



Dangerous Obsession

Author: *Kat Logan*

Category: Romance

Description: Passion, love, and danger can be a powerful obsession

Life on a private Greek island should be the height of luxury, but not for Jade Aristos.

As the bodyguard of the sexy and charming Maxim Hawthorne, its Jades duty to remain alert to danger.

And danger is never far away.

After creating an advanced AI program, Maxim realized it had the potential to remove every last bit of privacy from modern life.

Hed thought pulling it from development and retreating to his island villa would keep the program out of the wrong hands.

But hed underestimated the lengths other parties would go to get the program for themselves.

And Jade underestimated how explosive her feelings for Maxim had become.

What had started out as a fling—one shed ended—had become a full-blown obsession.

Losing her focus could put them both at risk.

But Maxim doesnt make it easy for her to resist.

Cole Ward has one mission: infiltrate the targets villa and locate the software program hes been paid to steal.

But he didnt expect the targets to be the fascinating Maxim Hawthorne and his stunning female bodyguard.

Cole decides his best move is to seduce his way into their elegant world.

The sexual tension between Maxim and Jade is hot enough to melt steel.

Perfect for Cole to draw the two into a sizzling three-way ménage

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

JADE

Jade Aristos kept her skills honed to a knife's edge. That meant constant training. A bodyguard had to be ready for anything. This morning, keeping her skills sharp meant heading to one of the open terraces around the villa with her bo staff for some martial arts weapon forms.

She'd start her training right after she checked on her principle, the man she was protecting—Maxim Hawthorne.

The handsome bastard who drove her so crazy.

It was bright and sunny out. A few strands of clouds drifted over the ocean that spread past the rocky cliffs.

The wind wasn't even bad today. The little Greek isle could get annoyingly windy at times.

It bothered her more than it did Maxim. She had long hair, after all.

Wind could make unbound long hair a real trial.

But her long hair was pulled back and tied up in a ponytail, and she was ready for business. All she had to do was check on Maxim.

He was probably meditating on the lower terrace, focused on the waves and the wind. Part of her wished he would train with her again. Like they'd used to train together.

Light sparring. Grappling. It had been the grappling that finally ended their training together. All that touching, body to body...

Jade felt a surge of desire pooling low in her abdomen. She had to stop and force it away. Focus. She needed to focus. That was all in the past.

Jade had been a bodyguard for most of her adult life. She'd never had a client like Maxim Hawthorne, though. Brilliant. Intense. Gorgeous. So good in bed, he left you trembling and hoarse from all your cries of pleasure.

Damn it! Stop thinking of that!

They were done. They were lovers no more. Finished. Over .

And yet she still worked for him. She still protected him. She lived on a small island with him, for God's sake.

She was crazy. One of these days, she'd get sick of yearning for what she couldn't have, and she'd finally leave. She'd head back to the States, find a good man, and settle down. Own a dog. And a fish. And maybe...a cat. If they could all get along. She would forget about Maxim forever.

Except in dreams. Where even now, he sometimes haunted her with those intense, smoldering eyes...

Enough! She stormed across the decks overlooking the cliffs and the ocean, holding her fighting staff.

She was wearing her training outfit. A sports bra and form-fitting boy-shorts for maximum flexibility.

She was ready to get in some serious workout, once she determined her charge was safe, and wouldn't you know, Maxim was being a pain in the ass, as usual.

Damn him.

She took her job very seriously. Not that anyone came to this side of the mostly empty island. The job was almost too easy.

Except it wasn't. Because of Maxim. Because of how much she wanted him.

As expected, she found him on the lower terrace. Except he wasn't meditating as she'd expected. He was leaning against the stone railing with his hands in his pockets, staring at the ocean and the seagulls who were riding the wind currents.

She hesitated only for a second. Even now, the sight of him sometimes struck her hard.

He was handsome. Distractingly so. It annoyed her, especially since it was her job to pay attention to any and all threats around Max.

Someday she'd be ogling his firm butt and she'd be caught off guard and then what?

The thought of losing him was like an icicle piercing her chest. That was one reason she was still here with him, working as his lone bodyguard. Working for him even after all their history and all the passion between them. She couldn't stand the thought of losing him forever.

Guess that made her a fool.

Maxim saw her approaching and grinned at her.

But his gaze remained the same penetrating stare it had always been, fierce and direct.

It was one of the things she liked about him, although the intensity could unnerve people who weren't used to him.

People who didn't know he had a heart of gold under all that muscle.

The rest of him was just as appealing as his smile.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, and clean-shaven, showing off his high cheekbones and bone structure that must have come from some Eastern European country, although he'd been born in Detroit.

He was wearing loose-fitting khakis and a dark T-shirt with a white button-down shirt over it.

The button-down was wide open and blowing behind him with the wind coming off the water.

It was easy to see how fit he was. Athletic. Part of Maxim's routine was lifting weights and physical training, including running, swimming, and diving. He wasn't as bulgy as a bodybuilder, but he was cut and hard, and when he wandered around with his shirt off, she had to stop and stare.

Without him noticing, of course. He wasn't paying her to drool over his pecs.

She managed to push all those distracting thoughts to the back of her mind where they belonged. She wandered to him, ready to tell him that she'd walked the house and the grounds and it was all secure. Only he beat her to the punch.

“You ever wish you could fly?” he asked in a musing baritone that was smooth as polished mahogany. He turned to stare at the circling gulls.

She snorted. She was used to odd questions. “Who doesn’t want to fly? It’s the crashing that’s the problem.”

He laughed, his eyes going all warm in a way that had her turning all melty inside. Damn him.

“Thank God I have you around to keep me grounded,” he said, still smiling.

She liked the praise. She always did. But it hurt a little too. Because she wanted so much more.

She should be happy with what she had. She was paid a very generous salary to live in a beautiful house worth millions, sometimes heading out for days on Maxim’s luxury yacht, all to keep a handsome man safe from threats that never made their way to the tiny isle.

Sometimes she wondered if Maxim was a little paranoid, keeping a bodyguard around like this when they only went to mainland Greece once every couple of weeks. Still, she wasn’t going to complain. The money was great.

Maxim was wealthy. Not just rich but super-rich.

He’d had this modern villa built here on Patroklos, the private island he’d bought from the Greek government.

On the opposite side of the island, he’d built a spa and health resort that specialized in homeopathic treatments and total care for body, spirit, and mind.

To her, it was more New Age stuff, but it was popular.

Probably because he kept the prices low and even had sponsorships for those in need.

That was Maxim. One great big softie.

Except for those eyes. And all those muscles.

“Do you want lunch?” she asked, suddenly casting around for something to say to break the silence. She didn’t want him to know how being this close to him still affected her. “Dimi is fixing something for us if you’re hungry.”

“Thanks,” he said, glancing back at the water. “But all my needs are met.”

That was a very Maxim thing to say. He’d told her once that he was very different than he’d been six years ago.

Back then, he’d been a high-end software engineer back in the States.

More like a software Mozart. The first AI program he designed had made him a millionaire, and it was only upward from there.

But after one project for the government, he’d suddenly pulled up stakes, sold his company and all his shares, and left the US. He’d also hired her to keep him safe...and teach him how to fight.

She’d done both. She was very good.

“So,” she said, jerking her chin toward one of the white terraces artfully built into the grounds around the house. “I’m going to do a few forms. Want to join me?”

He looked her in the eyes. Her breath caught in her throat at the look he was giving her. The intensity in his gaze had dialed up to the max.

He wanted to. She could see it.

Her realization made her respond with a wild mix of emotions. Her own desire. Followed by her hesitation. Her need to be touched by him. Kissed by him.

She'd made a mistake by making the offer. She realized that now. Forms might lead to sparring and then to grappling. You couldn't grapple without touching. Could she handle rolling with him? Having his body pressed against hers?

She would have to do her best. She was a professional.

Suddenly, Maxim seemed to pull back and regain control of himself. His eyes became guarded as if he didn't trust himself to keep his hands off her if the temptation became too much.

"You go ahead," he told her. He was still looking her right in the eyes, but the desire there had been concealed once more. "I feel like meditating for a while. Clear the mind, calm the soul."

She rolled her eyes. He was really laying it on thicker than usual today. "Okay, Zen Master. You could be like me, smacking things with a stick and having fun, but no." She narrowed her eyes at him. "I thought guys liked to hit things with sticks?"

She was poking him, part of her wanting him to train with her again. Like old times. Another part of her just wanted to see that desire again.

He wasn't taking the bait. His grin was charming. That damn grin was all he'd ever needed to disarm her.

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. Need to clear my head.” He actually looked a little... What? Off-balance? Rattled? Something. Maxim shrugged and began to walk toward the house. He passed right by her, very close. “Have fun, Jade.”

She watched him go. Emotions frothed inside her. Maybe she needed to do more mediation. She certainly wasn’t calm of spirit right now. She was frustrated and horny, and she had a gorgeous man so close, but he was off-limits.

She cursed, low and savage.

Even after all this time, she could remember how his lips felt on her body. How his kisses had claimed her, owned her.

She remembered all of that far too well.

Without allowing herself another word or thought, she walked to the faux temple terrace. She raised her fighting staff and began to work her way through her forms, fighting invisible attackers and beating them all down with her staff.

She had a lot of steam to work off. She might be here a while.

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COLE

A health spa was not exactly Cole's idea of a great vacation, even if he was on an island in Greece.

Then again, this wasn't supposed to be a vacation. It was work. Vacations didn't involve infiltrating the isolated villa of a reclusive billionaire and stealing software code.

Like he'd said. This was work.

He crossed his arms and stared along the rocky coastline, scoping out the best path to his objective. He had a trek ahead of him if he was going to cross the island. It wasn't huge, but the terrain wasn't always easy.

He was momentarily distracted by a woman's voice behind him. "Mr. Ward, your sugar wrap is scheduled for one o'clock."

He turned and put on his most charming grin. People remembered you if you were charming, but they didn't suspect you, which was to his advantage. Especially since Mr. Ward was a fake name and a fake persona. Besides, if you had a hard stare like Cole did, a smile helped soften the intensity.

The grin worked. The young Greek woman with the beautiful dark eyes smiled back at him.

"Thank you, Aniki," he said smoothly. Remembering names was a skill he'd

mastered long ago. People liked you more if you remembered their names. Still...what the hell was a sugar wrap? “I think I’ll walk today. It’s beautiful out. I could use the chance to stretch my legs, get some exercise.”

“Yes, Mr. Ward,” Aniki said, her smile turning a bit warmer than was strictly professional. If he hadn’t been working, he definitely would’ve stayed to experience a little more of that smile. “But don’t be late.”

He gave her a salute, knowing he didn’t intend to go to any sugar-wrap-seaweed-face-cucumber-eye-toxin-removal thing. First, he had to finish the mission. Then he could indulge himself. Indulge somewhere far from Greece where they wouldn’t be searching for him.

He left the pretty Aniki behind. It felt good to leave the sprawling spa complex.

He couldn’t get a read on exactly what kind of clientele this place catered to, and that was strange.

It seemed exclusive, which should’ve included rich people.

Yeah, wealthy people were here, along with the standard New Age hippie types.

But most of the guests were here to recuperate after a long illness.

And they didn’t necessarily strike Cole as being rich.

Of course, that was good. Made it easier to fit in, since Cole certainly wasn’t rich either.

But after this job, that was going to change.

One big score would let him cruise into the sunset.

He wouldn't be blowing his money at an exclusive health spa on some private Greek island.

No, he'd be blowing it in some exclusive casino in Venice.

The breeze cooled Cole's face and ruffled his nondescript brown hair.

The nondescript brown hair belonged to a wig and was part of the ploy.

The bright gold of his natural hair color was the bane of his existence.

He was a mercenary. His success, even his life, depended on his ability to blend into any crowd.

Blending was difficult when people turned to stare at his bright, golden curls.

It was far better to wear a good wig when he was on a job.

A common color let him play his role and fade into the background.

Right now, he was playing the role of Cole Ward, a patient recovering from stage two cancer. Same first name as his real one—that made answering easier—but a different last name. The wig fit nicely into his cover story too.

Cole headed for the marked hiking trail that made a circuit around the Athens side of the island. This was the populated side of the isle, with the spa and the village.

He'd done a little recon and a lot of research.

The health spa was owned by a mysterious benefactor who hired some of the best professionals in the business, both management and whole healthcare workers.

This benefactor was Cole's target...on the other side of the six hundred and forty-odd acres of island space.

Cole's thick leather hiking sandals made almost no noise on the sandy dirt covering the path.

The terrain was like everything else in Greece.

Rocks and sand interspersed with squat little trees, shrubs, and bushes.

Yew trees. Cypress trees. Grazing goats and olive groves as far as the eye could see.

There were cliffs and mountains of a sort.

Not exactly what a Colorado boy would've called mountains, but slopes of craggy rocks studded with trees twisted by a wind that never seemed to stop blowing.

As he climbed farther away from the Greek-style spa with its brilliant white terraces, beaches, and manmade grottoes, Cole had to shade his eyes from the morning sun in the intense blue sky.

If he were another sort of man, he would find this hike peaceful.

At least he wasn't hauling around seventy-plus pounds of gear like he'd done back in Special Forces.

Those were some of the most intense years of his life.

He missed them too.

Cole pushed those thoughts away. He didn't have either the time or the booze to go reminiscing. He was more concerned with leaving the trail behind in order to reach the rocky outcrop he spotted ahead. It might offer him a tactical view of the other side of the island.

The climb was rough, especially without boots. At times, he needed to leap from rock to rock. Eventually, he had to scale the steepest part of the outcropping freehand.

It was a triumph to finish scaling it and get the tactical view he wanted. He crouched and let the wind cool his flushed face and evaporate his sweat.

He was annoyed that he'd actually felt that climb in his muscles. Returning from the treacherous atmosphere of Afghanistan could easily coax a man into becoming complacent. He needed to get back to pushing himself to the limit.

But below him was the luxury home Maxim Hawthorne had commissioned and had built here.

The villa had modern architecture stylings, lots of big windows, and was a white so brilliant it was stunning.

With all those windows, it certainly wasn't a fortress.

Still, he needed inside, and he was a man with a wig and a plan.

The place was considerably smaller than the sprawling health spa.

Maxim Hawthorne made up for it by owning a yacht and a helicopter and who knew what other kinds of luxury toys.

The guy was no saint either, but then again, what billionaire was?

Maxim Hawthorne made his fortune on AI, but Cole was here for a very specific artificial intelligence program.

One worth billions. One that would change the world.

An integrated, learning facial recognition software that would link in with supercomputer-connected nodes, hundreds of thousands of databases—police, government, and private sector—and provide near-instant identification and advanced profiling.

Scary shit, but Cole was long past judging. He had a client paying top dollar for the program.

Now all Cole had to do was find the best way down to the private villa, get inside, locate the program, steal the program, and get back out again without getting caught.

Yeah. Easy-fucking-peasy. But afterward, he could meet his contact on the mainland for the exchange and get the rest of his money. He had a week to get this done.

Shouldn't be a problem.

He wouldn't hurt anyone, so this had to be done exactly right. He didn't do assassinations, and he certainly didn't harm innocent people. No money was worth that. But he had a good bit of intelligence on this target—something that had convinced him this could be done without violence.

According to his contact, backed up by Cole's intel, all you had to do was get the guy to offer you hospitality. Evidently, that was the rich dude's thing . Taking care of guests like some kind of medieval lord or something.

It seemed like a fatal flaw as Cole saw it. One that could be easily exploited.

Cole withdrew a small set of binoculars from the daypack he wore around his waist. He scanned the house, looking for security cameras and other threats.

And that was when he spotted the woman. She occupied what looked like a small temple because it was too fancy to be called a patio or whatever. There were columns all around a flat space in the middle, all made of stone, all painted white.

But she wasn't praying, unless she was worshiping the god of war. She was wailing on an invisible opponent with a fighting staff and doing a damn good job of it too. He was impressed by her moves.

The woman was tall, lithe, and wearing nothing but a pair of tight, boy-cut shorts and a sports bra.

Her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail that swung as she moved.

She was beautiful, the way a hawk was beautiful.

Deadly. Precise. Skilled. The sort of creature who could lure you in with a smile and then rip your face off with her claws.

She was whirling that staff so fast it was a blur. She struck with it, mixing it up with kicks, parries, and spinning dodges. Her pretty face was a study in concentration.

Cole understood that concentration. He was a student of it himself. And watching her gave Cole a sudden idea.

Strategic thinking meant being able to adapt a plan to the realities of the battlefield at a moment's notice. As he watched her power and grace, he adapted his plan to a new

one that would accomplish his goals perfectly.

And if he played it right, he'd be able to get close to this intriguing beauty too.

Either that or she'd beat his ass with that staff and push him over a cliff.

He grinned. Time to roll the dice and see if his gambit won or lost.

* * *

JADE

She was loving this. She'd fallen into her rhythm, moving effortlessly from martial arts form to form.

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The art of working herself into a state of physical exhaustion had long been a daily part of Jade's routine. After all, if you were physically exhausted, your mind stopped running in pointless circles. Or lusting after the man you were supposed to protect.

That was what Jade wanted these days: either inner peace or to train until she was too wobbly to move. Then maybe the sexual tension in the air wouldn't drive her insane.

Her staff slammed down against the ancient marble floor, and in Jade's mind, she had just flattened an opponent and crushed his chest. The impact vibrations traveled up the hickory staff and into her hands.

The force sent shivers up her arms and caused her muscles to bunch up with even more tension.

Tension. It was her constant companion these days. She swept the staff up and pivoted to swing it skillfully at a second imaginary foe.

Tense. Her whole body was tense. She was drying up like an old husk, and her resolve was beginning to crack. She could not take it anymore.

Sweat stung her eyes. She spun a graceful circle in her bare feet, her toes splaying against the cool white floor as she extended the staff to its full reach and leaped into the air to execute a perfect spinning kick.

It was a moment of release. A moment of flying into the air and allowing her body to soar free while she imagined the impact of her foot against something solid and alive.

Maybe it's Max I'm kicking.

The thought gave her a perverse jolt of amusement. She'd be kicking his ass because he made her life so wonderful and so insufferable at the same time.

Her feet landed squarely on the ground, and she kicked backward with every ounce of frustration in her body. The channeling of emotion into a physical expression of power.

Except this time, instead of kicking an imaginary attacker, her foot made contact with something very solid. She heard the thud of impact and the coughing exhale of breath as her foot hit square in a man's solar plexus.

A man who should not have been there.

The man staggered backward from the force of her kick. She recoiled and planted her staff on the ground. She used it to pivot herself around to face the stranger who'd managed to get so disturbingly close. She couldn't believe she'd been that sloppy.

And who the hell was this guy?

He was a big man. Six feet and a bit. Good-looking and dressed like a Westerner—Canada or the States, maybe.

Solid, fit, and well-muscled. Brown hair, tanned face, dark eyes, and now toppling backward as though she'd just handed him a death blow.

The guy hit the marble floor with enough force to make Jade cringe.

He lay on the stone floor, his eyes round with shock as he began to gasp for air. He was clearly no longer a threat.

“Don’t panic,” Jade said in a voice that was all-business as she set down the staff and knelt beside the stranger. “Just try and take slow breaths. It will pass.”

She wasn’t about to tell this trespassing stranger how disturbed she was that he’d managed to sneak so close without her spotting him. Clearly, she was off her game. The isolation, quiet, and beauty of the island were making her soft. A bodyguard couldn’t afford those kinds of sloppy mistakes.

The stranger nodded, still clutching his chest. He really was handsome. And built. His biceps and shoulders could give Maxim a run for his money. Right now though, he only looked surprised and winded, wincing in pain.

It was silly, but she felt guilty. She felt guilty even though he’d been foolish enough to sneak up on her when she’d been in the middle of a martial arts weapon kata and spinning her staff around like a ceiling fan.

“You’ll be okay in a second,” she reassured him, studying his face. She’d never seen him before. She would’ve remembered. “Why are you here?”

“I’m lost...” The man wheezed the words as he held his arms around his midsection. He was flat on his ass with his legs sticking out in front of him. He had on hiking sandals and khaki cargo shorts. His button-down shirt was vacation awful, so ugly she actually admired it a little.

“You came from the spa?”

He nodded, his face turning red. “Have to get back.”

“Yeah, I think you need to relax a bit before hiking back,” Jade told him, not unkindly.

She went to a small cooler and snagged a water bottle.

She returned to the man's side and handed it to him.

“Take a drink. When you feel like you can move, I'll give you a ride back to the spa so you don't have to walk. ”

After she headed inside to get her Glock 17 and holster, that was. She was paid to take no chances. Not when Maxim's life was on the line.

The man took the water bottle and lifted it to his lips. Before he drank, he fumbled the bottle, swayed a little, and suddenly collapsed to the white marble floor. He lay there unmoving, his eyes closed.

Jade stared at him in shock and rising concern. What in the hell was going on? If he was from the spa... Had she just kicked a sick man to death?

She dropped to her knees and checked his pulse points at both his wrist and his neck. He had a strong heartbeat. Thank God. He was just unconscious.

So, why had he passed out? He must have some kind of medical condition even though he looked like he was in top-tier shape.

Medical conditions weren't her department. They had professional medical staff at the spa, but she couldn't just leave him here. He didn't have a neck or spine injury, so she decided to risk moving him. She would have to drive him to the village.

Jade braced his weight against her bare midriff and began to pull him toward the stairs and the golf cart they sometimes used to transport things around the property when a wheelbarrow wouldn't work.

There was no way to bring the golf cart directly to him, and that only left one option.

Hauling his heavy ass around by herself.

He was dead weight against her, but Jade could not help but again notice how firm and well-muscled this stranger was. His hands were calloused and his nails trimmed short as if he worked with his hands. Still, he certainly didn't seem sick.

She'd just finished thinking that when his hair came off.

Jade stared at it in horror, as if it were a giant hairy spider that had jumped from his head to the marble floor. Then she finally realized it was a wig.

She looked back at the stranger. He had short blond hair shaved so close he must've been bald just a day or so ago.

Carefully, she grabbed the wig and put it back on his head as best she could. He didn't complain. He was still out.

Jade grunted as she got to the steps and carefully eased his heavy lower half down each one without any unnecessary jarring. She was in great shape, but she was still breathing hard by the time she managed to drive the golf cart over and drag him onto the golf cart's rear seat.

She kept expecting him to come to, but he didn't. His breathing was steady though, even if his heart rate was elevated.

She had to wrap her arms nearly all the way around the guy's waist in order to anchor the seat belt without choking him. Her breasts pushed against his side as she invented a new and creative way to secure a body in the back of a golf cart.

By the time she was done, her long, sun-streaked brown hair was coming loose from her ponytail.

She probably should've cut it all off last time she'd been in Athens.

It was usually in the way. But it was her one vanity.

Too many memories of letting her hair trail over Max's naked skin as they made love in the sun...

No. She was not going to go there. She checked the stranger's pulse one more time.

Gently lifting his eyelids, Jade found his eyes rolled back into his head.

Maybe he had some kind of blood sugar problem.

A chunk of the health spa visitors were diabetics.

He didn't look diabetic, but A1C numbers didn't always follow the obvious physical signs.

Or maybe the wig and shaved head indicated cancer?

Of course, what did she know? She was a bodyguard, not a doctor.

Jade swung into the driver's seat and set off in the golf cart. It was hard not to floor it and race down the sandy path between the house and the temple terrace like she usually did.

She needed to find Max and let him know they had a problem, and she needed to find him right now.

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MAXIM

The sound of the island breeze through the olive grove was only a whisper at the edge of Maxim Hawthorne's consciousness. Time had no meaning during meditation. But then, time had far less weight here on his little island, in a house overlooking the sea.

These days, Max's life was one long day interspersed with the necessary tasks that made living possible.

Nutrition. Bathing. Sleep. Business when needed.

Diving on occasion. And of course, keeping himself in top physical and mental condition.

Once the basics of life were accounted for, it was possible to strive for a true understanding of the existential meaning of life.

At least that was the wordy theory.

The reality was quite different. It was surprisingly difficult to relax, to focus, when you had a stunning woman for a bodyguard.

A woman who had the sweetest lips you'd ever tasted.

A woman with a smile that could melt your heart and stir your cock, both at the same damned time. A unique, beautiful, fearless woman.

A woman you couldn't have...

The scuff of a shoe interrupted Max's silent torment.

He opened his eyes. He was on the terrace overlooking the ocean.

The waves were the easiest thing to focus on if one wanted to enter a good state of meditation.

And of course, people were the easiest way to be dragged out of a state of deep contemplation and kicked back into the mundane world.

"Mr. Maxim?" the housekeeper, Dimi, said hesitantly. She didn't like to bother him at the best of times, but even more so when he was meditating.

"What is it, Dimi?" Max barely moved his lips when he spoke. He was still hoping he could slide back into his meditative state and continue once he'd helped her.

Her full name was Dimitra Spiros. "Dimi" was something Jade had affectionately started calling the older woman. Sometimes Max suspected Dimi and Jade were related in the convoluted fashion that seemed to happen in Greek families. The Greeks were very warm people. He loved living here.

"Jade has returned from her exercises with a large man," Dimi announced.

What ? A dozen questions shot into his mind and shattered any hope of returning to a meditative state.

Balancing himself, Max rose without shifting his legs. One moment he had his legs bent before him with the soles of his feet pressed together. The next, he was rising and lifting his arms to the sky in order to stretch his spine as he lifted his body to a

standing position.

Then he turned to Dimitra. “What happened?”

Dimi was looking more than a little concerned. “The large man was injured. Jade intends to send for a doctor or drive the large man to the village, but I thought you should know.”

“Is the man all right?”

“Maybe. You should see him. Hurry, hurry.” She turned and hustled away through the leafy bushes surrounding the terrace.

Dimi was a grandmotherly sort of woman who belonged to a very large extended family.

Many of them worked at the health spa on the other side of the island and lived in the village.

The rest lived a short boat ride away on the mainland.

She often joked that she enjoyed working for Max’s personal household because she got to be away from her loud, rambunctious family.

She always looked a bit on the flyaway side, but the woman was an incredible cook and never had trouble keeping up with the villa.

Since Max didn’t care for the distraction of a full staff, Dimi was the perfect answer.

He hurried along in Dimi’s wake toward the front of the villa.

He hoped this man wasn't seriously hurt.

He hadn't heard any screams or gunshots, so Jade hadn't killed him.

Or so he prayed. But if there was an injured guest at his villa, then it was Max's responsibility to care for this individual as best he could.

He came to the villa's wide, open-air foyer and found Jade and their unexpected guest. Jade was leaning over one of the padded lounge chairs that occupied this oasis of fountains and leafy tropical plants. True to the rumor, there appeared to be a large man on the lounge chair.

Jade glanced at Maxim and frowned. "I told her not to interrupt you." But she sounded as if she were pissed at him and not Dimi.

So fiery. It was one of the things he loved about her. "She did the right thing. Now, who is our friend, and is he alive?"

"Alive but unconscious," Jade answered. Her expression was concerned. "But it's weird. People don't usually stay out for long. He has to have some underlying health condition."

"How did he get like this in the first place?"

She looked him right in the eyes. "He came up behind me. I kicked him in the chest."

Maxim let out a low whistle. The guy would feel that for a little while. Jade was strong and tough. He moved closer to get a better look at their guest.

The guy certainly didn't look to be in poor health. He was damn handsome, tanned, his chest and shoulders broad, good muscles, although there was something wrong

with his hair...

He pushed that thought aside. Maybe the guy had a toupee.

Regardless, their guest was attractive. In fact, he was exactly the kind of man that Maxim would've favored in his wild youth.

Maxim didn't really see gender. Not in the way most people did.

To him, each gender was equally sexually attractive in bold and unique ways that he loved.

Why would he ever want to choose between them?

Max suddenly became aware of Jade's stare.

He met her gaze, and it struck him for the millionth time how beautiful she was.

She had large, almost doe-ish eyes. Innocent and wide.

Her dark hair might be a little disheveled and pulling out of her ponytail, but he knew from experience how soft and silken it was to touch.

Her pretty, heart-shaped face made a man believe she was nothing more than an athletic, beautiful woman with a tight ass, high breasts the perfect size to fit a man's hands, and full, pouting lips begging to be kissed.

Of course, that would be right before she slipped a knife blade between your ribs or shot you for underestimating her. But Max had always found that one of the most attractive things about her. Beauty and strength combined.

Even so, Jade had ended things between them.

The physical side, anyway. It had cut his heart out back then.

Living with her so close, so beautiful, so untouchable, only made the torment worse.

But that was why he had turned to meditation with such gusto.

He would conquer the pain. He would find balance without her.

He had too. Because someday she would discover that she deserved better than him and she would leave him for good.

Max forced himself to stop looking at her or thinking about what they'd once shared together. Instead, he approached the stranger on the lounge chair. "He got lost and wandered here from the health spa?"

"He said something like that before he passed out." Jade folded her arms over her chest and chewed at her lower lip while she frowned.

It was a posture and expression that Max knew intimately.

Her thoughtful face. "I checked his pulse. It's strong.

" She shook her head. "He just doesn't look like the sort of man to pass out for no reason. "

"Agreed." Again, the guy's hair didn't seem to fit his head exactly right. He reached out and touched it. The stranger's hair came off in his hand, and Max found himself staring at a brown wig in surprise. Beneath the wig, the man's head was shaved to golden stubble.

“Cancer patient?” Jade mused. “That was my other guess.”

As if the loss of his wig had roused him, the stranger opened his dark eyes. Those eyes widened when they focused on Maxim holding his wig out to him.

The man reached clumsily for his wig. “You had no right to pull that off.”

The vehemence in the man’s tone surprised him. He watched as the man snatched the wig and put it back on his head. It was a little askew, but Max would never point that out. He didn’t want to humiliate his guest. The man was in his care, after all.

“I’m very sorry,” Maxim told him gravely. “I was concerned that you were hurt. Please, let me show you the hospitality of my home. It’s the least I can do to make up for this terrible misunderstanding.”

COLE

His improvised plan had worked...even though it had hurt like hell. The girl could kick. His respect for her had only grown.

Cole had been playing possum, pretending to pass out. He figured it would be dramatic enough to get him into the house. He hadn’t expected her to drag his ass over to a golf cart by herself.

Again, he was coming to respect the hell out of her, even if she had let him sneak up close behind her. Close enough to kick. Of course, he hadn’t minded when she’d pressed that sexy body against him. She wasn’t wearing all that much either. Unfortunately, his eyes had been shut at the time...

But now he was staring right into the eyes of Maxim Hawthorne.

He recognized the man immediately, of course. Maxim was striking. Not just handsome, but he put off an aura of command and power that meshed well with his polite words. Maxim talked like a rich, educated guy. That was no surprise.

But for a tech geek, this guy deserved to star on the shirtless tech nerd calendar. Maybe even the cover. And every single month.

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It was an amusing thought but true. Maxim had to be around six-two, broad-shouldered with a narrow-waist and covered in smooth, tanned skin that showed off his athletic body.

Not an ounce of fat on the guy. Cole could verify that since Maxim was wearing nothing but essentially bicycle shorts.

They hugged his taut thighs and cupped his ass like a lover's hands.

The bulge at his groin wasn't exactly unimpressive either.

All of that in addition to the absolutely ripped chest and belly.

It was as if those classic nude statues over on the mainland had been sculpted to look like Maxim.

Another amusing thought.

"Don't worry. We'll send for a doctor," Maxim explained. His expression was concerned, but the man also had a strange intensity to him. Like he was zeroed in completely on Cole. As if Cole was the only person who mattered in the world.

"Thanks, but I'll be fine in a moment. I don't want to be any trouble. I don't need a doctor to come all the way out here."

Maxim didn't seem to like that answer. "Are you sure? Jade told me she kicked you pretty hard."

So her name was Jade. He liked it.

“She did,” he said, rubbing the spot where she’d kicked him. “But that’s not going to kill me. My physician back in New York submitted the necessary forms about my condition to the spa health practitioners.”

Jade tilted her head to one side and her stare was sharp. “And what condition would that be? Chronic trespassing? A delusional need to leave the marked path, climb a small mountain, and sneak up on a girl and her favorite stick? Is stupidity a medical thing?”

He looked her right in the eyes. He liked a wiseass. He was a bit of one himself. But he wasn’t going to let her get away with it. “I have cancer.”

That brought her up short. He actually felt bad for lying, but she clearly didn’t trust him. She had good instincts. He needed to be careful around her. Not only was she distractingly attractive, but she was also quick. Quick with her kicks and quick with her wits.

“Cancer.” The woman inhaled a big breath and let it out slowly. Her breasts rose and fell, and Cole found his gaze drawn to them, even though his brain pointedly reminded him that breasts were not his reason for being on the island.

Still, he was only a man. Some things in life were too wonderful to ignore.

“Cancer,” Cole affirmed, hiding the fact that he felt like a real bastard by playing this card.

But this was the job. Far better than trying to force his way in here to take what he wanted and someone ending up hurt.

He couldn't stomach that. Or forgive himself if it ever happened.

"Your staff physician has the medical file from my oncologist. I just had rounds of chemo and radiation therapy over the last year. It's left me a bit low. That's why I'm at the spa."

Maxim nodded slowly. "If you're sure you don't need a doctor..."

"I don't. But thank you. It was only a stupid accident." He grinned and rubbed the back of his neck. "I shouldn't have crept up on your martial arts instructor."

"Bodyguard," Maxim corrected with an answering smile. He reached out and put a hand on Cole's forearm, squeezing gently. "What's your name?"

"My name's Cole Ward." He had to keep his focus. Maxim's firm grip was unsettling. Cole's heart was actually beating faster as if he'd climbed that damn rocky slope again in his sandals. "Who are you?"

"Good to meet you, Cole. I'm Maxim Hawthorne." He nodded toward Jade. "You've already met Jade."

"I certainly met her foot."

That brought a smile to her face. It was there and gone again quickly, but it was a pretty smile. He was grateful to have seen it. Even though she was going to make this mission all the more difficult for him.

He was also impressed that Cole didn't talk himself up, going on about how he actually owned Patroklos. Owned a damn island .

"Can I get you something to drink? Are you hungry?"

For a rich guy, Maxim was pretty damn attentive. The info on the man being a good host seemed to be spot on.

If the man wanted to play host, it was best to accept something from him to lock in his status as a guest. “Maybe some water?”

Jade stood. “I’ll get it.” She looked at Maxim. “You’ll be okay?”

Maxim smiled at her. “Don’t worry. You trained me well, sensei.”

Jade snorted, turned on her heel, and left. Unless Cole very much missed his guess, Maxim’s gaze lingered over her with more than a passing interest as she retreated.

“Jade’s head of my security here on the island,” Maxim offered, obviously guessing correctly at Cole’s curiosity. He looked amused, though, as if he enjoyed an inside joke.

Cole wondered how Maxim would react if he asked the question in his mind right now. What was the relationship between Jade and Maxim?

And then the question Cole would ask himself: could that relationship be exploited?

“She’s a beautiful woman,” he finally said and decided to probe. “You must enjoy having her here with you.”

Maxim’s brow knitted. “Jade’s a professional. An employee... And a friend. So, yes. I enjoy having her here.”

No doubt. And Cole had no doubt Jade was checking him out right now, running a security screening on him. It didn’t matter. His cover as Cole Ward was perfectly legitimate-looking and perfectly inane.

The two of them chatted a bit until Jade returned. Wordlessly, she handed Cole the cold water bottle with condensation on the plastic. He twisted off the cap and took a deep drink.

When he finished, he smiled at her. “Thank you.”

She only nodded, watching him.

Maxim leaned in again. “Cole, I’d be honored if you’d agree to stay and have dinner with us tonight as my guest. It’s the least I can do to make up for this unfortunate accident.”

Cole held his gaze. “I’d like that. But I should probably get back to the spa or let them know where I am. I was supposed to have some kind of wrap.”

“Don’t worry,” Maxim replied. “We’ll take care of everything. You just stay here and take it easy for a while.”

And as simple as that, Cole was in.

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JADE

An hour later, Jade was upstairs in her private rooms on the second floor. Maxim and their guest were both downstairs talking away as if they were old friends. She tried not to be annoyed or overly distrusting. Although that was her job.

Her room was rather Spartan. She liked things clean, with lots of space and not a lot of clutter.

A second-floor room had drawbacks for a security professional.

But Maxim's bedroom suite was up here, and she had more than one way to descend to the first floor within seconds.

The large room did provide a view of most approaches to the house.

She paced to the door and listened, hearing their conversation drifting up the stairwell.

Part of her liked that Maxim was a gracious host and very generous, but she didn't exactly want this Cole guy here, making her life tougher. Besides the obvious security threat, the guy was handsome, and handsome meant distracting, and distracting was bad for focus.

She had it tough enough with Maxim.

Jade muttered a curse in Greek and slammed her butt down in her padded leather

chair.

She picked up her binoculars and began to scan the boats gathering around the island in the distance.

People liked to dive off the coast of Patroklos.

The water was clear, and there were plenty of caves, wrecks, and geographical features that divers found fascinating.

She worried one of those boats was observing them, waiting to see how their new “guest” managed to worm his way past Maxim’s defenses.

Besides, she was paid to be paranoid.

She didn’t see anything out of the ordinary, but that didn’t mean they were out of the woods yet.

She glanced at her computer. When she’d gone to get the water for Cole, she’d run the man’s name and an image from the villa’s security cameras through a bunch of databases, looking for a hit.

They’d come up with nothing. No criminal history or known associates.

That was the only reason she’d left Maxim alone with him.

Briefly. Because as soon as she was done with her task, she’d be right back downstairs. This time she was bringing the pistol.

She frowned, suddenly uneasy. For some reason, she felt like things were changing too fast to control. Too her, Maxim Hawthorne wasn’t simply her boss. She loved

him. She never said it aloud anymore, but it was still true.

From the moment she'd first laid eyes on him, she had wanted him.

If she closed her eyes, she could still remember the feel of his hands on her body and remember the scent of his skin.

Remember the way he kissed her. So tenderly at times, and with such fire and passion at others.

She remembered the love in his eyes when he smiled at her...

She had destroyed that. Her . She'd sabotaged her own love life for her job.

It was crazy but true. Bodyguards weren't supposed to be intimate with the people they protected.

It made them sloppy, made for errors in action and judgment that could get them both hurt or killed.

After it became clear there really were bad people who wanted to steal Maxim's intellectual property—and probably hurt him in the process—she'd made the impossible choice.

No more kissing, touching, sex. No more love.

Pushing him away had hurt him. At first, he hadn't given in. He told her how badly he wanted her. How he needed her. But after she threatened to leave him, he finally acquiesced. Sometimes she could still see the desire in his eyes...and the pain.

She was an idiot. She'd thought it would be easier than this. But it had been hell.

A sob nearly escaped her throat. She choked it back. None of that mattered. Not the way it felt to be held in his arms or the way it felt to be touched by him, kissed by him.

If she lingered on these thoughts for too long, her mind would begin to spin fantasies of Max coming to her as he once had.

The way he would take utter possession of her, cupping her head in his hands and sifting his fingers through her hair before he devoured her mouth in a kiss filled with such longing and desire that she could never deny him—

No. All of that was in the past. She'd made her choice. It was the right one. The one she owed Max. He needed someone to protect him from the very real threats to his safety. She had taken the job. She needed to be a professional. She cared for him too much to let him down.

Enough. Get this task done and get back downstairs.

She turned toward the electronic safe built into her wall.

There were several layers of security on it.

First, she used the scanner for her biometric thumbprint.

Once that was accepted and the lights turned green, she entered the security code.

The heavy outer door opened, and she had to enter yet another code for the inner safe. She opened that heavy metal door too.

Inside there was nothing but a hard drive.

She picked the drive up and moved it to a tablet computer that had been locked down, stripped to its core, and modified so it couldn't connect to the internet or install new software.

At the prompts, she reset the shredder program on the encrypted hard drive per Maxim's instructions.

If the program timer was not reset once every six days, it would systematically destroy every byte of data on the drive.

High-end encryption kept the shredder program from being shut down too.

When the hard drive was accessed in any way, the program locked everything down demanded the password.

Fail to enter the password and boom. Shredded data.

A fortune's worth of computer code gone.

Keeping track of this was an important part of her job. An annoying one too. She wished he would delete the whole thing and toss it in the ocean. He didn't need the money. Why keep this around?

Maybe she shouldn't wish for that too hard.

This little drive was a big reason he still needed her around.

The advanced-learning protocol AI stored on it was genius, worth billions to every government on the planet, and highly dangerous.

She could still remember the first time she'd done this task.

It hadn't seemed like such a chore then.

It had seemed like some kind of sacred duty or something.

That sounded stupid to her now. But of course, she and Max had been hot and heavy back then.

They'd been screwing each other's brains out and enjoying themselves so often and so thoroughly that everything in her life seemed filled with excitement and edgy thrills.

She went through the process in reverse, returning the hard drive to the safe and locking it away again.

After that, she took one more scan with the binoculars to watch the boats and the approaches to the house.

Their guest had come up from the cliff trails.

Wasn't it strange that a man who was supposed to be recovering from cancer at a health spa decided to leave the trail and endure a difficult climb?

No. She didn't trust Cole, no matter how cute he might be. Attractiveness was protective camouflage.

With that in mind, she put on her shoulder holster with her service pistol. She knew Max wouldn't be happy about the gun, but it was her job to keep him safe.

If he didn't like that, he could damn well fire her, and she'd finally be done with him.

* * *

COLE

It was late afternoon when Cole finally got a few moments to himself. He'd faked feeling a little tired. Nothing was wrong with him except he was still sore from Jade's kick. But Maxim had immediately urged him to lie down in the guest room if he needed to.

So Cole had taken him up on the offer, trying to get out from under Jade's watchful eye.

He'd overheard them talking together. Maxim was headed back outside to finish his meditation, and Jade was concerned that she couldn't be at two places at the same time.

Protecting the house and protecting Maxim.

Maxim had laughed and told her to stay in the house in case Cole needed anything. He'd be fine out on the terrace. Jade had obeyed, but he got the feeling she didn't like it.

For Cole, it was a setback. He needed her out of the house so he could search the place.

The next phase of his mission was locating and securing the computer code.

It was a strange damn world they lived in, where a computer program could be more valuable than diamonds and gold.

Actually, he hated this new world. Sometimes he suspected computers were more dangerous tools than guns.

Hyperbole, maybe, but still, at least everyone knew a gun would destroy you. No one ever suspected a computer.

Staying in the guest room wasn't accomplishing the mission, so he decided to recon the grounds. He wanted to see if he could learn the house layout and maybe spot something interesting through the big upstairs windows that might point him in the right direction.

Jade was loitering nearby in the kitchen. He knew she was listening for him. So he stuck his head in and gave her his most charming smile.

"I'm feeling better, but I'm a little restless. If you don't mind, I'm going to walk around outside a for a while. You have such beautiful gardens and patios here."

She watched him, unfazed by his smile. Oh well. You couldn't win them all. She was pretty enough to be hit on all the time by men. He idly wondered how many of them she ended up kicking.

"Do you want a tour?" Jade finally asked.

"I wouldn't want to impose. I know you have important work to do. I won't be long."

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Her suspicion was coming off her in waves, but he pretended not to notice.

She was a thorn in his side, but he actually really liked her.

He liked both of them. She was smart and skilled and, of course, stunning.

Maxim was smart and charming and...stunning.

He had no idea why the two of them weren't together. There seemed to be something there...

Whatever. It was none of his business. The fact that he liked them wouldn't stop him from doing this job. He headed outside, back into the afternoon sun.

The villa itself was made of whitewashed lime with native stone accents.

But instead of having walls that enclosed it and created rooms, the floor plan was utterly open except for the private suites.

The roof seemed to stretch over a maze of terraces that moved from one to the other until they seemed to flow directly toward the Mediterranean blue of the sea. The architect had some talent.

He began to walk the patios and terraces, strolling casually.

Pretending to be a man on a walk. Every so often, he would throw a glance back at the house, checking to see if he could identify where Maxim's office was located.

That would be the most likely place to find the computer or drive he was searching for.

He knew Jade was watching him from inside the house. He could feel her eyes on him, distrusting him. He needed to find some way to ease her suspicions. Unfortunately, he doubted it would be easy.

His walk led him to a set of marble stairs. Looking down, he spotted Maxim sitting in the lotus position on the lowest terrace and apparently staring out to sea.

Maxim was still wearing those form-fitting shorts and nothing else. Cole guessed that was his yoga or meditation gear.

Cole certainly didn't mind. He had a perfect view of Maxim's bare back.

Every inch of Maxim was corded with muscle.

He looked like an artist's rendering of the perfect male form.

His elbows rested on his knees, his forearms curled upward, and his fingers forming what Cole would've sworn was the universal sign for A-OK.

On top of that, the guy was sitting perfectly still as if he'd been there for days already and would probably be there for a few more.

Maxim Hawthorne was totally unprotected.

Cole could've murdered him right then without even disturbing his Zen state.

That was the problem with trusting people.

Cole never should've been able to get this close to Maxim.

He should've been taken down by ten security guards and dogs and booted back to the other side of the island. Or locked up.

Instead, Maxim had made him a guest.

He put his hand on the railing and took a step down.

He was going to take a chance and see if he could join Maxim in his meditation.

It would probably be the most boring thing in the world, but he knew it would score him points and earn trust. Besides, he'd be closer to Maxim's hot body in those form-fitting shorts. He grinned. The view would be great.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Jade warned from right behind him.

He froze, tensing, his heart lurching in his chest. Hell, she'd scared him half to death sneaking up on him.

He turned to face her, trying to get himself back under control. She leaned against the stone railing, arms crossed, watching him with a tight smile on her lips.

This wasn't good. He was off his game, and he wasn't sure how it had happened. Maybe all of this pretending he had cancer had backfired. Karma would probably kick his ass for that one. And it should because he deserved it.

He only hoped that karma waited until after he pulled off this job.

"He only looks as if he's vulnerable," Jade explained.

She was still wearing tight boy shorts, but her workout top covered most of her torso now.

Her hair was still in a ponytail. She looked incredibly sexy.

The top didn't hide the fullness of her breasts, which were spectacular.

The kind of glorious attribute a man wanted to cup in his hands in order to bury his face in their warm softness.

Then again, the top didn't hide the shoulder holster with the Glock in it either. He didn't really feel like getting shot right now, no matter how sexy Jade might look.

"I was just curious what he was doing," Cole managed to say. "He stays so still."

She arched an eyebrow. "They don't have you meditate at the spa?"

He shrugged and grinned. "I don't go. It seems boring. I like to move. Be active."

"Like climbing rocky cliffs?"

Ouch. She was on him like a dog on a bone. That was fine. Some part of him was enjoying the hell out of this. "Exactly. I'm a bit of a thrill seeker and adrenaline junkie."

That was no lie. He'd always been that way. It was one of the many reasons he'd joined the military.

"If you're curious," she said with a strange kind of mocking smile, "go talk to him about it. Just don't touch him."

He raised his eyebrows. Aha. So she was jealous. She didn't want him seducing her boss. He wondered if he could use that to his advantage.

“Thanks for the tip.” He wandered down the steps and across the marble terrace. He walked over to Maxim and glanced back at Jade. She still leaned against the railing, watching him with a hawk-like gaze but still smiling.

Cole decided to push things. Rattle her cage. He walked up behind Maxim and reached out to touch his shoulder—

It was impossible to say exactly what happened. Everything went down too fast. All he knew was that one second he was touching Maxim's bare shoulder, and the next he was flat on his back with the air knocked out of him.

It was as if Maxim had launched from the ground, grabbed hold of Cole's knees, and then levered his entire body around in a spectacular move full of grace and agility.

Cole had absolutely no time to react before he crashed to the ground.

His head smacked the tiles, and he found himself blinking and staring up into Maxim Hawthorne's face.

Cole saw the instant Maxim became aware of who his “attacker” was.

Maxim's eyes filled with concern, and he backed off on the punishing hold he had on Cole's forearms. Still, for the span of one second, maybe two, he was lying full-length beneath Max.

Max straddled Cole, pinning him to the ground and holding him captive.

A willing captive. For a few seconds, at least.

Staring up into Maxim's face and feeling the heat of his body brought a rush of powerful urges to the front of his mind.

The other man's dark gaze seemed to see right through to his heart, leaving Cole exposed to him.

There was concern in Maxim's eyes...and something else.

Something that had Cole's head spinning more than the thump against the ground.

"Did I hurt you?" Maxim asked quietly. He didn't get off of Cole and help him up. Instead, Maxim gently touched his face.

Cole stared back into those intense eyes.

He could feel his cock starting to stir.

But he also had to keep a smile off his face.

Here was phase two, right in his lap. Or on top of him.

If Maxim liked men too, then Cole would use that to his advantage.

Hell, it would even be fun. He loved men, giving or taking, it didn't matter to him.

He should've unseated Max. He could've planted his feet on the ground and bridged up and sent Max flying over his head. It could've turned into a full-on grapple. But it would've immediately given Cole away.

"Just knocked the wind out of me," he managed to tell Maxim with a wry smile.

"You surprised me. I'm starting to learn it's dangerous to walk up to someone from

behind around here.”

Maxim chuckled. “You’re right. We’ve been poor hosts. I apologize.”

Cole waved the apology away as if it wasn’t necessary. “Why do you have a bodyguard? I don’t think you need one.”

Maxim carefully climbed off him and stood.

That was a bit of a relief. Not that Maxim was overwhelmingly heavy or anything, but Cole was far too aware of Maxim for his own comfort.

Aware of the way it felt to have the man’s thick, powerful thighs on either side of his waist. Aware of the blood surging toward his groin, and his cock beginning to stand at attention.

Thank God the man had climbed off him before feeling that.

Although maybe he should’ve kept Maxim on top of him and let the man feel his hard-on after all. Send a message about what he wanted. Rush into phase two, guns blazing. Not literally, of course.

Maxim glanced up at Jade. She was still watching from the top of the stairs, her arms still crossed. She appeared amused. Well, she had warned him not to touch Maxim. He’d believed it jealousy, but she’d meant exactly what she’d said.

“Unfortunately, I do need a bodyguard,” Maxim explained. “Jade is one of the best. She has a tough job, and I don’t make it easy.” He shrugged. “I don’t want a full security detail hanging around, disturbing the peace and solitude.”

“So instead, you make my life difficult,” Jade called.

Maxim laughed but didn't deny it.

Hmm. Maybe phase two wouldn't work after all. There was definitely something between Maxim and Jade. Were the two of them sleeping together? What a lucky bastard. He was actually jealous of Maxim.

"Now I insist you stay for dinner," Max told him. "I won't take no for an answer."

"Thanks, but I think I've imposed enough," Cole said, playing hard to get.

"Nonsense. I want to make amends for being such a poor host. I'll arrange for a driver to take you back to the health spa after that if you wish. Or you may feel free to stay overnight in the guest room. The view is spectacular."

"Sounds awesome. I'd love to stay if it's no trouble." He didn't look at Jade. She would probably be glaring daggers at him.

It was almost funny.

Now he had to set phase two in motion. Maybe he had to expand it too.

Maybe he had to include the beautiful and deadly Jade in his plans for seduction. It would be dangerous, but the payoff would be unforgettable.

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MAXIM

Maxim took a seat on the modern sofa with a drink in his hand and felt a surge of fascination and interest in another man that he hadn't experienced in far too long.

Not only interest in Cole and his reasons for coming to the spa before he'd blundered into Maxim's private life, but intimate questions too. What was it like to survive cancer? How much had it changed him? What did he hope for now? What goals and dreams did he still cherish and want to accomplish?

Also, purely selfish questions. Was Cole straight or gay? Or was he bisexual, like Maxim?

He held those questions back. For now, at least.

Cole relaxed into the cushions of a matching sofa set at an angle to Maxim's seat and sipped his wine. He'd taken off the wig earlier and laughed about it. The soft glow from the overhead lights seemed to shine in the golden stubble that remained on his head.

Jade was nearby. Maxim knew it. She'd eaten with them, of course, and she'd even seemed to thaw a little toward Cole during the meal.

Especially after Cole revealed that he'd served in the U.S.

military. She'd hit him with some probing questions only someone in the service would know, but he'd passed her tests.

That had put her at ease. A little. She'd even laughed at a few of Cole's jokes.

Maxim smiled to himself. That was a lot better than having her kick him again.

Jade was one in a million. He didn't deserve someone like her in his life. Maybe someday he'd finally get the chance to make things right. To change things back to the way they should be...

He shook those thoughts away and focused on his guest. He didn't want to spend all evening mooning over Jade when his unexpected guest deserved his attention.

Besides, he knew that even if Jade had left them alone on the terrace after dinner, she remained ready to rush to his aid if there was danger.

Dimi had gone home after cooking the meal.

Now it was just the two of them in the terrace lights with the waves crashing on the rocks down below.

"The meal was great," Cole said.

"Thank you. I'll be sure to tell our cook. She'll be happy to hear it."

They'd had moussaka, and Dimi could make some of the best he'd ever tasted. Layered eggplant, spiced meat, and a creamy bechamel sauce, all in a baked casserole. Simple yet delicious.

"You don't have much staff for someone who owns an entire island."

"Ah, yes. Owning an island." Max sipped his drink and wished this didn't always come up eventually. "Truthfully, I didn't own it to start with."

“Isn’t that how it usually works?” There was a bit of mockery in Cole’s tone. “Rich men see what they want and buy it when it suits them?”

Max chuckled. “Fair enough.” This was a line of inquiry he would rather avoid. It was a delicate one. “The island had been in Jade’s family for many generations.”

Cole lowered his glass and tilted his head to one side. “She’s even more impressive than I thought. I wouldn’t have guessed her to be a rich heiress.”

“She’s not,” Maxim said bluntly.

Cole didn’t speak. He waited for an explanation. Maxim was sure Jade couldn’t hear them, but he wouldn’t betray her. It was a touchy subject. Still, Cole seemed to like her, even though she’d flattened him. Maybe that was why he seemed so intrigued. She was a very special woman.

Maxim would know. He’d lost his heart to her.

“Jade’s family owned the island once,” Maxim finally said. “I wanted to find someplace very private and secluded. It all worked out.” He waved his hand dismissively. That was enough. Especially without her in the conversation.

This was always the tricky part of his narrative when he talked with the rare guest or outsider.

How to pretend that he wasn’t hiding here on the island, making certain his all-too-effective AI program was kept out of the wrong hands.

Oh, and he’d been sick of the rat race and chaos of modern life.

But that almost went without saying these days.

“Well, it’s certainly secluded,” Cole said after a moment or two. “And you’ve got Jade with you. That must be rather satisfying.”

Maxim watched him. That was the second time Cole had made that type of comment. “You’re interested in her?”

“Who wouldn’t be? She’s stunning and fascinating.”

He couldn’t agree more, but he held his tongue. He didn’t intend to reveal how strong his love for her remained. He’d spent too much time crushing that love down because if he hadn’t, he would’ve lost her completely. Even a little of her in his life was enough. It had to be enough.

Cole leaned forward, his eyes shining in the light. “Are you two together?”

The bluntness of the question threw Maxim off step a little. He couldn’t fault the man for his curiosity. Maybe he believed he’d have a chance at Jade.

“We’re not together right now.”

“But you were.”

“Once.”

Cole sat back again, shaking his head before sipping his wine. “Sorry if I’m intruding.”

“Don’t let it trouble you. She is an extraordinary woman.”

“I agree.” He glanced at the house, at the balconies and terraces. “She’s keeping close, isn’t she? She doesn’t trust me.”

“It’s her job not to trust people. Don’t take it personally.”

“I won’t. The best thing about being bi? I can jump from women to men if the drama gets too intense.”

Ah. So there it was. The flag planted on top of the mountain, clear for all to see.

“She’s not one of those kinds of women,” Maxim said slowly. “She doesn’t enjoy drama.”

He wasn’t sure how he’d lost control of the conversation.

Cole was distracting in a way. He’d stirred up feelings that Maxim hadn’t experienced for another man in a long time.

Pinning him down earlier on the terrace had been...

interesting. He’d been thinking about it on and off throughout dinner.

How the other man’s powerful body had felt below his...

Like he’d said. Distracting.

But then Cole seemed to pull back. “You’re right. She’s clearly in a class by herself.” He grinned. “So tell me. How did you get involved in meditation?”

The conversation went on from there. Cole was clearly smart, but he also had a warm sense of humor and could laugh at himself.

That was always a good trait. They shared stories, and Cole did most of the talking.

He'd traveled the world extensively after getting out of the service.

His cancer diagnosis had only slowed him down, not stopped him.

It was quite late when Cole finally stood. "I'm pretty beat. I should head for bed."

Maxim stood too. They were close together.

"I'll show you to the guest room," he said. But as he turned, Cole reached out and caught his arm.

Maxim glanced at him, his heart pounding. Cole leaned in to kiss him.

He could have drawn back. Stopped it.

He didn't.

Cole's mouth felt wonderful on his own, and for a moment, Maxim's body took over and gave in. Without thinking, he kissed Cole back, deepening it, dialing up the intensity.

He groaned as he felt the power play between them. This was not the gentle yielding of a willing woman. This was the carefully banked power of a man, a rival. This was the bite of a male lover as they grappled for control in a passionate exchange of enjoyment and pleasure.

Pleasure. Maxim pulled him closer. Their tongues slid against each other as the kiss deepened even more. He could feel the other man's arousal, the hard press of his cock straining against his clothing.

Absurdly, that made him think of Jade. Of how many desperate nights he'd spent

hard for her, aching for her. Knowing he had to deny himself.

It was enough to cause him to pull back. He ended the kiss and stepped away, breathing faster.

And yet, when Maxim looked into Cole's eyes, he saw the heat of interest and arousal there. Arousal that stirred his own desire even more.

Cole gave him a lopsided grin. "That was good. Now, don't worry about me. I can get back to the guest room on my own."

Maxim watched as his guest left the terrace, walking with confidence, his head held high as if he owned the world.

For the first time in forever, Maxim felt himself growing fascinated with someone other than Jade...

JADE

Jade had every right to keep an eye on Maxim and this unknown stranger who'd invaded their lives.

It was her job. She was his bodyguard. She was the woman tasked with keeping Maxim safe even when he was determined to do stupid shit like play host to a sneaky trespasser who was too handsome and charming for his own good.

Especially when Maxim was hiding something so valuable and dangerous from the world.

Dimi had long ago left for the small village near the health spa, so it was just the three of them.

Jade had chosen a place on the wall that functioned as the exterior barrier between the rocky native soil of Patroklos and the smooth white limestone of the villa, the gardens, and the marble terraces.

She was close enough to hear most of what was being said. She wasn't spying. She was guarding.

But that kiss...

She should've been furious. She should've stormed in there and booted Cole off the terrace, maybe over the cliff. It would teach that conniving bastard to set his sights on her man.

But her jealousy was...strange. It was mixed with longing and even desire, arousal, need. It had been so long since she'd been touched like that. She ached for Max to kiss her like that again.

The deeply emotional tug that Jade felt in her chest was almost more than she could handle. She gripped the edge of the wall until it bit into her palm. But even that hum of pain did not make the sight of them go away. Or diminish its power.

The kissing grew hot and heavy. They grappled together, taking one another in an embrace that was as fierce as it was desperate.

Jade held back a groan as she watched their tongues tangle together in a heated exchange of power that left her wet between her legs and longing to join in.

Desire coursed through her veins, a feeling she could barely control.

Join in. That was insane. She didn't trust Cole. She loved Maxim. If anything, she should kick Cole again.

And yet, she couldn't deny the feeling, the arousal twisting and aching inside her.

Then Maxim broke away. The two men stood there, staring at each other like fighters in the arena. She clenched her thighs together even more tightly. The sight of them was turning her on so much, and it shouldn't. She shouldn't be this aroused seeing Maxim with someone else. That was crazy.

It didn't help that she'd overheard his praise for her earlier. That had really started the warm feeling inside her chest. And now this, seeing Maxim clearly drawn to Cole but stepping back out of his embrace.

She knew it had to be for her. He denied himself something his body clearly wanted, all for her sake.

For her.

Cole said something about finding the guest room.

She was barely listening, but she watched him walk away.

Once he was back in the house, she headed for one of the side doors.

He might've looked hot as hell kissing Maxim.

She might be sopping wet after the whole scene.

But she didn't trust him alone in the house.

Maybe tomorrow he'd leave. Or maybe he'd walk naked into the ocean like some Greek god who'd only appeared long enough to stir up trouble before vanishing again. And maybe doughnuts were a health food.

As she slipped into the house, she found Cole waiting for her near the door.

“You were watching.” Cole’s words were quiet but forceful. There was no question in the words, but no accusation either. It was a statement.

Why bother denying it? “I saw you kiss him.”

His low laugh made her belly tighten. She cursed him silently. Why was she attracted to him when every cell of her being told her that he shouldn’t be here? She loved Maxim. This man was a pretty distraction, a problem with an attractive face. And ass.

“He kisses well,” Cole said, his eyes blazing.

“I know. He does a lot of things well.” There. That was her return shot.

That seemed to please Cole even more. His eyes grew even more intense as he leaned toward her a little.

“He wants you ,” Cole said, his voice low and yet fierce. “But you know that.”

She didn’t say anything. What could she say? It was the truth.

“If you don’t use something, it goes to rust,” he warned.

She scowled at him, suddenly angry. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t, huh?” His damned smile was so cocky. “I don’t want to compete with you.”

“You’re no competition for me.”

He laughed. It was irritating as hell how he seemed to enjoy when she was being a

hardass to him. What was he? Some kind of sub?

No. Definitely not. She might've believed him weak this morning, but looking in his eyes had her thinking very differently now.

"You don't understand," he said. "I mean we can share him."

"No."

He was so close to her. Her nipples were hard, their tiny points reaching for him as though they could not resist. Her lips were parted. He leaned in slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. She tilted her head up to him, her breath catching.

Then she raised her hand and pointed her finger in his face. "Don't even think about it."

He stopped immediately and drew back. He didn't seem offended. He didn't even seem scared, which annoyed her. He seemed to accept her will and her warning, even though her body felt as if it were melting tonight, and she wanted so badly to feel another person's touch.

But she wasn't weak. She was in control.

"He wants you," Cole said again as he stepped back, giving her space to breathe.

"You want him." His grin widened even more, and the desire in his eyes was still undeniable.

"I want you both. There are ways to make all three of us happy." He paused, watching her like a jaguar. "All three of us at once."

She ground her teeth together. This bastard had no idea what was really going on. He didn't understand anything. He needed to shut his face. "You should go back to the health spa tomorrow. First thing tomorrow morning. I'll make sure it happens."

Cole only nodded, his smile lingering. "Good night, Jade."

He turned and headed into the guest bedroom.

She watched him leave. When she sensed someone behind her, she turned to see Maxim in the doorway, leaning against it with his hands in his pockets, watching her with an intensity she thought might set her body on fire.

But Maxim didn't say a word. He walked past her and up the stairs to the master bedroom suite...where he slept alone.

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COLE

He wasn't a con man. He was out of his element here, and he knew it.

What a fool. He'd thought this would be easy. He would seduce his way into Maxim's life, his trust. Earn himself freedom of the house. Find his target. Acquire it. Escape.

He hadn't expected the powerful feelings that had gripped him today. Feelings for Maxim...and for Jade.

As Cole stared out the open guestroom window, smelling the crisp ocean air, he couldn't help but feel unsettled. He was dangerously close to failure.

It was Jade. Or at least, Jade was the primary reason he felt as if this entire operation was hovering on the edge of disaster. In theory, she shouldn't matter. She was only a bodyguard, an employee. If Maxim trusted Cole, then Jade would have no choice but to allow Cole to remain here.

The reality was nowhere near that simple.

Cole stared out across the darkened landscape outside the villa, thinking about Jade, how beautiful she'd looked standing there, watching him with those wide eyes. His lips had still been tingling from the kiss with Maxim, but he'd wanted to kiss her so badly.

He'd made a move, and she'd denied him.

But that didn't mean the game was over.

Not by a long shot.

Besides, he still had a job to do. His client had already wire-transferred half Cole's fee, and these weren't the sort of men you cheated. Not if you wanted to keep breathing.

Cole turned away from the windows and looked at the bed. It had been a long, long day. He was tired. At least he didn't have to wear the wig anymore.

But he couldn't rest yet. He glanced at the clock, seeing it was long past midnight. The house around him was silent. He'd been listening. Waiting for hours. He had to make some kind of move tonight.

Jade had told him she wanted him gone tomorrow. Kiss or not, he was sure Maxim would give in if she demanded it. The man cared for her too deeply. You couldn't be around them for more than ten minutes without picking that up. That and all the sexual tension.

So he had no choice. He needed to make a move tonight.

He'd already scoped out the security cameras.

He would recon the ground floor to make sure Jade and Maxim were in bed.

Then he would head upstairs and see if he could locate the office that he might or might not have spotted during his earlier walk outside the house.

He waited another half hour before making his play.

Carefully, he slipped out of the guest bedroom.

He was bare-chested, barefoot, and wearing only boxer shorts.

If he was caught, he would say he was after a drink of water or a midnight snack.

It was a paper-thin excuse, especially since the guest room had a bathroom and a mini-fridge, but it was the best he had.

He quietly closed the door behind him. He had a good idea where Maxim's rooms were.

He was less certain about Jade. But even an opponent as formidable as Jade needed to sleep sometime.

All Cole needed was to locate the computer and set phase three in motion, if possible.

If not, he was going to have to do some quick thinking on his feet.

The villa's ground floor open-concept was irritating. It didn't allow any cover. But the second floor would be better. He paused at the foot of the curved, open staircase. He was listening for any sound that might indicate someone else was awake—namely, Jade. His nemesis.

There was nothing. No noise. No lights. The top floor had lots of skylights. The silver-blue moonlight reflected off the white limestone to illuminate the staircase as though it were dawn instead of night.

The limestone stairs were wide and cool beneath his bare feet as Cole made his way painstakingly up the curving pathway to the second floor. He paused at the top of the curved staircase and peered across into the moonlit silence of the second floor.

He caught a glimpse of a bedroom of sorts. It was a second-floor suite perched atop the villa like a guard tower. Could that be where Maxim was hiding the program?

“Lost, are you?”

The husky words came a millisecond before Jade attacked. Her lithe body slammed into his, catching him off-balance. She used leverage instead of raw strength to send him tumbling toward the floor.

This time, he reacted reflexively. He grabbed her and reversed their positions. By the time they hit the floor, she was beneath him.

He grinned down at her and opened his mouth to say something smart about his dominant position.

She didn't let him. Almost instantly, she had looped her leg around his neck in a position designed as a reversal.

He only had a millisecond to marvel at her incredible flexibility before she tightened her legs around his throat and pulled him over backward.

Damn, she was good. He struggled against her, but she had leveraged a position with both legs scissored around his upper body that forced him to reconsider how the hell he was going to get out of this.

Cole allowed her to pull him down to the floor until she was essentially straddling him. He was planning a reversal of his own when something hit him with the stunning power of a kick to the head.

It wasn't a blow. No, he simply noticed what Jade was wearing. Or not wearing.

Except for her panties, she was naked. No more boy shorts. No more athletic top. Her breasts were bare in the moonlight, her long hair a curtain slipping over her shoulder to tickle his chest.

She was absolutely breathtaking. And he knew he was in trouble.

JADE

Jade froze when she realized she'd allowed herself to be maneuvered into a dangerously intimate position with Cole.

She'd been undressing for the night, getting ready for bed, when her instincts had shot off like fireworks.

She hadn't heard or seen anything specific, no suspicious noises or movement, but she'd been certain someone was sneaking around downstairs.

She'd waited patiently, ignoring the fast thump of her heart as she listened.

Then she'd finally heard something. Steps. The nearly silent steps had come sneaking up the stairs.

Her heart had been pounding even harder in her chest, but she hadn't wanted to make the extra noise of scrambling to get her clothing back on. She didn't want to tip off her prey that she was alerted to him.

Now she had him between her thighs, half-naked, and grappling with him in the moonlight. She should've brought the pistol. Then again, he seemed to be unarmed since both his big hands were on her body. They felt very warm, almost hot, against her bare skin.

She glared down at him. “What the hell are you doing up here?” She squeezed her thighs tighter, crushing down on him. “Better hurry up and answer me. What are you after?”

“You.”

The answer was so immediate and so blunt that Jade lost her focus for a second. He took advantage of it, breaking her hold, forcing her legs open so he could escape. She shifted, meaning to go for an armbar. That would keep him still.

But he grabbed her before she could pull it off.

She gasped out a breath as he pinned her atop his body with her pussy pressing against the ridge of what she now realized was his impressive erection.

She was only separated from him by two thin layers of cotton.

The power of the desire and sudden pulse of sensation had her momentarily frozen, unable to pull off her counter move.

She had no idea how this stranger from a health spa had managed to grapple with her so effectively.

It did nothing to stop the alarm bells going off in her head.

But he didn't press his advantage. He gripped her wrists tightly, but he wasn't hurting her.

She was still straddling him, both of them breathing hard.

He was strong. That was very clear. She could break the wrist holds, but she held

back, waiting for the right moment to regain the initiative.

“That’s a lie,” she said, keeping her voice low because she didn’t want to wake Maxim and have him find the two of them like this. “You weren’t looking for me.”

He stayed still. He didn’t attack her. He didn’t even pump his hips, grinding his hard cock against her pussy lips. That kind of restraint when he was that aroused was a little amazing.

His cocky, lopsided grin appeared on his face. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I wondered if I’d turned you on enough to send you to Maxim’s bed.”

“You bastard,” she snarled.

“I want to kiss you,” he said, unconcerned by her names or the fact that they’d been fighting only seconds ago.

His words hummed through her, vibrating in her core. She had to force herself not to move her hips, seeking friction to ease some of the aching desire building inside her.

She knew she could refuse him. Strangely, she knew that would be the end of it too.

He had yielded earlier when she’d told him no.

He respected her will. That turned her on because Max had always been that way.

Commanding her when she wanted it, always respecting her needs, sometimes even before she could voice them.

This man below her was up to something; she was sure of it. But then again...maybe he really was just a hapless guest turned on by all the sexual tension sizzling in the

house. Maybe he only wanted to get laid, like everyone else in the human race...

When she didn't punch him or curse him out or even say no, Cole slowly moved.

His arms flexed, and she was amazed at how strong he was.

He spread her wrists apart, taking her arms and yet holding her steady as he forced her to lower the top half of her body toward his naked chest. He moved her closer for that kiss he wanted.

Oh, God. Her nipples were tightening into hard little points that threatened to brush the smooth surface of his chest. Her pussy was getting wet, and his hard length was still wedged against her slit.

She had to bite back a wanton moan. She wasn't supposed to be enjoying this.

She was fighting. Fighting for something...

He drew her to him and captured her lips with his, letting go of her wrists to run his hands up the outsides of her thighs to her waist.

His lips were every bit as firm and full as they looked.

She imagined that she could taste Max on his lips after their earlier kiss, and her desire bloomed out of control.

She spread her knees and ground herself against him.

The friction was almost enough to make her wild with the overwhelming desperation of her need.

He cupped the back of her head with his hand and took their kiss from desperate to carnal in the blink of an eye. Jade surrendered completely. She began rocking against him. The wetness of her slick folds soaked the front of his boxers.

Maxim. His handsome face invaded her mind. Cole kissed differently but with no less passion. Still, she clung to the thought of Maxim like a woman gripping a life preserver. It helped her focus, helped her regain control. She was responsible for this...this escalation. She needed to stop it.

But his kiss only deepened, almost blanking her mind with pleasure. His tongue rubbed against hers, the two of them engaging in a gentle tug of war that seemed to linger until time ceased to matter. She never wanted to stop. And yet this only whetted her appetite for more. For Max. To share—

She drew back quickly. Before Cole could grab her or kiss her again, she planted her hands on his broad chest and half vaulted, half stood until she was on her feet and safely away from him.

He was too good at kissing. The only other man who could rock her world like that was Max. She wasn't at all pleased that Cole had somehow used her own barely restrained need against her.

She should've refused that kiss. It had stirred something inside her. Something she was afraid could never be put back in the bottle.

He looked her over, his hot stare lingering over her body, promising things, showing how much he wanted her. It was the same way he had looked at Maxim.

She didn't move, didn't bother covering up. Let him look. She wasn't ashamed. Besides, he was the one standing there with that great big erection tenting his boxers. So she stood there boldly, getting herself under control, remembering her purpose.

Protecting Maxim.

He smiled, but there was regret in his eyes. “Cruel to leave a man with blue balls after stirring his blood like that.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage,” she shot back. “There’s hand lotion in the bathroom if you need it.”

He laughed, his eyes flooding with warmth and humor. He gave her a little salute.

“Goodnight, beautiful,” he said. He turned and descended the curved stairway again.

She stood guard there, naked, arousal still thrumming in her veins, aching in her core, and she didn’t call him back.

She didn’t go to Maxim.

Jade went to her own bed. The sheets were cold. She had a hard time falling asleep.

MAXIM

The sky was pristine with not a cloud in sight. The sun was brilliant. The tops of the waves glinted in the brightness.

The three of them were on Maxim's yacht. desc. It was a luxury yacht, yet small enough to sail without a crew. He was near the bow with Cole. Jade was on the bridge.

She had been very quiet today, even though Cole had gone out of his way to be friendly with her. She wasn't aggressive toward him, and she didn't seem to be as suspicious as the day before. But she was quiet.

He wondered what had changed. He'd fully expected her to demand that Cole return to the health spa this morning...but she hadn't.

So it couldn't be jealousy. After all, she'd seen Cole kiss him last night. He was sure of it, although she hadn't said a word about that either.

He felt bad about the kiss, but he also couldn't deny the kiss had been amazing. Still, he would never hurt her. He'd actually intended to send Cole back to the spa and out of their lives for good.

Only it hadn't happened. The man had been so charming and friendly this morning, he'd found himself drawn into conversation after conversation.

Time had flown by. Then he'd surprised himself by suggesting they take a jaunt out

on his yacht.

Cole had been eager. Jade had agreed without even scowling, but then again, she was doing her job.

A second ago, Maxim had suggested they go undersea diving. He had all the equipment.

Cole glanced at him with his eyebrows raised. “You dive?”

“That’s right. The diving here is great. Have you done it before?”

“Not since my military days. It’s been a while.”

“So. You interested?”

“Hell, yeah, I’m interested.”

Maxim laughed. “I thought it might beat heading back to sugar wraps and special diets for detox.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Cole rubbed a hand over the bristly golden hair on his head as he grinned with excitement.

He looked better without the wig, but seeing Cole’s nearly shaved head reminded Maxim that the man had endured a run-in with a disease that had taken millions before their time.

It was a ruthless disease. He donated to several large cancer funds and children’s hospitals, but right then and there, he resolved to do far more.

Health spas were great, but next in his sights would be a non-profit hospital specializing in cancer treatments and research.

Speaking of which, maybe it was finally time to leave the island and start building things again.

Things that made the world a better place instead of destroying it.

If he had redemption to earn for the AI programs he'd created, then maybe it was better to earn it with action instead of meditation and self-reflection.

But none of that mattered right here, right now. Right now, he wanted to go diving with Cole. Jade would stay on the yacht. She wasn't fond of being underwater.

Cole glanced over the side at the waves. "Anything particularly interesting down there?"

"Shipwrecks."

"Dangerous."

"You're experienced. I'm experienced. There should be no worries."

"All right. I'm assuming you have equipment to fit me?"

"You're my size. My spare set of gear will fit you fine."

Cole glanced at the bridge where Jade was. "Is Jade coming too?"

"Unfortunately, no. Even though she looks absolutely stunning in a swimsuit, she doesn't like deep water."

“My loss then.” His grin was engaging. “Any particular reason she stays out? Or is that just a quirk?”

He shrugged. “Sharks. The bends. Stonefish. Jellyfish. Poisonous snails. I could go on.”

“Yeah. Please don’t. If you need me, I’ll be hiding below deck with the covers over my head.”

“Don’t be like that,” Maxim said, slapping a hand down on his shoulder. “This is an adventure.”

“Fine. Let’s adventure.”

Maxim grinned. After this, he’d invite Cole to stay the night again. Or at least invite him to have dinner with them again. This distraction from routine had been the first new and exciting thing to happen to him in a while. He didn’t want it to end.

Cole Ward had certainly shaken things up. But maybe it was long past time for things to change.

COLE

Diving happened to be one of Cole’s favorite activities. It was a skill he’d picked up while he was active duty military. Unfortunately, he’d rarely had the opportunity to dive for pleasure. If Maxim wanted him along, he sure as hell wasn’t going to turn the man down.

Besides, this all fit into the next phase of his plan. Even Jade was warming up to him. A little bit. She hadn’t shot him, kicked him, or thrown him out this morning. In his book, that was a good start to the day.

And last night...after that smoking-hot kiss with Maxim, the memory of his little confrontation with Jade still stirred his cock.

Damn, she was sexy. Naked, she'd been absolutely unforgettable.

Her sitting on top of him had been even better, her body pressed against him, and their kiss had rocked his damn world.

His only regret was that she'd sent him on his way. But she was the lady. She called the shots. So he had gone...regretting it every step of the way.

At least she seemed to believe he'd been looking for her and not for the data drives. So he was lucky. Otherwise, she really might've shot him, and who could blame her?

The longer he was with Maxim and Jade, the more he cared about them, and the more he came to believe that successfully implementing phase three of this operation would involve exactly what he'd suggested to her last night.

A ménage. A threesome. The thought of his cock buried in her pussy or her ass while Maxim was in her too turned him on so damn badly that he could barely concentrate as he was gearing up. It was tough not to be sporting a raging hard-on right now.

By the time Maxim and Cole were geared up, equipment tested, and ready to go, it was mid-afternoon. The wind had died down a little, although the currents had grown stronger. They both flipped backward into the clear blue water as Jade watched from the bow.

The cool water enveloped Cole. He felt an immediate sense of calm as bubbles rose all around them. It was another world down here. A secret one that most people never experienced in their lives.

They were missing out.

He spotted Maxim just to his left and used his flippers to propel himself in the direction his host indicated with hand signals.

Both men moved smoothly through the water.

Schools of colorful fish darted past, and the sunlight filtered through the water to illuminate their path.

The wreck of a yacht or some kind of pleasure vessel sat on the ocean floor not far from their yacht on the surface.

They'd located it with sonar and set down the anchor.

A wave of eagerness had Cole propelling himself ahead of Maxim.

The ship was fairly large, and its hull was covered in barnacles and sea plants.

The name on the hull was nearly obscured by plants and silt.

Cole gently pressed his hand to the slimy mess and brushed it aside in order to read the name. ENAMORATA.

Maxim signaled that he wanted to head inside the wreck, and Cole made the OK sign with his fingers.

They swam over the railings and headed below deck through the open companionway.

Maxim continued swimming forward, but Cole slowed, staring around him at all the

fancy wreckage thrown around the cabin or floating at the top, trapped against the hull.

Sealife had gradually taken over what had once been someone's very expensive yacht.

It was strange to see, but fish swam in and out of his diving lights, curious about the human invader.

A liquor bar sat at one end of the wildly tilted space in the main cabin.

The remains of a piano had slid toward the bottom and crumbled in a tangle of strings and keys.

The wood was rotting away, and the entire scene seemed surreal.

He looked around for Maxim but didn't see him. Frowning, he began swimming forward.

A long hallway stretched off deeper into the huge pleasure yacht.

The space was located beneath the bulk of the vessel in one of those dangerous areas that could lure a diver to his death.

Wrecks presented their own set of hazards very different from creatures like poisonous jellyfish.

You always needed to be aware of your surroundings.

Still searching for Maxim, Cole headed for the topside of the ship.

The wide, airy space afforded windowed views of the outside world and a debris field of bric-a-brac and clutter pulled free of the ship when it sank.

He was looking over the devastation when a strange noise echoed through the underwater world.

It was a groaning, thrumming noise that seemed to shake the hull.

Whipping about, Cole glanced left and right but spotted nothing.

Using the motion of his arms to turn himself in a complete circle, Cole strained to hear the noise again.

Wearing a mask and a wet suit that covered your head was enough to drown out or dampen many sounds.

But adding the regulated hum of air in the tanks created white noise that obscured everything but the loudest noises.

There it was again! He didn't know what the noise was, but his heart began to hammer against his ribs. He hadn't seen Maxim since their initial entry to the ship. Diving in pairs was safest, but Cole had slowed up and allowed them to become separated. Damn it.

Speeding back toward the music room and the ruined piano, Cole bypassed the already explored region and slipped into the treacherous hallway underneath the bulk of the wreckage.

It was a tight squeeze. Cole had to take care not to disturb the sides of the narrow passage or slam his equipment into the walls. Time and the weight of the vessel had begun to collapse the byway.

A sense of urgency pushed Cole toward the far end of the tunnel. He could see darkness there. Darkness and a single beam of light. A diving light. The beam twisted and moved as though the diver wearing the light was thrashing about.

After emerging from the passage into a large room, Cole found himself briefly disoriented. Books were everywhere. They lay on what had once been a wall of windows that now held sand instead of glass. There were tables upended in the mess, and in one corner, a desk sat at an odd angle.

The light blazed from under the desk. Cole felt his heart leap into his throat as he realized what must've happened. He swam forward, gripping the corner of the large desk. It was heavy, made of solid wood. Even when immersed in water, it felt like it weighed a ton.

Maxim was beneath the desk, trapped under the L-section of the furniture.

Not good.

Cole reached down to him. A surge of relief swept through him when Maxim reached out and took his hand. His grip was firm. Trying to maneuver an unconscious diver back through that tunnel would've been next to impossible.

Maxim was riding the edge of panic but still holding it together. He was trapped, but Cole was here now. He needed to move the desk off Maxim but also keep it from damaging the room around them. He didn't want the rotting hull to come down on top of them both.

That was when the ugly thought hit him. It was a cold, completely merciless thought, and absolutely unlike him.

Leave him. Leave him and finish your job.

It would've been simple to leave Maxim trapped here until his air ran out.

Then, while the recovery operation was going on, he would have the villa all to himself.

Jade would certainly never leave Maxim's side, even in death.

Cole could've found the code or the drives, dumped them on his client, collected the rest of his payment, and headed for the Cayman Islands.

Mission accomplished. Money paid. Time to retire.

But he couldn't. Watching Maxim struggle under the weight of the desk was already ripping him up inside.

And thinking of Jade was like a slap against his face.

She would be crushed. Desolate. When she wept for the man she'd lost, those tears would destroy Cole.

Because Cole would've been the one to hurt her.

With icy fury, he shoved that evil thought out of his mind forever. He was no hero, but that wasn't who he was. Not even close.

Cole reached out and took hold of Maxim's diving mask. He stared down into the other man's mask for a moment, locking eyes with him and trying to get through to him, to let him know it was going to be okay.

It was a strange moment. Powerful. Unforgettable.

But Cole knew the exact moment he managed to reach Maxim through his fear and rising panic.

Maxim stared right back into his eyes through their diving masks, bubbles rising all around them.

Then Maxim relaxed. He accepted the help.

His body seemed to flow with the water currents as he waited for Cole to free him.

Cole let him go. He used a tall lamp stand as a fulcrum beneath the desk. Putting his full weight and strength against it, he managed to lever the desk off Maxim.

At once, Maxim pulled himself free. He swam clear of the desk and debris, placing a shaking hand on Cole's shoulder, letting him know that he was out.

Cole did his best to carefully lower the desk back to the hull. Once it was resting in its new semi-permanent place, Cole turned to follow Maxim out of the library through the narrow passage to the music room.

His hands were shaking with adrenaline, his heart pounding fast, but they had been lucky. Maxim was a little banged up, but nothing was broken, and he wasn't sporting any major wounds.

The two of them quickly left the cabins behind for the wide-open decks above.

Soon they were both rising toward the surface.

Cole caught Maxim by the ankle, tugging him as a reminder that it was never a good idea to surface so quickly.

They needed to surface at the rate recommended by the dive tables.

Maxim obligingly slowed down, and for a moment, Cole and Maxim stared at one another in the clear blue beauty of the Mediterranean undersea world.

Cole didn't regret freeing Maxim. Not for an instant. He was ashamed the ugly thought had even flashed through his mind, however briefly.

But there under the waves together, Cole knew something had changed. Something big. He simply didn't know what, exactly, that change might mean for him and his objective.

Right then, he didn't care. It was enough that they had both escaped unscathed.

Sometimes you lost the game but still had a chance to walk away. Today, Cole would gladly accept that and count himself lucky.

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JADE

Damn it! Damn stupid, thick-headed adrenaline-junkie men and their idiotic desire to get themselves killed doing stupid stuff.

Cole had explained to her what had happened below the surface. He'd told her the debris had shifted in the yacht wreckage, and a very solid desk had pinned Maxim down, trapping him.

She hated to think what would've happened if Max had been down there diving alone. She would've lost him for sure.

She couldn't protect him if he was determined to get himself killed underwater. It was infuriating.

More than that, it was terrifying.

She'd raced the yacht back to the slip at the pier.

Max had paid millions to have a private pier built beneath the cliffs and the house.

The pier sat far out in the water so that changing tides would never strand the yacht, and storms wouldn't drive it onto the rocks.

She'd become an expert at docking the yacht, but today her hands were shaking so badly she'd done a poor job of showing off her skills.

Not that she cared. She was too angry and rattled to give a damn if she marked up the hull.

Cole sat by Max's side on the foredeck. He had a hand on Max's shoulder.

She would've believed it a bro gesture, except that she'd seen Cole kiss him last night.

They were talking to each other. She couldn't hear them because she was at the helm, rushing them back home.

It frustrated her. She wanted to be the one by Maxim's side right now, but Cole was there instead.

As much as she wanted to hate and distrust Cole, she found that she couldn't.

He had saved Max's life. It was that simple.

If Cole meant Max any harm, he wouldn't have risked his life saving him.

Even though the bastard wandered around and got into all kinds of trouble, poking his nose everywhere it shouldn't be, she still owed Cole her thanks.

Once she'd finished docking the yacht and all the mooring lines were secure and the gangplank extended, the three of them left the boat.

Max was moving a little stiffly, but he'd been lucky.

He was shaken up and a bit bruised but not badly hurt.

Still, both of them walked on either side of Max, ready to support him if he needed it.

Soon the three of them left the pier and stepped onto the sand that stretched from the sea to the switchback stairway and the villa.

“You’re worried,” Max said quietly.

He’d caught her staring at him, struggling to hold back hot tears. She wouldn’t cry. That would only let these two bozos think she was weak and that she actually cared if they got their dumb asses killed.

“Of course I’m worried,” she snapped. Her resolution to give them the silent treatment had lasted all of two seconds. “I told you the ocean was dangerous! Who swims into a wrecked ship anyway? It’s not the Titanic.”

Cole was smirking, and that annoyed her too. “On the bright side,” he said, “there were no sharks. Or poisonous snails.”

She was going to murder him. As soon as she got him alone. Nobody made fun of her for the poisonous snails. And there wasn’t a person on the planet who loved sharks.

Max reached out and squeezed her arm. She could see from his eyes that he understood how upset she was. “Don’t worry. I’m all right.”

She moved out of reach. “Thanks to him. If he hadn’t been there, you’d be dead.”

Neither of them tried to deny it.

But it felt like they had teamed up against her. They were in the water together; she was on the boat.

It was a horrible feeling. Especially after all that she’d sacrificed for her duty, all to keep Maxim safe. She’d given up her chance at happiness...and he nearly got himself

killed in a stupid diving accident.

It hit her hard exactly at that moment. She didn't belong here anymore.

Max deserved a guy like Cole. One who would go on crazy adventures and nearly get them both killed.

Then they could drink beers and reminisce to their heart's content.

She was holding him back. She had seen the kiss they shared, hadn't she?

It had been so damned hot, but that was the problem.

Once upon a time, she'd shared her body and her love with Max.

But she'd been the one to end their physical relationship, knowing she needed to for professional reasons.

To do her job and keep him alive and safe.

It all seemed so stupid now. It had been the worst mistake of her life, even though at the time she'd believed she was doing the right thing.

She had hurt him, and she had hurt herself. Staying here was only tormenting her. Wanting what she couldn't have anymore. Aching for the thing she loved and had thrown away like a fool. Now she'd almost lost him again but for good this time.

Her heart couldn't take it anymore. Since Cole had arrived, everything had been upended and thrown into chaos. Everything had changed. Now she realized what she had to do. It was something she should've done a long time ago, but she just didn't have the heart back then.

Now she was done. They were walking in the sand on the beach. Max's luxury yacht was safely docked at the end of the huge pier. The sun was still warm; the wind off the water was cool. But everything else had changed for her.

She turned to face Cole. "Thank you."

Cole watched her with an intensity that reminded her of last night. The grappling on the stairway landing. The kiss they'd shared. She didn't look away, though. She was done with him too.

"It was nothing," Cole said. This time he didn't smile. He seemed wary, as if he sensed something was very wrong.

He was perceptive. Far more perceptive than Maxim, who could be clueless despite his big brain and all the focus that meditation supposedly gave him.

Perhaps this was for the best. Maybe this man would stick around and look after Maxim since he seemed to be so much more of what Maxim needed.

He wouldn't withhold his kisses and affection and love as Jade had been forced to do.

He didn't need to do the right thing to keep things professional and keep Max safe.

So she'd made a terrible mistake. Now it was time to finally finish paying for it.

Jade turned and walked away down the beach, leaving them behind.

She wouldn't cry. Not until she got herself somewhere alone. Maybe on the boat back to the mainland. Maybe not even then. Right now, she felt frozen and numb inside.

She didn't know when that feeling would ever leave her again.

* * *

MAXIM

Nearly dying had shaken a bunch of things loose in his head. Death had a way of cutting through the rest of the bullshit in a man's life. Sometimes you got into a rut and couldn't break out. Sometimes you needed a swift kick in the ass.

When Jade first walked away from him with her shoulders back and her head held high, he assumed that she was pissed.

He understood that. It was her job to keep him safe.

He'd done something stupid and reckless, not making sure Cole was with him as he pressed deeper into the wreck. She had a right to be angry.

And she cared about him. Even now. After all this time and all that had changed.

But when she kept walking without even a glance backward, he knew something was very wrong.

He moved away from Cole. His body ached. He was still a little shaken up, but he wasn't going to collapse, and he didn't need a wheelchair or someone to carry him around. He was going to have some nasty bruises where the desk had pinned him, but he knew he'd gotten off lucky.

Cole caught up and gripped his shoulder. "Let her go. She needs some space."

He shook off the man's hand and continued walking toward her. She was moving quickly, her long legs eating up the ground. She was already much farther away down the beach.

Cole stepped in front of him again. “Give her a chance to sort this out in her head. She cares about you and she nearly lost you today.”

He stepped around Cole and kept on walking. “You’re wrong. Something changed. Something’s wrong.”

He knew it in his gut. He knew it in his heart.

As he pursued her, he realized things had to change for him too.

He was no longer willing to keep up this charade.

He couldn’t continue with Jade so close to him, looking so beautiful, seeing her every day and unable to touch her, to hold her, to kiss her.

He never should’ve agreed to it in the first place.

But she’d begged him...and he’d been afraid to lose her.

So against his better judgment, he’d agreed.

Now he was losing her. Because judging from the way she was walking off, it didn’t look as if she ever intended to return.

Cole was striding along beside him, his handsome face concerned. He was watching Max closely. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure, damn it!” If Cole tried to stop him again or interfere, there was going to be trouble.

Nothing would stop him from reaching her and doing what he should’ve done a long

time ago.

Now Cole was grinning. “Then go get her, man. Go get her.”

Maxim didn’t need to be told twice. He broke into a dead sprint after her, leaving Cole in his dust.

She must’ve heard him coming, but she didn’t slow her walk. Infuriating woman. She was determined to drive him crazy.

He finally reached her and ran in front of her to block her path.

Now she stopped. She stared up at him with those wide, dark eyes.

Eyes that could seem innocent or as hard as steel whenever she wanted.

But he could see the glint of tears in those eyes now.

The sight of them shattered his heart into pieces.

He grabbed her by the shoulders. She could’ve broken the hold easily in a dozen different ways. She didn’t. She only stood there silently, looking at him.

He had words he wanted to say. They shot through his mind like meteors, flashing brightly, and then they were gone again.

To hell with words. He didn’t need them to show her how much he loved her.

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He pulled her into his arms, crushing her desperately against him, and he kissed her. He kissed her deeply. There was nothing timid about the kiss. He poured every bit of his passion for her, so long denied, and his love for her, which had never faded, into the kiss.

She opened her mouth to him, and her lithe body seemed to meld against his.

Her curves, her lips, her heat had his desire surging.

God, it had been far too long since he'd held her like this.

He had desperately missed it. He hadn't fully understood just how badly he'd missed it until now, after holding her again. Kissing her again.

He'd nearly lost her for good twice today. Once when he'd been trapped underwater. And just now, when she'd been walking away because she was no longer able to deal with the tension and bullshit of this crazy situation they'd forced themselves into.

He refused to lose her. Cole could go. The world could go. But he had to have her.

Slowly, he ended the kiss and drew back so he could look into her beautiful eyes.

She drew in a shuddering breath. "Max...we can't."

He kissed her again to shut her up. She half laughed, half groaned as she wrapped her arms tightly around him again.

When he was sure she wouldn't say anything else foolish, he ended the second kiss and looked into her eyes again. "I never stopped loving you. You know that."

She slowly nodded, her eyes very wide. He could read the joy, the emotion in them.

"I made a mistake," she said. "I thought I was doing the right thing. You trusted me, and I was wrong."

"The only thing that matters is what we do from now on, Jade. I don't care if it's unprofessional or risky or sloppy or whatever reason we had for denying each other.

I'll take that risk. Hell, I'll hire an entire squad of bodyguards to back you up if you think that's best. If it means you can belong to me.

You're worth more to me than anything. I won't lose you. "

She hugged him again tightly. She pressed her head against his chest. He enfolded her in his arms, embracing her, letting her know that things were all right.

From now on, they were going to be all right.

COLE

He stood off to the side about a dozen feet away and watched them. Yeah, he should've given them their privacy, but he couldn't help it. It was so damned heart-lifting, seeing this. He would've hated to miss it.

Hell, he was just another sappy romantic after all. He was a damned fool.

He should've used this chance to toss the villa, find the AI program and get the hell out of here. He might never have a chance as good as this one again. It was perfect.

Except he didn't move. He shouldn't have cared about them.

This sure as hell wasn't his life. He had his own problems. Yeah, Jade was smoking-hot, and Max was damn gorgeous, but he could leave here with blue balls and a full bank account and still count it as a win.

He didn't need to keep chasing his attraction, seeing where it led.

He didn't need phase whatever of the plan if he could get the code and take off.

But he didn't move.

The blue expanse of the Mediterranean stretched from this side of the island of Patroklos to the horizon. The ocean was empty of everything but a few boats in the distance. It made a charming scene, seeing the two lovers wrapped in each other's arms with the beautiful seascape behind them.

He couldn't help but grin, feeling damn good deep down for the first time in a long while.

What the hell was wrong with him? He actually cared for the two of them, as silly as that sounded.

Lusted after them, definitely. But cared about them?

It seemed too soon for that kind of emotion, but he couldn't deny what he was feeling.

Still, he should give the happy couple some privacy.

It was only right. He finally turned and began to walk off.

He wasn't going to head back to the house to search, even though a professional would've done exactly that.

No, he didn't want to ruin this moment for them in any way.

He still had time after this to do what he'd been sent to do.

"You lost?" Jade called to him. "Because you're walking in the wrong direction."

He turned back around with a huge grin. Both of them were smiling at him.

"Wanted to give you guys some space. Besides, watching you two is turning me on. I think I need to find the hand lotion."

Jade burst out laughing. Maxim only looked at him like he was crazy.

He shrugged. "Inside joke."

Maxim nodded and waved him over. "I want to thank you."

"We want to thank you," Jade corrected, still snuggling against Max. She was a hardass, but he loved seeing her this happy. It was like a complete transformation. He knew Max was going to get very lucky tonight.

He obeyed anyway, walking close to them. "You don't owe me a thing. You've been more than kind, taking me in. Giving me a place to sleep. Teaching me how to fall on my ass. Over and over again."

"We do have to thank you," Maxim insisted.

"I might not be standing here if you hadn't been there for me on that dive.

You saved my ass.” He shook his head slowly.

“Having that happen... It made me realize what was important and what wasn’t.

” He hugged Jade tighter against him. “She’s important. I let myself forget that.”

He decided to play it off as nonchalant, to not make a big deal about it. “Glad you two idiots decided to stop denying each other.” He tried not to look smug and probably failed. “I guess it’s good I crashed the party after all.”

“You certainly shook things up,” Max admitted.

“So. Guess I’ll head back to the spa then. My work here is done.”

“No,” Jade said, her voice filled with steel. “You’re not going back to the spa. We’re going back to the villa. We’re going to have a nice meal. We’re going to have a couple of glasses of wine. And then we’re going to fuck until we’re exhausted. All three of us.”

Both of them looked at her. Maxim’s mouth was open. Cole knew his own eyes were wide. He didn’t exactly know what to say to her announcement, but his cock certainly knew. That selfish bastard was so hard it was trying to rip its way out of his pants.

She was giving them both a wicked smile. “Oh, you’re forgetting I saw that kiss the two of you shared.” She looked right at Cole. “And then there was our little kiss when we were fighting...”

Maxim frowned. “You were fighting?”

“Hush,” she said, giving him a kiss. “It was a misunderstanding. All better now.”

Cole sure as hell wasn't going to correct that. The grapple session with her was going to be wet-dream fuel for the rest of his life. But he was definitely interested in where this conversation was going.

Definitely interested.

"Besides," Jade continued, her look still challenging him. "You told me there were ways to make all three of us happy. Now I'm telling you to put up or shut up."

He grinned, loving her sass. "That sounds like a challenge."

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JADE

Desire thrummed in every inch of her body. It was like being alive for the first time in so very long.

She clung to Max as he swept her into his arms when they reached the top of the stairs. He kissed her and carried toward his suite of rooms.

Jade couldn't keep from touching him, from stroking the handsome contours of his face.

She loved every detail. His high cheekbones.

The elegant line of his nose. The sexy way his strong jawline shaped his profile.

These were things she had always admired.

Once upon a time, they'd been hers to enjoy without guilt.

Now they were again. That simple fact had her heart soaring.

And now she had the chance to share him with someone who also believed Maxim was special. A person who believed she was amazing too. The realization stirred no jealousy, only a feeling that this needed to happen, that this was what she wanted. She wanted a love too big to be contained.

As her heart filled with this love, she reached up and drew Max's face down for

another kiss. She couldn't get enough of these sweet kisses. She'd missed them so much.

Cole had entered the house right behind them and had followed them upstairs as she'd ordered.

Grinning, she reached out for him. He smiled back.

His fingers interlaced smoothly with hers as the three of them entered Max's airy master bedroom suite.

Jade had once thought this room fit for royalty.

Now she had no doubt that she was about to be spoiled like a queen.

About damn time too.

No matter what happened with Cole after this, she was grateful for him now.

The emotions pressed on Jade's heart until she could not deny them.

He'd helped show them that they belonged together.

He'd shocked the two of them out of their complacent torment, so close to each other and yet keeping themselves so far apart.

It still hurt her that she'd been the one to drive the wedge between them.

But she believed tonight would go a long way toward healing that self-inflicted wound and repairing her mistake.

Inside the suite, Max finally set her down. She didn't want to be out of his arms, but Max made it all better by pulling her into another scorching-hot kiss that curled her toes and made her feel wonderful.

But she wanted to watch too. She wanted more of the kissing between these two sexy men that she'd witnessed last night.

Max seemed to perfectly understand her need. He let her go and turned to Cole.

As if by some unspoken signal, both men began to strip. She had the pleasure of watching them pull off their shirts, exposing two perfect male chests, broad shoulders, flat abdomens. Her arousal spiked, her heart beating fast, her core beginning to ache for them.

As Jade watched, Max slipped one arm around Cole's body and placed the other hand flat on Cole's belly. Max's mouth settled on his. The two of them exchanged a lazy kiss that sent a thrill of delight through her. Seeing two gorgeous, powerful males going at it like that? She already wanted more.

When Max was done kissing him, she slipped in for her turn with Cole, standing on her tiptoes and pressing her lips to his. She finished the first kiss off with a playful little tug on his bottom lip with her teeth.

Kissing him was different from kissing Max. Different but definitely good.

Max was sliding his hand down Cole's belly toward the waistband of his pants. "Jade, help me show him how we treat guests."

Jade didn't have to be asked twice. She eagerly sank to her knees and reached for the button and zipper of Cole's pants. His thick cock was already tenting the material.

After freeing his swollen shaft from his pants, Jade took him in her hands at the same time that Max claimed his lips again. Cole moaned against Max's mouth as the two of them continued their languid kiss and she traced her fingers teasingly along his shaft.

He was so big and so full. His cock was far too tempting for Jade to resist.

Placing her lips against the soft, silken surface of his cockhead, she gently sucked at the slit. She was delighted when she felt his whole body shudder with excitement. Jade tasted him with her tongue. His skin was earthy and masculine. Different from Max and yet no less enticing.

Slipping him into her mouth, she sucked deeply at his cock and bobbed her head up and down until she felt his pleasure building, seeing the tension that wracked his body.

"That's right," Max growled to their new lover. "Let her bring you to the edge with her mouth. I want to see her driving you wild."

She moved her head faster, eager to push Cole to his limits. She could still barely believe this was happening. Her head was spinning from Max's words and kisses down on the beach, and now she was ready to cut loose and get wild. She had a long dry spell to make up for.

Max's hand slid down toward Cole's cock. He let his fingers slide along the shaft until Jade felt them against her lips each time she took Cole deep into her throat.

"Don't let her pull you over the edge," Maxim warned. "I want us to fuck her together. Do you want that?"

Cole closed his eyes, his head lolling at the sensations she was giving him. He groaned low in his throat. "Damn it. You know I do."

Max gave a satisfied chuckle. He was enjoying Cole's pleasure as much as she was. It made her feel a thrill that shot straight down to her sex, making her slick, filling her with an aching need.

She hummed her pleasure against the cock in her mouth, and Cole gripped her head as if to stop her from going too far and pushing him over the edge.

She definitely took that as a challenge.

COLE

Cole had never wanted anything as badly as he wanted this, now, with Jade and Maxim. The tension inside him was coiled tighter than a spring. The pleasure they were giving him threatened to break him apart.

He let his hands rest atop Jade's silky head as her tongue traced around his shaft. Then she released his cock and ran her tongue down around his length and toward his sac. She took his balls between her lips and gently sucked until he thought he might go mad.

Behind him, Cole heard Maxim sliding his pants off. Then the length of Maxim's impressive cock pressed intimately against the crease of Cole's ass. That silken skin felt so hot against him that he bit back another groan.

Slowly, Maxim pumped against him, wrapping one hand around his neck and turning his head until the two of them could continue the deep kiss that chased all thoughts of purpose from Cole's mind.

He had forgotten the reason why he was here, why he had set all of this in motion.

There was nothing beyond the desire to give and receive pleasure.

Jade pushed his legs apart in order to get better access to his sac. She let his delicate flesh dangle between her lips to tease him in such an intimate way—one he never would've allowed with anyone else.

But he trusted her.

Maxim moved his hand from Cole's belly to his back. Being bent at the waist was as welcome as it was vulnerable. He let it happen, realizing this meant he trusted Maxim as well.

He didn't have time to think about what that meant. His breathing was ragged. He groped in front of him for the end of the bed frame, trying to steady his legs. How long had it been since he'd experienced this level of desire and let himself go like this? He couldn't remember.

But this was different. These lovers had already shown him their vulnerabilities, whether they realized it or not. Cole was lucky enough to share in their reunion.

"Jade, love," Maxim said roughly. "Get the condoms from the drawer."

She gave the sensitive skin on the inside of Cole's thigh a lingering kiss before slipping away to do as Maxim ordered.

A moment later, she returned to cup Cole's erection in her hands.

He felt the thin sheath of latex being slipped over his cock as she carefully protected him.

Then his cock swung heavy and expectant between his legs, so hard that it throbbed.

"Sheathe me," Maxim told her, his gaze hot with need.

Jade moved to do as he asked, sheathing Max's cock with a sexy smile full of promise.

As Cole watched, he felt a powerful thrill that seemed to clamp down on him and set his heart racing.

The two of them moved together so well. They knew and understood everything about each other, anticipated every need and want.

That was what he wanted. That intimacy. That love and trust.

Jade wasn't naked yet, not like they were, but Maxim set about correcting that. He kissed her as he undid the buttons of her blouse and expertly unhooked her bra, freeing those two gorgeous breasts.

Her dusky nipples were hard. Max caressed her breasts, tracing her nipples with the pad of his thumb. Then he undid her pants, baring those long, coltish legs, so perfectly shaped that Cole's cock throbbed even more. After that, Max slowly, sensuously, drew down her panties.

"Spread your legs, baby," Maxim urged. "Show me how wet you are."

Something in Maxim's voice—the love and command intermixed—aroused Cole on such a primal level that he felt every muscle in his body responding. Their lust was driving his arousal even higher.

Jade gasped in delight as Maxim gently probed her pussy with skilled fingers, stroking, thrusting, teasing.

Another powerful thrill of need made Cole clench his hands on the bed frame.

He could only imagine how wet and hot she was.

Soon enough, he would feel that loveliness for himself, and he couldn't wait.

"You've kept yourself shaved," Maxim murmured, sounding delighted.

"For you," she answered softly.

He kissed her passionately. The deep love in their embrace was clear to see.

"You're so gorgeous," Maxim told her reverently. He kissed her again. His lips trailed down her neck in hot little kisses and teasing licks.

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Then he swept her up in his arms once more and carried her to the bed, setting her down on it and stepping back to admire her beauty.

The sight of her on the end of the bed just a few feet from him was enough to make Cole groan.

The woman had a body to kill for. Seeing Jade lie back and spread herself like an offering was a turn-on that Cole knew would never be equaled.

She half reclined with her feet planted on the bed and her thighs open.

Her shaved pussy was splayed, the wet folds glistening in the late afternoon light.

Maxim leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Cole's spine. "You want her."

Cole struggled with the words. They were stuck in his throat. "More than anything," he finally managed in a hoarse voice.

Jade gave a naughty smile as she began to touch herself, tormenting them both. The sight of Jade's fingers gently stroking her wet folds sent a shudder of white-hot desire through Cole. He thought he would be undone right then, his seed spilling into the condom wrapping his swollen flesh.

He couldn't take any more. He went to her, moving between her thighs. He kissed his way up the soft, smooth skin of her inner thighs, taking his time, enjoying every kiss as he moved toward his goal.

He felt her responding, her breaths coming faster. He finally reached her sex and buried his face against her. As his tongue stroked Jade from opening to clit, he savored the taste of her. She clutched one hand in his hair, gripping him hard.

He didn't mind. She was so responsive, and he loved it. He drove his tongue deep, then used it to tease her clit, just enough to keep driving her arousal higher but not enough to make her come. He was returning the favor, and it was amazing.

Behind him, Cole felt Maxim gently spreading his ass cheeks. He almost lost his concentration on Jade when Max lightly stroked one finger across his puckered hole.

He redoubled his attention on Jade, delighting in her gasps and moans, but Maxim's fingers were more skilled than any lover he'd had before. The waves of pleasure surging through him were almost too much to take.

He barely had the mind power left to think. He couldn't worry that somehow phase three had happened, and his plan was falling apart. It had come out of nowhere, hitting him like a truck. He knew he had been the one seduced. His heart had been the one stolen.

But he didn't mind it for a second.

MAXIM

The sight of Jade's head thrown back in pleasure as Cole loved her pussy with his tongue was almost too much for Maxim.

Her sighs and gasps turned him on even more as he used the lubricant and began to work Cole's tightly puckered anal star, preparing him.

He was careful and gentle, not knowing how long it had been since Cole had been

taken like this.

The groans and growls of pleasure told Maxim that Cole liked what he was up to.

The throbbing of his cock nearly drove Maxim to give in to the desire to fuck Cole right this second.

But this first time was so crucial. This was not about getting off.

This was about wanting this man in their lives, welcoming him, allowing him to share their love.

Cole had played a big part in bringing Jade back to him.

Maxim owed him so much. Thanks would never be enough.

He had to show how much Cole meant to him now.

Jade's cries of pleasure drew Maxim back to the moment. He pushed another finger inside Cole as Jade came hard on the tongue stroking her pussy. She gripped Cole's head tightly as she shuddered around him, her eyes closed, so beautiful as she was lost in her pleasure.

After Jade's orgasm faded a little, she opened her eyes and stroked a hand down Cole's cheek. No words needed to be spoken. Max knew she'd already enjoyed seeing Cole kiss him. Now he wanted to give her something to remember. Just for her.

As Cole leaned against the bed, Max moved up behind him, gripping his ass tightly. Cole stayed still, allowing himself to be claimed, and that aroused Maxim even more.

He spread Cole's cheeks, then carefully placed the tip of his cock at the man's hole. Slowly, carefully, he eased forward. The muscle fought him for a second, even as lubed as it was, before finally yielding to him. The tight embrace of Cole's anal passage was almost too much.

How long had it been since Maxim had enjoyed this? He couldn't remember, and yet he felt a wild thrill that he'd be able to have Cole in this way whenever he wanted after this. They would never let this man go now that he'd become so important to them.

Taking hold of Cole's hips, Maxim angled himself for deeper penetration and began to fuck his new lover in earnest. He loved the way the other man simply took each stroke, gripping the bed hard as Jade watched them with eyes half-closed in lust.

Maxim felt the tip of his cock skid deliciously close to the sweet spot inside Cole over and over again.

It would not be long. The tension of every muscle in his lover's body was evidence of that.

Maxim's balls drew up tight between his legs.

He needed to spill his seed deep into his lover's ass and claim him.

But instead, he gripped Cole's hips and slowly withdrew himself.

Cole turned to stare at him, surprise on his face.

Max smiled. "Today it's about Jade," he said simply, knowing the other man would understand.

Cole nodded, and the desire in his eyes never dimmed.

Quickly, Maxim stripped off the condom, and this time, he let Cole roll a fresh one over him.

“Where do you want me?” Jade asked lazily, seeming to enjoy the sight of the two naked and very aroused men in her field of vision.

“I want you in my arms,” Cole said. Now he was the one to scoop her off the bed. His muscles bulged as he lifted and held her so that he was behind her, holding her back against his chest.

Max knew exactly what to do. He got the lube as Jade looped an arm around the back of Cole’s neck to help support her weight. Cole lifted her and held her by her thighs, spreading her legs wide, his hard cock jutting between the curve of her pussy and rear hole.

Max moved to them, took Cole’s cock in one hand while lubing her up with the same tenderness and care he’d shown Cole. She leaned back against Cole, eyes closed, head lolling, her breathing coming faster as her arousal began to spike again.

When she was ready, Maxim moved Cole’s cockhead to her hole. Slowly, Cole lowered her onto his shaft while Maxim gently traced lube around the stretching flesh and muscle.

Jade let out a long, erotic moan. Cole met Max’s gaze, waiting for him.

He needed no other encouragement. His cock was hard and throbbing as he grabbed it and lined himself up with her pussy. He slowly sank inside her until he filled her completely.

The feeling was incredible. A deep groan escaped his lips. He had missed this so much. Being inside her. Loving her. It was heaven.

Her weight was balanced between them now as they began to make love to her with slow, deep strokes. Maxim kissed her, captured her lips, and then kissed his way to her neck, along her ear, and back to her lips again.

Cole held her thighs and thrust up into her, and Max swore he could feel the other man's cock moving inside her too as he drove deep into her pussy.

Jade was panting, lost in the pleasure they were giving her. She had come once already, but he could see they were driving her toward a second orgasm.

He lost track of time. He was only focused on making her climax again and drawing out this incredible pleasure for as long as possible.

Then she lost control, her wail of pleasure like music to his ears as she went rigid in their arms, her pussy clamping down on him, and her body rocked by convulsions as the orgasm took her.

He thrust faster and harder to catch up and join her in climax.

Cole did the same, both of them fucking her hard.

She was still riding her orgasm when his pleasure reached its zenith.

Her body was trembling as Cole took her from behind and Max thrust hard into her core and his cum filled the condom.

The deep sense of connection he experienced at that moment was nearly too overwhelming to endure. But he loved every second of it.

They came down slowly. All three of them were breathing hard. Cole lifted her off his cock as Max held the base of his condom and carefully withdrew from her. Then Cole set her down on the ground, and both of them held her until they were sure she was steady.

Without a word, the three of them climbed onto the big bed they hadn't really used yet. He was going to need a few minutes to recover before the next round.

And there would be a next round. He was certain of it.

The three of them lay there together, limbs intertwined in a warm, sated tangle.

He gently kissed her temple and then rested his forehead against her and closed his eyes.

The emotions inside him were too raw and powerful to fully comprehend.

So he didn't. He focused on what he knew with all his heart.

"I love you," he whispered to her.

She hummed and snuggled happily against him. Behind her, Cole had his body pressed close, his arm around her too.

For the first time in so long, everything felt right.

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COLE

Five Days Later...

Cole woke with an overwhelming sense of panic gripping him hard. For a moment, he couldn't remember what day it was. He sat up in bed, his heart pounding as if he'd run ten miles.

Then it hit him. Four days had passed—no, five .

Five days. Damn it! He needed to contact his client today.

Dread seeped through him, colder than ice.

He'd fucked up. He'd lost himself in this incredible dream life here on the island with Jade and Max.

It was like living in a hedonistic fairy tale.

The three of them had done nothing but enjoy each others' company.

They'd walked the beaches, eaten meals under the stars, hiked the island, taken the yacht out to cruise the mainland coastline.

Then, his favorite: they made love over and over again.

It was a wonderful dream. He'd known he had a job to do, of course. But he had

pushed the thought away, knowing it meant trouble but unable to help himself. Just one more day, he'd told himself over and over again.

Now the shit had hit the fan.

Beside him in bed, Jade gave a little sigh as she slept on. The soft, feminine sound made him smile despite the fear grinding inside him. He adored her. Sharing her with Maxim was an honor that still staggered him. It was something too good to be true.

He carefully climbed out of bed, not wanting to wake Jade or Maxim as they slept naked in each other's arms. He hated to leave them and the warmth of the bed. But this had to be taken care of right now.

As he quietly dressed, he wondered how it was possible to feel as if he knew these two people far better than anyone else in his life. He knew them intimately, and he loved what he'd learned.

And yet, neither of them knew his history or who he really was.

He'd wormed his way into their lives, but even as they'd opened up to love and accept him, he'd kept his damn secrets.

He'd hidden the truth because they'd come to mean so much to him.

It wasn't only the lust and the sex. No, there was far more here, and he didn't want to ruin it. That was what he feared.

Every passing moment seemed to intensify the guilt that had begun swelling inside his heart.

The lie about having cancer. The true reason he was on the island versus the reasons

he'd given them.

It was all bullshit. He'd fed them so many lies, and they had trusted him.

He'd even won over Jade by saving Maxim's life.

That one hurt the most. Abusing her faith when she had suspected him—rightly so—from the beginning.

He left the room without waking them. His phone sat on his luggage in the guestroom where he'd tossed it after grabbing his gear from his bungalow at the spa.

He had to force himself to reach out and pick the phone up.

The dread deepened inside him. He'd been shot at, shelled, raced around a hostile country in a helicopter, and faced death dozens of times, but right now, he was terrified of what would happen next.

Five days. The words kept repeating in his mind like a tolling bell. Five days had passed in a blur of warm sunny days and passionate nights spent enjoying exquisite sex with two fantastic lovers. Shit. Five days.

Cole used the fingerprint code to unlock his phone.

There were thirteen unread messages from his client.

He scrolled through them, his disquiet increasing as the messages grew more and more threatening.

The last one was a flat-out warning. The client was waiting on the mainland for their meeting at a little Greek café in Athens later today.

He expected what he'd paid for. He also demanded an immediate update on the status of the job or he'd send people to look for Cole.

And they wouldn't be happy people either.

His hands shook as he stared at the little screen. Even if he wanted to call it all off, he had no choice now. He had no leverage. Some very bad people had already paid him half his fee. Now they expected him to deliver as he'd confidently promised.

Everything he'd gained here was threatened because of him. Not only because he was a mercenary and a liar, but because he'd allowed himself to put off dealing with this, ignoring it like a stupid kid who believed there would be no repercussions for his actions.

His gaze flitted to the window where he could see the ocean stretching away from the island of Patroklos. He had discovered life this week. A real life. How could he simply give that up now because of a stupid contract? A contract to steal something from two people he was falling in love with?

No. He wasn't going to steal from them. He wasn't going to betray them. He would lie to the client instead. He'd give back the fee that had already been paid. So sorry. He'd failed. The program didn't really exist.

What other choice did he have? He couldn't tell Maxim and Jade what he'd done. They would never forgive his betrayal. Hell, who could blame them? But seeing the hurt and disappointment in their eyes would crush him forever.

Cole went outside onto one of the terraces.

He used an encrypted app to fire off a response to the client.

He kept it terse. He said he'd failed in his attempt to locate and acquire the software AI.

After infiltrating the villa, he no longer believed it existed.

At least not at this location, maybe nowhere.

He would refund the client's money in light of his failure to complete the contract due to circumstances beyond his control.

Failure. Funny how Cole didn't give a damn what some unknown stranger thought about his skills now. He was more than willing to throw his reputation away if it meant keeping Maxim and Jade safe. And if it meant keeping his secret safe from them too.

He didn't care because he had something worth far more than he'd ever imagined possible.

Cole held the phone in his hands and paced back and forth as he waited for a response. He pulled up his off-shore bank account and refunded the down payment to the client. There. That should make it look like he was being legit.

After a few minutes, his phone buzzed against his hand. He swiped on the text in the encrypted app, dreading to look but helpless not to.

All this fear. What had happened to him? He was a hardened mercenary. He'd been in tight situations with nobody but himself to count on since the end of his military days. And now he was suddenly turning soft?

As Cole read the message from his client, the overwhelming sense of dread only deepened.

The message went straight to the point. Either Cole fulfilled the contract or the client would disclose his information to the local police, to Interpol, and even worse, to Maxim Hawthorne.

They would expose him to Maxim, and when Cole was in jail, they'd use a merc team to storm the villa and take what they wanted by force.

If Cole somehow managed to escape before he was arrested, the client would hire bounty hunters and mercenaries to hunt him down and make him pay.

The threats were brutally blunt. Cole either finished the job or they killed Maxim and Jade, took what they wanted, and came for him next.

A stillness came over him. This was karma.

Cole was a thief. He could call himself a merc, but right now, he was being paid to steal things from one person to give to another.

He was a con man. He'd tricked two good people into trusting him.

He'd manipulated them and lied to them. As he'd done it, he'd enjoyed everything they had to offer.

The hospitality, the intimacy, the connection. He'd exploited all of that.

Now, when he'd finally found something he desperately wanted in his life, something that mattered, his past sins would destroy it. His past would prevent him from being with the people he'd come to care for on such a deep level.

There was nothing for it. He wouldn't let them hurt Maxim. He wouldn't let them hurt Jade. She might take a few of them down protecting Max, but she would be

outgunned, and he knew she would never surrender.

He had no other choices left. Despair gripped him hard.

He leaned against the railing, staring at the ocean, knowing what he had to do.

To keep them safe, he would have to lose them.

He would have to give up his happiness. They would hate him.

They would hate him, but they would be alive.

They would be alive to continue to love each other long after he was gone.

He needed to find some comfort in that. He didn't have anything else. Karma was a bitch.

As he stood there, his mind put together the pieces of a plan. It was sloppy. It was rushed. But he had no other choice. He was going to have to betray Jade in the worst way possible so he could get what he needed. Because he knew where the electronic safe was now. It was in Jade's bedroom.

He couldn't break it open on his own, so he needed her to help him. And to do that, he was going to have to lose her forever.

* * *

JADE

Jade had the safe open and was going through the weekly routine of resetting the shredder program on the hard drive when Cole burst into her room.

“Jade!” he yelled, panic in his voice.

Her heart slammed in her chest as she stood, grabbed her pistol, and rushed to the door leading to the sitting room of her suite. She’d never heard that note of panic in Cole’s voice before. It terrified her.

“Here! What is it?”

Cole stopped halfway into the room. His eyes were wide, and there was raw fear in them. “Something’s wrong with Max! He collapsed!”

It was hard to speak through the tidal wave of fear that crashed down on her, but she managed. Barely. “What happened?”

“Dimi says he was meditating and she went to talk to him. But he collapsed. She thinks it’s a heart attack.”

For a second, she couldn’t move. She stood there rooted to the spot as she drowned in the panic. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t breathe. There was only the dread of losing Maxim.

Then she shoved through all that paralyzing fear and pulled herself together. She needed to help him. They were isolated, but she knew CPR. She could get help from the medics at the spa. A helicopter could rush Max to the mainland.

She set the pistol aside and hurried toward Cole. She didn’t need a gun because they weren’t under attack. “Where is he?”

“On the lower terrace. We have to hurry!”

She didn’t need any more encouragement than that.

She sprinted from the room, took the stairs two at a time, and ran for the doors.

Upstairs, Cole had been right on her heels, but she must've been faster than him because she lost track of him as she burst out of the doors and ran for the rocky cliffs facing the sea.

She raced up and down terrace stairs, vaulted a railing, and made it to the lower terrace in record time.

Max was sitting in the center of the terrace in the lotus position. His eyes were closed, but he definitely wasn't collapsed or having a heart attack.

She ran for him anyway. Relief surged through her even as the absurd fear that somehow he'd died in the lotus position rose up to engulf her.

"Max!" she yelled. "Max !"

He opened his eyes, startled out of his meditative state. He blinked at her. She didn't stop running. She threw herself into him, tackling him because she had to touch him. She was shaking. She had to make sure he was okay.

They fell to the stone in a tumble of limbs. She pressed her head to his chest, clutching at him. A cry escaped her lips as she heard his heartbeat. His wonderful heartbeat.

"Jade?" he said, sounding stunned. "What the hell is going on?"

"You're alive!"

He looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Last time I checked, yes."

“Cole was panicking. He said you were having a heart attack.”

“What? I haven’t seen Cole since breakfast. I wanted to meditate. And you needed to reset the drive—”

Oh, God, the hard drive. She’d left it on her desk next to the computer tablet. Cole had rushed in yelling, and she’d believed the worst...

“No,” she whispered as it hit her. She felt so cold she was numb inside. Her thoughts felt frozen in her mind. She couldn’t contemplate this. It terrified her...

Max pulled her close. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I left the safe open and the drive out. Cole came in, yelling that you needed help. I thought... I feared that...”

“I know.” Max seemed to guess what she was thinking. “He wouldn’t do that to us. He’s not like that.”

“He was right behind me...but he didn’t follow me outside.”

“He went to call for help. An ambulance.”

Tears burned in her eyes. She wanted to believe Max, but part of her had already accepted the worst. Too many things were wrong. She wanted to believe what Max was saying, but she couldn’t. “I need to go see.”

“I’m coming with you.”

Neither of them said a word. They walked side by side, back to the house. He had his arm around her shoulder. She leaned against him for comfort. They didn’t run. She

wanted to, but she couldn't. Her strength had fled.

Cole wasn't downstairs. The house was silent.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. Dimi wasn't even here. Today was the day Dimi went to the market to buy food. She should've remembered that.

A lie. Why would he lie?

But she knew. She'd known from the beginning, hadn't she?

Cole wasn't upstairs either. They walked into her room, the tension heavy in the air.

The hard drive was gone. The safe was open as she'd left it, but the hard drive had vanished.

"He took it," she said, her voice shaking. "I failed you."

Maxim pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. For the first time in forever, she began to cry.

COLE

Not only had Cole stolen the hard drive with years of Max's work on it, a prize worth billions, but he'd stolen the man's yacht as well. It had been easy enough, and he knew how to sail it.

Earlier in the week, he'd asked to take the yacht out with them, to man the helm.

Jade and Max had shown him all the startup procedures.

Nearly everything was simple and computerized.

It didn't take a lot of brainpower to use the engines, the radar, or to steer the ship to the mainland.

After docking, he'd hired a driver to take him to the cafe.

The heavy weight of the hard drive seemed to slow him, to drag him down with every step. He gritted his teeth and pressed on, finding a seat at the cafe and waiting on the client.

He chose a table near the outside edge of the open-air cafe.

From his seat, he could see anyone approaching him.

The hard drive was next to him on the table, wrapped in paper and stuffed inside a plastic bag.

That was less memorable than a fancy briefcase for the handoff and would attract far less attention.

It was late afternoon by now. He was growing more uneasy by the minute.

The client was already late. That didn't necessarily mean anything, but it still bothered him.

Rich and powerful men liked to make their underlings wait.

And that was what Cole had turned out to be.

Nothing more than a lackey. A common thief.

After all his planning, the job had come down to a grab and go. Jade panicked and rushed out to Max as he'd known she would. She loved Maxim with all her heart, after all. He had exploited that with expert precision.

After she was gone, he grabbed the hard drive and escaped. He headed away from the terraces, avoiding Max and Jade. When they had headed back for the house, he'd raced down the stairs and cliffs, to Maxim's pier where his yacht waited.

All so simple.

He waited some more, ignoring the empty hole inside him.

Finally, a man made his way to the open-air cafe—a man who looked like he might be connected to the client. Cole smirked sourly. The man actually stood out like a sore thumb. Shaved head. Sunglasses. Nice suit. Good shoes. Big guy, too. Probably not the client but only some goon.

The guy slowly scanned the patrons sitting at their tables until his gaze locked on Cole. Recognition flashed in his eyes, and he made his way over, walking like a man on a mission.

Cole sipped his tea and ignored him. He didn't really like tea all that much. Or he was used to American and British tea. He would rather be drinking a beer, but it was way too early for that. He needed his wits about him in any case.

The guy dragged out one of the chairs, unbuttoned his suit jacket, and plopped into the seat. He leaned forward. "You Cole?"

There was a slight Eastern European accent to his voice. He had the look of a killer. Cole had seen this type of guy before.

Cole made a show of smiling at him, even though he would've rather kicked the guy through a window. "That's me."

The man stared at him, his face like stone and his eyes hidden behind the sunglasses. "You have what we want?"

"I take it you're here to fetch and carry?"

"You have what we want?" the man repeated coldly.

He pushed the plastic bag across the table. "What about my payment?"

The man took the bag, wrapped it tighter, and slipped it into the pocket inside his suit jacket. He stood to go.

"You aren't gonna check it?" Cole growled.

The man looked at him as if he were a bothersome fly. “If you’re wrong or lying, you know what we’ll do.”

With that, he turned and walked away. Cole watched him move to the side of the street where a dark luxury sedan with tinted windows swung out of traffic and picked him up.

The car slipped away again into the chaotic traffic of Athens.

Cole sat there alone. What the hell was he going to do now?

That was the huge question, wasn’t it? Because he’d just torched his entire life.

He’d refunded the initial payment, hoping they would believe him.

After their threats, he’d finally given them what they wanted, but he had no faith they would pay him anything else.

Why would they? They had what they wanted.

They had all the leverage. And he sure as hell couldn’t go to the Hellenic Police and report a crime.

So what now?

Except, he knew, didn’t he?

He had to be a man and deal with the fallout of his betrayal. He’d stolen Maxim’s yacht. The least he could do was return it to the man. He couldn’t give back the hard drive, of course, but at least he could do this one last little thing.

Or maybe not the last. He needed to send Jade a message, warning her about the client so she would be on her guard. And maybe Max would stop worrying about distractions and his damn mediation bullshit and hire an entire army of security.

He would send Jade a text to her phone with the warning. If the gods were good, Maxim and Jade would be gone, and Cole wouldn't have to face them. Maybe they would head down to the village, trying to find him. Jade would probably shoot him if she ever saw him again. He wouldn't blame her.

He snorted, disgusted with himself. It was highly unlikely they would head to the village or the health spa.

Neither of them were fools. Jade would instantly know what he'd been up to.

The authorities would be on the lookout for him by now.

He'd stolen their damn yacht. They sure as hell would notice that.

There were no police on the island, but maybe they'd be waiting for him at the pier.

If so, he wouldn't try to escape. He would salvage the last of his battered dignity, and he would face the music like a man.

He stood, dusted himself off, and moved to the busy street. He hailed a driver to take him back to the slip where the yacht was temporarily moored.

The sun was beginning to set when he guided the yacht to the pier on Patroklos, reversed the engines, and drifted into the protected slip.

He'd managed to moor the damn thing twice without sinking it.

Even though he'd served in the Army Special Forces, maybe he would've made a halfway decent sailor too.

The journey here had been long and grueling. He felt the weight of what he'd done crushing down on him the entire time.

He couldn't even grieve over what he'd lost. The wound was self-inflicted. What right did he have to grieve? He had done this. All his regrets and his sorrow for the pain he'd caused Max and Jade added up to nothing in the end. He would never seek redemption. It was beyond him.

He didn't deserve it.

He walked from the yacht's bridge to the deck. From here, he could see Maxim's villa at the top of the cliff. The colors of the sunset painted the white villa and terraces in shades of red, orange, and purple.

No lights were on. The house looked dark and abandoned. The sight of it hurt his heart, a stab of pain going deep. He had to look away quickly.

Cole extended the gangplank and crossed it to the pier. Then he walked down the long pier toward the beach.

He had enough cash on him to leave the country if he wasn't apprehended outright.

He would head deeper into Europe. After that, maybe he'd make his way back to the States.

He was done with this life anyway. This last job had broken him.

Hell, right now, he didn't care if he lived on the streets, but he was finished doing

someone else's dirty work.

Never again.

He left the pier and began to walk along the beach toward the village. He could catch a ride back to the mainland from there. Again, if the police weren't waiting for him. He discovered that he didn't really care either way.

"Lost, are you?" Jade said, her voice fierce, cold, and loud, carrying even over the wind coming off the sea.

He whirled around. His heart was lodged somewhere in his throat. So much for escaping clean.

Jade and Maxim were standing in the shadows beneath the winding stairs that led up the cliffside. Both of them moved forward so he could see them better.

She didn't have a gun pointed at him. That was surprising. In his opinion, she would've been within her rights to shoot him.

He didn't know what to say now that he was face to face with them again.

He had a thousand things to tell them and more, but his mind wouldn't form words.

His lips wouldn't speak them. If he thought that getting on his knees and begging for forgiveness would work, he would've done it in a heartbeat.

But he knew that with some things, there was simply no coming back. Some betrayals cut too deep. This was one of those times.

Maxim was staring at him with those fierce, dark eyes, his jaw set. Everything in his

posture spoke of barely restrained fury. He looked like he wanted to run over and punch the hell out of Cole.

And again, in Cole's opinion, the man would've been within his rights to beat the shit out of him.

Instead of attacking, Maxim only narrowed his eyes and demanded, "Why are you back?"

Finally, Cole managed to find his voice. He didn't drop his gaze as he stared back at the two of them.

"I borrowed your boat. Thought you might want it back."

"You bastard..." Jade said. But there was no fury in her words. Only sorrow.

Hearing that sadness almost unmanned him. Seeing that sorrow in her pretty eyes. Knowing he'd been the bastard who'd caused it.

He'd been the one to betray their love.

"You took the hard drive," Maxim said coldly. His expression was hard to read now, and Cole had gotten good at reading him over the last week. The man was angry, but there was something else...

"Yeah, I took it. I tricked Jade. Made her think you were dying so she'd run off and leave it out. Then I stole it. And I stole your yacht."

Maxim was still looking at him with that unsettling intensity. "You brought the yacht back."

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He shrugged. Was the man trying to make him feel better? It sure as hell wouldn't work. "But not the hard drive. That drive and the program are now in the hands of my client."

"Your client," Jade said flatly. "You're a thief."

Her words still had the power to pierce him. "Mercenary. I do jobs for powerful people. Whatever needs to happen, I make it happen."

"A thug," Jade pressed. "A thief. A lackey. A liar. A traitor ."

He didn't have anything to say to any of those words, each of which hit him like a bullet, one after another.

"Who was your client?" Maxim asked quietly. He had his arm around Jade's shoulder protectively.

For the first time, Cole felt jealous of him. He didn't deserve to feel that way, but he hoped Max understood what a lucky bastard he was to have a woman like Jade love him.

"I don't know. From what I could figure out, they were Eastern European. That's a lot of ground, though. They wanted to remain anonymous, and as long as the money's there, I was happy to oblige."

"You sold us out for money." The sorrow in Jade's eyes was quickly turning to fury. Maybe it was best that Maxim had his arm around her. He might be able to stop her

from running over here and pummeling him.

Or maybe he deserved exactly that.

“I did. I sold you out for money.”

He didn’t tell them that he’d changed inside when he’d been with them.

He didn’t tell them how he’d fallen in love with them.

He didn’t explain that he’d tried to put the client off their trail and claim that he’d failed to find the program.

And he didn’t mention the blood money he’d transferred back.

Most of all, he didn’t tell them that he’d stolen the drive to keep them safe.

That he’d done it because he was afraid the client and his thugs would come here and try to take the program by force.

Or that he was too frightened to face the two people he loved most and tell them the truth.

And now he’d lost his chance and lost their love, and he deserved whatever else came his way.

He kept all of that to himself. Why? Because he didn’t want to diminish their rage at him. He didn’t want anyone feeling sorry for him.

He did not deserve it. Not pity, not forgiveness. Nothing.

MAXIM

Maxim stared at the man he believed he'd fallen in love with and used every bit of self-control to keep himself from punching him in the face.

All the calming techniques of meditation that he'd mastered came into play now. It was a near thing. He might not have managed it if he weren't touching Jade too. Her body pressed against his and helped keep him somewhat calm. Her presence soothed him. She helped him remember what was important.

He wasn't furious because Cole had stolen the hard drive with an AI program that might spell the end of personal privacy forever. He wasn't pissed that Cole had stolen a yacht worth millions.

No. He was pissed that Cole had hurt Jade.

The look of sorrow in her eyes had broken his heart.

She blamed herself for this. Maxim didn't blame her one bit.

They'd both fallen for Cole. He claimed he was a mercenary, but he was really just a con man.

He'd gained their trust, manipulated them to win their hearts, and ultimately betrayed them.

So Jade could never be at fault. If anything, she'd kept her suspicions of Cole until Cole saved him from being trapped in that undersea wreck.

He saved your life.

He had. Max couldn't deny it. But neither could he deny that Cole had done it to finally lower Jade's guard. To shake off her suspicions and get her to fall for him. It was only after Cole rescued him that things got hot and heavy between the three of them. That said everything that needed saying.

But he helped bring the two of you together again.

Yes. There was that. He didn't know what it meant either. Why would the bastard do something so...kind? It made no sense.

Unless, of course, it was just another part of his plan to seduce them, lower their guard, and slip past their defenses. Now it made sense. Cole had arrived, realized that Max still loved Jade and that she still loved him, and he'd set to work.

Why don't you ask him the truth?

He took a deep breath. Did he care? Did he really want to know Cole's twisted version of the truth?

More than that, would that "truth" hurt Jade?

She'd endured more than enough already. All he wanted to do was keep her safe.

To wipe away those tears. To see that rare and beautiful smile of hers again.

But yes, he knew that he did care. If he felt anything for Cole, he needed to let the man explain himself one final time.

But first, he wanted Cole to understand something very important.

"Your client didn't get the program he wanted," he said softly.

Cole flinched so hard it looked as if he'd been punched. "What?"

"The AI program. The advanced algorithm, quantum-learning program I created for the government that everyone has a hard-on for? It's not on that drive."

Now Cole looked as if the last of his hope had been ripped away. He looked stricken, defeated. Slowly, he ran a shaking hand against his bristly hair. "What was on there?"

"A shell program. Oh, and a bunch of malware and trackers I designed. When your client attempts to access it, he's going to get quite a surprise."

"Where is the real program?" Cole asked in a quiet voice utterly unlike him.

"Why would we tell you?" Jade challenged, glaring at him.

God, he loved the hell out of her. She hadn't known that the hard drive she'd spent years faithfully taking out of the safe and resetting a shredding program every five days had contained nothing on it but cleverly disguised garbage and cleverly hidden malware and tracking programs designed to ignore her specific tablet and attack everything else like angry bees.

She ran with it anyway, backing him up even though he knew she had to be pissed at being kept out of the loop.

He would hear about it later, for sure, but right now, she was letting him have this moment.

As he'd said, he loved the hell out of her.

"You don't understand," Cole said. "You need to give it to me. These bastards, they don't play games."

As soon as they find out I didn't give them what they wanted, they're going to come here.

Lots of them. With guns. Looking to take it by force.

The only reason they didn't do that in the beginning was because they were afraid you'd destroy it somehow before they could get their hands on it.

"He took a step toward them, the desperation in his eyes very clear to see.

"I didn't want to steal the drive. Hell, I refunded the money and told them you didn't have it.

But they didn't believe me. Either I delivered it, or they would kill you and take it."

Ah. So that was it. Maxim took a deep breath. There was clearly more to this story. Cole wasn't simply the villain he seemed so eager to make himself out to be. He seemed to want them to hate him. Maybe he felt that he deserved their scorn and anger. But Maxim was far more interested in the truth.

"You were right, though," Max said simply.

Cole's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? We don't have time for bullshit games."

"You were right. I don't have it. I destroyed that program as soon as I realized the threat it posed. I shredded every last byte and purged it from the world. No government or corporation or criminal organization will get its hands on it now. It was too dangerous."

That information seemed to shock them both, but especially Cole. "Then why pretend to have it? Why go through the trouble of some elaborate, crazy ruse that would only

lead to someone like me showing up?”

“I’ll tell you. First off, I thought I’d covered my tracks better than I apparently did.” He frowned and rubbed his chin. “Second, it was leverage. No one believes you when you say you don’t have something they want.”

“You expected it to be stolen eventually. That’s why you put a tracking program on it and all that malware.”

Jade shook her head, a tight smile on her face. “It was a kind of digital ‘fuck you’ to the thieves, right?”

“Exactly. I’ll send a message to some contacts I have at Interpol and the FBI. I’ll give them the ability to digitally track the drive and maybe take the criminals down.”

“Do you think that will work?” Jade demanded.

“Not likely. Unless they’re extremely stupid, they’ll smash the drive as soon as they figure out it doesn’t have what they want. Or after it attacks their systems. But it’s worth a try.”

He turned to Jade, looking down into her beautiful face. He cupped the back of her graceful neck as he held her close. Simple love for her filled his heart.

“So,” he said quietly. “There’s more to his story than he’s letting on. Now that he knows the truth about the drive, we should give him a chance to explain himself.”

“Why?” she demanded, so much conflicting emotion caught up in one simple word.

“He saved my life. He made me realize how much I love you and helped me see that nothing was worth keeping us apart. That our love was the most important thing in

the world. Oh, and he brought the yacht back. That should count for something.”

For a moment, Jade only stared deep into his eyes.

He could still see the pain there. Pain from the betrayal.

She was worried too. It was her job to protect his life, and she took it very seriously.

Now they knew they had dangerous enemies out there.

Enemies who knew where they were. Enemies who would be furious they hadn't gotten what they paid for.

Finally, she nodded and turned back to Cole. She stared him directly in the eye like a woman prepared to battle to the death. “Do you love me?”

The question caught Cole off guard. Hell, it caught Maxim off guard, and he knew how direct Jade could be.

Cole blinked at her, emotions flickering across his face, too many and too fast to read.

But Cole never dropped his gaze. He never looked away. And finally, he gave his answer.

“Yes.”

JADE

The simple word yes was exactly what she needed to hear from him. It was a start. It didn't make up for the harm he'd caused, the lies he'd told, and the trust he'd shattered. But at least it was a start.

The urge to get her pistol, get Max on the yacht, and get the hell out of here was stronger than ever after learning what Cole had done. But this was important. This moment would never return, so she couldn't turn her back on it.

When they'd spotted the yacht sailing in, both of them had known what it meant. They had raced down to the beach and waited.

She'd wanted a confrontation. She'd wanted a fight.

Maxim had only wanted the truth.

But Cole didn't try to defend himself. In fact, he'd done everything he could to make himself look as bad as possible.

Now she agreed with Maxim. She wanted the truth too.

The tormented look in Cole's eyes was almost too much to bear. Part of her wanted to reach out to him. To touch him again. To fix things and make them the way they had been.

But she wasn't going to be fooled again. Not until he came clean. Not until he

showed that he'd changed like they had changed.

"You could've left Max to die in that shipwreck," she said slowly. "I wouldn't have known until it was too late. But you didn't."

He looked at her, his handsome face a mask as if he were trying to hide his emotions from them both. "I didn't."

"Why? It would've made things easier for you."

Cole didn't answer at first. Then, quietly, he said, "Because I couldn't. I'm not that type of person. And I cared about him."

She accepted that. It had to be true. Cole had betrayed them, but she would stake everything on the fact that he'd felt something for them too.

Either that, or he was a master con man to fake everything in the bedroom, fake the look in his eyes, and fake the warmth of his smile.

Maybe. But like she'd said, he didn't need to save Max... and yet he had.

Cole must've seen the conflict in her eyes because his expression hardened and his fists clenched.

"I don't have cancer."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "We guessed that much already."

He ran a hand over his short golden hair. It had been growing out since he'd first shown up in that silly wig. His bristly hair rasped against his palm. "What kind of scumbag pretends to have cancer?"

This time, Maxim answered. “The rare kind of scumbag who helps two people who loved each other but lost each other discover that love again. That’s who.”

Cole shut his mouth with a snap, seeming surprised at Max’s reply.

“You said you loved me,” Jade said. “Do you believe we felt the same way about you?”

Cole looked away. She could see the agony in every line of his body. “You might’ve felt that way once. Not anymore.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to think, what to feel,” she said. “Not even Max gets to do that. I’ll speak for myself.”

Cole was silent. She could see he’d been rocked to his core by this.

“I don’t deserve it,” he finally replied. “I wouldn’t deserve you. Either of you.”

“That’s not what love is about,” Max said.

Cole closed his eyes for a moment as if trying to get himself under control. Then he opened them and met Jade’s stare. His gaze was raw. Agonized. “I’m so sorry I hurt you. I believed I had no choice. But that shouldn’t let me off the hook. I need to pay.”

“Stop being so damned ready to kick your own ass,” she snapped.

“I forgive you. Do you understand me? You hurt me, yes. You made bad choices. But so did I. I hurt Maxim with a bad choice. I hurt myself with the wrong choice. You helped me to realize that. I’m going to turn around and help you with this bad choice because I owe you. ”

Max put his arm around her again. "I'd take that offer, Cole. You have my forgiveness too. I love you, man. I can forgive the hard drive and the yacht and the lies. But it's harder for me to forgive you for hurting Jade. But she forgives you, so I will as well."

Cole didn't seem to know what to say. He simply looked at Maxim, emotions shining in his eyes. "I love you, Max. I'm a fool to ever have endangered that."

Maxim nodded, seeming at peace with that. "We're leaving the island. Tonight. Now. You're welcome to come with us, but we won't force you to do anything."

Cole gaped at them, stunned to his core. "You would take me along? After what I've done?"

"I believe in second chances," Maxim said. "It helps that Jade forgives you. If she didn't, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Cole looked at her. His smile was tentative, sad and sweet. His eyes were filled with gratitude and love. "I don't know how many times I can say it without you getting sick of hearing it, but I'm not worthy of you, beautiful. I don't think I'll ever be."

She walked over to him and stood in front of him. She planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. "You can start trying by kissing me."

A grin slowly spread across his face. He slipped his arms around her waist and drew her close.

He kissed her. The kiss was tender, gentle, loving.

But the sweetness of the kiss soon turned to something deeper, almost desperate.

She could sense his need, his love, and the depth of his gratitude in that kiss.

The kiss pushed aside the last of her worries that they wouldn't be able to move past this.

The kiss showed her how much he loved her.

“Never again,” Cole swore to them after their kiss ended, his voice vehement. “I will never fail you again.”

Maxim nodded, coming over to Cole. Max kissed him too as Jade still hugged Cole and watched. Their kiss was just as deep, just as desperate and passionate as the one she'd shared with Cole.

She pressed her face against Cole's chest, listening to the rapid thump of his heart. She didn't have any fancy words for this moment. She chose to believe him.

It was as simple as that.

Twenty-five minutes later, they were on Maxim's yacht, with Patroklos Island slowly fading behind them into the deepening twilight.

They'd packed everything they could take quickly and everything important—documents, laptops, valuables, photos.

She had most of her clothes, her fighting staff, and her pistol, so it was a start.

The three of them were on the yacht's bridge.

Max was at the helm. She was standing near one of the bridge windows where she could still see Patroklos in the distance.

Cole was next to Maxim and watching one of the weather radar screens.

The sea would be smooth and calm tonight. Not a storm in sight.

The plan was to sail to Italy. They'd find a port, restock, refuel, and resupply, and then skip on over to Spain.

There, they'd do the same thing before crossing the Atlantic.

They were headed for the Caribbean. Barbados.

The Cayman Islands. Aruba. Wherever. It would be the perfect, beautiful place to lie low for a while.

After that, they hadn't made plans. She figured they would bounce around from port to port, never staying anywhere for too long. The luxury yacht had more than enough space for three people.

It would work. For now. Maybe for good.

"Do you think those guys who were after the hard drive will burn down the house?" she asked quietly.

"Maybe," Cole replied. "But they'll probably just loot it. At least Max outsmarted everyone, including me. They didn't get the program. Hell, the program doesn't even exist anymore."

Maxim shook his head. "Deleting the program was like sticking a finger in a leaking dam. It'll be two years at most before someone else replicates the core processes and builds exactly the same thing. I've only put it off the inevitable for a little while."

Jade moved close enough to touch his arm, looking up at him with love in her eyes. “We can only be responsible for ourselves. We’ve done enough. Other people will have to step forward.”

“Or they won’t,” Cole said darkly.

She met his gaze. “I’m going to make a choice. I’m going to choose to believe people will do the right thing, even if it takes them a while to arrive there. You helped prove that to me.”

“That’s why I love you both,” Cole said, giving her a simple look of desperate love. “You’re both completely crazy.”

She stole one last look at the island as they left it in their wake. “I’ll miss this place.”

He put his arm around her and his other arm around Cole. “I won’t. It’s just a place. What matters is us. The three of us. We can go anywhere in the world.”

“Think we’ll be safe?” Cole asked.

“Yeah. I do.”

“What about Dimi?” Jade said, suddenly realizing that in all the drama and upheaval, they’d sent her home and hadn’t told her they were abandoning the villa for good. “She’s going to panic.”

“I called her while you were busy getting your gun and your big stick,” Max replied.

She chose to ignore the part about the big stick. “What did she say?”

He gave her a lazy shrug. “Not much. She seemed surprised when I fired her.”

Jade clutched at his arm, gaping at him. “You fired her?”

“Yep.” He grinned. “Then I hired her as Chief Health Services Coordinator at the spa. It’s largely a ceremonial title, but with a huge pay raise.”

“You put our housekeeper in charge of the health spa? What if she can’t handle it?”

“She’ll be fine. She’ll miss us and we’ll miss her, but she knows never to return to the house.

As for the spa, we have plenty of competent managers there to run the place and to plan for the future.

She understands she’s mostly there to chat with the guests, make sure any Greek food they serve is up to snuff, and things like that.

I’m sure she’ll spend most of her time knitting and talking about her grandchildren.”

Cole rubbed his chin. “Wish I had a cushy job like that.”

“You have one,” Max said. “It’s not as cushy, maybe, but at least it has fringe benefits.”

“Care to explain?” Cole asked, one eyebrow raised.

“You’re my new bodyguard. One of the two, anyway.”

Jade shot Cole a stern look. “The subordinate one.”

Cole laughed. It was good to see the joy and humor back in his eyes. He slapped a big hand down on Maxim’s shoulder. “You lucky dog. Now you have two bodyguards. A

beautiful, badass, sexy one. And you still have Jade.”

“Hey!” Jade said, hauling off and sending a fierce punch right into Cole’s shoulder.

“My bodyguards aren’t supposed to fight each other,” Maxim pointed out drily. “It’s in the contract.”

Cole laughed again, although he was rubbing his shoulder. “Damn, you can hit, woman. That’s gonna leave a huge bruise.”

“You deserve it, wise guy.”

Cole leaned in and kissed her gently. “I don’t deserve you, but I’m never going to let you go.” He slipped an arm around Maxim too. “Neither of you.”

CHAPTER ONE

CHELSEA

It was New Year's Eve, and so far, it had been the worst New Year's Eve of my life.

That counted the one I'd spent trapped in Chicago O'Hare with my plane encased in ice and every hotel full for miles.

It also counted the one when I was a kid and puked at my parent's big party after eating almost an entire tray of tiny hotdogs and cheese speared by toothpicks.

So claiming this one was the absolute worst was really saying something.

Even though it was cold out, it was a relief to push through the door and step outside, leaving the smothering heat and the noise of the bar behind.

The bar was Mr. Nixie's Cocktails, just another Cincinnati tavern in the cluster of them between E.

Liberty and the Ohio River. It wasn't a dive, but it wasn't anything special either, despite the odd name.

I was alone. I hadn't started the evening that way. My friend Karen had dragged me here, assuring me that she couldn't turn her back and leave her girlfriend wallowing alone in her apartment on New Year's Eve.

I did not wallow. It was simple. I'd moved to Cincinnati from Baltimore about a year ago and hadn't really put down roots yet.

My life had settled into a rut. It wasn't very exciting.

Karen was pretty much my only close friend at the moment, and the one romantic relationship I'd jumped into after moving here had exploded dramatically five months ago.

Exploded, as in I found out he was cheating on me with someone at his work.

It sucked to date a skilled liar. You always blamed yourself for trusting too easily.

Then again, I'd never been good at reading people or telling when they were lying to me. I guess I was just a fool, after all. But at least experiencing a relationship meltdown had been exciting.

Horrible. Gut-wrenching. Nightmarish. But exciting.

Still, that was months and months ago. I'd moved on. Unfortunately, it seemed I'd moved on into the boring phase of my life, and I was eager for something new.

The cold had smacked me in the face as soon as I stepped through the door, but it really settled in as I stepped down the stairs from the entrance.

The door swung shut behind me, quieting the thumping party music...

a little. My breath clouded around me as I crossed my arms, pulling my coat tighter.

Thank God I hadn't worn a skirt. It was cold outside, but I needed the fresh air.

I'd been feeling a little dizzy inside. The Ohio winter air helped clear my head.

The street was a narrow, one-way side street.

The red brick buildings were mostly three or four stories tall, with shops on the street-levels.

No cabs in sight and not much traffic either.

I needed to call a cab or a ride-sharing service since I didn't have my car.

Karen had gone off with a guy she'd met tonight, essentially stranding me here.

She told me she'd pay for the ride back to my place, but I didn't care about the money.

I thought it was us two girls celebrating New Year's Eve, but Karen had pounced on the first hot guy who'd come wandering over.

I let out a long sigh and massaged my temples. I didn't even have a half-decent buzz from my drink. It was over an hour until midnight, and all I wanted to do was go home and sleep until Spring.

"Long night?" a man asked.

Surprised, I turned to see a man leaning against the side of the building. He had his hands shoved deep in his long coat, his breath clouding around his face. He smiled at me, and I automatically smiled back.

It helped that he was handsome. He wasn't the kind of I'm-hearing-angels-singing or I'm-drooling-on-myself handsome that could leave me tongue-tied and awkward.

Sometimes it wasn't fair if a guy looked too good.

He was definitely good-looking enough for my taste; there was no denying that.

He had dark hair, and in the lights from the bar and the streetlights, I could see enough of his features to guess he had some Mediterranean ancestry.

Italian, maybe Greek. Or hell, maybe he was Spanish.

He had dark eyes, a strong jaw—which was clean-shaven—thick eyebrows, high cheekbones, lips...

Okay, maybe those lips made my hormones sit up and take notice.

Some people were blessed with lips from the gods, made for kissing.

This man seemed to be one of those people.

I pushed a lock of hair behind my ear, meeting that dark gaze and finally answering his question. "Needed some air."

"I understand completely. I came here after work, but the music's so loud that I couldn't hear myself think."

"Yeah, I think I'm done for the night. I came with a friend, but she went rushing off with some guy she just met."

"I'm sorry."

He actually did look sorry. He had big, expressive eyes. Sympathetic eyes. Eyes a girl could get lost in. But of course I really didn't think that, because it was too sappy, and

I didn't want anyone to know what a sappy person I was deep down inside.

Forget Nicholas Sparks movies. I sobbed over Mrs. Doubtfire and Toy Story Three.

"It's not like I'm surprised," I replied and shrugged. "And it's not like I won't forgive her tomorrow."

I'd always been a forgiving person. Besides, Karen was my only real, non-work friend here in Cincinnati, so forgiveness was pretty much moot.

The people at McFinn Dental, where I worked, were all far older than me.

I was a dental hygienist. I was good at it, but it wasn't exactly thrilling high-tension work. Teeth weren't very exciting.

And damn, was I complaining a lot tonight or what? I decided to put a sock in my whine hole and focus on this handsome stranger. He seemed interesting...or so I hoped.

The stranger grinned at me. "You're a good friend to forgive her." He pushed away from the wall and walked over to me. He held out his hand. "I'm Richard Morello."

I shook his hand. "Chelsea Davidson."

His hand was warm. He didn't hold mine for too long—his handshake was almost all business—even though I wouldn't have minded him touching me a little longer.

Like I'd said, his big hand was very warm.

We were alone out here on the sidewalk in front of the bar.

The muted bass was thumping through the walls from inside.

Occasionally I could hear the DJ calling out silly stuff designed to get people enthusiastic about New Year's Eve and midnight.

The place wasn't exactly a club, even though it had a dance floor and bouncers.

And it wasn't really a bar either, although that's what it implied in the name.

The occasional car cruised past on the street.

A few people were walking the sidewalks, couples and singles, but this street wasn't as busy as farther downtown.

The sky was cloudy, but even though there was no moon, it still seemed rather bright.

All the city lights reflecting back from the low clouds, apparently.

The city was alive, but right here, in front of this bar, it seemed as if we were in our own little world somehow. It seemed strangely...intimate.

I took a breath, ready to say something else that would probably be inane. Silences in conversations with new people made me nervous. I wasn't really an awkward person, but I got uneasy worrying that things were getting awkward for the other person.

Before I could blurt something out, the bar door swung open again, letting the bass-heavy music escape.

We both glanced that way automatically. A man walked out. He wore a sherpa-lined black jacket, jeans, and heavy work boots. He also wore a dark blue baseball cap with Fire Station 3 in gold letters on the front.

He saw us looking and tipped his hat our way. It was such an off-hand, friendly gesture—like something a cowboy would do—that it made me smile.

The new guy was tall. It was hard for me to judge how tall because I was only five-three or so, so most men looked huge to me.

But I guessed he was well over six feet.

He had a broad chest and wide shoulders.

His thighs were big too, really filling out those jeans.

I shouldn't have been surprised. His hat identified him as a firefighter, and firefighters had to stay in great shape.

He looked like he bench pressed refrigerators when he was bored.

The newcomer stepped off the last gray-painted stair and moved a few paces away, bringing a cell phone out of his pocket. I reached for my own smartphone, realizing that I should put my call in for a ride before the big rush after midnight when a bunch of drunken people would need rides home.

I dug out my phone, but I didn't have a chance to unlock it before getting distracted again. This time, it was a shop across the street that snagged my attention.

The shop facade, with its large display windows and dark purple awning, suddenly lit up with no warning. Lights above the overhead sign came on, and neon signs blinked to life in the window. "Tarot readings!" one red neon sign said. "Psychic" another flashed. "Open" proclaimed yet a third.

There was a painted hand on the glass window, and I guessed that indicated palm

readings. There was a bunch of other psychic-y design stuff like moons, stars, and tarot arcana painted on the windows, along with the words Madame Wanda's Good Fortunes . It all looked very...unique.

I frowned, staring. I didn't think I'd noticed the place when Karen and I had come here earlier.

It was so tacky that it was hard to miss.

So why had all the lights come on now? Were late-night New Year's Eve psychic readings a thing?

Maybe Madame Wanda was an insomniac. Or maybe she wanted to give fortunes to a bunch of drunken revelers and overcharge them.

If so, I had to admire her work ethic. If you're sober, dealing with drunk people was an exercise in patience. I should know. Drunk guys had been hitting on me all night.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

Beside me, Richard was also staring at the shop across the street. He rubbed his chin, blowing out a big cloud of breath. “I didn’t realize there was a big demand for tarot readings in the middle of the night.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“Great minds and all that.”

Next to us, the big firefighter didn’t seem to be as wowed by the tacky spectacle as we were. Then again, I didn’t think he’d noticed it yet.

He was pacing with his phone to his ear. I couldn’t help overhearing his conversation because he was close and the street was relatively quiet. Relatively quiet, except for the throb of the bass from inside the bar, of course.

Also, I decided to eavesdrop. Yes, I’m a bad person.

“Where are you guys?” the firefighter said, sounding irritated. He had a deep voice, a lower register baritone.

Mmm. I liked deep male voices. The way they rumbled and vibrated against you. Maybe that was an odd thing to focus on instead of his broad chest and what I suspected was a washboard stomach.

Mr. Firefighter wasn’t as handsome as Richard, but he was good-looking in a solid, football player way.

In a my-face-was-chiseled-out-of-rock way that wasn't necessarily pretty but sure was striking.

It suited him. He was clean-shaven too, with short, light-brown hair and light-colored eyes—I couldn't tell the exact color from this distance in this lighting.

Whatever answer the firefighter got to his question didn't seem to please him. He was rubbing the bridge of his nose as he paced, his head down as he stared at the sidewalk. All his concentration seemed to be on what he was hearing.

He looked so upset that I couldn't help but be curious.

It seemed like yet another distraction after the fortune teller place suddenly came to life.

It was strange. Being outside the bar was turning out to be far more interesting than when I'd been inside, where I'd only had creeps hitting on me with some really boring pickup lines.

They weren't even trying, and that was insulting.

“Yeah, that's funny. I can hear Derek laughing his ass off,” the firefighter snapped. “I appreciate you guys busting my balls.”

Now Richard and I were both watching the firefighter.

I felt bad for the guy. Apparently, his mates had sent him here to Mr. Nixie's Cocktails and they'd all met up somewhere else without him.

Was it some kind of firefighter hazing? If so, it helped remind me that men were still morons.

Nothing had changed. Gravity still worked, and men were still great big sexy idiots who did the dumbest things.

Like surfing on top of moving cars or jumping off roofs into the pool or anything to do with freehand rock climbing.

The firefighter disconnected the call with a grunt of disgust and shoved the phone back in his jeans pocket. I glanced away quickly, but he still noticed the two of us watching him.

“Sorry if I was loud,” he said.

Okay, he was a sweetheart, I decided. Anyone who caught two strangers eavesdropping and then apologized for being too loud was some kind of gentleman hero in my book. I was embarrassed to be caught listening in, but I couldn’t help but respond anyway.

“Sorry for eavesdropping,” I said, giving him the warmest smile I could.

I actually had a good smile, thanks to lots of dental work.

I also found that smiles helped put everyone at ease, and I really did feel bad for him.

After all, I knew what it was liked to be ditched.

Again, I brushed a stray strand of my dark hair back behind my ear.

“I was stood up too. Well, I mean, I came with a friend, and she dropped me like a ton of bricks. I was just going to ask if you saw that weird shop light up across the street a second ago and couldn’t help but overhear you.”

“Looks like we’re both out of luck on New Year’s,” the firefighter said. He glanced

across the street at the newly lit up psychic shop. “Huh. Weird.” He met my eyes again and gave me a half-smile that was a little cocky and a lot sexy. “I’m James, by the way. James Reed. A pleasure.”

“I’m Chelsea Davidson.” I pointed to Richard. “This is Richard Morello. We just met too. We’re forming a club out here in front of the bar. Where the really cool people hang out...at least until we can get a cab.”

James nodded to Richard. But Richard stepped forward and held out his hand. They both shook while I told myself not to check out their butts. I didn’t want to get caught staring, and they were probably really cute butts, judging from the rest of them.

Okay. I admit it. I peeked. They were really cute butts.

“So you came to the wrong place?” Richard asked him gently.

James rubbed the back of his neck and snorted. “Only because the rest of the crew sent me here. They’re all at McAlister’s together, laughing their asses off at me.”

“I heard firefighters like to prank each other,” I said, trying to make him feel better. One of my uncles was a firefighter, and he had all kinds of stories. Also, they were all obsessed with grilling things on the barbecue for some reason. “I guess it was your turn this time.”

He shook his head. “They’re just busting my balls because I’m new. I’m not a probie, but I’m new to Station Three, so I get all the crap.” He jerked his thumb at the shop across the street. “Guess I should’ve seen a psychic before showing up tonight.”

The three of us stood there silently in the cold air, staring across the street at the shop with all its signs, lighting, and neon.

Traffic had thinned out to nearly nothing.

An ambulance siren sounded in the distance.

I blew on my hands to warm them. It might be warmer inside the club, but I was having a better time out here, present company definitely included.

“I kind of admire Madame Wanda or whoever it is,” I said.

“Who doesn’t want to know your fortune for the brand-new year?

Will it be a great, exciting year, or a boring, trash year?

” I waved my hands around and said in a dramatic voice, “Only Madame Wanda knows!” Then I smiled and shrugged.

“She’s either an insomniac or a hard worker. ”

“I never believed in all that woo-woo crap,” James replied.

Richard chuckled. “Come on. It’s all harmless fun.”

“Have you ever done it?” I asked Richard. “Gone to a psychic?”

His grin widened. “Twice.”

“Was anything they told you true?” James asked.

“Not one bit. But it was fun.”

An idea hit me. I wheeled on them, grinning. “Let’s do it! The three of us. What do you think?”

“Waste of money,” James said.

Richard nodded. “He’s right, but count me in anyway. I could use a little distraction tonight.”

We both turned to look at James. I don’t know why it was suddenly important to me that we include him, but it was. I pleaded at him with my eyes.

Finally, he chuckled and shook his head. “I guess we could see if she’s the real deal. Let’s see if she can tell we’re all strangers.” The idea seemed to grow on him. “Yeah, why not? I’m not doing anything right now anyway.”

Richard was watching him closely. “You sure you don’t want to head over to McAlister’s with the rest of your crew?”

“Nah. Those jerks can kiss my ass.” He glanced at me. “Excuse my firefighter mouth.”

I snorted. “Please. I use fouler language every morning in rush hour traffic. You aren’t going to fucking shock me.”

That made both men laugh out loud. I guess it wasn’t very ladylike, but sometimes ladylike was boring.

“Now that we know Chelsea can cuss with the best of them,” Richard said, sweeping a hand at the psychic shop across the street, “shall we head over and try out her idea?”

James still looked amused. “Three strangers ambushing a psychic on New Year’s Eve.”

“Right,” I said brightly. “What could go wrong?”

“Never say that. That’s the first thing they teach a firefighter.”

“How was I supposed to know that?” I shot back, matching his smirk. “What am I, psychic?”

“Ha. Ha.”

We were having a good time, and I’d mostly forgotten about Karen ditching me.

I didn’t know these two men, but I felt safe enough with them.

I felt safe because we were all strangers, as odd as that sounded.

Well, safe enough to cross the street and enter a fortune teller with them.

I might not be good at telling when people were lying, but I liked to believe I could sense when people were good people deep down.

So maybe I was a little psychic after all because right now I had that feeling about Richard and James.

But there was more. I wanted to take a chance and do something exciting.

This had been an awful New Year’s Eve for me so far, but things had suddenly turned interesting.

I needed some kind of change. My life was in a rut, and I knew it. I needed to shake things up.

I wasn’t going to get crazy, but maybe I’d get an interesting story out of this.

Something to throw back at Karen next time I saw her.

Oh, after you abandoned me at the bar and left with your New Year’s boy toy, I met

two gorgeous guys.

One of them was a firefighter with big muscles.

And then something really crazy happened...

After that, there were no second thoughts for me. I needed to find out if Madame Wanda was up to giving an interesting fortune to three strangers an hour before midnight.