



To Love a Thief

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Category: Romance, Adult

Description: Knox

I'm The Charmer.

I flirt and bewitch; I steal the goods and get out. Nothing holds my attention longer than the time it takes to pull off a heist.

But when a job goes wrong and a gorgeous former Navy pilot comes to my rescue, all bets are off. Hunter does her best to resist me, but there's no denying the attraction between us. I may be a thief, but she's the one stealing my heart.

I'll go to any lengths to convince her to give me a shot. As far as I'm concerned, all's fair in love and thievery.

Hunter

I'm the bridesmaid, never the bride.

I watched my team find their soulmates and fall madly in love. But after being burned in a past relationship, fear keeps me grounded and my singed wings have forgotten how to fly.

So when a smooth-talking thief strolls into my life spewing silver-tongued compliments, my inner warning lights start flashing.

Before I know it, I'm swept up into Knox's world, helping his crew find and return a stolen emerald. As dangerous enemies close in, Knox's charms grow harder to resist.

I want to soar with him, but my wary heart would have to do the impossible—trust a thief.

****The Ring of Thieves series is written in alternating 1st POV and each book can be read as a standalone.**

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Prologue: Knox

48 Hours Ago...

All's fair in love and thievery.

It's a motto I embrace wholeheartedly, and maybe that's why I'm so damn good at my job. Looking around the big, round table at my fellow morally ambiguous crew, I know we all excel at certain areas when it comes to the art of theft. And I can readily admit who I am and what I do—my name is Knox Beckett and I'm a thief.

No need to mince words about my occupation. I may lie to others, but I don't lie to myself.

Right now, we're in the office and waiting for The Man to call. Addie said he has a job for us and I'm curious what it'll be. No one knows his true identity, but we've been told we can trust him by an extremely reliable source—her mother, Angel—and she'd never let us get hurt.

I hope our blind faith doesn't come around and bite us in the ass.

Trust is a damn hard thing to nurture among people who lie, cheat and steal for a living, but I fully trust the four people sitting at this table. Without a doubt, I know they have my back, and I have theirs. We've learned to work together quite efficiently, and although I don't consider myself an adrenaline junkie, I love the high I get from a successful heist. Not quite as good as sex, but a strong contender.

I glance over at Addison Mills, better known as The Boss, or simply Addie. With beachy waves the color of sand and cobalt blue eyes, she's an all-American beauty. But she also possesses an elegance that seems rare these days. The woman is also damn smart and an expert when it comes to dusty old antiques. If I dug a relic out of the ground, she could tell me where it most likely came from and its approximate age, along with its value. She decides on our jobs, with some general input from us and, sometimes, The Man.

Right now, Addie is talking about some new tech gadget with Ryder McKay, who we refer to as The Diamond Man. Our gem expert identifies, evaluates and analyzes gemstones using specialized tools to determine their quality, authenticity and market value. I guess when your parents own diamond mines all over the world, it's a skill you pick up. He also handles our tech and thinks his jokes are way funnier than they actually are, but we humor him.

Sitting between me and Ryder is Lincoln Decker. I call him Deck, but the big man is also known as Linc, The Safecracker and, when needed, The Muscle. He can open anything from safes to locks, and he excels under pressure. Maybe because he's a former fighter and loves a good challenge. Right now, he's drumming his fingers on the table and I'm not sure how a guy with such big hands can be so dexterous and nimble. But he always gets the goods.

Rounding out our dysfunctional little crew and sitting on my other side is The Sex Bomb, better known as BrightonLeroux. If you can imagine a raven-haired Marilyn Monroe with jade-green eyes and the lightest wisp of a French accent, that's Brighton. The woman has the power to stop traffic with a mere smile and shake of her voluptuous hips. There's something about her that's absolutely magnetic, and the moment she steps into a room, she draws every eye. Seduction is her weapon, and she's unerringly effective at wielding it to distract a target while one of us is robbing him blind. But don't underestimate her—she is wily and intelligent. She's also our getaway driver when necessary. Her dad is a former French pro race car driver, and

she picked up quite a few tricks from him. Tricks that have saved our asses on several occasions.

Together, we're a force to be reckoned with, and these guys are my ride or die. Even though we all come from different walks of life and backgrounds, we share a similar bond—we're damn good at pulling off cons, heists and burglaries. We get the goods and we get the hell out.

Every. Single. Time.

Well, at least for the last three years.

Is being a thief the most noble profession? Maybe not.

But ask me if I care.

After the way I grew up, I do what I have to do. No regrets.

Honestly, I'm not sure how long this gig will last. I can't imagine myself running around the world, attempting to pull off complicated heists when I'm sixty. But, for now, I'm going to ride this crazy train and enjoy every minute of it. When the time is right, I'll ride off into the sunset with a healthy bank account and maybe a pretty girl on my arm.

"You look deep in thought, Knox," Deck says, brown eyes glinting. "Got a hot date lined up?"

I smirk. "Always."

Brighton snorts. "The real question is will she last more than a night?"

“Probably not,” I admit easily, leaning back in my chair. The front legs lift off the floor and I lace my fingers behind my head. “But is it my fault I possess an excessive amount of charm?”

“Oh, God,” Addie groans and makes a gagging sound.

Brighton kicks her boot against my chair leg and it crashes down with a thunk.

“Sometimes I think you ladies don’t appreciate me,” I tell them, pretending my feelings are hurt and giving them my puppy dog eyes.

“Save it for your next mark, Knox.” Addie flutters her long lashes at me. “B and I know you too well.”

She and Brighton exchange knowing smiles, and I just grin. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter.

“Well, let’s be honest. No one at this table has a level of relationship experience conducive to giving anyone else advice,” I say.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I have no problem getting a woman,” Ryder says.

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“Yeah, you just don’t want one long term,” Addie states.

“Exactly. Relationships give me hives.” Ryder shudders, and we all laugh.

“I wouldn’t mind a relationship,” Brighton says carefully, “as long as it’s with the right man.”

“You mean a man collecting Social Security?” Ryder asks, and I crack up. We all know Brighton likes the silver foxes.

“There’s nothing wrong with a distinguished older gentleman. Maybe you boys could learn a thing or two from a more experienced man.”

The fellas and I all make a chuffing sound at that.

“I’ve never had any complaints,” Deck says gruffly.

“Who’s around long enough to complain, Mr. Fancy-Free?” Brighton teases. “We know you prefer being a bachelor.”

“Damn straight. I hate clingy women,” he grumbles.

“Depends what they’re clinging to, if you know what I mean.” I waggle my eyebrows, and everyone chuckles.

“Mon Dieu!” Brighton rolls her pretty green eyes. It’s cute when she starts speaking French. I think she reverts to her native language when she’s annoyed. And I have

way too much fun riling her up.

Giving her a devastating smile, I reach for her hand, lift it to my lips and press a kiss to her soft skin. “Mademoiselle Leroux, has anyone told you how stunning you look today?” I ask huskily.

She lightly flicks the end of my nose with her index finger. “You are so full of shit.”

I grin and nip her knuckle, releasing her hand as an incoming call rings on Addie’s laptop.

Finally, I think, sitting up a little straighter.

The Man, whoever he is, always receives our full attention without even asking. There’s something about him that commands respect. It’s weird that we all feel it, yet none of us know his true identity. There must be a reason he prefers staying in the shadows. All we know is Addie’s mom told her she could trust him. That after she was gone—which she is—The Man would be here to help and occasionally check in with jobs.

It’s all a little cloak and dagger, but Addie’s brother—a Navy SEAL—worked for a secret group called The Agency. Guess doing secret shit must run in the family.

A man dressed in black with a scrambled face appears on the screen. It’s hard to tell much about him except he has a broad, firm chest and muscled arms. His deep voice, however, is clear as day, and completely unfamiliar.

“Hello, how is everyone doing?” The Man asks.

“Good,” Addie responds, and the rest of us nod. “What have you got for us?”

I hide my smirk. Addie always likes getting straight down to business. I don't think she has a carefree or impractical bone in her body, but that's probably what makes her so competent. The woman doesn't waste time or mince words. She's pragmatic and tenacious, and those qualities serve her well.

At least when it comes to our line of business. If we're talking about romance, not so much. I get the feeling she may have been burned in the past, so now she keeps things simple—and that means testosterone-free. Apparently, none of us wants any of the drama that invariably seems to come with a relationship. We prefer our drama to come from the excitement of a heist.

“A man named Alejandro Torres, currently in South America, has a massive emerald.”

“Emerald?” Ryder echoes, perking up. “How many carats are we talking?”

Someone mentions a gem and, I swear to God, Ryder gets a hard-on.

“Just over twenty carats and near-perfect transparency.”

“Fuck yeah,” Ryder exclaims. “That's a nice stone.”

“Torres stole it, and now I want you to steal it back,” The Man says. “Then it will be returned to its rightful owner.”

That comment raises all our eyebrows. We aren't exactly Robin Hood, and we're certainly not known for our charity work.

“So, we're not cutting and re-selling it?” Addie confirms.

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“No.” When no one says anything, The Man leans forward. “Is that a problem?”

“Of course not,” Addie instantly responds. “It’s just a new way of doing business.”

“I’ll send you all the details. Torres is hosting a party Saturday night. I have one invite, but it shouldn’t be more than a two-person job.” He hesitates, then says, “Torres is a dangerous man. Be careful.”

“We always are,” Addie assures him. Then the screen goes black.

“He’s very mysterious,” Brighton murmurs.

“Yeah, what’s the need with all the secrecy?” Ryder asks.

Addie shrugs, and a moment later, her email pings. “He’s never let us down before, right?”

“Not yet,” Deck responds dryly.

She frowns and opens the intel we’ll need. “The emerald is in a safe in Torres’ office, so that makes Linc our lucky winner.” He nods. “Any other volunteers?”

“I’ll go,” I offer. Why the hell not? I don’t have anything else going on—like the hot date I’d insinuated—and maybe I’ll get to flirt with a lovely señorita. Or three.

Because that’s my job...I’m The Charmer.

Much like Brighton, I wield my sexuality for whatever we may need—usually a distraction. Sometimes, a seduction. Not to be arrogant, but my good looks and charismatic personality are an asset. People don't expect me to have a brain, and that means they underestimate me. Because when it comes to numbers, I'm a human calculator. My eyes are always on the prize, and I'll do whatever it takes to get the job done.

And right now, I'm about to get that emerald.

Chapter One: Knox

After going over every aspect and detail of the Colombian heist, I feel confident Deck and I will pull it off with ease. Addie emails us all the information from The Man. We have no idea where he gets his intel, but it's consistently legit.

Schematics and blueprints? Always accurate.

Passwords and keycodes? Never fail.

Hidden tunnel entrance or secret back door to an actual castle? No problem.

The Man provides time and time again when we need something. Just like Angel said he would.

Does it leave me with a multitude of questions? Sure. But we've come to rely on his inside information, and the last thing we want to do is piss him off and have him disappear on us. He wants his privacy, for whatever reason, and part of our unspoken agreement is to respect that.

Deck and I are taking a commercial flight that leaves in less than three hours. I have just enough time to pack a duffel bag and scarf down a sandwich before he picks me

up. We drive over to the airport and the flight is right on schedule. It's not long until the plane is up in the air and we're en route to South America.

I rotate my neck, working out the kinks, and glance over at Deck, who already looks a little pale. The big guy hates flying, and I take the opportunity to tease him a little.

"Hey," I say, nodding to the strip of silver tape above his head. "I sure hope there's more than duct tape holding this bucket of bolts together."

He looks up at the tape and turns paler. "Yeah, I sure fuckin' hope so."

I can't help but chuckle and he glares at me. Flying never bothers me. In fact, I kind of like it. Flying commercial sucks, but if I'm lucky enough to be on a private plane and can avoid the airport hassle, count me in every time. There's a certain level of freedom when you're soaring above the clouds at six-hundred miles per hour.

"Only six more hours," I cheerfully remind him, and he flips me off.

The party we're planning to infiltrate tomorrow evening is a black-tie affair and sounds like it's going to be a mix of socialites, wealthy businessmen and old money. Growing up poor, I was never invited to any fancy shindigs, but since meeting Addie and Angel, I've attended a hundred similar soirées.

Slipping inside the mansion and gatecrashing a hoity-toity party is a lot like seducing a whore—minimal effort to succeed. The attendees are so self-absorbed, they pay no attention to anyone but themselves.

And that makes my job easy.

I'm there to mingle and charm. Keep the attention off Deck, who will fade into the periphery like a phantom and break into the host's safe, stealing an emerald the size

of my fist. We work well together, and I'm not expecting any issues.

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There's only one thing that could turn into a potential problem for my crew.

"What're your thoughts on the detective who's been sniffing around?" I ask.

Deck shifts in his seat and frowns. "Vaughn?" he asks, voice dry. "He's definitely going to be a pain in our ass."

"Right now, all he has is unfounded suspicions. No evidence that we're involved in any of the crimes he's investigating."

We are involved, of course. In every single one.

"Not yet, anyway. But I get the feeling he's going to be a persistent prick."

"Yeah," I agree. "I get that feeling, too."

"Just means we have to be extra careful."

Nodding, I stretch my long legs out. "Did you see the way he was looking at Addie?"

"He gave her a few looks," Deck says carefully. "Like he couldn't decide if he wanted to arrest her or fuck her."

"Not good."

"No. Either way, I have a feeling he'd be up for cuffing her."

“Fucking great.” I rub two fingers against my temple. “Good thing she’s smart enough not to fall for his bullshit.”

“Let’s hope so.”

Luckily, the duct tape and bubble gum holds, and the plane lands safely at El Dorado International Airport in Bogotá. I stand and reach up to grab our duffel bags from the luggage compartment above. The capital city is surprisingly cool and averages around fifty degrees most of the year, so I slip my jacket on.

Since it’s late, we grab our fancy rental car and go straight to the hotel. Deck and I have a couple of rooms booked near the airport. It’s going to be a quick in and out, though. No time to mingle or explore.

After checking in under fake names, we dump our stuff off in our rooms and head down to the restaurant. We’re both starving, and while I order a monster dish of bandeja paisa, Deck finds a burger and fries at the bottom of the menu. He isn’t very daring when it comes to trying new food, but we both agree on a couple of Club Colombia beers which really hit the spot.

Deck eyes my huge plate of food warily after picking the lettuce off his burger. “What the hell is in that?” he asks.

“Beans, pork, rice, avocado.” I shrug and take another big bite. “Eggs, I think? I don’t know, but it’s damn tasty.”

“Is there anything you won’t eat?”

“Nope. I’ll try anything once.”

He shakes his head and reaches for a fry. For several long moments, we eat in

companionable silence while I instinctually scan the room. Looking for an easy mark or a target comes naturally to me, and I don't even think about it.

A good thief has certain innate qualities. In my book, those include agility, stealth, dexterity and adaptability. Being able to think fast on your feet and possess keen observation skills are also essential. And I'm always observing.

Like now, for instance.

The woman sitting by herself three tables away is wearing a ring on her left ring finger the size of Texas. It's practically screaming, "Steal me!" A businessman at the bar has his briefcase propped against the legs of his barstool. Probably contains his laptop, which I could swipe in half a second. Before he's even through finishing that sip of tequila he's drinking, I'd be out the door and on the elevator. Less than a minute later, I'd be in his email, finding his reservation confirmation and headed to the room he's occupying. After picking the lock, I could steal whatever I wanted.

Most people are oblivious to the glaring fact they're unconsciously making themselves a target to people like me. When an opportunity presents itself, I rarely bite anymore. Not when it comes to small potatoes. But way back before I met Angel, I seized every single one.

Alma "Angel" Mills, a.k.a. Addie's mom, was the best thief I've ever known. She took me under her wing when I was only eighteen and taught me all the best things I know. Addie and I were only twenty-three when Angel died. Of course, Addie was devastated. Her mother was her idol, and since Addie had become like a sister to me, we stayed close friends, even when we briefly went our separate ways.

When she decided to form this ring of thieves a few years ago, she brought me on board, and we've become quite the little family.

A very successful family.

“Are you done scoping out the room yet?” Deck asks, breaking into my thoughts.

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I nod, finishing my beer. “Yep.”

We pay the bill and return to our individual rooms. Normally, I might’ve lingered, eventually making my way up to the bar if I spotted a pretty woman. Or sometimes we like to hit the town, check out the newest and hottest club. I usually only do that if I’m in the mood to get laid. Other times, we just happen to have invites, courtesy of The Man, to a party on a yacht or a movie premiere or something equally glamorous. It’s a great way to mingle with potential targets and let off some steam.

To be honest, what used to be fun and exciting has lost some of its shine. It’s just as well, because I’m not in the mood right now. Besides, tomorrow is a big day, and today has already been too long. I’m ready to crash.

“See you bright and early,” Deck says, opening his door.

“Not too early,” I call as he disappears inside with a chuckle. The man loves getting up at the ass-crack of dawn for some ungodly reason. But me? I need my beauty sleep.

I take a quick shower, climb into the big bed and automatically reach for my phone. I already texted Addie to let her know we’d arrived, and we’ll make contact again before and after the heist. I avoid social media like the plague, but I check my email, tomorrow’s weather and spend some time playing a game I’m addicted to which involves puzzles and numbers. After easily beating ten levels, I grow bored, toss my phone aside and turn out the lights.

Stretching, I yawn loudly, and it occurs to me this is an awfully big bed for one

person. Guess it doesn't matter. If I'd invited anyone in here to join me, it would only be for a couple hours, anyway.

Better to sleep alone and get some shut-eye, because morning will arrive far faster than I'd like.

???

Deck and I spend the day going over the mansion's layout and the safe's schematics. Preparation and research are key components to any successful heist—but knowledge will only get us so far. Luckily, we've got plenty of skill and experience, too.

While I'm going in as a guest, sporting my custom-tailored Tom Ford tuxedo, Deck is practically anonymous in black pants, a white shirt and tie just like all the other waiters. Normally, you'd think a big guy like him would stand out, but nope. Linc Decker is just that good, easily blending in with his surroundings. It'll be child's play for him to slip into the side door, then bypass the kitchen and head straight for the safe located in Torres' office. Meanwhile, I get to rub elbows with the guests for a little while.

“Ready?” Deck asks.

I tuck my trusty Glock 19 in the holster hidden beneath my jacket. As prepared as I always am, you can never be too careful. “Let's go.”

The elevator ride down is quick, and once outside, I give Deck a nod. This is where we go our separate ways. Lucky me, I get to drive the rental car over—a silver Lamborghini Aventador that is everything I imagined it would be and more. Sleek, fast and comfortable. It screams look at me, stopping people dead in their tracks. The Lambo certainly lives up to its name, and I wouldn't mind owning one. Two million for a car is a bit steep for me, though.

But they sure are fun to drive.

“Have fun Ubering,” I call out, tossing my duffel in the supercool front trunk, and spinning the heavy key fob in my hand with a smirk.

“Eat me,” Deck responds flatly, and I laugh. I’m sure he’d love a ride over, but what hired help would arrive in a sexy beast like this?

The iconic scissor door opens upward and pivots, and I slip inside, settling into the seat and looking over the instrument panel. Oh, yeah. She’s a thing of beauty. The car starts with a growl, and I make sure to give Deck an obnoxious salute as I drive by, leaving him waiting on the corner for his ten-dollar ride.

Of course, he flips me off.

The next time I see Deck, he’ll be meeting me at the rendezvous point with a huge emerald that could buy a warehouse full of Lambos.

The drive to Alejandro Torres’ estate takes about twenty minutes. The place is lit up like a Christmas tree and guests are arriving in an endless parade of Ferraris, Bentleys and Rolls Royces. My door scissors up in a smooth lift and I get out, handing the key to the valet. Glancing up, I check out one of the biggest mansions I’ve ever seen, flawlessly pretending like I’ve seen bigger. It’s imposing with huge stone columns, and I walk up the wide stairs and extend my invitation to the woman at the door.

But she’s not looking at the engraved piece of paper. Her brown eyes are currently sliding down my bespoke suit, checking out my assets.

“Buenas noches, encantadora,” I murmur, dialing up my charm and turning down my voice to a husky tone.

“Buenas noches,” she responds with a little giggle.

I have no idea how good that invitation is, but I’m assuming if it’s from The Man, it’ll do its job and get me through the door. However, stranger things have happened, so I whisper more flirty Spanish words—I know enough to get by—intending to leave this woman distracted and panting for a few more.

She’s a flustered, blushing mess as I sweep past with a dazzling smile and a light touch to her elbow. If experience has taught me anything, it’s that women like to be noticed. They enjoy flirting and hearing compliments. My goal is to make them feel like the only woman in the room. Make them fall in love with me, if only for the evening.

As I walk through the large foyer covered in black and white marble flooring, I lightly touch the comms unit in my ear. Deck will check in once he’s in position. If he needs a distraction, he’ll let me know. In the meantime, I’m going to enjoy the party.

The moment I step into the main ballroom, three female servers approach me with trays of champagne and hors d’oeuvres, and a multitude of batting lashes. With a sexy grin, I accept a glass of bubbly and take a sip.

Ah, it’s the good stuff. But I wouldn’t expect any less. Alejandro Torres can certainly afford it. The man is loaded, mostly due to his penchant for selling arms and intel to guerrilla soldiers. He has houses around the world, so if it gets too hot in one location, he picks up and goes somewhere else.

“Hello,” a feminine voice purrs near my ear.

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Well, that certainly didn't take long. Not to be arrogant, but I usually get in a lap around the room before someone hits on me.

A woman in a barely-there, slinky silver dress is eye-fucking me hard. Sometimes I grow tired of feeling like a piece of meat. Other times, I embrace it. Right now, I'm in the mood to flirt and charm and make this woman want what she can't have. Not with me, not tonight. There's no time to deviate from the plan. Besides, she isn't my type.

Granted, that's a little harsh, because I love all women. They're fascinating creatures and I truly appreciate their complexity. When it comes to what attracts me most, however, flashy and overtly sexy isn't it.

I tend to be drawn to a quiet confidence. I'd rather wonder what's hidden beneath a baggy sweatshirt than have a pair of tight nipples practically poke my eyes out. Subtlety, intelligence, unpretentiousness, hair up in a messy bun—now that's what I'm talking about.

Time to play the game, though.

As I engage Twin Peaks in scintillating conversation, Addie's amused voice fills my ear.

“Looking good, Beckett. And who is that silver pop-tart with her tongue in your ear?”

Addie and Ryder laugh. Fuckers. Guess Ryder just tapped into the cameras which hang in every corner of the room. One of these days I'd love to see Addie or Ryder attempt

what Brighton and I do. Those two have about as much charm and finesse as a prickly cactus.

“Cams looping,” Ryder states.

“How’re you doing, Linc?” Addie asks.

“A-okay,” Deck reports. “Heading down to Torres’ office now.”

“Copy that.”

We go radio silent and I decide to escape Twin Peaks and wander around the party a little more. I like to get a lay of the land, scope things out. I’m also looking for our illustrious host. Part of my job is keeping eyes on him and making sure he stays far away from his office.

“I’m in,” Deck confirms a minute later.

So far, so good. This should be a quick in and out since we aren’t dealing with a complicated safe. Intel showed it’s not a biometric lock, which is good news. Having to obtain Torres’ fingerprints or eye scan would take a lot more work. Hell, with Deck on the job, we don’t even need the safe’s code.

Nope. All Deck needs is the neodymium magnet in his pocket. The rare-earth magnet is wrapped in a scarf and far from his cell phone, which it would fry in a second. Strong yet simple. After examining the model, Deck told us safes like Torres’ use a nickel solenoid to activate the locking mechanism, typically found on the front door. All he has to do is slide the magnet around, using the scarf to maneuver it, and then—

“Got it,” Deck murmurs. There’s a soft click and he’s already closed it. “No trace of an intrusion.”

“You’re a damn super star,” Addie says.

“And what am I?” I ask, feigning hurt. “Chopped liver?”

“Oh, Knox, you know we love you. Now get the hell outta there, you two.”

I smirk and turn toward the side exit where I’m planning to escape. Easy peasy. Damn, we’re good at our jobs.

The thought barely passes through my head when an alarm sounds. Chaos erupts and armed guards rush forward, ordering guests to remain still in rapid-fire Spanish. Then several gates come crashing down, cutting me off from Linc and my way out.

Oh, shit.

“Linc? Knox? What’s going on?” Addie asks.

“I accidentally triggered something,” Deck says. “But I’m out with the emerald. Where are you, Knox?”

I do a quick sweep of the room and force myself to remain calm and logical. “In the ballroom. Security just locked it down.”

“Can you get out?” Addie asks.

“I’ll find a way. Time for Plan B, though. I’ll see you at the airport, Deck.”

At least, I hope so.

Chapter Two: Hunter

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Present...

Looking out the plane's windshield, I see nothing but clear skies as I enjoy the final leg of the flight. I've had my pilot's license since I was seventeen, and flying is my first love. When I'm soaring above the clouds, all my worries and troubles temporarily melt away.

I've been doing a lot of flying lately thanks to my old military buddy Braxton "Pharoah" Graves. He and his team—better known as Ex Nihilo—needed a pilot in their quest to take down The Agency. A lot of secrets and twists I never could have imagined recently came to light, but Brax and company defeated the nefarious group. He also reunited with his ex-wife, Quinn, and they rekindled their love. And marriage. In fact, they should be enroute to their honeymoon in Hawaii right about now.

And I'm not jealous at all. Nope, not one little bit.

Okay, maybe a smidge.

But it has nothing to do with Brax and Quinn, who are perfect for each other, and everything to do with me. I'm not exactly sure what my problem is lately, but I feel...empty. Normally, I'm so independent, strong all on my own, and couldn't care less about finding a significant other. But after witnessing the Ex Nihilo crew fall in love one by one, it's making me question things.

Should I open myself back up to the possibility of love? Dating? A relationship?

I groan. Just the idea of baring myself to a man makes me queasy. It's so scary putting yourself out there, opening up physically and emotionally, then getting shit all over. I tried once, and it didn't end well—for me. Being burned sucks. And ever since that terrible experience, I've closed myself off. Like a turtle, I tuck my head and hide whenever I feel threatened. Or, in my case, someone flirts too hard and shows too much interest. Because letting a man get close again, allowing myself to be vulnerable and potentially hurt, scares me.

I shut that line of thought down fast and focus on the blue horizon. I left Brax and Quinn's wedding early for this job, so while it's not a pleasure flight, I can still enjoy my sky-time.

Current flight time has me arriving in Bogotá, Colombia, in less than half an hour. Local time is three hours ahead of San Diego, so I'll be coming in at eight in the morning. My job is to pick up one of Addison Mills' crew—a thief named Knox Beckett. More details are supposedly coming, but I haven't heard from her yet.

Addie is Ryland "Rip" Mills' older sister. And Ryland is a member of Ex Nihilo, which is the only reason I would leave a party for a rescue mission. Okay, not the only reason, but a pretty solid one. Ryland got a call from Addie during Brax's reception about needing help. Apparently, her thief got in some hot water while attempting to steal an emerald.

Now that Brax's team is out of the woods, I don't have anything tethering me to one place, so I jumped at the chanceto get out of town. Mostly, to clear my head and figure out what the hell I'm planning to do with the rest of my life. Because my current trajectory is going to lead me to nothing but loneliness. Something the party I left definitely put into perspective.

Feeling sorry for myself isn't my style, so I turn my attention to what I can control. I'm in the middle of reviewing my flight instruments when my phone rings. "Pyro," I

answer.

“Hunter?” a feminine voice asks. “It’s Addie.”

“Hi, Addie.”

She clears her throat. “So, there’s been a bit of a snag.”

As much as I appreciate a clearcut plan, I’m also damn good at adapting. Maybe the adrenaline junkie in me even likes when things occasionally go off the rails. A good challenge keeps me on my toes and working at my highest level. As a Navy pilot, that skill served me well. Hell, it still does. “What’s going on?”

“Knox got a little held up, but he’s on his way to the airport. At least, he was.”

“Was?” I echo.

“We lost comms. But he has his phone and I sent him your number. I told him to make contact with you the moment he could.”

“Does he have the emerald?” I ask. Ryland told me Knox tried to steal an emerald and then got into some trouble. I have no idea if he succeeded in his plans, but I can’t say I’m too thrilled about helping him escape the country with something so valuable. A manhunt for contraband tends to make things a lot more complicated.

“No,” she assures me, “Linc has it.”

“Linc?”

“Lincoln Decker, another member of my crew. He and Knox went down there together but got separated and things went downhill fast. Knox got detained briefly,

but like I said, he should be on his way to the rendezvous point now.”

“Roger that.” I’m used to working with former military men and women who are highly organized. This group sounds like a circus.

“I really appreciate your help, Hunter. I know this was all thrown at you last minute, and we haven’t even met, so thank you.”

“No problem,” I say easily, but my mind keeps reminding me I’m helping a bunch of thieves.

The truth is, I’m starting to have some serious misgivings about accepting this job. For one, it goes against my moral code. I’ve never stolen anything in my life, and I certainly don’t condone it. Second, what if their lack of organization gets me in trouble? Because, let’s face it, there’s such a thing as adapting to a changing situation, and then there’s trying to wade through someone else’s chaos without getting pulled under and drowning yourself.

Studying the horizon, I remember not everything Ex Nihilo did was exactly legit. They got involved in some sketchy shit, but they’re the best people I know. So, maybe not everything is always so cut and dry.

At least, that’s what I tell myself.

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“I owe you,” Addie says.

“It’s fine. I’d do anything for Ryland. Your brother is a really good guy, and after what happened with his dad—uh, your dad...” Welp, that got awkward fast. “Anyway, I’ll get your man out. I’ve got a pretty good track record at swooping in and rescuing people.”

“Good to know. Thank you again, and Knox should be in touch soon.”

After we hang up, I grimace. For a second, I forgot Ryland and Addie share the same piece of shit father. What he did to them...

I shake my head. Musings for another time. Right now, I need to land this jet and prepare for my passenger. Then we turn right back around and get the hell outta Dodge.

Smooth as butter, the jet’s wheels touch down at El Dorado International Airport. The tower instructs me where to park, and there’s nothing left to do but wait for my passenger to arrive. In the meantime, I’ll do my post-flight check and refuel, because the sooner we get out of here, the better.

I know Addie said Knox doesn’t have the emerald, and I hope that’s the truth, because I’m not looking for any trouble. My job is to pick the guy up and get him back home. The last thing I want is to be caught up in an international conflict.

Shit. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so quick to offer to pick this Knox character up. For all I know, he has the entire Colombian Policía Nacional hot on his tail. Or worse,

the cartels.

Too late now. I'm here.

Turning the engine off, I unclip my harness, grab my bomber jacket and open the exit door. A cool breeze lifts the strands of hair framing my face, and I reach back and tighten my ponytail. It's cooler out than I would've imagined, but it feels refreshing. Pulling in a deep breath, I lower the stairs and walk down.

My boots hit the tarmac and I lift my clipboard. Step by step, I check the plane over, making sure everything is in tip-top shape. Ever since I crashed my plane for Braxton and his team, I've been using the Slater Security jet. Luckily, Dash Slater, a former Delta Force commander, is extremely generous and I have it on loan for the foreseeable future. He and his wife Lake are also quite busy with their new son and currently not doing a ton of traveling.

Post-flight check complete, I glance down at my watch. Where is this guy? As if in answer, my phone rings and I pull it out of my inside pocket and swipe the bar over. "Pyro," I answer briskly.

There's a brief pause then a deep, smooth voice says, "I'm calling for Hunter."

"This is Hunter."

Another pause, and I'd be willing to bet this guy thought he was calling a man. Typical. I've had more than my fair share of dealing with people who've underestimated me because of my chromosomes. But I'm just as good of a pilot as, if not better than, most men.

"Hey, it's Knox."

“Do you plan on showing up to the airport any time soon?” I ask crisply. Waiting around is a part of my job, and normally I don’t mind, but my gut is telling me the sooner we leave Colombia, the better.

“Change of plans,” he says, and I frown.

“What do you mean?” I ask, suspicion lacing my voice.

“Unfortunately, I’m in a bit of a jam. Any chance you can pick me up?”

“I thought that’s what I was doing,” I respond dryly.

He clears his throat. “I can’t exactly get to the airport at the moment.”

Seriously? He wants me to play Uber? I make an annoyed sound and grit my teeth.

“You can’t just grab a taxi?” I clip out, tapping my clipboard against my thigh, and having no desire to drive through the city.

“Not at the moment, no. Sorry to put you out, Hunter,” he swiftly apologizes. “I know you’re doing me a huge favor, and I appreciate it. You have a lovely voice, by the way.”

His comment catches me off-guard, and I frown. “What?”

“Kind of smoky. Like my favorite top shelf whiskey.”

“I’m sorry, are you flirting with me?”

He chuckles and I get the impression he’s used to charming his way out of bad situations. Probably right into a girl’s panties, too. But I don’t have time to play

footsie with this guy, and I'm completely immune to his razzle-dazzle bullshit.

“Maybe?” His deep laughter vibrates through the phone and, dammit, the guy sounds sexy as hell. I don't need this kind of distraction. Not when I have a job to do.

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Releasing an unhappy sigh, I glance over at the airport's car rental office. "Where are you?" I reluctantly ask and, I swear, I can hear him grinning through the phone.

This was supposed to be an easy in and out. A quick favor.

So much for that.

Knox Beckett has officially become a pain in my ass.

Chapter Three: Knox

Eight Hours Ago...

"Why is nothing ever easy?" I wonder aloud.

Getting out of Alejandro Torres' ballroom after it locked down wasn't hard. I made my way back to the main entrance, found the woman who'd originally let me in, and flirted my way out. Okay, I also passed her three crisp one-hundred-dollar bills, so maybe the cash had more to do with it than my sparkling baby-blues.

After that, things didn't go quite as planned, though. Stealing my key fob back from the valet was easy, and I'd almost reached the Lambo when a couple of armed guards noticed me slipping away. They ordered me to stop, as expected. Instead, I threw them a curveball, jumped into the car and hit the gas.

Good luck catching me, suckers.

The last thing I wanted to do was lead these thugs to the emerald, so, I called Deck and told him to get the hell out of the city ASAP.

“What about you?” he’d asked.

“I’ll call Addie. We can figure another way out for me.”

“Are you sure?”

I squealed around a corner and checked the silver Patek Philippe on my wrist. Well-worth every pretty penny I’d spent on it. Besides, when you’re hobnobbing with billionaires, you gotta be able to fit in and look the part. “The flight leaves soon. Don’t wait for me. I’ve got guards to shake.”

“Knox—”

“Go! I’ll see you back in Denver.” After disconnecting the call, I’d dialed Addie and explained the situation.

“I’ll send someone for you,” she assured me. “Hang tight. I’m calling my brother.”

Addie and her brother Ryland have a bit of a tempestuous history. The former SEAL possesses a strong moral compass—ironic since he comes from a family of thieves and liars. I know it’s been hard for the siblings to see eye to eye at times, but it pisses me off when he gets judgy. Addie has always been one of my best friends, and Angel, their mother, is the reason I’ve survived and thrived. I owe her everything.

I understand Ryland sees things in black and white, but life can be very gray sometimes. Although, after his dealings with his father and The Agency, I think he understands that better. He and Addie seem closer now. They talk a lot, and if she asks him for help, he’ll find a way to deliver—which is good for me.

Exactly three minutes later, Addie calls back and informs me Ryland's friend, a former Navy fighter pilot named Hunter, is on the way to pick me up at El Dorado. Sweet. I hope the guy flies fast, because I'm ready to get the hell out of here.

After a quick calculation, including the three-hour time change, I conclude Hunter won't arrive for another seven hours and sixteen minutes. Give or take, depending on the wind. It's best that I lead the idiots following me on a merry chase around the city for the time being. I want them as far away from the airport, Deck and that emerald for as long as possible.

It's fun for a while, but I'm growing tired—literally and of their fuckery—and decide to lose these jokers and hunker down somewhere until it's time to meet up with Hunter. Brighton can give anyone a run for their money when she's behind the wheel, but I'm not too shabby of a driver myself. Especially when I'm behind the wheel of an automobile that goes from zero to sixty in under three seconds.

Once I ditch my pursuers, I start looking for a safe place to hide out, but I'm in an Aventador Lamborghini. It was made to stand out. Not much I can do about that, so I pull over to the curb, shut the car off and look out the window. I'm parked between two SUVs which provide a modicum of cover. Although a garage might provide better hiding, the last thing I want to do is trap myself in a place I can't get out of fast.

I'm not exactly sure where I am, but it's still quiet because of the early morning hour. Sliding my seat all the way back, I pull the end of my bowtie, leaving it to hang loose around my neck, then unbutton the first couple of buttons on my shirt.

Much better. Modesty aside, I can wear a suit like James Bond, but, after a while, just give me comfy pajama pants. In this case, I'll wait to change until I'm safely on the jet and heading back to the good ol' US of A.

Pulling my Glock from its holster, I lay it on the passenger seat and stretch my long

legs out as much as possible, trying to ignore my growling stomach. Breakfast would really hit the spot right about now. Maybe Hunter will have something I can munch on. Closing my eyes, I fold my hands and rest them on my stomach. It's been a whirlwind of a trip so far, and it's not over yet. If luck is on my side, I'll just hang out here until it's time to rendezvous with Hunter.

That's the plan, anyway. But things rarely go the way we want, so I'm not surprised when, sometime later, I see the same car that followed me from Torres' mansion slowly driving down the street.

It seems like I've barely rested, but I know hours have passed. I sink lower in my seat hoping they won't look my way and wishing I were in something a little more nondescript. Maybe a Honda.

Keep going, idiots.

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Brakes squeal and I know they spotted me. Cue my exit. I start the engine and jam on the gas.

The sun is starting to come up, which means my ride should be landing soon. Good. I've had enough of this place. A moment after that thought crosses my mind, gunfire pops through the air and I hear the ping of bullets on the car's flawless exterior. Destroying this beauty? Oh, that hurts. Plus, it's too early for this crap.

Ah, well. I do lead the life of a thief.

Steal the biggest emerald in all of Colombia from a baddie like Alejandro Torres and, yeah, I can expect to be chased.

And fuck, this puts a bit of a wrench in my plans. I can't exactly drive to the airport now. The last thing I want to do is lead these idiots straight to Hunter. Who knows what kind of weapons they might have—machine guns, grenades, a fucking RPG?

It's not a chance I'm willing to take. If Hunter isn't ready, and we don't get up into the air fast enough, it could lead to something really bad happening.

Nope. Time for Plan B. Or am I on Plan C now?

"What is Plan C, Beckett?" I casually ask myself as a bullet cracks the back windshield. I'm honestly not sure, but I need to figure it out fast. Spinning the wheel, I channel my inner Brighton and put my evasive driving skills to the test.

I'm not worried. I never worry. It's a waste of time and energy. Maybe because I

always find a way. My dad used to tell me I could fall into a pile of shit and come out smelling like roses.

#Facts. Maybe it's my easy charm or pretty face, but he's right. I could talk my way out of The Louvre with the Mona Lisa tucked under my arm.

I'm just that good.

My mouth curves up in a half-smile, half-grimace as I careen around a corner. As much fun as this is, these idiots are screwing with my schedule. I could still be napping, but now I'm driving around the city like a maniac.

My pursuers have become more persistent, and I look in the rear view mirror and sigh. By now, Deck and the emerald should be safely back in Denver, and I'm guessing Hunter will be landing shortly. Weighing my options, I think my best bet is to lose these dillholes again, hunker down somewhere and call Hunter for a pickup.

They chase me through another section of town, and I manage to fly through a red light, zip around a truck and shoot down an alley. On the other side of the block, I stop and take a look around. It's a touristy area full of small shops and restaurants.

Time to ditch this beauty and hole up until Hunter can get me.

After making sure I'm no longer being followed, I pull up to the curb and cut the engine. I wait for a few extra minutes. Confident the coast is clear, I slip out, tucking my pistol back in the holster beneath my jacket. Staying alert, I pop the front trunk and pull my duffel bag out.

It's early and the scent of baking bread makes me groan. My stomach wins and I head in the direction of pastries and carb heaven. Jogging forward a block or so, I pass endless shops and finally spot the bakery. Ducking around the nearest corner, I follow

my nose, moving fast, counting doors. Stopping at the fourth one down, I peer through the flimsy screen to see a middle-aged woman working at a flour-covered counter, rolling dough.

Without a second to spare, I open the door and step inside.

“I’m sorry,” I say in Spanish, and she looks up, startled. Giving her my most dazzling smile, I concoct a story about being a lost tourist who was nearly robbed. I tell her I managed to get away, but that a few men are looking for me. “So I ducked in here.”

Once she hears my story, her shoulders relax and she tells me it’s becoming more and more common. My Spanish is decent enough to get by and I discover she speaks English fairly well, so we switch over.

“It smells delicious,” I tell her, dropping my duffel bag. “Any chance I can hang out here until the coast is clear? And buy some breakfast? I’m starving.”

That seems to do the trick, and suddenly I’m embraced with good ol’ Colombian hospitality. She ushers me into the front of the store and points out the baked goods in the display case. Through the glass, I spot quite a few tasty-looking goodies—bread, pastries, and lots of South American sweet treats. I choose a few things then pull my wallet out of my back pants pocket, peel a couple of hundreds off my stash and hand them to her. I may be a thief, but I don’t like taking from people who work hard to make a living. That’s not my style.

For as much as I’ve accumulated, I’ll never forget where I came from—a working class family who struggled to make ends meet.

Her eyes go wide and she shakes her head.

“I insist. Muchas gracias.”

She points out a small table, serves up my breakfast and a cup of steaming coffee with gusto, and tells me to stay as long as I need. The moment she disappears into the back room, my gaze slants out the front window.

Fuck. A group of men are wandering up and down the sidewalk across the street. They must've found the Lambo and now they're searching for me on foot. Angling away from the window, I make sure to stay out of sight.

The surrounding businesses are still closed, so I should be fine for now. Unless they start breaking down doors, of course. As much as I'm enjoying my breakfast, I probably should get a move on.

I savor the last bite of a delicious pastry then pull my phone out.

Ah, the life of a thief. Stranded in a bakery in South America, being hunted down by an arms dealer's thugs, while waiting for a pickup from some former military guy. As much as I love the danger and excitement of what I do, I can't help but wonder again how much longer it'll continue.

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The truth is, I have more money than I know what to do with, and my family has been taken care of financially. I suppose it's only a matter of time before I move on, but I don't think Addie will be happy.

Considerations for another day. Right now, it's time to call my golden ticket outta here.

I open Addie's text messages, find Hunter's phone number and hit call. I hope the guy is going to be cooperative.

It barely rings before a brisk, feminine voice answers. "Pyro."

Not expecting a woman or "Pyro," I hesitate. Not much catches me off guard, and I have no idea why I assumed Hunter was a man, but just in case I dialed the wrong number, I say, "I'm calling for Hunter."

"This is Hunter."

Hmm. Unexpected and certainly a nice surprise. I assumed some former military flyboy would be escorting me home.

"Hey, it's Knox."

"Do you plan on showing up to the airport any time soon?" she asks in a tart voice.

"Change of plans," I tell her.

“What do you mean?”

“Unfortunately, I’m in a bit of a jam.” My attention moves back outside where Torres’ men continue to search. “Any chance you can pick me up?”

“I thought that’s what I was doing.” Her voice is dry as tinder.

“I can’t exactly get to the airport at the moment.”

She huffs out an annoyed breath and I find myself wondering what she looks like. If it’s anything like her sultry voice, I’m in trouble. Distractions on a job aren’t good.

“You can’t just grab a taxi?”

“Not at the moment, no. Sorry to put you out, Hunter.” Apologies can go a long way, and I infuse my tone with sincerity. “I know you’re doing me a huge favor, and I appreciate it. You have a lovely voice, by the way.”

I’m not sure where that last part came from, but it’s true.

“What?”

“Kind of smoky. Like my favorite top shelf whiskey.”

“I’m sorry, are you flirting with me?”

Her directness is refreshing. “Maybe?” I can’t help but laugh.

Another sigh. “Where are you?” she finally asks, and I grin from ear to ear. Even through the phone, my charm serves me well. Clearly, she isn’t thrilled about the change of plans, but I send her the address and she tells me she’s on her way.

Time to blow this pop stand. Er, bakery.

Chapter Four: Hunter

Whoever he is, the guy has balls.

With another shake of my head, I finish dealing with the airport's rental office, take the key and slide into the car. Plugging the address Knox gave me into the GPS, I leave the airport behind and venture out into the city.

Wow. Talk about going above and beyond. If there were an award for saving people's asses, I should definitely be nominated. Between swooping in to rescue Ex Nihilo over and over again this past year, and now this, I'd say I should win Pilot of the Year.

But he wouldn't have called me if he wasn't in trouble, right? At least that's what I tell myself until I pull into the alley behind the panadería and text him that I'm here. I'm not sure what exactly I expected, but it isn't the man who strolls out of the back door like he doesn't have a care in the world, wearing sunglasses and a tuxedo, tie hanging loosely around his neck.

He's carrying a pink bakery box and turns momentarily to speak to the woman now standing at the door before tossing her a jaunty wave. Maybe I'm reading the situation wrong, but she looks slightly flustered as she sends him off with smiles and, apparently, pastries and good wishes. Does he know her? They seem to be acquainted. Hell, he looks like he's out for a Sunday stroll, not running from a dangerous situation.

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With narrowed eyes, I watch him leisurely saunter over to the car, open the door and slip inside. He lowers his sunglasses and playful blue eyes the color of sapphires meet mine, followed by a bright, white smile. This guy thinks his shit doesn't stink.

"Thank you for picking me up, Hunter." His voice is deep and sure. A little cocky, maybe?

My gaze travels down over his rumpled tuxedo. A few undone buttons give me a glimpse of his smooth, tanned throat and, even though it's wrinkled, his tux fits him like a glove.

"You're welcome," I respond curtly, and my brow pulls together in a frown. I know his type only too well. The ultimate playboy who snaps his fingers and women come running. Bile crawls up the back of my throat.

I hate cocky men.

"Consider yourself lucky. I don't normally leave the jet to play Uber."

He chuckles as he adjusts the seat back further, his long legs barely fitting in the footwell. His scent fills the car, and whatever cologne he's wearing has me gripping the steering wheel harder, the delicious combination of amber and velvety musk teasing my nose. It fits him—all smooth and slightly sensual.

And it pisses me off.

"I am lucky," he tells me.

I clear my throat and meet his deep blue gaze. “Not that lucky. You didn’t make it to the airport and said you got into a jam. Was that before or after you stole someone else’s property?”

Okay, I don’t mean to sound quite so condescending, but the man is a self-proclaimed thief and part of Addie’s crew. I might not be the most upright person in the world, but I draw a line at stealing from others.

“I think you need a pastry.” He gives me a sexy smirk that probably sends most women into a panty-melting tizzy and lifts the lid on the pink box, cleverly avoiding my question.

“Thecocas de arequipeare heavenly, but pretty sticky. How about apolvorosa? Ever had one?” He tilts the box, offering me one. “They’re sugar and butter cookies. And absolutely delicious. No empanadas, though, sorry. Maria was still making them.”

Is he serious?

“Are you serious?” I blurt out, experiencing a clear descent into filter failure. “I left my friend’s wedding reception early so I could fly down here and rescue you. I rushed through the city, and you come strolling out with baked goods acting as though you’re on vacation? I thought bad guys were chasing after you and you’d gotten locked down in some life-or-death situation. I can’t believe this.”

Suddenly, it feels like he’s fucking with my time, and that pisses me off more than anything.

“Is this a joke?” I ask.

“No, of course not,” he says smoothly.

He sounds sincere, yet he's so calm and nonchalant for a guy who desperately needed a pickup.

"I appreciate you coming—" His voice abruptly cuts off, and I see his attention flicker to the passenger side mirror. "Speaking of bad guys. Not to rush you or anything, but you might want to get us out of here."

I glance up into the rear view mirror and see a car turn into the alley, slowly driving up behind us. "Bad guys?"

His body tenses slightly. "Yep."

That's all I need to know. I slam my foot against the gas and the car lurches forward. Knox grips onto the dashboard with one hand and reaches beneath his suit jacket with his other, pulling out a pistol.

I'm a pretty good driver and plan on ditching these clowns, but I like that he has a weapon. Just in case. Although I do keep one in the cockpit while flying, I don't normally carry a gun on me. Of course, this is Colombia, and I came to evac a thief. I'm not naive, so I brought my Glock which is currently holstered beneath my leather jacket.

The last thing I want is a shootout, though. Traffic has picked up and tourists are appearing. Trying to be careful yet still determined to get us the hell out of here, I jerk the wheel, squealing around a corner, doing my best to lose them.

"Nice move," Knox says. He points to an alley coming up fast. "Turn there. Then circle back around."

"Already planning on it," I tell him, whipping the steering wheel. We skid sideways, but I maintain control and accelerate. Racing past dumpsters, I keep my boot pressed

down firmly on the gas. He turns around in his seat, keeping a close watch on our pursuers.

“They’re getting too close,” he informs me. “We need to shake them.”

“No shit,” I grit out, glaring at the men still riding our asses. “Thank you for that keen observation, but this borrowed piece of junk can only go so fast.”

He glances at the speedometer and can see I’m flooring it. With a nod, he sets the bakery box on the dashboard, lowers the window and pushes up. “Keep it steady, Andretti,” he says cheekily, lifting his gun and leaning out the window.

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Shit. Half of his body is outside the vehicle and my heart thunders as he fires off a shot. His suit jacket whips up, caught in the wind, and my gaze drops to his ass. Seriously, Hunter? I give my head a shake and turn my focus back to the road.

Behind us, one of Knox's shots makes contact, splintering their windshield into a million cracks. I keep the car steady, but don't let up on the gas pedal. Knox fires again and the men chasing after us return fire.

Concentrating on driving, we blast out of the alley and back into slow-moving traffic. Oh, crap! I'm forced to swerve around stopped cars, and Knox jolts sideways, almost falling out.

Oops.

"You call that steady?" he yells.

Cringing, I ease up on the gas. "Sorry!"

He might annoy me, but that doesn't mean I want to accidentally kill him.

After a few damn good moves on my part, we roar through an intersection, and I swerve through several cars and past a truck. Knox slides back inside the car and drops down on the passenger seat.

"We lost 'em." I can feel him studying me and I glance over to see him assessing me with dancing blue eyes. "Nice driving."

I can't help but grin, ramped up from an adrenaline high. "Wait'll you see my flying."

He laughs, and for the first time in a long time, I feel lighter.

"Addie mentioned you're a former fighter pilot."

I nod, blending back into the flow of cars zooming along the highway and heading toward the airport. "Ten years in the Navy."

"Impressive. Thank you for your service."

I steal another glance at him. He's staring at me, and I can't quite figure out what I see flash through his gorgeous blue eyes. Suddenly, something hot and liquid fills my lower belly. No, no, no. I refuse to fall for this cocky thief. Swallowing hard, I look away and force a nod.

Okay, so he's hot. Big deal. A lot of men are, right? He's also smooth and arrogant as hell, which are two qualities I avoid at all costs since my relationship with Shane crashed and burned. My former Top Gun classmate is the reason I've stayed single and dependent on my vibrator for so damn long.

Because I've been down this road before and it only leads to heartbreak. Shane hurt me deeply, and I can tell Knox is cut from the same cloth. I know his type far too well—the charming, dashing, gorgeous rogue with a devil-may-care attitude and a gaggle of women panting after him. And much like my ex, I'm sure he's just as averse to monogamy.

Shane taught me a very hard lesson, and I vowed to never fall for another playboy. They don't settle down, and they certainly don't believe in being faithful.

Knox Beckett is a walking red flag.

Unfortunately, I can't help but notice him. And red? Well, it just happens to be my favorite color. He's far too attractive for his own good and there's a magnetic quality about him that keeps drawing my attention. So annoying. Too bad he isn't taking the next commercial flight back to the States and I can just drop him off and wipe my hands clean of him.

That would be too easy, though. No, I have to smell his sultry scent for the next seven or so hours and pretend this man isn't affecting me.

Pressing my lips together, I realize he's my fucking catnip. I'm used to being surrounded by lots of big, muscled, alpha men who grunt a lot. But Knox is a smooth-talking pretty boy who oozes charm and wears a suit like it's his job. His lean physique is more to my liking. He's tall, and I'm guessing under that expensive tux is a lithe, athletic body without an ounce of fat.

"I should apologize," he says.

"For what?" I glance over, not sure what he's talking about.

"When Addie told me Hunter was coming down here to pick me up, I assumed you were a man."

"Oh. Yeah, well, I get that a lot. In your defense, I suppose female pilots are less common than male pilots. But I'm just as good, if not better," I assure him.

"I have no doubts. Especially if your flying skills are half as good as your driving skills."

I'm not sure how to respond to that. The compliments roll off his silver tongue so easily, and I can't help but wonder how sincere he's being. I'm sure some women like that BS, but I'm made of stronger stuff.

And resisting this thief? Not a problem.

Just keep telling yourself that, Hunter, a little voice taunts.

Chapter Five: Knox

We arrive at the airport without further incident, return the rental car, and Hunter leads me to a private jet waiting on the tarmac.

“Go on inside and get situated,” she tells me. “I already did my pre-flight check, but I want to do another walk around.”

“Sure thing. I’m ready to get out of this tux like yesterday.” Hefting my duffel bag over my shoulder, I walk up the roll away stairs and step into the plane. It’s roomy and the passenger seats look comfortable. I should be ready to collapse into one of them, sleep the whole way home, but I’m still wired from our chase through the city.

I wander down the aisle, checking things out, and pass the small bathroom. Instead of trying to change in there and being all cramped, I move to the rear of the plane and find a back area with a table and some chairs. There’s an accordion-style door and I pull it partway closed and shrug out of my suit jacket.

Unzipping my bag, I rummage through it for my jeans, navy blue Henley and a fresh pair of socks. I’d love a shower, and noticed one in the compact bathroom, but I’ll wait until I’m back at my house where there’s no turbulence to potentially bounce me around.

Pulling my bowtie off and tossing it, I unbutton my white shirt and slip it off, drop my pants and grab my jeans. As I’m pulling them up, I hear Hunter enter the plane and close the flight door.

“Knox?” she calls out.

I fold the door back. “Yeah?”

She abruptly stops walking, brown eyes dropping. Her gaze moves down my bare chest like a physical touch, and I try not to react. For a lovely moment, she stares at my crotch.

Well, shit. She interrupted me before I had a chance to zip up.

Her attention jumps back up to my face and she clears her throat. “I, um, just wanted to tell you we’re ready to take off. So, whenever you’re seated and buckled up, we can go.”

“Great.” I quickly zip and button my jeans then grab my shirt. There’s no missing the way her pretty brown-sugared eyes skate over my chest again, and I can’t help but smirk.

See something you like, Hunter?

Even though I want to ask, I keep my mouth shut. I get the feeling she’s skittish. A strong, fierce badass when it comes to fighting the enemy, sure, but maybe not quite ready for a full-frontal assault of flirting from yours truly.

By nature, I’m an outrageous flirt, so I hope she can handle it. Otherwise, it’s gonna be a long flight. Because there’s no way I’ll be able to tone it down around her. She’s a gorgeous woman who caught my interest. Easy, sexy, playful banter is a part of who I am, and I enjoy engaging women and coating them in my honey-dipped words.

I’ve always loved and appreciated women. How could I not? I grew up with five sisters and my mom deserves a Mother of the Year award for putting up with all of

us. Eighteen years in a home surrounded by estrogen taught me quite a lot. Every time some jerk broke one of their hearts, I heard all about it. As a result, I've learned what women want and expect from a man. Being privy to their secret conversations made me understand quite a few things. Yes, women are complicated creatures, but at the heart of it all, they just want to be loved and respected. And they enjoy attention directed solely at them because it makes them feel special.

At the end of the day, isn't that what all of us really want? Well, in addition to some mind-blowing sex.

I watch Hunter scurry back up the aisle and disappear into the cockpit. If I'm not mistaken, I'd say Ms. Top Gun is a bit flustered.

Unable to suppress a grin, I saunter over to the seat closest to the cockpit, sit and buckle up. Stretching my legs out, I watch Hunter check various instruments and communicate through a headset to the tower. Her hands move adeptly over the flight panel, flicking switches, reporting readings. I have no damn idea what she's doing, but I find myself sitting up straighter, absolutely fascinated.

The image of those delicate fingers wrapping around my hard cock and stroking me to a volcanic eruption nearly fries my brain. She glances over her shoulder and I toss her a slow, sexy grin, my mind so far in the gutter, it's probably written all over my face.

Without a word, Hunter reaches over and shuts the door.

I try not to take it personally. She has a job to do, and maybe she thinks I'm a distraction. Yeah, my ego will go with that.

If I'm being honest, Hunter McGrath has my full and undivided attention. It's been a long time since any woman has been able to snag my interest so completely. Why is

that? Sure, she's gorgeous. Long, reddish-brown hair I'd love to wrap around my fist, but currently pulled back in a ponytail, and big, brown eyes the color of molasses. Eyes I'd like to stare into as I bring her to a glorious, earth-shattering climax.

But it's more than her looks making me sit up and take notice.

She doesn't succumb to my charm like every other female. Actually, a couple of different times, I swear, she seemed annoyed with me. That feisty side of hers is damn enticing, and I know she's smart as hell.

Beautiful and smart. That's a combination I'd love to tangle with.

Crossing my ankle over my opposite knee, I pull out my pencil and puzzle book. Numbers soothe me—they always have—and I enjoy trying to solve complex mathematical problems. Codes and ciphers can be fun, too, but mostly I stick to equations. My mind absorbs numbers like a sponge and it's easy for me to picture them. My crew calls me the Human Calculator because I usually know the answer to a math problem before they can finish punching it into their phone's calculator.

I'm not sure how much time passes, but a quick glance out the window confirms we're soaring above the clouds. I undo my seatbelt, stand up and stretch. Then I curl my puzzle book, tuck it into my pocket and grab the pink box of baked goods. Time to check in with the pilot.

Walking up to the cockpit door, I lift my hand and rap my knuckles against it. The door opens and Hunter raises an inquisitive brow.

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“Mind if I come up here with you?” I grip the edge of the door frame, looking through the windshield at the endless sky ahead. “I’ve got cookies.”

I lift the box and smirk.

“I don’t normally allow passengers in here while I’m flying,” she states.

“But you’re willing to make an exception to the rule?” My mouth edges up into a full-blown smile and I raise my brows hopefully.

“Something tells me you’re a very persistent man.”

“When I want something, yeah, I am.”

She rolls her eyes and tilts her head to the co-pilot’s seat.

“Alright,” I murmur, on the verge of pumping my fist like an excited kid as I step inside. Once I’m sitting, she motions to the seatbelt harness behind me.

“Put your harness on,” she orders in a no-nonsense voice.

“You got it.” I reach back and pull the straps over my shoulders, buckling myself in. Opening the box of sugary goodies, I offer her some. She hesitates, then reaches in and takes a cookie. I follow suit, popping a polvoroso into my mouth. “Mmm. Delicious.”

As I chew slowly, savoring the way the dessert melts in my mouth, I study the beauty

beside me.

“What?” she murmurs, sounding uncomfortable.

“When you answered your phone earlier, you said Pyro. How come? Is that a codename or something?”

She looks over at me and my gut tightens as the sunlight hits her brown eyes, making them glow. Striking. They match her hair, taking on this amazing russet-colored hue. Her aviators are tucked in the neckline of her tank top beneath her bomber jacket, and I’m so glad. I’ve never seen such pretty eyes before and, for a moment, I feel...

I don’t know. Strangely off-balance.

I frown and drag my focus away from her and back out the windshield.

“It’s the nickname I wound up with in the Navy after, ah, an unfortunate incident in Kabul.”

Again, she captures my attention, and this time she’s grinning—finally—so I ease back into my seat, getting comfortable, ready to hear what I’m thinking is an amusing tale. “Do tell.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” she insists, and I laugh.

“Whenever anyone starts a story with ‘It wasn’t my fault,’ I have a funny feeling it might’ve been.”

She waves a hand through the air and shakes her head. “No one told me the containers held gasoline. I thought they were filled with water.”

Her smile and tone are infectious, and I find myself grinning back, leaning closer.
“Okay, so what happened?”

She grimaces. “I may have accidentally set up some targets on top of the barrels and, well, my aim isn’t always perfect.”

I burst out laughing.

“One shot went too low and...” She makes an explosion gesture with her hands, “I blew up the landing strip. I was forever known as Pyro after that.”

“Classic. I love it.”

“I could’ve ended up with a way worse nickname, like some people I served with. How about you? Is Knox short for something?”

I shake my head. “Nope. My full name is Knox Remington Beckett, and what you see is what you get.”

I send her a smirk, and she lets out an unladylike snort.

“I’m sure,” she says, voice laced in sarcasm.

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“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You just seem like a man who would have a lot of secrets.”

“No way. I’m an open book. Ask me anything.” When she hesitates, I lock eyes with her. “Go ahead, Pyro. I dare you.”

For a long moment, we stare at each other. The air seems to heat up several degrees, charged with electricity, and I wouldn’t be surprised if steam starts fogging up the windshield. Then she blinks, breaking the strange spell that leaves me very aware of how small this cockpit actually is and how damn good she smells. Soft, like vanilla sugar. My attention moves to her mouth, and the overwhelming urge to kiss her full lips hits me hard. I can feel my unruly cock swell, pressing against my zipper.

I have a hard time believing a woman like Hunter “Pyro” McGrath would turn down a dare—and I’m right.

“Okaaaay,” she says slowly. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

“How did you become a thief?”

The tone in her voice sounds almost...judgmental. “Why? You don’t approve?”

“You’re dodging my question, Mr. Open Book.” She dramatically bats her lashes at me as though proving her point.

I can't help but chuckle. "No, I'm not. I met Addison Mills and her mom when I was eighteen, and they embraced me and taught me everything I know."

A strange look passes over her face. "Are you guys a couple? Ryland never said, so..." Her voice trails off and she fidgets with her ponytail.

I'd never admit it, but I'm inordinately glad she asked that. I want her to know I'm single as a Pringle, and she can jump me whenever she wants. "No," I answer. "Just friends who work together."

"Who steal together?"

"My occupation seems to bother you."

"Being a thief isn't an occupation."

Clearly, she is judging me. "Why do you care what I do?"

"I don't." She flips her hair over a shoulder. "It's just...I don't know, breaking the law."

"Not if you don't get caught." Even though I'm teasing, she makes a face.

Yeah, she's definitely judging me.

"So, you like living on the edge? On the verge of possibly going to jail at any moment?"

"Hunter, sweets, did you ever consider there's more to my story than what meets the eye?"

Her face screws up. “Don’t call me that. And your story is none of my business.”

“You’re right,” I say easily, “but sometimes things happen that we don’t plan. Like blowing up an airstrip in Kabul.”

Ha. For a long moment she doesn’t comment.

“Forget I said anything.”

“Not everything in this world is black and white. I’d think you know that better than anyone considering you used to fly around a bunch of assassins hellbent on revenge.”

“That’s different,” she says, voice firm. “I never worked for The Agency. I came into the picture after Braxton asked for my help.”

Braxton Graves. I’ve heard the former Delta Force commander’s name mentioned a few times before. Apparently, he’s Ex Nihilo’s fearless leader, and I can’t help but wonder about his and Hunter’s history.

“Were you two ever a couple?” I ask, throwing her question back at her, doing my best to hide the jealousy stirring in my gut. Damn. I can’t remember the last time I was jealous of someone.

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“Me and Brax? No. Just good friends.”

If I had to guess, Braxton is an upright military man, and except for his time with The Agency, he’s probably perfect in Hunter’s eyes. I turn to face her. Why I care what she thinks is beyond me, but call it curiosity.

“What do you see when you look at me?” I ask bluntly.

Her gaze drops downward. Is she actually checking out my—

“What’s sticking out of your pocket?” she asks.

Oh, right. I pull the puzzle book out and uncurl it. “Something to pass the time.”

She reaches over, plucking it out of my hands, and begins flipping through it. A frown creases her brow and she looks up at me. Surprise fills her eyes. “You solved all these math problems?” I nod. “For fun?”

I shrug. “I like numbers.”

“These are hard. I’m impressed.”

“Is that a compliment I hear?” My mouth edges up, and she hands the book back.

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

I have a feeling she’s avoiding it. “I asked you what you see when you look at me. Be brutally honest.”

She seems to consider it but holds back. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“A scoundrel, a thief, a playboy who’s used to getting what—and who—he wants. Someone who takes more than he gives and relies on his charm and looks far too much.”

“You think I’m good-looking?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Ouch. Guess she’s not holding back.

“A man who is more selfish than not and only concerned about his wants and needs,” she continues. “Someone who is impossible to trust and—”

I hold up my hand, trying not to cringe. “Damn, I’m sorry I asked.”

“Sorry. But you said brutal honesty.”

“I always thought I give a pretty terrific first impression.”

“I bet. Did I mention arrogant? Cocky?”

“Let me prove you wrong,” I say, a challenge in my voice. She thinks she has me

pegged, but I have a pretty good read on her, too. And Hunter McGrath doesn't back down from a challenge.

“What do you mean?”

“I want to show you I'm more than that. When we get back to Denver, let me take you out to dinner.”

As she pretends to consider my proposal, I send her my most charming smile. The one that never fails me. I got this in the bag.

And why wouldn't she agree? I know she has to feel this attraction between us. I'm certainly not imagining it.

“No,” she answers stiffly.

My jaw drops. No? For a second, I think I hear her wrong. Or maybe she’s even messing with me. But then she turns her attention back out the windshield.

Huh. I can’t believe she just turned me down. Guess there’s a first time for everything.

Lucky for her, I don’t give up easily.

Chapter Six: Hunter

Staring out the plane’s windshield, trying to ignore the rapid thumping of my heart, I can’t believe Knox Beckett just asked me out and I turned him down. Apparently, he can’t believe it either because the look on his face can only be described as flabbergasted.

I have a feeling I’m one of the rare few women to tell him no. Hell, maybe I’m the first. But I’m proud of myself for sticking to my guns and saying no.

It takes a minute for his ego to regroup. “Think about it.” He places a hand over his heart, giving me his best puppy dog eyes. “And before you say no again and hurt my very fragile feelings, why don’t you tell me how you became a pilot?”

Fragile feelings? I try not to roll my eyes.

“I didn’t have a big family. My mom died when I was young, so my dad raised me. He was an engineer and taught me everything I know about mechanics.” My voice

catches and I take a breath before continuing. “We used to take things apart and rebuild them together. He encouraged my interest in flying and I was a licensed pilot by the time I was seventeen.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.”

The sincerity in his voice catches my attention, and I glance over. He actually looks impressed, and I can’t help but smile. “He was the best.”

“Was?” he echoes.

My chest tightens and I swallow down the rising emotion. “He passed away a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry. It sounds like you were extremely close.”

“He was my best friend,” I say quietly. “I miss him every day. Flying always makes me feel closer to him.”

I press my lips together, not sure why I’m telling him all this, and suddenly feel very vulnerable. A warm hand touches my arm, and I don’t pull away.

“Sounds like he was a good man,” Knox murmurs, voice deep and comforting. “And he encouraged you to follow your dreams, which means he believed in you and wanted you to be happy.”

“He did,” I say softly. Clearing my throat, I lock my emotions down. Now isn’t the time to get weepy and bare my soul to this man who I barely know. Yet, strangely enough, we’re having a moment, so I decide to ask him about his family. “What about you?”

“Two amazing parents who’ve been married for thirty years and counting. And five older sisters who never hesitated to knock me upside the head.”

“Five?” I echo.

“Yep. I’m not complaining, though. They kept me respectable, and they certainly still keep me in line. When you live with that many women, you learn a lot.”

Tilting my head, I glance over at him. “And what did you learn?”

Before he can answer, his phone starts buzzing. “Excuse me,” he murmurs, reaching into his pocket to pluck it out. “Beckett.”

Giving myself a mental shake, I pretend to check an instrument reading, but really, I’m listening to his side of the conversation.

“What?”

Surprise fills his voice, and I study him closely. But he has a good poker face.

“Yeah, sure,” he responds, then looks at me. “I’ll ask her.”

He hangs up, turning his full attention back to me, and I’m curious what he’s going to say. Maybe he needs to be dropped off somewhere else. Or maybe—

“That was Addie,” he tells me, “and we have a bit of a problem.”

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I arch a brow. Maybe she was arrested. “Oh?”

“The emerald Linc took from the safe isn’t real.”

“That’s too bad,” I say easily, although it kind of serves them right. Karma and all.

“Ryder, our gems expert, confirmed it’s a fake.” He frowns. “Why the hell would Torres have a fake in his safe?”

“Maybe as a deterrent to thieves?” I suggest a little too brightly.

His mouth tightens and I’d be willing to bet my last dollar he’s holding back a snarky response.

“Addie wants to know if you’d be willing to fly us to Spain to get the real one?”

Oh, hell no.

But instead of revealing how I really feel, I merely ask, “How do you know it’s in Spain?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “I’m meeting my crew as soon as we land and will get more details on whatever the hell is going on. I want you to come with me. Addie will have an offer for you.”

“I’m not interested. And I think I’ve done enough.”

“Just consider it,” he presses. “We could use a good pilot. And you’ll be paid generously for your time and skills.”

His offer is tempting. So very tempting.

If I can continue borrowing Slater’s jet... I chew on my lower lip, seriously considering. It’s a very attractive and potentially lucrative opportunity. I suppose if I don’t break any laws there’s no harm in taking the job. But I’d be working for thieves.

I’d also be spending more time in Knox Beckett’s company.

The scales begin to tip from a maybe to more of a yes. What the heck does that say about me?

The rest of the flight goes by smoothly. Knox continues to engage me in conversation and even turns his charm up a notch. But I know it’s only because he wants me to fly his ring of thieves to Spain. I’m far too smart to fall into his honeytrap, believing his flirty smiles actually mean something. It’s not that he doesn’t come off as genuine, because he actually does—and that just makes the situation even more complicated.

How can I tell if he’s truly interested or only using me?

You can’t believe him, I tell myself. He has an agenda and wants your help. End of story.

Believing anything else...well, that would be bad for my heart. And, after Shane, it’s not a chance I’m willing to take. Absolutely no way. As tempting as Knox might be, he may as well be wearing a blinking neon sign that screams “Heartbreaker.”

At the same time, he’s damn hard to ignore. My gaze slides down his firm chest,

hugged by a fitted navy-blue Henley. The color shows off his sapphire eyes to perfection—and I guarantee he knows it. He’s currently focused on his phone, scrolling away, so I take full advantage and continue my perusal downward. At least he zipped up his jeans. God, when he stepped out of the rear cabin earlier, his jeans undone, hanging low on his slim hips, I couldn’t help but ogle the goods.

Knox Beckett is a smorgasbord of carnal delights, from his firm pecs to his tight abs to the obvious bulge of his well-endowed manhood. My mouth goes dry thinking about his cock. It’s been so long since I’ve had sex—since Shane crushed my heart—and my barren desert wasteland below is beginning to thrum with new life, thanks to Knox

He steals for a living, I remind myself. I can’t get behind that. I’ve spent my entire life trying to do the right thing. Always fighting on the side of good.

I sigh and look out at the infinite blue yonder. Maybe it wouldn’t kill me to loosen the righteous reins a little. I have a feeling if I gave him the go-ahead, this hot, morally gray piece of ass would be up for some fun.

“Penny for your thoughts?” He sends me a devilish smirk as though he heard exactly what I’m thinking.

My headset crackles and I pull it up around my head as directions from Denver Airport come in loud and clear. “We’ve just been cleared for landing,” I say, ignoring his question. Because the last thing I want to do is let him know I’m sitting here lusting over him.

Oh, God help me. Why am I always attracted to arrogant jerks?

???

I'm still not quite sure how I got wrangled into my current situation, but Mr. Charm Extraordinaire convinced me to drive him to his meeting, since Linc took the car when he returned. He also convinced me to go to said meeting. Okay, it didn't take much cajoling. I've always wanted to meet Ryland's sister. Truth be told, I am curious about her offer.

And there is also the fact that I keep picturing Knox naked and it's making my hormones go crazy. It feels like my ovaries are at a square dance, and they're ready to swing their partner and do-si-do.

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“Where are we?” I ask, turning the car off and eyeing the small office building.

“A-Squared Enterprises,” Knox answers. “The company Addie and Angel, her mom, started. Despite what you think you know about her, Addie is a respected antiques expert.”

I don’t comment, and I don’t doubt Addison Mills in the least. Quite the opposite, in fact. I think she’s a brilliant, extremely crafty businesswoman. I’m just not sure if I can trust her or her crew.

It’s a little after six o’clock and the parking lot is nearly empty, so I assume most people have gone home for the day. Knox guides me into the building, down the hallway and opens a door with the sign “A-Squared Enterprises.”

A group of people sit at a table, and a woman with dark, golden-blonde hair stands up. “Welcome back, Knox,” she says. She gives him a quick hug then sends me a big smile. “You must be Hunter. Ryland told me all about you. I’m Addison, but please call me Addie.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” I say, immediately liking the other woman’s vibes. She’s welcoming, friendly and her cobalt-blue eyes are full of intelligence. I can easily see myself being friends with someone like her. Plus, if she’s anything like her brother, I know I’m going to love her.

“This is the crew,” Addie states with a sweep of her manicured hand. “Brighton Leroux, Ryder McKay, Lincoln Decker, and, of course, you’ve had quite a bit of time to get to know Knox.”

She's looking from me to Knox, her blue eyes glowing mischievously, and I shift uneasily.

"I take it you had a good trip back?" she asks him.

"Things got a bit sticky, but Hunter came to my rescue." Knox sends me a panty-melting smile.

Addie nods as we move to sit down. "Thank you, Hunter. You're a lifesaver."

I don't miss the way Knox places his hand on my lower back and guides me around the table to two empty seats next to each other. He pulls my chair out and I sit, glancing around at the others.

"I hope Knox didn't get you into too much trouble," Brighton says. "He seems to attract it."

"Oh, and you don't?" Knox fires back with a grin.

Their interaction is friendly, a little flirty, but I get the impression they're merely friends. Although, I'm not sure how Knox can resist the woman. Brighton Leroux must be one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. She has a presence that demands attention, and with her stunning green eyes and ebony hair, she's a knockout. Her poise and classic beauty remind me of the Hollywood starlets from a bygone era, a cross between Vivian Leigh and Hedy Lamarr.

"I did notice that," I remark dryly, and everyone laughs.

"That's not all he attracts," the big man beside Brighton comments drolly. Cropped brown hair, dark eyes and, if I had to guess, a wickedly dry sense of humor. "You can call me Linc or Deck or whatever the hell you want. I respond to pretty much

anything.”

“I like to call him asshole,” the man on my opposite side says, and Linc flips him off. He extends his hand. “Nice to meet you, Hunter. I’m Ryder, our gems and tech expert.”

He has a twinkle in his chocolate-brown eyes and keeps looking back and forth between me and Knox. I shift in my seat, growing uncomfortable under everyone’s scrutiny.

“Alright, now that the introductions are done, what the hell’s going on?” Knox asks, turning the conversation to business. “You’re sure the emerald is a fake?”

“Fake as a dollar store diamond,” Ryder states.

At the head of the table, Addie lifts her hand and my eyes go wide at the fist-sized emerald resting on her palm. She tosses it and it slides across the table, landing in front of me. Knox reaches for the green gem, lifts it up and examines it.

“It’s a damn good fake,” he comments and hands it to me.

“You’re absolutely sure?” I ask, turning it this way and that, admiring the way it sparkles beneath the light. Ryder scoffs and I look up.

“Here we go,” Linc murmurs under his breath. “How to Spot an Emerald 101.”

Knox chuckles and Ryder launches into what I’m gathering is a well-practiced spiel. “What you’re holding is known as YAG. It stands for Yttrium Aluminum Garnet. It’s a synthetic stone, man-made in a lab, which means it’s clean and free of inclusions. Aside from its green color, a natural emerald will always have a myriad of inclusions, often referred to as jardin. These natural imperfections are part of what makes

emeralds so distinct. They also tell you where in the world it was mined.”

I raise a brow. “Really?”

“And she’s encouraging him,” Linc mutters, but I ignore him, and nod at Ryder to continue.

“Yes. For example, an emerald from Siberia will have needle-like inclusions. In Pakistan, you get two-phase inclusions, which is a really cool phenomenon.”

Knox pretends to snore, and I elbow him.

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“Ignore them,” Ryder says, leaning forward a bit and keying in on my genuine interest. “Basically, imagine a cavity inside a gemstone. It’s full of liquid—that’s one phase of matter. It’s also got a gas bubble trapped inside. That’s two phases of matter. A Colombian emerald, on the other hand, can have three phase inclusions—liquid state of matter, gas state of matter and a solid state of matter like a crystal inside of the emerald.”

“That’s fascinating, Ryder,” Linc states, voice dry as he stifles a—pretend?—yawn. “You still awake, Hunter?”

I smile at Ryder. “It’s interesting.”

“Maybe if you knew some of this stuff, you would’ve realized it was a fake right away,” Ryder shoots back.

Linc shakes his head. “I’m The Safecracker and The Muscle. You handle the geek stuff.”

“We think Torres has the real emerald locked away at his Spanish villa,” Addie says, getting the conversation back on track. “Right after Knox and Linc stole the fake, Torres fled Colombia fast. My intel says he rushed straight to Spain.”

She turns her full attention to me. “We need to go to Spain and get the real emerald, and I’d like to hire you to fly us over there.”

I decide not to mince words. “No offense, but I’m not a thief.”

“Well, that’s good. Because we don’t need a thief, we need a pilot. A damn good one.”

“Right, but I’m not going to be an accomplice and go to jail for stealing from Torres.”

“Technically, Alejandro Torres is the one who stole that emerald, and our job is to steal it back,” she clarifies. “To return the gem to its rightful owner.”

Wait. Did I hear her right? “Return it?” I echo, confused.

I look over at Knox, wondering why he didn’t lead with that part of the story. He arches a dark brow, but doesn’t comment, his dark blue eyes studying me closely.

“Are you in or out?” Addie asks. “Because we leave bright and early.”

My mind is spinning at this new information, and I let out a low breath. This kinda changes everything.

“I’m—” My eyes lock with Knox’s intent, blue gaze, and I hope I don’t regret this. “—in.”

Chapter Seven: Knox

She’s in. My heart knocks against my ribs and my pulse leaps. I’m not sure why I’m so excited to have Hunter join our team for this heist, but I can’t deny it—I’m fucking thrilled.

“You’ll fly our plane,” Addie continues, “and, of course, be well-compensated.”

“We have a plane?” I ask. This is news to me.

“We do now, thanks to The Man.”

Nice. One of these days, I’m going to find out the identity of our mystery benefactor.

Addie returns her attention to Hunter. “Ryland told me you crashed your own plane to help his team?” Hunter nods, and Addie’s voice softens when she says, “Thank you for being so instrumental in helping them take down The Agency.”

Hunter looks a little surprised and touched by Addie’s gratitude. “You’re welcome. They’re a great group. Like family.”

“I understand that only too well,” Addie murmurs, looking around at our crew.

Even though we tease each other mercilessly, she’s right. This little ring of thieves has become extremely important to me. I’d do anything for any one of them. I’m lucky enough to still have my big family back in the Midwest. I might not see them as often as I’d like, but I know they’re there. Not everyone sitting here can say that.

Hunter confided in me about her parents dying, and honestly, I can relate. Angel was like a mom to me. Losing a mother figure is hard as hell whether she’s your blood or not.

“Keep helping us out,” Addie continues smoothly, “and you’ll be able to buy yourself a new plane in no time at all.”

When Hunter doesn’t comment, Addie merely smiles. “That’s enough for tonight. I’m sure you and Knox are exhausted. Rest up as best as you can. We’ll leave for Spain by nine, if that works for you?”

“That’s fine,” Hunter says, and everyone stands up.

“Good.”

Hunter turns her attention to me. “Can you recommend a nearby hotel?”

“You can stay with me,” Brighton offers cheerfully.

I shoot Hunter a look as a surge of disappointment fills me. I was just about to make the same offer. But, it’s probably just as well. Having Hunter in my house and all to myself would be far too tempting. A complication I don’t need right now.

At least that’s what I try to convince myself. Because I don’t bring women home. Most of my hookups happen somewhere exotic, halfway across the world, before or after a heist. The idea of bringing a woman into my house, my private domain, feels too much like a relationship.

“Thanks,” Hunter says.

“You’re going to need to borrow some clothes, too. I think you and Addie are more the same size, though,” Brighton comments.

“I’ll bring you some things,” Addie tells Hunter.

Yes, Hunter is definitely shaped more like Addie than Brighton. I take a moment to admire her tall, lithe figure with curves in all the right places. She hasn’t taken her bomber jacket off since we met, but her fitted tank top beneath has caught my attention a few different times. Or, if I’m being completely honest, it’s the perfect swell of her round assets that’s snagged my interest. Her cup runneth over. Those

breasts look to be a very generous size C, and my palms are itching to confirm my estimation.

A woman's body is an amazing creation. One I could explore and worship for hours on end. And Hunter's rack is calling to me like a siren.

Yeah, it's best she goes to Brighton's place tonight. The last thing I want to do is make Hunter uncomfortable and pull out of the heist. First and foremost, we need a pilot. And, yeah, my dick has needs, too, but he's going to have to wait.

You hear that, buddy?

As we all walk out of A-Squared, I hang back, eyes glued to Hunter's ass. Apparently, my dick didn't get the memo and has no intention of laying low.

"See something you like?" Ryder asks in a low, amused voice.

I pull my attention up and slant him a look. "No idea what you're talking about."

"Liar," he responds easily.

Yeah, okay, maybe I am in serious denial. But I have to be. This is a job, and the job comes first. I can't screw things up because I'm thinking with the wrong head. A lot is on the line, so I need to keep things professional with Miss Hunter "Pyro" McGrath. Even if I am picturing her naked more often than not.

Gritting my teeth, trying to ignore this growing attraction, I tell myself there's nothing special about Hunter. Maybe I just need to get laid. Sure, I like her feistiness and how strong she is. There's a fierce intelligence behind her brown eyes that makes me want to learn more about her. And the fact that she doesn't look at me and giggle and bat her eyelashes is refreshing. I also have a feeling she'd be a wildcat in the

sack—all raw and passionate—but only after I’ve earned her trust.

I can tell trust isn’t something she hands over easily, though. Luckily, I enjoy a good challenge, and I think this russet-haired beauty will give me a run for my money.

Maybe once the job is complete I can convince her to accept that dinner.

We stop walking and everyone says goodbye, turning toward their cars. I run a hand through my hair, lost in my thoughts. I still can’t believe she turned me down earlier. A frown screws my face up as I think back, trying to remember the last woman who told me no.

I can’t. Because they all say yes.

Hell, I’m known as The Charmer for a reason. Am I losing my touch?

“Goodnight, Knox.”

My attention shifts back to Hunter, who gives me a small smile, and my stomach does a strange tumble. I’ve never had a woman give me butterflies before. For a long moment, we simply stare at each other. Words stick in my throat. Finally, I force a nod then watch as she heads over to Brighton’s fancy-schmancy black Porsche and slides into the passenger seat. It occurs to me that I’ve never been without words before.

What the fuck is happening to me?

The engine roars to life and, from the corner of my eye, I notice Addie walk up beside me.

“C’mon, loverboy, I’ll give you a ride home.”

Ignoring that comment, I walk over to her black Ford Mustang Shelby GT500, toss my bag in the back and slip into the passenger seat. Lost in my thoughts, I'm trying to come to terms with being shot down.

“Is there something I should know?” Addie asks.

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“What? No. I’m fine.” I give her one of my easy, self-assured smiles and spin my keys around my index finger as though I don’t have a care in the world.

“Hmm.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You seem...distracted.”

“Nope. I’ve got my eyes on the prize,” I assure her.

“And what prize are you referring to?”

“The emerald,” I state flatly.

“Just checking.” She smirks. “C’mon, Knox, it’s me. I can tell you’re interested in her. And, for the record, I approve. Although, I don’t think she’s quite as into you.”

“Fuck, Addie.” I give her a pained expression and pretend to clutch my heart.

“You’re brutal.”

“Just being honest. Because if you really want a shot with Hunter McGrath, you’re going to have to actually pursue her. Gasp! Shocking concept, I know.”

“You can be such a downer,” I grumble.

“I know,” she says pleasantly. “But women shouldn’t always just fall at your feet. It’s

always been too easy for you. I'm actually excited to see this play out."

"Sadist," I sulk.

"I'm ready to finally see a woman challenge you and make you earn it. To bring you to your pretty knees."

If things go right, Hunter will be the one on her knees. Of course, I don't dare say that to Addie, but, damn, the tantalizing image fills my mind in beautiful technicolor.

"God, Knox, get your head out of the gutter."

She knows me too well. "Who? Moi?"

Addie shakes her head, pulling the car into my driveway. Braking to a stop, she moves the stick shift into neutral and turns to face me. "All teasing aside, Mom would want you to be happy."

"She'd want you to be happy, too."

"I am happy." She pastes on the brightest, fakest smile I've ever seen.

"You're so full of it." I open my door then hesitate. "Since we're prying into each other's personal business, what's up with Detective Vaughn?"

The briefest flash of emotion flickers across her face, gone before I can attempt to decipher it. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh." I don't believe her, but it's a discussion for another time. Grabbing my bag out of the back, I say, "See you in the morning, Boss."

I shut the door and head up the walkway. My mind is all over the place, and that's not a good thing. Especially when we're on the verge of a job and focus is key.

But how do I focus when all I'm envisioning is long, reddish-brown hair dragging over my bare chest as Hunter kisses her way down my naked body?

"Fuck," I grumble, unlocking my front door. This isn't good. In my line of work, distractions can be a prison sentence. Or a death sentence.

Doing my best to push Hunter out of my mind, I step into my dark house, shutting and locking the door. My place isn't extravagant and wouldn't garner any special attention. It's lowkey, located in a nice, quiet suburb, and comfortable.

And now I'm depressed.

With a low curse, I drop my bag, walk into the kitchen and flip on the light. Addie said she doesn't think Hunter is into me. Yeah, that's not gonna work. I need to get that little sparrow on board before she flies off again and leaves me.

Coming home after a job and being by myself to unwind is something I typically look forward to. For some reason, it's not quite as comforting as usual. It seems extra quiet, and a bit lonely. Like something, or someone, is missing.

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“Dammit,” I swear to no one. As if to emphasize its utter emptiness, the house seems to echo my curse back to me.

I have a big problem, and her name is Hunter “Pyro” McGrath.

My stomach growls and I stomp over to the fridge and fling it open. Reaching in, I grab a bag of chips and a package of chocolate chip cookies. I need comfort food.

As I start munching away, I remember the first time Deck came over and asked why I keep my cereal, bread and cookies—what he called “pantry food”—in the refrigerator.

“What do you mean?” I’d asked.

He’d made a wide sweeping arc around my kitchen with one hand. “You have a lot of cupboards.”

And that’s when I remembered not everyone else grew up as poor as me. If we didn’t keep everything shut up tight in the fridge, the rats and cockroaches would eat it.

“Just out of habit,” I’d mumbled. Guess old habits definitely died hard.

I was lucky to grow up with both my parents, but they struggled. When both my mom’s parents got sick, their crappy insurance refused to cover anything but basic care. Basic wasn’t good enough for her. My dad already worked all day at an automobile assembly plant and my mom was a teacher. Low-paying jobs were better than no jobs at all, so they worked their asses off helping my grandparents and

feeding, clothing and schooling five girls...and then, surprise, I came along.

They would never admit it, but I'm sure I was an accident. My dad said he was thrilled to have a son, though I rarely saw him for more than a couple hours a day. He worked constantly. Weekends, too.

One Saturday afternoon, I remember walking into the living room, and he was sitting there. "What are you doing home?" I'd asked.

He said that's the moment he reassessed his schedule, making sure he was home for dinner, so he could help us with our homework or just play catch with me. My parents decided the most important thing was to be with each other and us kids, especially after my grandparents died.

As I got older, the financial situation got a little better, but we never lived on Easy Street. My parents sacrificed to take care of everyone around them for a very long time. Now, it makes me feel good to be able to see them living their best lives.

Addie is the only one who knows the truth. I didn't have a pot to piss in until I started working with her and Angel. I'll never forget the day I caught her lifting a man's wallet on the "L." Even back then when we were just eighteen, her sleight of hand was remarkable. The guy never knew what happened, and I'd ended up following her into an alley where she opened the wallet and was in the middle of counting the cash when I confronted her.

I wanted to be able to do the same thing. I'd just graduated high school and was floating around in limbo, not sure what I was going to do. College was a pipe dream. I would've needed a full scholarship, and other than being good at math, I was only okay at school. I knew I couldn't live with my family forever. Working my fingers to the bone like my parents didn't appeal to me, but I wasn't scared of hard work. I just wanted to see an enormous profit fast.

The only thing I really had going for me was my charm and good looks. So, I'd turned it up to the max...and Addie told me to get lost. But then Angel came around that corner and, for whatever reason, she decided then and there to take me under her wing.

I'll be forever grateful, and now it's my turn.

Making sure my parents and sisters have what they need—making sure my nieces and nephews don't have to keep cereal in the fridge—is the reason I do what I do.

And I have zero regrets.

My appetite disappears and I'm about to shove the snacks back into the refrigerator when I stop, turn and open an empty cupboard. Forcing myself to put the cookies and chips on a shelf, I let out a low breath. No bugs will get in, I tell myself. You don't live in that shithole apartment anymore.

Old habits die so fucking hard.

Shaking my head, I close the cupboard, turn out the light and head upstairs to my bedroom. I'll probably forget I put food in there. God, I'm a mess tonight.

And I know exactly who has me off my game. A certain russet-haired temptress.

Walking into my room, I turn on the light and frown. It's usually so easy for me to flirt, fuck on occasion, and move on. I never look back. Never even tempted to because I don't need anything more than whatever the moment offers—a conversation, a heist, a bedmate.

So, why doesn't that feel enough anymore?

Frustrated beyond belief at these foreign feelings leaving me so off-balanced, I strip my clothes off and get in the shower. The warm water pounds down on my body and my traitorous mind goes straight to Hunter. I imagine her in here with me, her lithe body gloriously wet and naked, in my arms.

I have a feeling she'd look insanely fantastic wet.

I've never wanted to kiss any woman as much as I want to kiss her. I'm dying to taste her sweet lips, tangle my tongue with hers, feel those luscious curves wrap around me. Desire burns through my veins, and I wrap a hand around my painfully hard cock. Pumping it hard, I imagine I'm inside Hunter, fucking her until she's shaking and coming all over my weeping cock.

That visual makes me lose all control fast, and I let out a long groan as my body stiffens and I blow my release all over the tiles. Fuck. Panting hard, forehead pressed to the cool wall, the pleasure consumes me.

"Hunter..." I whisper on a ragged breath.

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We leave for Spain right on schedule and I sulk in my seat, wishing I could sneak into the cockpit with Hunter. I enjoyed our conversation immensely coming back from Colombia, but I can't exactly go up there when Addie and my team are making plans. It's damn tempting, though.

After spending far too much time talking about Alejandro Torres, we've locked down a plan of attack. Thank Christ. Unable to stay away from our gorgeous pilot one second longer, I stand and head up the aisle, ignoring the knowing looks from my crew. I don't care. Let them think whatever they want. In fact, they can all go fuck themselves.

The cockpit door is closed, and I raise a fist and knock. It opens a moment later and I meet Hunter's molasses-colored eyes. I grip the edge of the doorframe, lean in and try to appear cool. For the first time, though, I feel like I'm failing.

"Hey, we have a plan and I thought I'd fill you in. If you aren't, you know, too busy?"

"Nope. Just flying a jet, but, sure, c'mon in." She tosses me a smile that I feel all the way down to my toes.

I step into the cockpit, grinning like a goddamn fool, and sit down in the co-pilot chair, buckling up like she showed me. The skies ahead are clear, the clouds far below us. I can see why she loves flying. There's a sense of freedom up here that you don't experience in the cabin.

“Torres is throwing another bash,” I tell her.

“The man sure does like his parties.”

“Good thing, too. Makes our job easier.” I shift in my seat to face her. Hell, that beautiful profile of hers should be minted onto a coin. Clearing my throat, I bring her up to speed. “Addie and Deck are going in as servers. Ryder and Brighton will be with the catering company. You and I are entertainment.”

Her head whips over and her brow pinches. “Entertainment? What’s that mean?”

“Torres hired a couple of models to swim in his glass-bottom pool. Those models were just informed they are no longer needed, because you and I are handling it.”

“We’re going swimming? I don’t have a suit.”

I smile then can’t help but tease her a little. “You won’t need one.”

Her eyes practically bug out of her head. “There is no way I’m skinny-dipping in front of a bunch of strangers” —she makes a choked sound— “with you.”

I chuckle. “You won’t need a bathing suit,” I clarify, “because Addie has it taken care of.”

“Oh.” She still looks uneasy. “What if someone recognizes you from Colombia?”

“They won’t,” I say easily. “Ryder looped the cams. And he will again.”

When she doesn’t comment, I lean forward as much as my seat belt will allow.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come.” My voice comes out way huskier than I intend, but

looking into her brown eyes affects me more than I'd like. More than I'm used to. But there's no point denying the attraction I feel. I'm just wondering if it's reciprocated.

Please, for the love of God, let it be reciprocated.

Chapter Eight: Hunter

For a moment, I can't quite catch my breath. Staring into the deep blue of Knox's eyes, my belly coils with heat. "I'm still not convinced it's a good idea," I respond.

No, it's definitely not. The more time I spend in Knox's alluring company, the more risk I place my heart in. Letting myself get too close to Knox would be foolish. Lock it down, Hunter. Don't fall for his BS. You know him. You know his type.

I learned the hard way you can't change a leopard's spots. Now I just need to remember that and not fall flat on my ass because I believed all the pretty lies pouring from his very tempting lips.

My voice of reason having spoken, I turn my attention back to flying. If he thinks he can just stroll in here and hang out for the rest of the trip, he's sorely mistaken.

"I have some things to take care of now. If you don't mind?" I slant him a quick glance then pretend to study the readings on the instrument panel. Okay, so I'm not exactly being truthful, but I need him to leave. The cockpit suddenly feels too small, and Knox's presence is larger than life.

"You want me to leave?"

He sounds surprised, maybe even a little hurt?

"That would be great, thanks." I know I'm being rude, dismissing him. But he's far

too dangerous, and he needs to leave before I do something stupid—like start believing him.

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“Yeah, okay.” He unbuckles himself and stands up. His hand touches my shoulder and squeezes lightly. “I don’t want to be a distraction.”

Well, you are! I mentally scream. A gigantic, overwhelming distraction that’s playing havoc with my fragile heart.

Finally, he leaves, closing the door behind him, and I slump back in my seat. Thank God.

“This was a mistake,” I whisper, my mind wandering back to last night.

After leaving the meeting, I went to Brighton’s house. I’m glad she offered because, for a brief moment, I thought Knox was going to offer up his guest bedroom. And that had a huge red X all over it, with a loud siren and blinking warning lights.

Brighton’s place suits her perfectly. It’s very feminine and smells like a garden thanks to the number and variety of plants and candles everywhere. There are a lot of windows, and I imagine it’s probably awash with natural light during the day. It’s also decorated beautifully with delicate trinket trays, fresh flowers everywhere and coffee table books about makeup and fashion.

Even though it was late, we ended up hanging out in her kitchen, munching on snacks and chatting, for almost two hours. She’s very engaging, and I found out her parents are French, which explains her faint accent. Even though I’m more of a tomboy who doesn’t have a clue about fashion and she should be walking red carpets in couture, we really clicked.

Of course, I tried to learn more about Knox without appearing too obvious. But Brighton is damn smart, and I don't think I was fooling anyone.

"He likes you," she'd said, green eyes twinkling. "It's obvious."

I can't lie. Her words sent a little thrill through me.

"I have a feeling that man hasn't met a woman he didn't like," I replied dryly.

But she shook her head. "Most women are a part of the job for him. Like most men are a part of it for me. We may appear like we're completely engaged, but we never let them get too close. It's a skill."

She'd let out a musical laugh and I wished I could be more carefree like her. But that's not the way I'm built. I overanalyze and sweat every single detail.

"Seriously, though," Brighton continued, eyeing me closely, "he watches you like he wants to devour you."

Devour me? A wave of satisfaction licked through me, as well as a shiver, and I wasn't sure how to respond.

"He never pays attention to anyone for very long, and he's used to women falling all over him. Maybe he senses you're a challenge."

"Or, maybe he's bored and wants a new plaything," I suggested, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"Knox isn't like that, Hunter. Under all the polish, swagger and pretty boy smiles, he's a damn good guy. If you're smart, you'll give him a chance."

“I don’t mean to sound rude, but if he’s so great, why haven’t you or Addie snagged him up yet?” I couldn’t wrap my head around how this crew of attractive people could only be just friends.

“Quite a few reasons. First, we work together, and Addie and I are too smart to get tangled up in that potential mess. Second, I prefer older men. Give me a silver fox any day of the week.”

“Really?”

She leaned closer. “Older men make the best lovers. They know how to make you scream.”

I flushed, deciding to take her word for it since I’d never slept with anyone older than my thirty-two years. Truthfully, as much as I thought Shane and I had a future together, he’d never made me scream. Not even close. He’d been all about himself in the bedroom. Always finished before me, and then seemed annoyed when I didn’t immediately orgasm after him. I learned to fake it to keep the peace.

Crossing my arms, lost in my thoughts, I gaze out at the clear, blue skies ahead. We should be arriving at Málaga-Costa del Sol Airport in Spain right on schedule. From there, it’s a thirty to forty-minute drive to Marbella, where Torres’ mansion perches on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

After landing, we split up into two SUVs and drive to a safehouse provided by someone referred to only as “The Man.” They’ve mentioned him a couple times, and I want to ask a million questions, but file them away for later.

Marbella is even more beautiful than I imagined. When we arrive at the safehouse, and I use the word lightly, I try not to gape. It’s beyond enormous and so luxurious. Definitely the biggest, most amazing villa I’ve ever visited. Tucked away on the side

of a cliff behind decorative, wrought-iron gates, it boasts ten bedrooms, cobblestone walkways and a view of the sea. It seems like everything is covered in jasmine and I inhale the sweet scent deeply, unable to imagine Alejandro Torres' place being much nicer.

"Marbella is well-known for its extremely wealthy, often famous occupants and visitors. Or, infamous, as the case may be," Knox tells me. "Bin Laden himself used to bring his family here."

"Princes, sheiks and movie stars are the norm," Addie adds, wheeling her suitcase over the uneven cobblestone courtyard. "Why doesn't everyone find a bedroom and get situated? Let's freshen up and meet in an hour."

"Sounds good," Ryder says. "I need a nap."

"Didn't you just sleep almost the entire way here?" Linc asks.

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“What can I say? I need my beauty sleep.”

“Can’t argue with that.” Linc chuckles and Ryder slugs him in the shoulder as they walk off, Addie and Brighton on their heels.

I hesitate and look over at Knox. “Who’s The Man?” I ask, unable to hide my curiosity any longer.

He shrugs. “I don’t know.”

My brows shoot up in disbelief. “You don’t know? How can you trust him? Orher?”

Because if none of them have ever met their so-called benefactor and master of ceremonies, how can they blindly follow what he says? This is beginning to sound a little familiar and it makes me nervous. Ex Nihilo went through a similar situation with their mysterious handler. And it didn’t end well.

“Addie’s mom told us to trust him. Implicitly. So we do.”

That’s far too simple and naive of an answer to me.

Frowning, I shake my head. “But what if he’s lying to you? What if he sets you up or—”

Knox captures my chin between his thumb and forefinger, sending my pulse skittering. “Sometimes you think too hard, sweets.”

“But how can you blindly trust him?” I press.

“I trust Angel, and she wouldn’t steer us wrong. Whoever The Man is, he’d go down fighting for all of us. I have zero doubts about that.”

He lightly rubs the indentation on my chin and my heart thumps madly.

“You worry too much, Ms. McGrath.”

“I know,” I admit. “I’m a bit of a control freak.”

“I can help you with that.”

“With what?” I ask, my attention dropping to his lips. Gah, they’re perfect. Just like the rest of him.

“Letting go,” he says huskily.

Every nerve ending in my body thrums and I can’t help how much I want him to kiss me. Even though my rational side is screaming to pull away and go to my room, I find myself leaning in closer. His scent envelops me, that velvet musk laced in amber, and my lips part.

Unable to control the desire firing through my veins, I push up on my toes. He moves at the exact moment, and our mouths crash together. My fingers curl into his soft Henley, trying to pull him even closer.

Am I surprised he’s an amazing kisser? Nope, not even a little.

So far, there’s not one thing this man isn’t good at. Not only is he beyond beautiful, he knows how to make my knees weak by kissing me senseless. No one has ever

kissed me the way Knox Beckett does. Deeply, thoroughly, oh-so sensually.

He knows what he's doing, and the moment I realize that, it's like someone pours a bucket of ice water on me. How many other women has he kissed like this on a job? How many have been seduced by his promises and captivating words? Am I just a pleasant diversion? A way to pass the time until the heist is over?

I jerk my mouth away from his and take a wobbly step back. He instantly reaches out, grabbing my elbow to steady me. His blue eyes look a bit dazed and he lets out a breath, his firm chest rising and falling harder than before.

“Hunter—”

But I shake my head, pulling my arm free. “That shouldn't have happened.” I spin around, looking for my duffel bag. “Pretend it didn't.”

“You're kidding, right?”

I grab my bag off the floor and try to get my bearings, but it's proving easier said than done after Knox just kissed me into sweet, dangerous oblivion. My fight or flight kicks in, and I turn away and bolt down the hallway. I can't deal with this right now. Knox is nothing but a big complication I don't need in my life.

“Hunter!” he calls, but I don't stop, blindly hurrying away as my protective walls shoot up around my heart.

Knox Remington Beckett is a chance I can't take. I've gone down that road and I know exactly where it leads.

Nowhere good.

Chapter Nine: Knox

“Dammit,” I hiss, watching Hunter run in the exact opposite direction I was hoping for—away from me.

She’s so fucking skittish, and I’m not used to kissing a woman and then having her bolt like the hounds of hell are after her. Shoving a hand through my hair, frustration bubbles up.

My little Sparrow has flown the coop.

What the hell can I do to make her understand she isn’t like all the other women I’ve known? I admire so much about her—her spirit, her strength, her intelligence. It’s so much more than her beauty that’s attracting me. I can’t ignore the way she’s making me feel. It’s throwing me for a loop. There’s so much I want to know about her, but damn, she’s definitely making this difficult.

What the hell happened in her past to make her so fearful and hesitant? So guarded.

Or, maybe it’s just me. Maybe for the first time in my life, my charm isn’t helping. If I had to guess, it’s hurting me.

But what else do I have?

Grabbing my duffel bag, I sling it over my shoulder and stomp down the hall to find a

room. As I traverse the intricately laid tiles and observe the opulence surrounding me, my dirt-poor upbringing, and everything I did to overcome it, flashes like a movie in my mind. In order to get what I wanted, I had to learn how to make myself attractive to other people. So, I honed my charm and smooth, laidback nature into a weapon that works for me.

It's never failed me before. Not until now. Until Hunter.

The more suave I try to be, the more she pulls away. The usual approaches and tactics that make every other woman swoon aren't working.

What do I have left?

I suppose I could try to just be myself. But who wants that? Nobody did when I was growing up, so why would she? Experience taught me women prefer the self-assured bachelor with a hefty bank account and unlimited supply of beguiling compliments.

But when I turn it on, Hunter looks at me like I'm full of shit.

Maybe I am.

The thought hits me hard as I walk into an empty guest room. It's bigger than I'm used to and beyond luxurious, the king-size bed covered in a pristine white blanket and throw pillows trimmed in gold. A crystal chandelier hangs above it and I sigh, dropping my bag on the floor and heading over to a set of double doors that open onto a private patio.

I pace back and forth, the sound of a distant fountain filling my ears. This place is really too much. Too excessive, too in-your-face, too—

I stop abruptly. Is this how Hunter views me? Am I too much?

Fuck me. Clarity strikes and I drop down onto a piece of fancy patio furniture that's more artsy than functional. I'm sure it cost a fortune, like everything else in this place.

But that doesn't make it better than the comfy hammock I used to swing in as a kid back in Chicago. Growing up with five sisters in a small apartment was hard, but I knew my family and friends loved me for who I was, not for what I had or projected to the rest of the world.

Sure, we had a crappy place on the South Side and money was so tight I used to wear the same Salvation Army clothes until they were embarrassingly worn. One summer, I sprouted up so quickly Mom couldn't afford to buy me a new pair of pants. I wore boots so no one could see they were several inches too short, exposing my ankles. Damn, I had such gangly legs.

I'll never forget when we would flip on the kitchen lights and the roaches would scatter. Those fuckers would get into everything. If there was an open box in the cupboard, you better believe they'd find a way inside and feast on what little food we had. I used to take great pleasure in smashing them to smithereens.

I watched my parents struggle to make ends meet every damn day and I vowed to change that by any means necessary. Meeting Angel and Addie gave me the opportunity to make something of myself and, more importantly, a chance to make good money.

My family has no idea what I really do. They think I'm a big shot at some Fortune 500 company who invests well. I also "invest" their money, because taking care of them is my most important job. I'll never let poverty affect another Beckett again.

So, I've learned to rely on what I have in my arsenal—my good looks and charm. I'm not an idiot, though. I know women use me just as much as I use them. They want to

be on the arm of the good-looking man in the tux. They want me because they think I have an endless supply of money.

They don't want the kid who grew up in the rundown apartment. Who shared a bedroom with his five older sisters. I was trash, and if they knew that, they'd never give me a second glance, never mind stick around for more than thirty seconds.

Well, except maybe one. Perhaps Hunter wouldn't care about my impoverished past. That doesn't mean I want her to know about it. I've come a long way and don't ever look back or regret the things I've done to get where I currently am.

I give my head a shake. Now isn't the time to dwell on my childhood. There's a heist to get ready for, and that means transforming into The Charmer.

Or maybe I should start calling myself The Pretender, because I'm beginning to feel like an absolute fraud.

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Marbella's Golden Mile, where Torres' home is located, boasts some of the most luxurious villas and estates in the world with views of mountains and sea, as well as landmark hotels and high-end shopping. It's a playground for the rich and famous.

We take both SUVs and find a couple of spots at the base of the hill where the hired help was directed to park. God forbid any piece of shit car dare roll up the main drive and intermingle with a luxury vehicle. Ryder stays behind in one of the SUVs, where he'll be our eyes and ears, working his tech magic and keeping a close watch on the situation.

Wearing the standard catering server uniform—a white, long-sleeve shirt and black pants—Addie, Brighton and Linc will blend right in, circling the room with the other waiters and sneaking off to wherever they might need to in order to find the emerald.

The truth is, we have no idea where Torres stashed the damn thing, which complicates the hell out of this job.

“Remember, this might only turn out to be recon,” Addie says, as though reading my thoughts.

“But we can narrow the possibilities down,” Brighton states.

Linc cracks his knuckles and rolls his shoulders back. “I'm ready to crack some safes.”

“What if it isn’t here?” Hunter asks. “Does Torres have other homes? He could’ve hidden it anywhere.”

“The Man believes the emerald is here,” Addie says confidently. “And he’s never been wrong.”

I can tell Hunter isn’t entirely convinced and wants to ask more questions, but now isn’t the time. She presses her lips together and looks over at me.

“Ready to go for a swim?” I ask, mouth edging up in a grin.

“Not really,” she says, voice flat.

I throw my arm over her shoulders, turning her toward the huge mansion lit up like the New York City skyline at dusk. Her body stiffens, then begins to relax as we walk up the hill to the gated estate. We’ll go in first. Ten minutes later, the others will follow, separated by five minutes each. Once inside, we’ll make sure we all keep our distance and only communicate through our comms.

“Bet you’ve never gone on a mission like this,” I say, keeping my arm around her, enjoying how it feels to have her tucked close to my side.

“Normally, my missions involve piloting a plane. Not a heist.”

The hike up the hill doesn’t take too long, and one luxury vehicle after another passes us. The cars roll through the large, open gates, drive past an enormous fountain and stop at the valet to let their precious passengers out.

“How much money do you think some of these people have?” she asks as a Rolls-Royce drives by.

I can't exactly get a read on her tone, and I wonder if any of this impresses her? Or does such a blatant display of wealth disgust her?

"Well, considering that car alone is worth around thirty million, I'd say a lot."

"Thirty million?" she bursts out.

"That's a Rolls-Royce La Rose Noire Droptail. Each car is one-of-a-kind, designed and built exclusively for the client."

"Do you know how many planes I could get for that? Well, I'd have to put some work into them, of course, because it wouldn't be a new jet. But still. What a waste of money."

The tension building up inside me dissipates at her words. "You're not impressed?"

Her face screws up. "Not even a little."

Her answer makes the poor kid in me smile.

"Money isn't everything," she observes. "And I've learned that people who have a lot of it tend to be the biggest assholes."

"So, what impresses you?" I ask, studying her pretty profile. I'm desperate to know.

"Depends."

"On what?"

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Before she can answer, I spot the side door where all the hired help is supposed to enter and sign in.

“We go in there,” I say, tugging her onto a small brick path. But I stop walking and face her, needing an answer to my question. “What impresses you?”

“Someone who possesses good qualities.”

“Such as?” I press.

She tilts her head, thinking. “Kindness, loyalty, courage...honesty.”

Damn. That last quality hits home hard. Something I need to work on. Because in my profession, sometimes lying is unavoidable.

“I’ve never lied to you,” I murmur, tucking a reddish-brown wisp of hair behind her ear. “And I promise to always tell you the truth.”

“We should probably go in—”

I grab her hand, pulling her back when she tries to walk away. She stumbles a step and I catch her, hauling her right up against my chest. “You’re always running away from me.”

“Because you’re dangerous,” she breathes out, her fingers curling into my shirt.

We’re so close, and all I want to do is kiss her, taste that intoxicating sweetness of

hers again. Breathing her soft vanilla scent in deeply, I lightly trail a knuckle along the edge of her cheekbone. “Don’t be so quick to fly away, little Sparrow.”

Her lips part in invitation and I lean down, unable to stop myself from kissing her. My lips barely brush hers before someone rushes past us, clipping our shoulders as they head into the side entrance. We abruptly pull away and she quickly turns, smoothing her hands through her hair.

Disappointment floods me. Again.

Later.

“C’mon,” I murmur, forcing myself to get control of the desire pumping through my veins. “We have a job to do.”

She nods and we walk through what can only be the servants’ entrance. Because I have no doubt this side door, tucked away from the grand main entrance, is only used by the hired help. Hell, Torres probably doesn’t even know it exists, which makes it an absolute advantage for us.

Now that we’re so close to the party, the mild air fills with the sounds of chatting, laughing guests, clinking silverware and the strains of music from a band. We sign fake names and jot down the current time on the required sheet attached to a clipboard, and then someone directs us to the pool.

“Who hires people to swim in their pool?” Hunter asks.

“Someone who can,” I answer.

She makes a little humph sound. “I don’t really understand the point.”

After weaving our way through tall palm trees and a variety of fruit trees, we step onto a back patio made up of tan and white stones.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” she murmurs under her breath, walking forward and looking up.

The pool hovers above the patio and has a glass bottom. It’s absolutely surreal, totally striking. It works amazingly well since the house is made up of different levels. There’s a second pool, too, here on the ground floor, but the star of the show is the one above us.

Just beyond the second pool, there’s an expansive glass wall that’s been pulled open. It looks like it connects to the garden and a golf course. The sprawling, open-plan house is insanely extravagant and far too much for any one person.

“Fancy,” I comment dryly. There are a couple of cabanas, and I nod at them. “Let’s change.”

Hunter chooses the one on the left, so I step into the other one and quickly remove my clothes, stuffing them in my small bag. I’m already wearing my swim shorts and adjust them. They’re far smaller and shorter than the trunks I normally prefer, but when in Spain...

Plus, the moment Brighton laughingly suggested Speedos, I refused. Stuffing my generous junk into a tiny pair of Speedos is a wardrobe malfunction just waiting to happen. Tonight’s job doesn’t include a strip show. Although, if it were Hunter stripping, I might change my mind.

Pulling in a deep breath, I grab the plush black robe hanging on a hook, slip it on and prepare myself. Seeing Hunter in a bathing suit is going to make me want things. Things I can’t have right now. And God forbid I get a massive hard-on and embarrass

myself in front of her and a few hundred guests.

Stepping out of the cabana, I wait for her, watching guests mingle through the glass in another part of the house. My earpiece crackles and Addie comes through loud and clear.

“Is everyone in position?” she asks, and we all check in. “Then let the search begin.”

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“Cams are looping,” Ryder confirms.

According to the house’s layout and intel from The Man, there’s an office and library on the first floor, each with a safe. There’s also an office on the second floor and the master bedroom is on the third floor. Endless possibilities.

The emerald could be anywhere.

Tonight, I’m merely playing a distraction. Swimming in a glass bottom pool and charming the guests. But if Addie needs me, if something comes up or changes, I’ll be ready.

Speaking of distractions...

Hunter walks out of the cabana and my gaze drifts down the black robe, pausing on her red-polished toes. Imagining what’s hidden beneath all that fluffy terry cloth, I give her a smile.

“Ready to get wet?” I ask.

Okay, so maybe not the best choice of words. Shit.

“Let’s do it,” she murmurs, and I relax slightly.

There’s a small staircase dripping with pink bougainvillea and we take it up to the second level. As I’m reaching for the belt on my robe, Hunter lets hers slide off her shoulders. My mouth waters as she tosses it over a lounge chair. Fuck me. Smooth,

lithe limbs, toned abs and tanned skin fill my vision. She's wearing a tiny red bikini, and all I can do is stare and hope she doesn't see my drool. She's absolutely perfect. Beyond gorgeous. And every nerve ending in my body responds to her.

Look away, I warn myself. Before you pop out the side of your swimsuit.

But I can't. Not for all the emeralds in the world. She's utterly mesmerizing, and I watch as she pulls the rubberband free and shakes out her long, reddish-brown hair. I've never seen it down, free of the ponytail she usually confines it to, and my fingers itch to run through all those russet-colored strands.

She turns to face the water, giving me a new angle to ogle. That ass is beyond tempting, and I want those long legs wrapped around my waist so badly I can taste it. The fantasies start to set my brain and body on fire with hungry desire. Glancing over her shoulder, she must notice me gawking, but she doesn't comment. Just sends me a wicked little smirk then dives into the crystal blue water.

I swipe a hand through my hair then hurry over to the edge and dive in, too. And even though I know I should stay far away from her and cool the hell off, what do I do?

I swim straight toward the object of my affection, lust burning through my blood.

Chapter Ten: Hunter

The quick glimpse I got of Knox in his little swim shorts makes me grin as I swim underwater. He didn't exactly look comfortable, but damn he fills them out well. His body is even more amazing than I would've guessed. I like how he's tall and lean, but still powerfully built. Those biceps of his are no stranger to the gym. And don't even get me started on his flat, ridged abs. Drool-worthy.

The warm water sluices over me as I swim up and break the surface. Of course, the

pool is heated, so instead of cooling me off, it's making me warmer. Slicking my wet hair back, I turn, treading water, but I don't see Knox anywhere. A moment later, I feel a tug on my ankle and glance down with a squeak. He pops up and shakes his head like a dog, sending water droplets everywhere.

I laugh and slap the water, spraying him. For a moment, we just stare at each other, breathing harder from swimming. I can't look away from his eyes. They're like two sapphires the color of deep midnight, rimmed in onyx. He has me pinned in his gaze, which is fine with me. At this moment, there's nowhere on earth I'd rather be.

"You look good wet," he murmurs, eyeing me like a hungry dog eyes a steak.

Clearing my throat, trying to break whatever spell Mr. Charmer has cast, I kick my feet and swim over to the side. He follows, placing a hand on the edge. We can't touch the bottom, but I manage to prop my toes on a small ledge.

"So, we're just supposed to swim around?" I ask.

"Yep." His mouth edges up and my attention drops to his angled jaw covered in light stubble.

Damn, the man is far too attractive. Why couldn't he be an uninteresting, unattractive dud? Someone who wouldn't make me want dangerous things?

You know what kind of guy he is, Hunter, the logical part of my brain says.

You've also been lonely for a very long time, the other part of me intrudes. Why not have a little fun?

The kiss we shared last night replays in my head and I can feel things heating up. Like a million degrees. We almost kissed again downstairs. And the truth is, I'm

disappointed we were interrupted. I'm craving his mouth on mine again.

"What're you thinking about?" he asks, moving closer, voice low and so sexy it has me rubbing my thighs together beneath the water.

"About—" I'm about to say "About that kiss" and take a huge, vulnerable leap, when I look over his shoulder and spot a few guests entering the pool area. Instead, I murmur, "We have company."

A wave of disappointment floods me. If I'd said what I was thinking, would he have kissed me again? Because why lie? I want his tongue dueling with mine again. I want to press up against his wet body and caress his hard muscles. The woman in me needs it. Desperately.

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He curses under his breath. “Time to do some laps.”

Maybe it’s a good thing we got interrupted, I decide, and start swimming the long length of the pool. I need to cool off and remember why we’re here. And it’s certainly not to get frisky with Knox in this pool. We have a job to do.

Knox is a wonderfully steamy distraction, and as much as I want to doubt him, I’m starting to see his good qualities. I really like how he includes me in everything, from the meetings with his crew to the conversations about the job.

With Ex Nihilo, I sometimes felt a bit on the outs. Probably because I was merely their pilot. They were the assassins gone rogue with a vengeance, and I hung back, stayed with the jet and let them do their thing.

Maybe there’s more to Knox Beckett than meets the eye.

After several laps, I let my feet touch the bottom in the shallow end. It’s about four feet deep and my toes slide on the glass. I see people below, looking up, drinking champagne and socializing, and I wonder if all these fancy guests live in houses like this.

I’m also wondering how Addie and the others are doing. We haven’t heard anything in a while, so they must still be searching. My earpiece is waterproof, so I know it’s working.

I watch Knox slice through the water with clean, strong strokes and lean my back against the side, lifting my foot, expecting it to hit tiles. Instead, it touches nothing,

and I lose my balance slightly. What the hell?

Glancing down, I realize there's an opening, and I'm trying to see through the blurry water when Knox swims up beside me.

"Look!" I murmur, pointing down at the circular hole. "There's a tunnel."

He moves closer, brushing up against me to get a better look, and I feel a thrum of awareness. Before he can comment, I pull in a deep breath and dive down. Swimming forward, I pass through the narrow tunnel, which is a few feet long, and find myself in a completely different pool.

Breaking the surface, I take a moment to look around. I'm standing in a much smaller, shallower, very private pool. Knox pops up beside me, pulling in a deep breath of air. There's a couch, table and expensive-looking piece of art on a pedestal. Several large oil paintings hang on the wall, probably priceless originals, and I wonder if Torres stole those, too. There's also a display case, but it's hard to see what's inside from my low position.

Moving over to the stairs, we both climb out and drip water across the shiny marble floor. I gasp when I see the biggest, brightest, greenest emerald displayed on a black velvet cushion, sparkling beneath a light.

Beside me, Knox lets out a low curse then presses his comms. "We've got eyes on the emerald. Hunter found it," he says, and my chest swells a bit because he's giving me all the credit. And he also sounds proud.

"Where are you?" Addie asks.

We both look around, not quite sure how to answer that.

“No clue. Some private room connected to an underwater tunnel to the upper pool. Gimme a sec.”

“I don’t see a door,” I say, searching for an entrance, an exit, some way to get in or out of the room other than swimming.

“It must be hidden, and we don’t have time to search. This is where Torres probably hides the hot stuff.” He scrubs a hand down his face then pushes his comms unit. “Deck, I don’t think there’s any way to get you in here other than a swim, and that’s going to draw attention.”

“What have you got?” he asks.

“A glass display case...” Knox bends down, examining the edges, lightly running his index finger along the wooden base, just below the glass.

A shiver runs through me at that subtle movement. Plus, it’s cold out of the warm water. Or, at least, that’s what I try to tell myself as I rub the goosebumps away.

“There’s a keypad,” he continues.

“Perfect,” Brighton says. “He can enter the code The Man gave us, grab the emerald and we get the hell outta here.”

“Hold up,” Linc warns. “We don’t know if there’s an alarm or pressure switch.”

“And there usually is,” Addie states.

I exchange a worried look with Knox. This is Linc’s area of expertise and he’s not here, which makes me incredibly nervous.

“I can walk you through it. At least, I think.”

“That’s not very reassuring,” Knox says.

“Can you or can’t you, Linc?” Addie asks.

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“Yeah, we definitely don’t want to trigger an alarm,” Brighton adds.

“I can deactivate the alarm,” Ryder interjects. “Hang on while I work some magic.”

My nerves are stretched tight and I feel like I might vomit. “Maybe we should go,” I suggest, but Knox shakes his head and lays a hand on my arm.

“I’ve got this. Trust me.”

I force a nod, but my stomach is a tight ball of nerves, warning me to run. “Knox—”

Suddenly, his hands lift, cupping my face, and our eyes lock. “Do you trust me?” he asks, searching my face.

I think so, I realize, but the words refuse to come out. “I’m trying,” I whisper raggedly.

“Try harder,” he demands. Then he leans in, his mouth crashing against mine, and we kiss hungrily. Water drips all over the floor as our wet bodies mold together. My arms snake around his neck and he tightens his hold. There’s not much between us, just some very thin, barely-there material, and his hard body is making me want more. Ohh. He’s deliciously wet, yet so hot, and I writhe against him.

“Okay, check the back of the case,” Linc says, and Knox and I reluctantly pull apart.

“You make me crazy,” he tells me huskily before tapping his earpiece. “Copy that, Deck.”

I shift, completely overheated as he circles around to the rear of the case and squats down.

“I’ve got a red, blinking light,” Knox reports.

“Good,” Linc responds. “That means you’re clear.”

Knox stands up and moves back to my side. “What’s that code?”

Linc starts rattling off a series of numbers and I’m holding my breath as Knox hits one button after another. Oh, my God, this is absolutely nail-biting. The only thing I can compare it to is when I was up in the air having a dogfight with the enemy. My heart is racing, my palms are sweating and adrenaline is pumping through my body.

After he punches in the last number, there’s a slight wisp of sound as the glass lifts.

“It’s open,” Knox murmurs, and I finally release the breath I’ve been holding.

“You need to check if there’s a pressure switch,” Linc says.

“And how exactly do I do that?” Knox asks.

“You have your switchblade?”

“Always.”

He plucks a small, folded blade from an inside flap of his swimsuit where it’s been carefully concealed.

I slant him a look as he opens it. “Are you sure you’re not former military? A SEAL maybe?”

He chuckles. “Maybe in a past life.”

“Okay,” Linc says, “carefully slide it beneath the emerald—”

“There’s a velvet cloth under it.”

“Huh.”

Knox and I exchange worried looks. “Huh?” he echoes. “You gotta give me better direction than that, Deck.”

“Maybe there isn’t a switch.”

A very tense, excessively long moment of silence passes.

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“What the fuck am I doing?” Knox asks in a singsong voice.

“Sorry, I’m just thinking of potential outcomes and how to avoid the bad ones,” Linc replies.

“Christ,” Knox murmurs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yes, please let’s avoid the bad ones.”

“Okay, slide the tip of the blade beneath the emerald and feel around for a pressure switch. It’ll feel like a little button. Just don’t lift the emerald off it,” he warns. “If you feel it, you’re going to slide your blade over it and sideways, wedging it in the crevice, making sure to keep the switch down. Don’t let it lift up at any point or it’ll trigger an alarm.”

Knox pulls in a breath, and I’m amazed at how steady his hands are as he does what Linc says. Once again, I’m holding my breath, my hands balled into tight fists, and anxiety fills me. I watch as he holds the emerald in place with one hand and carefully maneuvers the knife beneath it with his other.

“I don’t feel anything,” he says, carefully probing with his knife.

“No button? A small switch? Some kind of nub?” Linc asks.

“Pretend it’s a woman and you’re looking for her—”

“I have no problem finding that, you idiot.” Knox rolls his eyes at Ryder’s comment. Then he gingerly moves the knife’s tip, carefully prodding again.

“Anything?” Linc asks.

“No. I don’t think so.”

“You need to be sure.”

Knox looks over at me. “I don’t feel anything.”

I give him a reassuring nod. “He said there might not be one.”

He swears under his breath, and I’m not sure if it’s a bead of sweat that rolls down his temple or a drop of water.

“There’s nothing,” Knox states firmly.

“Then pick up that emerald and get the hell out of there,” Linc says.

“Addie?” Knox asks, deferring to their leader.

“You heard him,” she says. “We’ll see you outside the gates.”

“Copy that.”

Knox sends me one more look, and I nod. With my heart in my throat, I watch as he pulls the switchblade back and lifts the emerald off its velvet bed.

And the shrill sound of an alarm fills the air.

Chapter Eleven: Knox

“Fuck!” I hiss, spinning around and pushing Hunter toward the pool as I shove the

emerald down the front of my swim shorts. “Go!”

I palm my switchblade as we both hurry down the steps into the water, then pull in a deep breath and dive for the tunnel. Beneath the water, the sound of the alarm dulls and I wonder what the hell happened. Ryder said he disconnected the alarm, but Torres must’ve had a backup installed. Maybe something that ran on a battery.

It’s fucking Colombia all over again. And I’m really starting to hate this guy.

By the time we reach the other pool, the alarm has been turned off, but I can see concerned guests through the glass bottom. People are wondering what the hell is going on, and if this turns out anything like South America, Torres is going to lock the mansion down.

We need an exit plan. Fast.

Climbing out of the pool, we grab our robes and slip them on. No one is up here yet and I look around, trying to determine the best course of action.

“What now?” Hunter asks.

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Before I can answer, a couple of guards storm up the steps. “Don’t move!” one shouts.

I glance over at Hunter. “How’re your fighting skills, Pyro?”

“Excellent,” she assures me.

I grin, not at all surprised. “I’ll take the bigger guy.”

“Roger that.”

Her confidence turns me on big-time, and I quickly learn she has the skills to back it up. We spin to face our adversaries and drop into a fighting stance. I’ve learned a lot of tricks from Deck, who is a certified badass when it comes to fighting. Not even joking—he fought professionally in the cage for five years, and we spar together all the time.

After throwing a few punches and dodging some more, I manage to hit my opponent in his jaw. When he stumbles sideways, I take full advantage and shove him hard toward the pool. He falls into the water with a splash and a high-pitched girly shout. Guess he had no plans on swimming tonight.

I’m about to help Hunter, but I see she has it handled.

A smile curves my mouth as she ducks the man’s fist then launches her leg out in a perfectly-executed spinning back kick, catching him square in the chest. He grunts, falls backward and lands in the pool beside the other guard. Damn, she’s good.

“C’mon,” she urges me, running away from the pool.

I follow, catching up, and we race down the staircase to the ground floor. Most of the guests are inside and I see security moving around in there, so I tug Hunter sideways, off the edge of the patio and through the bushes.

Avoiding the garden’s lit pathways, we race for the wooded area on the side of the property. Then we stick to the tree line, making our way down the dark golf course. The moon is bright, but our black robes help us to blend into the darkness. Back at the house, several guards appear, stepping off the patio, and searching the garden with flashlights.

“We’re okay,” I assure her. Even so, I keep checking over my shoulder.

“Oh, thank God,” she murmurs. We’re walking fast and she lays a hand over her heart. “That was too close.”

I couldn’t agree more and touch my comms. “We’re out,” I report as we hurry forward and past an empty helipad.

“The alarm connected to the case must’ve been on a separate circuit,” Hunter states. “Or, it had a battery backup.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking, too.”

“Location?” Addie asks.

“The golf course behind the house. In the treeline.”

“Keep walking straight through and we’ll pick you up along the southern edge of the property,” Addie says.

“Roger that,” I say, mimicking Hunter’s military response. Normally, I’d say “copy,” but I guess she’s rubbing off on me. And I’m enjoying it thoroughly. However, I am not enjoying the big, hard gemstone that’s beginning to chafe my privates. “Uh, can we stop really quick?”

Hunter tosses me a questioning look but keeps walking. “We need to keep going.”

“Just gimme a sec.” I stop walking, open my robe and reach into my swim shorts to pluck the emerald out. Tucking it in the robe’s pocket, I grin at her wide-eyed expression. “Okay, much better.”

Even though it’s dark, I swear she blushes. We start walking again, the clamor of the guests fading in the distance until all I hear is the sound of chirping crickets.

“Are all your heists this exciting?” she asks.

“No. This one went a little off the rails,” I admit. “Sorry about that.”

“You’re lucky I enjoy a good adventure.” She sends me a sexy smile that makes my balls tighten. I can’t stop thinking about how good her wet body felt plastered against mine, the way she leaned into me when we kissed before grabbing the emerald.

Maybe I shouldn’t say what I’m about to, but fuck it.

“You enjoyed that kiss, too, didn’t you?”

She slows down but doesn’t answer me. Instead, she pulls her robe tighter and a shiver racks her slim body.

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“Cold?” I ask, instantly concerned. We had to leave our clothes in the cabanas, and I glance down to see her bare, red-polished toes moving through the dew-covered grass. “We’ll get the heat going and warm you up in the car.”

She stops walking, turning to face me. “I can think of another way. Because, yeah, I enjoyed it. Thoroughly.”

My heart thumps madly and I step closer. “Really?” She looks up at me through her lashes, and I take her soft face in my hands, gently trailing my thumbs over her cheeks. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?”

Her face tilts up to mine, awash in silver moonlight, and before she can comment, I capture her lips in a long, sensual kiss. Our mouths meld, tongues sliding against each other. Meeting, retreating, tasting again. As the kiss deepens, she presses her body against mine and I relish the feel of every curve. Curves I want to explore much more thoroughly.

“Where are you, Knox?” Addie’s voice blares through our earpieces and we reluctantly pull away, ending the perfect kiss.

“Almost there,” I respond in a raspy voice, lacing my fingers through Hunter’s. Neither of us says another word as we make our way across the rest of the golf course. I help her through the hedges and we climb into one of the waiting SUVs.

“You got it?” Addie asks.

I reach into the robe’s pocket and pluck out the emerald, lifting it up. “I got it.”

“Good job. Both of you.”

I look at Hunter, my attention dropping to her kiss-swollen lips, having every intention of kissing her in other places, too.

“As soon as we get back, we have a call with The Man,” Addie says.

My hopes for more sexy times with Hunter deflate. Hopefully, the call won’t last long, because I have things I want to do with her. So many delicious things.

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The call goes better than expected, and The Man wants us to lay low until morning. We don’t want to draw any unnecessary attention by making a hasty exit. So, we’ll remain at his villa until things cool off a bit. And he is getting no argument from me.

I can’t stop eye-fucking Hunter and, I swear, she’s reciprocating each heated glance. But I know she could still run from me, and that’s the last thing I want. After the call, she talks to Addie about leaving early in one of the SUVs to prepare the jet for our departure, and Addie approves.

The second they’re done, I grab her hand and tug her closer.

“Are you still opposed to the idea of having dinner with me?” I lift her hand and brush a kiss along her knuckles.

Instead of rebuffing me like I’m half-scared she’ll do, she flushes prettily and shakes her head.

“So, you’ll go on a date with me?”

“Sure,” she says slowly.

“Great. Give me twenty minutes.”

She blinks. “You want to go on a date tonight? I thought we’re supposed to lay low.”

“We’ll do it on the back patio.” I can’t help the wicked grin that curves my mouth.

“The date, I mean. Me, you, a pizza, some wine and the stars.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

I reluctantly release her hand and watch her walk away, missing that tiny, red bikini. But her hair is still down, long and loose, and I can’t wait to run my fingers through it. She tosses me one last look over her shoulder before disappearing down the hall to her room.

Go-time.

I head straight to the kitchen and pull out the frozen pizza I saw earlier. Not exactly gourmet, but I don’t have time to cook much else. I doctor it up with some fresh basil I pluck from a pot outside, add extra mozzarella cheese and drizzle a dash of olive oil. There’s a bottle of red wine in the cabinet which I uncork and then fill two glasses.

In less than twenty minutes, I place everything on a tray and carefully carry it down to the back patio. Some of my crew are hanging out between there and here, and I steel myself for the comments I know they’re about to sling.

“Well, well, well.” Ryder pauses clicking through TV stations, his voice full of amusement. “What’re you up to, Casanova? Got a hot date?”

“Actually, yeah, so stay away.”

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Deck looks up from the book he's reading and frowns. "Don't get involved, man. Do not do it."

I brush his warning off and continue walking. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Women are nothing but trouble," Deck grunts. I'm not sure what female put that bug up his ass, but I disagree. Women are amazing creatures. And the one I'm about to have dinner with? She's the most spectacular one of all.

They can tease all they want. I don't care. Hunter intrigues me, and I plan to get to know her better tonight.

After carefully setting everything up on the glass table, I light a few candles and pull up a jazz playlist on my phone. I'm so freaking pumped to spend some time with Hunter. She said yes to this little date and my body is vibrating with so much excited energy, I can barely contain it. Endorphins are pumping through my system, my favorite song is playing, and all I can do is dance. There's no stopping me. My body moves to the beat, and I channel my inner samba, moving forwards and backwards, rolling my hips to the beat.

When a throat clears, I turn to see Hunter standing there, and I smile. She exchanged her loungewear for a little swing dress and flip flops. And she looks gorgeous.

"I figured I'd wear my dress since it's a date and all." She sends me a shy smile that ignites something inside me. Electric sparks sizzle through my body and I samba my way over, my gaze sliding down her curves, pausing on her bare legs, then continuing

down to those small, polished toenails.

“You look lovely.”

“Thanks.”

I reach for her. “Dance with me,” I say, but she shakes her head.

“No, I can’t—”

“Can’t dance? C’mon, it’s easy. Just move your hips to the beat.” But she hesitates.

“May I?”

I lift my hands, letting them hover over her hips, and when she slowly nods, I allow them to drop. Holding onto her, I guide her hips back and forth, and we find a rhythm, completely in sync with each other and the music.

“You’re a great dancer,” I tell her, sending her a megawatt smile.

I’m not sure what snaps her out of the moment, but she pulls away. “Hardly,” she scoffs with a forced laugh. I hate that she pulls away, but I’m not going to let it disappoint me. The night is just beginning, and I’m on a mission to figure her out.

Baby steps, I remind myself.

Her attention drops to the table spread. “Wow, how did you do all this so fast?”

“You inspired me.” We sit down and I hand her a glass of wine. “Thanks for agreeing to have dinner with me. Normally, I don’t have to ask twice.”

Cocky? Maybe. But it’s true.

“I’m sure all the ladies eagerly wait for an invite,” she teases and clinks her glass against mine. “Should I feel special?”

“You are special,” I answer without missing a beat.

She scoffs. “You have a line for everything, don’t you?”

“It’s not a line.”

“If you say so.” Her attention drops to the pizza. “That looks good.”

“I wish I could’ve taken you somewhere a little more fancy than the patio, but hopefully it’s not too bad.”

For a moment she doesn’t say anything. Just looks around at the dinner, wine, candles, then finally at me. “It’s very nice. Thank you, Knox.”

“You’re welcome.” I brush her hair back over her shoulder, my fingers grazing her arm. A tingle zaps through me. “If you haven’t noticed, I like you. A lot.”

“I’m sure you say that to all the girls.”

She’s brushing me off, and I don’t like it. Reaching over, I grab her chin, forcing her to look at me. “No, I don’t. Honestly, Hunter, I don’t remember the last woman I actively pursued.”

She inhales swiftly.

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“You’re definitely giving me a run for my money,” I acknowledge, brushing my thumb over her lower lip.

“Good,” she whispers. “It shouldn’t always be so easy for you.”

“Sweets, you are anything but easy.” Her brow pinches together. “And I mean that in the best possible way.”

Chapter Twelve: Hunter

The words flow so effortlessly from his silver tongue, and I want to believe them. Want to believe him so badly. But my insecurities hover beneath the surface, reminding me I’m nothing like the beautiful, exotic women he’s probably used to dating. There’s no way I am Knox Beckett’s type. Not a chance in hell.

Feeling self-conscious, I grab the rubber band from around my wrist and use it to pull my hair up into a messy bun. He watches as though it’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen.

“What?” I ask softly.

“I like your hair like that.”

“Like a rat’s nest?” Disbelief fills my voice. Now I know he’s full of shit.

“Wild and free—like you.” He places a slice of pizza on a plate and hands it to me. “Although, I really like it down, too. I’ve never seen hair quite that shade of red

before. It's beautiful."

I shift, not used to so many compliments. Especially from such a good-looking man. I'm having such a hard time reading him, and it's driving me crazy. Normally, I can figure people out pretty easily. But Knox Beckett keeps throwing me for a loop. The moment I think I have him all figured out, he says something sweet.

Is he truly being sincere, though? Or is he so used to being a charmer that it just comes naturally?

You also thought you knew Shane, I remind myself. And look how that turned out.

"Talk to me, Pyro," he says, and I can't help but smile, immediately recognizing the reference to the famous line from *Top Gun*.

Talk to me, Goose.

I decide to go with blunt honesty. "You're hard to read. No, that's not exactly right. Every time I think I have a good read on you, you do something that throws me."

"I'm just being me." He holds my gaze then leans in closer. The hint of a smile plays on his lips and his yummy scent tickles my nose. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Caught in his stare, I nod, breathing him in deeply.

"I really, really like you, Hunter McGrath." His voice slides over me like hot butter. So low and sexy it makes my stomach flutter. When his fingers lightly brush my bare knee, I try not to melt. "Yet you keep looking at me like I'm full of it. I promise you, I'm dying of curiosity over here."

Now, he's lightly trailing his finger in a circle on my knee, and I bite my lip. His

touch is igniting a desire that usually stays under control. But Knox makes me want to throw caution to the wind and have some fun. Indulge like I never have before.

“What are you curious about?” I ask, barely recognizing my own voice. It’s so husky, and I’m breathing harder, waiting for his answer.

“Everything. From your favorite color to what you look like naked.”

Oh, God.

His fingers dip to my inner thigh, still lightly caressing, but only venturing up the slightest bit. “I want to know how you taste and the sounds you make when you come. Too forward?”

All the air rushes from my lungs and I can feel my panties growing wet. “Is that a line?” I ask, trying to make light of the situation. Trying my damndest not to succumb, but completely focused on his hand between my legs.

And how very much I like it there.

His entrancing blue eyes narrow slightly. “No, it’s not.”

“Give me your best line.”

“What?”

“I want to hear your best line. I know you have one.”

“No.”

“C’mon,” I cajole. “Pretend I’m your mark and you’ve seduced me into your bed. What would you say?”

“Why?” he asks carefully.

Because our adventure is almost over and I don’t want to have regrets or wonder “what if” after we go our separate ways. Because I’m going to give in. Because I’m going to sleep with you, and when you say it to me, I’ll know it’s just a beautiful lie and that it means nothing.

“Humor me,” I say.

“Okaaay,” he relents, drawing the word out, fingers starting to caress my inner thigh again. “But it’s just a line.”

I nod.

“I have to ease into it,” he warns me with a smirk. Before I can blink, his mouth is on mine, kissing me senseless.

My body responds and I slide my hands up around his neck, pushing closer. Our mouths meld, tongues stroking, and I whimper. He’s managed to break through my defenses and, right at this moment, I don’t have the strength to care, much less pretend I don’t want him, too.

When he finally pulls away, I'm still lost in that amazing kiss that has me tingling all over. My fingers curl into his shirt and I don't want to let go. Desire thrums through every cell in my body as he presses his forehead against mine and rasps, "If I had to choose between breathing and loving you, I would say I love you with my last breath."

And there it is—his best line. I can't lie, it's damn good, and my heart is beating hard, my body on fire.

I pull away, releasing him, and roll my eyes. "Oh, my God, shut up," I force out, trying to play it off. But I need to turn away and pull in a steady breath. Take a moment to compose myself. Because even though I don't want his words and actions to affect me, they do. So damn much.

Being in this sexy thief's world is intoxicating, and all I want to do is stay drunk on him. On his deep, dark blue eyes, his irresistible smile, his delicious body. Tomorrow, we go home and this all ends. So tonight, I'm going to keep drinking and enjoying the exhilarating thrill that is Knox Beckett. I'm going to let him go straight to my head and let it spin.

I'm also going to let him into my bed. And the anticipation that comes with that confession sizzles through me.

"Hunter?"

"Hmm?"

"Just so you know, I've never used that line on anyone."

"Really?" For some strange reason, I believe him.

“Guess I’ve been saving it.”

I nod, caught up in the magnetic pull of his universe. “Knox?”

A dazzling smile lights his face. “I like it when you say my name.”

“I’m glad. But you don’t need to waste any more of your best lines on me.” He frowns. “Because if you haven’t figured it out yet, I want you to take me to bed tonight.”

A mix of emotions flash across his face, and before he can say a word, I embrace this newfound boldness and lay down my terms.

“But what happens here in Spain stays here in Spain. No expectations, just sex. As long as you’re okay with that...” My voice trails off, but I have no idea why he wouldn’t be. I just told him we could fuck and then he can go on his merry way. I won’t call or cry or ask him to be my boyfriend.

A girl has needs. But I’m keeping my heart closed. End of story.

“That’s what you want?” he asks, cupping my face.

“It’s all I can give,” I whisper.

He considers my words for a moment then stands up and offers his hand. “You make the rules, Hunter. And I’m not wasting another minute. Let’s go.”

My heart thunders in my ears as I place my hand in his and stand. I can’t believe I’m doing this. I just told this gorgeous man I want to have sex with him and now we’re going to get naked. This isn’t me. I’ve never been so daring and forthright when it comes to men. But watching Knox walk away tomorrow and then having regrets isn’t

something I can let happen.

No way. Tonight I'm going to focus on pleasure. Both his and mine. I have a feeling he isn't going to be anything like Shane—a selfish lover who only cared about himself. At least, I hope not. Suddenly, I feel wound so tight and I need release.

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Knox spirits me down a back hallway, avoiding walking past Linc and Ryder. If I didn't know better, I'd say he's shielding me from their inevitable teasing and prying eyes, which is kind and considerate. Or maybe I'm just reading into the situation too much.

The moment we reach his room, he shuts the door and turns to face me. "One night, no strings. That's what you want?"

I'm not sure it's exactly what I want, but it's the only way to safeguard my heart from him. So, I do the only thing I can. "Yes," I whisper, reaching for the hem of my dress and pulling it over my head. I toss it on a nearby chair and turn to face him in only my bra and panties. I think the red bikini covered less, but the appreciation and flare of heat that passes over his face gives me a boost of confidence.

He removes his shirt, throws it over my dress, and stalks forward. His hands wrap around my waist, tugging me closer, and his mouth descends, covering mine. The kiss is possessive, deep, and I run my fingers through his hair. It's soft and silky, and I scratch my nails down the back of his neck.

I am lost, completely caught up in the magic that is Knox Beckett. His hand twists in my hair, angling my head to the side, allowing him to deepen the kiss. My knees shake as I hold onto his shoulders, but I kiss him back with everything I've got.

When he finally releases my mouth, I'm hanging onto him for dear life, breathing hard. His blazing blue eyes lock onto mine and he pulls me upright, walking me backward to the bed. The backs of my knees bump the mattress and I blink in surprise when my bra straps slide down my arms. I didn't even realize he'd unsnapped it. It

falls to the floor and he takes a step back, soaking up the sight of my bare breasts.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he says, voice husky. He lifts his hands, palming my breasts, and I drop my head back, offering myself to him.

The moment his mouth closes over a nipple, a moan tears from my throat. It’s too good, too much, and I arch back further as he sucks, swirling his tongue around the tight peak and then moving to my other breast.

I’m not sure how long he worships my breasts, but no one has ever spent so much time kissing and exploring them before. It feels so good, but it’s making me a little crazy, and I squeeze my thighs together. He’s moving at an incredibly languid pace, which is filling me with an intense anticipation. I’m about ready to scream “More!” when his hands slide down my back, dip into my panties and squeeze my ass.

A soft, needy sound escapes me, and I press my lips together, trying to be quiet. Normally, I’m not vocal during sex, but Knox is doing things to my body that make it sing.

“Don’t hold it in. I want to hear every sound you make. Each moan and whimper.” His fingers slide around to my front, dipping downward and caressing my slit. I let out a soft, shuddering sigh. “Just like that.”

I’m so used to a partner who shoves inside me after a couple of kisses, spends five minutes pumping his hips then rolls away and falls asleep, leaving me unsatisfied. I’m completely unaware of how good it could be.

So this is foreplay, I realize as Knox’s agile fingers work me. I really, really like it.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I drop my head against his shoulder as he slides his finger inside me then drags it out, coating and circling my clit with my wetness. Oh, my

God.I bite down on his broad shoulder, and he chuckles.

“Yes, this is foreplay,” he says, voice laced with amusement.

“Oh, my God.” How did I say that out loud?

“Makes me wonder what idiots you’ve slept with.” A dark look briefly passes over his face, but then it disappears. Another finger joins the first, and they begin moving in and out of my pussy. So slowly. Teasing. Stretching.

“Just one idiot,” I confirm.

He briefly pauses, then his thumb starts circling over my clit, rubbing harder, making me gasp.

“You like that?” he asks, continuing to play with my clit. He alternates pressure and speed until he finds the right rhythm, and my legs give out. He catches me with one hand—because the fingers of his other hand are still deep inside me—and lowers me onto the bed. “Where do you think you’re going?”

He straightens up, fingers pulling out, and I whimper a soft sound of dismay, instantly missing that intimate feel of him inside me. Heart thundering, I watch as he strips out of his pants and tosses them. My attention skates down his firm chest, over washboard abs, and zeroes in on the huge bulge straining against his boxer briefs. Oh, my. Of course, his cock would be enormous. I’m sure it’s just as perfect as the rest of him.

Laying here, looking up at him, excitement and desire lick through me like a wildfire. My greedy hands reach for him, but he grabs my wrists, pinning them to the mattress.

“Please,” I murmur. I’ve never sounded so needy or desperate, but if he doesn’t fuck

me soon, I'm going to implode.

"Are you in a hurry?" he asks, voice low and teasing.

Yes! I want to yell. God, I'm about to rip my own underwear off. All this buildup is killing me. Making me so desperate for him.

"I can't...I need..." I don't even know what I'm trying to say. He has me so out of sorts, I don't even know who I am at this moment.

"I'm pretty sure I know what you need." He gives me a wicked smile, releasing one of my wrists, his hand gliding down my side and back between my legs. He strokes me through my panties then pulls the material aside, continuing his delicious ministrations.

I'm on the verge of orgasm and I'm still wearing my panties. Knox has more talent in one finger than Shane had in his entire body.

The moment I arch up, Knox swiftly removes the final barrier between us, tossing my panties through the air. He hooks a hand beneath my thigh, but when he lifts my leg up over his shoulder, exposing my most intimate area, I stiffen.

No one has ever gone down on me before. Shane refused and I never pushed him. My fingers dig into the bedspread and I have no idea what to do.

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“So pretty and wet,” he murmurs, completely focused on my aching pussy.

Oh, my God. I’m throbbing, dying to feel his mouth on me.

He locks gazes with me as he slowly licks up my seam.

Jesus. My body jerks at the intimate touch and I gasp. Pressing my lips together, telling myself to be quiet, I wait for his next move. He’s watching me closely, an unreadable expression on his face. Just when I think he isn’t going to continue, he flicks his tongue against my clit. My lower body instantly reacts, my legs squeezing around his head.

“Sorry,” I murmur, trying to relax, but it’s impossible with what he’s doing to me.

“Sorry? For what? Being the sexiest damn thing I’ve ever seen? For tasting so good, I could feast on you all day?” Those blue eyes of his refuse to let go, holding me hostage, and I squirm, feeling his warm breath against my center.

“I just...” I swallow hard, not used to being in such a vulnerable position. “No one’s ever...”

I cringe. Why can’t this be easy? Why couldn’t he have just fucked me hard and fast? We’d be done and I could’ve avoided all this getting too personal stuff.

He lowers my leg, laying his hands on my thighs, his face so serious.

“Are you saying no one’s ever gone down on you before?” Before I can respond, he

continues, “Because that is so fucking hot. I’d be honored to be your first, Hunter. To give you so much pleasure your fucking world spins off its axis. But you need to trust me.”

He drags his cheek along my inner thigh, his sexy stubble leaving its mark, never breaking eye contact.

“Just say yes and I will lick you into a frenzy,” he promises huskily.

When he runs his tongue over his lips like he’s hungry, I do the only thing I can.

“Yes,” I whisper. For better or worse, I’m going to relinquish my control and hand over my trust. Well, some of my trust.

A second later, his lips wrap around my clit and begin sucking, and I am an absolute goner.

Chapter Thirteen: Knox

I’m not sure what alternate universe I’m living in when a woman as beautiful and intelligent as Hunter McGrath tells me no man has ever gone down on her. What kind of jackass did she date? No foreplay? No kissing this gorgeous pussy?

Good. I’m glad. Fuck that guy. Because his lack of attention means it’s all mine. And I’m all in, riding a wave of bliss and completely focused on her pleasure as I suck her into a mind-blowing orgasm.

She likes to hold the reins tightly, maintain control, but I’m going to show her it can feel even better when she lets go. I know trust is hard for her—or, at least, trusting me is—and I’m going to demolish those walls she’s erected. I’m going to prove to her it’s okay. Make her see I won’t ever, ever hurt her.

Pushing her thighs further apart, keeping her hips pressed against the bed because she keeps bucking up, I pull out every trick in my book. I'm completely fixated on her pleasure, listening closely to every single mewl, gasp and breathy cry she utters. Making sure this experience is everything she deserves and then some is my only goal.

For the first time in my adult life, I've completely disregarded my comfort and needs. I'm so damn hard it hurts, but all I want is to make Hunter scream my name. I gently spread her folds and work her with my mouth and fingers until she's writhing. But as much as I can tell she's enjoying the pleasure I'm giving her, she's also still fighting for control.

That's about to end, I think, feeling cocky. Very, very cocky, actually. I'm doing everything in my power to not blow my wad. I don't remember ever being this turned on, and my dick isn't even in her sweet pussy yet.

"You taste so good," I tell her, and she rewards me with a pretty little moan.

I ease a finger inside her, followed by another, and curl them, lightly stroking as I lick her clit. I'm in no hurry and plan to go for multiple orgasms. Okay, maybe that's a little ambitious since this is our first time together, but I feel like I've got a pretty good read on her. Her sexual experiences before tonight barely count, and I have every intention of showing her what a good, focused, attentive lover can do.

At first, I only wanted to make her feel good. I didn't really expect to get anything out of it. But, the strange thing is, I'm really enjoying this. I love how she feels, smells, tastes. Hell, I could do this all day, every day.

Every lusty sigh and needy sound she makes is like a gold star saying "Well done!" And my people-pleasing nature is highly encouraged to continue.

The moment I increase my suction around her clit, a shudder runs through her body and I can feel her inner muscles pulse around my fingers. Orgasm number one down. I ease up, letting her soar over the edge, but I'm far from done. Yeah, I'm not even close, Sparrow.

She's still shaking as I leisurely kiss my way up her body, dragging my tongue around her belly button, dropping kisses on her stomach, and moving back up to her breasts. They're perfect, too, and fit my palm just like I knew they would. I pull a taut nipple into my mouth, loving the way her fingers slide through my hair, pulling hard. It doesn't take long before she shudders again and lets out a soft cry.

And that would be orgasm number two. Hell, it's my poor dick that deserves a gold star for being so patient.

Her body is extra sensitive right now, and I can't get over how responsive she is to my touches and kisses. It's so damn refreshing. Everything about Hunter McGrath is exhilarating.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:54 am

Her pretty brown eyes flutter open, looking a little glazed, as she whispers, “I think you just ruined me.”

I chuckle, push up off the bed and look around for my pants. They’re here somewhere and I need to get the condom in my wallet. There. I bend over, snag them off the floor and find my wallet, flipping it open. As I tear the package open with my teeth, I feel her watching me intently. And I fucking love it. I love her eyes on me, her hands on me. I love everything about this woman.

Like. I like everything about this woman, I correct myself as I yank my boxer briefs down and roll the condom on.

I hear her swift intake of breath and she pushes up on her elbows, her focus on my raging erection. “You’re...” She licks her lips and, I swear, I grow another fucking inch. “Quite, ah, big.”

“You can take me,” I say confidently, crawling onto the bed and on top of her. Lowering my hand between our bodies, I stroke her pussy, smearing her wetness over my cock, pumping it a couple of times.

Fuck. I’m gonna blow. Gritting my teeth, I lower down onto my elbows. “This is embarrassing to admit, but my control is about to snap.” I press a kiss to her throat. When she reaches down and grips my cock, a guttural groan rips out of me. “Fuck.”

“Do it,” she hisses, lifting her hips, those long legs dropping open in welcome.

Hunter likes to maintain her control; I like to maintain my finesse. But it disintegrates

the moment I enter her, harder and faster than I intend. I'm not a selfish lover, though, and I adjust her hips, angling them just right before I start thrusting. Gotta hit the sweet spot.

Then, for the first time in my life, I lose myself in a woman. No, not just a woman. In Hunter. She's so damn hot, squeezing me, and I am a goner. Whatever rhythm I start out with goes to hell far faster than I'd like. My strokes become wilder, harder, and I'm on the verge of losing what shredded control I've managed to hold onto.

But I need her to come first. For the third time, thank you very much.

"Get there," I rasp, plunging deeper. A cry tears from her lips and her nails dig into my arms when her release hits. "Good girl."

As she comes, our gazes lock and the vulnerability I see in her molasses eyes, her pupils blown wide, sends me straight over the edge. My release hits me like a thief in the night, the intensity unlike anything I've ever experienced, and my body shudders hard as I erupt with a harsh groan. Pure ecstasy washes over me in waves and my toes curl into the mattress.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

I collapse, dropping down on her, careful to support my weight, but feeling like someone just stun-gunned me. Still lodged deep inside her, my dick is twitching with aftershocks, and I press a lingering kiss to the curve of her neck. Inhaling deeply, savoring her soft vanilla scent and the connection of our bodies, I know whatever happens in Spain isn't just staying in Spain.

Because despite what Hunter wants, I want something now, too.

I want her. And I'll do whatever it takes to make her mine.

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“Ohhh...Goddd...” Hunter shoves back against me, meeting each of my strokes. She’s bent over, elbows on the bed, gorgeous ass up in the air as I thrust into her from behind over and over.

I swear to God, at some point tonight, I lost my damn mind. I can’t get enough of her. I’ve lost track of the number of orgasms exchanged, the different positions tried, the naughty words whispered. All I know is I’m obsessed.

Fucking. Obsessed.

“Fuck,” I growl, reaching around and strumming that sensitive bundle of nerves. As a man who’s done his research, I know I’m toying with about eight thousand nerves in that little pink package, versus only about four thousand in the head of my cock. I can’t imagine what she’s feeling right now, but I’m determined to keep her screaming out my name.

“Knox!” She slams back then collapses, the bedspread muffling her cries.

My fingers dig into her hips, holding her up as I roar through my release. Dropping down, I cover her with my body, brush her hair aside and lightly kiss the back of her neck. I’m not sure what she’s done to me—what kind of spell she’s cast over me—but I am wrecked. Utterly and completely lost in a bliss and wonder I’ve never known before. And I will happily stay here forever.

After getting rid of the condom—thank Christ I found some extra ones tucked in the side pocket of my duffel bag—I slip under the covers and turn on my side to face Hunter. My hands itch to pull her close and wrap my body around hers, but the look in her eye warns me to move slowly. I want that fearful look replaced by trust more than I’ve ever wanted anything. She’s turning me inside out, making me want things

I've never wanted before.

"What're you thinking?" I ask, desperate to get to know her better. Needing to know every little thing. Like why she's so skittish and what I can do to reassure her. Reaching over, I tuck a lock of her russet-colored hair behind her ear.

"Tonight was..." Her voice drifts off and she gives me the prettiest smile. "Perfect. Thank you, Knox."

She sits up, pushing the covers back and I frown. Wait, what? "Where are you going?" I blurt out, pushing myself up.

Her brow furrows. "Back to my room. I thought we were, um, finished here."

And now I know what one of my marks feels like. Wow. Not good. I'm not going to lie, my feelings are kinda hurt.

"We aren't finished," I tell her, my voice harsher than I intend. Not by a longshot.

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“We’re out of condoms,” she reminds me.

Okay, so she has a point, but that doesn’t mean I want her to leave. “You don’t believe in cuddling?” I ask, striving to sound teasing and not like a possessive maniac. I reach for her wrist and tug her back to me. “Because I want to wrap you in my arms and hold you ‘til morning.”

“That’s probably not a good idea.”

Dammit, she isn’t going to make this easy. “What’re you so scared of?” I ask, cutting straight to the chase.

“I’m not scared,” she states, pulling her wrist free. “We said this would be a one-night thing.”

“No,yousaid that. I never agreed to any such bullshit. You know why?” I get up on my knees, moving closer. “Because you fucking enthrall me, Hunter. I want to get to know you better, share secrets, give you more orgasms. I want to take you out on a real date when we get back to Denver. Show you around the city and convince you never to leave. Fuck California.”

Her eyes widen. “We barely know each other,” she whispers.

Yeah, so maybe I sound a little crazy. But my head is in the clouds and I’ve never felt so good. I don’t ever want to come down from this high.

“So, let’s change that.”

For a split second, I think I've convinced her and she's going to give in, but then she shakes her head. "I-I can't."

"Why not?" Maybe I'm being a little pushy, but I don't care. I need to make her see reason, see how good we could be together.

"Because this" —she motions back and forth between us— "all ends in a few hours. Don't make this harder than it has to be. Please."

Her voice catches and frustration fills me. Why is she so damn scared?

"It doesn't have to end. Not if we don't want it to," I tell her. "Don't run away from me, Hunter. Stay. Please."

I've never begged a woman to stay in my bed. It's fucking humbling, and also terrifying because she has that deer-in-headlights look. My stomach twists with the kind of panic I very rarely feel—like when a heist is about to go wrong.

I force myself to smirk, trying to cover my desperation with charm. "What's the worst that could happen? A couple more orgasms?"

But she doesn't smile. Just slides off the bed, grabs her clothes and hurriedly starts getting dressed. "I have to go check on the jet soon."

No. I jump out of bed and stalk over, not caring about being naked and more vulnerable than I've ever been in my entire life. She's about to walk out this door and not look back, and I can't let that happen. "You're running," I accuse her. "I thought you were fearless."

She swallows, hands curling into fists at her sides.

“Not when it comes to you,” she finally whispers, then whirls around. Before I can figure out what the hell she means, the door swiftly opens and closes.

She’s gone, and all I’m left with are questions.

We had such a perfect night, and somehow, I just screwed everything up by suggesting we keep seeing each other.

What in the actual fuck?

Chapter Fourteen: Hunter

What is wrong with me?

Back in my bedroom, I take a quick shower, needing to wash Knox’s scent off my body. It’s too intoxicating, and I need my head to clear. Once I’m clean, all traces of him gone, I dry off and pull on a pair of jeans, tank top and my bomber jacket.

I need to get out of here because it feels like I’m suffocating.

There’s no point in denying it—panic made me run. Knox is right. I’m a coward.

But right now, I don’t care. I have a job to do, and that’s to get this crew back home. We still have a few hours until take off, but I’m leaving before everyone gets up. Knox and I weren’t exactly quiet last night, and I don’t think I can handle all the knowing looks and smirks.

Since I’d already consulted with Addie about taking one of the SUVs, I grab the keys and haul ass. I can’t get out of here fast enough. Part of me is scared Knox is going to be waiting for me at the front door. And another part of me feels a strange prick of disappointment when he’s not. I remind myself it’s for the best and keep moving

forward.

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What did you expect? I ask myself as I walk outside. He asked you to stay and told you he wanted to pursue things, and you practically ran out of his room like your hair was on fire.

He told me exactly what an experienced man of the world would say, my cynical side points out, and I'm not falling for it. Because opening myself up to him, allowing my heart and body to be vulnerable, is too scary.

I'd like to believe him, though. So very badly.

"What's the worst that could happen?" he'd asked. "A couple more orgasms?"

No, I wanted to say. I could fall in love with you.

Giving my entire self to a man again is a scary thought, especially since I've been alone for so long. I don't even know how to be with someone for longer than a night. As much as I'd like to try, something is holding me back. Fear, yes, but something more.

He called me a little sparrow, but the truth is I'm more like a swift.

Forever ago, I had to write a report on a bird, and I chose the swift. Fascinating creatures, and something that's stuck with me ever since. Unless they're nesting, swifts spend their lives in the air, living on insects caught in flight. They drink, feed, and often mate and sleep on the wing. They can go ten months without landing, and no other bird spends as much time in flight.

Kind of like me, I realize. Never on the ground long enough to settle. Always running or flying away.

Isn't it best to end things before they even begin, though?

"What happens in Spain, stays in Spain," I remind myself through gritted teeth as I start the car. After programming the GPS to take me to the airport, I hit the gas. But I find myself looking in the rear view mirror, wondering if I just made the biggest mistake of my life.

Because if Knox was sincere, then I just walked away from what might be the best thing that's ever happened to me.

It's such a mindfuck. Shane truly messed me up, absolutely destroying my ability to trust in men. After he cheated, I promised myself I'd never allow myself to be so vulnerable again, even if it meant being alone forever.

And then here comes Mr. Charmer, so easygoing and carefree, spewing compliments and multiple orgasms at me like it's no big deal. How can I not have trust issues?

I keep picturing the expression on his face right before I walked out of his room. He looked...crushed.

I wish there was a way I could peel back the layers of his heart and mind, see what he's really feeling and thinking under all the polished veneer and panty-melting smiles. But that's impossible.

There isn't any traffic on the road because the sun is just coming up and everyone who's anyone in paradise sleeps in. As a result, I make excellent time to the airport. The jet waits on the tarmac, ready to fly us all back to Denver, and then I'll continue on to San Francisco. My adventure with a world-class thief who's sexy as hell will be

over.

And then what? Nothing—no one—is waiting for me.

“Dammit,” I hiss, turning off the engine. A few days ago, I was sitting at Braxton and Quinn’s wedding, feeling so lonely, on the verge of accepting I’ll be single forever because I’m too damn scared to do anything about it.

This job was supposed to help me ignore the loneliness that had been steadily creeping in and taking over. Instead, it opened up an entirely new world, full of possibilities. And I just slammed the door closed on it all.

“You’re such an idiot.”

Dropping my head, I realize I sabotaged any chance I had at a potentially perfectly-wonderful future with Knox.

He’s probably over it, though. His options are endless, and I have no doubt he will move on and find a new woman to pursue. Me, though?

I give up.

My chest tightens and the foreign sting of tears threatens. Squeezing my eyes shut, I push them back. Now isn’t the time. I need to go through my pre-flight check and—

The driver’s side door opens, startling me, and I turn just in time to hear the crackle of a stun gun. Before I can react, the shock of electricity hits me and my muscles seize up. Sonofabitch, it hurts. The intense muscle contractions make me lose my balance. Slumping forward against the steering wheel, my body twitches, but there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

“Help me get her out,” a voice commands in Spanish. Unable to fight back, I struggle to keep my head up as two men drag me out of the driver’s seat and spirit me straight into a nearby SUV. They toss me into the back seat, and I am fucking livid. All of my military training and self-defense classes are urging me to fight, but I can’t even make a fist.

The shock of the stun leaves me disoriented and the painful contractions are like one big charley horse. All I can do is wait it out and hope they don’t stun me again before I regain control of my muscles and make them very sorry for their decisions.

In the meantime, a million questions race through my mind. Mostly who the fuck are these men, where the fuck are we going, and what the fuck is actually happening here?

I’m still a little fuzzy from the stun, but the more time that passes, the better and more clear I begin to feel. Even so, I stay down, not wanting to draw attention.

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We drive for a little while, and I remain on my side, looking up and out the window. The moment I get a glimpse of large wrought iron gates opening, I know where I am.

Alejandro Torres' estate.

The pieces click together fast. He wants his emerald back, and I guess I'm the unlucky one he was able to grab. But how did he know? Ryder looped the cams and we all managed to escape without incident. Unless he had some other tech running that recorded our images? Maybe the same system that activated the alarm? Or maybe someone followed us? I have no idea. I do know I'm not in a good situation because no one knows I'm missing.

Fabulous. Somehow, I'm going to have to fight my way out of a gated compound with security up the wazoo.

The moment the SUV stops, Torres' men get out. My door opens and a mean-looking mountain of a man stares back at me, a challenge gleaming in his black eyes. The top of his head is a big, bald dome and I wouldn't be surprised if he was a Sumo wrestler on the side.

"Are we going to have a problem?" Dome Head growls, lifting the stun gun to remind me he has it and won't hesitate to use it.

As if I need a reminder.

"No," I respond quickly, not wanting to become incapacitated by that electrical current again. It's imperative for me to remain alert because the first opportunity I

have to escape, I'm taking it.

"Let's go." He jerks his chin toward the mansion, and we start walking. The other guard, though smaller, is no less dangerous looking, and has a pockmarked face that reminds me of a lumpy toad.

Every step I take feels like one step closer to walking right off a cliff. Not having a weapon puts me at a disadvantage, but I'm also highly trained in hand-to-hand combat, thanks to the military. Plus, my legs are pretty long and I can run fast. And I'm not above running.

Now if I had access to a plane or jet, then that's a whole other story. I'm always up for a dogfight.

Damn, I wish I could get my hands on something with an engine and—

The distinctivewhomp-whomp-whomp of a helicopter's rotor blades fills the distant air. The sound is music to my ears and my pulse quickens. If I can get behind the controls of a helo, then game fucking over.

Before I can get too excited, Dome Head grabs my arm and jerks me through the front door. Toad follows closely behind, and they escort me straight outside to the large patio. A man who I assume is Alejandro Torres lounges on a rattan sofa beside the pool.

"Hello again, Ms. McGrath," he says coolly. His English is perfect, though accented, and he resembles a young Antonio Banderas. Definitely not bad on the eyes. Too bad he's a criminal.

And what does he mean by "again?" My gaze lifts to connect with the glass bottom of the second pool hovering above us—the one where Knox and I swam. But how

would Torres possibly know I snuck into his party as hired help?

I'm also wondering how he knows my name. The most likely answer is they hacked into the flight records and saw my name.

I decide the best thing to do is play dumb and keep my mouth shut. For now, anyway.

He arches a thick, black brow. "Nothing to say?"

I shrug a shoulder, remaining silent. Without warning, Torres jumps up, yanks me around and hauls me against his body. A muscled arm wraps around my chest and he flicks open a switchblade. I feel a prick against the side of my throat.

Holy shit, the man moves faster than a striking rattlesnake.

"I'm going to ask you some questions and I suggest you start talking." The sharp point of the blade pushes into my neck. "Comprende?"

I swallow hard and can feel warm blood trickling down my skin. "Yes," I force out.

"Good." He shoves me away, pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wipes my blood off the blade. "Now, why don't we sit down like civilized people and you're going to tell me everything you know about the crew who stole my emerald."

Dome Head shoves me down into the nearest chair while Torres returns to his cushioned sofa. Leaning forward, he clasps his hands together and skewers me with an intimidating, black stare. "Just so we're clear, Ms. McGrath, I don't tolerate being lied to. Every time you dare tell me a falsehood, I'll have Sergio cut something off your delectable little body. It could be a finger, a toe, an ear... Maybe I'll have him pop out one of your pretty brown eyes. Am I clear?"

Great. I'm dealing with a total psychopath. "Crystal," I respond, squeezing my hands into fists. Over my dead body is he cutting anything off. The first opportunity that presents itself, I'm getting the hell out of here.

I just need to figure out how.

"Let's start with the names of your crew." He leans back and waits, but there's no way I'm giving him any names.

So, what do I do? Lie and potentially risk losing a finger or worse?

Channeling those wily thieves, I put on my best game face. "That's going to be rather difficult since they only go by aliases."

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His eyes narrow.

“And, so we’re on the same page, they aren’t my crew and I have no loyalty to any of them. I was called in to pick up one of their team when their heist at your Colombian estate didn’t go as planned. My package was simply known as The Charmer, and after an alarm alerted you to the theft of what turned out to be a fake emerald, my job was to swoop in and fly him home.”

Torres drums his fingers against the sofa’s cushion. “And how did you get roped into the current heist here?”

“The Boss offered me a big pay day. I would’ve been a fool to say no.”

“Ah, I see. Money is a hard temptation to resist.”

“Apparently, so are emeralds. Correct me if I’m wrong, but the emerald taken from here wasn’t yours to begin with, was it? So thieves stole from a thief.”

Okay, I have no idea why I’m baiting this man, but I need to turn the mirror around so he can take a good look at himself. The self-righteous sonofabitch has the audacity to give me a slow, unrepentant smile.

“Normally, I don’t care for rude guests, but I enjoy a beautiful woman who is forthright.” My skin crawls at the compliment. It’s not that he isn’t unattractive, it’s that his expression carries no warmth. Hell, no humanity. Those black eyes remind me of a shark’s empty gaze, and I prepare myself for the possibility of another potential strike.

He studies me for an interminable minute, but I refuse to look away or let him think he can intimidate me with more threats. Nope. Not today, Banderas. Not today.

“Where is the emerald?” he hisses.

“I don’t know,” I say simply.

“Such a shame,” he murmurs, and I stiffen when he nods to Dome Head and Toad.

Uh-oh. They grab my forearms, pinning them to the chair’s armrests, and I fight, trying to break loose. Meanwhile, Torres gets up, flicking his switchblade open again.

“That was three lies, Ms. McGrath,” he states, moving in front of me and running the blade along my cheek. “At least three.”

Shitshitshit.

I don’t dare move.

“I think you know exactly where my emerald is and I believe you know the names of the crew who stole it. I also believe you’re loyal to—what did you call him? The Charmer?”

I grit my teeth together hard, refusing to respond.

“Show her,” he orders.

Toad releases my arm and shoves a phone in front of me. A video plays, and when I see Knox and I kissing heatedly next to the display case with the emerald in the secret room, I want to slap my forehead. Dammit. Where had the stupid camera been hidden? And why hadn’t it looped like the others?

I am fucked.

“Still don’t remember the name of the man who had his tongue down your throat?” Torres asks. “And think very carefully before answering, because I’m keeping count of your lies. Right now, you owe me three pieces of flesh.”

“I-I only know him as The Charmer,” I insist, refusing to give up Knox’s identity. “I swear it.”

Torres shakes his head, lifting the switchblade. “I’m sorry to say I don’t believe one word coming out of your deceitful little mouth. Maybe we should take your lying tongue out first.”

I clamp my jaw tightly together, and he laughs.

“No? Tell me then. What should I cut off first? Hmm?” The point of his blade presses into my jawline.

Yeah, I am so very fucked.

Chapter Fifteen: Knox

Despite being up all night with Hunter, there’s no way I’m able to sleep after she leaves. Without her, the room seems smaller, desolate. I stare at the tangled sheets, remembering all the things we did to each other—the way her long reddish hair tangled around my fist, the way her delicious vanilla scent surrounded and filled my senses, the way she whimpered and moaned when she finally let go and surrendered to me.

It wasn’t enough. I want more. Need more.

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How the hell could she have just walked out? The better question is how can she pretend that what happened was nothing? Can she really move forward and carry on like normal? Carry on without me?

The idea of her giving up on us so easily pisses me off. Doesn't she realize sometimes you have to fight for the best things in life? I know she isn't a quitter, so why is she running?

Well, like it or not, I'm going to fight for us, Hunter.

With an angry growl, I storm into the bathroom and take a quick shower. I'll grab a coffee and head over to the airport early. We're going to talk this out. I refuse to let her run away from me. Not after last night.

Not after she stole a piece of my heart.

My plan gets derailed when I step into the main living area and see Addie already up. She looks a little frazzled and I walk over.

"What're you doing up so early?" I ask.

"Couldn't sleep."

I feel like there's more to the story, but I don't push her. Addie will talk when, and if, she's ready. "I think we both could use some coffee."

"Yes, please."

I wander over to the kitchen and put the Nespresso machine to use. Once I have two steaming, frothy glasses of caffeine ready, I walk back over and sit down on the couch beside her.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, taking the drink. “So...you and Hunter.”

I take a sip of the hot espresso and shift on the couch. There’s no point in denying it. Addie is a master when it comes to reading people, and besides that, I don’t want to hide it. I want everyone to know how good Hunter and I are together.

“I really like her,” I admit. “I wasn’t expecting it, but she knocked me on my ass in the best possible way.”

She turns to face me, blue eyes widening. “So, it was more than just a one-night stand? You’re really falling for her?”

I nod. “Problem is she ran. The minute I mentioned pursuing something back home, she freaked out. I think she’s been hurt and now she’s trying to protect herself.”

“Can’t blame her. Getting hurt sucks.”

“So does watching the best thing that ever happened to me walk away.”

“Wow.” She studies me over the rim of her glass mug.

“She isn’t like anyone I’ve ever met, Addie. You know me better than anyone. I can always walk away. I can’t this time. I won’t.”

“The Charmer has fallen. Hard. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“She’s special. It’s more than just physical attraction, though there’s plenty of that.” I

smirk.

“Yeah, you two weren’t exactly quiet last night.”

I chuckle. “Sorry not sorry. Best fucking night of my life.”

A thoughtful look crosses her face. “Why? What made it different?”

Her question throws me, but I take a moment to think it over. “Everything,” I finally say. “No other woman, hell, no other night can even begin to compare with what happened. When I’m with Hunter, nothing else matters. She lights me up in a way I’ve never experienced before. I just know I always want to be with her.”

“Sounds like you’re falling in love.” She shudders.

“Hey. What’s so bad about that?”

“Nothing. It’s just not for everyone.”

“What’s not for everyone?” a deep voice asks.

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I look up and see Deck strolling forward, stifling a yawn, Brighton and Ryder on his heels. Since when does everyone get up at the crack of dawn around here?

“Can I tell them?” Addie asks. “Pretty please?”

I roll my eyes. “Go ahead,” I relent.

Addie clasps her hands together, grinning widely. “Our Knox is falling in love!”

“What?” Brighton’s green eyes nearly pop out of her head.

“Good luck with that,” Deck grunts.

Ryder, still half asleep, pauses scratching his chest. “You’re serious?”

“Is that so hard to believe?” I ask.

“Well, yeah,” Ryder says. “You’re not supposed to fall in love. Your job is to beguile, bewitch and bewilder.”

“Not Hunter,” I state. “She’s not just a mark. She’s more than that.”

“Exactly how much more?” Deck asks, keeping his tone neutral.

“Once we get back to the States, I want us to start seeing each other. Exclusively.”

“Is she on board?” Ryder asks, fighting to hide his smile.

“Not exactly. But she will be once I convince her why we’re so good together.”

“Oh, Christ. Sounds like drama,” Deck grumbles. The former fighter hates the combination of women and drama with a passion. “Good luck. I need some coffee.”

Brighton shakes her head then confidently predicts, “One day, Lincoln Decker, a woman is going to sweep into your world with all her drama and you’re going to love it.”

He scoffs. “Fat chance.”

Now that my crew knows I’m head over heels for Hunter, I feel better. They’re my closest friends, my found family. And if everything goes my way, they’re going to be spending a lot more time with her.

I’m contemplating all the best arguments to present to her about how good we are together when my phone buzzes. Setting my glass mug on the coffee table, I pull my phone out of my pocket and glance down. “Unknown” shows on the screen and I frown, sliding the message open.

The picture I see of Hunter will haunt me for the rest of my life.

My heart locks within my chest and I let out a vicious curse. Everyone’s attention snaps in my direction, but I’m too focused on Hunter, wrists zip tied to a chair, blood smeared on her face.

“What is it?” Addie asks, voice full of concern.

My phone buzzes again. This time it’s a text message and I quickly scan it.

“Torres has Hunter,” I tell them between gritted teeth.

Everything seems to tilt, like someone just ripped the ground from beneath my feet, and a potent wrath consumes me.

My crew gathers closer, and I turn the phone around, not able to look at the disturbing image a second longer. My stomach twists, and the assholes who took her? Who dared touch her? I want to smash their heads together.

“We’ll get her back,” Addie assures me.

“He wants to exchange Hunter for the emerald. And we only have an hour before his offer expires. Fuck,” I hiss, raking a hand through my hair.

Torres and his men are as good as dead. Once we get Hunter back, we’re going to have to get out of this country fast. Because I’m leaving a string of dead bodies in my wake.

My murderous energy must be palpable, because Ryder slaps my shoulder and gives it a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll get your girl back, Knox. Count on it.”

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“I don’t care what we have to do, I’m not leaving here without Hunter.”

Everyone nods in agreement then Addie stands up. “Ryder, go get the emerald. We leave in five minutes.”

“We leave now,” I say, but Addie shakes her head, reaching for her phone.

“Not without backup.”

“Who?” I ask.

“I’m calling my brother and his team.”

I know Ryland and the rest of Ex Nihilo are all former military badasses, impeccably trained to handle situations just like this. Plus, Hunter is their pilot and close friend. They’d want to know she’s in trouble.

“But they’re in the States,” I argue. “We don’t have time to wait for them.”

“No, they’re not,” she tells me, pulling out her phone. “At least, not all of them.”

I don’t have time to ask for details, and I trust Addie implicitly. With a sharp nod, I storm down to my room and grab my gun and holster. After pulling on a light jacket to conceal it, I glance down at my watch. Time to go. Every minute spent fucking around here is a minute wasted.

I won’t let Hunter down. I’m more than just a guy who’s smooth with words and has

a pretty face. I've also got a brain and I know how to fight—especially for what's mine. And whether she knows it yet or not, Hunter "Pyro" McGrath is all mine.

Back in the living room, my team is geared up with their weapons of choice—everything from guns to knives to laptops. We head out the door and climb into the SUV. Brighton gets behind the wheel and I slide into the passenger seat beside her while Addie, Deck and Ryder sit in the back seat.

Brighton hits the gas, turning us toward Torres' estate, and Addie leans forward to fill us in on her call. "Ryland and his teammate Saint are with their wives in Cádiz. Mia, Saint's wife, had to sign for some property she inherited from her father."

"Is she the one who had the bad billionaire daddy?" Brighton asks.

"Yeah, her father was an asshole, but was also seriously loaded. Anyway, Ryland said they're on their way, but it might take a couple of hours."

"Do we really think Torres will let us walk away after handing over the emerald?" Deck asks dryly. "Because I'll tell you right now, the answer is no."

"We don't have a choice," I snap. If that's what it takes to save Hunter's life, then that's what we're damn well doing. I won't risk her safety by playing games. Too many things could go wrong. I know reinforcements are coming and they'll be armed to the teeth, but what if they're too late? What if Torres reneges on his deal? He could try to kill us and Hunter. I'm sure he's pissed as hell we snuck in and managed to steal his shit not once, but twice.

I've executed a lot of heists, but this feels completely different. My trademark confidence and aplomb are nowhere to be found. Instead, my gut is curling with dread and I'm terrified of failing Hunter. Yes, she's tough, and I keep trying to convince myself she's going to be fine. Keep telling myself she can take care of

herself. Keep reminding myself she's a former Navy fighter pilot who graduated at the top of her Top Gun class.

But I also know the skills needed to defeat a snake like Torres aren't taught in a class. Men like him play dirty, and I have no doubt he'll stoop to any level to get his greedy hands on that emerald again. I lift my hand, see it's shaking, and squeeze it into a tight fist.

Fuck. I care about Hunter more than I even realized. Her sharp intellect, commanding aura and effortless beauty are everything I could ever want in a partner. One thought hits me hard and my heart squeezes.

I'm not falling in love with her. I'm already fucking there. Crazy, head-over-heels, want-to-grow-old-and-wrinkly-with-her in love.

Brighton must notice my trembling hand because she reaches over, laying her hand on top of mine and squeezing. "Hang in there, okay? Now isn't the time to fall apart."

"I know. And I won't."

Because if I do, Hunter is as good as dead.

Chapter Sixteen: Hunter

Time seems to crawl, yet, at the same time, it's flying by. I can't explain it, and it's putting me even more on edge. The good news is Torres hasn't cut off any of my body parts yet. Definitely counting that as a win.

He keeps asking me questions, and his threats flow faster than water over Niagara Falls, but I keep my answers as vague as possible. My loyalties run deep and, without even realizing it, Knox and his crew earned my respect. I genuinely like them all and

refuse to give this asshole any intel that might harm them. Even if it means it might cost me a finger.

God help me.

At one point during the interrogation, they take my phone, snap a picture of me and text it to Knox. My stomach clenches because I don't want Knox to see me like this—tied up, helpless, bleeding.

“Your team is bringing my emerald back,” he states. “In exchange for you.”

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Oh, thank God. Knox and the others are coming. I have every faith they'll get me out of here. Relief sweeps through me, making me bold.

"Why do you even want it?" I ask, unable to keep the belligerence out of my voice. "So you can hide it away in that secret room? What's the point?"

He moves closer and lowers his face down to my level. "The point is I enjoy collecting beautiful, rare, priceless things. I like to look at them and know they're mine." He tilts his head, seemingly studying me in a different way than before. Not so much like a problem, but more like...a possibility? I pull back, not liking the strange, possessive gleam in his eyes. Almost as though he's considering adding me to his collection.

I freeze when he lifts the switchblade and drags it over the shell of my ear. I'm tired of this bastard's games.

"Just get it over with!" I hiss. "If you're going to do it, then do it already!"

I regret the words the moment they leave my mouth. Of course, I don't want him to cut me, but I'm sick of him torturing me with that blade and his threats. Plus, I know Knox is on the way, which fills me with a surge of unruly confidence and renewed fight. I'm on the verge of telling this asshole to go fuck himself when he stands up straight, flicks the blade shut and sends me a grin that chills me to the bone.

"I have something else in mind for you." He motions to my wrists, directing his command to the guards. "Cut her loose and take her to my trophy room."

Trophy room? Something about the sound of it makes my skin crawl. Is this man an art collector or a serial killer?

Guess I'm about to find out.

Toad quickly slices through my zip ties and Dome Head jerks me up out of the chair. Glaring at him, I yank my arm and seethe, "Prick."

I'm angry as hell that I'm in this situation. If these bastards think I'm just going to bow down and do whatever they say, they better think again. I'm going to be the most difficult, biggest pain in the ass they've ever had the misfortune of encountering.

Unfortunately, Torres' thugs are bigger and stronger than me. They each roughly grab an arm and force me to walk into the house. We follow Torres down a long, breezy hallway, past fancy objets d'art including prints, sculptures and small ceramic statues. I can't help but wonder if he legitimately purchased any of them.

The mansion consists of multiple levels, laid out in a maze of corridors, and we walk down a set of stairs, down another hall and he pauses in front of a door.

"Prepare to be impressed," he states pompously, and I struggle not to roll my eyes. He punches a code into a panel beside the door and it whooshes open. Then he steps inside, spreads his arms wide and states, "Fuck the Louvre. I have the best art collection in the entire world."

Endless objects fill the room, and I suck in a breath as the door closes behind us and the guards release me. It's almost like a mini museum. Huge oil paintings, some that look vaguely familiar, hang on the walls; vases and statues adorn pedestals; and there's even an antique car parked in the corner of the room behind a velvet rope.

Instead of appearing impressed like he expects, I lift my hand and study my

fingernails with acute interest. There's no way I'm letting this narcissistic asshole think I'm interested, much less dazzled, by his illicit collection. I get the feeling he's waiting for me to respond or show my appreciation, but he can wait 'til the cows come home. Ha. Not gonna happen, dick.

There's only one thief who impresses me. One thief who ignites my blood and sends my emotions into a complete stall and spin. One thief who makes my heart do barrel rolls inside my chest.

Knox Remington Beckett.

Just thinking his name makes my body warmer and my soul light up. He's everything I've always wanted, and I pushed him away. So, so stupid, Hunter. I vow to get out of this situation, throw myself back into Knox's arms where I belong, and ask him to forgive me for being foolish and letting my fear take control of my emotions.

Because I am getting out of here. And we're returning that stupid emerald to its rightful owner. No way am I letting it get back into this narcissist's greedy hands.

"Have you ever heard of Vaisala?" Torres asks, his tone conversational.

I give the slightest shake of my head.

"It's a Finnish company that helps preserve the Mona Lisa by measuring and monitoring the conditions within its glass vitrine."

I have no idea where he's going with this, but I force myself to be patient when all I want to do is plant a roundhouse kick in his smug face.

"Most people have no idea how to care for treasures like the Mona Lisa. Like all of this," he continues, gesturing at the various objects on display. "But I do. I know how

important it is to measure and monitor the temperature and humidity. How to minimize ultraviolet radiation and help enhance the colors in a painting.”

“Good for you,” I murmur.

He keeps speaking as if he doesn’t hear my snarky comment. Maybe he’s so full of his own bullshit, he didn’t. “A state-of-the-art air treatment system is imperative. Absolutely vital for the conservation of such priceless objects.”

“Good to know.”

Instead of responding to my sarcasm, he sends me another one of his bone-chilling smiles. “Why don’t I give you a closer look?”

Unease trickles through me. “That’s okay.”

“I insist.”

He nods, and Dome Head and Toad each grab one of my arms again. “You don’t have to manhandle me,” I snap, twisting in their steel grips. “I can walk perfectly fine on my own, thank you very mu—”

Torres pushes a button on the side of a tall glass case and it opens. It reminds me of one of those pneumatic tubes at a bank drive-through. The kind they use to transport money and other small items between the customer’s car and the bank teller. But it’s much bigger.

“I recently became the owner of an ancient tribal mask, and I was planning to display it in here. But now I have a much better idea.”

I try to take a step back, not liking the strange, almost rabid look in his eyes, but two pairs of hands tighten so hard on my upper arms, I can’t move. There’s no doubt I’m going to have bruises tomorrow. That is, if tomorrow comes. Because I’m in a hell of a lot of trouble today.

“Put her inside,” he orders, and my heart sinks.

“No!” I fight against my captors, pulling and twisting, but to no avail. They shove me up onto the slightly raised platform and inside the tube.

“I’m sure you’re aware that certain things rust,” Torres continues casually, “and as a collector of precious items, I can’t have that. Eventually, all metals, with the exception of precious metals, will corrode. In order to prevent that, I’ve had these

spectacular de-oxygenated chambers designed.”

Oh, no.

“They act as a vacuum, keeping my prizes intact and perfectly preserved. I’ve also ensured the glass is fire-resistant and bulletproof. In other words, Ms. McGrath, the moment I shut this door, you will be completely sealed off. Your oxygen levels will slowly deplete, but don’t worry, you won’t die from running out of air. You’ll die from carbon dioxide poisoning, the byproduct of your own respiration.”

I try to step out, but Torres’ strong hand pushes me back inside.

“I’m so glad I didn’t start cutting your body parts off. Death by hypoxia will be so much more rewarding. The question is, will your body still decompose and become a sludgy pile? Or will it dry up from lack of oxygen and moisture? Maybe you’ll be the first mummy I acquire.”

Fuck me. This is not good.

“I think you will be my favorite prize yet,” he whispers excitedly, and I can’t help but cringe. “The truth is, I’ve been growing bored with acquiring the same old treasures. Look around, I have everything I could ever want.”

His pitch-black gaze pierces straight through me, and I try not to react, but it’s as though someone just walked over my grave. A shiver runs down my spine.

“Except you,” he adds, his voice edged with a perverse thrill.

Oh, God. Once this door closes, it won’t be long before I suffocate. My CO₂ will start accumulating and this entire container will become toxic fast. I might have what? Thirty minutes before this floor-to-ceiling tube becomes my coffin?

“Things could’ve ended so differently,” he murmurs, voice tinged with regret. “It’s too bad you chose to love a thief.” He pushes a button and the door starts to close. “You have, at most, twenty minutes to contemplate that. Goodbye, Ms. McGrath.”

My mind whirls as I watch him punch in a four-digit code, locking me securely inside. Torres contacted Knox maybe twenty minutes ago? Depending on any number of variables, he and his crew might not even get here for another ten minutes. That leaves them ten minutes or less to breach the estate, subdue the guards, find this room, figure out the code to open it and then, finally, unlock this chamber, which also has a code only Torres knows.

I’m going to die.

No! How can this be happening? I’m not ready to die. Not when I’ve only just met a man who makes my heart and body sing. Fear made me run, and I was an idiot for letting it take control. Knox is nothing like Shane.

Forcing myself to remain calm, to control my breathing, I watch Torres smirk then walk out, flanked by his goons.

Knox is coming, I remind myself. And once he gets me out of here, I have some groveling to do.

Because it’s all so clear to me now. I’m falling in love with him. Stupid, crazy, can’t-deny-it love. The kind that lets me know I can’t live without him. As absurd as that seems, it’s a fact. Yes, it’s been a whirlwind, but no one chooses to be in love. Love chooses you. And maybe it’s inconvenient and impractical—hell, we don’t even live in the same city—but love doesn’t ask permission. It simply connects two people in a way they’ve never connected with another person before.

And I feel that with Knox to the depths of my soul. When he looks at me, touches me,

I know he's my other half—the piece I've been missing for so long. The piece I was scared I'd never find.

We still have a lot to learn about each other, and I'm so ready. One day, we're going to know each other completely, from top to bottom, inside and out, the good and the bad. It might not always be mind-blowing passion and a dangerous adventure. Some days it might simply be sitting on the couch and watching a movie. Regardless of his trademark confidence and endless swagger, I know he isn't perfect. Neither am I. And we're going to discover things about each other that might be dark and haunting. But that's okay, too.

I'm ready to try. It's been a very long time since I've been able to say that.

A thief came along and stole my heart. Now I just hope and pray I'll have the chance to make things right. To tell him I'm not scared anymore, and I want to give things a shot.

I lay my palms on the cool glass and close my eyes, hoping against hope he's already here, storming the compound.

Please.

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Wavering slightly, my eyes pop open. It's already getting harder to breathe in here and I'm starting to feel a little lightheaded. Shit. Fear claws at me, but I push it down.

Hurry, Knox!

Chapter Seventeen: Knox

Every part of my being is completely focused on getting to Hunter and making sure she's okay. The idea that Torres might have hurt her shrouds my vision with a red haze. Even though she's tough, and that's one of the things I admire about her, Alejandro Torres is a shit human being, and I don't want my sparrow anywhere near him. I have a feeling he'd take great pleasure in clipping her lovely wings.

I'm practically jumping out of my skin on the ride over, and after what feels like forever, we arrive at the mansion's entrance. Our plan is fluid, not completely solid, but at this point, there isn't time to dick around and run through every possible scenario.

We're relying on our experience and guts to get this job done.

To save my girl.

Because she is mine. Maybe she doesn't realize it quite yet, but she will when I pull her into my arms and kiss the holy hell out of her. I'm not letting her go. If she runs back to California, then I'm going, too. There's something special between us, and I'm going to make her see it.

I'm jumping out of the car before Brighton comes to a complete stop. Normally, I'm the cool, confident one, but right now I'm strung tight and doubt threatens to pull me under. I have the most terrible feeling that Hunter's time is running out and she needs me now.

"Be careful and I'll see you soon," Brighton says.

While Brighton goes to park the SUV along the back wall of hedges and wait for Ryland and Saint, we walk up to the front door which immediately opens. Two hefty-looking men with guns stand on either side of Alejandro Torres.

"Check them," he orders.

The guards step forward, pat each of us down and confiscate our weapons. We expected this. They miss my knife, still secure in my boot, so that's good.

"Where's Hunter?" I demand as we step inside the foyer.

"Where's my emerald?" Torres fires back.

Addie pulls the emerald from her pocket and lifts it. Sunlight streaming in through a window reflects off its facets, making it sparkle, and I notice a matching gleam—pure avariciousness—appear in Torres' eyes. When he reaches for it, Addie moves it out of his range.

"Where is Hunter?" I grit out again, my patience razor thin.

"I'll need to verify its authenticity first," Torres says. "Follow me."

"Do whatever you have to do," Addie replies easily, "but it's the real deal."

We go into a nearby room where a man waits beside a desk with a refractometer. Ryder has one, too, and I know the small black machine can identify a fake gem fast. He extends a hand, taking the gem and lifts a jeweler's loupe to his eye. While the expert inspects the emerald, Torres keenly focused on him, we launch into subtle, clandestine action.

Ryder turns, using me and Linc for cover, and pulls out the fake emerald hidden down his shorts—what can I say? It's a great place to hide a gem the size of your fist—and discreetly passes it to Addie, who scrunches her nose, palming it. They accomplish the move so fast, so smoothly, literally between eye blinks, that neither Torres nor the gem expert notice.

"Well?" Torres asks impatiently.

"It looks to be real, but I need to examine it under the refractometer to make sure," he responds. While he fiddles with it under the machine's lens, we exchange looks.

My patience is just about gone.

"It's in the range for natural emeralds," the expert confirms.

"Wonderful." Torres takes the emerald back, slipping it into his pocket, and sending us a satisfied, smug smile. "I'm going to put this in a safe place before we conclude our business."

I move into Torres' path, blocking him, and take a threatening step closer, balling my fists. Pretending I'm on the verge of hitting him. Or, at least considering it. The coward jerks back, moving closer to Addie. Just like we want.

"Make it fast," I hiss between clenched teeth.

Torres' nostrils flare in anger. "What's the hurry,amigo? There's absolutely no rush, so relax."

The insidious way his mouth curls up tells me one very important thing—we should be in a big fucking hurry.

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I glance over at Addie and she gives me the subtlest of nods.

“Keep an eye on them,” Torres tells the guards. “I’ll be right back.”

As Torres walks away, I exchange a look with Deck indicating I’ve got the guard on the right, closest to me. I’m done waiting around, and my crew knows it.

Three...

Two...

One...

I take a flying leap toward the nearest guard, tackling him down hard, while Deck does the same to the other one. Meanwhile, Addie and Ryder order the gem expert to sit down and shut up. While they keep an eye on him, Deck and I subdue the guards fast. It’s honestly not that hard. They underestimated us, likely thinking we didn’t know how to fight, and that was a serious oversight on their part. A hard punch to the throat then an arm wrapped around the neck...squeeze...and it’s lights out. They both slump forward and we grab their guns and jump up.

“We need to split up,” Addie says. “Linc and Ryder, cover the main floor. Knox and I will head down a level. Stay in communication.”

I touch my earpiece and take off at a jog, forcing Addie to run alongside me or be left behind. Time is ticking down fast, each precious second echoing in my ears, and the need to find Hunter drives me forward.

“She’s in trouble,” I say, my voice full of the doom my heart feels. “I know it.”

Addie doesn’t comment, just races forward with me. As we pass by the huge glass wall leading out to the back patio and the upper pool where Hunter and I swam, I swear I get a whiff of her soft vanilla scent.

Hang in there, Sparrow, I’m coming.

No one is around and it’s far too quiet. My internal alarm bells are clanging. Something isn’t right, and my gut is screaming at me as I rush down the closest staircase.

“Knox!” Addie hisses.

Not stopping, sorry. Yeah, maybe I’m being careless, but the overwhelming need to find Hunter, to hold her in my arms and make sure she’s safe, propels me forward. I lift the gun I stole off the guard and hold it like a divining rod as I race forward. If anyone dares get in my way, I won’t hesitate to shoot.

At the bottom of the stairs is a long hallway and I hurry forward, stopping at a closed door with a panel beside it. Locked. I’m deciding how best to open it when Addie reaches me, out of breath.

“We need Linc,” she states, reaching up to touch her comms.

“No, we don’t.” I lift my gun and fire once...twice...blowing the door wide open.

Before she can criticize my impulsive move, I’m already pushing through, my gaze darting around some kind of mini museum filled with various art.

And then I see her.

Eyes shut, forehead leaning against the glass, Hunter is locked up in some sort of circular chamber meant to display art. Relief, quickly followed by worry and then a wave of fury, rolls through me as I run over to her.

Her head slowly lifts and surprise flashes across her face. Her mouth moves, and I think she calls my name, but I can't hear her. The tube is sealed shut and no sound escapes it. Instantly, I know something is wrong. Her skin has a bluish cast to it and her eyes are slightly unfocused. She lifts a shaky hand, pressing it to her chest, and mouths, "No...air."

"No air," I repeat, and Addie curses beside me.

No. Air.

Fuck. Me.

Panic rears within me and I try to force it down and focus. Getting Hunter out is priority number one. Motioning for her to watch out, I lift the gun and fire off a shot. Nothing happens. It's bulletproof glass.

"Dammit! We have to get her out!" I zero in on the control panel, needing the code in order to open the door. Only Torres will know the code, but there's no time to search this entire house for him. I touch my earpiece. "Deck! Get down here!"

I can hear the panic in my voice.

"I'm a little busy up here," he answers, and I hear gunshots.

"Hunter is locked up in some kind of tube and running out of air fast. I need the code to open the door. Do you have eyes on Torres?"

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“I did, but he ran.”

Fuck. “I need that code! Or I need you to come down here and bust this thing open.”

“On my way.”

I place my hand against the glass barrier, hating how helpless I feel. “Hang on, Sparrow.”

Her hand touches mine through the glass and our gazes lock. “I’m sorry,” she mouths, and I shake my head. She has nothing to be sorry for. Not a damn thing.

A crackle fills my ear and then Deck says, “Ryder and I are pinned down. I’m going to need a few minutes.”

“We don’t have a few minutes!”

Addie grabs my arm. “We need to start entering number combinations. You’re good with numbers and codes, Knox. This is just like one of your puzzle books.”

She’s right, it’s exactly like one of my code-cracking problems. Except it’s not. I have no idea how many digits I’m dealing with, and this is a life-or-death situation.

I meet Hunter’s molasses eyes, feeling an unbearable pressure building in my chest and crushing my heart. She’s going to die if I don’t get her out.

Her hand pulls back from the glass. She lifts four fingers and points to the keypad.

She's telling me it's a four-digit code. Then she blinks slowly, looking out of it, and gingerly touches her head. My heart cracks as she slowly sinks down to the floor.

"Knox! Punch some fucking numbers in!" Addie cries.

Pulling in a deep breath, wishing I could share some of my air with Hunter, I turn my attention to the keypad. Zero through nine. No letters, no symbols. A simple four-digit code. That's ten thousand possible combinations.

I could solve this in my sleep.

But can I solve it in under two minutes? Because I think the carbon dioxide in that tube is making Hunter dizzy, numb, confused. She's going to suffocate, Knox, a voice in my head tells me. Unless you use that brain of yours and figure it out like I know you can.

Angel. Addie's mom always believed in me. Always said I was more than just a pretty face.

Time to put that theory to the test.

"I need a pen, marker, something." A calmness washes over me from out of nowhere, settling my nerves, allowing me to focus on the problem. Possible number combinations swirl through my head and I begin tapping them into the keypad. There's always the possibility I might get locked out after entering the first three and getting them wrong. I pray that won't happen. It can't happen. Hunter and I just found each other and I'm not losing her so soon.

The first three codes are wrong, and I quickly enter a possible fourth combination. It's also wrong, but nothing locks me out of the system. Thank Christ. Addie shoves a marker into my hand that she found somewhere, and I scrawl out the first four codes I

already tried. I keep working on every possible number combination, writing them fast and furious on the tube's glass, and then Addie quickly enters them on the keypad.

The technique I'm using is pretty damn basic, no tricks involved. It's brute force algorithm and solves a problem by trying every possible solution until the correct one is found. It's a simple, straightforward approach that guarantees a solution if one exists, and basically involves trial and error.

However, I'm dealing with a person who chose this code, and when it comes to numbers, most people want something easy to remember. I cycle through all the most commonly-used PINs: 1,2,3,4...0,0,0,0...1,1,1,1...1,2,1,2...and so forth.

I'm writing so fast, my hand starts to cramp up, but I ignore it. Addie's fingers fly over the keypad as she enters all of my combos. Why is nothing working?

Goddammit.

My attention drops to Hunter and her eyes slip closed. Is she unconscious? No, no, no. I write faster, the glass covered with my scrawls. Maybe it's a date. A birthday or anniversary. Shifting my focus, I start writing every possible combination starting with nineteen.

"C'mon!" I can feel time slipping away, like the final sands are falling through the hourglass. Inside the case, Hunter's head lolls to the side.

Suddenly, there's a slight whooshing sound and the door slides open.

"Got it!" Addie cries.

I reach in, grab Hunter and drag her out. My fingers touch her neck, but I don't feel a

pulse. If she has one, it's barely there.

Get her breathing,Angel commands.

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Tilting Hunter's head, I open her mouth and blow into her lungs. Her chest rises, but she's not fucking breathing. I cycle through chest compressions then check again. Nothing. Fuckingshit.

Again, Angel whispers.

"Do it again," Addie says.

Bending down, I breathe more rescue breaths into her and follow it up with additional compressions. "Please breathe for me, Sparrow," I whisper raggedly. "Please."

Maybe I deserve this. I've always justified what I do. Living my life in the gray and taking from others. Sure, we only steal from the very wealthy, but does that make it okay? Maybe my soul is doomed, destined for an eternity in hell. And this is the beginning of that hell right here on Earth.

You're destined for love, Angel whispers. God, it's like she's right here beside me. I can hear her so clearly. Now kiss your girl.

Out of nowhere, Hunter gasps, jerking back to beautiful, precious life. Those pretty molasses eyes flutter open and I've never felt such complete and utter relief.

I press my forehead to hers, my hand sliding over her chest, needing to feel its steady rise and fall. "Take a breath, beautiful. Deep breath. I've got you," I whisper, hoping my voice is calm enough to reassure her, make her feel safe.

She starts to sit up, and I help her. "Easy." My arms wrap around her, holding her

against me, needing to confirm yet again she's alive and breathing. The realization I almost lost her leaves me shredded.

"You cracked the code?" Hunter asks in amazement.

"I cracked the code," I confirm, then press my lips against hers.

"Your boyfriend is a human calculator," Addie says.

Your boyfriend. I like the sound of that. Even more, I love that Hunter didn't deny it. My heart swells, and I wrap her even tighter in my arms.

"I don't mean to break up the PDA, but we need to get the hell out of here," Addie interrupts, then presses her earpiece. "Linc? Ryder? Where are you?"

"Right." I stand, pulling Hunter up with me, knowing she's likely still going to be wobbly, but also not quite willing to let her go yet.

"We managed to take out the guards up here," Ryder reports. "You still need help down there?"

"Negative. We're on our way up with Hunter," Addie says, and we hurry out of that god awful room, heading back down the hall.

"Copy that."

Once we reach the steps, we hustle up. Hunter is still leaning against me—definitely more stable on her feet, but at this point, I refuse to let her go—and we come to a halt at the top of the staircase.

In the distance, the whirring sounds of a helicopter fill the air, and I hear gunfire

blasting from somewhere.

“Backup just arrived,” Deck announces through the comms.

That means Ryland and Saint are in the house. Fuck yeah.

“Let’s blow this joint,” I say, and Addie nods.

“You heard him. Everyone get to the exit point,” Addie orders.

“We’re parked on the other side of the golf course,” I tell Hunter.

Ideally, all we have to do is run across the back portion of the property, slip through the hedges and we’ll reach our ride.

Unfortunately, nothing is ever as easy as it seems.

Chapter Eighteen: Hunter

Knox, Addie and I race out of the house and onto the expansive back lawn. My attention instantly goes to the landing pad where a luxury helicopter waits, its rotor blades spinning.

Ah, it feels good to be alive, I think, and breathe in the faint scent of jet fuel—a wonderful combination that smells like a mix of kerosene and burnt rubber, with the slightest tinge of sweetness.

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The rear hedges look extremely far away, but that's where they say Brighton is waiting. At least this time, I'm not wearing an itsy-bitsy-teenie-weenie red bikini.

Gunfire breaks out nearby and my heart speeds up when I see Ryland "Rip" Mills and Nik "Saint" Valentine burst out of the tree line, guns in hand, firing at their pursuers. Tall, muscled and gorgeous, they look like a couple of dangerous assassins on a mission—which is exactly what they used to be.

I've never been so happy to see my team.

I spot motion out of the corner of my eye, and spin to see several guards appear, lifting semi-automatic rifles.

"Get down!" I yell, throwing myself into Knox. We hit the ground and roll until his big body covers mine. Shots echo all around us as we scramble backwards to safety.

"Over here!" Addie calls out, motioning to us. We hurry over to where she's half-hidden behind a pillar. Ryland and Saint aren't far away, tucked behind another large stone column.

"Hey, sis!" Ryland yells jovially over the chaos, nodding in our direction then firing his weapon at Torres' men. "How's it going, Pyro?"

God, they live for this kind of stuff. I raise my hand and send him a salute.

"Good to see you, little brother!" Addie responds just as cheerfully.

The Mills siblings both have sun-streaked, sandy hair and cobalt blue eyes. Tall and gorgeous, they both attract attention. Trouble, too, but they love it. While Ryland is definitely the more laidback of the two, he goes into mission mode just as quickly as his sister.

Beside Ryland, Saint reloads his Udav pistol. Like his weapon of choice, the big man packs a punch. He's covered in black ink, courtesy of the Russian prison culture he spent far too much time in, and growls more often than not. Except when he's holding his wife, Mia. Then the dragon turns into the biggest softie I've ever seen.

After taking a moment to assess the situation, one thing is clear—we're going to have to go through a lot of guards to make it down the entire golf course, through the hedges and to the SUV. Chances of escape via that option are looking slimmer and slimmer. Bleak, in fact.

My gaze shifts to the helicopter and a new plan begins to form. It hasn't moved yet, which makes me think the pilot is waiting for someone, most likely Torres. But, I'm going to get there first. All I have to do is stay behind the tree line, circle around and then race over to the helipad.

"I can get to the helo," I tell Knox, pointing out my intended route, "while you guys take care of these guards and provide a distraction. After I commandeer that bird, we can fly the hell out of here."

"No, it's too dangerous," he states.

"It might be the only way," I insist. "You have to trust me—I'll get us out of here."

He studies me intently, considering. Even though he hesitates, I know he knows I'm right. It's our best, possibly only, option at this point. There are too many guards, too many weapons firing at us. I'm starting to feel like a sitting duck.

“Can we all fit in there?” he asks doubtfully.

“It’s an ACH-130, specially designed by Airbus and Aston Martin, and she holds up to seven passengers.”

“You impress the hell outta me, Pyro.” He gives me a hard, fast kiss then turns to Addie. “Hunter is going to fly us out of here, but we need to cover her.”

Addie nods then hits her comms and communicates the plan to the others. Ryland sends me a salute, and I tip my chin.

“Take this,” Knox shoves his gun into my hands, “and be careful.”

“This isn’t my first rodeo.” I send him a jaunty wink, and he grabs my face in his hands and kisses me again. It’s faster than I’d like, but we’ve got things to do.

“I know, Sparrow, but I have things to tell you.”

I’m not sure if it’s his kiss or because I’m still a little lightheaded from oxygen deprivation, but my knees wobble slightly. Nodding, I start to turn when he grabs my hand.

“Fuckit,” he hisses, then gives me his most dazzling smile. “You have grit and fire and steel in your blood, and thought you might want to know I’m in love with you.”

My mouth drops open then slowly curves up into a grin. I’m so caught off guard by his admission that all I can do is whisper, “Same.”

“To be continued.”

We squeeze hands and then I dart sideways, heading into the cluster of trees while

everyone starts firing at once, providing cover for me. Jogging forward, holding the gun close to my chest, I make my way through the underbrush.

My plan is pretty straightforward—force the pilot out and hijack the helo. Once everyone is safely onboard, we'll give Brighton the go-ahead to leave.

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It doesn't take me long until I'm directly across from the helo. With zero hesitation, my feet practically fly across the lawn. When I reach the back of the bird, I slip along its side and jump right into the open door. Pistol pointing at the back of the pilot's head, I yell, "Out!"

The pilot swears, yanks off his headset and throws himself out his door. Easy peasy. Climbing into the seat he just vacated, I set the gun aside and take a moment to familiarize myself with the controls and gain my bearings. Although I'm much more familiar with fighter jets, I do have stick time in helos. Just have to figure out where all the controls are located because each bird differs. Once she's in the air, though, they all pretty much fly the same.

After strapping in, I hit a couple of switches and begin to crank the turbine engine which brings the engine, the generators, the hydraulics and the rotor RPM all into the green. Once Knox and the others climb onboard, it'll be sixty to ninety seconds from rumps in the seats to skids in the sky.

C'mon, guys. Let's go. Glancing out the windshield, watching the battle raging, I don't hear anyone enter the helo. It's loud and I'm distracted. But the feel of cold steel against the back of my neck gets my attention fast.

"Get me out of here. Now!" Torres orders. He grabs the gun Knox gave me and throws it out the open door.

Shit. The last thing I want to do is help this asshole escape. But I don't have much of a choice.

“I have no idea how they got you out, but now you’re going to get me out,” he declares, shoving the pistol’s barrel harder into my neck. “With my prize.”

My heart sinks when he lifts the emerald, a smug smile on his face.

“Let’s go!” He shoves the emerald back into his jacket.

Dammit, this is not how things were supposed to go. Drawing in a breath, I flick another switch and prepare for immediate takeoff. I’m sorry, Knox. I screwed up and now Torres is going to escape with the jewel. And me? I’ll probably wind up with a bullet in my skull once we’ve landed safely.

Maybe there’s still something I can do. A way out of this seemingly bleak situation.

Think, Hunter.

First, I’m going to make Torres think he’s free and clear. Let him get comfortable. Because comfortable people get complacent. Then I’ll figure out a way to stop him from escaping.

From the corner of my eye, I see Torres has positioned himself in one of the middle seats. There are four passenger seats in the back, three in front, and he’s right behind me, his gun pointed in my direction. I have a feeling this is going to be a very bumpy ride, but I have no idea just how dangerous it’s about to get.

I take one last look at the controls.

All systems go...

Stand by to engage...

Execute.

Grasping the cyclic stick, I send up a quick prayer as we begin to lift off the ground.

Chapter Nineteen: Knox

No! The moment I see Torres running for the helicopter, I take off after him. He has the lead, racing across the lawn, while I'm relegated to the tree line, trying to stay out of the line of fire.

Torres leaps into the helicopter and I push myself, my arms and legs pumping hard.

The helicopter lifts up. I'm not going to make it.

Bursting out of the trees, I make a mad dash forward, not caring that I'm now in the open, a moving target.

I can't lose Hunter. I absolutely refuse. My gut is screaming to get onto this bird or else that monster is going to clip my Sparrow's wings.

Over my dead body.

With a burst of speed fueled by pure adrenaline and an even purer love for Hunter, I launch myself up and make a grab for the closest skid. My weight causes the helo to dip slightly, but we keep rising until the ground is a blur below. Gathering my strength, I pull myself up onto the landing gear and reach for the door. Fortunately for me, Torres is an idiot and it's still open, which works in my favor. Not so much in his. Fatal mistake, fucker.

Staying down and out of view, I pull the knife from my boot. Then I stand up and start to haul myself into the cabin. At the same time, Torres spins and fires off a shot

in my direction. Shit! I duck back down, barely avoiding a bullet in the face, and my cheek stings. I swipe a shaking hand over it and see blood. Not cool. If I fall now, it's game over.

Maybe I didn't think this out very thoroughly. My charming personality isn't going to get me into this helicopter, so I'm going to have to rely on my wits and strength. I can't hear anything over the loud spin of the rotors, and I know I need to get inside before Torres leans over the edge and starts shooting.

Without thinking too hard, knowing I have no other option, my feet push against the skid and I leap inside. At the same time, I launch the knife in Torres' direction and hope for a lucky hit as I roll, doing my best to stay low. Hunter must've known I needed help, and the moment I land in the helo, she unexpectedly tilts us. The sharp, fast move throws Torres off balance and he falls sideways, his gun flying.

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Good girl. Heart thundering against my ribs like a stampede of wild horses, I pull myself up and slam into Torres, taking him down. We hit the floor hard, grunting and throwing punches. Unfortunately, he's in decent shape, not some overweight butterball with a penchant for donuts.

I don't hesitate to employ every underhanded trick I learned from Deck. Yes, he spent some time as an MMA fighter, but he competed in underground fight clubs long before that. Illegal fights with few rules and large payouts. All I know is when Deck joined our crew, he didn't do it because he needed a paycheck.

A well-placed knifehand strike to Torres' throat has him gasping and choking. Then I make the split-second mistake of looking up at Hunter whose head is turned, watching us duke it out.

"Watch out!" she cries.

Torres' fist catches me in the jaw and my head snaps sideways. Damn, that's going to leave a bruise. I return the favor, slamming my knuckles into his side.

"We've got company!" Hunter yells.

This time, Torres and I both look up and over, out the side of the open door. At first, all I see is wide-open blue sky. But then we do a crazy dip and I see another helicopter not far away, closing in fast. Not good.

From the corner of my eye, I spot Torres' discarded gun. I think we both must see it at the same time, because suddenly we're clambering across the narrow floor, both

hellbent on getting our hands on it.

But my arms are longer, and I reach out, fingers touching the handle, when Torres drops down on top of me with a hard blow between my shoulder blades. His elbow, I realize. Fucking ow.

Once again, the helo dips sharply and we scramble for purchase as we both roll toward the open passenger door. I manage to snag onto the bottom of a seat, but Torres misses and, instead, grabs onto me. Barely.

My entire body jerks and he's clinging onto my ankles, the rest of his body dangling out the side of the helo, flapping in the wind like a flag. He's too damn heavy to dislodge with a solid shake, and I kick out, catching him in the face with my boot's heel. For an interminable moment, I feel him struggle...feel my body being sucked out of the cab...and then all the pressure disappears as his grip tears free and he falls.

I huff out a relieved breath and drag myself away from the door. Breathing hard, knowing I just narrowly escaped being sucked out the side with him, I carefully crawl over and shut the damn door. Of course, I take a second to look down. Make sure he's not hanging onto one of the skids. But Alejandro Torres is nothing more than a splat on the ground far below.

My stomach drops as the helo takes a sharp dive. Staggering up, I climb into the front seat beside Hunter and see the other helicopter heading straight for us. Great. More of Torres' goons.

"Strap in!" she orders, and I don't ask questions. But my trust in her doesn't prevent my heart from lodging in my throat. We're on course for a head-on collision.

"Hunter!" I yell, my fingers digging into the seat cushion. This is going to end in a fiery wreck.

“Don’t worry. I live for a good dogfight.”

Fucking fantastic. How can she be so calm? I’m seriously on the verge of shitting myself and she’s having a grand ol’ time. I don’t think she’s even broken a sweat, and I’m drenched.

“Do you trust me?” she asks, throwing my earlier question right back at me.

I look at the helicopter speeding straight toward us then over into her clear, fearless, focused eyes.

“I trust you,” I rasp, then let out a shout as she swerves us sideways and up at the very last second. Her perfectly executed maneuver manages to clip the other helo’s rotors in the exactright place to make it go spinning out of control. At the same time, we lurch hard and spiral off into our own spin.

“Fuck!” I brace myself, but can you really prepare for a crash? Teeth clenched, I think my life starts flashing before my eyes. But it isn’t the past I see—it’s the future. Moments with Hunter that haven’t happened yet. And, dammit, I don’t want to miss out on even one of them.

Everything happens so fast, but when I look over, I see Hunter manipulating the stick and pedals to counter the spin. I never should have worried, or doubted her abilities. She possesses a deft touch and knows exactly what she’s doing, and I watch in amazement as she regains control.

Once we’ve evened out, I slump back against my seat, and she throws her head back and laughs. “It’s been a while since I got to do that,” she tells me, glancing over.

I must be white as a ghost, and I slap a hand over my heart.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“I think my soul momentarily left my body.”

She extends a hand and I grab it, threading my fingers through hers.

“That was some fancy-fucking flying, Sparrow.”

“I told you I’m good.”

“Yeah, you are,” I say, “but I think I’m ready to put my feet back on the ground.”

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“Roger that.” She sends me the most beautiful smile and turns us around, heading back to pick up our crew.

Staring at her strong, stunning profile, emotions pummel me.

And I know, without a doubt, I’m looking at my future.

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Once we land on the helipad and I’m on solid ground again, my confidence returns. I grab Hunter, push her up against the helo and kiss the hell out of her. My hand is sliding over her ass when a whistle pierces the air, and I reluctantly pull back. Ryder, of course.

Torres’ guards—the ones who didn’t run scared like little bitches—have been taken down. My entire crew, along with Ryland and Saint, are heading toward us. I can already see the looks Ryland and Saint are exchanging, but I don’t care. Hunter is mine, and I plan to tell the entire fucking world.

“Something you want to tell us, Pyro?” Saint asks, crossing his huge, inked arms. Beside him, Ryland places his hands on his hips, eyes narrowing.

“Yeah, what did we miss?” Ryland asks.

They’ve got a good intimidation game happening, but I’m not scared. Not at all.

Before Hunter can respond, I wrap my arm around her waist and tug her close. “I love

this brave, beautiful woman,” I announce to everyone, “and I hope she’ll give me the chance to prove it to her every single day. Because there’s no way in hell I’m letting her walk away from me.”

“Oh, lighten up, fellas,” Brighton says cheerfully, playfully elbowing Saint in his side. “Can’t you feel the love in the air?”

“Hunter?” Ryland turns his full attention to their former pilot. “We need some intel here.”

“Yeah, do you love this pretty boy, or do we need to kick his stalker ass?” Saint asks.

Hunter looks up at me and arches a teasing brow. “Weeeellllll...”

I squeeze her side and she squeals, twisting away. But I catch her and reel her into my embrace. “Well?” I echo, looking into her pretty molasses eyes. The sunlight glints off the reddish strands in her hair and my heart squeezes as I wait for her answer.

“I love him,” she whispers, throwing her arms around my neck.

I pick her up and spin her in a circle. As a round of cheers surround us, our mouths collide in a kiss.

And my world is suddenly complete.

Chapter Twenty: Hunter

After defeating Torres and announcing to everyone that Knox and I are in love, the gang wants to celebrate. We go to a restaurant overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, eat far too much food, drink even more wine and spend hours talking and laughing. Ryland and Saint join us and bring along their wives, Harper and Mia. It’s the first

time Addie has met her brother's wife and they immediately hit it off. Harper is pregnant and Addie is thrilled she's going to be an aunt.

When I mention Torres fell out of the helo with the emerald, Addie smirks.

"No, he didn't have the emerald," she replies with a mysterious smile.

"But I saw it," I insist.

"We lured him in with the real emerald, then I swapped it for his fake one. Did you really think I'd let him get away with the real one?"

"My sister is a master magician when it comes to sleight of hand tricks," Ryland confirms.

"You're pretty good with your hands, too," Harper adds with a naughty smile, and we all laugh.

"What can I say? Mom taught me well." Addie flips her long, blonde hair over a shoulder. Then she reaches into her bag and pulls out the huge, green stone. "Time to return this beauty to its rightful owner."

Ryland arches a surprised brow. "You're not keeping it?"

"No, brother dear, it's not mine to keep." Ryland nods, and I can tell he likes her answer. In fact, he looks damn proud of her. "We will be returning it to its rightful owner, the Princess."

"Princess?" Linc echoes then lets out a snort of disbelief. "What princess?"

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“The one who needs a bodyguard. Of course, I immediately suggested you, Linc.”

“Hell to the no,” he grits out, sitting up straighter.

“With Detective Vaughn sniffing around, it can’t hurt to add a few legit jobs to the books,” Addie says, and Linc merely grunts.

“Seems odd that a princess wouldn’t have her own guards,” Brighton states.

“I don’t have all the details,” Addie explains, “but, we’ll find out when we return the gem.”

“What’s the problem, Linc?” Ryder asks, voice teasing. “Big brute like you would be perfect for the job.”

“Because I don’t babysit spoiled rotten brats,” Linc states, stubbornly crossing his muscled arms.

“I highly suggest you give it a try,” Saint murmurs, kissing Mia’s temple.

“Nik!” She swats his tattooed arm, pretending to be offended. “Are you inferring I’m spoiled?”

“Nope. I would never suggest such a thing.” He gives his wife a slow, sexy grin and she visibly melts.

As I look over the people gathered, new friends and old, I realize my family has

expanded. Yes, some are missing, but my circle is growing, and that brings me a sense of happiness and peace I feel to the depths of my heart and soul.

Knox doesn't leave my side and rarely releases my hand. When I speak, he gives me his full attention, listening to each word that comes out of my mouth as if it's the most important thing he's ever heard. He makes me feel...adored.

And that is something I've never felt before.

At some point, Knox and I wander onto the outdoor patio overlooking the dark sea. The smell of jasmine fills the salty air and pink bougainvillea grows over the railing. Leaning back against Knox's firm chest, I look up at the big, white moon and smile like only a woman in love does.

"I'd steal it for you," he murmurs at my ear, lightly flicking his tongue along its curve.

"The moon?"

"The moon, the sun, the stars. Whatever you want."

His arms wrap around my waist and he nuzzles my neck as his fingers splay across my stomach. I can feel his arousal pressing into my lower back.

"I just want you."

No statement has ever been more true. Knox makes me happy, content and so incredibly hopeful. I cover his hands with mine and sigh. For the first time, I know what it means to feel utterly complete.

"Are you ready to leave?" he whispers, voice husky and full of need.

“Yes,” I tell him softly.

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“Yes!” I scream, grinding down, taking every single inch of Knox’s cock as deeply as possible. I’ve never been so uninhibited before when it comes to sex, but he makes me feel free. Like I can be my authentic self without fear of being judged. Plus, he likes it when I’m loud and encourages me to be vocal.

His hips lift off the mattress, cock thrusting up, stretching me more than ever before, and my orgasm hits hard, blasting me off into the stratosphere. As I collapse forward, he arches up, growling through his release.

“Oh, my God.” For a long moment, I can’t move, can’t think. All I can do is sprawl onto his chest and pant as my inner muscles quake with little aftershocks.

“Holy shit,” he rasps, his fingers threading through my hair. “That was—”

“Otherworldly,” I finish, and he lets out a low chuckle.

When I’m finally able to lift my head, I look into his amazing sapphire eyes and curl my fingers into his shirt. We didn’t even take the time to get fully undressed, just pulled jeans down and ripped underwear out of the way. Our bodies came together fast and furious. I’ve never felt such potent desire or been so consumed by need.

We’re still staying at The Man’s safehouse and will leave Spain tomorrow. I don’t think anyone is in a hurry, though. Torres is dead and Addie’s team has the emerald. And, I got my man. Life couldn’t be more sweet.

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I glance over at my torn panties hooked on the corner of the nightstand and drop my face, burying it in his soft Henley. He tugs my hair, lifting my head, forcing me to look at him again.

“No more running, okay?” he murmurs.

“No more running,” I agree, lifting up and moving off him. He presses a quick kiss to my shoulder and slips out of bed to dispose of the condom. Meanwhile, I pull the sheet up over my lower half and sigh softly. So many things are spinning through my mind and I’m starting to think about the hard questions. Like how do we make this work when we live in different cities and—

“Hey,” he says, interrupting my doom-filled thoughts as he slides back into bed, “stop overthinking.”

“I can’t help it. It’s what I do.”

“Okay, you want something to think about, some new things to ponder? Well, how about this? I love you and you’re mine. End of story.”

I smile, his words a balm on my scarred heart. “Are you sure?” I ask playfully. “I can be hard to handle.”

“Bring it on,” he challenges. Our fingers lace and he turns my hand over, lightly tracing his thumb in small circles over my palm. Very quietly, he asks, “Who hurt you?”

I've never talked about my humiliating time with Shane before. Not to anyone. But I know I can trust Knox with all of my secrets.

"He was in my Top Gun class," I say, allowing myself to completely open up for the first time. Surprisingly, it doesn't hurt like it used to. "Shane Murdock, standout pilot, and total dick in every other way. I stupidly fell for him."

"I hate him already," Knox grumbles.

"He was my first and last real relationship, and it wasn't a good experience."

"Why not?"

I meet his curious blue gaze. "Because he wasn't you."

"Are you trying to butter me up for another orgasm?" he teases, but then quickly sobers, knowing I need his support. Needing him to be my anchor if I'm going to tell this story.

Releasing a soft breath, I let it all out. How I unwittingly fell for his charms, believing all of his pretty lies. And, how it all crashed and burned after I walked in on him in bed with another woman.

"He blamed me," I say softly. "He said I was bad in bed, too high-strung and controlling. The truth is, he fooled me into thinking it was all my fault. That because of my lack of passion, he had to go elsewhere. And, the sad thing is, I believed him."

"Oh, sweetheart," Knox murmurs, squeezing my hand, "he was a first-class bastard and he knew exactly what he was doing. He gaslighted you. Because you, Hunter, are the most passionate woman I have ever known. Excuse my language, but whether you're flying or fucking, I'm left in awe. You do everything with such zest and

enthusiasm. Don't ever doubt yourself again."

"Thank you for helping me open up again," I whisper. "You've taught me there's more than one way to soar, Knox."

"I'm glad." His voice is pleased, content, but his smile fades. "Now I understand your hesitation and why my charm scared you off. But, if we're being honest, I wasn't always like this."

"Like what? A devastatingly handsome heartbreaker?" Even though I'm joking, he doesn't crack a smile. "Tell me then. What did you used to be like?"

"I was a poor kid who wore clothes from Goodwill. Whose parents worked long, endless hours and relied on food stamps to feed their six kids. I shared a bedroom with five sisters until it was deemed inappropriate, and then I slept on the lumpy couch. I met Addie by sheer luck, and she and her mom Angel took me under their wing and taught me the art of the heist. I never looked back, never regretted any choice I've made...until now."

"Why now?" I ask softly.

"Because being a thief requires checking your conscience at the door and, dammit, you remind me a good man doesn't do that. He should possess kindness, loyalty, courage...and honesty. I promise I'm working on it."

He just listed all the things I said impressed me the first time we snuck into Torres' Marbella mansion. And now, knowing how he grew up, I can understand why he's done certain things. How he wound up on this path.

A fierce love swells up within me. I can picture him as a little boy wearing ill-fitted clothes, a latch key kid who slept on the couch, and my heart nearly breaks.

“He also should take care of his woman.” I release his hand and run my fingers through his hair. “And you do an excellent job of that.”

I’m trying to lighten the conversation, but he’s so serious.

His gaze locks onto mine. “What do you see when you look at me?” he asks.

It’s the second time he’s asked me this question.

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“I’ll always be straight with you,” I say carefully.

“Yeah, I recall you didn’t hold back the first time,” he says and flinches.

I move closer. “You might be interested to know my answer has changed.”

“Oh?” He arches a dark brow.

“I wasn’t looking for love when I met you. Quite the opposite—I’d convinced myself I didn’t need it. That it wasn’t worth the risk and love stories only happened to other people. Not me.”

“And now?”

“Now I realize it just...happens. It’s not something you choose or plan. It doesn’t matter if it’s the right or wrong time...if you live in a different city...if he’s a sexy thief who’s charming as hell...”

“Guilty.”

“I learned you’re so much more than that, though.” I trail my finger along his stubbled jaw. “You’re also kind, loyal, courageous and honest.”

My words seem to light him up and he closes the small distance between us, his lips crushing mine. The kiss we share is passionate and full of promise. I feel a shift between us. One that assures me there is no going back now, only forward, and I couldn’t be happier.

When we finally come up for air, Knox gently cups my face. “Know what I learned?” he asks.

“What?”

“Love doesn’t ask for permission.”

He’s right, and I couldn’t agree more. “No. It’s kind of like quicksand. The harder I tried to escape, the more it sucked me under.”

“You’re comparing me to quicksand?”

I laugh and push a hand against his chest. His fingers snake around my wrist, bringing my knuckles to his lips and pressing a kiss to each one.

“So now what? What’re you going to do, my Sparrow? Fly away? Or surrender to me? To us? To love?”

“I think it would be wisest to surrender.”

“Good answer. Because I don’t know if I can make this any clearer. I want you every day for the rest of my life. I need you to fall asleep beside me every night and wake up next to me every morning. I love you, Hunter, and I’m not letting you go. Ever. So, you may as well give in, because if you run away again, I’ll come find you.”

“I wasn’t planning on falling so hard and fast...so completely. But flying to your rescue was the best thing that ever happened to me. You, Knox Remington Beckett, are becoming my world, and that’s a little scary.”

“Don’t be scared. I will never hurt you,” he promises. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” I say with perfect honesty. “Completely.”

“Good.” He presses a kiss to my forehead. “Now why don’t you get naked so I can fuck you properly. Skin to skin.”

My pulse speeds up and I yank my tank top off, tossing it aside, my bra following. Knox wastes no time stripping down, too, and then he lifts me up into his arms and carries me into the bathroom.

Knox is moving at a much more leisurely pace than earlier and he slowly lowers me to the floor, letting my body slide down his. He’s kissing me deeply, our tongues dancing, and I can’t get enough. Leaning into him, I shamelessly rub myself against his rising cock.

“Slow down, Sparrow,” he murmurs. “This time, I’m going to explore and touch and taste every single curve.”

“Mmm,” I moan into his mouth. Unable to help myself, I reach down and wrap my fingers around his thick cock. Squeezing. Stroking his steel length until he grits his perfect, white teeth and groans. “I don’t mind fast.”

He hisses out a breath, wraps his hand around my wrist and tugs it up. “Keep doing that and I’m going to blow.”

“Go ahead,” I whisper, encouraging him. “If you want, you can blow in my mouth.”

He growls in response. “Later. First, we’re going to fuck in the shower. Slow and hot. That work for you?”

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“That works for me.”

He turns, putting that biteable ass of his on display, and flips on the water. After adjusting the temperature, he pulls me in with him and we kiss beneath the spray. So languid and deep. Fog steams up the glass doors and I can’t stop running my hands over his wet, muscled body, so hot beneath my touch. I’m about to combust with need and desire suffuses me, making every nerve ending tingle. It’s electric.

Being with Knox is beyond exhilarating, and when he lifts me up, sliding his hands under my ass and pressing my back to the cool tiles, I feel the last bit of the wall around my heart crumble and collapse.

And I’m free.

Free to be myself, free to love this beautiful man and soar into the future with him.

My head drops back as he licks along my collarbone then trails his mouth downward to worship my breasts. I arch, offering more as he sucks and laves my taut nipples.

“I need you,” I rasp, nails digging into his muscled shoulders, circling my hips, trying to draw his cock inside my dripping pussy. I’ve never felt this kind of overwhelming need. One so powerful, so all-consuming, that I’m shaking.

Knox grips my hips, lifts me up and notches the head of his cock at my entrance. Our gazes lock—no condom—and he hesitates.

“I don’t want anything between us,” I say, urging him to do it. To fill me completely

with no barrier.

It doesn't take much convincing.

I slam down as he surges up, and our bodies connect fully. Nothing ever felt so right. The plan to go slow is short-lived as a wildness takes over, as we claim each other and exchange silent promises.

When he reaches between our bodies and begins rubbing my clit, I lose whatever control I've managed to hold. With a cry, I bite down on his shoulder and my inner muscles squeeze hard, rippling around his cock. His thrusts grow harder, faster, and then a groan rips from his throat as he spills his release.

"Damn, Sparrow," he rasps, still lightly pumping. "So much for slow."

He pulls back, grinning wickedly. Always so handsome and charming.

"I didn't know you were a biter," he teases, and I flush, lightly touching the red mark I left on his shoulder.

"I guess you bring out my wild side." I press a soft kiss over the love bite.

"I like it. This is just the beginning," he tells me. "I'm going to learn everything about you. The basic stuff like your birthday and middle name. Every one of your favorite things—favorite color, food, movie, song, book. Every. Single. Detail."

"Every detail, huh? Like how many beauty marks I have?"

"So far, I've counted fifteen." He starts dropping kisses on each one, and I laugh.

"What else do you want to know?" I love this side of him. Earnest, honest, boyish.

“Everything. Your dreams, desires, wishes, fears. The way you walk, talk, laugh, cry. I want it all. I want every little piece of you from top to bottom, inside and out.” He traces his thumb along my jaw, over my bottom lip. “What about you? What do you want?”

As I consider his question, I realize it’s been a long time since someone asked me what I want. “Ever since my dad died, I haven’t had a best friend,” I tell him softly. “We used to do everything together, and I miss that. So, I’d like a man who can be my lover, but also my best friend.”

“I would love to be your best friend,” he says, and I’m not sure if it’s tears or the spray from the shower, but my eyes get misty.

Okay, so I’m crying. Big deal.

Knox tightens his embrace. “I love you, Hunter.”

I sniff and blink hard, scared my voice is going to crack when I answer back, “I love you, too.”

It comes out more like a choked whisper, though, and then Knox is kissing me, and I know I’m never letting this man go. And, best of all, I know he isn’t ever letting me go either.

Epilogue: Hunter

The following afternoon, we say goodbye to Ryland, Harper, Saint and Mia who are heading back to Cádiz. I’m going to miss Spain, but before we return to Denver, I fly the team to the French Riviera where Addie has set up a meeting to return the emerald to its rightful owner.

I'm not sure what to expect, but it certainly isn't a real-life princess and her family's stunning royal estate. It's practically a castle and puts Torres' mansion to shame. Princess Rosalie is a small, curvy blonde and insists we call her Rose. She exudes gratitude when Addie hands her the ginormous emerald and tells us it's been in her family for generations.

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I've never been in the presence of royalty before, so I'm not sure what to say or do. And even though Rose is proper and ladylike in every way, she has a friendly presence and exudes warmth, which helps put everyone at ease.

Well, except Linc whose arms are crossed and looks like he has a pole up his ass. I'm not sure why he's being more standoffish than usual, but I notice Addie slant him a warning look a couple of times.

"What's up with Linc?" I ask Knox in a low voice.

"He's still pissed off that Addie wants him to play babysitter, er, bodyguard to the princess."

"Oh, right," I chuckle. "Well, I think Rose seems nice."

She even invites us to lunch, and while I know everyone wants to get home, how do you say no to royalty? Quite simply, you don't.

Addie graciously accepts on all our behalf, and Rose leads us through the airy mansion. The open floor plan and high ceilings leave me a little wide-eyed, and a lot intimidated. It's clear this place belongs to people with excellent taste and the bank to furnish it. The huge home incorporates unique architectural features like statement chandeliers, interesting artwork and plenty of luxury materials such as custom pillows and tapestries. We walk past endless floral arrangements, open windows and, finally, step onto a large back veranda.

I pause mid-step, taking in the stunning view. The bright blue water sparkles like a

gem, yachts bobbing on its placid surface. My hair lifts on the salt-tinged air, and fragrant blooms lace it with sweetness. A long table is perfectly set and pitchers of ice-cold limoncello are already being poured into our chilled glasses as we sit down.

“Wow,” I murmur under my breath. Fresh flowers spill over vases and, once we’re all seated, servants carry out trays of food and serve us. “I could get used to this.”

Knox reaches for my hand under the table and squeezes. “I may be utterly charismatic and devastatingly handsome, but I’ll never be royalty.”

“That’s okay. You’ll always be my Prince Charming.”

He lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles. “And you will always be my lovely Sparrow.”

We dive into the amazing spread our hostess has provided, and everything is delicious. At some point, Addie presses Rose for more information about her needing a bodyguard. I don’t miss Linc’s grunt right before he stuffs half a croissant into his mouth.

“Not for me,” she clarifies. “For my good friend, Merritt.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Addie quickly apologizes. “My contact mentioned that a princess needed a bodyguard. I assumed it was you.”

We all know her “contact” is The Man.

“Oh, she’s a princess alright.”

As if on cue, a beautiful woman with brown hair swept up into a loose chignon walks onto the patio. Wearing a lace-trimmed blouse and slim-fitting pencil skirt, she’s the

picture of elegance and sophistication.

“Sorry, I’m late,” she says a little breathlessly, heels clicking. Her blue eyes sweep down the table and she lightly fingers the statement ruby necklace hanging around her neck.

“Everyone, this is Princess Merritt Fontaine, her Royal Highness of Arcadia,” Rose announces.

“Oh, please,” Merritt says with a wave of her delicate hand, “it’s just Merritt.”

From across the table, I see Linc sit up straighter, his full attention on Merritt.

“You know how I feel about royal titles,” Merritt continues with a slight grumble, pulling out the empty chair beside Linc. “Do you mind if I sit here?”

He clears his throat and shakes his head like a dog who just jumped out of its bath. “No,” he finally manages to croak, and I lift my fancy cloth napkin to hide my smile. The imposing former fighter seems a little flustered, and it’s freaking adorable.

“Addie and her lovely associates returned my family’s emerald,” Rose says, “and I was just about to tell them how you need a bodyguard.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard,” she clarifies, “but my parents are insisting. Specifically, they want someone not connected to Arcadia who can accompany me back to New York. Personally, I think they’re being a little overprotective.”

“Someone tried to kidnap her,” Rose states dramatically.

Everyone perks up at that little tidbit and Linc’s dark eyes narrow.

“It was a misunderstanding.” Merritt tries to brush it off and reaches for her glass of limoncello. Pink-painted nails tap against the crystal before she takes a dainty sip.

I can’t help but notice Linc watching her every move. The gruff man can’t seem to look away.

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“Anyway,” she continues, setting her drink down, “the bigger issue is someone attempted to steal the crown.”

“I’d say you almost being kidnapped is the bigger issue,” Linc states in his gravelly voice. They lock gazes, staring each other down, but neither relents.

I’m guessing no one normally challenges the princess, and the former fighter is used to winning. No one misses the palpable tension between them.

“Crown?” Addie echoes, leaning forward.

Merritt nods, pulling her attention off Linc. “My parents want to know how so it doesn’t happen again. Your company was referred to them, and they’d like to hire A-Squared Enterprises to make sure our security is top-notch and there’s no chance of thieves getting their hands on it.”

Oh, boy. A princess wants to hire a crew of thieves to check out her security system? I squirm in my seat, hoping against hope they don’t rob her blind. Just because they did one good deed doesn’t guarantee it will happen again.

“We’d be more than happy to help you,” Addie says smoothly. “A-Squared will make sure your security system is updated. No one will be able to breach it once we’re finished.”

Several looks fly around the table between Addie’s people.

“If Linc isn’t able to watch over Miss Fontaine, I’d be more than happy to do it,”

Ryder offers with a smug grin.

“I got it,” Linc practically growls, glaring at Ryder.

“Good. Then it’s settled,” Addie says, quickly intervening. “Linc will assume bodyguard duties for Merritt and we will head to Arcadia to update and test the current security system.”

More small talk and general questions about Arcadia prove rather quickly that Merritt is a reluctant princess. She doesn’t go into any specifics, but whenever the words “princess” or “royalty” are mentioned, she brushes them aside with a slight frown or telling twist of her lips.

Hmm. Interesting. Looking from Merritt to Linc, I wonder how this duo of unwilling princess and her grudging bodyguard will pan out. Stay tuned.

Lunch wraps up with a light lemon sorbet and then I politely excuse myself. I need to get to the jet and make sure we’re ready to go. Knox decides to come with me while the rest of the crew plans to sit down with Merritt to find out more intel about the new job.

As we’re walking back into the mansion, Addie lifts her buzzing phone and scowls at the screen before shoving it back into her purse. I noticed it rang several times throughout lunch, and Knox must have, too.

“Who keeps calling?” he asks Addie.

She looks up, distracted, and runs a hand through her beachy, blonde waves. “Cole Freaking Vaughn,” she hisses angrily. “I should sic my brother’s team on him. Or change my number.”

“He’s becoming a problem,” Knox says.

“He’s a major pain in my ass. My mom warned me to always steer clear of the Denver P.D., and I’ve tried, but Vaughn is a persistent prick. He still thinks we had something to do with that museum theft last year.”

“Well, we sort of did,” Knox murmurs.

“No, we didn’t!” Addie exclaims. “I only gave advice. We didn’t take a damn thing.”

“No, technically, we didn’t. But your advice allowed Laurent to successfully steal the painting.”

“How is it my fault the museum has a gaping hole in their security? I merely pointed it out to Laurent.” She sniffs. “Now he owes me a favor—and that’s a good card to be holding.”

I listen, absolutely fascinated. I’m willing to bet Addison Mills can quickly justify everything she’s ever stolen.

“Speaking of your mom...” Knox stops walking, looking from me to Addie. “I haven’t mentioned this yet, but when I was trying to break the code to release Hunter from that case...I heard Angel.”

Addie’s entire face softens. “What do you mean?”

“It’s like she was right there beside me, whispering in my ear. She encouraged me, told me I could do it.”

“And you didn’t give up,” I say softly.

“No.” He reaches for my hand. “She said I was destined for love.”

Our gazes lock and the purest love passes between us. But something is bothering me. I glance over at Addie and bluntly ask, “Are you going to steal from the princess?”

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A strange look passes over her face, but then she shakes her head. “No.” I’m not sure I entirely believe her, but she continues, “The Man merely wants us to tighten the Fontaine’s security and keep Princess Merritt safe.”

I’m happy to hear it, because I genuinely like Merritt. She seems sweet and I’d hate to see anyone take advantage of her. The entire situation does set me to wondering who this mysterious person called The Man really is. And how long will they blindly follow his orders?

“Aren’t we becoming the infamous Robin Hood?” Knox asks cheekily, but he doesn’t seem to mind at all. “It’s kind of fun for a change. Giving instead of always taking. I think Angel would approve.”

He gives Addie’s shoulder a little squeeze then turns to me.

“Let’s go, Sparrow. I want some alone time with you before the rest of the crew arrives.” He waggles his brows and I chuckle.

“I have a pre-flight check to perform, Mr. Beckett. I don’t need distractions.”

“Behave you two,” Addie scolds and walks away to join the others.

She’s barely out of sight before Knox grabs me in his arms, pulling me against his hard length. Tilting my head back, I look up into his gorgeous eyes and melt. He’s everything I’ve always wanted in a partner, and then some.

“I have no intention of behaving,” he whispers naughtily and nips my lower lip.

“Maybe—after my check—we might have some time to...”

“To what?” Those roughly-spoken words make his chest rumble against mine.

I give him my most disarming smile. “Misbehave?”

Another deep, almost primal growl vibrates through him. “You call me a charmer? You, my little Sparrow, are the most beguiling, most irresistible, most intoxicating creature I have ever met. And I am so far under your spell.”

Despite my initial fears and misgivings, I now know there is nothing I would change about this incredible man.

I tighten my arms around his neck and push up onto my toes, brushing the tip of my nose against his. “You caught me, my thief. Now what do you plan on doing with me?”

“So many wicked things. I’m going to corrupt you silly.”

I throw my head back and laugh. But the laughter cuts off when his mouth captures mine in a kiss to end all other kisses. Savoring the moment before we begin the next adventure, I realize that neither of us is perfect, and that’s perfectly alright.

I’ve finally found my man, and learned it’s so very easy to love a thief.