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CHAPTER 1

Drugs that make you appear dead have some shit aftereffects. Temporary paralysis, monster headache, confusion, delirium, and dog breath, to name a few. Worth it for anyone wanting to remove themselves from their old life. Or so Tony had gambled.

Now, hours after he'd taken the drugs, he regained consciousness, cracked open bleary eyes, and slammed them shut against stabbing, red-hot-poker sunlight.

Not for nothing, a jackhammer had mated with a battering ram to create whatever worked the inside of his skull right now.

Licking dry lips with a sandpaper tongue, he tasted copper and salt. Blood.

He forced his eyelids open, blinked away tears. Above, a vaulted ceiling was crossed by ancient wood beams. His gaze rolled across the room. The mutilated backs of bullet-torn leather couches, blood-soaked yellow drapes, the smell of death's bowels, the lingering scent of gunpowder.

What the hell had happened here?

Like an old Ford on a below zero January morning, his drug-addled brain misfired, turned over, and restarted.

Oh fuck, right. That shit in Mexico. Take out sex slavers. Fake your own death.

That explained the sour stench, the empty pit in his stomach, and the stone silence. A roomful of dead sex traffickers weren't generally loud.

And just like that, the brutal event that had sent him to this very room put on gloves, stepped into his mental boxing ring, and pounded him with heavy blows. His sister Justice. The shot. The kid. Brown eyes. Nervous as hell. So young.

Shit. He recoiled but was unable to stop the attack.

You'd think the jumpy, aggressive, snot-nosed guard was the one who was half-naked, unarmed, and being marched into the Mexican compound of a sex slaver to "perform."

So young he still had acne, the kid shoved Tony as he walked him and Victor to the golf cart that would take them inside.

Tony cringed. If Young and Pimply wanted to avoid the wrath of Justice, whose scope was on him and who took a threat seriously, he needed to stop acting like a macho idiot.

Because as agitated as this guy seemed, it was nothing compared to Justice, who wanted into the compound to save her boyfriend and destroy the sex slaver who'd killed her biological sister.

Reasons number one and two she should've been nowhere near this operation. From the very beginning, he'd said she was too close to this mission. He'd said it as she'd made mistakes. He'd said it as he'd come up with an alternate plan. He'd said it as she'd nearly gotten herself—and others—killed again and again. Hell, he'd even written it down in a letter to Momma.

But when no one in his family of female vigilantes had listened, he'd stop talking and had done something about it. He'd tried everything in his power to stop J's mission, keep her safe. Organized his plan. Sent word to Walid, let him know where to go to escape Justice. And... it hadn't worked.

He'd wound up in the role of betrayer. Now the only way to survive his family's wrath was to fake his own death. That was if he actually survived long enough to fake his death.

Tony's naked cheeks hit the striped vinyl golf cart seat and the compound alarm went off. That blaring pulse kicked the guards into action.

Wearing an FBI baseball cap and the attitude only a 6'3" jacked dude can manage, his inside man, Dusty, ordered him and Victor out and down onto their knees.

Come on, dude. Sure, Dusty had to make it look like he wasn't in cahoots with anyone, but that didn't mean he had to make Tony look guilty as hell.

Tony's knees hit the ground with a thud. Alarm. Jittery guards... Not a good combination. Young and Pimply bent over, got in his face, and lifted him to his feet.

"Knock it off," he told the kid in Spanish, gesturing with his hands. Maybe a little too dramatically. The kid startled, reached for his gun.

Tony's eyes widened. "Don't—"

Pop. Kid's head exploded. And then the next closest guard went down. All hell broke loose.

His stomach roiling, his mind reeling, Tony took off.

What the fuck. What the fuck. What the fuck.

He ran toward the closest building. He needed another plan. He needed another plan quick.

Victor caught up with him. "What are we doing now?"

We?

Actually, he could use Victor. Station him somewhere as backup while Tony made his way to Walid. If he could convince that psycho that he was on his side, tell him he was the one who sent the initial warning—he was—offer him his brother's real killer, get close enough to administer the poison, he could keep Justice and the rest of them from getting killed.

Lot of ifs, but it was a plan.

Tony groaned as the memories reasserted themselves in his mind, lodging their concrete presence in his brain—going to Walid, pretending to turn on Justice and Momma, an act even Justice had bought, and then the bloody battle in this very room.

The entire mission could've gone so much more smoothly. If only...

Didn't matter now.

The important part was Walid was dead. The guy deserved to die for his crimes, his abuse of women. Most importantly for hurting his sister Justice. She'd never forgotten. She'd grown up determined to take vengeance.

But as she'd gotten closer to that goal, she'd become obsessed. Everyone around her, including him, feared her quest would destroy her.

Though everyone in his family's secret society, the League of Warrior Women—because it was all adopted women 'cept him and Rome—had decided to let Justice give it a go, he hadn't.

Regret constructed a monument to his mistakes that stretched to the sky. How had wanting to save his sister's life turned him into a supervillain?

He shifted. A series of sharp pains reported back to him in stinging waves as his nerve endings fired brutal rebukes at him. *Yeah. Yeah. Just shake it off.*

Judging by the rising sun, it was near dawn. Made sense. The powerful drug he'd taken to make him appear dead had been designed to keep him out for hours, so his family, his sisters, would be long gone.

Thing about being a vigilante, you didn't stick around after a job.

A flood of relief swept his body as it really sunk in. They were gone. They'd left him. His two biggest fears had been his sisters would try to take what they thought was his dead body back home or bury him alive in the dry earth of Mexico.

As far as those two options went, the first had been more terrifying. The second meant he'd have gone to sleep permanently. The first meant they'd take him home, realize he wasn't dead, rob him of his memories, and replace them with who they thought he should be.

No fucking thanks.

His body came back online enough that he suddenly sensed the pain in his awkwardly bent leg. So numb he couldn't move it.

He reached down, grabbed a fistful of the green cargo pants he'd *borrowed* from one of Walid's guards, and moved his leg straight.

Leg must've folded under him when he'd fallen. Blood flowed back to the limb. Being stabbed hurt less. SOB. Dagger-sharp pins and needles lanced his thigh and calf. Biting off a curse, he rubbed at his leg. A figure crossed into the room.

No. Fucking. Way.

Why was this dude still here? The ex-FBI guy and Tony's inside man, Dusty, walked over to where Tony lay behind the couch. He was carrying a tarp.

"What the fu..." Dusty jumped back, dropped the tarp, and took out his gun. "You're not dead?"

So not what he wanted to deal with when his stomach gave him the middle finger and pins and needles jabbed his leg, teetering him between laughter and tears.

He wiped at his tearing eyes and sat up. Dizzy like that time he'd stumbled onto a vomit comet after downing sixteen shots of tequila. Yeah, that had been a mistake. This might've been too.

He put a hand to his throbbing temple, drove his fingers up and around to his aching neck. "They teach you those kinds of expert evaluations in the bur...bureau?"

Throat was so dry.

Dusty kept his weapon out—not pointed at Tony, just out. Uptight. Maybe this was his first encounter with the living dead. "What's going on, Tony?"

I'm stalling, trying to figure out my next move. Probably shouldn't go with that. Dusty wasn't stupid. And their partnership had really been an exercise in both of them using each other. Dusty had pretended he'd wanted to become a vigilante in order to get an in with Tony's family so he could take out Momma's black ops organization, the League of Warrior Women. Tony had pretended he'd bought Dusty's ex-FBI cover so he could have someone working here who wasn't a member of his family. Dusty had been a useful tool, but him knowing Tony had faked his death was not an option. "The poison I gave Walid must not have worked on me."

Dusty brought his gun down, frowned, and looked back toward the doorway. "Your sisters. We should call them, let them know you're alive."

This was a problem. Dude was big, like gladiator big. And Tony was in no shape to take him on. But he still had one advantage. Guy had no idea what was going on.

And it wasn't like Tony hadn't considered the problem that he might wake up in Mexico with someone nearby.

Oh hell. Rubbing his side, he worked his fingers under the waist of his pants to his live entertainer G-string—most humiliating cover ever. He pulled out the syringe from inside a sex tool. "Just help me up."

Dusty put his gun away, shook his head, stunned. "Lucky son of a bitch."

Tony rolled his hand in a tell-me-something-I-don't-know manner. He didn't feel lucky. Felt like a total douche.

According to his chemist sister, Zuri, the first step in erasing a memory was getting someone to recall the memory. The drug he had would disrupt the stored memory, allowing Tony to replace it. "Must've been scary to walk in here and find me alive. You okay?"

Dusty came over and gave him a hand. "Guarantee you it's not a regular occurrence."

Tony took the offered hand, stood up, and brought his other hand toward Dusty's shoulder as if to steady himself. Actually helped.

Leg was still kind of numb. He stabbed Dusty with the point of the instrument and at the same time pretended to fall.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scratch you.”

Dusty supported him. “Dagger claw you got there.”

Tony got his feet under him, slipped off Dusty’s gun.

Dusty reared back, rubbed at his neck, stumbled. “You…”

Dusty fell on his ass, sat there blinking and blank. After a few more minutes, he was completely malleable.

Bending over him, Tony edited the story of what had happened, and whenever Dusty looked confused or uncertain of this version, Tony repeated, “Leave it be, man. Leave it be.”

He did this until when asked what had happened, Dusty would look confused, shake his head, and whisper, “Leave it be, man. Leave it be.”

Once he was sure the guy’s memory was disrupted, knowing that nothing happening now would be recorded, Tony put him into a choke hold and put him to sleep.

Poor guy. Well, he wouldn’t remember any of this. Not for a while anyway. And by the time he did, Tony would be long gone, having set sail for warm beaches.

CHAPTER 2

Rain assaulted the thin, deserted strip of beach along Roseau, Dominica. Though rarely cold on the island, the lack of sun combined with the wild weather created a deep, nagging chill.

Tightening the straps on her jacket, drawing the slick red hood into an outline around her rain-drenched face, Honor pushed through the last brutal gusts of the retreating tropical storm.

Seaweed littered the sand. Stacked lounge chairs clacked, and striped cabanas snapped in the tempest.

It seemed the sky and heaven cried with her, tears of sadness and fury. Honor ducked her head and made her determined way around a large puddle on the sand. The indents from her sneakers created smaller puddles as she walked.

Had it really been two years today? Two years since she'd lost Mom and had run here looking for a new start, a life without the ache of missing her.

Hadn't worked. Mom's death had been so sudden that the punch of that wound, straight through her heart, still gaped wide open. There wasn't a day when she didn't feel bereft.

But today especially, the anniversary of her death. The media, reminded of her famous mother's passing, had reached out through phone, email, and texts for quotes.

Unable to deal with them, she'd come to the beach looking for a distraction.

She'd found one.

A kiteboarder, rash and daring with a bright-yellow sail, glided across the rough ocean water. His dark hair flew back as his agile body, covered in a wetsuit, maneuvered with and against wind and waves. So beautiful he created an ache inside her. To be that free, that strong, that daring.

He kept hold of the kite's line as each gale whipped the large sail sideways, dragging him. Outcrops and rocks dotted the water, but he avoided them with ease.

Another gust and the kiteboarder flew up and up. She gasped. Her heart rose with him. Too high. He had too far to fall.

He slammed back down to the surf, angled his athletic body this way and that to skim the waves. He'd done it. She resisted the urge to clap. Mom would've loved watching him, another confident, courageous soul.

Unlike Honor.

Mom had stomped through puddles.

Honor hung back, worried about consequences.

Mom had gone boldly after love, spoken her desires aloud, and given her heart away again and again.

Honor secreted away her heart and her true desires.

With every risky new relationship, her mother seemed to forget the tears, the drink, and the therapy needed to get right after the last one had ended. Honor had never forgotten.

But when the winds of time had swept Mom's fierce soul back into the never-never, as Mom had always called it, it hadn't been her wild and crazy lifestyle that had caught up with her. No. She'd been hit by a car as she walked the streets of her quiet neighborhood.

One less brave and daring light in the world. Honor felt the dark coldness of that extinguished warmth in her skin, her bones, her heart. Now anything that was wild and free and exciting felt like a call, a siren song to her soul.

Like the kiteboarder. The way he worked with the energy of the waves, wove himself among them even as he wrestled his second opponent, the wind. As she watched, her breath fanned out in hot sheets of white against the cool wind.

He must be so cold, but he didn't show it.

Explosive and strong, he leapt with his kite into the wind. A thrill gripped her as he launched skyward. A moment later, he hit the waves, leaned his body almost flat against the roaring ocean as the sail jerked his arms straight.

He rode the waves steadily for a beat, and then the wind turned, snapped his kite, and yanked him backward.

Honor froze. The wind tossed him up, then beat him down against a black outcrop of rock. His strong body, suddenly flimsy and fragile, slipped from the rocks and under the waves.

Faster than thought, she broke from stillness and raced toward the ocean. She flung off her shoes, ripped her rain slicker over her head. Knee-deep in water, she stopped. Where was he? The sail bobbed against the waves, but where was he? Where?

There.

His body, facedown. A wave rose up and crashed over him. He disappeared. She took two leaping steps and dove. Using muscles conditioned by years of swimming, she plunged under the beating waves and fought her way to him.

Salt water stung her nose, esophagus. Again and again, she felt the push, the ocean's insistent, "Turn around."

She kept going. Surfacing, she bobbed in the water, got her bearings. This was where she'd seen him go under.

Diving with her eyes open, she scanned. Green and gray, a surreal muted picture. Something dark, darker than the rest of the ocean. Him? Lungs burning, desperate for air, she swam closer and deeper.

No more death today. Please. Her ears muffled with pressure, she reached out and grasped the collar of his wetsuit, capturing a fistful of his hair in the process.

She pulled, arms straining. He came even with her, and she grasped under his armpits and kicked up. Her head angled as high as she

could get it. Air. She needed to breathe.

The weight of him slowed her.

Let him go or die?

She couldn't let go.

Wouldn't.

The edges of her vision began to dim. Too far. Not going to make it. She kicked harder. The glassy ceiling drew nearer. Please. So close.

She broke the surface. The kiteboarder was silent against her, his head bobbing in the surf. Legs as insubstantial as seaweed, she rolled onto her back and kicked toward the shore.

When her butt hit the beach, she gave an exhausted cry. Sweeping her feet under her, she crouch-pulled the kiteboarder onto the sand. Waves rolled into them, pushing. He was heavy.

"Let me help," someone said.

Gratefully, she looked up to find an older, bald man. Together, they dragged the kiteboarder out of the waves and dropped him onto the rain-soaked sand. She started CPR.

The bystander, hovering beside her, said he'd called emergency services and apologized for the inadequacy of his lungs. Asthma.

No air to respond, she pushed on the kiteboarder's chest. Drops of water slid across his handsome, too-pale face, but not one muscle twitched.

Please, please, please, she silently begged. Her knees ground in the wet sand as she pinched his nose, put her mouth over his, and forced air through her aching throat into his lifeless body. Crying now, begging God for intervention, she pushed again on his chest.

He convulsed once, hard enough to look like he'd been hit with electric paddles, coughed, and spat out water.

She helped him onto his side. He spat out more water. After another moment, he rolled onto his back, eyes closed, breathing heavily.

Breathing.

The bystander ran up the beach, waving to the EMT.

She'd done it. She'd saved a man's life. His eyes stayed closed, and she brushed the sand from his neatly trimmed goatee, cheekbones, and lips. Her fingers lingered against those full lips. The most perfect shape, perfect feel.

He was beyond handsome with a muscular build that filled out his wetsuit like a superhero. Her mother would've declared him "good enough to eat."

Lord. What was wrong with her?

His eyes popped open, blinked. Caught. She went still as a stone.

Deep hazel eyes ringed in the longest lashes she'd ever seen. For a moment, he seemed confused. His eyes turned to slits as if trying to puzzle something out. His lids rose, and his gaze cleared. "Silver eyes," he said, smiling. "Fucking beautiful."

Before she could respond or figure out how to respond, emergency services arrived. They carried him up the beach to the waiting ambulance with her dragging behind, gathering her jacket and shoes as she followed.

CHAPTER 3

Hidden by the dingy blue tablecloth, the six-year-old's heartbeat sounded loud enough to point fingers and wave arms.

Daddy continued to bellow, kick, punch her. The commonplace *thunk* and *thuck* and *umph* filled the small urban duplex, feeling different somehow. Worse.

This time, he wouldn't stop. Tony had to do something. Had to. Curling his fingers into fists, he charged out from under the table with a "Nooo!"

His bony shoulder barreled into his father's kneecap. Pain stabbed into his arm, but the unexpected action and his father's drinking worked in his favor. Daddy went sprawling.

Squirrel-running-from-a-dog quick, Tony spun away. Not fast enough. His father's hand latched onto him, dragged him back, hoisted him up, and carried him toward the laundry room. The dark door—a hole punched long ago in the plywood center—loomed before him.

Not there. He fought and twisted like a fish on a line. "Not in there. Not in there."

Mom had gotten up. She pulled against Daddy's arm. They were all three fighting. No use. Daddy was just bigger. Stronger. Tony was tossed into the laundry room. The door slammed shut behind him.

The dog came after him. All teeth and fury.

Tony yelled, jolted upright in bed, and remembered.

He was no longer a son to that bastard. He'd run away. And after his father's death, he'd been adopted by Mukta Parish, aka Momma, one of the wealthiest women in the world. Thanks to her, he was no longer without the ability to fight back. Momma's organization, the League of Warrior Women, had trained him—along with his twenty-seven other adopted siblings—to be warriors in her social justice crusade. He'd been fighting alongside his family for over twenty years. Until he'd fucked up. Now, he wasn't really Tony anymore. Now, he was Lazarus. A dead man returned to life.

Ugh. He lay back, head pounding. Seemed like he'd been here before. Or someplace like it. This time, memory came quickly. Tropical storm. Kiteboarding. Idiot.

Hospital lights shouted down at him, hitting him like a fist full of "wake up, dumbass." Probably shouldn't have gone out. He groaned, rolled his head to the side, nearly lost the liquid in his stomach.

Hard to tell which sounded louder, his head or the heart monitor. His right arm ached like it had been slammed with a rock. It had. And there was no one to blame but himself.

This morning, he'd felt homesick, anxious, and frustrated at his inability to get off the island because of the storm. He'd gone out looking for something so deep, so wild and filled with adrenaline, he couldn't think anymore.

Basically, he just wanted to kill his thoughts. It had worked for a little while. He had a concussion to prove it.

"Knock, knock."

His gaze snapped to the door, skimmed her tanned legs, wrinkled white shorts, and moved up to his most favorite physical asset. What he told his sisters was a great smile. Only because a nice set of boobs always brought a smile to his lips. Heat shot through his body.

Not for nothing, she was gorgeous. Those eyes. Silver? He'd thought he'd dreamt them. The eyes of an angel. A fierce angel who'd saved his life and then brought him back from the dead.

Beginning to become a bad habit of his.

He waved her inside, tried to sit up. The room tilted. He pressed the button on the guardrail, inched upward with a whir of the motor. "I need to thank you."

Was that his voice? Sounded as rough as sand. As rough as his uncle Leland's. Uncle? Still didn't sound right. The man had hidden his relation to Tony for twenty years. For good reason.

Being the first male adopted into a secret society of female vigilantes was tough enough. Finding out he'd been adopted not because of who he was but who he was related to? Fuck, that'd hurt. And pissed him off.

His angel walked across the room. Fierce and hot with loose brown curls that caressed a delicate, almost regal neck. Or maybe it was the way she carried herself that was regal.

And, oh man, he felt something. Something big. Something wild and filled with adrenaline and a zing of lust that sent his heart monitor galloping.

Her silver eyes flicked to the monitor. No way to deny that. She turned her attention to him and held out a hand tattooed with a date that started at the base of her thumb and ran up toward her wrist. "Honora Silva. Honor for short."

"My hero has a name worthy of her." He lifted the arm with the IV drip and took her hand. The silk of her skin ignited flames in his palm that spread through his body. Could hold this hand all day. Wanted to. "Lazarus Graves."

He turned her wrist a little and read the black ink tattooed there. Today's date. Two years ago. Slowly, she pulled her hand back, leaned against the bed, comfortable in a way that seemed unconscious. "Lazarus? Like the walking dead." She grinned. "Appropriate."

Huh. Kind of a smart-ass. He liked. "You got the States in your voice. On vacation? Determined to get every day you can from the beach, even during a tropical storm?"

"No." She pointed at her tattoo. "I moved here after my mother's death. That's why I was on the beach. A pilgrimage of sorts."

Something in Laz's chest moved forward, toward her. This had been a bad day for him. This had been an incredibly shit day for her.

And despite her grief, she'd saved his fucking life. He put a hand to his chest. "I'm sorry."

Her shoulders slumped. Eyes downcast, she brushed aside tears. That was it. That body visible ache. That was what grief looked like. What he'd done to his family. Fuck. She shook her head. "You actually did me a favor. Made it so something good came out of today."

He took a minute, processed what she'd suggested—if not for her mother's death, she wouldn't have been on the beach, and he might be dead right now. "Guess I owe her my life too. Along with her fearless daughter."

A startled sound broke from her like a crack of thunder. "I am not fearless. Mom used to call me the Cowardly Lion."

His brows drew together. "You jumped into the ocean to save an idiot stranger during a tropical storm. I call that fearless. And the Cowardly Lion was tough too. Just needed to find the right situation to bring it out."

At this, she laughed, a laugh so surprised, and maybe delighted, that her head tilted back. Her chin lifted to the ceiling. When she brought her head down, her silver eyes were alight. Like twin moons. "I make chocolate for a living."

"Sweet and brave. Must be the luckiest survivor in the world. Who you makin' chocolate for?"

"I own my own cocoa farm, lodge, and agro-touring business. Along with Papito, my grandfather."

Okay. Not just making chocolate. He motioned in a tell-me-more gesture. "What kind of tours?"

"Tours of Morne Trois Pitons National Park, the Boiling Lake. Rappelling, hiking, climbing. That sort of thing. We have a lodge and individual chalets that we rent. We do tours of the farm too, not just the nearby rain forest."

She gave tours of Dominica and her farm. Smart way to keep a business afloat. "That sounds really cool. Kind of my dream job. Rappelling, spelunking, anything to do with the great outdoors and adventure, I'm your guy. A little jealous."

Self-consciously, she fingered the bit of blanket poking through the metal guardrail. "And you? Are you on vacation?"

He had his cover. Of course he did. And yet, she'd been so honest with him, saved his life. Plus, he just didn't feel like lying to her. "Ran away from home. Changed my name. Set sail. Forced to port with the storm."

Her eyes brightened. "But that sounds like an adventure story. I love adventures stories."

She opened her mouth to ask a follow-up. A question he was sure he didn't want to answer. Hell, why wasn't she running out of the room right now? Brave as hell. He beat her to the punch. "Your eye color—is that real?"

Her eyebrows rose. "Of course."

Sensitive. "That offends you? Me asking?"

"The idea that I am a person who puts in contacts to impress others offends me."

He liked the way she spoke, clipped and absolute. Kind of formal. Reminded him of the girls at the Mantua Academy, the private school his family ran. And used as cover for covert ops. Did she have a private education? "Never said it was to impress anyone. Maybe people who wear colored contacts just like the way they look. Like I like my tattoos."

She swished her chin around as if sampling his words like a sommelier tasting wine. Freakin' adorable. She must've found them to her liking because she nodded and moved on. "My eyes aren't that unusual."

Okay. She couldn't actually believe that. "They're silver."

"Some would call them a light gray."

"Some would be wrong. They're silver."

"I think my skin tone might lend to them seeming more silver than gray."

She had great skin. A touch darker than his own, it was a tawny island tan so pristine, her body seemed draped in silk. He longed to brush a knuckle across the swell of her high cheekbones, collarbone, cleavage. "Maybe if I saw you in a different light, they'd look less silver."

She laughed. "You could see me in a different light, but that might not change anything. As Robertson Davies said, 'The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.'"

Yep. Well-educated. "I prefer Obi-Wan Kenobi. 'Many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our point of view.'"

She raised a dark eyebrow over one silver eye. It gave her a dangerous, seductive quality. Hard to resist. Not sure he wanted to.

A squawk from the hall announced visiting hours were over, but her gaze dipped to his bicep, to the tattoo revealed beneath the hospital gown. "And your tattoo, 'One for all.' Like the Three Musketeers. Does it have meaning beyond that?"

"It means my life for others. Used to be my motto."

"Not anymore?"

He wished she hadn't asked. She had. And the way he was feeling right now, grateful and turned on and fuzzy enough in the head that this whole conversation felt surreal, he told her. "I told you, I ran away from home. So I guess I'm looking after myself, making myself number one for a while."

To his surprise, she didn't frown or accuse him of being a totally selfish prick. She looked him in the eyes. "You say that like you're admitting a crime. You feel bad about it?"

Shit, yeah, he did. "That's not the way I was raised. I was raised to care. I do care."

"So why leave?"

Head pounding, he ran his fingers over his goatee. Every day, he woke up with this feeling of guilt. His stomach turning with the wrongness of it, of not doing what he was good at, what he could to help. "It wasn't really my choice. It was go or lose my mind."

She nodded, took a deep breath, like preparing to dive. "Do you know the Loco for Cocoa shop near where the cruise ships dock?"

"Docked at a makeshift pier. Haven't really been here long enough to learn the layout. Why?"

“Well, I’m there every other morning, Monday through Saturday. Or as my grandmother used to say, *Lendi to Sanmdi*. If you stop by, I’ll take you on a personal tour, an adventure through the rain forest. Show you my business. Even share some of my chocolate.”

Chocolate. Let’s hope that was a euphemism for what he really wanted to taste. Hold on. “You asking me out?” Her cheeks pinked. He grinned. She was. Aw, man, worst time for it.

If they hadn’t already, his family would soon figure out he was alive, be gunning for him, so staying in one place, especially this close to the States, was too dangerous. “Totally makes the concussion worth it, but…” This was going to kill him. “I’m not sure I’ll survive another adventure.”

She swallowed. Her eyes widened. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

His heart tripped in his chest. “I think you saving my life once is enough.”

In a move so sudden he nearly jerked back, she leaned over the bed and rested her lips against his cheek. Heat shot through his body, and something he hadn’t allowed himself to feel for a long time uncoiled.

He wanted her. Wanted to feel those soft, full lips working against his body. Wanted to take her in all the best ways, slow and fast.

She smiled, a smile for the record books, a smile like an ellipsis—the start of something that had no end. Her eyes traveled down his body. “I saved your life. I think you owe me.”

Wait. What did that mean? Was it his male ego or had she...? They locked eyes. And the blatant, unrestrained desire he saw there about knocked him out of the bed. Fuck yeah. He’d pay that debt. With interest.

He shifted his right leg at an angle, hid the reaction surging up between his legs. A boner tenting his sheets like a teen—not the first impression he hoped to make. Damn embarrassing.

She glanced down at his lips, licked her own. She leaned toward him, slow this time.

Like his heart, his monitor picked up its beat.

A nurse wheeled a blood-pressure machine into the room and with a no-nonsense shake of her head said, “Visiting hours are up.”

Honor took a step away from him. Was that regret in her eyes? That made two of them.

She turned and headed for the door. Her high round ass, feline in its sway, caught his attention, purred at him. Or maybe that was his perverted mind at work again.

When she reached the door, Honor looked back, caught his eyes on her ass. She grinned like she’d just pinned him in her playful paws and threw back, “Try to stay out of the grave, Lazarus.”

Fuck. That chilled him. He intended to. And that would be a lot easier if he left the island. Which meant, as hot as she was—hot enough to make him regret every life choice he’d ever made—this was the last he’d see of her.

CHAPTER 4

In the cramped real estate office overlooking a rundown neighborhood in Roseau, Dominica, Gray George answered the third line on her phone, the one that indicated someone was calling for a passport. “International Appropriations, Dominica.”

She’d made sure to raise her voice when she pronounced her country, “Doe-mee-NEE-kah,” as people often confused the island with the Dominican Republic. A bit of a tragedy when your mail went to an entirely different country.

The caller sounded Chinese, speaking in heavily accented—and strained—English. “Hello, I’m calling about getting a Dominica passport.”

She slowly explained the costs and the need to buy land on the island. She also assured him, as a real estate agent, she could handle the purchase of the land and the passport. *And if, by chance, he needed a tour of the island, she could provide that as well.*

Woman had to eat. No tour was necessary. He wanted the cheapest piece of land he could buy. Of course.

With the island recovering from a storm last year, so many swept in in the hopes of getting a deal. They didn’t want to pay a fair price. They figured beggars can’t be choosers. A difficult time to sell real estate, with both sides thinking the other was unreasonable.

If things didn’t improve soon, she might need to take her sister up on the offer and move to Florida.

After gathering the man’s details, she hung up and analyzed a computer screen filled with contact information.

Her phone rang again. Line two. Hallelujah. A good day. “George Travel and Real Estate.”

“I need to speak with the owner, Gray George.”

She rolled her eyes. This was how complaints always started. “This is her.”

The voice on the other end paused. “Sorry, you sounded…” He didn’t complete the sentence. He didn’t need to. People often heard her deep voice and assumed her male. The man on the other end recovered and continued. “I’m an attorney, calling for a client who wishes to remain anonymous. He wants to make an offer on a property in Dominica.”

“Can you give me the address or parcel number?”

“It’s not for sale. But the owner will sell.”

Gray slumped forward, her head almost touching her computer screen. Another person who thought they could waltz in and buy whatever they wanted. “I’m not sure—”

“My client wants the property owned by Honor Silva, the daughter of Natalie Silva. We’re willing to offer four million for it.”

Gray fumbled the phone as she sat ramrod straight at her desk. This was a joke. They had her on a radio program. She was being pranked. “What you’re offering—”

“Ms. Gray, it’s not just the property but the business that goes with it, Loco for Cocoa. There are many good reasons for this decision, and I can assure you all of them are sound.”

“It will never appraise—”

“I have a feeling it will appraise well. Now, can you handle making the offer?”

For a moment, Gray couldn’t speak. She quickly found her voice. “I require ten percent of such transactions.”

“That’s fine.”

It was? She’d expected to bargain, to settle for much less. This would change her life. Her children’s lives. “Send me the information, and I will make this happen for you.”

“I expect you will for that fee.”

An hour after she’d left the hospital, with the charming and handsome Lazarus Graves very much on her mind, Honor drove up the winding road that led to her mountain hotel and farm.

The raindrops had slowed, but her wipers *chu-whooshed, chu-whooshed* against the glass of her Honda Civic at the only speed they had, crazy fast.

A spin of her wheel directed her car up the long road that cut between the trees. Men with rain slickers tended the cocoa trees. She passed them and then the long, covered porch. Vats used for fermenting cocoa beans lined up under the steep, red porch roof. The architect in charge of this process—Uncle José’s self-description—worked among the vats.

Expecting nothing, she waved to her Uncle José. He turned his back on her. Oh well, can’t win everyone over.

A turn of her wheel, and she pulled up to the brightly painted green-and-yellow hotel with its charming wraparound porch. Seated at one of the many wicker tables, Papito stood and moved toward her.

He wore his trademark white hat, white shirt, and white pants. He called it his “costume.” When he’d come up with the idea of doing tours to supplement their income—he’d done tours in Puerto Rico where he’d grown up—he’d also come up with this farmer persona. As silly as it had seemed, Papito had a great instinct when it came to people. His farmer persona was a favorite of the guests. Such a charmer.

Holding an umbrella over her, Papito greeted her with a kiss on her cheek. He smelled like cocoa butter and looked like a man twenty years younger, with a straight spine and thick, mostly gray hair swept into a ponytail.

“These roads are treacherous in the rain. You should be more careful, *mi hija*.”

Dios. What a worrier. Once they were safely on the veranda, he lowered the umbrella and shook it off. Honor greeted a few guests, then took a seat on a wicker chair beside Papito.

He pointed to a pile of papers on the table. “You need to read that.”

Curious, she moved his ever-present cell phone off the stack and read. And then read it again. *Que es esto?* What was this? Someone had made an offer on the farm. A ridiculous offer. An offer that was twice what she’d put into this place after inheriting it.

Papito cleared his throat. “What do you think?”

She looked up. Her brain jumping around. “I don’t know. This is a crazy amount of money. What do you think?”

Papito shrugged, put his phone down. “Don’t ask me. You’re in charge.” He smiled. He always teased her, but now his smile faded. “José thinks we should take it.”

Honor bristled. José just wanted her to accept the offer so she wouldn’t be his boss anymore. Although, boss wasn’t right. She shared responsibility with Papito. Only making the decisions she felt most strongly about on her own. She lowered the papers. “With the island’s troubles, this could be something illegal.”

His eyebrows rose. “Because the property is worth half what they want to pay?”

He was being generous. Two million was what she’d put into the property. There was little reason to believe she’d get that back right now. Not without building up the business.

“What other reason makes sense?”

“I thought...because of your mother. Today of all days, she is on my mind.”

Her mother? “Why Mom?”

He reached over, flicked through the pages, and pointed. “You didn’t read all of it. See here.” He read it to her. “We reserve the right to use all branding opportunities associated with the product, including prior images and branding.”

Crap. She’d forgotten. When she’d first started Loco for Cocoa as a teen—a business that had gone nowhere—she’d registered it under her mom’s production company brand, Shameless Hussy. Maybe that was what this offer was about. She’d been approached over and over again by people wanting to use her mother’s sultry movie star image to sell products.

One man had offered Honor ten million dollars to use her mother’s Shameless Hussy branded silhouette shot where her “assets were highlighted” to sell car parts.

She’d been furious. He’d wanted to use an image her mother had cast aside, an image that in no way encapsulated all of who and what she was. “That makes sense, Papito. Two million for the business and two million to make Mom’s memory synonymous with a trashy, stereotypical image.” Honor pushed the papers away. “I’m not selling.”

Papito sat forward, grabbed her hand. “You could negotiate, ask them to take out that part. This is a great payout. No one, including me, would blame you for taking such an offer. This life is not easy.”

She flushed, hoped he didn’t see it. The “not easy” part was financial. The tours were the only thing keeping this place afloat.

She looked around at the jungle that surrounded them. On sunny days, cocoa would be set out to be dried and conditioned by the nourishment of the sweetest sunshine on this planet. And yeah, she knew that the sun was the same everywhere, but it felt different here.

It smelled different, too, in the lush jungle, with the bouquet of flowers, the buzz of insects, and the laughter of people working the land.

Any other day, the money would seem the most important thing. She could take it and go back to her original vision, starting chocolate stores all over the world. But that took out the most important elements, the cocoa, the collaboration with Papito, the island.

Running the tours to supplement the business was barely enough to keep the lights on, but this was an anniversary. A day when a bold and adventurous spirit had been taken from the world. Mom would never have taken the safe route. “I’m going to say no.”

His face still a little worried, Papito nodded. Pushing back her chair, Honor stood with a sense of relief and renewed purpose.

One problem though. Gray, the same woman who hired local touring companies for the cruise ship tours, was the real estate agent. She had to tell the woman who was basically in charge of the one aspect of the hotel making money, the tours, that she wasn’t going to accept an offer she was brokering. Basically, denying the woman a huge commission.

That should go over well.