
STEALING SARAH

Mercenaries Book One

EBONY ROSE



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Ebony Rose
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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

Brax dials the eyepiece of his precision rifle, focusing his gaze onto the stronghold below. It's almost six o'clock and time for his quarry to arrive. Hunkering down against the hard earth, he presses his body into the firm rock, lying low so as to avoid detection.

Soon enough, an entourage of black SUVs come into view, arriving at the flat, tiled mansion, like a procession of well-known politicians. Brax watches as the security team in charge of the group takes point, jumping out of their cars to secure the area, their movements organized and proficient.

Peering down at the flurry of activity, he wonders which one of them will be his target? *Probably the young, hot wife*, he thinks calmly, waiting for the family to emerge from their vehicles.

Brax knows he has a reputation as the 'honorable mercenary,' meaning that a lot of his jobs entail the extraction of rich, beautiful women. Basically, Brax is the guy you call when you want a client delivered with as little damage to their reputations as possible.

Pulling out his sat phone, he lays the device flat against

the earth beside him. If his handler gives him the identity of his target, then Brax can expect an encrypted message at any time.

Re-aligning his left eye with the scope of his rifle, Brax waits patiently as the car doors finally open.

The young family who makes their way toward the mansion are every bit the wealthy breed he'd expected them to be. The children are dressed in white smocks and look regal as they ignore their hulking male shadows, their smiles wide as they skip happily over to the front door.

Their stepmother is a vision of loveliness in her flowing white dress, wide, red lips and smooth, tanned skin. Her dark sunglasses take up most of her face and the wide brimmed hat she wears protects her perfect skin from the afternoon sun.

She follows close behind the two kids, her hip swinging gait attracting the attention of the hired muscle flanking her sides. *Fools*, Brax thinks with a sneer, watching as the men allow their gazes to become distracted by her obvious assets.

Brax continues to wait for a text from his mysterious handler, watching as the family disappears into their home, his window of opportunity eventually gone. *Looks like I won't be activated tonight*, he thinks with a mental shrug, panning his scope back toward the idling cars, his breath catching when he spies the familiar female emerging from one of the SUVs.

Sarah swings her legs out of the passenger seat, readying herself for yet another hard jog. She's once again delivered her quarry safely to their home, her latest babysitting job over. With a quick exhalation, she blows the hair off her forehead, the stickiness becoming uncomfortable in the island heat.

"Sam," she calls, addressing the large guard standing by the massive oak doors. "I need to complete a perimeter search; can you make sure the family doesn't go anywhere without me knowing?"

"Yes, ma'am," Sam replies, his manner gruff.

Sarah pushes a hand through her short brown locks, the fine strands spiking out from the dampness on her scalp. Nodding to the men who make up her small unit, she turns toward the fence-line and sets off at a speedy pace. The land is flat along this part of the perimeter, allowing for an easy path. Drawing out her semi-automatic weapon, Sarah reaches the bank of trees, both hands held out in front of her as she follows the rising path with her gun raised. If anyone is smart enough to breach her defenses, then they will probably use the natural rise as their cover, since it's the main vantage point on this property.

And here she comes, Brax thinks sardonically before he begins dismantling his weapon with expert efficiency. He's been watching this sexy female for over a week now, his body shooting tight every time he catches sight of her in her hot combat gear.

Brax dwells on thoughts of his hot pixie while he stows his rifle safely into its case. He imagines rolling her onto the hard earth beneath him, the pair of them wrestling for dominance before he manages to subdue her, running his tongue over those pouty lips. Shaking himself out of the fantasy, he slings the case over his shoulder and moves away from the small landing.

Unable to stop himself, Brax allows his gaze to find her again, his interest in her firm, muscular frame causing a hot flood of sensation to swarm his body. *She is definitely the brains*

of this outfit, he thinks hungrily, watching as she shrewdly scans the perimeter, her sure footsteps bringing her ever closer to him.

Brax continues to watch her for long moments before he forces his body into action. Sweeping the dust at his feet to hide his position, he collects his phone and turns to leave. The vibration of the device in his hand brings his attention to the locked screen, his spine shooting rigid with tension.

The image that pops up is a photo of his tawny eyed pixie, her eyes shining as she grins happily at the camera. Brax can feel his cock hardening painfully at the image of her full lips and upturned nose, even as his stomach clenches with dread.

Sarah is puffing slightly as she covers the second kilometer of her run, her body feeling stiff as she jogs with her arms raised in front of her. *A little muscle burn never killed anybody*, she tells herself, her mind going over each familiar rise and fall of this landscape, while she runs.

That's when she sees it—human tracks coming in from the south. Slowing her steps, she stares at two distinct foot-falls in the dusty earth, her stomach twisting as she realizes her perimeter has been breached.

Lifting a hand to her mic, Sarah pinches the button on her shoulder and whispers, "We have a perimeter breach on the southernmost corner. Move the assets to the panic room and wait for my signal."

Hearing the flutter of voices in her earpiece, Sarah plucks the receiver out of her ear and continues up the small incline, lifting her weapon to just below her jawline. As she stalks forward, her head cocks to one side, and she keeps her feet light as she controls her breathing, in and out.

A deep scuff across the top of the small hill indicates that someone has climbed over the side, so Sarah leans forward, her movements silent as she peers over the edge.

A sudden pressure from behind her has her arms pinned to her sides while her assailant attempts to drag her backwards. With a sharp stomp on his instep, she hears the man's grunt of pain before she flicks her head back in an attempt to connect her skull with his vulnerable nose.

When the grip on her body loosens, Sarah ducks and spins, her body fluid as she follows her momentum to deliver a sweep to the man's legs, sending him sprawling onto the ground. Lifting her firearm to aim at him, she underestimates his ability to rebound as the man quickly rolls to the side and sweeps out his own legs in a scissoring kick, landing Sarah flat on her back with bone jarring impact.

Kicking out hard, she connects both heels into his chest, sending him across the dusty ground as her pistol flies out of her grip. Slipping a blade from her waistband, she springs back to her feet, slashing out in an arc when the man charges forward. Just as the blade is about to connect with his neck, he rotates to the side, grabbing her arm and yanking her forward, tumbling her face first into the hard earth. Still clutching her arm, he follows through and flips her over, confiscating her knife in a bone crushing grip before lifting his knees to pin her shoulders, his dark brown eyes staring down at her.

"I suppose introductions are in order?" he says breathlessly, his chiseled features suited more to a swimsuit model than any kind of field agent.

Sarah glares up at him, her rage blistering as she considers the man from her prone position. *No one has ever bested her in hand to hand combat before.* Sarah purses her lips, her anger palpable. Instead of waiting for her to speak, he says,

"My name is Brax Westworth, Sarah McCallister, and I am here to rescue you."

Sarah stares up at him, her expression dumbfounded. *How does he know my name? Scratch that, why does he think I need rescuing?* She watches as the huge man pockets her gun before searching her body for more weapons. With a withering look, she stares him down while he slowly pats her tank top and cargo pants, withdrawing two more blades and her ankle holster. *Is it my imagination, or did the guy just feel me up?*

"Why are you here?" Sarah asks him suspiciously, her flinty gaze slicing through his relaxed one.

"I've already told you that," he says in a friendly tone, the pressure on her shoulders easing slightly as he moves his body backwards. "And before you start whaling on me again, I think you should check out this message."

He lifts his sat phone to show her a photo of her own smiling face, the text beneath it reading *spitfire*.

"Any reason why I'm supposed to say 'spitfire' to you?" he asks with interest, his knees disappearing altogether as he lifts himself off her body.

"It's... it's my dad's safe word," she answers, her confusion evident as she pulls out her own sat phone from her pocket. *Blank*. Her phone appears dead, its screen empty.

"Your phone's been shut down?" he asks, sidling close to see the empty screen. Quickly pocketing the flat mobile from his view, Sarah steps back, not trusting this man.

"It could just be out of battery," she says, hearing the doubt in her own voice.

"They mustn't make satellite phones the way they used to," he says, his brown eyes gleaming.

Sarah grits her teeth, her anger resurfacing at his infuriating tone. *How dare he laugh at me.*

"Just because you have my photo and my safe word, doesn't mean I'll be going anywhere with you."

"Really, and why is that?" he asks, his voice curious.

"Because I don't need you," she tells him, her voice defiant. "I don't need anyone; I can take care of myself."

Brax stares at the lovely female who almost cracked his nose and slit his neck in two. *She is even more beautiful up close,* he thinks, giving himself a mental shake. *Not the time for distractions.*

"I guess you have no choice, Sarah, since I've been employed by your father to bring you home."

He watches the color burst in her tawny eyes as she glares at him, reminding him of a spitting alley cat with her claws bared.

"Just because I'm not attacking you right now doesn't mean that you're safe," she tells him angrily, her eyes shooting sparks. "You need to go back to wherever you came from, Mr. Westworth; I have business to attend to."

Sarah twists on her heel, sprinting off toward the house, replacing her earpiece before reaching for her mic. A heavy shoulder into her side has her sprawling across the hard earth, her hands grazed from the sudden impact while she braces against the fall.

"What the fuck?" she bellows before Brax claps his large hand over her mouth, pointing a finger toward the iron gates.

Sarah glances down to where he's pointing, seeing three more SUVs entering the compound.

"Looks like you've got company," Brax whispers into her ear before removing his hand and grabbing her arm.

"You don't know that they're here for me," she pants, her calloused palms stinging.

"Really?" he says, his voice bemused. "Am I supposed to believe that their presence is just a coincidence?" he asks, his arrogant voice infuriating her.

When a team of men leap out of the car and immediately begin a perimeter search, Sarah takes pause. Grinding her teeth, she pushes herself upright, backing away from the approaching group of men to turn and sprint in the opposite direction.

"This way," Brax calls, approaching the perimeter fencing at the southernmost point. Sliding across the loose stones, he clears the underside of the high voltage fence, the current interruption device he installed allowing passage through the dangerous material.

Using her own momentum to drop and slide, Sarah manages to clear the fencing just as she hears shouting from the house and the sound of pounding feet moving rapidly toward them. Her instinct to flee had been right.

"I don't get it; half of those guys are on my team," Sarah yells, pumping her fists as she runs hard after Brax.

"You're all mercenaries, right?" he asks, his voice slightly breathless.

"Yes," she answers, hearing her own panting as she keeps pace with him.

"Then there's probably a price on your head," he says, ducking under the tropical brush and through the dense foliage.

Sarah follows Brax into the scrub, stopping short when she reaches his banged-up Jeep hidden on the far side of the road. She's lived in the Philippines for a while now and seen her fair share of shitty cars, but this old thing?

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Sarah turns to eye Brax warily, wondering if she should risk her life by climbing into the passenger seat beside him.

"If you want to see your family again, I'd suggest you come with me," he yells, yanking open the driver's door and jumping in.

Sarah growls under her breathe, obediently climbing into the passenger side and immediately grabbing onto the dash as Brax surges the vehicle forward, ploughing the rusted old Jeep along the overgrown path and into the forest.

Brax pumps the accelerator, aware that their position is tenuous at best. He has to get Sarah out of here and back to his safe house if they want any real chance at success.

Glancing over at the small woman sitting beside him, Brax is struck again by how lovely she is.

Her light brown hair is cut short and frames her face in soft spikes. Her eyes are a tawny gold, and she has the most delectably soft mouth that tempts him more than he'd like to admit.

Swerving to avoid a particularly large tree, Brax swears under his breath before sneaking another look at her large, plump lips. Her lower lip looks like a pillow, the distinct dip in its center making him wish he was licking it right now.

"Eyes on the road," Sarah barks, her gaze flashing at him.

"Sorry, babe," he murmurs, his gaze returning to the unmade road just in time to avoid a thicket of overgrown bushes.

Sarah rolls her eyes, astounded at this man's level of attention. "Let's just try to get out of this thing alive, shall we?" she asks, her voice put out.

Shooting her a heart-stopping grin, Brax wrenches the

Jeep across fallen leaves and branches, heading inward, toward the swamp.

"What are you doing?" she demands, her high-pitched screech drowned by the Jeep's roaring engine.

"They will have figured out that we are using the forest trail," Brax yells, his eyes bright with excitement. "We need to get through the swamp if we want to lose them."

Sarah turns her bemused gaze onto the swamp rushing toward them, Brax's Jeep hitting the marshy water in a burst of mud-caked spray.

Holding onto the side so that she won't be tossed clean from the Jeep, Sarah grits her teeth against the bruising impact, her ass bouncing against the hard bench seat.

"I suppose bringing me this way was part of your plan?" she asks, her tone sarcastic.

"Of course not," Brax answers, surprising her with the truth. "I'm completely winging it. In fact, I had no idea you were my target until ten minutes before I met you."

Oh, he did not just say that, Sarah thinks furiously, her gaze piercing his smug face while the Jeep ploughs through the dense water, the filthy spray soaking them both as it sloshes into the cab.

"And what if we get stuck out here?" she asks him, her own voice derisive. "I suppose we will be no better than sitting ducks?"

"We won't get stuck," Brax answers, patting the old truck affectionately. "Evie will save us."

Great, he's named this piece of shit? Sarah thinks, holding her breath when the Jeep slows to a gut-wrenching crawl.

"You were saying?" she asks, while Brax pumps the accelerator and pulls the choke as hard as he can. When the old truck surges forward with renewed life, a relieved smile breaks across his handsome features.

"You see," he says, his cheeky expression returning, "we've got nothing to worry about."

Sarah grits her teeth against the bumpy road and her already tender flesh. She's suffered much worse in her lifetime; a few scrapes and bruises won't kill her now.

Once they are far enough away from the immediate danger, Brax slows his Jeep, sticking to the speed limit while he avoids the main roads. Leaning over his seat, he fishes out a green, squared cap, pulling it over Sarah's head in an effort to conceal her features.

"That should do until we get back to my safe house," he tells her. "We shall have to lie low tonight then try to figure out how we are going to get off this Island tomorrow."

Sarah eyes him closely from beneath her lashes. "What makes you think that I will be staying anywhere with you?" she asks him coldly. "For all I know, you are planning on collecting the same bounty as everyone else."

Brax gives her an *are you kidding me* look, before returning his gaze to the road. "Look, babe, you don't have anything to worry about," he tells her, his use of the endearment making her cheeks heat. "I won't be collecting any bounties on you except the fee I'm being paid to deliver you back to your father."

"How can I trust you?" she asks, annoyed that her future sits in the hands of a mercenary. "You could be working both sides."

With a white knuckled grip on the steering wheel, Brax directs the car through the small streets, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "I give you my word that you're safe with me," Brax says, his eyes fixed ahead of him.

With a shrug, Sarah stares out of the passenger side, not bothering to question him. She knows better than to trust the word of a mercenary.

Brax weaves through the back streets of the inner

suburbs. Eventually, they slow, and Sarah's brows rise when they pull up in front of a small, non-nondescript shop front.

"Where are we?" she asks, her tone cautious as she takes in the dingy backstreets and dilapidated stores.

"My safe house," Brax tells her, jumping out of the Jeep and pulling out a duffle bag from behind the back seat.

Stepping out herself, Sarah keeps her head lowered as she follows him into the store. Without waiting to make sure she's behind him, Brax strides through the lined racks of the small grocer's, straight to the back of the shop. Once there, he scales a rickety staircase then ducks through another doorway into a wide corridor. They arrive at a heavy metal door, the flat surface flush against the wall, no sign of a lock, only the advanced security screen built into one side.

"You'll be safe here," he tells her, using his palm print to disengage the door and let them into his apartment. Re-locking the heavy door, he places his bag onto the kitchen table. Gazing around her, Sarah assesses the apartment with surprise.

"Not bad," she murmurs grudgingly, taking in the modern furnishings and strategically positioned location. "It doesn't look like you've been using it a lot," she adds, in an attempt to gain some much-needed information.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, ignoring her comment as he opens the fridge door and ducks his head into the space between the shelves.

"Not really," she answers, pulling out her sat phone. "Do you have an internet connection here?"

"Yes, but its secure, so I can't share it. My laptop is also for my personal use and I'm guessing your phone is still dark," he says, stacking bread, pickles and cold cuts onto the counter.

"Then can I use your phone?" Sarah asks, attempting to control her temper. She doesn't blame him for not trusting

her with his computer, but she does need to contact her family. When he peers over at her with his assessing gaze, she stares back at him, her expression carefully blank.

"Sure," he answers, suddenly tossing her his phone. "Knock yourself out."

"The passcode?" Sarah asks with gritted teeth, watching as he grins and sidles over to where she is standing, leaning a little too close to her side as he peers into the facial recognition software so that the phone unlocks. It must be a burner phone, since he is leaving it with her before he returns to his sandwiches and ignores her.

Dialing her father's number, Sarah waits while the phone rings and rings. Expecting to leave him a message, she is surprised when John McCallister's line cuts out without reaching its call center.

Sarah tries Lucas' phone next, breathing a sigh of relief when he answers on the second ring.

"Lucas, thank God," Sarah says, relief in her tone.

"Sarah, are you okay?" Lucas asks, his voice concerned. Clutching the small device like a lifeline, Sarah sinks down onto the single armchair in the room, her voice shaking as she answers. "I'm fine," she says, asking desperately, "can you tell me what's going on?"

"You're burnt, Sarah," he says bluntly, confirming her worst fears.

"Are you sure?" she asks. "I haven't breached any protocols or—"

"I think it was internal," he says, his voice gruff, and Sarah feels her blood run cold.

"What? I... who?"

"I don't know, but you can't trust anyone from now on," he tells her, his voice lowering.

"What about Dad?" she asks, desperate to speak with her father.

"Sarah, I... it may not be safe," he says, sounding hesitant.

Uncaring, Sarah replies, "Please, Lucas, I need to speak to him."

Sarah hears a shuffling, then her father's deep drawl. Lucas must have covered the phone, because she can't hear her father's words, just the urgency in his tone when he realizes his daughter is on the phone.

"Sarah, sweetheart, are you okay?" her father barks into the receiver.

Sarah clutches the phone tighter to her ear, carefully controlling her emotions as she says, "I'm fine, Dad. Do you know what's happened?"

"I don't know yet, sweetheart, but I promise you I'm going to find out."

Nodding her head, Sarah takes a few deep breathes, her voice remaining steady. "So," she says, "what now?"

"Are you with Mr. Westworth?" her father asks, his voice concerned. Glancing over at Brax, Sarah finds him standing silently while he stares at her.

"Yes, he's here," she answers, dropping her gaze from his before turning away.

"You need to return to Melbourne," her father tells her, adding, "we won't be able to discuss this over the phone. You have to go dark."

"Dad, wait," Sarah pleads before flicking her gaze back to Brax's again. "Dad," she says in a lower tone, dropping her head to speak into the receiver, "are you sure we can trust him?"

Sarah senses Brax's immediate tension, but she doesn't look up.

"Lucas says he's the best of the best, sweetheart," her father replies, his voice calm. "Sarah, you need to remember

your training and follow protocol. I know that you're going to be safe."

Sarah says goodbye to her father and waits as Lucas speaks into the phone again. "Hey, Sarah?" he says, his voice still gruff.

"Yes, Lucas?" she asks, stoic.

"Take care of yourself, okay?"

"Okay," Sarah answers, her voice small as she ends the call.

"Who was that with your father?" Brax asks, his aggression unexpected.

Glancing up sharply, she says, "That's none of your business."

"I'm in charge of your safety now, babe, so if you're talking to someone, I need to know about it."

When Sarah's face floods with color, Brax clenches his jaw, a muscle ticking in his cheek.

"He's... I... he's a colleague," she finishes lamely, unwilling to discuss Lucas with this man.

"I see," he says curtly, walking over to retrieve his phone. "Well, a little advice, sweetheart," he says, his voice angry. "No more chats with your lover boy, because right now you don't know whom you can trust."