

ONE

Dario Correa tightened his grip on her upper arm. "You're hurting me," Sassi Robins winced, trying to twist her arm free. But, he was too strong.

Coming to this abandoned dockside warehouse for the meet was supposed to resolve her issue with the thug. Instead, she seemed only to have inflamed his want for reprisal. There was a fire in him, a determination that she'd underestimated.

Tugging her closer, Dario leaned in to loom over the top of her. "I'll give you four weeks, Sexy Sassi. Four weeks to come up with the money your papi owed me or you belong to me."

Gritting her teeth, she didn't break eye contact because she wouldn't give the asshole the satisfaction of seeing her uncomfortable or in pain. "Not a chance!"

Grabbing her other arm, he hauled her to him and forced his mouth onto hers. Sassi spat him away.

He let out a hiss of frustration. "You've always thought you were better than me, better than everyone. But, look at you now, here, begging for mercy," he sneered, taking a vast amount of pleasure in her predicament. She hadn't begged, but resented the fact that it may come to that. "You're so sure you can come up with thirty grand? I'll give you a chance to scurry around and do it, if you're so sure you can. You get me my money or you give yourself to me."

He disgusted her. "Thirty grand or sex? Really, Dario? Are you that hard up?"

His lip curled with perverse pleasure. "I don't want a night. I'll own you forever. You'll say 'I do' and raise the next generation of Correas and you'll love every second."

Not a chance. Sassi hadn't wanted Dario to touch her in high school and she didn't want him touching her now. It didn't matter that most other women would think he was attractive and his money didn't hurt how attractive he was, to others anyway. Nothing could move her to wanting him.

But, her father's debt was giving Dario a chance to do what he'd failed to do at school over a decade ago. Damn her father for dying and leaving her to deal with his gambling debts. She damned her brother too, for leaving town before Dario caught up with them again.

With her brother, Stuart, at her side, Sassi had been dumb enough to think that she could face the trouble. Stuart had been hiding them for a month and the whole time she'd argued the case for reasoning with Dario.

Eventually, she'd taken matters into her own hands and arranged this meeting. Except as soon as she'd told Stuart, he'd scarpered. Sassi was alone. She had to fix this alone.

"I'll get you your money. I'll bring it here in six weeks," she said, every extra day she could buy was vital. "And, yeah, I'm confident. There's no way I'll let you lay your hands on me."

Leaning back, he leered at her body. "I'll cut my fiancée some slack, I'll give you the six weeks. You be here at midnight, six weeks from today, with my money or I'll track you down. I'll track down your brother, and every other person you ever loved, and I'll make all of 'em suffer for a long time before I put them out of their misery... and I'll still make you marry me."

Thrusting her away, he scanned her body again and his mouth slanted like he anticipated getting what he wanted. The idea of being with Dario made her sick, and his demand seemed petty and vindictive. But, he was a man who could do a lot of damage. He knew people, and delighted in torturing others. Sassi wouldn't let that happen to anyone she cared about.

Nodding at his men, they cleared out and Dario disappeared in their wake. As soon as the door on the warehouse slammed, she sighed.

Shit. What was she going to do? Thirty grand was no small order.

The only asset anyone in her family ever had was her grandmother's house. Sassi had believed it was paid for when her dad inherited it fifteen years ago. But, it wasn't. No, that was wrong, it had been paid off before her grandmother died. Since then, without telling anyone, her father had taken out two mortgages on the property so he could indulge his love of gambling.

The mortgages might not have been a problem, if her dad had bothered to pay them. But, the house had been foreclosed on while her dad was dying in the hospital. Sassi had been kicked out and lost

most of her possessions in the process. Her father's medical bills were still outstanding and her brother had been evicted from his apartment for failure to pay rent. The locks would be changed before the end of the week. Not that it mattered, they couldn't stay there while they were hiding out from Dario anyway. But, whatever was left of their possessions were still in there and Sassi had nowhere to move them to.

Losing the apartment wasn't all Stuart's fault. He'd been trying to cover bills and expenses and there just wasn't enough money to go around, which was probably another reason he'd chosen to disappear. Her brother had no apartment and, as far as he was concerned, a sister with a doomed plan.

Being on her own, Sassi was gaining a better appreciation of her brother's pessimism. She had no job, no home, and no family support. Yet, she was supposed to find thirty thousand dollars and get Dario off their backs?

Her cellphone rang. That would be disconnected soon too, she hadn't paid the bill for weeks. Not having a phone was the least of her troubles, but she'd embrace it while she still could.

That's what she thought until she saw Karen's name flashing on the screen. Karen was her brother's ex-girlfriend. Sassi didn't want to be the one to explain that Stuart had vanished and they had no way to contact him.

But, she couldn't ignore the woman who was the closest thing she had to an ally. So, Sassi answered the call. "Karen?"

"Listen, this might be insane," Karen said, nerves rattling her.

Intrigued, Sassi was also suspicious. "What?"

There was no immediate response. The last thing that Sassi needed was Karen hesitating for so long that the phone got disconnected while she was on it.

But, she did eventually speak. "I just got a call from a guy desperate for a cook."

Karen worked at a temp agency connecting employers to employees. Trusted with several of her own accounts, she'd offered to give the siblings dibs on jobs that would help them raise cash fast. Sassi would guess that Karen had tried to call Stuart first, but she wouldn't have gotten through. Stuart was ducking calls, or maybe his phone had already been disconnected.

"I'm a pastry chef," Sassi said.

She'd started her career as a baker during weekends and summers in high school. After graduation, she'd gone on to get official qualifications and started her own small business doing orders for coffee houses, bars, and restaurants, as well as taking on contracts making cakes for weddings and other events.

Or she had.

While her dad had been dying in hospital, she'd given up most of her clients. It would take time to build up her clientele again; time she didn't have. Not that she'd ever made close to thirty grand in six weeks before even if she had a full schedule.

"But you can scramble eggs and make meatballs or something, right?"

Karen's voice brought her back to the present. Sassi wasn't that great at haute cuisine, but she could do comfort food. "Yeah, but restaurants don't want—"

"This isn't a restaurant," Karen said. "It's only a four-week job. I know the mess you're in and... he said he'd pay fifteen hundred a week and pay a one-off ten-grand stipend to anyone who could be ready to cast off before dawn without complaint or delay."

"Cast off?"

"It's on a boat, a salvage vessel, and... I don't know how serious he was, but he said there was a bonus at the end of the job... he said it could be up to a hundred grand."

Gasping, Sassi felt hope for the first time. The figures were so good that even without the bonus, they'd get her over halfway to her goal. Even just a fraction of that hundred-grand promise could save her from a future of sexual servitude.

Grabbing a pen from her long strap hobo bag, Sassi tucked the phone on her shoulder under her ear and prepared to write on her hand. "Give me the details and don't send anyone else. Tell him I'll do it, say whatever it takes to get me the gig."

"I can text you—"

"No," she said. Karen was one of the few people who knew the situation, so Sassi could be honest with her. "I don't know how long this phone will last. Tell me now. And, will you clear out Stuart's apartment as soon as you can? Store everything at your place, I'll make it right when I get my bonus."

Karen had a key. She and Stuart had been together for years, though her brother had always been wishy-washy about making the final commitment. In her opinion, Karen was a keeper and her brother was a dumbass.

“Where... Where is Stu?” Karen asked without disguising her trepidation.

So, Sassi had been right in her assumption that her stupid brother hadn’t been decent enough to tell the woman who loved him where he was going. Somehow, she took no comfort in that triumph.

“He split,” Sassi said, believing that someone should tell Karen the truth, especially given that her pseudo-sister-in-law might just have saved her hide. “He’ll come back when this is all straightened out. I know he will.”

Truth was, she didn’t know anything for sure, but Karen was a good catch and she had a kind heart. Stuart would be a fool to let her go for good. They’d only broken up last week when Dario had turned up the heat and started threatening to hurt those they cared about.

Sassi and her brother had agreed that they should endanger as few people as possible. Anyone they cared about could be hurt to punish them, and Karen would be top of that list since Sassi had no romantic interest for Dario to target.

Karen’s groan was one of disapproval. “You shouldn’t be dealing with this alone, Sassi, honey. Oh, it’s so typical of him to run off like a coward.”

Her resentment toward the man who’d just recently broken her heart was understandable. Instead of offering excuses for his behavior, Sassi gave her brother an out. “This job could be our way out and Stuart can’t even boil water, so he’s no cook. This is on me,” Sassi said. “Give me the details.”

Karen gave in and told Sassi what she needed to know. Writing the specifics on her hand, she began to make plans. She’d pick up her kit from Stuart’s and while she was there, she’d whip up something delicious to tempt her new boss and colleagues.

It never failed.

She wasn’t hearty to look at, but any doubts they had would be erased by some cheesecake muffins or homemade bear claws. She’d cook up a storm and pack some ingredients and tools, as well as a few jars of her homemade jelly.

Sassi didn’t know what supplies she’d have to work with. Though Karen had said the ship would be stocked, Sassi guessed that was for meals. If she wanted to maximize her bonus, she’d have to pamper and spoil the boss’s stomach and she only knew one way she could do that: dessert.

If there was one thing that didn’t bother a baker, it was getting up early.

So, when Sassi was told to be on the docks at five AM sharp, she didn’t blink.

The sun wouldn’t rise for another two hours, but Karen had mentioned nautical twilight or some term like that. Sassi knew nothing about boats or about sailing, but she assumed that didn’t really matter; she’d been hired for her cooking skills.

Because she was worried about meeting the tough standard expected of the meals, Sassi had gone overboard bringing her own supplies. That meant she was traipsing along the dock pulling two suitcases, wearing a huge backpack on her back, and a small one on her front, as well as wearing her usual oversized hobo bag.

She’d never looked more like a hobo in her life, and figured she should’ve grabbed a shopping cart and collected some cans on her way to complete the look.

After begging her way through the security gate to get onto the docks, one thing became clear in a hurry: this was no high-class operation.

Sassi didn’t really know what she’d been expecting. But, when she thought about sailing, she thought of sleek yachts and cruise liners. She thought of uniforms and table manners. Her assumptions were nowhere near the mark.

Instead, what she found were a lot of noisy, dirty boats with chipped paint and stained ropes. Grubby sailors jeered her on her walk along the docks from their boats. It was sort of impressive that in near darkness, while she struggled with her luggage, these Neanderthals were still cat calling even though she’d probably never looked less attractive.

At the security gate, she’d told the guy hanging against the fence that she was Eros’ new cook because that’s what Karen had told her to say. He’d looked down to her feet and back up to her face again before laughing and punching in a code to unlock the gate. Why had he laughed?

Sassi had been preoccupied with the gate guy's amusement until the first sailor shouted out to her. Maybe there weren't many women down on the docks at this time in the morning; that could be why she was drawing so much attention. But, she'd been taught well and was street smart enough to know not to respond when the predators outnumbered her.

It wasn't easy for Sassi to hold onto her sass, not until she saw how huge most of these guys were. After that, she was okay with just keeping her eyes front and striding forward.

Feelings of dread joined her as she kept on going, looking for the boat that she'd been told she wouldn't be able to miss. If this had been any other job, she'd probably have turned and headed back inland by now. But, if she did that, she was admitting defeat.

The plain truth was, she needed this job. She needed the money.

How bad could it be?

This was a legitimate job. The captain... what was he called again? Carson Swain... Yes, Captain Carson Swain. He was the one who had called a temp agency looking for a cook. That was legitimate, right? If he wanted a sex slave, or just someone to beat on, he wouldn't identify himself to a reputable company, would he?

Unless he'd used a false name... but then he would have to give the ship a false name and—
Eros.

There it was. The name was written in thick dark letters that stood out on a red hull. They could be black, could be navy, could be a lot of things... But, it didn't matter, that was the moniker she was looking for.

Shit. The boat was huge and not what she was expecting at all. There was a tall white tower of decks nearer the front of the boat. The back was long and flat with a huge crane towering over it. She couldn't see any people or many details because of the dark and the proximity of the boat to the dock. But she hadn't expected all those antennae to be sticking out the top. With all those masts and spinning things adding to the height of the white block, it was taller than a building.

"You lost?"

Whipping around, she inhaled when she registered the height and width of the man striding toward her with a thick length of wound rope around his shoulder. "I..." Uncurling her fingers from the handle of her suitcase, she tried to be subtle about sliding her hand into her hobo bag to seek out her pepper spray. "I'm not lost, I'm looking for Eros."

Gruff and impatient, there was nothing welcoming about the stranger. "You found it, but I don't want to hear about what Swing did to you. Call a cop or a priest, I don't give a shit."

Wasn't that nice. All her ideas of good ole chivalry and naval decorum went out the window as she absorbed his features. He had thick, dark hair that looked as black as ink and as unkempt as the beard covering his jaw. He got closer and she found no civility in his eyes, in fact they narrowed to disgust when he reached her.

"You're a dainty one; there ain't an ounce of fucking fight in you. You've wandered out of your comfort zone. I'm surprised you made it this far with the Swag Wagon in port."

If that was a threat, she'd take it. As long as he was talking, he wasn't acting. Her finger moved over the trigger on the can of pepper spray. If this guy even thought about touching her with so much as a fingertip, she'd unload the whole damn can in his face.

The smell of the sea didn't completely overtake the scent of musky man and musty rope, but that rope was the only thing preventing her from pulling the can out. It looked heavy, really heavy. It was looped round and round, each length had to be four inches in diameter, but he was holding it there on his shoulder like it weighed no more than her purse. Still, while the coiled rope was there, he would be at a disadvantage if he tried to take her down.

"You'd be surprised how far my comfort zone stretches," she said, holding her ground. "Tell me where to find Captain Swain or move the hell out of my way."

The flare of surprise on his face told her that he wasn't used to people speaking back to him. But, Sassi wasn't going to be intimidated just because he was built of solid muscle, a foot taller than her, and probably twice as wide.

As fast as the surprise had appeared, it vanished. He narrowed his eyes to a grumpy growl again, blazing more disgust before he spoke. "What do you want with Swain?"

"He's my boss, and I don't think he'd like you loitering out here trying so hard to intimidate his new cook."

Sassi didn't know a thing about the man she was going to be working under, but she hoped there was at least some chance that he was a decent guy given that she'd be stuck on a boat with him and his people for the next month.

"Aw, shit," he exhaled and bent his knees to toss the rope off his shoulder, letting it drop to the ground. Planting one foot, she slid the other back, setting her stance wide while pulling her pepper spray closer to the top of her purse. If this was when he was going to make his move to attack, she'd be ready. "What the fuck am I supposed to do with a twig like you? You're a fucking waif."

His tone was offensive enough, his words were a smack in the face. "You don't do a damn thing," she said, forcing herself not to call him an asshole. Then, she started to put pieces together... and... oh... uh oh... he meant... "Oh no."

"Yeah, sweetheart. Captain Carson Swain, at your service," he said, though she didn't believe he'd do a thing for her even with a gun to his head. There was nothing warm or happy about his introduction.

"You're the captain?" she asked.

Swallowing hard, Sassi realized this was grimmer than she could ever have thought. This guy wasn't as bad as the Neanderthals she'd seen on her way here, he was worse.

His physical size pretty much guaranteed there wasn't a thing on this earth he couldn't take by force if the notion took him. Who would stand up to a guy as mean and rough looking as him? There would be zero chance of anyone else ever triumphing in a fight against him.

His black gaze trailed down to her feet. "I'm the cap'n, and you ain't no cook."

She had no idea how he could tell that from looking at her, especially since most of her was covered up, still laden with luggage. Proving her skills was not going to be hard; it would actually be fun. Taking him down a peg would be her pleasure.

Smiling, she unzipped the bag on her chest, so she could get to the plastic tub of cookies she'd put on top. "I bet you're a cookie man," she said, switching off the sass in favor of her best attempt at charm.

Sassi did have a tub of muffins too, but he didn't seem the soft and sweet type. He was tougher and chewier. His head tilted forward; she'd surprised him. Good. Sassi had never been accused of being predictable.

"What the fuck?"

Opening the tub, she reached inside to break off a piece of cookie. "Open your mouth, Captain."

She could do seductive if she had to, but Sassi tried to be selective about who she turned it on for and she didn't want to give him the wrong idea. "Not a chance, sweetheart."

Pushing out her lower lip, she wished she had the advantage of her cleavage, but it was covered up.

Dumping the cookie back in the tub, she licked her fingertips and re-zipped the bag. "Okay, then turn me away," she said. "You and your crew can do with cold cereal instead of bacon and pancakes every morning." Sassi made a show of looking left then right. "'Cause I don't see any one else asking permission to come aboard your dingy."

His jaw ticked before he clenched it tight. "It's a ship, not a dingy, and insulting Eros guarantees you won't set one fucking toe aboard."

Damn, she'd insulted him. The only way to ingratiate herself now would be to appeal to his ego. She hated doing that, especially with a guy so clearly arrogant enough that he needed no encouragement to believe he was the best.

"I'm sorry, Captain," she said, licking her lower lip to draw it in between her teeth. "I didn't mean to insult your friend. Eros is beautiful; intimidating, so large and powerful." Picking up the end of her hair, she coiled it around her index finger as she let a fingertip from her other hand touch a snap on the front of his coveralls. "A silly little girl like me would never—"

"You a lush?" he asked, pushing her finger away from his sternum with the back of his rough hand.

"A lush?" she asked, unable to hide her offence. "You think I'm a drunk? Screw you, asshole! I flirt with you, you're rude. I accidentally say something that hurts your precious feelings and you sulk. Then, I try to make you feel better by praising the hunk of junk you worship and you insult me. You know what, asshole, shove your fucking job up your ass! I don't need you any more than I need the other shit I've got going on in my life. I've had about as much of fucking men as I can take! Fuck you."

Spinning around, she was ready to march away, but his arm came under hers and he grabbed her wrist to whirl her around to face him again. “That’s the attitude you bring on my ship, Waif. You say you can cook? It’s not like I’ve got a lot of options. So, if you work hard, don’t complain, and quit the innocent babygirl thing, we won’t have a problem.”

Was he trying to provoke her into showing her spunk or was he just an asshole who’d accidentally stumbled on it?

Snatching her wrist back, Sassi withdrew a step. “What makes you think I want your stupid job now?”

“ ‘Cause what kind of fucking woman comes down the docks at five AM unless she needs it? My crew members need to have backbone, you’ve proved you’ve got that, now get your fucking ass on board, Waif.”

Tipping up her chin, she opened her arms to grab the handle of each of her suitcases at her flanks. “Stop calling me waif.”

“I’ll call you whatever I want; everyone’s got a nickname on the sea,” he said and nodded sideways. “Leave the dunnage.” He must have read her blank expression. “Your baggage. Shake a leg. Flank speed... When the captain says move, you move. Can you follow orders, Waif?”

Something about the question, abrupt and gruff though it was, made her want to flirt again. Wait. What was that buzz in her belly? He took half a step toward her and she inhaled. The nearer he got, the more intense that vibration in her skin grew.

But he was a dirty, smelly oaf. A lunkhead. A brute.

Hmm, why did her belly feel so light?

Twisting away, she chose to ignore her mutinous body, and spoke to him over her shoulder. “Maybe if you can ask nicely,” she said and flounced toward the gangplank.

She heard her cases move and the captain cursed under his breath. “You trying to sink us before we cast off?” he asked. “What the fuck you got in here?”

Everything she valued in life, but she didn’t say that. Steadying herself with a hand on each side of the gangplank, Sassi took one careful step and then another. The captain crowded up behind her, trying to move her forward faster, using his bulk against her.

He was so solid and strong that she had to hurry to try to put space between them, except his long legs ate up the gangplank and she couldn’t go fast enough to maintain any distance. Sassi felt flustered and didn’t like to be harassed.

In an attempt to turn the tables, when she got to the top of the gangplank, she stopped dead, right before stepping onto the deck.

“What’s the problem?” he griped.

Turning her chin to her shoulder, she steeled herself. “Are you always in such a hurry, Captain Swain?”

“You want your stipend? Get your tush on board, Waif, and I told you to cut out the flirting.”

Without hiding her smile from herself, she moved forward. The boat rose on the swell of the water to meet her and she stumbled, catching herself on the cold painted wall opposite the end of the gangplank.

Sassi didn’t appreciate the snicker she heard behind her. But, when he grabbed her elbow and pulled her down the deck, she re-thought how she’d goaded him and remembered what she’d thought about how he could take what he wanted from anyone by force.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked.

“Your luxury cabin. Buckle up, sweetheart, Eros is gonna take you for a ride.”

A ride. An adventure. Maybe this was the Voyage of the Damned. But, if she stayed ashore she’d be damned for sure; there was no way to make the money for Correa without this job. The captain was a brute, but she could deal with whatever he threw at her providing he paid her.

The money, that’s what this was about. As long as she kept that in sight, Sassi could handle anything.