



Assistant to the Assassin (Criminal Hearts #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Being an assistant is not the easiest job in the world, and that's especially true when your boss is Henry Cai, a Navy Seal-turned CIA agent-turned assassin. You'd expect him to be harsh and cruel given his traumatic past and violent profession, but to Bethany Beth Reed, he's a best friend, a partner...and the man she's desperately in love with. She's committed to hiding how she feels for him forever, but when one of his assignments goes horribly wrong and they are forced to hide out on a secluded island—things start to heat up, and not just because of the tropical climate. But with the looming threat of those hunting them and the dark truths of Henry's past revealing themselves, their budding romance falls into jeopardy in more ways than one. It turns out the real enemy was never the people seeking vengeance upon them, it's the fears and doubts festering inside a wounded heart that have now started to rot. If Henry and Beth don't figure out a way to let go of the past and fight for their future, then history is bound to repeat itself, only this time they'll lose everything.

Assistant to the Assassin is the first book in the Criminal Hearts series, a collection of standalone dark romantic comedies. Inspired by Grosse Pointe Blank, Killers, and the Red franchise; you'll laugh, you'll swoon, and you'll think twice before accepting a job as a hot guy's assistant.

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“If I were to ask you to describe a good memory, what would you choose?”

I bounce my knee on the navy blue carpet, a nervous tic I haven’t experienced since school when I would be called into the guidance counselor’s office. The feeling of being observed, of being watched, has always made me antsy, and just like back then, I can’t leave until this is done.

“I don’t see how that helps,” I reply stiffly.

“You are haunted by the horrible, traumatic memories of your past, Mr. Cai,” the doctor says, her posture loose and her expression indifferent. Given all that I’ve exposed her to today, her reaction towards me is quite alarming. “It’s important to reframe how we view the past if we are to move on from it. One way to do that is to remind ourselves that all our memories aren’t bad.”

I think for a moment, then I hear myself say, as if at a distance, “Whenever I had a nightmare, my mother would lie down beside me and listen to me describe what I dreamt about. She would run her fingers through my hair and put all of my fears at ease. I remember one time, after I had a particularly bad one, I asked her why we have bad dreams at all. I asked why they can’t all be good.”

“And what did she say?” she asks.

“She said that ‘dreams are a lot like life; there are good and bad because without the bad, we couldn’t appreciate the good.’”

The doctor smiles at that, making a quick note in her notebook. “Wise words. And

then what happened?”

“She sang to me.”

She tilts her head to the side in thought. “Did she do that often?”

“Yes.”

She stares at me for a moment, then gestures with a wave of her hand, indicating I should continue. So, I begrudgingly add, “She used to sing ‘Moon River’ to me. From Breakfast at Tiffany’s .”

“Why that song?”

“Because it was her favorite,” I reply honestly. “I can still hear her singing it as if she were in the room with me. I can hear the smile in her tone, the joy that song brought to her.”

The doctor places the notebook down, leaning back in her seat. “How did it go?”

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Would You Pray Before You Twist the Knife?

The man makes a gargling sound as I stab him in the throat. His eyes are wide in fear, his hands clawing at my arms and shoulder in attempt to get me away from him, but I have him pinned to the wall, and I twist the knife in further.

A radio sits on a table with an unfinished game of chess, and Elvis Presley's "You're the Devil in Disguise" plays loudly through the speaker, so loud I almost missed the sound of footsteps on the stairs. My first victim slides down the wall, leaving a trail of blood in his wake, and I hope the others won't be so messy. Blood is a bitch to get off of the walls.

You look like an angel

Walk like an angel

Talk like an angel

But I got wise

You're the devil in disguise

Oh, yes, you are, devil in disguise

I move over to the space next to the stairs, my knife in one hand and my gun in the other. When the first guy makes it to the bottom step, I shoot him in the side of the head. I hear another man shout, but the noise is quickly cut off when I shoot him in

the eye, making him topple down the stairs and land on his friend's body.

I step around them and race up the stairs, keeping my back to the wall as I survey the second floor. I see a guy to my left, and I duck just in time to miss his shot. I shoot him once in the side, then once in the neck, flinging my knife into the chest of the guy sneaking up on me. I say "sneaking" loosely; his shoes were squeaking like rusty hinges.

Mr. Stealthy is still alive, gasping for each breath and desperately trying to take the knife out, but he's too weak. I shoot him between the eyes, making his body go limp against the hardwood, then I yank the knife out. I don't bother cleaning it this time; instead, I throw it at the next man that rounds the corner, but he has enough awareness to duck. Sadly, he isn't quick enough to pull out his gun, and with one shot to the head, he falls down like a rag doll.

You fooled me with your kisses

You cheated and you schemed

Heaven knows how you lied to me

You're not the way you seemed

That was my last bullet, so I place my gun back into the holster under my suit jacket and dislodge my knife out of the wall. I fish my spare gun out of my leg holster, loading in a new mag just in time for another goon to appear.

We underestimated how many people are working for Samuels.

"Please, please don't shoot!" he begs, dropping his gun to the floor with a loud clang.

"I swear I'll do—"

His pleas are silenced by a bullet, but not mine. A big, burly man approaches us, disgust written on his face as he peers down at his victim. “Pathetic.”

“He was smart enough to know he couldn’t win. I would venture to guess your intelligence is lacking,” I say calmly.

The burly man growls, rushing at me like a linebacker. He knocks my gun away before I can shoot him, and with his size and the momentum he created, the two of us crash backwards into the kitchen, breaking the door on our way in. Splinters of wood fly around as we tumble to the ground, making us both groan. This guy has to be at least three hundred pounds of pure muscle and he’s currently on top of me, which is less than ideal. As I expected from a man with his size and strength, his hands grab on to my throat, squeezing down as hard as he can. I have to fight the urge to thrash, knowing I can’t win against him with strength alone.

Thankfully, when he knocked into me, he didn’t make me drop my knife. I plunge it into his side, forcing a scream out of him. I then bring my knee up into his stomach and punch him, making him fall to the ground beside me.

I scramble to my feet, finding the brute staring at me with my knife in his hand, his frame heaving sighs like a bull about to attack. I reach behind me and grab on to the first thing I touch—a saucepan—and swing at him like a baseball player. He swerves out of the way, swiping at me with the knife, but I hit the pan against his hand, making him lose his grip on the knife. Without wasting a second, I slap the pan across his face once, twice, then I kick him in the stomach hard. He slips on his own blood, which has been gushing from him since he pulled the knife out, and falls face-first onto the kitchen floor.

I pick up my knife off the floor and plunge it hard into the back of his neck. There are a few gurgles, then the man falls still, his blood slowly spreading along the white tiles.

You look like an angel

Walk like an angel

Talk like an angel

But I got wise

You're the devil in disguise

Oh, yes, you are, devil in disguise

After retrieving my gun from the hallway, I run up to the third floor, knowing exactly who I'll find hiding up there like a coward. There're two bedrooms; one is empty and the other has Ethan Samuels, infamous arms dealer, hiding in the corner with his knees to his chest. Just like a child.

"Whoever hired you, I'll pay you double," Samuels says with a shaking voice.

I stalk towards him, keeping my gun on him the entire journey across the room. "I'm not doing this for the money."

"Money is all anyone does anything for," he argues.

"Maybe that's true for scum like you, but I do this for the pleasure of eradicating monsters like you that sell automatic weapons to Nazis and predators."

Samuels lets out a laugh he tries to stifle, but he can't seem to help himself. "You just killed an entire house of people and you call me a monster?"

I smile down at him, lifting my arm so my gun is pointing at his forehead. "I never

said I wasn't one."

"Please," he begs, tears rolling down his face. "I'll do anything."

"Pray God has mercy on your pathetic soul," I reply.

And then I squeeze the trigger.

Oh, yes, you are, devil in disguise

Oh, yes, you are, devil in disguise

Oh, yes, you are, devil in disguise

"Ricky, I placed an order for three gallons of sodium hydroxide, not three pints! How the fuck are you supposed to get rid of a body with only three pints?" I ask, not attempting to hide my frustration. I'm one second away from stomping my foot like a toddler.

The black market dealer sighs. "I know, but—"

"No buts, Ricky! I don't care if you have another client request a big order, or if you're low on supply, or whatever excuse you want to give me. I want those three gallons delivered to the office by Thursday. Not a day later," I demand.

"You're a pain in my ass," he grumbles, his tone almost threatening. To anyone else, it would be terrifying.

I tilt my head, fluttering my lashes in an innocent and flirtatious way that would look less ridiculous if I were talking to him in person and not on the phone. "Oh, you sure know how to compliment a girl."

I can practically feel the sigh he gives me. “Fine, but I’ll charge you extra.”

I give a contemplative hum. “I’ll give you a hundred extra bucks.”

“Two hundred.”

“How about instead of extra cash, I get Mr. Cai to take care of someone for you? Then we call it even.” No way I’m letting him rip us off for two hundred bucks.

I’m met with silence on the other line, then I hear a very low, “Does he care about who?”

“Not as long as they did something considerably bad. He won’t kill your landlady for upping the rent or your girlfriend for cheating. He also won’t kill a kid.”

“How about a business rival?”

“You send over the details, and we’ll take it from there.”

His dark chuckle is music to my ears. “Always a pleasure doing business with you, Ms. Reed.”

I press the button on my headset to hang up, silently preening from my success, then I return to my task of filing the information from Henry’s latest assignment into the computer. We—and by we I mean I —do a lot of research into Henry’s targets to better understand how to take them down, and by the time the guy is dead, there’s page after page of documentation that no longer has any use. So, instead of throwing it all away, I file it, knowing we’ll probably need to use it later. It’s quite boring, but it’s only one of my many, many duties I do as his assistant, a job I have happily done for the past three years.

Just as I finish up this task and start reading emails, one of which is Ricky with his rival's info, a familiar ringtone fills my headset. "Secret Agent Man" by Johnny Rivers.

Henry doesn't find it as funny as I do.

I press on the side of my headset again and lean back in my chair. "Did you find Samuels?"

"You were right about the girlfriend. She knew exactly where he was hiding out. I found him and about ten workers in a house downtown where he was hoarding his latest shipment of ammo. And before you ask, yes, I'm alright. Ten is nothing."

Knowing he'd get cranky if I lectured him, I decide to let it go. "Did you call the client yet?"

"I wanted to call you first," he says.

I place a hand on my chest. "Aww did you miss me, H?"

"Fuck off."

I feign annoyance. "How rude. I have half a mind to cancel the private jet I rented for you that I've been assured has whisky in the minibar."

His voice grows deeper as he groans, and I feel my belly tighten at the sound. "You're an angel."

I can't fight my blush. "That's more like it. How much longer will you be?"

"His body is deteriorating as we speak, so I should only be another twenty minutes

and then I'll head out. Same airport as usual?" he asks.

"Yep. And before you ask, yes, I took care of the latest acid order. It will be here Thursday, on the condition you take care of one of Ricky's business rivals."

He grunts at that, clearly annoyed. "We shouldn't have to do him a favor when we already paid for those chemicals. It's bullshit."

I twist my palms up, shaking my head. "He's the best out there."

"No, he just has his competition eliminated and we're about to help him do it." He sighs, and I can just picture him pinching the bridge of his nose and furrowing his brows. "Have Ricky send me the asshole's info and I'll have him taken care of in the week."

"Roger that. Go call the client and then get your ass on the plane."

He chuckles, and as always, the sound sets a flutter through my heart. "That headset has made you bossy."

"I've always been bossy, and you know it," I tease.

He grunts in acknowledgment. "We still on for dinner?"

"I already ordered the usual from Angelo's."

"I don't pay you enough."

Ha. He probably pays me way too much. "You can contemplate giving me a raise on the way home. Stay safe, H."

“You too, B.”

I started working for the CIA as an analyst when I was twenty-two. It was the same year Henry Cai left the Navy SEALs and started working as a field agent. His methods were often times illegal and or unethical, but he never got in trouble for it because everyone knew he was the best. His skills, intelligence, and determination were unmatched by any other agent, so he could take whatever liberties he wanted.

We had interacted in passing a few times, but a year into my job, he approached me about the crime families in Italy, knowing I had been collecting data on the various weapon and human trafficking syndicates they ran. I was a little apprehensive about working with him, but after only a few days, I could read him like a book. On the surface, he's this heartless monster with no morals, but I have always been able to see the vulnerability in his gaze that's lost to everyone else. I could see how much his duties weighed on him, how lonely he was, and most of all, how deeply he felt his emotions. Henry doesn't do or feel by halves; everything he does is with his whole soul.

This ability to read him made our working relationship as easy as breathing.

Unfortunately, Henry was forcefully retired after he used my data to go rogue, and since I helped him, I was let go too. Whether from guilt or knowledge of our impeccable working relationship, Henry asked if I would come be his assistant. He said he was “going into business for himself,” which means “I'm going to kill people for a living” in our line of work. I agreed on the condition he would provide health insurance.

That was the first time I ever saw him smile. The dimples appeared when I accepted his offer, and I've been in love with him ever since. It was as simple as that.

We have an office inside a corporate complex in northern Virginia, in a city called

Fairfax. On our door, there's a sign claiming we're a tree trimming company, but it's all a front. We never advertise our business, but on the occasion someone calls, I inform them we're booked for the foreseeable future. This part of Virginia is basically all forest, so the idea of a tree trimming business being all booked up isn't all that farfetched. Inside our office is only my desk, our computer system, a fridge, and a room dedicated to storing Henry's "tools." Any item we get from our dealers is marked as a hardware item meant for trees, like axes and chainsaws. When Ricky finally gives us our order of acid, it will arrive in a box for metal polish.

Hopefully the secretary from the dentist's office upstairs doesn't snoop in our mail again. Last time it took hours to convince her that our order of mercury was for the wooden thermometers Henry was trying to make out of spare wood. I had to make her nephew one in order to keep up the facade. I had to fucking whittle .

Three years into the job, I don't have a single regret about leaving the CIA. This job pays better and has better insurance—which is important for a type one diabetic. I also get to be in charge of a lot more, which I love. I'm the one working behind the scenes, making all that Henry does possible. He couldn't do his job without me, nor could I without him. He may be my boss, technically, but he's always acknowledged me as his equal. His partner.

His friend.

"No one makes pasta like Angelo's." Henry groans, taking his first bite of lasagna. His eyes practically roll up into his head, and he licks his lips to gather every atom of the food.

I try not to stare too hard at that swiping tongue, but I'm only human. It's impossible to not ogle at someone who looks like Henry. His mother was Chinese, and his father was Italian, and from what I've seen from the single photo Henry owns, he is a spitting image of his mom. The only difference is their eyes. Henry's are a mahogany

brown like his dad's. Other than that, Henry has the same oval face, square jaw, tan skin, small eyes, plump nose, and full lips of his mom. The picture of his parents—it's of them on their wedding day—sits in a frame above Henry's living room TV. It's the only decoration in his entire apartment. His mom must be one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen, and his dad wasn't too bad on the eyes either.

It's no wonder they made Henry, who missed out on being Hollywood's next heartthrob, which only makes my unrequited love for him all the more torturous.

I tear my attention from Henry's mouth and refocus on my insulin pump, which I have in hand so I can calculate how much insulin I need for my chicken parmesan. It's about forty carbs, but since pasta is starchy, I direct my pump to give me twenty units. I'm supposed to have a carb ratio I use to calculate how much insulin I use, but after being a diabetic for well over a decade, I just go by instinct, much to the chagrin of my doctor. But fuck him. He doesn't understand that my body couldn't give a shit about a math equation.

With that taken care of, I dive right in with a hungry growl. Angelo's food is godlike in quality and has become a staple of the friendship I have with Henry. Getting the man to open up is like trying to pry open a metal safe with a toothpick, but in three years I was able to wear him down with Italian food and Netflix, of all things. I had told him a while back he needed to find a hobby to unwind after work, and this led to us binge watching shows together.

We've already burned through all of Game of Thrones, Outlander, and Bridgerton. Lately we've been watching Downton Abbey, which I think is my favorite so far. We're currently on season five, and we've just gotten to the part of the season where Lady Edith has run off with her secret daughter, Marigold. Edith is Henry's favorite character, so he's watching the screen with apt attention.

“I still can’t believe Michael Gregson died,” H grumbles around another bite. “Edith can’t catch a fucking break.”

“I’m sure it will work out for her.”

Henry scoffs. “Yeah, you said that about Mary and Matthew and look where that ended up.”

Fair point. “Okay how the fuck could I have seen that coming?”

“You’re the one that claims to be clairvoyant, so you tell me.” His eyes glimmer with humor, his tone teasing.

I elbow him gently in the side. “Fuck off.”

We stay silent for the rest of the episode, eating our delicious food while we watch the Crawley family deal with the bullshit of high society. They’re a bunch of pompous assholes, but they’re entertaining as hell to watch. When we’re done eating, we do the dishes side by side and then settle back down on the couch to watch another episode. Around this time, I usually get sleepy and spread out on the cushions, resting my feet on his lap, and as usual, Henry reclines as well, slumping against the elbow rest with one arm propping up his head while the other rests on my ankle. Even this small bit of contact has my pulse fluttering.

It’s pretty stupid to have feelings for Henry, for multiple reasons. First of all, he’s, my boss. An assistant trying to get into her boss’s pants is a recipe for disaster. Second, he’s my friend, and trying to get into your friend’s pants is an even greater recipe for disaster. Then there’s the tiny fact that he clearly only views me as a friend and coworker. Nothing more.

Him being an assassin isn’t included in my list of why loving him is stupid, and that

probably makes me as deranged as he is. The people he's sent after are the worst of the worst. They're human traffickers, rapists, mobsters, weapons dealers, and corrupt politicians. These people are better off dead. And what the fuck does it say about me that his dangerous and violent life makes me want to jump his bones and cuddle him even more?

"What's on the agenda for tomorrow?" he asks me, his chest slowly rising and falling under his T-shirt.

"You aren't leaving for your next assignment for a few days, so you get to help me by making sure the nosy dentist receptionist stays distracted while I take care of our new shipment of ammunition."

He grumbles, and I know without looking at him that he's scowling. "Why do I get to be the butt monkey?"

"Because that receptionist has the biggest crush on you, and she won't ask questions if you start flirting with her," I reply.

He grunts, and I know he's starting to cave to me when he goes all Neanderthal. "Fine."

I silently preen, but I try to be humble in my victory. "Thank you."

I can practically feel his scowl. "Mhm."

He's going full Neanderthal now. I sit up a little and give him an innocent smile. "You're the best."

He still scowls.

I mimic his expression and poke him in the ribs with my toe. “Don’t be such a butthead.”

He scoffs, batting my foot away. “I’m not being a butthead.”

I poke him again. “Come on.”

He rolls his eyes and forces a smile. “Better?”

“Much.”

“I live to please you.” Sarcasm drips with each word, but my mind conjures up a mental scenario where he’s saying that to me in that deep rumbling voice of his, with his lips on my skin and his hands caressing my body.

Focus, Beth.

“I should get going,” I announce, sitting myself up. Henry fantasies are usually welcome but only when I’m alone with a vibrator in hand, not when I’m in the same room with him. “You know I hate driving at night, and it’s nearly dark.”

“I can always drive you,” he offers, running a hand through his shaggy black hair.

I wave off the offer, knowing my imagination will only run wilder in a confined space with him. “I’ll be totally fine.”

I search around for my purse, but it’s dangling in Henry’s hand, as is my coat. He passes me the bag while holding up the jacket for me to slip my arms into, and my heart does a little jump.

Ever the gentlemen.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” I say with a smile, completely unprepared for the grin he gives me in return. It knocks the air from my lungs, even after all these years.

“Bright and early.”

Without thinking, I get onto the tips of my toes and kiss his cheek. It’s a quick peck, but it’s enough to make my face burn like molten lava, and I practically run to the door to ensure Henry doesn’t see it. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see him touching his cheek where I just kissed him, and I can’t bring myself to regret it, at least as of now.

I’m sure I’ll kick my own ass tomorrow.

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Labor On That Midnight Wire

“It must be so nice, being surrounded by nature so often. You probably look like Paul Bunyan out there.” Tiffany laughs, fluttering her lashes at me. She leans heavily on the front desk, tapping her polished blue nails on the wooden surface.

I force a smile, gripping the counter’s edge in an effort to keep myself from fleeing. “I do love being around trees.”

She laughs again, like I just told the most amazing joke. “I would love to see you out in action sometime.”

I continue to smile, internally cursing Beth for making me do this. “So are there any availabilities for Dr. Krane? I am in need of a cleaning.”

She looks as if I’ve given her some great honor by asking for a dental appointment. “Of course. What days work for you?”

“I’m usually free Saturdays.”

Her eyes twinkle. “Interesting.”

I ignore that, pretending to check my phone. “How about next Saturday at noon?”

She nods, typing away on her computer’s keyboard. “You’re all booked in. Maybe after your appointment we could—”

“I’m so sorry,” I interrupt, gesturing to the clock on the wall behind her. “I need to leave now if I’m going to make my next client. Thank you for the appointment.”

Her shoulders deflate a bit, but she nods. “No problem.”

I make my way out of the dentist office, keeping a brisk pace the entire time. I don’t want to risk Tiffany or anyone else stopping me. Small talk is my worst nightmare and I hate Beth for making me socialize. Thankfully our office is only one floor down, so I’m back in the safety of our dingy two-room complex in less than five minutes. I make sure to lock the door behind me, just as an extra precaution.

“You look like you might pass out,” an amused voice says from behind me.

I turn to find Beth in the storage area, looking through our newest shipment of ammo. She has an iPad in her hand, no doubt perusing over a checklist of everything she ordered. She’s always been organized like that, even back in the CIA. Makes her a damn good assistant.

Instead of responding right away, I watch Beth take inventory. I love the little crease between her eyebrows as she works, and the firm line her plump lips make. She’s wearing red lipstick today, which is a color I always love on her, though she looks good in anything.

Beth is taller than most women I’ve encountered, being around five-eleven. Her white skin is peppered with freckles across most of her face and neck, and I can only imagine that her freckles spread lower down her body—and believe me, I’ve imagined it quite a bit. Her tight blonde curls are pulled back in a ponytail today, making it easy to see her bright blue eyes. She’s wearing a red blouse and black pencil skirt today, and the material hugs her pear-shaped figure in a way that makes my dick become lead in my pants.

She's admitted to me before that being a plus-size woman has made her self-conscious in the past, and I have threatened to tear out the eyes of anyone who has ever made her feel bad about her body. She laughs me off each time I offer, but it's never been a joke. If someone can't see how sexy Bethany Reed is, then they don't deserve to look upon her.

I realize I've been staring for far too long, so I heave a sigh and say to her flatly, "You owe me one."

Her bottom lip pouts, and I want nothing more than to sink my teeth in it. "Aww poor Henry had to talk to another person today. It's a tragedy. Shakespeare is turning in his grave knowing he couldn't have written this as his next drama."

If anyone else but her spoke to me that way they'd have a black eye. Probably worse. "You can be a real pain in the ass."

She preens as if I just told her she's pretty. "Yes, but you wouldn't have me any other way, would you?"

There was a time I would have said yes. When we first started to work together, I found her joking, bubbly attitude annoying. I couldn't wait until I could get rid of her. But then I found out what a hard worker she is, how dedicated and passionate she is about making the world better, even if you must break some rules to achieve that. From the beginning, she could always gauge my moods and figure out exactly what I needed. Only my mother has ever been able to do that.

When I asked her to come work for me, I never expected our relationship to go beyond professional. But over late-night dinners, watching several TV shows, and going to a whole lot of therapy, Beth became my friend. My only friend, really. I came to crave her smiles, her smartass comments, her compassion.

I came to crave her.

“No,” I reply softly. “I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

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“How are you doing today, Henry?” asks my therapist, Kathleen Bennett. She’s sitting in a swivel chair in front of me, her hands clasped in her lap, a leg crossed over the other.

I’ve been seeing her for about six months at the recommendation of Beth. She thought talking to a professional would help me, because even though I’ve told her little about what keeps me up at night and sends me into random spirals during the day, she knew enough to push me to get help. As much as I dug my feet in the sand at first, I must admit she was right. I can be honest with Dr. Bennett in a way I can’t with anyone else, even Beth. Sometimes it’s nice to talk to someone impartial.

Dr. Bennett is a very calm and patient person, which I think suits me well. I am the exact opposite of those things; therefore, we work quite well together. She’s a bit younger than I am: thirty-three to my thirty-six. She usually dresses in workout attire—she likes to go for runs for God knows what reason. Her straight hair ends just below her ear, framing her round brown face perfectly.

She and I meet at her office once a week, and the office is about as bare as my apartment. Like me, she only has one picture on her wall, one of her wife and son. The picture rests just behind her head, and I tend to stare at it when our sessions become especially tense. Her family looks so happy, so at ease. I envy them that.

“I’m fine.” I’m leaning back against her blue office chair, with my hands resting on its arms. It’s pretty comfortable, but sometimes its suede cushions make a weird sound when I fidget, no doubt because of the suit I wear that’s made of the same

material. It grates on my nerves.

She gives me a knowing look. “How have you been sleeping this week?”

“Better with those pills. I got five hours last night,” I tell her.

She smiles, liking this news. “Are you still updating your journal?”

“Every morning.”

She stares at me, waiting.

With a huff, I elaborate. “I write down the dreams I have each night, even if it’s not a nightmare, just like I’ve done for months. I’m not stopping just because I’m sleeping better.”

“How many nightmares did you have this week?” she asks, typing some notes into her computer.

“Four.”

Click click click. “Were these on four separate nights?”

“Two were, the other two happened the same night.”

She continues to type, nodding along. “Same dream each time?”

I shake my head. “The two separate ones were about the day my mom was taken. The night I had back-to-back nightmares, it was about the brothel. I woke up in the middle of the bloodshed, so I splashed cold water on my face and did my breathing exercises like you taught me, but when I went back to sleep, the dream picked up where it had

left off.”

Dr. Bennett nods, once again nailing a sympathetic gaze that doesn’t come off as patronizing. “What about the other three days of the week?”

“I didn’t have dreams two of those nights, then last night I had a dream about Beth.”

She stares at me inquisitively for a moment, then says, “I’ve noticed a pattern, Henry. You never have a nightmare on Fridays, the day you and Beth have dinner together.”

I give her a noncommittal hum.

“You talk about Beth half of almost every session, she’s your only non-professional relationship, and your subconscious mind is at a more relaxed state after you’ve spent time with her. Do you think it’s possible you have feelings for Beth that go beyond friendship?”

The answer comes out of me with the ease of a wisdom tooth. “It doesn’t matter if I did. Nothing could happen between us.”

“Because of your job?”

I told Dr. Bennett what I did about a month into therapy. She actually reacted far better than I would have thought, but I did choose her because she specializes in helping military and law enforcement. I figured my best shot at not giving a therapist a heart attack would be a therapist like her. Our only rule is that I don’t give her specifics on future missions, because that’s when she’s legally obligated to go to the authorities.

I shake my head, turning my head into my palm. “Being my assistant and my friend is different than being my girlfriend or wife. If anyone caught wind of what Beth means

to me..." I trail off, unwilling to let that scenario play out even in my head.

Dr. Bennett leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "I think this all comes back to your mother, Henry. In the six months I've known you, one thing that's become abundantly clear is that she is the driving force behind every action you take in life."

I don't comment, so she continues on.

"Dream journaling and breathing exercises will only take you so far. When we go through something traumatic, our minds shut off and let adrenaline take over. When that's gone and we're safe again, all that trauma is still processing, and when you ignore it or shove it aside, you put a halt to it. And in your case, you not only have unprocessed trauma, but grief as well. The only way to finish processing all of that and finally move on is to face the trauma." Her brown eyes search mine, and I hate how easily she sees through me. "You must let yourself feel, Henry, the good and the bad. And once you've done that, you must forgive yourself."

I nod along to what she's saying, but I don't give a reply, and I don't think Dr. Bennett expects one.

She reaches out, and I watch her smooth brown hand touch mine, showing me what comfort she can as she gives me the harsh truths I've long avoided. "You did everything you could for your mother. Even the most powerful people in the world don't have control over what happens in life, and all we can do in the face of that helplessness is live despite it."

What she's asking sounds impossible, but I give her what she wants to hear anyways, knowing she won't let it go if I don't. "I'll try."

She smiles once again, extracting her hand from mine. "That's all any of us can do."

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

Begged, Borrowed, and Cried

Knock knock knock. “Delivery for Ms. Reed.”

My head lifts up from my laptop and I narrow my eyes at the door.

“What kind of delivery?” I shout back, glancing at the monitor to my right, which shows our building’s security feed. My eyes then flicker to my CGM receiver, which buzzes with my blood sugar reading every five minutes. It’s 167—okay but not great.

“A late delivery from the Wright his mother was rich, and his father started smuggling drugs throughout the East Coast, a hobby he got his son into. Dad overdosed, mom kicked Colt out the minute she learned about the drug smuggling, and now he’s on the verge of hitting gold in the black market. Ricky doesn’t do drugs, only chemicals and ammo, and he knows he needs Colt gone if he’s to achieve his goal of monopolizing the substance side of the black market.

No matter what side you work for, there’re always moves and countermoves. Despite all the bureaucracy in place within governments and their institutions, the same games happen that give the black market their reputation. At least people like Ricky and Colt know who and what they are.

The elevator dings, the doors slide open, and I start down the hallway towards Colt’s apartment: 22D.

When you’re on an assignment, you have to stay focused and emotionally detached. The second you let your personal feelings get in the way is the second you put

yourself and those around you at risk. I've always prided myself on being able to compartmentalize during a high stress situation. But when I open Colt's door—which was unlocked—I am met with a sight that blows that composure out of the water.

The man in question is wearing only a pair of gym shorts and socks; in his hand is a syringe needle filled with a resin-colored liquid, and I watch a bead of it fall down onto the exposed shoulder of a girl in a bra and underwear. She can't be more than eighteen, and I would venture to guess that she is far younger than that. She has a busted lip and a bruise along her cheek. Her eyes are red and puffy, though I'm not sure if that's from crying or drugs. Maybe both.

Colt's gaze lifts to mine, and I am vaguely aware that he's demanding why I'm in his home, but I can't hear him. I can't even see him. The edges of my vision blur as a new scene replaces what my eyes are viewing.

A syringe needle is sticking into her neck, with his finger pressing down on the plunger. He notices me only after half of the syringe is already in her body. Shock appears in his eyes, then that gives way to indifference. He has the audacity to shrug at me.

“We all must make the most of the shitty hand we're dealt. It wasn't personal.”

I can barely hear, feel, or process any thoughts, much less my actions as I zero in on Erik Colt, who has now let go of the girl and is reaching for the gun tucked into the waistband of his shorts. I'm quicker than he is by a long shot though, and by the time his fingers graze the handle, I've already put a bullet in his shoulder, sending him reeling back. I put another in his calf, which sends him tumbling to the ground, crying out in pain. I lean down and grab hold of his gun, stealing the mag in case he gets any ideas.

I turn my head to the side to check on the girl, who is looking at Colt in utter terror. It

doesn't take her long to realize I'm staring at her, and I understandably see fear in her eyes as she looks me over. She walks backwards until she falls onto the stained olive couch, then she lifts her hands up in a sign of surrender. "P-please don't hurt me."

I shake my head, trying to soften my voice. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to help. You got a name?"

She gives a small nod. "Arabella."

"How old are you?" I ask, dreading the answer.

"Sixteen," she whispers.

With flaring nostrils, I grip my gun tighter. "How long have you been here?"

Her lip wobbles as she shakes her head. "I don't know. I-I want to go home."

I pull out my phone and call one of three contacts I have. The line answers on the third ring. "You've reached the Human Trafficking Hotline, how can I help you?"

"There's a sixteen-year-old girl named Arabella in the Cardinal Apartment Complex on Silver Avenue in Richmond. She's been drugged and possibly assaulted."

There's a pause, then "We're sending a call to the FBI now. Are you being held at this location as well?"

"No. She'll be waiting for you in the lobby."

I hang up, stuffing my phone back into my pocket, never once taking my eyes from Colt. "Go get dressed and head down to the lobby," I direct to Arabella, who seems to be a little less uneasy around me now. "People are coming to take you somewhere

safe.”

She shakes her head, tucking a strand of her brown hair behind her ear. “I tried to run away once, and he found me.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that happening again. This piece of shit won’t be bothering you or anyone else anymore,” I vow, tightening my grip around my gun’s handle.

Her lips part; her eyes widen. “You are going to kill him.”

I give a single nod. “Hurry along now. I promise you don’t want to witness what’s about to happen.”

Understanding my warning, she darts into the next room and grabs a pile of clothes. She clumsily dresses herself as she heads towards the door, and she doesn’t give me or Colt another glance before she runs towards the elevator, shutting the door behind her.

I kneel in front of Colt, who glares up at me with gritted teeth. “Who fucking sent you?” he demands, his tone weak from blood loss.

“God.” I lean an arm on my bent knee, my gun in the other hand. “I’m the reaper he sends to deliver souls to their moment of judgement, and based on what I’ve seen, I’m pretty confident in how you will be judged.”

He whimpers at that, tears slipping down his cheeks. It’s a beautiful sight, one I revel in.

“Any final words? Any prayers for forgiveness?” I ask, pressing the barrel of my gun into his temple.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he begins to sob, clutching on to his shoulder and curling up on his side like a scared child.

I lean forward a bit, lowering my voice. "It's said that if you pray for forgiveness from God, he will pardon you and thus cleanse your soul, but that's a bunch of bullshit. There's no redemption, no repenting, no forgiveness that can be bestowed on someone that enslaves, exploits, and violates young girls." I spit those last words out, my voice so low that it makes this piece of shit start to shake.

I put my gun on safety, slipping it into the waistband of my pants. I then pull out a retractable knife I always keep in my suit jacket pocket, and when his eyes land on it, he cries harder.

"God's judgement will have to wait for a little while longer," I trail the blunt side of the knife along his cheek, making his shaking only grow worse. "I would say you have only a few minutes before those bullet wounds make you bleed out, which doesn't give us nearly as much time to play. But I guess I'll take what time I've been granted."

I flip the knife around in my hand, pressing down into Colt's skin, and that's when the screaming starts.

There's a man who leads a life of danger,

to everyone he meets he stays a stranger.

I peel my eyes open and zero in on my phone, which is illuminating my dark bedroom with its bright screen and blaring that song at full volume. I reach over and grab it, pressing the answer button on the call while still lying cocooned within my heated blanket. "Henry, you okay?"

I hear heavy breathing, then a soft, “I need you.”

His shaky tone is like a splash of cold water on my head. I sit upright, the blankets pooling down around my body. “Where are you?”

“Outside your front door.”

Dropping my phone, I jump out of bed and bolt down the stairs, taking them two at a time. When I reach my door, I quickly undo both locks, then I swing it open and find Henry sitting on my doorstep, covered in blood with his head in his hands.

I fall to my knees in front of him, looking over his body to see if there are any obvious injuries. “You hurt?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“What happened? Did you get Colt?” I cup his jaw gently in both hands, not caring about the blood seeping into my skin.

He nods. “He’s dead.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Henry lifts his head a bit, his eyes falling to his bloodstained hands. “I can’t get her blood off of me.”

“Whose?”

“Mama’s,” he whispers, still staring at his hands.

Henry rarely ever talks about his mom, if ever. I have no clue what happened to her,

but from the bits and pieces I've gathered over time, I know hers wasn't a peaceful death, and I know Henry was there to witness it.

"I'll help you clean up," I whisper.

I help him get to his feet, then I shuffle him into my apartment. I have two bathrooms, both of which have showers, so I take him into the nearest one next to my living room. I flip the lights on and get the water started; all the while H stares blankly at the floor, near catatonic.

"We need to get you out of these clothes," I whisper, gesturing to his stained shirt, jacket, and pants.

He nods numbly, then he begins stripping out of his stained clothes. It occurs to me once he's down to just his boxers that I should probably turn around, so I do, allowing him some privacy. I hear him shuffle into the shower, but I don't hear the door slide closed. I dare a peek at him, only to see him once again curled up on the floor, with the water's spray hitting him in the chest.

I've never seen Henry like this before, and I'm really fucking worried he's had some kind of psychotic break. What happened at Erik Colt's house? It was supposed to be a simple mission—in and out. He must have seen something that set him off. Henry is usually so guarded and closed off, it can be hard to tell what triggers him, though I've tried in vain to get some idea of what those triggers might be. If I can help him avoid them or help him through them, I would feel far less helpless than I do right now.

I leave him alone for a second so I can make a call to Dr. Bennett, the only person I can think of that could give me an answer on how to help him. Even at the late hour, she answers the phone after only a couple rings.

"Hey Dr. Bennett, it's Bethany Reed, Henry's assistant."

“Yes, I’ve heard a lot about you, Ms. Reed. What can I do for you?”

I glance at the door of my bathroom, which sits ajar in case he needs me. “Henry showed up at my house after finishing...an assignment. He’s acting weird. He’s not very responsive, he’s in like this catatonic trance, and he mentioned something about his mother.”

“What did he say specifically?”

“He looked upset by the blood on his body because he thinks it’s his mom’s.”

Dr. Bennett says nothing for a moment, and then, “All you can do is let it run its course and be there to support him.”

“I’ve seen him experience flashbacks before, but it’s nothing like this. Usually he looks shaken and anxious, but this...”

“Think of PTSD like a shaken can of soda,” Dr. Bennett begins. “Anytime you open that can, it will burst uncontrollably. The goal in treating PTSD is to be able to open the can without it exploding, and the way you do that is by opening that can again and again, until all the air fizzles out.”

An odd analogy but I guess that makes sense.

“To heal is to face the pain, and Henry has avoided doing that for a very long time,” she continues. “He’s only now processing his feelings and emotions, so it will get worse before it gets better. But it will get better.”

From my own time in therapy when I was a teenager, I know what she’s saying is true. It’s a marathon not a sprint. “Alright. Thank you.”

“Healing is always harder when you’re doing it alone, Ms. Reed, something I’m sure you know. Your presence and care will help him just as much as therapy will.”

With her advice in mind, I go back inside the bathroom to find Henry still on the floor, with his head bent down towards his chest and his hair plastered around his face.

I unhook my insulin pump from my bra and slip the needle out of the port in my stomach, setting the device down on the bathroom counter. Without bothering to take off my Belieber PJ’s, I get under the spray next to him and sit, offering my silent support. I have no idea how long he and I stay there, but Henry’s body is completely free of blood, and he looks like he’s starting to come back to the present. He glances over at me with a broken, defeated expression, and the sight breaks my heart.

“I’ll get you some clothes,” I tell him, reaching out to squeeze his arm.

He gives me a shallow nod, and with that I leave the shower dripping wet, jogging into my bedroom. I have a lot of T-shirts, most of which I’m sure will fit him, so I pick one at random—a lime green shirt with a smiling avocado on it—then I grab a pair of grey sweatpants. I have no underwear that would be suitable for him, so he’ll just have to go commando. I doubt he would appreciate my hot pink thongs. I go ahead and strip out of my wet clothes, throwing on one of those thongs, a BTR T-shirt, and blue-and-white polka dot sweatpants.

When I return to the bathroom with his fresh clothes, I see him wiping himself down with a towel, his tattooed and muscled skin stopping me dead in my tracks. This is the first time I’ve ever seen him naked, so I had no clue how many tattoos he had on him. I only knew about the ones on his arms, which are a purple iris and a portrait of Mother Mary. But now I see that there’s a blue bird over his collar bone, Lady Justice with her scales and sword on his chest, an angel reaching out towards a falling Lucifer, and on his lower abdomen, there’s words written in blocky letters:

Lord, how long shall the wicked triumph?

Without thinking, my eyes trail lower, and I immediately force my attention away, refusing to process the glimpse of Henry's dick I got.

I sound a bit breathy as I offer him the clothes. "I'll wait for you outside."

After grabbing my pump and reattaching it to my body, I hightail it out of that bathroom and make a beeline to my couch, where I then proceed to hit myself in the face with a pillow. What the fuck is wrong with me? I scream internally. The man is reliving his trauma and here I am ogling at his body! I'm such a hussy.

I groan against the pillow, then I try to compose myself and act like a semi-sane human being. But of course, the universe fucking hates me, and Henry walks out of the bathroom to find my hair all messed up and me glaring down at my pillow like it had physically attacked me.

I don't bother coming up with an excuse. "Don't ask."

He shakes his head. "Wasn't going to."

God I really am a hussy. All that's going through my head is how adorable he looks in my avocado shirt and how nice his butt looks in my pants. I totally get why guys love seeing their girlfriends in their hoodies. It's sexy as hell to see the person you have feelings for wearing your clothes.

Focus, Reed. Focus.

"Are you feeling any better?" I ask, approaching him cautiously.

He nods, his throat bobbing. "A little."

Henry is usually so hard and cold. Even in his times of vulnerability, there's always this brick wall surrounding his heart, unwavering and unbreakable. But right now, that wall is rubble at our feet, and instead of looking like a killer who is physically and mentally untouchable, he looks like a lost boy.

"Come here, H." I extend my hand out to him, and he slowly grabs on to it, letting me tug him towards my bedroom.

I know he's not in his right mind because he makes no comments about my posters. One Direction, Justin Bieber, Harry Styles, and the Jonas Brothers line my walls, making my room look like it belongs to a fifteen-year-old girl's. He just ignores them and collapses into my bed, like the weight of gravity is too much for him to bear.

Without thinking it through whatsoever, I crawl into bed next to him, positioning myself so I'm spooning his back. "Get some sleep, H."

"Thank you. For everything."

"Sorry in advance if my receiver and pump make a lot of noise," I say, glancing over my shoulder at my nightstand, where my receiver and a bucket of snacks—for low blood sugar—lies on the surface. It can get loud when it buzzes against the wood.

"It's nothing," he assures me quietly.

I snuggle into him, hoping the pump attached to my shirt isn't digging into his spine. If it is, he says nothing. "That's what I'm here for. I'll do whatever you need me to do and be whatever you need me to be."

"I just need you," he whispers, and my heart does a somersault.

"You have me," I assure him, tightening my hold on his body.

“I can never have you” is his reply, and I’m too scared to ask him what he means by that. I just let those words linger between us as he swiftly falls asleep, and I along with him.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

I Have Heavy Heartstrings

I jolt awake, reality bringing me away from the horrors of my past. My hands are clammy, my breaths are shaky, and you'd think I'd run a marathon by how sweaty and exhausted I feel.

It's an anxiety attack, Henry. Completely normal for someone with CPTSD, Dr. Bennett would say, and I hate that she's right. Ever since I started going to therapy and getting shit out of my head, I've been at the mercy of my emotions more and more. For years, I ignored everything: my pain, my worry, my anger. All of it. I could go into situations that would remind me of my mother and not freak out like I did last night. But now I'm in a place where I can't ignore my problems, and those problems are apparently hiding in the recesses of my mind.

I'm currently lying on my back, with my arm hugging on to a passed-out Beth, who is using my stomach as a pillow and is snoring incredibly loud. It's cute, and as much as I don't want to leave this position, she and I have work to do.

I shake her gently a couple times, then I watch her eyes peel open and her throat catch on a snore, making her choke and jerk awake. "Wasat?" she asks, stuck between sleep and wakefulness.

"It's nine-thirty in the morning," I inform her, glancing at the neon-colored clock on her nightstand. "We've got to prepare for my next assignment. I leave tomorrow."

She rubs her eyes and sits up, letting out a big yawn. "Are you sure you should go? After last night—"

“Last night won’t happen again,” I say with conviction. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“Are you really, though?” Her eyes search mine, and for the first time in three years, I hate how well she can read me.

“Leave it alone, B,” I beg, trying to convey with my eyes how badly I want to forget the last twelve hours. She nods, but I know she isn’t happy about brushing this under the rug.

“I’m going to drive back to my apartment and get changed,” I tell her, slipping out from under her multicolored blanket. “I’ll meet you at the office?”

She nods again, her expression still one of concern, but she holds her tongue. “Will do.”

Unable to help myself, I lean down and kiss her forehead, turning her expression from worry to shock within a blink. Her face is akin to the one I wore when she kissed me, and I hope she spends hours wondering what it means like I did.

“About my clothes from yesterday?” I start, running a hand through my mussed black hair.

“Yeah?”

“Keep them, sell them, burn them. They’re all yours.”

She looks down at the ridiculous shirt she picked out for me. “Those clothes aren’t yours, though. I want my avocado shirt back in one piece.”

Leave it to Beth to be concerned over a smiling avocado. “Copy that.”

“Jacob Harrison and his twin, Johnathon, were born July 2 nd , 1984, in Surry,” Beth reports, referring to the research she’s acquired over the last couple days. “Their father died before they were born, and their mother died when they were only three years old. They spent a few years in a group home before being adopted by a very wealthy couple from south London: Quinten and Irina Samuels.”

“Either of them have a record?” I ask, rubbing my chin in thought. I’m pacing the length of our office while Beth sits at her desk, reclined in her leather swivel chair with an iPad in her lap.

She nods. “Quinten was convicted of tax evasion and insurance fraud when the boys were teenagers and Irina lost custody of them after it came out that she was physically abusive to them. Jacob and Johnathon were put back into a group home for the last two years of their adolescence.”

I shake my head, feeling just a hint of pity. “If only society cared more about the lives of those that need help the most.”

Beth does a motorboat with her lips, scrolling down on her iPad. “Look straight at me and you see yourself,” she mumbles.

I pause in my pacing, titling my head her way. “What?”

She meets my eyes. “‘Look down at me and you see a fool / Look up at me and you see a God / Look straight at me and you see yourself.’ Charles Manson said that. I learned about it in an English class, and it’s always stuck with me. He spent most of his childhood in juvie and in homes, just like the Harrison brothers and dozens of other criminals. Our upbringing isn’t an excuse for how we behave as adults, but I think it’s an explanation for how we become who we are. And the lack of care shown to children in the system is one of many reasons why people like Johnathon and Jacob Harrison exist.”

I don't want to give Charles Manson any credit, nor do I want to agree with a racist, murdering fucker like him, but I must agree with that observation. Jacob and Johnathon Harrison weren't born the way they were; they were made into the monsters they are today by the people who promised to protect them.

The same could be said for me.

"Continue," I direct, starting up my pace again.

"Johnathon enlisted in the British army when he turned eighteen. He was deployed in Iraq for five years before being medically discharged. This didn't deter him though, because he became a part of MI6 a year after his discharge. He stayed there for fifteen years, then he retired to become the protection detail for his brother. Jacob, on the other hand, got a scholarship to Queen Mary University of London. He studied law and became an assistant for a law practice after he graduated. He ended up inheriting it when the attorney who owned it retired. He made a name for himself as a lawyer, which helped him when he ran for a cabinet position in Parliament. He won, obviously, and has been a terror to justice ever since. He and his brother have allegedly killed nearly two dozen people, all political rivals."

I nod, crossing my arms over my chest as I think. "If Johnathon is Jacob's protection detail, then they would both live in the same house. Did you find an address?"

Beth makes an aghast noise and raises her brows. "It's me! Of course, I did. Ye have such little faith."

She beckons me over towards her, so I go round her desk and grab the iPad she holds out to me. I stare down at the floor plan of the Harrison mansion, which is tucked away behind a large iron gate and protected by a complex system of cameras and alarms. There's a small house off to the back-west side of the mansion that functions as the hub for the security system and guards; the property is quite small compared to

other estates I've seen, but it makes up for it in height, having six floors. Jacob's bedroom and office are right beside each other on the second floor, and I'd bet money he's in one of those rooms ninety percent of the time.

"Simon, our client, has been doing some surveillance on Jacob since he found out about his sister's death, and according to him, the brothers return home every day around 6 p.m., eat dinner at 6:30 p.m., then Johnathon goes to the guard house for the next two hours while Jacob works in his office. Johnathon does rounds from 9:00 p.m. until 11:00 p.m., then he goes to bed. Jacob usually is in bed by 10:00 p.m.."

"So, we have to act while he's in his office or in his bedroom. How's the alarm system look in both rooms?"

She reaches up and swipes on the iPad I'm holding, going to another photo she took of the security mainframe, which is the same one Johnathon and his cronies have access to. It looks like there are cameras in every room, and when the clock strikes ten, the alarm system for the windows turns on, which makes it harder to strike when he's asleep. Theoretically Beth could hack into the cameras and the alarm, but why force her to do more work when there's a two-hour window where he's in his office and we only have to take care of one or two cameras?

"So, we'll do this while he's in his office?" Beth asks, glancing at her CGM receiver to check her blood sugar.

I hand her back the iPad once she places the receiver down. "You're the boss."

She chuckles, smug as ever. "You finally abdicate your crown, sir? Has the mighty king of the kingdom been defeated?"

I poke her in the ribs, making her squirm. "I am undefeatable."

She snickers, poking me right back, but instead of the ribs, she goes for my stomach. “I know all of your weaknesses, Henry Cai. I could steal your kingdom no problem.”

“Oh yeah? What are my weaknesses?”

She sighs, faking contemplation. “Well, there’s your love for Italian food, your obsession with fictional British nobles, and most of all, your inability to deny my charm and wit.”

She tries to poke me again as she finishes speaking, but I grab on to her hand and tug, pulling her off her feet. She nearly stumbles into me, but I lock my other arm around her back, keeping her steady. “That headset has really gotten to your head.”

She shrugs, giving me an innocent smile. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“Mhm.” I smirk down at her, putting slight pressure on her back, pushing her closer to me. “You couldn’t be boss. Power would get to your head.”

“Agree to disagree.” Her voice has grown quieter, her bravado starting to dwindle. Her eyes search mine, like she’s trying to decipher a puzzle, and it might be the only thing I don’t like about her. In a professional sense, her being able to read my emotions and my reactions is good, but ever since we became friends? I can’t hide anything from her. It’s fucking terrifying.

“What’s your weakness, Beth?” I murmur, looking down at where our bodies connect.

I watch her chest rise and fall a little quicker than normal, and when I reconnect my gaze with hers, she answers me in a defeated whisper, “My attraction to bad ideas.”

She takes a step back from me, her expression filled with a painful yearning that I

don't have the mental capacity to analyze. I drop my arm and my hand, physically aching to reconnect with her, but I refrain. I force my arms to my sides and flex my fingers, still feeling the heat from her skin.

"I'll call you tomorrow when I land in the UK," I tell her, starting to walk around her desk and towards the door. I'm just about to graze the doorknob when I hear Beth's feet shuffle across the floor.

I look over my shoulder to see her standing on the other side of her desk. "Be safe, H."

I give her a small smile. "Always am."

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

My Disease is What You Fed

“We clear?” I whisper into my earpiece.

“Clear. Two minutes,” Beth replies.

“Copy that.”

I’m on the roof of the Harrison Estate, with a tether around my waist, and a two-minute time limit to enter Jacob Harrison’s office and inject him with a dose of liquid cyanide. Because of his status and power, making it so his murder is completely untraceable is crucial. A gun gives more of a crumb trail than a needle.

Beth has the security cameras outside and inside the office on a loop of footage showing Jacob typing on his computer. Once the time limit is up, that footage will stop, and the cameras will find him dead. The goal is to be far away by that point.

I begin my descent towards Harrison’s second story office window, scaling the wall next to the shutters, which tap gently against the side of the house from the wind. I pull out a small handheld mirror, moving it until I get a clear view of the office. Harrison is sitting at his desk reading over something on his laptop, humming along to some song he’s listening to through his AirPods. From all the times I’ve heard Beth sing along to her pop songs, I believe he’s listening to something similar. His head slightly bobs as he goes along with the beat, which will make this task a little harder, but it’s only a minor inconvenience.

On the wall across from him, right above a fake fern, lies a security camera that’s

unblinking, occupied by the loop Beth has set up. I should still have a minute and a half left.

Pocketing the mirror, I swing myself towards the window, letting go with just enough time for me to land inside, with my tether still attached. I've done this enough to be able to land without making much, if any, noise, but he wouldn't be able to hear me even if I slammed onto the ground. He's lost to the music he's listening to. I take slow steps towards Jacob, mentally berating the man for sitting with his back to an open window with earbuds in. He's either so arrogant he thinks he's untouchable or he's too stupid to realize the danger he's put himself in.

Oh well. His loss, my gain.

I raise my needle, I take aim, and I plunge it into his neck. Jacob begins to struggle, grabbing on to my arms and shoulders in an attempt to get me off of him. His fingers grip on to the mask I wear, and before I can stop him, he rips it off my face.

He stares at me as his struggling becomes weaker. I watch the fear in his eyes morph into calm, and within a few moments, they become blank. His struggling stops, his arms drop. Just as I'm about to retract the needle, a flicker of the lights has me pausing.

In this line of work, you have to account for every variable, every possible outcome, every nail that could blow out the tire. This includes the weather. Beth and I scanned every station for the last two days, and we were assured that this area would not storm today. But it is storming a few miles away, and it must be live out there, because the lights flickering indicates a power surge, which has a tendency to reset or disrupt electrical devices. Like a camera.

I dare to lift my eyes to the security camera, and I find the light next to the lens blinking a bright green.

It's working.

And I'm staring right at it.

"Fuck," Beth and I curse at the same time.

I pounce out the window, planting my feet on the wall so I can scale up the side of the building and get back onto the roof. Once I'm there, I make quick work of untying the rope from my body, then I start running across the roof. I hear shouts coming from below me, and a quick glance down informs me that the whole house is on high alert. Armed men and women are running about the grounds, every light is flipped on, and a security alarm blares through the property so loudly that it nearly bursts my eardrums.

I've had a few close calls throughout my three different careers. There were times in the SEALs that me and my team barely made it out of a situation alive, there were times in the CIA where I was nearly captured, and as a contract killer, I've had a few wounds that could have been fatal. But this is beyond all of that. I was caught on camera killing a British politician. Johnathon Harrison and his entire mercenary group know what I look like. All because of a goddamn power surge.

When I make it to the other side of the roof, I don't hesitate to jump down to the ground, where I crouch and roll, preventing myself from getting more than just a sprain or bruise. A broken ankle would be a death sentence right now. Thankfully, I ran towards the side of the house I had climbed up, so on the other side of the metal fence is the motorcycle I rented. I hop the fence, making a beeline to the bike, then I turn on the engine. It blares to life, rumbling like thunder booming from the clouds above, and I don't hesitate to floor it.

I dare to glance over my shoulder, finding no other than Johnathon Harrison staring after me. His eyes narrow, meeting mine through the black metal bars, and I sense a

determination and rage that I know all too well. I see him grip on to the fence so tightly that his knuckles whiten, I see his expression grow cold and unresponsive, and I know that this moment will irrevocably change my life moving forward.

And Beth's.

With a screech of the wheels, I'm taking off down the street, trying to put as much distance between me and the estate as possible.

"White Walker!" I shout into my earpiece.

I hear the sound of engines starting up behind me, along with a barked order from Harrison that comes out more as a growl. "I want him alive!"

"H, are you sure?" I hear Beth ask, her voice frantic with worry.

"Yes! You know what to do. I want you out of the office and heading towards an airport in an hour, you hear me?"

"What about you? I just watched the mercs cram into two cars and now they're racing down the driveway after you. I can help you find a safe passage, a place to lie low—"

"I'll be fine, Beth!" I shout, increasing my speed as the sound of rumbling engines gets closer. In my side mirror I can see a pair of grey Lexus splitting off, trying to get me in between them. "I'm sticking to our plan and so will you. As your boss, I order you to enact the white walker protocol."

Beth's voice is firm as she replies, "Come back to me in one piece. Promise me."

There's a slight waver to her voice as she says those last two words, and even though it's stupid to make such a promise, I am unable to deny her anything. "Promise."

She goes offline, allowing me to focus on keeping that promise to her. The two cars position themselves on either side of me like I expected, and instead of trying to crush me between the two vehicles, one of the mercenaries—a white, blonde male with unnatural green eyes—pokes his upper body out of the back window and starts to shoot his pistol, aiming down for my tires.

I slow my speed, reaching out to grab his outstretched arm as he attempts another shot. I yank on him as I pass by the window, and a loud crack fills my ears as I dislocate the guy's elbow, making him drop the gun. I catch the pistol, aiming the barrel at the car's tires. I get one shot, then two, then the pistol runs out of bullets. My shots were enough to blow out a couple of the tires, and when we reach a turn in the road, the car skids and flips over, landing on its side near the road barrier.

The other car is still right on my tail, but the backroad we've been traveling on is about to come to an end, with the intersection to get onto the highway coming up. It will be easier to lose this car with so many others surrounding us, but if those mercs decide to start shooting in front of civilians, it will draw more attention, and right now that's the last thing I need.

The car increases its speed, and on instinct I do the same thing, but when I see the pothole in the middle of the road, I immediately veer to the right, which isn't what they had planned. Instead of me going 90 mph into a pothole, the car does, which expectedly makes it do a somersault before landing hard on its back, smashing the windows as a result. Glass pieces are scattered all around the road as I drive away, slipping easily into the crowd of cars and bikes on the highway.

Henry and I created code words based on Game of Thrones a while back, each with their own meaning that come with a carefully laid out plan. Varys means we're being followed, Greyjoy means one of us has been captured, Wildlings means one of us is stranded or lost, Red Wedding means one of us is injured.

And White Walker means we've been compromised.

"Shit shit shit shit!" I push away from my desk, running over to our storage area where three gallons of gasoline rest in a dust-ridden corner. Our protocol for being compromised is planned to a T; first, I have to burn down the office. All our computers, hard drives, and documents have to go. I empty all three gas jugs around the office, leaving only my purse unscathed, which I grab the second I'm done. I start searching for my lighter, but I remember the extra insulin vials I have in the mini fridge, so I stuff them in my purse. No way in hell I'm letting those go to waste.

I return to searching for my lighter, and I find it in the back of my desk drawer. With a single flick, the flame comes to life, and when I drop the lighter onto my desk, the whole thing gets consumed by fire. I quickly vacate the office, locking the door behind me.

I spare a glance at our fake company logo printed on the opaque door, and a stab of sorrow hits me right in the chest. Henry and I created this business from the ground up. All the late nights researching targets in this office, all the lunch breaks consisting of McDonald's Big Macs shared, and all the times we came up with plans to distract the nosy dentist receptionist, happened here. And now it's all gone. Once you're compromised, there's no going back. We have to go underground and stay there. This life, the one Henry and I chose and forged for ourselves, is gone. All because of a freak thunderstorm.

Time is of the essence, I remind myself. I don't have time to be sentimental right now. I can mourn this chapter of my life later. So, with a little wave I give to the shut door, I head towards the elevator, not looking back.

The next step in our plan is to head to my apartment. In my closet is a go-bag filled with money, a fake passport, my real and a fake birth certificate, some jewelry my parents left me when they died, a photo album, a wireless laptop, and a satellite

phone. All I have to do is pack clothes and essentials, get my insulin and other diabetic supplies, then I'll be on the road. I'm to go to Baltimore, ditch my car outside the BWI Airport, hire a charter plane to fly me to Miami, then meet a cargo ship captain that Henry will pay to ferry me to one of the uninhabited islands in the Caribbean, one covered entirely in jungle and golden sand, with an underground bunker where the two of us will lie low.

I call it Neverland, much to Henry's chagrin.

It's a fifteen-minute drive to my apartment, and I spend the time on the road making a couple phone calls. The first one is to Ricky.

"If you're calling to bitch about your latest shipment—" Ricky begins, but I cut him off.

"Tell Simon that Jacob Harrison is dead and his sister has been avenged. He already paid us a deposit but he can keep the other half."

There's a pause, then he says matter-of-factly, "You've been compromised."

"Yes. Cancel our preorders and reservations on all your products. If you require any additional payments, I can send it to you in a couple hours."

"That won't be necessary, Ms. Reed." I hear a sigh on his end. Then he says, in a quiet grumble, "Need any help?"

I chuckle. "You sound so happy to lend assistance."

"You know how it is. I don't want to get wrapped up in your shit but you're also one of my best clients. Just answer the damn question."

“We’ll be fine. Take care, Ricky.”

“You too, Bethany.” If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he sounds sad, and weirdly, so do I. I never thought I was attached to my black market dealer, but apparently, I am. I think I’ll even miss the asshole.

Focus, Beth. Stick to schedule.

My next call is to Henry’s therapist, and just like last time, she answers rather quickly. “Are you calling once again on behalf of Henry, Ms. Reed?”

“He’s been compromised on a mission. We’re going to a secure location outside the country. I just wanted you to be aware of why Henry will miss his next few appointments, but once things quiet down, we’ll be able to set up Zoom so you two can have sessions online. Is that okay?”

“Of course. Tell Henry I’ll be awaiting a call from him.” Dr. Bennett hesitates for a moment, then she adds, “Remember what I told you about how you can help Henry?”

I nod to myself. “You told me being there for him and showing that I care will be just as valuable as therapy to him. Trust me, I will never let Henry out of my sight again. Not after today.”

She laughs gently, though I don’t know why. “Take care, Ms. Reed.”

I hang up with the doctor, and as I toss my phone onto my passenger seat, my pump and receiver start yelling at me, telling me my blood sugar has gone below seventy-five.

Of course.

Sometimes I don't start to feel the effects of a low until I read my blood sugar, and this is definitely one of those times. I start shaking and sweating, a hunger like no other taking over me, but thankfully I'm not dizzy. That's not good when you're driving.

I dig a chocolate bar out of my purse, as well as a juice, which is a challenge when you're driving on the highway. As I rip open the bar with my teeth and start inhaling it, I notice Henry's apartment complex out of the corner of my eye. Without thinking much about it, because I can't really think that hard when my blood sugar is tanking, I merge into the next lane and speed towards the parking lot, breaking about five traffic laws while I'm at it. I hear horns honking angrily after me, but I'm a woman on a mission and I couldn't give less of a fuck about inconveniencing others.

Henry gave me a key to his apartment a long time ago, so I slowly make my way up the stairs to the second floor, finishing off my chocolate bar and diving into the juice. I'm done by the time I reach his apartment. I pull out my keychain from my purse and grab on to the key with puppies printed on it. They have big bug eyes, and their tongues are dangling out all cute. For some reason, they remind me of Henry, which is why I picked it as the key pattern when I was at Home Depot a while back. Henry disapproves, obviously.

When the door opens, I toss my wrappers in the trash, then make a beeline for the wedding photo of his parents. I carefully take it off the wall, then I look around for something I can wrap it with. If I put it in my purse without any protection, it will definitely break. I'm carrying a pharmacy in there, and none of it is cushioned.

I go into Henry's bedroom, searching through his wardrobe until I find a T-shirt—my T-shirt, to be exact. The smiling avocado one I gave him. I tuck the shirt around the picture frame and then jam it into my purse as gently but efficiently as possible. I'm about to leave the room when I notice a few things. For one, this room shows more signs of life than anywhere else in his apartment; there're personal touches like

photos taped to his dresser mirror—photos of the two of us. There’s also a Bible on his perfectly folded and tucked in sheets, a rosary hanging on his bedside lamp, and a notebook on his nightstand.

Curiosity compels me to snoop, so I open the first page of the notebook, and I realize right away that it’s something for therapy. In true Henry fashion, he’s labeled the entry “therapy journal,” as if to justify its own existence. There’s only a paragraph of writing under this title, and it’s incredibly straightforward and methodical, like Henry.

Therapy Journal

Entry 1

Dr. Bennett said I had to write down every dream and panic attack I have. Last night I dreamt that Beth showed up at my door and kissed me. It felt so real that part of me wondered if it had been a dream or not, but something so good couldn’t be real.

Ohmyfuckinggodoohmyfuckinggod

Henry dreamed about me kissing him? He deems that too good to be true?

My receiver beeps at me, indicating I’m still low, but I ignore it. I flip a couple pages ahead, skimming his handwriting for my name, and land on his twelfth entry.

Therapy Journal

Entry 12

Beth plays her music so much around the office that some of it has been imbedded into my subconscious. I had a dream where she was dancing to a love song by that

redheaded British guy, singing it completely off-key, and when she noticed me watching her, she invited me to dance with her. We swayed to the music until it ended, and then she kissed me. I woke up and found my cheeks wet. I had cried in my sleep. Haven't done that since I was a teenager.

A whimper escapes my mouth; it's a mystery if it was born from sadness, joy, or empathy. Maybe all of the above.

Henry has feelings for me.

Henry has feelings for me .

Is it the right time to do a happy dance? Absolutely not. But that doesn't stop me from doing one. I jump up and down and do the churning butter move with my arms like an idiot. It goes on for more than a minute before I remind myself that Henry is currently trying to escape England with his life, and I still have to get my butt out of the country. So, I swallow my excitement, stuff the rest of Henry's belongings in my purse, then leave his apartment to go to my own.

After a short drive where I grin to myself like I'm about to pass gas, I make it to my apartment. I slip inside, lock the door behind me, then I walk into my closet and retrieve my go-bag. I then proceed to stuff my favorite clothes inside, as well as my hair products, makeup, face wash, hygiene products, and tampons. I go into my kitchen and fill up a cooler with insulin vials for my pump, my extra insulin pens, extra needles, extra tubes and pump cartridges, a backup blood sugar meter, test strips, lancets, a glucagon, and extra CGMs.

When you are chronically ill there is no such thing as traveling light.

After I finish packing my supplies, I make sure to charge my receiver and pump, so they don't die on the way to Neverland. Charging the latter means I have to sit next to

a socket so the pump can stay connected to me. Henry has remarked before that I look like a robot when I do this. I guess in a way I am. My entire life revolves around machines. It's sad when you really think about it.

It's not like I can do anything about it, though. This is just my life.

Once everything is charged, I go to my bin of shoes in my living room and grab my sneakers and black flats, throwing both in the go-bag. I then do a thorough sweep of the apartment to make sure I'm not leaving anything behind, and when I'm satisfied I'm not, I put my bag and cooler into my car, go back to lock up my apartment, but then take a second to look around and take in this place, knowing full well I'll never be back.

Because of a stupid little power surge, we're both out of jobs and have to live in hiding for the rest of our lives. We can't enter the UK or US again, we can't get new jobs in or out of our field, and we'll basically be stuck on our little island. I shouldn't be as excited for the prospect as I am. A life in retirement with Henry on an island in the Caribbean? Sign me the fuck up.

Henry will probably try to convince me to find a home and employment somewhere else, since I won't be in nearly as much danger as him going forward. Theoretically, I could find work somewhere in the Caribbean, and I most definitely could find other housing arrangements besides our safe house, but I don't give a shit. Henry has been stuck with me since he hired me as his assistant, and now that I know how he feels? There's no way he's getting rid of me now. He and I are going to live happily ever after on Neverland until we die old and crotchety.

That is, if we can make it there alive.

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I Been Facing Trouble All My Life

I bang my fist on the blue townhouse door, praying to God that he's home right now. It would be just my luck that tonight is the night Mr. Parties Are For Children chose to go out in the town. But considering he picked Manchester to settle down in, I can only assume he's still an anti-social homebody.

"I'm fucking coming! Jesus Christ in a..." His voice trails off as he begins mumbling to himself, undoing all the locks on his door. He swings it open, about ready to speak again, but he falls speechless when he realizes I'm the one standing there.

Ian Lukas looks a lot different than the last time I saw him. Gone is his spiky brown hair, clean-shaven face, and wrestler physique. Now his hair is almost at his shoulders, he has a beard that covers half his face, and his body is incredibly lean—though he is still as freakishly tall as ever at 6'5". His shirt is off, so I can see tattoos covering most of his pale skin, and my heart clenches a little when I see the one over his heart:

Non sibi sed patriae.

Not for self, but for country.

The motto of the Navy.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asks, looking right and left of the street behind me. "Get in."

I slip past him and wait in his entryway as he relocks his door and closes all the blinds on his windows. Now he turns to me, assessing me the same way I did him before.

“You look like shit, Beast,” I remark, not knowing what else to say. That was his callsign, given to him because of how freakishly tall he is.

He glares, crossing his arms over his chest. “Don’t call me that. You lost that privilege a long time ago.”

“You know why I left.” Or at least part of the reason I left.

“Yeah, and look where you are now.” He walks into one room and comes out moments later wearing a tank top, with his fingers gathering up his hair into a ponytail. “You’re a fucking mercenary.”

I cringe at that title. “I don’t go out and kill anyone I’m paid to. Money has nothing to do with it.”

“You don’t have the right to be judge, jury, and executioner!” Ian snarls, his usual composure shattered. He storms off, walking from the foyer into his kitchen. I follow him, coming to a stop when I reach the other side of his kitchen’s swiveling doors, where I watch him aggressively start making tea in a purple kettle. “It’s people like you we took down during service.”

I scoff at that, leaning my hip against the doorframe. “That’s a gross exaggeration. If you really think I’m just as bad as the people we hunted, then why are you standing there making tea instead of arresting me?”

His back is turned to me, so I can’t see his face, but I can see the sigh he lets out, and the way his lean shoulders seem to hunch over in the process. “What do you want,

Henry? Why did you come here?"

I flick my eyes to the boiling kettle, watching steam rise from its nozzle. "I need your help."

Ian laughs, but there's no humor in it. If anything, he sounds sad. "With?"

"I need to get out of the country. Tonight," I say.

He shakes his head, loose strands of his hair pulling from the hair tie. "Let me guess, public transportation is off the cards for you because karma has finally come to bite you in the ass."

Annoyance churns in my gut, but I hold my tongue. I'm not going to stand here and justify my choices to him. "I know you still own a business class jet, a small one that could slip out unnoticed. I need to get to Miami as soon as possible."

He shakes his head, his fists tightening where they grip on to the edge of the stove top. "It's obvious you were compromised, but who is coming after you that's got you in such a hurry?"

Once the names Jacob and Johnathon Harrison leave my lips, Ian shouts a string of curses. "After all this time, you come to me knowing full well that Harrison and his whole team are going to rope me into this mess the second they track the plate number of the bike you rented or look at the logbooks of the airport my plane is at. You've just made me a target by coming here!"

"That wasn't my intention," I say honestly. "I didn't have another option. The plane I had chartered to go back to the States is at the busiest airport in London; they would have checked there first. It will take them a bit to realize I drove to Manchester."

“You say that like it’s justification for ruining my life. I moved here to escape that chaotic life and here you go dragging me back in.” He crosses his arms, his tea kettle beginning to whistle. “Why would I help you? Give me one good reason.”

I give him the only reason that matters to me, the only reason I’ve resorted to seeking Ian’s aid. “I told my assistant to meet me there. The people after me are powerful, and once they learn about her, they’ll be after her as much as me. She isn’t trained like us; she can’t fight them off if they capture her. She could die.”

I choke on that last word, and this reaction has Ian titling his head. “She just your assistant?”

I think about lying. The less people who know about Beth and about my feelings towards her, the better. I don’t want her used as leverage against me in any degree. But if I want to get Ian’s help, I can’t be dishonest. I have to trust that Ian hasn’t changed so much that he would take advantage of her to get to me, despite our differences. “She’s everything to me.”

His eyes narrow, watching me. I stand there silently, my expression open and honest, and this seems to be enough for him. Ian has always been an honorable man. I know he wouldn’t let an innocent woman suffer, even if it meant helping me. “Give me one hour.”

The relief that hits me is palpable. “Thank you, Beast.”

Ian rolls his eyes, repeating, “One hour. If you’re not ready, I’m fucking leaving without you.”

It was a split second ripple, a small flicker. Anyone else would have written it off as static or a glitch from the nearby storm. But something in my gut told me this was no fluke.

I told Colton to get out of the way from the monitor, and when I went into our system, I saw that someone else had been there. Someone had overridden our cameras. It took me a second to boot them out, and once I did, the camera feed for Jake's room jumped to a scene entirely different than the looped footage it was showing before.

One minute Jake was sitting at his desk like normal, bobbing his head to whatever music he listens to from his phone, then he suddenly has a syringe needle sticking out of his neck, put there by a man Jake had unmasked in his final moments. The man looks up at the camera, and I watch his eyes flare in surprise just before he makes his escape. And then he somehow manages to fuck up two of my cars and put three of my teammates in the hospital.

It only takes a few phone calls with some contacts at MI6 to figure out who this guy is. Henry Cai, Navy SEAL turned CIA, now works as a contract killer through the Dark Web. He has an office in the state of Virginia in the US that's fronted as a tree cutting company, and he has one employee working for him, a woman by the name of Bethany Reed, who is also ex-CIA. It's clear Cai and Reed were hired by someone with a vendetta against Jake, but I will deal with whoever that is in due time. If I wait to strike against Cai, he and Reed will go underground, and they'll be impossible to find. But if I start following their trail now, I can find them before they disappear off the grid, which I know they'll try to do. People like him have plans for when things go bad and they're caught, and most of the time they have a safe house somewhere they can lie low.

I just have to figure out where it is.

Going to their office in Virginia will be a starting point, but I doubt I'll find anything there. They'll have probably destroyed or cleared everything out by now. But from there any intelligence I can gather will lead me to where they lived, who they have connections to, what family they have left, and fingerprints I can use to track them

down.

Cai and Reed are going to live to regret what they did to my brother, my twin . They've ripped my soul in two like it was nothing, robbing me of the only person I have ever trusted or loved. Cai made Jake's last moments ones of terror and helplessness. He died without anyone there for him, to offer him comfort. I will ensure Cai stays alive long enough to endure the torture I have planned out for him; I will make them regret ever stepping foot in this house. Then just when he's about to die, I'll do the same thing to Reed. Their last moments will be filled with terror and helplessness. They will know how my brother felt.

I swear on him, of the life robbed from him, that I will make them pay. At whatever cost.

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My Heart Feels Like a Ghost

In Ian's plane, the trip from Manchester to Miami will be about five hours long, and it's evident only twenty minutes in that this will be a painfully awkward trip.

Back when I was in the SEALs, Ian was the closest thing I had to a friend. With every member of my team, there was a respect and fondness I held for them, but something about Ian's gentle-giant stoic manner made me drop my guard a little more than I did with anyone else. It made the decision to leave the teams that much harder.

I don't blame him for being pissed. In his eyes, I look like a guy that abandoned his oath and his team because I hated rules, but it runs so much deeper than that, too deep for me to be able to disclose. He'll just have to live with the assumptions he's made about me, and I have to live with the fact that I've lost his respect.

"How did you know I was in Manchester?" Ian asks quietly, his voice drowned in static from the headsets he and I wear.

I see no point in lying, so I answer, "I've kept tabs on you since I left. Besides, you always mentioned wanting to retire someplace you could read and drink tea in peace. Worsley, Manchester is the epitome of that."

"Great, so because you stalked me and dragged me into your shit, I am now forced to become an outcast like you. Thanks a lot," he deadpans.

I rub my tongue against the inside of my cheek, trying to check my annoyance. "Is this whole trip going to be a lecture? Because if so, I'm going to jump into the

ocean.”

He rolls his eyes. “This is my plane, and I will say whatever the fuck I want in it, especially since I’m carting your ass for free.”

“You think I wanted to go to you for help?” I ask, keeping my eyes trained on the dark sky around us. “Desperation and fear are what brought me to your doorstep, but not for myself, for Beth.”

His eyebrows quirk up at that. “So, Beth is her name. It’s pretty.” He steals a glance at me, something akin to wonder shining there. “In all the years I’ve known you, you’ve never been afraid of anything. It’s odd to hear you talk about fear so candidly.”

I’m always afraid, I think to myself. I wouldn’t be alive if I weren’t.

“I’ve never had something to lose before,” I say, shocked by my own honesty. I guess some things never change; I still have no filter around Beast. He just has a way of drawing information out of you without you realizing it, something we had used to our advantage against our enemies. No one could interrogate as well as him.

“How did you meet her?” he asks softly, genuinely interested.

“She was an analyst at the CIA. We worked together on a case, and I admired her ability to read my body language and emotions. She saw my assets and setbacks and adjusted accordingly to make us a team. When I went to work for myself, I asked her to come with me, and she said yes.”

“Are the two of you together?”

I shake my head. “That’s not in the cards.”

I see Ian roll his eyes out of my peripheral vision. “You’re the only person I’ve ever met that’s determined to be miserable.”

I huff a laugh at that. “Don’t you think I deserve to be miserable?”

He’s silent for a moment, then he says, “I don’t agree with what you’ve chosen to do as a profession, and I don’t agree with your shredded threads of a moral code, but you’re not so fallen that there’s no hope for you to rise again.”

“Who says I want to rise again?” I counter.

“You probably don’t.” He shrugs. “But the fact that you’re giving up everything to protect the woman you love tells me that you’re still a good man deep down.”

It warms me to know that his good opinion of me isn’t completely obliterated, but I can’t help but hesitate in agreeing with him. “My capability to love has nothing to do with what I am. I know where I’m bound when my life is done. I’ve made peace with it. I am okay with damning my soul if it means I can take down evil people whose retribution is held in the hands of power-hungry politicians and kings. You may think it’s wrong to enact vigilante justice, and in a perfect world, I would agree with you, but when rapists, abusers, sex traffickers, and predators are the very people who make laws and enact them, then evil runs unchecked. I refuse to stand by and do nothing.”

“So as a Catholic you’re perfectly okay with going to hell?”

A question I have asked myself many times since I decided to join this life. “The Bible says a lot of things about what makes you a sinner or a saint, but I think it’s all bullshit. Those rules were written by men, not by God. I believe that God punishes those who mean to harm others, but his justice only comes once someone dies, and how many innocent people will be harmed between now and God’s reckoning? I am fine facing my own reckoning one day if I can force others to face theirs sooner.”

Ian sighs, licking his lips. “With that ideology, you could kill anyone you wanted without remorse. You could justify horrible actions because they’re sinners in your eyes. How many innocent people, especially in America, have died because of that exact thinking?”

My nostrils flare at that. “I’m not a fucking Neo-Nazi that attacks people for being who they are. I’m a bisexual Chinese-Italian American. Those fuckers that use God to attack people like me are exactly the people I want facing God’s judgement.”

His eyebrows raise a tad. “I didn’t know you were bi. So am I.”

“I didn’t know that either,” I admit. “But you and I aren’t ones for chitchat, so it doesn’t shock me that there are things we don’t know about each other.”

Ian agrees with a grunt. “I think this is the longest conversation we’ve ever had.”

It probably is. “Yeah, and now you see why I don’t talk to people.”

Ian’s silent for a moment, then he says with sincerity, “I’ve never been super religious, but I never bought the idea that all sins are weighed equally. If God is the way you believe he is, then he’ll see your pure intentions.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t care.” For all that I said about not justifying my life choices to Ian I sure have done just that.

“That’s your problem, Henry.” I lock eyes with him and find his expression soft, his gaze earnest. “You do care, you’re just too scared to let yourself acknowledge it or, God forbid, let someone care about you too. You’re the most miserable grump I’ve ever seen, and it’s your own damn fault. You seem to think that guarding your heart will guard you from pain. It won’t. Life is pain, but a lucky few of us get to experience some love and joy mixed in. You have a chance to have some of that now

that you've been compromised. Live on your little island with Beth and be happy."

He speaks of it like it's so simple. "I don't know how to be happy or content."

"I moved to a quaint place like Worsley because I didn't know either. My life has always been about serving my country and defending the innocent, and ever since I retired, I've had a hard time learning how to be at peace. I think it just takes time."

I eye him curiously. "If you loved it so much, why did you retire?"

Ian's expression stays indifferent, but I know in his heart he's grieving. "Because I wanted to know what it felt like to serve myself, not others—to put myself first for once. I realized I had never thought about what I wanted to do."

"Have you figured out what you want to do?"

He gives me the smallest of smirks. "I'll let you know when I do."

I chuck my phone out the window on my drive down Washington Highway towards Baltimore. It's an easy way of tracking me, and as much as I hate to throw away my progress on Plants vs Zombies, the risk isn't worth it. I'm a little sad about having to part ways with it, but I am even more devastated having to say goodbye to my car, which is another easy thing to track. It's a 2014 Nissan Murano, and I affectionally named it Pietro after Quicksilver from the Marvel movies.

I have a crush on Aaron Taylor-Johnson, what can I say?

It's not the most fancy car, but it does have seat warmers and a bunch of airbags. Henry always joked that it's basically a marshmallow. I've had this car since I went to college. It's been with me through school, the CIA, working with Henry...

And now I have to fucking abandon it in an airport parking lot.

After getting my bag and cooler out of the back, I take a pen and sticky note from the center console and write a little note that reads “touch my car and you die.” I then stick it on the dashboard, place a kiss on the steering wheel, and whisper, “Farewell Pietro.”

I’m not ashamed to say I got a little teary eyed when I got onto the charter plane. I loved that car, dammit, and thankfully the pilot let a girl mourn her vehicle. He didn’t ask questions, just said there’s napkins in the barf bags for me to wipe my tears. This is where his consideration ended, however, because as soon as we were in the air, the man made it his mission to make the trip as quickly as possible, which caused a lot of turbulence and a few near collisions with birds that resulted in abrupt turns. He also played Jimmy Buffet the entire trip, and while I love “Margaritaville,” listening to him for three hours straight had me two seconds away from chucking myself out of the plane.

I was thankful to be rid of him when we reached Florida. He sent me off with a wink and a smile around the rim of a bourbon bottle, and while I forced a smile back at him, I was internally imagining pouring that bottle all over his bald head.

As I walk towards the front of the small airport we landed at, I attempt to flag down one of the taxis waiting for passengers, but none of them seem to be paying attention. I’m practically dancing around like a monkey, but it’s to no avail.

“Ever think they’re ignoring you because you’re acting like you have an ice cube in your shirt?” a gruff, familiar voice says from behind me.

I turn around, my heart stopping dead in my chest as I lock eyes with Henry. He looks exhausted. I would venture to guess he hasn’t rested since we last spoke, but despite the dark circles under his eyes and his weary expression, he looks just as

handsome as ever. The fear, worry, and anticipation I've felt since we were compromised hits me all at once, and I rush towards him at full speed, tears welling in my eyes. Henry opens up his arms and catches me, burying his face into the crook of my neck, breathing me in. I nuzzle into his chest, clutching on to his shirt like my life depends on it.

"I missed you so fucking much," I whisper, feeling my tears skate down my cheeks, dampening his shirt.

I expect him to reply with a witty comeback or remark on how it's only been a day or so since we last saw each other, but instead he holds me tighter and murmurs in my ear, "I missed you, too, B."

"As lovely as this reunion is, we should really get going," another voice says from behind Henry, and I tense up, confused by this random person's comment.

Henry pulls back from me and gestures to the behemoth of a man wearing sunglasses, jeans, and a navy-blue polo shirt. "This is Ian. We were in the SEALs together; he helped me get here and he's graciously taking us to Neverland."

Ian barks out a laugh. "Neverland?"

I give him an indignant nod. "Yes, Neverland. Do you have a problem with that?"

He smirks, holding his hands up in surrender. "Not at all."

I give him a victorious smile. "Good. My imagination will not be criticized. It's not my fault neither of you have any."

Henry gives me one of his infamous grunts and Ian just continues to smile. "I like her."

Henry doesn't seem too pleased by this confession. He wraps his arm around my waist and gives a firm nod to his old friend. "You're right, we should get going."

Ian continues to smile as he turns away, but Henry glares at the back of his head, like a child forced by his mom to share his favorite toy.

"If I didn't know better," I teasingly poke his chest, "I would say you're jealous."

I fully expect him to poke me back, just like he did a few days ago, but his gaze becomes earnest, and so do his words. "Maybe I am."

Oh. "What is there to be jealous of?"

He opens his mouth to speak, but then he reconsiders, finally settling on, "Let's get to the island, okay?"

I narrow my eyes his way but nod, hoping he knows I'm not letting him off the hook that easily. By the way he still protectively holds on to me as he follows after Ian, I would say he does.

From Miami we fly to Nassau, then Ian manages to rent a helicopter to take us the rest of the way to Neverland since there's no runway for a plane to land there. With the helicopter, we're able to set ourselves gently on the sandy beach, right in front of the lush jungle that hides our new safe haven. When I get out of the helicopter, stepping onto the golden sand, hearing the waves crashing all around us, I feel at peace, which isn't an emotion I am accustomed to.

I could easily spend eternity here. When Henry gets out and unloads my bags, his hair ruffled and his dark shirt sticking to his skin, I know for a fact I could.

Once the helicopter is fully unpacked, Ian gives Henry a long look, contemplating

something. Henry couldn't be bothered to notice though; he's too busy making sure my insulin hasn't gotten overheated and that the icebags are still in place.

"I'm going to stick around in Nassau for a little while," Ian announces, making H finally turn his attention back to him.

"You are?" I ask.

He nods, his expression softened. "Harrison and his goons will have already connected me to you, so going back home isn't an option. Besides, you guys could use someone keeping an eye out off the island. That way you won't be blindsided."

Henry reaches out towards his friend, nodding once. "Thank you."

Ian grasps on to his arm, shooting a smile my way. "You two look out for each other. I'll be in touch soon."

I give him a little wave in farewell, then I let Henry tug me towards the brush, with him carrying all of my luggage like a pack mule. The trees and bushes sway rapidly as the helicopter starts up again and begins its ascent into the air. Only after the wilderness surrounding us settles do we begin trekking through it, with H leading the way through the expansive jungle towards our bunker.

"Make sure to follow directly behind me—don't wander," Henry instructs, keeping his eyes firmly on the ground. "I have booby traps all around the island."

"Booby traps?" I ask.

He nods, walking around a large bush, so I avoid it at all costs, keeping right on his heels. "My dad fought in the Vietnam War when he was a teenager, and he told my mom about all of the traps the Vietcong set, how effective their methods were. I took

inspiration from the stories she told me. I have a map of where each trap is set. I'll show it to you later."

I try to remember what I learned in history about 'Nam, but my mind is totally blank. History wasn't my greatest subject. Guess these booby traps will just be a surprise.

The bunker is in the center of the island, with a storm cellar-like entrance hidden underneath moss and leaves. The metal doors are silent as Henry lifts them up, though by their rusty appearance I would've expected them to creak and groan. H must have oiled them up somehow.

He holds the doors open for me, and when I peer inside, I find a small metal ladder that goes about eight feet down to the ground. I take one of my bags and secure it to my shoulders, then I climb down the ladder, with Henry right behind me. When the doors shut, we are covered in darkness, but as soon as my feet touch the ground, a light on the ceiling turns on, allowing me to see a concrete hallway leading to an elevator. It has a scanner next to it, and Henry places his face directly in front of it, keeping his eyes wide open. It scans his face, then a green light glows from the screen, making the doors swing open.

"That's so fucking cool," I gush, following H into the elevator.

"Only you and I have access to that elevator. All you have to do is stand in front of the scanner and you'll gain access; that goes for every room in the safe house. If anyone tries to access the elevator or another room in the house, they'll be electrocuted."

Christ almighty. "You never do anything in halves." I observe, aiming for a joking tone, but it sounds more like awe.

"When it comes to your safety? No."

Okay not what I was expecting him to say but I silently preen at his reply.

“How deep does this go?” I ask as we enter the elevator. Without having to press any buttons, it descends lower into the ground, and it’s eerie seeing no screen showing the floors we are going past or hearing no jazz music in the background.

“The safe house is twenty feet below the surface,” he replies, staring ahead at the shut doors.

Shit. “And is it all concrete?”

“Yes.”

“Please tell me I’ll be able to get a signal down here. Kinda need one to live.” Literally. My pump and CGM require a Bluetooth connection.

He smirks. “I made sure it would, don’t worry.”

Just to make sure, I pull out my pump and find it working smoothly. My CGM must be working as well because the pump is still getting readings from it.

“Good.” One less thing to worry about. “Besides, I don’t think I can go even a week without finding out what happens with Lady Rose and Atticus or if Tom is going to move to America with Sybbie.”

“Neither can I,” he admits, and I have to hide my smile.

The elevator doors finally open, revealing a homey living room, which shocks me. I honestly expected this place to look like a military barracks, but it’s cute and comfy looking, with a large cream couch that could probably seat eight people, a sixty-inch flat-screen TV, a tree stump coffee table, a tan rug, and an entire wall of bookshelves

filled with thousands of DVDs. What really grabs my attention are the concrete walls though, which are painted sky blue, and on the ceiling there are realistic little white clouds.

“Did you do that?” I point upwards.

He chortles, shaking his head. “When the crew I hired to build this safe house were done, I commissioned a local artist. I thought it would please you.”

“Are all the rooms like this?” I ask excitedly.

“Why don’t you go see?”

The closest door is right next to the TV, so I scan my face on the scanner and then push it open to find a kitchen that would make Gordon Ramsay faint: a steel refrigerator and freezer, an electric stove, a large oven, dozens of cabinets that are filled with plates and dishes, an island big enough to cook a five-course meal on, and a pantry completely filled with nonperishable food like canned vegetables and beans, dried fruit, oats, rice, soup, granola bars, pasta, and a fuck ton of bottled water. Once again, the concrete walls are painted, but this time they’re a soft yellow, and on the ceiling, there is a very realistic-looking sun, with birds silhouetted midflight.

Henry walks over to the fridge and opens it up, revealing boxes of insulin pens and vials of both Humalog and Levemir already stocked. I also spot a couple glucagon pens and some juices for when I go low in there also. I don’t even use Levemir anymore since my insulin pump doesn’t use long-acting insulin, but he got some for me anyways.

My heart flutters like the wings of a baby bird taking flight for the first time as I stand there staring at the fridge, unable to form words of any kind. It shouldn’t surprise me that he would do something like this, but it does. I knew he would keep me safe and

take care of me, but this is above and beyond. The movies, the painted ceilings, the supplies in the fridge...

Henry shuts the door and points to an already open door near the stove, pulling me from my thoughts. It's a cute little bathroom painted red with little tulips on the ceiling. "All bathrooms don't require facial recognition, so if your blood sugar is high, you won't have to wait."

Every type one diabetic is different when it comes to low and high blood sugars, but for me, the symptoms hit me hard. When I'm low, I feel sweaty, shaky, dizzy, and all I can think about is eating. I imagine it's how a wolf feels after it hasn't eaten in five days. It's a hunger beyond hunger—an instinctive need to fend off starvation. And when I'm high, I feel thirsty, tired, I have a horrible stomachache and headache, I'm a complete bitch, and I have to pee like a racehorse.

I don't even try to hide how happy his accommodations make me. "You're my favorite thing in the world," I admit.

If I didn't know any better, I would say he's blushing. "Let's continue with the tour." His voice is gruff, raspy. Once he turns from me, a shiver runs down my body.

He leads me back through the living room and down a hallway on the right side of the elevator. There are quite a few doors on either side, and each of them are labeled: armory, gym, office, Henry's bedroom, and my bedroom. The armory looks like it's straight out of a John Wick movie: the concrete walls are covered in racks of guns, knives, ammunition, and rope; boxes of cameras, syringes, chemicals, and tactical gear line the floors. It's the only room without any paint on the walls.

The gym—which includes but is not limited to a treadmill, weight station, punching bag, wrestling mats, and paper targets for shooting practice—has a darker blue hue to the walls than the living room, with flowers growing out the trim, which has been

painted a dark grass-green.

The office, which more or less looks like our old one, is painted navy blue with constellations across the walls and ceiling, and a shooting star cresting where my new swivel chair sits.

My bedroom is painted purple, which is my favorite color. On the walls are cascading pink and lavender leaves falling from an invisible tree; they lead down to a mountain landscape with pink and grey hues and beautiful shading. There's a king-sized bed against the wall opposite the door, a set of double doors that leads to a walk-in closet that rivals *The Princess Diaries 2*, another door that leads to my own bathroom, and a TV twice my size on the wall opposite the bed, right next to the entrance. Right under it are a couple of beanbag chairs and blankets too. There's even a One Direction pillow on my bed and a poster of young Justin Bieber holding a heart with the words "I can fix up your broken heart" written in neon pink next to him.

It's perfect.

"You must be exhausted." Henry once again pulls me from my thoughts. "I'll leave you to unpack and get some rest. If you need me, I'm right across the hall," he says, starting to back into the hallway.

"H?" My voice stops him in his tracks, and he looks at me inquisitively. "Thank you."

He nods once, a smirk playing across his lips. "Anytime, B."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

Patchwork Hearts Lighting Up the Dark

Based upon my intelligence sources, Cai chartered a private jet under an alias name that flew him to England, and I suspect he would have used it to get back to America if not for him being caught. Someone with his intelligence and reputation wouldn't be stupid enough to risk leaving the country using any major airport, but my team checked them all anyways. Thanks to my time in the military, I have some contacts in MI6 that don't care about my current profession, or what it was. I'm technically unemployed now, since Jake had been my boss, at least in the eyes of everyone else, and now he's gone.

I have another source that's a coroner, and I paid him to keep the nature of Jacob's death a secret for now. I don't want any investigations happening, no cops butting into the operation I already have well underway. To the outside world, Jake committed suicide.

Thanks to the MI6 database and the network of license plate readers, I now have access to all the plate numbers we saw on the camera footage. I discovered that Cai rented a motorbike under another false name that we tracked to the flat of Ian Lukas, a former naval pilot that has worked on and off as a corporate pilot since moving here a few years ago. He was Cai's way of escape, I'm sure of it. We just have to figure out where the plane he owns landed.

I have my other teammates looking into Cai's life, his friends, his family—anything that could be used to our advantage. Cai's base of operations was in the US, in Northern Virginia, to be exact. The office registered in his name is burned to a crisp, as we expected. Cai would be an idiot if he thought we wouldn't try to seek him out,

so the fact that he's started covering his trail means he knows he's compromised, if the chase he led with my teammates wasn't sign enough. We were also able to track down his address as well as the address of his assistant, Bethany Reed. I have two guys flying out there tonight to see if they left anything behind, but I'm sure there isn't.

There's no sign of where Reed went, but I would bet she met up with Cai at his location. Since she was his only accomplice, it's not hard to surmise that he cares enough about her safety to secure it. She's a pretty thing, innocent and doe-eyed looking, but we'd be stupid to not assume she's as highly trained as Cai. She was in the CIA as an analyst and probably didn't receive any formal training from the agency, but who knows what cards she has up her sleeve after three years working with someone like Cai.

They have an advantage by being ahead of us, giving them time to prepare, so we need to go about this cautiously.

It's a good thing I have nothing but time.

Since the minute we were born, there was nothing Jake wouldn't do for me, and even though he's gone, I will continue to return the favor, starting with Cai, Reed, and Lukas. Then I'm going to figure out who hired them to do the job, no matter who or where they are. They could be the fucking king and I wouldn't care. The minute they decided to target my brother, they signed their death certificate.

As I read through the data we've already collected, I grasp on to the necklace around my neck, where it has been since I was born. Jake has an identical one to mine, a sparrow midflight. His lifeless corpse still has it on.

I hold it tight and press hard enough, hoping that by some divine miracle life will flood back into him, but I'm not naive enough to believe that things like miracles

exist. Jake and I learned that a long time ago. No one will look after you but yourself, and if you want to make it in this world, things like ethics and rules will only hold you back or get you killed. Laws and morals are put in place to keep us weak and submissive, which is why Jake and I picked the professions we did. If we didn't want to follow the old rules, we made new ones, all the while making a fuck ton of money.

But someone must have caught on, and that someone will pay for their actions in the same way Jake did, but in a painful and bloody end.

I set my laptop on my bed and blast music from its baby speakers while I unpack my duffle. Most of my music taste involves pop music from the early 2000s, namely One Direction if my décor was anything to go by. As basic as it makes me, they have remained my favorite band since I was fourteen, and I still have the biggest crush on Louis. He's so underrated, it's criminal.

"Diana" plays from my playlist now, and I hum along to it while I stock my closet full of my wardrobe, which is not as vast as it once was. I had to leave a lot behind at my apartment, but it's fine. I've never been super invested in what I wear as long as it's comfy. The only exception to that is shoes. I bet I could convince Henry to get me some new heels and boots, but for what purpose? This is my home now. I have no need for stilettos or ankle boots on an island.

It takes me hours to get everything packed and organized, but not because of the quantity of my items, but the fact that 1D was playing and I would often pause to dance and lip sync along. By the time I'm done, it's around eight at night, so I know Henry has probably gone to bed. He's a morning person, so he's always in bed before nine like an old man.

The items I took from his apartment are still on one of my beanbag chairs, mocking me, taunting me.

I should just go talk to him. Rip the Band-Aid off. It's not even that big of a deal honestly.

So I stopped by your apartment and snooped around to see if there was anything of value you might want and found your very personal dream journal and read enough of it to discover your secret feelings for me. Here are all the items I stole, goodnight!

I let out a groan, pinching the bridge of my nose. Why had I snooped? There's a reason they say curiosity killed the cat. In my case, curiosity is going to kill any trust Henry had in me.

I just need to do it. The longer I wait, the worse my anxiety will get about it.

Through the angelic voice of Harry Styles, I hear a thump, like something heavy had just fallen. I go over to my computer and turn my music down, craning my ears to listen for any follow-up noise. Nothing comes. I poke my head out of my room, making sure we're not dealing with an intruder, and that's when I hear a whimper coming from the room across from mine.

Henry's room.

It didn't escape my notice that part of my tour didn't include his bedroom, and that didn't surprise me. I hadn't been allowed in his room at his old apartment either. He clearly doesn't want me in there, but what if he's hurt? What if he needs my help?

Another whimper comes from behind his door, and I make my decision. I lean forward to let my face be scanned, then when it opens, I slip inside his room as quietly as possible. I notice right away that this room isn't painted and is very minimally decorated. There is a bed, a small closet, a bathroom, a nightstand, and that's it. Henry lies sprawled on the floor, with the blankets half on the bed and half around his torso. That explains the thud I heard; he must have fallen out of the bed.

He moans, his face contorting in agony, and I realize he's having a bad dream.

He'll probably need the dream journal I stole.

I bend down next to him, trying to be as gentle as possible as I brush my knuckles over the side of his face. He freezes at my touch, and then suddenly I'm on my back, with my body pinned down under him and a knife held to my throat.

Right. Why did I think it would be a good idea to sneak in on a sleeping assassin?

"H, it's me. It's me," I whisper, trying to swallow down the fear rising within me. I have no idea how out of it he is or if he's fully awake, so who knows what he'll do to me if he feels threatened.

Henry blinks for a moment, then his eyes widen in recognition. "What the hell are you doing, Beth?"

"I heard you whimpering and crying out. I thought you were hurt."

Henry suddenly looks mad. "If I was hurt you wouldn't have been able to help me. You could have been hurt, or worse. Never do that again."

He's really going to lecture me right now? "So, I'm just supposed to ignore you when I know you're in pain? I think not."

"I'm not in pain," he argues, stubborn as always, his hands tightening slightly around my wrists.

I roll my eyes and gesture for him to get off of me, which he does. I try very hard not to look at his bare chest as I pick up the blankets draped off the bed and straighten them out, but I do take a couple peeks. I'm only human. Once his bed is fixed, I pat

the left side, and Henry gets back into bed with a suspicious glance my way. Once he's settled, I slip under the covers on the right side of the bed and press my chest against his back, wrapping my arms around his torso, just like I did the other night.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"I'm trying to strangle you. What the fuck do you think I'm doing?"

"Why are you spooning me?"

I press myself tighter against him, like he's my own personal teddy bear. "Because I may not be able to fight off some mercenary or assassin, but I can fight off your nightmares. They won't bother you while I'm here."

He pauses, then "You know that's not how that works, right?"

It worked the last time. You slept like a baby.

I lightly slap his bicep, which is smooth and hard and oh so delicious. "Just go to sleep, Henry."

He falls silent after that, and after a few minutes, his breathing evens out and he falls asleep. I continue holding him, promising myself that I'll tell him about the journal tomorrow. He needs his rest, and frankly, I'm a bit of a wuss.

Tomorrow, I promise myself, then I fall asleep too.

Henry is very quiet this morning.

I wake up to an empty bed and the smell of pancakes, and after taking fifteen minutes to become fully conscious, I trudge into the kitchen to find him half naked in front of

the stove, flipping unevenly shaped chocolate chip pancakes.

A girl can get used to this .

“How did you manage to make those? There’s no milk or eggs in the fridge.” I sit down at the kitchen table, appreciating the eye candy while I check my blood sugar using my Dexcom receiver. I’m 110. My body is actually behaving for once. Go figure.

“It’s a box mix and water.”

I place the receiver back in my PJ pocket. “And the chocolate chips?”

“Were found in the back of the pantry to cover up the shitty taste.” He carries a pancake on a spatula over to a paper plate, then he places the plate in front of me. It kind of looks like Germany.

I’m about to voice that observation, but my pump chooses that moment to blare its alarm, alerting me that my insulin cartridge needs to be replaced. Henry is well attuned to the various beeps, vibrations, and alarms that I make, so without being asked, he goes into the kitchen and grabs an insulin vial, a needle, and a new cartridge.

“Thank you,” I tell him, injecting insulin into the new cartridge and loading it into my pump. Technically I’m supposed to change the tubing every time I change the cartridge, but with how much insulin I go through, my doctor told me changing the tube every other time would work fine. Otherwise, it’d be a waste. What’s annoying is that I still have to sit there and wait for the tube to be filled with insulin even if the old tube is still there. I stare down at the little screen while it counts the units being filled, willing the process to go faster.

Once that's done, I put in about fifteen units to account for the pancakes, chocolate chips, and syrup, then I dig in.

"Good?" he asks, watching me as I eat.

I nod, licking syrup from my lips. "My compliments to the chef."

He and I eat our pancakes in silence, just enjoying each other's company, but my brain doesn't allow me to savor the moment. As we both take our last couple bites, I'm reminded of the promise I made to myself to tell him about the journal today. The thought immediately puts my stomach in knots, but it must be done. At this rate, I'm going to send myself into a panic attack over it.

"So uh, I have something to tell you," I begin, suddenly feeling nauseous. "And I really hope you won't get mad, because we're kinda stuck in a bunker on an abandoned island and therefore kinda stuck with each other—"

"What is it, B?" His voice is firm but laced with concern. He sits down in the chair next to me, his gaze assessing and his body language stiff and on guard. "Tell me."

I take a deep breath, then I say as quickly as possible, "I stopped at your apartment before I left for the airport because I know that wedding picture of your parents is one of the only pictures you own, so I grabbed it, but then I wondered if there was anything in your bedroom that you wanted so I went in there and I found some stuff, including your journal. I didn't know what was in it so I opened it and read a little bit and realized that it was for therapy and then I felt really bad because I know it was an invasion of your privacy, but I also learned you have feelings for me and I do too so I wanted to clear the air and not start off this new chapter of our lives with a lie."

I take in a deep breath, having not done so the entire spiel, then I await Henry's reaction. For the first time since I met him, I can't read how he's feeling or tell what

he's thinking. Though maybe I've been overestimating my ability to gauge his reactions because he's harbored feelings for me this whole time and I had absolutely no idea. Sure, I knew he was attracted to me, but real romantic feelings? If I hadn't read words from his heart in his handwriting, I wouldn't believe it. I just had no idea.

When a minute passes and he still hasn't said something, I give him a look of sheer desperation. "Give me something. Anything."

"Where is it?"

I point behind me with my thumb. "My beanbag chair. That's where the picture is too. And a rosary I found."

Without another word, he stands up and leaves the kitchen. I hesitate, then I follow after him, doing my best to keep silent and let him take all of this in. Midway through the living room, he stops walking and turns around, making me bump into him.

"How much did you read?" he asks, his expression hard.

Uh oh. "Just a couple entries, all of them about me...Why didn't you say anything?"

He stares down at me, still expertly masking his emotions. I can't tell if he's pissed off or not. "It was for your safety. If anyone discovered what you are to me, they would use you to get to me."

That makes sense, I guess. "And what exactly am I to you?"

He takes a step closer towards me, crossing his arms over his chest...which is still bare. "You already know the answer to that."

I let out a little whine of exasperation. "For fuck's sake, can you put a shirt on?"

He just stares at me, not a muscle in his body moving.

I scowl up at him. “Give me an honest answer, H. I’ve read what you wrote, and I know you’re attracted to me, but what do you want?”

His Adam’s apple bobs. “You. I want you.”

I step closer, and now only a couple inches separate us. “Is it just sex you want? Or is it more?”

“I want you,” he repeats, leaning down so our faces are as close as our bodies. “In every way. I want your body, your mind, your heart, your laughs, your tears, your jokes, your optimism, your childish dancing that never gets better no matter how often you do it. I want all of you.”

Someone pinch me. This has to be one of my slow-day daydreams or the fantasies that haunt me each night. How can this be real? “Ditto.”

His eyes flicker down to my lips, then he goes ahead and licks his own. “I’m going to retrieve my items from your room while you finish breakfast, then I want you to meet me in the gym.”

“What?” Is he joking?

“I want to start training you. Including Ian, there’s two of us against nine highly trained ex-military mercenaries that are out for revenge. I’ll need you to be my eyes and ears like always, but if things go to shit, I need to know you can defend yourself.”

Makes sense . “What will you teach me?”

“These guys are highly trained and they aren’t here to fuck around. If they see you,

they'll shoot you. I'm going to teach you how to disarm someone, how to shoot, and how to fight. Given where we are, it will take them a while to track us down. They'll island-hop for a while, but they will land here eventually. I'd estimate a month or so, which doesn't give us a lot of time. I'm not going to hold myself back, B. I'm going to prepare you as fast as I can, which means going at it hard."

That's what she said. "But do we have to start right this second? We just confessed our harbored feelings and now you want us to go punch each other?"

Henry takes a couple steps back, and I swear I feel colder without him standing so close to me. "Like I said, we don't have much time to get you ready for a fight. Everything needs to come second to training until the threat has been dealt with. We can't afford to be distracted."

It takes all my willpower not to pout. "But—"

"I won't lose you." His voice is strained, making me pause. He sounds just like he did the other day when he thought his mother's blood was staining his hands. "I can't."

I give a slow nod, knowing I shouldn't press him. "I'll meet you in the gym."

Without another word, Henry disappears down the hall, and I make my way back to the kitchen to eat my derpy pancake, still trying to process what the fuck just happened.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

Lions Sit in Solemn Lines

I try my hardest not to stare at Beth as I walk into the gym. Somehow, I missed her going into her bedroom to change, because now she's wearing a sports bra patterned with daises and black sweatpants, with her hair pulled up in a bun. She looks simultaneously adorable and sexy, making my cock swell in my own pair of sweatpants.

When she sees me enter, she starts to do a boxer-like jog in place, shaking out her hands. "Alright, I'm ready. Let's do this shit."

Cute and sexy. I join her over on the wrestling mats, gesturing for her to stay still. "If we had more time, I would start at the basics and work our way up to the more complicated shit, but we don't have that luxury. I'm going to teach you how to react if one of the mercs tries to grab on to you and what do to if they succeed. Then I'm going to teach you how to use a gun, which should always be your number one defense method."

"Do you think they'll try to capture me?" she asks, placing her hands on both of her hips.

"That depends on what Harrison wants with me," I tell her, not trying to sugarcoat it. "He could just want me killed, and in that case he'll likely order us to be shot on sight. If he wants to go the torture route, then the mercs will be under orders to capture us, which is where these lessons will come in. If one of the mercs attempts to capture you, I need you to do everything in your power to escape, and if you manage to, don't wait for me. I was trained to sustain torture, you weren't."

Her face screws up in confusion, making her eyebrows furrow. “If I’m down here in the bunker, how would these guys manage to get to me?”

“By blowing up the doors. You never know what they have up their sleeve, which is why I need you to leave if you get the chance.”

“So, if shit hits the fan, I’m just supposed to abandon you?” she asks incredulously.

I harden my stare, trying to convey the gravity of the situation I hypothesize. “You’re supposed to keep yourself alive, Beth. If they get you, they’ll do unspeakable things to your mind and body. From Harrison’s perspective, you helped murder his brother and you’re the only person I care about. He’ll use you to torture me.”

Beth sets her shoulders back and tilts her head high. “Well then, let’s make sure neither of us get captured.”

I give a resolute nod, taking a couple steps back from her. “Okay, turn around for me.”

She does as I direct without hesitation, putting her back to me. I walk forward and wrap an arm gently but firmly around her neck. “In a situation like this, trying to pull yourself away or push my arm away is futile. So, I want you to twist your body towards my hand, and once you get your shoulders out, you shove me away. Try it.”

She does it perfectly, and when she’s free of my grip, she does a little leap and cheer. “I fucking did it!”

I smile at her enthusiasm. “Let’s do it a few more times.”

She does it perfectly again and again, and by the third time we try the move, she’s a natural. But instead of letting her get too triumphant, I move right into the next move,

grabbing her with both arms around the neck and pushing her against the wall. She gasps in surprise, and instinctually she attempts to shove my arms away from the sides, but it won't work.

“You're trying to fight me off with strength, but you need to fight me off with physics. See how my body is positioned? I'm leaning towards you at an angle. Twist your body just like last time, but now I want you to drop down at the same time.”

“Can't I just knee you in the nuts?” she asks.

“If I were anyone else, sure. But that won't mean shit to the mercs. They're like me; they were trained to handle extreme levels of pain. And don't try to headbutt them either; it may hurt them, but it will also hurt you. Now try it.”

She twists her body like last time, but she doesn't drop down fast enough, so my grip on her wavers only slightly before I resume my hold.

“Try again.”

This time she does it a bit quicker and manages to escape my grip. I immediately try to grab her again by the neck, but she automatically twists and pushes like I taught her.

“Fucking excellent.” I grin, watching her do a little victory dance.

“Those assholes won't see what's coming for them.” She punches the air, making her own whooshing sound effects.

“Cool your jets, John Cena. We still have a lot of work to do,” I tell her.

“Teach me more,” she urges, practically bouncing off the walls in energy and

excitement.

Without warning, I slip my foot around her ankle and pull, making her stumble forward. I grab on to her and, as gently as I can, push her down to the mat so she's lying on her back. I wrap my hands around her wrists, pinning down her arms, and I straddle her legs to keep them still.

Beth squirms under me, her expression scrunched up in determination, but she can't escape. After a few minutes of wiggling like a worm, she relaxes, catching my stare. She starts glaring up at me. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

I haven't been hiding my amusement in the slightest. "You're just making really funny faces."

She wiggles again, letting out a frustrated groan. "You're such a dick."

I smile down at her, flexing my fingers on her wrists. "I love it when you insult me."

She smiles sweetly. "I hope you choke on glass."

I chuckle at that. "As much as I'm enjoying having you under me, how about I continue with our lesson?"

"Well, get on with it then." She lifts her head closer to mine, staring me down in a challenge.

So feisty. "You ever do gymnastics as a kid?"

"Yes, why?"

"Make a bridge with your back and hips."

She tilts her pelvis up towards me, and because of the position I'm in, she pushes right up against my cock. It takes all my efforts not to groan. She stays like that as she waits for my instructions, and if I didn't know better, I would say there's a blush forming in her cheeks.

"At the same time, pull your arms down towards your waist," I instruct. "Try it."

She does both at once, thrusting her pelvis into mine, and a grunt escapes me.

I pray she doesn't look down right now.

"You see how it puts me off-balance?" My voice sounds thicker than usual, but I try to stay focused. "I'm forced to catch myself, giving you an opportunity to get the upper hand. What you have to do next is hug on to my torso, keeping me off-balance, then you grab onto this arm and push it between us. It will allow you to pull us both aside so you're now on top."

She does as I say, but when it comes time to pull us to the side, she rolls the wrong way and I end up having all my weight on her. She lets out a little squeak, and I immediately push up onto my elbows, not wanting to crush her. "Roll the other way."

She tries again, this time rolling to the left, and she ends up on top of me like I planned. She now straddles my hips, with her hands on my arms, and I was unprepared for how turned on the view of her on top of me makes me. It only gets worse when she grins down at me triumphantly and says, "Look who's the star pupil."

I like this side of her, this competitiveness. "Careful. Too much confidence in a dangerous situation can lead to mistakes."

She shrugs. "You've made it through and you're the cockiest bastard I know."

I grab on to her hips and flip us back over, and this time I lay my body along hers, completely pinning her down. “See? Instead of witty remarks, you could have slit my throat and saved yourself. But now you’re mine.”

I expect her to glare at me or call me an asshole, but instead her lips part and her breath catches. I look into her eyes and see her pupils widen, arousal filling her gaze. Whether unconsciously or not, she gently presses her body up against mine, and I feel myself harden to the point of pain. From now on, when I train Beth, I need to wear looser boxers, because this won’t cut it. I feel like circulation has been cut off from my dick.

“We should take a break,” I croak out, slowly lifting myself off of her.

She continues to lie on the floor, giving me a slow nod. “Yeah. A break would be good.”

The two of us are sitting down in the kitchen eating some Campbell’s soup from a can, with the news playing in the background on his laptop, which is resting in front of us on the table, but I can’t bring myself to pay attention. My mind is too preoccupied with the knowledge of our shared feelings and the near dry humping session we had today. With one peek at H, I know that he’s not listening to the news either. His eyes aren’t even on the screen.

I’m able to distract myself for a bit as I check my blood sugar and dose for my food, but pretty soon I’m sitting there as stiffly and quietly as he is.

Say something, Beth. Something to break the ice . “How come you never told me you were religious?” I ask quietly.

He tears his eyes from the table and stares at me, his expression unreadable. “I didn’t want to be one of those people that stuffs God down someone else’s throat.”

“Talking about something important to you isn’t the same as forcing your beliefs on others,” I argue, twirling my spoon around in the bowl. “You can talk about it with me if you want to. I was raised Baptist, but I stopped practicing religion after my parents died.”

Henry’s eyes refocus on the bowl of soup in front of him, and I see his expression harden into stone. “My mother raised me Catholic.”

Oh.

I know he wants to change the subject, and usually I would let him, but there’s something about our situation and what we’ve shared today that makes me pry. “Do you continue to practice because of her?”

“Yes and no.” He sighs, licking his lips. “My father was Italian; his parents moved to the States when he was a baby, and they raised him Catholic. My mom converted to Catholicism when they got married, and as a way to keep his spirit alive in death, she raised me in the faith. She firmly believed in being kind to everyone, helping those who need it, and never harming anyone. She would say hello to everyone she passed by on the street, would give whatever money she had in her wallet to the poor, and she volunteered most of her free time at charities. I asked her once if she did any of it to ensure she went to heaven to see Dad, but she said she didn’t care about where she ended up. She just wanted to help people.”

I grin at that, imagining the warm smile of Henry’s mother in the wedding picture. “She sounds like an amazing woman.”

He nods, still staring down into his bowl. “She’s why I do what I do. There are too many evil people in this world, and too many good people pay the price. I don’t care if I end up in hell as long as I can ensure I’m taking others down there with me.”

Instinctively I reach out and touch his arm, where a tattoo of Mother Mary rests. “I don’t think you’re destined for hell, H.”

“The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with passion.” His eyes lift to mine. “Psalms 11:5. God believes it’s wrong to fight evil with evil.”

“But you don’t?”

“How many cases in the CIA did we work that had casualties that could have been avoided?” he asks rhetorically, his eyes flicking to the TV, where a news story details another mass shooting in the US, at a grocery store. “In all these organizations, whether they be the military, the CIA, the FBI—you have to follow a code. There are lines you cannot cross, just like in religion. But the evil in this world doesn’t follow rules, and if you want to save the most lives, you have to play as dirty as they do. After working in the military and in the CIA, I learned that lesson the hard way.”

“Why do you think I agreed to work with you?”

His eyes flick back to mine, and he half smirks. “I thought that was because of the promise of good healthcare?”

“Well that too.” I squeeze his arm. “Thank you for telling me.”

He nods, meeting my gaze. “What made you decide to stop practicing?”

I’m surprised he’s asking me that, but I guess if I pried, so will he. “As you know, my parents died when I was seven. I went to live with my grandparents, and they took me to church on Sundays and made me say my prayers at night, but I didn’t want to talk to the God that took my parents away. How could God be benevolent if he causes us all so much unnecessary suffering? And then I got diagnosed a couple years later and

that firmly made me an atheist. God gave me a body that actively tries to kill me. I want nothing to do with God.”

He nods, no judgement whatsoever in his eyes. “I understand that. I may identify as a Catholic in terms of my faith, but I don’t subscribe to organized religion. Even when my mother was alive, I never went to church or read the Bible. My faith was built around the idea of loving and accepting everyone, a foundation created by my mother.”

“That’s beautiful,” I tell him, truly meaning it. These days faith is built around so much hate and anger—hearing about the opposite is refreshing.

He takes in a deep breath, doing a shit job of hiding his ever-poignant grief. “How is your blood sugar doing?” he asks.

I fish out my pump from my sports bra and check it, seeing that my level is at 208 and rising. I just ate, so this is pretty normal. I show him the screen, and he nods. “Go grab a juice from the kitchen and bring it with us to the gym just in case you go low later.”

Always looking after me. “Okay, Mom.”

He gets out of his chair and shoots me a glare. “Don’t be a brat.”

I give him a challenging grin in return. “Why? You gonna spank me?”

I meant it as a joke, but I get goosebumps by the way his gaze intensifies.

Oh my God, does he want to spank me?

Oh my God, do I want him to spank me?

“Meet me in the gym,” he says, his voice low and sultry. Without another word, he leaves the kitchen and disappears behind the metal doors.

Christ Almighty.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

The Extent of My Worthless Anger

We practiced the defense moves for hours after lunch. We only stopped to eat some dinner—which consisted of mac 'n' cheese—then we trained for another two hours. I bet I can do those moves in my sleep.

I offered to turn on some Downton Abbey, but Henry wasn't in the mood. He slinked off to his bedroom a little while ago, leaving me to my own devices. Naturally I started reading some fanfiction while listening to Justin Bieber's Believe album. "As Long As You Love Me" is playing, a personal favorite of mine, and I mouth along to the words as I read.

I'm something of a fanfiction aficionado. I wrote fanfics as a teenager and retired when I joined the CIA because I had zero spare time. But in the rare moments I do have a moment to myself, I open up AO3 and go to town on some 1D fanfics. Right now I'm reading one where Harry Styles is a vampire.

Feeling the need to set the proper mood, I go back to my Spotify and change it from JB to 1D, picking "Take Me Home" to listen to. "She's Not Afraid" starts playing, and I forgo with mouthing along to the words.

"She's not afraid of all the attention! She's not afraid of running wild! How come she's so afraid of falling in loooooooooove?"

I continue to shout the lyrics to my heart's content as I read Vampire Harry sucking the blood of YN, and I am so engrossed in the fun that I don't notice Henry standing in the doorway until the song ends.

“You’re so loud I could hear you through concrete,” he grumbles, leaning his shoulder against the frame.

I shrug, not embarrassed in the slightest. “It’s One Direction.”

“That boy band from the UK? Is that who was all over your apartment bedroom walls?” He asks this as if he doesn’t know. He literally got me 1D décor.

I roll my eyes, indignant to this overgeneralization. “There was also Justin Bieber, the Jonas Brothers, and an Avril Lavigne poster.”

He shakes his head, crossing his arms over his chest. The movement makes me notice his wardrobe: black sweatpants and a Navy SEALs shirt. “Isn’t that music for kids?”

I slap a hand to my chest, truly offended. “They are not kid bands! I’ll have you know, all of these singers manage to convey complex emotions like love, heartbreak, grief, and hope in a way that is both moving and fun.”

He looks like he’s trying hard not to smile. “I never knew you felt so strongly about this,” he sarcastically remarks.

“I knew you’d be a dick and make fun of me,” I respond, burrowing under the blanket I have wrapped around my body.

After a short sigh, he glances at my laptop. “Do you have a favorite?”

“One Direction, easily.”

“Why?”

Why indeed? “Because they all originally were solo artists, but through the magic of

reality TV, they were brought together and created dozens of beautiful songs. They became brothers by chance. I lost my parents, I wasn't really close with my grandparents, and school was always a nightmare for me...Music was my escape from all of that. I guess the idea of a family you choose was intriguing to fourteen-year-old me."

I can see the understanding in H's eyes, and all humor vanishes. "Do you have a favorite song of theirs?"

I nod, clicking to their album *Made in the A.M.*, pressing play on "Olivia." H sits down on the end of my bed and listens to the song along with me, his expression its usual stone-cold mask.

About midway, he grunts.

"It's good," he admits begrudgingly.

I give a little victorious cheer inside my head. "I agree...Do you have a favorite band or singer?"

He shakes his head. "I haven't really listened to music outside of the radio for a long time."

"What about before your mom—when you were a kid. What did you listen to?"

He thinks on it for a moment, then he answers, "My mother loved old Hollywood movies because of its music and dancing. She and I would listen to the soundtracks to those movies all the time."

"What movies?"

“Dozens, but Breakfast at Tiffany’s and Funny Face were probably her favorites.”

I smile at that. “She like Audrey Hepburn?”

“Loved her. Her name was Audrey, and despite what anyone said to the contrary, she claimed she was named after Audrey Hepburn.”

I think this is the most he’s ever told me about his mom. I didn’t even know her name. “Did you like those movies?”

“I liked them because she liked them.” His eyes glaze over as he falls back in time through his memories. “To me they were kind of boring, and Breakfast at Tiffany’s was really racist. But Mom loved Audrey Hepburn, so we watched them together. She would actually fast-forward through any part of the movie that didn’t have her in it for many years. I didn’t watch those movies all the way through until I was probably eight. And during any song, she would force me to dance with her in our living room. She let me stand on her feet until I got too heavy.”

The image of a smaller, innocent version of Henry dancing to musicals with his mom makes my eyes burn. “Did she have a favorite song to dance to?”

He nods. “‘On How To Be Lovely’ from Funny Face . She learned the choreography and would perform the scene seamlessly every time.”

I type the name of the song into YouTube and pull up a clip from the movie. The scene shows Audrey Hepburn and another older actress dancing on a stage of some kind. They’re wearing a matching outfit that consists of a white dress shirt, black pants, a blue skirt, and a scarf wrapped around their heads. I can see why Henry’s mom loved this song; it’s catchy as hell, and the choreography is simple and full of energy—a perfect song to dance to.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Henry smile at the screen, but pain is palpable in his gaze. The sight makes my heart clench.

“You know, I’ve never seen this movie before,” I comment as the song comes to a close.

I fully expect him to decline my subtle invitation, but after a moment, he gives me a small smile. “I’d be more than happy to watch it with you.”

I give H the task of making snacks while I pirate the movie online. By the time I’m done linking my laptop to the living room TV, Henry comes in from the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn bigger than my head. He and I assume our usual positions on the couch, with me using him as a pillow, and then we start munching on the mountain of popcorn he made as the opening credits roll.

“H?” I murmur, keeping my eyes glued to the screen.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for sharing a piece of her with me.”

His body stiffens a bit under mine, but then he wraps an arm around my shoulders, holding me tightly.

I never liked this house. When Jake started making bank as a lawyer, he insisted we get a place to live that exudes wealth and power, something we never had growing up. Even when I pushed back on this idea, he insisted. He said that the world was ours for the taking, and for a long time, I believed him. I believed we were untouchable, I believed we would take the world and build whatever we wanted on top of the society that betrayed us and left us behind to die.

But now I'm sitting in this gaudy mansion by myself, nursing a bottle of whisky, mourning the dream Jake and I were making a reality.

The coroner prepared his body for burial here in the house. I didn't want to go to a hospital or funeral home where questions could arise. I sat there, staring at his still form for what must have been hours while Jake was embalmed and touched up. By the end, he looked like he was sleeping. I kept expecting his chest to rise, for him to soon wake from his deep slumber. But his chest is hollow, his heart silent. My remaining teammates helped me bury him in the backyard. I took a rock and a Sharpie, making a gravestone to mark his final resting place.

Jacob Harrington

Beloved Brother

Once I was left alone, I knelt to the ground in front of the mound of dirt, and sobbed.

My twin is gone, my other half, the only person I could ever truly trust or depend on. Despite all the precautions we'd taken to ensure his safety, he was taken from me by a hired hitman and his blonde bimbo assistant.

They took the only person I've ever loved, the center of my world, right from under my nose, and now they're hiding out somewhere like the cowards they are.

But I will find them. I will not rest, I will not eat, I will not sleep, I will not surrender. Even if it kills me, I will bring the two of them down. Whatever it takes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

Jarring of Judgement and Reasons Defeat

“It’s been silent—no sign of anyone lurking about or asking questions,” Ian informs me over the satellite phone. He’s made his base of operations in a motel in Haiti; it’s where he stays when he’s not exploring the islands as a seemingly innocent tourist. His surveillance has been greatly appreciated over the last few days. I hate being blindsided, which is what I would be without him.

“Make some friends, preferably ones that travel around the area. A fisherman, a tour guide, anything.”

He sighs, clearly not liking the idea. “I’ll see what I can do. How is training Beth going?”

“She’s a quick learner.” I’m currently watching her on the security cameras in the office. I told her to practice with the punching bag while I talked to Ian. She is positioning herself the way I taught her, and her aim is good, but it will take a while for her to build up the strength needed to make an impact. “She just needs practice.”

“Must be weird being in such close quarters. You haven’t had a roommate since the service, have you?”

“No. I haven’t.”

Weird isn’t the word I would use. Living with Beth is easy. She’s very clean, likes to have alone time in her room, watches our show with me—she’s been great. She’s still sleeping with me at night, always spooning me, and it makes it so much harder not to

touch her. I swear she's teasing me on purpose—caressing my stomach and chest when we lie down, making any excuse to touch my hand or arm, always lingering longer than necessary, and she somehow manages to turn every single one of our training sessions into something sexual by rubbing against me or slipping innuendos into her taunts.

She's driving me insane.

“You're awfully quiet,” Ian observes, and I can hear the amusement in his voice.

“Just call me if you see anything,” I grumble, ending the call before he can make any more observations or amused remarks.

I make my way over to the gym and find Beth sitting down on the mats. In one hand is her Dexcom sensor receiver and in the other is a juice box. I sit down on the mat beside her, glancing down at the screen myself, finding a giant 56 on the screen.

“Do you need another?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “This is twenty-four carbs. I should be fine.”

“Let me rephrase: do you want another?”

She chuckles, giving me a thankful look. “I would love another.”

Every doctor insists you have to correct minimally for a low blood sugar, but as Beth has described to me before, when her blood sugar is low, she feels like a starving bear who wants some fucking food.

First time I ever saw her go low was when we were bringing a package from Ricky into our office and that annoying receptionist cornered us, asking what was in the

box. Beth started sweating, shaking, and she got this glazed, unfocused look in her eyes. The receptionist kept asking what was wrong with her, going as far as to step in Beth's way as she tried to get into the office. Beth violently shoved her aside and barely got any coherent words out as she dug around our minifridge for a juice. She downed three before she was able to explain that her blood sugar was 42.

I had known she was a diabetic beforehand, but I had been ignorant to what it really meant. She had leaned against our office minifridge, downing Capri-Suns like she might die if she didn't, and I had asked if she could explain her condition to me. We had talked for over an hour, and by the time we left the office for the day, a foundation of trust had been built between us—a trust that would develop into the greatest friendship I've ever known.

"How was Ian?" Beth asks once the juice box is empty.

"Nothing to report, so we still have time to practice." I wrap my arms around my bent legs, locking my hands together. "You've gotten really good at the escape moves, and your punching has improved greatly. Tomorrow, I want to teach you how to use a gun, and that's what we'll be focusing on until Harrison gets here. We'll still practice defense, but a gun will always be the most important weapon at your disposal."

She nods, letting out a heavy sigh. "Couldn't we take one day off? Just one, so we can spend some time together?"

"We've spent loads of time together," I argue. We eat every meal together, watch *Downton Abbey* after dinner, and sleep together at night.

She looks up at the ceiling in exasperation. "We're doing the things we've always done, and don't get me wrong, I love all the time we spend together, but I want more. I want to go on a date, I want to touch you and kiss you—I'm going insane, H. It was hard enough when I didn't know you felt the same way about me as I did you, but

now that everything is out in the open, I can't just continue to act like we're friends and nothing more. And I know we need to prepare for Harrison and his team, but can—"

I hook my finger under her chin and pull her lips to mine, cutting her words off. She sighs against me, and when she starts reciprocating, I bring my other hand up to cup her face, keeping her locked against me. She wraps her arms around my waist in answer, raking her fingers into my hair, and an involuntary groan escapes me as a result.

I've thought about what this moment would be like for the last three years, and even my wildest daydreams and most vivid fantasies didn't prepare me for the real thing. Her lips are soft and plump; I feel like I'm being sucked into her with each caress of hers against mine. She grows a little bold and bites down on my bottom lip, and I nearly come in my pants like a fucking teenager. I slick my tongue against her mouth, and she immediately opens up to let me in, meeting my enthusiasm tenfold. She's kissing me like we'll both die tomorrow, and if we actually do, at least I got to experience this before I left this earth. At least I'll die knowing the taste of her, the heat of her mouth, the little moans she gives me as I clutch on to her waist.

I'm the one to break the kiss, and Beth lets out a whine in protest.

"I've never done this before," I confess, caressing her jaw with my thumb. "I don't know how to be in a relationship, especially a romantic one. I never really had a friend before you, and I certainly never had a girlfriend or boyfriend. The most I've ever experienced were several one-night stands, and I never felt anything for those people beyond lust. I've never felt this way about anyone before."

"Neither have I," she whispers, tightening her hold around my neck, pressing her forehead against mine. "I love watching shows with you and talking and doing the things we've always done together. I still want to do those things. It's just felt like our

confession never happened, like we're still in the same place...Part of me wondered if that's what you want. Like you said, you have never had a relationship before. Do you even want one?"

"Yes. I'm sorry if my behavior the last few days has made you think the opposite." I shake my head, shutting my eyes. "Nine mercenaries are after us and you have little to no training. I like to believe that Ian and I can take care of them, but if we can't...I need to know you're able to defend yourself. I need you to be as safe as possible. I can't lose you too. I wouldn't survive your death."

She places a soft kiss on my lips. "You won't lose me. I promise."

"You can't make that promise," I grit out, pulling my head away from hers. "I've been going about life like we usually do because it's what I'm familiar with—it's a routine I can force myself to stick to. If I give in to the urge to kiss you, to touch you, to serenade you with romantic evenings, to stay in bed with my face between your thighs for hours on end—I am addicted to you, B. Always have been and always will be. If I give in, I'll never resurface again, and we'll never have you ready for the fight we know is coming."

"You may be easily distracted, but I'm certainly not," she argues, donning that bossy attitude I find so attractive. "I can simultaneously be an attentive student and girlfriend. We train from breakfast to dinner every day, and there will be a no flirting or touching rule other than for training purposes. Then every evening we will have a date of some kind, like a movie or candlelit dinner. And once training is done, all talk of impending doom and fighting gets tabled so we can focus on us and our relationship. How does that sound?"

The image of her at gunpoint surfaces in my mind, the hands of mercenaries binding and torturing her for any information regarding me, or just for the fun of it. I immediately dismiss the thought, but it stresses the fear I've been feeling ever since

that fucking security camera started blinking again. Beth could end up dead, and just like last time, it would be my fault.

But holding back my feelings for her won't keep us less distracted, it will only keep us more so. I'm going crazy as it is, and I know she's the same way. We'll only be torturing ourselves by going about life as usual, and I don't want to anymore. I've wanted Beth since she first started working with me, and now that I know she wants me too, there's nothing that will keep me from having her, nor her from having me.

But also we need to focus on the task at hand.

“Okay.”

She raises her brows. “Okay?”

“Let's go over the self-defense moves a few more times and practice punching, then we'll have a nice evening catered and crafted by yours truly.”

She brushes her nose with mine, smiling wide. “I can't wait. How about we watch more Downton? We haven't seen a new episode in a few days.”

“It's a date, then.” I reluctantly pull out of her embrace, hating the look of disappointment that fills her gaze. But she said herself we need to focus during the day, and I am not going to be lax about it. I can't be.

For our date, Henry makes me a charcuterie board of Cocoa Pebbles, beef jerky, cashews, and dried mango slices, topped off with a large glass of merlot. He puts on Downton Abbey, drapes me in a fuzzy blanket, then settles on the couch next to me, a glass of white in his hands. As we snack on the hors d'oeuvres and drink our wine, I snuggle up against Henry's side, and I love how he holds me, like I'm the most precious thing in the world to him. I'm practically giddy.

In the episode we're watching, the Dowager Countess gets reunited with a Russian prince just after the revolution. Many refugees are without homes and separated from their families, the prince included. It's incredibly sad.

Has Henry ever seen something like this? I wonder. I'm sure he has. He was never a part of a war, but from what I've heard of his assignments in the SEALs, he saw situations just as devastating. "You've never told me how you got into the military," I begin, hoping he'll let me pry into his past a little more.

He looks down at me, startled by the sudden question. "I was sent to military school when I was sixteen, by court order."

I stare at him, mouth agape. "Really? Why?"

"I kept getting into fights and causing trouble. My teachers and foster parents all agreed an attitude adjustment would do me good. I was ordered to stay there until I turned eighteen, but military service grew on me in the two years I was there. With a little help from my school, I got into the United States Naval Academy. I got a degree there, took the ASVAB test, passed the MEPS exam, then I became part of the Navy."

"Well then how did you become a SEAL?"

He sighs as he stares at the screen, not in frustration, but in reminiscence. "Lots of training and pulled strings."

"Do you ever miss it?" I ask, wondering if this is the part where he'll shut me down. Henry and I have talked about our pasts before, but there always comes a point for H when the details get too personal, or a nerve is hit too severely. It's made getting to know him quite difficult, and even harder becoming his friend. Relationships of any kind take a level of trust and openness Henry has never experienced before, and I

think his walls have less to do with an unwillingness to open up and more so about not knowing how to open up.

Or maybe I'm just overanalyzing him.

Surprisingly, he answers me. "I miss the idea of it. I miss the mission, the purpose to do good that drove all of us. I met some good people there. The best people."

"Like Ian?"

He nods. "The other members of my team were great too. Ian was the leader, naturally. Grant was a tricky bastard that cheated at every game of cards or chess we ever played. Atticus was a complete psychopath, but he was weirdly sweet and loyal. Claire was a ball buster that knocked us down a peg when we needed it...I usually hate people, but I never hated any of them. I think they're what I miss most."

"What happened?" I ask quietly.

He keeps his eyes on the screen, but his jaw flexes a few times. "I left the Navy for the same reason I left the CIA. I loved the mission, I loved the people I worked with, but the system itself wouldn't allow any of us to save those we swore to protect."

"Was there a specific thing that happened to make you realize this?"

I watch his chest rise and fall in a deep breath, then he gives a shallow nod.

"Did someone die?" I whisper.

"Someone wasn't found," he responds, and I know deep in my gut who that someone was.

His mom.

“H—”

“Don’t.”

“I’m not going to ask you what happened,” I promise, pressing my body closer to his.
“But I hope you know that you can tell me anything. You can trust me.”

Now, he finally looks at me. “I do trust you; it’s not about that.”

“Then what is it?” I plead, wanting to understand.

“It was my fault,” he admits. “All I didn’t do, and all that I did... You’ll never look at me the same way again.”

I bring my hand up slowly to his face, and when my palm touches his cheek, his body quivers. I’ve never seen Henry like this before. I’ve never seen such vulnerability in his expression or body language. He’s been open with me before, but quivering from my touch? Speaking so lowly about himself? He’s always wound so tight, like metal coils in a machine, but right now I’m witnessing those coils coming undone.

I don’t know who moves first, but as I bring my other hand up to cup his face, he wraps his arms around my waist, and our lips crash together. His lips are firm and hot; his tongue slips into my mouth, and the way he caresses me, the way he nibbles on my lips...it’s like he’s making love to my mouth. He cradles my body in his arms with a gentleness that makes my heart sing, but that all changes when I bite his lip; it unleashes something in him. He pulls me into his lap, and then his hands fly to every part of my body he can get access to. Our makeshift dinner and the stuffy Brits on the screen are completely forgotten.

I'm currently wearing sweatpants and a shirt with Harry Styles wearing his Vogue photoshoot dress on the front, but everywhere he touches makes me feel naked, completely laid bare before him. This feeling only intensifies when H thrusts his hands under my shirt, feeling around for the clasp of my bra, which he manages to undo with a single pinch of his fingers. Suddenly, my shirt is rolled up and my bra is being pulled off my arms. Henry is a man on a mission, but even in the heat of the moment he's still careful to extract my pump from my bra and my stomach, laying the device on the coffee table. His hungry expression doesn't falter for a moment. In fact, it only increases when he lays his eyes on my bare chest and stomach.

Last time I was with a guy, he took one look at my stretch marks and made a face of disgust—they're red and long, kind of raised. I've always been a big girl, even as a kid, and it's something that's taken a while for me to love about myself. But even though I've learned to love myself, part of me has worried that it would be hard to find someone else to love my body as well as I do.

I knew that Henry wouldn't have any sort of negative reaction towards my body, though. His expression is even more hungry than it was before, and instead of aiming his attention at my boobs like any other guy would, he leans forward and places a kiss on naval, making me break out in goosebumps.

"You're so fucking beautiful, B," he says against my skin, grazing his lips along each individual mark, placing kisses as he goes. I didn't think it was possible to love him any more than I already did, but he's proving me wrong.

He starts trailing kisses up my abdomen until he's at my chest, and an involuntary moan slips from my lips as his mouth locks around my right nipple. He sucks it into his mouth, palming the other in his hand, then he gently bites down, and I arch into him, begging for more. He switches to the other nipple, giving it the same treatment he gave the other, and I feel the hand not palming my breast slipping down to the waistband of my sweatpants.

He pulls away from my chest enough to look into my eyes, and his lips curve into a grin as he slides his fingers down to the seem of my pussy, gently tracing my labia and purposefully evading my clit, teasing me.

“You’re already wet for me, Beth,” he gruffly murmurs, keeping his gaze locked to mine. “Do you want my fingers? My tongue?”

“Whatever you’re willing to give me,” I pant, arching into his touch, hoping his hand will graze my clit, but he’s still being a tease.

He leans forward until our mouths are centimeters apart, then the pad of his finger finds my clit. I suck in a breath as he starts to circle it. “Since this is our first date, and I want to do this right, I won’t do any more than this. But tomorrow, when the training is done and we have time for ourselves, I’m going to spend the entire night worshipping this pussy.”

“Please,” I whine, frustrated and horny and impatient.

“Please what?” he asks innocently. “Do you want to come?”

He increases speed on my clit, making me whimper as I respond, “ Yes. ”

He grins, continuing to circle my clit with his thumb while he inserts his middle finger inside of me, crooking it so that he rubs my G-spot. This is the first time I’ve ever seen a guy know about the clit and the G-spot. It’s honestly impressive.

“Come for me, B,” he whispers, grazing his lips with mine. “Come for me.”

I begin rocking against his fingers, increasing the pressure, and with a slightly embarrassing moan, I come on his fingers, which don’t stop their movements for even a moment until I’ve completely come down from the high. Only then does he

retract his hand from my pants, and without breaking eye contact with me, sucks my release off of his fingers.

“Holy shit,” I murmur, letting out an incredulous laugh. I don’t think I’ve ever come that hard, especially not with a guy.

“I’ve dreamt of you coming on my fingers so many times, Beth,” he admits, gently kissing my mouth. “But that was better than any fantasy I could ever have conjured up in my mind.”

I look down between us and see the raging boner he’s sporting. “Need some help with that?”

He shakes his head, caressing my jaw with his hand. “I’ll survive until tomorrow. Tonight was all about you.”

I collapse my weight on his lap, forcing his constricted erection to rub against me. “But what if I want to make you come too? I’ve waited a long time to have you completely at my mercy.”

He groans as I gently grind my hips into his. “I’m at no one’s mercy. Not even yours.”

I chuckle at that, reaching down into the waistband of his pants just like he did for me, and when I grab on to his cock, he hisses through his teeth, leaning his head back against the couch cushion.

“You were saying?” I ask sweetly, starting to stroke him from base to tip, keeping my pressure tight. From the way his hips are lightly bucking up into my hand, I’d say he’s enjoying himself.

“You’re such a bossy little brat,” he grits out.

“Oh, is that so? Last time you said that you mentioned something about spanking me.”

His eyes are blazing infernos as they stare into mine. “Would you like that?”

My stomach flutters at the idea. “Maybe I would.”

His smile is near predatory. “What else would you like me to do to you, Beth?”

I think I like this side of him. I start stroking him a little harder, reaching down with my other hand to grab his balls. I fondle them and cup them, trying to keep my movements with both hands at the same pace.

“Anything you like, Henry. I’m willing to try anything once,” I whisper tantalizingly.

That bold statement is enough to send H over the edge; with a grunt, he comes over my hand, his chest heaving and his lips parted in a near snarl. He looks so unkempt, so unlike his usual stiff and cold manner. As I wipe up his release with my shirt, and I preen with the knowledge that I made him drop his mask.

“I look forward to doing that again,” I say, settling back in his lap.

He smiles, still trying to catch his breath. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

I giggle at that, linking my arms around his neck. “I sure hope not. I plan on tormenting you for years to come.”

He seems to like this idea. “I can’t wait.”

And because the universe hates me, my receiver chooses that moment to sound an alarm, telling me that my blood sugar is going up with two arrows. I may or may not have forgotten to dose because of my excitement for our date.

Whoops.

Feeling the mood quickly obliterated, I grab on to my pump and reattach it to my body, giving myself a correction so I don't spend the whole night high. But given my past experiences with situations like this, I'd say that's exactly what's going to happen.

"I'll go get you some waters," he tells me, placing a kiss on my forehead before heading towards the kitchen.

I smile after him, once again floored by his thoughtfulness and chivalry.

Like a knight in shining armor.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

I Can't Avoid the Lightning

Beth is currently sitting next to me on the couch, where the two of us are eating oatmeal and watching the Downton Abbey season five Christmas special. As invested as I am with this show, I can hardly pay any attention. My eyes are glued to Beth—to the way her blonde curls frame her face, to the way her lips close over her spoon, to the way her lashes flutter as she blinks. The moans she gave me as she came on my hand play through my mind as if they were still happening. I can feel the way her pussy contracted around my fingers and how her body responded to my touch.

“Staring is considered rude, you know.” She gives me a sly smile, never looking away from the screen.

“Do you honestly think I care about being rude?”

She chuckles, leaning her side against mine. “No. You’re edgy like that.”

I cringe, wrapping an arm around her neck. “You make me sound like a high school boy.”

She shakes her head, taking another bite of oatmeal. “Not a high school boy. More like a bad boy in an enemies-to-lovers fanfic.”

Oddly specific. “Read a lot of those kinds of fanfictions?”

“Not as much as I did as a teenager. Now I read AU fanfics and reader inserts.”

I have no clue what any of that means, so I don't bother questioning it. "I find it hard to believe teenagers swoon over glorified serial killers like me."

She sighs, just like she always does when I don't understand something relating to media or pop culture. "First of all, you're not a glorified serial killer. Second, those fics aren't targeted towards teenagers, that's just who primarily reads them. Third, those characters are swooned over because straight women love a man who would kill for them."

Is that so? "Do you group yourself amongst those women?"

"I think that answer is pretty obvious," she says, a little haughtily.

"I have to read one of these fanfictions," I decide.

She huffs out a laugh at that, kissing the side of my hand. "I think reading one of those books would give you a stroke. They're very explicit."

"I have had sex before, Beth, I don't think anything would surprise me."

Her head turns towards me at that, her expression bewildered. "You have?"

I don't know how to take her reaction. "Did you think I've been celibate for the past thirty-six years?"

She shrugs, placing her bowl down on the coffee table. "Kinda, yeah. You're not exactly a people person. I can't imagine you dating, nor do I believe you'd have enough time, with your schedule."

"I never said I've dated, I said I've had sex. Women typically don't respond well to me once they get to know me. Neither do men. They find me cold and sociopathic.

But no one has to get to know me if I meet someone for a one-night stand. I've been told I'm attractive."

She rolls her eyes and smacks my chest. "You know you are, you goober, don't try to sound humble."

I laugh gently, kissing her temple. "You're right about not having time for relationships, even short-lived ones. I haven't been with anyone in years. Not since I left the CIA."

She shakes her head, linking her hand with the one draped over her shoulder. "Here I thought I knew all your secrets, but you keep proving me wrong."

"If it makes you feel better, I didn't keep any of this from you on purpose. I just have a lifelong habit of not talking about myself."

She sneaks a peek at me, squinting. "Anything else I should know about?"

"I hate peas."

Now she glares. "I'm serious! If you and I are going to be anything, I don't want there to be secrets between us, especially given our circumstances. We are living in a bunker twenty feet below surface on an uninhabited island in the Caribbean; it's pointless to keep anything from each other. I want to know every aspect of you, and vice versa."

I can see where she's coming from, but like I said before, I'm not good at talking about myself, and it can be really hard to do so. I don't want her to think I'm not committed to our budding relationship though, and I oddly do want her to know all facets of my being, and I certainly want to know all of hers.

An idea comes to mind, and I grab on to the remote to pause the episode. “Okay, how about we play a little game. For every mark you make on the target today, I’ll tell you a secret. If you miss, you tell me a secret.”

She gives me a challenging grin, nodding enthusiastically. “Let’s do it. I’m going to kick your ass.”

“I won’t be shooting today, it will just be you.”

“Well then I’ll definitely kick your ass.”

I roll my eyes, placing another kiss on her head of curls. The two of us finish up breakfast and watch the last part of the episode, then we make our way towards the gym. Since we first arrived here, I have made her practice the defense techniques so many times she could do them in her sleep. Despite having never been an agent in the CIA, Beth has the same drive and tenacity that everyone has drilled into them through training. She’s a natural with learning new skills and committing them to memory; she never complains about the strict training schedule or how hard I push her; she just rolls with the punches.

I have no doubt she’ll be the same way with shooting.

Within our bunker’s gym is a target practice station, equipped with target sheets and a working track on the ceiling that moves it back and forth. Beth and I are twenty feet away from the target, where she eyes it warily.

“What if I fuck up? I could shoot you!” she exclaims, worrying her bottom lip.

I look through the selection of guns, trying to pick one that would be well suited for her hand. “I have faith in you.”

She makes an incredulous sound. “Well, I don’t, and neither should you.”

I pull out my nine milliliter Glock, one of two guns I carry on me at all times, and begin explaining the basics. “You see this little latch on the trigger? That has to be pushed to fire the weapon. There is no real safety. Down here in the handle is where the magazine is. You click this button here, near the trigger, and it comes out, allowing you to reload it. Never shoot a gun without loading a full mag and loading the chamber, by pulling back the top slide.”

She nods along. “Okay, that’s not too hard.”

“Once you have the mag in and a bullet in the chamber, all you gotta do is aim and pull. This gun won’t have the kind of recoil others will, and it’s nowhere near as heavy. It will be easy for a beginner to use.”

She takes the gun from my hand, then she loads in the magazine and readies the weapon to shoot, just as I instructed.

I gesture to the target, then step back to give her some space. “Now, usually if you’re beginning to use a gun, you’d wear headphones to protect your ears, but given our dire circumstances, you need to get used to the sound. If your ears ring for a while after we practice, just know that’s totally normal.”

She gets into a wide-legged stance. “Thanks.”

She aims at the paper target and fires, letting out a little squeak of shock when the bang sounds through the room. She places her free hand on her chest and takes a few deep breaths.

Oh, to be a rookie.

I pull the target towards us and see a hole just to the right of the target's shoulder.

She does a cute little growl in frustration. "I was pointing it at his head!"

"I know. You owe me a secret."

"I've never killed someone before," she admits, and I can't gauge from her tone how she feels.

"Does the idea of killing someone bother you?" I ask.

She bites her lip, looking back and forth between me and the target. "I don't know. I guess when I'm doing research on your targets or talking to you in your ear while you are on a job, I know how awful the person you're killing is. I know what they've done, and I know that the world would be better without them. But I don't know any of these mercenaries. What if they're just doing a job, like us? What if they think they're doing the right thing?"

I move closer towards her, adjusting her head to face the target and positioning her arms and shoulders so that they're more aligned. I then move behind her, grabbing on to her hips to position her posture and legs. "'Mercenary' is just a fancy word for what I am. These people are killers, make no mistake. Whatever their intentions or justifications, they will capture, hurt, or kill you without hesitation. They're all ex-military, many have been through war, some have worked in the CIA or MI6. You are trained to offer your enemies no hesitation, no mercy, and no thought. If you hesitate, they won't."

I step back from her once again and push the target back. I watch her reload her gun, making no mistakes, then she shoots again. She doesn't react as intensely to the noise as before, but she still flinches. I bring the target forward. She's still way off.

“How the fuck do you make this look so easy?” she demands.

I shrug, pushing the target back. “Years of practice.”

“Any way we can condense years of practice into weeks of practice?”

I chuckle at that, shaking my head. “I don’t need you to be an expert sniper in a few weeks. I just need you to know what you’re doing and be able to fend off a merc if they come for you. You don’t have to hit their head or chest, at least not at first. Hitting any part of the body is helpful, especially the arms. Making their arms immobile increases your chances of getting away. But if you can get a quick shot to the head or chest, it would ensure your safety more.”

She nods, looking a little uneasy. She fires again, barely grazing the target’s shoulder. I watch her stew in anger for a moment or two, then I remind her of our deal. “Your turn again.”

She huffs, swallowing down her pride, then she says to me matter-of-factly, “Your harsh and violent existence should be a turnoff but it’s the complete opposite. Thinking about the power you wield as judge, jury, and executioner to evil people in the world is stupidly hot.”

I grin at her, pushing the paper target back. “Stupidly hot, huh?”

She nods, aiming her gun once more. “You may think you’re fucked up, H, but I’m in the same boat as you.”

She fires again, and this time it’s better. She barely hits the arm of the target, but I’ll give it to her. Before she has a chance to gloat, I unveil a secret of my own. “Even though I consider myself a devout Catholic, I have not stepped foot in a church since my mother’s funeral, but not for that reason. Knowing that churches in the faith aim

to harm others, I could not stomach being inside them. Especially as a bisexual man.”

She gives me a sympathetic nod. “Same here. I mean I’m not bi, but I hate how harmful organized religion can be and I don’t want any part of it.”

She fires again and it hits inches away from the target’s head. She growls, aggressively reloading her gun. “I’ve only slept with one man in my life. It was another analyst at the CIA that I went on a few dates with. When he saw me naked, he grimaced at my stretch marks and made comments about going to the gym together.”

I see red at her words, and it doesn’t escape my notice that she hasn’t revealed the name of this weasel of a man. I may be on an abandoned island in hiding, but I could still eliminate that motherfucker. And she knows it.

“A man like that doesn’t deserve to be in your presence,” I say through gritted teeth. “Your body is one of my favorite parts of you, and that includes your stretch marks.”

She smiles, taking aim again. “He wasn’t very good in bed either. Had no idea where the clit was.”

I roll my eyes at that. “Men who don’t know how to please their partner are either too stupid to learn basic anatomy or couldn’t be bothered to care about anyone other than themselves. Either way, they’re not real men.”

“Even before last night I knew you weren’t grouped amongst men like that. You’ve always struck me as someone that gets off from the pleasure of his partner.”

I wink at her, biting back a smile. “I’ll show you how correct your assumption was tonight.”

With a large, triumphant smile, she fires again, this time hitting the target's bellybutton. She turns to me with a smug grin, and I give her a defeated nod. "I've had sex with ten people, six women and four men. But I haven't been with someone since we started working together. Meaningless nights of passion lost their appeal when you came into my life."

Her cheeks blush a bright pink, and I don't miss the little smile on her lips as she fires again. Her bullet hits a fraction of an inch away from the target's head. She reloads her gun, and without looking at me, she says, "I told you that music was a big part of how I coped with my childhood, but the other way was through being as positive as possible. I never really knew my parents, my grandparents were old and didn't really know what to do with me, and school was really difficult for me as a diabetic. Convincing myself I was happy and looking for any silver lining I could find helped me get through all that."

"You've mentioned having problems in school a couple times. What happened?" I ask.

She stares down at her feet, her expression the most guarded and cold I've ever seen it. "At my middle and high school, I wasn't allowed to carry my insulin on me or administer shots myself, so I had to leave class a lot. And you know how I get when my blood sugar is low or high: I have to pee, drink tons of fluids, and eat half the pantry. Everyone thought of me as a distraction and a troublemaker. I was harassed and bullied by a lot of teachers, staff, and students. I was blamed for having to take care of a condition I never asked for. My grandparents would get calls from my teachers or the guidance counselor to complain about me, but they told me to ignore them. I tried talking to my teachers, to the principal, I even had a meeting with the superintendent, but nothing helped."

She gives a dark laugh, shaking her head. "The superintendent said that he would back my teachers over me and that he wouldn't punish a teacher over one student's

complaints. Turned out he was sexually harassing kids in the school district, but everyone was keeping it quiet because he was so popular.”

I stare at her, struck silent by her words. “I’m so sorry, Beth.”

She shrugs. “That’s why I chose to get into the CIA. I wanted to help people who no one else would help, but I hated how hard the rules and the system itself made that job. So, when you came to me with a job offer, I jumped at the opportunity to do actual good. There are too many people like that superintendent that can do whatever they want because they have power.”

“It’s bullshit that fully grown adults would punish a little girl for a disease she didn’t ask for and make her feel bad for keeping herself alive.” My fists clench at my sides as images of a twelve-year-old Beth flood into my mind, her expression frustrated and angry as all the adults around her tell her she’s doing something wrong and bullying her for taking care of her health.

She shrugs. “Like I said, I managed to get through it with some forced positivity and a lot of boy bands. Therapy helped too. I was convinced that all of the bad treatment I received was earned, that I deserved it, and it took a couple years to unpack that false thinking. Why do you think I encouraged you to go see Dr. Bennett? I know how helpful therapy can be.”

I have nothing to say to that; threats towards those who wronged her won’t fix the past, nor the trauma she endured. She shoots again, and finally she clips the target’s ear. She turns and gives me another smug smile, her usual perky attitude back in place of the resigned sorrow. Now that she has revealed this part of herself, I will always wonder whether her joyful attitude is real or just a mask. I’ve always joked we were opposites in terms of how we present ourselves, but maybe I was wrong. Her walls are just made of different material than mine.

“You’re turn,” she says, still sporting that grin.

I shake my head, pointing at the target. “I’ll answer that if you manage to hit the arm or shoulder.”

She glares at me. “Fine.”

She goes through two rounds of ammo before actually hitting the line of the target’s arm. When I bring it forward and she sees the shot, she jumps and squeals with glee, waving her gun around in the air. I rush forward and grab it out of her hand, giving her an exasperated look. “Never do a giddy victory dance with a gun in your hand!”

She laughs, flinging her arms around my neck. “Don’t be such a party pooper.”

I laugh at how ridiculous that statement is. “I’m a party pooper for making sure you don’t fire an accidental shot?”

“My finger wasn’t even on the trigger. I’m not that stupid.”

I hug her back with one arm, holding the gun at my side. “Maybe leave the dancing for outside of training, that’s all I ask.”

She pulls back from me and gives me a little pout. “I guess that’s fair.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

Ain't It Warming You, the World Going Up in Flames?

I pull the trigger again, firing my last bullet from the magazine, and I don't even make it close to the target's chest. I keep hitting the arm, or more often, hitting nothing at all.

Two days we've been at this, yet I can't seem to get any better.

"This gun is defective!" I exclaim, unloading the mag and then angrily setting both items down on the rack.

Henry gives me a sympathetic smile. "It's not defective. It just takes a lot of practice, and you'll get there eventually."

I huff, planting myself down on one of the sparring mats. "I have been a star student since I was in elementary school. Never got below a B! I can ace a test on Macbeth but I can't shoot a paper person in the head!"

"Macbeth and killing people are hardly the same thing."

I give him a sardonic chuckle. "You clearly haven't read Macbeth."

"I think you're doing a very good job," Henry says, staring down at me with his arms crossed. "Better than most recruits in the Army. None of them have your level of determination and strive to improve."

I glare up at him. "So what you're saying is 'you get an A for effort'?"

He pauses, then chuckles to himself. “I guess I am. Would it make you feel better if I gave you a gold star?”

“Don’t patronize me!” I pout like I really am a student who just failed a test.

“Okay, how about something far more fun? Another game, like we did the other day.”

I stare up at him through squinted eyes. “Go on...”

“For doing such a good job,” Henry begins, the timbre of his voice lowering to a sultry rumble, “I will play out one scenario or fantasy that you’ve had about me, about us.”

I sputter, not having expected this conversation to head down such a naughty path. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He gives me a knowing stare. “You’re telling me that with all your pornographic fanfictions that you never pretended it was you and me, not the characters written on the page?”

Cheeks now flaming, I bashfully look down at the mat I still sit upon. “I don’t think you should open up Pandora’s box like that. I have years of fantasies backlogged in my head, most of them involving some kind of roleplaying, and I highly doubt that’s your thing.”

“Doesn’t matter. This is your gold star, and I will play out anything you want me to.”

Such power is dangerous for me to have, and already my mind is flipping through different fantasies like pages of a dirty novel. It’s hard to pick just one, especially one that Henry might actually enjoy doing. This may be my prize but I want him to have

some fun too.

After some moments of contemplation, I push myself off the floor and stand toe to toe with him, keeping my eyes locked with his as I divulge one of my longest-standing fantasies.

“You discover that I betrayed you,” I tell him. “You tie me to a chair and begin interrogating me for information. You’re angry, there’s fire in your eyes, and you get increasingly agitated that I won’t talk. So, as a last-ditch effort to break me, you lick my pussy until I’m on the brink of coming, but then you deny me my release over and over again.”

I watch gleefully as Henry’s pupils widen, hunger filling his features. “You want me to torture you with my tongue?”

I nod. “And I really want you to get into it. There’s something about seeing you all fired up and aggressive that makes me really horny.”

“That’s not normal, you know that, right?”

I shrug, slowly linking my fingers with his. “I just find it appealing in the bedroom, you going all ‘cold-hearted-killer’ on me. But outside the bedroom, I like you being a grumpy teddy bear.”

If looks could kill, the one Henry is giving me right now would have ended me right then and there. “I’m not a teddy bear.”

“Says the guy who wants me to spoon him every night.”

Henry’s cheeks redden at that. “So what exactly is the context of this fake betrayal?”

“Maybe you find out I stole all of your money, or maybe I became an informant for the FBI, who are trying to take you down.”

Henry nods, taking this perspective role very seriously. “How do you want to begin?”

I brush past him, heading towards the exit of the gym. “I’m going to be in the office, doing some important work for a new mission of yours. Wait five minutes and then come in to confront me about what I did.”

I put a little sway into my hips as I leave Henry behind, hoping to be a bit of a tease. Once I’m out of sight, I sprint to my room and change out of my workout clothes and into a pink dress with daisies, forgoing my panties to make me more accessible.

I casually walk into the office and sit in the chair behind the big computer monitor, mindlessly scrolling through camera feeds and clicking random keys on the keyboard, my whole body humming with excitement.

After a few minutes of pretending to be productive, I notice Henry standing in the doorway from his backlit reflection in the screen. He’s leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed, staring me down intently.

I turn around in my chair, giving him an innocent smile. “Why are you lurking over there?”

He doesn’t say anything, just continues to stare. His expression is cold, his posture hard, but his eyes are molten with heat, his pupils wide and transfixing. It’s like I’m staring into the void.

He slowly approaches me, locking his arms behind his back. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

I fake confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I pay you handsomely, I give you the best insurance, I treat you like my equal—why would you betray me?”

I drop the innocent act and shrug, trying to seem regretful. “I was given an offer I just couldn’t pass up. I was cornered by a fed and he said the only way to avoid jail was to help take you down.”

Henry, as if by magic, brings his hands forward, clutching on to handcuffs. He grabs my arm and yanks me up, forcing me to turn my back to him. He places my arms behind me and cuffs them, whispering into my ear as he tightens them, “I’ve imagined you bound many times, but I’m afraid this won’t be enjoyable.”

My heart flutters and I have to fight off a grin as he pulls me out of the office and drags me into the kitchen. I’m forced into a chair, with my arms around the back, facing Henry as he inspects kitchen knives from the knife block.

“What did you tell them?” he asks calmly.

I give him a defiant look. “You can go ahead and torture me, but it won’t work. I deal with stabs and cuts from sharp objects every day. Those knives don’t scare me.”

He sets down the knife he was inspecting, turning his gaze back on me. “I can always find far more painful methods of getting you to talk.”

I make a raspberry sound with my mouth. “You don’t scare me either, Henry.”

He quickly closes the distance between us, slamming his hands on the arms of the chair and dragging it towards the middle of the kitchen. He looms over me, his face right in front of mine. “It isn’t smart for you to antagonize me.”

God his lips are so close . “But antagonizing you is so much fun.”

Without taking his eyes off me, he wraps his fingers around my neck. He doesn't squeeze, merely rests them against my skin. “I could kill you without moving an inch. Just tighten my grip, apply pressure.”

He emphasizes his point by gently squeezing, with his thumb brushing the hollow of my throat.

“I have killed dozens, maybe even hundreds of people,” he whispers, his fingers tracing the lines and grooves of my collarbone. “I know how to make someone's death painless or agonizing, fast or slow. It's an art I've perfected. You knew this, yet you betrayed me anyways. Why?”

One step away from panting, I force myself to stay in character. “If you're going to torture me, just get on with it. What will it be? Your hands? Knives?”

Henry's mouth curves in a devilish grin as he kneels down in front of my chair. “I have a far more effective way of torturing you, B.”

He pulls on my thighs until I'm slightly slouched in my seat, then he peels up my dress, giving a satisfied hum. “Do you always work at the office with no panties on?”

I try to act nonchalant, keep playing the game, but it's nearly impossible with Henry gently brushing the skin of my thigh, with his hungry gaze placed solely on my pussy, which aches more with every passing second.

This truly is torture.

“Maybe I like feeling breezy down there.”

He chuckles, pulling my thighs farther apart and placing my calves over the armrests of the chair I'm cuffed to. He's made me immobile, unable to stop him from whatever he chooses to do. It's like he said: he could kill me without breaking a sweat, but the hands that are permanently stained with blood are touching me with a delicacy that has me quaking. There's something intoxicating about being the one person on the planet that such a dangerous man cherishes.

"Already wet for me," he croons. "Did that pissant ever go down on you?"

He means the guy I dated. I shake my head. "No. I've never been eaten out before."

He gives a disapproving growl, then, without warning, he leans down and kisses my labia, starting at the bottom and making his way to the top, only using his tongue once he reaches my clit. I let out a hearty moan, and in answer, H sucks my clit into his mouth and grazes his teeth over the hood, clutching on to my thighs with both of his hands.

Looking down to see just the top of his head and his scarred, rough hands holding me down while he eats me out? It's the hottest thing I've ever seen.

He starts alternating between lavishing my clit with his tongue and sucking it into his mouth, and within only a couple minutes, I'm already reeling towards an orgasm. When I use my vibrator, it usually takes at least fifteen to twenty minutes, but Henry has managed to get me there three times as fast.

But just when I feel myself cresting, Henry stops.

I let out a whine, and Henry bites my thigh to silence me.

"You don't get to come until you yield," he tells me.

“Yield?”

He nods, blowing air on my wet pussy, making me squirm. “You betrayed me. If you want to keep your life, you will yield to me by apologizing.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry for betraying you!” I blurt, not even caring about the game anymore, just wanting to come.

He clucks his tongue in disapproval. “You’re such a rotten liar.”

He licks my pussy again, avoiding my clit and instead focusing on my opening. He teases it a little, then I feel two fingers push inside me, curving upwards to hit right on my G-spot. I let out a whimper as he fucks me with his finger, using his tongue to circle around my clit without ever touching it directly.

“I’m sorry I betrayed you, Henry, it will never happen again!” I shout, wishing I could bury my hands into his hair and close my legs around his head.

“You lost the right to call me by my first name,” he replies against my pussy, the vibration of his voice adding to the acute torture.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Cai.”

“Not that either.”

God, he’s such an asshole. “I’m sorry, sir.”

He chuckles darkly, like a villain about to set his evil plan in motion. “That’s more like it. You need to learn how to respect your employer. It’s clear given your bossy attitude and your betrayal that you have none. I’m the boss, not you.”

“You’re right,” I sob, trying to buck my hips against his fingers and mouth. “I’ll do better from now on, sir.”

“You’re damn right you will.” He kisses my clit while his eyes flick up to mine. “Who is in charge?”

“You are, sir,” I reply.

“Who makes the rules?”

“You do, sir.”

“Who owns you?” he asks, biting down on my clit hard. “Who owns this pussy?”

“You do, sir. No one else but you, I swear.”

“That’s a good girl,” he croons. “Now come for me. Drown me.”

He sucks my clit into his mouth, and I’m a goner. With a cry of his name, I come around his fingers, giving him exactly what he asked for. He lets out a satisfied hum as he continues to flick my clit, wringing every ounce of pleasure from my body that he can. When I’ve finally stopped, he places a soft, tender kiss on my mound.

His brown eyes are wild with lust, and the hard-on he’s sporting in his sweats looks painful. He catches me staring at him as he gets off the ground, and his mouth, still wet from my pussy, curves into a grin. “There’s one more thing I require, one more method of repentance.”

I know where this is going and I am vibrating with excitement. “Can you please unhook the cuffs? Please?”

Henry gives a shallow nod, unlocking the handcuffs and letting me free from my imprisonment. I sit up, my dress falling back down to my sticky thighs, and watch as Henry undoes the strings of his pants, fishing out his hard cock. From what I felt when I gave him a hand job, I knew he was super girthy, but his length is pretty normal, no more than six inches.

Which is good for later because there's no way I'm putting a horse cock inside me.

"If it's too much, tap on my thigh," he says, waiting for me to give verbal confirmation before guiding his cock to my lips.

I immediately latch on and suck, wrapping my hands around the base and jerking my wrists in small but assertive tugs. Henry curses, gripping on to my hair tightly, my curls filling his hands.

I may not have a ton of sexual experience, but I know my way around a blow job. Shitty men I went on dates with would guilt me or bargain with me for them, and of course they wouldn't reciprocate. They wouldn't want to have sex either, and it made me feel like I wasn't beautiful enough to take the next step with. I think every plus-size woman can relate to that—the feeling of inadequacy, of failure.

But Henry has never made me feel like that.

He is gripping on to my head like it will keep him from being swept away. His eyes are shut, his head tilted back in bliss as I continue my ministrations. He's murmuring my name, giving me soft praises that make me feel like Aphrodite. Not to mention that five minutes ago he worshipped my body like my grandma worshipped Jesus in a church.

I've never felt so sexy in my life.

“B, I’m about to come,” he warns, rocking his hips subtly into my mouth, using my head as an anchor. “Pull back now if that’s what you want.”

In answer, I suck harder, making Henry chuckle in a sultry, toe-curling tone.

“If you insist.”

After a few more thrusts, he spills down my throat, and the way he moans my name—I’ve never felt more powerful.

I pull back, licking my lips. “Have I earned your forgiveness?”

He nods, panting as he tucks his cock back into his sweats. “Fuck yes.”

I giggle as Henry helps me on to my feet, then he plants a long, sensual kiss on my lips, and I swear I glow from within.

“Thanks for playing with me,” I whisper.

He holds my chin between his thumb and knuckle, rubbing my back with his other hand. “I look forward to the next time you betray me.”

I laugh, enjoying this teasing side of H. I’m about to retort with my own teasing comment, but my insulin pump chooses that moment to make itself known.

BEEBEEBEEP BEEBEEBEEP

I know without having to check that my pump is out of insulin.

Perfect timing, as always.

“Take care of your pump.” Henry kisses me again, though this time briefly. “Meet me back in the gym when you’re done.”

I give a reluctant sigh. “While you’re waiting for me, can you come up with the solution for my broken pancreas and shitty immune system?”

He nods in all seriousness, but there is a glimmer of humor in his eyes. “I’ll get right on that.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

Rather be a Nightmare Than Die Unaware

Since H planned our last date night, I get to plan the next one.

Once we finished our target practice for the day, I told H to go occupy himself for the next twenty minutes while I got everything prepared, and at exactly six, I call him into the living room, where I've lit a few candles and turned off all the lights. My laptop sits on the coffee table, which is pushed back towards the wall the TV rests against, leaving a large open area for what I have planned. Playing from my laptop is a playlist I created for tonight, and right now "S Wonderful" from Funny Face is playing from its small speakers. The voices of Fred Astaire and Audrey Hepburn fill the room as a mystified Henry walks into the room. I extend a hand out towards him from where I stand in the middle of the room, and he takes it without hesitation.

"Every classic romance movie has a dance scene," I say, pulling him towards me. "I thought we could have our own."

"I'm not a good dancer," he warns, holding our linked hands up next to us while his other hand grips my waist.

I sling my arm across his shoulder, resting my head against his chest. "Doesn't matter."

The two of us sway to the song in a gentle side-step motion, with his chin resting on my head, and my cheek resting against his heart, which beats steadfast and strong, like a song of its own.

The playlist goes to the next song, then the next, and still we dance, so wrapped up in each other that time becomes irrelevant, as cliché as that is. It may be easy to feel like you're in your own little world when you are in a bunker on an abandoned island, but I feel it nonetheless.

When the fourth song begins to play, Henry gives me an odd look. The previous songs have all been from old Hollywood movies, but I couldn't resist throwing in a couple bangers from this century.

"Hoedown Throwdown" from Hannah Montana: The Movie blasts from my laptop.

"You said your mom used to learn dances from movie scenes and do them with you." I take a step back from him, starting to do the moves I've memorized since I was a kid. "Thought we could keep the tradition alive."

Henry watches me do the routine for the first verse, then he makes an attempt on the second. His body is very stiff and he looks like he wants to bolt from the room, but he stays put and tries his best to follow along with the song.

I can't help but laugh as Henry attempts the moves, especially at the "shake it out head to toe" part, where he acts like he has a bug in his shirt he's trying to get rid of. Watching him pock and lock is fascinating as well. Seeing Henry dance like someone would in a Disney movie is like watching a dog do taxes. They just don't mesh together but fuck if it isn't hilarious.

By the third verse he has a better hang of it, and he's actually doing the moves on time instead of a few seconds late, so progress is being made. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's even enjoying himself.

I'm out of breath from laughing by the time the song ends, and I expect to see Henry exhibiting the same amount of joy and exhilaration, but instead I watch him tense up

and freeze. His eyes dart to the laptop, where the next song is beginning to play. Another Audrey Hepburn song.

“H?” I ask, worry welling up inside of me.

Without looking at me, he shakes his head and exits the room, his feet stomping with how quick his movements are. I hear a door slam shut, making me flinch, and I’m left reeling from whatever the fuck just happened. I go over to my laptop and pause the song that has only just begun, “Moon River.” Something about this song set him off, and since his mother was the one who introduced him to these kinds of movies, I’ll bet this was some kind of reminder of his mom.

Despite having been a soldier, killing people for a living, and seeing some of the most heinous things capable of the human race, nothing triggers him the way his mother does. From the moment I first heard about her, I knew she was the reason for Henry’s entire being—for all of his beliefs, actions, and feelings. Even in death, she continues to be the center of his universe.

I wish I knew what had happened to her. I could maybe help him cope through his still raw grief and PTSD, but I know in my gut getting the truth from him will be like prying a barnacle off a boat. Someone like Henry can only survive if he keeps everything vulnerable inside him guarded at all times, tucked away behind a wall no one can gain access to. I know because I used to be like that too before I went to therapy, a journey Henry is still in the early stages of.

I head over to his room and predictably find the door closed. Without knocking, I scan my face and slip inside quietly, finding him on the floor, his head between his knees and his hands clutching on to his rosary so hard that his knuckles are white.

I kneel down in front of him, not knowing whether I should touch him or not. “H?”

He shakes his head, keeping his head down. “Dr. Bennett said the only way to move on is by feeling everything, but I can’t. I can’t handle it.”

I reach out and grip his arm, making him flinch. “Yes, you can. You’re the strongest person I know. There is no fight you have lost or battle you couldn’t win, and this is no different.”

“There was a fight I lost,” he whispers, his voice thick with tears. “I lost everything, and it’s going to happen again. I’m going to lose again.”

“What are you talking about?”

He shakes his head, tightening his arms around his legs. “Go.”

I drop my hand, my stomach sinking. “Hen—”

“Go, Beth. Please ,” he begs.

I stand up and head towards the door, hating this feeling of helplessness and worry. I hate seeing him in pain and knowing I can’t help him. I hate that he’s shutting me out instead of letting me in.

I pause in the doorway, my own throat clogged with emotion, and say to him over my shoulder, “I’ll be in my room if you need me.”

Then I shut the door behind me.

There are over seven thousand islands in the Caribbean and Henry Cai is hiding out in one of them. Based upon my intelligence sources, my team and I tracked Ian Lukas’s plane to Miami, where Bethany Reed coincidentally flew by charter plane through the BWI Airport. From there, her trail becomes non-existent. But for Lukas,

he rented a helicopter to Nassau. I'm not too surprised; most scum for hire like Cai conduct their business through the islands in order to keep a low profile and avoid capture, which is annoying for someone trying to hunt him down. There are thousands of places to hide, and I can only use certain resources to search. I have to keep it that way if I want this operation to be covert. No one knows about the true nature of Jake's death, and I need to keep it that way.

I sent two of my guys to scout out Haiti while me and the others focus on Cuba. We're checking the bigger islands before working our way through the small ones. Even if Cai, Lukas, and Reed aren't in these countries, the likelihood of them having stopped here is high. At the very least they used these countries as waypoints to stock up on supplies, and that should be enough to narrow down our search. This part may be tedious, but it's only a matter of time before we catch up to the three of them.

I will not sleep until I have wrung Cai and Reed like towels and made their last moments as agonizing as possible.

Their time is running out.

Henry doesn't come out of his room until the next afternoon. I had knocked on his door a couple times since I had woken up, but I had gotten no answer, so I had decided to practice without him. I thought it was best to leave the gun alone for now since I was still new to it, so I used the punching bag. I mostly decided to do this because I thought it would be cathartic, and I was right. Henry has always been stubborn, like a boulder-stuck-in-a-ditch-of-mud kind of stubborn, but this is reaching new heights. He's never flat-out ignored or shut me out before. Given our present circumstances, it's extremely aggravating. I can't exactly leave to get a coffee or something—I have to stay in a concrete box with the guy.

So, the punching bag it is.

It's around dinner time that Henry makes his first appearance, marching into the room and placing a hand on the bag, stopping it from swaying. "Pick up your gun," he says quietly, his tone more reserved than usual, which is saying something.

Knowing better than to question him, I do as he says and get into position. He pushes the paper targets back, and with a silent nod, he gives me the okay to shoot. I pull the trigger, aiming for the head, but when he pulls the target back up, I can see the bullet hole two inches above the shoulder.

"Again," he orders, pushing the target back.

I shoot again, this time hitting an inch from the target's hip.

His nostrils flare, his knuckles turning white as he pushes back the target with the handle. "Again."

"H—"

"I said again!"

I place the gun down on the weapons' rack, crossing my arms over my chest. "Not until you talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about," he insists, his expression angry. He looks downright pissed, and while I know it has nothing to do with me, he's still directing it at me, and that's not right.

"Bullshit," I reply, marching up to him until our bodies are almost touching, but not quite. He has to look down to meet my gaze, and he seems more aggravated now than he was before. "A group of killers is coming for us and what are you doing? Sulking and fussing like a toddler. You were the one that said my training should be our

number one priority, but I've been here all day while you've been locked up in your room. Whatever is bothering you is compromising both of our safety, not to mention putting a strain on our partnership. So, spill it."

Henry looks taken aback by my outburst, but I'm pretty pissed myself. Henry has never been wishy-washy in the past, nor has he ever been so consumed by his emotions that he neglected his work. I've seen him have panic attacks dozens of times, but after getting some rest and unwinding, he's fine. But it looks like he hasn't come down from that place whatsoever. He's still in fight-or-flight panic mode. He was the one who convinced me that I needed training in case one of the mercs got to me, and he's leaving me alone to figure it out myself, which is absolute bullshit.

"I just realized that even spending late afternoons and nights away from training is putting you behind. I talked to Ian this morning and he's spotted some of Harrison's teammates talking to people around the airport in Haiti."

My eyes widen at that. "He's sure?"

He gives me a single nod. "He sent me pictures and I was able to scan them. They're with Harrison. Which is why we don't have time to fuck off and watch Downton Abbey. From when we wake to when we sleep should be dedicated to training you."

"Making us both work until we're exhausted won't make me any more ready than I am now. You can't turn me into an assassin in a week," I argue, hoping logic will break through this mental hole he's trapped in.

"No, but we can make you more prepared than you are now," he replies.

I feel like I'm yelling at a wall! "H, I'm going to be in a concrete bunker twenty feet below the ground behind metal doors only accessible by face scan, that happens to be equipped with ammunition. Why are you so convinced that something will happen to

me? Unless a nuclear bomb hits the island, I will be fine, and even then, I'd have a better chance at living than you would."

"That's not the point," he argues, his tone clipped.

"Then what is?" I shout, my frustration reaching a breaking point. My throat feels thick and raw, like I'm going to cry, but I pray that's not about to happen. That would be so embarrassing. I haven't been this frustrated since I was a kid, and right now tears prickle my eyes.

"What happened to your mother?" I ask, and you'd think I had slapped him. He flinches away from me, his own eyes lining with tears. "What happened that makes you so certain that I'll meet her fate?"

I watch a tear streak down his cheek, and I want more than anything to wipe it away, but I force myself to stay put. "She died because I failed her," Henry whispers, reconnecting his angry gaze to mine. "She died because I wasn't strong enough or capable enough to protect her. I refuse to make that mistake again. If I can't be enough, then you have to be."

Oh Henry.

"You didn't fail your mom, H," I whisper, taking a step towards him, but he steps backwards, shaking his head.

"And how would you know that?" he snaps, venom dripping from each word. He's like a snake backed into a corner, unable to find a way of escape.

"Because I know you, Henry. Whatever happened, I know you did everything you could to protect her," I insist.

“No, I didn’t. I was a good little soldier and followed all the rules even when it went against my better judgement and she was killed because of it,” he snarls, banging his fist into the wall behind him. It’s concrete, but you’d think it was foam from how hard he hit it and was able to shake it off.

“What happened, Henry? Please.” I reach out my hand towards him, but he just shakes his head again. “What are you so afraid of?”

“I’m afraid that I won’t be able to protect you,” he tells me, abandoning his plan of putting as much distance between us as possible, and instead walking me backwards to the opposite wall, where he then cages my body in with his hands. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to watch the person I love most in this world die for the second time in my life. I’m afraid of being with you only to lose you to either death or the inevitable resentment you’ll feel towards me if you ever find out the truth. I’m fucking afraid of everything when it comes to you, Beth, and I have been since we met. I should’ve left you alone—that way you would be safe—but I’m a selfish prick and I pulled you into this shitstorm because I physically can’t go a day without you!”

At this point, he and I are both crying, and when I slowly cup his cheek with my hand, he doesn’t pull away or flinch. He lets me wipe his wet cheek. He lets me comfort him.

“Why can’t you tell me what happened?” I press my forehead to his, feeling his body begin to shake.

“I can’t,” he whispers. “I just can’t.”

He tears himself away from me and storms out of the gym, leaving me to lean against the wall for support as all the emotions from today crash over me. All of the frustration, worry, and sympathy hit their peak, and I don’t hold back the tears any longer. I let them flow freely.

Nowhere to Go and No Place to Call Home

For the next week, Henry and I barely speak.

Physically, geographically, Henry and I have never been closer, but emotionally we've never been farther apart. For days, he barely looks at me, barely speaks to me unless he's giving me an order during training. He doesn't watch any Downton Abbey with me, doesn't eat most of the meals he makes for us, and when I'm in my room reading fanfics or blasting 1D, he never makes an appearance to comment on the noise level. There have been a few nights where I purposefully made the music loud, hoping he'd come scold me. But he didn't. Like clockwork, every morning we wake up, eat breakfast, we train until dinner, and then Henry disappears into his room. That's it.

I haven't gotten any better at shooting, which has made Henry even more irritable. The closest I ever get is just a nick or graze of the target's outline. I've never once hit the heart or head, and it's because of Henry's attitude more so than my lack of abilities. Every time I miss, he gets angrier. By the end of every training session, he's downright yelling at me, treating me like a grunt in the army that needs to be whipped into shape.

"You're not trying hard enough," he'll say.

"You need to be better!" he'll shout.

"Aim for the head, not the air next to the head!" he'll order.

It takes all my willpower not to snap and call him an asshole. The only reason I don't is because I know how fragile he is right now. He's lashing out because he's scared, and I don't want to push him too hard.

As if this week wasn't shitty enough, my blood sugar has been high. This tends to happen when I get stressed out, and nothing my pump does fixes the issue because the issue doesn't lie with my diabetes. I'm sad and miserable. I miss my best friend, the man I love. I'm going out of my mind right now, so obviously my blood sugar is going to be fucked up and make everything that much shittier.

High blood sugar can make you be in a shit mood, so my restraint with Henry is hanging on by a thread.

A couple of nights ago, I woke up to the sound of clanging, and when I went to investigate, I found Henry in the gym doing some practice of his own. He was there from midnight to four, and he's come back every night since. When we practice during the day, he's running on maybe three hours of sleep. It's very unhealthy, but I know he won't take my criticism right now. He won't even say hello to me. He must know I've been watching him while he practices, but he's made no indication during the night or the next day that he noticed my presence at all. Maybe he's so caught up in his own thoughts that he truly doesn't know. Maybe he doesn't acknowledge me because he doesn't want me to leave. Maybe he misses me as much as I miss him.

Right now, it just turned three in the morning, and Henry is doing pull-ups in the gym. His back is to me, and I watch his back and arm muscles flex as he lifts himself up and down. He's not wearing a shirt, so I get an unobstructed view of his body. Under better circumstances, I would find great enjoyment in watching him work out. Henry is hot as fuck, and what he's doing right now is like one of my wet dreams come to life. Besides the training sessions he's conducted for me, I've never seen him in his physical element. I've never seen him fight or shoot or work out before. His body moves in such fluid motions; there's no strain or hesitation, no sign of struggle.

He acts like this is second nature to him, and after all this time, it probably is. He said he was sent to military school at sixteen, so that's twenty years of fighting, exercising, and training.

He's stopped doing pull-ups and has now started to attack the punching bag like it killed his dog. He's not doing boxing-like punches as I've done, he's doing full on jujitsu. He uses his fists, his knees, his feet, his legs; he uses his whole body. His moves are so precise, so exact...

I bet he's the same way in bed.

I've never been hornier in my entire life. Henry gave me the most mind-blowing orgasm I'd ever experienced and now he barely even looks at me. Any time he touches me, either for readjusting my posture or pretending to attack me so I can escape him, I get overcome with images of his hands traveling over skin like they did that night; I ache in my body and soul for his kisses and his dirty words and his promises of pleasure. Henry's entire being is torture of the most exquisite kind.

Suddenly Henry stops kicking the poor bag, and I watch his shoulders fall and rise as he tries to catch his breath. He slicks a hand through his sweaty hair, and without turning, he says, "You should be asleep."

I shrug to myself, knowing he can't see me. "So should you, yet here you are."

"Since days are dedicated to training you, nights are for me to practice," he explains, picking up a water bottle he had resting on the wrestling mats. I watch his neck flex and his throat bob as he gulps down half the bottle, and even that is enough to make me all hot and bothered.

This is fucking ridiculous.

I walk over towards him and place my hand flat against his sweaty back. He tenses at my touch, lowering the bottle from his lips, but he still faces away from me.

“Just for tonight, can we forget about everything? Can we pretend no one is after us, that the past doesn’t exist, and our future is certain? I want just a few hours with you. I want to fall asleep in your arms and kiss you and be with you.”

He shakes his head before bowing it towards his chest. “Beth—”

“Please.” I lean forward and place a kiss between his shoulder blades, then I watch goosebumps break out over his skin.

For a few seconds, Henry neither moves nor speaks, then he says in a hoarse whisper, “I can’t, B. We both have to be up in a couple hours and if we’re both exhausted from being up too long, we won’t be practicing as hard as we usually do. Harrison could arrive any moment.”

I lean my forehead against his back, making him stiffen. “You’re acting like it’s written in stone that something bad will happen.”

“It might as well have been,” he whispers, gently leaning into my touch.

“Says who?”

“God.”

I roll my eyes, my longing replaced with frustration. “What authority does God have over you? If he is real, then he gave all of us free will, to choose our own destiny, but you’re letting him choose it for you. What good has God ever done for either of us? What aid or comfort or love has he ever provided us? None. If God is real, then he’s nothing more than an absentee parent that blames his children for all of his mistakes.

If he has decided what our fates will be, then let's use our free will to fucking change them."

"There are some things out of our control, some things we can't change. Whether it's God, fate, the universe, or luck, I've been shown time and time again that I'm not meant to be happy. I'm not meant to have love."

I take a step back from him, now getting angry. "Everyone deserves love, Henry. The only one keeping you from being happy and having love is yourself, and you're doing it because you're afraid. Don't blame God or fate for something you are doing to yourself. You are the one who pushes people away, you are the one who refuses to process the emotions inside of you, you are the one who believes you'll lose anyone you come to love. But you know what? It won't be death that makes you lose me. You'll only have yourself and your actions to blame for that."

I turn away from him and start towards the exit, and I don't have to look behind me to know that he's staring at me. I can feel his gaze on me like a brand. Once I scan my face to open the door, I turn back to him, and I hate the anguish written all over his face, even more so since I'm the one who put it there. But it had to be done.

"You need to stop living in the past, H. If you don't, you'll never have the love you crave so deeply...the kind your mother had for you. The kind I have always felt for you," I murmur, making his lips part in shock, maybe even awe.

And with that, I turn my back on him and walk to my room, the only sound being the doors slowly closing shut behind me.

There's a gym at the hotel I'm staying at, and every night since I arrived, I've spent every spare minute in there, thinking of my brother lying dead in the ground, driving me to make sure my body is ready for the coming fight. I must be focused and stick to the plan. Forbid empathy and never yield your advantage. There can be no

mistakes, no hesitations, no flaws in my actions or thoughts. I must anticipate Cai's moves and not improvise. I have one chance to avenge my brother. I will find his murderer, I will not hesitate, and I will carve him up with precision and purpose. I cannot fail.

I will not fail.

Least I Saw the Heart of You

At six in the morning, I force myself out of bed, just like I have every morning this past week. I know if I'm not ready to go to the gym by half past six, Henry will storm in here and chastise me. He's become a drill sergeant as of late, and is it kind of hot? Yes. Is it also really fucking annoying? Also, yes.

I've started sleeping in sweatpants and a sports bra at night, so I don't have to change when I wake up. All I do is throw my hair into a bun and head into the family room. Usually, Henry is making both of us some breakfast, but instead he's sitting on the couch, his posture stiff and unnatural, and his gaze distant. I think for a second that he's having a flashback, but his eyes flicker to me, and I see full awareness there.

"When I say I can't tell you about my mother, what I mean is that I know you'll feel differently about me once I tell you. You'll be disgusted with me," Henry confesses, his voice hollow. Lifeless.

I make a beeline for the couch and kneel down in front of him, placing my hands on his knees. "That would never happen."

He shakes his head. "You can't make that promise."

"If you've made up your mind about how I'll feel, why tell me at all?"

He swallows, searching my expression, then he replies, "Because I realized that we will never be able to move forward unless you know everything."

Apparently, my little speech earlier hit home. “I don’t want to force you to talk about something you’re not ready for. That’s not fair.”

He slowly covers my hands with his, squeezing them gently. “You were right. My choices have led me to the place I’m at now, and I can’t change any of them. The past is written already, but the future isn’t, and I’m the only one that can write it. So, I’m going to tell you what happened, how my mother died.”

I get off the floor and sit down next to him, keeping one hand linked with his. My touch seems to relax him a bit, but he still looks off-kilter and in pain. I absolutely hate it, but I don’t do anything more than that. The only way to help him is to let him unburden all that pain, to comfort him while he opens up a long-festering wound to me. So, I sit back and listen to his story.

“My father’s family originated in Sicily, and when he was a teenager, they moved to Maryland, to a small town where he met and befriended another Italian American boy named Anthony Boreanaz.”

“The two of them were inseparable throughout their childhoods, and this bond led to them both joining the Navy together. My father met my mother while he was on leave, and they got married a few months later, with Anthony as the best man. When they had to go back overseas, Anthony was shot in the leg, and the damage was enough to force him into a medical discharge. He went back to Maryland, where he looked after my mom while she was pregnant with me. He was even there for my birth. My dad died when I was only a few months old, captured and executed by pirates. Anthony vowed to look after my mom and I, and he did just that throughout my childhood.

“When I was ten, Anthony moved to Italy to take care of his grandmother, and we didn’t see him much after that. He still called every holiday and birthday, though, and the summer after I turned twelve, he invited us to visit him. We were supposed to

spend two weeks there in the middle of July, and for the first half of the trip, it was incredible. I loved the food, the history, the scenery—it was all perfect. But one night, about a week into the trip, I was woken up by a loud thud and the shuffling of shoes. We had been staying in a hotel paid for by Anthony, a really fancy suite, and I thought maybe Mama had the TV on too loud or that Anthony had decided to come visit. So, I poked my head out of my room, and I saw Mama in the arms of three fully masked men; one had her legs, one had her arms pinned down, and the other was clamping her mouth closed. They took her outside the room, and I just stood there and watched. My brain was moving twice as slow as it usually did, and it wasn't until a few minutes later that I ran after her. I shouted her name, begged the men to let her go, but I was too far behind them. They couldn't hear, and I doubt they would have cared even if they did. By the time I caught up with them, they put my mother in the back of a car and drove off. I called Anthony and told him what happened, and he promised he would search for my mother while I went back to the US, where it was safer. I didn't want to leave, but I knew I would get in trouble if I didn't, so I let him put me on a plane back to Maryland. Two months later, Anthony disappeared. I didn't hear from him after that.”

Beth's thumb brushes over mine, and I can't help but notice how soft they are. Her fingers aren't callused or rough, nor is her skin marred with scars and scrapes. She's smooth and delicate. Perfect. Her touch acts as a good anchor to hold on to while I continue to tell her my story.

“After five months of searching, they declared my mother dead, but I knew she wasn't. I was convinced I would have felt it if she had left this life to join God, so I held on to a small shred of hope that she was out there somewhere. That hope didn't offer me much comfort or respite from the anger and grief roaring inside me. I got into a lot of trouble because of it, and I was shipped off to military school when I was sixteen. I hated it at first, but as I got accustomed to the discipline, the other cadets, and the mission—I grew to really love it. You already know about my life in the military and why I left, but what you don't know is that I searched for Mama while I

was in service. My team was SEAL Team 6; we specialized in hostage rescue and counterterrorism, and the organized crime families in Italy were our main focus for a few years. They trafficked weapons, drugs, and humans in and out of the country. I was able to piece together that my mother had been taken by one of these crime families and trafficked, but I didn't know by who or where. We were only allowed to stop the weapons trafficking, but many of the buildings and boats we raided had trafficked people stashed away. Mama was never amongst the victims, and when I finally asked my superiors if we could focus on stopping the enslavement of innocent people, they said no. Human trafficking is not a threat to national security, they said. But even if the answer had been yes, Italy has virtually no database for the trafficking that goes on in the country, and our resources within the SEALs was minimal. I knew I wouldn't find her if I stayed, so I made the decision to leave."

Recognition fills her features. "Because someone wasn't found," she repeats my own words back to me, and I nod solemnly.

"The CIA allowed me to have more freedom than the SEALs did, but the red tape and bureaucracy followed me. As you know, I developed a reputation of going against regulations and orders, and for the most part, the higher-ups let me get away with it. I got results, and that's all they cared about. So, I used the CIA's resources and money to try and track down my mother, but the lack of data on Italy's part was still a problem. I needed knowledge of the different crime families, who traded in what, and where each family sent their slaves."

Her pink lips part. "That's why you sought me out."

"Yes. The data you had been collecting told me that my mother had likely been taken by the Santoros family. The hotel we had stayed at was in their territory, and they used the coast to export people to different parts of Europe, particularly in the Netherlands. Anthony Santoros, one of the members, owned property in the Red Light district in Amsterdam."

“But other organized crime groups deal in the trafficking of humans. How did you know it was Santoros, besides the location of the hotel?” she thinks aloud.

“I didn’t, but I had to start somewhere. Anthony Santoros owned three brothels there, and I searched the most popular of the three first, Elysium. I slipped in amongst the midnight crowd of customers, bartenders, and workers. I let one of the women lead me upstairs, but when we were behind closed doors, I asked her if she was being trafficked, and she broke down in tears. I managed to get out of her that all of the prostitutes and bartenders were there against their will, and their job depended on their age. You became a bartender if you were above sixty-five or a prostitute if you were above sixteen. I asked her if she had ever seen a Chinese-American woman in her fifties named Audrey, and her eyes grew cloudy with tears. She said Audrey was in room seventeen.”

My hand shakes in Beth’s grip, and I begin feeling the signs that I’m about to have a panic attack, but I don’t let these feelings overtake me. I need to get this out. If I break down now, I’ll never get through this, and I owe it to myself and to Beth to uncover this festering wound.

“I went into seventeen, and there she was. Mama. Naked. Tied up. Her body limp and frail, her hair streaked with grey, her skin sickly. A syringe needle was sticking into her neck, and a man had his finger on the plunger. He only injected half the dosage before realizing I was there, and when he turned towards me, I looked into the eyes of Anthony Boreanaz for the first time in over twenty years.”

“Oh my God.” Beth clasps a hand over her mouth, shaking her head.

I give a single nod, feeling my chest clench painfully, growing tight like a stretched band, as if my heart were trying to rip apart my body from within.

“No,” I whispered, my hand shaking as I pointed my gun at my dad’s best friend, the

man I had known my whole life...the only father I had ever known.

Uncle Tony let go of the syringe, leaving it sticking out of Mama's neck. He tilted his head to the side, his eyes wide and horror-stricken, like he'd seen a ghost. Ironical since he'd been the one presumed dead for the last two decades.

"Henry? My you've grown. You look just like your mother." He said it so casually, like I didn't just catch him drugging my mother.

"Why?" I begged, my throat growing hoarse. "My dad trusted you, my mom trusted you. We loved you like family. We—and then you promised to save her. I thought you were dead."

"The man you knew is dead," he said. "My parents abandoned their duty to our family when they left Italy, and my grandparents reminded me of the fidelity we have to blood. I reclaimed my true surname, my status, my wealth as the family's heir. I may have loved you, but you're not blood."

"You were the one that took her." My teeth gritted together, and I spit the words out at him. "You promised me you would bring her back to me! You promised me!"

He shrugged. "We all must make the most of the shitty hand we're dealt. It wasn't personal."

"I shot him right between the eyes," I tell her. "He was dead before he hit the ground."

"Good fucking riddance," Beth whispers, her voice thick with emotion.

"I ran to my mother's bedside and took that needle out of her neck, but the amount of heroin Anthony had injected her with was enough to make her OD, and even though I

didn't know it in that moment, my instincts told me my mother wasn't going to live. I knew I only had minutes with her before I would lose her again."

Tears streak down my cheeks, and I can hardly register Beth hugging on to my side, placing kisses on my shoulder and neck. All I can feel is the weight of my mother in my arms, of her blood soaking my skin from the beatings she received. All I can see is her cloudy gaze focusing on me, and her smile wipes away whatever pain she might have been feeling.

"Henry? My Henry?" she had whispered, reaching up to cup my cheek, and even that small movement exhausted her.

I nodded, holding her hand up to my cheek, placing a kiss on her palm. "I'm right here, Mama. I'm right here. You're safe. I found you."

She gave a weak laugh, and tears filled her weary eyes. "Look how you've grown. You look so much like your father."

By this point I was crying alongside her, but that last comment sent me over the edge, and for the first time since I was twelve, I sobbed in my mother's arms. Despite the fact she was dying, she used what energy she had left to comfort me, to assure me that all would be well, even though we both knew it wouldn't be.

"Please don't leave me, Mama," I begged. To her, to God, to the world. I begged for my mother to survive. I had just gotten her back. I already knew what it felt like to live without her, and I didn't want to do so ever again.

"I never left you, X?ng?n. I never will," she assured me, her expression contorting in pain. I looked around the hotel room for anything to help her, anything to make her pain lessen, but the only things here were sex-stained sheets, the dead body of the only father I ever knew, and a mostly empty heroine vial.

“I love you, Mama. I love you,” I sobbed, my tears splattering onto her pale, sickly skin. I leaned my forehead against hers, clutching her tightly to my body, as if I could transfer some of my strength to her.

“I-I love you,” she panted, her eyes becoming glassy. “I’m scared.”

“Everything is alright; N?shì ?nquán. N?shì ?nquán,” I whispered, placing a kiss on both her cheeks brushing her hair from her face.

I didn’t know how to put someone dying at ease; I still don’t. But I did the only thing I could think of, the thing my mother did for me whenever I was scared. So, in a soft, low tone, I began to sing, slowly rocking her body back and forth like one would do for a restless infant.

“Moon river, wider than a mile

I’m crossing you in style some day

Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker

Wherever you’re goin’, I’m goin’ your way

Two drifters, off to see the world

There’s such a lot of world to see

We’re after the same rainbow’s end

Waitin’ ’round the bend

My huckleberry friend

Moon river and me.”

She took her last breath shortly after I finished, and all I could do was stare down at my mom, my world, the light of my life. Part of me kept expecting her to regain focus and assure me that she was okay and would remain so, but she didn’t move. Her eyes stayed open, her mouth agape, her chest unmoving.

Dead.

“I heard a woman’s voice from down the hall,” I continue, “along with a deep masculine voice shouting in anger, and something inside me snapped. I placed my mother down onto the ground, exited the room...then I killed them all. I went from room to room, level to level, shooting everyone except for the workers. Every supervisor, every boss, every patron, every drunken observer in the street. When I ran out of bullets, I used a knife. When I lost the knife in someone’s back, I used the cane one of the supervisors used to beat the prostitutes. When the cane broke, I used my hands and whatever objects I could find. I bathed the brothel in the blood of the slavers and predators. By the time I was finished, my clothes and skin were soaked in the blood of my mother and the blood of my victims. The woman who had helped me earlier, as well as all the other prostitutes and bartenders, cowered in fear of me. They hid behind furniture, cried behind the bar, and looked at me like I was no better than the men that had sold them. Before the authorities arrived, I retrieved my mother’s body, drove to Veluwezoom National Park, and buried her there. I marked it with a makeshift cross I made from two sticks and then I recited various prayers, ensuring she would enter heaven.”

I flick my eyes to Beth, who sits next to me stiffly, her eyes red from tears. I can’t tell what she’s thinking by her expression, and I don’t try to decipher it. Instead, I tell her this: “The CIA had to do a lot of damage control because of the massacre I created in Amsterdam. The Netherland government claimed that the fault was with a group of brothel patrons high on meth. The director of the CIA said that pinning the blame on

me would only paint the CIA in a bad light, and the Netherlands along with it. So we all agreed I would go quietly. I had no idea that you would be let go as a result, and the minute I found out, I asked you to come work for me, and despite my best efforts, despite the vow I made to myself to never trust anyone again, to never care for someone again, I grew to admire and care for you as we worked together.”

I squeeze her hand in mine, feeling another tear fall down my cheek. “I love you, Beth. You think what I did for my mother was extreme and barbaric? There is no limit to what I would do to keep you safe. I would kill anyone, break any rule, defy any lingering code I still live by, even betray the God I serve. I’ve resisted you, pushed you away, because if you die—”

My voice cracks, and I’m not sure I can even finish that sentence. But I must.

“I learned how to survive without my mother, but I couldn’t learn how to survive without you. If you die, I cease to be.”

“You think it’s not the same for me?” she whispers, bringing her shaking hands up to cup my cheeks. Her palms and fingers are as soft as the rest of her, and I want nothing more than to fall into her arms and never leave them. “You are my life, Henry. Without you, I’m nothing. Did you really think you telling me all of this would change that?”

“It should,” I whisper, no longer having the strength to resist her comforting touch. I lean into it, into her. “I killed dozens, maybe even a hundred people because of my mother, and I know not all of them were to blame for what happened to her. The customers and bystanders did nothing, but I killed them anyways, and I feel no remorse for it. I feel no remorse for everything I did in the name of protecting my mom or avenging her death.”

Another tear falls down my cheek, and I let her wipe it away with her fingertips. “I’ve

been so scared of what Harrison will do when he arrives here because he and I aren't all that different," I admit. "His brother was his entire world, the only person he ever loved, and that was my mother for me. He'll slaughter anyone that gets in the way of his revenge, just like I did. And you know what the worst part is? I would feel no remorse if I did all of that again to protect you. I would bathe and revel in the blood of anyone who dares lay a finger on you. You should be repulsed by me, as I'm sure Mama would be if she were here."

She grips my face tightly in hers, her expression almost angry. "That's all a bunch of bullshit. You don't hurt people for pleasure or money, you do it to protect people. Everything you do is for the benefit of others, not for you, and that's what sets you apart from the rest, especially from Harrison. If it's true that all sins are seen as equal, and that you will be judged by God the same as the people you've killed, then I'll be suffering eternally beside you."

"What are you talking about?"

She laughs incredulously, shaking her head. "I agreed to come work for you, knowing full well how many laws and rules we both would break; I buy you acid and mercury to destroy bodies, a task you and I have both done on several occasions, and I help you track down and study the people you kill before you kill them. You may pull the trigger, but I load the gun. How could I judge you as if I were on a moral high ground when we've always been the same, H?"

I attempt to break my gaze with her, but she holds me firm, preventing me from turning away. "I love you, Henry Cai, and I'm not going to let those fuckers take our future away from us. When they show up here, we kill them all, then we spend the next six or seven decades eating food from cans and fucking on the beach. I will accept no other alternative."

The picture she paints is more than I could ever ask for, and for that reason, I know

it's too good to be true. I will never be allowed to have happiness like that, but even if I were..."I've spent so much of my life working towards the goal of finding my mother and killing all those who mean to harm others...I don't think I know how to do anything else. I don't know how to just exist in the moment, to be happy."

To my surprise, Beth smiles. "Good thing we'll have the rest of our lives for me to teach you."

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Living Life With No Need of Brakes

Henry leans forward and catches my mouth, and I'm once again caught off guard by how warm and soft his mouth is. It's so easy to let him pull you in through his kiss, like a siren luring a sailor with their song. I'm utterly lost in him.

He grips on to my hips as his tongue slips into my mouth, anchoring me to the couch. I move my hands from his face down to where his neck meets his chest; I fist his shirt in my fingers, pulling him closer to me, if that's even possible.

"Beth." Henry tries to break the kiss, but I know what he's about to say, and I'm not having it. I suck his bottom lip into my mouth, making him groan in pleasure and restraint.

"Beth," he says again, his voice barely rising to a whisper, but the urgency is still the same as before.

"What?" I lean back temporarily, but I don't let go of him. Neither does he.

"Are you sure?"

I nod manically. "Fuck yes."

"Good." He places his lips back over mine, then unexpectedly picks me up bridal style, making me gasp into his mouth.

"Where we going?" I ask, looking around as he carries me through doors and down

hallways.

“I’m not going to fuck you for the first time on a couch. You deserve a bed.”

That’s oddly romantic. “You can be such a softie,” I croon.

He narrows his eyes, giving me a warning glance. “Don’t patronize me.”

A giddiness rises in my chest. “Why not? I like pushing your buttons.”

He chuckles darkly. “You really are a brat.”

We finally make it to my bedroom, and only when my back meets my mattress, with Henry hovering over top of me, do I reply, “What are you going to do about it?”

His heated gaze leaves mine, running over my face, neck, and chest; I feel a blush creep up my skin wherever his eyes land, and I don’t think I’ve ever felt so sexy in my life. The lust and need in his eyes tell me how attractive he finds me.

“What do you want me to do about it?” he asks, and his words feel like a caress against my skin.

“When you misbehave, you get punished, don’t you?” I whisper, biting his lower lip, sinking my hands into his hair.

Using his knuckles, he brushes my cheek and temple, his voice becoming gravelly and rough, just like the five o’clock shadow that’s spread across his jaw. “I wouldn’t have pegged you as a sub.”

I shrug. “Perceptions can be misleading. Now stop talking and make me yours.”

By the erection he has rubbing against my core, I'd say he likes that idea. He grabs onto my sports bra and yanks it up, exposing my boobs to his hungry gaze, and just like last time, he carefully detaches my pump and sets it aside on my nightstand before starting to tease me, his hot breath caressing my nipples and the valley between my breasts.

“You said you’re willing to try anything once—are there any exceptions to that?”

“No non-con,” I say with hesitation, arching my back so my breasts get closer to his teasing mouth. “No choking either.”

He nods. “I agree. I don’t like degrading my partner. Is that okay with you?”

I give an impatient whine, wiggling under him. “Yes, now will you touch me already?”

His eyes travel up my chest to my face, then he tsks softly. “I’m the one that gives commands here. There’s another part of your body that I want to worship before I get to the rest, and you’ll just have to be patient.”

I’m about to make another comment, but then I notice Henry is sliding down my body and taking my sweatpants with him. I fall silent and listen to his instructions without protest, watching him with an eager expression as he undresses my bottom half and bares my pussy to his gaze. He spreads my legs, admiring me for a moment, then with a ravenous growl, he buries his face between my thighs, licking me from the bottom of my vulva to my clit.

“Christ on a cracker,” I breathe, locking my legs over his shoulders.

“Are you going to come for me, Beth?” he asks, sucking onto my clit.

I give a nonverbal string of grunts and whines, which Henry rightfully interprets as a yes. He alternates between kissing and sucking on my clit, very quickly sending me into the beginnings of a climax. I dig my nails into his scalp, urging him to keep going, but in a wicked turn of events, he stops his ministrations after my reply, once again hovering his body over mine.

“Why did you stop?” I demand, frustrated and aching for release.

“I want you coming on my cock,” he tells me, unhooking my sports bra from its front clasp and tossing it aside with the rest of my clothing. “But since you keep trying to make demands, I’m gonna make you work for it.”

Before I can ask what he means, he slides off the bed and begins undressing himself. He rips his shirt over his head, then starts on his pants, saying quietly, “Get on your hands and knees.”

I really like this dominating side of him. Panting and still aching from before, I do as he says, sticking my ass out towards him and resting my weight on my elbows. I look over my shoulder at him, finding him naked and stroking his dick, which is already leaking precum from the tip. He swipes that little bead again and begins unwrapping a condom, but I stop him.

“I have an IUD, and you said you haven’t been with anyone in years...”

He drops his act and raises a brow my way, seeking confirmation. “You are okay not using a condom?”

I nod. “I want to feel you.”

He grins, stepping behind me and rubbing his throbbing erection against my folds, making us both moan. He gives my ass cheek a small smack, not enough for it to

sting, and then gives the same treatment to the other. “Is that okay? Or do you like it harder?”

“Harder,” I whisper, and when he smacks me again, I arch into his touch, loving the muted sting his hand produced. “Just like that.”

I feel his cock nudge the entrance to my pussy, and with one hand on the small of my back and the other rubbing my still-stinging ass cheek, he starts to sink into me.

“Fuck,” he curses, pausing about halfway in, letting my body adjust. “How does it feel?”

I frantically nod, leaning back against him. “Keep going.”

He continues pressing into me until he’s buried to the hilt, and instead of fucking me, he bends over me until his chest is pressed against my back and his mouth is near my ear. “Are you going to keep telling me what to do, B?”

I shake my head, leaning my forehead against the rumpled blankets. “No.”

“You don’t get to come until I say so, and if you continue to be a brat or you disobey me, I’m going to take it out on your ass. Now, if I do something you don’t like or you want to stop, use a safe word of your choosing.”

“Dracarys,” I tell him, earning a chuckle.

“You want your safe word to be the phrase Daenerys Targaryen used to order her dragons to burn her enemies?”

I shrug. “I tried thinking of words I wouldn’t say during sex, and that was the first thing that popped in my head.”

Snickering, he places a kiss on my shoulder, then he gets off of me, resuming his earlier position of standing behind me. He twirls my hair around in his fingers until it's wrapped around his fist, then he pulls gently, using my hair as a handle. "Are you ready?"

I've been ready for three years. "Yes."

I can hear the smile in his voice as he says, "I haven't even moved and yet your little pussy is trying to strangle my cock. Are you close, B? I can feel how wet you are, how aroused that clit of yours is."

Who knew Henry had such a dirty mouth? "No, I can only come with your permission," I reply.

He gives a low hum, slowly pulling out of me, only to plunge back in. "Good girl."

He starts a steady pace, one that drives me absolutely up the wall. His cock is massaging my inner walls and my G-spot in a toe-curling way, but his speed is so fucking slow it's preventing me from building up to my own release, which is exactly what he wants. This is punishment for my comments, for ordering him around.

"You're such a fucking bastard," I hiss, looking at him over my shoulder. In answer, he slaps my ass hard, no doubt leaving an angry red handprint behind.

"What was that, B?" he asks, feigning ignorance.

"You're going too slow!" I growl, trying to fuck myself on his cock, but he's holding me in place by my hips.

The next time he plunges into me, he does so almost violently, snapping his hips into mine. I jolt from the impact. "Is this what you want, B?"

He continues to fuck me at this brutal pace, his one hand clutching on to my hair while the other takes a couple more swings at my backside. All the while his balls are slapping against my clit, making my orgasm go from distant to right within reach.

He pulls on my hair until I'm forced to kneel on my knees, with my back against his chest. He lets go of my hair and explores my body with his hands, caressing my breasts, my ribs, my naval, but he actively avoids my clit. His lips trail kisses up my neck and shoulder, and I lean my head back against his chest to give him full access. With all of his touches and the brutal rhythm of his cock, I'm right on the edge, but my body seems to take Henry's directions to heart, never plunging over the cliff because he hasn't given the word that I can.

I don't think I've ever been this turned on before. I feel almost dizzy from it, like I might pass out from the pleasure building inside of me. I want to give all the credit to H's bedroom prowess, but part of what makes this moment so monumental is him being the person I'm sharing it with. For so long, I thought I'd never get the chance to do this, to be connected with Henry in every way possible, to see him at his most vulnerable, to be worshipped with his hands, mouth, and body.

Dropping all games and attitude, I tilt my head until my forehead is resting against his neck. I place a small, chaste kiss on his jaw, reaching my arm behind me to wrap around his neck, holding him against me. "I love you."

He cups my cheek with one hand while continuing to explore my body with the other; as he tilts my face up to capture my lips with his, his nimble, scarred fingers finally touch my clit, and within seconds, I'm coming so hard my vision blacks out for a moment. While I'm caught up in the throes of my own climax, Henry reaches his, groaning my name as he comes inside of me.

Henry leans his forehead against mine, cradling my exhausted body against his. "I love you, too, B."

“Are all of your tattoos religious?” I ask, trailing my fingers along the depiction of an angel reaching out with his hand towards a falling Lucifer; it stretches over the left side of his chest, made entirely of black ink.

He and I have been cuddling in bed for the past half an hour, making random chatter here and there, but mostly just holding one another. It’s been nice, but my curiosity has gotten the best of me, and I can’t help but ask him about his tattoos. I’ve always wanted to, but I thought he would turn me down.

He shakes his head, grabbing my fingers and placing them over a tattoo of a blue sparrow under his right collar bone. “A blue sparrow is one of the many symbols of the Navy.”

He then places my hand on a tattoo on his left arm. “This is a purple iris—my mother’s birth month flower—then here is a white water lily.” He drags my fingers to the tattoo above the iris, hidden under his bicep. As I stare at the beautiful flowers, something occurs to me: water lilies are my birth month flower.

“You got a tattoo for me?” I ask, awestruck.

He gives a shallow nod.

“When?” I whisper.

He begins circling the skin of my hand with his thumb, our hands both covering the water lily. “Do you remember last December, your pump got crimped and you couldn’t get your blood sugar down? I’ll never forget looking behind me and watching you collapse from your chair onto the ground; the panic I felt in that moment will stay with me forever. I didn’t know what to do, so I took you to the emergency room and they were able to help you.”

My site, where my pump's tube connects to my body, crimped when I injected it and my tube into my stomach. Since it was a nine-millimeter site, it bent pretty badly inside of me. They had to remove it for me.

I nod, snuggling in closer towards his body. "Yeah, I remember."

"It was one of the worst days of my life," he confesses, bringing our combined hands up so he can place a kiss on my knuckles. "By that time, you and I had become friends. I knew I cared about you, but watching you pass out, seeing you in the ER, knowing I couldn't do anything to help you...I hadn't felt so helpless and afraid since my mother was taken. You had told me what can happen if a diabetic goes into DKA, and while I was in the waiting room, I was obsessing over the possibility that you might go into a coma or worse. When they finally let me back to see you, and you smiled at me like my presence comforted you...I knew I loved you. But if I'm honest, I was in love with you long before that. I just couldn't admit it to myself until I thought I was going to lose you."

I place a kiss on his chest, right below his blue sparrow. "And so, you got my birth flower tattooed next to your mom's," I conclude for him.

He nods once, leaning his forehead down to rest against mine. "I hadn't felt any kind of love since my mother, and when I realized my feelings for you, I swore I would never voice how I felt. I didn't believe you felt the way I did, which was one reason for my silence, but the main one was because I didn't want you to be used against me by my enemies. When I got compromised, when I looked into Johnathon Harrison's eyes after I had murdered the only family he had left, I knew that my worst fear was going to come true. All he would have to do is make any sort of threat against you and he would have me completely under his power. I saw history repeat itself, and I panicked, just like I did that night. I wasn't able to protect my mother, and I worried I wouldn't be able to protect you either."

“But that wasn’t your fault.” I pull my face away from his, cupping his jaw so he keeps his gaze on me. “You were a child, Henry, a twelve-year-old boy. There wasn’t anything you could do. And when you found her, there was nothing you could have done to prevent her from overdosing. If something were to happen to me, I know it wouldn’t be because you couldn’t have helped me. None of this was your fault.”

He shakes his head, his eyes falling shut and his jaw clenching. “If it wasn’t my fault, then I have to accept that there are things out of my control, that some things are truly up to God’s will.”

I give him a melancholic laugh, brushing his cheek with my fingertips. “When I was diagnosed, I felt the same way. Back then, I still held on to some of my religious beliefs, and I desperately looked for any reason why God would have given me an illness that couldn’t be cured. My grandparents would tell me that it was all part of God’s plan, but his plan fucking sucks. Why does he get to ruin my life just because he created us? God is no different than my grandparents, people who thought like they could decide how I felt and thought just because they were blood. So, I decided I wouldn’t believe in God, and I hoped that renouncing my religion would make me immune to the things that were out of my control, but it didn’t. I am still a diabetic and my parents are still dead. I can’t control everything, but what I can control is how I live my life. I choose to look at the world with a glass half full, to use my skills and time to help others, and to leave my comfortable job to take a chance on you.”

H opens up his eyes and tears blur his vision. With a blink, a couple drops fall down onto the pillow under our heads. As another one slides down his cheek, I brush it away with the pad of my thumb, trailing water across his skin. “You can choose to forgive yourself and accept that you can’t control everything. It won’t be easy, but what kind of life are you living if you don’t?”

He licks his lips, sucking in an uneven breath. “Can you hold me?”

I smile, pecking his cheek. “Turn over.”

I spoon him from behind, like I have done every night we’ve shared a bed, and rest my cheek between his shoulder blades, loving the content sigh he gives as he settles in my embrace.

“You don’t have to bear all the weight alone, H,” I whisper, kissing his back tattoo, which is a large snake slithering along his spine. “Don’t you think it’s about time you let someone protect you?”

He grabs on to my hands, holding them against his stomach. “From what?”

“Not all enemies are sentient beings. The most cruel and unforgiving are the ones that live inside our heads. You and I can fight all of them off together.”

He pauses for a moment, soaking in my words, then I hear him give a faint murmur. “Together,” he agrees.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

This Cage Was Once Just Fine

I wake up to a very insistent beeping noise behind me, one I recognize as Beth's pump. This beep goes off if her pump is out of insulin or it's been shut off for too long. With one peek over my shoulder, I can tell it's the former. Beth gives me a groan, her eyebrows knit in dramatic despair.

"I don't want to get out of bed." She frowns down at her pump, her nostrils flaring when it goes off again.

BEEBEEBEEP BEEBEEBEEP

I kiss her cheek, nodding towards the door. "I need to check and see if I missed any calls from Ian, anyways."

She reluctantly pushes herself out of bed, and I'm greeted with her nearly naked body. She's wearing a bra so she has something to attach her pump to, but other than that...

She smirks at me over her shoulder. "See something you like?"

I roll over on the bed, now lying on my stomach, facing her. "If you didn't need to refill your pump, I would keep you in bed all day."

She grins, giving me a seductive shake of her hips as she walks into her closet. "So, no training today?"

“I think you and I have gotten in a pretty good workout already.”

She cackles, poking her head out of the closet to tell me, “All it took for you to make a joke was to get laid.”

I tilt my head back, confused by her statement. “I make jokes all the time.”

She lifts a brow my way.

“What?”

She lifts both brows.

I roll my eyes. “You didn’t fall in love with me for my sense of humor.”

She smiles, happy that I relented. “True. I like my guy’s brooding, mysterious, and loving with a lot of emotional baggage.”

Oddly specific. “Know many guys like that, do you?”

She walks out of her closet, wearing a pair of leggings and a hot pink long sleeve shirt that says, “boss bitches wear pink.” “Only fictional ones. And the personas crafted by the media for members of boy bands. Like Zayn Malik.”

“Who?”

She shuts her eyes, holding up her hand. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that. Let’s get going before this fucking thing beeps again. I’m about two seconds away from throwing it at the concrete wall.”

I quickly put on a pair of sweatpants, then I follow her out into the living room,

where we both halt abruptly, meeting the gazes of two people sitting on the couch. One is Ian, the other is a man I don't recognize.

"How the fuck did you get in here?" I demand, pushing Beth behind me.

Ian opens his mouth to speak, but the other guy beats him to it. "That was me. Your system here is impressive—took me about twenty minutes to get through it."

He looks around Beth's age, and his accent tells me he's from the southeast of the US, maybe Florida or Louisiana. He's Black, with small brown eyes, a temple-fade cut to his hair, and a beard. He's wearing jeans, a long sleeve orange shirt that's only buttoned up halfway, and a necklace around his neck with some kind of tag on it. I think I see a nose piercing as well, and a small hoop in his right nostril.

"Who the fuck are you?" I ask, not sure what to make of his presence here. The bunker's security system is so advanced it would take the greatest hackers in the world to crack, and even then, it would take hours, maybe days. He managed to override it in twenty minutes.

He smiles, standing up to greet the two of us. "Of course. Where are my manners? Ambrose Jones, though I'm professionally known as AJ."

I glance at Ian, who promptly explains, "You said to make friends, so I did. Ambrose works down here as a smuggler; he knows the area well. He's also a hacker, which is how he got into your security system and let us in."

"It's also how I've managed to track John Harrison and his teammates," Ambrose adds, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "I checked on them this morning and they're searching the islands nearby. They should be here in a day or so."

I narrow my eyes, still not sure what to make of him. "What's in it for you? Why help

Ian? Why come here to help us?"

"I'm not a coldhearted asshole, first of all," he says a little indignantly. "Second, I owe Ian, so helping you is my way of paying my debt. And third, I was told your assistant would make a great client of mine, and I protect my investments, Mr. Cai."

I'm about to ask for more information, but Beth walks around me and points to the necklace he's wearing. "Is that a medical ID tag?"

Ambrose nods, holding it up so we see the medical insignia. "Type one diabetic since '06."

Her jaw drops, and a wave of excitement overtakes her. "I was diagnosed in 2007!"

He grins, sharing in her excitement. "Pump or pens?"

She taps the pump under her shirt. "T:slim. I've had it for about three years now; before, I used pens. You?"

"Still on pens. Pumps are fucking expensive."

She rolls her eyes. "Tell me about it. Only reason I got one was because this one gave me kickass health insurance." She points her thumb at me.

Of course, Beth would befriend the guy who broke into our bunker .

"What exactly do you smuggle? Alcohol? Weapons? Drugs?" I ask, crossing my arms over my bare chest.

He smirks, rocking back and forth on his feet, feigning humility. "A little bit of all three, but not the kind you are thinking of. I smuggle medical supplies. Rubbing

alcohol, needles, medicine of the physical and psychiatric persuasion.”

“Insulin?” Beth guesses.

He winks at her. “You bet. We give supplies to the Caribbean and the coasts of South America and Africa. Ian said you would be willing to take me on as a supplier since you plan on staying here long-term.”

“Yes! That’s incredible,” Beth gushes, her voice filled with admiration and awe.

I roll my eyes, looking to Ian. “How did you get past the traps?”

He crosses his arms over his chest, leaning back against the couch cushions. “My dad was in Vietnam too, Henry. I grew up with the same stories that you did.”

Right. I forgot that. “If Harrison is going be here any day now, we need to make sure we have everything prepped and ready. Do you know how to fight, Ambrose?”

He shrugs. “Basics, but nothing advanced. I’m of more use to you behind a screen than behind a gun.”

“That’s fine; there are traps I have set that require someone to operate them—you can be in charge of that. If Harrison and his group have any tech that they’re using, I want you to hack them. Any communication links they have, jam them. I want them going into this blind.”

Ambrose gives a little salute. “Gotcha covered.”

I look next to me at Beth, but before I get a word out, she speaks my thoughts. “I’ll stay with Ambrose in the office. I’ll be your eyes in the sky.”

I place a kiss on her temple, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, then I nod to Ian. “You and I will be on the ground above, keeping up high in the trees. Whoever the traps fail to take out, we’ll snipe from above.”

“Do you have a map of the island?” Ian asks, standing up, wiping his palms on his pants. “And a map of where all the booby traps are?”

I give a brief smile, shaking my head. “I’m insulted you would ask.”

“You go get those,” Beth says, keeping her attention on our guests. “We’ll be in the kitchen. I still need to refill my pump cartridge and I’m sure these boys are thirsty. It’s hot as fuck on this island.”

“A drink would be great,” Ambrose agrees, extending his elbow towards Beth. “I could use some candy or juice if you have any to spare as well. Living in such a warm climate makes me prone to lows. I usually keep a backpack full of candy, but I’m fresh out.”

Beth takes his arm and all but squeals. “I think you’re my new best friend.”

Christ almighty. “Yes, yes he’s a god among men, but can we refocus on the task at hand, please?” I ask, my voice clipped.

Beth pouts, giving me a knowing look. “Is someone feeling jealous?”

“No. I just don’t trust him, and neither should you,” I say pointedly towards our new friend, who finds my skepticism amusing somehow. He hasn’t stopped smiling since he got here. It’s like he’s on vacation.

Beth shakes her head, squeezing Ambrose’s arm. “I’ve never had a diabetic friend before, H. T1Ds are like unicorns, and when you find one, there’s a kinship there that

you don't understand. So yes, I trust him. So does Ian. Take a leap of faith, babe."

I feel my cheeks heat at that pet name, but I try my best to ignore it. Turning my attention back to Ambrose, I close the distance between us, pointing a finger in his face. "Fine, but I swear on every angel and saint in the heavens that if you betray us and jeopardize Beth's safety, I will rip you apart in ways that would make medieval executioners quake in their shit-stained boots."

With wide eyes, Ambrose leans down towards Beth's ear and murmurs, "Is he always this intense?"

Beth nods, gazing at me lovingly. "Yep. He's a scary motherfucker, but he's my scary motherfucker. You should heed his warning though; I got roofied at a bar one time and managed to call him before I passed out. When I woke up, I was in Henry's apartment, where the guy who roofied me was hung from the ceiling fan by his own intestines."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Ambrose curses, looking a bit queasy, his charming grin now gone.

"I know, he's romantic like that," she says, with a smile, completely serious in the face of Ambrose's and Ian's disapproval and horror.

I smile, mouthing that I love her. She mouths it right back.

"Come on, boys," she says, addressing us all. "Let's go eat candy and plan how to kick those fuckers right in the ass."

The four of us stand around the kitchen table, both maps spread out on the surface, and Henry pointing to different geographical points. When Henry made these maps, he made the one showing where the booby traps are on a translucent paper, so when

you overlap the two, you can see every marking from both. It's kind of jumbled when together, so I'm glad that we can look at them separately as well.

"You said that Harrison and his team are on two yachts, split into two groups of four and five, and their current location is the island closest to ours, about twenty nautical miles away. Correct?" H glances up at Ian, who is holding a mug of tea that's comically small for a man his size.

He nods once. "We just checked the tracker we attached to one of their boats about ten minutes ago. They just got there, and if we assume that they'll spend the day searching the island and then sleep through the night, they should be here before noon tomorrow."

Ambrose, who is munching on a bag of skittles, sends a questioning look to all of us. "What the hell did you do to this guy?"

"I killed his twin brother," Henry deadpans, looking back down at the map.

Ambrose pauses mid-chew and takes a moment to process this information, then he says, "Did it ever cross your mind that killing the twin of an ex-SAS agent-turned-mercenary leader was a bad idea?"

"We weren't supposed to get caught," I explain before Henry has time to comment. "So, what kind of booby traps do you have set? You never told me."

Henry begins listing the traps, pointing to where each one is on the map. "Here around the perimeter are pit traps where jagged branches hide under mesh; in the north around this section of trees are three trip wire traps that ignite grenades; a few yards away from that trap and inside the east perimeter, are more trip wires that trigger automatic machine guns camouflaged into the foliage; on the inside of the west and south perimeter are spiked maces and tree logs attached to a chain that will

swing into the person that triggers the trip wire, and then there's some bear traps scattered around there too; once you get to the inner part of the island around the bunker's entrance, that's where the landmines are."

"Oh, my fucking God, Henry." I can't believe I walked through that jungle and made it in one piece.

He shrugs. "Harrison and his team were trained like we were, so if we want to take them off guard, we need to use methods they aren't prepared for. No one today teaches you how to handle swinging maces or pit traps."

Ian confirms this with a nod. "True."

"We'll be in these trees." H points to one tree in the north and the other in the south. "That's where the beaches are largest, so the chances of the mercs docking there are high. Whoever survives the traps will get taken down by us from above."

"And we'll be down here helping you wherever we can," I add, nerves starting to kick in. We've spent the past few weeks mentally and physically preparing for this fight, for the day that we kill the people hunting us down on our own turf, on our own terms.

But now that day is here, and I'm not ready. I'm not ready for our little safe haven to become a battleground, for the possibility that Henry might die tomorrow.

H must see the shift in my mood, because he suddenly tells Ian and Ambrose, "Go to the office and acquaint yourselves with our equipment. I need to talk to Beth alone."

Knowing that there's no room for questions or arguments, the two men flee the kitchen, and once the doors slide closed, Henry steps forward and cups my cheeks, forcing me to look him in the eyes.

“What is it?” he whispers.

Tears are welling up in my eyes rapidly, clouding my vision. “It’s stupid.”

“Nothing that makes you upset is stupid,” he counters.

God why does he have to be so sweet? “I’m worried about tomorrow,” I admit.

His jaw tightens, anger and passion filling his features. “Nothing will happen to you tomorrow,” he vows.

I try to blink back my tears, but it only succeeds in shedding them. “Not for me. For you. I know how skilled you are at what you do, and I know you’ve been in probably more dangerous situations, but this is the first time since I’ve known you that you’re going into a fight outnumbered and evenly matched. I’m terrified that I’m going to sit at a desk and watch you die tomorrow.”

He leans forward until his forehead touches mine, and I watch through blurred vision as he breathes me in, holding on to me like I’m the most precious thing in the world to him. “I won’t die tomorrow. Wanna know why?”

I nod, another tear slipping down my cheek.

“I’ve been fighting every single day since I was twelve because I wanted to save my mother, and when I couldn’t, vengeance became what drove me, what fueled me. I didn’t have anything to live for other than the memory of her, and it’s hard to live for something that is already gone. But then you came into my life, with your joyous attitude, your awful taste in music, and your obsession with fanfiction, and my life found meaning again. I found a purpose outside of revenge. I have something to live for now: you and the future we’re going to build together, and I’ll be damned if I am going to let Harrison take that away from me.”

I laugh, but the sound is strained and weak. “I don’t have an awful taste in music.”

He kisses my forehead, smiling against my skin. “Agree to disagree.”

I pull back from him a smidge, wiping my eyes with my fingers. “We should go join the others. We’ll have plenty of time together tonight, but for now we have guests.”

H rolls his eyes. “Uninvited guests.”

“But guests nonetheless, who are helping us, by the way, so the least we can do is make their stay enjoyable.”

The look he gives me is skeptical. “What are you planning?”

I reply to his skepticism with a mischievous grin. “A game.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

J'veux Pas Mourir Toute Seule

"It's called Monopoly Empire," I explain, holding the small box of cards up. "It's Monopoly, but instead of stupid streets, you can own McDonald's."

Henry, Ian, Ambrose, and I are sitting on the floor around the coffee table, with an episode of Downton playing in the background—one of the earlier episodes so H and I don't miss anything while we play.

I designate myself as banker and begin setting up the pieces, allowing Henry to explain the rules. He and I had this game at the office to play if we ever got bored during a late night or were stuck there for weather, which happened a few times. We are both competitive people by nature, but when you sit us down to play Monopoly Empire, we become feral. We got a noise complaint once while playing this game; we were shouting so loud that it "disturbed the work of our neighboring businesses."

Once the rules are explained and the money is distributed, we begin to play. It quickly turns competitive, and before long, the shouting and outraged cursing begins. The bottle of rum I opened for the four of us to share didn't help. We've all paced ourselves, so we don't get drunk, but we're all tipsy enough that chaos is bound to happen.

I win the first round, H wins the second, and Ambrose has won the last two. Poor Ian hasn't won once, and coincidentally he's the one being the loudest. When Ambrose gets a chance card and gets to switch one of his properties with another's, he picks Ian, who up until this point had the lead. His mouth falls open as Ambrose trades Hasbro for Coca-Cola, and then he bangs his fist on the coffee table, shouting,

“Fucking Christ!”

Ambrose smirks, dramatically adding Coca-Cola to his ever-growing tower. “It’s not personal, Beast. Just business.”

Ian glowers at him, but I see some amusement in his gaze that Ambrose returns.

Henry clasps Ian’s shoulder, giving him a look of sympathy. “For a man so skilled in strategy, you’ve always been terrible at board games.”

As I roll the dice for my turn, I ask H, “You guys used to play games like this in the Navy?”

Ian takes another swig of rum, brushing Henry’s hand off his shoulder. “Not like this. Chess, checkers, and some card games. Poker was a dangerous game to play in our team; Grant could drain you of your life savings in a single game. No one could beat him. Don’t even get me started on playing blackjack with this one.” Ian points his thumb to H, who takes the bottle from his hands and grins into the rim before taking a drink himself.

I glance at Ambrose, who is softly smiling at Ian from across the table. “Are you good at cards?”

My words pull him from the trance he was trapped in, and he gives me a shaky smile, like a kid caught stealing from his parents. “No. I’m good at chess though. My brother and I used to play it all the time growing up.”

“Are you and your brother close?” I ask, passing Ian the dice.

Ambrose shrugs, his smile faltering. “We were. Then he became an FBI agent, and I became a smuggler.”

Yikes. “I bet he doesn’t approve of your job.”

Ambrose laughs, shaking his head. “Not in the slightest.”

Ian lands on one of Henry’s properties and has to pay him four hundred dollars, which he does while grumbling every curse word I’ve ever known. As Henry takes his turn, I let my curiosity get the best of me and I ask Ambrose, “How did you get into smuggling?”

He looks at me then, and in his gaze, I see an exhaustion I know all too well: the all-consuming physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion you feel having a chronic illness. “I worked for a cyber security company that did freelance work for various corporations. One of our client companies was Elias Rose.”

Elias Rose is one of the three biggest pharmaceutical companies in the world, and the leading supplier of insulin in the United States. “I bet that was hard for you.”

While Elias Rose and other pharmaceutical companies have done a lot of good, they are also one of the biggest pains in the ass any disabled person has to deal with. They have infamously high prices for insulin that far exceed the cap at \$35. Before I worked for Henry, I was paying a \$50 co-pay every month for just my insulin alone, not including my pump supplies and my CGM. Even with insurance, I had to pay around \$300 a month, and even then, sometimes my insurance would refuse to cover my supplies. It’s ridiculous.

He sighs, grabbing the dice off the game board. “It was. I had to be in meetings with the very people who made me pay a fortune every month to survive. We were hired to tighten their security because of people hacking into their system and stealing money, and I eventually discovered that the hackers were not only stealing money, but insulin as well. They would sell it for an even higher price in countries that didn’t even have access to insulin. I gave all this information to my brother, who had them

all arrested...but those people scammed still didn't have access to insulin that was affordable to them, or any supplies for that matter. Since I was already in the Elias Rose system, I got into contact with some people in their shipping department, people who helped those hackers, and offered them a new job: help me smuggle supplies and I'll pay them double their current income. They agreed, and I started my smuggling business."

"Did you get caught?"

He nods, placing his game piece in jail, ironically enough. "My brother found out. He told me that if I didn't leave the country in twenty-four hours, he'd arrest me, so I fled down here. I bought a bar with the money I'd saved, and it's been the base of operations for my smuggling ever since. I'm not just taking from Elias Rose anymore; I take from all of them, sending crates of insulin and other medical supplies along the African and South American coast. My customers don't pay more than five dollars."

I stare at him in awe, my admiration for the man next to me growing tenfold. "That's truly incredible. You've got yourself a new client."

Ambrose winks at me, making Henry stare daggers at the back of his head. Upon my own glare directed his way, Henry's peeved expression fades, though he still doesn't look happy.

"How did you and Ian run into each other?" I ask, trying to redirect.

Both men share an alarmed look, and when Ian attempts to answer, he stumbles over himself a few times. "Well, I was at a bar."

"My bar. The one I own," Ambrose interjects.

“Yes, that bar. We ran into each other, got to talking, had some drinks...” Ian clears his throat, shaking his head. “Then the next morning I caught him taking boxes of medical supplies to a boat.”

“My bar is next to a harbor,” Ambrose explains, his eyes firmly on the game board.

“And when I confronted him about it, we struck up a deal—”

“You blackmailed me,” Ambrose corrects.

Ian rolls his eyes. “I asked if he would help me find Harrison and his team and in exchange, I would keep his operation a secret from authorities.”

I hum, tilting my head to the side. “That sounds like blackmail to me.”

“Fine, I blackmailed him,” Ian grumbles, his cheeks growing a bright rosy red.

Henry and I share a look across the table, and I know he and I are thinking the same thing: they hooked up at the bar, and amidst the afterglow, Ian found out Ambrose was a criminal, so he blackmailed him into helping look out for the vengeful assassins coming after us.

That would make a really good book.

“I think we should all get some sleep,” Ian suggests, avoiding eye contact with anyone. “We have a long day ahead of us.”

“Henry and I have been sharing my room, so you’re welcome to share his,” I tell them, starting to clean up all the Monopoly money.

“Is that the only room available?” Ian asks.

“Unless you want to sleep on the couch,” Henry replies, trying his best not to smile as he helps me put the game away.

“You can take the room,” Ambrose immediately offers, gesturing to the couch behind him. “You need to get as much sleep as possible for tomorrow.”

“I could say the same of you,” Ian counters.

“It’s fine, I don’t mind.”

“I insist.”

With a roll of my eyes and a sigh, I whisper to Henry, “This could go on forever.”

Clearly in agreement, Henry helps me up off the floor and interrupts the argument unfolding before our eyes. “For fuck’s sake, share the damn bed, it’s not like you haven’t already.”

Ian and Ambrose fall silent, shocked by Henry’s outburst, and the former looks like his face is about to melt off from how red he’s turned. Ambrose doesn’t look embarrassed though; if anything, he looks pleased, like having slept with Ian is something to be proud of.

It’s absolutely adorable.

“We’ll see you two in the morning,” I say, tugging H along with me as I retreat down the hall, knowing the pair are likely to continue arguing over their sleeping arrangements.

When H and I make it to my bedroom, shut behind the automatic doors, I give him a pointed, amused look. “That was subtle.”

Henry shrugs, placing his hands on my hips, with his thumbs toying with the hem of my shirt. “Ian is wound so tight that if you shoved a lump of coal up his ass, in a few hours he’d shit out a diamond. If I didn’t say something, he would have argued all night. He has this unwavering sense of honor and chivalry that very quickly becomes annoying as fuck.”

“Ambrose really likes him. I can tell.” I lock my hands around his nape, smiling at him.

“So does Ian. I’ve never seen him so flustered.” Henry laughs to himself, shaking his head in disbelief. “He’s such a hypocrite, developing feelings for a criminal after spending the better part of three hours riding me for being a killer for hire.”

The irony wasn’t lost on me either. “The heart wants what it wants.”

“It certainly does,” he murmurs, his eyes glued to mine, his mouth parted slightly.

I don’t know which one of us moves first, but our lips clash together with an urgency that is almost violent. Henry cups my nape with one hand while holding my hip in the other. He slides his palm down my thigh, and without needing to be directed, I lift my legs to straddle his waist, and he holds me firmly in his embrace as he walks over to the bed, collapsing on top of me.

When he lifts his head, I see a coy, mischievous smile, and I know that we’ve officially stepped into our bedroom roles. “With our guests sleeping, you’ll need to be quiet. Think you can do that?”

I pretend to ponder, squirming on the mattress. “And if I’m not?”

“If this were any other night, I would tell you that if you made a noise I would edge you, sending you towards an orgasm only to take it away from you until you learned

to behave.” Henry licks the hollow of my throat, grazing his teeth over my skin. “But I need you tonight. I need to be inside you, Beth, and I need to remind myself what I’m fighting for tomorrow.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” I whisper, arching my chest upwards, silently begging for him to undress me, to touch me, to do something.

I let out a little squeak when H rips off my shirt with one hand and undoes my bra with the other. My pump, still attached to my bra, tugs hard on the tube still inside me as Henry attempts to chuck my clothes onto the floor. After seeing me flinch from the sharp pain it caused, he gives me an apologetic look and detaches the tube, then he proceeds to chuck my clothes onto the floor. My upper half is now naked, and Henry wastes no time doing the same for the rest of me. He drags my pants and underwear down my legs, and once they unceremoniously drop to the ground at the foot of the bed, Henry spreads my legs, giving a satisfied hum at what he sees.

“Someone is already wet,” he observes, letting go of my thighs to rip off his shirt, but he leaves his pants on.

“You tend to have that effect on me,” I reply, taking in his Achillean physique, which still manages to leave me breathless, especially now that I know what it feels like to have that body covering mine, to have all of Henry’s energy focused on me and my pleasure.

He pulls his cock out of his pants, palming himself as his body once again covers mine, and in a couple quick thrusts, he’s fully seated in me. His body gives a slight shudder, and I can’t describe the bliss that flows through me seeing his reaction to me. It makes me feel like a goddess. True to his word, he doesn’t waste any time before pulling back and thrusting back in, beginning a brutal, rough rhythm that shows me just how desperately he needs this, needs our connection, an anchor.

“Tell me you love me,” he demands, never faltering his pace.

“I love you,” I tell him, my fingers digging into the cords of his neck.

“Tell me you want to stay with me forever.”

“I want to stay with you forever.” Emotion clogs my throat, and tears begin to prick my eyes.

“Tell me who your body belongs to.”

“You,” I whisper, tears lining my eyes as my orgasm draws nearer.

“Tell me you’ll marry me,” he whispers into my ear, speeding up his thrusts until the sound of slapping skin fills my ears. “Tell me you’ll be my wife.”

I hit my peak as those words leave his lips, and a tear rolls down my cheek as my walls ripple around his cock. With a curse and a few more thrusts, Henry comes inside me, pressing his face into the crook of my neck, right where my pulse flutters under my skin.

He props himself up and looks down into my eyes, and his expression is so open and honest, his gaze earnestly searching my face for a reaction to that last request he gave me. “Are you serious?” I ask, another tear slipping down the side of my cheek.

He nods once, pulling out of me and rolling over onto the other side of the bed, still facing me. “I’ve never been more serious in my life.”

“But we can’t—not legally anyways.”

Henry chuckles at that, wiping away the tear clinging to my jaw. “When have we

ever cared about doing things legally? Whether we commit fraud and get married under false identities or we stand alone with nothing but the stars as witness as we declare ourselves to one another till death do us part, I don't care. I just want to be able to call you my wife."

I smile so wide my cheeks hurt. "You have to do this properly before I give you an answer. You gotta a ring?"

He gets off the bed and bends down on one knee, linking his fingers with mine. "I didn't think we needed one, because I thought we were perfectly entwined. Like branches on a tree or twigs caught on a vine."

That's oddly poetic of him.

Henry continues, locking his gaze with mine. "Like all those days and weeks and months I tried to steal a kiss, and all those sleepless nights and daydreams where I pictured this. I'm just the underdog who finally got the girl, and I'm not afraid to tell the world."

It finally dawns on me, and I gasp in excitement. "Are you quoting a One Direction song to me?"

He grins, enjoying my reaction. "Yes, because I am truly, madly, crazy, deeply in love with you, and somehow you caved all my walls in. So, baby, say you'll always keep me, say you'll be my wife."

This man, who has gone on record saying he hates "boy band music," memorized the lyrics for "Truly Madly Deeply" by One Direction to say during his proposal to me. It's straight out of a rom-com, which is just the kind of cheesy and sappy I need when I'm about to accept a proposal. So, after cupping his face and planting a long and sloppy kiss on his lips, I give him my answer. "Fuck yes, I'll marry you."

Henry gathers me in for a hug, laughing into my bare shoulder. I lock my arms around his neck and let him pick me up off the bed, swinging us around in a circle with glee like Mary and Matthew in the Downton Abbey Christmas special. It's absolutely perfect.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

I'll Curse the Ground Where You Kneel

I wake up at six in the morning with Beth sprawled on my chest, a piece of hair stuck to her mouth, and her snores drowning out any other possible noise in the bunker. I pray to God that I get a lifetime's worth of moments just like this, but this one will have to be cut short.

I need to get ready.

For the first time in years, I put on the T-shirt and pants, as well as my thick brown combat boots, my mother's rosary, and my tactical thigh holster for my gun. After I'm done, I wake Beth with kisses over her face and neck, and she greets me with a groggy smile. I hate watching the happiness flood from her gaze and the smile slacken when she realizes what today is, and without another word, she gets out of bed and goes into her closet.

I leave her to go check on the others, and to my delight, Ian is picking out weapons while Ambrose keeps an eye on Harrison's team using his computer, which is directly linked with the tracker he planted on their boats. He's already set up shop in the office, the hub of our security system. It's where he and Beth will be during this, giving directions and information through earpieces Ian and I both have.

Ian inspects the guns he's picked out, making sure each has the right kind of bullets in their magazine and that he has extra ammo for the fight. He also polishes a couple knives and sticks them in random places on his outfit, which consists of a dark-green shirt and cargo pants.

As I do a gun inspection myself, I begin to talk, keeping my voice low. “I did leave service because I hated following all the rules and being blocked by red tape and bureaucracy, but not because I wanted to do whatever I wished. It was because my mother was taken when I was a child, and those obstacles kept me from finding her.”

Ian freezes, flicking his eyes up from the knife in his hand, his eyebrows furrowing. I give him the entire story beat for beat as I did with Beth, and by the time I’m done, Ian’s expression has become one of pain, and I see regret in his eyes before he voices it. “I’m sorry—for all of it.”

“I am too.” I set my gun down on the rack of weapons, taking a step towards him. “I should have come to you about this. I should have told you and the team everything and allowed you to help me.”

“Why didn’t you?” he whispers.

“Because I thought it was my mistake to fix, and I couldn’t bear if anyone else I cared about got hurt because of me and my failures.”

Ian shakes his head, closing the distance between us, grasping my shoulders tightly in his hands. “You didn’t fail your mother, and you certainly didn’t fail me. You’re not to blame for any part of this.”

“I know, which is why I wanted to tell you. If the worst happens today, I wanted you to know the truth. I wanted you to know how sorry I am.”

The next thing I know is I’m being hugged, and it’s just as stiff and awkward as I would have expected hugging Ian would be like. His long arms wrap around my shoulders, and he bends at the knees to equalize our heights. He then pats my back gently, like you would to a fussy baby. “You’re forgiven,” he tells me.

I return his embrace, resting my head against his shoulder, glad my expression is hidden from him. “Promise me that if I die up there, you’ll protect Beth. Promise me you will ensure she’s safe, comfortable, and happy till the day you die.”

Ian is silent for a moment, then in his usual stoic tone, he replies, “I swear I will look out for her and protect her from danger. I swear it on my life.”

“Not good enough,” I grit out, emotion clogging my throat.

Ian pulls back, staring at me dead in the eyes. “I swear on Ambrose’s life that I will protect and care for Beth.”

I nod my acceptance, clearing my throat so I don’t give away my emotions. “I never thought I’d see the day Ian Lukas would find love, much less to a criminal,” I tease, trying to distract myself.

He sighs, picking up the knife he had set down on the rack. “I knew your reasons for leaving service weren’t what I had assumed after our conversation on the plane. I knew you were still the good man I used to call a friend, whom I trusted with my life and the lives of our team. You made me reconsider my opinion that people who break laws have cruel intentions. The world is a lot greyer than I thought it was.”

With a small smirk, I reply, “I’m just glad someone has loosened that pole jammed far up your ass.”

He rolls his eyes, shoving my shoulder. “Fuck off.”

Ambrose has already set everything up by the time I join him in the office. All our security camera footage is on, as is the laptop connected to the tracker on Harrison’s boats. On one of the monitors, we have the digital version of the mapped booby traps, and then on a slightly smaller one, we have a map of the island that picks up on

thermal radiation, so we can see who is where. There are two red dots showing where Ian and Henry sit in two high hides in the trees. They're these small platforms that snipers use to gain a tactical advantage above an enemy while staying hidden. Ian is in the south section of the island; Henry is in the north. They're both in the inner part of the island, with Henry closest to the entrance to the bunker.

"Coms check," I say into my earpiece.

"Check," Ian replies.

"Check," Henry says.

"The tracker shows the yacht a few clicks east of the island. They should be here any minute," Ambrose informs all of us, pointing at the screen to show me the little dot moving.

My stomach drops, dread filling my entire being.

"It's going to be okay, B," Henry assures me, having somehow guessed my current emotional state despite being far away.

I take a deep breath, shutting my eyes. "I know. God doesn't have the patience to put up with you anyways."

Ian barks out a laugh, and Henry joins him. I can tell he's smiling. "What about Satan?"

"Oh, even less. If you stepped one foot in Hell there would be big scary demons ready to kick your ass out."

"Well, it's a good thing I don't plan on meeting either today."

I smile to myself, the distance between us now becoming a physical ache. “Be safe.”

“Always.”

To my right, Ambrose taps a couple keys, humming to himself as he does, and then he shoots me a crooked grin. “It’s time to rock and roll.”

He presses the space bar, and Martha Reeves starts playing from one of the monitors. I’m about to ask why, but that’s when I see that little tracking dot sitting on the coast of the island.

They’re here.

“Their communications are jammed,” Ambrose says, playing the keyboard like a pianist. “All they can hear is ‘Nowhere to Run.’”

“Doesn’t that tip them off that we’re here?” I ask him, biting back a smirk.

“They would have been tipped off no matter what when they realized they couldn’t talk to each other. Besides, I never do anything without something to set the mood.”

“And why is that?”

He leans back in his chair, excitement lighting his eyes. “What kind of pirate would I be if I wasn’t a master of presentation?”

I huff a laugh at that. “Pirate is a bit of a stretch.”

Ambrose shrugs. “A smuggler that steals goods and sells them overseas is quite literally the definition of a pirate. Besides, I’m the registered captain of my smuggling boat. So, joke’s on you.”

“You can deal with the semantics of your title later,” Ian interrupts. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Eyes sharp,” Henry adds, going into “work mode.”

“Looks like they’re splitting up,” I tell them, watching the thermal signatures veer off to the east and west coasts, slowly making their way in.

“This is where the fun begins,” Ambrose murmurs.

He’s here.

From the second I stepped foot on the sandy beach, I knew this was the one. All the other islands we’ve searched had the noises of wildlife filling the air—there were squawking birds and rustling bushes where turtles were laying their eggs. But not here. Everything is silent, lifeless, as Cai will be, and everyone on this island, when I’m done.

And then just when I call out for a comms check to test our earpieces, Martha Reeves started blasting into my ear, a clear sign that our communications are trying to be blocked.

It’s no matter—there’s nine of us, and if my intelligence from the islands is correct, there are only three of them.

With Reeves as the unexpected soundtrack of our operation, I split the team in half, directing half to follow me along the east of the beach and the other towards the west. We’ll meet in the north point of the island and start making our way inward.

Colton, my second-in-command, walks beside me, murmuring under his breath to me, “The lack of any wildlife tells me Cai did something to the land.”

I nod, keeping my eyes on the tree line as we continue to walk along the sandy path.
“Keep a sharp eye out. Who knows what he has planned as a welcome party.”

I hear a whistle from behind me. One of my teammates, Jane, makes the tactical hand signal for “enter,” gesturing to a thicker part of the brush.

I nod to her, signaling for the others to stay put, guns ready. Jane cautiously walks towards the brush, keeping her gun aimed and her steps silent. She makes the signal for “stop,” tilting her head to the side as she inspects the growth there. The song in our earpieces changes to a one I don’t recognize.

“On the farm, every Friday

On the farm, it’s rabbit pie day

So every Friday that ever comes along

I get up early and sing this little song”

Jane takes a step forward, and as the chorus kicks in, the ground disappears beneath her, and she falls into a pit of some kind.

“Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run

Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run”

We all rush forward to see Jane face-up, impaled on sharpened tree branches. Her blood soaks the wood as she stares down at her chest in horror, her screams echoing throughout the beach.

“Bang, bang, bang, bang goes the farmer’s gun”

Another scream echoes in the distance, and I know one of my other team members fell victim to one of Cai's stupid little traps. Their scream fills the void Jane's left, now that her limp body lies skewered on the stakes like a fucking kabob.

"Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run

Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run"

"Do we continue along the beach, Sir?" Colton asks, staring down at Jane's body in anger.

"Don't give the farmer his fun, fun, fun"

I shake my head, already walking towards the trees next to the pit. "Cai has this place booby trapped like a caveman. Who knows what traps he set or where he set them. No matter how cautious we are, we're just as blind."

"He'll get by without his rabbit pie

So run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run"

"What's your order, sir?"

I look over my shoulder at Colton just as my feet leave the sand and touch wet dirt. "Kill Lukas but keep Reed alive if you find her. She could be of use to us. If you see Cai, bring him to me."

"Sir, yes, sir," my remaining teammates say in unison.

"Let's finish this," I growl, disappearing into the jungle.

“They’re scattering,” Beth informs me. “One is dead, one is injured, two are still in the perimeter, the rest are making their way towards the center of the island.”

I’m crouching in my high hide, peering around at the ground through the cover of the leaves. “Copy. I’m going to go silent from now on. Don’t want to give myself away.”

“Okay...I love you, Henry.”

My chest squeezes painfully, making it hard to breathe. I want to keep my promise to her, I want to stay alive and live a long fucking life with her by my side, but anything could happen in a battle. Despite my promises, despite Beth’s proclamation that my fate is in my hands, God may plan to take me today. And there might be nothing I can do to stop it.

“I was taught that you must love God above all others,” I tell her, blinking back the stinging in my eyes. “But as God is my witness, I have never loved anyone the way I love you. My soul and spirit have belonged to you since the moment we met, and I would watch Hell freeze and Heaven burn before I let anything harm you. My one regret in life is that I waited so long to tell you, and if today is the day the devil wants to claim me, I will find a way back to you. In this life or the next.”

“Why does that sound like a goodbye?” Beth whispers, emotion clogging her voice.

I shut my eyes, leaning my head against a branch of the tree I hide inside. “I love you.”

I take my earpiece out, using the back of my hand to wipe the tear that has slipped from my shut eyelids. I can hear the faint sound of Beth’s voice coming from the small piece of plastic, but I try my best to ignore it, needing to refocus on the task at hand.

In the distance, I hear the sounds of shouts and bloody screams, I hear detonating bombs and trip wired machine guns. All this preparation and planning has led to this moment, and I'll die before I let Harrison anywhere near Beth.

He is going to die tonight, even if it means I have to drag him down to Hell with me.

I watch on the monitors as the mercs unknowingly fall into the traps Henry set. One of them gets hit with the swinging mace, another gets blown up by a grenade, and another gets gunned down by one of the trip wired machine guns. Ambrose and I have been keeping the boys updated on where everyone is, and so far, no one has gotten to the inner part of the island yet, where Henry is. Ian, on the other hand, is currently in a shootout with one of the mercs who has two machine guns, one of which belonged to the merc who got hit with the mace. This guy was to be right next to him when it happened. We watched the merc scream and hold his dying friend, then he picked up his machine gun and ran towards the center of the island, but Ian started shooting at him, creating this back-and-forth we are witnessing now.

I'm trying to keep an eye on everyone, but my gaze keeps gravitating towards Henry, who I can see pretty well on one of the camera feeds. He's kneeling, his gun aimed and ready, his body almost completely still. He's a predator waiting to pounce.

Every now and then my eyes flicker to Johnathon Harrison, who has made it farther than any of his other teammates. He's almost at the inner part of the island, where he'll be in range for the landmines, but he'll also be near Henry. By his current path, he'll end up right where Henry is hiding.

As soon as I enter the jungle, chaos erupts.

To my right, Maximus hits a trip wire that activates a machine gun; the bullets rip his chest to shreds and I know he's dead well before he hits the ground. Kathleen watches this and lets out a bloodcurdling scream, diving behind a tree for cover. As

soon as she's behind the trunk, I see blood and chunks of flesh spray out from both sides. She must have triggered some grenade or land mine. Colton was too close to her when the blast went off; he got blown back into another tree, hitting his head and falling hard onto the bloody grass.

Despite how stupid it might be, I run over to check on him, and thankfully, he's still alive. As much as I didn't want to, I have to leave Colton there, knowing he has a concussion at best and a collapsed lung and massive internal bleeding at worst. Moving him now will only cause him more harm. It is best to leave him and hope he'll be alright.

Screams of my other teammates fills the island. Guns fire, bombs go off, agony is echoed through the trees. It's a fucking war zone. I'm luckier than the rest, or maybe I can just keep my head better in a situation like this. I manage to evade most of the traps by throwing sticks and rocks onto the ground to activate any possible trip wires or reveal any pit traps. One of my rocks hits a grenade, which does throw me back a little, but towards the path I had already walked.

One of my sticks hits a trip wire or sensor of some kind, because a loud creaking sound starts from behind me, and thankfully I have presence of mind to jump out of the way just in time to miss a spiked tree trunk flying through the air. It swings back and forth along the path I had been tracking, so I decide to head west, but no more than five steps into that direction, another swinging tree nearly wipes me out. I'm forced to crawl on the ground for several yards to stay clear of them, continuing to throw sticks around so I don't fertilize the ground with my intestines.

The Andrews Sisters' "I Didn't Know the Gun Was Loaded" plays in my earpiece the whole time.

Once I finally make it several feet without another flying tree being activated, I catch sight of a camera lodged into a knot in a nearby tree. Careful to avoid any traps, I

walk directly up to the tree and look into that little camera, wiping the dirt and blood from my face. “Very fucking funny, Reed. I hope you’re enjoying yourself while you hide away like a coward. Know this, I am coming for you and everyone else on this island. There is nowhere you can hide that I won’t find you, no hole deep enough and no place where you will be safe from me.”

I then take a couple steps forward, and my left foot lands right in a bear trap.

A scream rips from my chest as I crumple to the ground, my hands clutching at my calf so tightly my nails dig into my skin. The sharp metal claws of the trap are completely imbedded into the middle of my foot, and already I can feel blood pooling into the bottom of my boot. And even though getting rid of it may cause more damage than it did going in, I know it has to be done. I am not about to accept defeat from a goddamn animal trap.

I pick up a stick from the ground around me and shove it in my mouth, biting down on it as hard as possible. I place a hand on each side of the trap, and as hard as I can, I pull them apart. My scream is muffled by the stick between my teeth, my arms shake from the exertion and the pain, but I manage to rip the claws out of my boot and then chuck the trap into the jungle behind me.

Blood seeps out from the holes made in my boot, and when I try to put pressure on that foot, I immediately collapse. I try again, and the same result occurs. I make myself push through, though. I take it step by step, alternating between crawling, limping, and hopping forward, my rage and thirst for vengeance being the only things fueling me to keep moving.

At this point I’ve made it into the heart of the island—covered in my blood and the blood of my teammates, injured, exhausted, and all alone. I look around me, at the trees, the bushes, and the brush, and my rage overtakes me.

“Cai!” I shout, my voice raw from screaming.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:41 pm

Redemption Lies Plainly in Truth

I watch a bloody, disheveled Harrison turn around in circles, screaming my name. There's a feral gleam in his eyes as he looks around, his gun poised and ready in his grip.

“Come out here and face me, you fucker!” he shouts, his voice breaking towards the end. Given his limp and the blood dripping from his foot, I'd guess he got bit by the bear trap.

I know that if there's a time to shoot him, it's now, so I adjust my position and take aim, and Harrison keeps screaming for me.

“You come out now and I'll spare Reed!”

I pause, staring down at him through the leaves of the tree.

Harrison cackles, looking a little delirious. “I know she's more than just your assistant. I'll spare her life if you come and face me man-to-man. Come here and face me!”

“Henry, don't,” I hear Beth say from my earpiece, but her voice sounds distant, muffled. All I can hear is Harrison's crazed laugh as he talks about the woman I love.

“You are such a fucking coward!” he screams. “I will kill her slowly, I will peel the skin from her bones, crush her skull beneath my fingers, tear—”

I pull on the trigger and watch him jump away right before my bullet hits. With my position now known, Harrison takes cover behind a thick tree log and opens fire on the tree I'm perched in. I use the trunk and branches for cover, but too much of my body is exposed to his gunfire.

I shoot back at him, never quite managing to make my mark. Harrison goes through several rounds for his pistol before he switches to a backup gun, and all the while he sings the song Ambrose must be playing in his earpiece.

“Oh, lay that pistol down, babe

Lay that pistol down

Pistol packin' mama

Lay that pistol down.”

If I make it out of this alive, I'm going to berate Ambrose for his choice in music.

The two of us continue to take shots at each other, going through our rounds so quickly it's becoming a race to see who's faster at reloading their gun. Unfortunately, the answer might be Harrison, because when the both of us are loading in a new magazine, Harrison finishes a couple seconds before me, shooting a bullet that hits me right in the calf.

The shot knocks me off balance, and before I can catch myself, I fall out of the tree, leaving my gun behind. I hit the ground on my side, slamming my injured leg on the ground. I bite my lip to muffle my scream, a task that becomes harder once I drag myself behind the trunk of the tree to stay covered from Harrison's insistent gunfire. I do my best to shoot him back with the pistol I had on my belt, but my aim is shit. He isn't doing much better; the blood loss and pain have made him erratic and

uncoordinated, and I know I'm not far behind.

Pretty soon he and I both run out of ammo, and I know that things are about to get ugly. Harrison starts moving towards me, so I grit my teeth and force myself to my feet, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in my leg. When Harrison is within arm's reach, he punches me in the face hard, nearly sending me back down to the ground, but I manage to regain my balance, though my leg screams in protest.

"I have been dreaming about this moment for weeks," he tells me, attempting to punch me again, but I duck and hit him in the gut, headbutting him as he hunches over in pain. My head throbs from the impact, but it manages to make him stumble backwards, giving me the opportunity to kick him hard in the chest, sending him toppling to the ground.

Unfortunately, I also fell to the ground because my injured leg can't hold up my own weight by itself. Harrison forces himself up, blinking rapidly as he tries to refocus his attention on me. While he hesitates, I launch forward, punching him in the face, making blood spew from his mouth onto the grassy floor. Harrison growls and returns my punch with one of his own, gripping my shirt in one hand while he hits me repeatedly with the other.

"My brother was all I had," he says through gritted teeth, tackling me to the ground, proceeding to punch and slam my head into the dirt. "You took him from me!"

I bring my knee up into his crotch, wrapping my arms around his neck so I can topple us both over so he's no longer on top of me.

"He was using his power to kill innocent people. He had to be stopped."

He kicks at my injured leg, making me yell out in pain, but that's quickly cut off when he headbutts me. He tries to get to his feet, but before he can, I grab a rock off

the ground and slam it down on his injured foot, sending him right back to the floor.

“There are no innocents—only the weak and the strong.”

I swing my legs around and slide across the ground, connecting my foot with his face, breaking his nose. I try kicking at him again, but he grabs my leg and digs his thumb into my bullet wound. I let out a scream, kicking at him until he releases my leg, then I take my rock and start beating it into his chest. I manage to get a few hits in before he catches my arm and snaps my shoulder back, dislocating it. I drop the rock with another shout, but I punch him with my other arm before he can even think about picking it up off the ground.

“You and your brother kill fucking children! Does it make you feel strong to bathe in their pain and blood? Your childhood sucked, so little Timmy can’t have one at all? I wish I had made your brother’s death as painful as I’m going to make yours!”

He spits blood into my face, frantically grabbing at my neck and shoulders in an attempt to choke me, but I twist out of his grip, wrapping my arms around his arm and waist, flipping him over my shoulder. He lands on the other side of me, and I immediately hop into his back, keeping him pinned to the ground. I grip his hair and slam his head into the ground a couple times, but he manages to push himself up and roll over, so he lands with me beneath him. He elbows me in the side, trying to headbutt me from behind him, but keep a hold on his body with my legs and one good arm, trying to keep him locked down.

“I wasn’t there,” he hisses, trying to swat me off. “I didn’t protect him. It was my job to protect him.”

He thrashes like a fish out of water, clawing at me and digging into my leg. I lean down and bite into his ear, pulling as hard as I can until I feel the muscle rip and blood spurt onto my face. I spit out what remains of his ear onto the ground, and

Harrison manages to grab on to my fallen rock, using it to slam into my wound. I let go of him, too preoccupied by my pain to stop him from getting to his feet.

His face is covered in blood, and his teeth are stained red from it as he growls, “It should have been me. It should have been me!”

I punch and kick at the tree, not caring that my skin is splitting open and my knuckles are bruising. Behind me is where I buried my mother, in this foreign land without any church service or clothes. She’ll stay here in this hellhole forever because I couldn’t protect her.

“It should have been me,” I sob, punching even harder. “It should have been me.”

I try getting up, but Harrison kicks me in the stomach, sending me right back down.

He places his foot on my injured leg, keeping me in place as he brings the rock down on my head. “I want you to know how it feels to watch the only person you love die when you can do nothing about it. I will leave you on the verge of death, unable to move or scream as you watch me cut your little girlfriend into pieces.”

He discards the rock and throws his body weight on top of me, knocking the air from my lungs. His arms wrap around my neck, keeping me in a chokehold as he continues talking. “Every time I’ve killed, it hasn’t been personal; they were just a means to an end, an obstacle that needed to be taken care of. But I will enjoy killing you and that little bitch.”

“I won’t let you get anywhere near her,” I wheeze out, struggling against his grip, but it’s no use. With only one working arm and leg, it’s impossible.

Harrison drops his voice to a whisper, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “Watch me.”

I watch on the camera as Henry and Harrison beat the absolute shit out of each other. Just when I think Henry has the upper hand, Harrison deals a blow that makes the tides turn, and then the cycle repeats itself. The two are so evenly matched, fueled by adrenaline, pain, and bloodlust...who will win the fight depends on sheer luck at this point.

And I have a feeling Henry's luck is running out.

I push out of my chair and march into the weapons room, grabbing on to a handgun and a magazine before I start towards the living room. Ambrose follows after me, his voice frantic. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Henry needs help or else he'll die," I respond, letting each door scan my face so I can get through.

"You can't go out there!" he argues.

"Ian is preoccupied and even if he left his spot now, he might not make it in time." Once I reach the elevator, I turn around to face him, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible. "You said you didn't have any formal training in combat?"

Ambrose nods shallowly.

"I was in the CIA. I've been trained for years in how to fight," I lie. "I'm the only one who can help him now. I need you to stay here for Ian. He needs you."

Ambrose clearly doesn't like this idea, but he relents, taking a step back from the elevator doors, which have just opened.

I step inside, pressing the button to go up.

“Good luck,” he tells me as the doors start to close.

I give him a nod, only allowing myself to breathe once the elevator starts moving and I’m all alone.

This might be the single most stupid thing I’ve ever done. I mean, what am I thinking? From the cameras, it seems like Ian and Henry are fighting off the remaining two mercs, but the cameras don’t cover the whole island. There’s a chance someone is out there looking to avenge their teammates. I also could just stumble into a landmine or spiked pit by accident. Sure, I’ve seen the map of where each trap is placed, but I don’t know it by heart.

Stupid stupid stupid idea.

But if I don’t at least try, there’s a chance Henry might die.

When the elevator doors slide open, I sprint down the hallway to the ladder that leads up to the door to the bunker. Despite being made of metal, the door isn’t all that heavy as I push it open with both hands, but it is heavy enough to make a loud thud as it hits the ground, and I cringe as I pull myself into the daylight.

If there is someone lingering around here, they’re going to investigate that noise.

Stupid .

It won’t be a problem as long as I keep moving. Henry is about a mile to the north, so with a deep breath, I start running in that direction, inserting the magazine into the gun and loading a round in the chamber—another stupid decision, but whatever.

I try to picture the map of the booby traps in my mind, and I think I’m doing a pretty good job at avoiding them, but I might just be getting lucky. As an extra precaution, I

copy what Harrison did and throw rocks and sticks around the path around me. I hit a couple trip wires, but nothing goes off, indicating to me that the bomb or gun has already activated. That's good; it means there're probably not as many traps still active in the area.

I estimate I'm about halfway there at this point. My entire body is slick with sweat, I'm waving a gun around while moving at a full sprint, and the hem of my pants is getting stained with the blood of random mercenaries I am running over top of, whose blown-apart carcasses lie scattered around the ground like a scene from Final Destination. I'm pretty used to seeing gore, but this is a bit much for me to see. The air is already starting to smell from the bodies cooking under the heat, and I have to fight the urge to throw up.

Just a little farther.

Suddenly, something knocks me off my feet and falls on top of me. After my brain catches up with what just happened, I look up to see one of the mercs holding me down by the wrists. From my research into Harrison, I know this guy is his second-in-command, and he looks pretty fucking mad. His face is stained red with blood, his hair is matted with dirt and dust, and there's a crazed look in his eyes that makes my stomach drop.

"Well well well," he croons, grinning down at me. "You must be Ms. Reed. I know someone that would love to meet you."

I instinctively start struggling against his grip, but he's too strong. He begins laughing at me, amused by my reaction. He's like a lion watching a gazelle slowly be surrounded by his pride. I can see my gun on the ground a few feet away; it taunts me as much as the man pinning me down does.

"I'm going to enjoy watching John carve into your soft, delicate skin," he whispers,

his mouth so close to my face I can feel his hot breath fan against my cheek.

I hear Henry's voice in my head instructing me how to get out of a situation like this. He trained me for this. I can't fight against his strength, but I can make him fight against physics. I headbutt him, immediately pressing my pelvis up against his. He lets go of my wrists to catch himself, so I wrap my arms around his neck and my legs around his torso. I shove one of his arms between us, allowing me to roll us over so I'm on top of him. I don't have time to get my gun, so instead I grab a rock off the ground and start slamming it down into his face. I manage to get a few blows in before he shoves me off of him. I scramble to my feet just as he does, and just as he tries to grab me again, I kick at his chest as hard as I can, making him stumble back into a very familiar bush. It's the one Henry told me to avoid at all costs when we first got onto the island.

Mr. Second-In-Command falls ass first onto that bush, and he barely has time to process what's happened before an automatic landmine goes off, making him explode right in front of me. I watch blood and guts fly towards the sky, and I shield my face from getting splashed with them. I then hear a wet thud, and I find his head where the bush used to be.

I can have a mental breakdown about seeing a head blown off of a body later, I tell myself as I grab my gun off the ground, fighting an intense wave of nausea. My hands are starting to shake, and I've only been sweating more since the decapitated guy attacked me.

"Henry needs me," I whisper, reminding myself why I'm out here in the first place. I chant that phrase over and over again as I run the final stretch between me and him, and my legs move faster than they ever have before, my lungs heaving harder than they've ever heaved.

I just hope I'm not too late.

Harrison's grip around my neck gets tighter, and no matter how hard I pull at his arm and gouge at his hands, he doesn't let up. He's not going to relent until I die, and I'm starting to think there's no other way this ends. A minute or two more and I'll suffocate to death. That is, if he doesn't break my neck first.

The sinking reality that I'm probably going to die doesn't stop me from trying to fight him off. If I'm to die, I'm going to go out fighting. I'll be damned if I let this fucker have the satisfaction of seeing me give up.

Just when my vision starts to get a little spotty, I hear a gunshot ring through the air. I look up just in time to see the bullet hit Harrison in his right eye. His grip loosens on my neck, then he falls backwards, allowing me to stumble my way to freedom. I unceremoniously fall onto the side of my body that's mostly unscathed, and I find the still body of Harrison in a similar position—on his side, his head leaning against the ground. His one good eye stares right through me, and a chill runs down my spine at the alternative reality I see there, the person I could have been.

I expect to see Ian when I look over to where the shot came from, but I find a sweaty, disheveled Beth. She pants and shakes as she runs over to me, tears streaming down her cheeks. I want to give her shit for coming up here, for risking her life, but the only thing that comes out of my mouth is, "Thank you."

My gratitude makes her cry harder. "You're such an asshole."

I try to laugh but it hurts too much, so it ends up more as a coughing fit that I wince through the whole time. "For thanking you?"

"For nearly dying." She kneels next to me, cupping my face between her palms. "Your life isn't yours to give away, H. Your life is mine, understood? You're never going to jeopardize it again."

“So, bossy,” I whisper, smiling up at her.

“Beth?” I hear Ian’s voice ask. He shows up at my other side a few seconds later, sweaty and a little bruised up, but otherwise not injured. “What happened?”

“She saved me,” I inform him, letting out a slight whimper when Beth brushes against my dislocated arm. “Or what’s left of me. Think you could fix me up?”

Ian rolls his eyes playfully, unable to hide a grin. “Some things never change.”

Slowly, he and Beth help me up, and we start to move at a snail’s pace towards the bunker, with Ian taking most of my weight while Beth hugs my torso, partially to help me stand but also just to hold me, and I hold her right back, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

“I think we need to find another island,” Beth remarks, looking around at the horror movie surrounding us. “We can’t stay in the bunker forever, and if we come up here, it’s a bio hazard.”

“I’m sure we can help out with that,” Ian chimes in. “But are you sure you two want to stay out here? With Harrison and his crew dead, you don’t have to hide anymore. You could go anywhere, do anything, be anything.”

Beth and I lock eyes, and when she gives me a bright, beautiful smile, I know we’re on the same page.

“We have everything we need right here,” Beth answers, and I couldn’t agree more.

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It took a good three months before Henry was up and mobile again. Between the dislocated arm, concussion, bullet wound, and broken ribs, he's lucky his recovery didn't take longer. Even now, he's still a bit sore, but Henry isn't the kind of person to sit idle for extended periods of time. He's a busybody.

Thankfully he has the perfect task to occupy himself.

With the combined efforts of ourselves, Ian, Ambrose, and Ambrose's smuggling crew, we were able to clear the surface of the island of all the blood, bodies, and remaining traps. It took fucking forever. Henry was almost fully healed by the time the last landmine was taken out of the ground.

Ambrose was then kind enough to hire and transport some builders to the island to help us make a house. I love the bunker, but I've seen enough post-apocalyptic movies to know that living underground long-term isn't a good idea. The lack of sunlight and natural air would start to affect our health. So, after another month's worth of work, a cute cottage was built in the center of the island, right next to the bunker's entrance. Henry let me design it, so I showed the builders some cottagecore pictures off of Pinterest so they could get an idea of the vibe I was going for, and they made my dreams come alive. It's a single story with a fully working kitchen, two bathrooms, a living room, a bedroom, and a fireplace. Between it and the bunker, we have everything we'll ever need.

As promised, Ambrose became our supplier for all my medical needs and beyond. Ian went back home to England at first, but more and more we started seeing him accompany Ambrose on his visits to the island to drop off supplies. Apparently, Ambrose offered Ian a job as a full-time guard to join him on his smuggling trips. Ian,

a private person by nature, never gave too much away, but by the looks shared between him and the far more open Ambrose, made it clear that their relationship was more than just professional. This was confirmed to me just a couple weeks ago by Ambrose, who's become one of my closest friends. Henry and Ian's friendship is also stronger than ever, with the past forgotten and forgiven.

Henry and I may be retired, but having no job can be quite boring, so we've started helping Ambrose's smuggling business by checking the backgrounds of potential buyers, growing his clientele list with the connections the two of us have made over time, including our old weapons supplier, Ricky, who was willing to expand his business of making dangerous chemicals to making medicinal ones. I also started writing fanfictions again, and despite their ridiculous and very raunchy nature, Henry reads every chapter.

Henry started seeing his therapist again, remotely of course, and has included me in the continuation of his healing journey. He doesn't bottle stuff up anymore; we talk through every panic attack, every nightmare, and work through it together. I got him into doing meditations, something I used to do when I was in therapy, and thanks to Ambrose, Henry now takes Zoloft every day, which has helped him manage his PTSD better than ever before.

At the suggestion of Dr. Bennett, Henry has been trying to reconnect with his culture on both sides. He and I attempt to cook traditional Chinese and Italian recipes and celebrate holidays like Lunar New Year and the Autumn Festival. Neither of us are particularly good at cooking, but the effort is what matters. We're also watching a lot of documentaries about both cultures, wanting to learn about the history. It's been a fun hobby for both of us, and I know it means the world to Henry. I'm sure this is the closest he's felt to his parents in years.

On Valentine's Day, just as we talked about before the mercs showed up, Henry and I stood on the beach of our island, with no one around to witness us pledge our hearts and souls to one another.

“Peter 4:5 says that love covers a multitude of sins,” Henry had murmured, holding both of my hands in his. “I’m not naïve enough to think that love can absolve me of all the sins I’ve committed, but I do believe that through love, you can earn forgiveness. Not from God, but from yourself. It’s through you that I have learned to forgive myself, to forgive the world, to forgive God. Any ounce of light still in my soul has endured because of your love. I don’t know whether that sliver of light will make a difference in the end, and if I’m still bound for Hell, I’ll look back at my life with no regrets.”

With tears in my eyes, I squeezed his hands and gently laughed. “You son of a bitch, how am I supposed to go after that?”

He chuckled, his own gaze shimmering. “You’re off to a great start.”

With a cheeky grin, I began my own vows. “When I imagined what my husband would be growing up, I imagined Zayne Malik as depicted in mafia AU fanfictions. I knew that was unrealistic, yet here I am marrying an assassin who has a surprisingly good singing voice and is obsessed with period piece TV shows. You are far beyond what I had wanted growing up, mostly because my parents didn’t sell me to you to pay off their debt to your boy band.”

“That actually happens in those stories?” Henry asked incredulously.

“Yes, which would be really problematic, so thank God my childhood fantasies didn’t come true.”

“Glad I exceeded such a low bar.”

I swatted at his chest, indicating him to be quiet. “I’ve been in love with you since I first started working with you, and that love has grown every day since. Most people would find the idea of living on a deserted island for the rest of their lives crazy, but I can’t wait for the decades you and I will spend together here. You’re my favorite

person, my best friend, my sexy boss, and the love of my life.”

“So I dethroned Mafia Zayne Malik?” he asked teasingly.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re such an asshole.”

With a grin, Henry dug into his pocket and pulled out a ring. It was a gold band with a square sapphire in the center, reminding me of the sea. He slipped the ring on my finger, and said words that I would never forget. “With this ring, I take you as my wife and my partner, so long as we both shall live.”

He pulled out another ring, a simple gold band, and handed it to me. I placed it on his finger, and made the same vow. “With this ring, I take you as my husband and my partner, so long as we both shall live.”

“By the power vested in me by absolutely no one,” he said, smiling so wide his eyes crinkled, “I now pronounce us husband and wife.”

We kissed underneath the glow of the stars, with the waves crashing against the shore and sand between our toes. We then went back to our cottage and danced in our living room to “Something Great” by One Direction. I had finally worn Henry down into liking my favorite band.

How could life get any more perfect than that?

Want to see the story from Ian and Ambrose’s perspectives?