

Run With Me

Rain pounded against the windows like a war drum, blurring city lights into a wet watercolor. The black Ford Expedition carved through Los Angeles traffic with purpose, cutting lanes like a sleek predator.

In the back seat, Izabella (23), sat behind the driver's shoulder—her expression calm, posture regal, a tactical dossier balanced on her lap. She wore a slate-gray blazer and a pin with a faint glint of silver—a silent emblem of influence.

Jett Sentry (25), drove with laser focus, one hand steady on the wheel, the other hovering over a holstered communicator. His eyes scanned every shadow, every motorcycle tail light, every overpass like they were potential strike zones.

Izabella leaned forward slightly, close enough for her voice to reach him but not break the division of space.

"You know they won't attack until we're boxed in," she said, her tone crisp.

Jett didn't look back. "They know better than to box me in." She smiled faintly. "Confidence or arrogance?"

Jett offered a dry response. "Security."

Behind them, the glint of wet asphalt suddenly split—a black motorcycle appeared, trailing like a shark behind a boat.

Jett's jaw tightened. "And here comes the weather warning."

Three motorcycles roared in from side streets, surrounding the Ford Expedition with ruthless precision.

Rain streaked across helmets and headlights as the gang

boxed the vehicle into a narrow alley, brick walls pressing in like jaws ready to snap.

In the back seat, Izabella gripped her seatbelt, voice tight but composed. “They’re blocking us in.”

Jett’s eyes scanned the scene, heart thudding. “I see a way out.”

His gaze snapped to the tow truck parked at the alley’s dead end—its ramp slanted like a launchpad to freedom.

He hit the accelerator, the engine growling like an awakened beast.

The SUV surged forward, skimming through rain and gunfire—

Then CRACK!

A biker lifted his handgun and fired mid-air. The bullet struck the rear tire—dead center.

The Expedition hit the ramp and launched, wheels spinning wildly as rain streamed off its roof.

Mid-air, something shifted.

Jett’s grip tightened. “No, no—”

The vehicle tilted sideways, the busted tire pulling hard.

They landed with bone-jarring force—not flat.

The SUV skidded sideways.

Hydroplaned.

Twisted.

And with a gut-wrenching crunch of metal on concrete—

Flipped.

Jett’s vision blurred.

He woke to Jetting hazard lights, the SUV upside-down. The roof pressed in dangerously. Rain dripped through shattered glass. Somewhere nearby, a car alarm wailed in mock sympathy.

*He groaned, blood dripping across his temple, then rasped out the only name that mattered:
“Izabella...?”*

Jett groaned, one arm pinned awkwardly between his seat and the upside-down console. The shattered windshield leaked rain across his neck as he forced himself free, instincts kicking past the pain.

“Izabella...” he rasped.

He turned—though everything was flipped—and there she was, slumped across what was now the roof of the overturned Expedition. Her breathing was shallow, her forehead slick with rain and a thin streak of blood.

Jett scrambled toward her, his body fighting every bruise and aching rib. He cupped her face gently. “Izabella, talk to me...”

She stirred. “That... was not protocol.”

Jett chuckled weakly, relief washing over him. “No kidding.” Outside, motorcycles revved like vultures circling a downed animal. Their window to escape was closing.

Jett reached up and kicked out the side window, shards scattering onto wet pavement. He grabbed Izabella’s arm, helping her through the gap.

They crawled out into the alley, barely able to stand. Jett spotted it—a rusted junkyard gate, half-hidden behind graffiti-covered dumpsters just ahead.

“Come on,” he said. “We’ll lose them in there.”

Izabella stumbled, boots splashing in puddles, but Jett pulled her along—past flickering streetlights, discarded car parts, and the distant roar of engines growing louder.

They slipped into the junkyard just as the first biker rounded the alley corner.

Bent metal. Towering stacks of ruined cars. Oil-slicked mud. It wasn't safe.

Jett dragged Izabella through twisted aisles of scrap metal, past half-crushed sedans and engine husks swallowed by weeds. Thunder cracked overhead, but the real storm was closing in from the alley: revving engines, shouting voices, boots splashing through puddles. The Hollow gang was searching.

Then—Jett spotted it.

An old electric Chevrolet, tucked behind a stack of crumpled shopping carts and a bumper from a police cruiser that'd long forgotten glory. The car was dented, soaked, and definitely forgotten.

Perfect.

He yanked the warped hatch open. No backseats. Just empty carpeting, frayed at the edges, and a couple of crushed cardboard boxes marked with faded shipping labels. It smelled faintly of mildew and motor oil—but it would do. “Inside,” Jett whispered.

Izabella crawled in first, wincing as she settled against the floor. Jett followed, closing the hatch as quietly as rust would allow. Darkness wrapped around them, thick and close.

He slid into position beside her, breath shallow, heart pounding.

Outside: boots crunching gravel. A low voice barked, “Search everything. They couldn’t have gotten far.”

Inside the car, Jett turned his head toward Izabella, their faces inches apart in the silence.

“This hiding spot violates about fifteen codes,” he muttered. Izabella whispered, “So did your driving.”

**They both stifled a laugh—barely.
A motorcycle growled just beyond the junkyard fence.
Jett held his breath.**

**Inside the shadowy cocoon of the battered electric
Chevrolet, the tension hung heavy. Rain pattered
rhythmically against the rusted shell, muffling the threat just
beyond the junkyard's perimeter.**

**Izabella shifted slightly, her voice low and gentle—trying to
fill the silence that had swallowed them.**

“Ever been in a relationship?”

**Jett blinked, his eyes catching dim reflections off the
windshield shards. He let out a slow breath.**

**“Yeah,” he said finally. “But it didn’t last long... after I found
out she had one hell of a bounty on her head.” He chuckled
bitterly. “Imagine getting arrested by your own boyfriend.”**

Izabella’s brows drew together. “That must’ve been awful.”

**Jett leaned his head back, the carpeting rough beneath him.
“She said she loved me. Turns out, she loved smuggling rare
artifacts more. By the time I saw the wanted poster, I’d
already memorized her coffee order and her fake passport
number.”**

**Izabella didn’t speak right away. Just looked at him—really
looked. Past the banter, past the deflection.**

**“I guess trusting someone feels like a risk when you’re
trained to suspect everything,” she said quietly.**

**Jett turned to her, their faces still inches apart. “Especially
when you’ve got orders not to feel anything at all.”**

**They lay still, the sound of boots crunching metal and gravel
somewhere distant outside.**

But in that hollowed-out car, something began to shift—less fear, more understanding.

Jett shifted again, gripping his right hand instinctively. Izabella noticed.

“What happened?” she asked softly.

He let out a breath, staring at the scarred skin that had faded to uneven pink patches.

“Burn,” he muttered. “Fourteen years old. Passed out from heat exhaustion while cooking taco shells.”

Her brows lifted slightly, surprised.

“Yeah...” Jett continued, voice dry. “Right hand landed on the skillet. Scalded it pretty bad. But the worst part?” He gave a grim smile. “Walking around with tape slapped across my chest because my dad thought it’d keep the bandage in place. Ripping that off every day... especially when it took half a nipple with it? Let’s just say the embarrassment lingered longer than the pain.”

Izabella blinked, a small wince curling the corner of her mouth.

“That’s... vivid.”

Jett shrugged. “You wanted real.”

She nodded, then whispered, “I respect that.”

Outside, thunder rolled and gravel shifted—but inside the battered car, silence felt earned.

Jett shifted, brushing aside a collapsed cardboard box to peer through the cracked rear window.

Rain blurred the view into a mosaic of steel and shadow—but then he saw it.

Perched on a scaffold of rusted pipes, half-hidden behind the wreckage of a delivery van:

A Hollow sniper.

Jet-black helmet. Rain dripping down the sleek barrel of a long-range rifle.

Laser sight—steady.

Pointed directly at their car.

Jett froze. The red dot danced across the outer frame, settling just above the hatch they were tucked behind.

He ducked back, heart hammering.

“Sniper,” he whispered. “Forty meters. Elevated position.”

Izabella’s pulse quickened, but her voice stayed calm.

“Was the laser steady or searching?”

“Steady,” Jett said grimly. “They’re zeroing in.”

Outside, a shout echoed from the alley, followed by boots splashing through puddles.

Inside the battered Chevy, Jett wiped fog from the inside window, thinking fast.

“We can’t stay here,” he said. “If that sniper takes the shot—”

Izabella nodded. “We need cover. And misdirection.”

Jett glanced toward the cracked glove compartment. Inside: a bundle of roadside flares and—luckily—an emergency reflective blanket.

He grabbed them.

“Time to play bait,” he muttered.

Jett moved fast, reaching for the emergency reflective blanket bundled inside the glove compartment. It crinkled loudly as he unfolded it, the silver surface glinting like a signal flare in the dim light.

He pressed it against the cracked rear window, using old receipts and cardboard scraps to wedge it in place. Outside, the sniper’s laser dot vanished—blocked for now.

Izabella let out a breath, her body sagging slightly against the carpeted floor.

“That’s better,” Jett muttered.

Izabella shifted, pulling her arms close to her chest. The adrenaline was fading—and fatigue crept in like fog. She yawned, long and unfiltered.

“I swear,” she mumbled, voice thick with sleep, “I could... sleep like a rock. Right here, next to emergency flares and car grease.”

Jett raised an eyebrow. “Comfort and style. You really know how to pick a spot.”

She gave a half-smile, eyes fluttering shut for a moment. “If anyone asks, this is luxury tactical rest.”

Jett chuckled softly, then turned to check the window again—just in time to catch a flicker of movement: shadows darting between wrecked vehicles.

“They’re still out there,” he said quietly.

Izabella didn’t move. “Wake me if they knock.”

And with that, the storm outside continued, but inside the car, exhaustion wrapped itself around them like armor—fragile, but holding... for now.

Jett leaned his head against the cool metal wall of the Chevrolet, exhaustion threading through every muscle. Outside, the gang’s voices grew distant, muffled by rain and rusted steel.

He glanced down at Izabella, her body curled slightly, boots muddy and damp from their escape. Her breathing was slow, steady. The adrenaline had finally given way to weariness.

Without thinking, he began to hum—a soft, broken melody carried more by memory than voice.

It was the song his parents used to sing on long drives, when his eyes were heavy and the world felt too wide. Just a few quiet notes, simple and warm. Something about stars blinking and safe roads home.

Izabella stirred.

Then gently—almost dreamily—her head settled against his shoulder, nestling into the fabric of his soaked jacket.

Jett’s breath caught.

Her weight was light, the contact subtle... but it grounded him, ignited something small and sparking in his chest.

He swallowed hard, cheeks warming so fast he might've mistaken it for fever.

It wasn't adrenaline anymore. It was something far rarer.

Jett blinked, then looked down at her again—peaceful, resting like the storm outside didn't matter.

He whispered to himself, barely audible over the rain tapping metal:

"This can't be real..."

But it was.

Izabella shifted just slightly, her breath steady against Jett's shoulder. Rain tapped out a lullaby against the metal shell around them.

With her eyes still closed, she murmured, voice barely louder than the hum of the storm:

"Goodnight, Jett."

Jett turned his head slowly, eyes lingering on her relaxed features. The words caught somewhere between his throat and his heart.

He smiled faintly, the warmth in his cheeks returning with a vengeance.

"Goodnight, Io..."

He paused, flustered—then corrected himself softly.

"...Izabella."

She didn't respond.

But a gentle curve of a smile tugged at her lips, just enough to let him know she'd heard.

And beside the hum of danger waiting outside, something else settled in: quiet belonging.

Jett sat still, Izabella's head warm against his shoulder, her breathing calm and anchored.

But inside?

His thoughts stormed louder than the thunder outside.

He closed his eyes, the blanket still pressed against the shattered rear window, the rain tapping out a rhythm like a clock ticking too fast.

"Why did I do that..." he whispered. The words didn't need volume—they were carved deep already.

"Stupid."

His hand drifted to the burn across his knuckles, that reminder of fragile beginnings and a kitchen accident that somehow branded more than skin.

He stared into the darkness, listening to the gang shuffle through wet gravel and twisted metal. Every instinct told him to stay focused, stay sharp.

But all he could think was—

"God, I wish I was home for once."

A real roof. A dry couch. Maybe even the smell of something halfway edible.

No rifles. No targets. No rain-slick enemies.

Just... normal.

The kind of quiet where humming a lullaby didn't feel like defiance.

Izabella shifted again, closer. Her arm brushed his chest.

And suddenly... this didn't feel like weakness.

It felt like something he hadn't let himself want in years.

Jett rested his head gently against the metal wall, every beat of his heart reminding him of how far he'd strayed from the rules.

He glanced down at Izabella. Her breathing was deep, rhythmic. Still asleep, tucked against his shoulder like it was the most natural place in the world.

He knew the consequences.

He knew the number.

Protocol 39.

The one etched into every field manual, reinforced in every training sim, stamped on every classified mission brief.

“VIP Transport Agents must maintain emotional distance. Personal entanglement constitutes breach of operational integrity.”

No gray area. No wiggle room.

No exceptions.

Jett exhaled slowly, the breath fogging the damp air. He was supposed to be the steel wall between danger and the asset—not the soft shoulder she now rested on. Not the heartbeat that skipped every time she spoke his name.

“You’re cargo,” he’d told himself when the mission began.

But it didn’t feel like that anymore.

It felt like trust. Like connection. Like the first warmth he’d felt in years that didn’t come from a muzzle Jett.

And he hated himself for it—just a little.

“Damn it,” he whispered. “This is a violation... and I don’t even care.”

Outside, the gang regrouped. Inside, Jett stared upward—knowing that if he made it out, he’d have more than bullets to answer to.

For the first time in too long, Jett allowed himself to close both eyes—fully.

Not the half-lidded alertness he usually clung to. Not the paranoid rest punctuated by muffled footsteps or distant sirens.

Just sleep.

The kind that felt like sinking into warm water.

Izabella’s head still rested on his shoulder, anchoring him in place. And somewhere in that rain-slick junkyard coffin of

crumpled metal and faded carpet, the world seemed to hush itself.

Outside, the storm carried on without him. Thunder rolled like slow breath. Water pooled beneath stacked husks of forgotten sedans. The gang patrolled at the edge of tension—but never breached it.

Inside, Jett drifted.

Through kitchen memories and awkward tape-ripping pain. Through a lullaby hummed in his parents' backseat. Through rules he'd broken and warmth he hadn't expected.

The reflective blanket shimmered faintly over the rear window, keeping danger just one glint away.

And Jett slept.

Not like a soldier bracing for impact.

Not like a body too tired to keep watch.

But like a man who'd finally found a reason to rest.

The junkyard faded.

Jett's breath grew shallow, eyes fluttering behind closed lids. Sleep pulled him deep—and the dream struck like a lightning bolt in reverse: silent, cold, already inside.

He was fourteen again.

Back in his living room.

Rain thudding against windows. The scent of burnt taco shells still lingering. The TV flickering with static in the corner.

Then—

Crash.

The front door exploded inward, splinters flying.

Jett's father stood between the kitchen and hallway, frozen.

And there, framed by the storm and fury—

Mr. Kaiser.

The Hollow leader wasn't wearing a mask. He didn't need one. His presence alone drained the air from the room. Long coat soaked in rainwater. A pistol gleaming from under his lapel. Eyes—cold. Calculating.

"I warned you," Kaiser said, voice like rust on glass. "Debt isn't patient."

Jett tried to speak—move—do something.

But his legs wouldn't listen.

He was just a kid.

His father raised a hand, palm open. "It's coming. I promise. Just give me—"

Gunshot.

Jett's ears rang.

Kaiser didn't even flinch. He turned to leave, rain swallowing his silhouette as quickly as it had brought it in.

Jett crawled forward, hand burning against the floor. Burnt skin. Burnt memory. Every breath tasted like smoke.

And then—he woke.

*Jett jolted upright in the Chevrolet, heart pounding,
breath ragged. Izabella stirred beside him, still half-asleep.*

But the memory lingered.

Not just as nightmare.

As fuel.

*Jett blinked, heart still hammering from his own
nightmare—but Izabella’s restlessness pulled him back fast.*

*She shifted again—arms twitching, brow slick with sweat,
breath short and erratic. Her blazer clung to her, soaked
through from rain and something deeper: fear.*

*Jett leaned toward her, concern flooding his expression.
Her eyes fluttered beneath their lids, trapped somewhere
far from the junkyard. Far from him.*

*“Hey,” he whispered. He brushed her shoulder gently.
“Izabella...”*

No response. Just another tremble. Another twist.

Jett knew that look.

*The raw panic of dreamscapes gone dark.
Of losing something too vital to accept.*

He sat up more fully now, the car creaking beneath him.

He’d been there.

He’d lived there.

And this time, he wasn't letting her stay stuck in it.

"Wake up," he said, firmer now. He touched her cheek with the back of his hand—burn-scar and all.

Izabella gasped, eyes snapping open—but not really focusing.

Her chest rose and fell rapidly.

Jett leaned in. "It's okay. You're here. Junkyard. Chevy. VIP cargo compartment deluxe."

She blinked at him, dazed. Then the fear began to ebb, dripping away like the rain from the car roof.

He didn't ask what she saw. He knew.

Sometimes, silence was the kindest language.

Jett frowned.

Izabella's skin was clammy, her breathing still uneven. Sweat clung to her brow despite the cool junkyard air, and her blazer looked darker with damp, like her body was radiating more heat than it could manage.

He knew this feeling. He knew the signs.

Not panic. Not fear.

Overheating.

"Hey..." he whispered, leaning in.

He gently rubbed her shoulder, trying to ground her—not jostle her, just enough to remind her she wasn't lost in a dream anymore.

“Are you okay?” he asked, voice low and careful.

Izabella stirred, eyelids heavy. Her gaze found his—but it was unfocused, blinking like she was still climbing her way out of some sun-scorched memory.

“Izabella,” he said again, firmer now, concern bleeding into every syllable. “You’re overheating. Talk to me.”

She winced, pressing a hand to her temple, shivering despite the heat pulsing through her body.

Jett reached for the emergency blanket still taped to the window—peeled a strip loose and fanned her gently with it. It crinkled softly with each movement, pushing stale air against her skin.

Outside, the gang moved shadows across the scrap metal.

Inside, Jett stayed by her side.

And this time—it wasn’t protocol guiding him.

It was instinct.

Izabella jolted upright with a gasp so sharp it echoed against the Chevy’s metal shell.

Her eyes—wide, wild—darted around like she expected someone to be standing over her. For a split second, she wasn’t in a junkyard. She was somewhere else—nowhere safe.

Jett instinctively steadied her by the arm.

“Izabella... hey,” he said gently. “It’s okay. You’re here. You’re safe.”

She stared at him, breath shuddering, then wiped her forehead with a trembling hand. Her skin still burned beneath sweat, and her lips parted like she needed air and answers at the same time.

“I saw...” she whispered, voice cracking. “I—he was there. He looked at me.”

Jett leaned closer, brows knit.

“Who?”

Izabella swallowed hard, eyes unfocused.

“Mr. Kaiser,” she said.

Jett’s blood ran cold.

She wasn’t talking about a memory anymore.

She’d seen him—in the dream. Same way Jett had hours earlier.

Only difference? She wasn’t a bystander.

She was the target.

Jett stared at Izabella, the junkyard shadows flickering around them like ghosts still clinging to old metal.

She was sitting upright now, trembling—but with purpose. Her eyes locked onto his, and for once... her voice wasn’t calm.

It was edged with something else. Fear. Memory. Resolve.

“I didn’t just see him,” she said. “It was more than a dream... it was like a test. Like he was trying something.”

Jett leaned closer, heart ticking faster. “What did he do?”

Izabella swallowed hard.

“He had a device... a button. It looked like a detonator, but it didn’t blow anything up.”

She held out her hand, mimicking the motion.

“He just... pushed it. And you—your eyes changed.”

Jett froze.

“You went silent. Then wild. You grabbed your pistol and—”

She took a breath. “You shot me. In the arm.”

His mouth opened, horrified. “No...”

Izabella touched her shoulder, the phantom pain still fresh.

“I don’t think it was just a dream. I think he was testing something. That button—it triggered something inside you, like a chemical or signal. Like that blueberry serum from Zootopia, only this wasn’t a cartoon. It was you. Real you.”

Jett’s stomach dropped. He remembered seeing Kaiser in his own nightmare too.

Both dreams... the same man. The same power.

“What if he has tech that scrambles operatives?” she said quietly.

“What if Protocol 39 isn’t just about emotional distance—but shielding agents from psychological manipulation?”

Jett stared out the foggy window.

Suddenly, the rain didn’t feel so cleansing.

It felt like cover.

For something bigger.

Jett's voice was quiet, but it carried weight—like every word was chosen from a place deeper than protocol or instinct.

"The ending from Zootopia..." he murmured, brow furrowed.

"It sure does sound like what Kaiser did to me. That switch, that snap—just like Nick." He paused, as if replaying that twisted moment in his head.

"But listen..."

He turned toward Izabella, eyes locking with hers, steady and solemn.

"I would never hurt you. Not under any circumstances. Not if they drugged me. Not if they ordered me. Not even if they put a gun to my head and screamed commands."

His hand, the one with the burn scars, rested over hers.

"I'd rather sacrifice myself for you, Izabella. You matter that much."

His voice cracked, just a little—less from fear, more from truth.

"Remember that."

Izabella didn't speak right away. She couldn't. Her throat tightened. Her chest rose slowly—too full to speak, too raw to deflect.

Outside, rain hit rust like a rhythm.

Inside, a vow lingered—etched into the stillness like a promise strong enough to survive whatever came next.

Jett popped the Chevy's side window open just a crack—rain instantly sliced in, cold and sharp.

He lit the emergency flare with a snap, its red blaze flaring like a warning shot. Then, without hesitation, he hurled it hard into a pile of soaked metal and shattered glass.

The flare bounced once...

Twice...

Then ignited fully in a shower of sparks.

Outside, chaos followed.

Snipers shifted. Voices shouted. The junkyard lit up red, swallowing their precise crosshairs in smoke and flickering light.

Inside the car—Jett turned just as the engine roared to life beneath them.

His eyes widened.

“You—you started it?”

Izabella tightened her grip on the wheel, rain streaming across her brow.

Her expression? Calm. Fierce.

“Yeah,” she said. “My dad taught me. Back when I wanted to steal his old motorcycle and run away every time he grounded me.”

Jett blinked, somewhere between impressed and deeply confused.

“Well... thank him for the tactical training.”

Izabella smirked. “I’ll send a fruit basket. Assuming we survive.”

*Jett grabbed the pistol and braced himself.
The Chevy rattled in protest—but the engine held.
They were one gear-shift away from making noise Kaiser wouldn’t expect.*

The tires howled, chewing through oil-slicked gravel as the battered Chevy lurched forward—Jett gripping the cracked dashboard, Izabella hunched over the wheel like a woman possessed.

Rain flared in the flare’s red haze behind them, masking their escape just long enough to break past the edge of the junkyard.

Jett shouted above the engine, “You see that cave?”

Izabella nodded, swerving around a crumpled delivery van. “On it!”

The makeshift path twisted through weeds and scrap-laced terrain before dipping into a narrow cut in the earth—part erosion, part accident, all salvation.

The Chevy barreled in.

Inside the cave, the sound of thunder turned hollow. Earth swallowed the noise as shadows wrapped around them like armor. The wheels bounced over old construction debris, the car scraping just low enough to make Jett wince.

They jerked to a stop behind a curved rock wall, headlights off. Breath tight. Hearts louder than the engine.

***Then, like a stampede—
The Hollow tore past the cave entrance.***

***Motorcycles roared, engines snarling through the mist.
Kaiser's armored vehicle whipped around the bend behind
them, headlights slicing through sheets of rain like
searchlights on a monster hunt.***

***Jett watched through the rear window, eyes wide.
Kaiser's vehicle was massive, sleek, guttural—like a
creature too big for the road.***

***It skidded slightly as it turned—wheels churning mud, steel
thrumming like a predator chasing prey.***

***Izabella whispered, “He drives like he’s being chased by a
T-rex.”***

They waited. Silent.

And when the roar faded into the storm’s distance...

They exhaled.

Alive.

For now.

***They climbed out slowly, joints aching from the
cramped junkyard escape, air thick with damp earth and the
lingering taste of adrenaline.***

***Jett stretched his back with a low groan, raindrops dripping
from his hair like forgotten punctuation marks. The cave felt
like sanctuary—quiet, tucked away from snipers and
megaphones—but the tension still clung like fog.***

Izabella stepped away from the Chevy, eyes scanning the cave walls.

Then Jett pointed a thumb behind the vehicle.

“Uh... I need to use the men’s room,” he said, voice casual.

“Don’t come behind the car.”

Izabella raised a brow, smirking.

“We’re in a cave, Jett. There’s no plumbing.”

“I’m aware,” he muttered. “Still need... tactical privacy.”

She laughed softly, finally—a real laugh breaking through the chaos.

“Fine. Don’t step on anything venomous. Or cursed. Or made of Kaiser’s regrets.”

Jett winked. “Just need sixty seconds of undignified nature protocol.”

Izabella shook her head as she turned away, still smiling. But deep down, she knew—every break in danger was temporary.

And this cave?

It was hiding more than shelter.

Izabella leaned casually against a moss-slick cave wall, arms crossed, letting the momentary peace settle across her rain-soaked frame. But her ears perked at a faint mumble drifting from behind the car—too hushed to be intentional, but too clear to ignore.

It was Jett.

She wasn't trying to eavesdrop exactly, but it was hard not to catch his low voice echoing off the cave's damp stone.

Jett continued, barely audible:

"...probably thinks I'm some half-burned mess with bad taco luck."

"...she's wrong though... she's wrong about all of it."

A pause.

"...I'd walk into Kaiser's crosshairs with a smile if it meant keeping her safe."

Izabella blinked. Her stomach did a strange little flip.

Then Jett groaned—probably realizing he'd said all that out loud.

She smirked quietly to herself and turned away, pretending to study a rock formation.

But deep down, she'd heard every word.

And it changed something.

Jett had barely found a semi-flat patch of earth behind the Chevy, trying to shield himself from any cave critters or sniper drones, when his thoughts started leaking out faster than anything else.

"...should've stayed home..."

"...just wanted one normal mission..."

"...of course she'd fall asleep on me, of all people..."

"...God, why does she smell like lavender and adrenaline—"

"So... I smell like lavender and adrenaline, huh?"

Jett jumped—nearly hitting his head on the underside of the bumper.

Izabella stood a few feet away, arms crossed, eyebrow raised, looking far too amused for someone interrupting a classified relief operation.

“That’s oddly poetic for someone with a flare addiction and questionable junkyard taste.”

Jett scrambled to zip his jacket like it was armor, trying to gather the tatters of his dignity.

“I—I thought I said that in my head.”

Izabella grinned, voice dry.

“You said it with your mouth. Real words. Audible ones.”

Jett groaned. “I’m never peeing in peace again.”

She turned on her heel.

“Good to know I make that strong impression. Carry on, Spicy Hands.”

Jett was too red-faced to reply.

Izabella giggled—soft, sly, and unmistakably flirty. It curled upward like steam from warm asphalt, unexpected but electric.

A sound that danced somewhere between amusement and challenge.

She didn’t say anything more.

She didn’t have to.

*That giggle was a sentence in itself.
I heard you. I'm amused. And I might not let you forget.*

*Jett stared forward, jaw tight, still pretending he hadn't just confessed his soul to a cave wall.
But his ears were definitely still glowing.*

Izabella brushed past him lightly, her steps casual and confident, like she'd just picked up a secret souvenir and tucked it in her coat.

And somewhere behind the smirk and the soaked mission briefing—something unspoken had shifted.

Just a little.

Jett zipped up, brushed off the last remnants of cave dust from his jacket, and stepped around the Chevy like a man returning from war—and emotional devastation.

Rain still trickled faintly from the edges of the cavern ceiling, but inside him... the storm was entirely internal.

Izabella leaned against the fender, arms crossed, eyes glinting with mischief and a dash of something warmer. That flirtatious giggle? Still hanging in the air like lavender-scented evidence.

Jett stopped.

He didn't stumble.

Didn't mumble.

Didn't pretend it didn't happen.

He simply looked at her—dead in the eye.

For a long moment, the cave said nothing.

It was just them, hearts calibrated to chaos and chemistry, and one burned operative staring straight into trouble he'd risk everything to protect.

Izabella raised a brow.

Her smile didn't fade—it deepened.

Jett's voice came low, steady.

"I meant every word."

No denial. No backpedal. Just confession sharpened into clarity.

Her breath hitched—barely.

But it was enough.

Jett held Izabella's gaze, the last of his tactical break embarrassment still clinging to the edges of his pride—but his voice was steady now. Confident. Maybe even daring.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Fine then..." he said, tipping his head slightly.

"What do I smell like?"

Izabella grinned—not the teasing kind this time, but something softer, laced with fondness and trouble all at once.

She stepped forward, mock-sniffing the air dramatically.

Then shrugged.

"Hmm... gunpowder. Cheap motel soap. That weird diner we passed with questionable coffee. And..."

She paused, leaned in just a hair.

“...burnt cinnamon. Like someone tried too hard to impress a fire alarm with their dessert skills.”

Jett blinked. “Burnt cinnamon?”

Izabella smirked. “Yeah. It’s chaotic. It’s stubborn. And... oddly comforting.”

Jett bit back a smile, cheeks warming again.

“So what I’m hearing is—I smell like trauma with a side of baked goods?”

She laughed. “Exactly. Spicy Hands and his emotional spice rack.”

Jett blinked up at the dripping cave ceiling, still half lost in thoughts of reality, dreams, and burnt cinnamon destiny.

Then he turned, looked right at Izabella, and the words spilled out before he could catch them:

“God, sometimes I love you but... ah sh—”

Izabella whipped around, eyes wide and voice sharp with amused disbelief:

“Did you just—”

Jett covered his face with both hands like a man trying to stop time with his palms.

“I meant theoretically! In like—a cosmic field ops appreciation sense!”

Izabella stepped closer, one brow raised like a weapon of subtle interrogation.

“You love me... sometimes?”

Jett groaned into his palms.

“I was questioning reality not making declarations!”

She grinned, stepping in just close enough for the cave to feel ten degrees warmer.

“Well, next time you’re under a car and emotionally combusting mid-leak—you might wanna label your theories a little louder.”

Jett peeked between his fingers.

“I hate caves.”

Izabella winked.

“You love me sometimes.”

Jett cleared his throat, eyes darting anywhere but Izabella’s smirk. His ears still practically glowed from his accidental love confession, and his dignity was hanging on by a single thread—and a semi-functional seatbelt.

He gestured awkwardly to the Chevy, avoiding eye contact like it was radioactive.

“Just... just get in the car.”

His voice cracked halfway through.

“L.A. isn’t far from here.” He fumbled with the driver-side handle.

“Luckily The Hollow didn’t chase us ten miles out of the

*city..." he mumbled, more to the steering wheel than to her.
"So that's... good."*

*Izabella didn't move right away.
She just leaned over, eyes gleaming.*

"Burnt cinnamon's running away from his feelings."

Jett groaned, forehead gently thudding against the steering wheel.

"I hate caves and metaphors."

She slid into the passenger seat without missing a beat, her smile still simmering.

*But yeah... he saw it.
She didn't mind the words.*

Not one bit.

The Chevy's wheels hummed against damp asphalt, heading toward Los Angeles like it was some mythical safe zone rather than a city tangled in old wounds and new risks. Jett kept one hand on the wheel, eyes flicking between the road and the rearview mirror—more out of habit than threat.

Izabella sat quietly beside him, legs tucked, jacket still damp from cave air and chaos.

Then he spoke—quiet, gruff, but unmistakably sincere.

*"Once I get you home..." he began, not looking at her.
"You won't see me again. Or hear from me. I'll disappear.
It's better that way."*

Izabella turned slowly, her brows lifting.

Jett stared ahead, jaw tight.

“I mean it. I’m too close to this Kaiser mess. Too burnt up—figuratively and literally.”

A dry chuckle escaped him.

“You deserve normal. You deserve clean sheets and lavender air fresheners and not wondering which part of the mission is gonna emotionally blindsight you next.”

For a few seconds, silence filled the cabin.

Then Izabella leaned against the passenger window, voice low but laced with something sharp:

“Spicy Hands, you just told me you’d sacrifice yourself for me. You think I’m gonna forget that over clean sheets?”

He exhaled slowly. Didn’t reply.

But the road ahead suddenly felt longer.

And maybe... not so final.

BANG!

The Chevy jerked sideways—metal shrieking against asphalt as the rear tire gave up in dramatic fashion. Sparks skidded briefly, then silence.

Jett swore under his breath and pulled the wheel hard, managing a rough coast to the side of the road beneath a half-lit overpass.

Izabella looked at him, one brow already raised like the nickname was preparing for another round.

Jett unbuckled, opened his door, and paused.

“Stay in the car,” he said, hand gripping the frame.

“And for the love of God, stop calling me Spicy Hands.”

Izabella blinked.

Then smirked slowly.

“Copy that... Cinna-Man.”

Jett groaned as he stepped out into the drizzle, the sound of his boots crunching against soaked gravel practically punctuating his regret.

“I’m changing my name when this mission ends,” he muttered.

Izabella watched through the rain-streaked windshield, arms crossed but nerves taut beneath her calm exterior.

She spotted it first.

A sleek black SUV crept around the bend behind them—its headlights dimmed but unmistakable. The vanity plate? KAISER.

Trailing close behind: a matte gray van, no logos, no license plate. Fast. Quiet. Tactical.

Her pulse quickened.

She reached instinctively for the door handle—then froze.

Outside, Jett knelt beside the busted tire, muttering something about spare kits and tactical curses.

Then he paused.

His spine stiffened.

He looked up—

CRACK.

The rifle's butt met the side of his face with brutal precision. Jett staggered sideways, knees buckling, blood already blooming from a gash above his temple.

Izabella gasped.

“Jett!”

The masked figure who delivered the hit grabbed his collar just as Jett tried to rise—and dragged him toward the van’s side door. Another operative opened it wide like a hungry mouth waiting to consume him.

Izabella didn’t wait.

She launched from the car, fury blazing hotter than fear.

Izabella was mid-sprint—feet pounding, rage blazing—when a sharp hiss split the air.

Thunk.

Something bit her arm.

She barely had time to glance down before dizziness wrapped around her brain like fog. The tranq dart stuck out of her sleeve, pulsing faintly with its chemical cocktail.

“No—” she gasped, stumbling.

Her legs buckled, vision blurring, the world tilting sideways like someone had spun her inside a washing machine.

A pair of gloved hands caught her mid-collapse.

Kaiser's guard. Masked. Silent. Ruthless.

He didn't speak—just hoisted her like a ragdoll and carried her toward the van where Jett was already half-dragged inside, his head lolling with unconsciousness.

Izabella's heartbeat slowed, fluttering like wings clipped mid-flight.

But somewhere between fading light and forced captivity—her grip tightened weakly.

Even sedated... she was still fighting.

Izabella blinked.

The bag was pulled off her head abruptly, the stale cloth yanked away to reveal dim, flickering interior lights and the scent of old metal mixed with leather and gasoline.

She was seated on a storage crate in the back of a van—hands cuffed, shoulder still aching faintly from the tranquilizer. Her vision adjusted slowly, shapes blurring into focus.

Three guards.

One slouched in the passenger seat up front, snoring loud enough to rattle gum wrappers.

Another—sitting across from her—scrolling lazily through Amazon on a cracked tablet.

He muttered under his breath:

“Mechanical keyboard... backlit... ooh, RGB options.”

The third? At the wheel. Masked. Silent. Focused.

The van rocked slightly as it hit uneven pavement, outside lights flickering through gaps in the armored doors. Rain still streaked the windows.

Izabella cleared her throat softly.

Tablet Guard glanced up, unimpressed.

*“You’re awake. Congrats.” He turned the screen toward her.
“Should I go with this one? Or the one with the wrist pad?”*

She stared at him.

“I got shot in the arm and kidnapped,” she said dryly.

“You want ergonomic advice?”

He shrugged. “My wrists do things too, you know.”

Izabella glanced toward the front of the van.

Jett wasn’t visible. He must’ve been taken separately.

She flexed her fingers carefully—sore but working.

Already calculating.

Already planning.

The guard's fingers were rough, smudged with grease and gravel, as he tilted Izabella's chin upward, forcing her gaze to meet his. His grip wasn't harsh—just full of power-play arrogance.

“Such a pretty girl,” he said, voice slithering with mock sympathy.

“For a guard like him.”

Izabella didn't blink, didn't flinch. She knew these types—men who mistook control for strength, cruelty for insight.

The guard leaned in, eyes scanning her expression like he was looking for cracks.

“You know he's killed before, right?” he added, almost wistful.

“Jett isn't just some burned-out hero. He's dangerous. He doesn't protect people... he ruins missions.”

Izabella stared back, completely still.

He grinned, slowly.

“He wants to ruin Kaiser. Rip everything down. And he'll use you to do it.”

She let a beat pass.

Then, flat and calm, her voice cut through the van's stale air.

“Good.”

That made the guard blink.

Izabella leaned just slightly forward, cuffed hands braced on her knees.

“Because Kaiser deserves it. And Jett?”

“He might’ve killed before, but at least he didn’t kill for greed. Or for control. Or whatever sad god complex Kaiser’s nursing.”

The guard’s smirk flickered.

The tablet dimmed.

Even the snoring up front wavered.

Izabella sat back.

Her chin was her own again.

And she’d just reminded them whose story this really was.

Jett’s eyelids fluttered open—pain needling behind his eyes like shards of electricity. His head throbbed where rifle met skull. The air was thick, metallic, tainted with rust and restraint.

He was chained upright against the cold wall of a van—arms spread, feet bound. Every surface vibrated faintly with the hum of high-grade suspension. The walls were reinforced. Tactical-grade. No windows.

And ten feet away, under a single flickering overhead bulb...

Mr. Kaiser stood.

The man was pristine. Ironed suit. Charcoal gray. Gloves stitched with custom steel mesh across the knuckles. A presence that didn’t just enter a room—it rewrote it.

Next to him stood one of his elite guards—full armor, helmet down, expression unreadable.

They weren't looking at Jett.

They were talking about him.

"He's unstable," the elite guard said, voice like gravel soaked in ice.

"Wakes up fighting. Won't crack easily."

Kaiser smiled faintly—too calm. Too calculating.

"He doesn't need to crack," he replied, brushing nonexistent dust off his shoulder.

"He needs to watch. The girl. The collapse. Everything he thought he could protect..."

He leaned closer to the guard.

"He needs to realize none of it matters. Then he'll be useful."

Jett clenched his fists against his chains. Fury buzzed like static in his veins.

But he stayed silent.

Because if they thought he was just a broken pawn...

They'd never see the move he had left.

Kaiser turned slowly—his boots clicking sharply on the metal floor.

He wore a smile polished smooth and venomous.

“Well, well, well...”

He spread his arms slightly, as if welcoming a guest to a twisted dinner party.

“Look who’s finally awake.”

Jett strained against the cold metal cuffs biting into his wrists.

“Took you long enough,” Kaiser continued, glancing at his watch.

“Because we would be questioning the girl right about—”

“Where the hell is she?” Jett snapped, cutting through the theatrics like a blade through smoke.

His voice was raw, furious—punched full of urgency and defiance.

Kaiser’s eyes gleamed.

“Ah... now there he is.”

He stepped closer, hands behind his back, face unbothered by the rage boiling in front of him.

“She’s... somewhere she doesn’t belong. But you knew that the moment you pulled her into this mess, didn’t you?”

Jett’s jaw tightened.

He wasn’t just fighting chains anymore.

He was fighting to stay sharp. To stay dangerous.

Because Izabella was out there.

And the countdown had just begun.

Jett didn’t wait for another monologue.

As Kaiser stepped in close, savoring his psychological victory, Jett twisted his torso sharply—channeling every ounce of fury into motion.

WHAM.

His boot came up in a blur, cracking upward beneath Kaiser's chin with violent precision. The angle was tight, the force brutal—metal sole meeting bone with a sickening snap.

Kaiser staggered back, breath torn from his lungs, mouth bloodied, composure shattered.

The elite guard lunged forward instantly, hand already reaching for a stun baton.

As the elite guard lunged forward, stun baton crackling in hand, Jett's instincts took over.

He twisted hard against the chains—not to escape, but to reach.

His fingers found the hidden sheath strapped behind his belt, half-concealed beneath his jacket.

Steel hissed free.

SCHK!

Jett drove the blade upward in one fluid, savage motion—catching the guard under the ribs, just beneath the armor's edge. The momentum of the lunge only buried it deeper.

The guard gasped—a sharp, shocked inhale—staggering back with wide eyes, baton clattering to the floor.

**Jett gritted his teeth, arm jerking from the effort.
His cuffs strained but held.
So did his resolve.**

Kaiser stepped back, silent now, watching with new calculation behind bloodied lips.

Jett met his gaze, chest heaving.

“The next one who touches her dies faster.”

No bluff.

No bravado.

Just promise.

Kaiser stepped over the crumpled body of his elite guard, blood still glistening beneath the armor.

“Interessant,” he muttered, voice like winter frost cracking through glass.

**Jett squinted through the haze of pain and fury, jaw locked.
Then he snapped:**

“You speak German?”

A short pause—then with bitter fire:

“I am from Germany, you fool.”

Kaiser tells the driver to speed up, “Beschleunigen Sie den Fahrer”

“Beschleunigung auf 80 Meilen pro Stunde” The driver replies.

Kaiser's smile barely twitched, eyes narrowing like a predator studying another.

"And yet you fight like someone who's forgotten their roots."

Jett spat to the side—blood and defiance.

"No—I fight like someone who remembers them too well."

The air between them thickened—history, rage, scars layered like barbed wire. Jett's chains creaked.

Kaiser stayed silent, analyzing... calculating.

And somewhere in that tension was a past neither of them had spoken aloud.

Izabella sat silent, unmoving.

The guard across from her had gone back to scrolling mindlessly through his tablet, muttering about discount prices and mechanical switches. The snoozer up front was practically drooling. The driver tapped occasionally at the dashboard, eyes forward.

None of them noticed her fingers slide up to her ponytail. Slow. Casual. Quiet.

The hairpin was thin, matte black, and military-grade reinforced—more tactical than decorative.

With practiced ease, Izabella bent it just right, tilted her wrists, and began picking.

Click.

Click...

Snap.

The cuffs popped open.

She didn't move immediately—just lowered her arms like nothing had changed. Her eyes scanned the van. A nearby supply box had been left cracked open, half-full of shattered glass—old beakers or surveillance lenses. Perfect.

She reached behind her slowly, wrapping fingers around a jagged shard the size of her palm.

Then, in one fluid motion—

SLASH.

She lunged, driving the shard clean across the scrolling guard's throat before he could even gasp. Blood splattered the tablet screen. He dropped instantly, convulsing, eyes wide with shock.

The driver shouted. The sleeper jolted up—

Izabella was already moving.

She grabbed the fallen guard's pistol, aimed, fired.

CRACK.

One shot to the snoring guard's chest. He slumped.

The driver hit the brakes, swerving—trying to reach for his weapon.

Too late.

Izabella leapt forward, glass still in one hand, gun in the other. She kicked the side door open, climbed over the center console mid-motion, and pistol-whipped the driver hard across the temple.

He collapsed sideways.

The van skidded, corrected, then settled in an eerie silence.

Izabella sat behind the wheel. Hands trembling. Blood on her jacket. Rage in her veins.

She checked the GPS screen.

Jett was close.

Izabella's grip tightened around the wheel, heart pounding as she spotted the familiar matte-black van cutting down a desolate stretch of highway ahead.

Jett was inside.

She didn't hesitate.

VROOOOM.

She gunned the engine, flying past a civilian car in the adjacent lane with a blur of rain-streaked motion. Her tires howled across the asphalt as she locked onto the van's rear bumper like a heat-seeking missile.

WHAM!

She rammed the back of the van hard—steel slamming into steel. Sparks flew. The van swerved violently, fishtailing across the lane.

Izabella kept pressing. No mercy.

Both vehicles spiraled, tires screaming in protest. Then—

SKRRRRRRSHHH!

They spun out together, veering off-road into a muddy ditch, each collision punctuated by earth, gravity, and adrenaline.

Izabella's head slammed the wheel but she gritted through the pain, coughing as smoke began to snake from the hood.

A moment later—

Jett's hand appeared.

Clawed out from the side door of the wrecked van, chains still clinking around his wrists, face bloodied but eyes burning.

He dragged himself through shattered metal, coughing, panting—and fully alive.

Izabella stumbled from the Chevy, one hand clutching her ribs, the other still gripping her pistol. Their eyes met across wreckage and ruin.

Jett blinked at her.

“...You drove a van into another van for me?”

Izabella smirked, voice wrecked but cheeky.

“Didn’t think Spicy Hands was such a high-value asset.”

He groaned.

Then laughed.

Then ran.

Kaiser clawed his way out of the wrecked van, one arm dragging uselessly, the other clutching his bloodied side.

Glass crunched beneath his boots as he stumbled forward, dazed but still trying to stand tall.

Jett watched him, breathing hard, chains half-loosened, pistol trembling in his hand—but not from fear. From purpose.

The rain hissed lightly across the scorched earth around them, steam rising off metal.

Izabella stood behind him, silent. Eyes locked on Jett. She didn't stop him.

Kaiser looked up—one eye swollen, suit shredded, lips curled in defiance, and pointed a gun at Izabella.

Jett stepped forward.

“Goodbye, Mr. Kaiser.”

BANG.

The first shot echoed like a final verdict—piercing straight into Kaiser's chest.

The tyrant staggered, feet sliding back, expression falling.

Jett didn't wait.

BANG.

The second shot hit harder, driving him to the muddy ground like a fallen monument. No theatrics. No last words.

Just silence.

Jett lowered the pistol, breath steady now. The storm in him had finally spoken.

Izabella walked up beside him, her voice soft.

“Is he really gone?”

Jett stared at the lifeless figure, rain soaking both of them.

“He’ll never haunt another mission again.”

The Los Angeles skyline flickered through the windshield—neon signs pulsing between rain streaks and memories. The streets felt quieter now, the storm behind them traded for traffic lights and midnight glow.

Izabella drove in tense silence, one hand steady on the wheel, the other absently tapping her thigh. Jett sat slouched in the passenger seat, pale and still, gaze glued out the side window.

Then suddenly—

He groaned and grabbed his thigh.

Izabella’s eyes snapped over, concerned.

“Jett?”

He didn’t answer. Just clenched his jaw and lifted his hand away—revealing dark, soaked denim and a slow red bloom spreading from under his cargo pants.

Her heart dropped.

“You’re shot?!”

He gave a faint, pained smirk. “Didn’t really register until the adrenaline wore off...”

Izabella swerved into an empty parking lot, slammed the brakes, and jumped out.

She tore open the passenger door and knelt beside him, fingers already tugging at the fabric.

“Why didn’t you say something?”

Jett winced. “We were escaping a psychopath. I figured bleeding quietly was the least chaotic option...”

Izabella found the entry point—low on his thigh. It was ugly, but clean. No exit wound.

She ripped fabric from the hem of her undershirt, wrapped it tightly, eyes blazing.

“You’re lucky I didn’t crash the van again.”

Jett chuckled, teeth gritted. “If I die, tell HQ I hate tactical silence as a coping strategy.”

Izabella finished the wrap, pressed her forehead against his for a second.

“You’re not dying. You’ve still got metaphors to survive and cinnamon crimes to answer for.”

He smiled faintly. “You’re scary when you care.”

She smirked.

Izabella dug through the trunk of Kaiser's stolen SUV, hands trembling from fury and urgency. Amid tactical crates and expensive gear, she found what she was looking for—a black linen blazer tossed over a duffel bag marked “PRIVATE.” The fabric was smooth, tailored... and perfect for patchwork survival.

She yanked it free and rushed back to Jett, who had slumped partially out of the passenger seat, his breathing labored and uneven.

“Don’t you dare shut down on me,” she muttered, kneeling beside him.

She ripped a sleeve off with a fierce tug, wrapping the cloth tightly around his bleeding leg.

Jett groaned, lips curling faintly into a smile despite his pale skin.

“I’m just... gonna rest a little while.”

His head tilted, eyes fluttering. The pain was catching up fast.

Izabella grabbed his face gently, fingers pressing against his cheeks.

“No.”

She leaned closer, her voice fierce and steady.

“You stay with me. You don’t get to black out after I slammed a van into another van for your dramatic butt.”

He huffed a laugh—barely—but the smile cracked through.

“You... did hit it hard.”

“Exactly.” she said, pressing the cloth tighter.

“So you owe me consciousness.”

His eyes opened a sliver, head resting lightly against the seat. His hearing deafened and his vision was blurry.

And in that parking lot, bruised and bleeding but no longer hunted, the storm began to finally still.

Jett blinked awake to sterile walls, that faint antiseptic haze, and a monitor rhythm ticking faintly like an impatient metronome.

His leg throbbed. His pride probably hurt worse.

Izabella sat beside him with her boot propped on the chair, half-eaten Jello cup abandoned on the tray. The moment she saw his eyes open, her face lit up like someone had just won the sass lottery.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” she said sweetly.

“Your dramatic coma lasted just long enough for me to steal a nurse badge and get us room service Jello. You’re welcome.”

Jett groaned, rubbing his temple.

“Are we... back in L.A.?”

She nodded.

“Barely. Your thigh’s stitched up. Kaiser’s probably decomposing somewhere unpleasant. And your suit—your beloved, emotionally reinforced suit—was officially declared lost in combat.”

Jett looked around, eyes wide. Then he jolted upright with fresh panic.

“WHERE THE HELL IS MY SUIT?! THE SUIT WAS SPECIALLY HEMMED AND STITCHED!”

He winced mid-yell, grabbing his leg again.

Izabella just blinked.

“I saved your life and you’re worried about a snarky tuxedo?”

“That suit had backup encryption codes sewn into the lapel and a trauma-release thread woven by ex-military tailors.”

He thumped the pillow dramatically.

“It hugged me emotionally!”

She stood up, grabbed a hospital blanket, and wrapped it around his shoulders like a sad burrito.

“There. Now you’re emotionally swaddled. Happy?”

Jett sighed, slumping back.

“This is why Kaiser feared us. We’re terrifying and fashion-forward.”

Izabella sat beside him, grinning.

“I’ll find you a new suit. One with Kevlar... and maybe glitter.

Izabella checked her watch with a sigh, the hospital's soft beeping competing with the buzz of reality returning. The adrenaline may have faded, but her schedule hadn't.

She leaned over Jett, who now looked less like a tactical wreck and more like a man swaddled in blanket dignity.

"I have to get going," she said gently, brushing a stray thread from his hair.

Then—without drama, without warning—she leaned in and kissed his cheek.

Warm. Quick. Grounding.

Jett froze like someone had just detonated a glitter bomb in his chest.

The door creaked.

Enter George—Jett's longtime partner, who bore the smug grin of a man who arrived exactly on time for the good part.

George raised a brow, crossing his arms.

"I think she likes you."

Jett rubbed his cheek, still processing.

"She also crashed two vans, shot three guards, and threatened to emotionally swaddle me... so yeah. Jury's still emotionally compromised."

George chuckled.

"Cinnamon's finally getting his sugar, huh?"

Jett groaned into his pillow.

Izabella grinned from the doorway.

“Try not to bleed through that hospital swag, Cinna-man.”

And just like that—she was gone.

George pulled up a chair.

“So... wanna tell me what the hell happened, or should I just guess based on blood stains and sass residue?”

Jett leaned heavily on George as they exited the hospital, each step a careful negotiation between dignity and pain meds. The SUV waited nearby—black, sleek, probably borrowed from someone higher up the government ladder.

George popped the passenger door open, and Jett sank into the seat like it owed him emotional compensation.

**“Take me home,” Jett groaned, head leaning back.
“I want waffles and no mirrors.”**

George shut the door, slid into the driver’s side, and adjusted his sunglasses like he was about to deliver stock market news.

“Yeah... about that.”

Jett blinked.

George turned to face him.

“Izabella requested you specifically. 2PM. Upstairs library.”

Jett stared.

“...Library?”

George smirked.

“Apparently someone’s ready to discuss crashing vans, emotional bullet wounds, and maybe whatever that cheek kiss was about.”

Jett covered his face with his hands.

“I’m gonna need caffeine. And probably a thesaurus.”

George started the engine, grinning.

“Already packed your trauma blanket. Let’s go make literature out of chaos.”

The SUV rolled up to Izabella’s gated property—a sleek townhouse tucked into a quiet pocket of L.A., where tactical elegance met surprising warmth. Ivy curled across the facade like it was trying to soften the drama that had walked through its doors more than once.

Jett squinted at the modern exterior.

“She is living a life.”

George pulled the car into the driveway and shrugged.

“She’s got layers. Like lasagna. Or trauma.”

A tall, broad-shouldered guard stood at the gate, arms crossed, earpiece crackling faintly. He leaned down to the driver’s side as George rolled down the window.

Without saying a word, the guard stepped aside, pressed the gate remote—then winked at George.

Jett did a double take.

“Did he just—”

George grinned, flipping his sunglasses up.

“You have suit trauma. I have charm where it matters.”

Jett muttered, “Unbelievable. We’re not even inside and you’re already collecting winks like business cards.”

The guard gave a low chuckle as they passed.

Inside, the front door opened just as they parked—and there she was.

Izabella, standing at the threshold with that same sly smile.

“Two minutes early. I’m impressed.”

Jett groaned as George helped him out of the SUV.

“Your guard winked at him.”

Izabella tilted her head.

“He’s got taste.”

George nodded proudly.

“Cinna-man, meet my fan club.”

Jett looked skyward.

“Can I get tranquilized again?”

Izabella walked inside and disappeared upstairs while George was helping Jett up the steps.

The grand upstairs library smelled faintly of old paper, polished wood, and the kind of secrets that were bound in hardcover.

Jett limped toward it, eyes narrowing like the room owed him back rent in emotional vulnerability.

At the threshold, he paused.

Looked inside.

Nope.

“Nope. Nope. Nope.”

He turned heel with surprising agility for someone stitched up and emotionally exhausted.

“I am not doing book-themed confessions today.”

George rolled his eyes, grabbed Jett’s arm, and with absolutely zero respect for post-surgical pacing, dragged him toward the door.

Jett flailed.

“George—NO—this is kidnapping!”

George threw open the door, shoved Jett inside, and slammed it behind him with a flourish.

CLICK.

The lock engaged.

From the hallway—

HYSTERICAL LAUGHTER.

George and two of Izabella's guards practically folded over, cackling like sitcom villains.

One of them wheezed, "He walked in like he was allergic to emotions!"

***Another mimed Jett's limp, adding,
"Nope-nope-nope-EXIT-STAGE-LEFT!"***

Inside the library, Jett groaned audibly.

From the far corner, Izabella's voice chimed in.

"You realize this isn't soundproof, right? I heard all of that."

Jett turned slowly toward her—seated in the armchair, legs crossed, book in lap, eyebrow already halfway to judgment town.

***He muttered,
"...Did you install emotional ambush rooms on purpose?"***

She smiled sweetly.

"Only for you, Cinna-Man."

"What page was Protocol 39 on again George?" Izabella asked.

"Page 76 sweetheart" George replied.

Izabella stood slowly, the book forgotten on the armchair as she crossed the room with deliberate steps.

"We need to rewrite that protocol Mr. Sentry." Izabella said with the voice of someone asking a girl out.

Jett, still trapped in his emotional panic burrito, tried to act cool—backing away with the grace of a man dodging questions he absolutely wasn't ready to answer.

She cornered him.

Library shelves loomed behind him like judgmental witnesses. Her eyes never left his.

“So...” she murmured, tilting her head.

“About that kiss earlier.”

Jett cleared his throat.

“Kiss? What kiss? I was unconscious. I think it was the meds settling in, ha...ha?”

He glanced wildly at an old encyclopedia set.

“Definitely hallucinated. Also maybe dreamed it happened twice.”

Izabella stepped closer, smirking.

“Dreamed twice?”

He hit the final wall of denial—literally backed up against a bookcase labeled Unsolvable Mysteries.

And then—

CLICK.

The door creaked open.

George and three guards poked their heads in like sitcom extras hunting prime-time drama.

One guard whispered, “You recording?”

George held up the phone like a proud dad at a spelling bee.
“Yeah.”

Izabella didn’t even look back.

She just reached forward, tugged gently on Jett’s collar,
leaned in...

And whispered,
“Still dreaming?”

Jett blinked twice. His brain blue-screened.

Outside, muffled wheezing laughter erupted as one guard
collapsed into the hallway wall.

George turned the phone sideways.
“This is going viral in headquarters group chat.”

Jett groaned.

Izabella smiled.

Jett’s back hit the bookshelf with an audible thud. His
brain was still scrambling through emotional landmines,
betrayal trauma, gunshot wounds... and now a cornered
confession showdown with Izabella.

Her face was close. Her tone? Calm. Playful. Deadly
accurate.

His face? Bright red. Practically radioactive.

He stammered.

“Izabella... this is not an appropriate time right now...”
He blinked like he’d forgotten how social interactions

worked.

“Can we uh... do this later maybe... when... uh...”

His eyes darted toward the door.

“When George isn’t looking?”

From the hallway came a snort and the unmistakable sound of someone zooming in on the camera.

Izabella raised one brow.

“I think George’s entire soul is looking.”

Jett covered his face with both hands.

“Can I get re-sedated, please?”

She smirked and stepped back with theatrical grace.

“Fine. I’ll let you choose the time of your own emotional unraveling.”

Jett slumped into a nearby armchair, defeated but grateful.

“I vote... 3AM, over waffles, with zero witnesses and bad lighting.”

From outside, George yelled,

“NOTED!”

Jett barely managed a whisper, voice caught somewhere between fluster and awe.

She didn’t retreat.

Instead, she leaned in slowly—eyes searching his, breath warm, steady.

“Too close Iza...”

Then—

She kissed him.

Soft. Certain. No dramatics. Just gravity finally choosing its favorite pull.

Jett's mind went silent, every tactical alarm short-circuiting under the rush of lavender and cinnamon—scents he'd never noticed before this second, but now swore were stitched into her DNA.

The taste of apple lingered faintly on her lips.

Time blurred.

He didn't think about guards, cameras, Kaiser's echo, or George's peanut gallery still giggling somewhere beyond the library door.

He only thought—

Her.

Izabella pulled back just slightly, forehead resting against his.

Her thoughts weren't tactical now either.

Just one, looping softly:

"Your lavender smell is so good..." Jett said like he was dreaming about something good.

Jett blinked slowly, processing everything except grammar.

"Was that... policy compliant?"

Izabella laughed against his cheek.
“*Nope.*”

Jett grinned.
“*Reckless. I like it.*”

Jett had barely stepped two feet into HQ before he felt it.

The silence.
The stillness.
The staring.

Agents who were usually buried in code or tactical briefings were now frozen mid-scroll—phones glowing in their hands, eyes locked on him.

George, three paces behind, couldn’t contain the grin.
He clapped once—loudly—then declared for all of tactical humanity to hear:

“Busted,” George whispered to him.

Jett stopped.
His soul paused.
His career might have cried.

George held up his phone triumphantly.
“Group chat delivery achieved. Your library kiss is now the official HQ screensaver.”

- 1. From across the room, a junior agent raised his coffee and said solemnly,*
“Respect brother.”

Jett blinked.

**Someone near the vending machine whispered,
“They kissed twice. One for the cheek. One for the soul.”**

Another agent deadpanned, “We need emotional debrief protocols. Immediately.”

Jett turned slowly to George.

“You recorded a confession ambush and leaked it HQ-wide?”

George shrugged.

“With tasteful cinematography. I even added slow-mo.”

Jett groaned into his hands.

**One desk agent added gently,
“You smell lavender in the video. That part was poetic.”**

Jett turned back toward the hallway.

“I’m going to crawl into the filing cabinet and live there.”

From the corner, Izabella’s voice chimed through an open line:

“File it under ‘unexpected romance: case closed.’”

Jett stood in the middle of HQ, surrounded by a Greek chorus of phone-wielding agents and slow-mo video editors. He inhaled sharply.

“GEORGE, WHAT THE HE—”

Cut to:

Jett sitting at his desk.

His office was dimly lit, blinds half-drawn like they were trying to protect him from public shame. His elbows were on his desk, his face buried deep in his hands like someone had just told him his childhood teddy bear was working for the enemy.

He muttered into his palms.

“This is how it ends. Not with a mission... but with a group chat GIF.”

His inbox chimed.

Group thread: 🔥 CinnaDrama Chronicles 🔥

New reply: “He actually said cinnamon and apple. We swooned.”

Jett lifted his head slowly—face pale, soul frayed.

“I kissed someone. George filmed it. HQ turned it into a cinematic universe.”

He picked up a stress ball, squeezed it once, and whispered to himself:

“I was trained for explosives. Not emotional explosives.”

From outside his office, George tapped on the glass, holding up a smoothie with a tiny umbrella.

“Got you something to celebrate your emotional character arc!”

Jett didn’t move.

He just stared.

Like he'd seen a ghost.

Or worse—his reputation in a musical montage.

George casually strolled into Jett's office like he wasn't the root cause of a full-blown reputation meltdown.

Jett didn't speak.

He just lifted his head slowly—eyes hollow, face drained, and delivered a dead stare that could've peeled paint off the walls.

George grinned anyway.

"You've got the romantic collapse look down. Just missing a violin soundtrack and a slow zoom."

Jett blinked once.

Twice.

Then—

BZZZ.

His phone lit up on the desk. A message from Izabella.

Hey Cinna-man 💥

You free tonight for dinner?

My parents want to meet you—they're grateful you kept me alive.

I told them you had style, scars, and questionable decision-making skills. ❤️

Jett blinked again.

George leaned over the desk, peeking at the screen.

“Dinner with her parents?” He raised a brow.

“Wow. You’re upgrading from dramatic hostage rescuer to potential son-in-law material.”

Jett slumped deeper into his chair.

“I survived a van collision, an emotional ambush, and HQ-level public humiliation... and now I have to survive parental judgment?”

George patted his shoulder.

“Welcome to Phase Four: Emotional Boss Battle.”

Jett stared into the middle distance.

“Do I wear Kevlar or a cardigan?”

George shrugged.

“Depends how spicy the dad’s handshake is.”

