to meet his eyes—cold, pitiless.

“I am El-Maati,” he murmurs. “And you... are out of time.”

His hand closes around my throat, and he squeezes. “Access the file.”

Stars explode behind my eyes as his grip crushes my windpipe, cutting off every breath. I let out a strangled whimper, and he loosens his hold—just enough for me to speak.

“She played you,” I rasp. “And you fell for it. There is no memory card.”

His face turns crimson before he grabs me around the throat again and smashes my head into the wall. My legs sag, my limbs useless as tears fill my eyes, blurring the rage on his face.

This is it. This is the end. He’s going to kill me. Slowly, probably.

I’m going to eternal punishment, and I’m not ready to face God.

Voices blur in my head—Adena, Brooke, Mick—all tangled and jarring. My chest tightens, breath caught somewhere I can't reach. I squeeze my eyes shut.

And I pray.

God, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Mick's right, I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I did it anyway. I'm not worthy, I never was.

A whisper of a thought cuts into the pain tearing through my body. But it's not the ugly voice I've known all my life telling me I'm worthless and deserve to die.

It's calm, peaceful, and fills me with hope.

You are worthy, little one.

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Lightning flashes outside, and thunder follows so loud that the window pane rattles. In the midst of the pain, I close my eyes and silently pray to a God I thought had long abandoned me.

God, I'm not one of yours, but I'd like to be if you'd give me another chance.

I open my eyes, anticipating seeing the grimy kitchen, but everything is still encased in darkness. The only light is coming from the laptop.

Shouts echo from deeper inside the house. Everything happens at once. El-Maati shouts back in Arabic and loosens his grip.

I drop my shoulder and slam into him, shoving with everything I've got. He stumbles but grabs a fistful of my hair, yanking me off balance. Pain explodes at my scalp as I twist, throwing my weight against him. We hit the floor hard.

He curses, scrabbling for control, but I'm already crawling, slipping through blood—Mona's blood—slick and warm beneath my palms. The back door's ahead. I lunge for it.

My fingers fumble at the handle, too slippery to grip. I wipe them on my shirt and try again—twist, shove. The door groans open under my weight, and I spill out into the night.

Rain slams into me, cold and punishing. I stagger down the steps, vision swimming, lungs heaving for air.

The street's just ahead—freedom and backup within reach.

But I don't make it.

A hand clamps down on my arm, yanking me back with brutal force.

I scream and thrash, but it's too late. The stench of garlic and sweat hits me like a wall, and Hamza's voice rasps hot in my ear.

“I will make you talk. And I will enjoy it.”

Mick

Sprinting full tilt, I cross the street, Caleb tight on my flank. Jake swings the van into position just as I hit the grass, diving for cover a heartbeat before lightning splits the sky.

The decoy's right on cue—Verity and Reese's rental barrels down the street, engine roaring as it swerves toward the van. That was the plan: Verity draws eyes to the front, sows confusion, Delilah kills the power, and the rest of us move in.

Static charges the air. Rain slicks my skin. Even with goggles, the grass could be hiding anything.

Caleb skids in beside me, eyes locked on the side window. Brooke's inside. I see her silhouette—she's by the door, wrists bound but still standing.

I tap my side pocket. Glass cutter's there. We're seconds from breach.

A woman's scream punches the air.

Not Brooke.

The scream came from outside.

Confused, I jerk my head toward the sound, heart lurching.

Before I can move, Caleb grabs my shoulder—two fingers, sharp and quick. Military hand signal. Check it out.

He doesn't have to say a word. He's staying here. He'll get Brooke out.

I have to go.

Even if every instinct screams to stay.

I shift low and break left, pulse pounding in my ears like war drums.

Through the rain, I spot movement at the side of the house.

Samantha.

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The same man who assaulted her earlier has his fist knotted in her hair, dragging her back across the porch. She barely made it down the steps.

So close.

If she'd made it into the open, Luke would've taken him out.

But she's still under the porch overhang—too close to the structure. From the roof, Luke has no visual.

He doesn't even know she's out here.

She struggles—kicking, twisting, trying to break free—but he yanks her upright and throws her down. She lands hard, skidding across the slick grass, arms raised to shield herself.

His boot lifts.

Fury turns my veins to ice, and I step out from cover—just as lightning rips across the sky.

The flash overloads my goggles. Vision flares white, and I blink hard—too late.

Across the clearing, the man jerks upright. His posture shifts—locked on.

He's seen me.

“Look out!” Samantha shouts.

He raises a pistol.

The shot cracks.

Air snaps past my ear.

I drop, slam into the mud. It erupts beneath me—slick and foul, stinking of rot. My goggles twist from the impact. I rip them off, blink against grit and rain, heart hammering.

Everything’s a blur—shapes and movement bleeding together.

But one figure’s closer than the rest—too close.

My shoulder drives into his chest, full force. We slam to the ground in a brutal tangle, limbs slipping in the mud. He grunts—sharp and surprised—as we hit, rolling hard. Something cracks. Maybe a rib. Maybe a root.

I swing.

Once. My fist smashes into his jaw, bone against bone.

Twice. Blood sprays, blending with the rain.

Third time—his body goes slack beneath me.

But I don’t stop.

Not after what he did to Samantha. Like he enjoyed it.

I keep swinging until he stops twitching. Until the only sound left is the rain and the rasp of my breath.

By the time I stagger back, his face is a ruin of blood and sludge. My hands are trembling. My pulse roars in my ears like surf in a cave.

He's not getting up again.

Above me, Luke opens fire—his first clear shots, tight and deliberate, cracking through the storm like nails through tin. I spin toward the sound just as lightning flashes again, splitting the sky wide open in a blaze of white.

Samantha—staggering near the waterline, wild-eyed, backing away from El-Maati.

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He yells something in Arabic, gun in his hand as he gestures hard toward the airboat.

She shakes her head, slips—arms flailing—and hits the slick rocks. For a second, she scrambles, trying to find her footing.

Then she falls sideways into the water. Not deep—just enough to vanish into shadow.

El-Maati swears and vaults onto the airboat, one hand gripping the motor housing as he scans the surface.

Luke's rifle fires again—not at him.

Past him. “Contact in the water—right behind her!” he yells.

My blood turns to ice.

Two flat, unblinking eyes break the surface—gliding, steady, locked on a flailing Samantha.

“Cover me!” I yell back at him.

Behind me, gunfire erupts—tight bursts from inside the house. Silas and Reese are clearing room by room, pressing forward.

I sprint toward the water.

Mud grabs at my boots, sucking and pulling with every step. The rain is blinding

now, pelting sideways in sharp, stinging sheets. Branches whip at my arms. The cold sinks into my bones.

I hit the water at a run.

It's worse than I expect. Freezing. Thick. Alive. Something brushes my leg, rough and slick. I kick it off and push forward. There's no bottom—just the shifting, sucking drag of swamp beneath me.

Samantha's up ahead, thrashing wildly. Her arms slap the water. She's screaming, gasping, slowing herself with every movement.

“Don't fight!” I shout, swallowing water. “Float!”

She doesn't hear me. She's going under.

I reach her. My hand clamps around her arm. Her skin is slick, cold, trembling.

She turns and strikes out—panicked—her elbow catching my jaw, teeth clacking hard enough to sting.

“It's me!” I yell again, voice hoarse.

She freezes.

Then she clings—arms locked around my neck, nails digging in, breath shuddering against my ear. I hold her tight, turning her away from whatever's behind us.

Luke's rifle cracks again—sharp and steady.

Up ahead, the airboat veers and slams into the far bank with a metallic

roar—fiberglass grinding against mud and brush.

A shot cracks. El-Maati's silhouette jolts—then crumples in the spill of lightning.

I don't stop to check.

Samantha's shaking in my arms, too weak to swim, too terrified to let go.
Something's still in the water with us. I feel it. Hear it.

I kick.

Hard.

Every stroke is a prayer. My legs burn. My shoulder screams. Rain fills my ears, my mouth, my eyes.

My boot hits sand.

I haul her up the bank, dragging her over roots and soaked grass, past thorny brush that rips at our clothes. Her breathing is shallow, erratic. She's coughing now—gut-deep, wet.

Shaking.

But alive.

I drop beside her, chest on fire, every inch of me soaked and raw. Adrenaline still courses through my blood, but it's starting to burn out. I lean over her, bracing myself on one arm.

A flash of lightning rips across the sky. For one brief second, I see him—El-Maati sprawled beside the wrecked airboat, a dark pool blooming beneath his head. He's not moving. Not breathing.

Behind us, the porch light flares to life, casting a pale yellow glow over the mud and scattered leaves.

Caleb steps into view, a shadow in the porch light, moving like he's still mid-op—quiet, precise, all muscle and intent. Brooke's beside him, wrists still tied, but upright and steady.

He's already cutting her free with the blade in his hand, holding her firm with the other.

Relief slams into me—so fierce it nearly folds me. She’s alive. My sister. The one I dragged into this.

Caleb warned me not to involve her. Told me to leave her out of it. She should’ve been safe in Arizona, not here—bleeding and bruised because I didn’t listen.

I blink hard, jaw clenched, gut twisting with guilt—and gratitude that Hightower got involved when they did.

The glow from the porch spills across the mud, casting just enough light to see Samantha’s face. Her lips are parted like she’s trying to speak but can’t.

I slide a hand beneath her head and lift her gently into my arms. Her hair is plastered to her scalp, skin clammy, soaked to the bone.

“It’s okay,” I murmur. My voice breaks around the words. “They can’t hurt you now.”

Her fingers fist in my shirt, holding on like she’ll drown if she lets go. “I... I can’t swim,” she chokes, voice ragged.

I press my lips to her forehead and close my eyes.

“I know, honey,” I whisper. “I know.”

Samantha

I know I’m fading in and out of consciousness when one minute I’m beside the water and the next I’m in the van again.

A vague sense of warmth surrounds me, but it slips away as I fight to stay awake. My

dreams are fevered—nightmarish scenarios of the kind that haven't haunted me since I was a child, dumped on a stranger's doorstep and left to fend for myself in a world I didn't understand with people I didn't like.

I open my eyes, and pain shoots through my abdomen. Someone murmurs in my ear, soothing, kind, but unknown. "You passed out. I think you have bruised ribs," it says.

I open my eyes enough to find Mick's arms gently encircling my shoulders as if he wants to hug me but can't. His face is half covered in greasy streaks of green and black, and his clothing is still damp. His eyes are closed, his chin is down, and his lips are moving as if he's talking to someone. A smile curls at my lips. He is. He's talking to God. Praying for me, maybe.

I close my eyes and let my body relax and slip under once more.

Sometime later, vibrations rouse me, and I snap to wakefulness, my body too warm as I wriggle out from under a thick blanket someone has placed over me. I blink, looking around, trying to make out where I am and who is with me.

A plane. I'm on a private plane. I raise a hand and rub the sleep from my eyes. Mick is asleep beside me, snoring lightly. Jake, Silas, and Luke are all absent, but Adena is sitting in a seat, earbuds in her ears and her eyes closed.

While the rest of the plane is relatively quiet, Caleb and Brooke are having a low disagreement directly opposite me. From the way she's frowning at him and shaking her head, they must have been having it for a while. I try to listen in and catch some of their conversation.

"...said I was sorry," Brooke mutters.

Caleb doesn't look at her. "Wasn't about the apology."

She crosses her arms. “Then what was it about?”

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“Tension was maxed out, sweetheart. Next time, don’t make it so hard to save you.”

Brooke sighs and turns away, shutting the door on the conversation—maybe for good.

I shift, about to thank her for the risk she took—for the prayer, the singing—but movement beside me steals the moment. Mick is awake. He laces his fingers through mine, and I notice the bruises and torn skin across his knuckles—proof of the punishment he doled out on Hamza.

“The FBI wants to talk to you about the memory card,” he says quietly. “You think you’re up to that?”

My throat’s still raw, but I manage a swallow. “Where are you going to be?”

He leans in, his voice warm and steady. “Right beside you.”

“We all will be,” Caleb adds. “Silas isn’t going to leave you hanging in the breeze.”

I turn and find Caleb watching me. He dips his head and tips an invisible hat.

Brooke leans forward and waves dramatically, a grin tugging at her mouth. “The FBI’s probably going to offer you a huge reward. Maybe even a full pardon. You’re a bona fide heroine.”

I can’t return her smile. I drop my gaze to my fingers wrapped in Mick’s. Tears gather, blurring my vision as I shake my head. “I don’t want anything the government

can give me.”

Mick leans closer, his lips brushing my ear. “Then what do you want as a reward?”

I turn, my chest tight, emotions tangled. It takes a moment to find the words. “Redemption,” I whisper.

Mick

The wheels touch down, and I have little time to consider whether I’ve made another promise I can’t keep. My concerns are dispelled as we exit the small jet Reese was piloting with Verity as his copilot.

Verity flashes me a smile as Adena offers to help Samantha off the plane. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this.”

I chuckle and extend my hand to Reese as he leaves the cockpit. “Nice to fly with you again, Captain.”

Reese pumps my hand as he fights a smile. “Weren’t you supposed to be keeping a low profile?”

I wince as Caleb slaps a hand on my back. “Dundee was too busy fighting gators in the swamp,” he says.

Behind me, Brooke snorts. “Dundee?”

Caleb grins, way too pleased with himself. “Crocodile Dundee.”

I shake my head. “That movie’s older than half your crew.”

His grin widens. “Yeah, I know. Axel’s stuck in the eighties. Guess it’s rubbing off.”

My gaze flicks from him to Brooke, then to Reese and Verity. “Aren’t we keeping the FBI waiting?” I ask Caleb, trying to steer us back to the point.

He shrugs his massive shoulders. “Delilah has info, and she wants to share it before she gives anything to the government.”

Brooke casts a look at me and steps closer for a brief moment, her hand brushing my arm. Her eyes search mine—determined, composed, like the rush of danger didn’t faze her one bit. She’s tired, sure, but steady. Maybe too steady. “I’ll go see if Adena needs help. She said a nurse would be waiting.”

I nod my thanks and follow her lead, hurrying down the stairs, hoping this won’t take long—I need to get back to Samantha and check in at the base. I hadn’t thought beyond getting her out safely, but thankfully, Silas found my phone. It’s back in my pocket, digging into my thigh. The battery died hours ago, which is probably for the best. I can only imagine how many calls and texts are waiting.

Caleb plugs in a laptop, balancing it on an old oil drum, and boots it up. I lean in. On the screen is a girl in a purple dress with a lace collar, her copper-streaked hair piled into a messy bun under a gaming headset. She takes a long sip from an energy drink. Gotta be the hacker—the one Hightower keeps behind the curtain.

When she notices Caleb, she sits up straighter and waves. “You guys were awesome. I’ve made Zack watch it twice now.”

Caleb frowns but shakes his head as if this is a regular thing for her. “Glad you enjoyed the show, Delilah, but we don’t do this for your entertainment.”

Her face falls, and she fidgets on her seat. “I know. I know. I just... One of these days,

I'd like to be out in the action."

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Caleb's frown grows even more before he yawns. "Be careful what you wish for. You just might get it."

Her mouth twists, and she pouts. "You're right. I'll leave the action to you guys. Speaking of, Silas wants me to fill you all in before I send this off to the FBI." Her eyes scan the faces peering back at her, and she pulls a face. "Yikes. You all looked better in night-vision green."

Caleb snorts. "We'll wash the war paint off later. What did you want to tell us?"

She taps away, looking down at her screen before answering. "The data breach was bigger than I first thought. It wasn't just one. There were two separate, but linked, attacks. What's really bad is that the attackers were employees of WayBridge Government Solutions, a subcontracting company."

A document flashes up on screen, and we all shift closer to examine it. "It's a shell corporation. It doesn't exist. But—and this is the kicker—it ties back to an American-owned company, and our nasty senator is a whopping great big stakeholder."

That explains where they got the American weapons from. I'm sick to my stomach. Every single person who risked their lives today must be feeling the same level of betrayal I am.

Caleb's phone rings, and he glances at it before answering me. "I'm not comfortable with handing Samantha over. She's injured, and we need to get Ben involved."

"Ben?"

He holds up a finger and presses the phone to his ear. “Where are you?”

Reese answers my question while Caleb steps away. “Ben Harrison. Hightower’s lawyer.”

I give him a nod of thanks and make small talk, all the while trying to keep one eye on the room Brooke disappeared into and one on the phone call Caleb is having.

Finally, he nods, shoulders sagging slightly. His gaze tracks the direction Brooke and Adena took Samantha, and he lets out a long sigh. “Done.” His eyes shift to Reese. “How soon can you get us in the air again?”

Reese steps toward the exit. “We can be wheels up in twenty. Fifteen if Verity helps me.”

I look at Caleb as concern starts to gather in my midsection. Last I heard, Samantha would receive medical treatment and we’d head straight to the local FBI field office. Something has changed, and I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.

“You think jerking the FBI around is a smart move?” I say to Caleb.

His eyes zero in on me, and there’s a glimmer in them I’m not sure I want to question. “At Hightower, we do it God’s way, or we don’t do it at all,” he says.

Samantha

It feels like déjà vu as I hobble into the room and find Alice—the same nurse who treated me earlier—waiting for me. To preserve what’s left of my dignity, she’s set up a privacy screen and laid out a cot with a clean gown.

I’m too sore and exhausted to protest, so I nod when Verity offers to help.

Like before, Alice moves with calm efficiency, directing Verity to ease me out of my soaking clothes and assist as she examines my injuries. Verity offers quiet smiles and winces while the nurse wipes away blood and has me lie down to check my abdomen. I dig my nails into my palms, bracing against the pain—afraid if I cry out, Mick will come rushing in.

Not that I'd mind seeing his face.

I'm wrecked—physically and emotionally. And the more time I spend around these women, the more confused I feel.

Adena is talking to Brooke on the other side of the room, checking if she's okay. I try to follow their voices while Verity hovers nearby, her face drawn with concern. Alice shakes her head and murmurs to Verity, "Are they all dead?"

I blink, thinking I must've misheard.

"Mick left one alive for the FBI," Verity replies quietly. "The other three are dead."

There were two others? I never even saw them.

Alice shudders. "Thank the Lord you got to them in time."

She glances at me and gives a soft smile. "God sent His angels with you for your first operation."

I don't argue. I don't understand it, but for the first time in my life, I want it to be true. God is the only thing that makes sense. Two days ago, nothing—absolutely nothing—could've made me risk my life for anyone. Especially not strangers.

My throat tightens, and it's not from being half-strangled. "What's happening to

me?”

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Verity gently pats my shoulder—one of the few places not bruised. “God’s called you into His service, Samantha. And He’s not letting you go.”

Alice nods, and Adena’s voice drifts in from the other side of the screen. “Amen. And neither are we. As soon as we’re done here, we’re heading back to Jericho.”

Jericho?

I glance at Verity, confused. “What about the FBI? Mick said they’re waiting.”

Verity wrinkles her nose. “Well... Mick’s a great guy, but he’s not Hightower.”

Adena chuckles. “We can’t tell him all our secrets.”

Still baffled, I try to sit up. Alice helps me. “Secrets like what?”

Verity slides her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, lifting one brow. “Even if the FBI pardons you, you still know people who could make things... difficult.”

I rub my temple, trying to think, but the headache’s winning. “I know.”

Alice voices the question I haven’t said aloud, turning to Verity. “So what are you going to do to keep Samantha safe?”

Adena appears, exchanging a look with Verity. “That’s where Brooke comes in.”

Brooke peeks around the curtain, grinning as she touches her split lip with a wince.

“I’m going to write your obituary.”

Epilogue

Mick

Two weeks later...

I stare at the red phone on my couch and can’t believe Hightower managed to get into my apartment again.

I need a better security system. I was only gone for thirty minutes.

Frustrating as it is, I’m desperate for news of Samantha, and if this is how Silas Hightower is going to communicate, so be it. I snatch up the phone and read the message on screen, smiling when I see who sent it.

Delilah.

It’s all the confirmation I need, so I tap out a reply, add an emoji to it, then stalk around my apartment, wishing I’d thought to check in with Brooke again. She’s been way too blasé about what happened, and I’m a little concerned it’s an act she’s keeping up for my benefit.

Brooke will have to wait. I need advice—no judgment, no questions—and there’s only one person I trust to give it straight. I check the battery on my phone, glance at my watch, then hit call.

Dad’s always been an early riser, and since Brooke and I moved out, he’s kept to the same schedule even though he’s retired. He picks the phone up on the second ring, and emotion tugs at me when I note the concern in his voice. “Ahoy, all okay? Limbs

attached? Nothing bleeding?”

I smile at his greeting. “Ahoy to you. All’s well. I just need to pick your brain about a few things.”

He chuckles. “I’ll start the meter running. You can pay me when I see you at church.”

My father is as subtle as Silas Hightower is. They’d probably get along great.

“Where are you anyway?” he asks. “Brooke said you’re taking some time off, but now she’s disappeared too.”

Normally that wouldn’t be an issue. If she’s working a story, she’s been known to go to ground, and it’s days, sometimes weeks, before we hear from her. But it’s brainless to do so without stopping to consider she could have lost her life.

“I’m hanging with some... new friends.”

“Ah. Thought you two were conspiring. Is she working on a hot story again?”

I shrug, even though he can’t see me. I get he’s thinking about Brooke, but I don’t have a lot of time before I have to leave for my judicial hearing. “She is. So, listen, I have a couple hard questions to ask you. You got time to answer?”

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“Always, son. Let me have it.”

I take a breath and lay it on him. “I met someone, but she’s... not exactly the kind of girl you and Mom would have chosen for me.”

Dad exhales, the sound crackling faintly over the line. “How so?”

I shift the phone to my other ear, heart thudding like it’s trying to punch through my ribs. “She made some bad choices. Did some dumb things...”

A pause. “Right. How bad are these choices and these dumb things?”

I drag a hand down my face. “Bad. Really bad.”

“Did she murder someone?”

“No.”

A beat of silence. I can picture his brow raised, that skeptical half-frown I’ve seen a hundred times. “Hmmm. She conspire to murder someone?”

“It’s not that kind of bad.”

“Well, there is nothing that God won’t forgive. If she’s repentant, that’s all that matters.”

I run my hand over my face. “Yeah, I know, but... look, I need you to just be open-

minded. I'm not making excuses for her, but she didn't have it as good as me and Brooke did."

"What are you trying to tell me, son?"

"She was accidentally involved in the terror attack."

Silence.

"Dad? You still there?"

"I'm here. I'm just trying to figure out if you're yanking my chain."

"I'm not. She's the woman I was trying to find when I went on TV."

"Son, I'm not sure what you're trying to say."

"I'm trying to say..." I close my eyes. "I want you and Mom to meet her. Brooke already has."

"Brooke has met the woman who nearly got you killed?"

I kick the couch. I should have done this face-to-face and with my sister to back me up.

Another indication I'm not thinking clearly. Being apart from Samantha is ten times worse than being with her. "She wants to apologize to you both for the part she played."

"Son, the way you painted her, she needs to be serving a life sentence. Are you telling me you've not only forgiven her, but you're in love with her?"

That stops me in my tracks. I never said anything about being in love with her.

“Uh, I, it’s...” I say.

He chuckles. “Well, I’ll be. You really have fallen for this woman. I’m happy for you, son. Surprised at your choice, but happy.”

I’m so relieved my voice hitches. “Really?”

“Course I am. But between you and me, you made the right call letting me know first. It’ll give me time to warm your mother up before you bring her here.”

“I’ll swing by as soon as everything is... worked out.”

“Looking forward to it, son.”

I end the call, feeling more optimistic that Samantha will be welcomed into our family.

But while my dad might be handling this news okay, my mom will be a whole different ball game.

Samantha

If Silas Hightower wanted to intimidate me, it's working. This is the first time I've been called to his office, and I hope it never happens again. He's got that look—calm, unreadable—and suddenly I'm seven years old again, bracing for the news that another family's changed their mind.

My throat tightens, but I school my face into neutrality, the way I've done a thousand times before. No tells. No cracks.

But Silas just watches.

His gaze is sharp, cutting through the silence. I shift my weight, subtly, barely—but his eyes flick down, catch it. He sees the way my jaw tenses, the way my fingers curl in on themselves before I flatten them on my thighs.

I look away, pretending interest in a painting I'd already memorized.

Too late.

He leans forward slightly, like he's just confirmed something. "You don't have to hide here."

My spine stiffens.

"Which brings me to why I called you in," he says.

I hold his gaze, willing myself not to blink. "Have they decided what to do with me?"

My eyes shift from his chest to his face, trying to read him. He's maddeningly unreadable—same as Luke. I don't know who trained whom, but I want to crack that code.

"They have. The FBI's Joint Task Force approved you to serve out your community service with Hightower," he says.

I blink. "I can... stay?"

He nods once.

A slow breath slips out of me, shaky with disbelief. I glance down at the uniform that's somehow become familiar—khaki pants, lace-up boots, a black tee under the Hightower hoodie. The cross and shield emblem rests just over my heart. It still gets me—that this place, this crew, built their motto around Psalm 82:3.

Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.
Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

"For how long?" I ask, my voice lower now.

This time, something shifts in his face. He lets the mask fall and gives me a real

smile. “Indefinitely.”

Air catches in my throat. I’d braced for a year. Maybe two. A chance to prove myself.

But this...

“Your lawyer must be top-drawer,” I say.

He chuckles, and then he reaches into his actual top drawer, his expression serious once more as he pulls out a leather-bound book and pushes it toward me.

It’s a Bible.

“Ben is an exceptional litigator, but like everyone around here, he’s not much use if the Spirit doesn’t lead him. This is yours. So you don’t have to use the guest edition.”

With a smile, I accept his gift, and when he prompts me, I open it and study the line of scripture he’s written inside the cover.

You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book. Psalm 56:8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:10 am

I swallow, emotions bubbling up again just when I thought I had a rein on them. I amnotgoing to cry in front of him. I've been an emotional wreck since I got here. Crying almost every night, the more scripture I read.

Has Silas heard me? I thought I was quiet, trying to do my crying mostly in the shower, but the man barely sleeps. Maybe he did hear me once or twice?

Regardless of whether he did, the idea that God has counted every single one of my tears is almost unbearable. It takes me nearly ten seconds to regain composure, and when I look up, Silas is watching my reaction closely.

“You ready to sign the NDA?” he says.

I nod, still overwhelmed that I'm so readily officially joining an organization that I don't fully understand.

When he slides the document toward me, I scribble my signature on the bottom line, trusting that nothing else has been added since I read it over two nights ago, and lean back in my chair. I put the pen down and watch as he signs below my name. “What happens now?” I ask.

He smiles and twists to hand me a file that was perched on the filing cabinet behind him. “You get to work. This came across my desk a few weeks ago, but I didn't have anyone available. Take it with you, read it tonight, and get back to me with your thoughts in the morning.”

I start to open the file, but he stops me by raising his hand. “Enough work for today.

Verity's back, and since you're now well enough to move in, the ladies are waiting to show you around the women's barracks."

Unease coils inside me at the idea of moving away from what has become familiar. I haven't spent much time with Adena since arriving, and I only caught a passing glimpse of Delilah on arrival.

With a grudging nod at Silas, I push up from the chair, take the file and my new Bible with me, and walk the hallway as my apprehension grows. The last time I lived with other girls, I was eight years old and forced to share a tiny bedroom with two sets of siblings in a drafty old house close to a railroad.

Then Mona claimed me, and I never had to share anything ever again.

I pass the kitchen, the gym, and various other unmarked rooms, and walk outside into the fresh mountain air, thinking about whether I can tell Mick about any of this. If I even get a chance to. I haven't been able to speak to him, and there's a part of me that is trying to prepare for him to reject me now that this is all over.

Confined to the main house in the ranch, I haven't had a reason to enter the women's barracks, so when I open the door, I'm pleasantly surprised to find a barn-style living area, small kitchen, and bedrooms, rather than the army-style barracks I'd imagined. There's a sofa and two recliners all positioned in front of a flat-screen TV with a lot of snacks loaded on the top of a coffee table. Verity and Delilah are sitting together on the couch, while Adena occupies one of the recliners.

As I stand on the threshold, Delilah is the first to spot me. Dressed in boots and a patchwork dress with her hair in braids, she reminds me of Pippi Longstocking. I'm taken aback when she leaps to her feet, almost running at me like the older sister of the little girl in the mall.

“I finally get to meet you!” She grabs my hand and yanks me toward the sofa, almost pushing me onto it. “We’ll show you your room at intermission.”

I place the Bible on the coffee table and set the confidential file on top, unwilling to be far from it. “Intermission from what?”

When no one answers, I swallow past the nerves as Adena passes me a giant bowl of buttered popcorn. “All new recruits who live on-site have to have an initiation.”

My muscles tighten as I consider what that could possibly mean. Over the last two weeks, I’ve been living like a hermit and all without any real time to take a breath and figure out who I’m supposed to be now. Unless I can purchase a property, I’m stuck here for the foreseeable future. If I don’t get along with any of these women and I’m forced into menial jobs, it’s going to be like reliving my childhood all over again.

Verity, who’s seated beside me, digs her hand into the bowl. “We heard on good authority that you have some gaps that need filling.”

From where she’s plonked herself and has started tearing into a bag of Skittles, Delilah grins. “So we summoned you here to force you to eat your body weight in junk food.”

Adena groans and picks up the remote. “That’s optional. Tonight’s viewing, however, isn’t.” She hands the remote to me and waggles her eyebrows. “Go ahead.”

I glance sidelong at Verity, who nods, then at Delilah, who gestures to the big-screen TV mounted above the fireplace. Slowly, and a little unsure of what I’m about to be shown, I reach out my hand and hit the triangle symbol.

The Beverly Hillbillies theme tune comes out of speakers placed around the room. My surprise only grows as Delilah presses a button on a remote and crocodile-shaped

balloons drift down from the rafters.

Adena hands me a phone, grinning widely. “This is your official Hightower burner. It’s tracked so we can find you. Always answer it. No matter what.”

Beside me, Verity nudges my foot, drawing my attention. In her hand is another phone. “And this is your personal phone. We don’t track it or monitor your messages. But don’t use it to contact Hightower members. We segregate for safety reasons. Mick’s number is programmed in, and he’s waiting for you to reply to the text message he’s sent.”

Stunned, I try to look at both phones and read Mick’s message as Delilah points at the file. “Oooh! Your first assignment. What is it?”

“Um... I haven’t looked yet,” I say.

Delilah pulls a face. “Please show us.”

I glance sidelong at Adena. “Am I allowed to?”

She nods. “Absolutely. And once your probation is over, we’d appreciate your assistance on cases we take on privately too.”

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“We’re a team. We help each other out,” Verity says gently.

Delilah drops her hands and grins. “More than that—we’re sisters.”

I’m still trying to wrap my head around how easily they’ve welcomed me when all three—Adena, Verity, and Delilah—suddenly leap to their feet, popcorn flying as party poppers explode in a burst of color.

“Welcome to Hightower, Samantha!” they shout together.

Mick

As I jump out of my truck, my feet hit the gravel, and I skid slightly in my haste to make up the time I’ve lost. I peer into the distance, squinting as the sun hits the lake surrounding the cemetery. Picking up my pace, I check the time. I’m five minutes late. Not off to a good start.

I can’t mess this up. Not when there is so much at stake.

With every step, I start to pray for guidance and for the right words that will get me the desired result. I don’t think I’ve ever spent so much time with my nose buried in my Bible as I have done these past few weeks. I’ve barely slept, nerves keeping me awake, until I gave up pretending that there was anything I could do.

My ego isn’t big enough to try to take on the entire defense force. All I have is Caleb’s and Silas’s word that they are going to do everything in their power, to do whatever it takes. That, and relinquishing the idea I had any control to begin with, has

allowed me to wait on the verdict and the answer that will send me in the direction God chooses.

Everything hinges on today's result, but strangely there's only one result that's dominating my mind.

My phone chirps in my pocket, and I yank it out. I pause, adjusting my sunglasses as I prepare for the worst news, then quickly read the message as I crest the small hill. When my eyes snag on three little words—"Non-Judicial Punishment"—I look up and send my praise skyward.

At least I won't have to have that conversation with my parents.

It gives me even more hope that I didn't make a mistake trusting Hightower. They might be unconventional, but whatever Silas Hightower and his father, Justus, did has saved my career. I tap out a message, thanking the bearer of good news, switch the phone to mute, and continue my trek toward the lakefront.

One down. One to go.

The sun beats down on me, making me wish I'd changed into something less formal than a suit and tie, but a promise is a promise, and if there is one promise I'm going to keep, it's to do this right. I adjust my tie, scan the waterfront, and know we made the right call when I spot the figure standing at the water's edge.

A smile curls at my lips as I take in the flowing ankle-length dress she's chosen to wear for the occasion. Her hair is shorter and darker, and at her feet is a simple plaque with her name and the day she was born and the day she would have died.

As I step up to her and take in the words carved there, my heart squeezes in my chest. This could have been for real. Instead, the media is reporting on Samantha's

innocence, branding her a mysterious heroine, and Mona's corpse has been buried in Samantha's stead.

"Sorry I'm late," I say.

Samantha turns, smiles, and pushes her sunglasses atop her head, a wisp of hair falling into her eyes. If possible, the haircut makes her look even more desirable.

I slip my fingers into hers and draw her closer, relishing the scent of her perfume. After a month apart, I don't know which question to ask her first. I settle on one. "How are things at Hightower?"

She looks down, taking her time to answer. "It's been intense... They work hard. Train hard. But it feels good."

I glance down at the plaque. "Glad you're making friends."

She smiles and lifts her head so the sunlight catches flecks of auburn in her hair. "I thought I'd feel trapped. But I feel... free."

Good to get confirmation. Silas said she was doing well and was spending every moment she could learning more about Christ and how she can best serve Him.

Stealing my chance, I slip my hand into my pocket.

My friends are going to say I'm nuts, and I'm going to be the butt of endless jokes when they learn Samantha is the woman I was chasing, but I'm way past the point of caring what people say or think about me.

It's about restoring honor and placing the glory where it belongs.

I release her hand so I can open the velvet box, my stomach twisting in knots as I gauge the reaction on her face.

She freezes. Her lips part, and she swallows hard. Her eyes go wide, breath hitching, like she's not sure what she's seeing. A flicker of panic crosses her face as I offer her my heart to go with the princess-cut diamond on a platinum band.

“Will you marry me?” I say.

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She blinks, once, then again, and shakes her head slightly—as if trying to clear it. “You don’t have to do that. I know you care, and I know God loves me despite what I’ve done. That’s enough.”

I frown, shaking my head. “It’s not enough for me. I love you, Sam. Don’t you want to be my wife?”

Her brow furrows. “I... thought. Adena said I needed to pick out a new last name. I assumed that’s why you came. So you could help.”

A surprised laugh escapes me. I can't believe she's gotten it so backward. “The help I’d like to give you is for you to be my fiancée. After we get married, you can take my surname.”

She stares at me, brow still creased, as if her brain is catching up. Then she blinks rapidly and takes a half-step back, her eyes scanning my face like she’s waiting for the punchline.

Trying again, I drop to one knee and look up at her. “I’d like to sign a legally binding contract telling everyone you belong to me and I belong to you.”

Her mouth opens slightly, her breath shallow. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

She shifts her weight. “Aren’t you worried that I might mess something up?”

I stand slowly. “No. I’m worried that I might.”

Her gaze holds mine for a long beat, searching, wary. She’s still catching up, still stunned, but her expression softens—just a little—as she studies me.

“I’m still on probation, you know.”

“So am I,” I say.

She looks down at her hands, flexing her fingers slowly, like she’s picturing the ring in place. I wait, barely breathing.

Then she lifts her chin, mouth twitching with a smile she tries to hide. “Will you teach me how to swim?”

I don’t miss a beat. “On our honeymoon.”

Her eyes spark, lips parting with a yes that doesn’t need words. I exhale, hands unsteady as I slide the ring onto her finger.

When her eyes mist, I pull her close and kiss her—like a man who finally understands:

God’s providence wasn’t a detour.

It was the plan.

THE END... or is it?