

THE DANISH CHRONICLES

FIRE and ICE

First Five Chapters

2



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This book contains sexually explicit scenes, references and adult language, this might be offensive for some readers. PHW Love novels are intended for ADULTS ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase was made. Please take care to save such books safely where underage readers cannot access it.



Author's Note on Language

It's the old non American dialect disclaimer.

I'm giving fair warning I'm from a little known, two island country deep within the Southern Hemisphere - New Zealand.

As such the version of English that is standard here is what I'll be subjecting you, the lovely reader; to the wonderful and wacky world of how we Kiwi's spell.

Yes, that means an often weird and eclectic smash up of both the American and British dialect. Don't be confused seeing 'recognise' or 'apologise' instead of the covert 'z.' It's not that we don't like 'z' but with our fondness of 'u' in words like 'colour' and 'neighbour' we don't want to be hoarders of all the end letters in the alphabet, now do we. Shall I mention we also have a fondness for double 'L.' Some vices can never be overcome.

I should also note while most of us describe our height in feet and inches. In the quaint, middle of nowhere, blessed country where I live, we use the metric system. Pounds are not used to describe weight; metres determine length, so on and so forth. I try to incorporate both in my stories, so don't feel I'm being inconsistent, I am paying homage to my bringing while acknowledging my lovely fellow readers from different spaces.

To sum up: we Kiwi's are a unique bunch, full of those onion layers, you know the ones that have you crying if we didn't send you laughing your ass off first. So, enjoy reading from a land where six degrees of separation is more like two, and whole heartedly believe togs aren't undies until you cross the street.

Love and Light

PHW Love



Disclaimer

Please NOTE:

This book has trigger warnings.

War, parent death, violence and gun crime.

Reader discretion is advised. Please be kind to yourself

This book is for adults only.

What Romance are you reading?

A Alien/Sci-fi

B Batting for the same team/Bi

■ **C** Contemporary

D Dark

E Erotic

F Fantasy/Paranormal



We are all a little feral.





Chapter 1

So close Sandra and her friends could taste it—taste them.
Taste men again.

Would the past year have them see the rotten ones clearer now?

She hoped so, teasing her friends while landing like an awkward sober driver on the shonky bar stool. “Right, it’s the first week of December, ladies. We need to sort New Year’s resolutions for back home. Despite an abundance of men in bars, remember, their likely another in a lengthy line of frogs. Prince’s—heroes—magical unicorns don’t exist. It’d be wise, we remember that.”

Not one to be outdone in sarcasm, Leah poked back. “Maybe we shoot for frogmen or half-prince’s. Then we’d at least get a happy for now—” Words splintered into a grunt when Sandra collided with her.

“In this neck of the woods, I’d be grateful for a bed warmer.” Zoey flicked her annoying strand of hair blocking access to her wine.

She straightened before getting up close and too personal with the grungy wooden floor. Zoey hadn’t connected the dots. “For that to hold substance, we’d require available men.” Her own glass met with words, counting her blessings they’d gone by unnoticed in their frequent visits to the westernised bar, in one of the roughest parts of the war-torn city.

“Yeah, suppose so...” Zoey followed suit, her large mouthful finding freedom down her chin. Only to knock the damn glass again while failing to catch the trickle. “Old men, militia, teenagers, aren’t exactly appealing...”

“Zoey!” Leah spluttered, convinced she’d shot wine into the bar’s peanut bowl. “We’re teachers. Teenagers are a no—end of. Even ones on the right side of legal!”

“I never said they were an option. In fact, I said the opposite.” Shit, Zoey heard her words slur like a sailor. “Besides, our students are all single digits. That’s hardly a conflict of interest.”

She leant into Leah, amused at their frustration getting the best of them. “Well, happy for now”—her gaze met Zoey’s—“Or bed warmer, in this part of the world, won’t happen. Not why we’re here, anyway. Remember, two birds one stone.”

Zoey’s shoulders slumped, damn Sandra. “But, it’s been soooo long. Doesn’t help most are soooo damn fine. Pity the coup militia recruited them all.”

“Yeah, Pity.” Leah agreed. “Certainly more dashing than the pasty white prissy variety back home.”

“That’s a tad cruel.” Zoey choked as wine went south. “I was rather saying such handsome bachelors in our vicinity are going to waste.”

Her chuckle echoed louder, probably landing in the same peanut bowl Leah covered like a sprinkler. Almost eleven months they’d been there, six weeks left. Not their fault demands had reached breaking point. Didn’t help, unlike westernised liberties they’d taken for granted, self-service didn’t work. Though the absence of sex shops littered on every street corner made a refreshing change. “Let’s just remember why we’re here. Which isn’t chasing ‘handsome men’ for horn-bags like us. Six weeks left. We’ve got this.”

“Some sabbatical this proved to be!” Leah meant the sarcasm while boarding that plane. A year. A whole freaking year! “I vote being roofied into coming here.” Bugger, while using Sandra as a lean-to, they weren’t tipsy, but Zoey...

She knew it best to calm her spiralling horny friend, only to be met with a strong male presence half behind and to her right. Almost instantly said sandwiched friend eyes bugged out. Damn, her sigh blew her loose hair.

So close—so, so close...

Until her eyes landed on the masculine intruder.

Shit, her gasp joined her friends right across his taut chest, and the further her attention drifted, no drooled north, she met with the most brazen blue eyes she’d ever encountered. Unable to hide her own horny smile before brain cells kicked in. Damn. Not helping, it agreed with Leah.

And that.

Spelt trouble.

The intensity in his eyes burnt through her, searing parts of her to that seat. How could a woman deprived of sex not become frisky seeing his poor t-shirt under fire with that chest? Hell, those biceps put the same strain on shortened sleeves.

Forget trouble.

Try doomed.

“Evening, ladies.” Adam found himself dumbfounded how western women were in a shonky bar filled with the unsavoury of society, in the middle of a war zone. “What brings three beautiful women to this neck of the woods?”

Leah swallowed hard. Real hard. His brown hair, pretty boy styled; unlike, well. Not sure. But probably like the ‘heroes’ the kids call them. “We, ummm. We’re school teachers.” Her face burnt, had she been tossed on an open flame?

His eyebrow cocked at the brunette’s answer. The government had debriefed his base, stopping such endeavours. “How long you been here?”

Jesus, Zoey fidgeted with her fingers just to maintain a fake, and barely at that confident façade. But her tone wavered while leaning forward, and not just for a pervy view. “Nearly eleven months.”

He met the blonde’s hunched position, resting his arm on the bar. Line of sight covering all three, again, his mind wandered how these beauties remained unscathed. “This region is dangerous, ladies, certainly no place for you. Where you staying?”

Her mind cooled the heat his handsome features scorched her body with, lunging her upright. Shit, Leah almost fell. “Pardon me?”

“Manners... Makes a pleasant change.” A winked teased alongside his smile directed at the fiery auburn-haired woman throwing her scathing tone like a grenade.

“You’re mistaken. Merely basic courtesy.” Her glare narrowed from more than her eyes.

“Wouldn’t courtesy or etiquette dictate you answer my question?” He leant in, his eyebrow raising further, matching the smirk playing on his lips.

That smug expression drove her heckles into overdrive. They’d escaped both sides of the radar. How dare he! “If we’re going to navigate the

societal constructs of politeness. Wouldn't that decree we 'ladies' keep our abode private from strange men?" Determined to hold her ground from the brute. "Or is invading personal space your idea of good manners?"

He leant over his bent arm, with eyes on the blonde at the end, giving the answer. "Major Adam Cartwell. Now I'm no longer a stranger"—his smirk grew—"Besides, a man in the armed forces shouldn't be rebuffed." For fun, he winked. "So, where you ladies staying?"

Leah lost her marbles, hormones, or maybe her body. He was hot. Hotter than hot, more scorching earth to dust—hot. Her body flickered in an aroused hum erupting from her core when she saw no wedding ring had claimed him. "Uhhh. At the Sisters of Mary Monast—"

She landed a pointed elbow on Leah's side. It may've stopped the words, but not a disdainful grunt. She, however, with each word he spoke, grew more tart. "Well, Major Cartwell or whoever. Politeness would dictate we thank-you as we bid you farewell." What an ass, she sucked in a breath while turning her back on him. So, he sounded from their neck of the woods. It meant nothing with her friends losing the lusty fight. Sex was one thing, but jumping into bed with a stranger who'd have a gun strapped to his body. That wouldn't end well.

Not here.

Not in a war-zone.

He tapped the bar as he straightened, raising his other arm for the bartender's attention. If offered a gift, perhaps it'd break her ice thicker than the poles. "A round of whatever the ladies want." As he took a step towards his unit, the fiery auburn halted him.

"No thanks, Major Cartwell. Didn't you say it's dangerous here? What would come of 'us ladies' if we accepted a drink from a stranger?" At first, she felt victorious. A round in a boxing match to her, she mused. Only the further his form strolled away, she became besieged by a drunken, lusty stupor. Damn, that image forged a tattoo on parts of her still on an extended vacation.

Shit!

Stop, no!

But... Her mind skipped into that puddle with each step he made, and if she'd reacted with depraved fervour, Leah and Zoey would be melted wetlands. Sure enough, and she waited for the cage sparring claiming of him to begin.

“Ohhh dang, ladies. He’s mighty fine. Bed warmer, anyone...” Zoey bit her lip, waiting. It bruised when he landed at a booth. “He has friends, ladies.” Not sure she pulled off mimicking his tone and reference.

“Hey! Dibs, Zoey.” Leah grunted. “Besides, he looks like a ‘happy for now’ kinda gig.”

“Stop jesting. After ten-and-a-half months, we’re all at risk of marrying a bloody dildo, but...” She knew it was fine to look, but touch, no. It spelt disaster. “Just wait till we get home. Then suck and fuck all the dick you like. I’m positive a few would entertain being drained of life.” The last of her wine sculled back, wondering if she held the power to shift her friends from that bucking bronco. “Excuse me. I need to use the ladies’ room.” Her tone teased Zoey’s attempt at copying him.

“Need any company?” Zoey offered.

“No, it’s just over there, and that corner’s simmering like a testosterone mud pit.” Not entirely true. A pathetic half-walled partition may’ve blocked views, but everything else became fair game.

Fixated on her destination, a smile tugged her lips. Bathrooms in this part of the world kept genders separated. Another thing she hadn’t missed in watering holes where drunks did stupid shit.

Half-way through the corridor, she couldn’t shake the feeling he might take advantage of her absence. It wouldn’t take much for her friends to succumb to his charm. She almost had herself, and her balls of steel were stronger, barely. Although they’d agreed to avoid men, her friends were feverishly horny. Those men could strip their pact and friends naked in seconds.

Yes, she was horny too...

But this sabbatical was supposed to rid them of shitty decision-making while helping children living in constant chaos. And they were close—so, so—close to finishing their pact.

Free from the pungent hall that stunk worse than the toilets themselves, she paused, composing herself. Would he or one of his friends be foolish and attempt a second water cooler chat? Shit, one of them moved, stilling her race for freedom hoping to avoid more pesky dick.

Then his name stilled her thoughts.

And her feet.

But not her annoyance.

“Adam. You certain those Spiteful Spinsters at the bar are a no-go? How else we gonna get some action here?”

“Jesus, Chris.” He choked on his beer.

“It’s been a month since we executed operation puma and secured off-base leave. A month’s an eternity for a man.”

“Being one myself, pretty sure I’m aware of said fact.” Still choking, he sculled a mouthful, hoping it’d help. Nope. “There are plenty of willing locals.”

“How exactly do we know they’ll be willing? Not like we speak the same language!”

“Matt, you have much to learn, my young apprentice.” He hadn’t meant to sound roguish, but easy wind-ups couldn’t go unchallenged.

“I’m the same age as you, dickhead! But rules go double for foreigners here. I don’t particularly want in front of a firing line.”

“We might be the same age, Matt. But ‘women,’ I’m willing to bet I have years on you.” Yeah, how could he not? “And when it comes to those heavenly creatures, there’s only one language you need to understand...” He paused, leaning against the booth’s backrest. “And one thing you need to look for.” Their eyes gleamed, curious about his secret knowledge. “Watch their pretty little cheeks blush. The redder they go, the hotter they are for you. Then flash a few smiles as you switch on the charm, and they’ll be putty in your hands. Just leave before she wakes. You don’t need a stage five cling-on.”

“You tested this out before we arrived?” Matt’s excitement beamed when Adam’s smirk widened. “You certain we can’t prove your theory on those ladies? Surely they showed an interest?”

The gap between them shortened as he leant forward. Far too easy to wind up, unlike the fiery auburn-haired ring leader. “Yeah, two were, but Ice Queen on the end wasn’t having a bar of it. She’s so cold, Antarctica would catch a chill. But local women are ‘hotter’ if you catch my drift.” He winked, emphasising the last few words.

Their laughter boomed through her unbelieving ears, and she straightened her silk blouse. She’d have described its colour as dusky rose, but with her wrath, it probably shined red in fury. Screw him! Her steps, no march steamrolled towards Leah and Zoey, growling into each stormy stride.

Focused on the ground, rubbing her palms against her jeans, she collided with a barmaid holding a tray of beers, sending her on a path to the wooden deathtrap, anyway. Almost as jarring, out of nowhere, she found

herself rapidly departing from drowning in the frothy mess and broken glass to upright, being held in said position.

Frantic in her urgency to free herself upon realizing her hero, the Major's hands refused to budge the harder she struggled. The rising gasps stilled the second he shifted without removing himself. What the hell? Then it became a different fight altogether when beer flooded her eyes, and those brutish arms stopped her from reaching them. "Let me go!"

He'd never cleared his seat so fast in all his life, and if he obliged in her request, not grip tighter with how hard she fought, she'd make landfall on that mess threatening to scar. Her arms, as if detached, swung in weird fighting styles. Letting go, she began kissing the ground again. "Woah. Take it easy. Let me help you."

Embarrassment roughshod the sensibility raging her cheeks red too, what did it matter if she snorted? Not her best idea, the blowback of beer in her eyes flashed her temper a shade darker. "This Spinster Ice Queen is perfectly fine, thank-you!"

"Excuse me?" He caught her friends almost upon them, so lifted her a foot to the right before letting her go. "What did you just say?"

Her glare demanded it send him straight to hell. "This frosty bitch!"—putting a hand to her chest, her voice filled with venom—"Would rather have a thousand ice daggers hurtled in her direction from a scared Antarctica, than have 'you' in her space." Screw him—screw all men and she spun on her heels, grateful not to be foolishly wearing any. Damn-it, she almost fell again. Damn him, with his firm grip on her hips stopping her. Screw it all.

"That was a private conversation. Not for you to eavesdrop like a cheap spy."

Her head spun, the devil consuming her soul. Did the bloody fool just say that? Like hell low hanging fruit could continue keeping his hands on her, so wriggled while straightening and her patience ground to dust. "Cheap! So, I'm an old, bitter Ice Queen, unlike the 'hot' locals you prefer! But I'm also some cheap spy!"

Shit! He took a step closer, extending his hand. "No—no... That's not what I meant."

She tugged at her blouse that'd suction cupped itself to her chest. She didn't dare cop a glance to check if it'd become see-through, but with how all eyes had gravitated there, kinda answered it. "I'm an English Lit Professor. Don't try wordplay with me—" She stopped when his eyes narrowed. "What!

Guess I've confirmed I'm some Bitter Old Spinster! For your information, I'm not!" His head tilted with that grin she and her friends had fallen victim to. Vulnerable at the realisation, she crossed her arms. Too bad her blouse re-stuck itself to her breasts.

"No." A smile. That's all he had. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been pretty. "Just don't believe there's a need for English 'Literature' Professors at ground zero."

Her defiant attitude begged. Maybe she should become this Ice Queen? Yes, it screamed over her shoulder while flicking strands of her beer soaked hair. "Having the title of Professor doesn't stop me from teaching children. I spent years learning languages, including theirs! All because..." Her finger squared him like a scary battleaxe teacher. "You males always fight. From the sandbox to world wars! Always! And none of you ever understand the destruction you cause!"

Her glare then darted to Zoey and Leah. She had to rid this arsehole from under her skin. "I'm going. You can stay here. Apparently they want bed warmers too. You wanna forget our pact, and ride dick that'll be more toxic than a used biohazard container. Be my guest." Her tone remained uneven despite trying to growl it out.

Once free of the space it left her one loose end. But the bartender's attention remained on the chaos that'd unfolded. "I'm here to cover the cost of that." Her words more spluttered while flicking her hand towards the disaster without looking.

When he didn't answer, she turned to see what still held his attention. She'd not quite expected to see the tail end of that damn Major doing bullshit male sign language. Was it wrong she wanted to change the first half of his last name? Clean and simple, only two letters.

"No need."

Stunned, she stared the bartender down. "Pardon me?"

"There's no need."

She found herself speechless, well ears to hear as he strolled away cleaning a glass. That was a damn lie. Phone in hand, she fired off a text to the group chat. They, in quick succession answered what she already knew.

As she reached for the doors handle, an arm that stunk of beer as bad as her opened it. He needed to go play with a number nine bus. "Afraid I'd turn the door to ice now? Maybe blabber your secrets to the first hot local I

find?” Hit with the oppressive heat as she stormed the exit, her blouse clung again forming a second skin.

“What’s your problem?” He had to keep upping his pace to match hers, much like his frustration when she didn’t reply. “Hey, I said, what’s your problem?”

She stopped on a dime, facing him. Their bodies, now on a collision course, forced her to take a step backwards to the building behind her. “Do you think yourself that superior?”

“What?” He was wrong. Forget Ice Queen, she was fire and brimstone. No, both fire and ice.

Fast on her way to reclaiming a gold medal in speed walking, she rounded the corner to her street. Five minutes, and she’d be free of this bullshit.

His patience nosedived and grabbed her arm. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Unable to yank free, she kept trying while her tone barked like the wild dogs howling at night. “Was your self-importance born from being some high-ranking officer. Or because you have a third leg, and I’m obliged to reply. Because you know,” she spat the last few words. “I’m a woman!”

He dipped his head, a faint smile playing on his lips despite knowing it’d backfire. “You think I’ve a third leg?” His grip around her arm tightened when she fought harder.

“Or an extra pinky finger. What do I care?”

He knew she was tempting him to play rough, but she’d not get that from him. “I asked because women of your kind have no business working here! Your behaviour will gain unwanted attention, and that, will land you in a world of trouble.”

She yanked harder finding freedom from his hold as her expression hardened, marching in beat with her pounding chest. “We’ve been here nearly eleven months without so much as a raised eyebrow. And you, in less than an hour, lit a bright neon sign for everyone to see.”

“Me!” He snapped. “You’re the one who spied on me! Listening to something that was none of your business.”

She considered flipping the bird, but they’d reached the monastery. So, once on the first step of sacred ground her glare narrowed, letting sarcasm do her dirty work. “Ohhh, that’s right. I’m the decrepit, old, cheap spy Ice Queen.” She stomped another step, smiling at being one closer to peace. “You know, it’s funny your self-importance believes someone actually cares enough

to waste time spying on you.” With two left, she drove the scathing dagger home. “But hey, keep flattering yourself, low hanging fruit tends to do that.”

His temptation pivoted. Could he rise above? Yes—well—almost. “Well, seeing as I don’t know your name. I bid you farewell Ice Queen, now I’ve walked you home.”

Her body, in revolt, marched down those steps. Rage pulsed through her wedges still sloshing with beer. “You! I didn’t!” Screw him! Her words boomed through the streets and she wondered if it’d wake the dead, or just the sleeping nuns behind her.

“What?” He tilted his head, watching her pointed finger inch ever closer to his chest. The corner of his mouth curled, anticipating a vile response he couldn’t deny, intrigued him, even as the recipient.

“I did not ask for you to walk me home!” She had to blow the strand of hair off her face. He was nothing but a cruel, taunting asshole.

His grin only grew. “Perhaps not. But I believe in chivalry, even if it goes unappreciated.”

“You’re no gentleman!” Definite asshole, she snorted.

“You’re the one not acting like a lady.” Now he shifted on his heels, leaving her fuming in his wake. Aware he’d hit a nerve, he gave one last glance as his stroll gained a few feet. She did not disappoint, and another chuckle vibrated through his chest. What else was there but to wave as he bid farewell? “Goodbye Ice Queen. We’ll make sure your friends get home safely... Eventually.”



Chapter 2

Powerless against her irritation, she tossed for the millionth time, crash landing on the soft cloud under her head. No longer keeping count of her disdain, a grunt beckoned in annoyance. How could her friends bail on their pact? Those men were nothing but walking dildos banging any willing hole. Her threatening temper blew out another sigh while checking the alarm clock.

Two hours.

Her decision to share a large three-bedded partitioned space had perhaps been the worst decision she'd ever made. Her friends would return home reeking of sex, eager to share every sordid detail of their conquests: namely the Major, prattling on about his 'third leg' or 'pinky finger.'

She turned again, sending a disgruntled huff echoing off the annoying partitions that were nothing but decoration. Maybe finding elsewhere to sleep would save her from this nightmare? That asshole was horrid, nothing like a gentleman.

Ice Queen.

How rude.

Yet, being labelled a cheap spy alongside a Spiteful Spinster did them no favours either. And who could forget the accusation she wasn't a lady? He'd deliberately overlooked her manners.

God, he was such a tool!

Yes, blasphemy in a nunnery dedicated to bloody said entity, who was, unsurprisingly, also male.

Agitation continued to wreak havoc, clawing her thoughts into becoming that spy through the window, waiting for them to return. The urge was growing ridiculous, deciding the thick netting would offer privacy.

Should she message them? Make sure they were okay? Would that stop this craziness? Frustrated, knowing it'd do shit, she flung onto her back, hiding the flustered heat on her cheeks with her hands. Why couldn't she get comfortable? Why couldn't she sleep?

Getting beyond annoyed, she went to her elbows, her head falling victim to gravity backwards. If nothing else, it at least changed the view to a ceiling in desperate need of a repaint. The alarm clock, now a flame, drew her like a moth, glowing red with a snickering tease.

Three hours.

How much dick were Zoey and Leah getting? Was it a rinse and repeat or one massive orgy?

Goddamn-it! Stop! She fell off her elbows, shaking her head, taking fistfuls of her dark auburn hair.

Old Spinster Ice Queen!

How dare he!

She should've told her friends about the Major's derogatory slurs. Who was she kidding? All that masculinity had intoxicated Zoey and Leah. Only way to avoid their afterparty debrief was being asleep when they returned. But while she could fake that; if they chatted between themselves, it'd be for naught, anyway.

Damn-it.

Damn her friends.

"Damn it all!" she growled, dumping the pillow over her face. Maybe a lack of oxygen would knock her out?

Nope. After an eternity maybe two, her persistent restlessness answered that damn question. So did that stupid alarm clock. She'd have thrown the constant neon reminder if it wouldn't have knocked over those bloody flimsy partitions.

What was that noise?

There it was again, outside.

It meant one. No, two things. Zoey and Leah. She raced to the window, copping a peek from behind the heavy crimson drapes. Her friends climbed out of a military Hummer-style vehicle with the aid of those men. It triggered dark thoughts. Would they invite them inside the monastery? The

nuns would lose a coupon. Actually, it'd be perfect, shipping them back home on the next plane. But she fast dismissed the thought. They'd already ridden those arseholes close to death.

Four bloody hours.

That's a lot of sex.

Her breath caught itself in a trap. Leah embraced who should have Pain-In-Ass as a last name. His gentle response, Leah was right, he was a 'happy for now' kinda guy. But Zoey followed, and within minutes they'd hugged the others. All three man baboons then stood, waiting as her friends entered the front doors. Panic scraped against her fear when Major Cartwell scanned the front facing of the building. Still lost in her reckless frustration, embarrassment became centre stage when his eyes met hers as he nodded with a smirk. Oh shit! Before she could hide, he climbed into the front passenger seat.

Oh, shit! Racing to her makeshift bedroom, she flung the covers over herself just in time for Leah and Zoey to stagger in. Their giggling, failing miserably at shushing each other, meant one thing. In a mad dash, she threw the pillow back over her. She didn't care if it'd alert them to her being awake. She rather hoped they'd read its clear 'do not talk to me' road sign.

They dashed her hopes when their bodies landed at her feet. "You know... Some of us are trying to sleep."

"Ohhh come on, Sandy, don't be a party pooper." Zoey couldn't resist poking her calf. "You missed a great time."

"I don't consider having sex with anyone who thinks we're Spiteful Spinsters, Ice Queens, or pathetic cheap spies, anything great to miss out on."

Leah leant forward, placing her hand on Sandra's hip. "Well, had you come. Chris, who said Spiteful Spinsters would've apologised, like he did to us."

"He only did that to get you naked." It wounded her pride Zoey and Leah erupted in laughter. "If I'd known after ten-and-a-half months, you'd be falling off the wagon and onto the first dick to smile, I wouldn't have agreed to this pact. This 'man-ban' business was your idea, not mine." At this rate she'd have to remove her face, anger stifled the air.

"Don't say that, Sandra." Zoey felt the rage while stroking her friend's calf. "We're all tired of men."

"Well. Seems you aren't anymore." She removed her sweaty face, no longer able to hold her breath and smell what they'd been up to.

“We didn’t have sex.” Leah retreated her hand when Sandra’s glare turned rabid. “It’s the truth. But they wanted to know why you were so, well.” She sighed, Sandra snorted calling bullshit. “When we explained why we left home on sabbatical, they wouldn’t, even...”

“Call it for what it was, Leah.” Zoey swallowed hard as her pride took a hit. “They rejected us.”

“Zoey, that’s not true. They didn’t want us breaking our pact.” Leah teased Sandra with a glare. “Besides, Adam said they were a person down, and that wasn’t fair.”

“That just proves my point. Typical!” She lay down, relieved their pact remained intact despite their efforts to shatter it.

“How the hell does that prove anything?” Zoey asked, removing her hand too.

“If they’d found another, which I’m surprised they didn’t, they’d have broken our pact no problem.” Her eyes closed, hiding the tears for reasons she didn’t understand. “Do you mind? I’m tired. While you’ll be sleeping off hangovers, I’ll keep our promise, painting the nun’s fence.”

“We didn’t forget. Don’t worry.”

“Really, Zoey. Not going on another date? Thought you’d leapt off the wagon?”

Leah laughed, sensing something had ruffled Sandra’s feathers. “No, they only had one night’s leave.” Her chuckle stopped dead when her friend tensed. “What’s got under your skin? This is so unlike you.”

She went to an elbow, surely they didn’t need it spelt out. “You wanna know!” They both nodded, guess they did. “You chose dick. A stranger’s one at that, over...”

“Over what?” Zoey asked.

“Our friendship. I was called an old, bitter, spying Ice Queen!” She sucked in a deep breath, feeling better having said it.

“Well. Sandy. You can be cool when annoy—” Leah halted as Sandra’s frosty glare blew out the blush covering her cheeks. “He walked you home. Doesn’t that account for something?”

“Account for something! You’re kidding, right? He’s a rude asshole! If you’re right, and they’re back on duty, hopefully we’ll be long gone before they have another!” Reduced to hiding back under the pillow, she shouted the last few words. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I’m tired.”



Haplessly slapping the paintbrush on its intended target, the small picket fence, she ignored the disaster of having painted herself more than the partially white eye-saw. She focused on her protesting knees rather than her annoyance when fighter jets streaked across the sky in arrow formation. Were those walking penises from the Air Force? They'd worn nothing military, so it was hard to know. Yet, firm-fitting blue jeans and even tighter t-shirts created an altogether different jaw-dropping uniform.

Her attention returned to the right end fence pails she'd finished. A sigh escaped, knowing Leah and Zoey wouldn't be joining her. No sooner had she accepted her lonesome fate; her two bedraggled friend's laughter echoed through the narrow path well before they rounded the same end corner.

Deadpan staring for when they came into view. They didn't appear hungover. Maybe those men shared hangover recipes? Yeah, that'd explain it, and she turned away, determined to appear more interested in slapping the white mess like a preschooler.

But nosiness got the better of her. Unable to avoid side-eyeing them, she caught Leah clutching her hips, and Zoey pointing at the unopened paint buckets, deep in conversation. She didn't have the energy for their heeded chatter, so returned to missing the panels despite trying to paint them.

"Hey, where are the other brushes?" Zoey stormed her way towards Sandra. Unbelievable, they'd told her they'd be there.

Without missing a haphazard slosh of the brush, she wondered why it wasn't obvious. "Likely in the shed where I got mine."

Hands on her hips too, Zoey matched her friend's dismissive tone. "What the hell is your problem? I said we'd be here."

She faced Zoey while still on her knees. Her sigh cornered the brush, realising her attitude had been harsh for reasons unknown. "I thought you'd want to sleep it off. It's why I started early, and also why I'm half done." Another sigh, only softer, ended the anger ruling her sensibility. "If you gals aren't up to it because of, you know, being hungover, I'm happy to finish alone. I'd planned to, anyway."

While her friends remained locked in a staring contest, Leah stood beside them with brushes, landing one at Zoey's chest.

She offered again. “It’s okay. I know you were up late. I honestly don’t mind.”

Leah strode several feet past the deadlocked glaring-fest. On her knees, she gave the unopened can of white paint a violent shake, hoping to rid herself of the frustration Sandra had thrown around. “We said we’d help. We don’t break agreements.”

She snorted at that damn lie. “And yet last night, using your words—you nearly did.”

Zoey braved taking up a position downwind of Leah. “Nearly. Think that’s the pivotal word there, Sandy.”

“Perhaps, but that wasn’t from a lack of trying on your part. If they’d said yes, you’d have come home smelling worse than a gentleman’s club.” Though to her, they weren’t gentleman at all.

Leah had been too distracted to notice Sandra almost upon her and the still half-painted fence paling. “Doesn’t matter the context. The facts remain unchanged. Until we either ALL agree to end the pact. Which I’m just checking—it’s still the case?” Sandra’s expression turned hostile, answering that. “Or the sabbatical ends. Men aren’t on the menu.”

“Why end the pact now? Unless those men have leave before our sabbatical ends?” Oh shit, hang the hell on. “Did you gals give them the monastery’s phone number?” Her friends leant forward, almost painting their hair with freshly coated panels. “You didn’t!”

Zoey resumed sitting on her heels, slumping her shoulders. “No, we didn’t. But see, that’s why we needed you there. You’d have thought of that.”

“Well, I’m glad I wasn’t. I won’t spend time with men who hold such a low opinion of me without knowing who I am.” Nearing Zoey, she got up. “You finish those palings; I’ll start down there.” She dashed to the end, aiming for space. The last thing she needed was listening to the heated lust and desires of her friends.

Six weeks, she reminded herself. Six weeks left before she’d be free of Leah and Zoey behaving like crazy depraved women who’d gone mad over penises, and they’d suck and fuck their way to normal.



Chapter 3

Two weeks left she mused, pondering the pile of maths tests yet to be graded. Leaning back in the chair, her gaze shifted out her office window, hearing more fighter jets screech through the peace. In the year here, she'd never seen them so active. Zoey had even spotted troops on the ground while outside with the children.

The wall mounted clock chimed 1 p.m., pulling her from those mindless thoughts. In less than two hours, the kids would be home with their families. They'd thought about ending the day early, even called the monastery who owned the school. But the nuns reiterated there'd been increased activity before with no outcome. They'd also reassured with confirmed threats, they both received notification and, when necessary, evacuation aid. If they hoped stating to date, no child had received a scratch from the civil unrest, calmed her nerves they failed.

That, of course, happened before their arrival. And while it offered comfort, she didn't half feel getting the kids home was the best course of action. Parents, even older siblings, would be far better caregivers during this level of conflict.

Her breath blew out into the arid air, failing to ignore the discomfort of her elbows on the desk or chin from the tapping pen. Something felt off, and her arms landed on the desk, trying to break the nervous tension rumbling in her chest. Didn't work, and she stared at the ceiling. Least it didn't need a re-paint, but her lips still pierced under the strain, wondering if they shouldn't just ignore the nuns and do it anyway.

Hand on the phone's receiver having decided to call, its high-pitched screech startled her upright, crashing her chair to the ground and thighs colliding with the desk. No sooner had she freed herself of that lost breath and discomfort, did the door fly open with Leah pale as a ghost.

Unable to swallow against the nerves strangling her throat, she failed to say something as Leah lunged forward. Still nothing. Her jaw tensed with gritted teeth, demanding her mind and body work, she was head teacher for a reason. "Leah, it's happening, isn't it?"

Distracted by another sharp booming ring. It didn't get any further as Leah bolted the last few steps to her desk as she answered. "Hello, Miss McKenna speaking." She flicked it to speaker, shrugging off the foreboding feeling of death.

"Hello, Miss McKenna. It's Sister Cemile from the Sisters of Mary Monastery. The Army notified us of an impending attack. The school is within the impact radius. They've sent a unit to escort you three out. Dismiss the children and wait by the evacuation point."

What the hell! Her brain unscrambled itself. "What do you mean, dismiss the children?"

"End the day early. Send them home."

"Excuse me, Sister Cemile, but if the intel's accurate, sending the kids home could place them on death's doorstep, could it not?"

"Give strict instructions to go straight home."

"That sounds well intentioned, Sister Cemile, but walking home could get them stuck in the crosshairs, yes?"

"We don't have the man-power, Miss McKenna. It's the best we have."

Covert in her nod to Leah, she conveyed a new plan. "We'll do it. There's only forty of them. Half live near one another, anyway. It won't be—"

"Part of their continued support in stopping this coup includes the safety of missionary aid. That includes you three. Now, please dismiss the children. The more time they have to reach their parents or older siblings, the better."

The phone clicked dead before beeping that annoying tone. Her gaze shifted to Leah, who now paced, caged yet wild. To stop from joining her friend she held her hips, time was running out. "We can't just..."

"I know," Leah replied, "maybe we could group them, do it ourselves."

Amid agreeing with her friend, Zoey burst through the door.

And that's when she saw him.

Of all the men and days!

Her glare narrowed from behind the desk, pausing her mid-stride. Which darkened when he didn't turn away, either. She guessed it was time she lived up to his Ice Queen slur.

She fast noticed the guns he carried, including the rifle in his hands. There was no time and disregarded his presence, marching towards Leah dragging Zoey, until they huddled together. "The nuns said to release the kids."

"Surely not?" Zoey's tone saddened.

"They did." Leah confirmed. "We can't leave them to their own defences."

He moved within a few inches from their Little-Miss-Whatever huddle, his firmness he hoped would speak of the seriousness. "Ladies, we need to evacuate STAT."

Like Hell! She spun her head to face him, unphased by how close he stood behind her. Her icy scowl turned deadly when he raised an eyebrow. But she quickly pushed aside her disdain, returning to her friends and their plan. "You in Zoey? No pressure. Leah and I already decided."

He leant in and over her head, frustrated by her dismissive attitude. Time was ticking at the same rate as his plummeting patience. "We need to leave. Now, ladies. The nuns have plans for the children. Do as you've been—"

"A plan! You're kidding me!" She growled after his words brushed past her ear, poking her inner angry bear. Undeterred by his snorting breath, she faced him again, catching the stubble on his jaw across her forehead. Damn him, leaning over her. "Their 'plan' is to have the children fend for themselves. The youngest is barely five, none are older than nine. You have kids? Do you even understand the danger that lands them in?"

"You three will be in the same danger if we don't extract you. Now move!" He turned, expecting them to follow. When he reached the door, they remained motionless, seemingly more determined than before. "I said Move!"

"On your bike then. Don't worry, this Ice Queen has the balls to get those kids home!" She didn't bother hurling it in his direction. "Right, Leah, you take the kids living east of here. Zoey, escort the small western edge group. I'll take the re—"

He yanked her from the huddle, dragging her to the desk; his grip tightening as she tried ripping her shoulder from its joint. The MP5 strapped over his shoulder then startled her, and he shifted it aside. It only paused the

push-pull he was stuck in with the freedom-fighter, while holding the radio on his vest. “Prancer. Main office STAT.” He re-tightened his hold on her outstretched behind him. When would she quit?

“Copy Dasher. ETA three-zero.”

Fury tempted his demeanour when she continued wreaking havoc. “You’re not going anywhere but in that Humvee!” She fought harder trying to pry, no, break his fingers. Not happening, and yanked her towards him. As she collided with his gun free side, he leant into her ear. “I’ll carry you if need be.” Just missing her headbutt, she vexed his patience. “You want those kids to have a fighting chance, then quit creating chaos!”

She’d have bitten him if he wasn’t several layers deep in clothing. “If you don’t release me.” Desperate for him to become distracted, she continued her futile struggle. “I’ll make your life a living nightmare!”

“Doubtful.” He heard footsteps and waited for Chris. The moment he entered, both Leah and Zoey beamed an amused smile. Pity she wasn’t that compliant. It highlighted why women shouldn’t be on the frontline. Distracted soldiers became dead ones. Chris proved his point, seemingly just as smitten. “Prancer, get those two outta here. Go—”

“No!” Leah screeched bolting towards Sandra, their arms locking together. Chris marched over and she unbuttoned the bottom of her blouse, hoping to tie it around Sandra’s jeans belt. Before finishing the first loop, the brute arrived. “Don’t! They want the kids to fend for themselves. We can’t do that!”

Chris dragged Leah kicking and screaming to Zoey, hating and reluctant to exert more force when she dug her heels in. Thank fuck Matt arrived to help.

The clock glared its finality, telling him they were steamrolling to zero. “Blitzen. Take the other one! Humvee STAT!” Impatience tapped his foot until they were alone. Without skipping his steps, he towered over her until she rested her rear against that desk. His fists pounded either side of her hips on the wooden makeshift chair as he leant in, his tone now a shade darker. “You!” Her perfume halted his torrent, catching him off guard. “Will dismiss the children. Then You Will, get in that Humvee before both missiles and men flatten the five-mile radius we’re smack in the middle of!” Her smirk spiralled that off kilter further. “What! You think this is funny?”

“No.” She’d tried stifling her shit-eating grin. Fail. Epic bloody fail. It erupted into a chuckle. “Reindeers aye?”—her head fell back in a fit of laughter—“That’s gotta go down in history. Like Rudolph.”

He sensed her stillness when he leant closer, less than an inch separating his lips from her ear. Good, maybe now she’d be serious. “Go tell those kids to run. To run as fast as their little legs will carry them, if you want them to survive this.”

Her breath stuck in her throat as his angry, heaving one blew through her hair. When he backed off, she straightened herself, doing the same to her crisp cotton shirt. Without saying a word, she stood from resting on her desk, and started making quick steps towards the door until she sensed him moving behind her. Then she ran. “I’m taking those kids home. On my own, if need be!”

Damn-it, he muttered under his breath, darting after her. She was quick too! By the time he’d reached the assembly hall he’d seen her duck into, she’d locked the door. Why didn’t she understand time wasn’t their friend?

He kicked the locked barrier open, storming in behind what now rocked on its hinges before deafening the silence as it crashed to the floor. Having guessed it’s where the kids were, he didn’t much like their fear, piling into the corner like a traffic jam as he steamrolled in. She looked guiltier than sin half sitting on that damn desk, grating his irritation.

Determined to be on their way he marched towards her, scanning the room. When eyes landed back on the bane of his existence, it became clear why her expression spread like collateral damage. His tug at the damn things caused her to grimace. Good, and he demanded with more than words. “What’s this?”

“Making sure you leave. Pretty sure Santa’s Reindeers would rather be elsewhere. This old, bitter Ice Queen has it covered!” Her grin equally teased. If he was upset she’d handcuffed herself to the corner desk pole, he’d be furious about the cable ties behind her back.

Still tugging at those cuffs, they didn’t have release levers and he snorted. “Where did you get these!” No more barked, aware they were the real deal. “Better yet, why would you ever need them at school?”

“We taught the kids how to break free from them. Cable ties too.” She fisted the handful in the air, then realised it perhaps wasn’t the best idea; he’d snatched them from her grip. “Ouch, you brute!”

“Can’t have hurt that much. Ice Queen hurt you more.” Bugger, that hadn’t come out right. He had to regroup before her class action revolt led to the wrong path, and put his free hand to his hip. “Where are the keys? We don’t have time.” Definitely not, according to the counter on his watch. “If intel’s correct, we’re T-minus fifteen-minutes.”

“Then leave. I’ll save as many as I can.” She turned to the scared kids huddled in the corner, speaking in their native tongue offering comfort.

Unsurprised by her defiance, he leant between her head and the blackboard to hide his conversation from the children. “Don’t mess with me. I’ll drag you, with the desk, if I have to. Where are those keys?” Her cheek twitched. Certifiable. She was beyond certifiable—no, maybe an adrenaline junkie or perhaps had a death wish?

She teased further, despite impatience and nerves rushing through her chest. “In my bra. Though I don’t recommend rummaging for it. Not unless you want to suffer the same fate as Antarctica!”

His growl beckoned at the games she played. Did she not understand every second wasted brought them closer to death? “Quit with that already! Uncuff yourself!”

“No! Either leave. Or help!” Though it’d blurted itself out, she knew the idea was solid.

“Help?” His gut rumbled with a strange feeling at where it was heading.

“Yeah, help! You and the rest of Santa’s Sleigh brigade get ALL the kids home. Then I’ll fish out the key.” She shifted to sitting on the desk, her feet no longer touching the floor, and poked further. “Or are you imposters not capable of it?”

“Imposters! Who do you think you are! Imposters! I’ll have you know we’re Special Forces! Imposters don’t even get an invite!” His breath snorted out faster than his words.

“You’re still imposters.” She sniggered. “Santa’s Reindeers are females. Makes sense though. You envy us, and calling me Ice Queen. I mean, I do have more balls than you.” His darkened expression told her to stop. “Now leave. If your intel is correct, I’m fast running out of time.” She turned her attention to the children cowering in the corner, telling them to gather in groups with who lived nearby. Hopefully, their young minds would work it out.

He couldn’t leave her. Not only would they ground his squadron, General Sheppard would chew his ass off for hours. When would this

nightmare end? His mind scrambled while his tone more violent than a bazooka met his radio. “Donner, Dancer, Comet. Main assembly STAT!” He eyeballed her smug expression running his temper ragged. “I happen to like Christmas. Shoot me for all I care.”

She couldn’t help herself as his fierce stare scanned the room again. “Okay. Hand it over then.” Not expecting him to.

His hands landed on his hips while staring at the ceiling. Jesus, she was something else, and he rolled his shoulders, still unable to shift the tension. Then he realised. “What?”

“The gun. Hand it over.” Her grin grew as his eyes shot to her with a raised eyebrow. “You said I could shoot you. Hand it over.”

This—this one he smirked at. “You ever held a gun before?” Her expression told him everything, so he pushed the envelope, taking the strap off his shoulder, extending his rifle. Sure enough, she recoiled. “I’d be careful, though. I’ve calibrated it for my bad shoulder. The kickback’s something wicked for everyone else.” She turned her head, distressed. Reading the room, he re-holstered his rifle over his shoulder. About to speak, his team rushed in, startling her more.

He became puzzled by her reaction. That unease mixed in a violent thunderstorm with her frosty protective demeanour. Having missed his team’s words as they exploded on scene, his gaze drifted to the kids who’d shifted into three groups. Now her plan made sense. “You grouped them based on location?” She nodded, still somewhat reserved. It confused him more. “Donner take East.” She pointed towards the ‘Eastern’ group huddled in the middle and his soldier darted forward, waiting while they spoke in their native tongue.

Once the kids seemed agreeable, he continued. “Dancer, take West.” His patience would never last, uttering what would hopefully have her uncuffed. “Comet North and South.” It was the smallest group, but greatest distance, and he realised she’d given herself the hardest assignment.

The second they left, he upped the pace when she didn’t move. His watch told them serious trouble cornered their survival. They’d never escape the blast radius, but they could find better cover. “Uncuff! We have five-minutes.” He gave her the privacy needed to retrieve that key. It wasn’t until she, in a nano-second, came up beside him, did he shoot an untrusting glare in her direction. “You shouldn’t play games with human life.”

“Yet that’s exactly what you did.”

“Did not. They’ve known nothing but war, every moment of every-day. They’ll hear it, long before we do.” He put his hand on her back, more than guiding her towards the rest of his team.

“Hear it?” Why did she suddenly feel foolish?

He took another glance at the doomsday device strapped on his wrist. “Yeah, in about three-minutes you’ll hear drone missiles whizz through the air. We won’t make the Humvee, we’ll have to bunker down in the school’s basement.”

“W-we... We don’t have a basement.”

“Yes, you do. We reviewed blueprints en route.” While keeping his hand on her back, he spoke into his radio. “Rudolph, Cupid, Vixen, Olive. Move to retro.”

“Olive?” It was the distraction she needed.

“Yeah, you know... The ‘other’ Reindeer.” He thought it’d lighten the mood. It didn’t. Surely she knew the front line carried these risks? Should he try again before everything shot to hell? And once in the stairwell she wasn’t aware of, he tried. “She’s different, kinda like a dog with a bone. Or flea, as the story goes.”

“Ohhh...”

Then she heard it.

Whizzing through the air.

Then another, and another. Her terror immobilised everything, wondering if Zoey and Leah were safe. What about the kids? Her lungs stilled, forget moving.

Nothing registered.

Not being swooped up in his arms.

Nor flying down those stairs.

Though death shone like a beacon.



Chapter 4

No amount of swearing could ever convey his dread hearing the first drone missile hiss through the air. With how loud it echoed through that stairwell, it was close. Far too close. He got no further than another grunt as the building shook.

The concrete stairs coming up underneath him wavered as they vibrated, screaming how finite they'd become. Now it'd be impossible to reach the secret bunker. Best they could hope for was the stairs landing creating a cavity around them.

As he leapt airborne, clearing the last few stairs to said platform, the floor disintegrated beneath them. Another grunt—another realisation it wouldn't end well. Worse yet, he couldn't warn her, so braced himself as gravity forced their descent, chancing a quick look up. Could things get any worse? The stairwell had begun its own downward trajectory over them.

It was getting beyond complicated.

Now preparing for the inevitable meat in the sandwich they'd soon become, he coiled his limbs around her, acting as a shield. If he timed it right, and if by some miracle the rubble didn't crush them, they might just survive the initial blow.

The second his legs landed, the abrupt force painfully radiated through his bones. Pushing aside the shockwaves rattling them senseless, he rolled commando style, aiming for the nearest wall. Hopefully, the foundations were solid enough, affording them the safest protection. If not, they were

toast. He finally took a breath as they came to a stop—alive. She mightn't be in his arms, but she lay by his side.

The noise rung his tender ears as the rubble of the flattened building settled. For now, he considered them safe-ish, doing a quick limb check. Other than his legs, specifically his knees, aggrieved at being landing gear, he was in relatively good shape all things considered.

His attention shifted towards the asset, his hand resting on her shoulder. She didn't move. Bugger, the last thing he needed. "You awake?" Nothing. So took the more formal route. "Miss McKenna?" Still nothing, and checked for a pulse on her neck, notably relieved when it pounded like her mouth.

With that nightmare shifting to Neverland, he rolled onto his back, well, more half against the rubble, before checking his radio. The static told him it still worked, it was another thing in their favour. "This is Dasher. Roll call." After what dragged like a lifetime, perhaps five, a distant voice echoed.

"Copy. Olive, Vixen, Rudolph, Cupid, secure."

"Status of others?" He adjusted his arm that'd gone a tad numb under her head without removing it altogether.

"Prancer, Blitzen, both assets in safe-zone. Dancer, Donner, secure. Comet, unknown."

His breath grunted, boombox bouncing in the space. "Copy. Dasher, secure. Trapped in basement under lower stairwell with asset. Evac required." Aware Olive, being the tactical communication hub, would inform him the moment anything changed.

The radio fell into silence, diverting his attention back to the cramped space. First, his hand raised, careful to avoid injury. Fully extended, the tips of his fingers met the cold, harsh reality of their situation before using his leg along what appeared to be an even keel to his toes. It didn't matter how much further it went past his feet; with zero light, it wouldn't be their exit. Their options were fast evaporating when his arm slid along the ground above his head, finding a wall of rubble. If ever there was a moment to count his blessings... Just a foot further along, they'd be under that wreckage, crushed and dead.

Bright-side.

At least they could sit semi-reclined.

With a better idea of the space he refused to become their tomb, he tried rousing her again with his hand on her shoulder, hoping her unconsciousness

harboured nothing nefarious. “Miss McKenna?” Thank heavens, she startled. “Without adding to your state of mind. Does anything hurt or feel strange?”

She heard him fine, but no matter how rapidly she blinked, nothing. “I can’t see.” She focused on wriggling her body, waiting for pain, again, nothing. How did she thank upstairs? Though her ears rung in horrific clock tower at midnight fashion.

“That’ll be from zero light. Anything else?” He wanted off the ground the more she continued to squirm on his arm. When she rolled towards the makeshift wall, he took the opportunity to sit semi-reclined, gaining him better bearings. Could add, making his shoulder bearable too. Only downside; he’d taken more than his share.

He heard her cough turn into a deathly splutter, no doubt grating like a desert trap in her mouth. Upright would help her too. Of course, she rebutted his attempts to land her between his legs. When would she quit? He wasn’t trying anything, just a better position to clear out those lungs. “Stop brushing the dust off your clothes you can’t see. You’re filling the air with it.”

Fast losing that battle she quit, annoyed there was merit to his madness. “Only. Only if...” Damn him! Her tone becoming violent. “If you stop trying to put me between your legs.”

“I was merely offering you more space. Take it or not. Makes no-never-mind to me.”

“Sounds oxymoronic to me!” What an ass. Could she escape by herself?

“Oxymoronic?” His grin readable, baiting her.

“For me to have space from you! Wouldn’t that allow me pleasure of moving away. Not closer.” She shuffled upright while face palming that wall. Damn him! What he’d done helped no end. Such an arrogant, know-it-all ass.

“Suit yourself, but if you get sick of kissing the wall, between my legs will be waiting.” He enjoyed poking who vexed him.

“If you want a woman between your legs, go find blushing cheeks? Cause I assure you, Mine are Not!” Her tone thunderous like her attitude. He wasn’t wrong, keeping her distance had her face flush with that cold stoney surface like a pillow.

He leant in her direction before halting, thinking better of it. She provoked his status-quo every time her mouth opened. But he couldn’t stop himself, his hand meeting her shoulder spinning her around. Her own flailed wildly, landing on his thigh and parts she’d now know which side of ‘third-leg

to pinky-finger' spectrum he lived. It sent her rabid, forcing his hands along her cheeks following through on the tease he'd wanted to goad her with. "They feel pretty hot to me."

"You're such an arrogant pig!" She lunged back, cracking her head on that intrusive wall. It sent her crashing forward, desperate to find ground that didn't involve his thigh, groin or him full-stop. Once she found concrete gravel, a pained but relieved sigh filled the space. Sure it hurt, but she'd take cuts over him any day.

Already acclimatised, his perception of where she'd be was pretty accurate as his hand touched her back. "Try settle down. You're only working yourself into a frenzied anxiety or panic attack."

Outraged, she huffed, how dare he! "I'm not some delicate wallflower who can't handle herself! You're the biggest misogynist I've ever had the displeasure of meeting!"

He didn't understand her desire to live in fight mode. "That's not true. I happen to enjoy women. And I never suggested you were a wallflower. If you—"

"Implied, then!" She now considered her options. Maybe upright by his feet?

He had to credit her street smarts as he felt her shuffle down. "I wouldn't go down there. And I never implied that either, though, you clearly don't like guns. If you'll—"

"Right. Old, bitter Ice Queen. Thanks for the reminder—" A strangled whimper stopped her scathing words when her head collided with a protruding piece of metal. No sooner had her hand felt the trickle, than his firm grip plonked her in the single space she'd rather die than be in.

But she stopped short of another scathing attack when the painful gash spilled blood over her eyebrow, hating his perception. "Seeing a crazy gunman shoot everything that moved in a mall at ten-years-old, kinda has that effect!"

He did his best not to corner her constant irrational behaviour; it did him no favours. "Let me check." His fingers traced her cheek for the wound he distinctly heard tear open. Finding it by her temple, he sighed, relieved. Head wounds bled worse than they looked. "I'm sorry you witnessed such a violent crime."

The sound of his vests velcro echoed over her ragged breath while his thumb kept pressure on her wound to stem the flow. He then wasted no time

uncapping the superglue until she jolted at its smell. "It'll close the wound until it can be looked at. Be still."

Despite what sounded like genuine kindness, she wanted to shift away. His logical, rational self, taking care of something he'd created—annoyed her sensibility. Maybe she could lie on her stomach and feel around first?

Distracted by gaining distance from the man who mocked her more than a stand-up comedian, a sigh landed her further between his legs. If wishes were real, she'd have changed her fingernails into endlessly sharp claws. But alas, she had the garden variety and embedded them into his forearms. "Get your hands off me!"

"You just sustained a head injury. You realise you only have one of those, and they are, in fact, quite important." Jesus, he wondered when she'd quit?

"Actually! You can be kept alive without brain function. It's your heart you can't!" She seethed towards the arrogant arsehole! Didn't help her attempts to shove his arms away got her nowhere.

"Is that what you're doing?" He'd say those gouges felt equally wounding.

"Pardon Me?" Momentarily pausing, her confusion reigned supreme over finding space.

"Still with the manners. I'm impressed." He opened his thighs further, hoping it'd calm the wild in her.

If only it wasn't pitch black she'd have shot a death glare, certain she'd be the first person to harness such hatred. "We've already established I'm the one with etiquette, so don't change the subject."

"I wasn't." He teased, it was easier than baiting an outlier in a school of fish.

"Then answer the question!" She growled, impatient.

"And, what question was that?" Yeah, he mused, way easier.

"What do you mean? Is that what I'm doing!"

"Ohhh. That." A small chuckle erupted from his lips until reminded of her nails clawing deeper. "It came to mind, you might be trying to kill my heart with cruelty."

She considered his words, only it dug under her skin, irritating her frustration more. Though in her defence, she'd never suffered from overhearing callous gossip in her honour before. Sure, everyone gets ridiculed during their life, but hearing it hit different. "For me to end someone via

their heart, it'd require I had one, to know of its weakness. And since I'm the Ice Queen, it's your ego that's taken a beating. And that... That's entirely, A You Problem."

"When will you let that go? It was a private conversation!" He didn't often feel so off guard.

"So you think it perfectly fine to shit talk a person without them knowing?" Her incline against him now annoyed more than his words, forcing her to shift and meet with the roof. Truth be told, it still beat his close proximity.

"Would you cool your engine for five-minutes?" His hand went between her head and the rubble before she threatened to concuss herself again. As expected, she fought him. "Look. I'm not trying anything untoward. Simmer down, and stop being so hostile. Anyone would think you're a militia plant with how much you hate me."

Her nails left his forearms when he won the power battle, bringing their bodies closer together. At least he didn't want her laying on him, all that combat equipment made it impossible, anyway. "Bitter, old Ice Queens, kinda have that effect. Remember, you put yourself on that hit-list with Antarctica not—" Unable to finish, the crafty arsehole had guided her head to his shoulder, free of that vest.

He actually had to pierce his lips shut in order to stop himself from saying anything. It was like going ten rounds with a heavy-weight prized boxer. With her head in place, he held it there, knowing she'd be capable of pulling any number of stunts. But as time torturously slowed to half speed, the eerie silence cornered more than she did. "My unit are aware of our location. Once it's safe, they'll come for us."

"Okay." Good. But waiting until the militia cleared? That felt more terrifying than waiting in his space. It could take days, dare she think weeks? What about oxygen? His radio further rung a bell, clearing the fog in her already tender ears. Fear lost itself of its shackles, now afraid suffocating was the least of their worries.

And that realisation.

Held a fate far worse.



Chapter 5

“Dasher. Copy. Incoming combatants, hot and hard.”

Grunting under his breath, he used his free hand to acknowledge the shit that just wouldn't relent. “Copy Olive. Radio silence. Dasher out.” He turned the annoyance off as she left his shoulder. “Looks like you're gonna get your wish.” Now that she'd shifted, he put the medic kit in his vest.

“My what?” she asked, confused. He made no sense.

“You wanted by my feet. We have incoming, and by my estimations, that area has denser rubble. If we're to remain unnoticed, we'll have to burrow in deeper.”

“I see. Will it work?”

“Don't know. But we have to try.”

“Ohhh, so you'll be there too?” She scrambled to figure out how they'd go from a double bed space to a single. “Is that protruding metal down there?”

“As far as I could stretch my feet, it did.”

“But... But that means we'll be squished together!” No way! She figured the idiot was surely taking the piss.

“Together nothing. I'll be on top of you.” His hand wrapped around the back of her neck, restricting her fast upright ‘like hell’ reaction. “Cool your engines, Miss McKenna. Trust me, it's not by choice.”

“What? Afraid being close to the Ice Queen will chill you to death!” Surprised she'd switched from defiance to offended by his reluctance.

His other hand snaked over her mouth booming worse than the neon sign bar scene a month ago. Unsure how close the militia were, he cleared his throat before whispering. "Actually, I don't think it's fair on you. Not when you vehemently hate me. Now be quiet." He let her go, certain debris shifted on the other side.

"You put yourself on that hit-list, not me." Carefully, this time, she shifted her head away from him.

Positive he heard it again, they needed to move, and lowered his volume until he more mouthed. "Lay on your stomach and slink backwards until you can go no further, or can't feel the edge of the debris your head hit. Don't forget to use your feet to feel for protruding objects, we don't need another injury."

"My stomach!" she snorted. Ohh hell no. "If you think I'm gonna lay face down while you lay on top of me. You have another thing coming!"

"Whatever! Just move. We're running out of time."

Gingerly putting her feet first, her stomach brushed the cold concrete. She undertook a quick check, worried with how exposed she might be. The buttons had freed themselves. Just brilliant! Typical she'd suffer a wardrobe malfunction trapped with someone who thought her shit on his boots. Least the further she travelled north up the line of offenders, the three over her breasts were fine.

"Hurry up, would you?" There was still him to go.

Her growls matched a bear who'd lost their salmon catch as she went to her elbows. When her forehead grazed his inner thigh, her grunt shifted to a wolf angry at the moon before shuffling down. The space could take her, but him, it'd be a tight fit. And no way she'd lay on her stomach, so fixed that, too. "I'm done."

He sighed, rolling over, his vest hard against the ground while separating his feet, planking his way towards her. For every few shuffled steps he made, he checked his right flank, making sure he'd meet with that extended debris before her head. The second he found it, he whispered the next step between the slither of space between his vest and the ground. "Put your hands on your head until I find your shoulders."

"Done." She didn't like the incoming closeness with a chauvinistic pig.

The soles of his boots touched what he hoped were her shoulders. "That you my boots are kissing?"

Kissing! What the hell was it with him? Did he really think women were powerless against his charm? “If you mean are you at my shoulders, then yes—yes, you are.”

“Fold your arms.” He resumed his hovering as he lowered. That was until his groin brushed against her breasts. Unsure how he’d managed that faux-par, he did his damndest to hurry the hell up. He’d almost finished when the reason for their bodily collision became clear. She’d tucked her folded arms under them, essentially becoming a push-up bra on crack. Why did he keep going from one crisis to the next? Now inches from her face, well, kind of, he paused. “Can you shuffle down any further?”

“Why?” Her voice sounded unlike anything she’d heard before. Sure, she disliked him, but that advertised something darker.

“The deeper we’re in this hole, the less likely even torches will find us. And if they do, it’ll just look like I’m here.” His breath blew out, frustrated she fought him at every turn.

“How the hell will that work?” Her gut screamed of ulterior motives.

“I can dip my head, it’ll hide you. So if they decide to shoot, it’ll hit me.” His tone grated his temper and her cheek, her non-compliance was getting ridiculous. At this rate, they’d be mid argument while being shot at, because sure as hell he couldn’t fire one himself with her taking up valuable space.

“You mean kill?” She shuddered, it suddenly felt too real.

“Yeah.”

Now she understood the complications. “But your dead weight would crush and kill me, anyway.”

“Maybe. But it’s guaranteed if they notice you. Lay on your stomach, it’ll help.”

“I told you no!”

“Suit yourself. But stop asking questions and move.”

Oh, how she wished to be anywhere but stuck there with him. Militia too. She needed this nightmare to end? “Fine.” Perhaps her wish should instead be never speaking to him again.

He followed behind until his chest came in line with her face, releasing the straps to his vest. As it started coming off, he felt her tension suffocating the stale air and heaving against his shirt.

“What are you doing?” She begged to the heavens he didn’t want to lie on top of her.

“Freeing your breathing space. And if they take a shot, this vest will only make my deadweight worse.” He slid it down against his right thigh. All they could do now was wait. Though he hoped they’d give up the hunt sooner rather than later, this planking shit was no joke. His elbows hated the gravel surface, and his legs were protesting worse than any leg day at the gym ever had.

“Ohhh.” What else did she have? His words haunted like the first time he mentioned death. Then she heard it. Indistinct voices opposing the very distinct sound of debris being cleared. “Are they looking for us?”

His head tilted towards his chest and her. “Yes, but not friendlies.” The noise edged closer, sending her into a panic. Worse timing, despite being understandable. To calm hopefully, his hand traced from her shoulder to her cheek, his thumb grazing along her skin until reaching her lips. She still might bite, but his finger rested there, directing his words between this crazy planking. “I’ve got you.”

Her body screamed red alert. He was right, these spaces fast spiralled fear into panic, and to stop from falling into it, her still folded arms shifted to holding her heart, butterfly tapping her chest, praying it’d work like when she was ten. To her surprise, she started feeling better, but that’s when she noticed his chin rested on her head.

“Be quiet and still. They’ve moved debris up ahead.”

“But you’re nearly on top of me. I can’t breathe.”

“Nearly. But, Miss McKenna.” He halted the second a speckle of light flickered. “But not quite on you.” His words helped him realise the issue. “This was why I recommended laying on your stomach. It would’ve felt less confronting.”

“I see. So not in case of dead weight?”

“Affirmative. Now simmer down. I see daylight. They’re close.” With a bit of luck, they’d lose interest in finding him.

Who was he kidding? A solid hour of them rummaging, sometimes so close, he was certain their sweaty odour invaded his nostrils. It matched the repeating cycle of her breathing from rapid to heavy. Any louder would have them caught.

Unsure what’d greet him, he shuffled down to safely rest on his knees between hers, leaning to her ear. “I’ve got you.” He felt the slightest of nods, hoping it’d be enough, and shifted to his elbows, readjusting his hands until

they both held the top of her head. As he began stroking her hair, he prayed it'd gentle her fears.

He briefly considered going higher on his knees, but his butt hit the concrete as it was. Best he could do was keep his lower half free of her. Yes, the worst kind of muscle torture. Forget planking, this was something entirely evil. That train wreck smited to dust like the rubble surrounding them as voices became louder, jack-knifing her body in revolt. Drastic times demanded extreme measures, starting with him resting a hand to her ear and his cheek on the other bringing her trembling lips trembled against his neck. "I've got you."

Her sensibility startled at the push-pull of his calming tone, and rocks being tossed around. And when his hand landed over her mouth, she realised her breath hadn't been silent. Which begged to scream as footsteps crept closer and a crack of sunlight hit her squinting eyes.

Unable to cope, she squeezed them shut, failing to control fears of what sounded angry snorting. Her mind scrambled to focus. Nothing worked. That was until his breath washed over her—just. Every grunt, harsh yelling word, or removal of their only barrier, her body revolted, demanding freedom.

Still she failed and free-fell into wondering how long they'd remain hidden. Luck would never allow her to escape. With that reality her future, being shot and not taken, became her next prayer. Yes, she and her friends knew this threat existed, but just like overhearing cruel gossip, it hit different landing at your feet. That reminder sent her temper thunderously close to pushing him out of her space until his hand shifted from her mouth. "Can we leave now?"

His head, still too close for comfort to hers, shook to reply. Unsure if she understood, his gaze remained deadlocked on the crack in the debris where they once sat. "Not yet. They're still lurking."

"Does that mean we can't leave?" She wondered if he'd read between her lines?

"Yes, but I don't plan on getting any closer. You can stop worrying about it."

Not sure why her anger simmered as his tone brushed against her cheek. His dismissive attitude towards her as a woman, confused further when he tried creating space. "That position can't be comfortable. Why can't we lie sideways?"

“You’ve no idea. But, in that position if they come back, they’d see you.” To lighten the load on his elbows, he one at a time, shook them loose repeating the same with his knees straightening his legs.

She knew as the sunlight dimmed it’d been hours. Yet, he’d moved less than five times. His abs had to be next level. NO stop! Thankfully, his grunt helped yank her from those unwanted thoughts, forcing out the same tone with her words. “Soon you won’t be able to walk. Either you move. Or we leave!”

“We can’t leave. Not until nightfall.” He’d have to try being more discreet now she knew. But wavering thighs were a bitch.

“That the plan all along?” Her buttons pushed, he was such a liar and ass. She could add chauvinistic and misogynistic pig to the pot, too.

“Yes. Now quit talking. I rather enjoyed the silence.” Jesus, it was hard concentrating. He’d have thighs of thunder by the end.

“Screw you.” Maybe she could hurt him?

“No, Miss McKenna, you’ve made that abundantly clear.”

“Just move!” She started wriggling away from the only barrier protecting her towards the one that’d maimed. When he grunted, having already become furious, she aimed for a trifecta. “I said move! Why are you such an ass!”

“Me? I’m nothing of the sort.” Reduced to moving in unison in the opposite direction, his back slid down the concrete disaster, making sure nothing cut him to shreds.

In the passing moments as they stilled, she considered his comments. If the militia returned, they’d definitely see her now. Yet, the relief she was free of him over her settled her rapid breathing. Add facing the wall, double points for that success. It all became for naught, finding comfort proved impossible on the never ending concrete gravel underneath her.

He sensed her annoyance, over what, no idea now she’d achieved the space she wanted. “What now?” Yes, gruffer than he intended.

“Nothing. I’m fine!” Like she’d tell him.

“Liar. Tell me.”

“No! Leave me alone.” Her menacing temper being this close, rode her shock and roughshod her terror. How the hell had she survived a three-story building collapse, and evaded being shot, yet couldn’t get five inches of separation from him? That reality smacked her pride. Him. He kept her alive. It rattled her frustration more.

“Can’t. Kinda stuck in a tiny space with a distressed—”

“I’m Not! Pissed off, yes. High on adrenaline, totally! Scared for my life, without question! But distressed, I said I’m no wallflower. Just leave me the hell alone!”

The sunlight dimmed between the cracks, and he sighed, feeling the unmistakable tremble of shock raging through her body at breakneck speed. Aware anything he offered, she’d flatly refuse, it left few options other than his hand upon her shoulder. She collapsed off her elbow to escape, at least it stopped her brushing away the unforgivable gravelled rubble she lay on.

How dare he touch her! Her anger ended there, when rolling her shoulder broke her dark safe zone. His hand, almost on cue, gripped tighter, forcing her pride into action. Damn-it, her head met with the concrete determined to maim. Things then blurred when he spun her body around, her face and hands landing against his taut chest. Shit! No! Screw him! “Let me go.”

“Stop Miss McKenna.” Stealth as a bomber, his hand slid under her neck until she rested on his bicep. “I assume you were trying to get comfortable. I am merely affording you it.”

“You think this close comforts me!” She attempted to push off him, stopped by the immovable wreckage behind. Damn him! A grunt blew out as her elbows buckled, tucking her arms into his torso. “I don’t...”

The pause he wasn’t sure of. Maybe she was contemplating whether her abrasive nature would work against what she wanted. “Would my arm not be a better pillow than the fragmented ruins?”

“But!” She demanded, begged her anger to erupt. Wasn’t hard with all the cruel things he’d said. “This old, bitter Ice Queen doesn’t need what you’re pushing. Go find a hot local.”

Jesus. “Look, Miss McKenna I understand you hate me, but rehashing a private conversation that was none of your business won’t help either of us right now.” Her breath snorted, and he tried again. “This anger you have, you need to park until we’re back at camp. Do whatever you want then. Scream it from the top of the flagpole for all I care. Just right now—stop!”

Damn him, and his rational points. To satisfy her annoyance, she rubbed her head against his bicep, like a pillow she was making just right. A wicked grin grew hearing his grunts escape. That was, until it sounded more painful than agitated, so she stopped.

Thank heavens, his poor arm and shoulder were being ground apart with the stunt she pulled. “Now you have that outta your system, might pay to get some rest. It’ll be a few hours before we can move.”

“Sleep?” Was he serious? Surely he knew? “Thought being special forces, they’d have trained you in basic psychology.” Her ragged breath blew across her face, hating how close they were. “Women don’t sleep around men they don’t know or trust. And despite what you think of me. It still applies.”

“You’re certain—you know what I think?” Unable to hide his chuckle, this would be good.

“I don’t think. I know!” she shot back. How dare he!

“Well—well, Miss McKenna, I think you’ve finally got something right. I don’t think—You Know—either...”

“Yeah...” She didn’t like being right. Not on this. She’d done nothing to him, yet he’d been cruel. Wait, what? “Pardon me!”

He’d give it to her, it was impressive, after all. “You know... I’ve never met someone who, in a single sentence, can be the perfect epitome of social standing while delivering the most lethal slaying of one’s character.”

“You spoke ill of me. Cruelly, in fact. You deserve far more than I’ve delivered!”

“Did I... Or was I merely conv—” Shit. His voice now at mouthing volume. “Someone’s returned. We need to be quiet.”

“Could it—”

“No.” His finger brushed her parted lips. “Sleep—don’t sleep, up to you. We aren’t moving for a while.”

In the silence, she too heard the awkward shuffling of feet. What if they opened the hole further? Her forehead went to his chest, the smaller she made herself, the safer she felt. What she hadn’t banked on was his arms wrapping around her, gave an immeasurable amount of comfort. More than she’d managed alone. As her hand rested on him beside her face, the movement of his leg over hers fluttered out a sigh. He’d still try to protect her, even though they hated each other.

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