



From Thailand with Love

(AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANTIC COMEDY)

FIRST COMES LOVE

BOOK 5

CAMILLA ISLEY

One

Winter

“There’s a naked man outside the hut next door,” I say, talking on the phone with my best friend, Lana.

“Is that why we’re whispering?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“And why is he naked? Are you in a naturist resort?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Okay, but when you say ‘naked man,’ are we talking elderly pal who forgot to put on his pants, or—”

“No,” I interrupt her. “We’re talking six-foot-five of prime beefcake, white butt cheeks gloriously resplendent in the morning sun.”

“Uh-uh, attagirl. So, what’s the stud doing in the nude? Besides providing a nice view, I mean.”

I raise my gaze upward of the tush region, which so far has monopolized my attention, and take in the whole scene. “He’s shouting profanities at a monkey perched on the roof of his hut.”

“Why?”

I squint my eyes against the sun’s glare to spy better. “The little bugger has stolen his phone. Bah, the dude should’ve known better.”

“Hey, I don’t think he *volunteered* the phone.”

“No, but the resort is on the coast right at the edge of the jungle, and there’s warning signs everywhere recommending to keep doors shut at all times and to beware of the monkeys. He must’ve forgotten to lock the door, and the little thief ran in while he was showering. Why else would he run outside naked—Oh, crap!”

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The man turns, and, for fear of being spotted, I squat behind my hut's bamboo railing, dropping my phone.

"Sorry," I say in the AirPods mic while retrieving the phone.

"What happened?" Lana asks.

"Dude went back inside, I had to dive for cover."

"Oh, gosh. Did you get a full frontal?"

"No, I was too quick dropping to my knees."

"But why are you still hiding if Mr. White Cheeks is gone?"

"I don't know. He may come back."

"FaceTime me," Lana says.

"Why?"

"If you lift your phone's camera above the railing, I can tell you what's happening."

"You're a perv," I joke. "Isn't seeing the Sexiest Man Alive naked any time you want enough for you?" My best friend is in a relationship with Hollywood's number one heartthrob—totally by accident. Fate brought them together when she needed him the most, and while I don't envy the circumstances of their epic meet-cute, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't the teensiest bit jealous.

"Hey," Lana protests. "My interest is purely anthropological."

Out of curiosity, I do as she says, turning on the camera. Lana's face appears on the screen. I wave, smile, then flip the phone around and raise it an inch above the railing.

"What do you see?" I ask.

"Oh, shoot!"

"What?"

"He's back, but with a towel around his waist. Anyway, the bare-chest guise still has appeal." Lana sighs. "Even from a distance, I can tell he's eye candy."

"And what's the eye candy doing?"

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“Talking to the monkey, I think, but he’s too far so I can’t be sure.”

The naked stranger’s stilt villa and mine share a patch of grass enclosed within a square lined with hedges for privacy and are about thirty yards apart.

“Why don’t you come out and see for yourself,” Lana suggests. “He’s no longer naked.”

I get up from my squatting position but stay half-hidden behind the vertical cane screen shielding the left edge of the patio. Spying between the cracks in the wood, I can make out what happens on the other side.

“You’re right,” I tell Lana. “He’s negotiating with the monkey.”

“How does one bargain with a monkey?”

“The dude is offering a banana in exchange for his phone.”

Lana chuckles. “Is the monkey taking it?”

To better peer between the gaps, I bring my face so close to the divider my nose touches the wood. “Looks like she’s considering... she’s extending her free hand toward the banana... and, yep, she’s taken the banana and, oh, no! She’s dropped the phone.” I watch as the discarded piece of technology crashes to the floor, my neighbor not quick enough to catch it. “Ouch, you wouldn’t believe the stream of filth that’s exiting the dude’s mouth. He’s bending down to pick up the phone, the screen must’ve broken... and, oh gosh, there goes the towel... I have eyes on white butt cheeks again.” I push my phone slightly out to the side so Lana can see.

“Yeah, those are some impressive buns.”

We both keep an eye on the man as he takes a few quick steps to his door and, still cursing like a sailor, slams it shut.

“Aww.” I sigh, turning off the video. “Show’s over.”

After one last peek at the monkey now enjoying her banana

on the roof, I head back inside my bungalow, saying, “What’s up with you?”

It’s weird for Lana to call me while I’m on a work assignment out of the country.

“You have time to talk?” she asks, with an edge to her voice. Something’s definitely up.

“Not really, honey, I have a meeting with the expedition team in”—I check my watch—“twenty minutes.”

“Oh, okay.” She sounds downcast. “Can we talk when you come back?”

I double-check that my door is locked, then open the backpack resting against the wall next to it to get some clothes out and start getting ready. “Did something happen?” I ask, apprehension building in my gut.

“Yeah,” Lana says, confirming my suspicions. “But it’s better if we talk later. You’ll want to hear the whole story.”

I select a pair of shorts and a loose T-shirt and lay them on the mattress. “Now I definitely want spoilers.”

“Trust me, you don’t.”

“Do.”

“Okay, but you’re going to hate that you have to go to a meeting after I tell you...”

I untie the back of my bikini bra and toss it on the straw bench at the foot of the bed. “You’re raising my expectations... What *is* it?”

“I spoke with Summer today.”

Ka-Boom!

Lana drops the bomb on me.

“You’re right.” I sigh. “Now I don’t want to hang up. But, sweetheart, I really must go. I’m already running late. I’ll call you as soon as I get back, okay?”

“Sure.”

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“Just tell me, was it... civil?”

“Mostly, but I still don’t know how to behave around your sister. That’s why I called. I need to pick your brain.”

“Okay, my meeting shouldn’t take long, it’s going to be an introduction to the expedition team and itinerary planning. I should be free in an hour tops.” I make a quick calculation of the time difference between Thailand and California. In the US, it’s still yesterday evening. “Or is it going to be too late in LA?”

“No, Christian is at the studio doing a voiceover. He said it’ll take him hours to finish so I should be alone all night.”

“All right, talk to you later.”

“Later, bye.”

I shimmy out of my bikini panties and walk into the stone-and-wood shower to wash off the sweat of an hour spent sunbathing on the outside patio. As I quickly foam myself up, my thoughts inevitably drift to my sister.

In the past few months, I haven’t talked to her much. I still can’t forgive Summer for what she did to Lana. The thought of my sister having an affair with Lana’s boyfriend still sends me on a rage tailspin. But I hope that if they’re mending their relationship, we, too, can find our path back to each other. Being so mad at my twin that I can’t stand to see her face—incidentally, my face also—isn’t healthy.

I hop out of the shower, towel off, comb my hair back without drying it, and don the clothes I prepared. Flip-flops on, I’m ready to go. I slip out of the bungalow, opening the French windows the bare minimum—no monkeys in sight, but I’m not taking chances. Imagine if they stole one of my cameras... I’d be swearing far worse than Mr. White Buttocks. Yeah, better safe than sorry. Triple-checking the door is locked, I pocket the key and skip down the steps of my stilt hut to walk to the resort’s reception and go meet the others.

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I hope the team is solid. I've never worked with the agency that booked me for this job, so I don't know anyone on this trip.

Fingers crossed.

Nothing could be worse than being stuck in the jungle for three weeks with a bunch of morons.

Logan

I stare at my watch impatiently. Everyone's here, except for the photographer.

When the Social Sciences dean told me a woman had been hired, I tried to persuade him to cancel. But Dr. Voss insisted she came highly recommended, and I couldn't make a fuss. Securing the funding to finance this entire operation has already been close to impossible, and since UC Berkeley is our sole sponsor, I wasn't able to put my foot down too hard.

But now I wish I had.

With weeks of heavy trekking ahead of us, bringing a woman on board was a terrible idea. I've nothing against women per se. With my ex, we've been on countless archeological trips together. But a few bad experiences with mixed-gender teams afterward have taught me what a nightmare having a slow, whiny, drama queen on the payroll can be. I never want to go through that again. And this trip will be no joke, it'll be physically exhausting even for the most trained of us, and I'm used to setting a punishing pace. And even if the photographer is fit, she's bound to slow the group down. Plus, having one woman join a team of eight men is going to be an unwanted distraction on its own. We won't even be able to take a leak without making a fuss.

I hope at least she's ugly. Or married. Less chance of my

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team falling over themselves trying to impress her if she is. I have enough problems without adding yet another to the mix.

Already this expedition hasn't started in the best of ways. I unlock and re-lock my phone, reading the time on the newly-cracked screen. Fifteen minutes late and counting. I can already tell she's going to be a massive headache for me.

I snort and walk to the refreshment table to grab another pineapple juice. The humidity in this place is overwhelming. Even standing in the shadow of the Welcome Center—an open-walled wooden structure with a thatched roof—there's no break from the heat.

I grab a glass covered in condensation and turn back to rejoin the others, almost choking on my first sip when I spot a slender blonde walking into the hotel's reception.

Wet platinum-gold hair frames an angel face—big blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and full lips. And the body that goes with the face... Well, let's just say it brings to mind a very different kind of angel, as in the ones walking down the runway at the annual Victoria's Secret Fashion Show—generous rack, tiny waist, legs that never seem to end.

The blonde is wearing a flimsy T-shirt and a pair of light-washed jean shorts that are basically underwear. Really, *great legs*. I low whistle in my head, thinking the wait and the heat suddenly aren't quite as annoying, with this gorgeous woman to distract me.

My appreciation turns to dismay as the blonde takes a quick scan of the reception, pinpoints our group, and promptly walks toward the team to introduce herself, shaking hands left and right. It would appear our photographer has arrived.

I gape at the scene, aghast, as a band of hardened men transforms into a pack of doting puppies all wagging their metaphorical tails.

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Please tell me this isn't happening.

Oh, but it is.

All my worries are confirmed as I study the group's dynamic now that a Pin-up has joined the ranks. She's the focus of everyone's attention, all the sensible topics my colleagues were discussing beforehand forgotten at once. How are we going to get anything done?

The only attitude worse than the widespread adoration is the approving leer curving the lips of Colonel Smith, our chief of security and another member of my team I didn't pick.

I wasn't eager for a squadron of mercenaries to join the expedition in the first place. But Smith and his two minions are one more nuisance that came as a package deal with the funding. Still, I can't help not liking the man; he honestly gives me the creeps. An ex-Delta Force assault squad leader, Smith has turned to private security in his retirement. Of an undecipherable age between forty-five and fifty-five, he's retained all his military bearing: buzz cut shorter at the sides, lean muscled body, and a hard face marked by a livid white slash. The ominous scar cuts from his left eyebrow to halfway down his cheek. And he probably enjoys frightening children with it in his spare time.

The colonel is dressed in a military-like uniform of all black—from shirt, to boots, to weapons—and he looks like he's constantly standing at attention. And so do the other two soldiers, Carter and Montgomery—all three men only provided surnames—who also are ex-Special Forces. The trio is inseparable, apparently.

I drop the empty juice glass on the appropriate tray and join the rest of the team, ready to tighten the leash before my puppies get in a dog fight to gain the photographer's attention.

"This should be everyone," I say, entering the semicircle the

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others have formed. “Why don’t we make the introductions official? I’m Dr. Logan Spencer.”

The woman turns toward me, her eyes widening as if in—*recognition?* Nah, impossible. I’m sure we haven’t met; I’d remember a face like that. Next, she blushes slightly, and, finally, her expression settles on a half-amused grin she’s working hard to suppress. What does she have to smirk about? It’s unnerving.

Determined not to get sidetracked by the woman’s cryptic half-smile—See? She’s already a distraction—I tear my eyes away from the blonde and continue with my self-introduction. “I’m the lead archeologist on this team, and also a professor of Archeological Research Strategy at Berkeley University. Before I lay out the details of our itinerary, I thought it’d be good for each team member to introduce himself to—”

“Or herself,” the woman interrupts.

Oh, great, so the killer looks come paired with a feisty personality. Looks like I’ve won the Pain-In-My-Ass Photographer lottery.

“Sure.” I nod toward her, trying to keep the annoyance from showing on my face. “And tell everyone his or *her* role.” I tilt my head in her direction. “Ladies first?”

She flashes me an impertinent grin, and says, “Winter Knowles, travel photographer.”

That seems like all she has to say. Miss Knowles, at least, is not over-talkative. Without adding another word, she turns to the guy standing on her left, none other than my best friend, Archie, who quickly takes the prompt.

“Archibald—Archie—Hill,” he says, with a grin that promises nothing good. I know him too well; he’s already trying to impress the lady. Tall, blond, bearded, and with piercing blue eyes, he usually doesn’t have to try too hard in that department.

“Topographer, aerial drone controller, and human bullshit detector.”

Winter laughs, a light and bubbly sound. “We have a drone?” she asks with a big smile.

“Yup,” Archie confirms, smug.

“You’ll have to show me how to handle it.”

He grins. “I’m sure we can make that happen.”

Then my best friend and trusted companion of many past expeditions turns away from Winter and wiggles his eyebrows at me, as if saying he’d be more than happy to teach her how to handle *it*. I resist the urge to slap my hand over my face and groan.

This is a disaster.

Eager to move on, I stare at the next guy in our circle until he takes the hint.

“Dr. Rune Boonjan,” the short man says in heavily-accented English. “Head archeologist at the Thai Fine Arts Department, local expert, and interpreter.”

Dr. Boonjan and I met in person for the first time on the plane from Bangkok to Trat, and he impressed me with his knowledge of the Kingdom of Siam history. No worries about him; we clicked right away.

My colleague bends in a slight bow, with his palms pressed together in a prayer-like fashion, and salutes us in Thai, “*Sawatdee khrap.*”

We all bow back, mimicking his salutation except for the military guys, who remain upright.

Rude.

Then, the group’s focus shifts to the other Thai member of our team. About the same height as Dr. Boonjan, he’s leaner, and his brown skin looks more weathered even though he’s younger.

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“Somchai Inkong,” he introduces, in English even more accented than the professor, making it a task in concentration to understand him. “Horses and mules handler, local fixer...” With a cheeky grin, he concludes: “...and machete operator. *Sawatdee khrap.*”

“*Sawatdee khrap,*” we repeat.

I turn to my right to encourage Tucker to speak—he’s the only other known factor in this group besides myself and Archie. He hasn’t been with us from the start, but since our first trip together in Guatemala, he has become an invaluable member of every new expedition Archie and I plan.

“Tucker Wallace,” he announces in his clear baritone voice. “Logistics, cooking, and first aid.”

“We have a cook?” Winter says. “Yay, I had assumed we would eat beef jerky for a month.”

And she even managed to make *beef jerky* sound like a dirty word.

She smiles at Tucker, probably more pleased at the thought of his cooking skills than anything else, but there he goes turning into an adoring puppy like the rest of them.

Not him, too!

Women are Archie’s weakness, but Tucker is usually smarter than that. With brown eyes and a mop of curly brown hair, he’s the shy, responsible guy in our group. The teddy bear looks don’t fool anyone for long, though; when it comes to his job, Tucker is a dictator with an iron fist.

The next man in our circle, at least, has no puppy in him. Although I’m not sure “hungry wolf” is much better. I’ll have to keep an eye on him and his pack when they’re around Winter. Because I didn’t have enough to do already.

“Smith,” the mercenary says, not shifting an inch from his military resting pose—feet hip-width apart, puffed out chest,

hands clasped behind his back. “Head of security.”

His two deputies—both ex-sergeants in the army—echo him, keeping the same stance and not providing any additional personal details.

“Carter.”

“Montgomery.”

These military guys are so full of themselves, they’re ridiculous. But they also give off such a powerful not-joking vibe, even Miss Sass doesn’t tease them. But I can tell from the mocking twinkle in her eyes, she’s dying to. She physically has to bite her lower lip to stop herself from uttering whatever barb she’s thinking.

Definitely distracting.

Can’t she find a way to keep herself in check that’s less sensual? The pink cheeks and the lip-biting... those mile-long legs... I hope she doesn’t plan to cross the jungle wearing shorts.

“All right, that was everyone,” I say, ready to wrap up the meet-cute. “I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time to become more familiar with each other in the upcoming weeks.” Archie throws me a rakish, I-plan-to-get-oh-so-familiar-with-our-photographer look. I pause to scowl at him, then add, “Tomorrow we leave at the crack of dawn. Before you go enjoy your last day in the comforts of civilization, I’ll ask Tucker to walk us through the logistics of our first stretch on the road.”

“Great.” Tucker takes out his rugged tablet and shows the group a map on the screen. “The first part of tomorrow’s journey will be on the Jeeps. In a straight line”—he traces the path on the map with his finger—“our target is not far from the resort, but the road to get there is more of an abandoned dirt trail winding up the mountains.” He points at the three peaks on our left. “It’ll take us most of the morning to clear a relatively short distance. Halfway up, we’ll stop at the only village inland to

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collect the last few provisions. From there, we'll continue the crossing on horseback while the mules will carry most of the equipment and supplies. If everything goes according to plan, we should reach our final destination, the hidden valley beyond the peaks, before the sun sets. Once there, we'll build our base of operations and proceed with our exploration on foot over the next days with the support of our local bushwhacking guide."

Tucker nods at Somchai, who returns the gesture with a grin.

"Anyway," Tucker continues, "we meet again in the parking lot tomorrow at five a.m., so we should all get an early night."

He steps back, and I take the floor again.

"I'm sure there's no need to point this out," I say, staring directly at the photographer. "But we're going to travel through a hostile environment and we should all dress appropriately, and punctuality is of the essence."

Again, she bites her lip, but doesn't comment. Even if the hard stare she's giving me promises hell.

Before I dismiss the meeting, I deliver one last warning. "And finally, just a reminder that the nature of this expedition is confidential. If someone asks, our cover story is that we're in Thailand to study the ecology of the region. Flora, fauna, rock formations... that kind of stuff. So, please, no loose talk about a lost city of gold. See you all at five tomorrow," I conclude.

After my dismissal, the group breaks. The military guys leave, marching more than walking away single file. The two locals speak among themselves in thick Thai and then walk off in the opposite direction. And Archie and Tucker join me to go over the last details of tomorrow's journey.

I hope Miss Sass will get lost to her bungalow without any further demonstration of her saucy attitude.

"Excuse me?"

No such luck. I've just turned to talk to Archie when she

materializes behind my back, demanding attention.

“Yes?” I say, turning to her. Archie stands on my left, Tucker on my right.

I tower a good few inches over her, but the photographer doesn't appear one bit intimidated as she asks, “Do you have a problem with me?”

Busted.

“Is it because I have tits?”

As she says the words, three sets of eyes lower to her chest.

When I raise my gaze again to meet hers, she's giving me a hand-on-the-hip, have-you-had-enough-of-a-good-look, sarcastic pout.

Well, she can't speak that word in front of three men and expect any other reaction. It was practically a directive to look.

“Because I can assure you *I* am a professional.” Flaring up with self-righteous indignation, Miss Sass continues her tirade, “Not my first drill, you know?”

“Sure,” I say, dutifully chastised. “Sorry if I appeared disrespectful.”

“You didn't choose me for this job, did you?”

No point in lying. “No.”

“Didn't want a woman on board?”

“Nothing personal.”

“No, of course. Well, no need to worry. I can pull my weight and take care of myself. No damsels in distress here.”

Then she stops for a second, looking undecided if she should go on with whatever she's dying to say next.

She goes for it. “Like, for instance, I can read and comprehend the million warning signs around me.”

What the hell is she talking about?

With an evil little smirk playing on her lips, she asks, “How's that broken phone treating you?”

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I blink at her.

How can she possibly know?

The grin widens, and she answers the question I haven't asked.

"Our bungalows are adjoining," she explains. "Next time, I'd suggest doing as the signs say and locking your doors." Then, with a wink, she adds, "Nice negotiating skills, by the way. I'm sure they'll come in handy in the jungle."

My face flames red hot, and I can only hope I'm not blushing like a schoolgirl. Also, I don't have to look at them to know that both Archie and Tucker are tremendously enjoying me being told off. Usually, I'm the one doing the scolding.

Winter nods at them, saying, "Gentlemen," and then walks away, leaving us to admire her miles-long legs as she saunters down the road.

As soon as she rounds the corner, Archie low-whistles. "Imagine how that feistiness translates in bed!"

And damn me, because my friend's words conjure all kind of wrong fantasies.

"Dude?" Tucker asks. "What was she talking about with keeping the doors locked?"

And, as if my humiliation wasn't complete enough, now I have to explain to my friends about my earlier disagreement with the local fauna...

Two

Winter

The second I get back to my bungalow, I call Lana.

“You’re never going to believe this,” I say the instant my best friend picks up.

“What?” Lana asks, with a hint of playful curiosity in her voice.

“Guess who the esteemed expedition leader who incidentally hates women is?”

“Who?”

“Naked Dummy,” I say, collapsing on the bed.

“I take it the introductions didn’t go well?” she asks, now definitely amused. Easy for her to laugh; she doesn’t have to spend the next month trekking through the Thai jungle with Satan. “And how come he hates women?”

I sigh. “Maybe ‘hate’ is a strong word.” I rest my back against the headboard and tuck my knees close to my chest. “It was more the attitude sailors used to have about women onboard ships.”

“And what was that?”

“That we’re bad luck or something. What an insufferable, dumb snob.”

“If he’s leading such an important expedition, he can’t be that stupid. Didn’t you say you’re after a legendary lost city?”

My heart does a little guilty flip. Satan’s words ringing in my ears: “...*the nature of this expedition is confidential... no loose talk about a lost city of gold.*”

The dude’s so paranoid he even made everyone sign NDAs about it. Agreements I might have broken by telling Lana about

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the real reason we're in Thailand. But I honestly don't see what the big deal is with all this secrecy, and she's my best friend, so she doesn't count.

"I'm not supposed to talk about that," I say, deflecting Lana's question. And trust me he can be *that* dumb."

"Mm," Lana says nothing, but still sounds as if she's enjoying herself.

"You don't seem sympathetic."

"No, sorry. It's just that I haven't heard you so worked up about someone, well... ever."

"I know! He's the most annoying, arrogant bastard—"

"Does *he* have a name?" Lana interrupts my rant.

"Logan."

"Kind of a sexy name to go with a sexy ass."

"Oh, pwhff, please. I take back everything nice I ever said about his anatomy. He doesn't deserve it. And from now on we're referring to him as Satan."

"How's the face that goes with the ass?" Lana asks. "I couldn't see over the phone; is he ugly?"

"He's a type," I say neutrally.

"What type?"

"Thick brown hair, hazel-green eyes, full lips, slight chin cleft, a few freckles..."

"Sounds like everyone's type."

I scoff. "If you enjoy watching a constant scowl. And, anyway, it doesn't matter if he's not repellent, physically, he's still evil inside. Most beautiful things in nature are. Like, you wouldn't kiss a cobra or eat a moonflower."

"So kissing Satan would *never* cross your mind?"

"Haven't you been listening? Of course it wouldn't."

"I *have* been paying attention, that's why I'm asking. You're the one who brought up kissing, not me."

"You don't get it...!"

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“What? That your boss—*so to speak*—is tall, handsome... presumably smart—”

“And arrogant, and full of himself, definitely evil, and I hate his guts.”

“Whoa, he really crossed you, considering you only spent, what, an hour with him?”

“You should’ve seen him.” I use my mocking voice again: “*We should all dress appropriately for the jungle*, as if he expected me to show up in a skirt and heels.”

“Guess Logan is not used to having a bombshell as a member of his team.”

“Satan,” I correct her. “And bombshell, me? That’s Summer. I’m the tomboy.”

“You’re identical twins, who share 99.99 percent of your DNA.”

“Still, we couldn’t be more different. Speaking of evil twins... Sorry for monopolizing the conversation, but I needed to vent.”

“No worries.”

“So, Summer.” I go back to the topic Lana meant to discuss earlier. “Tell me everything. Did you speak with her in person?”

“Yeah, she called, asked if I wanted to grab a coffee and talk.”

“You’re a much bigger person; if I’d caught her screwing my boyfriend I’d never talk to her again, even if she’s my sister.”

“You still sound angrier than I am,” Lana notes.

“I told you, you’re the better person. Plus, you have the Sexiest Man Alive to distract you as a consequence of what Summer pulled. I don’t.”

Lana chuckles. “Ah, you have a point. Without Christian in my life, I wouldn’t be so Zen about everything. But, you’re right, Summer’s actions resulted in me being the happiest I’ve ever been, while she... Your sister isn’t in good shape, to be

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honest.”

Some deep, ancestral bond makes my insides twinge with worry. Summer might be the evil twin, but she’s *my* evil twin.

“How bad?” I ask.

“Nothing obvious on the outside, but it’s like she’s had her spirit broken. She was a ghost of her former self. Promise you’ll go see her when you come back. If I can forgive her, you should, too.”

“You forgave her?”

“As much as I know how. Our friendship won’t ever be the same as before, but I saw no point in holding a grudge forever...”

“Doesn’t the fact that she’s in a relationship with your ex bother you?”

“She and John broke up.”

“What?” I say, straightening up. *This is huge.* “How? When?”

“After he sold the story to the press, his sorry version of it. She cut him loose after reading the feature.”

“But that was a month ago!”

“You haven’t talked to her in that long?”

“No,” I admit, guilt gnawing at my sides. Summer and I have never had a fight that lasted months. “It’s been easier not to call her since I’ve been away.”

The new job starts tomorrow, but I’ve spent the past four weeks in Bangkok on another assignment.

“Anyway,” Lana continues. “Summer told me she was completely blindsided by the magazine piece. John didn’t tell her before going to the press, and she felt like he’d sold her dignity for ten thousand dollars. He didn’t consider for a second what the article would do to her, to her reputation... She also said she hated the way he spoke about me—revolting, to quote her.”

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“Well...” I relax my back against the pillows again. “‘Cause he is a disgusting piece of shit.”

“I guess.”

“My sister threw away a twenty-five-year friendship for a three-month affair. I still can’t wrap my head around it.”

“She *had* broken up with Robert only a few months before. Maybe the separation hit her harder than we thought.”

“How can you make justifications for her?”

Lana lets a few seconds pass before answering. “I thought seeing her at rock bottom would give me satisfaction, but it really didn’t. Honestly, I’m gutted for her, but I can’t be there to help her, I don’t have it in me, not yet. I just wish you were here. How much longer are you gone for?”

Again, guilt kicks around in my guts. “A few weeks at least, possibly more. Why do you think she reached out to you today? Why wait a month after she broke up with Johnathan?”

“She read the *Vanity Fair* feature about Christian and me being back together. She thought I’d be more willing to hear her out since I was so happy.”

“Which I guess you were.”

“Yup. Speaking of...” Lana pauses. “Christian just got back in.”

“I’ll let you go, then.”

“Will you be reachable in the next days?”

“Afraid not, we’re moving inland tomorrow, no service there.”

“Please call Summer today, then, before you go off the grid.”

“You’re really an angel.”

“Am not. And you’d do the same if it were me. Remember when I kissed Peter Gomez in the locker room and Summer didn’t talk to me for a week? You were there to advocate for me.”

“That was the eleventh grade.”

FROM THAILAND WITH LOVE

“It doesn’t matter. Promise you’ll call your sister.”

“Okay, I promise. Love you.”

“Love you.”

We hang up, and I remain motionless on the bed looking at my phone for the longest time.

Why am I being so stubborn? Why am I still so mad at Summer? If Lana can forgive her, I should be able to as well.

Maybe I shouldn’t ask myself to make peace with my twin all at once.

Right!

Baby steps.

I unlock my phone and tap her contact before I can change my mind.

Summer picks up after five long rings.

“Hello?”

Her voice sounds broken, as if she... “Are you crying?”

“A little,” she says. “But nothing serious. I’m just watching *Notting Hill*, the bit where Julia Roberts goes back to the shop and tells Hugh Grant she’s just a girl...”

My sister getting sentimental over romantic comedies? Lana was right, the situation *is* major.

“Where are you?” Summer asks. “The line sounds weird.”

“Thailand, near the coast. But I’m leaving for the jungle tomorrow. Thought I’d give you a call, as I won’t have service for a few weeks.”

Summer instantly calls bullshit on my story. “Lana told you to check in on me, didn’t she?”

“She did,” I admit.

“Guess you’re up to date on all the big news, then.”

“I am, and to be honest, I’m glad you’ve broken up with Johnathan. He’s a cockroach who never deserved you or Lana.”

“True. Which only makes me feel worse...” Her voice cracks again.

I swallow back all the harsh retorts that pop into my head and try to be conciliatory.

“At least now it’s over,” I say.

I’m not being the most uplifting, but... *I’m trying.*

“Can we... not talk about any of that, please?” Summer pleads. “Tell me about your trip. How’s the team? Mom’s worried because you’ve never worked with any of them before...”

That’s all the encouragement I need to tell my sister how I ended up working for Satan.

“He sounds like a handful...” Summer chuckles when I’m done. And that deep part of me that is linked to her for life whoops with joy that I could cheer her up a little. “How about the rest of the team? Anyone interesting?”

“Bah, the security team guys are all buffs, but they take themselves too seriously. The only fascinating fella is the topographer.”

“Fascinating how?”

“Think tall Viking warrior with dirty-blond hair and ice-blue eyes that stand out against his tan skin. Oh, and did I mention? The man has a beard.”

“Ew. I hate beards.”

“Just because you’ve never kissed one; his looks like the soft type.”

“Well, enjoy your bearded Viking.” Summer yawns. “I’ll let Mom know your team is cool.”

Leader aside, I think, but only say, “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I have no response, and she doesn’t say anything else. Suddenly our easy flow of conversation is gone, and things become super awkward again.

After a few seconds, Summer yawns, a bit too loudly to be genuine. “Well, the movie’s over, and I have to go if I want to

wake up at a decent hour tomorrow...”

“Yeah, right. Of course.”

“Thanks for calling.”

For a few brief, wonderful minutes we’ve been the Knowles twins again, inseparable from birth. But now we’re back to walking on eggshells around each other. I still haven’t forgiven Summer for what she did, and she knows it. A conversation, no matter how nice, isn’t enough to mend our relationship.

But, as I said: *baby steps*.

“Sure,” I say. “I’ll let you get to sleep. Night.”

“Night.”

When the line goes dead, I drop the phone on the nightstand and lay on the bed staring at the ceiling.

Lana was right: holding a grudge is no good. Now that I’ve talked to Summer, I feel a million times better, at least mentally.

Physically, I’m about to melt. The room has gotten too hot; the air conditioning is crap and does nothing against the midday Thai heat. Good thing there’s an ocean just a few yards away. I change back into my bikini and go for a swim.

Logan

“Man,” I say to Archie, snapping my fingers. “I’m talking to you.”

Archie, Tucker, and I are seated outside at a table in the shade under the giant wooden hut where the resort serves breakfast and lunch. We’re discussing more in detail the laser-scanned images of the area we are to explore on foot and the difficulties we might encounter reaching it. But it seems I’m the only person interested in the topic. My two friends are staring behind my shoulders like two hypnotized dummies.

“Sorry.” Archie’s ice-blue eyes flicker to me. “I was enjoying the view.”

A twitch of his mustached upper lip lets me know he’s not talking about the ocean.

I turn toward the beach just in time to see Miss Pain-in-my-ass Knowles walk out of the sea with the same sex appeal of a Bond girl in a 007 movie: wet hair swept back, water dripping down her body, wearing a bikini so skimpy it makes the shorts she had on before look like nun-ware.

If that wasn’t enough, she walks straight to the beach shower.

“Tucker,” Archie says. “Please tell me there’s going to be open showers at our camp.”

I turn back and find both of them still staring like imbeciles.

“No,” Tucker says. “But if we ration drinking water we could make one just for her.”

“I’m ready to die a happy, thirsty man,” Archie replies without removing his eyes from the photographer.

See? *See?* That’s why I didn’t want a woman on board. It’s objectively disrupting. And a woman like that...

I throw another furtive stare behind my shoulder just as Winter closes the water faucet and walks back to the beach to go lie down on a chaise lounge by the shore, finally out of sight.

“Okay,” I say. “Now that the show’s over, can we please concentrate?”

“You should learn how to appreciate the small joys of life, Logie Bear,” Archie says, using my college-football-playing-days nickname.

“A groundbreaking discovery of an ancient, untouched city is what would give me joy.” I flare my nostrils and point at the open maps on the table. “You were saying we won’t have a clear path of approach?”

Archie throws me another don’t-be-such-a-spoilsport look before he continues. “What these images tell us is that beyond

FROM THAILAND WITH LOVE

this position”—he points at the red-circled area Tucker has selected as our base camp—“we will have to hack our way through every inch of jungle to reach across”—he moves his finger to the other red circle on the map identifying our destination, code-named Area X—“to here. It’s a jungle stretch just shy of fifteen miles that will take us at least seven or eight days to clear.”

“Tucker,” I say. “What is your suggested approach? Should we advance each day, leaving enough time to circle back to the main camp, or should we set up secondary, one-night-only camps as we go? I’d prefer this second solution; it’d save us time.”

“I’d rather circle back to base, at least for the first few days. Unless you want to get eaten by a tiger, that is.” He stares down at the aerial pictures, where only thick green vegetation is visible. If it weren’t for the correlated laser scans, no one could’ve guessed the jungle harbors more than just vines and trees. “The place we’re going is so wild, the animals there must’ve never seen a man.”

“That’s why we hired a security team. I’m sure they can scare off a few big cats,” I counter. “Those military guys don’t look like they’re joking around.”

Archie scoffs sarcastically. “Aye, aye.”

“Still,” Tucker says. “We have no idea what’s waiting for us out there, and I’d rather we all got back in one piece. It’s not an everyday thing to reach one of the last unexplored regions on Earth.”

Archie pulls at his short beard. “Let’s hope we actually find something when we get to Area X.”

We have to. I’ve put everything on the line to organize this trip. My career, my reputation... I can’t fail.

The legend of a lost city made of gold and hidden in the thick of the Thai jungle has haunted me since I first heard it the

CAMILLA ISLEY

summer of my freshman year in college, when I spent a month backpacking in this country. Since then, finding the legendary city has become an obsession of mine. I've spent years collecting every scrap of research I could find on the topic.

But the area the various rumors pointed at had always been too vast to grant any real hope of success. Until I heard of a new technology that could take an aerial scan of even the thickest forest and reveal what lay hidden underneath. A city.

But will it truly be the legend I've spent years tracking and obsessing over?

Three

Winter

When I get back to my villa from the beach, it's already dark outside. One minute the sun was up, and the next it had disappeared behind the mountains.

Inside the hut, the AC is still doing a crap job, and the atmosphere is suffocating. I wish I could leave the French windows open to let the evening breeze in. But, as per the thieving monkey population, I'd better not. Still, I need the fresh air, so I jump on the bed and examine the overhead window.

Bingo!

There's a *fixed* mosquito screen, unlike the sliding one that protects the door. It should be safe to leave this window open...

Mmm... I sigh in relief as a gust of fresh night air blows in my face. Then, I hop off the bed and move to the bathroom to take my last—for how long?—hot shower.

I stay under the water as long as I can, enjoying this simple comfort of civilization. But when the heat makes me lightheaded, I have no choice but to step out. I wrap myself in a towel and collapse on the bed to lie down for a minute.

"...Nah, man, come on," Logan's voice drifts in from the open window.

Hey, I said I wanted to relax, not listen to Satan yapping. I'm tempted to get up and close the window, but the night air feels too good on my wet skin. And I'm just too plain lazy to move right now.

"We have to," Archibald the Viking replies. "It's a tradition."
"Shouldn't we wait until after dinner?"

"No, Tucker wants everyone to go straight to bed, and we

can't rush this. You have glasses?"

"Inside," Logan says, sounding resigned. "And close the door," he adds.

I smirk to myself. Looks like Satan is a quick study.

There's a moment of silence, followed by the sound of the sliding door opening and closing, a few quiet minutes, and finally the door again.

Then Archie speaks.

"Here's a glass of the best bourbon money can't buy."

"Amazing, man. Priscilla still sends you a bottle every year?"

Archie's reply is jokingly cocky. "Must've made quite an impression on the lady, haven't I?"

"That you did," Logan agrees in a tone of friendly reproach.

"To a new adventure," Archie declares. "And the greatest archeological discovery of the millennium."

"Cheers."

They clink glasses and presumably drink. There's another pause before Logan talks again.

"Speaking of ladies," he says. "I call dibs on the photographer."

"What?" Archie bursts out.

WHAT? I echo in my head. I thought the professor hated my guts.

"Seemed like you weren't interested," Archie says. "And since when do you mix business and pleasure?"

"I don't," Logan replies, sounding infuriatingly complacent.

"So why...? Wait a minute!" Archie protests, riled up. "You can't call dibs on her just to cockblock me."

"I can, and I did."

Oh, Satan thinks he's so smug.

I, on the contrary, am not pleased with either man. The nerve of them to barter between themselves who should "get the girl."

FROM THAILAND WITH LOVE

Well, sorry guys, I'm not some brainless object you can trade amongst yourselves.

Both gentlemen would greatly benefit from a meal of humble pie.

"Dude." There's a mocking note in Archie's voice. "Are you sure the dibs has nothing to do with the lady having the best pair of legs I've ever seen, not to mention pretty big..."

He doesn't finish the phrase, only makes a caveman noise. But I know he's not talking about my big *eyes*. I can practically see Archie mimicking cupping boobs.

"She's a beautiful woman," Logan says. A compliment that, coming from Satan's lips, doesn't resonate as one. It's like Logan has to admit I'm attractive against his will, and he resents me for it. And his next sentence confirms I'm right. "There's no denying it. But she's been a giant pain in my ass from the moment I set eyes on her." *Why? What did I do, besides existing and being female, I mean?* "So, yes, I'm sure."

"If you say so." Archie sounds unconvinced.

"Promise me you won't try to get in her panties," Logan insists. "This expedition is important to me, Arch. I need you to be focused. Promise me."

"All right, man, I swear. Relax..."

"When you and the genteel sex are involved, I can't. I'm only trying to avoid another Acapulco."

"Ah, yes, that would be impractical."

"Impractical? You nearly got us both killed. The lady's father chased us off his property with a loaded shotgun."

These two sound like they have a lot of history together.

"Okay," Archie concedes. "You've made your point. But—

”

"No buts!"

"—if the lady can't resist me and tries something, I can't

make assurances...”

“You’re incorrigible! Sooner or later it’ll come back to bite you in the ass.”

“Until then.”

I hear the clinking of ice in a glass, as if Archie just raised his drink in a mock toast.

There’s a pause, and then Archie talks again. “You worry too much, my friend. You said it yourself: the scans don’t lie. Something man-built lies hidden in this jungle.”

“But is it the legendary lost city of gold?”

“Would it make any difference if it were only stone?”

“No,” Logan admits. “It’d still be the greatest discovery of the century.”

“Even greater than an untouched pharaoh tomb?” Archie asks, an edge to his voice.

“Low blow, man,” Logan says, sounding displeased. “She has nothing to do with this.”

She? There’s a she?

Archie sighs. “Too soon?”

“Can we please not talk about women ever again?”

“Nah, and where would the fun be in that?” After a few moments of silence, Archie continues, “Let’s make a bet instead. How long you reckon before the photographer falls at my feet?”

I’m tempted to jump on the bed and yell, “Not gonna happen!” out of the window, but I keep my anger in check. Vengeance is a plate better served cold. And both gentlemen definitely need to be taken down a peg or two.

But how?

Archie is an easy fix. Ignore his sex appeal, show him I’m immune to his charms, and his ego will get bruised all right.

But what about Satan?

FROM THAILAND WITH LOVE

Dr. McEvil seems like someone who hates to make mistakes. Which means all I have to do is prove he's wrong about me. But first, I might need to bait him a little more.

Oh, the two of them, they think they're so hot and clever. But wait until they meet the real me. They won't know what hit them.

Boys, beware... Winter is coming!

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Camilla Isley is an engineer turned writer after she quit her job to follow her husband on an adventure abroad.

She's a cat lover, coffee addict, and shoe hoarder. Besides writing, she loves reading—duh!—cooking, watching bad TV, and going to the movies—popcorn, please. She's a bit of a foodie, nothing too serious.

A keen traveler, Camilla knows mosquitoes play a role in the ecosystem, and she doesn't want to starve all those frog princes out there, but she could really live without them.

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