

The book cover features a man and a woman in a close embrace. The woman is looking upwards with a serene expression, while the man looks down at her with a protective gaze. The background is dark, and the bottom of the cover is decorated with vibrant, flowing flames in shades of blue, orange, and yellow. The author's name is at the top, and the title is prominently displayed in the center.

LISA LADEW

Hide  
*my*  
Soul

Romantic Suspense Mystery Book

Hide me series - Book 4

# Hide My Soul

by Lisa Ladew

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Many, many thanks to my readers. You guys are amazing. I love to get your emails and read your words of encouragement.

Super huge thanks to my advance readers and my beta readers. :) you guys just plain rock.

## Chapter 1

Jordan strode up the walk to Blaise's apartment, her bag swinging heavily on her shoulder. Her phone dinged and she stopped for a moment to pull it out of her pocket and look at the text message that was coming in.

It was from Katerina - a picture of her and West in front of a gorgeous Hawaiian beach, insanely happy smiles plastered on their faces. Jordan smiled and checked both their expressions for signs of stress or strain. She saw nothing but joy and it made her heart sing. Katerina was finally getting the good life she deserved. They'd been in Hawaii for over two weeks already, and were showing no signs of coming home any time soon. If California was even considered home for either of them now. Jordan wasn't so sure anymore.

Jordan shoved her phone back in her pocket and knocked on Blaise's door. He didn't answer, so she let herself in with her key, a bit of disbelief surrounding her movements as she did so.

In the last two weeks, she and Blaise had become closer than she'd ever been with any man. He had such a strong and sensitive side, one that he usually hid behind humor and smart remarks. But he wasn't hiding it from her anymore. She saw the real Blaise, and the more she saw, the more she liked.

He'd given her a key to his place only three days before, when she'd had to wait ten minutes for him to get home from the doctor. She'd been worried sick about him, afraid the late time meant a raging infection or something equally horrible regarding his healing gunshot wound, and his response had been to comfort her, then try to distract her by offering her a key to his apartment. It had worked.

As she pushed open the door, she looked at the key in her hand. It was such a simple gesture, but it meant so much to her. He trusted her completely, and he didn't hold back at all – never playing any games about *where their relationship was going* or *maybe they should take it slow*. God knew she didn't want to take it slow. She'd been secretly in love with him for months, and she'd had private fantasies about him for a year before that, after he'd saved her from an abusive boyfriend, even though she hadn't even known his name. But the real Blaise was so much better than the fantasy.

She'd nursed him as much as he let her after he'd been shot and he appreciated it. That was obvious. They were closer than they'd ever been. She was loving the closeness, reveling in it, enjoying it as thoroughly as possible.

So why hadn't they had sex yet?

Jordan ground her teeth and locked the door behind her, then headed for Blaise's shower. She'd had a long day at work and wanted to be clean, happy,

and smelling fresh for him when he got home.

While the water sluiced deliciously over her skin, she thought about the one million dollar question. She *wanted* to have sex with him – badly. It was all she could do to hold herself back from jumping him every night when she checked the scar on his strong, bare chest for signs of infection or new pain.

And him? He'd been ready while the bandages were still on. But she *was* holding back, and she didn't know why. Something inside her was keeping her from being as open and honest with him as he was with her. She hated it.

She thought he could really be *the one* and if she couldn't get over her stupid games, she was going to ruin it – she knew that.

Jordan turned off the water and stepped out of the shower to dry off. She wrapped the fluffy white towel around herself, then stepped into the bedroom to find her clothes. She heard the door open and Blaise call out from the other room. "Babe? You here?"

Jordan opened her mouth and then slammed it shut, biting her lip to keep from calling out to him. The familiar but unwanted anxiety pinged around her skull. She didn't have time to stop and examine it - she needed to get dressed immediately. She ran the towel over her body quickly and began to jam her shirt over her head, heedless of the drops of water still clinging to her hair and skin.

She noticed her bra on the bedspread and swore softly under her breath,

then whipped the shirt back off and wrestled with her bra to get it on before he made his way into the bedroom. The bra finally succumbed to her frenzied movement and she grabbed her underwear, stepping into it just as the doorknob of his bedroom door began to turn.

Jordan turned around to face him, her face red and staring, like she'd been doing something wrong. Blaise entered the room, standing tall and strong, his dark eyes flashing like strobe lights at the sight of her.

A provocative grin crossed his face and he took three large steps to be in her space in an instant. His eyes traveled up and down her body and his hands slid over her waist, meeting at her lower back and toying with the upper edge of her panties.

One hand slid up her back and plunged into her hair while the other dropped lower into her panties and a finger or two glided into the still-damp cleft of her bottom.

"I missed you," he breathed, and lowered his mouth to hers for a sizzling kiss before Jordan could respond or pull away.

Jordan's mind and body warred intensely. She felt her core clench and throb as blood cascaded to it, while her mind chattered at her to pull away from him. To stop this. To get dressed right this instant!

Her body won for a moment and her own hands skimmed his shirt then

reached around him to dive into his back pockets, caressing the firm muscles covered by his jeans.

She returned his kiss whole-heartedly, happily, knowing this was where she belonged - this was what she should be doing.

Her tongue caressed his and he pulled her closer, tipping her hips against him so she could feel the steely length of him behind his zipper.

Jordan gasped at the size and hardness of it. She hadn't seen him naked yet. Had barely let him get to second base, no matter how much both of them wanted it.

They'd had marathon petting sessions, until they were both panting and wanting each other with every cell in their bodies, but Jordan always pulled back. Always stopped short. Always put on the brakes. Like she was doing now.

Jordan broke their kiss and positioned her hands between them. Blaise groaned and she heard true regret in the noise. But not as much regret as she was feeling. She knew he would stop. He was a gentleman who had too much integrity to push her. Even though sometimes she wished he would ignore her protestations, rip her clothes off and shove it inside her, pounding away any possible thoughts she could have about *not the right time* or *we shouldn't do this*.

He refused to be pushed away for a moment and he looked deep in her eyes. "Can we just *do it* already? What is holding you back?"

Jordan's breath froze in her throat. Could she answer his question? Did she want to? Did she have an answer?

"I don't know," she finally squeaked out, hoping to God the truth would get her out of this.

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Blaise gritted his teeth and fought every urge in his body. He wanted to ignore her words, her signs, her dissent, and rip her clothes off. He would chew through them if he had to. He wanted to throw her on the bed and ravage her, make her come again and again until she forgot why she ever had been scared to do it in the first place. She had to be scared. He knew she wanted to have sex with him. He could see the desire clearly in her eyes every time they kissed or touched. Something was holding her back and he hated it.

But he would never force her. He dropped his hands and took a tiny step away from her, his heart heavy. But he would continue to wait. She was worth it.

He gazed into her eyes and something in them made him raise his hands again. He grasped her forearm slightly and asked again. "Why are you scared to have sex with me, Jordan?"

His hands tingled as he asked the question and then grew red hot. Jordan looked down at them, then back up at his face, her gaze suddenly frightened.



Just like that he knew. Her reality popped into his mind like a stoplight that had turned from red to green.

"Oh baby," he said softly. "I could never think you are a slut. I know I said that awful thing one time, but it wasn't because I really thought it. It was because I was trying to keep you from getting close to me. It was a mean and awful thing to say and I never, ever meant it. Please, you have to believe me."

He pleaded with her with his eyes, knowing that if she wasn't able to get past that mistake he'd made, it could mean the death of their fledgling relationship, and that would kill him. That was the last thing he wanted.

Forgotten, his hands returned to normal temperature, and he gazed into her eyes for a long moment, hoping and praying that she believed him.

Jordan's eyes showed confusion for a second and then the slamming home of an epiphany.

"What? How did you? I didn't even ..." she stammered, then rocked backwards slightly on her heels and let her eyes drop closed.

He saw energy moving through her expressions and body. She bit her lip and a tear leaked out from under one delicate eyelid.

Blaise longed to kiss it away but he didn't want to interrupt her thought processes. He caught it with one gentle thumb and wiped it before it had a

chance to drop any farther.

When her eyes finally opened they were shining with a new light. She thrust her head forward and kissed him sharply on the lips, then dropped back and watched him openly. "You're right Blaise, I do want to. I want you so badly it hurts but I haven't been letting myself. There have been two reasons and I actually didn't even realize what one of them was until you just said it. That was silly of me. Some tiny part of me was clinging to the thought that you believed I was a slut, and that you would leave me once we had sex. I'm not sure why. I know that's not true. You're not that kind of guy."

Blaise's heart sped up and he grasped her upper arms. He growled lightly and pulled her closer, her bare midriff brushing against him deliciously. He'd never had her this naked before, and it was making him almost unable to function. She was right. He wouldn't leave her. He would keep her in his bed forever, if possible.

Jordan's voice rose. "But, there is another reason and it's the one I've been hiding behind. Even though I used it as a shield, I do think it's valid and we still need to wait just one more day."

Blaise wilted and gritted his teeth again. "Because of what the doctor said?"

Jordan nodded. "He said you weren't to do any strenuous activity for

three weeks, or there was a chance that your inner stitches could tear open."

Blaise finally dropped her arms and stepped back, hearing it but not believing it. "That doctor is a quack!" he cried. "I've never felt better in my life!"

Blaise turned and approached the far wall, then dropped to the floor, placing his hands sturdily against the floor, and flipping his feet up against the wall in a handstand. He heard Jordan gasp lightly behind him.

Blaise bent his elbows and lowered his face until it almost touched the floor, doing hand stand push-ups, a grunt escaping him with each push back up.

"Blaise, no, you'll hurt yourself," Jordan cried from behind him.

Blaise dropped his feet to the ground and stood up then turned to her and ripped his shirt over his head. His hands found the slight indentation under his right arm and he probed it, then he made a fist and hit his chest in that area as hard as he could, the sound thudding through the room.

"Eep!" Jordan cried out, holding her hands up. "Stop!"

"Jordan, I'm telling you – I'm completely healed," he said, but he stopped hitting himself for her. "What do you think I've been doing all day? I've been out riding my dirt bike!" he told her, not knowing how she was going to take that information.

Her eyes went wide and then she rushed into his arms. "Okay, okay. I

believe you. You feel good, you think you're all healed."

Blaise's gaze grew hot and Jordan quickly cooled him with a kiss and the fluttering of her hands on his face. "How about this," she pleaded. "How about we go to the doctor tomorrow and if he says you're all healed, then we do it. We do anything you want. Anything," she said again, her voice dropping slightly as she pressed against him.

*That was more like it. Except for one thing.* "After the doctor tomorrow, we head to Hawaii."

Jordan gave him a mischievous smile, one he'd never seen before, and one he liked immensely. She leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "Then maybe we will just have to join the mile-high club."

Blaise grinned, but knew that wouldn't happen. He would lose his job as a police officer if he were caught having sex on an airplane. Besides, he didn't want their first time to be rushed or inadequate in any way. He wanted to spend hours worshiping her body in the way she deserved.

"You're playing with fire," he told her, wondering if there were any other public places they could get away with indulging themselves in.

"I like it hot," she purred back and Blaise grinned, enjoying this new side of her much more than the anxious and unsure side he'd been dealing with every time the subject of sex came up.

But his dick was throbbing and almost painful, so reluctantly, he drew back. He gave her what he hoped was a sweet grin and said, "Can you believe Katerina and West are getting married in two days?"

Jordan grinned back at him. "Actually I can. They were meant for each other and I knew it was going to happen eventually. I'm happy for them."

Blaise took her hand and pulled her into the center of the room, willing himself to calm down. "Are you all packed?"

Jordan nodded towards the open closet door where her suitcases sat. "I'm totally ready to go. All we have to do is take West's cat to his neighbor."

Blaise nodded and pulled his own suitcases out of the back of the closet. He would get his clothes packed and ready and then they would take Nina to her temporary home for the next nine days.

Blaise grinned to himself. Nine days in paradise with Jordan. A ready and willing Jordan. He could think of nothing better than that.

## Chapter 2

Raven switched on his state-of-the-art telescopic glasses and focused on the tall man and lithe woman running into the waves on the picturesque, perfect beach. They jumped into magnified focus.

His mind tried to assign them their code names and he grimaced, hating them. What kind of code names were Thunder and Lightning? He understood Lightning, a little, because according to the grotesque, melted lump of a man back at Operation Arma, the woman could produce a kind of electrical energy from her body that was extremely dangerous. The melted lump was proof of that. But Thunder for the guy? Just because he was with the woman they called Lightning? That was *stupid*. He groaned at the thought that the names were assigned for good and he had to use them.

Normally Raven loved code names. He loved his enough that he referred to himself as Raven in his own head, and told the women he picked up off duty that it was his real name. Ravens were clever, large for a bird, and downright malicious when they needed to be. Not beautiful, but sleek and strong. Like himself. So Raven was apt, and that's one of the things he loved about it. Plus it was way better than his real name, Edgar Snoot. Women just didn't respond to

Edgar Snoot like they did Raven Montebanc.

Thunder had no basis in reality and so it irritated Raven. And Lightning? The lump had originally called himself Lightning, but changed it to Storm after a week, saying Lightning worked better for the woman. Why had the lump gotten to choose her name and his own name? Only agents should get to choose code names, in Raven's opinion. Raven couldn't bring himself to call the lump Storm, no matter how long he had been at Operation Arma or what kind of amazing mental feats the guy was performing.

Raven gritted his teeth as he watched the man and woman trying to boogie board in the gentle waves. They were laughing like loons and not leaving anytime soon, he was sure. He probably had all day to sit and relax and think on this beach.

The lump back at Arma shouldn't be called Storm. He should be called something like Bug, or Slime, or Yuck. He was like a big, nasty bug that should be stepped on, no matter what kind of abilities he had. Lump. That was it, that was the perfect name. From now on, Raven would call him Lump, at least inside his own head.

The man and woman moved farther down the beach with the waves and Raven stood up to stroll that way, looking every bit like just another beach-goer, he was sure, in his screaming board shorts, purple tank top, Gilligan hat, and

white flip-flops.

He walked close enough to the couple to use his directional microphone, cleverly disguised as a bottle of water, and flopped down on the sand, pointing it at them. Their voices fed directly into a wireless bud in his ear. Nothing but shrieking laughter. He turned the microphone off and watched a pair of women in tiny bikinis walk by.

He was off-duty tonight at eight, his first night off in almost a week, and he was going to make good use of it. He had already scoped out a bar on the north end of the island that none of his co-workers knew about. He would try out his new pilot's uniform there. He'd had good results last time *saying* he was a pilot, and he couldn't wait to see how the ladies fell into his lap if he actually *looked* like a pilot. He had his cover story all worked out - he had just flown in from Japan and was waiting for a friend. He hadn't had time to go to the hotel yet to change his clothes.

The man and woman caught his attention by leaving the water. He switched on his microphone quickly and pointed it at them.

"Their plane gets in at 3:24. We should head back," the man said.

Raven snarled. The airport again? They'd just been there yesterday to pick up the old lady. Wasn't anyone who was flying in for their wedding able to make it to a hotel on their own?



Raven stood quickly and headed back to his towel, stealing quick, occasional glances at Thunder and Lightning, and trying to force himself to use their code names. No one was going to change them for him. Someday he would be the guy in charge of all the code names, but not today.

He knew they were having a dinner tonight and a wedding tomorrow and he was fairly certain that sometime just before or just after the wedding would be the best time to snatch Lightning with the least amount of fuss. So far, she'd never gone anywhere without Thunder. But that couldn't last forever, could it? His boss wanted her taken alone, saying that she probably would be the most dangerous if she thought Thunder was in trouble. But if they could get her alone she wouldn't be able to muster the anger she needed for the electrical zapping thing - at least that's what their research said. All the digging they'd done on her said straight fear wasn't enough to give her that much energy. Raven hoped so, for his sake.

Then, when she was safely packed away, they could take care of Thunder. Orders hadn't come down on Thunder yet, so Raven didn't know if *taking care of him* meant a bullet in the brain or capturing him and holding him as leverage to use against Lightning if they ever needed it.

Raven puffed up slightly as he watched his two charges pack their belongings. It was his call when Lightning was to be taken, and this would be the first major assignment he got the lead on. He was not about to screw it up.

That's why he was taking a few hours off tonight, so tomorrow he could be extra vigilant, watching for that perfect moment to make Lightning disappear. Then getting to Thunder would be a piece of cake. Raven might even get a promotion out of this one.

But he wasn't going to underestimate Lightning, no way. He had no desire to end up like Lump.

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An hour and a half later, Raven jumped out of his black, chauffeured, government sedan and followed Thunder and Lightning into the airport. He stood along the wall and made pretend phone calls on the shuttle phones as he watched Thunder and Lightning kiss and paw each other inappropriately at the baggage carousel. When people finally started flooding their way in to pick up their luggage, Lightning let out an ear-piercing scream and ran towards the escalator.

Raven watched as she and a blonde woman hugged and cried and hugged some more. The tall, dark man who had been walking with the blonde woman held his hand out to Thunder, then the two men embraced and began talking animatedly. Raven had been studying the pictures of Thunder's family just last night and he knew this wasn't them. This must be the two best friends. He couldn't remember their code names and made a mental note to look them up as

soon as possible. The woman was a teacher and the man was a ...? His mind blanked for a moment.

The tall, dark man's eyes fell on him, and Raven could feel the gaze boring into him, searching him, even through the lenses of the sunglasses on his face.

Then he remembered. The man was a cop. That would certainly complicate things. Lightning and Thunder had never noticed his presence, never even looked around past each other, like two love-sick fools, but this cop had already seen him. Possibly marked him. That was bad.

As he busied himself along the wall, just a poor tourist who lost his way and needed a shuttle and a place to take it to, he remembered standing here yesterday as they picked up the old lady. For the briefest of moments she had seemed to mark him too, without even looking at him. It had been the strangest thing. He had felt her energy pointed at him, almost like her *soul* was looking at him, independently of her eyes. But that wasn't possible, was it?

No.

Just the cop would be a problem, but if Raven had to, he knew how to get rid of him and make it look like an accident a thousand different ways.

## Chapter 3

Forty-five minutes after they'd picked up his father and brother, plus Blaise and Jordan at the airport, West turned off the hot water with only the slightest twinge of regret. He'd gotten used to long showers and vacation days spent in the pursuit of nothing but pleasure. He didn't feel guilty for a second either. He'd worked hard his whole life, and now it was his turn to relax a little. Of course he would work hard again, but first he was going to take a few months off to enjoy his life, and his Katerina.

He stepped out of the shower and was greeted by the sight of Katerina at the vanity, practically bouncing on the soles of her feet as she tried to apply her makeup. West could feel her excitement and it made him smile.

"You happy to see Jordan?" he asked.

Katerina put her eyeliner down on the marble counter and turned to him, her eyes raking up and down his wet body. He grinned and gave her a show, flexing his biceps and turning slightly to imitate a bodybuilder pose.

Katerina laughed and dismissed him, turning back to the vanity to pick up her eyeliner again.

West winced and resolved to go to the hotel gym the day after their wedding.

"So excited!" Katerina cried as she lined one eye. "We've got a million things to talk about. Hurry and get dressed so we can head over to their room."

West dried his body and then shook his head like a dog, earning an undignified cry from Katerina. "You're getting my dress all wet!"

"I'd like to get your panties wet," West drawled, moving in behind her and grasping her hips.

Katerina smirked but admonished him. "Can't you stop thinking about sex for one minute? Your dad, your brother and your best friend just flew five hours to see you. I don't want to make them wait."

"My dad and my brother might wait a little, but I got the feeling from my best friend that he could use a half hour or so alone with Jordan."

Katerina finished lining her eye and dropped the liner, whirling around to face West, pushing him back slightly with her hand "He's had Jordan in his bed for more than two weeks. It's my turn now!"

"You want her in your bed?" West teased, a suggestive smile on his face.

"No," she glared at him and walked out of the bathroom. West followed, still grinning, while she continued to scold him. "I want to talk to her! I want to

hang out with her. I want to work out what she's going to wear tomorrow. We haven't talked about the wedding at all!"

West flopped down on the bed and began to dress as Katerina pulled on her shoes.

"Ok, just don't be surprised if you find them in a compromising situation," he told her.

"What? Is he as bad as you? Can't he keep his dick in his pants for more than two minutes?" Katerina baited him with a raised eyebrow.

West leaned forward, his grin mischievous. "The only reason my dick doesn't stay in my pants is because you're always pulling it out, sweetheart." He softened his banter as her eyes grew wide in mock outrage. "Besides, I don't think they've had sex yet."

Katerina's movements slowed as she considered. "Really? He told you that?"

"Well, not in as many words. I'm not positive."

Katerina leaned forward, her eyes hard. "You guys talk about sex with your girlfriends? What have you told him about us?" she demanded harshly.

West grasped her wrist and pulled her down onto his lap. "Calm down baby. First of all, you're not my girlfriend," he whispered, nuzzling her neck.

"You're my fiance, going to be my wife tomorrow," he finished as she gasped lightly and leaned into him. "Second of all, I haven't told him anything, really," he said, his voice low and sultry. He could feel her body start to soften and respond to him. But he couldn't resist. "Just that you're the hottest fuck I've ever had and that you can't get enough of my cock."

Katerina jumped to her feet, her eyes flashing as she tore her arm away from him. "West! Oh my God! You didn't-!"

West boomed laughter and grabbed her again, pulling her to him as she fought like a wildcat. He pinned both her wrists to her side, being careful not to hurt her. "I never said that, I swear. I never told him anything. He hasn't told me anything either. I don't really know if they've had sex or not, it's just a feeling I get."

Katerina stopped fighting and eyed him cautiously. "You're mean," she finally said.

"Baby, I'm sorry. Forgive me. My brother brings it out in me I think. You saw how much he razzed me on the way here. That's how he is, and sometimes I get sucked into doing it too. But I won't do it to you again."

"You promise?" she asked, her voice sulky.

"Promise."

"Ok." She perked up immediately and removed herself from his grip, fastening her shoe. "We'll meet you in the lobby!" she called as she grabbed her bag and hurried out the door.

"Katerina, wait!" West called, pulling on his shirt. By the time he had it over his head and tucked into his pants, the door was already slamming shut behind her. West felt a twinge of fear and jammed his feet into his shoes, wanting to catch up to her. He knew it was unreasonable - that she was completely safe and they had rooted out anyone who had any reason to hurt her - but he couldn't help but think his entire life had just run out the door on three inch heels.

He shoved his wallet into his pocket and followed as quickly as he could.

West ran down the hallway, breathing a sigh of relief as he saw Katerina's pretty form waiting at the elevator. He sidled up next to her and cupped her waist possessively, then kissed her lightly on her ear. The elevator dinged and they entered it, Katerina mashing the button to Jordan's floor aggressively, then telling the doors to hurry up.

The elevator ignored Katerina and responded at normal speed, but they were still in front of Jordan's door within only a few moments. Katerina pounded on it and West shook his head, laughing to himself.

Jordan opened the door quickly, fully clothed, but her hair messed



suggestively. West could practically feel Blaise's frustration floating out into the hallway. *Sorry man*, he thought, then tickled Katerina's arm, trying to pull her attention away from Jordan for just a moment.

"I'm going to check on Agnes, see if she's ready. I'll meet you guys back here or in the lobby, OK? Don't leave without us."

Katerina nodded and turned her attention back to Jordan. Dismissed again, West shrugged it off and headed down the hallway. He stopped at Agnes' door and knocked.

Agnes opened it immediately, looking light and younger than her 60-odd years in a flowery summer dress and sheer makeup. She gave West a weak smile as her hands fluttered to a bauble on a heavy chain around her neck. West saw she was wearing long, white, satiny gloves that were too hot for her outfit and the humid Hawaii weather.

West felt concern flood through him. She'd been positively radiant yesterday when they'd picked her up from the airport, but had faded quickly, retiring to her room before dinner, claiming tiredness from the flight. West hadn't even had time to tell her the real reason he had asked her to come out.

Of course he was eternally grateful for all the help she had given them when Katerina had been in the worst throes of being unable to control her own thoughts and impulses, plus they both thought that maybe Agnes could shed

some light on why Katerina had lost her powers and if the powers were likely to stay gone. But West also secretly hoped to get her alone and ask her about his own new and frightening power - the fact that he seemed to be able to make people do things just by touching them.

He hadn't told Katerina yet, not wanting to worry her. He hadn't even tried it out again since he'd told the waiter to cluck like a chicken and the waiter had complied in that freaky, zoned-out tone. He'd been trying to forget all about it actually, and he was happy he hadn't displayed any other powers or abilities in the last few weeks.

Agnes' eyes appraised him coolly, and he knew she was watching him not comment on her gloves. He spoke quickly, not wanting to appear rude. "You look lovely, Agnes, how are you feeling today?"

"Better, thank you," she said, but he could see the strain around her mouth and eyes. Strain that hadn't been there yesterday.

"I'm so glad you were able to come," he told her, intending to share how helpful Katerina had found their phone sessions, especially the later ones, but she held up a finger and he stopped talking.

"West, I need to tell you something, and I don't know how to do so without scaring you."

Anxiety gripped West's heart and he looked back down the hallway

towards Jordan and Blaise's room. He'd been afraid of something like this. He gritted his teeth and looked back at her, motioning for her to continue.

"I'm having the strangest free-floating premonitions. They aren't making any sense, really, because they're coming at me through the air maybe ..." She trailed off and stared over his left shoulder for a moment.

West looked that way down the hall, nervous suddenly. There was nothing there so he turned back around.

"You are in danger," she said simply. "You and Katerina."

West shook his head, denying the words. "That can't be. It's all over. Those men are in ... " West trailed off, thinking they weren't exactly in jail, were they? One was in a hospital and the other was in some sort of a home. Agnes didn't seem to notice his indecision.

"I know it, but I still feel it."

She wrung her hands together and West could hear the slippery sound the gloves made. It sounded grotesque to him, like a funeral shroud against the grain of a coffin.

She leaned in close to him and said, "Just - just be careful okay? I wish I could tell you more than that, but I don't know any more. I can't get a handle on anything but it seems to be coming at me from all sides. Somebody is watching

you. I don't know why, and I don't know who."

West felt itchy all over, like something was crawling on him. Should he believe her? Did he dare not to believe her?

Agnes forced a smile on her face and deliberately lightened the moment. "Anyways, thank you so much for inviting me. I just love Hawaii, and I'm so excited that the two of you are getting married."

She grasped his forearm with both hands. He shivered, not liking the feel of the gloves on his skin.

"We haven't had much time to talk yet. I know you said there were some things you wanted to share with me."

West nodded and took the hook she was offering. He didn't want to think about someone watching them right now. Besides, if someone were watching them, it was probably just a member of the press, trying to get the next big story about the psychic paramedic.

"We did have a bit of an ulterior motive, inviting you out here," he told her, not looking at her as he said it because of everything he was leaving out. "Katerina lost all of her powers," he said, looking her in the eye at the end of his words.

Agnes dropped her hands and stared at him openly. "What? How?"

West began to unbutton his shirt and she watched him with interest. He pulled it open and showed her the slight, circular scar on his chest. "I got shot," he said lightly, looking up and down the hallway to make sure no one was around. "I died. Or almost died. She saved me - healed me. And then she didn't have her powers anymore."

Agnes watched his face for a second and he could see the fascination in her expression. She dropped her eyes to the scar and lifted a gloved finger to it. "May I?" she asked.

He nodded and she touched it gently, no more than a graze really. She pulled her finger back and began to work off her glove. West watched her closely, anticipation building. He wondered what she was going to discover when she touched him. Would she immediately be able to tell what had really happened?

"Amazing," she whispered, peering at the slight indentation. "I wonder if \_"

Down the hall, West heard a door open and Katerina's voice float out. Jordan's laughter followed it.

Quickly, he pulled his shirt closed and buttoned it again. "Let's talk later," he told Agnes. She watched him closely, then reluctantly pulled her glove back on.

## Chapter 4

Katerina looked around the table at all the people she loved the most in the world, joy filling her very being. The restaurant was divine, the company amazing, and tomorrow was her wedding day. A day she'd never dared to let herself think about before. A day she had sometimes never thought would come. Marrying West was a dream come true. She let her gaze follow his profile as the words from the people around the table washed over her.

He was strong, incredibly handsome, true to his word, thoughtful, and kind. And he was all hers. They'd gone through hell together and come out the back side, whole, and with their relationship still intact. With anyone other than West, that would be a miracle. With West though, it was just a side effect of who he was. Steadfast. True. Faithful.

Katerina's eyes flicked to Brody, West's brother, and again she was surprised by how much they looked alike but how different they were. Brody sat on West's left, and Jordan sat on the other side of Brody. Brody and Jordan were sharing a laugh as Blaise looked on in amusement.

"C'mon, Jordan," Brody said. "What are you doing with that guy?" Brody pointed his chin at Blaise, his voice booming across the crowded restaurant.

"You should be with me!" he teased, winking at Blaise, and Katerina wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

Blaise snorted a laugh and picked up his beer. "You couldn't handle her, Bro," he said, putting a tough edge on the last word. Blaise's eyes glittered, and he never looked away from Brody once, like Brody would disappear with Jordan if Blaise so much as blinked.

Katerina leaned over to West. "What's going on?" she whispered, suddenly scared there was going to be a scene.

"They're always like that," West whispered back. "Don't worry. Brody doesn't mean anything by it. He idolizes Blaise."

Katerina sat back in her chair, relieved. Her eyes traveled to the other side of the table where Agnes and Sam, West's father, were huddled together, talking about California's history during the gold rush. Katerina couldn't think of anything more boring to talk about, but Sam and Agnes seemed enthralled by their conversation.

Brody turned his blue eyes, so much like West's, on Katerina and addressed her in a voice that made her wince. People on the next island could probably hear him.

"So Katerina, you finally tamed my wild brother - got him to settle down with just one woman. Good for you. That couldn't have been easy."

Katerina's eyes widened and she peeked at West. Wild? Settle down? She hadn't known West had been a playboy before they met.

West's laughter boomed across the table, and Blaise laughed too. Jordan seemed as lost as Katerina.

"The only wild child around here is you, Brody!" West countered. "Don't go giving Kat the wrong idea about me."

Katerina felt her heart return to a normal speed in her chest. So Brody was just teasing. West didn't seem like the type to have ever been *too* wild.

"Don't you have a girlfriend, Brody?" Katerina asked.

Brody sat back and shrugged. "I'm between girlfriends right now," he said.

"Which probably means he has five or six at the moment," West said, not without fondness.

Sam turned away from Agnes for a moment and addressed Katerina. "Ignore them sweetheart. I've got something I wanted to ask you, and I hope you don't feel pressured by it."

Katerina smiled at him. He was such a sweet man. Katerina could tell where West got his thoughtfulness and integrity from. She saw West shift in his chair from the corner of her eye and glanced at him. He looked anxious. She



glanced back at Sam, but didn't know what was making West react that way. She knew Sam had been having bouts of dementia over the last few years, but he'd been perfectly lucid every time she'd talked to him, and he didn't seem to be having any problems now.

She took West's hand and encouraged his father to ask his question. "I won't feel pressured, what is it?"

He held up a finger as if he were about to teach class. After a moment, he spoke. "I know that West has told you about my ... condition. It doesn't seem bad right now, and the doctor has assured me I have at least five years before it gets bad. I was wondering, well..." Sam dropped his finger and wrung his hands together, then pushed the words out. "I was wondering if you and West were planning on having any kids anytime soon. I'd love to meet my grandkids while I still know who they are."

A skinny tear slid out of one eye and traversed its way down Sam's face. Katerina's heart broke in two for her future father-in-law.

West squeezed her hand and she smiled at him gratefully. She looked back to Sam. "We haven't really talked about it," she told him weakly.

"So you're not against it? You want kids someday?" he asked hopefully.

"I'm not against it at all. I do want kids." She looked at West thoughtfully, surprised suddenly that the only conversation she'd ever had with

him about children was how to protect themselves from pregnancy in the moment. She didn't know if he wanted kids or not, or if he did, how many. It felt irresponsible to her to never have asked him.

"That's wonderful," Sam crowed. "I'll hang in there. I'll do everything my doctor says to keep my brain in the here and now. I know West wants kids. He used to tell me when he was little that he was going to have ten kids, all boys."

Katerina laughed abruptly at the image that came to mind. Her, with a never-ending pregnant belly and a pack of mischievous boys at her feet. Her eyes swung back to West. He was smiling at her gently. "I don't want ten anymore," he told her.

"Nine?" she asked and he chuckled.

She ran her thumb lightly over the back of his hand. "Want to start with two?" she asked softly.

"Two sounds good," he responded with a lopsided smile, his deep voice rumbling deliciously. Katerina felt a shiver of desire go through her. *Hers, he was all hers, soon to be her husband. And if they wanted to have children, there was nothing stopping them. Not money issues, not dangerous killers, not hounding press. They were in charge of the rest of their lives.*

The people at the table began talking again as Katerina and West gazed at each other, sending secret messages of love and commitment back and forth.

## Chapter 5

Jordan waved one more time as Katerina disappeared into the elevator with West, then turned to Blaise. "She's going to come get me at ten in the morning. We're getting our hair done and then we'll get my dress, then have lunch and meet you guys at the wedding site later."

Blaise reached for her hand and threaded their fingers together. "But tonight you're all mine," he said with a sly grin.

Jordan smiled cautiously back. She'd been a little disappointed on the airplane when Blaise had shot down the idea of the mile high club. But she'd also been a little relieved. Of course she didn't want him to lose his job, and she also wanted their first time to be something special, and she wasn't sure if being banged in a tiny toilet would have been.

Blaise pulled her to the back of the hotel lobby and she followed willingly. She could hear the waves pounding on the shoreline outside, and they sounded lovely. Maybe they could find a beach cabana and do a little making out before heading upstairs to finally consummate this relationship.

The doctor had been amazed at Blaise's progress and had cleared him for all physical activity, even for returning to work. Jordan shuddered when she

thought about that. She loved the idea that Blaise was a cop, that his very job definition made him a badass, but she hated the idea of him actually being on the streets and being shot at. Look at what had already happened. A bullet in his chest.

Blaise pulled her out the back door and her thoughts broke up and were carried away by the tropical breeze on her face. The temperature was perfectly lovely, and the night air smelled of salt and flowers. The ocean undulated a mere twenty feet away down the sandy beach. She lifted her face to the wind and took a deep breath, feeling joy spread through her soul. She was so lucky to be here in Hawaii, and with Blaise.

Blaise stopped walking and she ran into him abruptly. He folded her into his arms and lowered his mouth to hers for a soft kiss, their first one in the Hawaiian breezes. It felt good, and she didn't know what to pay the most attention to - the feeling of his lips on hers, the brush of his stubble on her cheeks, the tall length of his body pressed against her, or the sweet trade winds kissing them both, lifting her hair and cooling their bodies.

She closed her eyes as Blaise plunged a hand into her tresses and drew her in closer, making her breath catch in her throat. The passion in his kiss was overflowing, sending throbs of need and want and yes through her body, all the way to her toes and back. She melted into his embrace, all thoughts pushed away for the moment.

Blaise finally pulled away and Jordan sagged against him. She had no strength or breath left. She was completely under his spell. She opened her eyes and saw his face, bathed in moonlight, a knowing and satisfied expression on it.

"Wow," she breathed and he chuckled softly, then kissed her again, a chaste kiss that made her feel loved and special.

Blaise began to walk again, pulling her towards the sand. She caught up with him, striding close enough to rub elbows and hips with him, then looked up at the moon. "Is it a full moon?" she asked, gazing at the white orb suspended over the water. Pleasant sights and sounds were coming at her from all sides.

"Almost. Tomorrow is the full moon," Blaise said.

"How can you tell?"

"I always know when the full moon is. I track it."

Surprise shot through Jordan. "Why?"

Blaise shrugged but didn't say anything for a few moments. When he spoke, she could hear the mischievousness in his tone. "Because I'm a werewolf."

Before Jordan could laugh, Blaise stopped again and pulled her around to face him. His mouth fell on hers with more passion than before. Their tongues tangled together deliciously. Jordan felt him nipping at her lips and heat rushed

to her core. God, she wanted him! He was driving her crazy! She couldn't believe she'd managed to hold him back for almost three weeks and now she was the one who was suffering.

His lips traced a sizzling trail down her chin to her collarbone where he nipped her again, causing soft thrills to shoot straight to her breasts and her sex.

She moaned at the sensation, "Are you going to eat me?" she asked, trying to tease back.

"Yes," he replied. "You're my dinner, my dessert, and my breakfast."

Jordan whimpered as his hands circled her waist and dropped to her ass, squeezing lightly. *What were they doing out here on the beach? They needed a bed!*

She broke apart from him and tried to pull him back to the hotel. He stood tall and firm and no amount of pulling would get him to move.

"Blaise," she said, her voice low and needy, "Take me back to our room, now."

"Let's walk a little more," he said, his voice light, his eyes flashing in the moonlight.

Jordan pouted. "You don't want me." She knew she was being ridiculous but she hated not getting her way.

Blaise laughed, his voice mingling with the waves. He pulled her to him and spoke low in her ear. "I want you. I want you like I want to draw my next breath, like I want to stay alive, like I want food and water. I want you like I've never wanted another woman in my life."

Jordan gasped at his words. Hot, burning need ran through her. Her sex throbbed and a tiny thrill shot through her clit, making her knees give way slightly. She burned to get his hands down there, his tongue, his cock, anything that would give her the release she was looking for. Or maybe he could just say more things like that. More things that made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

"Come on you big caveman, you can have me already, back at the room. Why won't you go?" Jordan panted, trying not to whine.

Blaise kicked off his shoes and took a step backwards into the sand. "Because the wanting feels good. And because when I finally take you, you're not going to be able to handle it. I want to give you a little time to prepare yourself."

Jordan kicked out of her heels and giggled. "Is that a promise?"

"Yes," Blaise replied simply.

Jordan raised an eyebrow and her heartbeat kicked up a notch. She hadn't had sex with a man in way too long. Almost two years. Maybe she *wouldn't* be

able to handle it.

"Let's leave our shoes here and walk a little ways," Blaise said, putting their shoes in a neat line under a sea grape bush.

"Fine," Jordan muttered, ready to lead where he followed, but not wanting him to know that. She could wait if he could. Even though all it would take for her was the tiniest bit of friction ...

The warm sand flowed over Jordan's toes as they walked. Jordan closed her eyes and smiled blindly at the moon as Blaise led her to the waterline. The sand became cooler, then stopped flowing, then packed hard and wet under her feet. An incoming wave swirled around her ankles. Blaise's pant cuffs were getting wet, but he walked on, not seeming to notice.

They walked in silence, holding hands, for a lover's age. The beach seemed endless and perfect. Blaise stopped and looked around, then began unbuttoning his shirt. "Want to swim?" he asked, laying his shirt out on the dry sand.

Jordan looked around too. The lights and hotels had stopped in a line long before. The beach was secluded, a large rock blocking them on one side, and the empty beach stretching out on the other. They seemed to be completely alone, the twinkling lights of the city only a mirage or part of a dream.

She eyed the water nervously. "Haven't you ever read Jaws?"



"I watched the movie," Blaise said, dropping his pants to reveal a sculpted abdomen divided only by dark boxers.

"This is how it starts," Jordan said, eyeing his muscular legs and back in appreciation. If only he'd take those boxers off so she could get a look at the goods. He made no move to do so and she tried to convince him to stay on shore. "She goes swimming at night alone, and the shark comes up and eats her."

Blaise looked out over the water. "I don't think there's a lot of sharks here."

Jordan was about to say *there's sharks everywhere*, but then she wondered why she was arguing. She was about to get one thing that she wanted. Less clothes on the both of them. And maybe Blaise would get a surprise or two.

She stripped her dress over her head while Blaise was still turned away from her, then shed her bra and underwear in a flash. She walked past him, and heard his breath intake, a smile of satisfaction on her face.

"If a shark eats me, you won't get to," she called over her shoulder, then plunged into the waves, being careful to keep her hair above the water. She was putting on a bit of a show, but didn't want to actually swim. The water was warm, almost like a bath tub.

But the warm wetness felt so good on her naked body. It surrounded her like a skilled lover, reaching all her private places at once, lapping at her nipples,

caressing her sex. Jordan lifted her feet off the bottom and treaded water, drinking in the feeling. The moonlight sparkled off the waves, making it seem as if she were swimming in jewels.

Strong arms surrounded her from behind, circling her waist, brushing the bottoms of her breasts. Jordan smiled and whirled around in the water, placing her hands on Blaise's broad shoulders and wrapping her legs around his torso.

She gasped as she felt something steely and rock hard between them, pushing at her. "Is that what I think it is?" she gasped, looking into Blaise's eyes.

"I don't know, you better check it out," he said, his face stoic and gorgeous.

Jordan tightened her grip on Blaise with her legs, even as his hands stole around to her ass to hold her up. She shivered and her eyes widened in surprise as one of his fingers grazed her anus. Had he meant to do that? He grinned and she still didn't know.

She looked down, but could see nothing except swirling water. She reached one hand beneath the waves, stealing it down slowly through silky wetness, till it met something unmistakable, something completely unclothed. Jordan blinked and licked her bottom lip. It was what she thought it was, and it was huge! No wonder he was confident.

Jordan dropped her other hand to him and grasped his cock tightly, her

hands exploring, kneading, squeezing. Blaise tilted his head back and moaned, and Jordan stroked him relentlessly, glad to be the one in control for the first time since they'd gotten on the airplane.

Jordan ran her fingers up and down his length, then rubbed him again, creating a sultry rhythm that she knew he wouldn't be able to resist. She wanted to see him. Wanted to taste him. Wanted him inside her, every inch of him - but for now, she would take this, this sensual moment that belonged just to the two of them and nature herself.

Blaise moaned again and shifted backwards, causing water to slosh around them. He began stepping towards shore. Jordan opened her mouth to protest but Blaise fixed her with a stare that stopped her cold. She wasn't in charge anymore.

Blaise took her mouth again, harder this time, with urgency, as she stroked him the same way. He carried her out of the water and onto the sand and she lost her grip on him as he had to hoist her higher. She let out a whine of protest but the ocean winds carried it away.

Blaise bent and deposited her gently on his clothes, being careful not to stir up any sand. Jordan watched him through slitted eyes, wondering where this fun little incident was going. Nowhere? Or all the way, right here on the beach?

She knew what she wanted.

## Chapter 6

Blaise carefully placed his knees on either side of her, kneeling on his clothes, water dripping off of him onto her. He dropped down on one elbow and moved his mouth to her breast for the first time. Jordan flung her head to the sand as sensations shot through her. She bucked her hips upward, the earlier throbbing doubling and trebling as the night air kissed her sex. Her body ached and begged for release, her cells chanting Blaise's name.

Her right hand stole below her waist of its own accord. All it would take was one little rub, one tiny flick in the right spot, and she knew where that spot was. Then she could relax a little, focus on Blaise. Finally get her mouth on him in the way she wanted to.

Blaise saw her movement and caught her wrist, pinning it above her head. He released her nipple. "Oh no you don't, my little minx. Only I get to make you come tonight," he growled.

Jordan whimpered and bucked her hips again. "Please Blaise, I want ... I want."

"I know what you want, baby, and don't worry, you'll get it," he told her, releasing her hand and kissing the water droplets off her abdomen. The sound of

the waves crashing on the shore was replaced by Jordan's blood pounding in her ears as she dropped her hands to Blaise's head. This was the most sensual experience of her life and she was so crazed with lust and need she could barely take it all in.

His kisses trailed further down until she was gasping and arching like a cat. Blaise parted her folds gently and blew lightly on her clit, making the breath whoosh out of her lungs in exasperation. It was almost enough. Almost what she was looking for.

And then the velvet slide of tongue on soft flesh came and Jordan unraveled. "Blaise!" she cried into the darkness, as her climax exploded outward, making her and the ocean one as she flowed on waves of pleasure so extreme she gritted her teeth against the scream that wanted to follow her declaration of bliss. She writhed and wriggled, hands twined in Blaise's hair, alternately trying to pull him away and push him down farther.

Finally, she could take no more. She curled and twisted away from him, panting like she'd run a race. Blaise moved next to her and she collapsed in a heap of arms and legs, thoughts and desires nonexistent.

When Jordan finally opened her eyes, Blaise stared down at her, a self-satisfied grin on his face. She smiled back.

"You planned this," she accused, loving that he did.

"I did," he said just loud enough to be heard over the waves. "Is a secluded beach a decent replacement for a crowded airplane?"

"You," she growled in mock anger. "Wait till I get my hands on you ..."  
She looked down at his muscular body, thrilled to see his cock still standing at attention. "... and my mouth."

She sat up quickly and put her hands on him, then lowered her lips to his thickening erection. He moaned lightly and lifted his body to slide over and take her place on his clothes. "You don't have to, Jordan," he whispered, his eyes closed, his head thrown back in surrender.

She didn't respond. She wanted to, and she would show him. Give him what he had given her. Take what little control she could.

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Blaise willed himself to relax for just a second, to try to enjoy more than just the mind-blowing sensations coming from his groin. The moonlight shone on his face and warm sand shifted underneath him. Waves pounded, slower than his beating heart, but in a similar rhythm. He wanted to soak it all in, remember this forever. He looked down at Jordan's pretty face, completely intent and

engrossed on the task at hand. He thought he'd never seen anything quite as gorgeous as she was at that moment.

He had been right, Jordan was a wildcat, but he'd only been able to taste her for a few short moments. He couldn't wait to take her back to the room and indulge in every fantasy he'd been nurturing for the past few weeks, once the initial edge was taken off of both of their desires. He had a plan, and it included a lot of teasing, a ton of payback for the last few weeks. He wanted to hear her beg.

Jordan swirled her tongue around the head of him and he vocalized hotly, loving the sensation. Loving his life. Loving the woman who was working to bring him to his own personal ecstasy.

"Jordan," he growled, feeling his balls tighten, knowing he was right on the edge. The moon watched passively as he tried to give Jordan a warning, and as she chose to ignore it, sucking him, stroking him, bringing him more pleasure than one man should be able to experience. He abandoned himself to his release, stiffening as he spilled into her mouth.

When he recovered, Jordan was at his side, watching him exactly as he had watched her. He smiled up at the goddess above him as the moonlight sparkled in her hair.

"I think I'm prepared now," she said.

Blaise laughed and shook his head. She was clever, his girl. He wanted to remember that.



## Chapter 7

Katerina stepped out of the elevator and turned around to watch West, a bemused look on her face. "Can I at least walk to Jordan's room by myself? Or are you coming with me?"

He stepped out of the elevator after her and crowded her up against the hallway wall, nuzzling her cheek and kissing her ear. "I'm just going to miss you today, that's all," he said.

"You aren't even supposed to be seeing me right now," Katerina said.

West put his hand over his eyes and continued to kiss her. Katerina giggled and caught his lips for one deep kiss. She broke the kiss and stepped backwards, away from him. "I'll see you in eight hours," she said.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Shepherd," he called after her, his hand still over his eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too," Katerina cried over her shoulder and then took off at a run. When she reached Jordan's door she banged on it excitedly. "Jordan, it's me!"

No one answered or said anything for a moment and Katerina knocked

louder. She bet they had stayed up way too late last night. Oh well, coffee would be their first stop.

Finally, the door opened and Jordan peaked out of a completely darkened room, a white sheet draped loosely around her. "Sorry, come in," she whispered and retreated into the shadow.

Katerina followed her in, trying to get her eyes to adjust to the low light. Katerina looked around curiously. A chair was knocked over and clothes were spilling out of an overturned suitcase. Most of the bed sheets and quite a few pillows were on the floor. Katerina saw Blaise sprawled, snoring lightly, in the middle of the bed, obviously naked, only a tiny sliver of sheet covering his manhood. She looked away quickly.

"I'll just wait for you in the hall," she whispered furiously at Jordan's back as Jordan picked through a pile of clothes, looking for something to wear.

Jordan waved her hand and Katerina fled the room, blushing furiously. That had been much more of Blaise than she had wanted to see.

A few minutes later, Jordan came out, her face stripped clean of makeup, tying her hair back in a ponytail.

They headed for the elevator. "Wow, you wore him out," Katerina said.

Jordan grinned. "Yeah, I did."

Katerina laughed and shook her head. "West sure was wrong about you two."

Jordan cocked her head in curiosity. "Wrong about what?"

Katerina waved her hand at Jordan, then pressed the elevator button. "Oh nothing, West just thought you guys hadn't had sex yet."

Jordan grabbed her hand and spoke urgently. "We hadn't. Last night was the first time."

Katerina giggled. "Really? How was it?" she asked, only feeling a tiny twinge of guilt for discussing sex with Jordan after the hard time she had given West. They were girls. They were supposed to talk about sex. Guys were just supposed to grunt and nod and maybe swear a lot.

"Amazing," Jordan gushed. The elevator doors dinged open and Katerina stepped inside, Jordan crowding right up next to her, her face animated. "Better than amazing. The kind of sex that makes you want to tie the guy up in your basement so you can get it any time you want it."

Katerina gaped at Jordan for a moment and then threw her head back and laughed. Jordan grabbed her hand. "That's not all," she said, her voice low, as the elevator doors opened and they exited, walking through the lobby. "We did it on the beach!"

Katerina squeaked and covered her mouth.

"Well, not *it*, not on the beach, but we did *stuff*," Jordan corrected.

"The beach behind the hotel?" Katerina asked, astonished.

"No, we walked down a bit. Towards the end. There was no one down there."

"Well I should hope not! What if someone saw you?"

Jordan shrugged. "As long as we didn't get arrested, I don't care if anybody watched."

"Someone could have recorded you," Katerina hissed. "You could already be all over the Internet."

Jordan considered. "If they did, they did. But there was no one close enough to get our faces." She dropped Katerina a wink. "I'll have to look around on the Internet later though. It was hot. If there's a video of it, I want to see it."

Katerina stopped dead in her tracks, watching Jordan flounce through the lobby towards the ornate exit doors. How could Jordan not care if people had watched her have sex? How could she seem to be excited about it? Katerina thought she would die of embarrassment if someone saw her have sex.

Jordan walked out into the overgrown garden that was the hotel's front

walk, then turned around and motioned for Katerina. Katerina hurried to catch up with her.

"Where we going first? Are we taking a cab?" Jordan asked, the earlier subject forgotten.

"West said he got us a car," Katerina replied, looking around. The only vehicle in the area that didn't have people climbing in or out of it was a black, shiny limousine.

Katerina and Jordan's eyes settled on it at the same time. As they watched, a man in a dark suit exited the driver's seat and ran around to the back door, opening it and looking at them expectantly.

Jordan clapped her hands together. "Oh I just love that man of yours," she cried and hurried towards the limo.

"Me too," Katerina said under her breath and followed.

By the time Katerina reached the limousine, Jordan was already looking over the selection of wine. The driver introduced himself and asked if their first stop was the Ala Moana Dress Shop. Katerina confirmed that it was, then climbed into the back and settled next to Jordan, who was holding out a glass of sparkling champagne to her.

Katerina shook her head but Jordan insisted. "Just a sip, Kat. It's your

wedding day. If ever there was a day for celebration, this is it."

Katerina acquiesced and took the slim glass.

Jordan clinked her glass together with Kat's. "To my friend Katerina, who deserves this happiness more than anybody I know. May you always walk in sunshine. May you never want for more. May angels rest their wings right beside your door."

Katerina took a sip and felt the bubbles go straight to her head. She smiled around her glass. "That was beautiful. What is that from?"

Jordan waved her words away. "I've got a million of them. I think it's an old Irish toast. My grandma used to say one at the dinner table every night instead of a prayer. That's why I am the perfect bridesmaid. "

Katerina laughed as the limousine pulled away from the hotel and took off through the Waikiki traffic.

"You're the perfect bridesmaid because you're my best friend, Jordan. I'm so glad you got to come out, and I'm even more thrilled to see you and Blaise together. Who would have thought that it would've worked out?"

Jordan barked a laugh. "Not me. Do you have any idea how many nights I dreamed about him, fantasized about the tall, handsome cop who saved me? Imagined the way he'd be in bed? What kind of lover he would be? What kind of

person he would be? I just knew he'd be someone who would always protect me, someone who would never hurt me. A man who would always be true and faithful, and who would always do his best to make me happy. You know, like the prince is supposed to be in the Disney movie."

Katerina sighed. "Perfect, you mean."

Jordan nodded. "Yeah, I do mean that. And so far he is."

"West too," Katerina said, watching wistfully out the window at the beach sliding by.

"Of course he is, sweetheart," Jordan said. "That's why you're marrying him."

Katerina felt a secret smile tug at her lips. That *was* why she was marrying him. It was going to happen in, oh, about seven hours.

Before they knew it, the limousine double parked in front of a busy section of street. The driver got out and ran around to their door. He handed Katerina a card as she exited the vehicle. "Call me at this number when you are done and I will meet you right here," he said.

The two women made their way into the dress shop and waited for someone to notice them. A leggy blonde in a short black dress made her way over to them quickly and asked if she could help them.

"I'm Mrs. Katerina Shepherd," Kat said, squeezing Jordan's hand in glee at her first use of her married name. "I'm here to pick up my dress and my friend here is going to pick one out."

"Of course Mrs. Shepherd. I have it right in the back. I will get it for you and then we will find a dress for your friend. You can wait in the chairs by the dressing room there."

Katerina nodded and the two of them sat down where they had been indicated.

The woman came back quickly, holding a plastic garment bag with Katerina's dress inside it. She pulled it out and placed it on a hanger inside one of the dressing rooms. "Please try the dress on, Mrs. Shepherd. We want to make sure you need no final alterations."

Katerina nodded and stepped inside the tiny room, her heart beating hard in her chest. She couldn't believe this day was finally here. West had hired a wedding consultant, Pamela, to make most of the plans, since he and Katerina didn't know the island and were enjoying their pre-wedding vacation a bit too much to make a ton of decisions. Pamela had been the one who suggested this pattern and style.

She quickly undressed and slipped into her wedding dress. She looked at herself in the mirror, nodding faintly. She thought it still fit her perfectly. It was



a modern recreation of a vintage Hawaiian print wedding dress, floor length, and white with green, flowery, quilt like patterns running from bodice to toe, directly down the center, and larger green patterns down the sides. West would be wearing white slacks and a white shirt with a matching pattern. The sales lady from a week before had explained to them that many couples getting married in Hawaii chose to wear matching patterns. It was one thing that made Hawaiian weddings special.

Katerina stepped out of the dressing room and walked towards Jordan, a small smile on her face. She didn't know what Jordan would think of their unorthodox choice. In fact, she wasn't sure what she thought of it anymore, but it was too late to change her mind now.

Jordan pressed her lips together and her face looked pinched. Katerina's heart fell. So she had made a mistake in choosing this dress. Tears tried to fly to her eyes but she bit them back. She wasn't supposed to cry on her wedding day.

"You don't like it?" Katerina asked, her heart in her shoes.

Jordan took a deep breath and Katerina knew no matter what came out of her friend's mouth, it would be the truth. She could always count on that with Jordan. "It's cute. It's adorable. But your first wedding shouldn't be cute or adorable. It should be breathtaking."

Jordan's words cut like a knife through Katerina's mood and the tears

pushed harder to come to the surface.

"Not first," she said softly. "This will be my only wedding."

"Exactly!" Jordan said. "When you and West are fifty and renewing your vows at the same place where you got married with your twelve grandchildren running around your feet, that's when you wear a dress like this. But this time you do it right. White lace, satin. You can add some beautiful Hawaiian touches if you like, but I really think you would enjoy the memory of your wedding more if it were traditional." She stood up and took Katerina's hand. "I know you, Katerina, and I don't think this is what you really want." She waited a beat and stared into Katerina's face, where the tears were now dripping. "Is it?"

"I don't know," Katerina said softly around her tears. "West liked it. We had an appointment that afternoon to go parasailing. We didn't want to run late. He has a matching shirt. They said a dress like this is good for a wedding on the beach. That satin will just get ruined."

Jordan handed Katerina a tissue that had appeared as if from nowhere.

"Besides," Katerina said. "It's too late now. We're getting married in a few hours. West already has his outfit with him. He'll look stupid if I wear something else."

"It's never too late," Jordan said. She whipped her phone out of her pocket, then peered into Katerina's face once more. "Katerina, think about your

pictures, your memories of this day. Do you want cute, or do you want stunning?"

"Stunning," Katerina sobbed. She knew Jordan was right.

"Sit down. Have some tea. Leave it to me," she said, then motioned to the sales woman and disappeared.

Katerina sat while tea appeared beside her, and tried to get herself under control. She snuffled and tried to make apologies to the woman who brought her the tea, then just sat in silence, wondering what was going on.

Twenty minutes later, Jordan came back. "Katerina, take the dress off. We're going to a bridal shop two doors down." She motioned to the saleswoman. "Wrap the dress up please, we still want it."

When Katerina came back out of the dressing room, Jordan said, "West is totally on board. He says spend as much as you want, the card he gave you doesn't have a limit." She dropped her voice. "That's a good man you got there."

Katerina stood and retreated to the sales counter to pay for the dress she didn't know when she would wear now. But Jordan was here. Jordan would make sure things went perfectly. She knew it.

## Chapter 8

Katerina gazed out the window as the limousine sped towards the North Shore. The litter of traffic and highways fell away, replaced by palm trees, open fields, beaches on one side and mountains on the other.

Her hand went to her hair and patted it gently to make sure everything was still in place. She stole a glance at herself in the dim reflection of the retaining wall between her compartment and the driver's compartment. Her hair was twisted in an elegant updo, in a beautiful style she had never worn before. Her hand stole out to caress her silk, exquisite, cap-sleeved, pearl-adorned wedding dress with the fit ending just under her bottom, where it would then flare out like a ballroom gown.

This dress hadn't come with a veil, and the shoes were nothing more than pearl-lined straps that fit over one toe, off-setting the luxuriousness with simplicity. She was in love with the dress, and she hoped she could pull it off.

They had spent three hours in the wedding shop, trying on dress after dress, until the woman had brought out this one and Katerina had known she had to have it. It had needed a slight nip in the waist to make it fit perfectly and that had taken another hour. Jordan picked the first dress they offered her, but

Katerina had to admit it was gorgeous. An off the shoulder, plum-colored, pouf-skirt, that set off her hair and skin tone perfectly.

They had skipped the planned manicure and pedicure, grabbed a quick lunch, and then gotten their hair and makeup done. They now had only an hour and a half before sunset, the perfect time to take wedding pictures. Katerina wondered if West was already waiting for her at the private cove next to Turtle Bay where their wedding would be held. At least the weather was perfect. Hot, a bit of a breeze to cool the senses, puffy clouds on the horizon, and the sun racing them to their destination.

Katerina forced herself to take a deep breath. They would make it. She had the perfect dress, and she would make it in time for the perfect wedding, she knew it.

Jordan sat to the left of her, typing away on her phone.

Katerina stilled her own thoughts and craned her neck to see over Jordan's shoulder. "Who are you talking to?"

"Blaise, I'm just making sure everything is ready up there."

Katerina's eyes fell on the words *fuck you until you scream*, and she pulled back quickly, a blush flying to her cheeks. She covered her mouth with her hands and giggled.

Jordan glanced over at her. "What? He said everything is fine. And now he's telling me what we're going to do tonight." A grin tugged at her lips.

Katerina giggled harder. "Oh my God, remind me never to look at your phone again."

"Don't ever look at my phone again. You might see something that will tarnish your innocence."

"Ok." Katerina sank back into her seat, shaking her head. "It's *my* wedding night, you know."

"What? Other people can't have sex on your wedding night?" Jordan leaned over, putting her phone in Katerina's lap. "Quit complaining or I'll show you the dick pic he sent me this morning."

Katerina covered her eyes quickly, cupping her hands so as not to smudge her makeup. "Please don't. I could go happily to my grave without ever seeing Blaise's dick."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew how big it was," Jordan said quickly, perfect confidence in her voice. "I bet he's got a good two inches on West."

Katerina sat up straight, outraged. "You don't know that! West is big too, you know! Way above average!"

"Maybe you're right. Here, take a look and tell me whose is bigger,"

Jordan said, holding out her phone.

Katerina slapped her hands to her eyes, forgetting completely about her makeup, as she howled laughter. "No! Keep it away from me! I swear, Jordan, I don't want to see it."

"You don't know what you're missing," Jordan said, with true regret in her voice. "Got any in your phone of West? I could take a look ..."

Katerina peeked out between two fingers, making sure Jordan's phone was nowhere in sight. She dropped her hands. "I most certainly do not! West has never sent me a dick pic!"

Jordan lifted her chin sharply. "Text him. Tell him to send us one. I bet it would look nice in his wedding suit."

Katerina shook her head slowly, her mouth falling open and her giggles finally trailing away. "You're crazy. I'm not asking West for a picture of his dick. And if he sent me one, I wouldn't show it to *you*."

Jordan shrugged as if it didn't matter, and she had won the contest by default. "You shouldn't be so gullible."

Katerina gaped wider, feeling silly now. "What - you - what?" she stuttered.

Jordan laughed and flipped her phone around so Katerina could see the

screen. "He never sent me a dick pic. I was kidding."

Katerina pinched the bridge of her nose. Jordan was too much sometimes.

Jordan looked at the window. "We're almost there, have another drink, you need to loosen up. I was just trying to get you to laugh."

Katerina giggled again, lightly. It had worked. She took the offered glass of champagne and drank half of it. She did need to loosen up. This was her wedding and she wanted to be happy, not nervous.

She caught Jordan's eye. "I'll bet you a hundred dollars you do have at least one dick pic on your phone."

Jordan raised her eyebrows. "That's money you'd lose."

"Let me see."

Jordan held out the phone but Katerina held up her hands. "Never mind." She decided she didn't need to know for sure either way.

The limousine slowed and began to turn off of the road into a parking lot. Jordan leaned forward quickly to look at the window. "Is this it?"

"This is the boutique where we get dressed. The hotel is another ten minutes up the road and the cove is a ten minute walk past that."



"We have to walk?" Jordan said, eyeing her heels.

"No, they have an ATV that will take us to the beach."

The limo pulled into the parking lot and a tall, slender woman with flyaway black hair and a mocha complexion came quickly down the steps to greet them.

"That's Pamela, our wedding coordinator," Katerina said.

Pamela pulled open the door before the driver could put the vehicle in park. "Girls," she started, her energy preceding her. "Let's go, let's go, we have to get you beautiful."

She motioned the women inside the boutique and admonished them to go put on their dresses. Katerina retreated to her own private dressing room, feeling surreal. This was it. It was finally here. She pulled off her clothes and began to dress, starting with the white lace corset and tiny panties chosen specifically for under the dress. She then put on her foot covering, and finally stepped into the dress, being careful not to bunch the satin.

Jordan knocked on the door. "Do you need some help with your zipper?"

Katerina opened her door gratefully. Jordan's face lit up when she entered the room. She whistled. "You're going to knock West on his ass."

Katerina turned around, eyeing her reflection in the mirror. She looked

nothing like herself. She looked more ... more. More elegant, more beautiful, more sophisticated. She was suddenly reminded of how West used to see her - how she saw herself when she had looked at West's thoughts and feelings using the hated sense and power she used to have. But this time she really looked that way.

Jordan zipped her up and smiled at her in the mirror, clasping her hands together. "I can't believe how beautiful you are, Kat. You're like a princess."

Katerina turned around and took her friend's hand. She felt the tears begin to flow again. "Thanks Jordan," she whispered. "You look great too, I love your dress."

"No crying," Jordan choked out, her own eyes shining brightly. "Hold on." Jordan disappeared, then reappeared with tissues, taking one for herself and giving one to Kat.

They left the dressing room and walked out into the small boutique, Katerina feeling strangely shy.

Pamela gasped when she saw them and held her arms wide, taking Katerina into a soft hug. "Beautiful. Let's give you the finishing touches."

She hurried over to the counter and opened a plastic container. "This is a haku lei, and I ordered it for you when I thought you were going to wear something understated. But it just won't do now."

Katerina peeked at the lei in the container. It was circular, and smaller than the lei West had ordered for her when they arrived. Instead of being made with only one or two flowers, it consisted of a brilliant splash of pointed, green fern leaves, accented with white and purple flowers. It took Katerina's breath away.

Pamela took out the lei and laid it on the counter, then reached into a drawer for scissors. Katerina winced as Pamela cut the lei into pieces. "It's supposed to go on your head, but it's too heavy for a gown that amazing. We'll fix that." She cut a small portion and pulled a bobby pin from a small pile. "Turn your head."

Katerina did, and Pamela fixed one green leaf with one white and one purple flower to Katerina's hair in the back. "Now the other way." Katerina turned again and another piece of the lei was pinned to the other side.

Katerina looked in the wide mirror on the wall, scarcely able to believe she was looking at herself. Pamela had been right. The flowers looked wonderful the way she had done them.

"Now you," Pamela said to Jordan. "How about a piece over just one ear for you?"

Jordan nodded and Pamela finished the job. "Ok girls, we gotta go. The sun sets in forty minutes."

Pamela handed Katerina her bouquet, a striking, trailing garland of more purple, white, plus some pink flowers, then she grabbed all the bags and they flew out the door, Katerina carefully picking her way over the parking lot so as not to hurt her practically bare feet or dirty her dress.

Pamela chattered the entire way to the hotel, mostly about the lighting at sunset and how the photographer and videographer would position themselves. Katerina felt a strange, liquid anxiousness trying to push its way into her consciousness. She was hyper-aware of her heart pounding, the breath gasping in and out of her lungs, and a strange tingling in her hands. Joys and jitters clamored in her head.

Jordan handed her another glass of champagne, then rubbed one of her shoulders. "It's almost time," she whispered, pitching her voice low to be heard under the higher tone of Pamela.

They pulled into the parking lot of the hotel and Katerina saw the four-seater ATV waiting for them. She pushed out of the car and realized she would never make it through the wedding. "I have to pee," she said to no one in particular, her voice jumping.

Pamela pointed her to the hotel. "The bathrooms will be on your left. We'll wait for you. I'll hold your bouquet."

Katerina walked in the hotel lobby, enjoying the cool air-conditioning. A

small girl who was standing behind her parents at the check-in desk, no more than four years old, locked eyes with her, watching her pick her way carefully through the foyer.

The little girl finally ran to her, ignoring her parent's warnings. "Are you a princess?" the girl asked.

"No, but I feel like one," Katerina said, meaning every word of it.

Katerina found the bathroom, down a rather long hallway, and quickly did her business, staring at herself in the mirror as she washed her hands, carefully keeping her dress away from the counter. So this was why women couldn't wait to get married. To spend one day looking and feeling like this.

She dried her hands and pushed open the door, holding up her dress carefully. She turned quickly to head back down the hallway and ran right into a man who had been standing behind the door. He looked like a maintenance man, or maybe someone working on the electricity in the hotel. He had on dark sunglasses, a non-descript blue jumpsuit, and heavy gloves.

"Sorry," she mumbled, and tried to get out of his way. She stepped to the right at the same time as he did. She tried left, and he stepped that way too. His gloved hands grasped her upper arms and she looked at him, eyes wide, not sure what was happening.

"Katerina!" Jordan yelled from the lobby. "Hurry, they are waiting on

us!"

The man let go of Katerina so suddenly she almost fell, then rushed past her without a word. She stared after him, confused. What had that been about?

Jordan rushed down the hallway and grabbed her by the upper arm, pulling her back the way she had come. "We've got twenty minutes or we miss the sunset, shake a leg!"

Katerina forgot completely about the strange man and rushed along the hallway with Jordan. They exited the lobby, climbed into the ATV, and were off. Katerina watched the sunset over the horizon, trying not to stare at it. It was a brilliant, deep orange, and hung huge over the steel-gray water below it. In a few moments, a hidden cove opened up before them, its white sand perfectly framed by the vivid orb descending towards the horizon.

Agnes sat in a chair off to one side, but directly in front of her, five men stood strong and tall on the sand - a pastor she and West had met with a few times, Blaise, Brody, Sam, and West. Katerina's face flushed and she forgot to breathe as she looked over the men.

West had planned on wearing a simple shirt that had matched the dress Jordan had vetoed. But he stood before her in an elegant white tuxedo, complete with white shoes and a champagne-colored vest and tie, plus a purple boutonnière that was a match to one of the flowers in her hair. He also wore an

open, strikingly green, masculine, maile leaf lei that hung down to his waist and contrasted deliciously with his outfit. She'd never seen him look so handsome.

The last Katerina had heard, the other men had also planned on wearing simple Hawaiian print shirts, but Jordan had them all in black tuxedos with vests and ties that matched her gorgeous plum dress.

Katerina turned to Jordan. "How did you do all of this?"

Jordan smiled. "We knew it was important to you. So we made it happen."

Katerina took her friend's hand and squeezed it, as tears threatened to fall again. Perfection. That's what Jordan had created for her. She turned away from Jordan's warm expression and stepped out of the ATV, onto the still-hot sand. It heated her toes deliciously, contrasting nicely with the slight breeze coming off the water. In the distance, the sun dropped lower and lower, a magnificent ball of fire heading to certain watery destruction at the far edge of their view.

Her dress clung tight to her waist as the bottom flared and flapped around her ankles in the salty ocean wind. The scent of flowers reached her, and she beamed at each of her tiny wedding party in turn.

Agnes, looking lovely and cordial at the far edge of the beach. Their onlooker brought to them only by the same strange twist of fate that had flung her into the arms of West.

Sam, wiping his eyes as he nodded and radiated a divine, nervous energy over the rest of them.

Brody, his legs slightly apart, holding a wooden box in his hands and favoring her with his kindest smile yet.

Blaise, his hands clasped in front of him, next to Sam and Brody, his face displaying confidence and his eyes telling her everything was right and good.

The pastor, a man younger looking than she remembered, holding a thick book in front of him, waiting patiently for her.

Finally, West, her fiancé. Her almost-husband. Her savior and her hero. Her protector and her lover. Her guardian angel and her best friend. Her eyes settled on him and she tried to take a picture in her mind that would last for an eternity. His eyes sparkled at her and his face shone with delight and joy. As their gazes met she felt the spark, the promise between them of everything she had ever wanted and prayed for. He was for her, and she for him.

She clasped her bouquet tight to her chest and began the walk to him. The last walk she would ever take as a single woman. Her eyes fixed on the spot on the beach next to him. When she next moved from that spot, she would do so as a married woman. A partner to her soul-mate.

Her mother's presence wafted in on the breeze, enveloping her, reassuring her, spurring her on. *Thanks Mom, I love you too.*



She took the next step, and the next, over hot sand and smooth rocks, until she ended up next to her beloved. He smiled down at her and took her hand, then they both turned to the pastor, their smiles announcing their readiness.

Jordan followed behind, then stood next to Blaise as witness. The pastor turned to Katerina and addressed her, his voice mingling with the ocean waves behind him.

For Katerina, the wedding itself was both too short and an eternity. Words washed over her, prompting her to nod and smile, as the heat of her almost-husband's body beside her drove her slightly mad. Finally, the pastor turned to West and asked him to say a few words.

West turned towards Katerina and grasped both her hands. He took a deep breath, then began to speak. Katerina felt her emotions trembling inside of her, threatening to spill over at once. The energy of the moment doubled and tripled as the man she thought of as her rock began to profess his forever-love to her.

"Katerina, I wanted to say something special to you today, but I know it's all already been said before, by men much more eloquent than I. So I borrowed a few phrases from the Hawaiian poets that I hope will convey to you exactly what you mean to me."

He took another deep breath, gazed solidly into her eyes, and recited

from memory, " 'O Ku'u Aloha No 'Oe. A O Ko Aloha Ka`u E Hi`ipoi Mau.  
Ka`u Ia E Lei A`e Nei La. Ua Ola Ae Nei Loko I Ko Aloha."

Katerina's heart quickened again as the melodious sounds flowed over her. When had he had time to learn all of that?

"It means, You are indeed my love. With you joy will ever be mine. May our love last forever. Life is once more alive within me for my love of you."

West inclined his head towards her and whispered, "Thank you for loving me. I will always be yours."

Katerina bit her lower lip as her eyes and her heart overflowed. This man was so open and true and good to her, and her heart couldn't take much more.

The pastor turned to her and indicated it was her turn.

Katerina wiped her face, then tried to begin. Everything she had planned seemed to have fled right out of her head, but she didn't care. It had all been utter crap anyway. She would speak from the heart, right here and now. "West, I'm not good at this stuff either, and I've actually forgotten everything I had planned to say. So let me simply say, you are my life. You calm me, energize me, complete me, finish me, feed me, comfort me, love me, soothe me, cheer me, delight me, worship me, cherish me, and honor me. It's way more than one woman deserves and I know this. I promise you my everlasting love, my undying faith, and my ceaseless devotion." Katerina's voice broke on the final

word and her heart seemed to swell in her chest. Her throat thickened as she licked her lips and tried to go on. But West had heard enough. Without waiting for the official word, he took her in his arms and crushed his lips to hers, his tears mingling with her own.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the pastor said triumphantly. "You may continue to kiss the bride!"

Jordan let out a jubilant cry and somewhere, someone clapped excitedly, but Katerina could only pay attention to her husband. He bent her backwards and plied her with a passionate kiss that went on forever. She flung her arms around his back and felt someone pluck the bouquet from her hands so she could hold him properly.

Laughter and talking tinkled around them, but the kiss went on and on.

## Chapter 9

Later, with the pictures taken, the forms signed, and everyone piled into the same limousine, the party began in earnest. Katerina noticed Agnes seemed a little quiet, a little strained, but she couldn't spend too much time worrying about it. All eyes were on her, and everyone wanted to speak to her.

"A toast!" Sam cried out. He raised a glass that had been thrust into his hand by Jordan, who was still pouring out the rest of the champagne. "To the bride. Son, you're a handsome man, but I don't know if you'll even show up in those pictures. Katerina, you're the loveliest bride I've seen in all my sixty-four years."

Katerina blushed and thanked him.

Jordan handed out the last glass of champagne and found a spoon to bang on hers. "Another toast! Who has something else to say?" she cried.

Brody sat forward and held up his glass. "*A toast to love and laughter and happily ever after,*" he said, then clinked glasses with everyone in the backseat.

"Ooooh, good one," Jordan said. "Who else?"

Blaise and Agnes only smiled at the happy couple when Jordan looked at them so she took center stage again. "Okay, I have a few." She pressed her lips together in a look of determination and then started.

*"Here's to the groom with bride so fair, and here's to the bride with groom so rare!"*

Katerina laughed and clapped her hands together. This was a side of Jordan she had never seen before. "More," she said to her friend.

Jordan didn't even miss a beat. *"May your love be like the misty rain, gentle coming in but flooding the river - that's your department, eh West?"* She waggled her eyebrows at West and everyone laughed.

Katerina felt the stress of a lifetime fall from her. She knew the darkness was over now. Nothing could touch her ever again. Her friend would speak blessing after blessing over them and they would have the perfect life. "Another," she pleaded.

*"Without love, the world itself would not survive,"* Jordan said, looking like she was just warming up. *"May the saddest day of your future be no worse, than the happiest day of your past."*

Katerina saw Blaise looking at Jordan with a new, amazed light in his eye. She caught his gaze and winked at him. He was getting a little more than he bargained for. Probably a little more than he knew how to handle.

Jordan had a few more toasts to give. *"May the most you wish for be the least you get. May your troubles be less and your blessings be more, and nothing but happiness come through your door."* She took a swallow of her drink. "Ok, one more for all!"

She looked around at each of them in turn. *"May God be with you and bless you, May you see your children's children, May you be poor in misfortune, rich in blessings. May you know nothing but happiness from this day forward."*

Everyone held their glasses out and clinked in the center. "Hear, hear!" West boomed and Katerina felt a new, powerful emotion bloom in her chest. Had a wedding day ever been more perfect?

Jordan had been right, this was a day she could look back at and unpack carefully, no matter how bad things got, and remember that there was perfect, divine light in this world.

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West pulled Katerina into the nightclub next to their hotel excitedly. He'd rented them a balcony away from much of the noise and crowds, a place where they could relax. But he planned on partying a little, on shaking things up. He

remembered back to the first night he ever met Katerina - they'd danced that night, but they had never done it since. Now they had a lifetime of dancing ahead of them and she would be his one and only dance partner.

Fierce longing and protectiveness rose up in him. He would never let her go. She was his - she'd stood before God and witnesses and pledged to love him forever, then taken his name. He couldn't wait to get Mrs. Shepherd alone - couldn't wait to slip that silky, white dress off of her and worship the body beneath it. He planned on making sure their wedding night was as memorable as their actual wedding.

As West threaded his way through the throngs of people, he pulled out his phone and sent off a quick text. He led his small group up to their table on the second floor where they could see everyone and everything. "Put your stuff down, dance if you want to, we have this balcony until they close."

He watched Jordan pull Blaise away with a huge smile on her face. He was glad to see those two getting along so well. He'd never seen Blaise so happy, even in the face of the devastating injury he'd recently suffered. But Jordan had nursed him back to health quickly. Or maybe that had been all Katerina's doing.

His father tapped him on the shoulder. "Agnes took off. She said she can't handle loud places like this."

"Oh that's too bad," West said. "Is she feeling okay?"

Sam looked out over the dance floor. "She seemed fine. I'll check in on her later."

"Thanks, Dad," West said. Sam looked him in the eyes and West saw something simmering underneath the surface. But Sam didn't say it, he hugged his son and moved away. "I see some chicas on the dance floor I want to say hi to."

West laughed. His father thought he was still a young buck sometimes. West approved, thinking it might keep him young and slow the awful disease that had him in its grips.

Brody had already disappeared, saying hi to a stunning redhead on the way in and never even making it up to the table. West bet he'd have her back at his hotel room within a few hours. But it didn't matter - no one would be happier than he was tonight. He'd married Katerina, and that meant his happiness was assured for a lifetime.

And kids! She'd said two. A boy and a girl maybe. Or maybe two girls – two tiny replicas of their beautiful mother. Maybe they would start trying tonight. Could life get any sweeter?

He turned to Katerina and saw her tapping her feet to the music as she watched the crowds on the dance floor.

He took her hand and pulled her away from the railing, turning her to



him. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it, telling her with his eyes how much he loved her.

"Mrs. Shepherd, may I have this dance?"

She brought her hand to her mouth and covered it like a seventies pinup girl. "Why Mr. Shepherd, I'd be delighted."

West pulled her in close, unable to resist her coyness. He covered her mouth with his own and kissed her deeply, tenderly, but only for a moment. They had to get down to the dance floor and quickly.

When they reached the first floor, people parted easily for them, some whispering and pointing, probably because they still had on their wedding outfits.

The music stopped and the voice of the DJ filled the room, finding its own beat. "All right, all tight, my babes and busters. I've got one tiny request for you. Clear the dance floor one and all, stand back and feast your eyes on the first dance as husband and wife of Mr. and Mrs. West Shepherd."

Katerina's hand stiffened in West's and he pulled her close, then stepped onto the dance floor and invited her to follow. The first chords of Better Together by Jack Johnson filled the room and West saw Katerina's eyes move nervously over the crowd, who had indeed cleared the dance floor.

He tugged her gently to him and she finally looked at him. He smiled, and she smiled back. *She was his.* Silky strands of her hair fell around her face, framing it in a bewitching manner. She softened and went to him.

West pulled her to him, and they flowed around the dance floor, as people clapped and whistled.

"West, when did you do this?" she whispered in his ear.

"The moment we set the date and decided for sure it would be here in Hawaii. I knew we wouldn't have many people here to celebrate with us, so I wanted to give you the feel of a big wedding, even if I couldn't give you the big wedding."

"You're amazing," she sighed.

"I am," he told her.

"Don't get a big head, now." she laughed.

"Never."

They danced and they danced, and even when the crowds came back on the dance floor and pressed against them, West felt like they were the only two people on the planet.

## Chapter 10

Katerina allowed herself to be led away from the nightclub, back to their hotel. The hotel she had almost started to think of as home. They'd lived there for weeks now, eating every meal out, having other people clean up after them, relaxing, and delighting in their love for each other. But she would follow wherever West went.

The humid night air pressed against them. It was just after midnight, and Jordan and Blaise were still dancing the night away. Katerina was on too much of a high to feel tired herself, but she knew where they were going. To their marriage bed. Their first night of passion as husband and wife. A secret thrill went through her as she relished the thought. West always brought her to new levels of ecstasy and she knew he had something planned tonight. Something big.

He pulled her into the lobby and right past the elevators. "Aren't we going upstairs?" she asked.

"Not just yet," he said. He pulled her out the back door and she noticed at once the entrance to the pool was blocked by large partitions. In fact, the entire area of the pool that she could see was blocked from sight. A sign read, *Pool*

*area closed for private party.* Katerina could see a soft, flickering glow bouncing off the partitions, into the sky. The ocean breezes picked up her hair and rustled the flowers behind her ears.

West took her around the first partition to where a man was sitting in a chair. The man nodded. "Mr. Shepherd," he said, and stood, then put a key in the lock on the gate, letting them in, then swinging the gate shut behind them.

West led them around another partition. Beyond it lay the pool, and what Katerina could only guess to be at least a million candles, all lit, creating a soft, seductive radiance that took her breath away.

"West," she began, the tears starting in her eyes again. She'd never been romanced like this in her life. She carefully packed the memory away in the hope chest of her mind, just like the memory of the wedding. Even if he never did another romantic thing for her in her life, which seemed unlikely, she would remember this one and own it forever as proof of his love for her.

He smiled at her, cutting off her thoughts, and led her down a candle-lined path to a large cabana with a couch, table, and chairs. On the table sat more candles, strawberries, two slim glasses with an ice-bucket and champagne, and a chocolate fountain. A table in the back was lined with other food, more solid stuff, but Katerina ignored it. The only thing she was hungry for was West.

West placed her gently into one of the chairs, then fed her a strawberry.

He held a flute of champagne to her lips and watched her take a sip. "Mrs. Shepherd, your wish is my command this evening. Anything you want, it's yours. All you have to do is say the word."

Katerina sighed, her breath mingling with the breeze coming through the open flaps of the cabana. "It's so lovely, West."

"Not as lovely as you."

Katerina caught his fingers and pulled him to her. He raised an eyebrow. "Yes, Mrs. Shepherd, what is your desire?"

"Only you," Katerina said softly. "You forever and ever."

West dropped to his knees in front of her and spanned her waist with his hands. "You have me. Forever. I swear it."

He claimed her mouth, his intense need and desire obvious. Katerina ran her hands through his hair, feeling her breath flying from her lungs in pants and gasps. Their wedding had been foreplay, the dancing almost sex with their clothes on. But here they finally were, alone. West plundered her mouth, the sensual feel of his tongue sliding against her winding through her body, making her shudder with sensation.

Finally, he released her mouth and gazed into her eyes. She could feel the humid night air pressing on her. He inclined his head towards the bench at the

rear of the cabana. "I brought your swimsuit."

Katerina stood, feeling her body throb with need. West stood with her and slid his hand down her arm as she walked to her suit. She turned back to him. "You want to swim?"

He shrugged. "I want to do anything you want to do. I thought you might enjoy candlelight swimming on your wedding night. Or we could walk down to the ocean. They've cordoned off our section of beach, so it's completely private."

Katerina thought of Jordan and Blaise and the experience they'd shared out on the naked beach. Did she dare? She gave West the tiniest of grins and sashayed over to him. "Unzip me," she said, turning around.

West pulled her zipper down, slowly, his hand caressing the skin of her back. Katerina stepped out of the dress carefully and folded it, placing it on the bench next to her bathing suit. She heard a quick intake of breath behind her. She turned to see West gazing at her, lust and desire written clearly on his face.

"Now unhook me," she ordered, turning again. She could have stepped out of the corset, but she wanted his hands on her.

West did as he was told, finally pulling the corset from her body. Katerina bent, hoping he was watching closely, and rolled her panties down to the floor, stepping out of them neatly. She pulled the flowers from her hair, then the pins, and placed everything on the table, clearly feeling the masculine energy

pulsing behind her as West watched her movements. Then she walked out of the cabana, bold as love, completely naked, and dove into the deep end of the pool. Katerina opened her eyes underwater, loving the flicker of the candles above the surface of the pool, looking so much like uncertain moonlight.

She reached the far end of the pool, flipped, took a practiced breath, and headed back towards where she had left West.

She surfaced, water flowing deliciously off of her, and looked for West, still standing in the shadows of the cabana. She crossed her arms on the side of the pool and kicked her feet. "Come on in, I won't bite."

West chuckled hotly but didn't move. She saw his jacket come off, then his vest and shirt. She watched the outline of his muscles move fluidly with his actions. God, he was hot. Over six feet of muscled, man-candy. She could watch him all night. Off came his shoes, then his pants. Katerina held her breath. He pulled off his boxers, standing naked and sumptuous, only hesitating for a second. He walked toward her and Katerina could see him in the candlelight. Her eyes focused on his erection and satisfaction spread through her.

He lowered himself into the water, his cock jutting magnificently out in front of him. Before it could disappear under the surface, Katerina caught it in her hand, her tongue aching to taste him. To tease him.

She positioned herself in front of him and he groaned in anticipation.

"I'm surprised at you, Katerina," he choked out before she could get her mouth on him. Her grip and her resolve wilted.

"Surprised?" she asked.

He looked pointedly at her hand, then looked straight up at the hotel. Katerina followed his gaze. There were less balconies on this side of the hotel, only the most expensive suites faced the ocean directly, but they did exist. In her brief glance, Katerina did not see one person, but her heart leapt into her throat. She hadn't thought of the balconies!

"Oh my God!" she squeaked, grabbing West and pulling him into the water and ducking so her bare breasts dropped under the surface. West chuckled, his deep voice reverberating around the enclosed area.

"Is this what you were planning?" she hissed at him.

"I thought maybe we could take a moonlight swim, then have a little fun in the cabana," he told her, taking her in his arms. "It's open to the night air, but no one can see us in there."

"Oh," she said, laying her head on his chest.

"But I like this idea too," West said, gathering her wet hair over one shoulder and kissing her neck on the other side.

"No, West, no way," she breathed, her core heating up again, even



through the cooling effects of the water swirling around her.

"No one is watching," West rasped, the sandpaper in his voice fueling her ever-present desire for him.

"You don't know that," she offered weakly as he kissed her collarbone, his stubble raking deliciously over her soft skin, causing tingles to slither up and down her spine.

"Just give me a minute," he breathed, pulling her in closer. "You feel so good. Now that I've got you naked against me, I don't want to let you go."

Katerina allowed herself to be pulled up close to him, feeling his erection pulse hotly between them. Her skin slipped liquidly against his, the sensation only increasing her desire.

She tilted her head back, giving West greater access to her neck, but also looking up, searching for someone watching them. She saw no one, but that didn't mean anything. West's lips increased their pressure on the spots he knew to be the most sensitive on her and she sucked in a breath, caught on the cusp of a decision. No one could see anything right now that they wouldn't see on any street in the country.

She dropped her attention back to West and his talented lips. His hands slipped under her ass, pulling her closer. Katerina wrapped her legs around him and surrendered herself to him, letting him ply her with kisses, with words of

love, with hot passion that threatened to undo her.

West ran a hand up her back into her hair and she gazed directly into his eyes.

"I love you," he said, as if the words came of their own accord, as if he couldn't not say them.

"I love you too," she responded, and dropped a hand between them, finding his cock, loving the way the expression on his rugged face hardened at her touch.

With one deft movement, Katerina grasped his erection and slipped it to her entrance, feeling it throbbing there.

West's eyes widened slightly in surprise, seeming to ask her, *did she really want to do this?*

She did. "Yes, West," she breathed. She could do something out of character just this once. She could tack on a night of wild, public sex to the memories of this day she never wanted to forget.

He needed no more encouragement. He pulled her hips down sharply and filled her completely. She moaned into his neck as the sensation of fullness went on and on. She tried to wriggle her hips, create friction that would send her over the edge, but West pushed her against the wall of the pool, then pinned her

wrists to her sides, effectively holding her completely still.

He locked gazes with her, demanding her complete surrender, telling her he was in charge of their love-making. He would decide when and how she could respond. It made her mad with desire when he behaved like that and he knew it, slowly ramping it up each time they made love, trying to find her limit. So far, they hadn't found one.

Katerina whimpered and bared her neck to him. She was completely and totally his to command. Whatever he wanted, whatever he needed, whatever he demanded.

"Look at me, Katerina," he ordered.

She did. The gaze went on for an eternity, their souls uniting, having their own marriage. Katerina felt herself still and soften, even while West hardened to girded steel inside her. He stood perfectly still, molding himself to her, staring into her essence, making her wonder if the real marriage was only now occurring. Was this the moment they stopped being two and truly became one?

Almost floating in the water, with liquid pushing at her on every side and West's hard body anchoring her in place, Katerina felt swirling passion churn inside her like she'd never felt before. Her breath came in hard gasps and pants, like she was on the verge of orgasm. Her heart raced in her chest, and her core

throbbed in a heavenly pulse of bliss.

West's stare became more intense until she felt drowned in it, consumed by it. All the loving and sexy words he'd ever said to her tumbled through that gaze, making her heady with lust. Her body tingled and flushed and she felt on the verge of something, something big, even though West wasn't moving an inch.

He throbbed inside of her, and Katerina focused on the feeling. That combined with his passionate gaze were so primal, so animalistic, that she almost cried from the excess. West moved slightly and the graze of his skin against hers made her cry out. Oh God, she was so close! But she never wanted this to end!

West let go of her hands and skimmed the top of her breasts, his eyes never leaving hers. Her skin burned where he had touched it. The slight sensation raced through her body straight to her sex. She whimpered with the force of it.

West dropped his thumbs to her nipples and grazed them in slow, tortuous circles. Katerina couldn't help herself. She bucked her hips against him and leaned her head back, a low groan escaping her.

"Stop moving, Katerina, and look at me," he growled.

Katerina stopped, not knowing how in the world she managed it. She

pulled her head upright and found his ceaseless gaze.

"You're going to come for me, Katerina," he rasped, his voice low, demanding.

"I want to," she panted, her eyes never leaving his.

"Do it, baby, come all over me," he ordered. "Without moving."

Katerina clenched her inner walls once around him and he groaned, never looking away from her. She felt the cascade start immediately and she gave herself over to it completely, a low whimper escaping her. Her eyes slipped closed as her hands stole to West's shoulders and held on for dear life.

"Open your eyes," he directed. "Look at me while you come."

Katerina forced her eyes open even as her body flew apart. Pulsating, euphoric wave after wave flowed out of her womb, making her cry out, while she watched West scrutinize her in complete satisfaction.

Something about the complete stillness, the total absence of striving or seeking for the release made it that much more powerful. It went on and on as she stared at her man and tried to keep the noises escaping her low and controlled. She felt herself clench and release around West's erection again and again, an intimate caress.

"So fucking hot," West snarled under his breath, as her spasms finally

came to an end, leaving her with only a few delicious aftershocks. West withdrew only once and slammed into her, burying himself back inside her, as his face contorted and his breathing quickened. She felt his hot release spill inside her and her own satisfaction spread. The man was a God, able to make her come without even moving, and he made her feel like a Goddess in every way.

## Chapter 11

West kicked and clawed his way out of a deep even sleep, towards the something that tickled his ear and called to him.

"West, wake up, sleepyhead," Katerina said.

West mumbled and turned over, trying to pull Katerina in his arms. She scooted back, then pinned his hand to the bed and whispered in his ear again.

"Did you ever get to try guava yet?"

"No," West mumbled, then fell back asleep into dreams of the life he and his new wife were about to share.

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Sometime later, West woke up, sure the earlier conversation had just been a dream. He felt around the bed for Katerina, his eyes still closed. The memory of the night before came flooding back to him. After their erotic experience in the pool, they had made love with abandon in the cabana, then finally retired back to the suite and made love a third time before collapsing into sleep.

His hands found nothing. He was alone in the bed.

"Kat?" He called, opening his eyes to look around the suite. The room sat empty and still, except for him.

*She's in the bathroom*, he thought, but his heart gripped with electric fear. Completely awake, he stood up quickly and strode to the bathroom. The light was off and the door stood ajar. No one in there. West whirled and sprinted to the balcony. Empty.

He thought back on what had happened earlier. She hadn't said she was going out, but she must have. He hated the fear that seized him, threatening to choke the air out of him. Foreboding, worse than even the bullet that had pierced his heart, fell heavy on his midsection.

West pulled his clothes on quickly and found his phone and wallet, then ran out the door. He called Blaise's room, just to be sure, but he had a sneaking suspicion he knew where she had gone. The farmer's market. He had never told her not to go anywhere without him, not thinking it was necessary. Not wanting it to be necessary. She should be able to go anywhere she wanted. She should never have to have a bodyguard.

He hated himself a little bit for not warning her, not telling her to stay put. He knew instinctively that something bad must have happened.

Jordan answered and confirmed his second worst suspicions. No, Katerina wasn't there, and no she hadn't been there all morning.



"Jordan," he choked out. "Have Blaise meet me at the farmer's market on the corner. Tell him it's important."

He hung up the phone and prayed he was wrong, bargained with God that he would look like a fool in a few minutes. He entered the elevator and pushed the buttons impatiently, the time it took to reach the lobby seeming like a million years.

He ran through the foyer, his head swinging right and left, looking for Katerina. Nothing. West sprinted out the front doors and forced his body into a run. Within two minutes he was at the farmer's market. It encompassed a small section of the block, put up every morning for only a few hours, then taken down and rebuilt the next morning.

It was late enough, that they were already taking it down. West could see at a glance that there was nobody under the tarps who didn't work there.

*She could already be back at the room,* he chanted inside his head, much like a plea to the universe.

He ran as fast as he could, past tourists and locals alike, jumping around them and occasionally shoving his way past, earning stares and muttered curses.

West streaked by the valets and bellman at the front of the hotel and slowed to a walk, taking a closer look around the lobby. He walked straight to the front desk. The woman there smiled at him. They'd spoken to her several

times over the last few weeks but he couldn't remember her name right now. He couldn't even remember his own name. Only one name beat with his pulse inside his brain. *Katerina. Katerina.*

"Good morning, Mister Shepherd. Congratulations on your wedding," the bright young Polynesian woman told him with an authentic smile.

"Thank you," came out of his mouth automatically. He leaned forward and asked intently, "Have you seen my wife this morning?" His heart soared and clenched at the words *my wife*.

"Oh yes, she just came back from the farmer's market. I saw her in the lobby no more than fifteen or twenty minutes ago. She went towards the bathroom, and then I assume up to your room." The young woman pointed down a hallway.

West whirled and ran that way, leaving the woman confused. The hall was long and many closed doors sat on either side. Halfway down he saw a crumpled paper bag with exotic tropical flowers sticking out of the top. A lump formed in his throat and he ran to the bag, picking it up.

West ripped the birds of paradise, one of Katerina's favorite flowers, out of the bag to see what else was in it. Two guavas, sitting like bullets to his head in the very bottom of the bag.

West's heart tore in two.

West stood, completely unable to think or act for several minutes. No one passed him in the winding hallway. He finally was able to force one word through his hurting brain. *No!* The word ended his paralysis and pushed his legs into motion. He ran back the way he had come, to the elevators, and pushed the button for Agnes's floor, holding the crumpled paper bag and flowers in his hands.

When he reached Agnes's floor, he ran to her door and pounded on it. When she opened the door, he didn't say a word. Instead, thrust the bag and the flowers into her bare hands. Agnes stared at him in wonder and fear, and then he saw horror take over her expression.

"Oh no, West," she whispered. "Someone came up behind her and covered her mouth with his hand. She dropped the bag to fight."

Her horror was replaced with an all-consuming pity. "That's all I can see."

*Oh God.* West's legs buckled and he pushed up against the wall so as not to fall to the carpet. Where did he even begin to look for her?

His phone rang in his hand and he answered it automatically.

"West, I'm down here at the farmer's market. Where are you? What's the emergency?"

"Blaise, someone has Katerina," he croaked, his voice barely working.

"What?! Tell me everything."

West did his best to recount what had happened that morning. Blaise was silent for only a moment. "Okay, I'm calling the cops, and I'm going to talk to all the employees and people who were in the lobby. I'll talk to valets and bellmen also, and see if we can get a description on anybody who looked suspicious in the last thirty minutes. It's somewhere to start. Don't lose your head, we'll find her, I swear it."

West groaned into the phone and slid down the wall to the floor, his terror mounting. It seemed so inadequate. Katerina could even be dead by now.

Blaise fell strangely silent but didn't hang up, then seemed to be talking to himself. "Unless ... No."

West shot to his feet. "What? Tell me!"

Blaise started slowly. "Well, last night, at the nightclub, there was a man who seemed to be watching you and Katerina. I didn't think anything of it. Lots of people were watching you – you were still wearing your wedding clothes and you both looked so happy and vibrant – but something about him was off. I made up my mind to go talk to him, but he disappeared."

West gritted his teeth until he felt like his jaw might snap. The thought of

someone out there having kidnapped Katerina, having her in his possession for fifteen minutes now made him sick to his stomach.

"What did he look like?" West forced out.

"Not too tall, maybe five foot ten inches. He was wearing a dark Fedora pulled over his face. Plain features, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Muscular."

West forced back vomit. "I remember that guy. He sat at the small table in the corner, right?"

"That was him - look West, it doesn't mean anything by itself. Let me get the police down here, we'll have a sketch drawn up. If somebody can place him in the lobby, then we have a suspect and can get -"

West cut him off. He had an idea. "Great, Blaise, you do that."

He pressed end call and shoved the phone into his pocket, turning to Agnes who was still standing in her doorway, her face a mask of pain and grief. He grabbed her hand and pulled her into the hallway, spilling the bag to the floor. "We know who took her," he said. "I need you to tell me who he is."

Agnes did not protest. She tried to keep up with him as he pulled her into the elevator and out to the lobby. West kept his face pointed towards the double doors at the end of the large room. Let Blaise take care of what was going on down here. He had more important things to do.

He pulled Agnes to the nightclub next door and began to bang on the door. The sign out front said it would open at four in the afternoon, but he prayed someone was in there now. If not, he would break in.

After a moment, a man came to the door and shook his head, then pointed to the sign stating open hours. "Just open the door, please," West shouted. "We have to tell you something."

The man stared at him hard, and then drew back the thumb bolt, opening the door. West pushed inside. "We were here last night, and a man was here also. He kidnapped my wife this morning. We have to go upstairs and see if he left anything up there."

The man held up his hands, his face warring between pity and outrage. "There's nothing up there. The cleaning crew has already been through. They would have thrown away anything that anyone left."

West didn't have time to waste. He reached his hand out and grasped the man above the elbow, speaking with a low urgency. "Let us go upstairs to look around. You go back to whatever you were doing."

A glazed look came over the man's face and he nodded briefly, then turned around and wandered away. Agnes looked at West strangely and reached her hand out to touch him. He pushed her hand away almost angrily. "Don't worry about me right now! All that matters is Katerina!"

Agnes nodded and West pulled her up the stairs to the second floor.

"Right here," he said, pointing out the table the man had been sitting at. "He sat right in this chair and his arms were on the table all night."

Agnes went right to the table and fluttered her hands over the top of it. Her face took on a pained expression and then she touched the chair, and returned her hands to the top of the table. She closed her eyes and began to speak, her voice pinched and tight. "The plan was to take her to a plane at Hickam Air Force Base, where she was to be flown to Nevada. Another base. I can't get a name on that. It's fuzzy. I can't tell you for sure if it happened or not, I just know that's what he was thinking last night. They think she's got a weapon or something?"

West felt his heart burn in terror in his chest at her words. "Who? Who is they?"

Agnes opened her eyes and looked at him, torment filling her expression. "Our government, West. Who else?"

## Chapter 12

West shot down the fear that was threatening to immobilize him. The government? How could he fight the government? He forced his spinning mind to focus.

"Is he staying in a hotel?"

Agnes nodded, her eyes falling closed again. "He's staying at the Royal Hawaiian."

West clenched his hands into fists. "Our hotel."

"Room 1512."

"The room right next to us," West whispered, wondering if they'd been watching he and Katerina, listening to them talk and make plans and make love for the last two weeks.

"But he's checking out soon. He only had one more piece of business to take care of here once Katerina was kidnapped."

"What?"

Agnes opened her eyes and her gaze chilled his soul. "Killing you."



West's fingernails dug into his palms hard enough to draw blood. He'd see who killed who.

"What's his name?" he whispered.

Agnes shook her head. "All I get is Raven."

"Can you tell me anything else that will help me?"

Agnes closed her eyes again and ran her fingers over every inch of the table. She even ran them up and down the table legs, then touched the chair again. Finally she stood. "Only that he's devious. He has no conscience. He's killed many times, and not always on orders."

West nodded, knowing he was up against the worst threat he had ever faced. But he had to find Katerina. Had to save her. Luckily, he had a secret weapon. He turned and ran down the stairs, hearing Agnes hurrying behind him.

Out in the street, he left Agnes behind quickly, sprinting back to the hotel. Police cars were everywhere. He skirted around the building to the back. He couldn't get caught up in police questioning right now. Besides, how did he know they weren't in on it too? The government was the government. How could he trust anyone in a uniform ever again?

His phone beeped in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at it. Blaise, wanting him to come to the lobby. West shoved his phone back in his pocket and

ran around to the back of the hotel, entering a tiny door in the corner that he'd seen wait staff use before.

The door brought him to an empty hallway with a service elevator at the end. He ran to it and pressed the button. It opened and was empty. He said a small prayer of thanks and got in, pressing the button for the fifteenth floor. His plans only extended as far as room 1512. If he found it empty, he didn't know what he would do. He would figure that out when he got there.

West stepped out of the elevator and broke into a run, slowing as he rounded the corner that would lead him to his room. A man was already in the hallway, walking towards West. The man had a baseball cap over his face and was staring at the ground. West's heart slammed heavily in his chest. He hadn't seen where the man had come from, but there were only four rooms down here. A 50-50 chance that the man had been either at his room or room 1512.

West stared hard at him, willing the man to look up, calling into detail the face from the night before. Every nerve sang on high alert as he prepared to fight to the death if he had to. He watched the man's hands for the tiniest movement.

He and the man drew abreast, then just past each other, but West knew. It was him. West reached out and grabbed the man by the throat, slamming him into the wall. The man's hands flew up as he tried to wrestle West's hand away

from his throat, but West dug in instead, slamming the man's head against the wall again. With his other hand, West groped in his pocket for his room key. He found it and pulled the man to his room, opening the door and throwing the man inside before anyone could show up and end their little party.

The man fell to his knees on the carpet, making retching sounds as West slammed the door behind them. He kicked the man high on his chest, flipping him to his back. West dropped to his knees onto the man's chest, forcing the air out of him, his hands closing around the man's throat. He wanted to see terror in the man's eyes. He wanted the disgusting little worm to know he was about to die.

But West couldn't kill him and he knew it. West had never killed anyone in his life, but he could start now, for this dirt bag, if this guy wasn't his only line to Katerina.

There was no terror in the man's eyes. Only cold calculation. He knew West wouldn't kill him. West suddenly realized he didn't know where the man's hands were. At the same time, he felt a cold, hard length of steel slide on his arm and press into his side. He only had seconds before he was dead.

"Don't shoot!" he screamed, his hands still around the man's throat.  
"Drop the gun!"

The man's eyes went unfocused and the gun clattered to the carpet.

*Thank God.*

West grabbed for the gun and scrambled backwards quickly, pointing the gun at the man's head. The man still looked out of it. As soon as West's hands left his throat, he coughed and rubbed his neck, but his gaze still floated off somewhere past the ceiling.

*I've never tested it. I don't have any idea what this ability of mine can do.*

West wanted to kick himself in his own ass for not testing how his ability worked, but he never expected to use it again in his life.

West noticed a change coming over the worm on the floor. His eyes were focusing again and his movements had more rhythm.

West made up a plan of attack and jumped into action. He dropped to one knee and grabbed the man by the throat again, holding the gun at eye level.

"Where's my wife?" he screamed.

The man only looked at him, his eyes narrowing.

"Tell me where my wife is!"

The answer came, flat and unmotivated. "On a plane."

West's heart sunk. Was she already gone?

"Where is she going? Tell me!"

"Operation Arma."

"Where is that?"

"Nevada. Under Area 51."

"Under it? What does that mean?"

"Under it. It's an underground facility." The man spoke remotely, his tone completely without emotion. His eyes stared off and never met West's face.

West couldn't help but feel like he was wasting time. But what could he do? Should he bring the cops up here? If he did that, would the government swoop in and shut down the investigation. Would he and Katerina disappear forever? He couldn't chance it.

"When did the plane leave?"

"Didn't."

West felt something small building in his chest. Hope.

"When is it leaving?"

"2:05."

He had three hours to save Katerina before she went off to some government facility that he would never have any hopes of reaching. But how?

West let the gun drop a little, but kept his hand on the man. "Stay still. Don't move."

He thought furiously. What were his options? The press? Would that even work?

He looked back down at the man under his hand. The guy's face was ashen, and he looked like he might throw up. West shook him. "What would happen if the press found out about your little plane and the underground facility in Nevada? About you kidnapping United States citizens?"

The man didn't speak. His eyes glazed over and his complexion turned yellow. West shook him and dug his fingers into his throat, seeking out the trachea and tugging on it, knowing the pain would be exquisite. "Tell me! Answer every question I ask!"

"Nothing. We would deny it. You can't prove anything and if anyone got too close, we would take care of them."

West stood up and hauled the man up by his shirt front, his decision made. He would have to go after Katerina himself. They had very little chance of surviving if he did, but she had none if he didn't. "Can you get close to this plane?"

"Yes. I have clearance."

"What are you driving?"

"I have four sedans nearby that I can access."

"Pick the closest one. Let's go."

\*\*\*

West looked out the window, knowing Hickam Air Force Base was drawing close. He wouldn't allow himself to think of everything that would probably go wrong in the next few minutes. He would just keep driving forward, pushing, seeking, not stopping until he had Katerina or he was dead.

He had determined on the drive over that the man's name was Edgar Snoot, but he liked to go by Raven. He had a strange affinity for code names. He also learned that the government wanted Katerina to study her powers and possibly to turn her into a weapon. What they really wanted was someone who could use their mind to kill people from a distance, and make it look like an accident. They wanted to study Katerina and see exactly what she could do.

Raven drove directly up to the front gate of Hickam Air Force Base and flashed his security badge. The airmen guarding the gate asked to see his ID. West kept a guiding finger on Raven's elbow, whispering instructions to him, but

it didn't seem to be necessary. Raven stayed robot-like and compliant, as long as West's hands weren't off of him for too long.

The airmen at the gate inspected the underside of Raven's car with the mirror, then ran a dog in a circle around the vehicle. Then they were waved through. Raven drove through the maze of streets and eventually pulled up in front of a hangar. He sat and stared out the front window.

"Which plane is she on?" West asked, eyeing the humongous airplanes lining the runway.

"That one," Raven said, pointing at the biggest plane.

The very back of the plane was open, and men in military uniforms were shuttling crates into the belly of the flying monster. West saw two men with rifles guarding each entrance onto the plane.

"What kind of a crew is on that plane?"

"I don't know. I just delivered the woman."

West itched to pound the man's face in. Katerina was not 'the woman.' She was someone important, with a name and a life.

"How can I get on there?"

Raven shrugged and didn't say a word.



West grabbed Raven's tricep and squeezed as hard as he could. He screamed into Raven's face, all the anger and frustration he'd been dealing with since he woke up that morning spilling out. "Think of something!"

Raven grimaced and blood burst from his nose.

"Fuck!" West yelled, pulling back. He looked around, opening the glove box, and pulling out a handful of napkins. He threw them at Raven. "Clean yourself up," he demanded.

Raven cleaned himself up mechanically, then spoke. "Let's check the supplies. They will fill that plane before they take off. Maybe you could hide inside of something."

West nodded. It was the best they could do for now.

Together, they walked inside like they belonged there, Raven holding a napkin to his nose. West surveyed the interior of the hangar, trying to stem the intense, seething hatred he was feeling. Crews worked diligently at the other end of the hangar where it was open to the air, but no one came near them or took notice of them. West gripped Raven's elbow and led him towards the rows of pallets stacked high with supplies stretched out in front of them.

"What's going on that plane?" West asked Raven, prodding him.

Raven strode forward and looked at a packing slip on a pallet that was so

tightly wrapped with plastic West couldn't tell what was inside. "This is."

He strode to the next item. "This too." He walked to a Humvee. "This is going too."

The tiny light of hope inside of West grew slightly. There had to be something in here that he could hide inside. What about the Humvee? West circled it, eyeing the workers at the far end of the large building. No one was looking their way, and best of all, the very back of the Humvee was blocked from their sight by a monster pallet in front of it.

He looked back at Raven. He couldn't leave him here. No way. "Climb inside," he said indicating the back of the vehicle. Raven didn't move. West strode to him and pinched the back of his arm. "Climb inside," he said his voice low and deadly. Raven moved to comply instantly.

West looked around one last time, then followed him.

## Chapter 13

Katerina gagged, retching at the horrible, burning taste in her mouth and nose. She kicked and punched and threw her head backwards, trying to connect with her attacker.

Slowly she realized she wasn't being attacked anymore. In fact, she was sitting motionless in a chair, and her arms and legs appeared to be bound. Katerina opened her eyes and realized she was no longer inside the lobby of the hotel.

In a panic, she whipped her head back and forth and tried to pull loose of her bindings. She worked spit up in her mouth and let it fly, trying to clear the taste from her mouth of whatever horrible drug had put her under. She took great, whooping breaths and pulled madly.

When nothing worked, she willed herself to calm down and try to find some control. She breathed deeply and stared at the floor in front of her feet.

*Wait, there had been an airplane.*

When she had started to wake up in the airplane, a wet towel had been slapped over her mouth, and then someone had injected something in her arm.

Katerina's mind burned at the thought. Kidnapped. She'd been kidnapped the day after her wedding.

Slowly, with fear so great it was eating away at her life span, she looked up and around at her surroundings. Directly across from her, ten feet away, was a glass partition that went from ceiling to floor. Two people were looking at her from behind it. One was an old, bald man who almost looked out of place, wearing a long white coat like a doctor. The second was a woman with flaming red hair and a contemptuous look on her face, also wearing a white coat. They stared at her, telling her this was no ordinary kidnapping. If there was such a thing.

Katerina's senses all felt on edge, heightened. She watched as the man leaned forward and opened his mouth, about to say something. Katerina didn't want to hear it. She screamed at the top of her lungs, and noticed someone shifting in place just out of her field of vision. She whipped her head to the left and saw a young man in an army uniform, staring at her with unease painted clearly in his expression. Next to him, stood another man in an army uniform, but he was older. And in his arms he held a rifle, which was pointed directly at her. Katerina tried to look behind her, but couldn't. Instead she looked to her right and there, she saw another soldier with a rifle pointed at her.

She stopped screaming abruptly and looked from soldier to soldier, her breath coming in sharp gasps.

"Miss Holloway, can you hear me?" a controlled masculine voice said.

Katerina whipped her head towards the doctors, if that's what they were. The older man was talking.

"Right, yes, well. I won't waste words or imagine you want to be here. Let me just say that the sooner you cooperate, the sooner you'll be free to go on your way."

Katerina narrowed her eyes. That was obviously the biggest lie on the planet.

"My name is Dr. Ablewhite. This is Dr. Pritchard." He motioned towards the redhead next to him. "You have some, uh, abilities, we are interested in. We'd like to see a demonstration."

Katerina leaned forward in absolute disbelief. Until now, she hadn't even tried to think why she might be here. Because of her powers? They wanted to know what she could do? They wanted a demonstration?

The man spoke again. "Could you make electricity arc from your fingers?"

Katerina goggled at him. He wanted her to do what?

"Pvt. Poole will release one of your hands. If you hurt him, Sergeants Hughes and Nichols will shoot you. Not to kill, of course, unless you force them

to."

Katerina's mouth dropped open. He was lying again. About what she wasn't sure. The shooting part? Or just the killing part? The red-haired woman behind the partition with him rolled her eyes and then focused on Katerina with the same contempt and hatred she'd seen before.

Pvt. Poole, the young soldier without a gun, came forward slowly. Katerina watched his face. He would not even look in her eyes. She could feel the terror coming off of him in waves. He didn't want to be there. He didn't want to be doing that. And he was terrified of her. He gently released the medical-style cuff holding her right arm and ran back to his spot against the wall.

"Okay," the man behind the shield said. "Go ahead."

Katerina shook her head, her mind bending in disbelief. What did he want her to do again?

"You're crazy," she spit out. "I can't do that. I never could."

The man inclined his head and clucked his tongue at her like she was a child. "You don't want to resist. Your time here can be very unpleasant and yes, even painful."

Katerina bit her lip and realized her whole body was trembling. She looked up at the ceiling and prayed that this was just a bad dream. That she

would wake up soon, safe and warm in West's arms.

"Miss Holloway?"

Katerina ignored him. It was a dream. A nightmare. It would go away soon.

"Miss Holloway?"

"Shepherd," Katerina muttered under her breath.

"Miss Holloway, I really have to ask you - "

"Shepherd!" Katerina screamed. "My name is Mrs. Shepherd!"

The two scientists or doctors or whatever they were looked at each other and the redheaded woman rolled her eyes again, then spit out a diatribe. "That fucking idiot. If he brought the wrong woman I'm going to have his rank. I'll have his fucking job. I'll fucking castrate him. Get Storm."

A third voice behind the partition said something, even though Katerina couldn't see a third person in that area of the room. All she could see was the two doctors, but only from the waist up. The rest of them was hidden behind the desk they stood behind. The voice sounded slurred and thick, like maybe the speaker was drunk.

"I'm here."

The redhead jumped and took a step away from where the voice came from. Katerina could read utter repulsion on her face, like she'd seen a spider the size of a kitten. Or maybe a rat carrying a baby in its mouth.

Katerina's already overworked heart jumped in her chest and its rate tripled. Who or what was Storm? A seemingly seamless door in the partition slid open and Storm emerged in a wheelchair. A fancy wheelchair with a motor, that he only had to press a tiny joystick and it rolled forward.

*No!* Katerina's denial died in her throat. She knew who it was. The man wheeling towards her with a nasty grin on the destroyed face was Dylan Phillips. She'd thought he was dead. Hoped he was dead. Never, ever asked what exactly had happened in that hole beneath his family home after he had kidnapped Jordan and lured Katerina to the house and then threatened to kill Jordan. West had never spoken a word of it. Jordan had tried to tell her - had said Katerina had melted him. Katerina had covered her ears with her hands like a two-year-old who didn't want to hear what her mother had to say, then squeezed her eyes shut. Melted? How could that possibly be?

But Katerina saw how that could possibly be right in front of her. Dylan's face looked liquid, sliding to one side. There were no teeth left in his mouth. His eye sockets seemed too large for his face and his eyes looked in danger of falling out. His entire body was twisted and lumped to one side, his left shoulder sitting a good foot higher than his right. Even his skin looked wrong - too white, too



smooth, and horrifyingly shiny - like a poisoned hard-boiled egg.

Katerina wanted to squeeze her eyes shut and pretend the nightmare didn't exist. The nightmare kept coming closer. When he came within a few feet of her, she could see scars where his hairline should have been, but she couldn't really call it a hairline since he only had a few wispy hairs clinging to a lumpy scalp here and there. The straight and clean scars seemed to stand out, like they were fairly new, like maybe he had just had surgery.

"It's her," Dylan said, then rolled to a stop within a foot of her.

Katerina clamped her teeth together tightly, trying not to scream or whimper or beg.

Dylan showed his gums in a wider imitation of a grin and held up one hand. Blue-white electricity jumped from his thumb to his pinky, sparking at each finger in turn. The noise was awful, terrifying, like the squeak of a gate into hell.

Katerina shrank back from his demonstration of power, even as she noticed his mouth pull into a grim line. It pained him to do that, she could tell.

Screaming sounded in the corner behind her and Katerina tried to whip her head that way in fear. Now that her hand was unbound, she could turn a little farther in her chair. Behind her, sat a row of twenty or thirty cages, tiny brown monkeys in each one. They were screaming and chattering at the sight and sound

of the electricity.

"Shut up," the military man closest to them snarled, kicking the first cage. "Shut up, or I'll fry you myself."

Katerina's mouth went dryer still at the words. What in the world were the monkeys here for? Did they experiment on them? Did Dylan zap them with electricity? Did Dr. Asshole and Dr. Bitch expect her to do that too?

The electricity in Dylan's hand died away and he dropped the hand to his lap with a grunt.

Katerina shrank in her chair, wishing she were anywhere else. Praying that God would strike her dead before He let her be fried or tortured.

Words came tumbling out of Katerina's mouth of their own accord. "Look, I never could do that, but now I can't do anything. I've - I've lost all my powers. They are all gone."

Dylan chuckled, although his voice seemed softer than before. "That won't work here sweetheart." He looked at the two doctors behind the partition. "I'll convince her," he said in a grinding voice. "Re-fasten her hand," he barked at Pvt. Poole.

Katerina pulled her arm into her chest, but where could she go? The young private fastened his hands on her wrist, his face clearly saying he

expected to be fried where he stood, but within a minute he was back at his post against the wall, safe and sound, Katerina fully bound again.

Dylan leered and his too-large tongue fell partially out of his mouth. Katerina squeezed her eyes shut as he heaved himself closer to her. She felt him yank on her shirt and felt air on her chest.

Katerina opened her eyes and looked down in terror, seeing her shirt pulled open to the waist. "Oh God," she muttered, partly in fear, mostly in repulsion, as she realized Dylan was staring at her breasts. He squirmed in his chair and Katerina's eyes dropped to his lap. His simple, white, cotton pants bulged where an erection would have been, but it was no typical erection. It was as lumpy and misshapen as the rest of him, like some grotesque armadillo had wandered into his pants. Katerina swallowed hard, knowing her mind couldn't take much more. She felt herself swoon and actually seek out unconsciousness. Anything to escape what was happening.

Dylan's hand snaked out and headed back towards her chest. The fingers were bent and swollen at each knuckle, and long scars stood out between every individual finger, like they had been fused together and needed to be cut apart.

Katerina closed her eyes and called West's face into her mind. Only West. He would save her. She knew he would. She just had to hang on.

The horrible arcing, electricity sound came again and the monkeys

screamed behind her. Dylan swore under his breath and Katerina squeezed her eyes shut tighter. She felt a horrible burning and pressure at her chest, just over her heart. The intensity of the sound ratcheted up and she was pushed back in her chair as Dylan grunted and then screamed like the monkeys.

Katerina opened her eyes. Dylan was cradling his hand to his chest like it was hurt. An expression of determination came over his face and the hand reached her way again. Katerina watched it come, feeling sick with revulsion. Her chest jerked forward and a white heat burned over her heart again. Electricity arced from him to her, or was it from her to him?

His gums were clenched and sweat dripped from his brow as he seemed to use all his strength to force his hand forward.

The sound of an explosion ripped through the air and Katerina knew no more.

## Chapter 14

Katerina woke up with no sense of if it was night or day. She was on a tiny cot in a tiny cell, no bigger than a jail cell. She felt as if she had slept for hours, her arms and legs and back stiff and sore. Slept? Or been unconscious?

She tried to move her tongue about in her mouth. Her mouth still tasted horrible, like the drug they had used back at the hotel, which seemed like a million years ago.

She sat up and saw she had a new bandage on her left arm. From an IV? Under her shirt she could also feel a bandage on her chest. No pain though. Katerina peeled back the corner of the bandage, wanting to see how bad the damage was. An ugly dark burn stared back at her - a third-degree burn and that meant the worst kind – the most likely to get infected or have issues healing.

She palpated the burn gently, wondering if the force that caused the burn had done anything to her heart. She had tried not to worry about herself since her heart attack, but she had to face it, she wasn't as strong as she had once been.

Done exploring her injuries, she smacked her lips, feeling incredibly thirsty. She stood up to look around. A tiny sink sat in the corner and she walked that way quickly, twisting the knobs when she reached it. But nothing happened.

No water flowed out.

Next to the sink was a toilet. She peeked inside. There was water in there. She looked around with a grimace. Cameras sat on the walls and stared at her. She wondered if they were trying to humiliate her, break her. She wondered how long she would be able to last before humiliating herself by drinking the water out of the toilet.

With nothing to do but explore, Katerina walked slowly around her cell. It was set up more like an enclosure, with some sort of hard, clear material blocking her from the plain, dark hallway outside. On the ceiling and the walls, nozzles were placed every few feet. Some looked like the kind of sprinklers that sprayed water, like she would find in a hotel room. Others probably sprayed something different. Foam maybe. Katerina grimaced and pushed against the outside wall of the cell. It didn't budge an inch.

On the other side of what she assumed was the door, although she couldn't see a handle or knob, a simple note was taped so that she could read it.

*Don't try to blast your way out. We will be able to stop you. We are watching. Consider being more cooperative next time.*

Katerina completed her pathetic circuit of the tiny cell and fell with a thump back onto her bed.

*West! Where are you? Please come and save me from this!*

Katerina fell back against her pillow and tried not to cry. She heard a noise in the hallway outside of her room and sat up quickly, her heart beating hard. Someone was coming.

"Dylan," she said when he was revealed. She pushed herself back against the far wall, remembering his horrifying electric touch.

"That's not my name," he said simply. "Call me Storm."

Katerina said nothing, only watched him. He would always be Dylan to her. Dylan the monster. Dylan the feared and pitied.

Dylan wheeled his chair directly in front of her door and she noticed a tiny flap in the clear material, almost like a mail slot. Dylan took an item out of his lap and pushed it through the flap.

A bottle of water! He held it there and although she wanted to jump up and grab it, she did not want to get close to him. She stared at the water, licking her lips, her eyes wide.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said and shoved the water through the hole.

Katerina jumped up immediately and dove for the water as it hit the ground, her eyes on Dylan the entire time. She uncapped the bottle and drank the entire thing in four gulps, only thinking after it was gone that she should have

checked to see if it was sealed.

*Too late now.*

Dylan thrust another bottle of water through the hole in her door and then shoved through something that looked like a candy bar.

Katerina scooped up both items and ran back to her bed, pushing herself to the far end and taking her time with the second bottle of water, her eyes on Dylan still.

Dylan watched her for a few moments before he spoke. "How did you do that?" he finally said.

"What?" she replied dully.

"You ..." He shuffled his feet in his custom-made shoes. "You repelled me."

Katerina studied him and the look of pure vulnerability on his face made her almost feel sorry for him. Her thoughts swirled dangerously. She had repelled him? She hadn't done anything. Just waited for him to burn her. Third-degree burns even.

"How did you do it?" he asked again.

"I don't know – I didn't do anything." Anger welled up inside Katerina.



What in the hell was she doing here in this place? Kidnapped and burned and asked to do things she couldn't. "What I said earlier was true! I lost all my powers!"

Dylan studied her and Katerina didn't like his eyes on her. But his face was still open and vulnerable. He cocked his head to the side and looked like a lost little boy. A grotesque lost little boy, but still a lost little boy.

"How?" he asked.

West's face filled her mind and she squeezed her eyes shut in the wave of pain that followed it. "Healing someone," she choked out, her eyes still shut.

"You can heal?" Dylan said, his voice wistful and soft.

"I could. Not anymore," she said opening her eyes and looking at Dylan again.

Silence stretched between them for many moments. Dylan looked down at his lap and fiddled with something there she couldn't see. Katerina pulled herself into a tiny ball in the corner of the bed and ate her candy bar.

Several minutes after it was gone, he finally spoke again. "You must have some powers left. You did something to me. Repelled me somehow ..." His voice was soft, strange.

"I didn't try to," she said, but she was confused because she knew she had

wanted to do it, and if she had known she had the power to do it, she would have done it on purpose.

Dylan sat silent again for an eternity. When she couldn't stand another moment he opened his mouth one more time. "Don't tell them that."

"What?"

"That you don't have any powers." His eyes bored into her and he sat up straight to be more forceful, leaning towards her enclosure. "You're never leaving here and if you really don't have any powers left you won't be useful. They'll kill you."

"Like you are useful?" Katerina sneered.

"Yes, I'm useful," Dylan said, contempt and pride in his voice.

Katerina shook with subdued anger and all the emotions she'd been holding back for so long. "I'd rather be killed than fry defenseless animals," she hissed at him.

Dylan surprised her. He spoke softly, his gaze on the floor. "Yeah, I don't like that either."

Katerina would have thought that was one of his favorite parts. "What?" she said.

"The monkey's pain. It hurts me right here," he said, pointing at the center of his forehead. Katerina noticed that he shifted his hands in his lap as he did it, as if he were about to use his right hand, then changed his mind and used his left instead.

"Oh," was all she could think to say.

Dylan brushed it off. "So, uh, sorry about before."

"Before?" Katerina echoed, feeling like an idiot.

"You know, when I kidnapped your friend to make you come to my house."

It was the last thing Katerina had expected him to say. "Oh," she said again unable to comprehend what was happening in the conversation. Once again, silence stretched on and this time it made Katerina feel uncomfortable. After a few moments, just to provide a break in the quiet, she said, "Sorry for, uh, for that," flapping her hand at him.

Dylan looked up at the ceiling and didn't say anything. Katerina studied his face and thought she'd never seen such sadness in another human soul. Suddenly she felt a yearning from him. Like he was desperate for connection or companionship or something. She furrowed her brow and tried to figure him out, but her mind couldn't stop thinking of the third-degree burn on her chest and the look on his face right before he gave it to her.

"I thought God told me to do it," he said quietly.

Katerina thought at first that she had heard incorrectly. She played back over what he had said and realized it made perfect sense.

He spoke again. "Well, actually, I thought I was God, giving myself messages through my dreams and thoughts."

Awkwardly, Katerina cleared her throat. "You don't think that anymore?"

"No," he said and Katerina thought she could see his cheeks burning with the admission.

"What changed?"

He didn't say. He stared at his lap and fiddled with whatever was there.

Katerina didn't think any of this information could help her, but if Dylan wanted to confide in her, maybe it could be helpful in some way in the future.

"How long have you been here?" she asked, changing her tactic.

"Two months," he said quietly, his gaze still on the floor.

"Are you a prisoner here too?"

Dylan moved so suddenly that Katerina shrank back against the wall. He pressed his joystick forward with his left hand, bumping his wheelchair against her door. "I'm useful!" he shouted. "They need me!"

He pressed his lips together and wheeled backwards again. "I want to be here," he said in a softer voice. "You saw what I can do with my hands now! We've been working on my power, strengthening it."

Katerina nodded, her eyes huge and scared. He was a prisoner, but he didn't want to admit it.

Dylan lifted his left hand to his face and scratched, then dropped it into his lap like the feel of his own skin repulsed him. "Besides, in here, I'm wanted, respected, feared. Out there, I'm just a freak."

Katerina couldn't think of anything to say. So she sat silent and watched him.

Dylan looked at his watch. "I have to go. There's only thirty minutes before two a.m. checks."

"Two a.m. checks?"

"They check that everyone is in their beds and do a sweep of all the hallways."

"You aren't supposed to be here?"

Dylan shook his head and something like a smile crossed over his features.

Katerina pointed to the walls of her cell. "What about all the cameras? Won't they catch you?"

"Thisbe took care of them for me."

"Thisbe?" Katerina repeated, curiosity getting the better of her.

Dylan's eyes lit up and for the first time since she'd had the unfortunate experience of knowing him, she saw something like happiness cross over his face. "The computer system. This place is a hotbed of government secrets and we've got a smart computer system."

"You mean like artificial intelligence?" Katerina whispered, horrified at the thought.

"Kind of. It's not really like you see in the movies, she's not that intelligent. The Japanese invented her using the technology that we have today and our government stole one of their prototypes, then blamed it on ISIS. They set her up here to run this compound, after changing her name. I've been messing with her code to make her think it's okay to be devious. To hide things from her other coders."

"How do you know how to do that?"

"I took an entire computer science course when I was in jail twenty years ago for - well, that's not important. It was a pilot program to get convicts to

work. But they just gave me the course, they never gave me a degree, so I couldn't really do anything with it. Nothing legal anyway."

Katerina blinked. She couldn't process all of this. It was bordering dangerously on being too much.

Dylan bared his gums. "Anyway, she likes me. Thisbe, that's her name."

"She likes you? She?"

Dylan sat up straighter and Katerina could see pride in his countenance. Her heart broke a little bit for the sad parody of a human being in front of her. "Yeah, the system has a personality, and can learn, and she likes me. I told her what happened tonight and she told me to come down and see you, see if you could ...."

Dylan trailed off and looked away. Katerina wondered if he was hiding something.

He kept speaking, his eyes on the floor. "Thisbe created a loop in the videos of both our beds and the hallways. The security guards watching the cameras just see us sleeping and see empty hallways."

Katerina's heart beat faster suddenly. If Thisbe could do that for Dylan, maybe ...

Dylan worked his joystick and moved himself backwards, his eyes

averted from Katerina's.

Katerina stood up and walked closer to the door. "Maybe you can come back and talk to me later?" she asked hesitantly.

Dylan grimaced and once again Katerina thought she was seeing the saddest person in the universe in front of her. "Maybe. If I'm still ..."

"If you're still what?"

Dylan's torso quaked in torment, like he was struggling with something. Finally, he met her eyes firmly. "If I'm still alive." He lifted his right hand from his lap and she saw it clearly for the first time. It was blackened, burned, and falling in on itself, like the bones had been liquefied. It looked more like a mummy's hand than a humans.

Katerina stared at it in horror. "Call the doctors," she whispered. "They can help you."

"They can't," Dylan said firmly. "That's what happened to me when I tried to touch you. At first it was only the fingertip. They saw it and had no idea what it was. They ran a dozen tests on me already. It's not just a burn – it's like ... decay - like the tissue doesn't want to exist anymore." He hid his hand in his lap again and spoke one more time, his voice so soft she had to strain to hear him. "Whatever it is, I deserve it."



Katerina forced herself not to gag. Was this what had changed his mind about being God?

"Maybe ... What if ... Maybe they can cut it off?" She offered with trepidation, knowing it was the ultimate last resort.

Dylan pulled at his neckline with his left hand. "Too late," he said, exposing the skin there. Tiny tendrils of the same black that covered his hand were spreading across his chest. "I don't know what will happen when it reaches my heart. Or my brain."

He let his shirt go and dropped his left hand into his lap. "I may not even make it through the night," he said matter-of-factly.

His eyes suddenly speared into her and Katerina took a shaky step backwards. "Maybe you could heal it for me?" he said, his voice soft and hopeful.

Katerina shook her head. "I told you, I can't do that anymore. I've tried."

Dylan's face fell and he nodded. "I understand. I wouldn't expect you to try to help me," he said, wheeling his chair around.

Katerina made up her mind before he disappeared from her site. "Wait!" she cried. "I'll try."

Dylan's face contorted and Katerina realized he was trying to smile. He

rolled back to her and lifted up the flap in her door with his left hand, then gently placed his right hand in the hole.

"Does it hurt?" Katerina asked.

"Not at all. It's like it's completely dead"

Katerina swallowed hard, and reached out her hands to touch him, swallowing her revulsion and horror. But as her hands got close, when there was only an inch between her skin and his blackened flesh, she felt the same pressure and heat she'd felt earlier when he tried to touch her.

Dylan had used the word repelling earlier, and it was exactly correct. It was as if there was some sort of an invisible barrier between them. Katerina gritted her teeth and pushed.

An unseen force flung her backwards, causing her to take two large steps to keep from falling on her behind. Electricity pulsed at her fingers and crackled there, before dissipating.

She stared at Dylan in disbelief. "I didn't do that, I swear. I was trying to help you!" she cried.

He pressed his lips together and she couldn't tell if he believed her or not. He pulled his hand back into his lap and swung his wheelchair around, disappearing from sight down the hallway.

Katerina watched the last spot she had seen him in for a long time, ceaseless internal questions battering her. Finally, she lay down on her bed and tried to sleep.

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Sometime later, she had no way of knowing how long but it felt like at least an hour, Dylan returned. His eyes were bright and he had a new sense of purpose.

"No checks tonight. Something's up. There's been a security breach somewhere," he said, making her heart leap in her chest.

He stretched his good hand towards her door. "Let's get you out of here."

## Chapter 15

West reached his hand towards Raven, biting his fingers cruelly in the man's flesh. "Shut up. Don't make a sound," he admonished the man once again. Raven had taken to whimpering, and West's warnings only lasted twenty minutes or so before he had to do it again to stem the quiet noises of pain coming from deep in the man's throat.

The two of them lay in the back of the Humvee, still inside the airplane as far as West could tell. They hadn't moved since the plane had stopped taxiing, and every noise he could hear had a kind of echo, like they were inside a large building.

He felt awful for what he was doing to Raven. The man was sick, dying maybe, and it was all West's fault - it had to be. The man was bleeding from both nostrils and drops of watery blood dripped from his eyes. West hadn't seen any blood come from his ears yet, but he was afraid that was next. West felt his gut roil at the thought of what he had done to the man by controlling him for so long, but what choice did he have? It was this guy, for Katerina. He would choose to do it all over again if he had to. Besides, the man would have killed him.

West looked out the back of the Humvee again, seeing nothing but dark

shapes, and decided it was time to make his move.

He leaned close to Raven's ear, grabbing him again on the upper arm, and whispered, "This is your final instruction. Listen good and do exactly as I tell you. Lay in here for four hours, then get up and find a doctor. Do not remember me. Say you have amnesia. No, get amnesia. Don't remember any of this."

West didn't know if the man would live for four hours, but it was the shortest time he dared tell him. In four hours, West would either be dead, escaped, or captured and Raven seeking help would no longer matter.

An idea seized him and he leaned over to share it. "Never kill anyone again. In fact, never be a government agent again. Quit your job. Go live a peaceful life as a farmer somewhere. Be happy." He didn't know if that instruction would take or not, but he had to try. In fact, he didn't know if any of these instructions would last, but he couldn't bring himself to bind and gag the already weak man.

"Nod once if you understand and you are going to follow my instructions."

Raven nodded, bloodied tears slipping out from beneath his eyes.

West looked away quickly and raised up to his knees. It had to be good enough. He had one more thing to do before he could make his move. He pulled his phone from his pocket and turned it on, praying he had a bit of battery left

and a signal. Yes to both. He hadn't dared text Blaise before now, fearing Blaise would go right to the authorities and someone would inadvertently inform the wrong branch of government what he was doing. But he had to now, if he were caught, Blaise would be the only chance that he and Katerina had. Not much of a chance, he knew. What could Blaise do against the United States government?

West had two dozen text messages from Blaise and his brother and his father, but he ignored them all. He had a message to send and then had to get moving.

*In Nevada. Under area 51. Katerina kidnapped by the government. I'm trying to save her. Fly out here asap. Don't tell the cops for at least a few hours, in case we can get away clean. I don't want somebody informing these guys I'm coming. I'm going in now.*

West stared at the message long and hard before adding one more line.

*Pray for us.*

West pressed send and turned the phone off before shoving it in his pocket, trying to preserve his last bit of battery. He shuffled forward and flipped himself over the tailgate of the Humvee, dropping silently to the ground. He still had Raven's gun, but he didn't take it out. Stealth was his only weapon for now.

He had been right. The Humvee was still inside the large airplane. He could see the opening at the far end of a massive corridor and he crept slowly

that way. When he finally reached the end, he dropped to the ground and looked out. The plane was in a huge building, big enough to fit a small city inside, but instead filled with supplies and vehicles.

West saw no movement, no lights, no indication that anyone was around, so he snuck into the open hangar area. He tiptoed from one pallet to another, not knowing if he was heading towards the front of the building or the back.

Anxious thoughts began to coax their way into his head. What if Katerina were somewhere miles away from here? How would he find her? West bit back the thoughts and focused on the task at hand. He would find her. He knew he would.

When he came within twenty feet of the far wall, he heard whistling. It sounded so out of place in the massive room that West came to a dead stop. He looked around slowly trying to place where it was coming from. A soldier walked past the crate West was hiding behind and West bit back a hapless gasp of surprise. The man was so close West could have reached out and touched him. If the soldier hadn't chosen that moment to carelessly whistle, West would have walked right into him.

West crouched behind the crate and tried to still his racing heart. The soldier wore a black armband on his left shoulder, the letters MP emblazoned there. A firearm was strapped to his right side. *Military Police.*

The soldier pulled something out of his pocket and West craned his neck to see what it was. A screen glowed lightly. His phone. The soldier laughed at something on the screen and focused all his attention on it. West crept up behind him, his muscles as tight as rock. He didn't dare breathe as he reached out a hand and held it an inch from the man's back.

He timed it so he began speaking the second he touched the man, but still the soldier whirled around and almost took his head off. "Don't move. Don't touch your gun. Put your hands at your sides!" West hissed, making sure his voice was clear but not loud.

The soldier did what he was told, his face taking over the now familiar robotic look.

"The woman they brought in today. Where is she?" West forced out, praying he would get an answer.

The man blinked once but didn't say anything and West had to fight back bitter disappointment. His eyes dropped to the name embroidered above the soldier's pocket. Darden. And his rank. Corporal.

"Corporal Darden, answer me," West said in a low, dangerous voice, remembering that he had to give this specific order.

"She was taken to Operation Arma."



"Where's that? Show me."

The soldier turned and headed to the other side of the massive room. West followed, kicking himself for doing this again. He would have to let this guy go before the bleeding started. He couldn't take hurting an innocent person, even to save his own skin. If Darden was innocent.

When they reached the far wall, West gave the corporal a booster. He grasped his elbow and said, "Don't touch your gun no matter what. Do exactly as I tell you. Take me to the woman they brought in today."

The soldier reached out his hand and pressed a button on the wall. Part of the wall slid upward without even a whisper of sound and West gaped. It was an elevator. An elevator massive enough to fit a double wide trailer and he had never seen such a thing before. They stepped inside and the soldier pressed another button. The door closed and West's stomach dropped, as if they were moving quickly. He couldn't tell in what direction.

Too late, West realized that he had no idea what would be waiting for them when the monster door slid back open. He was being careless already in his desire to get to Katerina quickly. He couldn't stand the thought of what evil might be happening to her. He couldn't stand the thought of her being scared and alone and wondering if she would ever get out of this place.

He dug his fingers into Darden's arm. "Will there be more soldiers

wherever we are going?"

"Yes."

West's eyes rolled in his head and he almost slammed the red emergency button on the side of the elevator. "How many?" he hissed.

"One," the soldier answered as West felt the tiniest of bumps, indicating they had arrived at their destination.

The door opened and Darden stepped out into the crisp, white hallway beyond. Still, West could not tell exactly where they were, only that they were in a windowless enclosure that had a slightly antiseptic smell.

A man sat in a chair across the hallway and shot to his feet as soon as he saw West. The new guy looked at Darden, his eyebrows creased. He also had a gun on his hip and an MP armband on his shoulder. "Who is this?" He fired at Darden. "Why are you down here?"

Darden didn't respond, only turned around and faced West, his face still a strange blank.

West scrambled for an idea. He was ten feet away from the man and knew he would be shot if he tried to approach too fast. Instead he placed a haughty look on his face. "I'm Colonel Murphy, your new boss. This is a surprise inspection soldier, and so far you're failing."

The new guy snapped to attention and West tried to think of what to do next. He had to touch the guy. He should have said Sgt. Murphy. Then they could have shaken hands.

"At ease," he barked out, walking slowly out of the elevator. The new guy's nametag said Nelson. A sergeant. West tried to remember every tiny shred of army lore he had ever picked up from movies and TV. "Sgt Nelson, just what in the hell is wrong with your uniform?"

"Sir?"

West strode forward, a scowl on his face, lifting his right hand at chest level, his fingers poised to pluck an imaginary thread. He hoped he wasn't going to end up on the ground in a headlock.

He reached Nelson and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Don't move. Don't say a word. Don't touch your gun. Do what I tell you to do. Answer all of my questions."

Sergeant Nelson's face relaxed and he stood placidly. West breathed a sigh of relief. He walked to Corporal Darden and pulled him over next to Sergeant Nelson. "Anyone else likely to come this way in the next thirty minutes?" he asked, looking at both men.

Nelson shook his head. "Not until two a.m. checks."

"Where's the woman who was brought in today?" he asked Nelson.

"Cell 2B."

West thought seriously. He had a cell number and he was apparently in the right location. Now he just had to get to his Katerina without setting off any alarms. "Can you take me to her without anyone else knowing?"

Nelson shook his head. "No, the guys in the camera room will see us."

West felt acid-lined fear run through his veins. He looked up on the wall and saw a camera pointed right at them. "Can they see us now?"

Nelson spoke and the robotic sound of his voice just about drove West crazy, but at the same time he welcomed it. It meant the man was still under his control. "Yeah, if they are looking. The screen for this camera is on the back wall. They don't look at it much since there is always a guard here."

West prayed to a God he doubted was listening. *Please let them not be looking.* "Take me to the closest area where there are no cameras."

Nelson turned and walked swiftly down the hallway. West grabbed Darden by the sleeve and pulled him along. Not even ten feet down the hall, Nelson indicated a door. West pushed it open and saw a supply closet. He pulled both men inside.

"How can I get to the woman without security seeing me?"

The men stared at the wall behind him blankly. West touched both their forearms. "Give me suggestions. Good ones that will work."

Nelson spoke up. "You could wear a uniform. Do two o'clock checks. The cameras don't show faces very well."

"But what about the other soldiers doing two o'clock checks?" West asked.

Nelson didn't say anything. His mouth opened slightly as he looked far away.

"You could kill them," Darden said.

West shook his head. "Absolutely not. Next suggestion."

The two men didn't say anything for a while and West began to think his only option would be to steal one of their uniforms and try the two o'clock checks idea. But how would he get her out of there once he got to her? He hoped the only answer he could come up with wouldn't be to wing it.

A thought struck him. He looked at Nelson. "What did the woman do, anyway? Why is she here?"

"She's a terrorist – a spy for terrorists," Nelson said blankly.

West's mouth dropped open. "That's not true. She's innocent. She doesn't

know any terrorists," he sneered. "The government, your bosses, kidnapped her because she can do things with her mind, like hurt people. Things she doesn't even want to do."

The two men stared blankly, not meeting his eyes, their expressions not changing.

West grabbed both their forearms, his anger boiling over. "Believe me!" he screamed.

Both men winced and pulled away from him. West sighed and dropped their arms, knowing a lost cause when he saw one. "Okay, say I can get her out of her cell and out of here. How do we get away from this base?"

Corporal Darden spoke first. "Take a car from the motor pool. Drive out the front gate."

Sergeant Nelson shook his head. "Thisbe scans all vehicles exiting the gate. She'll know and keep the gates shut. They won't be able to get out."

"Thisbe?"

"The computer."

West twitched, wondering if he had heard correctly. Was this some sort of sci-fi nightmare he was caught up in?

Nelson spoke. "She doesn't scan the aircraft. He could take a helicopter."

"Can you fly a helicopter?" West asked both men.

They both shook their heads.

"Can anyone down here fly a helicopter?"

"No," Nelson said. "I don't think so. But I know where the pilot's barracks are."

"Good enough. West looked at the watch on Darden's arm. 2:00 was coming for him. He needed to make a decision, and fast.

## Chapter 16

Katerina gaped openly at Dylan. Adrenaline rushed through her veins and her heart sang in her chest. Get out of here? That was the best thing she had heard all day. But how? This place had to be guarded better than the White House.

"Can you really get me out of here?" she whispered.

Dylan shrugged with only one shoulder. His right shoulder didn't move at all. "I can try," he said.

"But why?"

Dylan pressed his mangled lips together. "It's my fault you're here in the first place isn't it? The least I can do is try to make that right."

Katerina's mouth went dry. "But ... but earlier ..."

"Earlier I was an idiot. Earlier I fucked up. But I'm pretty sure I'm going to die within the next two or three hours, and since I'm not God ... Well, maybe this is my last chance to get things right. Maybe I can make up, just a little bit, for all the things I've done wrong."



Katerina searched his face. Could he possibly be telling the truth?

Dylan raised his good hand to her door. Katerina watched him closely. There was no lock or even a closing mechanism as far as she could see. He splayed his fingers out dramatically and screwed up his face in an effort. A tiny spark jumped from one finger to the other and fizzled out immediately. His face fell. "Oh well. That was just for show anyway," he said. He reached in a pocket on his chair and pulled out a tiny silver cylinder then held it to his mouth. "Thisbe, open her cell."

With no fanfare, Katerina's door slid open, as if separating two sheets of glass. Katerina stepped out into the hallway quickly, not allowing anyone a chance to change their minds. If Dylan backed down, she would run.

But he didn't back down. "This way," he said and left her standing there. She followed through a long, sterile hallway, not looking back.

"It's probably better if we don't speak," Dylan said quietly and Katerina nodded, jogging a little to catch up with his chair. She glanced at his right shoulder and saw the black streaks had advanced even farther onto his chest. She could see them easily without him pulling his shirt back. His right shoulder seemed sunken into his chest like a cave. She grimaced and looked away.

He led her through what must have been a mile of empty, bleak corridor. The silver cylinder in his hand beeped and he held it to his ear, then swore

lightly. "Soldiers coming in this direction, we will have to head to a different exit."

Katerina felt her heart clench in fear. Was it a fool's game she was playing? Would she really ever make it out of this place alive?

Katerina's breath stopped in her throat as she heard yelling coming from a nearby corridor. Gunshots sounded, scaring her deeply. Her hands clenched into fists and she looked up and down the hallway, not sure which way to run. Dylan raised the cylinder to his lips. "Thisbe, turn off all the lights." The hallway plunged into darkness but emergency lights clicked on in an instant. "Cut the emergency lights too," he hissed.

Again, they were in total darkness. A harsh, masculine voice sounded nearby. "Drop the guns, get on the ground. Don't move!"

Katerina felt faint, like she might pass out right there. She fought it with every cell in her body. No way was she passing out and missing this. "West!" she screamed.

"Katerina?" West's voice called, sounding like a beacon from heaven.

Lights speared the darkness and Katerina realized they were coming from Dylan's wheelchair. She heard footsteps pounding towards them and she began to run in their direction, her emotions overflowing.

A man in military fatigues carrying two guns rounded the corner and Katerina let out a sharp scream before she realized it was West.

"West!" she cried, joy at seeing his face causing tears to fall from her eyes as she flung herself into his arms. He squeezed her tight, whispering her name into her neck, his voice low and needy.

His mouth found hers and claimed it, his kiss telling her everything would be all right. He would make sure of it.

He pulled away before Katerina could even get started and raised one of the guns. "Who is that?" he said, deadly steel in his voice.

Katerina looked behind her. "That's Dylan Phillips. He's here too. He - he likes to be called Storm now."

West raised the gun higher and Katerina could feel the tension in every set of his muscles. She grabbed his arm. "He helped me escape. He got me out of the cell they put me in."

Before West could respond they heard voices from behind them. "This way," Dylan called urgently, leading them in the other direction.

Katerina and West ran to catch up with him. He was already talking in a low tone when they got there, more to himself than to them. "They won't dare shoot in section E."

He held the cylinder up to his lips. "Thisbe, open the exit door in Section E. As soon as we get out of it, lock the door behind us and don't let anyone else out."

Katerina looked at him, her expression startled. "Dylan, are you coming with us?"

Dylan didn't say a word, only urged his wheelchair faster. They rounded a bend and came across a huge orange and black warning sign marking the entrance to Section E. It had a gun with a red line through it right in the center of the sign, and several other signs proclaimed: Danger - Flammable - No open flames - No guns allowed. As they passed the signs, the corridor opened up and began to change. Large pipes bound with heavy-duty tape ran along the ceiling and walls. Katerina shivered as she ran. The whole place looked so menacing.

Dylan made a motion towards the walls. "No guns allowed here. Twenty different experimental gases are being pumped into here and most of them are highly flammable. So you are at least safe from being shot for now."

They ran down the corridor, West on one side of Dylan and Katerina on the other. Dylan whipped his head towards West. "Put away your guns," he snarled. "Weren't you listening? No matter what you can't shoot in this corridor. If one of those pipes gets hit by a gunshot the whole place could go up."

West made the guns disappear in the waistband of his pants and Dylan

faced forward again. Katerina felt her strength flagging, her breath tearing in and out of her lungs in short gasps.

From behind them, they heard shouting. Katerina tried to put on a burst of speed, afraid of being caught. Then came a sound that chilled Katerina to her very bones. Gunshots. Katerina saw sparks fly as the bullets whined off the wall close to her.

"God save us all," Dylan muttered and ducked his head.

More shots roared from behind them. "What are you doing?" Dylan screamed over his shoulder, but his voice was swallowed in a great fiery whoosh that seemed to explode on all sides. Katerina cried out and almost fell to her knees as fire seared over her head.

West was there in an instant, cradling her, pulling her forward, urging her on. The hallway around them filled with fire and Dylan swore under his breath as Katerina and West covered their heads with their arms and bent low as they ran.

Dylan held his metal communicator to his lips again. "Thisbe, fire in section E. A pipe has burst. The idiots shot at us." Dylan listened for a moment and then spoke to the faceless computer again. "I know it's bad. You have to try."

Behind them, the roar of fiery gas escaping the pipe and metal melting

down the walls covered any other noises there might be.

They reached a T in the corridor and Katerina chanced a look over her shoulder. The fire was behind them. For now. The loud bray of an alarm descended on them from all sides, making Katerina cover her ears in pain.

Thisbe's voice came over a loudspeaker, cool and unemotional, but certainly not computer-like. "Fire in Sections E and F. Spreading quickly. All hands on firefighting duty. Enact containment plan 21. All hands. Prepare for escape plan 5150 on my mark."

Dylan led them left. Katerina could see a door big enough to let in a tank at the very end of the hallway. Dylan wheeled directly to a small door inset in the big one and pressed a button. The door opened and Katerina felt a blast of sweet, cool air on her face.

*Oh thank God.*

They stepped out of the doorway and onto a long, concrete ramp that led upwards at a steep incline. The door slammed shut behind them, cutting off the strident alarm. From where they stood, Katerina could see nothing. No sky, no stars, no trees, no ground. Only concrete on every side.

"Dylan, are we underground?"

Dylan only grunted, but Katerina knew they had to be. A horrifying

thought entered her brain.

"Dylan, are the monkeys kept underground too? Are they housed down there?"

West pulled impatiently at her hand. "The what? The monkeys? Forget about the damn monkeys. You can't save them all," he admonished Katerina.

Katerina pulled away from him, running to get in front of Dylan. "Dylan, the monkeys will be last priority, right? No one's going to save them will they?"

Dylan looked at her directly and Katerina saw something new in his eyes. A light. A ray.

"You're right Katerina. I'll see what I can do."

Katerina warmed slightly. Was it the first time he had called her by name?

Dylan held his communicator to his lips one more time. "Thisbe, they need a car." He listened to something only he could hear then turned to them, speaking quickly and deliberately. "Go to the parking lot on the far east side of the compound." He motioned which direction it was in. "Thisbe says for you to find the row of driverless cars along the very back section next to the fence. Get into the third vehicle from the end. Thisbe will take you out."

Katerina glanced at West's face and could immediately tell he doubted

the plan. She didn't. She trusted Dylan. She trusted the computer too.

She knelt in front of Dylan. "Thank you. You made up for all in my eyes. And maybe God's too."

Dylan's misshapen face broke into a smile of relief so great, it almost made him look beautiful. Katerina was able to smile back for only a second before West pulled her away.

They made it up the ramp much quicker than Dylan's wheelchair could, but Katerina could hear him barking orders at Thisbe behind them. He was asking her to open the doors to section R and inquiring if she were able to open any of the monkey's cages.

Dylan's voice faded behind her as she lost her breath again and her blood pounded in her ears. West curled an arm around her waist and urged her faster. The silent night air was broken by the sound of an alarm, and then sirens split the blackness. Reinforcements were coming.

They reached the very top of the ramp and Katerina looked around. There wasn't much to see, only dirt and a few large buildings and fences and scrub brush. Now Katerina could hear men's voices, yelling and calling instructions.

"Over here," West said, pulling her behind a large concrete pylon. He drew something out of his shirt. "Put this on."



Katerina shook it out and realized it was a military uniform, just like the one he was wearing. She put the pants and shirt on over her clothes, wishing she had time to stop and marvel at the fact that West had found her at all, and that they had escaped. She shoved her hair up under the cap and looked at him.

West peeked out from behind their inadequate hiding place. "I don't see anyone. We'll have to make a run for it and act like we belong. Let me do the talking if anyone stops us."

*No problem.*

They ran in the direction Dylan had pointed them, staying on the very outskirts of the base. People passed them on foot and in vehicles. A green fire truck and water tanker sped down the street in the direction that they had come from, but no one gave them a second glance. They finally reached the parking lot that Dylan had assured them would be there. They slowed, looking for the row of driverless vehicles. Katerina wondered if they would know them when they saw them.

She needn't have worried. In the very far corner sat fifteen vehicles, perfectly equidistant from each other and each looking exactly like the last. They counted three from the end and ran up to it. West opened the driver's door. Immediately, a light glowed on the dashboard. Thisbe's voice filled the cabin. "In the back seat please. Lay down."

West closed the front door and opened the back door, motioning for Katerina to get inside. Katerina did and West curled up beside her, trying not to put too much weight on her.

"I trust you are comfortable, Lightning and Thunder?" Thisbe said.

"What?" West muttered under his breath.

"That's us," Katerina whispered to him. "Yes Thisbe, thank you," Katerina said louder.

The car reversed smoothly and drove through the parking lot. Katerina watched out the front window and saw the very top of a gate leading to the exit.

"Are there any gate guards?" West asked, his words tight and clipped.

Thisbe's smooth voice answered immediately. "No. I called them all away to fight the fire. I looped the cameras also because I know Storm wants you to escape undetected and that is the only way it will happen."

Katerina saw the gate slide open and the car accelerated through the opening. She felt West breathe a sigh of relief next to her. He dropped his head so that his hair tickled her ear and she could hear him breathing deeply. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

They drove in silence for several minutes and Katerina's heart began to bloom with release and hope.

"How far can you go, Thisbe?" West asked and Katerina heard thick emotion in his voice.

"One hundred miles in all directions."

"What is the closest town?"

"Rachel. It is exactly 32 miles away."

"Can you take us there?"

Katerina gripped West's arm. Thirty-two miles? The closest town? Was that really smart? West shook his head in warning and squeezed her hand. "Trust me," he whispered.

"Yes I can take you there," Thisbe replied. "And yes I will. You may sit up now."

West sat up first and helped Katerina into a sitting position. He pulled her tightly into his arms and kissed her forehead. "Thank God you're real," he whispered. "Thank God I found you."

Katerina closed her eyes and felt their heartbeats merge into one. A miracle. That's what it was. A pure miracle that she had two men to thank for.

Her eyes shot open. "Thisbe, is Dyl - Storm okay?"

"He is okay for now. He is herding monkeys. It would be comical if not

for the fire."

"What about you?" West asked, sitting forward in his seat and staring at the light on the dashboard. "Are you OK? Is the fire still spreading?"

"The fire is still spreading. I am fine. My mainframe is well-protected."

West relaxed slightly and Katerina nestled into his chest. They were nowhere near out of danger, she knew that, but it still felt good to be held by her husband. She watched out the window as the car accelerated faster. They seemed to be going much faster than anyone would normally drive. She peeked around the head rest at the speedometer. One hundred and forty-six miles an hour. Katerina gulped and felt for her seatbelt. West noticed her fear and put his on also. But the car sped along perfectly straight down the empty highway, not giving them any reason to fear other than the speed and the fact that no one was driving it.

They rode along in silence for many minutes, West's hands roaming up and down Katerina's arms and pulling gently at her hair, like he couldn't believe she was real. Katerina recognized the feeling and shared it.

Abruptly, the vehicle began to slow. Katerina looked around. They couldn't have gone thirty-two miles already, could they have?

Thisbe's voice spoke from the console. This time, it sounded robotic to Katerina and the change scared her badly. "My mainframe will be breached in

eight minutes, four seconds. I must bring the vehicle back if no one is to know you have gone. Please exit immediately."

Thisbe maneuvered the car to the breakdown lane and West fumbled at the handle, finally opening the door and spilling them out onto the blacktop.

"Thank you," Katerina called, but the car was already accelerating again. It turned around and sped back the way it had come from, even faster now that it was completely empty.

## Chapter 17

West hugged Katerina to him, practically carrying her as he picked his way over the Nevada desert scrub.

Neither of them was sweating anymore, and he was afraid heat exhaustion would set in soon. If it did, they were dead. The sun had risen hours ago and it was beating down mercilessly on them. They had ditched the uniforms when Thisbe had dropped them off, but Katerina had the brilliant idea to keep the hats, and they both had theirs pulled low over their faces.

West's phone battery was dead. It had died an instantaneous and much mourned death the instant he had turned the phone on.

They had been walking for hours and Katerina was asleep on her feet. The lonely road lay a half mile to their right. West hadn't wanted to stay on it, afraid that any vehicles rushing down it would be military - men with guns ready to take them back to their certain doom. But not one vehicle had passed on it. West tried to make sense of it. Was it really that isolated out here? Why hadn't they at least seen fire trucks rushing to the base?

West swayed on his feet and gritted his teeth, fighting for control. Katerina mumbled and he pushed himself upright, gripping her harder. They had

to be close. Had to be.

He lifted his face, feeling the sun burning his cheeks and saw something that made his spirit soar over the dessert like an eagle. A building. A plain, white building that looked like the grandest hotel, with smaller buildings behind it. It was still over a mile away but he knew they could make it. Nothing would stop them.

"Katerina, we're almost there," he told her, hearing his own jubilation.

"What?" she muttered, trying to help him, trying to place her feet solidly on the ground.

"A building. Look."

Katerina lifted her eyes and he felt the exact moment that she realized they wouldn't die out here in the dessert. New strength flowed through her limbs and she stood fully upright, her pace quickening.

"We made it," she sighed.

The building seemed to take an eternity to reach, but they finally drew close. A sign announced that they had arrived at Little A'Le'Inn, Earthlings Welcome. Katerina gaped at it but didn't remark on it. West thought she was probably saving her energy.

Four cars graced the parking lot but no people were in sight. West looked

around for a phone, desperation lining his thoughts. How could he make this work? Give them the most amount of time with the least amount of danger? If they holed up here, and the guys from Operation Arma showed up with vehicles and guns, he and Katerina would be caught for sure. No warning, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. But what choice did they have? None.

He pulled Katerina around to the Inn's front door and pushed his way inside, hoping he didn't look too scruffy. A wooden bench sat just inside the door. Perfect. He maneuvered Katerina over to it and sat her down, whispering he'd be right back. He pulled his cap low to hide his features and loped up to the counter, where a tiny sign proclaimed he should ding the bell. He did, just once, as quietly as possible.

A slight man with heavy glasses appeared almost immediately. "Yes Sir, what can I help you with?"

West pasted a smile on his face and held out his hand, praying the man would take it. The man's hand reached out automatically. As soon as West felt the slide of the man's skin on his fingers he gripped. "Relax. Don't say a word. Look at the floor. I need a room for one night but I won't be paying and I can't show up on any register. Mark the room as unavailable but empty. Forget my face. Forget I was ever here. Do whatever you have to do quickly."

West made a vow to himself that if he got out of this he would send the



Little A'Le'Inn twice what the room was worth. No, four times! But right now he just needed the room and for this guy to not remember he existed.

The man's gaze slid into the slightly unfocused stare West was beginning to know so well. He bent under the counter and retrieved a key, handing it to West. "Trailer 5. Round the back and to the left."

West let go of his hand and grabbed the key, then turned to gather Katerina and leave before anyone else saw them.

Katerina looked surprised and about to say something. West held a finger to his lips and pulled her out of her chair, then through the front door.

"That was quick. I didn't even see you give him any money," Katerina said as they hurried through the dirt to the back of the building.

West spotted the trailer and made a beeline for it, pulling Katerina with him, hoping she wouldn't insist on asking more questions. She still didn't know about what he could do and he wanted to keep it that way. At least for now. Any time he stopped to think about it too long the implications threatened to knock him to his knees. What were the limits of his power? Did Katerina give special abilities to anyone besides him? He wasn't the only person she'd healed. Those kinds of thoughts ran races inside his head until he was half mad. He didn't want to give her those thoughts too if he didn't have to.

West climbed the three rickety steps to the trailer and shoved his key in

the lock, secreting them inside. He breathed a sigh of relief as the door shut behind them. That had been easier than it had any right to be. Katerina dropped to a bed and shut her eyes. West headed for the phone, his muscles still tensed for fight or flight.

He dialed Blaise's number but it went right to voice-mail. He cursed under his breath and hung up.

"What?" Katerina asked without opening her eyes, the tone in her voice implying she was near her breaking point.

"Blaise isn't answering. He's probably on an airplane on his way out here. That could take hours."

"Brody," Katerina said.

West tried his brother's number, but that phone also went to voicemail. "Nope," he said heavily.

"So we wait," Katerina muttered.

West stood and paced the room. "I can't help but feel like that's a bad idea. We need somebody to know where we are and what's happened to us. Somebody who cares. Somebody who has the power to do something about it."

"Pearson," he breathed, the sudden thought of his lawyer warming him. Pearson had helped them escape Dylan Phillips back when the man had been a

lunatic police chief who had it out for them. But even as he thought about it, he knew this situation was a hundred times worse than that one. Would Pearson be able to handle it?

On the bed, Katerina whispered, "Craig."

Craig Masterson! Why hadn't West thought of the FBI agent before? They'd done the agent a huge favor recently, and the man had certainly seemed to know his stuff. Fear worked little wormholes of worry into the plan though. The man was a government agent. Just like Raven. What if he knew about Operation Arma and, instead of helping them, decided to deliver them right back into the serpent's mouth?

West sat heavily on the bed, rubbing his eyes against the exhaustion that threatened to floor him. He knew he had to trust someone. What had happened to them was huge - way too big for them to claw their way out of by themselves. Without some major help they would be recaptured, or just killed, the moment they showed themselves.

Now that there was no immediate danger shoving a gun in his face, and he had Katerina safe beside him, thoughts about the hopeless nature of their circumstances crowded into his brain. How could they fight the U.S. Government and win? How could they escape something like this, that threatened to be a scandal to rival Watergate or Iran-contra? West's tired mind

tried to insist it had to be true. The American people wouldn't stand for a government that kidnapped their own citizens and held them in secret, underground facilities, using military forces to do it, would they?

West felt his eyelids drooping and knew he needed to make a decision. His mind cast a tired net over everything he knew about Craig. The man had dealt with scandal before, and fearlessly worked to put the bad guys in jail, one of them a U.S. Senator. Plus he was married to Emma, one of the most trustworthy people he'd ever known in his life.

Decision made, West stood up and grabbed the phone again. He stared blankly at the wall, realizing he didn't know Craig's number. He had it in his cell phone, but that was dead.

"555-4389," Katerina whispered from the bed, her voice heavy and thick, like she was about to drift off.

He turned to her. "Is that ...?"

"Craig's cell number, yes. I memorized it when we were working with him last month. You know, just in case."

West blessed her memory and bent to give her a kiss. Katerina clutched at him like she was drowning and he was the life guard. But only for a moment. She knew how dire their situation was as well as he did.

West dialed the number and waited, his teeth on edge. *Answer, answer.*

"Masterson."

When the rough voice cut through the static of the line, West almost couldn't react. *Were they saved?* He managed to force some words out. "Craig, hi it's West. Me and Katerina are in trouble man. Deep trouble. We need your help."

Craig didn't answer for several long seconds and West held his breath. A thousand scenarios flashed through his mind in an instant, each worse than the last. The man already knew what was going on with them and he wanted nothing to do with it. Or he already knew and he was part of it. Or he didn't want to know. Or he would find out and turn them in.

But when Craig spoke again, West was able to relax, almost slumping against the tiny table the phone sat on.

"Sorry about that. I had to step into my office for privacy. What's the trouble?"

## Chapter 18

West watched out the window, terror gripping him mercilessly as evening deepened into night and still Craig hadn't shown up. Katerina snored lightly behind him but he hadn't let himself sleep, not yet. Someone had to be awake, watchful. Not that they had any chance of running if the wrong people showed up.

A nondescript white sedan pulled into the parking lot just beyond the building where they had checked in. West narrowed his eyes and pressed his face to the glass. He'd seen only three vehicles enter and two leave today, and none had been Craig. Craig had promised he'd be there as soon as possible. West had done the math and figured the earliest Craig could have arrived would have been four hours, but that time had passed five hours ago.

His fingers itched to pick up the phone and call someone, anyone, but Craig had admonished him not to do that. Craig said the government had the ability to monitor every phone call placed in the entire country for certain trigger words, and if the computer heard the trigger words spoken, the call could be listened in on by CIA or other spying agencies the government employed. "What if they are already listening in on this call?" West had said and Craig's response

had not encouraged him. "Then we're screwed."

West watched as the car reversed again, disappointment spreading through him, but then the car pulled past the main building and headed towards his trailer. West stared openly, but reached behind him and jiggled Katerina's foot. "Babe, wake up."

It had to be Craig, but just in case ....

The car stopped and the driver side door opened. Craig Masterson got out and West released the breath that he had been holding. Craig walked up the steps and knocked on their door.

West let Craig in and turned around to see Katerina groggily sitting up. "Hi," Craig said gruffly, then pulled a rag out of his pocket, handing it to West. "Everything you've touched, and I mean everything. Wipe down the walls and the windows if there's a chance you touched them. Wipe off all of your fingerprints. We are out of here in three minutes."

West's words of thanks died on his lips. So they were still running.

Exactly two minutes and thirty seconds later, the three of them were in the car and Craig reversed it out of the parking lot, heading away from the Little A'Le'Inn. West thought he'd never been so glad to see something disappear behind him in his life.

"Where are we going?" Katerina asked from the backseat.

"Dallas," Craig said, his voice hard and a little forbidding.

West stared at him. "Dallas? Why Dallas?" A sudden foreboding told him he probably wasn't going to like the answer.

Craig took a deep breath and glanced at West, then back at the road. "Look, we need to have a very serious conversation. I've been pulling every string I know, every favor owed to me, and picking the brain of every friend I have. You two are mixed up in some seriously bad business. This Operation Arma doesn't exist. Every level of government I've approached insists there is no subterranean base under Area 51."

West began to stammer his protest and Craig held up a hand. "I believe you. I'm just telling you what I've been going through the last few hours. I've only found one person who was willing to talk about it, and she says it doesn't exist, but that anyone who escaped from there might as well be dead. She told me that the government will do everything in their power to silence you. You won't even be taken back there. You'll just be shot in the head and left in a ditch."

West winced. "I've been thinking about that. And our best solution has to be to go to the press."

"You can try," Craig said. "But I'd be willing to bet you'd be dead within



an hour of talking to your first reporter."

"No!" West yelled and slammed a fist into his door. "I refuse to believe that! This is the United States of America! We're not supposed to do that to our own citizens."

Craig didn't say anything, just drove on.

West licked his lips. He knew Craig was speaking the truth, but he didn't want to believe it. He tried another tactic. "We could run. Go to the press in another country."

Craig nodded like he expected that. "One of two things will happen if you do that. The US government will fabricate a murder or treason charge and present it to the foreign government for extradition. You'll be back here before you know it." West tried to protest again and Craig spoke louder. "OR! Or, your family will start to disappear. Everyone you know and love will suffer the fate that the government had reserved for you, until you come home in a panic, and then they'll finish you off and be done with it."

West shrank against the passenger seat, his exhaustion and discontent weighing him down. "So what do we do then?"

"Did you notice that it took me longer than it should have to get to you?" Craig asked.

West nodded, peeking at Katerina in the back seat to see how she was taking this. Her eyes followed both men avidly.

"I stopped at the field office in Las Vegas to put a few ideas into effect. On the flight over, I did as much research as I could and came to a decision of what would be best for you two. I had my friend, the one who was willing to talk about it, look into the situation there. Apparently the entire facility has been gutted. Everything is destroyed, and the fire is still raging on, taking out the base above now. There are pipelines feeding the gas into the underground system and all of them are ablaze, causing huge sinkholes and fire to spurt up out of the ground from anywhere with no warning."

West heard a small noise from the backseat and reached back to take Katerina's hand. Who knew who she was mourning over: Dylan, the monkeys, the computer. Any of them were a safe bet with a heart as tender as Katerina's.

"That's why no one has come after you. The entire place is in absolute chaos. From what you told me, there's a good chance that they think you are dead, burned to nothing but ash somewhere below the ground."

Craig stopped talking, letting the fact sink in. "The way I see it, now that you are dead, your only hope is to stay dead."

"And just how are we going to do that?" West asked, his entire life disintegrating in a flash.

"My friend? The one who told me all of this – she can set you up with citizen identities in another country. In fact, she already has. She hasn't told me which country, and I haven't told her who you are. No one knows the full story, which should make you safe."

Craig was silent for a long time.

"It's the best we can do."

## Chapter 19

*Two months later*

Jordan walked into Blaise's home office, finding him bent over paperwork on the desk. She rubbed his shoulders and smiled as he stretched like a cat and pressed into her. "Is that the paperwork from the attorney?" she asked.

"It is," he said fanning the papers at her. "He says it's too early to file a lawsuit. We have to have them declared legally dead first, but as soon as that happens we're going to move. The sooner the better, to force them to open Operation Arma files before they are all destroyed."

Jordan's hands tightened on Blaise's shoulder and he looked backwards at her. A lone tear dropped from her eye and he squeezed her hand and pulled her to him. She had cried a lot in the last two months, and he didn't blame her.

His phone rang, cutting off his thoughts. He looked at the screen, feeling that familiar zing of hope that the caller id emblazoned there would say West. It was Brody. He handed the phone to Jordan. "Can you talk to him? Tell him I'll get the full report to him tomorrow. It will be mailed at eight a.m., express mail."

Jordan nodded and took the phone, retreating to another room for the conversation. Blaise watched her go, appreciating her liquid feminine stride, and then turned back to his work. Brody had paid him a crazy salary to quit his job and investigate this atrocity full time, but he wasted too much of Blaise's time trying to hash things out, going over things they'd gone over a dozen times before. Jordan had to run interference between them frequently.

Blaise had been glad when Brody had offered him the job. Blaise had a hard time trying to face the thought of going back to his job at the police department after what had happened to West and Katerina. He knew he would never rest until the bastards that kidnapped them and held them till their fiery death were called out, brought to justice.

Blaise bent over the file again, but the one tiny piece of evidence that had never been officially logged called to him, like it always did. He pulled out the piece of paper that held the screenshot of the missed call on his phone and stared at it, his fingers caressing it. "West," he whispered. "If you're out there somewhere, why haven't you ever tried to call again?"

He slid the piece of paper back into its hiding spot underneath his paper tray. He knew that screenshot didn't mean West was alive. He'd traced the call number to the Little A'Le'Inn in Rachel, Nevada, even driven out there with Brody, but no one ever remembered seeing West or Katerina that day. The establishment had insisted they hadn't let anyone fitting that description use the

phone. In fact, the owners had eagerly cooperated and let the men look at their records. No one that could have been West and Katerina had rented a room that day either.

But the biggest mystery came when they examined the phone records of the Inn. No call to Blaise's phone was recorded. Brody hired a hacker to break into the phone records and his best guess was that the records had been tampered with and two calls had been removed from the records, but no matter how much money Brody threw at him, the hacker couldn't come up with the two phone numbers.

It didn't fit. None of it fit. So he pushed the call to the back of his mind again and concentrated on the evidence that did fit. Which was precious little. Only what West's text message had said, what Agnes could tell them, and what one lone former agent had come forward and provided. Blaise read the transcript of that conversation again then leaned back in his chair with a sigh. There would be a break eventually, he just had to find it. And he would find it.

He made a deal with himself. He would work for one more hour, and then he would go find Jordan to ease both of their pain in the only way he knew how. With gentle touches and long, soulful kisses that always led to them forgetting about the early demise of their best friends for at least a short while.

## Chapter 20

*Two years, eight months later*

"Come on Noemie, were going to be late!" West roared up the stairs in French.

Nothing. He didn't understand what was taking her so long. She was graduating at the head of her class in the first phase of her veterinarian degree today. She'd been so looking forward to it – to moving on to the hands-on portion.

But she had been acting strange all morning, not talking much, and moving slow. She'd taken forever just to get out of bed. West felt a thin stripe of fear strike him right in his midsection. Did she know something she wasn't saying? The sudden anxiousness that their identities were compromised and Kater-- Noemie knew it somehow struck West full in the chest. He took the steps two at a time chiding himself for calling her by her real name in his mind. It had been years, but he still did it sometimes. And he always thought of himself by his former name. A dangerous habit, he knew, but one he had yet to shake.

The sound of the TV upstairs matched perfectly with the sound of the TV downstairs. They had both TVs in the house tuned to CNN twenty four hours a day, always looking for any sort of indication that either there was some sort of a search on for them, or that someone had found out something new about Operation Arma. There had been a bit of an uproar in the days and weeks following their escape and subsequent flight to Switzerland with two new identities and seven thousand dollars in cash that Craig had provided for them. The uproar had been caused by Brody and Blaise, but hadn't lasted long. West wondered every day if his best friend and his brother had gone underground, or if they had been threatened ... or both. He knew they were both still alive. He followed Brody in the business pages but Blaise was harder to watch. He'd quit the police department for some reason and West still couldn't tell what he was up to or what he'd been doing since they'd been gone. West also had no idea what was going on with his father. All he knew was that he'd never seen an obituary for his father, and he prayed that meant the man was still alive.

West reached the second floor of the simple house he and Noemie lived in, and looked in the only bedroom. She wasn't there. That left the bathroom or the attic. He ran to the bathroom door and stopped short, hearing noises inside. Crying.

West's heart lurched in his chest. They had a good life. A simple life, but a good one. They had each other, and although they missed their friends and



family, most of the time they were happy. They were free, and they were alive.

Noemie still gave thanks every day that she was a normal person with no more powers, although she did get powerful premonitions that always turned out to be correct from time to time - and she knew nothing about West's powers. He'd never told her. He'd never used them again since that time in Nevada.

But Ka-Noemie was crying? Alone in the bathroom? Why?

He knocked lightly on the door. "Baby," he whispered. "What's wrong?"

She didn't respond, but her soft noises stopped immediately. West jiggled the doorknob but it was locked. Desperation clawed at him and he considered busting in the door. But he could hurt her ...

Something flew underneath the door between his feet. Something long and white. He bent down to pick it up.

It was a pregnancy test. A *positive* pregnancy test.

West's heart glowed full and strong as a fierce sense of longing and excitement gripped him. Pregnant. Katerina was pregnant. He was going to be a father.

They'd never talked about children since the dinner, the day before the wedding when his father had asked Katerina where she stood on the issue. When they arrived in Switzerland, they'd had their hands full learning the language,

finding jobs, and just surviving. When things had finally settled down, he'd wanted to broach the subject, but never did, taking his cue from his wife, knowing she would approach it when she felt ready. But also seeing her faithfully take her pill every day.

"Baby, open the door. I'm not mad. I'm overjoyed. Come here and let me kiss you. Let me touch you and talk to my baby. I want to teach him or her the ABCs."

A soft snort came through the door and West smiled. He'd made her laugh. That was a good start.

He heard the lock click as she unlatched it and pulled open the door.

West swept down on her, covering her mouth with his, telling her with his tongue that it was OK, it was good, it was right and he was the happiest man in the world. He finally pulled back and let her breathe. "A baby, a baby Noemie! Why in the world are you sad?"

"So many reasons," she sighed into his chest.

"Didn't you plan it?" he asked cautiously.

"No," she said with finality. "I took my pill faithfully every day, but the best I can figure is that when I had the stomach flu a month ago and was throwing up every day, my hormones got out of whack."

West dropped to his knees in front of her and lifted her shirt, kissing her belly soundly. He stood again and looked her in the eyes, cradling her face tenderly. "Still, a baby is never a reason to be sad."

"West," she whispered and a thrill shot through him. He hadn't heard that name on her lips in years. "School – I'll have to put it off."

"That's okay."

"And work. I want to stay home with the baby."

West kissed her on each cheek. "We'll figure out how to make it work, Katerina. I promise."

They had simple jobs that didn't bring in a lot of money, Katerina working as a veterinary tech and West fixed motorcycles, occasionally able to build one out of used parts.

Katerina looked at him and the pain in her eyes tore at his soul.

"West, I can't help thinking of your father. We don't even know if he is still alive. Are we really going to have a baby all the way around the world and never tell him?"

West hugged her for a long time and didn't speak a word. Finally, he told her the only thing he knew to say. "Some things can't be helped, Katerina."

\*\*\*

West pushed open the door to their home and flipped on the light, taking a good look around before he walked inside. Habit. His nerves stayed on high alert until he had walked through the house and ensured it was empty. When finished, he found Katerina in the kitchen, wiping the counter down absently. He wrapped his arms around her waist and tucked her body into his, where it fit so well.

"Thanks for dinner," she told him. "Although it was a bit too extravagant."

"We had a lot to celebrate," he reminded her. She lifted her arms to his neck and West prepared to kiss her, but something caught her eye and turned her face to the left. She was staring at the TV in the living room.

"Hey, is that Craig?"

West looked too and recognized him at once. He rushed towards the TV to turn the volume on. *Breaking News* flashed across the screen in bold red letters. West's finger froze on the volume button as he read the text that followed.

*.. entire section of the government shut down. Congress raided by FBI. Twenty-two senators led away in handcuffs. President denying responsibility or knowledge.*

*West flipped on the volume just as the picture of Craig was replaced by one of Wolf Blitzer. His voice flooded their small house. "This is the biggest investigation into our legislature since, well, ever. FBI investigators have uncovered reports of the government locking up citizens with no discussion of their rights, no chance at a trial, and actually without any proof of wrongdoing. Many of these people have knowledge or abilities the government is interested in. We have uncovered four secret bases around the country."*

*West sat heavily in his TV chair, all of his recent good news forgotten.*

*"The investigation started after a fire at one of these bases three years ago. A lawsuit filed against the government some months later captured the notice of the FBI. Lead investigator Craig Masterson will be holding a press conference in a little over an hour."*

*Katerina sat down next to West and they watched all night, neither daring to say what the other was thinking. Could they go home now? Were they safe?*

## Chapter 21

Three days later, West walked out to the mailbox, leaving Katerina behind to monitor the news. They had both decided to not change anything until they were able to talk to Craig. They'd been away from home for almost three years, what would a few more days matter? But so far, they hadn't been able to speak with Craig. They saw him on the news, night and day discussing his ongoing investigations, looking harried and tired, but satisfied and strong. His old cell phone number no longer worked, his home number was unlisted, his secretary answered his business line, and West couldn't bring himself to call Emma. He was supposed to be dead, and he didn't know if it was safe yet to shatter that illusion.

His heart was beginning to ache though, at the thought of his family and friends, so far away, thinking he was long dead and gone. It was something he had never let himself think about it until now.

He pulled open the mailbox and reached inside, finding a large, heavy-duty envelope almost big enough to be called a package. West pulled it out and looked at it curiously. The postmark said it was from America - California. West's heart sped up in his chest. Excitement laced through his bloodstream. In

all the years they lived here, they never had received anything from America.

It was addressed to Noemie and Marcus Girard. No return address.

West slipped a thumb under the flap, then changed his mind and ran back to the house, yelling his wife's name. It was good news, he knew it.

Katerina met him at the doorway, her eyes wide with fright. He thrust the package into her hands.

Katerina turned the item over, reading what he had read, drawing her own conclusions. With shaking fingers she unsealed the flap and looked inside. West watched her, his breath stuck in his lungs.

Her face clouded for a second and he reached out to steady her. Her eyes misted and she took a step backwards, then ran for their tiny kitchen table.

She turned the fat envelope upside down and shook it. Pictures spilled out across the table.

Jordan and Blaise, kissing at a restaurant, a diamond ring blazing on Jordan's hand.

Brody, a sweet-looking girl on his arm, standing in front of a car in someone's driveway.

West's dad at a festival with an ice cream cone, a devilish grin on his face

for the camera.

More, so many more pictures flowed out, telling a story of almost three years without them.

Katerina sobbed, picking up each picture with wonder and exclaiming over it in turn.

West felt wild laughter bubble in his chest. Their family knew they were alive! And they were reaching out!

Katerina pulled out a piece of paper with sloping writing on it, covering both sides. He recognized Blaise's handwriting immediately. "You read it," Katerina said, tears streaming down her cheeks."

*Dear Katerina and West,*

*Hopefully, when this letter reaches you, you will know that we have finally won. We have tailed the corruption as far as we could and all of the people responsible will be going to jail for a long time. We have forty-two former prisoners testifying and we don't need you to do so at this time. Maybe in the future. But right now, you are free to return to your lives whenever you would like.*

*Craig told us that you both were still alive only six months ago, when it became clear that our investigation was going to be successful. But he swore us*



*all to secrecy and made us promise we would not try to contact you until he was certain you would be safe. Brody and I have been working closely with him since our lawyer filed our first lawsuit against the government for your unlawful detention and death.*

*Jordan has written you a letter every day since we found out. I have included them all here.*

Katerina pulled out a fistful of smaller pieces of paper and held them up, her sobbing turning to laughter. West went on.

*We miss you guys more than words can express. Things have been hard here without you. The investigation has been draining in so many ways, and I even had to send Jordan away for a few months when I started receiving threats and our home was broken into. But that's a story for another time. Craig's wife refused to leave, so he moved his office into hers at the fire station and they began to wear Kevlar helmets and jackets to get to and from work. That was a very tough time, but things got safer when the first congressional interviews started. Everyone began pointing the finger of blame at everyone else and forgot about trying to shut us up. Now that the truth is discovered and out, we are as safe as we will ever be.*

*Enough about that. Enough about that for the rest of our lives.*

*No matter what you guys decide to do, we need you to stay put there for*

*at least a few more weeks. A wedding is heading to the church down the street from you.*

*Jordan finally said yes. She kept putting me off until the investigation and lawsuits were over and done with but then I managed to get her pregnant and she couldn't say no anymore. The date will be on August fifteenth.*

Katerina let out a shriek and then ran to West, hugging him tight to her chest, deep sobs wracking her body. West felt his own tears fall into her hair.

"That's a week from now," she said, her voice muffled.

"One week," West repeated and kept reading.

*Everyone's coming. Brody, Sam, Agnes. Not Craig though, he's too busy. He sends his regards. We will even be bringing your cat, Nina. She loves to travel – she went with Jordan when I sent her away. We will be there in two days.*

*Yours in everlasting friendship, Blaise.*

Katerina's knees buckled and West had to catch her by the arms to keep her from falling to the floor. She looked up at him, her body limp. "It's over. Truly and forever over. We can go home."

She found her feet again and stood up under her own power, her face wet with tears. She rubbed her still-flat belly. "Our baby will know his or her family,

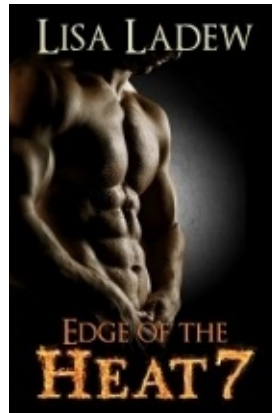
and be raised surrounded by love and friends. That's all I ever wanted."

West kissed her deeply, knowing in his heart that it was all he ever wanted too.

<<<<< The End >>>>>

Author's Note: When I did my planning for the Hide me Series, I ordered the covers and thought the story would be entirely complete by the end of the 4th book. As you see here, the story grew beyond my control and there are so many ways it could continue on. Does Blaise have powers? Does everyone who abducted West and Katerina end up in jail? What about the woman in the hospital who Katerina saved? Does she have powers? And Jordan and Katerina's babies ... are they girls, boys, best friends? Do *they* have powers?

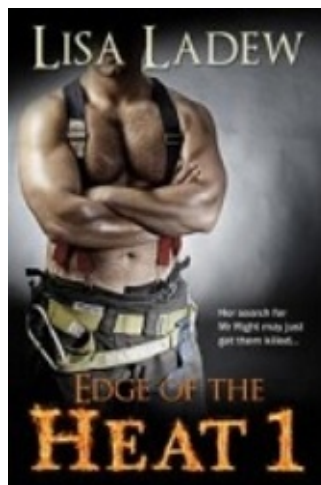
I don't know the answers to these questions although they do intrigue me. The Hide Me Series will be put to bed for now, but I'm sure these questions will fill my dreams, and if I ever decide to write another book, you'll be the first to know ;)



[Edge of the Heat 7 available Sep 30th 2015.](#)

as always, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Writing is hard work, but every time I get an email that says I made someone's day a little brighter, a little sweeter, it is all worth it.

If you haven't read the Edge of the Heat series and you are wondering about Craig and Emma, who feature so prominently in this series, they are the H/h of the Edge of the Heat 1 and 2. Check out the free first book of that series, [Edge of the Heat 1](#):



## About the Author

Lisa became a full time author in the summer of 2014, fulfilling a childhood dream. She lives in the Inland Pacific Northwest, and is married with 2 sons. She is a U.S. Army veteran, plus former paramedic, 911 calltaker/police radio dispatcher, and volunteer firefighter. Her husband is also a veteran, and a retired police officer. Connect with her on her facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/LisaLadewAuthor> or email her. Lisa@lisaladew.com