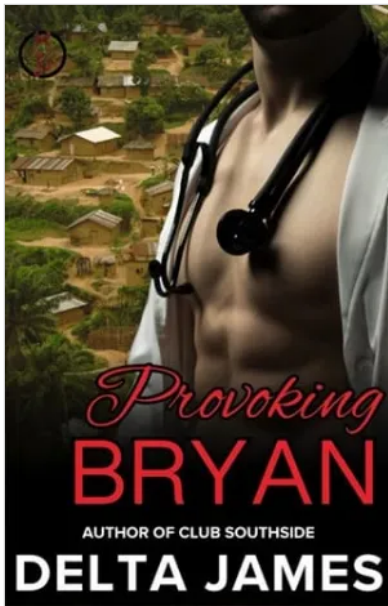




Provoking Bryan (Club Tales #5)

Author: *Delta James*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: She's been hired to protect him but who will protect her heart?

Dr. Bryan Mena thrives in high-pressure situations, but the relentless pace of the urban ER has lost its allure. Seeking deeper purpose, he joins Doctors Without Borders, ready to face challenges in the world's most volatile regions.

At a glittering fundraising gala, he encounters Sara Gray, a striking, enigmatic Cerberus operative. Sparks fly when their conversation veers into unexpected territory, with Bryan's natural dominance clashing with Sara's guarded submission. The event is violently attacked by the cartel, thrusting them into a perilous world neither expected.

Assigned to protect Bryan after intel reveals he's a cartel target, Sara struggles with his commanding presence and her own guarded vulnerabilities. As they navigate treacherous jungles and evade deadly ambushes, their simmering tension ignites into a passion that neither can deny.

But shadows of betrayal loom large. With a mole in Sara's organization and the cartel closing in, they must rely on each other like never before. In a final confrontation that tests their courage and commitment, Bryan and Sara fight not just for survival but for a future together.

Total Pages (Source): 10

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:30 am

1

brYAN

The emergency room buzzed with its usual controlled chaos—voices rising in clipped urgency, machines beeping rhythmically, the faint scent of antiseptic mingling with sweat and adrenaline. Dr. Bryan Mena moved through the chaos like a storm through a forest, commanding respect without needing to demand it. He was precision personified, a blend of sharp intelligence and unyielding determination wrapped in scrubs that did nothing to conceal a lean, muscular build.

"Dr. Mena, incoming GSW, ETA one minute!" a nurse called, snapping him out of his focused haze.

Bryan didn't need a briefing. Gunshot wounds were depressingly routine in Chicago. He pulled on a fresh pair of gloves, adjusted his face shield, and began to mentally map out the probable injuries and procedures.

The paramedics burst in, pushing a stretcher carrying a young man in his early twenties, his shirt soaked in blood. A large tattoo of a snarling cobra sprawled across his chest, distorted by the jagged hole in his flesh. His eyes fluttered open and shut, his body fighting unconsciousness as the paramedic rattled off vitals.

"Single GSW to the chest, probable hemothorax. Vitals unstable, systolic in the eighties. We've got an IV line in, one liter NS wide open," the paramedic said as they wheeled the stretcher to Bryan's team.

"Let's move! Get him to trauma bay two!" Bryan ordered, taking control.

His hands were steady as he assessed the damage. The bullet had torn through muscle, shattering a rib and likely nicking a lung. He issued commands with the practiced efficiency of someone who had seen far too many bodies broken by violence.

"Intubate him—he's crashing! Get a chest tube in; we need to decompress this hemothorax now," Bryan barked.

The team responded seamlessly. Within minutes, the man's breathing eased as Bryan drained blood from his chest cavity. He glanced up at the heart monitor. The rhythm stabilized—a small victory in an uphill battle.

"He's not out of the woods," Bryan muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

A loud commotion near the entrance caught his attention. Shouts. Panic. Then...

Gunfire.

The sharp cracks echoed through the ER, replacing the buzz of machinery with screams. Bryan's head snapped up as chaos erupted. A man dressed in dark clothes stormed in, wielding a pistol.

"Everybody down!" the assailant roared, firing indiscriminately.

The gang member's friends, Bryan thought grimly. He shoved a nurse out of the line of fire, ducking behind the trauma bay's cabinet.

Another shot rang out, and Bryan saw a uniformed officer collapse just feet away from him, blood pooling beneath her.

His pulse pounded in his ears, but his mind was razor-sharp. He crawled to the fallen officer, keeping low. He felt for a pulse, there was none. Her gun lay within reach.

Bryan hesitated only a second before grabbing it.

The assailant was reloading, his back momentarily turned. Bryan steadied his breathing, the weight of the gun foreign now but somehow familiar in his hand. Training kicked in—though not medical training. He'd served with several special ops units overseas—ostensibly as a medic. Because he often accompanied the teams he'd served with, he'd received specialized training in advanced weapons, languages, demolitions, and advanced combat tactics.

The assailant turned just as Bryan pulled the trigger.

The man crumpled, his weapon clattering to the floor.

Bryan froze, the acrid smell of gunpowder mingling with the antiseptic tang of the ER. Around him, the world roared back to life—patients sobbing, medical staff shouting, the frantic rush of sirens outside.

Later, after giving a statement to the police and helping his team recover from the chaos, Bryan leaned against the cold steel of a supply cabinet in the now-quiet ER. He stared at his bloodied hands.

He'd saved lives tonight—but he'd also taken one.

The moral calculus was clean; the man had been a threat. Still, the weight of it settled into his chest like lead.

Bryan looked around the ER, the walls stained with the evening's violence. Was this it? Was this what he wanted his life to be—a constant push against an unyielding tide

of destruction?

His thoughts drifted to an email he'd received weeks ago, one he'd been too busy to entertain. Doctors Without Borders was looking for trauma specialists.

"Maybe it's time," he murmured to himself.

The ER would keep spinning, with or without him. Maybe out there, in the far corners of the world, he could find something—peace, purpose, or at least, a different kind of chaos.

For now, though, he washed the blood from his hands and prepared for another patient. The ER never slept, and neither could he.

Three Months Later

Bryan adjusted the cuff of his tailored tuxedo, the smooth silk material unfamiliar compared to the scrubs he'd worn just hours ago. His last shift at the ER had been a blur of blood, adrenaline, and quiet goodbyes, leaving him with a strange sense of finality. Tonight, he wasn't Dr. Bryan Mena, ER physician—he was just Bryan, a man about to dive headfirst into the chaos of war zones and underserved communities.

The gala buzzed with energy. Waitstaff glided between clusters of well-dressed attendees, trays of champagne glasses balanced effortlessly in their hands. The room smelled of wealth and good intentions, though Bryan had learned long ago to distinguish the genuine from the performative.

He spotted Seth Newcomb. Cerberus was here. That was interesting. They didn't normally provide onsite security to events. Their specialty was black ops, kidnap and ransom, extractions, close cover to the wealthy elite, et cetera, not babysitting a

charity function.

Spotting him, Seth ambled over. Bryan found the man frustrating and fascinating at the same time. Seth was a member of the Cerberus team here in Chicago. Their US headquarters was over a swanky BDSM—or ‘lifestyle’ as they liked to call it—club here in the city. He knew a lot of Cerberus operatives, either having served with them during his time in the military or having been introduced to them over the years.

For the most part, he liked and respected them but had never understood the allure of the lifestyle. He had been in charge in the ER yet had never found any of his sexual relationships to be particularly satisfying. In fact, he’d often found them dull and had blamed that on himself and not his partners.

“Doc? It’s good to see you,” said Seth, snagging a glass of champagne from a passing waiter.

“Seth. I’m surprised Cerberus is here. Watching over a group of society people...”

“Normally we wouldn’t, or if we did, we’d be using it for training and would be charging them an arm and a leg, but we have close ties to Doctors Without Borders, and King thought it would be the right thing to do.”

“Are you expecting trouble?” Bryan asked, glancing around.

Seth’s beautiful wife, Hope, joined them, wrapping her arm around Seth and taking a sip of his champagne. “Not really, but trouble often seems to just find Cerberus.”

Seth chuckled. “She isn’t wrong, but I think it’s all safe for tonight. Who’s going to want to hurt a bunch of doctors just trying to ease some of the suffering in some of the worst shitholes in the world? Rumor has it you’re joining them. I thought you’d never go into a war zone willingly again.”

“I didn’t think so either, but a couple of months ago, I realized two things. The first was that Chicago is a war zone. And the second was I want to make a difference. I want to know that I’m leaving the situation better than I found it. In the ER I was just trying to do no harm.”

“Bryan...” Seth started.

“Hush, Seth,” said Hope. “I think what Bryan is doing is noble and worthy. Good for you.”

“I’ve only agreed to one tour, and the hospital has told me I can come back any time I want.”

“Do me a favor, and make sure we know where they send you. You’ve patched up more Cerberus people than I’d like to think about. If you get into trouble, just stay alive...”

“Seth,” Hope admonished.

“I’m not saying he will, I just want him to know that we’ve got his back.”

“Thanks, Seth, that’s good to know.”

Bryan wandered off and popped a canape in his mouth as he ordered an old fashioned. He turned from the bar and was scanning the crowd, drink in hand, when he caught sight of her.

She stood near the edge of the ballroom, her posture relaxed but alert, as if she were ready to spring into action at any moment. Her midnight-blue gown clung to her curves, revealing just enough to spark curiosity while her demeanor warned against underestimating her. Dark blue eyes scanned the room with practiced ease, framed by

loose waves of chestnut hair that fell over one shoulder.

Bryan felt the pull instantly. She was a striking contradiction—soft and fierce, alluring yet untouchable.

He crossed the room, curiosity outweighing any hesitation.

"Not much of a mingler, are you?" he said, his deep voice cutting through the chatter as he stopped beside her.

She turned, her gaze cool and assessing. "Depends on the company," she replied, the faintest hint of a British accent threading through her words.

He raised a brow, intrigued. "I'll take that as a challenge."

Her lips curved into a faint smile. "I don't believe I issued one."

Bryan chuckled, taking a sip of his drink. "Fair enough. Bryan Mena," he introduced himself, holding out a hand.

She hesitated, as if weighing her options, before placing her hand in his. "Sara Gray."

Her grip was firm, her skin soft against his calloused palm. He let his thumb linger a fraction too long as he released her hand.

"So, what brings you to this circus?" she asked, tilting her head slightly.

"Doctors Without Borders," Bryan replied. "Starting with them in two weeks. Tonight's about shaking hands and smiling for the donors."

He was surprised to see several Cerberus operatives in attendance. He knew JJ

Fitzwallace, the wife of Cerberus founder, Robert Fitzwallace, was a huge donor, but security for a fundraising event seemed a bit low key for the world-class security, intelligence and black ops group.

"Must be a change of pace for someone like you," Sara observed. Her eyes flicked over him—clinical yet charged.

"You mean someone who confines himself to the safe world of a hospital?"

She didn't answer immediately, but the corners of her mouth twitched upward. "Something like that."

"And you?" Bryan countered, stepping closer, lowering his voice. "You're not here for the champagne and hors d'oeuvres."

Her gaze sharpened. "What makes you say that?"

"Your eyes," he said simply. "You're scanning the room like you're waiting for something—or someone."

For a moment, Sara's carefully composed mask faltered, and something dangerous flashed behind her eyes. But before she could reply, the air shattered with a deafening crack.

Gunfire.

Screams erupted, the elegant room descending into chaos. Bryan instinctively grabbed Sara's arm, pulling her behind a thick marble column as people scattered.

"Stay down," he ordered, his voice steady despite the chaos.

Sara gave him an incredulous look. "Not a chance."

Before he could argue, she was already moving. She reached under the slit of her gown, pulling a small pistol from a thigh holster. Bryan stared, stunned but impressed. It was a Sig P238—a small but serious gun for a serious shooter.

"You're full of surprises," he muttered, his heart pounding in a mix of adrenaline and something else entirely.

"You have no idea," she shot back, her tone clipped.

Bryan didn't have time to dwell on her words. Across the room, a man in a ski mask aimed his gun at a cowering couple. Without hesitation, Bryan lunged forward, tackling the man to the ground. The impact jarred his shoulder, but he held firm, wrestling the weapon from the assailant's grip. It would seem the instincts he'd learned on the battlefield had not deserted him.

A sharp crack from Sara's direction made him glance up. She stood over another attacker, her movements precise as she disarmed him with a calculated strike. A third shot came from Seth, who stood over a third assailant.

The room was littered with broken glass, overturned tables, and sobbing guests. Bryan hauled his captive to his feet, securing the weapon before locking eyes with Sara.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, his breath ragged.

"Just a guest," she replied smoothly, though the grin tugging up at the corners of her mouth betrayed her.

She stepped closer, the air between them crackling like static electricity. For a

moment, the world shrank to just the two of them.

"Impressive moves," Bryan admitted, his voice low.

"Likewise," she replied, her tone laced with challenge. Her gaze flicked to his lips before snapping back to his eyes.

Before either of them could say more, police sirens sounded and Seth joined them, dragging his prisoner in tow. The police stormed in, weapons drawn, shouting commands.

"A day late and a dollar short," Sara quipped as she slipped away like smoke, blending into the chaos.

Bryan searched the crowd for her, but she was gone. All that remained was the faint scent of her perfume and the unmistakable memory of the fire in her eyes.

He clenched his jaw. This wasn't the last he'd see of Sara Gray. Of that, he was certain.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:30 am

2

brYAN

The sweltering sun pressed down like a weight, baking the cracked earth beneath Bryan's boots. He wiped sweat from his brow and knelt beside an elderly woman seated on a stool fashioned from a tree stump. Her lined face was taut with pain, her gnarled hands clutching her swollen knee.

"Tell her this should help with the inflammation," Bryan said, his tone gentle but firm as he handed the local interpreter a small bag of medication. "Two pills in the morning, two in the evening, and keep her leg elevated as much as possible."

The interpreter nodded and relayed the instructions in the local dialect. The woman murmured her thanks, her tired eyes glistening as she gripped Bryan's hands with surprising strength.

"You're welcome," he replied, offering her a reassuring smile before rising to his feet.

The makeshift clinic buzzed with quiet activity. It was every bit as busy as the ER, but the energy felt more hopeful than hopeless. Bryan's colleagues tended to villagers beneath the shade of an ancient baobab tree, their supplies spread out on collapsible tables. Children darted between them, their laughter a sharp contrast to the mostly deplorable conditions in which they lived.

Bryan scanned the faces around him, noting the mixture of gratitude and

apprehension in their expressions. These people had lived under the shadow of violence for too long, and the cartel's presence was a specter no one dared to name aloud.

"Dr. Mena."

He turned to find Lara, a fellow volunteer, approaching with a clipboard. Her face was drawn, her usual cheerful demeanor replaced by worry.

"More patients waiting?" Bryan asked.

"Not exactly." She hesitated, glancing over her shoulder. "A group of men arrived earlier—local militia, I think. They're asking questions about you."

Bryan frowned, his jaw tightening. "What kind of questions?"

"They want to know why you're here. And they mentioned the gala attack."

The air seemed to grow heavier. Bryan's mind raced. He'd thought the violence at the fundraiser was an isolated incident, but now it appeared his work here was stirring up something deeper.

"I'll handle it," he said, his tone firm. "Where are they?"

"Near the entrance to the village," Lara replied. "Be careful, Bryan."

He gave her a curt nod and strode toward the edge of the camp, his pulse quickening. The path was lined with dry shrubs and the occasional rustle of unseen wildlife, but the real predators awaited him at the clearing.

Three men stood near a battered pickup truck, rifles slung casually over their

shoulders. Their leader was tall and wiry, his face a mask of suspicion as he watched Bryan approach.

“You’re the doctor?” the man asked, his English heavily accented but clear.

“That’s right,” Bryan replied, keeping his tone neutral.

“You should leave,” the man said bluntly, his grip tightening on his rifle. “This is not your place.”

Bryan crossed his arms, his gaze steady. “I’m a doctor. I’m here to help these people medically. Nothing more.”

The man stepped closer, his eyes narrowing. “You brought trouble here. You think we don’t know about the gala? The people you killed there?”

Bryan’s breath hitched. “I didn’t kill anybody. That wasn’t my doing.”

“It doesn’t matter,” the man snapped. “Your presence disrupts the balance. The cartel will not tolerate it.”

Before Bryan could respond, a low whistle cut through the air, followed by a soft thud. The man staggered, clutching his neck where a small dart protruded.

Bryan turned sharply to see Sara Gray emerging from the shadows, her movements fluid and calculated as she dropped the two other men.

“Fancy seeing you here,” she said, her voice cool as she pocketed the tranquilizer gun.

Bryan stared at her, equal parts relieved and exasperated. “Sara. What the hell are you

doing?”

“Saving your life, apparently,” she replied, her eyes flicking to the militia members, who were all slumped unconscious against the truck.

Bryan’s pulse thundered as she stepped closer, her proximity sparking a dangerous mix of anger, fear, and attraction. “I had it under control,” he growled.

“Did you?” Sara’s gaze locked with his, challenging and unyielding. “Because from where I was standing, you were seconds away from being dragged off—or worse.”

Bryan exhaled sharply, his frustration mingling with the undeniable pull between them. “This is my job, Sara. My job. You can’t just swoop in like some rogue operative and?—”

“Watch me,” she interrupted, her tone laced with a kind of amused defiance.

For a moment, they stood inches apart, the heat of the African sun eclipsed by the fire between them. Bryan’s chest rose and fell with restrained intensity, his hands itching to grab her, to demand answers—and perhaps something more.

“This isn’t your fight,” he said finally, his voice low.

“Neither is it yours,” she countered, her lips curving ever so slightly. “But here we are.”

Before he could reply, distant gunfire echoed through the trees, sending a jolt of urgency through both of them.

“We’ll finish this later,” Bryan said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Sara arched a brow, but the glimmer in her eyes promised she wouldn't make it easy. "Looking forward to it."

As they sprinted back toward the village, Bryan couldn't shake the growing suspicion that Sara was more than just a passing complication. She was a catalyst—one that threatened to upend his carefully controlled world.

Later, Bryan paced his cramped tent, the flickering lantern casting jagged shadows against the canvas walls. Outside, the night was alive with the sounds of the savanna—distant animal calls mingling with the faint hum of generators. He'd just returned from a grueling day in the field, and now Sam Carson, the regional security coordinator for Doctors Without Borders, had dropped a bombshell.

"I don't need a damn babysitter," Bryan snapped, spinning to face Sam. His hands were shoved into his pockets, frustration radiating from him.

Sam, a burly man with graying hair and a perpetually calm demeanor, leaned against the desk, his arms crossed. "It's not negotiable, Bryan. The cartel's already made it clear they see you as a threat. You're not just a doctor to them—you're a symbol of resistance."

"Resistance? What resistance? Because I won't just turn a blind eye and let people die? Because I save the lives of those they try to kill? I came here to make the situation better, not get tangled up in some cartel war," Bryan countered.

"That doesn't change the fact that they've decided they want you dead," Sam said, his voice sharpening. "I told you this might not be a good fit because of your background and your connection to Cerberus..."

"What connection to Cerberus? I don't have a connection to Cerberus." Bryan held up his hand to wave off Sam's concerns. "Do I know some of those guys? Yeah. I

served with a few of them...”

“And you do know JJ Fitzwallace. Do you have any idea how much these guys hate her? They’ve tried to kill her—more than once—but her husband is good at making sure they don’t succeed. And there are other women in Cerberus that they’re not overly fond of either. If they take you out, it sends a message to every other organization trying to do good here. You’re a target, whether you like it or not. If you’re going to stay, you’re going to need someone to watch your back. Cerberus has offered to supply us with someone and pick up the cost.”

Bryan exhaled heavily, dragging a hand through his hair. “I work better without someone hovering over my shoulder.”

“This operative won’t hover,” Sam replied, a glimmer of amusement in his otherwise serious tone. “She’s trained to blend in. And—” he added, cutting off Bryan’s protest, “she’s got medical training. She can assist in the field.”

Bryan narrowed his eyes. “A medic-slash-bodyguard? Sounds like a disaster waiting to happen.”

Sam’s expression didn’t waver. “I thought the same thing. Until I met her.”

Before Bryan could retort, the tent flap rustled. He turned, and what he was about to say died in his mouth when Sara stepped in.

Dressed in practical cargo pants and a fitted tactical shirt, she exuded an effortless confidence. Her dark hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, and her sharp eyes immediately sought his, as if daring him to challenge her presence.

“You,” Bryan said, his voice heavy with recognition.

Sara's lips twitched into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Good to see you again, Dr. Mena."

"Wait, this is the operative?" Bryan shot a glare at Sam. "They sent her, and you agreed to it?"

"You're welcome," Sara said smoothly, stepping further into the tent. "Though I'm not sure why I expected gratitude."

Bryan turned to her, his frustration bubbling over. "I don't need you here."

She tilted her head slightly, her gaze steady. "Tell that to the men who've been asking questions about you in every village within a hundred-mile radius."

Bryan bristled, but before he could fire back, Sam held up a hand. "Enough. This isn't a debate. Sara's assignment comes from higher up. You don't have to like it, Bryan, but you damn well better cooperate."

Sam's tone left no room for argument. He pushed off the desk and headed for the exit, pausing briefly. "Play nice," he said before disappearing into the night.

The tent fell silent, charged with a kind of frenetic energy thrumming in the air. Bryan stared at Sara, every part of his body tight.

"You don't have to like me," she said after a moment, her voice calm but firm. "But we both know this isn't about you. It's about the people you're here to help. If I can keep you breathing long enough to do your job, I'll consider the op a success."

"And what about your medical training?" he asked, his tone edged with skepticism. "You going to patch me up if I stub my toe?"

She raised an eyebrow. “Try taking a bullet. Then we’ll see.”

Her response caught him off guard, and he couldn’t help the flicker of grudging respect that crept in. Still, her presence unsettled him—not just because of the danger she represented, but because of the way she seemed to look right through him.

“Fine,” he said finally. “But let’s get one thing straight—I call the shots when it comes to my work. Stay out of my way, and we’ll get along just fine.”

Sara stepped closer, her eyes locked on his. “I’ll stay out of your way,” she said softly, her voice dropping to a near whisper. “As long as you don’t put yourself in mine.”

The heat between them was tangible, charged with something neither of them wanted to name. For a moment, Bryan couldn’t look away, his breath catching at the way her eyes seemed to challenge and invite him all at once.

“We’ll see,” he murmured, his voice low.

Sara’s lips curved ever so slightly. Without another word, she turned and walked out, leaving Bryan alone with the uncomfortable realization that his biggest threat might not be the cartel after all—but the woman assigned to protect him.

Bryan crouched over the table in the center of the medical tent, his hands moving with practiced efficiency as he organized supplies into precise rows. Gauze, syringes, antibiotics—everything in its place. It wasn’t just a necessity; it was a ritual, a way to impose control over the chaos that had engulfed his life.

The flap of the tent rustled, and a gust of hot, dusty air swept in. He didn’t need to look up to know who had arrived.

“You’re like a walking hurricane,” Bryan muttered, his voice low but edged with irritation.

The sound of boots pausing just inside was followed by Sara’s measured reply. “That’s funny. You don’t strike me as the type who gets swept off his feet.”

Her words drew his attention. He looked up sharply, catching the faint glint of an amused challenge in her eyes. “This isn’t going to work if you think you can waltz in here and play games,” he said flatly.

“I don’t play games,” she countered, her voice steady and calm, though her tone carried a hint of irritation. She stepped closer, the subtle sound of her tactical pants brushing as she moved, her posture radiating confidence. “And let’s be clear—I’m not thrilled about working with a civilian who knowingly puts himself in harm’s way.”

Bryan stood to his full height, forcing her to tilt her head slightly to maintain eye contact. “Then don’t,” he snapped. His tone was firm, unyielding. “I didn’t ask for this. I don’t need this. If you’ve got a problem with me, there’s the door.” He gestured toward the tent flap.

She didn’t budge. Instead, her lips tightened, her expression hard to read.

He watched her closely, noting how she seemed to steady herself in the wake of his words. Was it stubbornness? Or was there something more, some reaction beneath the surface she was working hard to mask? Whatever it was, it flickered in her eyes, faint but there.

“That’s a flap, not a door, Doc. And I don’t walk away from my assignments,” she said after a moment, her voice quieter but no less resolute.

Bryan took a step closer, his gaze boring into hers. She didn't flinch, though he could feel the tension tightening between them. "You don't like working with civilians," he said slowly, testing her. "But here you are, sticking it out. Why?"

She hesitated, and he didn't miss the way her jaw tightened slightly before she answered. "Because I'm good at my job. And for now, you're my job."

He studied her, his instincts tuned to every flicker of expression, every shift in her tone. "Is that all I am to you? A job?"

Her breath hitched, so faint it was almost imperceptible, but he caught it. Her next words came quickly, as if to cover for the slip. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The conviction wasn't there, and Bryan felt a surge of something darkly satisfying as he took another step, closing the distance. He wasn't touching her, but the air between them felt charged, heavy.

"Somehow, I don't believe you," he said, his voice dropping lower, each word deliberate. There was a pull he couldn't ignore, something about her that felt both infuriating and magnetic.

Sara's lips parted slightly, as if to respond, but no words came. He could see the struggle in her eyes, as though she was trying to fight a reaction she didn't want to acknowledge.

Finally, she broke the silence, her voice sharper than before, a deflection. "I don't much care what you believe. This isn't about you, Bryan. It's about keeping you alive."

He leaned back slightly, his lips curving into something that wasn't quite a smile,

though the intensity in his gaze didn't waver. "Keeping me alive," he echoed, his tone laced with quiet amusement. "Interesting choice of words, considering you're the one struggling to keep your composure right now."

"I'm not?—"

"You are," he interrupted smoothly, his voice firm but not harsh, like steel wrapped in velvet. "And I think it's because you don't know what to do with someone who doesn't back down when you push."

She swallowed hard, and for a moment, her expression faltered. There was a flicker of vulnerability there, one she quickly masked, but not quickly enough.

"You're infuriating," she said, her voice quieter now, almost a whisper.

"Then why are you still standing here?" he asked, his voice calm but with an edge that dared her to answer.

The air between them thickened again, and he could see her weighing her options, her next words clearly a deliberate choice. She straightened her shoulders and took a deliberate step back. "You're going to follow my lead when things get dangerous. Like it or not, that's how this works."

Bryan raised an eyebrow, his expression unreadable. "I don't take orders," he said, turning back to his supplies, his tone signaling an end to the discussion. "But I'll consider your suggestions."

He didn't have to look up to know she was frustrated, but there was something else in her silence—something unresolved.

"You're impossible," she muttered as she turned and left the tent.

As the flap settled behind her, Bryan allowed himself a small exhale. He'd pushed her, and she hadn't broken. She might be dangerous, but damn if she wasn't intriguing.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:30 am

3

SARA

Sara adjusted the strap of her tactical bag as she surveyed the camp from the edge of the clearing. The layout was simple—two medical tents, a supply station, and a few scattered structures for sleeping quarters. Practical, efficient, and utterly exposed. Any half-trained operative would know this place was a soft target. She supposed that doctors just didn't think that way.

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she spotted Bryan walking toward the main tent. Even from a distance, he moved with an easy confidence, the kind of commanding presence that drew people to him. It irritated her how effortlessly he seemed to have slipped into a leadership position, as though he belonged in every room, no matter the stakes.

And it irritated her even more that it worked for her. She'd always gone for the rough and tumble type. Men of higher learning—doctors, lawyers, professors...that sort of thing—did little to make her ache for them. No, give her a commando or a cowboy.

"Looks like you're sizing up the camp for an assault," came a dry voice behind her.

Sara turned to see Lara, clipboard in hand and an eyebrow raised.

"Just getting a feel for the layout," Sara replied, keeping her tone light.

Lara frowned. "You're supposed to be logistics, right? Not security?"

Sara offered a thin smile. “Let’s just say I’m a little more versatile than that. I’m also able to assist medically if needed.”

The answer didn’t seem to satisfy Lara, but before she could ask more questions, Bryan’s voice cut through the air.

“Sara!”

She turned to see him standing at the entrance of the main tent, his arms crossed, a challenge in his body language. She resisted the urge to sigh. This wasn’t going to be pleasant.

“Excuse me,” she said to Lara before striding toward him.

When she reached the tent, Bryan stepped aside to let her in, then followed, letting the canvas flap fall closed behind him.

“Do we need to talk about your role here?” he asked, his tone even but edged with authority.

She dropped her bag onto a nearby table and turned to face him. “I thought we already did. Logistics. Medical support when needed. Anything else you want to add?”

Bryan stepped closer, his dark eyes narrowing slightly. “What I want is for you to stop scoping out the camp like you’re planning a defensive strategy.”

She didn’t flinch, meeting his gaze head-on. “I am planning a defensive strategy. If someone’s watching us—and they probably are—it’s better they know I’m here as a bodyguard. Hiding it only makes us look vulnerable.”

His jaw tightened, and for a moment, she thought he might argue. But instead, he took another step closer, closing the space between them.

“You think you’re calling the shots here?” he asked, his voice dropping to a low rumble.

She felt the heat of his presence, the dominating timbre in his voice, the way his quiet dominance seemed to wrap around her like a second skin. It unsettled her, sent a shiver down her spine that she hoped he didn’t notice.

“I think I’m doing my job,” she replied evenly. “Keeping you alive.”

Bryan’s lips curved into something that wasn’t quite a smile, more a deliberate challenge. “And if I told you to stop? To blend in like I asked?”

Her heart raced, but she held her ground. “I’d remind you that I’m not here to take orders from you, Bryan.”

He studied her, his gaze searching hers, and for a moment, the air between them was electric. Her pulse pounded in her ears, her body tense with the effort of maintaining control.

Finally, Bryan stepped back, breaking the moment. “You’re stubborn. I’ll give you that.”

“And you’re infuriating,” she shot back, more sharply than intended.

Bryan chuckled softly, the sound surprisingly warm. “Good. Maybe we’ll keep each other on our toes.”

She watched him leave the tent, her chest heaving as she exhaled.

Sara kept her back to the clinic wall, her senses sharp and her breath steady. The clinic was eerily quiet, the calm before the inevitable storm. She'd noticed the shift earlier—the lingering stares from a group of villagers near the perimeter—a subtle charge in the air that only seasoned instincts could detect.

Something wasn't right.

“Lara,” she said softly to the volunteer sorting supplies nearby. “Get everyone inside. Now.”

Lara frowned but nodded, picking up on the urgency in Sara's voice. As Lara ushered patients and staff into the main building, Sara moved toward the entrance, her hand already reaching under her loose shirt to the holster strapped to the back of her waist.

She had barely stepped outside when she saw them—five men advancing quickly through the trees, weapons visible. Her body tensed, adrenaline flooding her veins.

“Bryan!” she barked over her shoulder.

His voice came from somewhere inside. “What is it?”

“Trouble,” she snapped, cutting him off as she drew her pistol.

The first shot rang out before she could issue another order. She dropped to one knee, firing back with practiced precision. One of the attackers fell, but the others kept coming, spreading out to flank her position.

Behind her, Bryan appeared in the doorway, a rifle in his hand and poised to fire.

“Stay inside!” she shouted without looking back.

“Not a chance,” he growled, stepping up beside her.

The fight was fast and brutal. Sara moved with lethal efficiency, ducking behind crates and barrels, using the terrain to her advantage. Bryan held his own beside her, his shots precise, his calm under pressure impossible to ignore.

She hated how much she noticed it.

Two men were down, but the others pressed forward. One broke off, circling behind the clinic. Sara cursed under her breath and bolted after him.

“Cover me!” she yelled.

Bryan’s voice followed her. “Sara, wait?—”

She didn’t wait. She couldn’t.

The man was fast, but Sara was faster. She caught up to him near the back of the clinic, slamming into him before he could raise his weapon and fire at her. They hit the ground hard, the impact jarring, but she recovered first, pinning him with her knee and delivering a sharp blow to his temple.

His body went limp, but the victory was short-lived. A shadow loomed behind her, and she twisted just in time to see another attacker raising a knife.

Her hands scrambled for her weapon, but she wasn’t fast enough.

The sharp crack of a rifle shot split the air, and the man’s knees buckled as he collapsed to the ground, blood pooling beneath him.

Sara turned, her chest heaving, to see Bryan standing a few yards away, his rifle still

raised, his eyes locked on hers.

“You’re welcome,” he said, his voice rough but steady.

She didn’t reply, couldn’t. Something shifted in that moment—something she wasn’t ready to name.

The aftermath was quiet, almost unsettlingly so. The attackers were neutralized, the clinic secured, but Sara’s mind was anything but calm. She stood by the perimeter, her arms crossed, watching as Bryan spoke with the others, organizing clean-up and checking on patients.

He was good at this. Too good.

When he finally approached her, his expression was unreadable, but there was something in his eyes—something that made her feel exposed in a way she hated.

“You could’ve gotten yourself killed,” he said without preamble.

“So could you. I had it under control,” she replied, her voice sharper than intended.

“Did you?” he challenged, stepping closer. “Because from where I was standing, you were about to lose that fight.”

She bristled. “I didn’t need you to save me.”

“Maybe not,” he said, his tone calm but unyielding. “But I did. And if you can’t accept that, you’re going to get yourself killed trying to prove something.”

The words hit harder than she expected, and she hated the way her stomach tightened, the way her carefully constructed facade wavered.

“What’s your point?” she asked, her voice quieter now.

“My point,” Bryan said, his voice dropping lower, “is that you’re not invincible, Sara. And pretending you are doesn’t make you stronger. It makes you reckless.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but the words caught in her throat. He wasn’t wrong, and that realization cut deeper than any wound.

Bryan studied her for a long moment, his gaze searching hers before she turned and began to walk away. “Sara,” he called.

She waved her hand over her head and kept walking. She needed distance. She listened carefully and was grateful when she didn’t hear him following.

Later, in the privacy of her tent, Sara stared at her phone, her thumb hovering over Miley’s contact. She hadn’t called her in months, but tonight, she needed answers.

The phone rang twice before Miley picked up.

“Sara,” Miley said, her tone warm but curious. “What’s going on?”

Sara hesitated, then exhaled slowly. “I need to ask you about Bryan Mena.”

Miley’s voice shifted, a note of intrigue slipping in. “Bryan? What about him?”

“What do you know about him?” Sara asked, her voice quieter now. “And...how does someone like you—someone in our world—deal with someone who pushes back?”

Miley was silent for a moment, then she laughed softly. “Ah, I see. He’s getting under your skin, isn’t he?”

Sara didn't reply, but the answer was obvious.

"Let me give you the run down," Miley continued. "He's a brilliant physician but after an incident in the ER..."

"Incident?"

"Yeah, he was forced to shoot some gangbanger who followed the ambulance to finish off a GSW victim. Bryan was pretty cool under fire. He was fed up, didn't feel like he was making a difference. So Damon recruited him for Doctors Without Borders. You were at the gala, and JJ and Damon both wanted him protected. You were elected."

"Is he in the lifestyle?" Sara asked.

"God, no. He thinks we're all a bunch of freaks, and yet he has a membership. He says Club Southside's lounge has the best food and booze in Chicago. He isn't wrong, but I think he misses some of the guys he served with. Bryan is a nice guy, but he's more than that. He's strong, and he knows it. If he's pushing, it's because he sees something in you. Something worth challenging. Damon thinks he has latent Dom tendencies."

Sara laughed. "Damon thinks every guy with a set of testicles has latent Dom tendencies."

"Correct. So take that with a grain of salt. And Sara?" Miley added, her voice gentler now. "Sometimes, taking a chance on and letting someone in doesn't make you weaker. It makes you stronger."

The call ended, but Sara couldn't shake the lingering sense that the balance between her and Bryan had shifted—and that her carefully controlled world would never be

the same.

Sara stood at the edge of the camp, the night air cool against her skin. The rhythmic hum of the generator mixed with the faint rustle of the savanna offered a momentary reprieve from the day's chaos. She needed the space, the solitude, to clear her head.

It wasn't just the ambush that lingered in her mind. It was him. Bryan.

She turned at the sound of footsteps, her hand instinctively brushing her thigh where her knife was sheathed. But it was Bryan, his broad frame silhouetted against the lantern light of the camp.

"You have a habit of sneaking up on people," she said.

"And you have a habit of walking off when there's a conversation that needs to be had," he replied evenly, his voice a quiet rumble.

Sara wasn't in the mood for this, not now. "I've nothing to say."

"Too bad," he said, stepping closer. "Because I do."

Sara crossed her arms, her gaze narrowing as he closed the distance between them. He was close enough now that she could feel the heat of him, his steady presence pressing against her walls.

"What do you want, Bryan?" she asked, her voice low, defensive.

"I want to make sure you're okay," he said.

"I'm fine; not a scratch on me... at least not one from today."

“What we went through today can make you feel things you may not want to feel...”

“God help me,” she snorted, “and save me from people who want to help me process my feelings. Me and my feelings will do just fine without you or anyone else’s interference.”

His eyes narrowed, sharp and unyielding. “You pretend like you’ve got it all under control, but we both know that’s a lie.”

Sara bristled, the accusation cutting deeper than she expected. “Do we? Does it ever occur to you I might actually have everything under control because that’s my job?”

“Sara...”

“Drop it, Bryan. You don’t know me.”

“I know enough,” Bryan countered, his voice dropping lower. “I know that you carry yourself like someone who always has to be in charge, but there’s more to it than that...”

She felt the walls she’d spent years constructing start to tremble under the weight of his words. “You’re out of line,” she snapped, her voice sharp, desperate to regain control.

“Am I?” he challenged, stepping even closer. His eyes bored into hers, and she hated how much he saw. “What are you so afraid of, Sara?”

“I’m not afraid,” she said finally, though her voice lacked conviction.

Bryan tilted his head, studying her, his expression softening just slightly. “You don’t have to be perfect all the time, Sara. You don’t have to carry it all alone.”

The words hit her like a blow, her carefully controlled facade cracking under the weight of his quiet intensity. She looked away, her throat tight, the vulnerability too much to face head-on.

“I don’t need saving,” she said, her voice quieter now, almost a whisper. “Especially not here, not now, and not by you.”

“I’m not trying to save you,” Bryan said, his tone gentler but no less firm. “But maybe you need to let someone in.”

He took another step towards her, his eyes locking on hers, the air between them seeming to hum with unspoken possibilities. But then she stepped back, the movement abrupt, breaking whatever spell had held them.

“This can’t happen,” she said, her voice steadier now, though her hands still trembled at her sides.

Bryan nodded slowly, his gaze unreadable. “You’re right. It can’t.”

Neither of them moved for a long moment, the silence heavy with everything left unsaid. Then Bryan turned and walked away, leaving her alone in the darkness. He wasn’t just another assignment. He felt like a ticking time bomb, and she wasn’t sure she didn’t want to stick around to see him explode.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:30 am

4

brYAN

As the ping of a gunshot sparked off the medical transport truck, Bryan ducked. What the fuck? At least in Chicago it didn't feel like every time he turned around someone was trying to kill him. The sound echoed through the camp, silencing the distant hum of the generator and the rustle of the savanna. His heart pounded in his chest, adrenaline surging as he spun toward the sound.

The bullet had missed him, but not by much. A jagged dent in the side of the truck was proof enough.

"Sara!" he shouted, his voice cutting through the stunned silence.

She was already moving, her gun drawn as she sprinted toward the source of the shot. "Stay down!" she barked over her shoulder.

Bryan didn't argue—there wasn't time. Staying low, he helped Lara and the others move patients out of the line of fire. Dropping behind a stack of crates, he scanned the tree line, searching for the shooter. His instincts roared to life, the disciplined calm from years of military training kicking in.

A figure emerged from the shadows, rifle raised. Bryan's muscles coiled, but before he could react, a second gunshot rang out. This one came from Sara.

The lone gunman dropped, his body crumpling to the ground with a dull thud.

Bryan rose cautiously, his gaze flicking between Sara and the fallen attacker. She was already moving toward the body, her steps swift and purposeful.

“Stay here,” she ordered without looking back.

“Like hell I will,” Bryan muttered, following her despite the warning.

Sara crouched beside the gunman, checking his weapon and searching his pockets. Her movements were methodical, professional, but Bryan could see the tension in her shoulders.

“He’s alone,” she said, standing and turning to face him. “For now.”

Bryan’s jaw tightened. “You think more are coming?”

“Probably,” Sara said bluntly. “This isn’t going to stop, Bryan. They know where you are, and they’re not going to quit until you’re dead.”

Her words hung heavy in the air. Bryan exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. “I’m not leaving,” he said firmly.

“You don’t have a choice,” Sara snapped, her voice rising. “This isn’t just about you anymore. Every time they come for you, you’re putting everyone here in danger. The staff. The patients. All of them.”

Bryan met her gaze, frustration and guilt twisting in his chest. She was right, and he hated it.

“What’s your plan?” he asked finally, his tone clipped.

“We relocate you,” she said. “There’s a safe house along the coast. Isolated, secure.

You stay there until we figure out how best to deal with this.”

Bryan crossed his arms, his stance defiant. “And how long am I supposed to hide away while the people here need me?”

“As long as it takes to keep you alive,” Sara shot back, stepping closer, her eyes blazing. “You can’t help anyone if you’re dead, Bryan. Stop being stubborn and let me do my job.”

The heat between them crackled like static electricity. Bryan’s jaw worked as he wrestled with the decision. Finally, he nodded, the fight draining out of him.

“Fine,” he said, his voice low. “But this doesn’t mean I’m happy about it.”

“Noted,” Sara said, her tone softening just slightly.

While Sara made a great show of packing his things, he gave instructions to staff. Once they’d set off, he couldn’t help but notice Sara making her way toward the jungle and not the coast.

“You do know you’re going the wrong way, right?” he asked.

“Yep, but I don’t want anyone watching to know where we’re going. The savanna is wide open. Everything is easy to spot. The jungle gives us better coverage.”

Once they were moving along the trail, Bryan froze as he saw a Land Rover dead ahead. Before he could say anything, Sara laid her hand on his arm.

“Easy, doc. We always knew this was a possibility.” She pulled up alongside them. “You’re going to need to give them your phone, just in case, and we’re going to swap clothes and cars.”

Bryan shook his head. “Remind me not to doubt you in the future.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Sara laughed. “They’ll keep going in this direction and by the time anyone realizes it isn’t us, we’ll be lounging on the beach slurping back drinks with tiny umbrellas.”

Bryan laughed. He felt like it had been forever since he laughed.

In short order, they were on the road again—in different clothing and hats with brims that obscured their faces. They made good time, and the closer they got to the sea, the more refreshing the air. He’d never thought he’d be so grateful for the sound of crashing waves and seabirds.

The safe house was nestled on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean, the constant sound of waves against the shore providing a steady backdrop. The isolation was stark, the nearest road barely a winding dirt path, but he recognized the difficulty someone would have getting to them. There was an open field of fire to the heavily re-enforced back and a steep cliff to the front.

Bryan moved around the cottage, his arms crossed as he stared out at the horizon. The salt air was bracing, but it did little to cool the heat simmering under his skin.

Behind him, Sara moved through the small kitchen, her steps quiet but deliberate. She was always moving, always watching, like a predator waiting for the slightest hint of danger.

“You’re pacing,” she said without looking up.

“I’m not pacing,” Bryan replied, stopping himself as he said it.

She glanced at him, one brow arched. “You haven’t stopped moving since we got

here. I have all the alarms set up. We'll know they're coming long before they get here. If the Land Rover can get us out safely, we'll take it. If not, we get to the boat at the end of the dock via the pathway or to the one hidden in the cave. We reach that one via the emergency exit in the floor of the kitchen pantry."

"Just because I'm moving doesn't mean I'm pacing."

Sara rolled her eyes, the corner of her mouth twitching. "You're impossible."

Bryan turned to face her, the anxiety from the day finally spilling over. "And you're infuriating. You think dragging me out here is going to solve everything?"

"I think keeping you alive is a good start," Sara shot back, her voice sharp.

Bryan stepped closer, his gaze locking onto hers. "And what happens after? You can't keep me in a bubble, Sara."

Her jaw tightened, her usual composure slipping. "We'll figure it out."

"That's not good enough," Bryan said, his voice dropping lower. "You want me to trust you? Then tell me how this ends."

She hesitated, her defenses cracking under his intensity. "I don't know," she admitted finally, her voice quieter now. "But I've never lost anyone on my watch, and I'm not about to start now."

There was a vulnerability in her words that he hadn't expected. Bryan stepped closer, the space between them shrinking until he could feel the heat rolling off her.

"You don't have to do this alone," he said, his voice soft but firm.

Sara's breath hitched, her walls trembling under the weight of his gaze. But before either of them could say more, she stepped back, the moment breaking like a snapped thread.

"I need to make sure all the security feeds and alarms are working properly," she said, turning away abruptly.

Bryan watched her retreat, the tension between them thick enough to choke on. Whatever was happening between them, it wasn't over.

Not by a long shot.

Later that evening, Bryan sat at the edge of the safe house's porch, the cool evening breeze carrying the salty tang of the ocean. Waves crashed against the cliffs below, their rhythm a stark contrast to the storm brewing inside him. Across the small outdoor table, Sara leaned against the railing, her arms crossed, her posture casual—at least to the untrained eye. But Bryan wasn't untrained.

Her body was taut, her fingers twitching occasionally as though she wanted to reach for something—or stop herself from reaching for something.

"Relax," he said, breaking the silence.

Sara's eyes snapped to his, her expression sharp. "I am relaxed."

Bryan arched a brow, the corner of his mouth lifting in a knowing smile. "That why you look ready to spring at the first sign of movement?"

She exhaled sharply, a sound halfway between a sigh and a growl, and turned her gaze back to the horizon. "Habit."

“You always on edge?” he asked, his tone softening slightly.

She didn’t answer immediately, and he watched as her fingers flexed against the wood of the railing.

“Comes with the job,” she said finally.

Bryan stood, closing the distance between them with slow, deliberate steps. He stopped just behind her, his voice low. “Is it just the job?”

Sara stiffened, her breath hitching, but she didn’t turn around. He watched the faint rise and fall of her shoulders, the subtle tension that ran through her body.

“You’re doing it again,” she said, her voice quieter now.

“Doing what?”

“That thing where you think you can see right through me,” she replied, her tone laced with frustration but tinged with something else.

Bryan leaned in slightly, his voice dropping further. “Maybe I can.”

Sara turned then, her gaze locking with his. The air between them felt charged, the silence heavy with everything unspoken.

“You think you’ve got me figured out?” she asked, her voice steady but her eyes betraying her uncertainty.

“No,” Bryan admitted. “But I think you’re afraid to let anyone try.”

Her jaw tightened, but she didn’t look away. “And what would you do with what you

find?”

He stepped closer, his gaze unwavering. “I don’t know. That would be up to you.”

The vulnerability in her eyes was fleeting, but it was there, and Bryan felt something inside him shift. He wanted to push, to see how far she would let him go, but he held back, sensing the fragility of the moment.

“Why are you here, Bryan?” she asked suddenly, her voice breaking the tension. “Why did you leave a successful career in Chicago to come to places like this?”

He leaned back slightly, crossing his arms. “Because the ER wasn’t enough anymore.”

Sara tilted her head, studying him. “Not enough how?”

He exhaled slowly, the weight of his memories pressing against his chest. “Every day, I’d patch up people who would end up right back where they started. Gang violence, poverty, addiction—it felt like I was fighting a losing battle. And then there was... an incident.”

Her brow furrowed, but she didn’t interrupt.

“A gang member came into the ER, gunshot wound. His buddies showed up, trying to finish the job. A cop went down, and I...” He paused, his throat tightening. “I shot the guy. Saved lives, sure, but that wasn’t my job. I wasn’t supposed to be the one pulling the trigger.”

Sara’s expression softened, her usual defenses slipping. “And that’s why you left?”

Bryan nodded. “I wanted to feel like I was making a difference. Out here, I can do

that. It's messy, and it's dangerous, but at least it's real."

Sara's gaze dropped to the ground, her voice barely above a whisper. "You're braver than most people I know."

"Brave or stupid," Bryan said, his tone light but his eyes serious. "Maybe both."

She looked up at him again, her eyes searching his. Bryan reached out, his fingers brushing hers where they rested against the railing. She didn't pull away, but the slight tremor in her hand didn't go unnoticed.

"You don't always have to be in control, Sara," he said softly.

Her breath hitched, and she took a step back, breaking the contact. "I can't?—"

"Can't or won't?" Bryan asked, his voice calm but firm.

Sara didn't answer, her eyes darting away as she headed back into the cottage.

By the time he followed her inside, she had a number of ingredients and a heavy mixer on the kitchen island.

"In my old life, I loved baking bread. It relaxes me."

"You bake bread?" he asked, incredulously.

"Not as often as I'd like mostly because I'd eat the whole damn loaf with a pound of butter."

Bryan laughed. "Better get two spreaders so I can help. I can think of few things better in this life than hot, homemade bread with melted butter."

Sara grinned at him and turned back to making her dough. When the dough was mixed, Sara turned it out and began to knead for ten to fifteen minutes. Once her hands were immersed in the dough, Bryan stepped up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist, and added his own hands to hers to help with the process.

Bryan folded and pushed the dough, letting his frustration out as he pressed down on the sticky surface. About two minutes into the process, not knowing what he was doing, Bryan simply covered her hands with his and let her guide the process.

“Why?” he whispered.

She stopped moving her hands and turned her head about an inch, trying to see his face. “Why what?”

“Why did you have to have a craving for bread?”

“Because it’s delicious.” She obviously had no idea how she was affecting him.

“Fuck,” he grumbled, struggling to maintain some kind of professional decorum. “I was planning to behave like a perfect gentleman, and then you do this.”

“And by this, you mean kneading dough?” She bent down and snuck out of his embrace. “That’s what set you off? Really?”

“The way your hips were moving,” he closed his eyes and shook his head. “And being so domestic. I don’t know; it just got to me.”

She burst out laughing and went to the sink to wash her hands. “That—” she pointed to the dough on the counter— “is what triggered you?”

“Yeah. Why, is it a problem?” He turned toward her and leaned a hip against the

counter.

Shaking her head, she pushed him out of the way and placed the dough in the prepared bowl. The woman made him want to grab a bottle of bourbon. Her words and attitude took him way past frustration.

“No. Just never heard of bread being a turn on.”

“Well, it is.”

Sara reached around him, her boob lightly touching his forearm, and he had to bite back a groan. He uncrossed his arms and moved away from the contact. He didn't give a shit about anything other than making her talk to him. Without thinking, he moved closer, placed his hands on her hips and made sure his body was touching hers.

She looked up at him then. “I don't know if I can do this,” she admitted, her voice barely audible.

Bryan stepped closer again, his presence steady and unyielding. “Then don't think about it,” he said, his voice low and warm. “Just feel it.”

The words hung between them, heavy with meaning, as the sexual energy began to rise like the dough in the bowl. Neither of them moved for a long moment, the silence stretching as the waves crashed below.

5

SARA

S ara could feel the outline of his erection as she slid her hands around his waist and then down to cover his ass. Squeezing it lightly, she felt his cock twitch.

“Fuck.” He wrapped his arms around her body and lifted her off the floor, cradling her to his chest.

Sara had never been one for romantic novels or big displays, but she had to admit that every time one of the Doms swept up his sub either into his arms or tossed her over his shoulder, it was all she could do not to sigh. She laughed at the way he said fuck. It was like he was releasing all the tension that had been building between them since they’d bantered at the gala and giving into what he wanted.

“I think I would be remiss in saying that it is against Cerberus policy for bodyguards providing close cover to fuck the people they’re protecting.”

Bryan snorted as he carried her to the bedroom. “Yeah, right,” he said as he tossed her onto the bed. “Every single couple I know from Southside has met through Cerberus, and every single one of them fucked before their assignment was concluded.”

Sara lifted her body and rested on her elbows. “I didn’t say it didn’t happen. I just said it was against company policy.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I’m supposed to protect you, not fuck you.”

“Are you always this forward?” He pushed her onto her back onto the mattress and crawled up her body.

“Only with you.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.” She fisted her hand into his shirt and pulled him closer. “You’re my first.”

“As in, you’re a virgin?” He tried not to sound shocked.

“Not a chance, but I’ve never let myself get this far with a client. Should we have the obligatory safe sex talk? I’m clean and on birth control.”

Bryan chuckled. “You don’t even want to know all the testing they put me through before letting me out of the country. So no STDs for me, but then I’ve always been careful.”

He slid his hand under her shirt and moved his fingers back and forth over her belly as she reached down to unbutton his jeans. Sitting up, he helped her to pull her shirt over her head and then reached back and unhooked her bra. Before she knew it, Bryan had managed to strip her naked.

“Fuck,” he said as he sat back for a few seconds, staring at how she looked splayed on the bed in front of him.

Sara reached up and touched the side of his face. "I've been thinking about how you'll feel inside me since I met you."

He rolled off the bed and stood, removing his clothes. Sara ogled unashamedly all six feet four inches of his gorgeous naked body, and couldn't take her eyes off his magnificent, fully-engorged cock.

He lay back on the bed beside her, reaching for her hand and tugging her against his body. "I've never met anyone like you before."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Is that a compliment?" She kissed his chin, nose, cheeks, and finally his mouth.

"Definitely a compliment." He rubbed his nose back and forth over hers and then lowered his mouth to hers, biting her bottom lip and forcing his tongue inside. He didn't ask, he simply took the lead, and Sara was happy to follow. They let their tongues dance and tangle together. She pressed herself close and a quiet warmth suffused her being.

She moaned against his lips and continued enjoying the way he made her feel with every movement of his tongue.

She fisted her hands in his hair, "Bryan, let me feel you inside me. Please."

"Patience." He kissed her and started to inch down her body. "First, I need a taste of you."

"No," she started. But before she could say more, he flipped her onto her belly, landing three hard strikes to her backside before flipping her back.

"You may be in charge in matters of security. But I'm in charge in bed. We'll

use—what is it they all use? The stoplight system.”

As Sara leaned back against the soft pillows, she felt her body tense with anticipation as his warm breath tickled her skin. Goosebumps formed on her arms and a shiver ran down her spine. She couldn't help but smile at the familiar sensation that always came when he was near

He pushed her legs further apart and dragged his finger over her sensitive and needy sex.

He smiled and dropped his head. His tongue circled her clit, and she thought she might come right then and there. It had been so long, and every cell in her body lit up in anticipation. He pushed two fingers inside her and continued to circle his tongue around her throbbing nub. When he sucked her clit inside his mouth, Sara's body lifted off the bed, and her eyes flew open. The orgasm that washed over her was not like any other she'd ever experienced. She fell back and closed her eyes, taking in the moment.

Bryan began to make his way back up her body. She let her legs open wider, excited for what was next. He positioned himself over her, snugging his cock up to her entrance and slowly pushing inside. Sara helped to ensure he was in by wrapping her legs around his body.

He stilled and looked down at her. “You're gorgeous.”

“More,” she whispered.

He didn't hesitate. He pulled out and then thrust back in. Sara cried out from the arousal that surged through her body again. Over and over, he pounded into her, and Sara reveled in his attention. She hadn't expected the doctor to be as strong and virile a lover as he was.

He pulled her behind up a bit, so she was almost sitting on his thighs. The movement positioned his cock in the perfect spot, and another orgasm began to build low in her belly. She wrapped her fingers around his wrists and pushed her back against the mattress.

As Bryan thrust into her repeatedly, her inner walls shook and quivered as she tried to wrap her head around the intense pleasure he was giving her. Her breath sped up, and the noises she began making were more whimper than moan as her orgasm rushed over her.

Sara's body stiffened in anticipation, and her breathing became faster and more erratic. Then suddenly, it was as if the bottom fell out of her world, and she was spinning in a freefall of ecstasy. Bryan gave a last ferocious, deep thrust, grinding against her as he spilled himself inside her. Her pussy spasmed, clamping down hard, greedily milking his cock. Her legs trembled as she writhed in his hold, savoring every bit of pleasure as he held her in his arms.

Sara stirred awake, the faint hum of the security monitors pulling her from the edges of sleep. The small safe house was quiet save for the distant crash of waves against the rocky shore. The events of the day lingered in her muscles, but her mind was sharp, restless.

She sat up slowly, running a hand through her hair, and grabbed Bryan's shirt from where it was draped over the chair nearby. It smelled faintly of him, and she pulled it on, the fabric soft and oversized against her skin.

Padding softly into the living area, she approached the security console, her eyes scanning the monitors. The feeds were still—just dark stretches of sand and brush under the faint glow of the moon. Nothing seemed out of place, but she knew better than to trust appearances.

Her fingers brushed the edges of the keyboard as she adjusted the cameras' angles and ensured the infrared cameras were working as well. Satisfied, she exhaled and turned toward the island, turning the risen dough out of the bowl, then punching it down and kneading it again before putting it back in the bowl to rise a second time.

She then headed to the porch, needing fresh air to clear her brain. Usually, making bread did that, but she knew that from this time forward, she would always associate making bread with Bryan.

The wooden boards creaked under her bare feet as she stepped outside. The salty breeze wrapped around her, cool and refreshing, and she rested her hands on the railing, staring out at the dark expanse of the sea. The moonlight painted the waves silver, the horizon endless and daunting.

She felt him before she heard him. Bryan's presence was steady, grounding, even when he wasn't trying.

"You couldn't sleep either?" she asked without turning, her voice soft but carrying over the sound of the waves.

He stepped closer, his movements unhurried. "Didn't need to," he replied, his voice a low rumble.

When his arm wrapped around her waist, she stiffened for a fraction of a second before letting herself lean into him. The warmth of his body at her back was a comfort she hadn't expected.

They stood there in silence for a long while, the ocean stretching before them, the world shrinking to just the two of them.

"You okay?" he asked finally, his voice gentle.

Sara swallowed hard, her gaze fixed on the horizon. “I don’t know.”

Bryan didn’t push, didn’t demand answers or explanations. He simply stayed, his hand resting lightly on her hip, his presence enough to keep her grounded.

“I don’t do this,” she said after a while, her voice barely above a whisper.

“This?” he prompted, his tone free of judgment.

She exhaled, shaking her head. “Let people in. Let them see me like this.”

Bryan tightened his arm around her, a subtle gesture that felt like both reassurance and challenge. “Maybe that’s why you need to.”

His words sent a shiver through her, though she wasn’t sure if it was the breeze or the truth in them.

“I’ve spent my whole life building walls, Bryan,” she admitted, her voice raw. “It’s easier that way. Safer.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But is it better?”

She turned then, her back against the railing, her eyes searching his. The moonlight softened his features, but his gaze was as piercing as ever, steady and unrelenting.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly.

Bryan lifted a hand, brushing a strand of hair from her face. The touch was gentle, his fingers lingering for just a moment longer than necessary. “You don’t have to figure it all out tonight.”

The corner of her mouth lifted in a faint smile. “You say that...”

“Because it’s true,” he said simply.

Sara looked down, her hands gripping the edge of the railing. “You make it sound easy.”

“It’s not,” Bryan admitted. “But then most things worth doing rarely are.”

His words settled over her like a soft-knit afghan. She lifted her gaze back to his, her chest tightening at the sincerity in his expression.

For the first time in a long time, she felt seen—not as the operative, not as the protector, but as Sara.

She reached up, her fingers brushing his jaw, and he leaned into the touch, his eyes never leaving hers. The moment stretched, the air between them charged with unspoken promises.

“Bryan...” she started, her voice trembling.

But he shook his head slightly, his hand lifting to cover hers. “You don’t have to say anything.”

And for once, she let herself believe it.

They stood like that, the world around them fading into the background, the crash of waves the only sound as Sara let herself lean into the warmth and strength of the man who somehow managed to see through all her walls.

Finally, she broke the silence. “Bryan, I need to say something.”

His dark eyes lifted to meet hers, steady and unflinching. “Go ahead.”

“I’m not an easy person to be with,” she started, her tone quiet but firm. “I don’t do relationships—not because I don’t want to, but because I’ve learned the hard way that they don’t work for me.”

Bryan tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable but attentive. “Why don’t they work?”

She exhaled, her fingers lacing together as she searched for the right words. “Because of what I need. What I want.”

His brow furrowed slightly, and she rushed to explain. “I’m not talking about flowers and date nights. I’m talking about... control. The kind I have to give up in order to feel like I can breathe.”

The confession felt too weighty to be saying right now, but she pushed through. “Most guys either can’t handle what I can do, or they’re obsessed with it. They’re either intimidated by my skills or turned on by them in a way that makes my skin crawl. And neither of those things works for me.”

Bryan nodded, but he didn’t interrupt.

“And then there’s...” She paused, forcing herself to meet his gaze. “The submission. I need someone who can take the reins—someone I can trust to take them, even when I don’t necessarily want to give them up. But every time I think I’ve found that, it ends with resentment or disappointment.”

The silence between them was deafening, her words hanging in the air like a live wire.

Bryan leaned forward then, setting his glass down beside hers. His voice was low but steady when he spoke. “Sara, I respect the hell out of your abilities. I’ve seen you in action, and I know how damn capable you are. But none of that changes the fact that right now, I’m not thinking about the badass operative who can take down a cartel gunman.”

Her breath stopped, and she forced herself to breathe before she asked, “Then what are you thinking about?”

He held her gaze, his expression softening just slightly. “I’m thinking about the woman standing here next to me in nothing but my shirt while we watch the moon and tide dance together. The one who’s brave enough to say what she needs, even when it scares her. That’s the person I want to know. That’s the person I want to figure this out with.”

Her heart thudded against her ribs, her mind racing. “You don’t know what you’re signing up for, Bryan.”

He smiled faintly, leaning back in his chair. “Maybe I don’t. But I’ve always been curious about... the lifestyle.”

Sara’s brows lifted in surprise. “You have?”

He nodded, his tone thoughtful. “Yeah. It’s always intrigued me, but I was raised to think it was kinky—something nice guys didn’t do. It wasn’t until recently that I realized it’s not just about sex or control. It’s about trust, connection, and knowing what the other person needs.”

Her pulse quickened, a mix of hope and wariness coursing through her. “And you think you could... do that? Be that?”

Bryan's eyes darkened, his voice lowering as he replied. "I think, with the right person, I'd want to try. And I think that person might be you."

Suddenly the vast expanse of the moonlit horizon felt impossibly small.

"Bryan..." she started, but he shook his head, cutting her off gently.

"Don't answer now," he said. "Take your time. If you decide this isn't something you want with me, I'll respect that. But if you do..." He leaned forward again, his eyes locking with hers.

"I know this sounds stupid, but maybe this could be the start of something."

"Something good?"

Sara grinned. "That remains to be seen."

Before either of them could say more, the sharp beep of the security monitor shattered the moment.

Bryan stood immediately, his body tense. "What is it?"

Sara moved to the console, her eyes scanning the feed. A shadow moved along the edge of the camera's view, just beyond the perimeter.

"We've got company," she said, her voice steady despite the sudden rush of adrenaline.

Bryan stepped up beside her, his hand brushing her shoulder briefly. "We'll finish this later," he said, his tone calm but firm.

Sara nodded, her focus shifting to the task at hand, but her mind lingered on his words.

As they prepared for whatever danger loomed outside, one thought burned bright in her mind: later might be closer than she ever expected.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:30 am

6

SARA

S ara's fingers danced over the controls of the drone, her eyes glued to the screen displaying its live feed. The dim light of the safe house cast long shadows, but her focus was razor-sharp. The blip of movement on the security monitor had triggered every instinct she had, and she wasn't about to ignore it.

The drone hummed softly as it zipped over the perimeter, the infrared camera revealing the faint outlines of trees, rocks, and the occasional nocturnal animal scurrying in the darkness.

"Come on, show me what you are," she muttered, tilting the joystick to move the drone toward the fence line.

Bryan's voice drifted over her shoulder, steady and calm. "Find anything yet?"

"Not yet," Sara replied, her tone clipped. "Give me a minute."

Bryan didn't press, standing back but watching her closely. She could feel his presence like a weight, steadying and grounding, even as her nerves hummed with adrenaline.

The screen flickered, a faint blur of movement catching her eye. She adjusted the drone's angle, zooming in on the source of the disturbance.

“Gotcha,” she murmured.

A large shape loomed in the shadows, moving erratically. The drone’s lights swept over it, illuminating the culprit.

An antelope.

Sara let out a sharp breath, her shoulders slumping slightly. “Well, that’s embarrassing.”

Bryan leaned closer, his breath warm against her cheek as he peered at the screen. “Is that... a deer?”

“Antelope,” Sara corrected, already guiding the drone back to its dock.

Bryan chuckled softly, the sound irritatingly warm. “You were ready to take on a cartel hit squad, and instead, it’s dinner on legs.”

Sara shot him a glare, though she couldn’t help the faint smile tugging at her lips. “Laugh it up, Doc. Next time, you can handle security.”

Bryan held up his hands in mock surrender. “Hey, you’re the expert. I’m just here to admire your work.”

She rolled her eyes, powering down the drone and setting the controls aside. “Let’s just hope the next alert is another something with antlers.”

“Agreed,” Bryan said, his tone softening. “But I’m glad it wasn’t anything serious.”

Sara nodded, though the tension in her chest didn’t fully ease. Even a false alarm was a reminder of how precarious their situation was.

“Get some rest,” she said, brushing past him toward the door. “Tomorrow’s another day.”

The soft morning light filtered through the safe house windows as Sara sat at the small dining table, her laptop open in front of her. The faint aroma of coffee lingered in the air, but she barely noticed, her focus entirely on the encrypted files she’d received from a Cerberus contact overnight.

Bryan moved around the kitchen, humming quietly as he prepared breakfast. His presence was both a comfort and a distraction, but Sara forced herself to stay focused.

She scanned the documents, her sharp eyes catching a pattern that made her stomach tighten. A list of supply shipments. Travel routes. Personnel changes. All of it perfectly timed to correspond with cartel activity in the region.

“This doesn’t make sense,” she muttered under her breath.

“What doesn’t?” Bryan asked, setting a plate of toast and eggs beside her.

Sara leaned back, her fingers tapping against the table. “Someone’s feeding information to the cartel. Every time Doctors Without Borders makes a move, they know about it—down to the smallest detail.”

Bryan frowned, sitting across from her. “Are you sure? It could just be a coincidence.”

“It’s not,” Sara said firmly, turning the laptop to show him the files. “Look at the dates. The timing’s too precise.”

Bryan studied the screen, his jaw tightening. “If you’re right, then that means someone inside the organization is working with them.”

“Exactly,” Sara said, her tone grim. “And if they know we’re here...”

She didn’t finish the thought, but the implication hung heavy in the air.

Bryan exhaled sharply, his gaze meeting hers. “What’s our next move?”

“I’ve talked to the person who sent the file and updated it with what we know,” Sara said, already pulling out her phone. “They can cross-reference it with their intel and see if we can narrow down the leak. In the meantime, we keep our guard up.”

Bryan nodded, his expression unreadable. “And what about us?”

Sara hesitated, his question weighing heavily on her. “We stay put for now. The safe house is secure, and I’ve already adjusted the perimeter alarms.”

He reached across the table, his hand brushing hers briefly. “We’ll figure this out, Sara.”

The warmth in his voice sent a shiver down her spine, but she forced herself to focus. “We don’t have a choice.”

Bryan smiled faintly, though the tension in his eyes remained. “I’ll start packing supplies, just in case.”

Sara watched him move to the storage closet, her mind racing. The pieces were falling into place, but the picture they painted was far from clear.

And the question that loomed largest in her mind was one she couldn’t shake: How far did the betrayal go—and how much closer was the enemy?

Across the room, Bryan leaned against the kitchen counter, his arms crossed, his

brow furrowed in thought. His usually calm demeanor was strained, his mind no doubt racing through the implications of what they'd discovered.

"This changes everything," he said finally, his voice low but heavy with tension.

Sara stopped mid-step, turning to face him. "It does. And it puts everyone back at the camp in danger."

Bryan's jaw tightened. "They trusted me. They trusted us. And now?—"

"And now we make sure they're safe," Sara interrupted, her tone firm. She grabbed her phone from the table, already dialing Cerberus.

The line clicked, and a familiar voice answered. "Cerberus Ops, Miley speaking."

"Miley, it's Sara," she said, keeping her voice steady despite the storm swirling inside her. "We've got a situation. Someone inside Doctors Without Borders is working with the cartel. I have intel that proves it."

There was a brief pause, then Miley's tone turned sharp. "I'll get Damon and King on it right away."

"I'm sending it now," Sara said, her fingers flying over the keyboard as she forwarded the files. "But I need you to be discreet. If the mole catches wind that we're onto them?—"

"They'll bolt or retaliate," Miley finished. "Understood. We'll handle it. What about Bryan?"

Sara's eyes flicked to him, standing in the kitchen, his expression dark and unreadable. "He's safe for now, but this isn't sustainable. The mole has to know

we've moved him, and it's only a matter of time before the cartel comes for him again."

Miley's voice softened slightly. "We'll figure it out, Sara. You just focus on keeping him alive."

The call ended, but the weight in Sara's chest only grew heavier. She turned back to Bryan, who was watching her with an intensity that made her pulse quicken.

"What did Cerberus say?" he asked.

"They're handling it," she replied, though the words felt hollow.

Bryan stepped closer, his dark eyes locking onto hers. "You're tense," he said softly.

"Of course I'm tense," Sara snapped, immediately regretting the sharpness in her tone. She took a breath, her fingers pressing against her temples. "I'm sorry. This... it's a lot."

Bryan reached out, his hand brushing her arm. "You're carrying too much."

"I don't have a choice," she replied, pulling away slightly. "If I can't keep my head straight, I can't keep you safe."

He didn't let her retreat far. Instead, he stepped closer, his presence grounding and unyielding. "Sara, look at me."

She hesitated, but his voice held a quiet command that she couldn't ignore. Slowly, she lifted her gaze to his.

"You're spiraling," Bryan said, his tone calm but firm. "Let me help you."

“I don’t need?—”

“You do,” he interrupted, his voice steady. “You don’t have to do this alone. Let me anchor you.”

The sincerity in his eyes undid her defenses, and she nodded reluctantly. “What do you want me to do?”

“Sit,” he said, gesturing to the couch.

Sara complied, her movements slow and uncertain. Bryan knelt in front of her, his hands resting gently on her knees.

“Close your eyes,” he instructed.

She hesitated, but the warmth in his voice encouraged her. Slowly, she let her eyes flutter shut.

“Breathe with me,” Bryan said, his voice a low, soothing rumble. “In through your nose... out through your mouth.”

Sara followed his lead, her breaths shaky at first but gradually evening out as his words guided her.

“Feel your feet on the ground,” he continued, his hands steadying her. “Feel the weight of your body against the couch. You’re here. You’re safe.”

His voice wrapped around her like a cocoon, each word pulling her further from the chaos in her mind.

“Good,” he murmured. “Now, open your eyes.”

When she did, his gaze was waiting for her, steady and grounding. “You’re not alone, Sara,” he said softly. “I’m here. Whatever happens, we face it as a team.”

“You’re not trained...”

“I was a medic in some of the worst forward operating bases in the world. They made the camp here in Africa look like the Ritz. I can handle myself and a gun. And I can guard your six.”

She grinned. Her pulse thrummed, but it was something deeper—more significant—than anything she’d ever felt before... something that terrified and comforted her in equal measure.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Bryan stood, pulling her to her feet. “Come on,” he said, his tone lightening slightly. “We’ve got work to do.”

They moved to secure the safe house and prepare for whatever was coming, but in the back of her mind, the question lingered: Could they survive the storm they both knew was coming?

The late afternoon shone brightly on the porch of the safe house. Even though the sun was sinking down to the horizon, at this time of day, it looked as though it was at the same level as the porch itself. Sara paced its length, her movements sharp and restless. The steady crash of the waves below did little to calm the storm brewing inside her. Every instinct screamed that time was running out, that the safety they’d carved out here was hanging by a thread.

Her fingers brushed the holster at her hip, a reflexive check she’d repeated a dozen times already. The unease had taken root deep in her chest, gnawing at her with each

passing hour.

Inside the house, Bryan sat at the small dining table, a map of the region spread out before him. His brow furrowed as he studied the terrain, his pen tapping rhythmically against the wood. He looked calm—too calm—and it only irritated Sara more.

“You’re awfully relaxed for someone with a target on his back,” she said, stopping just inside the doorway.

Bryan glanced up, his expression unreadable. “And you’re burning enough energy for both of us.”

“Someone has to,” Sara shot back, crossing her arms. “The cartel’s not just going to give up because we’ve gone off-grid. If anything, they’re getting closer.”

He set the pen down, leaning back in his chair. “You don’t know that.”

“I feel it,” Sara said, her voice sharp. “This is what I do, Bryan. I know when something’s off, and I’m telling you, they’re closing in.”

Bryan stood, his height forcing her to tilt her head slightly to meet his gaze. “And you think you’re not enough to keep me safe?”

The question struck a nerve, and Sara’s jaw tightened. “I worry that I can’t do it alone. My fear is that what I’m starting to feel for you may compromise my ability to keep you safe.”

“You’re not the only one, but I’m not as helpless as you may think,” Bryan said firmly, stepping closer. “You have to let me help.”

“This isn’t your world. You’re a doctor, Bryan, not a soldier.”

His expression didn't waver, his dark eyes steady on hers. "I was a soldier before I was a doctor. Don't forget that."

Sara hesitated, her mind flashing back to the way he'd handled himself during the ambush. The precision of his movements, the calm in his demeanor—it was impossible to ignore. But this wasn't just about skill; it was about the burden of responsibility, a burden she wasn't sure he understood.

"I can't let anything happen to you," she said quietly, the admission slipping out before she could stop it.

Bryan's features softened, but his tone remained steady. "And I can't let you carry all of this on your own. We're in this together, Sara. Whether you like it or not. As I understand it, no Dom worthy of a woman's submission would let her bear the burden by herself."

The conviction in his voice sent a shiver down her spine, but she fought to keep her composure. "You don't understand how dangerous they are."

"Then explain it to me," he said, his voice low. "Help me understand so I can be part of the solution instead of just the problem."

The sincerity in his words threw her off balance. She wasn't used to this—not the vulnerability he offered, not the partnership he demanded. For a moment, she considered pushing him away again, shutting him out to protect him. But the look in his eyes stopped her.

He wasn't asking for permission. He was staking his claim.

"Fine," she said finally, her tone reluctant. "If you're serious about this, we need a plan. A real one."

Bryan nodded, gesturing to the map. “I’ve been working on it. There’s a secondary escape route along the coast. If we have to move fast, it’s the best option.”

Sara moved closer, her eyes scanning the map. He’d marked potential choke points, safe zones, and fallback positions. It was solid work—better than she’d expected.

“When did you put this together?” she asked, her voice softer now.

“While you were pacing,” Bryan replied with a faint smile. “Figured one of us should be productive.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress the small smile tugging at her lips. “Not bad, Doc.”

Bryan’s smile widened slightly. “High praise from you.”

The moment of levity was short-lived. A sudden rustle outside the window snapped them both to attention. Sara’s hand went to her gun as she moved toward the sound, her pulse quickening.

Bryan was at her side in an instant, his own weapon drawn. Together, they eased the door open, stepping onto the porch in practiced silence.

The wind whipped through the tall grasses, carrying the faintest hint of something not of the natural world—oil, gunpowder, danger.

Sara crouched low, her eyes scanning the open field. “They must have gotten around the perimeter alarm. Do you see anything?” she whispered.

Bryan shook his head, his grip on his weapon steady. “No, but something’s out there.”

A sudden crack of a branch made them both spin toward the sound, their weapons trained on the shadows. For a moment, the world seemed to hold its breath.

Then came the unmistakable glint of a scope reflecting in the fading sunlight.

“Down!” Sara shouted, tackling Bryan just as the gunshot rang out. The bullet splintered the wooden railing where he’d been standing moments before.

They hit the ground hard, Bryan’s arms wrapping around her instinctively as they rolled behind cover. Her heart pounded in her chest, adrenaline surging through her veins.

“Sniper,” she hissed, her mind racing. “We need to move.”

Bryan nodded, his voice calm but firm. “Lead the way.”

Sara took a breath, forcing herself to focus. The game had changed, and now it was survival. But as they moved through the shadows, Bryan close at her back, one thought burned bright in her mind: They were out of time.

And the enemy wasn’t going to wait for them to find their footing.

brYAN

B ryan zipped up his bag, glancing toward Sara as she worked, her movements precise and deliberate. The tension rolling off her was tangible, a maelstrom brewing beneath her calm exterior. She double-checked her laptop and satellite phone, securing them in her tactical bag.

“Ready?” he asked, keeping his tone steady.

She nodded, her jaw tight. “You’re sure the boats are compromised?”

“I saw them moving down the beach and another unit was moving toward the tunnels so if we don’t move, they’ll come up through the pantry.”

Sara shook her head. “Fitzwallace needs to invest in some new safe houses. Lately, it seems the bad guys know them better than we do. I swear he’s more interested in the latest spanking horse, than in our fucking safe houses.”

“You know that isn’t true,” said Bryan calmly. “And given what I know about the female operatives of Cerberus, those horses probably get worn out pretty fast.”

Sara whirled around to face him and laughed when he waggled his eyebrows at her.

“Maybe, but I prefer over-the-knee to a piece of equipment. It’s more intimate.”

“Good to know,” he laughed.

“We need to move fast, if the boats are compromised. We’ll take the headland and stay low in the grass. It’s harder to track us that way.”

Bryan slung his bag over his shoulder, falling in step behind her. She moved like a shadow, her every step purposeful, her focus razor-sharp. It was impressive, watching her work, but he couldn’t ignore the strain etched in her features.

The tall grass swayed in the evening breeze, the sound of the waves crashing below masking their footsteps. The air smelled of salt and damp earth, but Bryan could sense something else—a kind of disturbance that had nothing to do with the natural world.

“Stick close to the edge,” Sara murmured, her voice barely audible over the wind. “The cliffs give us cover.”

Bryan nodded silently, scanning their surroundings. The golden light of the setting sun painted the headland in warm hues, but his instincts were on high alert. Something about the stillness felt wrong.

Then it came—a sharp crack that split the air, followed by the faint hum of a bullet slicing through the grass.

Bryan dropped instinctively, yanking Sara down with him as another shot rang out. The bullet hit the ground just inches from where they’d been standing.

“Sniper,” Sara hissed. “Move!”

They scrambled forward, keeping low as they crawled toward a cluster of rocks near the cliff’s edge. Another shot struck one of the rocks, sending shards of stone flying.

Bryan's mind shifted into the calm focus he knew well from his time in the military. The adrenaline coursing through his veins sharpened his senses, clearing away the fear and leaving only clarity.

"They're not shooting to kill," he said, his voice steady despite the chaos. "They're herding us."

Sara glanced at him, her jaw clenched. "They want to capture us."

He nodded. "Which means they'll move in close soon. We can use that."

She hesitated, her eyes searching his face. "You have a plan?"

"I draw their fire," he said simply. "You flank them."

"Like hell you will," she snapped, her voice low but fierce.

Bryan met her gaze, his tone firm. "Sara, trust me. I know what I'm doing."

For a moment, she seemed ready to argue, but then she gave a sharp nod. "Fine. But if you get yourself killed, I'm not dragging your body back. I'll feed it to the lions."

Bryan allowed himself a faint smile. "Noted."

He shifted his position, exposing himself just enough to draw the sniper's attention. A shot struck the rock near his shoulder as the crack rang out. The impact sent debris scattering, but he held his ground, watching as Sara slipped into the grass and disappeared from sight.

Another shot hit closer, and Bryan shifted slightly, making himself a harder target while still keeping the sniper's focus on him.

He spotted the sniper just as a sharp crack of a pistol cut through the air, and the sniper's body slumped forward, his weapon clattering to the ground.

Bryan exhaled, relief washing over him briefly before the rustle of movement in the grass snapped him back into focus. Two more figures emerged, their weapons raised.

"Sara!" he shouted, warning her as one of the attackers fired.

The bullet grazed her thigh, but she didn't slow down. Her return fire dropped the man with a single shot. Bryan didn't have time to marvel at her precision—another attacker was closing in on her, a knife glinting in his hand.

Bryan's body moved before his mind caught up. He raised his gun and fired, the shot echoing across the headland. The man dropped, the knife slipping from his grasp as he hit the ground.

"Are you okay?" Bryan asked as he reached Sara's side, his eyes scanning her for injuries.

"I'm fine," she said, though her voice was tight with pain.

He didn't believe her but didn't press. There wasn't time.

More movement in the grass caught his attention. Without hesitation, Bryan raised his weapon and fired, taking down the final attacker before he could get close.

The silence that followed was deafening, broken only by the crash of the waves below.

Bryan knelt beside Sara, his hands gentle as he inspected the wound on her thigh. Blood trickled from the graze, but it didn't seem deep. "You're hit," he said, his tone

calm but firm.

“It’s nothing,” she replied, brushing him off.

His jaw tightened, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he pulled a bandage from his bag, wrapping it securely around her thigh.

As he worked, he spoke, his voice low but steady. “They know we’re here. We can’t stay.”

Sara nodded, her expression grim. “We’ll keep moving. Head for the cliffs. If we’re lucky, we can lose them in the terrain.”

Bryan stood, pulling her to her feet. “We’ll figure it out. Let’s go.”

Her eyes met his, and for a moment, something unspoken passed between them—a connection forged in the fire of survival.

But the danger wasn’t over. As they disappeared into the shadows of the tall grass, Bryan’s mind was already calculating their next move.

One thing was certain: the cartel wasn’t done with them. And he wasn’t about to let them win.

Bryan’s pulse thundered as he adjusted Sara’s arm around his shoulders, the weight of her body leaning heavily against him. The attack had rattled them both, but it was her injury that set his teeth on edge. Blood soaked the makeshift bandage he’d wrapped hastily around her thigh, the crimson stain growing with each step they took deeper into the rocky cliffs.

“I’m fine,” Sara muttered, her voice strained but defiant.

“You’re bleeding all over the place, Sara,” Bryan snapped, his tone sharper than he intended. “That’s not fine.”

She winced as he shifted her weight to get a better grip, her stubbornness faltering under the pain. “We need to keep moving. If they track us?—”

“I’ll deal with it,” he cut her off, his voice low but firm. “Right now, you focus on staying upright.”

The terrain was unforgiving, the uneven rocks and dense brush making every step a challenge. Bryan’s mind raced as he scanned their surroundings, calculating their next move. The cliffside ahead offered a narrow ledge that dipped into a small cove. It wasn’t ideal, but it was defensible.

“There,” he said, nodding toward the ledge. “We’ll stop there.”

Sara tensed against him. “We can’t stop. They’ll catch up.”

Bryan ignored her protest, guiding her toward the ledge. “You won’t be any good to either of us if you bleed out.”

She didn’t respond, but the way her head dipped slightly against his shoulder told him she knew he was right.

By the time they reached the cove, Bryan was sweating, his muscles burning from the effort of supporting her. He eased her down onto a flat patch of rock, his hands moving quickly to check her wound.

“You didn’t tell me it was this deep,” he said, his voice tight as he peeled back the blood-soaked fabric. The gash along her thigh was jagged, the result of a near-miss from a bullet.

“It’s not that bad,” Sara replied weakly, though her pale complexion betrayed her.

Bryan shot her a look, his frustration barely contained. “Stop downplaying it. Let me work.”

She fell silent, her eyes closing as he cleaned the wound with water from his canteen. Bryan’s hands were steady, his focus absolute as he worked. He wasn’t just treating her injury—he was anchoring himself, channeling the chaos of the day into a singular purpose.

“This is going to hurt,” he warned, pressing a piece of gauze against the wound to staunch the bleeding.

Sara hissed, her fingers curling into fists, but she didn’t complain.

Bryan’s jaw tightened as he secured the bandage with strips of medical tape. “You’re lucky. Another inch, and that bullet would’ve torn through an artery.”

She cracked one eye open, her lips quirking into a faint smile. “Lucky’s not the word I’d use.”

“Stubborn, then,” he muttered, sitting back on his heels.

She tried to push herself up, but Bryan placed a firm hand on her shoulder, holding her down. “Rest,” he commanded.

“I’m not some helpless female the big strong man needs to take care of, Bryan,” Sara snapped, her voice sharper than her strength allowed.

“And I’m not treating you like one,” he countered, his tone steady. “But right now, you’re injured, and I’m not letting you push yourself to the point where I have to

carry you out of here. So you're going to sit there, let me handle things, and rest. Understood?"

Sara's lips parted, likely to argue, but something in his tone stopped her. Instead, she leaned back against the rock, exhaling sharply. "Fine."

The silence that followed was intense, the feeling between them simmering just below the surface. Bryan worked efficiently, checking their supplies and scanning the horizon for any signs of pursuit. Finding none, they pushed on, as Bryan's map had shown a small army outpost attached to a fishing village. It wasn't ideal, but it would give them shelter, and perhaps he could trade his service for sanctuary.

They moved slowly along the coast, finally locating the army outpost from the map. The village elders greeted them with news that the army had left earlier in the day for patrol but would return tomorrow afternoon.

"We know their commander would offer you shelter, as will our village," said the elder.

"We're on the run from the cartel," said Bryan. Sara punched him in the arm—apparently telling the elder they could be taking on a lot of trouble was not something Sara approved of. He slanted her a look. "That's five you owe me."

The myriad of emotions that passed over Sara's face was almost comical: shock, lust, outrage and curiously, acceptance as she nodded her head.

"We are no friends of the cartel. What is the saying—the enemy of my enemy is my friend? Come, eat with us. Tend to your woman."

The elder turned away, and Bryan wasn't sure if tending to Sara meant just her wound or the discipline she was due. They were shown into a hut, and Bryan was

able to get Sara to sit still long enough for him to tend to her wound. As soon as he helped her to the sleeping pallet they would share, she used her satellite phone.

“Sara? It’s Seth. Are you both all right? Are you at the safe house?”

“No, the cartel found us,” she said. “We’re in a fishing village. Can we get an extraction?”

“Absolutely. I’m scrambling a team now. There’s a really good landing pad just outside the village.”

“The local militia,” said Sara. “And according to the village elder, they’re out on patrol until tomorrow.”

“You’ll be long gone by then. Anything you need us to bring?”

“Any fishing supplies you can find. And Bryan is indicating simple medical supplies—bandages, disinfectants, et cetera. These people have been kind to us. They didn’t have to take us in.”

“Understood. Hang tight. We should be there in a couple of hours.”

Bryan returned with two steaming plates of some kind of delicious-smelling fish stew. When he finally sat beside her, the intensity of what they’d been through during the day crashed over him like a wave. His body was tired, but his mind was sharper than ever.

“That smells great. Cerberus has a chopper with an extraction team headed our way.”

“Good.”

Sara frowned. “What’s up?”

“You don’t trust me, do you?” Bryan said sadly.

“I do.”

“No, you don’t and I’m trying to understand why.”

“You’re a doctor Bryan, not an operative.”

“I don’t deny that. But you think I’m just a civilian—a liability you have to protect. But I’m more than that, Sara, and I think I’ve proven it.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but he wasn’t finished. “I’ve been in combat zones, I’ve made life-and-death decisions under fire, and I’ve saved more lives than I can count. I’ve been with you every step of the way since we bugged out. You’re so caught up in your own need to control everything that you can’t let anyone else share the load.”

“That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” Bryan challenged, leaning closer. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Sara’s gaze darted away, her composure slipping. “I... I can’t,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Bryan softened, his frustration giving way to something deeper. “You don’t have to do this alone, Sara,” he said, his tone gentler now. “But you have to let me in.”

Her eyes glistened, the vulnerability in them catching him off guard. “I don’t know how,” she confessed.

“Then let me help,” he said, reaching for her hand. His grip was firm, grounding, as if he could anchor her with touch alone.

Sara hesitated, the tension in her body palpable. But slowly, she exhaled, her fingers curling around his. “I’m scared,” she admitted quietly.

Bryan nodded, his thumb brushing lightly against her knuckles. “So am I. But if we lean on and trust each other, we can get through this. Together.”

The words hung between them, a promise neither had spoken aloud before. For the first time, this thing between them felt less like a battle and more like a bond.

When she’d finished her meal, Bryan looked at her and watched a shiver run down her spine. He made himself comfortable on the pallet and extended his hand to her. “I believe you owe me five. I think we should start the same way we mean to go on, don’t you?”

Sara nodded, taking his hand and allowing him to strip her jeans and panties down to her knees. He guided her across his lap, allowing her to find a balanced spot. He couldn’t believe he was about to do this. He’d gone through the training but had then taken a step back, worried that being a member of Club Southside might cost him professionally, but now he didn’t care.

In a matter of days, he’d begun to need Sara Gray more than he needed the air that he breathed. He lifted his hand and then brought it down in the center of her ass. There was a satisfyingly loud smack and gasp from Sara as she reached for his ankle, holding on. He smacked her ass a second time, watching the pink color begin to rise.

Although he wanted her to know this was discipline, he couldn’t help his own physical reaction—his cock was hardening, and arousal was rushing through his veins. He smacked her twice more and was fairly sure that the sting was sparking

along her backside. At first her body was tense, but as he landed the last smack, Sara sighed, and her body went limp.

“That’s five. You did well,” he said as he helped her up and pulled her onto his lap, her jeans and panties still down around her ankles. He suppressed a grin—his sub, his woman had enjoyed her discipline. She was wet. “If I had the time, we’d do more proper aftercare.”

“Yes, Sir,” she whispered as she leaned against him, nuzzling his neck. “The chopper...”

“Not to worry. They’ll never know. I’ll make sure we’re ready to go when they get here.”

“Thank you, Sir. I think I needed that more than you know.”

Bryan chuckled. “Don’t know about that. You may be leaving a spot on my jeans, but trust me when I tell you, my cock is going to hurt until it gets back inside you.”

“Then we’ll have to make sure it gets what it needs”

As the distant sound of the chopper reached their ears, both knew the fight was far from over.

Bryan’s hand tightened around hers as he helped her to stand and gather their things. “I want you to get on the chopper and stay put. I’ll make sure the chief gets our gifts and then we can get out of here,” he said, his voice steady. “It’s not over yet.”

Sara nodded, her jaw set with determination. “Let’s finish this.”

8

brYAN

The roar of the chopper's blades grew louder as the Cerberus extraction team approached, kicking up dust and debris. Bryan squinted against the wind, his arm steadying Sara as they moved toward the landing zone. Her weight leaned into him just enough to remind him of the bullet graze she was too stubborn to let slow her down.

"I'm fine, Bryan," she said through gritted teeth, her voice barely audible over the din.

"I'll decide that," Bryan replied, his tone sharper than intended. He didn't have the patience for her bravado, not after what they'd just been through.

The chopper touched down, and two operatives leapt out, their sharp gazes sweeping the area. One of them, Kane Chaplin, approached with a confident stride. His eyes flicked between Bryan and Sara, pausing on the way her arm rested against Bryan's shoulder.

"Doc," Kane greeted, his voice neutral but his expression anything but. "Sara. You look like hell."

"Feel like it, too," Sara muttered, but her lips twitched in what might have been a smile.

Kane's sharp gaze lingered on them for a beat longer before he gestured toward the chopper. "Let's get you onboard."

Bryan didn't wait for permission. He guided Sara toward the open door, his hand firm on her waist. She shot him a glare, but she didn't argue, her energy clearly waning.

Inside, Bryan settled Sara into one of the seats, ensuring the harness was snug. She swatted his hands away when he lingered too long.

"I'm not going to fall out, Bryan," she said, her voice laced with exasperation.

"Humor me," he replied, his tone softer now. "I'll be right back."

Sara frowned but didn't argue, her eyes tracking him as he stepped back out of the chopper. Kane was waiting, arms crossed and a knowing look on his face.

"She's not used to letting people take care of her," Kane remarked. "But you seem to be doing just fine."

Bryan's gaze hardened. "What's your point?"

Kane grinned, holding up his hands. "No point. Just an observation."

Bryan let the comment slide, turning his attention to the crates the operatives were unloading. Supplies—medical kits, food, and clean water—were stacked neatly and ready to be distributed to the village that had sheltered them.

"Make sure these get to the elder," Bryan instructed one of the operatives. "I'll oversee the handoff."

Kane raised an eyebrow but didn't protest as Bryan moved toward the villagers

waiting at a respectful distance. The elder stepped forward, his expression a mix of gratitude and concern.

“Doctor,” the elder said, bowing his head slightly. “You and your woman are too kind.”

Bryan shook his head. “You helped us when you didn’t have to. This is the least we can do. Make sure you get them uncrated and then burn the crates. You don’t want the militia or the cartel to know you helped us.”

He spent the next several minutes explaining the contents of the crates and answering questions about the medical supplies. The elder listened intently, his gratitude evident in every word he spoke. Bryan couldn’t ignore the pang of guilt that tugged at his chest. These people were caught in a battle they hadn’t asked for, their kindness putting them at risk.

When he returned to the chopper, Sara was still watching him, her expression unreadable. As he climbed in beside her, she leaned closer.

“They think you hung the moon,” she said softly, a hint of warmth in her tone.

“They’re good people,” Bryan replied, his gaze settling on her. “And they deserve better than what they’re dealing with.”

Sara’s lips parted as if she was about to say something, but she closed them again, leaning back in her seat. Bryan didn’t press. There would be time for that later.

The inland compound was remote and secure, surrounded by dense jungle and equipped with all the necessities for a brief stay. Bryan helped Sara into one of the rooms, her limp more pronounced now that the adrenaline of their escape had worn off.

“Sit,” he ordered, pointing to the cot.

Sara rolled her eyes but obeyed, sinking onto the edge of the mattress. “You’re bossy.”

“You’re stubborn,” Bryan shot back, pulling out the medical kit. “Let’s call it even.”

He knelt in front of her, his hands deftly unwrapping the bandage on her thigh. The wound was healing, but the edges were still raw, the angry red a stark contrast against her pale skin. He cleaned it carefully, his touch firm but gentle.

“You’ve got to stop running around like you’re invincible,” Bryan said, his tone more frustrated than he intended.

“And you’ve got to stop hovering like a mother hen,” Sara retorted, though her voice lacked its usual bite.

Bryan’s lips twitched despite himself. “One of us has to keep you alive.”

“I’m doing just fine,” she muttered, though she winced as he secured the fresh bandage.

“Debatable,” Bryan replied, leaning back on his heels. “Now rest. Doctor’s orders.”

“I hate when you pull rank,” she grumbled but stayed put.

The next few days passed in a blur of planning and recovery. Sara spent hours poring over intel, her brow furrowed in concentration as she pieced together their next move. Fitzwallace and Seth checked in regularly, their voices crackling through the satellite phone.

“You need to wait,” Fitzwallace urged during one call. “Rushing this will only get you killed.”

“We can’t wait,” Sara shot back, her voice firm. “The longer we sit here, the more time they have to regroup. Right now they’re scattered, and they’re down at least ten or twelve well-trained guys.”

Bryan watched the exchange silently, his arms crossed as he leaned against the wall. When the call ended, Sara turned to him, her eyes blazing.

“They don’t get it,” she said. “This is our chance.”

Bryan straightened, his expression unreadable. “Then let’s take it.”

Her gaze sharpened. “You’re agreeing with me?”

“I’m agreeing that we can’t sit here forever,” Bryan said. “I also know you well enough to know you’ll take these bastards on by yourself if you have to. But we do this smart. No unnecessary risks.”

Sara hesitated, her usual confidence wavering for just a moment. “You’re serious?”

Bryan stepped closer, his voice steady. “If you’re doing this, I’m going with you or blowing the whistle with Fitzwallace and pulling rank as your Dom when it’s time to get the hell out of here. If I have to do that, when we get to wherever I say is safe, you’ll owe me ten.”

The air between them was charged and was heavy with the emotions that swirled between them. Bryan held her gaze, his hand brushing hers briefly before pulling back.

“You can’t just pull rank like that. We don’t have a contract, and I don’t have a collar.”

Bryan paused. He knew for submissives, especially those to who submission seemed to be in direct opposition to their skill sets, a collar was important, even more so than a contract.

“I’ll get someone working on a contract. As for a collar...” He walked over to his bag, reached in and pulled out his only clean shirt. He cut it into strips, braiding them together and using his class ring from his medial school as the center piece. He returned to her and lifted her hair. “Hold this.” She reached up to hold her hair up and he wrapped the makeshift collar around her neck, tying it in a secure knot in the back before taking her hair and releasing it to tumble down her back.

“You do know there’s supposed to be a whole ceremony where you offer me your collar and I accept...”

“When we get back to Chicago, you can arrange whatever ceremony you want, and I’ll get you a proper collar...”

“You don’t have to do that...” she said softly.

He leaned down and kissed her gently and possessively. “I know, but I’ve never wanted anything more in my life than to call you mine.”

“We haven’t known each other...”

“I don’t care, Sara. I know how I feel. I love you. I’d burn the world down for you if that’s what it took. I’d go through the gates of hell and snatch you from Satan’s grasp...”

She laughed. “I get it. You love me.”

“I do,” he admitted.

“Thank god, because I love you, too, and thought I’d be some kind of pathetic loser...”

“Call yourself that again, and it’s a minimum of ten.”

“You really liked that spanking thing,” she chuckled.

“I did. Far more than I thought I would, but then again, it would seem my sub not only liked it, but she also needed it.”

Sara nodded. “I did.”

“Then let’s get to work so we can get the hell out of here,” he said.

Sara nodded, her focus returning. “Let’s.”

Sara stood by the table, maps and blueprints spread out before her. The light from the single overhead bulb cast a golden glow on her hair, but her face was shadowed, unreadable.

“I’m going,” Bryan said firmly, crossing his arms.

Sara didn’t look up. “No, you’re not.”

“You can’t do this alone,” Bryan insisted, his tone steady but unyielding. “The extraction team has headed out again. There’s no one else—at least no one close enough to help in time. You need me.”

She straightened, her sharp gaze cutting to him. “Bryan, this isn’t a medical mission. It’s infiltration. It’s danger around every corner. You’re not trained for this.”

He stepped closer, his dark eyes locked on hers. “I’m trained for a hell of a lot more than you think. And you said yourself that the cartel uses underground medics. That’s my in.”

Sara pressed her lips together, her jaw tightening. “It’s too risky.”

“And what about you?” Bryan challenged, his voice dropping lower. “You’ve been shot at, ambushed, and nearly blown up in the last week alone. You think I’m just going to sit here and wait for you to come back—or not?”

Her silence was telling. For all her sharp words and iron will, there was a crack in her armor—a crack he intended to widen, not to hurt her, but to remind her she wasn’t alone.

“We do this together,” Bryan said, his tone softening but losing none of its strength. “You trust me, right?”

Sara’s eyes flickered, the vulnerability there gone as quickly as it appeared. “Yes.”

“Then let me help,” Bryan pressed, stepping into her space. The tension between them sparked like static electricity, the unspoken emotions simmering just below the surface. “Would you let me do something this dangerous without you at my side?”

For a moment, he thought she might argue. But then she exhaled sharply, nodding once. “No, but you follow my lead.”

“Deal,” Bryan said, a small, triumphant smile tugging at his lips.

The cartel's stronghold was a sprawling compound hidden deep in the jungle, its weathered walls lined with barbed wire. Bryan's heartbeat quickened as he and Sara approached, their cover story rehearsed to perfection. His medical bag felt heavy in his grip, not from its weight but from the gravity of what they were about to do—and the weapons in the false bottom.

Sara glanced at him, her voice low as they neared the gate. "Remember, you're a doctor they called in to take care of their wounded. Don't say more than you need to."

Bryan nodded, his jaw set. "Got it."

The guards at the gate were predictably surly, their eyes narrowing as they took in Bryan's clean clothes and medical bag. One of them barked something in one of the regional dialects, and Bryan's rusty knowledge of the language kicked in just enough to catch the gist.

"He's asking who I am," Bryan murmured to Sara.

Sara stepped forward, her tone clipped but authoritative. "This is Dr. Mena. He's here to treat your wounded. Let us through."

The guard hesitated, his gaze flicking between them. Then, with a grunt, he waved them in.

Bryan kept his expression neutral as they entered the compound, but his mind was racing. The air here was different—heavy with sweat, fear, and the sharp tang of antiseptic. Makeshift beds lined one side of the courtyard, occupied by men with various injuries. Some groaned in pain, while others eyed Bryan and Sara with suspicion.

"Over there," Sara murmured, nodding toward a corner where several men stood

talking in low voices. “Start working. I’ll gather intel on the Cartel’s operations.”

Bryan’s stomach churned as she slipped away, but he focused on the task at hand. Moving to the nearest injured man, he introduced himself in the same language as the first guard, his tone calm and professional. The man grunted a response, and Bryan got to work cleaning and stitching a deep gash on his arm.

Time moved strangely in the compound, each minute stretching into what felt like an hour. Bryan kept his movements steady, his hands sure, but his thoughts were never far from Sara. He caught glimpses of her now and then, her figure blending seamlessly into the shadows as she moved through the compound, downloading crippling viruses to destroy their information hub. It wouldn’t stop them but it would put a dent in their ability to do much of anything until their systems could be restored.

She was in her element here—focused, sharp, untouchable. And yet, Bryan couldn’t shake the nagging need to ensure she was okay.

“Doctor,” a sharp voice cut through his thoughts.

Bryan turned to see a man approaching, his dark eyes cold and calculating. He carried an air of authority, the kind that made Bryan’s stomach tighten.

“We’ve heard rumors,” the man said in English, his tone casual but laced with suspicion. “Americans sticking their noses where they don’t belong. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Bryan forced a calm smile. “I’m here to treat the wounded. Nothing more.”

The man’s gaze lingered on him for a long moment before he nodded. “Good. We’ll see.”

As the man walked away, Bryan's heart hammered in his chest. Something about the encounter felt wrong, and the unease settled deep in his gut.

He spotted Sara near the edge of the compound, her movements quick and precise as she tucked something into her pocket. Their eyes met briefly, and she gave him the smallest of nods.

It was time to leave.

Bryan packed his bag quickly, his hands steady despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins. He made sure the false bottom would be easy to remove if needed. He made his way toward Sara, careful to avoid drawing attention. She was already at the gate, speaking quietly with the guards.

Just as they stepped outside, the sharp crack of a gunshot shattered the night.

"Run!" Sara barked, grabbing Bryan's arm, darting across the open area and pulling him into the dense jungle behind her.

They sprinted through the undergrowth, the sound of shouts and gunfire close behind. Bryan's lungs burned, but he didn't slow, his hand gripping Sara's as they navigated the uneven terrain.

A burst of gunfire tore through the foliage, the bullets slicing dangerously close. Bryan yanked Sara to the ground, his body covering hers as they hit the dirt.

"Are you okay?" he panted, his voice low.

"Fine," she hissed, her eyes scanning their surroundings. "Keep moving."

They pushed forward, each step a calculated risk as the cartel's men closed in.

Bryan's mind raced, his medical training useless in the face of their pursuers. But he trusted Sara. He had to.

Ahead, a steep ravine loomed, its jagged edges disappearing into darkness. Bryan hesitated, but Sara didn't.

"This way," she said, grabbing his hand, sitting down, pulling him down beside her as she scooted off the edge.

They slid down the ravine, dirt and rocks tumbling around them as they descended. At the bottom, they scrambled to their feet, their breath ragged.

The sounds of pursuit faded slightly, but Bryan knew it wouldn't last.

"We need to keep moving," Sara said, her voice tight.

Bryan nodded, his hand brushing hers briefly before they continued deeper into the jungle. The importance of what they'd done—and what was still to come—weighed heavily on his shoulders.

But as they disappeared into the darkness, one thought burned bright in Bryan's mind: They were alive, and they weren't going down without a fight.

brYAN

Bryan's boots slid on loose dirt as they tore through the jungle, the sound of shouts and gunfire echoing behind them. The humid air clung to his skin, his breath coming in sharp gasps. He glanced back, checking on Sara. Somehow, she was managing to keep up. Despite the strain on her body, she moved with fluid precision, the weight of her injuries seeming to evaporate under the adrenaline pumping through her veins.

"They're gaining!" Sara hissed, ducking under a low-hanging branch.

Bryan tightened his grip on the strap of his medical bag, his jaw clenching. "We need to lose them."

"We're running out of jungle," Sara replied, her tone grim.

Ahead, the dense foliage gave way to open air. Bryan's stomach sank as they emerged onto a rocky outcrop. The jagged edge of a cliff dropped into a river far below, its waters gleaming faintly in the moonlight. The sound of rushing water filled the air, drowning out the distant shouts of their pursuers.

"No way down," Bryan said, scanning the sheer cliff face.

"Not without a parachute," Sara muttered, her eyes darting back toward the trees. The cartel men would burst through any second.

Bryan's mind raced, calculating their options. "We need another plan."

Sara exhaled sharply, her gaze locked on the dark compound below them. "The boats. Back at the docks."

Bryan's eyes narrowed. "Boats?"

"There's a small fleet," she said, her voice low but urgent. "We can use one of their boats to get out. Then we destroy the others—cripple their physical operations as well."

Bryan's chest tightened. "You want to go back into the compound?"

"It's the only way," Sara said, meeting his gaze.

"Are you crazy?"

"Probably, but what other choice do we have?"

Bryan nodded grimly.

"I slipped some explosives into your medical bag..." Sara continued.

Bryan shot her a sharp glance.

"It never hurts to have a little C-4 with you," she explained calmly as if it were the most commonplace thing in the world. "We get in, lay the explosives, and take one of the boats to safety. We take out the dock and their transport in one move."

Bryan swallowed hard, the riskiness of her plan settling over him. It was insane, but she was right, it was their best shot. And if Sara was willing to do it, so was he.

“Let’s go,” he said, his voice steady. “But we wait for cover of darkness.”

They found a hiding place to wait it out, listening each time their pursuers passed close by and breathing easier when they did. As the sun dipped below the horizon, it seemed the cartel’s men had called off their search.

Bryan crouched low, his focus on the task at hand absolute. The jungle was alive with the sounds of night when they moved from their hiding place.

“This is crazy,” he murmured, glancing up at Sara.

She was watching the compound through a pair of binoculars, her features illuminated by the faint glow of the moon. “I know, but it’s kind of fun, right?”

He shook his head. “Not really. We’re going to have a long talk about your definition of fun,” Bryan said, his tone firm.

Sara lowered the binoculars, her gaze softening as it met his. “I know. I just... This is dangerous. Even for us.”

Bryan reached out, his hand brushing hers briefly. “We’ve made it this far. We’ll make it out.”

Her lips quirked into a faint smile. “You better be right.”

The compound was a hive of activity, guards patrolling the perimeter with flashlights cutting through the darkness. Bryan followed Sara’s lead, his movements silent and deliberate as they slipped through the shadows. His heart pounded in his chest, each step a calculated risk.

They reached the dock, the faint sound of water lapping against the boats blending

with the distant hum of conversation. A single guard stood near the closest boat, his rifle slung casually over his shoulder.

“I’ll take him out, quietly,” Bryan whispered, his voice barely audible. “You cover me.”

Sara nodded, her body ready to move as she maneuvered into position.

Bryan crept forward, his breath steady despite the rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins. He approached the guard from behind, his arms wrapping around the man’s neck in a precise sleeper hold. The guard struggled briefly, his movements weakening as Bryan applied steady pressure. Within seconds, the man went limp, and Bryan lowered him gently to the ground.

Sara appeared beside him, gesturing for Bryan to move the body out of sight. He complied, dragging the unconscious man into the shadows before returning to her side.

“Nice work,” Sara murmured, her lips curving into a faint smile.

Bryan raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t think I had it in me?”

“I’ve seen you work under pressure,” she replied, her tone teasing. “But this is a new side of you.”

“Stick around,” Bryan said, his voice low and laced with heat. “You might see more.”

Sara’s smile deepened, but she quickly refocused. “Let’s move.”

Bryan worked quickly, his fingers finding the explosives in his medical bag and placing them with care. Sara kept watch, her sharp gaze scanning the area for any

sign of movement. The tension between them was palpable, a thread stretched taut by the danger of their mission and the unspoken emotions simmering beneath the surface.

“Done,” Bryan whispered, closing the bag. “Let’s get to the boat.”

They moved as one, their steps silent as they approached the remaining vessel. Bryan climbed in first, his hands steady on the controls as he prepared to start the engine. Sara joined him, her rifle at the ready as she scanned the dock.

The hum of voices grew louder, followed by the beam of a flashlight cutting through the darkness.

“They’re coming,” Sara murmured, her voice tight.

Bryan’s fingers hovered over the ignition switch, his jaw clenched. “Hold on.”

The engine roared to life, shattering the stillness of the night. The guards who reached the dock shouted, their rifles raising as they fired blindly into the darkness. Bryan pushed the throttle forward, the boat lurching away from the dock as bullets splintered the wood around them.

“Bryan, now!” Sara shouted, her hand gripping the detonator.

Bryan nodded, his focus split between steering the boat and the chaos erupting behind them. “Do it.”

Sara pressed the button. The explosions were blinding, fiery blasts that blew as one and lit up the night sky. The shockwave rolled over them, the force rocking the boat as debris rained into the water. The dock erupted in a fiery blaze, the remaining boats consumed by the inferno.

Bryan glanced back at the sight of the destruction. “They’ll be on us.”

“How? We blew up their boats.”

“You don’t think they have patrols out on the water?”

Sara shook her head. “Of course. Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.”

She nodded. “Let them come. We’ve got what we need to make some huge dents in the cartel’s business, and the fact that they haven’t been able to take out one pesky doctor isn’t going to play well with their friends.”

“We make a pretty good team,” Bryan said, a grin tugging at his lips despite the danger.

“Not over yet,” Sara shot back, her tone grim.

As the boat cut through the dark waters, the glow of the burning dock fading behind them, Bryan knew the cartel wasn’t finished. But neither were they.

Ahead, two small power boats emerged from the shadows, their engines revving as they gave chase. Cartel men crouched in the boats, their rifles gleaming under the moonlight.

“Shit! There they are—patrol boats.”

Bryan’s jaw tightened. “Hang on!”

He spun the wheel hard, sending their boat into a sharp turn that sprayed water into

the air. The patrol boats struggled to adjust, their smaller size making them more maneuverable but less stable in the wake of Bryan's larger craft.

Sara crouched low, her rifle on the deck of the boat at her feet as she pulled out her pistol. "Keep them off balance. I'll handle the rest."

Bryan grinned, adrenaline surging through him. "You got it."

He pushed the throttle to its limit, the boat cutting through the water with precision. The boats closed in, their occupants firing sporadically. Bullets pinged against the hull, but Bryan's calculated turns made it difficult for them to get a clear shot.

"Bryan, turn left!" Sara shouted.

He complied without hesitation, the boat veering sharply as Sara fired. Her shot was clean, and one of the drivers slumped over, sending the boat spinning out of control before crashing into the waves.

"Nice shot," Bryan called, his eyes flicking to her briefly.

"Focus on driving, Doc," she replied, her tone teasing despite the danger they were in.

The second boat was faster, its driver more skilled. The cartel men onboard leaned out, their guns trained on Bryan and Sara's boat.

"Take the wheel!" Bryan barked, letting go and moving to the stern.

Sara didn't question him, sliding into place and gripping the wheel with steady hands. Bryan grabbed the rifle from the deck, bracing himself against the railing as he aimed.

The first shot took out the smaller boat's engine, the spray of sparks and smoke sending the boat skidding to a halt. The second shot hit the fuel tank, and the resulting explosion sent the remaining cartel men diving into the water.

Bryan lowered the rifle, his chest heaving as the adrenaline ebbed slightly. He turned back to Sara, who was grinning. There was a part of her, he realized, that really was enjoying this.

"Not bad," she said, her voice laced with approval.

Bryan shook his head, moving to take the wheel from her. "Not bad yourself."

As they powered through the dark waters, the burning remnants of the dock and the destroyed patrol boats faded behind them, Bryan couldn't help but glance at Sara. Her hair was windswept, her face flushed with exertion, but her eyes burned with determination.

"You're amazing, you know that?" he said, his voice low but sincere.

She glanced at him, her lips curving into a faint smile. "You're not so bad yourself, Doc."

The first rays of dawn bled across the horizon, painting the sea in shades of gold and crimson. Bryan tightened his grip on the wheel of the boat, his jaw set as he navigated the still-choppy waters. The silence between him and Sara was now more companionable than charged. There was a comfort and familiarity that seemed odd given the short amount of time they'd known each other.

Sara leaned against the rail, the satellite phone pressed to her ear. Her voice was calm but clipped, the precise tone of a professional keeping emotions at bay.

“This is Gray. We’re requesting immediate extraction. I’m sending the GPS coordinates.”

“Tell them they’ll find us in that small inlet just to the southeast of those coordinates. It’ll be easier to stay out of sight.” Bryan steered the boat toward the inlet that was shielded by rocky cliffs.

“Got it.” Sara relayed the information. “Cartel assets neutralized, but they’ll regroup soon.”

The line crackled as the response came, a familiar voice carrying a tone of urgency. “Extraction team in route. ETA thirty minutes. Hold tight and stay low.”

Sara ended the call, shoving the phone back into her pocket. She turned to Bryan, her expression unreadable. “They’re on their way.”

With that, all the wind seemed to have gone out of her sails. She looked weary, the weight of her responsibilities etched into every line of her face. He couldn’t stop himself from reaching out, his hand brushing her arm.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice low.

She met his gaze, and for a moment, her guard faltered. “I don’t know,” she admitted quietly. “It’s not every day you blow up a cartel’s entire dock.”

Bryan couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at his lips. “Not every day you escape in a boat, either.”

Her lips curved faintly, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes. “They’ll come after us, you know. The cartel doesn’t just let things go.”

“We’ll be ready,” Bryan said firmly, his tone leaving no room for doubt.

She looked at him then, her eyes searching his. Whatever she saw seemed to steady her, because she nodded and leaned slightly into his touch.

The distant thrum of helicopter blades broke the quiet, growing louder as the extraction team approached. Bryan brought the boat to a stop as the chopper descended onto the beach.

The downdraft from the rotors whipped through the narrow space, kicking up spray and making the air thick with salt. Bryan moved quickly, helping Sara to her feet and steadying her as she climbed onto the rocky shore.

Two operatives emerged from the chopper, their movements precise as they approached. One of them, a wiry man with sharp eyes, nodded to Bryan. “You must be Dr. Mena. And you—” He turned to Sara, his expression softening slightly. “You look like you’ve been through hell.”

“Something like that,” Sara replied, her voice steady but tired.

Bryan stepped closer to her, his hand resting lightly on her lower back. “She’s been through enough. Let’s get her on board.”

Sara shot him a look, her lips parting as if to argue, but the exhaustion in her eyes betrayed her. She allowed Bryan to guide her toward the chopper, the operatives falling in step behind them.

Inside, the noise of the rotors was deafening, but Bryan didn’t care. He settled Sara into a seat, fastening her harness and ensuring she was secure. She glared at him faintly but didn’t resist.

“You really are bossy,” she muttered as he tugged the strap snug.

“And you really need to rest,” Bryan shot back, his tone soft but firm.

The chopper lifted off, the ground falling away as they soared over the coastline. Bryan sat beside her, his body tense as the adrenaline of the night began to ebb. Sara leaned back in her seat, her head tipping against the side of the cabin. Bryan reached for her hand, his fingers brushing hers. She didn’t pull away.

“You’re safe now,” he said, his voice barely audible over the hum of the chopper.

Sara turned her head slightly, her eyes meeting his. “I’m not used to this,” she admitted, her voice quieter now.

“Used to what?”

“Not being the one in control,” she said, her tone raw. “Letting someone else... take care of me.”

They didn’t speak again until the chopper landed at a secure compound on the isle of Crete. The soft, cool breeze of the Mediterranean was a refreshing change from the heat and humidity they had endured in the jungle. The operatives led them inside, the thick walls and high fences offering a sense of safety that had been elusive for days.

Once they were alone in the elegant room assigned to them, Bryan turned to Sara. She stood near the bed, her back to him.

“Sit,” he said gently, his voice carrying the same quiet authority he’d used on countless patients.

Sara hesitated but obeyed, sinking onto the edge of the bed. Bryan knelt in front of

her, his hands resting lightly on her knees.

“You’ve been carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders,” he said, his voice low. “It’s okay to let go, Sara. Just for a little while.”

Her breath hitched, and she looked down at him, her eyes glistening. “I don’t know how.”

Bryan reached up, his hand cupping her cheek. “You let me help you. You trust me.”

For a moment, she didn’t move. Then, slowly, she leaned into his touch, her body trembling as the walls she’d built around herself began to crumble.

“I trust you,” she whispered, the words a quiet surrender.

Bryan’s chest tightened, a mixture of relief and protectiveness flooding through him. “Good,” he murmured. “Because I’m not letting you go.”

The moment stretched, the air between them charged with a mix of emotions—fear, trust, love, and something deeper that neither of them could name.

They’d faced hell and come out alive. Whatever came next, they’d face it together.

10

SARA

Chicago, Illinois

A Month Later

Sara stood by the large window in Bryan's penthouse apartment, the shores of Lake Michigan stretching out before her. It was a stark contrast to the rugged wilderness and dusty compounds they'd left behind, but the chaos of the city seemed fitting for the storm of emotions brewing inside her.

Behind her, Bryan moved through the apartment with the quiet efficiency she'd come to expect. He was packing, preparing for his next mission with Doctors Without Borders. She watched his reflection in the glass, her mind wrestling with the inevitable separation looming over them.

"Are you going to keep staring out that window, or are you going to tell me what's on your mind?" Bryan's voice broke through her thoughts, low and steady, with just a hint of amusement.

Sara turned, crossing her arms. "Maybe I don't want to distract you while you pack."

He straightened, a folded shirt in his hands, and gave her a knowing look. "You're not distracting me. You're avoiding something."

She hated how easily he could see through her, but she couldn't deny the comfort it brought, either.

"I'm not avoiding anything," she said, her tone defensive. "I'm just... processing."

Bryan arched a brow. "Processing what?"

Sara hesitated, then shrugged. "Everything. This. Us."

He set the shirt down and crossed the room, stopping in front of her. His hand lifted, his fingers brushing her chin as he tilted her face up to meet his gaze.

"I'm not leaving you behind, Sara," he said firmly, his dark eyes locking onto hers.

Her heart skipped a beat, but she managed to keep her voice even. "You have a job to do. And I have mine."

His thumb brushed her cheek, the simple gesture grounding her. "Your job doesn't have to keep us apart. There's a place for you in my life, if you want it."

Sara stared at him, her mind racing. She'd spent years building walls, guarding her independence, and defining herself through her work. The idea of giving that up—or even sharing it—was terrifying.

"What would that even look like?" she asked quietly.

Bryan's lips quirked into a small smile. "It looks like us, figuring it out as we go. Together."

Her throat tightened at the sincerity in his voice. "I don't know if I can give up Cerberus," she admitted. "It's who I am."

“It doesn’t have to be all or nothing,” Bryan said, his voice steady. “You don’t have to lose who you are to be with me, Sara. I don’t want that. But I do want you to think about what makes you happy—what you want your life to look like.”

She looked away, his words hitting closer to home than she’d expected. “I’ve never thought about that,” she admitted. “Not really. It’s always been about the mission, the next job.”

Bryan’s hand dropped to her shoulder, his grip firm but comforting. “Maybe it’s time you did.”

The scent of coffee and leather filled the room as Sara sat on the edge of the bed later that evening, her mind still spinning. Bryan had gone to make a few calls, giving her space, but his presence lingered, a steady undercurrent to her thoughts.

Could she really walk away from Cerberus? The idea felt impossible, like leaving behind a part of herself. But at the same time, she couldn’t deny the pull Bryan had on her—the way he saw her, understood her, and challenged her in ways no one else ever had.

The sound of the door opening pulled her from her thoughts, and she looked up to see Bryan stepping into the room. His gaze found hers immediately, and the intensity in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine.

“Decide anything?” he asked, his voice low.

Sara shook her head. “Not yet.”

Bryan crossed the room in a few strides, stopping in front of her. He knelt, his hands resting on her thighs, his gaze unwavering.

“You don’t have to decide tonight,” he said softly. “But I need you to know

something.”

Her breath hitched as he leaned closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “I want you, Sara. Not just for tonight, or for the next mission. I want you in my life. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make that happen.”

Her heart pounded in her chest, the weight of his words sinking in. “Bryan...” she started, but he cut her off with a kiss.

It wasn’t gentle. It was possessive, commanding, and filled with the passion and emotion she had come to expect from him. Bryan never did anything by half measures. Sara melted into it, her hands tangling in his hair as he pushed her back onto the bed.

Bryan’s weight pressed against her, grounding her as his lips moved to her neck, his teeth grazing her skin. She gasped, her body arching beneath him, her walls crumbling with every touch.

“You’re mine, Sara,” he murmured against her skin, his voice rough with emotion. “And I’m yours.”

Her hands gripped his shoulders, her voice trembling as she whispered, “Yes. Always.”

The night unfolded in a blur of passion and intensity, their connection deepening with every kiss, every whispered word. Bryan’s dominance was a steady guide, his care and respect anchoring her in a way she’d never experienced before.

The next day, when the morning light filtered through the curtains, Sara lay tangled in the sheets, her body pressed against Bryan’s. She traced lazy circles on his chest, her mind quiet for the first time in what felt like forever.

“You still processing?” Bryan asked, his voice rough with sleep.

Sara smiled, pressing a kiss to his chest. “Maybe. But I think I’m getting there.”

He chuckled softly, his arm tightening around her. “Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

For the first time, Sara believed him. And for the first time, she didn’t feel the need to fight it.

brYAN

The steady hum of voices filled the room as Bryan adjusted his newly made black leather vest. He caught his reflection in the polished mirror lining the hallway outside the main lounge of Club Southside. The tailored fit of his new leathers was undeniably flattering, the sleek lines accentuating his broad shoulders and lean frame.

“Well, don’t you look like the poster boy for a midlife kink awakening,” Seth quipped as he leaned against the doorway, his signature grin firmly in place.

Bryan rolled his eyes but couldn’t suppress the faint grin tugging at his lips. “Don’t start, Seth.”

“Oh, I’m just getting warmed up,” Seth replied, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “From scrubs to leathers in just a couple of months? Fitz is going to have a field day with this one.”

Bryan turned to face his friend, his expression softening. “You’d do the same for someone who turned your world upside down.”

Seth’s grin faltered, replaced by something warmer, more genuine. “Yeah, I would. I did. And for what it’s worth, Bryan, you clean up well.”

“Thanks,” Bryan said, his voice low.

“Don’t screw this up,” Seth added, clapping him on the shoulder before disappearing into the lounge.

Bryan exhaled, his nerves tightening in a way he hadn’t felt since the day he first set foot in an operating room. Tonight wasn’t just about ceremony; it was about making a promise—to Sara and to himself.

The main floor of the dungeon had been transformed into a romantic sanctuary. Warm, golden light spilled from chandeliers, casting a soft glow over the gathered crowd. Their friends from both Southside and Baker Street filled the space, their familiar faces a mix of excitement and curiosity.

But it wasn’t the crowd that caught Bryan’s attention. It was Sara.

She stood at the center of the room, her back to him, speaking quietly with Miley and Damon. Her custom green silk brocade corset hugged her curves perfectly, the black lace detailing adding an edge of elegance to the striking ensemble. The matching thong left little to the imagination, but it wasn’t just her beauty that had Bryan’s breath catching in his throat.

It was the way she held herself—with confidence, grace, and the quiet strength he’d fallen in love with.

When she turned, their eyes met across the room. The noise faded, the crowd disappearing until it was just the two of them. She smiled, and Bryan felt the last of his nerves melt away.

He stepped forward, the murmur of voices growing softer as the room’s attention shifted to them. Damon and Miley stepped aside, leaving Sara alone at the center.

“You look stunning,” Bryan said, his voice low as he reached for her hand.

“And you look incredibly handsome and dashing,” she replied, her lips curving into a teasing smile.

He lifted her hand to his lips, brushing a kiss against her knuckles. “Are you ready?”

Sara nodded, her eyes shining. “I’ve never been more ready for anything.”

Bryan turned to Seth, who stood nearby, holding a small velvet box. Seth opened it, revealing the collar Bryan had designed especially for her.

The emeralds and baroque pearls gleamed under the light, the square-cut diamond at the center catching every facet of brilliance. Gasps of admiration rippled through the room, but Bryan barely noticed. His focus was entirely on Sara.

He took the collar from the box, the weight of it solid and reassuring in his hands. “Sara Gray,” he began, his voice steady, “this collar is more than a symbol. It’s a promise. A promise to honor you, to support you, and to love you. Always.”

Sara’s breath hitched, her lips parting as emotion filled her eyes.

“Will you accept this?” Bryan asked softly.

She nodded, her voice trembling. “Yes. Always.”

With practiced hands, Bryan secured the collar around her neck. The emeralds and pearls lay perfectly against her skin, the diamond glinting like a star.

Applause erupted, breaking the intimate bubble that had surrounded them. Sara turned to face their friends, her smile radiant, but it was the way she looked at Bryan—like he was her anchor, her safe harbor—that left him breathless.

Miley approached, clinking her glass to get the room's attention. "A toast!" she called, grinning broadly. "To Bryan and Sara—may your adventures be as thrilling as your love story and your dynamic as strong as your spirits!"

Later, as the celebration began to wind down, Bryan and Sara slipped away from the others.

"What's next?" Sara asked, her hand brushing against his.

Bryan looked at her, his heart swelling with love and determination. "Whatever we want. Our future is ours to make."

She smiled, leaning into him. "I like the sound of that."

Bryan wrapped his arm around her, his gaze fixed on the horizon. Whatever challenges lay ahead, he knew they would face them as a team—stronger and more connected than ever.

The night was theirs, and the future waited, full of promise.