

CHAPTER ONE

“I SHOULD CANCEL.” Allie Landers threw another massive load of white towels into the washer and bumped the door closed with her hip. “Honestly, I shouldn’t have let you talk me into this in the first place.”

“It’s cute that you think you let me do anything.” Her best friend, Becka Baudin, laughed. She pulled another set of shoes out of the metal bin and paired them up with the appropriate-sized cubby. “And, besides, I already checked us in for our flight. It’s too late to turn back now. Our classes are covered. Claudia is handling all the administrative work for the week—for both the gym *and* the shelter. If you stay, you’ll just stand around and stress out because things are operating just fine without you.” She slid another set of spin shoes back into their cubby. “When’s the last time you took a day off, Allie?”

Allie sighed, because that was the one argument she couldn’t win. She didn’t take days off. Her gym, Transcend—and the women’s shelter it helped support—were her life. She even lived in the apartment above the building combining the two. When she wasn’t filling in teaching a class for one of the girls she employed, she was handling administrative work or doing whatever was required for the shelter.

She preferred it that way. Being busy made her feel complete in a way that nothing else did. She was a vital cog in a perfectly operating machine.

Except little about it was perfect these days.

The few donors she’d had who helped keep the women’s shelter afloat had dried up. The gym functioned just fine on its own, but she’d been using every bit of profit to keep the shelter going. Because of that, the gym was in jeopardy now, too. The result... She was in trouble. More trouble than she’d let on to anyone. Admitting it aloud was akin to making it real, and she couldn’t do that. There was a way out. There had to be.

A way that didn’t involve selling out to the vulture investors who’d been circling for months. Allie just needed *time* to figure it out.

The very last thing she needed was to jet off to the Caribbean to some private island for a week. But if she admitted as much to Becka, then she'd have to admit everything else.

She couldn't. Not yet.

Allie had just sunk what remained of her personal savings account into keeping the power bill paid at the shelter, which meant another month gone by without debt collectors calling. Or, worse in so many ways, without having to turn out any of the women currently living there.

"Hello? Earth to Allie." Becka waved a hand in front of her face, a frown marring her expression. "Where'd you go?"

"Nowhere important." She forced a smile and reached over to flick her friend's hair. "The blue suits you." It was just as bright as Becka's personality, several shades melded together to create something beautiful.

"Don't change the subject." Her friend frowned harder. "You aren't going to cancel, are you? If you try, I will hog-tie you to your suitcase and haul your ass to the airport myself. You're going to relax and enjoy yourself for a week even if it kills both of us."

Allie snorted. "If it kills both of us, that's hardly relaxing, is it?"

"Smart-ass." Becka's blue eyes were pleading. "I've already left our contact info with Claudia. I promise, if something happens and they need you, I'll pay for your flight back to New York without bitching about it once. And I'll never bully you into going on vacation again."

Allie raised her eyebrows. "How much did you have to pay Claudia to make sure she doesn't call me?" That was the only way Becka would make a promise like that. Her friend played to win, and she wasn't afraid to play dirty. Claudia was just as bad.

Becka all but confirmed it. "Claudia is on the same page as I am. We both agree that you need to get the hell away from this place for a little bit."

She sighed again, but a small part of her looked forward to seven days with no email, no phone calls, no weight of the world on her shoulders. The island had no internet access except in the main lodge, so she'd have no choice but to relax. "I guess I have to go then."

“Yes, you do!” Becka gave a little wiggle. “Now help me get the rest of these shoes put away before your class. I’m going to pop in if it doesn’t fill up. Seven days of drinking and sunning myself are going to add up quick.”

Allie laughed and moved to help. She pushed away the worry and stress that had plagued her for months. It would still be here when she got back. What would it hurt to just cut loose for once in her adult life? “I’m looking forward to it.” And for the first time since she’d bought the tickets, she actually meant it.

*

Roman Bassani glared at the pretty Chinese woman behind the counter. “You’ve been giving me the runaround for weeks. I know for a fact that Allie Landers is in here daily and she’s actively dodging my calls. I just need to talk to her.” He couldn’t tender her an offer to invest in her business if he couldn’t pin her down, and he’d been having a hell of a time managing that since his initial call to propose the idea. Coaxing reluctant business owners into seeing things his way was something that usually came easily for him. But Allie Landers was a slipperier quarry than he’d expected.

Apparently she’d successfully dodged him. Again.

“I’m sorry, sir.” Claudia didn’t look the least bit sorry. “She’s out of town for the next seven days. Any business you have with her will have to wait until then.”

“Out of town? Where the hell did she go? There’s got to be some way to get ahold of her.” He didn’t actually expect Claudia to answer, but apparently needling him was too much of a temptation.

She leaned forward with a small smile. “She’s on a private island with no cell service or internet. If you want to contact her before she gets back, I suggest smoke signals.”

Cheeky.

He could use this. Roman plastered a disbelieving look on his face. “That’s bullshit. There isn’t a damn place in the Western Hemisphere without cell service or Wi-Fi, let alone without both.”

“There is on West Island.”

A-ha. He didn’t let his expression shift. “If you say so. You tell Allie to call me when she gets back.”

“I’m sure she’ll have you at the top of her list,” Claudia said sweetly.

Roman turned without another word and stalked out of the gym. He breathed an audible sigh of relief once the door closed behind him. Everything about that place was so feminine, he couldn't walk inside without feeling like a bull in a china shop. It was more than the tiny instructors that he seemed to argue with the second he asked after the owner. There wasn't a single pink thing in sight, but the place was always packed with women.

None of that was a bad thing, but the looks they gave him—as if they expected him to go on a rampage at any moment—and the subtle flinches they made if he moved too fast... It grated. It wasn't their fault, and he applauded what Allie Landers was doing there, but their behavior left him painfully aware of how big his body was by comparison to theirs, and of the fact that no matter how carefully he spoke or how expensively he dressed, he was still a goddamn animal beneath the suit.

He didn't let anyone see it, but those women sensed it all the same.

A predator.

It didn't matter that he'd chop off his hand before he raised it to a woman or child. To them, he was a threat.

Roman cursed and started down the street. He should hail a cab, but he needed to work off his aggression more. The long strides helped clear his mind and ease his agitation, leaving nothing but cold purpose in its wake.

This Allie thought she could skip town for a week and ignore the fact that his deadline was bearing down on them. Two weeks until she had to make a decision, or other investors would make the decision for her. Normally, Roman wouldn't hesitate to play dirty, but his client wanted Allie to agree to the contract without him putting on undue pressure. *An impossible task.* He had a healthy bonus waiting for him if he could pull it off, but that was secondary. His client wanted full acquisition of the business with the shelter intact—the women in the shelter would scatter if they thought it was a hostile takeover. They trusted Allie, and they sure as fuck wouldn't trust *him.*

All of it boiled down to his needing the damn woman to go along with this buyout and he couldn't convince her to get onboard if she wasn't here.

But he had a location.

Roman fished his phone out of his pocket and did some quick searching, his frustration growing when he realized that the resort was booked for the next year straight. The website promised a discreet paradise, which

translated to the staff being unwilling to move things around to accommodate him. Since giving him guest names so he could offer his own incentive was against company policy, he'd hit a dead end.

Only one thing left to do. He called his best friend, Gideon Novak. "Hey, don't suppose you have any connections with West Island in the Caribbean?"

"Hello, Roman, so nice to hear from you. I'm doing well, thank you for asking."

Roman rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes, I'm being a prick. We both know that's not going to change. The island. It's important."

The slightest of pauses on the other end wouldn't have been there if he hadn't fucked things up royally six months ago. He and Gideon were mending that bridge, but rebuilding the trust was slow going. It didn't matter that Gideon understood where Roman was coming from—Roman had still almost cost his friend the love of his life, Lucy.

Finally, clicking sounded on the other side of the phone. "I haven't dealt with the owner specifically, but I've placed two separate clients with his company and they're both still working there."

It was better than he could have hoped. "I need one of the villas."

Another pause, longer this time. "Roman, if you need a vacation, book it yourself. I'm not a goddamn travel agent."

"No shit. This isn't pleasure—it's business. I need to find a guest arriving today and offer them a truly outstanding amount of money to reschedule. The resort won't give out that information to me, but if you have an in, they'll give it out to you."

"This better be *really* important."

It wasn't a question, but Roman had nothing to lose at this point. "Vitality. One of the businesses I've been trying to court for months is coming down to the deadline. If my client doesn't invest first, the other wolves circling will. They'll damage the integrity of this place and do irreparable harm to people's lives as a result."

"Sounds like you're playing the hero. A new look for you."

"Fuck no. I'm in it for the bottom line, and the bottom line is that with the right spin, this place could be making a significant amount of money, and the good press that comes from it being connected with a women's shelter would go a long way to opening doors to me that have previously been closed."

Gideon snorted. “Whatever you have to tell yourself. Give me thirty.”

“Thanks.”

His friend hung up without saying goodbye. Gideon would come through for him. The man was an unstoppable force, and Roman counted himself lucky to have him on his side.

Sure enough, thirty minutes later, a text came through with the reservation details—and the significant amount of money to be wired to the owner of the reservation he was co-opting. Roman wasted no time sending the money and booking the first flight out of New York.

He had seven days to track down Allie Landers and convince her to see things his way. How hard could it be on an island with only ten villas on it?