

Chapter One

LEAH

PORT OF MIAMI

The elevator was hot and humid despite the air conditioning, filled with four other students, their luggage, and the unmistakable taste of excitement and salt water.

With a *ding*, the doors opened on the tenth floor, and the bellboy got off with my luggage. Wait. Were they called bellboys on cruise ships? Cabin stewards? I should have probably known that, seeing as this ship was my home for the next nine months.

“Wait,” I said, following him. “This isn’t my floor.”

“No mistake,” he promised, tossing a cute grin over his white-uniformed shoulder. “Your room is right this way, Miss Baxter.”

I flipped through my file folder while trying not to trip over my feet or the other students crowding the narrow hall during move-in day. “See?” I asked, waving the paper from

my “room and board” section. “I’m supposed to be on the fourth floor.”

In steerage. I laughed to myself, dodging a sweaty guy with frat letters on his sleeveless tee as he manhandled a suitcase into a room on my right.

“I have you on this deck,” he answered, correcting my terminology. “Do you know if your roommate is here yet?”

“She came down with mono three days ago.” And I already missed my best friend. Guilt sank my heart. Was her mom taking care of her? Was she getting enough rest? She’d taken such good care of me when I needed her the last two years, and I’d just *left* her. *She told you to.*

Considering I hadn’t left the house without Rachel pushing me in the last two years—hell, at first getting out of bed had been nearly impossible—I could barely believe that I’d actually come without her.

But she’d been right—living my life didn’t mean I loved him less, it just meant I loved myself, too.

“Oh, no. Did she get a refund?” he asked, waiting for another group to cross in front of us into their room.

“No, she’ll be here at the start of next term.” Thank God the Study at Sea program worked on the trimester system, otherwise Rachel would have had to wait until January to come. Instead, she could join us in Abu Dhabi in November.

Abu Dhabi. Being accepted to this program—a full academic year studying on a worldwide cruise—had been surreal. But now I was actually living it. I was really in Miami, saying good-bye to the U.S. for nine entire months. I just never imagined—or wanted—to do it on my own.

But that was why I’d agreed to this program, right? It was time to step out of the comfort zone I’d walled myself into the last two years, and it would look killer when I applied to graduate programs for International Relations.

Besides, Rachel couldn’t hold my hand for the rest of my

life.

“Here we are,” the cabin steward said, fumbling with the card key as we reached the back—*aft*, I corrected myself—corner of the ship.

Two girls in short dresses bumped into me, apologizing as they passed. They giggled with a lightness I slightly envied and entered the room on the opposite corner from mine.

“Sorry,” the cabin steward apologized. “It’s only my second day on the ship, and I don’t have the hang of these locks yet.” He sighed in relief when the door clicked open.

“It’s okay,” I said as he held the door for me. “Thank you, Hugo,” I added after reading the green tag on his shirt.

“No problem,” he said as I passed him, walking into the entry hall of the suite.

Holy. Shit.

“Yeah, that was my reaction, too,” he said with a soft chuckle.

“Oh, I said that out loud?” I asked, more distracted by the marble floors and the sheer size of the suite.

His brown eyes danced with laughter. “It’s your room. Feel free to swear as much as you want. Hall closet is here.” He pointed to a door on the right.

Hall closet? My entire room should have fit in there.

I tuned him out and simply walked. There were two bedrooms off to the right, connected by a large bathroom with double sinks, a shower, and a jetted tub. Seriously?

I picked my jaw up off the floor as I made my way farther into the suite. There was a dining area set up with a table to seat six and a living room with supple, buttery leather couches and a big-screen TV. But it wasn’t the space that had me speechless—it was the view from the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the exquisite suite. What would it be like to wake up every day here for the next nine months? To walk through those huge doors to the balcony and bask in the sunlight?

To be the kind of person who could even think about affording this?

It was perfect, but it wasn't mine.

If this place was on my bill for even one week, I could kiss every dollar of my savings good-bye.

"Hugo, I'm not supposed to be here. I'm in the work-study program. I'm supposed to be on deck four."

He stopped inspecting how my mini-fridge was stocked and looked up at me. "Right. I know." He shook his head. "I mean that I know you're in the program. I am, too. But you're supposed to be here, I promise. You're a tutor, right?"

I nodded. That had been the offer that had woken me up, brought me back to life this year: if I tutored one student on the *Athena*, not only would my tuition, field-studies, and room and board be paid, but the program would do the same for Rachel. As soon as I'd made sure that it wasn't some cruel joke, I'd pinched myself and signed the papers. With my parents under a Hollywood-Hills-house amount of medical bills, and Rachel's uber-uptight parents declaring that she couldn't go if I didn't...well, everything had fallen into place perfectly.

"Well, then this is your room."

"No way," I protested, looking up at the chandelier. *Seriously? A freaking chandelier?* "Is every tutor in a suite? Even with a ship that caters to rich kids, I have a hard time thinking the program is this hard up for tutors."

He stood and smiled. "Nope, just you. Why don't you pick out a bedroom? Or check out the balcony? I'll give Mrs. Trenton a buzz if it makes you feel better."

"That would be awesome, thanks." I opted for the balcony. The afternoon was winding down—the air still heavy with sultry heat as I opened the heavy glass door and stepped onto the polished wooden surface. Miami in August was hot as hell, and wearing jeans wasn't helping. I pulled my thick hair into

a messy topknot to get it off my neck and moved toward the smooth railing, testing my limits. After all, that's what this trip was for, right? But my chest constricted with every step, and as the water came into view stories below, the roaring that filled my ears sounded too similar to a California canyon wind and not enough like the Miami breeze. *Not now. God, not now.* I heeded my body's warning, backing away from the nauseating height. *Guess you're not quite ready.* But I had nine months on this ship, and maybe if I tried a little each day, by the end I could do it. Until then...well, I'd hang back here.

It was a gorgeous space with a fleet of cushioned lounge chairs and an unencumbered view down to the right—*starboard*—side of the ship.

Another student leaned against the railing about twenty feet away, his very tanned, toned, tattooed body on display in nothing but a pair of dark blue Hawaiian print board shorts that hung low on his hips.

I openly ogled the cut lines of his muscles, from his worship-worthy washboard abs to the way his biceps flexed, tattoos rippling as he pushed off the railing and sighed, running his hands over his midnight-black hair and lacing his fingers behind his neck.

He was *hot*. And not passingly hot, but more like *I-can-make-you-come-with-a-look* hot. Hell, I was halfway there, and he hadn't so much as glanced in my direction.

What the hell is wrong with you?

I shook my head and tore my eyes away. What was the point of looking, wanting, when he was so far out of my league that we were playing different sports? And besides, what kind of sport gave a guy a body like that? Where every muscle had a purpose?

My gaze drifted back to the stranger, appreciating the strong angles of his face that I could make out from here, the tattoos that moved with his skin.

Not for you. Yeah, obviously, but one more second of gawking wasn't going to hurt me. Hell, at least it reminded me that my sex drive still worked...and was currently in overdrive, apparently.

He looked pensive, like he carried some impossible, Atlas-worthy weight on his shoulders, and while part of me wondered what someone like him could possibly have to worry about, the other part instinctively wanted to soothe him.

Then he caught me staring.

I ignored my flight reflex and forced myself to hold his gaze across the distance. He cocked his head to the side, like he was trying to decide if he knew me, and smiled softly.

Yep. The old sex drive is definitely working again.

Damn it, he wasn't just hot, he was beautiful.

The door opened behind him and a goddess with long blond hair and longer legs floated onto the deck. He turned to her, his entire presence morphing into one word: cocky.

"You ready?" she asked. Even her voice was gorgeous.

I turned away from the obvious couple and was saved by Hugo opening the door. "Miss Baxter?"

"Leah," I corrected him.

"Leah, Mrs. Trenton is here." He held the door open, and I walked through, mentally kissing all this opulence—including the hot stranger—good-bye.

A middle-aged blond woman in a pencil skirt leaned over a folder of paperwork at my dining room table. *The table, not yours. Don't get used to this.*

"Miss Baxter." She greeted me with a smile and an outstretched hand, which I shook. "I understand that you don't like your room?"

My cheeks heated instantly. "No, it's gorgeous. I love it, but I'm supposed to be in an inside cabin on the crew deck. Is there another Leah Baxter?"

"No, this wasn't a mistake. The student you're tutoring asked that you be put here so he could have easier access to you as his schedule is quite demanding."

"Who would do that?"

"Paxton Wilder," she replied, her smile still firmly affixed to her face.

"Miss Baxter, which bedroom did you want?" Hugo called from the entry hall, my luggage in hand.

"None!" I called out. Easier access? Did this guy think I was going to be at his beck and call? Hopefully not, because I was no one's beck-and-call girl.

"Nonsense, give her the bigger one since her roommate won't be joining her until November."

"Absolutely not. This is Rachel's dream and she would deserve the bigger one."

"Perfect. Give her the blue room with the bigger balcony," Mrs. Trenton answered.

Crap. Did I inadvertently accept the room? "I can't afford this," I said quietly.

"Well, I'll look into that with the bursar's office. Now, here's your ID. It doubles as your room key as well as access to all your VIP privileges such as early disembarkation for field-study days, so don't lose it. Hopefully the lanyard helps in that department."

VIP? Unless that stood for *very impoverished person*, there was no way. She handed me the card and, yep, there it was—Eleanor Baxter, VIP. It said so right next to the cringe-worthy picture I'd taken in the cruise terminal. Fabulous, my normally tame brown hair was pretty much the before picture on an intervention makeover show.

"Enjoy your year with us."

How was I going to enjoy it if I couldn't pay for it? Before I could sputter an intelligent response, Mrs. Trenton was leaving.

“Hugo, you’ll take good care of her?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied as the door shut behind her.

“What does she mean take good care of me?” I asked.

“Your work-study is to tutor Mr. Wilder. Mine is to be your butler. I’m here to help you.”

Butler? That was it. I was in some kind of parallel universe. I tried to crank my jaw up off the floor and found some semblance of a coherent thought. “Which room is Mr. Wilder in?” I managed to ask.

“Ten thirty-two,” he answered.

I was in the hallway, my ID around my neck, before he finished. “Ten thirty-two,” I mumbled to myself as I walked two doors away to the other corner suite and knocked.

Loud rock music blared from inside, and I knocked again, this time harder.

“Hold on!” came a loud male voice.

A moment later, the door opened and a beefy, bald guy answered. “Can I help you?”

“Umm... I’m looking for Mr. Wilder?”

He looked me up and down and then smirked. “Not his type, honey. Sorry.”

If my cheeks had warmed earlier, now they were on fucking fire. “I’m not looking to score him; I’m his tutor.” I lifted the lanyard from my neck and dangled the attached ID.

His eyes widened. “Oh, Miss Baxter? He’s getting ready, but come on in. Wilder!” he yelled as he shut the door behind me. “I’m Little John, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, and bit my tongue when I wanted to ask where Robin Hood was hiding.

Wilder’s suite was bigger than mine, which was absolutely mind-boggling. What would someone need with all this space? We cleared the hallway into the huge living area, and I snorted. There were at least a dozen bikini-clad girls lounged over his couches, drinking out of red Solo cups. I guess you

needed that much room when you traveled with your own harem.

Don't get judgy.

Too late.

I couldn't help it. I was here for serious academics and travel, and he was, well...apparently not.

Looking up, I watched him come down the stairs. I might have been blown away by the fact that he had a two-story suite if I hadn't been stunned by Mr. Out of My League walking toward me with a grin. *No way. No. Fucking. Way.*

"Balcony girl?"

Oh God. He had seen me. And that *voice*. It was deep, slightly gravelly, and sexy as hell. Almost as sexy as the dragon tattoo that wound itself from his heart to where the tail dragged along the lickable line of his abs. *Not lickable. Nope. Not one bit.*

"Uhh, hi." Oh my God, that was up there with *I carried a watermelon*. "I didn't mean that."

His incredibly sexy grin widened. "You didn't mean to say hi?"

I blinked. "No, of course I did."

"Then I don't see an issue."

One of the partygoers knocked me off-balance—and right into Wilder. He caught me easily, his fingers flexing on my waist. I should have worn a thicker tank top—the silky material of this one let the heat from his hands right through to wake up every nerve ending in my skin.

"Are you okay?" he asked, turning the full force of his incredibly blue eyes on me. Magnetic. Glorious. Hypnotizing. Those were all better words to describe the insane variations of color there, or the way he pinned me in place without a single ounce of effort.

My first impression had been right. He could probably make me come with one look...and that exact look was

trained on me with all the accuracy of a guided missile straight to my thighs.

I didn't believe in love at first sight. I wasn't that stupid. But science? Chemistry? Pheromones? Yeah, lust at first encounter, I believed that all day long.

Words, Leah. Find them.

"Oh, you found your tutor," Little John said with a slap on Wilder's back. "We have to go soon, so get ready."

Wilder stiffened and carefully set me away from him. "You're Eleanor Baxter?"

"Leah," I corrected him automatically and dug my thumbs into the belt loops of my jeans.

"Holy shit." He closed his eyes.

"Are *you* okay?" I turned his words around on him.

He nodded, his eyes squeezed tight. "Just moving you out of the fuckable category in my brain. I'm going to need a minute."

Wait. He had categories? Scrap that. I'd barely met the guy and he's already friend-zoned me? *Out of your league.*

"Leah," he said, opening his eyes with a slight smile, like he enjoyed saying it. "So what can I do for you?"

"You can explain why I'm in a crazy-huge suite that I can't possibly afford and ask them to move me, since apparently you have the power over where I sleep." I crossed my arms under my breasts, well aware that I was fidgeting.

"Oh, do I?" he asked with a suggestive smile.

Apparently friend-zone was still flirt-zone to him.

I tried to look over his shoulder but, realizing he was too tall for that, I peeked around his side at the collection of girls who might have had an entire outfit if you strung their clothes together. "Unfortunately. Look, I don't mind tutoring you. I'm happy to do it to be in this program, but I can do it as effectively from deck four. I want my assigned room back. Now."

His eyes widened. "You're turning down the suite?"

My spine straightened. "I am."

"Wilder, we gotta go," Little John said, handing him a mess of black straps.

"That's not okay," Wilder said.

"Dude, we have a schedule, and the crew is already set up and ready."

He waved off Little John. "No, we're cool, I'm talking to Leah. You can't give back the suite. It's yours."

"No." I shook my head.

He stepped between the straps and twisted himself through the contraption until he had it on, clipping what was apparently a harness over his chest with a final snap. "Leah, it's paid for."

Wait. What?

I blinked rapidly, knowing that my anti-capitalist parents would be groaning if they heard my hesitation. "Mr. Wilder, that's...that's way too much. All I needed was my room and board; even the shore excursions were too much." What did he expect from me with that kind of "gift"? What kind of access was he looking for?

"It's Paxton to you, or Pax, whichever you prefer, and you're keeping the suite."

"Wilder, we have to go," Little John shouted over the music, the brunette next to him impatiently glaring our way.

"Right. Leah, if we can finish this later?"

I shook my head. I was only getting this courage up once. Anything more and I'd be basking in the glory of that room, the view, the bed, and the way that tub would soothe my sore muscles. "No. We're finishing this now."

He cocked his head to the side exactly like he had out on the deck, but the pensive guy wasn't here. No, this man was sure, confident, and oozed a blatant and obvious sexuality that made me glad I had my jeans on. "Are you ready for an

adventure?”

“What? I came on the cruise, right? And what does that have to do with the mini-mansion my suitcase is currently camped in?”

He studied me carefully, and I shifted my weight. Being around this guy threw me off my hard-earned balance, and I couldn’t afford that, not when I was barely back to standing on my own as it was.

“Okay, well, if you want to keep up this discussion, you’ll have to come with me. Is that okay?”

“Fine,” I answered.

“After you.” He motioned toward the doors, and I walked in front of him through the party. Once we reached Little John and the brunette, who shot me snotty looks like it was her day job, Paxton stopped.

“Zoe, how about you sit this one out. I’ll get you another time.”

Her jaw dropped. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“I’m not.” He dismissed her without another look, calling out to his guests, “Let’s continue this on deck, shall we? I’ll meet you guys at the pool!”

They all cheered as we left the room. “International frat party,” I mumbled as I followed Little John’s massive back down the hallway.

“I’m not in a frat.” Paxton laughed behind me as we dodged a couple of students moving into their rooms. “Now could you please tell me what it is you have against that room? It’s nice. I checked it out to make sure.”

I looked back over my shoulder. “Did you know that my scholarship includes my best friend, too? It’s already too much.”

He shook his head like I was nuts. “But you’re earning it as part of your compensation. Trust me, you’ll more than earn it.”

Compensation? He'd better not think— I stopped dead in my tracks and he bumped into me, the metal on his chest strap hitting me in the head.

"Oh man, you okay?" he asked and reached for my head, but I stepped away before he could make contact. Once had been more than enough.

"I'm your tutor. You know that, right? Only your tutor. Just studying. There's no need for me to have a giant suite with a"—I swallowed—"separate bedroom."

"Is that what you think?" he asked with an incredulous laugh. "Leah, get in the elevator."

We moved into the small space, and Little John pretended to ignore us, fiddling with the straps of another harness in his hands to give us privacy.

"What am I supposed to think?" I asked as we descended. "I was already told that you'd need *easy access* to me. I just want to make sure we start out with a crystal-clear understanding of what we both expect." *I'm sure as hell not your beck-and-call girl.* Especially not the call-girl part.

"I can't escape people even in my own suite," he answered simply, watching the numbers light with each floor we passed. The doors dinged, and I followed him out through the crew deck to the exit ramp.

"What does that have to do with my suite? And why are we leaving the ship? We're supposed to sail"—I checked my watch—"in exactly fifteen minutes. I'd kind of like to be on board when that happens."

"Don't worry. The ship isn't leaving without me, and I'll get you on board." His smile deepened, revealing two dimples. *Damn.* I had to find a way to not be affected by this guy if I was going to successfully tutor him for the year. I wouldn't exactly be effective with mush brain, and then where would I be? He had to pass, or my scholarship was gone. Rachel's scholarship was gone. The amazing experience for grad school was gone.

That was the deal. Besides, he was just a pretty face, and it took a lot more than that to turn my head.

Fine, then as of this moment, you are not attracted to Paxton Wilder. Nope. Not at all.

"Watch your step," he said, offering his hand as we moved onto the ramp.

Okay, well maybe a little attracted.

I took his hand, more worried about falling on my face than anything else. His skin was warm, his grip firm on mine as we moved down the ramp. He let go, and I realized that we'd reached the bottom.

I hadn't slipped or freaked about the height once. Miraculous.

"Thank you," I said quietly.

"No problem," he answered easily. "Look," he started as we walked through the nearly empty terminal in the opposite direction of where I'd entered earlier today. "I want you to keep the suite, and it's selfish, I know."

"How is that selfish?" I asked, walking next to him.

"School's never been easy for me. Ever. I need someplace quiet to study, and I'm hoping you'll lend me your living room—and your brain—at night, that's all. I made sure you were close to my room so I don't have to go far, and I can't exactly move you in with me without raising some eyebrows. I promise we'll work out a schedule. I don't expect you to be at my beck and call, but I'm going to need your help. A ton of your help."

Beck and call? *It's like he's in your brain.* "You're honestly that worried about your grades?"

"There is more than you could ever imagine riding on my grades right now. And, well, you have your work cut out for you."

Before I could question him, Little John opened the door to a stairwell and ushered us straight to another elevator

while he whistled. The doors dinged open, where a tall, lean, hot, equally tattooed guy leaned against the wall, wearing the same kind of harness as Paxton.

“Cutting the timing a little close, aren’t we, Wilder?” he called out, uncrossing his arms and openly glaring at me.

“Leah, this asshole is Landon, my best friend. Nova, meet Leah, my tutor.” He emphasized the last two words.

“Oh.” His eyebrows rose over crystal green eyes. “Nice to meet you, Leah. You ready for this?”

“I think so,” I answered. “As ready as you can be for a cruise around the world, right?”

His eyes narrowed, and he shot his gaze toward Paxton. “Wilder...”

Paxton sighed as the light moved from floor to floor with our ascent. “Leah, remember that whole nondisclosure agreement you signed to get your scholarship?”

“Sure. I signed an NDA about whomever I would tutor for their privacy.”

“Right. And the media release?”

My forehead puckered. There had been so many papers I’d signed. “The one that said I would release my image, video, that kind of thing for future promotion of the program as part of my scholarship agreement?”

Paxton winced. “Yeah, about that. We’re kind of making a documentary, and being my tutor, you’re probably going to show up in it a little.”

“A documentary? For video class or something? And by a little, you mean...”

He scratched the back of his neck. “A lot. I mean a lot. I’ll do my best to keep you out of the camera, but it’s going to happen. I mean, as long as you want to stay as my tutor, it will.”

I knew what he was saying: if I didn’t agree, I couldn’t be his tutor. Not being his tutor meant no scholarship, no cruise.

No Mykonos. No Rachel.

Do it for her.

I pulled in a deep breath. "How long do I have to decide?"

"About twenty seconds," Landon answered.

"What?" I shouted.

Paxton hit the emergency stop on the elevator. "You have as long as you need. But your answer is kind of holding up the departure of the ship."

I rubbed the damp skin of my forehead and cursed my jeans for the thousandth time. It was only a little documentary. Who was possibly going to see it? The media club at whatever college he went to? "Okay, fine."

He relaxed next to me and gave me a relieved smile as the elevator started to move again. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Besides, there wasn't much interesting about me, anyway. I'd mostly be in the background.

The doors opened, and the cameras that met us were anything but amateur. They looked like they cost more than my parents' cars. *Oh. Shit.*

"Pretend they're not there," Paxton whispered.

"Right. Because that's possible."

The cameras and crew moved out of our way as we walked onto what was obviously the top of the terminal's tower. Glass walls greeted us, as well as at least a dozen people holding cameras, microphones, and lights. "This isn't for your college media club, is it?" I asked quietly.

"No. It's not."

"Of course not," I mumbled.

"You ready for this?" Landon asked a camera like it was a real person. He'd transformed instantly, from sulky to star, making me wonder which one was more the real him. "We're about to kick off this worldwide spectacle."

"What about you, Wilder?" the cameraman asked.

"I was born ready," Paxton replied, his voice downright

arrogant. He'd undergone the same transformation as Landon, oozing a cool, cocky persona that gave me whiplash.

"And who is your new flavor?" Someone in the crew laughed.

"Watch your mouth, Lance," Paxton fired back, pointing his finger. "Leah is new to the Renegade family, and you might not realize it, but she's got your job in her hands."

The room fell to a hush, and all eyes swung toward me. I had zero clue what the hell Paxton was talking about, but I managed a shaky smile and wave for the camera. "Hi."

Smooth, Leah.

"Wilder, we're all set up for single on left, tandem on right," Little John said from across the room, where a single glass door was open to the balcony.

Paxton led me through the crowd until we stood on the grated metal balcony. *Holy shit.* How many stories up were we? How far apart were the metal slats? For the love of God, I could see the sidewalk through the space between my feet and the small crowd that had gathered there.

My vision narrowed, blackening at the edges, and what had been the grate seconds earlier now looked like a steep canyon wall with nothing between me and the ground hundreds of feet below. I blinked rapidly until the grate returned.

"I think I'll go inside," I whispered, backing up slowly until I bumped into Little John's belly, my breath accelerating.

"This is for you, Bambi," he said, handing me the harness he'd been carrying.

"What?" I squeaked. *Don't look down. Focus on him.*

"Bambi, you know...because you look like a deer in the headlights," he answered.

"Bambi is a boy, and what the hell would I need a harness for?"

"That." Landon pointed toward two thick wires Paxton was inspecting, which led from the top of the tower to—*no*

fucking way—a wall at the end of the pool. On the ship. Our ship. The one in port at least six stories beneath us. “We’re zip-lining into the set-sail party,” he said with a grin, as if I’d been given some kind of gift.

“No. Nope. Not happening,” I said, shaking my head, trying to back into the tower.

“Wilder, we’ve got a no-go,” Little John called out.

Paxton looked over from where it appeared he was securing whatever contraption wanted to kill me. He took me gently by the arm to the side of the tower where the cameras weren’t pointing and, for once, my thoughts weren’t on how hot he was but rather how quickly I could kill him and bury the body.

“There’s no chance I’m doing that.” My words ran together. “I don’t even know how to do that, nor would I ever *want* to. It’s insane.” *And dangerous. And so high.*

“It’s fun,” he promised and knelt in front of me. “Step here,” he said, guiding my feet.

“It’s not fun, it’s death, and I want no part of it.”

“It’s perfectly safe. Step again.”

My legs acted on autopilot, my eyes firmly focused on the zip line. “Why the hell would you even do something like this?”

“Because no one has,” he answered, as if that was reason enough.

“Did you ever stop to think there’s a reason no one has done it? Maybe it’s dangerous? Or illegal?”

He laughed and stood, pulling something up my legs and fastening it around my waist. “It’s actually safe, I promise. I’ve done it hundreds of times. Never onto a cruise ship, but through jungles, off a parasail, that kind of thing. Zip-lining is one of the tamer things that I do.”

“Then you’re mad.”

“So I’ve been told. Arm?”

I thrust it out. "Well, I'm saying no. I'm going to walk down this deathtrap tower and get on the ship."

"You can't."

"Excuse me?" I fired back as he snapped the clasp over my chest. Holy shit, I was in the harness. "I am a fully grown woman, I most certainly can say no."

"Oh, that you can. But they've already shut the doors and begun the launch, see?" He motioned behind him.

I leaned around his massive shoulders, my fingers digging into his taut, inked skin to avoid falling over the railing. He was telling the truth. The hatches had all shut, the ramps were down, and the engines were on.

"You have *got* to be kidding me."

"I'm not," he said, his nose wrinkled in apology. "Look, Leah, I made a wrong assumption. I never thought you wouldn't want to do this. I figured the minute you agreed to come with me, you knew what you were getting into."

"What?" My head snapped back. "Because I should automatically assume someone is going to zip-line onto our cruise ship?"

"Well, I'm not just anyone," he said. "Don't you know who I am?"

"Oh my God, could you be any more arrogant?"

"Yes."

I scoffed. "Hard to believe. What am I supposed to do?"

"Ride tandem with me," he answered with a dimple-deepened grin. *Asshole*. "It'll be fun. Plus, it's the only way to get on the ship, because it leaves the minute we land and they cut the line."

"Wilder, we've got to go!" Landon called out, already latched on to his wire.

"So my options are I slide down the death-wire with you, or I go home?"

"You could always meet us at the next port. I think it's

four days away, right?”

“I’d miss a whole week of class!”

“Well, there is that.” He shrugged.

“I. Do. Not. Like. You.” I spat out every word at Paxton as Little John came over with two helmets. *Hold on to the anger, it’s safer than fear.*

“Well, I actually kinda like you, so that’s enough for me. Then again, I’ve always liked firecrackers.”

Unbelievable.

“Let’s go, kids,” Little John called.

“Come on, live a little.”

“That seems more like a quick route to death. Unless you have some foolproof method of keeping me safe.”

He took the helmet from Little John, slipped my hair tie free, and ran his fingers over my hair. “You have gorgeous hair, Leah.”

“You have a huge ego, Paxton,” I fired back.

He slid the helmet onto my head, adjusted the chin strap, and snapped it before doing the same to his own. “If there was one thing you wanted from this trip, what would it be?”

“Not to zip-line right now.”

“Not an option. Tell me. What’s the one thing you’ve been looking forward to?”

I swallowed and focused on what I’d been dreaming of for the last six months. “Mykonos. We have an optional shore excursion that week, and I want to go to Mykonos.”

His eyes flashed with surprise, but he quickly masked it. “Really?”

“Really. My dad proposed to my mom on Kalafatis Beach.” She’d always been scared of marriage, commitment in general, but told me once that there was something about being there with Dad that made her abandon her fears and embrace her destiny. I knew it was stupid, but I couldn’t let go of the hope that maybe if I stood there, I could do the same.

But as of right now, that fear was holding my feet firmly on the ground and off that zip-line.

“Done. I will take you to Mykonos.”

My breath caught, knowing how much that shore excursion cost, and that it wasn’t included in my scholarship packet. “Why?”

“Because I need to get my tutor on that ship.” He looked past me, and the cocky grin was back in place seconds before a lens came over my left shoulder. Our privacy was at an end. “It’s up to you, Firecracker, but you’ve got about a minute to decide.”

Wasn’t that the theme of my day?

He walked me back through the crowd to where Landon stood on a platform, looking more than a little irritated.

My mind raced a million miles an hour, but it slowed the minute Paxton put his hands on my shoulders and demanded my attention. “If you do this, I’ll take you to Mykonos. I will personally make sure that this is the trip of your life. But you have to accept the agreement. The tutoring, the suite, the cameras, all of it.”

“And if I don’t?”

His tongue swiped across his lower lip and, as sexy as it was, it seemed more like a nervous, subconscious motion. “Then I’ll fly you home, first class, on me. You can think of this as that one day you almost did something insanely stupid.”

“And what happens to you? Nothing, right? You pull the next name out of the tutor hat?”

He shook his head. “Every other tutor is assigned. And besides, you were hand-picked for me for your academic strengths. If I lose you, I probably fail. All these people” — he gestured to the crew around us and leaned in to whisper — “they all lose their jobs.”

A heavy weight settled on my shoulders, and I wondered in that instant if that was what he’d been thinking of back on

the ship, if that was what made him so pensive. "How long does it take?"

"Five seconds, max."

My heart started to pound, as if it already knew the decision I was coming to.

If I kept my eyes closed, it would be over before I knew it, right?

He gently tucked my hair behind my ears, clearing it of the helmet's ear straps. How could I tell him what he was putting me through without laying everything bare and looking like an idiot? Without going into that night...and the following morning? Without seeing the cocky way he looked at me change to the inevitable looks of pity and morbid curiosity?

How could I ever get past it if I didn't get on that damn ship? Was it better to stay safe, locked away in myself? *Yes.*

But the crew around us? The ones who would lose their jobs?

I looked up into Paxton's eyes, and we lingered there, wordlessly exchanging something I hadn't had in years: trust. He would keep me safe. I somehow knew it with every bone in my pieced-together body.

"What do you say, Leah? Are you ready for an adventure?" He questioned me softly this time, as if he had somehow realized what he was asking me to risk.

I gave the one word that I knew would change... everything.

"Yes."