

ONE

For as long as she could remember, Zara Bandini had been enthralled by the idea of adventure. While other kids wanted to be rock stars and actors, all of her childhood games featured Indiana Jones or James Bond. Imagining herself as a Lara Croft type kick-ass hero fighting battles and saving the world took up most of her time.

Those fantasies all came before puberty when innocence was her constant companion. After hitting her teens, her life changed dramatically. At the age of fourteen, she lost her mother to cancer and found herself thrust into the role of ‘woman of the house’, looking after her father and brother.

Her childish dreams were replaced by a determination to escape her hometown and make it in the big city. Against her father’s wishes, she blew out of his farm in a beat up truck and headed northeast to get herself a college education.

Now, a decade beyond that dramatic day, she had cultivated a routine to remind herself of how far she’d come. Every Friday night Zara went to Purdy’s, a corner bar on the same block as her place of employment, Cormack Industries, CI. She sat alone, sipped a glass of dry white wine, and reflected on her achievements.

At first, she’d just been grateful to be free of oppressive small town life. College had been an eye-opening experience that made her proud of her independence. After college, she had almost fallen victim to the suck of the shallow corporate world. It would have been so easy to fall into the role of trophy wife or to get haughty about her achievements. Setting this routine of coming to Purdy’s was Zara’s way of ensuring she didn’t take the privilege of her life for granted.

It was after ten PM by the time she got to Purdy’s on that particular Friday night. Zara was exhausted and needed sleep, but she would never flout tradition and miss an appointment with herself. In the warm interior of Purdy’s, she enjoyed the solid mahogany of the stocked bar and the gold pinstripe of the wallpaper that glowed under muted lighting.

Catering to an affluent clientele, Purdy’s held single malts and champagne to fulfill the expensive tastes of those who frequented it. It was a far cry from her father’s smoke filled kitchen where a layer of grease covered everything.

After seating herself on a brown leather stool, the bartender brought over her usual drink. She sipped the cool liquid and exhaled.

“That’s some glass of wine.”

Turning to her left, Zara saw a striking blond man come up beside her. One of the reasons she loved this bar was its patrons. In the center of the city’s business district, this classy joint was overflowing with rich, influential people and the wannabes who listed “networking” as a hobby on their resumes.

Designer suits and smiling faces charmed each other until hands were shaken and deals made. This was a place for the elite to gather and praise each other for being so filthy rich and successful. Given where she’d come from, there were often times she fazed out of the moment, edges became blurred, until everything seemed dream-like.

For her, the meaning of success had morphed through the years and frivolous adventure was long forgotten. The most effective way she could make a positive difference in the world was through careful use of her position as Premium Personnel Coordinator to Grant McCormack, CEO of Cormack

Industries.

The clean-shaven man beside her flashed a row of straight white teeth that gleamed almost as much as his shirt under his tailored grey blazer that matched his slacks. All of the men she interacted with on a daily basis were assured and this guy's arrogance was proven when he took up occupancy on the stool next to hers and leaned in close.

"Can I get you another glass?" he asked.

"I just started this one," she said, taking another sip of wine while not allowing herself to smile. When dealing with intelligent men who usually enjoyed a puzzle, she'd learned it was best not to give too much away about her own mood. "Did I ask you to sit down?"

"No need," he said, undeterred, his smirk remained in situ. "It's a public bar, anyone can sit anywhere."

Leaving him guessing, she didn't give any physical hint of her interest. "And you chose the stool right next to mine?" she asked. The establishment was busy, but there were a half a dozen free stools at the bar, so he didn't have to choose the seat right next to hers. "Didn't your mother teach you manners? It's polite to be invited to join a person."

His confidence remained in place and he twisted his body to face hers, trapping her crossed legs between him and the bar. The flirtation in his countenance matched his positioning and his gaze danced over her figure. "Women like a man to take charge."

"Do they?" she asked, keeping her expression loose as she examined the bottles displayed behind the bar. Remaining aloof didn't mean she didn't notice how impeccable he was and how good his expensive cologne smelled. It wasn't too overpowering and merged with the scent of the hair gel that kept his locks in check. But she had to portray herself as a challenge, to match his confidence with sass if she wanted to intrigue him.

"Yes," he said. "Women want an alpha, a guy who is strong enough to look out for her."

This conversation was going to happen whether she coveted it or not, so she rotated to accept him into her company. "To look out for her?" she asked, dragging her fingertips over the bulge of her glass to settle them on the rim. "Why is that? In case of wolf attacks?"

Observing her body, her expression, and her glass, he was taking in all the details and his interest wasn't platonic or professional. "Forward of you to ask me to go camping with you, but I'm game if you are."

Dreams of travel and adventure had been put on the back burner so many times that she had given up all realistic hope of achieving either in deference to living a responsible life, but she could play along.

Tensing her cheeks, she teased a vague smile and relaxed into wry indifference to test his acuity. "A guy who can pick up and leave at a moment's notice," she said. "I sense a red flag."

He wasn't discouraged, being quick-witted was definitely a point in his favor as far as she was concerned. "Do you now?"

Raising her hand higher until only the very tip of her finger remained on the top edge of her glass, she drew a short crescent around it. "That tells me you have no responsibilities."

"None that would override a weekend away with a beautiful woman like you."

His grin came closer and his upper arm brushed hers. Mischief lit his eyes, tapering them, yet they remained aware. A guy like this with charm and looks could take his pick. It could be perceived as an insult or a compliment that he'd chosen her and that he thought such cheesy lines might work to woo her.

Maybe he thought she looked easy or maybe he thought she was the top prize in the room, though that was unlikely given she was still wearing the black suit dress she'd had on at the office all day. Her makeup was faded and her hair was beginning to escape the confines of her chignon, and being only five feet seven inches tall, she wasn't as leggy as some of the other trophies surrounding them.

Betraying that he was a physical guy by his need to get close, she chose not to relent to his advances just yet. "And where would we go on this impulsive getaway?" she asked.

With a short shrug, he watched her lips move as she spoke. "Anywhere you wanted. Manaus?"

Taken aback by such an unusual response, Zara tried to maintain her poise, but didn't like to reveal how untraveled she was. Exuding sophistication and eloquence were her ways of hiding the truth of her origins. A direct question like this could compromise her camouflage. "I don't even know where that is."

"A city on the Amazon."

Insecurities retreated to be replaced by a smile because there was little chance of that location being the first on her list of travel destinations. "Bugs and snakes? You know how to sweep a girl off her feet."

Are you just hoping to get the chance to suck the poison from a snake bite?"

"If there was a chance of sucking, I know where I'd like to get bit."

That sort of brazenness was very uncharacteristic of his type and she had to work to stop herself from releasing a reflexive laugh. The smart suit and dashing smirk was an excellent disguise. She drew back. There was more to this guy than there was to the usual conservative yuppies who would hit on her at Purdy's. That type didn't tempt her, she preferred her men to be more casual, more raw. It was possible this guy fit that bill.

"Your mother would be ashamed of that mouth," she said, feeling the first curl of instinctive attraction in her diaphragm.

As though he'd sensed her budding intrigue, he pushed the boundary of what was proper and leaned in until he was almost against her. "A man needs to know that his woman is strong too," he said.

She needed a minute to get herself together. Taking a mouthful of her wine, Zara hid her smile. A man who was this bold and authentic touched her primitive desires. Being on the periphery of luxury, the men who usually made a move on her were polished to the point of garish. Finding a guy who had any sort of a rough edge was unheard of, even guys who came from modest roots tried to hide any natural coarseness.

Returning her glass to the bar, she turned into his semi-embrace and translated for him. "You want a woman who isn't easily offended?"

"A woman who isn't too squeamish."

"Or too hard to please?"

Slowing their banter, his shrewd expression tantalized her. "Oh, I'm happy to take the time to please my woman," he said, reducing his voice to a purr and again watching her lips as she talked.

"Are you?" she asked. Knowing how a man liked the chase, she returned to her wine and after finishing it, she rested a hand on his forearm.

"You're a man who knows what he wants."

"Yes, I am," he said, taking his time over each word.

"I wish you luck in finding it."

Twisting on her stool, she had to brush her legs across his to get onto her feet. Testing the strength of his interest in her, she reached back to snag her purse from the bar, locking her gaze onto his. He might stop her. He might let her go. The answer came when his hand landed on the padded backrest of her stool, blocking her exit.

"Why do you come in here every week?" he murmured.

Zara had expected him to provoke her with a joke, in an attempt to keep her here and fire her curiosity. The revelation that he knew her habits made her frown and the excitement of this encounter faded. She couldn't remember seeing this man ever before and he was attractive enough that she would have remembered if Grant had dealings with him in CI.

Conscious of what his question could imply, her mouth dried, and the prospect of being stalked flitted into her mind. "How do you—"

His broad smile indicated that he wasn't concerned with the possibility of scaring her. But Zara wasn't going to let his easy manner mollify her. Any future partner would have to be strong and assured, but she wouldn't be taken advantage of or marginalized. Standing up to her father and brother had taught her a lot about fighting to maintain her identity.

Zara cleared her expression and held herself rigid until she got an explanation for his disturbing comment. "I asked the bartender about you after I noticed you a couple of weeks ago."

Caught off-guard by this reply, her façade of indifference slipped. "You noticed me two weeks ago?" she asked, and his humble shrug endeared her.

His confidence had gotten him over here and had piqued her interest, now she sensed a depth beneath it. That he had spotted her was flattering and it amazed her how a man who epitomized everything she would ask for in a fantasy partner had picked her out of a crowd.

"I've been psyching myself up," he said. "And I wanted to check if I had competition. No boyfriend, right?"

The boyish hope gleaming through his features made her smile. "No boyfriend," she confirmed, relaxing, though her purse remained in both hands against her chest.

His brows came up and she read swagger in his teasing. "Fuck buddies?"

Squinting, she returned to their previous game. "Is that your way of asking if I'm a slut?"

"Let me lay it out for you. I travel a lot for business and don't have time for your usual sort of

prolonged courtship. So when I see a girl that I want I like to get the contracts signed up front.”

Backing up into her stool, she put her purse back on the bar and awaited an explanation. “I’m not even sure what that means.”

His hand left the bar and he spread his fingers around her knee. “It means I don’t mess around with games. I make my intentions clear.”

“What are your intentions?”

Beckoning over the bartender, he ordered drinks for both of them. “This is where I’m starting,” he said, pushing her wine glass toward her. “I’m Timothy Sutcliffe, and if you want me to leave you alone say so now or forever hold your peace.”

Zara didn’t usually pick up guys in bars after work, but there was just enough intrigue around this one to keep her in her stool. Wrapping her fingers around the stem of the glass, she brought it up to her lips in a signal of acceptance.

Three glasses of wine later, they left the bar at closing time, which was later than she’d been out for anything other than work in a long time. Although she’d been at Cormack Industries before seven AM that morning, her conversation with Timothy had been worth forgoing sleep.

Caught in the crush of Purdy’s patrons who were all trying to get through the same narrow door, Tim snagged her hand so they wouldn’t lose each other and she was surprised to feel how rough his palm was. The last few men she’d dated were metrosexual types who had no qualms about admitting their dependence on the mani-pedi.

Their discussion featured her as the central focus. Tim listened and asked questions, he made jokes and flirted with her. Nothing after he admitted having noticed her a couple of weeks ago was strange or awkward. Talk flowed and he made her laugh. Until she actually relaxed into the current of their conversation and let it sweep her along, she hadn’t realized how much she had missed social, romantic contact.

Tim guided her away from the crowd outside the bar, most of whom were waiting for cabs at the taxi stand opposite the door. If they waited their turn for a ride behind the other Purdy’s customers, they could be there all night. Her date must have been of a similar mind because he led her down the block to the next street and stopped on the corner.

“I can get you a car,” he said. Most of the men who’d picked up women at Purdy’s were probably making similar declarations.

Staying close to him, she basked in the fresh autumn air, the susurration of the city streets, and the strength of the hand locked in hers. It was an incredible feeling to relax and just exist in time and space with her new friend.

Acknowledging that she was probably tipsy, her coy veneer was gone, and she didn’t mind showing her amusement. “Displays of wealth won’t get you into my underwear, Tim.”

His shining teeth and glittering blue eyes looked as gleeful as she felt. “Any tips on what will?” he asked.

Twisting herself into his body, she began to walk him backward into the shadow of the building beside them. When it came to men and sex, she had never been shy, but the alcohol certainly gave her confidence a boost. Urging Tim’s substantial form against the concrete, she got her first real feel of what was beneath the expensive fabric of his suit and she was impressed.

Taking hold of his tie in one hand, she slid the other upward. “Strong women turn you on?” she whispered.

“You turn me on, Zara.”

“Good,” she said. “Just one more thing we have to check.”

Pulling on his tie, he put up no opposition when she joined their mouths. Fatigue fled in the face of arousal and intoxication. Although she was the one in front, the strength of his kiss erased any hint that he was a reluctant participant in this exchange.

Reminding herself to unwind and bask in the rush of hormones that had been dormant in her for too long, she was further emboldened when Tim flipped their positions to press her back into the wall. By taking control of the kiss, he had fueled her arousal. Her private fantasies always featured a rough, powerful man who exerted authority over her.

But Zara had no chance to surrender to the moment because an instant later, her companion’s mouth left hers and the shelter of his form vanished too. In sync with her eyes opening, she heard the

thud of a body hitting the pavement.

Blinking into the empty space Tim had occupied, she dropped her focus to see the man she'd been kissing seconds before sprawled face down on the concrete at her feet. The dry sidewalk was stained with the sticky ooze spilling from a hole in his head. There was no way that the fluid discoloring his hair could be anything except blood.

Her reactive scream was so loud that it echoed through the cavern of this deserted street and even her hands over her mouth didn't muffle it. Alone, she gasped for air, and tried not to shriek again because she had to be smart, to keep her wits about her. Dropping down to her knees, she fumbled for a pulse, but found none. Her heart was beating hard enough for two bodies, but she couldn't share her pulse with Tim's prone form.

He was dead, shot, and with that clarity came the realization that she might not be as alone as she thought. Glancing around for signs of an assailant, she scrambled into the nearby alley and hunkered down behind the dumpster to hunt for her phone in her bag.

She had never seen a person shot before and certainly never murdered. Tears blurred her vision and keeping her head was difficult. Panic, screaming, and wailing wouldn't bring Tim back and her survival instinct seemed to suck the alcohol and exhaustion from her system.

Replaying their walk from Purdy's, Zara tried to visualize any possible attackers. She couldn't remember seeing another soul, but that knowledge didn't reassure her. While standing on the sidewalk before Tim was killed, Zara would've said that they were by themselves. Given that she'd been wrong then, there was a good chance she was wrong now. The murderer could be closing in on her.

Phoning the police, she begged them to hurry because she was too scared to venture out into the open until they arrived. She was given assurances that they would be quick, but it wouldn't be quick enough. Hoping she'd be safe if she just stayed hidden, Zara remained where she was, alone and crouched, until the cavalry arrived.

"And you'd never seen him before?"

Zara had already answered all of Officer Kraft's questions. The whole area was roped off and the scene was swarming with cops and other relevant professionals. Timothy was dead and there wasn't any amount of talking that would change that.

Her thoughts were meandering around in her mind in their own haunted bubbles. Floating and sinking, they tried to arrange themselves in some sort of order that made sense. But she was struggling to remember what she'd said a few seconds ago, so it was unlikely she'd be able to remember the course of the night with any kind of clarity, certainly not while her fatigue was making it harder to think.

"No, he approached me at Purdy's," she said and her head moved in a haphazard shake. "We talked and when the bar closed, he walked me down here. We were just standing here. We kissed and then, boom, he was gone."

The cop's lip twitched. "You were very lucky. This professional had his target in sight. You could easily have been hurt."

"A professional?" she asked, letting her gaze fall to Tim's sheet covered form.

While hiding in the alley she had been in fear for her life. But it hadn't occurred to her that this was any kind of professional hit. Her fear had been for a mugger, an opportunistic robber who had seen them on the corner and hoped to steal himself a few bucks after eliminating Tim who might have been a threat to the criminal's safety.

If it was a professional job, then Tim was something more than he'd portrayed himself as. She could've been caught in the crossfire, been collateral damage in a battle she hadn't even known was going on. Considering this made some of her melancholy give way to anger and confusion. Those emotions were easier to get a handle on than grief.

"You're certain you didn't hear anything?" the detective asked. "Or see anything?"

"No," she said, still languishing in the near miss and the idea that she could have lost her life tonight. In a single instant, she could've been snuffed out and suddenly her work at CI didn't seem quite so significant. "I didn't see anything. There was no one on the street. Aren't there security cameras on any of the buildings around here?"

CI was on the perpendicular street. It was a couple of blocks over so it was too far away to reveal anything about this crime, which frustrated her because it was the only video footage she'd have direct access to or the authority to release to the cops.

“We’ll be checking that out, Miss Bandini. Would you like an officer to take you home?”

Snapping out of her semi-daze, she made eye contact with the detective. “Are we finished?”

“Yes, we’re finished,” Kraft said and retrieved a card from his breast pocket to hand her. “If you think of anything else...”

“I’ll call you,” Zara said, snatching the business card and slipping it into the front of her purse.

Glad to be dismissed, Zara was escorted away from the scene and past the barricades. She refused the offer of a ride from the cops and instead hailed a passing cab. Shock was still vibrating through her, so it took her a couple of tries to give the driver her address. When they were on the way, she relaxed and told herself that the safety of her apartment and her uneventful life was just one car ride away and that when she got there everything would go back to normal.