



Spring Break with a Pilot

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Category: Romance

Description: He lives for the chase. She's running for her life. But the real danger is only beginning.

Silk

I'm bored out of my mind in this quiet little town.

I thrive on the thrill of the chase whether it was the battlefield as a ranger or the high-profile cases we take on for private security.

Danger is my addiction. I'm always one step away from chaos. When I see a curvy brunette being dragged down a dark alley, I'm in without hesitation. But after saving her, the woman disappears without a trace, leaving only her broken phone behind.

The thugs' cryptic words echo in the alley as I let him run off. "The man she belongs to wants her back. Now you're a dead man."

With the phone in my pocket and a new obsession in sight, I realize the game is far bigger than a random mugging. A thrill of excitement washes over me and I grin in anticipation.

Melia

I'm desperate to escape the suffocating control of my father. I've played the role of dutiful daughter. But now he's arranged a marriage that would trap me for good. I made plans to escape but someone I trusted betrayed me.

When I again meet the stranger who saved me, I see an opportunity to break free. But it comes with risks. In a world where loyalty means death and trust is a dangerous game, can I out smart my father and his ruthless grasp? What of the enigmatic man who's become a willing part of my escape plan?

Too late I realize the stakes are higher than I could ever imagine and running could cost us both everything.

They call him Silk, because no woman has held him for longer than a night. Now the tables are turned and he's left behind.

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Rhys “Silk” Oliver

“You know you’re a pain in the ass, Silk. We came out tonight because you wanted to party, then you sat in the corner all night nursing your beer. What the hell is up with you?”

“And you’ve been so much better? What have you done?”

“My job. I’m your wingman. I’m here to scare the ones you aren’t interested in away until you find the appetizer for the night, and I get lost.”

“Yeah, well I’m not hungry tonight.”

“You haven’t been in quite a while,” Silo jabs. “What’s going on?”

Hell if I know. Nothing, no one, has lit my fire in a while. The waiter at the restaurant where we ate recommended the Mezcal Mariner for the ‘scenery’ and a really good time.

The bartender is snapping at our waitress and a couple others trying to get them to push the drinks. Not a laid-back sort of place where you savor the hors d’oeuvres before the main course.

There are a lot of beautiful women ready and willing to party and not a one intrigues me. Their attention feels forced, almost driven. The place just seems a little off to me.

“Take out gets old. I want a home cooked meal.”

“Yeah, I been thinking that Pax and Dax got it made. Seems they got their shit together, like there needs to be more to life...” He waves his bottle. “...than this. Things have been quiet lately at work. Not a lot going on. Easy jobs. I’m a little antsy. I still have days where adjusting to civilian duty is hard.”

I can relate to that.

Silo drains his beer. “Heading out. Watching your pouty face all night has made me tired. Gonna catch a few.”

He stands. “You’re taking me to Vegas for that assignment in the morning. You good with hitting it a little earlier?”

“Yeah.” I hold up my bottle. “I’ll finish this. Be ready at oh-four hundred hours.”

He nods, taps the table with his knuckles, and leaves.

Finishing my beer, I slip a generous tip under my bottle. None of the team are big drinkers, but the waitress put in her time and was sweet and attentive. I’d rather pay for less booze and give the girl who really needs the money the cash.

“Sir, you forgot your change.”

I glance at her name tag, then lean closer. “Share what’s on the table, Trish. The money under the bottle is just for you. Take care of yourself.”

“Thank you,” she whispers.

Shooting one last glance at the bartender before sliding my palms in my front pockets

I walk out. Strolling along the boardwalk to the end and the overlook railing, I watch the gentle waves rolling and let my mind wander.

Maybe Silo is right. Maybe it's just been too quiet. I need an adrenaline fix. I've always needed to move, be on the go, test my limits. The only time I can sit still is when I'm piloting something going fast. A plane at mach 3, speed boat, INDYCAR, motocross.

I've been called a danger junky. I disagree. I don't have a death wish. It's the challenge, the test of my mental and physical ability and coordination, and yeah, sometimes the speed. I need that little something that makes my heart race and my blood pump faster.

My watch vibrates a reminder of the hour. Lost in my own thoughts I didn't notice the sky turned dark, storm clouds are rolling in and the wind is picking up. There're only a couple other stragglers briskly leaving ahead of me.

Cutting through the alleys behind some of the shops and bars, I head toward my truck.

A couple shops ahead of me a woman darts out from a side alley. She gets about four feet and some guy comes up behind her and grabs her by her ponytail and yanks her against his chest and back to where they came from.

Oh hell no. Reaching the entrance, I see her struggling against the big guy.

"Stop fighting, bitch. He wants you. You're coming with me. Don't make this hard on both of us." Grabbing her arm, she tries to swing her metal water bottle at him, but he blocks it and it drops to the ground. She ducks and twists, kicking and stomping anything she can connect with. Something falls from her pocket and gets kicked out of the way.

“Stop fighting or I’ll make you sorry.”

She lifts her knee. He shifts at the last minute to protect his groin. Girl’s got spunk.

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The guy is so focused on staying out of her range while still holding on, he doesn't see me come up behind him. I put him in a choke hold.

The woman kicks out at me, aiming—and thank god—missing my jewels. “Hey, hey. I’m on your side.”

She gives me a hard look before taking off. Pausing briefly under the streetlight, she glances back. I get a decent look at her. That body, that hair, that face, I’ll find her. Just a matter of time.

I release her attacker and he drops to the ground cursing, coughing then struggling to his feet.

“You fucking idiot. You probably just got us both killed. He wants her back,” he rasps out as he hightails it the other direction.

The night just got a hell of a lot more interesting.

I grab her water bottle from the ground. Next to it lays a phone that I’m hoping is also hers. The corner’s busted and the glass shattered. I’m sure my buddy can work with this. He’s salvaged information off equipment with more damage.

Wide awake now, I head for the hanger. I can catch a nap there. I’ll have the plane prepped and ready for take-off when Silo shows up. The sooner we leave, the sooner I can get back and find the woman from the alley.

Maybe Love Beach has more to offer than I thought.

The flight to Vegas goes off without a hitch. Deisel's been staying with me, but now that he's got his sister's baby, he wants a house if possible. Man, did he step into a shit storm. Thankfully we got people on the ground in Vegas to help.

Not much going on for me so I said I'd start looking around to see what I can find for him. Hell, it will give me a good excuse to be driving around town looking for Alley Girl.

Sent the phone to I-Tee via courier before I left for Vegas. After waiting the mandatory hours to fly again, I just got back to Love Beach.

Knowing him, he started working on the phone the minute it was in his hand. I call on my way back to my apartment. "Did you get it? Do you have anything for me?"

"Yeah, I got some info off the phone. But someone has—had—a really sweet tracker on it," I-Tee replies.

"You know who?"

"Not yet," he laughs, the one he uses when has a new challenge to decipher. The man won't sleep until he finds what he's looking for.

"Any luck finding her on street cameras?"

"Nope. Not any that pointed to that location. I checked the surrounding streets but didn't find anything matching your description. I can give you a log in and you can watch the feed I could recover."

Boring. "Nah, I'll hit the ground later. What about a name or address?"

"Name is Melia Rome. Photocopy of her driver's license has her living on one of the

islands, but it's expired. I'll shoot it to you to make sure it's the same woman."

"Thanks.

"Hey man, be careful. This was a really high-tech tracker. There's some money behind this."

2

Melia Rome

How the hell did they find me? My phone. I pat my pants pocket. Damn, I lost my water bottle and my phone.

Probably a good thing. I can't have anything that will lead him to me. He must have had a tracker on it to find me so quickly. How did he do that? God, I wish I was more techy.

Darting from alley to alley I'm thankful that guy stepped in. He may have been interested in his own agenda, but he got me free.

I'll pick up a burner phone. I need to be frugal, but a phone is a necessity. I've been helping at Boots & Daisies Flower Shop the last two weeks. The owner lets me store my bags in her storage space. I can't leave anything at the sketchy boarding house where I'm staying. Hell, I don't even like sleeping or bathing there. It's only a small step up from living on a park bench. Maybe.

Me and my damn curiosity. Why couldn't I leave well enough alone? Because Mom is sick.

Mom never lied to me. I've known the name of my sperm donor my whole life. I

know he gave her a pittance before I was born and told her to get rid of me, and that he never wanted to see or hear from her again. But she's sick now, and he should have paid child support to help her out. I thought I could just get her a little relief since she can't work anymore.

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I also wanted to see the asshole in person. I've googled him over the years. He's married to some socialite who came from money, has two legitimate kids—one only three months older than me—and a dog.

He's the attorney general. Out of curiosity I checked on some cases associated with him. Seems like his cronies always get off easy. He strikes me as just another smarmy politician padding his own pocket. Least that's what Granddad always said.

Arriving at my apartment building I circle a couple times before waiting ten minutes to make sure I wasn't followed. Inside I take a fast shower in the shared bathroom. In my bedroom I push the dresser in front of the door and flop on the bed. I need to sleep. Tomorrow I'm going to try to make it home to see Mom after helping Boots for a couple hours during her rush hour.

* * *

Boots is out back with her guy unloading a bunch of new flower vases and containers. I've only met him once in passing. He seemed nice enough. She said he and his brother were both military and now do some kind of security stuff. I can hear them coming toward the front.

"Stop it! Not here. We may have customers. I'll make it up to you tonight." Boots chuckles. "No. Later."

I finish wrapping the arrangement scheduled to be picked up when the bell over the door jingles. Looking up I come face to face with the guy from last night. Not the attacker, the one who helped me get loose.

Fear races through me. “Did you follow me?”

“What are you doing, here?” He stares at me in surprise.

“She works here, Silk.” Boots looks from one of us to the other. “You two know each other?”

“No,” I say

“Yes,” he says.

Boots shakes her head. “Okay... Then Silk, this is Melia. She’s helping out part time until I can afford to hire her full time. Which I hope is soon.

“Melia, this is Silk. He and Dax work together. They’ve known each other for years.

“How do you two know each other?” she asks.

“We don’t,” I say.

“Met last night,” he says, then grins. “I saved your water bottle. I’ll bring it by later.”

In the daylight he is a hottie, but I can already tell he’s very sure of himself where women are concerned. Not my kind of guy. “That’s okay, I have another one I like better.”

He raises and eyebrow. He knows I’m lying, but I don’t care.

Boots looks between the two of us. I’ll get fifty questions later. Dax looks to the heavens and shakes his head.

The bell over the door dings and two customers walk in.

Dax looks at Silk and grimaces. “You’re here, so make yourself useful and help me unload the truck.”

The minute the woman leaves with the flower arrangement I’d been wrapping, and the other customer chooses her bouquet, Boots turns to me. “Please tell me you two are a thing. I would so love it if you were dating. You two would be perfect together. You and I could work together and go on double dates with the guys after.”

“Uh, I don’t think that’s going to happen. We—ah, just met by accident.”

“He certainly looked at you like he was interested. For the record, he does look a little like a player. That gorgeous blond hair, the pecs and washboard abs, the cocky self-assured attitude. I thought he was too when I first met him.

“But all that swagger is his self-defense. If he can put you off, he doesn’t have to worry about you getting too close. I’m not sure what he’s afraid of when it comes to women. But he is.

“When it comes to protection, he’s the one who tries to have everyone’s back. You can trust him.” She holds my gaze. “I know somethings going on with you. I’ve been there. I see the signs. Someday, not here, we need to talk—real talk. Dax and his friends saved me. Silk is solid.”

“I can’t. It’s...”

“Dangerous? Believe me, I know. But the guys do dangerous really well.”

The bell announces another customer before I can ask her story and the rest of the afternoon flies by. I need to leave by four to catch the last ferry. My questions will

have to wait for the weekend.

3

Silk

“What’s going on,” Dax asks as soon as we’re out back.

“A couple nights ago I was walking home from the pier. It was late and I saw her dart out of an alley with a guy hot on her heels. He grabbed her and dragged her back between the buildings. She was trying to fight him off. I got behind him and put him in a choke hold. She must have thought we were a tag team because she lashed out at me—nearly caught the family jewels—then took off.

“She lost her water bottle and phone.”

“And...”

“Before I got to him, I heard the guy say, ‘he wants you back’. When he regained consciousness, he said we were both dead for messing up his retrieval assignment.

“I got the phone to I-Tee. He was able to get her name and save most of her stuff. He checked for a driver’s license and her listed address is on MyLand Island. The most interesting part, he found a very high-tech tracker installed on her phone.

“I’ve been trying to find her for two days.”

Dax shakes his head. “Boots found her sleeping on the Landon’s Dairy Cheeses’ stoop about two weeks ago.” He nods to the back entrance where Boots and Daisies

shares the entrance with the other side of the building. “She took her a coffee and a Danish from the bakery down the street. After they talked a bit, Boots offered her a job.

“She’s staying at that piece of shit boarding house where Boots was. I changed the locks on her door and put deadbolts in the bathroom. Made sure she could move the dresser in front of the door when she slept.”

“Diesel is bringing his family back with him, so he’s looking for a rental,” I say thinking out loud. “My spare room is empty.”

“I don’t think she trusts you.”

I shrug. “What time does she get off?”

“She’s leaving at four to catch a ferry to somewhere. Probably that island she’s from. What are you thinking?”

“The same thing you are. Something’s wrong. She’s running or hiding. Or both.”

“We got any transportation on that island?” he asks.

“Nothing of ours. They do have those electric bike rentals. I could follow the ferry in the speedboat. When I’m sure that’s her destination I could go ahead and be ready with a bike. It’s not that big an island. I’ll stay in the shadows unless she needs me.”

“I’ll text you when she leaves and I’ll follow her till she boards. Take your comm unit and keep in touch.”

“Roger that.”

Dax was right, she boarded the ferry stopping at her home island. I'm following at a reasonable distance when another speedboat jets by me, the HIN numbers conveniently obscured. I quicken my own speed, veering off when I've got a good idea where the other boat is headed. I don't like coincidences and two of us following the same ferry sets off my warning bells.

Docking, I pick up the rental bike and position myself to watch people disembark. I see her. Good girl, she's hidden her hair under a ball cap and has changed her shirt from what she wore onto the ferry. She knows she's being watched. Does she know by who?

Problem is if they're professional, they picked her out just like I did. She heads for the bike rental with several other passengers and rents one of her own. Joining at the rear of the stream of bikers hitting the road, I keep her in sight. One by one the riders breakoff going down separate roads or paths to their personal destinations.

Melia glanced back a couple times in the beginning, but I kept my head down. After a couple miles in she lost herself in what's obviously an enjoyable exercise for her. I keep my head down letting my own ball cap shield my face.

The whole island is only ten miles long. The address on her driver's license pins her home somewhere in the middle.

I glance back as a car approaches from behind. Blacked out windows, expensive model, obscured license plate. Damn, could they be more obvious? Speeding up I pull abreast of her. "Do you know someone with a black Beemer who'd be following you?"

She glances over her shoulder and pales. "What are you doing here?"

"Watching your back. Someone else is following you. Can we cut through that stand

of trees?”

“Yes. Its a little rough, but doable.”

“Lead the way, I’ll follow.”

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“Why are you here?”

“Boots is worried about you.” So am I.

She glances back once more before speeding up and cutting through the narrow field to the band of trees. Once hidden amongst the pines, I glance back. The driver is speeding down the road.

“Does the road loop around to the other side?” I call after her.

She stops. “Yes.”

“Is there another way to get where we’re going?”

“We could stay in the tree line, until we get closer, then cut across the road. There will be another copse of trees we could go through. It will be rough. But I did it as a kid.”

“Lead on.”

“Why are you here? And I want a real answer.”

“Do you know what Dax does?”

“Some kind of security consulting.”

“Close enough. He and I work for the same company. Sometimes we do

investigations, sometimes we're bodyguards. Boot's is worried about you. Dax, is worried about Boots worrying about you. I'm currently unassigned, so Dax wants me to watch over you, so Boots won't worry.

"It's a worrying situation." I grin, trying to lighten the seriousness of the moment.

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "You're incorrigible."

I nod in agreement, which gets me another headshake, but this time she smiles. "Lead on."

It is slow going in the trees but not more than a mile. She stops and points across the road. "We need to get to the other side of that band of trees."

"What's over there?"

"My house. There are a few things I need to get. M-my mom is in the local clinic. They think she had a stroke. They wanted to know if I had any of her old medical records or if she has insurance. She can't remember, so I need to check for her. I also want to see her, see if there is any improvement."

"Has she seen any doctors in Love Beach? Any specialist?"

"No. She... she refuses to leave the island."

"Why? This island is too small. There's no way it has the kind of care she needs."

"I told her. I tried. But she's afraid to leave."

I rub a hand over my face. "Alright, we?—"

The Beemer pulls to a stop on the dirt road across the way before heading back toward the ferry landing. They knew where she was headed.

“Was that...”

“Yeah. The car that was following you. They knew where you were headed. I don’t like this.”

“Please. They left. Can’t we go? I’ll be quick.”

This is a bad idea, but I can’t tell her no. We’re halfway down the path to her home when an explosion rocks the air and a plume of fire shoots into the air. By the time we get there the cabin is engulfed in flames.”

“How far away is your mom?”

“Not too far. There’s a little short cut I know.”

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“Take me there, now.”

Part of me relaxes when we head the opposite direction than the Beemer. The other part worries that they went there first. At the clinic, which is nothing more than a ranch house with four bedrooms, we go to the desk.

The grey-haired woman glances up a worried look on her face. “Melia, didn’t you get the message?”

“What message?”

“Your mom had a really bad episode, and they transferred her to the university hospital in Charleston.”

“When? When did this happen?”

“Earlier today. Your phone went straight to voicemail. The doctor left a message.”

“How long ago?” I ask.

“Around one I think.”

“Can you print me the notes from today with all the information as to who transported her.”

“I’ll give you what I can. It may not all have been entered yet. It might have been the coast guard because they are closest.”

“Thank you.”

When the receptionist walks away, I pull Melia aside. “You need to trust me. I can help with this. I’ll have my office start checking. They’ll find her. I’ll get you to her. My immediate concern is why those guys in the Beemer are following you. And how they knew where you lived.”

4

Melia

I can’t think. I can barely breath. Silk hugs me to his chest, wrapping his arms around me and rocks me back and forth while we wait for them to print the information from today.

“Sit down. I’m going to get you some water.” He fills two cups at the water cooler and returns. “Try to drink them both.”

While he waits, he pulls his phone and starts texting, pausing only to ask me my mother’s full name and if I know her social security number. Once done he gets his own water and sits next to me, placing his arm around my shoulder. “It’s gonna be okay.”

My mind is a ping pong ball, bouncing from panic to despair to fear. I have no doubt those men in the car were from my father, or one of his cronies. Did they do something to Mom? Is this all my fault?

Soon Silk has the papers he’s requested. “Do you think you can ride back to the ferry dock? There’re no taxis or uber here,” he jokes. “I have my own boat to get us back to Love Beach once we’re there.”

“I can make it. It’s not that far and it’s how I’ve always gotten around on the island. Bike or walk.”

“Sounds like the town I grew up in.”

Holding out his hand he helps me stand. I wave goodbye to the night nurse and we head back. Just before we get to the ferry landing he pulls into some trees. “I need you to stay here while I check out the area. I want to make sure the guys in the Beemer aren’t hanging around.”

It only takes a few minutes then we’re on his boat and headed out. He handed me a blanket before putting the boat in motion. Normally I’d love watching the water and sky. Tonight, I curl up on the bench seat huddled in the blanket and try to forget.

The world shifts and I hear voices. But I refuse to wake. I just can’t deal right now.

* * *

I have to pee. I stay huddled under the soft comforter as long as I can. But I have to go. Now. Tossing back the cover, I sit and force my eyes open.

Where am I? This clean bright room is not my resident dump. I glance around taking in the nice white dresser, the grey sitting chair, and the sunlit open window where the sheer curtains billow in the breeze. My jeans and blouse are folded on top the bed bench. A black robe is tossed next to them.

Slipping on the robe, I open the door and peek out. Ah, the bathroom is across the hall. The smell of coffee and soft voices greet me when I exit the small room.

“We’re in the kitchen,” Boots calls. “Follow the hall.”

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Dax and Boots are seated at the breakfast bar finishing up what looks like breakfast. Silk is across from them leaning against another counter. He holds up the coffee pot and I nod.

Thankfully, they give me a few minutes to down half the cup. Silk puts a plate of food, breakfast casserole and bacon, in front of me. Not really knowing what to say I dig in to buy myself some time as the others finish and get coffee refills.

Dax glances at his watch then at Boots. “We either leave or we call Landon and tell him you won’t be in today and ask him to put up a sign.”

She glances at me and I set down my coffee. “It’s Saturday, you need to go. I’ll be fine. In fact, I can get dressed and come now.”

“No. You need to stay and talk with Silk. Dax can run the register. That’s all I need today. Just keep us posted as to what we can do. We’ll see you tonight.”

She kisses my cheek, and they take off.

Silk watches in silence as I finish my food. Then refills both our cups. “Let’s go to the living room and I’ll update you on your mom.”

An extension of the kitchen, the living room has two chairs flanking the bow window and two recliners across from a wall mounted TV. There are large bookcases on either side of the TV and under it is a sound system including a record player.

“Is this an apartment or condo?” I ask, avoiding the upcoming conversation for a few

more minutes.

“Condo. It needed some work when I bought it, so I got it for a good price which made the remodel worth it. It’s two bedrooms and full laundry room. It’s perfect for me, and when we have guys on the team passing through or here for a job, they crash with me. One of the other guys has a place in the same complex.”

“Seems like all of ‘your team’ as you call it are close.”

“Most of us served together at some point. Yeah, we’re tight.”

He swivels his recliner so he’s looking at me. “What we’ve been able to find out about your mom is they think she was misdiagnosed. The specialist who saw her this morning is going to order a few more tests. But she found a tumor which can easily be misdiagnosed as a stroke without the proper tests. She also is optimistic that it’s operable at this stage with minimal side effects. Prognosis is good as long as nothing else shows up in the testing.

“Does your mom have insurance?”

“She has Medicaid. There aren’t a lot of employment options on the island. We got by with Grandpa’s help. He fished, she tended the garden, and we lived... well you saw where we lived. I started working as a nanny in the summers, or as a waitress, or housekeeper for the people with the big houses on the island as soon as I could to help. Those were the same jobs that Mom did. Sometimes they’d hire us both. Gramps died right after I got out of high school.”

“Did she always live on the island?”

“Yes, except for a few months. She went to Love Beach when she was around twenty and got a job as a live-in housekeeper. She was saving up to go to cosmetology

school at the time.”

I pick at the seam of my jeans. The silence gets to me, and I glance up. The look of understanding on his face almost does me in. Blowing out a heavy sigh, I continue.

“She got pregnant by the husband at the house where she was the housekeeper. Mom is, was, a little naive. She always sees the good in people. Anyway, the asshole threatened her and the child she carried if she told anyone. Gave her a few thousand to get an abortion and told her to go back to the island and stay there and never contact him again.

“Fast forward twenty-five years and she’s sick. They said it was a stroke. It’s just me and her. We have no money for medical expenses and the free places I looked at were awful. People just waiting to die.

“I came to Love Beach to try to get a better job and to look up my sperm donor. See if I could convince him to help her a little. I even thought about trying to sue for past child support. I knew he was a scum bag, but I didn’t realize how bad he was until I met him.”

“You met him?”

“I got a job and a little apartment in Love Beach and was working up the courage to try to contact him when he and some other guys came into the Mezcal Mariner where I worked.

“It was my night to waitress one of the private rooms. Ownership didn’t know, but it was my last day because the ritzy bar was barely a step up from a whore house. It was payday and I needed that check. The owners are scummy, and I didn’t want them to have any excuse to keep my paycheck. So I was toughing out the night.

“At the witching hour my doner walked in with a couple other men. Apparently, the old geezer with him took a shine to me and asked the bartender my name. When asshole heard the name, he did a double take.

“When I left work that night, he and his chauffeur were waiting for me. He asked if I was related to a Linda Rome. I said yes. He asked who my father was, and I told him it was him.

“He acted shocked, which was total BS because he knew. She told him when I was born thinking he’d want to know he had a daughter. He sent a thug to warn her off. Guess Gramps chased him off with his shotgun.

“I’m such a fool. I couldn’t see past my rejection.” The old anger and hurt, surge through me and I push off my chair and pace back and forth across the room. “I’d waited my whole life to meet him. I don’t know if I was hoping for some miracle that he’d take one look at me and tell me he was sorry and beg my forgiveness. That he’d promise to take care of Mom and me from now on. How Cinderella, right?

“What I got was a secluded restaurant that had private rooms where we ate and talked. Well, he talked. Said it would make him look bad if I outed him and he was a very important person trying to make the state a better place. He could try to help me get a better job and he’d see about getting money for Mom. He said he’d call me, asked for my phone to enter his number and handed the phone to his bodyguard to do it for him.”

Oh hell, I spin back to Silk. “That’s when he put the tracker on, isn’t it? God I’m such a fool.”

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Heading to the kitchen, I take my time making myself another coffee, using the distance from Silk to get my tears under control. Back turned to him, I call over my shoulder. “You want another cup?”

“Sure. Just black.”

After handing him his mug, I cross to the window, leaning against the frame. “Two days later his chauffeur came by my apartment with a party dress and shoes. He informed me to be ready by eight for a party with my father.

“He picked me up in a limousine. The windows in the back were blacked out. I couldn’t see anything. When we arrived at the party location he pulled into a garage and the door shut before he let me out of the car.

“Inside was movie elegant and beautiful. Crystal chandeliers, velvet chaise lounges and chairs, real crystal for the champagne. Very boujee but somehow sterile. I noticed you couldn’t see out the windows. The view was hidden. When the old man who we called Big Tipper at the Mezcal joined us, along with SD—my sperm donor—I got nervous.

“‘Lovely, well worth the price’, the old guy said to my father.”

I glance at Silk. His expression is neutral, but there is a tic in his cheek. He knows what’s coming.

“My sperm donor sold me to his good friend to pay off a gambling debt.”

“How do you know?”

“SD had his arm over my shoulder keeping me close. When Big approached, I was told to spin around to show off the dress.

“Then he looked at Big and said, ‘We’re even. Debt paid?’ Big nodded and SD gave me a little push toward the other guy.

“Big had just told him to stay off the Faro Lady Cruise Ship, when all the lights flickered.”

“What happened after that?” Silk asks gently.

“Honestly, I don’t know. The owner got a phone call or something and the next thing I was being rushed with SD to the limo and taken away. The car stopped to let SD out. When he was half-in and half-out, I put my foot on his ass and shoved. He fell face first on the sidewalk. I jumped out over him and ran like hell. I got into my apartment from the fire escape, packed what I could carry and took off again. I’ve stayed clear of every place I’d been since. That’s how I ended up on the stoop behind Boots’ shop.”

“You called the old guy, Big?”

“That’s what SD, called him.”

“You said your...donor was a hot shot in the state attorney’s office. I looked there are no Romes.”

“No, his name is Mic Dennis. He’s all over the news and papers.”

“He’s your father? Yeah, we know about him. He’s tied to Enzo Bay as well. They’re

both scum. Will you describe the old guy, Big, to a sketch artist? He's a piece we're missing."

"Yes, but why?"

"If we can identify him, we'll find proof and expose him."

"Why?"

"Because going after assholes like this is what HARDORE does."

"If I'm going to trust you, I need to know more."

"My Ranger team was betrayed on our last mission. We lost three good men. Our brothers. All so someone could line their own pocket. We protect our own and we make it our mission to help others, and one way or another, expose the corrupt."

I always wondered what the expression, 'stone cold', meant. Looking at Silk's face I now know. Exactly like I feel.

"At the so called party, I saw a few other women, some who looked nervous like me. Others who looked half drunk or maybe drugged up. There was an icky vibe about the whole place. Then when Big came over and I realized what was happening I wondered if...

"Mom never talked about SD. All she ever said was I was a gift and she loved me. Now I wonder if..." I meet his gaze. "If I was the result of rape."

5

Silk

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Crossing to the window, I stop behind her and wrap my arm around her waist. My chest aches for all Melia and her mom have suffered. I reaffirm what she already has to know. “Your mother loves you, that’s really all that matters.”

She nods, blinking back tears.

I’ll make sure Melia and her mom have justice. One way or another. “We need to know who Big is. We need to get a forensic artist as soon as possible. You aren’t working today. It’s not safe. Dax already said he’s staying with Boots at the shop.”

Melia chuckles. “Wish I was there to watch. He has a hard time keeping his hands to himself, or else he’s over trying to talk Landon out of free samples of his gourmet cheeses.”

She’s a fighter, trying to keep it light. “Can’t say I blame him. That place is addicting.” I release her and stand next to her.

“We’ve suspected a sex trade group operating out of Love Beach for a while. We’ve chipped away at them, but it would be nice to take down the head. I need to check with my headquarters to see if they want to bring in our own artist or if we use someone local.”

Not knowing who is on the take locally, the team reaches out to someone we’ve used before, and we do a video conference where Melia watches the artist draw online.

Dax and Boots show up after the flower shop closes, bringing dinner. He walks up behind Melia where she sits at the breakfast bar studying the artist’s work.

“I know that guy,” Dax says staring at the drawing. “He was on the Faro Lady when I was under cover. That’s not his real face. He uses high end prosthetics and silicone to change his appearance. He could have been wearing a wig as well the night I saw him. On the ship they call him Big Tipper. He’s more than a patron. I’m guessing owner, investor? He’s... something.

“Now that I think of it, with me he was acting like just a regular with maybe some history and clout because of it. I should have caught it then, but I was trying to get to Boots. Now that I think about it, the way the booker looked at him, he was giving the orders.”

“Any ideas on what lies under the prosthetics?” I ask.

He sits next to Melia putting his arm over the back of her chair. Possessiveness fills my chest. Boots comes to stand by me and wraps her arm through mine and gives it a squeeze. She smirks up at me like she knows what’s going through my mind.

The artist saves the first rendition then the three of them work together testing possible enhancements and fading them out. “Did you say Enzo was at the private room party?” I ask Melia.

“I saw him at the club and there was an open seat in the party room, but I can’t swear he was in with them.”

“We need to get back to the Mescal. How long did you work there? Did any of the girls go missing while you were there?”

“I was there a day short of three weeks. That was the first night I saw any of the men who partied with SD. I might have missed them though, depending on the tables I was working or if they came in the backdoor, which sometimes patron customers did.

“Some of the girls were willingly turning tricks. Others... I’m not so sure. I tried to keep to myself because I didn’t like the vibe. The bartender is basically the one who sets things up. Not in a ‘you will do this’ way but more ‘you need some extra cash’ option that he pushes pretty smoothly. He is a jerk though because he gets a cut of everything.”

The artist is still tweaking the drawing when I look over. “Stop. That guy looks familiar. The eyes and the mouth. I’ve seen him somewhere.”

The artist pauses. “Guys, I’ll send you all of these, but I’ve got another appointment. I can work with you more tomorrow.”

“Thanks, you’ve been great. We’ll give you a call.”

Boots cuts in, “I think we all need to step away and eat. Maybe even leave it till tomorrow. Stop forcing it and the answers will come.”

Boots and Melia go to the kitchen to reheat the dinner she and Dax brought. I nod to the back door and Dax follows. “This is the rest of the group we’ve been looking for. I can feel it.”

“Yeah. I wish I would have placed that asshole on the boat.” Dax rubs a hand down his face.

“And I wish I never would have let Boots be taken.”

He nods. “We need to go back to Mescal. We know that Enzo is in this somehow. And we now know that Dennis is dirtier than we thought.”

“I agree, but it needs to be just me. They might place you.”

“Silo’s on assignment in Vegas. You need a wingman.”

“I’ll be fine for a little recon. But you’ll have to keep an eye on both Boots and Melia. I’ll go late tonight. I feel like we’re running out of time.”

“I say we bring in Detective Ford. I’ll run it by Jed. Boots is looking out the window, time to eat.”

Melia

Idon't like it. He's putting himself in danger for me. He's been gone five hours. The bar has been legally closed for an hour. What if something happened? What if he's hurt?

I made up the bed for Boots and Dax in the room I used last night. They need some sleep because the shop is open tomorrow. The alarm is set and I promised to get some sleep in Silk's bed and put blankets on the couch for him like Dax insisted. No way will I kick him out of his own bed. I'll take the couch when he gets home. But right now, I need the comfort of his scent as I snuggle under his blanket and lay my head on his pillow.

Waking to a cozy warmth along my back I open one eye to the soft shades of the breaking dawn coming in the window. There's an arm wrapped around my waist and a large hand clasping mine. Silk's scent fills my senses. He's home. From the sound of his raspy breath, he's asleep. Closing my own eyes I finally truly relax and sleep.

Warm breath whispers over my neck and soft lips brush my shoulder. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I was coming around on my own. I had a hard time sleeping until I knew you were home safe. What time is it?"

"I'm guessing around nine. I heard Dax and Boots leave about an hour ago."

"You haven't been home very long. I woke at five and you weren't here."

“I didn’t plan on being gone that long but something came up.”

“Can you tell me?”

“Later, after we sleep a little more. If I roll to my back, will you put your head on my chest? I just want to hold you. I want to know you’re safe.”

His voice is already fading, but I do as he asks. My head on his shoulder, my palm over his heart. I feel each steady beat, each breath brushes over my cheek. His arm is wrapped around my waist like he needs the comfort, the reassurance.

For a man who always seems so sure of himself. I wonder if something bad happened.

Holding me tighter, he mumbles. Safe. Cuddled so tenderly I quickly fall back to sleep tucked in his warmth.

It’s almost eleven when we finally wake to the sound of his buzzing phone. “Yeah. She’s okay? Good. Sure, I can transport. Who you sending? How soon? Okay talk then.”

He disconnects and kisses my forehead. “Sorry, that was my CO. How would you like to go for a helo ride?”

“What?”

“I’m a pilot and I need to transport someone. When you were at Mescal, did you know a waitress named Trish?”

“She started like two days before I ran. Why?”

“Let’s get coffee and I’ll explain. You get the bathroom first. I’ll start the coffee.”

While he’s in the bathroom I start some scrambled eggs. I couldn’t miss the lion’s rumble of his stomach. Returning, his eyes light up when he sees what I’m doing. He grabs the leftover tortillas from last night’s dinner, warms them in the microwave, and pours us coffee as he talks.

“I’d been to Mescal a few days ago and my waitress was Trish. A good kid but out of her league in that environment. As you said, the bartender can be a little intimidating. She seemed a little down on her luck that night.”

“A lot of the girls are.” I shake my head. “I think that’s part of their plan, hire desperate girls and take advantage of them. I was desperate.”

7

Silk

“You’re right. I slipped Trish a decent tip and told her to keep it for herself. Last night she was working a different set of tables, but she saw me. I nodded. It’s only been a few days, but she looked different. Hopeless.

“She went straight to the bartender and ordered what I had been drinking before. When she brought it to me, she gave me two napkins. She’d written ‘help me’ on one.

“Using the info you gave me, I snuggled up to her like I was making an offer. I asked if she needed an escape, and she nodded. We have company resources, so I was wearing a wire and a hidden camera. She said she hadn’t been feeling right for a couple days and was getting scared.

“Bottom line, they started slipping her something, but she couldn’t figure out how. It

was messing her up, she couldn't think and had no one to go to for help. I got the private room special with a bottle of their best booze and was told that Trish would keep me company and take care of me the rest of the evening.

“We slipped out the back door, which I'm pretty sure set off a silent alarm, but we were able to get away. I took her to a small clinic we trust, stayed with her, and called Pax and Nyla to come take over. The call I just got was orders to transport her to a safe place.”

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“What does that mean, transport?”

“I’m a pilot. We have a recovery house run by one of the teams’ brothers. We’ll take her there. They’ll help her get over what she’s been given, counseling if she needs it, then help her get a good job. It would be best if we got her out of town today, before they can find what clinic she’s at.”

“Can I go? I want to see this place, know more about what it does.”

“I was hoping you’d want to. It might be easier for her to have another survivor along. I may have helped her to get out, but I’m another man she doesn’t know. We’ll spend the night there, then go visit your mom the next day.”

“I’ve never been in a plane before.”

“We’ll take the helo this time because they don’t have a landing strip at the farm. But if you’d like, I’ll get you on the company jet for a ride someday.”

We’re at the hanger within an hour. Pax and Nyla show up thirty minutes later. Pax pulls me aside. “They were putting it in her damn water bottle. Her memories are sketchy. She may have been raped. Clinic did a rape kit.

I shake my head. “She has no one. She grew up with her grandparents and moved here with a friend when they died. Her friend took off a month ago. She’s an only child with no other relatives, no money, barely twenty-one. Silo’s brother Bram knows we’re on the way.

“Damn glad you were wired up. Oh, and Jed says we’re to bring Detective Ford in on what we know. We called him and he did his own debriefing with Trish. He wants to keep this quiet for now since he doesn’t know who he can trust in his department. We need to find these motherfuckers and nail Enzo, Dennis, and whoever the top fucking dog is. Jed wants them bad.”

He glances over to where Melia is talking with Trish. “She going with?”

“Yeah, I thought Trish might feel safer with another woman along. Someone else who got out. Then I’ll take her to her mom.”

Pax nods. “How you doing?”

“Me?”

“I saw you fall. You going to be able to make it work with her?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

He laughs. “When you figure it out come see me. I’ll help you over the rough spots.”

The flight is easy. The women sit in back vacillating between holding hands, crying, and talking.

Bram and Silo’s farm is serene and quiet. Perfect to rebound. A big old house with lots of rooms and space. Bram and a young woman meet us in the field after we land.

“Welcome, Trish, Melia. I’m Bram. This is Mia. She and her mother both live and work here with me.” He crosses the distance and gives me a bro hug and slap on the back. “Good to see you too, Silk.”

He provides the tour and explanation as we walk the grounds. “We have the main house, guest house, bunkhouse, and barn. We still raise a few crops, cattle, goats, sheep, and chickens. Most of them are pets. We have dogs and cats running around and horses to ride. People who stay with us are required to help with the chores, including taking turns in the kitchen, cleaning the buildings, and laundry.

“Individuals in the group have suffered addiction, mental or physical abuse, assault, poverty, abandonment, homelessness, loss of jobs. We are all in it together here and support each other in our struggles. We work hard to make this a safe place to recover and start over. This is not an end spot. This is a get on your feet, learn what you need, and start the life of your choice place.

“We help you learn the skills you need to find a job and location where you can start over safely.

“No booze, or drugs. You’ll receive a medical exam, any meds you require, help getting straight and counseling, all dependent on your needs.”

He turns to look at Melia and Trish. “I’ve been homeless and unemployed. I’m a recovering alcoholic, drug user, and abuse survivor. I was a farmer, army medic, and now counselor.

“Silk and I have known each other a long time. He’s vouching for you. You’ll be in the main house.” He looks up. “Silk, you and Melia can have the guest house tonight.”

“Mia, please show Melia to the guest house, then Trish to the house and get her settled. If you ladies would like to help with dinner it would be appreciated. I need Silk to help me in the barn for a little while. We’ll be inside soon.”

In the barn, he turns to me. “The damn tractor is acting up again. Same issue as

before. Don't really want to break down and buy a new one. I heard you guys just signed on a new guy with lots of mechanical knowledge. Think **HARDCORE** can help me out?"

"I'll look at it. If it's too much for me, I'll talk to Diesel. His assignment is almost over. He's with Silo right now. You know Jed will approve any repairs. You've come through for us more than once."

I change the sparkplugs but I'm pretty sure there's something wrong with the carburetor. We're at least able to get hay out to the field for the animals.

Stopping at the guest house to clean up, I realize there's only one bed. I imagine Melia naked with her dark hair spread across the pillows lying there waiting for me to come home. Welcoming me into her arms after a rough mission. Contentment washes over me at the image of her being by my side. After taking a shower, I pull on sweats and a T-shirt from the guest clothes in the dresser before going to the main house.

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Soft rock-n-roll is playing in the kitchen. Mia's mom is at the stove directing six young women, and Melia is working with two others to prepare what looks like homemade biscuits.

A domestic scene right out of Hallmark. One I've never experienced. Melia talked about growing up with her mom and grandpa. A family unit who worked together, lived together and loved each other.

I was an upper middle class nobody. An only child, a little above average in studies, average in team sports, average in drive.

My main goal had been just to get out of my hometown and my family as fast as I could. My parents were too busy to pay attention to each other or me, because they were upwardly mobile and had plans for a larger, more impressive house, with more money to flaunt.

I floundered through high school, easily doing the work, but never caring about the outcomes. Nothing felt good except racing my skateboard down the steepest hill, narrowest street, or over the highest jump. Then came my motorized dirt bike, my motorcycle, my own car, and Dad's speedboat. At sixteen I worked at anything, construction, landscaping, lifeguard to pay for flying lessons. Joining the military, finding my found family with my fellow soldiers saved my life. It gave me a reason to come home.

During time in the army I'd learned I was capable of more when I had the support and people who cared about me. My team, the HARDCORE team who are more bonded than any family.

Now with several of them getting married or at least together with their significant others, I've started to feel that same old left behind restlessness.

Until Melia. Now I have a goal. Now I can once again dream of more. A new pulse coursing through me, sends equal spikes of excitement and calm to wash over me. Melia lit my fire and calmed the racing desire and need to run at the same time. She feels like home.

She'll think I'm crazy. It was too fast. But I know myself, my destiny. I knew I'd be a pilot the first time I rode in a plane. When I stopped in front of the army recruiter's office I knew. When I met an army ranger on base I knew I'd become one.

Melia is my future.

8

Melia

Trish and I are welcomed and immediately put to work. Meal prep for twelve people takes a bit of work. The atmosphere is a little tense at first as they get to know us too.

Momma, as everyone calls her, assures me the apprehension will pass quickly. "It's like the first day of school. Everyone is shy and nervous."

Off the kitchen is a large room that is the length of the house and twelve feet wide. Everyone on the property eats together we're told.

A series of six-foot picnic tables butted up to each other run the length of the room. With us adding the number to feed, they line up one more table.

The meal is fantastic, and the welcome even better. I can see Trish already relaxing.

When everything is cleaned up and put away, Silk and I head to the guest house.

All night he's been brushing up against me, touching my hand, my arm, my back. It's taken everything in me not to wrap myself around him and beg him to hold me.

He's already gone out of his way to help. It's obvious he's a good man, a caring man. "What's wrong, Silk?"

"This feels so right, I'm expecting it to fall apart any minute."

"What this? You mean this facility?"

"No. I mean you. You being here with me." He runs a hand through his hair. "I'm fucking this all up. What I'm trying to say is, I want you to stay in Love Beach. Not just because I want to protect you. I want to get to know you.

"I know this is fast and you just came off some scary shit. But I'm drawn to you. I'd like to get to know you more when this is all over and you feel safe. Maybe date."

"I'd like that, too."

"Tomorrow I'll take you to see your mom. I talked to Bram and he said I can bring you back to the farm until this mess is taken care of in Love Beach."

"No."

"No?" He frowns. "I don't understand."

"No. I'm going to see this through. I'm going to be there to help take down SD. He's not getting away with what he did to my mother or burning down my home. I'm not running or hiding."

“It could get dangerous. I want you protected,” he insists.

I cut him off. “Then you’ll protect me.”

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Entering the guest house, I head to the bathroom. “I’m going to shower, you can... have it next.”

Standing under the water, I lean my head against the wall. This is not what I wanted. I want him. I’d told myself I was going after what I wanted, for me for a change. I was going to invite him into the shower with me. I was going to seduce him.

I’ve seen the interest in his eyes. We’re both consenting adults. Yes, this is a dangerous situation going up against powerful people. But life is short and I’m tired of regrets. I’d rather deal with an ‘I’m not interested’ than to never have tried. Yet here I am, by myself because I chickened out. If I could do it over again.

“Melia,” he calls from the other side of the door. “I used the last of the shampoo and forgot to put the new bottle in the shower.”

Heart pounding. “Will you bring it in and...join me?”

Heart racing, I wait for the door to open. He finally walks in, naked except for towel wrapped low around his hips, shampoo in one hand a condom peeking between two fingers of the other, and stops on the other side of the glass panel.

“They call me Silk because I wear silk jockeys. I like the feel. The guys in Ranger training gave me the call sign as a take-off of being smooth with the ladies. What they don’t know is I don’t screw as often as they think. Sometime a woman just wants company and a little conversation. To feel seen.

“I haven’t been in a serious relationship since my senior year of high school. I’m not

a choir boy but I'm also not a player."

I can't help but smile. "I already figured that out, Silk. But I don't know your real name."

"Rhys."

"Rhys, I've only done this a couple times myself. Because of what happened with my mom, I'm on the shots. I don't think you're a player. I'd like you to join me."

Dropping the towel he steps in, puts the shampoo on the shelf behind me, cups my face in his hands, and kisses me. Gentle, sweet, almost cautious.

I slide my palms down his sides. The ridges and bumps under the torso-long phoenix tattoo that decorates his side surprise me. "What happened here?"

"I was hit by some shrapnel. Scars were kind of ugly. I covered them up."

"It feels like a lot of damage."

He shrugs. "I was lucky that Doc was there. He saved my life. He was a doctor before he joined the rangers and knows a whole lot of shit. I-I'd like you to meet him. He's a great guy. I'd like you to meet the whole team."

I cup his face in my palms. "I'd like that. Right now, I'd like you to kiss me."

One hand at the back of my head, he twines his fingers in my hair. He lowers his lips to mine. Sucking, licking, nibbling my lower lip before breaching my barrier. His kiss is gentle yet demanding. Consuming and worshiping.

"Damn, you're so sweet. Just like I knew you'd be." He lowers his lips, kissing a path

across my chin to my neck, over my shoulder. Cupping one breast he teases my nipple with his thumb and forefinger. I immediately harden. He kisses a path across the swell of my breast, before dropping to his knees and sucking my nipple. Desire is like lightning bolts striking my core, sending spikes of need blazing through me.

He worships one breast then the other. “Lean your shoulders against the wall,” he demands.

Sliding his arms between my legs, he lifts my thighs onto his shoulders and consumes my pussy. Licking, sucking, fucking me with his tongue. “I want you to come for me, sweetness. I want you to come hard.”

He slides two fingers into me while sucking and I explode.

“Oh my god,” I cry out. He holds me as I come down from the hardest orgasm I’ve ever had. I don’t even realize he’s crooning to me as he washes my body, hair and then dries me off. Setting me on the countertop, he gently brushes and dries my hair, before carrying me to bed. Slipping in behind me he cuddles me against his warm body.

A hint of morning light across my eyelids draws my attention, seconds before the warm body pressed to my back registers. At my subtle shift, his slightly calloused hand cups my breast and the obvious pole of his desire pushes against my buttocks.

Sliding his palm downward he cups my mound and teases my clit with two fingers. “Need you.”

I wiggle my butt against him. “Take me.”

Silk

Never have I wanted a woman like I want her.

I'm no saint. I've had my fair share of women, but I've just comforted and encouraged even more. A hand job has always been better than meaningless easy sex.

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This woman is it for me. Her or nothing. I've known it since the alley when I first saw her.

I learned the hard way to trust my feelings. My high school sweetheart. The girl who swore to be with me through thick and thin. The one I overheard tell her friend that the plan was to marry me, get pregnant with my brat, divorce me and live off child support and the divorce settlement from my wealthy parents.

Walking home from the restaurant where they were meeting, I passed by the army recruiter's office and signed up. That and disowning my parents were two of the smartest things I've ever done.

Now I have Melia. I'll do anything to keep her safe and maybe talk her into giving me a chance.

Rolling from the bed, I stand next to the side and pat the mattress in front of me. "Get on your hands and knees facing away from me, here at the edge."

She does. Standing behind her, I run my palms over the sweet curve of her ass. God, she is so fucking beautiful. I smack her ass cheek.

She groans.

Oh fuck. I am so screwed. I smack the other cheek. A shudder ripples over her. "Like that, sweetness?"

She nods her head.

“Use your words. Do you like it when I smack your ass?”

“Yes, I like it when you smack my ass like that.”

“I swear I’ll never hurt you. Just tell me what you like, how you like it.”

“Like that, for now.”

“Anything you don’t like, just say red and I stop. I will never hurt you.”

“I trust you, Rhys.”

“Keep your ass in the air but rest your head and shoulders on the bed.”

The urge to just drive into her is strong, but she’s not ready. I drop to my knees. With a palm on each cheek, I spread her open for my perusal. “Oh, sweetness, your little cunt is glistening with need.”

I skim my thumb from her clit button all the way to her forbidden hole and back.

“Please, Rhys.”

“Please what, sweetness?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been touched like this. I just know I want, need more.”

“I’ve got you, sweetness. I know what you need.” Running my tongue up her slit from nub to back door and back again, I smile at her litany of, “oh god” and “yes, yes”.

Sliding two fingers into her tight channel I tweak her nub at the same time.

“Rhys, please Rhys. Now. I need you now.”

“Come for me sweetness, then I’ll give you my cock.”

“R..Rh..Rhys!”

“That’s it sweetness, give it to me.” She is so expressive, so beautiful as she comes. Easing her to her side, I lie behind her and cuddle her against my body. I’m content holding her in my arms, her head resting on my bicep. I kiss the back of her neck, her shoulder, the top of her head as she falls asleep. Grabbing the blanket, I flip it to cover both of us.

“Rhys, oh Rhys, I’m sorry,” she whispers, turning in my arms as she wakes. I’m so sorry I fell asleep. You didn’t...”

“Shush sweetness, I like cuddling you. I like waking with you.”

“I like it, too.”

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Leaning forward, I kiss her. “Go to the bathroom and come back. We have time to snuggle some more.”

She chuckle-snorts as she climbs from the bed. “Snuggle, that’s what they call it now.”

Taking my turn brushing my teeth and splashing water on my face, I glimpse the terrycloth robe hooked on the back of the door. My girl is brave. Hell, she fought off her attacker and almost kneed me. Slipping the cloth belt from the robe I head back to bed. Time to find out if she can handle all of me.

She’s positioned herself in the center of the bed. I love that she’s naked, although I can tell she’s not as comfortable in her nudity as I am. I can’t wait to take her to my favorite nudist beach.

Smiling, I cross the floor and stop at the foot. Running her gaze down my body she pauses at my hard cock, her tongue sneaks out to lick her lips. Huffing, she sits up. “I was trying to look sexy, but I have no idea how.”

“Sweetness, just being you is sexy as hell.” I clasp the cotton belt in both hands. “Ready for round two?”

She nods.

“Hands above your head, grab a spindle with each.” Straddling her body, I knee walk over her until I can reach her hands. Gently I wrap the belt between the spindles and loosely around her wrist. Today is about the illusion. To see if this interests her.

Pausing over her breasts I stroke my cock watching her face. Her gaze is fixated on my length and movement. “What do you want, sweetness?”

“You. I want to taste you. I want to watch as you enter me. I want to feel you in me.”

Positioned at her lips, she immediately licks my hood, circling round and round with her tongue. “Open up, sweet.”

I feed her a couple inches and when she moans around me, I have to grip the headboard so I don’t lose my control. The heat of her, the way she licks and sucks, have me on the edge way before I’m ready. This connection, she and I are meant to be. I feel it to my core. She’s mine and I’ll never let her go.

“Now, Rhys. I need to feel you in me again. I need to see your face, your eyes, this time.”

Sliding down her body, I pause long enough to suckle each nipple before notching myself at her entrance. “Melia, I know it’s fast, but I love you. This isn’t a fling for me. I want you with me forever. I’ll be faithful and I’ll protect you. You have my heart. I’ve never given it to anyone before.”

She easily pulls her wrists from the loose wrap of the belt and runs a finger over my lips. “I love you, Rhys. Not because of what you have done for me or how you protect me. But because of the good man you are.

“Make me yours.”

Slowly, I enter her warmth. When I’m fully seated, I run my thumb over her lips. I’m home now. “Never gonna leave you, sweetness. Never.”

Melia

Hugging my new found friends goodbye, I promise to keep in touch with Trish and climb into the helo. It's not long before Silo lands us on the roof pad at the hospital where mom is being treated.

"Sweetness, your mom is here under a pseudonym. Jed was concerned for her safety. He also has one of our agents here with her." He grins. "Your sister, Red."

Walking into the room we discover Mom resting quietly on the bed. I know they have her drugged, but she seems so peaceful. A sound behind me has me turn.

A taller woman with long red hair smiles at me, before wrapping me in a comforting embrace. "Hey, sis. Glad you made it here safely. She's been asking for you. Truthfully, I'm not sure she can tell us apart right now. They're keeping her sedated, but it's about time for her meds so she should be able to talk for a few.

"The specialist was planning on meeting with us, but she had an emergency. She said she'd give you a call later. I gave her your new number. But, we requested copies of all the documentation and reports to be sent to our friend Doctor Hayes, and he's agreed to walk us through anything we don't understand.

"The general gist is the tumor is about the size of a quarter. They're trying noninvasive treatments first. She's in good general health and they feel prognoses is good. Sit with her for a while, talk to her, let her hear your voice and your love surrounding her. I know you can't stay long, sis. But I'm here for the duration. She won't ever be alone.

"We'll give you private time."

Leaning over the bed, I kiss Mom on the forehead. Remembering all the times she did

the same to me growing up sends tears streaming down my cheeks. I can't lose her. She's too young and she deserves so much more than she ever had. She deserves to be free, to live without fear.

I keep my voice low, the words quiet. "It's gonna be okay, Mom. It's just a booboo and it can be fixed. We'll get through this and you'll heal and be your old self-again.

"I finally met a man who makes my heart skip. He's a good man. He's helping take care of me, and you. I also made some new friends that inspire me. I'm going to get my education, but I may be changing my major.

"Momma, I promise by the time you're well, we'll be free. I was thinking maybe you'd like to finally go to cosmetology school. You're still young and I know you still love it. We could get a little house or something off the island. I promise we'll still be together. It's gonna be a better life."

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I sit lost in thought, stroking her hand, thinking of all she gave up for me, her struggles. How she deserved more, but she chose to isolate herself to be a loving mom.

I don't know how long I sit there stroking her hand in mine, lost in all my childhood memories. Too soon a warm hand slides down my back. Rhys kisses my cheek then places his other hand on Mom's where they're stacked on her stomach.

"Momma, I'm Rhys. We haven't met properly yet, but we will soon. I promise to take care of our girl and you. As soon as you get well you can help us find a home big enough where we can all live. A place where you'll always be safe and free to do what you want. We need to leave, but we'll be back as soon as we can. Remember sissy Roja is watching over you. You do not need to be afraid. You're safe. Rest and heal. We'll see you again soon."

I feel lost in a haze of sadness as he leads me from the hospital. I remember him hooking me into the seat and nothing after that.

11

Silk

I stand in the hall where I can see Melia and her mom. Agent Roja is next to me and I ask, "Any indication they've located her here?"

"No. You know I'd pull her in a heartbeat. I have everything I need to disguise her and get her away in a hearse out back. Thankfully all the bells and whistles she's

hooked to are just to monitor. Nothing is controlling her life force. The team has two game plans in place if we need them. And I have personal backup in town I could call on.

“Don’t worry about us. I’m more concerned about you and Malia. Detective Ford reported there are some secret meetings going on at the department that he’s been excluded from. He, we, never kept it a secret that he’s worked with HARDCORE in the past. He may have his own man inside and will let us know as soon as he can. He’s pulling in a couple IOU’s, too. Watch your six. This is starting to feel like Jenga. Just hope we’re pulling the right block, and their side is going to crumble.”

“You and me both. I’m gonna hit the head. You good here?” She gives me her battle smile that’s always a little too much like a cobra ready to strike. This is the soldier I want guarding what’s precious to me or mine.

Walking back from the bathroom I cross in front of the waiting area, glancing at the overhead TV.

“Breaking news. Lieutenant Governor, Neil Book has indicated in the past his concerns regarding the excessive restrictions on some businesses in the Love Beach area. He plans to present his new proposal to the governor tomorrow whom he’s publicly stated is dragging his feet on something that would be great for the state’s economy. Some constituents say it’s just another effort by Mr. Book to pad his own pocket.” Three images appear on the screen of Book glad handing crowds.

That’s him. Mr. Big. The man we’re looking for.

“In other breaking news another female body has washed ashore last night...”

Pulling my phone, I dial the office. I-Tee answers on the second ring. “Big Tipper is Lieutenant Governor Neil Book. Just saw a side view. Have Dax work with that

forensic artist.”

“Got it. I was just going to contact you. The dead body that washed ashore was another girl who worked for a short time at Mescal. We’ve also found two warehouses that belong to Melia’s sperm donor. Both seem to have a lot of activity for being empty. Thought you should know. Pax and Dax are going to check it out tonight.”

“I’m in. Do we have anyone who can watch the women? They aren’t trained yet.”

“No. Normally I’d say Ford. But he’s not responding. Jed’s working on more backup as we speak. Nyla’s a good shot. Make sure the three are together. One of you may need to stay back.”

“We’ll figure it out and let you know,”

Heading back to the room I update Roja and go in to get my woman and say goodbye.

“...Remember momma, sissy Roja is watching over you. You do not need to be afraid. You’re safe. Rest and heal. We’ll see you again soon.”

Melia is exhausted and half out of it. I get her into the helo and strap her in. She sleeps the whole flight back to Love Beach. I’ve no more landed than my comm unity goes off. As I-Tee comes over my headset, a half dozen flood lights pointed at my helo come on.

“Don’t land!”

“Too late. What’s going on? I’m surrounded by spotlights.”

“Warrant for your arrest in the death of the woman who just washed ashore. Ford

gave us the head's up as soon as he could.

"I saw the announcement, but didn't hear who."

"They're trying to say it was Trish. But we've confirmed she's safe. They have photos of you leading her out of Mescal. We figure they're going to try to pin them on you and set up shop somewhere else. Reggie and Jed are on the way. Gunner and Reba are with them."

I vaguely hear a bull horn. "Rhys Oliver, come out with your hands up. Come out or we open fire."

"They're calling for me to come out. I'm not risking Melia. I'm putting her in the secret hold. Tell Dax to get over here and get her. I'll put in the mini earbud. Good time to check it out. I just hit the outside camera. You getting the feed?"

"Roger."

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I squat next to where Melia is just starting to rouse. “Sweetness, we got a problem. Her eyes fly open. “I need you to do what I ask. I need to leave you in the helo in a hidden cargo hold. Dax is going to come and get you as soon as he can. We’re surrounded by cops that want to arrest me. It’s all going to be fine. But your life could be in danger if they find you.”

“What’s going on? I don’t understand.”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure either but my team and lawyer are on it. Please, promise you’ll do what I ask. I won’t be safe if you don’t. I need you to help Dax when he gets here.”

I hit the door latch. “Coming out. It’s caught. Give me a second,” I yell out through the crack.

I show her where the floor hold is. “You are safe. It’s bullet proof and ventilated. You can open it from the inside, but please don’t. If they leave someone behind, they’d find you. Dax will be here soon.

“If I’m going to get through this, I need you to be safe, sweetness. Do you understand? Dax will know more when he gets here.”

She nods and climbs into the space. “Rhys, I love you. I need you to come back to me. Promise?”

“I promise, love. Give me some sugar.”

Cupping my face, she kisses me and I know her whole heart is behind it. “I love you, sweetness. I’ll be back.”

I jiggle and wiggle the door like it’s stuck, then set it to lock the minute I cross the threshold.

The minute I’m out some big hotshot shouts, “Hands behind your head.”

Ford is standing next to the one shouting. He gives me an eye roll. Knowing Ford, he’s gonna let these assholes bury themselves. After they pat me down, Hotshot takes a cheap shot to my ribs. I drop to my knees to make the guy feel good, but I’ve taken worse sparring with my teammates.

“Not so tough are you, Silky?”

Ford reaches down, helping me to my feet and leads me to what I assume is his vehicle. Unfortunately, Hotshot rides with us.

Ford’s driving, I meet his gaze in the rearview mirror. “What the hell’s going on? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Got proof on camera of you abducting a girl from Mescal a couple nights ago. Found her body on shore yesterday,” Hotshot responds.

“It wasn’t me.”

“Sure as fuck was. Got your photo. Boss says it’s all the proof we need.” He slaps his forehead. “Sarge. Sarge says we need proof.” He tried to cover his mistake.

Ford meets my gaze again.

They take me to the station and book me then lead me to a walled cell down an isolated hall. Ford is still along for the ride but doesn't look happy.

"Why this one?" he asks.

"Boss said we needed something real secure for this guy. He might try something."

There's that word boss again. I see a muscle twitch in Ford's cheek.

A few hours later and well after midnight I hear the soft clink of keys. Then Hotshot appears in front of my cell, a loosely knotted sheet over his shoulder.

I nod. "I take it this is the point where I hang myself."

12

Melia

I feel like I've waited for days. I heard someone banging on what I guess was the outside door for a long time after Silk left. Then it was quiet forever. I may have dozed off a couple times.

At first, I was afraid I'd suffocate, but true to his word I soon felt fresh air filter through. Now a soft scraping sound reaches me. Then a mumbled voice. "Melia, it's Dax. Just give me a minute."

When the panel slides open, relief fills me and I sit up. "Is he okay?"

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“They’ve got him in jail. We assume he’s okay. Our company lawyer and CO should arrive soon.”

“What the hell is going on?”

“They’re trying to pin a murder on him.”

“What? Who?”

“Trish.”

“Is she dead? Did they find her?”

“Naw, she’s safe. Some other poor girl isn’t, but it’s too late for us to help her. We’ll be taking these assholes down one way or another after tonight.”

“What’s going on? Tell me.”

“Let’s get you home safe, then we’ll explain.” He helps me out of the hold and secures it.

We exit the helo and then cross into the field next to the airport pads. He leads me to where he’s hidden the van. Boots practically flies out when he opens the side door. Immediately she hugs me. “He’ll be okay. The guys will get to him, I promise.”

We stop in front of an older home that’s all lit up. Inside are a lot of people I don’t know. Boots keeps her hand in mine. “Trust me. It’s all going to be okay. There is

one face I do recognize. The governor. He's talking to a woman in a suit and a very distinguished looking man. Boots leans closer. "The man and woman talking to the Gov are Jed, the boss of HARDCORE, and his wife, Reggie. She is one hell of a lawyer."

As if sensing my presence the woman turns, looks at me and holds out her hand. "Melia, it's so good to meet you. I'm Reggie and I'll be handling your case. I've already explained what we've found to the Governor, and he's contacted outside sources for the case since the corruption within the state is so extensive."

"Governor," I shake his extended hand.

"Miss Rome, I'm sorry you became embroiled in this. However, your involvement is exactly what the state needed to finally be able to go after the ones involved. I have been aware there were issues, but without knowing who I could trust within the state offices and the local police, it's been difficult.

"Thanks to your friends, we are building a case to clean house both in the local government and statewide. I apologize. I know that your own father subjected you to an untenable situation. If you saw pictures of the location, would you recognize it?"

"The outside no, but the inside yes. I was told it was a mansion, but the windows were blocked." Reggie leads me to the TV and starts clicking, pulling up a series of pictures. "Stop. That's the main room, the meet and greet room. There are a few others on the same floor where they were having sex."

I'm able to confirm four rooms on the main floor. The loft rooms are unfamiliar.

"It's a warehouse that you—Dick Phelps and Enzo Bay own together. There is another one on the other side of town. A little less swanky, a lot more...intense. We believe it may be the kill sight for some of the women we've found."

There's a noise on the porch and the door bursts open. Silk crosses the threshold and I run to him, throwing myself into his arms. There's a slight grunt and I notice the bruises on his cheek and the brace on his arm.

"You're hurt. Oh my god, we need to get you to the doctor."

"I'm fine, sweetness. Give me some sugar and I'll be all better." Leaning forward he takes my lips with his, cupping the back of my head with his other hand. I lose all sense of place and time. When we slip apart, I hear a gruff voice say, "'Bout time he found the one."

EPILOGUE

Silk

It's our one year anniversary, and there were so many things I need to do once I'm relieved from security duty where we're protecting the Governor during the ongoing criminal trial. Dax is on tonight then Pax and I'm back on tomorrow.

Sweetness refused to go on our honeymoon and truly celebrate until SD and Neil Book are in prison. Enzo Bay already paid with his life. Some say it was a father getting revenge for the loss of his little girl—with a little help from friends. They may be right.

Parking my jeep behind the house, I go in the back door. Sweetness and Momma are in the front planting flowers. Momma mostly does the work now that she's finished all her surgeries and rehab. A lot of daisies and baby's breath that she sells to Boots. Next year she plans on expanding into tulips, snapdragons and maybe roses. She's still deciding if she wants to take her cosmetology classes. Forty-four is plenty young to start over.

This house was perfect for us when we bought it. Three bedrooms on one side with a

mother-in-law suite on the opposite side.

Next year Melia is starting her own classes to become a therapist and still plans to work parttime with Boots.

I double check as I place my items on the table.

Flowers, times two. Check.

Non-alcoholic wine. Check.

Steaks. Check

Three prepared potatoes for baking. Check and straight into the oven.

Spinach au gratin. Check.

Apple pie and vanilla ice cream. Check.

And the very special gift I got just for me and sweetness. A new red and black Shibari rope. The classes have been amazing. Melia loves them and always feels so relaxed afterward. Tonight, we get to celebrate our love, our way.