

Blurb:

*It was hate at first sight.*

She is the daughter of rock royalty.

He is a scarred, grumpy former Green Beret.

She thinks he's an amoral, uncouth soldier of fortune.

He thinks she's a limelight-grabbing goody two-shoes.

When Yara Emerson embarks on a humanitarian mission to Yemen, her company hires a security team for her protection.

Everything is business as usual until she meets Kade Spear.

Kade wants nothing to do with daddy's spoiled princess, but he needs the cover of the humanitarian mission to hunt down a terrorist.

Wills clash.

Tempers flare.

But their unwanted attraction burns hotter than the Yemeni desert.

Trust fractures.

Friendships break.

The aid mission unravels and danger comes after Yara from every corner.

Could the man who betrayed her be her only hope for survival?

# THE PRINCESS AND THE MERCENARY

By Victoria Paige

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## Chapter One

Fingers of lightning clawed through the dark, heavy clouds, the impending storm a churning threat in the distance.

From the cockpit of the Cessna 210, Yara Emerson clenched the flywheel and adjusted the rudder as the atmosphere's turbulence rattled the plane.

"Dammit."

When she left the airport in Chicago for New Jersey, bad weather wasn't expected until later in the evening. If Yara didn't land her plane in the next thirty minutes, she'd be in deep shit.

"TEB tower, what's the status of my runway?" she asked the Teterboro flight traffic control.

"A3D, I'll have your runway in five minutes. Stand by."

She wiped each clammy hand on her pant leg and stared at the approaching darkness. The day Yara decided to learn how to fly a plane was the day she almost died. The aircraft was similar to the 210. She and Jeff were delivering vaccines to a village in the Serengeti. It was her first experience with humanitarian aid. Little had she known it would also be her first brush with death.

Yara couldn't remember much after that, but she'd made three discoveries that day.

Uncle Jeff was her hero.

She wanted to learn to fly a plane.

She never wanted to feel so helpless again.

The traffic controller's voice crackled through her headset. "A3D, you are cleared to land. Expect visual approach, Runway 24 left."

"Any problems on the downwind?"

"No reported microbursts, but conditions will deteriorate in the next twenty minutes."

"Thanks, TEB."

"Roger that, A3D."

*We're going to make it.* Jeff's words that day echoed in her head. Their pilot'd had a heart attack, but Jeff knew how to fly and took control of the aircraft, preventing them from smashing into the vast fields of Tanzania. After being thrown around in the death trap, the aircraft skidded, cutting through a large swath of grassland as a herd of zebras and gnus scrambled to get out of its way.

Since she'd earned her pilot's license, she had logged many flight hours with Jeff at her side, but this was only her fourth solo flight.

Teterboro Airport appeared on the horizon, but her gaze was drawn behind it, to the lightning flickering inside a gray and black swirling mass of water vapor hovering over Long Island Sound. Giving her head a shake, she focused on the guiding lights of Runway 24. She prepared her approach, checking her altitude and air speed and other instruments.

"TEB, this is A3D, getting ready for final approach."

Slight crackle and then, "Looking good, A3D. Advise left downwind. Maintain seventy knots."

Yara exhaled a long effusive breath to release the weight in her lungs. Guiding the plane at a steady descent and with landing gear lowered, she adjusted the engine's power to accommodate the wind gust. As the landing markers grew closer, she shifted her eyes to the end of the runway, making sure she maintained her angle of approach and speed.

The Cessna jolted as it hit pavement. Yara winced at the less than graceful landing, but she was thankful to be on the ground.

"Good job, A3D."

She thanked the air traffic controller and guided the Cessna around the taxi way to the private aviation facilities. Minutes later, as she emerged from the hangar, rain drops started pelting her face. She sprinted to her Porsche SUV parked in front of the structure and managed to get into the safety of its soft leather interior. Despite being on the ground and being inside the

comfort of her car as the storm rumbled overhead, a tightness in her chest lingered.

Yara pulled out her phone and checked the message that called her back to New York.

“Blockade lifted. It’s a go.”

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Yara peeled one eye open.

The Spinners jolted her into consciousness.

Usually, their song *Rubberband Man* had her hopping out of the bed.

But not today.

The glass of wine and a hot soak in the tub the night before failed their promise to deliver a good night’s sleep. She tossed and turned, falling into a fitful slumber only to dream of crashing the Cessna in the midst of a thunderstorm.

She leaned over, stretching her arm, finger hovering over the snooze button, before changing her mind and stopped the alarm. A lot rode on her shoulders; it was not the time to wimp out. Dragging her unwilling body to the bathroom, she stared at the mirror and touched the back of her hand to her neck. Nope, she was fine. No fever. Her gritty eyes and sore throat were not a product of an oncoming virus.

Yara went on autopilot for the next forty minutes. Shower. Blow dry. Make-up.

She changed into a button-down silk blouse and a pencil-cut skirt and checked the time, noting with satisfaction that she had time to enjoy a cup of coffee.

Flipping on the switch of her coffee brewer, she picked up her phone to check any new messages or news alerts.

A strange rattling noise called her attention and her gaze lifted in the direction of the sound.

“No!”

Yara ducked, squeezing her eyes shut as her coffee station sputtered and spewed hot brew all over her. She yanked the cord of the machine, backing away, her gaze not knowing where to look—at her ruined blouse, at the machine, at the floor where her morning lifeblood lay in a puddle.

It taunted her, as if daring her to fall to her knees and lick the mess off the floor.

Coffee was one of her life's luxuries, one indulgence where seeking the perfect cuppa was religion. Sadly, the mess in the kitchen reminded her that top-of-the line could turn out to be a piece of crap.

"Time to go old school and get a percolator," she muttered as she walked back to the bedroom and rummaged through her closet, selected a cream turtleneck, and put it on. She checked her watch and grumbled. No caffeine and she was running late. Pausing at the hallway mirror, she fixed the hastily applied eyeliner that smudged into the concealer she used to hide her restless night. The last thing she needed was looking like a raccoon junkie heading into this meeting. Then her eyes fell to her shoulder.

A pink stain.

"Oh, come on!" Shoulders slumping, she decided to roll with it and put on her trench coat, flicking her dark chestnut hair from out under the collar as her mind refocused.

She had bigger problems.

The long-awaited humanitarian aid into Yemen was finally pushing through.

All the critics of foreign aid would have their eyes on their every move.

Every logistical step in their organizational plan was about to be set in motion.

Today was her least favorite part of said logistics—meeting the security team.

At least Jeff would be there. So would her father.

Sullivan Emerson was the lead singer of Sullivan's Creed and known to millions of fans as Sully. It spoke of the importance of the mission since he was supposed to be in Europe for his *Phoenix Rising* tour.

Yara stepped out of her Upper East Side apartment building and scowled at the double-parked Bentley and then at the man leaning against it. Len Whitlock was more bodyguard than driver. The bald former Army Ranger was in his usual attire of black jeans and a black tee and, in this brisk late Autumn weather, a leather jacket.

"You're parked illegally," she informed him, wincing as cab screeched around their car and the driver yelled at Len along with a crisp middle finger salute.

"New Yorkers," he muttered, opening the door for her.

"Hey! I am one."

Her dad's bodyguard merely smiled before closing the door. Yara scrolled through her

messages again, noting with irritation the ones from several reporters. God, they were like vultures. Her annoyance spiked further when one name caught her eye ... why was Elliot Denton calling her?

Shouting from outside drew her attention and she scooted to the left side of the vehicle in time to hear Len curse at a driver before he got into the Bentley.

“Len, what time did you arrive?”

He glanced at her in the rearview mirror before pulling the vehicle forward. “Forty-five minutes ago.”

“Mom?”

“Mrs. Emerson flew to Pakistan.”

Yara nodded. She figured that would happen. Relief items had been amassing since two months before when the peace talks and an end to the blockade became possibilities. Their foundation had been scrambling to get the pieces together. Once the ship left the Port of Karachi, it would make a brief stop in Oman for more containers and get to Aden, Yemen by the sixth day.

Zareen Emerson, formerly Zareen Palavi Carter was an American-Iranian supermodel who fell in love with a rock star.

Her mother used to be the face of their foundation.

Now it was time for Yara to follow in her footsteps.

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The Earth Rescue & Aid Foundation (ERAF) had their offices in SoHo, located on the eighth floor of a swanky Second Empire façade cast-iron building, typical of the 1870s.

Yara found her dad pacing in her office. He was on the phone, presumably with her mom.

The other person in the office was Uncle Jeff—Jeffrey Kennedy, ERAF CEO.

“There she is!” Jeff said brightly, stepping up to her and enveloping her in a bear hug. Uncle Jeff, as she called him, wasn’t really her uncle. He was Sully’s best friend since high school. Her dad skipped college to pursue his rock and roll dreams while Jeff continued on to Ivy League universities, finishing up at Harvard Business School. Twenty years before, with the success of Sullivan’s Creed and Sully’s star power, they formed ERAF—an advocacy organization that battled global poverty and hunger.

Aside from leading ERAF, Jeff had his own corporation—Kennedy Holdings. The majority of his business was mining in the Congo, shipping vast amounts of coltan—a metallic ore heavily used in electronic devices—to China.

“Yara’s here ... okay ...” Her father handed the phone to her as she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Mom.”

“How was your flight?” Her mother’s husky voice came on the line.

“S’okay. Beat the bad weather coming back. Are you okay? Are you in Karachi?”

“Yes.” There was a heavy sigh. “Didn’t get your voicemail until this evening.”

Jeff signaled Yara to end the call and pointed to his watch. “I gotta go. Are you going to the port tomorrow?”

“Yes. It’s going to be a full day.” Her mother sighed again.

“Take care then. Love you!”

“Love you too, *Azizam*.”

She ended the call.

“Well, glad that didn’t take five minutes to say hello,” Jeff smirked, making fun of her mother’s penchant of asking “how are you” over and over.

Yara rolled her eyes and turned to her dad. “Sully.”

From a quick assessment, her father looked weary, not that she expected otherwise given the unplanned transatlantic flight. Good thing he had his own plane.

“How many times have I told you to call me ‘Dad’?”

Her lips quirked into a smile as her father dragged her into a hug and kissed her temple. She started calling him by his nickname during her rebellious teen years and it stuck.

She stepped back and observed the bags under his eyes. Sullivan “Sully” Emerson had a muscular medium build on his five-ten frame. For a man one year shy of sixty, women younger than her twenty-eight years swooned when they saw him clad in faded denims, scuffed boots, and a tee. Sully swept his unkempt salt and pepper hair away from his angular face, his days-old scruff almost thick enough to be a beard.

Her dad glanced at his watch. “I can’t stay long, but this needs to be discussed face-to-face. Where are we on the Yemen mission?”

“I’ve forwarded the manifest of the shipment to Zareen and her assistant,” Jeff said. “Our



relief goods have been in warehouses for months in Karachi and Oman and I gave the team the go-ahead to load them into the crates.”

“How many containers, you reckon?” Sully asked.

“Eight forty-foot containers.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to put them on pallets?” Yara asked.

Jeff chewed on his lip. “The shipping company is taking this last minute. Better to have it in modular containers for stacking. Your mom agreed.”

Sully turned to Yara. “How about our people?”

“I pulled a team out of Darfur before I left Chicago,” she said. “I gave them mobilization orders to head to Ankara. Also booked our rooms to stay a couple of days for the inter-agency orientation and workshops.”

Her father rubbed the scruff on his chin. “Do we have the latest status from the UN and State Department?”

She nodded. “Ceasefire is holding. There’s a transitional council meeting next week in preparation for the peace talks in Sweden.”

“What does Tariq say?” her father asked.

Tariq Haddad was Yara’s close friend. They’d met at University of Leeds where they both pursued research degrees—Tariq in Applied Geoscience, Yara in Sustainability Research. Her friend was recalled to Yemen three years ago when the civil war broke out. His uncle, Nasir Haddad, was the leader of the rebel faction, the Nasir Rebels as they were popularly known.

“He says the situation is tolerable.”

Sully narrowed his eyes.

“Okay, it’s volatile,” Yara admitted. “He’s not going to sugarcoat what’s going on.”

“Maybe you should rethink going along, pumpkin.”

“We can’t afford to waste this opportunity,” Jeff said.

Sully glared at Jeff. “My daughter’s life is not an opportunity. Maybe we should let the crates go first with our aid workers. It’s more dangerous than I’m comfortable with.”

His CEO raised his hands in a placating gesture. “We’ve hired top-notch private military contractors. Kade Spear of Spear & Stein Retrieval and Recycling.”

Yara snorted. “Nice company name.”

“That’s a front.”

Of course, she knew that. She had conflicting opinions about private military contractors (PMC) but agreed they were a necessary evil. They were called mercenaries for a reason. Their aid workers complained to ERAF about the appalling behavior of the previous PMC company they'd used. Callous, brutish, and reckless disregard for human life were only a few grievances that were filed with their HR department.

She shrugged out of her trench coat and hung it on the rack behind her desk. Walking over to the single-serve coffee machine she kept for visitors, she asked, "Anyone want one?"

Sully grimaced. "Hate that shit. Not real coffee."

Yara laughed. "That's because you're used to mud."

"I'll take one." Jeff unbuttoned his suit jacket, revealing a slight paunch. He hadn't aged as gracefully as her father. His face was frequently blotchy red, his late nights and too many shots of Scotch taking its toll. His head of blond hair had thinned and was streaked with silver. Ever since his divorce, he'd thrown himself into work and had stopped using the gym in the building.

She pressed brew and turned back to them. "Well, we can't delay and we can't just dump the crates there. The press has been critical of the way humanitarian companies are collecting donations and delivering aid."

Yara handed Jeff his coffee. "Besides, Tariq's uncle has a low opinion of aid organizations. He thinks our government is using them to transport mercenaries into the country to assassinate him. Tariq had vouched for ERAF because of our friendship. Can you imagine if we simply dump the aid there accompanied by only PMCs?"

Her father's jaw clenched, glowering at her, but Yara refused to quail. "Think about it. This is the time to make this happen. There's a ceasefire—"

"You're forgetting, pumpkin, there's never a ceasefire for the other players. Al Qaeda controls thirty percent of the country and are scattered everywhere. Not to mention several militias. If they know that Sully's daughter is in the city—"

"I doubt they even know who you are, much less what I look like." At his continued unbending stare, she used her last ace—calling him what he wanted. "Dad ... come on. The UN compound in Taiz will be heavily guarded."

"I see Yara's point." Jeff scratched his chin. "The UN is brokering a peace agreement between all concerned political parties and Tariq could use our support. This can work to our

advantage. Yara showing up in the midst of the world's worst humanitarian crisis in this time of unprecedented progress in a country torn by war?" Her father's friend bestowed her with a proud smile. "You might land another VOGUE cover, my dear."

Yara's grin froze and her jaw hurt from trying to fake it. She had no qualms of using her public image to further the advocacy programs, but landing on the cover of VOGUE wasn't anywhere in her priorities. That cover sparked a backlash of tabloid articles accusing her of being a pretty face swindling people out of millions of dollars and ERAF was not delivering the aid where it needed to be. This mission to Yemen was her chance to prove the press wrong and reclaim her parents' philanthropic legacy which had seen numerous slurs from the press in the past few years.

Sully impatiently checked his watch. "I need to get back to LaGuardia in an hour."

"What?"

"Concert, pumpkin."

"You need to slow down."

Her father's irritated gaze softened. "I will. One last tour."

"That's what you said four years ago."

Jeff's phone buzzed. "Yeah? Send them in."

*Shit. They're here.*

Less than a minute later, Len entered the office escorting two men.

Both were tall, well over six feet, and muscular—but not the meathead type—and dressed in khaki cargos and black fitted tees.

The mercenaries.

## Chapter Two

Sleeve tattoos.

Dark eyes.

Unsmiling face.

Everything about this man was forbidding. His closed-cropped hair and rough stubble emphasized hard, angular jaws, and hinted of someone who hated his razor. A muscle ticked in his cheek as if the mere sight of her pissed him off.

She straightened her spine and lifted her chin, transferring her gaze to his associate, who was, at least, smiling.

Sensing her consternation with Tall, Dark and Broody, the man said, “Don’t mind Spear. He rarely smiles and is a grouch to everyone.”

Her attention pulled back to the man in question, noting how the lines on his sun-bronzed face deepened as he scowled at his partner.

“I’m Max Stein.” The sandy-haired man extended his arm and shook hands with Yara, Sully, and Jeff. “I’m the better looking and more charming one.”

They turned to the broody presence on their left.

“Kade Spear,” came the grunted introduction and a reluctantly offered hand.

Despite the less than enthusiastic reception, her father and Jeff shook the contractor’s hand vigorously, pleased with what they saw. Yara’s eyes froze mid-roll when Spear’s stare zeroed in on her.

Charged air crackled between them, a distinct pause in time, before his large hand swallowed hers, searing in its heat and intimidating with its grip.

Eyes clashed and an invisible gauntlet was thrown.

“Ms. Emerson.” Her name was a rough drawl.

She resisted the urge to snatch her hand from his and let the handshake run its course, but her skin grew heated and her heart rate picked up.

She’d never hated a person on sight before now.

“Mr. Spear.”

She stepped back.

“Glad we’re all here.” Jeff slouched at edge of her table. “Yara’s going to be point from now on since she’ll be accompanying the aid shipment. She’s our princess, so handle with care.”

*Not helping Uncle Jeff.*

Yara made her way around her desk, needing a barrier between her and the blast of disdain Kade shot her way. She pulled the collar of her turtleneck from her skin, feeling a sudden tightness. Sweat bloomed at her nape and the room became stuffy. She tried to concentrate on Jeff’s words as the other two men’s expression morphed into alertness, their faces shutting down.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Kade said under his breath. A string of curses followed, causing Max to shoot him a glare. “Last we spoke you indicated that *you* would be accompanying the aid.”

Jeff turned red and coughed into his fist. “My doctor didn’t clear me for travel. Hypertension that needs to be monitored. Besides, it makes more sense for Yara to go, she’s been the face of ERAF—”

“She’s”—an angry finger jabbed in her direction—“not gonna last a day!”

*Whoa! Yara recoiled. What. A. Jerk!*

“Listen here, Mister,” she snarled, leaving the safety of her desk and marching straight up to her preordained adversary. “Don’t think because I’m dressed in cashmere and Manolos, that I don’t know shit about humanitarian aid or the conditions we’re going to face. I’ve run logistics and played the politics game for the past five years on our different missions to Liberia, Sudan, and the Republic of Congo. I’ve been on the ground and I’ve encountered the scum of the earth.” She let her eyes give him a once over and was gratified to see his eyes narrow, her meaning not lost on him.

“What the hell are Manolos?” he muttered.

“Out of everything I said, that’s all you’ve heard?”

The amused gleam in his eyes told her she’d fallen for the bastard’s bait. Ugh, to not have a knife handy and stab him right here.

Max cleared his throat. “Before blood is further spilled. Ms. Emerson—”

“Call me Yara, please.”

“Yara.” Max grinned, but she wasn’t fooled. Kade’s partner wasn’t pleased she was going either, but he had more tact. “Yemen is the most hostile place on earth right now—”

“Because of the civil war? AQAP? ISIS?” She enumerated with saccharine sweetness before giving them a narrative of the State Department’s briefing. “It’s my business to know these things. Otherwise, our donors would think twice before handing us millions of dollars in aid.”

“A State Department briefing is nothing but blanket warnings and sanitized truths,” Kade shot back. “They don’t want to scare off people like you who would help paint a better image of Americans. Winning hearts and minds is useless in Yemen. No matter how much aid you give them, we are considered interlopers—the infidels—and we’re all fair targets.” This time it was he who gave her a once-over, his gaze lingering on the spot she had on her turtleneck. Yara instinctively raised a finger to touch the pink stain. His lips twisted in a sneer. “How can someone who worries about a smudge on her expensive top hope to survive in a war zone?”

*Bastard.* He did that on purpose. Yara quickly lowered her arm, but not before everyone saw where her hand had been.

“Have you ever been in an ambush?” He continued his attack, expression hard and tone coated with menace. “Have you ever been held captive under threat of beheading—”

“That’s enough,” Sully cut in and exhaled heavily. “Christ.” He scrubbed his face with his palm before casting Yara and Jeff a worried look. “Should we call the whole thing off?”

“Absolutely not!” Yara exclaimed. “You heard the UN last week. It’s the worst humanitarian crisis in the world right now. There’s no telling when the Saudis will enforce the blockade again. Our aid workers are gathering in Ankara. And Tariq”—she blew out a breath—“I have to be there.”

Her father didn’t reply but gave her a contemplative look. Sully was a member of the board, but left the running of the foundation to Jeff. With the CEO seeing this as a publicity coup

for the organization, there was no stopping Yara from going.

“So, gentlemen,” she said, directing her attention to the two contractors. “Either you’re here to discuss the security proposal and contract, or I’ll get another referral. But I will be in Yemen next Wednesday before the cargo arrives.”

If Kade’s eyes were steel blades, she’d be cut into ribbons by now.

*Back at ya, buddy, she thought. The feeling is mutual.*

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“We just got a new Gulfstream, Uncle Jeff. Why are we not using it?”

Kennedy frowned. “I don’t think you want to risk a sixty-five million dollar plane in a country like Yemen.”

Kade controlled his desire to surge to his feet, lean over Yara Emerson’s desk, and strangle her. Three chairs were arranged in front of her table. Sully had left to return to Europe for his tour. Kennedy sat in the far right chair, while he and Max sat side-by-side on the remaining two.

Yara flicked a glance at him before returning her gaze to the ERAF CEO. “But it was a donation specifically for the use of foreign aid, not to shuttle our executives. I don’t understand why we have to spend four-hundred thousand dollars more.”

“The Gulfstream 650 can only fit eight passengers,” Max said pleasantly. “As you can see from our proposal, there’ll be nine passengers all in all.”

She tapped her pen on the paper. “This is another point I wanted to ask. Why do we need eight security contractors? There’ll only be fifteen of us and, once we assemble in Taiz, the UN is providing security at the compound.”

“We like to keep a one-to-two ratio especially in a country like Yemen,” Kade gritted through his teeth. “If you add in the rotation, it’s not even one-to-two at certain times.” He smiled condescendingly. “We provide 24-7 security but not every man is expected to work more than 48 hours straight. That’s unhealthy, don’t you think? ”

Her mouth tightened and, rather than answer him, she steepled her fingers and regarded him in challenge. “Your rate of \$1200 per contractor per day is almost double the industry average, which I believe is now \$650 a day.”

So the lady did her research. Kade admitted he was impressed.

“We employ only the best,” Max answered.

Yara continued to stare at Kade.

His eyes slitted.

He stood up.

“Spear ...” Max said in an alarmed tone.

Kade leaned over and yanked the contract from her fingers, ignoring her startled gasp.

His peripheral vision noted Jeff rising from his chair.

He held Yara’s eyes for as long as possible, before grabbing the pen from his cargo pant pocket and crossed off the “8” and put in “10.”

Kade smiled without humor as he shoved the contract back at her, relishing the furrowing of her brows, then the dropping of her jaw. This princess would find out she couldn’t yank his chain anytime she pleased. He had intended to talk to her about increasing the number of contractors because it was she, and not Kennedy, who was going, but Kade didn’t get the chance before she went on the offensive.

“What the hell is this?” Yara fumed. “Can’t take my questions and this is how you respond?” She tapped a finger on the number in question.

Kennedy glanced at him. “Care to explain?”

“Gladly,” Kade responded, holding the older man’s gaze. “It was supposed to be you on this trip.”

“Are you being sexist?” Yara’s eyes widened. *Damn*, her eyes were magnificent when she was pissed. They flamed amber. Kade gave himself a mental headshake.

“Sexist has nothing to do with it. It’s who you are.” He took a couple of breaths, the next words promising to choke him. “You’re a beautiful woman. The daughter of rock legend Sullivan Emerson.” He glanced at Kennedy. “Figured you’re gonna have press coverage at the airfield?”

Jeff nodded.

Kade planted both palms on the table and leaned in. “You may not be known in Yemen at the moment, but with the way news travel on social media—not to mention the Dark Web, you can be sure you will be tagged and targeted. If Al Qaeda gets their hands on you they’ll use you for their sick propaganda—”

“You’ve already mentioned that,” Yara cut in. “I’m not complaining about the numbers. I



wanted an explanation and it was rude the way you yanked the contract from my fingers. I expect more respect than that.”

Kade bared his teeth in a poor imitation of a smile, but nodded a fraction.

Yara huffed. “I take our donations very seriously and I want to make sure every penny from our donors is put to good use. It is my job to negotiate, to get the best price without compromising the safety and well-being of our aid workers. Is that so wrong?”

Kade had to hand it to her. She turned this on him as if he was the unreasonable one. He leaned back, sliced his head to the right once, and returned it center in a negative, then sat down.

“Words, Mr. Spear.” Her eyes dipped to the contract. “Use them.”

The corners of his mouth threatened to rise in a grin. He squashed it down.

“The extra security around the hotel in Ankara. Is it necessary?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve vetted them,” Max added and went on to give more references.

Yara smiled sweetly at his partner.

Kade bristled. Max turned on the charm when he needed. Didn’t matter. Kade would be the one keeping an eye on the princess. As much as he dreaded it.

After another twenty minutes of back and forth, Yara initialed where there were changes, signed and pushed it back to them. “E-mail me a copy. Tonight or tomorrow at the latest would be great. Oh, and let me know how many rooms I should reserve for your team. The sooner the better.”

Max answered her. Kade was about to interject but knew she’d balk and he’d rather not rock the boat at the moment. The ulterior motive of SSRR’s real mission began to scrape at his conscience and a suffocating need to get out of there made him surge to his feet. Max frowned at him

“When do you need down payment?” Kennedy asked, surprised when it was clear Kade was leaving.

“You can pay us in full after the job,” Kade replied.

Yara’s delicate brows arched. “That’s a first.”

“We stand by our work,” he shrugged and offered perfunctory handshakes, nodded his goodbyes and strode out ahead of Max.