

## Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA

Chapter 120 The astonished looks on the faces of Javier and the guard were priceless. Dave's head went back and forth, not sure if he was hallucinating. "Oh, the happy couple. Am I glad to see you guys?" He sneered.

"It's good to see you too, Javier." Shawn echoed the sentiment. "We weren't sure if we were going to see you again." "Likewise," Dave replied, reflecting on the past weeks and winking at Catherine. "Hey, sis!" Javier and his companion stood frozen, like a deer-in-the-headlights look on each of their faces.

Shawn cautiously stepped toward the group. "It wasn't that difficult to find you, actually." He glared at Javier. "Shooting the man was a mistake, but leaving him alive was a bigger one. He gave us the final clue." Shawn smiled. "I have to say, though, that it was harder than it should have been to convince the local authorities that my historian needed to look at this ring and give them a lot of donations."

Dave stepped away from his kidnappers. "Thanks, gentlemen. It's been fun, but you guys are not welcome anywhere near my next exhibit." He smiled, "So, Shawn, sister? How did you know that the ring was the key?"

Richmond handed the ring to his brother-in-law. "It was too obvious when you zoom in on the images that we found from Leba." Realization washed over Dave's face. "Of course. I should have thought that you'll get the clue eventually. But is this real? I mean, you know?"

Shawn smiled and winked at him, "Yep, from Lek-Mraphi's basement, or shall I say ancient graveyard."

"It was there all along?"

"Oh yes," Shawn smirked.

Dave raised the ring to examine it more closely, admiring the precise detail. Every edge of it appeared as though it had been shaped by expert hands.

The bright diamond was massive and shiny, yet elegant. "It must go into the mouth, the diamond shall be in the small circle on its tongue." Dave walked back to the pole while his captors eyed him warily. Then, he motioned toward Catherine. "Sister, you look like s\*\*t... Are you OK? Or shall I kick Shawn for giving you a hard time?" Catherine rolled her eyes and smiled at her brother. "You b\*\*\*\*y owe me, Dave. You have me worried for days," she answered. "Yes, she is worried, but don't worry Dave, you'll be our best man again," Shawn added. Catherine just smiled back, obviously not interested in giving away any more details.

“Again?” “Oh yeah, this time it’s for b\*\*\*\*y real.” 1 “Did you tell her you love her?” Dave teased.

“I did.”

“About time.” He smirked.

Richmond turned his attention to Javier and the bewildered guard, “Now if you two boys don’t mind, please move out of the way.” He waved his gun in a motion indicating they should step to the left. “F\*\*k you, Shawn...” Javier said, with visible anger, his fury nearly consumed him.” And you, Catherine, wait until I make you scream. I will...” “Shut up, Javier!” Shawn grumbled as raw anger shot through him. “I will kill you if you ever lay your dirty hands on my wife.” He breathed in, then added, “But first, though, you are going to need to go ahead and drop those weapons that you’re carrying in your suits. And do it real slow. I have more than enough excuses to waste you two right now.” They complied, carefully reaching into their suits, and then dropping the guns to the ground.

“Good.” Now step away.”

The two shuffled sideways, moving away from the pistols. Javier never took his cold grey eyes off of Richmond. Even unarmed, the man’s gaze was menacing like he was willing to kill anytime as a muscle in his jaw twitched. With his free hand, Shawn reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone. Keeping the gun levelled at the two men, he held the device up to his face.

“Detective, we got them.”

“What do you mean you got them?” The man on the phone replied.

“We got Dave and the guys that kidnapped him. Well, it was my cousin, obviously. We are holding them at gunpoint as we speak.” “What’s your location?” Rodrigues’ voice sounded urgent. “At Wat Phra Kaew, in the basement.” “Okay, I’ll get the local authorities over there as quickly as I can. I’ll call my men. They’ll be on their way, maybe ten minutes at the utmost.” “You have men here in Bangkok?” Shawn was a little surprised at the cop’s persistence. “Yes, and like I said, I have a lot of questions for you. You won’t be able to answer them if you’re dead. And I thought you could use some backup.” “Don’t worry about us, detective. The situation is under control.” Dave had been busy taking a closer examination of the ring and the mouth of the lion’s statue. “I hope we don’t need to get it back out.” With that, he cautiously slipped the ring carefully into the mouth of the lion, slowly arranging it so that the massive diamond would be perfectly settled in its exact place. “Hell,” he

muttered. It was a perfect fit. With his index finger, Dave pushed the ring into the open hole. As the projectile went deeper, there was a click, then a few more until it was completely inside.

The enormous totem pole and the dirt beneath their feet began to tremble. Shawn shifted his gaze away from the two men for a split second, bracing himself by bending his knees slightly. His gun, though, remained pointing at them. The entire gang took a few steps back, unsure of what was going on. "Shawn, be careful!" Catherine yelled. "Don't worry, wife, I'm OK!" He shouted back

Slowly, the small rod in the dirt began to move. All of the rods on the left were sinking into the ground. They were rising on the right, but the pillar in the centre remained stationary. The strange incident lasted about a minute, but after the pillars stopped moving, their heights changed to a more staggered appearance, similar to a staircase. For a minute, all five witnesses remained motionless, staring at the peculiarity. "SO, Dave, what now?" Shawn finally broke the silence. Dave looked perplexed. "That should have been it. "Something's wrong." "Maybe you didn't do it right?" Catherine chimed in. "You are an artist, not a freaking treasure hunter, Dave." "Jesus, sister, you know me well enough to even just think about that." True, Catherine thought. He was her very own 'jack of all trade, master to none.'

"No. Catherine, I'm pretty sure that was it and that had to be the key." He looked around as if expecting some kind of sign from heaven to point the way to their goal. None came. "I don't understand."

The two prisoners stood still while the others tried to figure out what to do. Javier's eyes were fixed on Catherine like a rattlesnake on its prey. Shawn looked curiously at the scene. "Wife, keep an eye on those two."

"What is it?" Dave asked.

Tossing the gun to Dave, Shawn ignored his question for a moment and walked over to the totem that had lowered to where the top was only about four feet high. "They're steps," he finally answered. "The ancient keeper had a ritual for the new keeper. It was the final test they had to pass. They had to stand on top of a pole like one of these for the entire night. If they could accomplish this without falling off, they would be initiated." "How on earth did you know this?" "From my grandfather's bedtime story."

Realization came to Dave. "Of course. How did I forget that? I had guessed that from the dots earlier, it was an instruction. Not just some boring sayings."

"Beats me," Shawn said, hopping up onto the short log. He grinned cynically at his brother-in-law.

"Hope you know what you're doing, Shawn." Catherine shouted, "Be careful."

"I will, wife," Shawn shouted back. "It's only about five or six feet in between them. The problem isn't the jumping, though. It's the landing. The gradual escalation will not help either."

Shawn balanced himself on the two-foot-wide platform and jumped to the next one, making it appear simple enough. Dave returned to Catherine and their new prisoner below, still watching Shawn jump to the third pole.

He got to the centre pole very easily. He repeated the manoeuvre up to the fifth time. The platform was roughly ten feet up at this point, and each jump became riskier. Thinking ahead, the final leap would be to a height of about twenty feet, where the hazard would be broken bones or worse. He attempted to remove the terror from his head, but it remained as he made the next two leaps. On the sixth, his lack of focus nearly cost him as he cut the distance by roughly a foot. His fingers gripped the stone's front lip tightly, and his feet hung below. In case he fell, Dave moved quickly to get below him. "F\*\*k it ... careful, Shawn!"

Shawn hung above the dirt, kicking his legs in an attempt to wriggle his way up, struggling to keep his grasp on the top. He located the nose of a wolf's face protruding out of the front of the tall exterior with his right foot and used it to hold himself as he made his way onto the deck.

As Shawn lifted himself and prepared for the final jump, his teammates breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm fine," he said confidently. "I just lost my focus for a second there."

For a split second, he let his eyes scan the surroundings, expecting that the location would be disclosed from his current vantage point. It wasn't the case. So, with anxiety, he approached the pole's extreme edge. He was astonished by how hot his legs were at this time. Shawn was proud of the fact that he trained regularly and had a high level of endurance for physical activities. This routine has to have involved him working out body areas he wasn't used to using.

Shawn launched himself across the abyss with every ounce of leg power he could summon. Adrenaline must have taken control this time because he nearly overshot the thing, landing on the very rear edge and swinging his arms like a gymnast on a balance beam to keep from falling over. "Shawn, be cautious." Catherine's yells rang out in the dimly lighted cavern.

He returned his weight to the centre of the beam and glanced out across the landscape. He could see rolling forests in front of him. He couldn't help but be impressed at how such a modest height could improve one's perspective.

Shawn whirled around, his gaze travelling across the horizon.

"Did you notice anything?" Dave yelled from below.

"The road is just a collection of forests... nothing in here!" Then his gaze was drawn to something. "Wait a second. There must be something." He pointed over to what appeared to the group at the bottom to be nothing more than a dense clump of trees.

“What is it?”

“I don’t think you can see it from down there. But I see another statue, sticking up from the trees on that small hill, over in that direction.”

Shawn had found it. Dave stood on his tiptoes in an attempt to locate it.

Catherine, too, moved a few steps closer to the column of limestone faces to see what Shawn was pointing to.

She pulled her gaze away from Javier and the flat top for a split second to look towards the forest. Javier only needed a split second to take the hidden rifle from his back and fire three fast shots.

Catherine faltered and lost her gun when one of the bullets struck her, sending her tumbling backwards and collapsing to the ground in horror. “Catherine!” exclaimed Dave.

Javier had swung forward and caught Catherine around the neck, simply putting the weapon to her head as blood gushed from her shoulder wound.

Dave stood there powerless. He stood still, thoroughly taken aback by what had just happened.

“Put down the weapon, Brown. Don’t do anything stupid because I might still need you.” Shawn was hunched down in his position now, watching the action below. Catherine was still down, her clothing soaked in dripping blood. “Catherine!” Shawn yelled. “If you’d be so kind as to join us now, cousin.” Javier gestured for him to walk back the way he’d come.

Going down was considerably easier than jumping up, and Shawn was back on the ground in less than a minute. The enormous Russian had grabbed his gun and was now aiming it at Richmond

To say Shawn was frustrated was an understatement. He’d forgotten the most important guidelines of his training. Always search a detainee for more weapons. They were all back to square one now. Worse, Catherine was now in jeopardy. “Javier...leave her alone. Get her out of here,” he demanded. “She needs help.”

She squirmed against Javier’s hands, her eyes filled with horror.

“Now, now,” Javier said quietly. “Don’t fight, dear. I’d rather not have to harm you, my dear because I have to enjoy you first. You owe me that much, little one.”

Shawn’s request went unanswered.

She was unable to form the sharp words she desired to utter. Javier's vice-like grasp around her throat pretty much allowed her to breathe as her mind began to haze.

"Let her go! She is losing too much blood." Dave shouted this time. "She has nothing to do with this! The cops are on their way. What are you going to do? It's over!"

Javier replied with a wicked grin. "I believe we had better hurry then." He pointed his revolver at the location Shawn had indicated a few minutes ago. "Now! Or I murder her right now! You will obey me or she will die!"

Dave and Shawn had no other option. For a split second, their eyes were locked, frantic and befuddled. Then they began trekking into the woodland, Shawn leading the way. Javier had withdrawn his arm from around Catherine's neck and pushed her to move in front of him, holding the gun at the small of her back.

"How are we going to proceed, Shawn?" Dave inquired. His voice sounded childish and scared for Catherine's life. "She is bleeding..." "I'm not sure, we just need some extra time to lure Javier," Shawn whispered as they waded into the dense grass, he looked around, thinking the cops were on their way. "However, we're running out of time. Catherine is at risk of haemorrhaging."

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### **Chapter 121**

Javier forced the group to walk quickly through the forest. He had overheard Shawn's discussion with the authorities, so time, he understood, was running out. With frantic haste bordering on obsession, he hiked through the undergrowth. He growled and turned his head left and right every time a twig broke under someone's foot. The Russian, too, looked nervous, making sure he covered a 360-degree area with his pistol as he whirled it around wildly.

Shawn's thoughts drifted to Catherine. He wished that the police would come fast enough to get her medical treatment. The wound hadn't looked good, and his wife must have lost a tremendous amount of blood in a short amount of time. After a few more moments of marching through the trees, the group entered what Shawn had seen earlier.

Dave stared at one of the most outstanding Buddha shrines he had ever seen. Loose ground encircled it, indicating that the enormous thing had been largely concealed and buried, if not totally underground for hundreds of years. So this was why the Lek-Mraphi residence was renovated, and they made rumours about moving the golden Buddha and its vast treasure to Europe, and those many fake chambers in Leba were made to make the story believable. Thinking about it, Dave realised how smart the plan was. The plan was to lure the hunters into thinking about the impossibility of keeping it here. It

was a smart move to hide it in plain sight. The keepers had made sure that it was hidden well, though

The forests had been somewhat flat up until they got to that point. There, the forest ground gave rise to a tiny hill with the immense statue pole at its base. Just beyond it, at the foot of the hillside, gaped an opening to a cave. Javier motioned towards the entrance, "Quickly, inside!" The three hostages heeded the warning and swiftly scurried over to the entrance. It was a rift about six feet high and five feet wide. A wad of grass and mud lay next to it, insinuating the evidence that the passageway had been hidden for centuries. Javier removed a pen-sized military flashlight from a jeans pocket. The giant Russian did the same. "Go on. Faster or Catherine will be dead." He said and pushed the bleeding woman onto Shawn's side. That made him growl. "One wrong move, cousin... one wrong move and you will be a widow," Javier smirked.

"Catherine, are you-" Shawn halted when Javier's gun pointed to her head. "Move, Shawn, move f\*\*\*\*\*g now, and don't look back!"

"But she is weak. She needs my-"

"Help her and she is dead." To make his point, Javier fired the gun at her feet, which made Catherine scream.

"Ok! Stop scaring her, a\*\*\*\*\*e!"

Catherine wanted to cry and be done with the pain, but she knew she just couldn't give up yet. Moving without pain, without aches, was just one thing she used to take for granted. Today

her muscles feel as though they have been flash-burned with acid from the inside-just sufficient to make them move like the living cells have been replaced by ageing rubber bands, thick and twisted, Plus, her vision became blurry by the minute. The pain in her shoulder was getting worse. The ache was dull as if some lazy torturer was standing right behind me, only applying enough pressure to be an annoyance. It sits there, just to the side of the right shoulder blade, toward the spine. She imagined herself lying on a large glass marble, and while it might be pleasant at first, it would quickly become painful. "Shawn, I'm fine. Just walk." She murmured under her breath, too weak to shout at her captors, who kept their guns on her head.

Shawn swallowed his anger. He thought it was like how it was a fire-seed and forgot to drink something cool, and so it grew in his belly until it came out as hot as any dragon had ever flamed. He wanted to kill Javier. His fury smouldered like molten lava. "Do not hurt her or I swear..."

"Shut up and walk faster," Javier grumbled.

Dave turned around at the edge of the dark corridor. "Are we supposed to just go on through the dark?"

Javier replied with a fake pitying grin and tossed him the small light. "Lucky for you, I brought an extra. Now, move, boy!" He flicked the gun, herding Shawn and the others into the darkness.

Dave led the way in with Shawn just behind, followed by the stumpy Russian, then Catherine and Javier. There were cobwebs everywhere, and it was a struggle just to retain sanity while brushing them away every five or six feet. Apparently, the spiders that had spun them had long since died or given up trying to catch anything in the ancient territory. The walls of the walkway were smoothly carved stone, cut with laser precision. Overhead, the awning was also a flawlessly scored surface. The awed stillness shattered as they moved further underground. "Do you realise what we are seeing? No one has been inside this hall for maybe a hundred years. We are the first humans to set foot here in centuries."

"I'm not sure about that. My grandfather might have been here..., but I'm not sure. It looks undisturbed." Shawn replied. "Yeah," Dave responded, only half interested. The current situation overwhelmed his admiration of the surroundings.

The foyer came to a nook and whirled ninety degrees to the left, sloping down somewhat steeply. After about 15 feet, the same turn happened again, and the path went on below almost like a spiral staircase without steps.

After turning left numerous times and plummeting deeper into the dirt, the group came to a point where they could go no further. In front of them stood an embankment made from the same stone as the rest of the corridor. The variation was that the other embankments had no identifying markings. This one did.

Runic symbols and markings of remarkable detail jumped out from the solid gemstone canvas before them. There was no mistaking the inscriptions' heritage. Various Thai deities,

creatures, symbols, and other characters were easily recognizable, even for the most amateur of chroniclers.

"Wow! This is amazing," Dave whispered.

Shawn reached out slowly so the two men with guns wouldn't freak out. He traced the outline of a statue that he'd never seen before. It was a picture of some kind of small oval object, with diagrams of civilization and beasts surrounding it

"That must be one of the alien spaceships that brought the Europeans over here to Thailand." Dave teased. Javier looked at him wide-eyed. "Shut up, Brown." "Looks like they brought a bunch of gold with them. Probably as a payment."



"That would make sense," Shawn agreed. Then he whirled his attention to two anomalies on either side of the hallway.

Carved into the boulder were two sunken areas. Within each vacant seat sat a stone lion, the same lion at the entrance. The two beasts faced each other from across the aisle, and both had a small description below them. Javier was obviously irritated by their break in progress. "Brown... What the f\*\*k are you doing? Where the hell is the chamber? Where is the golden Buddha?" "H-he always likes this?" Dave jerked his thumb towards Javier. "You have no idea," Shawn chuckled, despite himself. "He has been like that since kindergarten. Believe me, he is that bitter." "Shut up, Shawn," Javier shouted. "I'm glad you two are comfortable with the fact that you are about to die." Javier threatened. Shawn's smile disappeared for a moment as he turned to face his cousin's deadly eyes. Obviously tired of the little trip down memory lane, Javier forced the pistol barrel to the back of Catherine's head.

Both the two faces turned somber. "Don't you dare, Javier?" Shawn was enraged.

"Try me, cousin, dear. Try and we'll see."

Dave spoke up. "Alright. Alright. Obviously, we can't just move this wall. It's got to be like two or three tons, easy." His eyes scanned the smooth surface that made Javier curious.

"What do these markings say? Can you translate it?" Javier urged and pushed Catherine to Shawn's side as the latter caught her in time before her face met the floor. He was glad to see he was no longer in alarm, Shawn turned to her, "Sweetheart, are you OK?" "I'm fine... just a little dizzy," Catherine replied as she sat on the corner. "I need to rest. This wound is small but... I'm losing blood." "Here." Shawn took a handkerchief from his pocket and said, "Let me help you with the tourniquet."

"Thanks."

Ignoring the couple, Javier yelled. "Now, Brown! Tell me something."

"Nothing much! That is just a... well, some miracles and sayings of the Buddha. Basically, it's a story of how the people came here to worship their many gods. Apparently, there was one man who they believed to be some kind of a redeemer for their civilization, someone who would take them to a new land."

"Sounds like the Buddha." The Russian finally spoke up. "Sort of like that. But this tale predates that one. These drawings are from a much earlier kingdom." He paused for a moment, thinking.

"I wonder what they wanted to get away from?" Shawn said from behind them.

“Yeah,” Dave continued. “You can tell from the formation of the images, the lines, the way they have been etched, that these are some of the more historical forms of writing. Very old. Not just 14th-century kinds of old, but older than that.” “You see,” he went on, “eventually, this one went to a more abbreviated form of writing. Odd, almost like the Indian...thingy.”

“Make sense,” Shawn said. “As far as I can remember. Thailand’s archaeological documentation implies an extensive human settlement history since the 4th century. The region also hosted several indigenous Austroasiatic-speaking and Malayo-Sumbawan speaking civilisations.” “Really?”

“Yes, however, little is known about Thailand before the 13th century, as the literary and concrete sources are scarce and most of the knowledge about this period is gleaned from archaeological evidence. Similar to other regions in Southeast Asia, Thailand was heavily influenced by the culture and religions of India, starting with the Kingdom of Funan around the first century until the Khmer Empire.”

“Hmm,” Dave nodded his head as he kept reading the wall. The Russian’s attention had been diverted by the bat on the left wall. His right hand held the gun, but the man’s curiosity led his left hand to the smooth stone of the carving’s head.

He was just about to feel it when Shawn yelled, “Stop!”

The massive man yanked his hand back, startled.

“Don’t touch anything,” Shawn ordered. “There is a riddle here. I think this whole place might be booby trapped.”

“You are watching too much Indiana Jones here, Shawn.” Javier barked, yet cast the Russian a warning glance.

“We can’t risk it. So we need to be careful.” Shawn explained. “Take care, my a\*s. I need my gold and that is all that matters.”

“Guys, stop... look,” Dave muttered, his excitement palpable. “It says, ‘To find the way, the lion will guide you. Death will bring forward the one who retreats. The other shall lead you safely.’”

“Now, tell me Richmond, what the hell is it supposed to mean?” Javier roared.

“Beats me!”

“Talk or I will kill your wife.” He said and pointed his gun at Catherine’s head.

She rolled her eyes and murmured something. Somehow, Shawn was amazed at how relaxed she was.

Shawn said sarcastically, “Ok” “That seems simple enough. To move the wall, we have to do something with one of these lions.” He looked at one and then the other.

“Yeah, but if we choose the wrong one, we may not get out of here alive,” Dave added.

“How do you know which lion? They look the same to me.” Catherine asked.

“I’m not sure, sis. But let’s guess...” Dave replied, scratching his head. “The one who returns... I wonder what that means.

“It must have something to do with the writing beneath the lion’s head. But the language is different from that on the wall.” As Dave pondered the problem.

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### Chapter 122

“Brown, read it, now!” Javier butted in and began pointing the gun toward them.

“I don’t know-how, it’s quite odd. Well, one wrong move and well, it’s our end.”

Javier watched silently off to the side, keeping his gun on the hostages.

“We have to assume that this one here is another clue or a warning.” “Dave,” he said, pointing to the lion’s head on his left. We have to choose carefully. However, look at this, Shawn.” He added and pointed to the right one, “This one here, look... This one looks like the one in Lek Mraphi’s home, almost similar.” Shawn nodded. “Oh, yes... almost and the word on that one matches the left. But that is only half a guess. But a careless guess is risky.” “So which one?”

“I’m not sure.” Shawn stepped across the small space to the other lion and turned his head when Catherine began coughing. “Almost there, wife...” then he turned his attention back to the lion. “Both of the lions look the same.”

Then he leaned down to look at something that appeared to be clutched in the lion’s ears.” Looks like some kind of hole. This one has a sort of earring sort of hole, so small it’s almost unrecognizable.”

“That’s it!” Dave exclaimed.

“What’s it?”

“See, the two are identical, but this one is different. Give and take, I choose this one.” Dave knelt at the foot of the lion’s ears and examined them carefully. He reached around the lion’s head with both hands and pulled the ear. The sculpture bowed forward due to the force of Dave’s hands. As the massive stone wall began to rise slowly, a loud

grinding sound reverberated through the ancient hallway, and the dusty floor underneath them trembled violently. The sight of the hefty door being lifted attracted the attention of all five visitors. Even Javier seemed taken aback by the strength that must have massive weight.

As the big stone's journey ended at the top of the doorway, a shitload of dust floated in the air. Javier motioned for the detainees to move to the other side. Beyond the debris cloud in front of them, more blackness awaited them.

Shawn crossed the threshold with caution, hoping there weren't any strange booby traps like he'd seen in so many movies. He'd only come across a handful of things like it in his expertise. However, most of the precautions put in place thousands of years ago to keep invaders out have long since decayed or lost their usefulness. Even so, it's better to be cautious than sorry.

"Move," Javier insisted, nodding.

"We must exercise extreme caution here. "You don't want to end up with a shot in your eye or whatever," Shawn joked.

The comment didn't bother Javier, but the Russian peered about, his eyes filling with paranoia.

When Catherine spoke out, they were all securely on the other side of the wall. "Can you guys smell it?"

"Yeah," Dave said. "It has the odour of some kind of gas."

The Russian's head raced from left to right, up and down, panic on his face. It was clear that the man did not feel at ease in such a remote location. It didn't help that they didn't know what was waiting for them down there.

"Does anyone have a match?" Shawn made the request.

"Are you going to light a match down here?" You simply stated that you smelled gas. "Are we just going to blow ourselves up?"

Shawn gave her a friendly smile. "There will be no casualties." His light illuminated a torch hanging on the wall in a holder made of the same rock as the wall. "Who would put a light there if something was about to blow up?" She assumed he had a point. Javier swung a tiny book of matches at him, striking him in the chest. Shawn caught it from the air before it hit the ground.

The wrapped clothes on the bit of timber were blazing fiercely a few moments later. Shawn pocketed the matches and handed the flashlight to Dave, assuming the old man wouldn't mind. He deliberately took a few more steps ahead before coming to a halt.

The hallway they'd been in for the previous 10 minutes opened up into a massive, square chamber. The single piece of furniture in the space was a pedestal in the centre, rising up from an indented lower floor.

The most striking aspect of the chamber, though, was not what stood in the midst of it. It was because the chamber was barren.

"Looking for the Buddha?" A familiar female voice appeared from behind them, and then they all fell to their knees.

Dart... Shawn thought before his eyes closed into the darkness.

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An hour later, the skin on Shawn's wrists stung from the plastic zip ties digging in, rubbing the flesh raw in seconds.

Elizabeth Grunt's men shoved him down the last two steps, and he stumbled forward into a cool, dry chamber. He tripped in the darkness, lost his footing, and crashed hard onto the floor, his shoulder hitting with a painful thud. He was lucky that he didn't hit his head or face. Still, he grimaced from the impact. Dirt, definitely dirt and dust, or worse, ancient bones.

His first instinct was to make a snappy comment that would have, in all likelihood, pissed off the b\*\*\*h and his men and resulted in some kind of threat or punishment, but due to the overwhelming confusion of the situation and the pain in his shoulder, he kept his mouth shut, thinking better of it until he could get a handle on things.

"Catherine?" He grumbled under his breath.

"Looking for your wife, sir?"

"Eddie?" He wriggled around, "How?" he gaped and tried to sit up, but another man in black stepped over to him and dangled a pistol over his head, letting the barrel waver back and forth, not that Shawn could see it.

Suddenly, the hood over his head was ripped away. He blinked furiously for several seconds, trying to acclimate to the bright lights in this new place. His eyes darted

around, taking in the setting. "Why, why did you betray me, Eddie." He asked. The betrayal stank like acid rain on his stomach,

"It is a matter of choice, Mr. Richmond. And I don't have to explain it to you." His old butler said with a smirk and kissed Elizabeth's lips, which made Shawn grimace, "Seriously, Eddie?"

He did not see it coming. Elizabeth and Eddie? all along?

Several lights were dangling from various places in a cracked ceiling. The air was dusty with a smell of the past, such as he'd detected in abandoned or condemned buildings, dilapidated structures, and sheds that hadn't been used in a long time. As the blurriness in his vision began to subside, Shawn took in his surroundings, becoming quickly aware of where they were and who was there.

They were still in the chamber, but there was no sign of Catherine and Dave, nor Javier, nor the Russian.

"Where are they?" He demanded.

"Javier and his men are dead."

"I'm not asking about them, b\*\*\*h!" Shawn shouted which earned him a slap on his left cheek.

"Stupid of you to say that, Shawn! Stupid," Another slap. Elizabeth grinned and motioned to his two companions.

Dave, and Catherine were on their knees, lined up next to the wall to Shawn's left. Two of Elizabeth's men were standing guard over them with weapons ready to cut them down at a moment's notice if the prisoners tried anything foolish. Shawn wondered about the wisdom of firing the weapons in this place. The guns were equipped with silencers, but even with those attached, it could get loud in a room surrounded by ancient stone block walls. Not only that, a stray shot could ricochet dangerously around the room and hit an unintended target. Unlikely, but still a thought.

Shawn knew that her men were highly trained, just as Eddie was. He recognised their killer's face just like his butler when he first met him. They were, in many cases, the front line of defence-and often, offence-for the assassin. It was preferable to use their talents and skill sets as opposed to waging an all-out war, especially when the latter could result in financial catastrophe for the burgeoning employer.

A figure in the corner caught Shawn's eye. It was a man dressed in black, like the others, but in this case, a business suit. Shawn knew him from somewhere, he had seen the man before. Catherine, with her weak demeanour, gasped. "Hugh?" She gaped. "How? Why?"

The man she called Hugh was the same man was dating, her yoga instructor.

manter 122

“Hello, Catherine, fancy meeting you here?” He smirked, and Shawn knew he was clearly the one in charge of this operation, if not the director itself. He doubted the latter could be true. Someone of that demeanour wouldn’t be out here in the field dealing with a few hunters looking for an ancient artefact. Or would they? Catherine shook her head. “How?”

“Come on, Catherine... it’s so easy to guess, can’t you see the resemblance?” He motioned to Elizabeth, “Or are you that stupid?” Again, Catherine gasped.

“Oh, there you get it... Well, she is my sister...” He smirked. “Can you see it now? You are just a p\*\*n sweetheart.” Hugh smiled and said, “By the way, I’m surely not gay.”

“But!”

“Enough!” Elizabeth’s shouts echoed through the chamber.

The more strange things happen in this case, the more Shawn’s belief that the fight is not over yet with finding the chamber itself.

Shawn sighed. The mere fact that Elizabeth was here was proof enough that even they believed. Someone far more powerful than Alfonso was behind this.

## **Billionaire’s Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA**

Chapter 123 Shawn remained on Hugh’s side, staring at the man he figured to be the one calling the shots. In his mind, he chuckled at the pun. He hoped whoever he was wouldn’t actually call for shots. Dying in an ancient chamber somewhere in Thailand wasn’t what he had planned for this mission.

Hugh gave a nod, and a firm hand grasped Shawn’s by the shirt and hauled him up, propping him on his knees.

The smart a\*s in him couldn’t be held back any longer. He turned his head and looked at the man who’d picked him up, most likely the guy who’d shoved him down the hole below. “Hey! You have to improve your trash. Let that be a lesson to you. Don’t shove people downstairs unless you’re going to help them up after.” The man appeared shocked by the statement but mumbled nothing, taking a step back and pointing his gun at Shawn’s head.

“Good to see your sense of humour is still on point, Shawn,” Elizabeth spoke in a cool tone, but it wasn’t the sound of her voice that frightened Shawn. It was the idea that she

knew their mission here. He realised that she had been on their trail from the very start and Eddie was feeding her information.

Elizabeth stepped forward, hands folded behind her back. From Shawn's vantage point, it was difficult to tell any exit point. Her silky blond hair was pulled back into a tight bun. She wore matching black glasses, though they could have been just for appearances, so thin were the lenses. She looked rather professional, not the w\*\*\*e he once dated.

She stopped three feet away from him and looked down.

Dave and Catherine were watching from the other side of the room. Shawn stole a glance at them. None of them appeared to have been tortured-not yet, at least, but Catherine looked exhausted. That would happen before long, though, which meant he needed to find a way out of this mess. Elizabeth's men weren't the kind to make mistakes.

Catherine looked at him, knowing that he was thinking about any exit as she looked at the goons. She'd had a run-in with the likes of them once before when Javier trained her. They were both after the same target, luckily, but Catherine had noted the significant methods used by the other aid. The man had been violent and cunning, and when it came to finishing the job, she'd taken the shot when she had to without a second thought. It had always bothered her a little that she hadn't been the one to take out the target. That was the competitive side of her. Now, she didn't care. In fact, she was glad she hadn't done it. One more soul haunting the notches on her belt was something she didn't need, no matter how wretched a person they might have been. But Elizabeth was a different matter. She loathed the b\*\*\*h so much that it hurt. The painful memory of losing her child never left her. Her anger rushed through her. Anger from the very depth of her heart overpowered her. She wanted nothing but to kill her.

"If only you listened to me before, dear, but anyway, look at you and your dumb wife? You are at my mercy." She smiled seductively and waved a hand around in a twirl before placing it back with the other behind her waist. "But of course, I need the Buddha more than anything else."

"For what?!" Shawn shouted, "Look around you! This chamber is empty! There is nothing here."

"Oh, really? Is that what you think?" "There are no such things as crazy questions, Elizabeth," Dave said with a giggle. "Stupid people who ask questions, sure, but no crazy questions." Shawn groaned a laugh. "Yeah, he's right. My bad." Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, and he could tell the woman was tempted to slap him. Shawn always dealt with life-or-death situations like this one in the only way he knew how: with laughter. That old saying about having to laugh so you won't cry has been a valuable tool throughout the years. "Shut up, you two!" She grumbled, clearly annoyed, coherently, and with more than enough menace in her tone to get the point across that she wasn't amused. "We've all had lots of jobs throughout our lives," she said. "You



never know who did what. But I know that millions of people will die soon, and I need the Buddha to do just that.”

Eddie, from behind Dave and Catherine, smirked and nodded to Elizabeth as if telling her to continue to let the world know about their diabolical plan.

“What do you mean, die?” Catherine muttered, clearly interested in knowing more.

“Ah...the b\*\*\*h is interested, but well... I know, there is no harm if I tell you everything.” She said and began pacing. “Whatever was inside the golden Buddha was nothing but a formula, the last ingredients for my ancient explosive weapon that could kill millions in one day.” She smirked, amused by their reaction. “...and poison the air for years.”

The captives gasped in unison. “Ah, what?!” Catherine asked, clearly confused. “I thought s-sir Anthony was looking for an a -answer about... about.”

“God? Knowledge from beyond?” Elizabeth’s laughter echoed in the chamber. “Stupid of you to believe him, of course, it was about that knowledge, well...the ancients called it the perfect formula for death, so maybe the old man wasn’t that far from the truth.”

“Oh, God!” Catherine murmured.

“Oh, hell indeed,” she paused and looked at Hugh, who nodded, “but let me tell you something: I am one of the last keepers, and the Grunt was the true keeper of the Buddha. Back a long time ago, Grunt trusted the Richmond family so much that he shared his secret with them, but look what it got him? It was claimed by Richmond. My ancestor was betrayed. Richmond ruined our calling. They perfected a plan to hide the Golden Buddha and then stole the treasure. Everything. They created a perfect thief, a perfect lure, and a perfect story to convince everyone that the chamber was in Europe. They hired Lek-Mraphi and even the Thai government; they convinced them that the Richmonds were the keepers, but it was all a big lie! A colossal betrayal.” Elizabeth inhaled deeply and turned to face Shawn. Hugh nodded as if telling her to continue

“Your grandfather was aware of it. He was well-informed, which is why the old man despised

me so much. But, of course, he thought I was just a w\*\*\*e, foolish, and only interested in your money, so he let me into your life to amuse himself. He didn’t even expect Hugh to be there; he was perfectly placed in Catherine’s apartment because she works for you. He gathered data from her, interfered with her phone, and even installed a camera in her room to listen in on everything about your company, but you, of course, You, being as naive and innocent from Anthony’s deception, Hugh never got anything and concluded that you didn’t know anything about your grandfather’s past,” she paused and pointed to Shawn. “But everything changed when you married Catherine. Then Anthony died, and our plan was restarted, so we arranged everything.” “Everything!” When Catherine screamed, Shawn whispered and looked at her. “You, b\*\*\*h! You

murdered my child!" Catherine screamed as rage overtook her. "Oh, dear, I did you a favour, at least your kiddo won't suffer from the poisonous gas in the air when I bomb London... I made the best decision for your child. Welcome!" . "You're evil!" As rage overtook her, she yelled. "Me? Oh, so as Anthony, may his soul rot in hell."

Dave intruded, "What do you want with us? Why were your men following us? If you know where the Buddha is?"

"That, Mr. Brown, is a question best answered by someone else." Catherine scrunched her forehead, caught off guard by the answer. Did that mean she and Hugh weren't the ones in charge of this little operation? A door opened directly in front of Shawn, and another figure marched in. The woman didn't have her hands tied, though she was clearly a prisoner like the rest of them. "Doctor Lanna?" Catherine spoke quickly. Her voice was full of both relief and concern. "What are you doing here?"

Shawn frowned. "Dr. Roundwater?" The woman nodded. "Yes." He turned to Catherine. "Hello, my dear." There was sadness in her voice. "What is going on?" Catherine demanded. "Why did you take her, Elizabeth?" The b\*\*\*h in the black suit snorted a derisive laugh. "We didn't take her," she said. "She came to us."

## **Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA**

Chapter 124 "What are you talking about?" Catherine roared. "Let us go! Let her go!" One of the guards moved closer to her, brandishing his weapon. She quickly quieted down. Dr. Lanna drew a deep breath and sighed. "They didn't take me, Catherine," she said. "Not initially, at least," she added with a degree of venom. "I went to them for help." "Why on earth would you do that?" Shawn asked. The old woman sighed.

Next, to Dave, Catherine was staring down at the nearest gunman, probing him for a weakness that was not easily revealed. Dr. Lanna turned to Elizabeth. "Is this really necessary?" She motioned to the others. "They're not going anywhere. You took their weapons. They are here to help me find the Buddha." "Oh, doctor, believe me, they killed my men before in Scotland. They can kill again," the woman said.

"What?" Shawn wrinkled his forehead.

"My men in Scotland, the one you threw in the window," Elizabeth rolled her eyes as Catherine furrowed her brow in confusion then nodded as if remembering what happened back then.

"So it was your man?"

"Of course!"

"B\*\*\*h! He threw himself!" Shawn shouted.

“Shut up, Richmond.” Elizabeth said and turned to Dr. Lanna, “By all rights, I should execute all three of them. Maybe even you, doctor. So far, you’ve presented no help for what you claim.

“Help?” Shawn asked. “What sort of help? What is this about?” Dr. Lanna took a swallow. “I’m sure this is all very confusing.” “You’re right, madam. It is!” Catherine shouted. “I thought you were one of the good guys. Instead, I found out you went to the b\*\*\*h for help!”

The old woman put up both hands and lowered them repeatedly to get her to calm down. “I know how it looks. Please, just listen.”

“You know how it looks? Because it looks like you sold us out, Doctor.” Shawn grumbled. “I didn’t sell you out!” She raised her voice to overcome him. “I found the clue to where the chamber is before you even came here in Thailand.” “So you sold us out?”

“No,” the doctor shook his head, “I-1... help Elizabeth f-for you not to find out about your ancestor’s past. I don’t want you to hate your g-grandfather...”

“Enough with the drama! Where is it?” Hugh demanded loudly. “Where is the Buddha?” He grabbed Dave by the shirt and pressed the gun deep into the skin underneath his jaw. “I don’t know,” Dave’s voice stammered. “This should be it.” Something in his eyes said that he was telling the truth.

Hugh released the gun from his hostage’s neck and carelessly pushed him away. “Is this it, Richmond? Is this your golden chamber?” Hugh shouted and went to Catherine, “Find it or so help me God, she is dead or worse, I am going to let her bleed to death.” The man added and pushed Catherine’s wound on her shoulder as she screamed from the pain.

“Enough! Bullshit! Enough!” Shawn yelled back, his hands trembling from anger. “You’d better look for it, Dave, or else.” He halted as fear echoed his eyes. “Of course I know that, Shawn!” Dave grumbled back as another slap went to Catherine’s cheek “Good, find my Budda!” Dave bit his lips, as he almost shook with fury. “I don’t know where the Buddha is. Maybe someone beat us to it. It should be right here. Let’s just look around. If we are lucky, we might find a clue as to where it went.”

Dr. Lanna lowered her head and approached Elizabeth, whispering something into her ear that caused the woman to raise an eyebrow.

Shawn stepped down into the centre of the room, lowering his light to get a better look at the pedestal. It was a simple design: a perfect, rectangular, stone dais. Unlike the blank walls surrounding it, the plinth was covered in symbols, not unlike what they had just seen on the colossal door a few moments ago. As Shawn drew closer and took a deep breath, he had to find it or else, he mentally shook his head. He doesn’t want

anything to happen to Catherine. He surveyed the dais and noticed an object resting on the top of the platform. His eyes widened in realization.

“Dave, look.” His voice was firm, trying to contain the excitement. You might want to come take a look at this.

“Is that what I think it is?” He looked at Elizabeth for approval. She nodded her head, and he went to Shawn. He blurted, “F\*\*k! Is that?” nearly missing the step down into the lower part of the chamber.

“Yeah, I think so.” “What is it?” Hugh asked. Clearly curious. They both stare at a stone disc of nearly identical size to the diamond on the ring. A symbol was lying on one side, a picture of an odd-looking lion carved into it. Both men looked at each other quizzically, unsure what to make of the piece. Hugh and Eddie ushered Elizabeth over to where Dave and Shawn were standing. “What is it?”

“I think it’s the clue to the next chamber,” Dave replied.

“Another chamber?” Elizabeth asked. “unbelievable.”

“Yes,” Shawn replied and looked at Catherine, who seemed almost unconscious now.

“But where is the Buddha?” Hugh had had enough of the games and riddles. “This was supposed to be a Buddha’s chamber. Not an empty one!” His voice echoed off of the solid walls.

Buddha is... missing...” He smirked at the obvious, but wanted nothing more than to p\*\*s the gay tard. While he spoke, his right hand reached over and grasped the stone disc, lifting it off of the podium.

As soon as Dave had lifted the weight, the ground beneath them started vibrating. Hugh and his cohort braced themselves by bending their knees and putting their arms out to their sides. “Catherine!” Shawn shouted in a hopeless tone as he grabbed Dave’s wrist and looked quickly at where the stone had just been resting a moment before. A small button protruded from the centre of the pedestal. “Not good,” Shawn said quickly. As he did, the grinding sound of stone on stone filled the room as the floor began slowly rising towards the ceiling. “Return it, Brown! Now!” Shawn yelled above the din.

Dave quickly obliged, comprehending what was going on. He carefully replaced the disc on top of the stand. The floor stopped moving as expected. It was roughly three feet closer to the ceiling now. “F\*\*k that was close.” “Don’t do that again,” Catherine said quietly as he gave Shawn a small smile as if telling him that she was OK. Shawn swallowed a lump. Hugh and the others nervously peered around, fearful that the floor might start rising up again, and if it did, they would jump back to the main floor, where it was safe. “Stop being a jerk, Brown!” Hugh yelled back Dave and Shawn were confused as they looked at the strange symbols on the stone cube in front of them.

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“It’s always a good idea to read the directions before activating a hundred-year-old death trap,” Dave said, casting a sidelong glance at Shawn. “There has to be some sort of weight and counterweight system. Don’t you agree?”. Shawn let out a short snort. “Yeah, this appears to be a narrative of some type.” He stroked the stone with his finger. “We should probably get out of here!” Dave nodded. But Shawn shifted to the other side of the platform. “Some sort of ring-like object.” He muttered and scanned the platform again, “We need to attach it to this object with the other stone.”

Dave took a step back to see what his friend had discovered. The stone had been carved with a two-inch-deep circle. “Do you think we could use anything like... a ring?” “Do you mean this?” Elizabeth growled and showed them the ring. The two nodded, puzzled

as to how she had gotten it in the first place. “The fake wedding ring from my grandfather, or maybe not fake, but a twin!” said Shawn under his breath. Elizabeth slowly went to their side and gave him the ring, “Don’t try f\*\*\*\*\*g the hell out of me, Shawn, or your wife... well, you know what will happen to her.” She growled and turned back to where she was standing earlier, thanking the doctor for her tip.

Shawn crouched down to one knee. The circular indentation in the stone podium mirrored the carving of the two lions, except that the two lions were raised, not indented like on the entrance. Quickly, he removed the ring from the velvet box and slid the stone into place and pressed it down firmly. Somewhere in the cavern, there were a few clicks and then silence. Nothing happened.

## **Billionaire’s Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA**

Chapter 125 “What is the issue now?” Hugh demanded, very irritably. Ignoring the query, Shawn removed the genuine ring from his pocket and placed it on top of its duplicate to give it more weight. The ground began to tremble again, and the ancient stones’ grinding sound resumed at full volume. Instead of ascending, the ground began to descend this time.

“Oh, my b\*\*\*\*y hell... I hope this isn’t the end of us, Shawn; I want to see more of the world and its wonders!” As the massive apparatus continued to glide downward, Dave shouted above the din.

“Good!” Hugh and Elizabeth looked at each other, then smirked, while Eddie looked worried. Shawn was suspicious, but he was eager to see where the lift would take them. As they sank into a shaft cut neatly into the sandstone, the ground above was gone. Then, along the border of the moving surface, a gap appeared, growing wider and wider until the old machine came to a standstill with a thud. The passengers’ gaze carefully probed the dark recesses of the room. Two massive golden obelisks rested on either

side of the stone lift, pointing gloriously towards the room's ceiling. Their spotlights and torches flashed off the walls.

Shawn moved off the platform and toward what appeared to be a bronze birdbath. Hugh signalled for the security to follow Shawn with a short nod. When Shawn arrived at the enormous dais, he took a quick peek inside before touching his torch to the stuff it held. The fuel ignited instantly, lighting up the entire quarter of the chamber.

What they saw was more breathtaking than anything they could have imagined. Shawn took a step backwards, almost colliding with the guard, who slipped briefly before regaining his equilibrium. There was an entire wall in front of them consisting of a square, golden panels.

Dave scarcely raised his voice above a whisper. "We're here."

The room fell silent, as though a bomb had gone off and everyone was waiting for the fallout. "I think this is it?" Dr. Lanna murmured under her breath. Dave hopped down from the stone platform and rushed over to the wall. He ran his finger over the incredible pieces of the yellow metal. It was solid gold. It was more amazing than anything he had ever seen. "So it is still here? I thought Richmond stole it all?" He said and looked at Elizabeth, who stared in bewilderment at the massive gold chamber. Hugh, Eddie too, and even the rest of their men seemed in awe of the scene. Hugh moved almost unconsciously from the platform on the ground to the main floor of the chamber, his mouth slightly agape at the sight as he moved closer to the shimmering partition.

The wall made of pure gold stretched fifty feet from corner to corner, reaching around fifteen feet in height. Its shiny surface was covered with ancient symbols and pictures and strange

text, similar in appearance to the words on the original medallion Shawn had found. Five other platforms accented the corners of the room. In between the platforms were five small stone Buddhas resting on the floor. They looked like guardians, but Dave wasn't sure. The large dais in the middle had the same odd-looking words chiselled into them. "This... oh, hell, this is incredible. I had no idea it was going to be so... spectacular." Dave's voice became strained.

Shawn grinned, half excited, partly frantic to find a method for them to survive, as he looked at Catherine, who appeared to be enthralled by the sheer beauty. He was well aware that they just had a few minutes to make their move. He made his way to another enormous dais by crossing over to the pillar on his left. This one was crafted of gleaming stone with ruby and jade accents on each corner. He dipped the torch into the ancient fuel torch once more, and the wall in front of him glowed with a flaming glow. The gigantic Buddha statue on the central dais seemed to glitter in the light, making them gasp in awe at its beauty. He replicated the illuminating technique on a fourth dais, this time made of chrome and dark stone.

Catherine marvelled at the splendour of the room as she followed Shawn's progress from the safety of the ground. Shawn flashed her a quick glance as he approached the final saucer. What did he want, need? She knew what that look meant. She was hurt, but she wasn't tired. She was just acting, waiting for a chance to overpower the guard on her side.

Shawn cast another brief glance to her left, his gaze fixed on the pedestal on the floor. The final dais and the lion's statue Shawn wanted her to take the ring off so the floor could begin to rise again. She moved her head. "It's okay," he said to her. Believe me! Carry it out."

Hugh stood squarely behind Dave, raising his rifle to the back of Dave's skull, as Elizabeth and Dr. Lanna examined the situation, looking at the enormous golden Buddha in the centre of the central dais. Shawn was almost done with the last dish. Catherine's gaze returned to Dave and then to Shawn. When Dave was executed, the guard knew it was time to kill Shawn. Then she'd be next. She had better do it swiftly and on time.

"I really must thank you for your help in finding all of this, Brown. It has been quite an adventure." Hugh finally spoke as he nodded his head towards Elizabeth, who was smirking, obviously her head running to her own mission to get rid of half the humans in the world as she held Eddie's hands. While her massive young lover and his men moved forward, one stood directly at Eddie and one at the old doctor, raising a weapon as Elizabeth nodded her head. Then, with a blink, Eddie and the doctor fell down the dais with a shock in their eyes. "Eddie!" Shawn shouted, but it was too late. Eddie closed his eyes for the last time.

While Dave turned around to find a gun barrel between his eyes. "Unfortunately, your services are no longer required," Hugh smirked. Shawn gave Catherine a short nod as he lit the final plate's gasoline, his eyes red with rage. The guard stood close behind him, his weapon drawn. His heavy face was absolutely emotionless.

Catherine bit her lower lip and reached down to pry the ring from the lion's statue with her fingertips. The ancient elevator floor that had brought them down roared to life again, gently

rising from the floor.

Hugh and Eddie were both taken aback by Catherine's quick movement. As a result, as the massive mechanism began to move again, they both immediately whirled around. Hugh's reaction was less astonished because he knew what was going on rapidly. He pulled his arm away from Dave and shot fast rounds that nearly missed Catherine, who was crouching behind the rising platform's stand. Something seized his ankle as he began to leap toward her.

But Dave's grip was tight, and Hugh lost his equilibrium, collapsing with a bang. Both elbows unexpectedly collided with the solid stone floor. The pain rushed through his arms immediately, and the revolver in his grasp rattled free. The guard's response to Catherine had been less synchronized across the room. The huge man appeared to be perplexed by what was going on. He swiftly followed Hugh's lead, though, and fired at the woman. However, the stocky man's weapon never discharged a shot. A stinging and blistering agony rushed across his head and face before he could pull the trigger, with chunks of pouring flame shooting past his eyes.

## **Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA**

### Chapter 126

Shawn had taken advantage of the unexpected and moved swiftly, slamming his arm as hard as he could. The flame struck Hugh's temple, sending embers and flames crawling around his skull.

The huge bulk swayed for a split second, dizzy from the impact. He instinctively dropped his revolver and rushed up with both hands to his face, screaming in anguish. Shawn retaliated with another swing. "F\*\*k!"

Hugh was prepared this time as his men attacked Dave and one attacked Catherine, while Elizabeth went to the golden Buddha statue.

Shawn woke up after the first blow and just in time put out his other arm to stop the burning stick from hitting him again.

Catherine screamed, "Shawn, to your left."

He was taken aback. He hadn't expected Hugh to be able to stabilise so quickly. The man seized the lamp with one hand and Shawn's throat with the other after blocking his attack. Shawn tried to dislodge the fingers that were squeezing his breath supply, but the grasp was too tight. He swung hard at Hugh's face, landing just a few glancing strikes that appeared to be futile.

As the shortage of oxygen began to take its toll, the chamber began to spin. Shawn's lungs pleaded for air, but he couldn't push his neck open. Shawn leapt and lifted both of his legs in a sprinting motion, virtually stepping on flat top's chest and then facing with both feet as a last ditch effort. Shawn's legs broke free from the man's clutches, sending him falling back towards one of the statues.

He sprawled on his side and coughed for air, his lungs gladly filling with relief. But Shawn just had a split second because Hugh had caught himself and was charging at him like a bull.



On the far corner, Dave fell to one knee, his hand remained on the ground. Another of the dais burned brightly a few feet behind him. The thought came swiftly enough as he shut the assassin. Another shot echoed in the chamber as two of Elizabeth's men lay dead beside Catherine.

Back to the third platform, at full speed, Hugh straightened his shoulders into a tackle position. He screamed, "I'm going to kill you, Richmond," he grumbled, preparing to knock Shawn to the ground. However, Shawn rolled out of the path and caught the attacker with his boot just as he was about to attack him. Hugh fell forward uncontrollably, and before he could stop, he collided with the burning dish, knocking it to the ground. As he fell, he stretched out his hands to the floor, but they landed in the flames that had already spread across the floor. He let out a yell and removed his hands, but his body slumped into the flames as he did so. In a blast of bright orange fire, his black suit surged to life. "Hugh!" Elizabeth's scream echoed through the chamber, as Dave shot another round at the remaining assassin.

Hugh screamed and struggled to roll out of the flames to safety as his entire body became

engulfed. Finally, after a moment, the man was able to worm his way onto a part of the stone surface where the fire hadn't reached, and he continued to turn over in the dust. A few seconds later, the flames had been smothered. The skin on his face and hands peeled and blistered from the burns, and his hair had been singed down to the scalp.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Shawn Richmond standing over him, holding his gun. Shawn lifted his weapon and fired a shot without hesitation. The bullet shattered the kneecap, fracturing it into a b\*\*\*\*y mess of bone and cartilage. "Ahhh!" Hugh slumped onto his side, wailing, both hands gripping the gory mess where his kneecap used to be. While Catherine went to Elizabeth's side and the two began fighting, Dave only smiled as Elizabeth screamed from his sister's unrelenting attack. Another blow. "Take that b\*\*\*h," another one. "That is for murdering my child." Another punch followed, "That for wrecking up my life!" Then she kicked her on the knees which made Elizabeth fall to the ground.

Elizabeth screams, helpless and defenceless, reverberating from four corners of the chamber. Catherine took advantage of Elizabeth's surprise fatal ball position and kicked her in the stomach many times as she advanced quickly, pressing her hands to her face as hard as she could. While another torch fell from the dais and fell on Elizabeth's face, the flame struck her temple, sending embers and flames crawling through her hair as his screams became more frenzied by the second. To their left, Shawn raised a brow. "Don't move, Hugh" Shawn remarked casually as he turned to leave Hugh twisting in agony on the floor. Richmond's attention went to the other side of the chamber as the ancient elevator-like ground continued its ascent.

Dave was hanging onto one of the assassin's feet for dear life, but Shawn gasped. The man took off his skin-toned mask, followed by his blond fake hair, as he smirked at

Dave. It was Alfonso Richmond III. His uncle. "How the hell?" Shawn grumbled under his breath. It was beyond him how the man managed to deceive Elizabeth. He was pretending to be one of her assassins, all the while waiting for the exact moment to attack. Then he saw Alfonso smirked." I told you I'm going to end your life, boy!" He said as he dragged Dave along. Then the ground trembled and Alfonso dropped to his knees, struggling to get to the gun that was only a few feet away. Across the chamber, both combatants saw an orange-yellow flash, followed by a howling scream and then a gunshot. Neither one could see beyond the giant column that was pushing the platform of the elevator up. Alfonso was only a few inches from the gun. His fingers scratched against the hard floor in an attempt to pull him closer to it. He kicked a couple of times, once catching Dave in the face. Still, the man would not let go.

Dave understood his attempt to obstruct the man was pointless. The impact of the black shoe on his jaw hurt. He could only think of one thing to do. He abruptly released Alfonso, who tumbled forward barely beyond the gun. Before Alfonso could fire a shot, all Dave had to do was duck behind one of the marble crates for safety. Alfonso had just been thrown off for a few seconds by the unexpected momentum. He swiftly recovered and grabbed the weapon, firing three fast bullets at the writhing Dave. The bullets bounced off the statue and rattled around the room for a brief while. "You're quite bright, boy!" Alfonso stood up and fired another shot right behind Dave's back, his voice nasty. It bounced against the golden wall next to him.

"But your little game is over," Alfonso added. He took a stride forward, ready to strike when another rifle came up from someplace else in the chamber.

Alfonso came to a halt. He observed blood slowly seeping into his clothes as he looked down at his chest. He swiftly swung around to return fire, but it was too late. Three additional shots were fired from the other gun, all of which struck Alfonso's body. His legs faltered for a time before giving way, dropping his now-heavy body to the dirt.

Shawn lowered his weapon and approached the man on the cold stone floor. "What a shame." He groaned. Alfonso's face was covered with blood from the corner of his lips. His piercing blue eyes widened in surprise. His lungs spluttered beneath the red-drenched shirt, battling the damage caused by the gunshots. Alfonso attempted to raise his gun in a final show of defiance.

Another loud bang from Shawn's gun pierced the man's brow, and the hand holding the gun slid lifelessly to the floor. Dave peered over the corner of the marble crate. He noticed his brother-in-law standing over Alfonso's body. Shawn placed the pistol close to the body on the ground. "Wow! Remind me not to p\*\*s a Richmond." Dave chuckled as he looked down at his captor.

"Sorry. I was a little preoccupied," Shawn said as he pulled his thumb backwards in the direction of Hugh's groaning. "Wait, you will let him live?"

Shawn nodded.

“What exactly do you do to him?” Dave inquired, unsure if he wished to know.

“Let’s just say he’ll never teach yoga again.” Shawn put up a brave face as he surveyed the place.

“Should we summon Catherine back?” The elevator had returned all the way to the top.

“Just a second, Brown.” He slapped his palm across Dave’s back. “This is what you’ve been looking for, right? Adventure?”

“Yes,” He smirked. They were both taken aback by the stunning scenery in front of them. Their heads twisted completely around to take in the scene. “It’s incredible. I still can’t believe we discovered it. Do you understand we’re possibly the first people in a hundred years to see this?”

“Maybe, you deserved it, maybe paint it for my children to see, so far this place must be back on Thai’s government. This is their story, their treasure, their ancestor.” Dave smiled as he turned to face Brown. “Thank you so much, Shawn. I knew you’d show up. But please don’t hurt my sister or-”

Shawn gave a nod. “She is my everything, Dave! But someone has to look after your dumb a\*s from time to time,” he remarked with a big grin. “But of course, I will take care of her for the rest of my life.”

“Good, now let’s get her out, or no honeymoon for you soon.” “Sure, let’s wait for Detective Rodrigues’ men to help us with the mess and let the Thai authority handle everything from here.”

## **Billionaire’s Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA**

End of Book 1

One year later... The laughter of Shawn and their four-year-old adopted daughter from the orphanage, Mathea, was the sweetest sound in the world to Catherine Richmond. It had been a long trip for the two of them, and after their third wedding, friends gathered to celebrate her coming back into the living. Chelsea and Jane were the ones who were overjoyed to learn that she was alive, and since then, Richmond Mansion has been tormented by their gifts almost every week, and because Catherine was three months pregnant, they decided to take a long holiday in the Bahamas, as Shawn had promised. Everyone had been kept in the dark about Anthony’s riches and their travels to Scotland, Poland, and Thailand. 1

Catherine paused and listened to their antics. Soon, Catherine strolled into their bedroom.

“What’s all the laughter about?” she asked, zipping her suitcase. “I helped Mathea close her case and lifted it to the floor. It was so heavy I told her I’d better check to see if she had Applejack in there, which brought on a fit of giggles.” “It’s a shame her Applejack can’t go.” “I wouldn’t let my kid go that far without me, either.” “I know.” She moaned as Shawn’s arms went around her waist and he pulled her against him.

The past year had been a whirlwind of happiness, adventure, and love, more than she had ever dreamed of. There was no more guilt. No more bad feelings about the past. No more adventure. Just life with a man she loved and a daughter she adored. She had the whole package, and never again would she let doubts and insecurities take over her life.

They’d gotten married in the small church, and her friends had been ecstatic

because she had let them plan the wedding. Jane had picked out her dress and Mathea’s.

Chelsea had had the time of her life handling the rest. It had been stress-free for Catherine and a happy occasion, even peaceful, which was a new standard for the Richmond family. The reception had been at the mansion, and then she and Shawn had flown away for a few days in the Maldives.

Shawn kissed the hollow of her neck. She turned to him. She would never get tired of looking at his handsome face and the tall, lean body she could touch whenever she wanted. Now, that was heaven.

“Ready? Mrs Richmond?” he asked. “We’re leaving in ten minutes.” “Yes, boss.” She saluted playfully and caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror. She stepped toward it. “Am I gaining weight? I bought these capris two weeks ago for the trip and they feel tight.”

“You look the same-beautiful. But there could be another reason your pants feel tight.”

Catherine frowned. “What? Too much ice cream?” He shook his head. “That too, but have you thought you might be pregnant with a twin?”

“No....too early to tell.”

She looked in the mirror, with her hand on her stomach, and then her eyes caught his. “So, dear husband, how would you feel about that?” “Happy... very happy!” He smiled at her and kissed her again. “Our lives would change,” she mumbled almost to herself as the thought took root.

“Our lives are about to change anyway, so we might as well make it a full-meal deal.

Are you ready for that?"

She met his gaze. "As long as you're with me."

"Always, my love."

She leaned into him, her heart full. "I'll buy more ice cream when we get back from our vacation, if I can wait that long." The excitement was already running through her system. Another child. That would be the icing on the cake of their happiness.

"In two weeks we'll be moving to the new mansion," Catherine said. "My brother will be in and out of our lives when we do, but he has a room at his private island and he spends a lot of nights there." She kissed his clean-shaven cheek

"Sweetheart, please stop worrying," Shawn said with a smile. "Shawn, I just want you and Mathea to be happy."

"We are. Mathea already loves the new mansion and I feel confident we can make it work, but you know what?"

"What?"

"Is there something between Chelsea and your brother?"

"Beat me! I don't even know, the two had been cats and dogs." She touched her stomach. "Remind me to ask the a\*\*\*\*\*e next time."

He nodded his head as he gathered her into his arms. "I guess he is into something now, probably into some treasure hunting again." "Really? He didn't tell me anything? Are you in this too?" Catherine raised an eyebrow.

"Nope! All I want is to spend time with my family. In another year, I might change my mind. But my wife will have a big say in that decision." He smirked.

"Your wife will love and support whatever you want to do as long as there is no killing involved, OK?"

"Mmm. I don't want us to live in a fishbowl with anxiety and guns around all the time. Though I do love the adventure, I want time alone with you and Mathea and our twin."

for på 1

She poked him in the ribs. "Ha! Soon enough you will be... into treasure again."

He burst out laughing. “Not without your help.” Then he kissed her on the neck, causing her to moan. She grinned, she liked it when he did it, and he was doing it more frequently these days. “I’m taking my accidental wife, Catherine, home with me for good.” “Shawn, she’s been staying with you for quite some time.”

“And I’m so grateful she finally agreed to love me for the rest of her life.” He kissed her lips passionately, and they lost track of where they were for a little minute. “We may have to stop for ice cream on the way to the airport.” I, too, am impatient. Perhaps the ice cream can determine whether it is a twin or not.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Mommy, do you have my Little Pony sunglasses?” Mathea called. They slowly drew apart.

“Why would I have your sunglasses?”

“Because I can’t find them.”

“Did you look on the top of your head? That’s where they were the last time you lost them.”

A chuckle followed. “Yep. That’s where they were. I want to take them with me. Aunt

Jane and Aunt Chelsea gave them to me, and they’re pretty. Oh, yeah. I’m pretty too.”

“Ten minutes and everyone has to be in the car ready to go. Got it?”

“Got it, Dad!” Mathea shouted back.

They were finally going to the Bahamas and then straight to Disney World—as a family.

It had been a year of love, burned pancakes, and changes, and they were all stronger for

them. Even Mathea. They’d been through a great deal and had come through everything with smiling faces and stronger spirits. Catherine felt truly blessed. No longer would a secret weigh her down with guilt and indecision. Love had filled her with confidence.

Shawn kissed her again and lifted her suitcase from the bed. “That means you, too, Mrs.

Richmond.”

She patted him on the back as he walked out. In minutes, she and Mathea were in the kitchen, ready to leave on a vacation they’d dreamed about for years.

For a moment, Catherine looked around her home and knew life would be different when

they returned. They would put the old mansion on the market and move to the new one. But she knew it would be a change for the better. They had a year of getting to know each other and growing as a family. Now they would go forward and make life even better. She just wished Dave would come home soon.

Catherine was trying to get them out the door so they wouldn't mess up his schedule. Mathea came to a halt at the doorway, her hand on her luggage. "I'd like to say something." "Do I need to contact the media?"

"I'm serious, Daddy." Mathea's feet stomped. "All right, what do you have to say?" "I'm overjoyed that we're now a family. I am so happy."

Catherine had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing out loud. Shawn had a similar experience as they both nodded their heads. He recovered first. "Well, baby, your mother and I are thrilled, too, because we're a real family. And we're thankful you're not weird or anything." Mathea covered her eyes with hot-pink feathery rhinestone sunglasses. "Cool."

She took a tiara from the glittering purse Dave had given her for her birthday and placed it on her head. "I'd like it if you could call me Princess Mathea from the House of Richmond while we're in the Bahamas."

Shawn caught Catherine's eye. "What are your thoughts?"

!

"Well... I suppose. It's OK." "Mommy is the boss." Mathea laughed and drew her bag closer to the door. "I need to text uncle Dave that we're leaving."

"Remember how we discussed continuous texting?" Shawn reminded her. Mathea rolled her eyes and resumed her walk to the car. Shawn encircled Catherine with his arms. "We need to have another child as soon as possible so we can stop spoiling this one." "Too late," she said quietly as she leaned on her tiptoes to kiss him. "I love you." "I love you too, our life, and our beautiful child. I've never felt happier." Catherine snuggled into Shawn's arms, thankful for a moment when they could have been destroyed, but love had kept them together. As it always has.

THE END FOR BOOK 1

## **Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA**

Book 2-Chapter 1

Two months ago,

The palatial manor, three hours outside Paris, glittered like a jewel beneath the starlit night sky. Lights glowed from within the sprawling mansion and along the circular drive out front, where half a dozen sleek sports cars were parked on the cobblestones.

From Dave Brown's vantage point on a tree-studded hill five hundred yards away, he watched as a beautiful yellow Ferrari rolled up to the villa and took its place between a dark Veyron and a silver Pagani Huayra. Add in the pair of Lamborghinis, the Maserati, and another Ferrari, and there was well over ten million dollars worth of automotive luxury parked outside the late Alfonso Richmond III Alfonso's mansion. Plus a collection of cars worth twice as much that was hidden in the huge bays of the private garage of the alleged drug-dealing mob.

If nothing else, Alfonso and his criminal associates had impeccable taste in cars.

"Apparently, selling your soul to the devil pays well," he muttered into the wireless mic that linked him to the Brown Hunter's Office's command centre back in London. He has his very own company, which specialises in finding long-lost artefacts and treasure hunting. It was Shawn's idea to start his own company. After all, after their adventure in Thailand, they were given a massive amount of gold to compensate for their good deeds, and Shawn, being a billionaire, gave it all to him, which was still unknown to his sister. It had been a year since their wedding, and now his sister was five months pregnant. Dave smiled as he remembered their conversation last night with his niece, Mathea.

"Do you see what I'm seeing here, mate?"

"Visual recognised, Dave."

Tyler, his comrade, had a deep gravel voice that was seldom easy to read, and today was no exception. Not that Dave expected the intimidating IT specialist to appreciate Alfonso and his associates' fleet of good British machines.

And it didn't really matter.

The automobiles, the mansion, and everyone inside would be reduced to ash and flaming rubble in a matter of minutes.

It's a shame about the autos. "Status," Tyler said through the earpiece as Dave huddled down to view the approaching fireworks.

"The packages have arrived, and the last party guest has just arrived. We're ready to go." "Did you get the receipt? We don't work for free, remember?" "Right here in my pocket," he responded, pointing to the flash disc Tyler had mentioned. Dave had been inside Alfonso's villa on a covert single mission to d\*\*\*\*\*d crucial computer data, then



take out the target, twenty minutes before arriving at his observation post on the hill. According to new information gathered by the Hunter's London headquarters, Hermano, now the leader, was the European distributor of a dangerous drug that turned otherwise law abiding people into crime-obsessed murderers. This new drug, known as 'gold coin' on the street, was supposed to be much more potent than its predecessor which had killed countless young men and homeless people when it first struck the streets ten years earlier. Criminal outbreaks were on the rise again across Europe, owing to Alfonso and his associates with the terror mob, causing worry among an already uneasy society. The authorities had made it clear that they wanted the problem addressed at its source as soon as possible.

Dave was delighted to be chosen for the clandestine mission. It had been a pleasant surprise to find that Alfonso's second in command, Hermano, had scheduled a private meeting for tonight. So, instead of looking for new lost artefacts, he helped the government with a secret mission, since his company had the best and most up-to-date covert technology for the job.

To that goal, four explosive devices capable of levelling an entire city block had been placed near Alfonso's villa. All Dave had to do was set them off with a remote detonator, and Alfonso's Russian associate would lose yet another crucial ally. The authorities were not going to stop until the entire organisation was demolished, and the cabal at its helm was identified and destroyed.

Dave glanced into the mansion with his field glasses. Although his vision was excellent, the lenses allowed him to focus on the lit window of Alfonso's associate and his men assembled in the great salon. They greeted one another with a lot of laughter and back-patting, a lot of ingratiating grins and kowtowing from their underlings to the dark-haired, hawk-nosed Hermano. The gold coin merchant and his cronies had undoubtedly been handsomely compensated for their role in the recent rise in attacks. Dave couldn't wait to deliver them all to their final destination tonight. "Light it up at your ready," Tyler advised. Dave smiled behind his binoculars. "With pleasure."

Glancing away from the meeting taking place inside the mansion, he reached to retrieve the remote detonator. Usually, he didn't care about seeing a target die, but it was hard not to feel a little bit of satisfaction tonight when he crashed Hermano's little party.

He brought the field glasses back up to his face-just in time to see that a woman had entered the room. The petite blonde wore a flashy golden dress that clung to her slender body like liquid silk. The neckline plunged low in front, the slit in the skirt slicing high up her leg, baring a lot of creamy thigh with each gliding step she took toward Hermano.

What the f\*\*k?

Dave hadn't realised there was a female in the mansion. Not that he felt much sympathy for

anyone who was associated with a thug like Hermano. And not that it should stop him from pushing the button on the detonator. But still...

His thumb froze, hovering over the trigger.

"Unidentified female on the premises," he murmured into his mic. "Stand by, base."

"Standing by," Tyler said. Then he made a low, appreciative noise that might as well have

been a wolf-whistle, coming from the eternally inscrutable warrior.

Yeah, the girl was hot. Dave barely contained his own primal growl at the sight of all those slender curves poured into a column of golden silk. He'd long avoided blondes – for personal reasons of his own—but everything male in him responded to the sight of this one like a flame to gasoline.

He stared through the lenses, watching as every head in the room turned to look at her as she approached Hermano. As soon as she was close enough, the muscled arm snaked out to h\*\*k her around the waist, pulling her roughly against him as his buddies grinned and chuckled.

More than one of the mob gathered in the room wore an expression of unabashed l\*\*t as their boss crudely cupped the young woman's breast in front of them all. Still, the woman's face was covered with a delicate golden mask. A jab of disgust spiked through Dave's blood at Hermano's manhandling of the woman. "There was no mention of a female in the intel," Tyler said. "No, there wasn't." Dave's reply was clipped, irritation combined with this unwanted element of surprise. "The report specifically stated that Hermano is single and hates women. He is gay, so who the f\*\*k is she?" "Collateral damage," Tyler replied evenly. "Pop the charges and get the hell out of there." Dave nodded, knowing that this was sound advice. But his thumb didn't move on the detonator. Something was starting to bother him about the woman the longer he stared at her... Something that gnawed at the perimeter of his memory. "I need a closer look." Without waiting for confirmation from his comrade, he set the detonator down in the soft grass and then tightened the focus on his binoculars. Not on Hermano or his men, but on her. The gorgeous blonde, whose heart-shaped face and pixie features seemed strangely, distantly familiar somehow, but sadly, the woman's face was not clear as she removed her mask and smiled at Hermano.

Which was impossible, considering this female was clearly Hermano's plaything. Then she turned around, to exactly where it was very clear on Dave's binoculars.

F\*\*k!

The face that teased at the frayed edges of Dave's mind and his heart-had no place here. Not with criminals and killers like the ones assembled inside the villa that was wired to blow on his command.

Holy s\*\*t. It couldn't be her. Tyler's voice sounded in his ear. "You got problems over there?"

Dave couldn't answer that. Not when his veins were filling with adrenaline and a sick feeling of apprehension was starting to take up space behind his sternum.

He brought the woman in closer, his eyes burning from the intensity of his unblinking stare. She was still caught within the cage of Hermano's thick arm, smiling indulgently as the leader showed her off like some kind of prize to his leering friends. Showing her off as if the b\*\*\*\*d owned her.

F\*\*k Don't let that be her.

"Status," Tyler demanded now. "What's going on?"

"I'm not sure. I think the woman is..." He drew in a breath, hoping like hell he was wrong." Christ, it's Chelsea."

"What? Your ex?"

"Sort of, you can call it like that." After all, they had never talked or seen each other again since Shawn and Catherine's wedding.

## **Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA**

Chapter 2 Inside Alfonso's mansion, Chelsea held her composure until she had reached her private quarters on the mansion's second floor. Once inside, she leaned against the closed door and let her revulsion leak out of her in a shudder. At least she was getting better at the charade.

She doesn't have any choice but to play this game if she wants to know about the sudden death of her step-dad. Yes, the man was not perfect, but he raised her enough to know that he didn't just die for some unknown reason.

There was a time when she might have had to bite back a scream because the revulsion of Hermano touching her was too much. It had been a year since the old man's death, but still, she was at a loss of what really happened to him in Thailand, and she knew Hermano was the one to blame.

Her skin, however, crawled everywhere Hermano touched her. His strong fingers were still on her body, on her breast. His harsh smack to her backside wounded her dignity as much as it did her a\*s. She despised being paraded in front of his cronies as his

personal show pony, made to look and act as if she belonged to a gang of lunatics. To be fair, he did, in many ways, own her. Her existence. Her liberty. Hermano possessed everything, regardless of how much she disliked him. He may have had her body as well if she hadn't persuaded him that taking that part of her would cost him the one thing he couldn't afford to lose. So far, the threat had kept her out of his reach, but she knew he'd been tempted to put her to the test. She simply hoped that if he tried, she wouldn't kill him. Because no matter how brilliant she pretended to be in dealing with Hermano, he always had one last, horrible card to play.

And she had no choice but to serve him as long as he held that over her head. She could never get away from him, not even in death. He'd made sure of it.

Chelsea knew better than to wait any longer. While he entertained his boot-licking pals in the big salon, he'd sent her away to retrieve the list of his associates. They were rejoicing over a hefty reward from a shipment of gold coins to the United States and the United Kingdom—a drug that ruined the minds of their own kind, the mob, turning them into blood-addicted monsters with just a small amount. They didn't care if their unexpected gain came at the expense of human and young lives. She had learnt a long time ago that Hermano's hunger knew no limitations. Neither did his rage. That her beauty had helped him amass his growing fortune, and the power that came with it, made Chelsea want to retch. How often had she thought about giving him a false name? False information? How many times had she dreaded that her help would one day prove useless? Not that seducing her enemies was difficult; after all, she was Helen of Troy's beauty rival.

But she hadn't deceived him, not once.

And, thankfully, her information had never been wrong. Either of those failings would come at the cost of innocent lives. Not her own, but the people she cared about most in the world. The only family she has left now

It was those precious lives she held close in her heart as she walked over to the cabinet across the room and retrieved the list Hermano would need downstairs. In reality, she was just biding her time, gathering information and evidence to take the b\*\*\*\*\*d to his knees soon. She sighed and secretly took a picture from her phone, then left it in the bin for her accomplice, the c\*\*k, to take out later.

She cradled the folder in her palms and drew it out of the cabinet. Her face stared back at her in the reflection in the polished golden mirror — but that wasn't all. Behind her stood the ominous shape of someone else.

Aman

Tall, immense. An intruder dressed entirely in black tactical gear. Chelsea sucked in a startled breath.

Fear streaked through her, but before her shriek could rip up the back of her throat, a broad palm came up to cover her mouth. Oh, God.

The folder was out of her grasp, thudding onto the thick rug. Muscular arms caged her from behind, immobilising her. She stumbled in her high-heeled sandals, helpless against the heat of a very strong, very male body. This wasn't any of the other men gathered in the salon with him either, although there was no question that the male trapping her in his unbreakable hold was Breed. "Don't scream, Chelsea."

He spoke right up against her ear. His growled command was spoken in a deep baritone that caressed her nerves.

He knew her name. How? Who the hell was he? Where had he come from?

She struggled and fought to break free, but he wouldn't let go. He was much too strong, and none of her squirming or resisting was getting her anywhere. All her grunts and cries for help were snuffed out by the hand that was still sealed firmly across her lips.

Trapped, she could only stand there, her breath rushing out of her nose in panicked gusts while terror wrapped around her heart like a vise.

"Be calm. I'm not going to hurt you."

Did he think she was a fool? She didn't believe him for a second, not when she could feel the lethal power radiating off his big body. Whoever this man was, he was beyond dangerous, and she did not doubt that his only business in the villa was death.

She groaned, trying futilely to pull away from him in another burst of desperation. Her heart was speeding, banging against her rib cage as if on the verge of exploding. Even though she was scared, she felt like she was starting to recognise something. She knew it was impossible, this strange feeling that this intruder was no stranger at all. Her

blood was still racing and cold with terror, but beneath the fear was a growing sense of familiarity.

A name skated across her memory, one she had tried for years to ban from her thoughts and her heart.

Dave?

No. It couldn't be him.

The beautiful, golden-haired b\*\*\*\*d she had known all those years ago had been a scholar, an artist, not a soldier. He would have no business in a place like this, among thugs like the ones gathered downstairs. Then again, there was a time when she'd have said the same thing about herself. "I'm going to remove my hand from your mouth now,"

he murmured. As he spoke, his breath skimmed warmly against her cheek and along the side of her neck. She shivered from the feeling and was surprised to realise how much he still meant to her after all these years.<sup>1</sup>

Because, yes, she did know that low, velvet voice.

Just as she knew the scent that enveloped her as she stood immobilised in his arms. Heaven helps her, but she had carried the scent of him, the sound of his voice, in a private corner of her heart since she was a teenage girl. “Don’t be afraid, Chelsea. I didn’t come here to harm you. Nod your head if you understand.” She nodded, and his grip on her relaxed. His palm fell away from her lips, leaving a coldness in its wake. Chelsea slowly turned around in his slack hold. “Oh, my God.” The words leaked out of her with a disbelieving sigh. “What the hell, Dave?”