

YOU, ME, AND THE SUNKEN TREASURE



GEORGETTE KAPLAN



PROLOGUE

A HORRIBLE THOUGHT CAME TO Easy Nevada as she dreamed, and the horrible thought was that she wasn't dreaming.

She dreamed of the pyramid, the betrayal—Candice's face as they took her away—and she dreamed of the desert sifting past with mocking monotony. Its features rearranged themselves around her; every dune she walked over circled around and placed itself back in front of her. Every mote of sand she coughed up came back into her lungs with ten friends.

She dreamed of the comparative health and haleness she'd had after Singh and his right-hand attack dog John Gore had left her for dead just south of the middle of the fucking Sahara. All het up on revenge, she could've run a marathon then. She'd buried Candice's grandfather—who'd been killed protecting Nevada so that she could protect his family—and taken the horse of a dead Khamsin along with a gun and three bullets.

She'd put all three into the horse after it couldn't go any farther. Why should it suffer? She'd been the one who'd made all the mistakes.

She was still dreaming of walking. Shouldn't she have woken up by now?

Time melted in the desert. The only way Nevada could tell it was passing was her tongue swelling in her mouth—a slug trying to crawl down her throat. Her lips blackening and cracking. Her throat closing. Everything wet in her body drying into hard leather. She forgot the feeling of having saliva in her mouth. She forgot the stability of having anything under her feet but shifting sands. She forgot her own name. But she kept walking until she couldn't anymore. Then she crawled.

When she couldn't even do that, she fell and finally felt cool.

CHAPTER 1

“SIR, MR. GORE IS ON THE line for you.”

Singh wrenched himself away from the window where he'd been resting his head. He pulled the sleep mask off and took in his surroundings: the limousine, its gentle vibrations as its tires dominated the road; the dire view out of the tinted windows; and the open partition to the front seat, where the passenger-side bodyguard had a phone pressed to his chest.

“Did you tell him I'm napping?” Singh demanded, wiping the crud from his eyes. “It's very important I get my sleep, you know. I was hoping we'd be out of this godforsaken country by the time I woke up. Now I'm going to have to—I don't even know. The internet here is shit. I want to play Candy Crush, but I can't find it on my phone and I can't download it again and—”

“Sir, Gore said to give you twenty seconds and then put him through.”

Singh sighed. “Fine. Hold the phone up to my face, I still have something in my eye.” He wiped at the corner of it as his bodyguard held the phone out to him. “Not that close! I haven't moisturized in a while. I want a respectful distance. Back, back, back!”

His bodyguard pulled the phone back. After a few feet, Singh gave a stiff nod and the bodyguard activated the video chat. Gore filled the screen, looking so fresh and professional it was irritating.

“Yes, Gore, what do you want?”

“I took the liberty of dispatching a team into the desert, after Nevada.”

“You said she couldn't survive. That she wouldn't last a day.”

“I like to be sure. It makes me happy.”

Singh scratched his chin. “So, how is she?”

“That's just it. We don't know. They couldn't find her.”

“Maybe some wild animals got her.”

"It's the Sahara," Gore said dubiously.

Singh blew air between his lips. "Well, she couldn't have gotten far. Find her."

"We're trying, sir. But as I said, it's the Sahara."

Singh chewed the inside of his cheek. Stress, stress, stress. First no Candy Crush, now this. "Maybe she's learned her lesson and now she's taking a load off in Aruba."

Gore acted like he didn't even hear. "I'll keep looking."

"So... She's not dead. You don't know where she is. And, *ergo*, you don't know what she's planning? Then all you've managed to accomplish by telling me this is to stress me out."

Gore blinked. "I thought you might want to know."

"Well, I don't! If she's in the next room with a knife and she wants to kill me, then I'd like to know! But what if she's just behind a sand dune, dead, and you couldn't find her because you're not looking hard enough? Then I'll have stressed myself out for nothing. No, I refuse to worry about this. You, *you*, worry about it. That's what I'm paying you for. I'm going back to sleep. *You* stay awake."

"It's 2 PM," Gore said.

"Then I've only had a forty-five-minute nap. Don't expect me to apologize for being grouchy when I've only had forty-five minutes of sleep." Singh pulled his sleep mask back on. "Find Nevada. She's in a desert. What could she possibly be doing to hide from you?"

* * *

"This seems rather gratuitous," Candice said as she worked the stripper pole.

It was hardly necessary—she wore a pleated skirt that came down to just below her crotch and a white dress shirt that was both unbuttoned to show off her cleavage and tied up to show off her midriff. Standing still would've been enough for almost anyone's sexual appetites, but she ground against the pole, circled it to show her body off from every angle, shimmied up and down it so that none of her exposed skin could possibly be missed.

Nevada sat at the foot of the stage drinking a Bloody Mary. "I'm American. I don't know the meaning of the word. Literally. Is it a kind of fruit?"

Candice gripped the necktie she was wearing and twined it around the pole. “You’re a lesbian. I thought you liked function.”

“I can think of several functions for you,” Nevada argued.

The club’s atmosphere was oppressively erotic—dimly lit to begin with, neon signs blaring to show off exposed skin in exotic shades. If Nevada wanted to see Candice’s natural coloring, she’d have to get her somewhere private, but for the moment, she was content to enjoy her company here. The speakers growled out Haddaway’s “What Is Love” loud enough to be another partner on the dance floor.

Nevada swilled her drink, the taste intense enough to linger in her mouth like someone had kissed her. “I know it’s kitschy, but I legit like this song. What *is* love?”

Candice’s tongue flashed out of her mouth and ran up the stripper pole, the saliva trail glowing with each pulse of the neon lights. Nevada thought about how unlike Candice it was to do something so unsanitary.

Like she’d read her mind, Candice said, “You do know you’re dreaming, yeah?”

“Of course I know I’m asleep!” Nevada retorted instantly, crossing her arms even if it made a little of her Bloody Mary slosh out. “Maybe if you showed a little skin...”

Candice hung off the pole, looking upside down at Nevada before jolting upright and driving herself against it with a domineering thrust. She pushed her ass out with the same conquering energy, like she knew Nevada’s eyes were being pulled to her tartan skirt as it drew up the curve of her buttocks. Nevada saw the lowermost whiteness where cotton panties covered Candice’s groin.

“Have you given any thought to what you’re going to do when you wake up?” Candice asked. The panties flashed down her inner thighs, painted red as blood by a neon throb, and then they slid down her long legs.

Nevada leaned forward to see more. She knew that the panties really made no difference when Candice’s skirt was in the way, but in her heart, it looked different. The skirt clung tighter to Candice’s curving buttocks, delved deeper into the valley between her cheeks. She could see a hint of the flesh that joined Candice’s legs together—shadows providing a tempting target for the glowing neon—and her lips felt *dry, bone-dry, and cracked like the ground after an earthquake, a taste of blood the only moisture...*

Nevada took another sip of her Bloody Mary. “What will I do when I wake up? Find you, kill Singh... make my dreams come true.”

Candice straightened her skirt with a dainty tug of her fingers. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen. I know I’m a black woman, but do you really think I have an ass like this?”

She gave her ass a slap that had the bass turned all the way up.

“Maybe if you bent over more, I could say for sure.”

Still with her back to Nevada—every curve of it—Candice reached to her chest and undid the few buttons that passed for modesty. Her blouse opened, pulled to either side by her spreading hands, and Candice twisted at the hip. Her open blouse wasn’t totally transparent, but Nevada saw the shadow of the side of her breast, the heft, the jiggle—all but the fine golden coloring that made her look truly delectable.

“Is there a worse phrase in the English language than *side boob*?” Nevada waxed philosophically.

Candice hung onto the pole as she slid down to the floor, landing in a tangle of crossing limbs and artfully concealed nudity like she’d *fallen down the side of a dune, sand burning her skin like a rain of boiling water, the night cold doing nothing to cool her when fever was frying her like an egg.*

Nevada tried to take a drink. Empty. “Service!” she called, shaking the celery inside the glass. “Where were we?”

“Racial stereotypes,” Candice said, coming to all fours, prowling to Nevada over a floor of shifting colors, everything changing but her eyes.

“Right. I think we’re breaking those. You know, most people would say a black woman couldn’t be a Japanese schoolgirl.”

“I thought I was Catholic.”

“Correcting me in my subconscious? That’s a new one.”

Candice padded onto Nevada’s table, neon flashing over her so fast that Nevada only caught glimpses. Her skin was creamy, taut with muscle tone, but no chiseled abs, no bulging biceps—no scars. Everything about her was as soft and smooth as a *drink of water being forced down her throat, Nevada gagging on it, her body rebelling against being awakened when it was so close to mercifully shutting down.*

Candice swiped Nevada’s drink away from her. It was full again, the Mary so bloody that it ran down the sides. “Find your boss. Kill your boss. Get the girl.”

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“It is the American Dream,” Nevada said. She reached for the glass, but Candice pulled it away before she could close her hand around it. Her fingers came away red with dripping condensation.

“You always did like a challenge,” Candice said.

“That sounds like a note of criticism in your voice. But it could just be your voice.”

“It’s not a criticism. It’s an observation.” Candice drank. Her lips dripped red. “You don’t want to see the world as denials and dead ends, so you look at it as challenges. Quests. Finding the artifact. Going on the adventure.” She smiled. Her teeth were red too. “Seducing the girl.”

“You think that’s all you are to me? A challenge?”

“You tell me. It’s your subconscious.”

“You’re a subconscious,” Nevada retorted in a snit.

“That’s what I just said.”

“Very negative. Lots of negativity.”

“Not really.” Candice grew serious. “If I were really being negative, I’d ask you what you expect to happen when you rescue me—assuming you find me, get past the private army, climb the mountain and all that. Do you really think I’ll want anything to do with you after you got me into all this?”

“You wanted to come!” Nevada protested. “It was your idea!”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Candice said. “Since you are literally telling yourself that.”

“God, all these years of people telling me I should be self-aware, I try it once and it blows. Why am I dreaming about you, anyway? I have an entire US Women’s Soccer Team to choose from.”

Candice grinned—raking Nevada’s mind over memories of how sunny her smile was, how it curved, how it showed her teeth, how it came so easily when she was pleased. “You’re dreaming of me because you miss me.”

“Yeah,” Nevada said dismally. There was no point in arguing. She’d never been much good at talking herself out of anything.

“The real question,” Candice said, “is: am *I* dreaming of *you*?”

* * *

Awakening pummeled Nevada, aches and pains slamming into her consciousness like a car crash. She moaned and tried to get comfortable.

All she cared about was pulling herself into a position that didn't exacerbate her pain. She rolled onto her side, held herself, and tried to breathe evenly enough not to aggravate anything.

It took long minutes, but the pain faded to a dull roar under her skin. She took stock of her body. Wiggled her toes, flexed her fingers. Nothing felt broken. Cracked maybe, definitely bruised, but she was in one half-dead piece.

For a moment, everything that'd happened seemed like a horrible dream. She felt Candice's presence so vividly that when she forced her eyes open, she expected to see Candice lying next to her. But there was nothing but haze in front of her eyes. She spared a moment to think of Usama, hoping he was at peace.

I don't really know much about Islam, but I hope you're having a good time in heaven with Allah and his... son?... Mohammed?

Fuck it.

She planted her fists below her and hauled herself up, gritting her teeth against the fresh wave of pain that hit her. It almost made her nauseous, her skull feeling both heady and airy at the same time, but she managed. The world was softer than she remembered—she was sitting on a mattress. Rescued.

She looked around.

Black bodies surrounded her. They looked like she felt. Dressed either in shabby donations, old fashions, and worn fabric, or cheap Wal-Mart chic. They looked cowed, tails between their legs, and as Nevada's vision swam into focus, it was easy to see why. Bruises, lacerations—they were a pack of beaten dogs, half-starved as well.

None of them paid much attention to her. Prison rules—*keep your head down and it won't get smacked down*. Most weren't speaking, but when they were, it was in low, hushed conversation. Nevada couldn't really listen—the blood pounded in her ears too thickly—but she recognized snatches of Bambara, Hausa, Buduma, Akan. Nothing she was particularly fluent in, but a smorgasbord of languages from Equatorial Africa. What were they all doing here?

She looked over their surroundings. A large common room, dozens of cots lining the walls, benches and a table running down the center of the room. Mudbrick walls, sandy floors. She was still in the fucking desert.

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It looked familiar, though. That gave her a headache, her mind another muscle strained and overused, but as she looked around, she placed the familiarity. Jacques had told her enough stories about the French Foreign Legion to recognize the shelves over the beds, the hanging cupboards, the air of distilled misery. This was a fort. Old, abandoned, put to a use its builders had never intended, but still an outpost of the Tricolor. And she was in the barracks.

She noticed a presence at the side of her cot, a puffball of curly black hair pushing up from behind the mattress. Nevada craned her neck until she saw the small child, no taller than her cot, staring at her.

“Yo, Don King, what’re you looking at?”

He replied in a patois far too fast and grammatically loose for her to detect more than some English DNA in it. Her headache felt worse.

“Okay, I didn’t catch any of that, but you’re like six, so I’m guessing you’re talking about Fortnite?”

“He’s asking you why your skin is white.” A man’s voice, with an accent Nevada wanted to place as... Mali?

“Tell him I grew up next to some power lines.”

The man was tall, slender, his limbs sprawling out from sloping shoulders and narrow hips. He had an affinity for the thrift store clothing, making him look more like a hipster than a hobo. Coming to Nevada’s bedside, he presented his hands. Wide palms, delicate fingers.

“I used to be a doctor,” he explained.

Nevada held out her arm and let him take her pulse. “Where are we?”

“Somewhere in Algeria, by my reckoning.”

“Algeria,” Nevada repeated a little woozily. The effort of conversation tired her quickly. She had to force herself to stay awake.

The kid said something, watching as the doctor examined Nevada’s eyes.

“He says you smell funny,” the doctor said, not looking up from her healing wounds. Nevada noticed as he went over them that the bandages were clean enough to have been changed recently.

“We don’t have to translate everything he says,” she replied. “Tell him it’s Chanel No. 5. It’s an institution.” She saw an IV line running from her arm to a saline drip on the shelf over her bed, where some long-dead legionnaire had kept his cleaning bag. “Jesus...”

“You are coming along nicely,” the doctor said. He sat on Nevada’s cot, shy of her hip. “When we found you, you were in and out, life and death. Dehydration, exposure. Very bad. We took you with us, and for the last two days, here you have slept. Oh. I am rude. My name is Sy Savant.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Nevada said. “More or less... Hey, Doc? This might be a cultural difference, but I assume when people are sleeping three to a cot, something’s not gone according to plan?”

Savant nodded. “We were meant to leave for Europe yesterday. They are keeping us here. Some tried to leave, but...”

“How many are there? Keeping you here?”

Savant looked to have misgivings about answering. Before he could decide either way, a booming *crack* shot through the barracks. A whole chorus of them assaulted the ear, and every man in the room shot to his feet, standing tall, almost *en pointe*, hands behind their backs, eyes looking straight ahead.

Prison rules. Can I call them, or can I call them?

They came in wearing desert camouflage and blue headscarves. Arabs armed with thick, black clubs and leather shields, pounding both together. Tuaregs, Nevada guessed from the geometric patterns on their shields. They could’ve been family heirlooms centuries old. The clubs, though, were stun batons.

As Nevada watched, Savant caught a guard’s notice. The guard advanced on him, berating him. Nevada couldn’t understand the language, but she got the meaning. The guard thought he was being eyeballed. Savant quaked, trying to hold himself still, like if he could make a statue of himself, he would be spared a beating.

The guard jabbed his baton into Savant’s chest; blue sparks shot out as it fed an electric current into his trembling body. The hyena cackle of the stun charge was loud, but it couldn’t compete with the physical vibration of Savant’s body seizing up, teeth set together, muscles locked, his flesh now a prison he was locked in.

The guard pulled his baton back and Savant collapsed, a puppet without strings. Then the beating started. Kicks. Stomps. The guard venting aggression, savoring the release—he might as well have been going at a punching bag.

“Hey!” Nevada called. “Why don’t you pick on somebody your own gender?”

The guard stopped to look at her. The others stared too.

“I’m calling you a woman,” Nevada explained. “It’s an insult. I’m being insulting... Lay off, okay? I just woke up.”

The guards surrounded her, sensing a threat in her mockery. Some stared at her balefully for the challenge, while others felt too much lust to be offended. Nevada girded herself for a fight, throwing aside the sheets to free up her body. Then she realized what she was wearing.

“Why the fuck am I dressed like Princess Jasmine on her honeymoon?”

She was in full bedlah—a bejeweled bra, a vest, and either harem pants or some kind of gauzy skirt. She couldn’t really tell the difference.

One of the guards triggered his stun baton. Electricity flickered between the prongs on the business end. “Come quietly.”

“You sound like my college roommate.” Nevada rolled out of bed. The guards surrounded her, stun batons at the ready, shields held high. “What do you think I’m gonna do, belly dance you to death? C’mon. Take me to your leader.”

She tried to hold her vest closed as they walked her out of the barracks. The heat smashed down on her, the sun stung her eyes—same old, same old. This was definitely a Legion fort, but not one any picky archaeologist would be interested in. The French had not left the place to move to the suburbs. The gates were blown off their hinges, with fragments of the heavy wood lying in the doorway, so badly burnt they looked like they could’ve still been smoldering. That passage was impossible to go through, but a hole blasted in the wall let people move in and out. Through it, Nevada saw a Quonset hut, its interior filled with crates, trucks, jeeps. *A smuggling operation*. It made sense. Get the migrants to buy a ticket, then tell them their seat’s taken by whatever you’re really shipping.

Sand grew over the place like a cancer, piling high and spilling out of windows. The architects hadn’t wracked their brains coming up with designs. It was four tall walls, walkways running over them for defenders to repel attackers. Mudbrick cabins ran along the walls: canteen, armory, kitchen. An array of stairs led into the cabins and over them, up to the wall walks. But battle damage had blown out the stairs in several places, as well as the cabin roofs that served as landings—they were replaced with

planks and ladders to make the spaces somewhat passable. It all seemed vaguely postapocalyptic, but then, Nevada had always thought one person's apocalypse was another person's Tuesday.

Between the walls, the courtyard was fifty square feet of dead sand. There was a stage and a twenty-by-twenty iron cage, empty, the open lock ringing against the door as it was blown by the wind. In the northwest corner, a tower rose past the thirty-foot walls, shooting above the battlements to provide a lookout platform. Beside it, a water tower balanced on four legs.

The guards led Nevada between the naked struts and into the tower beneath the lookout platform: an empty space of stairs turning their way up to an exit out onto the wall walks and further circling around to a door. Nevada got a shove in the back and trudged up the stone stairs. In places, the treads were gone completely, replaced by planks spanning the gaps, which bowed threateningly when she put her weight on them.

"You guys talk to OSHA about getting an inspector out here?" she asked the guards. "Everyone deserves a safe workplace."

They didn't answer. Like David Hasselhoff, no one appreciated her outside of Germany.

They forced her up, up, up, a strenuous task when her body was still working its way up to solid food. Nevada didn't mind. It worked the kinks out, snapped her bones back into position. She felt energy trickling back into her, like she was thawing out after a long winter.

Finally they arrived at the door. A guard reached past Nevada to knock on it. A moment later, the door opened, and Nevada was face to face with a fez.

The man was short, broad, and bloated in the middle, wearing dark sunglasses and a suit the color of mayonnaise gone bad. His skin was lightly perfumed with sweat, carrying its florid scent directly to Nevada's nose, and as soon as he'd opened the door, he beat a retreat back to his desk, where a fan hummed away.

"Come in!" he chattered in a slightly marble-mouthed Cairo accent. "In, in, in! I've been anxiously awaiting your awaking. Yes, very good. I can see you are feeling well."

A stun baton jammed into her back, not charged, but she felt the cool metal prongs through her thin vest. Nevada went in, noting that two guards followed her inside, closing the door and standing by it.

“Don’t worry about them,” the man continued. “Their English is, ah, nonexistent. Isn’t it, you fatheads? You bumpkins!” He smiled at Nevada, displaying teeth as small and fine as pearls inside an oyster. “We can speak freely. And eat!”

He gestured with sudden casualness to an old-fashioned loo table, set up with a newfangled folding chair for maximum discrepancy. On it, though, was a feast. Nevada’s stomach had been a tight ball of hunger for so long that she’d fenced it in at the back of her mind, but the sight, the smell of actual food brought it roaring back. She hunched over the table and stuffed herself, not able to decipher any of the ingredients or the meals they’d been mixed into, not caring. The typical Arab spices burnt her tongue, but she didn’t care about that either, except to look at the man and mumble, “Water!” with her mouth full.

He chuckled knowingly and walked to a window, opening the shutters to reveal the water tower right next door. Several planks had been ripped out of the tank so he could reach right over with a pitcher and fill it up. He brought it over to Nevada—allowing her to see the days of beard growth giving him a stubble like something that grew on cheese if you left it out too long—and poured it into a cup. Nevada drank greedily.

“You are a vision of loveliness,” he said as Nevada chugged from the cup and water ran down her chin. “A woman of great passions, of hunger! I have been keeping an eye open for a woman such as you.”

Now that her mouth was no longer on fire, Nevada started in on the flatbread things and the bean things. “You want to start a podcast?”

“I think you misunderstand. First, allow me to introduce myself. I am Ahmed Fedil, at your service.”

Nevada met his eyes while drinking in the room. The garrison commander had lived here once, if she didn’t miss her guess, but scavengers and souvenir hunters had stripped the place to the bone. Outlines marked where frames had hung and furniture had sat—now as pale as Hiroshima shadows. Fedil didn’t seem to mind the skeletal quality of his surroundings. This place was a way station, not a destination.

“Easy Nevada,” she supplied.

“Easy,” he repeated, rolling the word on his tongue. Apparently it didn’t taste like a noun. “Unusual name.”

“My parents lived in Hollywood. Why am I dressed like a gritty reboot of *I Dream of Jeannie*?”

Fedil picked up a stool from below the window and moved it to the opposite side of the loo table. Nevada watched him sit down across from her, feeling a canine growl welling in her. If he reached for any of her food...

“Let me explain that with a story,” Fedil began, folding his hands across his belly.

Nevada shut her eyes. Great. She’d been taken hostage by Aristotle.

“You’ve heard of the garbageman, yes? He goes from house to house, collecting refuse.”

“Rings a bell,” Nevada said. She forced her eyes open enough to see what she was eating. She was hungry enough to start in on the table if she didn’t know any better.

Pleased, Fedil rattled his fingers on top of the table. “Very good. The garbageman, he takes the refuse, he disposes of it. It’s worthless, it’s useless. Imagine, then, that one day he finds a diamond among the waste. Of course, though it would be his job to be rid of it with the rest of the trash, he would much rather keep it. This treasure.”

Nevada felt his smile on her like a layer of grease. “I’m the treasure.”

“Very much so. And you could have a fine life with me, a pleasurable life. There would be servants for the cooking and cleaning, of course. You wouldn’t sully your hands with such tripe. No, you are meant for more passionate pursuits. Tell me—are you aware of a rusty trombone?”

Nevada took a deep breath. “Listen, Ahmed—can I call you Ahmed? You’re a really great guy and you’ve taught me so much about inner beauty and you’re going to make some girl just so happy... but I think we should just be friends.”

Fedil’s eyebrows contorted like dying caterpillars. “You are spurning me.”

“Fraid so. It’s not you, it’s me. See, in my country, slavery is kinda considered... passé? I mean, unless you have an internship...”

Fedil shot up to his full height; it didn’t take long. “Then you will be sold with the rest of this scum! I am sure a white woman will fetch a high price!”

“We are pretty great.”

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“Guards!” They leapt to attention. “Get her out of my sight! Take her to the auction block and be rid of her immediately!”

Nevada glugged down her water before the guards could seize her. As they dragged her away, she shouted, “Joke’s on all y’all. I’m Liam Neeson’s daughter. You’re so screwed!”

CHAPTER 2

They led Nevada down the stairs and out into the courtyard, past the sawtooth shadows of the crenellated walls above and into the thick, stuffy air of the Sahara day.

“We fight,” Nevada said, sweat instantly breaking out on her forehead, “but deep down we really care about each other.”

It took work to make water a bad thing in the lashing heat of the desert, but they accomplished it. As Nevada was led to the cage in the center of the courtyard, now stuffed with the captives from the barracks, the guards started up a pump. Its rhythmic chugging irritated Nevada’s ears, instantly putting her on edge. She looked over at the pipe that ran down from the water tower, the machine pulling its contents down and pushing them out a hose. The water flowed out of the hose in a rushing stream, hitting the cage like an artillery blast.

The water was unstoppable, driving into them, heedless of their screams, knocking them back, shoving them down, forcing them to claw over each other for protection. It ripped their clothes, burnished their bodies into obsidian, and exploded into foam that they scrambled to drink as much as avoid. Watching the frenzy—the satisfied sneers that the guards wore as they reassured themselves of their own cruelty—Nevada wondered what Candice was going through. Her hand tightened into a fist. She felt her knuckles shifting like tectonic plates in an earthquake, vibrating, needing the solidness of slamming into bone...

The hose cut off, drips of water lost into steam upon touching the burning sand. The cacophony of rushing water and frightened screams became quiet, almost background noise. Whimpering and sobs.

“If you’re going to power-wash me,” Nevada said to the guards, “you have to use spring water. I have allergies and break out if you use tap. You

know there won't be a mortician in the world good enough to let you have an open-casket funeral, right?"

More shoving. They unlocked the chain, hauled the door open, and threw her in. Nevada turned and, pro forma, gripped the bars as the lock clunked back into place. She rattled them. There was something easy in the way they took her shaking.

Some of the others picked themselves up, wrung out their clothes—but many simply stayed where they had fallen. Nevada nodded to them. "How's it going, fellow slaves?"

She returned her attention to the prison bars. They were loose in their moorings. Not enough to make a damned bit of difference, but still enough to be telling.

The slavers couldn't keep their merchandise out in the sun all day. They'd lose too many to heatstroke, dehydration—it'd cut into their profit margins. That would explain the barracks. They could stow the slaves there indefinitely and bring them out here for the auctions. Stuff them into the cage, wash them up—that meant the buyers would be here soon.

It also meant this cage had seen a lot of turnover. Saturated with cold water, dried in the sun, exposed to piss, sweat, the weight of the leaning slaves—Nevada wasn't a scientist, but she doubted any of that was an improvement on Brasso. Touching the bars, she could feel they weren't smooth but *rough*, scratchy even, rust abrading every bar in at least one place. She couldn't count on Fedil being incompetent enough to let his prison rust away to nothingness—Nevada knew her luck better than that—but maybe there'd been enough degradation for her to make a point.

"Is it just me or was TripAdvisor way too easy on this place?" Nevada circled the cage, running her hand over the bars and seeing how firmly they stayed in place. "Now, I'm not the kind of woman who asks to speak to a manager, but the service here? I feel like the breakfast buffet was very oversold, the TVs don't even get premium channels, and I don't know about you, but my wine was served room temperature." She scowled. "Let's call it on this place and go to a Holiday Inn."

Savant spoke first—not that it was a close race. "You want to escape?"

"That's what I was getting at, yeah." Nevada paused. The bar she was passing had shifted when she'd pressed it. She scratched it with her

thumbnail, and the outermost layer of iron came off in dandruff flakes. “Maybe I was being too clever. I like to phrase things good and stuff.”

“If we try to escape, they will shoot us.”

“If you don’t try, you’ll be a slave. It’s a bad career choice. Lousy hours. No dental.”

“It is the only option,” Savant said firmly. “Escape is impossible.”

Nevada fixed him with her strongest stare, pushing into his mind with all the willpower at her disposal. “*Nothing* is impossible.”

She threw her elbow backward. It crashed through the loose bar, popping it out of the cell and down to the sand. Nevada stooped down to pick it up and offered it to Savant. “Hide this. Tell the others to be ready. When I give the signal, go apeshit. And, uh... stand in front of me while you translate?”

Savant still seemed bowled over by holding the prison bar in his hand. The question wrinkled his brow further. “Why?”

Nevada stepped behind him. She rubbed her elbow. “That was very cool and sexy of me, but it *really hurt!*”

* * *

Pulling her tendons to the snapping point, she managed to wrench out another three bars while the guards weren’t looking. *They* were busy erecting a large canopy and setting up rows of folding chairs underneath.

There was no place for Nevada to store even one prison bar, but they’d make good clubs for the other prisoners. If she could get them in a position to use them.

“The Foreign Legion, she is *misère game*,” Jacques had told her once. “They take the miserable, heap miseries upon them, situate them in *distilleries de la souffrance*, and then distribute that misery to those miserable enough to have the scorn of *le coq* upon them. *Viva la France!*”

Nevada hadn’t understood half of that, but the fort was definitely living up to its reputation as a distillery of misery. Maybe it was just her. Usually at times like this, she could focus entirely on her goal, almost willing what she wanted closer and closer until she could finally reach it. She couldn’t do that now. She kept thinking of Candice and where she was and what was happening to her. Singh had her, and Nevada could only think of what he

would do to get what he wanted. It gave her a rancid feeling—there wasn't any getting clean until she got Candice back.

Sound carried far in the desert. Nevada heard the trucks coming from a long way off. She looked at the thirty imprisoned with her, seeing if there were any cues for her to pick up on, but this was new for all of them. She stretched and popped the kinks out of her neck. No way of knowing what was coming, but when it did, she had a feeling it would happen fast.

The trucks stopped outside the crack in the wall. Nevada saw the sand kicked up, heard the hiss of engines cooling. Doors opening, boots pounding the sand. Abruptly, a guard filled her vision. He raised his AK-47 over his head and fired into the air, the shell casings tumbling down around his feet. Nevada dutifully covered her ears. The others cowered. Nevada didn't blame them. It was a hard sound to get used to. No more bullets. Sudden silence. It lingered almost long enough to become comfortable before Nevada heard the shunt of the key in the cage's lock, the rasp of metal being forced together. Four-man team. One opened the door, one covered the action with the AK, the other two went in with stun batons and dragged the first unlucky bastard out. A good, clean operation. They'd only made one mistake.

The door shut again. Locked. The slave didn't resist as he was forced across the courtyard, up onto the podium. It was only ten feet away. Nevada had a good look at him being forced up the steps and propped there like a centerpiece—positioned by the guards so they wouldn't be holding him in place, but he'd damn sure be where they wanted him to be.

Fedil's voice rang out with salesmanship as he led his clients in through the cracked wall. "Big, strong boys for your fields, pretty women for your houses, a few children—ah, this one here, a digger. Big, big, big, he'll work all day. What am I bid? Five hundred? Five hundred dinars, I cannot take less..."

Anonymous men followed him, dressed like they were on safari. Cotton khakis, even pith helmets. They drank heavily from ubiquitous plastic water bottles as they were wanded by the guards and parted from their guns and anything that made a loud noise going into an empty barrel. And right in the middle of them, big as life, was Jacques. He could dry-clean his suit, he could buy a new hat, he could even shave, but Nevada would know Jacques's mismatched face anywhere. She could've danced a jig.

“Six fifty!” Fedil crowed from the dais, his happiness souring Nevada’s. “Do I hear seven hundred? We are going once, we are going twice! Sold to Mister Six, thank you, and wise of all of you to save your money. The best is yet to come.”

Stooping, Nevada reached between the bars and grabbed the empty shell casings. She held them in her palm, working her hand in and out of a fist as the guards came again. Aimed into the cage, opened the door, moved like sharks for their chosen target, until Nevada stepped in the way. She felt the assault rifle bearing down on her, stun batons poised with their venomous charge almost touching her skin. She didn’t move.

“Why save the best for last?” she asked cordially.

The guard racked the bolt on his rifle. Nevada’s life flashed before her eyes. She remembered that Otis Graham owed her twenty bucks and had never paid her back. Then Fedil called out, with ingratiating slickness, something to paper over the incident. The guards took hold of her and directed her up to the dais with as much pageantry as a prisoner walking to the electric chair.

“We are off to a slow start,” Fedil continued in English, “and it may prove to be a long day. So let us get things moving with a special surprise for you gentlemen. As you can see, this woman is not meant for factories, for farming, for the housework—she is meant to be a queen. Gentlemen, I give you Desert Flower, a pearl that could only be formed under the light of a full moon!”

Where was this guy when I was writing my OkCupid profile? Nevada wondered. She stopped on the dais, three guards arranged behind and to either side of her. Eyes landed on her like a cloud of mosquitos.

“Of course, much as I would love to give each of you loyal customers a gift as sweet as this, only one of you can receive her,” Fedil boasted. “So let you show which will be most appreciative. Let us start bidding at ten thousand dinar!”

Nevada hummed consideringly. The other guy had sold for about five hundred American dollars. She’d made it into the quadruple digits right off the bat. Being sold into slavery was proving surprisingly good for her self-esteem.

Weeds sprung up in untended gardens with the same mindless tenacity that the customers bid for her. The words had no rancor in

them, no obscenity—just the coolly restrained excitement of the bidding. Nonetheless, they pawed at her, followed the course set by their lustful eyes in eating the flesh from her bones. There was a resentment there: for her youth, her beauty, her pride, and each shouted number was meant to chisel away at the target of the hatred. Nevada didn't know if she could've taken it so calmly without knowing Jacques was there to be her escape plan. As it was, it made for an interesting experience, but not one she'd recommend. Way too much like working retail for her taste.

Jacques's voice rose above the fray: "What are you trying to pull here?"

The sudden harshness of his shout brought the auction to a standstill. Before anyone could think of what to say, he had pushed his way through the crowd, coming up to where Nevada was on display.

"Look at her," he insisted, gesturing at Nevada as though he were trying to draw a waiter's attention to some glaring difficulty with his order—it being on fire, for instance. "This is meant to be a bedwarmer for a discerning customer such as oneself? I don't know about the others, but I may have a woman for free as I like. If I am to pay, I expect top quality. And yet, what's this? She is cross-eyed!"

Nevada obligingly crossed her eyes, telling herself that once she was done avenging herself on Singh and Gore, she would deal with Jacques. *You can't just pay full price, can you? You have to haggle...*

"Not that I mean to be exacting," Jacques demurred. "*Dites donc*, one cannot expect perfection. But look how she drools. Is it too much to ask that in a desert, one may keep dry?"

Nevada let some spit loll out before whispering to Jacques, "Take it down a notch, will you? You're not going to get them to give you a free toaster too."

Jacques nodded. "And she has bad breath! *Épouvantable!* I will pay seven thousand dinar, as the Good Lord asks us to be charitable, but not one penny more!"

Silence spread out from his last word, the force of Jacques's personality daring anyone to disagree with his assessment of Nevada. He eyeballed the crowd, and the slavers looked among themselves, but no one was willing to counteract him. Nevada couldn't help but feel a little offended.

"You might mention I have a great personality," she muttered.

"Why be dishonest?" Jacques whispered back.

Fedil, eager to move things along from this lull, clapped his hands together. “Very well—the customer is always right. Seven thousand from Mister Four. But surely, a few minor flaws cannot detract from the fiery soul of this woman! Who will give me eight thousand? Do I hear eight thousand?”

This must be what being on The Bachelor feels like. That’s my bucket list done.

Fedil didn’t like the taste of seven thousand dinars, but he stomached it. “Seven thousand goes once, seven thousand goes twice—”

“Twenty thousand dinars.”

The man spoke in a cool, clear voice that made up for in willpower what it lacked in volume. Eyes followed the sound like iron fillings to a magnet. The tall man with the noble bearing, the brutal face, the eyes that were sharp as razors and full of revenge. Nevada recognized him. Hadn’t she had killed his son?

“Twenty thousand dinars,” repeated Nazir al-Jabbar. “For the slow death of Easy Nevada.”

CHAPTER 3

IT WAS ALMOST GRATIFYING, THE terror these self-styled masters of the world suddenly showed in Nazir's presence. Nevada could see they were filthy with fear, glancing around to see if anyone was going to make a run for it, or maybe attack and give them the chance to get away. This had to be how stampedes started, when a lion wandered up to the watering hole.

"That is a very generous offer. A generous offer indeed," Fedil said, signaling his men to search Nazir. He lobbed endless pleasantries that hit with all the stopping power of confetti, but his patter smoothed over the wait as his man wanded Nazir. The metal detector revealed a sidearm. Nazir took out a Heckler & Koch P9S from its holster and took out the magazine, handing it over to Fedil's security. He kept the pistol.

"There's still one in the pipe, you idiot," Nevada muttered under her breath, squeezing on the spent bullets like 7.62mm stress balls. With the mob's attention on the interplay between Fedil and Nazir, she quickly traded whispers with Jacques. "You have enough to outbid him?"

"I *might*," Jacques said, his voice flooding with bitterness, "if the drugs I had been smuggling were not *stolen*!"

"Can the *j'accuse* act; it was like a year ago."

"It was last week!"

Nevada risked meeting his eyes, conveying with a glance that this could be hashed out later. He calmed and looked away again.

"We'll have to go to Plan B," she said.

"How darling it would be for Plan A to work for once. Just once." Jacques's eyes traced over Nevada and her outfit. "I always preferred *Bewitched* myself."

Fedil and Nazir had sorted out introductions. They walked up to the dais, practically arm in arm, while two of Nazir's black-clad men took up

position at the entrance to the fort. They held a brace of heavy chains. If Nazir won the auction, Nevada got the feeling she wouldn't be going with them under the honor system.

"Thea Quatermain," Nazir said as he came up to her, spreading his hands in greeting. "As far as I'm concerned, you're already bought and paid for. I'm merely here for the handoff."

"Nazir, always nice to see you," she replied. "How're the kids?"

"This time I feel you are much closer to God's plan for you. Not a hero. Only another American cowboy who thinks she can solve the world's problems with a lasso and a six-shooter."

"My gun's got a lot more than six shots," Nevada retorted.

"You think your petty quips hide the tininess of you... the futility... but I see through it. The scared little girl who thinks she can make herself big by pretending to be... what? Arnold Schwarzenegger? Sylvester Stallone?"

"Actually, I was always kinda partial to Bruce Willis." Nevada felt her adrenaline rising like gorge—an urge to do something, anything, so long as there was movement, a chance for salvation, or at least to bloody her knuckles before she went down. It took willpower to simply stand there and smile at Nazir, but when there was a shark in the water, it was better to smile than splash around like a wounded seal. "Can I be honest? You're over. You're done. You're like the Wilhelm scream. We get it. The whole Muslim terrorist thing is very last fall. We've moved on. We have Russians and North Koreans now, and sometimes Mexicans. You need to rebrand, give yourself a makeover. Maybe do a gender swap, add a black guy, some musical numbers, I don't know. But right now, you're about as relevant as MySpace."

Nazir's eyes blazed as they focused on Fedil. "Conclude the bidding. You can see the need to teach her proper respect."

"Twenty thousand dinars," Fedil said a bit numbly. "Do I hear twenty-one?"

Nevada shot Jacques an emphatic look. He hopped to. "Twenty-one thousand."

Nazir scrutinized him. "I don't believe this man has twenty-one thousand dinars. He looks like he doesn't even have a laundry machine."

"Hey," Nevada insisted, "you know the last thing to go through your son's head?"

“Thirty thousand dinar,” Nazir growled at Fedil, anger roughening his voice like something was scratching its way out of him. “Do not accept any more bids from the Frenchman. *Give her to me now!*”

“Last thing to go through Farouq’s head,” Nevada continued. “Probably the caboose.”

The next few moments proceeded with the spine-tingling slowness of a roller coaster cresting a hill. Nazir’s right hand dove into his robes, going for the bulge of his holstered gun. Nevada had seconds to act, but she was already in motion, reacting almost before Nazir’s first twitch. As he brought the P9S out of his shoulder holster, Nevada’s left hand chopped into his wrist, deadening every nerve in his hand. The P9S slipped out of his grip and hung in the air.

Nevada’s adrenaline surged, and the roller coaster went downhill. She caught the P9S in her right hand and brought it up, the bottomless pit of the muzzle now sucking at the fear on Nazir’s face. Her adrenaline shook inside her like a living thing—she nearly killed him just for the hell of it.

“Nazir al-Jabbar, prepare to meet Allah... in hell!”

She pivoted, gripping the P9S in both hands, moving so fast that even the oven-hot air of the Sahara felt cool on her skin. She came to a stop, the silent roar of the gun barrel trained on the cage as she gave it voice. The one round chambered in the gun flew out, the bark of its launch giving way to the aria of it cutting through the air, ending in a crescendo as it hit the lock on the door.

The lock fell in two pieces, hitting the sand with a muffled thud, as ordinary as a cough after an opera.

The slaves charged out of the open door. The Tuareg guards fought back an explosion. *Bzzt*—the electrical charge from a baton drove a slave nearly out of his skin. Another slave went after the same guard; the Tuareg’s shield knocked him back with a ringing *clang*. A third slave tackled the guard to the ground, and then a fourth and a fifth came to stomp their tormentor into the sand. And the same thing happened for twenty feet in every direction. One slave waded into the bidders swinging a prison bar, and blood flew from every arcing blow.

Nevada ignored it—background noise. She focused on Nazir. Rammed herself into him and drove the slide-locked pistol into his skull. It sounded beautiful, like an axe splitting lumber. He went sprawling, his motion only

checked by running into a guard. A guard with a pistol in his holster and blood pouring down his face. Nazir ripped the pistol from his holster and swung around to face Nevada. She didn't have time to think of last words before her vision flashed silver. A sword swiped past her face with Jacques on the other end of it. Then Nazir stood before her, his face a rictus of pain and shock, gaze fixed on his gun hand, detached from his wrist and laying by his feet.

"I guess you were just here for the hand off," Nevada said. She charged to finish him off but was slammed sideways by the struggling bodies of a guard and a slave. The ground rose up to hit her and snatch the gun away from her. She raised her head to see Nazir clutching his wounded arm to his chest and speeding in the other direction. Jacques yanked her to her feet before boots could land on her face.

"It is possible we have overstayed our welcome," he said, driving his sword into the nearest guard and surrendering it to the pull of the body cavity.

Nevada saw ten of Nazir's men coming through the gap in the wall, shoving and clubbing aside everyone in their path as they drove through the battleground. She turned the other way to find a Tuareg shoving a gun in her face.

"Don't you need these to make that work?" she asked, opening her hand and flashing him the spent shells.

He instinctively checked his weapon. Nevada swiped it out of his hands and used it to put his jaw at a permanently different angle.

"Jacques, quit playing with the sword. Here!" He stopped trying to pull the sword out of the dead guard long enough for Nevada to toss him the gun. "Go bring the car around."

Jacques checked the clip automatically. "What about you?" he asked, still sounding uncommitted to that plan.

Nevada shined a grin on him. "With an outfit like this, you let the dress do all the work."

Jacques shrugged. "You know, that Allah thing was not even a little theologically accurate."

"Hey, I get enough of that from Candice." She gave Jacques a shove. "Go!"

She took her own advice, running *away* from the exit, keeping the riot between herself and Nazir's men. Her only chance was to scale the walls, maybe work her way back around to the gap, and get outside the fort and to whatever transportation Jacques had handy. But as she ran, the shock of the breakout gave way to the Tuaregs' training. Sentries posted on the walls fired down into the crowd; Fedil yelled at them not to damage his rebellious merchandise or to hit him. More guards burst out of the fort's cool interior right in front of Nevada, making her the first thing they saw as they came out into the blistering heat.

Nevada thought fast. She jabbed her hand at the battle, shouting one of the commands she'd heard repeated frequently by the guards. Hopefully it was something along the lines of *Go! Now!*

Keyed up and given to ask questions never, the Tuaregs obeyed her directions, running past her in a rush of garishly painted shields and humming stun batons. It was only the last guard in line who wondered why he was taking orders from a woman dressed like she danced for Jabba the Hutt.

Nevada cringed. "What gave me away?"

He lunged. His stun baton shot out at Nevada. She caught the blow, her hands on the shaft of his baton and his forearm. The sizzling prongs of the taser stopped an inch from her face. She could see the blue sparks of its electricity through her eyelids when she blinked. He strained to drive the baton forward enough to make contact, but Nevada locked her muscles against him. He brought the shield in his other hand up to club her side. She ignored it as best she could, even as each clobbering blow wracked her sore ribs.

Footsteps behind her, a straggler running to join the reinforcements. Nevada barely heard him over the blood thundering in her ears, but she caught his footsteps stopping in the doorway as he gaped at the scene before him. Then they moved double-time, pounding the sand behind her. Nevada's muscles burned more with each second, the pain of the battering shield taxing her concentration—she felt like a terrier fighting a junkyard dog, her only advantage a tenacious determination to hang on. Finally, the other guard was upon them.

Nevada flowed to one side, shifting her weight to the right as she redirected the baton to the left. Without her resistance, the stun baton

drove past her face and into the second guard, delivering its charge right into his chest. As he shook with the voltage, Nevada whipped her freed hands down to *his* baton and jammed it into the first guard. They trembled as they electrocuted each other.

“Try to contain your shock.” Nevada grabbed both stun batons. Freed of the electrical charge that had held them paralyzed, the two guards collapsed against each other like a pair of drunks staggering home.

Carrying both batons, Nevada rushed into the mess room. The dank coolness was so different from the desert outside that it flash-froze the sweat on her skin. Stairs led to a second floor and took her through a trapdoor. She ended up in a barracks where the night shift roused to the debacle outside. Four men. All with stun batons.

There was no running the same scam twice. In her getup, she obviously wasn't supposed to be there. Two of the half-dressed Tuaregs came at her at once. Nevada parried them, hammering their batons down with her own. The other two guards were only a hair slower. They brought their batons down on Nevada's, trapping her weapons between theirs.

Nevada circled to the left, trying to free her batons. They circled to the right, keeping them trapped. She reversed course and went right; they went left. She backed up and they charged her, holding her batons in place as the wall loomed behind her.

The instant before she hit, Nevada jumped, kicking back with her feet. She rebounded off the wall and into the four men, tackling them to the ground in a sprawl of bodies. Nevada recovered first. She jammed her two batons into the nearest two men and taught them a new dance move. The other two attacked, and Nevada collared them both with the batons and drew their heads together. With two slashing swings from her batons, they went down with broken jaws.

The trapdoor hinges creaked behind her. Nevada whirled to see one of Nazir's men coming through. She threw a baton end over end, and he slammed the trapdoor shut again to shield himself. Nevada threw herself toward the nearest bunk bed, overturning it on top of the trapdoor. She ran the other way. Two of the Tuaregs were getting up. Nevada swung her remaining baton like a baseball bat as she passed. One's head rebounded into the other's with a noise like a blacksmith at work.

She ran up two flights of stairs, emerging onto the roof. The harsh sunlight gouged at her eyes. The sunbaked roof scorched her through her sandals. In front of her, there was a four-story drop down to the riot. Behind her, the wall. To the right, it was three car lengths to the roof of the neighboring building. And to the left, a ladder led up to the lookout platform on the fort wall.

With a crash, her makeshift barricade was overturned.

Nevada scrambled up the ladder. She emerged on the platform, where a Tuareg sniper sat patiently watching the riot below. He registered Nevada's presence and swung his rifle her way. Nevada threw the baton. It collided with his rifle, jarred it out of his hands, and sent it skittering off the edge of the platform.

"Not such a big man without your gun, are you?"

He stood up. It took a while, pulling out all six and a half feet between his shoelaces and his scalp.

"I take that back," Nevada said. "Still a big man. It's things like this that keep me humble."

He rushed at her, and Nevada barely touched the rungs as she plummeted back down the ladder, clearing his meaty hand just as it swiped at her hair. Below her, Nazir's men came onto the roof. There was no time to think, but then, Nevada had never been accused of being a great thinker. Holding onto the ladder, she kicked at the wall to catapult it the other way.

She rode the ladder down, dropping with a slow inevitability that made her wish for the dizzying vertigo falls were supposed to have. She couldn't even feel the wind passing by her. Then time unstuck so hard that it was like the world was shoving her downward. Air whistled by, her stomach climbed up into her throat, and the ground came at her until it didn't.

The ladder wedged itself between the two buildings, bridging the gap. Nevada hung down from the rungs, pulling air into lungs that momentarily couldn't believe they still needed it. Then she clambered up to stand on the makeshift tightrope and saw that on the rooftop she'd dropped down to, a Tuareg was waiting with *takoba* drawn.

"Seriously? With the sword? Are you the Highlander? Is there a Quickening in the area?"

He thrust the sword at her; she ducked backwards, barely catching herself on a rung of the horizontal ladder. He advanced with another slash.

Nevada retreated again. She chanced a look over her shoulder. Nazir's men were waiting for her with guns at the ready, not venturing onto the precarious ladder themselves but waiting for the swordsman to deliver her to them.

The swordsman carefully chose his footing and inched toward her, the sunlight blazing off his blade, making it pure light. His sword arm swung. Nevada dodged back a half second too slowly, and the tip of the blade carved a scarlet line across her belly. She winced in pain. A cheer went up from the Khamsin; the only thing better than killing Nevada would be taking her back to Nazir for flogging and other assorted character building. They jeered and booed as Nevada backed further down the ladder, only a step ahead of the swordsman's takoba.

And that step landed on a portion of the ladder that creaked threateningly under Nevada's weight, wood splintering. The swordsman froze. Nevada smiled.

"Fear of flying?" she asked and brought her foot down on the weak point as hard as she could.

The swordsman's face fell. Then the rest of him. The ladder shattered underneath them, breaking cleanly into two halves. As Nevada fell, she grabbed hold of the ladder. Reflex action. She'd been grabbing all her life, usually things that didn't belong to her, and it seemed the proper way to go out.

The ladder stopped suddenly, bringing her up short—its top rung hooked on the building's cornice so that its bottom rung, and Nevada with it, swung in a pendulum. Her arc carried her into a window. She burst through its wooden shutters, landed on her feet, and stumbled forward into what had to be Fedil's bedroom. Tasteless erotica on the walls, Persian rugs, and four Khamsin gunmen standing on a Kozak rug like they were waiting for her.

They weren't, and that was her only chance.

Instead of checking her stumble, Nevada kept her momentum going, breaking into a sprint. Nazir's men hadn't yet figured out who had lobbed a woman through the window, much less whether she would do the Dance of the Seven Veils or not. By the time she'd really registered, Nevada was almost on top of them.

One of them managed a snapshot. It went wide, stopping Nevada's heart for a moment before she flung herself into a baseball slide. Her heels dug into the carpet, jerking it out from under them. They went down while she came up.

She drove her knee into the nearest one's skull, cracking his head into the wall like she was making an omelet. Second one came to his feet. Nevada threw her forearm across his throat, knocked his Adam's apple into his spine. Third man came up swinging. She blocked with her left arm, threw out an uppercut with her right. Lifted his chin up, dislodged something in his neck—turned out he needed it. The fourth man was going for his gun. Nevada hurled herself at him and got her fist into his kidney. His knees buckled with the debilitating pain. Four hard rights to his face erased it and most of his features.

Nevada picked herself up. "Don't worry. Your old face was pretty worn out anyway."

One of them had been holding an FN SCAR. *Finally, a decent gun.* Nevada picked it up, checked the mag—*good enough for government work.* She barreled up the stairs and emerged onto the roof to see a ladder up to the wall-walk. Cracking gunshots forced her back inside. Nazir's men were firing at her from the opposite roof, keeping her pinned down until more of them worked their way up from the ground floor to corner her.

It finally happened. I'm finally in a position I can't fight or drink my way out of. Candice would've loved to see this.

She heard the chattering of helicopter blades chopping the air and saw the whirlybird itself pass overhead. Nazir. Not staying long enough to watch her die. Well, at least he wouldn't be able to give the show two thumbs-up either way.

The gunfire stopped—replaced by a cry of pain. Nevada heard something whistling through the air, an impact. Someone yelled, and Nevada saw a falling body pass by the window. Nazir's men were taking fire, having rocks and bits of broken masonry thrown at them by the slaves. They'd taken the courtyard, and now their aggression was turned on the remaining enemy.

The Khamsin gunmen tried to marshal a response, but Nevada cut them off. Switching the FN SCAR to full auto, she let them have everything in the clip. It wasn't the smoothest shooting she'd ever done, but then again, when taking a chainsaw to a bushel of wheat, there was no need for precision.

She looked down to the crowd and caught Savant in the throng. He gave her a thumbs-up. Nevada gave an OK sign back down to him and slung the rifle onto her shoulder. It was almost like she was having a good day.

From her high vantage point, she saw disaster coming before it hit. A phalanx of Tuaregs, reinforcements from some second location, came through the breached wall with twice the slaves' numbers. The slaves threw rocks, fired what few guns they had scavenged, but the Tuaregs' shields were locked in formation. The Tuaregs worked them to the far side of the fort with their advance, the thunder of their batons growing louder and louder. A couple of the slaves tried to throw themselves bodily against the juggernaut. They were smashed down by the shields and kept down by the electric sizzle of multiple stun batons. And there was nothing Nevada could do.

Nevada shot up the ladder to the top of the thickly crenellated wall and saw Jacques on the other side. He'd commandeered one of those limousines that looked like its father had been cuckolded by a Hummer.

"I know I'm a lesbian, but don't you think this is taking the butch thing a little far?" Nevada yelled down to him.

"It was this or camels!" Jacques yelled back. "No camels!"

"Did you at least kick the tires? All six of them?"

"What?"

"Never mind!" Nevada turned around, grabbing the ladder from the other side of the wall and hauling it up. It wouldn't cover all the distance, but it wasn't like a desert gave her a lot of options to break her fall with.

She stopped with the ladder in her hands. The slaves were cornered now. The guards pushed them against the wall, bringing their batons down mercilessly, not stopping until their victims fell.

"Fuck it," Nevada said, dropping the ladder. "Follow me!" she ordered Jacques

She took off the down the wall-walk.

Jacques cursed as he shifted the stretch Hummer into gear. "Peaudezèbie! Where are you going?" he called up to her.

"To get myself killed!" Nevada shouted back, feeling optimistic.

Jacques stepped on the gas. "*Les femmes*—and they complain about us not asking for directions!"

Nevada ran around the wall, hearing sounds of violence rattle up from the courtyard as she circled. The guards laid into the slaves, not bothering to use their tasers anymore. They wanted to beat them into submission. Their batons pounded into flesh and splintered bone.

Nevada poured on speed like she was trying to see how loudly her aching body could complain. She rounded one corner, another, and came to the tower of Fedil's office. The shadow of the water tower fell over her, bringing a measure of cool relief as she gulped in air. Below her, Jacques's Hummer ground to a stop.

"Throw me the winch!" Nevada called down.

"What?"

"Front bumper! Winch! Throw it up! It'll be just like in Venezuela!"

Jacques slid out of his seat and rushed to the front bumper. He unspooled the tow hook, letting it dangle before he spun its weight around in a circle like a grappling hook. "Do you remember why we're not allowed in Venezuela anymore?"

Nevada held her hand down. "C'mon, c'mon!"

Jacques sent it flying. The tow hook almost reached the top of the wall before rebounding off the parapet, ricocheting out into the open air. Nevada shot her arm out to catch it, ended up wobbling on the very edge of the wall before righting herself. She threw the tow hook around one of the water tower's legs. It looped around it and caught on the line, forming an effective lasso. "Jacques, drive!"

The Hummer's engine revved beautifully as he backed up, drawing the line taut. Its loop dug into the old wood of the water tower's leg, which splintered, cracked. Nevada grinned.

"Going once." She ran the rifle over the line she'd anchored, turning the cable into a makeshift zipline. "Going twice."

Walking over the battlement, she dropped down into empty space, catching herself by her hold on the rifle. It slid down the line, carrying her from the top of the wall to the Hummer. She let go of the last few feet of the line, landed in a roll, and came up with her arm outstretched to catch herself against the Hummer's grille. Running over the hood and windshield, she swung into the passenger seat.

"Let's take our business elsewhere."

Jacques stood on the gas. The Hummer surged into motion, making the towing line cinch, then rip right through the leg of the water tower. The entire unbalanced tank toppled over, sending a tsunami cascading through the courtyard, making it a bad day to be carrying a stun baton.

“Well, that’s my good deed for the day.” Freed of its anchor, the towline retracted back into the winch. Jacques twisted the wheel, whirling them around to face away from the fort.

“I think you could stand some charity, though. Give me your jacket.”

“It won’t fit,” Jacques warned her.

“How do you think my fist will fit in your eye?” Nevada reached over and took the wheel from him.

Jacques shrugged out of his jacket. “I think this is, how you say, buyer’s remorse. *Au fait*, since I was here anyway, I picked you up something.”

Nevada followed his gaze through the partition in back to see Fedil in the passenger area, bound and gagged. “Fedil! You’re letting us borrow your ride? That is so sweet of you.”

* * *

Every shudder of the helicopter’s flight made Nazir’s stump twinge, fresh pain firing up his arm and even out into the phantom fingers he could still feel moving. Made of nothing, feeling nothing. It was curious.

“We must get you to a doctor,” Mahmoud said, pressing more cloth to the wound. “You’re losing too much blood.”

Nazir’s attention was not on him. It was on the craft’s radar. He remembered how the sweeping arm had painted the landscape upon their initial landing. Nothing but black. Now there was a splotch of green.

“What is that?” he asked the pilot, pointing with his one hand.

“Radar signature on the ground,” the pilot explained. “We’re only seeing it because we’re so high up and the terrain is so flat.”

“It wasn’t there before.”

The pilot clenched and unclenched his jaw. “Someone must’ve landed a plane there.”

“Take me there now.”

“My Khalifa,” Mahmoud insisted, “we have no more men. And you need a doctor—”

Nazir grabbed him by the throat, but he spoke to the pilot. "You have flares onboard this craft?"

The pilot nodded.

Nazir turned to Mahmoud. "Cauterize."

* * *

Nevada scanned the dunes pressing in on all sides. She felt like she could be back home, a couple hundred years back, watching for Navajo lying in ambush. It didn't take much to imagine the grumbling jeep as a covered wagon, or the Sahara as a New Mexico wasteland. The great stillness around them, which swallowed up the jeep's many protesting noises, was big enough to encompass leagues and centuries alike.

Small wonder that she felt the need to speak up.

"Now that I've been a slave, it's really opened my eyes to social injustice, inequality, class warfare. You think I'll get anything if they give out reparations?"

Jacques scoffed. "*Sérieux?* It's called *Twelve Years a Slave*, not twelve minutes."

"Haven't you ever heard of a speed-run?" She grew serious. "Where's *The Flying Carpet?*"

"I set it down some miles from here. I thought it best to have it tucked out of the way of any festivities, knowing your penchant for *un dingue*."

Nevada looked over at the fuel gauge. "We have enough gas to get us there?"

"*Oui*, most assuredly. We are getting out of this *punaise!*" Jacques slapped the steering wheel for emphasis. "And the lovely Miss Cushing? Where is she?"

Nevada demurred, tilting her head back and forth. "Singh's got her. Went more douchebag than usual on us. We'll pick her up when we kick his ass. Save some fuel."

"*Tres bien*. Money..." Jacques began philosophically.

"Oh, here we go," Nevada muttered. "Is there a radio on this thing?"

"*Non*. Money is... necessary, it is important, but one cannot live for it. It is *bourgeoisie*." Jacques was starting to gesture. "Wine. Women. Art. These are the things of life."

"Had to lead with wine, didn't you?"

Jacques slapped her on the shoulder. “It’s been a good few years. Very profitable. But that was work. This is *life!*”

“What are you talking about? We were trying to get the money for the kid, remember? That’s not life?”

“*Je dis ça, je dis rien.* But there is a difference between providing for a child and being a mother. Just as there is a difference between saving our young damsel and...”

“And what?” Nevada interrupted. “I like her, okay? I admit it. I like Candice. And of course she’s totally in love with me. But mostly I want to get revenge on Singh.”

“*Ta gueule.*”

“Don’t underestimate the allure of revenge. They made four sequels to *Death Wish*, but *Sleepless in Seattle* was a one-off.”

For all that he was usually in step with Nevada, when Jacques next spoke, it was with an unexpected somberness. “You’re more used to being angry than being in love. But you’d be good at being in love. Take it from a Frenchman.” He brightened. “Who would know better, *n’est-ce pas?*”

Nevada opened her mouth to protest, voice pitched to furious denial, but she couldn’t find any words to fit into her objection. She ended up smiling lazily. “You may be right, Kermit. When was your last one-man wine tasting party? You’re usually much less sober than this.”

“Seeing as it is a special occasion, I have only drunken white wine.”

“You know, in America we call that sparkling water.”

Nevada checked the glove compartment and found a Ruger Speed-Six. She checked its cylinder, dry-fired it. It was in good shape. Probably would’ve brought more money than her at the auction. Pointing it out the window, she checked the sights. They looked as straight as the lesbian category on Pornhub.

The Sahara spread out in front of her gun barrel, golden brown sand forming sweeping dunes as smooth as glass, motionless save for the scree of loose sand that was drawn over them by the wind.

It made her think of Candice: mocha skin, honey-colored hair, the curves that made up her body. Nevada found herself treasuring the brief glimpses she had gotten of that body—soaked in sweat or awash in the crystalline water of an oasis—and recoiled mentally. You treasured people when they were gone. But she didn’t know what to do with people who

were still around. She'd save Candice, of course. And, by doing that, hand the woman incontrovertible proof that she cared. Deeply. Passionately. The way she'd always half-seriously tried to convince Candice she felt.

And so Nevada would be there, her heart on her sleeve and outside her bulletproof vest, and Candice would know exactly how she felt. She wondered what it would like—being the first one to say “I love you.”

“*Merde*,” Nevada muttered, making Jacques laugh.

“Yes, now we are riding the roller coaster, eh? Enough of the parlor games. Now we play for keeps!” He stood up on the gas pedal, bellowing with his fist in the air. “We fight for love!”

Nevada took the box of ammunition from the glove compartment and pocketed it in her jacket. “I hate Singh too, don't forget. So love and bitter resentment.”

Forty minutes later, they were at *The Flying Carpet*. The air seethed, the sky was unbroken blue, and the sun turned it all gold like the fingertip of King Midas.

“You power the plane up,” Nevada told Jacques. “I'll take care of Fedil.”

Jacques hemmed a little.

“What?”

“I know he's a slave trader, *mon brave*, but killing him in cold blood seems a little... *déclassé*.”

“You don't want me to kill him because it's *tacky*?”

“Yes, but I said it in French to be more sophisticated.”

“Very convincing argument.”

“One may not always have wealth or youth or beauty, but, ” Jacques held up a finger, “one always has style.”

“Fine. Cut him loose.”

A moment later, Fedil was mouthing frantic thanks as Jacques ran the preflight checklist and Nevada retrieved the chocks.

“I swear to you, I swear, I will never do anything bad again! There will be no more slaves, there will be no more drugs—I will go to Mecca, that's what I will do. I will go to Mecca and Allah will show me the path!”

“Sounds like a long drive.” Nevada tossed him the keys. “Speaking of which, while we were driving your car, me and Jacques noticed this weird engine noise? Sounded a little like, uh—”

Nevada drew her Ruger and fired five shots into the Hummer's radiator, leaving steam hissing in all directions.

"That," she concluded, replacing the gun in her waistband. "Might wanna get that checked out."

Jacques was powering the plane up when Nevada came up into the cockpit with the chocks slung over her shoulder. They clattered into the corner before she sat down in the copilot's seat.

"You know, in some countries that would still count as cold-blooded murder," Jacques said.

"Nah, I was pretty pissed off when I did it."

"Where to?"

"South Africa," Nevada said tiredly. Her eyelids were getting heavy. Through the windshield she saw nothing but little whirls of sand dancing for what few seconds they could before the wind died down. Nothing to hold her interest.

"That's where Singh is?"

Nevada rubbed at her eyes. "No, he wasn't kind enough to drop his itinerary. But Butch is there, and we need to talk to him."

"Butch? Your brother, Butch?"

"Who else but my parents would name someone Butch in this day and age? If anyone knows where Singh is going, it's him. He was born with his ear to the ground. It was pretty unsanitary, but our folks saved a bunch of money."

Jacques occupied himself with ignoring Fedil as he screamed obscenities at them from outside. "And you are on speaking terms with him at the present time?"

"He's family. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You two always run hot and cold. When was the last time you spoke?"

"I don't know—Thanksgiving?" Nevada ventured. "Just fly the plane, dude. *Rompez!*"

Jacques started the props spinning. "It's four thousand miles to South Africa. Two days in the air. We'll need to refuel."

Nevada leaned her head back, eyes closing. "I'll spring for gas if you pay for chips."

Jacques reached between their seats, opening the hatch that led into the nose compartment, where he'd replaced the pimply radome on the nose

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with a Plexiglass viewport. It was an excellent place to stow a cooler. He opened one up, brought out a bottled water, and pressed it into Nevada's arms. "Here. Rehydrate. Then go in back and sleep there. You know what sleeping in one of these chairs does to your back."

Nevada puffed out her cheeks. "How bad can it be if I'm so comfortable?"

"Besides, you snore."

Nevada punched him in the shoulder as she got up. "Lies. Blatant lies. I'm sleeping in the nose."

Grabbing up a bedroll, Nevada went down the few stairs that led below the cockpit. She situated herself above the landing gear and went to sleep watching the horizon prowl towards her, hoping it was bringing Candice closer and closer.

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YOU, ME, AND THE
SUNKEN TREASURE

BY GEORGETTE KAPLAN

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