

Eight Days In

At this time of night, and in other circumstances, the superyacht Escape should have been illuminated with a dazzling array of lighting – a shout-out to surrounding vessels, to aircraft, and to the crew and guests. Spotlights, deck lights, LED walkways. Underwater lanterns and multicoloured lasers, turning the water every hue under the sky. Fireworks were a regular evening spectacle on a yacht this size, though perhaps not in weather like this.

Tonight, the only glow was from a dying flare – the last one, launched in desperation. It glided towards the water, dancing as gusts of wind took it this way and that, before it was extinguished, unseen, under the black water of the Atlantic.

The superyacht drifted, thousands of miles from land, rising and falling in the white-crested swell. Water crashed over her bows and stern, swamping the lower decks, swirling into every corner. The metal hull shuddered under the strain, vibrations travelling deep inside the vessel. Thunder rumbled as wind screamed across every surface, with no sign of relenting.

Inside, on the main deck, the chandeliers should have been casting their sparkle over a room bursting with smiling crew, relaxing into the leather sofas, enjoying the splendour and isolation of the voyage. Their glasses should have been full, along with their stomachs.

But the chandeliers were dark, the only lights battery-powered, emergency use, already fading. The lower decks were pitch black, the upper decks lit sporadically, many of the torches extinguished on purpose as the crew took refuge in the darkness.

Glasses lay strewn across the floor of the lounge, contents spilled into the thick carpet. Empty bottles of wine and beer rolled to and fro, dropped as their owners hurried outside into the night, climbing as high as possible.

Trying to get away.

Outside, battling the wind and rain, a solitary figure crept along one of the side decks, pausing to peer into the swirling waters below, holding tight to the rail. The floor was slippery, the yacht's motion uncontrolled, unpredictable. They shivered against the wind, tasting the salt spray, feeling the drop in temperature the storm had brought with it, tugging at the zipper on their jacket. Was that movement – footsteps, a splash in the water? In this weather, it would be a miracle to hear anything useful at all.

The figure remained motionless for a few seconds, ensuring they kept to the darkness, out of the range of any feeble lanterns swinging in the windows, avoiding the probing search of a flashlight from above. Satisfied, they headed forward, ducking inside, towards the stairwell.

Three decks above, the crew huddled together in fear. Most had sailed through far worse storms than this. The motion didn't bother them, and neither did the wind and the rain. On a yacht this size, none of those things would normally pose a threat.

And yet, they were terrified.

The crew had shut themselves into the enclosed cocktail bar, a room some thirty feet across and twenty deep. The bi-fold doors were closed and locked. A distant flash of lightning illuminated them, just for a second, but long enough for all to see the smear of blood on the glass, and the crimson stains on the floor.

The single staircase down to the bridge was barricaded, covered over by a fridge, of all things, pushed across the doorway and wedged

at the corner with a fire extinguisher. They didn't put much faith in it. But it was all they had.

The storm raged. Dangerous and violent. They were at least three days from land, but with no way of contacting the shore.

One of the crew wept, legs tucked against her chest. Another tried to comfort her, but without much conviction. There was nowhere to go. No reassurance to give.

It wasn't the storm she was afraid of.

I

Two weeks earlier

The smell hit me before the noise. Salt, diesel, the bitter tang of chemicals in the air. It was followed by the low thrum of a busy port, distant and relentless. I'd followed the directions Mitch had given me, through the centre of Southampton, past the port towards the Ocean Marina, where he based his offices. I pulled up outside a squat brick building with bars on the windows.

'It's me,' I said, holding down the intercom button, catching my reflection in the dirty mirrored glass of the door, wondering if I should have made more of an effort. Too late now.

I heard a grunt, followed by the click of the lock. I took a swift breath, sucking in another lungful of fumes, before pushing open the door.

The office was cramped, but clean, professional. Freshly painted walls lined with pictures of Navy destroyers, a few private yachts to break things up. A photo of the winner of last year's America's Cup hung behind the single desk, along with a collection of framed military credentials. Mitch sniffed and grinned, pushing himself out of his swivel chair. His dark hair was longer now, as was his beard, both neatly groomed, finished off with an expensive suit. Civilian life suited him.

‘Sarah,’ he said. ‘Great to see you.’

‘You too, Mitch,’ I said.

I didn’t have many people I could count on, but Mitch was one of them. We shared an awkward hug, my stomach performing an involuntary flutter as his arms embraced me. He patted me on the back, punched me on the shoulder, indicated for me to take a chair. He slumped back into his, its frame creaking in protest.

‘You look . . .’

I stared down at my vest top and jeans, thrown on just half an hour before. Tatty trainers completed the look, poking out on to his nice clean carpet. I made a show of patting my hair.

‘Perfect?’ I said, baring my teeth.

Mitch laughed. ‘As always.’

He tapped the desk with a huge finger, unable to keep the grin off his face. I looked down.

A photo covered half the desk, a set of blueprints to the left, a thick wad of technical manuals and construction information to the right.

‘This is what you called me about? You’re kidding,’ I said, staring at the picture of the enormous superyacht. The shot had been captured from a helicopter or drone, showing off the multiple decks, the jet skis, the hot tub. A smiling family dressed in white, waving for the camera. The name of the yacht, *Escape*, was stencilled in striking titanium against the pure white of the stern. A delicious and grotesque monument of wealth. I leaned over to examine the image, kicking the chair to one side.

Mitch shrugged. ‘I can get you something smaller, more local,’ he said, ‘but not for a few weeks – probably

guarding some boatyard, charter stuff in the Med, that sort of thing.’

My heart thudded. ‘Twelve days’ passage. That’s what he’d said on the phone. Time to get my head together. I couldn’t do that locally, didn’t want some local job baby-sitting rich shits and their jet skis off the coast of Ibiza. I wanted as far away as possible. This was perfect. Just . . . unexpected.

‘Who owns it?’ I said.

‘We don’t get to know,’ he said. ‘Superyacht owners, ones who can afford these,’ he touched the photo, caressing the fine lines towards the bow, tapping the expanse of mirrored glass on the lower levels, ‘don’t advertise themselves. It’s another level. Proper money. I’m talking Abramovich and Bezos. The level that gets you assured privacy.’

I nodded. Another level. Another life. And the security detail that comes with it. Assholes, probably, the lot of them.

‘And it’s just a delivery?’

Mitch nodded. ‘It’s in Majorca for a refurbishment, but the owner wants it moved to Antigua for final fittings. Skeleton crew, straight A to B, no passengers. No hassle.’ He sniffed and leaned back. The chair gave another squeak of protest. ‘They decided at the last minute they wanted a security detail. Something about insurance crossing the Atlantic. You’re it.’

I could see the beginnings of a belly poking over Mitch’s belt. Too long out. Letting the training slide. He saw me looking.

‘You OK, Sarah?’ he said, sucking his gut in.

I hid the smile in time. I nodded.

‘I know this is a little rushed,’ he said, ‘but you’re one of the most qualified on my books. It’s why you joined me, right?’

Joined him and his security company, providing military-trained personnel to private and commercial industry. Mitch was ex-Royal Marines too, we shared that as a bond, and when I came looking, he snapped me up.

‘Fuck, Mitch,’ I said. ‘It’s perfect. I guess I should thank you.’

He laughed, a deep bellow, genuine. ‘You guess? Look, this is the job, Sarah. With your skills you can do this in your sleep and take home four times the salary. It’s good work.’ He patted his stomach. ‘So good, a man can go a little soft.’

I couldn’t hide my smile this time. My own body was only three months out, and my training hadn’t relaxed one iota. I didn’t leave because I wasn’t fit enough. I was in perfect shape; killer shape. I knew it, Mitch knew it.

‘You just wait,’ he said, reading my expression, looking a little hurt. ‘A couple of weeks of lazing around on that thing, those cute jeans won’t fit you any more.’

I shook my head, laughing. ‘There’s a gym on board, says so here.’ I pointed to the blueprint, tugging it out from under the photo.

‘And three kitchens and four bars,’ he countered, ‘not that you’ll be drinking. But tonic water is full of calories, you know?’

I relaxed, knowing we could banter all day. It was one of our tricks, learned through hours and days of operations skin-to-skin. Nothing more with Mitch, though, he wasn’t

up for that, and neither was I. We were pros, ex-pros, at least. And this was a decent way to make a living, after everything. He'd called me yesterday, told me he had a job, something right up my street. He knew what had happened, why I left, why I needed to do something to keep my mind sharp. He'd seen what happens when ex-soldiers are left to rot. He wasn't going to let it happen to me.

'So get your shit together,' he said. 'We'll do the full brief on Monday; you fly to Palma on Wednesday. Immediate departure.'

I tried to look like I was considering it, like I had a load of shit to get together. I didn't. This was pretty much it, here in this office, in a small industrial park in the Port of Southampton.

I carried all of my baggage inside.

I sat in the car for a few moments. It was Amy's, loaned on the condition I didn't add to the scratches or dents. Don't worry, sis, if anyone dents your car, I'll dent them. It's what I do. Did, anyway. Amy hadn't asked for all the details yet, why I left in such a hurry. But she would. It's what sisters do.

The house was empty when I pulled up. Amy might still be at work, her shifts twelve hours long – sometimes she slept at the hospital, sometimes she made it home. I breathed out, feeling the tension, sitting with it, knowing it had nowhere to go.

'Hey,' I said, stepping out of the car, spying Wilfred, her ginger tabby. He crept out from the garden hedge, rubbed against my leg. I crouched, scooping him into my arms, pushing my face against his warm fur.

‘Hungry?’ I said.

We went inside. Wilfred bolted his dinner before curling up on the windowsill, staring out into the back garden, a long narrow wilderness full of unsuspecting prey to be watched and judged. I cleared up, wondering if the ready-meal I’d grabbed from the freezer had more or less nutrition in it than the dried cat food. I decided I wasn’t that far gone, not yet, and threw it back, grabbing some veg out of the fridge, putting a saucepan of pasta on to boil. I eyed the rack of wine bottles for a few moments before taking a can of Diet Coke.

The front door slammed.

‘Only me.’

‘Through here,’ I called, grabbing another bowl, adding more pasta to the pan. The least I could do was cook for her. She’d refused rent, so far. With this job I’d be able to pay her back and then some, start looking for a place of my own. She didn’t deserve all of my crap on top of her already stressful life.

‘How’d it go?’ Amy asked, dropping her coat over a chair, kissing me on the cheek before pulling a bottle of Rioja from the rack. She studied the label, her face twisting as she evaluated it.

Her profile was similar to mine, with the same dark complexion, but her features were more refined, gentle, with welcoming brown eyes and a perfect bob, cut to emphasize her delicate chin, which she jutted out just the right amount to convey the strength of her feelings at any moment. Shorter than me, her frame was nevertheless cut from the same cloth, though she hid it under hospital scrubs.

I paused, smiling – a kiss on the cheek from a loving

sibling. Life was made of such moments, and they should be cherished.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘I’m taking the job. He’s paying me part up-front, so I can give you all the back rent –’

‘I don’t want your money,’ said Amy, popping the cork, grabbing a glass.

She glanced at me and I gave a small shake of my head. No alcohol. Not for me. My body is a temple, *blab, blab*. The truth is, it made the dreams worse.

‘I’ll pay you,’ I said. ‘It’s not fair.’

‘Sarah, I won’t take it,’ she said. ‘I don’t need it. All I want is a bit of time with my little sister, who I’ve hardly seen for three years.’ She took a swig of her wine. ‘So what’s the job?’ she said. ‘Pretend I understand.’

Pretend. My sister, the consultant oncologist, with a brain the size of a small planet and a heart to make it work. She’d got the brains and I’d got . . . well, an athletic body, a temper, and a constant sense of restlessness. We both picked what we thought were the correct career choices. She got hers right.

I’d pay the rent into her account. She couldn’t stop it. She wasn’t clever enough to break the banking system.

I gave her a sinister smile. ‘A delivery,’ I said, followed by a quick relay of most of what Mitch had told me. There was nothing confidential – I hadn’t been *told* anything confidential, and it made a refreshing change, being able to talk about my work.

‘A Russian oligarch?’ she asked, laughing. ‘Or a narco? No, wait, an oil baron?’

I shrugged. ‘A fast-food tycoon. In his sixties with a hairpiece and an eighteen-year-old wife.’

‘Pharmaceuticals,’ said Amy, decisively.

‘That’s the same as a narco. Plastic surgeon?’ I offered.

‘There’s money in that,’ she said, laughing, draining her glass and refilling it.

I tried not to raise either eyebrow. The shit she must deal with every day, if this was her way of winding down, it was fine by me.

‘Nearly two weeks at sea?’ she said, her face twisting in concern. ‘An Atlantic crossing is tough, isn’t it?’

‘I’ve done much longer,’ I reminded her, ‘been much further.’

‘Yes, but that was . . . you know. A Navy warship is pretty safe at sea.’

‘And so will this be,’ I said. ‘It’s huge. A floating palace. It’s got a gym and an art gallery on it, Amy. It’s safe.’

‘Because you’re on it,’ she said with a sigh. ‘I know. You can’t stop me worrying, though. I insist on it.’

We ate. She drank. She pried gently around the edges, not too much, just enough.

‘Hey,’ she said, between mouthfuls of pasta, ‘maybe you’ll meet someone. Sex on a superyacht!’ She wiggled her eyebrows.

I swallowed. Memories of Kay jumped out, brief stabs of pain, longing and regret. The moments we shared – at the time so dangerous and erotic and so alive, they scared the hell out of me. We’d lie awake at night in secret, my skin all goosebumps, anticipating his touch.

He’d make his move, rough, uncoordinated, but never clumsy. I’d shiver, burning as he knelt between my legs, eyes watching me, sparkling. I begged and writhed and

when I was done and completely exhausted, I'd ask for more.

The memory slunk away. Amy's comment was innocent, and not altogether crazy. Perhaps that was exactly what I needed. For the last twelve months, sex was something I read about in novels. Perhaps it would be nice to have some of it leap off the page.

'You're thinking about it,' she said.

'I'm not!' I said, feeling my cheeks flush, confusion mixed with guilt.

'You are. I'm a doctor. I see these things. Maybe a dashing captain, or a rugged engineer?'

'Jesus.'

'I'm just saying. How many people are on board?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I'll find out on Monday. Ten, maybe fewer. The essential crew, plus me.'

'You're essential.'

'I'm a last-minute addition.'

'An essential one.'

'I guess.'

'Ten possible playmates.'

'Amy!'

'What?' She cackled, refilled her glass, pushing her bowl to one side. She let out a huge sigh, leaning back, massaging her neck. 'I miss this.'

I finished off my Coke, crunching the can, dropping it in my bowl. So did I. Life could be this simple, for some people. Sleep, work, eat, drink. Repeat. I wish it *was* enough for me, but it never had been – and now, it never would be.

We cleared up and Amy went to bed, pausing to hug me so tightly I swear I heard a rib crack. I checked in on her a few minutes later and she was fast asleep, curled into a foetal position, the alcohol and fatigue sending her under without a moment's pause. She looked small in the king-sized bed, the bed she should be sharing with her husband, Rob. Except Rob had cheated on her and been booted out six months ago. She'd decided to keep the house, paying the mortgage on her own. Four bedrooms wasn't so lonely, she said, not now she had her favourite sister coming to stay. Rob was lucky I hadn't been around when he'd cheated. The blood would have been tough to wash out of these thick woollen carpets.

I lay in bed and prepared myself for the opposite of sleep. If I managed to doze off without the tablets, it would be interrupted, sweaty, restless. I used the techniques the shrink gave me – visualization, distraction – but I couldn't make any of the images stick.

I tried to imagine my next job, standing at the bow of the huge yacht, watching the hull cut through the limitless ocean, the stern waves betraying our passage, hearing the low throb of the engines propelling us along, observing the bustle of the crew keeping it all running in perfect harmony. All those things I was so familiar with, yet each of them conjuring waves of anxiety.

I pictured the lavish expanse of polished decks and soft furnishings, the yacht wrapping its protective luxuries around me. The alien glamour of a billionaire's plaything, beckoning me on board, welcoming me into their world.

I tried to picture the crew. Imaginary faces, imaginary

personalities. The people I'd be spending the next couple of weeks with.

But that was a mistake. Because then the real faces started to appear – the one I couldn't shake. The one that kept me awake every night, and had done since I'd been discharged three months ago.

The Southampton dockside was busy, the lunch crowds descending to the waterfront cafes and bars, fighting for the best tables, the clearest views of the water and the various motor craft packed in like sardines along the pontoon. I reckoned the average cost of the smaller motor yachts came in at around £500k, the larger ones topping £5 million. But that was still small fry compared to the *Escape*. Mitch assured me that once I reached Palma, the wealth would hit a different level. I took his word for it.

I was the last to arrive, though rigidly on time. Mitch had booked a table at one of the better restaurants near his office, a private booth overlooking the water, with a glass shield which did an impressive job of dampening the noise. The meeting would only take twenty minutes, he said, but appearances were important, and I had to be there. The captain and the owner's rep were both still in the UK and wanted to see us before flying out to Palma. Mitch had told me to smile and not talk. I told him what he could do with that advice.

I approached our table. Mitch gave me a wink before introducing me to the two men already seated.

'Sarah. This is your skipper, Greg Mayer,' he said, indicating the man to his left.

That ruled out the 'dashing captain', Amy's words

flashing to the fore. Greg was maybe fifty, with a receding hairline, a red nose and a body that hadn't seen a treadmill in a few decades. I probably wouldn't be looking to bunk up with him. Still, at least his smile was genuine.

'And Jason Chen,' said Mitch, indicating to his right, 'is a VP in our client's company. He'll also be on board.'

Jason's smile was reserved, unable to hide his surprise. He looked me up and down with the sort of disdain I'd grown used to as a female soldier, pausing in all the wrong places, as if I'd struggle to fight off a period, let alone a heavily armed aggressor. Yes, Jason, soldiers have tits, too. These are mine. Fuck you.

I smiled. 'Pleasure to meet you both,' I said.

Jason cleared his throat. 'And you're . . . um?'

His accent was clipped, American, coastal. I reckoned New York.

'Sarah French. Ex-Royal Marines,' I said. 'Served for five years, in Afghanistan twice, plus various places I can't tell you about.'

'Oh, right. Well . . .'

'I nearly shot this guy once,' I added, pointing at Mitch. 'Because he looked at me the wrong way. Like I didn't belong there.'

Mitch snorted, biting down on his laughter, looking as though his cheeks might explode. He threw me a pleading look.

Jason narrowed his eyes. I'd made my first friend on the crew. Great.

But a sideways glance at Greg showed the captain was equally amused. I'd misjudged his appearance, a bad habit of mine, but the man seemed the polar opposite to Jason.

He stood, placing his napkin to one side, and extended his hand, looking me squarely in the face.

‘Pleasure to meet you, Sarah,’ he said, his handshake firm, but lacking the squeezing insecurity of a man who had something to prove. ‘I’ve only sailed with a security detail twice before, and neither were as qualified nor experienced as you.’

‘That’s what sets us apart,’ said Mitch, obviously anxious to keep things friendly. Jason represented a valuable client. He wanted to make sure I didn’t piss him off too much before we sailed.

‘And it’s why we cost twice as much,’ added Mitch, with a beaming smile at Jason, who scowled, turning back to the table, and the array of paperwork covering it.

Greg was still grinning. ‘I’d love to hear some stories, Sarah,’ he said, ‘perhaps when we’re under way. I’ve always been merchant, private, never military, though I’ve sailed close to a fair few warships in my time. Too close, on occasion.’

‘We’ll swap stories,’ I said, nodding. I’d checked Greg off as a good guy. I could see the wisdom of a few decades at sea behind his eyes. We’d get on just fine.

‘Where in Germany are you from?’ I said, trying to place his accent.

He smiled. ‘I was born in the UK,’ he said, ‘but my parents are from Munich. I grew up there.’

‘And you came back?’

‘I go where the work is,’ he said, laughing.

‘Down to business?’ said Jason, looking impatient.

We ordered drinks and huddled over the schematics of

the yacht. It was even more impressive when displayed in blueprinted detail.

Jason gave us some limited detail on the client – bar anything that could identify him or her – and a briefing on the crew. Greg was recruiting a core team who would meet us dockside in Palma. He paused before describing the *Escape*.

Three thousand tonnes, three hundred feet long, forty-five feet wide. Bigger than plenty of naval craft I'd been on – and I suspected a tad more comfortable, if the cabin layout was anything to go by. Six decks in all, with a central spiral staircase connecting them, as well as fore and aft stairwells and lifts. In accommodation terms, that meant six guest suites in addition to the owner's vast cabin, covering a deck of its own including stateroom and office, plus a further ten crew cabins.

'Jesus,' I said. 'It's a floating hotel.' I glanced out at the boats in this marina. They were caravans in comparison.

'A private one,' said Mitch.

'It's better than a hotel,' said Jason. 'It's a palace. We've got everything. Indoor and outdoor hot tubs, sauna and steam rooms, a massage room, a sky lounge, a cinema, a beach club, a playroom, four bars, two dining rooms, a library and an art gallery. All of it wherever we want in the world.' Jason reeled it all off, looking very pleased with himself.

'Infirmary?' I asked.

'Of course.'

'You didn't mention it.'

Jason huffed. 'I didn't mention the laundry either.'

‘Oh. Has it got an engine room?’

Jason’s smile thinned.

‘Somewhere to keep the jet skis? I read the brochure.’

‘We’ll give you the full tour before we depart,’ said Greg, ‘today is to check what, other than Sarah, we need on board.’

‘Why am I on board?’ I said, ignoring the polite daggers from Mitch. ‘I mean, this is all lovely, but passage from Palma to the Caribbean is all blue water sailing, friendly states.’

‘Insurance,’ said Jason, cutting in front of Mitch, who looked poised to answer. ‘They insisted on it.’

I looked for more, raising my eyebrows at Jason.

‘The times we live in,’ he offered. ‘You never know.’

‘Never know what?’ I said, glancing at Mitch. ‘Because if –’

‘Our company gives owners the peace of mind,’ said Mitch, ‘that should *anything* at all happen, we’ll protect their substantial investment—and the crew on board—from harm. It’s what my business is built on. The one you work for, Sarah.’ Mitch’s voice was gruff; his eyes still sparkled but his expression was a little strained.

I tried to wind it in a bit. *This is what you do, Sarah.* I heard my ex-CO’s voice in my head: *You push it a little too far, masking your insecurities by attacking.* He was right. I should be able to deal with people like Jason without getting so wound up.

‘Gotcha, boss,’ I said, taking a breath. ‘So . . .’

‘We have a range of lethal and non-lethal deterrents that we can deploy,’ said Mitch. ‘I have a list of my recommendations here . . .’ He rummaged around in his open

briefcase, producing several copies of a spreadsheet, handing them to Greg and Jason. ‘I already have suppliers in Spain for everything – these items can be on board in less than twenty-four hours.’

I half listened as Mitch described what we had, my attention drifting, staring out past the glass and the passers-by and the small boats bobbing restlessly in their moorings. I reminded myself that the grey water of this harbour would soon be replaced with the aquamarine of the Mediterranean, the British clouds replaced with the blue skies of warmer latitudes, the city smog replaced with pure ocean air.

But none of it helped. I couldn’t dislodge the rock in my gut, soothe the ripples of guilt, the knowledge that I deserved none of it.

‘Fine,’ said Jason, his voice bringing my attention back to the discussion around the table. ‘This meets the brief. I’ll call the insurers this afternoon. I think we’re done.’

He scrawled his signature at the bottom, and on another two sheets of paper that Mitch produced. Turning to me, he smiled. ‘We depart Wednesday. See you in Majorca, Sarah.’

I could see Mitch’s shoulders relax. Contract signed.

And me signed up with it.

I hung around afterwards, walking through the car park towards Mitch’s office. Jason drove off in a Maserati, Greg in a Ford Mondeo. It surprised me – skippers on this circuit tended to earn big bucks. You didn’t let any old sailor take charge of a £200 million vessel, and the one you chose was compensated well.

'You still here?' Mitch loomed over me.

I nodded. 'Sorry,' I said.

'For what?'

'For being me,' I said. 'Jason just . . .'

'Jason's a complete arse,' said Mitch, 'as are a lot of my clients.' He shrugged. 'But . . .'

I winced. 'I know.'

'I'm trying to build this company,' he said. 'He's a VP of one of the biggest investment groups in Europe, he came to us at short notice, last minute, blank cheque – he could have gone anywhere. And this level of business . . . it's a small world. I want to grow our reputation as the best, with the best people, providing the best service.'

I shook my head. 'Then this was a mistake.'

'Bullshit,' he said. 'Look at me.'

I turned away, feeling the nerves biting, the blood rising.

'*Look* at me, Sarah,' he said.

I turned back.

'You don't have to grovel, serve, laugh at his jokes,' said Mitch. 'Hell, you don't have to be *nice* to anyone. But you can't be nasty. OK?'

I swallowed. Coming across as nasty was the last thing I ever wanted. Despite my career path, I was never the sort to go looking for fights. I just can't help my tongue sometimes.

I could jack it all in, let Mitch down, crawl back home and rethink my employment prospects, or I could suck it up and give it a chance.

I nodded. 'I'll try.'

Mitch examined me for a few moments before his beaming smile returned.

‘Of course you will,’ he said, slapping me on the shoulder with such force I staggered to the left, bracing myself against the doorframe. He still didn’t know his own strength, despite years of his fellow soldiers telling him not to hit them so hard.

‘To address your earlier concern,’ he said, his smile fading. ‘The biggest risk you face is boredom. But what you will have is time. Time to think, to heal, to get over what happened. That’s what you wanted, so it’s what I’m giving you – and paying you handsomely for it.’ He handed me an envelope.

I opened it and stared at the payslip inside, frowning. ‘This is –’

‘Your fee.’

‘This is *way* more –’

‘You’re way more capable than most, plus it’s all up front. Bank it, spend it, whatever. Just know you’re worth it, OK?’

I swallowed an uncomfortable lump in my throat. This type of kindness was rare, in my experience. Mitch was too good for me. This job was too good for me.

‘Now scoot,’ he said. ‘You’re making the place look untidy. I’ve emailed your flight details to you. Wednesday first thing. Don’t miss it.’

I folded and placed the envelope in my pocket, giving Mitch a tight smile before walking away. I managed to keep the shakes at bay until I reached the car.

My crack-of-dawn flight to Palma departed twenty-three minutes late, packed full of unbearably cheerful holiday-makers. I hunkered down in the window seat, thinking I'd been on military transport planes that were less raucous. The two hours dragged, but there were no further delays and I pushed my way through to baggage reclaim as soon as we landed, grabbing my trusty bergen off the conveyor belt and heading towards the exit.

As the glass doors parted, the island humidity embraced me like a suffocating blanket. The Spanish sun was dazzling, intense, the sky a deep blue, drenched with colour. It was already pushing thirty degrees, and by the sweat forming on the back of my neck, I reckoned near one hundred per cent humidity. I paused, sucking in a few deep breaths, thinking how I couldn't wait to get out on the water.

I checked my watch, approaching the first taxi in the queue.

'Club de Mar Mallorca, *por favor*,' I said, referring to the name of the private marina where the *Escape* was berthed.

The taxi driver raised his eyebrows, nodding, impressed, but not without a flash of confusion as he looked me up and down, watching me shove my tatty backpack on to the seat. I glanced down at my vest, already dark in patches, sticking to my skin. My appearance obviously didn't tally

with the normal fares who would be heading to such an exclusive marina.

‘Crew,’ I said.

His confusion disappeared, replaced with understanding, perhaps even a flicker of sympathy.

The short trip through Palma city centre, the so-called ‘Pearl of the Mediterranean’, blurred as I felt the nerves bite. I focused on my breathing, suppressing the nagging doubt that lodged just below my chest, where it sniped and grumbled at me. I was doing the right thing. I just needed to convince myself of it.

‘Air conditioning?’ I asked, waving my hands at my face.

The driver nodded, played with the controls.

‘*Gracias.*’ I felt a waft of mildly cooler air as we bounced along, past the old town, its streets heaving with sun-burned visitors and working locals.

The tourist traffic was heavy, refusing to thin out even as we left the market town behind and approached the sprawling marinas and shipyards that lined the west side of the bay. But soon, the crowded pedestrian streets disappeared and my view became dominated by a swathe of private yachts of every shape, size and colour. If the marina near Mitch’s office had a few million pounds’ worth of craft in it, it was loose change compared to this lot.

I spied small sailing vessels at first – forty-foot single hulls and catamarans, old and new, packed in tightly, masts swaying, halyards clanking by the thousand. As we continued, the masts disappeared and rows of motor yachts came into view, squat and gleaming in the morning sun,

fast, sleek, the daytime playthings of millionaires – but so far, predictable.

That was, until I looked past them, to the outer jetties, to the berths that could accommodate craft of several hundred feet in length. And there, gleaming hulks of metal rose above the rest. Monuments of maritime design forged with unlimited budgets. The superyachts, the megayachts. The property of the one per cent of the one per cent.

In amongst them was the *Escape*. My home for the next two weeks, give or take.

The taxi slowed, pulling up in front of a tree-lined entrance to the marina, security gates barring the road.

‘Club de Mar Mallorca,’ he said, pointing. ‘*A través de allí?*’

Through there.

‘*Gracias,*’ I said, tapping my credit card on the payment terminal, grabbing my bag, stepping into the heat.

I approached the gate, waving my passport at the reception window of a small guard box. The woman inside checked my name lazily against a clipboard, nodded, waved me through.

I checked my directions. Fourth pier along, the furthest from the entrance. The private club buildings were quiet at this time in the morning, restricted, exclusive. A man and woman passed me, coming from the direction of the jetty, arms linked, the gold on their necks and wrists contrasting perfectly with their deep tans, dressed in white linen that perfectly hugged their expensive bodies. I tried not to stare as they entered one of the exclusive waterfront cafes.

I kept going, past the buildings and on to the jetty walkways, staring out at the bay, again feeling the nerves teetering in my chest and throat, forcing them down.

To my left a small pilot boat trundled across the harbour, coming close to the pier, engine belching smoke into the clear air. It contrasted with the clean lines of the huge motor yachts; grubby and industrial, distinctly out of place. A group of men stood on the deck, busily packing holdalls and boxes. They looked like seasoned sailors, wearing black offshore jackets and trousers, and heavy boots. Tall, with thick beards, weathered faces. Fishermen? Coastguard? No, their gear looked too new, neat and expensive. Their appearance caused a pang of memory, of military preparation before setting off on a mission, the mental 'get your shit together' strength I'd worked so hard to perfect. Could I conjure it again?

One of the men saw me looking, meeting my eye, holding it for a moment before turning to the man next to him, speaking into his ear. The second man gave me a quick glance before ducking away as the boat rumbled off and out of sight.

Mitch's photos hadn't done the *Escape* justice. It was far better in real life.

At the end of the jetty, backed against the largest berth in the marina, was the gleaming expanse of the three-hundred-foot status symbol.

As long as a Premier League football pitch, or the length of Big Ben tower, if you were to topple it, the sleek hull of the enormous yacht appeared to be skimming the water's surface, perpetually in motion, the designers

having created an optical illusion, a vision that stopped most people in their tracks for a second look. Which was exactly the purpose of such creations – to make people look at you.

The glare of the hull forced me to squint, nudging my glasses back down, the polarizing lenses causing the mirrored windows on the upper decks to glimmer with a rainbow tint.

It was bigger in real life, too. I'd sailed on plenty of huge ships, but they were big for a purpose – war machines designed to circumnavigate the globe, remaining self-sufficient in times of conflict. They cost billions – but that was OK, because they were necessary.

Yachts such as the *Escape* were excessive. Nobody *needed* one of these. It was pure want and greed – by far the biggest toy I'd ever seen.

Entrance was via a passerelle from the jetty on to the main deck at the stern, and I could already see several people moving around, stowing equipment, pushing boxes to each side, stacking them with care. On the lower deck I spied a couple of jet skis under covers, ready to be moved into the garage – the rear storage area which housed the tenders and other watercraft: surfboards, diving equipment and whatever toys the owner had requested. A pair of water scooters were lashed to each other – small, hand-held propulsion units that could pull a swimmer through the water at a fair rate. We used them extensively in the Marines for rapid underwater approaches or egress. The bright yellow ones on the *Escape* would be used for far more leisurely activities – lazy snorkelling and scuba

diving. Not much chance to play with them on an Atlantic crossing, but they were part of the delivery.

Looking up, I noticed a flashing from the bridge deck – interior lighting being switched on and off. It was too early for a party, so I assumed perhaps an electrical test following the refurbishment. Mitch had mentioned something about the work being incomplete, but we were leaving regardless, the owner impatient and demanding to get his yacht to the Caribbean as soon as possible. ‘What the owner wants, they get,’ Mitch had said, ‘and besides, it’s all the same to us. If the sauna doesn’t work, you’ll survive.’

I checked my watch. Despite the delayed flight I was bang on time. Time to go and make friends. I grabbed my bergen. The rest of the security systems were already on board. Mitch had texted me the thumbs up earlier that day, and told me to call him from the hot tub once we were under way. I’d responded with the middle-finger emoji.

‘Sarah French?’

The voice belonged to a woman perhaps ten, fifteen years my senior. Home Counties accent, she was uniformed – first mate, according to her epaulettes – with an open, friendly face. Her dark hair was tied back, her posture relaxed but professional. As a woman of rank, she had my immediate attention.

I nodded. ‘That’s me,’ I said, giving what I hoped was my most genuine and least threatening smile.

‘Karis,’ she said, matching my smile, stepping on to the passerelle, offering to help me across.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘This is yours,’ she said as I stepped on to the deck, handing me a hard, locked case. ‘I was told to hand it over to you on arrival – you’ll lock it in your cabin?’

I took the small but heavy case from her. It contained my firearms – a Glock 22 pistol and a Swiss-made APC9K sub-machine gun, both lightweight and reliable, approved by Mitch’s suppliers and cleared by police and port security last night. The case would be chained to my bunk and locked until we docked in Antigua, when I’d need to declare it to Customs and offload to a partner company, who would arrange shipping back to Europe.

It was nothing but a box-ticking exercise, but that was the job – I needed to keep reminding myself.

Karis was looking me up and down while trying not to. She bit her lower lip. ‘I think it’s awesome.’

‘What?’

‘Having you on board,’ she said. ‘A woman who’s tougher than all of the male crew put together.’ She laughed.

‘Well, I . . .’ I frowned.

‘I mean that in the professional sense,’ she said. ‘When they said security, I thought they meant another tough-guy deckhand armed with a taser and an ego problem.’

‘Oh.’ I shrugged, glancing at the case. ‘Well . . . we do have tasers, but better things, too.’

She smiled.

‘I *do* have an ego, though.’

‘Good. And the experience to back it up,’ she said. ‘Greg told me about you. He was impressed. Reckons you’re gonna trade stories and give him the inside info on all of your military operations.’

‘He seems like a nice guy.’

‘He is,’ said Karis.

I saw her eyes sparkle as she said it, her thoughts drifting for a split second. So at least somebody was bunking in with Greg. Or wanted to. Not the best way to run a ship, but who was I to judge?

‘I’ll take you down to the crew cabins,’ continued Karis, ‘show you where to stow your gear, then I’ll get somebody to give you a tour. I would do it myself but I’m wanted on the bridge – Greg is already complaining that things aren’t as he wants them.’

‘Skipper’s prerogative,’ I said.

‘Indeed.’

We weaved our way across the deck – an immaculate wooden slatted floor running almost the full width of the yacht, some forty feet, sheltered by the overhang of the owner’s deck above. A collection of outdoor chairs and loungers were stacked along the port side, the rest of the space was given over to loading – I saw boxes of perishable and canned food, several cases of wine and beer, along with a stack of huge plastic crates cable-tied at the top.

We headed inside, stepping over the threshold on to polished hardwood.

‘This is the main deck lounge,’ said Karis, pausing to let our eyes adjust, ‘and dining area through there.’

I took it all in, managing to stop the string of expletives jumping from my brain to my tongue. ‘It’s . . .’

‘Impressive?’ said Karis. ‘That it is.’

The similarity with any Navy ships I’d sailed on ended here. I’d walked into a room that would pass as a luxury

lounge in a five-star hotel. The hardwood flooring soon gave way to thick pile carpet; there was a row of three cut-glass tables surrounded by stitched-leather sofas, cavernous brown Chesterfield armchairs and chaises longues designed to fit the room. The ceiling was high, painted white, but stepped towards the centre, giving the illusion of more space. Dozens of spotlights provided a warm glow, fading as they neared the windows – also oversized, with delicate shutters. I felt the cool blast of the air conditioning, the vents hidden, the air filtered and fragrant.

A grand piano stood to my left, the stool intricately carved. Every surface was peppered with abstract pieces of art, cut flowers and orchids – their colours matching the throw cushions. Bright flashes of colour were framed on the walls, enhanced by deep-purple crystal panels, along with long mirrors placed at strategic intervals, creating the illusion of even more space.

‘Are those walls made of –’

‘Amethyst, yes,’ said Karis. ‘They’re back-lit. I think they cost around a quarter of a million pounds each.’

I shook my head, keeping my lips sealed.

Beyond the lounge was the dining area – more wood, high-backed chairs around a fourteen-seater table, with a retro cocktail bar to the left. Not one but two glittering chandeliers hung above the long table. The colour scheme shifted, the bold colours of the lounge giving way to creams and browns. They probably had names like Sussex Cream and Amalfi White – I imagined the designers laying out colour charts in the same way Amy had done when she decorated her house. I remember her showing me over a Zoom call – *No, it's not just paint, Sarah, interior design is what*

normal people do. I'd feigned interest. Amy had laughed and said she'd paint the bathroom in Angry Sarah Pink.

At the end of the dining room was a set of double doors leading to the central foyer and spiral staircase.

'Is it all like this?' I asked Karis. It was the sheer scale that shocked me – the room was cavernous, and this was only one half of one deck.

'No,' she said. 'It gets better. The private rooms and owner's stateroom are another level.'

'F—' I bit it off in time.

Karis laughed. 'I know, right?' she said. 'You get used to it, although the effect never entirely wears off.'

I wanted to say it was grotesque, an insult to the 99 per cent, a waste of money and natural resources that could be used for far better things, and yet, part of me wanted to bask in it, jump on the sofas, roll around on a carpet that cost more than my annual salary. Perhaps dance on the table, lean on the bar, put some fingerprint smudges on the crystal. I could see why Mitch was so enthralled when he first showed me the pictures. I couldn't deny it. Being a billionaire looked like fun.

'It's *nice*,' I summed up, twisting my face as I said it.

Karis nodded with a shrewd smile. 'Nice. It's nice.'

She led me to the corner stairwell on the port side – there was one on each side, repeated at the front of the yacht. These, combined with a central spiral staircase, gave multiple routes through the yacht – essential for crew who needed to move around almost 25,000 square feet of interior space without disturbing the guests.

We headed down.

The smell of paint and new furnishings was even

stronger on the lower deck, hot too, as the air-conditioned luxury gave way to naturally ventilated passageways. As I jumped off the last step, I detected a hint of motion, the yacht shifting in its moorings. At sea it would be stable, designed for comfort as much as speed, although I suspected a decent Atlantic swell would still spill some drinks on that posh dining table.

‘Engine room through there,’ said Karis, walking a narrow corridor. ‘Then we’ve got laundry and infirmary, steps down to the tank deck, engineering – generators, electricals, monitoring.’ She pointed to another stairwell.

We passed through a thick bulkhead, well soundproofed to keep the engine noise from the cabins, emerging at the bottom of the spiral staircase.

‘We’ve got the six guest suites here,’ she said, pointing at the doors leading from the lower foyer. ‘Then the cinema and spa, and further forward are the crew cabins.’

I nodded.

‘All the guest suites except one are empty for this trip, but we’re not allowed to use them.’

‘Who’s the lucky one?’

‘A guy called Jason, the owner’s representative, or something. He gets the luxury of a guest cabin and full service, which at least gives the stewards something to do.’ She didn’t look too impressed. ‘However, we *can* use the cinema if Jack can get it to work.’

‘Jack?’

‘Jack Foster, chief engineer. Great guy. Australian super nerd. Keeps himself to himself, unless you want to talk about politics, then he’ll chew your ear off.’

‘No thanks.’