

Chapter One

“Welcome. We hope you’ll enjoy your honeymoon stay with us here on Hawaii’s big island.” The clerk at the hotel check-in throws me a dazzling smile at what we both know is a lie. My fake husband for the next ten days wraps his warm fingers around my cold digits and pulls me into his side, and I flinch.

“I simply *cannot* wait to whisk my bride upstairs,” Holden Abbot says. “Aaron and Lana Laskowski checking in.”

I try not to draw back when my curves hit solid muscle.

“We know who you are and why you’re here,” the check-in clerk says in a forced whisper. “You’ll have access to all parts of the resort with these cards. The safe will hold your gun, which has been cleared by our security team.”

Holden nods, scans me, and we have the same conversation we had before this assignment.

This time it’s silent.

You don’t have a gun?

I don’t and won’t.

My weapon of choice is a laptop.

Holden then discreetly scans the room. Something he does brilliantly, barely turning his head. I glance around while he hands over a black credit card across the smooth

wooden desk. Overhead fans puff wild ginger-scented air across my neck. High beams support a soaring ceiling. I inhale jasmine flowers that spill from terracotta urns. The chatter of birds is a backdrop against the murmur of people talking on the nearby balcony.

I am so nervous, excited, and slightly freaked that I'm on my first assignment, out from behind the computer and into the field, and it has to be with Mr. Hot, Silent, and Dangerous Holden Abbot, who takes the strong silent type to a whole new level.

Tall, tanned and chiseled everywhere I expect, with green eyes that change with his mood, kissable lips, and cheekbones that could cut diamonds.

But the showstopper is a smile that is slow to unleash then dazzles; a smile that has men and women walking into walls. I've seen it. It is both enthralling and terrifying.

I glance around the crowded lobby, which now includes small groups clutching brochures, waiting to be helped, close enough to take in the conversation.

"Suite seventeen is one of our favorites." The smiling attendant pushes two keycards across the polished desk. "There's a bottle of champagne chilling, fresh flowers, and our most requested item, body-friendly chocolate sauce," he says with an exaggerated wink.

Wait.

I cock my head to the side. "Chocolate sauce?"

Amused green eyes hold mine. "For when I lick it off your body, babe."

“Oh, right,” I squeak, mortification dripping through me. Nerves kick in, and a fun fact pops into my head. “Did you know you can mail a coconut from Hawaii to anywhere? No wrapping needed. Just pretty it up and take it down to the post office.” I beam up at Holden, who stares at me. “It’s a fun fact.” I worry the edge of my cotton shirt.

There’s no point telling him that, thanks to being a voracious reader and a bit of a nerd, fun facts pop out of my mouth at random, unpredictable moments. A habit that started when I tried to make friends at another new school, hoping to charm my classmates with my wit to cover my nerves. It met with varying degrees of success.

“I don’t suppose you’re interested that the twenty-ninth of May is ‘put a pillow on your fridge’ day?” I sneak a peek at Holden, who gives me a look like he’s hooked up with a crazy cat lover.

Well ... Hello Kitty.

An attendant hands me a glass with cucumber and strawberries colliding in the icy water. I sip appreciatively and thank him in Spanish. If you’re looking for someone who knows languages, then I’m your girl—all the usual suspects, along with Ukrainian, which is why I’m on this assignment.

I’m also nifty with a computer, having master’s degrees in both Computer Science and English. I’m pretty handy hacking into things that don’t want to be hacked.

Holden’s gift is surveillance.

As usual, I scan the exits. If something goes south, then I know how to get out.

I left WITSEC a year ago, determined to live my life in sprawling, anonymous Los Angeles. No handlers, no more running, just me living my life how I want to, because when it comes down to it there's only one person I can rely on and, and that's little old me.

I startle when Holden, who I internally call Aaron, grabs my hand. The kitten heels I've practiced walking in click across the spotless marble. Sneakers and flats are my preferred mode of transport. I pull on Holden's hand to slow his ten-foot stride, making no difference.

"Are we being pursued? Are there people with hatchets chasing us?" I glance behind me as we exit the reception area. Nope. Nothing except a happy couple to our left swinging in a hammock feeding each other mango slices. My shoes scrunch on the shell-and-petal path. Flowers from magnolia trees drop like swaying, fragrant parachutes.

"No." A statement, not a question, as I slam on the brakes and tug my hand free.

"Haven't you heard of smelling the roses?" I bend and inhale a flax bush that doesn't have a scent, but I'm making a point. My wedding band twinkles in the sun.

"We're supposed to be honeymooners eager to get to our room," Holden says in a low, gravelly voice. It causes stupid goosebumps to scatter across my neck, which is plain embarrassing.

“Right, I can see that, but you don’t have to go all caveman and drag me around.”

His fathomless eyes regard mine, and a slight smile tilts his ridiculously full lips. “Do you *want* me to pick you up and throw you over my shoulder?”

My cheeks are now on fire. “Don’t even think about it.” I plant my hands on my hips.

Another ghost smile curves his lips before he retakes my hand, and I don’t protest because there is no way I’m going to be thrown over his shoulder.

I face facts and not fun ones. Carbs and me are besties. My curves have curves. I’ve tried every diet on the planet and have invented my own—only eating boiled eggs and ham every day; a big shout out to the incredible Dr. Seuss—which didn’t diminish my curves at all. I’ve come to terms that I’m curvy. Having Holden try to firefighter-lift me over his shoulder would lead him to collapse, groaning about tearing an ACL.

Never going to happen.

I keep pace with Holden and turn my head when I pass a tall, gorgeous, blond woman speaking Ukrainian in hushed tones. Her perfume could knock out a swarm of killer hornets.

With Holden’s hand still wrapped around mine, we walk in silence along a winding path lined with crushed white shells toward our suite.

I don’t miss heads turning Holden’s way. He owns any room with a quiet confidence I wish I could say I had. When he strides past, women *and* men fluff their hair, push out

their assets, and smile like they've won the lottery. I, however, can fade into the background at a moment's notice.

Just the way I like it.

Holden inserts the card into the slot on the heavy mahogany door. A giant heart with the words *L and A Forever Together* is drawn in a fancy font.

I stare at the door. "They don't miss a trick." I tilt my head to the side. "Hearts and champagne and 'forever together'."

"You know it's all for show."

"Of course it is. But I can appreciate the effort, can't I?" I return with a beaming smile.

"Are you always sunshine and optimism?" His unfathomable gaze locks on mine.

"Yeah. Gotta find your happy where you can."

His eyes cloud for a second, and I wonder if I imagined it.

I trace the heart with my fingertip. "Do you take a spontaneous trip to the nail salon to get a mani and a pedi? Wander around a mall and make a mental list of the clothes you can never afford but dream about anyway for when you've lost those stubborn pounds?" I look at his still face. "Do you ever wonder what small Pacific island you'll buy when you win Powerball and stock said island with Vikings wearing leather skirts carrying trays of margaritas, who love to give a pedi?"

He doesn't miss a beat. "Vikings don't give pedicures. It's a known fact. They employ hobbits for the job."

Unexpected laughter shoots out of me. He gifts me with a smile that sucks the oxygen out of the room. The man is gorgeous when he smiles and flashes those white teeth, and on top of a killer body and rugged good looks, it's a beautiful package for some lucky girl out there.

I ignore the wall of testosterone next to me and walk into the most breathtaking room I've ever seen. I avoid the king-sized bed—time later to build the Great Wall of China in pillows. Another not-fun fact is I snuggle, which is *not* an endearing trait. That is *not* happening with Holden. I'd rather sleep on the floor than wake up sprawled all over him like a cat.

I push open the doors to the balcony, toe off my shoes, and breathe deep.

A line of green spotted turtles sun themselves on the Kona shoreline, ignoring the line of curious human onlookers. Pairs of tanned feet stick out of white cotton cabanas that puff like sails in the breeze. I turn my head at the distant thwack of a golf ball and the whine of electric carts. Not a cloud in the endless blue sky. The scent of magnolia threads through the dense, shimmering air.

The tension that's been keeping my muscles hostage melts away. It was a nearly six-hour flight from Los Angeles, and I'd forced myself to watch a movie I can't remember.

Claustrophobia hits at unexpected times. I want a shower, clean clothes, and something that starts with the letter N. I look longingly at the bed. A nap is not in my future.

Holden sits on the loveseat, a folder in his hand, ankle over knee, already in work mode. In jeans, a polo, and boots, he looks like he's about to step onto the plane, not off it. His gaze hits mine.

"Are you set up?" he asks.

"I will be." I pull my computer out of my backpack.

He nods. "We've got a day before the couple we're guarding arrives. This job has to be seamless."

"Seamless it will be."

Fathomless green eyes capture mine. "As you know, the client is used to having guards, but they asked for a couple posing as honeymooners for their honeymoon, so we'd blend in and do the same activities."

"Which is us." I beam and take in his blank face. "Another fun fact. Did you know there are nineteen types of smiles, but only six are for happiness?" A grin tugs at the corners of my mouth, and I shoulder-bump him. "Come on, you know you want to."

"I smiled for happiness two years ago."

Nothing moves on his face, and I'm not sure if he's serious or not.

I open my laptop.

No new emails have popped up since I last checked. I'm always available to the kids I help online, trying to find any family before they get jettisoned from the system and into the adult world. I saw a flyer on a lamp post in my neighborhood, asking if anyone had seen a kid's mom. I took the flyer and found the mom. Word spread. I'm the unofficial Equalizer for kids in Hawthorne and surrounding areas. These kids mean the world to me. It's hard to go through life on your own with no real friends and no one to lean on. If I can help one kid find stability, I'll do anything to bring them happiness.

"There's something we need to discuss." Holden looks up, and a glint in his gaze stops me.

Nerves prickle my neck at his serious tone. "Okay."

"Public displays of affection. What's a yes and a no?"

I whoosh out a breath. "Well, obviously holding hands in public."

"Agreed."

"Applying sunscreen," I say. That's an easy one. I always end up with a burned back.

"Good. Sunscreen applied to parts you can't reach yourself."

"Like to the bottom of your spine, and backs of thighs," I say helpfully.

Wait.

Long strokes of sunscreen on my lower spine from his big hand is *not* a helpful image.

"Kissing when necessary," he says after a moment.

“Oh, right. Yes, of course.” My cheeks heat. “When necessary. Honeymoon resort and all.”

His eyes lock on my mouth for a smidge. “What are your thoughts on tongue or no tongue?”

“Well,” I say, drawing out the word. I stare at his mouth and imagine his tongue sliding into my mouth. I’m caught up in the image, which is making my insides heat.

“Arabella,” he says a bit growly. A vein beats in his jaw.

I clear my throat of lusty tongue thoughts and think of penguins in a snowstorm in the Arctic. “No tongues.”

“No tongues. Agreed.”

“Slow dancing if we must.” It’s been on my to-do list forever.

“Waltz, tango and the samba, if required.”

I look at him in surprise. “You can do those?”

“At Stamford Brook boarding school, dance was a required subject when we were fourteen. I can line dance but don’t. Ever.”

I grab my phone, and after a quick search, look up in wonder. “Oh, my God. Can you do the moves to Achy Breaky Heart?” I am glued to my phone. “I’ll pay you. Do you wear the hat and boots? Wait.” My eyes narrow and my jaw goes slack. “Do you wear chaps?” I squeak out. I am *not* imagining Holden in chaps. Backless chaps highlighting his muscled ass. I clear my throat.

“If I were ever to line dance, it would be in flannel, boots and chaps.”

A whimper slips from my mouth.

Silence and not the comfortable kind, but the kind that makes me want to squirm. If I looked in the mirror, my eyes would be hazy like I’d binge-watched Jamie from *Outlander*.

“I think we’ve covered everything.”

“Agreed.” I snap open my computer with shaky fingers and imagine pouring icy water on my heated insides. I pull up the case notes for this job for the millionth time. I’ve spent hours poring over them, and I know everything backward. Except I know very little about my partner for the next ten days.

My suitcase has magically appeared while I’ve been soaking up the rays on the balcony. I drag it to the wardrobe. My boss, Harlan Franco, took me aside and said that my faded Levi’s and much-loved one-hit-wonder band T-shirts wouldn’t cut it. He’d asked if I had clothes for a high-end resort, which I did not. He’d then asked if I’d like a budget or if I’d prefer a personal shopper. Having no idea what to buy, I’d opted for the shopper. Sally had arrived at the office and taken my measurements. The detail was so personal I wondered if we were on a date and if I should’ve brought flowers.

I put my favorite pj’s—a tank top covered in baby goats and a pair of boy-undies covered in sleepy sloths—in a drawer. I marvel at the softness of the lace strapless bra.

I'm rubbing the fabric between my fingers when I catch Holden's gaze. Amusement and something else burns behind his eyes.

I stuff the rest of the clothes into the drawers with my face on fire, sorting them as I go. What I would leave behind is stacked on the bottom, favorite items on the top—a lifelong habit of fleeing at a moment's notice.

I hang summery dresses I'd never buy, alongside swishy skirts and colorful tops. I hang a stunning, strapless pale pink sheath dress in a closet bigger than my apartment in Los Angeles.

I quickly stuff a turquoise bikini at the bottom of a drawer, and the tension biting into my shoulders eases when I hold up a strapless nylon swimsuit cut so high I'll need to hit the waxing salon. Not ideal, but I'll take it. Nothing clears my head faster than following that relentless black line in a steady freestyle until exhaustion eats into my thoughts.

"I want to do a recon. Meet me by the main pool in ten. We'll start there and circle the property." Holden's voice is firm but gentle. "We're honeymooners, Arabella. You'll have to work on *not* flinching when I touch you. And not jump when I grab your hand." He stares at me. "What can I do to help? Can I count you in?"

Count me in?

Oh dear God.

"Count me in like we're doing a polka?"

"If it helps. What can I do to put you at ease on this assignment?"

The tips of my ears burn. I turn my head and stare at the crystal waves, and a tiny pit of despair opens in my heart.

God, count me in. That's just tragic.

How to play loved-up honeymooners when I've never been in love.

Not a fun fact I want to admit, but I nod because he's right. I've never had this level of intimacy and actively avoid it.

It's how I live.

It's how I've survived.

"I've got it under control." I shoot him my practiced sunny smile.

He stares at me for a second. "That's your fake smile."

It totally is. It's manufactured and comes with a warranty.

His stare bores into my skull. "For the record, I don't think you're ready for fieldwork." At the look on my face, he holds up his hands. "I think you will be, but just not yet."

Resolve and determination hammer my spine straight, and my Sicilian blood flares.

"I *am* ready for this. I overheard you and Harlan talking about my suitability for this case. You are dead wrong, *partner*. I am ready."

His eyebrows raise. "I'll meet you at the pool in ten."

"I'll see you in five," I say to the closing door.

Harlan had requested me because of my language skills, and I'm fairly decent at Krav Maga, if I do say so myself. I'd overheard Holden and Harlan debating if I was ready for this field assignment. Harlan had been sure I was, and Holden hadn't been sure since this was a high-profile client. I'm good at my job and I will make this cover work. I'll be all over his toned ass. Like. A. Rash.

Flinching at his touch is a thing of the past. I will positively melt into the man.

I pick up a pair of denim cutoff shorts a tweenie would *love*, and that I do *not*, and grab a pale purple camisole. After a two-minute shower, I pull my hair into a messy ponytail, slap on sunscreen, and push my feet into flip-flops decorated with pink and yellow daisies. I grab sunglasses and head out the door, snagging the room card.

I spot Holden leaning against a pillar by the main pool, wearing his trademark aviator sunglasses. He turns at my approach. "Wife," he murmurs when I arrive at his side.

"Hubs."

I still when he plucks a pink hibiscus flower and tucks it behind my ear.

"Did you know broccoli is actually a flower?" I press my fingers against my burning neck. "Don't know how you'd go arriving for a first date clutching a vase, just quietly."

Holden smirks, then stills. "Going to bring you next to me. Want me to count you in? Give you a sign like tapping your hand?"

I take a deep breath and hope I melt into him.

“How am I doing?” I wrap my arm around a muscled shoulder and give it a squeeze.

“Do you bench press small nations?” I squeeze again in wonder.

“Only Senegal and New Zealand.”

Another laugh-snort from me. His emerald eyes sparkle.

He pulls me closer, and I catch a whiff of him. He smells divine—woody and outdoorsy, like he’s been cutting lumber under a pristine waterfall. It’s not fair he smells so good. It’s also not fair that I require oxygen and breathe him in, which causes my blood to fizz.

“You okay?”

“I’m so relaxed I’m a yoga pose.”

I’m a pretzel. The hard twisted-into-a-knot kind.

“We’ve got twenty-four hours before our clients arrive. We’ll have to make use of every minute.”

I grab his hand, threading my fingers through his while forcing my body to relax. I practice the breathing I tried at a yoga class until my downward dog collapsed in a very inelegant mess, taking out the lululemon next to me.

I square my shoulders. “I may not have much field experience—okay, none—but I’ve put in the hours of training, and I’ve studied body language.” *At a hundred paces, I can see a twitching nose.* I huff out a labored breath. “You don’t know me, Holden.”

And you never will.

“But, I will know you, Arabella.”

My eyes narrow at the determination in his voice.

Never.

I’ve been Arabella for a while now. Before being Arabella, I’d been Zana, Yvette and Xena—and not the warrior princess variety. I am officially Arabella Dunn—because my old life of hiding is just that. Done.

Three hours later, we’ve completed the recon of the stunning resort, with Holden showing me places potential threats could hide. Some I knew, some I didn’t. I surprise him by pointing out a couple of potential hot spots. Despite his displeasure at having a field noob as his partner on this assignment, he’s a patient teacher, going over my questions and answering them thoughtfully. Our clients, the bride from a wealthy Ukrainian family who now live in the States, and her groom, are arriving tomorrow. They know we’ll be guarding them, and they’ve asked for it to be as low key as possible, so Holden and I will be at all the activities the bride and groom will attend. Well, not all of them. Obviously.

We arrive back at the pool, where couples sit at tables with champagne flutes, cocktails, or glasses of wine. The sunset is putting on a picture postcard display. The sky is pink, tangerine, and violet ribbons. A lone palm tree shadows the mesmerizing backdrop.

I slip into the only free seat at a table. Holden disappears, then returns with a bottle of champagne and two flutes. He pours two glasses, passes me one, then sits next to me, slinging his arm around my shoulder. The movement's abruptness makes me jump, knocking the glass from my hand, and in slow cartoon motion, it rolls down the table. Before it hits the concrete, Holden leans forward and grabs it. Heat pulses in my cheeks. I gaze around at the curious looks on a couple of faces.

Before I can react, I'm hauled onto Holden's lap, where he slants my head before his mouth captures mine. My mouth closes in shock, but when his hand brushes the underside of my breast, I gasp, and his tongue slides in.

He kisses with an intensity that steals my breath, mind, and body. Holden doesn't kiss. Holden claims.

"Put your arms around me," he murmurs.

Am I this far out of the dating game that I don't know how to respond? Apparently so, as my arms hang at my sides like wilted sticks of celery.

Finally, my brain returns from its journey to Greenland. I wind my arms around his neck; then curiously, I run my fingers through his dark hair. Yep, as soft and thick as I imagined. He hisses in a breath as my body melts against his. He releases me, folding me back into the chair as if I'm a doll with no limbs, a racing heart, and a body burning from the inside out.

The doves in my stomach, which I thought were long dead, shuffle their wings.

I wait for my axis to right and sneak a look at Holden, who takes a sip of champagne, turns, and stares into my eyes. There's a touch of red high on his cheeks. A vein pulses in his jaw, but nothing in his eyes, which now widen slightly. "Sorry about the tongue. Totally my fault."

Reality snaps me back.

Oh, God. I get it. I almost believed him.

He's here doing a job.

I'm here doing a job.

This is what honeymooners do in public.

I suck in a shaky breath.

Note to self: It's all play-acting. I have to learn to play.

It isn't like I haven't been play-acting my entire life.